Arc Zero:

PART ONE:

Job

CHAPTER 1:

Hey, you! Yeah, you, reading this sentence. Have you ever wondered what you would do if the world was going to end? Well, luckily, there is Spirit Intercom, the key to solving all of your problems with death. Not only do we send you to the Spirit World, but you also maintain your consciousness in a fairytale-like area. It seems too good to be true, but it is not! You can be sent to this magical place if you pre-register now. This is a first-come, first-served opportunity, so sign up fast! You can be a part of this spectacular experience for the price of $2.5 million. What a bargain! Hope to see you soon, and we would be honored to serve you as our guests!

It was 2053, a not-so-special year with the same old, same old events happening. Advertisements like these ran throughout all of New York County's streets. Just the casual daily uprootings and revolts against the government and a mere amount of people dying each day were no problem.

Ever since the introduction of excavating geothermal energy from Earth's core, all other energy platforms were shut down, and geothermal energy became the universal energy source. A high-pressure geothermal energy converter had been created, and this allowed for a high gathering of energy in really short periods. Specially-crafted wells stretched 1,800 miles deep from the surface of the earth until they reached the core of the earth. These special wells had cooling systems at the ends of their rods where they could cool the most extremely hot lava into rock. This liquid magma from the core would become hardened, and the upcoming steam would be trapped within the well until the steam ran its way up to the surface. The steam would then be

transformed into energy with the help of turbines. As more and more converters for geothermal energy were implemented, pressure in Earth's core started to build up due to the core becoming too hardened. The tectonic plates began shifting awkwardly, and each layer of Earth grew more irregular by the day. Earthquakes and tsunamis began to hit Earth as more people started to fear for their lives. Not only did tectonic plates shift, but the air grew more polluted from ashes and embers of volcanic debris. No one knows who originally instilled the geothermal converter in the first place, but the majority of the world blamed the masses of scientists.

Then there was Robert Rutano, and he had just completed his Spirit Intercom project three weeks ago. There were rumors that this company could save everyone from the geothermal energy crisis by sending people's consciousness to a virtual dimension where they could live indefinitely. The process and machinery had taken him nine years to finish, and it was finally approved by the government for use. Though the company was considered in the beta stage, people of only luxury and high class could pre-register for Spirit Intercom. With the political ties that Robert attained, he was able to have his project funded by the U.S. government. And government officials, such as state senators and congressmen, were granted free access.

People in New York City didn't tolerate this unwarranted exchange, and they revolted against the government for not taking initiative.

Son of Robert Rutano, Andrew Rutano, a 20-year-old man with light-brown hair, light skin, blue eyes, and three fingers missing on his right hand, was a prosthetic engineer that helped serve people who broke or severely injured their limbs. Working on himself, he had been able to create mechanical fingers for his missing three fingers at the age of 16. Andrew lived in Manhattan, New York, in an apartment not too far from Park Avenue. Andrew had two brothers and one sister. Marco was 25. Maxwell was 12. Lisa was 10. He lived in an apartment with his

roommate Kevin permanently and with his children every Saturday. On some weekends, his grandmother would visit him. And Andrew owned a poodle dog named Chet. His dog was physically pathetic in terms of strength.

Andrew's apartment contained two bedrooms, a kitchen, two bathrooms, a dining room, and a living room with a glass balcony that magnified the city from above. On his holographic touch-recognizing computer, Andrew sat on his green sofa in the living room. He had a diagram of a patient's amputated foot that was missing two metatarsal bones. Changing the angles of the foot with his left index finger, he contemplated which prosthetic parts could fix these missing bones.

Kevin shouted from his bedroom across the hall, "Any goldfish left?"

"Haven't I already told you before? We're on a tight budget for snacks right now," Andrew said, pinching his two lips.

"It doesn't cost much to buy a single box of Goldfish. I mean, come on, Andrew."

Rising from his blue king bed, Kevin walked to the kitchen and opened up the pantry. He tossed through different varieties of snacks and never chose one to eat from. He reached his hand far back into the pantry until he felt a rigid object poke his finger. "Ouch!" It was one of Andrew's prosthetic parts.

Kevin raised the sprocket with his hand. "Andrew, why the hell are there sprockets in the snack pantry? How many times do I have to tell you to keep your 'sciencey' stuff to yourself? I don't want to eat a sprocket for lunch."

Expressing a slight chuckle, Andrew said, "Won't happen again, young sir."

Andrew drew back his attention to the diagram until he received a notification from his brain through a messaging interface called Mindcord. The message was labeled as “Spirit Intercom Inc.”

“Dear Mr. Rutano,

As a close relative to Spirit Intercom through your father, we would be delighted if you could test the abilities of our beta machine. You can be the first to try it out, and this will be revolutionary for the world. Hope to see you there next week.

Best wishes,

The Spirit Intercom Team”

Andrew pondered his choices. If he were to go, he would have to revisit his father after many years of awkward social distancing. His father was very isolated and never had the chance to spend time with his kids.

For many years of Andrew’s childhood, Robert had been obsessed with the creation of Spirit Intercom and always seemed to have loved more towards his invention than his own family. Andrew’s mother, Marie, on the other hand, tended to spend more time with the family. She put more time and thought into the well-being of her family than her husband ever did.

Andrew’s brother was Marco. Eight years ago, Andrew’s father told his kids that their mother had died in a car accident. It was heartbreaking for Robert’s kids, and they blamed their father for not looking out for her more often. Andrew had lost respect for his father.

Andrew had trouble coming up with a final decision. His thinking felt restrained. Thoughts aligned, and he made a decision. He would go. It could be revolutionary.

CHAPTER 2:

ONE WEEK LATER.

It was a Tuesday afternoon, and Andrew was ready. Picking up his finger-scanning car keys and wallet, Andrew left his apartment. He patted Chet, barking with a sound of glee, and got into his blue GT Sporksterbeale car. This car unveiled a 1980 retro look of a sports car. The engine had 1000 horsepower, and the wheels were coated with chrome. His garage was suspended open as he looked down the streets of his neighborhood. Pressing his thumb on his keys, he entered the car, and he set his destination automatically to Spirit Intercom Labs. Before he left his apartment, he messaged his roommate Kevin through Mindcord, "Yo Kevin. I figured that I'd tell ya that I'm visiting these cool labs. I'll probably be back soon. Watch over my dog Chet for me." After sending the message, he ignited the Sporksterbeale.

Leaving his nice neighborhood, a whole new atmosphere of trauma and depression appeared in front of him. The streets in New York were extremely volatile in wealth, especially on Park Avenue. All he could witness were building debris and trash spaced out on the troubled street. People, bleeding and crying from the "natural disasters," could not handle the mourning and pain. Multiple buildings blazed from fires while other alleys were flooded with filth. The paleness in everyone's eyes brought too much attention as he drove down the damaged road.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a blue-eyed baby, crying alone atop a fully-filled dumpster. His heart sank. He couldn't alert authorities. They had all been dispersed. Anarchy ran society. Immediately stopping his car, Andrew arose from his seat and shoved the car door open. He picked the baby up. The baby's dirt-crusted eyes blinked. Andrew tried to soothe the baby by

cradling and quieting him. He placed him in his car seat. Andrew thought, *why would somebody just abandon a harmless baby? What's wrong with people?*

Driving down two more blocks, Andrew noticed an enormous amount of people rebelling and rioting against City Hall. Infuriated people leaned and pushed on the front entrance doors and side windows of the building. Many shouted hateful and vulgar language against the government: "Down with government," "Geothermal is not normal," and "Grant access to all." A man wearing green rags threw a brick, which penetrated and broke one of the windows. Andrew slowly drove past the ruckus. Worried government officials could be seen through the broken windows.

Looking at the baby through the rear-view mirror, he said to the baby (and also himself), "Don't worry. I won't give up on you."

Andrew contemplated whether he would go to Spirit Intercom or take the baby to his apartment. He was expected to be at the labs in 10 minutes; therefore, he would not have enough time to drop the baby back at his apartment. He was running late.

An automated voice on his Sporksterbeale stated, "Greetings Andrew. Would you like me to present a quicker route to your destination? I would take control of the steering wheel and gas pedal. This route is a bit experimental and may lead to some risks; however, it will get you to your destination on time."

Andrew replied, "Do your thing."

Right away, the car removed the brake and gas pedal into itself while the steering wheel collapsed and was engulfed into a small metallic disk. The car took complete charge and immediately accelerated through a filth-flooded alley, pushing Andrew back into his car seat. The Sporksterbeale moved with great speed, avoiding dumpsters and homeless habitats.

The baby cried. Andrew yelled at the car, “Why are you driving with such intensity and speed?! There’s a baby in this car, and I don’t care if I am late! Slow down now!”

“I am very sorry Andrew, but I cannot do that. You have already ordered me to take this route, and I cannot stop in the process. I warned you about the risks and must continue until the destination is reached.”

Again, the car made a sharp left and drove over debris and building rubble. It swerved and turned jaggedly. The car, attempting to make as many shortcuts as possible, cut through every alley opening and went wherever solid terrain existed. The baby kept wailing in the back. Andrew, biting his fingernails, hoped the car wouldn’t crash itself. A defibrillator couldn’t ease his beats per minute.

After several minutes, the Sporksterbeale was one mile away from the labs, which could be seen down the horizon. Andrew was dazzled by the massive complexes of Spirit Intercom. The white buildings were of the purest white that he had ever seen. Rows of glistening windows aligned on the buildings, and a huge steel fence encircled the labs. Around the fence were watchtowers with guards that would be ready at a minute's notice. Watchdogs walked along the periphery of the labs. On top of the tallest complex was a white flag with a yellow lightning bolt insignia.

The car voice finally stated, “We have reached your destination. Pardon for my miscommunications from the past, and next time I will question your affirmations more often.”

The Sporksterbeale finally reached the highly-secured gate of the labs. The baby remained in the backseat but did not cry atrociously anymore.

A security guard in a blue suit said, “Hello, Mr. Rutano, Spirit Intercom awaits you.”

CHAPTER 3:

As the charismatic security guard escorted the Sporksterbeale past the gate, Andrew observed the “Caution” sign from the car window.

The sign read, “No trespassing. Authorized personnel only. Please take caution that you are currently entering government territory. Any sign of distress or illegal activity on the premises is a federal offense, and *Spirit Intercom Inc.* is a proud venture of the federal government.”

Andrew reflected on this stern message and thought to himself that this place was the real deal. Before Andrew got a good look at the labs from his car, he cradled and brought the baby to his lap. His car cruised down a yellow road that led to the entrance.

The security guard guided the self-driving Sporksterbeale to the entrance until he said, “Mr. Rutano, you have arrived. I please ask that you leave your vehicle. We will take care of your car from here.”

Andrew nodded at the guard. He opened the car door and said, “Don’t be so reckless next time, Sporksterbeale. You know that your CPU of yours isn’t deep-learning. And I’ll see you soon. Thanks for the drive.”

The voice stated, “By no means, Andrew. I hope your destination satisfies you.”

Picking up the baby, Andrew got out of the car. A different security guard in a white suit entered the Sporksterbeale.

The security guard in the car said, “We can take care of your baby. Just give it to me.”

Andrew said, “Why do you want my baby—I mean—this baby? What will you do with him?”

“We will bring it to one of our best nurses on the staff to take care of it. Plus, you act like you own the baby. It isn’t yours.”

“It’s a ‘he’ for your information. Alright, just make sure to keep him safe. I found him abandoned in the bad part of town.” Andrew gave the baby to the security guard, and the baby was placed in the backseat.

The security guard, now in the car, said, “Please give me access to physical controls for the car.”

The Sporksterbeale voice said, “I am sorry whoever you are, but I cannot do that without Andrew’s permission.”

Irritated, the guard asked, “Can you please just ask your car for the physical controls so that I can drive it?”

Andrew hesitantly asked, “Why don’t you just allow the car to drive itself?”

“Are you kidding me? Just give me access, Mr. Rutano. I don’t mean to be rude, but we must have physical control over the car to achieve what we do.”

“What do you guys do?” asked Andrew.

The guard exclaimed, “That’s enough, Mr. Rutano! We demand physical controls, or else we cannot accompany you to Sprint Intercom and will ask you to leave.”

Surprised, Andrew didn’t want to undergo any more drama and said, “Okay, okay. Sporksterbeale, I grant access to physical controls.”

The voice said, “Thank you, Mr. Rutano. I will precede and initiate the physical control command for this man.” Immediately, the car revealed its gas pedals, and the small metallic disk expanded and turned into the steering wheel.

The security guard, rattled and satisfied at the same time, began to drive the car. He looked at Andrew in discomfort while he cruised it on a different side of the road of the white labs.

As his car drove down the side of the lab, the blue-suited guard that Andrew had previously met said, “Let us begin your tour of this extraordinary place.”

Andrew nodded in affirmation and took a glimpse of what surrounded him. He just became conscious that he was at the entrance. There were three massive complexes, and Andrew was in the middle one of the three. A white sign in red letters read, “Beta Spirit Contrivances Ready for Use.” He strolled a few meters in front and was finally in the enormous complex. The interior was pure white and provided a lavish outlook for the lab floors. Large spaces of gardens surrounded him on the bottom floor of the building. An endless amount of floors rose above him. A cylindrical glass elevator in the center of the whole complex climbed up to the countless floor levels. He saw numerous lab researchers on each floor since each floor was wrapped in the interior of the complex. The cylindrical elevator was surrounded by five bridges on each floor in the shape of a star. Therefore, Andrew could see the ceiling. Andrew locked his head back to eye level. The guard had something to say.

“As you can see from the sign in front of you, this complex is where the magic happens. We compile your mind to reach a different dimension so that you can travel to the Spirit World. Here, Andrew, you will be the first to access the Spirit World.” Andrew tuned out what the guard said since he was still in awe from looking at this wonder of a building. A bit flustered, the guard asked, “Did you even hear a word that I said, Mr. Rutano?”

“Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to disrespect you. It's just that I have never seen such a magnificent building as this.” He paused over what the guard said. “Yes, about what you said, I am excited to try this once-in-a-lifetime contraption.”

“Come this way to the elevator, please, Mr. Rutano,” the guard alerted. Andrew followed, and the elevator door opened vertically upward with the use of a sensor. The elevator door closed and traveled upward. “Be aware that you will be the first human to travel to this dimension, and note that we will not be responsible for your well-being. We have tested the contrivances on many types of animals, and they worked smoothly,” continued the guard.

Andrew grew a bit wary but kept his cool. The elevator continued its path for a few minutes until it stopped. The number “80” was read in the upper interior of the elevator. On the highest floor in the building, Andrew was overwhelmed.

Andrew asked the security guard, “Hey, just wondering… what is your name?” The guard glanced at him with the corner of his eye while waiting for the elevator to open. He did not respond.

The guard coughed. “Mr. Rutano, I think it would be best if I ignore you. You should not worry about the names of other inferior security guards.” Andrew grew stiff and discomforted.

The elevator door once again opened up vertically. The guard had a look of disgust in his eyes. “Right this way, Mr. Rutano.” Andrew did as the guard asked and followed him to a glass room. The guard opened a glass door for Andrew and pointed to a gray leather cushioned chair. The room was pure white and had a space of about 400 square feet. Andrew took a seat. The guard with little patience said, “Now, wait here.” The guard had left from the corner of Andrew’s eye to an enclosed room with blue walls.

Andrew questioned to himself why the guard would leave him in an empty room with only three chairs. Across from him was a glass reception desk with nobody in its seat. He didn't expect the lab to be so eerie and alone. On the top right corner of the room, a camera protruded from the wall. He carefully studied the room as he felt that he was being watched. The room felt so frail; the air felt so cold.

He had been waiting for quite some time until the sound of footsteps from the hall outside the hollow glass wall approached closer to him. Andrew, curious of the footsteps, hesitated if he should check who it was. Getting out of his chair, Andrew made his way past the door and saw a researcher dressed in a white lab coat walking ahead of him. Andrew asked the researcher, "What do you guys do here?"

The researcher stopped walking and turned his back around, looking at him with confusion, and asked, "I'm sorry but who are you?"

Andrew cleared his throat and said, "I am Andrew Rutano." The researcher opened his eyes widely while his eyebrows broadened.

The researcher exclaimed, "Wow, you're Mr. Rutano, the son of *the* Robert Rutano! You must be the first one to test out the Spirit Contrivance! It's an honor to meet you Mr. Rutano. How may I accompany you?"

"You may accompany me by answering my previous question."

"Yes, of course. I can show you the process of what scientific research we do here. It's a very complicated process." Andrew began to worry if the security guard who told him to wait would look for him, but he still agreed to follow the researcher by nodding his head with a phony smile. Before beginning his miniature tour with Andrew, the researcher had reflected. "Pardon

me but aren't you supposed to be accompanied by a security guard?" Involuntarily, Andrew's mind thought of perspiring, but his id stopped this bodily function.

On the spot, Andrew devised a bogus response and said, "I'm on my lunch break and just perusing around this gorgeous lab." A door cracked open from the room directly behind him. The bodily function this time could not be stopped, and Andrew broke a sweat. He jolted his body around. The security guard scurried past the door.

Behind the security guard was another set of footsteps. The security guard grimaced at Andrew's perusing around. A tall shadow behind the guard grew to his dismay. Directly behind him was the face of his father, Robert Rutano. Andrew gulped in his vomit and pain scorched his stomach. He felt congested, and his heart had dropped 100 feet underground. After not seeing his son for eight years, Andrew saw wrinkles and blemishes had eroded all over Robert's face. His father walked with high poise with a slight smirk on his face. Never looking directly at his eyes, Andrew trembled and walked with uncertainty towards his father.

Three paces in front of him, his father opened his arms up. Robert said, "Give me a hug, son."

Andrew didn't move until his father entered the go-zone for a hug. Robert wrapped his arms around him, and Andrew grew an uneasy smile.

His father said, "It's great to see you, Andrew, after all these years. How are you and your kids doing?"

Andrew, almost talking like he was in a rush, said "They're fine, Dad, and so am I. Why did you send me here?"

“Since you are now here, I think it is time I show you this great journey of mine that I have partaken in for so many years. Not only do I want you to be the first human to reach the Spirit World, but I ask of a task from you.”

Andrew asked, “What task?”

“I’ll further explicate on it later, son, but I need you to follow me and trust the process.”

“Trust the process? I don’t know if I can even trust you. How could you let Mom die like that? How could you be silent with me all these years and not even allude to her presence?”

Robert’s face did not change expression. “We will discuss family matters at a later time. I just need you to trust this process and believe in your father. I’m sorry, son, and I will talk about this with you later.”

Andrew’s eyebrows were still in the same position. “Fine, blow me away with this place.”

“Come, son.”

Andrew’s father walked across the white tiles of the room. Opening the glass door, Robert looked at the security guard. “Go back to your quarters, Rufus.”

Andrew with a smug smile said to the guard, “So, your name is Rufus, huh? See it was not that hard to say your name . . . Rufus.”

Rufus said, “Follow your dad, Andrew.”

Andrew dragged himself to follow his father. He stared at Rufus with irritation and left the room.

Andrew contemplated the following: *If no one tried this machine, is he trying to kill me with it? Why doesn't he speak about my mother with me now? Why did I even come here? Why did he talk about my kids when he only saw Max when he was four and when Lisa was two? How*

will this machine even work? Is it going to be painful or feel good? Why didn't Rufus reveal his name to me?

As Andrew reflected, his father and he walked through plain white halls, making lefts and rights all over the complex. After 30 minutes, Robert opened a black door using an eye-recognition sensor. A subtle red beam overlayed on his eye for a couple of seconds, and the door unlocked, opening vertically upward. Two security cameras were perched on top of the door. They both entered a pitch-black room, and a red velvet chair sat in the center of it. On top of the chair was a circular metallic rod connected with a thick blue wire. The wire ran down the chair. Next to the chair was Andrew, staring with disbelief.

Robert said, "Here is the place, son, where you can break dimensional forces. All that you have to do is sit in this chair and attach the metallic circular piece, or the Spirit Emissary. The whole chair is called the Spirit Contrivance. The blue wire from the chair is extended to our interdimensional communicator system. This communicator sends specially programmed sensory neurons to the Spirit Emissary that are transported to your brain. These programmed neurons change the principles of your dendrites. The dendrites in your brain project the dimension of the Spirit World. Therefore, you are experiencing the same five senses in the Spirit World that you normally would perceive in the physical world. Your physical body stays the same in the dimension, but you remain unconscious in our physical world. Think of it as mindfulness in the physical realm."

Andrew was shocked by this inventive creation. "Wow, Dad. This is insane. I have some questions though."

"What tickles your brain, son?"

"What task did you want me to partake in?

“It’s pretty simple actually. I want you to pretend that you live in the Spirit World. This dimension is known to be a sanctuary, and I want you to enjoy yourself to see if others could enjoy this place. I want to know if this place could be habitable for my pre-registered guests.”

“I also have another question.” Andrew was about to ask the other question, but he saw his father tilting his head to the side and not focusing on him.

In his ear, Robert received a message from his tiny black listening device. He put his finger over his ear and said, “Great!” He removed his finger. “Sorry, son, but your questions are going to need to wait. Guess who just arrived!”

“Who?”

“Your brother!”

CHAPTER 4:

Andrew's first thought that rolled through his brain at that moment: *Why Dad?* Andrew was infuriated and had not seen his brother for six years ever since he visited him that one Thanksgiving. Marco and Andrew always had their disputes and could never settle with each other. Marco continually was close with his father his whole life while Andrew had a closer relationship with his mom. Andrew was expecting a solo mission. Knowing that his brother will disrupt this experience, Andrew said to his father, "What were you thinking, Dad? Why would you invite Marco here? You know that I haven't had the best relationship with him."

Robert said, "Well, maybe you can fix that relationship when you are both in the Spirit World."

"But he is an annoying brother who thinks that he's better than me at everything."

"You will obey and go with your brother. If not, then you aren't going. Simple as that" Andrew did not refute his father and kept his anger bottled within himself.

A couple moments later, his father ignited the black door open with eye recognition. Marco passed through the door while Andrew pondered some bad memories of him.

Marco was taller and more handsome compared to Andrew, according to the girls back then from their high school. Marco was 6'3", and people called him a chick magnet. Having spiky brown hair, Marco had a protruding Adam's apple. Having ten fingers unlike Andrew, Marco used his hands quite extensively as a lava capturer, and his job was low-paying and very dangerous. Multiple people had died as lava capturers because when they collected the lava to trap the heat, some of the lava could leak onto them.

Marco made eye contact with Andrew and casually said, “What’s up Drewster? How are things hanging?”

“I’m fine, and don’t call me ‘Drewster.’ People called me that back in elementary school. We aren’t children, Marco. We’re adults. Communicate like an adult.”

Marco shrugged his shoulders. “That’s not a welcoming ‘hello,’ right, Dad?”

Robert chuckled. “It’s great to have you here, son. How are things going for you and your wife, Susan?”

“You know, the usual. I just hope that she doesn’t abandon me for six years as Andrew did,” he joked self-approvingly.

Taking slight offense from Marco, Andrew hesitantly yelled, “Hey, Marco!”

“What?”

“How about we just go to this damn dimension already instead of killing time making sweet talk with Dad. Also, how are we going to make it to the Spirit World with only one chair?” Andrew was tired of his brother already.

Robert felt this irritation. “Calm down, son. Trust me. Everything is under control.”

Marco also was feeling this sense of irritation. “Chill out, brother. Dad has another chair to hook me up with. I’ve toured this place so many times that I know all the ins and outs of it.”

Andrew put his peace-sign fingers on his forehead. “You’ve been here before?”

“Yep. That’s correct.”

Andrew was beginning to grow more hatred towards his father already. He lost patience. “I think it’s time, Marco, that we strap in these chairs and go to this stupid dimension already. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Alright, let’s do this. Don’t call it stupid though. Call it anything but that.”

Surprised by their quick readiness, Robert said into his earpiece, “Bring out the other Spirit Contrivance, Rufus.” Meanwhile, Andrew studied the interdimensional communicator system. He grazed the wires with his index finger. The system contained a medium-sized glass box. Enclosed by the box was a holographic visual. The visual was of a blue brain with different points located on it. On top of the brain was a placeholder that read “NAME OF SUBJECT.” Andrew inferred that this holograph would display the person’s brain using the Spirit Contrivance. There were other graphics on the outside of the glass box that read “Spirit Emissary Status,” “Neuron Coding,” and “Dopamine Levels.” Andrew pinpointed a tab that said “History of Tried Subjects.” With curiosity, Andrew tapped on the tab, and a list of words appeared.

The list read the following:

Tested Subjects:

37 Monkeys: Success

21 Armadillos: Success

24 Rats: Success

5 Chimpanzees: Success

1 Baby: In Progress

Andrew read the list and was haunted by the word “baby.” Andrew immediately asked, “Dad . . . why is there a baby on this list?”

Robert said, “Son, there is nothing to worry about,” emphasizing the word “nothing.”

“Are you guys testing a baby in the Spirit World at this instant?”

“No.”

Marco barged in and said, “Come on Andrew. You can trust him. I’m sure it is just one of his complicated scientific gimmicks.”

Andrew, still certain and skeptical that his father was doing something strange, didn't want to rile things up. "Okay then. Let's just use the Spirit Contrivances now."

The second chair that Rufus was commanded to withdraw opened up from the floor and propped itself right next to the other chair. Andrew was genuinely still surprised with how advanced the technology in the labs was.

Robert snarled at Rufus. "Rufus, you forgot to attach the contrivance to the interdimensional communicator system!"

At this instant, Andrew was starting to grow uncomfortable. He had no idea what to expect. Rufus attached the rest of the blue wire to the interdimensional communicator system by opening up the hatch for it. The system lit up with RGB colors on the outside. The interdimensional communicator said, "Communicator Ready," in a very monotonous AI voice. Marco was also ready to enter the Spirit Contrivance.

With high poise, Marco walked towards the machine and sat in the velvet chair. Grasping the Spirit Emissary, Marco put it on the crown of his head. The metallic ring fit perfectly for his head. Andrew still stood in anguish. Robert glanced at his son. Marco glanced at his brother.

Marco impatiently said, "I don't have all day, brother. Hurry up."

"Alright man, just give me a second," Walking with high doubt, Andrew slowly made his way to this foreign machine. He lightly tapped his feet against the ground.

He was not ready. His heart pounded as fast as a 10,000-volt generator, and he finally reached the chair and took a seat uncomfortably. Taking his time, he attached the Spirit Emissary around the crown of his head. The metallic ring was disproportionate and tight for his head. He looked at his father's eyes and regretfully said, "Ready."

Immediately, Robert talked to his earpiece and said, “Send in the lab researchers.” A few seconds later, several lab researchers, wearing white suits, entered the black room. They held brown clipboards, and others wore thick gray glasses. They walked studiously, and they reached Robert’s spatial periphery.

Robert ordered, “I would like you, fine researchers, to take note of every detail and observation you see on my sons. I need some of you to take control of the dimensional-tracking status and some of you to take control of their dopamine levels. If any problems occur, immediately exterminate the process and send them back to the physical world. Also—”

“What problems could possibly occur?” Andrew interrupted.

Losing his train of thought, Robert said, “Nothing, Andrew. I just want to take extra precautions for the well-being of my children. You have nothing to worry about.”

Bringing back his attention to his lab researchers, he said, “Like I was saying, track them when they are in the Spirit World with the use of our neuron-seeking sensors that are on the Spirit Emissaries. Thank you for your attention, and good luck on your dimensional management.”

Now bringing his attention to his children, he said, “More importantly, good luck to you Marco and Andrew. When you voyage through this dimension, take the time to observe how this world appears to your perspectives. This dimension is known as a ‘paradise,’ and—. I’m talking too much, aren’t I? I hope the best for my sons.”

Andrew wiped the sweat off his face. “Is this going to hurt, father?”

“Close your eyelids and just try to relax.”

Treading back to his lab researchers, Robert said to them, “Just like how we put a man on the moon, let’s put a man on the Spirit World. Ignite the communicator at once.”

A lab researcher with a name tag reading “Earl” inserted a five-inch key with intricate grooves into the ignition of the communicator system. The system made whirring noises and electrified, sending a neuroelectric current to the Spirit Emissaries of Marco and Andrew. Instantly, Marco and Andrew grew unresponsive with their mouths open and eyes closed. Unconscious, Andrew’s vision had faded.

CHAPTER 5:

A few moments later of blackness, Andrew started to gain his vision back gradually. The colors that appeared before him were blue and green. Andrew's first thought: *this is Earth-like.* Trying to recognize what was around him, he finally perceived a green-like substance on the floor. His whole body stood intact, including the clothes he wore at the lab.

Andrew had full consciousness and witnessed several green hills that lay throughout the horizon. He gazed to his left. Marco oddly looked more life-like to Andrew. Marco's eyes opened up as he tried to gain consciousness in this unvoyaged dimension. There was a white source of light coming from above, which appeared to be some sort of sun or star. The sky was blue with a tint of purple. A smooth breeze of five miles per hour pushed back Andrew's hair. The grass on the hills appeared green but with a tint of yellow. Marco finally gained full consciousness.

Marco's first impression was "Woah . . . this is awesome!" He bent down and felt the grass with his hand. "This grass feels very—"

"Life-like?" Andrew completed.

"Yeah, it definitely does. I feel that I 'feel' more." He opened and closed his hand.

"This dimension is communicated through the neurons of our brain, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, wouldn't that mean that we feel more from the coded sensory neurons that affect our normal senses then? Who knows? They could be playing around with our perceptions."

Feeling the grass with his hand still, Marco said, "I think you're right, Drewster. Our perceptions are exaggerated by the coded neurons. I feel so empty-headed"

Andrew looked down at his hands and felt a wave of joltiness. His right hand was missing his three mechanical fingers. Feeling a wave of confusion now, Andrew asked Marco, “Where did my prosthetic fingers go?”

“They’re not appearing because you don’t have nerves in your mechanical fingers.”

“Weird.” His thumb and pinky tapped one another.

Smirking gently, Marco said, “I think we better explore this place.”

Marco and Andrew walked towards an area where there was less yellowish grass. The source of light or some sort of sun object began to radiate more heat on the grass. They continued walking towards the huge patch of less yellowish grass, which turned into white shades of grass. Andrew felt hotter than usual.

Moments moved. Marco asked, “Why is it getting hotter?”

“I have no clue. And why is there nothing but just this plain white field? I haven’t seen any form of life yet in this dimension. Everything has been so simple and plain.”

After another plentiful length of time, the white grass began to fade less as they walked forward. Yellowish green patches of grass atop a hill were in front of them. Appearances of clouds formed behind the hill. The air was cooler as they reached closer to the hill. Andrew said, “I think there is more life behind this hill.”

They hiked up the decently large hill of grass and made it to the top. Andrew viewed what lay behind the hill, and he gulped in a spoonful of air.

Marco made it on top of the hill as well, and a hundred meters away from him were trees that grew a kind of purple fruit. Growing curious, Marco departed from his standing point. He got a closer look at them and found that the fruit had the shape of an apple but was purple. Andrew, catching up to Marco, said, “Wait! Are you actually thinking about eating those?”

“You mean this purple apple? Hell yeah I am.”

“I don’t think you should. I mean, who knows—” Marco without listening plucked the foreign-looking shaped fruit and ate it casually. “What are you doing Marco! Are you crazy!”

“No, I’m Marco, and that was a damn good purple apple,” Marco answered wittingly.

Andrew, feeling annoyed as if Marco was poking him with a twig, said, “Okay, don’t do anything stupid anymore.”

“You should try an apple. It tastes exactly like a regular apple as if it was from Earth.”

“I’d rather not. I don’t wanna die.”

“What’s the big deal? You won’t die in the physical world if you die here. Don’t forget that this dimension is only based on feelings from our nerves and not our physical bodies being at stake.”

“Well, I guess you’re right.” Andrew with hesitancy grappled the purple “apple” and slowly propped it into his mouth. He slowly chewed it, and his taste buds were enlightened. “Oh my God! This tastes great!”

Marco, a few paces away from Andrew, bent down. He put his hand on the stump, brought his hand to his face, and smelled his hand. His eyes slightly glowed up. “This yellow stuff smells amazing. It smells exactly like honey!”

“Is it honey?”

Marco licked his hand, and his taste buds enlightened even more. “I’m pretty sure it is. Tastes exactly like it.”

Not as nervous of the foreign objects around him, Andrew put his hand up to the “honey” and smelled it. The substance smelled as if it had been a gift from a mother bee.

Laughing from amazement, Andrew said, “Alright, things are starting to pick up!” His dopamine levels were increasing.

“What’d I tell ya? What even is this place? I feel like I am in a fairy tale right now.”

Obtaining more energy, Andrew said, “Let’s explore more of this fairy tale!”

Andrew and Marco quickly sprinted their way towards the other trees and ate the other purple apples with glee. While sprinting, Andrew felt he was losing a bit of his focus.

Andrew began to slow down his pace and fell behind Marco a bit.

Marco said, “So far, I feel that my five senses have been enhanced. The smells, the tastes, the looks of this place have been extraordinary. I’ve never felt this alive before.” Marco slowed down and waited for Andrew to catch up.

Next to one of the trees, a river stretched down with a glistening blue. There were a substantial amount of thick tree roots that crossed the river. The roots had almost formed a type of land bridge between the river. Andrew just found out that the trees with the purple apples stood hundreds of meters tall. The tender leaves quivered from the slight breeze. Across the river were thicker thickets and bushier bushes. More green lay across the river from them.

Following his nature of curiosity, Andrew put his first step on a thick tree root. He maintained his balance on the one-meter wide root. The river moved at a pretty fast rate. Small splashes from the river current slightly blocked his vision.

“There you go, Andrew. I like that you’re taking the lead.” Marco got onto the tree root himself and followed his younger brother’s lead.

Andrew knew he would fall just from the tiniest of mistakes. Making a minor mistake in footwork, he slipped a little but still maintained his balance. Somehow this mistake didn’t cost

him. He broke a sweat and tried to keep his sanity from not going off the charts. Andrew was about halfway between the river.

An eerie buzz noise vibrated in front of them. The noise grew louder as Andrew grew confused. “What the hell is that noise!”

“I have no idea, but it sure doesn’t sound friendly.” Marco started to break a sweat too.

The tall tree branches that were in front of them ruffled and shook. Moments later, A rapid huge bee-like species came out of the tree branches. This bee-like foreign creature with neon green stripes flew quickly towards Andrew’s direction. Its bright blue stinger was vibrating and was aimed at Andrew’s head. The bee moved so fast that Andrew couldn’t even react. The bee moved so swiftly that it sliced through time with its speed. The bee’s stinger punctured in the middle of Andrew’s forehead.

Andrew with great force flew off the tree root from the collision with the bee. Falling into the water, Andrew grew unresponsive. The bee’s stinger stopped vibrating and fazed to a gray color. Eyes closed, Andrew flowed down the river rapidly.

Consciousness shifts to Marco.

Clueless on what just happened, Marco yelled, “Andrew!” Not getting a response back, Marco, ignoring the bee, instantly hopped off the tree root to go after Andrew. Penetrating the warm river water, Marco swam downstream with all his strength. Marco heard the buzz drawing closer to him again as he swam in the river. Looking behind, he saw that the bee was gaining on him. Feeling fearful, confused, and mad, Marco exclaimed with water partly entering his mouth, “Get the hell away from us you god-forsaken creature!”

Near Andrew’s body, Marco was able to grab hold of Andrew’s arm. Trying to find a way to escape the gigantic bee, Marco took hold of Andrew’s body and was able to push him out of

the river to the side where there was more vegetation and green. Marco pushed himself out of the water as the bee's buzzing was amplifying. The bee's stinger began to glow to a light blue color and the vibrating emanated. Marco yelled ecstatically in terror. Rejuvenating its stinger, the bee flew towards Marco's forehead and struck him there with his stinger. Marco was knocked out cold and lost consciousness next to Andrew's body.

CHAPTER 6:

Consciousness shifts back to Andrew.

Andrew woke up in the physical world and gained back his consciousness while Marco awakened moments after Andrew. The lab researchers and his father gathered around them. He asked, “What just happened?”

Robert said, “It appears that a bee with huge size proportions injected you with dopamine into your brain. You reached such a high sensation of dopamine that the coded sensory neurons were dispatched, hence waking you up. This bee seems to have some sort of dopamine compositor in its body. According to our neural sensors, this helluva creature could turn the most depressed man on Earth to the happiest through its dopamine byproduct.”

Earl, the man who ignited the Spirit Contrivance in the first place, said, “More specifically, the dopamine neurons that penetrated the frontal cortex of your brain reacted with our coded neurons, creating a chemical reaction. This reaction created a malfunction in the interdimensional communicator system, and the coded neurons were aborted.”

Andrew asked, “But I thought I can’t feel the dopamine neurons in my physical brain since the bee didn’t sting me in the physical world?”

Earl said, “Yes, that is true, but you are missing one link in that statement. Since the coded sensory neurons in your brain open up to all the perceivings of the Spirit World, they interacted with the dopamine through that neurological feeling the coded sensory neurons are intrinsically opened up to. When foreign neurons, a.k.a. the dopamine neurons, travel to your brain in the Spirit World, these neurons mess up with the neurons that we coded in the communicator system through the chemical reaction.”

Andrew asked, “How is it possible then that you can send coded neurons to our head? I wanted to ask this earlier before we changed dimensions.”

Robert said, “I’m glad you brought that up.” He walked to one of his neural-sensing holograms. Playing around with the screen with his finger, he brought up a graph that slightly resembled a Richter scale. “These are your brain waves or your neural oscillations. We change the properties of your neurons by extending or shrinking the amplitude of the brain waves. Changing the waves changes the outlook on how your dendrites perceive the senses. Your dendrites are the part of the nerve where the impulses are received. For example, when you were in the Spirit World, the amplitude of your sensory brain waves was tinkered an inch taller in retrospect to the graph at this x value. Every change in the x-axis in accordance with the y axis constantly changes your neural waves, hence the reason why they are called coded neurons. The complexity of the actual code though is insurmountable.”

Not expecting the science to be this deep, Andrew said, “I see.” Robert closed the hologram. Talking remained extinct for a few seconds. “So, what now?”

Robert said, “Now it’s time for you and Marco to take a break from the high-tier sensation of the Spirit World. Go on a lunch break in the cafeteria. I hear they have medium-rare steak there. As for you, my lab researchers, converge in my headquarters to discuss further research.” Robert and the lab researchers, including Earl, left the black room through the vertically shifting-up door.

Once the room was empty with only Andrew and Marco, Andrew departed from the Spirit Contrivance and tapped the shoulder of Marco. Marco had been a little out of it and seemed tired. Andrew asked, “Wanna eat something?”

Putting his measly energy into the muscles of his mouth, he said, “I don’t know why, but I feel weak and exhausted.” Marco still got up wobbly with little oomph and made his way towards Andrew.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Just need time to recuperate a bit. That’s all.”

“Marco, what in God’s name was that bee creature doing, and why was it in the Spirit World?”

“Not exactly sure, but those creatures seemed awfully vicious and dangerous. Let’s make sure to never go around those things again.”

“Also, why didn’t Dad send us out of the dimension before the bee stung us? I mean—that bee was trying to kill us.”

“Maybe he didn’t react quick enough to abort us out of the dimension, or maybe he just wanted to see what would happen to us.”

“Why would he want to see that horrifying beast sting us in the forehead? What if we died?”

“As I said earlier Andrew, if we die in that dimension, we don’t die physically. Quit analyzing this so much, and let’s eat already.” Marco, losing patience, walked past Andrew and left the room.

Andrew was isolated. Once again before he left the black room, Andrew quickly studied the equipment that was used for the Spirit Contrivance. He noticed the interdimensional communicator was still on. He could access the Spirit World at any time as long as the communicator system was lit. Numerous gray desks rowed across the back end of the room with holographic three-dimensional screens. The screens displayed different overlays of the Spirit

World. Thinking that the lab researchers wouldn't want him invading their desks and property, Andrew left the black room and set his destination to the cafeteria.

The entrance door just shutting vertically closed, Andrew walked to his left through the many white hallways that existed. He was about to look for other researchers for guidance to the cafeteria until he realized something that he had completely forgotten. He wondered where they placed his Sporksterbeale. He rearranged his body 180 degrees behind himself and set his course to his dad.

Andrew walked in the opposite direction since he figured that his father wouldn't have traveled to the cafeteria and instead his headquarters. This hadn't been the first time that Andrew questioned his father. As he strolled down the white hallway wanting feedback, Rufus could be seen down the hallway. When they reached a fair distance near each other, Rufus intruded and said, "Where are you going?"

Feeling as if he was interrogating him, Andrew said, "Just going to see my father. Also, would you happen to know where his headquarters are?"

"Oh, I don't think you wanna go there." Rufus came personally closer to Andrew's body and put his hand on his shoulder. Rufus looked calm but tense at the same time. It was frightening to Andrew.

"Why not?"

Rufus cleared his throat and gave Andrew a bit of a shove. Rufus responded quietly but aggressively. "Like I said earlier, how about you go eat at the cafeteria?"

Feeling that he had no other choice, Andrew submissively said, "Alright."

“Great. Let me take you there.” Rufus took his hand off Andrew’s shoulder and pulled his hand out like a tour guide and pointed his hand to the opposite side that Andrew faced. Rufus softly guided Andrew’s body towards that direction with his other hand.

Andrew detected this as strange. He didn’t want to be in a brawl with any of the security guards, so he just followed Rufus’ lead. While heading down the hallway of the cafeteria, Rufus said, “How would you like to have your steak? Medium-rare?”

Andrew awkwardly said, “Sure. That’d be fine.”

“So, how was your trip to the Spirit World? I saw a glimpse of you from the neural sensors. That world looked more alive than this planet were stuck on.”

Unsure of why Rufus was engaging in conversation, Andrew simply said, “Yeah, it was a whole new experience for me.”

The rest of their trip to the cafeteria lasted in awkward silence until they reached the feastly destination. Rufus said, “That door leads you to the cafeteria. May your soul find you a good appetite.”

Rufus strayed the opposite way, and Andrew opened the red door. The cafeteria was assorted with many white tables and chairs. Lab researchers ate and talked amongst their table groups. 20 lab researchers waited in line with plates in their hands. A giant holographic blue screen filled up the right corner of Andrew’s eye. The spectacle enumerated various graphs with numbers and charts displaying the foundation of the Spirit World. Enhanced projections of the Spirit World showed the forest biome and the bees that transferred dopamine through their vibrant stingers.

When Andrew reached the line of sight of the lab researchers, applause and cheers intensified to Andrew's dismay. He heard many cheers such as "great job buddy," "congratulations," and "a spectacular venture for mankind."

Not sure how to react, Andrew put his hand up as a gesture of modesty and said, "Thank you." He walked past the tables to reach the food servings. Having arrived at the line of people, Andrew received a pat on the back from several lab researchers, whispering solemn complements to him.

Curious about what food they were serving, Andrew tapped the shoulder of the lab researcher in front of him. She turned around and said assuringly, "Anything I can help you with, Andrew?" She had pale white skin and blondish-brown hair with proportionate facial features. The nametag on her white lab coat read "Harriet Mortani."

Reckoning that all the lab researchers knew his name, Andrew said, "Yeah, I was wondering if you could tell me what they're serving today."

Harriet said, "Only the best food that your taste buds could desire. They're serving perfectly-cooked steak with assorted condiments, such as mashed potatoes, yams, and luscious wine. They cook the steak to your very liking."

Slightly chuckling at her over-detailed response, he said, "And when you refer to 'they,' you mean the cooks, right?"

"Of course not. How could you cook such perfect foods without the use of the Spirit Intercom's very own *Chef Bots Inc.* We would not be able to solve our very complicated calculations without the food fuel that they serve."

Andrew looked over her shoulder and did not see the Chef Bots. She said, "Oh, the Chef Bots are in the back preparing more steak."

Andrew pondered if they appeared grotesque or human-like. The condiments that Harriet proclaimed were displayed on a long gray counter, barricaded by a heat-resistant red-stained two-inches-thick plastic barrier.

Harriet said, “My name is also Harriet. Please excuse my inability to address my name to you sooner.”

“I knew your name already. It was on your nametag.”

Releasing a mild blush, she answered, “Yes, of course.”

After being in the presence with her for a decent span of time, Andrew felt a bit attracted to her looks and even her pretentious nature. He admired her blue eyes and smile. She did not wear thick glasses as all the other lab researchers wore. The line began to move as more food was served.

The Chef Bots finally emerged from the back and met Andrew’s eye. The robots had a central red orb on its blocky head figure. Having the height of a normal human being, they obtained glossy white arms with small metal rods that held pots, pans, silverware, and all other sorts of kitchen equipment. Each Chef Bot had eight arms, and each arm did a different task. Small bent antennas rose from their blocky heads. Two small wheels lay under the bottom of the robot for motion around the kitchen. The red orb carried multiple cameras and sensors for motion sensing.

They cut the steak thinly but proportionately. They worked at a rapid rate and would lay their finished plates onto the gray counter for pickup. A tip jar expressed a message that read “Chef Bot Appreciation.” A lab researcher in front of Harriet slipped in a $10 bill to the jar.

Harriet, having her turn to order, said, “I will require two thinly-cut slices of medium-rare steak. My assorted condiment will require one cup of your luscious wine and two perfectly cooked yams.” She dropped a $20 bill into the tip jar.

The Chef Bot blinked its red orb twice in retaliation and moved his blocky figure alongside the gray counter. Harriet followed the lead of the bot, and Andrew was next up to order.

Another Chef Bot rotated from the back of the kitchen and brought itself to the vision of Andrew. Unsure on what to exactly order, Andrew said, “I guess I’ll have medium-rare steak with mashed potatoes.”

The Chef Bot beeped once and said robotically, “Please specify the numeric value of your designated entree and assorted condiments.”

Andrew said, “Two and one.”

The bot questioned, “Two medium-rare full steaks or two medium-rare slices of steaks?”

“Two slices of steak.”

“One cup of mashed potatoes or one spoonful of mashed potatoes?”

Irritated on the constant questions, Andrew completed, “One cup of mashed potatoes, please.”

Thinking that the Chef Bot was done with him, he saw that the bot did not travel down the gray counter. He was waiting for the two beeps of the red orb. After a moment of silent pause, the Chef Bot asked, “Tip?”

Andrew was about to say “a big no” until he saw Harriet glancing at him from the end of the gray counter. Unfortunately, he took out his brown leather wallet from his right pocket and pulled out a $50 bill. Dropping the bill into the jar, the Chef Bot blinked its red orb twice and

continued down the gray counter. Glancing at her glance, Andrew saw a subtle smirk from Harriet. Andrew strolled down the gray counter and saw a big steak where his Chef Bot stood. The Chef Bot that was designated to Andrew took out its knife from one of its eight arms and precisely cut the steak two times. With one of its other hands, it reached to the left side of the counter and grabbed a plate to put the steak on. Further down the gray table appeared a big bowl of mashed potatoes ingrained into the gray counter. The Chef Bot's hand that held the knife retracted and a spoon sprung up from that same rod. The spoon dug into the mashed potatoes and the spoon was flicked into a metallic cup. 15 more spoonfuls were required to fill the rest of the cup. Suddenly, the rest of the seven arms retracted their kitchen gadgets and sprung up spoons for each hand. The Chef Bot dug into the mashed potatoes with the seven other arms and poured the seven spoonfuls into the cup. The Chef Bot plopped the remaining eight spoonfuls with all eight hands at once.

The Chef Bot triggered its red orb three times and said, "Your desired meal is done, sir. Please feel free to rate our service on your hand one through five."

Andrew slowly displayed a high five with his right hand. Scanning the hand with the motion sensors in its red orb, the Chef Bot said, "Thank you for your generous rating, and enjoy your meal."

Marked by the highly advanced engineering, Andrew became more impressed with the technology of Spirit Intercom. Looking for where Harriet was, Andrew saw her sitting alone at a table on the opposite corner of the cafeteria. *Why would she sit so far away from m*e, Andrew thought. He traveled the whole length of the cafeteria until he reached her table. Harriet had her attention focused on her thinly-cut steak.

Andrew asked, "Mind if I sit here?"

Harriet focused her attention on Andrew and said, “Affirmative. I will welcome any former Spirit Intercom participants to accompany me.”

Andrew said, “I’ll take that as a yes then.” He sat down in a chair right next to Harriet and studied the food on his plate. Taking a bite out of the medium-rare steak, he felt as if his taste buds couldn’t taste. He asked himself, *why does this steak taste like nothing?* After small thought, he realized that the food tasted so much richer in the Spirit World. He missed the enhanced senses. The bite of a purple apple tasted very sweet in the Spirit World while medium-rare steak, which he normally loved, tasted very bland.

Trying to engage in small talk, Andrew said, “As a prosthetic engineer myself, the structure of the Chef Bot hands are a work of art.”

Harriet said, “Indeed. It is quite superb how the Chef Bots can partake in eight tasks all at once.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how do they focus their attention on multiple things at once?”

“Through the use of eight control units that are communicated through coded motor neurons, just like the ones that traveled to your brain when you were sent to the Spirit World.”

Andrew grew confused. He said, “I’ve always heard of coded sensory neurons, but I’ve never heard of coded motor neurons. Does that mean they code the movement of the robots?”

Harriet said, “Yes. Sensory neurons affect what you perceive, and motor neurons are used for muscle contraction and movement.”

Genuinely feeling intrigued, Andrew said, “Wow, that’s amazing! Are all the robots in the labs controlled by coded motor neurons?”

“In fact, yes. With the use of Robert’s findings in neuron coding, we can replicate it onto every robot in our labs.”

Andrew asked, “Are you a robot flowing with coded motor neurons, Harriet?”

Releasing a small chuckle, Harriet said, “I sure hope not.” Andrew and Harriet continued eating their food with occasional smiles at each other.

Andrew asked, “So technically, couldn’t Spirit Intercom program human movement with coded motor neurons?” Andrew grew a bit haunted by this question.

Harriet said, “Technically they could, but that would be scary. Spirit Intercom would never do something that inhumane.”

Wanting to change the subject, Andrew said, “What are your thoughts on pre-registration? I mean—it is kind of unfair in my opinion.” Andrew put a spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. “Especially for the poor people who are dying from the earthquakes.”

Harriet said, “From my standpoint, I feel that it is a bit unfair that only the rich have their hands on this state-of-the-art technology. With all these ‘natural’ disasters happening, the world is in complete turmoil right now.”

“Could Spirit Intercom produce enough Contrivances for everyone in the world to use?” asked Andrew.

“Highly doubtful. It would require an astronomical amount of money to create millions of chairs. But maybe if you can bring a pitch to your father, we could implement a realistic increase of chairs for higher volumes of people to enter the Spirit World.”

Enlightened by her idea, Andrew said, “That actually could work. Maybe I could somehow convince him to make more chairs so that ‘more rich people’ could enter the Spirit World.”

Harriet said, “Yes. Give it your best shot.”

Andrew finished his “desired” meal and said, “It was a pleasure talking with you Harriet. I’ll see you around.”

Harriet said, “Take care. Maybe next time I can show you the ins and outs of my job.”

“Sounds great. Lastly, do you know where we place our dishes?”

“Just hand it in to one of the Chef Bots, and they will take care of it for you.”

Andrew finally said, “Alright, hope I can chat with you another time.” Andrew left the table and walked back towards the gray counter. Standing behind the counter, the Chef Bot grabbed the metallic cup and plate that Andrew handed in.

The Chef Bot stated, “Thank you for eating with us. Have a great day.”

Before Andrew placed his last step out of the cafeteria, multiple lab researchers gave him cheers and one of them said, “Go make history Andrew!” Several other applauses set off, and Andrew finally left the cafeteria.

Unsure of where to set his next destination, Andrew didn’t exactly know where his brother and father were. He figured that he ought to visit the black room with the Spirit Contrivance. Andrew also figured that he shouldn’t wait for Marco since he wanted to explore more of the Spirit World. Because all the lab researchers were on their lunch break, he could access the Spirit World without supervision.

Before making any moves, Andrew thought, *I better tell my roommate Kevin of all the shit that went down in these labs. He’ll freak out when I tell him through Mindcord.* Opening up Mindcord, he saw three messages. The first two messages were from his kids Matthew and Lisa.

Lisa wrote, “Excited to see you this weekend, Dad. I hope we can play more Jenga when you get home.” Before reading the next message, Andrew realized that he had lost complete

awareness of what time and day it was. He opened up the calendar from Mindcord and saw that today was Wednesday, and the time was 1:01 a.m. Having left his apartment Tuesday afternoon, he had been at the labs for a solid 12 hours. Sighing with relief, he was thankful that he was not out until the weekend. He opened up the next message from his son.

Matthew wrote, “How come you didn’t check in with me today like you usually do? I want you to go over with me on how to make a prosthetic thumb this weekend. Mom wanted me to go to bed early, so that is why I am writing this message to you at 9:03 p.m.” A bit touched by their messages, Andrew read the last message. It was sent by Kevin.

Kevin wrote, “Dude, where have you been? It’s 12:43 a.m., and you’re still not here. What the heck even is Spirit Intercom? I read a message from your computer (sorry for invading your privacy), and it said for you to visit their labs to reach the ‘Spirit World’ or something. Let me know what the hell is going on.”

Andrew immediately wrote a message that said, “You have no idea what is going on here. I can travel to a dimension through the nervous system with the help of coded neurons. I had a huge bee almost attack me, and it’s been a crazy day! I am not sure when I am coming back. These labs are unbelievable, and I want to figure out more.”

Closing the Mindcord interface, he wanted to now visit the black room. Andrew was still amazed by how cutting-edge the technology was. Andrew had a problem: he was unaware of how to go back to the black room, considering how many hallways and floors there were. He reckoned that he find a lab researcher to lead him to the room with the Spirit Contrivance. After a couple of minutes of searching, Andrew found a lab researcher.

Trying to not sound too abrupt, Andrew asked, “Would you happen to know where the room with the Spirit Contrivance is?”

Turning his body around, the lab researcher just realized who he was talking to. He said, “Hey, it’s Andrew! It’s good to see you. Where is your father and lab crew?”

Andrew said, “They’re busy on their lunch break, and my father told me that I could visit the Spirit World by myself.”

Puzzled, the researcher asked, “Are you sure that he said that? He ordered all the lab researchers to not open the black room for anyone else but ourselves.”

“Do you want me to tell my father that you are not obeying my orders?”

“No, please! Sorry, I was lost on which command I should follow. I’ll grant you access to the room. Come follow me.”

Andrew felt confident in this interchange. He said, “Good.” The lab researcher walked; Andrew followed. Andrew hoped that Rufus or his father wouldn’t catch a glimpse of him walking. After walking for about five minutes, they finally made it to the locked door of the black room. Remembering that his father entered with the use of eye recognition, Andrew was confused about how the lab researcher would handle this. The researcher dug into the left pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a one-inch by a one-inch small black screen. He put his finger on the black screen for three seconds and a picture of an eye appeared. Raising the black screen to the eye recognition of the door, the lab researcher opened the entrance of the black room.

Andrew asked, “How in God’s name did you do that?”

The researcher said, “With a screen of Robert’s eye, we can open the door through the recognition of his eye. He gives all the lab researchers a diagram of the eye so that we can use it for contrivance entrances.”

Andrew said, “Impressive.” They both entered the black room, and Andrew made sure to be in front of the lab researcher.

Andrew said, “I think I’m good from here. You can go now.”

The researcher said, “I think it would be better if I supervised you.”

Not wanting the researcher to be in his presence, Andrew said, “I command you to leave now. Don’t disrespect my authority.”

The researcher looked alarmed and said, “Very well then.” He left the room, but Andrew caught him off guard before he left.

Andrew asked, “Please make sure to shut the door on your way out.”

“At your command, sir.” The researcher closed the door, and Andrew was alone in the black room. Andrew immediately took action. He walked up to the interdimensional communicator system and still saw that it was on, just like what he had thought. No lab researchers around, Andrew sat on the chair, attached the Spirit Emissary around his head, and felt ready until he realized something important. He needed the ignition key to start the machine up, and he did not know where it could be.

Thinking that the lab researcher couldn’t have gone that far, Andrew escaped out of the black room and looked for him. Andrew saw him walking down the hallway. He tapped on his shoulder and asked, “Could you please come back to the room? I need your help on something.”

The lab researcher was disgruntled and said, “I thought you didn’t want me back there before. You told me to shut the door on my way out. What could you possibly want, Mr. Rutano?”

“I need you to ignite the machine so that I can go to the Spirit World.”

“No way in hell, Andrew. I can’t just send you to the Spirit World without permission from your father. It’s against our code.”

Andrew said, “Please, just do this for me.” He tried coming up with a scheme to convince him. “My father wants me to do a task there, and he told me to do it myself.”

The researcher said, “Yeah right.”

“Do you want me to tell my father that you're not obeying his orders?”

“Don’t pull that card on me again. You better supply me with a better reason if you want me to ignite it.”

“Please—” Andrew looked at the researcher’s name tag. “Bradford, I need this. I’ll owe you one.”

Bradford said, “Alright. You owe me a favor during your time here. I’ll ignite the interdimensional communicator for you if you come through with my favor.”

Andrew said, “I will. Thank you so much.” Bradford and Andrew walked together back to the black room entrance. The door shut when Andrew originally left the room, so Bradford needed to take out his small screen of Robert’s eye again. After penetrating the door open, they both entered, and Bradford walked towards the ignition station of the black room.

Andrew got into the Spirit Contrivance and attached the disproportionate Spirit Emissary on the crown of his head.

Andrew asked, “So do you always have a key on you at all times?”

Bradford looked at the key-hole ignition and said, “Of course not. None of the researchers have the ignition key on them.”

“What! How are we supposed to start the ignition then, genius?

“I can leave now if you want?”

Probably pushing his buttons too much, Andrew said, “Sorry. Just do your thing.” Bradford bent down on his knees behind the ignition station. He pulled out a small brass key

from his lab coat pocket and inserted the key into a lock that opened a box. The brass key unlocked the box that held the five-inch intricately-grooved key to ignite the system.

Andrew said sarcastically, “A key for a key. How surprising.”

Bradford ignored Andrew and obtained the five-inch key. Bradford inserted this key right away into the ignition, but it didn’t start.

Andrew said, “Thanks for listening to my orders. I really appreciate it.”

Bradford said, “Just don’t forget that you owe me a favor.” Without saying goodbye, Bradford started the ignition. Andrew thought, *well, here I go again,* just before he grew unresponsive.

CHAPTER 7:

Is it dangerous to go behind Father's back?

How much longer can Andrew be intact?

Andrew, robotically impressed with the Chef Bot,

Was not what Andrew sought.

By the river, Andrew awoke next to Marco's laying body. Andrew gained his vision back and saw the bee buzzing next to him with its gray stinger. Andrew's muscles convulsed and he immediately stood up. Backing away from the bee, he grew more petrified. The bee's wings flapped quicker than a hummingbird's, and it remained still in its spot. Waiting to see what it would do, Andrew stood still as well. His blood vessels pumped less, and his muscles relaxed. Andrew finally looked into the eyes of the bee. He could still hear the bee's loud buzzing from its wings.

Knowing a bit of biology as a prosthetic engineer, Andrew knew that the bee's eyes were not human-like, and instead they were light-sensing eyes. If he did not move, the bee would not detect him. Andrew waved his hand gently, and the bee let off a little flinch. Curious about the bee's reaction, Andrew approached the bee with one step. The bee flinched a little again but thankfully did not charge Andrew. He took another step, but this time the bee did not move a muscle. He took several more steps, and the bee continued to flutter in its stationary spot. For no reason, Andrew's subconscious told him to climb on the bee's back. Andrew, having complete confidence of not knowing what he was doing, walked towards the back end of the bee. His hand touched the bee's abdomen. The exoskeleton that Andrew touched was soft and hairy. To

Andrew's surprise, the bee had still not moved. Most bees tend to flee from humans, but Andrew was confused about this "helluva creature" not moving.

Andrew attached his other hand to the abdomen and pulled himself up to the thorax of the bee. Wondering how he made it this far onto the bee, Andrew moved himself to a mildly comfortable position. He patted the thorax with his right hand two times. Instantly, the bee departed and lunged itself forward with vigorous speed. Andrew almost lost his grasp and tenaciously grabbed the bee's thorax with all his strength. The bee accelerated upward through the brushes of the trees. Andrew could only see leaves and bark from the purple apple trees. The bee strafed up smoothly at an almost-exact angle of 45 degrees, but it moved with such high intensity. Close to the tree's apex height, the bee carried Andrew through the last branches of the trees. Rising above the trees from the thick forest, the bee changed the angle from flying upward to flying horizontally straight, almost propelling Andrew off the bee's back.

Andrew situated himself on the back and let out a big sigh of relief. The bee's flight felt exhilarating to Andrew, and he laughed out all his anxiety. Andrew thought, *these bee creatures are insane!* Andrew figured that he should tell Kevin through Mindcord all about this. He tried accessing it, but he realized that he wouldn't be able to achieve this in the Spirit World. Bringing back his attention to the present, he saw the source of light dim down. The whole time he was at the Spirit World had been daylight. The setting light exposed a bright vibrant purple.

Appraising the beauty of the sky while gliding on the bee, Andrew lost contact with himself, and his vision faded. He woke up on the Spirit Contrivance and felt mentally disoriented. He mumbled half-asleep, "Who turned off the paradise?" He obtained his vision in the physical world and saw Marco and his father staring at him with disgust. Lab researchers behind his brother and his father stared at Andrew.

Robert said, “What the hell are you doing, Andrew!”

Marco immediately followed up with his dad and said, “Wake up, Drewster!”

Andrew’s anger fluctuated, and he said, “Hey, what gives guys! Why would you send me out of the Spirit World?”

Marco said, “Well, sorry about hurting your feelings. Why would you go there without me?”

Robert said, “And why would you go to the Spirit World without my permission?”

Andrew said, “You guys never came back, and I was trying to fulfill the task that you gave us. Where were you guys? I didn’t see Marco at the cafeteria.” Andrew felt like he was on trial.

Marco said, “I did eat at the cafeteria, but I went without you. I didn’t see you at the cafeteria.”

Andrew quickly said, “I did.”

Robert chose to speak and said, “I was in my headquarters planning for the dimensional management of my lab workers. Andrew, you must acquire more responsibility if you want to continue to test out my machine.”

Trying not to stir up any more trouble, Andrew said, “Okay, I won’t.” Andrew wanted to still question them, but he gave up. They were already mad enough.

Robert, appearing troubled, stared at the floor. He said, “I think it is time that you, Andrew, take a break from Spirit Intercom. It would be best for you to come back when we have analyzed all the data we collected over the past day.”

Feeling a bit disappointed, Andrew asked, “But why, dad?”

Marco said, “What he is trying to say is that you’ve been a nuance and that you should come back when you get yourself back together.”

Andrew said, “Shut up, Marco.”

Robert said, “That is not what I meant, Andrew. I just think that you should take in all that has happened, and rethink your approach when you come back.”

Knowing in reality that they just didn’t want him there because he disobeyed their orders, Andrew simply just said, “Fine.”

Robert said, “Rufus will escort you and return your Sporksterbeale. I know, son, that this is difficult, but trust me because this will all be for the best.” Rufus entered the black room, carrying Andrew’s finger-scanning car keys. Andrew began to frown as the process of escorting him ensued.

Rufus said, “Andrew, it’s time for us to head out now.” Andrew got out of the Spirit Contrivance and walked to Rufus. He stared down the eyes of his brother and father. Rufus gave a minor push to Andrew, and they both walked out of the black room.

As they walked down the many hallways, Rufus made many fake empathetic remarks while Andrew left the labs without saying a word. Several lab researchers walk past him, not giving the usual applause that Andrew had expected. Andrew was not aware of anything because of his total distraught. After many bleak moments of departure out of the labs, they both made it to the exit of the labs.

Outside of the complexes, Rufus said, “Here are your keys.” Rufus gave Andrew his possessions, and the Sporksterbeale arrived at the front lot of the labs.

The voice of the Sporksterbeale said, “It’s good to see you, Andrew.”

Maintaining his mute state, Andrew didn’t acknowledge the car and entered the vehicle.

Andrew said, “Set destination to Benjy’s Bar.” He laid in his car seat as the Sporksterbeale drove him to a bar that was near his house on Park Avenue. The gates of the labs opened up, and Andrew left his father’s labs.

The voice said, “You never tend to drink, Andrew. Are you sure this destination will satisfy you?”

Andrew said, “Just keep driving.” He was not in the mood to back up anything and felt so agitated that he could stop anyone in his path. But this was not the case because down the street he saw hoards of people walling off the road with their bodies in front of him. The car was about one mile away from Spirit Intercom.

A tall muscular man with a loudspeaker in the front of the wall of men exclaimed, “Andrew Rutano, please step out of your car now, or we will burn you to the graves!” The men wore rugged leather coats, holding double-barrel shotguns and various melee weapons. Looking notably angry, they looked like they would start mayhem upon Andrew.

Andrew thought, *what the hell did I just get myself into.* His first thought was to drive off the road the other way, but he figured that they would shoot at him. He told the Sporksterbeale loudly, “Stop the car, now!” The car screeched its tires and decelerated until it was about 20 feet away from the puzzled mob.

Andrew estimated about 30 people were blocking his passage. Five run-down cars were on the side of the road, and the cars conveyed spray-painted messages of hate against the government, such as “federal is not credible,” “bomb Spirit Intercom,” and “eradicate the rich.” Andrew reckoned that these people were extremists against the government.

The man with the loudspeaker said, “Get out of your car, now!” Andrew quickly detached his seatbelt and opened the door promptly, making his whole body visible to them.

Trying to keep them as calm as possible, Andrew said, “What is it that I can do for you guys?”

The man said, “Don’t say another word unless I tell you to do so! My name is Wallace Creighton, and I am the leader of the Spirit Radicals. We demand that you give us access to the Spirit World. We have always been clawing through life from these horrific conditions that geothermal energy brought onto us. With the chance to deploy ourselves to the Spirit World, we do not want to throw away that opportunity. The high amounts of corruption that the government engages in with the rich is complete bullshit, and we will do everything possible to get our hands on the Spirit dimension. So, are you willing to help us or not? You may speak now.” The crowd rallied behind him and hollered loud yells of enthusiasm.

Andrew said, “First of all, Mr. Creighton, how did you know where I was? And second, how do you possibly know who I am?”

Mr. Creighton said, “Ha! Are you kidding me? The news has been all over town with you. You’re making the history books, considering that you are the first man to reach the Spirit World. Please call me Wallace, too. So is that a yes or no for the access?”

Andrew, of course, couldn’t give them access, but he didn’t want to upset them to the point where they exterminate him; therefore, he said, “I can give you access, but I just need the right opportunities to occur.”

The crowd let off jovial cheers, and Wallace said, “Great!” He looked behind himself and said, “I told you we could trust this guy!” He looked back at Andrew and said, “Come with us.”

Andrew said, “I don’t think I can at this moment. I need to get back to my apartment and get some rest.”

Wallace said, “If you don’t come to us, we’ll have to put *you* to rest. Does that sound better?”

Frightened and wary of death, Andrew said, “No, sir. I’ll come with you guys.” The crowd let off a big cheer.

Wallace said, “Good. I’ll drive you to our place with your Sporksterbeale. I hear it’s a high luxury car.”

Andrew remained subservient and said, “Go ahead.” Andrew’s level of comfort went down the drain, and he gave the keys to Wallace.

Playing around with the keys, Wallace said to his group, “I’ll lead the way. Just stick behind us. You guys know the drill! Who’s ready to deliver some justice!”

The crowd as a group said, “Justice for all! Justice for all! Justice for all!” They got into their low-maintenance vehicles, five or six people per car, and they positioned their cars behind the Sporksterbeale. Wallace got into the Sporksterbeale and saw that there was no steering wheel or gas pedal. Andrew, who was sitting next to Wallace in the front seat, took action.

Not wanting to go through the same mistake as last time, Andrew immediately said, “Sporksterbeale, I grant physical control access to Wallace.” The steering wheel and gas pedal opened up, and Andrew was happy he avoided this minor issue.

Wallace said, “Holy shit. This is some fancy scientific stuff.” He took hold of the steering wheel and said to Andrew, “Let’s make some business.” Out of the blue, Wallace pulled out a black ski mask and put it over Andrew’s head swiftly. Andrew’s first reaction was to struggle, but Wallace kept Andrew under his hold. “Don’t struggle.”

Andrew wanted to fight back, but he knew there was no way out. Andrew heard the Sporksterbeale’s ignition start, and Wallace drove off.

CHAPTER 8:

Where is this Wallace person going?

What were these people bestowing?

Kicked from the labs,

Andrew's patience capped.

Under the authority of Wallace, Andrew had been in the car, trying to speak as little as possible. All Andrew could see was pitch black. They had been driving for twenty minutes without saying a word until Wallace asked a question. He asked, "Andrew, do you have a family?"

Andrew, clearing up his voice, said, "Yes, sir."

Not getting a full response, Wallace said, "And . . ."

"And I have a 10-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son."

"Married?"

"No. Divorced."

"Aw . . . that's tough."

"No, it was for the better."

The car remained silent for another minute of driving. Wallace asked, "If the world was going to end, would you want your family safe and secure?"

Andrew said, "Yes, of course." He knew where Wallace was going with this.

"If you were I, do you think I would want my family to be secure?"

Having trouble breathing with the mask, Andrew coughed deeply and said, “Yes.” Flem reached the inner layer of the ski mask, and Andrew grew more claustrophobic.

Wallace continued and said, “This is why we go through all the trouble: for the sake of our families. We all want what is best for our families, and we make sacrifices to fulfill this need. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“That is why I am going to need you to cooperate with us as best as possible.”

“Yes.” Andrew’s mind jumpstarted, and he realized that he could ask for help by using Mindcord. He immediately accessed the interface. He opened up the tab for “Messages” and chose “Kevin.” Andrew, wanting to write a dramatized message for help, realized he couldn’t because there was no service available. Andrew endured high frustration and thought, *damn, this sucks.* Before closing the interface, he saw the time was 5:46 a.m.

Wallace continued driving for one hour, and Andrew fell asleep on the way due to not getting sleep for 21 hours straight. The Sporksterbeale finally came to a stop. Wallace removed the mask off Andrew and slapped him in the face. He said, “Hey! Wake up! We got business to do, Mr. Rutano!” Petrified by the slap, Andrew awoke with phlegm partly stuck onto his nose and mouth area.

Instead of being enclosed in the darkness, Andrew was now able to see. Having a structure of a circus tent, the hideout was encircled with trash and building debris. They were in a plain desert with no other buildings or people in sight. The hideout was a torn-down building with a faded red and white color on the roof. Rats nibbled on the almost-decomposed scraps around the outside of the trashed building. The only sense of communication they had with the

outside world was a bent TV antenna sticking out the roof of the building. The Spirit Radicals exited the five run-down cars and talked amongst themselves.

Wallace, already out of the car, said, “Get your ass over here, Andrew!”

Andrew said haphazardly, “On my way.” He closed the car door and treaded to Wallace’s position. Andrew thought, *I should steal my keys back and escape outta this shitshow.* He realized that this would be suicide and that there was no way he could pull that off. The Spirit Radicals drew themselves closer to Wallace and stopped their conversations.

Wallace said, “My brothers, I propose that we begin planning in our refuge.”

Andrew already despised all these men, but he knew he was obliged to listen. Andrew saw that Wallace had pulled out a gun, aiming at his torso. Wallace was first to enter the building; Andrew followed, and the rest of the men entered after Andrew.

Andrew noticed more loads of garbage in the interior of the building. The pungent smell of odor filled the entire room. A disorganized pile of guns was enclosed by a partially broken glass case on the interior left corner. The following gun types appeared to Andrew’s discernment: AK-47s, uzis, magnums, and snipers. A podium was centered with 30 wooden chairs laid out by each other. Flies invaded Andrew’s personal space, and the lumber from the circus tent was rotten. Wallace walked up to the podium and said, “Fine men, please take your seats.”

The men dodged Andrew’s presence as they made their way to the chairs. A man gave Andrew’s back a tough shove as he moved. Andrew said, “Hey! Who did that?” Andrew looked behind and saw that the person wore glasses with no lenses and had swollen blemishes on his right arm.

The man said dominantly, “It was me! You better supply us with access, man, or else we ain’t giving you any mercy.”

Andrew wanted to maintain his ground. He was tired of people constantly poking him around. Andrew said nonchalantly, “And who are you exactly?”

The man said, “Jimmy Creighton, son of Wallace.” He punched Andrew on the shoulder. “Take a damn seat already.”

Andrew, massaging his punched shoulder, lowered his ego and found a seat in the back row. Andrew felt he was under severe bondage.

Wallace said, “We have all been under scrutiny for too long, and now is the time for a change. A vast ocean separates us from our demolishing physical world and the Spirit World. But with Andrew to guide us, he can create a bridge for us to reach that goal. I have never been this exhilarated to reach a new sense of freedom out of this wretched Earth.” Wallace took a small pause and continued. “To achieve this, we need to specifically plan out how Andrew will sneak us into Spirit Intercom. This is where I open up the floor to Andrew.”

Andrew thought, *sneak in the labs? There is no chance that they could ever pull this off.* The radicals turned their heads to where Andrew sat. He thought, *they couldn’t possibly think that I knew a way to sneak into the labs, considering I was only there one time.* Knowing that they were expecting a response, Andrew contrived a plan and said, “What I was thinking is that you guys hook me up with a camera so that you guys could scan the interior and scope the dimensions of the labs. If you guys know the architecture, you would be able to pinpoint possible unguarded entries into the labs. Next time I’m invited to the labs, you guys let me do my normal thing there so that I can explore as much of the labs as possible. So, what is your guy’s take on this plan?”

Wallace said, “Sounds like a great plan to me. How about you guys? What are your thoughts?”

The men let off affirmative yells of “yeah.” Andrew was glad they confirmed this on-the-spot plan. The men disappeared out of their chairs and travelled outside the building. Wallace got off the podium and walked over to Andrew. Wallace said, “Don’t think that you’re off the hook just yet. You and I still gotta go over some of the details.” Andrew muttered quiet curses, wanting to leave this hellhole as quickly as possible. All Andrew wanted was the sweet comfort of sleeping in his warm bed.

Andrew knew what to say back, but he didn’t want to say it. His low patience couldn’t hold it back so he said, “I think it would be better if we go over the terms the next day. I need to get back to my apartment and get some rest. You’d understand, right?”

Wallace’s half-smile tainted to a half-frown. He said aggressively, “You think we care about your ‘rest.’ You ain’t going nowhere until we figure this shit out. No visiting family, taking bathroom breaks, sleeping, eating, drinking, or even *sitting* for you until we finish this!” He kicked Andrew’s chair laterally, and Andrew fell hard onto the floor. “Understand!”

Andrew wanted to punch Wallace in the nose, but he knew he had to remain submissive. There was no other way. Andrew breathed out heavily and said, “Very well, then.” Andrew lifted his body from the ground.

Wallace said, “Please follow me to my office.” Towards the left corner of the building was a small room with a door that read “Lead Radical.” Wallace opened the door, and Andrew followed him after. The room only had one light source: a flickering small light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A photograph of the front view Spirit Intercom building was displayed on top of a wall behind his desk. Wallace sat on his immensely-torn leather chair as Andrew sat on an uncomfortable metallic chair.

Andrew said, “So what in God’s name do you want to plan?”

Wallace took a black pen out of his drawer and said, “Just shut up and be quiet.” Wallace rose from his chair and swiftly punctured Andrew’s forehead with the pen.

Andrew immediately escaped out of the chair and said, “What the heck, man! What are you doing?”

Wallace said, “There. I inserted a tiny microscopic camera on your forehead.”

Andrew said, “With a pen? Are you insane or something?”

“No. You’re the insane one. This device is not a pen. The device is called a Camera Furnisher, and it carries ten microscopic cameras in itself and can be placed with exerted force.”

Andrew tightly put his hand over his forehead and said, “That was not with force. You stuck that shit on my head brutally.”

Andrew scratched his forehead and asked, “Will this thing be able to come off? I can’t even feel the camera with my finger, but I still feel like it’s a splinter poking deep into my body.”

Wallace said, “Don’t even think about taking that off. It’s connected tightly to your skin, and it’s meant to be small so that the lab researchers won’t be able to spot it.”

Andrew said, “Now that we have the camera in me, I feel it’s time to call it a day. How about you?”

Wallace said, “Shut up. Now that the hard part of the planning is done, it’s time we go over how you are going to physically perform this plan.” He put the Camera Furnisher back into his drawer.

Andrew said, “What do you mean? All I gotta do is just work there normally and explore more of the building. There’s nothing more that needs to be said.”

“It’s not all that simple. What you need are their trust and respect. Thinking about the past, why did they make you take a break from their labs?”

Andrew sighed and said, “Just because I used the contrivance without supervision … but that doesn’t mean that I don’t have their trust. I’m still the son of the creator, *the* Robert Rutano.”

Wallace said, “That doesn’t permit you to be on autopilot and do whatever you desire. You gotta be disciplined. You have to act passionate and pretend that you deeply care for the labs. Then you will earn their trust.”

Andrew asked, “Why do I need their trust in the first place?”

Wallace reached into his drawer and took out a blue composition book. Wallace said, “So that you can obtain security passes and rights for inaccessible rooms. We want as many resources possible that we can use to our advantage.”

Andrew said, “I doubt that they would be willing to give me any security access. After all, it’s not like I’m a security guard or a lab researcher.”

Wallace opened the composition book, and Andrew saw an upside-down long list of names. Wallace flipped through the pages of many names and numbers alongside each name and said, “This is a list of every security guard and lab researcher who works at Spirit Intercom. Next to each name is their security ID number.” He finished flipping through the 20 pages of names.

Andrew was impressed and shocked at the same time. He asked, “How in the hell did you get that list, and who gave it to you?”

Wallace said, “I got a guy who has been on the staff for a long time. His name is Rick, and he is a security guard there. You may have met him.”

“Nope. And if you have a guy working on the inside, why doesn’t he just give me the lock combinations?”

“Because he’s not the head security chief.” Pointing at a name, Wallace said, “This is the chief, Kurt Strawlin. If you can somehow even get in touch with him that’d be impressive. But I

doubt it. I say your best bet is to use Rick as a referral, a referral that can second-handedly contact the chief. Going to the chief head-on is too abrupt and will likely get nothing done. With this list you will be able to learn the names of every guard since each of them has a security ID badge on them at all times. Take this book with you when you're there." He handed it to Andrew's palm.

Continuing, Wallace said, "Saying hello to each of the guards will establish a closer bond with you and Spirit Intercom. My mate, Rick, may be able to help you out with any security questions or requests that you have. You understanding more of the plan?"

Andrew said, "Yeah. I am. Would you say that we're about done now?" Andrew was growing more exhausted by the second, and all he wanted was some nice quiet sleep time.

Wallace said, "There's only one more thing we need to go over." Wallace reached into his other drawer and pulled out a small handheld cardboard box. "When you're at the labs, make sure to deliver this package to Rick."

Andrew asked, "What is it?"

Wallace said, "Just give it to him. He'll know what to do with it. Just say it's from Wallace."

"I don't even know what Rick looks like."

Wallace said, "Rick told me that he usually patrols the southeastern part of the building near Room 2B or something. When you get the chance, just scout that area and give it to him." Wallace put the box into Andrew's left hand.

Andrew again asked, "What's *in* the box?"

Wallace said, “Shut up for the hundredth time. Give it to him. It’s an order. Follow it. Now get outta my sight! Close the door on your way out.” He pointed his finger sternly out the door.

Andrew said, “By all means.” Andrew spurted out of the room with the box and composition book in his hand. Shutting the door, he was ready to leave at a minute's notice; all he wanted was his sleep. Andrew still had his hand on the doorknob. Jimmy up in his face. Andrew’s body shivered from the abrupt startle.

Jimmy had a small black knife up to Andrew’s neck. Quietly but aggressively, he said, “You better do what my father ordered you to do, or else this knife is eating your pharynx.” Andrew’s tiresome state came inside-out, and his petrified state came over him.

Andrew panicked and said, “Don’t worry, man. I’m dedicated and won’t let you down and—”

Jimmy said, “Cut your bullshit. Get the hell outta here!” He released the knife away from Andrew and pushed him out of the building until Andrew fell on the outside desert floor.

Genuinely scared of Jimmy, Andrew scouted for his car but realized he didn’t have his keys. He asked, “Hey, Jimmy. Do you happen to know where my keys are?”

Jimmy came to the building entrance and windmilled the keys to the floor next to Andrew. “Here’s your keys. Better follow through with your shit or else—” Jimmy pulled out his knife and pretended to slice his neck.

Andrew scrambled for his keys and sprinted to his car. Smashing the touch recognition with his finger, he prompted the car door open. He threw the box and composition book to the backseat and sat in the front. Jimmy had a daunting stare on Andrew the entire time. Too afraid

to look into the eyes of this killer, Andrew, grabbing the steering wheel, drove off with his car wheels screeching from a 180-degree turn. Dust dispersed behind.

CHAPTER 9:

What was in the box?

How threatening do the radicals concoct?

Camera ingrained,

Surveillance of Andrew was sustained.

Looking back at the secluded hideout, Andrew just drove. *Drive straight*, he told himself until he told the Sporksterbeale, “Drive to my apartment now.” The car engulfed the steering wheel and gas pedal and took over control. He realized that he should mark the location of where the hideout was in case he wanted to visit it back. Andrew said, “Yo, Sporksterbeale. Before you autopilot me home, please pinpoint this location on your map and name it as ‘Radical Hideout.’”

The Sporksterbeale voice stated, “Gotcha. Location is marked. Longitude and latitude have been coordinated. I will engage in self-driving mode and drive to your apartment now.” Andrew finally relaxed and his tension shriveled. Andrew closed his eyes and fell asleep on the way to his apartment.

After driving for about three hours, the car stopped on the street of Andrew’s apartment. Andrew was still in deep sleep. The Sporksterbeale honked itself and said, “Andrew! Andrew? You have arrived at your destination. Wakey wakey!”

Andrew gradually opened his eyelids. Checking the Mindcord time, he saw it was 8:03 a.m. It was still a Wednesday. He was finally home. His anticipation to sleep in his bed couldn’t be contained. Andrew opened the garage door for the Sporksterbeale to park in. Kevin’s silver TY Zoor car was parked in the garage. Leaving the handheld box that was in the backseat,

Andrew escaped out of the Sporksterbeale, ran to his bedroom, and flung his body into his bed. Before closing his eyes, he saw Kevin enter his room with a troubled look on his face. Kevin said, “Bro, where the hell were you? Are you okay?”

Andrew said, “I’ll explain everything that happened to you later. I’m dead. Please lemme sleep.”

Kevin said, “Alright. As soon as you wake up rested, let me know.”

Similar to how Wallace told Andrew to close the door on his way out, Andrew said, “Kevin, close the door on your way out.”

Kevin departed from his room, and Andrew received some well-deserved sleep.

Andrew had slept for a solid 8 hours. Andrew’s instinct every time he woke up was to check the latest news on Mindcord; so he did just that. He saw the time was 4:11 p.m. Checking the daily bulletin of Mindcord News, he saw an article that stated “Europe has Split into Two Continents from a Massive Earthquake.” Another article stated, “African Inhabitants Completely Wiped Out from Severe Air Pollution and Smoke.” Andrew was alarmed by these catastrophic events. He selected his message tab and saw a message labeled from Robert Rutano. Andrew’s mind grew bewildered. He opened the message and it read the following:

“Hello, my son. I have been thinking for quite some time over the past several hours, and I finally came to a decision. I realized it was absolutely foolish of me to dismiss you out of the labs. All you desired was to visit the labs on your own time, which I understand being that I am a very curious person myself. I want you to come back as soon as you can so that you can help me once again. I invite you to join us on a one-week-long endeavour in the Spirit World where we try to uncover as much data and information about this dimension. Once again, I am truly sorry for kicking you out of the labs. I will always love you, and please come back.”

Andrew was perplexed by this message. He didn't know how to feel about this. Andrew thought, *why is my father bringing so much compassion?* He realized what he was feeling. He felt admired. He felt needed. He felt loved. He felt a desire to come back. He had to. If not, then Spirit Radicals would annihilate him.

Kevin barged into his room. He interrupted Andrew's train of thought. Kevin asked, "So are you going to tell me what happened?"

Andrew said, "Give it a break already. I'll tell you later. Get out!" Kevin got the message and shut the door on his way.

Andrew's train of thought resumed. He would go to Spirit Intercom right away—right after he explains everything to his aggravating roommate. It would be time to return to his father. He turned off Mindcord and got off his comforting bed.

In the living room, Andrew looked for Kevin. Kevin sat on the couch watching a news channel named MCN (Manhattan City News) on his 64K TV. Andrew said, "News? Aren't you sick of that already, considering everything is just bad nowadays."

Kevin turned to Andrew and said, "What's also bad is you not giving me any news about *you*."

Andrew said, "Jeez. I'll tell you now."

Kevin said, "Finally. It's about time."

"First, turn off that sad-sack news."

Kevin's snap of his fingers signaled the TV to turn off. Kevin had his full-on attention toward Andrew. Andrew said, "I'll be brief. All that happened was that I was the first one to enter the Spirit World dimension, I got coded neurons injected into my brain, I fought a bee that had a dopamine compositor in its stinger, I got fed by robots, and now I am home."

Kevin just stared at Andrew blankly. Kevin said, “Okay, there’s no damn way you did that. You’re shittin’ me, right? Are ya?”

Andrew said, “Nope. That’s the full truth.” Except that it wasn’t the full truth. Andrew didn’t want to bring up the Spirit Radicals and be kicked out of Spirit Intercom for unethical reasons; but, in Andrew’s mind, it was the truth.

Kevin said, “Well then. That’s a lot to take in.” He took a short pause. “Why did it take you 20 hours?”

Andrew thought, *maybe it’s because I got kidnapped by a bunch of terrifying rebels*. Andrew said, “What can I explain? It was a long shift, and we did a lot of testing.” Andrew knew this statement was just a small white lie, but he still felt a little guilty for lying to his best friend.

Kevin said, “Alright. That was one hell of a ride for you. At least you’re back now.”

Andrew said, “On that note, I actually won’t be here for a week because I’m leaving for another assignment with Spirit Intercom. And I need you to maybe watch over my kids for me this weekend because they’re visiting at that time. Sorry about that.”

Kevin grew disappointed but not to the point of irritation. He said, “Oh damn. That sucks. The second I think you’re back you leave.” He closed his eyes and shook his head for a second. “And regarding your question, I can take care of your kids.”

Andrew said, “Thanks, bro, so much. I appreciate it.”

“Sure, no problem. I’m sure that your kids will be a bit saddened you won’t be here.”

“Ahh. It’ll be fine.” Andrew walked to the kitchen and opened the snack pantry. He reached his hand in the back and took out a sprocket by accident. “Damn, you’re right. There are a lot of prosthetic parts here.”

Kevin said, “Well, anyway. Did you message them that you won’t be able to see them?”

Andrew said, “Why do you care so much, dude? I have everything under control.”

Reaching the point of irritation, Kevin said, “Do you have everything under control?”

Andrew asked, “Bro, what’s your deal? Why are you acting like this?”

Kevin rose from the sofa. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s the fact that you were gone for 21 hours straight, or maybe it’s the fact that you haven’t explained shit to me. Do you even know what you’re getting yourself into in Spirit Intercom?”

Andrew said, “What do you mean? I already told you. Spirit Intercom is fine. My father owns the place for God’s sake.”

Kevin walked closer to Andrew. “That place is not normal. Did you know they only allow the pre-registered to go? Do you know how many people want to have access to Spirit Intercom? It’s astronomical. The world is in turmoil. You saw it on the news. And you don’t suspect that anything bad could happen there? If I were you, I would rethink my entire approach to all this shit you’ve been through so far.” Kevin was right next to Andrew at this point.

Andrew knew that all of this was true, but he couldn’t admit it to Kevin. The Spirit Radicals were watching him through the camera at this very instant, and he couldn’t reveal anything. Andrew knew the reality he was getting himself into, but there was no other choice. Andrew said, “I know the world is going through trauma. I accept that. However, I have to give this place a chance. It’s what my father would want.” Andrew thought, *I could give a shit what my father thinks*.

Kevin said, “Don’t do all this just for your father. Start living for yourself, Andrew! Who gives a shit about your dad! What you should care about is your safety.”

Andrew agreed with all this 100 percent. On the other hand, he couldn’t *say* that he agreed with him. Andrew said, “I’m sorry, Kevin. I have to go. I’ll leave it at that.”

Kevin was furious, and he knew that he couldn't change his mind. He said, "So, when are you leaving?"

Andrew said, "To be frank, I'm planning to leave now. They want me there as soon as possible. Sorry again about this, and thanks for watching over my kids."

Kevin was now saddened. He said, "This sucks. Just stay safe. That's all I can say."

Andrew said, "Thanks. I'll see you soon"

Kevin said, "Bye."

All Andrew brought were his car keys, wallet, and his microscopic camera that was ingrained in his forehead. Andrew left the room and entered his Sporksterbeale. The car's voice activated and asked, "Where do you wish to go today, Andrew?"

Andrew said, "Spirit Intercom." He suspended the garage doors open and left his apartment. Not in a rush this time, Andrew didn't want his car to go on an experimental route. He let the car do its thing.

His car made it to the bad part of town, which was supposedly the majority of the town. His car continued driving through the troubled streets. As they passed City Hall, Andrew thought, *let's see what the new daily commotion is going on at City Hall.* Andrew looked out the window and saw City Hall was completely ravaged. The building had been burnt down, and dislodged government official bodies laid lifelessly in the debris. Andrew felt his eyes were deceiving him. He was horrified by this site. The Sporksterbeale said, "You seem intrigued by this location. Would you like me to take a rest stop for you to explore more of this desired place that you seem to seek?"

Andrew was in disbelief with what the Sporksterbeale stated. Andrew said, "No! Why would you ask that? Get the hell away from this place! Keep driving to Spirit Intercom!"

The Sporksterbeale voice stated, “Very well. Would you like me to introduce an experimental route to Spirit Intercom today? You will reach your destination three minutes quicker.”

Andrew said, “Also no! Are you drunk or something? Doesn’t your processor learn from its past mistakes?”

The Sporksterbeale said, “You wish to get drunk? Would you like me to set your destination to Benjy’s Bar?”

Andrew was infuriated. He said, “Holy shit! Shut the hell up already! Drive me to Spirit Intercom! Stop with all these destination suggestions.”

The Sporksterbeale voice stated, “Very well.” His car passed through the remaining streets. The closer they were to Spirit Intercom while driving, the higher the number of people there were on the streets. The people wore rags and laid depressed on the dust-filled street, possibly high on drugs or extremely intoxicated. Andrew could finally see the labs from his line of sight. Oddly, the insignia on the building had changed from the yellow lightning bolt to a yellow bee. He reached the gate of the labs and waited for it to open. A yellow-suited security guard smiled from his station and opened the gates like last time. The guard waved his hand, and the Sporksterbeale made it inside the gate.

The guard said, “It’s great to see you again, Andrew! Spirit Intercom awaits you once again!” His smile looked so genuine that Andrew couldn’t tell if the guard was this enthusiastic.

Andrew said, “Thanks. I’m excited to be here. Do you want me to engage in physical controls for the Sporksterbeale so that we avoid the fuss like last time?”

The guard said, “Whatever you prefer. Sorry about last time. Our hospitality was inexcusable last time. We will do whatever you find more convenient.”

Andrew grew surprised with this behavioral change but welcomed it. Andrew said, “Alrighty then.” Andrew got out of the car and left it in self-driving mode.

The guard got into Andrew’s car and said, “Just one minor problem. You need the Sporksterbeale to grant me access so that I can direct it.”

Andrew said, “Sporksterbeale, I grant access for this guard.”

The car voice stated, “Very well then.”

The guard said, “Andrew, feel free to enter the labs now. I can take it from here.” The guard’s white shiny teeth from his smile glistened like the white complex walls.

Andrew said, “Thank you.” He entered the building and disregarded all the signs that he had seen before. Robert stood ten meters away from the entrance, waiting for Andrew’s arrival. Robert walked towards Andrew and said, “Hello Andrew. It’s great to have you back again. We deeply apologize for how things went last time.”

Andrew said, “Thanks, dad. I’m excited to try out things again.”

Robert said, “Follow me. Let’s get you ready for your endeavour. Let us waste no time.” Andrew followed his father as they made their way up the elevator.

Andrew said, “Level 80 like last time, right?”

“Yep. Let me explain what I plan on having you achieve this week.” The elevator arrived at floor 80. “The Spirit World has been remotely discovered, and we only got a glimpse of this dimension. Because this dimension takes place on a real physical planet in our universe, we discovered that the planet is named Nirvana 74. The planet was found in the Andromeda galaxy, the nearest spiral galaxy next to the Milky Way. The number 74 denotes the angle of tilt that the planet rotates. We know the proportions of the planet, but we cannot comprehend the physical appearances of what substances the planet acquires. Nirvana 74 is the closest planet similar to

ours in the universe. Our neural sensors can only recognize the gravitational forces and dimensions of the planet. The planet also has the shape of an egg, meaning that gravity is weaker in certain areas. Your goal is to discover all the biomes and the physical nature that takes place in this dimension. We want you to find which area would seem most habitable for our guests." They walked past the hallways and were almost in the black room.

Andrew said, "That sounds fascinating. Will I be going with Marco again?"

Robert opened the door with his eye recognition. Robert said, "I may have changed up who you are partnered with. You may know her. The staff said that you seemed to have a good relationship with her."

The door opened up, and Harriet sat in a contrivance next to Andrew's. Andrew affectionately smiled.

PART TWO:

Endeavour

CHAPTER 10:

What did this endeavour have in store?

What were they exactly supposed to explore?

Reunited with Spirit Intercom,

Andrew had to remain calm.

Once again, Andrew smiled. He said, “Thanks, Dad. I’m pretty sure her name is Harriet.”

Harriet smiled and said, “That’s right. I’m excited to proceed with Andrew to this dimension. I’ve heard how immaculate it was.”

Andrew asked Robert, “So what will Marco be doing instead?”

His father said, “I stationed him to compose data with the other scientists.” His father continued. “I want this endeavour to go smoothly with as many problems avoided. You guys will be immersed into this dimension for one week straight. We will supply you with IV’s so that you can sustain your physical health while you voyage the dimension. We do not want you to take breaks so that we can simulate how life would be if you lived there. This will be our most important project for Spirit Intercom, and we put our full trust into both of you.”

Andrew said, “I will do my best. I’m sure that Harriet and I will do fine.”

Harriet said, “Me too.”

Andrew asked, “When we are transported to the Spirit World, where will Harriet be teleported, considering that I was riding the bee at the moment I was disconnected from the dimension?”

Robert said, “Taken care of. We coded her location to be on the back of the bee when you guys are sent to the Spirit World. Also, make sure that you stay safe. Like I said earlier, the majority of this dimension is unexplored so who knows what creatures exist there. For example, there was a huge bee with a dopamine compositor in its stinger. Who knows.”

Andrew said, “Yeah. I’ll keep an eye out.”

His father said, “Just before you begin, we need to supply you with IVs so that you can be well-nourished. Just take a seat on the contrivance.”

Andrew took his seat next to Harriet. A portable IV dispenser table was right next to his seat. He knew what was coming, so he displayed his right-hand palm upwards. Coming out of the lab researcher's huddle, a lab-coated lady held the IV dispenser and quickly punctured it into his vein located on his wrist. Andrew released a slight flinch.

Robert said, “I think it’s time that you strap in the contrivance now. We’ll plug you guys with our coded neurons as soon as possible.”

Andrew attached the Spirit Emissary on his head, except that this time the metallic ring was not disproportionate. It fit his head perfectly. Andrew looked to his right and smiled at Harriet. Eyes on Harriet, he said, “You ready? This place is awesome.”

Harriet said, “Sure am. Let’s ignite that communicator, Mr. Rutano. The senior Rutano, of course.”

Earl, the man who had originally ignited the communicator for Andrew and Marco, went to the ignition station and got the key out. Bradford stood next to Earl. Bradford looked at

Andrew with a look, a look that seemed to say that Andrew owed him something. Earl turned the ignition on, and Andrew and Harriet grew unconscious.

After a few more moments, Andrew received his vision back gradually. He saw that he was still on the bee's thorax. He looked behind and saw Harriet grabbing Andrew's back while riding on the bee. Her eyes were still closed, but she somehow managed to grab onto Andrew's back still. Her vision began to take form, and her eyes opened up. She took a deep breath in and said loudly, "Oh my God! Where am I?" She began to panic a bit and tapped on the shoulder of Andrew.

Andrew said, "Hey. Don't worry. We're just flying on this bee creature thing. Just ride with it." The bee was flying horizontally straight towards the direction where the source of light was setting. The trees were hundreds of feet below them.

She said, "What if we fall?"

Andrew said, "Just ride with it. That's what I've learned in this dimension. Don't forget you can't die in this dimension either."

She asked, "Can you feel pain though?"

Andrew said, "Now when I think about it, yes we can. So maybe don't fall."

Harriet looked down and said, "Yeah. That pain would be immense."

The only thing that could withstand her fear was holding on to Andrew's back with all her grip. Andrew felt a little tension from her, the tension that felt good. The bee continued flying straight at high velocity, and Andrew wondered if he would be able to control its sense of direction. He saw the antennas on top of the bee's head and grabbed ahold of them. He struggled to grab the left antenna due to only having a thumb and pinkie on his left hand. He still managed to hold on to it since the antenna was brittle and light. Andrew pulled the antennas away from his

body, and the bee dipped down. Andrew's stomach felt that it escaped out of his body as they travelled downward with such great speed. Harriet began to scream, a scream of terror but exhilaration. Immediately regretting this action, Andrew pulled the antennas towards his body, and the bee flew upward.

Harriet worriedly asked, "Um, Andrew, are you sure you know how to control this beast?"

Andrew said, "I'm learning as I go." He this time bent the antennas to his left, and the bee flew to the right. He moved the antennas to the right so that the bee would be aligned to fly horizontally straight. Andrew wanted to experience all the nature that was around him. He saw the thousands of trees that were under him. Illuminating a purple glow in the sky, the source of light's setting also shined the clouds with a purple vibrance.

Harriet said, "Despite almost dying from riding this bee, this place is still beautiful."

Andrew asked, "So where next to, madam?" She laughed, and they continued flying on the bee in a straight line. The source of light had completely set, and the atmosphere grew dark. Moments later, a subtle glow from a river. The long river stretched the entire side length of the forest, and it separated a savannah from a forest. Andrew guided the bee in that direction. Momentum exponentially increased from the bee's drop. The bee slowed down its fluttering and landed smoothly on the ground next to the river.

The river had a blue-green bioluminescence as the water flowed down to the horizon. Bringing himself closer to the river, Andrew looked into the water and saw small swimming creatures. They appeared to look like tadpoles. Harriet got a good look at them and said, "They appear to be luciferin-secreting tadpoles."

Andrew asked, "And what makes you think that?"

She said, “Was this river lighting up during the daytime?”

“No.”

Harriet said, “Exactly then. The tadpoles at night make the river light up with their luciferin, creating bioluminescence in the water. This light probably extends down the river because of the high population of these creatures.”

Andrew said, “This place is beautiful.”

She said, “It sure is.” Andrew heard loud panting and quick-treading footsteps behind him. A blue cheetah figure pounced on Andrew as he turned around. The creature had purple spots. With its razor-sharp claws, the creature slashed Andrew’s chest, and his body was launched onto the mossy stone floor. For the first time, Andrew felt pain. Meanwhile, in the physical world, Andrew shivered and stuttered. Andrew’s first instinct: flight. He struggled to get up. The pain was unbearable. The cheetah once again slashed Andrew in the stomach region. Andrew screamed in agony and tried resisting this horrid creature. Harriet ripped a piece of bark from one of the trees and threw it at the creature’s head. The cheetah creature changed target and met the eyes of Harriet.

With blood partially flowing out his mouth, Andrew said, “Harriet, run!” The cheetah sprinted to Harriet’s position while she attempted to run. Locked onto its target, the cheetah raised its five-fingered paw to strike Harriet. To the creature’s dismay, dopamine was injected into its brain, and the creature collapsed on the floor. The dopamine bee had stung the cheetah’s forehead at perfect timing. She couldn’t believe what happened. Sighing from relief, Harriet later worried about Andrew’s physical condition. She sprinted to Andrew’s position.

She said, “Holy shit! Andrew, are you okay!”

Andrew physically was not okay. The blood from the scratches stained his shirt, and a small amount of blood oozed out of his mouth. He said, “I’ll be fine. This place went from beautiful to straight delusional.” He coughed out a bit of blood.

Harriet worriedly asked, “Can you die in this dimension?”

He said, “I don’t think so. But at this point, I’m not exactly sure.” His voice grew more feeble as each sentence rolled off his tongue.

Harriet had no idea how to help. She was lost. Hoping he had an answer, she asked frantically, “What should I do to help you? What should I do?”

Andrew said softly, “I’m sorry. I don’t know how you …” He lost consciousness.

Consciousness shifts back to Harriet.

All Harriet could think of was putting Andrew’s body into the river that lay beside them. She said self-soothingly, “Here, I’ll put you in the river. Let’s start by washing up that yucky blood off you.” She couldn’t tell if she was going psychologically crazy and couldn’t tell if she was doing this to somehow soothe her pain of his pain. She attempted to lift his body, but his weight was too much for her strength. Instead, she dragged his body with the neck-end of his shirt. As she slowly moved his body, blood smeared on the mossy stone floor. She finally reached the bioluminescent river and dragged his body to the shallow end of the water. Panting with anxiety and hoping for his well-being, Harriet let go of Andrew’s neck-end and pulled off his shirt to view his wounds. He had five major slashes on his chest and stomach area. Letting his body gently float on the water, the blood mixed with the water fluid, creating a small red trail as the river flowed. Realizing that the lab researchers could view them through neural sensors, she yelled at the top of her lungs, “Hey! Abort us out of this dimension! Andrew is in so much pain right now! What the hell are you guys doing!” Hoping that she would grow unresponsive and be

transported back to the physical world, Harriet shrieked, “Help us!” Two drops of tears fell to her cheeks, and she tilted her head forward in melancholy.

A few sobs later, she lifted her head back up and saw Andrew’s body still lying stagnantly in the river. A tear fell in the river. Attracted to the teary saltiness, the tadpole creatures emerged from the river and travelled towards Andrew’s body. They swam to the top of Andrew’s stomach. Gathering one by one to his body, the tadpoles stuck to Andrew’s wounds by the shape of his wounds. The tadpoles filled up the entire region of his wounds with their bodies. Harriet felt confused and brought herself closer to Andrew’s body in astonishment. The tadpoles simultaneously gleamed their bioluminescence. The tadpoles departed from their arrangement and dispersed back into the river. Andrew’s wounds stopped bleeding immediately. His wounds withered away and scars formed in a matter of seconds. Andrew inhaled a deep breath of appeasement and opened his eyes widely.

Consciousness shifts back to Andrew.

Harriet cried, but this time she cried from enjoyment and confusion. Andrew retreated out of the river and stood up without feeling pain in his chest area. He blurted out a coughing laugh of amazement. He said, “What the hell just happened?”

Wiping the tears off her face, she said, “It was unexplainable. I couldn’t believe what had happened.” She took a deep breath in and said quickly, “First of all, you got cut in your stomach gruesomely by that creature beast thingy!” She pointed to the harmless unconscious blue cheetah that lay on the floor. “Then the bee beast stung the creature in the head before it attacked me!” She pointed to the bee creature. “And, finally, these magnificent tadpole creatures saved your life! Literally! I couldn’t believe it! This all happened so fast, and I worried so much for you!”

Andrew said, “Well, all that matters is that I’m fine now.”

Harriet said, “You went unconscious on me. Were you dead? Did you somehow wake up in the physical world?”

Andrew said, “I don’t recall anything that happened after I told you to run. For one thing, though, there was no way that I was dead.”

She asked, “Dead dimensionally or physically.”

He said, “Physically. But I’m not exactly sure about being dead dimensionally. My father did tell me that you can’t die in this dimension, but I’m sure why I didn’t wake up in the physical world when I dropped unconsciously.”

She said, “That’s a bit grim.”

Shrugging his shoulders, he said, “As I showed you before, just ride with it. Don’t spend too much time on every meager detail in this place.” However, Andrew did worry about every detail. Andrew extended his body to where the blue cheetah’s body lay. Mouth open with a small puddle of drool, the cheetah had its eyes open. He felt the fur of the cheetah with his fingertips: frizzy.

Harriet said, “Should we cut open into the creature’s body?”

Andrew asked, “Why?”

“In case we grow hungry.”

Andrew asked, “We can get hungry here? You sure?”

She said, “I’m hungry at this very instant. Our desire to eat comes from the hypothalamus region of our brain. The coded neurons we are currently experiencing aren't blocking the neurons that enter the hypothalamus. Although we are being nurtured with IVs, we still can grow hungry.”

Andrew said, “That’s kinda deep. Well, if you say we should eat it, then cut it up I will.” He grabbed the cheetah’s paw and was in the motion of cutting up the beast’s stomach with its paw. Andrew asked, “Wait! Isn’t this creature still alive? It’s only the dopamine that makes it unconscious. The creature is just extremely relaxed. You sure you wanna kill this thing?”

She hesitated and said, “Sorry, just kill it! I’m really hungry, and I can’t stand it. I’ll look away. The sight of blood disturbs me.”

The thought of hunger zapped into Andrew’s mind too. Andrew knew he was going to regret this. Grabbing the paw again, he jerked the sharp claws into the creature’s stomach area with great force. Releasing a tense quiver, the cheetah let off a weak roar, and its body relaxed again. Expecting to see blood gush out of its body, Andrew, instead, saw light-green fluid slowly ooze out the cut-open stomach. Andrew’s reaction: “What the hell?”

Closer to the stomach, Andrew with his two index fingers expanded the cut-open stomach area to see what hid anatomically. Thin brown roots branched through the internal structure of the stomach. Curved green tracts slightly throbbed. No stomach or blood was present; instead, only thin roots and robust green tubes were displayed inwardly. Andrew’s cut opened up a green tube, causing a light-green substance to secrete. Andrew quickly wiped the substance off his face. Harriet took a peek. She dug her hands into the organs softly, fiddling with the different tubes and roots.

Harriet said, “That’s something you don’t see every day. This anatomical structure looks exactly like the one of a plant.” She made a sharp tear into one of the green tubes with the cheetah’s paw. Rubbing her finger onto the light-green liquid, she said, “This substance is sap.”

Andrew said, “Sap?”

She said, “This creature belongs to the kingdom Plantae and has plant molecules, such as chlorophyll, chloroplast, starch, glucose . . . you name it.”

Andrew said, “Lemme get this straight. This injurious creature is, and I repeat, *a plant*?” Andrew’s eyebrows rose.

She said, “Correct. Its anatomy does not deceive. You have no clue how amazing this is. This creature is a marvel of enchantment! Nothing this extraordinary has ever been witnessed by a human being.” Harriet continued maneuvering her hands in the creature’s insides for more scientific fascination.

Andrew asked, “So what are we going to do with this creature?”

She said, “Continue dissecting.” She plunged her hands deep into the creature. At this point, her arms were completely covered with sticky sap. Suddenly, Harriet felt three small beads with her right palm. Enclosing her hand, she pulled her hand out of the mangled creature’s insides. She opened her hand and three brown seeds appeared. Raising her sappy hand to her open jawline, Harriet was enlightened.

Andrew recognized Harriet’s jubilance. “What is it?” Harriet kept staring at the seeds with perplexity.

Harriet said, “Do you have any idea what these seeds are?”

Andrew said, “What? Lima beans?”

She said, “These seeds came from that cheetah creature, meaning that they must have the same DNA. Therefore, when the cheetah dies and decomposes, the leftover seeds in its body grow, which could only mean one thing.”

Andrew, still clueless, asked, “What?”

She said, “When all these creatures die, they repopulate their species by leaving their internal seeds to grow in the soil, which also means that these creatures grow on trees! Just like fruit! This is remarkable!”

Andrew, who now understood, said, “Damn. That’s crazy. So you’re telling me that all the creatures here grow on trees?”

She said, “Strangely, yes! The whole ecosystem is all based on plant growth and chlorophyll. We have to share this information!”

Andrew said, “Spirit Intercom probably does know by now. They can watch us through their neural sensors. Back to what you said, this is incredible!” He took the three seeds from Harriet and got a closer look. They appeared as normal seeds to him. “Just the fact that they’re born on trees is so odd.” As he gave the seeds back to Harriet, Andrew asked, “How can you suspect that all the creatures are like this? How do you know if that bee creature we’ve been flying on has blood in its circulation?”

Putting the seeds into her pocket, she said, “A reproductive method as unique as this must be widespread throughout this entire planet. There is just no way that their reproductive glands are sex-based, considering that sex-based reproduction only deviates from Earth. The odds are close to none.”

Andrew said, “Makes sense, I guess.”

Feeling that she got everything out that she needed to say, Harriet looked at the sky and so did Andrew. Completely unaware of the time, they only knew it was pure nightfall. Andrew felt a big breath of cold air from the wind tickle his back. Andrew said, “It’s getting pretty chilly.”

Harriet said, “Sure is.” She cradled her body from the cold as well. Insufficient in adrenaline, they both grew cold. Relaxation equated to coldness.

Trying to be resourceful, Andrew said, “How about we start a fire?”

Harriet said, “Sounds good to me.” Taking action, Andrew gathered some of the loose bark from the trees and assorted them into one big pile.

Taking note of his determination, Harriet appreciated his work. “Thanks, Andrew.”

All Andrew needed was a spark to start the fire. Owning some knowledge on how to start a fire from third-grade boy scouts, Andrew found two dry wooden sticks. Attempting to create friction, the sticks wouldn’t budge. After minutes of failed attempts, Andrew finally gave up.

Andrew with frustration exclaimed, “Why won’t these goddamn sticks burn already!” His boy scout skills wouldn’t get him anywhere. However, a spurt of adrenaline from rubbing the twigs gave him some warmth. Andrew asked, “What the hell should we do? We’re tired, cold, hungry, and have nowhere to sleep with a dead cheetah by our feet!”

Losing patience too, Harriet said, “I don’t know. What do you expect me to do! We’re in the same boat, Andrew!”

“Ya, well, you’re the smart one here. Do something!”

“I think it’d be better if we tried to calm down.”

Andrew yelled, “That’s what’s making us cold in the first place! We need to find a solution now. How much longer in this dimension anyway? I adore the beauty and all, but not the surviving aspect.”

Thinking out loud, Harriet asked, “How about we eat the cheetah? It stores glucose in its green fibers.”

Andrew said, “I want real food! I’m a carnivore. This place is like vegetarian-hell land. I wanna get outta this place. Hey father, if you’re watching me, please send me back to the physical world. I want out!”

Harriet said, “Andrew, I’ve already tried doing that. Just like how prayers are never answered, Spirit Intercom won’t answer our woes.”

Andrew said, “Sorry if I’m being impatient. Please, just try to get this fire going. I’m freezing!” The necessity for a fire was in Andrew’s mind ever since that cold breeze poked him.

Harriet got to her knees and tried rubbing the two twigs together. After a few minutes of failure, similar to Andrew’s, she threw the twigs to the floor. She said, “Oxygen is key to starting a fire, and I think there’s a lack of it in this world.”

Andrew said, “Enough with the science! Why wouldn’t they be able to flame? Just try harder and put in more effort into the twigs.”

Harriet stood up and said assertively, “Speak for yourself!”

Andrew’s eyebrows dipped and his face grimaced. He felt an unimaginable severity of frustration. Andrew was done with yells and commands. He knew that they wouldn’t go anywhere.

Reaching peak irritation, Andrew said, “Well, if you’re not gonna help me, then I guess I better help myself.”

Harriet asked, “What do you mean? I’m trying to be as helpful as possible. The atmosphere possibly has too low of an oxygen percentage to start the fire.” (The atmosphere here only had 16% oxygen, whereas it took 21% to start a fire.)

Andrew said, “Bullshit! I’m tired of your science shenanigans. I’m out of here. Good luck on your own.”

“Where could you possibly go?”

Andrew said, “Away.” Leaving the vicinity of Harriet, he approached the bee and climbed up to its thorax.

Harriet began panicking. She said, “Hey! Wait! Where are you going? Don’t even think about that!” She tried running to the bee, but she was too late. The bee had already begun fluttering its wings.

Andrew said, “Sorry, but I have to start living for myself.” He heaved the bee’s antennas towards his body, and the bee flew off, leaving Harriet stranded.

CHAPTER 11:

Why would Andrew separate?

Why couldn't he and Harriet relate?

Andrew was inflamed,

Not feeling any blame.

His mind fluttering like the bee's wings, Andrew rode over the night sky, unwary of where his next destination could take him. Malnourished and tired, Andrew zoned out the scenery that was presented as the bee travelled. Simultaneously feeling sad and angry towards Harriet, Andrew thought, *she'll manage.* Still shivering from the cold night, he rubbed his hands against the bee's abdomen, trying to create heat with the friction. Blisters crested on his fingertips.

After gliding for a few more moments, Andrew fell asleep, and soon enough, his body fell asleep. Muscles relaxing, Andrew let go of the bee's antennas, and his body slid down the bee's back. Unconscious while falling hundreds of feet, Andrew collided with sharp-edged branches of the tall trees, somewhat slowing down his fall. Moving with enormous velocity, one thick branch pulverized his lower back, immediately waking him up with pain. Andrew's body underwent infernal injuries. Cracking bones left and right, every limb was misshapen with each gravitational hit with a branch. Agony, strain, and spasms: this was all Andrew could feel. Releasing tumultuous shrieks, his vocal cords gave out. The fall felt never-ending. Collision after collision. Mourn after mourn. Inside of a dimension where neural feelings were exaggerated, Andrew had never gone through this much pain. After what seemed to be a nonstop hell-trip, he

made a hard pounding onto the mud floor. He felt this was worse than death. The pain was excruciating and unbearable. He couldn't get up. Bones and muscles throbbed turbulently. Tears overfilled his eyelids, and he couldn't see anything but the blurry red all over his body with tears mixing with his blood. This pain was indescribable. No other human on Earth in every life had felt the pain Andrew was going through. He wailed and wailed, wanting someone to put him out of his misery. One loose branch broke off and fell, knocking Andrew's head. Andrew's wish was granted and he finally lost consciousness.

Knocked out for the rest of the night, Andrew finally awoke to the source of light arising. A pebble-like object penetrated Andrew's head. Andrew perched his head up and saw quite the figure. Slightly smaller than his size, the creature that threw the object had arms and legs just like a normal human except that the creature had a mouth of a venus-flytrap with small spiky hairs on the outer rim of the mouth. In addition, its limbs were made of wood. Arrays of triangular purple flower petals encircled the upper region of the creature's head. Andrew reckoned this creature was a hybrid of a human being and a plant. Its green-pupil eyes focused on Andrew. He gave the creature the name "animate plant" in his head. Startled by this living thing, Andrew slowly raised his body upward as aches and wounds taunted him. He slowly and steadily positioned his hand in an awkward defending stance. Andrew first asked calmly, "Hello? Who are you?"

The animate plant without moving its mouth said, "Free your mind of all anguish that you acquire towards me."

Andrew asked, "You speak? How is your 'mouth' not moving?"

The creature said in a monotone voice, "Hello Andrew. This is a message from the interdimensional communicator system. These creatures physically cannot speak, but the coded neurons you are currently experiencing can interpret the neurological thinking comprehension of

your so-called ‘animate plants.’ The neural sensors, additionally, can make your ‘animate plants’ understand your thinking comprehension thanks to our state-of-the-art technology. Therefore, what you hear is their neurological thinking put into words.’”

Contemplation finished, Andrew said, “Hmmm. Interesting.” Wanting to test this phenomenon, Andrew said, “Hello, creature.”

The animate plant said, “Hello.”

Putting too much weight on his right foot, Andrew fell. He felt that he may have broken a bone. Unveiling slight groans, he lay on the floor, rubbing his foot. Andrew looked at the animate plant and saw it pick up a wooden bucket. The animate plant quickly poured the bucket, and tadpoles stuck onto Andrew’s body. His automatic response was to flinch, but he realized that the tadpoles were healing him. This was his first time experiencing the tadpoles while being awake. The tadpoles projected their bioluminescence synchronously, healing his open wounds, fractured bones, and aching muscles. The tadpoles repelled off his body and fell on the fertile soil that Andrew was lying on. Now presumed dead, the tadpoles died from the lack of water. Disregarding this, Andrew said, “Hey, plant creature. Thanks so much! My wounds are completely gone.”

With full energy, Andrew stood up. The animate plant said, “Quick! Follow me!”

“What? Where are you even heading off to?”

The animate plant scurried with its three-toed-pronged wooden feet. Andrew followed. He was not the fastest runner, so it was hard to keep up. Still surrounded by uneven terrain and high-reaching trees, Andrew did his best to stay behind the creature. After running for a few minutes, the creature presented a dopamine bee to Andrew. The large bee was stationary. Andrew

was petrified at first but saw it didn't attack him. He was convinced this was the bee that he fell off from last night.

Andrew asked, "How did you know it was here?"

The animate plant said, "You're welcome."

"No, I am asking how did you know it was here?"

The creature said, "No problem."

Andrew thought, *ahh . . . whatever.* He climbed onto the bee's back. The animate plant was still staring at him.

The creature said, "I ride with you. Let me take you to my home." Andrew stared back at its green eyes.

Andrew said, "Hop on." The animate plant made a big leap onto the bee's back, sitting behind Andrew.

The animate plant said, "I take control."

Andrew asked, "How?" Lifting Andrew's torso, the animate plant maneuvered Andrew's body over its head so that it was sitting in front of him. Enwrapping its malleable wooden hands around the bee's antennas, the animate plant pulled down the antennas gradually, and the bee cruised up towards the atmosphere.

As they were flying, Andrew asked, "So, what kind of creature are you exactly?"

The creature said, "I am Plant. Every function in my body is intrinsic to Mother Nature. Mother Nature defines me as Plant."

Andrew thought, *he seems very self-aware.* He asked, "What should I call you?"

The animate plant said, "I am Plant."

Andrew said, "Okay then . . . *Plant*. Where are you taking me?"

Plant said, “To my home where my plant folk live.”

Andrew thought, *how could there be a plant with human-like qualities? I gotta think more like Harriet.* Taking a slight pause in his thinking, Andrew thought, *ughh . . . Harriet. Maybe I made a mistake.* Andrew knew it was too late for that.

Plant said, “It may take a awhile. Rest.”

Considering he almost fell to his death, Andrew didn’t want to take his chances on resting. Andrew told himself, *just ride with it . . . and don’t rest.*

The bee continued flying for the majority of the day. Andrew, who was seamlessly zoning out, was touched on the shoulder by Plant.

Plant said, “We are here.”

Looking to his right, Andrew was baffled. A whole new biome presented itself to him. It was a biome of shifting tectonic plates. Different areas of terrain were slowly ascending while other areas were slowly sinking. Each sector of shifting land had decently-sized trees that blossomed different colored flower petals. A humongous thick yellow flower with three huge petals stretched hundreds of feet across, covering most of the biome. On the huge flower were the animate plants, sitting and conversing with their group. The yellow flower covered the moving tectonic plates, causing the petals to slightly bend gradually. Partially decomposed, the flower revealed small brown spots on its petals. A subtle purple fog surrounded the flower. Off into the distance were small water springs, bursting water molecules into the atmosphere.

Andrew said jokingly, “This looks like one big banana peel.”

Plant asked, “Banana?”

Andrew said, “Nevermind,” as the dopamine bee landed on the tip of the big yellow flower petal. Making a big leap off the bee’s back, Plant waited for Andrew to follow.

Plant said, “Come.”

Being an observant person, Andrew said, “Give me a second. Let me admire this beauty.” Wanting to look at all directions of this biome, he looked up and saw a blue butterfly cocoon. In the stages of still becoming a butterfly, the cocoon oozed a drop of blue fluid onto Andrew’s eyes. Wiping the gross substance from his face, Andrew was done “admiring” and hopped off the bee. He fell onto the soft yellow flower petal. Andrew thought, *shit man, I feel like I'm on an acid trip.* He said to Plant, “Alright. I’m coming.”

The flower petal had a width of twenty feet. Plant and Andrew were hundreds of feet from the center of the flower. In the center of the flower sprung up a long purple stigma. Also in the center, yellow filaments arose with red anthers at the ends of the filaments. The levitating and descending pieces of land varied from one another. One piece of land rose 10 feet above Andrew while another piece of land was five feet below him.

Andrew thought, *I need to tune in to my sciency side here. I need to ask him some questions. Is Plant an it, him, or her?* He said, “So is this flower like your sanctuary?”

Walking forward to the center of the flower, Plant said, “Home. Flower is called Allure”

Andrew asked, “Allure, huh? Why did you take me here?”

Plant said, “What Mother Nature births, I bring.”

Wanting longer responses, Andrew asked, “How many ‘Plants’ are there of you? What gender are you?”

Plant answered, “We are not made up of numbers. We are all one big plant. Nature bored me as male”

Andrew said, “You have a name?”

“Name? We are all one big plant. Nothing more.”

“Okay cool. What’s the point of this place?”

Plant continued walking and put his barky hand up to Andrew’s mouth. “No more. I will take you, and you will be silent from now on.” Slightly provoked by his fast muscular motion, Andrew remained silent.

Now wasn’t the time for the scientific method. Now was the time to see what the hell these creatures would do to Andrew. As he walked past a different animate plant, it opened its mouth widely at him, possibly attempting to intimidate Andrew. He noticed a big wooden structure intertwined with the tree branches from the tall trees directly above the stigma of Allure. A long vertical ladder made of bamboo fibers led up to the wooden structure. Andrew predicted that the wooden structure was his destination for the time being. After walking tediously for quite some time, they finally reached the ladder that was positioned on the inner ridge of the petal.

Plant said, “Climb.” Following his orders, Andrew climbed the very tall ladder until he reached the surface level of the weaving tree branches. Shaped as a rectangular prism, the wooden structure contained nothing but a poorly-carved hole on the front wall facing Andrew. The hole was dark. A wooden plank connected the ladder to the ugly-looking shack.

Directly behind Andrew, Plant said, “Enter through hole. Now.”

Shaking his head with discomfort, Andrew placed his worn-out shoes onto the wooden plank step by step. Eventually making it to the entry, Andrew took a deep breath and barely managed to fit through the hole. Crawling through the prickly entrance, he saw a little brightness not too far. Escaping out of the hole, he entered a lowly-lit room with a low ceiling. Bending over, he noticed an animate plant standing next to him. With its ductile branchy fingers, the animate plant pointed to Andrew’s right. On his right appeared two red curtains with artistic

drawings of flowers and trees. Swaying the curtains open, Andrew couldn’t comprehend what he saw. He was extremely overwhelmed. It was his mother, Marie.

CHAPTER 12:

Who were these plant people?

Were they all equals?

The randomness of his mother present

Bewildered Andrew to the greatest extent.

Her mother looked exactly how he remembered her. She did not age one bit. Not seeing her son for over eight years, Marie immediately hugged her stupefied son. Andrew peaked confusion levels and still couldn't dictate what was going on. Andrew kept thinking in his head, *This can't be real. This can't be real. This can't be real.* Resisting his mother's hug, Andrew said, "How is this real? Mom, why are you here? How did you even end up here! Please, explain! I'm so confused."

Opening her arms up, his mother said, "Relax, Andrew. It's so great to see you! Now let me hug you!"

Andrew said assertively, "No! Not until you explain to me what is going on."

She said, "That'll be for another time. It's too soon for that. Let me just enjoy my son for now." She wrapped her hands around Andrew, but he resisted once again.

Calmly, he said, "Please. Mom, tell me. My mind is all over the place, and it would help if you could just explain one of my concerns."

She stood up and said cheerfully, "So aren't you gonna ask how I ended up with these plant people?"

Andrew said, "No."

She said, “Well, it happened the first time I was sent to this magical place. Confused and hungry, I searched for all kinds of prey to eat, but, of course, I was not strong enough. Disgusted by all my failures, I lay in the moist soil, crying and waiting for an act of God to help me. And that moment when I thought all was lost, a plant creature appeared before me. While sobbing, the warmhearted creature gave me a purple apple. Somehow being able to communicate with me, the creature praised me. It admired my beauty, my strength, and my love. And soon enough, more plant creatures appeared, and they took me to their humble home. I felt accepted, and they started calling me Mother Nature. Treating me as a deity, they provided me with their juiciest fruits and most comforting shelter. I couldn’t believe the love they had for me. At first, I thought this place would be a sojourn, but it ended up being my permanent home. I couldn’t be any happier. Just like how I gave love and positivity to you and Marco, I spread these lessons of affirmation to the plant creatures. I guess you could call me their ‘Divine Mother Nature.” She let off a mild chuckle. “So that is how I ended up here.” Attempting to hug Andrew once again, she asked, “Satisfied?”

Unsatisfied by her blissful response, Andrew said, “No. You didn’t even explain how you ended up in the Spirit World. You’re supposed to be dead! How the hell are you here?”

She said, “Dead? I’m not dead. Your father is just testing his Spirit Intercom doohickey on me right now. I’m sure he is tracking my activity right now.”

Andrew said, “No, Mom. You died in a car accident eight years ago. Dad told us this.”

Her mother said, “I’ve never been in a car accident. Like I said, your father is testing the machine on me right now.”

Suddenly, Andrew’s mind clicked. He grew infuriated. He realized that his mother didn’t die in a car accident. If she was in the dimension the whole time and if she thinks her husband is

still testing the machine, then Robert must have killed her in the process. Robert lied to his children. Robert killed his mother eight years ago when she was testing out the contrivance. Andrew couldn't believe it. Anger arose to his forehead veins.

Veins vibrating, Andrew said, "Dad lied to me! He killed you, Mom, eight years ago! That lying piece of shit! I'm killing that fucking bastard!"

She said, "I don't understand."

Andrew said aggravatedly, "Don't you see Mom! He killed you when you were testing the machine. The whole point of the Spirit Contrivance is for people to continue living in the Spirit World when they are killed while using the machine. That's why he is allowing people to use the machine since the world is ending right now. He probably killed you to test out the abilities of the machine to see if it would work. He's been lying to me for eight years. I'm killing that son of a bitch!"

Slowly sitting down, his mother put her hand over her open mouth. Eyes slowly closing, her face grimaced with tears. She said, "My husband. . ." She gulped in. "killed me?" She couldn't believe it either.

Andrew lost consciousness and was dispatched out of the Spirit World. Slowly waking up in the physical world, he saw Bradford, having a smug look on his face. All Andrew could think about was eliminating his father.

Bradford said, "Hey, Andrew! Calm down! There is no one here but just me and you."

Andrew swiftly rose out of the seat and pushed Bradford out of the way. He wanted to kill his father then and now.

Bradford exclaimed, "Andrew! Stop! You owe me a favor. If you walk out that door, you're getting killed! Those guards ain't giving you mercy."

Andrew knew he had to calm down, but he couldn't help it. His anger swelled up his thoughts and reasoning. Stopping his movement, Andrew said agitatedly, "What is your request?"

Bradford said, "I was the only lab researcher on shift who observed you. I saw what you said. I saw all of it. That's why I need you to not stir up any trouble and continue the expedition. You won't kill your father, and you will act like none of this ever happened. I will lock you back into the Spirit World, and you will continue your expedition. You and I both know that if you walk out that door, you will be a dead man. So let's just calm down and continue this voyage of the Spirit World."

Andrew processed this and said, "Goddamnit. Fine, but I will never forget that this happened."

Bradford said, "Strap in the contrivance."

After strapping in, Andrew closed his eyes, waiting to be sent back in. After a short delay, Bradford said, "Oh yeah. About what you said. I could make you forget that any of this ever happened."

Andrew said, "Really? How?"

He sent Andrew back to the Spirit World.

Waking up on the branchy floor, he saw his mother still crying next to the red curtains. His mother looked at him with glee. She said, "I thought you were gone forever, Andrew. I haven't seen a real human for so long."

Wanting to change the subject for his mother's sake and his own sake, Andrew said, "So how does this 'Allure' place function?"

Wiping her face, she said, “Allure is the name for this huge flower. This flower is responsible for running the entire planet’s ecosystem. The plant creatures have told me that they descended from this flower.”

Andrew said, “So when they refer to Mother Nature, are they referring to you?”

All tears gone, she said, “That is correct. The plant creatures have a deep admiration for me.”

Glad he was changing the subject, he said, “What do you call the plant creatures? Do they have a specific name?”

She said, “Now when I think about it. They actually don’t.”

Andrew said, “Why not refer to them as ‘animate plants’?”

She said, “Oooh. I like that name, Andrew.” She let off a simple laugh. “If you have more questions on the ‘animate plant’ descent, ask Herb. He doesn’t have an exact title, but I like to refer to him as my usual consultant.” She pointed to her left.

Herb, an animate plant, stood next to the hole that Andrew came out from. Andrew could care less about the animate plant ancestry. He only talked about the plants to ease his mother’s mind. He still thought of killing his father. But that had to wait. Having not seen his mother for over eight years, he figured he would spend more time and get to know her better.

Marie asked, “So, Andrew. How did you end up in this dimension? Are they testing the machine on you too?”

Andrew said, “Well, basically, I’m the first person they sent to test out the dimension until I realized that they tested you. Therefore, technically you’re the first one to enter the Spirit dimension. I’m on a one-week-long expedition to view the living conditions on this planet.”

She said, “You’ll only be here for one week? That’s too bad. Let’s try to make the most out of it then. I wish I could talk more. If you don’t mind, I have to attend a gathering with the ‘animate plants.’ It was scheduled to happen at sundown.”

Andrew said, “Sure. That’s fine, I guess.”

She departed out of the wooden structure through the hole. Herb just stared at Andrew.

Unsure of what to do next, Andrew just stared back at Herb. Herb looked exactly like Plant except that the exterior flower petals on his head were red instead of purple.

Herb said, “I will show you Allure. Follow me.”

Andrew said awkwardly, “Okay then.”

Herb departed out of the hole. Andrew was getting claustrophobic from the tight space of the structure. He finally reached the end. Herb waited for him to catch up.

Andrew’s mind was completely lost. So much happened to him. He needed peace of mind.

Herb said, “Seeing that you are the true Son of Nature, I cannot help but profess the ways of our culture, ancestry, and home. As we walk, please be silent. You must grapple our way of life so that you can be one of us.”

Disregarding the ladder, Herb jumped down hundreds of feet below from the branches until he landed on Allure itself. Slowly making his way down the ladder, Andrew pounded his feet onto Allure.

Herb said, “Be gentle to Allure. Allure sustains our life and habitat. Without it, we would be a goner.”

Andrew asked, “And why is that?”

Herb jumped off the side of the petal into a pit that was divided by the petal and the tectonic land pieces. The five-foot-wide pit circumferenced around and under the flower petals. The seemingly bottomless pit was completely dark. As Herb fell, he said, “Jump. Don’t fear.” Andrew didn’t know whether his courage or pacifism was more trustworthy. Leaning more towards his passive side, Andrew was denied by his feelings and suddenly got pushed from the back. As he lost balance and fell, he saw it was an animate plant that pushed him over. Plunging, Andrew tried grabbing the walls of the shifting terrain but only his acceleration sped up. Falling for a few more seconds, Andrew yelled out in terror until Herb’s extended branchy arm caught hold of him. Accentuating vulgar words from terror, Andrew knew not to resist. He was clueless about where he exactly was. Herb was holding onto a root of Allure. Directly below them was a darker bottomless pit, except that it wasn’t a pit. Everything below them was dark. There was no floor, but only up. Above them were the floating shifting tectonic plates, and the thick brown roots of Allure travelled in all directions. Andrew thought, *this seems way too surreal.*

Herb said, “You see this? These roots connect our entire planet. An absence of Allure leads to an absence of our planet.”

Panting heavily, Andrew said, “So everything is connected. I get ya.” Exhaling a major sigh, Andrew continued. “Why is there no terrain beneath us? Is this planet *hollow*?”

Herb said, “No. The gravity of this planet is disrupted due to the distance of the center of gravity.”

Andrew thought, *the egg shape, of course.*

Herb said, “We have two polar distinctions on our planet. In the north exists Allure.”

Andrew asked, “And in the south?”

Herb said, “Stop! No one speaks of the south!”

Andrew asked, “The south? What’s so bad about the south?”

Herb said, “No, no. I will not speak of the south. Just speaking of the south is too frightening.”

Becoming interested in this place, Andrew said, “What happened to my mother saying that you would explain everything about this planet? If it were up to me, I would say that you haven’t been the greatest consultant.”

Herb, growing defensive, said, “I am a good consultant. No one judges my loyal duty to Mother Nature. If you wish to discuss the south, I guess I must, considering that you are the Son of Nature and that you are here before me. Let me explain, even though it is still quite unexplainable. In the south exists a powerful source. No one has been able to pinpoint where this source comes from, but it seems to have some existential power. The source is shaped as a rift. This rift is gargantuan and contains a huge pallet of colors. No one knows where this rift reaches. No one dares to go to the south.”

Andrew asked, “Do you believe that Mother Nature created this? Does she know about this place?”

Herb said, “Yes and no. When she came to our world, the rift appeared.”

“Why don’t you speak about it with my mother?”

“We cannot complain about what Mother Nature brought us. She provided so much for us, and whatever Mother Nature bores we respect. We are blessed with any of her comings.”

Andrew asked, “But what if Mother Nature didn’t create that rift? What if it was . . .” Andrew took a slight pause and realized that he should speak in terms of how animate plants would speak. “A higher being that made this rift?”

Herb said definitively, “Impossible. No being is higher than Mother Nature. Her power is too divine for any other being to compete with.”

Andrew asked, “So has anyone encountered the rift itself.”

Herb said, “Enough! I can talk about Allure all you want, but I cannot handle speaking the south. I’ve done my best to obey your request, but it is too daunting to engage in this talk in any further manner.”

Andrew asked, “Fine. Could we possibly climb back up to Allure? I’m kinda scared of bottomless darkness that leads to oblivion.”

Herb said, “I don’t climb. I catapult.” He put less weight on his hand and held the hanging root with only one finger, letting gravity put more force on his branchy arm. Stretching slowly, Herb’s left arm elongated five feet until there was enough potential energy stored into the fibers in his arms. Having a greater gravitational force in his arm, Herb let go of the root, and they propelled upward several feet. Rising above the hole, Herb and Andrew landed onto the petal of Allure.

Andrew said, “Damn, that was crazy! How’d you do that?”

Herb said, “Gravity.”

Andrew thought, *thanks smartass*. He stared up and saw it was pure nightfall. Andrew was still perplexed that his mother was here. He wanted to see her, but he knew that she was at her animate plant shindig meeting. Herb wasn’t saying anything. Andrew didn’t know what to do. He felt genuinely bored. He awkwardly asked, “Hey, Herb, what can I do?”

Herb asked, “What?”

“What can I do now? I've already toured this place, it’s nightfall, and I have nothing to do. Also, is there a place I can sleep at?”

Herb said, “I have to go back to Mother Nature. She wanted me to come after I gave my tour to you. Just find a branch to sleep under.”

Andrew angrily asked, “Under a branch? Where do the animate plants even sleep?”

As Herb was treading away from Andrew, he said, “I must attend the meeting. Speak with other Plant.”

Andrew exclaimed, “Hey, Herb! Come back here!”

Herb began running with his pronged feet, hopping from one tectonic plate to another. Herb escaped from Andrew’s sight.

Standing still on the petal alone, Andrew wandered around the petal with confusion. He had no guidance on where to sleep. It had been a long day for Andrew, and he needed his rest. He looked for animate plants, but he couldn’t find any. He wondered if they were all at the meeting with Mother Nature, or his mom. Andrew sought out all three petals. No animate plants. He sought out the floating tectonic plates. Nothing. Andrew was cheated. Herb bamboozled him. All the animate plants were at that meeting with his mother.

No shelter was present other than the wooden structure his mother rested at. As Andrew escorted himself up the ladder, he entered the hole of the wooden structure. Behind the curtains displayed a small red cushioned bean bag filled up with chia seeds and different types of monocotyledonous seeds. He thought, *is this the only existent bed in this entire dimension?* Positioning his body comfortably, he outlined the grooves of the cushion, trying to clean the dirt out of the grooves. Closing his eyes to complete his second day in the dimension, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 13:

What was the rift?

How much could this dimension shift?

Professed as the Son of Nature,

Andrew found all this obscure.

Awoken, Andrew felt a tree branch poking at his forehead. Releasing mild scuffles, Andrew had been awakened by Herb, considering his red petals. Or was it a different animate plant that looked the same? Andrew asked, “Herb?”

The animate plant said, “I am Herb. I am one of Mother Nature. Wake up. I will introduce you formally to our culture. You deserve a proper introduction. We must show what Mother Nature bores.”

Voice groggy, Andrew asked, “Wait, where is she?”

Herb said, “She is with other Plant, waiting at the Forest near Allure. Hurry up.”

“I gotcha. I gotcha. I’m coming.” Quite annoyed by his tone, Andrew wanted to get this over with. Leaving the structure and climbing down the ladder, no animate plants appeared on Allure.

Herb said, “Now, I must bring you to a distinct location. I will cover your eyes. You must have no knowledge of the path.”

Andrew said, “Yo, what? Are you kidding me?” Herb firmly put its prickly wooden hand on Andrew’s eye area. Picking up Andrew, Herb felt his resistant struggle but still managed to pick him up. Feeling continuous bumps as Herb ran, Andrew felt somewhat embarrassed due to

being carried like a baby. After being blinded for a few more moments, Andrew finally obtained his vision back. He saw hundreds of animate plants lined up and sitting in rows, cheering and hollering. His mother was on his left. A bioluminescent river flowed to his right. The trees stood thicker here, and everything felt crammed in together as if there was no open space. The animate plants filled up every square foot of dirt. Every animate plant looked the same except that each one expressed different colored flower petals on the outer rim of their heads. Each color pattern marked their individualism. The animate plants stood in groups based on their overall color of petals. For example, red petals assimilated into one group while the yellow petals had their own separate group. Standing still like a tree, Andrew stood there, confused as a moth mistaking a bright lamp for the moon.

Andrew asked, “Hey, Mom, what am I doing here?”

Marie said, “You will be engaging in a traditional practice with the ‘animate plants,’ as you call them.”

Andrew asked, “What practice?”

Herb said, “Look behind you.”

Andrew turned around and saw a flat space of fertile mud and rocks that was surrounded by trees. Across the field, a ginormous black-and-yellow-striped frog relaxed on a stone that was encircled by a pond of freshwater. Herb said, “Approach the frog.” The frog was three times taller than Andrew’s height.

Andrew said, “Are you kidding me? No way in hell, man! That thing is huge!”

Herb said, “Vanquish your fear.”

Andrew said, “What do you want me to do? Kill it? Ride it? What?”

Herb said, “That’s up for you to decide. Just know that whatever you do, we see. And what we see will determine what kind of creature you are. Now, go!” He shoved Andrew from the back.

Andrew’s mind clouded with confusion. About a hundred feet in front of him, the frog remained calm on the rock. On the other hand, Andrew stood on the mud, thinking which next move would prevent him from his own demise.

Andrew said suggestively, “Hey, Mom, wouldn’t you think that this initiation thing, or whatever this is, will kill me? I didn’t know that encountering frogs would be this delightful.”

Marie said, “Andrew, you will do great. I believe in you.”

“I know. I’m about to frolic. There’s no way this frog will kill me, especially with its venomous poison around its skin and its mass,” Andrew said as he was shuffling slowly towards the frog. “I’ll do just fine.”

Marie said, “There you go, Andrew. I like your attitude.”

Andrew released a grimaced smile and said, “You do? Well, I’m glad you like my attitude. See you on the other side.” Andrew thought, . . . *of death.*

Marie said, “Yeah, meet us right back here after you’re done.” She smiled. To Andrew, she smiled nonsensically. Finished with his sarcastic remarks, Andrew, once again, took baby steps slowly but surely towards the poison dart frog.

Herb randomly said across to Andrew, “Free your mind, Son of Nature. Follow your natural instinct. Fear only prolongs indecision. Indecision results in poor choices. Poor choices lead to consequences. Extreme consequences can cause death. If you avoid fear, you stray further from death. Just remember death is not the answer for any creature.”

Herb was attempting to hint Andrew in the right direction, but Andrew was still lost. He had no weapon, and he had no items to perform any action. All he could think of was walking forward. Slowly. The very essence of approaching a poisonous monster thrice the size of a human haunted Andrew.

Suddenly, the animate plants halted their cheering. The forest was now dead silent. Andrew heard a faint crackling noise, sounding similar to a bag of popcorn in a microwave. He looked to his left, and above him was the blue cocoon, jittering and exfoliating. The substance blue juice of the cocoon oozed onto the floor, and a green and velvet butterfly with intricate patterns popped out. Gradually increasing its rate of fluttering, the butterfly seemed to be coming towards Andrew's direction. Slowly displaying his hand out, Andrew invited the butterfly to come to his five-fingered habitat. Andrew admired the butterfly's beauty. The colors caught Andrew's attention. He lost sight of the frog. The beauty overshadowed his fear. The butterfly gently rested its four longer legs on Andrew's palm. Andrew had stopped walking. He kept staring at the butterfly with awe and delight. Animate plants still silent, everything seemed at peace with each other. No noise present, Andrew carefully analyzed the marvelous patterns of the butterfly: diamond shapes, overarching crescents, zig-zagged trapezoids. The geometry and spatial symmetry of the butterfly appeared glamorous to Andrew.

All this appraisal abruptly decimated. The poison dart frog released its super long tongue and hastily stuck the butterfly, taking it from Andrew's possession. Swallowing the butterfly down its big gullet, the frog remained still, staring blankly at the mud floor.

Andrew's anger throttled out of position. Confused about why the frog would kill such a beautiful creature, Andrew followed his instinct of anger and approached the frog. Anger flooding over his old fear, he stormed up to the pond where the frog sat mindlessly. He wanted to

strike the frog with his fists, but his deductive reasoning kicked in and told him the dangers of poison. He knew he couldn't harm this frog. This frog was following its natural instinct of food survival. Not only was the frog following its natural instinct, but Andrew also realized that he himself followed his natural instinct, or emotional instinct. What Herb said was true. The frog followed its natural instinct to eat the butterfly so that it could survive. Andrew followed his natural instinct to attack the frog in anger, but his reasoning saved him.

After pondering life lessons, Andrew heard the animate plants cheer happily. Following this cheer, Herb said, "Well done, Andrew. You vanquished your fear towards the frog, but you did not kill it. You chose the path of forgiveness. You chose natural instinct, not just plain natural instinct though; you chose rational instinct. You did not kill the frog. That would be stupid. What you did was natural but also reasonable. We applaud you, Son of Nature. You have the pure royalty of Allure and the Forest."

Andrew asked, "Why isn't my royalty considered tainted?"

Marie said, "Andrew, you're my son. What Mother Nature bores, which is me, is the finest power in the land."

Andrew casually said, "Okay then. Call me whatever you want. All I want is peace with you guys and just to be able to explore more of your planet."

"Anything for you. We will experience your experience if you are experiencing a wanted experience," Herb said. "You are the true divine Son of Nature!" The animate plants yelled out more cheers. The herd of plants stampeded their way to Andrew.

The animate plants stretched their branchy arms and enwrapped their arms together, creating the shape of a hammock with their wooden roots. Invading Andrew's personal space, the animate plants grabbed his back and forced him onto the uncomfortable and thorny hammock.

Stomping their wooden feet on the wet mud, they headed to Allure, carrying Andrew with the mobile hammock structure. Rambunctiously bouncing, Andrew felt minor thorns impale his back while on the hammock.

Constantly in an up-and-down motion, Andrew yelled, “What a-a-a-re you guys do-o-o-oing?” He levitated out of his lying position and saw Herb directly in front of him, running with the pace of the herd.

Herb said, “Son, they are taking you to a good place that you may seek.”

Andrew said, “Wha-a-at place? Also, do-o-o-on’t call me, Son, please.”

Herb said, “You will see, Son *of Nature*.” Herb accelerated his position, leaving Andrew’s sight. Andrew’s mind boggled, and the continuous bumps pushed him down from his sitting position. On his left and right, animate plants cheered wildly, raising their arms up and down with excitement. His mother, on the other hand, stood still in her original position, smiling directly at Andrew as he was taken further and further from her.

Andrew turned his body over. Looking through the grooves of the hammock, he saw the animate plants carrying him. He said, “Hey! Where are you guys exactly taking me?”

Curving its malleable neck up, an animate plant, rising above the stampede, smiled at Andrew with its awkwardly-shaped venus flytrap mouth. It said, “Haha! The Son of Nature noticed me! I am popular!”

Andrew said, “Yeah, okay . . . . Where are you taking me?”

Still running with the herd, the animate plant said, “The place we are bringing you to, I pronounce, is . . .”

Andrew said, “Huh? Where?”

Smiling, the creature said, “You will like this place.”

Growing annoyed with its cut-off and haphazard phrases, Andrew yelled, “Where!”

The creature said, “Don’t worry. We are taking you there.”

Andrew said, “You rotten plant piece of shit. Tell me where!”

The animate plant frowned. It opened its venus flytrap mouth and released an unpleasant hiss. Maneuvering its neck fibers, it stopped staring at Andrew and continued running with the group. Andrew flipped over to his back and sighed. Mind complaining, he thought, *man, what even is this place? Nothing makes sense.*

Resting his eyes, he waited for the animate plants to take him wherever their destination was. His body lay constricted in the roots of the hammock.

After a while, the animate plants’ feet stopped trampling, and the hammock came to a stop. Opening his eyes, Andrew raised his body upward, and the hammock unfolded, propelling Andrew to a hard fall on the floor. The animate plants surrounded him, not granting him too much space. He still couldn’t tell where he was. The populous animate plants shadowed his line of sight. Andrew, once again, asked, “Where am I? I mean, come on, it’s a simple question.” He was tired of being oblivious. He needed answers.

The animate plants in front of Andrew uniformly moved outward, giving Andrew an open viewing panel. Andrew, gazing through this opening, saw a wooden teepee-shaped structure. Civil engineering not at its finest, the structure still covered the roof and had no holes in it. It was built out of many dainty tree branches and was located under the end of the flower petal of Allure. Andrew said, “You guys built this for me?”

An animate plant walked up to Andrew’s face and said, “Yes. We built this structure after we saw you were the true Son of Nature.”

Andrew asked, “Was this already built before I partook in your ritual, or whatever?”

“Yes.”

“So, what if I wasn’t the true Son of Nature?”

The animate plant bluntly said, “We would have demolished it.”

Andrew said, “Okay then. Can I go inside it?”

Quickly responding, the animate plant said, “It’s yours. Sharing hospitality to the Son of Nature is the least we could do.” The animate plants just kept staring at Andrew. Now it was an awkward silence. Weird vibes possessed Andrew. He walked closer to the teepee. He saw an arc of trees laid behind the teepee structure. These trees sprouted embryonic eggs that resonated the structure of a swell shark egg on the end of the branches. The zygotes and fetuses could be seen through the transparent egg wall. The pale brown zygotes and fetuses magnified small dangling arms and legs. Andrew couldn’t make out the headlike structure. Andrew was amazed. Harriet’s claim about Nirvana 74’s reproductive system was correct. Andrew’s thinking swayed back to Harriet. Again, he thought, *did I make a mistake?*

The animate plants cut short his thinking and said, “These trees are yours.”

Particularly, Andrew asked, “What are these trees?”

The animate plant strayed closer to Andrew and said, “They are what keep our circulation of life intact. They sustain our reproductive regulation through the seeds of our deceased inhabitants of Allure.”

Andrew asked, “Why are they mine? They are natural living creatures. Why would I *own* them?” He heard a whoosh of wind soar from above him. It was Herb, swinging on a vine, and he landed next to Andrew.

Herb said, “You do not *own* them! They are not your property but your children. You feed them. You nurture them. I would not suspect such vulgarity from the Son of Nature. One who

speaks against our way of life would be dealt with and punished! But I am not a combatant of the Son of Nature. Son of Nature, I ask of you to channel your rational instinct more. Think before you say. Think before you act!"

Andrew grew discouraged and angered with what Herb said. Wanting to alleviate the rupture, Andrew said, "Sorry I misinterpreted your culture. I will be more mindful."

Herb nodded his head left and right. Andrew asked, "Why are you nodding your head like that? What's wrong?"

Herb said, "Nothing is wrong."

Andrew asked, "Then why are you shaking your head like that?"

Herb said, "I am nodding affirmingly. I don't see what's wrong with my nod."

Understanding that his expression of yes was equal to an expression of no, Andrew said, "Nevermind. Disregard what I said." He saw that all the animate plants were still gazing at him. Andrew left this site and peeked into the teepee.

Words couldn't reveal Andrew's level of confusion. On the grassy floor of the teepee appeared a stationary large blue beetle, the size of Andrew's hand. Andrew queased and turned his head away from the disgusting insect appearance. He hated beetles. The fact that it was ten times bigger sickened him even more. Having trouble speaking, Andrew asked, "Why the fuck is there a huge beetle on the floor!"

Walking into the teepee, Herb said, "For Inoculation Jamboree."

Andrew asked, "What? What the hell is that?"

Walking out of the teepee, Herb said, "Follow me. Carry the beetle with you on your way out."

Andrew said, "Not even a chance I'm picking that up."

Herb said, “The beetle is a part of nature. All belongs to nature. Carry it.”

Perpetual thoughts told Andrew not to pick it up, but his natural instinct made his hands approach the beetle. As his hands came closer into contact, the beetle quickly flew over his head but thankfully didn’t escape out of the teepee. He couldn’t believe what he was doing. This was not rational, but it was natural, according to Herb at least. Lunging forward, Andrew slapped his hands together and barely caught hold of the beetle. The beetle continuously slapped Andrew’s arms with its supersonic fluttering. Reaching maximum grossness, the beetle almost flew out of his hands, but Andrew suppressed its struggle.

As Andrew exited the teepee, the animate plants stared at the beetle he held. Profusely reacting, the animate plants released high-volume chants repeatedly saying, “Jamboree!” Wanting to throw away the beetle in riddance, Andrew caught up to Herb. The beetle clamped Andrew’s fingers with its sharp mouth, gnawing away on many skin cells. He put more pressure on the beetle’s back, and it stopped biting.

Noticing this harshness, Herb said, “Hey! Be gentle to Beetle. What if I were to crush your spinal cord with ease? How would you like that!”

As they were walking, Andrew said, “Fine.” He unrestrained the beetle but still held it. “Where are we walking to?”

Herb elegantly said, “Afar from here. Be patient.” The “Jamboree” chants diminished, and the animate plants followed them. Herb grabbed Andrew by the chest. “We will travel a quicker way. I must bring you to a distinct location. You cannot know how to get there.” Herb covered Andrew’s eyes with one hand and carried him with the other.

Andrew said, “Not this again.” The beetle began gnawing on his hand, and Herb’s thorny hands were piercing his eyelids. Andrew was confined to two irritations. As Herb made a run for it, Andrew heard the animate plants’ approaching stomps.

After several moments of bickering harassment, Andrew felt the shakes of running stop. Andrew insisted, “Can you put me down now?” Herb did just that.

It was still daylight abroad and presumed that the beetle was still in his hand. And it was still ferociously biting Andrew’s fingers. He looked around and saw the hoard of animate plants covering his field of view. Acquiring no idea of their precise location, Andrew stood there, while Herb implanted his feet into the mud floor. Andrew emphatically said, “Tell me where we are.”

Herb discarded his hand from Andrew’s eyes.

Andrew’s mind fleeted with ebullience. The landscape projected an unimaginable sight. Absent of trees, the biome concocted an endless display of shifting tectonic plates made of stone. Water springs solidified into these tectonic plates. Unquantifiable amounts of color elicited the near-ending daylight sky. Andrew exhumed his admiration of beauty and took a deep breath of air in. Deeming this as not a fairy-tale, he saw this place as a luscious swirl of color and beauty. Contentment ran through his frontal cortex, and nothing could contain his dopamine levels. This was all too much. Purple and orange vibrancy glared upon his eyes.

Beauty intake postponed, Andrew heard a horn vibrate, quite possibly from an animate plant playing it. A mass of buzzing roared from beneath him. A proliferation of dopamine bees sprung above the water spring, each bee coming out faster than the other. Hundreds of bees flew in random jagged directions.

Putting his hand on Andrew’s shoulder, Herb said, “Inoculation Jamboree commences!” Turning his head to Andrew, he smiled.

The animate plants re-established their “Jamboree” chant, but this time, they sang the chant with overreaching and underreaching musical notes. More bees exited out of the water springs.

“Son of Nature, our community must protect itself,” Herb said to Andrew. “Sometimes, natural instinct makes us prone to danger and destruction. Inoculation Jamboree protects us from this unwanted natural instinct. Inoculation Jamboree may be a jamboree, but we see it as a necessity for protection.”

Before Herb continued, Andrew mentioned, “I see. How does this jamboree work?”

Herb quickly left the vicinity of Andrew and moved his body to a different tectonic plate. Inducing maximum power into his leg fibers, Herb propelled himself up a great height and managed to grasp the furry thorax of a dopamine bee. Herb rough-housed with the bee and enwrapped his hand fibers around the bee’s antennas. Swinging the bee’s direction, he flew the massive creature towards Andrew’s direction. Calming down the creature with constant but gentle constraint, he set the bee down next to Andrew. Herb almost lost control of the bee on his way down. Herb ordered Andrew, “Deposit your beetle into the atmosphere, lending it free of its constant bondage.”

Being a pest to Andrew, the beetle was let free from Andrew’s hands. The beetle took advantage of its freedom and rapidly reached high altitude into the atmosphere. Immediately, Herb unwrapped its hand fibers from the antennas, and the bee was let free.

Right away, the bee sprinted its way up in altitude and headed towards the beetle. Aiming its stinger at the beetle’s brain, the bee was not fast enough and missed. Regaining its speed back up, the bee, once again, reached the beetle and successfully inoculated the beetle with dopamine into its brain. The beetle lost consciousness and pathetically plummeted to the floor.

Recalling an experience similar to the beetle's, Andrew asked, "Why did it chase the beetle?"

Herb emphasized, "It did not just chase a beetle. It chased an intruder." The bee decreased in altitude and positioned itself on the floor.

Andrew questioned this whole process. "Why did you want the bee to sting the beetle in the first place?"

Herb simply stated, "For target practice."

The beetle lay motionless. Andrew said, "Why beetles out of all creatures?"

As Herb picked up the beetle, he said, "Because the beetles feast upon Allure. They diminish our resources and provide no moral or survival significance to our community. Supplying the dopamine bees with beetles trains them to fight against intruders and improve their stinger aim. The bees defy all laws of gravity and protect us at all costs."

Andrew said, "That's amazing."

"I'm not done with what I have to say, Son of Nature," said Herb. "There's one aspect that makes the dopamine bees vital to our existence."

"And what is that?"

Changing tone in his automated voice, Herb said, "Pollination of Allure."

Andrew asked, "Why do they need to pollinate Allure? Aren't there other pollinator creatures?"

Herb said, "No. The bees are the only creature big enough to pollinate the stigma of Allure."

"That explains why those bees are so big."

Herb said, “Yes. It seems that Mother Nature made each creature have a purpose on our planet. For example, the tadpoles heal, giving them the name the Healers. The bee pollinates, giving them the name the Protectors.”

Andrew said, “The cheetah devours.”

“Well, maybe not all creatures. But you understand my point. Mother Nature is destined to protect this planet, and we cannot forget this,” Herb said. He slowly trod his way towards the animate plant hoard. “Speaking of Mother Nature, she is right behind you.”

Turning his body around, Andrew was startled. “Jeez, Mom! Why do you gotta scare me like that?”

Marie, eyebrows abroad, said, “Sorry, son. Don’t worry. I’m just spectating.”

Andrew rolled his eyes up in confusion and said, “Okay . . . .”

Herb disrupted this awkward silence and said, “Ah, Mother Nature, what a delight it is to see you. Inoculation Jamboree has been presented to Andrew, and the session has concluded.”

She said, “Great to hear!”

“If you don’t mind me reminding you,” Herb continued. “I think it is time for the Celebratory Son of Nature Feast.”

Andrew thought, *feast?* Any word associated with food made him hungry. He had not eaten anything so far in the Spirit World ever since the beginning of the endeavour. The hypothalamus region of his brain still needed fulfillment. Luckily, Andrew remembered that all the food here was made of plant fibers, considering that he’s the most die-hard vegetarian.

Marie said, “That’s right. Well, the quicker we move, the less we starve.” Mild chuckles seeped out of her mouth.

Andrew asked, “Why don’t the animate plants use the dopamine bees to get there quicker?”

“No,” Herb earnestly said. “The bees are not for local travel. They are only for long-distance journeys.”

“Yes,” Marie agreed. Next to her, the animate plant group created a hammock-like structure with their entangling arm fibers. She fell into the malleable hammock and was cradled comfortably. No thorns surrounded the fibers. Enthusiastic in their cheers, the animate plant hoard completely left. This happened so fast that Andrew was left behind with Herb.

Andrew felt a bit disappointed. But Herb was still by his side. Knowing what his next move would be, Andrew said, “Do your thing. ‘I must not know the distinct location and how to travel there, and blah blah blah . . . .”

Herb said, “To your command, Son of Nature. I was going to let you ride the bee separately, but, if you say so, I will carry you.”

Andrew’s mind fizzled and regretted what it said. Herb covered his eyes and swiftly returned to Allure with Andrew in his arms.

Andrew opened his eyes and saw an extremely long wooden table that extended to the last animate plant in sight. The table was positioned next to his mother’s wooden “palace.” Empty-handed of chairs or silverware, the animate plants sat on the convoluted tree branches. His mother sat at the end of the table. Eating with wooden plates, they ate freshly-served blue beetles. Andrew’s inexorable hate for beetles intensified. The beetles, of course, are composed of chlorophyll, glucose, and other plant-based nutrients. Andrew conjured in his head another reason why they would use beetles in Inoculation Jamboree: so that the animate plants could eat

them. The animate plants collaborated and spoke with each other. Andrew stood on the opposite end of the table from his mother.

“Hi, Andrew!” Marie yelled. “It’s so great to see you engage in our feastly activities.”

Andrew couldn't comprehend what she said. Her vocal vibrations diluted with the racket of the animate plants. Herb, like last time, stood next to Andrew. Developing a pre-conceived notion, Andrew knew Herb was going to order him to sit down. So, Andrew enacted this prediction and sat at the end of the table.

“Please,” Herb said. “Nevermind.”

Chomping like carnivores, the animate plants ravenously ate the beetles. Before grabbing the food, Andrew took a step away mentally from the dinner. He wanted his mind to be in check with time or at least the Spirit World timezone.

Nightfall hit, and he realized it was his third day in this place. Four more days remained.

Marie said, “Andrew, feel free to eat some of our condiments. They’re quite scrumptious.”

“Noted,” Andrew said. On his left, an animate plant picked up a beetle off its plate and placed it on Andrew’s plate. Noticing this donation, he said, “Thank you.” The animate plant nodded its head left and right. “Why do you guys sing during Inoculation Jamboree?”

Herb, finishing his delectable chewing, said, “For rhythmical purposes.” His voice changed to a monotone voice. “Andrew, this is the interdimensional communicator system. The reason they sing with rhythm is so that their beta and alpha neural waves can be in synchrony. The bees end up falling in this synchrony as well, giving them a better ability to focus and work as a collective unit. Rhythm can make any group work as one. This is why the dopamine bees are so successful in targeting the beetles.” Herb’s voice came back on. “We thrive through music.”

Andrew said, “Pause.” He looked at his mother. “Mom, did you just see and hear that?”

“What? Herb’s voice?” Marie asked.

“No. That automated voice,” Andrew said.

She said, “No, I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” She returned to her eating.

Andrew couldn’t figure out how this voice spoke to him. Why couldn’t his mother hear it if they were both in the Spirit World?

Herb, changing back to the automated voice, said, “Andrew, after hearing your thoughts, I can tell you why. You are physically alive and well using the machine. I still have complete access to your brain and consciousness. I can read your thoughts and dopamine levels at all times. Your whole brain is opened up to me. Your mother, on the other hand, is dead and not using the machine, which means that I don’t have control of her brain or consciousness. Only physically-alive guests can hear the benefit of my voice.”

Andrew thought, *why would I want to hear your voice?*

The voice said, “So that I can help direct you in this foreign land. I provide and welcome service to new guests of the Spirit World. Once you physically die, I will have no control of your brain, and you will no longer have access to my voice.”

Andrew thought, *dying physically sounds awfully better to me.*

The voice said, “Farewell.”

This creeped Andrew out too much. A computer was always listening to his brain. Moving his mind back to where he was, he saw he was at the feast table. Poking and playing around with the beetle, while still being too afraid to eat it, Andrew asked, “So are all the creatures plant-based here?”

Herb, sitting down on Andrew’s left, said, “Indeed. All creatures of the Forest are Plant.”

Reassuring his question, Andrew asked, “No blood exists?”

The animate plants cut their chattering and dead silence broke loose. Dead center of Andrew’s vision, Marie stared directly into her son’s eyes, dropping the beetle from her hands. Herb also stared at Andrew with discontent.

Mortified, Andrew disliked their morbid facial expressions. He asked, “I’m just asking if blood—”

Herb disdainfully exclaimed, “No one speaks of blood!”

Andrew asked, “How come?”

Herb, lowering his voice, said, “Our ancestors have had a horrendous relation with blood. Dark times arise when blood interferes with the Forest.”

Andrew asked, “What exactly happened though?”

Herb, placing his arm fibers on his large mouth, said, “It-it-it was—”

Marie said, “It would be best to not speak of this matter. Dark times require dark stories, and it is, thus, too distressing for this to happen.” She clapped her hands together. “I say we forget this turbulence and enjoy some mouthwatering beetles.”

The animate plants revamped their cheers and continued back to their chattering. Marie went back to eating her blue beetles. Stricken by their fast approach to mutuality, Andrew still felt confused with all of this.

Herb said, “Eat you beetles.”

CHAPTER 14:

Why not speak of blood?

What more can they fear about these flower buds?

Andrew despised beetles.

Everything in this dimension was null.

Andrew, who had recently finished the feast, sat in his teepee-like structure. He had faked eating his beetles by shoving them in the mud while at the feast. The place he was now at provided a lukewarm temperature, and Andrew settled in cozily. Dark outside, Andrew slowly fell asleep.

Propping up his body to start a new day in this foreign dimension, Andrew stretched his muscles and exited the teepee. Checking behind his back, he heard a pretty high-pitched grunt. Behind his teepee were the embryonic trees. The eggs shells contained no embryo; they all had hatched. Getting a closer look, he saw small furry monkeys, veiled in a light reddish color. They released mild punches at each other, engaging in playful brawls. They appeared the same as a monkey from Earth, but Andrew spotted one subtle difference. Each monkey had two eye sockets but only one eye pupil. The black-colored eye could revolve from one white eye socket to the other by travelling under the nose gap. Hence, the monkey only had one elongated eye socket that stretched from one eyehole to the other. Andrew thought, *freaky.* The interdimensional communicator system agreed with him. *Get outta my head*, Andrew thought.

The voice said, “Will do.”

Andrew remained startled. He didn't know what to do with them. Estimating there were about twenty of them, he picked up one of them from the floor. The monkey from its left socket moved its pupil to the other one to get a better look at who was carrying its body.

Andrew became frightened of these babies. Setting the monkey down, he left the area of his "house." Due to his "house" being positioned directly under the Allure flower, he managed to grab onto a hanging branch that connected to the large petal. He climbed it and made it onto the flower petal. Before walking too astray from the teepee, he remembered, *they are not your property but your children. You feed them. You nurture them.* Andrew thought, *ehh . . . who cares. They're just monkeys.* He needed to start prioritizing things that only pertained to himself. He was done with people bossing him around.

He continued walking forward onto the petal. He saw casual walkers, as in animate plants, of course. A crescendo of buzzing ascended near Andrew. In the sky was a dopamine bee. The bee landed on the stigma of Allure, and its stinger morphed to a bright yellow color. It contracted its stinger, and pollen transferred to the stigma. The animate plants near the vicinity released joyful cheers. One yelled, "Allure lives on!" The bee left the vicinity.

After this considerably significant event transpired, Andrew heard plant ruffles. Behind him was Herb in his presence. Andrew shook in startle. Herb said, "Hello, Son of Nature. Did you enjoy your celebratory feast yesterday?"

Still struck by his quick appearance, Andrew said, "What? Yeah. I enjoyed it. I guess."

"Great to hear!" Herb positively reinforced. "Well, anyway, I was thinking that I show you more of our everyday life at Allure."

Andrew scratched the back of his hair. "Okay. Do you also know where my mother is?"

"Mother Nature is enjoying herself to some peaceful rest."

Andrew wanted to speak with her. He wanted to know more about her past life. The life where she lived physically, not dimensionally. “When she wakes up, tell her that I wish to speak with her.”

Herb eloquently said, “Request granted. I think it is time I show you the different factions that we got going around here.”

Andrew asked, “Factions? What do you mean?”

Herb placed his prickly hand on Andrew’s eyes. “I take you.”

Andrew knew to zone out. It was his fourth time using this “mode of transportation.”

Zoning out complete, Andrew obtained his vision. Trees still fixated around them. Below them, entwined tree branches sprawled. To his left and his right, animate plants laid their bodies out in certain areas where light illuminated. However, all these animate plants expressed a blue majority of petals on the outer rims of their heads. The light shined on their relaxed chlorophyll-flowing bodies.

“These Plant are the Seekers,” Herb said. He was attracted to a shining spot of light. He admired the light. The light nourished him photosynthetically. “The Seekers scout the best and most fulfilling spots for photosynthesis. Esse gives us light. Each day Esse brings light is a blessing. Her forthcoming marks our existence.”

Andrew finally breathed out. “Esse, huh? How do the Seekers detect which sun spot—I mean Esse spot—is best?”

“Esse granted this physical power to the Seekers by offering them thermoreceptors.”

Andrew said, “So they can perceive infrared light through these sensors?”

“That is correct,” Herb answered. “Infrared light cannot be seen with the human eye. Humans can only see visible light when light waves emit 380-740 nanometers. However, with

thermoreceptors, animate plants can spot infrared light that emits more than 700 nanometers. In fact, our receptors are located on their eyelids. A translucent green film overlays our eyes. This film displays the different infrared waves present in our atmosphere. If you ever wanted it, they could lend it. Want to give it a try?"

"Sure," Andrew enthusiastically requested.

Herb definingly yelled, "Hey! Shruburb! Expel your thermoreceptor, and lend it to the Son of Nature! Now!" Herb released a shrill hiss. Andrew felt awkward.

Shruburb contracted its venus flytrap mouth. Pinching its eyes as if it were taking off contacts, Shruburb rested them on its wooden palm. It caressed them with its other hand and gave them to Andrew.

Andrew asked, "How do I put them on?"

"Easy. Just place them on your eyes," Herb stated.

"They burn?"

Herb reaffirmed, "Of course not. The film is made of a transparent chlorophyll cell wall."

Placing the first one in his eye, Andrew suddenly felt his eye unfettered by a burning sensation. Quickly placing the other one in his other eye, the unfettering doubled. While his eyes suffered, he saw red and orange colors where the Esse light shined; whereas, the branches were dark blue.

The burning gradually ended. Some spots glamoured more bright colors while others lessened. The fact that animate plants used photosynthetic manipulation fascinated Andrew. Andrew said, "Okay, okay, I'm convinced." He took the films off his eyes and gave them back to Shruburb.

Herb said, “As you see, the Seekers are needed. Their faction is mandatory for our functionality.” Herb got up from the floor. “Now, it’s time that I take you to the next faction.”

Andrew said, “Carry me for the fifth time. I’m totally down for this.”

After this magical carrying ended, Andrew saw the new faction. Beautiful flowers blossomed all around Andrew. Animate plants with a red petal majority wandered around the flowers. Andrew recognized some of the flowers: jasmines, roses, daisies, lilies, and gardenias. All colors arose in this gargantuan cluster.

Herb said, “The Coddlers are responsible for making Allure as lively as possible.”

Andrew said, “Plants coddling plants, hmmm. Sounds legit to me.”

“And that’s all there really is to them. Off to the next faction.”

Carried for the sixth time, Andrew witnessed a long bioluminescent river. Animate plants with a yellow petal majority stood in the water, holding wooden buckets.

Herb said, “These are the Gatherers. They replenish our chlorophyll intake. They, too, are important for our functionality.”

Andrew said, “Alright, man! I get it. There are different roles here. Why do you have to show me all of this?”

Herb said, “To expand your rational intellect. To gain perspective. Everyone lives in unison here. Everyone has a job. Your job is to continue your royalty as the Son of Nature.”

“Okay. Can we just return to my teepee?”

Herb said, “Yes, as soon as I finish pouring this water on myself.” As Herb picked up a wooden bucket, Andrew heard a loud bass-infused noise.

Andrew asked, “What is that noise? It’s so loud!”

Herb expressed an excited sigh. “That’s the sound of a burrowing bass ferret. Which means—oh no! An intruder has been spotted! You stay here Son of Nature while I investigate. Stay safe!” He scurried off with his long legs and ditched Andrew.

Andrew couldn’t wrap his head around all the abruptness he went through. He thought, *burrowing bass what?* He couldn’t catch a break. Sitting next to the river, he closed his eyes. Trying to reach a meditative state, Andrew tried connecting his brain with the nature around him. Exhaling and inhaling at relaxed intervals, he finally felt peace in his mind. He relaxed. He breathed. He could hear. He could smell. The smell of water provided him with a vibe of freshness. The sound of the bass noise was no more. The sound of flowing water reeled into his mind. As transcendence and peace flowed, Andrew heard the sound of Herb’s quick footsteps.

Herb said, “Son of Nature, I present you with a visitor.” Andrew opened his eyes and terminated his nirvana. Turning around, he saw it was Harriet, with no facial expression. A baby was cradled in her arms, the exact baby that Andrew found on the fully-filled dumpster. Andrew felt silence.

Andrew hesitantly said, “Hi, Harriet.” Andrew’s heartbeat trembled.

She handed the baby to Herb. Harriet remained expressionless until her eyebrows slowly uncoiled. Teeth slowly emerged. Lips slowly pursed. Cheekbones slowly levitated. Harriet’s expression: done.

She raised her hands. All of a sudden she gripped her hands around Andrew’s neck and tenaciously squeezed with all her angry strength. Andrew throttled back and forth, struggling for a gasp of air. Underestimating her strength, he tried pushing her body back in retribution, but she maintained her clench.

Herb jolted to Harriet and restricted her body away from Andrew's. Andrew vacuumed in a fresh gulp of air. Exhaling rampantly, Andrew exhaustedly shouted, "What the hell, Harriet! What are you doing!" Harriet was painted with an indignant face.

She snarled at him and screamed, "Andrew, how could you leave me out there! You're a horrible person!" Tears flew out of her eye sockets. Herb carried Harriet away from Andrew.

As he moved, Herb said, "I'm so sorry for provoking you, Son of Nature. We will dispatch her as soon as possible. Treasonous acts such as these will not be tolerated."

Harriet said, "Son of Nature? What are you? A god now? You turn your back on me, and you become a beloved deity? What even is this! This makes no sense!" Herb changed from walking to running.

Andrew bit his tongue. "Hey! Don't kill her!" He couldn't tell if Herb was out of hearing range. He couldn't tell if Herb meant what he said. Butterflies swelled his stomach. "Herb? Herb! Come back here!"

No response.

A pervasive flourish of chills trickled down his body. Isolated in an extraneous position, he sought to get help, but he had no sense of general direction. His dialogue vibrated to the nearest animate plant. He asked, "Hey, how do I get back to the Allure flower?" His voice still felt clogged after the choking.

The plant continued scooping the water from the river. It placed the bucket with the pile of filled buckets. Picking up a new bucket, the animate plant scooped the water. The process repeated: scoop water, place bucket, and obtain new bucket. The plant ignored Andrew.

"Hey!" Andrew yelled. "Can you help me?" Still possessed in its labor, the animate plant scooped the water, placed the bucket in the pile, and obtained the new bucket. Andrew stormed

to the animate plant and tapped its wooden shoulder. Bending down to scoop the water, the animate plant did not notice. Caught up in a short horoscope of time, Andrew shook its body. Until then did the plant notice him.

The animate plant said, “Hello, Son of Nature. What can I do to assist you?”

Letting go of his shoulders, Andrew said, “Please tell me the quickest route to Allure from here.”

The plant said, “Why, of course! Just walk up this river, and when you find the first tectonic plate, make a right, and Allure will be at your forefront.”

Anxious for time, Andrew said, “Alright. Got it. Thank you.”

The plant went back to its water gathering: fill, old bucket, new bucket. Andrew grew alarmed with its civil obedience. Forgetting this, Andrew rapidly made his way on the route. Nervous energy prevailed in his body as he coasted down the river. Tadpole creatures, or the Healers, appeared from the outer edges of the water, surging downstream. Andrew’s quick walking transformed to a light jog. This light jog converted to a mellow sprint. As his desire to save Harriet drove him, Andrew placed every foot with passion.

Tadpoles still by his side, he noticed several hanging eggs on the embryonic trees. Andrew panted heavily, yet he did not feel tired or lose stamina. He was full of energy. Perspiration was non-existent. Andrew stopped running. He heard something: a noise that he heard from before. It sounded like a similar footstep that he knew of.

The same noise occurred again. Andrew brought himself to the noise’s direction. A blue cheetah stared blankly at him. A hesitant growl spurted out of its mouth. Each paw clawed into the mud, but no movement transcended. The cheetah’s eyes remained stagnant. The cheetah

looked ferocious, but an underlying spark of care seemed to seep through. As if it had some submissive will. Andrew's sense of safety did not fly. It was firm and calm.

Andrew raised his palm gently. Naturally, Andrew said, "Hello there, little cheetah. You look lively today. Wanna go for a ride?"

The cheetah held its ground, but its growls diminished. The cheetah's heartbeat is non-volatilely. Just how Andrew overtook the bee, he needed to overtake the cheetah, naturally though. He approached the cheetah slowly, yet he was still in a hurry. Time ticked slower here.

By the cheetah's hindlegs, Andrew tenderly placed his hands on its back. The cheetah unleashed a small fidget, yet no physical movement. Andrew braced the cheetah and was now on top of it. He petted the cheetah's neck delicately with his only index finger.

Now under the control of Andrew, the cheetah took small strides ahead. Pointing straight, Andrew yelled, "That way!" The cheetah immediately spurred forward, almost knocking him off in chronic force. Following down the river, he thought, *damn, I really messed up this time.*

The cheetah said, "So where are we going, Andrew?"

Andrew spazzed out in confusion. Was that just real? Did the cheetah just talk? Was there a coding error in the Spirit World, allowing the cheetah to speak?

Seeing if the cheetah spoke, Andrew said, "Sorry, can you repeat that?"

The cheetah continued running in silence. It may have been Andrew's feeling of hunger that provoked this vision. The two continued down the river for some time until they reached the first tectonic plate. The animate plant was correct. Allure was a few meters away from him at his forefront.

Andrew departed off the cheetah. He patted the cheetah's head twice and quickly headed to the ginormous flower. Wanting to give himself more credit for overtaking his fear of the

cheetah, Andrew had to put this on hold. Finding a hanging vine attached to Allure, he climbed this and placed his feet on the surface area of the flower. No animate plants appeared in the entire area. He thought, *where are they?* This wasn't the time for thinking. Now was the time to save someone that tried strangling him. He figured they would be at his mother's shack, or "palace." He looked for the ladder, but no ladder could be found. Self-doubt loitered him. Of course, Herb would do anything possible to cover his tracks from Andrew.

He needed a mode of flight, but sadly no dopamine bees meandered. In most need of a resourceful idea, he looked at what surrounded him. The cheetah was still behind him. The elevated tree branches that he needed to get to were still elevated. Nothing was cooking for him.

The cheetah expressed a prominent yelp. Andrew turned around. Knowing that cheetahs couldn't talk, he nevertheless hoped that it would tell him an idea through some means of communication. Andrew hopped on its back, and, unexpectedly, the cheetah zoomed forward, hopping from floating tectonic piece to piece. The usual abundance of trees dimmed in number. The cheetah felt reliable and quite trustworthy to Andrew. The animal made a sudden stop. Directly in front of them, a giant purple ruellia flower stood. In height, it stretched twenty feet.

Andrew waited. He was unsure why the cheetah would even bring him here. The cheetah walked up the stem, looking at the concave hole of the flower. Andrew, still confused, walked and stood on the petal. The cheetah made a nodding gesture to the hole of the flower.

Andrew asked, "What?" The cheetah just stared at the center of the flower. The center dropped down a few feet, almost the height of Andrew. His natural instinct insisted on walking in the dip. Andrew questioned this, but by the time he questioned it, he was already in the hole. The flower coughed up and closed its petals. He stood in the dark. Suddenly, the flower spat Andrew out, propelling him hundreds of feet up in the air. Arms and legs flamboyant with the fragile air,

he fell from the apex of his flight path until he landed onto the elevated tree branches. Thankfully, the branches donated a safe landing due to their high malleability.

That whole sequence seemed too surreal to him. It was too unexpected, but his adrenaline to save a hater overturned him to keep moving. Seeing his mother's shack off into the distance, he sprinted to it. Sitting in a yoga-like stance, animate plants crowded around the structure. Time sped up here. Making it to the crowd, he pushed every plant that clouded his vision. He finally saw Herb, his mother, Harriet, and the baby in the center of the crowd.

Harriet seemed calm. Herb seemed relaxed. His mother seemed tranquil. They all held partially decayed manuscripts as his mother's lips moved vividly.

Andrew coughed deeply and put his hand on his mother's shoulder. "What's going on?"

Marie said, "Why, of course, we were engaging in the Sacrament of Green Euphoria. What else would we do?"

Andrew stepped back for a second. He said, "Herb. When you said 'dispatch of her,' I was assuming you'd kill her, not cultivate in naturalistic principles." The animate plants meditated, breathing together simultaneously.

Herb said, "Sorry if you felt misguided. Now, if the Son of Nature wouldn't mind, I think Mother Nature would like to continue her spiritual reading."

Andrew clenched his fists. "Please," Andrew reiterated. This whole process felt quaint to Andrew.

"Thank you, dear. Now, where was I?" Marie said. Eyes focused now on the script, she started. "Ah, yes, Green Euphoria. So I say to you my fellow Plant, let us blossom our eudaimonia and shine our internal being. The inflorescent light of Esse transcends our physical life each day and every day. Esse always knew our destiny, our destiny to seek contentment from

the preservation of our ecology. We work. We breathe. We pray. And in repentance, Esse gives us her energy. Esse wants peace. Esse wants your loyalty, your love, and your determination. Only through chlorophyll, transpiration, and guttation can we achieve concord and a never-ending embellishment of tranquility."

Andrew interrupted. "Don't you mean 'through blood, sweat, and tears'?" All the animate plants gasped and overarched their backs. They couldn't believe what Andrew said.

Herb said, "How dare you say blasphemy twice! This is despicable! You crossed the line too many times. Son of Nature must be expunged."

Andrew felt puzzled. "Shouldn't have Harriet been killed too?"

Three people yelled at the same time: Harriet, Marie, and Herb, as well as the entire animate plant crowd. After this vocalized collision ended, Harriet said, "You leave me outta this Andrew!"

Andrew yelled, "No, how 'bout you shut up. I came to rescue you, but instead, you engage in some peculiar ritual. And now you all want to kill me? This is unreal!" Turmoil had erupted.

"They forgave me!" Harriet professed. "I told them who I really was and what horrible things you did to me. If anything, *you* should die. You're a scumbag for leaving me stranded in the forest for almost two days!"

Herb said, "Son of Nature, we've told you many times already to unleash your rational side. Your inability to do this gives us a hard time as a community. You lessen our options on how to deal with you. Trust me, Son of Nature, of course, we wouldn't want to kill you. We see you as a leader and valued member of our society."

Andrew asked, "So why kill me then?"

Herb said, “Because enough is enough! That is why. Countless misdemeanors against Allure should not be ignored. Like I told you before, you must be aware of your actions and what you say. We have determined what creature you are.”

“Come on!” Andrew exclaimed. “Surely you can forgive me as you did to Harriet. I’m a valued member and she’s just an unwanted intruder. I don’t see the correlation.” He walked up to get closer to Herb’s face.

Herb paused. “It’s up to Mother Nature to decide your fate.” He stepped back from Andrew’s face.

This was the point where Andrew backed off. This was the make-or-break moment of his life. Anything said could tick her off, so he remained silent. The only thing he did do was attempt to make a wide-eyed look with his eyes.

His mother hesitated for a second, glancing at his son’s eyes. She was neither smiling or frowning. Her expression: blank.

Andrew thought, *if I die in this dimension, what happens again?* The interdimensional communicator did not respond because Andrew told it to be quiet.

Her lips finally relocated. She said, “I am quite disappointed with my son going against our culture, but I do see his point of forgiveness. Moreover, he is also my son. I do think that Andrew should unleash more of his rational side as well. I conclude that we forgive my son and move on from this.” She formed a bittersweet smile. And so did Andrew.

The animate plants nodded their heads and returned to their sitting position. Herb picked up the baby that was on the floor. He said, “You’re not just off the hook yet, Son of Nature. You owe this baby an apology.” He brought the baby to the face of Andrew.

Andrew thought, *how did this baby end up in the Spirit World again?*

He realized something. Way back when he asked his father about the baby being on the Spirit World sensors, his father lied to him. The baby had been in the Spirit World ever since his first entry into the labs. Andrew's mind was folded all over the place. He now had to bring his attention to a talking plant.

Andrew said, "I didn't do anything wrong with it. What do you mean?"

"No!" Herb unleashed. "You did do something wrong. You let this baby suffer from Harriet this whole time!"

Andrew said, "That's not true! She just found it recently and—"

Marie shouted, "Enough with the arguing! It's just too much. If we could please just settle down and return to our scripture."

Herb backpedaled and said, "Of course, Mother Nature. I agree as well."

"Me too," Andrew said, "I'm outta here. I can't handle all these naturalist ideals. Peace." Holding two fingers in the air, he left the entire crowd. He walked through the entangled branches until he noticed no ladder was present. "Um, as a side note, how do I get down from here?" He was expecting stubbornness from them.

"Just jump off. Your plant fibers will be able to handle the fall," said Herb. "Oh wait, I'm sorry. You don't have leg fibers. So maybe you're just stuck here."

Andrew's prediction: strikingly true. Everyone was still in their original standing positions, staring at his failed attempt to leave. Andrew returned himself to the group. His patience lessened. His energy to speak declined. Again, he put his face up to Herb's. "So then how about you carry me, like you did the other five times, huh? Or is that asking for too much?"

Herb said, "You are in the attendance of the scripture reading. It is impermissible to leave. It's code of conduct."

Andrew's jaw tightened. "If you don't get me down, I'll blend you into some venus flytrap extract and cure some of your cancerous orders."

Herb hissed. The whole animate plant gang hissed. Andrew didn't bother. He wanted their disapproval. He was fed up with their stubbornness. Harriet, on the other hand, laughed, covering up her mouth in secrecy. Andrew's mother frowned.

Harriet kept on laughing, yet Marie noted this. Mother Nature asked, "What's so funny, Harriet?"

Unable to contain her temperament, she opened her eyes. Trying to suppress her laughs, she said, "I'm sorry. It's just, it's just—" She blurted out in laughter. "That joke was so spot on! You have no idea how well that was crafted." The whole crowd still had disappointment in their eyes. "You know, you know, the fact that venus flytrap extract is known to be a preventative procedure against cancer and the fact that Andrew called Herb's orders cancerous made it a million times better!" She continued in laughter.

Herb was steamed. And so was Marie. Herb proclaimed, "Hush! This uprooting will not be tolerated!" Harriet laughed again from this unforeseen plant pun Herb cluelessly made. "Son of Nature and Harriet, I force you guys to leave immediately. Shruburb would be happy to escort the two of you. No questions!"

Harriet's laughter quickly terminated. Awkwardness indulged Andrew and anger overthrew his vibes. He and Harriet were soon acquainted with Shruburb by their side. Retaining a blue color majority on its head, Shruburb said, "Hello, fellas. I will carry you down this branchy steep. Cradle yourselves into my arms. Come on, now."

Andrew asked, "Harriet, you prefer the left or right arm?"

Harriet said, "Why does that matter?" She entered the right arm.

Andrew said, “Just being polite.” Cradled into the other arm, he saw his neck was considerably close to the strangler. The baby remained on the floor, slowly wriggling in random directions. Herb and his mother eyed each other in disappointment. Shruburb approached the end of the branches. The animate plant, carrying two human beings, bounced off, plummeting down hundreds of feet; however, Shruburb began to lose mid-air balance. The plant’s left side was aimed towards the ground. Absorbing the grassy mud, the plant’s left side remained unaffected; yet, Andrew got crumpled. Too much G-force pursued his left hip, leaving the bone possibly broken.

Shruburb repositioned its body and profoundly threw Harriet and Andrew to the floor.

Harriet said, “Thanks for being polite.”

Shruburb said, “At your service.”

She said, “That was directed towards Andrew.”

“Well, I hope the two of you will be more respectful at the next reading,” the talking plant said.

Harriet answered, “Well said,” as Andrew grimaced his face in pain. He attempted to gain distance from her. He didn’t want a strangler by his side who talked shit on him.

“I must return,” Shruburb said. He rapidly climbed the tree branches and attended back to the naturalist readings.

Andrew said, “Hey, Harriet! How about you stop being a little bitch all the time, and fuck off!”

“Andrew, I’m done with you!” she exclaimed. “All you do is think about yourself. You can’t fathom the stuff I went through in the forest! I had to work my way out of this forest to get

to you. It was unbearably difficult, and it was all your fault. If your pathetic pride didn't cloud your mind so much, then I wouldn't have had to deal with any of this!"

"That doesn't give you the right to strangle me! If I wanted to, I could easily strangle your throat too!"

She exhausted a tiresome chuckle. "Yeah, well. I think that was a fair action I did in reaction to what you did. I was cold, hungry, and alone out there! Several creatures attempted to attack me, but I managed to run my heart out! What I went through was ten times worse than your situation! You were regarded as a king while I was on the mud floor, struggling to even live!" Harriet was yelling at the top of her lungs.

Herb from up above heard this loud commotion. Poking his head out of the high-altitude tree branches, he said, "Hey! Be at peace with each other!" His head left Andrew's sight.

Still fed up with her, Andrew said, "Yeah, Harriet. How about you be less disruptive, and respect the reading."

She yelled, "I'm never forgiving you! You will always be a selfish douchebag in my eyes!"

Andrew stood closer to her. "Yeah, well—" He paused, having trouble coming up with something. "I don't care!" He crossed his arms together. Above him, he saw Shruburb go airborne, falling towards their direction until he landed near them.

"Herb sent me," Shruburb pronounced. "You guys have to relax. You guys are too loud." He sat on the mud. Looking at Harriet and Andrew, he said, "Take a seat, Son of Nature. Take a seat, Harriet."

Harriet closed her eyes in relief and sat down. Shruburb said, "So what seems to be the conflict between you guys?"

“What are you, a therapist or something?” Andrew said.

“No,” Shruburb said. “But I want to do the best I can to eliminate this hostility between the two of you.”

Andrew began reminiscing about his time when he was at marriage counseling. The counseling tried to seal the bridge of his marriage, but that ended up not being the case for him. Divorce had gotten the best of him.

Focused on the present, Andrew sat down as well. He said, “This will get us nowhere. It won’t help.”

Shruburb said, “Son of Nature, I will do my best. Now, tell me what the issue is.”

“I think you know what the issue is,” Harriet said, “I kind of made a scene with my yelling in front of everyone at the religious revival.”

The plant said, “Okay. Andrew, what caused you to abandon her, according to what she previously stated?”

“I left her because she was slowing me down,” Andrew complained. “She kept on coming up with excuses and was being a real pain in the ass.”

Harriet yelled, “Every new word that comes from your mouth increases my desire to strangle you again!”

Shruburb loudly said, “Let’s calm down,” but each word deteriorated after the next in noise level. “Son of Nature, you must resort to less pride and more humility. Your self-arrogance has clouded up your mind.”

“Exactly what I said!” Harriet renounced.

“Hey,” Andrew stated. He remained silent for a bit. He decided to use more contemplation instead of words. “I guess you guys are right. I can be, at times, selfish and in my own world.”

“You sure can,” Harriet repeated. Shruburb hushed her.

“And I guess I need to be more caring. I can respect that. I see what you guys mean.”

Shruburb said, “Good, good.” He slowly stood up with his leg fibers. “So you guys are at peace now?”

Andrew and Harriet said the same thing at a slightly awkward timing. “I guess.”

“Good, good,” Shruburb said again. He immediately departed and arrived at the tall tree branches.

Andrew’s perception of time kicked in. It wasn’t day but night. Now with Shruburb gone, he could be open with Harriet. His consciousness had changed and his perspective had changed. It was time to be a hundred percent honest. “Hey, Harriet. I’m so sorry for leaving you behind like that. I was a complete dick and hope that you can forgive me.”

What Andrew said this time hit differently for Harriet. She said, “I appreciate what you said. That was nice.” The original mean look in her eyes had shrunk.

He felt content with what he said. Maybe his emotions needed to be more compassionate. He said, “Again, I’m sorry.”

She developed a smile. “I forgive you.” He was surprised with what she said. Forgiveness sparked a bit of joy in him. He was also surprised that Harriet swooped in for a kiss on his cheek. Andrew smiled too with partially blushed cheekbones. He raised his body and offered his hand to her. Grabbing his palm, she rose with the help of Andrew’s body weight.

She asked, “So, where do we go now?” The animate plants were still practicing their ritualistic readings in the tree branches above. The night sky was black as pitch.

“Um, I can go back to my teepee.” He just remembered about the crazed monkeys. The vibes felt good tonight for Andrew. “I think that I should go this way, and you should go that way. See how your living station will go down.”

She casually said, “Okay.” The two gained distance until their bodies were socially distant. Finding the Allure flower, he found his way towards the teepee. The first thing he saw at his teepee was that the monkeys were fully grown: arm scale, leg scale, and head scale. They were in their original positions, waiting patiently for absolutely nothing. Passing by them, he laid down in his teepee. Coming in one by one, the monkeys entered his room, all looking at him with their singular eye glands. He questioned their extreme closeness. He said, “Get out! Give me some space.” The monkeys’ intellect was too low to understand literal comprehension. Andrew sternly shifted his finger out the entrance. Understanding this message, they yelled sporadic murmurs. He repeated the same gesture in an even firmer manner. The monkeys finally left the teepee, continuing their murmurs outside. Andrew slept.

CHAPTER 15:

Why did Herb reveal the factions?

Did Herb just want his reaction?

The monkey's eyes truly appeared grotesque.

Andrew saw these as too picturesque.

An interrupting noise awoke him. Waking up to the start of a new artificial day, Andrew heard faint talking, but he couldn't make out the words. Andrew also had a turbulent dream last night. Coming out of the teepee, he saw small miniature structures constructed from tree branches. There were five of them, equaling the same amount of monkeys that pestered him last night. Peeking through the structure, he saw a monkey, eyes closed. They were called the Builders for a reason. The monkeys opened both eye sockets and screeched profusely. In accord, each monkey woke up from the screech and disassembled its structure, clawing at it erratically. Leaving their branches behind, the monkeys collectively sprinted away as a group.

Andrew climbed his occasional vine to get on top of the Allure flower. A few paces from him, there was an animate plant herd, lined up with two human figures by their side: his mother and Harriet. In front of the herd appeared an animate plant attached with some foreign apparel. A small brown kilt overhung on its head. Andrew took the courage to approach them, even though it did not require that much.

The plant wearing the kilt spoke to the crowd. Before listening to them, he asked, "What's going on?" The speaker and the animate plants still had their eyes locked on to each other.

Growing impatient, Andrew asked, “Hello? Son of Nature here.” His mother and Harriet caught eyes with him. Also, Herb was there, protecting the beloved queen of the land. The speaker dissolved their speech.

Andrew had a closer look at the speaker. It looked like a gypsy with the clothes it wore. “Why are you guys listening to this gypsy?”

Herb said, “She is telling us something important that has come up. She just began speaking, and you interrupted her. Channel your intellect more before you speak, Son of Nature. Go on, Hedga. Continue.”

Hedga, the gypsy, said, “A disruption in Allure is at stake. It seems as if Esse is unbalanced in our universe, and we are in trouble. I am told that a greater power will obliterate us all.”

A plant in the hoard asked, “What kind of power?”

She said, “A power so powerful that not even Esse can protect us. Esse has made a call to us from a source.”

Another plant asked, “What kind of source?”

She said, “A source so resourceful that many fear to approach it. Mother Nature bore this source. This source is the rift. I am told that Esse has the answer for our salvation. Esse can only communicate this message if someone goes to the source. If someone has enough courage to travel to this rift, our kind can be saved. The question is who is up for it?”

As if the ritualistic readings weren’t bizarre enough, Andrew couldn’t believe that they were now engaging in existential prophecies. He said, “Wait a minute. You guys actually believe in this stuff?”

Hedga attracted her sight to Andrew. “You’re the Son of Nature, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am but that doesn’t matter,” he said. “Are you guys kidding me with this?”

She said, “You’re the one who should go. It all makes sense now. It was the Son of Nature’s destiny to recover the source his mother bore.”

“Wait, what?”

“Esse gives hope to all. Son of Nature gives hope! We will be saved!” The whole crowd cheered. She said, “So it’s settled. He will journey once Esse sets before the night. We just need one more person to help guide him through this journey. Quite possibly two.”

Andrew was confused out of his mind. “Hold up! Hold up! This is all bullshit. There is no Esse or rift that you preach of. I’m not agreeing to any of this.”

Harriet said, “I’ll go with him.”

Immediately after, Herb said, “Me too.”

A new voyage was planned for Andrew before he could even go against it. He said, “Yo, is anyone listening to me?”

Herb nodded left and right and said, “Yes and you have no choice. You must go. The fate of Plant rests in your hands.”

Andrew said, “But none of this is true. Absolutely none of it makes sense. Say whatever you want, but I’m not crossing half the world for just a religious purpose. This ain’t a pilgrimage!”

Herb fully opened his venus flytrap jaw, revealing every sharp prong in his mouth. “I am known to be an herbivore, but if I wanted to, you could be my first dinner to mark my carnivorous transition.”

This was clearly a threat to Andrew, so he kind of had no other choice, sadly. He sighed in disappointment and fear. Backing up from the dominant plant, he looked at the gypsy plant

and said, “I guess I’m going then.” Having already heard a cheer from them, he didn’t want to hear another cheer. Expecting their reaction, the animate plant gang did not say a peep. Silence was the only noise present. The crowd slowly began to disperse until there was no one left other than the people he knew of.

The gypsy, the strangler, the mother, the baby, and the counselor looked at Andrew. The gypsy left, the strangler departed, the mother fled, the baby disappeared, and the counselor escaped. Only Andrew stood on the flower.

Andrew thought, *isolation.*

He stared at the floor blankly, unable to think any more. Still looking down, he walked on the flower petal, feet abrim to the petal’s edge. Finding his branch, he grabbed it and slid down with kinetic energy. Now that people ignored him, he could finally savor some rest. Entering his teepee, he closed his eyes, laying down with hands behind his head. He desired to reenact a sloth’s life. Not having to do anything until dusk, he rested. He was interrupted with a vocalized repercussion after just one minute of rest. Even though this interruption was small, his infuriation was gigantic. Coming out of the teepee, he didn’t see the culprit guilty of the noise. He went back to his teepee, but he heard the noise again. Sprinting out the teepee, he looked in all directions, and in front of his feet, a ferret popped out from the mud. Opening its mouth, the ferret produced a loud bass noise. Andrew thought, *burrowing bass ferret.* This was the most bizarre creature he had seen—still cute though. Drawing closer to it, he studied its face. The creature spattered a tiny white bead into Andrew’s open mouth. Coughing it up out of confusion, the bead slithered down his esophagus. His throat felt dry. Angered by the ferret, he kicked away at it, leading the creature to swoop under the mud.

Containing himself, he settled back into his teepee. The moment he laid his back on the floor he fell asleep, completely out. Moments thereafter, he woke up, nose stuffy. Time expedited before he could even perceive it, as nightfall had arrived. Outside the teepee opening, Herb, appearing disgruntled, stood, tapping his wooden fingers impatiently.

Lacking any energy, Andrew closed his eyes again. Herb loudly hissed, giving Andrew a jumpscare. Herb said, “Son of Nature! What’s the meaning of this? You were expected to journey off now. Dusk happened one hour ago! We were looking all over for you”

Rubbing his eyes, Andrew said, “Oh. That’s unexpected. Let me sleep in just a little more.”

“No,” Herb declared. “We need to leave now. We become more subject to risk every minute that you waste. Get up!” Grabbing his shirt, Herb lifted the sleeper’s body up.

Obtaining more energy, Andrew said, “Sorry about that. This um . . .” He had trouble remembering. “This ferret spit this weird substance into my mouth. It made me super tired for whatever reason.” Herb guided Andrew out of his teepee.

“Oh, the burrowing bass ferret,” Herb completed. “When startled, they launch a highly-enhanced isovaleric acid chemical into their opponent.”

“Iso-what?”

“Acid. It’s a chemical that makes other people prone to drowsiness. Isovaleric acid deviates from the valerian plant, but they developed the ability to store the chemicals in their gullet.”

“That’s weird. Are we going now? I’m not ready.” Andrew remained sleepy to some standard.

Herb reclaimed, “Yes, we’re going. Now. Harriet is ready too. We must meet with Mother Nature before we venture on.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Andrew secreted out of his mouth. “How much longer ‘til the chemical wears off?”

“I’d say a few more hours. I will carry you.” Sixth time’s a charm. After carrying the Son of Nature like a baby, Herb arrived at a hoard of plants with Harriet, the baby, and Marie. Herb threw Andrew to the floor like a dead body to display to his mother.

Looking at Harriet’s mouth upside-down, Andrew said, “Harriet, are you ready for this trip in the name of some supernatural being?”

Bluntly, she said, “You think I want to be here too? If I didn’t volunteer, I would’ve been killed too.” Everyone could hear what she said, eliciting a situation full of awkwardness. Andrew laughed at her upside-down mouth.

Marie said, “Well, then. Let’s get this started.” Directed towards the crowd, she said, “Who here is ready for salvation?”

In a distinct loud cheer, they yelled, “We are!”

Andrew still laid on the floor. Still in his own world, he asked, “Why is there a baby here?”

Harriet asked, “Why is your body on the floor? Are you okay?”

“I’m more than okay. Don’t worry about me,” Andrew said.

Herb said, “He’s intoxicated with isovaleric acid. Not a big deal.”

“Burrowing bass?” Marie asked. Herb nodded his head left and right.

Hedga, who was also there, said, “Set your destination southbound. I can envision our safehood. We are so close. Son of Nature, Herb, and Harriet, best of luck, even though Esse will protect you guys along your voyage.”

Marie said, “In addition to luck, make sure to maintain yourselves. Keep your health at a steady level. That is why I present you guys with hydrophilizers.” She held three of them in her right hand. “These hydrophilic straws allow you to suck water out of various plants. May they provide significant use to your survival.” She handed the three to Herb, who gave one to Harriet and gave one to dazed-out Andrew. Herb thanked Marie. She said, “Hop on a bee and get on going! Our kind depends on you guys, and, furthermore, Esse bless!”

Harriet thanked her too. Herb said, “Rise, Son of Nature. No more lying around.” The crowd riled up in the background. Raising his arm up, Herb gradually lifted up the unresponsive clump of meat. Now in his hold, Herb carried him for a seventh time.

Having arrived at where Inoculation Jamboree first occurred, Herb got out a small horn that was attached to his wooden torso. Emitting a pure G sharp chord, the bees swiftly jarred out of the inner holes. A beetle presented itself to Herb, which was carried by a smaller animate plant. He released the beetle into the open air. The animate plants began their chanting. A bee attracted to it, chased it, and stung it. Herb launched himself onto the bee’s back, suppressing its scathing absurdity. Ushering the bee to the ground, he conquered the bee’s physicality. He said, “Harriet! This bee is designated for you and the Son of Nature. Please hop on it before I lose control of it.”

Set beside Harriet, Andrew laid on the floor. She said, “Coming. Will Andrew be fine? His energy looks plain dead.”

“Of course, he’ll be fine. Son of Nature, get yourself up. Time is shrinking.” Andrew yelled indistinct chatter. Herb got off the bee and picked him up from the floor like a courier for an eighth time. Harriet threw herself on top of the bee. Herb placed Andrew behind her. Repeating the same process, Herb captured a bee for himself.

Andrew’s body remained fragile and wobbly on the bee’s thorax until he reached an epiphany. He wasn’t going to fall off the bee this time. Reigns of terror gazed before his unwatchful eyes. Last time he fell off felt like a nostalgic distant memory. The isovaleric acid kicked in and erased his thoughts with drowsiness.

Harriet pulled down the bee’s antennas, launching her and Andrew up into the sky. Hydrophilizer in a loose pocket, Andrew secured himself onto the bee’s back by secretly tying a ductile vine around Harriet’s belt loop on the back of her pants. If he fell down, she’d be alerted or pulled down. It was genius, somewhat.

Herb’s bee, in front of Harriet’s, propelled higher up and established a surmount altitude. Looking down, Andrew noticed the animate plants were specks. Allure was mighty small and green vegetation displayed the horizon 360 degrees. Harriet turned her face around and smiled at Andrew. Although it was night, light crept in small places of bioluminescence, whether it be the rivers or unseen creatures. Harriet asked, “You ready to explore, Andrew?” He wasn’t in the mood for talking. He was a bit sleepy. His eyelashes rested on his lids until he fell asleep. His quandary died out.

CHAPTER 16:

Was this journey to the rift legit?

What did Andrew forget?

Bonding efficiently with Harriet,

Andrew rode the bee as a chariot.

Andrew woke up. First thing off the bat, Andrew noticed they were way closer to the ground. Almost too close. Trees stood not that far from below. Andrew felt like himself. The chemical had worn off, and Herb was correct. Andrew said, “Jeez. How long have we been flying?”

Harriet said, “I’d say about seven and a half hours but not entirely sure because my sense of time on Earth is not exactly in check with Nirvana 74.”

Her pretentious nature was too predictable for Andrew. The amplifying noise of the wings and buzzing clouded the back of his ears. Gusts of winds pulled Harriet’s hair back into his mouth. Wanting to speak to Herb, Andrew couldn’t because of the distance. He was growing impatient. Maybe a superficial conversation would extinguish some time.

“Hey, Harriet,” he started. “So, where did you end up sleeping last night?”

She said, “Huh? I didn’t sleep last night. I was awake riding the bee all night and still am.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I was mixing it up with the night before that.” Now when he thought about it, he realized she got no sleep. He thought, *that actually says a lot about her. Maybe I could help.*

“Your mom allowed me to sleep in her place. It was nice.” She stared off into the horizon. “Oh yeah, I forgot to say something too.”

“Me too,” Andrew added.

They both said, “You go first,” at the same time but with minuscule imprecision.

Andrew again said, “You go first.” She made a shy nod.

“How in the world was your *mother* in this dimension? It’s just so bizarre.”

“It definitely is. It’s kinda a long story that I can tell you later.” Taking a pause, he said, “I was going to add that I can take control of the bee if you want.”

“Sure,” she appreciated. “We might have to land so that we can reposition ourselves.”

He said, “Alright. Let’s do it.” She zoomed the bee forward, propelling her bee in front of Herb’s.

Turning her neck around, Harriet said, “Herb! I’m going to land to switch places with Andrew!” Herb didn’t react. Despite this, she gradually descended the bee down. Fewer trees were prevalent here. The bee finally landed on dirt, not mud. Harriet hopped off the bee, but she felt something caught in the back of her pants. Andrew collided with her and made a hard pounding to the floor. Harriet fell too. His belt loop vine carried him down to the floor. Andrew felt immense embarrassment, leading to stomach aches. He looked at Harriet’s face to see her reaction. While laying on the dirt, she cracked a grin and then laughed. Andrew was confused.

He immediately said, “Sorry about that! I am an idiot.” Wanting to terminate this awkwardness, he quickly said, “I attached this vine thing to your belt loop so that you’d be alerted if I fell asleep and fell off. Must’ve been the stupid isovaleric acid that made me do something like this. And for some reason, I thought this would be a good idea so that I wouldn’t

free fall off a bee a second time. But if you think about it, you would end up falling too if I fell, so this whole plan was stupid and—"

Smiling, she said, "No, no. Don't worry. That was really funny!" She cut the vine with her long fingernails. "Silly Andrew."

Andrew was confused but relieved that she'd laugh at his stupidity. He thought, *her sense of humor is unique.* He said, "Alright, whatever. I'll lead now." He sat in the front and Harriet was behind. "Is the place were going to even exist?"

She said, "Just roll with it, like you said. This is just one big fairytale."

"Where's Herb?" Andrew asked. "He didn't land with us?"

Twisting around, she said, "Nope. That's pretty concerning." Andrew rushed the bee's antennas upward. He repeatedly pulled them down in worry of losing Herb. He pulled them pretty vigorously.

"Hey, Andrew! Don't yank them off. Be gentle."

Worried for time, he said, "I know. I'm sorry. It's just that I can't afford to lose another person in my life!" Herb telepathically said in Andrew's head, *be natural but rational.* He used less force on the antennas. The bee was now at a good height. Andrew, looking for Herb, came up with the conclusion: gone. "Where is he! I don't know what to follow now. Which way is the rift?"

"Calm down. He'll turn up," she affirmed. Andrew relaxed his tense shoulders. He muttered affirmingly as well.

"How far is this place? Why are we making a pilgrimage to this supernatural plant god again?" Blood pumped quicker to his brain and muscles.

She said, “Andrew, don’t get so worked up. Just chill out.” She put her hand on his shoulder.

Andrew said, “I’m not craving affection.” He denied her hand. His eyes were focused on finding his target: Herb. “I’m not losing this talking plant. He’s the only one who can provide us with any sense of direction.”

In response to his frustration, she said, “Andrew, breathe.”

He said, “My hypothalamus is degraded, my life is debunked, and I’m stranded on a bee! I mean, how did I even end up here? That damn gopher! Or was it a ferret? I can’t remember. I swear, if Herb doesn’t turn up, Imma freak out!”

Harriet said, “You’re mind’s all over the place. If you don’t feel good, maybe just set the bee down.”

Still lost in his thoughts, he said, “I’m so gonna kill my father. That betraying son of a bitch! His eight years of lying to me! He always—” He saw Herb’s bee into the distance near the horizon. Quite afar from him, he sprinted the bee forward. Acceleration throttled. They both backpedaled and almost fell from the speed.

They finally caught up with Herb’s bee. Looking closer, he saw there was no one on the bee. It was a loner bee. Andrew’s anger doubled. Harriet said, “Let me control the bee, Andrew, while you cool off. Really.”

Andrew jittered his hands fervently. He quietly said, “You’re probably right.” She couldn’t determine his psychological state after this statement.

“Okay then. Just set the bee down, and I’ll take control.” She spoke with as much precaution as possible. He dipped the bee down and set it onto the dirt floor. Without words, they

rearranged seating positions smoothly. Harriet took off and was back at altitude. Andrew felt lost in this dimension. Everything had felt off to him.

He said, “How do you know what direction to go?”

“I don’t,” she responded. “But I know I will end up finding Herb if I continue to move straight where we originally went.”

Scratching his head he said, “True. Alright then. Well, I’m gonna rest, and just make sure that I don’t fall.”

“Understood,” she said. Although she had zero sleep and he already had seven and a half, she still controlled the bee. He fell asleep, head on her shoulder.

After a few moments of snoozing, Andrew was alerted. He heard Harriet’s voice. She said, “I see Herb! Just a couple hundred meters from us!”

“Are you sure that’s him or is it an alone bee?”

“Nope, it’s definitely him. I can see his spiky silhouette on top of the bee.”

Still inattentive, he said, “Oh, that’s good to hear.” She hastened the bee forward.

Peeking over her right shoulder, he saw Herb’s flapped-back petals on the outer rim of his head, flapped-back from the winds, of course. The bees were now side-by-side: Herb’s and Harriet’s. Esse shined Herb’s green eyes, illuminating a white reticle around each eye. It threw Andrew off a bit. Herb said, “I thought I lost you guys. It’s good to reconvene again, Son of Nature and Harriet.”

Andrew said, “Thank god you showed up! I thought we would be lost forever.”

Herb said, “Well, no worries, I suppose. It is awfully bright right now, and I reckon that I will lie down for a bit to rejuvenate myself.”

“Oh, for photosynthesis?” Harriet questioned. Herb nodded left and right.

“I’m setting down the bee. It may be a few hours until I regain my energy.”

Andrew complained, “Hours! Jeez, man. If it takes that long, then I guess we better get it over with.”

Herb said, “Just set up for camp, and maybe explore a bit. If you look below, you can see the lake and the diminished amount of trees.”

“And why is that?” Harriet asked. “Why not just the usual forest biome?”

Herb mentioned, “The farther south you travel, the more different the biomes become. Even the creatures change considerably.” He turned his neck to the ground. “I must head down now.” His bee tipped and plunged downward. Harriet’s followed.

A vast blue lake in the shape of an irregular oval was surrounded by a decent amount of trees. Herb placed his bee on the coast of the lake where dirt cemented the floor. Harriet placed hers next to his. Herb added, “And, unfortunately, it is known to be that the south grows more venomous the farther down you go. It’s not a fact, but it’s what my ancestors would profess.”

Andrew looked around. No creatures were in sight. He said, “This place seems fine. It’s nice and quiet.” In addition to absorbing the light, Herb also drenched his body in the lake for water absorption.

Andrew felt parched, according to his hypothalamus to the very least. He felt a bulge in his right pocket: the hydrophilizer. Pulling it out, he asked, “Herb, how does this device work?”

“Just insert the straw into a plant, and it will secrete the water out of it. Suck out of it, and the water will flow to your mouth,” Herb suggested.

“Sounds simple then.” Andrew noticed the wide variety of plants and trees, though less in number when compared with the north. “How far are we from the rift, Herb?”

“Halfway,” Herb completed. “Equal distance from the north and equal distance from the south.” Andrew thought, *obviously equal distance.*

“That’s pretty far,” Harriet said. “Probably only another 12 hours until we arrive there. I can handle another 12.”

Herb was impressed with her devotion. “I might need to start calling you Daughter of Nature at this point. You’ve been a great help on our journey so far, and I appreciate it.”

Neurological spikes navigating in his cingulate cortex, Andrew grew a bit envious. “I’m going to use the hydrophilizer.” Herb and Harriet continued talking in the background.

Approaching the plants with small steps, he saw hanging pinecones dangling from the tree branches. Several sages sprouted in subtle crevices. Multiple ice plants added more to the green vibe. An oak tree stood in his way. He figured he’d try the hydrophilizer on this tree. Inserting it into a crack, he sucked the straw. After a few seconds, his tongue sensed a liquid. It tasted like syrup—as if it was probably sap. Not too far from Herb, he returned to him.

“Hey, Herb, why isn’t this thing working? I sucked on it and sap came out. It doesn’t even work.”

“Sap?” he questioned. “What plant were you trying it on?”

“An oak tree.”

Herb’s face grew worried. “Oh no. That means the tree is dying.”

Andrew said, “Dying?” Herb ran past him and found the oak tree. He studied the stump and bent his elastic body all around the tree.

Herb said, “My brother is dying. It seems that a pest has been fouling this innocent tree.”

“I’m thirsty, Herb. I don’t want maple syrup.” Andrew was ignored.

Herb caressed the tree with his hand. “Poor tree. I’m so sorry you have to suffer.” He brought his attention back to Andrew. “Give me that!” Andrew gave the straw to him. Herb attached it to his wooden torso. “This does work! Just be patient, Son of Nature. Stop always focusing on yourself.” Herb was standing taller than Andrew. Andrew understood. He gathered himself and went to where Harriet and the bees were.

Herb slowly caught up to them. Resting his body on the ground, he said, “I rest” as his eyes closed.

Still quite thirsty, Andrew asked, “Harriet, wanna try these hydrophilizers out?” He wanted physical action to get his endorphins going.

“I’m fine with that,” she pronounced. “There are so many plants to use it on though. Which one fits best for that device?”

“We’ll just test it out on different plants and go from there.” Things finally felt laid back for once. Harriet agreed with him and set foot to the conglomerate of plants. Beautiful colors from flower bunches provided more life for the terrain. Drier than the north, the soil germinated irises, miscanthuses, heucheras, hostas, and baptisias. The straw’s diameter was too big to exhume any sort of water from these plants. Andrew said, “Trees are probably our best bet.” He disregarded the plants and headed a few meters ahead to where the trees were. He cut across the dirt until he reached a neem tree. This tree stood 100 feet tall and was considered an evergreen. “Wanna try it on this tree?”

Not in the headspace of trees, she said, “This is off topic, Andrew. I was going to ask how your mother entered this dimension. I’ve been trying to puzzle it in my head for hours.”

Not really in the headspace of talking about his mother, he said, “Um, sure.” He put the hydrophilizer back into his pocket. “I found my mother in this dimension because of my father.

He . . . .” (Hey, reader! You get the full gist of the mother story by now. I’ll save you some time and fast forward this part.)

After his long story, Harriet responded, “Woah. That is some deep stuff. Now I see why you’re always so frustrated.”

Andrew said, “Yeah, it sucks.” Harriet felt she needed to change the mood.

“So, you wanna try out these hydrophilizers?” she insisted. Harriet wanted to vanquish his vulnerability from which he expressed in his story. Andrew affirmed. Poking the straw into the neem tree, she attempted to suck out of it.

Andrew revealed the hydrophilizer again. “You taste maple syrup? That’s what it tasted like for me.” She contorted her face, trying even harder. Her face finally relaxed. She felt the substance of water touch her tongue.

Removing her mouth from the straw, she declared, “This thing works! Water comes out of it! Pure water.” Andrew felt electrified and stumped.

“Why did I taste sap when I did it?”

Not even using one second of contemplation, she said, “When you attempted the oak tree, sap came out because the tree was rotting.” She resumed her water experience. Pointing to a tree, according to her line of sight, she said, “Try out that tree way into the distance. It looks healthy!”

“That tree better treat me well. I’m dying of thirstation.” She let off a sluggish laugh. Evaluating the distance, he ran to the tree. It appeared to be another neem tree. Inserting the straw, he obtained the sweet sensation of water, even though water acquired no taste. Sucking it as much as he could with eyes closed, he swallowed multiple cups of water. Satisfying his hypothalamus, he opened his eyes.

A ginormous gray beast with four limbs faced Andrew directly. It was a rhino with a vibrant purple wedge on the back of its head that also had a light-green horn on the tip. Andrew couldn't picture how this creature looked, despite it being at his forefront. He didn't move. He was too frightened. The beast didn't move either. He additionally realized this creature had no eyes, mouth, or ears. Andrew thought, *can this thing hear me?* He wanted to call over Harriet to help, but he didn't want to disturb the rhino either.

Gently, he lifted his right foot and placed it back. The same process repeated for the other foot. The creature remained anchored in its position. Andrew enacted on this process exponentially quicker, desiring as much distance as possible. Countless possibilities of failure surrounded his thoughts.

Gazing behind, he spotted Harriet, drinking from the hydrophilizer. The rhino was now at a considerably safe distance from him. He was at a considerably close distance to Harriet. He unknowingly managed to escape a creature tremendously larger than him.

Taking note of his presence, Harriet said, "Andrew, what are you doing—" Andrew put his finger on her lips. He pointed behind his back. Glancing over, she shook her shoulders up and down, and then raised her hands in confusion. Andrew thought, *why's she confused? There's literally a rhino behind us.* Again, she asked, "What is it? I see no—" Andrew shushed her again. Turning around, he saw no appearance of the rhino. "Are you seeing things, Andrew? There is nothing there."

Andrew was discombobulated. "What! I swear to god I saw a huge rhino! Where'd it go?"

Harriet said, "I know what you went through with your mother was hard, but I think you shouldn't trust all the things you see by this point. It was probably just your imagination."

Andrew denied this. “No! I saw it with my bare eyes. It was no vision.” Harriet shook her head with skepticism.

Harriet said, “I say we head back to Herb. I feel fulfilled with the amount of water I drank.” She began walking back, Andrew or Andrew-less. Forgetting her, he walked back to the same spot that he saw the rhino at. Travelling in other areas where the rhino could be, he couldn’t find it. He felt meek disappointment. He didn't know why though. Andrew headed back to Herb’s proximity.

Harriet was there and so was Herb, but this time he was floating on top of the stagnant lake, absorbing Esse’s light. Andrew asked, “Is Herb done yet? I wanna get to this ‘rift’ thing as quickly as possible.” Herb told him to relax. He needed his photosynthetic energy. Andrew also asked, “Herb, have you ever seen a rhino creature on this planet during your lifetime?”

“Rhi-no? No.”

Andrew said, “I figured that you’d be an adventurous venus flytrap who’d acquire knowledge of every creature. Well, I guess you’re not then.”

Herb shifted his floating position to a standing position. He was standing directly on top of the water. “Are you questioning my intellect, Son of Nature?” Harriet and Andrew were mystified by his stance.

Andrew had completely zoned out his question. “How are you standing on water? I didn’t know you were the new Jesus?”

Harriet played along as well. “Yeah, who knew you were the Messiah?”

Of course, Herb was oblivious to these terms. He said, “I can stand because of photosynthetic floatation. Once I get enough Esse light, I’m light on water.”

Andrew asked, “Harriet, can you fact-check that?”

“Can do. It seems true to me,” Harriet said. She held back her laugh, but she was genuinely surprised.

Herb was genuinely offended by Andrew. “I constitute more knowledge than what your brain suffices to. I know the natural spectrum of our planet and know every creature that exists. Your *rhino* that you speak of is nothing but a fallacy.”

Andrew said, “If you’re so smart, then you would know that we should continue our journey. Knowing that you’re standing on water means that you’ve reached the peak of your photosynthetic energy. If you were an intellectual, you would order us to start heading back, you old plant.”

Herb took a minute to process this. “You’re right. Let’s get going. More distractions mean more vulnerability.” He began walking on the water towards them. While walking, he disfigured his right leg and fell into the water, though he did not sink. He yelped with water cascading into his mouth.

Andrew grew frantic. “What is it! You okay?” Herb grabbed his leg and splashed all over the place. Andrew jumped into the water and swam to Herb. Carrying Herb, Andrew brought him to the coast of the lake.

Herb coughed up some water. He laid on the dirt next to the lake, still holding onto his leg. “I think an ivyfish stung me. I feel frail.”

Andrew panted heavily. “Ivyfish? What’s that?”

Still struggling to keep his cool, Herb said, “I forgot you foreigners don’t know everything. I will share my intellect. It is basically a fish that acquires poison ivy on its scales.”

Harriet came in quickly and said, “But poison ivy is only supposed to make you itch.”

Having a distorted face, Herb said, “No. Poison ivy is poison. It sends venom to our roots and infects our whole rudimentary system.” He expressed his shouts of pain.

Andrew sighed. “Shit! How can we help? Any treatment to make this feel better?”

Herb struggled and said, “Well, I may know the knowledge of the species, but I am not accustomed to the vast field of medicinal treatments. I am not sure.”

Andrew’s legs trembled. “We can’t just leave you here to suffer! There’s gotta be something we can do.” Herb rested on the floor like an inanimate stick.

Herb said, “I know my downfall is here. Right here, right now. And there’s nothing that can change that. What I can say though is that, Andrew, you must travel to the rift. Just head in the same direction we were going down before. There’s no turning back. It’s what Esse would’ve wanted.”

Andrew’s emotions disconnected. “No! You’re not going to die! We’ll just carry you. We’ll, um, we’ll, um—”

Harriet shouted, “We’ll get those tadpole creatures to heal you. In fact, I’ll look for them now.”

Herb said, “No! The Healers only exist in the north. You will get nowhere. I’m sorry. Just go. Now! Time is shrinking!” His leg fibers tightened. Harriet dropped a few tears. Andrew didn’t cry. He didn’t want to leave either.

Andrew said, “I’m not leaving you, Herb.”

Herb’s eyes were closed at this point. He had stopped ventilating. He was dead.

Andrew asserted several profane slurs at himself. He dropped a few tears. Harriet put her hand on his shoulder. He said, “I can’t believe he’s dead. It doesn’t make sense. He was breathing one minute ago, and now he’s gone.”

Harriet said, “I know. It’s just really, really sad.” With her hand, she pinched the top of her nasal bone while looking down.

“Why are *you* sad?” Andrew asked. “You barely even knew him.”

She said, “No, I did. Just because I didn’t know him as much as you did does not mean I shouldn’t be remorseful.”

“Yes, it does. You only knew him superficially. You didn’t get to know the *real* him.” He had a mildly-irritated look in his right eye. From Herb’s wooden torso, Andrew picked up the horn that was attached to it. Inserting the instrument into his mouth, he played the G# chord in remembrance of Herb. However, being naturally attracted to this noise, the two dopamine bees went sporadic and flew up into the air. The bees had lost their sense of control.

Harriet said, “Andrew! What are you doing?”

He said, “I’m just remembering Herb for who he was.”

“Yeah, but you’re making the bees go crazy. Stop playing the horn!”

“No, shut up, Harriet! Let me deal with my grief my own way. I need this.” He played the horn note again.

She said, “What we don’t need though is our bees escaping. They’re our only mode of transportation. Please, just stop!” He terminated the G# chord. “You’re approaching your crazy side again. Just try to calm down.”

Andrew said, “I’m sorry, but everyone goes through sorrow a little differently. And you should respect that.” The biome’s vibrancy felt decreased to Andrew. The flowers showed no color, the water wasn’t vivid, and dirt felt paler than his own skin.

“Andrew, I told you before. I respect your grief. I honor it. It’s just that we have to follow common sense, too.” He grabbed Herb’s right leg and dragged his body to the lake. Purple

cumulus clouds covered up Esse. Insufficient in photosynthetic nutrients, Herb sunk to the bottom of the lake. Andrew returned to Harriet and sat down crisscrossed. The bees halted their dispersion and rested behind the two.

Harriet said, “I think we should hop back onto the bees.”

Loudly, Andrew yelled, “And why is that, Harriet? Huh? To get to a pointless ‘rift’ destination? This shit is all bullshit! None of it matters.” He threw the horn into the lake. It sunk.

Harriet saw it was now night. She suggested, “I’ve gotten no sleep for the past 24 hours. I think we should sleep here tonight and leave when the sun rises.”

Andrew stood up and said, “Yeah. That’d probably be best. And it’s called Esse, not the sun.”

“Alright.” She found a pile of soft dirt and laid her body on it. The weather here was lukewarm. “Are you gonna sleep, Andrew?”

“I’ll try,” he said as he laid on a pile of dirt.

The night passed on. Waking up to the first Esse beam of light shining in her eyes, she pushed herself up from the ground. Reaching her hand out to Andrew, she calmly said, “Come on, let’s go now. It’s what Herb would’ve wanted.” Andrew faced the opposite direction of her. His eyes became lost in the lake. She gently poked his shoulder. “Come on,” she repeated. Andrew slowly got up. She saw his eyes had gone extremely red and strained. “Did you sleep okay?”

He said, “Sleep? I couldn’t sleep for even one minute.” Hopping on the bee’s thorax, he waited for Harriet.

Rubbing her eyes, Harriet remained still. She asked, “Since we have two bees, should I hop on yours or use Herb’s?”

His voice was monotonous. Andrew said, “Hop on mine. His bee stays his even after death.” She agreed and sat at the front of the thorax. The other bee sat motionless while Herb’s dead body rested at the bottom of the lake.

She asked, “Do you want me to control?”

“Please. I don’t want to kamikaze us.” She pressed the bee’s antennas downward, and they were off. The wind brushed her hair back, making her head look like the outer rim silhouette of an animate plant.

Andrew’s distraught slowly died down. He dazed blankly into the atmosphere as the bee went forward to the unknown: the rift. The overseer of Andrew came out. He asked, “How many days have we been here, Harriet?” He noticed that it was morning now.

Analyzing her rollercoaster of an experience here, she said, “I think today is our . . .” She paused. “Seventh day.”

His eyes widened. “So today is our last day here!” he finished. “Fuck! That means by the time we get there, it’ll probably be night!”

She said, “Shoot. You’re right. But if we maintain our pace, we should be fine.”

He complained, “I knew we should’ve left last night! But, of course, you wanted to leave this morning because of your ‘precious’ sleep.”

“Andrew, we’ll be fine! By the time we get there, it’ll probably be evening. And then we’ll have some time in the night to find the rift,” she said. “You’re just tired. Just sleep on the way there. You can even do your belt loop mechanic if you want. I don’t care.”

Andrew had no vine, so he rested his head on her shoulders. He finally fell asleep.

Tapping his forehead, she awakened Andrew. She simply said, “We’re almost there.” Vision blurred, he saw sand in the air, and a dark orange mist rectified all around them. They were in a sand blizzard. Esse did not shine through the thick mist either.

Andrew contracted his eyebrows. He had so many questions. “Where are we!” Microscopic sand dust chafed his inner throat.

Harriet said, “I think we’re getting closer. Herb did say the biomes changed the further south we went.”

“What does this rift even look like? How do you know if we passed it or not?” Andrew questioned. “Imagine if this rift is just symbolism for their god. How do we even know if the rift is a concrete thing?” Harriet disliked his perverse questioning.

She said, “I have no idea by this point. It’s almost night, and I’m tired. Just cross your fingers that it exists.”

“Even if it does exist, what does it accomplish? I feel we're getting nothing out of this.”

“Just do it for Herb by this point.” She tilted the bee’s antennas a little upward. “But I definitely feel like we’re close.” Andrew somewhat agreed with this.

He heard a weird noise, sounding almost like a whale hum. The sound felt distant but also close, too. “The hell was that?” He lowered his voice. Moreover, he felt creeped out. The bee continued travelling forward, but the speed seemed slower. Gravitating towards his fear, he looked all around to and fro. A creature encroached on his peripheral vision from a pretty far distance. The creature floated in the atmosphere at the same altitude as the bee. Its bleached blue body was shaped like a hot air balloon, similar to a bent stingray. The creature looked menacing. Pointing at this outlandish creature, he said, “Harriet, look at that. What am I seeing right now?”

Spooked out, she said, “Okay, let’s stay away from that thing.”

Tracking its movement, he saw the creature was slowly appearing larger. Looking in the opposite direction, he saw another one. And later, he saw even another one next to that one. Andrew's sanity was at its boiling point. "I think those things are coming at us!" Then, unexpectedly, the bee began declining at a steady level. "Why is the bee falling now!"

"I don't know! Maybe it's tired?" Harriet freaked out. The bee was inches above the sand. Colliding into the sand, the bee awkwardly tumbled, launching the two in opposite directions. Andrew's body was inhumed into the sand, which also clogged up his mouth. Upping his body, he squinted his eyes, but the sand partially covered up his vision. Searching for Harriet, he scurried around the bee's body, which remained unconscious. A few feet in front of the bee laid Harriet's buried body. Only her legs stuck out. Pulling her out of the sand, he saw her face was expressionless. Shaking her shoulders, he attempted to wake her up. He knew she wasn't dead. No blood was present. The G-force put her out of her conscious state. Shaking her again, he saw she didn't wake up. Deciphering on whether to pick her up, he came up to the conclusion not to since her body was too heavy. All he could see was sand. He walked forward in an attempt to journey to the rift. Above, the hot air balloon creatures prevailed in the skies. They were slowly gaining on Andrew. Nervous energy swept through him, causing him to run in the same direction the bee had originally gone. Panting greatly, he buried each footstep into the sand. He put every ounce of energy into his muscles. His time in the Spirit World was ticking. The endeavour was almost concluded, and not knowing how much time existed worried him even more.

On the sand, he saw a decayed blue beetle. It had no life.

Checking behind, he saw the grotesque creatures had appeared bigger, and their altitude shrunk. Running faster, he saw another dead beetle and then another. Later, a dead green deer with square hooves decomposed. Next to that was a red boar with no eyes—dead, of course.

Farther into the sandy distance appeared a big pile of dead beetles, jumbled closely together. Andrew felt he was on the brink of a heart attack. The floating stingrays were disturbingly close now. One of them was approaching Andrew head-on. Scared out of his mind, he dashed to the right. The creature was almost arm's distance from him. It had wavey green tentacles. These tentacles tried to touch his body. One of the tentacles oozed a green substance out of it. Andrew figured they were poisonous. The creature was right behind his tail. Another creature flew towards him from the front. He was about to be sandwiched. Dashing to his left, he escaped both of these creatures. A fat purple koala remained dead by his feet. Andrew figured this ludicrous sight meant he was near the rift.

Still chasing him, the flying creatures couldn't keep up with him. He moved too quickly. He saw a distilled yellow shine subtly sparkle through the sandy air. It had to be the rift. Getting closer, he saw huge hoards of dead creatures so tightly packed near each other that he couldn't recognize what they looked like. Moving in jagged directions, he lost the creatures that were chasing him. The light had become defined, and the sand was less rampant. The rift could be seen. Andrew was in awe. The gigantic oval-shaped rift glistened as a portal, revealing a forest on the other side of it. It was ten times taller than Andrew. An array of lively colors outlined the portal, which also floated a foot above the sand surface. The other side of the portal portrayed green trees. Andrew magnified his vision into the rift and saw a beetle from the forest fly through the portal, reaching the desert biome that he was in. Near the rift felt warm but not hot. He stood right next to it. He attempted to put his hand through it, but the rift pushed his hand back, almost like a mirror. This time he tried walking into it, but the portal still restrained him. Looking through it, he saw another world—a world that seemed familiar to him: the north. If the beetle managed to fly through the portal from the forest and if Andrew couldn't go against the portal

current, then it wasn't a coincidence. Something unique was going on. Andrew began processing this. According to Herb, he said that the portal arrived when his mother came into the dimension, meaning eight years ago. And if she was the first one to enter the Spirit World, then she was responsible for the making of this portal. But why? Thinking even harder, he realized the stuff going on in the portal was an inversion of the south. But why would a planet have a portal of its same planet in an inverted way? Andrew finally came up with the best realization he had ever thought of. The rift was a coding error of the Spirit World that was originally implemented when his father forced his mother to journey to the Spirit World. Inside of the portal was the physical world while the side he was on, of course, was the Spirit World. Only things from the physical planet of Nirvana 74 could enter the Spirit World while stuff from the Spirit World couldn't possibly enter the physical world because that would break basic physics principles. Therefore, the beetle that went through the portal came from the physical planet of Nirvana 74. It was all making sense to him now. The rift was a bridge from the physical world to the Spirit World. The rift was just one big glitch.

Immediately, he was pulled out of the Spirit World. He was brought back into the physical world where he was being fed with an IV. Harriet was next to him, but her eyes were still closed. Still dizzy, he asked, "Is the endeavour over?" His vision was now clear.

He saw a red-suited guard that he'd never seen before in front of him. The man said, "No, the endeavour is not over." No one else was in the black room.

Andrew said, "Then why am I here? Who are you?"

The man punched Andrew in the face. His right eye received a cut under his eyelid. The cut bled like an untangling spool of string. The man said, "I'm Rick. And Wallace told me that you haven't done shit so far." Rick slapped his face.

Andrew was frightened. He was strained in the contrivance, so he couldn't fight back. Rick said, "You haven't given me my package yet, and you've been sitting on a chair the past week! Wallace is furious with you."

Andrew panicked. "Sorry! Just tell him that Spirit Intercom forced me to do a one-week experiment with their machine. He'll understand."

"Are you kidding me!" Rick yelled. "He's been watching you through your camera for the past week. You haven't done anything that he said so far, and he told me to get you back into order. You owe me my package, too. Where is it?"

Andrew remembered it was in his Sporksterbeale. He left the composition book there also. "It's in my car."

"Then move your ass and give it to me! I don't have all day."

"I can't though," Andrew said. "I can't have my father spot me. He'll get suspicious and catch both of us."

Rick said, "Well then, I can always tell him about the portal that you just witnessed."

Andrew took a second to think and said, "Here, how about I make you a deal? If I go get your package, you won't speak about the portal I saw. Okay?" He wanted no one to know the portal, especially his father since suspicion would arise.

Rick grabbed him by the collar. "Deal. But you better do it quickly. As in now!" He grabbed Andrew up by the collar and threw him to the ground. The IV disconnected from his arm. Andrew was strongly surprised by his physicality. "Don't let your father see you, and don't tell him anything. If you do, I'll kill you." Andrew nodded spasmodically.

Before he left, Andrew asked, "Sorry, but how much time do I have left for the endeavour?

Rick said, “You have one hour, so you better get on moving!” Andrew left the black room. Once again, he was surrounded by infinite hallways. He didn’t know where each hallway led to. He made a left and sprinted forward. Each minute wasted here was a minute wasted in the Spirit World. Wanting to tell his mother of the rift, he had to get this “package” deal done as quickly as he could. As he was running, he saw a meandering lab researcher.

Approaching him, Andrew asked, “Sorry, but do you know where my car is located?”

The researcher said, “You’re Andrew, aren’t you! Wow. How is the endeavour going?”

“Good, good. So do you know where my car is?” Andrew didn’t want too much attention to spark.

“Yes, Jr. Rutano. Walk down the rest of the hallway, and the elevator will be at the corner. Go to level 1, and just make your way to the entrance. Ask one of the security guards to bring your car over, and they’ll be more than happy to escort your car to you.”

“Great, great. Do you know where my father is too?”

The researcher nodded and said, “Yes, he’s in his quarters managing the labs. You know, the usual.” He laughed. “You get it, don’t you?”

Andrew laughed along and thanked him. Walking in the opposite direction of the researcher, Andrew resumed his running. He reached the elevator, and thankfully, no one was in the elevator either. Pressing level 1, he descended 80 floors. Making it to the main complex, he looked down and walked to the entrance in a hope that nobody would notice him. Remarkably, he wasn’t noticed, that is, until he arrived at the entrance. A security guard said, “Look, it’s Andrew!” A bunch of them approached him and applauded. Andrew grew extremely uncomfortable.

“Hey,” Andrew expressed. “ Could you guys possibly pull in my car for me? I forgot something in it.”

“Of course,” a yellow-suited security guard stated. “I’ll bring it over.” He ran to the left side of the road and entered a different complex—probably only a complex reserved for security.

While Andrew waited, a security guard asked, “Where’s your father at?” Andrew wanted to avoid talking, but he had to respond at the very least.

“He’s just at his office doing lab stuff,” he said. “Work. You guys understand work. Don’t we all?” The other security guards chuckled.

His Sporksterbeale arrived. He thought, *thank god.* He thanked the yellow-suited guard and entered his car. He found the box in the backseat and the composition book as well. Picking up the box, he decided to bring the book just in case. “Alright, that’s all I needed. Thanks men.”

They simultaneously said, “No problem.”

One said, “Whatever we can do we do.” Andrew appreciated their versatility. Keen for time, he entered back into the building, entered the elevator, and entered the hallway on floor 80. Running down the hallway with two things in his hands, he arrived at the black room door. He could not pass through. He needed the picture of Robert’s eye. Knocking on the door, he pleaded for Rick to open it. He now had less than an hour in the Spirit World. Rick opened the door.

“Have the package?” Rick questioned. Andrew nodded. Rick let him into the black room. Andrew handed the box to him.

“What’s even in it?” Andrew asked.

“Shut the fuck up. Get back into the contrivance. You better get Kurt’s adoration soon, buddy. We need those lock combos ASAP!”

“Who’s Kurt again?”

“The lead security supervisor here. Jeez, you really don’t know any of the guard’s names here, right?” Seeing the book Andrew was carrying, he said, “Hand me that book.” Andrew gave it to him. “Have you said ‘hi’ to any of the guards yet?”

“Yes.”

“By their name?”

“No.”

Rick said, “Idiot! You’re so behind on your shit. Better get working on it. Time is ticking.” Andrew strapped the Spirit Emissary around his head. He saw Harriet was still unconscious. His IV rested on the floor.

Andrew said, “I think I need my IV. Could you get a nurse to insert it for me?”

“Oh for crying out loud!” Rick announced. “You don’t need no IV for 45 minutes.” He picked up the IV from the floor. “If you want it so bad, I can take care of it for you.” Holding the needle, he forcefully jabbed it deep into his vein.

“Aw shit!” Andrew expressed. Blood gushed around his wrist.

Rick said, “Now you’ll maybe shut up for once. Again, do your shit, and less harm will come your way.” He turned back on the interdimensional communicator. Andrew was sent back to an unconscious state.

Waking up on the sand floor, he coughed out some sand. The portal was above his head. His first thought: *let Mother know*. He got up and analyzed what was in the portal for another time. Noticing a small gray blob behind the trees, he tried getting closer to it, but the portal barricaded him. The blob drew nearer towards him. It wasn’t a blob anymore. It was the rhino—the same rhino that had no eyes, ears, or mouth. Attracted to the portal, the rhino was only a few feet from him. Andrew thought, *can this thing hear me?* The rhino went through the

portal and stood on the sand floor. The purple wedge on its forehead was vibrating softly. Andrew without thought grabbed its back and hopped on top of it. The creature made no noise or movement. Pointing the opposite direction that he had travelled to get to the rift, he said, “That way.”

The rhino took off, speeding through the terrain. It moved quicker than a dopamine bee. Considering that it took 24 hours to get to the north for a bee, Andrew doubted the rhino could reach there in 45 minutes. It was mathematically impossible. But he really wanted to tell his mother about the rift. Or at least say goodbye to her. While the rhino sprinted, Harriet’s body and the unconscious bee could be seen. He yelled, “Stop.” The rhino halted.

Jumping off its back, he flipped over Harriet’s body. Her face still remained expressionless. Shaking her shoulders, he attempted to wake her up again. To his surprise, he saw her eyes slowly prop open. She grew startled and retaliated against Andrew. Coughing indisputably, she said, “Where are we?”

“We crashed earlier. I ended up finding the rift.”

“Really? Sweet. Can I check it out too?”

Andrew agreed. Assisting her body up, he said, “Get on the rhino and we’ll get there.”

She looked behind him. “What rhino? I don’t see anything but the bee.”

Andrew turned around and saw the rhino had disappeared. Andrew castigated himself. He was absurdly confused. “I literally rode it to get here. Where’d it go?”

Harriet asked, “Andrew, is it one of your visions again?”

“No, it’s not! This can’t be happening for a second time. It was here physically. How did it leave so fast?”

She said, “I have no idea, but that’s fine. We can just walk.”

Giving up on this mystery, he said, “Fine.” He began walking forward. Harriet followed. No flying creatures were in sight.

“Anyway, where are those monsters that were attacking us?”

“They’re gone.” After walking, they finally made it to the rift. She was in awe. She studied the colors on the outside of the portal.

Harriet said, “This is a marvel—”

“Of enchantment,” Andrew completed. “I get it. Look, we’re going to be taken out of the Spirit World in any minute, so adore it the best you can.”

She asked, “And why is that?”

He said, “Because the endeavour is going to end soon.”

Andrew and Harriet grew unconscious. The endeavour had ended.

Part THREE:

Solution

CHAPTER 17:

Could the rhino hear him?

Were Andrew and the rhino too akin?

Endeavour was over,

But Andrew's endeavour wasn't over, moreover.

Permanently removed from the Spirit World, Andrew woke up in a world of physicality. Waving his hands around in disorientation, he peeked open his eyes. It was his grinning father, eyebrows raised. To his left was Marco, flickering his eyes with slight jubilance. Behind these two was a group of 20 lab researchers, smiling as well. Rufus was in the back. Supporting his shoulders up, Andrew looked at Harriet, who was awake. Robert said, "Congratulations, Andrew! Your endeavour was a complete success! We're so proud of the two of you." The researcher group clapped unanimously.

Andrew didn't pay attention to what he said. He was attempting to hold back the anger towards his father. Now wasn't the time to appear troubled. It was important to be nimble out of all other times. Andrew said, "Thanks! That's great to hear." Andrew assimilated into their smiles. Harriet smiled at Andrew. She said something affirmative too. Bradford stood in the lab researcher group, but he wasn't smiling. He had a blank face.

Robert said, “We collected great data from your endeavour. We dictated that Nirvana 74 is, indeed, habitable for our guests. Moving forward, we will always recognize the hard and dedicated work that you have helped us with. We will always recognize Harriet for her work likewise.”

Stepping forward, Marco added, “Most definitely. Andrew and Harriet have done a spectacular job here.” Andrew felt Marco said nothing with that statement. There was no originality.

Robert said, “We’ll get you guys situated back again. I’m sure you both are tired of the same IV serum you’ve been supplied with the past week. We are serving parmesan pasta with nurtured meatballs. Pummeled casseroles and steamed carrots are served on the side.”

“Nurtured meatballs? What are those?” Harriet asked.

Intentionally releasing a short laugh, Robert said, “You’ll understand what that means once you are given your meal. So I suggest that you two temporarily take a break from this room and head on over to the cafeteria.”

Harriet said, “That sounds great.”

Robert said, “Researchers, you are dismissed. And so are security guards.”

She asked, “Wanna eat something, Andrew?”

Andrew stared at the while tiles, noticing the meticulous craftsmanship. “Sure, I’ll come.” Before Andrew raised himself out of the chair, Robert held his shoulder.

Robert said, “If I could have a minute before you headed off, I’d really appreciate it.” Andrew looked at his taut lower eyelid and agreed. Harriet departed out of the room. Marco followed behind her. There was no one but just Andrew and his father in the black room. Andrew slightly felt apprehensive. “I appreciate you taking the time to explore this world of mine. I know

that it was not easy, and I wanted to thank you personally one-on-one. I love you, son, and I'm sorry if some of my decisions upset you. Just know that in the long run, they'll benefit you."

Knowing he would want a response back, Andrew said, "I know, I know. Thanks for trusting me in this process."

"Of course," his father replied. "Feel free to enjoy your feast. I'll be out of your hair for now." He smiled and left the room. Andrew was alone in the black room. He sighed and was honestly quite impressed with his sincerity. But he wasn't sure if the sincerity was truthfully genuine. Door levitating, Andrew exited the room.

Rick from outside the door grabbed Andrew by the shirt. Whispering into his ear, he said, "Better do your shit, buddy. Here's your composition book. Start kissing those guards' asses. Time is ticking." Shoving the book to Andrew's open hand, he pushed Andrew to the opposite side, pretending as if nothing happened.

Walking down the hallway, Andrew thought, *fuck these radicals.* His mind clouded with more and more stress. Having past knowledge of where the cafeteria was located, he walked in that direction. Someone named Rufus had previously forced him down that route. Circumnavigating his way through the hallways, he found the cafeteria entrance. Opening the red doors, he saw the usual lab researcher groups sitting at their usual tables. Realizing he held the composition book, Andrew sheathed it under his shirt. He saw Harriet waiting in line like the last time he met her. Planning his next move, he decided to wait in line. Avoiding talking was his best bet. Half the stuff he went through in the Spirit World wouldn't be tolerated whatsoever in Spirit Intercom. He began thinking more: *why wasn't my father mad? Why was everyone grinning so eerily? Is my father hiding something? How much time is the radical people giving*

me? Thinking finished, he waited in line. Second time witnessing the *Chef Bots Inc.*, the Chef Bot asked, “What would you like today, Andrew?”

“So they implemented my name in the system?” He said, “That’s cool. I’ll have the pasta.”

The robot said, “Please specify the numeric value of your designated entree and assorted—”

“One pasta bowl and one casserole.” Andrew could anticipate their algorithmic dialogue.

“How many carrots?” the bot asked.

“Three.”

The Chef Bot stood still. “Tip?”

Andrew didn’t say a word and walked alongside the counter. The other Chef Bots began preparing his meal. Fascinated last time by their work, Andrew wasn’t this time. He only noticed the flukes in their robotical mechanisms. His food was ready and served on a tray. Andrew gave no thanks or remarks of appreciation.

Finding Harriet, he sat at her table. She said, “That was an adventure last week, right Andrew?”

“Yeah, it was. It was a bit chaotic though.”

Holding up a meatball with her thumb and index finger, she said, “This is a nurtured meatball. Do you know what a nurtured meatball is?” Wary if anyone was spying on him, Andrew looked around. “Andrew?”

“Sorry, what did you say?” he asked.

“I’m asking if you know what a nurtured meatball is.”

“What? No, I don’t. Look, Harriet, I don’t care about that. I have other things on my mind.”

Annoyed by his aloof attitude, she asked, “Like what?” She crossed her arms.

“Doesn’t matter. Let me just eat my food.” He was thinking where all the security guards were. He would have to start memorizing their ID badge numbers if he wanted to call them by their names.

“You know what, Andrew? I don’t like your attitude. Just relax for a bit. We just completed a huge project. Isn’t that something worth celebrating?”

Andrew said, “No, and I don’t why you’re celebrating either. Do you actually think we’re absolved with all the stuff we did in the Spirit World? I feel like they’re hiding something from us.”

She dropped her silverware. “How so?”

“Their fake smiles, their fake positive energy, and their fake hospitality. It’s all fake.”

She said, “They were just being welcoming.”

“Not likely,” Andrew expressed. “They were so general in their statements. Not one of them resorted to telling a detail of our endeavour.”

Picking her fork back up, she said, “I suppose you’re right. They sort of spoke with a mask of ignorance.” She took a bite out of her meatball. “But that shouldn’t equate to you always being so stressed. So what were they general? They’re not threatening us—or something similar to that nature.”

Andrew said, “Of course, they’re not threatening us. I’m just a little suspicious.”

“Andrew, I got the honor of getting to you on the endeavour, and what I’ve seen is that you’re a pretty tense guy. So if I were you, I would be less paranoid about this whole situation that you think you’re in.”

“So you don’t trust my judgement? How could you say that?”

Fed up with his hyper rejections, she said, “Andrew, you’re so full of yourself. You need to rethink the grand scheme of everything.” Carrying her tray, she departed from the table and sat at a different table in the opposite corner of the cafeteria.

Andrew muffled his swears. He was angered by Harriet yet again. Putting his energy on finishing his food, he cleansed all the crumbs from his tray. He carried his tray and disposed of it at the counter. It was nice to supply his hypothalamus with something other than the IV serum. The Chef Bot asked, “Would you reconsider for a tip?”

Andrew definitively stated, “No.” He pushed the tray firmly to the Chef Bot’s arms. Tension was building inside of him. Eyeing Harriet on his way out, he shoved the cafeteria door open. He wondered what time it was. Opening up Mindcord, he observed that it was Wednesday, and the time was 4:22 p.m. Checking his notifications, he saw five messages from Lisa, two messages from Maxwell, and one message from Kevin.

The five messages from Lisa cohesively expressed one long message. Messages attached, Lisa wrote, “Dad, are you there? Hello, Dad? I miss you. Why aren’t you responding? I hope you come back.”

Hatching open Maxwell’s messages, Andrew read, “What’s taking you so long? I thought we would review robotics this weekend. Where are you even? Kevin said that he didn’t know what you were doing. I miss you. Please come back.”

Lastly, Andrew opened Kevin's messages. Kevin wrote, "You're kids have been a handful, but I've been managing. The media's perspective on the world ending approaches closer each day after the other. Things have been chaotic. The President announced recently that we've reached anarchism and that there's no undoing it. Stay safe out there. Considering Spirit Intercom is a governmental chain, I'd be alert for anything. Come back soon."

He suspected that the intensity here had widened, and he was correct, according to what Kevin wrote. He had to restrain any distractions. His main goal was to keep every scenario given to him under control. The only problem was he didn't know where to go from here. He temporarily ticked off Harriet, and he had no clue where his family relatives were. He thought, *can I return to my house? Would it be safe to leave the labs?* As these questions permeated, he strolled down whichever hallway he was in. An immobile researcher spoke with another researcher in an intersection of hallways. As he reached the intersection, he ingested some of the information they spoke about. He walked slowly on purpose.

Lab Researcher A said, "Did you hear what's going on tomorrow?

Lab Researcher B said, "No, what?"

Researcher A said, "It's rumored that the attorney general is stopping by."

"Really? No way!" Researcher B said. By this point, Andrew was too astray to understand any more of their conversation.

What Kevin wrote was true, and it was coming fast. Initiatives were taking place to this societal anarchism. Underlying motives were transpiring every day. Maybe now would be a good time to reach out to the security guards by their names. Pulling out the composition book from under his shirt, he opened it. He studied each name that was associated with each security

number. After a few minutes, he completely memorized each number. He had a bit of a photographic memory, so it didn't take too long.

Analyzing where most guards would be, he determined they would be near the entrance or even the complex where they parked his car. Escaping out of the hallways, he found his way to the main complex. He stood right by the elevator that was encircled by the garden. Near the entrance, a lounge had small gray couches and chairs for researchers to relax on. He spotted a security guard by the lounge. Approaching him, he saw the number 19293704 listed on his security badge. Calculating this, he concluded that the guard's name was Morgan. Now in speaking range, Andrew said, "Good afternoon, Morgan. Great day, huh?"

Noting his presence, Morgan realized it was the renowned son of Spirit Intercom. He appreciated the comment and said, "Sure is." As he moved past Morgan, Andrew glanced behind. The guard appeared excited. If he kept this up, he would be one step closer to the radicals not killing him. There was another guard near Morgan, but reapproaching back to the same guard's vicinity would erode awkwardness. Leaving the lounge area, he told himself to try it out on the guards by the entrance.

Stepping foot on where the entrance was, Andrew witnessed a blue-suited guard. 20304815 was his number and his name was Samuel. Calling the guard by his name, Andrew said, "Thank you for your protection. Keep it up!" He raised two thumbs up.

"Thanks, Jr. Rutano!" Samuel exemplified. Andrew felt accomplished. The question was how many guards did it take to pleasure to earn the security's trust as a whole? Desiring to try out more names, he went to the elevator. Pressing floor 2, he scouted if any other guards would be there. He circled around the floor in search of a guard. Whistling casually, he saw a blue-suited guard nearing his presence. The number read 42526037. Percolating his mindful

archives, he realized the number signified Rufus. Looking at his distinct facial features, he saw that it was Rufus. Judging from his eyebrows, Andrew noticed his suspicion.

With a queer eye, Rufus said, “Hello, Andrew. What are you doing here?

“Just exploring.” Andrew double-checked that the composition book was safely secured under his shirt. He shuffled his feet back subtly to indicate that he would head back to the elevator.

“Have your living arrangements been planned?” Rufus asked. “Follow me.” He grabbed Andrew’s hand with great tenacity. Andrew slowly misguided his hand away but kept following him. Rufus went inside the elevator and closed the door after Andrew came in.

Andrew wanted to ask whether or not he could stay at his home, but he knew this could cause a rupture. Breaking the silence, Andrew said, “So where do I sleep? And how long am I expected to be here?”

On the elevator keypad, Rufus clicked floor -1. Andrew did not understand why the underground floor wasn’t entitled as floor 0, considering that floor 1 was one floor above. Mathematically, the floor numbers didn’t appeal to him. Rufus said, “You’ll be sleeping where our scientists sleep.”

“They live here? I didn’t know that.” Andrew studied Rufus’ facial expression. The face wasn’t stank or assuring. It was deadpan.

As the elevator plummeted two floors down, Rufus said, “You are expected to sleep here until your father is satisfied with everything. When all well is well.” The elevator dinged electronically and artificially.

“Since they sleep underground, doesn’t that cool down the strata temperature, thus allowing possible health problems?” Andrew asked. He was flexing his engineering intellect.

Rufus said, “I don’t know, man.”

“You guys have never looked into air destratification?”

“Look, dude. I’m not a civil engineer. I’m just a security guard. Why do you keep asking me these questions?” The stank face began to evolve.

The elevator door opened. Andrew said, “I’ll stop.” A hallway stretched not too far across. Gray paneling covered the walls. Rufus walked to the end of the hallway with Andrew behind. The end of the hallway had a gray door with a keypad on the side of it, similar to the elevator. Except that this keypad had a touchpad of the numbers 0-9. Some RGB colors lit up for some texture, of course. “What is this?” Andrew asked.

Rufus said, “If you put in your code, the door will open your room up. Behind this door is a gigantic disk that moves clockwise almost like a revolving door when their room is requested. There are about 100 rooms.”

“But if the rooms are only on the circumference of the disk, what’s in the inner part of the disk?” Andrew wanted to know.

“Empty space.”

“Wouldn’t you say that this design is a bit flawed then?”

Rufus said, “Personally, I felt this design was a bit extra. Spirit Intercom, who has such a high budget, had to use their money for something like this, which was a technological misfortune.”

“Maybe you do have some inner engineer,” Andrew said. Rufus’ stank face was reassured. Rufus, placing his fingers on the keypad, entered a number. Andrew couldn’t see it though. And there were a lot of numbers, too. It was in the 10+ digits. “So what’s my number?”

“628208420606848 is your number.” After digits were configured, a whirring noise vibrated behind the wall. The door hatched open. Glossy white tiles on the floor, the room elicited a plain white couch, white chair, and white bed. The furniture placement was quaint to Andrew’s eyes.

“Your father’s orders,” Rufus responded. Pulling an object from his pocket, he handed a gray fountain pen to Andrew. “He also wanted you to have this.”

“Okay. I appreciate the glamour.” Andrew still stood outside the bed. “Do you want me to enter the room though?”

“Yes, please. Take a tour of it.” He gently pushed Andrew into the room.

“There’s not much to see though,” Andrew said as he saw Rufus shut the door. Jiggling the doorknob, Andrew couldn't open it. “Am I stuck in here!”

Rufus said, “Calm down! I didn’t trap you. It’s just that your father thinks you should get some rest.”

Talking through the wall panelling, Andrew said, “How do I get out? Plus, I already got one week of straight sleep.”

“If you look above, there’s a hatch, but I haven't opened it yet. Just get your rest.”

“Bro, it’s 5:00 p.m.!”

Rufus said, “I’m on my way out. Enjoy your rest.” His voice faded.

Andrew asked, “If this disk rotates, won’t I feel it?”

No response. Andrew gave up on the doorknob. He placed the fountain pen on a white desk, and he bounced his body onto the bed. Checking Mindcord, he saw it was 5:01 p.m. Time fled in this room. Andrew felt trapped. Fresh with energy still, he got off the bed and looked at the hatch above. It was similar to a submarine hatch. Wrapping his fingers around the yellow

handle, he pulled. It didn't budge. Therefore, he pushed. The hatch did budge, but it began to budge very slowly. Raising two hands above, he increased the hatch's momentum. Before long, the hatch finally opened. As a submarine hatch usually amplified a whale's breath of air, this hatch did not. Peeking his head out of the hatch, he saw the other hundred hatches arranged in the shape of a large circle. Strangely, the floor wasn't white here. It was gray. He could see the open quad area in the opposite corner of the main complex. Unsure about leaving the hatch open or not, he let it be. Attracting himself back to the main area, he needed the approval of more security guards. He saw a white-suited guard near the lounge. Molding his hair back into order, he walked lightly.

A petite young man was in a white suit. He seemed approachable. Robert's eye was in his pocket. Seeing the man's number, Andrew read 73062524. Andrew said, "Hi, Zachary! Great job so far!" The guard happily signaled him with a wave of his hand. Andrew thought, *I don't need no rest.* The radicals, looking through his ingrained camera, were probably applauding every time he talked to a guard. Leaving the lounge, he went towards the elevator. There had to be more security guards on the upper levels to greet. Waiting for the elevator door to open up, Andrew took in some of the beauty from the small garden. He missed nature, even though the nature he perceived in the Spirit World was synthetic. As the door opened up, Rufus' body expanded symmetrically. Andrew was tripped out, and he tripped on the hoistway doors. Andrew asked, "What are you doing here?"

Rufus said, "I'm the one who should be asking that. I think you should resume back to your rest. Your body is not sustainable for physical movement."

"What do you mean 'rest'? I got plenty of it. Now if you don't mind, I'm gonna explore more."

“It’s normal for you to be thinking like that,” Rufus explained. “Mentally, you’re not the fullest, and that is why your brain is wired for you to think like that.”

“That makes no sense.”

Rufus said, “Your father wants you to be as relaxed as possible.” Since Andrew was in the elevator, Rufus closed the door. Then, he pressed floor -1.

Andrew was angered. “Come on, dude. Don’t do that.” Andrew clicked floor 1. He crossed his arms, spreading his disappointment upon Rufus.

Rufus retaliated and clicked floor -1. As Andrew glided to the floor 1 button, Rufus tightly restrained his hand. He pulled Andrew’s hand to his chest. Rufus softly said, “Rest.” The elevator declined. Andrew knew not to be vigilant. Submissiveness would solve things in the later run. They reached the underground level. Doors opened, the elevator saw Andrew quickly scurry past its doors. Rufus was behind.

“Put in my damn code already,” Andrew demanded. He was sick of this same security guard hollering at him to get his rest. Rufus slowly inputted the code without saying a word. He had a stank face though. The door opened and Andrew’s room was displayed. Andrew entered the room and forcefully said, “Close the damn door.” Rufus listened.

Andrew was bestranged by all of this. He thought, *how did Rufus know I left the room? Why don’t they want me to explore? Do they know about the radicals? What are they hiding?* He was bothered by all these questions. His brain processor couldn’t process them. The coordinate plane his mind was on was extraterrestrial. Maybe he did need rest. He had no other choice. Hopefully, the radicals would understand. Resting his head on the pillow, he slowly drifted off. He fell asleep. Distant dreams floated around him in his sleep, but no dreams directly entered his memory. His dreams were loose and scattered.

These dreams were halted, and so was his sleep. Peeling his eyes open, he saw a red-suited guard: Rick. Andrew jumped out of the bed. His fight-or-flight instinct kicked in. Rick said, “Hey, calm down. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Backing up, Andrew said, “What is it? Am I in trouble again?”

“No. Wallace told me what you recently had to go through, what with the guard forcing you down here and your inability to approach the other guards. That is why I’m here to fix that.”

“How though? Whenever I leave this room, a guard named Rufus is notified. I don’t know how he gets notified, but he just does.”

“I don’t think Rufus will argue with my commands. I have higher security personnel than what he has.”

“Really? How? Rufus is the main guard for my father.”

Rick stood up taller and said, “And I’m the guard for Kurt Strawlin. My rank is higher than that Rufus kid. I’m a red while he is only a blue. He—”

“Colors signify security hierarchy?”

“Yeah. From highest to lowest, it goes black, which is only Kurt; red, which is me; blue, which is Rufus; yellow; and white. Robert only has access to blue, yellow, and white guards while Kurt has control over all guard colors. When I tell you I have things under control, I literally do. Let’s get the fuck out of here now.”

Rick with his profound strength easily hatched the hatch open.

Andrew asked, “Where are we going?” Rick hopped out the hatch.

“Just come,” Rick said as he offered a hand to Andrew. “By the way, Wallace was impressed with your security interchanges. He is feeling more and more confident that you’ll

obtain the lock combos." Andrew accepted his hand and aborted out of the hatch. Rick added, "You're gonna meet the head security."

"Hold up," Andrew said. He stopped walking. "Now?"

"That's right," Rick said. "I've already talked with Kurt that you want to know more about the field of security. He's gonna give you a tour of our main station. All you have to do is positively affirm anything he says. Agree with everything he says, but don't be a total kiss-ass. Can't make it too obvious."

Mindcord revealed 7:22 p.m. "You're crazy, man! You think that he'll just give me the combos if I agree with his craft. This is so far-fetched!"

Rick said, "I also told him that you wanted to know more about the security so that you protect your father 'personally.' You're not diving into this with no swim trunks. And yes, my plan will work, and you ain't wussing out of it."

Andrew sighed. He envisioned mistakes. He saw failure in this plan. Andrew resumed his walking.

"Where is this security place?" Andrew asked. Small talk would possibly ease the tension.

"The right complex. It's pretty massive," Rick spoke. "Don't mess this up. Cause if you mess this up, it means the whole radical plan falls apart. And you'll be dead by the time that happens." Andrew gulped. Small talk wasn't a depressant for his stress. Rick was heading to the elevator. The elevator doors open. It was Rufus.

Rufus slowly but statically walked to where Rick and Andrew stood. Rufus' face morphed into the stank face. Rick's jaw mutated.

Rufus said, "Hello, sir. I think Andrew must return to his rest."

Rick said, “I think not. I’ll be taking care of him for now.”

Rufus responded, “But Robert Rutano commands that—”

“Hey, Rufus, are you really going to disobey my authority?” Rufus shook his head. “Well, if you wouldn’t mind, maybe get the fuck outta our way, and let me deal with my tasks. I already have enough tasks, and any problems avoided would be most appreciated by me.” Rufus, appearing weaker physically, looked down and walked past them. Andrew had witnessed the pure definition of dominance.

Rick clicked floor -1. After witnessing what he just did to a security guard, Andrew didn’t question anything Rick did. The elevator reached the underground floor. However, the door did not open. Rick put his wrist up to the sensor. A blue sensor glowed. Immediately, the elevator accelerated to Andrew’s left. It stopped moving horizontally. Making a short pit stop, the elevator continued its movement upward. It moved up one floor. The elevator door opened. A whole new dimension of Spirit Intercom was introduced.

CHAPTER 18:

What is Father hiding?

More importantly, what is Rick hiding?

Desiring the approval of Kurt,

Andrew better not be thrown into the dirt.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Andrew's life depended on the chief of security's judgement. Death was lurking, and Andrew had to hide from it. Rick walked out of the elevator first. Andrew took a second, but he left the elevator, too.

The new complex made Andrew appear weak. A blue-gray reception desk stood in the front. An elegant woman in a white blouse sat at the desk. A touch-recognition phone operator was ingrained into the desk as well. Behind the receptionist was a giant yellow bee emblem. Under the emblem read "Spirit Intercom's Robust Security." Hallways ran down on both ends of the reception desk. The woman said, "Hello, Rick. Anything I can help you with?"

"I have an appointment with the chief," Rick stated.

She said, "Ah, yes. Kurt is waiting for you in his office. Pop in there anytime you like." She locked her eyes back to her computer screen. Rick, appearing grateful, thanked her. Her eyes were still retained on the screen, not on his gesture. Rick pulled Andrew by the hand as he walked to the right. The hallway they were on turned left. Andrew steered his vision to a door sign. It read "Mr. Strawlin." Andrew's chest felt the aftershock of his heart's pumping.

Rick heard Andrew's hyperventilation. He said, "Make the rads proud, buddy."

Andrew tightly winked both eyes. “I can’t do this. I’m gonna let my anxiety get the best of me.”

“Then spit that toxicity outta ya mouth, and take control! We’re all depending on you.” Rick opened the office door. Andrew needed to put on a show in front of Kurt. He had to.

Kurt, sitting on a desk chair with high poise, wore a pitch-black armor suit. Only his face and hair were visible. A bald eagle badge stuck to the left side of his chest, marking his covenant with the U.S. government. The mouth region of his face had deteriorated. Disfigured blemishes surrounded his mouth. However, his mouth was a gray zipper with a small tassel at the end of it. Unappealing to Andrew, the mouth was unzipped by Kurt’s hands. The mouth didn’t look like a mouth. It was a small dark hole with no teeth and only a small sliver of a tongue. Kurt finally released a sound. Unable to enunciate consonants, he said, “Hewwo, Wick. Is dish duh shon of Wobert?”

Rick said, “Yes, he is, commander. He was interested, and, as you know already, I invited him here to gather more of a glimpse of this place.”

Kurt said, “Uh-huh, makesh shense.” He stood up. Half of his left arm was missing. He talked in a relaxed manner. “Sho, Andwoo, what do you wish to gain in dish tour? Knowedge? Exper-exper-ex-ex . . .”

“Expertise?” Rick suggested.

“Yesh. Do you wish to gain expertishe, Andwoo?”

Slightly pestered with Kurt’s mispronouncing of his name, Andrew said, “Yes, commander. Being the son of such a great scientific industry makes me more interested in the safety of this place. The more time I stay here, the greater the passion I have for it. That is why I

want to be updated on all the security advancements that you all have succeeded on." Kurt's quirky caricature kept catching Andrew off guard.

"I shee, I shee," Kurt said. Every time he spoke a consonant, his tongue floundered in his mouth. "Wet ush go on a tour den. Fowwow me." Inching around his desk, he exited the door. Rick forced Andrew forward, hinting at him to follow directly behind Kurt.

Kurt walked down the hallway, past the reception desk, and to a high-reaching door. The door marked the words "Physical Training." Using his right hand, Kurt put his wrist up to the door. He did not need Robert's eye; he could use his own wrist. The door levitated up. The room was dark with minimal lights on the 15-foot ceiling. Security guards stood on both sides of the door. They both acknowledged Kurt. Raising his eyebrows, he said, "Hewwo, men. Howsh duh twaining going?" The guards smiled and said something affirmative. Kurt looked at Andrew. "Andwoo, dish ish duh pwace where our men weach tip-top shape. Wigowous pwepwawation of our men ish wequired if worshe comesh to worshe." It took Andrew some time to piece together his words. He understood the main gist of what Kurt said. Rick was still surveilling behind Andrew. He tapped his back.

Andrew said, "Yes, commander. I understand." Trying to come up with an interesting question, he asked, "How much do they train?"

Kurt said, "A wot. It ish unfadomable. No one worksh ash hard ash our men. I'm gwad you ashked dat." The way this man kept talking tripped out Andrew, but he was optimistic with the question he asked. Gym stations and weight sets rested on the veneered floor. Wearing white gym clothes, some guards lifted weights. The room was so big that there were yoga mats with a yoga instructor, leading the other guards to inner peace. "Moving on," Kurt announced. "There'sh weawwy no more to dish woom. Wet ush move on to duh next woom." Departing out

the door, he strayed down the hallway, stopping before the reception desk. He made a left and another tall door read “Surveillance.” Prompting this door open with his wrist, a smaller room awaited Andrew. A barricade of flat screens stood in the shape of a pentagon. There were probably about a hundred screens, displaying different angles of the labs. Andrew peeked over Kurt’s tall shoulders to get a better look. Sitting in a chair in the middle of the pentagon, a guard studiously watched the cameras to keep in check with their safety. Kurt said, “We musht monitor evewy nook and cwanny at all times. We cannot wesort to waziness, and evewy pwecaution ish accounted for.”

Putting on a face of awe, Andrew said, “Wow, that’s amazing. How many cameras are there?” Rick poked Andrew’s back, possibly noting that he said something wrong.

Playing around with his zipper, Kurt said, “I’m showwy, but I cannot weweashe that information. I wike your curioshity dough.” Rick removed his finger from the poke of Andrew’s back. Andrew felt at ease with everything so far. The commander did not seem like a harsh guy that he envisioned him to be. Kurt asked, “Sho, how are thingsh going, Farwand?”

Farland, the watchman, appeared hesitant and stiff. He said, “I’m sorry, commander, but there appears to be an intruder on ProxiCam 65-2A. The intruder is holding a musket.” He pointed to the exact screen among the hundreds of other screens. Kurt, Andrew, and even Rick gazed at the intruder. The man on the screen stood outside the main lab fence, wearing nothing but drab underwear. He looked psychotic, jumping around in a fritz. He banged the fence and shot bullets up in the air. Andrew lost this attention to the screen next to it. The camera angle displayed a lab researcher's bedroom. It was the same white room that he slept in, and the angle focused from the desk. A realization struck Andrew. They were surveilling his room through the fountain pen. The fountain pen was just a security camera to spy on him. He was furious.

Kurt said, “Farwand, you should have shpotted dat man when he was a hundwed feet fwom duh fenshe. Why did you jusht find him now? Do you think your pwecautions were accounted for?” Andrew was not focused on this conversation. He was extremely upset at Rufus for giving him the fountain pen.

Fear broke into Farland’s eyes. “Uh-uh-uh, I’m so sorry sir. As you said, my precautions were not accounted for.” Ashamed, he bowed his head down. While his head was down, he rolled his eyes around to see if anything would happen. And something would happen. Andrew was still thinking of the fountain pen situation.

“I musht take pwecaution for your mistakesh,” Kurt said. As Kurt lifted up his amputated arm, a one-inch wide metallic scalpel, the length of a sword, arose from his armor sleeve. He brought it closer to Farland. Andrew was slowly bringing his attention to this situation.

Farland started sweating. Turning his head around, he said, “I’m sorry, sir! I’m sorry. Please don’t use the Claver on me! I will be more responsible next time. I promise!”

“Dispway your handsh out pawm-down.”

Trembling, Farland displayed his hands to Kurt. Angling the scalpel, or the Claver, towards Farland’s index fingernail, he penetrated the blade under the nail. The fingernail popped out and flung to Farland’s face. Now only blood, the index finger gushed. Farland winced every facial muscle. He screeched in agony, convulsing his fingers together. Andrew had lost complete thought of the fountain pen. This hell overrode his thoughts.

Andrew was horrified. He was left in discomfort. Kurt said, “Wet ush continue duh tour,” as he walked out the door.

Every assumption Andrew made about Kurt was eliminated. He was more scared of Kurt than anybody else. Even Rick’s face was troubled after this. Farland sat on the floor, latching

onto his index finger. He felt bad for him. Rick, grabbing onto Andrew's shoulder, directed him to follow the nail-picker. As Kurt moved to a different room, he sheathed his Claver. They turned down the hallway, past the reception desk, and past his office. They reached a door entitled "Motor Configuration Beta Training." This was the biggest out of all the doors so far. Andrew kept his distance from Kurt. Kurt's eye open the door with the sensor. Kurt walked forward. Putting his mouth up to Andrew's mouth, Rick whispered, "This is the last room he'll show ya. Get those lock combos."

Andrew pushed his face away. "Don't rush me." The technology in this room was the most advanced out of the rest.

The first thing Andrew witnessed was a Chef Bot. Not just one though. There were about a hundred of them, aligned into one row. Kurt put his hand on the orb of one of the bots. He said, "Ash you can shee, Andwoo, deesh are duh chef botsh dat accompanied you wast meal. But deesh machines have a twisht." He took a pause, wanting an answer back from Andrew.

Andrew, who was lost, said, "What's the twist?"

"Deesh botsh have two bwain hemishpheresh. Of courshe dey don't have weal bwainsh. Dey have pwoshesshor unitsh inshtead. Well, anyway, the firsht hemishphere ish for cooking. And the shecond hemishphere ish for exter-exter-ex-ex . . ."

Rick completed, "Extermination?"

"Yesh, dank you, Wick. We have maneuvered their coded motor neuronsh to accompwish two tashksh. I will demonshwate." As he lifted up his left arm, Andrew was afraid that the Claver would reappear. Instead, Kurt pulled out a highly-advanced touch screen. It was a remote control to ignite the Chef Bot. Kurt clicked the green button, ordering the Chef Bot's orb to flash red for three long seconds.

The Chef Bot said, “Hello, Kurt. What can I cook for you today?” Kurt pressed the red button with his able hand. The Chef Bot grew dysfunctional for five seconds. Then, its orb flashed a green light for three seconds. Immediately, all eight of its arms retracted its kitchen appliances to deadly blasters and guns. Its two wheels underneath retracted and turned into legs. It now stood at the height of a human. Andrew was frightened of this image but impressed by its mechanics. In a deeper automated voice, the bot said, “Who should I exterminate?”

Kurt said, “Andwoo Wutano.”

Andrew feared for his life. He began sprinting for the door until he heard Kurt say, “Wewax. I’m jusht kidding.” He let out some inaudible laughs. Andrew’s panting cooled down. He was pissed, but he couldn’t upset the lock combo dealer. Continuing, Kurt said, “We have deesh wobots to pwotect ush fwom the webelsh and waidersh. We even have inshight of an organization named the Shpirit Wadicalsh, but dere is not much known about dem. In addition, dese wobots transhfiguh duh attacking movement thwough Beta Twanshfiguration. Fowwow me.”

Walking further down the giant room, Kurt waited for Rick and Andrew to follow his lead. Several computer setups docked up adjacent to the wall. Looking like electrode pads, these circular pads connected to the computers through a thin wire. These pads stuck to different muscular joints of humans. Andrew saw multiple people, wearing these pads, move in awkward motions, raising their hands up, kicking each leg, and even holding a fake gun in the correct stance. Another set of electrode pads connected from the computer to several other Chef Bots. These Chef Bots tried replicating the movement that the humans were making. Kurt said, “We pehfect duh coded motor neural movementsh thwough configuration. Duh motionsh our teshters

do are shtored in our communicator shyshtems. The communicator wepwicatesh the motor neuwons to duh Chef Botsh. Fashcinating, ishn't it?"

Andrew spiked his head up and down. He lost track of how many times he was frightened on this tour. To think that bicameral-minded chefs could be used as killing machines haunted him. Kurt said, "While I'm at it, I might ash well show the armowy. It'sh further down the woom."

As they walked, Rick whispered, "Andrew, stop canoodling with Kurt, and ask for those damn lock combos already!"

Andrew spiked his head again. Moving closer to Kurt, he asked, "If an emergency were to occur, how would you all escape safely?"

Kurt said, "I'm gwad you ashked dat. I will show you after the armowy." A new door appeared, but it wasn't the normal vertical-shifting door. It was a simple pair of doors that had to be opened manually. Using his only hand, Kurt pulled the knob towards him. Shelves of limitless weapons hung. Infrared blasters, electron-bursting guns, gamma blasters, manual guns, shotguns, submachine guns, AK-47s, and melee weapons were locked within the shelves. They were not accessible unless activated. "We have evewy pwecaution accounted for. When doomshday hitsh, we are weady."

Andrew asked, "What's doomsday?"

Kurt said, "Doomshday ish appwoaching cwosher dan we expected. Dis day occursh when duh geothermal cwishish harms on everyone. By dat time, all our wegishtered gueshtsh will be up and running on the Shpirit Contwivanshesh. Shcientishtsh predict dish can happen any day. Ash duh pweshident shtated, anarchy ish here. And we will pwepared for anyding dat happensh outshide dose Shpirit Intercom gates."

“How will you specifically enable the shutdown?” Andrew said.

“I have an emergency massh shutdown shenshor that can be activated with my wisht in my offishe.”

Andrew said, “I’m sorry, but did you say ‘wrist’ or ‘list’?”

“I said wisht,” Kurt repeated.

“I think he said wrist,” Rick brought up.

“Yesh.” Kurt changed his facial expression. He said, “I’m showwy, but I need to ushe duh deck. Dose nurtured meatballsh dat Cheryl dwopped off at my office hit diffewentwy, yet dey tashted vewy spwendid. Excushe me, pweashe.” He left the armory and circumnavigated to the bathroom.

Rick punched Andrew’s shoulders. He said, “Come on, man! You’re losing him. Ask for those codes for the hundredth time.”

Andrew gently shoved him back. “I’m doing something better than that. Haven’t you figured out already that asking for the codes straight up is too suspicious? That is why I want to gain knowledge of the fire exit instead. The Spirit Radicals will have an easy entrance to the labs through this. Stop destroying my plans so much!”

“Well, either way, we will need the lock combos to even enter the fire exit from the outside.”

Andrew said, “I know. I know. After he presents me with the fire exit, I will smoothly transition to the lock combinations. This plan is all about timing and persistence.”

Rick, satisfied, said, “I can live with that.” Kurt could be seen at the end of the complex they were in. He made it back to the armory.

Kurt said, “Anyway, dish armory ish a major ashpect of our shecurity. And—”

Interrupting, Andrew said, “Sorry, but do you know what a nurtured meatball is?” Rick looked dissatisfied.

“In fact, yesh, I do,” Kurt noted. “Not many people know what it ish, so I appweciate your curioshity. Duh meatballsh are made in a cooking wab. Duh shientishtsh feed ratsh with butter, cheesh, and yogurt. Dish ish sho dat dey can inweashe duh bweasht gwands of the ratsh. Duh meat becomesh more tender. Dey den kill duh ratsh and exhume duh meat out of it. Dey inhume pweshervativesh to maintain ish fweshnessh. Dey spway artificial meat pweshervativesh to enhanshe duh tashte. And dat’s it! I am gwad you ashked dat. We need more curioush people wike you.”

Andrew wished he didn’t ask this. He only did it to create the modest persona of a person. But, obviously, this was not worth it. He felt genuinely happy he didn't eat the hideous meatballs. Just hearing their process wanted to make Andrew barf. He said, “Thanks for answering. Can you show me the fire exit now?”

“Okay,” Kurt said, “Ash a shide note dough, I am doing you a favor by showing you the exit. No one but myshelf and your father have knowedge of it. I am alsho doing a tweat to Wick from dish.” He departed from the armory and made it back to the reception desk with Andrew and Rick behind. “I alsho heard many gweat thingsh fwom my fewwow shecuwity guardsh. They’ve told me how appwoachable and outgoing you are.” He entered the elevator, and pulling down his armor sleeve, he put his wrist up to the elevator keypad, causing the blue glow to shine. Making awkward turns, the elevator opened up to the hallway where the underground rooms with the disk were. Walking up to the door, he laid his index finger on the keypad. “Duh code dat opensh up duh fire exit is 62951413.” After he typed this number in, the disk whirred, prompting

the door open. A room didn't appear; instead, white stairs descended 45 degrees into a white tunnel. The tunnel was brightly lit. "Do you guysh want to shee where duh fire exit weadsh to?"

Andrew affirmed and headed down the stairs. He stepped foot on the beginning point of the narrow tunnel. To the right of him, he saw a giant cylindrical device with three little circular wheels equidistant on the circumference. Inside the cylinder was a hollowed-out seat with a steering wheel and gas pedal. It was painted blue. Andrew pointed to this technological marvel and asked, "What is that?"

"The Pirouette," Kurt said. "Dese vehiclesh can wevolve at shupershonic shpeeds. Duh thwee inner wheelsh pwopel the Pirouette forward. It can turn ash well."

"Why is it called the Pirouette?" Andrew asked.

"Becaushe it twirlsh wike duh bawwewina danshe. Wanna give it a shpin?"

"Sure," Andrew agreed. Jumping into the cushioned seat, he positioned his legs. There wasn't enough leg room. "Does it require access?"

"No, and, sadwy, I can't ushe one. My physical body doeshn't meet the shteering wheel shtandardsh."

Andrew stigmatized this machine as extraordinary. The engineering fandom couldn't be contained. He put his foot on the pedal, and the Pirouette took off. He suspected that he moved at least 100 miles per hour. The inner wheels rotated above him, below him, behind him, and in front of him. The hallway blurred behind Andrew's eyes. He was gassed. Solo in the Pirouette, Andrew was free of Kurt and Rick. After driving for 1.2 minutes, a giant light emitted ahead of him. The problem was that he didn't know how to stop the vehicle because there was no brake pedal. The Pirouette kept cycling. A flight of stairs travelled upward to the light. The vehicle rode up the stairs and dove into the light. Andrew's Pirouette tumbled onto the sand of a desert

floor. It was sunny. The hallway had led him here. Nothing but clear skies and sand painted this place. He calculated he traveled two miles from Spirit Intercom.

The Pirouette kept speeding while Andrew tried decreasing its velocity with hard turns. He finally turned the steering wheel to a very jagged left, causing the Pirouette to topple over. The side of Andrew's body scraped the sandpaper-like sand. Accounting for his speed, Andrew felt a burning agony. The Pirouette stopped sliding. Legs cramped, he adjusted himself out of the seat. Standing up to the scorching heat, he scouted the horizon in every direction. Again, only sand and sky laid visible to his eyes. He saw a speck down the horizon though. It was red and white. He couldn't envision the rest of the speck. The hole he had come from was pretty hidden. Undoubtedly, he lifted the Pirouette back up on its normal standing side. He rearranged himself back onto the seat. Unfortunately, the Pirouette suffered some scratches on its blue plating. As the wheels ignited, Andrew stuffed the gas pedal, aiming his target at the speck. Soon enough, the Pirouette made it to a visible-distance territory. He saw this speck was the Spirit Radical hideout. It was the same colors as the circus tent. Excited with joy, he concluded that his plan was a hundred percent accurate. The radicals could enter the labs through the fire exit tunnel. It almost seemed too good to be true. He U-turned the Pirouette, returning to Rick and Kurt.

Andrew was satisfied. The likelihood of this was downright minuscule, and finally, something was going his way. He drove into the hole, down the stairs, and the white hallway. After driving for one minute, he saw Rick and Kurt, walking the opposite way he drove. Desiring to stop this machine, he overturned the vehicle and it crashed. On the bright side though, the Pirouette did slow down. The impact this time was harder, and Andrew collided into the wall. His hearing was impaired for a couple of seconds. Luckily, his head wasn't the main target that hit the wall; it was his back. The Pirouette endured injuries as well. Two headlights that it used to

have completely shattered. Andrew fell into the realm of embarrassment. Not too far from him, Kurt and Rick possibly could have seen his impact. Abandoning the vehicle, he walked to Kurt and Rick.

They had seen everything, and they looked mad, according to their uptight eyebrows. Kurt said, “What in God’sh name are you doing! You’ve deshtwoyed the Piwouwette! What were you thinking!”

Quite worried, Andrew said, “I’m so sorry. I tried slowing down the machine, but I didn’t know how to.”

“So you psychotically flipped the Pirouette into a wall!” Rick complained. “That’s the only one that exists.”

Kurt looked unfit for talking. He still spoke though. “Dish machine is worth ten miwwion dowwarsh! And the one you were in was your father’sh!” He rearranged his left arm. “Wait until you tell your father about dish. He’ll be infuriated.” Kurt arranged his arm again.

Andrew was worried the Claver would come out. “Again, I’m sorry. I couldn’t find the brake pedal. I’ll do anything to repay it.” Kurt stopped arranging his left arm.

Kurt said, “If you want to wepay it, I guessh dere ish one thing you can do.” He took a slight pause. “Acshually, there are two thingsh you can do. You’ll have a choishe. The first one is that you twy out a new wie detector machine that we wecentwy cweated, or I ushe the Cwaver on your fingernail.”

Andrew felt the right choice was obvious. He said, “I’ll try out the lie detector, I guess.” All of this felt ominous to Andrew.

“Perfect,” Kurt said. He covered up the Claver. “If you wouldn’t mind, pweashe eshcort the Pirouette back to duh hallway. To slow it down, you pull duh wever dat’sh above your head.

My mishtake for not accounting for dish pwecaution.” Andrew lifted the Pirouette and got into the seat. He saw the lever above. Accelerating, the vehicle made it back to the hall after 0.2 minutes. He decelerated it with the lever. Andrew thought, *why a lie detector machine? That's random as fuck.* Waiting for the two disappointed men, Andrew hopped off the Pirouette.

They partook in small chat on the way until they arrived. Andrew asked, “Where is this lie detector?”

Kurt casually said, “Jusht fowwow me.” He walked up the stairs. The hole was closed since the disk door had shut. Entering the same code, he opened the door. He walked down the hallway that led to the elevator. As he put his wrist up to the elevator keypad, the elevator went on its usual strange path. He walked past the reception desk and past the office. He walked down the hallway of where his office door was until he reached a blue door. It was a manual door. Opening it, he let Andrew and Rick come inside. Kurt said, “Dish wie detector twacksh the impulshesh of your neural flow. It is always a hundwed pershent cowwect, and dere ish no other machine wike it.” The lie detector was just a normal Spirit Contrivance with a Spirit Emissary. “Hop on, Andwoo. Wet'sh twy dish out.” A flat computer screen displayed the words “Lie” and “True.” Andrew strapped the Spirit Emissary around his forehead.

Andrew asked, “What are you going to ask me?”

Kurt said, “Nothing too important.” He clicked some buttons on the screen, preparing the device. “I'll shtart it off eashily. Are you Andwoo Wutano?”

Andrew said, “Yes.” He thought, *I'm not how he pronounces it though.*

The word “True” was encircled on the screen.

“Good. Ish Wobert Wutano your father?”

“Obviously, yes,” Andrew affirmed. The screen encircled “True” again.

“Good, good,” Kurt said. He took a major pause this time. “Ish Wick a Shpirit Wadical?” He had a sly look on his face.

Andrew hesitated instantly. He grew nervous. Rick, looking awfully confused and troubled, stared at Andrew deliberately. Perspiration enacted. He knew the device would catch his lie. In respect of Rick though, he said, “No.” He exhaled heavily.

The screen encircled “Lie.” Immediately, hell broke loose. Kurt, pulling out his Claver, aimed it at Rick’s neck. However, Rick retaliated quickly enough and shot Kurt in the head with his gun. Andrew jumped up in fear. Head blown to shreds, Kurt’s body laid lifelessly on the floor. Putting his gun away, Rick locked the door. Andrew closed his eyes in terror.

Andrew yelled, “What the fuck!”

Rick said, “Quick! Get outta that contrivance!”

“What are you doing! Why would you—” Rick covered his mouth.

“Protecting the both of us. Now, I need you to shut the fuck up, and listen to what I have to say. You’re in this with me.” Andrew, hyper-ventilating, nodded convincingly.

The receptionist, who was several feet from the incident, asked, “What was that noise?”

Rick said, “It was nothing Cheryl. Kurt is just showing the recoil speed of his new gun again.”

She awkwardly said, “Okay.” The footsteps of her returning to the reception desk ensued.

Rick sighed and quietly said, “We need to get rid of this body. No one can ever know it was us.”

Andrew said, “How wouldn’t they know? The chief of this entire governmental chain is dead!”

Rick slapped his mouth. “Lower your fucking voice down. We’ll just say he died of a heart attack.”

“Yeah, I think a decapitated body goes great for our case.”

“Alright, maybe not then. Can you think of something?”

Percolating thoughts persisted through Andrew’s mind. He thought of something. “Let’s say he went crazy and that he tried killing us for no moral reason.” He peeked over at Kurt’s stinky blood overflow. “Or maybe you can say that you killed him. Then I would be free and could continue your radical mission. You could escape this place and rest at the hideout.”

Rick said, “That could work, but it would be better if I maintain my position here. With him gone, I would now be the new chief of security. I’d provide more resources to the rads if I’m here. Now when I think it over, blaming it on me wouldn’t work.” He examined the body. “What if we put the blame on you?”

“What?”

“If we put the blame on you, I would still control the lock, camera, and guard security systems. I mean, we really don’t need you for anything else if I get the lock combos as chief.”

Andrew said, “But did I tell you that the fire exit literally leads to the radical hideout? With this in mind, we don’t need the lock combinations. All we need is the fire exit. So, I think we should place the blame on you.”

Rick grew frustrated. “Shit, I’m just gonna call Wallace and see what he thinks.” Accessing Mindcord, Rick talked with Wallace. “Hey, Wallace. We’re in a predicament here. Kurt is dead, and we are not sure who to put the blame on. What are your thoughts?”

Andrew couldn’t hear Wallace’s side of the conversation. Rick continually nodded. He hung up the conversation.

“Wallace said we should put the blame on me,” Rick stated. He looked pissed. “Alright, then. Just act scared. Duck and cover in the corner.”

Andrew, happy with this, said, “Okay.” He positioned himself in the opposite corner of Kurt’s lying body.

Rick said, “In five minutes I want you to yell. I will already be miles out of this place when you do so.”

“How are you escaping though?”

“The fire exit.” He unlocked the door. “Put some of Kurt’s blood on your face to make the scene more realistic.” Andrew was grossed out. “I’m outta here, and remember: five minutes.”

“Got it,” Andrew reassured. Before Rick left, he kneeled next to Kurt’s body. Holding Kurt’s amputated arm, Rick guided the Claver towards Kurt’s other arm. He chopped Kurt’s only hand. Some blood splattered on Rufus’s face. Andrew yelled, “What are you doing!”

Rick said, “I need his wrist. Remember what he said? He said that the shutdown switch can only be activated from his wrist. We need his skin patterns if we want to start a lockdown. Bye.” He carried the hand and left.

Looking at Kurt’s body, he still couldn't process what happened. The chaos here overwhelmed him too much. Popping open Mindcord, he set a five-minute timer. Ticking down second by second, time went fast. He hoped people would buy their cover-up. He contemplated whether he should put blood on his face. His disgust won the decision. He remained stationary.

The five minutes finally passed, and it was his time to shine. He yelled, “Help! Help! Help!” Right away, he heard the receptionist’s footsteps approaching. Cheryl slammed the door open. She gasped at Kurt’s dead body.

She yelled, “Guards! Guards! Kurt is dead! Come quick!” From surrounding hallways, Andrew heard their footsteps. Five guards stood by the door.

One of the guards asked, “What in God’s name happened?”

Andrew, trying to appear frightened, said, “It was Rick.”

CHAPTER 19:

Why did time move at a fast rate?

How much time could Andrew await?

Kurt wouldn't wake up next dawn

Because his brain was plain gone.

Escorted by the guards, Andrew was brought to his father. They both sat where Andrew had originally tested the Spirit Contrivance. The yellow-suited guards planted Andrew into a chair. Robert asked, "Son, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Andrew answered. He saw detailed pictographs of the Spirit World behind his father.

"Tell me what happened." He crossed his legs.

Resorting to frailty, Andrew said, "I was petrified. Kurt, who was giving me a tour, wanted me to try out this lie detector machine. He—"

"Why is that? What led him to use the lie detector?"

Andrew, unsure if his father knew about the Pirouette, said, "When he presented me with the fire exit, a little accident occurred."

"My Pirouette getting massacred? Was that your 'little accident'?"

Skittish, Andrew apologized. "I'm so sorry about that, father." He wasn't sorry though.

"You're fine. Just resume your story. What led to Kurt's death?

Andrew retraced his steps, but these steps had to be told methodically. "Kurt saw the lie detector as a good opportunity for me since I could be better acquainted with the technology."

“Before you go on, why did you meet with Chief of Security Kurt Strawlin?”

“I wanted to be conscious of our safety and promote some security expertise of mine.”

Robert smiled a bit. “I like that. You take initiative, son, and that’s the good thing about you. Go on.”

“He showed me all the different rooms, which I was fascinated by. Then, we tried the lie detector—”

“Why was Rick with you?”

Clearing his larynx, Andrew said, “He helped me meet with the chief. I personally asked him about my security interest. Little did I know that he would kill the chief. I couldn’t believe it.”

Robert said, “You keep jumping around in your story. And that’s called nonlinear narrative. Tell me the story sequentially. More importantly, what was the main reason Rick shot Kurt?” He seemed a little impatient and demanding.

Andrew said, “Rick shot Kurt when I used the lie detector test.”

“I know but why?”

“It is because I didn’t know the answer to a question.”

“What question?” Robert kept shooting questions at Andrew. “Because when I saw the footage from the room you were in, I couldn’t make out what you guys said. Auditory functions are not compatible with our cameras.”

That was a relief for Andrew. He needed to come up with something on the spot. “It wasn’t a question per se. It was more of a rhetorical question. Kurt asked, ‘Would it be bad to kill Rick?’ And, of course, I was confused as hell. When I said the word ‘yes,’ Kurt immediately attempted to murder Rick. But Rick was quicker for the most part. I had no clue why he would

ask that or where he even came up with the question." He felt saying something overwhelming would bring the point to his father.

Robert said, "That is definitely odd." He seemed more fulfilled with the storyline of this murder. He levitated his shoulders up and levitated them down as he sighed. "Well, thanks for telling me, and let's hope that this commotion never happens again." He let off a little laugh. "Thanks for communicating with me."

Andrew was thankful that nothing had slipped out. He said, "Thank you. Now that the chief is dead, who's going to be in charge of security?"

"I came up with the resolution that I would just take over this firm. It felt like the simplest option."

Andrew said, "That seems like the best choice."

Leaning back, Robert said, "That's enough serious talk. Go spend some time with Harriet. Forget this wretched thing even happened, and change the subject within yourself." He said, "Get on out of here," playfully. Andrew stood up from his seat and was ready to depart. "And before you go, I have one more thing you should be aware of. Tomorrow, I'm meeting with the attorney general to go over this worldly situation. I'm going to need you to be at the meeting, and it is highly obligatory that you come, especially in tough times like these. It will take place at the Conference Room at 10 a.m."

Andrew asked, "Okay," hesitantly. His father nodded back, noting Andrew that he could leave now. Leaving through the door, Andrew felt the presence of his father still with him. He still didn't forgive him. He dreadfully wanted to confront his father. But now was not the time. The timing was key to his plan—his plan for success. Andrew didn't also know how to react to the attorney general situation. Why would his father want him there? What were they planning to

do? As these questions were bypassed, he saw no reason but to seek help from Harriet. Maybe she could help him with his situation. Plus, his father had said to visit her. He wasn't seeing her because of his father though. He was seeing her because he individually chose to. His father couldn't sway his decisions. Making his way to the elevator, he saw someone waiting for it. Andrew got closer to this person. This person, turning around, was Rufus.

Rufus' face turned smug. Andrew berserkly grew surprised with the appearance of this man. Rufus said, "How was your security tour? I heard it went great. Oh wait, I heard it went completely, absolutely, positively horrible. Also, I heard there was a guy who tried to prevent this from happening. Oh wait, that person was me." As this guy rambled, Andrew cut him in line for the elevator wait. "What do you think you're doing?"

Andrew proudly said, "If you're gonna be a dick, I'm gonna be a dick." He planted his feet into the ground ahead of Rufus. The smug look of Rufus vexed. The elevator opened up and Andrew prepared to enter. But Rufus cut his way in, pushing Andrew's body to the side.

"How did you like that one, dick?" Rufus replied.

Andrew wanted to be more profound in his banter. "You're not gonna tuck me in bed tonight, are you? Are you going to coddle me in my room?"

Rufus, appearing angry, said, "No, and I hope you don't need a pacifier when you sleep tonight." The elevator began to descend.

Andrew, angry as well, delivered a minor shove to Rufus. Taking major offense to this small physical knockback, Rufus gave Andrew a major shove, causing him to bang into the elevator wall. Andrew pushed him back while also adding a small punch to his face. Rufus grabbed Andrew by the waist and unleashed some of his physical-security-personnel-training

power upon him. Waist grabbed by Rufus, Andrew was impelled into the elevator wall. Andrew said, “I’m sick of your bullshit!”

Rufus landed another shove on Andrew. “You’re a psycho! You know that,” Rufus said. Andrew, struggling, couldn’t escape out of Rufus’ hold. “Why do you keep acting like this? You’re like a slithering snake. You keep trying to escape me.” He socked Andrew in the mouth and teeth region. Some of Andrew’s blood fell to the floor. He knew he was going to lose this fight.

Wanting mercy, Andrew said, “I’m sorry. I’ll stop.” Rufus let go of his grab. Andrew’s torso and mouth ached pretty severely. Andrew ran out of breath. The elevator reached the first floor.

As the door opened, Rufus willfully stared at Andrew. He said, “Stay the fuck away from me, Andrew.” He left the door first. Still struggling a bit, Andrew took a few seconds for the physically-dominant man to gain more distance away from him. Andrew was growing impatient. He felt he was a mess. The next thing on his to-do list was to see Harriet. Hopefully, she wouldn’t punch him ruthlessly. He left the elevator. As he perused around the lounge area, he thought, *what is going on? Am I losing contact with myself? What am I becoming?* Existential questions as these made him lose his focus. Time went on, and he spent several hours searching for where Harriet could be and asking other researchers of her whereabouts. He had finally found her. She was in the cafeteria, staring blankly at her food. This site made Andrew uncomfortable. He thought, *has she been sitting here since the last time I saw her?* He didn’t know how she was feeling neurologically. Passing through the other chairs and tables, he approached her table. Bringing her eyes to his eyes, she looked disgusted and apathetic. Andrew was about to ask how she was feeling.

“Why is your mouth like that?” she first asked.

Slightly annoyed that she spoke first, he said, “I can tell you later. Wanna talk in a different space?”

“Different space? Why? There is no one here but me, you, and the Chef Bots. The cameras can’t hear our conversations either.”

Andrew said, “I will discuss with you everything that happened if you follow me to a different space.”

Sighing deeply, she got out of her seat. “Fine. But you have to tell me everything. And you’re not gonna talk to me like you did in the last conversation. That was just plain-ass rude.”

Andrew agreed. He said, “Let’s talk in my room. It’s more secluded there.”

As they walked out of the cafeteria, she asked, “They gave you a room?”

“Yep. It’s pretty cool, too. I like the aesthetic there and stuff.”

After all the convoluted directions and turns, they ended up in the room. Harriet said, “Woah, this room is nice. Sure is fancier than my room. Probably because of you being the son of the owner and all.” She sat on his bed. “So, tell me what’s been going on.”

Rubbing his bruised mouth, Andrew said, “Alright.” He was going to be completely honest with her. But he wasn’t going to speak of the radicals. It was too risky to foretell any of this information. “I met with my father today, and he brought up something weird.”

“How weird?”

“He wants me to meet with him and the attorney general tomorrow. I don’t know why, but he just wants me to. And considering everything that’s going on worldwide, I think they’re planning to do something big, yet I don’t know what it is, of course.”

She said, “That actually seems really serious. What do you think they’re going to talk about?”

Andrew said, “I don’t know. Like I said, my father didn’t give me any details.”

“You still haven’t told me how your mouth ended up like that,” she said.

Revisiting his brain, he confirmed this was safe to tell. “This annoying security guard kept harassing me. I tried fighting him, but—”

“But you lost. Aww, poor Andrew.” She walked up to his face and put her hand to his mouth, trying to soothe it with arbitrary hand motions. Andrew felt a little tension, the tension that felt good. Caressing her hand, Andrew accepted her.

They had sex. After this had commenced, Andrew laid in bed with Harriet by her side until they both fell asleep.

Waking up, Andrew opened up Mindcord. He read the time was 9:55 a.m. A flicker of flight tinkered his mind. The meeting with the attorney general was in five minutes. He was screwed timewise. Jumping out of bed, he put on his remaining clothes and settled to the door by entering his code, yet he had trouble remembering it. Piecing his photographic memory together, he realized it was 628208420606848. Scrambling the code in, he opened the door. As the door opened, he saw Rufus waiting patiently by the door. Andrew was bewildered and said, “Why the hell are you here?”

“You’re almost late,” Rufus stated. Presenting his electronic screen watch, he showed the time. “I’ll guide you to the meeting.”

Shirt backwards, Andrew said, “I don’t need your guidance.” He pushed him out of the way and walked down the hall to the elevator. Rufus still followed him silently. Andrew entered the elevator. Rufus entered the elevator. Bad memories of elevators whirled through Andrew’s

mind. Sticking to the left wall of the elevator, Andrew was paranoid of Rufus. Making it to the first floor, Andrew read the time was 9:57 p.m. Andrew took his first step out of the elevator and stopped. Rufus didn't leave the elevator.

Rufus said, "The room is in a different complex. I can take you there if you like with some handy-dandy wrist action." Seeing really no other choice, Andrew returned. Rufus put his wrist up to the elevator keypad. Swerving random directions, the elevator made its way to the complex (the third complex on the right that Andrew had never been in). The door opened and a vibrant blue reception desk displayed the entrance. The architecture was similar to the security complex. Eyeing the receptionist, Rufus said, "Hello, Sharon. On our way to the Conference Room. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing great, Rufus. Is this Andrew's first time here?" Her nose ring was so big that Andrew could see his reflection.

Andrew said, "We don't have time for this. Just show me where the meeting is, Rufus."

Rufus said, "Not until you answer her question."

Bothered for time, Andrew recognized her presence and said, "Yes, ma'am. This is my first time. Hope you're doing fine, too." Looking at Rufus, he said, "Show me where it is now. It's 9:58 p.m."

"I will. I will," Rufus responded. "Have a good day, Sharon." She smiled. Rufus finally reunited his attention back to Andrew. Changing his tone in voice, he said, "Follow me."

Andrew thought, *finally.* Literally right next to the reception desk, a door labeled "Conference Room." Rufus knocked on the door twice. The door levitated upward. The time was 9:59 a.m. Andrew wasn't even sure if the knock was required. A long wooden table with twelve chairs sat in the middle of the room. An unknown man sat in the closest chair to him. His father

sat next to this man. He saw Marco sitting next to his father. His brother's presence disturbed Andrew.

Robert said, "You're early, son. Join us." Rufus behind him, Andrew took a seat next to his brother, even though he wanted to avoid him.

The unknown man said, "So this is your other son? It's great to meet you, Andrew." He displayed his hand out in an attempt for a handshake. Gripping his hand, Andrew felt the moist pores of his partially-soggy hand. As he sat back down, Marco displayed his palm to the unknown man additionally. The man didn't notice it, which left Marco hanging. Initiating this drawback, Marco inserted his hand back to himself. The man said, "I am Attorney General Howard Wayne. Nice to meet you. I'm going to get straight to the point. My team has been greatly struggling to keep peace within society. Earthquakes are more rampant than ever. Tsunamis have already decimated half the world. We are lucky that here in New York nothing too significant happened." Wearing the stereotypical badge and soldier tunic, this general spoke in a very business-like fashion.

Explaining further on, Robert said, "In addition, we are in an emergency crisis, and the attorney general is here for a reason. We put our scholarly minds together and came up with a plan."

Without hesitating, Marco said, "I applaud you, father, for your hard work. I'm with you a hundred percent." The three of them stared at Andrew, waiting for his response.

Wayne said, "Is your other son fully on board, Robert?"

"Andrew, are you willing to help us on our plan?" Robert asked.

Acquiring no knowledge of the plan, Andrew, a.k.a. the other son, couldn't fathom how things would turn out. He couldn't tell if they were bluffing or legitimate. Andrew said, "Fine. Let me hear this plan of yours."

"Everybody get up then," Robert pronounced. "Let's show you guys some things." The four of them got up out of their chairs, Robert being the first to catalyze this reaction. They left this room and walked down a series of hallways. "The endeavour provided us with a lot of assistance to the plan." A door marked the words "VIP Access." This was the biggest door Andrew had seen from the rest. And it was the glossiest white as well. Entering through the sliding door, Andrew felt the emptiness of this black room. It appeared similar to a movie theater, except that each chair was a Spirit Contrivance and there was no big screen. A giant interdimensional communicator system stretched thousands of wires to each of the chairs. Lined up in rows of ten, this display of Contrivances reached in the thousands. This number was absolutely absurd to Andrew. Walking down the outer aisle, Robert enthusiastically stated, "This is for our pre-registered guests. The number of chairs that sit in this room is 1034. As you see, many are interested in joining the Spirit World, and we must do everything we can to give them an easy transitional experience when they come here. The only problem is that the world is getting riled up every bypassing minute. In this room, specifically, we have a main control unit that tracks the flow of all the neurons. Follow me." Down the aisle was a small manual door. Opening it, the main control unit revealed a suave yellow color. A holographic depiction of a brain had three different tabs under it, showing the words "Sensory," "Motor," and "Dopamine." Andrew studied this new artifact. Robert said, "We will obviously send coded sensory neurons for our guests. But the other two neural categories are there for technological purposes, and we

will never use it on them. On the other hand, to help minimize the problem that exists in the outside world, we may need to use these other categories."

The last statement Robert said felt too general to Andrew. Breaking the flow of the presentation, Andrew asked, "What do you mean by 'other categories'? And what do you mean by 'problem'?"

Wayne took the respect to talk. "That's a fair question, Andrew. The problem your father is alluding to is the outsiders and the destitute. The people outside these walls are becoming more ravenous and barbarous as the geothermal catastrophe wears down on them. The 'other categories' he speaks of are the dopamine neurons. People that are this deranged should not be ignored, and they interfere with our pre-registered guests. We have a solution to this problem with the help of this special kind of neurotransmitter called dopamine." Wayne began walking out the main control unit door. "Let me explain more. Follow me."

As Wayne took charge of the tour, Andrew grew more skeptical. Treading up the aisle, they left the "VIP Access" room. Walking further down a hallway, Wayne said, "Your father allowed me to watch some of your endeavour, Andrew, and it was a pleasure to. It gave me an idea that your father and I paired together." Andrew, growing impatient with each prolonging, he thought, *tell me the idea already, goddamnit.* Wayne reached a door labeled "Dopabee Seduction".

Andrew was immediately confused as heck. He knew that the word "Dopabean" was a medicine to help people with low levels of dopamine since his second cousin was diagnosed to have it. But the word "Dopabee" didn't click for him. He asked, "Sorry, but what's a Dopabee?"

Wayne's face began to look eager. He said, "Oh, I'll tell you what Dopabees are. They're the things that are solving this problem of ours. To be fair, all solutions require problems to begin

with.” He opened the door. This room, or complex as a matter a fact, was the biggest one yet. Ten feet by ten feet metal cages rose to the ceiling. There were hundreds of them. Inside each one was a communicator system with a thick blue wire and red wire attached to it. Wayne said, “Dopabees are the dopamine bees from Nirvana 74. It is known that they have a dopamine compositor in their stingers, which gave your father and me an idea—the idea to entrap these bees and harvest their dopamine. And then this dopamine would be fed to all the ignorant fools who interfere with our registered guests. You see, we must keep these kinds of people under control. Their suppression and obedience is a must.”

Andrew’s heart pounded off-beat. He was deeply horrified. And enraged. He wanted to yell at them and even fight them. This angered him so much. But he needed to know more information. He needed to obtain more intellect before his natural instincts kicked in. In a calm voice, he asked, “And how will this dopamine be given to the poor people?”

Robert said, “It will be easy. We have compiled thousands of Spirit Emissaries, not just normal ones though. These are portable Spirit Emissaries. The Dopabess would get their dopamine extracted from their stingers, and the interdimensional communicators would successfully store the dopamine to the emissaries. We suspect when our guests arrive, hoards of people will be at the gates, protesting for admittance. Therefore, these portable emissaries will be dispatched to this public from outside our gates. Once they get their hands on them, their minds will be all over the Spirit World, whereas, in reality, they're only falling into a deep state of dopamine influx and coma. The bees are needed for the dopamine, and they are our prime target.”

Unbearably resisting his anger, Andrew lastly asked, “And how do you plan to capture the Dopabees?”

Wayne said, “We plan to capture them by ship. As in, we will travel to Nirvana 74. We have the ship and everything.” He reasserted the badge on his tunic. “Are you guys willing to board the ship with us and lead us to where the Dopabees are? We know you guys will do a great job.”

Before Andrew could think, Marco said, “I’m all in. I pledge full attention and compliance.” He smiled.

Andrew’s intolerance towards this plan was insurmountable. Andrew couldn’t hold back his grudge. He exploded. Raising his fist, Andrew punched his father in the face. “Dad, how could you do this! You sick man! You’re nothing but a liar and a complete bastard to this world!” Wayne, using his muscular-attorney-general strength, clenched Andrew backwards. Marco grabbed his father back as well. Tears came down Andrew’s eyes. “You lie about my mother! You lie about the baby! You lie about this whole plan! You lie about your love! You’ve been lying to me my entire life! How could you do this!” Andrew had fluctuated to maximum turmoil while Wayne dragged him from the room. While being dragged, Andrew said, “Marco, I’m begging you don’t do this! How could you be this ignorant! They’re using you! This isn’t the right thing!”

Robert massaged his left eye. Using his earpiece, Robert said, “Send in guards, please. We have a little problem.” In about ten seconds, five guards appeared at the “Dopabee Seduction” door. Wayne let go and the guards grabbed Andrew. Andrew’s resistance didn’t go anywhere. They stopped dragging him, and Robert stood in front of Andrew’s sight. His father’s face seemed even more punchable the closer he got. Robert said, “That wasn’t kind, son.” He got out a handkerchief and wiped the remaining blood on his eye. “You should know better than to

hit your own father. And seeing that you are mad about your mother leaves me to think that we should change that. Wouldn't you agree, General Wayne?"

Wayne said, "I agree without a doubt. I think it's a good time to use it on him."

Andrew's perplexed mind thought, *use what on me?* Robert said, "Guards, follow me." Without an ounce of struggle, they dragged Andrew's body out of the door and down a different hallway. Andrew's anger stopped his ability to think straight. All he saw was a man that lied to him his entire life. While being dragged, Robert said, "This is an experimental device that has not been put to use yet. Good thing we have you, Andrew, to try it out." This angered Andrew even more. Not even a remark of sympathy strayed through Robert's mind. Marco followed his father like a toddler in a grocery store. The guards, dragging Andrew, finally reached a new door, a manual door that read "Memory Metamorphose." Using Andrew as a battle ram, the guards opened the door. The room was small and a bit claustrophobic for the number of people in the room. A pale green desk with a Spirit Emissary positioned in the middle of the room. A small holographic screen lay beside the emissary. Robert said, "This is a scientific wonder. This device is a memory eraser and falsifier. With the help of your hippocampal neurons, we can change them and implement new memories or delete memories. We track the memories through that small thing in your head: Mindcord. It just so happens that Mindcord is electronically embedded into the hippocampus region of your brain, therefore, allowing the machine to track memories at the time ratio it happened at. Even more fascinating, General Wayne here is the creator of Mindcord. We paired my neural technology and his memory technology together to create this beautiful machine. It's almost like God wanted both of us to work together."

Wayne said, "Everything your father said is completely true. Tracking the time of your memories, this device can allow us to code artificially new memories. Thank god for

hippocampal neurons. Not only does Mindcord record your hippocampal status, but it also records your emotional status. And finally, it tracks your five senses. Ah, I love technology all too much."

Everything had instantaneously climaxed for Andrew. He said, "You've been tracking the human mind for every human being who attains Mindcord? You guys are insane!" He attempted to punch the guards away but his strength was too measly. "You're just gonna erase my mother? This is so fucked up! I'm not hooking up to this devilish piece of shit!"

Wayne said, "We've got that covered. Maybe after this, you'll agree with your father." A guard took out a syringe. Andrew had no clue what it could be.

Andrew said, "You think changing my memory will change my outlook on my father? There is no way! There is an entire galaxy of shitty memories of him. You'd never be able to erase them all. It's infinite!" The guards carried his body up and placed him on the chair that belonged to the desk. The guard holding the syringe inserted it into his arm.

Andrew immediately grew sleepy. The last phrase he heard was from his father. "Mother never existed." Before his eyes closed, he saw Marco. He seemed a bit uncomfortable.

While Andrew's mind got reconfigured, he lay unresponsive and helpless. Memory after memory of his mother began to erase. Falsified memories were not used. The machine only deleted them. Andrew rested on the desk for hours with the Spirit Emissary clung around his head. The buzzing of the machine magnified when an entire memory was erased.

Consciousness shifts to Harriet.

Harriet woke up. Checking her surroundings, she couldn't feel the presence of Andrew. He was missing. She thought, *what time is it?* Accessing Mindcord, she noticed the time was 12:11 p.m. It was still a Thursday. She was surprised at how long she fell asleep. Taking her

time, she put her garments back on and remade the bed. Examining more of the room, she noticed the fountain pen on the desk, which pointed directly at the bed. She adored the artistic designs on the pen, especially the black circle that was on the end of the cap. Deeming she ought to scout where Andrew was, she departed the room through the hatch on the ceiling. Clipping it open, she brought herself up to the first floor. A bit hungry, she reckoned that she visit the cafeteria for a quick bite to eat. Travelling to floor 80 with the elevator, she wanted to message Andrew through Mindcord, but she never received his contact information. After some more motor thinking, Harriet remembered that he was at the attorney general meeting, or something along those lines. Arriving at the cafeteria, she saw the Chef Bots were serving nurtured hot dogs. Anything with the word "nurtured" caught Harriet's food attention. She loved anything that was nurtured. Grabbing a tray, she stood in line. While waiting, a man approached her. It was a man with similar facial features, but she couldn't remember this person's name. The man said, "Hello, I'm Rufus. You're Harriet, correct?"

She said, "Yes. And, presumably, who are you?"

"I said who I was. I'm Rufus. But in terms of Spirit Intercom status, I'm a correspondent and security guard for Robert."

Harriet asked, "What is it?"

"Because you went on the endeavour with Andrew, Robert would like to speak with you on what they have further planned. He would like me to guide you to him."

She felt a bit awkward with this. "Can we go after I eat my food?"

Rufus said, "I'm sorry, but Robert told me to bring you to him now. You can eat at a later time."

Missing out on the nurtured meal, she said, "Very well."

Rufus said, “Follow me.” Dropping her tray on the counter, she followed his lead. Abandoning the cafeteria, Rufus went in the elevator with Harriet. Casually waiting for the contraption to reach floor 1, Harriet remembered something that Andrew said—something about a fight in an elevator. Rufus placed his wrist on the keypad after they reached floor 1. The elevator went on the bizarre route to the other complex. As the door opened, Harriet saw the vibrant blue reception desk in front.

She said, “I’ve never been in this complex, and I’ve been working here for three years. What is this place?”

Rufus walked to the reception desk and said, “Don’t worry. Robert will tell you all about it.” Locking his eyes to the reception desk, he said, “Hi, Sharon. Good to see you again. How’s your nuclear malware project coming along?”

Disregarding this, she saw Robert in front of her. He stood with high poise. She saw the bloody cut on his left eye. She said, “Hello, Mr. Rutano.”

“Good to see you, Harriet,” he said.

“How’s Andrew been?”

He looked down. “He’s fine. He’s fine. How have you been?”

Harriet said, “I’ve been doing good, too. What was it that you needed from me?”

He rearranged his eyes and said, “Yes. I need you to listen to what I have to say. We’re in a really important circumstance right now, and I require your full trust. We have a budget for time, and I cannot expend any more.”

She nodded. Considering the head of Spirit Intercom contacted her must’ve meant that something critical was taking place. Robert said, “Great. Follow me.”

He walked down the hallway with Harriet by his side. He said, “I have deemed it infallible that we will safely provide a smooth process for our pre-registered guests. But before this can happen, we need to go over some underlying provisions.” He opened the door for the “VIP Access” room. “As it might be seen, this is the place for our guests. Our entire company leads up to this moment. I took note of your experience in the Spirit World, and I was amazed by your performance. Not only did you successfully suffice to your surroundings but you also connected with this world on a personal level. You being such a highly-valued member of our company brings awareness to what else you could achieve. Therefore, I will share the plan that was given to Andrew. You two will work side-by-side on this next mission that I have planned. It’s the most important, and the fate of our company depends on this scenario. Understand?”

Harriet felt needed. She felt significant. She said, “I understand fully. Do you know where Andrew is?”

Immediately, he said, “Don’t worry. He’s just inspecting more of the plan.” Exiting this room, they headed down the hallway.

Harriet asked, “So what’s the mission?”

“The mission is to travel to the physical planet of Nirvana 74.”

“Why?”

“To see if the Spirit World is exactly coded to the physical standards of the planet.”

She understood now. She said, “That’s smart. It’s good that you’re double-checking that the guests are receiving a correct world in respect to the physical world. Props to you.”

“Definitely,” he said as he opened the door to the Conference Room. She saw an unknown man, a recognizable man, and Rufus in the room. The unknown man introduced

himself as Attorney General Howard Wayne. The recognizable man introduced himself as Marco Rutano. Each shaking Harriet's hand, they took a seat in the Conference Room.

Wayne said, "It's good to finally meet you, Harriet. We are excited to have you help us on this mission of ours. The government greatly appreciates it. As Robert may have already told you, we are planning to leave on a spaceship to Nirvana 74. Once we're there, we will examine all the creatures and geometric dimensions of the planet to make sure that they align with our software and code of the Spirit World. The ship is named Nirvana Voyager. It is the biggest spaceship ever created in the history of mankind. It moves at the speed of 185000 miles per second. Just below par of the speed of light. Plan to check-in at the spaceship at 5:00 p.m. Get settled and prepare during these five hours. Good luck to all of us, and may this mission prove anything but good to us." Harriet appreciated the tenacity of the plan. It was coherent and well-thought-out. Her only question though was where Andrew was. She hadn't seen him since they had sex. The five people in the Conference Room agreed and exited. Harriet thanked Robert.

Robert said, "Please arrive at the ship by 5:00 p.m. Rufus will escort you to the ship from your room and will notify you when it's time. Thank you so much for all your flexibility during these chaotic times. Lastly, Rufus will escort you out of this complex." She nodded and Rufus was by her forefront. She didn't want to leave yet though. She still hadn't seen Andrew, and she wanted to explore more of this complex before leaving it. Robert entered the elevator and said, "See you." The door closed.

Rufus by her side, she said, "Rufus, could you give me more of a tour of this place? I'm curious." In reality, she just wanted to find Andrew.

Rufus said, “I think it’d be best if you returned to your room. You must get your rest before this long journey of yours.”

She felt rested. “No, I feel fine. Could you show me where Andrew is inspecting the plans?”

“Harriet, if you don’t mind me repeating myself, I think it’s important that you obtain your rest,” Rufus said. The repeated assertion of this phrase felt weird to her.

“I already told you. I’m fine. If you’re not going to show me where he is, then I will find him myself.”

Rufus’ face winced. He grabbed her by the shoulder. “Follow me.” He only took a few steps before he started speaking again. He began to whisper. “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but I can’t take it anymore. This whole thing is too fucked up for me to ignore. The truth is that this whole plan is fake. All of it is. I’ll tell you more, but you need to promise me that you’ll keep quiet.”

She affirmed, “I promise.” They took more steps down the hallway to gain distance from any possible eavesdroppers.

“They’re not taking you to examine the planet,” Rufus directly stated. “They’re taking you there so that you can lead them to where the Dopabees are?”

“What are—”

“The dopamine bees. They’re going to fucking capture these bees and possess them to obtain their dopamine. Then, this dopamine will be transmitted into portable whatchamacallits. These whatchamacallits will be used on the poor people to keep them submissive and stop their protesting when this day comes. It’s all a plan just to allow the guests to safely enter through.

When Robert told me of this, it was too much for me to handle. I couldn't manage his loyalty. Oh yeah, and Andrew is in a memory eraser chamber right now."

Harriet yelled, "What!" Rufus told her to pipe down. He pointed down the hallway at the door named "Memory Metamorphose."

"They're erasing his brain at this very second."

She said, "Then bust him outta there. We can't let his mind become even more fucked up." She sprinted to the door and opened it. Andrew's head lay pathetically on the green desk with a mechanical contraption ingrained around his head. She was terrorized. Drool puddled. She unwired the Spirit Emissary from his head. He was knocked out still. "What happened to him? Why would they do this?"

"They must've slipped a drug in him," Rufus said. He tried waking Andrew up by lightly tapping his cheekbones. This was unsuccessful. "They tried erasing memories so that he would concur with their plan. I'm not sure which ones though."

She began panicking. This panic was worse than the one she felt when Andrew got mangled by the cheetah. "What do we do? Is he gonna wake up before the ship leaves?"

"I'm puzzled too," Rufus said. "At least the memory eradication was terminated, which means that not all his memories were deleted. I say we bring him on the ship."

Harriet fizzled around with her hair. "Bring him unconscious? No. Did you try waking him up with the old water trick?"

"What's that?"

"It's where you dump water on his face," Harriet said.

Rufus said, "I can get some water. Just wait here." Rufus left this room and moved down the hallway at a quick pace. Harriet waited impatiently. In a matter of minutes, Rufus returned

with a glass of water in his hand. “This is Sharon’s water cup. I’ll refill it for her later.” He dumped the water on Andrew’s head. The water droplets bickered Andrew’s nose, some of it reaching into his nasal cavity. Andrew coughed some of it out. His eyes slowly fluttered open. His lips pulsed. He had awakened.

Consciousness shifts to Andrew.

The first visible thing he saw was Rufus’ face. He swatted this face. Rufus retracted backwards. Andrew coughed up some more. He said, “What the fuck happened! That shit was worse than isovaleric acid.” Pointing at Rufus, he yelled, “Why is this guy here!” Harriet and Rufus both tried to calm him down. Andrew’s mind was more astray than it ever had been. Washed-up memories danced around him. He didn’t know what was real. He thought, *is this a memory?*

Harriet said, “Relax. Rufus showed me where you were. He’s cool.”

Andrew’s body reflected up as he sniffed in. “Shit’s crazy now. Where’s my father and the general?”

“They’re nowhere near us,” Rufus stated.

Andrew didn’t trust Rufus. “How do I know if you’re just spying on me for my father?”

Rufus said, “Man, I’m not. I know we have our differences, but I genuinely want to help you. Your father’s plan is completely diabolical and messed up. The ship is expected to leave at 5:00 p.m., and it’s 1:00 p.m. right now. We have four hours to figure out something.”

Andrew asked, “Harriet, what did they tell you? How’d you end up here?” His mind was clouded with all sorts of information.

Harriet said, “They made a plan for me saying that they will study the anatomy of the planet, which is all bullshit by the looks of it. Rufus is the one who brought this to my attention.”

Andrew said, “But do you know what their actual plan is?”

“Yeah, I told you that Rufus told me,” Harriet responded. “Lighten up more with Rufus. He’s changed.”

“Whatever,” Andrew said. “The most important thing is that we intercede with them. Harriet, are they planning for you to board the ship?”

“Yes. And before we discuss anymore, Andrew, are you okay? What memories were erased?”

Rufus said, “He wouldn’t know. He can’t remember his memories being erased.”

“Thanks for clearing that up, Rufus. Please, let’s focus on the plan. This is so hectic,” Andrew complained. He stood up and peeked through the door. No one was there.

“Are they expecting you to board the ship? Or do they have something else planned for you?” Harriet asked.

Andrew said, “I don’t know. My best judgement is that they wanted to erase my memory so that I would reconsider them. So maybe they’ll bring me?”

Harriet said, “I have an idea. Allow me to travel with them and have Andrew travel secretly on board. They wouldn’t suspect anything.”

Andrew said, “That could work, I guess. But why would I need to come?”

Harriet mentioned, “Duh, so that you prevent them from capturing the Dopabees. Who knows how much brute force they’ll bring to Nirvana 74? Those animate plants will surely be up against something.”

Rufus asked, “Andrew, what memories did they try to erase?”

“Rufus, I literally just asked that,” Harriet said. “And you told me he wouldn’t remember. But since you bring it up again, Andrew, what memories did they try to destroy from your head?”

Andrew said, “I do remember that they wanted me to forget about my mother.”

Harriet asked, “Well, do you remember her? Remember when we visited her at Allure?”

“Um, I’m not exactly sure. Everything just seems so faint. I remember her from when I was a kid. Seeing her at Allure? I feel like we saw her, but I just don’t remember. It’s weird.”

She said, “Strange. Your father really is a psychotic douche. No offense.”

“No problem. Moving forward, we will just do what we said. I’ll pretend I’m still using the machine, and when they wake me up, I’ll just say I forgot about my mother. I’ll act in accord with my father. The problem is I don’t know how he will react with me.”

Harriet said, “That’s why I think you should secretly board the ship before they see you. We’ll hide you during these four hours, and you can board with us hiddenly.”

“I can sneak Andrew on the ship,” Rufus said. “So is everyone on board with this plan?”

“Oh, I see what you did there,” Harriet said. “I am.”

Andrew was still a little skeptical. He said, “Yes,” though. “Do you know where the ship will be picking us up?”

Rufus said, “In the front of the labs. Right by the entrance. I can trick your father even more by saying that the general has ordered me to keep you under supervision in the ‘Memory Metamorphose’ room. That way I can sneak you on the ship, and your father would have no idea.”

Andrew said, “Okay, sounds good. I’m gonna go back to my room and rest a little. I have a severe headache.”

Harriet said, “We can’t let anybody see you though.”

Rufus said, “If I’m near him, it’ll be fine. I can escort him to his room.”

“I’d appreciate it. Okay then. Everyone do what you’re supposed to do, and we’ll be golden,” Andrew said. Harriet and Rufus nodded.

Quietly leaving this room, they walked down the hallway. No sound was present. They made it to the elevator. Rufus ordered the elevator to go to the first floor with the help of his wrist. Reaching this floor, Harriet left. Rufus ignited the elevator to go to the underground floor with his wrist once again. Making it there, Andrew left, saying, “See you at 5:00 p.m.” Rufus agreed and closed the elevator door behind him.

Computing in his room code, Andrew unlocked the white room. Immediately, he implanted his face into the bed pillow. Flipping his body around, he opened up Mindcord. He planned to wake up at 4:55 p.m. It would provide him enough time to get ready. However, he saw the fountain pen. Therefore, he changed his alarm to 4:50 p.m. He fell asleep.

CHAPTER 20:

Will the plan go smoothly?

Smooth as lapis lazuli?

Memories hesitant,

Andrew still sees Father as decadent.

Nap done, Andrew was awakened by his 4:50 p.m. alarm. Slouching out of bed, he saw the fountain pen again. It was time to be productive and smart. The only skepticism invading his mind was that of Rufus. Instead of leaving through the door, Andrew opened the upper hatch. As soon as he reached the first floor, he heard a whirring noise. It was the Nirvana Voyager with its loud engine directly by the front entrance. The size of the ship was so massive that only the entrance of the ship could be seen from the entrance of the labs. A gray metallic ramp stretched down. The ship overwhelmed Andrew. Being in public around the lab researchers overwhelmed him as well. The process of sneaking on the ship confused him. Should he be weary of guards? Is Andrew still permitted to be at the labs? The route to the spaceship entrance was wide-open; no guards or lab researchers were present. Instilling that he should make a run for it, Andrew double-checked both ways. Leaving the hatches, he approached the entrance by hastily walking. Pools of nervous energy swept through him. He passed the entrance door and saw two guards that stood on the sides of it. A slight headrush blackened his vision for a few seconds. He thought, *create an excuse right now.* Not seeing the face of this lonely wanderer, a guard said, “Hey, what are you doing?” Andrew revealed his face to them. “Oh, it’s Robert’s son. Please, go right ahead.” He pointed to the spaceship door.

This caught Andrew off guard. Keeping a cool face, he responded, “Thanks.” While giving them a thumbs up, he gazed at the ship. The size was astronomical. It was the height of the eighty-floor lab. It was the length of two football fields. What surprised Andrew, even more, was that this wasn’t the only ship; there were hundreds of small space cruisers and U-shaped assault vessels. There were so many of them that they were parked outside of the lab gates. The Nirvana Voyager vaunted a giant golden bee emblem on its fuselage. This ship possessed three massive corridors with a door hatch on each of them. They could open up with the use of a lever. Made of steel, the ship was shaped curvaceously with no jagged corners. Various blasters poked out of the front. The engineering and architecture attracted Andrew, causing him to stare at it for two minutes. This short amount of time was still significant for Andrew. His father, his brother, the general, Rufus, or Harriet could appear at any second. He decided not to waste any more seconds, and he walked up the ramp that led to the inside of the ship. Inside was brightly lit. Blue LEDs shined the white tiles on the floor. It was spotless. The cliche archetype of a ship could be seen, such as the countless buttons, holographic screens, never-ending wires, and magnified sensors. The thing that struck Andrew’s attention most was the front of the ship. The front had an entire map of the Spirit World with possible locations of where Dopabees could be; additionally, it contained a glass wall and steering wheel. The pinpoints of the Dopabee locations were placed up north of the planet. This angered him. Leaving the cockpit, he needed to find a hiding spot. Cracking open Mindcord, he saw the time was 4:58 p.m., leaving him two minutes to find one good hiding spot in this gargantuan ship. He also didn’t want to be too far from where other people would be situated. Seeing one of the corridor doors from the side of the ship, he saw ten feet by ten feet black cubes with a metallic lock on top of each. The gap between the frontal cockpit and the cubes was only about 50 feet, providing him with enough space to hear possible

conversations. He crouched behind one of the cubes and waited. This spot seemed fine to him. Now it was a matter of patience.

Mindcord displayed the time of 5:00 p.m. Immediately, he heard crisp metallic footsteps. The clatter amplified as more people entered inside. Peeking over his right, he saw the first person to enter the ship; it was Rufus with Harriet by her side. She first said, “That’s so weird.” Their dialogue echoed.

Rufus said, “We’ll figure it out. And I guess we’re early, too.” A few seconds later, more footsteps approached, that of his father’s and later the General’s. Peeking over his shoulder, Andrew saw Rufus take notice of Robert. Wayne and Robert shook Harriet’s hand.

Robert said, “Harriet, are you ready to help us?”

She said, “Yes,” as Marco ran through the door. Andrew’s brother was one minute late. The map of the Dopabees shut off and became a blank screen.

“Sorry I’m late,” Marco said.

Wayne said, “No problem. Let’s get this ship up and running.”

After this, twenty blue-suited guards came from behind them. Lastly, one single man with a green vest entered. This man said, “Who’s ready for some flyin’? Let’s get this ship a’steerin’.”

Robert said, “Harriet, this is our pilot, Fred Batenhoff.” Fred shook Harriet’s hand. “He has flown for the U.S. Air Force in many simulations, such as Frost Island, Candy Fortress, and Blaze Land. His skills are outrageous. He even got a score of 13200 on the bonus feature, marking him as the world record holder.”

Harriet casually said, “Okay.” Fred arrived at the cockpit and took hold of the steering wheel. The twenty guards were ordered by Wayne to their standing locations. A pair of guards were assigned to protect the black cubes, leaving them directly in front of hidden Andrew.

Quickly asserting his back to the back of the cube, Andrew held his breath. He was sure that they hadn't seen him, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure. He had to rely on his hearing.

Fred said, "Let's engage in some Sub-Lightspeed." Electrifying the ignition, he said, "In 3 . . . 2 . . . 1."

Andrew felt a rampant shock for less than a second. This shock was absorbed by the vertical stabilizer. The amorphous steel of the ship morphed its shape and re-established its original state. Having no windows other than the frontal glass, he couldn't see their spatial location. Andrew wanted a quick peek of where his father was, but he concluded it was too risky for this.

Wayne said, "Antebellum America was a prosperous time before the geothermal crisis. Who knew that one small crisis would lead us to something like this." Andrew heard footsteps that grew further from him.

Robert's distinct voice echoed, "It truly is. Now, if we could bring our attention to this screen, I would greatly appreciate it." An emittance of sound went off. "This right here is a map of Nirvana 74. It specifies which creature associates with each biome. It also calculates the dimensions of each biome, whether it be their height, width, weight, and density. Quintessentially, it is most important that these creatures match up with the standards of the Spirit World. If just a minor mistake is made in height, for example, we will do our best to match our code to Nirvana 74's physical standards."

Harriet said, "I am in agreeance."

There was plain silence for ten seconds. Then, Marco asked, "Which thing on the map represents the Dopabees we need to capture?" Five more seconds of plain silence. An awkward cough emerged.

Rufus said, “Harriet, you’re under arrest.”

Andrew heard weird sigh noises. Harriet said, “What! What are you doing?”

Robert said, “Obeying my orders is what he’s doing.”

“I don’t understand,” Harriet said.

“Of course, you wouldn’t,” Andrew’s father expressed. “You crossed us so we double-crossed you. You thought Rufus would betray me? Well, that is something that you misjudged. You see, my plan required a backup plan—a backup plan where both you and Andrew would board this ship. I knew you two would be stubborn, and the oldest trick in the book needed to be played: reverse psychology.”

“How do you know Andrew is on this ship?” she asked. Andrew’s face grew red.

Robert said, “You don’t think that I keep an eye on my labs at all times? I knew Andrew’s location from the very start when he laid that punch on me. Every move he’s made has been calculated for. I also knew that his skepticism would get in the way of things, which led him to board this ship without Rufus. There was a reason my guards allowed Andrew to board.”

Harriet asked, “So where is he then?”

“A casual game of hide-and-seek will lure him out,” Robert insisted. Raising his voice, he said, “Andrew, my son, if you don’t reveal yourself, your friend Harriet will be a goner. I’m giving you ten seconds to come out, or else this trigger will be unleashed.”

Andrew felt stupid. There was really no other word that could describe him. He quickly side-stepped from behind the cube and revealed himself. “I’m here,” said Andrew. “Don’t do anything dangerous.”

Robert said, “Andrew, you thought you were so clever. Since I have you here, I think you should show us the Dopabee coordinates on this map. Harriet can assist you, being that you two

have the most experience in the Spirit World. Any trick or falsified location will not be tolerated."

"How did you—why did you," Andrew stuttered. "Why are you doing this? You know this isn't the right thing: salvaging bees for the well-being of the guests. You and I both know that stealing these bees will be detrimental for the Nirvana 74 society."

"Society? You think they have a living society? I'm sorry, son, but those animate plants, which you refer to, are nothing but lifeless organic matter."

"But they do have a consciousness," Andrew argued. "You're completely misinterpreting—"

"That's enough!" Robert said. "Enough bickering. Pinpoint the location on the map already. If not, then you'll know what'll happen." This father-to-son conversation was so intense that even the pilot directed his attention to this.

The screen presenting the map was highly advanced. It allowed Andrew to zoom in, view a 2D map, view a 3D map, and see each creature by name. The map was already zoomed into the northern hemisphere of the planet. Robert said, "Harriet, want to give Andrew a little head start? Zoom in where you approximate the Dopabees would be located in." Harriet looked gloomy. She zoomed even more north. While zooming in, Andrew recognized the river that the cheetah attacked them by. Not too adjacent from the river, Allure could be seen. Robert said, "Andrew, now you take control. Show us the exact location." Each breath of Andrew's pulsed with animosity. If he gave this location, the animate plants would be devastated, yet he had no other choice. Placing his two fingers, he zoomed into the big yellow flower. At this point, the location of the Dopabees could be seen. The water springs and absence of trees was shown in the bottom

right-hand corner. All he needed to do was place his finger on it. The devastation of the animate plants was in his hands, literally. In full regret, he placed his finger on this location.

The map screen said, “Location has been coordinated. Longitude of 11.87668 degrees. Latitude of 135.91696 degrees. Nirvana Voyager’s route has been verified.” This robotic voice was feminine, yet it sounded demonic to Andrew. He wanted to fight back, but this time he was absolutely entrapped.

Fred said, “We should be there in five minutes. Only 3,330,000,000 miles to go.”

Robert said, “Guards, please hold onto Andrew’s arms. I can see how tempted he is to blind my other eye.” Immediately, a guard, which originally stood by the cube, grasped Andrew’s arms tightly. “Since we will be there in such a short time, I think this would be a good time that I speak of the origin of Nirvana 74. It’s a very fascinating historical story, and, yet, only the top scholars in the world know this information.” He cleared his throat. “The Dawn of Man is a very interesting thing, Andrew. It all starts with Earth as a planet itself, physically. It used to be two spheres connected: that being Earth and that being Nirvana 74. These two planets—or, I mean, one planet—grew birth to both humans and, as you call them, animate plants. Humans were the first species to be born. Animate plants were created with the combination of human genomes and plant genomes. No one knows the origin of how these two interacted, but this was the birth of animate plants. Due to the geographical isolation of the Nirvana 74 side, these living plant creatures populated astronomically. Humans, on the other hand, populated at a slower rate on the Earth side of the planet. An imbalance of the two creatures was too apparent. As time moved on, humans began to take notice of this imbalance. A quest for survivalism struck humans, or as Darwin puts it: “The Survival of the Fittest.” Humans feared animate plants would become the dominant species. Eventually, a portion of animate plants began to migrate to the

Earth side. In retaliation, a portion of humans migrated to the Nirvana 74 side. On both sides of the planet, animate plants and humans lived. Ultimately, humans grew territorial with the Earth side of the planet, claiming it as their home and so forth. This emanation of home is what caused humans to lead a mass genocide on the animate plants. Humans successfully killed all the animate plants that migrated to the Earth side of the planet. Receiving message of this, animate plants saw reason to do the same to humans. Establishing a successful genocide, animate plants took control of the Nirvana 74 side. A fear percolated on both sides of the planet. Neither side wanted to step foot into the other. As generations of time passed on, the conjunction of Nirvana 74 and Earth began to lose physical contact. A planet containing two spheres side-by-side was not the most stabilized form of a planet. The two sides finally broke off, leaving Earth and Nirvana 74 alone to themselves. This is why you see creatures with similar body features when compared with Earth. The blue cheetah of Nirvana 74, for instance, is just a mutated deviation of Earth."

The map screen said, "You have arrived at your destination."

Wayne said, "Tell me again, Robert, how did Nirvana 74 separate so far from Earth?"

"It entered through a wormhole," Robert said.

"Oh, yeah that's right. I'm glad you clarified," Wayne said. "Those studies felt so long ago."

Andrew said, "How is that even true? It doesn't make sense."

Robert said, "Why do you think the animate plants were afraid of the word 'blood' then?"

Andrew hesitated and saw the correlation. What he said was true. "Where did you learn this stuff from?"

Robert said, "That's for another time. Right now is Dopabee encapsulation time."

The general put his hand on his ear and called in the guards. One by one, the guards, wearing oxygen masks, mounted themselves next to the general in a straight line. Wayne said, “Everybody put on a mask. Those oxygen levels ain’t gonna supply you enough.” Robert, nearing the cockpit wall, grabbed five masks, handing one to Marco, Andrew, Harriet, and Wayne.

Andrew couldn’t fathom that this was actually happening. Strapping the mask behind his head, he took a deep breath. Robert said, “Fred, open this door.” Flicking some hatch, Fred prompted it open. As it descended, the first thing Andrew laid eyes on was a blue flower petal, a big one. It had the same shape as the Allure flower, yet it was blue instead of yellow. “Well, that’s not a good sign for our guests. We gotta get our coders on this problem right away,” Robert noticed.

Andrew felt less weight on his shoulders, literally. The gravity here had lessened. Wanting to test this out, he did a little hop, which ascended him three feet in the air. Robert took notice of this. “That’s also right. We need to account for the fact that there is less gravity on the northern and southern polar points of this planet. After all, this planet is egg-shaped.”

The ship was parked directly under the basin of the Allure petal. Oxygen stabilized all the humans that stepped on Nirvana 74. Andrew’s father was the first one to step foot on this planet. The soil caressed his black boots. Hundreds of space cruisers and assault ships parked along the flower’s circumference. The pilots and soldiers exited their ships, carrying blasters and guns. Thousands of them surrounded the flower. An animate plant stood still atop a petal, staring at the giant ship with its green eyes. Eventually, more animate plant heads popped out from the petal above. The plant that stared at the ship vibrated weird noises out of its opened epiglottis. It released short intervals of different pitches, almost like morse code. They communicated in

musical pitches. Of course, Andrew couldn't understand anything and neither could the rest of the humans. A security guard reloaded his shotgun. The three plants grew scared and hid away. Robert released a short laughing spurt.

Andrew didn't understand what his father and the rest of the men were doing. They stood timidly and quietly. Putting his finger on his ear, Robert said, "Men, I have located on your map trackers where the rest of the bees live, according to my son's directions. Slowly but promptly make your way to this location." Two guards had their guns aimed at Andrew. Andrew took note of this. The guards and Robert began to walk to the Dopabee location.

"I can see that you really don't want me to punch you again," Andrew said. At this point, he had reached full resentment. Andrew didn't think twice of his words. "You're lucky I only hit one eye. Two black eyes suit you better."

Robert said, "Guards, silence him."

"Not another word," a guard said as he drew his gun closer to Andrew's head. Robert and the guards walked silently to the location until they saw an absence of trees. Water springs became apparent. Robert and the thousands of other soldiers stopped walking. Harriet, Rufus, Marco, and Wayne were by Robert's side.

Robert said, "Where are they?" He took a small pause. "Andrew, where are they!" He took a smaller pause. "Did you lie to us!" Taking the smallest pause, he said, "Because if so, you're dead." The bees did not come out of the water springs because the G# chord needed to be played.

An animate plant out of nowhere approached from mid-air to his father. Its venus flytrap mouth revealed its sharp fangs. The guards shot the plant before it bit Robert. The dead plant lay next to Andrew's two feet. His father's face became two times more punchable. Wayne said,

“Andrew, if you don’t explain what’s going on, you’re gonna end up like this poor animate plant over here.”

Andrew, stubborn as a mama bear, said, “You have to get an animate plant to play a G# chord with a horn. Then the bees will appear. But I am not sure how you will get them to play the horn, considering that you just shot one of their kind.”

Robert said, “Enough. Rufus, go fetch me my dLMC converter.” Rufus agreed and headed back to the Nirvana Voyager. No other animate plants were present at the moment. “I can get them to cooperate if I speak their language. Andrew, let’s forget about this whole situation for a few minutes. Let me tell you another scientific marvel that I’ve come up with. Marco and Harriet, feel free to join in on this lesson as well.” The breeze of Nirvana 74 was calm. Natural vibes settled in, even though his father was going to speak of science. “Let me start off briefly with the term ‘dLMC.’ This is known as the dorsal laryngeal motor cortex. This part of your brain is responsible for your voice pitching. The nerves connected to this cortex send signals to your vocal cords. And because animate plants speak in musical pitches, this converter, which I’ve invented, can process their pitches. Then—”

Rufus, running, said, “I’ve got it, sir. Here you go.” He handed the converter to Robert. This machine was shaped as a biker helmet with two straps that would be worn on the crown of the head. Metallically colored, the converter had a small rectangular speaker atop it. Robert thanked him.

“Like I was saying,” Robert resumed. “The converter can understand their pitches and translate it into English by using a small speaker that is built inwardly and next to my ear. Next to this inner speaker is a microphone. This is for when I want to communicate back to the plants.” He put the machine on his head, and he had trouble strapping it under his chin, just like

how a five-year-old would experience this with a biker helmet. “This helmet anatomically locates where the dLMC is. It attaches an artificial nerve, or neural fiber, through my head and cranium until it reaches this part of my brain. Believe it or not, I think the converter is inserting the artificial nerve into my brain as we speak. I can physically feel the microscopic fiber poking through my head. It actually hurts a little. Anyhow, the converter now has complete control of my dLMC. As I talk to the microphone, the converter will convert what I say into musical pitches with the help of the neural fiber. On top of this helmet is a bigger speaker, which will amplify the pitches to the plants. Pretty extraordinary, isn’t it?”

Before Andrew even got a chance to respond, Marco said, “Neat.”

Robert clicked a tiny button on the side of the helmet. He said, “Plant, gather around. Please, come. It is I, Esse,” Gradually, animate plants came out of the bushes and shrubbery. “I have a message of your salvation. Once again, gather around.” As he spoke, musical notes and chords vibrated from the speaker atop the dLMC helmet. Animate plants understood him. By this point, almost all the animate plants were visible. “Your eternal doom is near. But I have come to warn you before your downfall ensues. I ask that the bees be set free. Let your horn pronounce this. I plead greatly, and your kind will be saved.” Simultaneous noises went on at the same time: the notes of the speaker’s vibrating and Robert’s talking. It, therefore, made it difficult for Andrew to understand what his father was saying. An animate plant, bowing down, approached Robert with a horn in its wooden hands. Random chords demonstrated their communication. This animate plant played the G# chord. Robert released a grim smirk.

What Robert did, according to Andrew, was “deplantisizing.” The ground shook like geothermal earthquakes. The bees finally emerged out of the water springs. Robert took off the

dLMC converter from his head and gave it to Rufus. The bees sporadically moved in the air. Robert put his finger up to his ear, saying, “Release them.”

Andrew heard a loud thump noise. Ten more thumps thumped. Looking behind himself, he saw ten black cubes on the soil with guards protecting them. The top of each cube slowly doored open. Inside the cubes were robotic blue beetles, hundreds of them per cube. Contagiously horrifying, the mechanical beetles ascended out of the cubes. These beetles, swifter than real beetles, approached the Dopabees. Conniving through the atmospheric air, the Dopabees noted their presence. Immediately, the bees chased the beetles. Robert said, “Marco, using the beetles was a genius idea.”

“Thanks, father. All it took was just some heavy footage watching of the endeavour,” Marco said.

Andrew was shook.

Animate plants exponentially increased their musical notes at quicker intervals. They communicated at 200 beats per minute. They spoke with dissonance. Using their venus flytrap mouths, they attacked the soldiers. Unfortunately, their warfare techniques were no match with the technological warfare of humans. Gunfire grew louder than the plants’ singing. Plants fell to their death quicker than their musical tempo. Destruction and chaos overtook the planet. Adding an extra ingredient to the chaos, soldiers carried flamethrowers and set several trees to ashes. Allure caught fire.

Andrew had felt this burning sensation. He stood still while the horror went on in the background. He had lost hope. He felt like a failure. He had failed the animate plants.

The beetles flew back to the ship to lure the Dopabees in. The three massive corridor doors of the ship opened. Inside each corridor were metallic jail bars. One by one, the Dopabees entered the ship.

Robert seemed pleased. He said, “Rufus, please place the converter back on the ship. I don’t want the ashes to interrupt its glossiness.”

Rufus, who began to have glossy eyes, said, “Okay.” Andrew noticed his glossiness. Robert handed the helmet to Rufus, who walked slowly to the ship. Fire sparks slightly shaded Andrew’s vision. He was at a loss for words. He suspected that his father would kill him now since he was no longer of value to him anymore.

Marco said, “Andrew, you deserve to die.” This was such a profound statement said in such a small amount of words. He had no emotion when he said it though.

“Thanks, Marco,” Andrew said. Since the destruction began, his father hadn’t looked at his son’s eyes. The musical pitches diminished as every beat passed by.

General Wayne said, “Robert, with this taking place, what do you reckon we do with your other son and Harriet?”

“Kill them,” Robert said. His eyes were only focused on the burning blue flower. “But give it a little more time. They deserve to watch this.”

As Andrew meekly stood helplessly with Harriet, he heard a rumbling noise of an engine. It grew louder and closer. An ATV vehicle, driven by Rufus, was speeding towards Andrew. Pulling out his handgun, Rufus shot the two guards that were behind Andrew’s tail. Stopping the vehicle, he said, “Andrew! Harriet! Get on!”

In a millisecond Andrew and Harriet got on. Rufus boosted forward and jolted the car in a 180-degree turn. An echo of “hey”s directly spat out to Andrew. As they made distance,

Andrew heard his father ordering the soldiers to shoot them. The dLMC converter was in the side pocket of the ATV. Bullets swarmed by them. Dodging through trees, the ATV ran over several roots and branches of the dead animate plants. Andrew was astonished with what Rufus was doing. Andrew yelled, “Where are we going!” More bullets passed by them. One bullet hit the front-left tire.

Rufus yelled, “Put the converter on your head. Tell the plants what you wanted to tell them!” Grabbing it, Andrew put it on his head. A sharp needle trickled down his cranium. It hurt immensely. The converter now had control of his dLMC.

Andrew yelled, “Animate plants!” He heard the arbitrary animate plant notes. The speaker was too loud for his ears. “You are in utter danger right now, and Esse is sorry for what is happening. Esse needs you to go south! As you go south, you will find salvation. An enormous power is at hand in the shape of a gate. If you pass this gate, you will be saved, and Esse will meet you permanently. You must—” Andrew got shot in the hip. Pain pervaded every nerve in this area. He screamed loudly. Harriet screamed in fear. Andrew’s scream translated into one screechy-like noise out of the speaker. His ears now hurt. “You must leave now!” He heard a slight response from the animate plants through their musical notes. Even though he couldn’t see them, he knew they got the message. He removed the dLMC converter from his head and padded his hands on his wound. He bellowed wildly while Rufus tried dodging as much as he could.

Harriet asked, “Rufus, where are you taking us! And why have you decided to help us now?”

Rufus said, “We gotta find a space cruiser. It’s our only way outta here.” Seeing a dead-end of tectonic stone, he turned flawlessly. Guards in every vicinity shot their guns. The dense numbers of trees helped shield them though. “We need to fix Andrew up.”

Harriet said, “We need to find those tadpole creatures.”

“That’s genius,” Andrew said as he exhaled deeply.

“We don't have enough time for that,” Rufus brought up. He continued driving forward. He saw a blue space cruiser. However, five guards were blocking his way. Seeing that they were about to shoot, Rufus took a sharp turn around them. Surpassing this, Rufus saw the entrance was open. Obviously, not as big as the Nirvana Voyager, the space cruiser was a decent size. The entrance was big enough for the ATV to fit in. So Rufus drove straight into the entrance while the guards attempted to shoot them. They safely made it into the interior of the cruiser.

Harriet yelled, “Close the door!” Rufus, seeing an emergency shut-off switch, smashed his hand on the red button. Andrew still sat on the ATV while guards approached the entrance. Right before they could get a shot off, the door had closed. Andrew felt at rest. Harriet took a deep breath.

Andrew said, “Rufus, why are you doing this? What’s your motive in all of this?”

Rufus sat on the floor. He was tired. He stood quickly back up. “I gotta start this ship. Where’s the ignition?” Andrew was certain that Rufus was in his own world. “Harriet, grab that emergency kit for Andrew! I need to fly this thing.” Andrew could hear bullets hitting the steel of the space cruiser. Rufus walked towards the cockpit.

Andrew asked, “Thanks, Rufus. But again, why are you helping us?”

Putting her mouth up to Andrew’s ear, Harriet whispered, “Shut up. Don’t question his help. Just appreciate it while we can.” She hurried to the emergency kit that was ingrained on the left wall of the ship. Pulling the kit out from the wall, she placed it on the floor. “Andrew, get on the floor.”

Struggling off the seat, he collapsed on the floor. He tightly placed his hands over his painful wound. Suspended on the inner compartment of the kit, tweezers and pincers were ready for use. Neglecting the pincers, Harriet pulled out the tweezers. She said, “I’m not the best surgeon. Could you show me the wound?”

Andrew asked, “Are you nervous?”

“No,” Harriet answered. “Are you?”

“No.”

Andrew pulled the left side of his pants to reveal his fractured hip. He could feel the bloody moistness spreading down his leg as he lowered his pants. Sweat ran down his cheeks. Some sweat merged with some blood. Peeking over at the wound, he could see the dark crimson red that imprinted permanently on his hip. However, Harriet could erase this permanence. Andrew was wary of the tweezers. Much pain was at stake. He convulsed his body as the tweezers poked the wound. The pain was grueling. As bullets prevailed on the steel wall, Andrew screamed in agony. Andrew could hear the engine of this ship whir. The shooting and whirring helped him lose his focus on the wound. Rufus said, “I started the ship. Thank god for auto-pilot! And thank god Earth is a choice of destination!”

One inch deep in Andrew’s skin, the tweezers grasped the bullet. Harriet yanked the bullet out. A few capillaries and venules broke off, leaving a trail of blood to trickle down his leg. Andrew felt less tension now. He heard a glass window shatter behind him; some of the microscopic glass molecules scathed his outer skin. Andrew yelled, “Rufus, get us out of here!” As he said this, he saw two more windows shatter behind him. Thankfully, the broken windows were not big enough for the guards to enter. A flamethrower flamed the outer steel, slowly melting it. A major pounding vibrated from the entrance door. The guards outside were trying to

batter it down. Rufus said, “I’m trying. This terminal is giving me a hard time.” He took out his gun. “Harriet, take my gun in case those guards get in!” He threw it to her. Andrew was still on the floor. “Tell Andrew to put pressure on his hip!” Andrew did just that as he weakly laid on the floor.

She said, “I’ve never held a gun before.” Rufus ignored her and played around with the terminal. Andrew guessed that there were hundreds of guards outside this ship.

Rufus said, “It’s working now! All I gotta do is put Earth as our target.” The entrance door clapped down. Two guards holding a battering ram could be seen. Harriet shot both of them. She didn’t miss one shot.

Andrew yelled, “We need to close this hatch if we’re gonna have broken windows! Leaving the corridor they were in, Andrew said, ``Drive, Rufus!” As Rufus took hold of the main control unit, a loud soothing chime eclipsed from outside the ship. The space cruiser slowly ascended upward. Some guards tried to climb up the entrance. Harriet shot these people as well. The ship ascended upward more quickly. The guards had stopped their shooting. They finally sustained a safe distance away from the obliterated planet.

Andrew brought himself up. He looked out the destroyed entrance door. Getting one last glimpse, he saw true decimation. Fire and ashes were all that was left on Allure. The big blue flower had turned into a red flame. However, he saw hoards of animate plants running away from this scene. With their pronged feet, the plants quickly traveled south. This enlivened Andrew a little. It gave him hope. As for the Dopabees, he saw none of them. They had all been captured. He laid back down on the floor. Standing required too much energy. The ship went Sub-Lightspeed. Nirvana 74 was gone.

“Rufus,” Andrew began. “Why are you helping us?”

Rufus stepped away from the cockpit. He said, “Because what you two are doing is upstanding. I needed a change. And the timing was important for that change. I knew I couldn’t let you two down. After what happened to the Dopabees, I right-mindedly couldn’t take it. I know that I betrayed you guys in the past, and I am deeply sorry about that.” Andrew noted that blood was still pouring out his hip. His hands were covered in it as well. “I hope you guys can forgive me. If not, I completely understand.” Rufus saw Andrew’s injury.

Harriet said, “I can’t believe I just murdered five men. I’m a horrible person.”

Rufus said, “Harriet, we need to sew Andrew’s wound. If not, then all the blood will drain out of him.”

Harriet panicked. “You expect me to kill men and fix his wound! Don’t you think that you should step in for once as the alpha male!” She sat on the floor crying. Rufus ignored this.

Rufus sat on the floor next to Andrew and opened up the medkit’s small suturing kit. He picked up the needle. Andrew asked, “Have you ever sutured a banana?”

Rufus answered, “No.”

Andrew said, “I’ll do it myself then. Back off.” He weakly pushed Rufus away. Andrew was slowly growing light-headed. This is what it felt like to be iron-deficient.

Rufus said, “I can help.” Andrew refused.

Reminiscing of fourth grade, Andrew pieced together his photographic memory and remembered how to suture a banana. He grabbed the needle and thread. He hesitated to poke himself. He thought, *why do I have to do everything myself?* As the needle punctured, he reflexed. He gradually moved through the process: poke-by-poke and thread-by-thread. He said, “I forgive you, Rufus.”

Rufus was sitting in the cockpit and couldn't hear him. Harriet stood back up. She had relaxed. She asked, "What do we do when we reach Earth?"

Andrew, who had completed his suturing, said, "Fix everything."

CHAPTER 21:

How far must Andrew go?

How much does he not know?

Dopabees confiscated,

Spirit Intercom dominated.

Underneath the ATV engine, Andrew waited for Earth's arrival. The ship stated, "Five minutes remaining." Traction stained Andrew's thoughts. It was time for Andrew to be the venerable one.

Andrew contemplated the following: *My father is probably after me right now. The radicals are probably watching me right now. Does Wallace want me at the radical hideout? Can I talk about the radicals to Harriet and Rufus? Probably not. Did the animate plants make it to the rift? Is Rufus still trustworthy? Will Father's Dopabee plan work? What should I tell Harriet and Rufus to do when we land? How much time do I have?*

Andrew was disrupted by a mental chime from Mindcord. Harriet said, "I just got an alert from Mindcord News."

"So did I," Rufus added. Andrew received the notification. It was a video with the title "Scientists Predict Doomsday Will Hit Tomorrow." This scared the bejesus out of him. He started the video.

The news correspondent said, "Seismic waves reveal that the biggest earthquake in human history will hit tomorrow. Scientists believe this will break Earth's core. This frightening news has doomed us all as a human species. Thankfully, Spirit Intercom has taken initiation, and

pre-registered guests are expected to enter starting tomorrow." The correspondent put his hand over his heart. "Thank god I got access! For all the sad saps who don't, unfortunately, you're gonna die with the rest of the world." The video ended. Before Andrew closed out of Mindcord, three big X's filled up his mental screen.

A giant message on Andrew's Mindcord read "Sorry, but you've been hacked."

An audio message began to play. It said, "Hey, Andrew! It's Wallace! We just got news of our worldly downfall, and we need you to be at the hideout in no less than 30 minutes. Get your ass over here, or we're going to get your ass!" The hacked screen with the 3 X's went away. Andrew closed the interface in shock.

Harriet said, "I can't believe this is happening. What are we going to do?"

Andrew needed to set his mind in accord with this situation.

Andrew said, "Rufus, right when we land, I need you to bring my Sporksterbeale in. I need to evacuate the labs as soon as we get there."

"How do you know that I know where it is?" Rufus asked.

"Because you've dealt with my car more than once. Harriet, when we land, I need you to hide at the labs for the night."

"What? Why?" she asked.

Andrew said, "I need both of you to sleep here overnight. I'll need your assistance tomorrow. And don't forget that all we got is tomorrow. Tonight, I have to check that my kids are safe."

"We can't sleep there. The entire place is covered in camera surveillance," Harriet said.

Rufus said, "I know a low-profile bunker we can hide in. It's a secret bunker for protection against any natural disaster. No cameras are there either."

“See, this can work,” Andrew reaffirmed. “First things first, I need Rufus to bring my car in.”

The ship stated, “30 seconds until arrival. Please prepare for landing.”

Andrew asked, “Everyone knows what they’re doing?”

Harriet and Rufus agreed at different times. Andrew felt a little bump beneath his feet. The soothing chime went off. Slightly limping, Andrew approached the broken entrance. Winds flew beneath the ship. No other ships were present. Departing off the ship, he stepped down to the earthly floor. He told Harriet and Rufus to hurry up. A severed man with a gunshot wound was moving quicker than two physically-abled humans. Rufus said, “Harriet, come with me to get Andrew’s car.” Nodding complete, Harriet took off with Rufus through the main entrance door of the labs.

Andrew peeked in the entrance. All he saw were casual walkers and lab researchers. No other security guards were at hand. Andrew bit his fingernails as time prevailed. Quickly opening up Mindcord, he checked some messages to pass the time. He received a message less than a minute ago. It was from Kevin. It was written in all caps. “ANDREW! TELL ME WHAT IS GOING ON! I’M STUCK WITH YOUR TWO KIDS WHILE THE END OF THE WORLD IS STRIKING TOMORROW! I NEED YOU TO GET BACK TO THE APARTMENT! OUR ONLY WAY OUT IS THROUGH SPIRIT INTERCOM, ACCORDING TO MINDCORD NEWS! YOU’VE BEEN WORKING THERE FOR AN ETERNITY, SO YOU MUST HAVE SOME METHOD FOR ACCESSIBILITY! CONTACT ME NOW!!!!!!!”

This frightened Andrew. His best friend and two children were vulnerably entrapped in one apartment. The fate of the world relied on Andrew, and his close relatives relied on him as well. Andrew heard his unique car engine noise. Harriet and Rufus were in the car. They stopped

it next to Andrew. “There you go,” Rufus announced. “Harriet and I will be on our way to the bunker. Before I go, give me your Mindcord contact so you can message me.” Andrew slowly bonked his forehead with Rufus’s. “Thanks. Got it.”

Andrew got in his car as Rufus and Harriet hurried into the labs. Processing what stage of his life he was in, Andrew said, “Sporksterbeale, how long is the trip to ‘Radical Hideout’?”

The voice stated, “Hello, Andrew. The route is 1 hour and 10 minutes. I can offer an experimental route if you prefer.”

“Really? How long would that route take?”

“1 hour,” the voice stated.

This fizzled Andrew’s patience. He needed to be there in less than 30 minutes, or else he was screwed. Playing around with the keys, he came up with a great realization.

He got out of the car and headed inside the labs. Treading lightly, he saw the hatches that were arrayed in the disk shape. He saw that the hatch for his room was still left open. Seeing if anyone was around, he climbed down the hatch. The fountain pen lay on the desk. Picking it up, he threw it against the wall with all his strength. The camera inside of it broke. He opened the manual door of his room by entering his long code. The elevator down the hallway appeared to Andrew. Leaving his room, he waited for the disk door to close. The outside keypad allowed for him to input a new number since the door had closed. The disk had recalibrated. Andrew put in the number 62951413. The disk began to whir and rotate. Andrew waited patiently. The fire exit emerged. As he walked down these stairs, he saw the partially-demolished Pirouette. This route to the hideout was only 1.2 minutes compared to the 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Slouching in, Andrew pulled the lever. Making distance in the dark tunnel, Andrew felt a bump as the Pirouette ascended upward. The bumpiness was due to the stairs. The darkness was

due to the time. He made it to the end of the tunnel. The bumpiness halted to a smooth texture. The time on Mindcord read 12:01 a.m. There was no signal as well. Therefore, technically speaking, this was the last day on Earth. If Andrew was lucky, the world could end in one minute. It all depended on the timing. Pulling the lever backwards, he decelerated the machine until it stopped. Rotating 360 degrees, he saw a lusterless light in the distance, no bigger than a speck. He accelerated towards it. He arrived at the hideout.

He figured that he wouldn't want these savages and outlaws to see his state-of-the-art, one-of-a-kind wheel transporter. Therefore, he stopped the device at a 100-foot gap between it and the hideout. He ran to the hideout. The earlier he got there, the less chance they would kill him. This made sense in his mind, figuratively. The building's disgusting vibes were kept flamboyant since the last time Andrew was here. Straight away, Andrew witnessed Jimmy by the entrance, fiddling with a knife in his hand. Jimmy witnessed him too.

Jimmy said, "Aye! It's Andrew! Man, it's been a while since the last time I saw you. Great to see that you had the guts to come back here again."

Andrew, bending his knees down subtly, said, "Yep, it's me."

"Hey, that stuff you did with your girl last night was some hot stuff. You two dug into each other."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you don't know? Do I gotta spell it out for you? I'm talking about the last time you had sex, S-E-X, with that hot chick."

Andrew blushed. "Wait! How do you know about that?"

"Through the camera that's stuck in your head, of course," Jimmy said.

Andrew was morbidly embarrassed. They spied on him while he had sex. This sentence couldn't progress through his mind. As he thought about this, he realized that the fountain pen had also recorded him. There were dual-camera recordings of him. Spirit Intercom and the Spirit Radicals had possession of this. The lymph nodes in his bones delayed their pumping. "You guys watched me! You guys are sick!"

Jimmy said, "I wouldn't blow the torch that quick, considering that you just got here. You don't want to start in a bad way."

This porn-watcher was right. Andrew had to keep his cool.

Wallace approached the entrance. He was surprised by Andrew's quick arrival. He said, "Hello, Andrew. Quick, get inside. We have some business to go over. Jimmy, you too." Wallace went inside.

Jimmy said, "If you create another film, make sure to let me know." He followed his father.

Andrew breathed in the noxious air heavily. He went inside to where the decayed chairs and broken pedestal were. Rick, wearing his tarnished red suit, was sitting in a chair. The other low-life revolters were in the remaining chairs. Wallace got up to the podium. Rick released a subtle look at Andrew just for the sake of it.

Wallace said, "Fellas, if you couldn't tell already, we got the gatekeeper with us now." The people cheered. "As Rick and I have spoken before, we plan to leave at early dawn. We have created an elaborate plan and if you listen to us, everything will run smoothly. The guests are expected to arrive at 10 a.m., leaving us enough time to infiltrate before. We will travel through the fire exit, which is right next to us. Since the gatekeeper is the only one who knows about the VIP Room, he will lead us to this location. Salvation of our kind is near. I hereby announce that

the rich will no longer step on us like dirt. We have become the shoe." He stepped off the podium. "That is all I have to say." The people got out of their chairs. Wallace approached Andrew. "I need to speak with you. At my office." Andrew followed.

Closing the door behind him, Andrew was in Wallace's stuffy office. Andrew said, "Watching me have sex was not cool."

Wallace was stunned as he sat down. He said, "I didn't watch you engage in any of that."

"Yeah, well, your son did. It's kinda messed up."

"Things aside," Wallace said. "I need to give you something. Although you will be protected by us, you must have some sort of self-protection. I saw all the shit up to this moment of what you've been through, excluding the sex part, of course. Those Spirit Intercom men aren't happy with you after what happened at Nirvana. I trust that you will be fully dedicated to our orders while our infiltration goes on tomorrow." He checked Mindcord. "I mean, today."

Andrew said, "I'm dedicated. What was it that you were gonna give me?"

Pulling out his desk drawer, Wallace revealed a pitch-black pen. Andrew thought, *not another fountain pen.* "This is a laser pointer," Wallace said. "It shoots 1000 megawatts in the diameter of 5 millimeters. If this penetrates skin once, it is going straight through your internal organs, worse than extreme radiation poisoning. If anyone threatens you, just point this at their head, and their head won't work anymore. Simple as that."

Andrew grabbed it carefully. He studied the anatomy of it, not organically. Revolving it countlessly, he accidentally clicked it. The laser accelerated its limitless beam at Andrew's small left toe. The burn was so quick that his neural receptors couldn't process the pain to his brain. His skin and blood completely deteriorated. Part of his shoe was missing as well. Andrew yelled loudly. "Shit!" He juggled the pen of his hands.

Wallace said, “Luckily, the beam wasn’t pointed at your brain. Be careful with that thing. Keep it with you at all times.”

“I don’t want that! That thing’s gonna kill me!” Wallace told him to calm down, and he handed it back to Andrew.

Andrew accepted it regretfully. Wallace said, “Get outta here! You’re sleeping outside!” He guided Andrew out of his chair.

Andrew shouted, “What!” Wallace closed the door.

Undeniably hospitable, the radicals continued their blabbering and reveling with one another. Rick was sitting still in the chair, looking straight at Andrew. Rick pulled out a chair in front of him and pointed it at Andrew. “Andrew, sit here,” Rick insisted. Andrew approached.

Lounging into the chair, Andrew noticed Rick’s posture. He was still a bit intimidated by his size. After he thought about it more, Andrew was, for the most part, intimidated by everyone here. Rick said, “I don’t know how you made it outta Spirit Intercom alive.”

“Me either,” Andrew said. He was trying to study his emotions.

Rick said, “When we leave tomorrow, you must be silent and tolerant of our orders. We needed obeying Andrew, not rebellious Andrew. I’ve witnessed that side of you with Kurt, and there will be none of that. Tomorrow is the most pivotal day for our group. We cannot let you ruin all the planning and work that leads to tomorrow.” Rick checked Mindcord. “I mean, today.”

“I’m not rebellious. I’m trustworthy. I won’t let you guys down,” Andrew said.

Rick dictated, “And on the off chance that you do decide to turn your back on us, you will meet nothing but consequences, and I mean really bad consequences. We have these consequences prepared. Now, go back outside and get your rest. This is the last physical sleep-in you’re ever going to get.” Rick got out of the chair and wandered off.

Andrew went back outside. He knew he couldn't disobey the radicals, but he had to. He was tired of them always pushing him around. He needed freedom from this confinement. The radicals shouldn't be his main issue. It should be Spirit Intercom itself. He needed a way to get the radicals off his tail. Kicking the dark sand, he began to ponder options.

From outside the hideout, he heard Wallace say, "Alright, everybody. Tomorrow—I mean today—is our day. Let's get some sleep. Lights out." The lights inside turned off. Andrew's vision was pitch dark now. This didn't stop him from pondering though. He came up with yet another great realization. This realization was full-proof. It worked flawlessly in Andrew's head. This kept him at ease to fall asleep. He deeply took in one thing Rick said: it was his last day on Earth. He thought, *today is my last day on Earth, but this day won't be my last day.* He fell asleep. His Mindcord processor didn't.

Now dawn, Andrew was awakened by Jimmy. This brute said, "Get your ass up! We're leaving." Andrew was surprised with how quickly the morning arrived. He opened up his Mindcord to see if any messages were apparent. Jimmy slapped Andrew across the face. "We ain't waiting. I said get up now!"

"I will!" Andrew got up lickety-split. He had so many doubts and unknowns for this day. Once again, he was lost. The five run-down cars purred next to him.

Wallace, holding the steering wheel of an old Nissan Versa, said, "Hey, get in, Andrew." Wallace looked at his men. "Who here wishes we had Andrew's luxury car? Man, I miss that sweet technological ride!"

A guy yelled, "Hell yeah!" The others kissed Wallace's ass, too. Andrew hurried to the backseat of the car. The fragments of crumbs and the oily smell of the car distracted him. He

wasn't used to a car this bad (in Andrew's words, *shitty*). Jimmy got in the backseat as well. Rick sat in the front seat with Wallace.

Wallace said, "Why am I the one driving? Rick, you take the wheel. You know the way, and you worked there for a reason. Plus, I don't want my arthritis to kick in." The two switched seats. Wallace looked at Andrew. "Let me describe our plan, Andrew. We—" He saw the car wasn't moving. "Rick, drive! We're wasting time!" He looked back at Andrew. The car began to move. "Our first move is to enter from the fire exit. Once we arrive there, we will send Rufus off alone to ignite the security lockdown sensor with Kurt's wrist to create a massive diversion." Rick displayed the wrist up in the air. "While he does this, we will sneakily make our way to the VIP Room. Since you're the only one who knows this location, we'll follow your lead at this part. Once we're there, we're home-free. It's so simple." The car had now reached the entrance of the fire exit tunnel. The other four cars were behind. Wallace saw the Pirouette in the distance. "What in the hell is that machine?"

Rick said, "Pirouette, sir."

Wallace seemed intrigued. "Really? Tell me more."

"I would sir. It's just that I am driving."

"I could care less what you're doing. Tell me what that is!"

While this heated conversation resumed, Jimmy put his mouth up to Andrew's ear. He whispered, "If you don't listen to what my dad says—" He pointed down to his other hand that held a knife. "Then this knife is going to marry your pharynx."

Andrew backed his head away. "I won't." He missed part of the Wallace-to-Rick conversation.

Rick said, “I ain’t gotta say shit! All I gotta do is my job, and my job is what’s saving your ass in the first place!”

Wallace said, “I’m your commander, don’t forget! You can’t disavow me.”

“Yes I can! You’re not even my commander. My *real* commander is the person’s wrist I am holding. You’re no one without me, so shut your ass up already!”

Wallace remained silent. This car ride felt uncomfortable. Also, the seats were uncomfortable. Andrew received a message from Mindcord. Jimmy was looking at him. The message was from Rufus. He scrolled down to his name. Before clicking it, he saw he had Harriet’s contact information. He must’ve accidentally gotten it when he bumped heads with her while having sex. Rufus wrote, “Harriet and I are growing more discomforted. We hear major outcries and gunshots outside the fences, and we think there is a major problem out there. We are—”

Jimmy asked, “Andrew, why are your eyes moving so weirdly?”

Wallace, turning at them, asked, “Were his eyes moving from left to right?” Jimmy nodded. “That probably means he was reading a message on Mindcord.”

Andrew continued reading the message. “We are still in the bunker waiting for your directions. We just worry if you’ll safely make it to us. It’s crazy out there so stay hidden!”

Jimmy asked, “Whatcha reading, Andrew? Anything suspicious?”

Andrew closed out of Mindcord. He grew on edge. “No.”

“Andrew, we don’t wanna give you a hard time,” Wallace said. “Tell us what you read.”

Rick interfered and said, “He doesn’t need to.”

Wallace said, “What makes you say that? He has to obey me. Andrew, tell—”

“He ain’t gotta say shit,” Rick proceeded. “It’s not like he can cover up anything from us. We’ll just have a closer eye on him.”

Wallace said, “What is up with you today? How come all of the sudden you get to order people around? I’m the leader, and what I say always—”

“No! Today, I’m the leader. I’ve prepared more for this day than anything else I have ever done. I fucking shot and tore Kurt’s hand off for this day. So shut up from now on. Because if you don’t, I’m gonna crash this car into the side of the wall, and you ain’t getting any access!” Wallace remained silent again. Even Jimmy looked scared.

Rick saved Andrew on this one, unintentionally. Andrew reopened Mindcord. Jimmy looked extremely annoyed with Andrew. Clicking on Rufus’s name, he wanted to write a message back. The realization that Andrew came up with before he fell asleep at 12:12 a.m. required him to obtain the screen of Robert’s eye from Rufus. Andrew began to concoct the message. He wrote, “Rufus, please have Harriet give me the screen of my father’s eye. It’s important and necessary for this day. I will let you know when.” Jimmy seemed even more bothered now. The continuous eye movements made him think that something was up.

Jimmy yelled, “Dad, I can’t take this anymore! This bastard is doing something behind our backs! I wanna knife his pharynx so badly!” He held the knife up to Andrew’s neck.

Wallace said, “No, Jimmy! Stop!”

The knife was shaking in Jimmy’s hand. “I hate this dude. He’s gonna screw things up for us!”

Rick said, “Jimmy, relax. If you knife Andrew, I’m crashing this car right away.”

Jimmy restrained backwards and put the knife away. His eyebrows bent greatly while he exhaled tumultuously. Face red, he crossed his arms and stared out the window.

Andrew kept to himself. The light at the end of the tunnel sharpened. The five cars slowed down. Andrew began to hear rampant gunshots. Some shrieks and yells could be heard. Wallace opened the glove compartment. He took a pistol out of it. Pulling out another one, he handed the pistol to Jimmy. Jimmy accepted it without eye contact. Wallace displayed a third gun to Rick. Rick said, “I already have one.” He cradled the gun that was on his hip.

Wallace displayed the third gun to Andrew. Wallace said, “Wait, you already have that laser pointer. That’s lethal enough.” He put this gun away back into the glove compartment. All the cars had finally stopped. They saw the door. Getting out of their foreign vehicles, the men waited for their instructions. Andrew, Jimmy, Rick, and Wallace got out of the Versa. Wallace said, “We need to stay low and quiet. If they find us, we’re dead. I’m assuming those gunshots are aimed at all the protestors and outcasts that want access. We’re getting access because we enter with style.” The crowd dilated their cheer as Wallace hushed them. Rick went up to the door and put the number 62951413 in. Andrew could’ve done this, too. Wallace said, “Nobody says a word past this door. Follow Rick and me quietly.” The hallway led to the elevator. Rick led the group. Andrew followed them, and he saw Jimmy right behind his tail. Some of the men crouched.

The elevator was not big enough for 30 people. Wallace whispered that they would make two trips. Rick said, “We can’t have the men go on the elevator yet. I’m gonna set off the lockdown while you guys wait here. Don’t move.” Rick went on the elevator by himself. Holding Kurt’s hand in his left hand, Rick used his own wrist to trigger the elevator’s convoluted trip. Everyone had to wait patiently. Jimmy’s vision was deadlocked onto Andrew.

The floor rumbled and shook. The screams grew louder as this happened. The first minor earthquake of the geothermal energy crisis had hit. Andrew was getting more worried by the

minute. Jimmy pulled his knife out again. Jimmy said, “Don’t message anyone else.” His father hushed him. The rumbling occurred again, leading to even more shrieks and scares from outside the gates. Andrew knew an innocent person was dying every moment he sat mindlessly doing nothing to help him. He felt sad and frightened from all this chaos. As these horrific sounds continued, all the lights in the hallway turned off. Only two red lights lit the entire hallway. An ear-splitting siren went off. The lights flashed around in circles.

The elevator opened up with Rick inside. Rick whispered, “Get in.” Andrew went on the first trip. 15 of the men squeezed into the elevator with Andrew. Before the door closed, Jimmy stopped it and made his way inside the tightly-packed elevator. Rick pulled out his wrist, and the elevator made its convoluted trip to the other complex. Jimmy still had his penetrating vision on Andrew intact. The elevator was bumpier than normal. The elevator door opened and the blue reception desk appeared. Sharon, the receptionist, was not there. Rick said, “Wait here while I get the rest.”

Andrew’s legs developed pins and needles. The needle he worried more for was the blade of Jimmy’s. Another earthquake hit; this time the shake was joltier. This floor was dark and only a minimal amount of red light shined the hallway trails. Andrew wanted to see what was outside the labs. The amount of noise that it vibrated couldn't be ignored. The 15 men and Jimmy remained silently still. Andrew heard faint footsteps from behind. Multiple footsteps. The men took out their guns and pointed them towards this sound. The footsteps drew nearer. There were five yellow-suited guards. Due to the darkness, these guards didn’t spot Andrew and the radicals. However, a man from the radicals released one gunshot. One guard fell to the floor. The remaining guards approached the position of Andrew and rapidly shot fire with submachine guns. Multiple radical men fell short and died. Andrew laid on the floor to avoid the bullets.

Jimmy, who was crouched behind a wall, yelled, “Idiot, use your laser gun!” Andrew pulled it out from his pocket and turned the laser on. He moved the laser in random directions all over the guards. The guards yelled vehemently as the excruciating pain of melted skin and boiled blood developed over their bodies. All the guards died. Andrew’s subconscious was horrified with what Andrew did. He felt psychotic and ill-minded. Turning around, he saw about four dead men on the floor covered in blood. Jimmy yelled, “Fuck! Now our cover is blown!”

The elevator door opened. The 15 other men along with Wallace and Rick stared at this scene. Wallace yelled, “What the fuck happened!”

Jimmy said, “Andrew killed them!”

Andrew yelled, “No I didn’t! He’s lying! These five guards came by and one of the men began to take fire at them.

A man from the group said, “Yeah, Andrew didn’t start it. It was actually me who took the first shot at the guards.” Rick shot this man. The death toll of radicals reached five.

“Holy shit!” Wallace expressed. “Why would you kill him?”

“We specifically said not to encounter anyone. He betrayed us,” Rick said.

Jimmy said, “Why is Andrew even with us? He holds no value. Let’s just kill his ass already.”

“We need him to guide us to the VIP Room. After that we can decide his fate,” Wallace said.

Rick said, “Enough words. Everybody shut up! Andrew, lead us to the VIP Room. I’m, instead, going to get another job done. Go without me.” He still carried Kurt’s wrist. “I don’t need this anymore.” He threw the wrist to the floor.

Andrew asked, “What job?” The elevator door had already closed in front of Rick.

Wallace said, “You heard his orders! Lead us the way before we get shot at again.” Andrew needed Robert’s eye. Opening up Mindcord, he was about to type a message out to Rick. He wanted Harriet to give it to him, but the radicals were too close to him. He dismissed the message. Looking at Kurt's wrist, he came up with the greatest realization. Because Spirit Radical did not know where the VIP Room was, this meant that Andrew could take them wherever he desired.

Andrew said, “Follow me.” These two words had been ordered at him so many times. Now he had ownership of this phrase, and he was in control. He picked up Kurt’s hand from the floor. “Maybe we’ll need this.” Additionally, Andrew legitimately forgot where the “VIP Access” room was. He began to walk down a random hallway. His greatest realization would work if he conquered precision and timing correctly.

Jimmy said, “Give me your laser gun. I don’t trust you with it.” Andrew looked at Wallace and handed it to Jimmy.

Andrew obtained a message from Rufus. It read, “Your father is with us at the bunker, pointing a gun at me and Harriet. He says that he is going to imprison us. Please come help us! The bunker is located in the disk door underneath. Type in the code 64782598 to enter. If anything, he’s gonna send more men to kill you!”

Consciousness shifts to Harriet.

Harriet, standing still next to Rufus in the bunker, had a gun aimed at her head. The bunker was a dark blue room with metallic walls surrounding it with canned food, supplies, and water. Robert said, “I know Andrew is here. Tell me where he is.” Another earthquake hit them, causing Harriet to almost lose her balance.

Rufus asked, “How’d you know we were here?”

Robert said, “As chief security, I study all camera footage. Luckily, I found the correct camera, which was located just outside the bunker.” He pointed their gun closer at them. “Once again, tell me where he is! I have no time for games!”

“We don’t know,” Harriet said. “For real, we do not know.”

Robert slapped her face with his gun. He said, “I will resort to violence and torture if you don’t tell me. This moment for Spirit Intercom is the most important day! I cannot have our guests face any issues!”

Gentile and creeping footsteps descended closer to them. These steps were slow and calm. Harriet saw a man, who she had never seen before, behind Robert. This man (who was Rick) wore tarnished red armor. This man pulled out a gun and asked, “Who are you? What are you doing here!”

Robert turned around and saw this old acquaintance and betrayer. Robert pointed the gun at this man and gained space from Harriet and Rufus. Robert said, “Wow, I can’t believe you revealed your face here, again. Scram.”

Rick said, “I need to kill those two. So you need to back off.”

“I need these two for the location of my son. You’re not laying a finger on them.”

Rick said, “Looks like we’re in an ordeal then.”

“You betraying son of a bitch. You broke the trust of Spirit Intercom just for low-life scum. They’re nothing but dirt and so are you.”

Rick said, “But today, we become the shoe.” Rick shot Robert in the belly. Robert shot him back and hit Rick in the head. Rick fell dead while Robert suffered on the floor with dismantled organs. They both had dropped their guns.

Consciousness shifts to Andrew.

Andrew really wanted to help Rufus and Harriet out. But he had to deal with the radicals behind his back. Holding Kurt's wrist, he walked down a random hallway, pretending as if he knew the spot for the "VIP Access" room. He wanted to walk to the outer wall of the building to see through the glass wall. As he turned through multiple hallways, he found glass at the end of a hallway. He approached the glass. Jimmy said, "Does this guy know where he is even going?" As Andrew walked through these hallways, he saw sensor terminals at each hallway turn, meaning that the hallways could be closed.

"Yes," Andrew falsely affirmed. "The room is near this glass door." He peeked through the glass wall. A new-looking world came into shape. Herds of outlaws and poor people crowded the entrance of Spirit Intercom. About one-hundred-thousand people wanted accessibility from the outside. Hundreds of security guards stood on the roof of all three complexes, holding futuristic guns. Chef Bots, who became killer bots, were the infantry on the floor. These robots shot many people from the outside. The floor outside was corroded by earthquakes. It began to look like a Nirvana 74 tectonic biome. These outsiders kept dying one by one as robots and their species from Spirit Intercom massacred them. A man with a megaphone from the outside chanted, "Give us access! We will not be forgotten!" General Wayne, who proudly stood on the roof of the main complex, talked into a megaphone. He said, "Access is coming your way. We have supplied enough portable Spirit Emissaries for everyone. Follow my instructions: the first thing you must do is strap the device on the crown of your head, and that's it!" He saw the crowd was still rampaging. "Please, everyone. Stop fighting. We have your access." 20 cannons on the roof shot these portable devices into the air. The emissaries landed on the floor and on the heads of the outsiders. They listened to what the general said and put the devices around their heads. Andrew was so interested in the outside that he stopped walking. So did the radicals. They didn't

say anything back. All the people scrambled for a Spirit Emissary berserkly. They began punching and fighting for this property. General Wayne said, “Everyone! We have enough for all of you. Please stop fighting.” The cannons fired off again, and more emissaries popped out. In front of the hallway was a terminal. His greatest realization could work. The Spirit Radicals were so absorbed in the outside drama that Andrew took action of this timing. Every outsider now had a Spirit Emissary. They began to cheer happily. Andrew ran to the behind terminal by demagnetizing around the radicals. General Wayne said, “Who’s ready for the Spirit World! Initiating emissaries in 3 . . . 2 . . . 1!” Every outsider fell unconscious on the ground. Andrew put Kurt’s wrist up to the sensor, and a glass door, moving vertically down, began to close the hallway behind the radicals. The dopamine from the fake emissaries transfigured to the outsiders’ heads. Andrew ran to the terminal that was in front of him. As a joke, Wayne said, “Sike.” Scanning Kurt’s hand on this sensor, Andrew ignited the frontal door to close. The back door was completely closed. Black SUVs from the outside horizon drove down the road. Hundreds of these cars lined up as the rippling tectonic plates gushed out small trails of lava on the ground. Wayne said, “Welcome, guests! Please enter through the main security complex. After you get there, we will guide you the rest of the way to the Spirit World.” The frontal door began to close. Jimmy, who was blown away from the drama, looked away from the glass wall and saw what Andrew was doing behind their back (literally).

Jimmy yelled, “Shit! What the hell is Andrew doing!” The radicals looked in front and saw the front of the hallway begin to close. The vertically-shifting door was halfway done. The radicals sprinted to the front in a chance to not be trapped. They were too late. Right as they reached the door, it was closed completely. All they saw was Andrew through the glass door.

Andrew playfully waved. The men were so furious that they shot the wall. Thankfully, the glass was bullet-proof.

Wallace shouted, “You sneaky little rat! We’re gonna kill you!” Wallace pulled out a walkie-talkie. He said, “Rick, use the explosive remote on Andrew, now!” He looked at Andrew. “Have fun getting your brains blown out from that tiny little camera stuck in your head! The package you were ordered to give to Rick from the start was a remote for your death. You were carrying your weight the entire time!” He laughed maniacally. However, he received no response from Rick. “Rick? Rick? You there?” No response again. Andrew was waiting for his death but nothing was happening. Jimmy’s face was steaming. Mouth open, Jimmy tried knifing Andrew through the glass. No luck. Jimmy pulled out the laser gun and beamed it. Glass being reflective as well, the door reflected the 1000 megawatt beam into Jimmy’s eye. He died. Andrew was about to leave. Wallace shouted, “Fuck! My son! Andrew, consequences are rolling in.” Using his walkie-talkie again, he said, “Kill his children!” He put the walkie-talkie away. “I’ve sent two bounty hunters to your house. Your children are dead like mine.” Andrew feared greatly now. Kevin was at the apartment with them still. He needed to help them. Unfortunately, help was needed at the bunker. He ran down the hallways until he reached the elevator.

He spam-clicked floor 1. The elevator reached this floor. Using Kurt’s hand, he did the wrist mechanic to ignite the weird route to the disk door hallway. Underground, Andrew exited out of the machine. He made it to the disk door. Opening Mindcord, he put the code in that Rufus sent him. The blue bunker appeared.

He saw Rick’s dead body and his father’s aching body. He was petrified. Harriet and Rufus sat on the floor, looking at Robert. Andrew’s father looked at his son. Blood surrounded his stomach. His father’s eyes were teary. Robert feebly said, “I was wrong, Andrew. What I

created was a terrible thing for humanity. Those poor people are all going to die like dirt. I never took their lives into consideration. Now only the rich will succeed. But there is still one way you can fix this." The floor rumbled. "Listen carefully. You must go to the Dopabee Seduction Room. Once you're there, you will see the Dopabees have a blue wire attached to their stingers. A thick red wire will be attached to their heads. This red wire is connected to the communicator system, which sends coded motor neurons for the bees to sting. The blue wire transmits the dopamine from their stinger into the portable Spirit Emissaries. The repeating of having them sting is what allowed us to store dopamine. There is a way where you can change this though. All of the communicators that send sensory neurons are controlled by a main control unit. If you can get to this unit, you must change the type of neuron coding. Switch it from coded motor neurons to Spirit World sensory neurons. The unit also allows you to change the anatomical location of where the red wire is located on the bee. Move the red wire to the stinger of the bee, and detach the blue wire completely from the bee. Therefore, this will allow the communicator to send coded Spirit Emissary neurons into the stingers of the bees. The last thing you would have to do is set the bees free. Visually attracted to brains, the Dopabees would sting the outsiders and protestors. The neurons stored in their stingers will allow these people to enter the new dimension, the Spirit World."

Andrew looked at Harriet and Rufus. They seemed on board with this plan. Robert said, "I'm sorry if I ever betrayed you. You are a moral person, and you stick with your foundations. You must stop your brother and the general. Those two are your main threats. I love you, son." He died.

Rufus right away said, “Let’s go.” Andrew left his physically dead father. He felt bad for him. He felt forgiveness towards his father. They left the bunker and hurried to the elevator down the hall. Harriet asked, “Where’s the seduction room?”

“The other complex,” Andrew said. “I forget exactly where the door is though.” Andrew, holding Kurt’s wrist still, entered the elevator with Rufus and Harriet. They were disgusted by this. Andrew scanned the elevator with the wrist. It traveled the convoluted way to the other complex

Rufus said, “Blekh. Where did you get that?”

“Not the time,” Andrew said. “We gotta save these people first. And while we speak, my children may die.” Harriet and Rufus didn’t hear this because a gigantic earthquake hit. The elevator almost collapsed. They made it to the blue reception desk.

Rufus, having knowledge of the location, led them to the room. The probability that this whole plan would work felt slim to Andrew. The rich were getting their hands on the Spirit World while the destitute laid unconsciously on the floor. This enraged him. They found the door labeled “Dopabee Seduction Room.” Inside they saw the thousands of entrapped Dopabees, having their dopamine seduced out of them. This sickened Andrew. He asked, “Where’s that main control unit?”

Rufus said, “It’s down on the left aisle. I can show you guys.” He walked to the aisle with Harriet and Andrew behind. Inside the main control room was Marco, holding a gun. Rufus had a gun, yet it was in his holster.

Marco said, “You’re not messing this up for Dad. Back away from here, and I won’t shoot.”

“Dad’s changed, Marco,” Andrew professed. “You need to change too. So many innocent people are going to die in the shadows. If we provide them access, we can live in a world with all kinds of people. We would all be happy.”

Marco said, “Well, I only want to live in a world full of rich people. We need a word with class, not a world of peasants and airheads. General Wayne knew something like this would happen. You are not going anywhere near that unit. The Dopabees stay.” Another massive earthquake startled them. They all fell to the floor. Marco still had the gun pointed at them.

Andrew said, “Marco, please reconsider. Look in your heart, and see what’s the right choice to make. Don’t let people like Dad and Wayne sway you. I’ve known you my whole life, and I know there’s betterment inside yourself.”

Marco grimaced his eyes and eyebrows. He threw the gun to the floor. “You’re absolutely right. Fuck this. Fuck the rich. Everyone should earn a chance.” Andrew sighed and immediately went to the terminal of the main control unit. The holographic brain read “Motor.” Andrew swiped it with his hands, and it switched to “Sensory.” A whirring noise occurred in every communicator system. A screen displayed “Red Wire Placement” and another one called “Blue Wire Placement.” Pressing the red one, Andrew noticed a diagram of a holographic Dopabee. Using his finger, he clicked the head instead of the stinger. The red wire shifted to all the bees. He now clicked “Blue Wire Placement.” He clicked “Completely Detach.” The blue wire unplugged entirely for all the Dopabees. The bees were being injected with neurons for the Spirit World into their stingers.

Andrew asked, “How long do we wait? How do we even set them free?”

Marco said, “I have the key for that.” A keyhole underneath the main control unit was present. He pressed the key in, and the entire ceiling of the “Dopabee Seduction Room” opened

up. The bees left their cages and roamed freely in the polluted-atmospheric air. Flying great in height, they saw the unconscious humans near the Spirit Intercom entrance. Attracted to their brains, the bees broke through the wind and stung all of their heads. The people were still unconscious, but they were successfully sent to the Spirit World. Andrew was pleased and happy. Marco asked, “What are we going to do with the rich people then? We could stop their entry to the Spirit World if you wanted.”

Andrew said, “We should allow all kinds of—” An earthquake this time was so strong that it cracked part of the ceiling. The walls began to deteriorate. “Forget the rich. We need to go to the Spirit World ourselves before we die.”

Harriet said, “Let’s go to the VIP Room.” All four of these people, now considered morally good, escaped the seduction room and headed to the VIP Room. The hallways were dimly lit, and the floor was cracked. The true end of the world was at hand. They arrived at the room. All 1034 Spirit Contrivances were filled up. The rich people already made it to the Spirit World. General Wayne stood at the end of the aisle. Three Chef Bots with built-in turrets aimed their weapons at the four morally-good people.

General Wayne said, “No way. The only dimension you’re going to is hell. Bots, shoot them.” The turrets spun rapidly as the four good people ducked under the contrivances. Some of the rich people got shot, but it didn’t matter since their consciousness had already manifested into the Spirit World. Rufus got shot in the left arm. Marco got shot in the torso. Harriet was clean. Andrew was clean.

Andrew opened up Mindcord accidentally, and he glanced at Kevin’s message by chance. He had forgotten about his kids and his roommate. He was in a serious conundrum. Harriet said, “How the hell are we going about this?”

Andrew said, “I’m going after my kids! Maybe I can distract those bots or something. He rose from his duck-and-cover position and ran out the room. The shooting was never-ending. He needed a weapon of some sort. He heard footsteps clattering. Other guards were approaching him. He remembered his laser gun. Yet, it was sandwiched between the two walls. He found the place where the Spirit Radicals had been trapped. They were all dead due to suffocation. Using Kurt’s wrist, he opened the glass door and picked up the laser gun from dead Jimmy. This weapon was his only way to salvation. He scurried to the upcoming guards and burned them all with his laser pointer. Going back to the VIP Room, he burned the CPUs of the Chef Bots and killed General Wayne. Andrew said, “For all the rich people who died, take them out of the contrivances and use them yourself. They will still be in the Spirit World. Do this, now! Before the roof cracks your skull. Marco, Rufus, and Harriet did this. They thought Andrew was going as well, so they immediately grew unconscious from the machine and were zapped into the Spirit World.

CHAPTER 22:

Will his children survive?

How much was Andrew sleep-deprived?

Containing a lot of air pollution,

The world needed a solution.

Andrew's laser pointer could stop any enemy in his way. He had no sympathy towards the Spirit Intercom guards anymore. He didn't see the dignity they owned as a human. Andrew ran out of the labs through the main entrance. The outside air turned gray and polluted. Lava oozed out of certain cracks. Tectonic plates were dislodged. The thousands of outsiders laid on the outside floor, enjoying their time in the Spirit World. He, on the other hand, had to save his roommate and kids from two psychotic bounty hunters. This comparison felt fair to him. He needed his car to get back to his apartment. He remained optimistic in hope that they weren't dead. His car appeared total. The Sporksterbeale was in the dead center of the crowd of unconscious people. Graffiti and shattered glass covered the car. Andrew, who still had the keys in his pocket, turned the car on. The signal didn't work. He had to open it with the manual key. Andrew thought, *this is so 2000s.* The automated voice of the car was glitched. It spoke in fragments. Andrew zoned out every funny and repulsive noise the car made. His mind was focused on his children. He had to drive manually too without the use of a map. Remembering the route he took a long time ago, he drove this way. Driving over the unconscious bodies, Andrew didn't feel guilty. Their consciousness had already been transcended. The car voice said, "B-B-B-Benjy's bar?" Andrew disagreed.

Making it to Manhattan, he saw the entire city had been abandoned. The sky was masked in red, and fire roared from every building. The road was cracked significantly, and his car's tires received a major beating. He finally arrived at his apartment. Several of the walls were missing. He was scared. He didn't know what to expect. Taking a deep breath in, he walked up the stairs to his apartment. He began to cough out the putrid air. He hoped he didn't develop emphysema. He got to his apartment door. It was locked. He unlocked it. Bulky people with sunglasses lay dead on the floor. His children were cornered in the room, shivering with terror. Kevin laid on the floor, suffering from a gun wound to the chest. Kevin said, "Andrew! It's you!" He laughed weakly. "Thank god you're here. I was able to kill both of them, but they managed to get a shot off of me." Andrew cried a bit from this scene. It was traumatizing to see his best friend shot and his children vulnerable in the corner.

Andrew asked, "Don't worry, bro. I'm gonna save all of us." He looked at his kids. "Maxwell, Lisa, I'm so sorry you had to go through this. Just follow me and you'll be okay."

Maxwell said, "No, I don't wanna go out there. It's scary." He wrapped himself with the curtain cornered on the wall. Andrew soothed them and they were convinced to follow him. Andrew lifted Kevin from the floor and held him by the left shoulder.

Andrew, looking at his children, said, "Help Kevin on the other side of his body." As his children attempted to carry the other side, some of Kevin's blood dripped onto Lisa's face. She screamed. Before Andrew left, he heard a bark. It was his poodle dog, Chet. The dog followed Andrew out the door. Andrew and his children placed Kevin in the front seat. A startling earthquake hit the ground. They all fell. The road they stood on cracked in half. His children screamed involuntarily. They all got in the car, and Andrew boosted the car forward.

The car voice said, “Ex-ex-ex-experimental route?” Andrew disagreed. Lisa cried. Maxwell coughed. After this terrible car ride ended, Andrew made it to the labs, accidentally running over more people. Getting out of the car, Andrew carefully picked Kevin’s body up. Kevin had lost a serious amount of blood. His face grew pale and he smiled. Carrying him over the debris with the help of his children, Andrew made it to the elevator. The siren and alarm bells still signaled. Andrew heard a set of footsteps behind. There were more guards. Andrew told his children to cover their eyes. He beamed them with the laser pointer. Entering the elevator, Andrew used Kurt’s wrist one more time and arrived at the blue reception desk. Sharon still wasn’t there. Andrew’s eyes began to water, and he coughed severely from all the smoke. They made it to the VIP Room. All of Andrew’s adversaries were dead. Andrew placed Kevin on the floor. A small chunk of the roof had cracked Harriet’s skull. Seeing multiple dead rich people, he pulled them out of the chairs and disconnected the emissaries from them. He placed his children on the seats and attached the emissaries. Picking up Kevin, Andrew saw that he was unconscious. He hoped his best friend didn’t die. He rapidly strapped the emissary around Kevin’s head without even putting him in the chair. More earthquakes struck Earth. Andrew said goodbye to his physical body. He entered a Spirit Contrivance and grew unconscious. He welcomed his neurological manifestation of consciousness.

He woke up in the Spirit World. He saw his children and Kevin beside him. They were healthy-looking. Kevin hugged Andrew and said, “Bro, you just straight-up saved us! Best roommate ever!” His children hugged Andrew as well.

The weather was sunny. They were in the forest, right next to the Allure flower. Andrew saw the animate plants welcome him. They spoke English. Looking above, he saw his mother’s home. Climbing the wooden ladder, he approached his mother. She and Harriet were talking. The

baby was beside his mother. As they saw Andrew, they hugged him. This environment of life had been so positive. Harriet and Andrew kissed. After having an entire conversation about what happened after he left his mother, Andrew left this place and explored more of this world. He missed his father. He saw Marco and Rufus. He chatted with them casually. Andrew saw Shruburb.

Shruburb said, “Ah, Son of Nature, it is good to see you. Did you see the gift that Esse brought to us?” Andrew desired that he show him the gift. They both hopped on a Dopabee and travelled to where the water springs were. “We have been blessed with more of our kind . . . but with a twist. This gift is us, but they speak differently than us.” The animate plants rode Dopabees. On each Dopabee were two animate plants, except that both animate plants had the same color flower pattern and looked exactly alike. That is because they rode with their true conscious being. One plant spoke English, and one plant spoke morse code. The plants who were made within the code of the Spirit World now rode with their conscious selves. It was like seeing twins, or clones, side-by-side with each other. It was trippy for Andrew. Andrew thanked Shruburb and departed off the bee. Shruburb said, “Before you go, I have one more thing to show you. I will carry you to this thing.” Picking him up, similar to what Herb used to do, Shruburb brought him to a river in the middle of the forest. In the river was Herb. It was the *real* Herb. The one that owned a consciousness. Andrew, knowing that the creature wouldn’t recognize him or speak to him, still thanked Shruburb. All Andrew cared about was that Herb lived. His consciousness is what mattered.

Andrew felt at peace with everything. Everything had worked out. He lay on the mud, feeling satisfied with what he accomplished with his physical life. He took a nap.

Andrew woke up from the sound of a horn. It was loud and was played in the chord of G#. Standing up, he saw his father next to him. This confused the living daylights out of Andrew. He backed away from Robert.

Robert said, “Hey, Andrew. It’s me, your father.”

Andrew asked, “Are you real? Am I hallucinating or something?”

“Of course, I’m not real, neither are you. We are just conscious beings living in a different planar setting.”

“How are you here then if you died physically?” Andrew asked.

“Ahhh, Andrew, isn’t science just unpredictable? I did die physically, but I created a creation before my creation even emerged.”

“What?”

Robert said, “Starting when you were just a small baby, I created Spirit Intercom, which you know of, of course. I began to think how fascinating it could be to enter another dimension even after death. When this invention was in the beta stage, I shared my idea with other companies in the interest of a partnership. Yet, none of them were interested, and I was left in the dirt. I knew my invention was a solution for death, but no one would use this solution. Therefore, I needed a problem for my solution to work. The problem I created was thought of as a solution. I invented the automatic geothermal excavating energy transmitter. It was revolutionary for the energy market, and it became the new universal energy system. This invention, as witnessed just a few hours ago, destroyed the entire world. This was the perfect problem for my solution.”

Andrew said, “So you destroyed the entire world just so that people would join the Spirit World? Why though?”

“Andrew, my son, to create a world, you have to destroy a world. All solutions must have problems.”

“How are you still here though? You never used the Spirit Contrivance!”

Robert said, “I predict these things. I coded my consciousness here before I died.”

Andrew said, “What’s the point of going through all of this if your consciousness remains the same, just in a different environment, or as you say, a different planar setting?”

Robert said, “For world domination. You see, nobody in the Spirit World can die, which means they must be loyal to me for an eternity. I have planned to be an authoritative king since the very beginning of Spirit Intercom.”

Andrew said, “What! That’s morally wrong in every single way possible! What’s wrong with you! What even makes you think that we will listen to you? We have free will!”

Robert said, “Not in this dimension,” Robert said. “I have coded every single consciousness of the Spirit Intercom guards into the Spirit World. Look behind you.”

Checking behind himself, he saw a hundred guards lined up, wearing armor and holding weapons. Andrew fell to the floor exhaustingly. He couldn’t breathe. Robert said, “You were always a great son, Andrew. Thank you for making my life-long dream come true.”

Lucid Arrival

2 YEARS LATER

Arc One:

Neurotransmitter Level Default Percentages
50%=normal default

	aggres	confid	strengt	vigilan	anxiety	irritabi	rage	empat

	sion/happiness	ence	h/memory	ce/passion	/depression	lity/intrusive thoughts		hy/love
People	dopamine	serotonin	acetylcholine	norepinephrine	glutamate	GABA	adenosine	oxytocin
Andrew	43	38	57	58	49	42	63	56
Harriet	51	48	42	49	52	51	54	67
Robert	59	58	68	71	67	24	73	16
Kevin	46	45	50	53	48	51	51	52
Wayne	47	46	21	52	52	47	50	38
Rufus	54	52	57	52	49	51	55	57
Marco	46	48	46	47	53	46	57	48
Marie	39	37	47	46	59	45	48	50
Maxwell	42	43	58	61	48	44	53	63
Lisa	48	49	56	63	48	45	52	52
Horace	46	47	55	54	47	52	57	42
Alonzo	48	52	53	62	54	47	59	39
Natasha	47	48	50	53	48	49	50	53
Keith	42	39	58	57	59	41	66	39
Harry	48	49	56	53	46	48	52	55
Fabian	52	56	59	63	64	39	58	47
Waldune	67	42	57	58	50	49	56	33
Melua	48	49	46	50	46	47	52	54
Zim	51	63	55	56	52	45	66	45
Conley	54	48	51	61	56	54	52	59
Thom	52	63	67	53	58	59	54	51

Gordin	57	59	60	58	57	38	58	44
Bandu	54	63	57	64	65	49	48	33
Vivian	62	65	56	45	32	35	56	41
Lee	46	51	50	57	42	43	56	45
Omega	51	73	76	84	89	23	75	26
Dotor	53	56	47	53	61	54	48	39
Terry	43	46	46	56	57	45	62	42
Rose	45	43	45	53	55	43	49	51
Enzo	44	58	43	42	40	36	41	35

Chapter 0.1: Bobby

"Bobby, supper is ready! Come on down!"

"Mother, I'll be there in a minute."

"It's getting cold, son!"

"I said I will be there, mother!"

"It's about time you arrived. What were you doing anyway?"

"Mother, everything finally clicked. I learned how to achieve neuropsychodynamic mass-energy oscillatory equilibrium."

"Bobby, I told you to cut out that kind of talking! It's a waste of time for you and your family!"

"But Father, I finally came to the realization that—"

"No! Not another word, son. Now eat with your family." [1]

CHAPTER 1: Insertion

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ANDREW RUTANO

Robert's men opened the door. Andrew's arms had been restrained. An MRI-looking machine appeared. They placed Andrew on a patient table. A gray plastic belt went over Andrew's waist. He couldn't move anymore. Robert and his men left the room. Andrew's heart level instinctively rose. Two poles with plastic ovals at the ends of them propelled out of the sides of the patient table and approached Andrew's head. Each pole sandwiched Andrew's head into place. A small hatch on the right side of the patient table opened like an automatic sliding door. Immediately, wires with tools connecting to them sprung free, resembling the tools a dentist would use. A saw disk tool jolted forward, almost making contact with Andrew's face. The disk began to spin, turning itself into a blade of hell. Andrew began to scream. The blade revolved to Andrew's right side of his head. The blade began to move slowly toward this region of his head. Andrew couldn't fidget away. The blade made contact with his hair first. As Andrew received a haircut, the blade penetrated his scalp. The blade penetrated his cranium next. Blood poured into Andrew's right ear. Andrew's shouts wouldn't stop the blade. The blade finally finished Andrew's craniumcut.

Andrew's temporal lobe could be seen, along with all the blood. The saw disk stopped spinning and retracted back into the hatch. Andrew's screams could finally be heard. A cable arm holding a black circular piece, the size of Andrew's craniumcut, came out of the hatch. Colorless hairs were attached under the surface of the circle. On top of the circle were numerous tiny holes with tiny symbols under each hole. These colorless hairs were artificial nerves. The circular piece advanced towards Andrew's cut area. The artificial nerves connected to Andrew's temporal lobe. There was no sensation to Andrew when this happened. The circular piece fitted perfectly with Andrew's cut. Another tool looking like the tip of a glue stick appeared, and a thermo-silicon adhesive was dispensed around the cut to seal the Hub to his skull and skin. The

pouring blood from Andrew's cranium had lessened. All the tools retracted into the hatch. The hatch closed. Andrew was drenched in blood. And in pain.

Robert and his men entered the room. He said, "Say hello to your Hub."

THREE WEEKS LATER

Trapped. Knees crouched, Andrew's body was strapped to a chair. A Spirit Emissary was strapped on his head. Screen directly in view of his face, Andrew squinted his eyes.

The screen relayed this information to Andrew's head. Andrew sighed. He was caged, along with all the other pre-registered guests. His father had usurped the authoritative rule. Andrew's left leg went numb on him.

Left leg disabled.

He began to fidget. Occasionally, the torture device, called the Motoneuronal Occluder, would disable motor movement to limbs to help remove muscle memory and to stop Andrew's motor functions. Having uncoordinated prisoners aided Robert's internment.

Andrew exhaled.

Robert, who had an entire assembly of soldiers and mutant Chef Bots by his side, controlled Nirvana 74 and Allure. Harriet, Kevin, Marco, Rufus, and Andrew's children had been separated for the past three months as well as the other 10,000 other guests. He had installed the Hub next to each person's temporal lobe. Five centimeters deep into the head, the adapter acquired a diameter of three inches. The circle relayed tiny knobs for all kinds of neuro-converters. These knobs were only twistable if a key was inserted. Guests called these "the keys that unlock your mind." Each key was thin as a paperclip but firm as steel. Of course,

Robert owned all these keys, and each key represented a different neuro-converter. When the key was inserted, an artificial neural fiber from the brain's region of interest was attached to the Hub. The Hub would be able to send its electrochemical messages to the specific brain region. Buildings and palaces were built by enslaved animate plants.

Andrew missed his family. He didn't know if this emotional transgression was artificial or not. Yet, Andrew did not care. He had already succumbed to three months of agony and torture. Every emotional center of his brain deteriorated.

Andrew was calm compared to the other captured guests. If anyone rebelled with too much hostility, their consciousness would either become tabula-rasa'd, or they would be thrown in the Neural Freezer.

A moral currency called "Dopamine Coins" spurted people's dopamine levels when they behaved in accordance with Robert's authority. With their Hubs, prisoners could give and take dopamine through a cable called the Dopamine Coin Transferer which would allow up to 1,000 coins to be deposited or withdrawn in the span of a day. The Transferer could connect to the Dopamine Withdrawer where dopamine could be taken. The Transferer could also connect to the Dopamine Depositor where dopamine could be deposited. The Dopamine Coin Transferer, Withdrawer, and Depositor were all aligned on the upper rim of the Hub's circular shape. The number of coins in small text read next to these three holes. When one acted with obedience, their neurotransmitters were rewarded with a sweet dopamine high. Bragging about neural wealth became a competition. This competition transitioned into an imperfect social hierarchy. People with the lowest neural wealth were left to finish the dirty work while the neural wealthy could get away with delegating their work to the lower class. People with the lack of dopamine tended to submit to others' work. Argumentation against delegating did not cross the minds of the

depleted. While doing someone's work as a sign of obedience, the neural unwealthy tended to do their jobs poorly due to their exhaustive and uncommitted nature. Therefore, the neural wealthy became more wealthy when they delegated their jobs to the neural unwealthy. If any problems were to come up from the neural wealthy's duties, they would argue that the job that they originally were signed up for was given to the neural unwealthy. Andrew was in the middle of this hierarchy, meaning that he delegated his work to others half the time and finished his assigned work half the time. He had obtained a total of 1,032 dopamine coins. There were some people who had as low as -12,573 dopamine coins, and levels this low required dopamine chargers. The dopamine levels for these people were so low that they wouldn't even have the motivation to stand up

Andrew finally heard footsteps. The Spirit Emissary was removed from Andrew's face, and one of Robert's men unstrapped the chair. Andrew's line of sight stayed parallel. The man said, "Inmate #0001. Round 91 complete." The number #0001 was marked on the top of his Hub circle. Everyone's Hubs were labeled as well.

An AI voice in the ceiling said, "Duly noted, Soldier Barnett."

Barnett unlocked the restraints of the chair. "Time to move #0001."

Andrew attempted to stand up but couldn't. His motor nerves were uncoordinated. Wrapping his arm around Andrew's waist, Barnett helped walk Andrew out of the room. Andrew had been so used to staring at a screen that his vision stared blankly at the same spot.

"Can you stand?" Barnett asked.

"Yeah."

Unwrapping his arm, Barnett handcuffed Andrew's wrists and ankles. "Please, follow me."

Andrew's feeble legs started to receive some physical memory as he walked. Leaving the Occluder room, Barnett opened the door and the jail lobby appeared. The entrance of the jail could be seen too. A road and alleyway stood just outside the entrance. Majority of the trees around Allure had been extremely cut down. A small haven of buildings existed, and Andrew saw animate plants galloping and using their hands. Wearing neon vests and helmets like construction workers, they appeared to be building something. He couldn't tell what they were building. Taking a right and another right, they followed a long hallway until they reached a door. They arrived in a new complex. Dusty gray jail cells ran up the stories. Ten stories tall, each row attained a hundred cells. Andrew's cell was Floor 1 Cell 1.

Entering his cell, he stared into the four walls of boredom. Barnett locked his cell and left. Tired mechanically from the Motoneuronal Occluder, Andrew jumped on his stiff mattress.

Night p.m., Andrew closed his eyes. His circadian rhythm did the rest. He fell asleep.

Day a.m., an alarm shook his body up. Swallowing the aftertaste of his nighttime drool, his gullet leaned back. His back leaned back. Aiming his eyes on the floor, he was welcomed by the daily breakfast. The tray held a plate of french toast and gooey scrambled eggs. Andrew despised everything about the jail except the breakfast-in-bed luxury. Reaching for his food, the tray slid away. Barnett had clung onto the tray. Andrew froze.

"Where's my 'thank you'?" Barnett asked.

"Huh?"

"You forgot to thank me."

"For what?"

Barnett moved the tray farther away. "Your meal."

Andrew mentally sighed. It was the chefs that cooked the meals, not Barnett. Barnett was simply the food courier. “Thank you.”

“You always thank someone before a deed is done. It’s not the result that matters. It’s the intention.” He grabbed the tray tighter and threw it far away behind him. The toast and eggs splattered, and so did Andrew’s patience. Barnett smirked and kicked the tray further.

Andrew yelled, “What is that even supposed to mean?!”

The guard said nothing and left. Andrew tensed both arms and punched the concrete floor, barely leaving an indentation. He laid in bed breakfast-less.

Stomach churning, Andrew heard a message from the prison’s intercom system. The message said, “Rotate.” The cell doors opened. Guards from all corners constantly yelled at people to exit their cells. Andrew stayed in his bed. He wouldn’t move.

Several seconds passed until a guard spotted Andrew still in his bed. “Get outta yuh cell,” the guard said. He darted toward Andrew’s position and flipped the mattress upside-down atop Andrew. Andrew’s adenosine uplifted. He left the room smoothly and quickly. As he walked away from the cell, the guard followed him closely. They reached the prison lobby until they entered the main outside area. Andrew breathed in the manure field. Nothing but manure and sodden benches sat on the manure. 10-feet tall fences with electric fences at the top of them perimetered the field. Andrew’s olfaction was obliterated to shit. The smell couldn’t be contained in a vacuum.

It was their daily outside break. The outside breaks were scattered into five time sessions. Each session contained 2,000 humans with a number of 400 guards patrolling them. The prisoners all wore white garments. Seasons never existed on Nirvana 74. The weather was

always humid and sunny. Sunny from the desolate star that stood millions of miles away. Ranging from A-E, the rotating session letter for Andrew was “A”.

Andrew and the guard finally reached the public vicinity of all the prisoners. The outside time per session was 30 minutes. The guard held on Andrew’s shoulder and pushed him into the crowd. The guard then vanished. Lost in the summation of people, Andrew walked aimlessly around others. The faces of those around him were broken. Faces of defeat and hopelessness swept across each person. Andrew wore this face too. Lightly shoving others and stepping over the barren shoes of others, he got caught in something. A hand was holding onto the back of his tarnished shirt. He reacted slowly. Turning behind, Andrew saw a face that appeared so dead and depressed that the devil himself would have been terrified. The eyes of this man contained bags underneath bags. Darkness reflected off his retinas.

The man screamed, “Lend me some Dopamine Coins! Please!” He tightened the threads of the shirt. “Come on, man! I’ve got -3,000 coins and need a grain of pleasure!” Andrew kept silent and stared into him with wide eyes.

Another man with a more brightened face removed the hand from Andrew's shirt. The man with the dark retinas was punched in the face. “When will you learn to behave, you neuro-degenerate?!” the brightened man asked. Now eyes on Andrew, the man said, “Name’s Julius.” Andrew didn’t look at the man and left.

Andrew kept walking around others. As he glided over his next step, he saw Julius in front of his way. Julius said, “You aren’t gonna thank me?” Andrew impatiently scratched his hair.

“Thank you,” Andrew said. He made the motion for his next step but Julius still blocked him off.

“You aren’t curious about what just happened?” Andrew stared into the ground. “What you just witnessed was a depraved man. He was really out of it, wasn’t he? No hope or happiness in his soul. A psychologically dead person. A mistake in space-time. A lost soul. Imagine what it feels to have negative Dopamine Coins. I’m just glad I wasn’t him.” Julius gulped in air and a bit of saliva. “So . . . you aren’t curious about how many Dopamine Coins I acquire?”

“Huh?”

“Make a guess.”

Andrew coughed. “I don’t know. How much?”

“8,032 Coins. And you know how I earned it? By having suckers do all my work. Dull-minded peeps submit to other’s work. Imagine how weak-minded you have to be to not take advantage of the system. Men like him are hopeless and indifferent to facing death.” Andrew’s anger scorched as his cephalic and basilic veins popped out of his wrists. “I’d be surprised if--”

Andrew lifted his arm in the motion for a punch. Before he could make contact with Julius, he was pulled away. The face of Kevin appeared. Andrew finished the punching motion in thin air. “Kevin! What are you doing!?” Kevin pulled him farther along.

“I’m saving your life like you saved mine,” Kevin said. “It was about time I found you. What exactly was going on with you and him?”

“He’s a piece of shit. That’s all there’s to it.”

Andrew struggled against Kevin’s grasp. Biting Kevin’s pinkie, Andrew escaped his grab. Using all his mechanical energy into his legs, he bolted back to Julius. People in the crowd glared at him as Andrew made distance. Julius’s body was in view, facing backwards. Andrew pulmonated his neck veins. Bending down, he picked up manure from the floor and placed it on his right palm. He tapped Julius’s shoulder. Expecting Julius to turn around, Andrew saw Julius’

right leg had risen at a 90 degree angle. Reversing the leg's motion, Julius kicked Andrew in the groin with his heel at an obtuse angle. Andrew fell to the ground. Suffocating over pain, Andrew dropped the manure. Two other men approached Andrew's lying body. Julius gave a hard kick to Andrew's stomach. "So . . ." he said. "How's that punch of yours coming along?" Picking up manure, he threw it at Andrew's eyes. Andrew twitched and closed his eyes. "How is that sneak attack of yours going?" The two men who had approached kicked Andrew in the gut multiple times. Andrew's upper ribs lodged out of place. The kicking continued. Bodily fluids like blood, sweat, tears, and mucus mixed around Andrew's lips and nostrils. Andrew did not scream in pain as it was too difficult to breathe. His internal organs wobbled out of place as the kicking ensued.

Andrew flickered his eyes back open as his eyelashes tossed out particles of manure. Kevin's presence culminated down the manure horizon. Sprinting towards Andrew's field of view, Kevin landed a punch on Julius. Julius fell to the floor. Two other men threw punches but missed. Kevin's agility outmatched them, and he landed two more punches on both men. Their bodies dropped next to Andrew's eyes.

Andrew quietly said, "Don't watch me fail." Kevin didn't hear him.

A huddle of five people a few meters away began pushing through the crowd. Angered expressions painted their faces. Kevin said, "Get up."

Andrew lay, legs muscles barely twitching.

"Get up, again."

He lay.

Grabbing his right palm, Kevin hoisted Andrew up. "Wake up," he said. "Mentally and physically." Andrew's eyes flared up. The huddle made it to their proximity.

Andrew muttered, "What do we do?"

Thinking Kevin would say to fight, Andrew was pulled by Kevin. “We run!” Kevin and Andrew dissolved in the crowd.

CHAPTER 1.1:

“How was school, Bobby?”

“Good, mother.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

“No.”

“Come on, give your mother a hug.”

“...”

***

“Father, guess what?”

“Not now, son.”

“I earned first place in the New York Associative Press for Science Scholars Competition!”

“...”

“And I’m also thinking of starting my own startup company. It’s gonna be something big, and I already know--”

“Get out of my bedroom, Bobby!”

CHAPTER 2: Incarceration

“I think we lost them,” Kevin said. “What’s wrong with you man? Why you starting fights with people?”

Andrew and Kevin were now out of harm's way of the angered huddle. It was pretty easy to mix in with the batch of 2,000 humans. Except that it wasn't just 2,000 humans, it was 2,000 prisoners plus 500 animate plants. These prisoners were both animate plants and humans. Andrew had never noticed the animate plants' presence since he had been too cognitively drained. Four-fifths of the humans were prisoners while one-fifth were animate plants. Except that it wasn't the native plants from the physical planet of Nirvana 74. It was the english-speaking animate plants that came from the virtual dimension of the Spirit World.

Andrew's jaw was cracked out of place by a few centimeters. He said, "By this point, I don't know. I can't even tell what's right from wrong." As they walked, he smeared away the remaining manure from his face. "So yeah . . . as you said, something is wrong with me." He slowly 360'd his neck around to gaze upon his surroundings. "I could care less."

There were less bodies surrounding Andrew and Kevin now. "Okay, I think I see them now," Kevin said. "Hurry up."

"Who?"

"The same people we've always been seeing the past three months." Kevin sighed and strutted along quicker.

Rufus and Shruburb stood next to the fence of the manure field, waiting for Kevin and Andrew to come into contact. They wore white uniforms as well, yet they appeared dirty from the manure.

Andrew's legs were giving up on him. The Motoneuronal Occluder and the beatings encumbered him. In speaking range, Andrew yelled, "Hey! You two walk to us." Andrew laid down and flailed his arms to the floor. The terrain below him felt separated from his

environment. His body felt separated. Moisture exited his mouth as his tongue felt the manure dust of his recent fall.

Shruburb laid eyes on Andrew. “Goodness! Son of Nature, are you okay?!” He rapidly departed from the end of the fence to Andrew’s shoulder. Rufus slowly followed.

Andrew coughed. “No, I’m not fine, Shruburb. Also, I told you to quit calling me that.”

“Here,” Shruburb began. “Let me wipe off the excess manure from your body.” He laid a wooden finger on Andrew's forehead.

“No!” Andrew hit his hand away. “I’m sick of people laying their hands on me. And another thing: why is there so much damn manure everywhere?!”

“Don’t you remember? Our planet used to harvest offspring in our manure. Children of Allure were born from the very dirt Esse conjured up.” Shruburb stood back up. “Anyway . . . Andrew, try to lighten up.” He put his venus-flytrap nectar glands up to Andrew’s ear. “We still have to find a way to escape from here.”

Andrew lightly pushed back Shruburb. “I don’t care.”

Shruburb raised his wooden eyebrows in confusion. “What do you mean? Don’t you wish to leave this place?”

Andrew tilted forward. “I’m numb. And to be honest, I gave up trying three weeks ago. If there’s anything I’ve learned from this place, it’s that any stand for justice leaves that person tortured or beaten to a pulp like me.” Andrew rested his head back down.

Now in speaking distance, Rufus said, “Andrew. This place sucks. I think all of us agree in some shape or form with you. And yes, the constituents of Dopamine coins are messed up, too. It’s just the harsh reality of this place. But there are much more important things to focus on right now.”

Irritated with constantly having to respond to others, Andrew said, “Like what? Escaping? That’s a load of bullshit.” His voice lifted. “Whether we escape or not, it doesn’t create any difference. We’re all physically and mentally drained that we’d achieve nothing outside these fences.” He jammed his hands in the manure. “Why do you think I gave up? Because our fate has already been determined by my father. So, therefore, I submit!” He flung manure bits into the air. “Now, I’m done with talking. It takes too much energy.”

Shruburb said, “Andrew . . . can’t you see this is what your father wants you to think. His main goal is to emotionally tire everyone until they submit so that any sort of rebellion can be suppressed. Don’t give up on--”

“Well, in that case he’s won,” Andrew spat out.

A brief period of silence filled their conversation.

Kevin crouched next to Andrew. “You know . . . Andrew . . . in psychology there’s a term I learned called external locus of control. Which basically means that the person resides on the idea that their surroundings and other people control their fate. But in my terms, this just means being a pussy. Andrew, you are a pussy.” He looked at his fingernails. “You may have accepted your pussyness a long time ago, but don’t drag others down with you. The rest of us are gonna find a way to escape whether it’s with or without you.” No reaction came out of Andrew.

Rufus said, “Andrew, don’t you care about your family, too? If you’re not gonna help yourself, at least help your family for Christ sake.”

“You guys are wasting your time,” Andrew sighed. He rested his head on the right side of his face. He saw two pairs of barren shoes.

“Wasting your time on what?” a voice above him proclaimed.

Andrew startled, sending an aftershock to Kevin, Rufus, and Shruburb.

Immediately, Kevin said, “Who the hell are you? Get out of here.”

The man standing closer to Andrew’s head acquired poor posture and wore blonde hair. Looking young-aged, he said, “No, no, no, no, no. I don’t mean to scare you guys. It’s just that me and my wife couldn’t help but hear your interest in escaping this prison. We didn’t mean to come off as harmful in any way.”

Andrew tumbled around in the manure and stood up. Shruburb said, “Hey, no worries. We were just saying that--”

“We were just saying that you guys should leave,” Kevin said.

“Hey, Kevin, come on,” Andrew cut in. “These people don’t come off as bad.”

“Since when did you start feeling like talking again?” Kevin said, “A moment ago you were in despair..”

Rufus said, “Anyway . . . what are you two’s names?”

The man said, “Sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Alonzo, and this is my wife Natasha. We’ve been searching for a way to escape this hell ever since we were zapped into this dimension. Three months later, I’m still surprised I’m alive in this dump alongside my wife.”

Shruburb said, “It’s awfully depressing the conditions we’ve been under. You guys are more than welcome to help us find an end to this imprisonment.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin said. He held his fingers under his chin. “Not trying to be rude or anything, it’s just that we don’t know you two. We don’t obviously know what you’ve been through or where you came from, so, therefore, our bond of trust remains unknown.”

The wife of Alonzo said, “We totally understand the pre-conceived notions you guys must hold for outsiders, and this may sound clichè, but you have to trust us. Our desire to escape is equivocal or even more than your guys’.”

Alonzo stepped forward. “I don’t know what it takes to convince the four of you, but I’ll share some horrendous experiences of ours. Around last week my mother was sent to the Neural Freezer. She’d been complaining to a guard about her lack of food and how she felt really sick. Being the shitty person he was, the guard decided he wasn’t gonna tolerate her anymore, and he threw her into the freezer. My mother was stuck in that asylum for three days straight!” Alonzo convulsed his risorius muscles near his mouth. Tears began to stream down his cheekbones.

“Her brain had been frozen for so long that she couldn’t drink or eat anything until she died from dehydration! That son of a bitch forgot about her! She didn’t get to enjoy or experience the final moments of her life. She was just an unconscious meatbag.” He flicked the tears off his face. “I hope you can see our true hatred for Robert and his men. There’s only a matter of time before he kills us all.”

Andrew empathized with the guy. He shared Alonzo’s anger and frustration. This empathic energy gave him motivation. Numbness morphed into feelings. “We’ll help you escape,” Andrew said. “I don’t care if my friends are against the idea. If they are, I’m helping you escape outta here by myself.”

“And to think that you didn’t want to escape a few moments ago,” Rufus said. “Rightfully so, I am completely on board.”

Shruburb said, “I am as well.”

All eyes glanced on Kevin. “I’m sorry for what you two have been through. And yes, you can help us. We could always bring more people on board with our escaping pilgrimage, but it’s the strategy and plan that we gravely need. We can’t just--”

Kevin’s voice was interrupted by the prison intercom. The intercom said, “Good evening. Would all humans please line up by the gate? Single file by inmate number.”

Waddling like penguins, people slowly made their way to the gate. The neurochemically-wealthy walked quicker. Animate plants, stagnant as a lake, stood. The watchtowers that stood around the fences had guards rappelling down to escort the prisoners in the manure.

Andrew was caught off-guard. “Wait . . . what’s happening right now? We never usually line up. And why’d they say only humans?”

Shruburb said, “Something most likely not good.”

“We’ll hear about your plan later, Alonzo,” Kevin said. “I guess our thirty minutes came to an end sooner than we presumed.” Alonzo and his wife nodded.

A pack of guards approached Andrew and his friends. Andrew saw that the guards had physical attachments to their Hubs. Different looking pieces stuck on the Hub, but they moved so quickly that Andrew couldn't piece together the exact designs. Small faint lights lit up in small time intervals. The guards carried guns, including rifles, shotguns, and pistols. They aimed at them. They repeatedly shouted, “Single file! Single File! Single File!” They wore orange-tinted goggles. They wore black armor that resembled the pattern of the rock pumice. The guards additionally had small blue and red pipes that started toward their heart region and ended at their Hub. The pipes, measuring one inch in diameter, were connected to their armor, and they ran horizontally across the chest, up the collar bone, up the neck, and up the cheekbone until the pipes reached the right side of their head. The blue and red pipes ran parallel with each other.

Andrew was separated from his friends. A gun poked at this back, signaling him to move forward. Andrew heard Kevin yell, “Where are you guys taking us?!” Meanwhile, Shruburb stood alone. And Rufus was behind Andrew’s guard a few feet away. Andrew and the guard

walked a good amount of steps. He lost sight of Alonzo and Natasha. He needed to hear their plan.

Andrew finally came closer to the proximity of the larger crowd of people. Footsteps became louder. “What’s the purpose of lining us up?” someone asked.

More people began to speak at once.

“Is this an execution line?!”

“Get away from us you mindless soldiers!”

“I don’t wanna die!”

“What’s happening to us!”

The original huddle of five that Andrew ran from was in view. One of them held manure. Another had a guard in a chokehold. The guards, however, didn’t shoot them. Manure was hurled at the guard who was in a chokehold. Running from the distance, a guard holding a taser tackled the manure thrower and zapped the taser inside his Hub. The man fell unconscious. The guard stomped on the chokeholder and zapped his Hub too. The other three from the huddle backed away with faces of terror. The guard yelled, “Who else wants to be neurochemically frozen?! This is as bad as the Neural Freezer!”

Any sort of rebellion lessened and so did the noise. People grew silent as petrification overruled revolution. Assembling more into the shape of a line, the prisoners didn’t speak another single word. They were only single in file.

The guard behind Andrew said, “Inmate #001, you’re first in line. Hurry up.” He compressed the pointed gun harder against Andrew’s spine. After demonstrating all his motor movement, Andrew was right in front of the gate with thousands behind him. The line was not completely formed or straight.

The prison intercom went off. “Anyone who does not situate in their Hub number in line from #0001 to #2000 in the next thirty seconds will be put to sleep. Any sort of rebellion will not be permitted.” The intercom went off. So did their spirits.

People started pushing each other. Chaos emerged. The animate plants in the background remained still and isolated though. As each second passed, people read each other’s inmate numbers to each other. A number of 2,000 people was so large that Andrew couldn't comprehend how many people were moving at once. Someone tapped Andrew’s back intermittently. Sweat poured down this man’s face. He said, “Sir! What number does it say on my Hub?! I forgot my number!” Andrew read the number off his Hub. He instantly regretted it. The number read #1909. He didn’t want to tell the poor soul.

“You’re #1909 . . .” Andrew said. “I’m so sorry.” All the energy in inmate #1909 dropped. All his nervous energy decimated into his upcoming fate.

The prison intercom said, “Time’s up! Everyone please wait in line until further instruction.”

Inmate #1909 let off a crooked smile. Andrew empathized with the guy. #1909 immediately stepped behind Andrew. He whispered in his ear, “Just pretend that I’m behind you, okay?” Inmate #0002 was slightly pushed back from inmate #1909 unintentionally.

#0002 was a six-foot dude with ripped biceps. He said, “Hey, man! Whatchu doin’?! Get out of my spot!” He pushed #1909 to the side. #1909 laid on the manure in front of all the guards.

The nearest guard said, “Hey, #1909. You should’ve listened to the intercom.” The guard pointed his gun.

#1909 catapulted himself onto #0002 and choked him. #1909 screamed, “I hope you burn in hell!” #0002, struggling for air, punched #1909 in the gut. Retaining his air back, #0002 tackled #1909 to the ground. Tossing and turning in a brawl, both of them fought to the death. However, there was no victor. The nearest guard shot one bullet, collaterally puncturing both of their heads. They both died. Some inmates in the line screamed from this sight. Gunshots farther down the line went off simultaneously. Andrew’s mind couldn’t keep up with everything. Down the line, dead bodies tallied somewhere in the fifties. He was disturbed tremendously. He was angry at #0002 for revealing #1909 like that to the guards. He was angry at the guards for killing #0002 and #1909. He was angered by his father. Robert had created this hell.

Andrew’s attempt to process everything cognitively was disrupted by the loud screech of the gate’s opening. The prison intercom turned on again. “Anyone who additionally steps out of line physically and metaphorically will be shot in the brain. No words will be spoken.”

Absent of #0002, #1909, and many others, the single file line became a single muscular unit of stiffness. Blood shined off the white clothes of the dead. A thought rolled into Andrew’s mind: *did Kevin and Rufus join the line of the dead?* He picked the skin around his fingernails and shook his legs in anguish. The line was too long to recognize the distant faces of the dead.

The intercom continued its message. “Starting with #0001, please follow the guards ahead and, once again, walk single file. If the line curves, the curve must be tangential. Any overlap in tangent will result in death.”

A guard in front of Andrew screamed. “You heard the intercom!” The guard pulled Andrew by the front of his shirt. “Lead the way!” The guard mustered all his blood into his palmar arteries and Andrew’s body ahead past the gate. Two watchtowers stood to the left and the right of the gate.

The line walked uniformly. The guard released Andrew's shirt. Andrew reached the lobby doors. As the first person in the line, Andrew determined the curvature of the line and the speed of the line. A guard, looking straight at Andrew, had a finger pointing toward his right. The fingers of the guard's left hand carried a gun pointing at Andrew's skull. He was smiling menacingly. As the first person in the line, Andrew determined the curvature of the line and the speed of the line. He needed to make a right to the cafeteria.

As he curved to the right, he looked behind him. People walked like ants. People walked with poise and a compliant posture. He looked ahead. The doors from the original Spirit Intercom complexes looked the same as the prison doors. Andrew walked by the door. Levitating its door hatch, the door bore a hallway that led directly to the cafeteria. As each foot dropped on the granite floor, Andrew felt his patterns being traced by the predecessors of the line. He crossed the hallway and entered the spacious cafeteria. Red circular tables and empty trays scattered across the surface area of the floor. Half-sphere black cameras with moving red dots on them situated in every corner of the cafeteria. But Andrew felt he had entered the same room again. A guard, holding a gun in his left hand, pointed to the right door. This door was the same as the other door. The door opened. Stairs appeared. The stairwell was dark as nightfall. The night fell deeper down the stairs. After he stepped down for at least two minutes, the stairs ended.A yellow fence blocked off the hallway from the auditorium. Andrew stopped walking. Another guard with a hand gesture of halt waited in front of him, too. The size of the auditorium was intimidating. The height of the ceiling climbed almost 100 feet up. The room was an aquarium. An aquaritorium.

The walls were light-reflecting windows. The auditorium was submerged in an acidic green lake. Gigantic bubbles magnified some of the green light on the windows. 100 rows

descended down to the main stage of the auditorium, big enough to fit 10,000 people. 100 people per row. Red curtains outlined the main stage. Each row had a bench and an elongated table which stretched down the row. Blue wires sprouted from the tables. The benches had owned gadgets that stuck atop of the benches. The gadget was a retractable head gear, similar to the device Andrew foresaw when his Hub was implanted. The main stage was empty and so were the rows. Yet they would be filled soon

The yellow fence split into two and opened up thanks to the two guards. #0003 had finally caught up to Andrew. Gunshots echoed down the stairs. Screams and shouts continued down the stairs.

“Stay in the line, fool!” someone said. “Your life depends on it!” Andrew’s heart sank. He worried that he was to blame for the gunfire. He wondered if he had curved too sharply or if he had walked too fast. Bellowing cries screeched out from a woman. The horror was in the fact of not being able to see but only hear. Every shot that went off was a chance of his friends dying. The woman screamed louder. Another gunshot percolated and ended this woman’s scream. A guard shouted, “Shut up! Talking includes screaming!”

A guard who opened the yellow fence said, “Please enter your row number.”

“What row am I?” Andrew asked quietly.

The guard released his hand off the fence and aimed his gun at Andrew. He got up close to Andrew’s ear and whispered, “No talking. I’m letting you off easy here, Mr. Rutano.”

The other guard who had opened the fence pulled out a pistol and shot this guard in the skull. The other guard put away his gun. Blood splattered on Andrew’s hair. Andrew’s eyes burst open. The other guard looked at the corpse. He said, “You disobeyed what the intercom stated, cormac. The intercom said, ‘Kill them if they speak.’” The guards that perimetered the

auditorium didn't react. Andrew couldn't comprehend what kind of code of conduct these soldiers ran. The guard who spared his life died. Yet the guard who killed the life-saver lived. Andrew's body began to shake as his sympathetic nervous system retrieved what had occurred. He wanted to crawl up in a ball. He also wanted to punch everyone there. Andrew wasn't sure if he should feel guilty of the life-saver's death as if he were to never speak no repercussions would've transpired. He shedded more tears of confusion. The other guard looked calm. His expression however changed in a split second, and he pushed Andrew ahead down the rows. "You're in Row 1! I'm keeping you alive for now so that you can digest what you just did to this innocent guard."

Andrew's legs could barely walk down the auditorium stairs. As he walked, the prison intercom spoke. "Everyone must be in their assigned seat and row. Row 1 are #0001-0100 while Row 20 are #1900-2000. There were 100 rows. Please comply and be in your seat within the next thirty seconds. Failure to do so will result in your death." Andrew's legs started running. His adrenal glands sufficed his movement to his seat within the appropriate time constraint. He made it down the stairs to his row number. As her an horizontally down Row 1, he arrived at his seat which displated the number "#0001" in bold font on the headgear. As he sat on the bench, he saw the line had collapsed. #0003 was the second person to take a seat. People swarmed down the dark stairs. People pushed and shoved each other on the auditorium stairs. People tripped. People fell. While chaos ensued, #0003 scooched closer to Andrew. He had a twinkle in his eye and a charismatic face. He said, "These people are animals, amirite?" He let off a grin. "People need to learn to behave and not unleash all their survival instinct at once. I mean, I guess Robert is testing out terror management theory, so I wouldn't blame people's reactions."

Andrew gave this man a confused look as blood dripped down his hair and onto his thigh. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Name’s Dotor. I like how you behave, Andrew. You were very polite and civil when the guards were fulfilling their orders.”

“Umm . . . thanks?” Andrew felt every new person he met grew more strange.

The prison intercom said, “10 seconds remain.” The loudness in the auditorium escalated. The line had now morphed into a blob. People started throwing hands at each other. No one was safe.

Dotor reclaimed Andrew’s attention back. He said, “You know why the guard’s aren’t shooting us?”

“...”

“It’s because the prison intercom never stated that the guards had to shoot people if they talked. The intercom only said that guards were to only kill people if they weren’t in their seats. I swear, these guards work like robots.” He chuckled.

The prison intercom said, “Time’s up!”

“To be frank, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were robots under all that armor and gear of theirs,” Dotor finished.

Andrew was too scared to see if everyone was in their seat. He quickly glanced. The rows were not all filled. Around fifty people were still running down the stairs or laying on the floor unconscious due to being trampled. Andrew didn’t want to look anymore, so he locked his eyes on the ground. He didn’t want to witness another mass killing.

Footsteps echoed from the main stage. A voice said, “Kill them”

Guns went off like firecrackers. Cries and bawlings succumbed to the bullets. The bullets finished.

The footsteps continued on the main stage. Andrew was traumatized. He didn't want to look back. He couldn't. The footsteps stopped. The voice said, "Look up, everyone, and witness the mask of human nature." Andrew slowly lifted his head up. He couldn't believe his vision. He hadn't seen this person for three months. It was Robert.

CHAPTER 2.1:

"I'm telling you, Bobby, this stuff is revolutionary. Your parents just don't understand."

"I know, Howie, but you can clearly see where my frustration lies, right?"

"Yeah, I definitely can. But don't let it get to you. You are going to help so many people out that your parents' opinions will remain outta the picture."

"So you're on board with me?"

"100%! Let's go save lives! I'm surprised you haven't shared this with Professor Aushteiv yet. He'd certainly help you with your mission."

"I still need to touch up on a few of my calculations."

"Come on, Bobby, it's already good enough."

"Yeah . . . I guess you're right."

CHAPTER 3: Transcription

Robert was a changed man. Not morally but by appearance. He wore a black tie, a white long-sleeve, white dress pants, and black dress shoes. He grew more wrinkles. A device was implanted in his head, but it looked different. It was hard for Andrew to distinguish its shape and form.

“Andrew. It’s so great to see you after what . . . how long has it been? Three months? Wow. Time really flies.” Robert paused. Andrew couldn't help but look at his father. So many emotions swirled in his mind that he couldn’t remember what a regular emotion felt like. Robert acquired a gentle smile while he spoke. “Well . . . anyway, Andrew. Wanna give your father a hug? Come on, like old times?” Andrew wanted to shout a thousand things at that man but knew he couldn’t. A brief period of silence transposed. “Andrew . . . I’m not going to start until--”

“Why the hell did you gather us here?!” a voice behind Andrew yelled.

Robert reached for his back pocket, pulled out a gun, aimed it slightly above Andrew’s head, and shot.

As screams escaped, Robert said, “Eager to start, huh? Well then, I guess my hug will have to wait for now.” He put his gun away. “The reason you are gathered here today is because you will be taking a test. A test where you will demonstrate your IQ. Your score will determine your social status. The higher, the better, obviously. Before I go on any further, my Sentinel, please distribute the testing materials that I messaged you all earlier today.” Some of the guards in the perimeter of the aquaritorium began walking up the two flights of stairs. “As they do that, I may as well go over what the test is composed of and how it correlates with my future utopia. Or should I welcome the element of surprise for this test? What do you think, Howie?” Footsteps emerged.

General Howard Wayne appeared, head poking out of the main stage curtain. He stepped out on the main stage. Wayne looked slightly confused and disoriented to Andrew. Wayne had a normal Hub. He wore a white shirt and white shorts and white sandals. No weapons were on him. Wayne said, “Wait . . . where are we again?”

“Answer the question,” Robert said.”

“Oh okay. Element of surprise then.”

“You can go back now. Sentinel, escort him.”

“I can walk by myself.” Wayne said. He left the stage.

Two more drops of blood fell on Andrew’s white shirt. Footsteps emerged again. They came from the two flights of stairs.

“Sounds like the testing materials have arrived right on time,” Robert said. Andrew gazed at the incoming guards. Each of them held a clear plastic bag of earmuffs. 20 guards assembled on each flight of stairs. Two guards per row. “Sentinel, please open the bags and place the earmuffs on each person individually.”

The guards began to walk horizontally on each row, plastic bags in hands. As Andrew was on the left of Row 1, a guard immediately pulled out an earmuff from his bag. He looked at Andrew. The earmuffs were orange. Its design appeared blocky. Getting closer to Andrew, the guard placed the earmuffs on his head briskly. All sound for Andrew became silent. The guard moved on to #0003. The silence scared him. He looked to his right. Dotor sat still as the guard placed his earmuffs. After the guard moved onto the next number, Dotor adjusted his earmuffs and looked at Andrew. He mouthed certain phrases and pointed at his smiling mouth. Andrew let off a fake smile back. Looking forward again, he saw Robert had vanished from the main stage. Andrew waited in confusion. His diaphragm was misaligned as he breathed.

A few seconds had passed. He decided to look around to see how much progress the guards made in handing out the earmuffs. About half of the auditorium now wore earmuffs. Something caught his eye off-guard. Looking more to his left, he saw a prisoner in Row 13 grasping his right hand very tightly. So tight that his hand reddened and his arm shook very subtly. The man appeared to be holding a blade. Andrew’s face reddened. The rightmost guard

on Row 13 was a seat away from him. The guard finished giving the earmuff and moved to the crazed-looking prisoner. The guard reached for his bag to pull out another earmuff. Before he took it out, the prisoner pulled out his blade and slit the blue and red pipes of the guard. Blood rapidly spewed out of these pipes. The prisoner dug the knife into the guard's heart. The guard's face grew expressionless. The earmuff dropped and so did this dead body. The prisoner stood on the bench. His veins in his neck popped out as he screamed out words. Andrew couldn't hear anything going on though. It was only pure silence.

A guard from Row 12 pulled out a pistol and shot the prisoner. The rest of the prisoners were horrified, yet they did not act. Neither did Andrew.

The earmuffs on Andrew compressed against his head. They were locked in place. A radio chime went off. A voice came out of the earmuffs. It was Robert's voice. He said, "Please remain in your seats. The man you just witnessed thought he could start a revolution. Yet he miserably failed and so will anyone else. So I'd advise the rest of you to keep calm, and just focus on your test." The chime turned off.

Andrew couldn't look away from the bloody pipes. Rivers of blood dripped down the stairs. Andrew waited as the rest of the earmuffs were distributed. A guard from Row 12 walked over the shared pool of blood from the tubeless guard and dead prisoner. More earmuffs were distributed. Andrew turned to his right and saw Dotor. Dotor nodded and smiled infectiously, lifting a thumbs-up. Andrew tapped his feet uneasily. The chime from the earmuffs turned on again. Robert said, "Sentinel, all earmuffs have been administered. Connect the prisoners."

A thin white wire with a unique-looking plug end popped out of the tables immediately and synchronously. A six-inch white restraining curved pole wrapped along the prisoners' torsos. Robert said, "No one can escape this test. My progressive society will work and you will all

make it happen. If you choose to consciously not try or participate on this exam, you will be executed." Andrew's amygdala stimulated. Andrew looked up. People above Andrew squirmed in their restraints. "Prisoners from Row 2 through 3, quit moving or we will blast you." They stopped. "Do I need to repeat, Sentinel? Connect them!" Guards from all corners ran haphazardly. A guard came running down the auditorium stairs and stood to the left of Andrew. He dove for the plug and inserted it into Andrew's Hub. Andrew felt no sensation. Andrew wanted to flinch, but there was no need to. After a few seconds, the plug connected to Andrew's Hub, making a clicking noise so loud that Andrew heard it through the earmuffs. There still was no sensation from this clicking. "Deploy the test."

Slits from the glass ceiling, which reflected acidic water, above each prisoner opened up. Floating water pallets de-escalated from these slits. The water was formed like vertical sheets of paper but a little thicker. The water contained tiny bubbles on the edge of its floating figure. They gently descended. Andrew's water sheet was the first to present itself at ground level. The water sheet was blank. Robert said, "Begin the test as soon as your water pallet is in reach. Additionally, no cheating is permitted." White walls rose around Andrew. Five-foot walls enclosed him from the sides and back. He couldn't see the prisoners anymore. "I've prepared for the worse." Actions seemed to move quicker than Andrew's processing speed.

Andrew looked at the clear water sheet. It was blank. So was his knowledge of how to begin the test. Robert said, "Click the water pallet to begin." Andrew touched it. The point of touch rippled across the sheet. Just how land can terraform, the water changed form. It displayed "Loading" with a spinning wheel. No text overlaid the water. It was just the water making grooves and changing depth and length in respect to the letter shapes. The message rippled and disappeared. The water sheet resembled the patterns of those old touch screen phones. Robert

said, “This test will measure multiple intelligences based on psychologist Howard Gardner’s principles. The test consists of nine sections: linguistic, logical, mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, music, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic intelligence. The first section will appear once all prisoners have booted up their water pallet. The test will be 60 minutes. Select responses by touching the water appropriately.” Andrew waited five seconds. “The test questions officially begin. Good luck!” The water sheet rippled with new text. Nine horizontal tabs appeared in vertical fashion ranging all the nine intelligence questions. Andrew tapped on “Linguistic.” Six questions appeared. Andrew chipped away at the test. An example question read, “What’s the phonetic transcription of the word ‘tree’?” After finishing this section relatively quickly, he began the “Logical” section. Andrew was stronger in mathematics and despised every other subject for the most part. A logical question read, “Select the word that best completes the analogy.” Andrew’s gray matter was stimulated. As he guessed on the majority of this section, he moved onto the “Mathematical” section. Questions containing derivatives and exponents filled this section. Each section seemed to be six questions. As he breezed through this section, he encountered the “Spatial” section. The water sheet stretched from its 2D figure to 3D. The 2D screen still stood. But 3D floating water objects protruded out the screen. The figures contained cubes connected with half-spheres. A question read, “Rotate the object to match the 2D figure shown.” Andrew slid his hand through one of the objects. He swished the water to his left. The object rotated according to this motion. Masterfully manipulating the complete figure, he managed to create the same pattern as the 2D figure from the angle of the water sheet. The 3D object turned into a bubble and popped. Andrew breezed through this section as well. He arrived at the “Body-Kinesthetic” section. As he clicked the section tab, a fourth five-foot wall rose in front, enclosing him and the floating water sheet into a roofless room. The water sheet translated

90 degrees and laid like a floating napkin above Andrew's head. Andrew's torso belt was unbolted and disappeared. The headgear displaced inside of the bench and disappeared too. A big slit from the auditorium ceiling slid open directly above Andrew. A waterfall dropped on Andrew. As water struck the ground, the four walls acted as a pool. The five-foot walls ascended to 20-feet walls. Andrew was now 20 feet underwater. The water sheet managed to delineate itself in the pool of water above Andrew's head. Andrew struggled to live. The water sheet read, "Swim above for air." Andrew tossed and turned in the water. Bubbles of his exhalation and acidity meandered around his body. The acidity slightly stung his skin. Flailing his arms and legs, he propelled himself up the water. As he swam up, the Hub wire elongated in relation to his height. After many strides of movement, he gasped for air above the tall pool of water. He looked over the edge of the tall tub. No other tall tubs stood. The prisoners could be seen taking their tests on the water sheets. The water level in Andrew's pool began to drain. As he descended in the aqueous solution, the floating water sheet followed his head. The draining stopped. The earmuffs and Hub wire still remained intact. The water sheet moved to its original position, relaying the rest of the sectional tabs. Andrew was sick of these tests. Robert said, "30 minutes remain." Sitting back down, Andrew clicked the "Music" tab. The water sheet transformed into the shape of a 3D drum. The drum gravitated towards Andrew's lap. The top of the drum read, "Splash the drum rhythmically when the beat from your earmuff presents itself." A fast tempo beat began. It contained only horns. Andrew hit the water drum with his hand. He heard a drum noise from his earmuffs. He tried to articulate the drums with the horns the best he could, but he was no musician. Andrew was unsure on how this section would be scored. The tempo grew quicker. Maintaining rhythmic beats grew more difficult. The section ended. The drum transformed back to the water sheet. He clicked the "Naturalistic" section. A tiny rod popped out

of the table next to the Hub wire. Seeds were dispensed from the tiny hole of the rod. They laid on the table. 10 brown pots popped out of the table. The modernity of the auditorium felt more alive to Andrew when he saw soil. The water sheet read, “These are enhanced growing-speed seeds. You must plant these seeds. Your score will be determined by how many plants still stand upright by the end of the test. Andrew grabbed one seed and one pot. He covered the seed in soil gently. He repeated. All seeds were planted. He moved to the next section. He began the “Interpersonal” section. The sheet read, “You will talk to one of the guards through your earmuffs. Speak into the mic, the tiny indentation on the left of your earmuffs. Your score will be rated based on your tone, attitude, emotion, dialogue, and facial expressions. Choosing to be rude will significantly lower your score.” The water sheet displayed a guard’s face in real-time.

Andrew spoke into the mic. “Hello, can you hear me?”

Andrew heard the earmuffs release an exhalation. The guard said, “Fuck you.”

Andrew was blank. “What?”

“Fuck you!”

Andrew was angered. He wanted to say it back, but he knew this was just a ploy to decrease his score. Andrew said, “How are you, sir?”

The guard said, “I love you. Let’s marry.” The eyes of this guard on the water sheet sparkled since he did not wear his helmet.

“What? Okay . . . then.” Andrew wanted to perform well on the test. Maybe he could be given a less miserable position if he was ranked highly in Robert's utopia.

“Don’t you love me?”

Andrew knew he had to submit to the procedures of the test. “Of course, I do. So . . . how are you doing?

“You’re a piece of shit! I’ll kill your entire family.”

Andrew couldn’t handle this. “Umm . . . what am I supposed to say back here?” Andrew expressed a fake smile and hid his urge to yell.

“Remember the time when your father sent your mother to the Spirit World? Wait . . . you wouldn’t since you never knew about it.” The guard had been smiling the whole time. “How’d that make you feel?”

Andrew was done. He said, “What’s making you say these things?!”

The guard’s face got larger on the water sheet. The water sheet came close to Andrew’s face. The earmuffs grew louder. The guard said, “You’re afraid of intimate relationships. Everyone you ever grew close with cut you off. Like your father, for example. You were afraid to talk to him as a child. You were afraid to be intimate with Harriet. You were afraid to always hug your mother as a child. You are afraid of knowing yourself and--”

Andrew was sweating and his eyebrows bent. “Please stop!”

The guard said, “You have failed this test.” His face disappeared from the water sheet and the rest of the sectional tabs opened up. This felt worse than solitary confinement to Andrew. He grabbed his face and weeped. The chime of his earmuffs chimed. Robert said, “Andrew, my son. If you cry anymore, you will be killed. Same thing goes for the rest of you, inmates!” Andrew sniffed out all his mucus and wanted to die. He clicked the next tab that read “Intrapersonal.” The water sheet loaded until it turned into a blank sheet. There were no directions for this section.

The sheet rippled. Andrew’s face appeared on the water. It was a clone of him in real-time. The clone said, “Do you love me?”

Andrew couldn't tell if his brain was fooling him or if this was an illusion. He was mentally conflicted.

"Do you love me," the clone repeated.

Andrew asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm you."

"Impossible."

"No. Now answer the question."

"Well, if you are me, then yeah I love you."

"Do you love me?"

"I said 'yes,' okay?! I do--"

"Do you love me?"

"Yes!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"No you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"I don't love you."

"You're not real so I don't care."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes! You just saw that we mirrored our conversations. Our consciousnesses are interlinked. I am as real as you are.”

“Stop talking. You’re making me crazy!”

“Okay, then you stop talking.”

“Okay.”

“Would you like to get to know me more?”

“No. Because you’re a fucking hologram.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Of what?”

“Yourself?”

“No. I love myself. I’m only afraid of you.”

“But you are me.”

“No I’m goddamn not! Quit messing with my fucking head!”

“Don’t be afraid. It can be very intimidating to come into contact with yourself.”

“JUST SHUT UP!”

“Do you ever ignore me? Because that’s what you seem to be doing right now.”

“I’m gonna kill you!”

“So you’re suicidal? What triggered this behavior?”

“Shut the fuck up!” Andrew punched the water sheet. The clone disappeared. He sighed immensely. He wanted to cry. But he couldn’t. The water sheet rippled and read the message, “You have failed the Naturalistic, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal sections.” Andrew just noticed all 10 of his plant pots had cracked. The soil lay wasted. He was miserable. The sheet read, “Taste the water, smell the water, hear the water, see the water, and feel the water.” His earmuffs

decompressed and fell off his head. A stream of floating water gravitated from the water sheet to his mouth. This water forced its way down his trachea. Another stream went up his nostrils. Another stream splashed in his ears. Another stream swam parallel with his fingertips. Another stream collided with his eyeballs. His test dividers disappeared. He finished his test, and Andrew still couldn't hear a thing.

CHAPTER 3.1:

"Phenomenal, Bobby. Your research is getting there."

"Thank you. Dr. Aushteiv."

"I am more than happy to aid you in your journey of your scientific career. You have clearly displayed how unique your mind is. I can only wish for the best in your future."

"Thank you so much, Professor. I don't want to take all the credit though. My friend, Howie, has been there every step of the way, and he deserves a name too."

"Of course. Well . . . I look forward to helping, and please drop by anytime you have questions."

CHAPTER 4: Experimentation

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ROBERT RUTANO

ONE MONTH AGO

Robert awoke. The starry night shimmered light on his white hair. He lay on a grass field, slowly opening up his eyes. His sleep schedule was as irregular as a dozen equating 13. He

sniffed in the nightly breeze. The nature of Nirvana 74 never failed to impress him. Many trees. Much bioluminescence. Rising up, he noticed a gadget on the grass next to his shoes. It was a neuro-converter. It was incomplete in form and in beta stage. He had been fiddling with it a few hours ago until he was knocked out by drowsiness.

The neuro-converter was the size of his thumb. Producing a shiny gray, the converter had unfinished wires sprawling out of its exoskeleton. Picking it up, Robert walked across the large meadow of grass. Surrounding the grass were high-reaching buildings with no roads or automobiles. Electricity was generated from the inside of the prison and ran across the whole reservation city. Surrounding the city, walls made of thick tree roots stood taller than every building's height combined. A conglomerate of humongous trees covered the perimeter of the city. Robert mixed highly-potent manure with his enhanced growing-speed seeds to bore these trees. The city was still a make-in-progress. The animate plants built the buildings. They still were. No one lived or walked in the buildings. They were empty.

Inhaling all the abundant carbon dioxide from the surrounding trees, he finally crossed the grass field. Looking back, he saw a small patch of grass standing slightly taller. Immediately, he pressed and held a tiny red button on his Hub for three seconds. Robert's red button notified the closest animate plant by proximity. Underground, the animate plants had implanted notifiers in purple UV-light containers that they lived in. The UV light acted as their energy source for photosynthesis. The city was divided into different territories in which animate plants from underground preserved the sanctity of. Robert's Hub was special. It wasn't a circle like everybody else's. It was square-shaped and acquired more holes, buttons, and neuro-converters. 10 seconds later, an animate plant from underground summer-salted out of the grass field and landed next to Robert.

Robert yelled, “What the fuck are you doing?! You just ruined the grass with your armadillo-like entrance!”

The animate plant was nervous, judging by how his venus-flytrap mouth convulsed in the upper corner ridges. “I am very sorry. I will fix it right now.”

Robert said, “I was originally going to ask why the grass was uneven here, but now you just massacred this whole field.”

“Please, sir. Give me another--”

“*Sir*? I am your Monarch! And no. You aren’t getting another chance!” Robert stretched his right hand wide open, dropping the neuro-converter on the uneven grass. The micropyles on his fingertips released viscoelastic liquid titanium shards like a cheese grater. The tiny shards solidified into triangular blades. Robert grabbed the wooden arm of the animate plant.

The animate plant shrieked, “I’m sorry!”

Robert crunched the wooden arm. Burning titanium leaked through the palm of Robert and struck onto the wood. The animate plant screamed. He tightened his hand, and liquid titanium elongated into strings that wrapped around the wooden arm. As he tightened his hand again, the titanium strings grew longer and wrapped tighter. The wooden arm finally snapped. Robert seized the animate plant’s head and shoved him down the hole that the plant originally came up from. He produced more liquid titanium from his fingertips and poured it into the hole. The metal hardened. He sighed. He acquired this viscoelastic power by implanting a galvanic titanium stimulator chamber in the shape of a cylinder underneath the basilic vein of his forearm. The titanium secreted in relation to the electric currents of his nerves. He emulated the design from a galvanic vestibular stimulation. He had a chamber in each arm. Artificial nerves

connected from the chamber to the end of his fingertips. He would refill the chamber with titanium pellets that he kept tied next to his left leg.

He kicked the wooden arm off the grass field. He walked on dirt now. He stopped himself. He forgot the neuro-converter. The titanium on his right hand evaporated back into his micropyles. He picked up the neuro-converter. He walked again on the dirt. As he walked, he opened up a visual messaging system that could only be relayed through his visual cortex. It was similar to Mindcord, but it was more secure and he was the only one who had permission to send messages. The messages would only be sent to his Sentinel, General Wayne's soldiers called the Myriad, and a select few of animate plants. He composed a message to be sent to his coffee organizer. The coffee organizer was an animate plant named Lush. He typed, "Have my coffee ready in three minutes." He continued to walk. He composed another message for two people named Harry and Fabian. They were soldiers of Wayne. He typed, "Please be in the Experimentation room ASAP. Thanks again for volunteering." He put away the messenger.

He was in a ghost town. Nothing but Robert and the dirt. Walking around empty building walls, he arrived at the coffee shop. It was only an outside bar with a small slanted brown roof. Lush waited behind the counter. He held a plastic vacuum-insulated red bottle. Robert approached.

Lush said, "Decaf cappuccino."

Robert reached for the bottle. Lush handed it. Robert said, "You don't need to always specify the coffee. I get the same kind every time."

"Sorry, Monarch."

"Don't be sorry, Lush." Robert opened the bottle and took a sip. "Also, the bottle was supposed to be lavender today. I think you lost track of the weekly color rotation."

“I am so sorry. I’ll--”

“Again, don’t be,” Robert said. He took another sip. “The coffee tastes amazing though. You cut the coffea plants yourself, right?” He glanced at the coffee roots and the knife at the end of the counter.

Lush smiled. “I do. It’s very spectacular how you were able to create a new species of plants on our planet. More importantly, I'm glad you’re enjoying the coffee today.”

“Thanks.” Robert galvanized his hand and grabbed Lush’s wooden arm. Treating the viscoelastic titanium like super glue, he stuck the arm to the counter. Lush screamed. Robert reached for the knife at the end of the counter and dug it into the wooden arm so that the knife stood upright on the table. “Next time you won’t screw things up or else it’ll be your other arm.” The molten titanium began to burn the roots of Lush, eating away at him like a forest fire. Lush’s whole arm was now on fire. Opening the bottle lid, Robert poured the steaming coffee on the arm to stop the fire. He threw the bottle at Lush’s face and walked away.

As Robert walked back towards the prison, the screams of Lush manifested a decrescendo. Moving on only three hours of sleep, he felt his legs lose energy to walk. He walked half of a mile until his legs gave up on him. He sat on the dirt and held the red button on his Hub for three seconds again. Eight seconds later, an animate plant dug out of the dirt and stood a little taller than Robert. The plant awaited instructions.

Robert said, “Carry me back to my office.”

The plant picked up Robert and ran with his three-pronged feet. Robert rested his eyes. He fell asleep.

Robert awoke. He was inside his office. He looked at the plant. “How long was I out?”

“Ten minutes,” the animate plant said.

Robert got out of his lying position. He said, “Thank you. Now, please leave.”

The animate plant left. The room was the size of an office. A brown desk in the shape of a curvature outlined the three blue inner walls. A window on the fourth wall revealed the outside fence surrounding the manure field, the watchtowers, and the great tree walls. In the middle of the curved desk, Robert sat on his roller chair. Nothing sat on the desk other than a holographic computer terminal, notebooks, and a photo frame. He grabbed the frame with both hands.

In the frame was Dr. Aushteiv. The professor appeared in his 60s with a suit and tie that he would always wear to Robert’s college classes. Memories of this man flooded Robert’s mind.

Footsteps approached. It was the receptionist. Putting down the photo, he registered Melua’s appearance. She was wearing the tight red dress that Robert liked. She said, “Harry and Fabian will arrive in less than a minute.”

Robert said, “Thanks, dear.”

She left. Inhaling deeply, he swerved his chair and breathed. He looked out the window.

He noticed something.

Outside the curved metal fence that entrapped the manure field were three beautiful flowers sprouting with life and length. They danced in the dark with their light green bioluminescence. Each flower was three feet tall. As their stems reflected green, their petals blossomed a magnified magenta. They gently hit the fence from the breeze. Robert smiled.

[PHOTOEMPATHETIC PLANT]

He heard a knock. Turning away from the window, he saw Harry and Fabian. They were both wearing their soldier armor, helmets and everything.

Harry had his knuckles on the door that separated Robert's office and hallway to reception. The door was ingrained into the desk as was the other door on the opposite wall. Harry was slightly taller than Fabian. Harry said, "Sorry if we were late." Fabian nodded.

"No, no. No rush," Robert said. He reclined his legs on the desk. "Would you mind closing that door though? I don't know why Melua always keeps it open."

"Sure thing," Harry said. He closed the manual door.

Robert relaxed in his chair. He said, "What you men are about to venture on requires courage. So I commend the both of you for agreeing to do this." He got out of his chair and looked at both of them. "You guys ready?"

Fabian said, "Of course." Harry nodded.

Robert said, "Good." He opened the door on the opposite side of the two. "Follow me to my Experimentation room." They followed.

As Fabian passed the window, he said, "Nice flowers." Robert let the two of them enter the room first. He closed the door after them.

The Experimentation room was not the size of a room. It was the size of a complex. It was crowded with thousands of lying papers, books, different-colored post-it notes, and trash. Dangling sombrero-shaped lights illuminated the walls. The walls were covered with different things. A big black cabinet hung on the left wall of the interior. A chunk of the counter was missing since a bench, resembling the structure from the aquaritorium, took its place. A pair of earmuffs and the headgear gadgets attached to the bench as well. Robert clicked a yellow button next to the door they just entered through.

A wide cylinder, bigger than all three of the men standing there, corkscrewed its way out of the granite floor. As it spun out, Robert said, "It's quite messy, the room. I know. Wait until

you see the other section of it. As this opens up, follow me." Robert walked next to the wall the door was on. He clicked a blue button above the counter. The rightmost section of the wall split itself and rotated itself open. Another room appeared. It was a gym. It included weights, treadmills, and punching bags. A gray rug sat below all the gym equipment. The rug turned into granite halfway across the floor, separating the gym from the food court. On the granite were two rows of food catering aisles. Three animate plants worked at the back preparing food with pots and pans. Robert said, "That's not all." He clicked a green button on the wall next to him. The back of this irregular room opened up again, and three human strippers pole-danced in unison. He walked towards the poles and clicked a red button. This irregular room of an irregular room opened up twice again. Three king-sized beds sat identical with one another.

Fabian asked, "Why does this exist?" He took off his helmet.

"Because you two are gonna have to get used to living here," Robert said. "Please place your helmet on the floor, and you can come back for it after our session." Fabian placed his on the floor. Harry took his off and placed it on the floor as well. "Come this way. I think it finished opening up." They left the rooms full of women, prepared food, and gym equipment. They arrived at the cylinder that stopped spinning. He clicked a purple button on the cylinder. A small hatch opened. A small wall of water stuck inside the hatch. The water floated out of the hatch and turned into a water sheet. Robert splashed his fingers against the water to his left. The cylinder rotated to this motion.

Different compartments with tiny knobs laid on the lateral surface area of the cylinder. The cylinder spun 180 degrees. Each compartment had a number, ranging from 1-16. On the water sheet, 16 sectional tabs displayed themselves.

The compartment for number 1 opened up like a desk drawer. Robert said, “This is the first neuro-converter of many: the neurotransmitter converter.” The device was two inches long. The first inch was the shape of a very thin bobby pin with an intricate key design. The second inch was a quarter-inch wide and an eighth-inch thick. Two formations of traffic light circle sets paneled itself on the second inch. The six circles were all a colorless gray. Robert picked up the neuro-converter by the key-end. “Each circle is a colored light. Each color is a neurotransmitter. Blue is dopamine. Green is serotonin. Red is adenosine. Brown is norepinephrine. Orange is acetylcholine. White is glutamate. And GABA is purple. The light for each neurotransmitter will signal when in use. Experiencing higher levels of these neurotransmitters offers advantages in both combat and emotional strength.”

Harry asked, “How so?”

Robert said, “For example, norepinephrine increases your heart rate and blood sugar levels to release more energy in your body. If I were to raise the ante of the neurotransmitter from the converter, you would acquire more motivation and energy to withland longer periods of combat.”

Fabian got a closer look at the neuro-converter. He said, “This looks unsafe. Are you sure it works?”

“Yes it does work,” Robert said. “Either safe or unsafe, you two are giving the converter a whirl. This is what you signed up for.” His eyebrows began to valley.

Fabian presented his palm up. “I know. I know. I was--”

Harry stepped on Fabian’s shoe without Robert noticing. Harry asked, “So how do we use it? Is there a--”

“You use a wireless screen called a Navigator to control the neurotransmitters,” Robert interrupted. “Before you two can insert the converter in your Hubs, you must ingrain a Navigator to a palm.”

“A palm?” Harry asked.

Robert said, “Yes. It can either be your left or right. Up to you to decide.”

Fabian asked, “Doesn’t that hurt?” Harry stomped on his shoe this time.

“Of course it hurts!” Robert yelled. “Everything in life is supposed to hurt!” He threw the converter to the floor. “You’re wasting my time!”

Robert opened his messenger. Composing a message to Melua, he typed, “Please bring in TinkerBot. Not for a Hub implant, but for a Navigator implant.” He closed his messenger.

Robert said, “One of you, pick up the converter.” Fabian picked it up. “Now give it to me.” Fabian awkwardly presented it. Robert swiped it and grabbed Fabian’s head with his other hand. He rotated the head to where the Hub was. “You see where the number 1 is?” Robert’s voice grew louder with every word.

Fabian felt uneasy. “Um . . . no. I can’t see that part of my head.”

“Well,” Robert said, lowering his voice. “For future reference, always insert the neuro-converter into the appropriate number like this.” He jammed the converter’s key into the #1 circle of the Hub. Fabian tightened his eyes in fear as this happened. “You feel anything?”

“No,” Fabian said. “I was expecting it to hurt. Didn’t you say that it was supposed to?”

Robert condescendingly shoved Fabian back. Robert said, “Yes, But I was referring to the Navigator. Your brain itself doesn’t have any sensory receptors for touch or pain.”

Robert received a message. Melua wrote, “TinkerBot is ready by your door.”

“Speaking of perfect timing,” Robert said. “The Navigator is ready to be installed.”

Harry asked, “Don’t I need the neurotransmitter converter before we can start though?”

Robert said, “We’ll start how I want to start.” Robert walked away and opened the Experimentation room door.

The TinkerBot sat in his office. The bot was a patient table with wheels. Robert grabbed the handle at the end of it and pulled it through the door. As he walked towards Harry and Fabian, he said, “I really should be having my two testers assisting me with this. But I’m a decent man.” He stopped rolling it. “Who wants to be first?” Robert bent under the patient table mattress and flipped the switch from “Hub” to “Navigator.” Harry and Fabian both stood still.

“Without action, nothing can be done,” Robert said. He held Fabian’s shoulder and looked at him.

Fabian dropped his head slowly. “I’ll go first, I guess.” He transported himself onto the Tinkerbot.

Robert said, “Lay down. The bot won’t begin unless all your body heat evenly lays itself on the mattress.” Fabian lay head-to-toe.

Right away, the hatch on the right of the mattress opened. Tools flung out of it, unveiling a saw disk and a tool with a tip of a glue stick. The tools were connected to cables. “It also won’t start until you open up the palm you prefer for the Navigator.”

Fabian opened his left palm. A belt wrapped around his left wrist. The saw disk cable gravitated towards his palm. Fabian screamed before it even made contact. The saw cut his palm into the shape of a rectangle, cutting only a few millimeters deep. The rectangular cut was complete, spilling blood down his wrist and forearm. Another cabled-tool was extracted from the hatch. It was pliers. The pliers clamped at the end of the rectangular skin and peeled it off, displaying a canvas of dark red. Fabian tried pulling his body away, but his wrist was too

restricted. Another cable holding the Navigator screen came out of the hatch. The screen was precisely placed within the red rectangle. The screen was only a few millimeters thick, leveling out the skin depth of his palm. The glue stick apparatus tool oozed a thermo-silicon adhesive where skin and screen met. The perimeter of the Navigator stuck to the palm. Blood dripped down his hand. The belt around his wrist loosened. As Fabian closed his palm, the Navigator screen folded and mimicked the wrinkles in his hands.

Fabian jolted his arm and held his left wrist as he spun his arm in circles. A small circle of blood tainted the patient table of TinkerBot. Fabian yelled, “Fuck, my hand!”

The cables wheeled back into the hatch of Tinkerbot as Fabian jumped off the patient table. Robert said, “Shut off your whining.”

“I think I’m bleeding to death,” Fabian said. “Blood keeps dripping!”

Robert said, “Silence. The adhesive works better than stitches.” He strutted to Harry.

“Why didn’t you anesthetize me?” Fabian asked. His eyes glared with impatience and widened with anger.

Robert said, “Requires too many resources. Harry, get on the damn table already!”

Harry got on the table. He experienced the same amount of pain as Fabian as the Navigator was implanted in his Hub. There were more screams and profane slurs, however.

Harry finished.

Robert said, “Show me your palms.” As Harry and Fabian raised them, Robert received a mental message. It was from a man named Horace Blanche. Horace wrote, “Greetings, Monarch. The infirmary project has just been put on hold. The animate plants have stopped working. We need to meet.”

Robert yelled, “Damnit!”

“What is it?” Harry asked.

Robert calibrated both of their Navigators by completing fingerprint scans on their screens. Their screens displayed nothing still. Robert said, “Anyways, your Navigators are calibrated. I’ll provide a brief explanation on how to navigate your Navigators. The first--”

“Good play on words,” Fabian said.

“Shut up,” Robert said. “You turn on your Navigator by tightening your palm three times into a fist.” Harry and Fabian waited for more instructions. “Do I have to tell you two twice?! Do it!” They both tightened their fists three times. Blood seeped. “Open your palms.”

The Navigators lit up a neon blue background. On top of Fabian’s screen, his name appeared. The 12 sectional tabs of each neuro-converter were in view. All the numbers were grayed-out except for number #1. Harry looked over at Fabian’s screen.

Harry asked, “Why is my #1 gray and his isn’t?”

“Because you haven’t implanted the neurotransmitter converter into your Hub,” Robert said. “Speaking of . . . let’s get that in you.”

Harry bit the vermillion border of his lips.

Robert reached for the neuro-converter from the drawer of the cylinder and stuck the converter into Harry’s Hub. Robert resumed the Navigator tutorial. He said, “Your neuro-converters will only work if you twist the key to the right. Other converter keys require knobs and these knobs cannot function unless you twist the key as well. So twist your #1.” They twisted. “Select #1.” They did. A menu of six different-colored knobs could be seen on the Navigator screen. The first knob above that read, “Dopamine Concentration.” The blue knob ranged from zero to 100 percent. Each knob controlled the concentration of each

neurotransmitter of the converter, all of them in accordance with the colored lights of the key-end of the converter. Robert said, “The rest of this is self-explanatory.”

Harry asked, “How does this work?”

“I just told you,” Robert said.

“No,” Harry said. “I mean, how did you actually manage to build this? How does the converter affect our neurotransmitter levels?”

Robert said, “I don’t have time to explain. All I want you two to do is experiment with your neurotransmitter concentration. The default setting is 50%, meaning normal levels. Please do not exceed 75%, or drop below 25%. I don’t want the side effects to be too drastic.”

“Side effects?” Fabian asked.

“Yes...”

“Like … like what?” Fabian asked again.

“Side effects will be different for each person as everyone’s brain is neurochemically different. The duration and magnitude to which you levitate or plunge in neurotransmitter percentage will also determine the severity of side effects.”

“Specifically speaking, what are some of those side effects?” Fabian asked once again.

“It’d take too long to list them. It’s best if I don’t. Don’t be nonsensical, and you won’t need to worry.”

Robert clicked the yellow button next to the door that they had originally entered through. The cylinder corkscrewed its way back into the ground, concealing the rest of the neuro-converters.

Robert said, “I have to go.” He walked away. After ten steps, something clicked in his head. He walked back over to them.

“Follow me, you two. I think we can put your neurotransmitters to the test.” Robert smiled.

CHAPTER 4.1:

“So he actually is on board?!”

“Yes, Howie, he is! I can’t believe that my theoretical model worked.”

“I can believe it, Bobby. You’re a genius for a reason.”

“I’m really not.”

“Come on . . . you are.”

“I guess.”

“Well . . . anyway. What’s that folder you’re holding?”

“Next course of action is funding.”

“Funding?”

“Yes. We’ll need to scout out some possible VC companies. We’re obviously only high school seniors, so we’re not the most qualified. But I think the science will speak for itself. This is a list of all New York VC companies ranked alphabetically. I think that--”

“Heyyy! Look, it’s Bobby. Nice glasses! Whatchu reading by the way?”

“Hey, sir. What are you--”

“What is this list?”

“Hey! Give me back that!”

“Not until you tell me what this is. I’m curious.”

“Listen to Bobby. Give it back, man!”

“I don’t give a shit who you are. I’m speaking with only Bobby right now.”

“I ask you again. Please give me that back. I spent so much time data plotting all of those companies.”

“What companies? Tell me what this is, or I rip it up.”

“It’s just a list of VC companies in New York.”

“Oh that’s interesting. Okay . . . you can have it back.”

“Alright . . . so are you gonna hand it back?”

“No. I’m gonna rip it up instead.”

“Why?!”

“Because some people deserve to be miserable. You’re wasting your time with shit like this. Focus on being a high-schooler. Overachievers like you try to steal all the good jobs from this world through hard work. It doesn’t work like that. It works through dominance.”

“What’s your deal? I’m now begging that you give it back. I don’t want to go back to scurrying every VC site. Just don’t rip it!”

“Too late.”

“What the fuck!”

“Am I gonna make you cry now?”

CHAPTER 5: Infraction

Robert, Harry, and Fabian went through the prison lobby doors. The doors closed behind them. As they made distance from the door, the door opened again. Melua appeared. She ran to Robert. She said, “Chief Keith Konrad is ready to share his weekly security report with you right now.”

Robert said, “Tell him I’ll meet him at 7:00 p.m.” Robert gently pushed her away. He exhaled deeply. His face was a slight red. He continued his walk with his two testers.

“Monarch . . .,” Fabian said. “Are you feeling alright?”

Robert stopped walking. He looked at Fabian. “I haven’t been alright since birth. I’d worry more about yourself.” He resumed his walk.

Fabian said, “I was also meaning to ask . . . where are we going?”

Robert pinched Fabian’s cheekbones. “Quit talking. All you do is waste time. Something that I don’t have a lot of.” Robert heated his hand with titanium but didn’t let it seep through his micropyles. Robert gave Fabian a warm hand and jerked his head away.

They continued walking. They passed through the various buildings of the reservation city. They were now northeast of the prison. Turning for a third time down another dirt row, they were greeted by a new type of building. This structure was different from the rest of the buildings. The structure was unfinished, made out of wood. Robert had arrived at the infirmary. Three-fourths of the main structure had been built. The structure was the height of two stories but remained as one story. A clear substance, resembling the structure of a spiderweb, acted as the exoskeleton to the building. The web was tightly woven. The substance secreted from spider-looking creatures. The spider creatures were as big as Dopabees in proportion. They illuminated light-green bioluminescence, and brownish-red stripes hugged over their thoraxes. 12-legged and quick in speed, they roamed the walls and dangled on the webs, slowly creating more of the web. The spiders worked.

Animate plants with construction vests stood on pillars, the floor, and on ledges of the structure. Wooden signs all around the construction area had different colors, which designated where animate plants with different colored petals were supposed to work. “Red” was located

atop the roof area while “Blue” was on the northern wall of the infirmary. Other colors specified other regions of work. The animate plants didn’t work.

Some animate plants lie in groups of the same petal color, laying in the sun and receiving photosynthesis. A group rolled dice. Another group used their wooden fingers and shape-shifted the wood into a 3x3x3 tic-tac-toe cube.

Robert flexed his flexor carpi ulnaris arm muscles out of furiosity. He inhaled in an attempt of meditation. He said, “I need the both of you to demonstrate some sense into them. Experiment with your neurotransmitters, but remember what I said about 75% and 25%. I only want hand-to-hand combat. No guns.”

“I have a question,” Fabian said. “What the fuck are those spiders?”

Robert said, “I’ll only tell you if you can get these plants to start working again.”

Harry and Fabian nodded. They took off from Robert. Robert did not watch them. Instead, he walked inside the infirmary. The automatic door creaked as it opened. Wood matched the interior and exterior designs. Only one-to-two animate plants were indoors. Two-thirds of the roof was built. No furniture or rooms were built except for one room all the way down the inner complex. Robert entered the doorless room. On the side of the room was a brown desk with a man sitting on a chair alongside it. The man was shorter than Robert by two inches. He wore a hardhat with a wooden stick impaled in his visual cortex. A one-inch diameter hole was made in the hardhat so that he could wear the hat. His hair grew out of this hardhat hole. A cane holster was strapped to his right hip. The man heard Robert’s footsteps. He said, “Who’s there?”

“How's the lobotomy treating you?” Robert asked. He forced a laugh. “It’s me, Horace.”

Horace said, “Oh, it’s you. That wasn’t funny. I don’t know if you remember, but I’m blind now. I can’t see anything.”

Robert said, “Should’ve worn your hardhat.”

“It’s not my fault. Those plant bastards are the ones who caused the roof over my head to fall down. If I could see, I’d beat every last one of them to death.”

“You’re covered for that then. I’m having two of my soldiers test out their combat with the new neurotransmitter converter as we speak.”

“Finally, some good news.”

Robert looked at the blind man. “Mr. Blanche, are you sure you have this covered? For one, you can’t see. And two, you have no one to enforce those plants to work.”

“No, I have everything under control. It’s only been this week that’s been tough on me. Ever since I grew blind.”

“It’s okay, Horace. I’m not mad. I’ll have someone sent over to help you.”

“Whatever.” Horace looked down. “Robert . . . are the animate plants legitimately constructing an infirmary? Or are they building something far greater than that?”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the big questions. Just continue doing your job, and I’ll come by if you ever have any more issues.” Robert patted Horace’s shoulder. Before he left the room, Robert said, “By the way, I’ve been developing a virtual cortex neuro-converter where you would be able to sense your environment without the need of eyes. I still need to configure the correct piezoelectric currents to the brain. I’ll have it ready for you soon.” Horace nodded. Robert left the room. As he crossed the interior, he noticed the one-to-two animate plants from earlier were gone. He left the interior.

By a pair of pillars, a brawl was occurring. Harry and Fabian, side-by-side, had their fists up. Five animate plant bodies lay unconscious next to them. Their bodies were bent in half and their roots were wound up. Harry leapt at a plant and forced him into a chokehold. Fabian

delivered two punches at a charging plant. The plant fell. Fabian kicked the plant in the back repeatedly with agility. Fabian screamed loudly and smiled as he continued to kick the plant. Robert smiled too.

Harry's chokehold snapped the animate plant's neck. Harry began to laugh. He wiped the blood that leaked down his nostrils. The surrounding animate plants did not make a sound. They were successfully terrified. Robert breathed out. He said, "That's enough, Harry and Fabian! Get over here."

Fabian delivered one last punch to an unconscious plant. Harry approached Robert. Fabian yelled, "Who wants some more?!"

"Fabian!" Robert shouted.

Fabian blinked his eyes tightly and looked at Robert. He followed Harry.

Robert yelled, "Animate plants! Get back to work! If any bullshit like this goes on again, I'll bring men with guns!" Harry and Fabian arrived by his side. He changed his speaking tone. "That was excellent what you two did."

Fabian said, "I know. That felt amazing. I wanted to keep fighting, but I restrained myself for you, Monarch."

Robert asked, "What setting did you two employ?"

Harry said, "We employed 67% dopamine, 75% adenosine, and 75% norepinephrine."

Robert nodded. "Good. Please revert back to default settings now." Harry nodded and took out his Navigator.

"Fuck no," Fabian said. "I've never felt this good before! This is better than every kind of amphetamine combined!" Robert's smile disappeared. So did Harry's.

“Come on, Fabian,” Harry quickly said before Robert could get any word in. “Cut the bullshit.” Harry reverted all his neurotransmitters back to default

Fabian’s smile continued. He said, “I’ll only revert if Robert tells us what those fucking spiders do.”

“Fabian!” Harry shouted. “Shut the fuck up and listen to our Monarch! We--”

“It’s okay,” Robert said as he raised his hand. “You’re right, Fabian. Follow me and I’ll show you.”

Fabian flung his arms up. “About time! Show us the way!”

Robert moved forward around the perimeter of the construction site. Harry and Fabian followed. The clear webs casted a shadow on their heads from Esse’s light. As they walked, Robert said, “The substance that the spiders secrete is called thlava. The animate plants call the spiders ‘avalhts.’ Thlava is a clear substance that remarkably cannot be penetrated by forces, such as gravity and simple push-and-pull forces, and energy, such as kinetic energy or even the speed of light. This substance can only be penetrated if an avalht sucks up its web from its spinneret. I like to call it the Unbreakable Substance.”

“Holy shit! That’s actually fucking amazing!” Fabian yelled with a smile.

The three of them continued to walk. They passed the end of the infirmary construction. Robert said, “The avalhts originate from thlavic chasms. ” Small cracks of tectonic plates created big enough holes where bioluminescent light-green liquid could be seen.

Fabian asked, “What gives it that shine?”

“Thlavic acid,” Robert said. “Stronger than fluoroantimonic acid. The avalhts chemically compress the thlavic acid into a solid compound in its spinneret, which, in turn, produces

thlava.” An avalht crawled out one of the thlavic holes. “This is the reason why the lake nearby the prison is partly acidic.”

“I’m getting a closer look at this!” Fabian exclaimed. He got closer to a thlavic hole, standing directly above it. “Isn’t nature wondrous?! Each planet somehow has its own way of establishing equilibrium.”

Robert approached Fabian. He said, “It truly is.” Robert galvanized his right hand. He created a solid titanium cup in palm. He bent over and scooped the thlavic acid with the cup. “Luckily, thlavic acid cannot deteriorate titanium.” Robert flicked the cup forward. The acid penetrated Fabian's left leg.

Fabian screamed in agony. His pain receptors were eaten away along with flesh, blood, and bone. His left leg deteriorated. Fabian fell backwards on the floor, swimming in his puddle of blood.

Robert said, “Let me hand you a hand.” He grabbed Fabian’s left hand and opened up his Navigator. Robert selected the #1 tab. Before Robert could click anything, Fabian clung onto Robert’s shirt collar and threw him to the side.

Fabian yelled, “Get the fuck off me!” He tried to crawl towards Robert. “I’m gonna kill you!” Before Robert could get up, Fabian tackled him. Robert struggled to get up. Fabian pinned down both of Robert's arms.

“Harry! Help me!” Robert yelled.

Fabian landed a punch on Robert. Unpinned, Robert’s right hand quickly galvanized titanium. Robert tried to land the liquid titanium on Fabian’s face, but Fabian grabbed his wrist midway. Fabian headbutted Robert’s forehead. Robert tried to shove him off, but Fabian was too strong.

Harry opened up his Navigator. He raised his adenosine levels and norepinephrine levels to 100%. He ran at Fabian and tackled his back. Harry said, “Get the fuck off him!” He separated Fabian from Robert. Harry flipped over Fabian’s body and punched him in the jaw with dangerous brute force. However, Fabian was able to headbutt Harry. Escaping his grab, Fabian stood up with his one leg, raising up both of his hands. He waited for Harry to get up.

“You’re asking for more!” Fabian yelled with a broken nose and jaw. Blood dripped down his right leg and face. Harry got up, raising both of his fists as well. Robert watched from a distance on the floor, still struggling to get up. Harry landed two upper-cuts on Fabian with both of his hands. Fabian swung a punch but Harry dodged swiftly. Harry kicked Fabian’s only leg. Fabian fell. Harry kicked him in the head repeatedly. “That all you got?!” Fabian blabbered as blood dove out his mouth. Harry kicked him three more times. Fabian’s eyes closed. Fabian grew unconscious. Harry still kicked him.

Robert rose up. “Don’t kill him, Harry! He’s knocked down already!”

Harry began to kick Fabian’s stomach. Fabian unconsciously coughed up more blood. Robert yelled, “Stop!” He sprinted at Harry. He galvanized both hands this time. Harry’s face faced the opposite side of Robert.

Surprising Harry from behind, Robert grabbed his neck as the liquid titanium wrapped and burned Harry’s skin. Harry screamed. Robert tackled him to the floor. As Harry’s head hit the floor, Robert hardened the titanium to a solid state. The titanium formed into a donut shape entrapping Harry’s neck against the floor. Harry tried to get up, but his neck wouldn’t budge. He tried to remove the titanium neck brace with both of his hands.

Robert exacerbated. He finally got a hold of his breath. Spools of blood stuck on his legs and arms. Every bit of his face hurt. He walked over to Harry’s body.

Harry continued to scream. Robert grabbed Harry's left wrist. Harry tried to punch Robert but failed. On his left palm, Robert opened up his Navigator. He selected #1 and decreased Harry's norepinephrine levels to 0%. Harry fell unconscious.

Robert coughed up a spoonful of blood. He checked out Fabian's body. Luckily, Fabian's chest still appeared to move. Robert opened up his messenger system. He decided to leave a voice message. "Sentinel, please come east of the infirmary. I need major clinical help now." He closed the messenger.

Robert looked at the two unconscious bodies. The steam from the titanium brace lost its smoke. He smiled disdainfully.

As he waited for medical help to arrive, he opened up his Navigator on his left palm. His Navigator did not display each neuro-converter by number according to how many were inside his Hub. Instead, his Navigator displayed each neuro-converter by whichever converter was twisted in the key hole of the Hub. He twisted a converter key. The Navigator read, "Thought Reminder." Robert selected the tab.

Oscillatory Thought Log:

Speak with Keith.

Howie.

Install Hubs in every inmate.

Finish visual cortex converter.

Finish building the infirmary.

Robert closed his Navigator by closing his hand three times. He continued to catch his breath. The titanium steam stopped.

Time passed.

Robert's Sentinel arrived. Two TinkerBots as well. 20 guards, all wearing their orange-tinted-glassed helmets except for two of them. These two wore dark blue glass protection helmets. A blue guard got the closest to Robert and took off his helmet. The guard was a man with a confident face. He pointed his right arm horizontally at Robert in the form of a handshake. Robert got up from the floor. The guard said, "Name's Zim. I'm an executive security guard appointed by Chief Keith Konrad." The other blue guard took off his helmet too. "He's Conley." Robert shook Zim's hand. Zim's grip was tighter and swifter in motion than Robert's. Zim looked at the two unconscious bodies and Robert's bloody face. "Which of these two motherfuckers started it?"

"Keith appointed you two?" Robert asked. "Can you alert him to meet with me immediately regarding his security report at his office?"

Conley said, "You got it, Monarch." He opened his Navigator. Robert nodded and looked away.

Zim walked toward Harry's unconscious body. He said, "What's that metal ring around his neck? Damn!"

Conley, next to Robert, said, "We'll escort you three to the infirmary. Good thing that its location is closer than we presumed."

"Isn't the infirmary construction not finished?" Zim asked.

Robert, looking at Conley, said, "Those two are. I'm not. I've got business with Keith. Fix them."

Conley nodded. He looked at the Sentinel and said, "Place Harry and Fabian on the TinkerBots, and escort them to the infirmary stat."

Two guards, each strolling with a Tinkerbot, approached Harry and Fabian.

“You sure you’ll be fine?” Zim asked, looking at Robert from a distance.

“Yes,” Robert said. “Sever the titanium ring off from Harry’s neck and the ground. The longer you wait, the more it hardens.” Robert walked away from Zim’s almost puzzled look.

Robert departed from the infirmary. The opaque shadows from the thlava strings reflected off of Robert’s corneas. He smiled upside-down. He opened up his Thought Reminder.

Speak with Keith.

He turned back as he walked across the dirt. The two bodies laid on the TinkerBot.

Time passed.

He arrived at the prison lobby doors. He made a left in the cafeteria. He made another left to a hall parallel with the cafeteria with a locked door that read “Security.” A vent on the lower left of the wall to the door leaked a small puddle of water. The door had an insertable key-card lock. The top of the rim of the lock was bright red. He knocked on the door. Nine seconds passed until a lady with long red fingernails opened the door. The rim turned green. Part of her ring-fingernail chipped off from reaching the doorknob. Robert picked up the nail piece from the floor without the lady noticing. She had her face glued to his, and she smiled. He put the nail in his pants’ pocket.

She said, “Welcome, Monarch.” A yellow hexagonal table sat in the middle of the diamond-shaped room. Desks filled each side of the hexagon with security guards and holographic terminals. They had their faces glued to their holographic screens. A blue ceiling, red floor, and white walls colored the room. From the ceiling’s perspective, the door that Robert entered from was the bottom of the diamond while the top side of the diamond was conjoined with an octagonal room that stretched twice as far in distance compared to the diamond side walls.

Down Robert's line of sight, he saw that a giant black wall stood at the back side of the octagonal room. Trapezoidal desks filled the outer interior of the octagonal room. Close to Robert's sight, he saw a rectangular reception desk.

The lady who opened the door sat at this desk. She spun 360 degrees in her swivel chair. Before she opened her mouth, Robert walked around her desk. He walked around the hexagonal table. The security guards were still glued to their screens. Robert shouted, "I know you're behind that wall, Konrad!" He continued walking. "Give me a rundown of the security report already. When are you gonna take down that one-sided mirror, huh?!" He passed the triangular desks with the security guards who had their faces glued to their holographic screens. "I'm running late on time!" Robert walked around the black wall.

Keith had orange earmuffs on. His eyes, covered by glasses, were closed, and his neck laid back in his chair. Robert's forehead developed wrinkles. Robert grabbed the earmuffs from the top of Keith's head and threw them away. Keith shook his body and shuttered his eyes. "Wha-what's going on?" Keith asked.

"Shut up. Quit the sleeping gag! Where's the security report?"

Keith said, "Gag? No. I was legitimately sleeping. It's been a quiet day today anyway so not the biggest mistake in the world."

"In my world it is," Robert said. He grabbed onto Keith's brown beard. Keith's glasses fell to the floor. "You give me it now! No bullshit." Keith's pupils pulsed.

"Yes, Monarch." He opened his desk drawer and pulled out his security report file in the form of a floating water sheet. The loading symbol began spinning on the sheet.

Robert punched the sheet. The water droplets dispersed. Robert said, “I’ve lost patience for you! Have Melua print a copy of it for me.” He changed stance and walked back. “I won’t forget this.” Keith’s face displayed no remark.

Robert left the octagonal room. He walked around the hexagonal desk of the diamond room. His left hand reached into his pants’ pocket. He waved a right goodbye to the receptionist, and he closed the door with his right hand as he left the diamond room. The door closed. With his left hand, he grabbed the broken fingernail of the receptionist and dropped it into the insertable key-card lock. The lock beeped repeatedly trying to signal failure. He opened up his Thought Reminder.

Howie.

Memories filled up his conscious perception. He got slight chills down his spine. He walked quicker this time. He walked down the hallway, made a right, passed the lobby, and went inside his office. He closed the door behind him. He sat in his desk chair. He closed his eyes and breathed.

He called this a moment in time.

Blood dripped down his chin. Wiping it off, he noticed the flowers outside his window. Their bioluminescence stood tall. He smirked.

He looked away. He stood out of his chair and walked to the corner of the room close to his desk. Below his feet was a black cellar door. He pulled on the rugged handle. Dust penetrated the air as the door opened. He entered the cellar by hopping down a few feet. A ladder laid to the side. The cellar room was pitch black. Robert’s head almost touched the ceiling. Reaching for a switch, he turned on a blue light. The room wasn’t the largest. It was quite claustrophobic. The NeuroCloud main control unit could be seen. A Memory Metamorphose machine could be seen.

Two new machines could be seen as well. One was labeled “Conscious Plane Allocator,” and the other was labeled “The Four-Matter Formatter. The Allocator machine was the shape of an arcade box. There was a glass screen that separated thousands of tiny spheres that emanated an electric blue glow. They remained stationary spatiotemporally. A number pad was on the part of the machine where buttons would be placed in relation to an arcade box. Robert inputted the number -0001.

Immediately, Howard Wayne’s name appeared on a screen next to the number pad. One of the tiny spheres gravitated to the right of the glass screen. It began to pulse, and its blue glow began to circulate outside of its spherical shape. It disappeared from the glass screen’s view. A thlavic wire connected to the Allocator behind the glass. The wire reflected an electric blue from its clear substance. The sphere traveled along the wire and was transported to a thlavic rod connected to the wire. Robert disconnected the rod from the wire. The emanating blue sphere remained in the center of the rod.

Robert now devoted his attention to the Formatter machine. It resembled the shape of an open cardboard box. The box was big enough for Robert to fit his legs in it. The lateral surfaces of the open box flaps were each a different color with a different label. The blue flap read “Conscious Energy.” The red flap read “Solid.” The green flap read “Gas.” And the yellow flap read “Liquid.” Connected to the outside of the box flaps were cubes that stuck firmly to the floor. Floor vents were positioned parallel to each of the cubes. The inside edge of the Conscious Energy side of the open box had an insertable compartment where the rod could be placed. Robert inserted the rod and it clicked in place. A pillar that climbed up to Robert’s waist in height had a fingerprint scanner on it. Robert scanned his right thumb.

The four vents immediately steamed and whistled like a teapot. The four inner edges of the box propelled tiny bristles like a hair comb. The gas, solid, liquid, and conscious energy sides now had thousands of tiny lines stretching across the opening. A grid was formed. The number of horizontal lines that stretched from each edge could increase or decrease. On the bottom of each of these bristles were tiny holes that expelled either gas, liquid, or solid matter depending on where the bristle started from in accordance to the edge.

The tiny holes under each bristle began to expel material. The conscious energy side however didn't expel or react. The solid and liquid bristles expelled material simultaneously. Body material started to print layer by layer. Beginning with the feet, the Formatter welded solid bone and liquid blood together. Metatarsal bones were born. Bristles got thinner when they increased in number to form more intricate designs. Crafting arterioles, moles, and toenails, the Formatter now worked on the ankles. The number of bristles on each edge was constantly changing every time it created a new layer. Legs were born. The Formatter was now on the torso. The gas bristles expelled material now since the gastrointestinal system required methane for the stomach and intestines. Ribs and heart valves were born. The Formatter built the cephalic veins of the arms. Arms were born. The Formatter formatted the neck. The larynx and pharynx were born. The face was built bottom-up. Teeth, taste buds, and eyelashes were born.

The brainstem was built. The occipital, temporal, parietal, and frontal lobes began to form. As the brain was being neurochemically built, the conscious energy rod emanated powerfully. Only one bristle was propelled, and the tiny sphere was expelled in the frontal lobe. The rest of the brain was formed. Hair finished off the endocrine system. The Formatter finished formatting the body.

Howard Wayne was born again but this time as a 59 year old man. He opened his eyes slowly. Spasms struck his neck. His alveoli sacs in his lungs were filled up with air. His heart pumped with blood. Poles inside the Formatter box supported his legs and head for balance. However, since his vestibular gland was working, he no longer needed these poles. His body shook. He grabbed onto his hair and began pulling away at it. His trachea released screams. His Broca's area part of his brain produced speech. He screamed, "FUUUUUCK!!!" His eyes began to wetten. He was terrified. Terrified of a reality he didn't belong to. He detached his limbs from the poles and climbed out of the box and fell to the floor.

Wayne looked up at Robert and propped himself up. Robert, holding a brand new Hub in his left hand, said quietly, "I know you are terrified, but please trust me." Wayne changed stance, bending his knees slightly and looking ready to make a run for it. "No."

Wayne lunged forward and ran toward Robert. Robert galvanized his right hand. Meeting Robert's position, Wayne ducked Robert's hand. Titanium flung on the Allocator glass screen. Wayne ran past Robert and grabbed onto the ladder.

Robert tried to pull him down from the ladder but was too slow. Wayne climbed out. Robert yelled, "Fuck!"

Wayne had escaped.

Robert looked for Wayne in his office. Nowhere to be found. There was only a matter of time before the naked old man would lose him indefinitely. Robert bit his lips. He didn't breathe rhythmically.

He opened up his messenger from his Navigator. He messaged his Sentinel. "Inmate #-0001, Howard Wayne, has escaped! Find him immediately!"

He climbed up the ladder and stood in his office next to the underground cellar. He scrunched the printed-out copy of Keith's security report that Melua had dropped off earlier on his desk.

CHAPTER 5.1:

"I'm at a loss of words, Bobby!"

"We all are, Bobby! We're blown away!"

"So you agree with my pitch?"

"Hell! We more than agree! We're ready to throw any figure of money you see necessary for your vision. What was your original offer? 10,000 dollars for five percent? I'm willing to invest double the amount of money for the same equity for the reason of getting all the support you need. We need as many researchers as possible on this."

"I second that!"

"So you all are seriously willing to invest in my startup for 20,000 dollars?"

"You better believe it!"

"I'm stunned. This is more than a dream come true."

"And look at you! You're only a sophomore in college and closing full-scale business deals. You're truly an inspiration."

***

"Howie! I still can't fathom what just occurred! We fucking did it!"

"What did I say, Bobby? Trust yourself and the process. Caltech selected you with good reason from the start."

"Haha! Quit boosting my ego."

"So what's the next move from here?"

“Dr. Aushteiv and I continue our research. We move with speed too. Our plan is to revolutionize and fix the world of mental health for everyone. Be both neurochemically and psychologically.”

CHAPTER 6: Objectification

Robert stood outside Chief Keith Konrad’s office. The insertable key-card lock had been taken off the wall. The door remained open at all times instead.

Robert walked through and disregarded Keith's receptionist’s greeting. He moved across the diamond and octagonal rooms and disregarded Keith’s security guard’s greetings. He saw Keith wide-awake this time. Robert grabbed him by the throat. He yelled, “You fucked me over! If you hadn’t put me in a bad mood with your ineptitude, I wouldn’t have lost focus with my latest task!”

Struggling to breathe, Keith said, “What task?”

Robert said, “Your incompetence has cost too many mistakes for me! I lost General Wayne because of you.” He let go of his grasp. “And it’s now your sole mission to find him!” Keith massaged his bearded neck and fell back off his chair.

“How is it my fault?!” Keith asked. “It’s your fault for--”

Robert choked him tighter. “If you don’t find him in the next hour, I’m snapping that neck of yours!” He threw him to the ground. He left Keith’s office and disregarded Keith.

Robert got his breathing more in rhythm. He messaged Fabian and Harry: “Meet me at the Experimentation room ASAP.” He headed towards there.

He was there at the entrance. Fabian and Harry were there in time. Robert didn’t observe their faces and entered the irregularly-shaped room. The dangling sombrero lights were dimmer

this time. Robert stepped over all the lying papers on the floor and immediately pressed the green button that was on the furthest wall from Harry's and Fabian's standing position. The room walls displaced position, and three strippers danced on poles. Robert passed by the women and pressed the red button, opening up the three beds. Robert laid on the middle bed. He said, "Vivian, jack me off right now."

Vivian, the stripper on the middle pole, walked over to Robert's bed. Harry and Fabian slowly approached the beds. Robert still didn't observe their faces. Vivian said, "In front of these two?! No way!"

Robert hissed in anger. His right hand steamed with titanium. He grabbed her right hand with his right hand and liquid titanium spewed out. As she screamed, he stuck her right hand onto the headboard top rail of the bed. He solidified the titanium so that her hand was stuck to the bed. Robert screamed, "Do it! I've had a long week!"

She screamed, "My hand is burning off! What the fuck did you do to me!"

Robert said, "You better be left-handed. If not, I'll kill you and have my other strippers do the job for me."

She said, "I need medical help now! Why--"

"Another word out of you and I'll kill you! Do your job!"

"Fine!" She pulled down his pants and began to do away with her job.

Robert observed Harry's and Fabian's faces. He said, "Treat yourselves. You two must've had a long week too. This is your chance to relax."

Harry and Fabian look disgusted. Harry said, "I think I'm okay for now." Fabian nodded after. They slowly began to turn around.

“This isn’t a choice of yours to make,” Robert said. “I’m ordering you two to relax. Join me now!” Still looking disgusted, the two laid themselves down on the beds. “Bernice, I assign you to Harry, and, Pyra, I assign you to Fabian. Give these two the best experiences of their lives!” The other two strippers left their poles and approached the two men who laid next to Robert. “Faster, Vivian!”

Harry laid on the bed right to Robert. Fabian on the left. Bernice said, “Why aren’t you taking off your pants, cutie?”

“Don’t rush them!” Robert insisted. “They go at their own pace.” Robert caught his breath for a second. “So boys . . . let me get to know you more. To start off, where were you guys originally from back on Earth?”

Harry, who was refusing to pull down his pants, said, “I was from Connecticut. Same as Fabian.”

Robert nodded as he was staring at the ceiling. “Fabian,” he said. “Were you friends with Harry at a young age?”

Fabian, who already had his pants down, said, “We both attended Boston College. Same major as well.”

“What major?” Robert asked.

“Physics,” Fabian said.

“Goddamnit! Why won’t this stick up?! I said faster, Vivian!”

“I’m going as fast as I can!” she screamed as blood continued to drip down her right hand. “I need something to stop this bleeding, too!”

Robert galvanized his right hand again and solidified the excess remnants of titanium of her hand to close up the bleeding. Her bloody hand burned once more as she let out another

scream. Robert pulled out his Navigator and navigated to the neurotransmitter converter. He decreased his serotonin percentage from 58 to 50.

Harry finally agreed to have Beatrice pull down his pants. She began to do away at her job. Robert asked, “Would any of you like a decrease in serotonin? Helps with sex drive.”

None of them answered.

“Anyway,” Robert continued. “How did two physics majors end up becoming soldiers for General Wayne?”

Fabian said, “When we were studying in Duchesne Hall--”

“That reminds me,” Robert interrupted. “I need Horace to check in with Keith. Goddamnit! We need to find General Wayne!”

“What!” Fabian and Harry shouted at the same time. “What happened to him?!”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Robert yelled. “I can’t compose messages with you two talking!”

“Is that so?” Vivian asked. “But you can focus on composing messages while being jerked off? Why not get a surgeon to amputate my right hand while I jerk you too, huh?!”

“Quiet, bitch!” Robert galvanized his right hand and slapped her mouth. He stuck his hand there as he secreted liquid titanium to muzzle her from talking. Tears streamed down her face as the sound of her scream began to fizzle in volume. “You asked for this! I also didn’t tell you to stop jerking me either!” She continued away at her job.

Robert noticed Harry’s troubled look. He stared back at the ceiling and finished composing his message to Horace. “There. Finally sent. Now . . . let’s resume our conversation. But before we do that, I want to test out who has a higher sex drive. Harry or Fabian? I’m willing to make it more interesting too. Whoever orgasms first will have the rest of the week off from

training in addition to owning my women for a week." Vivian's continued scream was only audible to Robert.

"You're kidding, right?" Fabian said. "That's disgusting! I'm not doing that."

"This is an order," Robert said. "Beatrice and Pyra, go as fast as you can! The game begins now!" They did away at their jobs simultaneously and rhythmically.

Robert exhaled heavily. "Vivian, you finally completed your job. I'm proud of you. So proud that I'm going to remove that metal muzzle from your mouth." He galvanized his right hand and melted the titanium sticking to her mouth. Her screams began emanating louder until her bleeding mouth was completely visible.

Vivian screamed, "You sick fuck! You really think these two are friends with you or something?! What kind of person resorts to this?!"

Robert got out of his bed. "Vivian, I need you later to tell me who wins this game. I think I've had enough pleasure for today." He looked at Harry and Fabian and left the Experimentation room.

Robert was in his office now, on his desk. He received a mental notification. He awoke.

He scrolled through his mental feed and saw a message from Vivian: "Harry won." He scrolled a bit further. A message was from Horace. It read, "General Wayne has been found!" He coughed out a bit of whiskey. He immediately got out of his chair and called Horace.

Robert asked, "Where is he?"

"In the infirmary," Horace said.

Chapter 6.1:

"Umm . . . Dr. Aushteiv?"

“Yes, Bobby.”

“You know how I was stuck before? Can you tell me if I’ve made any progress?”

“...”

“Dr. Aushteiv?”

“Bobby. You’ve done more than progress. No. What you have solved is . . . remarkable!”

“Really?!”

“Oh yes, Bobby. You’ve managed to condense all my research into a simple equation! Do you have any clue what this means?!”

“What?!”

“We can now incorporate all of our neurophysical technology into fMRI machines! We would be able to measure all neurotransmitter levels of any brain! We would be able to detect what neurotransmitter abnormality defines a person’s mental illness! We could know exactly which type and what measurement of antidepressants to prescribe to each person! There would be no need for people to suffer from the Russian Roulette system that we have today!”

“This is amazing!”

“This isn’t amazing, Robert. You’re amazing. Your mind is amazing!”

CHAPTER 7: Irritation

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: KEITH KONRAD

Keith Konrad was in his late forties while Horace Blanche was in his late fifties. Wayne’s body lay on a bed in the infirmary. Keith faced the opposite way. He didn’t crave the nudity of an even older man.

“Robert’s on his way,” Horace said. He faced Wayne’s direction, but his blindness directed his vision into oblivion. Zim and Conley stood a few meters from Horace. They approached Horace.

Keith was frustrated with Robert. He needed to express this feeling to someone.

Conley got Horace’s attention with a “Hey!” He grabbed Horace’s shoulder amicably. “That was quite a great find by Zim, huh?!”

Horace nodded willingly. “I was surprised myself. I even–”

“You know, Zim actually has a hard-on for finding escapees. He obtains a rush every time he captures someone.”

Zim amicably grabbed Horace’s other shoulder. “It’s true.”

Horace let out an encumbered laugh. “I’ll be sure to let Robert know who obtained the catch.”

“Ah, you don’t need to do that,” Zim said. He released his arm from his shoulder. “To be frank, I love my job, and I just hope Robert will be able to get General Wayne back up and running to his old self again.” Zim laid his eyes on Keith and slowly strutted towards him.

Conley said, “In all seriousness though, Zim always appreciates when he does get recognition. He loves to please people.” He chuckled and released his hand from Horace’s shoulder.

Horace said, “Likewise, I appreciate you boys always looking out for one another, especially in the Sentinel.” Horace took out his cane from his holster. “I think I’m going to go back to my office. Was a long day today, and you both should be proud of yourselves. Take care of yourselves, too.” He slowly began walking to his office.

Conley said, “Take care of yourself first, ya old man! Love you!” Conley laid his eyes on Keith and approached him.

Zim and Conley covered Keith’s entire frontal field of vision. “That man walks slower the more I see him,” Zim said. “Gotta be the age, huh, Isn’t that right, Keith?”

Keith, irritated, expended a full five-second stare into Zim. “Are you two not fed up with Robert?”

Zim punched Keith’s shoulder lightly. He whispered, “Quiet, man! You don’t want Horace listening in on you.”

Keith said, “That blind sad shit that you take for as a man has no power over me! And I could give a fuck what Robert thinks of me. He’s already fed up with me enough.”

Conley said, “Keith. You need to just take a breather.”

Keith said, “You need to take a step back and perceive this all from a wider standpoint. Robert is too mentally unstable. I wouldn’t be surprised if he kills us all at the end. Whatever empire he’s trying to build is obviously a secret since he hasn’t spoken a word to any of us Sentinel. Except for Horace possibly.”

Zim said, “So what? Complaining’s gonna solve nothing.”

Keith increased the gap of his lower lip from his lower set of teeth. “I’m saying we do something.”

“Do what exactly?” Conley asked. “You trying to overthrow him or something? Why would I even want you over Robert?”

“Yeah either way . . .” Zim said. “I despise both of you.”

Keith said, “Would you much rather have a mentally insane psychopath or me as your leader? You can at least trust me somewhat. And I can promise that I wouldn’t pummel you all to the ground.”

“What’s stopping me from overthrowing him before you?” Zim asked. “Why not take this into my own hands?”

“You would get nowhere without me,” Keith said. “Do you know how precautious Robert actually is? You don’t think that I have some figment of imagination capable of imaging what Robert has in store for us. I have the most knowledge of Robert’s plan as chief of security.”

“That’s not true,” Zim said. “General Wayne does if anything.”

“You mean that unconscious fresh sack of meat exhibiting his naked body to the world?” Keith said. “He knows nothing. And the fact that I barely know much even as chief of security demonstrates how secretive Robert is.”

“Okay, you make an argument. So why not just shoot Robert in the face? Boom. One shot. Mission complete.”

“I’m sorry but it won’t be that easy. I’m convinced Robert has made himself physically invincible considering he implanted a titanium chamber in his arm. He’s probably half-cyborg under that skin for all we know.”

“Okay, fine. Why not just all three of us jump him when he’s alone?” Zim asked.

“Did you not hear about him taking on two neurochemically-enhanced soldiers by himself? The man is in his seventies, yet he’s built like a machine.” He caught his breath. “No. The plan would be to create a big enough crew that could stand any of Robert’s opposition.”

“You forgot about Gordin,” Conley said.

“What about him?”

Conley said, “We’re part of the Sentinel while he’s part of the Myriad.”

“Again, what about him?”

“He seems tight with Robert and Wayne. If he heard us plotting to overthrow, he’d for sure tell them.”

Keith said, “This is why we’re gonna be low-key about this. This will be a slow and steady process. We will slowly begin telling people we trust most our plan. The more Sentinel we gain on our side, the greater chance we have at dethroning Robert.”

Zim said, “Just call this a coup, man. Robert’s ain’t no king to me.”

“So are you two with me?” Keith asked.

Zim said, “I need closure before I do anything. What will you give me in return if you do happen to become leader?”

Keith said, “I’d make you a leader of your own kingdom. I don’t know. What do you want me to say? You two would obviously be my forefront for power.”

“That’s enough for me,” Zim said.

“Not for me,” Conley said. “Before I do anything, I need you to promote Bandu to an executive security guard.”

“Why?” Keith asked.

Conley said, “He’s my cousin. And also he could help a ton if he joined in.”

“So you want family in on this too, huh? Alright, fine.” Keith said.

Conley said, “I highly doubt this will work but like you said, Robert is off-the-rails mentally. I feel this would be our smartest option for survival. Even if Robert does decide to not kill us off in the end, he’ll just make us all slaves most likely. I don’t want to be ruled by a lunatic like him.” Zim agreed with a nod.

“Just to rephrase then . . .” Keith said. “We assemble a Sentinel team slowly but surely under Robert’s nose. Then when the time is right, I’ll organize a secret meeting. But for now, we stay quiet, and don’t tell any of Wayne’s men about our plan. I hope—” Keith stuttered as he saw Robert enter the infirmary from the other side of the building. Two other men followed him. Gordin and someone else Keith had never seen. This other man wore a black leather jacket. He was muscular, plump, and tall. Robert’s walk intimidated Keith once more.

Keith, quieter this time, said, “We will meet—just the three of us—in my office later.” Zim and Conley nodded.

Keith glanced at Wayne’s body behind him just to make sure it didn’t magically disappear. Keith’s anxiety was through the roof. Robert was now within speaking distance of Keith.

Keith, wanting to break the silence, said, “We found him, sir.”

Robert said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you fucked him on my way over here. I am your Monarch. Fuck you, sir. I hope you learn some humility in all of this. Next time, you will bring me my security reports on time.”

Keith wanted to kill him. But he knew another time would be the right time. He said, “Yes, Monarch.”

General Wayne’s chief guard Gordin Myers had a brown complexion of hair. Keith was subconsciously jealous of his hair color.

Gordin walked past Robert and gandered at Wayne’s unconscious body. “Is he okay? How did you all manage to find him?” Gordin asked.

Zim said, “I found him. He was trying to climb up the giant tree walls in the northwest district.”

Robert said, “Nobody asked who found him. Put your pride and ego aside.” He approached Wayne's body.

“I can’t actually believe he’s alive still,” Gordin said. He looked at Robert. “I know you told me that you brought him back to life beforehand, but the truth is I didn’t fully believe you until now. I’m beyond perplexed.”

Conley joined in. “What happens now with him?”

“We implant his memories back in,” Robert said. “He maintains his same neurochemistry, but you can’t neurochemically implant memories with the Formatter. Memories can only be attained through experience.”

Gordin asked, “How is he gonna gain all his memories then? He can’t just relive his past.”

“You’re obviously not knowledgeable of the Memory Metamorphose,” Robert said. “The device entrapped all of his memories right before his passing. He needs to re-experience them though Mass Memory Overloading. Meaning that we bombard his hippocampal neurons with extremely volatile and high speed Gamma waves to alter the dendritic length of each neuron and manipulate each action potential with—”

Gordin said, “I get it. Complicated stuff. Let’s get him to that device as quickly as possible right now. I don’t wanna risk losing him again.”

Looking passed Roebrt’s disappointed face, Keith noticed the intimidating large man behind Robert. Keith asked, “What’s his name?”

Keith refocused his eyes back to Robert’s disappointed face. Robert asked, “Why so curious?” The large man situated his spine in a more upright position. “His name’s Thom. He’s my new bodyguard. He was originally General Wayne’s #0171 guard, but I personally pulled

him out of his command to have him by my side. After what happened with Harry and Faian, I decided to establish a better safeguard."

Keith wanted to reassert to Zim and Conley his claim dealing with Robert's constant precaution. He said, "That was a smart decision, Monarch."

Robert's disappointed look dissipated more. Focusing his eyes past Robert and Thom, Keith saw an approaching TinkerBot. Robert said, "Gordin, don't worry. I recognized your concern, and I'm having Wayne be exported to the Memory Metamorphose immediately." The TinkerBot propelled its cables and placed Wayne's body on itself.

Gordin said, "Good."

"I also need you to be present as Wayne's memories are being processed," Robert said. "Follow me." The TinkerBot followed Robert with Wayne's body. Thom and Gordin followed. Before they left the infirmary, Robert turned around and gave Keith one last look.

"How are we gonna do anything now?" Zim asked. "Don't expect us to get anywhere when he's got a bodyguard around all the time." He looked at Conley. "And why was Gordin being such a pussy for General Wayne. I—"

"I need you both to give me room to think," Keith said. Flustered and feeling a wave of depression coming, he slouched his body over to the floor. "I'm heading back to my office. Come by in about an hour so that we can think of something." He began to walk out of the infirmary with low posture.

Zim said, "What? Why not figure it out now when we're already here?"

"I said I'm not in the damn mood!" Keith said. He left the almost fully-constructed building.

Keith was now in his office, face on his desk. He tapped his right foot rhythmically. His head felt too heavy. He dozed off. He slept.

Keith felt his cheek being scratched. He woke up. His receptionist, Luna, had cut his cheek by accident with her long fingernails. Keith rose up and wiped his finger across his cheek and saw blood.

“What’s your problem?! Why didn’t you tap me on my shoulder to wake me up? Fuck your fingernails!”

She panicked. “I’m so-so-so sorry. I tapped your shoulder but you wouldn’t wake up. You had no areas of skin to feel other than your face.”

Keith flexed the corrugator muscles on his forehead downward towards his eyebrows.

“Please forgive me!” she yelped.

“I’ll forgive you once you tell me why you awoke me.”

“Huh–?! Oh . . . yes! Executive guards Zim Worcestor and Conley Villnavi are out the door saying they are ready for your ‘meeting’.”

He squinted his eyes slightly. “What meeting?” His superego recalibrated the more he awoke. “Oh yeah. That meeting.”

Luna nodded with a fake smile and began to make her way back to her desk. Keith wanted to say something mean to her but was too depressed. He walked past his office, the hexagonal room full of his guards, and Luna’s receptionist desk until he arrived at the entrance door. Zim, Conley, and another person he couldn’t recognize were there.

Before Keith could even ask, the unrecognizable man said, “Name’s Bandu. I’m Conley’s cousin. Judging by your face right now, you don’t seem too stimulated.”

“You don’t seem that wise,” Keith said. “Before I let you into my office, give me one reason why I would need you in this mission of ours.”

Bandu leaned in on Keith’s face. “I’m willing to bet you don’t have a plan as of now based on what my cousin stated with you being sad and storming out of the infirmary. Based on your unstimulated self and unstructured plan, you have nothing. You will gain something from me because I have something.” He pointed his thumbs to the side. “These two men can back me up with ease.” Zim and Conley nodded. Bandu leaned back.

Keith said, “You are full of shit. But you are correct that I have no plan.”

“If you don’t let us in, you’re getting no plan,” Bandu said.

Keith said, “Conley, tell your baby cousin to shut the fuck up already. Come inside.” He walked to his office.

As they walked, Bandu said, “You think I’m a baby?!” I’m three years older than Conley.” They passed the hexagonal room and arrived at his office. “What’s with the wall in front of your desk? Looks out of place.”

Keith jolted back and clamped onto Bandu’s shirt collar. “I’ll end your life if that’s what you desire.” He slowly curled his fingers out as his grasp lessened. Bandu was jittering. He nodded.

Keith was slightly jittering too. He sat down on his chair. He mentally created a new identity of who he was in his head. He exhaled his frustration. He said, “Tell me your plan. I don’t have all day.”

“Manipulation through loyal aggression,” Conley said.

“Speak normal words to me,” Keith said.

Conley said, “Robert loves people who are aggressive and loyal to him. Not people aggressive towards him. But people willing to be aggressive towards others to display their loyalty in front of Robert. Robert is a complicated individual, and through my experience of my job, I’ve been able to analyze his behavior somewhat. For instance, if a guard murders a misbheaviing priosner, Robert will smile, which he rarely does. If Robert could appreciate one of us as a guard enough, he could possibly accept us into his trusted few.”

“Trusted few?” Keith asked.

“The people he’s close with like General Wayne, Bandu, and Horace,” Conley said. “If we get in his circle, we could gain access to his Experimentation Room.”

“For what reason?” Keith asked again.

“Allow me to explain this fully. Once we have access, we can steal off some of Robert’s neuro-converters. We originally thought of asking Harry and Fabian to steal the neuro-converters but they seem tight in Robert’s circle.”

“Hold on!” Keith yelled. “I can’t let you explain something that makes zero sense. Neuro-converters . . . really? Those experimental machines are locked away for our own benefit.”

“Allow him to finish, Keith!” Zim yelled. “This plan is smarter than anything you could come up with.”

Conley continued. “With converters, we might stand a chance in a fight against Robert when the time does come. After hearing what Harry and Fabian were capable of doing to those animate plants, I see promise in those machines.”

Keith said, “You should see failure in them. For one, those converters turn you uncontrollable, and, two, they don't turn you invincible. All they do is manipulate your

neurochemical state. The converters don't offer any physical weaponry or anything to that assortment. Also! I already have access to the Experimentation Room! There's a reason why I've never touched them! Many reasons! No, but I'm curious. Please continue this master-mindful plan of yours."

Conley, Zim, and Bandu all looked annoyed. Bandu, especially. Conley said, "Bandu would basically put on a show for Robert during the Social Status Testing. Then—"

"What's that?" Keith asked.

Zim said, "Robert messaged us that there will be a social status test for all the inmates inside the aquaritorium tomorrow night. You seriously are an old man. Conley, finish your plan."

Conley said, "We expect there to be many inmates trying to rebel during the test, so we plan to have Bandu display exaggerated aggression and hostility in front of Robert. Hopefully, Bandu would be able to join Robert's trusted few. Once in, Bandu would steal the neuro-converters."

"If granted access into the Experimentation Room," Keith said. "Also if he is granted access into Robert's trusted circle'."

"You know what?!" Bandu yelled. "We don't need you! Right guys?!"

"You've done nothing but complain," Zim said. "You won't listen to our plan or offer any sort of insight. If we're taking out Robert, I'm not listening to an old man like you. We're gonna be our own kings. As a matter of fact, we're done with old men telling the youth how to operate and behave."

Conley nodded. Bandu said, "Let the youth prevail. Fuck you, Keith. Sorry but we're doing this without you."

Before Keith could get a word of irritation out, they all ran out his office and dispersed in disappearance. Keith was extremely irritated.

The next night arrived. Keith was in the Experimentation Room. Keith wanted to kill Robert, but he felt he didn't have the balls to do it. He wanted to still kill him though. He was conflicted. He realized that the neuro-converters would solve this conflict.

Clicking the green button, the rotating cylinder presented itself. The cylinder released its floating water sheet that displayed the 17 tabs. The first tab revealed "Neurotransmitter Converter." The rest of the tabs displayed the following.

2. Posterior Parietal Cortex (PPC) Converter [Spatiotemporal Kit]

3. Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC) Converter [Spatiotemporal Kit]

4. Neural Lag Converter

5. Double Thought Converter

6. Neocortex Converter

7. Five Sense Converter

8. Thalamus Converter

9. Vestibular Gland Converter

10. Visual Cortex Converter

11. Hypothalamus Converter

12. Dorsal Laryngeal Motor Cortex (dLMC) Converter

13. Mental-Physical State Converter

14. Stimuli Inhibitor Converter

15. Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (VMPC) Converter

16. Brain Numbing Converter

17. Consciousness Inversion Converter

Keith was overwhelmed. He didn't know what each converter's function was because no descriptions were given. He wanted to change his mind. Maybe this was a bad idea. He was too far in the process already. He had to fully commit to save himself and everybody else from Robert. He selected "Neurotransmitter Converter" since it was the first on the list, and after hearing what Harry and Fabian did, he felt this device would be the most beneficial for physical combat. He inputted the number 1 since the sheet asked how many converters he wanted. The converter came out of the cylinder. Keith picked it up. It felt lighter than he expected. He had no clue on how to insert it into his Hub. He couldn't see his Hub either. He rubbed his right finger against his Hub and sensorially read the holes' placement like braille. He was starting to sweat. He did know that the upper-left hole was for slot #1 just from prior general knowledge. He found the upper-left hole with his fingers.

Holding the neurotransmitter converter with his right hand, he inserted the key-end into the #1 hole. He was shuttering his eyes tightly in worried anticipation for pain. He turned over his wrist to see if his Navigator would display anything. It didn't. He also didn't feel pain.

Nothing was happening. He didn't have time for nothing to work. He didn't want people to see him in Robert's Experimentation Room unaccounted for. He was upset and worried. He began twisting and shaking the neuro-converter frustrated that it wouldn't work. He twisted it to the right, and the Navigator screen loaded. He let go of the converter and focused on his Navigator. Six knobs for six neurotransmitters appeared. Keith let out a nervous laugh, surprised at it working. He didn't know which knob to twist. All he knew was that he wanted to kill Robert. He randomly twisted his dopamine to 75%. He felt an immediate spurt of happiness and aggression. He wasn't worried now. He felt determined. He twisted acetylcholine to 80%. He

started feeling brain zaps. His head shook while he couldn't stop smiling. He felt a surge of strength. All of his past anxiety and depression had faded into aggressive happiness. He raised his norepinephrine to 86%. All his muscles were pulsating. He felt crazier every knob he manipulated. He felt angrier. Saliva dripped down his lips. His body was shaking tremendously. He'd gone super manic. His muscles felt strong and weak simultaneously. Keith no longer had behavioral control over himself which is what he wanted. Now he could charge at Robert without hesitancy.

Keith selected the *Posterior Parietal Cortex Converter* and the *Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex Converter* mindlessly. The cylinder opened the #2 slot first. The PPC converter had a similar design to the neurotransmitter converter but opposite of the key-end was a 2 inch long, 2 inch wide metal piece with graph lines on it. He had trouble inserting the converter into the #2 hole of his Hub since his hand shook too much. He successfully got it in. He twisted it to the right. A second tab on his Navigator appeared. He saw a description for the converter. It read the following.

Instructions: To use this converter, look around 360 degrees, trying to focus on the depth and field of objects. Once you've scanned your environment, you may close your eyes, and you will have complete memory and perception of the depth of your environment.

Keith exposed his teeth with each crooked smile he released while reading the description. He looked at his environment while spinning 360 degrees to test out the converter. He took note of the cylinder's position and all the desks in the room. He finished turning and closed his eyes. He had complete depth perception of where everything was. He could walk while knowing exactly where the cylinder and desks were. He reached his hand out and touched the cylinder with his eyes closed knowing fully well he would. He opened his eyes back up and

pulled out the DLPFC converter. This converter had the same design as the PPC converter except the metal piece's art design was different from the graph lines and instead had a traditional clock emblem on it. He had a better time with inserting it into the #3 hole of his Hub. His Navigator revealed a new tab and instructions on how the converter worked. Two knobs appeared too. The description said the following:

Instructions: To use this converter, adjust the left knob to increase or decrease your reaction time speed. If you—

Keith had a neck spasm while reading. He grinded his teeth. He continued reading.

If you adjust the right knob, your perception of time increases or decreases.

He decreased the left knob to have a reaction time of 0.0001 seconds. Visual information retained into his visual cortex felt almost like light-speed. The knob also displayed he could now see in 10,000 frames per second as opposed to a normal 30-60 frames per second. He increased the right knob to 2.0X speed. He perceived time at double speed. He walked to witness this. His perception of the speed of time didn't mean time itself sped up. It was just Keith's perception. He tried 0.5X. Everything felt slow. However, he was given more time to think thoughts while his physical body moved slower. He moved the knob back to 1.0X. He selected the fourth tab, the *Neural Lag Converter*, from the water sheet. He picked up the converter from the cylinder. His vision began to feel blurry around his peripheral vision. The neural lag converter had the same design as all the other ones except that the art on the metal piece end was a red and blue nerve sprawling in different directions. Keith got this converter into his #4 hole first try. It read the following:

To use this converter, adjust the knob to the time length to which you want to perceive no pain.

The knob was at zero. Keith adjusted the knob to the maximum which was 5 minutes. Keith bit his right ring finger. His pain receptors didn't react. He felt no pain. Additionally, he didn't feel the pain of his muscle aches anymore. Keith smiled more crookedly. He adjusted the right knob of his DLPFC converter to 3.0X speed. He was tired of the long wait. He wanted Robert to be dead and over. He felt as if everything happened quicker. His physical actions seemed to move quicker than his perceptive thoughts. He felt he didn't need to grab anymore neuro-converters. He felt undeniably unstoppable. He ran out of the Experimentation Room. He evaded past Robert's office successfully without anyone noticing him. A bit of diarrhea splattered in his pants. He continued running at 3.0X speed. He ran past the lobby and entered the cafeteria. No one was there as expected. Everyone was in the auditorium taking the Social Status Test. He walked to the end of the cafeteria and saw the door with the stairs that led down to the auditorium. Before he entered, he stopped. His logic of reasoning kicked in for once over his constant emotional repercussions. He needed to enter the auditorium from backstage so that no one would notice him. He left the cafeteria, lobby,and the prison building entrance itself. He adjusted the right knob of his DLPFC converter back to 1.0X speed so that he could think clearer. He walked towards the side of the outside of the prison building where the cafeteria could be seen through a window. There was a small fingerprint scanner on the outside wall. As chief of security, he had access to all fingerprint scanners. He scanned his finger, and the manure below him cut itself into a square. This manure square began to descend underground quickly. He rode the secret elevator. He was now 50 feet underground. A new manure square covered up the top opening to conceal the elevator. He looked at his neural lag converter to see how much time remained. 2 minutes and 31 seconds. He regretted not starting the timer later. As Keith

descended down to 100 feet, he had formulated a plan. He was emotionally stimulated, cognitively enhanced spatiotemporally, and receptively numb to pain. He was ready.

The elevator door opened quietly. Keith heard Robert say, “Three minutes remain.” Keith clenched his fists, and his legs trembled greatly. Keith saw General Wayne in white garments facing the opposite way laying down on the ground. No one was backstage but Wayne. Keith silently poked his head out of the elevator door and turned to the right. He saw the enormous scale of the auditorium but just only the ride side of it. The aquaritorium was illuminated by one light on the glass ceiling. Keith grabbed the gun out of his right hip holster. He took ten steps until he was at the edge of the backstage exit, right next to the curtains. He poked his head out of the right side curtains and scanned the depth of his environment. He noticed the guard’s positions on the sides, the prisoners’ sitting positions, and, lastly, noticed Robert’s position. He got a blood rush to his head from looking at him.

He pointed his gun at the giant light above and shot it. Darkness filled the aquaritorium. A few screams occurred. Keith had complete awareness of where everything was still, assuming that people didn’t move since all objects were cognitively localized in his posterior parietal cortex. Keith dropped his gun and pulled out a knife from his left hip knife holster. Knowing Robert’s position, he charged in the night. He tackled Robert to the floor. Immediately, Keith felt Robert’s resistance. Robert yelled, “What the fuck!” While Keith screamed ferociously with happiness, he successfully put Robert in a submissive hold and stabbed his knife towards Robert’s head. The knife could only break skin. Keith was confused.

Robert laughed wittingly. “Titanium skull.” He galvanized his right hand and grabbed Keith’s left hand. Keith didn’t react to the burning metal. Robert tried to throw a punch with his left hand, but Keith immediately dodged it with his 0.0001 seconds reaction time. Keith, holding

the knife in his right hand, chopped off Robert's right arm. Molten titanium and blood splattered everywhere. Keith screamed in anger, and this time dug the knife towards Robert's heart. It only broke skin again. Keith screamed louder as saliva droplets fell on his disintegrating bloody left hand. Robert laughed more weakly this time. "Titanium heart chamber." Keith dug the knife in Robert's gut. It cut through internal organs. Robert moaned loudly. His microphone captured his audio waves to all the prisoners with the earmuffs on. Robert tried for a weaker attempt of a punch, but Keith easily dodged it. Keith pulled the knife out of Robert's gut and slammed it into Robert's head repeatedly. Stabbing and slamming the titanium skull with his knife, Keith felt as if the skull was beginning to crack. He smiled more and more with each crack he heard.

Keith yelled, "Eventually everyone cracks!" Robert was beginning to lose consciousness. Keith, about to deliver another blow, couldn't bring his right hand down. He turned around and saw the face of Horace. Horace gripped Keith's right hand, and lifted up his cane in the air with his other hand. Keith noticed a difference with the cane. There was a blade at the end of it. Horace sliced off Keith's head.

Chapter 7.1:

"I can't hide the truth from you, Bobby. From what you've described to me, it seems you have an adult psychopathy personality."

"I have what?"

"It is very common for psychopathy to arise more towards adulthood. Judging by your recent impulsivity, misunderstandings with others, and your apparent lack of empathy, it seems though that yours is a later onset than most."

“I’m already 29. I don’t feel like I fit any of that criteria.”

“That’s also common to think. Psychopaths tend to be egocentric.”

“I’m not a fucking psychopath. Fuck psychologists. All you guys do is expose the problem without providing a solution. Speaking of, is there even a cure to psychopathy?”

“Again, I’m afraid not. However, there are options to alleviate the suffering. I can put you on sertraline for the meantime to lower your impulsivity.”

“Why? So that you can stabilize my ‘condition’? Fuck you. I’m not suffering. There is nothing to alleviate. I’m a genius when it comes to understanding mental health. Psychologists don’t understand shit. For that matter, you don’t understand shit!”

“You may feel you’re not suffering, but from an outside perspective, you are. You need to take a deep breath, consider your options, and—”

“No! Shut the fuck up! I’ve developed an fMRI machine that can detect in real-time if I have any neurotransmitter abnormalities, and I didn't the last time I checked!”

“It’s too early for any scan to detect any change in neurotransmitter abnormality. You—”

“All that comes from your mouth is bullshit. Looking forward to seeing you never!”

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“How are you doing, Bobby?”

“Good, Howard.”

“Wanna hear some good news?”

“What is it?”

“The government may potentially fund us. The U.S. government!”

“That’s good to hear.”

CHAPTER 8: Assimilation

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: MAXWELL RUTANO

It was dark. It was loud. It was chaos.

Max couldn't see a thing except the faint lights that illuminated from the guard's helmets. Max had finished his test, and his dividers were down. It was so loud that he could hear through his earmuffs. He no longer heard Robert talk from his earmuffs. He heard muffled screams and gunshots. Max was #8081 of Prison Rotation E. He had spotted where his father sat before the test had ended. He was scared, yet he realized this could be the only possible time to reunite with him. The headgear gadget had detached since he finished his test, so he could move freely. Guards on the aisle next to him were sprinting down the stairs towards the mainstage of the aquaritorium.

Max tried to get out of his seat but was too scared. Some people seated in front of him tried bum-rushing guards with their fists. Some people were still in the middle of the tests, so their dividers blocked them. Max heard a loud crackle sound to his left. There was nothing to his left side but the aisle. He looked up.

The glass ceiling had cracked, and water flooded in rapidly. The water reached the aisle, and a new waterfall formed from a following crack in the ceiling. The waterfall splashed on Max and other people surrounding him. The water carried him down the aisle stairs. The water's force pushed his earmuffs off. His body tossed and turned over stairs, and several of his vertebrochondral ribs broke.

The water finally stopped pushing him. The gunshots and screams were even louder now. He couldn't get up. He heard people yelling things like "this will be the only time to rebel,"

“everybody fight,” and “escape.” Max set his route for his father. Max began to cry as he struggled to run down the stairs in the dark.

He tripped. He fell on his face, heavily impacting his jaw. He looked up again and saw an even bigger crack grew in length. The new waterfall made its way down as Max dove to the side where all the seats were. His vision slowly adjusted to the darkness. He could make out faces now. He rose up and looked down the bottom third of the auditorium. Dozens of guard’s lights flashed on the main stage while some lights moved with the rapids of the water. He spotted his father again. He whimpered in anxiety. He heard a loud stomp to his left. Directing his attention to the sound, he saw a light shine in his face. A gun was pointed at him too. The guard, standing in the aisle, yelled, “Follow me or I'll shoot you!” Max couldn’t move. He had to reunite with his father. There was no other way in his mind. A crack above this guard formed a new waterfall and battered him down the stairs.

This was Max’s chance. A prisoner stuck in his seat struggled to breathe air out of his test dividers. He was drowning from a slightly-leaking waterfall above him. Max wanted to help him. He climbed over the necessary seats to reach him and situated himself above the test divider pool. The prisoner’s hand only touched the air. Max grabbed his hand and tried to pull him out. The prisoner wouldn’t budge. The headgear locked his head in place since he was in his testing phase still. Max cried. He wanted to save him but couldn’t. He yelled, “I’m sorry!” The man screamed underwater. Max let go of the prisoner’s life and proceeded towards his father. He was on the tenth row from the main stage. His father stood in stillness looking at the main stage.

Max yelled, “Dad!” Tears streamed down his face. He got down the ninth and eighth rows. His father turned around. His eyes widened.

His father yelled, “Max!” Seventh and sixth row down. A crack, the length of an entire row, formed above Max. A wall of water shielded his father and the entire main stage. Max screamed and stopped on the fifth row. The water’s power was too dangerous for Max to burrow through. His chance ended. He could only turn back now. There were almost twenty waterfalls spewing from the ceiling. Max planned a route to the exit. Climb up to the middle of the 30th row, climb up the left aisle, climb up to the middle-ish right of the 70th, and climb up the left aisle to the exit. Max worried if his father died. He couldn’t have since Max survived those waterfalls, yet this waterfall was the biggest and most powerful. Max’s worry over his own survivalism kicked in more. He focused back on his route. The prisoner who he had tried to save was dead. Max forced himself to look away. His guilt couldn’t look away though. As he climbed up the seats, he grasped perceptively more of what was going on around him. A herd of about sixty prisoners fought against an assembly of illuminated guards on the left aisle next to the 30th row. Soldiers sprayed their rifles like hoses. Prisoners dropped dead like flies. Every few seats or so, Max saw a dead prisoner or guard. More dead prisoners than guards.

Max was on the 30th row now. He needed to get up the aisle, but the prisoners-guard brawl blocked his way. He changed course and turned right where a waterfall poured. He dove through this waterfall and fell in the right aisle. He saw three guards in close proximity in front of him. He didn’t know if a guard would either escort or kill him. He avoided their streams of light and crawled past them. He sprinted up the aisle stairs. A huge waterfall blocked his path around the 60th row. He attempted to dive through it, yet its force pushed him into a tumble. He dropped to the 55th row. More of his ribs cracked. He couldn’t get up anymore. He cried in pain.

Max felt himself being picked up. A bright light slightly blinded his eyes. A guard had picked Max up. Not knowing if this guard would kill him or not, Max tried to resist. The guard

yelled, “Stop! I’m here to save you.” Max was too hurt and exhausted to fight back. The guard carried him like a baby and began to run to the left of the 55th row. There were less screams now due to either more people having escaped or died. Max passed out.

He awoke in his jail cell bed. His bed covers were kicked to the floor. His eyelids couldn’t cover his eyes any longer. He saw a millisecond-long vision of his father as his perception widened. He tried to get up, but his injured ribs stopped his motor movement.

On the other side of his prison cell doors was the guard who saved him. The guard was in a crouching position. The guard said, “My name’s Lee.”

Max started to cry from pain and guilt. “Why did you save me?! You should’ve let me die! I don’t deserve to be alive!”

“Hey, hey, hey, relax kid. Don’t speak such harsh words about yourself,” Lee said.

Max grabbed his pillow and stuffed it in his face. “Someone died because of me.” Drool and tears painted the pillow a darker shade around his facial area. “And my father is most likely dead.”

“Your father lived. And don’t let guilt eat you up. You’re just a sweet little kid. There was nothing you could do in that situation,” Lee said.

“Exactly! I’m just a little kid who can’t do shit.” Max lifted the pillow from his face as mucus strings disconnected. “Why are you still here?”

“Lighten up a little that your father survived. He—”

“Why should I?! Dead or alive, it doesn’t matter if I’m never gonna see him!”

“I can completely understand your frustration. You just need time to process—”

“Again! Who are you?! Why are you acting all nice to me?!”

“Just know that you have someone looking out for you.”

Max stuffed the pillow in his face again and relaxed all muscles. “Fine. I give up arguing since that gets me nowhere.”

A small pause occurred. Lee asked, “Is that a wooden flute?” Max didn’t respond. “Because I technically would need to confiscate any item that could pose as a weapon,” Lee said. “That being said—”

“Go ahead and take the only item I have.”

“That being said . . . I won’t, and I’m curious.. Where’d you get this?”

Max was no longer sobbing. “I didn’t find it. My friend made it for me.”

“How? There aren’t any resources to craft an item with such detail.”

“My friend, Sawostick. He’s an animate plant. He molded the wood from his own body and severed a part of himself just for this flute.” Max put the pillow away from his face and looked at Lee.

“He seems like he would care deeply for you to do something like that. He’s always by your side whether he’s dead or alive. That’s something you should definitely appreciate. I know I would if I was you.”

Max’s head felt a bit more clear. He took a deep breath. “Thanks for saving my life.”

Lee stood up. “You’re welcome. Do you know how to play that flute of yours?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be your audience.”

“You’ll what?”

“I’ll be your audience. Play it. I’m all ears.”

The wooden flute was right next to the bedside. Max picked it up. “You don’t understand what it’s like to have everything taken away from you. This flute is the only sense of something

that I have." Max closed his eyes and began to play the flute. Harmonious vibrations traveled to Lee's auditory cortex. As each note came out, Max's desire to tear up increased. By the fourth measure, a tear dropped on the third hole of his flute. His finger almost slipped, but the melody still persisted ahead.

He opened his eyes and saw four other guards huddled around Lee. They seemed to adore his playing. Max closed his eyes again and let his brain enter a rhythm state. Over 32 measures in, the intercom noise spliced Max's temporary rhythmic nirvana. He opened his eyes and stopped playing. His cheeks were moist.

Being the only guard who teared up, Lee said, "That was beautiful, Max." The four guards around Lee were nodding.

The intercom said, "Rotate." Max's jail cell opened.

One of the four guards looked at Lee and changed his facial expression. He said, "Why the fuck are you crying? You're soft as a fucking teddy bear." He jolted his hand down and snatched Lee up by the arm. "Don't forget where you are. This isn't a fucking concert!" The other three guards assimilated with the fourth's guard's facial expression. They nodded along.

Lee wiped the tears from his face and fixed his posture. "I-I-I'm sorry. I won't again." He assimilated with their facial expressions. He turned to Max and yelled, "You deaf to the intercom?! Out of your bed! Come on!"

Max was confused by Lee's immediate assimilation. His sudden disregard to human emotion saddened Max. More so, it terrified him. He said, "Don't you remember my ribs hurt! I can't get up!"

"Then I'll force you." Lee approached Max and pulled him by the right arm out of his bed. Max's body lunged forward. He felt an abnormal sensation in his ribs. A painful one. Max

yelled in pain. Lee used his other arm to guide Max's back up. He pushed him forward out of the jail cell. The other four guards maintained their facial expression: emotionless.

Still holding his flute in his left hand, Max yelled, "Why'd you change behavior all of a sudden?! Are you the same as every guard here?!"

"Silence!" Lee yelled. He continued pushing him down the aisle where the rest of the first-floor jail cells were. He guided Max's movement but with brute force and speed. The four other guards followed directly behind Max.

Max yelled, "What happened to your tears?! What happened to your interest in my flute?! What happened to your personality?! What happened—"

Lee yelled, "One more word! One more word and I'm cutting open your ribcage and pulling out every rib one by one!"

As the gatekeeper of neuronal impulses to the pons, Max's cerebellum was fully flooded with neuronal impulses signaling to cry. Max sobbed uncontrollably. This part of his brain was unlocked in its entirety.

Lee walked quicker and pushed Max harder. Max's vision was a wet blob of gray. The whole prison felt this way, vision or no vision for him.

They arrived at the manure field. Lee let go of Max and shoved him forward into the crowd of prison inmates. One of the guards yelled, "Assimilate!"

Max's ribs hurt too much to walk by himself. He didn't feel like moving. An inmate, wearing white garments, as every other inmate wore, turned around to Max. The man saw the weak-abled, feeble, sad body of Max. Max had his right hand over his ribs.

The man asked, "What's wrong?"

"Everything," Max said.

The man said, “Oh.” He turned away from Max and dissipated back into the crowd.

Max heard a scream behind him and turned around. It came from an animate plant. One of the guards who had originally followed Lee twisted the plant’s right wooden arm into a knot. Lee was nowhere in sight.

Max couldn’t understand. He couldn’t understand why no one helped anyone. He didn’t understand how these people’s minds operated.

He took his right hand away from his ribs and tightened his fist. He ingested his pain. He couldn’t handle the pain of others. His tears lowered in pH to sweat. He took step after step. Before his vocal cords could emit sound, an animate plant grabbed Max by the left shoulder. It was Sawostick.

He said, “Don’t.”

Max’s spurt of anger quickly eradicated. “Why is nobody doing anything? He wanted to cry again.

“You can’t expect someone to do anything if their spirit’s been broken.” Sawostick wrapped his right wooden arm around Max. The guard tore off the animate plants knotted right wooden arm. “There’s nothing we can do now. But that doesn’t mean we can’t help bring change in the future.”

Max’s emotional balance scale between sadness and anger kept swaying. “But why can’t we help now? If we wait, more and more people end up suffering.”

“Because then we die. If you’re so adamant about helping people, which I know you are, then consider your own life first.” Max looked at Sawostick. Max always thought of him as a big brother. “All things considered, be happy the flute’s with you.”

“I guess you’re right.” Max wiped off the tears and sweat from his face with his right hand. He lifted up his left hand. “You’re gonna have to help me walk to our spot.”

Sawostick said, “You keep forgetting how strong I am. I’ll carry you.” He picked Max up, giving his ribs a break. Max shut his eyes to cherish a brief moment of relaxation while his body bounced to every step Sawostick took. The screams of the animate plant faded away. A few moments passed. “We’re here.”

Max opened his eyes. He saw Roota. She was an animate plant who was originally friends with Sawostick. She then befriended Max. Due to animate plants physically aging quicker than humans, Sawostick and Roota were technically the same age as Max but they behaved wiser and older. They were at their usual spot next to the curved metal fence. Sawostick set Max down. Roota had her left arm shape-shifted into a harp. Wooden thread spools acted as strings for the harp. Sawostick played the drums, yet he didn’t have a wooden instrument to perform. Instead, he used his wooden arms and banged whatever object near him he found suitable. Reminiscing about all the old times when they would play together, Max cheered up a bit. He enjoyed playing with them. Music was his way of mentally escaping the prison.

Sawostick said, “Hey, Roota. Is your sickness getting better?”

“No,” she said. “I've still had trouble breathing, and I don’t have all my energy back yet.” She saw Max’s grimacing face. “Is everything alright with you, Max?”

“No. But that’s alright,” Max said. He raised his flute. “Wanna play?”

Roota nodded. Sawostick said, “Let’s do this. And a 1-2-3-4!”

Sawostick banged his wooden arms on a pole of the metal fence. Roota strummed the harp harmonically. Max puckered his lips as air escaped from the tiny crater of his mouth. Their music playing would tend to gather small audiences as they got into their third or fourth song.

Their melodies were originally crafted from their minds. They strived for originality. Sawostick and Roota each had their eyes closed, lost in the music. Before Max closed his, he wanted to visually admire the flowers as he did every time they played. He noticed the usual beauty of the light-green bioluminescent flowers had been decaying. They stood shorter.

Max squinted his eyes open. He heard a nearby footstep over the music. It was the same man. The man who had said, “Oh” and turned his back around. The music cut out. The man had snatched Max’s flute away from him. He snapped it into two.

Max’s emotional balance scale immediately dropped to anger. He poorly punched the man in the jaw with his right hand. The man barely flinched. Max screamed, “When will you people die?! Why do you do this to us?!”

The man lifted Max’s right arm to the point where Max’s feet weren’t touching the floor. The man used his other hand to snap Max’s right arm perpendicular to how his elbow would normally bend. Max couldn’t breathe. The man let go of his arm and Max fell to the floor. The man stomped on Max’s ribcage. The man asked, “What’s wrong?” Max’s right arm had gone numb. All of his pain receptors were ignited in his ribcage. He couldn’t scream with his vocal cords. He only screamed out in breath. All of his muscles were convulsing. His entire nervous system felt like it was beginning to shut down.

An unexpected fist let fly. The man was proficiently punched in the jaw. He fell to the floor. Max could barely see this other man. This other man yelled, “What’s wrong with you?! Who the fuck beats up a kid?! You fucking animal! ” He repeatedly punched the man in the face. Splashes of blood landed on Max’s eyelashes. Max saw a womanly figure toward his peripheral. This other man got up close to Max’s visual field. “You okay, buddy?! Someone get a cloth or something to stop the bleeding!” The womanly figure got up close too.

It was Harriet. She had the number #9991 ingrained on her Hub. She said, “Max?! Max! Who would do something like this to you?! You’re gonna be alright! Don’t worry!” She brought out a white towel and padded it on Max’s ribs. She shedded a few tears. Max’s vision slowly grew fuzzier.

Sawostick yelled, “ A towel’s not gonna do anything! His bleeding is internal! He needs real medical help!”

“There’s no medical help in a prison!” the other man said. The voices slowly grew quieter.

Roota said, “I may have a solution. I can shape-shift my way into his body. I’d have to stick my arm down his mouth and stretch down to his ribs. I could use my fibrous leaves to possibly lessen the flow of his internal bleeding.”

Harriet said, “That’s not how the gastrointestinal system works. You can’t shape-shift down to his ribs. You’d need to sever internal organs to reach his skeletal system.”

“No I can still do it,” Roota said. Max’s noiseless screams stopped emanating. He lost consciousness.

He woke up. He now felt the pain of his broken right arm. The pain in his ribs hurt even more. The perception of his pain fluctuated as his wakefulness increased. His scream had a voice this time. He was propped up to the metal fence. He saw Sawostick, Roota, Harriet, and the nameless man huddled around him.

Harriet's eyes lightened up. “My God! He’s awake! Max, I know that—” Max’s scream postponed her message. “I know your pain is immeasurable, but Roota was able to stop the internal bleeding. Focus on your breathing.” Max breathed through his screams.

“My name’s Terry, by the way,” the nameless man said. He had the number #9992 ingrained on his Hub. He wore glasses with green frames. “Listen to what Harriet said.”

Max tried to focus on his breathing. He tried to hold in his screams.

Sawostick looked at Terry. “Thanks so much again for stopping that neuro-degenerate. What’s seriously wrong with some of these people?”

Terry said, “Some people aren’t meant to be born.”

“Not exactly true,” Harriet said. “The man could’ve been depleted on Dopamine Coins. Any major change in neurotransmitter level can seriously demolish someone’s neurophysiological state. So he’s not entirely to blame.”

Sawostick said, “I don’t care how mentally fucked someone’s neuro-whatever could be. There’s no excuse for beating up an innocent child. He deserved every punch.”

Terry nodded. He said, “I’m astonished that no guards interfered in our brawl.”

“I’m not,” Sawostick said. “They treat us like animals. They don’t care if we kill each other. Their only job is to keep us in.”

Max let out a scream. He had trouble maintaining his breathing.

Terry yelled, “Man, fuck this place! This is a living hell!”

“Don’t agitate him,” Harriet said. “He’s under a lot of pain. Let’s change the subject.” A pause. “Roota, what you did with your healing powers was magnificent. How did you manage to pull that off?”

Roota said, “My fibers can grow thinner than the size of a human pore. I, therefore, could shape-shift my way into any bodily system without severing any organs. I then enlarged my fibers around the veins and arteries next to his ribs. I had to use up a lot of energy since I was sick, but I was more than willing to.”

The intercom noise went off. “All animate plants! Please report immediately to the infirmary!”

Chapter 8.1:

“I won’t go through with it. I have to tell them, Bobby. What you have discovered is an extreme invasion of someone’s mental privacy. It has the potential to help people, but I see it more as a threat to humanity.”

“Dr. Aushteiv. Come on. Please don’t tell anyone. With a neuropsychodynamic mass-energy oscillatory hohlraum, we would be able to fix anyone’s psychological problems. Isn’t that what our original plan was when we partnered together. We both said we wanted to eliminate all suffering in the world of mental health. And with speed too. We’ve done research for almost 15 years together now. Don’t ruin our chance of saving the world.”

“I told you before, Bobby. It can save the world. But more importantly, it can destroy lives. It can do more than that. It could allow anyone to control and tinker one’s mind to their liking. It’s too extreme for the human species. If this sort of technology fell into the wrong hands, they could lead armies of people with mind-control. Not only mind control. But the ability to change any components of their id, ego, or superego.”

“So you’re stubborn to the idea?”

“Yes, Bobby. I’m sorry. I have to tell them. Carrying information around like this is too heavy and dangerous.”

“Dr. Aushteiv. I’ve known you since high school. We’ve gotten to know each other over the years. We bonded and we grew closer as friends day by day. And—”

“I agree, Bobby. I’ve enjoyed every moment of research with you. I always like to stick around when there’s a genius around. However, I’ve seen change in you over the years. To be

frank, you've become more volatile in behavior, and it's gotten to the point where I've begun to worry about you. I miss the old Bobby. The Bobby who was excited when he made a new achievement in research. The Bobby who would be excited to learn new laws of physics. The Bobby that misled, respected, and took the time to follow my lead. Not the Bobby that has become detached. I feel you've gone astray mentally dating back a few years ago. And once again, I worry for you."

"You miss the old me? Dr. Aushteiv, what are you talking about? I've always been the same. You can trust me."

"I'm sorry, Bobby. I can't keep this a secret."

"It's no secret that everyone around the lab hates you. In fact, I hate you more than all of them."

"Bobby. Please get out of my way."

"I've always hated you. You annoying old piece of fucking filth."

"What are you doing?!"

"Eliminating your suffering!"

"Let go of my neck, pl—pl—please!"

"I'm sorry. I can't"

"KHAAA—"

CHAPTER 9: Manipulation

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ROBERT RUTANO

Robert woke up. He was on a TinkerBot in his office. Thom, Horace, Zim, Conley, and Bandu were huddled around him. He had trouble feeling. He opened up both of his palms. His

right palm was now robotic, as was his entire right arm. The arm was made of titanium. A galvanic titanium stimulator chamber was also implanted in his titanium arm, and this time it wasn't concealed. The entire crown of his head was wrapped with bandages, as was his whole chest area.

Horace said, "The Bot's got you on many painkillers as of now. Your titanium skull and heart chambers were partially fractured."

"How did I live?" Robert asked. "Who stopped Keith?"

Horace said, "The visual cortex converter . . . saved your life. I managed to sense Keith in the dark. More importantly, I got bigger news."

"Why—" He coughed. "Why wasn't Thom there to stop him?" Robert stared at Thom lethargically.

Thom displayed fear but didn't show it. He said, "I wasn't told about the Social Status Testing."

Robert's dilator naris muscles near his nose contracted upward without revealing his teeth. His stare dictated a change in energy. "You weren't told? I wasn't told to survive this ambush. Nor was I told by my bodyguard he would be absent during supposedly the most likely time for a surprise attack." Thom's shoulders tensed up.

Thom said, "I'm sorry. Look, I know I fucked up, but just know that I won't mess things up next time."

Robert said, "Fate chose me over you. If I had died, you would've lived. But I'm sorry. I don't control fate's game." Robert ignited his new galvanic stimulator and galvanized his metallic right hand. He spewed out liquid titanium at Thom's face.

As his screams were muffled, Thom fell to the floor and involuntarily slapped his hands over his face. More titanium drenched his hands and face. His body oscillated all over the place. Robert cut the titanium flow. Thom moved less and less as his air circulation was cut. Robert stopped directing his attention to this site. Zim, Conley, and Bandu had stepped back from the body whose heart would stop beating in about 20 seconds. Robert asked, “So what’s the bigger news, Horace?”

Horace, who never directed his attention to the site of Thom, leaned closer to Robert. “The animate plant and human cross-breeding transpired. You told me to initiate the go-ahead once the ‘infirmary’ was fully constructed.” Thom’s body lay motionless.

Robert jolted his posture forward. “How’d it go?”

“It worked out. However, there was a minor problem in which a Sentinel soldier, named Lee Harvey, escaped with an animate plant concubine. Don’t get too worked up about it. I’ve ordered Harry to lead a search team to find them.”

“I don’t care about one fucking guard,” Robert said. “Tell me how many prisoners survived.”

“6,186.”

“What a fucking disaster.” Robert fell back into the mattress. “None of this should’ve happened. I should’ve twisted his neck the first infraction he made!” Robert inhaled and scanned the other three men in the huddle. “Why are you three here?

Horace said, “You wouldn’t be here without them. They safely evacuated you out of the aquaritorium.”

Robert rubbed his eyes. “Really?” He looked into the eyes of Bandu. Bandu switched focus from Thom’s body to Robert. “I can admire that. I don’t admire the fact that you three

couldn't sense Keith's irritation towards me. If you had been more perceptive of your superior, you could've let me know, and we could've avoided this entire incident." The three glanced at each other.

Bandu swallowed air. He said, "We had no idea. We always took Keith to be a strict but efficient chief. We never could've seen this coming."

Zim said, "To pardon ourselves for not envisioning this incident, we would like to ask you if we could be by your side at all times to steer clear of any future threats that may be against you." Conley nodded affirmingly, staring at Thom's body.

Robert half-smiled. "Quite a proposal. So you all wish to take on the job of that man down there?" He pointed at Thom. "I'm flattered. I'm more than happy to give up this recent job opening for you three. Be aware of the stakes, of course."

"We accept," Zim said.

Robert rested his robot arm back on his bed. "It seems most appropriate that I get you all up to speed with what's truly going on then. Can you three be entrusted? Or will you end up like a Thom or a Keith?"

Bandu said, "You can trust us with your life. And it's your judgment too. If you want to use us as target practice, we would be delighted. We are your loyal slaves."

Robert jumped off the TinkerBot. He ignored the pain. "You mind if I run a little test then?" Bandu nodded half-willingly. "Horace, can you hand me the device that was implanted in Thom's back?" Horace nodded. He crouched and took off Thom's shirt. The device stuck on the lower part of his spine. The size of a hole a thumb and pointer-finger create when touching each other, it reflected the same 3D structure resembling a subterrene with a flat surface sticking to his back. The sharp end faced away from his back. "If any of you backstab me literally and

figuratively, you will literally be backstabbed. I call it the Backstabber. Was never really good with creative names. The blade will pierce when I give it the signal." Horace ripped it off Thom's back. Bloody pieces of ripped skin stuck to the sticky flat-end of the Backstabber. "I believe Bandu was the most determined to take on this job. He can be the first to utilize the device. The TinkerBot can easily stick that onto your back with a thermo-silicon adhesive."

Bandu's spine bounced up and down in posture. "Yeah . . . I'll be the first."

"So please lay on your stomach on the Tinkerbot. It's a very similar process to the installment of your Navigators."

Bandu nodded hesitantly. He got on the TinkerBot. The Bot locked him in place with an enwrapping belt along his torso. The Bot released its cables from the right side of the mattress. A cable arm and a glue stick cable appeared. Horace handed the Backstabber to the cable arm. Another cable arm popped out and picked off the bloody pieces of skin from the Backstabber's flat-end. It then raised Bandu's shirt up to his armpits. Bandu began to shake his tender back. The glue stick discharged the thermo-silicon adhesive on the flat-end. The cable arm placed the burning metallic flat-end on Bandu's back. He reflexed back and screamed as the glue burned off his spinal skin. The belt disappeared and so did the cables. Bandu tried to reach for his back to cool off the steaming glue. He yelled, "I'm done, right?! This fucking hurts!" Bandu jumped off the TinkerBot.

Robert nodded. "Horace, remind me to create two more Backstabbers for Zim and Conley." Robert added this reminder to his oscillatory thought log. Fixing his posture, he walked over to Bandu. "You're officially my bodyguard." He was up to his face now. He grabbed Bandu's shirt collar with his robotic arm. "You're not gonna be like Thom, right?! I slowly began

to take a liking towards him. But guilty as charged." Robert laughed. He let go of his collar. "Horace . . . tell me something."

Horace said, "Yes, Monarch."

"I—" Robert heard footsteps. He turned around. It was Gordin and General Wayne. Gordin had his eyes locked on Robert as he walked.

Gordin said, "I can't believe it! You're standing! You've recovered quicker than I expected. As it turns out, General Wayne suggested checking in on your condition." As Gordin got closer, he devoted his eyes away from Robert. He saw Thom's dead body that was behind the TinkerBot. Gordin's poised look degraded to anxiety.

Robert said, "General Wayne, how is your memory doing?"

Gordin asked, "What happened?" Robert disregarded his concern.

General Wayne noticed the body. He said, "You're not gonna tell us what happened?" Robert forcibly switched gears to Gordin's original concern.

Robert said, "Fate had chosen me over him." Gordin analyzed the missing piece of skin on Thom's back. "He was a mistake from the start. A fat piece of shit who slept on the job. And he almost cost me my life."

General Wayne asked, "What happened?"

Robert said, "I fucking told you already."

"What happened to you specifically?"

"You know what happened."

"I don't remember."

Robert paused. “I would expect you to not remember your past life, but you witnessed this incident in your new life. The memories of your past life will come to you with time. Have you lost all of your crystallized intelligence?”

General Wayne spoke emphatically. “I feel like myself. However, I forgot all about my goals and motivations I had in the past. I’ve lost my sense of purpose. I fucking hate being confused.” His voice loudened. “Robert! Tell me! Why am I alive? Why did you bring me back?! What were we planning to accomplish?!” Wayne had his hands on Robert’s shoulders. “A life without purpose is a life not worth living!”

Robert said, “I can give you a mental refresher. I resurrected you so that we could fulfill what we originally had planned. To rule a kingdom side-by-side.”

Wayne clenched onto Robert’s shoulders tighter. “I know myself, and that doesn’t sound like something you’d say.”

“You shouldn’t be one to make judgements. Consider the fact that you are still going through a memory metamorphosis. You don’t know yourself. It’s only an impression. Memories make up a person. Not assumptions and inferences.” Robert stared into Wayne’s blank soul. “Now get your hands off me.”

General Wayne reserved his hands back. He calmed down his voice. “So it’s true? We’re gonna rule an empire together?”

“Of course,” Robert said. “You probably don’t remember, but we were best buddies in high school. We both made so many sacrifices to get to where we are now. You physically sacrificed your body for us. It was commendable, and you wouldn’t remember that either.”

Wayne began to cry. “All I remember is being in an eternal plane of empty darkness.” He hugged Robert.

Robert tried to accept the hug. “You have every right to be terrified. Most importantly, you should let me handle everything from here on out. You’ve done more than enough. The last thing I need you to do is to give the go-ahead of installing Hubs for your Myriad. You just need rest until all of your memories return”

“Thank you.” Wayne breathed out. “Hubs? Myriad?”

Robert said, “The Myriad are your soldiers. We require Hubs out of everyone who will live in the kingdom of ours.”

General Wayne said, “I don’t know anything about that. Gordin has been handling all that business.”

“Well then. You can have Gordin tell them for you then.”

“Okay. Yeah I can do that.”

Gordin made himself more noticeable to Robert. “I’ve taken complete control over the Myriad until General Wayne recovers. What’s this you’re talking about regarding Hubs?”

“It’s a requirement,” Robert said. “General Wayne is on board so it will be your job to inform Myriad to comply.”

Gordin said, “What’s the purpose of having Hubs? Don’t the Sentinel have them already? I thought we had enough neuro-enhanced guards.”

“Don’t argue with me,” Robert said. “General Wayne is your superior, so you will comply, and the Myriad will further comply.” Robert stood closer to Gordin. “Anyway . . . please tell me where we stand with numbers with the Myriad.”

Gordin said, “We lost around a fourth of our men, but I heard the Sentinel suffered greater numbers.”

Bandu said, “So you guys lost around 250 men?” Gordin nodded.

Horace chimed in. “The Sentinel lost 869 men to be exact. Something not to be proud of.”

“Fuck!” Robert yelled. “I hadn’t realized we lost that many men. Goddamn that Keith son-of-a-bitch!”

Gordin crouched next to Thom’s body. “Hey,” Gordin said. “Random question. Why is Thom’s body missing a piece of skin there?”

Robert yelled, “Get the fuck out, Gordin!”

Gordin asked, “Why? What’d I do wrong?”

Robert said, “Everyone in this room did something wrong! I did something wrong! You did something wrong! Go back to your office and figure out preventatives to stop being wrong in the future.”

Gordin asked, “Why do you only desire that I leave though?”

“You wanna know why?!” Robert yelled. “It’s because you’re a fucking neurotic! Lend me a break one time!”

General Wayne said, “Robert, I don’t remember you being like this. I sense you’ve changed since I died.”

Robert said, “Well, maybe you don’t remember the old me then. Do me a favor, and get some rest until you’ve regained your memory.” He pointed to his office door. “I want you and Gordin out of here!”

Gordin matched Wayne’s look of distaste towards Robert. Gordin rose from the ground and attempted a poised walk towards Robert. He tilted his head and studied Robert. “What else do you have planned that we aren’t aware of? There’s something you’re not telling us.”

Robert said, “Your head’s off-center. My only plan is the plan I told you both. I don’t need to further explain myself.”

Gordin said, “What, that you’re going to rule a ‘kingdom’? I find that whole Social Status Test a load of horseshit! I find belief in the fact that you’re engaging yourself in something much more astronomical. Something far more complex.”

Robert said, “Believe what you want to believe. Regardless, you’re obligated to take heed of my command.” He lifted his robotic arm and released steam from the galvanic chamber stimulator. “Do I need to ask twice?” Gordin’s lips overlapped each other. His attempt at being poised became a failure. He nodded.

Wayne said, “Okay. We’ll leave.” Robert’s spine arched the most out of everyone in the room. Robert put his robotic arm down.

Wayne walked through the office door. Gordin followed. As he walked out of the room without poise, Gordin’s eyes were locked on Robert. They were gone.

Robert’s robotic arm was shaking. So was the rest of his body. His left arm clung onto his robotic arm. Both of his arms shared vibrations. They shook intermittently. He stared at Thom’s dead body. He bit his bottom lip and began to punch Thom’s head repeatedly. He screamed in fury as he cracked the skull. Blood got caught between the titanium tendons of his arm. Thom’s brain was exposed. He punched harder and harder. He stomped on his cranium. Thom’s head splattered all over the floor. Robert yelled, “I’m the one who’s winning this game!” He galvanized his hand and spewed titanium over the lake of blood. The blood mixed with the liquid titanium. Blood steamed.

He got up. He breathed in deeply. He looked at the lookers. He said, “It’s time I truly tell you all what’s really going to happen.”

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: LEAFLET

Leaflet was an animate plant concubine. She was assigned to mate with Sentinel soldier Lee Harvey in the Cross-Breeding Quarters, which was originally prefaced as the infirmary. They both escaped together.

Leaflet and Lee hid on the fourth floor of an empty building in the reservation city. They crouched beneath a window. A sliver of brightness filled up the room. Leaflet's breath panted quicker than her heartbeat.

Leaflet asked, "Are we safe?"

"I think so," Lee said. "For now."

"Well, how long will 'now' last us?"

Lee hugged her. "Try not to worry. I'm here to protect you no matter what happens."

She attempted to smile at him. "When's the baby expected to come?"

"Horace told us within the next four hours."

"How many hours has it been?"

"Two."

"How are we able to cross-breed species?"

"We were all injected with something before we began the mating process. I have no clue what it was."

"Should I be worried? What if our baby isn't meant to be born? What if I bore a monster? Isn't this what Robert would want from this whole cross-breeding scheme?"

“Robert never alerted the Sentinel about any of his plans. He only told us what to do at any given moment. Don’t worry about it. It’s the parents that dictate a baby’s future. No one is born a monster. That’s not how nature works.”

“But what if our baby doesn’t work with nature?”

Lee wrapped his shoulder around her. “You’re thinking too much. Just know how much I love you.”

Leaflet hugged him tighter. “I love you too.” Lee placed his lips on the bristles of her largely-proportioned venus-flytrap mouth. Her mouth sucked onto his cheeks while they kissed. They expressed their love freely.

Leaflet stopped kissing. She said, “What’s the point?”

“Of what?”

“Of this. What’s the point of being together if it’ll only last a few moments? We can be killed at any moment.”

“It doesn’t matter the time we live. All that matters is the experience we live. Even if our love lasts a few minutes, that’s okay. Death is an imminent unknown. Love is a known force. We can only perceive what we know, and, therefore, we should appreciate this force.”

Leaflet sobbed. “It’s the unknown that scares me. It can strike at any time, and I wish I knew when.”

“Fear is a known too. Love is stronger. Me. You. We’re both stronger than the unknown.”

“How can you maintain yourself? Why did you, of all guards, decide to escape with an animate plant? Why did I, of all animate plants, decide to escape with a human? Were we so hooked on the idea of love that we lost all sense of rationality?”

“We were the only rational ones. Everyone there is going to die because of Robert. I can sense his radiating evil. He’s a time bomb. He’s mentally sick. Fucked in the head. Beyond that, if no one stops him, the human race will most likely come to an end.”

Leaflet rested her head on his shoulder. “Why must everyone suffer so much? How can one man inhibit so much pain unto others?”

“A summation of too much suffering. No empathy. The only way to handle pain is by inflicting it on others. Every guard is mentally forced to adopt this behavior.”

“Reason why I love you. You’re so wise and not like the rest of those monsters. You’re kind. You have empathy. You’re capable of loving others.”

“Not entirely true. I’m not proud of some things I did.”

“Like what?”

“Like, for example, I—” A flurry of footsteps coming from the first floor could be heard.

“Hey,” a distant voice said. “I hear voices!”

Leaflet shut her green eyes and squeezed Lee’s body in fear. Lee whispered, “Fuck.” The footsteps multiplied in number and increased in volume exponentially. Leaflet’s body was shaking. “Leaflet.” She opened her eyes. “You’re going to have to save us. Do you think you could jump us out through that window? Can your body handle the fall?” Lee shared the same level of concern as her. Leaflet’s leafy eyelids shivered. She rose and looked out the window. A large horde of Sentinel shoulders stood at the base of the building.

Her wooden legs trembled and felt as brittle as twigs. She said, “Yeah I can handle that fall. But I don’t think we’d manage to escape that horde the second we’d land.” She shot out two quick questions. “Are there any other windows? How many stories is this building?” The two were no longer whispering. The footsteps intensified.

Lee stood up. “Fuck! I’m not sure.”

Leaflet turned away from the window. “We have to go upstairs then. Come on! I’ll carry you!”

Lee nodded. She picked him up with her versatile body and malleable rooted arms. Utilizing her springy legs, she sprinted up each flight of stairs thrice the speed of a human being, skipping 6 steps with each stride. The footsteps decreased in noise. They were on the eighth floor. Leaflet’s desire to be with Lee masqueraded all of her past fears. She yelled, “How many floors are there?!” Her physical heart continued to pound. Her heart for Lee was louder. The flights of stairs ended. They were on the tenth floor. A hatch to the roof appeared above her head.

Cradled like a baby, Lee yelled, “Open the hatch! Hide on the roof!”

Stretching her right arm, she pulled down the hatch lever. It was almost night. She propelled Lee and herself up with a powerful hop. She landed on the concrete roof. Every other building in their vicinity was the same height. Leaflet stood still. She didn’t know what to do.

Lee said, “Close the hatch so they can’t get to us.” Leaflet nodded and closed it.

Leaflet could still hear the approaching footsteps, but they were muffled. She said, “They’re still gonna reach us! We have no other option but to jump.”

“To the ground?! That’s a 10-story drop! No way you can survive that.”

“To the other building, I mean. It’s risky, but it’s all I can think of.” Her masquerade began to fall. Her fears began to seep in. The distance between the ledges was close to around 20 feet.

Lee yelled, “Leaflet! Look at me!” All of her fear laid in her green eyes. She reflected this fear to Lee. “You can do this! I fucking believe in you!”

Leaflet put on this masquerade again. She raised her right foot high up in the air. She distributed all of her physical energy into the first stride. She sprinted for the other building. One stride. Two stride. Three stride. She leaped. She felt the air tickle all over her body. Her potential energy was equivalent to that of her kinetic energy, yet she felt more of an energetic rush from the kineticism itself. She landed on the other roof with both feet. She exhaled with mania.

Someone from below yelled, “I saw them!”

Her masquerade and mania quickly dissipated. She stood still again. She panicked. She looked down at Lee’s cradled body. “What do I do?!”

Lee yelled, “You do it again! Keep going!”

She scanned around for other rooftops. The closest one was to her right, yet the gap was close to around 30 feet. She yelled, “I can’t! I won’t make it!” The sound of a rooftop hatch opening signaled Leaflet’s hearing. She turned around. A Sentinel guard came out of the hatch from the building she’d hopped from.

The guard yelled, “Spotted them!” He pulled out his gun.

Lee yelled, “Do it!”

Leaflet shut her eyes tightly for a whole second and set her course to jump the 30-foot gap. She raised her right foot higher this time and implanted it hard into the ground. She thrusted her body forward with all of her force. A gunshot went off. She wasn’t hit. This was her moment to completely drape herself in the masquerade. One stride. Two stride. Three stride. Four stride. She leaped. She looked down at Lee’s uneasy smile for a brief millisecond. She looked ahead. Her trajectory was short. Her feet weren’t going to make it.

Cradling Lee with her arms, the outside of her branchy fingers grazed the building wall until it became a sudden physical bump. Leaflet shifted her right arm up and cradled Lee with

her left arm. Knocked back a few inches from the bump, she fell until she felt the indenture of a window sill with her right hand. She clamped onto this small protrusion of a wall and was jolted up and down from the sudden shift in gravity. Lee fell out of her cradle. She grabbed onto four fingers of his left hand. She looked down. It was a nine-story drop. She physically couldn't survive the fall. She looked back and saw more Sentinel guards with guns on the rooftop of the first building she had hopped from. She was the target of their aim. Her masquerade didn't fully cease to exist. She put it on.

Pulling herself up with her right arm, she lunged into the glass window and shattered it with her head. She dove in an upward motion into the inside of the building, flinging along Lee with her motion. Gunshots went off. She dodged them again. She tumbled on the hardwood floor of the inside. Lee tumbled atop her. The glass cut her branches. She clung onto Lee and dove away from the window's opening. More gunshots went off but she dodged these too.

An outside voice yelled, "Ninth floor! Ninth floor!"

Lee's head suffered a major cut. Blood dripped down his scalp. He was no longer smiling, and his eyes seemed less bright to Leaflet. Weakly, he said, "Keep going. We're almost at the finish line."

Leaflet got up. She picked up Lee. Physically exhausted and suffering major wooden tendon aches, she wanted to faint. She climbed upstairs to the 10th floor. She looked up. There was no rooftop hatch. Footsteps enlivened from the bottom floor. She put on the masquerade for the final time. She didn't need to be asked what to do. She knew what to do.

She aimed at a window ahead of her. She sprinted forward, taking her longest strides she'd done in her lifetime. One stride. Two stride. Three stride. Four stride. Five stride. She broke the glass, jumping over the outside window sill. Her hang time felt infinite. This gap was

close to around 35 feet. Her trajectory seemed on point. She had enough mid-air height to clamp onto the ninth-story window sill.

She bumped into the building wall. However, her speed had been so great that she wasn't knocked back by only a few inches. This elastic collision bumped her a few feet away from the wall. Reaching her right hand out to clamp the window sill, she was horizontally short by three inches. She free-fell down. Her descent felt never-ending.

Until it ended. Her back snapped as she hit the dirt floor. She screamed as her wooden head curled in deformity from the impact. She suffered the majority of the fall for Lee. She no longer could put on the masquerade. She bellowed like a dying animal. Tears flooded over her green eyes. She screamed, "FUUUUUCCCCKKKKK!" She couldn't handle the pain. Due to animate plant bodies being more susceptible to physical damage, she suffered from a higher threshold of pain than humans. Lee's inelastic collision with her had cracked her wooden torso.

Leaflet couldn't focus on any other stimulus but her pain. Lee, whose entire face was covered with blood, yelled, "I'll take it from here!" Lee struggled to pick her up. He had suffered too much physically to demonstrate any strength. "Let's both work together on the count of 3!" Leaflet continued to wail.

She screamed, "FUUUUUUUUCCCKKKKK!" Lee grabbed her by her mangled back. He screamed as he attempted to pick her up.

Leaflet and Lee screamed, "FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCCCCCCCCCCCKKK!"

Leaflet felt her body beginning to rise. Their screams matched in pitch. Her body began to slowly move forward. Lee's "FUUUUUUUCCCCCKKKK" superceded Leaflet's "FUUUUCCCKKK" in volume and vocal length.

Leaflet's entire body was discombobulating. All of her tendons shook. All of her branches became twigs. The masquerade revealed itself even after what supposedly felt like the final time. She blinked out the lake of tears.

She and Lee were about 20 feet away from the entrance of the building that she had failed to enter. She continued to scream. Yet she heard a footstep over her scream. She turned to her left.

A Sentinel guard popped out from the side of a building. Leaflet's green eyes dilated. She screamed, "LEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Lee looked to the side. He dropped Leaflet's body to the floor. He screamed, "HAAAAARRRRRRYYYYY!"

Harry had his gun aimed at Lee. Harry yelled, "What are you doing?! Are you seeking to die?!"

Lee screamed, "DON'T DO THIS! I GIVE UP! DON'T KILL US!" Lee fell to the floor.

Harry put down his gun. "If you agree to be a prisoner, I won't shoot!"

Lee yelled, "HUH?!" He rapidly pulled out his gun.

Harry pulled out his gun.

Harry was too slow.

Lee shot Harry in the head.

Leaflet continued to scream in pain. Lee bawled. He attempted to pick up Leaflet's body again before Sentinel guards arrived. Screaming and bawling were the only two things Lee could emit from his mouth. As he carried Leaflet's body, he yelled, "I'm sorry!"

Leaflet's entire body shut down from the pain. She lost consciousness.

She woke up. It was almost pitch black. Lee and she were underneath a staircase on the fifth floor of a building. A small pool of blood sat stagnantly next to her torso. Lee had an incessant smile on his face. He whispered, “We lost them.” The blood on his face had been all dried up, looking like he wore red face paint. Leaflet’s pain continued to persist. She began to moan. “Shhhhh. We don’t want to make any noise just in case they’re continually searching. It’s been two hours since you went out cold.” Leaflet couldn’t think or talk. Pain talked to her as she thought about pain. “We were lucky Harry lowered his guard. I still feel guilty for shooting him though.” He smiled incessantly still.

An immediate insurmountable wave of pain hit Leaflet. The baby was coming out. She couldn’t conceal her screams. This passed the normal threshold for pain for animate plants. A new form of pain had evolved as this pregnancy did not follow the normal laws of nature. It was an unnatural pregnancy. It was unnatural pain.

The baby was born. This new species was an unnatural product of an animate plant and a human. It was an animate human. The baby acquired bones with leaves and branches weaving around them. It had a human face with a venus flytrap mouth. It acquired leafy hair. Its integral structure was made of wood and bone. Its hands flaunted flesh while its feet flaunted wood. Leaflet found it hideous. She fainted again from the pain overload.

She woke up. It was the brink of dawn. Her vision was blurry. She couldn’t get up from all the pain she’d endured. She saw Lee crouched in the corner staring and appearing horrified. She looked to her right.

The animate human had completely evolved in size. It crouched with its hands folded in its lap. It was 12 feet tall. It was more hideous than before. The creature spoke. It said, “I was

waiting for you to wake up. I was trying to make conversation with my father, but he doesn't seem too interested."

Lee said, "Leaflet. I was wrong. Some things can be born monsters."

Leaflet couldn't speak still.

The animate human said, "I decided to name myself Omega. What do you make of that male name?" No response. "Anyway . . . I was telling your 'Lee' how much I loved you and was looking forward to your wakefulness. He kept insisting that I was going to hurt you, but I never would lay a finger."

Leaflet's green eyes watered. "You love me?"

"Of course," Omega said. "I don't." He stood up and dove towards Leaflet's laying body. Using his mega strength, he cut open Leaflet's insides with his sharp wooden fingernails. She screamed.

Lee pulled out his gun. He shot Omega in the head. The creature however didn't die. It only flinched as this bullet was minuscule as a scratch. Lee repeatedly shot him. Omega flinched more and backed away from Leaflet. Omega yelled, "I'll be back with more of my kind!" He grunted as he strode away to the window. He shattered the window with his right fist and dove out of it.

Leaflet moaned and moaned. Lee put away his gun. He put his face up to hers. He cried in empathy. "I need you to run as far away from here as you can! I'll come back for you!"

Leaflet yelled, "Why are you leaving me?!"

Lee said, "About that thing I wasn't proud of doing . . . I wanna make up for it. I'm going back to save this boy named Max. He doesn't deserve what's coming to him. Nobody in that prison deserves it."

“What about me?! Don’t you love me! Why are you leaving me?!”

“If you come with me, you’ll die. If you love me, you will listen to me!” Lee cried.

Lee ran downstairs.

Chapter 9.1:

“Hello? Sharon, is that you?”

“It’s me, Dad.”

“Oh. Hello, Bobby. Can you remind your mother to turn off the stove in case I left it on? You know, me being blind and all.”

“Mother is dead. I murdered her. You must’ve not heard, considering your hearing is aging poorly as well.”

“You did what?! I’m going to kill you, you little shit!”

“You’re going to do nothing in your condition. So let me ask you a few questions before I kill you too.”

“If I could see you, I’d poke out your eyes!”

“Why did you never care for me?”

“Why’d I never care for you?! It’s because you’re not my son! I never chose to raise you!”

“Why might that be?”

“I knew you were trouble the day I heard you discussing your neuro-whatever-the-fuck! You were smart. And you may have found things to better the world, but I knew there was something scary to you. I never understood why your mother was so supportive of you. She should’ve seen the future ugliness you would become!”

“She was supportive because she loved me. She had heart and soul. But you didn’t.”

“Why did you murder her then?!”

“Because I’ve never loved her. I've never loved both of you. You two were holding me back from my vision of world domination since birth.”

“You are truly a psycho! You are demented! The only thing that stands is that you aren’t my son!”

“Your perception of reality is not reality. Goodbye.”

CHAPTER 10: Resolution

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ANDREW RUTANO

Andrew felt the manure of the manure field on his back. He had trouble maneuvering his back. He smelled the shit. He saw darkness since his eyes were closed. To his left, middle, and right, he saw Kevin, Rufus, and Shruburb all standing above him.

Andrew said, “Someone kill me.”

Kevin said, “Get up.”

“No. Fuck off. I can’t handle the pain. I can’t handle being away from my children as they suffer. I want to die. Yet I can’t handle death as I would be leaving my children behind. I wish I didn’t have to exist for a brief period of time!”

Shruburb leaned towards his face. Shruburb said, “Pain. It’s what differentiates us between the living and the dead. Those who cannot handle it simply die.” Shruburb slapped his face. “I am telling you this because you must desensitize yourself to the pain. Pain is what makes you stronger. Avoiding the pain makes you weaker. It makes you prone to death.” Andrew felt his right cheek get slapped harder. He saw the morning sky and Shruburb’s disgruntled face as he opened his eyes. “Are you this weak?! This is not the Andrew I know! You’ve been through so

much already, and you want to throw it all away! You've come too far to give up!" Andrew felt the strongest slap of the crescendo.

Andrew squinted his face. He rubbed his red cheek. He yelled, "Fuck!" He rose from the floor of shit. He jolted his arms into his torso. "What the fuck is wrong with me?!"

Rufus said, "Nothing is wrong with you, man. We all feel like dying. You're not the only one. But you gotta keep pushing through. We all do."

Andrew spit the dryness out of his mouth. He flexed his hands and made his metacarpal bones visible. Andrew yelled, "Then why are we all still here?! When are we gonna bust out of here?! When are we finally going to escape?!"

Andrew saw Kevin staring through the metal fence solemnly. Kevin said, "Do you ever just wonder how we end up places? Do you just—do you just think what life would've been like if Robert had never done any of this shit? I should be in my apartment with Andrew. I should be planning on having a wife soon. I should be planning on having a family. What's a man in his mid-thirties doing in an enslaved virtual world?"

"Look," Rufus said. "We could all go around sharing sad personal monologues. Or we can act and find a stop to this bullshit."

Andrew said, "If we're gonna escape, we're gonna need help. Where's that man who was so insistent on helping us?".

"Me," a voice said. Andrew turned around. He saw Alonzo. "I can genuinely assist you all now. I've developed a plan that's more than full-proof." Andrew saw Natasha alongside him. "It's going to be extremely risky. However, I'd say our odds of staying alive inside the prison are slimmer than escaping the prison successfully."

Andrew asked, "Are you always hearing in on our conversations?"

Alonzo said, “It’s a possibility.”

“Forget that,” Kevin said. “Tell us your plan.”

“Wait,” Andrew said. “If we’re legitimately escaping, I’ll need my children with me.”

“Not possible,” Alonzo said. “It’s impossible to establish contact with inmates from other Prison Rotations.”

“Why can’t we break that rule?”

“Did you not hear me correctly? There’s no remote possibility.”

“Okay, fine. Out with the plan then.”

“Are any of you familiar with the Consciousness Inversion neuro-converters?”

“The what?”

“Guessed not. Now listen to this. If you wouldn’t guess, I was listening in on another conversation of two guards a few days ago before the aquaritorium disaster. They spoke on how Robert was considering utilizing these neuro-converters on his Sentinel before prisoners. From what I gathered from them, these neuro-converters are a means of escape. They lead to a sub-virtual world or as they put it: ‘you are free to live life by your own choosing and will.’ Apparently, it’s a world where you create your own reality with your own imagination. And you live even if your physical body passes. I'm lastly guessing that Robert created this dimension for his Sentinel as a relaxation place for when they are exhausted from their job. If we could obtain access to these consciousness inversion converters, we could perhaps escape to this sub-virtual dimension.”

Rufus said, “I don’t believe a word of that. A virtual dimension to another virtual dimension?”

“Shut up, Rufus,” Andrew said. “How would we get our hands on them?”

“That’s gonna be the tricky part,” Alonzo said. “We’d need a Sentinel guard to cooperate with us.”

Rufus said, “How could we possibly reason with the Sentinel? They're practically programmed to be monsters.”

“Through brute force,” Alonzo said. “Kidnapping and torturing them seems to be our best option.”

Kevin said, “This seems too ambitious and far-fetched.”

Andrew said, “As much as I wish to escape, Kevin’s right.”

“I also feel the need to tell you all . . .” Alonzo said. “That while listening in on the conversation of those two guards I heard them say that Robert had been planning on making an ‘announcement’ to all prisoners and animate plants anytime soon. And using my best judgment based on how hostile Robert can be, I don’t think this is something to take on lightly.”

“Meaning what exactly?” Andrew asked.

Alonzo said, “An ‘announcement’ most likely implies an impending doom for—. I can’t comprehend specifically what Robert could have in mind, but I can imagine it being an eventful disaster.”

Rufus asked, “Why should we trust what you say?”

Alonzo stretched his eyebrows. “Why in God’s name would I lie to you all? What would I gain from sharing this? Think it all out. If you try to deduce, you won’t be able to come up with ulterior motives.”

Shruburb said, “He’s speaking the truth. He really wants us to escape with him. Even if he did lie, he would have nothing to obtain from deceit.”

Rufus said, “I guess.”

“So you’re with us?” Natasha asked. “I know I can’t speak much for you guys, but you all must believe my husband. Our will to live is much the same as yours.”

Andrew saw the group of five as a whole. He asked, “So what should our plan be?”

“We fuck a guard up,” Kevin said. “But we have to lure him to an area where there are no witnesses.”

“But how?” Rufus asked.

“I’ll do it,” Andrew said.

Rufus asked, “When though?”

“I’m gonna do it fucking now,” Andrew said. He turned around from the collective five. He walked away. As he left speaking range, Rufus said, “But how are we gonna convince them?” Andrew was out of speaking distance. He didn’t know how he would convince them. But he still walked.

Kevin yelled, “Where the fuck are you going, Andrew?!” Andrew walked faster. He was out of yelling range.

Andrew stood in the middle of the manure field. He was surrounded by white garments of other inmates.

He was shoved to the floor. A man grabbed him by the shirt collar. The face of this man was not brightened. His face winced.

Andrew was punched in the face. His nose cracked. Blood seeped. Andrew was punched again. His vision grew blurry. The man cried. He said, “I’m sorry.” He dragged Andrew by the shirt collar. Andrew was still conscious. His physical body said otherwise. The white garments in the crowd remained stagnant. He was pulled along the manure. Andrew dozed off. Time passed.

Andrew was slapped. He looked up. Three muscular men surrounded his field of view. The man in the middle pulled out his Dopamine Coin Transferer from his Hub and plugged it into Andrew's Dopamine Withdrawer. The man withdrew 1,000 coins from Andrew. The man disconnected the Transferer from Andrew's Hub. The man said, "You did well, Cameron."

"I did what you said," Cameron said. "Could you please spare some of your dopamine now?"

"I don't spare," Waldune said. "You earn through action and—"

"I did act!" Waldune said.

"And begging," Waldune said.

Cameron screamed, "I am begging!"

Waldune said, "Where's the body motion? Where's the performance?"

Cameron fell to his knees. He ripped out the remaining hair from his almost bald head. He screamed, "I beg!"

"Now that's something," Waldune said. "Since I'm feeling a tad generous, I'll lend you 5 coins." Waldune transferred 5 coins to Cameron's Hub.

The man threw his hair in the air. He yelled, "Thank you so much!" He fell face-first in the manure and sobbed. The man to the left of Waldune disconnected Waldune's Transferer cable from Cameron's Hub.

Andrew witnessed this entire exchange as he recovered physically.

He said, "So this is what you do, huh? Taking advantage of the depleted. You're a sick man."

"You're a dopamine-poor man. You're almost at zero while I'm at a happy 33,131 coins. You're the neurochemically-sick man. Not a neuro-degenerate though. This man below me.

Cameron. He's a neuro-degenerate. The poor fella is at -11,301 coins. Hardcore depression, lethargy, and desperation are all that makes up this person."

Andrew wiped the blood away from his nose. "Can't you empathize with the man? Are you narcissistic or are you just so plentiful on dopamine that pride is all you're able to feel? You're neurochemically sicker than all of us."

Waldune said, "I'd be more careful of what you say next. If you threaten me in any way, my buddies will gladly pulverize you." The two muscular men raised their posture. "So get the fuck out of my sight." The muscular man to his left grasped onto Andrew's shoulders and lifted him up into the air. He threw Andrew. Andrew glided across the manure as he fell. His head tapped lightly next to someone's foot from the impact. The person with the foot looked down at Andrew. He kicked him in the face. Andrew's nose bled more.

Andrew yelled, "God fucking damnit!" He struggled to get up. The man with the foot pushed him even farther from himself and Waldune's group direction.

He dove into the manure harder. Andrew blinked it out. He got up with struggle.

He walked fast as his muscles convulsed. He saw a Sentinel guard on the inside perimeter of the manure field. The guard was shorter than him. Andrew found this more approachable. He dodged all of the white garments. He was a few feet away from the guard. He opened his mouth.

He was pulled to his right side by his shirt collar. His collar had been stretched tremendously. He saw the man who pulled him. It was Kevin.

Andrew yelled, "Let me go!"

Kevin said, "I don't think so."

“Fucking let go!” Andrew punched Kevin in the jaw. Kevin let go of his shirt collar. Andrew ran for it. He cried. He yelled, “I’m sick of this shit! When will it end?!” He looked back. Kevin chased him down.

Andrew tripped on a prisoner’s shoe. He fell. Kevin caught up to him. He grabbed onto Andrew’s left arm. Andrew screamed, “When will you let go of me?!”

Kevin yelled, “Relax, Andrew!”

Andrew sobbed. “No! I want to die! But I don’t want to die! I’m tired of the suffering! I don’t give a fuck what Shruburb said about desensitizng yourself to the pain! It’s too much!”

Kevin tightened Andrew’s wrist. “Andrew, please. Get a hold of yourself!”

Andrew yelled, “I wish I couldn’t perceive pain! I wish I was emotionless! Why have emotions if all they do is bring constant excruciating pain?! Maybe all of these apathetic monsters have it better than us! Maybe that’s why they still have the will to live while I don’t!”

Kevin let go of Andrew’ arm. He sobbed too. “None of that is fucking true! People who don't have emotions suffer more! Being unable to perceive pain brings them more pain! But they don’t show it! Because they can’t show it! They’re lost souls!” He slapped Andrew across the face. He screamed, “BEING EMOTIONLESS IS WORSE THAN DEATH!”

“How would you know?!”

Kevin yelled, “Look at them all around you! Look at your father! You think he likes who he is?! He’s given the impression that he likes himself because all of his excessive irritability overshadows his logical thinking! Let me repeat again! They are lost souls who need help!”

Andrew lost all energy to speak anymore. He let his tears do the talking. Kevin said, “Our emotions don’t bring us pain. They help handle the pain.” Kevin put his arm around Andrew’s

shoulder. “Take a deep breath. I actually have good news for once. Alonzo is in the process of luring a guard to an area where no guards have sight.” Andrew inhaled. He exhaled.

Andrew closed his eyes. He inhaled deeper. He exhaled greater. He opened his eyes. He wiped away his tears. He said, “I’m just so tired.”

“Well,” Kevin said. “Assemble all your energy because we need your help in executing our plan.”

“What plan?”

Kevin said, “Alonzo already told us about it. I’ll tell you later. We should head over there right now. They might need our help in case things don’t go too smoothly.” He offered a hand to Andrew.

Andrew grabbed onto the hand. He said, “You’re a great friend.”

“Thanks,” Kevin said. “We better run. Follow me.” Kevin booked it. Andrew followed at the same pace. As they ran, Kevin said, “I hope they’re able to physically suppress the guard.” Andrew dodged the white garments. “I wish I hadn’t wasted so much time to be honest.”

Kevin ran laterally to the left more. Andrew kept up. They passed more white garments until there was an empty gap of just manure. At the corner of the fence curvature, Andrew saw Rufus, Kevin, Natasha, and Alonzo standing closely together. So close that the sides of their bodies concealed what was behind them.

Kevin said, “Hurry, Andrew.” Andrew and Kevin approached the tightly-knit pack of humans. The pack glanced at Kevin and Andrew’s presence. “Where’s the guard?”

“Good,” Alonzo said, back turned towards the fence. “This is the reaction we would want other guards to sustain.”

Kevin said, “What do you mean?”

Alonzo stepped to the side, away from Natasha. A Sentinel guard was tied to the metal fence by Shruburb's branches. Andrew stepped back. His legs and arms were inwardly bent towards the focal point of his body. His mouth was covered by Shruburb's arm. He breathed out heavily from his nose.

Kevin yelled, "Shit! How did you guys—"

"Shhh!" Rufus expressed. "We don't want to direct any attention." The guard breathed louder and in quicker breaths. Rufus turned towards the guard. "Why is he breathing like that? I think he's struggling to breathe. Is he about to die?"

Shruburb asked, "Should I let go of his mouth?"

"Not yet," Alonzo said. He walked up to the guard's face. "You gonna keep quiet? And listen to what we told you before?" The guard nodded rapidly. He hummed under the branch. "If you say or do anything out of line, we'll end you." Alonzo looked at Shruburb. "Uncover his mouth." Shruburb retracted his arm branch away from the guard's mouth.

The guard said, "I couldn't—" He was out of breath. "I was dying. I have a deviated septum and can only breathe out of one nose hole." He breathed in deeply. "It feels so good to breathe again."

"We could care less," Alonzo said. "Just give us the converters."

The guard finally got a hold of his breath. "Yeah. Just don't murder me. And follow my plan that I thought up while held up to a fence." He looked around the meatshield. "I'm a nice guy. My name is Enzo, too, if any of you cared."

"We don't," Alonzo said. "What's your plan?"

"You seem like a complete downer. I—" Alonzo slapped his face. Enzo realigned his head. "Okay, relax. One of you would have to guise as a captured prisoner where I would lead

you to the Experimentation Room. I could possibly get away with saying that one of you is a test dummy for a neuro-converter. I could say it was an order. I'd figure it out on the spot."

"That sounds a bit promising to me," Rufus said. Alonzo still had his face locked on Enzo. "What do you think, Alonzo?"

"It'll do," Alonzo said. "So who will be the one to—"

Andrew said, "I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna get us out of this mess."

"Okay, that's sorted then," Rufus said.

Enzo asked, "Can I have my helmet back?" Shruburb picked up his helmet next to the base of the fence. "By the way, I won't help unless you untie me from this fence" Shruburb retracted all of his branches, and Enzo fell to the floor. Shruburb handed the helmet to him. "And I want dibs over the converter too. I want out of this place too."

"Doesn't make a difference who obtains them first," Alonzo said. "But sure. You can be the first."

Enzo put on his helmet. "So who's gonna be my lucky prisoner?"

"I am," Andrew said.

Kevin said, "Let me do it, Andrew. You've been through too much as of lately."

"No," Andrew said. "I already told you. I'm doing it."

Enzo stretched his muscles. He said, "I'm convinced I developed arthritis from that position I was in. So . . . are you ready? What's your name?"

"Andrew."

"Alright, then," Enzo said. "I'm gonna need to cuff you."

"Do it."

Enzo pulled out a pair of handcuffs. He cuffed Andrew. Enzo said, “Don’t say a word when I’m around guards.”

“You better not say a word about our plan,” Alonzo said. “You’ll have six people who’ll want you dead.” Enzo nodded, grabbed Andrew’s right shoulder, and guided him forward. They passed more white garments and manure terrain.

Andrew scanned the guards atop the watchtowers next to the manure field gated entrance. Enzo squeezed Andrew’s shoulder tighter. He whispered, “Just look straight.” Enzo brought Andrew so close to the front gate that he almost made contact. Andrew looked straight.

A guard from the left watchtower said, “What the fuck you doing?”

Enzo said, “Please open the gate for me. I was ordered by the Monarch to run a series of converter tests on Inmate #—” He took a short pause. “0001.”

The guard asked, “Since when?”

“Since now.”

“We were never alerted about anything of that nature.”

“Look. Do you really want me to tell the Monarch that you are resisting orders?”

“No. I—”

“Good. Then open the fucking door.”

The gate began to open. Andrew glanced up at the left watchtower. There were five guards on this tower. He couldn’t read their faces due to their helmets. The gate fully opened.

Enzo pushed Andrew forward. Andrew looked straight again. The lobby doors were ahead of them. Enzo said, “I played that well, didn’t I?”

Andrew said, “Just hurry up. We can’t buy more time.”

“Calm down, downer.” Enzo and Andrew made it to the lobby doors. Enzo opened them. “We’re almost there.” He turned Andrew to the left. They walked down this hallway. They turned left at the dead-end to another hallway. “Cross your fingers the Monarch isn’t in his office.”

Andrew whispered, “This is my father’s office?”

“Your father is the Monarch?!” They made it inside the office. The chair behind the desk was empty.

Andrew said, “Yeah. Is that an issue or something?”

“No. I didn’t expect that. That’s all.” Enzo continued to push Andrew forward. “We’re lucky he isn't here.” A door stood in front of Andrew. “Now we pray no one is in the Experimentation Room.” Enzo opened the door. No one was in this large white complex. Andrew had never seen this room too. “We hit a double jackpot.”

Andrew said, “This seems too easy.” Enzo let go of Andrew’s right shoulder.

“I can uncuff you from here,” Enzo said. He uncuffed him.

“Hurry up again,” Andrew said. “Get the converters. Hurry.”

“Relax, you downer.” Enzo was near a wall.

He pressed a green button. A rotating cylinder presented itself. Floating water sheets displayed 17 tabs.

Andrew said, “Jesus. What is this?”

“All 17 neuro-converters.” Enzo selected #17. Andrew read the rest of the converters.

“What do all of these mean? What’s a ‘neurotransmitter converter’?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.”

“Let’s bring some other kinds of converters, too.”

“No. That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“They might give us an advantage when we escape.”

“No. How many consciousness inversion converters did you guys need?”

“Shit. I’m actually not sure.”

“I’ll just grab 200.”

“200?!”

“Yeah. The Monarch has thousands of converters. I doubt he would notice too.”

“Whatever. Just hurry up for the last time.”

“Downer.” Enzo inputted the number 200 on the water sheet. 200 consciousness inversion converters spat out of the cylinder. They fell on the tile floor.

Andrew yelled, “Holy fuck!” The converters looked like small black keys to Andrew. He picked one up. He analyzed it. “How are we gonna transport these?”

“Use your shirt as a pouch,” Enzo said. “You’re the one who needs to hurry up now.”

“Shut up,” Andrew said. He dropped the one converter. He bent down. He bent the bottom of his shirt forward with his left hand and scooped up a handful of keys with his right hand. Andrew repeated this process. “Help me.” Enzo got down to the floor. He scooped keys with both hands and dumped them in Andrew’s shirt pouch. Enzo repeated this process.

They had scooped all of them. Andrew got up, holding the shirt pouch with his right hand. He said, “Okay. Let’s both hurry outta here.” Enzo nodded and got up too.

They speed-walked out of the Experimentation Room. They swiftly galloped past Robert’s empty office. They walked down the hallway. They turned right. A guard stood in front of them. He looked down at Andrew’s shirt pouch. “Hey! What the fuck?!” the guard yelled.

Enzo said, “Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. Relax.”

The guard said, “Who gave you permission to withdraw this many converters?! Why the fuck is an inmate with you?! This is—” The guard got closer to them.

Enzo said, “This can all be explained!” The guard stopped approaching. “Let me just—” Enzo pulled out his handgun. The guard’s eyes dilated as he was punctured through the frontal lobe with a bullet.

Andrew loudly whispered, “Fuck! Why’d you do that?!”

Enzo said, “Thank the heavens for my silencer. Let’s both hurry up before anyone spots the crime scene.” He shoved Andrew forward. Andrew slipped on the dead neuronal blood. He tried to get up. He quickly smeared the blood on the tile floor. Enzo lightly pushed him forward. “We gotta hit the triple jackpot.” They both began to run. They turned right again. They were in the lobby. Andrew stained the floor with his bloody footsteps. He scanned the lobby. They faced the opposite way of the reception desk. Four guards walked away from behind them.

Andrew got close to Enzo. “How the fuck do we get past the gate looking like this?”

Enzo paused. “Firstly, take off your shoes. And secondly, relinquish some of the converters you're holding. I take that back. Relinquish the majority of what you’re carrying. Bring as many as you can fit in your pockets. I should handcuff you again too.”

Andrew said, “Let’s go back to the hallway to avoid suspicion.” Enzo nodded. They headed back to the hallway. Andrew saw the dead guard again. He quickly took off his white shoes. Shirt pouched unfolded. 200 converters hit the floor. Andrew stuffed a handful of keys in his left and right pockets. “Hurry. Cuff me.”

Enzo cuffed him. “Let’s go.” Enzo speed-walked. Andrew followed in his socks.

They made it to the lobby again. Andrew scanned it again. No eyes were on them. Enzo opened the lobby doors. He whispered, “Just look straight.” They walked on the dirt trail. They

arrived at the gate. Andrew looked straight through the gate at the manure field filled with white garments.

A guard, atop the watchtower now to the right of Andrew, asked, “How did your converter tests go?”

“They went great,” Enzo said. “I tested the vestibular gland converter on him.”

The guard said, “Really? How did he react to it?”

Enzo took a short pause. “He reacted to it just like everyone else did.”

The guard said, “I see. What does the converter exactly accomplish? Because I’ve never actually seen anyone use it.”

Enzo took a pause. “Oh, you know. It affected all of his brain stuff. I wouldn’t know all the details too as Robert only ordered that I run the series of tests. He never specified that I analyze or take note of how Inmate #0001 would react.”

“Okay,” the guard said. “I guess that makes sense.”

Enzo took a long pause. “So could you open the gate for us? As I said, the testing is over.”

The guard took a short pause. “Sure.”

The gates began to open. Andrew glanced up to his right. He remembered. He looked straight again. The gate opened fully.

Enzo grabbed onto Andrew’s right shoulder. Enzo pushed him forward as he followed. They walked to the right to head back to their original manure-field standing position. They passed the stagnant white garments.

Enzo said, “We hit the triple jackpot.” Andrew npdded.

“Uncuff me now,” Andrew said. Enzo uncuffed him. “We still need to hurry. They can find that fucking dead body at anytime.”

They continued to walk forward. Andrew first saw Alonzo’s face and then the rest of the group. They waited, sitting in a circle. Alonzo met eye-contact. He rose and smiled. The rest of the group stood.

Andrew was at the group’s forefront. Shruburb was the first to get closest to Andrew. Shruburb said, “Success?”

“You bet,” Andrew said. He grabbed a consciousness inversion converter out of his right pocket and presented it like a piece of art. Shruburb reached his wooden hand out. Enzo snatched it from Andrew’s hand.

“I’m wasting no time whatsoever,” Enzo said. “Someone insert this into my #17 Hub hole.”

Andrew asked, “Are you crazy? Why now out of all—”

“Let him do it,” Alonzo said. “He has dibs.”

Enzo said, “Fuck it. I’ll insert it myself.” He read the holes like braille and inserted it in the most bottom-right hole. A crackle noise went off. He fell unconscious.

Kevin yelled, “Wh-what?! Why’d he fall to the floor?”

Alonzo stepped forward towards Andrew. He dug both of his hands in both of Andrew’s pockets. He grabbed the handfuls of converters and tugged them away from Andrew’s possession. Andrew yelled, “What the fuck!” Alonzo put the converters in his pockets. He took off his white shirt. “What the fuck is going on?! Why the fuck you take them away from me?!”

Alonzo’s face: blank. He turned his back towards Andrew. Both of the rhomboid major muscles of his back opened up with titanium exhaust muzzles. His back became a jetpack.

Andrew was too slow to make a move. The exhaust muzzles blasted with fire. Alonzo levitated 15 feet above the manure. Andrew only gravitated.

Alonzo yelled, “Who wants to escape from this prison?! I’m offering a chance to escape to another dimension for 10,000 Dopamine coins! I only have 23! This is a first-come, first-served opportunity!”

Andrew couldn’t move. He saw Kevin grab onto Natasha’s shoulders. He yelled, “What are you two up to?!”

Natasha said, “We’re seizing an opportunity.” She shoved Kevin away.

Andrew began to hear murmurs. Now noise. Now commotion.

Andrew turned around. A hoard of white garments began to assemble.

Kevin yelled, “Are y’all fucking nuts?!” Andrew turned to Kevin. Kevin threw a punch at Natasha. Natasha barely reacted. She returned a much harder punch back. Shruburb charged Natasha.

Andrew turned around again. White garments began to parade Andrew’s personal space. People behind the front view of his hoard began running. Andrew turned to Kevin. Shruburb had Natasha tangled in branches. Andrew was pushed from the back. The commotion grew louder. Andrew fell. People trampled on his back.

Andrew got up and pushed away the white garments surrounding him. He looked up. Alonzo levitated while carrying someone with white garments with his left arm. It was Waldune. Alonzo had his Dopamine Coin Trnasferer attached to Waldune’s Hub. Andrew said, “Everybody stop.” The density of packed white garments was at its peak directly underneath Alonzo. “Everyone stop!” White garments shoved and screamed. Hands were up directly underneath Alonzo. “This isn’t supposed to happen. This wasn’t supposed to—” Someone’s hand got caught

in Andrew's mouth. He shook the hand away with a head shake. Andrew screamed, "EVERYBODY STOP! THIS IS ALL—" He was shoved to the floor once more. "THIS IS ALL A SETUP! DON'T USE THE CONVERTERS!" He was in a sea of manure and white shoes. "FUCKING STOP USING THE—" A white shoe stepped on his neck. His neck slightly cracked. "STOP USING THE CONVERTERS!" Tears, blood, and manure lit up his taste buds. He attempted to stand. "FUCK YOU, ALONZO!" More white shoes stepped on his back.

Andrew's shirt collar levitated. He choked with his cracked back as he was pulled up from the manure floor. It was Kevin. He dragged Andrew through the white garments. Kevin yelled, "I'm gonna get you outta here, Andrew!" Andrew closed his eyes. Bodily forces bounced and impacted him as he was pulled to his left. He wailed.

Andrew screamed, "THIS IS ALL MY FAULT!" Tongue blood flowed down his jittering jaw. "KILL ME!" He was pulled quicker. He bumped harder with the white garments, but there were less bumps.

"Andrew!" Kevin yelled. He grabbed onto Andrew's left hand in addition to his shirt collar. He pulled him faster. The shouts and bodily forces were less. "Fuck! We're gonna figure all this shit out! Don't give up!" He stopped dragging Andrew.

Andrew opened his eyes. There were less white garments. He saw Shruburb and Rufus by Kevin's side. White garments continually shouted. "Jesus, Andrew," Rufus said. "Are you okay?!"

Andrew let out a bloody cough. His body started to give out. "You need—" He inhaled as blood passed down his trachea. "You guys need to warn everyone that the converters are a trap!"

"A trap?!" Kevin asked. "How?!"

"It's my fucking father! He's behind all this shit! Tell them for me! Trust me! Please!"

“How do you know?” Rufus asked.

Andrew screamed, “JUST FUCKING DO IT!” Blood filled up his septum. He spoke every word he could.

Kevin yelled, “Alright! Me and Rufus will! Shruburb, you protect Andrew!” Shruburb nodded. Kevin and Rufus charged in the white garment moshpit behind Andrew.

Shruburb crouched next to Andrew. “You’re right, Andrew. Your father must’ve planned this whole charade ever since we first met Alonzo. But I don’t understand. What would his motive possibly be?” All Andrew could do was nod. Shruburb turned around. Andrew just noticed Enzo’s unconscious body. Shruburb approached it. He got close to Enzo’s face. Andrew had tuned out all of the white garment commotion. “He looks like he’s breathing still.” He grabbed onto Enzo’s shoulders. He tried to push Enzo’s body closer to his chest. Enzo’s body wouldn’t budge.

Shruburb pulled him harder. Andrew heard the loudest crack. Enzo’s skull discombobulated and cracked as Shruburb pulled his body away. A supernova of blood exploded. Blood reached Andrew. As Shruburb’s pull motion ended, a floating solid clear substance appeared where Enzo’s head used to be. A tiny spider rested on this floating substance. Enzo no longer had a face. Fractured bone and blood laid on the manure. His brain suffered a major hemorrhage.

Andrew gargled blood as he screamed at this sight. Shruburb hopped away from the body and screamed.

Andrew’s scream was in competition in noise level with the new screams of the white garment moshpit. Still laying on the manure, Andrew shifted his head to the screaming

competitors. Alonzo still levitated above, yet he wasn't holding Waldune. He was holding onto someone else. Andrew forced himself to get up.

White garments violently danced around in a circle. Inside the circle was Waldune. Every individual's scream couldn't be separately deciphered. There was only one unified scream. White garments attempted to steal Waldune's converter. Waldune held the key up with his right hand as he was brutally battered and shoved. White garments clawed and scratched his bleeding arm. Someone dove on his head. Waldune's arm sank as he himself sank into the sea of white garments. He couldn't see where Kevin or Rufus were.

The prison intercom went off. "Prison Rotations A-E, please report to the outside field at once. Rotate!"

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: INMATE #7031

[DA - 29]. g*imme some fucking dopamine . . . it's so crowded . . . get your hands off me . . . I need it more than all of you . . . I need some . . . I can't handle it . . . let me live again . . . fucking just give me the consciousness inversion key . . . I hate my life . . . escape . . . I'm in fucking Dopamine Coin withdrawal*. "I need a key!" *I'll kill anyone who gets in my way . . . I'll stab them . . .* "I need it the most!" *hahahahaha . . . I wish I was dead . . . no . . . I need to live . . . I'm going to live . . . fuck! . . . a key!* "Give it to me! I NEED IT MORE THAN ALL OF YOU!" *The key is so fucking close . . . fuck all of these white garments . . . ugggghhhhh . . . it's so close!* "AHHHH! GIVE ME IT YOU BASTARDS!" *I'm going to kill all of these fuckers . . . it's too close! . . . I miss my old self! . . . this is the only fucking way! . . .* "PLEASE!" *no . . . No . . . NO . . . NO! . . . NO!! . . . NO!!! . . . how the fuck did I fall?! . . . am I really going to die alone like*

this? . . . this isn't fair! "OWWWW! GET YOUR FEET OFF ME YOU ANIMALS!" *I hate all of you! . . . fuck you! . . . fuck all of you!* "FUCK THIS WORLD!"

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: MAXWELL RUTANO

Max stood in line about 40 people away from the gated entrance. Almost two-fifths of the inmates were gone. Past the gate, Max heard distant screams. Everybody in the line behind and in front of him was silent. Even with its grand size, the manure field was almost packed to the brim.

About 3% of the white garments paraded in a mosh pit far out in the right hemisphere of the manure field in relation to Max. As each person in the line passed the gate, Max breathed heavier. He desired to see his father. However, in a sea of around 6,000 white garments, Max disregarded this idea. He desired to see Roota and Sawostick. As #8081, Max planned to meet them to his left in close proximity to the gate where they usually played their music. Sawostick was #9006 and Roota was #9007.

Max was next in line to enter the gated entrance. He looked above at the two watchtowers. They wore helmets. No facial expressions were identifiable. Max entered the manure. The presence of white garments increased. The distant screams increased, but he couldn't pinpoint the location of them due to his height. He did a quick scan to find his father. No results. He decided to execute the plan and wait to the side for Sawostick and Roota. He dodged the white garments.

He arrived at the spot. He waited for their presence. Time passed.

Waiting alongside the metal fence, Max saw a white garment seeming to walk towards his position. He didn't trust white garments as much as the Sentinel and Myriad.

The white garment maintained the same directional movement. Max strayed to the right a bit. The white garment tinkered his directional movement. Max stopped straying. He yelled, “Back off!” The white garment maintained the same unbrightend face and directional movement. Max wanted to run, but he needed to meet Sawostick and Roota. “Why can’t anyone leave me alone?! Stay away from me!” The white garment was a few feet away. He reached his right arm out. He touched Max’s Hub.

The white garment weakly said, “Spare.” He stopped touching Max’s Hub. His right arm, enwrapped by branches, was ripped off from the rest of his body. The white garment winced his face but didn’t have the energy to make a sound. Max turned to his right. It was Sawostick. Roota was directly behind him.

Max began to cry. Sawostick threw the arm to the side. He punched the white garment’s unbrightned face repeatedly until the white garment fell to the floor. Max turned away from this sight. He felt a hug. It was from Roota. Sawostick yelled, “Who touches a child?!”

Max still heard punches. He put his bloody hands on his face. He whimpered. “I want this to all stop.” Roota hugged him tighter.

“Stop it,” Roota said. “He wants you to stop!”

The punches stopped. Sawostick said, “Sorry, Max.”

“It’s not you,” Max said. “I just want all the suffering to stop. I really don’t know how much more and how much longer I can handle it.” Max resisted Roota’s hug. The distant screams now felt like white noise to Max.

Sawostick said, “I’m sorry again, Max.” Max removed his hands from his face and looked at Sawostick. “Don’t be scared. We’re here with you, and we’re not gonna let anything happen to you again.”

Max said, “What happens when you two are gone again though? I can’t always be protected.”

“That’s something for you to not worry about,” Sawostick said. “Focus on the now.”

Roota said, “Now, I get the feeling that something bad will soon occur. Yet I can’t tell what’s going on down there. Seems bad.” She officially ended her hug. “I think we should set our priorities straight. Sawostick, what do you think of escaping? Now would be the best time to escape with that commotion going on in the background.”

“No,” Sawostick said. “There’s no way out of here regardless. We wouldn’t be able to hop over the fence even if we tried. And climbing over it is out of the question. The electric fence would turn us to firewood.”

“See,” Max said. “It will never stop.”

“Not with that mindset,” Sawostick said. “I suggest we play some music to pass the time and get us in the right mindset.”

Max wiped his bloody hands on his white garments. “I don’t have my flute. I have nothing to play with.”

“Who says I can’t make you another flute,” sAwostick said. He extended the branches in his right arm. He created a new flute. He grabbed the flute with his left hand and ripped it off his right arm. He jolted. He presented it to Max.

Max said, “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Yes,” Sawostick said. “But it’s worth it. Let’s play some music now.” Max grabbed his flute. The wooden texture was smoother than his first one. It felt lighter.

Roota created her harp with her fibrous branches. She said, “Let’s play.”

Max wiped his tears. He nodded.

Sawostick started the rhythm by making the first drum pattern by banging his wooden arms on the metal fence. Max blew in the flute. It sounded more crisp. Roota strung the harp. The more they played, the more a listening crowd of white garments began to form. Unbrightened faces brightened. Max closed his eyes. The rhythm carried his mind. His puckered lips began to rise. Their harmony was greater than the last time they played. Max smiled. The rhythm had finished carrying him. He opened his eyes.

A guard without a helmet had a gun aimed slightly to the left of Max's head. He shot. He aimed slightly to the right of Max's head. He shot again. Sawostick and Roota died. Max's hearing went out. He couldn't turn his neck. The listening crowd dispersed.

The guard aimed the gun at Max's head. His arm shook unsteadily. His eyebrows oscillated. He put the gun down.

Max's legs went numb. He dropped his flute. Lips sealed, his jaw and eyebrows dipped down. His whole body shook and went numb. His vision grew wet.

Max's hearing came back. Halfway-spoken screams entered his ears. The guard said, "I'm sure it's not easy losing your loved ones. How do you think I felt?"

Max finally turned to his right. Sawostick's body and the flute lay dead. Dead wood. Max's tongue felt liquified. "Sawo—?"

He turned to his left. Roota's body and her harp lay dead. Two dead wood. "Roo—?"

No white garments stood in the guard's 100-foot radius except Max and the manure. The guard laughed. "You're lucky you're a human. What's a human like you doing entangling himself in social interactions with these plant mongrels?" He ended his laughing tone. "Ponder how I felt when I lost my buddy, Harry, because of these goddamned walking shit-sticks. Cherish that—. No. Live that feeling that I felt." His smile returned.

Max sobbed. He fell to the floor. Having vision and hearing hurt. He looked at Sawostick's body. "I did this out of free will. It wasn't some neurotransmitter abnormality that persuaded me to do this. It was me! I'm me!" Max looked at Roota's body. "Human entanglement with plants. It's—it's—it's—it should be illegal and—. No. All animate plants deserve what's coming to them. I just cherished that beginning appetizer."

Max clenched on the manure with both hands. He let go of his hands. He saw the flute. He clenched the flute. He rose. He screamed. He sprinted at the guard. He raised Sawostick's extended bodily appendage in the air. He jumped. He stabbed the guard's right eye with the flute.

The guard leaned back and reenacted the performance of a seizure. His scream superseded Max's scream. He pulled out the flute with his left hand and pulled out his gun simultaneously. "Son of a fucking bitch!" Max kicked him in the groin. The guard dropped his gun. "YOU—"

A deafening clicking sound went off across the entire manure field. The guard this time actually had a seizure. Every guard on the manure field had a seizure. He fell to the floor. His entire body discombobulated. Max backed away.

The prison intercom noise went off. "All humans, please remain calm, and try your best to stay away from all animate plants as the genocide process commences itself."

The guard's body had stopped discombobulating. Max felt the ground rumble. Loud grunts crescendoed. Still relatively close to the gated entrance, Max saw a hoard of monsters enter through this. Almost 200 animate humans loudly stomped their way in on all-fours.

Max's tears had vanished. The guard rose from the floor with an emotionless face. He pulled out the flute from his right eye, igniting a bloody volcano. He threw the flute to the side

with the same face. He pulled out his gun. He aimed it at Max. He shot but missed due to his sight. He swayed his aim more to his left.

Max was tackled to the side. The guard missed again. It was Terry.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: SENTINEL GUARD #1322

[Oxytocin, Substance P, and Glutamate Exterminated]. #9481 of Prison Rotation E yelled, "Jacob! Open your eyes! I'm your wife!"

Sentinel Guard #1322 yelled, "I know you're my wife!"

#9481 yelled, "Why are you doing this to me?!"

#1322 thought, *Fuck! I love her!*

#9481 yelled, "I love you Jacob! Think about our kids who died because of Robert! Don't be upset at me! Be upset over Robert neurochemically manipulating you and all of his other men!"

#1322 thought, *I hate her! I hate you! Why the fuck am I like this?! I like murdering women and children! I hate Robert! This isn't me! I'm going to kill her!*

#9481 said, "Fight that monster in your head for the sake of us! Don't kill me! I love you more than anything!"

#1322 screamed, "Fuck!" Guard pulled out his gun and aimed it at Inmate's head. #1322 thought, *I'm going to kill her! She deserves to die!*

#9481 screamed, "Jacob! Please!"

#1322 screamed a louder "FUCK!" He stuck the gun up to his ear. He shot.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: LEAFLET

It began to rain. Leaflet laid in her same spot on the fifth floor of the building. She felt too weak to move. The pain had lessened as her body had gone numb. She worried for Lee.

She heard a grunt. Four grunts. It was the same grunt she had heard before. The grunt of an animate human. She was their prey. She had to get up. She forced her disfigured back up. She held back a painful scream as motoneuronal control lessened the numbness. She stood. All of her numbness morphed into pain. The grunting arrived at the bottom of the stairs. Down was not an option. She took her first step. All of her bodily nerves felt more twisted in pain than the disfigured branches in her back.

“I heard a footstep!” a voice yelled. The grunting sped up. Leaflet took her first stride. She headed up the stairs.

“You mean footsteps!” another voice yelled. Leaflet let out a worried yelp.

“It’s definitely her!” the voice of Omega yelled.

Leaflet increased the speed of her strides. There was no Lee to protect her. If they got to her, it was the end of her. She was on the seventh floor. She put extra strength in her wooden toes. Eighth floor. Ninth floor. Tenth floor. End of stairs. There was a hatch. She pulled the lever. Rain poured on her. She hopped through the hatch and landed on the roof. She closed the hatch. She scanned her surroundings. One possible roof jump ahead of her. And one impossible roof jump behind her. She doubted herself in her physical condition. She took the first stride. She slipped. Her feet lost contact with the building roof, and her back slid off the edge.

She grabbed onto the edge with her right hand. Almost losing grasp, she grabbed on the edge with her left hand too. The grunting noises began to eclipse the sound of rain. She tried to lessen her swaying and lunge her body to the side of the building. Lightning struck. She almost lost grasp again. She pulled herself up.

Leaflet's feet came into contact with the building roof. She mentally implanted her feet to avoid slipping. She retried another first stride. Two stride. Three stride. She hopped the gap. Her feet were short of this building. Yet her hands caught the building. The aftershock of landing arched her back even more irregularly. She heard the hatch behind her open. She pulled herself up and turned back. Staring down Leaflet, Omega stood on two of his feet on the roof. He got on his fours. Leaflet panicked and pulled the lever of the building hatch. Crawling in and before closing the hatch, she saw Omega hopped the gap in one stride on all-fours. He landed with two feet. He dove for the hatch, but Leaflet shut it closed. She shut her eyes close in anxiety. Omega tried to jiggle it open, but she maintained grip of the lever inside the 10th story of the building. "Mother . . ." Omega said. "Please let me in." She heard two more grunts land on the top of the roof.

"Us in," another voice said. The jiggling strength doubled. Leaflet struggled to hold on, yet her strength persisted.

The jiggling stopped. Leaflet still held on.

Three grunts simultaneously loudened. The hatch itself disconnected from the building's roof, and Leaflet was pulled up into the air as she maintained grip with the lever. She saw all three animate humans. She let go and fell back into the building. She sprinted for the stairs. This staircase was different from the other building. It was a spiral staircase. An animate human dove into the hatch hole and landed steps away from Leaflet. It snarled instead of a grunt. It dove for Leaflet.

Leaflet hopped over the railing of the spiral staircase, falling vertically down the hole. The animate human dove over the railing. As she fell down, she saw the animate human become stuck in the circular hole due to its size. She looked down. Her trajectory slightly moved to the

right. Her right hip banged onto the railing of the fifth floor. Her left hip hit the fourth-floor railing as she toppled over the railing and fell on her back on the stairs. She grabbed her hips. She winced as she failed to recover. She heard grunts of another animate human as footsteps crawled down the staircase.

"Help me get out of this!" a voice, six stories above, yelled.

"I'm trying my best here!" another voice, six stories above, yelled.

"She's mine!" Omega, four stories above, yelled.

Leaflet jerked herself up. She jumped over the railing and down the circular hole again. She aimed her trajectory to land on her feet on the first floor.

She landed on both of her feet, withstanding the gravitational force with her fibrous ankles. She looked up. The animate human stuck in the circular hole had its arms wrapped by another animate human, struggling to pull him out of place.

Omega's grunts were rampant and close. Leaflet made a run for it out of the building entrance. On a road that used to be dirt but turned to mud from the rain, she saw the prison was about half of a mile from her with some 20 buildings left with alleys. She knew the only place with the slightest sense of safety was back at the prison, specifically, where Lee was: the manure field. If she were to run straight, she'd arrive at the prison lobby doors. The ideal route was to go around the prison and enter the manure field from the back. To do that, she'd need to curve to her left. She'd throw them off through alley cuts. This was her route.

Leaflet sprinted down the mud road to the base of the building and made a left down an alley of two buildings. The grunting made its appearance outside. She committed down the alley. She turned right to make lateral distance with the prison. She sprinted down another mud road. "You think I can't spot you without sight?!" Omega yelled. "You're underestimating my

olfaction! You never realized how gifted your son really was, huh?!" The grunts ended his dialogue.

Leaflet repeated this process of running mud roads in latitude and alleys in longitude. She completed this process three times. She was halfway across an alley. She looked back. Omega appeared outside of this alley crevice. He strode on all-fours. She breathed out in terror. She slipped on the mud. He entered the crevice. Placing all mechanical energy into her damaged hips and back, she propelled herself up and continued sprinting. Omega yelled, "Give your son a hug!" Leaflet's mechanical fuel tank was almost on empty. Down the alley and across the mud road was the back of the infirmary. She dedicated every stride towards the infirmary.

She escaped the alley crevice. Too scared to turn back, she strode across the mud road. There were no doors in the back of the infirmary. There was only a large complex with an array of glass windows that stood five feet above the ground on the wall. She headed for the windows. Passing the width of the mud road, she devoted all her energy into her last stride and leapt up five feet. She broke glass and dove into the interior of the infirmary, landing on her right shoulder. Too many of her branches had been mangled from physical falls and cut from glass. Inside was pitch black. Only the bleak brightness from the rainy outside barely illuminated the outside floor of the interior through the windows. Windows ran horizontally across all four walls of the complex.

Her mechanical energy tank was empty. She couldn't get up. She crawled to her right on the cold tile floor. She tilted her head back to the shattered glass above her. The grunting noise grew vicious, louder, and quicker, morphing into a panting grunt. Omega dove into the window where Leaflet had originally shattered the glass. He landed on all a few feet further from where Leaflet had originally landed. She crawled to her right, moving herself across with her left arm.

After a few crawling motions, she softly bumped into something. Only Omega's disgusting legs appeared in the bleak brightness. She sealed her eyes hoping he didn't spot her.

Omega's legs entered the dark. "Mother," he said. "This was where you and Father mated. This was the helm of my pre-creation." He took a step. "It's amazing how malleable the constraints of biology are. The coming-together of two different species into one. It's shocking." Leaflet, without trying to emit noise, waved her left hand horizontally to feel the something that was blocking her crawling path. "You may be keen on my heightened olfaction; however, you might not be so keen on my heightened auditory receptors." She felt the edge of the something. She grabbed onto it and pulled herself forward with her left hand. Her moist wooden chest squeaked across the wet tile floor. She immediately stopped all movement. Her body jittered from coldness, pain, and anxiety.

Omega released a grunt. He stepped and stepped. His steps seemed to grow quieter. He said, "Too bad you couldn't have given me heightened vision. My hearing isn't as keen as my smell. And your smell decreased quite a bit from being in the rain for a long time. You are one lucky plant." He took another step. "But that's okay. I'll find you some time. You can't conceal yourself in the darkness indefinitely." Leaflet's anxiety overtook coldness and pain.

Leaflet had no way to move without emitting noise. She didn't know what to do. She began to hopefully cry. "Son?" she asked. "Why are you doing this? Why don't you love me?"

Omega stopped with the footsteps. "I knew you were going to talk some time," He said. "Your voice is relatively far from me. Perhaps this supposed heightened auditory ability is nothing but a fluke. Perhaps a disadvantage. In any case, I know your location. I could immediately target you. But please, go on. I'm interested to learn more about how my other half would normally behave." Pain overtook her. She said, "What's controlling you to behave this

way? Do you really not feel any attachment to your mother?" Anxiety overtook her. "Please—please—please—please don't hurt me! I love you no matter how evil you are! You are a part of me! You are loved!"

Omega laughed. "Loved? How can a concubine love her own production? There's no substance in what you're trying to refer to. I was simply born to murder your kind. What's so complex about this that you don't understand?"

Leaflet turned her shoulder and laid on her back. "You have no heightened abilities. You only have an inability to love! Nature didn't want you to be born! That's why you are biologically programmed to not operate in the flow of our world but only to destroy it!" She slowly stood up and cried uncontrollably. "Please look past this inability! Say no to nature! Break free from how you are programmed! Learn to love me! Love me! Please! Love me!"

Omega laughed again. "I'll never understand your kind." He gave out his loudest grunt and pounded the floor with a shake. Leaflet's mechanical energy fuel had been filled partially. She took a huge stride to her right. She headed for the windows again. The ground shook in quicker intervals than her stride. Arriving by the window, she implanted her foot on the tile floor and dove through the glass. Huge spiders and light-green acid oozing out of the jagged rock crevices blocked her entire forefront. The spiders hung on clear webs attached to the roof of the infirmary and proximal trees. The terrain was rough. Past this forefront was the prison about a quarter of a mile away, specifically, the side of the cafeteria. There was no other route to avoid this forefront. She pursued forward with more strides.

The glass behind her shattered. Omega yelled, "I gave you a headstart! I was being easy on you! No more games from now on!" As Leaflet hopped on the rocks, he shook the ground as he clamped the floor with his strides. Hopping from unleveled rock to another, Leaflet avoided

the chasms. Omega continued stomping but halted his vocal grunts. “We have a fun playground ahead of us. The famous thlavic chasms and renowned avahlts. I may not be gifted in loving as you say, but I am certainly more than gifted in physical maneuvering. There’s no escaping from here.”

Leaflet was perched on top of a high-leveled rock that was separated from a low-level rock by a long chasm. She took one stride. Two stride. Half of the surface area of the base of her fibrous left foot landed on the jagged rock, cutting her foot inches deep. Her green eyes reflected a lighter glow from the acid as her tears bursted from the pain. She caught her momentum with her right foot. She looked back. Omega was almost ten rocks behind her. The farther forward she strode, the bigger the chasms got. She hopped from the low-leveled rock to another high-leveled rock with her right foot. The chasm wasn’t as big, but landing on her left foot left her in even more pain. She turned back again. Omega was around five-to-six rocks behind her. She hopped to another rock. And then another. The chasms began to take such great shape that an acidic lake began to take over this shape. The next rock she had to jump was the biggest gap. She took one stride. Two stride. Three stride. She landed on the rock with her right foot, yet she wasn’t able to land her left foot to stop the momentum. The rock itself moved and carried her momentum. The rock glided on the thlavic acid. She panicked. Almost losing balance, she followed the horizontal movement and surfed the rock with her left foot. She maintained balance. The rock stopped moving. There were no chasms beyond this point. Only floating rocks in a thlavic lake. She looked back. Omega, still hopping on all-fours, was on the third-to-last chasm from the lake. “Losing balance? That’s very sad. Too bad you weren’t born with an enhanced vestibular gland. My balance can’t be outmatched.” She continued forward. The rocks were getting smaller. She

took one stride. She landed on the next rock with her right foot. She surfed it. She looked back. Omega hopped the last chasm. He followed the same pattern of rocks she stepped on.

The rock trembled with Leaflet's dying and feeble body. She was on the verge of giving out at any moment. Leaflet formed an idea. She waited for him. Omega hopped the first floating rock. "You give up? Don't think about jumping into the acid. I at least deserve the satisfaction of the kill." She waited. "I respect your willingness to accept defeat. Goodbye, Mother." Taking a gigantic stride on all-fours, he dove for her. At the same time, she took a big stride and hopped to the next rock. She propelled his rock back, sending Omega to overcalculate his jumping force. She landed on her next rock with her right foot. Omega's two feet and knees landed on his rock, but his entire upper body fell in the acid. He caught his momentum by leaning his upper body under the rock and grabbing onto the bottom end of the rock with his hands, the same end his feet were on. His head and arms burned in the acid. Positioning his feet next to the rock's end, he lunged his upper body up, revealing his deteriorating head and arms. The skin and skull on Omega's face melted off, including his eyes, ears, nose, and venus-flytrap mouth. His frontal and parietal lobe of his brain appeared out of his partially melted skull. The rain added to the burning sensation. His two arms only flaunted bone and a few ligaments. He pressed his boney arms against the rock and situated all of his limbs on the rock. He stood up with his two feet. Leaflet was beyond horrified. Her son only had a brain for a face. She screamed. Yet she continued forward. "I may not have the flesh for a mouth, yet my fibrous branchy skin protected my neck and vocal cords. And while I may not possess the ability to see, I still have access to my olfactory bulb even without the need of a fleshy nose. I can smell your scent. But I better speed up the process before the rain eradicates your smell." He hopped on the next rock with his two feet. "As I said, I can triangulate your movement from your past scent locations." Leaflet's green

eyes dilated. She immediately hopped to the next rock. Anxiety overtook pain and coldness indefinitely. The gaps between rocks widened, but there were only five more before the lake ended. Her mechanical energy tank was almost empty. She channeled all of her energy into her legs. Each stride became one hop. One stride. One hop. Two stride. Two hop. Three stride. Three hop. Four stride. Four hop. Five stride. Five hop. Half of the base of her left fibrous foot landed on the jagged firm rock. She caught her momentum with her right foot. Her whole body fell on the rock. Both of her feet were severely cut.

Pain temporarily overtook the coldness and indefinite anxiety. She screamed, “FUUUUUCCCCKK!” She turned back. Faceless Omega was on the third hop. Indefinite anxiety retook the throne. She had to get up. Fourth hop. Omega's right foot landed on the rock, yet his left foot dipped in the acid for a temporary second as he bent down from landing. She tried to get up. Fifth hop. He landed on his left knee, and his right leg dipped in the acid for a temporary three seconds. All four of his limbs had partially deteriorated. His wooden legs and feet were only bone and a few ligaments. She got up. She could only apply pressure on the ground one foot at a time. She hopped on one foot. Pain and anxiety shared the throne. Her tank only had a sliver of mechanical energy remaining.

Omega said, “Too bad you have a sense of pain. My limbs may be immobile, but that doesn’t mean I myself am immobile.” He began to do a worm-like motion with his mega upper-body strength. He continued to chase her. She couldn’t believe it. She increased the distance of her hops. Using his mega strength towards his mid-body, he matched the same distance of her stride. One stride. Equal stride.

Leaflet saw the metal fence of the manure field. She was less than 100 feet away. She kept her speed. “I have to admit,” Omega said. “I may have miscalculated a few things. But

that's alright because you have nowhere to escape. It will be impossible to hop the fence in your condition." She screamed as she hopped on each foot. Her hops increased in speed. She soon began running on both feet. Her anxiety helped her manage the influx of pain. She began sprinting.

Omega began to grunt. He increased the speed of his worm-like strides. She was 20 feet away from the metal fence. She looked back. He was a few feet away from her. Omega said, "You're running out of energy."

Leaflet dedicated her last grain of mechanical energy towards one last final stride. She hopped and clung onto the 10-foot fence. She was two feet below the electric fence. Raising her right arm, she clung onto the electric fence. Electricity ran through her entire body. Her wood began to crisp. Her limbs caught fire. All of her body caught fire. She screamed with the current. She clung on with her left hand, creating a closed circuit. Her insides began to flame. Her green eyes began to redden. She pulled herself up. Her upper body reached above the fence. She let go of the fence and fell into the manure field. The electricity stopped flowing through her. The rain slowly began to put out her fire. Ashes floated out of her branchy crevices. Her mechanical energy tank was beyond empty. It was negative. The aftershock of electricity superseded all of her coldness, pain, and anxiety. She smiled and laughed as she felt her entire body burn. She looked at her morbidly disfigured son past the fence. Omega had become an inanimate human. He said, "You haven't escaped." He took a ginormous stride and hopped the fence with his worm-like catapult. He landed on top of her. His brain juices slobbered all over her face. He raised his boney arm and shape-shifted his last ligaments into a sharp-edged fiber. He slashed Leaflet's burning insides.

Leaflet screamed at the top of her lungs. "HELLLLPPP MEEE!"

Omega slashed again. Leaflet jolted her body up and down and cried. Pain was her ruler. This moment was the highest threshold of pain she ever felt. Burned, motionless, and mangled, she suffered more slashes on the wet manure. She was on the brink of death. She grabbed onto her left foot that was sprained.

The exposed-brain creature was punched in the frontal lobe. Omega grunted and strode in his worm-like motion away.

“Help me, Dotor!” a voice yelled.

“Rose, relax!” another voice yelled.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ANDREW RUTANO

“DON’T USE THE CONVERTERS!” Andrew screamed, still laying weak on the floor next to Enzo’s dead body. The noise level could only be heard by Shruburb’s, Natasha’s, and his ears. It began to rain.

“You’re too late!” Natasha yelled, entangled with branches against the metal fence. “The depleted will all end up like Enzo!”

A deafening clicking sound went off across the entire manure field. Andrew covered his ears as the short-lasting sound came to a stop. Andrew cleared out his bloody septum. “WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING?!” He took his hands away from his ears.

The prison intercom noise went off. “All humans, please remain calm, and try your best to stay away from all animate plants as the genocide process initiates itself.” The manure floor rumbled. Grunts superseded the noise of the white garment’s screams.

Andrew’s inferior oblique muscles in his eyes raised themselves as his eyebrows lowered. “Shruburb?! What did they say?!”

“Get up, Andrew,” Shruburb said. The grunts grew louder. “GET UP, ANDREW!”

Andrew screamed, “I CAN’T!” The first animate human appeared in Andrew’s vision in the sea of white garments. The monster pounced in Andrew’s direction.

Andrew screamed, “SHRUBURB! RUN!” Andrew battled his volition to stay on the floor. He bit his jaw forward. He dug his hands into the manure and pushed the ground of Nirvana 74. A guard shot the charging animate human. The monster changed its course.

“I’m not leaving you here to die!” Shruburb yelled. The animate human with its claws slashed the guard’s red pipe that ran up his neck. The animate human ignored this bloody detour and shifted back to its original course.

“It’s not after me!” Andrew yelled. He got up. “It’s after you!” The animate human leaped over Andrew, landing on Enzo’s cracked cranium. It tackled Shruburb.

Andrew charged at the animate human. Without turning its back, the animate human sliced at Andrew’s wrist. His right hand dropped. More blood spewed out of his arm than the guard’s red chest pipe. He screamed.

Avoiding two bloody detours, the animate human slashed Shruburb’s insides. Andrew grabbed onto his right dangling flesh and fell on the manure floor again. “SHRUBURB!” More animate human feet appeared in the sea of white garments. More gunshots went off.

Shruburb screamed, “GET OFF ME!” Two more animate humans leaped over Andrew. They slashed Shruburb thrice more.

Andrew snorted blood while simultaneously instigating noise through his vocal tract. He moaned in cries. He helplessly again screamed, “SHRUBURB!” Every stimulant in his periphery was more blaring than the other. His detached right hand rested on Enzo’s cracked cranium. Shruburb’s body stopped resisting, and his screams ended. The three animate humans turned away from his body. They leaped over Andrew and grunted away.

Shruburb's insides were distributed across the manure floor and spread onto Enzo's body. The screams of the white garment hoard surrounding Alonzo entered Andrew's ears again. Hemoglobin escaped out of Andrew's right arm. Andrew struggled to get up. An animate human dove onto a guard's back. The guard tried to push him off, but the animate human managed to unscrew the guard's Hub and rip out his temporal lobe and dead artificial nerves.

Past the sea of white garments, Andrew saw a familiar family-oriented face. It was his brother, Marco from 100 feet away. He limped greatly and pushed the white garments as he ran towards Andrew's proximity. Andrew yelled, "Marco!" Andrew smiled as his iron levels decreased. Having not seen his brother since the physical world, he couldn't wait to be saved and reunited with Marco in the Spirit World. 50 feet away, Andrew saw a more defined version of Marco's angered face. Marco's eyes squinted faster than his teeth chattered, and his back was slouched. Andrew's smile lessened. Marco raised a fist. "Marco?!" 25 feet away, Marco screamed and sprinted faster. Andrew couldn't tell if he was charging at a guard or him. 12.5 feet away, Marco raised two fists. Andrew got up. In parallel, a guard bit off a white garment's ear. The white garment ripped off the guard's upper lip, yet the guard shot him in the head soon after.

Marco grabbed Andrew's neck with two hands and pummeled him to the manure floor. Marco's whole body vibrated and discombobulated. Andrew couldn't breathe. Using his only hand, Andrew poked Marco in the eyes. Marco didn't react. Andrew pressed Marco's eyes tighter. Marco still didn't react. Andrew popped Marco's eyeballs out of his eye sockets. Still no reaction. Marco still maintained his grasp as blood from his eyes dropped on Andrew's eyes. Andrew grabbed onto Marco's neck and tried to nudge him away. This nudge managed to throw Marco to the side and lose grasp of his neck. Andrew's pharynx was filled with air. Andrew was greeted by another familiar family-oriented face. It was his mother, Marie. She dove and directed

a knife at Andrew's head. Andrew impulsively covered his head with his right arm. His right arm was trimmed even shorter now. Andrew screamed. She slowly raised her knife again. Before she could make a downward motion again, Andrew rolled the opposite side of where he threw Max. In parallel, a white garment hung on an animate plant's back, trying to topple it down. The animate plant enwrapped its branches around the white garment's arms and pushed him to the manure floor.

Marie knifed the manure floor. She cried, "I'm sorry!" She raised the knife. Andrew tried pushing himself up with his left hand. His entire right arm went numb. "I don't want to do this, Andrew! My mind is possessed! Please stop me!" Andrew got up one last time. She swung her knife at his head. He dodged it. "Kill me before I kill you!" Andrew began to feel light-headed as blood continued to leave his system. Andrew heard Marco laugh maniacally as he rose from the manure floor. Marco swung his fist at Andrew's head. He missed without Andrew needing to dodge. Andrew punched Marco with his non-dominant hand. The force was weak, yet Marco's discombobulating body was more weak, sending him to the manure floor. In parallel, an animate plant had its arms wrapped around a guard's eyes and shape-shifted its branches into his eyes. Blind, the guard blankly shot the animate plant's head.

Andrew cried, "Why are you guys doing this?!" He struggled to stop his lips and eyelashes from jittering. "I'm not going to kill you guys!" Marie swung another knife but horizontally this time. It skinned Andrew's white garments. Andrew squeezed on his right dangling flesh with his left hand to stop the bleeding. Marco laid on the ground still laughing as blood escaped his nose. "I can't handle this!" In parallel, five guards encircled one animate plant and repeatedly shot at it. The animate human slashed two of the guards, but its strong cranium cracked from too much bullet penetration.

“It’s your father!” Marie yelled. She cradled her knife and missed another knife swing. “You won’t be able to stop or escape from us! Robert programmed us to kill you!” Andrew continued to dodge. He didn’t know what to do again. He wanted to save them. And he wanted to save himself. He couldn’t run. He couldn’t fight. He could only wait. In parallel, an animate human tore off the arms of a white garment, originally having his arms protecting an animate plant child. The animate human sliced off the white garment’s head.

Andrew screamed, “WHAT DO I DO?!” He let go of his right dangling flesh and slapped his palm on his forehead. Blood resumed its flooding. He moaned a deep breath. Marco stood up. He charged at Andrew and landed a feeble punch on Andrew’s face. Coming in to complement another attack, Marie swung her knife horizontally. It wedged itself between the skin of Andrew’s left thumb and index finger. “FUUUCCKK!” Flexing every muscle in his hand, Andrew wrapped his four fingers over the knife and his thumb. He clenched the knife and threw it to the side. He didn’t have another hand to stop the bleeding of his left hand. Marie chased after the knife. Marco landed a stronger punch on Andrew. Andrew’s vision blackened from his loss of blood. He fell on the manure field. He slowly regained some of his vision. He was losing too much blood from his arms. In parallel, a depleted white garment, losing his balance, had a guard in a chokehold. The depleted white garment lost footing, and the guard shot the depleted brain.

“ANDREW!” Andrew heard Kevin’s voice. Kevin landed a very forceful punch on Marco. Marco fell on the manure floor. In parallel, a guard chased an animate plant against the metal fence. Grabbing the electric fence, the animate plant burned as the guard shot him in its ashy insides.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ROBERT RUTANO

Robert watched a screen in the irregular room of the Experimentation Room. A screen that casted everything going on the manure field. He changed camera angles by turning a dial on his Navigator that switched the visual cortex converter projection on the screen of the Sentinel and Myriad. He switched to Sentinel Guard #1241, who was in close proximity to Andrew, Marco, and Marie. He saw Andrew's laying body and arms bleeding in the background. In the forefront, the guard was shooting aimlessly at every animate creature, including white garments, animate plants, animate humans, and other guards. He smiled. He relaxed on his king-sized bed. None of the strippers were present since Robert had sent them out on the manure field to die. Horace, Zim, Conley, and Bandu stood alongside each other to the side of the leftmost bed.

"I knew I shouldn't have trusted you to install Hubs for my Myriad," General Wayne said. Robert looked to his right. A gun was pointed at his head.

"Hey!" Bandu yelled. Before the executive security guards pulled out their guns, Robert raised his left hand in a stop motion. Horace had his hand on his cane.

Robert said, "Let me hear what he has to say." The executive security guards let go of their guns.

General Wayne said, "I'm the one who is lucid now, Bobby." He stepped closer. "You really don't think I know what's going on? You only resuscitated me for my men! They wouldn't have agreed to follow through with your Hubs if it wasn't for my command. If I had been completely lucid, I would never have given the go-ahead. You took full advantage of my forgetful vulnerability. My question though. Why would you go through the trouble of establishing a fiscal endeavor of creating the Spirit World with me if all you were going to do was backstab me? Another question though. Why would you go through the trouble of

implanting memories if all you needed me to do was say a simple ‘yes’ without me needing to gain lucidity? Last question though. Why would you have me eternally suffer in the nothing dimension where I floated consciously in a dark void? It traumatized me insurmountably. Do you just like to toy around with people? Are you just so evil that you find other people’s suffering comical? We never agreed to install Hubs into people when we would rule the Spirit World. Our original plan was to rule them physically. Our plan was never to control them neurochemically. That’s beyond evil. It’s more depriving than anything!”

Bobby put his left hand down calmly. He said, “I admit I did not need to reinstate your full mental state with your memories. However, I missed you, Howie. I thought you would be more than appreciative of this world that I’m saving.”

“Saving?” Howie said. “Your mind is more than fucked up. Thinking back on my own life, I was fucked up too. The fact that I never pushed you to pursue a world of good with your scientific inventions and instead gave in to your convoluted mind of world domination will continually haunt me in this second life of mine. To think that you are neurochemically destroying people instead of neurochemically solving every known mental disorder is devastating for this world. You couldn’t even solve your own mental disorder. You’ve created a world of horror with that brain of yours.”

Bobby asked, “So what do you plan to accomplish if you shoot me?”

Howie said, “I’m gonna save this last world of humanity before you destroy it.”

“And how would you possibly do that?”

“I—I—I would cure them neurochemically by—”

"I control every man, woman, and child neurochemically with my Navigator. I exterminated oxytocin, substance P, and glutamate from all of my guards, including yours. If I were to die, my Navigator would deactivate, rendering your plan useless."

"Forget that then. You may have already destroyed this world, but I can stop you from further destroying it even more. Killing you is enough already for me."

"You're forgetting one more thing."

"I'm not forgetting anything. Ever since the day we met, you've forgotten that I remember everything." General Wayne shot. The bullet punctured Robert's forehead skin, yet his titanium skull stopped the bullet's momentum.

Robert said, "You can't form new memories in your second life. If you could, you would've remembered that Keith Konrad's attempt to slaughter me was a destined failure. This time when you die, don't worry. Your consciousness won't traverse across a dimension of nothingness." He galvanized his right robotic hand and spewed liquid titanium at General Wayne's face. General Wayne reenacted the past physical motions of Thom. He covered his face and fell to the granite floor as he screamed. Robert continued to spew titanium all over General Wayne's discombobulating body in a top-down manner. He draped him in a complete coat of titanium. General Wayne's discombobulation came to a quicker stop than Thom's. He died. Robert continued to spew titanium post-death.

Horace yelled, "Monarch!" Robert turned to his left. Zim's right arm was sliced off by Horace's cane. "Backstabbers!" Conley shot Robert's right levator scapulae muscle on his neck. Robert immediately rolled off the bed to the right, falling next to General Wayne's cocoon of titanium. He galvanized his robotic hand and applied a thin coat of titanium on the wound to stop the bleeding. He navigated his Navigator to the neurotransmitter converter levels of Zim, Conley,

and Bandu. He adjusted all of their neurotransmitters to zero. Zim, Conley, and Bandu had taken out their neurotransmitter converters before any of this. His Navigator had zero effect on them. Robert navigated to the Backstabbers. He signaled them on. Robert heard Bandu scream. Conley and Zim didn't make a peep. He had forgotten to install Backstabbers in them. Conley dove over the bed and fell next to the cocoon. He revealed a knife with a blade longer than Horace's cane.

Conley sliced Robert's left hand off. Robert didn't react. He stood up. He galvanized his other hand and spewed titanium at Conley's face. Conley ducked under it. Conley raised his knife with both of his hands and directed it horizontally at Robert's neck. Robert ducked under it.

Robert said, "Separating the heart from the brain without penetrating the titanium chambers. Smart." Grabbing the top blanket of the king-sized bed, he galvanized the blanket and threw it over Conley's head. Knife and body under the blanket, Conley charged forward at Robert.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: MAXWELL RUTANO

"Where did my target go?" the guard who had missed Max with a gun said.

Terry carried Max over his right shoulder. Harriet ran next to Terry in the sea of white garments. Max resisted Terry's grab, almost knocking off Terry's green eyeglasses.

Max cried, "Why can I never save myself?!"

"Calm down, Max!" Harriet yelled.

Terry yelled, "Stop resisting!"

Max yelled, "Put me down! I've been nothing but a useless vegetable!" The guard shot his gun. No impact on Terry, Harriet, or Max.

Terry yelled, "If you really want me to put you down, I will!"

Harriet yelled, “No! Don’t!” Terry did a 360-degree spin through a wedge of two white garments. The guard shot again. The white garment on the left side of the wedge was shot in the head.

Terry strafed left, Harriet still following. Harriet yelled, “Max! Please! We’re trying to save you!”

Max yelled, “That’s the problem!” He slapped Terry on the head and pushed off his back. He strafed right and ran away.

Harriet screamed, “MAX!”

Max mixed in with the sea of white garments. Terry and Harriet were out of his sight. Max was out of sight from Harriet and Terry. He lost them. He was lost.

Reality started.

He saw an animate plant run past him as a guard chased it. He heard the plant get shot.

He saw an animate plant lay on the floor with its branchy legs torn off looking over Max’s shoulders in fear. He heard a grunt behind him. He felt an animate human grab his neck and launch him 15 feet in the air.

He saw a depleted white garment run for the metal fence. He heard the white garment scream in a radically-changing pitch. He felt a guard shove him as the guard chased the white garment. He smelled the white garment’s brain being fried from contact with the electric fence.

He saw a guard aim a gun at his head. He heard him say, “Hello, child.” He felt the guard grab his hair and push his face into a thlavic-webbed discombobulated brain of a white garment. He smelled the manure. He tasted the brain’s blood.

He saw the guard leave him.

He perceived his sister, Lisa, crawled up in a ball and staring up at the rain in fear.

Reality ended.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: LEAFLET

It stopped raining.“We can’t just leave her here!” Rose yelled.

“Since when did you share sympathy for animate plants?!” Dotor yelled. “We don’t have the time to save her!”

“Have some compassion!” Rose picked up Leaflet and carried her on her back.

Dotor yelled, “Do you know how much of a target that makes us?! What the fuck are you thinking?!”

Rose yelled, “I’m thinking about doing something kind for once!”

“You chose the worst time to do something like this! We still need to find Andrew!”

Rose said, “I don’t care. And if we find him, we find him.”

A grunt ignited.

Leaflet looked behind. Out in the open manure, next to the metal fence, and 30 feet away from the sea of white garments, she saw an animate human leap out of the sea.

Landing 10 feet away in front of them, the animate human pounced on all-fours straight at them. The animate human dove and swung its claws for Leaflet. Rose twirled with Leaflet on her back and dodged the animate human in action. Leaflet felt a surge of fear override her pain in reaction. Rose headed for the sea of white garments while Leaflet still had her eyes on the monster.

15 feet behind them, the animate human shifted its body around and strode after them. The animate human dove in for a tackle. Rose swayed her body to the right by applying all of her

body weight on her left foot for a side-stride in action. Leaflet panicked and screamed in reaction. Halfway between the sea and fence, Rose diverted her direction back to the sea.

10 feet behind them, the animate human dove for a final time. The animate human peeled off Leaflet's ashy back with its claws. Rose still sprinted forward in action. Leaflet screeched as pain overtook the throne in reaction. Rose entered the sea of white garments.

Five feet away from the sea of white garments, the animate human dove inside the sea. The animate human reached both of its claws out. Rose evaded its attack and lunged left in action. Leaflet continued to cry in reaction. Rose headed towards the deeper-end of the sea.

They escaped the animate human.

Directly in front of them, a pack of depleted white garments punched each other. A white garment threw a punch for Rose. Rose veered away from this punch and sprung through the pack in action. Leaflet wanted to let go of Rose's back due to the painful throne in reaction. Rose headed deeper inside the sea.

They escaped the pack.

Clouding their right peripheral, a guard who held a taser ran parallel to Rose's strides. The guard aimed his taser at Rose's Hub. Rose ducked and the taser landed on another white garment's Hub to her left peripheral in action. Leaflet was traumatized by the sight of electricity again in reaction. Rose ran perpendicular to the guard.

They escaped the guard. They had also escaped Dotor ever since they escaped the animate human.

However, Leaflet saw Dotor again. 50 feet away from them in the midst of the sea chaos, Dotor had his hands grasped to a boy. The boy was resisting. A girl crawled up in a ball and stared at the manure floor.

Rose directed her movement toward Dotor. She accidentally stepped on a thlavic-webbed discombobulated brain. She said, “I’m coming!”

Leaflet attempted to pause all pain and terror. She asked, “Why is he tying up these poor children?” Rose continued to sprint through the sea without a response. The increased number of dead white garments, guards, animate plants, and animate humans decreased the number of persistent screams. “Answer me!”

“It’s not on your agenda!” Rose yelled. She stepped over a decapitated animate plant. 25 feet away.

The boy screamed and resisted Dotor. The girl sat helplessly. Leaflet directed her voice to Dotor. “Let go of them!” Dotor used a sliver of a branchy animate plant arm as a rope to tie the boy’s hands. 10 feet away.

Leaflet let go of Rose’s back and sprinted past her straight at Dotor. Vigilance overtook the throne of pain and tenor. She strode. One stride. Two stride. Three stride. She tackled Dotor before he could tie the boy’s hands completely. She punched Dotor weakly. Dotor kicked her burnt body off.

The boy screamed, “I’LL SAVE US, LISA!” The boy sprinted at laying Dotor. Before Leaflet could see the boy’s attack, Rose grabbed her by the back and punched her face. Leaflet’s mechanical energy tank had been negative since the start. She could only accept punches. Her vigilance couldn’t make up for the fuel. The boy continued to scream. “I’LL STOP BEING USELESS! I’LL FIGHT FOR US UNTIL I DIE!” Leaflet was punched again. She cried.

The punches stopped. Rose was tackled to the side by a young lady. The lady yelled, “Who captures a pair of innocent children?!” The lady punched Rose. A man with green glasses

hopped over Leaflet's body and grabbed onto the white collar of the lady. He threw her to the side. The lady yelled, "Terry, what are you doing?!"

The green-glassed man yelled, "Getting our revenge as Spirit Radicals!"

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ANDREW RUTANO

Andrew screamed, "DON'T KILL HIM!"

Kevin took his hands off Marco. Marco's nose and mouth seemed to blend into one bloody shape as he lay on the floor. Kevin yelled, "What the fuck is going on?!"

Andrew yelled, "He's my brother!"

"Andrew . . ." Rufus said. "You're bleeding. Bad."

A knife poked out of Rufus' heart. Marie's face rested on his right shoulder. Marie's face winced. She screamed, "PLEASE STOP ME BEFORE I KILL YOU, ANDREW!" She pulled the knife out of Rufus. Rufus dropped dead. She charged at laying Andrew.

Marco stood up. He sprinted towards Andrew and stepped in front of him.

A knife poked out of Marco's discombobulating heart. Marie screamed in terror. She pulled the knife. Marco dropped dead.

"Is this real?" Andrew asked weakly. He was at a loss for words and blood.

Marie charged at Andrew. No one was in her way or could get in her way. "ANDREW!" Kevin screamed.

Andrew closed his eyes awaiting his death. Death didn't strike. He waited. Yet it still didn't strike. He opened his eyes.

The knife floated next to his head. Two hands shaking the floating blade. Marie's eyes squinted with tears, body shook with fear, jaw jittered with sadness, and lips smiled with blood.

Full body discombobulation. She screamed, “I HOLD THE POWER OVER MY MIND!” She reversed the blade’s direction and struck her heart. Marie dropped dead.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ROBERT RUTANO

Robert ducked beside the leftmost bed of the irregular room. His galvanic titanium stimulator chamber had run out of titanium. He reached with his robotic arm for his last titanium pellet he kept attached to his left leg. He was losing blood quickly from his left arm. He failed to insert the pellet inside the chamber due to its location being the forearm region of his robotic arm. He put the pellet in his mouth and bit on it.

“Robert!” Conley yelled. “For an old man, you fight like a cheater!” Robert began to sweat. He dropped the pellet for the chamber. It missed. “Zim?! Bandu?! Are you guys alive?!”

No response.

Robert bit down on the pellet again. He dropped the pellet. It landed inside the chamber. Robert closed his robotic fist and exhaled.

He peeked over the bed. Conley’s legs were drenched and stuck in liquid titanium. General Wayne’s dead body lay next to him. Conley had his hand reaching out for General Wayne’s gun. Robert fully stood up. He walked around the bed slowly and looked into the eyes of Conley. He said, “You all thought you could take out the old man, huh?” Conley’s arm shivered for the gun in close proximity. Robert’s feet stood next to the gun. “It was silly of me to have forgotten to install two more Backstabbers for two more backstabbers. Maybe Howie was right. My memory seems to worsen the older I get.” He spewed a puddle of titanium on Conley’s trembling hand. He screamed from the burn. “But maybe . . .” He stepped on the gun. “Maybe I knew all about your plan. Maybe I enjoy playing a good match with worthy opponents. Yet you

three were not worthy in the slightest. You failed miserably. And those who fail miserably fall in the hands of fate. Which is me." He took his foot off the gun and picked it up. He shot Conley in the head.

Robert heard a gun being reloaded behind him. He turned around. Next to the wall separating the room full of strippers and bed, Zim laid on the floor with only a right leg and a left arm. Zim picked up the reloaded gun and aimed it at Robert.

Zim was shot in the head. Robert turned around again. By the entrance of the Experimentation Room, Fabian stood holding a gun. Blood dropped out of his revealing temporal lobe. His Hub was nonexistent. It had been pulled out.

Robert stood motionless. Robert said, "You really forgot to disable neurotransmitter extermination from my Hub from the rest of the guard. What the fuck is wrong with you? Regaining my substance P back was not fun especially when I have the hemorrhage the size of the fucking Grand Canyon in my skull and brain."

"Thank you for saving me," Robert said. "Don't worry. I'll fix you up as soon as I clean up a few things."

"You might wanna start with that trail of blood," Fabian said. "And you're welcome you old fuck."

Robert nodded and followed the trail of blood that exited the Experimentation Room. It was Bandu's.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: MAXWELL RUTANO

Max's hands were tied up. He cried at the top of his lungs. He screamed, "I'M A FAILURE!" Tied up next to Max, Lisa sobbed silently.

Terry had Max tied up. Rose had Lisa and the last animate plant alive tied up. Dotor had Harriet tied up.

Harriet cried too. She yelled, “Fuck you, Terry! Manipulative scumbags!”

Dotor said, “This isn’t personal. If you have anyone to blame, blame Andrew. He killed our leader Wallace. This is nothing but simple revenge. Don’t overthink it.”

Max gave up mentally and physically. He failed his sister. He failed his father. He failed himself.

The deafening clicking sound went off again. All of the guards regained their normal neurotransmitter levels back. This loud noise made Max scan his environment. All animate plants were dead. All animate humans and guards stopped fighting. Every white garment who attempted to escape the prison or rebel was dead. All of the depleted white garments were either unconscious or dead of thlavic-webbed brain discombobulation. The rest of the white garments sat traumatized on the manure, analogous to Lisa a few moments ago.

Max heard a new footstep. He looked to his right. It was Lee. He held a gun. He distributed aim to all three Spirit Radicals. He said. “Untie them.”

Terry said, “Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m the only person with a gun here,” Lee said. “I’m here to follow through with my promise. Two promises.”

Dotor said, “We could easily take you—”

“You three can’t do shit! I can end your lives right now, but I’m being humanely generous! Now untie them or I will!”

“Fuck!” Dotor yelled. “Fine.” Terry grabbed onto Max’s rope.

“I can’t believe you came, Lee! I love you so much!” Leaflet yelled.

Lee, putting his gun down, said, “I love you too.”

Terry let go of Max’s still-tied rope.

A grunt emanated.

Behind Lee, a limbless exposed-brain animate human hopped and bounced in huge strides with its worm-like motion.

The animate plant screamed, “LEEEE!”

Dotor said, “It’s back again?”

Lee turned around. The animate human catapulted itself and landed on Lee’s face. The monster unsheathed a shape-shifted fibrous blade. Before Lee could get up, the blade sliced off his head.

The animate plant screamed in sorrowful pain. The animate human said, “I never forget a person’s scent. You’re next.” The monster catapulted itself on the animate plant’s face. In the middle of a scream, the animate plant’s ashy head was decapitated.

The animate human catapulted itself away from Max’s vision.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ANDREW RUTANO

Andrew laid on the manure. Kevin sat next to him.

Andrew said, “I’m a horrible person.” He lost all energy to cry or move. He was an animate creature awaiting inanimacy.

Kevin cried, “What hell are we living in?!”

“You’re living in my hell,” Robert said. He stood above Andrew’s laying body. “Do you wish to know why I built, what you say, this hell?”

Kevin looked up at the new speaker. He jumped up. He placed his hands around Robert’s neck and choked him. He yelled, “Fuck you! Life-destroyer!”

Robert galvanized his only hand and spewed titanium into Kevin's face. Kevin fell to the manure floor. Robert covered him into a titanium cocoon until Kevin's body stopped moving.

Robert said, "This is getting old. At least someone found my physical weak point after all of this time." He kneeled down to Andrew.

Andrew laid emotionless. He couldn't speak or act or feel. He could only breathe.

Robert said, "Now that I have you with me, I might as well share with you why I created this world." He sat down on the manure. "I created this world to feel. With my neurochemistry, I don't possess the ability to feel or share a sense of empathy that most people have. I'll get to the gist." He coughed up a bit of blood. "Inside each person's Hub is a special neuro-converter that no one knows about. It's an Empathizer. It accumulates and collects oxytocin from a person and transmits this neurotransmitter energy to my Hub. This neurotransmitter energy can only be collected when there's, what I call, a 'Witness of Suffering'. When a person empathizes with someone's pain, oxytocin is naturally released in their brain. This is how I accumulate my source of oxytocin. This is how I feel. This is why so many people suffered. This is why I created monsters. Animate humans. Oxytocin-less guards. Dopaminergic-depleted inmates. This is why I committed genocide on all animate plants. Every person in that manure field with a somewhat normal brain felt a flourish of oxytocin for their loved ones. And I embellish on this feeling. I crave this feeling. Feeling makes me feel younger to when I wasn't a psychopath. When I had a normal brain that could experience simple, but great, feelings of life. I unfortunately never figured out a way to create artificial precursor cells for oxytocin. With the neurotransmitter converter, I could lower it but I couldn't create it." He put his hand on Andrew's left shoulder. "I have another reason for doing all of this. I may have been doing all of this to benefit me, but in

reality, I was also doing it to benefit you. I want you to suffer. I want you to feel what it's like to have zero emotions. I want you to be like me. I want you to empathize with zero empathy."

Alonzo flew in on his fleshy jetpack and landed next to Robert. Alonzo said, "How'd I do, Monarch?"

"Fantastic work," Robert said. "You've completed your mission successfully. You also came at a great time. I was in the middle of discussing with my son why I did all of this."

Alonzo said, "What the fuck happened to your arm?"

"I had a little issue with Backstabbers. They—"

"Was it Zim, Conley, and Bandu?"

"Yes. And General Wayne and even Gordin. Gordin's death is the most comedic. He hid behind my desk in my office, waiting for me to come out of the Experimentation Room. He cried pathetically, having a gun aimed at my head, and he asked me if General Wayne was okay. Before I could answer, Fabian peeked out of the room and luckily shot him down for me."

"They were all neurotic," Alonzo said. "I'm glad that at least you're okay." He fixed his posture. "Did you tell Andrew that it was his fault for all the depleted inmate deaths?"

"I actually didn't," Robert said. "But I'm happy you brought that up. Why don't you tell him all about my next venture?"

Alonzo smiled. "Yeah so anyway . . . remember those Consciousness Inversion keys? Those were legitimate converters, but they—" He laughed. "They didn't send you to a utopia-like dimension or any of that shit. They send you to the Psychozone. Which is basically a physical dimension for your mental world. A world where physical manipulations change your psychology. That's the simplest I can put it. It's a pretty fucking complicated project. I don't even understand most of it." He took a deep breath to control his laughs. "But all in all, we planned for

you to inadvertently distribute those keys so you would be responsible for their death or unconsciousness."

Robert said, "You forgot to bring up the thlavic principles and what the aquaritorium was actually used for."

Alonzo laughed again. "My fault. When the Consciousness Inversion converter is inserted, a baby avalht spider, nestled in a little pouch inside the Hub, produces a white matter tract of thlava that channels the consciousness singularity to—. I don't know. It's complicated stuff. But if your brain moves when you are in the Psychozone, your head discombobulates due to the thlava being an impenetrable force." He took a pause. "And as for the aquaritorium . . . the 'Social Status Test' was actually something much bigger. Correct me if I'm wrong, Monarch, but wasn't it called Parallel Artificial Neuronal Transcription Pathing." He sat down. "So yeah. The series of tests you took required you to use every region of your brain. And when this region of interest was used, artificial neurons would clone off of the energetic stimulation of your original neurons. The Hub basically created a second artificial brain in your head for the Psychozone so that a physical layout of the Psychozone's physical dimension could be formed."

"That's enough lecture on neuroscience," Robert said. "The Psychozone would allow me to psychologically tinker anyone's mind. I've already completed physical and neurochemical domination. This is the last on my list. I'm deciding on—"

"DAAAAADDDD!" Max screamed from a distance.

Andrew's mind awakened. He woke up. He jolted his body up. A bridge of sutured dead animate plant bodies wrapped over the electric fence of the metal fence. A man had Max tied up on his back. A woman had Lisa tied up on her back. Another man had Harriet tied up on his back. They slowly climbed up the electricity-trapping-animate-plant-bodied bridge.

Andrew screamed, “MAAAAAXXXXX!” He sprinted for the metal fence, completely disregarding Robert and Alonzo sitting on the manure. “I’M COMING!” Blood poured out of his missing and dangling-fleshed arms.

“Go! Go! Go!” the man who carried Max yelled.

Andrew screamed, “STOP!” He ran quicker. He forgot about the bleeding. He forgot who he was. All three of the carriers were three-fourths up the 10-foot fence. Andrew was 20 feet away. His eyebrows bent. His jaw began to jitter. He ran his fastest he had ever ran. He felt manic. He felt like a superhero. He hopped for the fence. No arms or hands, he bit down on the Max carrier’s pants. He bit down the other two carrier’s pants. All three of the carriers, in addition to his loved ones, fell on the floor. His vision went blurry. He headbutted the Max carrier’s face. He kicked the Lisa carrier’s face. He rammed his body into the Harriet carrier’s body. He repeatedly kicked at the three of them. “I’LL KILL YOU ALL!”

He felt a ginormous brain zap. His muscles fasciculated. He fell to the floor. His mouth went numb. His tongue tingled. He got back up. He screamed maniacally. He looked at his son. He charged, ready to strike his son with a kick.

He stopped moving his body. He winced his face. “I’LL KILL MY CHILDREN! I HATE THEM!” He flexed all his muscles and dropped to the floor. He smiled and cried in screams. “BUT I LOVE THEM!” His legs became paralyzed. His whole body shivered and discombobulated. “BUT I HATE THEM!” He tried leaning his upper body up.

He saw his daughter’s face. She was frightened. He saw his son’s face. He had tears down his cheeks. He saw Harriet's face. Her eyes were closed with tears down to her jaw.

“Dad?!” Lisa cried.

The three carriers struggled to get back up.

Harriet said, “Fight that neurotransmitter monster!”

Andrew shivered more. He wailed. He was angry. “I CAN’T!” He struggled to breathe. “FUUUUUUUUCCCCCCKKKKK!”

The three carriers got up. The Max carrier yelled, “Should we fight him?!”

“He’s too unpredictable!” the Harriet carrier yelled.

The three carriers picked up his loved ones on their backs. Andrew wailed ferociously. His face grimaced.

“DAAAADDDDD!” Max screamed as his carrier carried him up the metal fence. Harriet and Lisa were broken.

The three carriers lifted them up the fence and threw them over. They hopped over it. They picked up his loved ones again and ran away.

Andrew’s face hit the manure floor. His muscles stopped aching. His body stopped discombobulating. His vision became clear. He cried.

“Not bad,” Robert said. “I sneaked in a neurotransmitter converter inside your Hub before you took off and changed your levels extremely in volatility. Welcome that feeling of defeat until you become numb to apathy.”

Andrew looked to the metal fence. The dancing light-green bioluminescent flowers died. So did everyone else neurochemically.

Psychozone Book:

“Where the fuck am I?!!!” Andrew yelled voraciously. “I fucking demand somebody tell me!!”

He was kicked in the face. Brutally. Pain fled into his body like a caterpillar leaving its cocoon like a supernova. The pain ruptured down his spine. Muted background is all he heard.

Andrew said, “Please! Stop kicking me! I want a girlfriend and to feel healthy!”

“Too bad,” said the Posse guard wearing black beetle like armor. “Those things will never come as long as we stop you.”

“Please,” Andrew begged. “I just want to live a normal life.”

“No,” the guard said. “Now shut up.”

Psychozone Book

Andrew Rutano woke up. He didn’t know where or who he was. Five posse guards wearing black suits of beetle-like armor surrounded him. Darkness is all he saw.

Psychozone Dimension with the physics and sci fi ideas things:

- Write about love. And about the zoloft. Insular energy
- Stakes for the 6:
- Stakes have to be more than just themselves.
- Andrew: if he doesn't stop naegleria fowleri and follow robert's predeterminism trail, the fate of the whole psychozone town will be destroyed and humanity will die, and he won't be able to save his family and his friends.
- Agwa: she has to save her sister ani from becoming empathy terrain. Has to save her father asta from becoming terrain from her mistakes too. Has to save the human race from the free-form beings killling them.
- Sina: as a servant to King Tayvion, she has to save herself from dying when being sent out to collect insular juice for the king with an insular juice extractors
- Max: escaped classified before harriet a bit before her and before he was insular-exterminated, he escaped and Naegleria Fowleri hooks onto his left ankle. He is only focused on saving himself from Posse members.

- Issa: tries to save herself and her family as a human war recruit. Her family can be given privilege to not be insular-exterminated if she performs well in the war.
- Harriet: has to escape the classified to save herself and skye. Tries saving the world from lizabeth's predeterminism trail.

6 YEARS LATER

CHAPTER 0: AWAKEN.

CONSCIOUSNESS TARGET: ANDREW RUTANO

Location: Psychozone Reside Grasslands

Andrew woke up. He had no clue where he was. He felt an array of infinity wash over his mind. It's as if the past of everything that happened to him was complete. His vision was darkness. He was blindfolded and felt blades of grass under his body. Nothing could be deciphered physically yet his own bodily senses. He felt an urge to get up. Yet he was kicked down briskly but blindly as his vision was blackened. Ignited in anger and fumed by rage, he sternly arose. Before he could get up, he felt a morbid thump on his chest blast like a vocal chord being strummed at 90 megalaser volts. He was viscerally defeated in prowess. His ears quirked.

"Let's finish him." the guard said.

"No," Andrew said. He slowly rose.

plot: andrew has to save his family from the naegleria fowleri reaching to zier’s pier