

PART ONE:

Job

CHAPTER 1:

Hey, you! Yeah, you, reading this sentence. Have you ever wondered what the hell we would do if the world was going to end? Well, luckily, there is Spirit Intercom, the key to solving all 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!

The year was 2053. Revolts against the government and clusters of people dying at mass became the norm. Everyone wanted their hands on Spirit Intercom, their savior from their own physical demise from Earth's demise.

All known energy platforms shut down once geothermal energy became the universal energy source. Excavating geothermal energy from Earth's core increased the pressure in Earth's core. Earthquakes and tsunamis swallowed Earth's fear. Tectonic plates shifted, and floating ashes and embers polluted the air.

Robert Rutano, creator of Spirit Intercom, officially completed his nine's year work three weeks ago. Approved by the government for use, people could pre-register to transport their consciousness through Spirit Intercom.

Unhappy, people of New York revolted against the government for not solving the geothermal issue. The aftermath of the geothermal energy crisis were known as “natural disasters.”

Andrew Rutano, son of Robert Rutano, 32 years old with light-brown hair, blue eyes, and three fingers missing from his right hand, was a prosthetic engineer who helped serve the broken and injured limbs of New York. Having engineered three mechanical fingers for his right hand, Andrew lived deep-end of Manhattan, New York, in an apartment not too far from Park Avenue. Divorced, Andrew had two children, 12-year-old Maxwell and 10-year-old Lisa. He lived with his roommate Kevin permanently and visited his children every Saturday.

Consisting of two bedrooms, a kitchen, two bathrooms—Andrew’s smaller than Kevin’s—, a dining room, and a living room with a glass balcony that magnified the city from above. From his touch-responsive computer, Andrew changed the angles of someone’s amputated foot hologram that was missing two metatarsal bones. He contemplated which prosthetic parts could fit these missing bones until his train of thought was interrupted by Kevin for the fourth time today.

Shouting from across the bedroom, Kevin asked, “Drewster, do we have any Goldfish left to eat?”

Andrew snapped. “Haven’t I told you before not to call me that?! And I already told you that we don’t have Goldfish. We’re on a very tight budget for snacks right now!”

Kevin said, “It doesn’t cost much to buy a simple box of Goldfish.”

Elevating from his blue king bed, Kevin walked over to the kitchen and opened up the loose-handle pantry. Tossing through every variety of snack, he reaches his hand far back into the

pantry. A rigid object cut his pointer finger. “Ouch! What the hell?!” It was one of Andrew’s prosthetic parts.

Kevin said, “Dude, I just cut my finger from one of your dumbass sprockets. Keep your science stuff to yourself.”

Andrew said, “Yeah that’s my bad. Won’t happen again.” He maintained his train of focus on the metatarsal bones.

The train of focus was interrupted from a Mindcord notification. Mindcord, the world’s new brain messaging interface, displayed a message labeled as “Spirit Intercom Inc.”

“Dear Mr. Rutano,

As the son of Spirit Intercom CEO Robert Rutano, we would be honored if you could be the first to test out our beta device, the Spirit Contrivance. Revolutionary technology runs through the family after all. 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.

Andrew pondered his choices. In a rushed manner of course. If he were to revisit his father after many years of awkward social distancing, something could spark. Yet this technology was revolutionary.

For many years of Andrew’s childhood, Robert was obsessed with the creation of Spirit Intercom and always seemed to have a love 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.

For many years of Andrew's childhood, Robert obsessed with his creation of Spirit Intercom, exceeding the love towards his family. Andrew's mother, Marie, obsessed her children Andrew and Marco with love.

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.

Eight years ago, Andrew's father told his children that their mother had died in a car accident. Heartbroken, Heartbroken, The kids 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. Yet, he came up with the realization that he better checkout the invention. It could be revolutionary (or it could be a fluke).

Andrea had trouble coming up with a final decision. He came up with the realization that it would be better to check out the invention due to the revolutionary technology it acquired.

CHAPTER 2:

Is Father a liar?

Why he be so dire?

But Andrew made his mind

To attend his father's grind.

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 shedded a 1980 retro look of a sports car. The engine owned 1000 horsepower, and the wheels were coated with chrome. His garage 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.

Tuesday afternoon, Andrew was ready.

Leaving the nice neighborhood in which he lived in, a whole new atmosphere of trauma and depression had appeared in front of him. 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. Andrew saw the paleness in everyone's eyes 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. Immediately stopping his car, Andrew arose from his seat and shoved the car door open. Running with all of his might, he picked the baby up. He saw the baby's dirt-crusted eyes. Andrew tried to soothe the baby by cradling and quieting him until he placed the baby in the back seat. Andrew thought, *why would somebody abandon a harmless baby? Why would no one help this baby out? Why is the world so cold?*

Driving down two more blocks, Andrew saw 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. Slowly driving past the ruckus, Andrew saw worried government officials through the broken windows.

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

Andrew contemplated whether he should go to Spirit Intercom or take the baby to his apartment. He was expected to be at the labs in ten minutes; therefore, he would not have enough time to drop the baby back at his apartment. The map showed that 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 will take control of the steering wheel and gas

pedal. This route is a bit experimental and may lead to some risks, but 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. Andrew did not have access to drive the car manually, and the Sporksterbeale took complete charge. The car immediately accelerated and took a sharp left into a filth-flooded alley, pushing Andrew back into his car seat. The car moved with great speed, avoiding dumpsters and homeless habitats.

He saw the baby cry. Andrew said to 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!”

The voice stated, “I am very sorry Andrew, but I cannot do that. You have already ordered me to take the 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 of the car. Andrew, biting his fingernails, hoped the car wouldn’t crash itself.

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 the purest white that Andrew had ever seen. Rows of glistening windows aligned on the buildings, and a huge steel fence encircled the labs. Around the fence were watch towers with guards that would be ready at a minute's notice. Watch dogs were 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 still remained in the backseat but did not cry atrociously anymore.

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

CHAPTER 3:

Who left that baby there?

Does the world seem not to care?

Andrew took matters into his own hands.

And helping the baby was the right plan.

As the charismatic security guard escorted the Sporksterbeale passed 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 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 to make sure that he was safe. 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, and I ask that you leave your vehicle. We will take care of your car.”

Andrew opened the car door and said, “Thank you Sporksterbeale for taking control of the driving. They will park you, and I’ll see you soon.”

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

Picking up the baby, Andrew got out of the car and saw a different security guard in a white suit enter 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,” said the guard.

“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 guard placed him in the backseat of Andrew’s car.

The guard asked, “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 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 anymore drama and said, “Okay, okay. Sporksterbeale, I grant access to physical controls.”

The voice said, “Thank you, Mr. Rutano. I will precede and open up physical control 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 road on the side of the white labs.

As Andrew saw his car drive 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. When he gazed up, he saw what seemed to be an endless amount of floors above him. A cylindrical glass elevator in the center of the whole complex rose up to the countless floor levels. He saw numerous lab researchers on each floor since each one 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 and saw that the guard looked like he had something to say.

The security guard said, “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, Andrew?”

Andrew said, “Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to disrespect you. It's just that I have never seen such a magnificent building as this.” Pausing over what the guard had expressed, Andrew 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. “And 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 upward until it stopped. The number “80” was read in the upper interior of the elevator. Marking 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 back.

The guard said, “Mr. Rutano, I think it would be best if you focused on your mission of trying out the contrivance and not worrying about the names of other inferior security guards.” Andrew grew stiff and discomforted.

The elevator door once again opened vertically, and the two exited the elevator. Having a look of disgust in his eye, the guard said, “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 for Andrew to sit on. The room was still pure white and had a space of about 400 square feet. Andrew walked over to the chair and 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, he saw a camera protruded from the wall. He carefully studied the room as he felt that he was being watched. He felt a strange feeling in the room being alone. The room felt so frail; the air felt so cold.

He had been waiting for quite some time until he heard the sound of footsteps from the hall outside the hollow glass wall. 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 with uncertainty 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,” Andrew said.

The researcher said, “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 and said, “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.” His eardrum vibrated and heard a door crack 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 and saw the security guard scurry past the door.

Behind the security guard was another set of footsteps that Andrew heard. The security guard grimaced his face because of Andrew’s perusing. Andrew saw a tall shadow behind the guard grow to his dismay. Directly behind the guard, Andrew saw the face of his father, Robert Rutano. Andrew gulped in his vomit and felt pain in his stomach. He felt congested, and his heart felt that it had dropped 100 feet underground. After eight years of not seeing his father, Andrew saw the wrinkles and blemishes in his father’s face that grew over the years. 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.

Andrew saw three paces in front of him that his father opened his arms up. Robert said, “Give me a hug, son.”

Andrew steadily walked forward and entered the go-zone for his father's hug. Robert wrapped his hands 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?"

"They're fine, Dad, and so am I. Why did you send me here?" questioned Andrew.

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

"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 Mom's presence?"

Robert's face did not change expression. He said, "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."

Still feeling displeased, Andrew said, "Fine, blow me away with this place."

"Come, son."

Andrew's father began to walk across the white tiles of the room. Opening the glass door, Robert looked at the security guard and said, "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? I better try to take precaution of my father. 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? How did my father even get sponsored by the government? Why can only people with 2.5 million dollars go to the Spirit World? Why didn't Rufus reveal his name to me? What task does he want me to do in the Spirit World? This lab seems strange, and, most importantly, can I even trust my father?*

As Andrew reflected, his father and he walked through plain white halls, making lefts and rights all over the complex. After walking for about 30 minutes, Robert opened a black door using an eye-recognition sensor. A subtle red beam overlayed on his eye for a couple 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 was in the center of the room. On top of the chair was a circular metallic rod with a thick blue wire connected with it and 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 the 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, or the projection of your neurons. 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.”

Andrew was shocked by this inventful creation. He said, “Wow, Dad. This is insane and a genius invention. I have some questions though.”

“What tickles your brain, son?”

Andrew asked, “What task did you want me to partake in, again?”

Robert requestfully said, “It’s pretty simple actually. I want you to enact in the Spirit World as if you lived there. 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!”

Robert said, “Sorry, son, but your questions are going to need to wait. Guess who just arrived!”

With little expression Andrew said, “Who?”

With high excitement Robert said, “Your brother!”

CHAPTER 4:

How will this place turn out?

Is Father way too devout?

His brother was invited.

Andrew remembered of his hatred.

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 had 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 thought that his father was going to send him to the Spirit World on 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 we can't supply you with this experience." Andrew did not refute his father and kept his anger bottled within himself.

A couple moments later, Andrew saw his father ignite the secured black door with the eye-recognition, which propped open the door. Marco past 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 6'1", and people called him a chick magnet. Having spiky brown hair, Marco had a protubed Adam's apple. Having ten fingers unlike Andrew, Marco used his hands quite often as a lava capturer, and his job was low paying and very dangerous. Multiple people had died as a lava capturer because when they collected the lava to trap the heat, some of the lava could overflow and leak onto the workers.

Marco met 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."

Shrugging his shoulders, Marco said, "That's not a welcoming 'hello,' right, Dad?"

Robert chuckled and said, "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 like Andrew did," he joked self-approvingly.

Taking slight offense from Marco, Andrew hesitantly said, "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?"

Feeling his sense of irritation, Robert said, “Calm down, son. Trust me. Everything is under control.” Marco also was feeling this sense of irritation.

Marco said, “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.”

“You’ve been invited here before?” questioned Andrew.

“Yep. That’s correct.”

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

“Alright, let’s do this,” Marco assured.

Surprised by their quick readiness, Robert said into his earpiece, “Bring out the other Spirit Contrivance, Rufus.” Meanwhile, Andrew studied the interdimensional communicator system. The system contained a medium-sized glass box. Enclosed by the box was a holographic visual. The visual was a blue brain with different points located on it. On top of the brain was a placeholder that said “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 with his finger, 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?”

“Son, remember what I said. Trust me.”

Marco barged in and said, “Come on Andrew. You can trust him. I’m sure it’s 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 and said, “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 were.

Robert said with fortitude, “Rufus, you forgot to attach the contrivance to the interdimensional communicator system.”

At this instant, Andrew was starting to grow uncomfortable and wary of the machine. He did not know what to expect and didn’t want to travel to the dimension with his brother. 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 and lit up a sign that said, “Communicator Ready.” 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 Marco’s 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, just give me a second,” Andrew responded. Walking with high doubt, Andrew slowly made his way to this foreign machine. He looked directly at the interdimensional communication system’s message of “Communicator Ready.”

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 a bit tight for his head. He looked at his father’s eyes and 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 in a studious manner, 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 when Marco and Andrew are in the Spirit World. 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 precaution 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 attention, and good luck on your dimensional management.”

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

Andrew asked, “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 man on the moon, let’s put 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:

Where is Andrew travelling?

Is his trust unravelling?

Coded neurons lead to a new atmosphere.

Brother by side, he must be sincere.

A few moments later of blackness, Andrew started to get 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. He had gained full exposure to what he could see. He looked down and saw his whole body stood intact, including the clothes he wore at the lab.

Andrew gained full consciousness and witnessed several green hills that laid throughout the horizon. He gazed to his left and saw his brother wearing the same clothes that were worn in the lab. 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. The grass on the hills appeared green but with a tint of yellow. Marco finally gained consciousness and looked at Andrew.

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.”

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

“Yeah.”

“So, wouldn’t that mean that we feel more because of the coded sensory neurons that affect our normal senses then?”

Feeling the grass with his hand still, Marco said, “I think you’re right, Drewster. Our perceivings are exaggerated from the coded neurons, like you said. You’re pretty dang smart.”

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

“Maybe it’s because you don’t have nerves in your mechanical fingers, so, therefore, the communicator can’t project it through this dimension.”

“Hey, Marco, you’re pretty dang smart too.”

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 surface of the floor. They continued walking towards the huge patch of less yellowish grass, which turned into white shades of grass. Andrew felt hotter than usual while he walked.

After walking for what seemed to be a pretty long time, Marco said, “Why is it getting hotter?”

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

Walking yet for another plentiful length of time, Andrew saw the white grass begin to fade less as they walked forward. Yellowish green patches of grass atop a hill were in front of them. Appearances of clouds took form 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 laid behind the hill, and he gulped in a spoonful of air.

Marco made it on top of the hill and saw a hundred meters away from him what seemed to be trees that grew a kind of purple fruit. Growing curious, Marco departed from his standing point and quickly ran to the trees. 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 going to eat those purple things?”

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

Andrew exclaimed, “I don’t think you should. I mean, who knows—” Marco without listening plucked the foreign-looking shaped fruit and ate it casually.

Andrew said, “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 felt enlightened. “Oh my God! This tastes great!”

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

Confused on what the substance was, Andrew asked, “Is that 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, “So far, this dimension has been amazing!”

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

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

Andrew and Marco quickly sprinted their way towards the other trees and ate the other purple apples with glee. While sprinting, Andrew realized that he shouldn’t get too ahead of himself in this unforeseen place. He contemplated the following to himself:

Hey, Andrew, don't lose your focus. Your father wants to see if this place is habitable for other guests. Try to discover new things in this dimension. Also, remember that your father is trying to make you create a closer bond with Marco. Don't put your full trust in Marco or your father since this dimension is unseen territory by every human being. Take your time, and don't jump ahead to conclusions so fast.

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, Andrew saw a river flowing down with a glistening blue color. He studied the river and saw that it stretched a distance of about 10 meters in length. There were a substantial amount of thick tree roots that crossed the river. The tree roots had almost formed a type of land bridge between the river. Andrew also had noticed 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 laid across the river from them.

Following his nature of curiosity, Andrew put his first step on a thick tree root that was near him. He maintained his balance on the one meter wide root. The river moved at a pretty fast rate as Andrew continued to walk on the slightly slippery tree root.

Marco said, "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 looked down into the water while walking and thought that he was going to fall. Making a minor mistake in footwork, he slipped a little but still maintained his balance. He broke

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

Andrew began to hear an eerie buzz noise in front of him. The noise grew louder and Andrew grew confused. Andrew asked, “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, Andrew saw a rapid huge bee-like species come out of the tree branches. This bee-like foreign creature with neon green stripes flew quickly towards Andrew’s direction. It’s bright blue stinger was vibrating and was aimed at Andrew’s head. The bee moved so fast that Andrew couldn’t even react to it. 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 faded 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 being right next to him, 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. 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:

Where did Andrew go?

Back to Earth? How so?

The bee was provoked,

Leaving Andrew's body soaked.

Consciousness shifts back to Andrew.

Andrew woke up in the physical world and gained back his consciousness while Marco awakened moments after Andrew. Dazed and confused, Andrew saw the lab researchers and his father around him. He asked, "What just happened?"

Robert said, "It appears that there was a bee with huge size proportions that 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 man on Earth 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 real life physically?”

Earl answered his question by stating, “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 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 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 were 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 they are called coded neurons. The complexity of the actual code though is insurmountable.”

Not expecting the science to be this deep, Andrew said, “That’s cool.” Robert closed the hologram. Talking remained extinct for a few seconds.

Andrew said, “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.

Before leaving the black room, Andrew asked, “Marco, what in God’s name was that bee creature doing, and why was it in the Spirit World?”

Marco said, “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?”

“Like 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.

Once again before he left the black room, Andrew quickly studied the equipment that were used for the Spirit Contrivance. He noticed that the interdimensional communicator was still on. He realized that 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 totally forgot. He wondered where they placed his Sporksterbeale. He rearranged his body 180 degrees behind himself and set his course to his dad. He wanted answers on where his car was.

Andrew walked the opposite direction since he figured that his father wouldn’t have travelled to the cafeteria and instead his headquarters. As he strolled down the white hallway wanting feedback, Andrew saw Rufus down the hallway walking towards him. 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.

Feeling a bit intimidated, Andrew said, “But do you know the way to my father?”

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 really 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 on 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 from 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 really sure on 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 of 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."

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 you're 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 to 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 as a grotesque or a human-like figure. 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 like 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 laid under the bottom of the robot for motion around the kitchen. The red orb carried multiple cameras and sensors for motion sensing.

Andrew saw them 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 it’s 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 in a robotic manner, “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 what seemed to be a minor 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, “You’re 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 me*, Andrew thought. He travelled 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 any of the steak. 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 to multiple things at once?”

“Through the use of eight control units that are communicated through coded motor neurons, just like the ones that travelled 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 awfully 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 on 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 really 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 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.

Max 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 saw 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 am able to 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 with how cutting-edge the technology was. Andrew had a problem: he was unaware 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 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 in 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 a span of five minutes, they finally made it to the locked door of the black room. Remembering that his father entered with the use of an eye recognition, Andrew was confused on 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 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 recognizing 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 in sight, 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 had no knowledge where it could possibly be.

Thinking that the lab researcher couldn't have gone that far, Andrew escaped out of the black room and looked for him. Running down the hallway that they came from, 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 (the middle part). Wondering on 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 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 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 even 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. Andrew saw several lab researchers walk pass him, not giving their 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 there were about 30 people 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 intrinsic 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 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 flem 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, glocks, magnums, and snipers. A podium was centered with 30 wooden chairs laid out in accordance with 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 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 affirming 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 really 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 really 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 up 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 Radicalist." 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 frontview 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 out a black pen out of his drawer and said, "Just shut up and be quiet."

Wallace arose 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 needed to be said.”

“It’s not all that simple. What you need is 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 really 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 on 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 peruse in 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. Having his hand on the doorknob, Andrew saw 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 a Wednesday still. 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 out of his room, and Andrew received some well-deserved sleep.

Andrew had slept for a solid 8 hours. Andrew’s instinct everytime he woke up was to check the latest news on Mincord; 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 totally 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.

Andrew saw Kevin barge into his room. Kevin 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 got back into business. He would go to Spirit Intercom right away—right after he explains everything to his aggravating roommate. It would be time to return back 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 being 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 from 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 though that your kids will be a bit saddened you won’t be here.”

“Ehh. 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 to 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 up 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 actually want to have access to Spirit Intercom? It’s astronomical. The world is under 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 actually planning to leave like 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 amount 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. Cruising down the street to the entrance, Andrew saw 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 change in behavior 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 the 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 at 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 Andrew saw Harriet sitting 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 comprise 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.”

Taking his seat next to Harriet, Andrew saw a portable IV dispenser table 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. Andrew saw Bradford 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 on to 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 in direction. 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 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. Looking to his left, Andrew saw 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 the bioluminescence in the water. This light probably extends all the way 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 for 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 laid 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 up, but his weight was too much for her strength. Instead, she dragged his body with the neckend 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 neckend 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 under 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 down 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 in accordance with the shape of the 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, "Like 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 actually hungry at this very instinct. Our desire to eat comes from our hypothalamus region of our brain. I studied this topic in my research at Spirit Intercom, and I’m very acquainted with the anatomy of the 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 motion of cutting up the beast’s stomach with its own paw. Andrew asked, “Wait! Isn’t this creature still alive? It’s only the dopamine that made 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. With the look of his eye, Andrew saw 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. Wiping the substance off his hand, Andrew saw Harriet take 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 everyday. 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. It's 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 deeply 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 saw Harriet's jubilation and asked, "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 absolutely 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 or not 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 what 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. Owing some knowledge on how to start 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, “Don’t you think it’s possible that fires can’t exist in this atmosphere? 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 down 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 chords 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 lifetime 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 own 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 circumferenced 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 rose his body upward as aches and wounds taunted him. He slowly and steadily positioned his hand in an awkward defending stance. Andrew first asked in a calm manner, "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 down. 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 antennae, the animate plant pulled down the antennae 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 of Mother Nature. Mother Nature defines me as Plant.”

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

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 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 throughout majority of daylight. 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 majority 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 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 laid 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. You’re 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 pulmonating, 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 own loving 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 up 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 favor?”

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, “Goddamn it. 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 actually make you forget that any of this ever happened.”

Andrew said, “Really? How?”

Bradford said, “Too late.” 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 his 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. Escaping out of the hole, Andrew saw Herb waiting 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 gonor.”

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 down, 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 on 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 Andrew saw 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 together. 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 about 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 to. 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 seeked out all three petals; no animate plants were in sight. He seeked 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 saw it was Herb that woke him up, 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, Andrew saw no animate plants 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 perimetered by trees. Across the field a ginormous black-and-yellow-striped frog relaxed on a stone that was encircled by a pond of fresh water. 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, and to top it off, that is also a poison dart frog! I've definitely seen this species before."

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 on 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 on 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 thrust 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 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. (Yo, whoever is reading this, research what a swell egg looks like. They look incredible.) 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 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. (Andrew wishes the beetle did fly out though.) 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.

While exiting out of the teepee, Andrew saw 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.

Looking around, Andrew saw it was still daylight abroad and presumed that the beetle was in his hand still. 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 fled 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 surmass 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 on, 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 antennae. 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 antennae, 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 actually really 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 heals, 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 back to Allure with Andrew in his arm.

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, comprised 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 vocalled 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 soft-spokenly 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 the 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 (with his real voice), "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 disidainly 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 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 off 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 eye hole 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 (in Herb's real voice), *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 of 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 to 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. (Hey, reader! Just to let you know, infrared light [a.k.a UV light] cannot be seen with the human eye. Humans can only see visible light when light waves emit 380-740 nanometers. However, with thermoreceptors, the animate plants can spot infrared light that emits more than 700 nanometers.) “In fact, their receptors are located on their eyelids. A translucent green film overlays on their eyes. This film displays the different infrared waves present in our atmosphere. If you even wanted to, they could lend you it. Want to give it a try?”

“Wow, really? Sure,” Andrew enthusiastically requested.

Herb definingly yelled, “Hey! Shruburb! Expel of 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 glamourised 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: jasmins, 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 back 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 of 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 still 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 bursted 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 that it had with its society. 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. Bringing his body to that noise's direction, Andrew saw a cheetah, the same species that had pounced on him an earlier time. 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 may have looked ferocious, but Andrew saw an underlying spark of care. As if it had some submissive will. Andrew's sense of safety did not fly. It was firm and calm.

Andrew raised his palm up 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 heart beat 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 actually 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 span of 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 nod 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 petals spattered out, and the flower spit Andrew out, propelling him hundreds of feet up in the air. Arms and legs flamboyant with the fragile air, he fell downward 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. His mother cultivated naturalistic principles instead of exterminating Harriet. Quite interesting. The animate plants meditated, breathing together simultaneously.

Herb said, “Now, if the Son of Nature wouldn’t mind, I think Mother Nature would like to continue her spiritual reading.”

“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 everyday. Esse always knew our destiny, our destiny to seek contentment from 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 for a second time! 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 dwindle down 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 in 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 like you did to Harriet. I’m a valued member while she’s just an unwanted intruder. I don’t see the relationship.” 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 come to the conclusion 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 (left and right) 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 to it. What do you mean?"

"No!" Herb unleashed. "You did do something wrong. You let this baby suffer with 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 back 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 tightened his fists. "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 still 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 back," 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 down 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 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 up and offered his hand to her. Grabbing his palm, she rose up with the help of Andrew's bodyweight.

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 (according to his recent brain activity). Coming out of the teepee, he saw small miniature structures constructed from tree branches. There were five of them, equaling to 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 their 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 overhanged 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 its 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 calling to us from a source.”

Another plant asked, “What kind of source?”

She said, “A source so sourceful 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 each 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 head. He desired to reenact a sloth’s day in 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 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 at 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 in disappearance.

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 in 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 thing 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 to 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. (Some may find this funny, if they have a convoluted sense of humor.)

Looking at Harriet’s mouth upside-down, Andrew said, “Harriet, 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. It was funny-looking.

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# 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 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.” The bee was possibly lower due to the tiresome long flight.

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 miniscule 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. Less 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 even 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!”

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 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 in 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 reckoned that I 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 actually 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 tasted a liquid. It tasted like syrup—as in it was probably sap. Not too far from Herb, he returned back 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 foul to 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. More dry 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 acquires 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 who 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 up 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 quick 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 have 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 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 rhi-no 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 has poison ivy on its scales."

Harriet came in quick 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 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 shedded 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 shedded 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 sank to the bottom of the lake. Andrew returned back 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 sank.

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 antennae downward, and they were off. 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 his peripheral vision from a pretty far distance. The creature floated in the atmosphere at the same altitude of the bee. It’s 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 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 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 distance on Andrew. Nervous energy swept through him, causing him to run 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 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 of a 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 had his mother 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 in 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 with 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 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. Geesh, 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 remained unconscious. His IV rested on the floor.

Andrew said, “I think I need my IV. Could you get a nurse to insert it in 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 a span of 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, Andrew saw Harriet's body and the unconscious bee. 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 jubilation. 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 your 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 white 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 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 to talk 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 are 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 they were 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 with 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 together, 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 over robotics this weekend. Where even are you? 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 everyday. 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 near 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 and extratified. 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 in 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 it was 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 sleep straight.”

“If you look above, there’s a hatch, but I wouldn’t open 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 on 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 the 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, Andrew saw

Rufus' body expand 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 own 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.”

Checking his Mindcord time, Andrew saw it was 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,” Andrew said.

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. Not too far from it, Andrew saw 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 position.

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 hyper-ventilation. 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 perimetered around 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? Knowledge? 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 ewewy nook and cwanny at all times. We cannot wesort to waziness, and ewewy pwecautiun 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 curioshty 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 on 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 bedroom. It was the same white room that he slept in, and the angle

focused from the desk. A realization struck Andrew. They were surveillancing 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. Like 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. Andrew saw 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. Biting his nails, Andrew saw Kurt’s eye open the door. 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 abled 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 armow. It’s 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 armow.” 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 ewewy 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 wegistered 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 curioshty. 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 knowledge 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 shecurity 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, Andrew saw a giant light ahead of him. The problem was that he didn't know how to brake 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 tiny 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 of the circus tent. Excited with joy, he came to the

conclusion 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 back to Rick and Kurt.

Andrew was satisfied. The likelihood of this was downright miniscule, and finally something was going his way. He drove into the hole, down the stairs, and down 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 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's name are you doing! You've destroyed the Pirouette! 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 for 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. "Actually, 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 pwecautiun." 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 quick 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 back 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 whole 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 sliced Kurt's only hand off. 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 initiation, 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. Timing was key to his plan—his plan for success. Andrew didn’t also know how to react with the attorney general situation. Why would his father want him there? What were they planning to do? As these questions 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 made the choice 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 preventing 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 to 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 to 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 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 troubled 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 saw the time was 9:57 p.m. Exiting the door, Andrew saw 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 back. 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?”

She said, “I’m doing great, Rufus. Is this Andrew’s first time here?”

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 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 moisty pores of his partially-soggy hand. As he sat back down, Marco cringeworthingly 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.

Explicating 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.

Having no knowledge on 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 saw a black room that 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 gave me the opportunity 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 “Dopabeen” 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 up 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 I 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, it’s important that we 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 amount of people in the room. A pale green desk with a Spirit Emissary positioned in the middle of the room. A small holographic screen laid 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. As a matter a fact, 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 with 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 laid 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 clinged 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 whole entire

company leads up to this moment. I took note of your experience in the Spirit World, and I was amazed with 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. It’s important that you 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 laid 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 the most astrayed 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 compacted 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 they’re 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 have memory of 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, being normal and everything, and Andrew travels 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 sure 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 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 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 cliché 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 clattering 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. One eye showing, 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 obviously 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 an 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 with no living consciousness.”

“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.” Andrew saw her look of anger. She zoomed in 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 were 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 have knowledge of 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. Gaining 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 down, the first thing Andrew saw was a blue flower petal, a big one. It had the same shape of 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 that there is less gravity on the northern and southern polar points of this planet. Afterall, 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. Andrew saw his first ever animate plant in the physical world. It 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 bees rest, 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 laid 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 bilateral 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 chords. And due to the fact that 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 of 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 to the eye. "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 horrified, Andrew saw the mechanical beetles ascend 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 ablaze. 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 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 glosiness.”

Rufus, who began to have glossy eyes, said, “Okay.” Andrew noticed his glosiness. Robert handed the helmet to Rufus, who walked slowly to the ship. Fire sparks slightly shaded

Andrew's vision. He was at a loss of words. He suspected that his father would kill him now since he was no 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 deadend 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, there were five guards 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. Still seated in the ATV, Andrew saw guards approaching 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 the steel wall, Andrew screamed in agony. Andrew could hear the engine of this ship whirl. The shooting and whirring helped lose his focus on the wound. Rufus said, "I started the ship. Thank god for auto-pilot! And thank god Earth is a choice for 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 miniscule 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, “Drive, Rufus!” 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 was 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 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 saw 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 actually 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 bursted 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 ACCESS! 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 laid 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 whirl 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 saw Jimmy standing by the entrance, fiddling with a knife in his hand. Looking up, he witnessed Andrew.

Jimmy said, "Aye! It's Andrew! Man, it's been awhile 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 really dug into each other," Jimmy added.

"What are you talking about?"

Jimmy answered, “Oh, you don’t know? Do I really 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 off in a bad way.”

This porn-watcher was right. Andrew had to keep his cool.

Wallace approached the entrance. He was surprised with 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 was. Rick, wearing his tarnished red suit, was sitting in a chair. The other low-life revolvers 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 has knowledge of 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 over to 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, it is important that you 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 Minecord. “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 quick 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, obviously. 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 had 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 preceded. “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 from 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 for a second time, 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 own 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 as a matter a fact. 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’s 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 had no knowledge of 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 have no knowledge.”

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!”

Gentle 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 ten thousand people wanted access 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 own 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. Andrew saw in front of the hallway was a terminal. Andrew saw behind 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. The entire crowd of outsiders owned a portable 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 behind 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 began 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 own death. You were carrying your own 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. Andrew saw Jimmy’s face. It 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 consciousness 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 to. 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 world 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. Andrew saw a screen called “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 key hole 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 up 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-Benja's bar?" Andrew disagreed.

Making it to Manhattan, he saw the entire city had been abandoned. The sky was masked in a red color and fire ablazed 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. Immediately, Andrew saw bulky people that laid 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 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 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 of 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." Andrew saw the animate plants riding 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 each other. It was trippy to 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 actually lived. His consciousness is what mattered.

Andrew felt at peace with everything. Everything had worked out. He laid 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 to other companies in 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 in order 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 took into form as the universal energy system. This invention, as you just went through 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, in order 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 own consciousness here before I died.”

Andrew said, “What’s the point of going through all of this if your consciousness still 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 got 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.”