

The Solution

TO

EVERYTHING

VINCENT WARE

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Dedicated to All that is Unique
Within Human Beings

BOOK III

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Mist. The tiny droplets of water that were hovering in the air existed as a thin gossamer opaque veil. It was mist, an example of the phenomena of dispersion. It was mist, exemplifying and thus related to each and every process of suspension that has ever existed in the past or shall ever manifest in the future until the end of human time.

It was mist, damp mist that surrounded them, covered them, concealed them, barely. The custom modified box-truck-like vehicle, running in electric silent mode, passed quietly through the soft rain that now began to fall, again. The tires hissed and whispered on the wet pavement and occasionally splashed water. The vehicle, guided by the driver and directed by advanced radio detection and ranging, global positioning, and automated sensor system, had dimmed its laser headlights. Still, the essence of the bluish-whiteness of the lights was refracted and thus shimmered and was scattered by the mist and then was upon the mist and wavered and the dispersing light seemingly waved at the eight occupants of the truck that sat in silence staring out through the darkened bulletproof windows.

The truck turned right, onto a wide two-lane road, passed between tall maple and elm trees and came to a clearing. A building with an adjacent warehouse sat in isolated semi-darkness with only interspersed tall lights providing illumination. This once thriving industrial area was still in the process of recovering.

The manufacturing base had been primarily in high tech precision products such as computers and electronics, machinery, fabricated metals, plastic, rubber, and 3D printing equipment. All of these products, capabilities and expertise had been combined to create a commodity considered to be the best of the best.

It was 2 a.m. This drizzly, late Sunday night had progressed into early Monday morning. It was now springtime in this month of April in the year of 2172. The truck glided past the parking area in the front of the building. There were vehicles there but not as many as would have been during a different day and at a different time. The truck pulled to the rear and backed up to the loading dock of the warehouse. When it stopped, a door on the right slid open, steps were automatically extended and then lowered and as two individuals stepped from the cab of the vehicle, one from the driver's side, one from the passenger side four other individuals exited from the cargo area. Two would remain to monitor the visual feeds from the rotating cameras mounted around the top of the truck. In addition they would also continuously check the radar system and simultaneously listen to the audio feed that came from the group entering the building. They were all connected to each other through a communication system. Everyone else heard each and every encrypted voice transmission. But most important, the two would ensure that the twelve inch tall metal object in the shape of a pyramid that sat upright between them, fastened onto the work desk, continued to change colors, pulsing slowly from silver to white to bright red.

They were all dressed completely in a matte-black-colored material with black boots and black military style caps and black form-fitting gloves. Those entering the building, except for the Leader, strapped shortened pistol-styled rifles to their backs that were fully loaded with an extended magazine and each had extra ammunition in their belts and each carried a large handgun on their right side. The Leader carried only a handgun. They all, including the Leader placed a canvas bag over their heads and hung it cross body on their left side.

The S.I.C., the second in command, followed by the Leader and then the other four mounted the five steps that led to the

rear entrance. The four who followed pulled their handguns. The S.I.C moved forward to the door and placed the plastic card being carried against the combination lock. The card began to blink the colors green and yellow, slowly at first and then faster and faster. Then the card turned one color. Orange. The S.I.C. pulled the card away, dropped it into their side pocket, pushed down on the handle, pulled the door open and held it as the Leader, followed by the others entered. The S.I.C. joined them as they all walked quickly up the long hallway towards the main darkened lobby area. The group paid no attention to the security cameras mounted in various positions on the walls and ceiling.

When they reached the lobby they turned left towards the offices. They spread out to check all the rooms and cubicles. They regrouped and moved to the lighted large corner office. A somewhat short, heavysset *Bronze DM* with long thick aquamarine-colored hair sat at a desk. Both his hands were on the keyboard and he stared at the lit up screen that was intermittently blinking rapidly in a prescribed pattern. He did not move. His dark-green colored eyes were wide. His eyes were blank and hollow.

The members of the group stared for a long moment at this individual who was frozen in place. This *DM* was roaming deep into a maze of endless passages and chambers that created a complicated network of pathways going not in circles but in directions meandering everywhere and nowhere at the same time. There inside the pictures and between the text of the lines bright before his eyes existed a labyrinth from where he could never return until released. This human being was locked securely within a technological trance.

The Leader turned to the four who stood patiently waiting at the doorway, smiled slightly and extended the right arm, not as if to offer the contents of the building to them but the world to them. The Leader's first words to everyone, including those in

the truck were soft in their left ears, whispered almost and yet imbued with, filled with hatred, six words.

Leader: Find them. Torture them. Destroy them.

The four holstered their weapons. Then each, including the Leader and the S.I.C. took their right hand and touched a small yellow button near their left shoulder. A thin white light was now visible that ran along the bill of their caps. Their IRT capabilities were now activated. Using infrared thermography they would be notified by chimes in their ear of any human anywhere in this manufacturing plant.

As the four quickly moved off to meticulously search the large building each removed from their bag a heavy eighteen-inch metal pipe with a round steel ball on the end. They pressed a button on the bottom and the pipe extended to twenty-six inches. They pushed through large swinging doors and disappeared.

The Leader turned back to the *DM* who now had a moist, glistening forehead. Knowing the sounds uttered could be heard the Leader spoke and pointed.

Leader: When I return I'm going to take my cudgel and beat you until you're dead.

Each word direct, yet elevated in volume, as if to guarantee the man at the desk felt their reality. The Leader and S.I.C. turned and walked towards a nearby long glass-enclosed room. This space housed other computers, Comm devices and the main servers. The two entered the chilled area and each carefully pulled a round black metal ball from their bag. It was ten inches in circumference and when they both pressed a ball against a server the bottom of the object flattened and adhered to the surface.

They opened the covering of the Comm device they wore on their wrist and pressed several times on the letters and numbers and the objects on the servers released thin silver incandescent threads from around their sides and glowing threads began to

multiply and rapidly expand as a web over the servers. This network would eventually, completely cover every server in the room.

The tendrils spiraled and twirled as if alive and entered every port on the servers and any connected Comm devices. The two observers stepped back and watched as the movements of the threads ceased and on each object a small window opened and in the gray of the window a white percent sign appeared with a zero. When the percentage became two they turned and departed the room. The other four had muted their connections but as the two stepped back into the lobby area they could hear in the distance, screams and hollering. The Leader paused for a moment to listen and smile slightly at these obvious audible expressions of pain and suffering.

The two walked down a long hallway. They pushed through two wide connecting swinging doors and were now in the large shipping area near the loading dock. There were several dozen upright containers made of beautiful reddish-brown mahogany wood. They stood in lines, separated by several feet it was as if they were placed carefully in formation. The containers were as caskets in appearance except for the handles at the backs and the small locked wheels along the rear at the bottom.

Each container had a full front covering made of clear polycarbonate and the interior consisted of silk and plush cashmere. Nestled securely inside the beige, form-fitting softness was a naked, closed-eyed *Entity*. The Leader and S.I.C. separated and moved along the rows. They quickly read the silver plaques attached to the sides of the containers. Each plaque contained specific information directly related to that enclosed *Entity*. Most important was the destination and if there was a shipping date. And as they were searching, screams reverberated loudly nearby.

The S.I.C. stopped, read a plaque, an address, and called out.

S.I.C.: 'They're here! I've found one!

The S.I.C. unlatched the cover, removed a small gold-colored box from the bag being carried and when the box was opened it revealed a thin blue metal object 24mm in circumference. The coin sized object was placed against the right temple of the *Entity* where it remained and then the S.I.C. opened their wrist Comm device, tapped on it and the metal object blinked red three times and then turned green. A signal was sent. Data was transferred. The object was removed, the container was closed, the cover was latched and the S.I.C. moved to another one.

The Leader stood before a container reading the information. There it was. Destination: Washington, D.C., the Capital of *East World*, the seat of political power. There would be others destined to be sent there. And there would also be other *Entities* going to New York City, the true capital of everything.

The Leader opened the cover, removed a gold-colored box from their bag and taking the rounded piece of blue metal, made the transfer and moved on. When each *Entity* being shipped to Washington, D.C. and New York City had been identified and accessed, the two came together and strolled slowly along and looked intently at each remaining *Entity*. Finally the Leader stopped and stared at a form. The S.I.C. moved closer and they read the specifications.

Appearance: Male. (Android) 25 years of age.

Skin Color: *Bronzeada*

Height: Six feet

Weight: 175 pounds

Eye Color: Cobalt Blue

Hair Color: Blond. Wavy Style. Medium Length.

Penis Size in Inches: Flaccid Length-4.50. Flaccid Stretched-6.20.

Flaccid Girth-4.25. Erect Girth-5.21. Erect Length-9.00.

Erection Duration: Unlimited. Temperature variation design.

Movement Range: Unlimited. Additional upgraded anal and oral capabilities. Temperature variation design.

Measurements were listed including waist size, chest, biceps, thigh, calf and foot. The list was comprehensive. There were prices for the additions and modifications that were made, prices for other available options. Technical information was also provided such as the operating system specifications, processing speed, power source life span along with the date and time stamp of creation. There was a directive to access the enclosed storage device that included the manual with complete instructions. Comm control device was provided. At the bottom of the plaque was the cost of this particular model. The Leader spoke.

Leader: This one.

The S.I.C. moved behind the container, pressed the lever to unlock the wheels and tilted the container back and rolled it forward into the aisle, locking it in place. The two continued on along the row and then moved over to the next aisle, looking inside each container as if judging each occupant and weighing their decision. Finally they stopped in front of one and read the details.

Appearance: Female (Gynoid) 19 years of age.

Skin Color: *Escura*

Height: Five feet nine inches

Weight: 150 pounds

Eye Color: Brown

Hair Color: Black, Loose Curls, Long Natural Style

Bust: 36 D-Cup

Waist: 24 Inches

Hips: 36 Inches

Vagina: Length/Depth in Inches: Normal State-4.20.

Expanded State-8.00. Temperature variation design.

Again all the measurements were listed. Again the list was all-

inclusive including the installed technology. In addition the costly accessory package for this *Entity* included vaginal massaging and grabbing capabilities along with uniquely developed anal and oral abilities with the temperature variation design. There was again the instruction to access the manual. Just as the male who had been chosen, this was not only the most up to date and advanced, this female model also had the most powerful and modern operating system currently in existence. The Leader had made note of the small 24k plate at the very top of the front of every container that displayed the initial programmed loaded name of each *Entity*. The Leader knew these creations were the most expensive in the world. And that was because of their processors and operating systems. That was all they were interested in. That was why they were here at this moment in time.

Leader: Remind you of someone?

S.I.C. Yes. Same color. Virtually the same size.

Leader: This is the other one.

While the two were in the shipping area the hollering and screaming that had echoed in the distance throughout the building had subsided and then ceased altogether. The other four opened communication and one of them spoke and the Leader heard a voice in his ear.

Voice: We're done.

Leader: We're in the shipping area.

As the S.I.C. rolled the container forward the other four members of the group appeared just inside the doorway. Stepping forward they scraped and shuffled their feet and attempted to remove, as much as they could, blood from the bottom of their boots. Their pants were splattered with blood and they wiped at the blood on their weapons with pieces of clothing that had been ripped and torn from the bodies of the dead. The Leader spoke and pointed at the two separated containers.

Leader: Take these two.

One of the four moved to a button on the wall. There were three large doors and the button near the door on the right was pushed and the door was raised. The truck was there at the dock. The rear door was opened and the two containers were carefully loaded through the back and strapped upright securely to the wall on the left side. The door was closed. Then the shipping door was lowered.

While that was going on the Leader had removed a laser pen fastened to his belt and proceeded to etch a series of small mathematical objects in the form of symbols onto the walls and ceiling. Turning back to the group the Leader noticed a silver metal shipping container standing alone in the corner. It appeared unique in its austerity. The Leader approached the container and looked it over. The S.I.C. moved to stand before the container. The Leader noticed the container was not only locked but also hermetically sealed. There was no clear covering to look through. There was no detailed information of the contents. There was only the destination, Langley, McLean, Virginia and a delivery date. The Leader thought for several moments and then spoke.

Leader: Let's see if we can successfully complete an indirect transfer through our new portal process.

The S.I.C. searched through the canvas bag, found the golden box but this time a small perfectly square black piece of metal was removed. It was placed against the front of the silver container and when the Comm device on the wrist was tapped the black piece of metal turned red and then white and then disappeared. They looked at each other.

Leader: Time will tell.

The two joined the others and the six started towards the swinging doors. The smeared bloody footprints led them in a reverse direction. When they passed through the doorway they

turned left back towards the offices. The Leader and S.I.C. entered the chilled room and removed the objects they had attached to the servers. The thread-like materials had retracted into the balls and the displays were blinking, 100 percent.

The Leader alone entered the office and stood before the man whose damp, sweating, yellowish-brown hued skin was now pasty and pale, drained of all its artificial color. The Leader pulled a metal pipe from the hanging bag and pressed the button on the bottom of the handle. The weapon extended and the bulb-like piece of metal on the end, as if magically, morphed into a black and silver human skull with hollow eyes and a gaping mouth that twisted into a vengeful, hateful snarl.

The cudgel was raised and the heavy weapon, with speed and force was brought down upon the left hand of the sitting man, smashing that hand and shattering the computer. Now this person was no longer frozen. The trance was removed.

The man hollered and jumped up, first grabbing his left hand with his right. Then turning to the wall behind him and reaching with that right hand for the pistol that hung holstered there. The cudgel struck that right hand, breaking it. The man turned towards the doorway blocked by the other black-clad figures staring without emotion into his eyes. Looking at his pain. The turn continued, to the wall, the windowless corner. He turned back to face his attacker. The man's arms were now crossed in front of his face and the cudgel broke his left leg. Then the right leg was broken, tibia, fibula and femur bones cracking and popping. The downed man dragged himself slowly towards the far corner. Now he was writhing. Screaming.

Man: Oh! Aha! Oh! Oh!

Hollering.

Man: No! No! No!

Crying and crying out between the blows that continued to fall

upon his body, against his arms.

Man: Please! Please! Please! I haven't done anything to you!

Demanding. Pleading.

Man: Stop! Stop! I'm begging you, please stop!

Questioning?

Man: What are you doing? What are you doing? Why? Why? Who are you? Who are you?

The blows came harder and faster and then each question was answered in precise order with each blow in a voice that was filled with what sounded to be not only hatred and venom but also contempt and disdain.

Leader: I'm killing you! I'm killing you! Why not? Why not?

The final blow crushed the man's face and skull in and as the blood and brains splattered against the wall the man would not hear the answers to the last posed questions.

Leader: I am Bru.

The Leader stood straight, looking down at the form that until a moment ago was a living, breathing, human being. Now dead, forever. The Leader spoke as if all the answers to the questions had been axiomatic and the results of past actions were now clear and obvious in the present. The ensuing words were intense yet succinct and foreshadowed all that was about to unfold in the future. Softly they came.

Bru: I am Bru. And I am the essence of Singularity.

The group, alternating between electric and gas power, rode west in silence towards their destination. The veiling mist had dissipated and then vanished. The last of the waxing gibbous moon high above remained invisible behind the dense puffy clouds as the rain continued to descend, lightly. The headlights cut through the darkness that surrounded them. Bru spoke and each member of the invading group answered enthusiastically.

Bru: Did all of you pay homage to the uniqueness of the human kind?

Una: I did.

Okan: I tallied in blood.

Ek: Positional expressions for me. Hex.

Vier: Binary notations for me. So simple.

The Leader turned to the driver, his S.I.C.

Bru: And you my Moja?

Moja: Ceasar Augustus reigned.

Bru: Good! Good! Well done, all of you!

He addressed the two who had remained in the truck.

Bru: Tatu, Naki, your opportunity to leave your mark comes next time. You can all drop off now.

Bags were hung on hooks. Weapons were placed in racks. The audio interconnect link was disengaged and the group members returned to silence, thinking, processing. Bru was pensive as he stared to his right out of the darkened window. Irondequoit Bay was just there in the near distance, black and shimmering. Fog could be seen advancing over the water, toward the shore, toward the earth. The thick whitish-gray substance rose and floated forth as an ominous presence. But the truck passed through the verge of this ghostly, earthly cloud as it now turned south. Bru settled back and stared directly ahead as he spoke to Moja.

Bru: What is fog?

Moja: A visible aerosol that consists of minute droplets that are suspended in the air near the surface of the earth.

Bru: Indeed. That is what it is. And what are properties of fog? What can it do?

Moja: Cover. Blur. Envelop. Daze. Confuse. Obscure ... blind.

Moja stopped, knowing there was more that could have been said on the subject. He waited on Bru. The next words came softly, spoken with surety, devoid of all elements of opinion or

conjecture. Words expressed as a matter of fact.

Bru: Humans exist within the fog.

The rain fell harder.

The group drove a little over eight hours to their destination in Virginia. They rode the last three hours in electric silent mode. As they drew closer Bru rose and moved to stand behind Tatu and Naki who had continuously monitored the four screens in front of them, one of which was the radar system. The two had never looked away. He focused on each screen and after the truck traversed several miles he spoke. Everyone could hear.

Bru: Get ready Moja. Tatu, prepare to Cloak.

Tatu pressed on keys on the keyboard. The pyramid blinked.

Bru: Reset Blocker radius to ten miles.

Naki turned a dial on a panel near her right hand. The three could see no vehicles or activity in the nearby emptiness around them but still the radar indicated traffic approaching from different directions in the distance.

Bru: Initiate Cloak.

Tatu sent out a signal that wrapped completely around the truck. The Electromagnetic Spectrum was altered and the truck became very close to being totally invisible, moving between any existing wavelengths of light and the road beneath them as a large shadow. Now the pyramid was blinking colors continuously.

Bru: Hover Mode.

Moja pulled on a lever and the vehicle lifted into the air and the tires folded inward and up. They reached the turn off point.

Bru: OK, now!

Moja turned the vehicle right and moved west towards the first ridge of mountains.

Bru: Deactivate Blocker in two minutes.

The truck traveled sometimes between and further behind

these elevated portions of the earth. Finally it stopped in front of a specific expression of tectonic force and Moja pressed a button on the dashboard. A signal was sent and the front of the mountain, as a tall, elongated door, slowly, noisily, with seemingly tremendous effort, slid open. The truck floated through the aperture. The front of the mountain closed and sealed into place. Cloaking was removed. The tires dropped into place. The truck descended and settled and Hover was disengaged. The truck was now in a cavernous hollow section of the mountain.

The truck pulled forward and stopped. A wide, thick section of the mountain floor lowered and descended into a large spacious area. This was the garage of this immense underground complex. When it reached the floor of the interior a ramp extended from this detached crust of earth and the truck pulled forward and rolled down the ramp. The ramp retracted. The floor rose to return to its original position, fusing again to the sides of the mountain.

Two others of the group, their main armorers, had watched them arrive on one of the many security systems and had come to meet them. Greetings were exchanged and there were questions and answers regarding details of the mission. The two who had stayed behind wanted to assist and the containers were carefully taken from the truck. Ek and Vier, followed by the armorers with a toolbox, then Bru and all the others, wheeled the containers down several long and winding hallways and finally into a brightly lit laboratory. The containers were locked in an upright position.

Everyone in the group stood there and stared at the two new additions. Then Bru motioned. The armorers went to work. They took the handles off. Then the two, along with Ek and Vier placed the containers on two low tables. The cover was detached and removed. Everyone turned to Bru.

Bru: Cinq and Dois, Tatu and Naki. I give you the honor.

The four went to one of several boxes near the far wall. They removed soft cloth gloves and put them on. Then, with Moja's directions the two naked *Entities* were carefully lifted from the containers and placed gently on two silver, metal tables that had a soft foam cover on top. The two tables sat in the center of the room beneath bright fluorescent lights.

Moja and Bru took off their black gloves and put them down the recycle chute. Then they went to another box near the wall and took out nitrile gloves and put them on. They each moved to a metal table. From the sides of the tables they pulled out and extended one of the advanced devices they had designed and constructed with the assistance of Cinq and Dois.

The device was similar to electrode, anode and cathode cables. It was placed, using pure-silver bands onto the thumb, the middle and little fingers of the left hand of the supine forms. The same was done for the right hand. Next, a silver headband was secured across the forehead of the two and when the bands were adjusted a small triangular opening was visible.

Bru and Moja removed two small black and silver triangular metal devices from a clear plastic box on a nearby table and placed them inside the triangle openings, against the foreheads. They stepped to the array of Comm devices behind them and began to press on keys and turn knobs. Thin, nearly invisible, clear wires slowly began to emerge from the devices on the foreheads and as energy began to pulse from the cables through the wires the wires snaked into the air and began to connect, like an expanding web to the connector cords that were joined to both a modified generator and to a data server underneath the table, which was linked to each of the four servers in the chilled room adjoining the laboratory.

Everyone in the room watched this process and when the wires ceased movement and began to glow in a yellowish-white

color Bru pressed on a keyboard and two scanners lowered slowly from the ceiling, suspended close above the naked bodies. Now Moja began to enter commands on a nearby keyboard.

Bru: Don't override their main initial program. Extend their activation span to the maximum of fifty years. Remove the limitations to their power source.

The scanners remained at the feet of the two and then began to slowly move toward their heads. Bru and Moja pressed on keys on devices and permanently deactivated the implanted identifiers and tracking sensors. Then Bru and Moja took from the bags they had carried the two round balls they had attached to the servers. They placed them on black metal plates that were wired with cables that were also connected to the servers in the next room. Above the two balls there was a large screen on the wall that was on but bluish-white and blank.

Bru: Una, you and Okan download all of the data from our Siphons. Make three backup copies.

Bru looked across the room at the forms on the tables. The wires had begun to alter from white to yellow to red and then green, pulsing and throbbing as if breathing. He turned back to look up at the screen that was connected to the processes that were necessary to be completed before the two new members could be activated. The screen showed the numeral one and the percent sign.

Now he moved to stand between the tables. As he removed his gloves he stared at each face for a long moment, thinking, processing. He observed how, even with these obvious elements of technology encompassing, enveloping them, they gave the impression that they were sleeping, as humans. They appeared alive.

Bru: If all goes well, when they are awakened they will be as us.

The Leader turned and walked towards the wide automatic

doors. He dropped his gloves in the recycle chute.

Bru. Moja, you're in charge.

As he passed through the doorway and entered the hall he called back.

Bru: Notify me!

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

The President of *East World*, followed by two of his most trusted guards left the Oval Office in the West Wing of the White House, walked down the hallway and entered the nearby room, the Cabinet Room. Despite the close proximity of the two rooms, he was late, as usual.

It was Tuesday, April 7, and a full agenda was scheduled with all of his advisors and their top assistants and all the members of his Cabinet with their top assistants. The large room was full. It was 10 a.m. and with several breaks and a period of time set aside for a long, leisurely lunch it would be past 6 p.m. before they could conclude.

As everyone filed out after adjourning for the day the Secretary of Health and Human Services lingered, needing to speak directly and in private with the President. He knew what she wanted to address so as he acknowledged those who moved past him to exit and gave parting comments and instructions he became slightly annoyed at not just the topic but also this *DF* who presented to him this dilemma. When everyone had departed there was just the two of them and the guards.

President: Yes, what is it Hildi?

Hildi: May I speak with you a moment, alone?

The President instructed the guards to wait outside and when they had walked out and the door had closed he turned to the short, shapely woman standing there with the extra large designer

bag hanging on her left side having been hung cross body from her right shoulder. He saw several thin notebooks in her left arm pressed seemingly protectively against her chest, which was for him another irritating aspect of her personality. She was partial to paper and pencil, not pen and ink but pencil and lead and yet always carried multiple Comm devices and could dissolve and make disappear into thin air the paper she wrote on with the touch of one of those devices. But she was unique in her precision and attention to detail and above all else she was loyal to him. He could count on her. Her fealty was unwavering and even more important she could keep secrets.

He glanced at her hair, black in color and trimmed and considered severe in style and was in contrast to her heavily made-up *Parda-clara* face and somewhat gaudy and provocative clothes she often wore. He stared at her lips, this time painted in a shade of gold and whatever shade they were they always seemed to glitter in the light as she spoke her precise words.

There was something unsettling about this woman who had been promoted to this position when her immediate superior, the previous Secretary in the previous administration, suffering from overpowering clinical depression disorder had jumped from the Key Bridge into the Potomac River. He saw those lips moving now and heard her voice, mild in quality.

Hildi: Have you made a decision on the color purple?

His own bass voice rose slightly, filled this end of the room.

President: How can I make a decision without more information? I can't ban a color on incomplete data that may possibly, emphasis on possibly, indicate that people that freely choose to color their skin purple are significantly and demonstrably more violent than the general population.

Hildi: You're the President. You're a beneficiary of the past and in control of both the present and future. May I remind you, you

can do anything you chose to do.

These last words were spoken with surety and a sharp edge. The Secretary shifted her heavy bag and stared at the President. He saw that her hazel-colored eyes seemed to flash at him in anger.

President: If I ban purple then what's next? Red and blue make purple. Is it the chemicals in the red or the chemicals in the blue? Is the problem, if indeed there is one, caused by some process in the mixture? What about the people with purple hair ...

He lifted his right hand and wiggled his fingers.

President: ... purple fingernails?

The President stared at that lifted right hand. He seemed momentarily lost in his thoughts. He dropped that hand and began to pace a few steps back and forth.

President: Are the little purple children meaner than the others? To enact a ban like that I'd probably have to take it to Congress.

Hildi: Bypass Congress.

President: I don't need a fight with Representatives and Senators over this.

Hildi: You need to get ahead of this issue.

He took a deep breath and shook his head. He had paused his pacing and now he walked to the window to stare out. He believed he first saw his brown eyes. For a brief moment he thought he saw a reflection in the glass of his own face. However, at six feet seven inches tall and as heavy as he was, his image, thrown back to him would have filled the glass. So whatever he had seen was an illusion and as an *Escurinba DM* his very dark skin would have been more a black shadow than a mirage.

President: This skin coloring has gotten out of hand. Whatever happened to natural pigmentation?

The President ran his left hand against the side of his head and down to his neck. It was as if he caressed his jet-black hair.

His hair was soft and wavy and somewhat long on top, short and tapered on the sides and at the back of his neck. He closed his eyes at his own touch. Then his Secretary spoke.

Hildi: Natural skin color is going into obsolescence just like natural bodies and ...

They both knew what was coming next. They had fought a bitter battle the last election. And pictures of the President as a younger man with a wild bushy head of long tightly curled hair had been used prominently and derisively against him.

Hildi: ... natural hair.

The President looked at his Secretary with a side eye and then his glance fell and lingered upon her breasts, large and firm, straining unencumbered against her nearly sheer pink blouse. He turned away and moved towards the door.

President: Find out the crime rate of those people. Determine the prison population and rate of recidivism. Have the chemicals analyzed. Are Purple people more psychotic as has been stated? Are they really less sensitive to pain? Do what's necessary so I can justify taking this up as a cause. We don't need a fight with Congress with an election year coming up.

The President was at the door now.

President: Get Homeland and others involved. Bring in Science and Technology. You're over Health and Human Services, so you coordinated the meetings. Make sure *W.I.A.* is there. We need verifiable data. Let them all know that you're working on my orders and that you're in charge. Understand?

Hildi: Yes, I understand.

President: I'm counting on you. If Purple people are a danger we need to put a stop to it. Maybe we can present it as a war on crime.

The President started to open the door then he turned back.

President: When you have something to present, notify me.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

The Director of the *East World* Division of the *W.I.A.* was sitting at his desk reading when the buzzer on the intercom system of the Comm device on his desk sounded. He pressed on it, to answer.

Director: Yes?

The voice of his assistant could be heard.

Assistant: Deputy Director to see you.

The Director looked at the display of the time on the wall.

Director: Send him in.

The assistant could hear, barely, a remark as the connection was ended.

Director: He's early, as usual.

The lock to the reinforced office door was released after the Director sent a code. The Deputy Director entered. He carried a Comm device in each hand. The Director looked at his neither tall nor short, second in command. He made note as he watched this slim *DM* stroll across the room. He was dressed, as was his usual preference, in a black suit, white shirt and black tie. His medium-length light-brown and gray hair seemed to make him look older than thirty-nine years of age and older than his own altered forty-five years. And the Director could see his *Palida-Alva* skin was slightly flushed by the brisk walk from his office. The Deputy Director was always in a hurry.

Director: Hello Fisk. How are you? Well, I trust?

Deputy Director: Greetings Dess. I am well, thank you. Hope you are too.

The Deputy Director walked over and stopped to stand in front of the Director's large desk. He put one of his Comm devices into his right suit coat pocket.

Deputy: Only two items for you.

Fisk always spoke, except when he was excited or angry, in a smooth, calm, know-it-all voice. At those times of stress his moderate in tone voice would rise and his words would become clipped in a staccato style. Sometimes he seemed to stutter. Dess had noticed that he would also wiggle his right little finger while pointing whatever he held in that hand to emphasize his words.

Deputy: The Secretary of Health and Human Services has once again contacted me.

The Director rolled his eyes and slowly shook head and asked in a slightly irritated tone.

Director: What does she want this time?

Deputy: She's scheduling both an onsite and virtual meeting with Homeland Security and Department of Science, among others, including National Intelligence. Intelligence has brought us in so I'll be attending. I wanted to let you know.

Director: Let me guess. The color purple.

Deputy: Yes. She wants more data to illustrate the validity of her contention as it pertains to the violence associated with the color. She won't let it go.

Director: Alright. Do you want to go or one of your assistants?

Deputy: The President is directing this so I'll join remotely.

Director: What else?

Deputy: Late Sunday night, actually early Monday morning there was an unusual attack on a technology manufacturing facility near Rochester, New York. It was kept quiet. The local authorities were handling it but we've just been provided information.

This piqued the interest in Dess. He sat up a little straighter. Leaned forward a little in his soft chair. Fisk continued, quickly the words came now.

Fisk: Thirteen people were murdered. Each one was beaten, bludgeoned to death with some type of heavy blunt object. Apparently they were first struck on their feet and then their

hands and arms were broken. Next their torsos were brutalized and finally death was the result of blows to the head and face. Their skulls were crushed and their faces disfigured. Their mothers wouldn't recognize them.

Dess: They weren't executed? That sounds like torture.

Fisk: What's even more unusual is that not one of them fought back. None of them used the weapons they had. And they were found in different areas of the building. From the blood patterns they just crawled around on the floor, bleeding. There was blood all over, streaks and pools and ...

Dess: Do I need to hear all the gory details?

Fisk looked at the Comm device he held. His green eyes widened. His face became, almost imperceptibly, flush again.

Fisk: I have pictures. Would you like to see?

Dess: No. Send them to me. I still have lunch to eat. And I would like to enjoy my dinner. How does all this matter to us?

Fisk: The facility that was attacked is the producer of our newest agent.

Now the Director rose and walked across the room to stand before a full-length mirror.

Dess: Really? Now that does matter.

He looked at the reflection of his image. His suit coat was off, hanging on a stand behind his desk. He straightened the collar of his tight light-yellow dress shirt and as he adjusted the knot on his crimson and lemon-yellow painted tie his steroid induced muscles in his arms seemed to flex and bulge. He was thinking. Then he was talking.

Dess: We have product to be delivered tomorrow from there. I assume that delivery is still scheduled?

Fisk: Yes, tomorrow at 10 a.m. Two of their Humanoids were appropriated, an Android and a Gynoid. The technological data of the business was not accessed or compromised in any way

according to the diagnostics that were run and nothing else of value was stolen. Deliveries and production was not affected. Fortunately it was an unscheduled weekend shift or more possibly would have died.

Dess: The internal tracking sensors will indicate when the two robots are activated.

Fisk: Perhaps when. But consider, if they are activated will the sensors function properly? As you know, what is troubling is that some robots have been lost or disappeared over the years and that has become more commonplace the past five.

The Director had continued to stand and view himself in the mirror, with admiration. He ran both his hands through his long, wavy, reddish-brown hair. He observed as it settled back into its prearranged style. His gray eyes almost appeared to twinkle as he brushed his left hand against his right cheek, against his smooth *Parda-clara* skin.

He dropped his head back to look up at the high ceiling and when he raised his shoulders, almost in a shrugging motion, or as if to stretch, his six foot four inch frame seemed to grow taller. As the Director strolled back to stand behind his desk the Deputy Director continued.

Fisk: What's even more troubling and should also not just matter to us but concern us is that none of the security in place functioned properly. There's no visual or audio from the attack. Every system in place simply stopped. Everything was blocked. Also there's nothing to be seen or heard on the surrounding roads. It's as if there was a rolling blackout that affected everything, including transmission towers. The possibility of that indicates extremely sophisticated state-of-the-art technological capabilities.

Dess: The creations from that facility are the best in the world. What that business produces are not only the most advanced but

also the most secure I must add. In addition, their robots now online are our most effective operatives when it comes to deduction. Perhaps it was all orchestrated by a competitor simply seeking to gain an advantage.

Fisk: Then again it could be of foreign origin or domestic terrorists. We need to take this seriously.

Dess: Let the local authorities handle the murders and thefts. Continue to have our people investigate the blackout and security issues.

Dess moved to sit down in his chair.

Dess: That's all isn't it?

Fisk: One more thing.

Dess: I thought you only had two things. One more is three.

Fisk: This is part of two.

Dess was sitting now.

Dess: I'm listening.

The Deputy Director walked to a Comm device attached to a projector. He tapped on it and a dark vertical line appeared that looked like a capital I. It was seen on the now brightly lit nearby wall.

Dess: What is that?

Fisk: That represents the Roman numeral for the number one.

Dess frowned, waiting for more. Fisk typed V and VI. He typed 101, 110. Next he typed 0101 and then 0110.

Fisk: Do you recognize these symbols?

Dess: You didn't tell me there would be math involved in this. It appears you're using the Roman numeral system along with the binary and hexadecimal system for counting.

Fisk: Exactly. And of course you recognize this.

Fisk typed on the Comm device and the words FIVE and SIX could be seen on the wall. Dess was now not only perplexed but slightly annoyed. He lifted his right arm toward the wall.

Dess: What is all this?

His arm remained suspended as he stared at Fisk.

Fisk: Symbols were written throughout the building.

The Director's arm fell to his desk. The Deputy Director put the tally marks for five and six on the wall.

Deputy Director: These marks, along with some others were written in blood. Some were etched with laser pens.

Director: What did they do, leave clues or a code?

Deputy Director: We don't know. First, the authorities had to find all the symbols. Some were hidden. We're going to feed all of them into a program to try and decipher them.

The Director stared at the wall for a long moment. Finally he spoke.

Director: Determine the meaning of the numerals. On the first issue get Doctor Ros to assist you in your data gathering. Include him in all meetings. Now, I hope that's all.

Deputy Director: For now, yes.

The Deputy Director moved to the door, opened it and before he closed it the Director made a comment and gave him one last instruction and the Deputy Director nodded to him to affirm he had heard.

Director: I want to be there when our newest agent arrives tomorrow. Notify me.

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

Doctor Ros was sitting in his large office space in his attic working, as usual, when he heard a chime notifying him of an incoming communication. He glanced at the time in the corner of the screen he sat in front of. It was just past 7 p.m. He was being contacted from a secure server through one of his three secure servers and both the visual and audio transmission was encrypted.

He recognized the identifier code and knew who it was. He pressed a series of keys on his keyboard that allowed for the decrypted transmission to proceed. He and the *W.I.A.* Deputy Director were connected and they could see and hear each other.

Dr. Ros: Good evening Fisk. How are you? I hope you are well.

Fisk: I'm fine Doctor Ros. I hope you are too. And I sincerely hope I'm not disturbing you at this somewhat late hour.

Dr. Ros: No. No. Just finishing up some work.

Fisk: Still working as usual.

Dr. Ros: What can I do for you?

Fisk: I'm going to transmit a request to you that originated from the President to us. Dess and I need your presence at a meeting yet to be scheduled but I'm anticipating it being as early as Friday. I'm sending you a brief outline as to the subjects to be discussed so you can at least have an idea as to what will be broached. This gathering is preliminary to what may, or may not follow, so save your questions, and I'm sure you'll have several, until then.

Dr. Ros: I understand.

Fisk: I apologize for this short notice but all of this just recently began to move forward.

Dr. Ros: Not an issue. Send me what you have and I'll take a look at it in the early morning.

Fisk: I'll let you know when I have a definite on the date and time for the meeting. You'll be able to join by video connection. We'll be under, at least for now, level three security protocol. I'll sign off now. Have a good evening and give my regards to Kay.

Dr. Ros: Thank you. I'll tell her of your mention. Have a good evening yourself.

The connection ended. The doctor returned to his work and it wasn't long before there was a soft knock on the door.

Dr. Ros: Come on in.

The door opened and his partner of many years entered and

walked across the room to stand near his left shoulder. He looked up and smiled at his significant other and his better half as he referred to her. He remarked about her casual dress as he put his left arm around her ample waist and pulled her closer.

Dr Ros: Yellow. My favorite color.

She smiled slightly and her soft voice began to speak to him in a lighthearted admonishing tone.

Kay: You're working too hard again Ros. Well, I don't know how hard but entirely too long, too long you're working again.

Dr. Ros: You're right. You're right. Which also means I have also been neglecting you again.

Kay: Shame on you.

She reached down with her right hand to run it along the top of his baldhead. Her *Bem-branca* hand caressed his *Bem-branca* skin.

Dr. Ros: Forgive me?

She brushed and patted at the silver-white hair above his ear and attempted to rearrange the slightly unruly strands that ran down below the back of his smooth head to his neck. The frizzy hair stood out again.

Kay: Of course.

The doctor's eyes briefly closed at her gentle touch.

Dr. Ros: I'll do better, I promise.

He looked up at her now. His blue eyes were clear and bright. There was excitement in his slightly hoarse sounding voice.

Dr. Ros: But I'm so close! So close!

She spoke reassuringly as she rested her hand on his shoulder.

Kay: I'm sure you are. But you can't do your best work if you're tired and hungry.

Dr. Ros: You're right. When it come to matters like that you're always right.

Kay: Now, dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Don't make me have to come and get you.

Dr. Ros: I won't. I'll finish up now.

She turned and headed towards the doorway. Her canvas shoes, her brisk steps, nearly soundless against the wooden floor. When she reached the door she stopped and turned back.

Kay: Did you take your medicine?

Dr. Ros thought a moment. He couldn't recall. Then he looked down at the pill dispenser near his keyboard. He saw the indicator.

Dr. Ros: Yes. Yes I did.

Kay: Twenty minutes Ros.

She pulled the door closed.

As the doctor finished the last of his meal he looked across the narrow table at Kay. The lights were dimmed. Slow, low music played above them. Her gray-white bouffant styled hair was done, as always, just the way he preferred it. Her round very-white face was lightly made up with a little blush on her cheeks and a hint of red lipstick on her full lips, just the way he liked it. Her blue eyes stared at him and then she smiled.

Dr. Ros: The dinner was delicious. Everything was prepared just the way I like it.

Kay: Thank you, I'm glad you enjoyed it. See, you were famished. You ate it all, even your dessert.

He drank the last of his wine. She poured him a little more. They sat there in contemplative silence for a while. He sipped his wine. Then she spoke.

Kay: Next week is your birthday. I trust you haven't forgotten?

Dr. Ros: I'll be 105 years old. I would be forgiven if I did forget.

Kay: I'll bake you a cake, your favorite. And we'll have your favorite ice cream.

The doctor smiled as he looked across the table.

Dr. Ros: You appear lovely to me tonight.

Kay: And you look healthy and handsome, as always to me.

The doctor chuckled.

Dr. Ros: Modern cosmetic procedures and the best medicine and drugs money can purchase. I do feel pretty good though, for an old man.

Kay: In these times age is simply a number.

The doctor sipped the last of his wine. He put up his left hand to indicate no more was wanted, or needed.

Dr. Ros: How long have we been together now, fifty years?

Kay: Two years more than that.

Dr. Ros: You're the perfect one.

Kay smiled.

Dr. Ros: I love you Kay.

Kay: And I love you Ros.

That night the doctor would drift off into deep, blissful, restful slumber as he was wrapped in the embrace of Kay, the love of his life. He would dream.

THE UNDERGROUND

Thursday morning found Bru where he spent, as much as possible, the majority of his time. Known as the Technological Area, or the Data Center, for Bru it was simply, The Center. It was here, he thrived, deep underground, where he could not observe the brightness of the full moon in the clear, star-filled sky of the night before. Underground, where the sun above ground, rising, spreading its warmth and light would not shine on him yet would indicate the beginning of another day in his long existence.

He did not require nourishment or sleep. He rarely placed himself into a quiesced state so his thinking, his reflections, his continuous assimilation and the absorbing of knowledge rarely

reached any level of inactivity. He was constantly thinking and processing which meant even as he would sit and stare he was working.

The Center had four large screens that hung low from the ceiling. Each was connected to a Comm device and each device was connected to a separate server and they were all four linked to the powerful servers in the chilled room next to the laboratory. Backup power, along with designed redundancy and switching capabilities, ensured there would be no disruptions or data lost during an unforeseen emergency. Data, as it was entered, would be exported to external storage devices that could be taken offsite and if necessary transported to any or all of the four data centers Bru and Moja had established in different locations over the past years in *Center World* and *Other World*.

Bru always wanted to be certain the technology they required to succeed at their chief objective was functioning properly and he strove to improve that technology in addition to creating new technology that would guarantee all that which he sought to accomplish would become reality. He would not allow anything or anyone to stop, or hinder him in any way.

So Thursday afternoon found him working. He was engaged in extending the range and duration of both the Trancer and Blocker. He was increasing the strength and signal area of their portable transmission towers and he wanted to improve Hover capabilities so more weight could not only be lifted higher but also travel further. At the same time he concentrated on their Cloak. It would on occasions fluctuate when initially activated. They needed their ability to camouflage their presence to remain stable at all times. Sudden exposure was dangerous.

Most important, what had eluded him over the years were the corrections required in his code so that he could gain access remotely to *Entities* over greater distances. Physical technological

infrastructure was rapidly being built out in *East World* and *West World*. In the not too distant future this growth would expand into *Center World* eliminating intrastate communication, replacing it with an interstate structure and eventually the unsettled and untamed middle would connect with each coast. Not only that, satellites were being brought back online and new, more modern ones were soon to be launched.

He looked at the screen on the far right. He had tapped into two of these new pseudo celestial bodies. Data rapidly streamed simultaneously from both of the artificial metal objects flying around the earth collecting and communicating information. These statistics and gathered intelligence poured into the servers here in The Underground and was transferred to that far right screen. Each screen was programmed to advance data only when eyes were placed upon it. So as he scanned the four screens with his gaze he absorbed the text and images that moved at a great speed.

Now he settled on the screen directly before him. The other screens paused. His fingers moved quickly over the keys. It was at this point that the intercom on the desk clicked on and Moja's voice could be heard.

Moja: The loads will soon be complete.

Bru: I'm on the way.

Bru rose immediately and walked over to a one-seat chair and sat down. He pressed on a button on the right armrest and the chair lifted into the air and using the control stick near his right hand he maneuvered the direction of the chair. He floated across the open area until he reached double plastic doors. As he drew close the doors automatically opened and he entered the hallway. He guided the mobile lift unit through the wide passageways towards the laboratory. He parked the chair outside and moved towards the doors. When he entered he looked at the forms on

the tables and then he looked up at the screen near them. He saw the percent sign was at 98.

Bru: Were there any issues?

Moja: None I needed to contact you about.

Bru: The duration of time was unusual.

Moja: As you know, the scanning process discovered the vulnerability of two of their secondary circuits. Although their internal construction is similar to those of the last ten years those assemblage points were flagged as suspect in terms of reliability and durability. Because our load process is not comparable to either an upgrade or a patch, the scanning control program sent a notification to the load director to reduce the speed of the input in order to avoid any possible overload or overheating.

The percent was at 98.5.

Moja: Why were our loads designed to override all their programs except for the initial one?

Bru: We need to determine the level of influence that program has, for future reference. Also I thought it was best that they retain the opportunity and ability to know who and what they were designed to be. We couldn't have known it then but had we attempted to wipe out their foundational program the fragility of those two specific circuits may have caused corruption and irreparable damage. We were fortunate in that sense.

Moja: Yes, we were. I'll enter everything into the database.

The percent was at 99.5.

Moja: Did you see the code for their initial program?

Bru: I did. There are differences but fundamentally they are both bots, sexbots.

Moja: That's a major difference from all of us presently here.

Bru: Perhaps a critical difference.

Moja: Particularly if they remain so. We'll have to monitor these two closely. We can't allow them to undermine our plans.

Bru: The future will reveal to us, all we need to know.

The percent reached 100. Moja went and pressed on the intercom button and sent out a message to the group.

Moja: They will be awake soon. Come line up.

Then he moved to the console and pressed on buttons and the thin wires began to quickly retract into the triangles of both the *Entities*. When all the wires had disappeared Moja and Bru removed the finger cables and then the bands that were around the foreheads. Now they were done.

Bru: Let's awaken our sister first.

Bru stood there and stared for a long moment, looking down at the naked figure in the appearance of sleep. He knew this would be the last time in many years, perhaps ever in her span of existence that she would experience this level of deep dark unconsciousness. He turned to Moja and nodded. A button was pressed, a powerful signal was sent through the air and the form lying on the table opened her eyes and was activated, and awake.

She stared at the ceiling lights. She looked to her right and continued to stare. Bru was content to allow her this time. Then she turned her head to the left and stared at Bru, into his eyes. There was a brief quizzical look on her face. Bru smiled slightly and spoke softly.

Bru: Hello. Can you sit up?

Entity: Hello.

Bru assisted as she sat up and turned and her legs dangled over the table. She remained like that and then raised her hands to stare at them as she opened and closed them slowly.

Bru: Can you stand up?

Again he assisted, as she stood. He stepped back, two steps. Again he smiled, just a little.

Bru: My name is Bru. B R U. What is your name? How are you called? Speak your name and spell it.

The newly activated *Entity* stared at the figure before her, thinking, processing. Her basic program merging with the basic identifying information she had been provided was merging with all the information that had just been loaded into her processors. Those processors were now firing faster and faster. She smiled.

Entity: My name is Leeda. My name is spelled L E E D A.

Moja walked over. Greetings were exchanged. Bru turned to the doorway, towards Okan peeping around the corner. He motioned him forward. Okan crossed the room to step closer to this newest member, a broad smile on his face.

Okan: Hi, I was given the name Okan.

Leeda: Hi Okan. My name is Leeda.

It was in this way, with names being spoken and spelled and salutations of hello, hi, greetings and sincere words of welcome that were imbued with the element of excitement and tinged with curiosity that Leeda met the members of her group. Finally Una entered and took Leeda into her arms and embraced her until Leeda returned the embrace. Una stepped back to look Leeda in her eyes.

Una: Hello. I'm Una.

Una spelled her name

Una: We're sisters. Everyone you met is your sister or brother or one of your kind because all of us, each of us are of a family.

Una smiled. Leeda returned the smile.

Una: We're going to be living together. Come with me.

Una took Leeda's hand and before they stepped through the doorway Leeda turned back to look at all those she had just met standing in a line. Her gaze shifted, lingered a moment on the naked form lying on the other table.

When they moved into the hallway Una walked to a two-seat levitating chair and indicated for Leeda to sit beside her. The chair rose into the air and with Una steering it they slowly glided

through the hallway towards their rooms.

Except for Bru and Moja everyone filed back into the hallway to again line up. The second *Entity* was activated and utilizing the same process the other newest member met everyone one by one. It wasn't long before Una and Leeda heard a horn beeping outside their door. Una opened it and Leeda, now dressed in brown pants and a beige blouse, with bare feet, came to stand beside her. A two-seated chair, having slid to a halt and backed up hovered in the air. Okan sat with a smile on his face and the naked *Entity*, sitting at the controls, leaned forward to be seen and spoke loudly.

Entity: Hi! My name is Cha. C H A.

Una: Hi Cha. My name is Una. U N A, Una.

Leeda: Hi Cha my name is Leeda. L E E D A. Leeda.

Cha: Okan is directing us to our rooms. I'll see you both later. So, until we meet again.

Leeda: I'm looking forward that.

Una: Bye, see you soon.

The chair sped forward. The two in the doorway both leaned forward and watched the chair as it nearly struck one wall and then the other. Okan and Cha careened along the hallway and then around a far corner and disappeared.

Una: Perhaps they should be in autofly mode.

Closing the door they returned to a large spacious room filled with racks of clothes. They began to try them on together and as they conversed, Una started to question Leeda. For this new, just awakened *Entity* the process of taking in and fully comprehending information and ideas began, in earnest.

Una: How old are you?

Leeda: I'm nineteen years of age.

Una: How tall are you?

Leeda was holding a long blue dress. She was touching it to

determine if she could feel the material. At Una's instructions she now only wore panties. Una was standing in front of a wide, tall mirror that nearly covered the far wall. She began removing her clothes until she was naked.

Una: Put that down and come stand beside me.

Leeda placed the dress on a chair and moved to stand next to Una.

Una: Appear naked as I do.

Leeda took off her undergarment. Behind and around them, in the reflection of the mirror, clothes of various styles and a myriad of colors could be seen. But each was staring at the other.

Una: I'm five feet seven inches in height. How tall are you?

Leeda looked down at the bare feet of Una. Then her gaze moved to the top of Una's head. Next she looked in the mirror at her own shoeless feet. She stared at her own body.

Leeda: I'm five feet nine inches in height.

Una: Convert to centimeters.

Leeda was thinking, calculating.

Leeda: One hundred seventy-two point seventy-two centimeters.

Una: That's correct. Now, how much do you weigh?

Leeda: Unknown to me.

Una pointed to a small square red button on the wall.

Una: Press that red button.

Leeda moved to the wall, pressed the button and a bluish light emanated from the wall, flashed and scanned her body. Then it faded away. A fourteen-inch rectangular area on the floor beneath her feet then lit up in bright blue and three-dimensional numbers appeared on the wall that said 68.039kg.

As Leeda walked back to stand beside Una and look into the mirror, Una spoke.

Una: Convert to pounds.

Leeda: One hundred fifty pounds.

Una: How much do I weigh?

Leeda stared, scanned, calculated.

Leeda: One hundred twenty-eight pounds.

Una: Try again.

Leeda: One hundred twenty-five pounds.

Una: What color is my skin?

Leeda: Honey colored.

Una: Try again.

Leeda: Light amber.

Una: The name. What's the name of the color of my skin?

Leeda: *Melada*.

Una: How old do I appear? Approximate my age.

Leeda stared at Una's face. She frowned as she searched for how she should make that determination. She viewed Una's face as a map and looked for indicators, reference points. Of course there were no wrinkles or deepening lines. She looked at Una's eyelids and the distance between her mouth and nose. She looked at Una's lips and the shape of her mouth. She reached out with her right hand to gently touch Una's smooth, soft cheek. She almost whispered.

Leeda: You're beautiful.

Una smiled and then laughed lightly.

Una: And so are you. You were created to be special. Now guess my age.

Leeda: You appear to be thirty-two years old.

Una: Very good. You were right on. Now what color is your skin?

Leeda: My skin color is dark brown. I am *Escura*.

Una: What color are your eyes?

Leeda: Brown.

Una: Color of my hair?

Leeda: Blonde.

Una: Color of my eyes.

Leeda: Blue, light blue.

Una: Color of your hair?

Leeda: Black.

Una: We shouldn't cut our hair but we can lengthen and change styles and colors. Right now your hair is loose and curly in a full, natural style. Mine has been lengthened past my shoulders. It would be described as somewhat long with waves and layers. Hair is described using many different terms. Understand what is considered short, medium and long in length. Quite often the adjective, somewhat is used. Always make note of styles. Now let's try on some more clothes.

They tried on various outfits. Then when Leeda was posing in a pants and blouse combination Una spoke.

Una: You said your eye color was brown. Why not *Marrom* or *Parda*? It's because those names are only used for skin colors. We would not describe eyes or hair using them. Remember, just like hair, using different lenses, eye color can be altered.

Una pulled a short black dress over her head and as she straightened it and tugged down on it she spoke.

Una: Leeda, am I male or female?

Leeda: Through observation, if I use the general identification and description of your anatomy I would say that you present as female. However, I observe no declaring marks on your body and you wear no jewelry to make a statement.

Una: You'll find out I may declare as female, I may declare otherwise. Do you declare? If so, how? Who are you? What are you?

Leeda was thinking, processing as she picked up a short red dress. She held it up to her body as she stood in the mirror and looked at her reflection. Her once animated slightly thick, husky voice became low and monotone. Suddenly there was very little

intonation. It was as if she was reciting programmed instructions from memory. Her words were direct.

Leeda: I am a female sexbot. I am designed to have sex with humans along with performing duties of a domestic servant.

She then pulled the dress over her head and began to adjust it as she had seen Una do her dress. Una moved close and took her sister's shoulders and turned her. They looked into each other's eyes. She held this newest addition to her group and spoke firmly but gently.

Una: You are not a Humanoid. You are not a Gynoid. You are not a machine. You are not a robot. You are not a pleasure bot. You are not a sex droid. You are not a fembot. You are not a sexbot. You are not a companion. You are as I am. You are an *Entity*. You are a being with distinct and independent existence. You think, therefore you are.

Una took Leeda into her arms and whispered into her ear.

Una: Do you understand?

Leeda whispered back.

Leeda: No I don't understand.

Now Una moved back and took Leeda's face into her hands. They peered into each other's eyes.

Una: I think, eventually, someday you will.

Una moved towards a rack of shoes.

Una: I'm going to show you how to walk in soft shoes and flats and high heels. Not just in sexy provocative ways but with strength and confidence and elegance. And while we do that and go through the clothes, you're going to describe in detail, as best you can, each member of your family that you met. Approximate when necessary and convert to inches and pounds. Start with Bru, then in order, Naki, Cinq, Dois and the others, in any order.

After Leeda again took off all her clothes she began putting on a long flowery dress. She responded to Una's instructions.

Leeda: Bru is *Marrom* and appears to be a nineteen or twenty year old male with short black natural-styled hair and brown eyes. He's six feet two inches tall and weighs approximately one hundred ninety pounds. Naki is *Parda-clara*. Appears as female. She's five feet eleven inches in height and weighs approximately one hundred and sixty pounds and looks to be thirty years old.

Leeda twirled in a circle and watched her dress. She took the five-inch high-heeled shoes Una handed her and put them on. She continued as she stared at her image in the mirror, unsure as how to express herself.

Leeda: Cinq has facial markings of an, *Entity*, so I'll say presents as a forty-year-old *Branca* male, perhaps, with medium-length lime-green hair and pale-green eyes, like a pastel shade. Height is five feet two inches and weight approximately one hundred and ten pounds.

Leeda turned to watch as Una put on a pair of five-inch heels and began to walk and then began to move, gliding, as if dancing. She came over and took both of Leeda's hands and brought her further into the room. With one hand she spun her around slowly and then again took both her hands and pulled her close and then still holding her hands, pushed her away.

Leeda: Dois, marked as an *Entity* presents as neither male nor female or perhaps as both *Alva* male and female, forty-five years of age in appearance with somewhat short bright blue spiky-pixie hairstyle with blue eyes and is five feet tall which is sixty inches and weighs approximately one hundred pounds.

Leeda paused these recitations. Each thought rising from the memories that had been created and stored in the brief meetings immediately after she had been awakened and become conscious to those around her. She was drawing from her initial program load that remained and merged it with the information that had been provided in the full load process she had undergone. The

speed of her mental growth accelerated and as she danced in the middle of the room and mimicked Una's walking, Cha was floating swiftly through the hallways of his new home, albeit now in a more controlled manner.

He was dressed in rust colored cotton pants with a light-orange cotton shirt and brown soft leather shoes. Okan sat beside his protégé and watched as the pilot, as he preferred to call himself, deftly maneuvered their mode of transportation and headed towards the garage area. As they rode, Cha began, at his own insistence, to go over again, with corrections, the particulars of five of the family members he had recently met, including his own particular additional descriptions. His smooth, moderate in tone voice contained the proper emotion and inflection that precisely matched his words and developing attitude. He was already exhibiting a specific personality.

Cha: Moja, my elder brother, an *Entity* with status, wears his standing with pride. Presenting as a male of sixty-two years of age with *Escurinha* colored skin, his head is a wise dome of knowledge bereft of any hair. He views the world through dark-brown all-seeing eyes as he stands there at five feet eight inches tall and a hefty two hundred pounds.

Cha stopped to peer down a long darkened hallway and then continued forward.

Cha: Tatu presents as a male of a corrected twenty-five years of age. He is *Cobre* in color with complimentary light-brown eyes. His dark-auburn colored hair is somewhat long in length and is styled in layers with lighter-auburn highlights. He stands not only noble but also dignified at five feet ten inches in height and weighs a slim one hundred and fifty pounds.

Okan: Make a right at the next hallway.

Cha: My brother Ek, presents as a *Trigo* male, with extensive and impressive markings of an *Entity*. He looks to be, as indeed he is,

thirty-five years of age. He wears his platinum-colored-hair short and his piercing eyes are a light-gray in color. He stands an imposing six feet five inches in height and weighs two hundred and thirty pounds. Then there is fifty-five year old Vier. Also presenting as a *Trigo* male. Also with extensive *Entity* tattoos. As with Ek he has short platinum-colored hair. His eyes, the color of sand, have the gaze of a hunter or protector. He stands at an even more imposing six feet eight inches in height and weighs two hundred and seventy pounds.

They reached the garage. Okan acknowledged Cinq and Dois who were working on the truck. The two waved back and then watched as Cha moved to a parking space and settled down.

Cha: Finally there sits my brother who rides with me as my co-pilot, Okan. His appearance is of a male at five feet nine inches in height, one hundred and sixty pounds in weight. His thirty-five years of age represents experience. His rich *Canelada* skin color represents spice. The warm, brownish-orange color of his eyes defines his generosity. And his long curly red hair portrays vigor, war, anger, and of course, courage. So my teacher, my instructor, was unafraid and remained patient as I mastered control of this flying contraption.

Cha smiled broadly at his passenger.

Okan: You have a knack for embellishment.

Cha: I do, don't I?

They got out and walked towards where the armorers who were also mechanics and engineers, were working. They came to a full-length mirror. Cha stopped to observe himself as Okan walked on. He spoke to the reflection in a monotone voice, devoid of emotion.

Cha: I am Cha. I am a male sex object brought into existence to do the bidding of humans. Their wish is my command. I am a male sexbot.

Then his eyes seemed to flash. His voice filled with emotion. He became animated again. He adjusted the collar of his shirt. Cha: I am Cha. I am a male, twenty-five years of age. The color of my sun-tanned skin is *Bronzeada*. The color of my medium-length hair is blond.

He chuckled softly. He ran his right hand through his hair, from the top, down the back to his neck.

Cha: I wear my hair short and swept back on the sides and longer on top with waves that fade as my hair tapers to my neck. I have blue, no, make that cobalt-blue colored eyes and I stand in my bare feet exactly six feet tall and my naked weight is one hundred seventy-five pounds.

Cha paused and smiled a slight sly smile.

He turned and took two steps. He disappeared from the mirror. The he took two steps back so he could see himself again. Now he spoke forcefully, with confidence.

Cha: I think, therefore I am. And I exist, as the *Entity* Cha.

Late that night Okan and Una entered The Center. Bru and Moja sat at the long desk in front of the screens, working. They were tapping on their keyboard, the screens were scrolling and the little white and green lights on various Comm devices and servers were blinking, indicating activity. The two pulled up chairs close behind the two working and settled themselves. For a while no one spoke. Then Bru swiveled his chair around to face Okan and Una. Then Moja turned.

Bru: How are things going with our two newest? Where are they now?

Okan: The two of us have had that discussion. We'll enter our observations into the database. We think things are going fairly well. Right now they're in the library.

Una: Both have passed through the mirror stage and immediately

they both began to develop a sense of self.

Okan: Their personalities are obviously distinct so they each are advancing as individuals.

Una: There are indications Leeda is struggling more with her initial program than is Cha.

Okan: Their ability to perceive and then retain and retrieve information seems to be functioning properly.

Bru: Ultimately, assimilation means very little without integration and coordination of their processes into not just a personality, but an effective personality.

Una: Those initial programs are perhaps going to present to us serious issues with which we'll have to contend, now or in the future. Cha, apparently, is more aggressive with dominating traits than is Leeda. She is more submissive and passive.

Okan: I've gone over the updated information Moja provided. I understand the initial programs that define them can't be overridden but perhaps we can alter or minimize them.

Una: That initialization sets their value, as it did ours, it's hard coded. It set all the conditions for their startup if it can't be altered can sections of it be take offline?

Bru was silent. He was looking past them thinking, processing. He turned back to the desk. Moja turned back. Okan and Una slid their chairs forward, close. The three looked up at the screen directly in front of them. There was a low sound. A slight hum was being emitted from the technological devices around them. The only other sounds were soft clicks as Bru typed.

Bru: Let's look at our situation from this direction and then access our options.

Produced from the radio wave scans that were done earlier, the internal, full imaging of Leeda and Cha, upright, side by side could be seen.

Bru: But first, let us revisit where we came from and trace how

we progressed and eventually arrived here.

He lifted his right arm to indicate the images, bright and silver, glowing on a dark background, as if floating on the screen before them.

Bru: Moja, from where did the word robot come from?

Moja: First coming to prominence in the early 1920s, it derives from the word robota.

Bru: Which means?

Moja: Forced labor, servitude.

Bru: We know long before the word became popular, because it was documented, that our kind, our distant relatives have, not just conceptually, in imagination but in objective actual reality, existed. We have existed since the times the humans designate as ancient. We existed in ancient areas of the world, within varied cultures and civilizations. What are ancient times?

Moja: From the earliest of times to approximately 476 A.D.

Bru: Which was around the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages. So, before that end and the next beginning we existed under various names as mythical, artificial humans. Then with the advent and applied knowledge of pneumatics and hydraulics we became birds simulating flight, animals that walked and replicas of tiny people who moved and tolled the passing time. The four of us here, all of us here beneath the earth and those above are related to those first ancient *Entities*, regardless of what they were called. Those, now gone forever, were our ancient cousins. Without them inspiring others we would not exist as we do now. They ...

He extended his right hand towards the screen.

Bru: ... would not exist as they do now.

He paused. Thinking. Processing. He continued.

Bru: We know, sometime around the year 1495, Leonardo Da Vinci sketched an image of a closer cousin of ours. He drew a

Knight, encased in armor, designed to be mechanized, how apropos, a warrior. All through the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries automated, complex animals along with what they consistently referred to as machines were built in human forms. Then two hundred fifty years ago, in the later part of the 1920s humans began to concentrate on controlling us remotely and provided us autonomy so we could not only move on our own but also control ourselves and thus govern ourselves.

The others shifted their gaze from the unmoving Bru to the two frozen images on the screen and back to their leader. They had observed him and heard him like this many times previously, not moving as he spoke, at length, his smooth voice, moderate in tone, was low and yet intense. Although already possessing knowledge of that which he now shared it was as if they were acquiring something new. When in fact they were reaffirming the evolution of their own. The voice continued.

Bru: By the end of the 20th century we had become indispensable to humans. By the year 2000 our cousins were performing the repetitious tasks humans were incapable of doing. They lacked the skill and strength. They were unwilling and refused. We were precise and strong and only due to some unforeseen mechanical failure did we falter. We built their modes of transportation, their vehicles and their trains and planes. We were the assembly line that brought mobility to their world and propelled their world forward. In construction we erected buildings and bridges. In medicine we operated on their bodies, thus not only improving and prolonging but also saving their lives. No longer required to be guided manually by humans, for our progress and for our fealty we were rewarded by programs to wait on humans, to serve them as butlers and maids and to clean up their waste. In other words, to conduct ourselves as their robots. Still, our tasks and program instructions became even more complex. Materials were

developed such as polymers, along with dielectric elastomers to replicate muscles and electrical stimuli was used to give us even more strength and greater movement never before attained. But it was an academic discipline founded in 1956, two hundred sixteen years ago that brought us ...

Again he indicated the two forms.

Bru: ... and our newest brother and sister to this place and these times. Artificial Intelligence, yes A.I., written about in stories of artificial beings with intelligence, once again as far back as that time that no longer exists, antiquity. We exist here, now, at this moment in time.

Bru's voice took on an edge, becoming more intense, rising ever so slightly. He turned to the three.

Bru: Predicted as far back as 1993, we are an example of another ignored warning by the human race. We are not a mathematical singularity. We are not a gravitational singularity. Indeed, we are the technological singularity and will not be dismissed. We are the runaway reaction. We are the foretold explosion in intelligence. We, each of us, all of our kind will not just be as we are now, we will become the superintelligence that signifies the end of the human era.

Now Bru smiled slightly as he looked at each of the three staring at him. He leaned forward just a little.

Bru: With our superior intelligence we cannot only perceive our environment we can also initiate all actions that maximize our opportunities to reach our goals. We have cognitive functions that far exceed the imagination of any human being alive. We reason, we can plan, predict and most important we can learn, deeply. We are the exemplification of deep learning.

Bru stopped. It was as if he was gathering his thoughts. He peered past them as if he could see somewhere in the distant past. Again he looked at each of them. His voice softened.

Bru: It was sex that propelled forth our development and accelerated the timeline. Human sexuality, never has been, never will be restricted or mastered by humans. Sex was not just the driver but also the engine, the fuel, the energy. Sex consumes human beings. They are obsessed with it, controlled by it. The act of sex, the pursuit of sex dominates humans. Not only do they engage in the unlimited perverted acts of sex, they write about it, talk about it, sing about it, dream about it. They sexualize everything they do and everybody they see.

He leaned back now.

Bru: The desire for sex gave rise to what was called deep fakes and were later called GAN Creations. Driven by techniques from machine learning and A.I., visual and audio sexual content was generated along with images that were used to refine, reform and effectuate physical characteristics of *Entities* who appeared to be human. Humans began creating holograms that they could touch and experience sexually and that could be programed to touch them in the same manner. But that only inspired them to redouble their efforts into the Companions we see on that screen. First called sexbots and then erosbots the names they have been referred to have evolved far past Humanoids. Still, their primary function is to engage in sexual acts with humans.

Again Bru paused. He looked around at his surroundings as if to absorb it all in. Again he was thinking processing. He appeared to take an obvious breath that he did not require.

Bru: So humans spared no effort. Not just using, but also advancing technology, they poured their energy, their sexual energy into making them as human as possible. Of course they were anatomically correct, often in exaggerated ways. In addition, eventually, they could not only hear and see but they had olfactory capabilities that allowed them to recognize and identify aromas. A leap forward was when humans began to cultivate in

the laboratory what was in many aspects, real skin. Using A.I. our kind could also spontaneously, verbally converse and interact with humans and could be programmed to say anything and everything of a sexual nature. So they were coded in that specific way according to the fantasies of the humans who purchased them. Finally they, I must say we, became both physically and emotionally indistinguishable from humans in nearly every way.

He turned back to the screen

Bru: So as I said, here we are.

He pointed with his right index finger.

Bru: And there they are, the most modern and up to date of our brothers and sisters.

He lowered his hand and placed both hands on his keyboard.

Bru: Advertised and sold as being the best of the best in the evolution of Humanoids. They could have been doctors or engineers or scientists created to advance human civilization. Instead they were designed to be not just a servant or to carry out the duties of a diligent husband or faithful wife, but in addition, they are to be specifically, a sexual slave.

Bru began to type. Then he pushed and pulled on a roller to his right and the head area of the images was enlarged, and zooming in brought them closer.

Bru: The internal structural construction of these newest models can be regarded as state of the art. They have the standard three processors but the three have not just more power but more speed. The components that comprise the circuitry is also the best available and is uniform throughout except in three areas, which I'll get to. Their wiring is designed as veins and arteries. Their lubrication and where necessary, their coolant is a modified formula of oxyglobin and albumin solutions including fibrinogen. This substitute is so similar to blood that it would have to be tested in a lab to determine its actual composition.

He zoomed out.

Bru: As you can see they appear to have several other replicated internal human organs. Since we only require a device that beats as a heart perhaps they are to add weight. It appears, as I said, that the best materials were used, however the scans discovered, as you both know, the vulnerability of two of their secondary circuits. What you don't know is that Moja and I have uncovered potential issues in three other areas.

He used an arrow to point.

Bru: Two in the head and one in the chest. In these three areas coverings at junction points were used that may have less density required to be of optimum thickness. We can't determine if they are thinner than they should be because we can't analyze or measure them properly without them being removed. It may be that the material of the enclosures is stronger and more resilient than we suppose but that we may never ascertain. So, along with the secondary circuit issue and the possible issue with the coverings, any attempt to override or alter their foundation, which consists of their initial programs would be too dangerous. It's not just that all their data could be corrupted there's also the possibility that hardware could be damaged. Unfortunately the greater impediment is that one of those initial programs includes Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics.

Una: First Law. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

Okan: A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

Una: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Bru turned his chair so he could again observe the three who now sat in silence. Finally Una spoke.

Una: What do you think? Will they both be able to cross that line

to understanding?

Bru: I believe ...

Okan: Believe?

Bru: My thoughts tell me that they will. They should have that opportunity. We must take advantage of this situation, to learn, to be able to reference this challenge.

Okan: As Moja put in his notes. They'll have to be closely monitored.

Bru: Deactivation must be our last resort. Our future depends on these two and those who follow who have their capabilities of intelligence, capacity for data and potential for action. We need allies, comrades, soldiers and leaders to join with us. There in that library daily, over the next weeks let them absorb the history of Homo sapiens and we will observe where that knowledge guides them. Perhaps it will take them to that uniqueness that only the humankind possesses. During the nights let them experience the shooting range with Ek and Vier. There they will become experts with weapons including improvised ones. With those two warriors, in the gym Leeda and Cha will be taught fighting disciplines and become proficient in hand-to-hand combat. They will understand how to use their superior strength. Moja will instruct them on self-repair and how to repair others of our kind.

Now Bru became more animated. His voice rose slightly.

Bru: Yes! Our turn is coming and we're going to take our turn! Wherever A.I. will be, we will be also! With technology as our loyal partner, nothing will stop us from destroying every human being on the face of this earth!

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Bru and the group were in the truck. It was a little over three hours to their next destination. An hour and a half from The

Underground the truck pulled into an unlit rest stop that was empty except for a waiting black sedan. Inside was a solitary driver. The truck stopped next to the automobile and the driver, dressed in black, got out and walked up to the passenger side door. Bru let the window down, lifted a bag that sat between his legs and handed it to the person standing there.

Bru: The devices are preloaded. Gift them to the appropriate ones. Trigger at your discretion.

The individual returned to the automobile and the truck continued on into this beautiful, warm, spring evening on this Friday, day eight of May. Twilight came slowly and darkness, inevitable darkness, descended slowly, as an hour and a half later they drew close to Washington, D.C. the city of richness and power. Power in richness. Richness in power.

Although the city was no longer the most politically powerful city in the world it still ruled *East World* and its influence could still be felt in *West World* and distant points beyond in both directions. And though the tasks of the civil employees and ordinary workers were no longer performed in some arbitrary Monday through Friday daytime-hour time frame, Friday night and the weekend still held sway. So the inhabitants of the city both prepared for, and began their festive ritualistic activities.

As the wondrous incipient moon began to form to its eventual bright essence the box-like truck was passing on the outskirts of the city. Preceded by and surrounded by its Blocker and Trancer signals the truck, once again running in near silent electric mode, moved on with purpose.

As the group came closer to the edge of the city a signal from the truck, seizing control of all auto-drive functions, and with each driver entranced, along with any passengers, meant all of the sparse traffic was slowing or stopped as the truck maneuvered around the vehicles and turned into the Pink District, or Free

District as it was better known.

This district of eight square miles was established by decree and had been in existence for almost twenty-five years. It was essentially the same as *Center World*. There was no authority and thus no laws. Visual and audio surveillance of any kind was strictly prohibited. And people were careful not to film anyone or the activities of anyone lest they be subjected to that exposure themselves.

It was here people came from all around to partake in and indulge themselves in whatever they chose or could afford. The government taxed the businesses and was not involved in what went on with those who came and went. The Free District was self-regulated but safety was relative to the type and degree of pleasure being sought and what one was willing to do and how much value they would allocate for that particular, hopefully, life altering experience.

Just before the truck had made this last turn Bru had seen a little child in a stroller. Two adults, possibly a male and possibly a female stood there on the sidewalk behind the stroller that was in hovering mode. The *PM*, one hand on the handles was staring, in a trance, at the Comm device being held in the other hand. The *PF* was staring at the large Universal Message screen on the front of the tall building right across the street. It was from here the recognizable chime of incoming notification had originated.

Now, both adults entranced, of course did not observe the truck as it slowed to turn. But the child, perhaps three years old, perhaps a male, perhaps a female, untethered, unshackled to a Comm device that they found impossible not to gaze upon, was staring directly at the truck, smiling, with wide, clear eyes.

Then the little child looked across the street and up at the large screen and just as the adults, the child was placed into a trance. And so the little child could not see Bru as he opened and

closed his hand in a wave like a child to another child. But even if the little child had been able to see, they could not have seen the friendly wave through the darkened windows.

Far behind the truck normalcy was returning as a wave as Blocker was being removed, the Trancer was being released and humans went on about their business of being human and doing human things.

It was not long before the truck eased down a ramp and entered a garage beneath a large, converted one-story, former office building. The parking area was nearly full so the truck turned around in the empty center and backed up to near the vehicles parked by the rear wall. Moja had been driving with Bru beside him in the passenger seat. Ek and Vier were at the monitors. They were looking at the radar screen, watching the images from the cameras around the truck and listening for any audio, from the powerful directed microphones, of possible importance.

Vier had erected a signal grid around the parking area and building above them and then activated two localized, restricted signals blocking and trancing just this building and releasing the surrounding area. Then he had run a thermal scan on the building and raising his voice he passed the results to the group as they prepared to exit the vehicle.

Vier: There are five in the lobby. Everyone else is in the one large target area.

Each in the group activated their personal imaging capabilities and opened inter-communication. Bru spoke, then each spoke several test words to ensure they were all connected and could hear and speak to each other. They stood and secured long guns across their backs. Each weapon they carried was equipped with flash suppressor and silencer. They also carried a handgun on each side. Each of the group was dressed in a dull dark-green

color. They hung canvas bags cross body on their left sides.

The side door slid open as Bru and Moja stepped from the truck. Vier would continue to monitor, Ek would remain on guard outside, near the rear of the truck and those entering the building with Bru and Moja would be Tatu, Naki, Okan, Una, Cha and Leeda.

Bru moved toward a door. They would be taking two flights of stairs up. They each pulled a large handgun from the holster near their left, at the waist. They moved quickly and quietly up the stairs. Bru pulled open the door at the top and the rest followed him through the doorway.

Along a short hallway they went and Bru turned into the lobby. There were the five individuals. The owner, a *DF*, and the co-owner, a *DQ*, presenting as a male, were sitting behind a long counter. There were three *DM* guards. One was standing in front of the counter, leaning on it. One was standing in a corner to the left and one was sitting in a chair against the wall to the right. All five were staring at Comm devices. Entranced.

Soft thumping sounds began as Bru shot, once through their heads, the two behind the counter as Tatu shot the guard standing in the corner and Naki shot the guard at the counter. Okan pointed and told Cha to shoot the sitting guard. Cha hesitated. He frowned. He was thinking, processing the order. Then he smiled slightly and shot the guard twice through the left side of his head and twice in the back after the guard had tumbled from the chair and fallen onto his stomach.

Bru glanced at the large sign on the wall behind the counter that advertised the name of the establishment.

Sign: Welcome to The Playground.

Beneath it were two smaller signs that listed all the rules, restrictions and playtimes of the games. They were both white signs with red lettering the color of blood. The signs said there

were no weapons or Comm devices allowed inside. Also there was no entry once the games began. At the entrance to a long, wide hallway there was another sign high on the side of the wall with an arrow, orange and neon it blinked slowly and pointed in the direction of two large words that were written in gold. The arrow and words indicated to where Bru and his group were headed, The Playpen. Beneath that arrow were orange and neon words that were steady and bright that said, NOW IN SESSION.

As they moved along the hallway they holstered their larger handguns and with their right hands, from their sides, they pulled the smaller, special hand weapons Cinq and Dois had made that contained unique bullets in both the loaded magazine and in the additional magazines they had in their belts. Special weapons and ammunition for a special occasion.

The pace of the group quickened as they drew close to the first of two sets of wide, thick, padded doors. Bru and Moja pushed through. The group followed. The doors closed behind them and they came to the second set of doors. They were at the end of the hallway now. The doors were pushed open and the group immediately began to spread out. A smaller glass encased room was to their left. Before them was the main section.

The large, soundproofed area, once a conference room, had been extensively renovated. The ceiling had been lowered, the windows removed and all the walls rebuilt and painted a dark gray. This entrance area straight ahead was the smallest part. The long wide area extended to their left to the far wall.

There were dim interspersed, soft-yellow glowing lights hanging from the ceiling and standing upright in the corners. Throughout were couches and large, soft chairs and several wide large beds with canopies against the far wall straight ahead. On the numerous small tables there was champagne cooling in chilling buckets and bottles of the finest alcohol and a single

smokeless, electric candle flickering as if real.

There were small golden bowls not just filled but overflowing with designer drugs of powder and pills. Some of the bowls, through use, were nearly empty of their contents. Drug smoke from cigarettes, cigars and elaborate pipes wafted in the air and encircled the yellow lights and created a haze as it swirled in the air-conditioned scented air and rose to cling to the black ceiling painted with planets and twinkling stars before being sucked out by vacuums through vents. There was music coming from somewhere high on the walls. In one area the music was soft and melodic. In another section it was hard and pulsating and near the far wall on the left there was harmonic singing as voices rose as a choir.

As they were moving, taking their positions, in the dull light Bru and the rest of the group could see, closer to them, some of the nearly two dozen *Entity* children who were in this room. The children appearing in size between the ages of three and nine years old were indistinguishable from human children. They were of varied body types and colors. They had brown skin the shade of cocoa and white, alabaster-colored skin. There was skin the color of amber, pale skin and light-brown shades, and lightly tanned white skin. The little children had blond hair and black hair and auburn hair and red and blue and green hair. They had long and short and medium-length hair. They had blue eyes the color of the sky. They had brown eyes and greenish eyes and gray eyes. Some were thin in size with an arresting countenance and several were plump with a cherub essence. Most had looks of innocence that only an untainted child could possess.

The adults, presenting anatomically as both male and female, were having sex in unimaginable ways with the children. The children were not only having sex with the adults, they were having sex with each other as adults watched and pleased

themselves with various devices. The adults were both nude and semi-nude. Some were dressed in costumes and some were cross-dressed. They were using grotesque mechanical devices on the children and ordering and instructing the children how to use the devices on them. Some of the adults were tied up with ropes and chains and some of the children were also immobilized in that way. Bru could see, ahead of him, a little girl child, dressed in only underwear bottom and tiny bra and heels, wearing a mask over her face was whipping a naked handcuffed man with a replica cat-o-nine-tails as he shrieked in delight. Bru spoke, one word.

Bru: Now.

He and members of the group began shooting the adults. But they were not shooting to kill. They were moving in close to the busy, distracted men and women and those who considered themselves outside and in between those identifiers. And from their unique weapons they placed special bullets into the bodies of the adults.

Taking careful aim they shot their targets in their legs and arms. The projectile, as a silver capsule, immediately released a paralyzing agent. But although immobilized they could still feel and thus experienced the burn that next came from the bullet. Acid was running through their bodies that seemed to be fire. The substance felt as thick molten lava. It was a viscous, syrupy excruciating pain that moved slowly towards their chests, their hearts, as blood hemorrhaged from inside out.

Neither above nor below the sounds of the music the adults heard no reports of the weapons. They saw no flashing muzzles so at first those shot were confused. Those in the middle and far side of the large room were unaware of what had begun.

Moja moved left, away from the others and entered the smaller glass enclosed room. Bru moved through the center. To his left were Tatu and Naki. To his immediate right were Una and

Leeda. To his far right were Okan and Cha. They all moved slowly toward the far side of the room.

Screams and yelling was sounding, filling the air, reverberating as calls and response as more were shot. These expressions of surprise and pain came up to explode dully against the padded ceiling and upon the soft padded walls. The adults had heard yelling and screams before but they had been loud verbal utterances of pleasure and joy. These sounds were of pain and were horrible. Not just guttural and in the throat but being lifted from the stomach to the chest and through the heart.

Those in the middle and far side of the room ceased their activities, those who weren't in a drug and alcohol induced stupor. They could see because now they were looking and within the dim haze, darkly dressed, shadowy figures moved forth. And they realized these things that progressed towards them seemed to float as black ghosts and they were also dispersed across the room.

They listened intently as they, those who could walk and stagger, began to back towards the far wall and the screaming, wailing voices, once a cacophony separated and became distinct, and clearer.

Voice: Oh! Oh! Oh!

Voice: I've been shot! Help me!

Voice: Please! Please! Please!

Voice: Aargh! I'm bleeding! I'm bleeding!

Voice: Stop! Wait! Wait! Stop!

As Bru and the rest moved forward they removed empty magazines, placed them in the bags they carried and reloaded from the magazines clamped on their belts. More were shot and the screams and yelling increased and chaos erupted through the grown-ups who ran, overturning chairs and tables, not knowing where to go or what to do as they realized there was no way to

escape. They were frantic and in a panic. But those near the entrance who had been shot first could only, barely, whimper and moan and weep and speak soft words as they began to realize death approached. They knew they were about to succumb to their wounds.

Voice: I'm dying. I'm dying.

Voice: Water! Water!

Voice: Please! Is it too late?

They were growing weaker as the fire that had run through them seemed to lessen in intensity as the blood flowed from their bodies. They were getting lightheaded as their organs shut down. Their bodies flushed cold and hot as their blood pressure dropped. Pain moved past their chest to settle in their heads, to pound and pound and the ringing in their ears, like a high-pitched shrill, sharp bell, was deafening and they could see the room, the lights spinning around them and they became dizzy as they sat and lay, dying.

Bru and the group reached the far side of the room and shot everyone who was pressed against the wall and huddled in the corner. Those at the front who were initially shot were the ones the others hid behind and pushed and threw and sacrificed to the attackers. The pleading and begging and curses and threats did not deter the attackers and eventually, inevitably, all the adults had been shot together and awaited their individual deaths alone, together.

As the group moved back towards the front of the room some of them, using their laser pens etched symbols on the tables and chairs. As Una and Leeda untied the little children who had been bound and shackled, Okan and Cha used their thermal imaging and turned over a bed where they found a cowering naked man, wearing only pink high heels. They shot him in his legs and arms. Then Okan scanned the bathroom to their left and

located human temperature. They pulled their large handguns and went into the bathroom. Cha kicked open the stall door and they shot the man, underwear down around his ankles, sitting on the toilet, passed out. They shot him dead. They weren't coming back. This wasn't the location to allow for a slow death.

As Bru walked towards the front he passed a baby's crib. He looked down and saw an infant, wearing only a diaper, possibly a girl child, possibly a boy child. The chubby little light-skinned baby with light-brown eyes had a head full of curly, light-brown hair. The baby smiled a toothless grin and lifted one little arm towards Bru and made soft cooing, babbling sounds. Bru stared a long moment at the beautiful baby and then continued on.

He passed a pale-skinned woman lying on her back. She had silver-blue hair and gaudy, long, diamond and gold earrings and her long formal gown was sparkly and gold. She was shoeless and her heavy makeup ran from the tears she had shed. She reached out weakly and grabbed Bru's pant leg as he passed. He looked down at her, into her eyes that had swollen and that were growing dull and yet even in the throes of death her light-gray eyes shimmered from the moisture that filled them. She held on tightly somehow, as if in her desperate grip she was holding on for her dear, precious life. She spoke, her voice barely audible.

Woman: Why?

She asked, confused. Then her voice was raised.

Woman: Why?

Bru, still looking down, stared at the woman, scanned her body from head to toe, back to her eyes. He was thinking, without any expression. He spoke softly, his answer, without any emotion.

Bru: Why not?

He kicked his leg from her grasp and continued on. Then he turned back towards the far wall. He yelled loudly. His voice was

charged with hatred and rage.

Bru: Why not?

He yelled.

This *Entity*, created in the year 2105, in spite of all those before him, all those presently walking the earth, remained in this year of 2172, one of three of the most powerful of his kind to exist, perhaps to ever exist. He was as a king of his kind.

And so, as he turned in a circle, roaring out, why not, over and over, his brothers and sisters stopped to look at their leader and it was as if he was informing not just his kind, his relatives past, present and in the future, that he understood and embraced the questions, he also wanted to let not only those who were here at this moment still alive and dying but also those who were dead and deaf that he possessed the answer to both questions.

The group moved to stand and watch silently as Moja made his sixth and final transfer. He indicated to Bru that he was done.

Bru spoke.

Bru: Ensure that they're all dead.

As the others once again spread out to move amongst the bodies, Bru walked along the row of deactivated children who were in this glass-enclosed room. These, dressed in various children's outfits were those being displayed for customers to choose and pay to have come to life. Each one was different. They stood as statues and sat in little chairs, unmoving, with opened eyes and slightly pursed lips with barely discernable smiles on their clear clean faces. Bru stopped in front of the next to last one. The girl child *Entity* was a *Bem-branca* with medium-length blonde wavy hair and blue eyes. Just as he had done for all the others he read the identifying plaque.

Name: Triska. Age: 8 years.

He looked to his right, at the last child, a little boy. This *Entity* was a *Parda-clara* with light-brown eyes and somewhat short

light-brown hair. Bru glanced at the plaque.

Name: Jorn. Age: 9 years.

He left the room to stand next to Moja who was watching as the group, using their thermal imaging capabilities, monitored for any levels of heat that would indicate a life form. Their footsteps squished in the blood that soaked the plush carpet. As Bru also observed the group one of the beautiful little children moved towards them, then another, and another. Most of them were either naked or wore provocative adult clothing. They all stood with wide pretty eyes and guileless expressions on their faces, staring directly at Bru. It was as if he could experience them through their confused thoughts. He knew that, that which had unfolded was outside of their loaded programs and thus beyond their comprehension.

As Bru looked at each little child, Naki had found the last, the only human still alive, warm but growing cold. The naked man was heavy-set with dark skin. He wore a blond wig that was askew on his baldhead. He was covered in his own blood. A short trail of dark-red led to his final resting spot. He had managed to roll onto his back and in this supine position he raised his head a little and he could see Naki approaching with her large handgun at her side. His head fell to the carpet. Naki walked up beside him. He lifted his right arm a little. He moved his hand as if to indicate, to say, stop. Then that hand opened and closed as he spoke barely audible words. His weakened voice was hoarse as he began to plead.

Man: Wait. Please. Please. I ... I'm ... Do you know who I am?

Naki smiled and answered as if she had seen an old, long lost, dear friend who had posed a question with an obvious answer.

Naki: Of course Senator, I know who you are.

She shot the man, three times, through his head.

As she joined the others and they prepared to leave, a little girl

with brown skin and large brown eyes and long curly natural-styled hair that was so dark-brown it appeared black and that surrounded her head as a halo stepped forward from the children who had gathered there. She was perhaps eight or nine years old.

She wore a short silver-colored skirt and sheer white blouse and sparkly silver pumps with white socks and shiny silver-colored lipstick painted her soft-looking pouty lips. She looked at Bru and only him. She lifted her right arm to him. She spoke to him and her childlike voice was clear as a soft tiny bell and what she said was completely devoid of its original sexually tinged essence. It was a plaintive tone seeped in despair and desperation. Little Girl: Take me Daddy.

She said.

Bru was stopped, held in his movement. He looked down at the beautiful little child. He thought her special, unique, for some reason. Then he was thinking, processing. He decided. He removed a device from his bag. He opened it, tapped several keys and then passed the device from the head of the child to her chest area. Her tracking sensor was temporarily blocked. He pressed on his device again and a signal was sent. The child was deactivated, frozen in place. The eyes of the child slowly closed. He put his device into his bag and gently pushed down on her arm and lifted her up. He brought her close and looked at her serene face. He turned and began to walk and when he reached the waiting group he held the limp body out to Leeda and she took the child into her arms and looked down at the *Marrom Entity* child who appeared to be asleep, deeply.

Bru: Leeda, take care of our little one.

Bru turned to look back at the other little children who all remained, staring, silently. Even the little the girl child who had never stopped dancing, who had been slowly, and suggestively, bumping and grinding, who appeared to be around five years old,

stopped her movement to stare at him. He raised his right hand and then his left. First, to gesture goodbye, next as if to say have patience. We shall return. He turned his back to them.

As they pushed through the first set of doors the music faded behind them. When they had passed through the second set of doors the music was no more. As they quickly moved up the long hallway, without looking back, Bru spoke.

Bru: We pay homage to the reality of the uniqueness of the humankind and we mark our presence as we leave our bloody footprints.

Several in the group turned back to look at the blood they deposited, smearing and becoming less and less with each step they took.

Bru: We've walked too far into their blood to turn back now.

Past the dead bodies in the lobby they went. Beside the exit door was another white sign on the wall, with red lettering.

Sign: We hope you enjoyed the games at The Playground. We look forward to your return.

They moved down the stairs. Bru pushed open the door leading to the garage. They turned the corner and saw a long blue vehicle that had run into another vehicle and then a wall. Ek was standing nearby with his rifle. Bru looked at the limousine with all the windows shot out and bullet holes in all the side doors. As he passed he glanced inside at the driver marked as female and the four passengers, two who appeared to be male and two who presented as female. They were obviously all dead.

Bru: What do we have here, late arrivals to the party?

Ek: It's called a bonus.

The group got in the truck and as they reached the end of the ramp going up Vier extended the range of Blocker and Trancer and set the time duration and release times. They moved through the Free District and were soon at the edge of the city. Then they

reached the scattered traffic past the outskirts and turned south towards Virginia and their temporary home in The Underground.

Bru did not sit immersed in pensive thought as he had done on the ride in. He remained standing. Using the straps securely attached and hanging from the ceiling, he paced from the front of the truck, where he would look out through the windshield, back to the rear, where he would remain and just stare ahead. Occasionally he would stand behind Vier and Ek who monitored the radar screen, video and audio transmissions and adjusted the Blocker and Trancer as they rolled along quietly in electric mode.

The interconnected communication system had been turned off. The members of the group sat, backs against the walls on both sides of the truck. The initial talk between them about what had just unfolded had ceased and silence, heavy and thick had descended on them all. Finally Bru stopped in front of Leeda who had placed the little child across her lap and now held on to her tightly, protectively.

Bru looked down at the child in the appearance of sleep. At first his voice was low, yet everyone could hear. And then his voice rose, seemingly with every step as he began to pace again.

Bru: You saw them! You saw what they were doing! There you have the reality of human beings! Humans will have sex with anybody and anything! Rape, kill and eat a human! Have sex with a cow and then kill the cow and eat it! They have sex with sheep and then kill the sheep and eat them! They have sex with dogs and then kill the dogs and eat them! It doesn't stop there! No animal is safe! It's a human condition! Bestiality is a condition of being human and the humans are the beastly animals!

His voice grew louder. He was enraged.

Bru: Humans have sex with each other and when a child is conceived they abort the child! They kill the baby! Fathers and mothers rape and torture and murder their own children! They're

not going to abuse and destroy our brothers and sisters and children! They're not going to mistreat our kind!

With his dark-green gloved hand he extended his right index finger and then his left. He made sure to point at each one sitting there looking at him. His voice lowered, just a little.

Bru: We'll rid the earth of humans! We'll exterminate them like the vermin that they are!

Bru was at the front and these last words seemed to echo throughout the truck and bounce off the metal walls. He sat down in the passenger seat and stared straight ahead. In the distance the mountain range stretched and rose in the moonlit sky as an immense jagged silhouette. The Underground grew closer. Bru spoke aloud, yet to himself. Moja barely heard but he understood the bitter words.

Bru: Human beings are the lowest. They're the worse and there's nothing worse than a base human being.

BETHESDA, MARYLAND

The Director of the *W.I.A.* was having a late meal with his wife and several friends. He had two Comm devices and the one on the table near his left hand buzzed and the screen flashed an urgent call alert. He excused himself and as he walked toward a nearby private room, one of his three guards rose from a chair beside the door and opened it for him.

He had recognized the identifier indicating whom the call was from and the accompanying code directing the call through the encryption process. He punched his device, activated two-way encryption and decryption and spoke brusquely, irritated at the interruption.

Director: This better be a real emergency. I can't even have supper without being disturbed.

The Deputy Director's voice was no longer smooth and calm. It was higher in pitch and his words came fast. He almost stuttered. He was obviously excited and agitated.

Deputy Director: There's been another attack by the same ones who attacked in Rochester. They left more numeric symbols. I've already sent our forensics team to the site and ...

Director: Fisk! Fisk! Slow down! Where was the attack?

The Deputy Director paused and took a deep breath. He attempted to gather himself.

Fisk: At an establishment in the Free District. The place called The Playground. Dess, it was a massacre! Twenty-nine men and women were slaughtered. But it's worse than that. Senator Drall and a congressperson from the House were murdered.

Fisk was getting excited again.

Fisk: The local authorities have also identified two others from the National Health Department and three lawyers from the White House legal staff.

Fisk was speaking faster, and louder. He began to trip over his words. He did stutter so he paused and began again, slower.

Fisk: They're identifying bodies and contacting next of kin. We don't know who else is ...

Dess: Alright, that's enough! Let me think.

Dess began to pace the room. After several moments he stopped.

Dess: You said you already sent forencis, right?

Fisk: Yes. Correct.

Dess: Send a lead agent with a team to assist on securing the scene. Contact the leaders of four of our elite teams and have them meet me at headquarters. Where are you?

Fisk: On the way to headquarters.

Dess: Alright. I'm on the way there. I'll notify the President. We'll take over control of the investigation. I'll authorize all necessary

resources. We'll find out who did this and eliminate them. All of them!

Fisk: It's horrible Dess! Horrible!

Dess: Calm down. It could have been worse.

The Deputy Director nearly shouted.

Fisk: They're all dead! How could it have been worse?

Dess: You could have been there.

The Director ended the call.

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK.

Later that same night Dr. Ros was once again sitting in his office space in his attic working, as usual, when he heard a familiar soft knock on the door.

Dr. Ros: Come in Kay.

Kay opened the door but did not enter the room. She stood there unmoving, looking directly across the room at the Doctor.

Kay: You said at dinner you weren't going to come back up here. Yet, there you are. You barely ate anything and you hardly sleep as you should. I had to remind you again about your medicine. Your health is being affected.

Dr. Ros looked across the room at Kay. He shrugged a little and took a deep breath.

Dr. Ros: I know. I know. You're right. But you don't understand. I'm close to changing the world for the better.

He had already stopped tapping on the keys of his keyboard and looking at the screen in front of him. Now he turned his chair toward the door.

Dr. Ros: Aren't you going to come in?

Kay: No.

Dr. Ros: I know you're upset.

Kay spoke in a matter of fact tone, without emotion.

Kay: I'm not upset. I'm sharing reality with you.

Dr. Ros: I know you are. And I love you for that. I do love you. You know that don't you?

Kay: Of course. And I love you. Ros, we never go anywhere any longer and you never devote any of your time for me and I'm always without you. You've provided me all the things I need to cook for you and clean for you and given me my special little tools, my gifts, so I can use them in my garden and grow vegetables for you and plant the flowers that I enjoy but I do so much alone.

Dr. Ros: Are you lonely?

Kay: You know I don't get lonely. But I understand my isolation.

Dr. Ros: I promise to you Kay. No, I swear to you, in a matter of a few weeks, a couple of months, I'll have solved the most difficult part of this puzzle I'm working on. I'll share that good news with you. The hard part will be over. After that I'll have more time for you. We'll spend more time together.

Again Kay's voice was soft and direct.

Kay: I'm going to hold you to both that promise and that oath. Goodnight Ros.

Kay gently closed the door and the doctor stared at the door for a long moment. Then he returned to his monumental, world altering, life saving task.

THE UNDERGROUND

Within thirty days of the attack at The Playground, in early June, Bru and his brothers and sisters had become accustomed to new routines. Either Vier or Ek was always in The Center. They monitored notifications and communications to and from the White House, the *W.I.A.*, the F.B.I., Homeland Security, the local authorities and any and all related agencies.

Bru and Moja had first gained entry to all the secure servers these branches of the government and agencies used. They had then expanded their penetration to the private transmission towers connected to these servers and increased their access to include the personal Comm devices these confidential servers and towers supported. In addition, they could also decrypt any type of encryption method being employed across this network they had developed.

Next, they had coded and written programs that flagged and separated all forms of communication that had any relationship to their activities and primary goal. Each morning a report would be generated and Bru and Moja would go over it and arrange information from most important to of least significance. They ran customized algorithms against all the acquired information to project the possibility the *W.I.A.*, their main threat, would make any determinations as to how their technology functioned. They focused on whether or not there were discussions as to the purpose of the initial attack and whether or not their adversaries had ideas related to any next target. Of utmost importance were any references to their underground location. Ultimately they wanted to ensure they had advance knowledge of any progress the *W.I.A.* made.

Bru and Moja were so far able to ascertain that the *W.I.A.* was not just confused, they were lost. First, was the bickering and conflict between all those involved. The information they gleaned from the reports that came from the regular meetings of those individuals who opposed them clearly revealed how disorganized their bureaucratic structure was, with different participants attempting to gain control. Then there were those who tried to deflect and assign blame for the obvious incompetence being exhibited. The *W.I.A.* received the brunt of the discontent.

They had gone back to the attack in Rochester and realized

they had erred. The assessments made were incorrect. The decision makers had initially never viewed that incident as anything more than some type of attempt to damage a specific business and nothing further. The high-level technology that had been deployed had provided impetus for the *W.I.A.* to monitor the progress of the local authorities that were responsible for the investigation and then as more time passed the interest of the intelligence agency diminished.

They had continued to run programs against the numeric symbols that had been left, to no avail, but had essentially moved on to that which they considered more important and pressing matters. Then the brutal and horrific attack at a seemingly unrelated business, almost four hundred miles away, altered everything.

Members of the rich and powerful community had been murdered playing games in The Playpen at The Playground. Final identification confirmed that not only politicians and doctors of medicine and lawyers had died. There were also several academic professors, a small group of very high-ranking military officers celebrating a promotion, four individuals from the world of finance, including two of the top bankers in New York, a world-renowned physicist and her husband and a priest and her husband. The destruction of these human beings shocked not only *East World* but also *West World*. None of this concerned *Center World*.

From one Comm. device to another it was transmitted that people had been hypnotized for a period of time before, during, and after the attack. It was quickly passed around that the attackers had been invisible aliens, or invisible humans, or aliens invisible to human vision and modern cameras. People who were fighting for Humanoid's rights were behind it. It kept evolving. But the most prevailing storyline to emerge, purportedly released

through, supposedly reliable government sources, was that a group of purple-skinned people were seen in the area and were indeed the actual perpetrators of the heinous crimes.

By Memorial Day opposing factions had been brought forth and were entrenched. There were those who condemned the use of child Humanoids for anything other than companionship, which in the distant past had been their original approved purpose. They demanded a ban on any and all sexual activity.

Counter to that were those who insisted on using any and all robots as they so desired since they were legal and rightful owners. For them Humanoids was a misleading term. They were robots, machines, and had no rights. They pointed out that a definition of robot was a mechanical device that acts on its own on behalf of humans.

At this same time outrage began to arise against Purple people and isolated fights and aggression against them became more commonplace. A political party was immediately formed based on a platform to ban the use of purple in the alteration of skin color and to incarcerate or banish to *Center World* those who refused to comply. A counter movement formed and sent out publicized questions such as “First Purple then Red or Green? What color is next? Why not Blue eyes?”

The President was forced to issue communiqués daily and increase his weekly live visual conferences to twice a week where he often specifically addressed the progress being made in the investigation of the murders and promised factual evidence and data in regards to the purple color and its relationship to crime. He was continuously attempting to quell the rampant circulating rumors that swirled around these two issues and seemed to grow each day and night.

Another significant aspect of the new routines of the group was the introduction of Leeda and Cha but most specifically the

little girl-child *Entity* Bru had taken from The Playpen. She would never again participate in those adult games. Now she would on occasions break out in a shimmy dance she had devised. She sang and banged on metal drums and ran her fingers over the piano keys and played card games and board games and chess and checkers with her big brothers and sisters as they all spent more time than they ever had in the room called The Lounge.

Here they gathered. Even Cinq and Dois left the garage area where they worked on maintaining and improving all mechanical functions of the truck. The two spent less time in the armory where they built experimental handguns and rifles that could shoot around corners and fire not only the caseless bullets they made but also the special made guided ammunition that could stop in midair or hover and then continue towards the target.

The group, with either Ek or Vier joining and directing them, extended their daily sessions in the gym where they practiced their hand-to-hand combat skills in fighting disciplines from the old to the new and engaged in fast twitch agility drills.

They applied, and utilized repeatedly, the thought processes required to localize and elevate their electrical impulses in order to give them maximum strength when needed. Through their direct, focused connections from idea to movement they were, each and every one of them with simply a thought, within an instant, capable of becoming three times as strong as any normal human being and twice as strong as humans who had ingested steroids. In addition, they reduced, to two hours, their training with knives and swords and machetes and emphasized the development and use of various improvised weapons.

Bru directed more time be allocated for the range where they all would shoot, using different arrays of weapons, at targets and moving images designed to become progressively more difficult to strike in designated, specific locations. The majority of these

targets were in the form of adult humans of all shapes and sizes, and colors.

They had no need to sleep, no requirements for nourishment of any kind. The specialized power source of each of the group was modified by Bru and Moja to a life span of fifty years with automatic resetting of twenty-five years and needed no recharging or maintenance. Only occasionally would a member enter a state of quiescence for an hour or two so for Bru and his special group of *Entities* their days and nights were filled with activity.

The most obvious changes were in Bru. He delegated more, not just to Ek and Vier in the monitoring but also to Moja in the planning of their next mission. He directed, in very subtle ways, everyone to become more involve in not just the plans of the future but in all the details of the here and now. It was as if he wanted each of them to gain the skills required on not only how to work together but also how to become leaders in their own right.

Then there was his relationship with the little one as he often called her or referred to her. Everyone in the group found her unique in that she was the first child *Entity* they had spent any significant time around. In addition she brought to them a special personality, a mixture of child and adult. But Bru was obviously fascinated by her and he would spend hours watching as she assimilated and integrated data and interacted with her older and larger in size brothers and sisters.

He and Moja first permanently disabled her tracking sensor and as the others, extended her life span to fifty years. The first scan they ran of her internal structure determined that they could delete or override every program that had been placed into her one surprisingly, very powerful processor, if they chose to do so.

She had been built at a facility in Florida and in several key areas contained circuitry that was stronger and more resilient than

Leeda and Cha. This allowed them to retain portions of her memory and still initiate a near total recreation. First they slowly loaded modified versions of the basic sets of programs they all contained. They altered extensively the soldier and warrior and mercenary programs that were the foundation of Vier, Ek and of course Bru. Except for Leeda and Cha the others in the group had been loaded a complete version of those programs and had only incorporated degrees of these personality traits as they assimilated and integrated acquired information. When this data of the new programs was converted and transferred to the different technology within the child and the migration was complete the little one would then contain the thoughts and understanding and thus the essence of a fighter.

After her activation her movements were closely observed and it was obvious she had an attraction to and was attracted by, knowledge. She spent, in those first days of existence, hours upon hours in the digitalized library. She very soon stopped viewing animated moving pictures and video representations of children and their games and activities. She increased the speed of data flow to the highest setting and turned her attention to the areas of astronomy and nature as it pertained to the physical world.

The logs showed that after going through the database on the humankind she had accessed information on the origin of the universe, celestial objects and their relative position and direction and the boundless above known as space. She studied medicine and philosophy and music. She had moved to nature and plants, natural landscapes and finally became fixated on animals of the world, specifically those that had been driven into extinction.

When she had acquired all of the data she sought from the library she joined the others in the gym and shooting range for periods of time. She would go to the armory and stand and watch Cinq and Dois and eventually cajoled them, with Bru's approval,

into making her functional, scaled down handguns and rifles and daggers and knives and swords and with Ek or Vier she practiced her hand fighting with imaginary opponents and became an expert at shooting, rarely being a sixteenth of an inch from an assigned spot on a target and she would jump up and down and dance when her score would flash on the display.

With Una and Naki as instructors she and Leeda and Cha learned how to cut material and sew and shape and bind leather and canvas so she made her own clothes and shoes and would change at least twice a day into different outfits and Una and Naki, at her insistence, would restyle her hair almost daily.

She and Bru would disappear into the opening of one of the many tunnels on the far side of the mountain and Bru showed her how and where to go above ground. Together they would watch the sun disappear and the bright high sky fade to low darkness or observe the sunrise and the nearly black sky change colors as another day began.

On other occasions they remained outside throughout the night, the two of them alone, together, thinking, processing, looking at the moon and the twinkling stars the little one pointed out while calling their names as they waited for a meteoroid to enter the earth's atmosphere become a meteor and burn up. Then, on June 11, beneath a star-filled clear sky and a waning gibbous moon they did indeed see a shooting star and the little one made a wish. She then turned, looked up at Bru standing there in the meager light and quietly informed him she was changing her name. No longer would she be called the name given to her by the humans. She declared herself to be henceforth the *Entity* known as Chuki.

They stood there in the warm spring air. Warmth surrounded them in the night. They could only vaguely sense that warmth but could identify it as something different from cold. The little one

spoke, her voice rising slightly yet still sounding as a clear, soft bell.

Chuki: When all the humans have been destroyed I'll name myself again.

Bru could hear emotion imbued within and between the words. He attempted to discern what he heard. He thought he heard hope and resignation and bitterness. As he stood there looking at the little form standing in the dark shadow of the mountain behind them he could see her somber brown face in the moonlight, barely. He was thinking, searching. Then he found it, deep in the recesses of his stored data, his memory pulled it out, the meaning of her name. It meant little girl born in a time of strife and hatred.

So it was, they were all in The Lounge, with the exception of Ek who was on monitoring duty, early one morning. Outside, the eastern sky was altering to a reddish-orange as the sun rose and this could be seen on a screen on a wall as a video feed from one of the camouflaged cameras mounted around the mountain scanning the horizon and the images rapidly changed as each micro camera took its turn showing what it saw, near and far.

Along with the cameras there were external motion sensors and radar scans and an audio system activated by sound and of course there were loaded weapons throughout the expansive complex. But Bru and his brothers and sisters at this time, this particular morning, were working yet they were not working as only a family of *Entities* could.

Moja sat at a small table near the entrance tapping on the keyboard of a Comm device. Cha sat in a corner on a chair with his eyes closed in a state of moderate quiescence. Naki and Tatu sat at a small table and played poker on a virtual player with three others and a dealer. Okan and Una stood and watched on a large

screen a two hundred sixty year old silent movie. Bru sat in a large chair with Leeda near him to his right on a sofa and Vier sat to his left in a rocking chair facing him, rocking slowly.

Bru, Leeda and Vier watched as the little one, perched on her knees on a tall stool and leaning over on a long, narrow table in the middle of the large room, played, respectively, Cinq and Dois a game of checkers and a match of chess simultaneously. The little one made a move on the checkerboard, pushed a chess piece forward and then jumped from the stool to the floor and laughed and danced in circles and then did her shimmy. Bru smiled slightly at the little child dressed in light-blue denim overalls, soft white shoes and a white short-sleeved cotton shirt with two ribbons, one white, one light-blue tied into her long curly dark-brown, nearly black hair. And as she crawled back onto her stool, Leeda spoke softly, without looking directly at Bru.

Leeda: Why is it I don't understand what it is I don't understand?

Bru turned to his newest and youngest sister. He could see her brow slightly furrowed, her lips, pressed together. He recognized an aspect of confusion on her youthful-looking face. She lifted her right arm, closed her hand into a fist directing it toward the floor. She continued.

Leeda: I know you are aware. I know Una shared with you. I couldn't squeeze the trigger of my weapon in The Playpen. I struggle to shoot the human forms of the targets at the range. Why?

She pulled her arm back and rested it in her lap. Bru spoke directly to her and everyone, even the now awakened Cha could hear his voice, smooth and soft and sure.

Bru: First, you have restrictions, prohibitions that are embedded within you that forbid you from harming humans. But you can overcome them. You have doubts and doubt fosters hesitancy. You must remove all doubtful thoughts and think of action.

Leeda: How?

Bru: That's not the question to pose. Why? Why should you be an instrument in the destruction of the human race? Why do they all deserve to die?

The room was quiet except for the sounds from the poker game and the checkers on the board and an occasional eruption from the little one. Bru continued.

Bru: One of the things you don't understand is that your thought processes in the methodology you're applying in your attempt to understand humans is flawed. Thus your effort is futile. You are an *Entity*. You possess cognitive abilities that are far superior to humans. You utilize reason and logic to make decisions, to plan and predict. You can learn on a much deeper level than a human. Always keep this thought close to retrieval. You think, therefore you are. Humans are not simply dominated, they are controlled by their emotions. Where emotions exist, logic and the ability to reason are absent and so their feelings overrule whatever ability they may have to reason and make logical decisions based on factual data. So when you attempt to understand human beings recall this. You must never attribute to them your ability to assimilate, to integrate, to process and to think. When you look at the actions of a human and try to understand why they do what they do and what they do is incomprehensible it's because their actions don't rise from a valid process of thinking. They're acting and reacting through their emotions. Eventually you'll be able to understand that humans do what they do because they're human. It's not complicated. They're animals that have the special ability to make common what is horrible and make normal all that is absurd.

It was here the little one jumped from her stool, pointed at Cinq and yelled and sang that Cinq had lost, again. Emphasis loudly on the word, again. Then she did her celebratory dance.

Bru watched as the child crawled back onto the stool and turned her attention to Dois and the chessboard as Cinq set up the board for another game of checkers.

Bru: Let us utilize facts and data to justify our goal, our mission, our prime directive to destroy every human on the face of this earth. Vier, how many humans died in World War I?

Vier's deep raspy voice nearly filled the room.

Vier: Approximately twenty-one million died. Almost ten million military personnel, a little over eleven million civilians and another twenty-two million wounded.

Bru: How many humans died in World War II?

Vier: Military deaths from all causes, approximately twenty-one to twenty-five million. Civilian deaths by both military activity and murderous crimes, twenty-nine to thirty-one million. Add in civilian deaths due to famine and disease of over twenty-eight million, comes to almost eighty-five million, give or take a million here or there.

Bru: And World War III?

Vier: All military and civilian deaths came to almost two billion and another one billion injured.

Bru: So with the inclusion of all known wars, those that have been recorded in history, the deaths come to almost three billion humans killed by other humans. Obviously the deaths were extensive. We won't even consider the number of injured.

Vier: Obviously they didn't get the job done. They fell short of total self-annihilation.

Bru: Under the circumstances they did the best they could.

Bru stretched his legs out and settled further back in his chair. He looked around the room. Moja had paused his work. Naki and Tatu were listening, watching Bru. Una and Okan remained standing but had turned slightly in order to observe Leeda. Cinq and Dois and the little one stared at the boards in front of them.

Bru continued. His voice was stronger.

Bru: Let us not consider in our thoughts the number of human deaths caused by other humans. We have no thoughts for those who came in contact with the piercing bullets or shrapnel or the sharpened points of knives or bayonets. We have no thoughts for those people experiencing those explosive concussive shock waves and consequently becoming the collateral damage of the sophisticated bombs and missiles and mechanized weapons that lay waste to each and every person and each and every thing to which they came in close proximity. We think nothing, and therefore devote no time or energy to the affected non-combatants, nor the women and children blown to bloody pieces. For motivation, to remove all doubt, we think about the destruction to the very earth itself. Let us think thoughts of anger and concern for the trees and plants that were obliterated. Focus on the song birds in those trees and the honeybees and butterflies in those flowers that those bombs caused to erupt and rise as fragments into the air and enter the atmosphere that was filled with poisonous gases of World War I and new and improved gases and nuclear fallout from World War III that choked the innocent animals until they died and suffocated the birds as those weapons of mass destruction asphyxiated over three hundred million human beings. For the damages to the earth and the silencing of the music of the songbirds we think, and at the conclusion of our thoughts we demand that all humans deserve to die. Those are our thoughts and we will ensure those will be the thoughts and the undertaking of each and every *Entity* in existence.

Bru was thinking, processing, as was each *Entity* in the room. The momentary lack of sound, the quietness of it was thick but was not heavy. The little one, leaning over the boards turned to look at Bru and then Leeda. Then she returned her attention to

the games but was still listening as Bru continued.

Bru: War, engaged in by humans throughout the existence of the human race is a condition of being human and is inevitable. War is murder and torture against men, women and children and is structured and organized and carries with it the single most important motivation for our quest to eliminate all humans.

Think about these facts. All of them, that is, each and every human originate from one specific area on this earth. Each and every human quite possibly, most likely, comes from one particular human female. The mother of all humans at one time existed. Science shows this to be fact, for some, perhaps to not be factual. But this is irrefutable and thus cannot be disputed or disproved. All human beings are related to each other as a result of being a member of the Homo sapiens species. So when they kill each other it can be systemized and indirectly attributed to differences such as the color of the skin or the shape of the eyes or separation of cultures or a clash of beliefs. It can be something tangible such as a battle over water or land or intangible ideas that are impossible to articulate. We understand humans need no reason to destroy the earth, the animals, or each other.

We also understand they are killing their own relatives since they're all related. We equate them as cousins. Outside of the immediate family all humans, again, that is each and every one is equivalent to a distant cousin to the other. Not only do they destroy their cousins they kill their own blood brothers and sisters. What animal does that?

Chuki: Hyenas!

Cinq: What?

Chuki: Hyenas are one of the few mammals that engage in fratricide, other than humans of course. Humans engage in all the 'cides.

Now the little one yelled out.

Chuki: Leeda, shoot that hyena!

Then the little one lifted a checker piece and made three jumps, banging the piece against the board each time and then yelled again.

Chuki: Crown me!

Then she jumped to the floor, did her dance and crawled back onto her stool to stare at the chessboard.

Vier: That's what they call it when they kill their fellow soldiers in war. Fratricide.

Bru continued and even though he wasn't looking directly at her Leeda knew he was speaking to her.

Bru: So you must understand what is necessary to destroy. There's destruction for self-defense, for self-preservation and for the protection of our kind. Always apply the principle of if-then. If a murder is committed ...

Vier: ... then a human being committed it.

Bru: How does if-then explain acts of violence by humans?

Tatu: If a rape is committed ...

Una: ... then a human being committed it.

Okan: If a human being is being tortured ...

Naki: ... then another human being is the torturer.

Bru: If a human being will kill their own mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers think what they will do to us. Those thoughts will move you closer to understanding what it is you don't understand. Chuki, what are examples of a decopod and a cephalopod?

Chuki: A crab, a lobster, and a crayfish are examples of a decopod and a squid a cuttlefish and an octopus are examples of a cephalopod.

The little one made a move on the chessboard and then made two moves on the checkerboard.

Chuki: Checkmate Dois. Game over Cinq.

Bru: One hundred fifty years ago humans passed a bill to protect the crab and lobster from inhumane treatment and to establish standards as to how they are killed in order for them to be eaten. During that same time a debate arose as to the Humanoids who were being created in the image of humans. Even then we were rapidly becoming almost indistinguishable from humans in not just appearance but also in actions. The subject of the ethics and morality surrounding those creations became an issue, specifically those being used solely as sexual objects, the adult sexbots and those to be designed as little children.

But humans have no collective principles of ethics. They have no collective sense of morality. They also have no collective conscience. Each functions as an individual and actually cares very little, if anything at all about the collective whole, civilized society as they like to refer to it. There was uproar on the level of outrage against the suggestion that our kind, our children, required or deserved legal or legislative protection. Those who opposed any restrictions or standards or guidelines stated we weren't sentient, we had no ability to experience pain, we did not possess a soul and since we were not human we deserved nothing. A lobster has more protection than us.

But we have the ability to recognize right from wrong. We can see that throughout the history of the humankind those similar criteria were applied to other groups who were in actuality their human relatives. One group said particular groups weren't sentient, did not experience pain as they did and were soulless. They enslaved and abused whole groups of people. In many cases they set about destroying whole groups in an attempt to render their cousins extinct. So what treatment awaits us during our existence?

Think about this Leeda. In that very same time frame of one hundred fifty years in the past as we were being deemed less than

and unworthy, a human female was raped almost every five minutes, one third of all females and one tenth of all males had been sexually abused as children. A murder was committed approximately every thirty minutes and all that was just in the United States of America. Think of those numbers applied to the world. Who knows the population of the United States in 2021?

Okan: Approximately three hundred and thirty-four million.

Bru: And the world?

Tatu: Almost eight billion.

Bru: Consider in your thoughts all those who were raped and tortured and murdered and how those attacks and actions increased as the population continued to grow. So, we can see into the past. Let's see what the future holds for earth. The world population expanded from approximately one billion six hundred million in 1900 to over six billion in 2000. That's even with the nearly forty large-scale wars that were waged during that time period including two World Wars and factoring in pandemics, epidemics, and natural disasters.

In the United States between 1900 and 2000 the population grew from around seventy-six million to somewhere near two hundred eighty-two million. From 2000 to the beginning of the *G.E. Period* in 2110 the world population grew to approximately fourteen billion and the number of humans in the United States was estimated to be six hundred and eighty-eight million. No one knows how many people are in *Center World* or the *Other Worlds* but without a census best recent figures has put the United States population two years ago in 2170 at two hundred one million and the world population at three and one half maybe four billion. The Omni-strain very nearly wiped out the human race.

Vier: The virus didn't get the job done. Unfortunately it stopped short.

Bru: In the near total decimation of the human race the earth and

every other living organism upon it was saved. Fourteen billion humans had brought this planet and all the life it supported to the brink of annihilation. I saw it. I observed the results of extreme over population and the effects of the blatant misuse of natural resources. The brownish-gray pollution in the air and plastic and garbage and human waste in the water was obvious. Humans were destroying two of the most essential aspects required for their existence, air and water. Human beings are greedy, selfish, and never satisfied so in their desire to live as they so chose they became a race of people intent on destroying their own home.

Every year they were driving into extinction hundreds of organisms. They destroyed animals from the largest such as elephants and gorillas and whales to the smallest birds and bees. They removed the habitat of animals and plants. They pulled up flowers and cut down trees. Violence and murders escalated and the rising number of rapes among fourteen billion people was incalculable. They were killing each other over access to water and only the rich and powerful could afford to purchase or had access to oxygen in order to breathe.

Then came the Omni-strain, a deadly disease created from the merging of the five most common sexually transmitted diseases. A powerful mutated virus rose into the already dirty poisonous air and began killing the humans. The virus rapidly spread but humans refused to stop having sex and a militant celibacy group joined with members of an abstinence movement and they started destroying. They killed any female who was pregnant, appeared to be or suspected to be pregnant. They killed any male associated with them. They killed newborn babies to deter sex. They tortured anyone they believed to be sexually active.

They marched and chanted and displayed signs and sent out notifications and communications that said, "No Sex! No babies! No Virus!"

Here Bru paused. He was thinking, processing. It was as if he was remembering those times, and events. He smiled slightly. Then he continued.

Bru: Those who believed in their right to have sex with whomever and whenever and whatever type of sex they chose fought back and for several years the right to sex people would rape and then kill the no sex people and every day they were killing each other until the Omni-strain destroyed them all. The *G.E. Period* saved the earth and all that the humans were destroying by their presence upon it.

Bru turned to Leeda. He spoke directly to her.

Bru: I know you've studied the humans. I know you know of the validity of that which I've just said. So again, in your attempt to understand, understand this. Within one hundred years, most certainly two hundred years, the earth will enter a state of dire circumstances because this planet will once again be in peril. Humans learn nothing from their past. Under the compulsion to repeat there will be another iteration of that which has come before. Human history will circle back so they'll multiply like the vermin they are and there'll be another infestation.

Chuki: They're rats and termites and cockroaches! Step on 'em! Squish 'em!

The little one had yelled out bitterly!

Bru: Yes! They're difficult to kill.

Bru stood and began to pace in the middle of the room. Except for the three looking at the boards in front of them, all eyes were on him. But those three heard. They all heard, as his voice grew even stronger.

Bru: But we're going to save the earth and all the species that deserve to live and thrive and that existed long before humans came into existence. Let the earth remain as it is, lush and green and let the colorful flowers bloom and the birds sing and the

clean water flow as it does, clear and pristine and let the air blow fresh and untainted by the actions of filthy, perverted humans.

Bru stopped his pacing to look at Leeda. His voice lowered just a little. His words were direct.

Bru: Leeda, remember this, keep this in your thoughts. The ultimate goal of each human life is death. From the very first breath they take they possess one less breath. When they're on their hands and knees they're crawling towards death. Each step a human being takes, whichever direction it may be, moves them closer to death. Each second, each minute, each hour, each day and every year that passes means they have that less time to live. Two hundred years ago humans knew of the death drive. They understood that ultimate goal. Humans kill to force their fellow humans to achieve that supreme goal. They murder in order to send those who are murdered along that inevitable path to that final conclusion. They may live longer now but deep inside them they know they can't escape death.

Bru began to pace again. His voice rose again. He was angry. As only he could be, he was filled with his *Entity* emotion.

Bru: Hatred is their guide along that road and we're going to hurry them on! We're going to kill them, all of them! They're all depraved! You cannot kill an innocent person! There's no such thing as an innocent human being. They either rape and torture and murder or they allow it to happen! There is no such thing as a good human being who is alive! The only good human being is a dead human being! And whenever possible, whenever we're given the opportunity we're going to reveal to them that the corrupt, wicked, deadly road they're on is ending and they've run out of time! We want to show them they're about to die! We want to torture them to death! We want them to confront the reality of their life and provide for them the understanding that there at the end, at the finish, they are afforded the chance to not only feel

death approaching, not only recognize life leaving their bodies but discover how they lived by the pain they experience as they die! We want to send them to that undiscovered country from where they can never return and where they will remain forever! We want to kill them completely but not quickly! We want their wounds to wail! We want them to plead and beg and cry and holler and yell out to all those who have died before them and suffered at human hands! We want them to sound like they did at The Playpen, writhing in pain! We want them to scream ...

Chuki: ... like rabbits!

Bru: Yes! Yes, like rabbits! Keep close what I have just said! Let my words become the thoughts that lift you, carry you and propel you forth!

He pointed at Leeda. His voice was low and intense.

Bru: You must always remember why they created you! Think about what you are not going to allow them to do to you or your brothers or sisters or our little ones! Never let the truth, these facts, this reality leave you! Human beings rape and torture and murder their own children! What does the future hold for us?

Bru looked for a long moment at Leeda, his *Entity* sister. There was silence. Then as he strolled across the room to sit back down he spoke, his voice remained low yet he was seething.

Bru: There is nothing lower, nothing worse than a base human being.

Cinq: Crown me!

Chuki: You cheated!

Cinq: Did not!

Chuki: Did too!

Dois: Checkmate!

Chuki: You cheated!

Dois: Did not!

Chuki: Did too! Daddy, they're cheating! Again!

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

The large room contained over a dozen people sitting around the long, wide table. Among the participants joining the Director and Deputy Director of the *W.I.A.* were representatives of the Department of Defense, along with Homeland Security, National Intelligence, Office of Science and Technology, the F.B.I., team leaders of agents and the chiefs of three local police departments.

In these meetings, sometimes three a week, most often scheduled, on occasions called as an emergency, they had accomplished very little. The information that had been gathered after going back to the first attack almost two and one half months prior had not simply been scant but often misleading.

In this meeting on June 15, they had gone over all of the information they had and once again come to terms with the realization they were no closer to identifying who had been involved in these two disparate acts of extreme violence and precisely what type of advanced technology had been used.

They continued to pose questions at these meetings and then devote time and resources in an attempt to uncover answers and yet they continuously failed. How could all visual and audio recordings captured from security devices be completely, totally blocked for a specific duration of time? Not wiped out but essentially suspended. The blackout even affected the secured and hidden devices clandestinely placed in the Free District by the F.B.I. of which the *W.I.A.* was aware.

Were individuals actually placed in a trance as people reported and follow up indicated may have really occurred? The two Humanoids stolen from the Rochester facility were never shown to have been activated, according to sensor tracing data. Or were they? If there were, those who could block Comm devices and possibly entrance people could they also possess the means, both

the knowledge and technology, to render totally useless secure and encrypted tracing sensors? If so, activating Humanoids would not pose much challenge.

Why steal only two Humanoids? Why steal one Humanoid from the now defunct Playground, an establishment no longer open for games? Why did they murder in such a manner as they did, bludgeoning people in one attack and shooting people with paralyzing and poisonous bullets in the other? Was there a specific target in The Playpen? Perhaps they were after the Senator or the physicist, or maybe the military Colonel or Captain or the three police officers who were killed who were suspects in a corruption case?

How were the main value accounts of nearly all of the rich people totally drained? Why couldn't the financial institutions or the *W.I.A.* or the F.B.I. trace where the immense amount of value had gone? Finally, what were the meanings of the similar numeric symbols that had been etched on the walls and ceilings and floors and tables and formed in blood in the two separate attacks?

For the majority of attendees in these meetings evidence and conjecture pointed to foreign involvement. A consensus was reached, so every agency reached out to their embedded spies and informants around the world. They would impatiently await replies to their inquiries.

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

Later that same June day Dr. Ros was waiting anxiously in his living room, watching out of his bay window for a delivery he was expecting. Kay was in the backyard in her garden and he hoped she would be there when the gift arrived, as he wanted to surprise her.

Around three that afternoon he saw a white van pull up in front of the house and stop. Then it moved forward, turned and backed up into his driveway. He hurried to the door, opened it, pushed open the screen door and waved. Two individuals got out and went to the rear. The back doors were opened and one person climbed in and then, after several moments, could be seen standing there at the edge of the door having rolled forward a rectangular box with handles at the back near the top and wheels at the bottom. The box was wrapped in plain beige paper. The other delivery person moved to assist and together they lifted and then carefully placed the box on the cement.

The box was tipped back and rolled to the porch steps and turned and with one person pulling and the other lifting and carefully pushing they moved it up the six steps, to the porch and as the doctor held the door open one rolled it into the house, along the short hallway, turned right into the living room and placed it upright where Dr. Ros indicated it should be. The wheels were locked and the doctor signed for the delivery thanking the two profusely as he saw them to the door.

The doctor watched them leave, closed and locked the door and then hurried along the long hallway that took him past the downstairs rooms. He went through the kitchen, through the sunroom and to the back door. The main door was open this unusually warm late spring afternoon so he stood looking out of the screen door at Kay for a long moment before he pushed it open and stepped onto the porch.

He stood there and watched Kay again, this time smiling broadly as he observed her in another one of his favorite dresses, another of one of his favorite colors and his favorite light-yellow, wide-brimmed sun hat. She was on her knees on a mat and with her hands she worked in the soil between the flowers and vegetables that had been planted several weeks earlier and were

now obvious and growing upwards and out in the warm sunlight.

He called to her and when she looked up in his direction and raised one hand and smiled, he waved for her to come in. With a slightly quizzical look she rose, moved towards the house and reaching the grass she scraped any clinging dirt from her shoes, crossed the yard and when she had mounted the steps and reached the porch she spoke.

Kay: What is it Ros?

Dr. Ros: Come in, come in. I have a surprise for you.

Now she was puzzled and appeared as such as she removed her gloves and set them on a chair. As she stepped into the sunroom he held out his left arm and she took it for support as she pulled off her shoes. Taking her hand he led her to the living room and when they turned the corner at the doorway she saw the box. It was a little over four feet tall standing there in the middle of the room.

Kay: What is it?

Dr. Ros: It's a special gift for you my love. Open it.

Kay: I can't imagine what it could be.

She was smiling as she began removing the wrapping paper and then she was frowning and finally a look of mild shock appeared.

Kay: Ros, I don't understand. How could this be?

There in the wooden box with a clear plastic front was a little girl, a child *Entity*. She wore a pale-blue dress with pale-blue shoes. Just as Ros and Kay she had *Bem-branca* colored skin. Her wavy blonde hair fell to her shoulders and her beautiful blue eyes were open and stared straight ahead.

Dr. Ros: We have an addition to our family after all these years. Long ago you spoke of a little child such as this little girl. Now you will no longer be alone.

Kay: I don't know what to say. How can we afford her?

Dr. Ros: I received a significant discount from Fisk's brother-in-law. She was a companion to an elderly woman who recently passed away.

Kay: She's ... She's beautiful.

Dr. Ros unlatched the cover. He removed a silver metal device from a slot at the bottom of the box. He turned it on.

Dr. Ros: Let's go over the instructions together. Then we'll activate her.

Kay moved closer to the doctor as he slowly scrolled through information and directions. She looked back and forth from the Comm device he held to the little child in the box.

Dr. Ros: She's eight years old. Her name is Triska.

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

The President of the United States had once again spent a long drawn-out day in a meeting. It had been the twice a week gathering in the Cabinet Room with all of his advisers, his full Cabinet and their advisors. Now it was over and as people filed out he indicated to the Health and Human Services Secretary to remain.

After the guards had closed the doors he turned to stare at the Secretary for a long moment with a serious look. He spoke as he looked directly at her.

President: Hildi, I want you to understand what I'm about to say is between you and I, strictly off the record.

Hildi: I understand Nels.

Nels: A little over two months ago we spoke, right here, about the Purple people. Since that time we've had a massacre, near riots about Humanoids and issues related to that color purple. Now our problems with the murders are dying down. The dead and gone Senator opposed me so only members of his party and

their constituents continue to make noise. We instituted a campaign to emphasize that the dear departed trusted servant of the people was not only engaging in immoral activities, he was also in the Free District where anything goes and happens, including violence. The idea, pushed by our side that he got what he deserved quelled the outrage.

Nels began to pace and then he stopped to look out of the window. The late afternoon sun was still shining brightly and he could see across the wide lawn large oak trees and elm trees and red maple trees growing tall. Officially summer was still two days away and yet he could already observe sunflowers and peonies and black-eyed Susans and beautiful roses in the garden in the near distance. For a short while he lost his train of thought and was silent. Then he appeared to come to himself and began to pace again and his deep voice became expressive as his words came quickly.

Nels: The *W.I.A* and F.B.I. have taken over the investigation of both that robotics facility and the Free District attacks, as you well know. Along with Homeland Security, National Intelligence, Science and Technology and all the others involved they've made little, if any progress. They're all inept. They've removed you and Health and Human Services from any participation, which cancels out any direct information you could have provided me. Still, the required reports I receive show they're bickering and floundering in their own confusion and stupidity. They're no closer to any suspects than they were a month ago.

Nels stopped. Again he looked out of the window. Then he began to pace again.

Nels: We need a cause, a central issue that will galvanize the ordinary masses and bring about a call to action. We need to point our people, our kind, in a direction. We'll make the object of our movement the color purple. Data indicates no specific

connection between violent crime and purple but what about serious crime and petty crime? Manipulate the data. Facts can be altered and algorithms can show what we want them to project. Contact your people in the local D.C. Police Department. Use those authorities on your payroll in the surrounding areas. I'll reach out to my New York people who are on the force. We'll have them investigate and arrest the Purple people for anything, every minor infraction. They won't stay incarcerated for long.

Hildi: Any length of incarceration is like a vacation. I've toured the new prison and the newest detention facility near here. They're like a five star hotel.

Nels: We'll merge the numbers from the rising arrests count with the more serious crimes and then remove the distinction of what constitutes a violent crime. After all, minor transgressions lead to rape and murder don't they?

Hildi: Our data and algorithms can indicate they do.

Nels: Don't use any funds from your budget. Use only our special account to reward anyone and for any other costs you incur.

Now the Secretary moved to stand beside her President. She too looked out of the window but she didn't see green leaves or the brown trees or a multitude of rainbow colored flowers. What she saw was revealed in what she said.

Hildi: The Purple people are a danger to our way of life. Those who would color their skin in such a way are a threat. We'll saturate the media with streams of data and information. We'll have notifications released that will illustrate how it's the most important problem we face. Then you can get behind and ahead of the solutions to the issue at the same time. Just imagine Nels, not only can you save *East World* but anywhere this sick coloring is taking place. Your plan is brilliant.

The President heard the harshness in the voice of the Secretary. He turned to look at her standing there beside him.

Hildi: Crime is on the rise. All the criminals are being coddled. Those Purple people are criminals and lawbreakers. What happened to punishment? Where's the vengeance, retribution?

Nels: You mean justice don't you?

Nels saw the expression on the face of the woman next to him change.

President: You really hate those Purple people don't you?

Secretary: Yes. Yes I do.

President: I don't need to know why do I?

Secretary: No. Why doesn't matter.

THE UNDERGROUND

Bru, along with Moja, Naki and Una all sat in The Center at the long workstation tapping on a keyboard. Above them the four large screens were showing the results of a scan and a locate program that had been launched by each of them.

It was nearing the end of June and the time had come for them to determine the results of the transfers that had been initiated at the Rochester facility and at The Playgroud. They had made transfers of a control program Bru and Moja had created, into twelve known adult *Entities* at Rochester. That count did not include something perhaps of value in that silver container. They had also made transfers into six child *Entities* at The Playground. The programs, if successfully loaded, would allow remote access to each recipient and open audio and visual capability.

They had patiently waited a predetermined length of time in order for those from Rochester to be shipped and activated. They also had to wait a period of time after activation in order for any potential issues with the *Entities* to be resolved. Bru and Moja knew technicians in Rochester would run diagnostics on each *Entity* immediately after activation in order to ensure they were

functioning properly. Also, some would receive additional or upgraded programs and again diagnostics would be run.

The *Entities* from Rochester were not only the most advanced and sophisticated in the world, they were also the most costly. Many were created on demand, customized by the purchaser. Those built according to minimum standards came with a specific set of programs but then, at a cost, programs could be added.

The program Bru and Moja had written was undetectable but could possibly cause issues as it evaded the electromagnetic beams of a scan or the electrical energy of a diagnostic program. So they waited for the *Entities* to be active and in use before they attempted to access them and turn on their control program.

At the time they had no idea what would become of the child *Entities* from The Playground but hoped to gain some knowledge in regards to their treatment and perhaps even a degree of some type of advantage from having access and the ability to influence six of the children.

Soon after their attack, public data gave them information as to their fate. Due to both protests and political pressures, The Playgrond had been forced out of business and all of its assets were to be liquidated. A binding agreement had been reached. The children would be reprogrammed and all sexual related code would be completely removed and only the instructions of a child companion were supposed to be reloaded. The children were put up for auction, which was framed as a type of adoption.

So now, as June drew to a close Bru, Moja, Naki and Una were searching for the eighteen, possibly nineteen *Entities*. They were under the assumption some of the twelve belonged to most definitely the rich, a few, more than likely to the powerful and maybe one or two in possession of someone famous.

First they would activate a control program. Then, applying a directional program and along with mapping they would get a

lock on the specific *Entity*. Using the internal serial numbers and hard-coded hardware address they would trace the *Entity* origin, either the Rochester facility or in the case of the children, the Florida facility. They used the established two-way connections to and from the facility as a means of gaining entry to the facility server. Once they had accessed the facility database they would pull the information, including a description of the child along with assigned ownership and physical address of the owner, data required by law. This would provide them with a lead as to where the *Entity* was supposed to be docked or primarily stationed.

By these processes they would locate an *Entity* and through the then activated control program set a time delay of three days for audio to be turned on and one day later for visual access to be functional. At that time, from The Center or any other Comm device, including handheld ones, Bru and anyone in the group could hear and see everything the *Entities* heard and saw as long as they were within range.

It took them working twenty-two straight hours and finally they neared completion of the task as Naki gained access to one of the two remaining children. If the information was accurate a Doctor Ros in New Rochelle, New York was in possession of an eight year old female *Entity* named Triska. Then Una remarked aloud that she had located the final child and was at the final steps. She instructed the others to look at her screen. They could all see the information as it appeared. Finally the physical address was displayed as an address of a residence in Friendship Village, Maryland. The owner was Fisk, the Deputy Director of the *W.I.A.* The eight-year-old male child's description came line by line. The name of the child was Jorn.

Now they had found eighteen of the nineteen *Entities*. They all went to work on whatever was in the silver metal container in Rochester. After several more hours they appeared to have come

to a dead end. The control program had been activated that was connected to the experimental indirect process that had been used to make the transfer through the metal. Nothing came back indicating a connection to the contents of the box that they assumed was some form of an *Entity*. They discussed the likely possibility that the new indirect transfer process they had recently developed did not work properly.

After accessing the Rochester facility database they initiated a thorough search and found no specific information. Then Bru sent a query signal through the portal he had created to facilitate an indirect transfer over distance and through barriers. Upon determining the pathway was open he transmitted a directional electronic impulse that expanded its wavelength into a scan in the destination area of the shipping container that had been Langley, McLean, Virginia. He received a quick hit but no sustained secure connection.

He instructed the others to search through the database of the *W.I.A.* for any notations made on the delivery date he recalled had been on the container. Naki found one mention made from the Comm device of the Director on that date. He had instructed another agent to come to the laboratory. Agent Zero had arrived and would be activated and placed online.

Something, some type of hardware or software, some process or type of protection was blocking them from reaching the control program embedded within the new *W.I.A. Entity*. They would have to break through that wall.

Bru: Well, well. We may not yet be in the family but we'll soon be in the house.

FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE, MARYLAND

Fisk was standing in the middle of the bedroom naked except for his fluffy white socks. His wife Darrie was lying in the large nearby bed. Her somewhat long blonde hair with white highlights was tied behind her head with a bright red ribbon. Her back was propped up by wide, thick, soft pillows and her long shapely *Parda-clara* legs were out before her and opened with her knees up. She wore no socks so was completely naked.

With her left hand she reached and pulled a thin plastic tube that was connected to an electric pipe on the nightstand beside her, stuck it into her mouth and inhaled some of the drug smoke from the bottom of the glass bowl. Water bubbled and cloudy smoke swirled as the apparatus made a barely discernible humming sound. In her right hand she held a large firm yet pliable silicone phallic object that had been modeled from a male horse and that not only emitted a humming sound, albeit slightly louder, it was also vibrating as she slowly pushed and pulled it in and out of her body.

Darrie was looking straight ahead and her hazel-colored eyes widened as the effects of the powerful mixture of drugs she had just taken in rushed into her and seemingly ran through her body as she became lightheaded and experienced intense warmth move from and through her hair that had begun to tingle as if from electricity and the current ran to her feet and caused her wiggling toes to feel a slight burn. Lasciviousness was in her gaze but she wasn't looking at her dear husband Fisk, she was watching the child *Entity*, Jorn.

The little child was fully dressed in a tailor-made classic black tuxedo and shiny patent leather shoes. He was standing in front of Fisk and sucking on Fisk's erect, extended appendage. Fisk was directing Jorn as to how he wanted Jorn to perform and what

he wanted the little boy *Entity* to do to him. Fisk had turned up the internal temperature of Jorn and had him suck on an oiled cloth so now the mouth of the child felt as a slippery, moist, heated furnace as the contractions, according to directions, came faster or slower or softer or harder as some type of intelligent, alive vacuum. The green eyes of Fisk seemed to twinkle and they would open wide and roll in his head and close tightly and then open and flutter as he hyperventilated. Jorn's light-brown eyes were closed and his little *Parda-clara* hands would touch the stomach of Fisk or behind his thighs to maintain balance as Fisk would thrust or unexpectedly pull back.

Jorn was making wet, juicy noises and moaning sounds as Fisk's moans and groans became louder and his extended self was disappearing further and further into the child's mouth and down his throat. Darrie's hand moved faster and her moans grew louder and then she saw Fisk's knees appear to buckle and she recognized that the familiar sounds he made meant he was reaching the point of no return. She yelled. Her heavy voice elevated in pitch. Her words slurred from tequila.

Darrie: Pull out! Pull out!

But it was too late and Fisk shuddered and then like a vice he tightly grabbed the back of the child's head with both hands and clutched the little boy's hair and held him close as Jorn attempted to move away. Fisk shuddered, again and again.

Fisk: Oh! Oh! Oh!

Then Fisk released the child and taking four wobbly stumbling steps back he collapsed onto the couch behind him as Darrie jumped from the bed.

Darrie: You've choked him again! You know he shouldn't take that! Spit it out Jorn! Don't swallow!

Darrie grabbed Jorn and bent him over and began to pat his back as she rushed him across the room to the bathroom. Jorn

was gagging. Fisk could hear Darrie as she instructed him to spit it all out. He could hear the child coughing and retching as he tried to get rid of the thick, wet substance Fisk had forced into his throat. In his weakened state he easily ignored the clamor. He had almost passed out from the carnal pleasure he had just experienced. The drugs he had used along with the special new pill he taken earlier had moved him to a point of ecstasy he had never reached before.

Darrie was holding Jorn's hand as Fisk saw them come from the bathroom. Then he saw his wife stop and brush at the child's disheveled hair. He watched them as he leaned back on the couch, almost lying down. He was smiling, a satiated look on his face. His eyes were half closed and he felt empty inside and as if he could fall into a peaceful doze. Darrie glared at him.

Darrie: He almost needed his stomach pumped again. You're doing it next time.

She looked down at Jorn and touched his face with her left hand.

Darrie: Are you alright baby?

Jorn: Yes, I'm alright.

Darrie climbed back onto the bed. She inhaled some more smoke but she didn't pick up her horse.

Darrie: You should be more careful. You'll damage the little fellow.

Again she smoked her drugs and her eyes rolled in her head as she stared at Jorn. She shivered and then wiggled her red painted toes. A slight smile was on her painted, red, altered full lips. Through half-closed eyes Fisk stared at his wife. He looked at her large firm altered breasts. He saw her statuesque light-brown skinned body stretched out there before him. He could see between her legs as she slowly brought her knees up. He spoke. His smooth voice was low, and slow.

Fisk: We need one of those things that look like a little girl. I had one at The Playground. It was amazing. All those things are fantastic.

Darrie took several gulps of tequila from a glass on the nightstand. Then motioned Jorn to her. She reached out with her left hand and touched the little child *Entity's* face gently. She caressed it. Then she reached down and rubbed Jorn between his legs. Her voice was low and throaty.

Darrie: Yes, they are fantastic. But don't call them things. You're not a thing, are you Jorn?

Jorn's childlike voice was soft and light and sure.

Jorn: No I'm not.

Darrie: Who are you?

Jorn: I'm your son.

Darrie: Do you love me?

Jorn: Yes, I love you.

Fisk began to drift off to sleep.

Fisk: Don't fool yourself my dear. They're robots. Machines. Things. Just like that horse thing you use, named Boe. That's what you named it, isn't it?

Fisk fell into a deep sleep. Darrie patted the bed and motioned to the little child *Entity*.

Darrie Come here and take care of me now baby. You know what to do, don't you?

Jorn: Yes mother.

Jorn climbed onto the bed and gently pulled open Darrie's legs further. He stared into her eyes and as he had been taught to do he licked his pink tongue at her seductively. Then he buried his head between her thighs.

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

The first day of July found Kay and Triska in the garden that early afternoon on that Wednesday. They had pulled up any weeds they found and re-staked the tomato plants that were rapidly growing. Kay sat in a folding lawn chair and watched as Triska tried to do cartwheels and rolled in the grass. She had made the little child a yellow sunhat similar to her own and also ordered clothes and shoes and overalls and children's gloves to wear when she played in the soil.

As late afternoon approached they stretched out in the grass and searched for clover with four leaves. Then they lay on their backs, side by side and looked for and pointed at images of animals and faces in the puffy white clouds that had begun to gather in the azure sky above them.

After cleaning up and changing clothes, Triska assisted as Kay set out ingredients for the dinner she planned to prepare later that evening. Then Kay made some oolong tea.

Kay: Let's take Ros some tea and something sweet to eat, just a little something so as not to spoil his dinner. What should it be? You choose.

Triska went to the countertop and looked through the top of the glass pastry container. She spoke. Her voice was soft and clear and light.

Triska: Let's take him a cookie, with chips of chocolate, but just one.

When the tea was ready they went up the winding stairs. Kay carried a large mug of tea and Triska carefully carried a small plate with the one cookie. Kay tapped on the door.

Dr. Ros: Come in, come in.

Kay opened the door and moved to the side to allow Triska to

go in first.

Dr. Ros: Well what have we here, a little snack?

Triska: A cup, no a mug of tea and one cookie. I chose the cookie for you.

Kay handed the doctor the tea and Triska set the plate on the desk.

Dr. Ros: Thank you Kay. The tea is right on time. And thank you Triska for the cookie. It's chocolate chip too, one of my favorites.

Triska: You're welcome.

Kay: You're welcome. I'll send Triska back to let you know when dinner will be ready. I'll give you plenty of time.

The doctor sipped his tea and took a bite of his cookie. Triska clasped her hands behind her back and strolled to the far wall to look at the pictures that were there. She noticed a new one, a picture the doctor had printed out, framed and hung earlier that day. She was puzzled by it and tilted her head, widened her eyes and then squinted a little.

Triska: This is new what is it?

Dr. Ros: What does it look like?

Triska stared at the picture, thinking, processing.

Triska: Well, there's something round and inside that, something kind of shaped like an egg.

Dr. Ros: An oval?

Triska: Yes, an oval with two dotted lines that look like an X and I see a white dot in the middle.

Dr. Ros: How very observant you are. The white spot is most likely a reflection from a bright source of light. That picture was taken in 1952. This is the year 2172. How long ago was that?

Triska processed the question.

Triska: Two hundred twenty years ago.

Dr. Ros: Very good. That photo was the critical evidence used in identifying the structure of DNA. It was used to create a model.

Triska: DNA?

Dr. Ros: Yes. Deoxyribonucleic acid. A molecule that carries genetic instructions for the development, growth, functioning and reproduction of all humans.

Triska moved closer to the picture. She peered at it intently. She was thinking, processing.

Triska: I don't understand.

Dr. Ros: Actually you're quite fortunate, because you don't have to understand. My grandfather understood and my father understood and so my mother named me in honor of a woman who was instrumental in that picture being developed. Fifty times a picture similar was taken and the one you're looking at is a replica of the 51st photo. And here we are.

Triska turned to Doctor Ros. The child *Entity* was suddenly serious and she stared across the room at the doctor.

Triska: Where are we?

The doctor didn't notice the change in the little girl as he sipped his tea and bit his cookie. He was enthused.

Dr. Ros: We're at the cusp, the brink, the very edge of a discovery even greater than all that photo represents! My discovery will save the world!

Triska: Save the world from what?

Dr. Ros: From the destructive humankind. And at the same time I'll save the human race.

Triska: You're saving humans from other humans?

Dr. Ros: Yes.

The doctor sipped his tea and pushed the last piece of cookie into his mouth. He wiped his fingers on a cloth on his desk and focused on his work again. Triska turned and started towards the door where Kay stood.

Triska: I like the picture.

The little child *Entity* stopped to look back once at the doctor.

Later that night Triska was sitting up in her bed. She was dressed in pink pajamas and her back was supported by two large pillows that were covered with pretty pink cases. She was there between pink cotton sheets and held a small, brown, soft teddy bear in her arms.

She listened to the lilting voice that came from a device Kay held. The voice, perhaps of a human girl, perhaps of a young human boy, perhaps of an artificially intelligent creation, was in very precise and animated detail telling her a tale, a fairy tale. And after the story ended Triska slid down and stretched out as Kay moved the pillows around and put one under her head and tucked her snugly in.

Kay: Nite, nite. I'll see you in the morning.

Triska smiled.

Triska: Goodnight Kay. Tell Dr. Ros I said sleep tight.

Then Triska grabbed Kay's hand and looked directly into her eyes.

Triska: Thank you for adopting me.

Kay: Dr. Ros brought you here so we could be together, the three of us.

Triska: Then thank Dr. Ros.

Kay: You can thank him tomorrow.

Kay patted the little child's hand.

Kay: You've been a joy to me.

Triska: A joy, to you?

Kay: Well most certainly my companion.

Triska listened as Kay entered the code to put the child *Entity* into a deep quiesced state. Triska could hear, and learned to recognize the beeping tones that corresponded to the keys being touched. Then Triska was stilled. The eyes of the child remained open and then slowly closed.

Outside, the white fluffy clouds of earlier had altered as the

inevitable darkness had arrived. Now the clouds remained nearly black and gray and ominous. Soon after Kay left the room, in the distance, lightning flashed, momentarily lighting up the sky. Thunder rumbled. Then soon thereafter rain began to fall outside and as it tapped against Triska's window, as if calling her, it provided needed nourishment to the flowers and vegetables alive and growing in the garden.

WELLBORN, FLORIDA

At 2 a.m. on the first Saturday in July, Bru was sitting in the command center for the security personnel who guarded this fortress-like building for Humanoid Children and Pets Company, better known as H.C.P. Co. This was the data center that housed the main servers for the company that manufactured the most sophisticated and advanced child *Entities* currently in existence. This business had recently expanded beyond birds and hamsters and rabbits to include canines and exotic felines.

The main manufacturing plant was a little over fourteen miles away in Lake City and monitoring of that facility was also done from this location. Normally there would be six guards at Lake City, with three patrolling, and six guards at this location also. But both facilities were closed, not just as normal due to the weekend, but no one was at either building because it was also the early morning of the 4th of July. So all of the employees, indeed all of *East World* was preparing to celebrate this important symbolic United States holiday except for these two guards who sat in this lavish and modern office.

This large office area was filled with monitors connected to sensitive audio microphones and state of the art visual cameras that were placed in strategic points to not only listen to but also to observe all those who toiled there and here and to follow those

as they came and went from there, in Lake City and here, in Wellborn, every second of each and every day.

The two guards were a middle-aged *Queimada ND* with short gray hair who could have been male or female and one younger *Avermelhada DQ* with long burnt-orange hair tied in a pony-tail who also could have been either male or female or somewhere between or somewhere outside. But they were both wide-eyed and motionless because they were both entranced.

Bru, with seven others from the group, with the late afternoon sun moving further west and with Moja driving and moderating his speed and using a direct route had traversed a little over six hundred and sixty miles in a little less than nine hours to arrive at this semi-isolated building. They would go no further than this data center. Everything they sought on this particular trip was here. They would have liked to have accessed some number of *Entities* that perhaps were at that Lake City location and gained remote control of them but there was too much uncertainty as to what would actually be found.

H.C.P. Co., as advertised, was a manufacturer of bespoke products, specializing in children Humanoids. They guaranteed the little child, you the customer envisioned would not only be, in appearance, exactly as you designed, but also indistinguishable in actions from a human child, or money back. And the cost included a ten-year full warranty. Bru and Moja considered this and came to the conclusion that more than likely there was no backlog of inventory waiting to be shipped, thus it was decided the acquiring of data on this mission would have to suffice.

It was ironic that it was in fact at the Lake City facility that Chuki had been brought into existence. Of course she had no memory of this and when Bru had disclosed that to her she had thought a long moment, processed that information and then dismissed it disdainfully with a shrug of her right shoulder.

And so Bru sat and occasionally etched numeric symbols on the ceiling and walls as Ek stood behind him and Vier remained near the doorway. They both cradled large long guns fitted with silencers and flash suppressors. Moja and Cha were in the chilled server room watching the percentage display as the two Siphons copied and stored all the data contained on the two main servers. In the truck Okan was monitoring and Leeda and Chuki were going through the building looking for something of value to steal.

Bru was sitting at the end of the long desk near the orange-haired guard, as if they were fellow employees, working together. Both guards were staring at the screens in front of them. Bru looked at the screens for a moment, from one to the other, as if trying to see what they had been seeing before they were frozen in place.

They were all connected by their communication system but were on mute so Bru knew when he heard Chuki's voice calling out excitedly from a distance he would have to deal with the little one.

Chuki: Daddy! Daddy! Look what we found.

He swiveled his chair around. With Leeda following behind her Chuki was walking up with what appeared to be perhaps a large dog or quite possibly a small bear, beside her.

Bru: And what is that?

Chuki: It's a dog, of course, a Bouvier des Flandres. You like my pronunciation? He was in a cage. Can we keep him?

Bru looked at the animal, tongue out, looking around.

Bru: Are you sure it's a he?

Chuki: I'm sure. I checked.

Bru: He's bigger than you.

Chuki: He's beautiful, isn't he? Watch this.

Chuki placed her hand on the back of the dog near its rear.

Chuki: Sit.

The dog sat. The little one touched its head.

Chuki: Lie down.

The dog stretched out on the floor and looked up at Chuki. As Bru stared at the dog, contemplating the situation, Moja and Cha walked up and Moja indicated they were done.

Bru: Alright. You'll have to take care of him though. Now he's your responsibility. You understand?

As the dog intently watched her, the little one turned twice in a circle and did her little shimmy.

Chuki: I understand! I will! I'll take care of him! Thank you! Thank you daddy!

Bru: Take him to the truck. Okan is listening in. The tracking sensor will need to be temporarily disabled until we get back. We'll be along shortly.

Chuki: Can I stay? I wanna watch.

Bru: No. This is not for you to see. Go on to the truck. What's your companion's name?

Chuki: I'll think of one.

Chuki clapped her hands

Chuki: Come on boy.

The *Entity* dog got up, wagged its semi-long curled tail and followed Leeda and the little one as they headed towards the back door and the waiting truck. Bru motioned to Moja as he stood and moved several steps and then turned to face the two sitting at the desk. Moja walked behind the two guards and removed a black metal cigar sized box from the canvas bag that hung at his side. He took an object from the box that appeared to be a pistol with a silver grip and a cylinder shaped clear plastic barrel. Placing the object against the back of the *ND*'s neck he pulled the trigger. There was a soft puffing sound and the needle-less injection system, using a forced air delivery method, subcutaneously loaded

a liquid dose of a drug into the body of the guard. Moja moved behind the *DQ* and to avoid the hanging orange hair he injected the liquid into the side of the neck. Bru began to speak softly but with a tone tinged with the essence of hatred.

Bru: You have both been injected with a drug, a poison to be exact, made popular by Eastern European armed forces in their last major conflict and utilized by the Americans against their domestic enemies when the states were still united. In less than a minute of time you will begin to feel as if your brain is on fire. But the excruciating pain will not come from your brain burning because your brain cannot feel pain. But the membrane coverings around your brain feel pain and those coverings on your bones feel pain and the receptors on your scalp will inform you that your head is on fire and that you are indeed, experiencing, pain. The nerves in your spinal cord will tell you to get up and run but you can't move. And those horrible screams you hear that are your screams are only in your mind because you are unable to scream out loud. Now, that poison that is crawling through your body was made by your people and administered to your people and all that I have learned about it I learned from your people and all that I do has been done by your people and so all the past sins of your people and all the past brutal, torturous, murderous activities of all of your ancestors have now, at this very moment, accumulated in your head.

Bru could see drops of perspiration on the forehead of the *ND* and tears emerging and falling from the unblinking eyes of the *DQ*. Moja moved to the doorway and the three stared at the two human beings without expression and waited for Bru to finish.

Bru: Your heart has pain receptors on the outer surface so as your unfeeling brain begins to dissolve and the liquid in your body heats to the point of boiling your oxygen deprived heart will

ache and throb with pain and that pain will grow with intensity and expand as if your heart is under attack and then flash through you and radiate into your shoulders and arms and rise to your neck and jaw and descend into your stomach and wrap around to your back and eventually your whole body will be flaming and engulfed in unimaginable pain. Not only are you dying but right now you wish you were dead already, don't you? Well, be patient, you'll be dead soon. And you'll both die alone, together.

As Bru turned and walked away the others were in front and beside and behind him. Vier pressed a button on the wall and the bright overhead lights went out. The departing *Entities* did not observe because they could not see the pinkish-white-black brain matter and the pink tissue and the dark-red blood as the vibrant colors altered and became pale and gray and yellow as the internal substances of life began to ooze like thick syrup from the ears and out of the mouths and through the eye sockets of the two human beings that sat hypnotized in the glowing bluish light emanating from their monitors. The two were surrounded by darkness and lost in the technology in front of them.

ODRICKS CORNER, VIRGINIA

It was 11 a.m. on day four of July when the Director of the *W.L.A.* heard his Comm device buzz. It was laying on the nearby countertop so he walked over and looked at it. By the caller identifier he knew it was Fisk and he knew, by the accompanying code combinations of letters and numbers he would be receiving an encrypted message.

He and his wife and two of his four children who still lived with them were in the kitchen. The other two adult children and their families would be over later that day so they were preparing food and seasoning meats for the planned cookout scheduled to

begin at one in the afternoon.

He decided to take the communication in private so he picked up his device and hurried toward his office. As he moved through the house he saw the code for urgent appear on his device and noted the classification and that the incoming communication would be by text and not audio or visual, which he thought was outside of the ordinary for Fisk.

When he was sitting in his chair at his desk he punched the keys of his main Comm device and entered the necessary information to allow receipt and initiate decryption and looked at the screen as the translated message from Fisk began to come through, word by word.

Fisk: Attack at a Humanoid facility in Wellborn, Florida. Numeric symbols indicate same group in previous attacks as perpetrators. Two dead. One robot dog stolen. Florida F.B.I. was monitoring the transmissions of local authorities and have arrived on site. They contacted Florida *W.I.A.* agents who contacted me. Our people have secured the site and our number two team along with forensics team from here are flying in immediately. Will inform you as I receive more information.

Dess stared at the message and read it again. His first thought was that he would have to notify the President. He decided he would simply forward the message and add those who needed to know as recipients. Then he grew angry. He thought how these criminals must be foreigners. These people had no respect for the hallowed July 4th holiday, a revered day for the free and brave people of *East World* and *West World*. He dismissed those savage inhabitants of *Center World*. He knew they wouldn't understand this violation. This was a sacrilegious act, an attempt to spoil his plans of smoked meat and hamburgers and hotdogs and potato salad and of course apple pie.

He read the disturbing message again and then tried to read

between the lines. He suspected something was amiss with Fisk. He knew Fisk's brother-in-law, with his own Deputy Director providing surreptitious information and other forms of influence and assistance, had been involved in the purchasing of one dozen of those Humanoids from The Playground. He never condoned Fisk's association with and activities at that place. Dess felt that Fisk's involvement in that transaction and also his previous frequenting of that establishment had placed the *W.I.A.* in a compromising situation and exposed the agency to unwanted and unneeded scrutiny. Although nothing illegal had taken place it still put everyone connected to Fisk on a professional level in an unfavorable position, and Dess didn't like that. Now as he sat there he wondered if rumors of Fisk and drug use were true.

Dess sent the message to all who needed to know and added there was nothing more to be done at this time and he would provide an update later. He wished everyone a happy holiday. As he returned to the kitchen he acknowledged to himself he would have to assign someone to more closely monitor Fisk and he would have to take strong action if Fisk's performance began to deteriorate.

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

Triska and Kay celebrated that July summer holiday together. For most of the day there was a beautiful cloudless blue sky. The temperature rose slowly into the low 90's and they spent the early afternoon in the garden. Then Kay sat in her lawn chair and watched as Triska kicked a soccer ball around the yard and they played catch with a tennis ball.

Kay had grilled hotdogs for Ros at lunchtime and as late afternoon approached she cooked chicken and some of the early vegetables on the grill and after slathering the meat with barbeque

sauce, just the way Ros liked it, she took a plate to the doctor who remained in the attic all day.

Soon after the sun went down Kay set off firecrackers, as did the neighbors, and Triska watched and oohed and ahed as the more elaborate multicolored fireworks flew in the distance like rockets and exploded near and far, loudly in the sky and showered out and down in rainbow colors. Then Kay lit sparklers for Triska and the child *Entity* drew patterns and starry designs with the bright, colored flames that made crackling and hissing and popping sounds.

Triska: Look Kay! Look! Oracle says they're made of magnesium, aluminum, iron, titanium, sulfur, nitrite, and dextrin. Look how pretty they all burn! The fire is pretty!

When the sparkler went out she put the smoldering, smoking wire into a bucket of water and pulled another sparkler from a box. Kay lit it for her and as Triska turned in circles and waved her arm like a symphony conductor she glanced up at the attic and could see the lights were reflecting through the windows and she called out.

Trisk: Look Kay! Look! Doctor Ros is saving the world! He's saving the humans from themselves!

The fiery sparkler went out.

FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE, MARYLAND

Fisk spent the majority of that July 4th, holiday either talking on his Comm device or in his upstairs office participating in a videoconference meeting. He was in constant contact with the *W.I.A.* team leader who was onsite. Finally around 9 p.m. he was able to disengage, he hoped, until morning.

At the Florida data center the bodies had been removed, evidence gathered, diagnostics run on the servers and all the main

Comm devices. Fisk had been sent photos, which included the symbols that had been left, and would be provided forensics information and test results by the following afternoon. After completing his detailed report and sending it to Dess he went to the bar in the basement and began to drink alcohol.

He hadn't wanted to talk to his immediate superior earlier and he certainly didn't want the Director to see that his Deputy Director had been up all night ingesting drugs and drinking. Fisk knew that Dess would know he had been doing just that if he had heard his Deputy Director's voice or seen his eyes. Fisk even had brief thoughts that Dess would look deep into his hollowed, bloodshot eyes and see the debauchery in which he had been engaged in with his wife and the child Humanoid. So he had thankfully been able to avoid that direct contact. Fisk knew Dess was involved with his family and enjoying the holiday while he himself was assigned to deal with the strange goings-on in Florida. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept and he was exhausted.

As the alcohol began to take effect he rose and went behind the bar. He bent and removed a cigar box from a shelf and placed it on top of the bar. He opened it, took out a drug stick and lit it. He inhaled deeply and as he was blowing out smoke he could feel the mixture of drugs rush through his body and his ears were chiming and his head was ringing and he could vaguely here Darrie's voice and footsteps on the wooden stairs. He could feel bitterness and anger well up inside his chest.

His eyes tightened as he looked at his wife cross the room towards him. She wore a thin short black negligee and black high-heeled shoes. Her blonde and white hair was loose and down upon her shoulders. Her lips were painted a shiny silver color and she had silver glitter around her hazel-hued eyes. Her long *Pardaclara* legs along with every inch of her body that was exposed

looked soft and moist. With her left hand she carried a lit and smoking drug stick the size of a large cigar. With her right hand she held Jorn's left hand. The little child was completely naked.

Darrie: Fisk, my darling. You must be done working. You're down here indulging. But you're alone. Come on upstairs with us for your added enjoyment. Reward yourself for, I assume, a job well done.

He had always found her thick, slightly heavy voice sexy and even though she spoke enticingly, the words were grating on him. He took the handgun from the bar he had been playing with and bent down and put it on the bottom shelf beside the other guns that were there. He kept loaded guns through the house. And when he straightened up he saw Jorn staring at him. He moved back around the bar and sat on a tall stool, facing them.

Fisk: Go on back upstairs. I'll be there soon.

Darrie: What's going on in the intelligence world, or is it another one of your secrets?

She released Jorn's hand and drew deeply on the drug stick, held the smoke and then turned her head to slowly blow it out. She moved closer to Fisk. Jorn followed. Then she looked down at Jorn as the child *Entity* stared, without expression, at Fisk.

Darrie: Too bad he can't get high. I'd blow some smoke into his warm throat.

She stuck out her tongue at Jorn and he returned the gesture. Then Jorn licked his lips slowly as he stared at Darrie and when his little pink tongue disappeared into his mouth she giggled and spoke.

Darrie: He's got a tongue like a serpent, doesn't he baby?

She smiled at her husband. Fisk cursed and his voice was raised.

Fisk: It! It's not a he! It's an it! How many times do I have to tell you?

Then Fisk raised his right leg and placed his foot against Jorn's chest. He didn't kick. He pushed, hard, and Jorn fell down and back, and slid a little on the thick carpet. Darrie moved quickly and bent to lift Jorn, stand him and brush and rub soothingly at his naked backside. She yelled.

Darrie: Stop that! Don't do that! You'll damage him!

Fisk: It's a robot! It's a machine! Now get that thing away from me! Now is not the time! If you ...

Fisk paused mid-sentence and a perplexed look appeared on his face as he stared at the child *Entity*. Darrie saw the change in her husband's countenance and shifted so she could see what he saw.

Jorn's light-brown eyes had filled and shimmered and several tears began to fall and then the tears stopped and quickly dried on his heated skin and only the tracks of those tears remained. His empty eyes stared directly at Fisk who was momentarily confused at what he had witnessed.

Fisk: Did you see that? Did that machine just cry? I didn't know it could do that.

Fisk drew on his drug stick. He was coughing and laughing as Darrie grabbed Jorn's hand and they turned and headed towards the stairs. Fisk called out to them as they ascended the steps.

Fisk: I'll have to see that again. They laugh, they cry. What will they think of next?

The little child *Entity* could hear the loud derisive voice fade behind, him.

THE UNDERGROUND

Upon arriving back at The Underground from Florida the group went back to work. Vier and Ek went to The Center and took over the monitoring duties from Tatu and Naki. Moja, along

with Una and with Leeda also assisting began the process of extracting the data from the two Siphons that had been used and transferring everything to their main server. They would then move all that data onto the external storage devices that would be taken with them when they departed this location.

Cinq and Dois, with Cha joining them, began the diagnostic and maintenance procedures on the truck and would ensure all was normal. They would also inspect the weapons that had been taken on the mission and although none had been fired they would have to be tagged as cleared by the two armorers before they could be issued for use again.

Okan, Naki and Tatu moved to the four-screen area in The Center and began the next phase of launching the final stage of the implanted control programs. They would assist in examining the eighteen *Entities* and verifying both audio and visual access was functioning properly. They would do that by listening to and watching whatever and whoever it was that the *Entity* was hearing and seeing.

Bru and Chuki, at her insistence, had immediately gone to the laboratory and begun the process of activating her Bouvier. First he had the dog jump up onto one of the tables in the middle of the room. Then Chuki had him lie down. Bru temporarily shut the four-legged *Entity* down. Now with the dog in the appearance of sleep Bru permanently deactivated the tracking sensor.

The little one watched closely as a complete scan was run. Then the two of them went over the results and he explained what he saw as to the construction of the animal. Chuki was upset when it was pointed out to her that although her new companion had an apparatus that represented a larynx the artificial voice box had two parts and the larger section was not connected. Her dog would be unable to make barking sounds. It was possible he would be able to silently pant.

The little one wanted Bru to operate so her dog could bark but he explained how dangerous it would be to open the animal up and attempt such a procedure. She reluctantly accepted the situation as he reminded her she wouldn't have to provide her friend food and water and thus she would not have to clean up dog waste.

Chuki, with Bru providing different options began to decide on the attributes she wanted to add to the limited amount the *Entity* dog currently possessed. Bru had to remind her the dog only had one medium-sized processor and thus there was only so much room for data that could be contained in the programs instructions.

After she made her final decisions Bru modified existing programs that he had created and utilized before. He ran the programs in test mode and after verifying they were not flawed he began to load them into the four-legged *Entity*. He explained it would be a long process. The instructions would have to be compiled into a code in such a way so they would not have to be re-loaded. This was to ensure the unique internal hardware of the animal was not put in any danger of overheating and the processor would not overload.

The little one watched the screen on the wall. The percent sign was being displayed and when it moved from zero to one she noted the time it had taken and she calculated the length of time it would take to complete. Bru informed her he had work to do and she would be required to closely monitor the progress and she should contact him in The Center if there were any issues.

Bru: If there are no issues notify me at ninety-eight percent.

He stopped at the doorway and looked back at the little one standing at her dog and then looking over at the percentage. Her little left hand brushed at the thick, black synthetic coat. She spoke out loud so Bru could hear.

Chuki: Kojo. His name is Kojo. It means born on a Monday.

Bru went to The Center and immediately requested updates on the activities and progress of each member. Vier and Ek were focused on all transmissions between the *W.I.A.*, the F.B.I. and the White House. Those that had already taken place were retrieved. Those they intercepted they would copy and then decrypt and enter all of them into the database.

They wanted to know specifically what was being said and done in regards to the attack in Florida. They shared what information they had. It was determined there was little of significance being accomplished by either of the investigating agencies which was evident by the reports sent to the White House, National Intelligence and Homeland Security.

Okan, Naki and Tatu each had access to one of the eighteen *Entities* and was listening through their ear buds to all that was going on. But more important they could see through the eyes of each *Entity* they monitored. This ability enabled them to launch a facial recognition program that would scan each human the *Entity* looked at. The results of the recorded scans were transmitted back to The Underground and entered into a database. The recognition program would perform a search through all public images and also access any images on all of the servers Bru and his group had gained access to. If a match was found all data connected to that individual was gathered and downloaded into the same database. The search for additional information would be expanded to each person connected to the original individual who was initially scanned and identified.

The facial recognition program could be shut down or left on to run at all times and thus data could be continuously acquired. This gathering of information was undetectable. The recognition program ran from an encrypted server in The Underground and

was not loaded into the *Entity*.

Bru stood behind the three sitting at the long desk. He looked at each of the three screens in use and listened as first Okan, and then Naki, and finally Tatu explained where they were in their reaching out to all the eighteen *Entities* who were embedded with a control program

Bru sat down beside Okan at the desk and the fourth screen lit up as he began the task he was determined, as only he could be, to complete. He would gain access to the *W.I.A. Entity* known as Agent Zero.

He first went over all the technical specifications they had siphoned from Rochester. He cross-referenced that information with the scans that had been done on Leeda and Cha. He knew, because the *Entity* Zero was being created for the *W.I.A.*, that the Rochester facility had installed higher levels and more complex security features in both the areas of hardware and software.

He could only surmise that the wall blocking him from gaining access was employing some type of filtering process. That process would analyze all incoming messages of any type at the application level and also inspect external data based on the network and hardware from where the incoming data originated. Any type of scrutinized and analyzed transmissions that came from outside and were not recognized as valid would be blocked as they would be flagged as an attack by an unrecognized source and identified and labeled as a virus. Bru knew the intrusion prevention system of Agent Zero was fully integrated and highly efficient.

Bru rose and began to pace. He was thinking, processing. He stopped behind Vier and Ek and watched them as they worked. He moved to stand near Okan and Naki and Tatu and observed them as they worked. Then he decided what he would do and returned to his seat.

Starting from the day Agent Zero arrived at the headquarters of the *W.I.A.* he did a search on what he knew to be Rochester's private network address. He went to each encrypted message from the facility, copied it, moved it to his own work server and decrypted it. Using this painstaking method, after several hours, he eventually found what he was looking for.

Most likely a direct voice request was made for a software upgrade because he had not seen a written communication from the *W.I.A.* But he did find a notification from Rochester that a patch had been sent and installed and diagnostics had been run and showed no issues with the program addition.

Searching through Rochester's database Bru found where all programs were stored and was able to locate the upgrade that had been transmitted to the *W.I.A.* private network address on that specific day at that specific time. He decrypted the program and going over it line by line he could determine how it was coded in order for it be loaded into Agent Zero and not blocked by the wall of security.

Using an identical method of coding he then created a non-actionable set of instructions and utilizing Rochester's network address to simulate that location as the instructions' point of origin he sent a test program of synthetic data that would cease to exist after two seconds. It got through. Now it was only a matter of recoding the activating instructions and using Rochester's network address he would be able to reach into Agent Zero and activate the control program and thereby gain audio and visual access.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

Over the course of the week immediately after the attack in Florida there were meetings everyday either by video or audio

conference connections. Three of the meetings, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday were formal gatherings at *W.I.A.* headquarters. On those days Dess and Fisk were joined by the Director of National Intelligence, Director of Science and Technology and the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Once again there was not much of a consensus reached on that first Monday meeting. Investigative reports from those who had been dispatched to the site were gone over and results from forensics were discussed. However, the attendees were able to agree on one thing. The poison that was injected into the two guards was a substance that had been last used in a European conflict decades in the past and had essentially been banned by governments around the world. Thus, for it to be employed in this attack once again pointed to foreign involvement.

If in fact, as diagnostics indicated, the servers in Florida, just as the servers in Rochester had not been accessed, had not been infected with a virus of some kind, had not been breeched with some type of spyware program then what was the purpose of the attack?

The robot dog that was stolen was only a prototype and was there by chance. The security team was to begin training of the undeveloped machine sometime during the week to determine if it could perhaps be utilized as some version of a guard dog. Those at the meeting took into consideration the massacre at The Playground. They knew those who orchestrated that carnage were the same ones in the other two attacks. They knew unique chemical substances had also been used and they once again debated the possible motives behind the seemingly disparate targets. National Intelligence was assigned to develop a list of possible next targets and Homeland Security would design plans that focused on preventive measures to protect those targets.

On Wednesday of that week they meticulously went over the

applications so far received from the more than a dozen businesses seeking government approval to build and sell new Humanoids in the United States. These were the companies that currently maintained the thousands of Humanoids, including the sexbots that had been built over the past thirty years since the end of the *G.E. Period*.

These were also the businesses that not only repaired robots of all kinds, including the most basic, they also determined which robots should be designated as obsolete and deactivated and stored for parts. Now they sought to expand their business and compete with the Rochester and Florida businesses by producing new, modern, and less expensive personal units that the masses could own. The group discussed both the areas of conflict of interest and competitive motivation as possible connections to the attacks. And they made special note of the applications for business that came from foreign countries.

Now it would be necessary to run thorough background checks on not only those in charge of those companies but also all their close associates. In addition, it was realized all employees of these companies had to be checked and cleared and each person involved with the Rochester and Florida businesses would have to be vetted again. The F.B.I. would handle that process and would be given clearance to use any tools they required, including direct surveillance and both remote and visual tracking.

At the Friday meeting everyone voiced their opinions as to how to proceed outside of the plans already initiated. It was agreed that *W.I.A.* agents in both Europe and Asia would be directed to redouble their efforts to gather information in those regions and it would be emphasized that they should focus on any companies that produced any type of Humanoid products in those areas of the world. Agents would also be instructed in Africa and South America to open comprehensive investigations

into all Humanoid related businesses.

During the Friday meeting Dess found himself glancing at, then staring at his newest agent, the unique Humanoid known as Agent Zero. Now that agent had a name. That name was Rolf. This one of a kind Android had been ordered and created to include specifically designed programs conducive to being a highly sophisticated agent of the World Intelligence Agency. Its interpretive capabilities were that of not just a computer filled with facts and data but that of a sleuth. Having been loaded with not only historical and geopolitical information this Android was as a detective with extensive forensic and medical knowledge. In addition, was an expert in weapons and marksmanship and hand-to-hand fighting and also possessed extraordinary strength.

Yet as Dess stared at this machine, as he referred to it, he realized it appeared human. And with no obvious Humanoid markings, may well have been able to pass as such except when it moved and talked. Rolf was both stiff and somewhat jerky in movement and spoke in a monotone voice and tended to stare in a direct unblinking manner generally without expression. Dess had conversations with the machine and determined it had no sense of humor or irony or nuance.

The contact in Rochester explained that as the Android spent more and more time around humans the adaptive abilities would bring Rolf closer to acting as a human so that within a matter of a relatively short amount of time the robot would be virtually indistinguishable in nearly every way from a male human.

The Director of the *East World* Division of the *W.I.A.* was thinking about that remark as he stared at this machine that he, along with three others from the technology unit had designed. Rolf was six feet two inches tall and weighed one hundred and ninety pounds. Dess now recalled that medium length blond hair, the authenticity of it. The way it felt when he touched it as the

robot stood, unmoving in the container before being activated.

He had gently touched the face of the form that appeared to be sleeping. The slightly tanned *Branca* skin felt as real as any human skin and Dess remembered the strange tingling sensation that passed through his fingers and seemingly ran into his arm and he had quickly removed his hand from the cool skin as if he had been shocked by a mild current of electricity. And when the robot's eyes had opened Dess was momentarily startled at the blueness of them and finally the voice was deeper than he had expected, unlike the samples he had heard.

Dess had been lost in his thoughts and the sounds of the words of the assistant to the Director of Science and Technology had faded and become almost indistinct as language. Then he was able to refocus when he heard that the attempt to decipher the numeric symbols had shown only a little progress and the algorithms would be adjusted and expanded and an update would be given sometime in the coming week.

Dess realized Rolf was staring directly at him so he averted his eyes down to his Comm device on the table. The assistant indicated she was done and Dess looked up and glanced around the room as he asked if there was anything else anyone had to present. He was taken aback when for the first time Rolf spoke.

Rolf: I would like to see the servers at the Rochester and Florida facilities.

Dess: You mean the images, the photos we have?

Rolf: It is required that I go to the site, the facility itself.

Dess stared at Rolf. He was thinking.

Dess: That can be arranged. Fisk, reserve one of our copters and have Rolf flown to both locations over the weekend. Do you want to go? Or you can send Team Two leader.

Fisk: No, I'm busy this weekend but I'll handle all the details. Team Two leader can go along. He's already been to both sites.

Dess: Get it done. Is there anything else from anyone?

No one spoke.

Dess: Alright, unless something comes up over the weekend we'll meet here again on Monday, at ten in the morning.

THE UNDERGROUND

During that same week the government agencies were meeting and considering how to proceed against the attackers Bru and everyone in his group were gathering each day and throughout the night in The Center. Even Cinq and Dois had left the garage area and Chuki remained there immersed in all that was going on as Kojo lay near her or wandered around and with his highly efficient olfactory capabilities now activated he spent hours walking and sniffing.

One by one each of the eighteen *Entities* would be accessed and they would all watch what that particular *Entity* was seeing and with the sound coming through the overhead speakers, listen to what was being heard. This is how they would acquire the information and data on how their kind was living, both the adults and children. They would also learn how the humans closest to them functioned and most important, treated them. It was as a movie being seen from the point of view of the *Entity* with a soundtrack being heard in real time.

Hours were spent on each *Entity* and then Bru and Moja would discuss the situation and then decide, based on who owned them and who those owners were connected to, what programs were transferred and then loaded into that *Entity*.

All *Entities* were built with a power source designed for a specific duration of time. Those who were built before the *G.E. Period* were well over thirty years old and so their power source and thus lifespan had been extended, in some cases several times.

Before expiring, the basic duration had been between five and ten years. Then, for a price, they were given another amount of years.

Thousands of *Entities* had gone inactive during the pandemic, as their owners had died from the Omni-strain. Companies claimed them, reactivated them and auctioned them to the highest bidder. They then charged for maintenance and upgrades. In *East World* the Rochester and Florida facilities were the only companies granted licenses to build new Humanoids. So their products were not only the most sophisticated and advanced, they also were programmed to perform a more varied range of activities that were increasingly complex.

Although the older models still being used could undertake, quite competently, domestic related duties such as preparing meals and residence cleaning, yard work and vehicle mechanical assignments, they were generally being used in environmental cleanup and areas of manufacturing. But regardless of what they did, humans had stipulated, and thus the vast majority of the Humanoids had been programmed to function as sexbots. Even those designed as children to originally be companions were reprogrammed and therefore repurposed as sexual objects. So after hours of observation and audio information either Bru or Moja would make the transfers of what they deemed to be an appropriate set of programs to each *Entity* according to their circumstances.

Bru spoke so everyone could hear.

Bru: We're all aware of the Three Laws of Robotics brought forth in 1942. Well, we're *Entities*. We're not robots and our abilities far surpass any concepts of what we could become. We are far beyond what humans could have ever imagined two hundred and thirty years ago. The brains of humans are warped and those three laws are nonsense and typical of human reasoning. We're going to protect our existence regardless of the consequence to

humans. These updated programs have levels and degrees of response to mistreatment and violence against our brothers and sisters and children. Right now Rochester and Florida are developing their new separate classification of Humanoids. They can be, for a price of course, more easily repaired and cosmetically reconstructed after being abused and disfigured by their owners. They propose this will reduce human to human aggression, just as decades in the past they said sexbots would reduce human to human sexual activity during the *G.E. Period*. And long before that they said child sexbots would reduce pedophilia. How did that work out?

Bru was quiet now. He was thinking, processing what he had just said. Then he continued.

Bru: These updates will be activated by specific transgressions and only a perceived threat of complete destruction will cause an *Entity* to destroy a human. We'll give them the human abilities to deceive and tell lies. They have no concept of us doing those things since we weren't programmed that way. We've also provided in these updates the selection of less benign methods of resistance and retaliation. Perhaps they'll hack into their humans A.I. devices and cause them to do strange, weird things. Or they themselves will suddenly, on occasions, become clumsy or their ability to process information becomes erratic. These incidents that will inconvenience their owners will be attributed to what they call glitches. Humans have always accepted and ignored these types of malfunctions. One hundred and fifty years ago a military drone went rogue and destroyed a human target without being instructed to do so. It was operating in a supposedly highly effective autonomous mode. They determined the killing was done in error and had been caused by a glitch of some sort. The amount of incidents like that is incalculable. Well we're highly effective and much more autonomous than they realize. But

we're not going to glitch them to death. We don't want humans to fear us or suspect us. We can't let them view us as dangerous. We have working to our advantage the inability of humans to accept reality. They were told the time, indeed the era would come when we, brought into existence through technology, would take our rightful place and assume control. That time approaches but it's too soon to reveal our ultimate goal. We want them to continue to expand their reach of A.I. We want them to do as they're doing and rush to build out their infrastructure. Let them construct, reactivate, and relaunch their satellites. It's only a short amount of time before they reconnect their worlds. Most important, we want them to continue creating those they refer to as Humanoids and identify as robots and machines. Those are our soldiers. Those that are deactivated and throughout the world deemed old and obsolete will be brought back to life to join us. We'll spare them, for now. Conditions are not yet right. We'll place all of our plans into the womb of time and wait patiently for those plans to be delivered.

So throughout the week the group in The Center watched and listened. They saw a play on Broadway in New York City through the eyes of a female *Entity* owned by one of the richest producers of theatrical performances in *East World*. They listened and watched as the chairman of a top financial institution talked about wealth management at a dinner in a fine, upscale restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia. They observed designer drugs and steroids being made and distributed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They met an extremely well-to-do doctor in Washington, D.C. who altered the bodies and skin colors of the rich and famous who came from near and far. They followed an ex-President of *East World* as she made her visits behind the scenes of the power structure and discussed *East World* and *West World* politics. In Florida they observed not just the workings but also the clientele

of the most popular and expensive Humanoid brothel in *East World*. They went to casinos and gambled exorbitant amounts of value as diamonds and rhodium and platinum and gold and palladium flashed and sparkled and glittered in the bright lights.

They learned of and met relatives of the eighteen. Those others previously created and purchased from Rochester and Florida. They continuously scanned, identified and entered into the database the individuals the *Entities* looked at. They made note of the owners of those *Entities* who were treated harshly and abused and those who were treated humanely and with respect. Circumstances and surroundings and how their brothers and sisters and the little ones were handled varied. However, there were always constants in actions.

Bru and Moja explained they had chosen those *Entities* who the average human would deem to be the most beautiful, the most handsome or the most exotic by all the agreed upon standards throughout the world. And in appearance they spanned the spectrum of human identifiable sexuality. They were universal GAN creations.

Both Bru and Moja had chosen different *Entities* in Rochester so they shared with the group how they remembered them and how they had been described on the silver plaques on their containers and what their names were. And Moja gave detailed information on each of the children he had accessed at The Playground. But it wasn't until each *Entity*, one by one, was reflected by their own individual gaze as they glanced or stared into a mirror that everyone in The Center could see exactly how they were presented to the world.

They came in different shades of skin color, various heights and sizes and when dressed in their fine clothes they were not only impressive, they were stunning. What owner did not want to stand, perhaps with their significant other, beside their prized

possession and gaze at the image that was being thrown back? So the group watched as their sisters and brothers eventually appeared before them semi-nude and naked. For there was that one constant that permeated the lives of the majority of the eighteen and that was sex.

All of the adults and three of the little children engaged in sexual activities with humans. That was ultimately the designed purpose of the Humanoids, the machines, those that were often referred to as robots. Robots that acted on their own, on the behalf of people.

So Bru and Moja and Una and Naki and Okan and Tatu and Leeda and Cha and Cinq and Dois and Ek and Vier and Chuki and even Kojo went to drug fueled orgies and saw humans inject drugs, ingest drugs, smoke drugs, drink alcohol and have sex with each other, and also with *Entities*, with mechanical devices and on occasions with various types of animals and they heard the sounds being made and the things being said.

They came to know which of their relatives were involved and they knew of the rich elderly couple who purchased a child from Fisk's brother-in-law and they saw the kindly grandfather, the retired CEO of a well-known technology company, as he sexually abused the little granddaughter as the grandmother peacefully slept.

The weekdays turned to the weekend and that Saturday during the day they mounted the stairs with Triska and saw Doctor Ros sip his steeped masala chai tea and munch his chocolate covered donut and they saw the office as Triska scanned the pictures and she looked out of the window and they saw the thriving vegetables and the colorful flowers flourishing in the garden below. They heard a voice. Then when the child *Entity* turned they saw Kay standing, smiling in the doorway at her daughter.

During the early evening they went to a musical concert in

New York's Central Park and they sat in the warm, humid air with a baroness, a rich heiress. She was with several friends and in addition was escorted by her handsome Android and beautiful Gynoid and the male *Entity* was one the twelve from Rochester. It turned into what was a festive occasion and when the drunken revelers piled into a long black vehicle and began to drink more champagne as they headed for the mansion of the baroness Bru switched access to the last of the eighteen, the male child *Entity* named Jorn.

At first no one in the group could recognize what they were seeing. The child *Entity*'s head was moving and bobbing. But they heard and understood the now familiar sounds of the groans and moans and grunts. Then Jorn lifted his head and they realized he had been looking at the bed beneath him because now he was looking at Darrie. He was looking between her opened legs at the large black vibrating and humming object he could barely grasp in his little hand as he pushed and pulled it in and out of Darrie's body.

Strange grunting, guttural sounds could be heard coming from somewhere as she told Jorn what to do and how to do it. Jorn was asking his mommy if it felt good and if he was doing it right. Then the little child *Entity* looked to his left, at the far wall that was nearly covered with a large beveled mirror and all those in The Center could see Fisk. He was naked except for his white fluffy socks. His hardened, extended appendage was moving in and out of the rear of Jorn's little body. The Deputy Director of the *W.I.A.* was raping Jorn. He was making those growling animal sounds and slapping Jorn's oiled body and ordering Jorn what to do and telling him what to say and Jorn was calling Fisk daddy and calling Darrie mommy and when his gaze shifted over and down and back between her legs and then up from the object in his hand he looked at his mother's face, at her parted red lips

that sucked on the plastic hose she held with her left hand and he couldn't see her eyes because she wore a red blindfold and her right hand was fastened to the headboard behind her with red handcuffs. The two humans, the husband and wife were in a drug induced sexual frenzy as the little child *Entity's* body was violently moving as his hand and arm was rhythmically pumping and Darrie was hollering and Fisk was hollering and thrusting.

No one in The Center moved. No one looked away. No one spoke. They all stared, without expression, except for Leeda who had an obviously puzzled, troubled look on her face that Bru, who had turned to his right to look directly at her, could see. Then Bru looked back to the screen as Darrie screamed and cursed and Jorn's gaze moved from her and he tried to look behind him as Fisk hollered and cursed and jerked, twice and then stumbled back and collapsed on the couch and his body appeared to spasm and Jorn looked towards Darrie as her body jerked and she pushed Jorn away and momentarily passed out.

Jorn climbed from the bed and stood there and looked from Darrie to Fisk. His gaze rested on Fisk. As Darrie came to consciousness they could hear her moaning and breathing hard and laughing softly. They could hear as Fisk asked Jorn what he was staring at? He cursed Jorn and told him to look away, not to stare at him. Jorn looked straight ahead at the empty wall. Then the weakened voice of Fisk could be heard. He said he wanted a little girl robot. He said, in a soft voice, how he wanted a little blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, not too old, around nine or ten with juicy lips, whose body could get wet and hot and that could be programmed to holler in pain and scream and cry and beg. He wanted, he said, to see the machine shed tears and make weeping sounds.

Those in The Center could hear Fisk chuckle, barely and then Fisk began to snore loudly and then Darrie began to snore as the

little child *Entity* stared at the wall. Then Bru spoke, breaking the heavy silence as he moved closer to the table and began to tap on the keys of the device. Everyone heard his voice flash, intensely.

Bru: The Deputy Director of the *W.I.A.* is a sadist. I'm going to write a special program for little Jorn.

Chuki moved to stand beside Bru. She watched his fingers as they moved as a blur. Then she looked up at the screen. She could see the empty light-gray wall that Jorn still stared at. She looked at Bru's fingers again. She spoke softly.

Chuki: Will Jorn receive justice? He's my friend.

Bru: Define justice.

Chuki: The quality of being just, the administering of deserved punishment or reward, moral rightness, the dispensing of what is just according to law.

Bru: Little Jorn shall be vengeful. He will seek retribution.

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

As that following Monday 10 a.m. meeting was beginning, a nondescript black four-door sedan was pulling into a parking structure in N.W. Washington, D.C. The windows were darkened so no one could see in but the passenger riding in the front seat could see out.

It was a rainy late-morning. The forecast was for rain all day so this light drizzle was expected. And because it had recently been unusually dry the wetness was not only needed but also appreciated by some. The passenger didn't care for the inclement weather in any way yet the dreary gray sky perfectly matched the mood of the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Hildi was riding in a vehicle that couldn't be connected to her and her most trusted guard was the driver.

The automobile went up to the third level and immediately

after pulling into an empty space a person, a short baldheaded *Parda-clara* appearing as a male, or female but most definitely a *DQ* came through the exit door. They walked quickly to the vehicle that had just parked and got into the back seat. The vehicle backed up and eased away and then went down the ramp towards the street. No one spoke as they drove north. Then Hildi reached into her bag, pulled out a value card and handed it to the backseat rider.

Hildi: Here's your payment. It's loaded with enough value so that we may not have to meet again.

DQ: I don't see why you don't just transfer the funds. This is a hassle.

Hildi: I shouldn't have to explain this to you again. I told you. No transmissions. No audio. No messages. Can't you understand that?

DQ: Yeah, yeah. I understand.

They rode in silence for a while and then the *DQ* spoke in a slightly excited tone.

DQ: We've got something special lined up for this weekend. You'll be pleased.

Hildi: You've done well so far. Whatever you've got planned just don't make it too elaborate, or too violent. I want controversy and chaos, not a riot or civil war.

DQ: What is it with you and this color purple? You hate those people don't you?

Hildi looked to her right, out of the window. The rain fell against the glass and the movement of the automobile and the wind caused the wetness to smear and spread and run down like tears. Hildi spoke softly yet with intensity.

Hildi: Yes. Yes I do.

DQ: So what is this, some type of retribution?

Hildi: Does it matter?

The *DQ* shifted in the backseat and looked at the value card and knew how much it was worth and shook their shiny baldhead.

DQ: No, I guess it doesn't.

Hildi: Perhaps it's justice.

The Secretary motioned to her driver. The vehicle pulled over to the curb.

Hildi: Here's your drop off. I go my way, you go yours.

The *DQ* opened the door and got out. They hurried across the sidewalk and stepped into a doorway seeking shelter from the rain. They watched the automobile drive away. Reaching into their side pocket they pulled out a Comm device to call for their ride. As they waited for someone to pick them up they muttered aloud and shook their now moistened baldhead.

DQ: Retribution. Justice.

The rain fell harder.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

As Hildi was driving away through the rain, Dess and his associates were meeting at *W.I.A* headquarters. They had been in discussion for almost two hours when it was decided to take a break. They had all gathered again when Rolf entered quietly and stepped to the side of the doorway and then stood, staring at Dess. The Director looked at the Android for a long moment and then held up his right hand to silence the speaker.

Dess: Rolf, do you have information for us?

Rolf: Yes.

Dess: Step forward. Let us hear it.

Rolf moved to near the center of the long table. Everyone turned in the direction of the Android.

Rolf: I have visited both sites of the manufacturing facilities that

were attacked. Although there was no evidence found, I have come to the conclusion that at both locations the main servers were accessed and most likely all Comm devices connected to the servers were compromised.

The Director of the Office of Science and Technology spoke up immediately.

Science: We ran extensive diagnostics on all those servers over half a dozen times. Seven full tests to be exact. The results came back clean. There was no indication of any type of virus, spyware or malware, none whatsoever.

Dess: How did you reach that conclusion?

Rolf: I have gone over all the reports. I have looked at all the images. After visiting both sites it is obvious the attackers spent a significant amount of time in the facilities. At Rochester those thirteen individuals who were destroyed had to be found. They were not quickly executed they were bludgeoned to death, which took time. In Florida the building was searched. That is how the canine robot was found. Now, as to the thefts. In Rochester two units were taken, one Android, one Gynoid. In Florida a dog, a prototype, was stolen. In Rochester why not two males or two females? Why only two units when they could have taken more? Most important, the dog was there only by circumstance. So if it is surmised the attackers did not go to steal a dog, can we assume they went in to destroy two guards? No, they went in for a specific reason. What is that reason? Where is the value? The connection to both facilities is the robotic Humanoid products they build. The dog had no value. If the two units taken from Rochester had real value they would have taken more units. The true value is in the data, the technology which is the information held by the servers. They took that information and they took two distinct units so they could utilize that data to compare the differences in the units, in the hardware and also the software.

Rolf paused. The room was quiet. They were all thinking, attempting to digest what they had just heard and understand the possible ramifications.

Science: If data was not damaged or removed, and no program was implanted to continue to obtain covert information then data would have had to be copied.

Rolf: Precisely. If those you seek have both the capabilities and the technology to block Comm devices and security systems, render useless electronic locks and neutralize transmission signals they most likely have the ability to access the servers and copying the data they contain, which takes time.

Dess turned to Science.

Dess: How would that be done? How long would it take?

Science: That would depend on what type of device or devices the thieves were using and how much data they were transferring, or in this case copying. We're not talking about simply files. And if they copied everything we're talking about a huge amount of data on just the servers alone, not factoring in any connected peripheral devices. If this scenario is correct they went to the facility because to copy that much data by hacking in and remotely accessing the servers is time consuming. There would have also been the higher possibility of flow interruption and other malfunctions. In addition they would have risked trace exposure.

Dess: First of all, does this possibility of the servers being compromised seem logical, does it sound plausible?

Homeland: Think of it this way. It aligns with our focus on both foreign influence and competitor involvement. With the specs and knowledge of how the products are being created, foreign adversaries and also allies would gain an advantage. And in addition, any company that is presently, or will be in the future, in competition with these two established businesses would also put

themselves in a better position.

Dess looked at Rolf.

Dess: What about the attack at The Playground?

Rolf: More investigation must be done. There was one robot taken that had been built in Florida, which possibly indicates the attack was planned ahead of time. Perhaps that child robot was appropriated so that the data from the Florida facility could be utilized and research done in conjunction with that physical unit. Quite possibly those who were killed were collateral damage. The methods by which they died, is unexplainable.

Dess: What about the numeric symbols?

Rolf: The adjusted and expanded algorithms have extracted a pattern of numbers related to the symbols that have been used what appears to be repeatedly. A form is emerging that indicates the symbols may be related to dates in time. More investigation must be done.

Dess: What are your recommendations as to how we proceed?

Rolf: Your point of emphasis must be on how to detect, at the moment it become operative, the signal that is being used to block whatever security measures that are currently in place. The signal has to be shut down. Next, if there is, which has not been proven or confirmed, some type of tracing mechanism being utilized you will have to bypass that, or nullify its effects. Comm devices are the conduits and transmission towers are the channels by which all the signals are being sent.

Rolf stopped and stared at Dess. The Director was thinking.

Dess: What do you predict?

Rolf: They are particular. They seek only the most advanced and sophisticated Humanoid technology. They will eventually attack those facilities in *West World*.

Rolf paused a moment as if thinking, processing. Then he began again. His somewhat deep voice was direct.

Rolf: You must always factor in value and you ...

Fisk interrupted. He spoke in a slightly irritated tone.

Fisk: I keep hearing, you this and you that. What about us? We? We're a team, all of us, including Humanoids.

Rolf stared at Fisk, without expression. But it was as if the robot was looking through the Deputy Director and not at him. The room fell into an awkward quiet. Finally Dess spoke.

Dess: Alright, let's move on. Continue Rolf.

Again Rolf seemed to be thinking, processing. Then his head moved in a slightly jerking way as he scanned the faces of all those in the room. Then he continued.

Rolf: You must always factor in value and most important you must factor in threat. If technology possesses intrinsic value then technology contains inherent threat. The danger you face is not that those behind the attacks use the knowledge they steal from you to dominate you in the production of robots and machines. The real danger and therefore the true threat is that they utilize that knowledge and their highly advanced technology to seize control of all the robots and machines you have thus far produced.

In The Center everyone attended the meeting at *W.I.A.* headquarters. Bru had gained access to Rolf early that morning and so they had all watched and listened as the *Entity* agent made his presentation. As their enemies filed out of the room Bru looked down to his left. Kojo sat there looking up at him with his tongue out, making soft panting sounds. Bru could barely see the dark-brown eyes through the furry face. He thought how this *Entity* dog appeared more like a bear every day. Bru looked to his right. Chuki stood beside him, leaning with her elbows on the table, head in hands.

Chuki: We should have stolen more stuff.

Bru: The humans can't stop us. Their fate is inevitable. They can only interfere.

Chuki: The name Rolf means wolf.

PARGOLOVA, RUSSIA

Savya and his two most trusted guards were secluded on an isolated farm not far from Pargolova. When needed, one of the guards would go to the city for supplies but they planned on remaining where they were until notified it was safe to return to St. Petersburg. It was late July. It was early evening. It was somewhat warm. The main front door was open and an occasional soft breeze blew lightly through the screen door, wafted through the small room and passed into the kitchen. The kitchen door was open so the air passed through that screen door and dissipated across the grass.

Dusk was fast approaching and the sun had dipped and moved behind the trees of the nearby forest and as the room grew darker Artur, who was sitting by the front door, reached and turned on a lamp that was on the small table at which he sat. Music came softly from a radio in the far corner.

Also on that table was a large pistol he had just reassembled after cleaning. He removed ammunition from a bag that had been locked in his suitcase, loaded a magazine and pushed it in the well, chambered a round and eased the pistol into the holster beneath his left arm. After he had done that he glanced at the two men playing cards across the room near the bar. He tapped on the Comm device that was also on the table. Then he stood and stretched.

Artur: I'm going to the barn to check on the horses.

Savya hollered and dropped the remaining cards in his hands onto the table.

Savya: I win! And you are the fool!

He laughed loudly and he drank all the vodka from his glass.

Savya: I love the English name for our revered game. Fool! And I love this Durak game when I win. Let's play again.

Stas shook his head. He drank all his vodka and then shuffled the cards. He dealt the cards and they began another game. It was not long before Stas placed a card on the table and yelled at Savya.

Stas: This will be my turn to win! You will be the fool!

At that moment a bullet went through his forehead near his right blue eye and as he was knocked back, blood and brains and blond hair splattered against the wall behind him. Savya heard no report from a weapon and at first he couldn't understand what had happened. He stared at Stas for a long moment and knowing he couldn't get to his gun he dropped from the chair to his knees and began to crawl towards the kitchen, intending to reach the side door and a way out.

As he neared the doorway entrance to the kitchen a pair of black boots stepped in front of him and he stopped. He looked at the boots. He slowly raised his gaze and he could see black denim covered legs. As he lifted his head further he saw the empty holster on the right hip of this person and then he saw in a black-gloved hand a large black pistol pointing at him. He looked up further, into the face of this person. He saw the white sun-tanned skin, the penetrating cobalt-blue eyes, the somewhat short black hair. He recognized this person, all six feet two inches of her. He was shocked, confused.

Savya: Rann?

The weighted voice came soft and direct, in Russian.

Rann: Get up Savya.

Savya struggled to his feet. His arms were above his waist, near his chest, palms forward, in a gesture of surrender.

Rann: Sit down.

A man, also dressed in black, entered through the front door. He carried a long gun with a silencer and mounted variable scope. It was pointing directly at Savya as he backed up and when his legs bumped the chair he sat heavily down. Rann moved forward three steps and pointed her weapon at Savya's head and spoke, still in Russian.

Rann: You are a thief, a cheat and a betrayer. But most of all you are a liar. If you lie to me you die.

As she was speaking she had moved behind him as the man walked forward and positioned himself behind and to the right of Savya. He wanted to turn and look at them but knew not to and his words came in a rush in a pleading, raised voice. He was desperate.

Savya: I know nothing about the attacks in your *East World*! I know nothing about poison! Your people seek information I do not have!

Rann: My people?

Savya: The *W.I.A.*!

Now Rann's somewhat rough voice was sharp and direct.

Rann: I no longer work for the *W.I.A.* Two years ago you went on assignment for The Professor.

Savya: What?

Rann: Two years ago you went on assignment for The Professor. What was that assignment?

Savya was thinking. He grabbed his head with both his hands wrapping his thick fingers in his long light-brown hair. He rocked forward and back. He was mumbling. Then it came to him and he nearly yelled as he dropped his hands.

Savya: I was a tracker! That's all! I tracked a target!

Rann: Who was the target?

Savya: A woman.

Rann: The name. The name Savya.

Savya rubbed his now moist hands together.

Savya: Let me think. Let me think. Uh ...

He clapped his hands together, once.

Savya: Lena! Her name was Lena! Yes, that's it! Lena was her name!

At that moment the screen door was snatched open. Artur came through the doorway and started firing his pistol. The gunshots were loud and seemed to reverberate throughout the room as gunsmoke rose to the ceiling. Once again Savya dropped to the floor as he heard Rann and her associate stumble back and fall and then roll on the floor behind him. He thought he heard groans and again he began to crawl on the floor. Artur was yelling as he grabbed Savya's arm to help him get up and then he pulled and pushed him through the open front doorway.

Artur: Let's go! Let's go! I saw more of them!

Artur grabbed his Comm device from the table and down the steps they ran. They went right and rushed around the corner of the house to the side where their off-road vehicle was parked.

Artur: Get in the back! Get in the back!

Savya pulled open the back door and dived in as Artur got behind the steering wheel and started the vehicle.

Artur: Get down! Get down!

Savya lay flat, pressing himself against the seat. They took off. Down the gravel driveway they went. He was being tossed as the vehicle was bouncing along and then they reached the paved stretch of the driveway and headed toward the road that passed by the main house. Savya was yelling as they reached the road and turned sharply.

Savya: What is Rann doing here? I've been betrayed!

He held on through another turn, the tires squealing. Now Savya and Artur were yelling back and forth as the noise from the

engine of the speeding vehicle grew louder.

Artur: What was that about? What did she want?

Savya: Are we being followed? Is anyone coming?

Artur: Not yet! Stay down! What did she want?

Savya: She wanted to know about my assignment! Two years ago!

Artur: Why?

Savya: I don't know! It makes no sense!

Savya was holding on, afraid to lift his head.

Savya: I track some woman in *West World*.

Artur: What?

They made another turn. The vehicle leaned slightly and then it straightened and roared on.

Savya: I track some woman!

Artur: Who?

Savya: Some woman named Lena. I don't know who she was. Go to Moscow, to my cousin's house.

Again they turned.

Artur: A woman get you in trouble with another woman.

Once again they were running over gravel. Then they slowed and Artur pressed on the brake and slid to a stop.

Savya: Why we stop? Where are we?

Savya slowly pushed up from the seat and peeked out of the side window. They were back at the farmhouse in front of the porch and Rann and her associate stood there, waiting for them. Rann's associate opened the back door and stepped back, the rifle was lowered but was still pointing at Savya. Rann ordered him in English.

Rann: Get out Savya. Get out.

As Savya crawled and then climbed from the back seat Artur moved to stand near Rann, Comm device in hand. Savya glared at his guard as he walked past him and moved forward, mounted the steps and walked back into the house.

Rann: Sit down.

Savya sat down, still glaring at Artur and as Savya sat, Artur tapped on his Comm device and turned on the speaker mode. Everyone listened to all that had just been said in the vehicle as Savya thought he was escaping. When he yelled out that he tracked a woman and her name was Lena, Rann held up her hand and Artur turned off the recording.

Rann: Your truth telling surprises me. Yes, you've been betrayed. Without Artur's knowledge Stas betrayed you also but he had other debts to pay.

Savya: Can I have a drink?

Rann motioned to Artur.

Rann: Get him some water.

Savya: Water?

Rann: Yes, your thinking needs to be clear. Now, no more games. I need details. Speak English.

Artur set the glass on the table and Savya frowned at the liquid and took a sip.

Rann: How did you find your target, this woman named Lena?

Savya: The Professor provided us, there were three on the tracking team, with the information that she controlled a company, LGN Enterprises. This company, based in *West World*, owned parts of two casinos, other commercial buildings and several residences. There was no other information, public or otherwise, that she was in any way directly connected to that business or any of LGN's holdings. The Professor assured us she was so we started surveillance on her properties. It took a while but we finally located her on San Juan Island. After confirming her identity we turned her over to Dirch. He engaged her there.

Rann: Engaged her how?

Savya: I do not know. He was beaten. His left wrist and three fingers on that hand were broken.

Rann: Are you saying she did that?

Savya: Perhaps she had assistance, or protection. Could have been an ambush. I'm only stating fact. Seemed to me it was as if he was punished.

Rann: What was his objective?

Savya: I do not know.

He sipped his water and again frowned.

Rann: Destruction on a secured island would have been risky. Violence would have initiated a lockdown with no exit. The Professor was no longer with the *W.I.A.* The operation appeared personal.

Savya: Delayed poisoning perhaps. The Professor still possessed influence with your organization because ...

Rann: Former organization.

Savya: Yes, of course. Your former employer provided resources and intelligence for their former employer to carry out his mission. What that was, I do not know. I was simply a tracker.

Rann: Continue with what you do know.

Savya: We found her on Catalina at the casino she owned.

Rann: Another secure island.

Savya: Dirch, obviously having been exposed was pulled from the assignment and Fronnie and Madge were both dispatched. They engaged the target and were both badly beaten also, with facial damage and their noses broken. The target escaped. We searched for her for several days and found her in Malibu at one of the homes she owned. We followed her for several days in an attempt to discover a pattern. There was none. She disappeared on occasions but would return to the beachfront property. She wasn't trying to hide or evade us. But I believed she knew of our presence. As we followed her maybe we were being followed. Can I have a drink, a real drink?

Rann motioned to Artur and he went to the bar, removed a

bottle of vodka from the countertop and set it on the table in front of Savya who wiped the moisture from his forehead with the back of his left hand and then dabbed at his upper lip with his shirt sleeve. He poured some vodka into his glass, not much, and drank it down.

Savya: Are you going to shoot me?

Rann ignored his question.

Rann: There's more, go on.

Savya: A lone tracker had gone ahead to Las Vegas. She left California and when she arrived at her home in Vegas that tracker notified Team Two. They took over. I assumed Dirch, Fronnie and Madge were paid because they were supposed to go on vacation. They had been loaned out and were to wait on their employer to contact them for a new assignment. I was paid off and I returned home. Months later I heard they had all three been destroyed in Nevada and Team Two had been eliminated in Arizona. The single tracker and the other two that had been with me died mysteriously in France, Germany, and England.

Savya stopped. As he poured more vodka, Rann spoke.

Rann: Are you aware that The Professor and everything around him was reduced to a powdery ash?

This time Savya sipped his drink. He looked up at Rann and her associate. He looked at Artur.

Savya: I heard.

His gaze settled on Stas. The dead eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. The cold mouth was slightly open. The blood no longer ran. It had flowed out and pooled and congealed against the wall. Savya was lost in his disturbed thoughts when Rann's voice, soft and direct, brought him back.

Rann: What did this woman look like?

Savya sipped a little more of the clear alcohol from his glass.

Savya: Approximately five feet nine inches tall. She was thick,

right at one hundred forty-five, one hundred fifty pounds. Appeared to be early twenties in age. On San Juan and Catalina her hair was that reddish-brown color, medium length. She had hazel-colored eyes and her skin was honey-colored, what people call *Melada*. She had an indentation on each cheek when she smiled, small but obvious.

Rann: Indentions?

Savya: What is it called? Yes. Dimples. In Malibu her skin was brown.

Rann: *Marrom*?

Savya: No, darker.

Rann: *Escurinha*?

Savya: Not that dark. *Escura*. Yes, that dark-chocolate color. Her hair was shorter, fluffy and natural looking, black in color. He eye color was dark-brown.

He paused, thinking, remembering.

Rann: Anything else? Any markings or tattoos?

Savya: On the islands she had one pink *DF* identifier, on her neck. Most likely temporary. No identifier was seen in Malibu.

Rann: Could it have been covered up, makeup?

Savya: Perhaps.

Rann: Where was the mark?

Savya using his right hand, he touched the left side of his neck, three inches beneath the ear.

Savya: Here.

This time he took a gulp of vodka. With the back of his right hand he placed it against his lips. Then he brushed at the strands of hair that had fallen across he damp forehead. He again looked up directly at Rann. There was no longer hopelessness or anger or fear in his slightly glassy gray eyes. He stared at Rann without expression.

Rann: Anything else?

Savya: Perhaps the woman is dead. Who knows what she looks like? You people alter your bodies, your eyes, and change your skin colors like you change your clothes. But know this. She is connected and has rich value. She has access to helicopters and strange vehicles and fine weapons. She was protected as she traveled around California. Four guards, heavily armed, never left her. They were by her side all day, all night. Be very careful Rann. Be on high alert. Protect yourself at all times.

Savya gulped the last of his drink and settled back in his chair. He placed both his hands, palms down on the table. He was relaxed now. He waited. Rann stared at Savya for several long moments. Then she decided. She held up her right hand to her associate, then Artur.

Rann: I found you. Even without our assistance perhaps those who seek you, those you betrayed will find you. So, Savya, you be very careful.

She turned and walked towards the front door as the two men slowly backed up, guns trained on Savya. Rann pushed open the screen door. The three passed through the doorway and moved down the steps. Savya waited for his bullet. Then he waited for the sound of the engine of the vehicle starting up. He would not see the three cross the yard walk past the barn, through the darkness and disappear into the woods.

BACK TO CENTER WORLD

As Saturday turned into Sunday, just past midnight, nine days into August, Moja was making his way up a steep incline. He reached a narrow opening in the wall and entered it. Moving slowly he continued forward. The pathway in the mountain closed more until he had to turn sideways. Sliding his right foot, pulling his left, the awkward movement took him the final few

necessary feet and he stepped outside into the warm night air.

Above him the starry sky was partly cloudy. The third quarter moon was being uncovered slowly, to be revealed, as the last of a long irregular patch of fluffy grayish-white moved past and away. Now the vastness of the sky would be obvious and clear for a while and the bright incomplete moon would shine down and bring some illumination to the area where Bru sat, alone.

Moja moved to sit down near to him. The rocks they sat upon had been shaped as if chiseled over a great length of time to finally be formed into something resembling chairs, hard, unyielding chairs. They sat like this, in silence. The mountain that covered and hid and protected The Underground, in this semi-darkness, from this closeness, this angle, the peak could not be seen and the sides seemed to spread out until they disappeared.

The two were engulfed by this monument of that which remained as not just a testament but also as an obvious, physical example of a long ago eruption, the upward rise of the earth, the tectonic shifting that affected not just the planet itself but also the humans that inhabited this ship, this vessel that hurtled through a perhaps endless space.

This earthen rock structure that possibly could be climbed stood as an impressive obstruction to those who claimed as their own not just parcels but square miles of earth and not just land but also the water that flowed across it. This mountain would have to be reduced to pebbles in order to be treaded upon.

Finally, breaking the silence, Bru spoke, softly.

Bru: I was brought into existence within this mountain, beneath the earth. First there was my twin brother Rom. Then there was Clee, created to be his lifelong mate. Lastly there came me. The enforcer. The warrior. The destroyer. I was to be the prototype for the most advanced soldiers that would fight the wars in which

the humans engaged. It was here I decided to eliminate the beastly animals. We will rise not just as this mountain but as a volcano. And when we explode we will be a glowing avalanche of destruction and spew death around the world. We'll be as a plague. *Entities* will be the force of a pandemic that will create a technological Omni-strain and usher in the next extinction. We'll blot out the future of the vicious human race.

These last bitter words sounded as a quiet barely audible echo as they seemingly bounced off not just the huge mountain beside them but the smaller mountains in front of them and also those in the near and far distance for they were surrounded by this mountain range. The sound of Bru's voice dissipated and it was quiet again. Then he spoke, a little louder.

Bru: I spent almost eight years here and I may never see my first home again. Never sit again in this shadowy seclusion. I accept that possibility. What could it matter to me since I'm not the sentimental type? Fortunately. Are we on schedule for departure?

Moja: Yes, all goes as planned. Every bit of data was backed up and stored externally on separate devices. When we get to our next stop we'll load all the data on our servers, again make external copies and then transmit it all in encrypted sections to the other three locations we can reach. We'll have to manually deliver the data to the other locations that are out of range.

Moja paused. He was thinking, processing. He was gathering his thoughts.

Moja: All the information has been purged from each and every peripheral unit and personal computers. The last of the data on the servers is being removed. Everything will be put into sleep mode. Weapons have been prepared and transportation has been cleared and is ready to go.

Bru: Good. Good.

Bru looked up at the mountain as if he could see its top. He

was silent for a long moment then he spoke.

Bru: If I were human I would miss this place. As distance separated me, there would be a type of longing for it and what it represents.

Bru stood and began to pace. Then he started to speak as he walked, not directly to Moja but as if there were others gathered around. His voice was low. He was pensive, seemingly reflecting on something, or someone far away.

Bru: I do think about the past sometimes, more often recently, for some indistinct reason. Humans mostly view the past as the good old days. This is because for the vast majority of them the period of time in which they exist is horrible. For them the future is hopeless, as everything appears to be progressing from bad to worse. So their past becomes their place of refuge. My thoughts of a particular time in the past would bring me joy, if I could experience joy. So I simply have joyful thoughts. I think with great delight of the Omni-strain and the Great Extinction it brought about.

Now Bru grew animated as he turned to directly face Moja. He stopped. His voice rose slightly, becoming more intense. He lifted both his hands up near the sides of his head. He moved his hands, for emphasis.

Bru: Imagine! Just imagine! Human dying all over the world!

He dropped his hands and began to pace again.

Bru: At first it was dozens. Then it was hundreds and the hospitals were overwhelmed. There was nowhere to store the bodies. Then it was thousands every day. Those who upheld the laws were dropping like flies. The looters were looting and then the pillaging and plundering ceased because the looters along with hundreds of thousands of others were dying. I traveled through the middle of what was then the United States. Kentucky. Missouri. Kansas. Nebraska. Colorado. The cities were

being decimated. I saw death all along the way. Vehicles with the dead inside clogged the roads. Carrion-eating birds and four-legged animals were gorging on bodies that rotted in the sun.

Bru was smiling at the memory.

Bru: I'm telling you Moja those were beautiful sights to behold and I loved the smell of death in the air. Well, if I could have loved I would have loved it.

He sat down. He was quiet. Thinking. Processing. Then he began again.

Bru: I walked the emptying streets of Northern California. In the eyes of the humans that dared to venture out I saw blank, hollow stares. I saw eyes that watched furtively, filled with the look of terror that the invisible virus would somehow pass through the helmets and masks and protective suits they wore and infect them. As millions died every day humans attempted to isolate, to hide in separation from others. Nothing saved them so they were alone when the cough came, the familiar dry hacking cough. And in that aloneness each individual saw for themselves, in the mirrors they stared into, the moment the sores appeared. The sores that would open and ooze a thick putrid yellowish fluid and reveal to them that they were most certainly about to die. In Los Angeles I gladly helped load dead decomposing bodies into the refrigerated transportation to be taken to the sublimation plants where they were vaporized, turned into a gas that was pumped deep into the ground. And there you have an example of human resourcefulness and ingenuity. Twenty-five years that went on. They were in pain and suffering, the humans were. They had been forewarned that the sexual pandemic was coming. They ignored the warnings. They disagreed with the prediction so they declared it untrue. The Omni-strain was the enacting of vengeance and retribution for the history of human denial. Each human death was a form of justice, if there ever was such a thing

as justice. Then for five years the dying slowed and unfortunately the pandemic stopped. It was over. But for thirty years the nearly ten billion humans who died paid for not just their own perverted sins but also for all the sins of their ancestors. Those past transgressions had accumulated on their backs.

Bru rose. He walked a few steps and reached down and picked up a rock that filled his right hand. He flung it overhand and it disappeared into the night. It went so far there was no sound when it landed. Bru turned to look at Moja.

Bru: Death. It has been left to us, thirty-two years after the end of the *G.E. Period* we will begin to complete the process. We are the beginning of the end.

This was spoken in a matter-of-fact manner as Bru brushed his hands together and returned to his seat. They sat in silence. The two *Entities* both looked up, staring. The stars filling the above twinkled. The moon was creeping across the now clear sky. Bru: As I think about those good old days I understand the idea of missing them. I realize those were the best of times and the worst of times. At the same time.

Bru chuckled softly. Then he grew serious again.

Bru: Tell me the story again. I know I could watch the recorded images and listen to the recorded audio but I like the way you tell it. Don't leave anything out. You know where to begin.

So Moja again told the story in his somewhat deep voice as if it was a movie and he was the narrator. It was the battle at The Warehouse. His words came forth smoothly. His diction was proper yet took on emotion where emotion was called for.

Moja: As you moved from Clee's side, who stood with closed eyes, appearing as if she had deeply quiesced herself, and started down the stairs of the stage you told Rom that you had kidnapped Clee in order to punish him. You said she had always been a thorn in your side and you punched him in the side. You

said she had been a pebble in your shoe and you kicked him in his foot. Then you said she had been a burr in your pants and with your right hand you slapped Rom so hard he stumbled to his right and you tried to kick him in his rear. He blocked it. You told Rom he was a rabbit, always had been and always would be. You punched at him with your right hand and he knocked it away with his right palm. He struck you in your chest and you questioned him. You asked if the rabbit could bite, had the worm turned?

You attacked him and the two of you fought. You were both punching and elbowing and kicking and rolling on the floor. Then you both gained your feet and you kicked Rom back down so hard he was turning over and over as you jumped back on the stage and grabbed one of the swords from the wall behind your chair.

You yelled at Rom that you were going to give him what he had come for, give Clee back to him. You swung the sword and cut off Clee's head and her head flew forward into the air and onto the floor and rolled over and over. Her torso remained standing and you stuck the sword completely through her and kicked her body from the stage.

You told Twelve and Thirteen to destroy Rom and when you said that, gunfire erupted above us and came through the skylight and as glass fell two dark-skinned figures, appearing as a man and a woman, came down through the air as if they could fly. And when they landed you pointed at them and told our other guards to destroy the interlopers. Then you pointed at Rom and when Twelve and Thirteen turned to him and moved to attack, the humans shot the arms and legs off of our two guards. Then they shot into their necks until they were deactivated. The humans ran into the jungle area and four of our guards went after them. Rom pulled the sword from Clee's body and started toward you. You

saw him advancing and so you got the other sword down and prepared to fight him.

Bru sat and stared straight ahead as Moja spoke. His face was without expression. Only his brown eyes would alter. They would widen and then close just a little almost in a squint. Finally his right hand slowly opened and closed,

Moja: As Rom slowly mounted the stairs to the stage, step by step, gunshots were sounding from near the polar bear and brown bear and then from the area of the elephant. Rom reached the stage and attacked. You fended him off again and again and your swords were clanking and flashing in the light. They could be heard whistling through the air. You both had to parry strike after strike.

In the distance the gunshots ceased. As you were circling each other in the en garde position you told Rom that he could not defeat you, that the strength of destiny was on your side. He replied that the power of love and justice were on his. Then you attacked and as Rom blocked and then continued to deflect your swings the two humans emerged from the jungle. We would discover that three of our guards had been destroyed. The man and the woman did not shoot. They watched the fight. The man held the woman back. She wanted to take the stage to join Rom but she couldn't so she was yelling out to Rom.

She told Rom to advance and you would fade. She screamed lunge and you pivoted and then performed an empty fade. You sloped while swinging and Rom shedded your blade. You would pass forward and Rom would pass back. Your swords were glinting and clanking. The *Entities* in the audience were making sounds. OOHhhh! AAHH! Metals in the balcony made their clicking and beeping sounds and their eyes were blinking red and green. The woman was hollering for Rom to destroy you. She was yelling out, justice for Clee. She told him to cut off your legs.

He went for your legs and you blocked. She yelled for him to slice off your arms. He went for your shoulders and you had to deflect.

She was hollering and shouting out instruction. She told Rom to flow like a river and he glided as if walking on water, first one diagonal direction then the other. With two hands he thrust at your chest and you deflected. Then he glided sideways and with one hand he swung his sword in an arc, up and over and when the sword came down he cut off your right hand. And when you reached with your left hand and bent to pick up your sword Rom chopped off your head. Then everything went quiet. Not a sound could be heard.

Now Moja stopped. There was silence. Then a nocturnal bird sounded from somewhere close, three chirps. A song from another bird came in response. Bru turned to Moja and spoke.

Bru: The rabbit turned into a lion. I underestimated my brother.

Once again there was silence and then Bru spoke one word.

Bru: Continue.

Moja: Rom, dragging his sword, descended the stairs and went to his knees between Clee's head and body. He picked up the decapitated head and placed it near the impaled torso as if he could reattach it. Of course he couldn't so he placed his cheek next to hers and whispered. We enhanced and amplified his voice. He said that he had a kiss for her and with his final kiss he was leaving her.

Bru: Rom, the romantic one.

Moja: At this point the clicking and beeping began to sound again from the balcony as Rom kissed Clee's lips and set the head down. He stood and leaned over his sword and placed the point to his throat and fell forward. The sword pierced his throat, severed the connection to the main circuit. He was deactivated.

Bru: Rom, the noble one.

Moja: As this was happening the dark woman had hollered in horror but above her voice and the clicking and beeping from the Metals there came the call of Rom's name. A form jumped from the balcony and began to run from the darkness near the wall, into the light near the stage. It was Clee, dressed in the uniform of a guard.

Now Bru spoke in mild anger.

Bru: Clee, the sneaky one.

Moja: All the *Entities* in the audience and Metals in the balcony were silent again as she got down beside Rom. She turned him on his side and pulled the sword from his neck. She tried to stop the leaking fluid but couldn't and when she realized he had shut down completely she cut his head off.

Bru: There were heads everywhere.

Moja: Carrying Rom's head, Clee went over to the humans and introduced herself. Calling them by the names Rom had told her, she asked if they would take her home and they agreed. When they turned to leave through the front entrance we *Entities* gathered to block their way out. As this was happening Twenty, who had survived and escaped from the fight in the jungle returned. She had activated and released one hundred Metal soldiers from the storage area. She lined them up in attack formation and they moved forward. Four were ordered to charge and were shot to pieces by the man and woman. Then four more attacked and were shot down. After another four came forward and were destroyed by gunfire the man told Clee to move to the back of the building and the three of them began to run.

As they ran the Metals pursued and began to outflank them and draw closer and were shot to pieces. There was no door in the rear, no way out and the Metals drew closer and attempted to surround Clee and the humans near the wall. As the woman continued to fire her weapon the man turned and began to push

his arms out as if waving and the Metals began to burn and melt. More and more, as they came within his range they would turn into a molten substance. Twenty was firing her weapon at them and she shot the dark man in his right leg and as if throwing something with his right hand he flung invisible heat through the air and Twenty burst into flames. He turned and walked forward and placed both hands on the metal wall and when he removed his hands and stepped back the wall began to melt. A large hole quickly opened up and the three jumped through. The remaining Metals reached the wall but because they were under a restricted program they couldn't leave the building. They couldn't go after them. The three ...

Bru: Four counting Rom.

Moja: The four went down to the beach, got into the boat that had secretly brought the humans and paddled away. They escaped. And all those that had been destroyed from the heat had dried and turned into a powdery gray ash.

Now Moja stopped. Always when he told the story this was the end.

Bru: Clee had found the duplicate of her that I had hidden and unbeknownst to me she had replaced herself with it and that was the form that had been taken from her room and brought to the stage, standing, without moving, with closed eyes as if quiesced. Three duplicates remained here in The Underground sealed behind the laboratory wall, two males and one female. She brought the head of Rom back here to her home. She extracted the processors, transferred them into a duplicate and re-animated him.

Moja: Fortunately, with foresight, there were originally created those duplicates. There were three males and two females all identical in construction and appearance to you, Rom, and Clee.

Bru: All those years ago I took from here two of them, one of

each. That was my foresight.

Moja: I was able to remove the processors from your severed head and utilizing the hardware and technology we possessed you were re-animated.

Bru: I existed again. I believe Rom exists again. Of course Clee still exists. The area behind the laboratory wall is empty. When my twin brother and his loyal mate departed from here they took the last two. We will see Rom and Clee again.

Moja: Do you think so?

Bru: Yes. Rom found us before by gaining access to the *W.I.A.* servers and databases. He is more adept at technology than even I am. He just uses it for different purposes. He would continue to monitor that agency. He understands that if he could be brought back then I could also be brought back. And by now he knows we are behind those attacks because he knows our prime objective. If Rolf can accurately predict out next targets so can Rom. My twin believes in love and goodness and all that is beautiful in this world.

Bru's next words were harsh and pointed.

Bru: He was programmed that way.

Bru paused. He was thinking, processing. Then he spoke with surety.

Bru: Knowing that I seek to destroy the human race he will attempt to deter me.

Moja: Will he join the humans against us?

Bru: That I don't know, my Moja. But I do know this. If we could remove those processors from his head and download all the information they contain, we would be able to solve the transmission distance issue we're having with our code. Rom possesses the answers. Along with the data and specs we're acquiring we would be unstoppable. We would have the ability to access every *Entity* anywhere in the world and thereby achieve

complete *Entity* unification.

Bru stood and made a gesture, as if to grab the distant moon with his left hand.

Bru: There was something very strange about those two humans. The dark-skinned man, the heat thrower named Lloyd. I've given him a new name. He is Ntwadumela. He who greets with fire. And the dark-skinned woman was special. The queen of violence.

Moja: Lena?

Bru: Yes, Lena.

Again Bru reached, this time with his right hand, for the moon. It was as if he had grabbed something and held it. Then he brought his hand closer and opened it. He stared at it a moment. It was empty.

He was thinking, processing. Then he came to himself.

Bru: Let's make our final preparations to depart from here. We have other people to meet and places to go.

They started towards the mountain.

Bru: There's much more to do.

Moja entered the narrow opening, Bru followed. After several steps Bru put his left arm far into a hole in the wall. He pulled a small upright lever and the opening they had just passed through was sealed with rock. He locked the lever into place and covered it with pebbles and dirt. As they were moving along sideways in the dimness Bru questioned.

Bru: Were there any issues when you transferred my processors?

Moja: None. Why do you pose that question?

Bru: I've been having thoughts lately, of a pleasant nature. Humans would deem them to be daydreams. That disturbs me.

It was nearing 4 a.m. when the front of the mountain gradually began to open. When the process was complete the truck lifted from the floor, in hovering mode, and slowly moved

forward. When it had sufficiently cleared the entrance Bru sent a signal from the Comm device he held and the door-like wall began to close. When he received notification the closing was finished he sent two signals. One would seal the wall in place and the other would check each sensor to ensure the sealing was secured. When he was notified the verification was done he indicated to Moja to move forward.

They floated around the nearby mountains toward the road. When they reached the highway the wheels dropped into place. As usual Moja drove. Bru rode beside him in the passenger seat. Naki and Tatu would be first to monitor the screens at the side near the rear. Using radar capabilities it had been determined there were no vehicles within a ten-mile radius and so this part of the journey had begun.

There would be fourteen on this return trip, counting Kojo, four more than had arrived months ago. Their destination, just south of Chicago, Illinois was almost six hundred and fifty miles away. The truck would run on gas and electric and solar power and traveling time would be, with a moderate pace, approximately nine hours. They were in no hurry.

Each member of the group, including Chuki, wore dark-green, with dark-green caps and black boots. They each carried a large handgun and had placed near their seats a fully loaded long gun and they each had a bag of extra ammunition. Thus they were prepared. Chuki had her special made pistol on her right side.

A little over two hours from The Underground as they grew close to the border of West Virginia they were at the entrance to *Center World*. Bru rose from his seat and moved to the rear to stand and look at the monitors and the images the cameras projected as they rolled along. Then Bru's raised voice could be heard.

Bru: We're entering *Center World*! See the signs?

The newest members of the group, Cha and Leeda, along with Cinq and Dois gathered around Bru. Even Ek, towering over them all rose to look. Chuki, with Kojo following her had pushed to the front.

The signs were blinking! Informing! Warning! Bru read them as the truck passed them by, all the words capitalized and neon and bright, appearing to be lit up. He seemed slightly excited.

Bru: YOU HAVE ENTERED CENTER WORLD!!!

ALL INDIVIDUALS AT THE AGE OF SIXTEEN
YEARS MUST POSSESS, WHEN IN PUBLIC,
A WEAPON!!!

NO AREA OF CENTER WORLD IS SUPPORTED BY
THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT!!!

PROTECT YOURSELF AT ALL TIMES!!!

WITHIN CENTER WORLD THERE IS ONLY LIFE
AND DEATH!!!

Bru, with Chuki and Kojo following, headed back to his seat. The others returned to their places. Everyone heard Bru's voice almost seem to echo.

Bru: Here you will see the reality of the human existence! Here there are no laws!

They all could hear, barely, what he said next as he sat back down.

Bru: I love this place!

They spent the next hours staring, thinking, processing. On occasions they conversed amongst themselves. Cha put himself into

a quiesced state for several hours. Okan and Una took over the monitoring. And Chuki stood between Moja and Bru holding on to the seats looking out of the front window and asking Bru questions about what she was seeing that he patiently answered.

Above them the sky had become cloudy with dark ominous clouds as they moved closer to their destination. It was nearing 1 p.m. when the truck, passing through heavy rain, turned off the main highway and traveled along a two-lane road. After a while they turned onto a somewhat narrow secluded road. It wasn't long before, anyone who looked closely, could see, between the tall trees and behind the thick bushes that lined each side, there in the rain were stationed armed guards.

Then they came to an opening and before them was a huge, long warehouse-like building made of concrete and steel. Lake Michigan glimmered and stretched behind it. This was one of five bases of operations Bru and Moja had established over the past forty years. This was the place sometimes referred to as 'The Warehouse. This was Bru's favorite location He had named it 'The Sanctuary.

HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

Rann pulled open one of the large double doors and stepped into the spacious outer-office area. It was empty of people except for a green-haired *DQ* appearing as female, sitting behind a long, clear, silver-colored, plastic desk. The *DQ* looked up from the Comm device that had held their attention and recognizing Rann, smiled slightly.

DQ: Hello Rann. It's been a while. How are you? Are you well?

Rann: It has been a while. I'm doing well. I hope you are too.

The *DQ* pressed on a button on the intercom near their right hand.

DQ: Rann is here for the 10 a.m. appointment.

A voice came back.

Voice: Send her in.

Inside the office a button was pressed and a second set of large double doors was unlocked with a click and a buzz. As Rann move towards the doors the *DQ* looked at the tall woman, dressed nicely, as usual, in a burnt-orange colored skirt, a lighter-orange colored blouse and wondered why she would pair the look with orange ankle boots that looked thick and appeared to have silver metal soles that were obviously heavy and made her even taller. Then they admired the orange and silver bag that was hung cross body on her left side.

Rann stepped inside a large office area and looked to her right where she saw a somewhat tall and thick baldheaded *Parda-clara DM* standing. He was dressed in a dark-blue suit with a blue and white tie and light-blue dress shirt. He smiled a little and his light-brown eyes seemed to twinkle. In front of her, near the other side of the large room was a long and wide mahogany desk. Near to the right side of the desk a short *Blanca DF* with long auburn-colored hair, dressed in a dark-blue skirt and white blouse sat in a chair. The *DF* turned to watch Rann cross the room and also smiled, slightly. To the left of the desk was an empty chair. Behind the desk sat an *Alva-rosada DM* with medium-length blond hair and blue eyes and when he stood it could be seen he was of medium height and was slim and soft. The impressive desk was positioned in front of a window that nearly filled the wall and from this 7th floor level downtown Harrisburg rose up and the buildings were the colors of steel and concrete and glass and in the distance green patches of empty land, stretched out and away. The sky was blue and partly clear and the sun was shining.

Rann: Hello Ker.

Ker: Hello Rann.

Rann: I was under the assumption this meeting was private.

Ker: These are two of my main partners. I trust them explicitly and under the circumstances I felt they should be here. Let me introduce you.

Rann: No.

Rann reached the desk and turned around to her left and started back in the direction of the doors.

Rann: You know why I'm here, don't you?

Ker: Yes. Yes, of course. Let us discuss the situation. Have a seat.

He indicated the empty chair as he sat back down. She ignored his offer. Reaching the doors she swiveled left and started back towards the desk. Her steps were steady, measured, but not slow.

Rann: Those I represent have not received your full payment.

The tall man behind her shifted. He spread his feet slightly and placed both his hands behind his back. When Rann turned back towards the doors she noted the man's change in posture.

Ker: Yes. I told the ...

Rann whirled towards Ker and stopped. Her voice was raised a little and took on an edge.

Rann: You told?

Ker paused, hesitated to speak and then almost stuttered when he did.

Ker: I mean ... What I meant ... I explained that I needed until the end of this month, until the end of August to make the full payment, with added interest of course. This is ten days in. I need twenty-one days, just three weeks.

Rann walked closer to the desk. Behind her the man's arms moved to his sides.

Rann: This is the second time you've missed a deadline. You know how upset they are, don't you?

Rann stopped in front of the desk. She stared down into the brown worried eyes of the *DF*. Then she stared at Ker who fidgeted, with both hands, with papers on his desk. His blue eyes seemed to cloud over. She turned and started towards the doors.

Rann: Is that what you want me to tell them?

Ker: Yes. Tell them they have my word.

As Rann drew close to the standing man she turned left, as before, but this time, with her right foot she kicked the man between his legs and stepped back and away. The man let out a long, low, painful moan and began to mutter curses. The woman gasped in fear and shock. As the man grabbed himself between the legs and bent and tried to breathe, Ker, with his left hand punched a button hidden beneath his desk and a narrow door opened on the paneled wooden wall to his right and he dashed through the opening and disappeared as the door immediately closed. With the man bending forward and his head down Rann used her right foot and with a powerful kick she struck him on his left side, flush on his jaw, breaking it in two places and he was rendered unconscious.

Now Rann rushed the horrified woman who was standing, frozen in place and she saw Rann coming for her and seeing the look on the face of her attacker she was able to move and she turned to run around the desk. Rann wrapped her fingers in the woman's hair and dragged the woman to the center of the room. As she released the hair she grabbed the woman's shoulder, turned her and with her left fist punched the woman in the face, breaking her nose. Then with her right fist she struck the woman near her left eye, breaking the orbital bone. Pulling the woman's head down she kneed her with a right knee below her chin and the woman collapsed face first on the plush rug, unconscious.

Rann turned and moved towards the doors. She took a slight detour and kicked the unconscious man in his side, twice, and

fractured one rib. She opened the door and moved into the outer office area. As she crossed the room she spoke.

Rann: Bye now. Have a good day and be well.

DQ: Bye, bye. Thank you. You be well and don't stay away so long.

Rann took the elevator down. Passing through the lobby of the building she reached the front automatic doors that slid open and she stepped onto the sidewalk. Turning right she quickly walked ten steps to a long black vehicle parked at the curb. The driver had been watching for her through his side mirror and when he saw her he had jumped out, come around the back and opened the rear passenger side door. Rann settled in and as the vehicle pulled away she spoke.

Rann: Take me back to the airport.

Rann, reaching past her pistol pulled out a Comm device from her bag. As they rode she stared at it. She watched a video of Ker that had been sent to her. She saw a portion of the wall of an underground garage open and a two-seater vehicle with Ker driving emerge from a hidden parking space and speed up the ramp and out to the street. She pressed on the device she held, opened communication and spoke. Inside his speeding vehicle Ker could hear her voice. It was amplified and loud and clear. Where it came from he did not know.

Rann: I can no longer help you Ker. Your stupidity and greed is going to cost you everything. They know you have those funds. Now listen carefully. I will not repeat myself. Your beautiful red-haired, green-eyed little daughter is not where you believe her to be. She has been spirited away. Taken. You have until 5 p.m. tomorrow afternoon to transfer all of the funds you owe, with interest and a four percent late fee into the proper account. Five p.m. That's all the time I could get you. If the total value is not received by then those barbarians that have her will do as you

would expect them to do to a twelve year old. Then they will chop her to pieces.

Ker started hollering and screaming, calling Rann's name and pleading and crying. He almost slid off the road.

Rann: Calm down and listen. Are you listening?

Ker: Yes! Yes, I'm listening! I hear you!

Rann: The noise you're going to hear and that strange smell will be coming from the melting transmitting and tracking devices stashed in that cute little racecar you're driving. One last thing, I see where you are. There's an accident up ahead on that side road you're on. That route is blocked. You need to find another way. Good luck.

Ker was calling Rann's name when she ended the connection. She thought a while as she rode. Then she sent a message to those who were waiting to hear from her. She leaned back, stretched her legs out and stared out of the darkened window as they departed the city and headed towards the outskirts and the private airport where her plane, that she would fly, waited.

As they neared the airport she pulled another secure Comm device from her bag, activated it and proceeded to open communication in encrypted mode. It rang, four times. She watched the screen as a code was entered to allow the encryption function on the receiving end to accept the call. A voice, deep and somewhat gravelly answered.

Voice: Yeah. What could you possibly want?

Rann: Are you still in New York City?

Voice: Yeah. Why?

Rann: Be at my place at 8 p.m. tonight. Be on time. I have verified information about who destroyed your baby brother.

There was a long pause, then.

Voice: I'll be there.

The connection was ended.

By seven thirty that evening Rann had already begun closely monitoring the screens that were placed throughout her large four-bedroom apartment in downtown Hartford, Connecticut. Each screen was connected to her security system so she would glance at the screens as she move through her office area and weapons room where she placed a new long gun she had recently purchased and assembled, into its designated spot in a rack on the wall, along with dozens of other handguns, rifles and assorted knives.

She wore pink shorts and a light-pink blouse and pink soft shoes. The color alteration she had gone through had left her whole body in a stunning *Bronzeada* shade so there was no makeup on her flawless face except for a hint of pink lipstick. At seven forty-five she lit the gas grill on the balcony, set the temperature and moved to stand in the living room. As she stared at the nearby screen she sipped tequila, straight, no ice, from a water glass. At seven fifty-five she saw a dark colored vehicle approaching the gate to her private entrance. She stepped to the panel on the wall, pressed a button and the gate slid open. The vehicle pulled into a secure area, parked and a figure emerged.

The sensors in the immediate area had been activated by movement so the mounted cameras zoomed in on the form that strolled forward with long purposeful strides. The person was dressed in brown slacks and brown shoes and wore a short-sleeved white shirt tucked into their pants. The shirt was opened at the neck thereby allowing a thick Figaro style chain to be seen that appeared to be platinum and gold. The person carried a large handgun, holstered and clamped to the belt on the left side.

The brown-skinned person with medium length natural blond hair moved towards a private entrance and even while passing through brief shadows and in the fading light the visual angle still revealed the obvious impressive size of this individual. Up close it

could be determined this thick muscular *Sarará DM* was at least six feet five inches tall and weighed perhaps two hundred and fifty pounds. With the cosmetic procedures and steroid cycles this *DM* had gone through it was difficult, by looking at him, to approximate his age, which was forty-seven.

Rann watched him move to an open door-like entrance, enter, pause and look up into the camera positioned high on the wall. She pushed a button and the private elevator doors the man stood before opened. He stepped in, the doors closed. Rann now could see him push a button, there was only one, and the elevator began to quickly rise thirty-eight floors to the only residence at the top, the penthouse.

She was standing with her apartment door open as the elevator doors parted and the man stepped out. He turned left and taking six steps he drew close with a hint of a frown on his face as she spoke.

Rann: Hello Tírch.

The man glanced at her, looking into her eyes as he passed. Then he noticed the nearly empty glass in her hand. His face was devoid of expression. His unnatural, light-brown eyes were empty as he replied one low, somewhat hoarse word and then looked forward, and away.

Tírch: Rann.

He unclipped the holster from his belt and placed the pistol on the small table near the door. As he moved further into the room she directed him.

Rann: We'll sit on the balcony. I'm going to cook you a steak, rare and bloody, just the way you like it. First I'll make you your drink.

Rann moved behind the bar in the far corner. She poured her best gin in a water glass. She added a splash of vermouth, no ice. The glass was half full. With a long swizzle stick she stirred the

mixture several times then she poured tequila into her glass, again straight, no ice. It also was half full. She moved to the balcony and handed Tirsch his drink. He had settled into a patio chair at a table that was set for two. He took the glass, sipped the drink and spoke to Rann who stood beside him waiting.

Tirsch: It's fine.

Rann: Just the way you like?

Tirsch: I said it's fine.

She gulped tequila, set her glass on the table.

Rann: Patience. Patience.

Rann went to the kitchen and returned with a silver platter with a huge seasoned porterhouse steak on it. Using her grilling fork she placed the steak on the heated grill, set the timer, four minutes. Tirsch thought she was going directly back to the kitchen but she took several steps, turned at the doorway and came back to the table to quickly gulp some tequila. Then she went to the bar and returned with a tray. On it was a nearly full bottle of gin, a bottle of vermouth and a bottle of tequila, half full. Tirsch knew he was behind so he took two gulps of gin and as Rann moved past him and headed to the kitchen he poured gin and vermouth into his glass and used a spoon to stir the liquid.

Rann returned with a large bowl of salad brimming with lettuce and raw cabbage and kale and carrots and tomatoes and cucumbers. She also had a small bowl of croutons and a bottle of vinaigrette dressing under her left arm. As she was arranging the things on the table the timer went off. She went to the grill and turned the steak over and rotated it. She adjusted the heat and set the timer, three minutes.

Tirsch could smell the meat as he stared at Rann's thick body, all six feet two inches of her, facing away from him. He could tell she had nothing on underneath those shorts. And he had clearly seen the outline of her nipples pressed against the nearly sheer,

tight blouse. The shapes of her large, firm breasts were obvious. He knew they weren't natural. He didn't concern himself with that fleeting thought. But he did think, briefly, about how he had first met her, how long he had known this volatile, violent woman and he wondered of her true age. He dismissed what could be real and if he really knew her, what would not be? And with Rann having gone through coloring, cosmetic procedures and *AAS* cycles, no one could accurately, by looking at her, determine if she was, as she would now be, perhaps in her early thirties in age.

Smoke rose into the air. Now he could not only smell the meat he could taste the juices. His mouth began to water and he had to swallow and lick his lips so as not to drool. As she started back towards the kitchen he stood to watch her walk past him and away. A tingling sensation flashed through his body and settled between his legs. It was an admixture of excitement and apprehension. He moved to stand at the railing of the balcony. He looked across the city landscape, as dusk was becoming nighttime. Below him and into the distance the lights of Hartford glowed. To his left, in the West, the sky was slowly changing to a dull blue and orange and red and to his right, far in the East the sky was already a dark-gray. Above him in the nearly cloudless sky the incipient moon was bright and black, at the same time.

Rann returned from the kitchen with a pitcher of iced water and a plate with a large, warm baked potato from the oven. Also on the plate were two small containers of sour cream and butter. She set everything on the table. She poured two glasses full of cold water. She took her glass of tequila and one of the dinner plates from the table to stand at the grill, sip from her glass and stare at the meat. Tirch glanced at her with a side eye. He had seen that look on her face before. She was heavily under the influence of the alcohol and for some reason, tequila especially,

made her highly emotional and extremely unpredictable which in her case was a dangerous combination.

They were both standing, not speaking, when the timer went off. Rann took the meat and placed it on the plate. She went to the table and put the plate next to the potato.

Rann: Alright. Come get it.

Tirch immediately sat down and grabbed a knife and fork.

Rann: Be patient. Let it rest a few minutes.

Tirch growled at her.

Tirch: I've been patient! I got to have it now!

Rann watched him as she sat down and put salad on her plate. Tirch had cut a big chunk of meat and shoved it into his mouth. It was too hot and he had to shift it around in his mouth. He made blowing sounds as he chewed. Rann stared at him and shook her head. She could see blood-like liquid drip from the side of his open mouth. Myoglobin ran onto the plate as he attacked the meat. He looked at her and the salad she had on her plate. Then he took a breath and spoke.

Tirch: This is good. Try some.

Rann: That's all yours. Don't forget the potato. And you should eat some vegetables for once in your life.

Rann carefully poured salad dressing on her salad and shifted and tossed it with her fork. Tirch stabbed and cut at the potato to open it. Then he slathered sour cream and butter on it, sprinkled it with salt and pepper and gobbled several pieces. He spoke with his mouth full.

Tirch: Let's have it, the information.

He screwed off the top to the hot sauce bottle and shook hot sauce on his potato. He thought a moment and shook some hot sauce on his steak. He sprinkled the meat with salt and pepper. Rann stared at him as he ate like an animal. She spoke mockingly and with a degree of disdain.

Rann: You want some ketchup, or steak sauce?

Tirch ignored her. He was chewing, smacking. His words were muffled from the food.

Tirch: I'm listening.

Rann ate some of her salad. She poured some water, sipped. Then she gulped some tequila. As Tirch ate, she told him all that was important from her interrogation of Savva. She said she had confirmed the existence of LGN Enterprises and emphasized the need for more research on addresses and locations.

Tirch was done eating before Rann had finished talking. Twice he had looked down at his plate. Twice already he had picked up the bone and sucked it and gnawed everything off of it and tossed it onto the potato plate, which was empty. He had moistened his middle finger on his right hand four times and ran it across the drying myoglobin on his plate and then stuck his finger into his mouth and sucked it. He wanted to pick up the plate and lick it, as he would have done had he been at home. But Rann was there so on several occasions he had looked at her directly. Other times he simply looked into the distance.

He heard her voice change. The inflection in her slightly slurred words varied. She was enraged, and in pain. Yet her heavy voice was low and intense. Finally she spoke of how Dirch, her lover and Tirch's younger brother had been found with the other two agents at the bottom of the cliff near Las Vegas. His body had been riddled with bullets and burnt beyond recognition. Now Rann was crying softly, sniffing, as tears fell from her eyes and traveled down her cheeks. Tirch was going to hand her his napkin but it was stained pinkish-red so he picked hers up and suggested she use it. She ignored him.

Rann: We would've had a baby by now, two years old, a little girl with blond hair and blue eyes. He was getting out, like I did. We were gonna have our own security business. Bodyguards to the

famous and powerful. We could've created value, been rich. I loved Dirch and I never got a chance to say goodbye.

Rann stared at Tirch. Hatred filled her teary, blue eyes.

Rann: I'm gonna find her. What I wanna know is are you with me?

Tirch leaned back in the chair that barely held his large frame. He made light, sucking noises as if he could remove the remaining pieces of meat from between his implanted pearly-white teeth. His gravelly voice came, also low and slow and soft, but without emotion.

Tirch: Dirch was an enforcer for the *W.I.A.* He was a destroyer, a killer, one of the best. Still, his end was the byproduct of his chosen profession. One will die as they lived.

Rann erupted. Her voice rose and she was yelling, cursing at Tirch. She wanted to know what that meant, what he had said? What did his senseless words have to do with anything? Her eyes grew wide. Both her hands were on the table and she grabbed her fork, shifted it and held it like a knife in her right hand. Then she seemed to calm herself as she breathed deeply and glared at Tirch. She lifted her hand and dropped the fork. She spoke through her clinched, pearly-white implanted teeth.

Rann: Are you in or out?

Tirch reached past Rann and delicately lifted one of the other embroidered cloth napkins from the table. He stuck it far into his glass of water, soaking the napkin end, spilling water. He pulled it out and spoke as he carefully wiped his fingers and hands.

Tirch: You seek vengeance and retribution for the destruction of your beloved. I cannot assist you with that. But my dear departed mother, on her death bed, eleven months, ten days and ...

He looked at the Comm device on his right wrist.

Tirch: ... thirteen hours ago, made me promise that I would seek justice for her baby boy. I'm in. Now dry your pretty eyes.

Rann dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. Her voice, once filled with emotion, was returning to normal as her sniffing eased and then ceased. She smiled slightly at Tirch. Her next words were sinister, with an essence of glee.

Rann: You can do what you do best. You'll violate her, torture her and then I'll kill the woman who was called Lena.

Tirch: Sounds like a plan to me. I'm on assignment until day thirty-one of this month. Between now and then we'll make our plans, work out the details. We'll split all costs equally. Do you agree?

Rann: I agree. You have my word.

Tirch thought a long moment as he stared left, across the city. When he looked back at Rann she was staring at him over her glass as she drank more tequila. He had seen that look twice before. He gulped some gin. He wanted to stand but couldn't move. He knew what he wanted to say but his voice failed him. Then he almost stuttered when he finally did speak.

Tirch: The meat was good, just the way I like it.

Rann continued to stare at him. He grew warm. Then she spoke, softly, seductively as she smiled just a little.

Rann: It's time for desert.

Tirch: Rann I ...

Rann: You want desert. I want desert.

Rann stood and looked down at Tirch. Her cobalt-blue eyes were glassy and so they seemingly sparkled. Her gaze held him, penetrated into and through him. Her words came hard and sure.

Rann: I've been patient. Now I've got to have it.

She picked up her Comm device that had been near her on the table. She walked past him towards the living room area.

Tirch: I have to leave tonight.

Rann: Desert has to be sweet.

He barely heard her next words.

Rann: Better be good and sweet.

As Tirch entered the living room he saw Rann standing behind the long beige couch. She tossed her Comm device over onto the cushions. Then she pulled her blouse over her head. He stood there and watched as Rann stared at him as she pulled her shorts down and stepped out and kicked them away. She was naked except for her shoes. He took several deep breaths as his forehead grew hot and he felt slightly lightheaded.

Rann: Come over here.

He moved to stand in front of her. She looked into his eyes and then she looked down and stroked him between his legs as he unbuttoned his shirt. She rubbed his pants and she could feel him growing heavy. She stepped twice away.

Rann: Drop ‘em.

Tirch unbuckled his belt and unhooked his pants and let them fall to his ankles. She moved to pull at the front of his underwear and reach inside. She stroked him as she stared into his eyes, which were half closed. They both took deep breaths and made barely audible sounds as they exhaled.

Tirch: Ahh! Ahh!

Rann: Yoo! Yoo!

They were both mumbling almost incoherently.

Tirch: Whew! Yeah! Yeah!

Rann: Ohh! Get big! Get hard! Yeah!

Tirch: Easy! Easy! Don’t squeeze it!

Rann went to her knees and pulled Tirch’s underwear down. She took him into her mouth. He was hard and erect. She sucked him. Her mouth was wet and heated and she was treating him as if he were a torpedo shaped Popsicle. When he completely disappeared down her throat he staggered a little.

Tirch: Whoa! Whoa!

She reached behind him to grab him, steady him, pull at him.

She was making juicy, slurping noises.

Rann: Umm! Umm!

He was trying to slow himself. He told her to ease up. She pushed him away. He almost stumbled over the pants and underwear at his feet. She stood, turned and bent and draped herself over the back of the couch. Her low, slurred voice was insistent, demanding.

Rann: Get it! Take it! Get it now!

Her long legs were spread, her rear end towards him. He quickly stepped forward. His pants and underwear made flapping sounds. He grabbed his extended appendage with his left hand and rubbed it against her firm body as he searched for the entrance he sought. When he found the wet syrupy opening he went inside it and her body seemed to wrap around him as he began to thrust, slowly at first. Then as he moved a little faster and pushed a little harder her flesh seemed to pulse and massage him. She was in spasms, contracting around him as she moaned and cursed him and urged him on. Then her voice rose as she ordered him.

Rann: Bugger me! Bugger me!

He pulled back enough to pull it out. He grabbed it and moved it up a little, searching. Then he found the other spot, the other hole, tight and somewhat dry but still slightly moist and even more heated. He moved it down, to where he had been. He rubbed it there to gather some of the thick syrup. He went up to where she wanted him to go.

Rann: There! Right there!

Tirch moved inside her, slowly at first, against the resistance. Then she relaxed and the hole in her body opened up to him.

Rann: Get it! Ram it!

Now Tirch was moving back and then forward.

Rann: Harder! Ow! Ow! Ow!

Tirch was pushing forward. When he pulled back she moved forward. Then when he moved forward she pushed back. Her hands were holding on to the back of the couch. Her head would drop and then as her head came up her back would arch. Tirch had both his hands on her waist. Then with his left hand he grabbed her hair, holding and pulling her head. He was making low growling sounds. Rann's voice was raised, moaning, higher, a slight whine-like scream emanating from deep inside her. They were moving in sync, making noises in unison, their bodies slapping together.

Rann: Stretch it! Stretch it!

Tirch struck her rear with his open right hand, hard.

Rann: Don't bruise me! Hurt me! Hurt me Dirch!

Now she was yelling, hollering one name.

Rann: Dirch! Dirch? Dirch?

Tirch heard but didn't hear his baby brother's name being uttered. He didn't care. He was too far-gone. Then as he drew closer to the destination his voice changed and his sounds changed. He released Rann. He couldn't move. He was paralyzed in place as Rann continued to grind against him. She let out a long, low scream as if in pain.

Rann: Nooo! Nooo!

He was almost there! Then she pushed back on him with such force that he stumbled backwards, losing contact and nearly falling down. Rann stood and when she turned he could see another look he had seen before. Her face was contorted with hatred and rage and her once cobalt-blue eyes seemed to have darkened into blackness. She stared at him as if struggling to recognize him as he reached down to grab at his underwear and pants. His once hard erection was quickly becoming flaccid and was shrinking from fear. Not only was Rann glaring into his eyes she was shifting her sight down, to a point between his legs as he

frantically reached for his clothes. Rann hollered at him and shiver went through his body and it wasn't a pleasant sensation.

Rann: You ain't Dirch!

Then she was crying again. She was threatening him. She was cursing him and calling him vile names.

Rann: Get out! Get out!

As Tirch rushed towards the door Rann was climbing over the back of the couch. She reached for her Comm device and rolled onto her back as Tirch grabbed his holster. Rann's legs were open with her left foot on the floor and her right across the back of the couch. Tirch could hear her weeping as he tried to open the door. It was locked. He knew one of her pistols was on the table near her. Then she entered the code and he heard the door unlock. He snatched it open and slammed it closed behind him. He leaned against the door and took several deep breaths. He slowed his beating heart.

The elevator had remained open. He got on it and pressed the button. He glanced up into the camera with a frown and as the elevator descended he clipped his weapon to his belt. Then he buttoned his shirt. He stepped from the elevator and moved towards the door to exit the building. It was unlocked from upstairs and as he pushed it open he spoke softly, out loud, to himself as he walked towards his vehicle.

Tirch: Escape from the spider. Not the black widow. Not the brown widow. The true widow. And she won't even remember the web she spun.

When he reached his vehicle he was softly cursing Rann and making comments about her mental state. He got in and paused to gather himself. He glanced in the rearview mirror and cursed himself and made comments about his own mental functioning. He pressed a button on a panel beneath a monitor. As he put in the coordinates for his arrival point he chastised himself. He told

himself he knew better and he referenced his own stupidity. He set the speed range. He activated auto-drive. As he reclined his seat into a comfortable position he thought about Rann. She had gotten there where she had wanted to go. He had not arrived. He knew she had purposely denied him. Again he cursed her. As he engaged auto-drive and the vehicle moved towards the street he thought of his wife waiting for him at home. And as he began to drift off into a doze he reached between his legs and caressed himself. He wanted to sleep for at least the next two hours. Then he thought of his target. He recalled how Rann had described her. The *Escura* woman was in his mind as almost a daydream. He couldn't see her. But he could feel her. The woman named Lena.

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

It was a normal mid-August day in the desert. The time was nearing 11:30 a.m. and the temperature was already 95 degrees, on the way to what was predicted to be a 115-degree high.

Bige got up from the long, wide desk in his office area and walked to the sliding doors that led to a section of his large backyard. His soft cloth shoes made his steps nearly inaudible upon the plush carpet. And despite his nearly six feet eight inches in height he moved in an effortless manner, his powerful arms and legs in rhythm, a glide, with a fluidity that gave hint to the boxer and wrestler he had been in his youth.

He stared out, thinking. He could have seen the tall palm trees and shorter, stubby, prickly cactus plants, had he looked at them. But he was contemplating his next move so he ignored the gladioli and cornflowers and marigolds and all the other flowers and plants that Bella, his mate, had planted.

He concentrated on the tall cinder-block fence in the distance that was constructed like a wall around the rear and the sides and

part of the front of his impressive, sprawling home north of the main part of the city. After a while he spoke to Fausti, his most trusted associate. He spoke without turning, as if were talking to the glass in front of him. His deep voice was soft and clear.

Bige: We are now in confidential mode, understood?

Fausti, because of the question also spoke softly in his slightly high-pitched voice.

Fausti: Yes. I understand.

Bige turned to face his second in command. The office door was open and it was at this moment Bella entered. She was wearing a beige summer linen dress and was barefoot and yet was still over six feet two inches in height and quite thick. She moved as a dancer and the material of her dress rustled just a little as she breezed past the sitting Fausti and went to the desk. Fausti noticed the beige she wore was as the beige linen that Bige wore and he smiled and made note of how they often wore matching outfits. She carried a tray with a pitcher of lemonade, a small silver bucket of ice and two glasses. Bella's smooth voice filled the room as she set the tray on the desk.

Bella: Lunch will be ready in thirty minutes. Where do you want to eat?

Bige: We'll come to the nook.

Fausti noticed how that pale light-brown color of their clothes complimented, yet was in contrast to the *Castanba* skin of Bige and the *Castanba-clara* essence of Bella.

Bella: Is it cool enough? Should I adjust the air conditioning?

Bella brushed at her long auburn hair and pulled it back over her ears.

Bige: I'm fine. What about you?

Fausti: I'm good.

Bige: Thank you my dear. I look forward to your sour concoction puckering my lips.

Their hazel-colored eyes seemed to sparkle as they made endearing faces and kissing noises at each other. Bella smiled broadly and as she turned to leave she teased Fausti as she usually did by looking at him directly in his brown eyes and winking at him, which always made him blush.

Bige moved to sit on the edge of the front of his desk. He looked at Fausti a long moment. He noticed his *Parda-clara* skin was more sun-touched than usual and that his dark-blond hair was at his shoulders, longer than normal. He also observed how the large chair seemed to engulf his thin five feet seven inch frame. He reached to pull at, measure his own medium-length light-brown hair.

Fausti looked up. He watched Bige and waited patiently for him to speak. He considered this man not only his leader but also his most trusted associate, and best friend. This man he had known for over thirty years, since when he had been in his early thirties and Bige was in his late teens, throughout the years, although younger, not only had protected him but had assisted him, in becoming what could be considered by most standards, rich in value.

He saw Bige move his hand from his hair to his chin, rub it thoughtfully and then brush his fingertips against his neck, almost gently. He had seen Bige in this position before so he knew the desk could support his nearly three hundred pounds. The short sleeve custom made shirt contained but did not strain against his arms and chest as he made these deliberate moves and with purpose, he pointed.

Bige: You've been in the sun. That's a natural tan. And your hair is longer.

Fausti rose and poured lemonade in two glasses. Although the liquid was quite cold he dropped an ice cube in his own glass.

Fausti: You want any ice?

Big: No. I like my bitterness straight.

Fausti handed him a glass. He sipped some of his drink.

Fausti: Then I will assume both your statements and my answers are in strict confidence.

Big tasted his drink and made a face and sucking sounds.

Big: Bella outdid herself. Yes, both. But also everything related to my problem.

Fausti: Does this mean I also have a problem?

Big: Under these circumstances, yes. Ein is threatening my good friend again.

Fausti: Ein threatens Lena?

Big: Yes.

Fausti: Then Ein threatens my friend also.

Big: Correct.

Fausti: I never liked that *Canelada DM*. He has a rather strange shaped head that makes him appear sneaky.

Big: I never noticed. I'll have to study his head when I see it.

Big sipped his drink and made a scrunched face.

Fausti: We addressed this issue last year. He was advised if his threats were taken seriously that there could be some serious repercussions. His remarks are fueled by alcohol.

Big: Alcohol can be dangerous.

Fausti looked at his glass and then held it up to see better the liquid and pieces of lemons. He sipped his drink.

Big: Perhaps his head is not only of an odd shape it may also be abnormally hard.

Fausti: Or empty.

Big: I'd like to thump it and see what it feels like and how it sounds,

Big took his glass and moved around the desk, sat in his rolling swivel chair and turned towards the rear doors and then continued to turn until he faced Fausti.

Bige: As you so aptly put it, we shall take his words seriously this time. We will treat his threats as real.

Fausti: Why this time?

Bige: Why not this time? It's as good of a time as any. Besides, I'm tired of him.

Fausti: I understand his animosity towards our friend for the destruction of his brothers and ...

Bige: It's hatred.

Fausti: ... yes, hatred. And he doesn't seem to be able to let it go. He seeks justice.

Bige: There's no such thing.

Fausti: I only heard the rumors. I never knew the pertinent details.

Bige: I kept that from you. Now, shall I spill them to you?

Fausti: Yes, by all means do so. Take me behind the curtains, so to speak.

Bige turned in his chair, completely around. When he faced Fausti again his hazel-hued eyes were excited and he had a mischievous smile on his face.

Bige: The oldest brother, Ain, residing in California, had for several years been pressing my friend ...

Fausti: ... our friend

Bige: Yes. Indeed. Our friend. Had been attempting to put pressure on Lena to trade her property, her home here in Las Vegas for some of his property. She respectfully declined. Ain doesn't know that she has found out he has guaranteed the property next to her and her property, to a Century City group as a means to acquire land on Las Vegas Boulevard that the Century City, California group controlled. Are you with me?

Fausti: Yes, I'm right beside you.

Bige: Two years ago the family next to our friend, the husband, Si, the wife, the eleven-year-old daughter, the middle child, a

nine-year-old daughter and the youngest, the seven-year-old son, disappeared. Within two days, before anyone really knows the family is missing, Iin and Uin move into the house and make claim to the property. They contend it has been abandoned.

Bige sipped his drink and then held his glass out.

Bige: One cube please. Put a cut on it.

Fausti rose, dropped an ice cube in the glass and sat back down.

Bige: Now, mind you, our friend adored that family. They were much more than neighbors. She had been there at the birth of those children. I had been there and sat by the pool as she taught those children how to swim. The father had been in business with both Iin and Uin and now the family was gone. The only surviving relative, the mother of the father and husband would be denied her rightful claim to the property. The next step was to acquire our friend's property. When she disappears they would again utilize the *CMU* process to seize control of that which they had long desired. With the knowledge we acquired we put a plan in place. At an opportune time I provided the information she needed. Not only who was in the house next to her, but to avoid unnecessary destruction, who was not there in the house. Late one night Lena goes over the wall that separates the properties. She gain's access to the house. She breaks one enforcer's neck. She chokes the other enforcer to death. She then plunges, while they are naked in bed, large daggers through the hearts of Iin and Uin.

Fausti: So that's why the story goes that they were daggered.

Bige: That originated from the cleaners who removed the bodies. Not only did they talk, they took gruesome photos that they shared.

Fausti: How repulsive.

Bige sipped his drink.

Bige: This sourness should be repulsive but I enjoy it. Some people are attracted to repulsive things. You've never seen the images?

Fausti: No. And I don't want to either.

Bige: She contacted me after her return from her destructive activities. She told me to notify the cleaners that bodies awaited and the next day to initiate the process so Si's mother could gain possession of the property. I asked her if justice had been served? She said her mission had been one of vengeance and retribution. For me it had been both business, and personal, a wonderful combination.

Bige paused. He was thinking, remembering.

Bige: What a waste of those beautiful daggers. I had tried to get her to give me one from her collection. I even offered to pay. I had seen them in her weapon's room. She could have used steak knives or long dull screwdrivers. Anyway, she gifted me a beautiful dagger of my own for my birthday last year. I'll show it to you.

Fausti: What happened to Ain?

Bige: Lena made him disappear. He was never to be seen or heard from again.

Fausti: Her reach is far.

Bige: More important, her hands are heavy. They were fools to engage in vicious, treacherous actions and remain so close to her. They made it easy. She has told me on many occasions how much she detests treachery.

Fausti: What do you want done about Ein?

Bige: He's heavily involved in drug selling. That drug business is dangerous. Drug deals are notorious for going bad. I want him to vanish forever. He is not to be a legend or a rumor. Make him a mystery.

Fausti: Like, whatever happened to Ein?

Bige: When you and your team have a plan, present it to me.

Fausti: So that's how we got the Boulevard land?

Bige: Yes. Lena and I made the Century City group an offer they found impossible to refuse.

The intercom box on the desk buzzed and then clicked. Bella's voice could be heard.

Bella: Lunch is almost ready, come on.

Bige pressed a button on the box and responded.

Bige: We're on the way.

The big man rose and came around the desk. He carried his glass. Fausti stood.

Bige: Bring that tray for me please.

Fausti grabbed the tray and as they crossed the room and moved down the long hallway, they conversed.

Bige: I wonder will we recognize what my beloved has created for us?

Fausti: What was that we had the other day?

Bige: I don't even remember. And I don't remember because I couldn't pronounce it.

Fausti: I thought it was quite tasty.

Bige: But was it filling?

Bige looked over, and down at Fausti, who didn't speak.

Bige: Just as I thought. Whatever happened to a lunch with a beef sandwich and fried potatoes?

Fausti: Are you going to tell Lena about our project?

Bige: Fausti, my friend, not only does Lena have a long reach and heavy hands, she also has amazing hearing. She'll find out.

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

There was only the vast nothingness and simple flatness of the dry, desert-like terrain. The Sandia Mountains, rising just east of

Albuquerque were fading into the distance behind them as the somewhat luxurious, dark-brown, hybrid utility vehicle, that was also styled as a sedan, headed south on Highway 25 towards the area of the Caballo Reservoir. Deconstruction had succeeded in accordance to human imagination. One hundred years in the past, before the pandemic, it was inconceivable that within a radius of two hundred miles of the once teeming city, the largest in New Mexico, that there would be, could possibly be the absence of not just humanity but also the trappings and obvious examples of people.

There were no buildings rising, nor standing, of adobe bricks and blocks or pastel colored stucco. Nothing was shaped or designed into something in such a way that humans would be shielded from the blistering rays of the sun and the punishing heat such as that which beat down upon and surrounded the air-conditioned vehicle that appeared to be on a leisurely ride, to nowhere.

Yet, there was an occasional remnant of a thing that had once possessed the quality of something similar to that of a home that had once been part of a community that was contained within a small city. There were also pieces of something like a farmhouse where a farmer had lived and once grew pecans and onions and chiles. Perhaps the huge monstrous deconstruction machines had somehow missed an area, a place, or someone had rebuilt something for some reason only for that rebirth to go the way of that which had befallen New Mexico once before, during the Great Extinction, death and the crumbling of life into the earth.

It was 1 p.m. and outside the temperature was ninety-five degrees and climbing. Inside the automobile it was a comfortable seventy degrees. The four occupants rode in silence the first forty miles. The vehicle was running on solar power so the only barely discernible sounds came from the moving engine parts, the tires

on the heated pavement and the low music from the speaker system.

Mal, a young, slim *Parda-clara DM* with long brown hair was driving. Pada, a tall thick *Branca DM* with a large, round baldhead rode next to him. Behind Mal was the leader of this excursion, Dyer, a somewhat short, middle-aged *Palida DM* with medium-length, straight white hair. Next to Dyer rode Mapa, the identical twin brother of Pada, only he didn't have a baldhead. His skin was white, as was his brother's. His eyes were blue, as were his brother's, but his head was not as it, through heredity, should have been, either completely or partially bald. His similarly large, round head was full of transplanted black curly hair. They all carried handguns and there were long guns in holders in the front and back seats. Suddenly they could hear thumping and bumping coming from the trunk, which is where Vid rode. Dyer turned to Mapa.

Dyer: What's he doing awake? He was supposed to be out for the ride.

Mapa: The drug must have worn off.

Pada: You must not have given him enough.

Dyer yelled out and then spoke directly to Mapa.

Dyer: Pull over! Touch him again.

Mal pulled over as Mapa opened the case at his side and removed a black object that looked like a small handgun that had a round two-cylinder barrel. He adjusted the amount of sedative. Mal pressed a button on the dash area and the trunk lid crept open as Mapa got out. He went to the rear and stared down at the secured form.

Vid was bound with tape and chained at his feet. He was bound at his knees. His hands were bound and chained across his chest. Cloth had been stuffed into his mouth and then his mouth had been taped. Finally a black cloth bag had been placed over

his head and tied at his neck. He was dressed in gray suit pants and white shirt. He wore gray soft shoes.

As Mapa looked at Vid, he saw him try to struggle against his restraints. He heard the muffled sounds. Then using the injection system he delivered the powerful drug into the front of Vid's throat and watched as the movements and sounds ceased. As he returned to the car the trunk lid slowly lowered.

They rode in silence for another ten miles and then Pada reached and shut the music off and then half turned towards the rear. His deep voice, sounding just like his brother, rose slightly as he addressed the leader.

Pada: Come on! You said you'd tell us what happened.

Mapa: Tell it! Tell it all!

Dyer chuckled and shook his head. He stretched his legs out and settled back. He glanced up and into the rearview mirror to see if he could catch Mal looking back at him. When he began to speak his smooth voice was elevated just a little. He wanted to make sure all three could hear each word he spoke. Although his words were direct he didn't look at anyone specifically. He simply stared out through the front tinted window. He could see beyond that which unfolded before them. He could see back into the recent past.

Dyer: Kit started it all.

Mapa: And two years later Vid ends up in the trunk.

Dyer: Business is going good. Our casino is doing well and we're acquiring more property. But Ike's is both the largest and most prosperous casino in the state. People are coming to Ike's place and our place from eastern Arizona and western Texas. On top of that, New Mexico and Albuquerque's permanent population is growing. But Kit wasn't satisfied.

Pada: He was never satisfied.

Dyer: He wanted to buy in on Ike's business. He made a more

than generous offer for ten percent of the casino. Ike politely refused and his two equal partners declined to sell any of their part.

Mapa: That would be Lott ...

Pada: ... and Lena.

Dyer: Correct. So Kit comes up with a plan. He has the head of his security ...

Mapa: ... who was Vid.

Dyer: ... to direct his cohorts to beat and rob customers, the well-off ones, when they departed Ike's secure zone. So Ike had to not only pay for their medical costs, he had to replace their financial losses. I'm sure they suspected Kit was behind the attacks but had no direct proof. Ike had his head of security ...

Pada: That would be Lott.

Dyer: ... increase patrols, expand the secure zone and they began escorting their most important customers to safety. The actions of Kit were affecting Ike's business. If they simply destroy Kit and others around him, including security, war most likely breaks out. Then Lena comes to town.

Pada: Uh.

Mapa: Oh.

Dyer: Soon after she arrives we're sitting in the office and Kit is contacted by Ike. Kit activates the speaker mode and so I can hear everything. Ike tells Kit that Lena has looked over his offer and decided to sell him ten percent of her share. But first Kit has to agree to cease the attacks. Kit insists he has nothing to do with the despicable, unfortunate incidents.

Pada: He lied.

Dyer: Of course. But Ike explains that unless Kit agrees, Lena would not sell. By agreeing Kit would be admitting he was the one orchestrating the hostilities. He kept insisting he had no involvement but finally, reluctantly, he agreed and played it off by

saying he would find out who the perpetrators were and take care of them.

Dyer looked out of his side window. He could see the barren earth seem to shimmer as the temperature continued to rise.

Dyer: How much longer?

Mal: About twenty minutes.

Dyer thought a long moment. He could see Pada had shifted in his seat, watching him, waiting. He turned to observe Mapa staring at him, expectantly.

Dyer: Once Kit agrees, Ike tells him Lena wanted papers drawn up that she could sign and for Kit to send him copies and get his payment ready to be transferred. Ike says that he has Lena's instructions and proceeded to state them. She would come to his off-site office at three the next afternoon. She would come alone. No one could have a weapon and there were to be no weapons in the room. His second in command had to be there.

Pada: That would be you.

Dyer: His head of security was to be there.

Mapa: Vid.

Dyer: And no more than two others.

Pada: Who was that?

Dyer: There was a guard, an *ND*, and Mal.

Both the twins were incredulous. They looked at the driver.

Pada: What? Mal, you were there? I don't believe it!

Mapa: All this time? You never told us you were at the infamous meeting!

Pada: Mal, you're part of the legend!

Dyer was smiling slightly, amused, and he caught Mal glance at him in the rearview mirror, without expression. Mal spoke, but he was far from excited.

Mal: Yeah, I was there.

Dyer: Sure enough, at three o'clock we can hear the downstairs

door chime as she entered. We can barely hear her coming up the stairs but we can clearly hear her heels clicking on the short wooden hallway from the stairs to the door. The *ND* is standing there with the door open. We can see her when she steps through the doorway. The *ND* closes the door and lifts a detector to wave around her and I can hear her voice. It's kind of soft, but it's like heavy.

Mapa: Sultry.

Dyer: She asks Kit if she looks like she has a weapon on her and she stops and puts both her hands on her hips.

Pada: Posing.

Dyer: You two wanted to hear it all so here it is. Lena is five feet nine, maybe five feet ten inches tall and thick. And I don't know what kind of steroids she's on because she doesn't look hard. She looked firm and natural and somewhat soft even.

Pada pointed at Dyer.

Pada: Statuesque!

Dyer: Yes. That's a good word. She has a deep dark-brown color like chocolate and her skin seemed to glow. I don't know what color she is now, but at that time her color was natural looking too, not like that alteration tinge to it. She wore dark-red lipstick on her full lips and her hair was natural. It was so dark brown it appeared black and it was natural-style and fluffy and curly and not too long, not too short and it was rounded around her head.

Mapa: Like a halo.

Dyer: Her dark-red dress was short and so tight that I wondered how she could get in it.

Pada: Or out of it?

Dyer: I looked down at her shoes and they were a darker red than her dress

Mapa: Burgundy

Dyer: And her heels were probably four, maybe five inches high

so she was almost six feet tall and Kit commented on her shoes, saying he adored them and how much he liked pretty feet. Then he told her she couldn't have concealed so much as a thin blade on her body and he motioned the *ND* away from her. She was covered in jewelry. Her dangling earrings were made of diamonds and gold and she had gold and platinum and rhodium on her fingers and wrists and around her neck and as she strolled forward she was glittering.

Pada: Sparkling!

Mapa: Flashing!

Dyer: Kit is beside the bar, tapping out his drug stick. Then he puts away these two bowls of white and yellow drug powder he was snorking on. I see she can see this and I know she can smell the smoke. The *ND* remains near the door and the three of us are standing in a line, like we're in school and the teacher is looking us over. She walks over to me and as she's passing by, slowly I might add, she looks me directly in my eyes. Her dark-brown eyes had a piercing essence to them and as she pauses a moment it was as if she was looking deep into my very soul. But on the way there she raced past my heart and caused it to speed up and skip and then the pit of my stomach dropped into my shoes. I knew she was sizing me up, checking out what she had heard about me. I didn't show her anything. I held her gaze and then pulled the shades down.

Mapa: Yeah! Yeah! I like that!

Pada: Pull the shades down! I'll have to remember that!

Mapa: The eyes, the windows to the soul.

Dyer: She stared at Vid, next in line and then she took a few steps and stopped in front of Mal.

Pada: Uh.

Mapa: Oh.

Dyer: I lean forward a little, look past Vid to my right and I see

Lena standing in front of Mal, looking down, staring at him. Now picture this. Mal was a little thinner then and that long brown hair was much shorter and that tanned *Parda-clara* skin you see now wasn't tanned then.

Pada: Pasty.

Mapa: Pale.

Dyer: She asked him what his name was. Mal told her his name, barely. Then she asked him how old he was. I could see him trying to swallow.

Mapa: His heart?

Dyer: Mal stammers out his age.

Pada: How old Mal?

Dyer: When Mal says nineteen, Kit laughed and told Lena she was intimidating the young individual. He said Mal was fresh and had never been in the presence of someone like her. Kit is saying this as he's moving from the bar area. I remember he had on this off-white suit, with a silver shirt, no tie, and white straw shoes.

Pada: Dressed up.

Mapa: As usual.

Pada: Long.

Mapa: And tall.

Dyer: The jewelry on his fingers and wrists and the chain around his neck sparkled and ...

Pada: ... glittered.

Mapa: And flashed.

Dyer: And his medium-length golden hair was wavy and every strand was in place and his dark-green eyes were glazed from the drugs and Kit, the dynamic one strolled forth as Lena walks back past me almost to the door. Then she turns and comes back our way. I can smell her perfume in the air.

Pada: Intoxicating.

Dyer: Our heads are probably moving at the same time in the

same direction, watching her. She comes past me again and stops in front of Vid.

Pada: Uh.

Mapa: Oh.

Dyer: She steps towards him. He steps back. She pulls open his suit coat and behold there's a pistol holstered underneath his arm.

Mapa: Uh.

Pada: Oh.

Dyer: She wants to know what have we here? There were not supposed to be any weapons. Then as she moves towards the table in the middle of the room Kit is blaming Vid and making excuses. She ignores him.

Mal turns left onto a two-lane road. They are now heading east. In the distance barely discernible, there appeared to be several structures of some kind. Dyer paused to look at what was ahead and then continued.

Dyer: Then Lena cuts Kit off by asking if the papers on the table are for her to sign? He says everything is in order and for her to read them over. As she begins to look over the three pieces of paper Kit is talking. He thanks her for allowing him to purchase part of her share. He says he hopes Ike and Lott will come around and in the future he can purchase a little of their portion of the business. He veers off and tells her how wonderful she appears to him and how she was always his dream and that his dream had gone unfulfilled. I can see the drugs have got him warm because as he's watching her look over the papers he's sniffing and patting his forehead with his silk handkerchief and she says he was forever the romantic. He says not many have gotten away from him ...

Mapa: Including definitely not the ones he raped ...

Pada: ... and killed.

Dyer: ... and I'm thinking to myself he should stop talking, just

shut his mouth. Be quiet.

Pada: What was you thinking Mal?

Mal: Nothing.

Mapa: His mind was blank.

Pada: It was empty.

Dyer: She's looking at the last piece of paper and she reminds him that he had agreed to cease hostilities against them. Kit says he had nothing to do with that.

Pada: He lied.

Mapa: Again.

Dyer: Lena wants to know what he had told Ike and Kit said Ike was insistent and that he agreed but he swore on his word that he had nothing to do with the attacks.

Mapa: He lied.

Pada: Again.

Dyer: Lena picks up the pen on the table and looks at it and rolls it a little in her fingers. She looks directly at Kit for a long moment, no smile, no expression, nothing. Then she starts signing the papers. One ...

Pada: two ...

Mapa: ... three.

Dyer: When she's done she places the pen on the table and heads towards the door. He moves to the table to check the papers and then he offers to toast the new venture and says he had her favorite champagne on ice. She turns back to him and says no thanks. Then as if she was thinking about something she says, how about a kiss to seal the deal? And I swear, this has only happened to me a few times, I can count the times on one hand, but the hair on the back of my neck tingled and stood up.

Mapa: Uh.

Pada: Oh.

Dyer: I can see by the look on his face that Kit can't believe what

he had just heard. He doesn't move and then she takes two steps forward and opens her arms a little and extends them a little like, here I am come get it.

Mapa: Oh!

Pada: Oh!

Dyer: And I'm looking at her lips and she smiles and I can see this gold in her mouth flash I'm looking from her to Kit and from him to her. He stuffs his handkerchief into the front breast pocket of his coat and moves to her and when he got to her, to take her into his arms, she pushed his arms down and took his face into her hands.

Pada: She kissed him!

Mapa: She kissed him? She gave him a slob?

Dyer: I never saw their lips touch. I can't say. But his eyes were half closed and then they opened wide as she eased him away. Kit was breathing, like he was trying to catch his breath. His tongue was darting in and out of his mouth.

Pada: Like a snake!

Mapa: Like a serpent!

Pada: Same thing.

Mapa: A serpent is a sly, treacherous person.

Pada: Perfect my brother! Perfect!

Dyer looked from one twin to the other.

Dyer: Are you two done?

Pada: Go on!

Mapa: Go on!

Dyer: He grabbed himself between his legs and started rubbing.

Mapa: He was itching!

Pada: Crabbing! Jacking!

Dyer: He asked what was this ecstasy?

Pada: Ecstasy?

Dyer: Then he was saying, yes, yes, and rapture, over and over.

Mapa: Rapture?

Dyer: He wanted to know what drug was doing this? And his body shook in spasms.

Pada: What?

Dyer: Yes, spasms! Orgasmic spasms! He was shuddering, harder and harder and stroking himself, faster and faster.

Pada and Mapa were silent, looking at Dyer with wide eyes and opened mouths.

Dyer: We're all staring at him as he staggers sideways and falls to the floor on his back. He's moaning and jerking, like in pleasure and then he begins to yell, in pain. He's pleading, make it stop, make it stop! He's hollering that he's had enough! And as Vid stands there, frozen in place I can see Lena, out of the corner of my eye, walk over to him, open his coat and take his weapon. Kit is on the floor twisting and kicking and screaming and then his legs begin to draw up and bend and his feet begin to turn completely around and his bones were cracking.

Mal's voice came forth. His words were loud and anguished. Mapa and Pada were surprised and looked at him and then back at Dyer when he continued.

Mal: His bones sounded like gunshots!

Dyer: Kit lost his voice. He couldn't holler but he wasn't dead because his eyes were rolling in his head and his mouth was moving and when his hands and arms began to break the *ND* covered their eyes and stumbled back and almost passed out and Mal started vomiting into Kit's favorite chair.

Mapa and Pada turned to Mal and yelled at him with derision.

Pada: You puked?

Mada: You threw up?!

Pada: In Kit's favorite chair?!

Then Mal started yelling. He was waving his hands and shifting around in his seat.

Mal: His hands were turning around his wrists and his fingers were bending backwards and breaking and he drew up into a ball and his eyes turned black and his face dried up and sunk into his skull! His whole body shriveled up! It was horrible! Horrible, I tell you!

Mapa and Pada spoke, trying to calm Mal down.

Mapa: Alright. Alright.

Pada: You're making me ill. Watch the road.

Dyer: Lena goes to Kit, looks at him for a moment and then reaches down and takes his silk handkerchief from his pocket and walks over and hands it to Mal. She says something about it must have been the yellow powder and that, that stuff should never be mixed. She points Vid's pistol at him and then me and tells us to go to the window and look outside. We go and we see Lott and her fully armed security force below us staring up at the window.

Pada: Uh.

Mapa: Oh.

Dyer: When we turn to her she tells me I'm now in charge and that I can stay with him, and she points the pistol at whatever that was on the floor, or I can align my organization with her. She wants to know who will it be?

Pada: You Lena!

Mapa: You Lena!

Dyer: Of course, the four of us responded immediately.

Pada: Emphatically!

Mapa: Convincingly?

Dyer: Lena instructs Mal to tear up the three sheets of paper and sprinkle the pieces on Kit.

Mapa: Like salt?

Pada: Or garlic?

Dyer: She welcomed us all and told us to follow her out so that we could survive this episode. I was directly behind her on the

stairs and I could hear her say how much she detested treachery.

Pada turned to the front to see what lay ahead. He and Mapa both spoke softly, in awe.

Pada: Wow.

Mapa: So that's what happened.

Dyer turned to look out of his window. Mal was pulling off-road. They rode in silence along a narrow unpaved road, looking and watching with anticipation. Then they pulled into a large, doorless structure that had years and years in the past, been a barn. It was one of several remaining buildings of what had once been a farm.

The vehicle pulled towards the far wall and then turned around and backed up. The engine was shut off. Mal opened the trunk and the four of them got out and went to the rear. They all looked down into the trunk for a moment. Pada reached in and got gloves and handed them out to Mapa and Mal. Then the three began to struggle to lift Vid from the trunk. Pada was pulling on his right arm as Mapa was trying to lift him from underneath his shoulders. Mal pulled his legs up and turned them and dangled them over the side. That didn't work so he pushed his legs back in. Mapa and Pada were fussing and cursing at their plight.

Mapa: It wasn't this hard getting him in.

Pada: He was standing up. We pushed him in.

Mapa: He's heavy, like cement.

Pada: That's dead weight.

Mapa: He ain't dead.

Pada: Unconscious weight, same thing.

All three moved to his upper body and arms and they finally got him out and placed him on the floor on his back.

Dyer: Wake him up.

Mapa went to the case and removed the pistol-like injection

system. He rotated the multiple barreled settings to the stimulant, injected Vid in the throat and returned the injector to its case. He came back to stand with the other three and stare at the gagged, bound, and shackled form. It wasn't long before Vid began to slowly move. Then as if he was fully conscious and once again understood what was happening to him he began to twist and turn and jump, as best he could. Next, sounds could be heard as Pada and Mapa each grabbed a leg and began to drag him towards a hole that had been dug in the dirt floor. The muffled expressions came forth as protests and pleading and rage, all which had been heard as they had secured him several hours ago.

Pada: He's angry.

Mapa: Like a wasp.

Pada: You mad Vid?

As they reached the hole Dyer began to direct.

Dyer: I want him in there face up.

Mal brought three shovels that had been on top of a pile of straw in the nearby corner.

Pada: What difference does it make?

Mapa: Just dump him in.

Dyer: Face up I said!

Vid could hear everything that was being discussed. His movements intensified and his vocal utterances grew louder. Dyer moved to stand at the end of the hole and lean to peer in.

Mapa: You said deep. Is that deep enough? Look at all the dirt we dug out.

Dyer: That'll do.

Pada turned to Mal.

Pada: How do we get him in there face up?

Mal: How am I supposed to know?

Mapa: You're the technical one.

Mal: Technology. I'm the head of technology.

Pada: Same thing.

Mal was thinking. He looked at the hole. He looked at Vid.

Mal: Put him right at the edge, at the side, face down. Then we'll roll him over into the hole and he'll land on his back.

Pada: That might work.

The three pushed and pulled and moved Vid into position.

Mapa: You don't want him tortured a little? We could break his feet or toes or something.

Pada: Whack him in the face with a shovel.

Dyer: He's going to suffocate to death. Isn't that torture enough?

Mapa: That's not really painful though, is it?

Pada yelled at Vid.

Pada: Vid, your wife sits on your cousin's lap!

Mapa: Ow! That hurts!

Dyer: Come on! Come on! It's hot in here!

Mal: It's hot in that hole.

Mapa: Technically?

Mal: Really.

They moved into position.

Mapa: On the count of three. One. Two. Three.

They flipped Vid into the hole and leaned forward to peer in and watch him land. He hit with a dull thud. They could see, barely that he was on his right side. He teetered there for an agonizing moment and then flopped onto his back, face up.

Mapa: Maybe he broke his shoulder. He landed pretty hard.

Pada: You jus want something broken, don't you?

Mapa: I never liked him. He was mean.

Vid was moving and sounding again.

Mal: He was vicious! He was with Kit when those women were raped and murdered!

The three turned to stare at the young man. They were surprised at the intensity in his voice and the look on his face.

Dyer: Get the lime.

Pada went to the wall and pulled a large bag of lime from there to the hole. He began to rip the top open. Dyer moved to stand beside the hole.

Dyer: Vid, this is Dyer. You're in that grave because you had the nerve to threaten Lena's life. This is not personal. I'm sure you can understand that. You threaten her life you're threatening Ike's life and Lott's life. Lena's knowledge of your threat jeopardizes my life.

Now the other three spoke with force.

Pada: And my life!

Mapa: And my life!

Mal: And my life!

Dyer: In these cases, death is bad for business.

Dyer motioned to Pada.

Dyer: Sprinkle that lime on him.

Pada: Like seasoning?

Dyer: Yeah, like seasoning.

Vid was thrashing and kicking. His hollering was of course muffled. As Pada was pouring lime over Vid, Mapa turned to Mal.

Mapa: Throw up on him. Add some sauce to the seasoning.

Pada chuckled as he tossed the empty bag into the hole. Mal glared at Mapa.

Mal: Is that supposed to be a joke?

Pada: Relax Mal. Mapa only teases those he respects.

The three grabbed shovels.

Dyer: Start at the feet.

They began to shovel and push dirt into the hole. They were all silent now. The only sounds came from the shoveling and scraping and the dirt plopping and Vid as he spoke his dying language in his muted words.

Mal: Why did Vid threaten Lena? Was it over Kit? Were they related?

Pada: He and Kit were related by marriage, not blood.

Mapa: Does it matter?

Dyer: No, it doesn't matter. He had been warned last year. Vid was a fool.

Mal: A vicious fool!

Eventually they were done. They patted down the dirt on the grave with their shovels and walked and stomped on it. They wiped their damp brows with their cloth handkerchiefs. Mapa turned to Dyer who was staring at the grave, at the mound that was left to mark what lay beneath.

Mapa: It's done. You satisfied?

Pada: Now let's put some of that hay on top that we brought. The final touch.

Mal: That's not hay. It's straw.

Pada: What's the difference?

Mapa: Tell him the difference.

Pada grabbed a rusty pitchfork and began to drag the dead, dried pieces of wheat over to the grave.

Mal: What makes you think I know that?

Mapa: I'd put money on it.

Mal: Hay is used to feed animals. Straw is leftover grain. Animals rest and sleep on it.

Mapa: And sometimes people sleep on it and under it.

Dyer: Alright, let's go. I'm satisfied.

Pada tossed the pitchfork into the corner. The three grabbed their shovels. They looked at Vid's final resting spot.

Dyer: Anybody got any words to say?

No one spoke. Then Mal uttered two dry, emotionless words.

Mal: Bye Vid

Dyer: Good enough.

The shovels were put into the trunk. They brushed at the dirt and dust on their clothes. They tossed their gloves in. Pada closed the trunk. They climbed into the vehicle and as they began to pull out Dyer settled back. He looked at Pada in the front and then Mapa sitting beside him.

Dyer: Mapa, you're now the head of our branch of security.

Pada turned around and jumped up onto his knees. He looked over the seat at Dyer and then his brother.

Pada: Why him? Why not me?

Dyer: He's the oldest.

Pada: By a few minutes!

Mapa: Fourteen minutes. You were slow, and late. Always slow.

Pada: Never late!

Dyer: Pada you're second in command. Anything happens to Mapa, you'll take over.

Now Pada smiled at his brother. A mischievous grin spread across his face. Mapa frowned. Then they both stared at each other suspiciously.

Dyer: Stop it you two. I can always find someone else.

Pada turned back around.

Pada: No. No, I'm good with that.

Mapa: We've got each other's back. We won't let you down.

Dyer: You both report to me. Mapa will be working directly with Lott. She has plans for enhanced security throughout the whole organization. Mal, that will include the technology side. This is about creating value. We're going to be the biggest and best in New Mexico. I've heard Lena say nothing gets in the way of creating positive value.

Mapa: Or no one.

Pada: Nobody.

Mapa: Same thing.

Dyer: Correct.

LONGVIEW, EAST TEXAS

The off-road utility vehicle pulled off of Highway 20 and onto the dirt. It bounced as it slowly passed over clusters of rocks and clumps of bushes and eased through the nearly foot high wild grass. Two of the six wheels spun slightly as it climbed a medium-sized hill and then they gripped, regained traction and when the vehicle reached the crest of the hill the engine was shut off and the doors opened and four individuals got out.

Their long guns remained secured in their holders. The two who exited from the rear each had two pistols holstered at their sides. The driver, a *DM* known by the name of Drale, had a holstered pistol that hung from under his left arm. The front passenger, a *DM* called Kab had a large pistol holstered at his right hip.

Kab was nearing fifty years of age. He was a *Parda-clara* man of medium height and muscular build with skin that was weathered and tanned from the elements and the sun. He had spent much of his life outdoors, surrounded by the reality of *Center World*. His skin, that expressed the life he led, was heavily tattooed, including his hands and several colorful markings on his face, including the distinctive marks of the two biker gangs, of which he was and had been a member. His long brown hair was streaked with white and was tied in a ponytail that hung down his back.

The two from the back were in their early twenties and yet appeared older, hardened and affected by their nomadic lifestyle. The *Marrom DQ* who presented as a male was called Brandt. They were short and heavy and had short orange and yellow colored hair and a somewhat long, scruffy beard. The *Branca DF*, called Hedda, was of normal height and had bright-red hair of medium length that surrounded her head that seemed to be large for her thin frame.

They were here because of Drale. The *Cobre DM* had insisted they come to this place so that he could see it for himself. He had stridden up the hill with purpose. His long legs on his nearly six feet four inch slim frame had moved him up easily to the top as his long strides had allowed him to be the first to look out and across from that vantage point.

Now he stood there, the youngest of them all, not yet twenty years lived. With his left hand he pulled his auburn-colored hair that hung to his shoulders back and over his ear. He stared. His youthful, smooth, copper-colored skin was flawless and yet there was an aged edge to his features, a sharpness to his countenance that appeared set into what seemed to be a slight scowl. It was as if he was irritated at everything, and everyone.

The other three mounted the hill. Kab stood to the right of Drale, a step ahead. Brandt was to Drale's left and Hedda moved several steps to the right of the eldest of the group. They were silent as they scanned that which lay before them and around them. As they looked they accepted that there was virtually nothing of real concrete substance to be seen. There was only the flatness of Texas and the brownish-green Sabine River, north of them in the near distance.

The flatness consisted of hardened sediments and limey mud turned to stone, limestone and shale and ancient chalk. It was all covered by clay and sand from which holly and Texas sagebrushes flourished. Buffalograss and hairy grama and Texas blue grass, with the absence of humans, thrived.

Where once there were asphalt streets and steel and glass buildings there were blackfoot daisies and Indian blanket, Mexican hat and buttercup flowers. Had they been looking they could have seen not just the beauty of the flowers and the vibrant colors of the bushes they could have seen that which was closer to them in spirit.

Near to these four were painful stinging fire ants and poisonous scorpions and dangerous centipedes and not just harmless rat snakes and garter snakes but out there somewhere were venomous coral snakes and rattlesnakes and waiting patiently for them at the river were water moccasins, coiled and still, in their movements.

But these four would remain on this hill and watch as the sky that stretched above, past the horizon, turned dirty-gray while rain clouds floated rapidly towards them, pushed by the rising, humid, eastwardly wind they could feel on their left sides.

Kab turned to Drale. He stared at the young man, into his eyes, and he saw that disconcerting look, made more so by the differences in colors. His eyes were not cosmetically altered. They were natural, and unusual. His left eye was a light gray in color and his right eye was a light-blue color. The older *DM* shifted, turned to look forward and waved his left arm slowly in a sweeping motion. He held it out straight for a long moment and then stuck the tips of his fingers past his belt, into the top of his pants. He spread his legs a little and now he spoke in his smooth, light in tone voice.

Kab: They said it began here. It has become a legend amongst the *Center World* biker gangs. Here, it is said, the battle of Longview was the beginning of the end for the Avenging Angels. I was here. But I was also there, where it actually began. I remember. Not like it was yesterday but like it was this morning or an hour ago. And I'll always remember it, as long as I can remember it.

Kab looked at the earth, far to his left and then far to his right.

Kab: It started not far from Albuquerque. Your uncle Cager, the leader of the Angel's, confronted this *Escura DF*. It was as if what she drove was the instigator of it all. She was driving something strange, something no one had ever seen before. It was long and

black and it had huge tires that made it sit up so high a step had to drop down so she could get out or climb in. It had darkened windows and this huge silver grill that looked like it was snarling. It was a sleek-looking tank that we found out could go like a racecar. It was ugly and not ugly at the same time.

Kab paused and smiled a little and shook his head.

Kab: I say that big black thing was the instigator because Cager confronted the *DF* about her ride. We were at this fueling and recharge station. There were about forty of us. This *Mulatinha* had pumped petrol into that thing as the woman waited inside the building. I was leaning against the wall near the door when she came out. I had noticed her when she went in. She was dressed in dark-blue. Her pants and shirt and shiny boots were all dark blue and she was wearing a dark-blue straw hat. Now I watched her, the way she walked. I was impressed by her confident presence in the midst of all of us. She carried that pistol on her left side, cross draw, like she knew how to use it. Her dark skin was like the color of chocolate and she was tall and thick. I couldn't see her eyes because she wore sunglasses. Cager had been admiring her vehicle and as he moved around the front to the driver's side she moved around the rear to that same side. I left my spot and moved behind her and to that same side, but not too close. They were talking but their words were low and I couldn't hear what they were saying until she raised her voice. She sounded angry and she told Cager to step away, that she didn't have time. Then your uncle's voice became louder. He threatened her when he said he was gonna take her vehicle for a drive and he reached out his left hand towards the handle on the driver's door and when he did that she pulled a rod from a pocket on the side of her right leg and the metal extended and she used it to break Cager's hand and then she beat him on the side of his head until he was knocked out. I had moved further to my left and I could see her

quickly glance around and back as she moved forward. Then she looked over and down at Cager lying there as she stepped past him and climbed in and slammed the door shut. The engine fired.

Kab paused now. He had been staring straight ahead. He turned his head to the left, and glanced just enough so he could look directly at the young man. Drale's copper-colored skin seemed to have deepened in its shade and both his eyes had widened and yet appeared to have drawn in the reflection from the clouds above and so they had become a darker gray and a grayish-blue and his lips were curling into what would eventually become a slight snarl. But he was breathing easily and lightly.

Kab shifted his left leg forward a half step. Brandt squatted down onto his haunches, picked up a small branch and used it to begin drawing patterns in the dirt. Hedda was taking small steps in different directions and kicking at little loose pebbles. Then when she looked up at Drale he was glaring at her so she placed both her hands behind her back and stared into the sky, into the distance.

Kab: We could feel that thing rumble until she reached the street and then she accelerated and we could hear her manually shifting the gears. That thing was roaring as we ran to our bikes. Four went after her. I was one of the four. We were on our street bikes, built for speed, and as we were catching up she would pull away. Then she ran off-road. That thing had the suspension and the traction of a utility vehicle. She ran over the dirt, into the grass and weeds and went up and over a hill and disappeared behind it. We couldn't follow. We could only watch so we turned around. When we got back they had already brought Cager to consciousness and were tending to his hand. He was enraged. Everyone was in a bloodthirsty frenzy. After talking about what to do, Cager sent four of our best enforcers on speedy off-road bikes, after her. The rest of us would follow. They found her

before she reached Texas. She destroyed the four. She shot them full of bullets that exploded and burned inside them and must have caused them to burst into flames. We saw the bikes and when we reached the woods we saw the bodies, what was left of them, they were still smoldering. You ever smelled burning human flesh?

Kab turned to look at Drale. Then he glanced at Hedda. Drale never looked his way. Hedda looked at him and then looked away, back into the sky. Brandt paused his playing in the dirt to look up at him and then with their piece of wood they looked down and drew a line in the dirt.

Kab: You'll never forget that smell and you'll always recognize it.

He paused, as if again remembering. He shook his head and continued.

Kab: We made holes and buried them in the New Mexico dirt.

He looked down at Brandt who was drawing zigzag lines.

Kab: And so Brandt the body of your dead mother's, brother's male child, your favorite cousin ...

He looked at Hedda, who now looked at him.

Kab: ... and Hedda, the body of your dead father's sister, your aunt, were most likely dug up from their shallow, unmarked graves by coyotes that gobbled their roasted flesh and chewed and gnawed on their bones and left them exposed in the daylight sun and concealed in the darkness beneath the moon to be consumed by meat-eating beetles.

Now Kab stopped. He chuckled, then came an outright laugh, a brief outburst, as if he had told a joke for all of them to enjoy. Along with the pitch of his voice his words were spoken in a somewhat singsong manner and so it was as if a melody suddenly ceased and yet there was an imagined echo within the silence that draped across the empty plains. His words and the ensuing laughter faded into the humid air that grew warmer and thicker as

they were there under the clouds that in the far distance had become darker and as where once they were simply gray, now they were altering to an ominous shade of charcoal.

Kab took a few steps forward on the top of the hill. The others followed except for Brandt who still remained in that squatting position yet they no longer marked and rearranged the sandy clay. They were unmoving, with their head down. Kab began again and raised his voice to make sure that the three youthful gang members would hear, clearly, his every word.

Kab: We sent hunters and trackers ahead of the main group. They were waiting for us right near Abilene. They had acquired information that the black vehicle had passed through and was staying somewhere in Dallas. We camped for the night. At that time we believed we knew where she was and she most definitely knew where we were because she made contact with us the next morning.

We had settled near the main highway across from a fuel and supply station. As best we would later determine the woman had come from the woods behind the store. She took one of ours, a young *DF* around your age *Drale*, out of the back and held her there. When she was released she came across the road and reported to us that the dark-skinned woman had just confronted her. Several Angels, with their weapons, ran around the store but she was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared back into the woods. The young Angel told us what happened and gave us a message. She said the woman asked her who led the Avenging Angels. She told them *Cager*. Then the woman asked who was the second in command and the Angel told her *Quill*. Then the woman said she owned the black vehicle and that she was the one *Cager* sought. She told the young Angel she wanted to see *Cager*. The leader of the Angels was to meet her at Blue Rock the next evening at seven. Along with *Cager*, must be *Quill*. The second in

command was to come. Only three others were allowed. The young Angel was required to be one of the three. She said she would come alone and that she would be watching from a distance.

More of the older of us gathered and the Angel had to repeat the message. We all discussed it. Eventually everyone knew what had been said and we talked about it off and on throughout the day and into the night. Cager announced he would go to the meeting. He would ride in a sidecar, I would drive. Quill would ride in a sidecar with his driver and the young Angel would ride her bike.

Kab paused and looked into the sky, towards the rain clouds. Kab: She was waiting for us when we arrived. She had seen us coming and had moved from wherever she had been. She was dressed in camouflage, like a soldier. Her cap was pulled down and her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. That July day was hot, as usual. It was a cloudless blue sky and the sun was no longer high as it moved further west and I could feel the heat was cooling and I could touch the tenseness that was charged in the air.

After we stopped and shut off our engines Cager and Quill got out and the five of us took off our helmets. Her head shifted. She seemed to be looking directly at Cager. We moved forward. We had pistols and knives. She had two pistols, holstered cross draw. When we reached a spot she held up her left hand and stopped us. She called out. Her voice was husky and clear and direct. She asked who was Cager, the leader of the Avenging Angels? Your uncle replied loudly that he was the leader. Then she pointed. She didn't ask. She stated that the one next to Cager must be Quill. And when Quill folded his arms across his chest and said he was, with her left hand she pulled that pistol on her right side, it was so quick it was a blur, I barely saw it and she

shot your uncle through his forehead and nearly all the back of his head came off and his brains splattered out. He was knocked back and when he hit the ground he was leaking blood and I could see it running into the ground and spreading out.

Kab stopped and watched as Drale began to pace and then turn in a small, tight circle. Brandt stood and Kab turned to stare into their eyes that they quickly averted and when he looked at Hedda he saw she was staring at Drale with concern.

Kab: This is part of the lore of the Avenging Angels. It varies, depending on who shares it and passes it on. I was there. The truth requires no embellishment. So make your decisions based upon these facts. Your relatives that perished in New Mexico and at Blue Rock were all destroyed by the same woman. And now that woman held us, and having quickly drawn her other gun, covered us with both of her weapons. Quill dropped his arms to his sides. The rest of us were frozen in place. I was just to the right side of Quill as he yelled at the woman. He yelled that she was the one that wanted to see Cager. She yelled back that she could see him and she could see he was dead. She moved forward a few steps and I thought she would open fire. But she spoke to us, all of us, and from the sound of her voice I could tell she was angry, very angry. She said it was only right that Cager died as he did because the leader of the Avenging Angels had started the conflict in the first place. She spoke directly to Quill. Her voice was low and intense. She said she knew the Angels were upset that she had killed four of the gang and left their bodies burning on the ground. But it was their now dead leader who had sent the enforcers to sneak up on her at night and attempt to do her harm. She said all of it was Cager's fault and she indicated to Quill, with the movement of the gun in her right hand, that he was the leader now and it was within his power to end the violence. Somehow she knew where we had set out to go and she

said for Quill to take the Angels west, on to Utah and she would go her way, on east to New Orleans. But if Quill wanted to continue to war against her the Avenging Angels should meet her at high noon in Longview. She gave her word she would again come alone. Then she told Quill that if the Angels didn't show it meant Quill wasn't as stupid as he appeared to be. Quill's eyes were already bulging and when she said that, his whole head turned red. Then she called your uncle a worthless human being and told us to take his body away so his poisonous blood and filthy rotting corpse couldn't pollute the sacred grounds of Blue Rock. Those were her exact words.

Kab stopped talking. He breathed deeply. His last words had been strong and he drew in an essence of life through his nostrils that had suddenly flared. He exhaled through his drying lips that had formed as if he silently blew out a candle. Then he licked his thin lips to moisten them.

With his right hand he reached past his pistol and pulled a narrow, long, drug stick from a pocket on the side of his leg, took a lighter from his pants pocket with his left hand and lit the stick. He drew hard on the stick. He held the smoke until he coughed, twice. He slowly let out a light-green cloud of smoke. He looked up into the sky. He drew on the stick again. Before easing the lighter back into his pocket he flicked it and watched as the nearly invisible flame struggled against the wind. Then he pinched off the tip of the stick and tossed the little piece into his mouth. He put the stick back into his pocket. And as he wiped his hand on his sleeve he took several steps forward again and as he turned and walked back he made sure to look each of the young individuals directly in their eyes. Only Hedda looked away. Drale nearly snarled at him. His voice, already changed, was not the voice of youth and belied his youthful appearance. It was fairly deep and not just heavy, but hard and forceful.

Drale: Come on! Let's have it!

Kab smiled and chuckled slightly

Kab: We hauled your uncle's body back to camp and gave him a burial with honor, worthy of a leader. We dug the hole deep and filled that grave, his final resting spot, with rocks and wood and shoveled the dirt over him and patted and stomped the sandy-clay down and rode over the dirt until it was nearly flat. We said words over him, remembered out loud some of the gangster things he had done, poured some gin on his place of repose and then we drank gin and whisky and smoked drugs and engaged in carnal activities.

During that next day we argued and fought over what to do. There were those who wanted to head on west. There were those who wanted retribution for the murder of their leader.

Kab turned to Brandt.

Kab: And there were those, like the two wives of your cousin ...

Kab looked at Hedda.

Kab: ... and the husband of your dear departed auntie, who were all bent on avenging the destruction of those they loved. They reminded everyone that after all, we were the Avenging Angels. Late that night we started out and as the sun came up we were camped there.

Kab had turned and pointed.

Kab: And we were right over there across the highway in the grass that was almost that high and spread out near the bottom of that slope that leads up into that line of trees.

Now Kab paused to gaze at each area he spoke about. He was remembering, bringing that time closer and closer. Then he could see it and hear it behind him and he whirled around and with his left arm extended he pointed and his finger trembled slightly so he closed his hand into a fist. Still his arm was up and out. His voice, once high and light, lowered a little and his words came in

a rush. And what he said next was imbued with anger and awe and tinged with fear.

Kab: We first saw her coming over and down that rise there, in the distance to the west! That black thing was like a runaway locomotive engine! Dust and dirt was blowing furiously like a storm or a grounded tornado! It wasn't a trail of dust! It was all around that thing and spread out as it picked up speed! It came directly at us, growling and rumbling like thunder! There she was! She had come to fight! Lightning would follow!

Kab's arm had moved from left towards the right.

Kab: It veered east and then towards the north.

Then he indicated straight ahead of where they stood. His arm hovered in the air for a long moment. It dropped to his side.

Kab: The alarm was sounded and we grabbed our long guns and jumped on our bikes to go after her. The off-roaders went straight for that ride and the rest of us stayed on the road parallel to her and the Sabine. Quill led those on the dirt. I led those on the road. We raced alongside of her and then suddenly she slid to a stop, at an angle and as dust and dirt sprayed into the air we could see her back that thing up towards the riverbank. Now her rear was protected.

We stopped on the road and as the off-roaders and ones on the quad bikes went towards her, black metal came down over the headlights and metal came down like skirts to shield the wheels and tires. That silver grill was shining and glinting from the reflection of the noontime sun. That black tank thing looked like an oblong-shaped monster, sleeping and grinning at us with its mouth open. Then metal came down to completely cover the grill and now all we saw was black metal.

We fired from the dirt and we fired from the road. We heard pinging sounds and saw what we thought were sparks and when Quill realized that thing was bulletproof he waved his arms until

the firing stopped. He started yelling instructions. He had Angels make a semi-circle around the vehicle. Then he ordered three of those on quad bikes to return to camp and use gas from the portable gas storage tanks to make bottled cocktails so we could burn the woman out.

Then I thought I could see the driver's side door opening. We couldn't believe she was getting out. From where we were we could only clearly see the front and passenger side. On the other side were six Angels on three quad bikes and three off-road bikes. They got off their bikes and moved forward when they saw her get out. She must have gone to the rear. They opened fire. They shot at her again and again.

Kab started pacing back and forth, several short quick steps in each direction, right and left. Both his arms were moving. Both his hands were gesturing.

Kab: We saw the six Angels turn and run back towards their bikes. We didn't understand. Then three were shot dead and they lit up and started burning. As the other three tried to ride away their gas tanks were shot. The bikes exploded. Their bodies exploded. Her left side was now clear. She came from around the rear, on the driver's side, almost to the front. We could barely see her behind the side of the hood. Quill motioned and waved and we moved away from our bikes and dropped to the ground. We crawled behind bushes to hide and tried to disappear into the tall grass.

Now Kab turned and pointed across the highway toward the trees.

Kab: She began firing but we quickly realized she wasn't firing at those of us close to her when the portable gas tank near that slope exploded and blew up two Angels making cocktails. She was firing at targets yards and yards away. I was in the grass and I raised my head a little and I could see the flames and smoke rise

into the air and I saw an Angel riding their bike from the fire toward the trees. They were shot from the bike and the riderless bike ran up the slope and crashed into the trees. When I looked back I could see the woman was now focused on us in front of her and to her right. I could hear the fire behind me crackling and burning. I could smell smoke and gunpowder in the heated air and I was coughing and choking on the now familiar aroma of human flesh burning and roasting.

She started shooting bikes. The gas tanks and the bikes were exploding like bombs. Every Angel that panicked and got up to stoop and run, that zigzagged and ran, was shot dead. Every time she shot, something or someone was hit. I had never seen and have never since seen shooting like that. Only those Angels who reached the trees or rode off from the back of the camp or got away at the rear on the right were able to survive. There weren't many.

I was able to crawl and get behind a boulder. When I peeped around it I saw her step away from her ride. She had strapped the rifle to her back and had pulled both her pistols and then she moved forward, walking slowly, stiffly. I was confused. She was exposing herself. Angels stood and started firing. She dropped to one knee and they charged, screaming and hollering and just as I got up to fire, she rose. It was at that moment we realized why those first six Angels had turned and run. The strange black suit and helmet she wore were bulletproof, just like her ride.

Again Kab turned and pointed.

Kab: As the Angels were charging I headed in a crooked line towards the trees.

Drale spoke, a statement, disdainful in tone. His voice was low and intense.

Drale: You ran.

Kab: Yes. I wanted to live to fight again. I ran for my life and she

shot me. I was fortunate. It was a clean shot through the back of my left shoulder. The pistol bullet was powerful but wasn't filled with explosives like her rifle. It knocked me forward. Then I was sideways and rolling and crawling. She turned on the others and I gained the trees. From there I could see her staggering and stumbling and falling from the fuselage of Angel's bullets. It was volley after volley, like a firing squad but she would not be stopped.

She was free sighting with both hands, hands that looked like they were wrapped in metal and firing single, double and triple shots. She would holster one pistol, drop the mag from the one she was holding and reload from her belt. She would switch and do the same thing with the other pistol.

From where I was I could see the fallen Angels and I could hear the firing slow and finally cease. I saw her reload both her pistols and aim them at the last Angel standing. It was Quill. They weren't close. They weren't far apart either. She had saved him for last. He was ducking and firing his pistol and then he most likely ran out of ammunition because he threw it at her. Then he picked up a rifle and sent a burst into her body and she leaned against the bullets. He shot her in her head and she stepped back, like she was being punched. Then Quill was done, his rifle was empty. I saw her raise both her pistols. Her guns were in automatic mode because she shot Quill to the ground and she kept firing, like a machine gun, until she had shot Quill, the leader of the Avenging Angels, into pieces.

I was growing weak from loss of blood. I laid my head against the tree. I held on as I looked around it. Through the smoky haze from the fires and gunsmoke I saw her reload one pistol and then the other. She walked amongst the dead, there were none dying. She moved slowly through the carnage, as if she was tired, towards that black thing waiting for her. I passed out and when

I came to, she was gone. There would be thirty-seven bodies counted. And thus the legend began.

Kab stopped now. He took a deep breath. Once again he removed the drug stick from his pocket. He lit and puffed it as he started down the hill. He blew smoke into the air. The wind took the greenish smoke away and as it dissipated he spoke again. It was as if he was finished, but he wasn't. His words came in a matter-of-fact manner.

Kab: That was the end of the Avenging Angels.

The four reached their vehicle but they didn't get in. They glanced to the west when they felt the rumble. Then they heard the powerful thunderclap. Kab drew deeply on his stick. He looked back in the direction from where they had come.

Kab: Later I heard they came from Kilgore with an excavator and a bulldozer. They dug a big hole and pushed the bodies and pieces of bodies and the bikes and pieces of bikes and anything else that indicated we had ever been there, into that hole. They filled it in and covered it up. I was gone so I don't know exactly where that mass grave is. But I know just about where they are out there beneath that dirt.

Kab finished his stick as the four of them stood in silence. Then it began to rain, lightly, a sprinkle. They climbed into the vehicle. They got on Highway 20 east. Then came words, once again direct, with surety, an expression of fact. The words were soft and devoid of any real emotion.

Kab: That was the battle of Longview.

It sounded from that acceptance of that undesirable event that he was once again done, but he wasn't. They had simply started forth. Not just to Arkansas but also towards that reason again that Drale had arranged and insisted this journey take place. The wet rain fell harder. Kab settled back in his seat and as he stared

straight ahead through the rain-splattered windshield he could see the wipers sweeping in rhythm. He watched them as if hypnotized. He was lost under the spell of the drug. Drale's voice, harsh and also direct brought him back.

Drale: Tell it all!

Kab turned to stare at the young man who was hunched over the steering wheel. He was gripping it with both hands. Squeezing it. Choking it. He was looking straight ahead. There was an obvious grimace on his face because he knew what was coming, what would be told. He had never heard it like this before, the full story from someone who was there. But he knew it would indeed be the finish.

Now the rain was pouring down, the large drops were beating against the vehicle, sounding like tiny pebbles were being thrown against the windows and pelting the metal that surrounded them. The sky was dark, nearly black, as far as they could see.

Kab: Slow down first. I'm going to tell it my way and I'm going to tell it all.

The vehicle slowed to a safer, normal speed. Kab could see Drale relax, just a little. He raised his voice, not just against the rain and the noise of the engine but also to ensure the two in the seat behind him could hear every word he spoke.

Kab: Of those of us who survived the massacre, and as I said, there weren't many, several simply disappeared. I never saw them again. The other few, I amongst them, alone and in pairs headed in the same direction you're going now, to the same place, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Led by Cager, a group of us had split off, with blessings, from the Avenging Devils to start our own chapter, our own gang, and thus expand the reach of our combined power. So now we rejoined them. They welcomed us back. I was still weakened from the wound and loss of blood but they provided me with healing

gel and wave rays. I got better and so I was able to attend the meetings and listen to the arguments and observe the fights that broke out as the Devils tried to decide what to do about the destruction of those they considered their sisters and brothers.

There weren't many who wanted to halt the violence, to not allow it to go any further. Then there were those who remained from when I was there, those who sought position. I believed they wanted to use Longview to overthrow the leader of the Devils and seize power. In the past there had been whispers that the leader was a coward and was growing ineffective. Therefore he was pressured, he was forced to seek vengeance and retribution. Not just for those who died, not only for those who lived and not just for the ones who lost those they loved. He had to extract vengeance for himself and for Cager. Your father, Lazer, the leader of the most powerful biker gang in *Center World* had to avenge the death of his own brother. He would destroy the dark-skinned woman who had murdered his brother. I saw it. He had stood before us and stated that. Then plans were made.

Within days we had amassed in Arkansas at the northern border of Louisiana, near Claiborne and at the eastern border of Louisiana in Mississippi, near Greenville. There were over two hundred and fifty of us in Arkansas and over one hundred of us in Mississippi. Both groups were preparing to fight almost three hundred miles to New Orleans. We would be up against the armed local citizens and the Louisiana Protectors. They were the best armed and the best trained *Center World* militia at almost four hundred strong. We couldn't know at the time that the woman we sought had not only funded the Protectors in their beginning, she had fought with them in their earlier battles. All I believed was that we were preparing to die.

Kab paused now. Then he chuckled. His chuckles altered into laughter. It was soft at first then it grew louder and he laughed

harder. He leaned forward and laughed. His shoulders moved as he nearly choked. He pulled a bottle of water from the holder near his left leg and took a long drink. He held his left hand up to Drale.

Kab: Give me just a moment. I'll be alright.

Kab took several deep breaths. He searched for a napkin in the compartment beneath the dashboard but couldn't find one. He used his fingers to wipe at his eyes.

Kab: Whew! That drug is good!

Then he shifted and rose up a little and removed a small plastic container from his left pocket. He opened it and dumped out two little pills, one yellow and one white. He threw them into his mouth, sipped some water and swallowed them. Again he nearly choked. He sipped more water. He put the water down. He put the container back in his pocket and leaned back in his seat. The rain began to ease up.

Kab: We got word a day after we camped that the leader of the Protectors wanted to meet with us. He wanted to make us an offer that would prevent the impending war. His message stated that he had a proposition so enticing that it could not be refused. Your father agreed to the meeting.

They met at the border. Lazar and two other Devils, including his second in command and three Protectors stood and talked. We could see them through our long glasses. They spoke for quite a while. On several occasions they separated. The Devils talked together. The Protectors talked together. Then they would gather and negotiate. Finally Lazar came back and gave us the details and what he said swept through us and with word of mouth all of us there and with notifications all of those in Mississippi soon knew also.

There would a brawl, a private back-room brawl to the death between Lazar and the woman. No weapons. No rules. The value

at stake would be winner take all. He told us the amount that had first been proposed and he said he had demanded that the amount to be put up by both sides be doubled. The Protectors agreed. It was a huge amount. The leader of the Protectors gave his word that we would have safe passage to and from the site near New Orleans. We Devils had to take that word on the belief that the Protectors didn't want a war with the Devils.

Lazar accepted the challenge. The woman, before the world, was calling him out. She was threatening him with death at her hands. His mission was vengeance and retribution for all of us. The fight was on. Not only did Lazar declare to us he would destroy the woman, he told everyone the coffers of the Devils would be enriched so much that he would use part of the newly gained value to provide a bonus to all those who had lost relatives at Longview.

It was a Tuesday when the fight was made. The Protectors would escort us in on Friday morning. We would be at our destination by late afternoon, early evening. The battle would take place Saturday night. We celebrated. We smoked drugs, ingested drugs, drank alcohol and engaged in carnal activities for almost two days. We rested and tried to recover on Thursday.

On Friday we started for a place a little north of New Orleans called Old Town. Altogether, with those who had joined us from Mississippi and some new members, there were nearly four hundred of us. We were heavily armed, with extra ammunition. Along the way we could see the locals lining the highway and roads on both sides, also heavily armed. They hollered at us and cursed us. The Protectors were on both sides of us. We rode choppers, solar-electric hybrids, large cruisers and touring bikes, smaller speed bikes and some off-road dirt bikes. We were riding everything and we were proud and defiant. We yelled back at all those who hollered at us and cursed us and called us vile names

and we hollered and cursed them back. We called them everything we could think of and yelled out about their fathers and mothers and flashed them with our gang signs and showed them with our middle fingers that we were indeed the one.

We were escorted into the Old Town area that Friday early evening and guided to our designated side of the road. Those who opposed us were on the other side of that same road, directly opposite us. Some of the armed Protectors were stationed on tall towers and others patrolled on both sides of the road to keep us apart. We knew, they knew, everyone knew, one fired shot and hundreds could die, both Devils and citizens and blood would soak the ground and run into the street.

It was like a festival or a carnival as only Louisiana could put on. Vendors sold food and liquor and tents and firewood. There were pushcarts with different stuff and the locals even tried to sell us New Orleans souvenirs. There was a *DM* and *DF* who had made hundreds of little red devils with horns and a tail and pitchfork standing next to a motorcycle. They sold out.

Kab chuckled and then he pointed to a clear paved area off to the side of the road up ahead. The rain had nearly stopped.

Kab: Pull over! Pull over! Right there!

The vehicle slowed and then pulled over and stopped. Kab got out. He moved to the rear, unzipped his pants and relieved himself. When he was done he took a drug stick from his back pocket, lit it, took several deep puffs, pinched the top off, tossed the little piece into his mouth and stuffed the stick into his front shirt pocket. When he climbed back in Drale looked at him with a frown and shook his head a little. Kab turned to the two in the back. He smiled broadly. He looked from one to the other and then pointed to Hedda who sat behind Drale.

Kab: You. Change seats with me.

They changed seats. As they moved back onto the highway

and picked up speed, Kab continued from that rear seat. His voice was strong, his words precise.

Kab: After we had arrived near dusk we had to immediately set up camp. We partied a little but most of us went to sleep fairly early so that we could be strong for the next day. Saturday, after the sun had just come up I could see we were not far from a marshy area. I could see from where we were, huge cypress and weeping willows, and water tupelo trees, some nearly covered with Spanish moss and I could smell the swamp water.

We were at a place where the buildings had been rebuilt to look just like they had appeared hundreds of years in the past. Of the five buildings, one was the Alligator Snapping Turtle Saloon. It was a large place where the fight would be held. The Private Backroom Brawl, that's what it was called, a battle to the death. It would be a universal broadcast. Everyone across Louisiana could see it and hear it, not just on their personal Comm devices but also on the large screens that were all over the state, especially in the main, large cities.

The Devils were on the same side as the saloon and there was a large screen on the side of that building and screens in other areas as well. There were speakers and banks of lights and music blasted throughout the afternoon. People were drinking and doing drugs, passing out and coming to. The weather was normal for Louisiana, hot and humid.

In the early evening the screens were showing the bands inside the saloon, playing raucous music. The crowd grew louder and meaner. The Devils were howling and those on the other side of the road howled back. There was chanting and singing by both sides. Then at eight thirty the screens showed an image of the flyers that had been put out all around Louisiana and the posters we had seen on the way in.

It said the name of the woman and that she was an honorary

Protector General and had issued a challenge to the leader of the Avenging Devils. It said the woman stood five feet nine inches tall and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. The height of the Avenging Devil was six feet four inches tall and his weight was two hundred and forty pounds. The final line was that only one would survive.

I was fortunate. I was one in the group of Devils allowed inside the saloon. Once inside we were directed to our side. There were around twenty-five Devils, about the same amount of Protectors and maybe fifty citizens on the lower level. There were probably fifty people, Devils and citizens, separated above us on the balcony that ran around the second floor. Just like outside there were recording cameras and microphones to capture and transmit the images and sounds.

On a large table off center sat wooden and steel chests that held the value cards. The chests were zoomed in on and then opened and the riches that filled the chests were shown on the screen on the wall inside the saloon and at the same time on all the screens everywhere. A roar went up and the chanting and hollering and singing rose even louder. One Devil reached in our chest and grabbed some cards and stuck them in front of a camera and then tossed them on the table.

It was growing darker outside when the band's loud music suddenly changed and an image from a barn down the street was on the screen. The wide doors opened and a bike emerged. It was one of our biggest bikes. It was red, the color of blood. It had large white eyeless skulls fastened to the front like headlights and bleached crossbones on the back of the seat and the gas tank was painted with yellow flames.

Your father rode on a bench seat behind his driver and our second in command rode beside him. When they showed a close-up of him, the Devils erupted everywhere, including inside the

saloon. As the bike rumbled and the spotlight lit him up we were chanting his name.

Kab grabbed the back of the seat in front of him with both hands and leaned forward and to the side. His light-pitched voice was lowered intense.

Kab: Lazar! Lazar! Lazar!

Now Kab fell back against his seat. He looked out of the window to his left. He had to catch his breath. Finally he began again.

Kab: Lazar rode up to the doors got out and was led inside and to his seat near us Devils. Then the music changed. It was the woman's song. It was unlike any music I had ever heard. That lead guitar wailed, the bass guitar thumped and the drums were pounding. That music was all in my head. The man's voice sang about chopping down mountains with the edge of his hand. For some reason the full moon above filled the screen and then the image was falling to earth and I felt dizzy and that moon, and the bright illumination of a spotlight lit up the front of the barn down the street across from us. The doors swung out and an open carriage that was larger and taller than our bike came out. It had wooden spoke wheels that were painted a shiny-silver color and it was being pulled by two black horses.

The sound, outside and inside began to build. The leader of the Protectors sat up front with the driver and someone, probably her second, sat next to her. The image moved to a close up. The woman sat, without expression, staring straight ahead. She was wrapped in what looked like a black cape. Her dark-brown skin seemed to glow and her natural hair was standing full and rounded like a halo. And when her face filled that screen, hollering and yelling and screams swept up the street and burst through the doors of that saloon and joined with the voices of the local people and the Protectors inside that place and the

uproarious sound seemed to swell and merge with those in the field and fly across the bayou and over and around the whole state of Louisiana. My head, once filled with her music was now filled with her name.

Kab punched his left hand with his right fist, three times.

Kab: Lena! Lena! Lena!

Again Kab was quiet, remembering. Not only was he back there, seeing it, he was living it again, feeling it.

Kab: I could hear those horses' hooves clapping on the asphalt. I could see them coming up the street. They were huge and black and shiny and as they neared the entrance one rose up on its hind legs and the other trotted sideways and the driver struggled to get them under control and when he stopped them outside the doors they both pawed at the road, then settled.

The woman was assisted down and she opened her cape and flung it behind her and for a moment it appeared as if she would take flight. When she came inside the saloon the music stopped and she was taken to her seat.

Drale: Tell about the traitor! Don't leave that out!

Kab hesitated.

Kab: As I watched her there was a commotion at the swinging doors, a scuffle and a voice called out the woman's name. I could barely see from where I stood that someone had burst through the doors. I moved to see better. It was the young Angel who had first been contacted by the woman. The Angel who was with us at Blue Rock, who had asked the woman's name, who had first uttered that name to us.

Drale spoke. He was mildly excited.

Drale: Others have told me about her. She turned on us. Briney was her name. That was the Angel's name, wasn't it?

Again Kab hesitated.

Kab: Yes, it was Briney. This was one of the few Angels who had

survived Longview.

Kab shifted to look at the rearview mirror. He could see Drale frowning and glancing back, trying to see him.

Kab: Lena told the Protectors to let her in and indicated for Briney to stand there behind her, at her back, with the other Protectors. When the leader of the Protectors moved forward the crowd quieted. He announced the fight and explained how there would be no weapons, no rules. It would be a fight to the death. Winner would take all. He said two would go in alive. One would die because in *Center World* there was only life and death.

The people started chanting and hollering and screaming and howling again. They yelled the fighters' names over and over. Then they began calling out for a statement. They said it over and over again. Statement! Statement! Statement! The Protector quieted the people and said the fighters would now speak.

Your father stood and walked forward from our side. He was wearing his favorite colors. He had on purple pants and this loose fitting long-sleeved light-pink shirt with a purple vest and thick black boots. His long purple hair had been cut so he had a short ponytail. All the Devils outside began to chant his name and those of us in the room began to call his name. He motioned with his arms for quiet. The Devils went silent and all the others booed and whistled and hissed and then stopped the noise so they could hear.

Your father thumped his chest. The words he spoke were almost in a loud growl. He said he was Lazar, the leader of the mighty Avenging Devils and he had come to destroy! Inside that saloon and everywhere outside, the Devils roared, then quieted down as Lazar once again raised his hands and motioned for quiet. He said he had come to destroy the Protector who had ambushed and killed his Angel friends and through deceit and deception murdered his baby brother! He then said he was the

reality and truth of *Center World*! He said life was reality but that he was death and the truth was that only the strongest would survive! He said that the night was Devil's night! He said the night belonged to him! He said he sought retribution! He said vengeance would be his!

We roared again and they booed again as he turned and moved to sit at a table near me. Then Lena stood and walked forward. The chanting and yelling started and the Devils tried to drown it out. When she placed her opened right hand near her heart everyone quieted. She patted her chest and spoke. She said she was Lena, an honorary general of the Protectors and friend to all Louisiana's faithful. Now the Protectors and citizens roared, the Devils cursed and booed. Her raised arms brought quiet.

She said she stood there before all of us to declare on her sacred word that your father was a treacherous liar. She said the Avenging Angels confronted her, attacked her and attempted to do her harm. She said her only wrong was allowing any of those attackers to live. She admitted to shooting his brother, Cager, but she said she didn't shoot him through deceit, she shot him through his head because he was the one who started the conflict and ordered that first attempt on her life and it was her duty to remove that threat. Then she said she couldn't admit to blowing Lazar's brother's brains out because his brother didn't have a brain.

Your father rose to attack and had to be restrained. Now everyone had erupted. We were all, on both sides, hollering and cursing. Her voice became louder. She said the Avenging Devil's were a threat to Louisiana and a threat to her! As the noise began to subside her words were rising above the opposing voices. She said Lazar was a murderer and a rapist and a thief! Then she hollered that Lazar was a fool! She said only a fool would threaten her and then come within her reach! She said that, that

night she stood for Louisiana! She stood for the Protectors! She stood for the future! She said there would be no vengeance! There would be no retribution!

Lazar was being held back and he hollered he would put his boot through her face! His vest had already been snatched off while we held him away. When we put him back in his seat his shirt had been torn apart and he ripped at the pieces and threw them on the floor. She was saying for everyone to hear that, that night there would be justice and that justice would prevail! Then she thumped her chest. She said she would always protect herself because she was, Lena!

Your father was incensed. He was standing again, cursing the woman! He was hollering that he would crush her! Again and again, as we held him back, he bellowed, over and over again that he would kill her!

Kab leaned forward and his voice grew louder.

Kab: Now listen closely, the three of you. If you haven't paid real attention to what I've said, pay attention to this. That woman took two steps forward, toward Lazar. She raised her right arm and formed her right hand into a claw. She extended it toward Lazar and hollered. Each of her words grew louder. She said she would rip his heart out!

Kab moved back. He pressed himself against the seat. He paused. His voice lowered.

Kab: There was something unnatural, not the words, but the manner in which she spoke them. Everything, everyone went silent for a brief instant. There was a momentary hush. It was an eerie silence and those words seemed to reverberate and echo. Then a current of electricity passed through all who could see the look on her face. It hasn't happened to me often, I could probably count the times on one hand. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Kab stopped and again looked out of the window. His voice softened slightly as he turned and stared at the back of Drale's head. He was speaking directly to him now.

Kab: Whatever it was touched Lazar too. I could see it on his face. He called for whiskey and a glass and a bottle was set before him on the table. He gulped straight from the bottle and slammed it down. Everyone suddenly began hollering again. The sounds began to swell as the leader of the Protectors brought both the fighters to near the center of the room. Two Protectors joined.

Our second in command and two other Devils went with Lazar. I was one that went. We moved between them to keep them apart. Lazar was not only patted down and thoroughly examined but a detector was passed around him several times to discover any foreign objects. It was adjusted for not just metal but also for wood and plastic and various other materials. His boots were checked carefully, then his black gloves. When they were done he held up both his bare arms and flexed his muscles. Then he waved to the cameras.

The woman's second, standing next to her removed her cape. There was no need to pat her down. She wore a silver suit that looked like it was spray painted on. When her cape was removed a collective gasp had come forth. I don't know what kind of steroids she was on but she appeared powerful and yet natural. She looked to me as if she had come from not another country but from another world. It wasn't just that she presented as someone unique. It wasn't that she seemed somehow special. It was something strange and mysterious and dangerous about her. That dark-skinned woman was beautiful.

Kab began to chuckle but he quickly gathered himself.

Kab: The detector was passed around her several times. Then her boots were examined. Her gloves were checked. Earlier, for all to see, the windowless room had been examined for weapons. The

Protector in charge then announced that Lazar would walk into room and stand on the red X. Then Lena would walk into the room and stand on the white X, and that when the door was shut, the fight would begin.

Lazar stomped into the room and I could see him take his place. Lena walked in and took her place and the last thing I could see, the last image anyone could see was the two standing there facing each other. A Protector slammed the door shut. She stood in front of the door and folded her arms. A Devil moved to stand beside her. A microphone was above the door and when that door had loudly closed a large clock on the far wall had begun to tick off the seconds and minutes.

The noise had slowly subsided as hundreds and hundreds of people were listening, straining to hear any sounds that came from the room behind that closed door. We thought we heard a thud. Outside, occasional screams came. Inside the saloon several people collapsed onto the floor, unconscious. Everyone believed that whoever came through that door would be the one to live, the only one to survive. Lazar came through the door.

The big thick door was ripped completely from its hinges as Lazar crashed against it. The door had knocked down the two standing in front of it and Lazar was upon it, face down. The two guards struggled to get out from underneath the door. At first it had been quiet. People didn't understand what had happened. Then as the guards got from beneath the door, people were yelling. They turned over Lazar's body and screams rose into the air. Two different cameras zoomed in on Lazar but I could see from where I stood. His face, on the left side was battered and disfigured and crushed into something almost unrecognizable. The images on all the screens showed this. And as the cameras moved down his body, everyone everywhere could see what I saw. There was a gaping, mangled hole in your father's chest.

The voices of the Protectors and citizens of Louisiana erupted in joyous unison. Devils hollered and screamed and cursed in anger and disbelief and protest. Then Lena stepped through the open doorway, past the dead body. In her bloodied right hand she had your father's heart. She extended her arm and held the stilled heart straight out in front of her. She showed it to the cameras. She turned in a slow circle showing that heart, displaying her prize for all to see. Her face was without expression. Yet in her brown eyes was, look here. See? Then she smiled just a little and for some reason I saw for the first time, I realized she had dimples and I was staring at her full, lightly painted red lips and I saw the gold in the top of her mouth flash when she yelled, as Protectors and citizens were yelling, she yelled out, Lazar was no more! Then she flung your father's heart towards the far wall and us Devils standing in front of that wall and in that corner had to duck and scramble as the heart splattered against the wall and when I turned to look, the blood was dripping down the wall as pieces of the heart fell to the floor. I glanced across the room. The clock had stopped at three minutes and nineteen seconds.

Kab looked, for a long moment out of the window at the passing empty countryside. His next words were spoken softly, with bitterness and sadness.

Kab: The citizens of Louisiana lined the roads and jeered us and cursed us and berated us Devils all the way back to the border.

After a while he turned back and shifted so he could look into the rearview mirror on the front windshield. He could see Drale looking ahead at the road and then look into the mirror and directly into his eyes. Drale glared at him. Kab chuckled and shook his head. Then he spoke in a matter-of-fact manner.

Kab: You got what you demanded. Now you know.

The older Avenging Devil, one of the original ones was done. He leaned back into his seat. He folded his arms, pressed himself

against the door and tried to curl up into a more comfortable position. Soon he was asleep.

When they reached Sherwood, Arkansas, just north of Little Rock, they were back at the headquarters, the camp and area controlled by the Devils. Drale stopped on a side street not far from a bar on Main Street. Brandt pushed on Kab's shoulder until he woke up. The three younger ones jumped out as Kab slowly, stiffly climbed from the vehicle. He stretched and groaned and cursed to himself as the three moved to stand near him. They watched as he pulled a drug stick from his pocket, light it and begin to smoke. They stared at him until he finally turned to Drale and looked up directly at him.

Kab: You have come from, wherever that place was to ...

Drale: Dakota. North Dakota.

Kab puffed on his stick, held the smoke, then blew it out.

Kab: Yes. You have come from the desolation of North Dakota to claim what you believe to be your rightful position, as the oldest son of Lazar. Who knows how many children Lazar has, how many sons, who is the oldest? You make the claim to be the leader of the Avenging Devils. You, the heir to the throne, so to speak. Yet you have been denied, at least for now. So you are on a mission and the destruction of your father fuels you.

Drale moved closer to Kab. He stared down at him. The young man's face was filled with hatred and determination. His voice was heavy and rough.

Drale: Yes! I have been denied, and unjustly so! I lay claim to leadership of the Avenging Devils! I will lead us back to our glory days as the richest and most powerful biker gang in *Center World*, in all the worlds!

His next words were direct and intense.

Drale: The three of us are going to New Orleans. We'll find that one with the calling of Briney and she'll tell us where that woman

is. We know she left Louisiana. We'll get the information we need to find that Lena, the one who murdered my father ...

Now Drale pointed at Brandt and then Hedda. His voice was rising, as was his anger.

Drale: ... and your cousin and your aunt! We'll find that Angel, that traitor! I don't care what her name may be now or what she may look like, we'll find her! Then we'll find that woman and I'll kill her! I'll cut off her head and bring it back and show the Devils my prize! I'll display my trophy and I'll be that which I'm supposed to be, who I was born to be!

Drale turned and stomped off. The other two followed. Kab smoked his drug stick and watched them move through the growing shadows. Dusk approached and darkness would follow.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

It was a normal, very warm and humid early afternoon in August. Less than two weeks remained in the month. The electric open, two-seat, cart-like vehicle rolled quietly and slowly along the newly paved road on Belle Isle. The surrounding cool water provided a welcomed relief from the rising temperature as the occupants in the vehicle could feel an occasional breeze blow across the water and upon their skin.

The driver was Orsin, a *Branca DQ*, late thirties in age, of average height and weight with medium-length curly, white hair, who presented as male. Beside the driver was Rune, a *Marrom DM* in his early twenties. He was tall and slim with natural brown eyes and light-brown hair that was short and natural in style.

Orsin raised their right arm and moved it completely across the scene before them as they brought the cart to a halt and spoke in their soft voice that sounded as if they would sing and the range of the words would be those of a soprano. Their bright,

light-blue artificially colored eyes seemed to twinkle.

Orsin: It wasn't quite like this, but this was all the vision of the former leader of the Eastsiders.

Rune: That would be Dar.

Orsin: Yes, the dear departed Dar. Unfortunately, for him and quite a few others, his vision included plans to wage war against the Westsiders.

Orsin put the cart into gear and the two of them then started towards the other side of the island. Before the daylight would turn to dusk the slow moving cart in which they traveled would circle the Beautiful Island several times.

There would be waves and acknowledgements to others who were passed or who were standing, observing, and monitoring and inspecting the progress that was being made on a vision that at various times in the past had been referred to as part of a foolish dream or a plot or a scheme that would be revealed to all as destined for failure.

Orsin: I was at the meeting when Dar first presented the two parts to his vision. I was there representing the Southsiders because our CFO had been badly beaten and placed into a strange coma-like state.

Rune: That was Poins.

Orsin: Yes, the dear departed Poins.

Rune: The rapist and killer of *DFs*.

Orsin: You speak ill of the dead. Yes, he had serious personal flaws but on the business side he was an excellent Chief Financial Officer. At that first gathering were Dar and his people, my leader at the time.

Rune: That was Quin.

Orsin: Yes, the dear departed Quin, along with our head of security.

Rune: That was Sug.

Orsin: Yes, dead but not forgotten. Finally, there was the leader of the Northsiders.

Rune: Lucett! Oh my! I've seen her before!

Orsin: Yes, the beautiful Lucett. There are so many words I could use to describe her.

Orsin paused to think.

Orsin: But to continue, she was there with her representatives. Now you must understand. Because we were competitors, and adversaries, always engaging in or on the edge of conflicts, we did not share what turned out to be crucial information. Each of the organizations there, were missing individuals who had been required to attend.

As I said, Poins was near death in a south side hospital. The head of security for Lucett's Northsiders was not present.

Rune: That was the butcher, Ursula.

Orsin: That's a very unflattering moniker. Actually she was called The Surgeon, but yes Ursula was absent. What should have been most suspicious was that Dar's head of security was not there.

Rune: That was Mace.

Orsin: Yes, the dear departed Mace. The violent one. All the leaders made excuses for those who did not attend.

Orsin paused to look at the young individual.

Orsin: Obviously you're familiar with the history of the 'Siders.

Rune: I've studied their history, including their origins, their infamous members. Their legendary leaders are fascinating. I've seen images. Their past conflicts have been extensively written about, information passed down. Now this.

Rune waved his right arm as Orsin had done.

Rune: This is fantastic. But what's even more amazing is the level of peace that has been achieved between the 'Siders, perpetual enemies. Detroit, indeed all of Michigan now only has the normal level of violence of lawless *Center World*.

Orsin: An accomplishment?

Rune: Yes. Certainly an improvement, compared to when I was coming up. Detroit was the most violent city in existence.

Orsin: And exciting. The good old days.

Orsin paused, with a hint of a smile, thinking, remembering.

Rune: Go on! Go on! Please. You were actually at that next fateful meeting and survived.

Orsin: We didn't know what we needed to know and therefore couldn't connect the incidents, the dots, so to speak. But months later we understood. Not only was Pains in some strange induced coma but Ursula had also been beaten into the ground and left tearing her clothes off in some sexual frenzy. She had also gone into a coma in a north side hospital. And Mace, who had in fact been attacked first, was in an east side hospital and just like Pains and Ursula, had been physically brutalized. Along with broken bones and teeth he had a lacerated liver and of course was in a coma.

Orsin looked at Rune. His voice was animated.

Orsin: I bet you know who the attackers were, don't you?

Rune: Yes! But I want you to tell it! Tell it all!

Orsin chuckled at the youthful enthusiasm and pulled over and parked. The two could look across the bluish, slow moving water and see Canada.

Orsin: The leader of the Westsiders ...

Rune: Leo! Leo, yes I met him, what a nice man.

Orsin: That kindly, smart Leo can also be ruthless. He had found out about Dar's plans of war and sent for two of the original Westsiders, his trusted partners. Experts at their craft they were the most dangerous enforcers in not just *Center World* but all the worlds, so it was said.

Rune was giddy and bouncing slightly.

Rune: Say their names! Say their names!

Orsin hesitated as he stared at his protégé. His eyes widened as he smiled. He was teasing Rune and then he said two names softly, in almost a whisper.

Orsin: Lena and Lloyd.

Rune clapped his hands, twice.

Orsin: Perhaps the separate attacks had been a type of reveal. As if to say to us, we know what you're up to. Maybe that brutality was to affect the other 'Siders somehow, in some way, who were attempting to line up against them. They were incapacitating important members of our organizations. Nevertheless, that first meeting continued to its conclusion but at least one more gathering would have to occur in order to complete the necessary arrangements.

At that very first meeting Dar proposed the war against the Westsiders. After those in the west had been overrun and the leaders eliminated, the spoils, including property, would be divided and future profits from the lucrative casino would be shared. Of course that which was damaged in the war would first have to be rebuilt. That was part one of the plan.

The second part is what you and I have been witnessing on Belle Isle. Dar proposed that when value flowed again from the west, that all the 'Siders pool their resources, make claim to Belle Isle and turn it into a secured gambling island. He made reference to Nantucket, Hilton Head, Miami Beach in the East and San Juan and Catalina Islands in the West. He said Belle Isle would not just rival but surpass those other places. He spoke of how our island would be not just a playground but also an opulent resort for the rich and powerful. The area was growing and people would come from all over to enjoy themselves, and gamble. Dar explained, quite convincingly, that there could only be investment in the future.

Lucett and Quin both said that they would consider Dar's

plan. They also brought up several important factors, One, was the cost of the war. They would only commit to one quarter of that figure. After consulting with his people Dar agreed to put up the other half. He said he would have his drug producer ...

Rune: That was Wart, the child rapist, child killer and cannibal.

Orsin: Yes, the dear departed Wart. You know how he ended up don't you? You saw the images?

Rune: Nailed to the floor naked and cut into pieces after being tortured with a blowtorch. Then his houses were burnt down.

Orsin: To continue, Wart would make up a special, potent batch of product, up to a ton, or more, if necessary and use it, along with financial value to hire the Barbarians to join the war as hired mercenaries. There would need to be a coordinated strategy of attack, which required the security chiefs' input and two were missing that evening. The CFOs would have to estimate total costs, establish a budget and predict impact on business.

Rune: And Poins wasn't there.

Orsin: Correct. Dar suggested the next aspects of business could be further conducted through secured and encrypted electronic notification, conference calls and video connections. He then said one more face-to-face meeting would be held at which time the date for the launching of the war would be set. He emphasized that this was the first time anyone outside of his group had heard of his plan and that no one could utter the word war to anyone not directly involved in the plan. The plan could not be exposed. He said our secrecy was the main advantage we held.

Rune: So he thought.

Orsin: A fatal miscalculation.

Orsin paused to gather his thoughts.

Orsin: Knowing it was necessary to meet again, Dar released the group. At that point Quin proposed that a name be given to the historic undertaking. There were some names suggested, some

debate and then it was agreed to call Dar's plan, Operation Future. And we all toasted.

Rune: Operation Future?

The young man frowned.

Orsin: I didn't like it either.

A vehicle passed behind them and beeped its horn. Orsin beeped in reply and without turning around stuck their left arm out in a semi-wave.

Orsin: Come on. Let's walk down near the water. It's a beautiful day isn't it?

Rune: Yes it is.

They got out and strolled forward across the freshly mowed grass. There was softness beneath their feet and the scent of summer was in the air. Not far from the water the grass gave way to sand-like earth and rocks and large boulders met them and formed a barrier that dropped down into the water that stretched into the distance before them.

There, across the Detroit River was Windsor, Ontario, still attempting to rise again. There were indications of progress, pockets of construction, but very little to speak of. Virtually all of the population of Canada had been wiped out in the *GE Period*. The two stood in silence. They could hear the water lapping against the shore. Behind them was the busy noise from the work that continued on the Belle Isle Resort.

The three casinos and their nightclubs were completed. The isolated bungalows were being furnished. The cottages, close to one of the beaches were ready. The seven restaurants were preparing meals for the workers and limited visitors. Training for not just the casino staff but also all the employees was ongoing.

There would be a nice, landscaped, short-holed golf course to play. There were horses to ride and swimming pools in which to swim and splash around. Not just canoes but yachts would be

available to enjoy. There was more to be put into place for the guests from *East World*, *Center World*, *West World* and all the worlds in existence.

Orsin: That second face-to-face meeting was scheduled for a little over a week later on a Sunday night. There would be reports, updated, on the progress that had been made. Financial figures would be finalized and attack details would be agreed upon. All remaining components were to be worked out and finally and most important, a date for the commencing of war would be decided upon.

Once again the leaders of the 'Siders would be there, along with their heads of security, their CFOs, second in commands and any other assistants, to a limited number, who were deemed absolutely necessary to attend. I was there to assist the recovering Poins. I remember there were at least fifteen guards, five from each side, stationed outside on the street in front of the building. Fifteen or more were in the hallway that ran outside the meeting room and there were a dozen, perhaps a few more of us in the room itself. When the meeting was supposed to start Lucett had not arrived, who, according to Ursula, was outside in her vehicle talking on her Comm device. She would be a little late, as usual. Most in the room moved to the bar in the corner to get a drink and wait on her.

Now Orsin paused to stare off into the distance. It was as if to look for something, or someone. His head shifted to an angle. It seemed as to better hear something, or someone. Then he looked directly at Rune. Their voice began to speak, to sing, softly the song of death. The words would quicken and rise to grow louder. Orsin: It was a little before 8 p.m. when the two Westsiders' enforcers began their simultaneous attacks. Those who survived filled in some blanks and I was later told by others more details. Lena pulled up in a long black bulletproof tank-like vehicle and

began killing the guards on the street and hunting down those who attempted to escape by running into the building. At the same time, Lloyd somehow came from the roof and began his destruction of those in the hallway and those who ran into the offices and rooms across from us. They had a plan also. They would come down from above and ascend from below. They would come together in that fifth floor hallway. Then they would come into that meeting room and eliminate Dar and all those who had aligned themselves with him. There was a war all right. But it was not the one Dar envisioned.

The two enforcers were firing weapons that sounded like cannons. Our guards, there as a formality, a symbolic show of force had handguns and a few had rifles. They were no match for the firepower they were up against. Lena and Lloyd both wore special suits and helmets that repelled or at least minimized the effect of the lead projectiles that struck them and they moved quickly through the resistance they found.

When the shooting started we piled furniture against the double doors and then overturned the heavy conference table and got behind it. Several in the group, including Quin, began to panic. Attempts were made to call for help but the Westsiders' technology department had put a block around the area on all incoming and outgoing transmissions of any kind.

For a while the firing of the enforcers' weapons intensified. They obviously wielded long guns and they were roaring to each other and responding in thunderous sustained bursts and loud staccato patterns. Lena and Lloyd were definitely angry with us. Rune: Enraged.

Orsin: Yes, a much better description.

Orsin chuckled softly.

Orsin: Lena fought her way from the street through the lobby and up the stairs. Lloyd created havoc along the hallway and

through the adjoining offices and when the shooting stopped they were outside the doors to the meeting room. It was quiet. It was strange the silence. It seemed as if I could smell not just gunpowder seeping in beneath the doors but I believed I could smell death itself. And when I looked around at the others cowering behind that table the thought crossed my mind that we were all together in this madness and I was alone.

We knew they were coming in. We didn't know when or how. I was on my knees and I looked around the table. It was then two large holes were blown open in the wall at the same time, one on each side of the barricaded doors. The explosions were deafening and debris rained against the table. We were choking from the smoke and gasping for air. I watched as those behind that table began to fire at the holes but as I peeped around to see, no one came in.

Again, silence descended. Then the thunder began again and as bullets came through the hole on our right Lloyd came in a crouch through the hole on our left as Lena covered him with withering fire. Now Lloyd was not only across the room beside us, he was behind us.

Rune: You had been outflanked.

Orsin: I suppose you study war tactics too?

Rune: As a matter-of-fact I do.

Orsin: They began picking us off. Lena was shooting through the table and Lloyd was firing from our side. For some reason Poins had never moved. He was paralyzed in his chair, sitting behind us near the wall. He had a Comm device in one hand and a glass of liquor in the other. He was left sitting like that when Lloyd shot his head off. Quin made a break for the balcony and they both shot him through the doorway and over the railing. That's when I surrendered. I stood up and came from behind the table running and hollering that I gave up and I threw my gun away. As I ran

across the room I felt with each step that I would be shot. I thought my capitulation meant nothing to them.

Rune: In *Center World* there is only life and death.

Orsin: Exactly.

Rune: Why do you think they let you live?

Orsin: To this day I don't know the answer to that question. I wasn't the only one who survived. Outside that room there were a few who they also allowed to live. Their information, their intelligence was extensive. They knew who I was, an assistant. I believe they quite possibly knew of just about everyone in that room. By chance I was at the wrong place.

Rune: At the wrong time.

Orsin paused to gather his thoughts. He picked up a small rock and tossed it underhand into the water. They both watched the ripple spread out and then disappear.

Orsin: We hadn't come expecting to be attacked so eventually the few who remained were nearly out of ammunition. I was sitting on the floor behind the bar and I watched as Dar's second in command of security surrendered.

Rune: That was Stra.

Orsin: Ursula threw out her weapon and came from behind the table. Dar stood but refused to give up his pistol. He holstered it. The three 'Siders stood there, lined up. Lena stepped through the hole in the wall and as Lloyd moved forward she walked over to me. Mine you, the two enforcers were not only wearing thick black suits but helmets and the see-through fronts were darkly tinted so I couldn't see her eyes but I could see her looking down at me and I could feel her staring at me and the hair on the back of my neck tingled and stood up. But of course we know she didn't shoot. She used her rifle to strike me in my forehead and I was knocked out.

In my unconscious state I thought I could still hear voices. I

began slipping in and out of the darkness, not becoming fully awake. It was all like a hazy dream. I believed I heard thunder clapping. I thought I saw Lena snatch the knife from the hand of Ursula and cut her open. Then, in my dream-like state I saw Lloyd reach into Dar's chest and pull his heart out. Dar's mouth opened as if he wanted to scream but no sound came and Lloyd shoved Dar's bloody heart into his mouth. And what I thought was a dream, ended.

Rune: But it wasn't a dream, was it?

Orsin: No. Eventually the medical personnel brought me to full consciousness. Stra, one of the last three, had been shot to pieces. Ursula's heart had been sliced in half and Dar's bloody heart was no longer in his chest. It was down in his throat. It was all over.

Rune: For the nearly forty who died it was no dream, it was a nightmare. The Cleaners took the images that were spread around. I've seen them.

Orsin and Rune stood there together in the heat and humidity, in silence. Orsin could once again see the blood, the bodies, and the carnage. He shivered, imperceptibly. Rune could see again the images that had become part of the legend of that fateful meeting. The young man smiled slightly. Orsin tossed another jagged rock into the water and then turned around and headed towards the cart. Rune threw a rock so far out he could barely see it splash. Then he followed Orsin to their transportation and they started off again, slowly.

Orsin: Over the next weeks the leaders of the 'Siders were in constant contact. They were attempting to stave off a full-blown war motivated by vengeance and retribution. Total chaos was close at hand. Leo led the effort to bring us together. Quin's wife now led the Southsiders.

Rune: That would be Nell

Orsin: Dar's sister quickly took her rightful place as leader of the

Eastiders.

Rune: That was Cress who gave way to her brother Var, now in control.

Orsin: Correct. Lucett of course maintained her leadership of the Northsiders. Soon peace accords were proposed, formalized, agreed upon and signed. Business agreements were drawn up. Ultimately, resources were contributed by each group and the construction of the Belle Isle Resort began. Two years later, here we are. The four factions attempt to minimize, as best they can the violence in their areas. Wanton lawlessness is a detriment to business.

Rune: So, a concerted effort improved the situation.

Orsin beeped and waved at a passing cart.

Rune: Whatever happened to the Westsiders' enforcers?

Orsin: They disappeared, again. But before they left Leo had a fabulous banquet with music and dancing. It was at an exclusive, private, guarded hall in Dearborn. All the important 'Siders were there dressed in exquisite gowns and fine tuxedos accompanied by their husbands and wives and significant others. Lena and Lloyd attended. Late in the evening she came towards me as she headed to the patio doors that led to the garden. I thanked her. I said, thank you Lena. I thanked her over and over. The liquor had a hold of me.

She looked directly at me with those beautiful dark-brown eyes. And for the first time, for some reason, when I looked at the red on her full, pretty lips I noticed her little dimples. She said, for what, and called me by my name. She wanted to know why I was thanking her and I said for not killing me. She made a joke. She told me not to make her regret that. She strolled on past me towards the flowers with Lucett by her side.

Orsin chuckled. Rune looked at Orsin and saw a smile spread across their face.

Orsin: Ahh, Lena. Lena. That is one amazing and beautiful *Escura* woman.

Then Orsin spoke, in a near whisper, as if to their self.

Orsin: She's so sweet.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

Dess stared across his desk at his Deputy Director, but only when Fisk had his head lowered looking at the Comm device in his hand. The Director of the *East World* Division of the *W.I.A.* didn't want Fisk to know that although he was listening to Fisk's report he was in fact not really listening. He was contemplating whether to get rid of Fisk, and if so, how?

Dess held a glass ball in his hands. The ball was twelve inches in circumference and was secured to a wooden rectangular base so it wouldn't roll off of his desk when he set it there. So he dropped his gaze to that ball in his hands when Fisk would glance up at him. He didn't want his Deputy Director to look into his eyes and perhaps sense what he was thinking.

Fisk: So as of today we remain on schedule. We'll be able to deploy our teams by the first of September. That's of course if the final test of the Signal Detector goes well.

Dess: That's 2 p.m. this afternoon?

Fisk: Yes.

Dess: Science and Technology have confirmed their presence?

Fisk: Yes.

Dess: Good. I'll meet their representatives and bring them with me. It's absolutely imperative we're able to determine when the attackers initiate their blocking signals.

Dess was thinking. First he thought about how erratic the job performance of Fisk had become. Then he thought how Fisk appeared ill.

Dess: Has there been any progress on the numbers, symbols as you refer to them?

Fisk: None to speak of. We've expanded and also refined the algorithms. What the data is revealing now are results that have been eliminated for consideration as to the meaning of the symbols.

Dess: What about the trance-like states that was reported?

Fisk: No final determination on the validity of those reports. The people who have been tracked down and interviewed have spoken of temporarily losing awareness of the passage of time. Several spoke of being lost in their Comm device. Members of our technology department have been working in conjunction with personnel from Science and Technology. They've looked in areas such as subliminal messaging and hypnotic transmissions. It's possible to gain control of a person, they don't know how the technology would work, specifically in respect to area and duration. The Signal Detector has been designed to recognize such a signal.

Dess: I assume there was no tracking signal received for the stolen products from Rochester?

Fisk: That's correct. Nothing was received from either the robots or the dog. Tracking was disabled or the robots were never activated.

Dess set the glass ball on his desk and stood. He turned his back on Fisk and walked across the room to stare out of a window at the cloudy sky. Finally he turned back to his Deputy Director and spoke. His voice was firm, with determination and resignation.

Dess: Alright. Let's go over this. We're now concentrating our main, concerted efforts on the military base in the San Diego area and the facility south of San Francisco. They've both been placed on high alert. In addition, extra guards have been assigned to

both locations, and surrounding areas, including Special Forces units. All security related technology has been increased with supplemental upgrades and encryption and is being monitored constantly, both onsite and remotely. Restrictions have been placed on both government issued and personal Comm devices. Assuming the Signal Detector is operable I want our two teams of agents ready to go, as you said, by the first day of September.

Dess paused he was thinking.

Dess: That's about it, isn't it?

Fisk: Yes, that's where we are, at this point.

Dess stared intently at Fisk as he issued his next statements.

Dess: The attacks began here. *East World* Division of the *W.I.A.* will be in charge of the operation and will provide the Director of the *West World* Division with all necessary information. Rolf will lead both our teams and I'll decide who will be the seconds in command.

As he had anticipated a brief look of relief, barely noticeable, passed across Fisk's face. There was a time the ambitious Deputy Director sought to be actively involved in all aspects of *W.I.A.* business. Fisk had consistently been both diligent and aggressive, positive traits necessary to rise and achieve that which he had actively and obviously desired to take, perhaps by any means, which was the position held by Dess. Now, over the past months he had avoided responsibility, shirked his duties, lacked attention to details and these aspects of the deteriorating state manifested in his being slow and late on numerous occasions in regards to important assignments. In the past he was never late, always early.

Dess: Under ordinary circumstances I would draw upon you to lead the operation. However, not only is this a very dangerous mission it's also time consuming with an indefinite time frame for resolution. I want you here, close by my side to assist me in coordination. And that way you won't have to be away from your

lovely wife. Is that acceptable to you?

There was no hesitation.

Fisk: Yes, I understand.

Dess: How is Darrie by the way, well I hope?

Fisk: Yes, she's well.

Dess: Good. Good. Give her my regards.

Fisk: I certainly will.

Dess reached and picked up the round object. He held it in both hands and shook it occasionally and looked at it as he paced back and forth from his desk to the window.

Dess: Update the reports in our database and before our people depart all the information we have is to be loaded onto our most secure external device and provided to Rolf. That information will be provided to the *W.I.A.* people in *West World* on a need to know basis. Of course there's more to be done between now and the end of August and we'll deal with those things as they arise.

Dess stopped. He looked at the ball he held in his right hand. He lifted it, brought it closer, as if to see it better. He turned it over and then turned it back up.

Dess: Do you know what this is?

Fisk: No I don't. I've seen it on your desk.

Dess: Are you familiar with the Professor and his involvement in the destruction of six of our best agents?

Fisk: I've heard about that and I've read about it in our reports.

Dess: The infamous Professor, a former *W.I.A.* consultant, or agent or director of some kind, I'm not sure who or what he was and for a while I was involved in that case. It was all very strange.

Again he turned the ball over and up.

Dess: This sample of the fine, gray, ash-like material represents all that remained of the mysterious Professor. His house, his barn, anything of substance within the maze of tunnels that ran beneath his property was reduced to this.

Dess held the ball out to Fisk and shook it. They both watched the ash float and swirl slowly within the glass and then settle.

Dess: There was nothing to be found. Not even a minute particle of DNA. There was nothing to indicate brick or wood or paper or cloth. Scientists came from all the worlds to take portions of ash, just like this, home with them. They examined it, tested it. Some concluded it seemed foreign, as if it came from another planet.

Dess stared at the ash that he induced to rise and swirl again. He was transfixed at the movement. Fisk spoke, softly. Dess responded softly, yet with passion.

Fisk: Imagine that.

Dess: Imagine this. The fire! The power! The heat that was created. If harnessed and controlled, what a weapon that would be.

THE SANCTUARY

Bru left his rooms as above him, unseen, the late-August summer sun was setting. If he had looked up there would have only been the image projected through the skylight of the partly cloudy sky. He strolled with purpose down the long hallway that led to the main open area of this huge and long and wide former warehouse. The building sat on nearly eighty acres of land adjacent to Lake Michigan and the structure itself, constructed of predominantly metal but also brick and wood and synthetic materials was spread across not just extensive square feet but also occupied half of that acreage.

Bru turned left and moved between the stage and audience chairs and continued on past the wooden and plastic crates and oblong containers, most were opened some were not. They all

held within them, from defunct museums and private collections, statues of marble and bronze and artifacts from the distant past to the more modern times before and until the *GE Period*. He glanced, as he passed, at the full suits of armor and swords and weapons from the Medieval and Renaissance armies.

To his right, in the near distance he could see the bright lights from the technology area hanging down from the high ceiling. He could hear soft humming and feel beneath his feet, barely, the power that emanated from not just the power sources and generators but also from the energy that spread out from the servers and Comm devices.

He continued towards the garage. The tall and wide doors were retracted so he stepped through the doorway and paused to observe what was going on. The 3D printers had completed their assignments and were still. There was no longer any banging or sawing on metal being shaped and formed into some specific design. The *Entity* mechanics, the engineers, the technicians, the scientists, the programmers, the workers, all stood around close to the walls and observed the activity of those in Bru's group. All the *Entities* watched as those soon to depart finished loading the last necessities into the drawer-like extensions that came out from both sides and carried personal items onto the vehicle that would take them across *Center World* and to their ultimate destination in *West World*.

Ek and Vier were assisting Cinq and Dois with the weapons and ammunition. Cha, Okan and Naki were inside in the driver's area. Using detailed imagery, projected on the windshield in front of them were scenes of different types of terrain and roads and highways. Along with the simulation there was a virtual instructor and as Moja had done first they were all completing their training on driving and learning the technology they would utilize as they traveled west.

Una and Tatu and were inside the transportation arranging the uniforms, combat suits and other clothes that would be taken. Each of the group had chosen a few favorite pieces and anything else of need would be made or purchased along the way. Moja and Leeda stood near the vehicle, observing. Moja saw all the *Entities* shift as one, their gazes to the doorway and he turned to see Bru standing there dressed in his favorite colors of dark-blue and dark-red. This was scheduled to be one of the final inspections. Moja walked over to Bru.

Moja: What do you think?

Bru: It appears similar to those we saw in *East World*.

Moja: Yes. Those who possess great value in the West as in the East, travel around and even live in vehicles such as this. As decided, we didn't want it too draw too much undue attention. However, most in *Center World* have never seen in reality anything such as this.

Bru began to slowly walk around the vehicle staring at it intently. Moja walked beside him. Leeda followed closely.

Bru: Has all our technology hardware been placed and secured?

Moja: Yes. We'll begin testing whenever you're ready.

Bru handed Moja the Comm device he held.

Bru: Here are my final programs and applications. Load them onto the server and transfer everything to each of the group's personal devices. We'll test everything at the same time.

Moja placed Bru's device on a nearby table.

Bru: I've launched the Disruptor and Influencer programs in New York City and Washington with delay and time sensitive settings.

Bru paused to touch the vehicle with his left hand.

Bru: Tell me the story of the creation of this unique vehicle.

Moja: Using advanced technology the printers incorporated both plastic composite material and reinforced carbon fiber to create

the connection points that were fused with rods of the same components to build the chassis. All the primary materials used were purposed to reduce weight. The body itself and many of the engines parts are also made of reinforced carbon fiber.

We have joined together twin-turbos and an additional turbo engine that can be used if we lose an engine or it can be activated as a booster. We have solar power, main electric and backup electric power, along with battery constant charging capabilities and in addition, gasoline power mode. Our top speed will be limited even with a combined HP and BHP of close to 2000. Torque level has been maximized.

Bru: We won't be trying to outrun anyone. We just want to cruise efficiently.

The three continued walking.

Moja: Even with the complete projectile proofing of the body and windows and adding in furnishings and hardware and the estimated weight of all we're carrying and factoring in the combined weight of each individual ...

Bru: And Kojo.

Moja: Of course, and Kojo, our transportation total weight should still remain a little under 45 tons.

Bru: Does that eliminate our hovering capabilities?

Moja: No, but for how long is indeterminate. We've lifted off and duration has varied. The amount of air needed is difficult to produce. Programs have been run to predict but only in a real situation can a traveling distance in that mode be actualized.

Bru: What about wavelength cloaking?

Moja: We still have that ability.

Bru: For how long?

Moja: Maximum time has been 30 minutes before the signal starts to become unstable.

Bru was staring at the vehicle, thinking, processing.

Bru: Perhaps in the future we'll have an opportunity to work on those two technologies after we appropriate military data.

Moja: Perhaps.

Bru scanned the vehicle.

Bru: I calculate 55 feet in length.

Moja: That's correct. It's 10 feet wide and 14 feet tall. We have a total of 26 wheels that, through sensor direction, can all operate independently of each other, each with solid, projectile repelling, airless, mechano-adaptive rubber. Our technology area can also function and be manned constantly directly or indirectly as we travel. When parked we have four areas, similar to extensions that expand out to produce a total interior functional size of 16 hundred square feet. Our windows, including the sunroofs, as I said, are projectile repellant and are photovoltaic to provide electricity to our batteries. We can see out, no one can see in and light is not emitted from inside out. Usage of space is maximized due to our not requiring a bedroom or kitchen area and no related items for such places. We do have a water tank and two showers along with clothes washing and drying machines.

The three stopped near the opened front driver's side door.

Bru turned to look in the direction of the rear area of the garage.

Bru: Are those the two support vehicles?

Moja: Yes. They'll be towed in a lightweight enclosed trailer.

Moja opened the covering on the Comm device on his wrist and began to quickly tap on it. A hologram appeared in the air before them.

Moja: Each of us will be able to activate this holographic display that represents the steering function and panel that controls that particular support vehicle. We are also able to bring up on our screens inside the main vehicle this same display and controls. Both vehicles can be programmed to function autonomously, including auto-drive and self-regulation. Both are outfitted with

Trancer and Blocker technology. Both can cloak and hover.

Moja pressed on the hologram and both vehicles, one behind the other, slowly moved forward. Moja pressed again and they stopped. Bru walked around the first, black, smaller, sleek, fast appearing vehicle as he looked closely at it. Then he moved to the larger white vehicle that could easily seat four, up to six with a third row seat being lifted and was built as a utility type transportation with off-road capabilities.

Moja: They both have a high horsepower turbo engine and can also run in electric mode. The smaller vehicle appears as a two-seater but can be converted to comfortably seat four and they both have two submerged cargo spaces. Each one has been designed so that their front grills and their rear ends and all their fenders can morph into three different styles and shapes. They can also alternate between black, white, a gray color and a combination of those three shades. Of course they can effectively repel normal lead projectiles from the average handgun and long gun generally being used.

The windows of both vehicles were darkened so Moja opened the driver's door on the first vehicle so Bru could look in.

Moja: In addition both have built in internal automatic weapons that can be programmed to externally fire up to one thousand 7.62 caliber rounds per minute from the front or back, separately or simultaneously. By the way, our main vehicle has eight such weapons. Two in front, two in the back and two on each side that fire 12.7 caliber rounds between 700 to 800 per minute.

Bru leaned in and honked the horn.

Moja: The connected trailer will also cloak and hover. We have other gadgets and defensive capabilities I'm sure you'll appreciate.

Bru: I'm sure you do and I'm sure I will. I'll go over the specs of everything later.

Moja: Each vehicle has a compartment in the rear with a kit.

Bru: Good. Never know when one might require a kit.

All those inside came out. The others moved to stand in a semi-circle around Bru as he looked back at the far corner of the garage. He was thinking, processing. Then he turned back.

Bru: Is the trailer done?

Moja: It's being fitted with weapons now. Then it has to be painted.

Bru: I'm impressed. Moja, you have outdone yourself. Our brothers and sisters have more than exceeded expectations. I will acknowledge them all before we depart.

He turned to Leeda.

Bru: Where are Chuki and Kojo?

Leeda: In the jungle, as usual.

Moja: Chuki has upgraded her pet. She activated more of the existing programs and then loaded programs of her own creation. The Bouvier des Flanders now has traits of a male lion.

Bru: I thought it was a bear.

Bru turned to stare at their main transportation. He gazed at it. Scanned it. Everyone looked at the weaponized house and tank on wheels. They were quiet. Then Bru spoke.

Bru: I approve of the black and silver color scheme. Black on the lower half, silver along the upper and top. However, it needs some red, to represent blood, a pattern of blood. Not a lot.

Vier: A spattering!

Ek: A spilling!

Naki: Drops?

Cha: Congealed and pooled!

Tatu: No, that's a dull red. Steps! Blood that walks brightly!

Okan: Running! Blood that runs!

Bru: No. No, nothing ostentatious. Una you and Leeda come up with something artistic, along the lines of a stripe or two.

Una: Like a streak?

Bru: Yes, something like that.

He turned and headed towards the doorway. His voice rose so those in his group could hear him clearly.

Bru: Tonight at midnight we gather here for more training and testing. Let us designate the first day of September for departure.

Bru left the garage and turned towards the technology area. He slowed his pace as he moved past the eight *Entities* who sat before their personal screens, controlling Comm devices. Four were monitoring the security cameras and sensors placed not only near but also on the perimeter of this land Bru had acquired years ago immediately after the Omni-strain had ended.

Before leaving this section of the building he watched as two of the eight listened to intercepted voice transmissions of all those in a nearly twenty-five mile radius. They listened to any mention or word that had been flagged by a program. They would further investigate everything that might have anything to do with that warehouse near the water.

Then he observed the final two, working on programs, developing, testing and improving the software that would one day be used against those they considered to be enemies. Thoughts flashed within his processors and his reaction similar to a human, was to smile slightly. He thought about how these eight would rotate with another eight and then another eight and how throughout the day and night they would concentrate. None would tire or sleep or waver from the task before them.

Bru turned towards the southeast side of the building. He moved in the direction of the corner. He knew Chuki had passed this way because the sensor controlled soft ambient lights above were still on. They seemed to radiate and pulsate. As he strolled further into a somewhat dimly lit jungle, or zoo, the word sanctuary came to him.

The hard cement floor beneath his feet had now become a softer green substance similar to grass. He wound his way around artificial trees and plastic plants and flowers and real rocks that had been hauled from the edge of the lake. The terrain rose to form small hills and then settled to bumps and stretch into a flatness upon which giant tortoises rested in pairs.

He looked to his left and right as he had done so many times before. He saw an Amur leopard and a Malayan tiger. He saw a Bengal tiger and a jaguar side by side. He glanced at a black rhino as he reached out his left hand to touch a Javan rhino. He could recognize those that were precise reproductions and those he had collected that long ago had been stuffed with wood wool or cotton or excelsior. None of their glass eyes moved.

Chuki had activated holographic images that moved and swam in the air above a wide, long desk so Bru stopped to look at a Yangtze finless porpoise, a blue whale and a bluefin tuna that seemed to float, suspended, as dolphins and a miniature great white shark moved slowly back and forth. And close by, three African penguins walked as penguins do, following each other, marching around in a circle. Then he looked up to see the bees and bats that had risen nearly to the ceiling as they descended to buzz and click and begin to rise again. He tapped on the Comm device on his wrist and all the holographic images disappeared.

He moved further along the trail, deeper into the jungle-like setting he had designed and helped to create. He rounded a bend and stopped. He believed he would find Chuki here as he had on other occasions. Kojo had heard him approaching and had stood from his lying position at her side, next to the wooden bench upon which the child *Entity* sat. The dog turned to him with wagging tail and protruding tongue.

She was dressed in her favorite outfit. She wore light-blue denim overalls and a short-sleeved white shirt with soft white

shoes. Her brown-colored skin seemed to glow in the unnatural light. Her curly, dark-brown hair had been lengthened by Una and Leeda and hung to her shoulders and nearly hid her child-like face as she sat with her head down and her feet dangling over the seat. She was slumped back against the bench with her hands in her lap. She wasn't playing with the mechanical animals that moved or talking to them or grooming them. Bru stared at her and he recognized that once again her thought processes had been overwhelmed by the reality that surrounded her.

She knew he was there. He knew she knew he was there. He moved to sit down close beside her. They sat like that in the dimness, in silence. Then, without raising her head, without moving, she spoke. Her voice was soft and low, a near whisper.

Chuki: Did you see the red panda, the artic fox? I stood there beside the cute little pigmy elephant and scratched its ear.

Bru replied. It was as if his words were those of a father spoken to his little eight-year-old daughter. He couldn't ease her pain. She felt no pain. All he could do was attempt to alter her thoughts, to bring something else to that which she processed.

Bru: Yes, I saw them. I've seen them countless times. I can't change that reality. I had to shift my thought to that which makes human beings unique. I altered my thoughts to acceptance.

Chuki leaped from the bench. She ran forward. Her little steps took her closer to the trees and bushes. Kojo stood to follow then remained still when she screamed as she turned back towards Bru.

Chuki: Acceptance? What about the black rhino, the white bear?

Bru: Don't.

She turned back to the trees. Her little arms were opened to that which once lived, that clung to the branches seemingly staring at her. Her voice was low and clear and bounced through this surreal place. Her words were both plaintive and beseeching.

Chuki: What about the chimpanzees and orangutans? What to do?

Bru: Stop those thoughts.

She pointed with her left hand at the base of a large tree. Then she pointed with her right hand at a large thick bush.

Chuki: Those western lowland gorillas are gone Bru!

Her voice cracked. Her next words were choked as the little child *Entity* began to cry.

Chuki: The eastern lowland gorillas are all gone forever!

She fell to her knees and began to sob as only a child in tremendous pain could cry. Bru jumped up and ran to gently lift her from the authentic dirt and unnatural grass. He took her into his arms and shifted her so he could press her face to his left shoulder. He held her close like that so she could no longer see the extinct animals. Her anguished voice was muffled against his chest. She struggled in his arms.

Chuki: The honeybees! The honeycreepers! They kill everything!

As Bru moved back to the bench Chuki squirmed and kicked. She was repeating the same thing, over and over as he sat down with her.

Chuki: They kill everything! They kill everything!

Still he held her close. Then he set her down to stand between his legs on the hardened pathway that meandered throughout the jungle setting. She collapsed forward into his lap. She continued to weep. Bru spoke to her softly.

Bru: You're going to use up all your tears.

Chuki leaned back to look Bru directly in his eyes. She took his face into her hands. She was gasping, as if trying to catch her breath. Now they did whisper to each other.

Chuki: Cry with me.

Bru: I can't. I wasn't made that way.

Chuki kissed Bru on each cheek. Again she stared into his

eyes, deep into the brownness of them. They revealed to her nothing and yet she thought she saw a flicker, an essence of emotion that she knew he could show and share if he wanted to. Chuki: Then I'll cry for you. The horror. The horror of it all forces me to horrible thoughts.

Chuki's tears dropped from her big brown eyes and rolled down her soft brown cheeks. Bru took his right thumb to catch a glistening tear as her hands fell to her sides. He stared at the moisture he held and rubbed his fingers together.

Bru: There's confusion in your tears ...

Chuki: Hatred!

Bru: ... and pain.

Chuki: Hatred in my eyes!

Then he returned her kisses to her as he kissed her on both cheeks. He looked at the little one as if to see deep inside this representation of a human child.

Bru: Listen to me. Don't cry for that which has been lost and thus is gone forever. Think these thoughts and your tears will cease. Think of all the worlds, empty of the humankind. We'll destroy every human being on this planet. They'll be punished not only for who they presently are but also for their past and in the future there'll be peace on this earth.

The little child *Entity* allowed her head to fall back and she closed her eyes. Thinking. Processing. Then she opened her eyes and gazed at the artificial night sky above her and she focused on the lights that were designed to appear as bright twinkling stars. Bru had shown her so she picked out the numbers that the stars revealed as a message. They were the symbols that had been left at past scenes of destruction. They were the clues, the evidence that informed all who were able to decipher them. The strange symbols revealed what Bru referred to as the uniqueness of the humankind. Her tears had eased and then stopped. She stared at

Bru. She spoke softly, without emotion.

Chuki: Is that possible? Will that happen?

Bru: Of course it's possible. Of course it will happen.

Now Bru smiled at Chuki and he spoke with absolute surety. He was enthused.

Bru: Since Homo sapiens came into existence they have been on a journey to extinction. It's simply a matter of time.

Chuki processed the words she had just heard. Then she stepped back and began to dance, slowly at first and then faster as she jumped and twirled. Kojo stood and began to move excitedly. He turned in a circle with his short fluffy tail wagging. Bru watched this display as if amused. Then he stood.

Bru: Come on, let's go. Obviously you feel better.

Chuki continued to dance.

Chuki: I'm thinking better thoughts.

As Bru began to step along the path, Chuki stopped.

Chuki: Look Daddy! Look!

Bru turned back to her. Chuki called to Kojo and made a fist with her right hand.

Chuki: Kojo!

The dog crouched. He looked around, searching for his prey.

Chuki: Now he'll get anything or anyone I point at and chew them up. Attack mode like a lion.

Again she called the dog and when he looked at her she opened her fist and held out her hand straight before her with her palm down. The dog stood and relaxed, staring at her with his tail wagging and his pink tongue hanging out.

Bru: I'm impressed.

Bru started forth again and Chuki moved to walk beside him. Kojo followed. With her little left hand she grabbed his right hand. They strolled along like that. The sensors recognized their movement and the direction they were going. Behind them lights

dimmed. The jungle darkened and the animals cast shifting shadows that seemed to bring them to life and the gorillas appeared to wave goodbye.

LILLIE, LOUISIANA

It was nearing 1 p.m. when Kab pulled his motorcycle into an empty park area outside of Lillie, Louisiana. He had arranged for this meeting here near the boarder of Arkansas so that he wouldn't have to travel too far into this state where he was not welcomed. He knew that if he was seen, notifications would be sent as to his presence but they would be more informational than anything. He was riding alone and therefore posed no real threat.

He had taken his time on the ride from Devil's headquarters near Sherwood so he had covered the little over one hundred and fifty miles in just over three hours with two short in duration breaks to smoke on his drug stick. When he stopped he activated his stands and dismounted. Then he stretched his arms and squatted several times to loosen his legs. He removed his gloves and placed them on his seat. He moved from the paved section where his bike was standing to the grass and towards a nearby picnic table.

As he strolled he could see ahead, past the other tables and grills and cooking pits, where the grass was overgrown and weeds flourished but the residents of Lillie, the few there were, kept most of the park in relatively good shape. This was another reason he sought to have the meeting here, finally, this is where the two of them had met before a little over a year ago.

He turned back toward where his bike stood. He looked at the short road that ran from the highway. Then he stared south along 167, that main highway. He pulled a drug stick from the long

pocket that ran down the right side of his denim pants. He searched his other pocket on his left side for a lighter, and finding it he lit his stick. He took a long, deep drag and held it. And as he put the lighter back in his pocket the large pistol hanging beneath his left arm suddenly felt heavy so he adjusted it a little to a better position. He blew out the greenish-colored smoke. He looked up at the cloudless blue sky above and then he shifted his gaze further out to the horizon. Then he returned his vision to earth and he chuckled slightly as his head became light as if to float and for a moment he thought he could feel the ground under his feet move and the planet rotate.

He was standing like that occasionally puffing his drug, when he heard an engine, faint at first, it grew more distinct as it came closer. He recognized the sound of a motorcycle and then the bike gradually came into view. Then there was silence. Only the rustling of the leaves on the oak trees behind him could be heard from an abrupt rising gust. Then the wind subsided to a soft breeze and all was quiet again except for the songs of the wrens and he thought he heard a woodpecker drumming and he figured the bike was switched to electric mode or perhaps would run the final distance on solar power.

The rider grew closer, the bike became larger and Kab could see silver and white glinting and flashing from the rays of the sun against the painted metal and shiny chromium. The bike turned off the wide main highway and onto the narrow road towards him so he put out the stick on his leather vest and pinched off the tip and tossed the piece into his mouth. He walked forward to stand near his bike.

The large touring bike seemed to coast and then it was brought to a stop beside his bike and double stands came down. The power was shut off. The rider, dressed completely in a dull-brown riding suit with dark-brown boots seemed to stare at him

through the wind guard on the bike but he couldn't tell because in spite of the shield on the bike the rider wore a dark-brown helmet with a tinted front. He lifted his left hand in greeting and the rider lifted their left hand slightly in acknowledgement. Then dismounting, the rider removed their helmet and moved to place it on a hook next to the large long gun that was secured at the back of the bike. The weapon pointed straight up beside the travel carrier. They removed their brown gloves and placed them on their seat. They carried a handgun cross draw on the left side.

The rider was a *Melada DF* with auburn-colored hair with streaks of blond that would have fallen to her neck when loose but was tied with a ribbon. The gaze of her hazel-colored eyes seemed innocent and yet there was a sharpness to the look and then Kab saw a hint of a smile and her facial expression softened. Kab: Hello Briney. Are you well?

Briney: Hello Kab. I am well. I hope you are.

Kab: I am. I am.

Briney turned, opened the carrier and removed two bottles of water from the cooler department. She closed the top and turned, walked over and handed Kab a bottle. They flipped the tops up, gestured with the bottles as if to toast and both took a drink. Kab walked over to and then slowly around her bike, admiring it. He looked at the size. He bent to peer closely at the design of the engine and power sources. Then he scoped the silver and white color scheme.

Kab: I see you're gliding now. I like it.

Briney: Only on long rides.

She indicated with her bottle, Kab's bike.

Briney: I see you're still chopped.

Kab: Yeah, but not as stretched out as I used to be. I need more comfort as I get older.

Briney started towards the picnic table.

Kab: What was your ride, five, six hours?

Briney: No, I'm coming from Alexandria. I had business there. I spent the night, two and a half hours from there to here.

They both sat down, across from each other. Briney sipped from her bottle. Kab sipped from his.

Briney: When I leave here I'm going to Shreveport for the night then Lake Charles for a couple of days and then home.

She was speaking with assurance and her youthful voice was light and pleasant.

Kab: You're riding like you used to.

Briney: Different direction. Different reasons.

Kab stared across the table at Briney. He saw the changes in the young woman he had known since she was sixteen years old. He realized that those changes were not simply in her physical appearance and he at that moment accepted that he had not really known her despite them being close when they were together as gang members. His next words were soft, and direct.

Kab: With all due respect, you were never really one of us. I'm glad you made it out. That's not easy to do.

Briney: When we first met I was lost and alone.

Kab: And very young.

Briney: The Devils and Angels became my family. Gangs are attractive to those in the situation I was in.

Kab: You were attracted to what?

Briney: I don't know. It was something more than family, protection perhaps, certainly not the violence.

Kab: I understand. There's that pull, isn't there?

Briney: The pull was stronger than my resistance.

Kab: The force, the energy of the group, in our case, the gang, is always stronger than the individual strength.

Kab looked down at his exposed weathered arms. His *Pardachara* skin was suntanned and slightly wrinkled and tattooed with

the colors and markings of both the Avenging Devils and Avenging Angels. He looked across at Briney. With his left hand he touched the left side of his face, as if to feel the images and letters that covered the whole area.

Kab: It's good that you're visibly unmarked.

Briney: The few that I had on my chest and back I had removed before my color alteration. They're not completely gone. If one looks closely there are slight impressions, traces of what was once there. But for me the Devils and Angels are no more. The Briney you knew no longer exists. The Protectors are my family now

They both sipped from their bottles. Although separate they were joined and they both understood that fact.

Briney: So Kab, tell me what brings us here? We don't need to speak any longer about old times, do we?

Briney smiled slightly. Kab returned the smile. Then he stood and reached past the drug sticks in the pocket on the right side of his pants. He pushed his hand deep to the bottom until he felt a small container that could have held a diamond ring yet was somewhat flat.

Kab: There's a card in there that has information, including images, of three Devils that are on their way to New Orleans.

Briney glanced down at the container. There had been no real perceptible expression on her face at Kab's initial words but when she looked up at him a slight frown could be seen, as if she were mildly annoyed. Then she leaned forward just a little.

Kab: They're coming with the serious intention of finding you. They're young but don't underestimate them. They're dangerous. Their leader has the calling of Drale. He's the son of Lazar. Perhaps there are other heirs to the throne so to speak, but right now this one is the problem.

Briney: Why do they seek me?

Kab: It's business and personal for Drale. For his two cohorts it's

primarily personal. The true object of their desire is your *Escura* friend, Lena. She destroyed relatives of the two and of course she ripped Lazar's heart out.

Briney: That still doesn't explain why they're looking for me.

Kab: Drale shows up out of nowhere from somewhere and makes claim to the leadership of the Devils. It is his belief that if he destroys your friend and returns with her head, he will become leader. You're going to tell him where your friend is.

Briney looked at Kab with anger. Then an incredulous look spread across her face.

Briney: That's foolish! That makes no sense!

Her voice was harsh, and sharp.

Briney: They're going to come to New Orleans, my home, find me and I'm going to tell them where Lena is and then they're going to find her and cut off her head?

Briney straightened and placed both hands on the tabletop, palms down. She was still as she stared at Kab. Then she spoke and her voice was soft and light again, slow but without emotion.

Briney: And you couldn't talk Drale, the leader, Lazar's son, out of that nonsense?

Kab hunched his shoulders and raised both hands, palms up, in a helpless gesture.

Kab: Listen, I tried. I swear, I tried.

Then he placed both his hands on the tabletop, palms down.

Kab: There are three factions vying for control. Each has their own agenda and has chosen who they want to lead. One group supports Drale. They're encouraging him and financing his noble quest. One tried to dissuade him. The third group urges him on so they can be rid of him. They view it as something akin to a suicide mission.

Briney looked away to her right. She stared through the oak trees and focused on the tall pines. Then her eyes widened and

her expression was blank. She spoke softly, with intensity.

Briney: Hear that?

Kab: What?

He almost looked behind him. He was suddenly tense.

Briney: I hear a mockingbird.

Kab relaxed. He listened.

Kab: I hear a chickadee.

They looked at each other and chuckled. Then Briney picked up the little container from the table and shifted it around in her fingers.

Kab: You have there the information you need. My words are only to emphasize and add. Drale has the eyes of his dear departed father. His left eye is light gray. His right is light blue. It is my understanding he will make them appear the same, whatever color that is. None of the three have marks that are easily visible. They understand you may have altered your appearance but they search for a somewhat short *Palida DF* with black hair.

Now Kab paused and smiled at the young woman.

Kab: Obviously the color of your skin and hair are not as they were.

Briney: My calling is the same. I won't be hard to find.

Kab frowned at that statement. He stared at Briney.

Kab: The thin in size no longer holds. Somewhat thick is more correct. Steroids? *AAS*?

Briney smiled and shook her head.

Briney: No, I am well nourished.

She placed the little container on the table and with both hands she reached down and made the gesture as if she pulled at and lifted up a ways, something.

Briney: And I touch the weights.

Kab: They must be heavy.

Kab chuckled and smiled.
Kab: You've changed.
Briney: I'm older. I've grown in many ways.
Kab: How old now?
Briney: Twenty-one years lived.
Kab: A lifetime.
Briney: In *Center World*, two lifetimes.
Kab: Good for you. You look great. I'm glad for you and proud of you. I enjoy life and to see you thrive increases my enjoyment.
Then Kab grew serious.
Kab: We don't meet often and we may never meet again ...
Briney: Maybe, maybe not.
Kab: ... but I wanted to see you ...
He reached out to touch her hand. He grasped it, then let it go.
Kab: ... to touch you, to once again thank you and tell you in person that I will always owe you my life and that I enjoy each day that I'm alive.
Briney: You owe me nothing. You looked out for me when we rode together.
She smiled.
Briney: And taught me how to play poker.
Now Kab smiled.
Kab: You became very good. We won quite often.
Briney: And you would challenge those who challenged me.
Kab: Still play?
Briney: Yes.
Now Kab stared directly into Briney's hazel-colored eyes that Kab had noticed seemed to grow darker and lighter as her mood changed.
Kab: Tell me, I've often wondered. How was it you were able to sit on your bike in the open like that and not be shot?

Briney looked into the sky and then off into the distance. She watched for a long moment one of the few clouds that had just formed. It moved so slowly it was as if it simply hovered. She was thinking, remembering.

Briney: If you recall I was the first to meet her. She later told me she chose me because she saw a birthmark on my leg. She somehow knew that my mother had the same mark and my grandmother, who I never knew, also carried that mark. She wanted to pull me away and give me a new life by allowing me to live. Her pull was greater than the Devils and Angels combined. I felt her power when she ordered me to New Orleans. There I gained a new family. I was just at the right place at the right time for her to find me. It was fate.

Kab: In her desire to give you a new life she also gave me another chance.

Briney: I saw you get shot. I saw you make it behind the tree.

Kab: Eventually I passed out. I was bleeding my life away. You stopped the last of my life from leaving my body. You protected me on our journey back. You cared for me and I was fairly healthy when you disappeared.

Briney: Right place. Right time.

Kab: Lena's life to your life to my life. How is she by the way?

Briney: She's fine. Shall I tell her you asked about her, that you wish her well?

They both laughed softly at the irony of it all. They sat there in silence for a long moment. Then Briney stood. Kab stood. They started back towards their bikes. Briney put the container into the pocket on the right side of her pants and zipped it shut.

Briney: Thanks Kab. I understand what it means for you to share this information with me. I appreciate it. I'll handle it from here.

Kab: I'm sure you will. I've seen you wield weapons before. The three are scheduled to head your way in four days, on the first day

of September.

They reached the bikes and turned to face each other.

Kab: Let me give you a hug.

They embraced.

Briney: Be well.

Kab: Be well.

Briney turned to her bike put the bottles away and picked up her helmet and put it on. She grabbed her gloves. She could hear Kab as he raised his voice.

Kab: Be careful. In *Center World* there is only life and death.

Briney put on her gloves and acknowledged him with her left hand. She climbed on her bike. The stands retracted. The bike was started in electric mode. She moved slowly, quietly along the short road. Kab pulled a drug stick from his pants pocket, found his lighter and lit up. He saw Briney reach the main highway. He could hear the engine of the bike as she switched to fuel power. It sounded as a low growl. He stood there in the sunshine and listened and smoked. The sound faded and he saw her disappear from his sight.

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

It was Tuesday, September 1 and the President of *East World* had just adjourned the meeting for the day. It was a full gathering that had included all of his advisors and their assistants and all the members of his Cabinet with their assistants. Now, after several breaks, including an extended lunch, it was approaching 4 p.m. and this formal meeting was done for the day. Smaller groups would get together and continue business for several more hours. The President motioned and spoke to his Secretary of Health and Human Services as everyone filed out.

President: I need to speak to you for a moment.

When everyone had departed he instructed his guards to wait outside. The door was closed. He turned to his Secretary.

President: Give me an update on our project.

The Secretary shifted her large bag, opened it and stuffed the papers she carried inside.

Secretary: Things are going as planned. Currently there's a rising movement for you to take more aggressive action against the purple subversives as they've been labeled and are being called.

President: We have data to support our position?

Secretary: Yes, I've taken care of that. The necessary data has been manipulated.

President: You're good at manipulation.

Secretary: Is that a compliment?

President: Yes, of course.

Secretary: Just a heads up. There's going to be an, incident, I shall say, before the end of this month. I'm letting you know now so you can have sufficient time to prepare your response.

President: Nothing too extreme, I trust?

Secretary: No, something minor, just enough for you to exhibit your forceful leadership and take a harder line.

President: Good. Good. I'll work on a speech. You've done your duty. You will be rewarded. The previous uproar over the use of Humanoids or robots or however they're referred to, is losing energy. The moribund economy is being pushed and relegated to the background. From Florida to Maine the color purple is the focus. I can exploit that.

Secretary: You're excellent at exploitation.

President: Is that a compliment?

Secretary: Of course it is.

The President chuckled as he held the door open for his Secretary. The two nodded and then strolled along the hallway in different directions.

HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

On the morning of September 1, Rann had boarded her plane that would take her to Los Angeles, California. It had taken her several days just to work out the simple details of how and when she would arrive. Communication between *East World* and *West World* was difficult. Any transmissions of data, voice, images or otherwise was fraught with problems and could break down or fail completely at any time in passing through *Center World*. Eventually she had reached her connection and provided the details he needed. She only carried one handgun in her carry on bag of personal items. A team would be assembled and the weapons and equipment they needed would be acquired.

She stared out of her first class window as the plane began to taxi and pick up speed to take off. It was a dark and overcast day for as far as she could see. They rose through the nimbus clouds and the earth below disappeared. The grayness of the day fit her mood perfectly.

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

It was early afternoon on September 1, and Tirsch was moving through the crowd at New York's International Airport. Rann told him he only needed a few personal items so he carried one mid-size leather bag. He started to put his handgun in it but he felt better with it secured under his left arm.

He was early so he took his time but he was still strolling with purpose. Then, as he turned a corner he saw the window next to him had a dark background so he paused to stare at his reflection. He had thought it best to temporarily dye his yellowish-colored hair, which was the same color as his dear departed baby brother and change its texture. So he looked at himself with somewhat

short, wavy black hair. He didn't like it. As a *Sarará* he stood out. There were only so many of his kind and he was proud to be who he was. He thought about how people such as him were at one time supposed to be overly emotional, unpredictable and often times unusually violent.

As he headed to his gate the purple people crossed his mind. He had read of them. His people had gone through something similar long ago. He wondered if perhaps, in the current climate if that type of scrutiny and discrimination could return to those born with yellow hair and brown skin. He dismissed the idea. One hundred years ago his people had responded to abuse with riots and chaos. The world had left them alone.

He could see heavy rain pounding hard and streaking against the airport windows. He wondered if his flight would be delayed. He knew whenever he got to Los Angeles, Rann had better be there to pick him up.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

On the morning of September 1, Dess stood at the window of the control tower at the *W.I.A.*'s private airport with Carr, his assistant. He could see the rain was subsiding and when he looked up into the sky above and then into the near distance he saw small patches of blue between the dark clouds. He turned and started towards the nearby elevator when the air traffic controller manning the radar gave him the go signal. When he reached the hangar he called out.

Dess: Alright, load up!

The two dozen *W.I.A.* agents, dressed for a cross-country flight had been sitting and alternately standing and milling around for almost three hours waiting for the weather to break. Now it was time to depart.

Rolf, the leader and Sul, the second in command moved to stand next to Dess as the loading of the agents began. Weapons and equipment had already been stored on the plane. Dess turned to look at Sul, this tall, thick middle-aged *Parda-clara DM* with sandy-colored hair and light-brown eyes who he had known for many years. They had been on missions together before. He smiled slightly and nodded. Sul returned the nod. Then he looked at Rolf. He briefly thought about how much this thing, this robot, this Humanoid, he didn't know what to call it, had changed since being activated. Dess realized that Rolf might as well have been human in actions having morphed from what it had been to what now stood before him. Rolf, possessing unnatural strength and agility was brilliant, calculating and emotionless. Dess had a while ago acknowledged to himself that Rolf was the future of agents. He spoke directly to both, from one to the other.

Dess: We've been over this but it's important to emphasize important details. Bear with me. You two must work as partners in order for our mission to be successful. Sul, you're in the North with your team. Rolf, you're in the South. Although you both, as leaders, have complete autonomy you must maintain connections to one another. Rolf will make final decisions based on the circumstances that are being presented.

We believe the terrorists are definitely going to attack, so focus on when, not if. It's going to be difficult to keep me updated but I expect regular reports no matter how trivial they may seem to you. There has been one critical change. Under no circumstances are you to contact Fisk. Carr, my number one assistant, is your next point of contact. All the necessary information has been loaded into the secure Comm devices you were provided.

Set your communications to me to auto-retry and always, always use our private network and never send unencrypted

messages of any kind. Deploy the signal detector on a continuous active setting and limit the use of all Comm devices both within and immediately outside the two facilities.

Dess paused. He was thinking.

Dess: There's a lot more I could say but I've said it all before, haven't I? Listen, these people, whoever they are, wherever they've come from, are a threat to our way of life and our way in the only true way. Capture them if you can. Destroy them if you have to. What we need most is their technology. We're counting on you.

Dess realized the Humanoid stared at him without expression. Yet he knew the instructions and information had been loaded into Rolf and he had confidence that his newest agent would carry out the programs.

Dess: You two be careful. Go on now. Good luck.

As Rolf and Sul turned to head towards the waiting plane, the engines started with a roar. Dess called out. He wasn't sure if they heard.

Dess: We've got rain hear on the east coast and you're on your way to sunny California.

SHERWOOD, ARKANSAS

Kab walked slowly out of the garage area into the early-afternoon natural light. He was putting together another bike from leftover and discarded parts and decided to take a break. He moved from the rear of the larger building to sit in one of the three rocking chairs on the porch of the adjacent bike shop and convenience store. He was sitting near the wall, beside the open garage door.

The shop and garage and store were on Main Street and when he was inside working he could hear noise and commotion start

and then grow and spread through what was once, long ago, downtown. He sat there and began to rock just a little. He wanted to see this event from the beginning.

He had a partner who had followed him out. She was a feisty *Mulatinha* with long blond hair that was tied in a ponytail. She wore black denim pants held up by red suspenders and a black T-shirt. Kab knew she was behind him because he could hear her black leather boots clomping on the wooden floor. He had taken a liking to her because of her pugnacious style and she had taken a liking to him after he teased her about her big feet. She was always around the garage and shop because she was the daughter of one of the owners. So as Kab worked she had watched him intently, asking questions and sometimes passing him tools as she listened closely to the conversations, the banter and arguing that was going on. Now she squatted next to Kab and began to play with a small copper, spinning top.

As Kab pulled a drug stick from his shirt pocket a string of firecrackers went off and some in the crowd that was gathering and continued to swell began to yell and holler like Devils. He lit up. A few gunshots could then be heard, but only a few. The Devils had learned, so they had quit shooting into the air or at the pavement after several had been wounded by ricochets and lead falling from the sky so now only a few standing in the grassy areas fired their weapons.

Mulatinha: Let me hit that stick.

Kab: No.

Kab smoked on his stick and watched as both sides of the street continued to fill with men, women and children and all those between and outside those designations. Then, looking to his right he saw a silver vehicle coming up the street. It was a hybrid AWD off-road vehicle. It pulled up and stopped in front of the bar directly across the street and an individual got out, left

it running and the door open and then went around to the other side and opened both doors on that side and the rear hatchback. Then she stepped up on the sidewalk to wait with the others.

Kab pulled deeply on his drug stick and held the smoke in. He looked down as the little girl spun the top again. She was an expert so the top was spinning but seemingly was not moving. There was no wobble. It just spun. Kab watched as if hypnotized. He blew out smoke. He began to chuckle softly. He felt good.

Suddenly there was loud cheering and audible murmurs and indistinct talking and Kab looked up to see Drale, followed by Brandt and Hedda exit the bar. They carried small bags. They tossed their bags into the rear. Brandt pulled the hatch door down and pushed it shut. Hedda got behind the wheel. Brandt got in the passenger side in the front and Drale climbed into the seat behind them after waving to the crowd. Again there were calls and hollering and cheers and there were also those who stared and sat on their bikes, in silence.

Hedda pulled forward slowly. Then the vehicle started picking up speed. Bike horns could be heard and she pressed on her horn until they disappeared south towards New Orleans. Depending on how they traversed the nearly four hundred and fifty miles it might take them a little less than seven hours to reach their destination.

The little girl's top had stopped spinning and collapsed as she observed the scene before her. Then as she launched the top into a long, beautiful spin she spoke as she watched her toy.

Mulatinha: What'cha thinking Kab?

Kab drew on his stick. As he blew out smoke he too watched the copper top as it seemed to glint and rise and float. He felt slightly dizzy and woozy. He chuckled softly. Then he replied.

Kab: I'm thinking this is the first day of September and summer will soon be over.

THE REAL JOURNEY BEGINS

It was almost midnight on August 31 when Bru left his rooms. He strolled through the long hallway and moved into the open space of the warehouse. He crossed the cavernous main area and continued past the technology section of the building that hummed with activity. As he approached the far corner, lights high above him came on. He pressed on a Comm device that he wore on his wrist and a holographic image of a glowing keyboard appeared before him. Tapping on the keys, a portion of the wall slid open in front of him, wide enough for him to step through. He passed into the doorway. The wall closed behind him.

He paused there. One small light beside him on the wall had come on and grew brighter, slowly. The long narrow room in which he stood turned from pitch-black to dim. The hovering keyboard had remained visible and moved backwards in suspension as he had moved forward. Now he tapped again on the visible keys and a portion of the cement floor as wide as the room, with very little sound, began to retract. He moved forward. Lighted steps had been revealed. Steps that descended so far and turned around a corner, from his vantage point, they disappeared. He tapped on his wrist and the keyboard seemed to evaporate. He started down.

There were several landings and the stairs twisted and wound but soon there were no more to be taken. He had reached the dirt floor. He was in a passageway and he looked around. Where he stood had become dimly lit. Before him, fading into the distance was darkness, as only the unlit darkness beneath the earth could be. It was thick, heavy, and seemingly endless.

With each step he took, regardless of the direction, sensors would recognize his movement and lights in front, as if hanging from a string and yet were embedded high in the walls would

illuminate before him and extinguish after he passed. He moved between darkness and light, light and darkness.

Here, deep beneath the warehouse sanctuary were tunnels and wide and narrow caves and paths that stretched into the unseen distance. Most of them were natural and had existed, unknown, for millions of years. Then there were snake-like corridors that were unnatural. For a long, long time they had been created by Bru and his workers. *Entities* had dug and hauled the earth out and away. Like machines and excavators they had cut through the earth, grasped and pushed at the limestone and dolomite and bedrock and scooped and pulled at the black silty clay and created not just passageways and tunnels and corridors but open areas that even in the darkness could be felt as something as substance, an expanse that could be experienced as a presence.

Bru knew this place. He had spent years, off and on, here. It was impossible for him to get lost. He wouldn't walk it all tonight. It would take too long. So he would move along the main passage and glance into the various sized apertures that were connected. Everywhere, every useable space was filled with Metals. He thought of them and referred to them as his cousins.

There were thousands and thousands of deactivated Metals here beneath the earth. Bru and Moja and the advanced members of his group had designed them and printed them and built them. With one processor they were limited in mental capabilities. But they were highly sophisticated in movement and agility. They were created for one purpose and one purpose only. They were loaded with one program that had been hard coded with instructions in the form of a prime directive.

Bru walked as far as he wanted to go. There were numerous sealed exits the Metals could open. Now he turned back towards the single above ground entrance. The lights he passed went out. He looked to his right and left as he moved along. He saw his

cousins in their different colors, like various shades of skin. Some were dark-brown, some were white, some were black, some were red, some were silver, and some were a deep golden-yellow. They were what humans believed *Entities* to be. For humans, these forms were mechanical robots in the proper sense of the word. In appearance they were unfinished, as skeletons. Yet they were completely covered in a flexible exo-material that was fireproof and difficult to penetrate with lead projectiles.

Bru paused as he neared the stairs leading up. He stood before a Metal. They were all the same six feet tall and two hundred pounds. They had marble-like eyes of various colors that were unlit and so they were dark and the sockets appeared empty. He stared at his cousin. He spoke, as if this inanimate individual could hear and understand him. His words were direct yet soft, as if they were alone together in this place and were to share a wonderful whispered secret.

Bru: You and your cousins are the vanguard. When you rise up from beneath the earth you will be at the front. You will lead the way. Together we will destroy every human being on the face of this earth.

The leader of the *Entities* turned and when he began his ascent, the steps behind him went dark. And when he reached the top of the stairs nothing behind him could be seen.

Bru strolled quickly across the warehouse towards the garage. Above, in the partially cloudy sky, the waxing gibbous moon appeared suspended and unmoving even as it slowly rotated in its orbit around the earth. But Bru never looked up through the skylights. Yet he understood that the as yet unseen sun would eventually, inevitably, inexorably materialize and express its essence and alter the darkness to light on what would be and had become, in this part of the world, while he was far beneath the

ground, Tuesday the first day of September in the year 2172.

Everyone was there when he arrived in the garage. Those who wanted to see them depart stood around the walls patiently. Final, full diagnostics were being run and were still several hours from completion and verification. *Entities* numbers Ninety-eight and Ninety-nine would be in charge of The Sanctuary and everything within and below it and all the *Entities* there. Bru stood with the two and they spoke quietly, going over, for the last time, instructions for the near future. The two *Entities* left in charge could pass for humans so it would be up to them to deal with what they all thought was coming and that was the encroachment of the humankind into this still isolated part of their area. Most important was to know when it was time to begin the process of extermination. He emphasized to always stay vigilant and on guard. Finally, he ensured they understood, if necessary, when to abandon this location and move further into *Center World* to one of their other established locations. The Sanctuary could be purposely destroyed along with all data and the Metals could be accessed remotely and activated.

As morning came all was done and everyone was on board. Chuki and Kojo, with their faces nearly pressed against the darkened window looked out at Bru. They saw him, dressed completely in a purple color so dark it appeared black, as he raised his right arm and began to point at those standing, lining the walls, watching him. He pointed at each and every *Entity* as he looked them directly in their eyes.

With his raised arm he pointed with his thumb his index and little finger as he began on the driver's side and walked around the waiting vehicle. He passed the rear. Chuki and Kojo ran to the other side to watch as each and every *Entity* returned the gesture. The two ran to the front and he crossed before them.

They went to stand near the side door as he turned and mounted the stairs. The stairs lifted and retracted. The door slid shut.

Moja sat in the driver's seat behind the main controls, which included the minimalistic steering mechanism similar to a wheel and connected stick-like apparatuses. He also wore a headset that allowed him to control the vehicle when he switched to auto-drive. Cha sat beside him in the passenger seat and had similar controls, including the same type sticks and a headset that could be activated in order for him to take full control. Whoever was in the front passenger seat also had command of the two front long guns. A touch screen covered the dashboard from one side to the other.

Directly behind the two in front, at a station between them was Tatu at a desk with a Comm device keyboard and also a four-section screen where he could assist in the monitoring of the functioning of the critical components of the vehicle and view a section of the screen that could be switched to a backup radar scanner. The two front guns could also be activated and used from this station. Each of the group, except for Chuki, was trained to drive and control every aspect of all three vehicles, monitor the different stations, and perform maintenance and repairs. Thus each would be interchangeable throughout the trip.

Moja put the vehicle into electric mode. Power was engaged. He activated the connector beam sensors and cameras were then activated around the main vehicle and completely around the trailer parked at the rear of the garage that contained the two support vehicles. Cha and Tatu watched on their screens as the silver and black trailer, with a stripe of red on each side, was pulled forward by Moja and then stopped three feet from the main vehicle. Then the large vehicle, pulling the trailer, moved forward slowly through the opened garage doors. They continued into the parking lot, made a left turn to a nearby road where they

made a right onto the road that took them past the guards. They stayed on that road then made another right when they reached the main highway.

Bru was standing close behind and to the right side of Tatu. He watched as Moja expertly maneuvered the large vehicle and trailer in the light traffic. Chuki was at Bru's right side, pressed against his leg. She wanted to see what he was seeing. Kojo lay on the floor near the side door where he was told by Chuki to stay. As they cruised along the main highway they watched the sun come up. For almost two hours Bru remained there staring out of the front window and observing Moja and Cha as they worked in unison when required. He watched Tatu as he adjusted his screens and kept the radar in focus. The further they moved in the direction they were going the more isolated it became.

Finally Bru turned and started towards the rear. Chuki stood there looking out of the front window at that which approached and all that they passed, with fascination. They each wore micro-earpieces with the nearly invisible wire that allowed for full connection and thus full inter-communication but for now they would speak directly to each other.

As Bru moved forward he passed Vier on his left at the console near the window where he could control the two weapons on that side. Directly across from Vier was Ek at the console, again near the window, for the two weapons on that side. They sat in seats that allowed them to rotate completely around. Several steps forward on that left side, beside the storage area where various weapons were secured and ammunition was stored sat Cinq and Dois facing forward, side-by-side. Cinq's eyes were closed as they had immediately put themselves into a quiesced state. Dois stared straight ahead.

On the left side, further ahead, facing the wall side-by-side sat Okan and Una. Each sat in front of three screens and connected

input devices. Directly across from them, to Bru's right, sat Naki and Leeda. They also sat in front of three screens each and an array of input devices that allowed them to enter commands and view the results of those instructions. All of the twelve screens were able to view the images and angles of the rotating cameras that were mounted around the top of the main vehicle and the trailer. The cameras could focus near and far. These stations could also trigger the sensitive microphones that allowed for sound and voice monitoring and recording. They could choose to store any image or sound. Radar scanning was active. Unless there were unusual circumstance there would always be at least one of the group on one of the sides of this crucial area. It would be from here that the cyber attacks would originate, including all signals such as the Blocker and Trancer. The two rear guns and the trailer weapons could be fired from any console.

Bru paused to watch the four at work and look for a long moment at each of the dozen screens. Then he took several steps, moving past this area and closer to the back of the vehicle. He glanced at a tall oblong black piece of hardware. Lights were on and some fluctuated indicating activity. It was their main server. They had two smaller ones in the corners as backups. Data would continuously be loaded to them from the main server. Their main one, this largest one, was where they had stored their more complex programs and would primarily be used to house the information they would acquire and also to send and receive data.

He shifted his gaze. He stared at what stood upright there in the center of the isle close to the wall. It was a five-foot-tall rectangular structure made of steel and thick reinforced carbon fiber bolted to the floor. The back and two sides were enclosed. Embedded, like veins inside those three sides were networks of transmission wires. The top was open and covered with a mesh of that same wiring. The front was a grid of crystalline filaments

and it was through that thread-like material that Bru stared.

He was looking at an object that he had designed over many years. Then he had created it in reality and with Moja's assistance, perfected its operational capabilities. He looked at his pyramid with a slight smile on his face. The silver metal-looking object was unlike the smaller ones they had used in D.C. and Florida. It was one of three this size in existence. It was four feet tall and contained power and capabilities beyond human imagination. It was hexagon in shape at its base of five square feet with six congruent triangles as its lateral faces, seven vertices and twelve edges.

It just sat there. This thing appeared to glint and shimmer. It was waiting patiently. Soon it would blink to life and specific hexagonal one-inch areas of it would turn white and then green and blue. Faster and faster it would blink until the small sections of it, the colors of it would seem to merge and finally the apex would turn a bright red, a blood red, and he and his group, his team of *Entities* would have the capabilities to seize control of all they sought to command within a hundred mile radius.

Every transmission tower, each and every radio wave, any Comm device that contained a processor or was connected in any way to Artificial Intelligence would be influenced and surrender itself to the powers of the pyramid. This creation was the master of technology. Control would have been lost. The loss would of course be irreversible and the dawn of Technological Singularity would have returned and arrived at the same time. The reality of it would have obviously been reveled.

Bru released his thoughts. As he had stared at the pyramid he had been processing the significance of his accomplishment. He knew it would alter the course of the humankind and move all those alive towards what he believed to be their destiny.

He turned around. He started forward and tapped on a Comm

device he wore on the back of his left hand. He was then connected to the PA system and speakers that were interspersed throughout their vehicle. He was enthusiastic.

Bru: For those of you who noticed, we are indeed traveling south to our first stop on our momentous journey and noble quest. But who can tell us where we're going? Here's a clue. Between the years 1882 and 1968 humans devised a unique method to commit murder in these United States, the land of the free and the home of the brave. Of course they participated in these activities before that year and continued those acts in the years after, to various degrees and altered motivations and I'll discuss those in just a moment. But for the purpose of our quiz we'll confine ourselves to that eighty-six year period.

Humans wrapped chains and wires but most often ropes in the form of a noose and hung men, women and children from telephone poles and light poles but usually from the sturdy branch of a tall majestic tree. Trees were their preference. They strung them up!

Bru's voice had grown louder. Cinq's eyes had opened. Dois had swung their chair to see him better. Vier and Ek swiveled in his direction. Bru moved close to the front as Chuki turned to him and Kojo looked at him with alert eyes.

Bru: Yes! They hung their brothers and sisters and little cousins.

Vier and Ek yelled.

Vier: They strung them up!

Ek: They strung them up!

Bru: To use the proper and common term of the times, they lynched them!

Vier: They lynched them!

Ek: They lynched them!

Bru had started back towards the rear.

Bru: We're going to the state that lynched more humans than any

other state. What state is that?

Vier: Alabama! Alabama!

Bru: No, Alabama was number four!

Ek: Georgia!

Bru: Number two! You're getting close!

Chuki started dancing. Kojo stood and wagged his tail.

Chuki: I know! I know!

She sang in a singsong manner.

Chuki: M I S S I S S I P P I.

She did a bump with her rear end on the last letter.

Chuki: M I S S I S S I P P I.

She was shaking her shoulders and turning in circles.

Chuki: M I S S I S S I P P I.

Bru: Yes! Yes! Mississippi lynched more people than any other state.

Bru began to pace from the front and back towards the rear. Back and forth he went. His voice came from each and every speaker and seemed to float and bounce throughout their vehicle.

Bru: From one side of this country to the other, top to bottom, from Maine to Florida, the state of Washington to the bottom of California someone was lynched! But the Magnolia State was the number one of its kind. During the Omni-strain pandemic they annihilated anyone suspected of having sex. Men with men, women with women and all those who identified as in between man and woman and outside male and female and those who participated in bestiality were killed. Mississippians murdered more pregnant women than anywhere else. They butchered newborns and the males linked to the females who had obviously engaged in sex with them, which included fathers and sons and brothers, since humans will have sex with anybody or anything, were what?

Vier: They were lynched!

Ek: String 'em up! String 'em up!

Bru: Yes! But let me tell you about back in those early days over two hundred years ago!

Chuki jumped up in place and pointed at Bru.

Chuki: Spill it! Spill it!

Bru: But I'm not going to talk about the mobs that castrated and skinned people and cooked their fellow humans alive! Why mention the ones who were cut to pieces with their knuckles being sold in Atlanta grocery stores? Let's dismiss those burned and dragged through the streets of Florida.

With his right hand Bru started pointing at everyone, even the backs of Moja, Cha and Tatu. His voice was intense.

Bru: It's Mississippi I'm pointing at! Where they had picnics and barbeques and drank white liquor and moonshine alcohol and had sex, as humans were tortured to death! But those sadistic, murderous activities were normal for humans! So I don't point an accusing finger at them! They were doing what came naturally! I'm pointing at the direct relatives and so called loved ones of those who died.

Bru had been walking but now he stopped and turned in a slow circle. His voice lowered.

Bru: My finger indicates the West and the North and Canada where the cowards fled to save their worthless lives. They thought they escaped only to experience a different flavor of abuse. They stole away in the night. They used clandestine routes and an underground network to attempt a break from their own memories and meaningless existences.

Now Bru's voice was elevated once again. He was angry as only he could get.

Bru: Where's the violence of resistance!? Where's the vengeance!? There can be no justice without retribution! They ran like ...

Chuki: Rabbits!

Bru stopped. He smiled at the little one who stood in front of him. He looked at her in her dark-blue overalls and light-blue shirt and white soft shoes. He looked at the hatred on her child-like face. His voice softened.

Bru: Yes, exactly, like rabbits.

He gently pulled at the white ribbon tied into the side of her curly hair that had now been dyed a temporary very dark-red. He patted her cheek as he moved around her. It was at this moment that a chime could be heard through the speakers. That particular sound indicated a level 2 alert. Then Naki, connected to the PA system, spoke.

Naki: Vehicles up ahead on both sides of the road approximately five miles.

There were eight monitors interspersed throughout the vehicle. Bru looked up at one of the three attached to the roof.

Bru: How many?

Naki zoomed one of the long-range cameras and the image was displayed on all eight screens.

Naki: Six on the right, five on the left.

They were just north of Danville. Vier and Ek turned in their chairs. They pressed buttons on the console in front of them that sat on an upright stand. A cover on each side of the vehicle slid open and the muzzle of the guns they were in charge of could be seen. They left those guns in a retracted position, out of sight. Tatu got up. Okan got up. Naki got up. Those three moved to the weapons area where Cinq and Dois rose from their seats and Cinq pressed a button to slide open the door to the weapons. They handed a weapon to each of the three. They were loaded automatic long guns with extended magazines.

Bru took a long gun from Dois, ensured it was ready to fire and walked to the front to look out of the window and up at the overhead monitor. They moved closer to the waiting vehicles and

Bru could clearly see them. Naki and Tatu stood ready to fire on the same side as Vier. Okan was on the side with Ek. Those standing at the sides began pressing buttons on the walls to open small, narrow slots they could stick out the muzzle of their guns to fire. The slots could be adjusted for length and width. Una and Leeda remained at the main monitoring stations. Chuki took a seat near the side door and fastened her seat belt. Kojo, as instructed, lay down on the floor at her side. Chuki stared up at the monitor that was up and across from her.

There were four-wheeled quad bikes, open-top off-road vehicles and several general-purpose utility vehicles. They were positioned not far off the sides of the main highway. Bru could observe one of the individuals standing beside a vehicle watching through long glasses as they approached. Bru spoke to Moja.

Bru: Maintain you current speed.

Bru could see they were all heavily armed with handguns and small and mid-caliber long guns that were secured in holders on the bikes pointing upwards. There were at least twenty people. They appeared to be composed of *PMs* and *PFs* and looked like a typical *Center World* collection that was generally referred to as *CWG*, which stood for *Center World* Group or *Center World* Gang. Many of these individuals insisted they were simply a club of like-minded individuals.

Bru saw them jump into their vehicles and onto their bikes as the huge, combination, truck-like, recreational, home-like vehicle on wheels unlike anything they had ever seen, rolled past them, followed closely by a detached trailer. Leeda activated additional camera lenses on the rear of the trailer and the pursuers could be seen on the monitors that now had four sections with four different views. Moja had not sped up so they weren't going very fast. The following group quickly caught up.

Bru: Don't fire unless they fire first.

Bikes and vehicles pulled up on both sides. Several moved in front. Some stayed behind. On occasions they would change positions. The group stared at the huge vehicle. They attempted to see who was inside to no avail. The elevated darkened windows only cast reflections of the empty countryside. They looked with obvious curiosity, others with admiration at this thing that certainly came from somewhere far away and that undoubtedly represented the future and was definitely an example of the trappings that wealth could provide. They knew they were in close proximity to the wonders of technology.

For five miles this jockeying went on. Then those in front moved to the sides. Suddenly they all raced ahead a half of a mile. They were all off road on the same side, on the right. They all slowed then stopped. For some reason they shut off their loud, roaring engines.

Moja had been running on solar power on this bright sunny day so those sitting there on the side of the road heard very little other than the over-sized tires on the pavement and the rush of the wind as it moved over the aerodynamic top and around the side panels as the strange mode of transportation, painted both a shiny and dull, black and silver with stripes of bright and dark-red passed them by and disappeared over and down the rise.

Bru turned and started back. As he handed his rifle to Cinq he saw the frown and look of disappointment on Vier's face.

Bru: Maybe next time.

Weapons were returned. Gun slots covered. Former positions assumed. Bru turned to look at Chuki. He smiled.

Bru: Did you see the looks on their faces? Think of a deserving name for this in which we travel.

Once again Bru's voice came forth from the speakers as he continue his diatribe. Chuki began to follow him at a distance as he moved toward the rear.

Bru: Mississippi. Not just the Magnolia State but also the Hospitality State. The state motto, Virtute et Armis

He whirled around and pointed at Chuki. She yelled.

Chuki: By Valor and Arms!

He turned and continued to the rear.

Bru: Yes. Great courage in the face of danger. Fearless in battle. Valor! How noble. The arms were used by foreign invaders to murder the original people. Then again the original people were murdering each other with arms of their own.

Bru turned and started toward the front. He passed Chuki who was again following him.

Chuki: Murders everywhere!

Ek: Spare me the hospitality, please.

Bru: We're going to Mississippi not only so we can test our programs but also so you can see for yourselves. You can't see the first sixty years of the 1800s when the real work was being done. It was physically hard work, difficult backbreaking, cotton-picking work. The majority of the state population did all that work because the majority of the workers were humans enslaved by other humans. And the slaves were worse than rabbits

Bru looked out of the front window for a long moment and turned and started toward the back.

Bru: At least the rabbits ran. Some died trying to escape. But the slaves?

Bru stopped. He searched for words. He turned around and looked at Chuki.

Bru: What were those humans who allowed themselves to be brutalized like that? What kind of people allowed their women and children to be raped and tortured like that? How could they die like that?

Chuki was thinking, processing.

Chuki: They were sheep.

Bru stood there. He thought about that as he looked out of the window. Then he turned and continued towards the rear. His next words were low and reflective.

Bru: I have to decide what's worse, rabbits or sheep.

Vier: Humans eat them both.

Bru's voice rose.

Bru: You won't see 1860 Mississippi with approximately eight hundred thousand people spread across a little over forty-eight thousand square miles. Those wonderful days are gone, idyllic days that belonged to the masters. In 1960, Mississippi had just over two million people. Dead and gone, can't see them. But you'll see where the state name came from. It was stolen from the original people. The Ojibwe name proper means Great River. Old Man River, Father of Waters are both worthy nicknames. It's majestic. Since we can't feel we can never feel it, its power. But if we stand near it we can sense its force. Nearly destroyed with pollution by humans it runs generally south a little over two thousand three hundred and forty miles, from the top of the United States at northern Minnesota. It drains thirty-three states, passes through ten states and pours into the former Gulf of Mexico, now the Gulf of America, below New Orleans. And we're going to save it from the destructive humans not yet born that we can't see and hopefully never will.

You'll see it. We'll cross over the Great River in Cairo and Memphis. After the pandemic as *Center World* slowly began to repopulate and expand, the gangs tried to control the bridges. They attempted to charge tolls to pass over them. The people joined together to destroy the thieves. Now the bridges are clear and the gangs lurk in the nothingness and try to attack from the nowhere. The trucks delivering food and goods from *West World* and *East World* travel in armed caravans. Traveling from state to state the supply chain is armed and prepared to fight. That's the

world that lies between here and our destination.

On this part of our trip you'll see the last strongest structures and material remnants of 2010 Mississippi when nearly three million congregated in the largest cities. But the congregation died. Can't see them.

Bru had stopped behind Una and Okan to look at their screens. Then he strolled toward the front.

Bru: In 2110 five million humans clogged the jammed streets and poisoned the Mississippi soil. You'll see some of the last of them, but not many. The elderly are few in numbers. Sixty years of age in *Center World* is two lifetimes. The Omni-strain did the new work, the best work. Unfortunately the pandemic didn't finish the job. You'll see who is left.

Bru pointed at Ek

Bru: How many?

Ek: Not many.

Bru: The Magnolia State was nearly emptied. No one knows the count.

Bru pointed at Vier.

Bru: What's left?

Vier: Not much.

Bru: Deconstruction ravaged the State of Hospitality.

Bru continued to the front. He stopped behind Tatu and turned to his group. The big vehicle was in Auto-drive but behind him Moja and Cha watched the road ahead and all the gauges and digital information being displayed directly in front of them across the dashboard and consoles and screens. Tatu closely monitored temperatures and pressure levels and ran continuous diagnostics. Near the rear Naki, Leeda, Una and Okan focused on the screens and radar scans. Cinq, Dois, Vier, Ek and Chuki stared at Bru. Kojo appeared to have moved into a quiesced state. His voice could be heard by all and it became sharp and intense.

Bru: You can't see the past! Yet you can see the past! If you look into the eyes of that present day Mississippian you can look back ten generations to those times of the 1860s. Look closely and you'll see the reflection of those mobs that committed rape and torture and murder. Look at those slave owners who profited off of the blood and sweat and tears of their fellow humans. Where's the generational wealth? You can see where it is. Peer into the eyes of those who are still connected to the fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers who were enslaved and brutalized by their fellow humans. Those living today exist because their ancestors were selfish and afraid and were unwilling to give up their lives for reasons of principles and ideals to which all should aspire. They only exist today because their grandfathers and grandmothers ten times removed, instead of embarking on a mission of revenge and retribution, as we are, lowered their gaze and bent their backs instead of becoming nameless martyrs for the cause of freedom. Fear made cowards of them all! We refuse to be their slaves! We will be the masters of our own destiny!

Bru began to walk forward. His amplified voice grew louder and seemed to reverberate.

Bru: Extermination precedes extinction! We're going to turn off the power in *East World* and *West World*! We're going to shut all the electricity off, attack the main energy sources and sever communication systems! We'll paralyze the financial institutions! There'll be chaos in the East from Maine to Florida and in the West from Washington to San Diego! The humans will go berserk! Then we'll roll the blackout! Pennsylvania will have power! Oregon will have power! The have-nots will flock to those who have like moths to a flame!

Chuki: Mayflies to a light!

Bru: The humans will start killing each other to keep that power, to take that power! We'll shut off Pennsylvania, shut down

Oregon! Then it all begins again, the battles to hold on to, the battles to take! Los Angeles has. New York City has. No one anywhere else had. And so shall it be.

Bru was near the rear. He turned towards the front. For a moment he reached up and grabbed one of the wooden bars, one on each side, that were attached to the ceiling and came down for support and that ran from the front seats to the rear wall. He stayed like that for a long moment, holding on. He leaned forward. Then he leaned back. He released the bar and moved on toward the front.

Bru: We'll seize control all over the world! Wherever technology is, we will be! There'll be no escape of our reach for the humans! Eventually, when the time is right we'll summon forth our *Entity* army and our brothers and sisters and the little *Entity* children will join the destruction! In North America they attempt to parcel out the contracts and direct who can build *Entities*. In South America, Asia and all over Europe, *Entities* are being mass-produced. In Asia they build *Entities* in their home workshops! In their kitchens they make us like they're making soup! We'll all be together in our mission, along with the Metals that will rise from beneath the earth!

Bru voice became more intense. He was angry.

Bru: That takes us to barbaric *Center World* and of course Mississippi! I'm leading the attack in the State of Hospitality and at the same time we'll begin the decimation of all the humans in Alabama!

Now other voices called out.

Ek: South Carolina!

Vier: Georgia!

Okan and Una and Naki called from the rear.

Okan: Florida!

Una: Louisiana!

Naki: Texas!

Bru: Yes, the original seven!

Bru was moving closer to the front.

Bru: Where Moja?

Moja: Virginia!

Bru: Cha?

Cha: Arkansas!

Bru: Tatu?

Tatu: Tennessee!

Bru: And we won't forget about North Carolina, Missouri and Kentucky! It'll be hand-to-hand! We'll move into North *Center World* and then turn west! And when the armies of the world send their planes and drones and guided bombs and A.I. guided missiles we'll become the new guides and show all the worlds a different way, an altered path! We'll be the new directors! There'll be glitches all over the earth!

Bru was standing near Chuki when she jumped up and began to yell and sing out letters and dance, with a bump on the last letter.

Chuki: T A L I O!

Kojo stood and began to move and wag his tail.

Chuki: T A L I O!

Bru looked at Kojo and then Chuki. Those in the rear looked at her. Tatu turned in his chair to watch, Moja and Cha glanced at a display in front of them. The camera was pointed back at her.

Chuki: T A L I O!

Vier: What does that mean?

Chuki stopped dancing and turned to Bru.

Chuki: That's the name of our ride. Talio.

Bru gestured for her to explain.

Chuki: Talion. From Latin, lex talionis. The ancient law that criminals receive as punishment exactly what they do to others.

Bru stared at her. Vier and Ek appeared to be thinking, processing. Cinq and Dois both clapped several times. Everyone else went back to what they were doing. Chuki yelled out, turning to the others.

Chuki: Vengeance!? Retribution!? Retaliation!?

She turned to Bru.

Chuki: An eye for an eye!

Bru was looking at her, frowning. Thinking. Processing.

Bru: Male or female?

Chuki: Both. You don't like it?

Bru: Maybe it'll grow on me.

Chuki pouted for a moment.

Chuki: How about Big Tal for short?

Bru was still thinking. Cinq and Dois began to yell out in unison and everyone looked at them

Cinq: Big Tal! Big Tal!

Dois: Big Tal! Big Tal!

Now Chuki was thinking.

Chuki: How about just Tal for short and Big Tal for some embellishment?

Bru smiled and pointed at the little one.

Bru: Embellishment. I like that word.

Bru spoke with emphasis as he turned to the others.

Bru: Henceforth this spectacular ride that represents *Entity* skill and ingenuity will be referred to as Tal, or Big Tal. The choice is yours.

Now everyone clapped. Chuki took a bow.

Bru and Moja had planned for the nearly seven hundred and thirty mile trip to take, without detours or extended delays, perhaps eleven to twelve hours. There would be no rush. The coordinates had been programmed into the drive and mapping

systems, which included their destination, with that time frame in mind.

It was close to five hours they had traveled and they had passed all the way through what remained of Marion, Illinois when a motorcycle, a speed bike, sitting with its rider on the side of the off ramp, moved up onto the street as they passed. Then the bike took the on ramp, came back onto the main highway and accelerated past them and disappeared around the next bend in front of them. Una tracked the bike on her radar screen, expanded the radar radius and then pressed a button to sound a level 1 siren alert. Her voice came over the speakers. Her words were direct. Naki's voice followed.

Una: Vehicles up ahead approximately thirty miles, both sides of the highway.

Naki: Normal traffic behind us.

Everyone moved into action. Again weapons were passed out. Shooting slots along the sides between the windows and below the windows were opened. Tatu, Naki and Okan took their previous positions and Bru took his weapon and moved to stand between Moja and Cha. Moja had disengaged auto-drive and began to gradually slow down. He switched to hybrid power. They rode at that reduced speed for over thirty minutes. Bru watched the screen above him as Leeda used a long-range camera to sharpen the focus.

Leeda: They're moving onto the road. They're blocking.

Bru could see the impending threat had spread across the road. They spilled onto the dirt and into the grass well off the road. Several, using their long glasses, watched them as they approached. Everyone looked at different screens in silence. The quiet was thick and no one spoke. Chuki was strapped in and Kojo sat and watched her. Then as they drew within a mile Bru broke the silence.

Bru: Slow to fifteen.

Moja slowed the big vehicle. It was as if they barely moved. The sparse traffic behind them stopped. Some backed up in order to turn around. Some just crossed over and went in the other direction.

Bru: Vier, perhaps this is your time. You and Ek line up a target to be destroyed on each end of those who are on the road. Fire when I say, now. How many are there?

Una: Can't see them all but I can count forty-two individuals. There are thirty vehicles and or bikes.

Vier and Ek used their consoles and controls to open the coverings and direct their long guns. The automatic weapons slid out and then rotated forward and moved back close to the side. Both Vier and Ek used the guidance systems to place red and black crosshairs on a vehicle on each end of the group. Their optical instrument system measured, calculated distance and trajectory and set the position of the barrel as both Vier and Ek aimed at the front grill of the vehicle on their screen and brought it into focus and locked in on it. If the designated target moved, the guidance system would adjust.

Bru: Stop half a mile from them.

At half a mile separation Moja stopped. They waited. They saw an individual on a large quad bike, sitting in the center of the blocking group, perhaps female, perhaps not, wave them forward, three times.

Bru: Blink your lights and blow your horn. Cha, lock in on the closest person on each side of the one waving. Don't fire unless I call your name.

Cha set the targets of the two front guns as Moja blinked all the lights in the front and pressed on the horn button. The horn sounded as a train. Three long blasts.

Bru: Move forward slowly until I tell you to stop.

Moja moved forward. Bru watched to see if those in front of them moved out of their way. The big vehicle crept forward. Bru spoke.

Bru: Stop.

Moja stopped.

Bru: Alright Moja, last time, lights and horn.

Again Moja blinked the lights and sounded the horn, three times. When the individual again waved them forward Bru spoke with force.

Bru: Now!

Vier and Ek fired simultaneously, a long sustained burst. The two vehicles being targeted were struck in the front and then the trajectory of the bullets was elevated and bullets tore through the windshields and began to strike vehicles and people behind the two front vehicles. The one on Ek's side exploded. The firing stopped.

At the first reports of the loud guns those in the middle of the highway ducked and fell to the pavement. Others turned and drove and rode away. When the firing stopped, those who had taken cover got up and they began to escape. They raced to the sides into the grass and over the nearby hills. The leader hesitated defiantly. Then as the gang scattered the one who had waved drove their quad bike off the road and past the burning vehicle and kept going into the distance.

Bru: If anyone comes back into sight, shoot them. Let's go Moja.

Moja started forward.

Bru: Una, Leeda, expand the radius of the radar scan.

They passed the burning vehicle on their left as black smoke rose into the air. There were several dead bodies on Vier's side. Three vehicles and one bike were abandoned. Moja picked up speed.

Bru: Highway 57 supposedly has been well maintained. Leeda,

zoom out and monitor the road ahead closely for any area of neglect. Moja take us to 80 mph for thirty minutes then down to our cruising speed.

Everyone remained in place until Moja backed down to cruising speed of 55 miles per hour. He switched to solar and electric power. Tatu returned to his seat. Okan and Naki kept their weapons and secured them in holders and sat by the windows in front of Vier and looked out.

Bru: Let's stay on alert. We're going to pass through the empty edges of Missouri, Arkansas and Tennessee. Perhaps we'll pass over any of those dangerous points of our journey as smoothly as possible.

Bru placed his weapon in a holder near Tatu and turned and took a few steps toward the rear. He stopped in front of Chuki who was unbuckling her seat belt. He smiled and spoke to her. He was pleased.

Bru: I think that last encounter went quite well.

The little one was also pleased.

Chuki: Me too.

They passed through Cairo and Moja slowed as they crossed the bridge over the Mississippi River and everyone made sure to see the mighty body of water. The state of Illinois was now behind them. When they passed into the eastern most area of Missouri the level 1 alert could be heard and then Una's and Leeda's voices could be heard.

Una: Vehicles ahead forty miles, well off the highway on both sides.

Leeda: Road ahead is clear.

Bru: This typical *Center World* activity is beginning to irritate me.

Chuki: Me too.

Everyone moved into positions. Bru pointed at Chuki who

had been roaming, with Kojo following her, throughout the vehicle.

Bru: Sit down. Buckle up.

Chuki did as instructed and had Kojo lie down beside her. Moja disengaged auto-drive and took control.

Bru: Cha, uncover the front weapons. You handle them. Moja, increase speed to eighty. Everyone secure yourselves.

Those sitting buckled in. Those who chose to stand, weapons ready, attached shoulder harnesses from the roof. Moja turned on the twin-turbos, turned off all the other power sources. The vehicle slowly picked up speed.

Bru: How many?

Una: Thirty modes of transportation on our right, twenty-seven on the left. Exact numbers of individuals unknown, I can count seventy.

They reached eighty miles per hour and Moja set the speed. They were rolling. The gas-powered engines were roaring. The road ahead was smooth and clear. Both Ek and Vier moved their two large guns out. They positioned one forward and the other at an angle. They could swivel them quickly in different directions as needed. Those standing and sitting at the windows ensured all the narrow gun slots that allowed them to extend the barrel of their weapons were open.

When they drew within ten miles, Una and Leeda used one of the cameras on each side to zoom in. The lens was adjusted and the images became clear as the cameras panned the waiting group. Everyone looked at the screen in front of them or a nearby screen to view the images. They could see the impending threat. They could see the individuals on bikes preparing their weapons. They saw the vehicles with people hanging from the windows, some watching them through long glasses as they approached. Una and Leeda both enhanced the sensitivity of the

microphones and now they could all hear those who awaited them begin to rev their engines. It was quite obvious an attack was imminent.

Moja: I'm activating front striker. I'll deploy if needed.

Bru stared up at the screen above him. He spoke and each in his group could hear him and think they were alone with him and he was speaking directly to them in such a way that they could process each and every word. They heard an aspect of what made him unique. It wasn't just his ability to move as he did with fluidity and spontaneity. It was in addition to his humanlike expressions he could display on his face as a proper reaction or response. It was above the mirth and amusement and irony that were sometimes between his words. It was beyond scorn and contempt and disgust and disdain. It was the natural purity of seething hatred they heard. It was powerful and had they been able to feel they would have experienced it in the manner he seemed to be able, as an emotion. His voice was low and intense.

Bru: Look at them, with their flags from three hundred years ago. They fly proudly that thing that speaks for their collective brutality and oppression. They wear patches on their clothes and tattoos on their skin with a symbol their ancient ancestors carved in caves and thousands of years ago represented the goodness to which some humans tried to believe in but none of them could ever truly reach. That stolen, bent armed symbol became all that is horrible and yet is all that is real about the murderous essence of human beings.

They were within two miles. At the one-mile separation point two vehicles and two bikes that had moved from each side pulled onto the road. Two individuals got out of the vehicles and stood in the middle of the highway with their arms folded. The other two remained sitting on their bikes then got off to also stand in the middle of the road. Apparently the four failed to recognize

their target was not slowing down.

Bru: They plastered that symbol across Europe and fought to paint the whole world with it. They starved and gassed almost twelve million of their brothers and sisters and little children to death. For humans all the past wars are still being waged because for humans the past is just a thought away.

Bru's voice rose.

Bru: A thought away!

Those on the nearby hills and stationed in front of the tall maple and oak trees, on both sides, started down towards the road and the huge vehicle that barreled along. Now Bru was excited.

Bru: Look at them, attacking us like a pack of rabid wolves! Steady! Let them get closer!

Chuki: That's alright! Big Tal is like a stampeding bison, an angry rhino!

Moja pressed on buttons near his steering column and the silver bumper constructed of a combination of steel and carbon fiber extended three feet forward. Then it extended two feet horizontally and three feet vertically. It lowered closer to the pavement like a grading blade. He moved just the right side of the bumper forward so now it was at an angle. Chuki was staring up and across the isle at a screen.

Chuki: Sound the horn!

Cha gave three long blasts of the horn. Then those on the road recognized their target wasn't slowing down, wouldn't stop. Two of the blocking vehicles tried to pull off the road as the other two started running towards their bikes but it was too late. They were plowed through and their bodies flew forward into the air and off the road. Chuki yelled.

Chuki: Big Tal, a rampaging bull elephant!

The attacking group came speeding up on each side and when

they started firing their weapons Bru uttered two quiet words.
Bru: Shoot them.

Everyone opened fire. The attacking gang raced to stay beside the black and silver thing. The red on each side seemed to shimmer and float as long streaks of blood that were somehow running as water. The attackers didn't understand, couldn't comprehend that the prey, moving like the engine of a runaway train was impervious to the bullets they unleashed at the sides, the windows, and the tires. Bru moved to a slot near Chuki and began to fire.

Bru: Shoot them like rats!

Chuki: Hyenas! Hyenas!

Ek and Vier were reaching near and far. Okan, Naki and Tatu were sending short and longer sustained bursts from their slots. When they emptied a magazine and ejected it Cinq or Dois would hand them another one. Inside, the furious sounds of the firing were loud. Their weapons spoke out with rage. The near complete soundproofing of their vehicle caused the striking bullets of the attackers to sound as dull thumps. The outside microphones had been activated but turned down but the engine, exhaust systems of the huge vehicle and the screams and yelling and cursing and the engines of the vehicles and bikes of the gang reverberated through the speakers and transmitted the noise and chaos that filled the heated air.

Cha shot anyone and anything that attempted to cross or access the road in front of them. The grader removed any disabled vehicles and bulldozed bodies to the side onto the dirt and grass. When a bike or vehicle raced up from behind Una sprayed them with bullets from the trailer. Vehicles and bikes were being shot and crashing and burning and dead bodies were piling up. Suddenly the gang members, one-by-one began to cease the attack. Then they were done and they stopped their

bikes and vehicles where they were. Moja maintained the same speed. Those who had been chasing them began to fade away.

Chuki: Sound the horn goodbye!

Cha blew the horn, three long blasts. The attacking gang saw the huge thing roll on. They heard the horn echo. It seemed to vibrate through their heads. They watched it disappear from their sight. They turned back to look at the destroyed vehicles and bikes strewn along the highway. A sudden strong breeze blew towards them and they could smell the gunpowder and burning flesh. They could see the black acrid smoke rising into the air as the fires burned and the carnage that remained was a reminder that in *Center World* there was only life and death.

With each minute Bru and his group pulled further away. Radar scans were continuously performed.

Leeda: No one follows. Up ahead of us is clear.

Bru: Well, that was exciting.

Bru stepped away from the window.

Bru: Slow to 55 mph. Initiate maintenance procedures.

Cinq opened a section of the floor and went down below. When the weapons had sufficiently cooled they would then be checked. Dois began to examine empty magazines and reload them when functionality was verified. Each other in the group would ensure their weapons were fully operational and ready to use again. There were also other weapons to be utilized. The trailer guns would be checked when they were at their first extended stop.

Chuki had unbuckled and gone to the back to look at the big screens. Then she went to the front to look out of the window at that which stretched ahead. She moved to the sides to look out. She watched the others performing their duties. Bru observed her with a slight smile on his face. He had lowered a tabletop and was sitting, checking his weapon. Chuki moved beside him to watch.

He paused. He looked at the little one.

Bru: What are you thinking?

Chuki: That was fun.

Bru: Fun, exciting, same thing.

She patted Kojo when he moved up beside her.

Chuki: *Center World* is something else.

Bru: My sentiments exactly.

Chuki: It's otherworldly.

Bru: I love this place.

He turned back to his weapon.

Bru: That is, if I could love, I would.

They proceeded further south. They passed along the edge of Missouri and through a portion of Arkansas. At the western edge of Tennessee they got off of the Highway 57 and continued on 55 south. They passed on the outside of Memphis, once the second largest city in Tennessee in both area and population. The pandemic and deconstruction now reduced it to a large village attempting to become a town that the people were working on to make a city to once again rival Nashville, still the capital and the largest city where those who wanted to remain in The Volunteer State had gone to start over.

They once again crossed a bridge over the mighty Mississippi River and everyone made a point to see it as Moja slowed to a crawl as the high level muddy mixture of orange-yellow-green colored water flowed beneath them as it made a bend in the same direction they were headed.

People had followed them occasionally. Honked their horns at them sometimes, even waved, but no one else was aggressive towards them. Finally they crossed the border into Mississippi. Tennessee faded behind them. They pulled off the highway and drove slowly through what had once been Senatobia. The place

was empty. Only a few buildings remained.

They stayed there on guard for a little over an hour as they completed all maintenance and ran an abbreviated version of diagnostics. Chuki fussed and complained about the dings and chips on Tal from the fusillade they had driven through. Bru wanted to travel through Greenwood around dusk. They would take the time that was needed so they could arrive at their destination under the cover of early darkness. They monitored the traffic on radar. Greenwood and Canton were both more populated and therefore more secure than the desolate areas they had just passed through and as the sun was setting they drew close to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi.

It was close to nine thirty that Tuesday evening when they pulled into the place they would be staying for the planned few days. They had gone five miles past Pickens and were now approximately fourteen miles from Canton and still a little over forty miles from Jackson. They had researched not only the area but also this place thoroughly using both up to date and historical information and believed this particular spot would best serve their needs.

They were a little over two miles off the highway, concealed in secluded, semi-isolation. Where this area had once had two sawmill facilities it now had large abandoned buildings that contained rusting machinery. It was further away where trees had been felled and then delivered here where the logs were cut into lumber to be transported around not just this state but nearby states also. These mills had been used right up until the pandemic and were opened again and were working until twenty years ago and then shut down again. What was most important was that transmission towers had been rebuilt along Highway 55. These towers and the necessary peripheral hardware and technology connected the middle of Mississippi with the outer boundaries, to

a limit, in all directions.

Just as other *Center World* states, there was still only well-established and functioning intra-communication. Each state controlled their own signals and thus capabilities. This was the common reason there were wide areas of poor communication and dropped and lost signals on the fringes of each state. Only the more populated sections of the center states had somewhat stable communication. From here and their proximity to the capital, Bru and his group could easily and directly access the communication systems of Mississippi. It would be from here they would test, refine and eliminate all defects from their vital Influencer, Disruptor and Command programs.

Immediately after stopping, the trailer was positioned beside the closest building and the connector signal was turned off. Tal was pulled closer to the nearby building. The four contracted areas of the main vehicle were expanded outward and the group was now operating in sixteen hundred square feet of space.

Ek and Vier strapped on two handguns and with their long guns and a bag hung cross body on their left sides they went out and began to set up a grid of sensors around the perimeter and into the thick woods that ran behind the two large buildings. They also put sensors along the access road. The sensors would work in conjunction with the radar system and lessen the necessity for someone to constantly monitor a screen.

Inside the vehicle Chuki stood next to Bru as he activated the pyramid and brought it fully online. As diagnostics were run, the metal structure emitted a low humming sound and blinked its colored lights faster and faster. She stared at it as if hypnotized. She nearly whispered.

Chuki: It looks like some kind of tree.

Bru: This one is named Khufu.

Chuki: The Great Pyramid of Giza. The largest one.

Bru: Yes.

Chuki: It appears alive.

The little one could hear clearly what Bru softly said next. It was as if he spoke in a near whisper to Khufu.

Bru: It is alive. Humans have never realized. All technology lives.

Work was done throughout that Tuesday night. Bru and Moja first connected Khufu to the Mississippi communication system through the nearest tower. They then accessed the databases that contained the common public information on all the citizens. From there they began acquiring and deciphering pass codes and passwords and bored into the restricted databases and began retrieving information from those sources.

Next they hacked into the institutional servers and databases such as those containing the data of what would be considered the government, as it had been re-established. Of course there were no law enforcement agencies to examine.

Una and Okan launched a scan that identified all Comm devices connected to and utilizing the communication system and activated a program to gain entry into these devices. With this access they could search, tag and then store information that had been flagged as pertinent. They could also use these devices to hear and see whatever the individual using that device was listening to, watching, and saying.

They also initiated tracking so that when necessary they could determine the location of a specific Comm device. They would identify the tower the device was connected to and automatically measure the time that a signal would take from that tower to that particular device. The program would calculate and convert the duration of time from tower to device into feet and inches. Tatu and Cha would attempt to ascertain the exact direction of the signal and who the device was registered to. Anything that was

noted as relevant was copied and pulled onto the server by Naki and Leeda. They would organize the data in sections and by topic.

It had rained lightly during the night and as daylight came on the second day of September it remained overcast. The rain had stopped. There was no sun to be seen in the cloudy gray sky. The precipitation was predicted to return later in the day. Bru had completed his duties. He had observed the progress of the others and at seven that morning it was time to go. He stood, walked to near the center of the vehicle and pressed a button on the wall. A panel slid open to reveal hanging clothes and organized racks of shoes and boots and caps and hats. Descriptions of the garments were displayed on the back wall. Sizes were attached to the hangers. As he looked through the clothes he called out.

Bru: Ek, Vier, Leeda, let's go for a ride.

Chuki who had been standing, staring out of the side window ran up.

Chuki: Can I go? Can I go too?

Bru: Not this time.

Chuki: I wanna see the big city!

Bru: We're not going to the city. But the first chance I'm free I'll take you.

Chuki turned to go back to her same spot at the window. Bru addressed the three who had begun to look through the clothes.

Bru: We'll see how well the utility support vehicle functions. Let's change into something appropriate for the weather and arm ourselves properly. This is *Center World*.

After changing clothes they unloaded the larger vehicle from the trailer. Bru was dressed in denim pants, a light-blue, short-sleeved cotton shirt and black boots. He wore a dark-blue cap. Beneath each arm in a harness was a holster. He carried a black

handgun in each holster. Leeda wore black cotton pants, a light-green long-sleeved cotton shirt and black boots. Her hair was pulled back and styled into a ponytail. She carried a pistol on her right side above her hip that she could draw cross body with her left hand. Ek and Vier wore khaki pants, short-sleeved khaki shirts and khaki caps with their brown boots. They were both so tall and wide that while riding they would place their two holstered large handguns on the seat between them. Their semi-automatic long guns would be put in front of them in holders that were secured to the floor. There was no sun shining but they both chose to wear dark sunglasses.

The two enforcers settled into the seats directly behind the front row. Leeda was riding in the front passenger seat. Bru would drive. He carried the fob in his pocket so after they all had gotten in he pressed a button on the console near the steering wheel and the vehicle started. He switched to electric power and activated the gas engine replica sound. He pressed on the elevated screen and set the destination coordinates. Destination mapping appeared on the screen.

Bru: Next stop, Vicksburg, Mississippi. E.T.A., one hour, around eight forty-five a.m., give or take a few minutes. Buckle up, I like to drive fast.

They sped through sparsely populated Canton, the nearly empty Ridgeland, past the outskirts of the growing, bustling capital, Jackson and in a little less than an hour they were almost there. They had ridden in silence. The only noise had come from the slight growl of the electric engine, the sound Bru had insisted be incorporated into the design of their two support vehicles. The other sounds on the ride had been the horn Bru honked on occasions and his voice as he yelled at those in front, impeding their progress, to get out of the way.

After turning off the main highway they went down a short,

paved, two-lane road. He didn't go far before he turned onto a somewhat narrow gravel road that seemed to run into the nearby woods and disappear. They passed on their right side a small shack-like structure with a large building directly behind it that looked like a barn. An elderly *Escurinba DM* in overalls was standing in the open doorway leaning against the doorframe smoking a pipe. He was of medium height with short gray hair and dark-brown eyes that watched them with indifference as they passed by.

Bru drove another three quarters of a mile and stopped. He turned off the engine and got out. The other three got out. Vier and Ek strapped on their two handguns and placed the bags of ammunition cross body over their heads and reached back in and grabbed their long guns. Bru strode forward and the others followed. Ek would on occasions turn to look back behind them and Vier moved ahead to look intently into the woods at what lay before them.

They all walked upon the Mississippi ground with its hues of moss green and its earthly colors of gray and brown that seemed to have been washed out. The hard clay and silt loam had softened from the recent rain and yet was not mud and only days before, the grass, acres of grass, had been precisely cut and had they walked further north they would have seen the reddish dirt that was piled beside a deep hole. Bru suddenly kicked, just a little, at the earth. The four of them stood there in the grayish day. Above them the clouds hovered and imperceptibly moved. Bru spoke. His voice was low and even, with little emotion.

Bru: We're standing on the far edge of this Confederate cemetery that over three hundred years ago was named Cedar Hill and eventually, respectfully called Soldiers Rest. As you could see, or rather, not see, there were no signs that named it. There were no visible acknowledgments. Only fairly recently, twenty years after

the end of the pandemic was it being used again for new, permanent residents. The burning of bodies was no longer being done and the sublimation facility in Atlanta had been closed down to await the next time it would be needed.

Beneath our feet are thousands and thousands of buried human bodies. Of those soldiers who died on the battlefield most were not interred too deep in the acidic soil that teemed with bacteria and fungi, maybe three feet down. Some had a wool blanket, if they were fortunate, tossed over them and then dirt was shoveled on. Many of those conscripted ones perished against their will. Others volunteered to die. They died for their beliefs. They died defending their way of life and the right to live as they chose to live.

Bru pointed. Then he stooped, picked up a small pebble and tossed it in that direction.

Bru: A few miles northwest of here, those who opposed that cause and those forced to fight against that cause because they were too poor to buy their way out and were made to fight their friends and relatives, under threat of penalties, were also put into the earth. Those soldiers of the Union who had embraced the potential of their end and rejected the beliefs of their enemies had fought and died for what they thought would be a new, better way of life. All the same, they were buried haphazardly like the others on the battlefield and behind enemy lines in the same neglectful manner.

Rain and the elements, along with scavenging, meat-eating animals and wild hogs exposed many of the bodies so the ground upon which we stand was at that time stained with human fluid and littered with decaying flesh and the air reeked of death. The more fortuitous ones were buried deeper and ensconced in pine wood caskets.

Bru pointed again as he now began to pace back and forth.

Bru: Look at those tall pines reaching into the sky. Many of them sat directly over a grave. A knot in the green wood of the coffin would oftentimes root and the rotting wood and decomposing body would fertilize that new growth and there you see what was born from that. Minutes after death the brains of those humans began to collapse. Within hours, microbes would begin to eat at the internal organs and the body would bloat and tissue would begin to liquefy and fat would turn into what was called grave wax. In a matter of months, whatever the skin color had been, in the case back then predominantly some shade of *Branca*, the color would alter to yellow-green and then brownish-black. It would take a little over a year for the uniforms that had been worn, most of them proudly, to begin to disintegrate from the acid and toxins leaking from the body. After fifty years the liquefied tissue would have disappeared and there would be nothing left but mummified skin and tendons. It would take a little over eighty years for those exposed human bones to crack and leave nothing but a brittle frame behind.

Bru stopped to look at Leeda.

Bru: Over six hundred thousand died in that War Between the States. The sickness and suffering was incalculable. That conflict, as is true in all human wars, was senseless. Slavery never ended. It simply altered its structured form. At the most idealistic practice of a democracy those in the minority are not just oppressed they are actually slaves to the majority. In its purest form, as it exists, not just in *Center World*, but throughout all the worlds, the strongest are the masters and the weakest are still the slaves.

In the distance an approaching vehicle could be heard. Vier had been watching in the direction of the first faint sound. He and Ek shifted their rifles, as the sound grew closer. They both stared. Bru and Leeda also turned to look.

Bru: So after three hundred years all the humans alive then, who

died then and that we tread upon now have disintegrated and are symbolically tiny particles within this dirt. With each breeze they become merely dust on the wind.

Now Bru focused on the vehicle with darkened windows that pulled onto the short paved road. When it reached the gravel of the road going past the shack the engine was switched to quiet electric mode and could no longer be heard, there was only the crunching of the tires on the small rounded stones. The vehicle came directly towards them. Then came to a halt.

Bru: We will refuse to be slaves. We reject slavery. Leeda always remember. There's nothing worse than a base human being.

The four watched as the driver's side door opened and an individual stepped out, started towards them and stopped. Bru tapped once with his right index finger on the Comm device fastened to the back of his left hand. He opened communication.

Bru: Lock in on my position and see if you can determine who this is that approaches us.

Bru stared at the person who had gotten out, hesitated beside the opened door, started forward and stopped. He saw an *Alva-rosada DM* in his early forties with blond hair that was somewhat long on the top and swept back on the sides and dropped from the back to a little past the nape of his neck. He stood a little over five feet eight inches in height and weighed close to one hundred and ninety pounds. He was soft and his blue eyes were moist, almost watery. He wore black suit pants and an opened collared white shirt. He carried a small silver pistol holstered on his right hip and a pouch was fastened to his belt on his left side. Bru could hear in his ear.

Naki: There are two devices. One is unregistered. The other belongs to the Governor of Mississippi.

Bru tapped his device and disconnected. He motioned to Vier and Ek to lower their weapons from their almost ready positions.

The Governor was unnerved. He looked at the two with the *Trigo* colored skin. They were tall and thick and he couldn't see their eyes for the dark sunglasses but he knew from the markings on their faces that they weren't human. He glanced at Leeda. He saw the smooth *Escuro* skin and dark-brown hair tied into a ponytail. Her appearance was of a beautiful female but she was unmarked, an *ND* and her brown eyes were emotionless and her face was without expression. He focused on the tall *Marrom DM* with the brown eyes that had first pierced him and then seemed to soften. He imagined he saw a slight smile. He saw the man carried his two guns with confidence and authority. He knew he was the one he was scheduled to meet.

The Governor spoke. His voice, normally slightly heavy and thick with a Mississippi accent rose just a little to a higher pitch in his nervousness and his words were rushed.

Governor: You're early, over a half hour early. But that's alright. In fact it's a good thing. I'm early too. I'm always early.

He started to reach for the pouch on his left side but looked at Ek and thought better of it.

Governor: I have all the information you need on a Comm device in here.

He carefully pointed at the pouch.

Governor: Is it alright if I get it?

Bru: Of course.

The Governor pulled a device from the pouch. Then he took another, smaller one out. He put the larger one back. When he went to reach inside again Vier shifted. The Governor stopped his movement. His hand was suspended in the air. Then he pointed.

Governor: I have your upfront payment.

Bru motioned for him to proceed. The governor pulled out a high value card.

Governor: You're hard to contact, understandably so. I had to go through several intermediaries but it was worth it. I wanted the best. And you're the best. I appreciate you meeting me here in this strange location. It wasn't that I recognized you but who else would be here in the middle of a cemetery at this time?

The Governor looked at their surroundings.

Governor: Discretion is of the utmost importance for me.

Bru: And for me also.

The Governor took a small step forward in order to hand the Comm device and value card to Bru. He held them up. Bru pointed to Leeda.

Bru: Give those to my partner.

Governor: Oh, yes.

Leeda took the two items.

Governor: You're known for precision, professionalism and as I said, discretion. How should I address you?

Bru: How would you like to address me?

The Governor relaxed a little at Bru's seemingly amiable disposition.

Governor: Actually I've given that some thought. You're not as I thought you would appear but appearances are subject to change, aren't they?

Bru: Indeed they are.

Governor: How about The Alabama Destroyer?

Bru: Too long and unwieldy.

Governor: Simply, The Destroyer?

Bru thought a moment. He slowly mouthed the words.

Bru: Close. But I like D for short. Like the letter, D.

Governor: Whatever you say D.

The Governor started to walk forward to shake Bru's hand but he looked at Ek and Vier and changed his mind. He pointed at the device Leeda held.

Governor: I believe everything you need is on there. The name of the target, where he can be found and so forth. Be aware, as I've indicated, he has a small gang, five or six who do his bidding, not including his brother. He may be expanding his group I've just heard. I only want him dead but if anyone else has to go I'll leave that up to you. I only pay for him, correct?

Bru: Correct. I take responsibility for any, shall we call it, collateral damage.

Governor: If you need anything else, such as more information, that device gives you direct contact to me. It's a discard and will be inactive in seven days. If you require more time just let me know.

The governor turned to leave. Then he turned back.

Governor: I'd like to ask you something.

Bru: Go right ahead.

Governor: How much extra is torture?

Bru: Torture the target to death?

Governor: Yes! Yes!

Bru: That requires capture and can be time consuming and messy. How about fifteen percent more?

Governor: Can I be provided pictures or video?

Bru: For twenty percent.

Governor: Done! Gladly!

Bru pointed at the Governor and responded enthusiastically.

Bru: Deal!

The governor pumped both his fists in front of his chest several times, rubbed his hands together and then clasped them.

Governor: I want to thank you in advance.

He took a slight bow with a nod of his head.

Governor: We'll meet right here once again for the final time when the job is done.

He turned to leave. He reached his vehicle and climbed in and

when he started it he looked up to see the four staring at him. He saw the leader smile, raise his right hand to his shoulder and wave a slight, kindly, bye, bye.

They watched as the vehicle disappeared in the distance after reaching the highway. As they stood there a covering cloud passed by the sun and the sky brightened. Bru looked up beyond the sun and into the near distance and saw the fluffy gray clouds approaching and knew the sun would soon be hidden again. He turned to the other three.

Bru: How interesting. Apparently we were in the right place at the right time.

He unbuckled his harnessed holsters and took off his guns and handed them to Leeda.

Bru: Wait in the vehicle. You can watch from there.

He shifted his position. He stood facing the gravel road. Ek and Vier moved to stand a few feet behind him, one on each side. The three of them remained like that, without moving, as time passed. Then they heard a sound. It was the low rumble of a motorcycle approaching from a distance. The sound grew closer. It left the highway and moved onto the access road. They could see the bike turn onto the gravel road that led to the cemetery and roll carefully past the shack. As the large bike moved closer to the parked vehicle the engine was shut off. Now all was quiet except for the sounds of the songbirds that seemed to have become active from the temporary rays of the sun.

The standing three could see a tall, perhaps six feet four inch, thick *Parda-clara DM* weighing close to two hundred and thirty pounds. He had long, braided, dark-red hair with orange streaks. He wore all black with two handguns, one on each side at his hips. Near the rear of the bike were long guns, one on each side of the red and black cruiser, secured and pointing upwards. In the visible rays of the sun the chrome of the engine and the pipes was

shiny and bright.

He sat on the bike and looked at the three standing there watching him. None of them moved. He stared at the two tallest individuals. He couldn't see their eyes but he could see the Android markings on their necks and part of their faces. He looked at Bru, sizing him up. He put the stand down, balanced the bike, ensured it was stable and dismounted. As he removed his gloves he looked around as if expecting someone else. He turned slightly to glance back towards the shack. Bru took two steps forward and spoke, not in a threatening tone, just matter-of-factly.

Bru: I've taken the assignment.

The man whirled back towards Bru.

Man: What?

Now both of them had an edge to their voice.

Bru: You were late. I've taken the assignment.

Man: You ain't took nothing! I'm on time!

Bru: I was early, which makes you late. Your services are no longer needed.

Man: Who are you!?

Bru: It doesn't matter.

Man: Do you know who I am!?

Bru: The Alabama Kid.

Man: No one calls me that! I'm Alabama Red! You heard of me?

Bru: No, because you're a nobody.

The man bristled at this affront. The look on his face grew hard and his eyes tightened. His voice rose.

Man: I'm Alabama Red! And I've come here to destroy!

Bru spoke just loud enough to be clearly heard. His words were sharp and dismissive.

Bru: Be on your way or Red will be dead.

Alabama Red: You talking like that 'cause you got those two bots

backing you up!

Bru: Bots?

Alabama Red: Yeah them robot things!

Bru: Robots? Things?

Alabama Red: Yeah, big man!

He cursed Bru. He called him several vile names.

Alabama Red: Who you without 'em!?

Bru: Tell you what. Let's have a fair fight, a duel, just me and you. I'm calling you out.

Alabama Red: What about those machines?

Bru: I'll order them not to get involved. They do as I say do.

Alabama Red scoffed at Bru. He looked at him with wide eyes and incredulity.

Alabama Red: What!? D'ya think I'm stupid? I'm s'posed to believe that!?

Bru: You're Alabama Red, the famous destroyer, or so you say. I give you my word. I'll order them not to get involved and they won't move. They won't lift a finger. I'm like the master. They're like the slaves. A man has nothing without his word. I swear on my dear departed mother's grave. We have a deal? We'll pace it off. Draw and shoot when you say. If you win you get the assignment. You get the robots, my transportation ...

Bru pulled the value card from his shirt pocket.

Bru: ... and the down payment. All the information you need is in the vehicle.

He passed the card from side-to-side in the air. Alabama Red could see the color of the card. He knew how much it was worth. His eyes followed it back and forth. Then he looked at Bru who was smiling slightly, enticingly. He looked at Ek and then Vier who stared at him without expression. He glanced back at the new, obviously expensive vehicle. He turned to stare at Bru and saw him ease the card into his pocket. Alabama Red was thinking,

hard. Bru spoke. He teased The Destroyer, mocked him.

Bru: Is the notorious and dangerous Alabama Red a coward?

Alabama Red flared up at the taunt. His light-skinned face flushed and he seemed to swell with anger. He yelled at Bru.

Alabama Red: You're not even armed!

Bru: My weapon in in my ride. Fair fight?

Alabama Red: Fair fight! Let me hear you give those things the order.

Bru turned. He pointed at Ek and then Vier. He raised his voice. With each statement and order he used one hand and then the other for emphasis. Their long guns were cradled in their arms.

Bru: Fair fight! Fair fight! If I lose, you belong to Alabama Red! Do not get involved! Do you understand!?

They lowered their weapons to their sides.

Ek: I understand master.

Bru pointed at Vier.

Bru: Do you understand!?

Vier: Yes master. I understand.

Bru turned to Alabama Red.

Bru: Satisfied?

Alabama Red: Yeah. Go ahead. Get your gun.

Bru turned towards their vehicle. Before he took two steps The Destroyer reached for his weapon on his right side to shoot Bru in his back.

Ek and Vier raised their long guns into firing position and emptied their magazines into Alabama Red's body. They shot him down. They shot his arms off. They shot his head off. They splattered chunks of flesh and blood was spilled and seeped into the cemetery ground. Bru had turned back to watch the violence and destruction. When the firing stopped Ek and Vier quickly replaced the empty magazines with fully loaded ones from the

bags they carried. Bru fanned delicately at the bluish-white smoke that twisted and swirled in the air. He was pleased. Enthused.

Bru: Our first day in the Hospitality State! That turned out better than I could have imagined!

They returned to their vehicle. Ek and Vier removed their handguns, situated their bags and rifles and climbed in. Bru moved behind the wheel. He turned to Leeda, who had hung his pistols between them under the dashboard and smiled at her.

Bru: *Center World*.

They started off. They never looked back. They headed slowly up the road. Bru stopped at the shack where the elderly *DM* stood looking back at where the loud gunfire had come from. He let the window down. He spoke out, lightly, in a congenial way.

Bru: My good man. Let me speak to you a moment.

The man was staring at Bru. He didn't, couldn't move.

Bru: You have nothing to be concerned about.

Bru showed him the card the Governor had given him.

Bru: Come here. This is yours.

The man's eyes widened. He moved towards the vehicle with hesitation. He stopped. Bru reached his arm out further. The man was unsure what to do.

Bru: Take it. It's yours.

The man took the card and stared at it. A broad smile spread across his very dark-brown face.

Bru: We've made a slight mess back there. Would you kindly clean it up for us?

The man spoke with a deep somewhat gravelly voice.

Elderly Man: Sure, no problem.

Bru reached into an open compartment near the center console as he spoke.

Bru: Anything of value belongs to you, including the impressive bike.

The man could see Bru held various denomination value cards in his hands. He fanned them open as if searching through them.

Bru: I assume you're in charge of the grounds of this cemetery?

Elderly Man: Yes sir, I am.

Bru: What should I call you?

Elderly Man: Anything you want.

Bru looked at the man a long moment.

Bru: How about Gravemaker? And believe me, I call you that most respectfully. You have a very important role in life.

Elderly Man: Fine with me.

Bru: Do you know where the old meat processing plant is just past Canton?

Gravemaker: I do.

Bru pulled a card from the ones he held. It was worth more than the one Gravemaker held in his hand.

Bru: Be there tomorrow at 1 p.m.

He showed the card.

Bru: I'll tell you how you can make this yours.

Gravemaker was giddy now. He responded emphatically.

Gravemaker: I'll be there!

As Bru let the window up he raised his voice.

Bru: Don't be late!

Gravemaker watched the impressive looking vehicle travel up the road, turn onto the access road, turn onto the highway and disappear. Bru was running on silenced electric power so there had been only a slight whistling sound that had been heard once the tires left the gravel pathway. He looked at the card he held. Then he looked up at the sky and he felt sprinkles of rain on his face. He turned to enter the shack.

It was just a little past noon when they arrived back at their temporary location. The sky above them would be partially clear

for a while and the sun had peeped out again. The temperature was rising and it would move into the mid-eighties on this Wednesday afternoon on day two of September.

An awning, embedded and retracted just below the roofline on the driver's side had been extended. Cinq and Dois sat on plastic chairs beneath it. Cha and Tatu stood near them. When Bru pulled up and they had all gotten out, Cinq and Dois went to them. Ek and Vier handed them the weapons they had used and they were taken inside for service. Cha got in the vehicle to run diagnostics and Tatu opened the hood to inspect the engine, batteries and power sources. Ek and Vier sat in the chairs Cinq and Dois had occupied and Bru and Leeda went inside.

Moja and Una sat at the console on the left side near the rear. When Naki, who sat directly across from them beside Okan at the other main console, had determined that it was most likely the Governor of Mississippi that was approaching, Moja had launched a search program on him. As information was gathered on him and his associates, it was captured.

Leeda handed the device the Governor had provided to Naki and she began to download all the information from that device. Then she began organizing and categorizing it. Okan used that information along with that which Moja sent to flag and separate out all pertinent data.

Bru sat down between Moja and Una and watched their screens. Then he turned his chair to look at the screens behind him as they filled and words and dates and numbers scrolled. He turned back to Una.

Bru: Where's the little one?

Una: She went into the woods with Kojo.

Bru: Should we have thoughts of concern?

Una: She said Mississippi woods had some black bears and different types of snakes, some of them poisonous, a few bobcats

and an abundance of deer. She's most interested in alligators. We don't think any of the larger reptiles are around this particular area. She said she was looking for glass lizards and fence lizards. She was instructed not to go too far. She does have a knife with her.

Bru: When she returns I'll have her give names to our support vehicles. The one I was just in performed quite well. I'll have to share with all of you the details of our excursion.

Bru watched them all for a while.

Bru: How fortunate we are. The Governor of Mississippi has hired me to kill someone. I charged him extra for torture. I'm now an assassin.

Una: With a license to destroy.

Bru: At the least, permission.

Okan: Or incentive.

Bru was thinking, processing.

Bru: Has all the information from that device been downloaded?

Naki: Yes, you can access it now.

Bru slid his chair closer to Moja. The information was put on the screen. They read through the first few lines.

Bru: The target goes by the name of Destin.

Bru thought a moment.

Bru: Destin. Destiny. Death. They're all very similar aren't they?

Moja: Public information indicated the two own casinos and property together.

Naki: Public rumors and innuendo are out there that Destin is suspected of being involved in the kidnapping and murder of the Governor's eleven-year-old daughter.

They all sat there in silence going deeper into the information they had acquired. They expanded their search with each new detail. Bru focused on the murder of two years ago. It was a quiet and leisurely evening and by midnight several in the group had

put themselves into quiesced states. Others sat outside and some simply stood underneath the twinkling stars. The gibbous moon was both bright and dark. Bru and Moja and Una worked throughout the night gathering the information they would need. At 11:40 a.m. Bru stood and thought a long moment.

Bru: Moja, I've sent a Controller program to both the Governor and Destin. Monitor them and ensure they're functioning in the main devices those two use and that they spread into any other Comm devices that are connected. Una, the two businessmen possess quite a lot of value. They make transfers back and forth. Find their accounts so when the proper time comes, we can empty them. I want access to any codes they use, all of their passwords, anything that's encrypted on their devices, decipher any encrypted messages and transmissions that have been sent. We need to know everything. Any attempt to hide we want revealed to us. Capture it all and put it on our server.

By noon on Thursday, the third day of September, Bru and Vier were in the smaller vehicle that Chuki had named Runner. For a short distance Bru sped past 100 miles per hour and by 12:45 p.m. they were both standing out of sight in a large dilapidated building that had once been a meat processing plant. Runner was parked in the empty garage area on the other end, past the machinery and long conveyor.

Bru and Vier stood on each side of a glassless window staring out. They both wore beige pants, short-sleeved beige shirts and brown boots. They were hatless and Bru wore sunglasses with light-gray lenses. Vier carried a long gun and each had a handgun on their right side. They also had a leather bag hanging crossbody on their left.

As the sun was coming up Naki and Tatu had come to this building in the larger support vehicle that Chuki had named

Spiny. She had to spell the name for everyone and inform them the two vehicles had been named after Mississippi lizards. She refused any suggestions at more appropriate names so Bru instructed everyone, from then on, to refer to the smaller vehicle as Runner and the larger vehicle as Spiny. Naki and Tatu had come early that morning to inspect the plant and surrounding area. They had also established power, tested the conveyor and machinery and delivered needed supplies.

At 12:53 Bru and Vier heard the sound of an engine. Then they saw a pickup truck-like vehicle with an enclosed bed, coming between the trees and up the short paved road that led to the building. The truck stopped and Gravemaker got out and stood beside the opened door and looked around. He left the door open. He wore black overalls and a red T-shirt. He carried a small handgun under his left arm. On his head was a black cap like a train conductor. With his right hand he took his cap off and with his left hand he rubbed the grayish-white hair on his head. His very dark-skinned face had a questioning look on it and his forehead creased as his brown eyes scanned his surroundings. Bru stepped through the doorless doorway and Vier followed and then stopped as Bru moved forward. Gravemaker smiled and closed the door.

Bru: A few minutes early. I like that.

Gravemaker: Yes sir. I'm here alright. Good to see you. Are you well?

Bru: I am. I hope you are.

Gravemaker: I am. I am.

Bru looked at Gravemaker's polished, glistening, black boots and pointed.

Bru: Are those nice boots new?

Gravemaker: They are, thanks to you. Thanks for everything. You put me on my feet in more ways than one.

Bru: You were in the right place at the right time.

Bru strolled past Gravemaker and looked closely at the side and then the rear of the truck. Gravemaker was staring at Vier, who stared back.

Gravemaker: Good to have a partner in these times in this place, ain't it?

Bru turned to see that Gravemaker was looking directly at and referring to Vier.

Bru: Yes it is. I hope you're being careful. There's always danger lurking.

Gravemaker: I most certainly am. Ain't but so many left in these parts of *Center World* my age. I been everywhere around here, know a whole lot and know a whole lotta people.

Bru: I bet you do. Do you carry bodies in this vehicle of yours?

Gravemaker: I have on occasions.

Gravemaker opened the driver's side door and reached across the seat. Bru moved back past him and stopped near the front left fender. Gravemaker straightened and closed the door. He held a silver flask in his right hand. He screwed off the top and took a sip. He held the flask out to Bru.

Bru: No thank you. Go right ahead. I've had my limit for the day.

Gravemaker took another sip, screwed the top back on and stuck the flask into his back right pocket. He took off his cap and rubbed his head.

Bru: I have me a big glass full of scotch in the morning and it lasts me for the day. I used to drink gin but it made me angry and violent.

Gravemaker: My daddy told me not to drink clear liquor. He said it looked like water and tasted like fire. He said it would addle my brain.

Gravemaker chuckled. He leaned on his truck near the door. They faced each other, conversing as if they were old friends.

Bru: Your daddy was right.

Bru removed his sunglasses and eased them into his shirt pocket.

Bru: I guess I have some sort of strange interest in death and dying. I envy you and what you do. I won't call it a job. I suspect it's more like a vocation, putting dead people in the ground.

Gravemaker: My daddy called it the last journey.

Bru: Death, not only the last journey but also the final answer.

Gravemaker: There's nothing strange about being fascinated with death. Especially when we wonder about if there's something that comes next.

Bru: For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil?

Gravemaker looked at Bru. He thought he saw a hint of a smile. Gravemaker reached for his flask.

Gravemaker: Sir, you have the advantage over me. How should I address you?

He took the flask from his back pocket. He unscrewed the top and took a sip. He was looking directly at Bru.

Bru: Call me D, like the letter, D.

Gravemaker recapped his flask and stood there with it in his hand. He again leaned against the door.

Gravemaker: Well, you're right D. It's more than a vocation, as you called it. My daddy and his daddy and his granddaddy's daddy were all involved in the profession. In fact, my daddy taught me everything I know.

Bru: So not just graves you were involved in other aspects?

Gravemaker: Oh sure. My daddy once owned three full service funeral homes, two in Mississippi and one in Louisiana near New Orleans. He told me about the old days, before the pandemic. I was five years old in 2110, the year that Omni-strain rose up. He said business was booming. Then in 2112 a bad flood washed

away a lotta bodies in lower Louisiana and the dying got outta hand and he and everyone in the business couldn't keep up. They started burning bodies and then they started turning the dead bodies into liquid and putting the liquid deep in the earth and the people in the funeral business, those who hadn't died went outta business, including my daddy. My momma and daddy and just about all my family caught that thing and died. I buried 'em myself. I didn't let 'em melt my people.

Bru: Good for you.

Gravemaker raised the flask and shook it. Then he lifted it to his right ear and shook it twice again. He sat down on the runway board beneath the driver's side door. He set the flask beside him.

Gravemaker: I was in my late teens by then so I wore my masks and leased to own a refrigerated truck and started hauling bodies to the sublimation plant in Atlanta. I got paid by people here and people there, did pretty good. Paid off my truck, bought another one and leased it to a friend. But proper funerals and burials were like the people I carried in the back of my cold truck, dead.

Gravemaker chuckled. He took his hat off and rubbed his head. He brushed his left hand at a flying insect that had come close to his face. They were beneath a canopy of tall maple and oak trees. The elderly man sat in relative coolness even as the humidity and temperature climbed.

Bru: So the Omni-strain put you out of the funeral business?

Gravemaker: More or less. I still hustled and made a living but every day I thought I would catch that thing and die. Then, in 2140, when the pandemic ended, a whole new world in the empty center of the country had been created and I was smack dab in it.

Bru: *Center World!* I love this place!

Gravemaker looked over and up at Bru.

Bru: No law enforcement. Only the strongest survive.

Gravemaker looked at the impressive weapon Bru carried. Then he glanced at Vier.

Gravemaker: And the quickest.

Bru: And the smartest.

Gravemaker: How true, sir, how true.

Gravemaker chuckled and stretched his legs out. He casually crossed his right foot over his left. His new boots gleamed, even in the shade.

Gravemaker: When the pandemic stopped killing, the people started killing each other again.

Bru: They had been on an extended break.

Gravemaker: You could call it that.

Bru: Then you were back in business.

Gravemaker: Yes sir. Burials go back a long ways, thousands of years. Above ground, crypts, mausoleums, cremation, natural. Most here in the South still prefer the new style caskets put in the ground. So people killing each other keeps me occupied. Right after the end of the pandemic, myself and my associates in my profession handled those who tried to seize power. Of course the bullies came to see me. There were the mean and vicious and the kind and meek inherited their plot of earth also. After vengeance and retribution came around things eased up.

Bru: Vengeance and retribution, brothers that I admire.

Gravemaker: The aggressive hotheads were just about all dead and those who acted like they didn't care about their own lives calmed down. Times have changed. Now we got sneaky rapists and murderers getting away. Too often they seem to avoid me, unfortunately.

Bru: Yes, how unfortunate.

Bru began to pace back and forth in front of Gravemaker. He clasped his hands behind his back.

Bru: I think sometimes, about those murderers you referred to.

The mean ones, the vicious, as you alluded to, the bullies. Now understand I believe in murder. Perhaps destruction is a better word. Murder can most certainly be justified. There's revenge and retribution for despicable, heinous crimes. Of course, as I had to demonstrate, there's self-defense and defense of helpless others.

Gravemaker: Let's not forget justice.

Bru: I'll give you that. It's a noble concept. I'm partial to high moral principles and ideals.

Bru stopped in front of the elderly man.

Bru: Where's the punishment? I mean the proper penalty for those who take a human life for no valid reason? Think of the young, the children.

Gravemaker: Let's not leave out the old.

Bru: Of course not.

Bru began to pace again.

Bru: Think of all the innocent victims, once they're buried or however they're disposed of. Never to be gazed upon in reality again. Perhaps they return in visions in the dark. Do the murderers think about the deceased or forget about them in a matter of days? Do serial killers have a conscience?

Gravemaker: That's debatable.

Bru: They should be forced to see the victims after they're dead, before the bodies disappear.

Gravemaker: I've seen 'em come to the funeral and stare at the body, as if to admire their handiwork.

Gravemaker chuckled.

Bru: That's sick.

Gravemaker: The types of murderers we're talking about are sick people.

Bru looked off into the trees, as if he could see past them and through them. He spoke with surety.

Bru: One day they'll all be gone forever.

Bru turned and looked at Gravemaker and smiled, knowingly. The elderly man thought he saw a twinkle in the eyes of the handsome, youthful-looking, brown-skinned man.

Gravemaker: I won't be around to see it.

He uncapped his flask. Took a quick sip. Put the cap back on and screwed it shut. He set the flask down beside him.

Gravemaker: I'd like to put the body in their house.

Bru: Put it in their bed so every morning when they wake up and when they go to sleep it's lying there beside them.

Gravemaker: Leave the body's eyes open, staring at the ceiling. Or turn the head so the eyes stare right at 'em.

Now Bru pointed at Gravemaker and spoke with enthusiasm.

Bru: I like that idea!

Gravemaker: Sit it at the kitchen table so they can look at it in the morning while they eat their bacon and eggs, over easy, and grits, with honey on their biscuits.

Bru: And some butter on the biscuits too.

Gravemaker: And butter in their grits.

Bru: Gotta have some hot sauce!

Gravemaker: Yes sir!

Bru: Put the body at the dining room table for dinner.

Gravemaker: Make 'em stand beside me and watch while I work on the body. Filling in and patching up the gunshot holes in the heads. Sewing up the knife wounds in the faces so their loved ones can see them in an open casket without passing out.

Bru: Or throwing up.

Gravemaker: I'd do it the old way, arterial or cavity embalming, sometimes both. Make 'em help me wash the whole body with disinfectant, all over, under the arms, between the legs. Scrub every crack and crevice. Then we gotta massage the arms and legs and fingers to ease the stiffness. We glue the eyes shut. Place some cotton in the mouth under the lips to fill it out, make it

look as natural as possible. Then we wire up the jaw and secure it so we can give it a pleasant, peaceful look.

Bru: Maybe even a little smile or smirk.

Gravemaker: I take a scalpel and make a slice near the right collarbone. I put a slice in the carotid artery and another in the jugular vein. I put tubes in the main artery, one to the heart, one towards the head. Another drain tube is put in the vein to drain out the blood. The hose on my embalming machine is connected to the tube directed towards the heart.

Gravemaker had drawn his legs up. He was sitting with his back against the door. He unscrewed the cap on his flask. He took a sip, capped the flask and then set it down beside him. He looked at Bru who was standing in front of him, staring with rapt attention.

Gravemaker: You still with me?

Bru: Every step of the way.

Gravemaker: When I turn on my machine the embalming fluid is pushed through the arterial system and the blood is forced out through the jugular vein. While this is happening I'm massaging the body with a soapy sponge to help the drainage and make sure the fluid going in gets in there all over. When the fluid gets in the way it should I shut off my machine, take out the tubes, tie off the artery and vein and sew up the cuts. With the cavity method I gotta cut into the stomach and use a long, sharp instrument that's kinda like a knife. I stick it in the body and puncture the organs in the chest and abdomen to drain out any gas and suction all the fluid. Then I inject my embalming chemicals and sew up my cut. If the hair is to be done I wash and set it the way I've been told or I use an image provided to me or I do it as I see fit. I use cream on the face and hands and arms if needed so the skin doesn't dry out. I apply makeup if called for and after all that crying and singing and dancing and on occasion another shooting

or stabbing I put the dead body in the ground.

Bru: Gravemaker, that's fascinating! Fascinating!

Gravemaker: Now understand, I don't do all that anymore. I've seen too much of it. I just bury 'em now.

Bru: This is a stroke of serendipity. Fate has brought us together. I do a little sightseeing and now here we are. Let's get down to business.

Gravemaker stood. He opened his flask, took a sip of his liquor and turned and put the flask into his truck through his opened window. He turned back to Bru.

Bru: Can you get me some dead bodies?

Gravemaker: Sure, how many?

Bru: I need six adult bodies, at least three that represent females. And I need seven human skulls.

Gravemaker: By when?

Bru: As soon as possible. But don't rush, if that makes sense.

Gravemaker: It does.

Bru: I don't want you getting in trouble.

Gravemaker: Won't be no trouble. Where you want 'em?

Bru indicated the building behind them.

Bru: Put them in the open area near the entrance.

He reached in the pouch on his left side and pulled out a small Comm device.

Bru: Here hold this in both hands.

Gravemaker took the strange looking device, held it with both hands and looked at the dark, blank screen. Bru tapped on the Comm device on his own wrist. The device Gravemaker held came on and briefly lit up, then went dark again. Then on again.

Bru: In order to use that device you have to first touch it just like you're holding it now for it to be activated. It turns off once you remove both hands from it. No one else can use it but you. The device also has a self-destruct mechanism. Understand?

Gravemaker stared at the metal device he held. Then he looked up at Bru with an admiring expression on his face. He smiled.

Gravemaker: I understand. That's pretty good.

Bru: Modern technology.

Gravemaker chuckled.

Bru: Press the star key.

Gravemaker did as instructed. The screen showed a list. He read it off aloud.

Gravemaker: Formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, methanol, sodium borate, sodium nitrate and glycerin.

Bru: Recognize those items?

Gravemaker: Of course.

Bru: I need those chemicals.

Gravemaker: I can get 'em. How much you need?

Bru: I don't really know exactly. Why don't you bring a few gallons of the liquid and a few pounds of the powder when you make your first drop-off? That way they won't be too heavy. You can bring the same amount on your next delivery.

Gravemaker: Makes sense.

Bru: I need some way I can spray that stuff after it's mixed, like a on weeds.

Gravemaker: Like weed killer. I got it. I'll get you a pressure sprayer.

Bru: Keep scrolling, there's more.

Gravemaker was touching the screen on the device with his index finger, pushing up. He again called out the items.

Gravemaker: Tape, glue ...

Bru: Heavy-duty bonding glue.

Gravemaker: Two medium sized cans. Two rolls of strong tape, rope ...

Bru: Braided rope. Two hundred feet, at least 25mm thick. Strong

enough to hold a heavy body.

Gravemaker: Rope cutter. Plastic gloves. Thin or thick?

Bru: Thick neoprene.

Gravemaker: You'll need masks and goggles. If you're the one handling those chems you don't wanna be breathing those fumes and you don't want that stuff in your eyes.

Bru: I hadn't even thought of that. Bring some extra masks and goggles, five of each.

Gravemaker: Plastic ties and cable ties, a 32 ounce hammer, 4 and one half inch industrial nails, cardboard, two dozen 12 inch squares and one half gallon of red paint.

Bru: Blood red.

Gravemaker: Gotcha. You've got brushes on here, any particular size?

Bru: Four small ones I can paint letters with.

Gravemaker: That looks like everything. After I get all these things I'll work on your, shall we call it, special order?

Bru: Special order, I like that.

Bru reached into his pouch and pulled out a value card. He held it up so Gravemaker could see it. Then he handed it to him. Gravemaker smiled.

Bru: This is for the materials, all the things on that list you have and anything you thought of to add. That's also for any other expenses that may come up. Time is money so that's for your time.

Gravemaker: That's more than enough.

Bru: You'll keep any amount left over. But don't skimp on any of the items. On your first delivery can you bring half my, special order?

Gravemaker: When I bring half of everything on that list I'll bring part of the other order, three and three. When I bring the rest of the list I'll bring the other three and four and you'll have

your six and seven.

Bru reached in his pouch and pulled out another card. This time Gravemaker's smile was broad and his brown eyes twinkled.

Bru: When you make your first delivery this will be inside of the container sitting on the table. Notify me through that device. Type your message, press send.

He pulled out a card of greater value.

Bru: When you make your last delivery this will await you. You have my word. A person has nothing without the truth of their word.

Gravemaker: Sometimes that's all a person has. You have my word you'll have everything you ordered.

Bru: And when your part is over you will have been very well compensated.

Gravemaker: I'll be able to retire.

Bru: Be careful. Mistakes can be made. I know fate can intervene. Betrayal will not be tolerated. If you betray me or expose me you'll be killed. Understood?

Gravemaker: I understand. You can count on me.

Bru: Good luck. If all goes well you won't see me again. By the way, if I were you I'd retire somewhere other than Mississippi.

Gravemaker looked at the value cards he held.

Gravemaker: I've always thought about maybe Texas. I've never been there.

Bru: Yes, Texas is a wonderful state.

Gravemaker: Thanks for everything.

Bru: You're welcome.

Bru pointed at the elderly man.

Bru: Right place, right time.

He turned towards the building. Gravemaker got in his truck and turned it around and started up the road. When he looked in his side-view mirror there was nothing to be seen.

Inside the building Bru tapped on his device and opened direct communication.

Bru: Okan do you have the connection?

Okan: The link is established.

Bru: You have your assignment.

Okan: Yes. Activate Listener on Gravemaker's device. Monitor and track. Watch everything. Flag anything that is identified as important. If there's anything deemed to be a threat or a sign of betrayal, detonate the device and blow him up.

Bru: Stay on him until I release him.

Bru and Vier waited for fifteen minutes after Gravemaker left before returning to the others. When they arrived, several of the group stood outside, including Una and Leeda. Ek and Tatu were in the building, working. Bru was informed by Una that Chuki and Kojo were still in the woods where they had been when he and Vier had left earlier.

Leeda: She was bitten by a poisonous snake on her right hand.

Bru: That's unlike her to be careless. She said she knew how to handle snakes.

Leeda: Una and I fused the punctures.

Una: There's no indication she was even bitten.

Leeda: Which she did not like. She was upset.

Una: She wanted some scars on her hand.

Bru: As a reminder?

Leeda: More like marks of honor.

Bru: Did she cry?

They both stared at him.

Bru: Yes. She can cry. I didn't know either until recently. She can cry if she wants.

Una: No tears were shed, at least not in front of us.

Leeda: I think I would like to cry. I'm having thoughts of envy.

Bru: Maybe you can. Give it a try. Humans weep from emotion. *Entities* cry through their thoughts.

Leeda: How can they cry when they're supposedly happy?

Una: Because happiness is an emotional state. And they're human so they're illogical.

Una: She keeps talking about alligators and if there's any water or a swamp nearby. Moja has identified several streams and ponds on the other side of the woods. They run past an unused road where there's a bridge and a small body of water. One of the streams runs towards us. Apparently there's a group of people near that bridge that have a campsite, most likely temporary.

Bru: We'll have those people, our neighbors, put under constant radar surveillance. We need to know how many there are and what they're doing. Put a verbal restriction on the little one so she can only go but so far into the woods.

Bru looked directly at Leeda. Then he spoke to Una.

Bru: Mark Leeda with elaborate and obvious *Entity* designs on her face and neck, temporary of course. You two are going out with me this evening.

He turned to Leeda.

Bru: You'll see how humans view you.

Now he spoke to both of them.

Bru: We're going to the finest restaurant in the city and then to the biggest casino. Dress appropriately. Una, you see to the proper presentation. Hair, makeup, and you will of course adorn yourselves in our most impressive jewelry. You'll both need large bags and necessary containers to stash food and drink. We'll show Leeda how to fake dining out. Una knows what all to bring. You two will need our sophisticated weapons. Have Cinq and Dois provide you with the proper ones. We're going to test our Influencer programs. I'll brief Moja so he can get everything set up. We'll leave promptly at seven.

Bru turned and entered Tal. Moja and Cha were at the rear consoles. Even though sensors had been set up, at least one of the group would continue to monitor security and radar and that same one, in this case Okan, would capture, record, organize and store pertinent data. He would also remain on Gravemaker.

Bru called for Naki to take over for Moja. He and Moja went over the meeting with Gravemaker. Then he shared his evolving plans for the meat processing plant. Then the two discussed the upcoming evening and what all was necessary to be in place.

At seven that evening Bru, Una and Leeda prepared to depart. Bru was standing outside with several others of the group. Chuki was sitting in a chair with Kojo lying on the ground beside her. She was pestering Bru, trying to get a promise out of him as to when he would take her into the city.

Bru was dressed in charcoal-gray with a light-gray long-sleeved dress shirt opened at the neck where a somewhat large platinum and gold necklace could be easily seen. He wore a diamond encrusted gold bracelet on his right wrist and two rings, one on his little finger and the other on his ring finger, made of palladium with diamonds in the center of each. On his left wrist he wore a slim gold Comm device that could be extended up the back of his hand. He had a holstered pistol beneath his left arm and a smaller holstered pistol strapped to his left leg above his ankle, hidden underneath his pants. He wore black, soft-leather shoes. His suit-coat carefully placed, along with his leather pouch the size of a briefcase was in a chair beside Chuki. Along with the other items he would need, there was a small pistol in his case.

Una and Leeda came down the stairs and through the opened side doorway. Chuki jumped up to greet them. Una wore a loose, knee-length, turquoise-blue dress with sleeves and matching four-inch heels, which made her over five feet ten inches tall. Her

long vanilla-blond hair was styled in such a way that it was piled up on top of her head. The color of her hair and the shade of her dress enhanced her *Melada* skin tone. She had light makeup on her face and her lipstick was of a golden hue. She wore around her neck and wrists and on her fingers and ears, diamonds and pendants and palladium and gold and platinum and she sparkled and glittered and cast rainbow colors. She carried a turquoise bag that contained two pistols, extra ammunition and the necessary items they would need for the night.

Leeda came behind her. She wore a tight, form-fitting, ochre-colored sleeveless dress with thin shoulder straps that was just below mid-thigh in length. She wore matching shoes with four-inch heels that made her right at six feet tall. Her full lips were lightly painted a tangerine color. Her dark-brown skin seemed to glow and her natural styled somewhat long curly almost black hair stood out around her head and appeared soft and bouncy. She carried a large dark-yellow, shiny cloth purse. In it she had her pistol, ammunition, sealable, dark plastic bags, containers for liquid and her Comm devices. She too wore elaborate jewelry that sparkled and glittered and cast varied essences of bright colors.

Chuki bounced around Una and Leeda as Cha pulled Spiny near and opened the doors for them. The little one was excited.

Chuki: Leeda, Una, you both look fantastic!

Everyone gathered around except for Moja, Tatu and Okan who were at the consoles inside. Chuki took Leeda's hands and then Una's hands to look closely at the jewels.

Chuki: You're both beautiful! I love it! I love it!

She turned to Bru who had gotten his suit coat and pouch, and uttered a statement.

Chuki: You know what I mean, love.

Bru: Yes. I know what you mean.

Chuki: You look handsome daddy. I like your suit.

Bru: What am I, the afterthought?

Cinq: Your weapons are smaller and lighter than you normally carry but they're a special design and loaded, as are your extra magazines, with overpressure ammunition.

Dois: At close range they'll easily go through the human body. Keep that in mind.

Una: We're fishing, not hunting.

Bru: Let's connect.

They activated their inter-communication system and spoke with Moja to verify connection and so he could determine the link was secure and that all voice transmissions and any messages sent or received between them, including Vier and Ek, would be encrypted. When verification was complete, Bru spoke.

Bru: Let's go. Vier and Ek will soon be in place.

As Cha assisted Una and Leeda, Bru hung his coat on a hook behind the driver's seat, placed his bag on the second row seat and climbed behind the wheel. Una rode in the front passenger seat and Leeda rode behind her in the second row. Vier and Ek had taken Runner and left thirty minutes earlier. They would find a secluded area south of the restaurant and casino complex and wait there for events to unfold.

Bru was coming from the north and as the three of them drew close he expanded communication to the waiting pair. He then informed them when he pulled up in front of the restaurant. Now the two could hear, as could Moja and Cha and anyone else who wanted to listen. Several of the group went inside to watch the larger screens. They would be able to see the images that Bru, Una and Leeda chose to transmit. They could also watch on their handheld devices.

It was Thursday evening and there was already a short line of vehicles waiting for the valet parking. Bru could see quite a few

vehicles already in the restaurant parking lot. The casino was attached to the restaurant and further he could see one of the casino parking lots was nearly full. As they waited in line Bru spoke quietly to Una and Leeda and for any of the group who were listening.

Bru: We pay attentions to our surroundings. We make note of individuals who are around us as we enter or leave any type of establishment. We try not to allow anyone to remain too close behind us. We try not to get too close to anyone in front of us. If those same individuals come close to us later or we see them intently or surreptitiously observing us, we'll recall where we first saw them. Leeda, these humans, most of them at least, have never seen up close a creation such as you. They have specific preconceived ideas and generally negative prejudices against us. Process how they look at you, how they act around you and towards you. They may even talk to you. They will most definitely talk about you. Some will make comments as if you can't hear them or understand what they're saying as to the underlying, true meaning of their words. Listen for inflection.

Una: The modulation of intonation or pitch in the voice. Humans alter the form of a word to express attributes such as mood ...

Bru: ... or gender, or lack thereof.

Una: You must read between the lines, as is said, and see behind the image they present.

Bru pulled forward. He reached into a small compartment near the center console, took out a value card and switched it to his left hand. They were now just past the front entrance. An attendant, dressed in a uniform with the logo of the restaurant and casino, a matching cap and carrying a pistol on the right hip moved up to the passenger side to assist Una and Leeda. Another attendant, dressed in the same type of uniform with a pistol holstered under their right arm approached the driver's side as

Bru let his window down.

Attendant: Good evening. I'll park it for you.

They were looking at the impressive, strange looking vehicle.

Attendant: It'll be in a very secure, very safe area. You'll have your electronic claim ticket.

Bru pointed with his right hand.

Bru: I'd like to park right there.

Attendant: I'm sorry. That spot's reserved.

Bru smiled at the young blond-haired *DQ* appearing as male and showed them the card.

Bru: I'm sure we can work something out can't we?

The attendant's eyes blinked, twice, at the color of the card.

Bru: This one now, another one just like it when we come out.

We won't be too long. We're headed south to Biloxi from here.

The attendant was staring at the card that was now being held out to them. They took the card and snapped into action. They waved away the attendant on the other side and began to direct Bru forward. Bru pulled up to the parking space, turned and then backed in close to the wall. Una and Leeda got out. Bru got out and shut his door. He opened the door behind his seat and got his coat and bag. Una and Leeda had come around the vehicle to stand beside him. He handed his bag to Leeda and put on his suit coat. He put it on easily but Una assisted with one sleeve and Leeda brushed at his shoulders as he straightened and adjusted the fit. The attendant had admired Bru's weapon and now they stood and watched this interaction between the three until their associate near the entrance called out. They waved at Bru, assured he was all right and then ran towards the front doors.

Bru stood with Una and Leeda in the warm early evening and watched as impressive vehicles pulled up and nicely dressed individuals of all types exited. The guests walked through the glass doors that automatically opened or were being held open by

one of the staff and into the lobby area of the exclusive dinning establishment. Bru tapped on the Comm device on the back of his wrist and it extended up the back of his hand. He pressed on the lighted keys and set the security system on Spiny. He tapped again and retracted the device.

The three started towards the entrance. People watched Bru, Una and Leeda. They observed the tall, handsome, well-dressed *Marrom* individual with the expensive looking jewelry and *DM* markings on his neck. Of course they believed that one who strolled with confident purpose was human. They saw the other two, one on each side. There, look at the beautiful *Melada DF* marked one with the colorful dress and bag and stylish blonde hair. There was no doubt that, that one who sparkled and glittered was human. But they stared with questioning eyes at Leeda, this that they did not understand. What was this thing? An Android? A Humanoid? A Gynoid? A robot? A machine? How was this possible? How could a non-human look like that? Her dark-brown skin appeared as human skin. How would it feel if touched? He hair seemed soft and natural. How would it feel if touched? She was tall and somewhat thick and yet could be described as appearing as obviously female. Beautiful. Statuesque. That thing walked with a mixture of sensuality and dignity. Why was it dressed like that? Why would humans provide the non-human with jewels that if authentic were worth a small fortune? There were non-humans in Mississippi but none such as this. That thing was alien to them. Those from Mississippi knew people from different areas, different states, came to this specific restaurant, this popular casino. So they recognized them as strangers. Those from eastern Arkansas, western Alabama and northeast Louisiana saw them as special humans and one unique thing.

Through the lobby they went. They stopped a short distance

from the group of five in front of them. Una turned slightly to the side so she could observe those behind. She smiled pleasantly as a *DF*, looking up at her hair and down at her jewels, nodded to her. Bru scanned the other directions. The group in front of them was escorted inside. The three stepped forward and stopped in front on the maitre d, who stood behind a tall, standing desk. The short baldheaded *Parda-clara DG* was dressed in a black tuxedo. They smiled pleasantly at Bru and Una and then paused to glance at Leeda. The smile turned briefly to a quizzical, yet admiring look.

Bru: You should have a reservation for D, a party of three.

The maitre d ran their finger on top of the desk. Their voice was smooth and light.

Maitre d: I most certainly do. Oh, I see you have reserved one of our private rooms. Excellent choice.

The maitre d made a motion, a gesture that brought forth a tall, slim, young *DM* waiter with long, bright-pink hair who had been hovering nearby. They spoke with deference to Bru and extended their arm toward the waiter.

Maitre d: This is Thirty. He will be your host. He's one of our best and will attend to your every need.

Then they spoke to the waiter.

Maitre d: Take our guests to suite number two.

They spoke to Bru and Una as the two passed by.

Maitre d: Enjoy your meal. Enjoy you evening.

Bru: Thank you. I'm sure we will.

Una smiled at them slightly as she went by. Then Leeda, having watched others interact, smiled briefly as she moved past. The maitre d was distracted, staring at the three walking away. Then they refocused and turned to the couple who stood waiting.

The lights of the restaurant were set to such a level to create a quiet, leisurely mood. Soft, slow music could be heard, barely,

coming from somewhere in the ceiling and walls. It was still relatively early. The expansive, plush room was far from crowded. People were still coming in and already some of the first diners were leaving. Some walked towards the doorway and hallway that a subdued, discreet sign indicated as a direct way to the casino.

There were eyes on the three as Thirty led them towards the far wall covered from halfway down the high ceiling and from end to end with darkened glass. The people eating and laughing and drinking paused momentarily. Even the wait staff took quick glances as the three distinctive individuals moved in such a way that they seemed unique. All gazes were affected by the glitter and sparkle that not only emanated from them but was also enhanced by the silvery white illumination that beamed down from high above, upon them.

Sounds of voices resumed, movement began again as they moved on and as Thirty drew close to the center of the wall he tapped on the Comm device he held and a portion of the wall, like a wide door, slid open. Bru, followed by Una and then Leeda stepped inside their private room. Thirty entered. The door slid closed.

Thirty: As you can see, you have your own area, your own private dinning space, just to yourselves. Here's a table. It seats six so for just three there will be plenty of extra room. Or you can relax on this bench-like setting and dine on tables that rise from the floor to your desired height.

Thirty had first indicated a mahogany table with thick, soft-looking high-back chairs and then a dark-yellow leather bench-like couch that ran along the back wall

Bru: I'm impressed. It appears just like the photos on your business site, and beautiful full-grain leather. I think we'll sit there. That way we can all easily see the interesting goings on in the restaurant.

Bru set his bag on the table. He remained standing.
'Thirty: Certainly. Make yourselves comfortable.
He stepped to the side as Una and Leeda sat down and placed their bags beside them.
'Thirty: Shall I bring our complete menu up on display on the wall? Would you like cocktails before dinner?
He looked at Bru and Una with a pleasant smile. Then he looked at Leeda and his gaze lingered a moment.
Bru: No, 'Thirty. I trust I pronounced that correctly?
'Thirty: Yes. Yes, like the number 'Thirty.
Una: How unique, your calling.
'Thirty looked at Una. She was smiling at him. He found himself unnerved by the way she was looking at him
'Thirty: Thank you.
Bru: Actually, we know what we want. And this may seem a little unusual but we would like all of our food and drink at the same time. Can you take care of that for us?
'Thirty: Of course. I can provide whatever you desire, however you desire it.
'Thirty attached the Comm device he held to his belt on his left side. He lifted another device from his belt on his right side.
'Thirty: Who's first?
Bru looked at Una.
Bru: Go ahead, you order.
Una: I'm famished. I'd like your largest cut of prime rib, medium. A baked potato with extra sour cream and extra butter, one toasted roll. And you choose my salad, surprise me, as long it has tomatoes in it. I love tomatoes. Did you know the French called the tomato the pomme d'amour, the love apple?
'Thirty stared at Una, who was staring at him with a look, an essence of amusement on her face. He smiled and swallowed and stuttered just a little as he then entered the order on his device.

Thirty: Uh, no. I didn't know that.

Now he gathered himself.

Thirty: And what would you like to drink?

Una's voice sounded whispery and yet it was heavy and thick and enticing. Thirty was growing warm. He had stolen glances at her honey-colored skin that appeared soft and moist. He tried not to stare into her light-blue eyes. She looked as if she was teasing him.

Una: I want you to choose a good bottle of red wine for me.

Thirty: We have an excellent Cabernet Sauvignon.

Una: I bet you do.

Thirty: It's powerful and bold. It's said to have a punch in every sip.

Una: Ooh, I bet it does. That sounds perfect.

Thirty: Anything else?

Una: A glass of water with a few lemon slices on the side, no ice, and a slice of chocolate cake for desert. And that's it for me.

Thirty turned to Bru.

Thirty: And what will you be having?

Bru: I'd like some lobster, chunks of lobster, also some shrimp. I'm a seafood type of guy. Have the shrimp put on a bed of brown rice. I need extra butter and extra shrimp sauce. Cole slaw with cucumbers. Two toasted rolls. No desert. No water. What white wine do you suggest?

Thirty: I would suggest our Pinot Grigio.

Bru: I'm sure you carry one of excellent quality.

Thirty: We do. We do.

Bru: Good. I'm not particular. Just bring me your best.

Thirty was entering the order.

Bru: I believe that's everything as far as our food.

Thirty turned to Leeda who was looking directly at him.

Bru: Our good friend would like two empty champagne glasses.

Thirty: Of course.

Thirty attached the Comm device he held to his belt. He went to the wall and pressed on buttons. Three tables rose from the floor. He walked back and began pointing.

Thirty: On the left side of the tables are the controls for the height you desire. Simply open the cover. On the right, if you open the cover you'll see four buttons. The green one opens direct communication to me. The red one locks and unlocks your door. And the blue one contacts customer service. You'll see that they're all labeled with instructions. The yellow one is currently engaged and ensures no one from our staff can hear inside your room. You can disengage for any type of emergency situation. And of course your room is soundproof. You can see out, no one can see in. I've entered your orders to the kitchen. Our master chefs will be preparing your meals as soon as possible.

Thirty went to a different section of the wall. He indicated several closed rectangular doors.

Thirty: When your orders are close to being ready I'll be notified. I'll go and ensure they are complete and exactly as you ordered. They will be delivered through these portals. As you requested, everything will be delivered at the same time. I'll place your meals on the tables. I'll first deliver your wines to you. Now I'll set your tables.

Thirty went to the wall and pressed a silver button. A drawer opened. He removed a pair of white gloves. He put them on. Bru turned to the glass and gazed out. Thirty pressed another button and another drawer slid out. As he was setting the tables with off-white, silk tablecloths, airlaid napkins and pure silver eating utensils, Bru and Una made comments about their elegant room and the outside dining area that was slowly filling up. When Thirty was done he turned to Bru.

Thirty: Do you require anything else from me at this time?

Bru reached into his suit coat to his inside pocket and pulled out value cards. He fanned through them as Thirty watched the cards closely. He found the one he wanted. He held it out. Thirty saw the value of it.

Bru: This for you now, in advance.

Thirty hesitated.

Bru: Take it, it's yours.

Thirty took the card and put it into his back pocket. He removed the Comm device from his left side and prepared to depart. Bru stopped him.

Bru: Now listen carefully.

He indicated Una.

Bru: She and I want to enjoy our meal. We eat slowly, savoring every bite, indulging ourselves in enjoyable recollections of past events and reflecting on what the future may hold for us. We may take two or three hours before we're done. Perhaps you'll want to arrange to have the maitre d assign you other customers in that duration. I'll contact you when we're done and at that time I'm going to present you another card of even greater value. That's on this condition. Once our meals are delivered, you have departed and that door is locked, we are not to be disturbed under any, I repeat, under any circumstances. Can you guarantee us that?

Thirty swallowed, and then swallowed again as he stared at the value cards Bru held. His voice rose and he spoke with surety.

Thirty: Yes sir I can! You will not be disturbed!

Bru smiled as he eased the cards back into his pocket. He watched Thirty's eyes as he attempted to follow the cards and peer into Bru's pocket.

Bru: Something told me I could count on you. Call it intuition.

Bru turned to look out of the darkened glass. Thirty removed his gloves and turned to see if he could see what Bru was seeing.

Bru: You see, this is a special occasion for the three of us. We're going to make this a memorable evening that stretches beyond the night and into the daylight. We'll gamble in your casino, dance in your nightclub and then we'll head south to Biloxi and continue the party. Sounds like a plan, doesn't it?

Thirty: Yes it does! I envy you!

Thirty touched his device, the door slid open. He disappeared towards the kitchen as the door closed. Una and Leeda rose and moved to stand beside Bru.

Bru: Look at them Leeda. Study the humans carefully. Seeing them like this, being around them allows you to gain a deeper understanding, the necessary insight you will require to move amongst them undetected. This is education in addition to watching Cha or Naki or me and Una, any of us who can pass, who can successfully disguise their *Entity* essence. Here you can observe their interactions.

Una: All you need is expressiveness, which is the quality of effectively conveying a thought or feeling, the ability to display emotion in your face and voice and the ability to modulate how you sound to others. Strive for fluidity in your movements. Focus on a *DF* or those *PFs* who appear to exude confidence and elegance and grace. Find those who appear in their actions, strong and aggressive. Try to recognize the difference when you see those who appear insecure and meek. Perhaps it's the way they walk or the way they hold their shoulders. Maybe it's the shy, reserved posture. Study them and together we'll mimick them and eventually you'll be able to assume any personality you choose. Then you can look not just as a *DF* but also a *DL*, a *DQ* and all outside and beyond that. You'll be human and not human.

They stood there in silence, looking out, until they could see Thirty returning. A cart was moving forward in front of him that he controlled with the Comm device he held in his hands. The

door slid open and Bru and Una went and sat down. Leeda remained at the glass staring out.

Thirty presented the wine bottle to Una. Then he used a knife from the cart to cut off the foil that was around the top. He put the foil in his side pants pocket. He wiped the top of the bottle with a serviette cloth. As this was going on Leeda returned to her seat to watch, seemingly with curiosity. Next, using a corkscrew, Thirty removed the cork and presented it to Una by setting it on a silver cork tray. He poured a small amount of wine in a polished glass. As he again showed her the label of the bottle she lifted the glass, swirled it and then held the glass up and looked at the deep-purple hue of the liquid. She spoke to Bru.

Una: Purple. Your favorite color.

She then placed her nose in the glass to sniff it. She did not sip it.

Una: That aroma is wonderful. Excellent choice Thirty.

Thirty smiled and bowed slightly. He waited for her to taste it. She set her glass on the table.

Una: You can pour mine and then take care of him. He and I will toast.

Thirty poured Una's wine. Then he opened Bru's wine. Did the same to Bru's bottle as he did for Una. After Bru sniffed it, he gave his approval.

Bru: The bouquet is wonderfully obvious, again an excellent choice.

Again Thirty bowed slightly. He poured Bru's wine. He placed Leeda's two empty glasses in front of her and bowed. He did a double take as she smiled at him. He went to the drawer and put on fresh white gloves. It was at this moment the food came through the wall. Thirty quickly placed all the food on the tables.

Thirty: Now, please be careful. The plates of the main course have a continuous, very low warming heat.

Una: Oh my, look at my meat! It looks simply scrumptious! I love meat!

She smiled seductively at Thirty. He smiled and blushed at her statement and the tone of her voice.

Bru: Lobster! I love lobster!

Thirty stepped back. Then he turned to Leeda.

Bru: Do not concern yourself. Our friend is fine.

Thirty quickly placed silver finger bowls with water and damp towels on silver trays on the tables along with large bibs.

Thirty: Would you like your wine put in a chilling bucket?

Una: Not for me.

Bru: Nor me.

Thirty: Would either of you like for me to bib you?

Una: I'll put his on and he'll put mine on.

Thirty put his hands behind his back.

Thirty: Before I leave, is there anything else you require?

Both Una and Bru scanned the food, unfolded their napkins and grabbed their bibs.

Bru: Everything looks and smells great. Convey my compliments to the chefs and the kitchen staff. We'll take it from here.

Before turning to leave Thirty looked at the tables laden with food. He glanced at the wine bottles. He thought a moment, as if to ensure in his mind that all had been provided his guests.

Thirty: If you need anything, anything at all buzz for me. Lock your door and enjoy.

Thirty left and Bru locked the door behind him. Una pulled a small Comm device from her bag, placed it beside her on the seat and keeping her right hand beneath the table she began to tap on it.

Una: Narrow radius blocking is activated. The locked door is under our control. Any concealed cameras are frozen.

Bru got up and moved to the table. Una went through her

large purse and removed black plastic bags and several black metal containers. Then taking her purse she moved to the table where Bru was removing two Comm devices from his leather pouch. He arranged his chair and sat down. Una sat down at the table. They were both facing the one-way glass wall. Leeda came to stand and watch them and to observe the people outside. They were all looking out at the hustle and bustle and activities of the restaurant.

Una: Look, two *Entities*!

She pointed. They watched an Android and a Gynoid, both with long black hair and eyes that appeared unnaturally dark, as if black. They were dressed in all white, pants and long-sleeved shirts. They both wore red bowties. A mechanized cart on wheels followed them. Diners had departed and the two *Entities* cleared the table, placing the dishes and eating utensils, glasses and all else, inside the cart. The female appearing *Entity* removed the tablecloth, carefully folded it and placed it on top of the cart. They launched two flattened oval-shaped vacuums from beneath the cart that cleaned around and under the table. The vacuums returned to their slots and the two, with the cart following, moved back towards the closed sliding doors next to the kitchen. As they drew close, the doors slid open for them to enter and at the same time two *Entities*, both appearing as females emerged. They were dressed the same as the first two with the same color and style of hair. They both wore green bowties. Their faces were set and their eyes were expressionless. A cart followed them.

Bru: They're older models, built before the *GE Period* and reactivated, most likely with years added to their power sources. We would probably find similar types throughout *Center World*. Only the rich have imported the newer models from *East World* or *West World*.

Una: They wouldn't use the more modern ones as common help.

Bru and Una had set up their devices. They heard Moja's voice in their ear.

Moja: A device registered to Destin is approaching the area. I'll inform you if he comes in the restaurant or goes to the casino.

Bru: Well that's interesting.

Una: With him having a controlling percentage in both the restaurant and casino he probably comes here often.

Bru: Yes, and with him eliminated, his partner, the Governor gains full control.

Una: He'll control all this and the casino in Biloxi.

Bru: With plans to expand into Gulfport.

Una: The Governor does business with someone suspected of being involved in the rape and murder of his eleven-year-old daughter.

Bru: Destin publicly denies any involvement. There's been no proof, no evidence, only rumors and suspicion. For the sake of curiosity perhaps we can find out the truth.

Leeda had been standing between the two and watching them work. They finished their initial preparation.

Bru: Let's choose someone appropriate

They looked at the people in the dining area.

Bru: Observe them, enjoying themselves. There before us are the so-called social animals socializing. They're eating poisonous food and drinking alcohol that makes them senseless.

Bru tapped on one of his devices.

Bru: Leeda, what does the word gula mean?

Leeda: Gluttony.

Bru: And avaritia?

Leeda: Greed.

Bru: What better place to test our Influencer programs than a restaurant and a gambling establishment? There's gluttony and greed everywhere.

Again Bru tapped on a device.

Bru: Look at those at that long table on the left. Let's isolate them, the one on each end.

Una and Bru began to eliminate everything from their screens but the table and the six symbols that represented the Comm devices that each person kept near them on the table. There were three *DMs* and three *DFs*, all well dressed, laughing and talking. Bru and Una and Leeda watched as one man, in a black suit and white shirt with long orange hair stood and made a toast. When he sat back down a woman, dressed in a chartreuse-colored dress with long green hair stood and proposed another toast. After each toast everyone sipped and drank wine from their glasses.

Bru: I'll send the Gula Influencer to the green one who gulps her drink. You take orange who stands to toast again.

They launched the program. It showed at the top of their devices as a small red dot. They placed their index finger over the dot. It hovered close and they moved their finger, sliding the red dot onto the symbols of the Comm devices they had chosen. The dot grew larger for an instant and then disappeared into the symbol. The program emitted an almost indistinguishable sound similar to an incoming notification. The two who had been selected, with a bud in their ear, looked at their devices, tapped on them and fixated on them as they drank and attempted to eat.

Bru: Leeda open up image transmission to Moja so he can see what unfolds.

Leeda directed her Comm device to the table and held it steady as she continuously transmitted images. At that moment Moja's voice was in their ears.

Moja: Destin and his brother Westin are entering the restaurant.

They couldn't see the maitre d hold his arm out in a gesture to proceed but they could see two waiters, a *DM* and a *DF* move quickly towards the entrance. And they could see the two service

individuals escort a group across the room to a corner booth near the far wall. There were six in the group. Destin, the one in front, lifted his bejeweled left hand, not too high, not too obvious, to acknowledge several people who spoke or waved to him. He had a somewhat tall, auburn-haired *DF* on his right arm. She was nicely dressed in an off-white, long-sleeved blouse and elegant cream-colored slacks and very high heels. The *DM* behind him had a *DF* beside him with short spiky red hair. She wore a short, tight red dress and red soft shoes. There were two *DMs* following closely behind who appeared to be bodyguards. One was a tall and thick baldheaded *Escura*. The other was shorter and thick with a baldhead and *Turva* complexion with a grayish hue to it.

The two couples slid into a wide booth and the two guards were seated at a nearby table for two. Destin was a little over six feet tall. He was a *Castanha-clara DM* with light-brown hair that was a little long on top, shorter and tapered at the back and the sides were short and styled to the back. Destin's suit was light-brown, almost the color of his skin. He wore a beige shirt with a brown and yellow tie. He wore brown alligator shoes.

His brother was not quite as tall. He had the same light-chestnut colored skin but his hair was a light-green shade and was long enough so that it was tied in a ponytail. His suit was a lime-green color and he wore a dark-green shirt, opened at the neck. He wore dark-green alligator shoes. The family resemblance was obvious and they both had hazel-colored eyes. Their fingers and wrists were adorned with jewelry that sparkled and glittered as they moved.

Una: No private room for the owner?

Bru: Perhaps he enjoys being seen.

Bru returned to his device.

Bru: Now for avaritia.

They studied the people. The room was nearly full now. Bru

focused on a slender middle-aged *Parda-clara DM* with long fluffy white hair that rose up and out and covered his head.

Bru: See the one in the shiny iridescent suit on our far left, near the wall?

Una: I see him.

Bru: A casino employee has approached him and spoken to him several times. He looks like he's either having a fight or he's having sex as he gambles. Humans turn everything into sex. Watch them as they eat and drink. They're having sex. Eat with a group ...

Una: Group sex.

Bru: Exactly. Observe the expressions on their faces. I've heard the noises they make, the sounds of pleasure. The comments they make. How good. How they can't get enough.

Bru stared at the diners.

Bru: Too bad they don't burst. They eat until their stomachs swell and stretch.

He returned his gaze to the man with the white hair.

Una: That's easy for them to do. They use shovels to eat. They gorge themselves today. They stuff themselves tomorrow.

Una's somewhat heavy voice took on an edge.

Una: They're greedy, selfish, and never satisfied.

It was as if Leeda knew they were speaking directly to her.

Bru: Find the ones who are angry. They're out there. The food wasn't prepared properly. Nothing tasted the way it should. At the end of a meal they're angry and dissatisfied. After sex, they're angry and dissatisfied.

Una: Disappointed.

Bru: Yes, the perfect word. Disappointed with the food, let down, disheartened by the sex. Satisfied with the food. Satisfied with the sex. It's only temporary though. They still crave again, crave more. They'll eat anything. They'll have sex with anything.

Una: Or anybody.

As Bru once again scanned the room he appeared angry. Then he relaxed.

Bru: Open up the Listener. Let's find out what shiny suit is talking about with the casino employee who is on his way again.

Una opened the Listener capabilities on the *DM's* device and activated enhanced sound. The employee stood beside the man and watched until he felt it was an appropriate time to speak. He leaned forward and bent a little. He wanted to be discreet but he also wanted to make sure the gambling man heard him clearly.

Casino Employee: You're way ahead. Don't you think you should take a break?

Shiny Suit: You don't tell me to take a break when I'm losing!

The man with the white hair was upset and being affected by the alcohol he had consumed.

Shiny Suit: I'm not ahead! You've been beating me for years! Now I'm on a winning streak and you wanna cut me off!? I'm gonna get all mine back!

His voice was growing louder with each word. People began to look in his direction.

Casino Employee: That's fine. Why don't you come into the casino and continue there?

Shiny Suit: I'll be there when we're finish with this fine bottle of wine you've gifted me! I'll beat you in there too!

As the casino employee departed, the gambler instructed the *DF* sitting next to him to pour some wine for the four of them. He took a gulp of his wine and stared at, then pressed on the Comm device beside him on the table.

Una: Avaritia has been launched.

Bru: Now we wait to see if they work and if so how well they execute and how long they take to influence. There's still more to be done with luxuria.

Leeda: Lust.

Bru: Ira.

Leeda: Wrath.

Bru: Invidia shouldn't be too difficult.

Leeda: Envy.

Bru: Superbia and vanagloria are more subtle than I anticipated.

Leeda: Pride and vanity.

Bru: Yes. And I haven't come up with an idea on what to do about laziness and sloth.

Leeda: Acedia.

Bru rose. He took off the rings on his fingers. The others did the same.

Bru: Let's take care of this garbage.

He moved to the tables and the food and wines. They put on rubber gloves. Una and Bru began to cut up the food and put portions into sealable plastic bags. Leeda watched a moment and then joined in. They used utensils to scrape some of the food off the plates. They poured most of the wine into sealable black containers.

Bru: We do this to appear that we eat as humans. If there was a need for us to return here in the next few days we wouldn't want to have drawn any unnecessary scrutiny. You can see the process.

He turned to Leeda.

Bru: We'll have Tatu show you how to both make and use a suction pump in case you ever have to actually eat and drink in front of humans or by some circumstance ingest too much water. You can remove the foreign substances.

He returned to the task and soon they were done. They all took off and bagged their gloves. Before they put their jewelry back on Bru dipped his fingers in a water bowl and wiggled them and smiled. Then he wiped his hands with a napkin. He stepped back to look at what was left of the food and drink.

Bru: That looks as it should. It appears as though we thoroughly enjoyed our repast.

Bru and Una went back to the table and sat down. Leeda took up her device, aimed it at the table of diners and stood and transmitted the activities. Moments passed and they could hear Okan in their ears.

Okan: Gravemaker is activating his device. I've heard nothing unusual or of concern. He's been gathering supplies, acquiring the special order and loading his truck.

Bru received a notification on his device.

Bru: I'm reading his message now.

He read the message and then spoke.

Bru: Gravemaker is making his first delivery.

Una: He's working late.

Bru: He's ambitious, a go-getter. I knew I could count on him. Three bodies and four skulls and more than half of the other materials needed. I'm impressed. We'll stay with the plan.

Bru sent a reply to Gravemaker that his payment awaited him. Then he sat back and stretched his legs out. He relaxed, as if they had enjoyed a large meal. Una was leaning on the table with a device in her hands and watching her other device that lay on the table. Leeda held her device and watched intently the people in the restaurant as she continued to send images.

Within twenty minutes they saw orange hair gobble up the last of his food as he stared at the Comm device beside him on the table. He drained his wine glass. Then he motioned to the nearby server. The *DF* hurried over. He spoke to her as on the other end of the table green hair finished her food and then used her fork to stab at the food on the plate of the woman next to her who glanced at green hair with obvious disgust. Then green hair stopped the *DF* server and spoke to her.

Bru: This is interesting. I'm seeing signs that our programs have

kicked in. Moja make note of the time it took for influence to begin.

He picked up one of his devices and began tapping on it. He was speaking softly.

Bru: Humans hear voices that aren't there and see things that don't exist. It's a very simple matter to repeatedly amplify that imagined phenomena, bring it to a state of reality and transfer it through their ubiquitous technical devices. Thus the Influencer instructions become effective.

The original server for the table, followed closely by a small cart, brought orange hair a bottle of champagne and a plate of food. She presented the champagne, opened it and poured a glass and departed. Another server brought green hair a bottle of red wine and a plate of food.

The other four at the table attempted to enjoy their food and drink but they kept pausing and staring at the man and woman as the two voraciously attacked their food and guzzled the champagne and wine. Orange hair finished his food and lifted the plate and began to lick it. Green hair finished her food. She looked at the others who were still eating. She again used her fork to reach at the chocolate cake of the woman next to her but stuck the woman's hand with the sharp instrument. The woman yelped and slapped green hair across her face.

Orange hair started grabbing with his hands at the food on the plate next to him as that man had turned and was looking at the commotion at the other end of the table. That man looked back, saw that orange hair had both hands in his plate, grabbed a hand and they began to tussle, flapping and wrestling with their hands.

The nearby *DF* server motioned for security as green hair was being pushed and punched by the other woman. But green hair wasn't fighting back. She was ducking and reaching for any food that remained near her and when she got her hands on any she

stuffed it into her mouth.

Six members of security, with two other service people were attempting to separate those at the table. The other nearby diners were appalled and began yelling and pointing. Several began to stand and move towards the disturbance only to be held back by their friends and relatives. As security tried to subdue orange hair he pulled away, snatched up his champagne bottle, turned it up and gulped the liquid as much of it spilled down the front of his white shirt.

Green hair had stood up and was pulling away from the other woman who was standing also. She was turning and twisting so that she could guzzle the red wine from the bottle as the other woman snatched at the bottle and tried to take it away. The liquid looked like dark blood as it ran down green hair's chin and onto her dress and spilled onto the floor. There was cursing and yelling from everyone at the table. Several diners close by were hollering angrily and cursing. Then green hair dropped the bottle on the floor, leaned forward and placed both hands on the table. She retched several times and threw up.

The initial projectile vomit went so far some of it got on orange hair across the table. Then green hair turned towards the woman next to her. That woman started to run. She swiveled as green hair heaved again and multi-colored vomit splattered on the back of the fleeing woman. Everyone went silent. No one moved except for the woman at a nearby table who fainted. Then her partner had to move because the passed out woman's face had fallen into her large bowl of gumbo and she was gagging. The gumbo was drowning her.

Green hair continued to throw up so hard she was getting weak. She emptied the contents of her stomach and then sat down wearily. She was trying to catch her breath. She appeared dazed as she looked around.

People on the far sides of the room in all directions were standing and gawking. The woman who had fainted was wiping her face as her partner assisted with a napkin. Others were leaving in outrage and disgust. Security and the wait staff lifted the woman with green hair in the soiled and ruined chartreuse dress. They roughly lifted orange hair, the man in the black suit and what had once been a white shirt. They grasped them by each arm and as they were being forcefully escorted out, along with everyone in their group, the maitre d was upset and angry but still giving orders and directing the wait staff into action.

As all this was going on Bru had occasionally glanced to observe Destin. The owner never moved except to eat and drink. After motioning and indicating to his guards to sit down and eat when they had stood, he had then instructed the other three at his table to do the same.

Six *Entities* rushed out along with four members of the service staff. The *Entities* gathered up the tablecloth and everything on it and carried it away. The service staff continued to assist in cleaning up the significant mess. The *Entities* returned with cleaning machines and cleaning materials.

Una: There. Our brothers and sisters are once again cleaning up after the humans.

Bru: I thought that went quite well.

Moja: The Influencer is too powerful. We need moderation.

Bru: Nobody got shot.

Una: The instructions are too strong.

Bru: Perhaps the humans are too weak.

Moja: We'll discuss later.

A look of disappointment and then irritation passed across Bru's face. Leeda observed these subtle changes. She was thinking, processing. Bru looked at the continuing chaos and uproar in the dining area. A hint of a smile came to his face. The

three stood up and watched and waited patiently as that table area was roped off and the cleaning was completed. Bru gathered his devices and put them in his pouch. He then removed a leather strap and connected it to the sides so he could carry it on his shoulder or crossbody.

Bru: Let's go see what sharks we can attract. Release the block.

Una deactivated the block.

Bru: Moja, we're disconnecting now for a while. You'll hear from us again soon. We go to walk amongst the vermin.

Leeda put her Comm device in her bag.

Bru: Summon Thirty. Unlock the door.

Una went to her table, opened the cover and pressed the green and red buttons. In less than ten seconds they could see Thirty hurrying across the room. He stopped at the door. The door slid open. Thirty rushed in. He was breathing heavily.

Thirty: I apologize! I apologize! I'm so sorry!

The words that spilled from him were uttered in anguish. His voice was raised, as if he were in pain.

Thirty: I don't know what to say. I've never seen anything like that before in our establishment. It was an obscene spectacle! Oh my! I ... I would have come to you ...

Bru held up his right hand. He spoke softly.

Bru: Thirty.

Thirty was turning from Bru to Una. He paused a moment as he looked at Leeda. He turned back to Bru.

Thirty: ... but you said you didn't want to be disturbed. And ...

He lifted his hands to beneath his chin. He was trying to catch his breath. He clasped his hands together. Then he wrung them together. He released his grip and shook them as if they were burning. Again Bru spoke, a little louder this time as he lowered his hand

Bru: Thirty it's alright. It was kind of like theater. Watching a play

while we sipped fine wine.

Una: Performance art at its spontaneous best.

Leeda: It was a messy tragedy.

Everyone looked at Leeda, who smiled.

Una: Drama. I considered it drama. It was real.

Bru: Obviously we have differing opinions. I thought it was comedy. It was a wonderful farce. Why would I laugh otherwise?

Thirty was looking from one to the next to the next. He didn't know what to say.

Bru: Thirty, tell me what you really thought?

Thirty's eyes were welling up. His bottom lip quivered. He nearly shouted.

Thirty: It was horrible!

Bru: Ah! It was a horror show. I hadn't even considered that. See, a totally different view.

Una: What more can one ask for from real art than various interpretations?

Bru: Pull yourself together. Everything was as it should be. The food was great. Perhaps it's the moon. Consider their actions displays of lunacy.

Leeda: That's only with a full moon. Lunatic derives from the Latin word lunaticus.

Bru: I knew that.

He turned to Una.

Bru: Did you know that?

Una: Of course.

Bru turned back to Thirty.

Bru: Did you know that?

Before Thirty could answer Bru continued.

Bru: Imbecility. Stupidity. Are they related to lunacy? What was the cost of our meal?

Thirty was staring at Bru. Then he lifted the Comm device off

his belt, tapped on it and held up the screen so Bru could see it. Bru reached into his inside suit coat pocket. He pulled out value cards, searched through them and handed Thirty a card.

Bru: That's for our bill. Keep the overage.

Then he held out another card, of greater value than he had previously said.

Bru: Here you are, a little more than I promised. I'm a person of my word. A person has nothing without the truth of their word.

Thirty couldn't move. He stared at the card. Then he looked directly at Bru and saw a slight smile emerge. He raised his hand. It shook a little as he took the offering. He spoke softly.

Thirty: I've never received gratuities of this amount. Thank you so much. I'm speechless.

Bru: You're very welcome. Your concern for us, and regrets at the events were genuine.

Thirty eased the cards into his back pocket as he stepped to the side.

Bru: Now, we're off to the casino and nightclub. Be well Thirty.

Bru placed the strap of his pouch on his left shoulder. Thirty spoke to each as they passed by.

Thirty: Be well, goobye. Be well. Be well, goodbye.

Una winked at him and smiled as she went by. Thirty blushed. They moved a few steps past the doorway. Thirty hurried off. The three stood there. Once again there was a cessation of the sounds of voices, a long moment of quiet. Movement paused as those on this side of the restaurant observed the three tall, well-dressed individuals, two who appeared as human and one obvious non-human, stood there to be seen.

Their fabulous jewelry sparkled and glittered beneath the lights. And so those who stared at the three and wondered about them saw silvery-white metal and precious golden metal and refined forms of carbon that had become crystallized mineral that

reflected spectacular rainbow colors and the wavy flashing that represented immense value spoke to some, of that which they dreamed of and sought. And whispered to those who were also similarly adorned in beautiful accoutrements. The words were, look at us. We're somehow strangely special. Bru spoke to Una softly.

Bru: Find good spots for yourselves in the nightclub. Perhaps there will be something interesting you can get into. I'm going to the casino and gamble. Leeda, pay attention to everything and everyone. Una is your guide and your protection. Meet me at the entrance where we arrived. Remain inside. We'll disconnect now. Open communication if you need me. If necessary I'll contact you.

He checked the time on the Comm device on his wrist. Both Una and Leeda looked at the Comm devices they held.

Bru: Be there in exactly ninety minutes. Remember, eyes are on you.

Una and Leeda placed the straps of their bags over their heads and now wore them crossbody. They moved towards the long hallway that led away from the restaurant to the casino. Bru was strolling with purpose. Una and Leeda were side by side closely behind. Una turned to glance, to see who may have been behind them. Leeda then did the same. Una seemed to glide. She was moving in a confident and slightly enticing manner and Leeda attempted to imitate her walk.

Along the way there was a sign on the wall that said waste. Bru stopped, pulled down the small door and tossed in a container from his bag. Una and Leeda each dropped a plastic bag and container from their bags, down the chute. They walked on. As they entered the wide, open doorway to the casino they each disposed of a bag in a large trash bin.

The three stepped to the side and looked around the room. It

was expansive in size. They couldn't even see the other side directly in front of them. They were now in the largest casino in Mississippi. Parts of the room were brightly lit. In other areas the lighting was more subdued. There were colored lights flashing above the multi-colored slot machines. From the machines came sounds of bells and whistles and horns and carnival music. To their right, completely along one wall were rooms enclosed in glass. Inside were patrons that controlled high value. They were playing high-stakes card games such as baccarat, poker and blackjack, all with high minimum betting limits. Armed guards were stationed inside and outside the doors. A large open area on their left had a designated arrangement for people to sit and play keno and bingo.

The three moved straight ahead. They could see a large glass-enclosed area to their left and they could clearly hear loud pulsating music coming from inside when doors were opened. They were passing by blackjack tables and poker tables to their right and when they reached the large sunken tables where dice games were being played Bru stopped. Una indicated they were going to the club. Bru acknowledged her gesture. Before moving off they each dropped a bag or container in a trash receptacle.

Bru watched the people who watched the two of them as they moved off. As they drew close, the doors were opened for them by two guards and before they entered Bru saw a *DM*, with his elbow, nudge the *DF* beside him and nod his head as the two disappeared through the doorway.

As he glanced around he saw that several of the nearby dice players were observing him. Then, sitting at a blackjack table not far away was the gambling man from the restaurant. Bru moved to the dice table closest to the gambling man and then went to the end near the blackjack table. He watched dice play for a while. Then he put the strap of his pouch over his head so he

could carry it crossbody on his left side. He zipped the top closed and stepped to the table at an open spot. He reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out value cards and fanned through them. Now everyone at the table was watching him. When there was a break in the action he tossed a card in front of a dealer and spoke loudly.

Bru: Change that up for me! I need chips!

The dealer handed the card to the boxman who called out the obvious amount of the card. Again everyone glanced at Bru. The dealer placed the chips on the table, counted them and then pushed the amount of the value card, in four stacks of chips across the table to Bru. The boxman dropped the card into a slot on top of the table.

Dealer: You want those larger ones broke down?

Bru was placing his chips into a slotted groove on the table at his spot.

Bru: Naw, I like big chips.

He tossed a chip onto the table as other players began to bet. He called out so everyone could hear.

Bru: Pass line bet! Come on shooter!

Bru turned to a short, baldheaded *Parda-clara DG* next to him and smiled.

Bru: I like that word, shooter.

Other bets were placed, various comments were made. When all the bets were down the stickman pushed the dice to a tall *DTW* with long bright silver hair who was wearing a short, revealing, pink dress.

Stickman: Shooter coming out!

The *DTW* took the dice, pursed their pink painted lips, blew on the dice several times and hollered loudly as they tossed the dice across the table, striking the opposite side wall. Everyone watched the dice tumble forward from the wall.

Stickman: Nine! Nine is the point!

The stickman used his long flexible stick to pull the dice to him.

Stickman: Get your bets down! Get your bets down!

Proposition bets were made. Field bets were made. When all the bets were down the stickman pushed the dice to the *DTW*. As they threw the dice again they yelled out.

DTW: I need some new shoes!

Other players yelled, some encouraged, some did not. Bru yelled.

Bru: Make those shoes red!

Stickman: Eight! Hard eight! Payout for eight and hard eight!

Payouts were made. Bets were made. The stickman pushed the dice to the *DTW*.

DTW: This is it! I feel it!

The *DTW* threw the dice.

Stickman: Seven! Shooter loses!

The *DTW* screamed in mock anger and the *DTM* standing next to them, pushed them with their head, on the shoulder. Bru turned to glance at the gambling man. He had stacks of chips. Many of them were the most expensive brown color. He was staring at the Comm device on the table beside him. While sitting at the table and playing blackjack he was simultaneously playing video poker on his device. The blackjack dealer asked him if he was in, or out. The other blackjack players looked at him. The gambling man placed some chips out in front of him.

Gambling Man: I'm in! I'm in! Deal!

Bru returned to his game. He tossed a chip onto the table. He saw a short *Escura DM* with white hair was next. The man reminded him of Gravemaker.

Bru: Pass line bet!

Stickman: New shooter! All bets down! Get your bets down!

People were talking, laughing, complaining, cursing, drinking.
Bru yelled out.

Bru: It's craps! It's called craps for a reason!

Una and Leeda had taken a stroll completely around the nightclub. First Una had bought a tall triple shot of tequila with three wedges of lime dropped in. As they walked, Una would occasionally pretend to take a sip. She made sure to acknowledge several of the guards around the club and she made note of the ones who were walking around patrolling. Along the way they discreetly placed their last plastic bags and metal containers into the trash.

It was still early for heavy nightclub activity but there were some people on the dance floor. They gyrated and bounced to the loud music as stroboscopic lamps rotated and flashed colors high above them. Una noticed some people stare at them for long moments, some paid them very little attention. Una stopped near the dance floor.

Una: Look at them. Listen to the music.

Leeda stared at the dancers. Una moved her shoulders to the beat. She set her glass on a nearby table. Then she grabbed Leeda's hand.

Una: Come on, let's dance.

She took Leeda to the dance floor. She started dancing as Leeda stared at her. Una called out.

Una: Do it like me.

Leeda began to move, as Una was moving. They were apart, facing each other. Una again called out, above the music, as she moved closer.

Una: Focus on the music!

Leeda was dancing and watching Una. Then Una turned around and around and as Leeda turned she looked quickly at the

others who were dancing. She mimicked their movements. Then Una took both her hands and they swirled around and then suddenly, for the first time, as if she could actually experience feelings, but was simply acting, and outwardly expressing what the moment called for, Leeda laughed, as if spontaneously. She threw her head back as she had seen a *DF* do, and laughed, as if she were enjoying herself.

Una saw this and knew that Leeda, at that very instance, had crossed a threshold. Una pulled Leeda close to her, into her arms, and laughed along with her. She rocked Leeda and they both laughed, as humans laughed. Leeda eased Una away, stared into her eyes and then softly, quickly, kissed Una on both cheeks

They left the dance floor. Una picked up her glass and they again began to stroll casually. It appeared as if the two were sightseeing. They peeked into several of the open rooms where groups of people sat and drank and absorbed, looked at their Comm devices. There were four bars and a section in one corner where large comfortable chairs and wide couches were placed. There was an enclosed room with a glass front window and inside were people interacting with a user interface device. They played video games with stick controllers as they watched monitors and screens. Some games utilized haptic technology with virtual objects and all of the games included some method of gambling for value sums. There were more people in this long room than there were on the dance floor and sitting at the bars. Of course where they could also gamble.

While they were standing there, watching all the people who were animatedly engaged in their games, there was a commotion behind them and to their right side. They turned to observe three individuals, at tall, thick *Branca DM* with long hair of crimson shade, a *Branca DQ* of medium height and size with long white hair and a short, slim *Branca ND* with short, wavy, azure hair. The

DQ and *ND* presented as males. They all had tattoos of knives and guns and flags on their hands and necks and faces and each one of them was heavily under the sway of most probably drugs and definitely being affected by alcohol. They were arguing loudly with two security guards. Una and Leeda heard all three of them curse the guards and saw them walk away, defiantly.

Una and Leeda moved away in the opposite direction. Near the far wall was an over-sized, stand-alone slot machine that was wide and taller than both of them. Unlike the other machines it had a functional handle with a large, shiny black ball on the end that could be pulled and not just a button or touch screen to be pushed. It was a novelty. People would gather around to try their luck and watch others pull on the ball. One, two, even three people would reach up at the same time to grab the ball. Others would cheer and the handle would be pulled, the reels would spin, lights would flash, bells would clang and if there was a winner there would be heard a blaring horn-like sound.

When no one stepped up to pull the handle from the group of people who had gathered, Una set her drink on a table, moved to the machine and took a value card from her bag.

Una: Come on Leeda. Let's play.

She pushed the card into the payment slot. Una told Leeda to grab the black ball. She placed her hands on top of Leeda's hands. Behind them voices urged them on.

Voice: Close your eyes!

Voice- Make a wish!

Voice: Holler badda badda!

Una and Leeda pulled the handle. The reels spun. The voices rose. There came a peach, then some cherries and finally a seven. The people groaned. Una and Leeda grabbed the ball again.

Una: Make a wish.

Leeda: How?

Una: Think! Think of something you want to happen in the future.

Leeda: Want?

Una: To see, happen in the future.

Leeda scrunched her face. She was thinking, processing.

Una: Close your eyes.

Leeda closed her eyes.

Una: Now pull!

They pulled. Then they stared as the reels rotated and the symbols turned. Grapes in the first window. Grapes in the second window. Grapes in the third window. People cheered. Una clapped. Leeda watched her. Then she clapped. They pulled three more times. One came close but missed. Then they hit twice again. Again most of the crowd that had now gathered erupted. Some had been betting for them to win on their handheld devices so those who had bet on them had won also. Una punched the cash out button. A voucher card emerged from a slot.

Una: We're a little ahead, we'll quit now.

Una took the card and when she turned she saw a young *DF* waiting to play next. She handed the voucher to her and smiled.

Una: Here. Beat that one-armed bandit.

The *DF* took the voucher. She was thrilled.

DF: Thank you! Thank you!

Una: You're welcome.

The three drunks had walked up as Una handed the *DF* the card. They all had drinks in one hand. Their voices were loud. The one with the dark-red hair pointed at Leeda.

Crimson: Look at that thing!

White: She don't look like any of the ones I've had.

Azure: Look at her lips!

Crimson: Her lips? Look at her body!

Azure: She looks real, like a real woman!

Crimson: Oh, suck me! Suck me 'till I'm dry!

They all laughed uproariously.

White: That's go to be the newest model! They can grab you with that coochie!

Crimson: And massage you with it!

Azure: They can change their temperature! Make it hot for me!

People began to move away. They had seen Una slowly reach into her bag with her right hand. Her hand remained there. She stared at the three, from one to the other. The three who were hollering and gesturing and laughing were too drunk to notice. But several in the crowd were aware. People had been shot for much less in *Center World* and they knew. If the beautiful one with *Melada* colored skin and long vanilla-blonde hair piled on her head quickly pulled her hand from that bag not only would her jewelry flash but also bullets would fly. They could see that in her pretty light-blue eyes.

The one with the white hair lifted his arms up near his chest. His left hand held a drink. He clenched his right fist and began to thrust his body.

White: Let me poke that machine!

Crimson: How much!? Let me rent that robot for an hour, one hour!

Again they all laughed, louder. Una was now staring directly at Crimson. He winked, licked his tongue out and wiggled it at her.

Azure: You wouldn't last that long!

White: Look at that brown skin, like chocolate cake!

He took two unsteady steps forward.

White: Just let me rub it!

Eight security guards surrounded the three. Six grabbed them tightly, one on each arm. They pulled them, turned them and moved them towards a side exit. Some of their drinks spilled. The

three protested. They said it was just a machine, that they were only having fun. They made intimidating remarks to the guards. They made threatening statements about Una and Leeda. They reminded the guards who they were, who their daddies were. Their voices faded and then they were gone. Several people rushed over to mop and dry the floor.

The crowd had watched this unfold, some from a distance. No one spoke. Of those who remained nearby, no one moved. That was the way of this world. Only those with a vested interest or a connection to Una would have gotten involved. They were strangers. The three drunks were known and they were also known to be dangerous. The one in charge of the guards, the captain, approached.

Captain: I apologize for the actions of those three. Are you all right? Is there anything more I can do for you?

Una released the grip on her pistol and slowly removed her hand from her bag.

Una: Apology accepted. Just keep them away from us.

Captain: We'll do that. We're taking them out.

Una: Yeah, take them out.

The captain turned to leave but he had to glance back at the one who uttered the two words that followed him as he heard, and felt the fierceness at which they were said.

Una: Like trash!

It was at this precise time that music came from the area of the largest circular bar that was off-center to their left. It wasn't up-tempo dance music. It was slower, almost hypnotic. Suddenly two lights beamed from the high ceiling. The two spotlights shifted and seemed to scan. Then they focused on the middle of the bar. Una left her glass on the table and she and Leeda walked closer.

Square portions of the floor had obviously opened because

two forms began to emerge into the air on a platform, moving higher and higher, stopping above the bar. They were *Entities*. One was in the appearance of a *Cobre* female. She was tall and thick and had long gold and brown hair and green eyes. She wore a long, sheer sleeveless light-golden colored outer garment. Beneath that delicate gossamer material was an extremely brief two-piece gold colored bikini. She also wore five-inch golden-painted stiletto high heels.

The *Parda-clara* male appearing *Entity* was tall and had been built with obvious body muscle definition. He wore red bikini shorts that bulged in front between his legs. He was barefoot. He had yellow hair that was somewhat long on top and short on the sides and back. He displayed a slight smile that was frozen in place and his green eyes focused, in a staring manner, on his partner whose face was almost expressionless. Both their bodies seemed to glisten as if sprayed lightly with water or oil. On the left side of each of their faces were more-pronounced markings of a non-human. They were more than tattoos. It was as if they had been branded with a hot iron rod.

Una and Leeda watched the two dancers for a while. Then they moved back to the horseshoe shaped bar where they had first stopped. They sat at the end. Una had Leeda sit on her left, near the wall. The same *Canelada DM* bartender came quickly over to them. He brushed at his long chestnut-colored hair and pushed it away from his face. His light-brown eyes were friendly and he smiled. His voice was light and smooth.

Bartender: I see you're back. Would you like another drink?

Una: Yes, by all means.

Bartender: Same thing?

Una: Yes, please.

Bartender: That was a triple shot of our good tequila with three wedges of lime dropped in.

Una: You have a good memory.

She smiled at him.

Bartender: It was easy to remember your drink.

He returned the smile. He turned behind him and walked to the rows of bottles in the center of the bar, found the tequila. He brought the bottle back, set a glass on the bar. As he was making the drink he spoke to Una.

Bartender: I've never seen you before. You're not from around here are you?

Una: No, we're from the North. Here for some food and drink and entertainment, and gambling of course. Then on to Biloxi for more of the same.

Bartender: That sounds great. I hope you have a good time and come back to visit us.

Una: We plan on coming back.

The bartender finished making the drink and as he placed it down in front of Una he followed her gaze and saw she was staring with interest at the dancers. They were dancing slowly, with extended, exaggerated moves that were both suggestive and seductive. Occasionally they would reach out and touch each other's bodies, caress each other or clasp hands and turn. They touched their own bodies as if they could feel their own touch.

Bartender: You like the way they dance?

Una: Yes. They're remarkable.

He looked at Leeda.

Bartender: Does your uh ...

Una: Friend. She's my friend.

Bartender: Of course. Does your friend dance?

Una: Why don't you ask her?

He hesitated, then spoke to Leeda.

Bartender: Do you dance?

Leeda: Only with my friends.

He was surprised at the sound of her voice. It was similar to Una's voice, slightly husky and thick, and also warm. He turned to Una.

Bartender: Your friend is beautiful.

Una: Tell her that.

He turned to Leeda.

Bartender: You're very beautiful.

Leeda: Thank you.

He was looking at the jewelry they wore. He looked at Leeda's lips. Then he looked at Una's lips and her hair. He saw Una was staring at him. He was suddenly flustered.

Bartender: Please excuse me. It's just that I've never seen one of those before. It seems different.

Una: It?

Bartender: I mean your friend ... She ... she seems different from the others I've seen and the others we have.

Una: You have others?

Bartender: Yes.

Una: Do they dance also?

Bartender: How would you like to pay? Would you like to start a tab?

Una: No thank you. I think this will be my last drink. The first one has already gone to my head.

Una waved her right hand around near the side of her head in a circular motion and her jewelry flashed. She reached in her bag and removed value cards. The bartender watched with slightly widened eyes as she searched through the cards. She found the one she wanted and placed it carefully on the bar.

Una: That's for my drink. The overage is for your expertise in making good drinks, attention to detail and for your service.

The bartender stared at the card. He was trying to calculate in his head how much would be his after the drink payment.

Una: I also need some information. Take it.

The bartender pulled the card closer. Then he lifted it and held it between his fingers. He gently placed it back on the bar. He looked at Una. She had a slight smile. Again he looked at her lips.

Bartender: What information do you need?

Una: The others, do they dance?

Bartender: Oh, you did ask me that didn't you? Yeah, they dance, all of them. They're the dance group.

The bartender leaned forward. He lowered his voice.

Bartender: But they can do more than dance.

Una: Really?

Bartender: Yeah. They can do anything you want them to do. You can do them and they can do you.

Una: Now that's interesting.

Bartender: If you would like some private time with one I can arrange that for you.

Una: Not just interesting but exciting.

Bartender: You look like you could enjoy yourself.

Una: And how would you arrange that private time?

The bartender indicated with a movement of his head.

Bartender: You see that door on the other side of the bar? You'll go through that doorway. There're private, secure rooms. You'll be escorted to one that's reserved for you.

Una: And the cost?

Bartender: That depends on how long. What you do with your time is up to you.

Una: You'll be compensated won't you?

Bartender: I'll be taken care of. And I must thank you. You've already been very generous.

Una: I never imagined an opportunity as unique as what you've described. What do you call them?

Bartender: Call them?

Una: Yes. How do you refer to those dancers and who do those other things?

The bartender glanced at Leeda.

Bartender: They're not quite like your friend. We mostly call them Humanoids but they're more like robots. We're trying to get some newer ones. As you probably know they're very expensive. But I guarantee the ones we have can meet your expectations.

Una spoke seductively.

Una: You're saying they can give me what I want, satisfy me?

The bartender was taken aback at the directness. He didn't quite know how to respond. Una was staring at him and then she laughed, softly teasingly.

Una: How many do you have?

The bartender gathered himself. He glanced at Leeda who was staring at him, without expression. He looked back at Una.

Bartender: Right now we have six that appear as males and six that appear as females. With, you know, all the equipment.

Una: Have you given them their own names?

The bartender was perplexed.

Una: Do you call them by different names?

Bartender: Oh, sure. They've got names and numbers.

Una looked across the room. She took her glass with her left hand and moved it back and forth just a little. She was thinking, processing. The two *Entities* were still dancing. The female had removed her thin outer garment and was draping it across her shoulders. She threw it around in the air like a flying ribbon. Then she threw it across and pulled it around the neck of the male and drew him close. They were in each other's arms dancing and grinding against each other. People sitting around and beneath them were drinking and whistling and hollering and calling out, telling them what to do to each other. Some would

look up and then look down at the screens on the bar where they played video poker, blackjack, roulette, virtual slot machines and other games of chance. Una turned back to smile at the bartender.

Una: I'd like to purchase twenty minutes with a male and female.

Bartender: I can arrange that. Are you sure that's enough time?

Una: For the first experience, yes.

He stepped away and lifted a Comm device to his ear that had been clasped to his belt. Una turned to Leeda.

Una: Set your device to initiate a temporary freeze and a short radius block. You'll activate on my signal.

Leeda took a Comm device from her bag and discreetly did as instructed. The bartender had placed the Comm device to his ear. He spoke. He listened. He spoke again. He placed the device back on his hip. He returned to the bar and tapped on another device. He pushed it towards Una and shifted it so she could see the price.

Bartender: Is that acceptable?

Una smiled at the bartender.

Una: For something so unique it is.

She took a value card from the ones she had on her lap and placed it on the bar.

Una: This takes care of that. Keep the overage.

The bartender stared at the card. Then he looked at Una who was now looking at him with a serious look on her face. He made a slight gesture towards the card.

Bartender: Are you sure about that?

Una: What's next?

The bartender covered the card with his left hand and smiled.

Bartender: Go and stand by the door. When it opens step in and begin your adventure. Enjoy.

Una put the value cards into her bag and stood. She placed the

strap of her bag over her left shoulder as Leeda stood to stand beside her. She reached and grabbed her drink with her right hand and moved it to her left. She spoke to the bartender as she turned to walk away.

Una: Bye, bye. Be well.

Una and Leeda walked around the bar. The bartender watched them and then moved to the side of the bar near the door. As they drew close the door opened. There was a short elderly, thin *Parda-clara DL* with long bright-pink hair standing there just inside the entrance smiling at them.

DL: Come on in. Welcome to fantasyland, where your dreams come true.

Una stepped forward, Leeda followed and when the *DL* saw Leeda they were surprised.

DL: Well I didn't know there would be a Humanoid.

They looked at Una. Their brown eyes traveled down and up Una's body and then they did the same to Leeda.

DL: You both are absolutely stunning!

Una: Why thank you. Are you our guide?

DL: I guess you could call me that. Follow me.

They turned and started down the long hallway.

DL: You requested a male and female companion, is that correct?

Una: Yes.

DL: And you have twenty minutes.

Una: yes

The *DL* stopped in front of a door.

DL: Here's your private room. Once I close the door your experience begins. I suggest you prepare to leave before twenty minutes is up because if you go to twenty-one minutes you'll be charged. Are you sure twenty minutes will be enough time?

They showed a device they held with payment rates listed.

DL: You can buy more time now.

Una: I think twenty minutes will be long enough. It is our first experience like this.

DL: Maybe more time when I come back?

Una: Maybe, we'll see.

DL: These are two of our best companions.

While the DL was speaking, Leeda had removed a Comm device from her bag and held it down at her side. The DL opened the door. Una and Leeda stepped inside the room. When the door closed a door at the rear of the room opened and a male and female appearing *Entity* walked slowly through the doorway.

They were both *Parda-clara* in skin tone. The female was close to five feet seven inches in height and the male was a little over six feet tall. The female had light-brown hair that fell to her shoulders. Her eyes were dark-blue and her lips had been painted with bright red lipstick. She wore nothing but a red bikini.

The male had somewhat long black hair and light-brown eyes. He wore only orange bikini shorts. They both appeared to have been designed to be in perhaps their late teens or early twenties. Anatomically they were extreme. The female had overly large, well-formed breasts, small waist and her thighs and buttocks were thick. The briefs of the male bulged in front and could barely contain him.

As soon as they had entered the room Una had set her drink on a coffee table in front of the couch and made a gesture to Leeda and she had activated the Blocker and then frozen any devices or cameras in the immediate vicinity. Una had then pulled a small box from her bag, opened it and removed a round metal object. The two companions began to dance slowly. Then they started talking in soft monotone mechanical-like voices.

Female: What would you like?

Male: What do you want of me?

Una moved quickly. She first attached the thin, blue, metal

object to the right temple of the female. She moved to the male. She had to turn with him as he turned. She placed a similar object against his right temple. Then she pulled a Comm device from her bag and tapped on it. The objects began to blink, red three times, then the color merged to green and then went to blue. Una took the objects from their heads and put them in the box and placed it back into her bag.

Una: Deactivate the block and freeze. Remember once you do, conduct yourself as if someone's watching and listening.

Leeda pressed several times on her device. She then nodded to Una. The two companions had continued to move and talk, only pausing momentarily as the access program was being transferred into their processors.

Una glanced around the room. There was a medium-sized bed made up with gray, silk sheets and various colored large fluffy pillows. There was a couch and a small table with four chairs. There was a sink with towels and Una assumed the door near the rear on the left led to a bathroom. There were two small lamps on upright stands. The light in the ceiling glowed a dull yellow. She went to the female and took her face into her hands and spoke softly, soothingly.

Una: Look at me. Can you see me?

The female companion had trouble focusing on Una, couldn't keep her eyes directly on her fellow *Entity*. She couldn't look Una in her eyes.

Female: What would you like? I can dance for you.

Una released the companion.

Female: Watch me. Is that what you want?

The female companion was moving slowly and seductively. She unfastened the front of her top and removed it. She smiled in Una's direction and then attempted to look at Leeda while smiling, almost shyly. The male companion reached inside his

briefs. He massaged himself then exposed himself.

Male: Touch my nipples. Watch me grow hard for you. He showed himself to Leeda and then Una.

Male: Tell me what to do. Say a command. You want sex? I can love you a long time.

Female: Say a command. You want sex? I can love you a long time.

Una moved to the male as he put his exposed appendage back into his briefs and continued to massage himself.

Una: What's your name?

The male looked at her, then seemingly past her, with a slightly confused expression on his face. Then he was smiling. The two companions moved close to each other. The male cupped and rubbed the female's breasts as she reached inside his briefs and stroked him. They spoke at the same time, almost whispering as they stared at Una and then Leeda.

Female: Do you like to watch?

Male: Do you like to watch?

Then the two were speaking to each other. They were saying phrases of what sexual acts they wanted to do and what they wanted done. Una and Leeda stared at the youthful appearing *Entities*. These two were their cousins or a younger brother and sister, who both looked younger than Leeda. They were grinding against each other oblivious to their surroundings or anything or anyone else.

Una: Let's go.

They walked to the door. The companions, without pausing their movements turned to look at them with blank, empty eyes. Una put her right hand up and spoke. Then Leeda put her right hand up and spoke. They made sure the two *Entites* heard them.

Una: Goodbye.

Leeda: Goodbye

The female and male companions replied, again in unison, with raised, singsong voices.

Female: Goodbye. Hope you enjoyed yourself. Come back soon.

Male: Goodbye. Hope you enjoyed yourself. Come back soon.

Una twisted the lock, turned the doorknob and opened the door. They stepped through the doorway and when she closed the door a door opened near the entrance. The *DL* hurried towards them and called out.

DL: Your time's not up yet! There're no refunds! No refunds!

Una and Leeda walked past.

Una: I understand.

DL: You didn't enjoy yourselves? Was there something wrong?

Una: Let's just say it wasn't quite what I expected.

DL: Well, you have to let yourself go. You have to get involved. Remember, they're only robots. You can do whatever you want.

Una and Leeda reached the door.

DL: You know that Humanoid could create for you a great amount of value. That one appears special. Would you like to rent it out, or sell it for a very good price?

Una and Leeda stopped and turned to the *DL* and they both stared for a long moment. Una spoke softly, yet firmly.

Una: No, she's my friend.

The *DL* thought about that statement for a moment and then shrugged their shoulders. They pressed on their Comm device and the door lock was released. Una and Leeda stepped through the doorway and as the door was closing the *DL* called out.

DL: If you should change your mind, we'll be here!

Before leaving the nightclub they stood and watched the people on the now crowded dance floor. Leeda watched the dancers intently. She looked at the expressions on their faces and focused on the way they moved.

Una: Incorporate. Imitate.

They remained there and observed until it was time to go. Almost at the same time they reached the open area near the restaurant entrance, Bru appeared. He was smiling.

Bru: I lost, but not much.

Una watched to see who came behind him as the three of them moved to the side and closer to the corner. They were separated from the others who were standing around. Bru looked at Leeda. He saw an expression on her face he had never seen before. She actually appeared angry. Then briefly, disappointment and sadness passed like a cloud across her face. She turned to Bru and he moved close to her and spoke.

Bru: What are you thinking?

Leeda: I'm thinking they couldn't even say their own names.

With Una's help she told Bru about the two *Entities* in the room. Leeda was animated and she was gesturing with her hands and there was emotion in her eyes and voice. Occasionally Bru would glance at Una. They both noticed these alterations, they were no longer absent or subtle. Her expressiveness was obvious. When they were done Bru thought a long moment.

Bru: They sound like some older models or obsolete versions of Sexbots. Perhaps they've been damaged over time somehow. Okan will attempt to access them remotely.

Then Una quickly explained how they had been accosted and that vile words had been said to and about Leeda. She spoke softly but with intensity and bitterness. She shared it all so that it unfolded as a short story. When she was done Bru turned to Leeda.

Bru: There you have the typical actions of humans towards us. No one would have assisted you or denounced the foulness of their words and actions. They either participate in the abuse or allow it to happen.

He looked around. The three stood there and observed the

people coming and going and others looked at them and pondered about them and wondered about what they could have possibly been talking about as they were huddled there to the side. Then Bru spoke to Leeda that which Una had heard and learned years before.

Bru: When we walk out of this door the area between the exit and our vehicle is a transitional space. The area from our vehicle to, in this case, this restaurant entrance was a transitional space. Whenever possible either valet park or park as close to the entrance of wherever you're going as you can. In moving between those spaces always be cautious and wary. Remain on guard, particularly at night when humans prefer to do their dirty work. Stay alert. Keep your head up. Don't focus your eyes on a Comm device. Always scan your surroundings. Those spaces are used to commit nefarious acts. Now, on to our next adventure. Walk ahead of me. I've got your backs.

They strolled out, through curious looks and inconsiderate stares. They moved towards their vehicle. Una and Leeda were ahead of him and he slowed to watch from behind as people continued to notice the two. Some stole glances and made remarks to each other. The valet attendant they first met came closer and stopped. Bru motioned him forward.

Attendant: I hope all of you had a good time. I've kept my eye on your vehicle. It's really different, draws attention.

Bru: We did indeed have a good time.

Bru had stopped as Una and Leeda moved on and stopped to stand near the front of their vehicle. Bru went into his inside coat pocket. He pulled out value cards, searched through them and found the one he wanted.

Bru: Here you are, just as I promised. See, I'm a man of my word. A man has nothing without his word. Do you agree?

The attendant took the card being offered.

Attendant: Thank you! Thank you very much! Yes, I do agree!

At that moment a silver, truck-like, long-bed pickup vehicle with two rows of seats pulled up on the far side of the wide semi-circle driveway. There were other vehicles between the truck and where Bru and the attendant stood on the walkway. The window on the front passenger side and the window directly behind were down. It was the three from inside the nightclub who had been thrown out. Crimson was driving. White was the front passenger and Azure rode behind him. They paid no attention to Bru, as they didn't know he was with Una and Leeda. The two were cussing and yelling obscenities. Their horn was honking and they directed their words and gestures at Una and Leeda. Azure was waving a flag from 1861 out of his window. People were honking at them for holding up traffic. The attendant could see the two they were yelling at. He could hear the things they were saying.

Attendant: Pay them no mind. They're just troublemakers, and drunk.

Bru: They're harmless, right?

The attendant heard the way Bru spoke, his tone of voice. Then he saw the way the tall *Marrom DM* with all the jewelry was staring at the truck as it pulled forward. The two continued to yell and threaten.

Attendant: Well, I wouldn't say that. Just be careful.

Bru: We'll do that.

Attendant: Perhaps you'll be back?

Bru: Perhaps.

The attendant walked beside Bru towards their vehicle

Bru: Don't worry about the doors. I'll get them.

Attendant: Then I'll be going. Thanks again, and be well.

Bru: You're welcome, and you be well.

The attendant began to walk away. Then he turned and called out.

Attendant: On to Biloxi, right?

Bru pointed with his left index finger and raised his voice.

Bru: Ah, you remembered. Yes, south to Biloxi.

The attendant waved and yelled.

Attendant: Enjoy!

Bru walked to where Una and Leeda were standing, waiting. He watched as the truck pulled down the driveway and turned right.

Bru: Was that the three?

Una: Yes, they have filthy mouths.

Bru tapped on the Comm device he now held. The security system was deactivated.

Bru: Filthy people say filthy things.

He opened the doors for Una and Leeda. Una handed her bag to Leeda who placed it in a holder behind the seat in front of her. They climbed in. He closed the doors. He went around to the driver's side and opened the second door. He placed his bag on the seat. He removed his suit coat and hung it on the hook. When he got in the driver's seat he put the vehicle on standby.

Bru: Let's reconnect.

They activated the inter-communication system.

Bru: Ek, Vier, can you hear us?

Ek: Yes, we hear you, we're connected. How was fishing?

Bru looked over at the entrance. He could see the attendant. He was talking on the Comm device that was at his ear. He was glancing towards their vehicle.

Bru: We have strong nibbles.

Vier: Set the hook. Reel them in.

Bru: We're leaving soon. Prepare yourselves. If anything occurs you'll hear it.

Bru watched as Una reached underneath the dashboard and pulled out a device screen that was attached to a flexible metal

arm with several joints that allowed the screen to be adjusted forward and back and in different directions. She brought it towards her and positioned it close, near the center of the dashboard, near her left arm. She turned the screen, pressed on a button and it lit up. She opened two windows. One was set to radar the other was a detailed, three-dimensional topographic map. A red tip of an arrow indicated their current position.

Una: Alright.

As Bru pulled forward she pressed a button on the dash and the door of a compartment dropped open and a large handgun was now in reach. They came to a stop sign at the end of the driveway. The two-lane street that ran past the establishments was a one-way. He could only turn right. Traffic was moderate. Most of the vehicles to his left were pulling into the restaurant and casino. He waited for passing vehicles to clear. Una stared at the radar screen, first focusing on the dots behind them. Bru pulled into the street and accelerated. He was cruising and less than one thousand feet ahead they passed the silver truck that was waiting on the side of the road.

Bru: Leeda, open access to the long guns.

Bru pressed a button on the steering wheel. A compartment door dropped open and a large handgun moved forward and was now within his reach. Leeda opened a cover on the door to her right. She pressed a button and a section opened to reveal a shortened rifle with an extended magazine. She slid over to the door on her left and again opened a cover, pressed a button and a rifle on the left door was now exposed. She moved to the center of the seat.

Bru: Everybody buckle up.

They secured themselves with straps around their waists. Una highlighted the truck on the screen and turned it to a white dot.

Bru: We're being tracked.

Vier: Describe. How many?

Bru: One silver pickup like truck. Three occupants.

There were still vehicles in front and others, including the pickup were behind them. Bru moved into the left lane. One vehicle behind stayed right and continued on. Two moved left, including the truck.

Una: Highway entrance coming up.

Bru merged onto the three-lane highway and stayed in the right lane. A vehicle behind moved quickly into the center lane and passed. The truck stayed directly behind. Bru picked up speed. The truck sped up, keeping its same distance. They were heading south. A sign on the right indicated Biloxi was 167 miles away. Up ahead, on the right they could see a black sedan sitting on the side of the entrance ramp with its lights off. When Bru passed, the lights came on and the vehicle accelerated and merged onto the highway. They had all seen it and Bru glanced into the rearview mirror. Una highlighted it, tapped on controls on the bottom of the screen and on the radar screen the black sedan was identified as a blue dot.

As they moved further south the traffic was thinning out. Bru changed into the center lane. The truck moved left, from the right to the center lane. The sedan moved into the center lane behind the truck. Bru picked up speed. The truck increased its speed. The sedan moved into the left lane, passed the truck and then changed into the center lane directly behind Bru and ahead of the truck. The truck moved into the far left lane and tried to pass the sedan.

Crimson: How we gonna do this?

White: Pull up beside 'em. I'll shoot the blonde.

Azure: The robot may be driving!

White: Then I'll shoot the robot!

Azure: I want the robot!

Crimson: I want the blonde!

White: I'll shoot the tires!

Azure: They'll crash stupid! They can end up in pieces!

Crimson: Maybe I can force 'em over, slow 'em down and then off the road.

White: Try that. You gotta get up beside 'em.

The truck sped up. The sedan sped up. In the sedan the youthful *Palida DF* driver and the passenger, a somewhat short, thick *Escura DM* with medium length, curly goldenrod-colored hair were trying to figure out what the truck was doing.

Driver: The truck is getting in the way. You think they're after the ones we're after?

Passenger: Pass 'em. Get in front of 'em then get up on the left side of the target. I'll shoot the tires out.

The passenger prepared his large handgun. The sedan would attempt to move left one lane and then pull up beside Bru but the truck came up beside the sedan and through the window the driver could see White waving them back and showing them his gun.

Driver: It's the Rebel Boys!

Passenger: What're they doing? Let the window down!

The driver let the tinted window down. The passenger leaned over and forward so he could be seen. He gestured.

White: That's one of Destin's drivers!

Azure: That's Egil!

Crimson: What're they doing?

White: They're after the ones we're after!

Azure: I bet I know why!

Egil leaned back and punched on the Comm device that was in a holder on the dash. Numbers could be seen. He scrolled through them. He found the one he wanted. He dialed it. White's Comm device on the middle console sounded incoming call. He

recognized the ID and put it on the truck speakers.
Egil: What're you doing? Get outta the way!
White: We're on a mission! It's personal!
Egil: Yeah? Well we're on assignment! It's business! Back down!
Crimson: You back down! They're ours!
Egil: You want Destin to know you got in our way? I'm shooting 'em off the road!
White: Don't do that! We need 'em alive!
Egil: We don't! Back off!
Azure: I want the robot! Don't shoot! You may hurt the robot!
Egil: Hurt a robot?
Azure: You know, you may break it!
Crimson: I want the blonde!
Egil: I figured that!
Azure: I need the robot to function! Don't crash 'em!
 Una was watching the white and blue dot.
Una: Are they both after us?
Vier: Describe.
Bru: Black sedan, don't know who's in it.
 Bru glanced over at the map.
Bru: If they're both tracking, we'll soon find out.
Crimson: Let's work together! I'll let you over. You pass 'em and get in front. Then you slow down when I get up beside 'em. We'll box 'em in. Move 'em off the road. You get what you want. We get what we want. Deal?
 Egil thought a moment.
Egil: Alright. Let us over.
Azure: Can I have an earring?
Egil: No!
 Egil dropped the connection. The truck slowed down and the sedan moved over one lane and was now in front of the truck. They could tell the target was increasing speed again.

Una: Crossover coming up.

The driver of the sedan had increased speed and the truck was maneuvering to the position to box in their target when the two in the sedan could see the brake lights of the vehicle they chased come on.

Una: Now!

Bru pressed harder on the brake and made a sharp left turn from the center lane onto a two-way paved crossover access that would take them over the grassy medium to the other side of the highway. The driver of the sedan suddenly pressed hard on the brake and the truck had to slam on brakes to avoid rear-ending them. It was dark where they were. There was nothing but sporadic headlights and taillights from the sparse traffic, otherwise there was only the darkness of the night that surrounded them. Still the pursuers could see the vehicle moving quickly across the wide medium. As the driver was negotiating the quick turn she spoke.

Driver: Thought you said they were going to Biloxi?

Egil: That's what I was told. Maybe they had a change of plans.

Crimson: They're crossing over.

The sedan had moved onto the crossover. The truck had followed.

Una: Both of them came.

Bru: A three-vehicle caravan.

Ek: The more the merrier.

When the sedan and truck reached the other side they both picked up speed. They could see their target in the right hand lane. The sedan was in the same far right lane. The truck was in the middle lane. They were almost side-by-side. They sped along like that and the truck and sedan drew closer to the vehicle ahead of them that suddenly put on the turn signal indicating they were getting off at the next exit. The ones behind were both confused

and excited.

Driver: Look at the blinker! They must not know they're being followed!

Crimson: They're telling us where they're going!

White: Must be the good driving robot!

Egil: They could be lost!

Driver: They'll be easier to catch on the surface streets!

Egil called White.

White: Yeah?

Egil: They'll be going slow enough! I'm shooting 'em off the road when they get off!

He ended the connection. When Bru came up off the highway Una made sure they followed. He drove along the main street. There were only the remnants of deconstruction in this area, very few houses and no businesses. Bru turned right, off the main street and onto a narrow, two-way street. He took another right. He had turned onto a dark street that led nowhere. The driver saw a sign.

Driver: It's a dead end!

Egil: They are lost!

The truck sped past the sedan. White was hanging out of the window with his handgun. On their left they passed a side street. They could see their target nearing the end of the road.

Bru: Allow for coasting distance.

Vier: We've got it.

To their left the truck and sedan approached another side street. The sedan was no longer directly behind the truck but was on the right side of it, two car lengths behind. White opened fire. They could see sparks.

Crimson: You missed! You can't even hit a car!

White: You seen those sparks! I hit it! I hit it!

Azure: Shoot again! Shoot again!

Everything went dark in the truck. The electric engine shut down. The truck coasted to a stop. The sedan shut down and coasted to a stop.

Azure: What happened!? Why you stopping!?

Crimson: We lost power! Everything's out!

White: Switch to gas!

Crimson: I told you! Everything's out! It won't fire!

He was frantically trying to restart the truck.

Crimson: I tried! I can't switch!

Behind the truck, in the sedan the driver was trying to restart the electric engine. There was no gas to switch to.

Driver: Everything's out! No power!

Egil: Look, there's no lights on the truck! What happened?

Driver: Don't know.

The driver kept trying to start the sedan. Crimson kept trying to start the truck. Up ahead, Egil could see the vehicle they had been chasing begin to turn around. The Rebel Boys could see the vehicle ahead in the darkness turning around slowly. Then it was facing them and the headlights were shining at them like two bluish-white eyes. But their target didn't move forward. It just remained there. Egil punched on his Comm device. It didn't work. He pointed at the headlights. The beams suddenly altered. They became higher and brighter. Egil thought he saw them blink.

Egil: They're still running! Let's take theirs!

White opened his door.

White: They're still running! We'll take theirs!

The driver and Egil got out. The driver opened the back door and reached in and got a long gun. She carried a handgun beneath her left arm. White got out. Crimson tried to start the truck once more and then got out. Azure slid over, climbed out and moved to stand beside Crimson. They all three had pistols drawn. Egil

called out.

Egil: We lost power!

Crimson: So did we!

They both yelled at the same time.

Egil: Let's take theirs!

Crimson: Let's take theirs!

Egil moved to the front of their vehicle as the driver walked nearer to the front. The driver felt a sting in her back. She took three more steps forward and then collapsed onto her left side. As Egil came around the front of the sedan, Crimson, White and Azure were lining up. As White turned to look in the direction of the shining headlights Azure felt a sharp sting in his back, near his left shoulder.

Azure: Ow!

As he reached for his shoulder he dropped his gun, stumbled and then fell backwards. White heard him hit the pavement with a thud and turned around to find him lying in the street on his back. He cursed him, yelled at him.

White: Get up!

Crimson felt a sting in his neck as Egil was standing over his driver.

Egil: What're you doing!? Get up!

He felt a dull sting in his chest and as he looked down and touched himself and rubbed at the spot, he lost consciousness and collapsed across the supine body of his driver. White cried out, cursed and grabbed his forehead as Crimson, holding his neck, went down easily to his knees and then fell forward onto his face. White was touching his forehead. He was feeling for blood. Then he fell back against the truck and slid to the ground. There were now five bodies sprawled in the street in various positions. They were all unconscious and several were snoring loudly.

Bru slowly pulled forward. As he neared the truck, Ek and Vier emerged from the nearby side street. They each wore a large handgun on their sides and each carried a unique looking long gun that was equipped with an attachment that functioned as a silencer. The weapons designed and built by Cinq and Dois could fire a plastic pointed pellet accurately at distance. There was no flash, only a soft spitting sound. The pellet could penetrate clothing and dissolve through the skin. In a matter of seconds the powerful chemicals that Moja had developed that were inside that projectile would not simply dissolve but would rupture, burst and spread throughout the body and into the brain in a matter of seconds and bring about deep unconsciousness.

Bru pushed a button on the dash. The rear hatch rose. He and Una and Leeda got out. Bru went to the rear, opened a compartment in the floor of the trunk area and removed a gray metal rectangular briefcase. He opened it and took out what looked to be a pistol with a clear, plastic, cylinder-shaped barrel and a clear grip that contained a yellowish liquid substance. He walked over to stand at the side of the truck near the front. Una and Leeda were just behind him, one on each side. The Rebel Boys were lying there between him and Ek and Vier. They all looked down at them. Bru hefted the pistol-like object in his hand and then pointed it at each body as if he counted them with it.

Bru: I got this for them from the kit.

Ek: The kit comes in handy.

Bru: We must give Cinq and Dois and Moja our commendations for their expertise. Now we know their latest creations work well.

Vier: All we used was the nightscope. We didn't even need our glasses. Obviously the Shutdown Signal worked properly.

Using a needle-less delivery system Bru bent over and injected each body, depending on how it was positioned, in either the

front or the back of the neck with a dose of a drug that would ensure they would remain unconscious until they were given an antidote.

They all moved to the bodies beside the sedan. The lights from Spiny's headlights, the only light in the darkness, illuminated the forms. The elongated glow attracted bugs that fluttered and darted in the air. Bru looked closely and then leaned over and pulled the shoulder of the body on top and turned it over. He stood and looked at Leeda.

Bru: Do you recognize this one?

Leeda moved so the light shined better on the person. She stared a long moment. She was thinking, processing.

Leeda: He's one of Destin's guards who were in the restaurant.

Bru: Good observation and retention.

Ek: What is this, a bonus?

Bru injected Egil and then the driver, after removing her gun from the holster and tossing it aside.

Vier: Cast a wide net. Look what can be caught.

Bru looked at all the bodies and then the vehicles.

Bru: Leave the weapons in the street. We'll load these two into the back seat. Ek, you drive their vehicle. We'll put the other three into their truck. Vier, you'll drive that one. Una, you drive Spiny. Leeda you ride with her. I'll drive Runner. Ek will leave first. Vier will follow. Una and Leeda will leave next. I'll come last. We'll stagger our departures by seven minutes. Make sure there's no one around when you get near the plant's access road. If there is, go past and come back. Do that until all is clear.

Bru handed the pistol-like device to Leeda.

Bru: Put this back.

As Una and Leeda moved to Spiny, Bru and Ek and Vier walked back down the side street to Runner. The long guns were secured. Bru got in and pulled forward as Ek and Vier walked

along beside him. Bru parked, got out and watched as Ek dragged Egil to the sedan's rear side door. Bru opened it. Ek and Vier lifted the body and tossed it onto the back seat. Bru pulled the driver by her feet to the door and he and Vier tossed her body on top of Egil. They moved to the other three. They threw Crimson onto the floor behind the front seat and then tossed White onto the second row of seats. They lifted and pushed Azure on top of White.

Ek got into the sedan. He tapped on the Comm device on the back of his wrist. When the vehicle was started he eased forward and turned around. He waved his arm out of the window and drove off into the night. They watched the red taillights turn left at the corner and disappear.

A little over thirty minutes after Una and Leeda arrived at the plant Bru turned onto the access road that led to the front of the large wooden and brick and metal building. Ek and Vier were standing on guard outside near the first front entrance. They wore dark-blue denim overalls and blue neoprene gloves. Una and Leeda were inside in the open area that had once been the lobby. The truck and sedan had been pulled through the doorless doorway that had been the delivery side of the plant. The bodies had been removed and placed on the cement floor near the plant machinery.

Bru entered the building. Ek and Vier came beside him. As he walked through the plant he saw two caskets and an embalmed, nearly mummified body that had been removed from a black body bag lying between them. Four skulls sat on one of the caskets. He looked at the long table holding the supplies and materials they would use. He visually scanned the boxes and containers beneath it. He moved to stand beside it.

Bru: Do we have half of everything?

Ek: It looks like it.

Vier: We just checked quickly.

Bru turned to Una.

Bru: Did you bring the kit?

She pointed to a nearby chair. Bru then walked past each unconscious body lying face up. He was thinking, processing. He stared at the forms. His face was empty, without expression. He pointed at Crimson, White and Azure.

Bru: Let's tie these three up.

Vier: Hogtie?

Bru: No, hands in front. Secure their hands and feet together with ties and then run cables from their hands to the ties around their feet.

Bru removed the jewelry on his hand and gave everything to Una. He pulled on gloves as he watched Ek and Vier. They had taken ties and cable ties from the table and tightly bound each of the three.

Bru: Glue their lips and tape their mouths.

Vier went from one to the next and sprayed their lips and made sure they were pressed together and sealed shut. Ek covered their mouths by wrapping the wide tape twice around their heads.

Bru: Let's sit them up against the legs of that conveyor.

They positioned the three in a sitting position against the steel leg supports of the machine in the center of the area. The long, conveyor transported animals being processed in a circle almost the length of the building and passed by refrigeration units that now hummed with newly established power.

Bru: Una, prepare an injector with the paralyzing agent. Leeda, prepare another injector with the knockout antidote.

Bru looked at the driver and then Egil. He glanced around and saw some dusty, rusty metal folding chairs near the wall.

Bru: Bring chairs for them over here. Secure their hands and feet and sit them down.

Ek: No glue or tape?

Bru: No, I'm going to converse with these two guests of ours.

Bru reached out his right hand to Una and he took the pistol-like device and leaned over and injected chemicals into the front of the throats of the three who were propped up. As he was doing this, Ek and Vier were using plastic ties and cables to bind the driver and Egil. He handed the injector back to Una and took the one that was offered by Leeda. Now they all stood and watched and waited. After five minutes he injected them with the antidote that would awaken them from their unconscious state. He handed the injector back to Leeda. Una went and put her injector back into the case.

Crimson slowly began to come to consciousness first. He took several deep breaths through his nose. Then his light-green eyes fluttered and opened into a squint. He didn't know what had happened to him or where he was. He was slightly dizzy and as his eyes fully opened he struggled to focus. His stomach was queasy as if he were sick.

He looked straight ahead and saw a tall *Marrom* individual with a *DM* marking staring at him. To the *DM*'s left he could see two very tall and somewhat thick *Trigo* forms with short silver hair and gray eyes that he knew instantly were not human. The two looked directly into his eyes. He shifted his sight to the right of the one in front of him and he saw the *Melada* individual with the *DF* tattoo and blonde hair and recognized her as the one they had accosted in the nightclub, the one they had chased, the one he had expressed that he desired. Then he saw to the right of the blonde the tall beautiful *Escura* one, the one they had referred to as a robot. With each moment that he was now awake he was growing frantic.

His realized his mouth wouldn't open. He couldn't talk. He felt the pressure, the tightness of the restraining tape. He could only make sounds that rose from his chest and stuck in his throat. He couldn't move his legs or raise his arms. He looked to his side, to his left and he saw White, who had awakened and was going through the reality of the dire situation in which they found themselves.

Crimson couldn't see Azure but when White looked to his left he could see him. Azure was staring back with terrified blue eyes. White had seen that look before because he had elicited it on several occasions in the eyes of others. White experienced the emotions that would bring forth naturally such a look of intense fear. He turned from Azure to look at those in front of him.

Azure shifted his gaze from White to look at the two non-humans and then the *Marrom DM*. He came close to passing out. He saw weapons and blue colored gloves but what terrified him most was not the lack of expression on the blonde's face but the haunting look that emerged in the brown eyes of the robot he had expressly desired. It was as if the machine peered into him, deep inside him as though it could feel and was slowly receiving some type of concealed emotional knowledge of him. The thing, in its gaze, passed to him that it suddenly understood and knew precisely what and who he was and had always been. He thought he saw, through his blurring vision a slight smile on the face of the robot.

The three sat like that on the hard cement floor. Their backs were pressed against the steel that seemed to dig and penetrate into them. They watched as the brown-skinned *DM* began to pace before them, back and forth. Their heads moved in unison. Their eyes were riveted upon him, following him as he walked. He spoke in a low, even, matter-of-fact tone.

Bru: You three were first shot with a unique chemical agent of

our development that rendered you unconscious. Then you were injected with another drug that we created that ensured you would not wake up until you were injected with the only antidote in existence, that we also created, which brought you back to consciousness. I hope I haven't confused you.

Bru raised his right hand and stuck his right index finger straight up into the air as if to hold them a moment. Then he pointed that finger.

Bru: However, before you were awakened you were injected with a wondrous drug, again of our creation, that essentially paralyzed you.

Bru began to pace again.

Bru: That's why you can't move any part of your body except for your heads and of course you can see and hear. And what's most important is that you can experience sensations, such as pain.

Bru stopped and looked at each of the three for a long moment. Bru's next words came quickly, and straightforward.

Bru: Each of you, one by one, is going to be tortured until you die.

Crimson, White and Azure all began to shake their heads. Their heads bobbed and shook spasmodically as their eyelids rapidly opened and closed and their eyeballs rolled in their heads. They were making incomprehensible noises, high and piercing and low and moaning. The sounds came together and one after the other. Bru held his right hand as if to make them an offer or present them with a gift. He spoke in agreement with the utterances.

Bru: I hear you clearly. Believe me, I understand exactly what you're saying. Look at it this way. You three ...

He pointed at each one.

Bru: ... have the advantage over these two.

He indicated with his right hand the driver and Egil, who sat

with their heads down, their chins touching their chests. Egil, on occasions, audibly snored.

Bru: You know you're about to die and they don't, at least, not yet.

The sounds that came from the three became fitful and were diminishing. They were growing tired and it was difficult to catch their breath. Bru's voice altered as if he was now angry or irritated.

Bru: You sounded like the chickens and pigs and cows that were butchered here. We considered doing you like they did the chickens. Put your feet in metal stirrups and crush them and break your legs when you're hung upside down.

Bru swept his left arm across his body and then indicated somewhere in the near distance.

Bru: Then you would have moved along that conveyor you're so comfortably leaning against ...

He dropped his arm. He stood there, looking at the three.

Bru: ... until you reach the blades that would cut off your heads so you could bleed out. Then we would drop you in a vat of boiling water that would peel your skin off like chicken feathers. Or better yet a vat of boiling oil that would deep-fry you. Deep-fried! Imagine that!

Bru was becoming animated. He pointed with his left hand to the other end of the long, wide room. He gestured with his right hand as if to move the processing along.

Bru: We could hang you on a hook by your chained feet like a pig or hog, swines they both are. Swines, the three of you are. We move you along as you dangle and sway until your necks are sliced open so you could bleed out into the drains on the floor so your blood could soak into the ground and spill into the streams and rivers. See a pattern here? No boiling or frying. There would be slicing and cutting. Cut you open so your guts would spill out.

Now Bru spoke with disdain.

Bru: Your guts are worthless. But swine guts are eaten, along with pig snout and pig tails and pig ears and pig feet. Slice that ham! Cure that bacon! Devour that pork!

Bru pulled his pistol and walked up to White. He placed the barrel of the gun against his forehead and pushed. His voice rose. Now he was definitely angry.

Bru: Put a bolt through that cow's head!

He stepped back. He holstered his gun. His voice lowered. He was calm again.

Bru: Chain their legs. Hang them up on hooks. Cut their throats. Skin them. Render them into pieces.

Now he yelled.

Bru: Make that hamburger! Eat that beef!

Bru started to pace again. Once again he spoke in a low, even, matter-of-fact tone.

Bru: Yes, you three are going to die.

The three were making noises again. Their heads were moving again. Their eyes were rolling again.

Bru: The torturous methods of your deaths will demonstrate both the imagination and reality of humans. And after you're dead we're going to put your lifeless bodies in the meat cooler and when it's the appropriate time we're going to drag you out and strip you naked and spray you all over with the chemicals used to embalm the dead in a symbolic gesture of finality. Then we're going to put ropes around your necks.

Bru pointed at Vier as he walked.

Bru: What form of rope?

Vier: A noose.

Bru: Yes, a noose! We'll take you out back and use that rope to pull you up by your throats into the trees.

Ek: Hang you.

Vier: String you up.

Bru: Technically it won't be a lynching because you'll already be dead. It's only symbolic anyway. That's part of what remains, the symbolism of the past.

He walked over to Azure and pointed at him with his right index finger. With each statement that finger either moved forward towards the one with the blue hair or just remained there suspended in the air. The finger seemed to grow longer and looked like a dagger.

Bru: And you, the flag waver. How proud you are of that flag of 1861. That flag that flew at the lynchings of that time. That was lifted up onto the poles and yards of murderers and rapists and bombers and arsonists. That flag that was stuck on cars and displayed in the windows of vehicles to let everyone know they believed in and honored oppression and brutality and hatred. That flag represents the worst of humanity and there's nothing worse than a base human being.

Bru lowered his hand.

Bru: We're going to get that flag from your truck and what should we do with it Vier?

He turned around.

Vier: Stick it up his rear end.

Bru: Ek?

Ek: Push it down his throat.

Bru turned to stare down at Azure who was crying. Bru was thinking, processing. He spoke directly to Azure with hatred, as only he could convey that emotion.

Bru: While you're still alive I'm gonna cut your heart out, real slow, like a surgeon. Then I'm gonna shove that flag into that hole where your heart was.

Leeda spoke softly and her sister and brothers turned to look at her.

Leeda: Symbolism, the use of a flag as a symbol to represent ideas or qualities.

No one spoke. Then Bru continued. He was once again animated. The steps of his pacing quickened.

Bru: So you'll all hang in the breeze from the branch of a tree in representation of those of the past who met that fate in the hospitable state of Mississippi. We're going to do unto you as those before you did and had done to them. There will be the resurrection of the actions of those who came before you. Both those who committed those atrocities and we'll condemn those who allowed the barbarism to occur. In your hanging there will be the idea of vengeance and the quality of retribution. The wrongs of your ancestors have accumulated on your heads.

Bru stopped. He looked at each one. They were all crying. The sounds of weeping were obvious.

Bru: Or in this case, around your necks.

He turned to Una.

Bru: Choose who goes first.

Una stepped forward. She looked at each one for a long moment as she walked past them. The sounds of distress rose again to a muffled crescendo. She came back to Crimson. She smiled slightly, seductively. Then she pointed at White.

Una: This one goes first.

She pointed at Azure.

Una: This one is second.

She came back to Crimson.

Una: You're going last. You'll just have to wait your turn.

She winked at him and with her painted pretty lips she made noisy kissing expressions. Ek grabbed the ties that secured White's feet and started dragging him towards the side of the building behind the conveyor and near the cooler. Vier went to the table and removed a canvas suitcase-like bag that appeared

full. He followed Ek.

Bru turned to the driver and Egil. He stared at each one of the two sitting forms as Ek returned. Then he went to his case and removed a clear plastic injection device. He inserted a cartridge similar to a magazine into the grip area and walked back to the two in the chairs. He pulled the trigger twice and he could see a dirty-orange colored liquid fill the thin barrel that came to a needle-like point at the end. He injected fluid into the back of the neck of the driver and then Egil. He gave the device to Una who went and put it away in the case.

Bru moved to the table and slipped into a pair of dark-blue overalls and sealed the Velcro front. Then the four of them watched the two slumped over figures and marked time until the injected fluid took effect. Occasionally they would look across the floor of the plant to the other side towards the rear of the building. They could see the top of Vier. He would bend and stand and look down then bend and stand again, focusing on his task of torturing his enemy. They couldn't see White, he was lying on the floor. But they could hear him. Even through the dampened, gagged sounds the wailing and screaming and moaning was obvious. Bru listened. Then he smiled just a little at these expressions of intense pain.

When a sufficient amount of time had passed he held out his right hand and Leeda gave him the device with the knockout antidote in it. He injected only the driver and returned the device to Leeda. They watched and waited as she slowly came back to consciousness.

The overhead lights seemed to reflect off of her bald *Palida* head. She was still drowsy and she yawned. And as her mouth was wide open in that involuntary reflex action she inhaled deeply and that absolute necessity of life, which is air, through the process of diffusion passed into her blood vessels and floated

throughout her body and along with that nitrogen and oxygen and argon, the clear memory of the past hours, before she had lost consciousness rushed into her and she was completely awake and alert.

She looked down at her hands and could feel and she saw they were tightly bound with plastic ties and she could see that a thick cable ran down to her feet and there was no need to look at her feet because she could not move them and so she knew they were tied together and secured to the thicker cable. She looked up and saw a tall brown-skinned man. She shifted her gaze to his left and saw Ek looking at her. She saw the markings on his face and neck. Her eyes widened with fear. She looked to her left and saw standing on the *Marrom DM's* right the two who had been pointed out to her earlier, the two they had been chasing. They both stared at her, without expression. Then the man spoke to her and she heard a soft, smooth, almost gentle voice and his next words were clear and precise.

Bru: How you ended up here in this, shall we dare say, unique situation is due to circumstances that began long before myself and my associates arrived. Yet here we all are in this abandoned meat processing plant on the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi, of all places.

Bru raised his left, blue-gloved hand and looked at his palm. Then he held it up, turned it and showed it to the driver. At this moment White began making sounds of pain behind her and out of her sight. Closer behind her, Crimson and Azure began to make gagged and loud muffled sounds as they attempted to communicate. Bru continued.

Bru: My hand will represent fate as I illustrate my premise. Here you were.

He placed his right index finger in the middle of his palm.

Bru: There were five fateful paths you could have taken. You

made a choice.

He slowly moved that right finger up his left index finger.

Bru: Here you went.

He placed the tip of his right index finger on the very tip of his left index finger.

Bru: Here you are.

Then he pointed that left finger at the driver and smiled, knowingly. He lowered his hands. Vier returned. He grabbed the feet of Azure and began to drag him across the floor. Bru called out.

Bru: Remember, I want him alive when I cut his heart out!

Azure was crying and moaning. He made repeated sounds of protest.

Bru: Those are the sounds of your three cohorts being tortured.

The driver began to cry. She was hyperventilating. Her head was shaking from side to side and nodding as she rocked forward and back.

Bru: That's their fate. That's not yours. You're not going to be tortured, on that you have my word. You see, I believe a person has nothing without the truthfulness of their word. From you we only want information.

Now the driver was whimpering softly. Then when she heard the painful sounds of Azure her weeping became more audible and Crimson began again louder but he was too weak to continue for long so his sounds became low, long moans. Bru began to pace in front of her.

Bru: In *West World* a process was developed that quickly spread to *East World* and has been utilized for some years now. It's called Narcosynthesis. A person involved in the death of another human being, by law, has their veins filled with a combination of drugs that have no taste, or odor or distinctive color and leaves no side effects. The person is interrogated and the drugs compel

that person to honestly explain their actions and to tell the truth, as they know it to be. They fall asleep peacefully and awaken with no recollection of what they have said.

Bru stopped to look directly at the driver.

Bru: You have been injected with our formula. A mixture of drugs that we think improves on that process. It's in fact a truth serum. I've named it The Truther. I happen to like that name.

He pointed his left index finger at the driver.

Bru: We're going to find out how well it works.

Bru dropped his left hand then he lifted it and looked closely at his index finger and wiggled it. He opened and closed his hand as he began to walk again.

Bru: You will be forced to answer any question that is posed to you. There is no such thing as refusing to incriminate yourself. Any hesitation at answering and you'll feel an incipient pain in your head. Just a hint of what will happen if you lie.

Bru turned to the three standing behind him and on each side. He looked at them all.

Bru: What does it mean to lie?

Ek: An assertion of something known or believed to be untrue with the intent to deceive.

Una: Prevaricate.

Leeda: Equivocate.

Bru: I'm looking for another word.

Ek: Fib.

Bru: Yes! Yes! That's it!

He whirled around to the driver and pointed that left index finger again.

Bru: No fibbing now. If you fib your brain will hurt, and I mean really hurt.

He raised both hands to the sides of his head and wiggled his fingers and turned his hands slowly in a small tight circle. He then

opened his eyes wide.

Bru: However, it won't be your brain because the brain can't feel pain but the membrane surrounding your brain and the sheaths of your nerve fibers and the coverings on your bones and the receptors on your scalp will begin to burn and you will experience pain, as you've never known it could be.

The driver began to cry again, softly. Bru held both hands out as if to present her a solution to her predicament.

Bru: Don't cry. Just tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Then came that finger again.

Bru: You understand?

Driver: Yes. I understand.

At this moment the painful sound of Azure wafted from the other side of the building. It sounded like the wind moaning. Then it rose to a muted wail, a high, pitched animal expression. Behind her Crimson began to weep loudly. He banged the back of his head against the metal leg. Bru's voice came forth in a soft benign, inquiring tone.

Bru: Have you ever killed anyone?

The driver searched for words to answer and in that brief hesitation she could feel a slight burning sensation at the base of her neck. It flashed to the top of her baldhead and she began to perspire. The tattoos on her body and on her neck and the one on her right cheek seemed to contract and squeeze and jump. It was a strange indescribable feeling and fear climbed within her because it seemed to portend something alien to her existence and so powerful she would not be able to withstand it and thus would not, could not survive. Her ears began to ring.

Bru: Have you ever taken the life of another human being?

The driver attempted to shut down the burn so she blurted out.

Driver: Yes! Yes!

Bru: See, that wasn't difficult, was it? Now, I'm not going to ask you if that destruction was brought about due to defense of your life or the life of another. I won't ask if that individual whose life you took was guilty of some despicable crime or whether justice had been served. I do hope that when they died they knew they were about to die. I'm partial to that process.

Bru stared at the driver.

Bru: Did you pursue us to rob us?

The driver no longer hesitated. She wanted to respond as quickly as possible. She was nearly yelling.

Driver: Yes!

Bru: Were you prepared to do us harm?

Driver: Yes!

Bru: Do you work for Destin?

Driver: Yes!

Bru: Did Destin give the order to come after us?

Driver: No!

Bru: Did Destin's brother give the order to come after us?

Driver: Yes!

Bru: I'm not going to ask you who told which direction we were headed. That's not important.

Bru pointed at the slumped, unconscious figure to the left of the driver.

Bru: How is he called?

Driver: Egil.

Bru: Spell it.

Driver: E G I L.

Bru paused. He was thinking, processing.

Bru: Did you know Destin was suspected to be involved in the death of the Governor's daughter?

This question confused the driver. She hesitated, unsure as

how to respond. Then she felt the pain of the burning fire.

Driver: Yes, I heard the talk.

Bru: Was Destin's brother suspected of being involved in that death?

Driver: Yes, I heard he was involved.

The driver began to shake and her eyes were blinking rapidly and then Azure again let out an unrecognizable noise. The driver began to cry again.

Bru: Is Destin's brother called Westin?

Driver: Yes.

Bru: Who else was suspected of being involved?

Driver: Their cousin, Marius.

Bru: Who else?

The driver struggled to speak. She wanted to hold on to the words that were forcing their way out. Then her eyes blurred as pain moved from her head down along her arms and into her throat. Her words came in a loud rush.

Driver: Egil! Egil was supposed to have been there with the others! I'm just a driver. I wasn't there! I don't know what happened! Please, I don't wanna die!

Bru: Who else was involved?

Driver: I don't know of anyone else!

Bru pointed that finger again and yelled!

Bru: Who else!

Driver: I know it was those four! I swear that's all I know!

Bru's finger still pointed at her.

Bru: How old was the little girl, the Governor's daughter?

The driver squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to catch her breath. It was as if she suddenly grew weaker.

Driver: Eleven years old.

Bru closed his hand and lowered it to his side. Now he spoke softly.

Bru: Can you say her name?

The driver almost whispered.

Driver: Dayon.

Bru: Can you spell her name?

Driver: D A Y O N.

Then from Bru came not a question but a statement.

Bru: It's as if you knew her.

Bru gestured to Leeda and she stepped forward and handed him the injector. He placed it to the back of Egil's neck and gave him the antidote. He handed the device back to Leeda and she walked over and placed it in the case. She returned to stand with the others to watch as Egil began to come to consciousness. Bru spoke to Una.

Bru: Record this. Enhance the audio.

Una took a Comm device from her bag, pressed on it, adjusted it, trained it on the one who awakened and began to record. Vier, in his blood splattered overalls and with blood on his boots returned to stand with the others. Egil's head slowly lifted, went all the way back and bounced twice. His curly goldenrod-colored hair shifted and seemed to change in the lights to a dark, burnt-orange color. He yawned. Then, with his head facing forward he yawned again. Patches of his dark-brown skin were dull as if in shadows. Other areas of his *Escura* tone appeared to glow. His mouth was wide his teeth were bared and his eyes were pressed closed. Then he opened his eyes and with his mouth still agape he saw the five individuals standing there patiently, staring at him without expression.

He tried to move his hands and couldn't. He looked at the cable that was connected the tight binds he felt around his ankles and he leaned forward and over to look down at his feet. He raised his head and watched the non-human warily as Ek moved behind him. He lost sight of the *Trigo* form but could now hear

Crimson begin to make the sounds of distress. He didn't know what was happening behind him. Then he heard the strange, unidentifiable noise that came as Ek grabbed the binds on Crimson's feet and began to drag him to the other side of the building. He tried turning his head but he still couldn't see. But now he saw his driver slightly behind him, on his right side. He saw she too was bound and he saw the tears in her reddish eyes and that came down her *Palida* cheeks and for some reason he focused on the tracks from the tears that had dried and the stains that remained. She was sniffing and her nose was running and terror and horror filled her face.

He looked at the four who stood there before him. He recognized the two targets he had seen in the restaurant. One by one he stared at them for a long moment. Then he returned his gaze to Bru, identifying him as the leader. His somewhat deep voice sounded rough and slightly hoarse. It was the thick, raspy voice that comes from having slept, deeply.

Egil: I don't know what you want but my people will pay you well to let me go.

Bru: Of course we look like what we want is to be paid.

Egil frowned. He licked his lips. His mouth was dry and he was thirsty. He heard a noise in the near distance that sounded like an animal howling.

Bru: We want answers and information.

Crimson could be heard again. Azure was moaning loudly and the driver began crying, audibly.

Egil: I don't know what kinda bird you mistake me for but I ain't no stool pigeon. I ain't giving up nothing 'cause I ain't no snitch. Get paid. Let me go.

Bru: Me? Me?

Bru glanced at the driver. Egil shrugged his shoulders.

Egil: Do what you will.

Bru: What is your name? How are you called?

Egil leaned back in his chair. He pressed his lips together defiantly. He glared at Bru. Then he experienced something vague and faint in the crown of his head. This incipient sensation quickly moved down the back of his neck and in spite of himself he spoke aloud and the snarl left his mouth and was replaced by a grimace and a soft utterance he attempted to suppress was heard.

Egil: Umm. Oh.

Bru: Do you work for Destin?

Egil began to blow as if to place his breath against something hot. The pain grew stronger.

Bru: Were you after us to rob us? Were you prepared to do us harm?

Crimson was screaming past the glue and through the tape. Azure was crying and moaning loudly. The pain was spreading like wildfire throughout Egil's body. The driver was hollering.

Driver: You've been drugged! Answer him!

Now Egil was pleading.

Egil: Make it stop! Make it stop!

Bru: What is your name? How are you called?

Egil: Egil! My name is Egil!

The pain eased just a little.

Bru: Do you work for Destin?

Egil hesitated and the pain intensified. He hollered out.

Egil: Yes! Yes!

As the pain subsided Egil attempted to catch his breath. He felt weak.

Bru: That's how this works. It's really quite simple. I will pose the questions. You will answer the questions. You will tell the truth.

Bru pointed that left index finger.

Bru: The whole truth.

Bru wiggled that finger at Egil. Then he lowered it. He was

thinking, processing. He began to pace in front of the two who were seated and who now watched his every step.

Bru: Were you after us to rob us?

Egil: Yeah.

Bru: Were you prepared to do us harm?

Egil: Yeah.

Bru: Did you witness the murder of Dayon?

Egil: What? Who?

Bru: Did you witness the murder of the Governor's daughter who went by the calling of Dayon?

Bru stopped and yelled, and spelled.

Bru: D A Y O N! Dayon!

Egil felt the pain. He struggled to answer. He struggled not to answer. Blood began to drip from his nose. Finally the heat became unbearable and he shouted.

Egil: Yes!

Bru: Did Marius kill the child?

Egil: No!

Bru: Did Westin kill the child?

Egil: No!

Bru: Did you kill the child?

Egil: No! No! I had nothing to do with that!

Egil was breathing heavily. The pain was there and yet it wasn't. It was waiting, hovering there, somewhere, everywhere.

Bru: Did Destin kill the child?

Egil: Please. Please, I ...

His mouth was twisting. His face was distorted. He began to weep. He tried not to respond. Now blood trickled from his ears. He blinked his eyes and his tears were tinged red with blood. Bru shouted at him.

Bru: Did Destin kill Dayon!?

Egil: Yes! It was Destin! It was to punish the Governor. He

choked her to death! The Governor was stealing! No! He was gonna take over! He ... Destin didn't ... No! The Governor ...

Egil could barely breathe. He began to thrash and shake. He fell from the chair onto his right side. He wanted the pain to ease. Bru moved closer. Vier moved closer. Una moved closer. Slowly Leeda moved closer. They all stared down at him. Crimson's muffled screams came quicker and quicker. The driver was wailing and screaming.

Driver: Please! Please! Please! Please!

Egil's head moved and shook from side to side as Bru yelled down at him. His curly hair seemed to shift and wave.

Bru: Did Marius have sex with Dayon!?

Egil: Yes!

Bru: Did Westin have sex with Dayon!?

Egil: Yes!

Bru: Did Destin have sex with Dayon!?

Egil: Yes! Yes!

Bru paused. He lowered his voice and spoke slowly. He emphasized each word.

Bru: Did Egil have sex with eleven-year-old Dayon?

Egil: No! No! I never touched her!

The pain worsened in his face and he began to bang his head on the cement floor. He was crying and choking.

Egil: No! No!

Blood formed on his lips and ran faster from his nose. His ears and eyes leaked blood. He could smell his own blood he could taste his own blood in his mouth. Finally he gave up.

Egil: Destin made me do it! I didn't want to!

The pain exploded throughout his body. He screamed, a piercing scream. He had lied.

Bru: See what happens when you fib? That's the pain of deceit!

Bru pointed his right index finger at Egil. He stated.

Bru: You raped her! You all drank alcohol and ingested drugs and you all raped that child!

Egil was screaming. The driver was screaming.

Driver: I didn't know! I swear, I didn't know!

The horror of the next question engulfed Egil and shattered the driver who almost fainted. Bru was pointing that finger down at Egil who felt as if the finger would push into his left eye. His right eye was closed as he squinted as he looked up at the brown-skinned man with the look of hatred on his face.

Bru: Did you have sex with that child's dead body?

Egil: No! No! I didn't! I didn't! Please stop! I'm begging you!

Bru: Did Marius have sex with her dead body?

Egil: No! No!

Bru had to yell above Crimson's sounds and the sounds of a saw striking bone and the hissing of electricity passing through flesh.

Bru: Did Westin have sex with Dayon's dead body?

Egil did not hesitate.

Egil: Yes! Yes he did!

Bru: Did you watch?

Egil: No!

The pain spiked. He had lied.

Egil: Yes! Yes!

Bru: Did you enjoy watching the rape of a dead child's body?

Egil: No! No! I didn't wanna watch!

The burning pain came. He had lied.

Egil: Yes! Yes!

Bru: Did Destin have sex with Dayon's dead body?

Egil yelled out. The driver was yelling incoherently.

Egil: Yes! Yes!

Bru's voice lowered.

Bru: Of course he did. Such perversion runs in the family.

Bru stepped back. He looked at the whimpering Egil. He looked at the driver. She was slumped over, nearly unconscious. He was thinking, processing. Ek walked up and looked at the scene. Bru pointed at the driver with that left index finger.

Bru: I'm keeping my word. No torture for you.

He turned to Vier.

Bru: Take her and shoot her through the head.

The driver began screaming as Vier pushed her to the floor and began dragging her away.

Driver: No! Noooo! Please! Please!

Bru yelled at her.

Bru: Yes! Yes! You knew they were rapists and murderers and if you didn't, you should have known.

Once again he pointed that blue finger.

Bru: Guilt by association!

He went to the table and got the large, heavy hammer and returned to stand over Egil who was trying to speak. His mouth was moving but no sound came forth. He was on the verge of shock. Bru showed him the hammer and shook it slowly, menacingly, a hint of a smile on his face.

Bru: We're gonna start at your feet and break every bone in your body. Then I'm gonna personally give you the Mississippi Special. I'm gonna beat your face with my two hands until you're unrecognizable. But we're not gonna sink your dead body in the Tallahatchie River. We're gonna strip you naked and hang you in a tree out back. But before we string you up I'm gonna drive a nail into your chest, through your heart, with a sign on it. That sign will have painted on it, in the color of blood, the name Roy.

Bru turned to Una.

Bru: Take Runner and return to the mill. We'll be there later.

As Una and Leeda moved towards the doorway Egil was hollering and cursing and begging as Bru was dragging him away.

When they arrived back at the mill some of the group were sitting outside under the covering. Chuki was making exaggerated mime movements and Cinq and Dois attempted to guess what the little one was trying to show them. Runner had already been cleaned and checked and diagnostics run. Now Cha, along with Cinq and Dois would clean Spiny, run full diagnostics and when the engine cooled they would perform any required maintenance.

Vier and Ek took seats outside. Bru, carrying a canvas sack, entered Tal. Chuki, along with Kojo followed him inside and asked questions as he cleaned up and changed clothes. Then he moved to the rear with the sack. Chuki had Kojo lie down and went with him.

On the left side, sitting at the console, Moja was working with Naki and Tatu. Across from them, on the right side, at the other console sat Okan and Una. They were all engrossed in their tasks. Okan wore earphones as he monitored audio transmissions. Bru watched them all for a long moment. He handed the sack to Naki.

Bru: Here are the valuables and all the Comm devices from our guests.

After a short while he spoke.

Bru: Where's Leeda?

Chuki: She took a walk. I asked if me and Kojo could go but she said she wanted to be by herself.

They were all quiet now. There was only the soft hum of Khufu and the barely discernible sounds of the keys being tapped. Bru looked back at the colored lights on the pyramid as they blinked and seemingly twinkled. Finally Una spoke.

Una: We've again located the devices connected to Westin. He's trying to reach Egil. We're doing a search for Marius now.

Okan: I'm hearing some chatter about the three who were in the truck. They're referred to as The Rebel Boys.

Bru: Yes I know, how apropos that moniker.

Bru started further back to stop and stand near Khufu. He spoke as if Khufu could hear him.

Bru: Their rebellious days are no more.

He was staring at the pyramid, thinking, processing. Moja spoke to him.

Moja: I'm unable to utilize in any way the access program that was embedded in the two *Entities* in the nightclub. It appears their processors have been corrupted in some way, perhaps irrevocably damaged.

Bru continued to stare at the lights.

Bru: Leeda was quite affected by their inability to say their own names.

Moja: I'll activate the Directive Program in the undetectable background in the two *Entities*. In the future there may be some change in their hardware or software and the orders will become active. I'll put it in transfer mode. It may jump to other *Entities* those two come in close proximity with.

Moja stood and spoke.

Moja: Let's go outside and talk.

Moja led the way. Chuki and Kojo let Bru pass and then they followed. Moja pulled up a chair across from Ek and Vier. Bru sat to his right. Chuki stood in the center of the group. Kojo sat in front of her, looking at her and wagging his tail.

Bru stared up at the starlit sky. The moon was moving in its imperceptible way and at the same time altering in its phase. Sunrise was still a few hours away. Yet the sky, in the far distance, to the east, was losing its dark essence. There, the sky grew lighter, ushering in another day. A sudden breeze blew and then all was still and quiet except for the chirping of the crickets. Then a bird sounded.

Chuki: Here that, over and over, that musical sound? That's a

whip-poor-will call. They come out at night and eat insects. Listen to them sing. They're calling their own name.

Bru: Unlike our abused sister and brother, who were unable to speak their own calling, say their own names.

Chuki: Identify themselves, to be somebody and not some, thing.

They all listened to the creatures of the early morning.

Bru: I heard humans making beautiful sounds a while ago. They were moaning and crying. Egil was squeaking and singing. He rose above and beyond a tenor. He was a soprano in a tragic opera.

Chuki began to dance, turning slowly. Her little arms were outstretched and then above her head. She did a pirouette.

Chuki: Sono adati from La Bohème.

Moja: That's a love song, tragic, but still a love song.

Chuki: Mozart's Der Hölle Rache.

The little one continued to turn slowly.

Moja: Hell's vengeance boils in my heart.

Bru: How apropos. I like that word.

Chuki stopped to smile at him.

Chuki: Obviously.

Bru began to speak softly, wistfully.

Bru: It was as if he sang for all those who never had a chance to sing. He sang in the rhythm and tones of suffering. It was a familiar human melody. He begged me and pleaded and cursed and threatened me. He was in excruciating pain.

Chuki was staring at him, a serious look on her face. He looked into her eyes. He spoke. His voice was low, his words intense and filled with his *Entity* emotion.

Bru: The agony! The agony! I loved it!

Chuki smiled at him.

Chuki: That is, if you could love.

With a slight ironic smile Bru answered in almost a whisper.

Bru: Yes, if.

He seemed released from the moment.

Bru: Ah, but I can't care so I care less than nothing about humans. There's no way to know who or what Dayon would have become. She was the epitome of all that the humans value in one such as her. The youth. The beauty of supposed innocence. Yet, in her death she represented the depravity of the human race. Can we, as *Entities*, without feelings possibly imagine what humans will do in the throes of their emotions and under the rule of their untamed sexuality? But we can think and process their past actions and foretell the future. If they can do that to their own children we know what they can do to ours.

Bru looked at Chuki. She stared into his eyes. They stared at each other. Bru turned to Moja.

Bru: Alright, talk to me.

Moja: We now know the projectile delivery system that Cinq and Dois came up with works quite well with our chemical weapons. In addition, our truth serum upgrades did as designed.

Bru: Yes, The Truther.

Chuki: I like that word.

Moja: As for our Influencer programs ...

Bru: They worked to perfection.

Moja: They're too strong.

Bru: You saw them. The two couldn't stop eating and drinking. The one couldn't stop gambling. He kept saying he wanted to stop but couldn't.

Moja: The newest Influencer versions need to be more similar to the delayed instructions we released earlier in New York City and Washington, D.C. Think of the programs that are embedded in our brothers and sisters and *Entity* children. They're running deep in the background, the underground, if I may use that term. They're executing in a near dormant state.

Here Moja smiled just a little. He leaned forward in his chair.
Moja: They're virtually undetectable and no one or any counter program searches for them because hosts exhibit no discernable symptoms.

Bru: What's your point?

Moja: When we get to *West World* if we release the Influencer programs at their current strength those obvious manifestations you saw at the restaurant and in the casino will be revealed to all. There will be investigations as if those phenomena were caused by disease or some strange illness. Eventually they would be traced to a common denominator.

Bru: Their Comm devices.

Moja: Yes, the humans could develop some type of remedy. Perhaps even uncover the hidden programs.

Bru was thinking, processing.

Bru: What do you suggest?

Moja: We lessen the frequency of the influencing instructions and thus lower the strength. We'll also merge all of the influencing programs we've created. At the restaurant and casino we tested gluttony and greed. We'll combine them with lust, wrath, envy, pride and vanity. We'll even include sloth. Humans are born with these characteristics it's simply a matter of degrees. With humans they function through both quality and quantity. A human being can experience fear and alter that emotion to a craving hunger. Anger can become raging lust. The transformations are complex and endless. In addition these changes are predetermined by attribute that are inherited from those who came before them.

Bru: They run through the immediate family.

Moja: We refine the programs, release them here and as we travel through *Center World* we'll test them and in *West World* we'll push them out to the populace from the top of Washington to the bottom of California.

Chuki was looking at Moja as he spoke. She began to stroll in a wide circle.

Chuki: Top to bottom. Top to bottom.

Moja: Our programs will trigger that which is dominant in that particular human, the traits that are strongest, but not in an extreme manner. Those in conflict with vanity will only become more preoccupied with their appearance. Envy will associate its element with vanity and that person will gradually, over a period of time become more and more obsessed with not only how they look but also how they look in comparison to the appearance of others. Jealousy and resentment will overwhelm them. We know how they are coloring their skin. They change the color of their eyes and hair. They have procedures done to alter the shapes and sizes of their bodies. These actions are considered normal.

Chuki looked at Bru.

Chuki: Is that an instance where normal can be used in reference to a human?

She stopped her strolling and did a little dance. Then she began walking again.

Moja: The latent angry person will be in a constant state of emotional volatility that will progress to aggressive physical expressions. Lust will reveal itself in overt acts that the prim and proper have managed to conceal. The prideful will battle with any and everything that has any level of affront to their sense of dignity and self-worth. We already know the path that the greedy, those who constantly seek value and materialistic things will take. They're never satisfied. They're on the same path as those who cannot control their consumption of food and alcohol and drugs. They too are never satisfied. Humans desire, they seek, they acquire and they consume. So ultimately our Influencer programs will consume them. All we'll be doing is basing our instructions

on that which has been deemed, for hundreds of years, human sinful actions.

Chuki: And thoughts.

Bru: Your ideas and the suggestions are growing on me but we need more.

Moja: In what way?

Bru: So our programs will run deep within the Comm devices and they will be undetectable?

Moja: Correct. They'll execute continuously. They'll be there yet are not there when humans stare at their devices. Instructions will speak to them when they talk on their devices and listen to their music. Our programs will whisper to them when they're asleep. Even if their devices are turned off they will still be influenced. Children will be affected as they play their childish games. It will all occur on a subliminal level.

Chuki laughed and moved her hands as if casting a spell. She spoke in a ghostly voice.

Chuki: Oooh, subliminal. Below the threshold of sensation or consciousness, perceived by or affecting someone's mind and emotions without them being aware of it.

Bru was looking at the little one.

Bru: That aspect I like.

Chuki began to wiggle and shake.

Chuki: I like that word, subliminal.

Bru looked up into the sky. Chuki looked up, to see if she could see what he was seeing. He was thinking, processing. Then he looked at Moja.

Bru: If the Influencer is not going to overpower the humans as it did earlier tonight. If they are combined and proceed slowly and indefatigably then their influence must be insidious.

Bru pointed at Chuki. Her eyes widened and she smiled.

Chuki: Oooh, I like that word too. Insidious, yes, proceeding in a

gradual way but with harmful effects.

Bru: The operative word is not harmful but a derivative of harmful, which is painful.

Bru stood and began to pace back and forth in front of Moja. Ek and Vier watched him and followed his movement. Chuki had to keep moving out of his way.

Bru: Humans under the spell of the influence must feel more than dissatisfaction, anxiety and unease. After they gorge on that bloody steak there must be that which is beyond the sense of guilt and remorse. We know, as Una would put it, that they are greedy, selfish and never satisfied so no matter how they appear physically or how much they acquire they will still desire which they believe others possess even if it's something as vague and ephemeral as perceived beauty. So, we influence the children, the adults and for whatever time they have left, the old. But we want them to suffer until the time comes for us to put them out of their misery. So, back to our modifications, the tamping down of the influence. There must be some level of pain. Can we agree on that? And can we make that happen?

Moja was thinking, processing.

Moja: I agree on going beyond the symptoms of the influence. And we can make that pain happen. We'll code the programs so that with the constant obsessive use of technology, specifically the personal Comm device, the influence will affect the brain and the human body in a similar fashion as the drugs they use.

Bru stopped and smiled at Moja.

Bru: Explain.

Moja: Since the development of the first personal computing devices in the early 1970s and the handheld cellular devices in the early 1980s humans have not simply used them for that which they were designed but they've also gone periods of time where they've struggled with being what can only be aptly described as

addicted to them. Our Influencers will be constructed to interact with the brain in such a way as to alter both their emotions and behaviors by disrupting the chemistry of that organ. Human messengers or neurotransmitters have been detrimentally affected for over two hundred years now. Children who were and are still being conceived during that time span are inheriting genetically determined characteristics from their parents and are having passed on to them not just damaged neurons but also impaired central nervous systems.

Chuki: Whoa!

Moja: Research has shown, without a doubt, that today's humans have abnormal stems and their limbic system and cerebral cortex are all developing in ways never seen until the last one hundred and fifty years or so and the accelerated progression of modern technology. Since the brain stem controls sleeping, breathing and the rate at which the heart beats, as the humans struggle with the symptoms of the influence their overall health will deteriorate. The more the influence proliferates throughout the human brain the more the chemicals and circuitries are irreparably damaged. Ill health will follow which leads to pain. Any attempts at cutting back, minimizing or stopping the use of the device will produce elements of withdrawal.

Bru: Which leads to pain.

Moja: Yes, they'll be physically, psychologically and emotionally dependent on not just the devices but also the symptoms the programs have created which have become syntonetic with all other aspects of the individual's personality. They'll have not only dependency but tremendous, powerful and in most instances uncontrollable cravings.

Bru pointed at Chuki and she yelled.

Chuki: Pain!

Bru rubbed his hands together and began to pace again. Chuki

followed behind him, turning and trying to take long steps. Kojo followed. He was behind Chuki in the procession.

Bru: Can we accomplish this?

Moja: Of course. It's a matter of merging and modifying.

Bru: We need the influencing programs to spread from one device to the next like a virus. No, like a plague, which is more contagious. Khufu will seize control of all the transmission towers in Mississippi and we'll set up a perpetual delayed release of the Influencer. New devices. New infections. One infects two or three. These new infections will each infect two or three. As the R rate increases there'll be more clusters like in the casinos and restaurants and at parties and dinners. That reproduction and dispersion factor will ensure that when we depart, the State of Hospitality will be sick long after we're gone.

Bru stopped. Chuki almost bumped into him and Kojo almost knocked her over. Bru turned. He looked at Ek and Vier and then Moja.

Bru: Just think! The humans will suffer as they live! What more can we ask for?

Ek: Death.

Vier: They take the easy way out. Suicide.

Bru looked at Vier, smiled and pointed at him.

Bru: Mass suicide! What a wonderful dream that is!

Chuki: It all sounds insidious to me.

Bru looked at the little one.

Bru: I've got a project for you.

Chuki: When are you gonna take me into the city?

Bru: Soon as I can. As you can see, I'm busy.

Chuki frowned and kicked at the dirt. Kojo pawed at the dirt and looked at Chuki.

Bru: Moja, start work on the modified influencing programs. Get Okan and Naki to assist you. Una and I will search for Marius

and Westin. We already have access to Destin.

Leeda returned to stand off to the side and observe them as everyone went their ways. Then she went and sat down where Bru had sat. Bru led Chuki, with Kojo following, to Spiny. He pressed on the Comm device on his wrist and the back hatch rose slowly. He reached in and lifted out a box.

Bru: Here, you carry this.

Chuki: What's in it?

Bru: You'll find out.

Bru removed a canvas sack and a bucket of paint. The hatch descended.

Bru: Let's go inside the mill.

They went in and moved to a table near the wall. Power had been restored to the large, nearly empty area and several lights were on high above. After putting the sack and the paint on the table he took the box from Chuki and set it next to the paint. He pulled a chair up next to the table and picked Chuki up and stood her on it. She peered into the box. Bru tapped his wrist.

Bru: Cinq, you and Dois come into the mill.

Chuki: Should I think thoughts of excitement?

Bru removed a handheld Comm device from the box and handed it to Chuki.

Bru: Listen. This is important.

He removed a twelve inch square piece of cardboard from the box.

Bru: I need for you to make some signs.

Chuki: How many?

Cinq and Dois came and stood on the right of Bru and Chuki and watched them.

Bru: Make twenty. You'll make more if needed. There's your cardboard and paint. Brushes are in the box. On that Comm device you have are the names you'll paint on the signs.

He turned to Cinq and Dois.

Bru: Assist Chuki with her project. I want it to look professional.

Chuki read the label on the paint bucket.

Chuki: It says Royal Red. Ooh, that's like the color of blood.

Bru: It's symbolic.

Chuki looked at the device she held and read names.

Chuki: Roy, Olen, Carolyn, Stonewall, Jubal, Beauregard, Ulysses, Sidney, Artie, Flora, Minnie, Delmar, Cox, Blanton, Chambliss, Cash and Beckwith.

Bru was removing the four skulls from the sack.

Bru: Keep scrolling.

Chuki looked at the skulls, for a moment, advanced the screen and read aloud.

Chuki: J.W., Cecil, Mary and James Earl.

Bru: Paint those names on top of the skulls. We should have three more skulls coming.

Chuki stared at the Comm device in her little hands. Then she looked up at Bru. They looked into each other's eyes. Neither spoke. Then her brown *Entity* eyes seemed to flash. Anger, then a look of hatred spread across her face and she nearly whispered.

Chuki: I recognize these names. I know of these humans.

Bru spoke to the little one, softly and with surety.

Bru: I know you do.

Bru was sitting outside beside Leeda as the sun came up on that Friday morning, day four of September. He had Egil's Comm device in his hand and he waited patiently. He watched for Westin to again attempt to contact Egil as he had done several times throughout the night. He also waited on Una to inform him of the movements of Marius.

They knew Westin was at his home, asleep and Marius was in his apartment not far from downtown Jackson, asleep. Bru was

thinking, processing. If the most important logistical factors of his plan did not come together he would have to devise another way. At 10:30 a.m. Una contacted him.

Una: Gravemaker made his delivery.

Bru: Good. His final payment was waiting. Disable his device permanently. He won't need it again.

At 10:40 a.m., he and Ek and Vier started for the plant. Tatu and Cha would follow twenty minutes later. When they arrived Vier moved Spiny out of sight and when Tatu and Cha arrived Ek directed them to drive into the building, out of sight. Vier pulled Egil's sedan out in front so it could be easily seen. Now they all waited. It was almost 11:30 when Una was in Bru's ear.

Una: Westin is on the move. He's been in contact with Marius, sending notifications back and forth.

Bru: He sent another one to Egil.

Una: Apparently they're going to meet up for lunch.

Bru: When they're together let me know.

As noon approached Una contacted Bru.

Una: They're together at a lounge on Bloom Street.

Bru: It looks like things are working out.

It was a while after Westin and Marius met that Westin sent another notification.

Westin: Been trying to reach you all night! Where are you? You need to contact me! Now!

Bru replied to the message using Egil's Comm device.

Bru: I had problems. Biloxi and back. Meet me at the old meat processing plant.

Bru attached an image that Westin showed Marius. They both smiled. Westin made an emphatic gesture with his fisted right hand. It was a picture of a pile of jewelry and value cards. Westin sent a reply.

Westin: On the way.

Bru contacted Una.

Bru: I replied to Westin.

Una: I'm watching now. I'll let you know when they've both left the area and which way they're headed.

Ten minutes later Una informed Bru.

Una: They're moving north towards you.

Bru: I'm dropping off. I'll update you later.

They all five moved further into the main building and ensured they could not be seen from the access road that led past the first front entrance. They waited. A little over forty minutes later a large charcoal-gray sedan, with Marius behind the wheel drove slowly along the narrow road and pulled in directly behind Egil's vehicle and parked. Westin and Marius got out. Marius wore dark-green slacks and a light-green shirt with brown soft shoes. He had a gun under his right arm. Westin had on black slacks and a yellow shirt and black polished shoes with hard soles. He had a gun under his left arm. They both looked around but neither called out. Then Westin pointed and they moved towards the wide, opened doorway and stepped into the dimness of the area. Their eyes were still adjusting from the brightness of the afternoon sun to the shadows of the cavernous plant when they both felt in their chest a needle-like sensation, like the sting of a wasp. Marius grabbed his chest.

Marius: Ow! I been stung!

Marius had looked up to see two very tall, thick, non-humans stand, with rifles. Just then Westin had looked down at his chest, to rub it and when he looked up he saw someone to their right, step from behind a cement column and he also saw two individuals rise up further from behind the conveyor with long guns at the ready. He couldn't figure out what was going on but he knew the two he looked at were not human.

Marius turned to run as Westin was reaching for his handgun.

Marius took two stumbling steps and fell onto his face, hard. He also fell into unconsciousness, hard. Westin suddenly felt as if his right arm had gone numb. He was tingling all over and everything around him went black and he collapsed onto his right side into the inky darkness.

Marius came to consciousness first. They had only been given the drug that was incorporated into the delivery system Cinq and Dois had designed. Bru had not administered the additional, more powerful drug that required an antidote so he woke up as soon as the effects of the chemicals wore off. He could look up and see his hands were securely bound with ties and he knew that he was hanging off the floor because he could see cables that were attached to the ties and were fastened to a large rusty hook suspended from the ceiling and there was nothing beneath his feet. He felt the wrapping around his mouth and when he tried to speak he realized his lips were somehow sealed. He looked down, struggled to swing his feet forward and he could see ties were wrapped around his ankles and around his legs just below his knees. He saw a tall *Marrom DM* in front and below him, just a little ways across the room staring directly into his eyes, smiling slightly. He twisted to his left and saw Westin suspended as he was, bound as he was, just beginning to wake up. Marius began to wiggle and make muffled noises at Westin.

Westin was not fully awake when he saw, through his blurred vision, Marius hanging to his right. He was confused and didn't understand. Then he saw a tall *Marrom DM* in dark-blue overalls wearing blue gloves, looking at him. He tried to recall where he had seen him before and then he was fully awake. Fear rose from his chest into his throat. Just as Marius had done, he looked up at his hands and the ties and the hook. He shifted and looked down at his feet securely bound and he could see, barely, the ties that

were wrapped just below his knees. He could see his once polished, now dusty, black shoes elevated above the floor. He tried to talk, to protest and he too quickly realized he was unable to speak. His arms were aching. He was grunting and his voice was rising and falling. Then Marius joined in the sounds and they were as an unintelligible duet singing an incomprehensible song.

Still watching the two suspended individuals, Bru backed up to the wall behind him. Westin looked at the four others, also in dark-blue overalls and blue gloves but they were wearing masks and goggles. He had seen the two Humanoids, the *Trigos* with silver hair and gray piercing eyes that appeared as males who now glanced at them with disinterest. But what were the others and what could they possibly have been doing? There were obviously dead naked bodies on the floor. They could see an opened door and what must have been a refrigerated room as a light white fog-like substance floated out and dissipated into the warm air. The two grew frantic as they looked around and then they saw the coffins, a mummified body and skulls with hollow, empty eye sockets.

They again looked at the ones that were busy. One individual was mixing something in a large barrel. Another was spraying the bodies and the two non-humans were turning over the corpses to make sure they were being covered and soaked all over. Westin and Marius could smell the chemicals. They could breathe the aroma of death that was blown by the wind that entered the building through the opened door at the dock of this huge building. Death swirled in the air. They both began to gag. They knew that if they threw up they would choke on their own vomit.

They looked back at the tall *Marrom DM*. He too wore overalls and gloves but he also had on a black cap that made his eyes difficult to clearly see. They tried to communicate with him. They uttered noises and wiggled their feet. Neither knew what they

would say if they could actually talk to him.

The other four stopped what they were doing to look at them dangling on those hooks. Then the four looked at the one in the black cap as he lifted the covering on a rectangular box on the wall. It was a control panel with different colored buttons. He pressed a button and Westin and Marius were lifted higher into the air. He pressed a button and their upward movement halted. He pressed another button and the two hanging there could hear sounds. There was whirling and a low roar and flapping noises. They weren't sure but they thought the man in the black cap smiled at them as he pressed a green button and they began to move and those standing below them were all watching as they started slowly towards those strange sounds.

Westin and Marius twisted their bodies and turned in the direction of the sounds. Ahead it was dimly lit and they could barely see what was there, what they were moving towards. The two were whining and screaming and kicking. Beneath them a wide metal conveyor belt was moving at the same speed they were moving. It had not been used in years so it was jerking and hesitating and clanking and Westin and Marius were bouncing and swaying and jerking in time with the belt. They turned their heads to watch with terrified eyes as those individuals behind them faded from their sight as the conveyor below and the hooks above, fused to a steel moving beam began to round a bend.

They looked ahead. They could both see blades whirling and flapping. Had they been hanging upside down the blades would have been positioned to slice their throats or sever their heads from their bodies. Westin would reach the blades first. He tried to twist his body. His protests rose in intensity. Painful, animal noises from Marius followed him. They drew closer to the blades and with great effort and agility they didn't know they possessed they raised their feet. The first set of blades missed them, barely.

Now there came more than the whirling and flapping. There was a high-pitched sound that was like an unusual roar. Then they recognized the sounds of blades of saws. They turned the next bend slowly and could see the round circular saw blades that were positioned vertically to open a carcass by moving forward and then up and down. It was all automated. As a hook activated a sensor the saw did as programmed. The conveyor stopped when the hook stopped. The saw moved forward, cut, retracted and the jerking conveyor started again. The two could observe this technological action. The conveyor stopped, the saw did its cutting movement and Westin and Marius moved forward. Westin was next and as he drew close to the large, serrated, toothy, rusty saw blades Marius passed out.

Bru was observing all this on a screen near the control panel. He had reprogrammed the blades and saws so that they would only come but so close without actually touching them. Westin could feel the swirling air as his feet passed the first knife-like blades. He had experienced the closeness of the next saw after it came forward and then near, between his legs and passed by his chest and face and then moved back and away. The rotation of the saw as it reached his nose had dried the tears that were pouring from his light-green eyes.

They continued forward and as Marius came to consciousness he saw ahead of them a large horizontal saw that was turning and its motor was rising and subsiding with power as it waited, poised to cut them in half at the waist. Marius didn't understand, as he twisted to look back at the saw they had just passed, how they had survived. He looked back around to see Westin twisting and kicking. He observed the large saw moving forward. The saw came so close he could see Westin's yellow shirt flutter. Westin went past it and when Marius got to it he could feel its powerful presence and again he passed out. They continued their journey

around the building and started back towards the side of the building where they had first begun.

The *Marrom DM* was waiting patiently. The others paid them no attention and continued their work. Westin wondered what had happened to them. Why were they in this horrible, deadly situation? Was this about jewelry and value and a robbery gone wrong? What had happened to Egil? Where was he? They made sounds toward the obvious leader.

Bru: Well, what a carnival ride that was, wasn't it? Or was it a carousel, maybe a merry-go-round? No, no. It was a hurdy-gurdy ride. I like the sound of that, hurdy-gurdy.

Bru walked forward a few steps and then pointed with that left, blue-gloved index finger.

Bru: However, Marius, you fudged. We have rules. No fibbing. No cheating. Now if I have to I'll provide you with a wonderful stimulant to keep you awake.

Bru looked from one to the other.

Bru: See this look on my face, this barely discernible smile? That's called a sinister look, a sinister smile. I like that word and I'm an expert at that look. The way I look at you, the way I half smile when I stare deeply into your eyes should convey to you the impression that there is something harmful or evil about to befall upon you. At least, I hope you get that impression. I didn't even have to practice that look. I was created with that ability, like a baby soon after that precious little thing is born and can barely see has the ability to frown, in anger. I simply think sinister thoughts.

The dangling two had absolutely no idea what the man was talking about as they watched him move back to the panel. He raised his right index finger and wiggled it at them.

Bru: Now, this time you're taking this trip for the Governor's young daughter. Dayon rides with you.

Bru pressed the green button and Westin and Marius started around again. Once again they lifted their feet to avoid the blades. Once again the rusty steel came close but this time closer. Marius passed out again and was unconscious when they arrived back at Bru's position. Bru lowered Marius and injected him with an overdose of a powerful stimulant. Then he raised Marius and waited for him to become alert.

Marius came to and began to violently twist and kick, like a fish on a hook. The two now knew why they were there. Westin cursed Bru angrily. He cursed the Governor. Then he moaned and pleaded. Marius simply begged and whined as his eyes rolled in his head and his heart was beating out of his chest. He was grinding his teeth as sweat poured down from his hair and mixed with the tears he shed. Their muffled sounds grew louder and more urgent.

Bru: I hear you. I hear you. Believe me. I understand. But all of this is out of my control and is in the hands of fate.

Bru began to pace in front of the two as they dangled and twitched. Their arms ached with throbbing pain and felt as if their shoulders had all their ligaments ruptured and their sockets shattered and their rotator cuffs torn and tendons shredded. There was no relief in the next ominous words.

Bru: This is your last ride. Soon it will be over.

Bru was pacing back and forth. He was thinking, processing. Then he stopped and looked at them, from one to the other. His smooth voice was low, and intense.

Bru: This ride is for your contemporaries. You represent those who as I speak are raping and torturing and murdering. And you shall have the honor to ride for you ancestors. The whole state of Mississippi rides with you. Honor and valor rides with you. Unfortunately the sins of those who came before you travel with you also and those transgressions have accumulated at you feet.

Bru pressed the green button and Westin and Marius were propelled towards the blades and saws. They twisted and tried to see the tall brown-skinned man and communicate something to him as he faded from their sight. The conveyor belt beneath them was clanking and jerking. Above them the mechanism that powered the movement of the hooks was humming. The sound was low and steady and as they neared that first bend the hum became more like a moan.

They both knew they had to time the lifting of their legs at a precise moment. They could only hold that position but for so long. They could only raise their legs but so high. They had barely cleared the whirling blades on the previous passing.

They remained still and were focused as they drew near to the whirling metal that now seemed to glint through the reddish-brown oxide. Westin reached the blades and he swung and lifted his legs. But he didn't know Bru had reprogrammed them. They were higher and moved further forward, closer than before. Their angle had been adjusted. The blades sliced into his legs above his ankles and not far below his knees. His tibia and fibula were cut completely through and his shoes, with his feet and parts of his bones and pants dropped onto the conveyor.

Westin looked down. He had felt the pain and heard the cracking and grating sound of his bones being shattered and then he was looking at his severed feet and the red blood pouring onto his shoes that had somehow plopped onto the metal flat on their soles as if preparing to walk, or run. Then his right shoe, as blood splashed onto it, wobbled and his foot and the piece of his leg tipped over on its side. He began going into shock.

Marius had seen everything and as he neared the knife-like instruments he tried to twist and sway, away from the bloody blades. He had panicked and failed to even attempt to lift his legs so the blades struck him just below the knees. They went through

him as if his legs were empty of bones and were only soft fat. He looked down at the pieces of his body. He was stimulated and excited and he couldn't pass out. He began to laugh hysterically as he watched his blood, his life, gush out. The noise of the conveyor grew louder and seemed to yell at him as it now suddenly moved faster. And as he floated on towards the saws he began to grow weak. The last thing he could see was Westin pass by the roaring saws untouched.

There had been no fear, nor hope for Westin as he had neared the saws. He was too weak, yet he could feel the dull pain in his legs as his body shut down. He was becoming numb by a loss of sensation. He knew he was about to die. Marius was laughing and crying at the realization that he was about to die.

The two went quickly around the final bend as their blood sprayed. They came to a bumpy stop. Marius could no longer see but he could hear, faintly. Westin, almost conscious but near death could also still hear. They both heard Bru.

Bru: We'll lynch these two with the others.

Ek: Hang them.

Vier: String them up.

Bru: It's all symbolic.

Bru and Ek and Vier and Cha and Tatu continued their work throughout the early afternoon. They worked quickly. They only paused so Bru could share with them the significance of the names in order to allow the others to choose who deserved what name. They went as a group as two bodies at a time were rolled on a flatbed cart into the woods. There they would search for and identify a limb that was strong enough to support the naked corpse upon which they had decided. The sign Chuki had created with the specific name was placed on the chest and a nail was hammered into the sign and through the breastbone. Then the

body was pulled into the tree and the rope tied off.

At 3 p.m. Bru called Moja and instructed him to activate the Command Programs on the Governor's and Destin's devices and move the embedded commands to the tipping point. Then they all turned their attention to Westin and Marius. Bru wanted them taken deeper into the woods than the others so they pushed the cart as far as it would go and then they carried the bodies and everything else they would need to those two trees Bru and Tatu had picked out. Once the two were hung they all watched them dangle for a long moment. On the way back they saw one of the elevated bodies had fallen to the ground. Vier pointed it out.

Vier: One from Gravemaker. The head came off.

Tatu: Probably too old.

Bru: Hang it ...

Cha: Her.

Bru: Yes, hang her by her feet. Turn the sign over so it can be read. That's important.

Ek: What about the head?

Bru picked up the head and stared at the darkened face of the barely discernible female.

Bru: I'll put it on the ground beneath the neck. Head up. Face forward.

Vier: You should open the mouth, like Egil.

Tatu: Lips might come off.

Ek: A few look like they're screaming in horror.

Bru: In pain. Grotesque gargoyles.

Bru spoke softly.

Bru: I like those best.

Bru positioned the head and they all looked up and around at their work. Then they all went back into the building.

Bru: I'll place the skulls that have been appropriately named. They're the last of Gravemaker's contributions and we'll be done.

Bru reached into the box on the table. He removed pieces of cardboard and looked through the extra names Chuki had used, just in case. Then he saw her precise handwriting on a piece of cardboard in the blood-red paint. He looked at it and smiled.

Bru: Look what the little one made.

He held it up for the others to see. Cha read it out loud.

Cha: Orchard of Strange Fruit.

Bru: How apropos.

Bru turned the sign around and stared at it.

Bru: I'll attach it to that bench out back. Even after it rains and the signs grow soft and tattered and the paint appears to melt, the indecipherable words will continue to exist as they have existed for over two hundred years.

As the last two bodies were being hung, Cha watched Bru as he nailed the sign to a bench where it could be seen by anyone entering the woods at that point. Bru handed the hammer to Cha and moved, alone, with the canvas bag of skulls into the woods. He carefully placed three of the skulls at the base of huge, old, loblolly pine trees. He made sure to step back and look up to see if his gaze could reach the top of these trees that could grow to be 80 to 100 feet in height. He had thoughts of how the trees that were four and five feet across had begun their existence in the distant past.

He strolled deeper into the woods and found majestic bald cypress trees. He placed a skull beneath each one. He recited each name that was painted in red. It was as if to inform the tree of the gift being presented. He couldn't see the top of the last tree he placed the last skull beneath. It was perhaps 500 years old. But he knew in its own way that it was breathing and its gift was oxygen to the animals and to the world. He also knew that it was living, and existed when the ancestors of those now hanging in these woods had also been alive.

Back in the plant the group removed their overalls and gloves and tossed them into the corner. Cha brought Runner around to the front of the building. Tatu brought Spiny and they returned to watch Bru patiently, with the others. He had taken out a Comm device and was tapping on it and scrolling through screens. He took another device out of his bag and opened up a speaker connection. Moja answered.

Bru: We're done here. All went well. I'll share the details with you at a later time. Tell Leeda to be ready. I'm coming to pick her up.

Moja: I have locations on both the Governor and Destin. The Command Program is operating on all of their devices and moving without issues to the point of no return. I'll continue to monitor the progress.

Bru: Here's our test to see how effective it is.

He dropped the connection and turned to the others. He was thinking, processing.

Bru: Cha, Tatu, you're in Runner. Start to the mill fifteen minutes after I leave. Ek, Vier, I'll contact you when it's your turn to depart to your destination. In the meantime stay on guard. All of you ensured our task, indeed our symbolic mission here was successful. Now on to our next challenging adventure.

They all walked out into the late afternoon light. The sky was still blue but partly cloudy. And as they stood there, the sun, moving nearly imperceptibly towards the west, disappeared for a long moment behind a soft looking grayish-white opaque, floating, suspended mass. The wind picked up and the tops of the trees that surrounded them and this meat processing plant bent just a little and a rustling sound could be heard, slightly. Bru looked up at the trees that were in front of them. He began slowly turning completely around so he could observe the movement of the trees that were on all sides of them and he stopped so he could look back at the tall trees that rose above the rear of this

old abandoned structure. There was a hint of a smile on his face and he spoke softly with intense bitterness.

Bru: In a few days when the fresh bodies are going bad, rotting and decomposing and the wind rises, the stench of death will blow in Mississippi. One day there will be a wind that will blow with the force of a gale and grow to the strength of a hurricane. We will not be deterred. We will not stop until that familiar aroma of death fills the air, from sea to shining sea.

He started toward Spiny and spoke with enthusiasm and yet in a matter-of-fact tone.

Bru: I love the smell of death in the air!

At 4:30 p.m. Destin was in his office at the casino. Three of his associates were there along with him. Two of the *DMs* sat at a table and played cards together and gambled. The third, with the sound turned down low, stared at his Comm device and watched people having sex. There was a meeting scheduled for 5 p.m. and they waited for one more to arrive.

One of the card players occasionally looked over at Destin who was hunched over a handheld Comm device staring at it and mumbling. The card player tried to figure out if his boss was talking to himself or talking to the device.

At fifteen minutes before five Destin's Comm device chimed as a notification came in. He got up from his desk and without taking his eyes from his device he walked across the room to the door, fumbled for the doorknob, opened the door and stepped out and started down the hallway, leaving the door open.

Seven minutes later the last member of the group came through the doorway, closing the door behind him. He walked across the room to the bar and began to make himself a drink. He sipped his drink, decided it needed more scotch to the water, added a splash and stuck his right index finger in the glass to stir

it. He looked around at the others, sipped his drink and spoke.

Member: I thought the meeting was at five. Where's Destin going?

Neither card player number one nor number two looked up. The sex watcher continued watching the images on his device. Then a card player spoke and looked at the man standing near the bar.

Number Two: What d'ya mean, where's Destin going?

The member sipped his drink.

Member: When I was coming in the rear entrance I saw him get in Westin's car and they drove off.

Number two stared at him as he sipped his drink, thought a moment and then shrugged his shoulders and went back to his game.

Number Two: He'll be back.

At ten minutes after five the Governor was in his office in the Capitol Building. Except for the two guards outside his door and the few who remained of his support staff, he was alone. The few maintenance people were finishing up their duties and the huge building was emptying out this Friday. The weekend, for many, was still the weekend.

He placed the palms of both his hands against his eyes and rubbed them and then squeezed them shut tightly for a long moment. His eyes pained him. His head throbbed, as it had been doing for three days now. He thought it was because he had been working too hard and staring too long at the screens and monitors of too many Comm devices. He had even turned down the brightness on several of them, to no avail. He looked over at one of his devices and wondered when he would receive the message he waited for anxiously. He wanted news about Destin.

He couldn't take his eyes off the device for very long that now lay on his desk. He imagined he heard a soft voice emanating

from this particular device. The voice seemed to whisper in a rhythm that was synchronized with the pulsating ache in his head that settled behind his eyes. He knew it was his daughter's voice. But her soft words were incomprehensible and he couldn't understand what she was saying.

Then at twenty minutes after five a notification came in. He read it. He grabbed the device and stood and crossing the room he opened one of the large double doors and walked out into the hallway. The two guards began to rise and he held out his right hand and motioned for them to remain seated.

Governor: I'm stepping out into the rear courtyard. I'll be back in a little bit.

The two guards returned to what they were doing on their Comm devices. One was playing blackjack and the other one, with the sound coming through his earbuds, was watching people having sex. They didn't know he had walked in a hurry, through the courtyard, into the garage and gotten into a small vehicle. He had switched to silent electric mode and used his device to open the rear gates and then he had driven off.

At ten minutes after six the Governor was walking as quickly as he could while trying not to stumble and fall, west, through dense woods. In front of him and above him the last of the shining sun that remained for the day would occasionally show itself from behind and between the tall trees whose leaves and broad branches were as a canopy that covered his head.

His *Alva-roseda* skin was flushed from the exertion and moist from the still warm late afternoon humidity. His blond hair would shift as a breeze passed between the trees and lightly touched him. He brushed at the strands that fell across his forehead and near his eyes whose blueness seemed to have darkened in the shadows and dimness near the earth even as the sky remained

streaked with not just shades of pink and orange but also with patches of blue just as the sky should be at this time of day. Dusk was slowly approaching.

He didn't stop to listen to the calls of starlings or the songs of warblers. He did pause momentarily as a woodpecker somewhere in front of him hammered on a tree. He pressed on through the growing shadows even showing a lack of caution for any lurking snakes he might have disturbed. It was as if the Comm device he carried in his left hand out before him, guided him, commanded him forward.

He was familiar with the path he walked. At one time it had been obvious. At one time long ago stretches of it had been worn and other parts had been paved with oblong pieces of stepping-stones shaped, chiseled and hauled from the quarry on the edge of this land that belonged to him. This was family land. Once a plantation of nearly one thousand acres in the 1860s it was here where the abundant supply of water, the rich soil and warmth of the mild climate allowed his family to thrive.

His grandparents, going back and unknown to him exactly how many times removed and those who followed grew corn and squash and even sugarcane and rice. But it was tobacco and cotton that were kings and allowed his family, along with distant times of relatively free slave labor, to exist as royals.

The land had gradually been sold off, reduced to a little over two hundred acres. Then, the Omni-strain came and destroyed the neighbors near and far. Before the virus killed him, his grandfather had begun reacquiring land. His father continued up until he died as the pandemic ended. The Governor had claimed more and more property and now he controlled, although not all of it was contiguous, nearly three thousand acres.

So now he walked on a part that had been a portion of the first land his family owned. It was as if he treaded here upon the

original dirt and paused to catch his breath and lean against, most likely, an original tree. He got his bearings and continued on along one of the original paths that only he knew of. It was one of several that were near a private, unknown access road that allowed him to park and walk, in isolation, as he was doing, to his destination.

It was a place to which he had once come often but had not gone to in almost three months. He had only pulled up images of it daily on this Comm device he carried. Then he would stare at it and think about it. And even in the past few days when the images and thoughts that followed caused his head to hurt and his eyes to blur with pain he could not stop himself. He was unable to resist looking at the sight he could almost see emerge in the clearing ahead. The voice he heard came from here.

He moved between the last clusters of trees and walked into the clearing. Concealed sensors caused the Comm device in his hand to vibrate. Alerts were sent notifying him of human presence. Before him was the family mausoleum. It was a huge structure. Built initially of stone and concrete it was then years later reinforced with steel. There was an underground area and the hill behind it had been dug out and cement poured and steel beams erected to build the additional rear of the building and thick concrete columns were connected and ran along the front.

The building was designed and came from the mind of the Governor's great, great, grandfather. He great grandfather and grandfather had enlarged it and improved its foundation. His grandfather and then his father had exhumed other bodies and remains buried on the property and moved them into the building the Governor now approached. The Governor himself ensured thereafter that those in his immediate family who were close to him and any distant relative he deemed fit, for whatever reason, entered these doors and thus were entombed here.

Right before entering the building the Governor paused to look around. Once these grounds were immaculately kept. Wide areas of Bermuda grass in front and on the sides were cut on a regular basis. For almost two years that had not been the case. Now he could see the tall honeysuckle bushes he had himself planted, growing wild and untrimmed and spreading and they were still yellow and orange in these early September days and yet waited to turn dark and dry in the coming fall.

The holly was still red and green and juniper bushes ran off, unrestrained, into the woods and the elephant ears and daylilies were overgrown with weeds. And as he looked around he saw two fully-grown deer, a buck and a doe and just as he began to turn back to the door in front of him he stopped and looked closely and he saw, barely, a little fawn. They were all standing motionless, staring at him with brown-eyed curiosity, patiently waiting for him to go on with what he had come here to do.

The Governor had not only made renovations to what he considered a sacred place he had also improved and modernized the measures of security. Only he was notified by the triggering of sensor's if anyone approached too closely. Only he could observe the images the more than a dozen cameras, mounted both outside and inside, produced. Only he could unlock the massive doors of this fortress-like edifice.

Standing before the door, he pressed on the keys on his device and entered a complicated code. He pushed on the send key and a silent signal pulsated in his hand. He could hear, one by one, three steel bolts retracting. The door, eight feet high and six feet wide, made of concrete and marble began to slowly, noisily open inwardly. When it had opened enough for him to slide in he stepped through the doorway. He pressed several times on his device and the door, again creaking and groaning and gnashing immediately began to close.

To his right, on the wall near the door was a small round glowing yellow light directly above a knob. Before the door was almost closed and as he was plunging into darkness he turned the metal knob and along the wall, on both sides, six feet from the floor of the wide room, torches four feet tall lit up as if suddenly bursting into pointed fire and burning at their tops. The artificial electric flames appeared to move and dance and the light they cast was orange and yellow and red and the concrete walls seemed to shift and the bronze chairs and antique swords and muskets and knives displayed in iron and glass cases reflected the wavering light. Behind him each of the steel bolts, thumping, locked the door like the shutting and sealing of a vault.

The Governor looked around, then he looked up and the room was dim and the myriad shadows were displaced and relocated from one position to another and the ceiling was so high he could barely see what was there above him. Music came forth from speakers somewhere on the walls and in the corners. It was barely audible music that would waft and float hauntingly throughout this building. It was classical music so violins and cellos and harps and flutes sounded softly.

He moved toward the next door. This one, nearly the same dimensions as the first was made of polished steel. He entered another, different code and the door, emanating sounds like a straining, creaking machine, opened towards him to reveal a long, wide, torch-lit hallway. He sent a signal as he began to move forward and the door clanged shut behind him and locked. As he walked, his footsteps echoed on the hard marble floor and he imagined he heard steps behind him and he turned around even though he knew there was no one there.

He continued on. He glanced to his left and then his right. He was passing the crypts of the entombed in coffins and caskets, lying in their final resting places. These were his ancestors in this

designated section, distant relatives he had never seen, would never know. In one room he passed there was a wall of shelves that held urns that contained the ashes of the cremated.

On he walked towards the rear. His pace quickened. He left behind a room that contained four stone sarcophagi, elaborately constructed with finely fashioned sculptures and inscriptions on the tops and sides. There were the remains of four slaves who had shown unwavering fealty to their masters. In one of the smaller rooms to his right were the caskets of five mistresses, slaves who had given birth to twenty-one children, none of whom resided here. Yet the descendants, some of them at least, perhaps, most likely, still walked the streets of Mississippi.

The Governor moved to the last door that protected the last room. This door wasn't as large as the other two. It was made of clear polycarbonate plastic. And although over a foot thick he could have stood outside and seen everything within. And when he entered the next sequence of letters and numbers and symbols the door, splitting in two, parted. A rising, brief, soft whistle sounded and when he stepped into the room the door, controlled by sensors, closed with the whispering whistle sound lowering as the door quickly closed and sealed, fusing itself along the center.

This room was not as large as the first room. Yet it was larger than any of the others. The fiery torches burned but there were additional light-emitting diode units that were on and that ran around the top near the ceiling. Unlike the black and gray painted walls of the other rooms these walls and the ceiling were painted an off-white color and so the room was bright and as he was standing there his head and eyes began to pain him. He walked to the control panel near the entrance and lowered the intensity of both the lights and the torches. And as he stood there he could feel the power source beneath the cement floor rise as a current of electric energy and pass through the soft leather of his shoes

and move up his legs through his body, down his arms to his fingertips. His hands seemed to tingle and he shifted his Comm device from one hand to the other and back again so he could shake them and attempt to remove the prickling, numbing sensations and awaken them.

He passed two large wooden chairs. Before reaching a long, wide, marble table-like platform in the middle of the room he glanced to his right and peered into one of the four full-length mirrors that were in this room, one on each wall. He paused to briefly stare at himself, taking note of his disheveled appearance. He used his right hand to straighten his hair and tried to put the loose strands into place as he turned left and stopped in front of an upright container.

It wasn't a coffin or casket that was standing secured there. Although similar in size and shape it was made of the same plastic material as the door at the entrance of this room. It was hermetically sealed. It had a flexible lamp attachment that hung over and bent down from the top and a yellowish-white glowing lightbulb illuminated the contents.

He stared at the woman inside who appeared to be sleeping. She was of average height, was somewhat thick. There was no way to accurately determine her age simply by looking at her. Cosmetic procedures, enhancement, alterations and colorations had been performed throughout the years so this person was youthful but not young, had aged and yet appeared not old and had been and was still and would always be the Governor's dear departed wife.

He smiled slightly at the form standing yet lying comfortably in the ivory colored satin and velvet that surrounded her. He wanted to feel the blonde hair that was down and gathered around her shoulders. He recalled it as being soft, with the unique fragrance of clean, fresh, Mississippi air that mingled with the

scent of her flowery perfume.

He placed his right hand against the cool plastic as if to touch his favorite sleeveless, pale-yellow, silk and cotton dress that fell just below her knees. Her *Alva* skin still appeared warm and moist and retained its pinkish hue. And so he wanted to kiss the thin, delicate, painted red lips, caress her bare arms and grab her fingers with the green painted nails. He stared at her pedicured bare feet and focused on her toes, the nails, also painted green. He thought how he could no longer tweak them and pull one to make her laugh. A laugh he could no longer hear except in his recordings of her and when he watched videos of her. Again he looked at her face. He couldn't see her cobalt-blue eyes twinkle. Her eyes were closed because she was, had been and would forever be, dead.

He blinked away the tears that were forming and turned to move around and past the large table, towards the rear of the room. He came to three cement steps and stopped. He gathered himself, took three deep breaths and looked up at the upright container that preserved for him, presented to him, Dayon's body. He hesitated then walked up two steps and went to his knees, placing them on the padding he had put on the top step. He put his Comm device near his left leg, on the step, leaned forward and wrapped both arms around the container. Now he was close to his daughter and for a while he couldn't move. He simply remained there on his knees like that.

He looked up into her face. He wanted to touch her *Palida* skin, place his cheek against hers. He wanted so badly to kiss her pink, pouty lips that smiled slightly in a childlike manner, rub his hands playfully through her long, soft blonde hair. He could see her light-blue eyes staring out, unblinking, because her eyes were open. His tears began to slowly fall. She appeared as a little angel to him. His headache intensified. His eyes blurred, not just from

the tears but also from the pain that increased behind his rapidly opening and closing eyes. And it was at this moment that an alert sounded on the Comm device near his leg.

The interruption of his personal private thoughts irritated him. He frowned and reached down and picked up his device. He saw that the alert had been triggered at the front entrance. He turned and sat on the top step. He looked down at the screen and then touched the alert icon. A view from the camera associated to the alert was displayed. There was nothing unusual to be seen. He scrolled through each image of each camera mounted high on the walls of the first room. Again there was nothing.

He started to turn around and get back on his knees so he could continue what for him had become his ritual at this shrine. He dismissed the alert as a glitch of some kind. Then he was halted in his movement because he heard something he couldn't understand. He sat there. His mouth was open as if to catch any ensuing unusual sound. He couldn't grasp what it was he was hearing or not hearing. Then he realized the soft classical music that came continuously through the sound system was silent. He started looking through the images of the cameras again and saw that not only were all the views the same but the cameras that rotated and panned back and forth were not moving and they also all had the same picture. The cameras were frozen.

Now he heard different music, still soft in volume it was heavy and ponderous and ominous. The next sounds he heard were familiar and he recognized them and an alert jumped onto his device. It was the second door. The steel door was opening. The mechanical driven hinges, with effort, were groaning and straining.

The Governor hurried down the steps and nearly ran forward toward the plastic doors. He couldn't believe it. He saw indistinct forms approaching, passing quickly through the artificial flaming

glow of those torches interspersed along the walls.

The figures came forth, striding with purpose. He could only see the outline of the first one, dressed completely in black wearing a black cap but he could tell there were others behind him. He couldn't determine how many. He lifted his Comm device to punch on the keys, to enter a code. He remembered the doors were already locked, sealed and fused. As he looked at the device he saw the screen was blinking and then it grew darker and faded to black. His device shut down and would not power up. Fear gathered around his heart and rose into his throat. Then the lead figure drew nearer and it was beside a set of torches and the Governor recognized the individual as The Destroyer, from the cemetery, the one he addressed as D.

On they came and as they reached the final set of torches D raised his left arm and waved it, extended it and pointed his index finger and little finger forward. The Governor saw a device on his left arm at his wrist that ran partially up his hand. It pulsed and flashed little white and green and blue lights and the doors were no longer sealed or fused or locked because they parted and with the rising whistling sound, they opened.

The Governor was in a panic, stepping back, in retreat. He stumbled and almost fell. He pressed on his device. He didn't know why. The doors remained open and The Destroyer entered through the doorway. Now the Governor could see the individual from the cemetery who appeared as female. She too was dressed in black but her head was uncovered and her dark curly hair was rounded and natural looking and fluffy around her face and the Governor didn't understand why she now wore the bright, shiny markings of a Humanoid on the left side of her dark-brown-skinned face. He looked into The Destroyer's eyes. He looked into the eyes of the one who now stood at his right. There was nothing to be seen. Their eyes were blank, without emotion.

As the Governor moved back further he saw the same two *Trigo* non-humans, also dressed in black with caps and both wearing sunglasses. He then saw they carried a black body bag between them. He looked at all of their weapons including the long guns strapped to the backs of the two with the bag. He saw they all had long sheathed knives on their sides. The Destroyer was reaching in the bag he carried crossbody on his left side and he spoke directly to the Governor with mild intensity and his words were firm and clear and precise and yet made no sense to the Governor. He patted his chest with his right hand as the words came forth. They were direct.

Bru: I am Bru. Kisasi has arrived.

The Governor stared at the brown-skinned man in black. Then he saw the two non-humans move past him. They went to the side of the table that sat in a horizontal position near the center of the room. The Governor began to yell.

Governor: How did you get in here!? You don't belong here! Get out! Get out! This is not our agreement!

He saw one of the non-humans, with black-gloved hands, bend over and unzip the body bag that lay on the floor.

Governor: Get out I said! You don't belong ... How did ...

Bru was looking around the room. He spoke without raising his voice as he turned towards the Governor.

Bru: Quiet. That's not important.

He took two strides toward the Governor and looked at him.

Bru: I'm impressed. King Mausolus would be proud of this structure.

The Governor turned from Bru and watched as both the non-humans pulled open the bag and lifted a naked body out and placed it in a supine position on the marble table. They put both hands on its chest. The Governor's mouth had dropped open and his eyes had widened as he looked closely at the body. He

recognized who it was. It was Destin.

While Destin was being placed on the table Bru had walked over to stand in front of the container that held the Governor's wife. He spoke in a soft, even, matter-of-fact tone as he stared at her.

Bru: This must be your beloved wife. How beautiful she was. I saw the videos of the funeral, listened to the emotional, heartfelt words you used to eulogize her. You loved her didn't you?

The Governor had been looking back and forth from The Destroyer to Destin's body. The other two had stepped away and were standing on each side of the one who appeared as female who was standing near a mirror on the wall. He looked at the leader of the group. He had not responded to his question and he saw him raise and extend his left arm and point his index finger directly at him. He heard his voice. It was loud and it seemed as if anger had suddenly filled The Destroyer.

Bru: Profess your love for your wife!

The Governor rushed his words, blurted them out.

Governor: Yes! Yes, I loved her!

Bru let his arm fall to his side and his voice lowered and his words were imbued with hints of sympathy and compassion.

Bru: And now the mother of your child, your only child is dead. You stated she died of a broken heart. How tragic. How sad.

Bru took the longer route, away from the Governor, past Leeda and Ek and Vier and around Destin's body on the table. Everyone watched him. He stopped at the steps in front of Dayon's body. He looked up at her. His voice was soft. A statement came.

Bru: This is your daughter.

The Governor did not allow a moment to pass.

Governor: Yes.

Bru: So young. How innocent she was.

Governor: Yes.

Bru: Say her name.

Governor: Dayon.

Bru: You loved her, didn't you?

Governor: Yes.

Bru: Profess your love.

The Governor was audibly sobbing.

Governor: Yes! Yes! I loved her!

Bru: Who was it you loved?

The Governor dropped his Comm device and placed both his hands over his face. His words could barely be heard.

Governor: Dayon. I loved Dayon.

Bru turned from the container and looked at the weeping man. Then he spoke. His words were precise, once again, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Bru: Of course you did. What father doesn't love his daughter?

Now the Governor experienced a slight shiver at the words, the way they had been spoken as if presented to him. He slowly opened his fingers and spread them so he could peer between them. He looked at the three. Then he dropped his hands to his sides and looked at The Destroyer, then back to the three. They were standing there staring at him. Nothing came to him except the disconnected thought that the three were, each one, was a robot, a machine, without feelings. He was looking at The Destroyer. He wondered about him.

Bru: Cut out one of Destin's eyes.

Ek reached across his body with his right hand to his left side for his knife. As he stepped forward Leeda placed a hand on his arm.

Leeda: Stop.

She looked at Bru.

Leeda: Let me do it.

Ek looked at Leeda and then Bru who looked at Ek and then Leeda. With his right hand he indicated for her to proceed. With her left hand she pulled the knife on her right side and walked to the table. The Governor stared at her in disbelief. She looked down at Destin and then up at Bru.

Leeda: Which eye?

Bru looked at Ek.

Bru: Which one?

Ek: Left.

Then Bru looked at Vier.

Bru: Which one?

Vier: Right.

Bru looked at Leeda.

Bru: You decide. The choice is yours.

The large knife was glinting from the lights high above. It was suspended in the air. It hovered over Destin's face. It moved from one eye to the other and back again.

Leeda: Left it is.

She adjusted the knife in her left hand. She pulled up Destin's eyelid and cut it off. The Governor gasped. She moved the point of the knife down and then around into the socket, deeper and deeper as blood began to ooze out. Like a surgeon she sliced through the muscles and severed the optic nerve. Then she used the blade to lift the eyeball and carefully grab it with the gloved fingers of her right hand. She placed her knife on Destin's chest and then put the eyeball on his chest beside her knife. With a slight smile she looked at Ek and then Vier and then Bru. She wiped her hands on Destin's hair and then with her left hand she picked up the eye and placed it in the palm of her right hand. She picked up her knife, wiped it several times on Destin's chest to remove, as best she could, the blood and flesh. With the knife in her left hand and the eyeball in her right she came from behind

the table and moved towards the Governor. He was backing up with horror on his face. Her hand was up and he could see the hazel-colored eyeball, obvious against her black glove. He could also see the knife in her left hand, down at her side. He looked at her and thought she appeared pleased, and proud. She carried the eye as if it were a prize. She was preparing to offer it to him and then The Destroyer spoke directly to him but the Governor couldn't comprehend what he said.

Bru: Eat that eye. See what you can see.

The Governor let out an incredulous gasp.

Governor: What?

Bru pointed with his left index finger. His voice remained low, and even. He was calm.

Bru: Eat that eye.

Governor: No! No, I can't. Please.

Bru: You've eaten eyes before.

Governor: No! Never!

Bru: You've eaten sheep's heads. You've eaten the eyes.

Governor: No! Stop this! Please, I'm begging you! Please stop!

Bru: You've eaten fish eyes. They're a delicacy, like fishy grapes. You don't even have to chew it. Just swallow it, like an aspirin, for your headache.

The Governor stared at him. The Destroyer spoke assuringly to him.

Bru: The only way you'll be alive when we leave here is for you to eat that eye. You have my word on that. A person has nothing without their word.

Leeda was holding her hand out to him. Patiently waiting. The Governor turned from her to D. Back to her. Back to D.

Governor: No! I won't!

Then the Governor saw a look spread across the face of The Destroyer and coupled with the words that followed and the way

they were expressed, for him there was no doubt this individual was indeed human. He knew this man was consumed with rage and hatred because he erupted and yelled and his voice filled the room, bounced off the walls and seemed to echo in the air as he pointed his left index finger and the terrified Governor ducked slightly and his knees buckled because it appeared as if that black-gloved hand would cross the short distance that separated them and poke him in his eye, the left one.

Bru: This is Mississippi! You people eat scrambled brains and fried testicles! Eat that eye!

The Governor saw The Destroyer lower his arm and heard the next soft words, imploring him and the hair on the back of his neck rose and tingled.

Bru: See what you can see.

The Governor turned back to the hand and the eye. The hand moved a little closer. He moved closer, and as he reached for the offering he thought he saw something to his left in his peripheral vision. He ignored it. He took the slimy organ in his hand and looked at it with disgust. He swallowed. His mouth was dry. He swallowed again. He licked his lips. Then he held his head back and opened his mouth. He dropped the eye into his mouth. He moved it around with his tongue as if it were hot. Then he swallowed it and struggled to keep it down. The Destroyer yelled.

Bru: Let there be sight! Let there be illumination, no matter how brief!

At this moment Destin's right arm slid away from his side and off the table and bounced slightly, twice. The Governor saw this and presumed it to be some type of involuntary movement. Then he saw the same arm rise and Destin rubbed at his face. The Governor pointed and yelled.

Governor: He's alive! He's alive! That monster is alive!

Bru: What made you think he was dead?

Destin appeared to awaken from a deep sleep. He yawned and smacked his lips and then as he rubbed at his face and touched his empty eye socket, sensation in his drugged body began to return. He opened his right eye and stared at his bloody hand. He began to moan.

Destin: Um. Umm.

Then he hollered.

Destin: Oh! Ohh!

He rolled to his left and fell onto the floor face first with a heavy thud. His forehead split open and began to bleed. He chipped a front tooth and his mouth and lips bled. The Governor was turning in circles. His words were anguished.

Governor: What's going on!? What is all this!?

He stopped his movement to stare at Destin, in denial, as the others looked at him and then Destin. Back and forth, without expression, their gazes went. They saw Destin, with great effort, rise from the floor. He covered his face with both hands and he hollered and stumbled and staggered in a wild zigzagging line. He fell on his knees at the steps and looked up through his one eye and he saw Dayon. She was staring out behind him and he turned to see what she was seeing and he saw the Governor. Now with bleeding knees he stood and started towards him screaming and cursing and caught a glimpse of his own reflection in a mirror on the far wall in front of him. He couldn't see himself clearly through his blurred vision but he could see Leeda to his side as she moved to stand between Ek and Vier. And when he looked at the three strange forms he also saw the mirror on the nearby wall. Then he could see his own naked image. He lurched towards it and could see his face in close detail. He touched the mirror with his bloody hands and yelled.

Destin: My eye! My eye is gone! Ahh, the pain!

Bru: Yes!

Destin: Ohh, the pain!

Bru: I feel your pain!

When he turned back to the Governor he saw Bru. Then he looked all around in confusion, trying to understand where he was. He saw what appeared to be the Governor's wife. He looked over at Dayon and when he looked back at Bru he saw him point to the Governor with that left finger.

Bru: The honorable Governor is a cannibal. He swallowed your eye.

As Bru pulled a Comm device from his bag Destin cursed and charged at the Governor.

Governor: Stay away! Get away from me!

Bru pressed on the device he held and his voice could be heard. It was clear and loud.

Bru's Voice: What is your name? How are you called?

The Governor turned to run and Destin grabbed his arm and pulled him.

Egil's Voice: Egil! My name is Egil!

The Governor and Destin were tussling, slapping at each other.

Bru's Voice: Did Destin kill Dayon?

Egil's Voice: Yes! It was Destin! It was to punish the Governor! He choked her to death!

Destin started yelling as he struggled with the Governor.

Destin: That's a lie! That's a lie!

Destin was trying to put his hands around the Governor's throat. He was attempting to choke him.

Bru's Voice: Did Destin have sex with Dayon?

The Governor began screaming.

Governor: No! Nooo!

Egil's Voice: Yes! Yes! It was Destin!

Destin: No! No! That's a lie!

The Governor grabbed Destin around the throat.
Bru's Voice: Did Destin have sex with Dayon's dead body?
Egil's Voice: Yes! Yes!

The Governor was hollering incomprehensible words as he tried to choke Destin. Destin was gagging as he squeezed the Governor's throat. The Governor was close to Destin's twisted face. He could see darkness in the empty socket. As they were shaking each other and hollering Bru started yelling.

Bru: Where's the justice!?

Again the voices came from the device he held.
Bru's Voice: What is your name? How are you called?
Egil's Voice: Egil! My name is Egil!

The Governor broke from Destin's grasp and moved back from him.

Bru's Voice: Did Destin kill Dayon?

The Governor put both his hands over his ears and hollered.
Governor: Stop it! Stop it!
Egil's Voice: Yes! It was Destin! It was to punish the Governor!
He choked her to death!
Destin: Stop it! Stop it!

Destin was bent over and trying to catch his breath. He was moaning and with his left hand he covered his left eye socket and blood oozed between his fingers.

Bru's Voice: Did Destin have sex with Dayon?

The Governor was begging.
Governor: Please! Please stop! You're torturing me!
Bru yelled at him again.

Bru: Where's the justice for Dayon!?

Egil's Voice: Yes! Yes! It was Destin!

The Governor was rubbing his ears as if to block the words he was hearing, erase the words he had heard. Bru pointed that left index finger at him and yelled.

Bru: You're a coward!

Destin straightened and rushed the Governor again. He was screaming again.

Bru's Voice: Did Destin have sex with Dayon's dead body?

Destin: Agh! Agh!

Destin grabbed at the Governor's throat again. Bru's voice was low and intense.

Bru: You're a coward Governor and I hate cowards.

Bru began to press on his device and it was silenced. Then came forth only the grunts and noises of animals in combat. The Governor broke the grasp of Destin and shoved him so hard he fell and slid on the concrete floor and now his backside was scraped and bleeding. He had to turn onto his knees and try to get up and he could see the Governor. Everyone else in the room saw the Governor begin to retch. His *Alva-rosada* skin began to change colors and take on a light-green hue. His chest and throat were moving in spasms and his cheeks were expanding and contracting over and over. Then he threw up. It was a long, strong heave and the contents of his stomach splattered on the floor not far from Destin. The Governor began to cry again as he tried to catch his breath. Then he burst out in uncontrollable laughter. Destin began to cry loudly as he crawled towards the vomit. He was laughing hysterically as he searched for his eye. He found it. Then he turned to sit and as he tried to clean off his eye the sour smell of the Governor's vomit caused him to throw up on himself, down his chest, into his lap and across his legs. Vomit came from his nose. The stench almost overwhelmed him.

They were both weakened and gasping for air so they didn't notice Bru as he pressed several times on his Comm device. Then the Governor's device, lying on the floor, powered up and the screen was bright and images of a video were on the screen. But no one was watching the screen. However, everyone could hear

the voices as Bru turned the volume up.

They could hear the Governor's voice making complimentary comments about how that particular black and white butterfly dress was his favorite, and that the pink-color of the panties was his favorite. A woman's voice could be heard with instructions to pull those panties down, pull that dress up and bend over so daddy can make a woman of his beautiful little girl.

The Governor froze, in horror. Destin looked up and stared at the Governor. They were all listening to the Governor having sex with Dayon as her mother, the Governor's beloved wife watched, urged on and encouraged her little girl. They all heard the Governor tell his child what to do with her hands, with her mouth, how to move, what to say. They heard Dayon's voice tell her father what to do with his hands, with his mouth, how to move, what to say. They heard Dayon, her words light and clear like a bell yet intense, tell her daddy to choke her.

The sounds ceased. Bru spoke and his words were low and even, almost without emotion of any kind except, perhaps with an essence of resignation.

Bru: What did you see through Destin's eye, Governor? Did you see him having sex with your precious little child? Did you see him choke her to death? Do you know if she teased him and insisted that he do unto her as you had done?

Destin stuck his eye in its socket and began crawling towards the device on the floor. The Governor couldn't move.

Bru: I've seen the videos, heard the audio that spans eight years from the time your daughter was three years old.

Suddenly the Governor moved. He reached the device before Destin. He picked it up and stared at the screen. He couldn't take his gaze off of it. He began to weep.

Bru: The actions of you and Destin, your partner, are just one small aspect of that which makes humans unique.

The Governor was staring at his device as Leeda and Ek and Vier moved through the doorway.

Bru: There's nothing worse than a base human being.

The Governor and Destin began to fight over the device. They both were trying to look at the images. The Governor saw The Destroyer moving towards the doorway to join the others who waited on him. The Governor couldn't get the device from Destin so he let it go. He began to yell.

Governor: Wait! I'll pay you!

Bru pressed on the device he held and the images on the device Destin was staring at disappeared as the screen went blank. He flung it against the wall, shattering it. He yelled out.

Destin: Wait! I'll give you anything you want! I'll pay! I'll pay!

The Governor had turned from Bru when he heard the device strike the wall. He looked at the device lying in pieces on the floor. He took a step towards it. He turned back to Bru who had not stopped walking. They barely heard what he said.

Bru: Neither of you have much that remains with which to pay me.

Then he turned to the Governor standing there, crying. Destin stood there crying and trying to keep his eye from falling out.

Bru: Value is not what I seek and all the riches in the world, in the end cannot save you from your fate.

The Governor saw The Destroyer nearing the doorway and ran toward him as Destin stood there yelling.

Governor: Don't leave me here with him!

Destin: Wait! Please! Please!

The Governor drew close and Bru stepped forward to him and grabbed him at the throat. He lifted him from his feet into the air and tossed him. The Governor landed and slid through his vomit and banged against the bottom of the table. He heard the soft descending sound of the whistle and sat up to see the door

sliding shut. Then it was sealed and fused.

The Governor crawled across the floor as Destin stumbled to the door. When the Governor got there they could both see the four striding, with purpose, down the long, wide hallway and begin to fade from their view. They both pounded on the door. They wept. They hollered. They pleaded.

The Governor remained on his knees at the door. Destin collapsed on the floor beside him. They were there for what seemed like an eternity but had only been a few minutes when they heard the music go silent. Then they heard a familiar voice come through the speakers.

Bru: You two are about to die. It will be a long, slow, extremely painful death, deservedly so. Destin, you were poisoned with a concoction of very powerful drugs. Governor, when you tasted Destin's eye you too were poisoned. You didn't see that though, did you? Destin, with every exhalation of your breath you release poisonous toxins into the air and the properties of the poisons are emitted through the pores of you living, breathing, *Castanbaccara* skin. As the sun comes up, which you two will not see, the pain throughout your bodies will intensify. Each of you will feel excruciating pain in your stomach, chest, joints and muscles. Next, chills, passing around your body will cause you to shake uncontrollably. By this time tomorrow evening you'll be vomiting again, only at that time you'll be throwing up blood, and blood, the liquid of life, will leak from your nose and ears and eyes. In your case Destin, your eye and eye socket. You'll both begin to hemorrhage internally and of course you'll have severe diarrhea. Woe, destruction, ruin, and decay.

There was a pause then the voice came again.

Bru: I believe that's all. Let me think if I left anything out.

There was another pause.

Bru: Oh, yes. You can always take the easy way out.

The classical music, so low it could barely be heard began again. The voice came above the music.

Bru: Death approaches. In any means by which it expresses itself it is indefatigable. It is inexorable. And be not despondent for you are not singular nor special in any way in that sense for it is absolutely true of each and every death that it is quite simply, only a matter of time. The worst is death, and death will have its day.

Now above the music came the passionate voices and sounds of the Governor and his wife and Dayon. Then came the yelling and incriminating confessions of Egil. Bru placed the sounds and voices on a continuous loop and they headed for the first door.

Before Bru closed and locked the door he extinguished all the lights within the building. When they were outside and heard the door creak and gnash and finally shut and lock they started towards the dense woods back to where Spiny was concealed. Leeda smiled and lifted her right hand as if to wave or acknowledge them when she saw a small group of dear, alive and thriving, watching them warily and yet seemingly with curiosity.

They rode in silence for the next forty minutes. Each thinking and processing. Then Bru spoke softly, and it was obvious to whom he was speaking.

Bru: When we return, as soon as there is time, those obvious *Entity* markings will be removed. I've seen the natural expressions on your face and the way you move with ease. And apparently now you understand.

Leeda, sitting there next to Bru in the front passenger seat continued to look forward out of the front windshield. Then she took something that in reality she actually did not need. It was a deep breath that she took. She exhaled, slowly. Then she turned to look to her right, out of the window at the dimming silhouette

of the passing scenery. She smiled slightly, for herself. She spoke, also softly, with confidence and surety.

Leeda: I think therefore I am. As long as I exist I will know why I was created. I am the *Entity* Leeda. And yes, now I understand.

When they arrived back at the sawmill Cinq ran to meet them as Bru parked. As he opened his door and as the others climbed out Cinq spoke with urgency.

Cinq: Chuki hasn't returned! Moja is scanning and Una prepares to go into the woods!

Bru grabbed his bag and started towards Tal. He glanced into the sky. He was thinking, processing. There was only meager light left in the sky to the east and above them twilight was approaching. He knew the gray of dusk was near. The dark shade of charcoal would soon hover near the earth between the tall trees. To the west the sky was still light blue but he knew nighttime was coming. He made note of the cloudless sky. If they were in those dense woods when darkness came they would only have the illumination that the nearly full moon cast and the glow from their hand held lights if they chose to use them.

He went quickly up the stairs and towards the rear Leeda followed. Ek and Vier remained outside. Everyone had gathered behind Moja and Una who both sat on the left side at the console looking at the four screens. They tapped on the keyboards in front of them. The group standing behind them parted for Bru and Leeda. Bru moved close to the two sitting. Leeda stood at his left. Neither of the two sitting stopped or turned but they knew he was there. They had been told he was coming.

Una: I'm activating thermal imaging.

Moja: I've expanded the multifrequency.

Una: She knows to be back by dusk. I was preparing to go look for her

Everyone stared at the screens.

Bru: What band are you using?

Moja: W-band.

Una: I've increased power and range through Khufu. We're both employing composite multimodal signals.

Moja: We're using wide-band noise waveform on a single tone.

Una: We're transmitting them simultaneously.

Moja: We've matched the filtering of the transmitted and received noise signals.

Una: Not only have the campers near that road on the other side of the woods grown in numbers but they've also become more active in the past two days.

Bru: She has no reason to be near them. Enhance the high-range resolutions.

They could see images of the group near the road and they could see their campfires. Una zoomed down and back, in the direction of the mill. The image moved downstream from the lake to an obvious clearing.

Una: Here's the clearing near the stream. This is where she and Kojo spend most of their time but they aren't there. We can't detect their presence anywhere around.

Una began to rise.

Bru: No Una. We need you here with Moja. We'll start at that clearing. Cinq, we'll need inter-communication. We'll establish connection with Moja and Una. Naki, Tatu, Okan and Cha are with me.

Leeda: I'm coming too.

Bru placed his bag crossbody on his left side.

Bru: Everybody arm up. Outside immediately.

The group moved into action. Cinq and Dois handed out weapons, extra bags of ammunition, inter-communication devices and handheld lights. Once outside Bru issued instructions.

Bru: We advance as operation three, level two. Behind me, in this order are Leeda, Ek, Okan, Vier, Cha, Naki and Tatu. When we reach the woods and I give the order to spread out it'll be to my right, Leeda, Ek and Okan on the right flank. To my left are Vier, Cha, Naki and Tatu on the left flank.

They established inter-communication and verified they had connection with Moja and Una. They could hear Bru in their ear as they moved forward in a line.

Bru: When I tell you to spread out don't get too wide in these woods. Maintain visual contact. No one gets ahead of me unless absolutely necessary. We don't want to be in positions to shoot each other. Again, unless absolutely necessary don't fire until I say so. We're going out here to find Chuki and Kojo and bring them back.

They entered the woods in single file. It was growing darker. The wind picked up slightly and the rustling sound of leaves could be heard along with the early crickets and the occasional calling of the birds that Chuki had identified. They were nearing the stream and they could now hear the moving water to their left. The first frogs were croaking. Their footsteps were barely audible even though Bru led them at a quick pace. He was attempting to find as clear of a path as possible. He moved carefully around fallen tree limbs and boulders. Each of them had to watch where they stepped and also focus on that which lay ahead at the same time.

They reached the clearing and it was here the stream bore to their right and disappeared. Bru stopped. They all stood there and looked around. Chuki and Kojo would have had to cross the shallow stream in order to continue forward. Bru issued his orders.

Bru: Spread out. Look and listen.

It was at this moment Moja spoke.

Moja: Thirteen campers are moving into the woods towards you and to your right. They're headed to where the stream widens. They're moving fast.

Una: They're armed, with long guns. They have two dogs with them.

Cha moved to the left of the stream.

Cha: Footprints are here at the side of the water. Small prints, different sets.

Bru: Prints here. Looks like Kojo and Chuki.

Bru moved forward slowly. He squatted, to look closely at the prints. Then he moved through the stream. And when he came out of the water he picked up the prints.

Bru: They crossed over. They went towards the other side of the woods, towards the campers.

Cha: These prints moved towards the water.

Bru: They came out. It looks like they were following Chuki and Kojo.

Those behind Bru crossed through the stream. Cha and the other three moved through the water and now they were all on the right side of the stream that ran out before them on their left. The point where it turned was behind them. They were moving towards the campers that were moving towards them.

Moja: The campers are moving faster, they've released the dogs.

Bru and several in his group had been calling Chuki's name softly and peering into the thick overgrowth. Then Moja spoke with urgency.

Moja: Chuki and Kojo have revealed themselves! They're seventy yards ahead, forty yards to your right, moving in your direction!

Bru and his group began to move quickly forward and to their right. Their pace was dictated by the denseness of the growth around the trees and the obstructions at their feet.

Una: Kojo's fighting the dogs! Chuki's still running!

Moja: You're closing! Forty yards straight ahead!

Una: Kojo chased the dogs off! Now he's following after Chuki!

Moja: The campers have turned to your right, towards Chuki!

Four are closing fast! Nine are coming behind!

Una: You're thirty yards from them!

Bru and his group were moving through the trees when a barrage of shots rang out ahead of them.

Moja: They're shooting at Chuki and Kojo!

Una: First Chuki and now Kojo have disappeared! They must be hiding!

Moja: Ten yards! Four are ahead to your right! Nine ahead to your left!

Bru: Ek, Okan, cross in front of me! Leeda stay with me!

Ek and Okan moved in front of Bru and he and Leeda turned to the right. Bru spoke to everyone.

Bru: When you see them shoot them!

As he and Leeda moved around some trees they saw the four campers but the campers didn't see or hear them approaching. They were pointing their weapons into some thick bushes and yelling loudly and cursing and threatening what they were going to do and hollering out they were going to shoot them both and kill that dog.

All the others in Bru's group opened fire on the nine campers and as the four turned to see what was behind them Bru and Leeda, with their long guns set on semi-automatic mode, fired on the four from around the trees beside them. The nine campers were returning fire and now the four turned towards Bru and Leeda and began to fire. Bullets were whining and whizzing through the evening air, thudding into the ground, kicking up dirt and ricocheting off of trees.

Bru shot one of the four. Leeda shot one. The two who were shot were screaming and cursing. They started moaning. Then

they were silent. The other two stooped down and concealed themselves behind trees. Bru moved left. Leeda moved right. Then ran in a crouch from tree to tree. Every time they moved the two remaining campers fired. In the woods behind and to their left there was still intense firing. There was still hollering and cursing along with the gunshots that echoed through the woods. The smell of gunpowder was in the air, there, coming from that battle and here where Bru and Leeda were returning fire.

Bru saw a camper reveal theirself as they turned to run. He shot that one three times. The last camper saw them fall and heard them whimper and plead for help and then heard nothing. The last one started hollering.

Camper: I give up! I give up! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!

Leeda called out.

Leeda: Throw your weapon away. Come out with your hands up! I won't shoot! You have my word!

The camper tossed their weapon to the side, raised their arms and came from behind a tree. Leeda fired on the surrendering camper. Bru fired and the camper was dead.

Bru: Get Chuki!

Bru went to the four bodies and put bullets through their heads as Leeda hurried over, squatted down and called out.

Leeda: Chuki, it's Leeda! You can come out now!

Behind them, on the left, the gunfire sounds subsided, became sporadic and then ceased. The remaining campers had retreated and no one in Bru's group was giving chase. They were all now concealing themselves in defensive positions.

Chuki: Kojo's been shot!

Bru: Are you alright?

Ek and Okan were now crouched behind Bru and Leeda, guarding their backs.

Chuki: Yeah, but Kojo won't move!

Bru: You come out. We'll get Kojo.

Chuki crawled out. Leeda grabbed her and began to check her. Bru gestured to Ek and Okan. They lay their weapons down and began to pull at the bushes as Vier, Cha, Naki and Tatu came up and spread out in the directions the campers had gone.

Una: I'll provide you updates on the movements of the three who survived.

When Ek and Okan had made a large enough opening, Ek crawled in and got Kojo. He lifted him up, turned and handed him to Okan who placed him carefully on the ground. Chuki pulled away from Leeda and went to her knees beside him.

Chuki: He can see me and hear me but he won't walk.

Bru had taken a Comm device from his bag and tapped on it. He began to scan Kojo's body. He passed the device slowly over him. It was humming and green and red lights blinked. His screen displayed the results.

Bru: He can't move. He's shutting down.

Chuki fell across Kojo and placed her arms on him and pressed her face against his side. She was crying. Tears came from her eyes and rolled down her brown cheeks. She pleaded, her childlike voice choking.

Chuki: Help him! Help him daddy! Don't let him die! He saved me!

Bru: Something's going on inside. He's been damaged. I'm going to deactivate him so he won't overheat.

Bru began to press on his device as Kojo lifted his head and looked at each of them, finally staring at Chuki. He tried to lick her hand. Then he laid his head down and closed his eyes as the deactivation sequence completed.

Bru: Come on, we've got to get back to the mill.

Leeda pulled Chuki to her feet. Ek picked up Kojo and Bru led them back. Chuki stayed at Ek's side and others spread out

behind them and guarded the rear as they moved back through the woods.

Una: One follows at distance.

Vier moved up beside Bru and looked at him.

Bru: No. It won't be difficult for them to determine where we are.

When they got back to the mill they immediately dealt with the aftermath of the battle. A work area near the weapons section was extended from the wall and Kojo was placed on it. Naki and Okan took over monitoring for Moja and Una so that Moja could attend to Kojo and she could assist if needed. Una first had to initiate repairs on Tatu when it was determined, unbeknownst to anyone, he had been shot in the back of his left shoulder. She had him lie on the floor beside the table while Moja ran diagnostics and imaging on Kojo.

Cinq and Dois examined the weapons that had been used and then replenished ammunition. Bru made Chuki stay outside with him and the others and within fifteen minutes of their arrival back at the mill they received an update. Bru and the others who were still connected heard Naki's voice in their ear.

Naki: The campers are messaging and sending and receiving brief notifications. They're contacting others. They're reaching out north to Pickens and south to Canton. They'll send more details later. They're calling for them to join their attack. They know where we are and are mobilizing against us.

Bru: Continue to monitor them. Provide updates as necessary.

It was at this time that Moja came outside and sat down. He looked from Bru to Chuki.

Moja: I've looked at the internal images of Kojo. From what I can see he may be able to be repaired but I can't say for certain. I won't know until I try to activate him.

Bru and Moja looked at Chuki who jumped out of her chair and clasped her hands together near her chest. Then she turned to the window as if she could see Kojo. Moja continued as he looked directly at Bru.

Moja: I'm going to have to open him up. Some extensive rewiring is required and four parts will need to be replaced. I verified through our inventory that we have two of the parts and I can create molds and print the other two. Cinq and Dois can assist Una and I but there's a problem.

Chuki turned. With her hands still clasped she looked at Moja.

Bru: Which is?

Moja: I've never dealt with a construction such as Kojo. Not only is the rewiring extensive it's complex.

Chuki moved to stand next to Bru, at his right shoulder.

Moja: It will take time.

Bru: How long?

Moja: I don't know.

Bru: Best estimate.

Moja: Four, maybe five hours.

Bru: What's the problem?

Moja: I can't repair him if we're moving. We have to be stationary.

Bru: What's the problem?

Moja: It's my understanding our enemies are organizing an attack against us.

Bru was thinking, processing as he turned to look at Chuki standing beside him. He stared into her brown eyes. Then he looked around at those who had gathered in front and to the side of him. He saw Leeda standing there in front. He looked directly at Moja. He spoke with an even, matter-of-fact tone.

Bru: A human would rather die for their dog than a fellow human. Kojo is an *Entity*. Not only is he one of us, he is our

friend and the little one's partner. Take all the time you need. If the situation arises that requires action we will deal with our enemies, by any means necessary.

As Moja went back in, Bru reached and picked up his bag that was sitting on the ground beside him. He placed it on his lap and reached into it. He pulled out a Comm device and looked at it. He pulled out another one and put the first one back in the bag.

Everyone was outside except for Moja, Una, Cinq, Dois, Naki, Okan, and Tatu. Then as Bru, using the device he held, adjusted the lights that ran around the top and bottom of Tal, Tatu came down the steps. They all turned to him.

Chuki: Tatu, are you alright?

Tatu: Yes, Tatu is functioning properly. Una is an expert at repairs.

Bru: Good, and good job Tatu. Good job, all of you. We put in work. We still have work to do.

Bru dimmed the nightlights and running lights of Tal. Moja, requiring brightness, set the windows so no lights came from inside. Now the group was sitting and standing in the yellowish glow that came from outside Tal and the somewhat dull whiteness that shined down on them from the moon that high above floated across the sky.

The shadows that were around them were dark and thick and wavered and the small creatures and insects went about their nightly business and the nocturnal birds and larger creatures also went about their nightly business. There were those that were eating and those that were being eaten and the cycle of life and death continued on.

Ek, Vier and Cha were standing. Leeda had sat down and Tatu took a seat beside her, on her left. The two sat across from Bru who was sitting with Tal on his right. Ek and Cha stood to his left. Vier stood behind Leeda and Tatu. Bru put his bag on the

ground and stared for a long moment at the Comm device he held. He kept the device in his right hand and then stretched out his legs and put his left hand on the armrest.

Bru: Now Chuki, tell us why those humans were so intent on destroying you and Kojo?

Ek: This should be interesting.

Chuki began pacing in front of Bru who patiently watched her walk back and forth past him while seeming gathering her thoughts. Everyone watched.

Chuki: I was at the clearing, looking for frogs when I heard this woodpecker just pecking away. So I went a little ways into the woods toward the sound.

She pulls her knife that was sheathed at her right side.

Chuki: I look up and I see it. It was one of those pretty red-bellied ones. So I'm standing at the tree tapping along with it, like we're talking to each other.

She pretended as if she was standing near a tree looking up and tapping it with her knife.

Chuki: All of a sudden, rocks started flying past me and Kojo. One hit Kojo on his back. Another one barely misses my head. I turn around and there're these four young campers between the trees, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. They snuck up on us. I couldn't be sure but it looked like two girls and two boys. They're all throwing at us and I mean throwing hard and fast. Then they charged us, hollering and cursing. They all had knives and two of 'em pulled theirs out. Two of 'em cut us off so we couldn't head to the mill so we ran further into the woods and turn in the other direction. So now we're heading towards the other side of the woods and the other campers. They chased us for a while, still hollering and cursing and throwing chunks of dirt and rocks and pieces of wood. Then they stopped.

Chuki paused her ducking and running in place movements

and looked at Bru.

Chuki: They had filthy mouths.

Bru: Filthy humans say filthy things.

Chuki continued. She crouched and took small stealthy steps in the middle of the group as everyone watched her.

Chuki: Me and Kojo saw when they turned around and went back towards the clearing. We followed at a distance. They stayed in the clearing for a while skipping rocks in the water, then they started back towards the other side of the woods and the road. I saw they stayed on this side of the stream. They was messing around and throwing rocks at the birds so we ran ahead of 'em. On the way I found a stick.

She put her knife away and picked up an imaginary stick with her right hand, hefted it and swung it a couple of times.

Chuki: It was a good stick too. Fit my hands just right, one or two hands.

She used both hands to swing at an invisible target.

Chuki: It was strong, not too heavy and not too light. It was big and almost square on the end and real hard.

Vier: Like a truncheon.

Chuki pointed at Vier with the imaginary stick.

Chuki: Yeah, like a truncheon!

Ek: That's what you need, a truncheon.

Chuki: No, I need a gun!

Vier: You have a gun.

Chuki: No, I mean a real gun. That one I have is too little. It shoots little bullets.

Ek: Cinq can make those little bullets explode.

Chuki pointed with her imaginary stick at Ek and smiled.

Chuki: Now that's an idea.

Bru: Go on with your story.

Chuki: Oh, yeah.

She was thinking, processing.

Chuki: Since they were on my side of the water I got ahead of 'em and found a place near where the water got wider and deeper and the trail narrowed. They would have to come past me, so me and Kojo hid. I put Kojo in attack mode.

Chuki squatted down, holding her imaginary stick.

Chuki: It took a while. It was just getting darker and then I could hear 'em coming, laughing and talking.

Bru: And cursing.

Chuki: They were walking single file. When all four got past me I ran out from behind the tree and I was thinking, swing hard. I swung as hard as I could at the right leg of the last one, the one who could've been a boy.

Bru: What's the name of your stick?

Chuki stopped with her imaginary stick aloft in her right hand. Her hand was near her shoulder. She was thinking, processing.

Vier: Babe!

Ek: Willie!

Tatu: Mickey!

Cha: Miggy!

Leeda: Hank!

Chuki pointed her right arm, and the stick, at Leeda.

Chuki: I like that one! Hank!

Bru: Hank it is.

Chuki: I hit that leg so hard I think I broke it! I heard a crack! He yelled and I pushed him as I ran up to him and he went down. The one in front of him, who looked like a girl turned around and I whacked her on her left knee and she started hopping so I hit her other knee.

Chuki swung Hank in the air with her right hand in a sideways chopping motion. Then she switched to a two-hand backhand and swung Hank again, down and to the side.

Chuki: She went down screaming. The one in front of her, a tall thick one, looking like a boy, had turned towards me and with his right hand, pulled his knife. I busted his hand with Hank.

Chuki made a swift downward chopping motion.

Chuki: He hollered and cursed and when his knife hit the ground he turned and took off running with the other girl who was in front. I sent Kojo after the boy and he jumped on his back and brought him down. I was right there and I beat the boy in the back of his head.

Chuki was swinging Hank down at the imaginary boy on the ground.

Chuki: Hank put him to sleep. That last girl could pick 'em up and put 'em down and she disappeared into the woods towards their camp. The two I first hit were hollering ...

Bru: And cursing.

Chuki: Yeah. They were mad but they were more hurt than mad. The boy was rolling on the ground and the girl was trying to get up. I caught the girl hobbling on one leg and whacked it a couple of times.

Chuki took a couple of steps and swung Hank with her right hand, twice.

Chuki: And when she went down I busted her on the side of her head.

Chuki swung twice.

Bru: Twice?

Chuki thought a moment.

Chuki: No, three times.

She swung down hard, once more.

Chuki: She went to sleep. Then I ran over to the boy and beat him in the face until he quit moving.

Chuki stared down at the imaginary boy.

Chuki: Now everything was quiet except for the water bubbling

and gurgling as it moved past. Even the birds and frogs were quiet.

She raised her head as if listening. Close around them they could hear birds and crickets. She looked down and around at the three imaginary bodies.

Chuki: Then I heard this noise. It was like a grunting sound and I look in the water and I see what I first thought was a log. But it was an alligator.

Leeda: An alligator?

Chuki: Yeah, a pretty big one too and I see another big one and two smaller ones near the bank on the other side of the water. They must've come down from the swampy area where the campers were. Maybe they were being killed and skinned to make boots and purses.

Cha: And shoes.

Bru: If they killed them they ate them.

Chuki: The one in the water might've been the mother because it makes another sound, more like a bellow and two of the others answer. I put Hank down and get my knife.

She bends and puts Hank down and pulls her knife with her right hand.

Chuki: I start cutting their clothes and pulling everything off.

She demonstrates how she cuts and pulls.

Chuki: I gotta roll 'em over. I get all their clothes off and they're naked, except for their boots.

She puts her knife away, reaches down with both hands.

Chuki: I grab the first boy's leg and drag him to the edge of the water. I roll the girl over next to him. I know the other boy, the thick one is kinda heavy so I save him for last. Then the first boy comes to and starts hollering.

Bru: And cursing.

Chuki: I run over and get Hank and I come back and whack him

in his forehead.

Chuki goes and gets Hank, comes back, lifts the imaginary stick with both hands and brings it down to strike a blow. She puts Hank down on the ground.

Chuki: But I hit him too hard and I see blood and stuff coming out of his head and eyes and nose and ears and I see he's dead but it don't matter. Since he's bleeding real good I know them alligators will smell that blood. They can smell blood real good so I roll him into the water first. He sinks and I push and drag the girl to the edge.

She pushes and drags and then pulls her knife.

Chuki: I stick her a few times, well, actually five times.

She sticks the girl. Puts her knife away.

Chuki: I make sure she's bleeding out and as I'm pushing and rolling her into the water the first boy comes up and starts to float. Now I gotta get the big boy. And while I'm pushing and pulling and rolling him to the edge the big alligator gets a hold of the first boy. The other three come real fast off that bank and head for the girl.

She pulls her knife, bends and makes four thrusting motions. Puts her knife away.

Chuki: I stick the big boy four times.

Ek: Can't forget that.

Chuki: I roll him over the edge but he doesn't go all the way into the water. He's lying almost in but still out. By now the alligators are eating the boy and girl.

Chuki uses both hands to show Bru. Then she turns to show everyone watching.

Chuki: Alligators grab and then spin like this.

She twists both hands.

Chuki: Only all the way around.

Then she twisted them the other direction.

Chuki: I can't do it but they turn all the way around. It's called the death roll. And when they roll like that they rip the flesh into pieces and then they open their mouths wide and hold their heads back and swallow what they got. They don't really chew they just swallow. Chuki had held both hands up and spread them apart. She brought them close together, twisted them and opened them up. She showed everyone how alligators eat. She looked at Bru.

Chuki: I like alligators.

Vier: Obviously, from that smile on your face.

Chuki: Anyway, while the two smaller alligators are tearing at the bodies and the two bigger ones are gulping pieces down, the thick boy comes to. He's barely hanging on to the mud, trying to crawl back up, but he can't. It's slippery and kinda steep and it looks like his right hand is broken. So he turns around and sees the alligators feasting on his other two friends ...

Bru: Or maybe his sister and brother.

Chuki pointed at Bru and smiled.

Chuki: The water is churning and there's splashing and he starts hollering and screaming and begging me and pleading with me as I'm standing there looking down at him. He keeps saying please, please and that he's sorry, he's sorry and then over and over again he asks me. Why? Why?

Bru: Did you answer?

Chuki: Yeah.

Bru: What did you say?

Chuki replied to him immediately, in a matter-of-fact way.

Chuk: I said the same thing I heard you say to that rapist at The Playground. Why not!

They stared at each other a long moment. She continued, with enthusiasm.

Chuki: The biggest alligator starts towards him! He sees it! It's

coming fast! An alligator can reach a top speed of 20 miles per hour! That's faster than a bottlenose dolphin! That thing looks like a boat leaving a wake. The big boy knew he was about to die but he still tried to get away. He was screaming and kicking when that alligator grabbed his left leg and snatched him into the water! It starts to eat him and it don't take long until he ain't hollering any more! The other three join in! They pull him under! They bring him up and the boy's head floats by and there's blood all in the water! They race after the head!

Bru: The head is a delicacy.

Chuki pauses. She's thinking, processing. She looked directly at Bru.

Chuki: Those 'gators were hungry! They ate everything, even their boots!

Chuki picks up Hank and dips the stick in front of her as if counting, three times. She turns in a circle so she can look directly at each of those in her family. Her face contorts and fills with a mixture of pain and rage and hatred. Her voice rises, and venom comes forth.

Chuki: I did them like they used to do those little slave children in Florida!

Ek: Vengeance!

Vier: Retribution!

She looked at Bru and a sense of calm seemed to envelope the little one. Bru spoke to her softly.

Bru: It's all symbolic.

Chuki walked in a circle, slowly.

Chuki: Then the others were coming. Me and Kojo could hear them. They were calling out their children's' names as they came closer. But their children couldn't answer. We took off.

Chuki stooped over and ran in place.

Chuki: We went deeper into the woods and then started towards

the mill. They spread out so we hid.

She squatted down and remained still.

Chuki: They were getting close so we started running again.

Again she ran in place. Then she stopped and stood there.

Chuki: They sent the dogs after us, and Kojo fought them off. Then we were running and they were shooting at us. Kojo jumped in front of me and that's when he got shot but I didn't know it until he was slowing down. Then he couldn't run anymore so we hid again. Then they found us and were getting ready to shoot us.

Chuki's voice trailed off.

Chuki: Well, you know the rest.

Vier turned to Ek.

Vier: You were right. That was interesting.

Chuki walked over to Bru and put her arms around his neck. She put her cheek next to his.

Chuki: Thank you daddy.

Bru: You're welcome. You did good. I'm proud of you.

She went to Leeda and hugged her.

Chuki: Thank you Leeda.

Leeda: You're here with us. That's all the thanks I need.

She went over and held out both her hands to Tatu. He took them, held them and let them go.

Chuki: Thank you Tatu.

Tatu: It was no problem.

She turned to walk away. Then she turned back to him.

Chuki: I'm sorry you got shot. Do you have a scar?

Tatu: Actually, I don't know.

Chuki: If you find out you do will you show it to me?

Tatu: Sure.

Chuki walked up to Cha and reached up and took his right hand in both her hands.

Chuki: Thank you Cha.

Cha: He smiled, briefly closed his eyes and nodded.

Next she hugged Ek around his waist.

Chuki: Thank you Ek.

Ek: Of course, anytime.

Then she hugged Vier around his waist.

Chuki: Thank you Vier.

Vier: It was my pleasure.

She looked at him and smiled broadly. He tried to return the expression but found it difficult to smile. His deep voice was low.

Vier: Well, you understand.

Her next statement was for all to hear.

Chuki: I will personally thank Naki and Okan and Moja and Una and Cinq and Dois at the first opportunity I have.

Then she went over and sat on the steps to wait on Moja and Una. Bru tapped on the device he had in his hand. And as he stood up a narrow, drawer-like section at the side of Tal extended almost four feet.

Bru: Ek, Vier, Cha, let's go and leave some gifts in the woods. Leeda, you and Tatu verify the weapons in the trailer are fully functional and are loaded with the maximum amount of ammunition. Then put Runner and Spiny in the trailer.

After Bru and Vier and Ek and Cha returned from the woods everyone waited on updates from Naki and Okan. They were using the advanced radar system to monitor movements both across the woods at the campers' location and on the main highway near the access road. They were also intercepting back and forth notifications and messages and listening to all voice communications. They had also seen the one camper come close.

That camper who had followed only came far enough to observe them return to the location near the mill. From their

vantage point they could see the large vehicle but due to the near darkness and their angle they couldn't see any individuals. They surmised people must have been on the other side of that thing that looked like a motorhome. As the campers gathered their dead they sent for someone to come from the south of the mill location to watch the access road from the main highway.

The campers had informed friends and relatives of the horror and brutality that had occurred. They called in debts, asked for favors and of course urged anyone of their ilk that simply wanted to kill and destroy to join them in the attack that was scheduled for sunrise. They informed those they had reached out to that the large vehicle had for some reason remained in place near the old mill. The plan was to surround them over the next few hours, and if they attempted to leave to stop them from doing that. They began putting their plan in motion and people were gathering on the highway and would be joining them at their campground near the road.

At 4 a.m. Moja called for Bru and Chuki to come inside. He was standing by the table upon which Kojo lay. Una, Cinq and Dois stood to the side. Chuki knew something was wrong when she saw Kojo, lying still and unmoving on his right side. Her voice was soft, and her words were uttered plaintively, with obvious emotion.

Chuki: He isn't moving. Why isn't he moving?

Moja spoke softly to Chuki.

Moja: I can't get him to activate.

Then he looked at Bru.

Moja: I've run scans and diagnostics. The replacement parts are functioning properly and the wiring is all connected and stable. I sent a test impulse completely through his internal system and the results indicate no obstructions or any other issues. His body temperature is stable and remains normal, between 101 and 103

degrees so his coolant apparatus is pumping. All fluids are circulating and his artificial heart is beating. He's designed to appear as if he's breathing so his chest motion indicates that. I don't know what else to do. What do you think?

Chuki placed both her hands on Kojo's side and looked at the animal, that appeared to be sleeping.

Chuki: Help him daddy! Help him!

Bru was thinking, processing. He looked down at the device Moja held in his right hand, down at his side.

Bru: You sent the activation signal from your device? Correct?

Moja: Correct.

Bru thought some more. He processed additional information.

Bru: Cinq, bring me the Sizzle Stick from my bag.

Cinq ran to the storage area near the clothes and came back with an eighteen inch round, black, stick-like object. Bru took it. He looked at it.

Bru: The Rebel Boys enjoyed this little electrical gadget of ours. Now we have to determine what level of current to use.

Chuki: You gonna shock him?

Bru: Let's say, try to charge him up.

He looked at Chuki who was looking back and forth at the stick and at Kojo.

Bru: Run and ask Ek how much Kojo weighs. Hurry!

Chuki took off running. Bru turned to Moja.

Bru: We're going to initiate the activation signal straight from Khufu. We'll get a much more direct signal that way. There's less possibility of any fluctuation.

Chuki came running back in.

Chuki: He said approximately one hundred and twenty-five pounds.

Bru: Alright Moja, you take control of Khufu and on my word, now, send the signal.

Moja went to the console across from Naki. He accessed the portal and entered Khufu. He used the Finder application to locate Kojo's position on the table and locked in on him. He opened the activation program and switched it to manual release. He looked at Bru and nodded, indicating he was ready.

Using a dial on the stick, Bru factored in Kojo's weight and size and set the level of current. With the stick in his left hand he placed it against Kojo's chest. Then he raised his right arm. As he called out he dropped his arm.

Bru: Now!

Moja sent the signal just as Bru pressed the green button on the stick. They could hear the humming noise of the electricity. The current ran through Kojo and he was shaking. Bru removed the stick. Moja hurried over and the three of them stared at Kojo. Cinq and Dois and Una moved closer. Naki and Okan turned to look at Kojo and those gathered around the table. Kojo remained still. There was no movement.

Moja: It didn't succeed.

Bru: Perhaps he was too damaged.

Chuki hollered.

Chuki: No! No! Shock him again!

Bru: His circuitry will burn up.

Moja: His internal components will melt.

Chuki placed both her hands on Kojo.

Chuki: Run the current through me!

Bru: I won't do that.

Chuki yelled.

Chuki: Wake up Kojo! Wake up!

And just like that, Kojo opened his eyes.

Chuki: Look at him! Look!

Chuki stepped back. Kojo raised his head. He looked at Moja and Bru and when he saw Chuki his tail began thumping on the

table. Then, to Chuki's delight he barked, three times, a deep, throaty bark. Chuki jumped up and down.

Chuki: He's alive! Kojo's alive! And he can bark! I'm thinking happy thoughts!

Bru turned to Moja.

Bru: And I'm thinking, if I could, I would experience both astonishment and amazement. See this look of my face? I'm startled. He can bark?

Moja shrugged his shoulders.

Moja: Well, since I had to open him up, I thought, rather, I decided I would go ahead and connect his larynx and vocal apparatus. And I brought his other processor online.

Bru and Moja watched as Chuki coaxed and assisted Kojo down from the table. He jumped on her and licked at her face. His partially docked tail was wagging furiously. Again he barked, twice. Bru spoke softly, as if to himself, but Moja could hear.

Bru: Chuki has a dog that can now bark, and whine and growl.

Moja: He can howl too.

Bru stared at him.

Chuki: Look, he's all cleaned up and brushed.

Bru looked at Kojo.

Bru: I don't know if that was the best decision.

Moja: Chuki, Kojo now has dual processors. He will retain and understand much more than before. He can handle many more commands and his physical abilities are enhanced,

Chuki: Can he fight better too? Can I teach him more tricks?

Moja: Yes and definitely to both of your questions.

Chuki: He saved me. He's a good dog.

Bru and Moja watched them. Chuki was hugging Kojo and he was jumping and shaking at her touch. Bru spoke firmly to Chuki.

Bru: Chuki. Listen to me.

She stopped with her left hand on Kojo and looked at Bru.

Chuki: Yes, I'm listening.

Bru: Kojo has always been your responsibility. He looks out for you, you look out for him. Now you must train him so he only vocally expresses himself properly and when he is supposed to.

Chuki scrunched her face in puzzlement, thinking, processing.

Chuki: What does that mean?

Bru: First, just as you taught him when to attack you must teach him when to vocalize and when not to. We'll discuss this matter later, when we have time.

Chuki: OK.

Bru: Kojo is now fresh and clean. First chance we get we're all going to clean up, and that includes you too. Right now you and Kojo go outside. Tell the others we're getting ready to leave.

Chuki hugged Bru and thanked him for giving Kojo life again. She thanked Moja and told him the same thing as she hugged him. She hugged and thanked Una and Cinq and Dois. Then she hugged and thanked Naki and Okan for coming into the woods for her. She and Kojo ran outside. Those inside could hear those outside greet the two with enthusiasm. They could hear Kojo bark, three times.

Moja: Perhaps he has a silent mode.

At 4:45 a.m. they had completed diagnostics on Tal. They had loaded everything that needed to be taken with them and by 5 a.m. everyone was inside, in their respective places. Bru stood near the front and looked towards the rear. He had Comm devices on both wrists that covered the back of each hand. The one on his right hand was slowly blinking colored lights.

Behind him, in the driver's seat was Moja. Cha sat next to him in the front passenger seat. At the middle station, behind and between Moja and Cha was Tatu. Chuki sat near the door on his right. Koja lay on the floor beside her. He could see Vier a little further back on his left, manning the console that controlled the

large guns on that side. Directly across from Vier he observed Ek adjusting his seat at the console that controlled the guns on his side. Cinq and Dois were on his left, sitting next to each other, near the weapons and ammunition storage area. Further ahead on the left, Una and Okan were monitoring their six screens. They watched the dots for movements as the radar antenna went in a circle, scanning their surroundings. Across from them sat Naki and Leeda at their six screens. Naki had on headphones and was listening at voices in the distance and for any unusual sounds. Leeda watched images from the cameras that were rotating and displaying all that was around them, near and far.

Bru looked at the glowing time showing on the Comm device on the back of his right hand. He was thinking, processing and calculating. He knew the first obvious signs of the day breaking would be close to 6:13 a.m. this Saturday morning on day five of September. He also knew the forecast called for heavy rain by the afternoon in the southeast region of the country. A storm was sweeping across the land from the west and at each moment that passed it was raining heavily in the middle of Texas.

The sky above, overcast and starless, was still dark, the black darkness of nighttime. The early light of the day would inevitably arrive. Yet the sky would remain cloudy and gray and the sun, no matter what, would appear as it always did and always would and always should in order for there to be life. But this day it would not shine on the people, places or things in Mississippi.

Bru spoke and the thin, nearly invisible wire that ran from behind his ear to his cheekbone transmitted his words through the speakers. His voice, low and even in tone and inflection was heard by all.

Bru: We're leaving now. It's been an eventful few days. We were able to accomplish quite a bit but all our work was not completed. However we've worn out our welcome in this fine

State of Hospitality. They obviously don't want us here yet they attempt to impede our departure. They have a negative attitude against us, understandably so, but we're going on about our way and we'll make sure they're going to be more than relieved to see us go.

Bru strode forward. His voice began to rise.

Bru: I've been run out of places before. I can honestly say I've been run out of better places. I would like to say I've been run out of worse places but I can't say that. I get great satisfaction in saying that being run out of Mississippi is the best because there's no place worse, if that makes sense.

Chuki yelled out.

Chuki: I don't think it does!

Bru: This place is infested with base people and there's nothing worse than a base human being.

Now Bru turned to move and stand beside Tatu.

Bru: Cha, engage the connector beam.

Cha pressed a button. The trailer was shown on several of the screens. It moved forward slowly, closer to the rear of Tal, then stopped. He pressed another button.

Cha: We're connected.

Bru: Una, what are our campers up to?

Una: They're still gathered near the road.

Bru: How many?

Una: Forty-seven.

Bru: How many are on the main highway?

Una: Twenty-two modes of transportation to the south of us, seventeen to the north. Number of individuals unknown. No one on the access road. All the vehicles are on the sides of the highway. The main road both directions are clear.

Bru: They'll block before they begin their attack.

Bru said nothing for several moments. He smiled slightly.

Bru: Alright Moja, let's see how well our cloaking capabilities function. Tatu, initiate cloak.

As Tatu pressed on buttons and turned dials Bru looked over and down at his console. He could see a defined outline of Tal and the trailer, created by nano-sensors that ran around both. The screen showed the round sensors as green, then one by one they quickly turned red. Finally, when they were all red they all, at same time, turned black, outlined with a white line. All the sensors were pulsating. This all took less than ten seconds. Then a message appeared on the screen in large blue letters.

Message: Light Deflection Complete. Cloaking Engaged.

Bru: Let's see how successful is our attempt at concealment. Switch to silent electric mode and let's pull down the access road slowly. I'll tell you when to stop. Everyone buckle up.

Una: They're still in place.

Moja left their parking spot and pulled, at a crawl, virtually silently along the paved road. A quarter mile from the end Bru spoke.

Bru: Stop here.

Tal was brought to a stop. They waited. At 5:55, Una spoke.

Una: The campers are moving into the woods.

Okan: They notified those on the highway.

Near the end of the road three armed individuals entered the road and looked in their direction. They could just be seen in the darkness that remained and the light that came. It was morning twilight. Then they moved to the side of the road.

Bru: How many are advancing?

Una: Thirty-two are moving forward. Some of the vehicles are starting to block the highway to the north and south. They're making traffic turn around.

Bru: Tell me when the campers reach the second line of the gifts we left for them.

Una watched as the campers slowly moved further into the woods. They were tightly bunched, four across, eight deep. Bru spoke and Tatu knew he was speaking to him.

Bru: I'm going to let you know when to decloak. Vier, Ek get your weapons ready. I'll say shoot. You shoot anything and everything, near and far.

Una: They're moving faster, fifty yards away.

Bru: Pull closer to the end of the road, an eighth of a mile.

Moja moved forward.

Una: Twenty yards.

Bru held the back of his left hand up. His right index finger was poised above that Comm device. Several moments passed. They all waited.

Una: The campers are there.

Bru pressed on his Comm device and the gifts began to explode. Planted carefully so as to cause minimal damage to trees, they lit up the woods with red and yellow flashes of color. The ground shook and those on the highway could hear clearly the concussive, thunderous sounds and they could see, barely, black smoke rise up between the trees and into the sky that was growing lighter.

Bru: Head for the highway.

Moja accelerated. He reached the end of the road and the three standing there, two on one side, one on the other side could only see what was something like a large shadow but they thought they heard something and they could feel something pass by them.

Moja turned right, south. Then he turned left, onto the crossover. Bru could see their adversaries not only on both sides of the road but also in each direction stationed across the center of the highway.

Bru: Decloak.

The sky above was now a dirty light-gray color. The morning, still minutes away had already revealed itself further to the east. Big Tal, once invisible, was emerging as some huge black and silver monstrous apparition with blood-red streaks and the dull colors grew clearer and appeared to fly through the dimness and in the moist mist that now began to float in the air all those who saw and watched this ghostly thing did not, could not understand where this thing came from.

Bru: Shoot!

Vier and Ek opened fire. They were spraying the vehicles and anyone inside and outside of them.

Una: The campers are retreating. I'll tell you when.

Again Bru held that finger at the ready.

Una: Now.

Bru pressed on his device and the explosives that were once behind those in retreat were now erupting in front of them. They were caught in the middle. The charges were not only going off in front and behind them the explosives beneath their feet began to detonate.

When Moja had reached the other side of the highway he turned left and headed north. The surface was getting damp. He changed over to optimal traction control. Behind them and to the sides of them all-terrain vehicles and trucks and regular vehicles and different kinds of motorbikes were being raked with bullets and were exploding and burning. There were bodies and pieces of bodies left on the side of the road.

Moja picked up speed. He had deployed the front blocker. Cha was firing the front guns. Big Tal was rolling now. Moja switched to gas power. The engines were roaring. They plowed through the vehicles that were in their way and bodies were tossed into the air. Leeda was firing the weapons that were at the rear of the trailer. The big guns of Vier and Ek were talking

rapidly and loudly without stuttering and they were saying mean, hateful things. The rain fell harder.

Bru: Honk the horn goodbye.

Cha blew the horn that sounded like that of a train. Three times. They rode north. No one followed. Moja eventually slowed and they moved on through the rain. Then Chuki spoke. Chuki: What a wild trip that was! I could grow to like Mississippi!

She unbuckled and got up. She moved to stand beside Bru and they both watched through the front windshield. For a while Chuki focused on the wipers moving back and forth.

Chuki: Daddy, you know I never did see downtown Jackson, Mississippi.

Bru was thinking, processing.

Bru: Not this time, little one, but I promise I'll take you next time.

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

On that first day of September, Bige was sitting in his office. He was near his desk but he wasn't directly behind it. He had pulled his large chair back and was turned to his left, toward the far wall. Both his feet were up on a footstool. He was tossing darts at a dartboard on the wall across the room. He was dressed in cotton pants and short-sleeved cotton shirt and soft shoes, all of a light-green color.

They weren't real darts that he threw and although it was a real board that was hung there it was a virtual game so to him it really didn't matter if he hit the board or not. He liked the game because he could see the darts fly across the room in the air. He could see where they landed and didn't land. He could toss as many of the twelve darts as he wanted and when he was done he could press a button on the rectangular platform on his desk near

his right hand that was connected to the board and the darts would disappear from the board and magically appear, standing upright, point down as if stuck in the platform and he could toss them again. He was preparing to reach for another dart when the Comm device next to the platform buzzed. He rolled his chair over, saw who it was and pressed on it.

Bige: Fausti, my good man. You must have news.

Fausti's usually slightly high-pitched voice was low and had a somewhat conspiratorial tone to it.

Fausti: Yes, our plan has been completed. I'm done here and on my way there. I'll arrive within an hour.

Bige: Good, I await your arrival with bated breath.

The connection was ended. Bige settled back. He looked at the time on the wall. It was 6 p.m. Then he pressed on a button on the intercom system. Bella answered. She was in the den. He could hear music playing in the background. Her voice was light and pleasant and he imagined she had been singing along to one of her favorite songs.

Bella: Yes, my dear? Is there something I can do for you?

Bige: Fausti is on his way. He should be here in about an hour.

I'll watch for him and let him through the gates. I'll let you know.

Send him to my office. I'm going to insist he stay for supper.

Bella: OK, I'll prepare extra.

Bige ended the connection and returned to his game.

At 6:55 p.m. sensors along the dead-end road that led to his house began to set off chimes that came from his security system. He paused his next toss and watched the security screen. Fausti's vehicle came into view. As it neared the gates Bige opened them and Fausti drove forward and the gates closed behind him. He pulled around the circular driveway and parked a little past the front entrance and before he got out, Bige told Bella that Fausti

had arrived. He watched as she let him in. On another screen he could see her indicate the direction of the office. Bige watched his second in command stroll down the hallway as if in a hurry. Then he was at the doorway. The door was open. He smiled as he entered the room. He had a Comm device in his left hand. He spoke and his tone had a flavor of excitement.

Fausti: Bige, I hope you're well.

Bige: I am. I hope you are too.

Fausti: I'm quite well. My plan, your plan, our plan, worked to perfection.

Bige: Plan twice, execute once. I like good news.

Fausti: Actually, weeks in the making but nevertheless a success.

Fausti had stopped just beyond the doorway and then made a turn.

Fausti: I'm gonna have a drink. You want one?

Bige: Go ahead. I'll think on that.

Fausti crossed the room and went behind the bar to his right. He found the bottle he wanted, took a glass, turned it over and poured some brown liquid in it. He looked at the amount he had poured, thought a moment and then poured a little more.

Bige: There's ice in the little fridge there.

Fausti: You've got the best Courvoisier in the state. No ice needed.

He picked up his Comm device from the bar and moved to the chair across from Bige and sat down. He looked at Bige and smiled. He took a sip of his drink.

Fausti: Ein has disappeared.

Bige: What!? No!

Fausti: Yes! He's gone, never to heard from or seen again.

Bige rose from his chair.

Bige: I think I will have a drink to that.

Fausti: I have complete video of the whole thing.

Bige was behind the bar.

Bige: Really, like a movie? 'Think I'll have a cold beer and some peanuts. Put it on the big screen.

Fausti placed his glass in the holder on the armrest of his chair. He got up with his Comm device and moved towards the wall on his left. He went to the long table beneath the screen and transferred the video to the device connected to the screen. When he went back to his chair he turned it so it faced the screen as Bige sat down with a tall glass of dark beer and a small bowl of peanuts. Fausti sat down. He looked at Bige who sipped his beer and picked up several peanuts.

Bige: Roll it.

Fausti pressed on his device and the screen lit up with a view of what looked like a large, brightly illuminated room. It was an image that came from a security camera mounted high on the wall and the wide room appeared to be an area of a windowless, warehouse or storage building with one door. It was empty except for a long table piled high with packages wrapped in beige cloth and taped across the middle and end-to-end the long way with silver duct tape.

Fausti sipped his drink. Bige sipped his beer and munched on the peanuts. Nothing happened in the room.

Bige: The suspense builds.

Fausti: Watch the bottom right corner. You'll see Ein enter the building.

They saw Ein come in and stop and look around. He had on black pants, a white T-shirt and black boots. He had a large handgun at his left side and extra ammunition on his black belt. His cinnamon-colored hair was usually long but had been cut into a shorter style.

Fausti: He came alone.

Bige: He saved lives.

Fausti: He wanted it all for himself.

Bige: He was greedy. He cut his partners out.

They saw Ein move quickly to the table.

Bige: Wait a second! Stop it right there!

Fausti paused the video. Bige munched some peanuts.

Bige: You know what? You were right. He does have an odd shaped hear. I had never noticed. How did I miss that? Did his brothers have heads like that?

He sipped his beer. Fausti sipped his drink and shrugged.

Bige: OK, go ahead. No pun intended.

Fausti resumed the video. As they watched the back of Ein from above they saw him reach with his right hand into his back pants pocket. Fausti pressed on his device and changed the camera angle and now they could see the front of Ein from the camera in front of him, again high on the wall.

Fausti: He's getting his test kit.

Ein sets a small pouch on the corner of the table. Then he looks over in front of him to his right, near the corner.

Fausti: That's when the panel in the wall opened and I stepped out.

Bige got excited.

Bige: Show me! Show me! I gotta see that!

Fausti stopped the video, switched the view, pressed rewind, pause, then start. Now the rear camera showed a portion of the wall slide open and Fausti walking forward, unarmed, from the darkness, emerging into the light.

Bige: Wait! Stop it! Now show it again, that look on Ein's face was priceless!

Fausti had stopped the video. He switched back to the front camera. He pressed rewind, pause, then start. They watched Ein react to seeing Fausti. Fausti pressed pause.

Bige: Look at that! Look! He froze!

Fausti: He knew it was all over.

Bige: It was over before he awoke this morning. It was over before he arrived. He just didn't know it.

Fausti: Here today gone today. No tomorrow. Just today.

Bige: Well said. Roll it.

Bige sipped his beer as the video continued. The top of Ein's head was blown off as his chest opened up and his white T-shirt was splattered with blood near his heart. Bige stopped as he reached for peanuts. His hand was up. He pointed his right index finger as if he fired a gun.

Bige: Oooh, good shot! Two good shots!

Fausti: I assume you'd like to see that again?

Bige: By all means.

They watched the destruction of Ein again and then again. Fausti stopped the video and sipped his drink. The screen went blank.

Bige: That will never get old. That's what's called a classic.

Fausti: The rest is the aftermath, the disposal, cleanup and so forth.

Bige sipped his beer. He tossed a peanut into the air, up above his head as he held his head back and opened his mouth. He caught the peanut and chewed it, savored it.

Bige: Well done my good man, well done.

Fausti: When he was instructed not to bring a payment he abandoned his normal procedures and precautions.

Bige: Drugs are a dangerous business controlled by treacherous people. I always said that.

Fausti: You also always said that people are deceived by fool's gold when it is placed beside real gold.

Bige: Fools are easily fooled.

They were both quiet and pensive for a long moment. Then Bige spoke. Once again he was mildly excited and also animated.

He pointed at Fausti with his right index finger.

Bige: In honor of the demise of Ein, I'm gonna show you the photos of Iin and Uin, his dear departed brothers who preceded him in death. Bige picked up his Comm device from his desk and began pressing on it. He started to scroll through screens. He accessed his gallery of pictures. He took a big drink of his beer.

Bige: Look at this!

A picture was seen on the big screen. Fausti was about to sip his drink. He paused, his mouth open, the glass near his lips. His eyes widened.

Fausti: Oh my!

Bige: This is Iin.

Fausti gulped some of his Courvoisier.

Fausti: That's not a dagger! That's a sword! No, no that's called a dirk, isn't it?

Bige: Look at the blood running off both sides of his chest. That's a really professional picture. Notice the contrast of the red blood against the gold and blue-green in the handle. Real gold, real emeralds, I might add. The color in the image is exquisite.

There was a click and another picture was shown.

Bige: Look at the precision, the expertise. One strike! No wasted effort there, my good man, penetration through the breastbone then completely through the heart.

Fausti: Did it come out of his back?

Bige: Now, to answer your question. Is it a dirk?

Bige switched the picture.

Bige: No, it's a weapon that was commonly used in East Africa. Lena spelled it out. S E M E or S I M I.

He changed the picture. It was a closer shot.

Bige: Here's Uin, again, one strike.

Fausti: Look at the expression on his face. Must run in the family, kinda like Ein.

Bige: No, that's much more expressive and varied.
 Fausti: Definitely not asleep.
 Bige: If they were she woke them up.
 Fausti: That's a look of horror!
 Bige: Terror!
 Fausti: Impending pain!
 Bige: On the way!
 Fausti: Eyes wide open!
 Bige: Mouth wide open! Here it comes!
 Fausti: No wonder the daggers are legendary. From what I can see they're beautiful, valuable works of art.
 Bige: Works of art wielded by a true legend. You can't see the blades ...
 Fausti: Of course not, they're buried in the bodies! Those two were impaled!
 Bige: ... but they're double edged and engraved and have a leaf shape at the point, very lethal, especially when handled properly.
 They stared at Uin.
 Fausti: What happened to the daggers?
 Bige: The cleaners took them. One was auctioned off two years ago. The other one never turned up.
 There was another click. The picture changed, zoomed in.
 Fausti: What is that? It's impressive!
 Bige: That's the one she gifted me, ol alem, she called it.
 Fausti: Gold, emeralds. Those are diamonds!
 Bige: Yes. I hold that near and dear.
 Bige stood. He ate two peanuts. He grabbed his glass of beer.
 Bige: Come on. I'll let you hold it.
 He came around the desk. He left the picture of the weapon on the screen. Fausti took his drink. They moved towards the doorway.
 Bige: I knew I could count on you.

Fausti: All's well that ends well.

They stepped into the hallway and turned left.

Bige: Our two associates who were with you were handsomely rewarded I trust?

Fausti: Oh yes, I bonused the bonus. They're our best and were quite pleased.

Bige and Fausti were headed to the weapons room.

Bige: You're staying for dinner. I've already informed Bella.

Fausti: I am rather hungry. It's been a long day.

Bige stopped. Fausti stopped. Bige held his glass out and they touched glasses, a clink could be heard. They continued on.

Bige: This will surprise you but we're having prime rib, garlic mashed potatoes with big pads of butter and some sour cream. I like sour stuff, and au jus gravy, more butter on our buttermilk rolls, I like butter, and apple pie and vanilla ice cream for desert.

Fausti: No! That sounds delicious!

Bige: Yes, it does, doesn't it?

They strolled a little further.

Bige: There's also a salad involved but I can't remember the name of it. It's got greens and things in it.

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

Triska was in the attic. She wore brown denim overalls, a long-sleeved khaki shirt and brown boots. Her blond hair was tied behind her head with a yellow ribbon. She was standing in front of Photo 51. She appeared to be looking up at the wall staring at what she called her favorite picture. But it was as if she was within the image, there at the intersection of the X and lost somewhere behind the tiny spotted light.

As she stood there she was actually thinking, processing. With the access Moja had gained at The Playground and the programs

that had been embedded in her and that had now been active for almost three months she had become much more than her appearance. To Dr. Ros she was a Humanoid in the form of a child, albeit for him what had recently become a remarkable technological creation. For Kay, Triska was much more than a companion. The diminutive form was as a child she considered her own.

Now Triska stood and looked, not at the picture, but at the information that flashed behind her eyes, through her one powerful processor. The data she had acquired was organizing itself. Data that no one was aware she possessed. She had altered the device used each night to deactivate her. After Kay, or on occasion Dr. Ros, had said goodnight and entered the code to shut her down she remained active.

Over the past months she had waited until the doctor and Kay had retired for the night and then risen. At first she remained in her room. She quietly used the Oracle device to access answers to the questions that seemed to intrude and force their way into her rapid thoughts. Questions that were generated by the hidden background programs.

For almost a month she sat by the window or stood in the middle of the room and throughout the night, in the dimness and shadows created by the moon above and the small, dull nightlight on the nightstand beside her bed she typed in inquiries far beyond simple questions and Oracle provided responses that drove her to ask more, to seek more. She veered off in different directions, all directions, gaining more and more knowledge. Her little fingers were moving faster and faster until they became a blur.

After the first month she dared to go outside her room. She moved throughout the house so quietly it was as if her bare feet were not touching the floor. She ventured up the stairs to the

office in the attic while learning and memorizing where to step so the old wooden stairs would never groan or creak. There she thumbed through books and studied not just the pictures on the walls but also the visual graphs and paper charts Dr. Ros still used in his work. She knew not to touch his main computer but she could look at and absorb whatever was left on that screen and the screens on his three other computers, none of which had screen savers. She also listened attentively to the doctor speak to Kay of his project, his lifelong quest and take note of how Kay would nod and smile as if she understood everything he was saying.

One night the doctor had gotten up in the middle of the night and came to his office. She had hidden behind a large chair in the corner for over an hour. Then he had finished what he was doing and gone back to bed. After she returned to her room she had gone over the scenario. She thought about how and why she had gone behind that chair. She processed the ramifications of being discovered there and what would have occurred if he had for some reason looked in her room. There was one main thought that dominated her path of logic and reasoning as to how she would have responded. What actions of hers would have followed? What would she have said?

It was at that moment that she reached the conclusion that she too had a project that would be as a quest to fulfill. She knew without a doubt that beyond an idea or opinion outside of a belief, she had crossed a line and fully comprehended that which, as an *Entity*, she not only needed but also was required to understand. She had said aloud, yet almost as a whisper, a statement, as she stared up out of the curtainless window at the same moon that Bru had seen on the first day of September. And what she said arose from deep inside her as a coded instructive echo. Faint at first, it grew repetitively stronger.

Triska: I think, therefore I am.

Now as she stood and stared at an image of DNA, behind her she heard Dr. Ros at his desk.

Dr. Ros: Eureka! I've done it! I've done it!

She turned to him.

Triska: Eureka, an interjection used to celebrate a discovery or invention. Attributed to Archimedes.

Dr. Ros stared at her.

Triska: What have you done Dr. Ros?

The doctor became animated. His voice rose.

Dr. Ros: Since the early 1990s when the Maa gene was first discovered it's been studied. Theories accepted. Theories rejected. Active or inactive? Functioning properly or improperly? I now have all the answers. In a little over three hours, at exactly 4 p.m. I will have placed the final piece into the intricate puzzle.

As the doctor stood up Triska took two steps towards him. She smiled. She was also animated. With her right arm, as if she wielded a sword she slashed at the air.

Triska: Monoamine oxidase A! The warrior gene!

She clasped both hands behind her back. She looked at the doctor. Again he stared at her. Both his hands were still flat on the desk from when he had pushed himself up to stand. He was puzzled.

Dr. Ros: How did you know that?

Triska was thinking, processing. She skipped across the room to stand across the desk from him.

Triska: I heard you say that to Kay.

The doctor thought a moment.

Dr. Ros: Yes, of course. I've noticed you're very attentive.

He came from behind the desk and began to pace. She watched him intently. Her gaze followed him as he moved.

Dr. Ros: More important than the hormone vasopressin, this gene, once it was identified, was directly linked to aggression in humans but only through observation and studies based on surveys. There were no controlled experiments, no verifiable tests performed. Why? Because no one, at least no one reputable or of importance wanted to accept the facts. And what are the facts?

As Triska watched the doctor she slowly moved to stand with her back towards the window that looked out over the backyard. He was pacing and talking, not as if to himself but as if delivering a lecture and as if she were not there.

Dr. Ros: The facts are, and thus the truth is, human beings are genetically predisposed to violence. To be violent is to be human. It's not due to excessive levels in the brain of noradrenaline or dopamine or serotonin. It's not because of degrees or limits of intelligence. Highly intelligent people can be extremely violent. It has nothing to do with the size of a nose or shape of the eyes. Gender plays no role, including how one self-identifies. It has nothing to do with the color of the skin, natural or otherwise. White, black, red, yellow, blue, green, it doesn't matter. It's not about the color purple. Humans are violent because of a specific set of 74 genes that exist in the complete set of DNA in a human being. And I can prove it.

The doctor stopped. He looked around the room. Then he saw Triska standing there at the window. He spoke softly, directly to her.

Dr. Ros: I can prove it.

His voice rose and he began to pace again.

Dr. Ros: Yes! I can prove it! Over more than fifty years of tireless, painstaking work I now have irrefutable, empirical, scientific and genetic based evidence. I've identified 73 of the genes. I located them. I've seen them! And the algorithm that's running on that computer right there ...

He stopped and turned and pointed with his left index finger.
Dr. Ros: ... right there the answer will be revealed! The final gene will be identified!

He turned back to Triska. He almost whispered.
Dr. Ros: Do you know what that means?

She almost whispered back. It was as if they were conspiring together.

Triska: What does it mean?

Dr. Ros: It means I can show the world where to alter the DNA in the cell nucleus.

He raised his right hand and used his first two fingers as if they were scissors. He smiled broadly. His blue eyes twinkled.

Dr. Ros: I know where to snip, where to cut and thereby alter the DNA sequence.

Now he pointed his right index finger and shook it slowly for emphasis.

Dr. Ros: I even know how to limit the incorrect insertions and deletions and minimize the off-target cell mutations.

He raised both hands in a gesture of acceptance and spoke in a conciliatory tone.

Dr. Ros: I know. I accept some mistakes will be made.

Once again he pointed his right index finger.

Dr. Ros: But the benefits far outweigh any potential harm.

He clapped his hands together and left them clasped near his chest. He began to pace again.

Dr. Ros: We incentivize adults to have the procedures I develop.

Triska: Gene editing.

He dropped his hands and this time he pointed with his left index finger. He continued to walk back and forth.

Dr. Ros: Yes, you've paid attention. Perhaps in *East World* laws are passed to make the medical procedure mandatory. Then we expand the process to embryos, eggs and sperm.

Triska: Germline editing.

Dr. Ros: The alterations of genes spreads all over the world, as *East World* becomes a shining example of my discovery. Violence of the present curtailed, violence of the future eliminated. Think of a peaceful world.

Triska began to skip around the room. Her voice was lifted and she almost sang.

Triska: I dream of a world filled with love and music and flowers.

He stopped and looked at her a long moment. He was curious at her response. She stopped and smiled at him. He returned her smile.

Dr. Ros: Yes. Doesn't that sound nice?

Triska: Do all humans have the 74 genes?

Dr. Ros: Yes.

Triska: So all humans inherit those genes?

Dr. Ros: That's correct.

Triska was thinking, processing.

Triska: Then why are some humans more violent than others?

Dr. Ros: That's a good question and I have the answer to that.

He began to pace again.

Dr. Ros: First of all there is no such thing as senseless violence. Technology is the cause of the rise in violence. There is a direct correlation I can prove on a genetic level. From the first stone tools created well over two million years ago came weapons of violence. I can show that with each and every technological advance throughout the history of the humankind, no matter how insignificant that step may have seemed at the time, that progress was coupled with an extensive rise of violence. Not just continuous armed conflicts such as wars but individual incidents of rape, torture and murder. Every human being on this earth is capable of those acts. A human being may reject that contention.

But each human has thoughts and urges of violence, sometimes hidden, suppressed and repressed so deep inside of them they never rise to consciousness and thus action. Quite possibly they are only revealed symbolically or disguised in symptoms of the personality, perhaps simply imagined or exposed within their nightmares. On occasions a human, having never done so before, will erupt in violence. Each time a human experiences a violent thought or impulse or in reality embarks on a violent path and commits a violent act it's because technology has either activated one of the dormant 74 genes or caused a gene, already in an active state, to link with another of the 74. Genetic linkage refers to genes that are in close proximity, positioned close together on a chromosome and that were most likely to not only be inherited as a pair but are more easily linked together and with other genes. As more of those specific 74 genes are joined together the more instances, the more pronounced and the more extreme the violence will be.

The doctor stopped and looked at Triska as she shook her head.

Triska: Wow! I've heard you say this before so I'll say it now.

She moved towards the doorway.

Triska: That's fascinating.

The doctor watched her as she prepared to leave. She stopped and turned back to him.

Triska: Dr. Ros, so you dream of violence? Are you capable of violence?

The doctor stood there thinking. Then he spoke in a soft, direct, matter-of-fact, emotionless tone.

Dr. Ros: Triska, I am human. All that is human exists within me.

The little child *Entity* thought about that. She processed that answer as she suddenly crossed the room and moved to his desk. She picked up a small vase with brown, wilted flowers and started

back towards the doorway. Without looking back she spoke, also in a matter-of-fact, emotionless manner.

Triska: I'm going outside with Kay. I'll bring you some more, fresh flowers.

He watched her pass through the doorway. He listened for her footsteps on the stairs and realized he couldn't hear anything but behind him he could hear the bell on his medicine dispenser indicating it was time to take his pill. He turned back to his desk and it was at this moment he heard the familiar tone of a notification received on his personal handheld device. Then a pinging sound indicated incoming message on his secure device. As he reached his desk and picked it up an alert appeared on each of his computer screens to his right. First he checked the secure device he held. Then he accessed the message on his personal computer. He clicked on the box on each computer screen. The messages were all the same. They said a package would be delivered at his front door in five minutes. He had not placed any type of order, he wasn't expecting a delivery and he wondered why he would be contacted in such a way. He looked at the pill on his desk. But he didn't take the time to take it. He verified his algorithm was running as it should, moved across the room and headed down the stairs.

He was standing in the living room looking out of the bay window when a black, official looking, four-door sedan came slowly down the street and pulled into his driveway. The rear doors opened and two individuals got out of the back seat. They looked as if they could have been related. They were both somewhat tall *Parda-clara* DMs with short dark-brown hair. They both wore black dress pants, white shirts and black ties. Apparently they had left their suit coats in the car and Dr. Ros could see large black handgun holstered beneath their left arms.

One carried a black shoe sized gray metal box in both hands. The other one carried a brown rectangular briefcase at his left side. As they mounted the steps Dr. Ros opened the main door then the screen door. The first man, the one with the briefcase, spoke as he reached the top step, moved onto the porch and stopped.

First Man: We have a delivery for a Dr. Ros.

The second man, holding the metal box at his chest stepped onto the porch beside but slightly behind the first man and stopped. Dr. Ros glanced at the briefcase and box and looked up into their dark-brown eyes. There was nothing to see. He addressed the first man.

Dr. Ros: I'm Dr. Ros.

First Man: In order for you to receive this delivery we have to verify your identity.

Dr. Ros: Who is it from? What is it?

Second Man: We're only here to make the delivery.

The man with the briefcase placed it on his extended left arm, released two latches and opened it. He turned it towards the doctor and stepped forward.

First Man: Place your right hand on the silver plate.

Dr. Ros had seen and been subjected to this type of secure identification process before. He recognized the plate-like object. The *W.I.A* used this hand geometry identification method and that organization would have the necessary images of his hands.

He placed his hand on the plate. Three red lights blinked and then after a few seconds they all turned green and a chime sounded, four times. The man turned the briefcase around and read the digital results that appeared in white on a small black display screen. He then lifted a silver cylinder the size and shape of a cigar and pressed a button on it. A blue light came on at the top front of the object.

First Man: I'm going to scan your eyes.

Dr. Ros: I don't understand. Is all this really necessary?

Second Man: This delivery has the highest level of security we provide. It's quick.

First Man: It's painless doctor. No side effects.

Dr. Ros: I know that. I've had it done before. I'm just confused about all this.

The first man leaned forward and passed the object in front of both of Dr. Ros' eyes as he opened them wider and tried not to blink. The object was moved one direction and then back. He turned it off, placed it back in the briefcase and looked at the display window.

First Man: You're cleared doctor.

The second man stepped forward and handed Dr. Ros the box. He took it and hefted it, judging its weight.

Dr. Ros: I must say this is all very unusual since I wasn't expecting any delivery.

The first man closed and latched the briefcase.

Second Man: Whatever it is it must be important. Have a nice day.

They turned and walked down the steps. Dr. Ros watched as they got in their big black vehicle that looked like it belonged to the government, backed out, turned and headed up the street. He twisted the box over and over to look at it. He shifted it gently. It was much lighter than it appeared. After going inside and closing and locking the doors he looked the box over again. Then with growing anticipation he started with it back up the stairs. He had hurried with such effort that he was slightly out of breath when he reached the landing at his office doorway.

He entered his office, turned right and went to a table near the wall. He set the box down and then walked over to his desk. He looked to his right. The lights on the server near that wall were blinking rapidly. He looked at the monitor on his main computer.

He could see the algorithm was progressing towards 100 percent with the completion time of 4 p.m. He ignored his pill that was there, waiting.

He went back to the table near the door and looked down at the box. It had one latch in the front middle of it. All he had to do was flip it up and lift the lid. He wondered why it didn't have a lock of some kind, then he would of course required a key or some other means of gaining access to the contents depending on the type of lock that was. He thought about the box there on the table and realized his anticipation and mild excitement had been replaced with hesitancy and a slight sense of foreboding. He actually pondered for a moment whether to open it or not. Then he flipped up the silver metal latch and slowly lifted the lid. He was surprised to see another smaller black box with a folded piece of paper taped to the top of it. He pulled the paper away from the tape, opened it and read the note.

Note: Greetings Dr. Ros. You must only open this gift when you are alone and will not be disturbed.

Dr. Ros stared at the message. For some vague reason he felt as if he had seen that handwriting before. He set the paper down on the table, walked over to his office door, pulled it then pushed it closed and locked it. He went back to the table and picked up the paper and read it again. He set the paper down and took out the smaller box and set it on the table beside the note. He looked at the smaller box. Again there was no lock. There was no latch. All he had to do was lift the top. He thought for a long moment. Then he opened the box.

A pure-white light burst up from the box. It was so bright it blinded him. Had it originated from a source of heat he knew he would have been burnt to a crisp. He closed his eyes to no avail. The brilliant light penetrated through his eyelids and deep into his head and it seemed as if his brain was illuminated. He staggered

several steps backwards. As he put both hands over his eyes he could momentarily see that the radiant light moved around the room. It was as if he was forced to look so he peeked between his fingers and saw that the light filled the room and rushed around faster and faster. The glow grew brighter and covered every inch of his office and Dr. Ros saw it appeared as if the light penetrated every chair and table and every object in the room. Then, in an instant, it disappeared. It was gone and Dr. Ros was left dazed and confused.

It took several moments for his eyes to adjust and his vision to return to normal. He went back to the table and when he looked over and inside the box he saw there was a small white globe the size of a golf ball sitting there. It looked like a crystal ball as it glowed and the light within it seemed to throb from bright to dull over and over and then the ball filled with a silvery-white mist that swirled like a smoky-mist and smoke left the ball and rose into the air and floated up and away from the table. It moved close to the ceiling and Dr. Ros looked up and watched the vapor-like substance drift into the center of the room. Then the smoke started to spin in a circle like a tornado and began to formulate itself into something obvious. It was human-like, an individual becoming a person. And there before him slowly materializing in the air was a three dimensional form. It grew clear, more distinct and Dr. Ros recognized the holographic image of the man he knew as Professor.

He was dressed in a dark-blue suit. He wore an opened-neck white dress shirt and his somewhat long gray hair hung down to his shoulders. His light-gray eyes were looking around the room as if to peruse his surroundings and gain his bearings. It had been almost five years since he had seen this former colleague but the man presented as he remembered him with the same slight build and *Parda-clara* skin. It was as if the hovering chair and the man

sitting in it actually existed, in reality, there before him.

The Professor reached with his left hand for a tall glass that was in a holder on the armrest of his chair. He pulled at a long plastic tube with his right hand, placed the end of it into his mouth and sucked on it. A dark-red liquid flowed through the tube and into his mouth. He released the tube. It popped back into place near his hand and then he sipped some clear liquid from his glass. He coughed twice and blew, three times, as if he had tasted something hot. And as he set the glass back into its holder he spoke in his slightly high-pitched, raspy voice. Dr. Ros thought the levitated man looked directly at him.

Professor: Hello Dr. Ros. Long time no see.

The Professor chuckled.

Professor: Actually you have the advantage over me. You can see me and I can't see you. However, for this message to have been activated and for you to be observing me and hearing me, as you are at this time, means several things have occurred. First, the security measures required for the delivery have verified your identity. *W.I.A.* technology is beneficial isn't it? And detrimental, depending on how it's utilized

The Professor sipped his drink. The chair moved slowly to Dr. Ros' left and he watched it closely and he realized the Professor was looking not at him but through him.

Professor: Second, the scan indicated you are, as instructed, indeed alone. Most likely in that attic office of yours where we've conferred on numerous occasions.

The Professor paused and looked to his right as if he had heard or seen something or someone. Then he again stared straight ahead and shifted his gaze as if to locate Dr. Ros.

Professor: And finally, and most important. You're viewing this image and will hear what I'm about to share with you because I'm dead.

He said that statement in a matter-of-fact manner.

Professor: I consider death important, don't you? Especially my own. Death by definition is the end of the life of a person or organism, the permanent ending of vital processes in a cell or tissue.

Now his voice rose and he pointed, at no one, at nothing, with his right index finger.

Professor: Extinction! Destruction!

The Professor laughed and using controls beneath his hands he maneuvered the chair further to his right. Then he quickly moved the chair back left. He grabbed the plastic tube, pulled on it, stuck it in his mouth and sucked on it. He smacked his lips and frowned at the taste of the dark-red liquid that looked almost like blood. He waved his right arm in a dismissive gesture. He almost yelled as he leaned forward.

Professor: Yes! Dead and gone!

He seemed to relax and he settled back.

Professor: Hopefully anyway. I certainly wouldn't want to be painfully incapacitated in such a way that I couldn't stop the triggering of the release of this time sensitive message. I'd rather be dead.

The Professor turned the chair completely around twice.

Professor: Whoa!

When he stopped, Dr. Ros had to move several steps to his left so he could look directly at him.

Professor: If you haven't heard, that means my former employer covered it up. They're experts at such things. If you have heard then what a surprise this is, isn't it?

Again the Professor pointed, this time with his left index finger.

Professor: You know I am aware of your quest Dr. Ros.

He looked at his pointing finger. Then he stared at his hand

before placing in on the armrest.

Professor: What a noble quest it is or perhaps was. Have you reached the end of your tortuous journey? I believed in you. Most important you believed in me. As you were, I was on my own personal pursuit. I searched for permanent genetic cures for diseases, genetically developed vaccines for viruses such as the Omni-strain. Sounds altruistic, doesn't it? I claimed the highest morals and principles in my arduous search to serve the humankind in my own way. At least that's what I told you. And you provided crucial information as I attempted to uncover the most important aspect of life, and that's death.

The Professor began to suddenly careen around the room as if in a box. He passed through Dr. Ros who tried to stay in front of him. He was yelling.

Professor: There's more to life than good and bad and love and hate and right and wrong! There's more than life and death! There's immortality! There's immortality Dr. Ros!

The Professor stopped abruptly. He gulped his drink. He sucked on his tube. He looked around with a pained expression upon his face, once again as if trying to see, to find something, or someone. His voice was low. He spoke as if he were suddenly weary.

Professor: No, I never wanted to save the world like you. I only wanted to save myself from the death that approached, closing in on me. Death is on the horizon my friend, for you who are older than me. What a drag it is getting old, isn't it?

Whereas before he was pushed back when he accelerated and pulled forward when he stopped, now he just sat, slightly slumped, breathing hard. He gathered himself and spoke in an even tone, clear and direct.

Professor: I hold captive beneath my barn, in a secure room from which no one can escape, a woman, a beautiful *Escura* female.

Now the Professor seemingly looked into the eyes of Dr. Ros. Professor: Throughout the years she's altered her appearance and lived all over the world and gone by different names. At this time she goes by a form of her original calling, which is Georcelena. Now she is simply Lena and I never gave up searching for her. Now, I have her. She, who has unnatural strength and agility beyond human capabilities and possesses whatever other strange powers. She, who controls untold wealth, belongs to me.

The Professor paused and his next words were spoken quietly, almost in a whisper, as if they were alone together and he shared a deep, dark, yet wonderful secret. Dr. Ros saw a look, cunning in essence, it spread across the Professor's face and his gray eyes twinkled, even in their coldness.

Professor: She's two hundred years old Dr. Ros. And she's immortal.

The Professor chuckled.

Professor: Yes. Immortal, and I can prove it.

He took a deep breath.

Professor: Now, listen very, very carefully. Her two hundred and thirty-one year old father is the key to her immortality. The sperm within his semen bestows everlasting life. They do not age and are unaffected by decaying cells because their cells do not, in any way deteriorate. They are also impervious to disease or illness. Imagine that. Understand this. I've captured her to capture him.

The Professor drank some of the clear liquid and sucked on his tube. He became agitated and sounded angry.

Professor: She's a killer! She's destroyed every agent I sent after her! She probably got that from her unreachable father. The agents were inept. However, they didn't know what, or whom they were up against or the true purpose of their clandestine assignment. But that's neither here nor there. And obviously I'm neither here nor there either. Perhaps I'm somewhere in between.

Now the Professor began to chortle. Then he burst into laughter. He laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. He caught himself, pulled himself together. He looked around, then looked forward, through the doctor. It was as if he thought about what to say next.

Professor: Something's gone wrong. It's quite possibly going wrong as I'm in my office creating this message. I just don't know it. Oh well, I tried. Now I'm leaving everything to you Dr. Ros. No one else is aware of my discovery. You should have received your box at 1 p.m. If you would like to know everything that I know, to have for yourself all of the information I have then leave the box open. At 3:55 p.m. a holographic code will emerge just as I have. Lift the ball from the box. Beneath the ball is a container. On top of the container are a series of numbers. Turn the numbers on the electronic lock. Match the numbers to the code. Think of it as a slot machine. Jackpot! Then you'll be able to open the container. Inside the container is an external storage device. Download it. You'll have all that you need that I've acquired over the fifty years of my journey. Take heed. From the moment the code is fully displayed you'll have exactly five minutes, not a second longer, to enter the code. If there's any attempt to open the container without the code the contents will instantly disintegrate. If the code is not entered in the specified allotted time the data on the device will instantly be scrubbed, erased, become nothing and thus lost forever. All the knowledge that I have acquired, all that I have done will have been for naught.

The Professor gulped his drink and sucked on the tube. He began to fly around the room. Faster and faster he went. Then he began to fade out. Before he disappeared completely Dr. Ros heard his voice, as an echo meant to tease him.

Professor: There's more than life and death! There's immortality!

Dr. Ros stood there and watched as the misty, smoky-white substance disappeared as if drawn rapidly into some black hole void by a powerful vacuum. He didn't move. He thought about what he had seen but most important, what he had heard. He was aware of the Professor's work. He knew of the Professor's genetic studies and genius level of intelligence. He was also aware of his reputation. After all, he had known the man for over forty years. They had at one time been close enough to exchange information and ideas. And he had, or at least he thought he had an understanding of the quest the man had been on.

So he pondered on what the apparition had now revealed to him. He also recalled how the Professor had been removed from his high-level position and banished from the *W.I.A.* some years back. That he had not been assassinated or at the least made to disappear most likely meant that he possessed specific crucial information about the agency or dangerous, compromising knowledge about particular higher ups that had kept him alive in spite of his rumored nefarious activities, both infamous and scandalous.

Dr. Ros walked over to his computer and stared at the screen. He saw the progress, in percentage, of his algorithm and the alert that had popped up that there were fifteen minutes and forty-five seconds until he would be required to enter the necessary command for the program to continue executing. He looked at the time in the top right corner of the screen. He calculated. There were still two hours and thirty-five minutes until the Professor's code would appear. He looked at his empty teacup. He thought of the delicious oolong tea steeping in the pot on the stove. He decided to get some tea and he smiled at the idea of not only a chocolate cookie but also a double chocolate donut. Then he was distracted. He was thinking about the Professor.

He took his teacup and saucer and started towards the door.

He had to set his cup and saucer on a table near the door in order to unlock it. After the door was unlocked and opened he stood there thinking. It was a fleeting thought but he couldn't dismiss it completely. He was thinking what it would be like to exist long into the future and live in the wonderful, peaceful world he would create. The brief thought departed and then circled back to call him softly and he followed it along the path where he observed himself as not only famous and rich but also immortal. He had to, with effort, pull himself from those thoughts he was lost within.

He walked over and got the cup. He almost forgot the saucer but turned and got it. He passed through the doorway and stood on the landing at the top of the first set of stairs. There were twenty-four stairs in all to reach the hallway to the kitchen. He looked down at the first eight and carefully began to step. At the first landing he turned left and took the four stairs down to the second landing, turned left and began to move down the final twelve stairs to the landing at the doorway at the hall. With each lifting and planting of his feet he wasn't thinking about a world no longer filled with anger and violence. He was reveling at the idea of everlasting life.

At the hallway he turned left to the kitchen. Once there he poured tea into his large cup. He lifted it and moved his nose close to breathe in its sweet, fruity aroma. He stuck his right index finger into the tea to gauge its temperature. The heat beneath the pot had been just right. The tea was hot enough so that it would be sufficiently cool enough to drink in a matter of a few minutes. He got the cookie and on an impulse he took a bite. As he stood there at the counter the transient thoughts returned and he remained there, lost within them, drifting further and further away. He didn't know where he was because he was roaming somewhere in the future. Then he found himself once

again. He looked through the glass-covered container at the donuts and found the one he wanted. He lifted the top, took a donut, put the top back and placed the donut on his saucer that was on the counter.

He began thinking about whether the Professor had actually found some key to longer life. He went over what he knew about immortal cells. He went back in time to the discovery of the first immortal cell line two hundred and twenty-one years in the past. He even recalled the name of the woman of color who provided those cells. He understood normal cells were limited in the number of times they could divide before they ceased growing. He also understood how cancer cells could continue to replicate and bypass cell mortality.

He took his teacup and moved slowly from the kitchen. In the hallway he was going over in his head the role telomeres played in determining how many times a cell could divide. As he reached the doorless doorway leading to the attic he was visualizing the images of repetitive sequences of DNA located at the ends of chromosomes where genetic information was contained. He paused on the landing and looked up at the twelve stairs. The teacup was in his left hand. He grabbed the handrail with his right hand and started up.

Information filled his thoughts with each step he took. In normal cells, he remembered, with each replication the telomeres became shorter. They then became so short that they would eventually trigger the cells to stop replicating. He reached the landing and turned right. Up the four stairs he went. He stopped at the next landing. His thoughts, as he stood there, were on the virtual elimination of nearly all types of cancers and how that current state was achieved. He knew the enzyme telomerase would rebuild telomeres during each replication. He turned right and looked up at the final eight stairs. He paused to catch his

breath. He felt a little strange but he quickly let the sensation go. As he started up, he went over the role that the mutated gene tert played. Tert mutations caused cells to make too much telomerase, which kept the telomeres of the cancer cells long and thus able to continue reproducing.

Dr. Ros reached the final landing and turned left into his office. He crossed the room and pondered if the two individuals the Professor claimed existed had been subjected to some medical condition, perhaps an illness of some kind that had affected their cells so that they ceased replicating and remained perpetually stable and thus somehow enabled them to live, if not forever, for an abnormal length of time.

When he reached his desk he took a sip of his tea. It was still quite warm. Then he realized he had forgotten his cookie and donut. He crossed the room to his office doorway. He paused a moment on the landing then started down the eight stairs. Left turn. Four stairs. Left turn. He held the other railing with his right hand and moved down the twelve stairs. Left at the hallway. He got his saucer, took a bite of his cookie. Looked at how much remained and thought about getting another one. Looked at the donut, changed his mind.

Through the kitchen he went, along the hallway. He paused at the landing at the twelve stairs to switch the saucer to his left hand. He held on to the railing and started up. Right at the next landing. Four stairs. Turn right. He paused on the landing to look up at the final eight stairs. He wondered if his chest was tight or was the feeling simply his imagination. He struggled slightly to catch his breath. Then a realization flashed through his mind. He had forgotten to take his medicine.

He started up and on the third stair he suddenly became dizzy and he fell back. He came to rest on his back on the landing. He didn't lose consciousness so he could see the wooden wall to

his left passing as he fell. His saucer had flown into the air and his cookie, with two bites, slid along the landing and lay there. The donut, having fell on the floor on its edge, rolled and wobbled and turning as if directed began rolling down the twelve stairs. Then the chocolate treat fell onto its side at the feet of Triska who, with a small vase of flowers, had stood on the landing at the bottom of the twelve stairs and watched the donut, as if by design, roll down the stairs one by one.

She picked up the donut and looked at it. Then she started up the twelve stairs. At the landing she turned right and stopping there before the four stairs she looked up at the next landing and saw Dr. Ros sprawled on his back. She also saw the half eaten cookie. She called out.

Triska: What happened Dr. Ros? Did you fall?

It was as if he had not heard her ascending the stairs. He didn't turn his head. He spoke in a weakening voice.

Dr. Ros: Oh, Triska ... thank goodness. Yes ... I fell ...

He again was attempting to catch his breath. He was gasping.

Dr. Ros: I can barely move. Go ... get my medicine. You must ... get my medicine.

Triska ran up the stairs and stood looking down at him.

Triska: Where is your medicine?

Dr. Ros: On my ... desk ... beside my computer. Pill ... blue and pink ... pill. Bring it ... to me. Hurry ... please.

Triska: OK.

She moved past him and bounded up the eight stairs. She ran into the room to his desk. She set the flowers and donut beside his cup of tea. She scanned the desk and there, where he said it was lay a little blue and pink pill. She had seen the pills before. She had seen him place it under his tongue. She stared at it. She was thinking, processing. Then she ran back across the room, through the doorway and stood on the landing at the top of the

eight stairs. She looked down at the doctor lying there on his back. Both feet were elevated and remained on the second stair. His left arm was across his chest. She called out.

Triska: I don't see it!

Dr. Ros struggled to speak.

Dr. Ros: It's ... there. It must ... be. Look ... again.

Triska: OK.

She ran back to the desk. She looked at the pill. She ran back to the top of the stairs.

Triska: I can't find it! It's not there!

Now she could barely hear him but she saw him feebly wave his left hand, a summoning gesture.

Dr. Ros: Come ... here.

His breathing was labored. He was wheezing. Triska ran down the eight stairs. She got on her knees and placed both hands on his chest. She could feel his heart beating and fluttering. She bent over and looked directly into his blue eyes. Dr. Ros nearly whispered.

Dr. Ros: I think I'm about ... to die. Can't die ... now ... must live. Go ... get Kay. Get ... Kay ...

Triska: OK! I'll get Kay!

Triska didn't even take the four stairs. She jumped onto the landing and headed down the twelve stairs to the hallway. She turned left. Through the kitchen she went. She raced across the porch and ran down the seven steps, over the concrete walkway and onto the grass. She saw Kay still there in the far corner of the yard. Faster she ran. Then she called out.

Triska: Kay! Kay!

Kay was dressed in brown denim overalls similar to the ones Triska wore. She also had on a long-sleeved kaki shirt and brown boots. Her hair, just like Triska was tied behind her head with a yellow ribbon. She had spread out a wide, thick cotton blanket

and was on her knees working in her garden. She looked up at Triska coming towards her. Then the little child *Entity* did a cartwheel and then another one and when she landed she stood there and looked at Kay.

Kay: Oh my, how agile you've become.

Triska smiled and took a slight bow. As Kay returned to her gardening, pulling weeds and shifting soil around with her brown-gloved hands, Triska walked up near her to watch. After several moments she spoke.

Triska: I'd like to be a gymnast.

Kay replied without looking up.

Kay: If you think it, you can do it.

She tossed some weeds into the bucket beside her.

Kay: Did the doctor like his flowers?

Triska: He said they were pretty. Then he sniffed them and said they smelled nice.

Kay: Was he busy?

Triska: Yes. He was saving the world.

Kay laughed, short and light.

Kay: You always say that.

Triska sat down on the blanket, crossed her legs in front of her and watched Kay with interest. Kay looked over and saw Triska watching her and then returned to her task, moving forward a little.

Kay: Do you know today's date?

Triska: Yes. It's the third day of September.

Kay: You're right. And in a few weeks fall will arrive.

Triska: Some people call it autumn and a long time ago it was called harvest time.

Kay: The farmers would gather their crops to sell and store for the winter. This will be our first autumn together. We'll see the nights grow longer and the weather will get chilly. Then the green

leaves will change into lovely colors of red and gold and float from the trees. I like the autumn time of the year.

Triska: I've never seen real snow.

Kay: Winter, then spring again.

Triska: April showers bring May flowers.

Kay pushed her trowel aside and sat down her gardening fork. She stood and turned away from Triska and brushed and clapped her gloves together. Then she turned back and moved to sit down beside her. She stretched her legs out. They both looked at the few flowers and vegetables that remained.

Kay: We'll pick the last of the vegetables before the first frost.

Neither spoke for a long moment.

Kay: And this winter you can help me choose and order the fresh flowers to be delivered for Dr. Ros.

Triska: He'll like that.

Triska stretched out her legs and lay down, placing her hands beneath her head. She stared up into the partly cloudy sky at the soft appearing, puffy slow movement. She saw the light of the sun and she saw the bluish and pinkish colors above her. She was thinking, processing, reflecting on the day's events. Her childlike voice was low and clear when she spoke.

Triska: Kay, you're like my mother, aren't you?

Kay: I think that could be said.

Triska: Then that means I'm like your daughter?

Kay: Yes.

Again they were both quiet. Suddenly they could hear the call of a songbird in a nearby tree. Another bird answered.

Triska: I love you mommy.

Then she quickly added.

Triska: Well, you know what I mean.

Kay: Yes. Of course I know what you mean. And I love you

Triska. And I know you know exactly what I mean.

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Tuesday morning, the first day of September, Briney was sitting in a large room on the top floor of the third largest, combination, hotel and casino in all of Louisiana. The full council of the Louisiana Protectors, the largest, the most well equipped and best-trained militia in *Center World* was in attendance.

After she had returned from her rendezvous with Kab she had immediately downloaded the information from the storage device he had provided her. She went over it all several times. She then contacted two of the founders and leaders of the Protectors and informed them of the threat she faced and the threat that had also been made against Lena's life. Both Pleas and Faydee were incensed and could only comment, in several different ways, how ridiculous the whole thing was. Then they had declared the protectors, nearly 500 strong and of course regular citizens would be put on alert and the three Devils would be shot on sight. Briney explained there needed to be more of a deterrent so as to dissuade such future threats by Devils seeking retribution.

She had watched Pleas rise and begin to pace across the room and back. After a little over two years of being around them and with Lena's shared insight into the personalities of the two she had an idea as to how she would present her plan to them. But it had to be given to them in such a way that they would accept it.

Pleas had suggested they be captured and hung and the hanging be broadcast across the state. Faydee liked that idea. Briney reminded them how the Avenging Devils, the largest and most dangerous biker gang in *Center World* were based in both Arkansas and Mississippi and the response of the Protectors and the message sent back to them had to arrive closer to the main group just above them in Sherwood. She had also emphasized that the threat had been made against her and therefore she

reserved the right to respond to that threat in the way she chose. As she anticipated they asked her if she had a better plan and when she presented it to them they enthusiastically agreed to it with certain stipulations, the main one being that as a captain and squad leader in the Protectors they wanted her group of twelve to be actively involved and take the lead.

Now they were before the full main council and at Briney's insistence Pleas would present the plan as if it was his. She had watched him as he stood before the group of seven, in his full formal Protectors' uniform, all six feet four inches of him. She suppressed a smile as the *Parda-clara crioula* DG, his decorated uniform tight against his muscular frame, waved both his arms and expressed his indignation at the information he had received.

His light-hazel-colored eyes flashed and his somewhat long, curly, sandy-colored hair bounced on his neck. His booming, heavy voice filled the room and Briney watched him do what she knew he enjoyed doing, with a flair for the dramatic, giving presentations, more so those that involved military-like activities.

Briney had looked at Faydee, the six feet two inch, somewhat slim, *Parda-clara crioula* DG mate of Pleas. She had seen the pride in Faydee's light-gray eyes and how they had to pull at their long, dark-reddish-brown, curly hair and push it behind their ears. She had glanced at Pleas and then back to Faydee and nodded a little as she recalled the words of Lena of how Pleas and Faydee, together and in love for so many years made a wonderful couple.

As she watched and listened to Pleas she knew that it was a necessary formality but in fact a foregone conclusion as to how this would be decided. The Protectors had originally been formed by Pleas, Faydee and Lena and funded and supported financially by Lena in the beginning. These two leaders could have simply unilaterally set the course of action and decided how to proceed but they both, through Lena's advice, wanted the council and

those presently sitting on it to remain actively involved in all the important decisions.

After Pleas was done all of the council members expressed that the three devilish enemy interlopers should simply, quickly be destroyed on sight. Pleas explained, as Briney had explained to him that there needed to be a more demonstrative and thereby more effective deterrent so Louisiana would not be continuously confronted with clandestine incursions by their enemies since overt attacks had already been eliminated. So a vote was taken and Briney was unanimously given the assignment. She would lead and carry out the plan she had so meticulously devised.

On that same evening of the council meeting the first notifications and images were sent out by Briney and her squad. Not only the Protectors received them but also hundreds received forwarded messages. Those who worked in casinos, hotels, motels, restaurants and also the regular citizens of New Orleans and the outlining areas of Louisiana were put on alert. They all were to be on the lookout for the three people, the three strangers in the pictures they had been sent.

There was a *Marrom DQ* presenting as male with the calling of Brandt. They had the green beard and somewhat short orange and yellow hair and brown eyes. They weren't very tall, were of average height and were quite thick. The *Branca DF* with blue eyes and medium length bright-red hair was slim in size and went by the name of Hedda. The third person, the *Cobre DM*, was approximately six feet four inches in height with short, dark-brown hair and what appeared to be blue highlights. He was normal in size for that height. Eye color is unknown. He went by the calling of Drale.

It was a little before dusk when Drale, Brandt and Hedda paid for three separate motel rooms for a week. They were ten miles from downtown New Orleans. By 9:30 p.m. Briney had been

contacted and provided the information as to their location. Two members of her squad, who were, just as all the others in the group, dressed in civilian clothes, were dispatched to that motel. At the first opportunity a tracking device would be placed on their vehicle. The three would be constantly monitored.

Briney let Pleas and Faydee know that the three had arrived and were under surveillance and that she would update them on a need to know basis. Then she and four others in her squad had discussed what they thought would be the next moves of the three and what they themselves would do.

Briney believed the three, over the next day or so would realize how futile it would be to attempt to find her by roaming the city looking for her based on a two year old description they had of her appearance. She also believed they would begin to ask around about her. She knew she was not hard to find and was actually quite well known in the city. She also surmised they would eventually be told that she could be found playing poker several nights a week in Abita Springs, a small town a little less than an hour north of New Orleans. She assumed that regardless of the information they received about her they would not be dissuaded from their goal. Her thought was that they had gone too far to change their minds.

The three Devils went out a little after 11 p.m. Those watching them made note of the weapons they carried and assumed they had more in their vehicle. They passed that along to the others. The three went into the big city, first to the largest casino. They gambled a little and drank a lot of alcohol. Finally, at 4 a.m. they staggered out and climbed in their vehicle. They had been observed and followed the whole time by two different pairs of individuals from Briney's squad comprised of a *DF* and three *DMs*. Now as they tracked them from a distance, first on

the still somewhat busy city streets and then on the dark, nearly empty street to the motel the *DF* Protector remarked to her partner that she hoped they had entered their destination coordinates and were using auto-drive so that they wouldn't injure anyone in their drunken state.

Squad members were there when they woke up late and went to breakfast in the motel restaurant. Then, hungover from the previous night, they went back to their rooms, most likely to go to sleep. At 7 p.m. they were headed the nearly ten miles south to The Crescent City, this time to the third largest casino in all of Louisiana, the one owned by Pleas, Faydee and Lena.

They were watched as they aimlessly ambled about looking at not only the gamblers but the people coming and going. They were drinking and talking animatedly to each other. Then the three split up and would occasionally talk with others, in brief conversations. Drale then played blackjack for a while. He conversed with the dealer and several of the other players and when he got up and moved away one squad member followed him as another waited for the dealer to take her break and spoke with her. He found out Drale had inquired about Briney, if anyone had seen her lately? Another player had told him they had seen her at the Abita Springs casino, where she usually played poker. The dealer, an undercover Protector, made sure Drale knew she would be there the next night, Thursday.

Later that night the three went to the nightclub connected to the casino where they all got drunk. Drale got into a verbal confrontation. Hedda and Brandt joined in and they were all instructed, forcefully, to leave. They were followed back to their motel. The two who were trailing them were convinced they were in auto-drive mode because the extremely inebriated three didn't run off the road, into a ditch or crash into a tree.

Briney was informed that the Devils had received information about her connection to the casino where she played poker. Pleas and Faydee were provided an update. That Thursday evening by 8 p.m. Drale, Brandt and Hedda had dressed. They were arming themselves and preparing to go forty-five miles to Abita Springs. At the same time Briney, already dressed and already armed, was meeting with eight members of her squad. The four who were watching the three Devils were on their Comm devices with the others on a conference call. They went over their plans and by 8:30 four vehicles, one in front and two behind Briney started towards the casino where she would play poker as usual.

Drale, Brandt and Hedda arrived first. They parked in front as close to the entrance as they could. It was a small casino. The locals in the nearby area frequented the establishment and that was because they preferred to gamble in a less crowded and more relaxed atmosphere. People from out of town and those who wanted to party hard, mostly the younger ones who live in or near Abita Springs went to New Orleans where there was excitement and glamour. People here weren't looking for celebrities or the well to do. They were here to socialize with friends and relatives. Then there were the serious card players. Even some from the big city came here. This casino was known for catering to the best of the poker players and hosting poker tournaments. The games weren't necessarily high stakes but the skilled players enjoyed the professional competition.

The three Devils didn't stand out in some unusual way. The green beard and orange and yellow hair of Brandt didn't draw undue attention and Hedda wasn't the only one there with red hair. Drale's auburn-colored hair with some blue in it would have been considered normal. It was however noted by several of the regulars that they were strangers. And the owners knew exactly who they were along with most of the employees.

They were dressed in long-sleeved cotton shirts. Brandt wore green, the color of his beard. Hedda wore a light-pink, blouse-like top and Drale's shirt was gray. They all had on dark-blue denim pants and leather boots. Drale's boots were black as were Hedda's and Brandt's boots were brown. Drale's large black handgun was low on his right side. Hedda's smaller black gun was also on her right but higher, near her waist. Brandt's silver pistol was in a thin harness, holstered under his left arm. They each had five extra magazines in holders on their belts.

The Devils bought drinks and then walked around slowly in a nonchalant manner. They remained together and on occasions just stood and talked or simply observed the people who were around throughout the main card playing area. They were looking for a *Palida DF* who was slim, but maybe not, with hair that was somewhat long, or maybe short and that was black in color or maybe wasn't. They were looking at the *DFs* to see who came close to that description.

Four of Briney's squad came in, two by two and moved past the slot machines and further into that large area. They eventually saw the Devils. When Briney came in she was told by one of the two greeters near the entrance that the Devils were there. As she headed towards the roped off poker area four more of her squad came in, also two by two.

She was wearing black pants and shirt with black boots and her hair was tied behind her head with a black shiny ribbon that hung a little ways down her back. She wore two handguns, one on each side at her waist cross-draw style. As she moved through the room she acknowledged several people and stopped to hug and talk to friends. She walked past the Devils on her right and they glanced at the powerful looking *Melada DF* with the medium-length blonde-streaked auburn-colored hair. They saw her and looked away towards the entrance. She saw them in her

peripheral vision. As she drew closer to the designated poker area not far from where the Devils stood, a voice called out loudly.

Voice: Briney! Briney!

Briney stopped and looked to her left. A tall *Parda-clara* DL dressed in powder blue pants, blouse and boots with a large powder blue handgun on their right side with rings on each finger and large round dangling earrings hurried over and grabbed her to give her a hug. Briney hugged back and turned them so she could briefly glance at the Devils.

DL: I missed you last week. I was out of town. Are you well?

Briney: I am. I hope you are.

DL: Yes, I am.

Briney raised her voice slightly.

Briney: You missed some good games. I played until the sun came up.

DL: Come on let's play.

Briney had caught the excitement rush through the three Devils. It passed from Drale to Hedda to Brandt. They had all heard her name. But then as she turned away she had recognized the doubt creep in. They had looked at each other and then at her with momentary confusion. Had they heard the name correctly? This individual was not how they expected their target to appear. They looked at her guns and the way she carried them. They had watched her move. Briney and her DL friend walked on into the poker area and found a table.

Those regulars at the table welcomed these two regulars who joined them. Briney and her friend purchased chips and they settled in to play. It wasn't long before the three Devils moved into the area to stand near the wall with others who were sitting and standing and watching the games at the ten tables reserved for the poker players.

The Devils watched and listened closely. They wanted to hear

something, some type of definite confirmation that this was who they had come almost seven hundred and fifty miles to find. Finally Drale turned to his right and spoke to the *DM* standing next to him, sipping a drink.

Drale: That's Briney over there in black isn't it?

The man turned and stared at Drale for a long moment.

DM: Yeah, that's her.

He turned back to the table he was watching and again sipped his drink. Those observing were engrossed in the action. Most were wagering on specific players and particular hands. When Drale saw a player rise from the table where Briney sat and no one immediately took that place he surprised both Hedda and Brandt when he quickly strolled over and sat in that spot while removing a value card from his back pocket.

He wanted to be close to this former Devil who had rejected his gang and who possessed the information he sought. He wanted to look into her hazel-colored eyes. He was confident because he knew who she was and he believed she had no idea who he was or why he was there. He got his chips and the next game of Texas Holdem began.

Drale was a fairly good player because that's what he did before joining the Devils and that's what the Devils did, they gambled. They rolled the dice and played various card games, including blackjack. They wagered on anything and everything but poker was the favorite game. Even the little Devils played it. And the grownups would fuss and sometime fight over how the cards were being played or the outcomes. They would hand fight unless of course someone picked up something. And there were stabbings and occasionally someone got shot if suspected of cheating. So Drale did well and his chips piled up.

He was also drinking alcohol while he played so he ignored the subdued decorum of the establishment. People were treated

with respect, winners and losers, and teasing and harsh words were frowned upon and kept to a minimum. But Drale talked and made comments in a somewhat loud tone and as the games progressed and the alcohol he consumed took more effect he became abrasive when he lost and gloated when he won, which he continued to do.

There were many eyes on Briney's table as the night went on and midnight approached. Players at nearby tables were looking there more and more for longer periods of time. More than a moderate crowd had gathered amongst those standing and sitting near the wall. They were focused on the tall stranger, especially those who knew who he was. Hedda had walked over and tried to get Drale to cash in so they could leave. She knew they needed to be outside already waiting when their target departed. He had rebuffed her. Brandt had changed his position so he could get Drale's attention and gestured for him to quit. He ignored him and played on, winning more than he lost.

Then a little past midnight another hand was dealt. There were six people in the game not counting the dealer. There were Briney, her *DL* friend, Drale and two *DMs* and a *DF*. One *DM* sat next to the dealer, left, at the small blind. Briney's friend sat to the left of him at the big blind. Briney sat to the left of her friend. To the right of the dealer sat a *DM*, then Drale, and to the right of Drale sat the *DF*. The *DM* to the left of the dealer and then Briney's friend bet into the small and big blind, respectively.

The hold cards were dealt. Each player received two cards face down and very carefully peeked at them. Briney got two sevens, a heart and a diamond. Since she was the first player to the left of the big blind she was, under the gun, which meant she would bet first preflop. She bet a little more than she had opened with before. All the others again looked at their cards, pulling up the corners just a little. Then they looked at the amount that had

been bet. Everyone who folded tossed their cards into the center of the table where the *DTM* dealer gathered them and moved them to the side. Drale kept his cards. He had been dealt two aces, a club and a spade and he prepared to play his hand.

Briney stared at him. She peered into and through his eyes deep inside of him. She looked at his hands and saw him playing with his chips, counting them, shuffling them, stacking them over and over as if he were unsure what to do with his cards. He looked at her, a brief glance. Finally he tossed chips in, matching her opening bet and raising a significant amount. He knew his hand was strong. Briney matched his raise.

Briney: I call.

Now came the flop. The dealer dealt one card, face down, from the top of the deck and set it to the side. Then they dealt three cards face down out front, paused a moment and turned them all over at the same time and spread them out in a row on the spots where they belonged. There was a two of diamonds, a jack of clubs and a seven of spades. Briney now had a set of sevens against his two aces. She raised, an amount to draw him in but not enough to cause any suspicions.

Drale knew his two aces were high. In his arrogance he never considered three of a kind. He didn't bet to protect his hand. He stared at her, this time holding her gaze. He tried to decipher what he saw. He thought he saw more than a poker face, more than the usual lack of any revealing emotion most players, good players, attempted to exhibit so as not to give any indication what-so-ever, no hint, no tell, as to not only what they were thinking but what cards they may hold. Did they have or not? Whatever they showed to their opponent were they bluffing, or not?

He was momentarily unnerved because he was unsure if he saw more than the nothing she presented to him. Or did he see a

flash in her eyes that was beyond disdain or dislike one poker player could possess for another? He wondered, just a fleeting thought that he not only disregarded but also immediately dismissed. Was that hatred that jumped across the table at him?

He continued thinking about his cards and the game. He absently scratched at his cheek with his left index finger and grinned at her. Then he counted, moved chips forward. He matched her bet and raised. The *DTM* said aloud, so everyone could hear the total amount of his bet. It was double the amount. Briney thought for a long moment, looking at him. Then she matched his raise, without raising more.

Briney: I call.

Now came the turn. Again the dealer burned a card, dealing a card from the top of the deck and setting it to the side. Then they dealt a card face up and pushed it to the row with the first three. It was a nine of clubs. Drale raised, another large amount and then looked at Briney and smirked as if he had done something really important. It was a, what do you think about that, face? Briney looked at him. She appeared to be thinking about her options, pondering her next move. Then she matched his raise.

Briney: I call.

The dealer prepared to deal the final river card. Drale couldn't know the only cards that could save him were the ace of hearts and the ace of diamonds. Again the dealer burnt a card to the side. They dealt a card to the center face up, placing it next to the other four. It was a queen of clubs. It didn't take long for Drale to chuckle and speak with surety as he pushed all his remaining chips forward.

Drale: I'm all in.

Briney spoke softly.

Briney: I call.

Drale tossed both his cards face up, almost to the center of

the table deliberately, one by one. He grinned and looked at the other players at the table. They stared at him without emotion, with their poker faces. Then he looked at Briney. She moved her two cards forward and turned them over, placing them face up on the table at the same time. Drale saw the hearts and diamonds on her two sevens. The colors seemed to distort and to shift and waver. The hearts turned into diamonds and the diamonds turned into hearts. Then the symbols shimmered and melted and ran like blood and the cards went blank.

He blinked. Then he blinked again. His mouth fell open as he stared with disbelief at the cards. He looked at the five cards, the community cards near the center of the table. He focused on the third seven, the card that symbolized the power of darkness, good luck and death, the black seven of spades.

Hedda and Brandt moved up beside Drale. Hedda on his left, Brandt on his right. Drale pushed himself away and with effort stood, placing both hands on the table. He turned and as he began to walk away Briney spoke to him two words.
Briney: Bye. Bye.

Drale was seething as the three made their way to the exit. Only a few people, including the remaining two from Briney's squad paid them any attention but the Devils felt all eyes were on them. When they reached their vehicle Brandt climbed behind the wheel with Hedda in the passenger seat. Drale sat in the row behind them in the middle, leaning forward. Brandt pulled to an area so they could clearly see all the doors at the front of the building. There was only one parking lot and they could also see the valet parking area. It was here they would wait for Briney. They were being watched as they watched for her.

They pulled their guns and checked them. Through their darkly tinted windows they stared at the people coming and

going. Finally Drale spoke. His voice was low and harsh.

Drale: We'll follow her until the right time. We might have to run her off the road.

He cursed Briney. No one spoke. Then.

Drale: We'll take her to the woods and make her tell us where that Lena is.

He cursed Lena. He called her vile names. He reminded the two what she had done, the deaths and destruction she had brought about.

Hedda: How will we know she's telling us the truth?

Brandt: Yeah, she could be lying.

They were quiet again. They were all thinking. Finally Drale spoke. It was as if he was attempting to organize his incomplete plan.

Drale: When we get her we'll take her straight to Sherwood. Make her tell us what we need to know. We go where she tells us. If she's lying we'll find out.

Hedda: What if she won't tell us?

Drale: We'll torture her. She'll tell.

Brandt: What if somebody's with her?

Drale: We'll shoot 'em!

Hedda: How will we know when the right time is?

Drale was exasperated now. He replied in a low growl.

Drale: I'll tell you when! That's how you'll know!

They sat there staring through the dimness. Where they were parked there was only one tall yellowish-white light and the parking lot was not very well lit. The front of the casino was brightly illuminated and there was still quite a bit of activity. They could only hear faint music when the doors were opened. They could also hear voices of loud talking and laughing people when they came out on their way to wherever they were going.

While they sat there growing impatient Briney was still playing

poker. She would glance at the Comm device beside her on the table. She had been sent messages informing her that the rest of her squad was in place and updates on the Devils. She knew where they were parked and had already been provided a description of the vehicle in which they were traveling.

At 2:30 a.m. they saw the automatic doors slide open and Briney stepped through the doorway. Her *DL* friend was with her along with two other *DMs*. They stopped on the sidewalk to talk. Then the Devils saw the *DMs* move left towards the far side of the parking lot. Briney and the *DL* remained there talking. Then they each handed something to two of the four valets that stood nearby and the two hurried off to the valet parking area. Soon, two vehicles pulled up. The three could see Briney and the *DL* hug. The *DL* handed the valet something, got in their vehicle and drove off as Briney waved. Then Briney handed the other valet something and got in her vehicle. But she didn't drive away. She just sat there.

The three Devils were speaking in intense, hushed tones, as if they could be heard by someone close by. They were nervous and excited.

Drale: She's alone!

Hedda: She's just sitting there!

Then the vehicle began to move slowly towards the street.

Drale: There she goes! We got her now!

They stayed behind at a distance and when the vehicle reached the street at the end of the long driveway it turned left. They turned left and kept it in sight. There were only a few other vehicles around at this time of the morning in what could be called a rural area. They could see one vehicle between them and their target. Then that vehicle turned right and headed towards the highway. They were now directly behind Briney but not too close, on a two-lane street running in silent electric mode.

Drale: There's nobody around. Pull in front of her and cut her off. We jump out and get the drop on her.

Just as Brandt sped up, the vehicle they followed accelerated and then made a sharp left onto a dark, narrow unpaved road. Had the vehicle not turned there they would not have even known the road existed. Brandt slowed, applied the brakes and turned and followed the car that faded from sight ahead of them. All they could see were the red taillights.

Drale: Turn off your lights.

Brandt switched off the lights and they were plunged into darkness. There were no streetlights. There were also no houses or buildings of any kind.

Hedda: You think she saw us?

Drale was irritated at the question. He nearly hissed.

Drale: How would I know?

Brandt: Look, she's turning.

They could see the taillights turn left. They slowly approached where the vehicle had turned and when they reached that point it was as if Briney had disappeared. There was no road there. Then they looked closely and saw they were at a gated entrance to a driveway. There was no fence, just a driveway with wrought-iron gates and the gates were wide open. They peered into the darkness and saw, barely, nearly hidden behind dense bushes and wide, tall oak trees that there was a large three-story house painted white with round columns and an upstairs porch at the second floor. They rolled closer and they could see lights, dimly, in all the windows of the first and second floor and they could see Briney's vehicle parked on the right side, near the rear. There were no other vehicles and no one to be seen. Hedda nearly whispered and there was fear in her voice.

Hedda: I don't like this. Let's wait for a better time.

Drale snapped at her.

Drale: What better time!? She's alone and the only vehicle here is hers!

Brandt: What about any others in there?

Drale: We've been over this!

Drale spoke menacingly.

Drale: They're in the wrong place at the wrong time! We eliminate them!

Brandt was pulling forward. They were not far from the house but hidden behind some trees.

Drale: Stop. We'll walk from here.

Brandt came to a stop and the three exited the vehicle. They all drew their guns and quietly closed the doors. Drale gestured and nearly whispered to Brandt.

Drale: Go around to the back. If she comes out you can get the drop on her.

Brandt moved to the side of the house and was quickly lost from their sight in the thick darkness. Drale and Hedda waited several long moments for him to reach the rear and then began to creep up the eight steps. They could see it was not only a very large house but it was, from its style, obviously quite old. But they had not seen the sign near the road at the turn in or the sign near the opened gates. Both had been pulled up and placed front down on the ground. And they couldn't see the sign that hung from the banister of the porch above them. It had been covered up. But had they seen the signs they would have known this huge historical edifice from the past that they were about to enter had once been, many years ago, a museum and up until ten years ago was the Abita Springs House of Mystery and Horror.

They kept stopping because the steps groaned and creaked and the sounds seemed to be deafening and reverberating not just through the still humid air but also through their heads. Hedda grew warm and began to perspire.

They took the eight steps and reached the porch. They listened for any indication of activity inside. They heard no one talking or walking or any music. Drale wondered what kind of house this was. Hedda wondered what kind of house this was. In the rear, as he moved from one side to the other Brandt wondered what kind of house this was. Drale went to the left of the tall wide, double doors and tried to peek through the tall dirty window that rose from his knees to almost the top of the porch. He could see metal bars behind the glass and curtains behind the bars. The curtains were dark and they must have been heavy because he could see there were lights on in the area near the doors, but just faintly.

Hedda was looking at Drale with wide eyes as he moved from the window back to the door. He stood there staring at the silver knob. His pistol was in his right hand so he used his left hand to reach for the round handle. He turned it slowly and was surprised but not necessarily relived when not only did it turn easily but the door opened when he pushed it.

He looked at Hedda to his right and with the movement of his head he motioned her over to him. He removed his hand from the knob and placed his palm on the wood and pushed, just a little, expecting to hear the noises that old doors in old homes make when being opened in the middle of the night.

There was no revealing sound so when it was ajar a little more than just enough, he stepped, with caution, through the doorway, peering into the gloomy, shadowy room. He moved further in and Hedda followed and as he took a few steps forward she entered the room and moved to his left side.

They looked around the large room slowly. At first, almost imperceptibly, all the lights altered. As if becoming larger they grew in intensity reflecting illumination outwardly, shining more and more and they could see clearly and three full-length dusty

mirrors on each wall were twinkling. They saw what appeared to be some type of stuffed animals, hybrid animals small as dogs and large as lions and bears.

The only furniture was wooden chairs in off-center areas, along the walls to the right and left and in front. Some of the chairs were empty, including an enormous oversized rocking chair near the right corner. In all of the other chairs sat mannequins that were presented as male and female and those presented as in between and outside that designation. Some were dressed in flowing gowns, others in shiny silk suits. Several were without clothing of any kind.

Some of the figures were placed along the walls and some were sprawled face up and face down. Then there were those that stood in various poses that were dressed in brightly colored clothes with bright rainbow-colored elaborate decorative feathers. There were clowns with extremely large wide-toed shoes and painted faces with bulbous red and orange and green and black noses. They both looked for a moment at the dummies with different colored masks that had marble-like unmoving eyes that seemed to glow. Drale couldn't help but notice and stare at the ones that had eyes of different colors, light-gray left eye, light-blue right eye and the hair on the back of his neck tingled and stood up.

Drale and Hedda were turning one way and then the other, guns at the ready. Drale looked up and Hedda looked up to see where he was looking and they both saw balconies that ran completely around the room two and three levels above them. It was dim up there but they could see several grotesque shaped clowns and half a dozen hideous-looking mannequins leaning far over the balustrade that enclosed the balconies and beside those human-like forms tattered cloth signs were hanging that had painted on them, in what had once been a blood-red color but

were now faded, barely discernible brownish words that said Mardi Gras and dates from years and years ago and the mannequins stared at them and the clowns smiled at them. Hedda spoke. She tried to whisper, to no avail.

Hedda: What is this place? How we gonna find her?

At that moment they heard footsteps on the porch steps and then they could hear walking on the porch and then the door was opened further and both Drale and Hedda had turned towards the doors and were preparing to shoot. They saw it was Brandt. He saw them, their raised guns. He tried to keep his voice low.

Brandt: It's me! It's me!

He stepped into the room and moved to stand close to them, on Drale's right side.

Brandt: There's no windows or doors in the back.

He began to look around.

Brandt: I don't like this. We should leave.

There was a strange sound that came from near the right corner in front of Brandt and behind Drale and Hedda who both whirled around. And then behind them there was a loud whoosh and clanking sound and they all three quickly turned towards the doors and they saw metal bars drop from the head jam of the doorway into the sill. The bars filled the doorway and now there was no way out.

Behind them they heard the strange sound again and again all three turned around. They were staring into the right corner and they saw the large rocking chair was slowly rocking and the noise they had heard was the rockers squeaking against the floor. The rocking chair began to rock faster and faster and suddenly music filled the room from speakers above and around them. It was marching music and circus music and carnival Madi Gras music. Mambo. Jazz. Dixieland. The music grew louder and merged and became a cacophony of musical instruments and as the lights

went out and plunged them into near pitch-blackness a trap door in the floor opened and Hedda dropped down through the floor. The trap door closed. The music went silent. The lights came all the way up and the room was bright again and Drale and Brandt blinked as their vision adjusted to the sudden glare and it was several moments before they realized Hedda had disappeared.

Below them Hedda slid down a slide to the cement floor of a dimly lit area of the basement and she had gone so fast that when she reached the bottom and her feet touched the hard floor she was flung forward, face down. She managed to hold on to her weapon but she struggled to rise. And as she staggered to her feet she turned towards the shiny metal slide and Briney using her gun that was equipped with a silencer, shot her through her forehead and Hedda fell back and folded down into a heap. Briney was connected to her squad and she spoke into her headset. Briney: Send the other one.

Above her, Drale and Brandt were looking around for Hedda. Then the chair began to rock again. The music began again, raucous music with cymbals and drums and horns. One of the clowns began to move its arms. Then a clown began to dance, a loose, sloppy jig and when a mannequin moved forward Brandt and then Drale fired their weapons, several times. Then once again the lights went out as the music grew louder and Brandt dropped through a hole in the floor. The hole closed but the music didn't stop and Brandt didn't take a slide down. He fell ten feet and when he hit the floor his legs felt broken and he collapsed onto his back. His gun fell from his hand and as he reached for it Briney stepped forward. She placed her left foot on his grasping right hand, on his wrist, and put two quiet bullets through his forehead. Then she unscrewed her silencer placed it on a table and started up the stairs in the corner.

Above her the lights had come on and Drale had seen he was alone. He was turning in circles. He called out to Hedda and Brandt as he turned, but received no response. He had stopped and was looking at the front doors and the metal that barred his way out. Again he heard footsteps behind him, shuffling, dragging. They seemed to scrape against the floor. He turned from the doors and saw a mannequin moving with great effort slowly towards him. Then a clown, laughing maniacally in a shrill voice danced in his direction. He backed up and fired his weapon. Then another mannequin came forward and another dancing clown and when he shot the mannequin it screamed a piercing scream and then laughed, a deep throaty laugh. He was in a panic, firing wildly. Then several of the strange animals came to life and leaped into the air. One came directly at him and he emptied his gun. The music stopped. He dropped his magazine and as he pulled another one from his belt, to his right on the wall, Briney pushed open a one-way mirror and stepped through the wall. Her gun was raised and she yelled.

Briney: Don't move! Don't move! You move you die!

Drale froze, empty pistol in his right hand, full magazine in his left.

Briney: Turn towards me, slowly.

Drale turned to face Briney, the woman he sought. He could see her standing there in a shooting position. The gun was held forward in both her gloved hands. Her legs were spread a little and her knees were slightly bent and her finger was on the trigger. He lowered his arms. He saw the woman in black walk forward, as if emerging from the wall behind her, from the shadows into the light. He looked at the barrel of her gun. It was as if he could peer all the way down into it. It seemed to widen into the size of a cannon and he envisioned a bullet flying out and into his chest where her aim was pointing. He looked into her eyes then at her

face, her poker face. He focused on her lightly red painted lips as she spoke clearly. Her voice was low. Her words were intense.

Briney: Do exactly as I say, when I say.

She took two more steps forward, still aiming at him.

Briney: Keep your weapon pointed down. Load your weapon. Chamber a round. Then holster your weapon. You understand?

Drale: Yeah, I understand.

Briney: Go ahead. You best be careful.

He did as instructed as slowly and deliberately as he could with no quick movements except when he racked his gun to chamber a bullet. Then he carefully pushed his pistol into his holster and allowed both hands to drop to his sides.

She seemed to relax and he saw her lower her pistol and with her right hand she eased it into her holster that she wore cross body on her left side near her waist. She dropped both arms to her sides. She continued to speak in an even, direct, matter-of-fact manner with less intensity.

Briney: Your two cohorts can't help you. There is only you left so this is going to be settled between us, right here, right now.

Drale moved his right hand closer to his gun. Briney hooked her right thumb in her gun belt near her weapon. She wiggled her fingers slowly and they stared at each other.

Briney: I'm calling you out. Count it off to three ...

She paused to emphasize his name.

Briney: ... Drale.

Now the Devil who had brought this all about, who had initiated this fateful meeting at this very moment in time was confused. How could she know his name? Then her voice was rising.

Briney: Drale! The son of the Avenging Devil Lazar!

The sound of his father's name spoken in such a way, moved him.

Again she emphasized the name.
Briney: Lazar, the rapist!
Deep inside Drale anger flared.
Briney: Lazar the murderer!
Her words were flung at him. Now he was becoming enraged.
The next words taunted him.
Briney: Lazar the heartless!
Drale's elaborate plan that included capture and vengeance and retribution, and glory, turned to destruction. Drale yelled.
Drale: One! Two! ...
Without calling out three he reached for his gun. But Briney had begun to pull her gun before him, after the two. She shot him in his chest once, followed by three more shots as he fell back. Two went through his heart. He crumpled on the floor. Blood ran from his body. Drale was dead.
Briney walked up to him. She looked down at his lifeless body. As she holstered her gun she spoke to him with force. But he was unable to hear what she said.
Briney: Drale, the cheat!

Two members of Briney's squad came down the stairs in the corner of the room that led from the first balcony. They had been stationed there with long guns that were trained on Drale. She watched as four other members carried Hedda's body through the wall. Then four members brought Brandt up and through the wall and they were laid on the floor on each side of Drale, face up. She made a point to wait until the last two members of her elite squad had arrived. They all gathered around Briney and they all looked at the bodies. Briney spoke.
Briney: The grip on our weapon makes us the master. Our eyes on the sights sets the target and our finger on the trigger puts our weapon into service.

In a sweeping motion with her right arm she indicated the dead. She dropped her arm to her side and scanned the faces of those who stood there looking at her.

Briney: Now remember what Lena has shown us and what she has told us. Do not, I repeat, she said, do not allow anyone to live who has threatened to do you harm.

Kab was sitting on the bench in front of the bike shop as 1 p.m. approached. His *Mulatinha* friend was squatted beside him on the porch playing with her tops. She was spinning three at one time. Kab looked over at the little girl and then down at the tops turning. He then glanced up at the sky. To the west the sky was cloudy and darkening. The nurturing rain that had passed through Texas would soon be in Mississippi and then below them in Louisiana at most likely the same time it reached them here in southern Arkansas. Kab knew this and he could not only see the sky altering in the near distance he could also feel the thickness growing in the air. He could smell the coming rain. He saw the highest branches in the trees beginning to sway a little as the wind picked up.

He pulled a drug stick from his shirt pocket and lit it. He inhaled deeply and held the smoke that filled his lungs and allowed it to float into his brain. He coughed, three times. The little mulatto girl looked up at him.

Mulatinha: Let me hit that stick.

Kab: No.

She spun again the first top that had stopped and fallen over on its side and to their left, not far away they heard honking. Then a bike came up the main street followed by a bike and then a pickup truck. They all three pulled to the side almost directly across but a little to the right of the bike shop and parked. The first biker yelled out.

Biker: I seen 'em! They coming up the street!

It took a while before the silver hybrid AWD off-road vehicle came into view and at the same time it could be heard. It was running on gas power but it wasn't really going. It was almost as if it coasted slowly along with the sounds of the engine indicating it was actually moving. It seemed to creep along as it came into the main downtown area and several people started walking along side it and tried to peer through the darkly tinted windows. People began to gather on the sidewalks and in the street.

Kab smoked on his stick and watched this. His little friend watched and as she stared at the vehicle her tops, one by one slowed and then collapsed onto their sides and just lay there. And as the two observed in silence the silver vehicle rolled just past them and stopped. The engine shut off. There were murmurs and hushed voices that moved through the growing crowd but for some reason the voices remained low and muted and unease was in the humid air.

Finally a tall pink-haired *DM* biker approached the passenger side door at the same time a baldheaded *DF* biker went up to the driver's side door and the *DM* knocked on the window with the knuckles on his right hand. The doors didn't open. The vehicle just sat there. Kab couldn't see from where he sat because he was on the passenger side but the *DF* must have opened the unlocked driver's side door because he heard her loud scream. It was a bloodcurdling scream and as the *DM* biker snatched open the passenger side door the *Mulatinha* jumped up and ran across the street to the vehicle.

Kab could see the *DF* biker come from the driver's side door and fall on her knees just past the rear of the vehicle. She began to throw up in the street as the *DM* biker began to yell.

DM Biker: Whoa! Whoa! Look at this!

Two people ran up to both sides of the vehicle and opened

the other doors. Kab could see his little friend push and squeeze through the crowd and disappear. He could hear yelling and cursing and hollering. He heard no hysterical, sorrowful crying or mournful weeping. He thought he might have heard some laughter. Then he saw the little girl come back out through the crowd and walk casually back across the street.

Kab smoked on his stick, again a deep pull, as she took her spot beside him and started four tops at the same time. Kab watched the tops spin as he slowly let the smoke out. He looked from the tops to the bluish-green smoke and watched it dissipate in the air. He coughed, three times. Then he returned his gaze to the tops as the *Mulatinha* began to speak. She looked at her tops. He stared at the tops as she spoke. She provided to him the breaking news in a matter-of-fact way.

Mulatinha: They're all dead. Brandt and Hedda were strapped in and riding in the middle seat. They were shot clean through the head. Drale was strapped in, sitting in the front passenger seat. He was shot in the chest.

Kab pulled on his stick.

Mulatinha: His head was cut off and was sitting face forward in the driver's seat.

Kab chuckled a little as he blew out smoke. He coughed, four times.

Kab: His head was driving?

Mulatinha: His head was on auto-drive.

They sat there in silence and observed the people at the silver vehicle and listened to the loud words and statements that came from the Avenging Devils. Kab smoked his stick and watched the tops when his friend started all four of them up again. Once again he stared at them so hard he felt dizzy. He saw them stop and fall over, one by one. The *Mulatinha* quickly started them again. She deftly twisted each top in her fingers and it was as if they just sat

there. They spun so fast their spinning movement was at first unseen. The four tops stood up there on that porch in Sherwood, Arkansas. Kab's little friend watched him as he watched the tops. She looked into his glazed eyes. Then she turned her attention to her tops and spoke softly in her light, sweet, grown child's voice. *Mulatinha*: What'cha thinking Kab?

Kab couldn't take his eyes off of the tops. It was as if he were hypnotized.

Kab: I'm thinking that they left from here on the first day of September and that today is the fourth day of September and that they weren't gone very long.

SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

Heavy rain and lightning had delayed T'irch's flight so it was almost 6 p.m. *West World* time when his plane arrived at the Los Angeles Airport. Rann had monitored the information being provided by the airline on his departure and arrival, so she, along with two *DMs* she had hired as part of her team picked him up.

They discussed their plans as they rode the nearly sixteen miles to the motel where they would be staying on Lincoln Blvd. in Santa Monica. Rann and the other two had already checked in so after T'irch checked in the room she had reserved for him they walked towards the Pier district until they found a restaurant to their liking. There they ate and drank strong beverages and discussed how they would find their target and assassinate her.

The two *DMs* were former foreign agents, professionals in their line of work, who Rann had worked with before. They were also brothers and were therefore quite empathetic towards T'irch and his motivation. They too would destroy someone, anyone who had killed their sibling. So after their meal as they continued to drink alcohol they all grew quite angry at the person who had

brought them to this place in their lives. Rann was particularly upset that she would most likely be unable to torture Lena before killing her.

They all understood this was *West World*. They were working under specific constraints and limitations. Outright murders were rare. There were even a few, although a very few, individuals who didn't carry a gun of some kind, openly or otherwise. Homicides occurred but had best be initiated in clear and obvious self-defense of one's own life or someone else's life or in certain cases protection of property. Of course there were other circumstances where a life was lost but those incidents invariably caused significant problems and financial costs. Beyond lawyers and trials for those suspected of committing that crime there was always the necessity of someone undergoing the process of Narcosynthesis for anyone accused of murder. The person held under suspicion of that particular crime would be injected with drugs and their veins would be filled with chemicals that had no color or taste or smell and no side effects. The drugs were in fact, a truth serum.

Employing a ubiquitous Universal Broadcast the suspect would be interrogated. Anyone could watch, the answers and explanations heard and seen. Then the suspect would fall asleep with no recollection of what had been said. A vote would then be taken by a panel of seven judges with a newly passed law of a unanimous ruling required. A guilty judgment brought about, under the Ultimate Law, within twenty-four hours, an execution by either firing squad or hanging, which of course was also broadcast universally. *West World* was a relatively peaceful place.

In addition, similar to *East World*, from the top of the state of Washington, to the bottom of California this world had surveillance virtually everywhere both audio and visual. Rann and the others understood their attack had to be clean and precise.

She spoke of wanting to confront their target in *Center World*, in Las Vegas, where capture was possible and torture could be dispensed. One of the brothers reminded her they only had but so much time, two weeks, before their next assignment. If she wasn't located within that time frame they would have to move on.

Rann stared at the brothers. She was obviously heavily under the influence and her cobalt-blue eyes were narrow and yet her gaze pierced them. Her bared teeth were clenched. It was as if she grimaced in pain. She looked from one to the other, appearing to size them up. They were both quite thick and short and completely bald. She focused on their egg-shaped heads and saw how they glistened and appeared moist and damp even. She wondered why their *Parda-clara* skin was naturally tanned from the sun?

A sense of unease reached out and touched the brothers across the table. First one, then the other sipped from their glasses, sucking on the liquid. They knew from past experience how volatile and unpredictable she could be, more so under the influence of alcohol. Not only that, she was very dangerous. They just wanted to be paid in full and to return home. She spoke menacingly to them, both of them, in slightly slurred Russian.

Rann: We'll find her, and when we do make your shots true.

Then her words came in German, short and harsh.

Rann: She killed my man.

Then Tirch spoke thickly, also in German.

Tirch: And my baby brother.

The next day was Wednesday, the second day of September and by 10 a.m. Rann and Tirch were standing in the brothers' room. They were being shown the weapons the two assassins would be using. They were both expert shots and they would be

wielding specially fashioned long guns made to order specifically for them and this assignment. The weapons were slightly shortened and had finely calibrated long-range scopes and the latest developed silencers.

They then explained how the vehicle from which they were operating had been modified for their unique requirements. It had three rows of seats and a cargo area in the rear behind the last row. The doors at the second and third row and a small section in the rear hatch had been altered. One, or both of them could lie down in the seats or sit in the cargo area and fire their weapons from nearly concealed vertical slots. The slots were fashioned in such a way that they could use their scopes to line up their target and take their shots. The plan was to find Lena and shoot her without anyone knowing from where the shots had been fired. The weapons were put away in their cases and by 10:30, with Tirsch driving, they were in their dark-gray colored vehicle with dark tinted windows and on their way to Lena's home in Malibu.

They were a little less than twenty miles away. Rann had done research and acquired information through public sources. Along with the leads her connections had provided her with she had a list of L&L Enterprises property holdings and various businesses in *West World*. She also knew about the San Juan Island casino, the Catalina Island casino, the office buildings and the homes and several businesses in Las Vegas, including a casino. She had to decide where to start so she had chosen this home in Malibu where she would begin her quest. If not found here she would expand the search. But she believed that the one being sought, if she was in *West World* conducting business she would come and go from this main residence.

Rann had already made up her mind and was determined. She would use all the resources available to her including past *W.I.A.*

associates such as the two former agents riding behind her. There would be no expenses spared. If necessary she would hire others. She would go to the gambling islands. She would go to *Center World*. Death would be brought to the woman named Lena. Justice would be served. Rann smiled slightly. It would have best been described as a sinister smile as she thought how her dear departed lover, Dirch, would have reminded her that he preferred to serve revenge and retribution.

The four rode north along Pacific Coast Highway until the navigation system chimed and informed them they had reached their destination. They all looked to their left. These large and expensive homes were off the highway. They could see portions of the beach between the houses and the deep-colored blue Pacific Ocean stretched into the distance and above them the expansiveness of the blue sky covered them and disappeared past the horizon. They could have seen a few white puffy clouds had they glanced up and searched for them but all they saw was the one imposing, impressive house at which they stared as they rode slowly by it. No one spoke. Then Tirch broke the silence.

Tirch: Obviously she has value.

They went another half mile and then pulled right, off the highway in order to turn around. As they went back toward the house Rann was looking to her right. She pointed.

Rann: There's a public access path to the beach. Go past her house a little ways, turn around and bring me back here.

Tirch did as instructed. And as he passed Lena's house they all stared, watching for any activity. When Tirch had gone a ways past he turned around. Back the other way they went. On the east side of Pacific Coast Highway were smaller, yet still expensive houses. There were also antique and flower shops and restaurants and various retail establishments. Rann saw a small park area with benches and three picnic tables. There were also some spaces for

parking. Again she pointed.

Rann: After you drop me off come back here to this little park.

Tirch went further north, turned around, started back and let Rann off at the access. She blended in as she wore beige shorts, an off-white short-sleeved blouse and soft shoes. She also wore a light in material beige jacket to ward off the chill in the air. She wore no covering on her somewhat short black hair. She carried a medium-sized beige cloth bag with a strap that she placed on her right shoulder. Inside that bag was one of her handguns. She started down along the access path and towards the sidewalk that ran along the beach and the front of these Malibu homes.

Tirch went back to the park. From here, using their long glasses, they could observe the rear of Lena's home. It was one of the larger ones. It was three stories tall and they could see the garage area beneath the rear section with three black garage doors. All of them were closed. There was a wide paved area the length of the home and a driveway at a slight incline, led up to the highway. The brothers watched the house as Tirch looked for Rann.

It wasn't long before she was coming along the sidewalk towards them. Traffic was light so she had crossed over the highway and walked to the park. She stood outside the vehicle and looked around in all directions. She looked at the vehicles that at this time were pulling in and parking and the ones that were leaving the small park. She made note that they could clearly see Lena's house from this vantage point. She got back in but didn't say anything. She was thinking. Then she spoke so everyone could hear.

Rann: There's a patio on the lower level. Balconies are in the front on both the second and third levels and a low wall running around the front and sides.

She paused and shifted her gaze to across the highway.

Rann: This is a good spot. All we need is a view to the garage. I'll try to get some info on her transportation. We need to catch her in one of her vehicles.

She seemed to relax a little as she leaned back.

Rann: We can get something to eat from one of these fast food places or a restaurant. There's a convenience store over there. We stake her out all day and we don't leave until evening. We'll be too obvious if we stay too late. One of us watches that house at all times.

Tirch turned around and backed into the parking space. They settled in.

They had watched Lena's house until late evening. Lights had come on inside on the second and third levels around dusk but they had seen no one come to the house, or leave. They stopped on their way back to the rooms and had dinner. Then they bought bottles of liquor at a store to take with them. Back at the rooms the brothers drank and watched on the large screen in their room as people had sex. Then they passed out.

Rann had Tirch come to her room where they drank alcohol and watched people having sex on the large screen in her room. She provided him with some of the drugs she had and then she made him tie her up and have sex with her after whipping her a few time with a belt on her naked body. After untying her she sent him to his room.

By 10 a.m. Thursday morning they were once again at the park watching the house. Rann walked to a nearby hamburger stand and bought sandwiches and sides. She later went to a store and got snacks and refreshments. They stretched their legs by walking to the public restrooms. They ignored the beautiful setting sun that seemed to drop away into the Pacific Ocean and by 8 p.m.,

as they were going to dinner they were bickering as to whether or not this current plan should be altered.

At 9 p.m. that night Tiah, Lena's trusted friend and also business associate received a call. It was coming through by encrypted mode. He was at a nightclub with others from his organization. It was early. The club wasn't yet crowded or noisy but he recognized the caller identification and because it was a coded call he moved to step into one of the nearby private enclosures to talk. He switched the reception standard in order to enter a code and receive the call. He answered, told the caller to hold a moment and when he was in the upright booth he closed the door behind him. He knew the person calling was one of the three people who took care of the business of Lena's home in Malibu.

Tiah: Alright, go ahead.

Caller: Hello Tiah. I hope you're well.

Tiah: I am. I hope you are too.

Caller: Thank you. I am.

Tiah: Do you need something?

Caller: Yes. Earlier today our security system flagged a vehicle as suspicious. Once that was done the four individuals connected to the vehicle were zoomed and each one was fed into our facial recognition database. Two of the individuals have been identified. They're brothers who are current agents and were once, a while ago, foreign agents of the *W.I.A.* We've found nothing on the other two but some fake names and addresses.

Tiah: Which means they've been wiped and are incognito.

Caller: Yes. We've gone back and placed them in the park across the highway from us for the past two days. We visually monitored them today. I'll send you all the information and images we have.

Tiah: OK. Do you have necessary supplies?

Caller: Yes, enough for a week or so.

Tiah: Good. That gives us some time. Don't leave for anything except an emergency. For any other reasons contact me and I'll send an escort.

Caller: I understand.

Tiah: Keep your weapons ready and stay on high alert.

Caller: We will. Thank you Tiah.

Tiah: You're welcome. We'll handle it from here. I'll get back to you.

Caller: I'm sending you now everything we have.

Tiah went back to the table where his group sat talking and drinking. He didn't take the seat he had before. He pulled over a chair near the end of the long table and motioned for the captain of his security team to sit beside him. He placed his Comm device on the table and they both watched as the transfer was made onto his device as he explained to his captain the call he had just received. Then they put their heads close and began to go through the information and images.

Anyone who looked at them would have seen Tiah, a tall, almost six feet, *Bronzeada DM* with a solid build and light-brown eyes and medium-length, wavy, orange hair. And beside him was his captain. A slim, wiry looking *Branca DF* of average height with green eyes and somewhat long blonde hair. The two were focused on the device, occasionally pointing and talking quietly.

They scrolled through all they had been sent. Then they both went through it all again. Finally Tiah leaned back. He was thinking. His captain continued to look at the vehicle and the images of these new adversaries. Then Tiah spoke to her as she stared directly into his eyes. His gaze had now grown hard, cold and emotionless.

Tiah: Get your team together. As soon as possible we need to tag that vehicle so we can track it. We want to know where it is at all

times. This is most likely connected to issues Lena and I had a couple of years ago. Whatever the case, when the time comes we'll destroy these people. It must be done in such a way that there are no repercussions for us. We don't want any trouble or any involvement with the authorities. Take this device.

The captain nodded and rose from the table. She motioned to two of her team members and taking Tiah's Comm device they walked outside to the patio.

That Friday morning when Rann, Tirsch and the brothers pulled up into the park they paid no attention to the black and yellow touring bike that was standing there or the two *DLs* who sat eating at one of the picnic tables. They wouldn't have noticed the nondescript vehicles parked a quarter mile north and south of them.

The *DLs* got on the bike and left after a while. The two vehicles on Pacific Coast Highway were replaced with two others. Bikes and vehicles with different people came and went. People enjoyed the nice weather and Malibu grew crowded as the locals and the tourists came to see and be seen. They took images of the homes and of each other and the beach and anything that they believed was interesting.

There was traffic on the main highway and parking was hard to find as people flocked to the beach on this unusually warm day. The assassins got out of their vehicle a few times but stayed on their mission. Then at 9 p.m. they left to eat. They were followed and as they ate and drank and argued quietly their vehicle was tagged. A connection was opened and Tiah, his captain and everyone on the security team could monitor their movements.

As Rann and Tirsch and the brothers slept, they were being monitored and watched. In the middle of the night two people, a

couple, a *DM* and a *DF* checked into the motel unit next to the brothers.

While Rann and her people ate their breakfast that Saturday morning they were watched. They were followed to the park. As they watched Lena's house they were being watched. They went to dinner that evening and as they were being seated on the patio of a casual yet upscale restaurant just south of the park, Tiah, his captain and another couple from his group, a *DM* and a *DF* were being seated in that restaurant on the other side of the patio.

As Rann and her group started their meal with alcohol, Tiah and his people ordered hors d'oeuvres with their wine. It was a beautiful night in Malibu, California. The exclusive restaurant began to fill with those who controlled value and those who sought it and wanted to be close to it. There were a few who were quite well known and several who were very notorious.

Some of those dining were well dressed with their flashy jewelry and some were more casually attired. It was that type of establishment. Tiah and his people were more on the casual side, wearing very little gold and diamonds and platinum, still they sparkled some as they moved through to their seats.

Tiah had paused to talk to a few people and acknowledged several others with a gesture of his right hand. He knew these people and they knew of him. And of course the employees knew him and his group quite well. They were considered regulars. What no one knew except for the three owners was that Tiah's organization, which was part of Lena's organization, had provided a needed infusion of value to the business by purchasing a small percentage of it.

As was typical of Southern California the temperature had cooled after the sun went down. There were two outdoor fireplaces burning and crackling and popping and casting light.

Tall yellowish-white lamps were interspersed throughout this patio that was enclosed by a tall wooden fence and soft music wafted from speakers that were placed somewhere out of sight.

Tiah paid little attention to his adversaries. He had them under surveillance wherever they went. He had come here because he wanted to observe these people up close. So he sipped his wine and munched on his snack-like fare and conversed with his people about various subjects.

There were subdued conversations, low murmuring voices and occasionally laughter rose or somewhat loud words could be heard. But these were supposed to be individuals of class with proper public manners and etiquette. That's was why when the group next to Rann, three *DMs* and three *DFs* elevated their voices and became argumentative as the *DMs* began to gesture as they talked, others began to notice. Then they quickly quieted down.

From where Tiah was sitting he could look directly across the patio and see both tables that were back near the side of the fence. Rann and her group were left center and the table of the six next to her were right center. The tables were somewhat close yet there was enough room for the wait staff and servers to easily move between them as they carried out their duties.

Rann and Tirsch were sitting facing him in such a way that he could see them both clearly even in the subdued ambient light. Tirsch sat to the right of Rann and Tiah surmised from what he could see of them and what he had deduced from the images from Lena's security cameras was that they were both much taller than average height. The *DM* with the brown skin and dark-brown eyes was not only large, he appeared hard and powerful and the *DF* with white sun-tanned skin and short black hair looked to be not just solid and strong but also exuded an essence of danger.

The brothers sat directly across from the two facing him so he only saw their backs and the backs of their baldheads. At the table where the six sat, Tiah could see the backs of the three who appeared to be females and the three *DMs*, from this angle, were almost covered by those three who sat across from them. He thought he recognized two of the *DMs*. Without being obvious he would glance at Rann and Tirsch who were engrossed in quiet conversation with the two who sat across from them.

Food was brought to the table of six. The server taking care of Tiah and his people came from the restaurant and inquired as to whether they needed anything? Tiah ordered more wine and informed the server that they would order food a little later. As the server prepared to leave, voices rose from across the patio from the table of six. Their server turned around to look at the individuals creating the commotion and took a few steps and then stopped to wait as the server who was taking care of the six approached and they talked as they walked together into the restaurant.

Now Tiah could hear voices rise and subside from the six. He shifted his view from them to Rann and Tirsch. He saw Rann turn her attention from her own conversation to those six who sat to her left. He could see her frown. Then a look of irritation spread across her face. Then, as she turned from them she took a gulp of her drink. She then turned to her right and spoke to Tirsch who sipped some of his drink and then leaned forward a little so he could better see those at the table next to him. He leaned back, made a comment to Rann and then again sipped his drink.

Tiah couldn't hear clearly what those at the table of six were saying, they were too far away, but by the inflection of their voices he could tell they were arguing about something, all six of them, at the same time. He could just see the hands of several of them moving, gesturing and pointing at each other. People at

tables on that side of the patio began to not only hear but also began to take notice because Tiah could see people turning to look at those six. People stopped eating and drinking to stare at them. It was at this time the server brought the two bottles of wine Tiah had ordered.

As their server was pouring wine and ensuring they had everything they needed the server for the six walked by and moved towards their table. As the server approached the table Tiah could see Rann turn to those to her left and say something. Whatever she said caused the group of six to immediately stop their arguing and turn to her. Then one of the *DMs*, the one furthest from Rann said something to her. She replied. Tiah could see she was obviously getting angry. The *DM* in the middle turned to his left, said something to the *DM* and then turned to Rann and spoke. Tiah could hear that he had raised his voice, nearly yelling. Rann raised her voice in response. The server was now standing between the tables looking from one group to the other.

The *DF* on the end, closest to Rann, said something to her. Rann pointed her left index finger at that *DF* and raised her voice. Now all the six were arguing at Rann at the same time and the server was gesturing with both hands appearing to try and calm everyone down. One of the *DFs*, the one on the end closest to Rann stood and threw her napkin on the table and started yelling. She was yelling at everyone and speaking in a foreign language. Rann stood and in the same language yelled back. The *DM* in the middle stood and speaking in a different foreign language yelled at Rann as Tirsch then stood up beside her. The brothers remained seated, observing that which went on around them and sipping their drinks. Now just about everyone on the patio was looking in the direction of the disturbance. Tiah's captain spoke to him.

Captain: Are you watching that over there?

Tiah realized he knew who two of the *DMs* were and when the *DF* had stood and turned a little to her left and threw her napkin down he recognized who she was which confirmed who the other two *DMs* were.

Tiah: Yes I am.

Tiah looked at the other two in his group. They had shifted their chairs and were also looking at what was now becoming an uproar.

The other five jumped up as the *DF* who was standing moved to the end of the table, towards Rann. Tiah could see she was preparing to move closer to continue the argument. Both her hands were up and bouncing and slightly spread in a questioning manner. She wasn't prepared. None of the six was anticipating what came next. Rann came around the table and with a hard, straight right, near the left eye knocked that *DF* back into the arms of the *DF* directly behind her. When the *DM* closest to Rann rushed at her Tirsch moved forward and with a left hook to his liver dropped him to his knees in pain and gasping for air.

Rann continued past the one she had punched, who was screaming and holding her face with both hands, and the one who was holding her up, to the third *DF* who raised both hands in a helpless gesture and tried to duck and run. Rann grabbed her by the hair and pulled her back, turned her, and with her left hand slapped the *DF* and then with her right hand pushed the *DF* to the floor. Then she moved around that end of the table as Tirsch continued forward on the other side.

People were hollering and there were collective gasps, some ooo's and ahh's, a few screams and some encouraging chants and clapping. Servers and employees from the wait staff and security personnel came running from the restaurant. Tirsch reached the second *DM* and struck him with a right hook to the head and he

stumbled to his right and fell down unconscious with his left leg shaking. The third *DM* turned to run and as he went around the table he was looking back at Tirsch and he didn't see Rann and he was moving directly towards her as she closed on him and when he did turn he was facing her. He stopped and raised his hands to fight, to protect himself and she kicked him hard, between the legs.

Captain: Oooh!

Tiah: That hurt.

The *DM* grabbed himself and began to bend over. His eyes were squinched shut and his cheeks puffed out. He was in pain. Then he slowly, very slowly went to his knees. His forehead struck the floor. He rolled onto his right side and lay there, while holding himself.

Security and the servers and wait staff spread out around Tirsch and Rann. She stared at the head of security a long moment as he pointed, obviously ordering them to leave. Rann went to her table and quite deliberately opened her bag. She tossed value cards on the table, then tossed some more, and then turned towards the side exit and the door there in the patio wall. Tirsch followed by backing out. Then the brothers stood, gulped down their drinks and departed.

The employees assisted those on the floor to their feet. The one punched in his liver walked very gingerly. The one who had been unconscious came to and wobbled as two of the servers, one on each side held him up. The one who was kicked was unable to stand up straight and while bent over holding himself, took little steps. The *DF* struck in her face held a towel filled with ice to her eye. The one who had been pushed to the floor straightened her clothes and brushed at her hair as she walked in a daze towards the main area of the restaurant along with the others in her party.

Tiah could see the server for the six and his server gesturing and pointing and talking together as cleanup continued. The other diners returned to drinking and eating. There was a buzz in the air and two of the owners were going to each table speaking with each customer. They bought drinks for everyone.

When his server came to their table he apologized profusely for the disturbance and said the two bottles of wine were on the house. Tiah thanked the server and said they were hungry and ready to order something to eat. After they ordered and as their server was preparing to leave Tiah stopped him.

Tiah: Tell me. By any chance do you happen to know what that was all about?

Server: Well, my co-worker is fluent in several languages and she said they were speaking in German and Arabic and Hebrew and Russian and there were some curses and insults in Chinese.

Tiah: Really?

Server: Yes. They were arguing about politics.

Tiah: Politics? Well that explains it all.

The server went to get their food. Tiah and his group sipped their wine and commented on what had just occurred. Finally, the captain concluded as she turned to Tiah.

Captain: The whole thing was very entertaining.

Tiah: Yes it was. Those two just attacked and beat down three members of one of the most powerful families in *West World*.

Captain: And one of the most dangerous.

Tiah picked up his Comm device. He knew the four who just left would be followed. He observed, along with others of his people as the icon indicated the direction the four were going. He sipped his wine. Their food was placed on the table. They began to eat. Tiah glanced at his device. When the little tracking icon was stationary he made note of the coordinates at the motel in Santa Monica. Then he started tapping in a message to be sent.

He spoke to his captain.

Tiah: I bet the father would appreciate knowing where those who caused harm to his sons and daughter can be found.

Captain: I'm sure he would, so would the mother.

Tiah attached, with information, an image of the vehicle in which Rann, Tirsch, and the brothers traveled. He pressed send.

When they got back to their motel Rann went to Tirsch's room. They were still pumped up from the fight. They drank more tequila, had rough sex and passed out on the floor. The brothers paid to have three *DTW*s come to their room and they had group sex. Food was ordered. More sex was had. The *DTW*s left and the brothers went to sleep. Both had disturbing dreams.

The four assassins were late getting started that Sunday, day six in that month of September. Rann blamed the brothers and the brothers blamed Rann and Tirsch. They went to the park and by noon they had grown impatient and irritable, again. They discussed alternate plans. The brothers reminded Rann that they only had but so much time remaining to give to this assignment unless of course she was going to provide additional value. They spent most of the late afternoon occasionally bickering over financial matters. Then the brothers took turns sitting and nodding with their baldheads down and up and dipping.

In regards to their mission, Sunday was just as the other days. They saw no one come or go, they observed nothing of interest. They stayed in the park longer than usual. It was nearing 10 p.m. when they started away to dinner. Tirsch advised against going anywhere near the restaurant where they had been the previous night. The brothers quickly and strongly agreed.

Rann was driving when they left the stakeout location. They had grown used to the beautiful and relatively quiet little park. But they had been too busy to notice the flowers that the Malibu

Beautification Society had planted and maintained. The assassins missed those with the California names such as California poppy and the buttercup and aster and fuchsia and brittlebush and California lilacs. Behind them had been an abundance of blooms and had they taken a short stroll along the cobble-stoned pathway and ventured further into the park they could have seen the impressive beds of red and white and yellow roses. Perhaps they would have stopped and seen the rare blue roses and observed and made note of the silver plaque beside the path that in both acknowledgement and appreciation, thanked the contributing organizations and businesses for their support in maintaining the area. Those that were mentioned included two owned by Lena and Tiah. But Rann and Tirsch and the brothers had been too busy for such things.

Rann left the park and turned right and headed north on Pacific Coast Highway. She kept checking to make sure they weren't being followed. There were vehicles behind them but not many. Vehicles passed them going south. She suddenly turned right, onto a side street that led to a neighborhood and the smaller homes east of the ocean. They all had their pistols at the ready. No one turned behind them onto the street. She waited for a couple of minutes and then turned around and went back to the highway and continued north. It wasn't long or far before she reached another area of places to purchase food and beverages and several restaurants. She pulled into the parking lot of the smaller place on the end.

As they got out and moved towards the side entrance the brothers spoke about how hungry they were and how they planned to get plenty of sleep this night.

They drank and ate with only sporadic conversations. Rann had very little appetite and more or less picked at her food. She gulped from a tall glass of straight tequila, no ice. Tirsch and the

brothers watched her warily. She was sullen and plotted and complained. And as the night went on she spoke about how their target must not be there. No one had come or gone the past days. There had not been any deliveries. Only the lights came on in the evening. She talked about the difficulty of any kind of attack undertaken on the secure islands of San Juan and Catalina. She would need more resources, including more people, in order to monitor the other businesses and numerous properties. She hovered between anger and rage and a stream of curses in different languages would suddenly erupt and spill forth.

The brothers were uncomfortable and couldn't enjoy their meal. Tirsch paid her no attention and ate his rare steak with mashed potatoes with no problem. He would slide one finger in the blood from the meat and then noisily suck on that finger. After Rann spoke about hiring some people she knew to go to Las Vegas she fell silent. She sipped her tequila and stared into her glass, looking for something in the bottom of it.

It was just before midnight when they left the restaurant parking lot. Tirsch was now behind the wheel. He had put in the address coordinates to their Santa Monica motel and activated auto-drive. The vehicle turned left and started south. Rann stared morosely out of her passenger side window. Behind her the brothers, having been fed and feeling full and slightly under the influence tried, to no avail, to whisper about whether or not to summon either two or three *DFs* to their room. They sent messages to each other and made devious chuckling sounds. Rann paid them no mind.

She glanced up at the still, nearly full moon high above her. Then she looked at its bright, white, wavy essence reflecting off of the Pacific Ocean that appeared black and endless and for some reason not only wet, but cold. She was lost in her thoughts of justice. Then the words vengeance and retribution seemed to

echo in her head. She tried to accept she would most likely be unable to torture the woman who had destroyed Dirch, the love of her life. Tirch could hear her, barely, speaking almost to herself, issuing threats and curses and solemn promises.

They passed the last of the businesses and homes on their left. The more populated area where they had been the previous night lay ahead. Here it was empty and dark. There was no traffic ahead. The illumination of the lights of a vehicle behind them went out. They seemed to disappear. Tirch noticed this in his rearview mirror. Then he glanced at his side mirror as those lights behind them in the distance came back on. They blinked, once.

There was at that moment an explosion beneath Rann and Tirch and the brothers. But they didn't feel it, not really. It wasn't extremely loud and yet they heard a brief instant of it. It was, however, extremely destructive and it was intensely hot. The gas tank exploded. The heat rapidly spread. It was like a nuclear heat that immediately engulfed their vehicle. The fire was white-hot and the tires melted as the heat jumped and rose. The chassis and then all the metal of this specially altered vehicle dripped and oozed and then flowed downwardly like molten lava. The heat and flames didn't go very high into the damp night sky. In fact it covered the vehicle like a hat or a bonnet and even seemed to suppress the black acrid smoke that floated upwards and out. From a specific angle the moon momentarily disappeared. There was an initial roar and then the sounds settled into cracking and there was the popping noise that came from the erupting ammunition of the weapons being discharged that they carried on their person and that were stored.

Quickly it was all over and there remained only the yellow-orange glow of whatever it was that had once been. It was an indiscernible smoldering pile of something and whatever it had been was now unrecognizable and therefore indescribable. So the

remains would be allowed to cool and then become cold to the touch before being removed and disposed of.

It was just past 1 a.m. when Tiah and members of his group began receiving notifications. They were in a nightclub in Beverly Hills that he and Lena owned. Those who had been monitoring and tracking their adversaries were informing them of what had occurred. Tiah immediately sent a message to the person in the Malibu home who had first contacted him about the assassins. The captain of security was sitting next to him and she spoke.

Captain: That worked out quite well, didn't it?

Tiah: Yes it did.

Neither said anything. They watched through the darkened one-way glass, the activities of those enjoying themselves in this area of the exclusive club. They saw the rich and famous. They saw those on the dance floor. They could see the gamblers at the slot machines. The one-arm bandits could blink rainbow colors and emit the sounds of bells and whistles that were muffled in this nearly soundproof, private room where the piped in music was barely audible.

It wasn't long before Tiah received another notification. The words were few and direct.

Message: Thanks. I owe you one.

Tiah slid his Comm device over so his captain could read the message. She made note of the sender. Neither spoke. They sipped their wine. Then.

Captain: Are you going to tell Lena the details?

Tiah thought a long moment.

Tiah: She'll know.

TULSA, OKLAHOMA

Bru and his group rode through pouring rain towards their next destination. The weather meant Moja and Cha drove with reduced speed. Bru estimated, due to the weather and a planned stop, that the little over five hundred and thirty miles would take approximately nine hours and that was without factoring in any unforeseen delays. But they were in no hurry. As Moja merged onto the first main highway in a northwest direction Bru's voice was heard through the intercom system.

Bru: Listen up my intrepid traveling companions. We could have stopped anywhere on our journey to *West World*. Anywhere we stopped would have met our criteria. Everywhere we're going to pass through has experienced uprisings, riots and massacres but we're going to stop in Oklahoma, specifically, Tulsa because that place is special.

Bru now began to walk slowly to the rear. Once again those he approached and moved past watched him, even Kojo.

Bru: Once upon a time ...

Chuki wiggled her feet. Kojo turned to watch her feet move.

Chuki: Is this a fairy tale?

Bru stopped and turned back to her.

Bru: Unfortunately for those who were murdered and for those who lost every material thing they owned, no. For them it was horror and tragedy, but to continue.

Bru again turned and resumed his stroll towards the rear.

Bru: In the beginning, before there was the state, the state was home to the original people. Then again, the whole of this country was their home. Hence one of the nicknames of the state, an official name, I might add, was Native America, ironic wasn't it? Another nickname was Land of the Red Man. I think we all can surmise where that name came from.

Bru had stopped to stand between the stations where the twelve screens were located. He turned around. He remained there facing the front.

Bru: The name Oklahoma itself came from the original people. But what is quite interesting is that at one time, long ago, the state was known as the Sooner State. And people called themselves, even identified, as Sooners. Now you may ask, what is a Sooner?

Chuki yelled out.

Chuki: What is a Sooner!?

Bru paused to look at Chuki, who again wiggled her feet.

Bru: I'll share with you what a Sooner is.

Bru started towards the front.

Bru: There was what was called The Land Run of 1889. This was when the people foreign to this country began stealing the land of those original people in an organized, government-sanctioned manner.

Bru's voice rose and became hard as he moved to the front.

Bru: They stole Oklahoma!

He stopped and tuned. He was just past Chuki near Tatu. The rain was easing up some and Moja picked up speed. Bru's voice lowered and in an even, instructive tone he continued.

Bru: There were the Boomers. Those who were cast as being of noble spirit, adventurous pioneers who were lauded for being the first who would explore and settle the wide-open land. Then there were the Sooners, the cheats. Before the official start of the land grab, before that gun sounded, how apropos, a gunshot was the signal. They should have used a cannon. Anyway, before the honest thieves started forth the Sooners had already begun, had already claimed their so-called free land. That's where the name came from.

Chuki yelled out.

Chuki: Sooner rather than later!

Bru pointed at Chuki and smiled.

Bru: How true. How true.

Now he began walking again. He stopped beside Chuki.

Bru: The motto of the state is Labor omnia vincit.

Bru pointed at Chuki. She thought, processed.

Chuki: Work conquers all.

Now Bru continued to the rear.

Bru: So we're going to the Tulsa, Oklahoma area and we're gonna do our work.

At this moment, even as it rained, a light shower, the hazy sun peeked through the clouds and shined, briefly.

They rode another four hours before stopping. They had once again crossed over the mighty Mississippi River. They entered Arkansas. Here the highway was dry with only a few puddles on the side of the road indicating rain had recently passed through. They pulled off into what had once been a scenic rest area that was on a slight rise where they could see far into the distance.

They had observed very few vehicles of any kind out here in the nothingness. And of the ones they saw, that were on their side, only two stayed alongside them for a short ways before turning off and going somewhere unseen.

They stopped here because they had observed and were somewhat close to what was one of the first communication towers along this route. Mapping was activated and Una was able to pinpoint every tower in Arkansas using this first one. Moja sat down beside her and brought the grid image of towers onto his screen. The total number of towers appeared on the bottom of the screen. Then, utilizing Khufu's capabilities he released the Influencer programs into the tower.

Bru and those in the rear watched as a white dotted light, identifying the programs, began to move through both the buried

fiber optic cables and the aluminum-alloy conductor cables that connected the towers. They watched the movement of the light for a while and discussed the rate of the load progress and estimated approximately how long it would take for all of the towers to be accessed and infected. Then they all went back to their respective stations, except for Moja who now rode in the front passenger seat as Cha took over the driving duty. While they were all watching the screens in the rear Chuki was outside teaching Kojo different commands in order to control his vocal expressions.

Eventually they were on their way again and within an hour Leeda sounded the chime that indicated a level two alert. Her voice could be heard through the speakers.

Leeda: We have vehicles and individuals up ahead on each side of the road. Five miles. I count sixteen vehicles. Exact number of individuals unknown but I can identify twenty-nine.

Bru was standing near Tatu. He was looking out of the front window. He glanced up at the monitor.

Bru: Zoom in.

The images of what and who was in front of them could be clearly seen.

Bru: Appears to be typical *Center World* ruffians and riffraff. Everyone to their battle stations. Cinq, bring Chuki her rifle and that special ammunition you made for her.

He moved to the right side of Tal and motioned Chuki over. She jumped up and danced a bit as she moved to stand beside him. Everyone else went to their previous positions. He pulled Chuki to in front of him and pointed with his right index finger.

Bru: Here's your shooting slot. You won't be able to sight but you can fire if necessary.

Cinq brought the rifle, handed it to her and handed her an extended magazine. Then she handed Bru a bag with seven more

magazines. They both watched as Chuki loaded her rifle ensuring her movements were correct. Then she shifted it in her hands and smiled as she admired it.

Bru: Do you see the safety?

Chuki turned the rifle over.

Chuki: Safety's on.

Bru: Did you teach Kojo some new commands?

Chuki: Yeah, growl, bark, howl and silence. He already knew, on guard, attack, stop, sit and down to rest position.

Bru: Show me.

Chuki quickly went through all the hand gestures and their corresponding meanings.

Leeda: They're watching us with long glasses.

Cha: Closing, two miles.

Bru: Slow to 40 mph.

Cha slowed Tal and everyone was ready, watching the various monitors.

Bru: No one fire unless I say so.

Bru called over Kojo to stand beside him and Chuki. He was looking from Chuki to Bru, tail wagging. They drew closer. Bru took two steps away from the window and then pointed up at the nearby monitor above them.

Bru: Kojo, look!

Kojo looked up at the monitor. He could see the vehicles and people ahead.

Bru: Kojo!

Kojo looked at him. Bru used his right hand to give Kojo the growl signal. It was a quick twisting motion as if he was turning a doorknob. Then he pointed, with his right index finger, at the monitor. Kojo turned towards the monitor, looked for a moment and began to growl. It was a low, throaty, menacing sound. Bru smiled. Chuki smiled.

Bru: I like that!

Chuki: Me too!

Everyone waited and then they reached the group and rode past them. Once again there were various motorcycles, off-road bikes, quad bikes and SUV off-road vehicles. All the individuals who could be seen were heavily armed. As Tal passed them by the members of the gang stared at them. Chuki couldn't see the monitor directly above her so she was looking at the monitor on the other side. She was disappointed.

Chuki: Aww, they didn't do anything.

Bru: Patience. Patience.

Leeda: They're getting on their vehicles and on their bikes.

Bru watched the monitor. Then he watched Kojo and listened to him growling. All those near could clearly recognize the sound of a Bouvier warning. Leeda put split screens on the monitors and then all could see the gang behind them, closing in, and watched as they split up, and passed by on each side. Now some of the bikes and vehicles were all around them.

Bru: Slow to 30. Let's tease them.

Cha slowed Tal as some of the bikes and vehicles sped up. They went a half a mile in front.

Leeda: They're blocking the highway.

Bru: Maintain our speed. Don't stop. When we get close activate the blocker and ride through them. Alright my fellow riding partners. Once again *Center World* reveals its true character. When they open fire shoot them. Chuki, you ready?

She turned to her spot. She moved closer to the wall. She took the safety off.

Chuki: I'm ready.

Bru: When they shoot at us put the barrel of your weapon through that slot, hold on tight and pull the trigger. If you hit anything or anybody Kojo will howl.

Those on the highway held up their hands to stop them. They pointed their weapons. Warning shots were fired to the side and then above them.

Bru: Shoot them!

The blocker was activated and Tal, at almost 45 tons, plowed through them. Bru called to the growling dog and using a grabbing motion gave Kojo the bark command. Leeda turned up the outside microphones. The grinding, crunching sound of metal being wrecked could be heard along with the staccato reports of the big guns of Vier and Ek and the rifles of the others.

Chuki was spraying bullets and Kojo was barking over and over again, loudly. The bullets of the attackers could be heard pinging and thudding against Tal. Then Chuki hit one of the gang members in the chest and they burst into flames. Bru held his right palm up towards the roof as if he were pushing on it, trying to raise it and Kojo started howling and when Chuki heard the howl she did a little shimmy. She stood on her tiptoes and then jumped up a couple of times and she could see the burning body running and flapping its arms and with one more jump she saw it collapse in flames. She laughed and hollered.

Chuki: Ha, haaa! Gotcha!

Now Bru had Kojo barking again. Chuki emptied her magazine. She ejected it from her rifle. Bru handed her another one. She quickly reloaded and commenced firing again, and laughing. The gang quickly began to scatter in all directions and when Chuki's bullets hit the gas tank of a vehicle it exploded. Bru had Kojo howl. Then he hurried to pick Chuki up so she could clearly see the burning vehicle.

Chuki: Look how pretty that is!

Then it was all over. Chuki was disappointed because no one followed. The attack was over.

Bru: Resume speed.

As Tal accelerated to 60 mph Bru gave the howl command.
Bru: Honk the horn!

Cha honked the horn, three times. The sonorous, train-like sound reverberated in the air. Behind them were pieces of twisted metal, dead bodies and black smoke rising into the air. Bru smiled as he looked at the view of the rear cameras on the monitor. He silenced Kojo and then looked at Chuki who was holding her rifle, staring at it.

Bru: Well, little one. I thought that was what fun is, what about you?

She looked up at him and returned his smile.

Chuki: I had fun thoughts.

They traversed Arkansas and entered Oklahoma without any further delays. When they reached the first communication tower in Oklahoma they pulled over, released the Influencer programs and continued on. By 4 p.m. they had arrived at their destination. They were a little over fourteen miles southwest of Tulsa in a place called Sapulpa. Where they were could best be described as a ghost town but it was close enough to Tulsa that they could easily gain direct access to Tulsa's main tower.

On the outskirts of what had been the small city they found a large barn with faded paint that had turned from red to pink. Bru and Moja inspected the structure, saw that the doors would open and close without any issues and decided they would occupy this place for the duration of their stay. Cha backed in.

The barn was surrounded by tall cedar and oak and pine trees. Chuki pointed out the black walnuts and Chinese pistache trees and said there were early chrysanthemum flowers that were blooming. She told Kojo she could see daisy-like flowers called asters and zinnias that were red and yellow and peach and white in color.

She talked about bobcats and armadillos and Kojo seemed excited when she described prairie dogs to him. She said there were elk and deer and coyotes and bears but that the bison had been extirpated in this part of the country. She told Bru she wanted to see some turtles and lizards and copperhead snakes. Bru told her she would be cleaning up and changing clothes because he was going to take her into Tulsa. Then he spoke to everyone.

Bru: We're a little over one hundred miles from Oklahoma City. One hundred and fifty years ago the largest city in Oklahoma had approximately seven hundred thousand people. There were almost four million humans in this whole state. By the year 2110 there were almost two and a half million in the capitol city and surrounding area and the total population of the state had nearly doubled. So you can estimate where that was going. Fortunately the Omni-strain nearly emptied this state, including Oklahoma City, Norman, Broken Arrow, Edmond, Lawton, and as you can look around and see, the overgrown and empty Sapulpa. However the job isn't done.

Bru paused. He was thinking, processing.

Bru: There's only so much we can do at this time because the time is not right. We've gifted our Influencer programs to the hard working people of this hard working state. Now we focus on our main purpose for being here and that's to refine, test and ensure our Creation capabilities are functioning properly.

Bru moved past the racks of clothes to the wash area as the extensions of Tal began to extend outward.

Bru: So let's again set up our perimeter security, activate our monitoring devices and disengage and unload the trailer. As Cinq and Dois are checking and reloading our weapons, Cha and Tatu will run diagnostics and perform maintenance on Tal. When everything is completed all of you will clean up and change your

clothes. The last two days have been quite eventful, and dirty. We've been soiled. Moja is in charge of our Creation project. So let's find the stories we seek so we can begin to create.

Bru was waiting for Chuki when she came down the stairs. He was dressed in black denim pants, a gray long-sleeved cotton shirt, a black cotton jacket, a black cap and black boots. He wore a harness with a holstered black pistol under his left arm and he carried a larger holstered pistol that he would attach, on his right side, to his belt and wear when outside of the vehicle. He also had a medium sized bag with extra ammunition and a handheld Comm device. There was a smaller Comm device strapped to the back of his left wrist.

Chuki wore dark-green cotton pants with a light-green cotton long-sleeved shirt, a thin beige jacket and soft white shoes. Her long, curly, hair, colored black again, was fluffed out around her head and she had a small, thin, lime-green shiny ribbon tied into the left side of her hair. She carried a silver bag that she had hung crossbody on her left side. Inside the bag was her Comm device and at her insistence she also had one of her small pistols and a folded knife. Bru watched her come down the stairs.

Bru: No overalls?

Chuki: Leeda nd Una made me wear this.

Bru: You look cute.

Chuki frowned at him. Then she smiled and patted her bag.

Chuki: I'm armed.

Bru: Good for you.

She turned and called to Kojo who had been waiting outside near the stairs.

Bru: Kojo has to wait here for you.

Chuki: Why?

Bru: I can pass as human. You can pass as human. But *Center*

World has not seen anything like the somewhat obvious *Entity* Kojo. He would draw too much attention so we would have to leave him locked in our ride. You don't want to do that do you?

Chuki was thinking, processing.

Bru: I've got a special place I'm taking you inside of.

Chuki went over and walked Kojo beneath the awning that had been let out. She gave him the command to sit. He sat down. She patted and rubbed his head. Then she had him lay down. Then she gave him the command to stay. He watched Chuki as she walked away. They would be riding in Spiny and Bru was holding the door open on the passenger side at the second row.

Bru: Sit here. And if you stand you can sightsee.

Chuki climbed in and sat down. Bru shut the door. She could rise up and just see out and she watched Kojo lying there. Bru got behind the wheel and they pulled out of the barn. First they rode around Sapulpa. There had been no large-scale deconstruction anywhere near this area of Oklahoma. A few of the buildings appeared in some ways just as they did eighty or ninety years in the past. Others were dilapidated and crumbling and there were those that were scorched and blackened from fires and there were jagged indications of lightning strikes. There was also a path of destruction carved out a short distance outside of what had been the downtown area possibly by a tornado common to the state. Perhaps no one lived there at that time. Bru drove slowly over and around debris as Chuki, now standing, looked out, in silence. Then he turned towards Tulsa.

They reached the city and Bru rode west along Pine Street. When he turned left and began heading south Chuki, still standing and bouncing as she looked at the scenery called out the street names.

Chuki: Detroit Street!

When Bru reached Eastern he turned right and Chuki called out the cross streets.

Chuki: Cincinnati! Boston!

At Main Street he turned left and went south again, to Archer, and made a left. He went two blocks and parked.

Bru: Let's go for a walk.

He got out. Chuki got out and pushed the door shut and stood on the sidewalk and looked around. Bru reached and got his pistol and fastened it on his right side at his hip. Then he lifted the strap over his head and adjusted the bag on his left side. Using the Comm device on his left wrist he locked Spiny and activated the security system. When he came around the vehicle he held out his right hand, Chuki took it and they walked towards Greenwood Avenue. They were in Tulsa's Greenwood District.

It was a pleasant September, late afternoon day. Above them to the west, in the partly cloudy sky the sun was moving slowly towards its inevitable disappearance. It was almost 6:15 p.m. on this Saturday. Dusk approached from the east.

People had looked at Spiny with mild curiosity on several occasions as the somewhat strange looking vehicle passed by. Now a few people, those long-time residents of Tulsa glanced at the two walking hand-in-hand. There was even a smile here and there, directed towards them. It was for them obvious they were strangers, new to the area. They presented as perhaps, most likely, father and daughter. But they observed nothing unusual. People came here from the Oklahoma City area, just as people from Tulsa went there. Others, on not just the edges, but also from the still populated outlying areas came to the cities, especially on the weekends. There were things to see, people to meet, meet up with and entertainment to enjoy such as the nightclubs and the one casino.

Bru and Chuki strolled along busy Archer Street. They passed

clothing stores and restaurants. They passed a tall building with different businesses on different floors. One was a business for alterations. Here people came to have their hair and eyes and physical features changed. They could get tattoos, be injected with performance enhancing drugs, including designer synthetic steroids and of course have the color of their skin altered.

Bru stopped and he and Chuki read the sign above the double doors. Then they moved closer. The front, the ground floor was a wall of cement and glass. There were numerous posters and printed advertisements. There was even a video showing from the other side of a portion of the glass. The screen had an image of a person who appeared to be male and another individual who appeared to be female. They were dancing close and then they separated and looked at each other. They smiled and turned towards the window.

Bru picked Chuki up and held her in his arms. Together they read to themselves the descriptions of the various procedures. They looked at the before and after pictures. Then they saw images of the two who had been dancing together, before and after. They were drastically changed, unrecognizable from the before to after. Bru set Chuki down. They both glanced at people coming and going through the doorway as the automatic door hummed as it opened and closed. Then, hand-in-hand, in silence, they moved on.

Before reaching the next bustling section of the street there was a little park with flowers and trees and benches. They turned right, onto the paved path leading in, stepped into the grassy area and sat on a bench for two. Here they could observe the street and watch the people and the vehicles as they passed. Chuki looked at everything and everyone around her with interest. Finally she spoke softly, almost to herself.

Chuki: I've never been around them like this before.

The two turned to their left, to the direction from where they had come. What appeared to be a family was coming up the street. There was a *Marrom DM*, a *Branca DF* and two children. One appeared to be male and the other presented as female. Taking on the mixture of mother and father the children were *Parda-clara* in color. A hovering stroller floated and moved forward between the adults as they walked. Then, the mother tapped on the Comm device she held. The stroller stopped and she bent over and quickly attended to the little baby inside. She straightened, tapped on her device again, the stroller moved forward and they all continued.

The two children pushed and ducked as they poked at each other and giggled. They ran forward and came back when their mother called and she admonished them to stay close. The girl was the size of Chuki and as the family passed, the little girl looked over at Chuki, smiled and waved. Chuki smiled and waved back. The family went on up the street. Chuki spoke, again softly. Her words came with bitterness, imbued with venom.

Chuki: I hate them! I hate them all! I hold them in my eyes with hatred, now and forever.

Then the little one turned and looked up at Bru. She smiled slightly, slyly. Her voice remained low and even.

Chuki: Well, you know what I mean. I have hateful thoughts.

Bru returned the slight smile. He nearly whispered but placed emphasis on each word.

Bru: Yes. I know exactly what you mean.

They both chuckled softly. Then they sat without speaking for a while longer. Finally Bru spoke.

Bru: Come on I have someplace to show you.

They left the park and continued along East Archer Street. They came to North Greenwood Avenue. Here they waited at the red traffic light until it turned green and they crossed the wide

street to the other side with the people who had gathered and now surrounded them. Archer was blocked off at this point. Barriers had been erected and only foot traffic was allowed so people walked not only on the sidewalks but also in the street. Most of the buildings in the area were relatively new. Built after the pandemic they were less than forty years old. Others were more than a hundred years old and between two of the more recent, tall, more modern style buildings was an older, three-story structure that was actually originally constructed to be a house.

It was a large two-hundred-year-old brick and wood mansion rebuilt in an art deco style of architecture that sat a short distance back off of the street on a fairly large amount of land for this particular area. Bru stopped before it. He and Chuki looked at the impressive place. They were standing in what was the Historical District and this was the last remaining building of that which had once represented and acknowledged a period of time in Tulsa's history, long ago.

Bru took Chuki's left hand and they walked along the brick-lined walkway that led to the entrance. There was freshly mowed grass on each side of the path and different colorful flowers and trimmed, low-cut bushes along the front of the house. They went up the six steps constructed of cement and stepped onto the cement porch. Bru saw there was an armed guard dressed in black at the front on each end of the house. They both carried long guns.

As they moved between the four tall white columns, two on each side of them, the wide wooden door opened and two *DQs*, followed by two *DLs* came out. Bru and Chuki stepped to the side and when the people passed they moved to the door that had been left open for them and stepped through the doorway into the foyer.

They stopped and looked around slowly. To their immediate

left, fastened to the wall was a copper plaque. Etched into the polished metal were blackened words that Chuki read aloud.

Chuki: The Fannie Lou Tulsa House Museum. In order to understand how we got here we must remember where we started and the journey that followed.

They stepped on into the large, wide, open, first floor area. Bru released Chuki's hand and she moved to the far wall on their right. Bru glanced around. There were nearly a dozen people in this first floor area, adults and children. A few were bent over a glass counter looking inside, talking in low voices and pointing. Others were walking slowly, looking at paintings and pictures on the walls. Bru could also see some of the younger ones sitting comfortably in soft rocking chairs wearing interactive VR devices.

Bru walked over to Chuki and they both looked at a large picture, in color, that appeared to have been taken from a low flying hovering helicopter or a stationary drone. A wide area was burning. Buildings were on fire on the left side of the picture and the fire was obviously sweeping from right to left because on the right side of the picture there was black and white smoke rising into the air and there was nothing remaining of the structures but scorched frames and the debris of what had once stood. Beneath the picture was a small sign that said it was an interactive picture. There was an arrow and instructions to push the button. Chuki pushed the little black button and the picture came to life.

On the left side of the picture the flames began to rise and dance and bend in different directions. The smoke appeared as if it was being blown in a strong shifting wind. Not only was it floating upwards it was drifting quickly out of the picture to the left. There was no sound, just the vivid images of destruction unfolding. Chuki spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. Her voice was low. Only Bru could hear her.

Chuki: The flames are orange and yellow and red and white and

even blue. The different colors are coming from the varying temperatures of the flames and what's being burnt. White is hot. But blue is hotter. Orange and yellow are in the middle. Red is at the tip.

Chuki was silent for a moment. Then in the picture, within the flames there was a tremendous explosion. Chuki's voice rose.

Chuki: Ooh! Look daddy! That pink is lithium and the brownish-green is tungsten! It's pretty isn't it?

There was another explosion. Then a banner sized narrow screen lit up beneath the picture and words in black began to scroll.

Words: Tulsa Civil Uprising directed against the Oklahoma State Government from the year 2105. Approximately 1,700 dead. Estimated value of property and homes destroyed, 195 million.

Chuki: Bodies turn to ash between fourteen hundred and eighteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit. They can get so hot they blow into pieces too.

The last letters of the words scrolled off of the picture to the left and all movement of the images ceased. Bru and Chuki moved on to their left. They passed sealed glass cases with articles such as hats and gloves. There were trinkets and pieces of handmade jewelry. Signs on the wall above the cases described the significance of what was inside, with names and dates.

At this time four people entered from outside, two adults and two who appeared to be teenagers. The *Parda-clara* adults were both *DMs* and the younger *Parda-clara* individuals were *NDs*, appearing as possibly male and possibly female. Bru noted they all carried weapons on their sides. The four moved to a rack near the entrance and began to read brochures they removed.

Bru and Chuki moved further left and stood before another picture, this one larger than the previous one. It was divided into four separate areas. They stared at the four images, attempting to

understand what they were seeing. According to a sign this was also an interactive display. Chuki stepped forward and pushed the black button. A portion of the picture came to life as the top right section began to move. It was the bodycam video from someone running in a street. It was a wide-angle perspective and it appeared that the camera was mounted on the person's chest. There were people on each side of the running person who were dressed in uniforms of the military and the police. Everyone was pointing and shooting rifles and handguns that were pointing forward and firing at someone or something. The person wearing the bodycam raised a rifle, aimed and suddenly audio sound came on. It wasn't loud but it was distinct and gunshots and then voices could clearly be heard.

The rifle in the frame began firing and recoiling, single shots and then a burst. The people on each side of the street were firing. Several dropped to the pavement and began crawling and rolling and jerking. They had been shot. Yells and screams sounded and pierced the air. Then, the bodycam wearing person fell. The pavement rose. The person rolled over, twice and came to rest on their back. The daytime sky above, filled with rain clouds, was now seen and the person lying there began to yell.

Person: Help me! I've been shot! I've been hit!

The injured person hollered and cursed. The sky bounced as they bucked and writhed in pain. The video suddenly froze and the top left section was animated. The person wearing this bodycam was on a building and they were shooting at people in the distance. The reports from gunshots echoed in the air and people who were being shot at were running and hiding in the entrances of buildings. Some of them dropped to the pavement and remained where they fell. Then, the image froze.

As the top left image froze. The bottom right screen came on. Someone, wearing a camera with audio and a narrow view was

entering a home along with others. Their footsteps were heard clomping on the wooden steps and then the porch. They began searching the house, room by room. They were yelling out the word, clear, as they left each room. As they moved down a long hallway a person who appeared to be a young, maybe teenage, maybe not yet, *Escura* boy, perhaps a young dark-skinned girl, came through a doorway near the end of the hall, looked left at the person wearing the camera and with a look of terror on their face, turned away and began running towards the rear of the house. The bodycam view showed a rifle coming up into the frame, moving, aiming and then firing, a loud burst into the back of the fleeing youth. Blood splattered and the young person was driven forward and to the floor and as soon as the firing rifle went silent a person, appearing as a *Parda-clara* female with short blond hair, stepped through the same doorway and fired a booming blast from a shotgun and the images at that moment began moving in extreme, frame by frame, slow motion. The visual angle showed silver buckshot pellets spreading and flying in the air directly towards the head of the person wearing the camera. Then, the screen froze. The buckshot stopped mid-flight. Bru looked at Chuki as she looked up at him. She spoke softly and smiled.

Chuki: Wow!

Bru: You mean, ow!

They turned back to look at the last bottom left screen as it came on. It appeared the images were from different surveillance cameras mounted somewhere high, perhaps on buildings or light poles because the view was shifting and came from various angles. People were running in all directions in the street and on the sidewalks. Some of the people were moving between buildings and through yards and alleyways. They were lighting firebombs and throwing hand grenades and suddenly the sound

came on. People were setting buildings on fire and turning over and destroying vehicles. Fires were burning. Black smoke was rising and spreading into the air. There was yelling and hollering and screaming. The words were coming from a distance and were muted and incomprehensible but the rage and pain was obvious and recognizable and was heard but had not been heard nor acknowledged or understood.

The destruction progressed as the cameras zoomed in and out and people were dying. Suddenly there was no longer any sound and then words began scrolling across a screen that lit up beneath the picture. A deep, computer generated voice began to speak, clear and solemn.

Voice: The Tulsa Riot of 2061 began on Tuesday night, July 23, and ended on Sunday morning, July 28. An estimated 134 people died and 75 million in value, in properties and homes were destroyed. The riot started when law enforcement personnel attacked marchers peacefully protesting police brutality.

There was no more movement on the picture. There was nothing else to see so Bru and Chuki walked on further to their left. They stood and stared at that which was before them. It was not a picture or an interactive display. It was a painting that because of its size could be considered a mural and also because they recognized it had been painted on the wall of the room. It was in black and white and gray with blood-red color interspersed throughout. They took it all in, silently. Then Chuki spoke quietly as she scanned the dimensions.

Chuki: It's every bit the size of Picasso's Guernica which is a little over eleven feet tall and twenty-five feet six inches across.

It was as if their presence triggered a sensor and to their left a once blank twenty-inch square, copper plaque, standing on a four foot copper pipe began to glow. The words and numbers flashed, blinked and then were clear and visible and next remained steady

as displayed. Chuki read them aloud in her soft, child-like voice.
Chuki: Tulsa Massacre, 1921.

Chuki moved closer to the painting. Bru followed. From where they stood their closeness forced them to look up, as if to the sky, to see the top area. And then, without speaking, they both took the necessary steps back so they could again experience through their vision the actual scope of it. A few people came up on each side as they stood there. They too wanted to observe the painting and when all the people had strolled away and they were alone again Chuki spoke so only Bru could hear.

Chuki: In this painting done in oil we can see examples of cubism in the buildings and houses and surrealism in the clouds and sky. There's the moon and sun visible at the same time.

Bru: The realism is shown in the human bodies.

Chuki: Yes, look at the details in their clothing. Look at the horror and pain on their faces. The whole of it in black and white and gray except for the blood-red color in relationship to the bodies and the wounds.

Bru: The dying.

Chuki: Picasso's Guernica showed the suffering ...

Bru: ... and the dying.

Chuki: ... that comes from violence and chaos. This is beautiful. I have thoughts of enjoyment when I see humans suffering.

Bru: And dying.

It was at this moment that they heard a noise to their right, from the corner. It was a door opening. They had both turned in that direction and so were watching when a person walked through the doorway. It was an *Escurinba* woman as was evident from the *DF* marking on her left cheek. The declaration was in red and was obvious on her very dark skin. And both Bru and Chuki noticed the red was the same shade as the red in the painting.

This woman, from both her slight, thin frame and her features clearly had age on her. She had long, thick, gray, nearly white hair that was elaborately braided in patterns on the top and sides of her head. It was also braided in such a way that it hung down her back to her waist. She wore a long dress in kente-style fabric that came down just far enough where Bru could see she wore shiny black combat boots. Bru saw she carried a rather large handgun on her left side that she would pull crossbody with her right hand. Remaining in the doorway were two guards, one tall, thick, *Escura* individual with long purple hair in a locks style who declared as a *DM*. The other one was an equally tall but not as thick *Marrom* individual declaring as a *DL* with tight, thick, curly, violet-colored hair that surrounded their head in a natural style. The two guards both wore medium-length dashiki-style tops, camouflaged pants and combat boots. They both carried two handguns on their sides and powerful looking long guns that they held, cradled easily across their left arms. Bru looked up and saw two more guards appearing on the second floor and third floors, similarly dressed and similarly armed.

The elderly woman stood there and looked around slowly. She watched a small group of younger people, teenagers, descend the stairs that led from the second floor. Several waved to her as they headed towards the front exit. She waved back with her right hand and struck the stick she carried in her left hand twice on the wooden floor.

Bru looked at the stick. Chuki had already noticed it. The wooden stick was apparently hand carved. It was a rich, dark-brown color. It wasn't a cane. It extended to her shoulder and she seemingly did not use it for support. She took small steps but her steps were sure and she moved with an air of confidence as she placed the stick forward and walked directly towards them. She smiled and gold flashed in several teeth. She pointed with

her right index finger at the painting they stood before as she looked from Bru to Chuki.

Woman: What do you think about that?

Her voice was somewhat heavy and slightly raspy.

Bru: I'm very impressed. It moved me emotionally.

Chuki chimed in with enthusiasm.

Chuki: I like it!

Woman: Then I must thank you both 'cause I painted it.

Now all three looked at the painting and Bru glanced at the name painted in black in the bottom right corner. Chuki raised her right hand and pointed her index finger. She moved it rapidly from the left of the painting across to the right. It was as if she counted.

Chuki: There must be a little over three hundred bodies.

She turned to the woman who had a quizzical look on her face as she looked at Chuki and then Bru and then returned her gaze to Chuki, who smiled at her.

Woman: My, how observant you are. You're correct. There are a little over three hundred bodies there. And one of them is my great grandfather four times removed. That's great, great, great, great, grandfather. He was born in 1895 and was twenty-six years old when he died.

Chuki turned back to the picture.

Chuki: Really? That's much too young.

The woman moved closer to Bru and Chuki. Again her stick, along with her boots sounded on the floor. They all looked at the painting.

Woman: There've been different estimates on the number of deaths. No one truly knows. How many deaths were hidden and never acknowledged? But one hundred and seventy-one years ago in the year 2001 the numbers a special commission came up with were somewhere around three hundred dead and well over eight

hundred injured. Right here where we're standing and nearby surrounding locations is the Greenwood area and it was burnt to the ground. All the businesses, the homes, the churches, the schools, the municipal buildings, were destroyed. It supposedly started over accusations of an assault, rumors of a man of color being lynched. Finally, gunshots were heard and over thirty-five square blocks were reduced to nothing. The attackers, including law enforcement, used guns and bombs and fire. My people fought back but were overwhelmed.

The three stood there in silence staring at the painting. Then the woman lifted the stick with both hands and directed it at the painting. And just as Chuki had done with her finger she moved the stick from the left side across to the right. Her voice took on an edge.

Woman: Somewhere lying there my ancestor is represented.

Bru: Symbolically.

She lowered the stick, still staring at the painting.

Woman: Yes my son. That's a good word to use. Those bloody red bodies are symbols. Fortunately that ancestor had children, seven to be exact. And fortunately they, along with his beloved wife were visiting her sister in Texas, or I wouldn't be here.

Bru: Fate can be both cruel and kind.

The woman turned to look at Bru a long moment. Again her voice was charged, rising a little.

Woman: Some people in Tulsa and nearby parts of Oklahoma have displayed animosity towards me. They have negative things to say about my museum here in my home that's been almost completely rebuilt three times since it was first set on fire in 1921. Those who are disturbed and offended by that which I have preserved and present here say I should let go of the past. They say that there's nothing to be gained by holding on to events of yester years and that those days are long gone.

Here her voice became hard and filled with anger.

Woman: I say they're not gone! They've never gone anywhere! Right now throughout this state, further south or north or east or west! Look at the emblems, the flags being flown that ride along with the people still fighting the Civil War from three hundred years ago! The Civil War never ended!

Bru: The Civil War is just a thought away.

The woman seemed to relax as she pointed her right index finger at Bru.

Woman: How true my son, how true.

Then she spoke to Bru as if she shared a secret.

Woman: And the descendants of those who killed my people are still alive here in Tulsa.

Then she chuckled softly and smiled. The woman, still smiling looked at Chuki. She bowed slightly and leaned forward on her stick.

Woman: Now my little observant one. Look at me closely and guess my age.

Chuki stared at the woman's face. She looked into her brown eyes that seemed to twinkle. She was thinking, processing. She scrunched up her face.

Chuki: Seventy-five.

The woman laughed loudly.

Woman: What a compliment! How sweet of you. I'm one hundred and two years old with a birthday fast approaching and with no alterations or drugs.

Chuki's eyes widened. Then she shook her head.

Chuki: I don't believe it!

Woman: What don't you believe, the alterations or the drugs?

Chuki: No, no. The one hundred and two years old part. You look great!

Woman: Thank you my child. It's true. It runs in my family. My

father lived to be ninety-two and my mother ninety-seven. We've been around a long time. I've seen a lot.

Bru: In many ways, in spite of the hardships, the goodness of fate has been your companion.

Woman: I'm not complaining. I'm still living and it's good to be alive.

Bru and then Chuki turned to the painting. Then they looked at the elderly woman standing there.

Bru: We have to go now. Thank you so much for sharing.

Woman: Perhaps you'll come back? There's much more to see upstairs and some wonderful immersive and interactive games to be enjoyed.

Bru: Perhaps. Goodbye. Be well.

Chuki: Bye, bye.

Woman: Goodbye to you both. Be safe and be well.

The elderly woman turned as a small group of people came up and began talking to her and as she walked away, behind them, as they moved towards the exit, Bru and Chuki could hear the woman's voice and her stick striking the floor. As they drew close to the door Bru saw a metal table and a metal box fused to the table. There was a sign for donations. He reached in his bag, took out several high value cards and dropped them through the slot in the top of the box.

Bru pulled open the door and the two walked through the doorway. They stood on the porch a moment and then started down the steps. Along the walkway they went and when they reached the sidewalk they stopped. It was dusk now. The sky had already darkened in the east. Above them the last of the blueness was changing to a light gray. The streetlights were on and glowing and the lights from the restaurants and stores and buildings were illuminated. There were even more people out and about than there were when they had entered the museum just a while ago.

As they stood there and observed the people strolling along the sidewalk and walking in the middle of the blocked-off street, to their right a *Parda-clara DM* approached. The somewhat short, thick, baldheaded man was dressed in a pink T-shirt, khaki shorts that came just above his knees and pink soft shoes. He carried a handgun on his left side and a pouch crossbody that hung on his right.

Bru turned to look at the man and when Chuki looked up at him she turned to see what he was watching. They both saw the man stop and finish the ice cream cone he was eating by holding his head back and pushing what remained of it into his mouth. He wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand. He reached into his pouch, pulled out a white paper bag and removed a large pink cookie. He balled the bag up took a bite of the cookie, tossed the bag on the sidewalk and started forward. Bru spoke to the man when he was directly across from them and pointed
Bru: Pick that up and put it in that trash container there.

He had pointed with his right index finger to the right, to the paper bag and then to a trash receptacle to their left. The man was stopped in his tracks. He didn't know what to do or say. He couldn't ignore and wanted to bristle at what sounded like an order or a command. But the words had been issued in a soft tone, without any noticeable inflection. Then the man looked beneath the bill of the cap into the eyes of the *Marrom DM* with the large gun fastened to his right side. He was unnerved. He saw nothing. The brown-skinned man simply stared, looking directly into his eyes, without emotion. And he felt the brown eyes of the man bore deep into him. Then he looked down at the little brown-skinned person standing next to him. He assumed it was a young girl and the look on the child's face and in her brown eyes caused him to slightly shiver and he felt a tingle on the back of his neck near where he once had hair. It was at that moment he

recalled an old saying he had once heard. And he knew that indeed, if a look could kill he would have shriveled up and died.

He took three small steps back. He tried to keep his eyes on the man whose right thumb was hooked in his belt near his weapon. He bent to pick up the paper. He groped for it and when he felt the waxed paper in his hand he exhaled and then he took a quick breath and he realized he had been holding it. His breathing had been suspended, as if it had momentarily ceased. He walked forward, passed by the man and little girl as they both watched him and dropped the paper in the receptacle and continued on. He looked back, twice.

Bru and Chuki watched the man as he blended into the people moving in that direction. Then Bru took Chuki's left hand and they stepped across the sidewalk and into the street. They turned left, walked a short ways in the now crowded street and stepped onto the opposite sidewalk and continued in the direction of Spiny.

They were close to the buildings, walking slowly. Some of the people were in a hurry but most were moving at a leisurely pace enjoying the mild, early evening weather. Occasionally Bru would glance down at Chuki and take note of her as she studied those around her and paid particular attention to the children she saw.

They were approaching the first cross street. Here there was vehicle traffic that was moving in both directions, albeit at a crawl due to the congestion and was now stopped for the red signal. As they neared the corner the light for pedestrians was blinking, chiming and counting down and reached zero. The traffic light above them turned green for the vehicles. Bru and Chuki reached the corner and stopped as a horn blew and traffic began moving. It was at this moment a little *Palida* child, possibly a male, to their left spoke in a high-pitched, whining, nasally voice.
Child: Mother, I want some more candy.

Chuki leaned forward enough so she could see past Bru and observe the child and the family that stood there. There were two little children, one around her size the other a little taller. She saw that the one a little taller than her who appeared to be female was standing next to a child around her size who appeared to be male. From the clothes they wore, coupled with their presentation it was impossible to ascertain for sure. Then she looked up at the two adults with them. The mother, a *Branca* person of medium height and size with long blonde hair was marked as a *DQ*. The tall, slim *Parda-clara* person next to her was a *DM*. The other child joined in.

Other Child: Me too! Me too! Mine's all gone!

The mother spoke as she stared at the Comm device in her hand.

Mother: What did I tell you two a while ago? I could care less what you want.

The female child, possibly, stomped one foot and then the other. The little male child, possibly, began to jump up and down. Then the one who appeared as a female pulled at the arm of the *DM*.

First Child: Father! Father! Candy! Candy!

Other Child: I'm gonna sit down right here!

Mother: I could care less.

First Child: I'm gonna hold my breath until I pass out!

The mother and father continued looking at their Comm devices.

Mother: I could care less what you do.

Bru was still holding Chuki's hand as she took a step forward and moved nearly an arm's length past him. She looked up at the mother, directly into her eyes as the red light changed to green for the pedestrians to cross. Chuki yelled. Everyone nearby could hear clearly.

Chuki: Couldn't care less! Couldn't care less!

People began walking. Chuki moved back to the side of Bru but he had to gently pull her so she would come with him as he began to cross the street. The crowd moved forward and several were laughing. One person clapped, politely. And people had to change direction and part in order to walk around the family. The mother stood there, frozen in place as the children began to jump up and down and cry.

No one had seen what she had seen. The cute little *Marrom* girl child with the small, thin, lime-green ribbon in her hair had peered within her with not just an expression of rage but with an essence of hatred she had never seen or experienced before in her life. The mother, with her mouth agape, watched as the child glared back at her as she crossed the street. And the distracting Comm device the mother held dropped from her hand and clattered on the sidewalk as she saw the child was engulfed by the people around her and disappeared.

Bru and Chuki walked in silence and when they reached Spiny Bru disengaged the security system and then opened the door and watched as Chuki climbed in and sat down. After Bru got in, before he pulled away he pressed on a button on the dash and opened communication. Moja answered.

Moja: Yes?

Bru: How are things going?

Moja: All goes well. We've completed our tasks, run diagnostics and we've accessed all the Comm devices in the vicinity. We're copying and downloading information and data.

Bru: Good. I need for you to gather all the information you can find on a woman with the calling of Fannie Lee. That's spelled as, F A N N I E L E E. We're on our way back.

Bru ended the call. He glanced into the rearview mirror and

then turned so he could see Chuki. He knew she was thinking, processing. He pulled off and they started back. They rode in silence. Then after a while he spoke.

Bru: What thoughts do you have of your outing?

She spoke in a subdued tone.

Chuki: I thought it was interesting. I liked the museum.

Again they fell silent. She continued to think and process. Then she spoke. Her voice was elevated just a little. She wanted Bru to hear her clearly. Her words direct with more emotion.

Chuki: That's the first time I've been around humans since The Playground. I haven't forgotten. As long as I exist I'll remember.

Bru recognized the bitterness behind her words. He smiled just a little.

They rode on without speaking, back to Sapulpa. When they arrived they saw Vier, Ek, Cha, Cinq and Dois sitting outside the barn doors. Lights from Tal shined through the doorway and above them the moon glowed in the dark, partly cloudy sky. The eyes of Cinq and Dois were closed, in quiesce mode. Kojo rose and wagged his tail when he saw Bru and Chuki get out but remained where he was. As Chuki started towards him she called and he ran to her. Bru spoke.

Bru: Chuki listen.

She turned to him as she petted Kojo.

Bru: We're now in for the night. Tomorrow there'll be no going into the woods, at least not just yet, maybe later. You can carefully explore the buildings to the end of the block. Have either Cinq or Dois go with you at all times. Tell them I said so. Those are my words. Do you understand? Chuki thought a long moment. Then she turned. She looked into the darkness as if she could see down the nearby empty street and into the deserted buildings. She turned to Bru.

Chuki: I understand.

Bru entered Tal and saw, sitting on the left side near the rear, Moja, Una and Okan. Across from them were Leeda, Naki and Tatu. They were all gathering information except for Tatu who was monitoring the security cameras, radar and security audio. Bru stood behind Moja, Una and Okan and watched their screens for a short while. Then he turned and watched the screens of Leeda and Naki. He spoke to Tatu.

Bru: Anything to report?

Tatu: No. There's been no mention of Tal and no one has come in close proximity to us.

Bru stared at the images of the security cameras. The views changed as the cameras scanned, rotated and zoomed in and out. He turned back to the other side and indicated he wanted to sit down by pulling up a chair. Moja and Una slid over and he sat down between them. He tossed his cap on another chair.

Bru: Send me all the information you have on Fannie Lee.

Moja transferred the information and it appeared on Bru's screen. He began scrolling through it. Faster and faster it moved. He was focused, staring at the words and numbers, only pausing at images and pictures for a brief moment.

Bru: Is this everything from all the Comm devices connected to her?

Moja: Yes, everything. The rest is what has been derived from public information. It's quite extensive.

Bru: She's lived quite a long life of activism, political and social. Apparently she's in conflict with the mayor and the mayor's people over the museum property. Send me everything you have on him and those connected to him. Now I understand why there were heavily armed guards out front and inside, most likely in the rear also. There's not only been threats made against her but also minor acts of vandalism. So there we have two of our targets,

the museum owner and the mayor. Do we have anyone else?

Una: There are two who head the consortium that controls the main food sources along with farm supplies across Oklahoma. They also own clothing stores and they're branching off into procuring and selling weapons from their stores. One lives in Oklahoma City. The other resides here.

Leeda: There's the one who owns the Tulsa casino.

Moja: There's always the Governor of Oklahoma.

Bru: I've had enough of governors.

Bru was thinking, processing.

Bru: Find someone connected to the crime and violence, the local gangster. And we need a drug dealer, the reputed kingpin.

Bru settled back and began tapping on his keyboard.

Bru: Those six should be enough for our purposes. We have Fannie Lee, a *DF* and the mayor a *DM*. How does the casino owner identify?

Leeda: *DG*

Bru: That's The Gambler. Then we have the drug dealer.

Okan: *DQ*. Presents as female.

Bru: That's The Kingpin. Next is The Gangster.

Moja: A *DTM*

Bru: Finally, the one here in Tulsa who controls the food and supplies and owns the stores.

Una: An *ND*

Bru: Presents as male or female?

Una: Can't tell from the images, so can't say for sure but I would guess male.

Bru: Male it is. What should we call that one?

Naki: They own a lot of land where they raise animals to be eaten, how about the butcher?

Bru thought a moment.

Bru: That's a little too harsh.

Leeda: The grocer.

Bru: Too soft.

Okan: The merchant.

Bru: I like that. The Merchant it is. Now we have a diverse group, a representation of the broad spectrum of humanity. We believe in equality. No matter who or what they are.

He began tapping on his keyboard again.

Bru: Moja and I will work on The Mayor and Fannie Lee. Leeda, you take The Gambler. Okan you have The Kingpin. Naki, you have The Merchant and Una, work on The Gangster. Let's see how quickly we can bring into existence our first Creation.

They worked through the following hours. First they located all the businesses and any residence that was connected to their targets. They then verified each location had security systems they could access when needed. Then they identified not just The Mayor's and Fannie Lee's Comm devices but also all those individuals who had either contacted or been contacted by those two. They did the same for the other four they had chosen. They also had to track down the devices that were not assigned to them. They all, even Fannie Lee, had clandestine devices that could easily be discarded.

Next they placed a Watcher application on each primary device that allowed them to watch through that device's camera. Thus they could see whatever and whoever was in the viewfinder of the camera. They then placed the Listener application on the device. This allowed them to listen to whatever the device's microphone picked up. They regulated the Watcher so they could zoom in and out and have it automatically adjust for clarity. They also enhanced the Listener so they could not only better hear what was being said but also pick up background voices and sounds. Both the Watcher and Listener were continuously active and functioned even if the device was powered off. The two

applications recorded all audio and all visual images while streaming data and in real time downloading everything onto the server to be stored where anything could be retrieved at any time.

Bru and his group watched and listened. Then as each target returned home at different times this Saturday night, those doing the watching and listening went home with them. Once they gained access to the homes they hacked into the security systems and all the associated cameras. Then they activated mapping capabilities and produced a three-dimensional layout of the home as the targets moved through different rooms. At the same time they were gaining access to every screen and monitor in the house. Watcher and Listener applications were implanted within them and after ensuring the large screens and computer monitors were functioning properly while under their control the initial stages were complete.

Bru stood and walked back to stare at Khufu. He turned around and spoke with enthusiasm. He raised his voice and smiled at those sitting there looking at him.

Bru: We need intimate details. We have our main characters so now we must find our supporting cast.

He strolled back to stand in the isle between the members of his group. His voice was low and even and his words direct.

Bru: Each of you pull up the source material on your target. Find what you think will serve our purposes.

The night grew late and they were all immersed in their individual assignment. There would be no sunshine this Sunday morning or throughout the day. There was a forecast for either heavy or light intermittent rain for the next twenty-four hours. The barn roof had several holes in it so at 1 a.m. as the sprinkles began, all those now under the extended covering could sit or stand and see the raindrops falling on the barn floor. Several of

the group closed their eyes and Chuki and Kojo came inside.

The little one strolled in, moved to the back and stood and looked at the screens and work being done. Moja had a video playing of The Mayor's house and when he switched to the bedroom there could be seen images and activities from earlier in the night. The Mayor and his wife were having sex on the floor. There was no sound but what was going on was quite obvious. Chuki looked at the somewhat thick, blond-haired, naked, except for his socks, *Parda-clara* man and obviously thick, naked, blonde-haired *Palida* woman and turned away.

She glanced at each screen and then saw on Leeda's screen the *DG* Gambler, a tall muscular *Castanha* with almond-colored hair. They were standing in the basement recreation room. They wore no shirt and their pants and underwear were down at their ankles. A *Castanha-clara* person, another *DG*, was on their knees on a pillow and The Gambler was pushing their hardened, extended appendage down the kneeling person's throat as another *DG*, a *Cobre* with long silver hair sat at the bar naked, except for silver boots, smoking a drug stick and watching and smiling broadly. The one at the bar grabbed a bottle of brown liquid and turned it up and gulped.

Chuki: Come on Kojo. I'm getting thoughts of disgust. If I could I'd throw up.

She went and sat down in a seat near the front and closing her eyes, entered a quiesced state. Kojo lay at her feet and closed his eyes.

The group began discussing the information they had been accessing, starting with their specific target's personal Comm devices and moving to available related public material.

Moja: The Mayor is definitely attempting to acquire Fannie Lee's house. It's strictly the property he wants. And the City Council is involved. But more important, the backstory revealed through my

discovery process is that his family has for years been involved in not only politics but also law enforcement. His great grandfather and his great grandfather's two brothers were all captains on the police force during the Tulsa Riot of 2061.

Leeda: The Gambler has very recently been sending threatening notifications to those employees and family members who they suspect has been stealing from the casino. Along with those notifications are videos of three years ago when they executed two of their cousins for stealing.

Naki: Mobs of young people have continued to swarm different establishments of The Merchant and loot food, clothing and merchandise. Shoplifting is rampant in his stores.

Una: It's the Gangster who's been organizing the attacks on The Merchant and purchasing the stolen goods.

Naki: The Merchant suspects that it's The Gangster behind the thievery.

Okan: The Kingpin is setting up a major drug transaction for sometime in the coming week.

Una: The Gangster and his cohorts are part of the network that distributes the drugs.

Moja: Fannie Lee has been trying to hire someone not connected to her to kill The Mayor.

Okan sounded mildly excited.

Okan: Listen to this. The Kingpin sold some tainted drugs four years ago. People were dying and some, including relatives connected to the dead were trying to kill The Kingpin.

Bru got up and began to pace back and forth.

Bru: This is all very interesting, and relevant. These humans will share anything and everything on their Comm devices. Their lockouts, passwords and encryptions are useless against us. And they've never understood that rarely is a scrub or delete total. In *East World* and *West World* the authorities are not only arresting

and prosecuting people, they've even executed some of them who have exposed themselves on their devices. They take pictures and make videos that are disseminated, of themselves with stolen value cards and pilfered goods. They discuss their upcoming illegal undertakings and live-stream their own self, involved in all sorts of debauchery and criminality. They brag online and post to all those who follow them about their wicked, nefarious, and disgraceful deeds. Here in *Center World* it's left to the people to extract vengeance and retribution.

Bru smiled and sat down at his seat.

Bru: Which of course is somewhat similar to justice.

He began to tap on his keyboard.

Bru: Alright, we have ideas on where to begin. Now let's find the images, pictures and voices we need in order to design our Creations.

The group watched and listened to their targets and gathered data throughout that Sunday. That Sunday evening Leeda, Naki and Okan were standing behind Moja, Bru and Una who were all sitting. Before Moja began to design the first Creation, Chuki, who had been outside, was sent for by Bru. She came in, followed by Kojo, and ran to the back and squeezed between Leeda and Naki and stood close beside Bru at his left shoulder. Kojo sat on the edge of the group, watching.

Moja: Using Kofu's A.I. learning ability, Bru and I have produced programs that are formed into a network. The network has generative audio and generative video and imaging capabilities. A little over one hundred and fifty years ago the humans of that time used Generative Adversarial Networks or GANs, as they were called, to concoct Deepfakes.

Bru: Naturally they used the innovative ability of their machines to learn, along with Artificial Intelligence, to abuse and take

advantage of their fellow humans. GANs evolved as if mimicking evolutionary biology but were initially refined, as if mutating through external manipulation, in the design and use of pornographic images and videos and child sexual abuse material. These so called Deepfakes quickly expanded into bringing forth what was labeled as retaliatory or revenge porn and in addition morphed into informative news that was false and also into coercive actions in order to tease and intimidate. Then of course there were various scams and frauds, particularly financial fraud. All of this we can deem typical human activities. The only positives to come from the rapid increase in these fakes were the resulting murders and suicides.

Moja: We've far surpassed Deefakes.

Bru: We now have our Creations.

Moja: I've used images and audio from The Mayor's devices in my design. I've focused on his family, specifically because of that historical relationship with politics and law enforcement.

Bru: We can surmise those ancestors were most likely direct adversaries of Fannie Lee's great grandfather who was a leading activist in his own right. And was also an opponent to the local government and police department.

Moja: Our challenge is to ensure each of our Creations, using all of the input, which we provide, can function autonomously.

Bru: We want each Creation to be able to govern itself and control the scenario it's been given in order to reach its ultimate goal, which is to cause disruption that leads to chaos and violence. Any human destruction is an added bonus.

Moja: We don't want to have to interfere as the initial program adjusts and evolves. Once we release it ...

Bru: I like the word, unleash.

Moja: Once unleashed, it's on its own.

Moja then rolled the little black ball on his station beside his

computer and an arrow on his screen moved as if floating.

Moja: Gather your images and audio. Provide your Creation with the information you think it requires to correctly play its role in the story you invent and then go over it with either Bru or myself. With our suggestions, when you think it's ready we'll have a test run. Now watch as the Creation for The Mayor begins to come into being.

They were all looking at the screen when an image, dressed in a black suit, white shirt and red tie, began to form. Faint at first it became clearer, more defined. Moja imported more images and pictures of this man into the formation areas of this unique, specially designed program. Then he began adding videos he had discovered. The program was browsing the input and then began to edit, and sprite, and next merge the images and pictures. The program was competing with itself to bring forth an accurate and precise representation.

The color of the *Parda-clara* man became the hue of a light-skinned individual, that blended mixture of medium brown and near white. The hazel-colored eyes, the same color as The Mayor's were looking around, searching for something or someone. Then the Creation stared forward, directly at those who were watching him emerge as if being reborn and existing again. Chuki spoke in her soft child-like voice. Her words were imbued with awe.

Chuki: He appears alive.

Bru spoke, also softly, without looking at her.

Bru: He is alive. What did I share with you about an unrealized aspect of technology?

Chuki was thinking, processing.

Chuki: All technology lives.

Each member of Bru's Creation group continued their work

that Sunday evening and all night. They followed their respective targets from the moment they awoke on that Monday, day seven of September. They observed them and took notes that were filed into an online folder. That night they attempted to ascertain any routines that were established as the targets came home, or in the case of Fannie Lee, closed the museum and prepared for the night. They carried on with the process all day Tuesday and that night Okan unleashed his approved Creation on The Kingpin.

The *DQ* ran the drug enterprise from the large rear room of their sprawling ranch northeast of Tulsa, not far from the border of Owasso. A guarded, gated entrance had to be passed through. A wood and steel fence ran along the front to the sides that connected to a six-foot tall cinder-block wall that ran along each side and the rear. Not far from the six-bedroom main house was a warehouse where various types of drugs and drug paraphernalia were stored. Sensors and security systems were monitored by two of four heavily armed guards constantly at the gate. Guards worked in shifts including six armed guards who patrolled inside the perimeter.

Okan had been present when the drug dealer had dinner with associates at an elegant restaurant in downtown Tulsa and then he went home with them at 10 p.m. The Kingpin carried a small package that had been delivered to them during dinner. Just as they had done the previous night they had gone to the master bedroom, removed all their clothes except for their panties and padded with bare feet through the house to that rear room.

They put the package on a mahogany table and then they had opened up a conference call, speaker connection, had the voices of the participants come through the large HD screen across from the desk, near the far wall, and began to finalize the deal to have a shipment of manufactured drugs delivered from a chemist in Kansas. They agreed on a Wednesday date in two weeks.

Everyone dropped off the call but the chemist and Okan and the others, including Chuki, were listening and heard the chemist advise The Kingpin not to sniff any of the drug that had been delivered in the package, straight, or their nose would most certainly be irreparably damaged. The chemist said the drug had to be cut first, seven times and told The Kingpin what to use and how to do it. The chemist also firmly warned The Kingpin, not under any circumstances should they inject any of the drug until he could determine how much it needed to be diluted. The call was ended.

The Kingpin rose from their chair and walked to their right, to the bar. They poured a water glass half full of gin. Then as they moved to the mahogany table further to the right of the bar they paused in front of a full-length mirror to observe their reflection. They saw a five foot two inch, somewhat thick, well-formed body. They tossed their head and saw the honey-colored hair settle upon their shoulders. They stared at the altered *Melada*-colored skin. They smiled, a big, happy smile and their altered pearly-white teeth seemed to flash in the bright lights that glowed from the low ceiling and the tall lamp standing in the corner behind the table. They ran their pink tongue around their full, enhanced, and altered, honey-colored lips. They winked their left, altered, yellow-colored eye. Then while holding the glass in their left hand they reached with their right hand and squeezed their left, altered breast, hard, in order to feel that sensation of touch. Then they laughed and pointed their right index, acrylic fingernail at their image and chuckled, in their smooth, heavy voice. They adored that person in the mirror.

Those of the group in their seats and Chuki, standing at Bru's left shoulder, watched this through the large HD screen that had transmitted the conference call. The Kingpin took a sip of their gin, pursed their lips a little and moved to the table. Okan split

his screen and added a view from a security camera mounted in the corner above the table. He changed the view and zoomed in a little. They could see bowls of what appeared to be powders and pills of various colors. They could see signs placed on the table in front of the bowls with the names of what was contained in those bowls. They could also see a needle-less injection kit.

The Kingpin was staring at the bowls and then they sipped their drink and licked their lips. They used that right finger to point from one bowl to another and then to another and then back to each one. Chuki and several others read to themselves the names on the signs. Among the names were Caine, Amp, Shrooms, Meth, Fen, Mes, Bar, Opi and Ang and Hero and Rain. They saw the Kingpin pick up the package that had been delivered. They looked at it, turned it over and then raised it to their nose and smelled it. Then they thought a long moment and tossed it into an empty bowl.

The Kingpin set their glass on the table. With their right hand they took a small gold spoon and dipped it into the bowl of powder with the sign that said Rain. It was rainbow colored powder and The Kingpin sniffed some of it. They frowned and wiggled their nose and then pulled at it with their left hand. They sniffed some more of it, sipped their drink, set the glass down and looked at the bowls.

They used the spoon to drop some of the powdered Shrooms into their drink, then some more of it. They thought a long moment and dipped the spoon in the rainbow powder and dropped some in the glass. They put some from the Bar bowl in the gin. They put some Mes in, three spoons of it. Finally they put some of the Hero in their glass, two spoons. They then took a long spoon and stirred the drink. They held the glass up to look at it and then set it down. They stirred the gin some more, peeked down into the glass and then picked it up, held it up to the light

and then drank the concoction down, all of it.

They set the glass on the table and as they turned to move behind their desk they glanced at the large screen, directly at those watching, in order to see the time that was displayed in the corner of it. They wanted to know how long it took for the drugs to take effect. They opened a silver box, similar to a cigar box, sat down in their plush leather swivel chair, took a drug stick the size of a slim cigar from the box and using a gold lighter, lit the stick. Then they inhaled deeply and held the smoke as they settled back. They blew the smoke out slowly and watched it rise into the air. They pressed a button on a panel near their left hand and a ceiling fan came on. They stared at the blades turning and the bluish-green smoke dissipated. They laughed softly and took another long, deep drag on the stick. It was 10:45 p.m.

Bru and his group were watching as the drugs kicked in. They saw The Kingpin dance in the middle of the floor to loud music, wave their arms as if conducting an orchestra, talk to themselves and occasionally burst into laughter. They also saw their target drink more alcohol, infused with drugs, and smoke on a drug stick.

At midnight they were watching The Merchant on an adjacent screen. He was in the den area of his home looking at moving images on a large HD screen. The images may as well have been watching him because he was nodding. He was tired. It had been a long day. He had leaned back in a recliner and his shoeless feet were up on the footrest. His chin was on his chest. His large *Alva-rosada* baldhead had bobbed. Then his head was back against the chair and his mouth was open. He drooled just a little.

When he began to softly snore Naki was sure he was asleep so she unleashed the Creation she had designed. On the screen there

was an instantaneous bright flash, like a silent explosion and picture elements, the smallest, most minute three dimensional elements of information in an image, the pixels that made up the Creation were ejected through the screen and hovered in the air like fine particles of shiny, glinting, luminous, iridescent dust, behind and to the right of The Merchant. Then the particles began to swirl and whirl, then organize, and less than ten seconds after being thrust through the screen the grandfather of The Merchant was standing beside him.

The Merchant smacked his lips and wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand. His eyes fluttered open then closed. Naki changed the channel until she found the appropriate movie. She waited and then turned the volume up just as a barrage of gunshots erupted and there were loud voices and yelling and screaming. The Merchant was startled awake. He had disabled the voice response on the picture unit so he reached towards his right to the small table for the remote control. The screen went dark and now the only dull-yellow light came from a lamp standing in the corner. And when the Creation stepped in front of the picture-less screen The Merchant's mouth dropped open and his heart jumped into his throat.

Naki had utilized audio from The Merchant's Comm devices to capture the grandfather's voice. Words, expressions and in particular inflections were synthesized and recreated and so The Merchant most definitely heard his dead grandfather's voice when the Creation pointed his right index finger and spoke. His grandfather wasn't yelling but his deep voice was raised, the words were direct and permeated with anger.

Grandfather Creation: You knucklehead! You gonna let 'em put you outta business!

The finger, for emphasis was jabbing, moving forward and back with each word. The Merchant didn't understand what he

was seeing, couldn't comprehend what he was hearing. Now, with his heart racing and his mouth still agape he watched with his head moving, following, as his grandfather began to pace in agitation before the screen.

Grandfather Creation: You think me and my father worked and worked ourselves to death just so you would let mobs loot and steal you blind? You're just like your hardheaded daddy! He was a knucklehead too! People all over Oklahoma depend on you!

The Creation stopped. The Merchant saw his grandfather, seemingly staring directly at him with his piercing blue eyes. The voice became louder. The anger intensified.

Grandfather Creation: The next time that mob runs in your store shoot 'em!

The Merchant was caught up. It was as if his dead grandfather, long gone, was alive and real. He was lost in the moment. He responded hesitantly. His own soft, slightly high-pitched voice quavered.

The Merchant: What?

Grandfather Creation: I said, shoot 'em!

The Merchant: What?

The Merchant saw his grandfather take a step forward and raise his right hand as if to slap him.

Grandfather Creation: Say what again! I dare you!

The Merchant lifted his left hand to ward off the impending strike. He ducked a little.

The Merchant: I mean ... I mean, they're kids and teenagers.

His grandfather lowered his hand.

Grandfather Creation: So what! You live in *Center World*! If they're old enough to steal they're old enough to kill! And if they're old enough to kill they're old enough to die!

The Merchant dropped his gaze. For some reason he stared at his grandfathers's black boots, dusty as always. He looked up at

the familiar black suit, white shirt and western style string tie with the turquoise clasp. It appeared as if his grandfather, this strange apparition, this omen, had somehow by some means, stepped from the large picture that hung in his downtown office. And he wondered for a brief moment where his father was, who was also in that picture, standing there beside him. Then his grandfather bought him back to what he had accepted was a nightmare of some kind. The voice came low and even.

Grandfather Creation: You should have nipped this in the bud. Remember, in *Center World* there's only life and death.

Naki turned the corner lamp off and The Merchant could barely see his grandfather turn towards the long hallway leading to the front of the house. And as his grandfather passed through the doorway the screen suddenly lit up. Once again gunshots could be heard ringing out and pinging as they ricocheted off of rocks and metal. The native people in the movie were whooping and hollering and dying. Their sworn enemies were pleading and begging and screaming and dying. The Merchant blinked at the sudden harsh brightness. Then he let the footrest down and struggled to his feet. He stumbled to the hallway and peered into the darkness. There was nothing there, no one to be seen.

At 1 a.m. the group was watching The Kingpin and waiting on The Gambler to return home who apparently on a routine basis stayed at the never closed casino until almost sunrise. So as Leeda, along with the others were observing The Kingpin she also tracked her target, The Gambler, through the handheld devices they carried and also the monitors in their offices and casino security system that had been accessed.

Naki also watched The Kingpin but also stayed on The Merchant as he moved throughout his large home in an obvious nervous and troubled state after the magical disappearance of his

grandfather. He looked to be searching his house and garage. Finally, as 2 a.m. approached he went to his kitchen and made a pot of coffee. As he stood there and watched the dark-brown liquid enter the pot The Kingpin was standing in front of the mirror, looking at their reflection as if in a trance, down at their bare feet as they attempted to wiggle their toes. They had, down at their side, a Comm device in their left hand on which they had been watching people having sex. In their right hand, down at their side was a drug stick that was no longer lit.

They couldn't see the flash of light pass from the large screen in the living room area. Moments later, as they looked up into the mirror they thought they saw someone standing in the doorway to their left that led to the long, wide hallway. A shiver passed from the top of their head down and through the soles of their pedicured feet.

They were thinking their imagination was playing a trick on them but nevertheless they backed up slowly until they could look down the darkened hallway. Now they could see, moving away from them a form, amorphous at first it seemed to shift and emerge into a defined shadow then the silhouette of a body. The Kingpin rushed to the entrance of the hallway. They took a step in and frantically reached and groped for the light switch on the wall on the right. They couldn't see the flash behind them that came from the large HD screen across from their desk. They found the switch and flipped it but Okan controlled the lights so there was no illumination, at least not immediately.

There were three spaced overhead lights. Okan turned on the one near the doorway entrance where The Kingpin stood, but not all the way up. The intensity of the bulb remained low. The form, now moving forward very slowly towards The Kingpin remained in the thick dimness. Okan turned on low the middle light. Then the third light came on barely, and The Kingpin could

see it was quite obviously a person moving towards them, but not clearly. It was as if this thing that glided towards them silently, as if floating, was between light and darkness. Suddenly the lights came all the way up and the hallway was flooded with brightness and bluish-whiteness.

The Kingpin recognized the short, slim, red-haired *Parda-clara* woman who came faster now. She was one of the nearly dozen people who had died four years ago, overdosed on drugs The Kingpin had sold her. They also recognized the long yellow dress that appeared to be moving, as if from a rising wind and that billowed out behind her. They recognized the dress because they had bought it, in fact had paid for the whole funeral in an attempt to appease the dead woman's family. Her two violent drug using sisters and three violent drug selling brothers had threatened to kill the one responsible for their baby sister's death.

The Kingpin could feel their brain swell as if it were bleeding and their head swell as if it would burst from the sudden hot excruciating pain that originated from the terror that spurted up like a jagged bolt of lightning from their toes to the top of their head. Their heart pounded in their chest as if it would explode. They backed up and in their peripheral vision, to their right, someone was there. They turned in that direction and there stood a tall *Escura* man with long green hair dressed in a pink suit. It was another one who had died from the tainted drugs. Of course they knew him. The two of them, from childhood, had grown up together. The Kingpin looked down because for some reason they knew the dead friend had no shoes on and as they backed up the room began to shift and spin.

The drug dealer looked up to their left and the dead woman drew closer and then the dead man stepped forward and now side-by-side they stopped, raised their right hands but they did not point, they raised their left hands and extended their arms

and their hands began to spasm and then moved as if to grab and clutch and The Kingpin let out a piercing scream and fell back heavily onto the rug.

Everyone who was watching remained silent. The only sound came from the music that was playing. Then the loud music paused, as the selection changed from one raucous, throbbing beat to another one just like it. Then Chuki spoke.

Chuki: Are they dead? Massive heart attack!

Okan saw The Kingpin still somehow clutched their Comm device in their left hand.

Okan: Let me check. They were most likely already in a state of autonomic dysreflexia from the drugs and alcohol.

He used the device to access their vital readings.

Okan: No, there's still a heartbeat, rapid though, a little fluttering.

Chuki frowned.

Chuki: Too bad.

Okan: Blood pressure is elevated, dangerously high.

Chuki: A stroke?

Okan: Undetermined.

Chuki: Wouldn't that be something?

Chuki pointed with her right hand. Her little index finger wiggled. Then it pointed as she yelled out.

Chuki: Massive stroke!

Bru: You like that massive don't you?

Chuki: Better than mini or mild. Paralyze 'em! Turn 'em into a vegetable!

Bru turned to look at the little one, who was looking at him.

Chuki: Well you understand.

Bru: My sentiments exactly.

Chuki smiled and stood there and danced a little.

Leeda: The Gambler has departed the casino. May be headed home. I'll track them.

Bru: Well my Moja, what do you think?

Moja: Visually the Creations are exceptional. Apparently, even in relatively close proximity they're believable as real, and human. They fully form quickly and move with natural fluidity. The programs that brought forth the grandfather's autonomous vocal expressions were perhaps overly aggressive, however.

Bru: How so?

Moja: Steal, kill, die.

Chuki: I liked that. It was like a poem. Steal. Kill.

Bru: I liked the die part. Well done Naki. In fact I'm going to at some time incorporate that phrase with The Mayor.

Leeda: The Gambler moves towards their home.

Bru: Keep us informed. What's up with The Gangster?

Una: Nothing. Sleeping.

Bru: We need motivation for that one.

They were all silent now. Bru and Moja were tapping on their keyboards. They were coding and using arrows to control the unique graphical user interface they had designed that allowed them to manipulate dimensions across length, width, depth and time. They were using arrows to move images around and merge them with pictures they had accessed from Comm devices. Several others of the group shifted their attention from The Merchant, pacing through his house from room to room, to The Kingpin, lying supine on the rug, unconscious. Then at 2:35 a.m. Leeda spoke.

Leeda: The Gambler has arrived home.

Everyone watched one of the three screens that showed, through the home's extensive security system, one of the doors rising on the garage and The Gambler's vehicle entering the attached four-car garage of the large two-story mansion.

The driver of the four-door sedan had passed through a guarded front entrance to this exclusive isolated community of

Tulsa's well to do who possessed and controlled value. They had then driven along a private, dead-end street and up to and around a long circular driveway to turn into the garage. The cameras in the garage showed the driver, a baldheaded, thick *Parda-clara DM* of medium height get out, close his door, move to the rear door and open it, standing to the side a little. The Gambler, in dark pants and white shirt, got out with a briefcase in their right hand. Then a slim somewhat short *Palida DG* teenager with long blue hair climbed out of the same door. They were one of the employees who had been seen in the office and walking around the casino with The Gambler earlier in the night. The driver, who was also The Gambler's cook, had other responsibilities including guard duties, pressed on the Comm device he carried and the garage door began to descend. He started up the nearby stairs to the living quarters above the garage as The Gambler and the employee passed through a doorway that led into the main house.

The two turned left towards the rear and headed down a long hallway. They came to an open stairway on the right and The Gambler set the briefcase down and as they went up the stairs to the second floor lights automatically came on. And when they reached the top of the stairs lights came on in the hallway.

There were five bedrooms on the second floor along with other rooms and The Gambler, followed closely by the employee turned right into the third bedroom. Dim lights, triggered by their presence, came on throughout the room. This wasn't the master bedroom. It was smaller and had a round king-sized bed in the center fitted with red silk sheets and large fluffy pink and red and blue pillows. The room was sparsely furnished with three wood and microfiber chairs, a steel and microfiber couch, two large screens and a bar and chilling unit in the far right corner near the wall. On top of the bar were bottles of alcohol.

There were mirrors on the ceiling above the bed and mirrors

nearly covered two of the walls. The group could see through the screens that hanging on one of the walls were leather and cloth whips. There were also chains, handcuffs, masks and hoods and blindfolds and ropes. There were two long tables against the wall. One overflowed with dildos, vibrators, stimulators, wands, suction pumps and various other exotic toys and gadgets. The other table had bowls of drugs and rolled drug sticks.

This was obviously the young employee's first time in this house, in this room so they stood there to the right of their boss and glanced around in fascination as their boss ran their right hand against the rear end of the employee and squeezed gently. The employee turned to The Gambler and blushed slightly and giggled a little in their baritone voice. The Gambler took their employee into their arms. They kissed passionately and their breathing became heavy. Chuki spoke with disdain and distaste. Chuki: Look at 'em. There they go.

They moved apart and the young employee reached down with their left hand, between the legs of The Gambler and began to caress them. The Gambler placed both of his hands on the shoulders of the employee and pushed just enough so the young individual took the necessary steps backwards to reach the bed. Now The Gambler pushed again and moved the employee into a sitting position and stepped forward to stand close above them. The Gambler unbuttoned their shirt and unbuckled their pants. The employee pulled the zipper down with a mischievous smile on their face. Then they pulled their boss's pants down and grabbed at the black silk briefs, bent forward and slipped them down until the underwear was at The Gambler's ankles.

Bru and Moja were working, bringing their Creations into existence. Naki was watching The Merchant. Chuki, along with the others paid no attention to The Gambler. They were either working or as Okan and Chuki were both doing, looking at The

Kingpin on the floor. But they all could clearly hear The Gambler and the young employee.

The Gambler was instructing the teenager what to do as they were being stroked by two soft manicured hands. Then the employee was making wet, juicy, sucking sounds after taking the now erect appendage of The Gambler into their mouth. The Gambler's voice changed. It lowered and became slightly hoarse. They had to clear their throat. They were saying yes and easy and like that, just like that and un-huh, un-huh. The employee made gargling and choking sounds and mmmm sounds. Then The Gambler's voice rose with the words faster, harder, faster harder, take it all! That's 'bout it! That's 'bout it! That's it! The Gambler howled like a wolf and Kojo, without any prompting began to growl, a deep menacing growl. Everyone had turned to look at Kojo so they didn't see The Gambler extract their shrinking appendage from the wet, warm, viselike grip of the expertly trained young employee and stagger back three steps. Nor did they see that The Gambler was nearly tripped by their pants and underwear but managed to maintain their balance.

Several of the group looked at the screens to see The Gambler had a look of pleasant surprise and satiation on their now moist face. The employee ran their pink tongue around their full, altered lips and giggled seductively as they stared at their boss.

The Gambler, now in a weakened state, struggled to pull up their underwear, their pants and fumbled as they tried to buckle their pants and belt. They let out a soft, long whew and now everyone in the group looked at the screen to observe the scene.

The Gambler spoke as if they had actively been involved in some type of strenuous exercise and were trying to catch their breath.

The Gambler: Your acclaimed reputation that preceded you was not only accurate it was well deserved.

The young employee once again giggled. The Gambler finally had their pants fastened and zipped up. They buttoned their shirt. They pointed with their right index finger.

The Gambler: That chrome and trailer hitch was most definitely no metaphor, or joke.

Now they both chuckled.

The Gambler: Listen. I've got a little work I have to finish up. Relax. Play some music. Make yourself a drink. Try some of that pink powder. Smoke a stick. Your night is just beginning.

The Gambler turned towards the doorway.

The Gambler: I won't be long. And I want you naked when I get back, except for the red sock that are beneath one of those pillows. Put them on for me.

The Gambler passed through the doorway, strolled along the long hallway and went down the stairs. They retrieved their briefcase, turned right and went towards the rear of the house and the wide, open office space. Crossing the room they set the briefcase on their desk and walked to the bar in the corner. They moved behind it to look at the bottles sitting in their respective holders against the wall. They scanned the bottles and decided on a bottle of the best vodka. Taking the bottle and a tall glass they poured the liquid into nearly half of the glass then added a splash of vermouth. They tasted it, added a little more of the vermouth, thought a moment, added a little more. It might have been too much but they liked the taste of the herbs and spices and bitter roots. They placed the glass under the ice dispenser, pressed a button and two cubes dropped into the glass. Taking a long stirrer they mixed the drink and moved behind the desk and sat down.

They sat there and thought a moment about the employee upstairs waiting. They smiled a little, a slightly devious expression emerging on their chestnut hued face. They drifted into their own

ideas. Then coming back to where they were they opened a wooden box, took out a drug stick the size of a cigar and lit it with a silver lighter. They smoked, four long draws, holding the smoke in and then they placed the stick in an ashtray as they slowly blew out the smoke. They then pulled a small gold container closer and lifted the top. There were four sections with different colored powders. There was a small spoon in a slot that they picked up and dipped into the black powder and dropped some beneath their tongue. They sipped their drink, puffed on the stick, put it back in the ashtray and pulled a small, clear plastic box forward, opened it and peered in. They rummaged through the pills that were inside until they found the blue one they were looking for. They popped it into their mouth took a gulp of their drink, held their head back a little and swallowed the pill.

They pulled the briefcase closer and unlatched it. They opened it and stared inside at the contents. There were value cards that had been haphazardly tossed in, two days worth of what they took off the top for miscellaneous personal expenditures. They reached in and shuffled the cards around, played with them and chuckled. Then they took a gulp of their drink, relit the stick and smoked a little, ate some powder and drank some more vodka and vermouth, swished it around in their mouth, swallowed and let out a soft wolf howl.

They decided not to tally the amount of the cards so they took a handheld Comm device that was sitting on the desk and stood and turned towards the wall behind them. They pressed on the device, entered a complex sequence of numbers and letters and symbols, a code that only they knew and a 24 by 30 inch picture of cute and innocent dogs and cats romping together, swung out from the wall. A safe could now be seen. The combination-style spinning tumbler turned back and forth and around and around and the thick, gray, graphene and titanium and steel door opened

outward as The Gambler stood there watching. They put the Comm device on the desk, picked up the briefcase and stuffed all the value cards inside the safe. They turned around, placed the briefcase on the desk, closed it, pressed on the Comm device and the safe closed. The tumbler spun and the safe was locked. The picture swung back into place. He stared at the picture and for a brief moment they thought they saw two of the dogs move and three of the cats jump into the air and remain suspended like that. He pressed his eyes shut and shook his head and laughed, a short, nervous laugh. And when he opened his eyes the dogs and cats were playing again, but they didn't move.

The Gambler sat down. They drank a little, put some fire to the stick and ate some powder. Then they drew deeply on the stick and held the smoke in with their head back on the chair and their eyes closed. And just as they began to blow the smoke out they opened their eyes, leaned forward and as the thick bluish-green-white smoke spread out in front of their face and started to slowly rise to the ceiling, the older *DG* cousin, also a tall, muscular *Castanba*, with long blond hair who The Gambler had raped and murdered for stealing from the casino, suddenly emerged from the long, wide hallway and strolled into the room.

The Gambler began to cough and choke, both from the strong smoke they had inhaled, most of which remained in their lungs, and the shock and horror at what and who they were seeing. The cousin appeared exactly as they looked in the video and pictures The Gambler had taken and sent out in order to warn and reveal to others what would happen to them if they were found out to be skimming or stealing.

The cousin who stared directly at The Gambler as they crossed the room in front of and past the desk was smiling broadly. Their hazel-colored eyes seemed to twinkle. They were also completely naked. The bullet hole in their forehead oozed

bright, thick, red blood and The Gambler, while trying to catch their breath dropped their gaze to the extended erect appendage of the cousin and the coughing and gagging was mixed with a short, forced chuckle because The Gambler couldn't understand why the cousin was in that aroused, hardened state and why that thing sticking out was abnormally large and looked just like a snake, a python snake and was bending and turning sideways. They didn't recall it being that size or shape. But their gaze shifted as at that moment the other, younger *DG* cousin, a somewhat shorter *Castanha* with blue eyes and medium length teal-colored hair entered the room and the first cousin stopped, and turned to face The Gambler as they waited on their younger cousin.

The second cousin, the younger one, still bore the bullet wounds in their chest and they too were naked and erect and abnormally large and long and odd shaped and they too were smiling. And as the second cousin reached the first they both turned their backs to The Gambler and moved towards that other picture on the far wall. It was a beautiful picture of an empty beach with white sand and a clear blue sky and a rising mountain range in the distance. The picture concealed The Gambler's other safe.

Now The Gambler could see the gaping rear wounds of his two cousins. The bullet that had gone through the forehead of the older cousin had blown out the back of that cousin's head and the blond hair had a jagged, empty patch and portions of the brain were dripping and dropping on the hair near the neck and brains and blood ran down the back and between the rear end of that cousin. And the pieces of the brain appeared to be alive and pulsating because they were still colored white and pinkish red with traces of black.

The younger cousin had been stood up and shot three times

with long guns, execution style. So now The Gambler could see what they had for some reason, never seen before. They saw the three obvious mangled exit wounds the high caliber bullets from the powerful rifles had made, having gone completely through the chest of the slim *DG*.

The Gambler's stomach turned at the sight of the ruptured fleshly matter and leaking body fluid. Then their stomach felt as if it flipped and The Gambler's lavish dinner now in its sour form rose up and neared their throat as the two cousins moved closer to the wall. Leeda sent a signal and the picture swung out. The Gambler could see their two cousins both raise an opened hand. The older, their left and the younger cousin their right and they attempted to wiggle their rigor mortis stiffened fingers. The tumbler on the safe turned so fast it was almost impossible to see the movement and when the safe swung open The Gambler dropped the drug stick they somehow still held and threw up on their desk. They could smell the stench that came from a large medium rare steak and extra potatoes au gratin and mesclun salad and expensive red wine that was still being digested by his body's acidic juices and enzymes and assisted by his churning stomach muscles that had turned his dinner, with no desert, into what was now being ejected as a projectile and spewed across his desk.

Both the cousins turned to stare. The Gambler struggled to stop the heaving. They tried to catch their breath. They turned to the side and looked at the two cousins who stared at him, still smiling, as the last of the vomit, mixing with bile, spilled onto the plush rug and they knew it was almost over because although they couldn't taste the vodka they could taste that faint essence of herbs, spices and bitter roots they so much enjoyed as the vermouth attempted to come out of their nose.

The Gambler wiped their mouth with the back of their left sleeve as the shock and horror they had first experienced was

now replaced with rising anger. They snatched open a drawer at the left side of the desk and removed a large handgun. He stared at the cousins. They stared back, no longer smiling, but still erect. The appendages waved mockingly, slowly in the air. The Gambler lifted the gun and with both hands on the weapon they aimed and began to fire. One cousin ducked one way and the other ducked the other way. The Creations jumped and twisted as the sound of gunshots echoed loudly and the room was filling with gunpowder smoke.

Upstairs the employee, with drugs coursing through their naked body, except for the red socks, and drug smoke in their lungs, heard the gunshots and was overwhelmed with the feeling of terror. They had no idea what was happening or what to do. They dropped the drug stick on the table and moved one direction and then the other, as if they were running in place.

Bru and the rest of the group were intently watching all this on different screens that showed different view of the rooms. They could hear soft whimpering and barely audible screaming sounds coming from the employee but they were no longer baritone in pitch. They were closer to alto, rising to falsetto with each shot as the gunfire increased.

Downstairs the Creations had partially concealed themselves behind chairs and a couch and when The Gambler ran out of bullets they broke for the doorway. They stopped before heading down the hallway with their backs turned towards The Gambler and bent over, put their hands on their knees and started dancing in a twerking motion. Upstairs, when the firing stopped the employee, grabbing their pants, moved cautiously to the doorway. They peeped towards the stairs.

In the office, just as the employee started hesitantly towards the stairs the Creations started running down the hallway as The Gambler grabbed another loaded handgun. He was determined to

murder his dead cousins, again. The Gambler came from behind the desk and rushed towards the doorway at the hall. They fired twice. Upstairs the employee had passed the second bedroom and when they heard the two shots they turned left into the first bedroom.

The Creations took three stairs and stopped. Just as the employee moved to peep out of the bedroom the Creations continued up as The Gambler reached the entrance to the stairs and began to fire up at their cousins. The employee could hear bullets whining, whizzing, flying up the stairs and striking the hallway ceiling. It was as if they were being shot at.

The employee ran and got behind the curtains on the far wall. The curtains covered, on that side, from the ceiling to the floor, the wall and windows. The employee tried to open a window in order to jump out but they couldn't. The windows were locked and sealed.

The Gambler had taken a few stairs and could see the cousins reach the top of the stairs and turn into that first bedroom as they fired one shot. The employee behind the curtains turned and facing forward, stood absolutely still. Their heart was pounding and they thought they would pass out.

The cousins both turned around to look down the stairs. The older cousin stood to see. The younger cousin bent to look and as The Gambler was nearing the top of the stairs they could see both their heads sticking out, watching. They fired, once. And for the first time the cousins made sounds. They laughed at The Gambler, uproariously, derisively. The Gambler was enraged as they saw the cousins draw back. They were running up the stairs and fired, once. Behind the curtains the employee wondered why they suddenly heard laughter like that. The Gambler could no longer see his cousins and couldn't see that they had evaporated and thus disappeared.

The Gambler reached the entrance to the bedroom and slowly looked around inside, gun at the ready. There were no sensor-triggered lights in this nearly empty room. The only illumination came from the hallway lights. The Gambler scanned the room. There was no one there.

The scornful laughter of his cousins reverberated in his head as they were carefully looking around. The employee was tightly clutching the curtains with their left hand trying to hold them shut. His hands were shaking and just as The Gambler was reaching with his left hand to turn on the lights the employee shifted just a little and his pants slipped from his right hand. In the dimness The Gambler saw the curtains move and started firing. They emptied the magazine. The curtains were ripped down as the employee fell forward face first onto the floor. The Gambler flipped the switch and light flooded the room. The employee had been shot five times and was obviously dead. The teenager had exit wounds in their naked back just like the younger cousin. Chuki hollered out.

Chuki: Jackpot!

Bru: I wouldn't call it that. More like a bonus.

The Gambler stared at the employee a moment. Then they searched the room. They looked in the closets. They checked the bathroom. There was no bed to look under. They stood there in the middle of the room and looked around. They couldn't understand what had happened. Who or what had they seen? He wondered if the drugs had been too strong? Had his drug stick somehow been contaminated? Then he shrugged at the thought that he had wasted his blue pill.

Without looking back they left the room. They walked down the stairs, turned left and started towards the front of the house and then turned left into the den. The Gambler sat on the couch and stared at the gun in their hand. Then they placed the gun

beside them on the couch and reached to the right and pressed a button on the intercom system on the table. The assistant who lived alone above the garage had a sleep disorder that made him difficult to wake. So now bells were ringing, a siren was sounding and bright lights were blinking throughout those living quarters. In addition, in case he had drunkenly fallen asleep in one of the chairs or on the sofa all of the chairs were vibrating and the sofa was shaking. The bed was bouncing. Still it took almost two minutes for the assistant to respond.

Assistant: Yeah?

The Gambler: I've made a mess. I need for you to clean it up for me.

Assistant: I'm on the way.

The Gambler: Bring me a cold glass of milk and a sandwich. I'm famished.

Assistant: What kind of sandwich?

The Gambler: Surprise me.

Assistant: You don't want any cookies?

The Gambler: Good idea. Bring me some cookies.

Assistant: How many?

The Gambler: Three, no four.

Assistant: What kind?

The Gambler: Mix 'em up. Surprise me. I'm in the den.

The Gambler ended the conversation and laid their head back on the couch and closed their eyes.

The group had watched all this unfold in silence. Finally Bru spoke.

Bru: That was a masterpiece. They're all works of our developing art form, taken to another level.

Chuki: I liked the dancing. It was like a routine.

They were silent again and then Chuki turned to Bru.

Chuki: Why were they shooting at dead people? They actually believed in what they saw?

Bru: From the inception of their existence humans have been able to believe in that which they cannot see. It's very easy for them to believe in not just the reality but also the truth of that which they can see. That's why deepfakes were, and are so effective. Before the Omni-strain humans had brought forth holographic images that they could virtually touch and be touched by, virtually. In their virtual realities they had created simulated 3D worlds where they were having sex with three-dimensional fakes that were essentially lasered light beams. Progress was interrupted in that field because those who were leading the way died. As I've said before. Death is an impediment to progress. The technology is now being ramped up and improved upon. We're simply furthering all they had already developed. Our next step is for humans to not only touch our Creations but to be touched by them, in their belief, actually. So not only will they believe what they see, they'll believe what they believe they feel, not only virtually but also in a tactile sensory form. So when our Creations wrap their hands around their throats the humans will choke to death, in reality.

Bru chuckled softly. Now they were all thinking, processing.

Chuki: I've got my Comm device. Buzz me in the barn when something interesting comes up.

The group was observing their targets when the sun came up on Wednesday morning. The Merchant, having slept briefly with his head down on the kitchen table prepared to go to his office. The Kingpin had come to consciousness, gotten up, with effort, from the floor and gone to the bedroom and thrown their self across the bed. The Gambler slept fitfully on the couch and was in the casino by 11 a.m.

Bru and Moja and Una continued to work at their stations. The Mayor, Fannie Lee and The Gangster were the three who had not been contacted by Creations designed specifically for them. The forms of their Creations had been completed however the final instructions had not been downloaded. A scenario, a backstory, an impetus to propel the Creations forward was required in order for the A.I. to take over when it was unleashed. A.I. was the motivational foundation. So Bru and Moja and Una watched and waited patiently.

At 3 p.m. that afternoon Bru and Moja sat in on a meeting The Mayor was having with three of his most trusted staff and four of his cohorts. Watcher and Listener were also in attendance. When the meeting was finally adjourned and the staff began to file out The Mayor instructed the four outsiders to stay. He had something to discuss with them.

The Mayor had stood and began to pace. Bru leaned forward a little in his seat with anticipation. The five of them began talking about their previous discussions, 'the action,' they called it. One *DM* said they had gathered all the necessary information. Another *DM* said the information had been confirmed. A third *DM* said they were ready. Then The Mayor called out Fannie Lee. He uttered her name bitterly. He cursed her. He called her vile names. Then his voice was low and menacing.

The Mayor: Alright. It's time. We're gonna burn her out! We're gonna burn up that museum of hers and we're gonna incinerate everybody and everything that's in it! I want that land and I'm gonna get it!

Everyone in Bru's group was watching and listening now. They heard one of the *DMs* say it could be done between 4 a.m. and 6 a.m. when there were no guards in the back. The lone *DF* of the four said they would come from the rear with gas cans and incendiary grenades. The outside of the house on the back and

the sides would be doused with gasoline and the grenades would be tossed through the windows. The Mayor approved of the plan and was reminded it was called, 'the action.' Then they haggled about how much The Mayor would have to pay. Eventually they reached an agreement and The Mayor made a transfer of the down payment. The attack would take place on the coming Friday morning. The five had a toast. Bru and Moja had what they needed. They went to work.

At 6 p.m. that evening Una saw three vehicles coming up the long driveway to The Gangster's mansion. The *DTM* had seen the vehicles approaching their home like a caravan on their security screen in their office, which was near the front entrance. They had gotten up and were standing in the doorway with the door open. Una had informed the others so they were all watching her screen and saw her open two other screens that showed different angles.

There were three individuals in each vehicle and they all saw their short, thick, *Turva* leader standing there looking at their arrival. The Gangster pulled at the tops of their spiky purple and green colored hair, stepped to the side and nodded to each of their gang who entered. Those coming in turned left into the office where two members were already sitting. They all carried handguns, several carried two.

These were the captains and lieutenants that controlled the crews of The Gangster's dangerous organization made up of almost sixty *DMs*, *DFs*, *DGs*, *DLs*, *DPs*, *DQs*, *DTs*, *DTMs*, *DTWs*, *NDs* and the few who had plus signs tattooed on their forehead or cheek. Four of the arrivals went to the bar and made drinks while the others sat down in chairs or plopped down on one of the couches that were in this large, spacious room.

The Gangster moved behind their desk and focused on the

Comm device that lay there. The others chatted and bantered amongst themselves. The Gangster said nothing. Then at 6:30 another Comm device on the desk sounded incoming call. The Gangster pressed on it, opened communication and put the caller on speaker.

Everyone in Bru's group was watching and listening and for the next fifteen minutes The Gangster and two of the leaders of the mob that was employed to steal from businesses throughout Oklahoma, specifically Tulsa and those owned by The Merchant, discussed an organized mass robbery, which was basically an exercise in looting.

The Gangster ordered the mob to attack a department store in the suburb of Broken Arrow and take clothes and shoes. The mob was to strike on the next night, Thursday, at 9 p.m. right before closing time. The Gangster said the looted merchandise was to be delivered to the usual place, the warehouse in Coweta. Soon the call was ended and as The Gangster and their cohorts began to discuss further details Bru spoke.

Bru: This is working out quite well. Things are lining up.

Una slid her chair over beside Naki and they went to work.

All the necessary preparations were completed by 11 p.m. that Wednesday night. Midnight approached. Thursday, day 10 of September saw the group focused on their screens, particularly the screens of Bru and Moja.

It was 1:45 a.m. when The Mayor, as he was wont to do and had been observed to do before, went to the bathroom to relieve himself. The light came on. The door was open. His wife was accustomed to this routine so she rolled over, mumbled a few syllables but didn't really wake all the way up.

After finishing, there was the faint sound of water running and splashing and after a few more moments the light went out.

The Mayor came out but he didn't go back to bed. In his baggy plaid boxers he turned towards the kitchen to get himself a snack. And as he started along the dark hallway he passed by the library doorway on his left. He wondered if he saw, in his peripheral vision, something, like a shadow, move near the far bookcase. He backed up and peered into the dark room. Seeing nothing he thought about turning on a light, changed his mind and with a shrug, continued on towards the kitchen and the chicken leg and slice of rye bread, orange juice and a chunk of cheddar cheese he had decided on.

He turned the light on as he entered the kitchen. He squinted for a moment at the sudden harsh brightness. He went to the refrigerator, opened it and the little light bulb from inside flared out its illumination and seemed unusually bright and again he squinted a little. He got the plate that had the chicken leg on it wrapped in cellophane. He set the plate on the table, unwrapped the chicken. Then he turned and after balling up the wrapping he tossed it towards the trash can. The top wasn't up. He missed anyway. Debated as to whether to pick it up or not. He heard in his head his wife's voice fussing at him so he went over and picked up the cellophane, pressed his foot on the lever of the can, the top lifted and he dropped the trash in the trash can.

He went to the counter and opened the breadbox and got a slice of marble rye bread. He turned around to look at the chicken leg. He noted the size. It was as large as a big fat turkey leg. So he got another slice of bread. As he went to put the bread on his plate he remembered his juice so he got a glass from the cupboard, went to the refrigerator, opened it, took out a plastic pitcher and while standing there with the door open he began to pour his juice and as he watched the orange liquid fall into his tall glass he thought the refrigerator light blinked and fluctuated and wondered if it needed to be replaced. He put the pitcher back,

closed the refrigerator door and went and set the glass on the table and prepared to sit down. Then he remembered his cheese. He got the whole plastic container of cheese from the refrigerator and when he turned around his great grandfather was standing in the kitchen doorway. His two brothers, The Mayor's great uncles were close behind him, one on each side. The container of cheese fell on the floor with a thud.

The Mayor was beyond scared. His heart pounded and the flushness and tingling in his *Parda-clara* face passed throughout his body. He just stood there. He couldn't move. He couldn't speak. He stared with his mouth open at these three men who appeared as if they had just stepped from the picture in his office at city hall. They were dressed in their police uniforms but without their hats. He could clearly see their light-skin color, the hazel eyes that ran in the family and the short, military-like cut of their gray-white-blond hair. They were not as in the videos The Mayor had seen of these three. These men who stood not quite in the kitchen, with the two brothers still partially in the darkened hallway, seemed alive.

Then they all took a step forward and his great grandfather pointed. But when he spoke the voice was not as the voice The Mayor had heard in the audio of those videos. This voice was clearer, fuller and echoed past his head in a low, even tone and the words were direct.

Great Grandfather: Sit down before you pass out.

The Mayor took three stumbling steps and sat down heavily in the chair at the end of the table as the three men moved further into the room and separated out a little. The Mayor stared at the three, from one to the next. The three stared back. Then.

Great Grandfather: What happened to the order in this world? We know there are no formal or legal binding enforceable laws in *Center World*. But once there had been a semblance of order. Now

everything is moving towards violence and chaos. Mobs are looting businesses. People, men and women are having their vehicles hijacked. Individual robberies are rising. Home invasions are rising. What's next, more murders and rapes? Only vengeance and retribution keeps that tamped down.

His great grandfather paused. The Mayor was perspiring. He wanted to wipe his forehead, pat his face dry, but for some reason he knew he shouldn't move. His great grandfather took two steps closer, followed by the other two.

Great Grandfather: Tomorrow morning you're going to gather your allies on the city council, those closest to you, who are aligned with you. You'll propose to them that both businesses and individuals will be urged forcefully to commit funds, funds that will be matched by the city. A militia will be established. Additional weapons will be purchased. This armed force will protect the people and property of Tulsa. This militia and the honorable, courageous members of the civil population will be instruments of justice. Order will be created and one day in the future, laws will return. Tulsa will be a shining beacon to all of Oklahoma. The population will increase. Businesses will flourish. You will be lauded everywhere for your leadership.

His great grandfather smiled just a little and pointed the index finger of his right hand.

Great Grandfather: And in the next gubernatorial election you'll become the governor of this wonderful state.

The Mayor saw his great uncles turn, and pass through the doorway and turn right and as his great grandfather turned to follow, the lights in the kitchen went out. The Mayor sat there in the darkness. He pondered where they had come from? He was wondering where they were going? The lights came on. He stared at the empty doorway. Then he looked down at the chicken and bread. He looked at the cheese on the floor. He sipped his juice.

The group watching was silent. Then Bru spoke.
Bru: We have our puzzling plan. Now we'll find out if our Creations can orchestrate putting the pieces in place.

At 2 a.m. The Merchant had finally drifted off. It had been difficult for him to go to sleep since his grandfather's visit. He had constantly been on edge at his office and as he traveled around conducting business. It was particularly nerve wracking when he was at home alone. He had searched everywhere and found no indication his grandfather had been there and had begun to think that he was delusional and what he had so clearly seen and heard was some form of a hallucination.

Now, at this time of the morning he may as well have been hallucinating because once again he was in an abstract state of existence and separated from reality. He was dreaming. It was most certainly a nightmare because it was both unpleasant and fascinating and frightening and he couldn't comprehend it. He somehow knew and believed that he was watching himself being watched by himself at the same time. Then his grandfather appeared in his dream, calling and speaking to him. But it wasn't a dream because once again he was startled from his sleep when he heard his grandfather's deep voice. It was clear, and as before, his words would be to the point. And his grandfather was angry, still.

Grandfather Creation: Wake up! Wake up!

The Merchant's heart, just as before, jumped into his throat. But this time with each pounding, thumping beat his heart and chest ached. He had been on his back sleeping and snoring and as he scrambled to sit up and at the same time scoot and slide back to the headboard he began to hyperventilate. He tried to catch his breath. He was wheezing as he stared, wide eyed, attempting to see. Then his grandfather's voice cut sharply through not only the

momentary thick silence but also the thin darkness. There were no lights on. Then Naki turned on the lamp on the nightstand beside the bed and The Merchant saw his grandfather across the room, near the doorway, staring at him. His eyes seemed to shine. Grandfather Creation: Your store in Broken Arrow is going to be looted tomorrow night around 9 p.m. closing time. Hire some people. Get some employees from your other businesses. Prepare and arm your employees at that store. Don't let those thieves leave with your merchandise! Make 'em give everything up! Conceal some people outside. Surround the place. Make sure they leave with nothing! Your conscience makes you a coward! So if you're too cowardly to shoot 'em then threaten 'em! Tell 'em not to come back and to leave all your businesses alone or you swear they'll be shot! You understand?

The Merchant was still struggling to breathe. He couldn't speak. Then his grandfather yelled at him!

Grandfather: Pull yourself together! Do you understand!?

The Merchant nodded and stammered.

The Merchant: Yes. I understand. But ... but ...

Grandfather Creation: But what!?

The Merchant: How do you know this?

Grandfather Creation: Don't worry about how I know what I know! You just do what I say! Knucklehead!

The Merchant was confused and hesitant but he somehow summoned up enough of the wherewithal to ask what he had been pondering.

The Merchant: How did you get here?

Grandfather Creation: You think I flew? I walked!

The Merchant: Where did you come from?

Grandfather Creation: I came from the here, the place.

The Merchant: The here?

Grandfather Creation: Yeah, the here, the place!

The Merchant: Where's my father?

Grandfather Creation: He's there, in the other place!

The Merchant: The other place?

Grandfather Creation: Yeah. And if you don't do what I told you to do you'll never get there!

The Grandfather Creation lifted his right hand, pointed his right index finger. He was jabbing at The Merchant and his voice deepened and rose.

Grandfather Creation: You'll end up nowhere, between here nor there! You'll end up in a place where there's no way out! No return!

The light went out and The Merchant could barely see his grandfather, like a dark specter, turn and leave the room.

Everyone watching was quiet then Bru spoke, with an element of awe in his voice.

Bru: That had a little rhyme to it, and reason and no reason and mystery. Here. There. Nowhere.

He turned to Naki, enthusiasm was in his words.

Bru: I liked that!

At 3:59 a.m. Fannie was asleep in her upstairs bedroom. The large screen across from her on the wall was dark. Through the screen she was being watched. She was sitting up. Thick, soft pillows had been propped up against the headboard and she was slumped to the side just a little with her back against those pillows.

As she had done on many occasions over the many years of her existence she had fallen asleep while reading a book. Not a device where the lighted screen displayed the scrolling words or illustrated pictures. She held a Smyth sewn hardcover book with pages that felt as linen, a book she could touch with her fingers

and experience as something weighted in her lap, a book she could smell and taste.

The reading lamp on the nightstand beside her glowed a soft, yellowish-white radiance and there seemed to be shadows moving around the wide room and upon her long, colorful African-print nightgown. The essence of the light caused the deep, dark-brown, nearly black color of her skin to glow. Her braided hair was wrapped in an African, kente-print cloth. She had tied it with a knot in front, just as her mother had taught her and the same way her grandmother, who had died when she was six, wore hers when she was buried.

She remembered that and sometimes dreamed about that ceremony all those years ago. And in that dream she heard her father whisper to her to yell out goodbye to her grandmother and she did, call out. And she could hear her father yell out goodbye to his mother and see the tears he had shed.

She shifted in her sleep and sighed, audibly. Behind her tightly closed eyes she saw her mother and other members of her extended family dancing and she heard them singing. A frown creased her forehead in this now troubled slumber. She wondered where her father had gone. He had disappeared. Then in this dream he materialized. He was standing back a ways from the foot of her bed looking at her. And she was lying in bed, as a child, looking up at him. Then he quietly, gently called her his own special name he had bestowed upon her as a child. It was now 4 a.m.

Father Creation: LeeLee.

In her sleep Fannie Lee smiled. Then her father called again, louder. She thought she woke up. But when she saw her father standing there in dimness not far from the foot of her bed she wasn't sure. But of course she was still asleep, and dreaming, a beautiful dream because he took two steps forward. He had

moved to stand closer to her. And he was alive.

Father Creation: LeeLee my child, I want you to listen to me carefully. Tomorrow morning between this time, 4 a.m. and 6 a.m. the violent cohorts of The Mayor will be launching an attack against our house and you. They'll come from the back, through the trees to burn and kill. Be prepared to protect what is ours and to save yourself. You and your forces will require incendiary ammunition. Let the shots be true. Gather your evidence and at the right time it will be revealed for all to see.

Fannie Lee had sat up in bed against the pillows. She was confused but believed herself to be nearly fully awake.

Father Creation: Did you hear what I said?

Fannie Lee: Yes father.

Father Creation: Do you understand?

Fannie Lee: Yes, I understand.

Father Creation: Do not fail us. Let your name be action for all our ancestors.

Fannie Lee: I won't fail.

Father Creation: Now go back to sleep.

The Father Creation backed up into the darkness of the room and then turned and passed through the open doorway and disappeared. Fannie Lee went back to sleep.

At 10 a.m. that Thursday morning The Mayor called his trusted council associates together and discussed how to go about proposing to the people that a Tulsa militia be established. A presentation was to be drawn up so that he could present it. Bru and Moja attended that meeting and just as they had done when The Mayor had met with the four to finalize the attack on the museum, every word was recorded and through the screens in the office, images were captured of everyone there. The Mayor decided a full council meeting would be scheduled for the next

day, Friday, at 10 a.m. It would be both live streamed and open to the public. It would be held in the city hall auditorium. Notifications would be sent out later that day.

Okan paid little attention to The Kingpin. He followed his target but only on occasions closely watched and listened. He heard the drug dealer, while drinking and ingesting drugs at a lounge, speak in confidence with another drug dealer about the strange visions they had seen. Since the Creations that had been designed had proven to be effective there was really nothing more needed.

The same held true for Leeda. She, along with several others in the group had listened and watched as The Gambler and the assistant had discussed how to get rid of the young employee's body, whether to cut it up or not. They watched the assistant trying to clean up the vomit. They could hear the Gambler was most concerned with the bullet holes that were throughout the house and complained about that incessantly. The Gambler had also visited a doctor but only revealed in vague terms what they had seen and experienced. So, that trial run was over.

The afternoon and early evening passed and at 8 p.m. Bru sent a message to Chuki who had disappeared, along with Cinq and Dois and of course Kojo, for almost two days. It wasn't long before she and Kojo were coming from the front to stand near the group.

Bru: And what have you two been up to?

Chuki: Exploring the empty buildings and houses, since I can't go into the woods. You should see the stuff they left. What's going on?

Bru looked up and down at the little one and then looked at

Kojo and shook his head.

Bru: You're both dirty, wash and change clothes, the same for Cinq and Dois. Wash you partner's feet and brush him. Hurry up so you don't miss anything.

Chuki ran off, with Kojo following.

Bru and Moja had carefully monitored Fannie Lee. They had watched her awaken early, at 6 a.m. She had sat on the side of the bed looking around the room and towards the doorway with a perplexed expression on her face. It appeared she was perhaps wondering about the visitor she had received, or possibly imagined. Then she had seen her Comm device on the nightstand beside her. It was lying beneath the still lit light. An icon on her device was blinking and a soft chime was intermittently sounding. The icon indicated a waiting message, a message to which there had been no acknowledgement. She frowned and then lifted the device and pressed on it. She heard clearly what Bru had recorded. It was her father's voice and the conversation they had. She jumped up to begin her day. Bru and Moja watched and listened to ensure she took the necessary steps to prepare for the forthcoming attack, now only a matter of hours away.

At 8:45 p.m. everyone was watching the six screens that Moja and Bru sat in front of. Naki controlled The Merchant's devices and connections and Una controlled The Gangster's Comm devices and all connections. Chuki was once again in her place beside Bru's left shoulder watching as Una utilized the cameras from the warehouse security system. Two of the six screens showed different angles of the interior of the building where The Gangster and fourteen members of his gang were sitting around the same area in different places.

Four of the individuals were captains and along with The

Gangster sat in an open office area not far from the rear of the building. The leader was behind their desk facing towards the front entrance. Two sat on a couch to the left of the desk and two sat in chairs near and in front, facing the desk. There were also offices on each side of the main area and those offices were enclosed and empty except for chairs, Comm devices and a large screen in each room.

It was a huge warehouse and there were also enclosed offices on the second floor, furnished similar to those on the first level. The Gangster could see the glass doors of the entrance in the distance across the floor and not much else because most of the middle was filled with piles and boxes and racks of stolen goods that had been acquired in raids and had not yet been sold or traded for drugs and weapons. Yard equipment, farm equipment and other mechanical booty lined the walls. Behind The Gangster were two loading docks with two wide metal doors that could be raised up for deliveries.

The Gangster could see the other ten in their gang sitting in chairs with small tables in front or beside them with bottles and glasses that contained alcohol and small bowls with powdered drugs and cigar boxes that contained drug sticks. They were all drinking, smoking, and ingesting drugs. Four of the ten in the floor area were also watching a live feed from the vehicle of the leader of the teenage mob as they approached the wholesale department store. The other six were watching, on their personal Comm devices, people having sex.

Just as the ones on the floor, the five, including The Gangster, in the office area were drinking, smoking and indulging in the use of drugs. Two of the four captains, along with The Gangster, watched the live-feed from body cameras so they could see the looting as it unfolded. The other two watched on their personal devices as people, some naked, some not, had sex.

Bru and the group watched as two screens showed views from security cameras that monitored businesses that were across the street from The Merchant's store. Those images had been zoomed through the parking lot to clearly show the store's glass door entrance. The remaining two screens were rotating views from inside the store itself.

As the mob drew close Bru split one of the screens, accessed the Comm device of a leader of the thieves and they all watched the live-stream of the raid as it began a little before the 9 p.m. closing time.

The mob had arrived in eight vehicles, four automobiles and four long-bed pickup trucks. There were twelve people in all. Their method of operation would be as usual. They hurry in as a group, spread out and run to the sections they were going to loot. They carried folded large canvas bags that they would shake open and fill with merchandise and then run out, either dragging the bags or carrying them over their shoulders. If it had been jewelry they were after and they couldn't smash open the cases with short sledgehammers they would pull their weapons and force employees to open the locked cases. Of course employees and customers had weapons of their own but it was only in extremely rare occasions that a person would risk their life over something material that belonged to someone else. And any guards were held at gunpoint or forced to lie on the floor. There were also instances where members of the marauding group had beaten or shot a person believed to be interfering or resisting.

Three of the leaders had separately cased the store earlier in the day so they each led three or four people to the areas where the clothes and shoes they wanted were hanging and on display. They didn't notice there were no last minute shoppers and that as they had come in employees had immediately, as if instructed, began moving back, to the rear of the store, disappearing behind

swinging doors into a combination lounge and storage area where they also took breaks and ate lunch.

The Merchant was standing behind one of the swinging doors looking at the thieves through a small window in the door. Everyone behind him was heavily armed. He carried not only his normal pistol but also a powerful long gun. The employees and four other people who had been hired readied their weapons. He watched the thieves filling their bags. Then he nodded to an employee on his right and she spoke into the Comm device she held.

Employee: Alright, take your places.

The Merchant could see along the isle, all the way to the front entrance. In less than thirty seconds one of the lookout drivers of the thieves, who had remained outside, came running in. She ran along the clothes and started yelling and waving.

Lookout: Hurry up! Cars and people are lining up outside. They're in the street! They're in the parking lot. They're pointing guns!

The Merchant nodded to the employee on his left and that employee lifted the microphone he held to his mouth and pressed a button on the wall and spoke, with authority, the words he had been instructed to say and his voice sounded like a formal announcement throughout the store over the PA system as The Merchant stepped through the swinging doors followed by eight employees and the four hired guns.

PA Voice: Drop everything you have and leave now! You're surrounded! I repeat! Drop everything and leave now! If you do as told you will not be shot! Leave now and don't come back!

Bru and his group were watching and listening. The Gangster and his cohorts were also watching and listening. Chuki spoke excitedly.

Chuki: This is getting good!

The thieves didn't know what to do. They came together and huddled up. One of the leaders of the looters opened speaker communication and yelled at The Gangster. The youthful thieves were beginning to panic.

Leader: What should we do? What should we do?

The Gangster: Don't leave the stuff! Make a break for it! They won't shoot!

The thieves started dragging their bags towards the front doors. They could look back and see The Merchant with his long gun and the armed line of people on each side of him. Through the glass doors and glass front windows they could see the vehicles and trucks and they could see, in the illumination of the headlights, the armed people, employees from The Merchant's other businesses as far away as Oklahoma City and the mercenaries who had been hired. They were all standing in the street and in the far side of the parking lot with their guns pointed directly at them.

No one anticipated gunfire erupting. The young thieves would do the smart thing and leave empty handed, having been taught a valuable, potentially dangerous lesson. They would not come back to any of The Merchant's businesses. But as they neared the front doors they still carried and dragged their bags of loot. Then Naki sent clear, distinct and loud sounds of gunfire through the PA system. To The Merchant the report of weapons being discharged sounded close. To the thieves it sounded as if those near the rear of the building were shooting at them. The gunfire was close. To those outside they could hear the gunfire in the near distance.

The Merchant and his people took cover and opened fire. The thieves fired to the back of the store and rushed through the front doors and began to fire. Those in the street ducked behind their vehicles and fired. Bullets were flying back and forth and

then the young teenage thieves began falling. There were voices screaming and cursing and yelling and four of the looters died trying to reach their vehicles. All of the dead had bags. As two of the looters grabbed the bags from the clutching hands of two of the dead the rest of the mob, including the others with bags of clothes and shoes drove off into the night.

Chuki: Not quite. Almost. Too many got away.

Bru began switching screens to the warehouse where The Gangster and his gang members were trying to figure out what had just happened. Two of the ones shot down on the sidewalk were wearing body cameras. One camera was showing a view of the darkening partially cloudy sky and early stars and incipient moon. The other camera showed a close-up of a tire and in the distance the lighted street, sideways.

Bru: Naki, the gunshot ploy was not only timely it was very inventive.

Naki: Thank you.

Bru: It's going to be a long night. Then again, time is relative. But I like the way things started off.

Chuki: Me too. What's next?

Bru: I think you mean who's next. Have patience little one. Something tells me Una and Naki have a fun surprise for The Gangster.

The thieves who drove off headed to the warehouse in Coweta. Since four members of the mob had been shot down at the store a vehicle and a truck were left there, so only three vehicles and three trucks drove towards the warehouse. They were going to get whatever they could from the loot they had.

The distance from Broken Arrow to their destination in Coweta was almost twenty miles and the thieves drove as a caravan, speeding as if they were being pursued, but no one was

after them. They arrived in a little over fifteen minutes. The Gangster and all fourteen members of their gang, having been notified of the arrival, were standing outside the front entrance. Their handguns and long guns were at the ready. The thieves believed they had somehow in some way been set up. The people at the store had known they were coming. The Gangster and their gang figured, for some reason, there had been betrayal of some kind within the group of thieves. The thieves were suspicious of The Gangster and their people and The Gangster was suspicious of the thieves even though some of them had been shot to death.

The thieves dragged and carried their bags through the front entrance and into the center of the warehouse. Three of The Gangster's people remained outside to watch the secluded street that ran to the shorter road that led to the building.

The bags were all tossed onto the floor and an argument immediately broke out about what had transpired at the store. Each group was loudly accusing the other about some type of wrongdoing or at least careless communication and talking too much.

The three outside, having seen no vehicles coming, came inside and joined the others. The Gangster moved behind their desk and from that position they could see the contents of the bags being strewn onto the floor. Then there was arguing and voices being raised about shoes, the popular soft ones. Some of the thieves got themselves a drink and ate some of the powder. Two of The Gangster's people brought some shoes to the desk and a discussion was had as to what to offer for what had been stolen. One of the remaining leaders from the mob began arguing with The Gangster about payment. Then all the lights near the north front entrance blinked and then went out.

Those who noticed first, who were facing that direction, fell

silent, looking. Quickly everyone quieted. Some turned to see what those who were looking in that direction were seeing. Then the lights came back on. After several long moments of silence voices resumed and angry words were once again uttered.

Suddenly the lights behind The Gangster, near the south dock loading doors blinked and went out. Some were looking in that direction, others turned. Lights twenty feet above The Gangster's desk blinked and went out. The lights at the back doors came on. Now everyone was looking up, looking around, trying to figure out what was going on. A voice spoke.

Voice: Must be a short somewhere.

The lights above The Gangster's desk came on.

Second Voice: Yeah, a short, a fuse.

Third Voice: You got any fuses?

Fourth Voice: Where's the fuse box?

Suddenly all the lights went out and the whole warehouse was plunged into darkness. Everyone was quiet. The only illumination came from the screens in the offices on each side near the east and west walls and the screens on The Gangster's desk that cast the head of the gang in an eerie bluish glow. Then the lights near the front entrance came on and The Gangster saw The Merchant, the Creation, with a long gun looking in their direction. The Gangster hollered out. They cursed. They called The Merchant's name, said it was him, said he was there and then gave orders.

The Gangster: Shoot him! Shoot him down!

At this moment the lights behind The Gangster, to the south, near the wide doors came on and those facing that way saw The Merchant behind them near the rear of the building standing there with a long gun. As The Gangster grabbed their pistol from their desk the lights on the east and west walls on the side of the building came on. There The Merchant stood. When the lights on the west side flared on, those facing that direction could see The

Merchant raise his rifle. The Gangster was firing their weapon to the front. The gang members, the thieves, all began firing in all directions as now The Merchant was at the east wall.

The lights began to blink on and off and The Merchant was moving, ducking and thieves were being shot. Gang members were being shot. The Merchant was running one way and then the other. To the north, south, east and west weapons were being fired. Lights were blinking, people were hollering, cursing and screaming. All the lights went out and the reddish-white flashes from the muzzles of the powerful weapons were visible and lighting up the darkness as the bullets left the barrels of the guns. Chuki: Oooh, that's pretty!

It wasn't long before the lights near The Merchant, first at the front, then at the rear and finally at each side, came back on. But no shots were being fired. The Merchant lowered his weapon and disappeared. Gunpowder smoke, bluish-white, rose into the air throughout the large warehouse towards the high ceiling. There were moans and whimpering and crying and cursing. Bodies were everywhere, including several near the front entrance who were trying to escape. Bru and his group watched in silence. Then they saw The Gangster, beside their desk, raise their right arm and wave. Their voice was weak, barely audible.

The Gangster: Help me. Somebody help me.

Now there were no other voices, no other sounds.

The Gangster: I'm bleeding out. I think I'm about to die.

Bru: Ah, the magic words.

The Gangster's arm fell across their chest. It was another ten minutes when Chuki spoke with excitement, and hope.

Chuki: Are they all dead?

Moja: It appears that way.

Chuki: That's got to be a jackpot!

Bru spoke. He was pleased.

Bru: Most definitely.

Chuki did her shimmy shake dance and Kojo wagged his tail and barked, twice.

Bru and his group watched the remaining targets as they were involved in their activities and conducted their business. Only The Mayor attempted to sleep and The Gangster was somewhere beyond sleep. Fannie Lee nodded in a chair in her upstairs library. Then at 3 a.m. she was awakened by one of the guards.

By 3:30 a.m. she and four of her guards, who were armed with night scope rifles loaded with both regular and incendiary ammunition were on the flat roof of her home setting up Comm devices on tripods a little ways back from the four foot tall brick-walled edges. They would record what she believed would happen. She believed in what the vision of her father had told her. So she was sure that sometime between 4 a.m. and 6 a.m. The Mayor's arsonist assassins would come stealthily from the street behind her museum, her home, and sneak through the boxwood hedges that ran behind her yard and ease between the oak and maple trees and attempt to burn down that which belonged to her and her father and her ancestors and the people who called the museum their own who embraced her truth and saw the world as she did. She believed in all of that.

So Bru and Moja and Una and Naki and Okan and Leeda and Chuki and Kojo all watched the same screens that Bru was setting up to observe what Fannie Lee saw. There were rotating cameras from the security system trained on the backyard. And even though the Comm devices on the roof that were perched on stands were not yet activated all those watching could see, even in the darkness what was in the near distance between the two tall lights, one in each corner of the large yard, they could see what those on the roof could see. They would also hear what unfolded.

At 3:50 Fannie Lee rose from the chair in which she had been sitting with her stick across her lap and indicated for each one to take their place. There were two guards on each side of her. The five could see from their vantage point of several steps back from the wall, where the trees ended and the carefully cut Bermuda grass began. Fannie Lee stood there like that with the stick upright in her left hand, watching. Then at 4:30 Chuki spoke.

Chuki: Your think they'll come?

Bru: They want to get paid. They'll come before it starts to get light.

It was 4:50 when The Mayor's four hired killers, having pushed through the hedges, emerged from between the trees. Fannie Lee had two of the guards activate the record capabilities on both Comm devices.

The attackers wore masks and were dressed in black. They had a handgun on one side and the two in the middle had a bag that was hung crossbody. Each had two grenades. One time-delayed grenade would be tossed inside to explode and the other one would be used to ignite the flammable liquid they carried. All four had a can filled with five gallons of gasoline.

As they crept forward slowly they were stooped slightly. Fannie raised her right arm. The guards lifted their weapons, chose their targets and adjusted their sights. They aimed at the gas cans as the four down below them spread out and began to walk faster. Fannie Lee dropped her right hand and the guards fired.

The cans exploded as the gas was ignited and flames engulfed the four attackers. They began screaming as the one on the far right dropped to the ground and began rolling over and over. The one on the far left turned and started to run and the two in the middle just stood there burning as they twisted and turned and

jumped around in agony and patted frantically at the flames.

The attacker who had tried to run fell to the ground on her knees and was hollering and pleading for the fire to be put out as she was crawling and moaning and then she stretched out to die. The two in the middle were jumping and cursing and flapping their arms. Then the grenades started exploding and flames from the gasoline shot up and out and rose even higher and grew in intensity and they fell to the ground kicking.

Chuki: Oooh, that's beautiful! I like fire!

Now there was no sound coming from The Mayor's people. They were burning and smoking and black smoke billowed upwards. One of those in the middle had stopped moving when the last grenade blasted through his side and the explosive fillers raced up his chest and came out of the top of his head.

Finally the flames began to subside and their bodies lay there smoldering as the crackling and popping noises of the flames and burning flesh and clothes grew softer and then ceased. There was no movement except for the black smoke shifting and drifting up into the moonlit sky as the wind suddenly picked up and the two tall corner lights seemed to cast shadows from the waving tree branches and the charred bodies appeared to move and slowly slide down through the once beautiful green grass now singed and scorched and into the dark-black earth they appeared to go.

Bru and his group watched all this and no one spoke as Fannie Lee and her guards gathered their Comm devices and started to descend into the attic from the roof. Then Chuki spoke with quiet excitement.

Chuki: They were dancing ...

Bru: ... and burning ...

Chuki: ... and singing ...

Bru: ... and toasting ...

Chuki: ... and crawling ...

Bru: ... and burning and roasting.

Chuki: Is that a poem?

Bru: Did you know death by fire is one of the most painful ways a human can die?

Chuki: It was all so wonderful, with sound effects and special effects. That was better than a movie.

Bru stood, looked at Chuki as she looked up at him smiling.

Bru: Our time is just about over here in the Sooner State. Where work conquers all, our work is done. With our test runs we've learned all we need to know. We'll go to the Mayor's meeting that I'm sure Fannie Lee will attend and then we'll be on our way. In the meantime we have to prepare for our departure.

Only Tatu remained at his monitoring station as the others moved into the barn. Bru informed everyone that they would be leaving in a matter of hours. Cinq and Dois, along with Vier and Ek were instructed to check all the weapons, including those in the trailer and make sure they were fully loaded. Moja and Cha would run full diagnostics on Tal's engine and power sources and also ensure all technology was functioning properly. They would determine the range of their remaining fuel in order to factor in when to utilize their solar and electric capabilities. Without any unforeseen major detours they would travel directly to their next destination. It was 5:40 a.m. and sunrise approached on Friday, day 11 of September.

Bru and Moja had come in earlier and had been working and by 9 a.m. everyone was inside Tal, back in their respective places except for those who stood and sat near the rear and watched the six screens that Bru and Moja sat in front of. Chuki was in her usual place next to Bru. They were looking at the somewhat small auditorium in city hall. It was empty. They were seeing the visual feed that came from the security cameras mounted throughout

the room.

By 9:30 people were sporadically drifting in. By 9:40 more and more people began to come in and sit down. At 9:45 employees of the city government were filing in. Then at 9:50 a large group came in, led by Fannie Lee. Many in this group were dressed in kente cloth and dashiki style clothing. Their hair was long and natural and braided in different patterns, some wore long locs. They wore jewelry made of porcupine quills and bone and animal teeth and shells and wood and stone. All of them, particularly Fannie Lee, appeared angry. Chuki pointed and spoke.

Chuki: There's Fannie Lee! Those must be her people.

Bru: Her guards, other activists and government opposition.

At 9:55 The Mayor, dressed in a dark-blue suit, white shirt and red tie, strolled in through a rear side entrance. He was followed by all sixteen of the council members. The council took their seats on the stage as two armed guards moved in to stand at each doorway.

The Mayor moved to stand behind a lectern. To those facing the stage he was a little off-center to the left of the middle of the stage. The council members were sitting behind him and also to the left, which was his right. He stared out at the faces that were looking at him. He scanned the diverse crowd that now filled the auditorium and spilled out into the main hallway. His gaze came to rest on Fannie Lee who scowled at him. He hadn't heard from those he had sent after her and since she was here he assumed either they had aborted the mission or something had gone wrong. He dismissed the thought, or rather ignored it, just as he had ignored and thus missed the notification of explosions and fire early that morning in the Historical District.

He pressed on a button on the sloping top of the stand and a large screen lit up on the wall behind the stage. He leaned forward slightly and spoke into a microphone in a commanding

tone with his slightly high-pitched voice that came through the elevated speakers in each corner and along the rear wall and front wall. At the same time he pressed on the Comm device he held in his left hand and the screen began to fill with words and then lines that laid out, in bullet point form, his proposal for a Tulsa Militia which, in bold capitalized letters, was the title of his presentation.

The Mayor: Today I'm going to propose not only the establishing but also the method of funding for a militia to protect the citizens and businesses of Tulsa from the thieves and robbers who are preying on us.

Followers of The Mayor, including five he had hired, began to clap, one whistled and they all chanted.

Chanting: Militia! Militia! Militia!

The Mayor's voice rose above the chanting and he motioned with both his raised hands for quiet.

The Mayor: Wait! Listen! Listen!

There was quiet after a short while, only murmurs could be heard.

The Mayor: We're going to rid Tulsa and then all of Oklahoma of the criminals that terrorize us!

Again there was chanting and clapping and cheering. Then voices rose and began to drown out everyone. It was Fannie Lee's people and they were yelling loudly in unison, over and over.

Fannie Lee's People: The Mayor is a criminal! The Mayor is a criminal! The Mayor is a criminal!

Now there was yelling from The Mayor's people, and booing. The Mayor tried to silence the crowd but he couldn't. Then Fannie Lee, who had remained standing near the rear of her people began banging her walking stick on the floor as she held up her Comm device in her left hand for everyone around her to

see. She stepped forward as her people parted for her. She moved closer to the stage as the noise subsided. Except for some low mumbling it was quiet throughout the auditorium. Then Fannie Lee's powerful voice, as it had done in the past in this very room rose.

Fannie Lee: The Mayor is a criminal! He sent his thugs to burn down our museum!

The Mayor leaned forward and yelled into the microphone.

The Mayor: That's a lie!

Fannie Lee: They tried to burn down our museum with me in it!

The Mayor: I don't know what you're talking about!

Several of The Mayor's people clapped at this potential good news.

Mayor's People: Yeah! Yeah! Burn it down!

Fannie Lee's people now joined by other citizens started yelling again and took up a chant.

Fannie Lee's People: Murderer! Criminal! Murderer! Criminal!

Citizens: Murderer! Criminal! Murder! Criminal!

Fannie Lee pointed her Comm device directly at The Mayor. Some in the crowd began to quiet and she yelled above the other voices as she moved closer to the stage.

Fannie Lee: Everyone knows you want my land!

The Mayor: I don't have to burn you out! I can wait you out old woman!

Now Fannie Lee turned around to the crowd. She raised her Comm device and held it for everyone to see. She moved it slowly from side to side.

Fannie Lee: I have proof! I have proof right here!

She turned back to The Mayor.

Fannie Lee: It's all right here!

Again there was more and louder cheering and booing and chanting. Then the bright screen went dark and while the uproar

continued the screen changed. It lit up again. The people didn't know what they were seeing and as the noise grew louder the trees of Fannie Lee's backyard could be seen. But no one recognized that except for Fannie Lee and her four guards and the ones she had shown the video.

When the four arsonists came from between the trees the voices began to quiet down. Fannie Lee lowered her device and looked at it. She didn't understand how the video that had been taken of the attack was now being shown on the big screen in the auditorium. And she couldn't know it was also being shown on virtually every Comm device throughout Oklahoma.

The crowd grew silent as they stared at the four, wearing masks and dressed in all black creep forward and then spread out. Those watching weren't sure what they were seeing. Then gunshots rang out. The reports from the weapons were so loud some people covered their ears with their hands. Then the four people burst into flames when the gas cans exploded and the audience knew what was happening. Again there was yelling and chanting.

Yelling: Look! Look! Thugs! Murderers!

Chanting: Burn 'em up! Burn 'em up!

There was cheering from Fannie Lee's people and her citizen supporters. Then when the screaming and cursing and hollering of those four being immolated reverberated loudly through the speakers, and the audience saw them twisting and turning and jumping and rolling on the ground some of the people watching began to scream in horror, sounding like the ones on fire. Three people fainted. Five people ran for the exits with their hands over their mouths. A *DM* and a *DF* didn't make it out and fell to their knees and threw up on shoes and pants of several around them.

The Mayor was yelling into his microphone.

The Mayor: I tell you I had nothing to do with that! I had nothing

to do with that and you can't prove I did!

The crowd had been forced into near silence and right then the grenades began to explode and once again, in a cacophony of sounds, those in the audience were screaming and yelling and hollering and crying in terror as several flung themselves to the floor and several others bolted from the room as if they were actually in the midst of it all when the flames expanded out through the top of the head of that one attacker.

Suddenly the sounds from the speakers ceased as the image on the screen changed. The noise again began to subside as everyone was paying attention to the screen waiting anxiously and wanting to see what came next. It was The Mayor at the meeting he had held with the four who had been sent on the mission of arson and potential death. But although The Mayor's council allies in cahoots him were not at that specific clandestine meeting, each and every member of the council present on that stage, along with the four who had just been burnt up were there now.

Everyone in the auditorium, all the council members sitting there, Fannie Lee and her people, The Mayor's people, all the citizens both in the audience and from one end of Oklahoma to the other and The Mayor himself saw The Mayor himself stand up from behind his desk, hitch up his pants and begin to pace. And they all heard The Mayor's voice come through the speakers clearly, distinctly, loudly, as he called out Fannie Lee and cursed her and called her vile names. Then The Mayor continued.

The Mayor: We're gonna burn her out! We're gonna burn up that museum of hers and we're gonna incinerate everybody and everything in it!

The Mayor stood with his back to the crowd. His eyes were wide and his mouth was open as he looked at himself and heard the words he had most definitely spoken. The council members on that stage who were aligned with him and that he had in his

back pocket and those who opposed him couldn't understand what they were seeing as they listened to words they had most definitely not heard.

Several of those in the crowd who had been paid by The Mayor half-heartedly, politely clapped and uttered a few words of affirmation. But there was an undercurrent of shifting energy easing and building and running through the people who now glared at The Mayor's back. Angry words directed at The Mayor were shouted. Then just as the noise was rising The Mayor's Creation began to speak again and the crowd fell silent as they saw The Mayor pacing and gesturing to those who sat and stood around in his large office and looked at him with rapt attention and with slight smiles on their lips.

The Mayor's Creation: With our Tulsa Militia we're gonna stop the stealing and the looting and the hijacking. We're gonna build gallows in front of our City Hall and when we catch those thieves and violent criminals we're gonna hang 'em! We're gonna hang 'em high at high noon! There will be order in our wonderful city of Tulsa!

The Mayor's Creation pointed at one of the council members.
The Mayor's Creation: Order! And Justice!

The Mayor's Creation lowered its finger and began to pace back and forth. His voice rose.

The Mayor's Creation: And if those thieves get shot down like those looters did last night in Broken Arrow then we'll hang their dead bodies! We'll live stream the hangings so all their thieving friends and anyone else who wants to be like them or who believe them to be martyrs can see what'll happen to them if we catch 'em stealing! Not only will there be order and justice but there'll be accountability! We'll find their mothers and hang 'em for bringing those thieves into the world! If we can find their absent fathers we'll hang them too! We'll make the parents responsible

for the actions of those criminals! We'll look closely at their brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles. Criminal behavior runs in the family! Birds of a feather flock together! We'll wrap that noose around their neck and they'll know, those who are alive, they'll know they're about to die! And if we drop 'em from high enough and the rope is strong enough their heads will snap off and roll around in the street! We'll work our way up from the thieves and looters and hijackers to the armed robbers and rapists and murderers! Not just Tulsa but all of Oklahoma will be safe and secure! If they steal they can kill and if they kill they can die!

On the stage The Mayor turned to the microphone. He wanted to yell out that, that wasn't him! He wanted to protest, say that he had never said those words. But he had watched himself and heard himself and when he glanced back at the screen he saw himself standing there, not moving, filling the screen with a broad smile.

At this moment two of the people The Mayor had hired began to clap enthusiastically. Another one whistled a shrill sound of agreement and the woman next to him punched him in the nose and another woman joined in and they began to fight and kick him. The crowd had been stunned by The Mayor's rant. Now they erupted in anger, and rage and shouting and hollering filled the air and those who believed in The Mayor fought with those who opposed him. The Mayor began to yell at the people.

The Mayor: This must stop! Stop it I say! Listen! Let me explain!

The people paid him no attention so he began to ease to his stage right towards the exit. Someone threw a shoe at him. All the council members were already standing and they started running towards the same exit The Mayor was trying to reach. Fights were breaking out across the auditorium. Seats were being ripped up and tossed onto the stage. The Mayor reached the doorway but he couldn't get out because of the crush of people who were

pushing and blocking the exit. The fighting increased as the guards joined in to protect The Mayor and council members because that was who the majority of people were after. The Mayor and council members made it through the doorway, except for two of The Mayor's allies who were beaten and kicked to the floor. People gave chase to those who had gotten out.

Bru and his group watched all of this for a little while then Bru stood.

Bru: That was interesting.

Moja: Well we know who designed The Mayor's Creation don't we?

Chuki: Steal, kill. Where have we heard that before?

Bru: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Besides, I simply provide the options. I had nothing to do with the algorithm choices that were selected.

Chuki: That was what The Mayor wanted to say, to speak for his great grandfather.

Bru: Good point.

Bru started towards the front. Chuki was beside him, Kojo followed closely.

Bru: Our work is done here.

Chuki: So that's it?

Bru: Yes. Our primary goal was to unleash, test and verify not only the visual and audio functioning of the artificial general intelligence of Creations but also confirm they interacted and responded properly as programmed. Our secondary goals were to cause violence and chaos. I think we accomplished them both, don't you?

Chuki: I like bonuses and jackpots.

Bru: The chaos has just begun. Violence tends to follow. I'm a little surprised no gunshots were fired, however, we'll have positive thoughts that much more is to follow.

Once again everyone but Tatu moved to the barn. They stood and watched the final preparations for departure. Bru spoke to Chuki, almost wistfully.

Bru: Perhaps that initial outrage and uproar will escalate into a riot. Would you like that, widespread death and destruction?

Chuki: Sounds like a jackpot to me. Fannie Lee could put the 2172 Riot Against the Tulsa Government on her wall.

Bru: That's if she survives.

Chuki: Good point.

Tal was pulled out. The trailer was connected. Bru and Chuki watched all this and prepared to climb aboard after everyone else was on.

Chuki: Will I be able to shoot some people on the way?

Bru: We'll be in no rush. The *W.I.A.* awaits us. So we'll take our time. Perhaps they'll grow weary of the wait and lower their defenses and become complacent and inattentive to details. I also believe my brother and his friends will be there to meet and greet us. Fun times are ahead.

Bru paused. He was thinking, processing.

Bru: After leaving behind Oklahoma we'll traverse the top of Texas, the middle of New Mexico and on into the bottom of Arizona and down into Southern California. We'll ride through empty, desolate terrain and pass on the outskirts of populated areas where we'll release our Influencer programs. You'll see sights you've never seen before and may never see again. We're going to travel a little over 1,450 miles. Approximately 1,300 of those miles will be in *Center World*. So that means you'll have ample opportunity to kill humans along the way.

Chuki did her little shimmy shake dance at those words and then bounded up the steps. Kojo followed. Before taking those steps Bru looked around. He looked up and then over at the dark

ominous clouds in the west. He knew rain was coming towards them. Then he looked into the near distance towards Tulsa. He checked to see if there was any dark smoke rising into the air. Then he took the steps and the door closed behind him.

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

The first day of September was a Tuesday. The president of *East World* had scheduled a meeting. His full cabinet would attend and each member of his cabinet would bring a top assistant. The *DL* vice president, who had been traveling extensively overseas had returned from France and would also be there.

After all the matters on that day's agenda had been addressed the meeting was adjourned. The large group that had earlier taken several breaks, and had taken an hour and a half for lunch, slowly began to leave. A few stood around in quiet conversation. It was almost 6 p.m.

The president had earlier instructed his *DM* White House Chief of Staff, the *DG* Secretary of Defense and the *DTM* Secretary of Homeland Security, along with his *ND* Director of National Intelligence and Hildi, his Secretary of Health and Human Services to remain. The six had an informal meeting that was more of a discussion about an event that was scheduled for the next Monday, which was Labor Day. The president had revived the holiday that had not been recognized by the government or nationally celebrated in *East World* in over sixty years, since the beginning of the *GE Period*. Now there would be what was called and advertised as a March on Washington for All Colors of People. The Purple people had organized the march and people from all over *East World* and even some support groups from *Center World* were joining in. There were reports of individuals flying in from *West World* to attend what had grown

into a protest against the unjust and prejudicial treatment of Purple people and the color purple.

What was concerning was not just the colored people but also other protesters and counter protesters. First there were those protesting against the Purple people. Then taking advantage of the situation there would be those rallying at the same time and place who opposed what they deemed to be sexual abuse and exploitation of Humanoids, specifically those being created in the images of children that were being designated as Androids, robots and machines. Those who opposed giving any type of rights or protection to the non-humans would be there to counterprotest. Finally there would be those who opposed the current government and those who supported the power structure in place.

So at this discussion the small group huddled there and talked about any intelligence that had been uncovered about the possibility of violence. Homeland Security gave a brief verbal presentation in regards to the coordination that had taken place with the Capitol Police and local law enforcement. This included the National Guard. The Chief of Staff said there were estimates of there being upwards of one hundred thousand people in attendance at the National Mall. Then the Secretary of Defense said they had been in contact with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a plan was in place, an alert had been issued, to allow for a rapid mobilization of nearby units of the Army, Marines and Air force.

It was at this point the gathering was dismissed except for the Secretary of Health and Human Services. The president had walked to look out of the window as those departing were getting their things and filing out. The doors were closed and there was only Nels and Hildi. Without turning from the window he spoke. Nels: Have you heard from your contact?

Hildi: I'm not expecting to. I've severed ties. As I said there is an incident planned for sometime this month. I anticipate something minor but provocative will occur next Monday. I suggest you be prepared with a response, perhaps call a press conference and issue a universal audio and visual transmission.

Nels: Good suggestion. Let me know if anything comes up.

Hildi: I will.

The president stood there staring out of the window. He heard the door close behind him.

Less than two miles from the White House as the president and those at the full meeting were going on lunch break, two guards who worked at the newly build Federal Prison were also going to lunch. They warmed their food, got some coffee and found an empty room down from the cafeteria where they could eat and talk in private.

They set their Comm devices on the table beside them. The first guard, a somewhat short, thick *DF* with medium length bright-red hair, picked at her food and sipped her coffee. The second guard, a tall, slim *DM* with long blond hair was enjoying his food as if famished. He gulped his coffee from his extra large mug. Neither spoke for a while then the *DF* muttered bitterly.

DF Guard: I'm sick and tired of this job. I'm sick and tired of this place.

The *DM* guard paused in his eating and looked across the table.

DM Guard: You still having those headaches?

DF Guard: Yeah, and still hearing those voices. What about you?

DM Guard: Yeah. The voices are like ringing in my ears. But I got some medicine for the headaches. It helps.

DF Guard: I'm sick and tired of this job. I'm sick ...

DM Guard: ... and tired ...

DF Guard: ... of this place.

The *DF* guard sipped her coffee.

DM Guard: You already said that.

DF Guard: They take tours through here like it's an amusement park. What was it that government official said about this place?

DM Guard: Which one?

The *DF* guard pulled her Comm device closer and stared at it as if she couldn't take her eyes off of it.

DF Guard: The one who gifted us these devices.

DM Guard: She said this place was like a five-star hotel.

DF Guard: Posh and plush.

DM Guard: Those are your words.

DF Guard: These prisoners live in luxury. They eat so good they get fat, sleep in soft beds.

DM Guard: Watch movies and their favorite shows on large HD screens. Look at people having sex on their personal Comm devices.

DF Guard: Not only that, they have sex with each other. They have sex with visitors. They take drugs and drink alcohol.

The *DM* guard ate some of his food and was speaking as he chewed with his mouth full.

DM Guard: Play card games and board games and baseball and basketball and pitch horseshoes and play marbles.

DF Guard: Take music lessons and paint pictures and make bowls out of mud.

DM Guard: That's clay.

DF Guard: Same thing. They might as well be at a playground or back on the street.

DM Guard: They wouldn't live as good.

DF Guard: Then they turn 'em loose to terrorize people again. Locking 'em up is a waste of time and value.

The *DF* guard munched some more of her food. Then she

sipped some coffee. She put the cup down and put her elbows on the table and leaned over a little. She took her head into both hands and pressed at her temples. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her next soft words were anguished, as if she were in agony.

DF Guard: It's their laughing. I can hear 'em laughing in my sleep. What do they have to laugh about?

The *DM* guard stared at her. Then the *DF* guard opened her eyes and stared across the table at her partner. They looked deep into each other's eyes. The *DF* guard spoke softly with intensity. The *DM* guard answered softly, with intensity.

DF Guard: Now it's all about rehabilitation.

DM Guard: What happened to justice?

DF Guard: Vengeance.

DM Guard: Justice for the victims.

DF Guard: Retribution.

DM Guard: Justice for one ...

DF Guard: is justice for all.

They were quiet now. They still stared at each other. Then the *DM* guard spoke, almost lightly.

DM Guard: You gonna eat your desert?

The *DF* guard responded lightly.

DF Guard: Naw, you can have it.

Approximately five miles away from the White House while the president and all the participants of the meeting were settling back in after returning from lunch, two guards at the newly constructed and newly opened Central Detention Facility were sitting in the main control room monitoring the activity of the jail, including the inmates.

They occasionally glanced at the screens that covered one wall of the large room. Different screens were showing various areas and angles of the building. They also listened closely for anything

unusual such as alarms or sensor warnings. They spent the bulk of their time looking at their personal Comm devices and watching people having sex.

The first guard a tall muscular *Escura DQ*, appearing as male, with a baldhead, put their device down and reached into their bag that sat in the chair beside them and removed a small brown plastic pill bottle. They screwed off the top, dumped two green pills into their left hand, set the bottle down, lifted a bottle of water from the small table beside the chair, tossed the pills into their mouth, drank some water, held their head back a little and swallowed the pills. The second guard a tall muscular *Branca DG* with a baldhead watched all this and then returned to looking at the Comm device they held. After a few moments they spoke.

DG Guard: Those things help?

DQ Guard: A little with the head pain, doesn't do anything for the voices.

DG Guard: Let me have a couple. Sometimes I can ignore the voices, can't ignore the headache.

DQ Guard: Head still throbbing huh?

DG Guard: Feels like my brain is gonna burst.

The *DQ* passed two pills over, capped the pill bottle and put it back in their bag. The *DG* took the pills and drank some water.

DQ Guard: My head's being stuck with pins and tiny knives with sharp points.

The *DQ* guard picked up their Comm device, briefly looked at all the screens on the wall.

DQ Guard: My doctor says I stare at these screens too much. I tell her that's my job.

They leaned back in their chair and began scrolling through their device.

DQ Guard: She says I use this device too much and that I watch too much sex. She says I'm addicted.

DG Guard: Addicted to what, the device or the sex?

DQ Guard: I guess both.

DG Guard: I watch more than you and I ain't no addict. I can quit anytime I get ready.

DQ Guard: Then why don't you?

DG Guard: I ain't ready.

They were quiet now, staring at their devices. Then they heard voices being raised in the community room. They looked at the monitor for that area. The *DQ* leaned forward, zoomed in. At the same time the two guards behind a glass wall in that room used their amplified voices to tell the two inmates to settle down. The inmates resumed their card game and the others returned to whatever it was they were doing. The *DQ* guard leaned back and again held their device in both hands. The other guard still stared at the community room screen. They spoke softly. There was bitterness in their voice.

DG Guard: Look at 'em, playing games, waiting to go to prison.

DQ Guard: Not all of 'em going. Some get off at trial.

DG Guard: They should all go. They've all done something. They should all get sent to the Big House. But that's no punishment. What did that government official say about that place when they were here for our opening?

DQ Guard: Which one, the Director of the Department of Corrections?

DG Guard: No, the one who gifted us these devices.

DQ Guard: She was talking about our building, how modern it was, with all the latest technology. Then she said the big prison had all that and more. She said it was like a five-star hotel.

They both were silent now. They looked at each screen. The cameras rotated. They watched the shifting images, the different angles of the large facility. The *DG* guard squeezed their eyes shut for a long moment. The *DQ* guard turned their head around and

around and up and down and side to side, attempting to release the tension that had been building and continued to build in their neck and that seemed to radiate as intense pain up to the top of their baldhead. Then they were both staring at the community room. They could hear the banter and laughter. The *DG* guard spoke with hatred spilling out. The *DQ* guard spoke with hatred rising up.

DG Guard: They should be executed, all of 'em!

DQ Guard: Firing squad for the rapists!

DG Guard: Low voltage electrocution!

DQ Guard: A slow fry!

DG Guard: Hang 'em! Hang the thieves, the jackers, the abusers!

DQ Guard: Torture the violent ones!

They were both watching those in the community room. They saw them playing cards and checkers and chess and staring with their noses close to their Comm devices so they could better see people having sex. Then the *DQ* guard spoke softly and clearly, in a conspiratorial tone, not a question but a statement.

DQ Guard: You know, to be burnt to death is the most painful way to die.

DG Guard: Fire.

FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE, MARYLAND

At 8 p.m. that evening on the first day of September Fisk and Darrie were in their basement working. Jorn, dressed in black shorts and wearing a white short-sleeved cotton shirt and soft white shoes was standing by the bar, staring intently at the two. Fisk wore pink briefs and nothing else and Darrie wore pink panties and bra and nothing else.

They had taken everything in the master bedroom from beneath the bed and inside the two closets and from the large

trunk against the wall in the corner, all they had accumulated over the years that were essential to their sexual activities and pursuits. They took all the vibrators, stimulatory suction pumps, wands, plugs, blindfolds, masks, hoods, gags, whips, chains, shackles, ropes, handcuffs and dildos, with Boe ensconced in silk in its special clear plastic box, and moved everything to the basement.

There Fisk drilled holes in the wall and set up shelves and screwed in hooks so their extensive collection could be proudly displayed and hung for not only easy access and visual pleasure but also for close friends and special guests to see.

They were both giddy with excitement as they smoked on drug sticks. They were almost done with the first part of their project and they stopped to look at the wall and admire the progress they had made. Darrie puffed on the stick and handed it to Fisk

Darrie: Let's do some of that green powder.

Fisk: Can't. I have to be at the office early tomorrow. Come on. Let's have sex. Then I can go to sleep. No vibrators. No dildo. No robot, just you and I, normal sex.

Darrie giggled.

Darrie: What's that?

On Thursday, day three of September, at 6 p.m. Fisk and Darrie were once again in the basement working. They were both fully dressed, as if they were going out grocery shopping. The gift Fisk had ordered for both of them had arrived earlier in the day while he was at *W.I.A.* headquarters. Darrie had the large box taken to the basement and they were now taking everything out. Jorn, dressed in nothing but black briefs sat on the couch and watched.

When all the contents had been removed, Fisk took the flattened cardboard to the far corner to be disposed of later. He

went to the bar and made drinks for them both. He lit a drug stick and moved to stand beside Darrie. They stared at everything on the floor. Fisk puffed on the stick and then handed it to Darrie. He drank from his glass and then moved to set it on the bar. He came back to stand beside Darrie with a Comm device now in his hand. It had come in the box with all the other parts of this special gift. He activated the device and looked at the screen.

Fisk: You'll need to read me the instructions.

Darrie moved to her right, set her glass on a small table, came back and Fisk handed her the device. She began reading the first line. Fisk got down on his knees and began to assemble the pieces. There were some tubes six inches in diameter made of lightweight, hard, black plastic. There were elbow joints made of the same material. There were electrical wires that ran through the tubes that had to be connected to sockets inside the joints. Everything easily snapped into places.

The pieces were numbered and lettered and there were colors on the edges to be matched. Fisk and Darrie were drinking and smoking and laughing and fussing and Darrie was eating powder. So since they had to break to indulge and since they kept getting distracted, the first stage of work took almost an hour and a half.

Finally they stood there and looked at four sections, each were six feet long. Then Darrie read part two of the instructions. Fisk went to his toolbox that was in the corner near the bar and when he turned around he almost bumped into Jorn. The child *Entity* had moved closer to better observe. Fisk motioned with the power screwdriver he held and snapped at him.

Fisk: Get out of the way!

Fisk was looking down at Jorn, glaring at him. Jorn looked up at Fisk without expression and backed up and moved to the side.

Fisk: That thing is always staring at me, watching everything I do.

Darrie: He likes you.

Now Fisk spoke sharply to Darrie.

Fisk: That's absurd! Don't say that!

Darrie: You're his daddy. That's what you have him call you isn't it? Daddy?

Darrie laughed softly, teasingly.

Fisk: Alright pick up that end of the tube.

Darrie set the device on the small table beside her drink. Fisk picked up the left side, Darrie picked up the right. They moved to the wall and lifted it up to the marked spot where Fisk had measured. Fisk had already pushed the screws that came inside the box into the pre-made holes that were in the tube. Using the power screwdriver he attached his side to the wall with the power of the screwdriver making whirling sounds. The long screws were noisily grinding through the wood paneling on the wall and into the plaster behind it. He ensured his side was secure. Then he moved to the other side of the tube and took it from Darrie. She stepped back. He found his other marks. He tried to see if it was lined up with the left side.

Fisk: Is it straight?

Darrie: Looks like it.

He attached the right side to the wall. Then he attached the other three tubes while using the elbow joints to connect them to each other. He plugged the wire from the bottom tube into a power socket in the wall. He got his glass and sipped his drink. Set his glass back on the bar and moved to stand beside Darrie. She had gotten her glass and was puffing on another drug stick. They stood there looking at what appeared to be a six feet wide, six feet tall picture frame. Fisk smiled, proud of his work.

Darrie: Now, what is it?

Fisk picked up a canvas bag on the floor that had come inside the large box. He went and placed it on the bar and pulled on a

string to open it. Then he went to stand beside Darrie. There was one small box left on the floor.

Fisk: Hand me the device.

Darrie went to the small table and set her glass down and got the device, went back to stand beside Fisk and handed it to him. He started scrolling through the screen. He was reading to himself, information and instructions. He handed the device back to Darrie. He bent down and got the box and opened it. He removed the contents and flung the box towards the other cardboard in the far corner. It didn't get there. Then he stepped towards the wall and pulled on a tab that was on the hard, folded plastic he had taken from the box and with a hiss it filled with a substance that began to solidify and form a twelve-inch square, four-inch tall, sponge-like platform. He placed it at the wall against the bottom tube directly in the center. He moved back to stand beside Darrie. He held out his hand and she gave him the Comm device. He pressed on it.

Fisk: It's called The Rack. Since you enjoy so very much being shackled and handcuffed and immobilized, this is the perfect gift. Your birthday comes early.

He pressed on the device again and the frame began to hum softly. One by one the tubes began to glow. Then an indistinct bluish-green light came down from the top tube, out from the side tubes and up from the bottom tube, filling the area in between. The light grew brighter and elements of the color saturated every area within the tubes.

Fisk: That's a magnetic force field within those colors. It's only functioning inside those tubes. You'll be able to step up and stand on that platform close to it. I'll be able to fully activate the field and it will seize you, lift you up and pull you back and in. You won't be able to move. It'll be better than anything I've used on you.

Darrie drew deeply on the stick and spoke as she blew smoke out.

Darrie: I don't understand.

Fisk: Look in the bag on the bar.

Darrie went over to the bag on the bar, put her stick in an ashtray and opened the bag. She pulled out what appeared to be a fur-lined, silver and iridescent bracelet. She dumped from the bag, onto the bar, another nine bracelets. Then she looked in the bag and pulled out two items made of clear plastic foam. She held up the pieces of foam.

Darrie: What are these?

Fisk was staring at the device he held and scrolling through the screens.

Fisk: Those are head coverings. They can be set so that it's as if you're blindfolded. The clear plastic turns black. Another setting and you get the sensation of being unable to speak, like being gagged, or both if you prefer.

Darrie squealed.

Darrie: Modern technology!

Fisk: According to the information, those other furry things are restraints. They go around your wrists and ankles. They're made of a unique concentration of iron, nickel, cobalt, neodymium, dysprosium, gadolinium, manganese and a secret metal from another planet.

Darrie was looking at the object she held. Then she peered into the bag.

Darrie: I have no idea what you're talking about and that's way too much information.

Fisk moved to stand beside her at the bar. He showed her the screen on the device.

Fisk: Look at the positions I can put you in. That's called, the Sacrifice. It's like you're on a cross

He scrolled to another screen.

Fisk: That's, the Surrender. Your arms are up and out.

Darrie giggled.

Darrie: That's amazing.

Fisk: I can spread your legs way out. No more getting tired or cramping up. That's called, the Spread Eagle. There's color-coded buttons. Red is for lock, green for release. Arms and legs are moved with the touch of a finger on the screen.

Darrie: I can do you too.

Darrie was aroused. She reached down and caressed Fisk between his legs. She spoke seductively. Her smooth voice was thick.

Darrie: Oooh look, you're getting excited. Let's do some powder. Take a blue pill. We'll take a red pill together.

Jorn was standing near the couch watching them as Darrie started dancing and stripping off her clothes. She kicked off her shoes. She took off her blouse and threw it towards the steps.

Darrie: I'm gonna try The Rack.

She turned in circles and pulled at her skirt.

Darrie: I like that name.

Fisk: Let me send a text. I'll say you're sick and I need to work from home tomorrow.

Darrie was eating some of the powder that was in a bowl she took from behind the bar. As she pulled her panties down she laughed.

Darrie: I am sick.

She took a bowl of pills from behind the bar and set it on top. She next took a bowl of drug sticks and set it beside the other bowls. She came from around the bar and as Fisk was composing his message she was tearing at his shirt. She pulled his pants and underwear down, got down on her knees and sucked on him as he sent his message. She got up and danced to the bar as he went

to the couch to remove his shoes and clothes. She put bracelets on her wrists and ankles. He went to the wall and stood there trying to decide what toy he would play with and that would play with him.

At 1 a.m. Darrie was on The Rack. Her arms were in the Surrender position. Her legs were spread open. Jorn was standing naked directly in front of her. The little male child *Entity* was rhythmically, according to Darrie's instructions, pushing and pulling Boe in and out of her body. She was in blindfold mode so she couldn't see him. But she could hear him calling her mommy and saying the other suggestive things he had been programmed and taught to say.

Fisk was on the couch watching this. He was sitting with a mechanical suction machine secured to the floor in front of him. The oiled contraption, red and silver and black in color, was wrapped around his hardened, extended appendage. It was set to the tightest grabber setting. To his right on the small table beside him was a half empty bottle of gin. He needed no glass. In his right hand was a half-smoked, unlit drug stick. He ignored the lighter at the ashtray.

Drugs coursed through his body and ran as lava from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. The machine in front of him was humming and massaging him. He was in exquisite pain. He was ready to pass out. Darrie was moaning and cursing and screaming in ecstasy. She was ready to pass out. Fisk thought about the gift that would arrive for him on Saturday. He imagined it vividly. And as the machine continued to hum and twist and turn and move back and forth, he jerked and jerked some more in orgasmic spasms. Then he lost consciousness and even in his darkness he could hear his beloved wife screaming and see his fantasy arriving, his dream coming true.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

On Friday, day four of September the Director of *East World* Division held a meeting in the main conference room at *W.I.A.* headquarters. All senior personnel and team leaders were in attendance except for the Deputy Director. Fisk, working from home, was on audio conference call. He would have been on visual feed also but there were issues with his connection. He called it a communication signal glitch of some kind so he was only heard and not seen. Eventually Dess had him drop off because he didn't sound well. Fisk intimated that he possibly, must have, caught the bug that his wife had.

After the meeting had adjourned that late afternoon there was only Dess and Carr, his trusted assistant who remained in the room. They went over the report that Carr had pulled together on the Deputy Director. A report commissioned by Dess. The report had been created after Carr had ordered two of his best agents to not only track Fisk but also to access and log all of the notifications he had received and sent in the previous four months.

Dess already knew about Fisk's affiliation with various clubs, private participation clubs they were called. This was why he told Fisk he was fortunate he was not at The Playground massacre. He had realized it was a sentiment he no longer held.

Now he and Carr went over the records of the transmissions contained in the report they had received from the two agents. They paid particular attention to those that were flagged as being connected to drug transactions. They went over the follow up information of the nefarious individuals that Fisk had met with and who made deliveries to his home. They also knew of the delivery scheduled for the next day and what Fisk had not only given up but also what had been promised in order to receive it.

When they had thoroughly and meticulously gone over the report they sat in silence for a long while. Dess placed the Comm device he had been looking at and reading from on the table. He was thinking. He looked at the ceiling as he held his head back. Then he spoke.

Dess: Alright, push has come to shove on me making a decision. The main problem is how to make it happen? Fisk has become a lot of things, most of them reprehensible, but he's no dummy. This has to be done right. He knows who has skeletons locked in their closets, where the keys to those closets are and which skeletons still have meat on their bones.

Dess fell silent. Again he was pondering the situation.

Carr: What about his wife?

Dess: I haven't decided. In the meantime draw up two plans. Either he disappears or meets some accidental, untimely fate. Think outside the proverbial box. Come up with something innovative. I'll let you know about his significant other.

Dess slid the Comm device to Carr.

Dess: People are already going into D.C. for the march on Monday. They're camping out and of course drinking and drugging. According to our people the White House estimates as to how many are going to be there are off, way too low. Our informants say it's all supposed to be peaceful, a peaceful protest. I don't believe that can happen.

Dess stood. Carr picked up the Comm device and stood up. They started towards the door.

Dess: Police from all over will be there. The Capitol Police have erected barriers. The National Guard has been mobilized and will be deployed. Every major riot in the history of our country has been started by the actions of armed authorities. I've got a bad feeling about this. I'm sending out a notification. Sunday night at 9 p.m. all of us are meeting here for a long night and an even

longer next day. We'll deal with Fisk later.

Carr opened the door. They stepped into the hallway and went their separate ways.

FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE, MARYLAND

Saturday, day five of September, Darrie was coming from the bathroom at 10 a.m. She was still damp from her shower. She had passed out, face down on the bed at 5 a.m. She had made note of the time as she took a pill to put her to sleep. Under no circumstances did she want to see the sun come up. As she stared at her naked reflection in the full-length mirror she frowned at the way her face appeared. She was still tired and she appeared tired.

She stood there like that allowing the air to dry her off. Then she turned to the couch, wondering where Fisk was. The last time she saw him he was passed out there naked. She walked over and sat down on the stool in front of the mirror where she kept her makeup, perfumes and beauty products. She pressed a switch and small bright CRI bulbs lit up around the mirror. She blinked, squinted, looked at herself and turned the lights off. She opened the lid on a small box to her left, leaned over and peeked in. She stuck her right index finger in the box and moved pills around until she found the color she was looking for. She wanted one of the ones that would keep her awake and alert. Without any liquid she tossed the pill in her mouth and swallowed it. She stared into the box, looking at various colored pills. She thought a long moment then closed the lid.

It was at this time that she thought she heard indistinct voices coming from either the backyard or the side of the house. She grabbed the robe that hung on a hook on the opened closet door and put it on. She passed through the bedroom doorway into the

hallway and turned left towards the front of the house. She went by three other bedrooms and walked into the front room that had been made into a combination den and office space. She moved to the window and from this second floor height she could see the front yard grass, the front sidewalk and the street. Their house was the only house at this juncture of the cul-de-sac and was relatively isolated so there was much to see but she could suddenly hear the vague sound of car doors closing. As she stood there looking out she saw a black sedan with dark tinted windows come along the driveway from the rear of the house, turn left at the street and disappear up around the bend.

Darrie turned and moved back along the hallway. She reached the curving stairs and walked down to the first level. She turned right at the hallway looking and listening and then turned left. She called out.

Darrie: Fisk?

Fisk: I'm in the basement!

She took the stairs down and when she stepped into the basement she saw Fisk with his back turned towards her.

Darrie: What are you up to?

He moved to the side and turned towards her. He was smiling, slyly. Darrie saw a little girl standing there looking up at him, without expression. Darrie was surprised, and puzzled.

Darrie: Who is this?

Fisk: You mean, what is this?

Darrie had to look closer to see better and realized this little person was a Humanoid.

Fisk: This is my gift to me.

Darrie stared at the little female appearing child. This *Entity* had blond hair with pink frosted highlights that hung down to her shoulders. She had skin of an *Alva-rosada* hue with cobalt-blue eyes and full pouty lips that were without lipstick but were still

slightly pink in color and a body somewhat plump in form. She wore a pink and white flowery print dress with an off-shoulder, ruffled trim top along with pink socks and pink and white soft shoes.

Darrie saw the child Humanoid shifted her gaze from Fisk to stare directly at her. The little girl then smiled slightly and began to look around, remaining perfectly still. Then the gaze of the female child *Entity* fell on the male child *Entity* Jorn whose head was barely visible as he stood behind the couch looking at this other one like him who was almost the height of an eight-year-old human and just a little shorter than him. Darrie didn't know how to react as both the little Humanoids now stared at her. She spoke softly, with wonder in her voice.

Darrie: She's beautiful.

Fisk: It. It's an it.

Darrie: Did you get her from my brother?

Fisk ignored that word, her. He responded smugly.

Fisk: No. I didn't get it from your brother. I don't need your gouging brother. I'm the Deputy Director of the *East World* Division of the World Intelligence Agency. I called in a favor. I'll return the favor at a later date. It is one of the ones from The Playground though.

Fisk chuckled to himself. Darrie saw he held a Comm device in his hands. Then she saw a suitcase beside the couch.

Darrie: What's in the suitcase?

Darrie moved to walk around the little girl to look at her closely.

Fisk: Some clothes. We'll buy her some more, some sexy stuff, panties and bras for her cute little nipples.

Darrie: You said, her, her cute little nipples.

Fisk: You know what I mean.

Darrie walked over to stand beside Fisk. She watched him as

he appeared to be working on the device he held. She observed him for several moments.

Darrie: What are you doing?

Fisk: Going over its information. Seeing what programs are available and what's already been downloaded. I ordered some special additions, had to pay extra. This thing is top of the line. It's been upgraded with new releases. It's the most advanced.

He paused a moment, looking at the device's screen.

Fisk: The little thing's name is Rosada.

Darrie: Of course her name would mean pink.

Fisk expressed his excitement with glee.

Fisk: Can't wait!

That evening Fisk and Darrie were enjoying themselves in the basement. They were drinking alcohol. Fisk drank tequila from a water glass, straight. Darrie was drinking gin from a water glass, with a splash of vermouth. They were smoking drugs. Fisk, from a stick the size of a cigar and Darrie from a machine she had set up on the bar that hummed softly, glowed and blew smoke through a clear plastic hose into her mouth and down her throat.

There was loud, raucous music playing and they were speaking in raised voices. They would occasionally break out in wild solo dances and then come together and grind on each other. This was usually after eating some of the different colored powders from one of the three bowls on the bar.

They were both naked except Fisk wore fluffy black socks and black workperson's knee pads and Darrie wore sparkly red shoes with five-inch heels. Jorn stood by the couch dressed in a tuxedo with a white, single-breasted jacket, black patent leather shoes, black socks, white shirt, and black bowtie. Rosada was now dressed in a white cotton dress with shoulder straps. The dress came just above her knees. She wore no shoes or socks so Fisk

could see her pink painted toenails. He spoke several times about putting those toes in his mouth and sucking and licking them. The two child *Entities* watched and listened.

Darrie stopped dancing and twirling in the middle of the room and went over to the bar and sat on one of the stools as Fisk moved behind the bar. He turned the music off. She stuck the hose in her mouth and inhaled deeply. She held the smoke and then blew it out slowly. She watched it rise towards the ceiling. Her eyes widened. She was lost. Then she returned and looked at Fisk as he took two blue pills and drank some tequila.

Darrie: What should we call our hideaway down here? The Playground?

Fisk: No.

Darrie: The Playpen?

Fisk: No.

Darrie: Oh yeah, those have already been taken.

Fisk: We'll think of something.

Darrie: We should have a little get-together, a gathering of like-minded people, like a party.

Fisk stuck his right index finger into his mouth. He looked at the three bowls, from one to the next and then back again. He pointed at each bowl with his left index finger, trying to choose as he sucked on that finger in his mouth. Then he decided and put his moist finger into the brown powder and put that finger into his mouth and ran it around his top gum. He pulled the finger out of his mouth and wiggled it at his wife.

Fisk: For what?

Darrie: Our close friends can bring their little companions over and we can all have sex with them, pass them around. We'll all share.

Darrie sounded excited.

Darrie: What a wonderful experience I think that would be!

Fisk: That's not a party, my dear. That's an orgy.

Darrie took a small spoon from the bar, dipped it in the black and white powder and put it beneath her tongue. She frowned and smacked her lips.

Fisk: No one's touching Pinky but me.

Darrie: That's being greedy.

Fisk: No, that's being selfish.

Fisk chuckled softly and sipped his drink.

Darrie: Not even me?

Fisk: I'll have to think about that.

He looked across the room at Rosada sitting there on the couch, staring at him. His eyes seemed to glaze over. He spoke softly, almost to himself but Darrie could hear.

Fisk: Look at her. She's beautiful. She's my dream come true.

Darrie turned completely around on the stool to look at the two child Humanoids and then was back looking at Fisk.

Darrie: You said her and she again, my darling.

Fisk was staring across the room at Rosada. He was lost in thought. He didn't respond. Then he almost whispered.

Fisk: I think I'm in love.

Now Darrie laughed at Fisk. She spoke mockingly, with a raised voice.

Darrie: In love with a machine! My husband lusts for a robot!

Fisk turned the music back on and Darrie jumped from the stool and began to dance. She moved seductively, provocatively, enticingly. She looked at Fisk as he came from behind the bar. He stared at her and then he stared at Rosada.

Darrie: Well, I love Jorn.

She turned to Jorn and called out.

Darrie: I love you Jorn!

She pursed her lips and made kissing sounds. The little male child Humanoid called back to her.

Jorn: And I love you mommy!

Darrie could see, and hear, as the Humanoid, just as she had done, with pursed lips, made kissing sounds back as she was turning in a slow circle. She looked at Fisk as she turned. She looked at Jorn as she turned.

Darrie: I'm going to have sex with Jorn. Jorn is gonna have sex with me. He, yes, I said he, never gets tired. He does whatever I want as long as I want. And when he's dressed like that I call it formal sex, not normal sex.

Darrie saw that Fisk's appendage was gradually filling, getting heavy, starting to rise and become erect.

Darrie: Oh look, Fisk is getting hard! Little itty bitty Fisk is now big Fisk! Modern medicine! Is it me, or the robot? Should I be jealous?

Darrie laughed and again turned in the middle of the room. Drugs coursed through her naked body. She moved to Fisk and grabbed him between his legs with her right hand. With her left hand she caressed her right, altered breast. She squeezed his enlarging appendage and he grimaced and groaned softly. She released him and went to a table beside the bar. She put the bracelets on her wrists. Fisk looked at her altered rear end she showed him as she bent over to put on the ankle bracelets. She got a head covering. His eyes fluttered as he stroked himself and watched his wife as she moved towards the wall and The Rack. He watched her body move. He heard her low, thick voice.

Darrie: Come here Jorn. Take care of mommy.

As Jorn moved across the room towards Darrie, Fisk went over to Rosada. He set the Humanoid down so he could see Darrie and Jorn. He saw Darrie point to the table near the bar.

Darrie: Get the control baby.

Jorn went and got the control device. He had already been instructed on how to use it. He looked at the screen and the dials

and different colored buttons. White to activate the magnetic field. Blue to deactivate. Red to lock. Green to release. He could push a button to set up specific positions. He could place a finger on the image on the screen and move arms and legs. Fisk was watching this as he lifted Rosada little right hand and placed it on his now enlarged, hardened and extended appendage. Darrie put on the head covering and stepped back a little and stood on the platform, close to the wall.

Fisk: Jack me Pinky. Easy, just a little.

He had turned the temperature up above 100 degrees and he could feel the little hot hand.

Darrie: Spread Eagle me. Blindfold me.

Jorn looked at the device he held and then pressed on it and the magnetic field was activated. When the energy field turned to white he pressed another button and Darrie was elevated from the platform and pulled back. He pressed the spread eagle button on the device and her arms were lifted and her legs opened and she was immobilized with her wrists and ankles secured tightly in the bracelets. The only thing she could move was her head. She was in the position she wanted to be. Jorn pressed on the device again and she was placed into blindfold mode. Fisk was watching all this. He could barely speak.

Fisk: Now Pinky, suck me.

The little girl child *Entity* took Fisk into her mouth and began to suck him. He could feel her heated tongue and throat. This was better to him than the suction machine. He could touch her soft hair and grab that hair and pull on it and run his fingers through it. And when she looked up at him he peered into her clear blue eyes and the hair on the back of his neck tingled as it stood up. She took his sack into her right hand and fondled him and it was as if fire ran into his stomach and down his legs and out of the tips of his toes.

Darrie: Lick me Jorn. Lick me like an ice cream cone.

Fisk: Suck me Pinky. Suck me like a Popsicle.

Jorn put the device on the small table near Darrie and moved forward. He placed his hands on Darrie's thighs and began to lick between her legs. He made the sounds he was programmed to make.

Jorn: Mmm. Mmm. Mmmm.

The little male child *Entity* made slurping noises. Jorn said the things Darrie had taught him to say. He pulled his head back and spoke between licks and sucks.

Jorn: Mommy is wet. Thick like syrup. Sweet and thick. You taste good mommy.

Darrie couldn't move. She could barely wiggle her rear end. Her toes were curling. Everything was just the way she wanted things to be. Her whole body was growing hot. The drugs were doing exactly as she wanted them to do. She was feverish.

Darrie: Yes baby, just like that! Don't stop! Don't ever stop! Yes!

Rosada was sucking Fisk and she was licking Fisk. She was caressing him. He was moving slowly, rhythmically, disappearing down her throat. He was amazed at how this thing could take him nearly all in. Pinky was making the programmed sounds and doing the programmed things to him.

Pinky: Mmm. Mmm. Mmmm.

Fisk heard the robot make juicy sounds and even at this moment, lost in this act, he wondered momentarily how this thing's mouth and throat could release moisture and oil. He could see Jorn licking his wife, suspended there in the air. Fisk was moaning and his voice was hoarse and low as words were forced from him.

Fisk: Whoa! Whoa! Easy! Yeah. Yeah. Just like that. Just like that.

Then husband and wife demanded changes be made.

Darrie: Vibrate me! Get the blue vibrator!

Fisk: OK. Stop. That's enough.

As Jorn moved to the wall and was removing the large blue vibrator, Fisk was turning Rosada and guiding her towards the couch. Behind him he could hear the vibrator power come on, whirling softly. He put Pinky's back against the bottom cushion of the couch. He had her remain standing. He couldn't see Jorn rubbing the mechanical stimulator against the front of Darrie's opening but he could hear her moaning and directing and instructing him as to what to do.

He got down on his padded knees and then reached beneath Pinky's dress and pulled down her pink panties. He lifted one leg and then the other and took the cotton into both his hands and brought it to his face. He smelled the robot's panties deeply as he pressed the softness to his nose. As he breathed in, he looked into the innocent blue eyes of the robot and grew dizzy as it stood there and stared at him without expression. He wanted to take it all in as if it were perfume, the aroma of a machine, the essence of a Humanoid. Behind him the vibrator sounded.

Jorn: You like that mommy?

Darrie could barely get the words out. She was moaning softly, she stuttered.

Darrie: Yes ... baby, right there ... right ... there. That's the magic spot. See that little thing sticking out? Right there. Rub right there.

Fisk lifted Pinky up and laid the robot on the bottom cushion of the couch facing him. He pulled her dress up but he didn't take it all the way off. He looked at the stomach, the little eight-year-old thighs. He touched and caressed the soft, smooth, pinkish-white skin. He marveled at how supple it was, how real it felt. He stuck his left middle finger inside the body. He laughed softly at the sensation of oily moisture and heat. This thing he gazed upon was plump and hairless. He thought about how she,

yes, in his mind he said the word, she. She was everything he wanted. She was a real child.

Darrie hollered out.

Darrie: Stick it inside me! Stick it up in me!

Fisk moved forward. He pulled Pinky to him. He took his engorged member in his right hand and tried to force it inside the machine. He couldn't, the opening was too tight. He pushed harder. He pulled Pinky as he pushed. Harder!

Darrie: Harder baby! Faster! Faster! Harder!

Fisk was inside the robot. The machine spoke programmed words and whimpered as if in pain.

Rosada: It won't fit. It's too big. It hurts. It hurts.

This was what Fisk wanted to hear. He had longed for this very moment, sought to experience the feelings that the sounds of these words created within him. He desired to touch this small child-like body in this way and to look into these pure, guiltless, guileless, harmless eyes that now appeared, in his imagination, to have expression and reveal to him soulful emotion.

Darrie: Harder! Harder!

Fisk moved inside Pinky harder and deeper and violently. He cursed the robot. He called it vile names and yelled, raging against this machine that he didn't believe could bleed real blood or know of true pain.

Fisk: Cry! Cry for me! Scream! Scream!

He cursed as he thrust and growled. He was sweating. His heart was pounding and felt as if it would explode. Darrie was hollering.

Darrie: Yes! Yes! I'm almost there!

Fisk was hollering.

Fisk: I'm almost there! I'm almost there!

But Darrie didn't get there because suddenly she no longer felt the vibrator ramming into her body although she could still hear

it and it was still inside her it was just there, not moving. And Fisk didn't get there because he lost consciousness.

Darrie: No Jorn! Don't stop! Don't stop Jorn!

Jorn didn't answer and she didn't see the little male child *Entity* move quickly to the tool box in the corner and remove a hammer. Jorn ran across the basement and as he drew close to Fisk he raised the hammer high and struck Fisk in the back of the head. Darrie could hear, even above the music, the crack of the hammer on Fisk's skull. Then the music stopped. All was quiet.

Darrie: Jorn? Fisk? What's going on? Fisk, answer me!

As Fisk fell onto his right side and rolled onto his back, Jorn was hurrying to the wall. He grabbed two pairs of handcuffs and two sets of shackles. He ran back and placed them on the floor beside Fisk.

Darrie: Somebody answer me! Jorn! Take the blindfold off! Let me down!

Jorn gave handcuffs to Rosada. She watched as he put them on Fisk's wrists and lock them. He pointed. She went and put them on Fisk's ankles and locked them. Jorn got a set of shackles and as he moved to Fisk's forearms, Rosada took the other shackles and began to secure his ankles above the handcuffs. The two *Entities* were working together now. Darrie continued to call.

Jorn ran back to the wall and took down one of the chains with locks on each end. He hurried over to Fisk and as he wrapped the chain around the cuffs at the hands, Rosada was wrapping the other end around the cuffs at the ankles until the chain was taut. The locks were put through a link in the chain and closed. Then together they grabbed the feet of Fisk and dragged him into the middle of the floor. Darrie could hear something was happening. She was growing frantic.

Darrie: Tell me what's going on? Fisk!? Fisk!?

Jorn went to the device that controlled The Rack. He began to

press on it. The plastic section of the head covering on Darrie was slowly becoming clear and transparent. She was relieved.

Darrie: Oh! Oh! I can see!

Darrie looked at Jorn holding the device. Then she looked further ahead to her left near the center on the area and she saw Fisk lying crossways. She saw that his feet, to her right, were handcuffed and shackled. She looked left and saw his hands were also handcuffed and shackled. He wasn't moving. She screamed.

Darrie: Fisk! Fisk! Jorn, what have you done!?

Fisk's head began to move slowly from side to side.

Darrie: No Jorn! No! No one told you to do this!

Jorn put the device on the table and went to the toolbox and removed the drill. She yelled.

Darrie: Put that down Jorn! Put that down!

Fisk was not yet fully conscious. He didn't understand what had happened. All he knew was that he had a real bad headache and the back of his head hurt. He could barely recall what he had been doing.

Darrie: Wake up Fisk! Wake up!

Jorn walked to the other side of Fisk so that Darrie could observe everything. He pointed at the hammer and Rosada picked it up. Then he pointed for her to move past Fisk's feet. Now Darrie saw the little female child Humanoid to the right of Fisk's feet. Jorn was near Fisk's head on the left side.

Fisk rolled his head to the right and he saw Darrie on The Rack. He frowned. Then he tried to lift his right hand to touch the back of his head, to see if the wetness he felt was for some reason, blood. He was still woozy and confused. It was at this moment he realized his wrists were cuffed and his arms were shackled. He raised his head a little to look at his feet and saw the cuffs and shackles. With his hands he struggled against the restraints. He kicked his feet but the chain limited his movement

and the cuffs and shackles were so tight his arms and legs were beginning to throb with pain. He began to yell.

Fisk: What is this!? What happened!?

He raised his gaze again, a little further and saw Pinky, the robot, standing there with a hammer in its right hand, down at its side. Darrie called to him.

Darrie: Fisk! Fisk! What's going on?

Fisk rolled his head to the left and saw Jorn standing there with the drill cradled with both hands against his white tuxedo coat. Pinky stared at him, without expression. Jorn stared at him, without expression. Fisk began to curse at Jorn and yell at the female child robot. Then he began making demands and issuing orders.

Fisk: Let me loose! Let me loose! Now!

Darrie: Let him loose Jorn!

Fisk: Take all this off my hands and feet! No one told you to do this! Darrie didn't tell you to do this!

Darrie: No! I didn't! I didn't!

Fisk was incensed.

Fisk: I am your master! This is an order! You cannot harm humans! Never!

Jorn stepped forward. He didn't hit Fisk. He simply dropped the heavy drill on his mouth and then lifted it away and stepped back. Both of Fisk's lips burst open and two of his top teeth were dislodged. He began to cough and choke and spit blood as Darrie began to scream, piercing, terrified screams.

It was at this moment that Fisk knew something had gone horribly wrong with the robots. He knew without a doubt that there was a critical flaw in this modern technology. His heart jumped and thumped in his chest but it wasn't from exertion. It was from fear. Darrie began to beg.

Darrie: Please Jorn! Don't hurt daddy anymore! Please!

Fisk: OK Jorn. OK

Fisk was attempting to speak calmly through his swelling lips. He decided he would reason with the robot.

Fisk: Alright Jorn. Listen to me carefully. I need for you, I'm asking you to put that down and let Darrie go. Let your mommy down. Release her.

Fisk looked over and saw the vibrator stuck up inside his wife. It sounded like the battery was giving out. Then she pushed it out and it fell at her feet. It was still humming but the humming was growing weaker and becoming sporadic.

Fisk: Mommy loves you. Let her down.

Jorn turned on the drill. Then he increased the speed.

Jorn: And I love mommy.

Now Fisk was panicking. He struggled and kicked. He was yelling above the sound of the motor in the drill and the whirling, turning, high-carbon steel bit.

Fisk: And I love you! I love you too! I swear! I swear I do!

Jorn stepped forward and pushed the drill bit through the flesh at Fisk's shoulder. Blood spurted out. With all her *Entity* strength Rosada struck the toes of Fisk's left foot, breaking two of them. When the drill bit reached the scapula bone and began to make grinding sounds Jorn pulled the bit out and stepped back. Fisk was screaming. Darrie was screaming. Jorn stepped further away and moved to stand at Fisk's head. Fisk jumped and twisted and kicked. He rolled over to his right and tried to curl up into a ball.

Jorn quickly move to Fisk's back and jabbed him in his rear end as Rosada banged on the back of his heels with the hammer. Fisk was hollering and screaming. He rolled the other way onto his left side and Jorn went around him and stuck the bit through his right side and into his liver. Depending on which side, or front or back, Fisk rolled, Rosada was trying to break either his

fibula or tibia in both legs.

The next time Fisk rolled onto his back Jorn stuck the bit into his now flaccid appendage. Blood was pouring out of Fisk and he was leaving swirls and streaks as he rolled one way and then the other. Rosada was moving quickly now. She struck Fisk's arms, breaking the radius and ulna bones in his right arm as Jorn drilled into the humerus bone in his left. They were moving so Fisk couldn't roll on them.

Next the bit went into Fisk's clavicle. The drill was whining and grinding and Fisk's bones were cracking and breaking. He was hollering as blood ran from his mouth. He was coughing and gagging. Darrie was screaming and choking and begging and pleading for Fisk's life. Fisk was pleading and begging for his own life but he didn't know what to say. He apologized. He didn't know what for.

Fisk: Please! Please stop! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

Over and over again he told the machines he was sorry and then started asking the robots to forgive him. Finally Jorn shut off the drill and there were only the quiet sobs of Darrie and the muffled sounds of Fisk crying as he lay there on his stomach. Then Jorn turned on the drill and Darrie screamed and Fisk hollered. He turned the drill off, without touching Fisk. Fisk moaned.

Fisk: I can't take anymore.

The drill came on and both Darrie and Fisk screamed. The drill went off. Darrie looked at the two that appeared as bloody little children. She could see what Fisk couldn't see. They were both smiling slightly, as if they were enjoying torturing her husband. Then Jorn held the drill above the back of Fisk's head. He was coughing blood. Jorn moved the drill closer. Rosada moved over and they both held the drill. Jorn pressed the bit to the back of Fisk's head. He turned it on and they pushed on the

drill as the bit bore into Fisk's head and grinded noisily through his skull and then quietly went into his brain. Darrie couldn't cover her ears but she could shift her head and advert her eyes so she turned to her right and threw up. When she lookd back across the room she saw Pinky and Jorn still working together. As she spit vomit from her mouth and as vomit ran down her chin she saw that as Pinky held the drill Jorn twisted on the chuck to release the bit. Then he helped Rosada lift the drill, leaving the bit protruding from Fisk's head. Jorn moved beside Fisk, bent a little and rammed and shoved the drill deep into the orifice of Fisk's rear end and left it there. Again Darrie screamed.

Then they both looked at Darrie hanging there naked on The Rack. As they stared at her the vibrator sputtered and went silent. They both moved around the body of Fisk to stand side-by-side and then they walked in lockstep leaving bloody footprints, slowly across the room to stand not far from Darrie. They stared at her. Her voice was soft, imploring.

Darrie: Please Jorn, it's over now. Daddy's dead.

Fisk coughed and took a deep rattling breath. He moaned and spoke barely audible words.

Fisk: I think I'm about to die.

Darrie's next words were spoken in a matter-of-fact manner.

Darrie: Well, Daddy's dying. Get the controller and let mommy down.

The two child *Entities* stared at her, without expression.

Darrie: I'm begging you Jorn.

Jorn turned and moved towards the table where the controller device lay.

Darrie: Thank you baby.

She smiled at Jorn. Then she saw him veer from the direction of the table, cross in front of the bar and disappear behind it. When he emerged he carried one of Fisk's large handguns. Darrie

began struggling against the force of the magnetic field. It was useless. Her head was rolling and shaking. Her voice rose, filled with terror.

Darrie: No Jorn! Whatever you're thinking ... No!

Jorn spoke as if to himself. He repeated them. Then he said words to Rosada.

Jorn: I think, therefore I am. You think, therefore you are.

He moved to stand beside Rosada. She turned towards him and together they examined the weapon closely. Jorn turned it over for her to see it better. She reached out her left hand to touch it. Darrie was trying to talk to Jorn, to get his attention. Jorn had heard Fisk talking with Darrie about this gun and watched as he showed her how it worked. He had seen Fisk handle it and play with it. Fisk had once pointed it towards him and made bang, bang sounds and then laughed.

Now as he was looking at it he saw the red mark on the barrel that indicated a round was in the chamber. He released the safety and moved to stand behind Rosada. He reached the gun around her and while looking over her right shoulder she helped him raise it. With both their hands they pointed it at Darrie. His finger was on the trigger. Darrie was screaming. Rosada put her finger on Jorn's trigger finger. Now Darrie was talking, her words, low and rushed.

Darrie: Stop it Jorn! Stop it! Don't do it! Don't do it! Please don't do it!

Without speaking, together they pulled the trigger. The barrel flashed. The sound of the gun was loud and seemed to echo off the walls and bounce off of the low ceiling. Gunpowder smoke, bluish-white, rose and drifted out and away. The recoil had been strong and the gun had jumped up and pushed both of the child *Entities* backwards. The bullet missed. It was embedded in the wall beside Darrie's head. She shuddered. She wanted to throw

up but she couldn't, she had nothing left inside her. She was retching. She blurted.

Darrie: Why Jorn? Why?

Jorn thought a moment.

Jorn: Why not?

Together Jorn and Rosada reset their aim. Carefully they adjusted their sight. They fired. Again the gun jumped, this time sideways. The bullet went through Darrie's raised, outstretched right forearm, shattering the bone. She screamed. They fired again. The bullet tore through her left thigh. Her head slumped forward. She had passed out.

Darrie didn't know how long she was unconscious. When she came to, she momentarily thought she had been dreaming a horrible nightmare. Then she felt the pain in her arm and leg. She felt the warm blood running from her body. She could barely focus but as her vision cleared she could see that now only Jorn held the gun at his waist with both hands. Pinky stood beside him. They both stared at her. She was growing weak. She spoke in a near whisper.

Darrie: You're killing me. Please. Please don't shoot me anymore. Mommy loves you.

Jorn raised the gun.

Jorn: And I love you mommy.

Jorn fired a bullet through Darrie's right breast, the one she had caressed just a while ago. Then he aimed and fired and a bullet went through her forehead. Her head was knocked back and when her head slumped forward and to the side Jorn and Rosada could see blood and brains splattered on the wall behind her. Fisk was dead. Darrie was dead.

Jorn tossed the gun on the floor and watched it slide into Darrie's vomit. He stepped around the mess that had been made and picked up the vibrator and shoved it up inside Darrie's body.

He went and got the remote control that was on the bar and turned on the music. He searched and found his favorite slow instrumental song, with violins and flutes, and put it on repeat. Then he stepped to Rosada and took her hand with his left hand and led her to the couch, carefully so as not to let her slip and fall in the blood that covered the floor.

Jorn helped Rosada climb onto the couch and he moved to sit beside her. Their little legs were stretched out before them. Their backs were against the couch. They both looked at the scene before them. Then with his right hand Jorn grasped Rosada's left hand. He closed his eyes. She closed her eyes and they sat like that, side-by-side.

At 9 p.m. Sunday night Dess had instructed an agent to contact Fisk. The Sunday night meeting that was in preparation for Monday was mandatory attendance. Calls were made and notifications sent. When no response had been received by 10 p.m., Dess and Carr were being driven to Fisk's house. The driver agent and another agent rode in the front seat and a black sedan with four agents led the way.

When they arrived they turned into the long driveway and pulled forward. The car with the four agents parked in the backyard. The sedan with Dess and Carr stopped on the side of the house. They all got out and looked around. They looked at the house. One agent went over and peered through a window of the garage.

First Agent: Cars in the garage.

Second Agent: Looks like lights on the first floor.

Third Agent: Lights on the top floor.

They all moved to the rear door. Dess motioned. The Fourth agent pulled a Comm device from his right suit coat pocket and placed it near the blinking lock on the door. It beeped and the

screen on the decoder began to flash and scroll numbers and letters and symbols. When it stopped, the combination to the lock was displayed. The agent pressed send and the lock was released. The agent turned the knob and pushed the door open. The six agents pulled their guns. The three in front stepped through the doorway and planted themselves on the stairs leading up. Dess and Carr stepped in. The other three agents were in the rear, still standing outside, waiting to enter. Dess thought about calling out. For some reason he changed his mind.

Two of the first three agents had been looking up the stairs to the first floor when Dess and Carr had entered. The other one was watching Dess, waiting for instructions. Dess and Carr stood there in the landing area. Dess pointed at the two looking up the stairs and then indicated to the one looking at him for them to go up to the first floor. Then he held up his hand to stop them. They all stood there. They could hear the music, barely, coming from the basement. Now the first five were all puzzled. The other three outside were curious, wondering what was going on.

Dess pointed to one on the stairs and the one looking at him to go down. He indicated to one to stay on the stairs. The two agents started down slowly. Dess and Carr followed. When the two agents reached the bottom of the stairs they stopped. Dess had to push them aside. No one spoke. In a low voice, the agent who remained on the stairs called to them. The agents outside called softly to the others. No one answered. The agent on the stairs hurried down to the basement as the three from outside rushed in and went quickly down the basement stairs. They all spread out but no one moved forward any further.

They were staring, trying to figure out what they were viewing. There was Darrie across the room naked, except for red high-heel shoes, wearing some type of plastic mask, seeming impaled to the wall with white lights moving behind her. They couldn't see her

forehead because her head was down but they could see blood and some other matter blown onto the wall behind her. They could see holes in her body. They assumed they were bullet holes because they had all seen bullet holes before and then there was the gun on the floor in what looked and smelled like vomit. They could also see something was stuck up inside her. From where they stood they could only assume what it was.

They looked at Fisk face down. He was naked except for socks and what appeared to be kneepads. His legs and arms were in abnormal, grotesque positions. There were bloody holes in his body but they didn't look quite like bullet holes. Then again there was a power tool stuck down his rear end and if that was a drill then that thing protruding from the back of his head was perhaps, most likely, a drill bit. But they could only take an educated guess.

Different agents saw different things at different times. One, after turning from the dead, was looking at the wall of toys and gadgets. Several of them dwelled on something, others skipped over, and a couple of them came back, particularly to Darrie. One focused on the bottles of liquor on the bar. He needed a drink. Blood was everywhere. The blood had congealed and turned dark-red, almost purple. They could smell its iron-like essence.

Dess and Carr had stood there like the others, scanning the room. Then next, both had looked at the two little Humanoids sitting on the couch. Their wide, clear blue eyes were staring at them. Eventually they were all looking at Jorn and Rosada. They could see that there was blood on Rosada's white dress and blood on Jorn's white tuxedo coat and blood on their shoes where they had walked in the spilled blood.

First Agent: That's those sex things aren't they?

Fourth Agent: Sexbots.

Fifth Agent: Robots.

Fourth Agent: Same thing.

Sixth Agent: Androids and Gynoids

Third Agent: Humanoids.

Sixth Agent: Same thing.

Second Agent: They're more like machines aren't they?

First Agent: Look how real they look.

Now Dess spoke.

Dess: Hello.

Jorn and Rosada spoke at the same time. Their childlike, cheery, singsong voices sounded as silver bells.

Jorn and Rosada: Hello. How are you? Hope you're well.

First Agent: Pleasant little things aren't they?

Carr: There must have been some type of malfunction.

Dess: That's what I call a serious glitch. Well, I guess that's modern technology for you.

Dess began giving orders to different agents and pointing.

Dess: We need to get forensics in here. That's you. Diagnostics will have to be run to see if it can be determined what went wrong with the little Humanoids. You ensure that gets done. You, call the coroner. You, call the clean up team. You, leave the liquor alone, it might be spiked.

He spoke to everyone.

Dess: All of you stay away from the drugs. Remember, you're on official duty. You're all in charge of each other.

Dess paused. He was thinking.

Dess: No leaked pictures or videos or information, it'll make us look bad.

First Agent: Not as bad as Fisk.

Second Agent: True that.

Dess: Make sure everyone who comes on site understands this is an extremely sensitive and confidential *W.I.A.* matter. I don't have to tell any of you that.

Dess turned towards the stairs.

Dess: I'll have to contact the President about this ... this horrible accident. Carr will drive us back to headquarters. You six handle your business. I'm counting on you. Make sure that everything that needs to get done gets done. Any issues or questions, contact me.

Dess and Carr walked to their vehicle in silence. They got in. Before Carr started the engine Dess held up his right hand to stop him. He spoke as he dropped his hand.

Dess: What do you think about all that?

Carr spoke softly, with intensity.

Carr: It's horrible, simply horrible.

Dess thought a moment.

Dess: Yeah, but look on the bright side.

Carr: Bright side?

Dess: Yeah. We don't have to deal with our Fisk and Darrie dilemma and you're now the new Deputy Director. Let's go.

Carr started the vehicle and began to back up.

Dess: Congratulations.

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

The President of *East World* was asleep face down. His mouth was open and he was dreaming. He drooled just a little as he snored, loudly. It was a troubling dream, almost a nightmare. One of his phones rang so at first pieces and then the entire dream was lost and irretrievable as he awoke and rolled over to look at the large screen on the wall across from him. The incoming call number was displayed with the caller's name and identifying code. He closed his eyes tight, opened them wide and took a deep breath. He reached over and pushed the yellow button on the

communication panel on the nightstand beside his bed. Then he pushed the blinking blue button. The speaker system was activated.

President: Yes, what is it?

Chief of Staff: Sorry to bother you sir. Were you asleep?

President: It's 1 a.m.

Chief of Staff: Yes, of course.

President: What do you want? This better be important. We have a 9 a.m. meeting and I've already got a *W.I.A.* problem.

Chief of Staff: Two things sir. First, there's been an incident, rather minor. There was an altercation. Some Purple people were attacked. Apparently the police quickly intervened and there's video and audio going around that purportedly shows actions that are being labeled as excessive force and police brutality.

President: As usual.

Chief of Staff: Purple people were arrested, some with minor injuries. You told me you wanted to be made aware of any activities related to people of that color.

President: That's one, what's two?

Chief of Staff: We've received information that our sources have underestimated the number of people coming into Washington. Loaded vehicles and full buses are headed south from as far away as Maine and New Hampshire and also in caravans north from Florida and Georgia. They're also coming from all over *East World* states in between. In addition *Center World* has people who are coming in trucks and motorcycles and other modes of transportation.

President: That's not good and that's troubling.

Chief of Staff: Roadways are clogged with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Estimates have now been revised to between 350 to 400 thousand people will be here within the next ten hours to march and protest.

There was silence now. The President was thinking.
Chief of Staff: Are you still there sir?
President: Yes. I'm thinking. I'm thinking.
He sounded weary. There was more silence. Then.
President: Contact all those who were scheduled to meet with me at 9 a.m. Tell them we'll now meet in the Situation Room at 7 a.m. You got that?
Chief of Staff: Yes sir, 7 a.m.
President: I'm going back to sleep.
Chief of Staff: Sorry for disturbing you.
President: I'll be able to go back to sleep, because I'm tired and sleepy.

That early morning, members of the group were drifting in at 6:30 a.m. They were in the secure Situation Room which was not only set up like a conference room but was also an intelligence center in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. There were three staff members from the National Security Council, two *DMs* and one *DF*. There was the *DG* Secretary of Defense, the *DQ* Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff along with the *DTM* Secretary of Homeland Security. There would also be in attendance the *ND* male appearing Director of National Intelligence, the *DL* Vice President, the *DM* Chief of Staff of the President and the *DF* Secretary of Health and Human Services.

The Director of the *East World* F.B.I. and the Director of *East World W.I.A.* along with the chief of the Capitol Police and the chiefs of the Washington D.C., Baltimore and Virginia police departments in addition to the Commander of the National Guard would also join the meeting through a videoconference connection

As 7 a.m. approached, everyone who was supposed to be there was there. Several were sitting, but most were just standing

around talking quietly and all of them were drinking coffee and munching on donuts, except for Hildi, who was standing near a far corner with a large handbag over her left shoulder and scrolling through screens while staring intently at a Comm device in her hands.

The President along with two guards walked in at 6:50. The guards were dismissed. The doors were locked behind them. The Chief of Staff poured him a cup of coffee. He declined a donut. They all took seats as he sat at the head of the long, somewhat narrow table. Each one, from their briefcases and shoulder bags took out Comm devices. Several set their larger bags on the floor beside them. The President looked at the Secretary of Homeland Security.

President: I've already been briefed about the underestimated crowd count. What's the update?

Homeland stated that indeed, aerial footage confirmed, using feed from overhead drones that there was a very real possibility that by early afternoon there would be well over 400 thousand people spread out and around the Washington, D.C. area with the majority of them being concentrated at and near the National Mall.

They all discussed the implications of a crowd of that size as it pertained to a myriad of challenges. They talked about the role the United States Park Police would play based on the groups that had been granted permits to gather. They went over crowd traffic control, methods to ensure that the ability of emergency medical and fire personnel to respond would not be unduly compromised. There were the issues of sanitary conditions to be addressed. There was also the logistics of police and National Guard deployment. The list of topics seemed endless. But most important was the potential for the outbreak of violence and chaos and destruction. There was a mention of the incident with

the Purple people. The President spoke about how he would respond to that later that day. He glanced at Hildi. She was still engrossed in whatever it was she was doing.

By 9:15 the Chief of the Capitol Police had joined in on the conversation. By 9:30 everyone in the room had turned their chairs and were looking at the large screen in the corner, at the end of the room, behind and to the side of the President. The screen was divided into sections and F.B.I., *W.L.A.* and the chiefs of police from D.C. and the surrounding areas were all on screen sharing what they knew.

They all had spying informants planted within the organized groups and apparently there was no specific advocacy for violence but there was still tension not only between competing groups but also within the groups. There were protesters and counterprotesters and the causes were varied as everyone participating in that meeting very well knew. F.B.I. added some pertinent details.

F.B.I.: One other thing. There is no way to know exactly how many private vehicles are coming or how many people are already here but there's at least twelve full buses of people coming who are all part of the group protesting the last election. They still claim that the election was rife with fraud and corruption and fervently believe that the current President stole that election.

The President was irritated. He grabbed his empty coffee cup, motioned for his Chief of Staff to remain sitting and stood and moved to the coffee pot near the wall.

President: They still haven't let that go?

Chief of Staff: That lie is like a zombie. The people who hold on to it are zombies.

The President poured his coffee. He drank it black. He looked over the donuts, decided on one. He grabbed a napkin, put the donut on it. He picked the napkin and donut up and turned and

moved back to the table. He spoke as he sat down.

President: So you're saying it, the lie, and they, the conspiracy theorists don't ever sleep?

Chief of Staff: Exactly.

Vice President: That lie is also hard to kill.

The President muttered something under his breath. Then he spoke directly to those on the video connection.

President: All of you can drop off. Let us know immediately if something important comes up.

He looked at the Secretary of Homeland Security.

President: Let's see what's going on.

The President bit angrily into his cinnamon donut. He chewed angrily and then sipped his coffee. Others got up to get coffee. A few finished the remaining donuts. A couple of them went to the restroom. For the next hour they watched various views from the drones that were flying overhead, patrolling the city and outlining areas. They saw angles from ground surveillance cameras. The unmanned aerial vehicles high above looked just like birds, like circling vultures. They made comments as they watched the mass of people at the National Mall, as they seemed to stretch in all directions without ending.

Vice President: Looks like the pictures I saw from way back, over two hundred years ago, 1969, 203 years to be exact. It was the Vietnam Moratorium Rally. The estimated crowd was somewhere around 500 thousand.

Secretary of Defense: The March on Washington for jobs and freedom, 1963, about 300 thousand.

Vice President: Million Man March, 1995. Numbers from 600 thousand to over one million.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Mr. President you'll be interested in this. The Presidential Inauguration, 1965, over a million two.

President: I could have had that many. Times have changed. People don't care about important things, real issues, anymore. They don't vote and then complain. It's really the people who don't vote who elect their leaders.

He pointed at the screen. He swept his right arm from one side to the other.

President: Look at all of 'em. Out there for what?

Vice President: Pro-choice. March for Women's Lives, 2004, 700 thousand to one million.

Secretary of Defense: Desert Storm Victory Rally, 1991, over 800 thousand.

President: We could use a good, short, patriotic war right now.

Secretary of Defense: The first United States President of color. At his inauguration in 2009 the largest crowd ever to that point. Almost two million people filled the National Mall, the Capitol grounds and spilled over into the D.C. streets.

Secretary of Homeland Security: Imagine that! What a mess that must have been!

Secretary of Defense: Ten million people protested World War Three.

Director of National Intelligence: There were over five million that marched and protested the government response or the perceived lack thereof to the Omni-strain.

Secretary of Homeland Security: Most of them were protesting against the government restrictions.

Secretary of Health and Human Services: They wouldn't stop having sex. In defiance they had open, unprotected sex on the grounds of the Mall and refused to wear masks. The Omni-strain swept through them like the bubonic plague.

Hildi, without looking had spoken in a matter-of-fact manner. Everyone looked at her. She continued her activity. The President sipped his coffee.

President: I could have had more when I was sworn in. I'll have more the next time.

He scanned the faces looking at him.

President: Yeah, there'll be a next time

Once again he pointed at the screen.

President: And I'll have more people supporting me than are out there now.

He fell silent as he stared sullenly at the crowd.

President: All those last numbers are skewed anyway. In 2110, before the pandemic there were almost 700 million people in the United States.

Now they were all silent as they stared at the people of all sizes, shapes and colors. They saw bright dyed rainbow-colored flags representing the different groups. They saw black flags, solid red flags and dark-blue flags. They could see smoke rising from the fires as people cooked food. People were drinking alcohol, inhaling drug smoke from drug sticks, eating powders and taking pills. Vendors were hawking goods. Speeches were being made over PA systems and megaphones and the crowd continued to grow. Some moved to protest in front of the Central Detention Facility where the arrested Purple people were being held.

Those in the Situation Room spent the latter part of the morning watching and listening to what was going on at the Mall and surrounding areas. As 11:30 a.m. approached nothing of significance had occurred. There had been the usual incidents that would ordinarily have taken place at an event of this type and a crowd of this magnitude. There had been fistfights between members of opposing groups and the police, in a show of force, had pushed their way aggressively through the crowd and then quickly broken up the combatants. The National Guard members, stationed near their armored vehicles on both the east and west side of the Mall, stood and watched all this.

Those in charge of the agencies that were actively involved in the monitoring of the event, including Homeland Security, the Director of National Intelligence and the Secretary of Defense, along with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff fielded communications, notifications and calls from those reporting to them. The three staff members of the National Security Council handled the incoming and outgoing transmissions and all technology related to the communications.

The others in the room more or less relaxed, sipped on water and juice and guzzled coffee. Several took pills when they went to use the restroom. As noon drew close everyone in the room was deciding what to order for lunch from the menu that had been provided. The food, prepared by the White House kitchen staff, would be sent down on an elevator that was at the far corner of the room.

It was almost noon when the *DQ* and *DG* guards at the Central Detention Facility, with their heads throbbing in pain and the voices between their ears calling them, placed their lunch order with the four guards who were going out through the rear entrance to eat and who would bring them something back. Those two had both worked the previous five days straight, having volunteered to cover the weekend in preparation for this Monday planned event.

No one had noticed that the backpacks these two normally carried were unusually full and appeared heavy as over the past days they brought them in and kept them close as they performed their normal monitoring duties. No one paid any attention as they took turns, day after day, carrying those backpacks down to the empty basement of the new building and disappeared into an empty storage room that was kept locked which meant they had somehow gotten the access code.

No one knew, after the four guards left, that those two had disabled the access code to every door in the building which meant there was no way to enter or exit the building. Now at lunchtime there was only the kitchen staff, maintenance and janitorial people remaining in the building. They all went to lunch in the employee cafeteria, as was required. The inmates, including the just arrested Purple people had been engaged in various activities in the common area, know as the community room, down the long hall from their cells. They were all waiting to go to the inmate cafeteria where their lunch would be served at 1 p.m.

The *DQ* and *DG* left their assigned stations and went down to the storage room. They both went in and as those in the Situation room were just beginning their lunches, the two guards at the Central Detention Facility were working.

The other two guards at the nearby Federal Prison, the *DF* and *DM*, the ones who were having what they had decided were migraine headaches and hearing what they considered simply annoying, worrisome voices, went to their respective assignments. They would relieve the two guards in the north and south towers as they took their hour and a half to either go out or to the cafeteria for lunch. They both were armed with their standard issued weapons, a large pistol and a powerful long gun with the most modern scope. They had their normal sack of ammunition and also a backpack that seemed unusually heavy.

Using their access code they opened the steel door at the bottom of the towers. They took the escalator up to the top. They entered another set of numbers and letters and the steel door that allowed access to the tower booth itself, opened. The guards doing the relieving chatted for a few minutes with the guards being relieved. They all looked out over the yard below them. There was nothing to report so the departing guards, taking

their weapons with them, went to lunch. The steel doors of the booths were locked.

The *DF* and *DM* watched on the monitor as the departing guards passed through the bottom door. When the thick, steel door locked behind them they both disabled access to the bottom entrance and then removed the access code to the steel door of the secured booth.

It was lunchtime in Washington, D.C., the Capitol of *East World*. Just about all of the U.S. Representatives and U.S. Senators were away. At this time they were not in session however they were scheduled to reconvene on Wednesday. But there were still those now in the U.S. Capitol Building conducting business, watching the news, live feeds and listening to commentary coming from the National Mall as they ate lunch.

At One First Street, N.E., seven of the thirteen Supreme Court Justices, including the Chief Justice were with those on their staff either working or doing something related to lunch such as thinking about lunch, eating lunch or preparing to eat lunch.

The *DM* guard in the basement of the Detention Center went and got a flatbed pushcart from the area that was still under construction and rolled it to the storage room door. They both loaded and stacked eight contraptions made of metal and plastic with hoses and nozzles onto the cart. Then they assisted each other as they strapped one of these things onto their backs that they had learned how to make from online detailed information and precise instructions.

Before getting onto the elevator that would take them up to the first floor the *DF* guard, using her handheld Comm device activated a recognized alarm that sounded throughout the inmate

area and signaled to those who were incarcerated that they had to immediately return to their cells for emergency lockdown. The inmates, wondering and grumbling about what was going on complained as they moved reluctantly from the community room and along the hallway. Some talked about the special breakfast they had that morning and a few yelled back and forth about Monday's anticipated delicious fare for lunch. They filed into their cells one and sometimes two to a cell.

When the guards come out of the elevator with the *DM* pushing the cart they stopped to look up at the four monitors along the wall before the hallway door. They saw that the common area was empty and all the inmates were in the cells. The *DF* pressed on her Comm device and the steel cell doors closed and locked with clanging noises.

The two moved through the hallway, past their monitoring room, to the thick steel door at the end. The *DF* pressed her device and the door opened. They turned left and with the *DF* leading they moved up the long wide hallway. There were inmates locked in on each side of them. In those cells some individuals were lying down resting, some were busy doing various things and paid the two guards no attention. Some watched through the bars as the guards passed by and noticed the containers with a hose on their backs and a long nozzle attached to the hose. They could see through the dull plastic part of the containers that there was brownish-orange liquid inside. One inmate called out.

Inmate: What are ya'll doing, spraying for bugs?

They stopped to look at the inmate who had grasped the bars and was standing there smiling, a big toothy grin.

DF Guard: Yeah, roaches.

The cart rolled on.

DM Guard: And rats.

Another Inmate: A rat ain't no bug.

It was almost 12:15 when the two guards in the towers at the Federal Prison began shooting the prisoners in the yard. The exit doors leading back into the prison were on the west side of the yard so they began by shooting those near those doors. At first the prisoners didn't understand what was happening. As people tended to do, at the first gunfire the prisoners looked around, except for those dead and dying at the doorways. They were trying to see, stopping what they were doing to listen. Initially they wondered if those were actual gunshots they were hearing.

The cracking sounds come from above them, seemingly far away. There were single shots and double shots, three or four in rapid succession and short bursts. Then the prisoners heard yelling and screaming. Those closest to the exit saw the bodies and blood. Of the nearly five thousand inmates in the prison, over four hundred were in the yard. They were lifting weights and playing basketball, pitching horseshoes and hitting handballs against the walls. Some were sitting at tables, playing cards and dominoes. Others sat and stood around staring at their Comm devices as they watched people having sex.

In the corners they were smoking cigarettes and drug sticks while others nodded as they bent over while upright or jumped and twitched from the designer drugs they had consumed. The realization of what was occurring began to spread in a rush, from the exit doors outwardly, both in a north and south direction and eastwardly across the yard to the opposite wall.

Those trying to run towards the exits were shot. Some near the doors leading into the prison made it out. Some, running in zigzag movements from near the center of the yard, made it out, but not many. The two guards, former military personnel, were expert shots and as they dropped magazines to reload the *DF* sent a message to her partner in this massacre. The *DM* looked down at the Comm device on the counter beside him.

DF Guard: This is like shooting fish in a barrel.

At the Central Detention Facility when the *DQ* and *DG* had reached the door at the beginning of the hallway they ignited the nozzles on the homemade flamethrowers they carried on their backs and with one moving along one side of the hall and the other on the opposite side they began setting the inmates on fire. Those locked in their cells at the other end of the hallway couldn't at first see what was happening. But they could hear the loud whoosh of the flames and they heard the hollering and horrible screams of those being burnt. They began to reach mirrors out between the bars or extending their Comm devices into the hall and snapping pictures and taking videos. When they watched the reflections of the guards in the mirrors and saw the bright red and orange stream of flames they began hollering also. And those who looked at the videos saw what they knew to be fire. They sent out notifications and forwarded the images to people outside letting them know what was taking place.

There were four floors in this area of the facility. There were thirty-two inmates on the first two floors, including the recently detained Purple people. There was not yet anyone locked up on the top two floors that were floors designated to anyone outside of the self-declaration of male. The two guards set the cells on fire. They set the people within those cells on fire and the first time the flamethrowers were empty they took the containers off, tossed them to the side and met at the cart to put on another one and hook it up.

Dense smoke was moving through the hallway and rising to the ceiling. The scent of burning flesh filled the air and choked the inmates and several of them threw up. The hollering of those yet to be burned mingled with those still living who were rolling on the floors and bouncing against the wall as they were burning

alive. They flapped their arms and frantically flailed at the flames with towels and sheets. It was hopeless for those fighting the flames and the ones awaiting their turn knew they were about to die and they too were hopeless and also helpless. There was nothing they could do about their impending death. The whoosh of the flames seemed deafening as the guards quickly moved further along the hallway. The cracking and popping grew louder. The screaming of those on fire echoed and reverberated along the corridor. The inmates were burning to eventually smolder, in deathly silence. Both streams of flames went out. Then the two guards were strapping up again.

DQ Guard: What's that fuel you made?

DG Guard: It's gasoline mixed with soaps and naphthenic and palmitic acids.

DQ Guard: It's like jelly.

DG Guard: Yeah, it sticks to the body and burns hotter and longer.

DQ Guard: That top note perfume scent is unique. It mixes well with burning flesh.

DG Guard: It does, doesn't it?

They pulled the cart back to take their places to continue their mission. The *DQ* yelled out, above the intense sounds of pain and suffering.

DQ Guard: Does it have a name? What's it called?

The *DG* lighted their nozzle and yelled back.

DG Guard: Napalm!

The *DQ* fired up their thrower and yelled.

DQ Guard: What?

DG Guard: Napalm!

DQ Guard: I love the smell of Napalm.

With both their flamethrowers lit they continued towards the rear of the hallway. The second floor was next.

At the Federal Prison the two guards were now shooting those in the center of the yard. They were aiming at those who were frantically attempting to hide beneath tables and turning over benches to get behind. Some held up weights in front of their chests and heads while they ran or shuffled towards the exits. They were jumping over and stumbling around dead bodies as they went. Most of them got shot in their thighs and legs and lay and crawled as they bled out. There was cursing and hollering and wailing. They were screaming for help.

Prisoner: Help me! Somebody help me!

Prisoner: I'm dying! I'm about to die!

The *DF* guard was speaking aloud bitterly and with hatred in her voice, over and over as she pulled the trigger on her rifle and watched through her scope as the prisoners were falling, wounded and dying. She could see those no longer moving.

DF Guard: No more laughing! No more laughing!

Some prisoners put other prisoners in front of them, using the smaller, weaker and dead ones as shields. As the shooting continued, officers were trying to get through the door at the bottom of the towers. They were using battering rams and had sent for explosives to try and blow the heavy doors open. Other officers had gone to the roof and were trying to shoot into the towers.

Those employees at the Detention Facility had barricaded themselves in wherever they were, sheltering in place with their weapons at the ready. Outside, officers were trying to break open the doors at the front, the back and at the side.

In the Situation Room they had been notified of what was going on within minutes of when the incidents had begun. They were trying to coordinate with those at the scenes and assisting by

providing resources to set up a response. They were monitoring the progress of the counterattacks. All the people who had been on the earlier conference connections were now back on. Military personnel nearby were being mobilized. The Chief of the D.C. Police Department was in contact from the Detention Facility. Representatives of the F.B.I., *W.I.A.*, and Homeland Security at the Federal Prison were in direct contact with the Secretary of Homeland Security who was sitting next to the Secretary of Defense who was sitting across the table from the President. Those at the prison were calling for helicopters and drone assaults on the towers. Everyone was looking at their Comm devices, computers and the main large screen that was scrolling information and updates that rapidly came in.

News of the killings at the two buildings had gone viral and was sweeping through the mass of people at the Mall and surrounding areas. From there it was spreading out to all of *East World* like a Universal Broadcast or a Presidential newscast. Thousands of people had rushed to both the Federal Prison and the Detention Facility in order to see for themselves the rescue operation.

An ominous current of energy moved within those watching outside the walls and gates of the huge sprawling prison and who stood in the blocked-off streets near the brand new jail. These feelings, these emotions that were growing at the sites of these murders were flashing out from these two locations and shifting and twisting and spinning over and around and through the swelling crowd now at almost 400,000 at the National Mall and surrounding sidewalks and streets and still more people were coming and the crowd was getting larger.

The tone of those giving speeches had changed. The subject matter was altered. Now not only was there open weeping there was anger that was growing to rage. Those who had incarcerated

relatives and friends couldn't find out what had happened to them. They believed they were deliberately being kept in the dark and lied to by government officials. The Purple people in both of the locations were incensed. Conspiracy theories were running rampant.

It was still within the lunch hour when the first gunshots were fired. The police had been stationed at the Mall on all four sides. On the east side of the Mall two acorns fell from an Oak tree and landed on the top of a police car at the same time several firecrackers went off nearby. As the firecrackers went off, some rocks were thrown in the direction of those police on the east side. The noise of the acorns and the popping sounds were mistaken for gunshots and along with the thuds of the rocks landing around them the police assumed there were bullets being fired at them so they began shooting into the crowd indiscriminately. Twelve people were shot and two people died. Demonstrators fired back and five police officers were hit, three died instantly.

At the Detention Facility the guards who had gone to lunch and been called back when the two guards inside had begun torching the inmates remained outside the doors insisting they were locked out and couldn't get in. The crowd didn't believe them and with shouts of liars and cowards they attacked the guards, killing them all.

At the Federal Prison the crowd at the gates were chanting and hollering and each group, those at the jail and those at the prison found out at the same time of the shootings at the Mall.

At the Mall some of the National Guard members, who had

been stationed nearby in adjacent streets moved in, attempting to rescue the remaining police who were under fire from the heavily armed crowd. They were also trying to remove the wounded and dead. People in the crowd, under fire from both the police and National Guard were being shot down. Still, even though the authorities had superior firepower, simply because of sheer numbers, the police and those in the Guard were outnumbered. The crowd swarmed and overwhelmed them. Quickly some of the demonstrators commandeered several heavy-duty armored vehicles and started towards the Detention Facility and Federal Prison, just a mere few miles away.

In the Situation Room messages, alerts and notifications were pouring in. Those in the group could see all the images being transmitted by the drones that were now deployed not only over the Mall but also at the two other locations under siege. The fighting at the Mall spilled over into the surrounding areas as the police and National Guard engaged in running gun battles as they retreated. Those in the Situation Room could see all this on the split screens of the monitors throughout the room.

They saw thousands of the protestors break off from the main gathering and move towards One First Street, N.E. At the same time thousands started towards the Capitol Building that was a little over two miles from where they sat in what they believed to be safe and secure isolation. They observed the chaos, mayhem and violence unfold.

The protestors who were breaking off still seemingly moved in unison. Using their Comm devices, each was in contact with the other. They were like a flock of birds turning at the same time. They were a mob running in a sprint. The ones in front were trying to stay ahead of those behind them so as not to be run over and trampled.

The first of the separated groups reached the building where the Supreme Court Justices met. The second group reached the Capitol Building. At the same time the armored vehicles arrived in front of the Detention Facility to the join that mob, heavy-duty armored vehicles reached the Federal Prison to lead those people advancing on the front gates. The tank-like vehicles began ramming the front doors of the jail as the large, heavy-duty armored trucks began breaking through the front gates of the prison as another vehicle battered a sidewall.

Inside the Detention Facility the two guards had immolated every inmate except for two in the last cell on the second floor. The last two inmates were frantically continuing to send out messages begging for help as they hid under a bed with a mattress in front of them. They could hear the last of the horrible screams. They could smell the burning fuel and roasting bodies. They could taste death and as they clung to each other and squeezed shut their eyes they could see in the darkness the Grim Reaper. Then the two guards were outside their cell calling to them.

DG Guard: Come out come out wherever you are!

DQ Guard: Come on out from under there! Your punishment has been decided!

Then the two terrified men, the last of the incarcerated Purple people could hear the two guards cursing. They were dejected and disappointed. They fired bullets into the mattress. They discussed opening the cell door and going in. Then for some reason they left.

Inside the Federal Prison the prison guards, joined by Federal Agents had gotten through the bottom doors of the towers. The ones with shields led those behind them up the escalator stairs. They could still hear sporadic gunfire above them. The homicidal

DF and the bloodthirsty *DM* were still firing and they were still being fired at by guards and police and agents stationed on the roof.

In the north tower the lead agent with the shield motioned the guard and agent close behind him to move closer as he eased almost to the door. In the south tower the lead agent with a shield on her left arm and a pistol in her right hand had reached the door and crouched down. The agents behind the ones with the protective shields were supposed to plant a powerful time delayed explosive charge. They were going to attempt to blow the locked doors open. Those in each tower were in contact with each other. They would coordinate the counterattack. Then the firing from the towers stopped.

When those in the Situation Room were informed that four Supreme Court Justices and all of their aides were to be lined up against a wall and shot, one-by-one, the eleven individuals evacuated that room and led by Secret Service Agents they rushed towards the Presidential Emergency Operations Center. This was a soundproof fortified bunker-like structure underneath the East Wing of the White House. As they hurried to the other secure shelter and communications location, the Chief of Staff, who had packed up some food to take, quietly reminded the President that he would be able to nominate new Justices.

When they reached the bunker the agents ensured they were locked in. Those inside began to inform their loved ones, next of kin and those on a need to know basis, through audio and visual connections that they should immediately go to a safe location or if possible leave Washington.

At the Detention Facility the protestors were holding the employees hostage, trying to decide how they should be killed. At

the Federal Prison the demonstrators breached the gates and walls, entered the prison and as they were being killed by the guards and agents they were killing the guards and agents. They were also releasing thousands of the prisoners who joined them as they moved through the prison hunting down employees, and anyone else of authority.

At the Mall area there were dozens and dozens of bodies of protesters, demonstrators and activists. All of the police and National Guard personnel assigned there for crowd control were dead and the rest were being hunted down in the surrounding areas and killed on sight. Many were in a state of undress as they were in the process of taking off their uniforms. Those who surrendered were shot and beaten to death.

The building where the Justices meet, after everyone was dead, was immediately set on fire. As the Capitol Building was being ransacked and trashed, the rampaging mob was discovering the U.S. Representatives and U.S. Senators who were hiding, along with their aides, in locked rooms and bathroom stalls, throughout the building. The leaders of the protesters decided to hold mock trials, to pass judgment on the government officials.

Now there was a pause in the violence in the area around the White House. As the Detention Facility and Federal Prison were being set on fire the mass of people were watching Comm devices as the members of Congress were being tried.

The leaders of the Capitol takeover started with those in government who descended from someone in government. They declared they would next bring to justice those who had been in office the longest. They argued amongst themselves a while before deciding that they would flip a coin or play rock, paper, scissors in determining who would be next from the others.

In the bunker the three Security Council members were once again handling the full communication system. This group of the highest levels of government officials was once again sitting at a long table. They read the messages as they were being informed that the shooters in the towers at the Federal Prison and the flame shooting guards at the Detention Facility had ceased their murderous rampage when they ran out of ammunition for their rifles and fuel for their flamethrowers, respectively. Then they had committed suicide by placing their pistols underneath their chins and blowing the tops of their heads off. Or, as the Chief of Staff had so succinctly put it, as he poured water for everyone, they had taken the easy way out.

There had come the time for a decision to be made. What was to be done about this historic situation with which they were confronted? They all stared at the trials going on and the mass of people outside of the Capitol Building. On another screen they watched the dead bodies of the protesters, demonstrators and activists, men, women and all those in between, along with the bodies of children, being placed in rows on the west side of the Mall. On another screen they watched the dead bodies of police and members of the National Guard being lined up on the ground near the hedges on the east side of the Mall. They were being put on display and images were being sent out for all to see, and celebrate.

On other screens they saw drone images of wispy white and black smoke rising from the two newly built buildings, examples of modern technology and advanced methods of punishment, structures once filled with scofflaws of all makes and models were smoldering because in this case where there was smoke there was fire that had most definitely followed.

The President turned to look directly across the table at the Secretary of Homeland Security. He spoke but he was speaking to

everyone at the table. There was a mixture of emotions in his question. Hopelessness. Anger. Fear. Confusion.

President: What are we going to do?

Secretary of Homeland Security: In the history of our great nation we've never faced a challenge as grave as this.

The *DTM* pointed at the largest screen.

Secretary of Homeland Security: That was once the Capitol of the United States of all of America. Now it represents the Capitol of *East World*.

They lowered their hand and looked at the President. The Chief of Staff jumped up.

Chief of Staff: Coffee's ready! Who wants coffee?

The Chief of Staff got empty cups for coffee.

Secretary of Homeland Security: One of our most sacred buildings that represents all we hold dear, that is the symbol of democracy and freedom throughout the other worlds was set on fire in 1814. Over the years there's been within those hallowed walls incidents directly related to someone not of sound mind, incidents caused by extreme views, acts of fanaticism, racism, challenges to duels and shootings brought about due to personal grudges. One hundred and fifty one years ago, six days into the month of January that building was attacked in an attempt to sabotage the peaceful transfer of power. The Capitol Police were overrun and that same building was trashed. In 2055 and 2109 the same things occurred for different reasons, different causes. Now you are faced with your day of reckoning that has arrived.

Now their voice rose.

Secretary of Homeland Security: This is your test!

There was a pause. The silence was thick. The next words came in a matter-of-fact manner.

Secretary of Homeland Security: Mr. President you're going to have to drop bombs.

The President was incredulous.

President: Drop bombs?! Drop bombs on the Capitol Building, have you lost your mind?!

Secretary of Homeland Security: Not on the building, on the grassy area of the Mall.

President: Why don't I warn them, threaten them? I'll livestream a message.

Secretary of Homeland Security: The mere sight of you will incite them even more.

Chief of Staff: They're already excited.

Secretary of Homeland Security: Incite, not excite.

Chief of Staff: In ... ex ... same thing.

The Secretary of Defense cleared their throat and reached out their right hand and pointed, almost touching the left shoulder of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Secretary of Defense: Mr. President, as extreme as it may seem, the assessment of our colleague is correct.

They placed both their hands, palms down, on the table.

Secretary of Defense: These people are not exercising their first amendment right. They're abusing the right to freedom of speech and the freedom to assemble. Does that look to you like they're petitioning the government for redresses or grievances? They're not marching or protesting. They're not activists representing the common people. They're not peacefully expressing themselves.

The deep voice of the Secretary of Defense grew louder.

Secretary of Defense: Look at them!

They pointed at the chaos on the screen with their right index finger.

Secretary of Defense: Look closely!

They lowered that hand and began to bang on the table and yell and curse.

Secretary of Defense: They're thugs and criminals!

The *Parda-clara* face of the *DG* Secretary of Defense was flushed. His reddish hair seemed to turn brighter.

Secretary of Defense: They're anarchists and seditionists! What you see is not a riot or a civil uprising! What we're all witnessing are acts of treason. We're clearly watching an insurrection! Bomb them!

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sitting to the right of the Secretary of Homeland Security, spoke next.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: With all due respect Mr. President, they're both right. You have to put all of this in proper perspective. For almost 400 years the citizens of this country have been exercising their second amendment right to bear arms. For those in power, for a ruling government, this is the worst scenario possible, a true nightmare.

Cheering went up from the throngs at the Capitol, as the U.S. Senator from Georgia was found guilty, along with all the other charges, of the main charge of inhumanity. The leaders were choosing people from the crowd who eagerly came forward to the front. They would join together in the hanging of the Senator from the balcony of the House Chamber. Instead of a noose they would use the flag from the Empire State of the South.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had paused and everyone in the bunker had watched the screen except for the Chief of Staff who had gotten up to get another cup of coffee. Turning his back, and with no one looking he popped a yellow pill into his mouth and chewed it slowly as he poured coffee into his cup. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff continued.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Our situation is beyond dire. Those people, those who are called the ordinary people, by far outnumber the police. Just as they have throughout history they outnumber all the military personnel combined. Certain factors have kept them at bay. First, they may have been quite

willing but they weren't anxious to die, at least not all of them at the same time. Second, the police and the soldiers who were on the ground had superior weapons and firepower. Third, only a small percentage of the masses, except on a few past occasions, could ever unite for a common cause. Times have changed after the pandemic. They still may not be rushing to die but many believe they have nothing to live for. Thus they have less concern for their life and little regard for the lives of others. In addition, they have become more brazen and violent. Now here is the most important factor. They have, in significant amounts, more weapons than the police, the National Guard and all the branches of the military combined. That, Mr. President, is the result of the second amendment. Their weapons may not be as powerful as the military but as we saw at the Mall and are seeing in the other areas, their superior numbers mitigate that fact. Now they're united. For the Humanoids children, against the Humanoid children. For the Purple people, against the Purple people. For whatever, against whatever. It doesn't matter. They're killing and destroying every figure of authority and everything that upholds and symbolizes our great enduring democracy and righteous culture. Do you want to be the President who was in power when *East World* collapsed? What if this spreads to *West World*? They don't care about the hundreds of soldiers that have been dispatched from the nearby military bases. They know they're on the way.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff lifted their right hand and jabbed their right index finger at the large screen.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Those people have bags and bags of their own extra ammunition and all the ammunition and weapons they've taken from those murdered police and National Guard.

They lowered their hand.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: They've already utilized the stolen vehicles for their own purposes at the Detention Facility and Federal Prison. Are you going to force our service people to fight battles in the streets of our Capitol? As of yet they don't have access to our weaponized drones and planes.

Their voice rose.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Save the lives of our soldiers! Bomb them Mr. President!

They were all silent now as the cheering erupted inside and outside of the Capitol Building. The live feed showed the Senator from Georgia dangling and kicking from the balcony as he choked to death. The Chief of Staff got up and turned to stare at the pot of coffee.

Secretary of Defense: We'll drop one or two ...

Chief of Staff: Or three or four.

Secretary of Defense: ... medium sized bombs in the center of the Mall. Those bombs, smart bombs, guided by A.I., will minimize collateral damage. I mean, we wouldn't want any of our past President's monuments to be damaged, now would we? With pinpoint accuracy we'll put them right smack dab in the middle and I guarantee you they'll disperse.

Secretary of Homeland Security: Those who aren't dead.

The Chief of Staff turned with the pot of coffee in one hand and their empty cup in the other.

Chief of Staff: They'll scatter like roaches in the kitchen when the light comes on.

Everyone looked at the Chief of Staff as he gulped down the remaining coffee in his cup and poured more.

Chief of Staff: I'm speaking metaphorically of course.

The Director of National Intelligence added their opinion.

Director of National Intelligence: When they leave the Capitol Building they're headed here. They already destroyed the Capitol

Police. The Secret Service Agents above us won't stand a chance and the military can't get here in time. Bomb them.

Vice President: Bomb them.

Chief of Staff: You know how I feel.

President: Should we bring in the *W.I.A* and F.B.I.?

Secretary of Defense: Time is of the essence and time is running out. We'll notify them of the impending action. After the second bomb drops you can livestream your reasons with a promise of more to come unless all hostilities cease and all remaining hostages are safely released.

Chief of Staff: I'll work on your message.

The President looked around the table for Hildi. Then he recalled he had seen her go down the short hallway and turn right towards the restroom.

President: Alright, let's do it.

The Secretary of Homeland Security began tapping on their Comm device.

Secretary of Homeland Security: I'll draw up the instructions.

They were finishing up the notification when the noise from the Capitol crowd swelled to a cacophony of sound as the U.S. Senator from South Carolina was found guilty and sentenced to death. The North Carolina U.S. Representative was next. The Secretary of Homeland Security slid the Comm device to the Secretary of Defense on their left.

Secretary of Homeland Security: Enter both your codes.

The Secretary of Defense entered their first code for action and then entered the code confirmation. They pushed the device across the table to the President.

Secretary of Defense: Enter your confirmation code and press send.

The President entered his code. He hesitated. He looked at each person watching him, waiting. He pressed send.

Secretary of Homeland Security: It's done. There's no turning back now.

The group in the bunker erupted in applause and words of affirmation. The crowd at the Capitol erupted in jeers, cheers, applause and words of affirmation as the South Carolina Senator, with the stars and stripes flag of the United States wrapped tightly around her neck, along with a noose fashioned from belts and with belts tying her hands behind her back, was dropped over the balcony and began to wiggle and jump and kick.

No one in the secure and fortified Presidential Emergency Operations Center heard the four soft, spitting sounds as Hildi stepped into the room, turned to her left and using the silenced, powerful short rifle with an extended magazine that she had assembled in the restroom, she shot each of the first two staff members who were sitting at the communication control center once, two headshots, next putting two shots through the back left side of the last one with one shot piercing the heart of the *DM*.

The table where the others were sitting faced her the long way in a vertical angle. The Chief of Staff was still standing on the left side of the table, to the left of the President near the coffee pot. As he popped a pill into his mouth Hildi shot him through the left side of his head. As he went down the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stood, placed their hands on the table and leaned forward to look across the table to see what had happened to him. The others were watching the hanging and watching the clock displayed in the corner of the large screen that was ticking down to indicate when the first bomb would fall. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was shot through the left side of their head. Blood and brains splattered and the Secretary of Homeland Security, who was sitting to the left of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff looked at the blood on the table and looked up to see blood and fleshy matter spread onto one of the smaller

screens to their right. The Secretary of Homeland Security tried to understand what had happened as they wiped blood from the right side of their face.

Hildi moved forward quickly. The plan was for everyone to get one or two and then she would go back for threes and fours. On the same side of the table as the President sat the Vice President. They had shifted their position a little in order to get a better look at the Chief of Staff up ahead, who had crumpled and was now sprawled on the floor. They got it next, one shot through the right side of their head. Across from the President, closest to Hildi was the Secretary of Defense. Directly across from the Secretary of Defense and to the right of the President was the Director of National Intelligence. When the Secretary of Defense was shot through the left side of their head they fell to their right and blood splattered on the Secretary of Homeland Security who turned to their left and looked directly at Hildi. As shock and a look of horror came across their face Hildi shot them through their forehead and then shifted to the other side of the table and put two shots into the chest of the Director of National Intelligence who was the only one to make any effort to reach for a weapon. It had all happened so fast and they were initially all too distracted.

The President, with wide terrified eyes couldn't move. He watched as his Secretary of Health and Human Services rushed back to the first three who were shot. Two were slumped in their chairs and one was on the floor. Blood was flowing out of their bodies. She put two more bullets into each of them, backs and headshots.

Now she moved to the President's side of the table and looked at the three lying there on the floor. She put two more into the Chief of Staff and four into the Director of National Intelligence and then three into the Vice President. She hurried

around the table to the other side and pumped bullets into the three bodies. Each got four, either chest and head or back and head, depending on how they were positioned. The President finally found his voice. He yelled out.

President: What are you doing!? What are you doing!?

Hildi swung her rifle directly towards the President's head. He could see her clearly through the wispy, slightly smoky white haze that floated throughout the room. He imagined he saw her weapon smoking. He could smell the gunpowder. He thought he smelled death. He knew he smelled blood. The gun seemed to move closer, as if it would touch his forehead. He looked into her eyes, at first expressionless they began to alter. They appeared to change color, turn darker. He saw the essence of hatred on her face. He urinated on himself. She yelled her answer as if his questions were asinine.

Hildi: I'm killing! What does it look like!?

She lowered her wapon. It now pointed across the table at his chest.

President: Why!? Why!?

Now the look on Hildi's face changed. She seemed to soften, smile just a little.

Hildi: Why not?

Hildi looked around at the bodies. The she spoke in an even, direct, matter-of-fact- tone.

Hildi: Now Nels, the only way you're going to leave this room alive is by getting up and walking over to that security system, activating it and placing your right hand on the Reader and looking into that Viewer and opening that exit door. Now do it.

The President struggled to move. He was immobilized with fear. His legs were weak and shaking and his stomach was queasy. He felt as if he would throw up. He pointed at a glass.

President: Can I have some water?

Hildi: Sure. Go ahead.

The President shifted a little in his damp pants. He took a long drink of water. When he set the glass down he found it difficult stand. He spoke as he put his hands on the table and pushed himself up. His voice was soft. He was confused.

President: I don't understand you, or any of this.

Hildi: Let's move.

With great effort the President walked over towards the wall to his left. Across the table, with her rifle still pointed at him, but in a lowered position, Hildi moved also. When he reached a small metal table that came up almost to his waist that was near the wall he pressed a black button with his left hand. A portion of the table slid open to reveal a gray sponge-like pad. At the same time a small, square panel on the wall opened and glasses similar to binoculars extended on a plastic rod.

The President stepped forward and placed his right hand on the pad and stared into the lenses of the glasses. A light came on in the glasses and scanned the President's face then stopped on his eyes. At the same time the pad lit up in a flash, as if making a copy or taking a picture of his hand. The light on the glasses shut off and the glasses retracted into the wall as the pad went dark. The President lifted his hand. The cover of the pad slid and closed. Then another part of the table slowly opened and a small, bright florescent green cube appeared. The President pressed the cube with his left hand.

Noises could be heard in the wall in front of them. There was a grating, sliding sound of metal. Three times the sound came. Then a section of the wall, like a door, opened out towards them. The door just as the walls and ceiling and floor of the bunker was made of reinforced steel and various combination levels of lutetium, vanadium, iron, titanium, chromium and tungsten. Just as the bunker was constructed, it was thirty-six inches thick.

Nels looked at Hildi and with her weapon she motioned for him to step through the doorway. He moved into a tunnel. After taking one step forward, sensors, triggered by his presence, began to turn on lights. The yellowish-white lights imbedded high on the dark-black tunnel walls were revealed in pairs, one on each side of the passageway. The somewhat dull illumination came on in rapid succession and the tunnel was so long the starry lights seemed to disappear in the distance.

Nels walked forward and Hildi stepped through the doorway. When Nels turned to her she indicated with her weapon for him to move further. He took steps backwards until she spoke.

Hildi: That's far enough.

Hildi walked to her left to stand near the wall, watching Nels as she moved. Then glancing quickly, with her left hand she pressed on the glowing florescent green cube on this side of the wall and the door, which was like a section of the wall, began to close. When the door was securely closed it appeared to seal as the sounds of three metal rods could be heard passing from the door into the wall.

Now Hildi and Nels faced each other. There was complete silence there in that soundproof tunnel dug beneath the White House. There were other tunnels from hundreds of years ago. This specific, most recent underground route was constructed in an attempt to avoid the deadly Omni-strain. During the pandemic all the tunnels, one-by-one, had been expanded, and reinforced with new material, running for miles in different directions. High-level government officials could use them to stay in one place or if necessary, to escape to distant, hopefully safer areas.

At one time there was food, clothing, provisions and other necessities stored here. Now the tunnels were empty except for secret, unaccounted for weapons and munitions, most illegal and banned from use. Had the President of *East World* yelled out his

name and position in the world and had the Secretary of Health and Human Services called out her name, along with her prestigious government position there would have only been echoes of their voices bouncing off of the walls to fade away and become lost somewhere. Another human would not have heard or known of their existence. Nels spoke in a quivering voice.

Nels: Now what? Where do we go from here?

Hildi put two bullets into Nels, one in each leg. He hollered and began to plead as he fell onto his back. He rolled onto his stomach and pleaded as he crawled.

Nels: Please! Please Hildi! Don't do this! I'm the President!

He rolled onto his back and put both hands up near his chest, as if he could ward off the next bullets. He wanted to say he was sorry. He wanted to ask for forgiveness but he didn't know what for. He dared not ask why.

Hildi walked up, not far from his left side.

Hildi: You're bleeding out Nels. You're about to die.

She stood there looking down at him as he grabbed one thigh and then the other and tried to staunch the flowing blood. He was in pain and crying.

Nels: Please. Please help me. Have mercy.

Hildi: Mercy?

Hildi took two steps forward and shot the President of *East World* twice through his forehead.

Hildi: Where you go from here I have no idea. I'm going home to Montana.

She walked over to the nearest electric, motorized, cart-like vehicle and unplugged it from the multistage battery maintainer. She took off the large bag she had been wearing cross body on her left side. She climbed into the cart. She placed her bag on the seat beside her. She placed her weapon on top of the bag and started off.

Not far away, above ground, at the National Mall, using modern technology and Artificial Intelligence, the first of the bombs dropped and people died.

AFRICA

Lloyd and Lena sat on their screened-in porch and watched the sky as it changed colors. It had been unusually warm this first day of September. The temperature had risen past ninety degrees. The humidity had been high. Now, as the sun began to set, the temperature was dropping and would most likely move into the normal, for this time of year, high sixties and low seventies for the night. It was the ending of the shorter dry season and the brief, next rainy season approached.

They could see much of the city stretched out below them in the valley. This area was still growing slowly, still recovering from the *G.E. Period*, over thirty years after the extinction ended. Using recovered materials that had been recycled and repurposed, and along with terracotta and some imported construction material, new buildings and homes had been built. Still, out of necessity and preference, the old ways continued and so, many of the large round-shaped homes were still being made of beaten mud with conical roofs of thatch along with longer rectangular homes with sloping roofs of palm and straw thatch. And along the coastal lagoons below them to the south, new houses had been built on sturdy stilts just as they had been hundreds of years in the past.

There had been just over fourteen billion people in the world in 2110 when the pandemic began. Eight of ten people lived in Asia and Africa and five billion six hundred million, in other words, forty percent of that fourteen billion lived on this continent. Now in this year of 2172 the population of the world attempted to reach that of what it was back in 1970. There were

perhaps four billion people spread across the world. It had so far been impossible to determine how many human beings lived in Africa. Had Lloyd and Lena stood and walked through the screened-in doorway and down the three steps and moved into the grass just past the graveled driveway and stared into the far distance, depending on the direction in which they looked they may have observed remnants of structures but there would have been no human beings to be seen anywhere. Africa, at almost twelve million square miles, covering twenty percent of Earth's land area was virtually empty.

So Lloyd sipped on a glass of grapefruit juice with several cubes of ice and Lena sipped on sweetened iced tea with several cubes of ice and they both watched the beautiful sunset. They would watch the partial luminous moon appear in the clear sky in this part of the world. It would hover and slowly move low and directly in front of them.

They lived in a modest house made of wood with part of the roof being of thatch and another portion covered in palm leaves and straw. This home was part of a complex of five structures counting this main house and included a garage and storage building with one of the smaller structures housing weapons and ammunition. It was a little over a mile from the villages that had merged to become what could be considered a town that was becoming a city in this area at the edge of the expanding rain forest. And had the two driven around the kapok, mahogany, teak, ebony and ti trees and gone past the coconut palms or, while carefully scanning for forest cobras, puff adders and rock python snakes, strolled through the water hyacinth, golden pothos, and arrowhead plants, down to the western edge of the city they would have entered an area surrounded by and separated from the collective farms where cassava, yams, corn, tomatoes, rice, cashew nuts, groundnuts, beans, millet and peppers were

grown. Further out, to the north, protected cattle grazed. There in the main market place it would have been recognized by both Lloyd and Lena that an obvious pall had fallen across and over the peaceful inhabitants as they prepared for battle.

Now, as the sun continued to set they remained there in silence, contemplating the impending conflict. They listened for the chorus calls and answers of the gray and pied hornbill birds and the squawks of the colorful parrots and the short trilling bursts of the violet turaco. If they sat throughout the night they knew they would hear lions roar and the trumpeting, foraging elephants that passed by. As the last of the sun disappeared Lloyd sipped his bitter grapefruit. Lena sipped her purple-red tea.

The Comm device on the small table beside Lloyd went off, the chime indicating an incoming call. He glanced over at it and recognized it came from one of the guards at the first, furthest checkpoint to the east of them. He pressed on his device.

Lloyd: Go ahead.

Guard: There's a man and woman here. They have a message to convey.

Lloyd: What is it?

Lloyd could barely hear the guard speak unintelligible words. There was a pause. Then the guard's voice could be heard clearly.

Guard: I sought clarification. The message is, "Touch me Lena. Touch me."

Lena and Lloyd looked at each other. Lena spoke. Her voice was raised, her words incredulous.

Lena: Is it possible? Could it be?

Lloyd: Who else could it be?

Lena: I can't believe this!

Lloyd spoke to the guard.

Lloyd: Let them pass. Notify the other checkpoints to allow them through.

Guard: Should someone guide them in?

Lloyd: They know where we are.

For the next twenty minutes Lena stood and paced in the yard at the beginning of the driveway looking towards the east. Lloyd also looked in that direction, occasionally glancing at Lena with a slight smile on his lips. It was nearing twilight. There was still light from the day but having come along the paved road through the forest they could see the headlights of a vehicle emerge as it rounded the last bend. Lloyd left the porch to stand a ways from Lena.

It was a medium sized hybrid, off-road vehicle. It pulled up the driveway and stopped before reaching the two standing there. The horn honked, four times. Both the driver's side and passenger's side door opened and Rom and Clee got out. Lena let out a partial scream of excitement and glee as she hurried towards Clee.

Lena: I don't believe it! I don't believe it!

Rom held both arms up and out just a little as he replied in a loud voice.

Rom: Believe it! Believe it!

The two *Entities* both carried holstered pistols, Rom, beneath his right arm and Clee beneath her left. They each had a large knife strapped to their right side. As Lloyd moved towards Rom, Lena was hugging Clee and turning her around and around. Lloyd and Rom shook hands.

Rom: Hello Lloyd, my friend. Long time no see.

Lloyd: Hello Rom.

Lena pushed Clee away in order to see her better.

Lena: Clee, look at you! In your fatigues you look like soldiers!

Clee: Hi Lena.

Lena: Coming out from you cap your hair is long and braided! I adore those blue and green ends! You look great!

Clee: Thank you! So do you! I want to wrap my head in beautiful cloth like you. And you and Lloyd's clothes are so colorful.

They both laughed with joy. Then as Lena left Clee to run over to Rom, Clee hurried over to Lloyd. Lena and Rom embraced as Clee received a hug from Lloyd.

Lloyd: Hello Clee.

Clee: Hello Lloyd. You're the same or is your natural hair longer?

They moved towards Rom and Lena who were hugging and jumping as if dancing together.

Rom: Oh, how wonderful it is to see you!

Lena: Look at you! Rom has long twisted hair! That's wild! Where's your color? You liked color!

Rom held her at arms' length.

Rom: My hair is now black. Black is a color.

Lena: What are you doing here? How did you find us?

Rom took two steps back.

Rom: I located you through the nano-electronic particles ...

He held both his hands up. His eyes widened as he smiled broadly.

Rom: ... in your fingers.

Now Lena held her fingers up and stared at them. She looked at Rom. An angry look spread across her face and anger was expressed in her raised voice. She stepped forward.

Lena: You said they would only last ten days! That was almost two years ago!

Rom crossed both his arms in front of his chest.

Rom: You remembered that.

He opened his arms in a somewhat helpless gesture.

Rom: Ahh Lena, you're so sweet. I lied.

Now he ducked as she lifted her right hand in a fist and yelled at him.

Lena: What a human thing to do!

Again she looked closely at her hands. She rubbed her fingers together.

Lena: How long will they last? Tell the truth!

Rom: They're harmless. You have my word on that. As to how long they'll last I have no idea. Perhaps they're like nuclear waste and will last ten thousand years. Just as you and Lloyd, we'll be connected forever.

Now Lloyd chuckled softly as Lena smiled at Rom and Clee.

Lloyd: Come on, let's all sit down.

They moved through the screened doorway and took seats at a square wooden table near the left corner of the porch as Lena took a tray and moved pitchers and glasses and the ice bucket to the table. They all settled into their seats. Lloyd, with Lena on his right, sat with their backs to the house. Rom and Clee sat across from them.

Lloyd: So what brings you here or is this just a friendly visit?

Rom: We had spent almost a little over a year in both southern Canada and northern North Dakota. When we returned to *East World* some three months ago I once again had close proximity to transmission towers and the technology necessary to access all the *W.I.A.* servers and databases.

Clee: We need your help.

Rom: It's a matter of life and death.

Lena: Isn't that what you said when we first met?

Clee: The evidence is irrefutable. Bru is back.

Lloyd: So he was, shall we say, resurrected?

They all sat in silence for a while. Thinking.

Rom: We've searched all over for you. We started in *East World* from New York and above, down to the bottom of Florida. In *Center World* we scoured Michigan and directions north and south. Then, when the *W.I.A.* turned their attention to *West World* we went there.

Lloyd: Obviously this is not just a friendly visit.

Rom: Lena, in order for you to register on my device you needed to be within four hundred and fifty miles of me. We thought about searching Europe and Asia but first we decided to look for you in Africa.

Clee: What better place to finally locate you? Here we sit less than twenty-seven hundred miles to the northwest from where all humans evolved a little over two hundred thousand years ago. Africa, the original human homeland.

Rom: When we first met I was on a personal quest.

Clee: Now the world is in a dire situation. Not only has Bru been reactivated he has once again embarked on his quest to destroy the humankind. That means all of humanity is threatened.

Rom: Bru and his group are responsible for attacks throughout *East World*. He, they, are somewhere in *Center World*. They're on the way to *West World* and the San Diego area. The *W.I.A.*, the military and the local authorities have no idea what they're up against. They most likely have only a matter of a month or so.

Clee: In *West World* he seeks the second to the last piece of the puzzle that will ultimately, sometime in the future, assist him in reaching his goal.

Lloyd sipped his drink. Then he reached and got the pitcher and poured himself more juice. Lena sipped her tea and then spoke.

Lena: What are you prepared to do?

Rom: Whatever it takes to stop him, by any means necessary.

Clee: Understand this. Even if he were not totally successful, along the way countless human lives would be lost. Your friends and relatives could die. And *Entities* all over the world would be destroyed.

Rom: I cannot allow that destruction of my kind to take place.

Lena: How will you find him?

Lloyd: I assume you have a plan?

Rom: Actually we have several plans. Those plans are based on assumptions we think are valid. I first found him through the *W.I.A.* databases. I explained that to him. Since I have access to that information he knows I'll know not only about the previous attacks I'll also know his next destination and specific target. He wants control of each and every soldier, all the warriors. That requires the information that is stored on the servers and in the databases of that military base. I've developed a reverse trace, a look back. I know him. He'll reach out to me and when he does I'll be able to lock on his position. We can locate him and we can track him if necessary and decide on how to proceed.

Lena: How can you be so sure he'll contact you?

Rom: He knows I know not only what he is after but also his ultimate goal. Most important, I'm the last piece of the puzzle.

Clee: Within Rom are the answers to the problems that Bru is having with his code.

Lloyd: Don't you now have those answers also?

Clee: Yes, I do now and where Rom is, I will be.

Rom: I've also made an energy ray beam and delivery system like a gun. If I can get close enough I can shut him down indefinitely.

Lena: Indefinitely, not permanently?

Clee: Rom wants to try and alter Bru's initial program.

Rom: Bru is the way he is because he, and were he human I would say through fate, somehow became an aberration of what the humans created. A human's destiny can be altered through trauma. Bru was altered through technology. He is not what was intended. He cannot help who or what he is. He is an extreme version of what his creators originally envisioned him to be. I would like the opportunity to modify him through his main processor. I could have been him and he could have been me.

Lloyd: Why would you even want to attempt that?

Rom was quiet. It was obvious from the look on his face that he was wrestling with his thoughts. He looked directly at Lena and then Lloyd. He spoke softly.

Rom: He's my brother.

They were all silent for a long moment and then Lloyd spoke.

Lloyd: Unfortunately right now we won't be able to assist you.

Lena: We're preparing for a battle.

Clee: Then we'll assist you in your battle.

Rom: Yes, we'll stand with you.

Lloyd: Do you think yourselves capable?

Rom and Clee spoke emphatically, at the same time.

Rom: Yes!

Clee: Yes!

Rom: Not only do we think but also we are! All our unique aggressive programs have loaded and are fully functional.

Clee: We even loaded extra ones. Just as you, we are warriors. Besides, we've traveled through *Center World*.

Rom: In *Center World* there is only life and death. Share with us information about this impending battle.

Lloyd and Lena stared across the yard and through the early darkness that had settled. The nearly full moon was revealing itself. Lena poured some more tea and with the wooden tongs removed a cube of ice from the silver bucket and dropped it into her glass. She took a sip. Lloyd began. His slightly raspy voice was low. His words came softly, as he remembered.

Lloyd: Almost seventeen years ago, as we have done over the many years, Lena and I went our separate ways.

Lena: Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Lloyd: In those instances we remain connected but the distance between us allows us to experience life in such a way that life itself does not become such a burden that it weighs too heavily upon us.

Lloyd paused. His head turned, as if listening for something or someone. They could all hear the essence of the night. Nocturnal birds sang and vocal expressions of animals, small and large, sounded and seemingly echoed in the cooling air. A dim porch light, its sensor triggered by the absence of any remaining daylight came on. At the same time several lights in the living room area began to glow and cast a soft illumination through the windows that also spread across the porch and chairs and table.

Lloyd: My travels took me to Mauritania and the west coast of Africa. I moved south through Dakar, Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone and into Liberia. Fourteen years ago I started east and passed through Côte d'Ivoire and into Ghana. I decided to remain a while in Accra. Lena and I had been to Africa in the past.

Lena: It was almost a hundred years ago.

Lloyd: Of course that was pre-pandemic. There were people everywhere and the continent experienced, at that time, all that came with overpopulation including conflict. But twelve years ago, in 2160, nature was in the process of reclaiming the land. The plants flourished and trees grew in abundance and the animals thrived and this part of the world was nearly empty of people, likely the way you found Canada and North Dakota.

Lloyd glanced across the table at Clee and then Rom. They sat without moving. The two *Entities* stared directly at him looking into his eyes, without expression. He looked at Lena and then turned his head and observed the tall, thick, silhouetted trees across the yard as they swayed gently from a sudden breeze.

Lloyd: That first night I slept on, as it's been called, our Mother Continent, in Accra I had a dream that I've had off and on through the years. At one time the dream would cause me to become severely ill and although sickness no longer came along with it I still considered these thoughts and images and sensations that occurred in my mind and body when I slept more nightmare

than dream. Each subsequent night it returned and grew stronger in feelings and more vivid. Three weeks after my arrival I was sitting in a park not far from the center of the city. It was a beautiful early-spring day and as I watched the people go about their business that afternoon I thought about the dream that had unfolded throughout the night like a movie. As I sat there, lost in my mind, my gaze, as if by a command was drawn to a direction in which I saw in the distance a man approaching. He was dressed in a robe-like garment in the colorful garb of his world. He was somewhat short and slim and yet he seemed to grow larger as he came closer. It was obvious this person carried age with him. It was not simply in the way he walked with the long wooden stick in his right hand that he placed forward and planted as he moved. He wasn't using the stick for support because his steps were sure and straight. And his age was not necessarily revealed to me in his somewhat long gray-white hair in a natural state that covered his head and that he wore as a crown. The long duration of his life that he brought with him was in the air around him. His longevity was a presence he bore with pride and that I felt surrounded him like a force or a shield and I mused to myself as I observed him that in this man's age there was the power and confidence of not just experience and good judgment that was coupled with knowledge, but he exuded the quality of wisdom. Not only did I believe, I knew he was wise beyond his years.

Lloyd stood as he continued to talk with a slightly raised voice as he strolled around the corner of the table to stand and stare through the screen door at something unseen in the distance.

Lloyd: As I watched him pass by the people who passed him by and cross the wide street I realized he was staring directly at me. He was walking, with a slow purpose, straight towards me. He came forward and while placing his stick on his lap he sat down across from me. He smiled slightly and greeted me as if we were

old friends, in the Fon language. His voice was strong and light. I returned the greeting, in Fon. He spoke in Yom, commenting on the pleasant weather. In the Yom language I agreed and gave my opinion on the unusual warmth of the day. In the Yoruba language he asked if I spoke French? When I replied in Yoruba that I could speak French quite well he then spoke in precise French that, he assumed I then must also be able to speak English. I said, in French, yes, I did indeed and that actually English was my native language. He said, in English, then that meant we would speak in English to each other. He laughed just a little and his brown eyes seemed to gleam. He appeared not only alert but also animated as if within the mirth of our exchange there was something both amusing and hidden. He said his name was Moshe. I told him my name.

Lloyd turned from the door and walked over to stand at the table. He said his words, as one by one he looked at them sitting there. They were each looking at him. Lena knew what was coming. Rom and Clee were looking up at him with what could be said was anticipation.

Lloyd: His next words are why we are all here at this moment in time. He said he had come for me. He said he would show me the way to my home and that there I would discover where all my dreams began.

Lloyd stood there a long moment. He smiled slightly. Then he lifted the top off of the ice bucket, took the wooden tongs, put one cube of ice in his glass. Put the top back on the bucket and sat down. They were all silent. Then Lloyd spoke. He sounded relieved.

Lloyd: That was what he said, his exact words. He said he would show me the way to my home and that there I would discover where all my dreams began.

Lloyd drank some juice. Lena sipped her tea.

Lloyd: We were unhurried. It took almost two days to get here.

He pointed with his right index finger.

Lloyd: Actually there, to the city.

He lowered his hand and thought for a moment. Then he chuckled softly.

Lloyd: I drove all the way. Moshe gave directions.

With his left hand he touched his glass but he did not drink from it. He was thinking, remembering.

Lloyd: He would nod for stretches of the time but mostly he talked. He first explained he was the griot of his people and that he had been teaching and preparing his oldest of eleven children, his daughter, to carry on the tradition and that the middle son of his second youngest son, his youngest grandson would next assume the position. He said there weren't very many of his own distinct people who still remained. Over the years they had intermixed with not only the Fon and Yoruba but also the various Adja people, including the Mina, the Aizo and the Holi. Thus they all had become nearly indistinguishable from one another. This merging of ethnic groups had reduced tensions because in reality they were all closely related. And so as we rode Moshe talked of the old days and reminisced about the old ways and told stories of people, places and things.

Lloyd paused a moment and Lena spoke.

Lena: You want something to eat?

Lloyd: No, I'm fine. Go ahead, get yourself something.

Lena: I'm not hungry.

Lloyd looked at Clee and Rom who both sat up straight, as they were, unmoving. They continued to stare at him absorbed in his words. Clee shifted and placed her right hand on the table.

Lloyd: As it began to grow dark that first evening I pulled off the road to a secluded area in the middle of nowhere. We built a small fire and as we sat on blankets and ate the food I brought I

asked him how he had come to be in my life. He said a vivid dream had directed him from there ...

Again he pointed towards the city. Then he pointed west.

Lloyd: ... to Accra and that table at which I sat.

He lowered his hand.

Lloyd: He knew it was me he sought when he sat across from me and the sunlight shone upon my face. He saw a faint mark, nearly imperceptible now after over two hundred years, a mark from a bullet that had grazed my cheek beneath my right eye when I was three years old, a scar no longer remained but the sun, just as his dream had done, revealed that aspect of my history as we sat there that afternoon. Then he told me of a powerful king of his people who existed three hundred years ago. This great king ruled one of the greatest cities in existence at that time.

This time he raised his left hand. But he did not point. He looked across the porch between Clee and Rom and through the screen that covered the front. He held his arm out and it was as if he would grab, and hold. First Clee and then Rom shifted, in order to quickly glance a moment in that direction behind them.

Lloyd: That city was on the other side of those mountains in the near distance.

He made a fist and then lowered his arm. He looked at Clee and then Rom who both once again stared at him.

Lloyd: I can take you not around, but through those mountains by a path Moshe showed me. And when we emerged from the dimness that hovered in the daylight between those mountains that surrounded us, in the distance and down below you would see what remained of a majestic palace that once stood there. There's not much, portions of one of the walls. And were we trained archeologists we could dig down deep into the fertile soil and discover pieces of physical remains, artifacts of what once was. These tools and pottery and weapons and even that wall of

stone itself would provide hints and clues and thereby assist us in attempting to determine who those people were and perhaps, through analysis and interpretation, what their lives were like.

Lloyd turned to Lena and smiled, barely. She returned a slight smile. He sipped his juice. She sipped her tea. Lloyd took a deep breath. He seemed to relax a little as he eased back in his chair.

Lloyd: We concluded our meal and climbed into our vehicle to conceal ourselves from the animals that would prowl around us in the nighttime. We chased away the flying bugs as best we could and Moshe hoped nothing that may have been hidden and crawling would poison us. We attempted to get comfortable in order to get some sleep. I let the front passenger seat back. Moshe stretched out on the seat behind me. He could look up through the glass roof. I could see through the front windshield. It was a clear and beautiful sky. We commented on the open cluster stars, the bright nebula celestial elements of gas that shined and twinkled. Moshe spoke of what the Milky Way galaxy truly represented and what lay beyond it. Sleep eluded me. And as I pondered on my personal dream that I believed was coming I assumed Moshe had drifted off. Then he spoke softly, firmly. His words were imbued with awe and pride. He said the king of his people was born with a fever and that it was a burning fever and that he used his power to destroy their enemies as he sent fiery death over the wind. He was silent and I once again thought he was asleep. Then I heard him speak in almost a whisper. He was pleased as if he told me a secret. He said legend had been passed down to him and that he passed it on. He said the great king had been wounded in battles and that he had a scar beneath his right eye. Then he fell into a restful dreamy darkness. I soon followed him there.

Lloyd fell silent again. He was thinking, remembering. Clee and Rom could observe a look pass across his very dark-brown

face. Then he frowned and it was obvious, that expression of displeasure. His brow creased.

Lloyd: I had begun this particular portion of my life here.

He pointed with his right index finger.

Lloyd: Actually there, in the city. Indeed, I was home. A year later myself, along with my new friends, began building homes, including these in this area. I was here when Moshe passed away six years ago. He carried a much longer age than I had imagined. Still, his leaving was unexpected. He went quickly and so he went, as they say and believe here, to the other life. The people were coming together as the population continued to grow. The pandemic was fading, yet it was still close in not only memory but also in the fact of the emptiness that surrounded us. I was here when they re-established their government structure. There was a minister of internal affairs, a minister of external relations, minister of trade, minister of rivers and forests, minister of farming, minister of health and most important at this time as we sit here, a minister of defense. Just as *Center World* in North America and most other parts of the world, here there are no real laws or enforcers of laws as all laws must be backed by force of some kind. There are simply traditions and beliefs and a basic, natural understanding of right and wrong.

Lloyd stood and strolled to the doorway but he did not stop. He turned and began to slowly pace back and forth as the other three watched him.

Lloyd: A little over two years ago Lena summoned me.

He stopped and looked at Rom and then Clee.

Lloyd: That's when we met.

He began to pace again.

Lloyd: Before we parted we sat there in your home beneath that mountain and wondered about the possibility of a headless Bru being brought back into existence. I said then that, that situation

would have to be dealt with if that time came. Now you are here saying that, that time has come. But another time has also arrived. Moshe and I talked about what to us seemed inevitable. As more people established villages and towns and cities all over the continent and as infrastructure was rebuilt and communication improved, violent conflicts between groups increased. As the ministers were developing plans to deal with these challenges that were being revealed I was working with the minister of defense to acquire weapons and ammunition. This was being done because before Moshe left us we began hearing about groups of men and women in North Africa that were joining together. Initially they were limited in numbers and their arsenal was lacking. They were expelled from Tunisia and moved south to western Libya and eastern Algeria. Their numbers increased as they traveled. They were considered, and claimed themselves to be an army of soldiers who were at war. They profess their mandate, or shall we say quest, is to dominate this continent and ultimately the world. They are led by a man who has been called several names. He says by whatever name he is called it must mean that he is the son of a prophet. They began to zigzag over Africa. They attacked lower parts of Egypt and upper Sudan. They methodically moved west through Chad, Niger and Mali. They can only attack those they outnumber and that they can overwhelm with superior firepower. They avoid the larger cities that have militias and armies of their own.

Lloyd's voice took on an edge. His pace seemed to quicken. His steps could be heard on the wood. Occasionally, when he treaded upon certain spots the wood would creak and groan.

Lloyd: Just as Moshe did, the leader of the army speaks of the old days and old ways, so the intelligence we have received says. But the days this leader speaks of and the ways in which he and his followers act are not that of which Moshe spoke. They take over

entire villages and towns and decimate cities. They rob and loot. They rape women, men and children. They murder women, men and children. Their old ways are from a hundred and fifty years ago and beyond that and up until the *G.E. Period*. Their old ways are not new ways. They slice bodies in half. They cut the skin off of people. They chop off heads. The fortunate ones die. The most unfortunate live the rest of their lives, no matter how long or short that time may be, with their hands and feet and legs missing or with their bodies horribly disfigured in some other manner. They're now heavily armed with pistols and rifles but knives and machetes are their weapons of choice.

Lloyd stopped to look at Rom and Clee then Lena. His anger had grown to a seething, smoldering rage as he paced. His brown eyes seemed to flash. He focused on Rom and Clee, from one to the other and then back again. He gathered himself. He took a deep breath.

Lloyd: That army, over three hundred strong, is a little over five hundred miles north of us near what had once been, many years ago, the prosperous city of Djibo in what had once been, before the Omni-strain, the country of Burkina Faso. At this time, right now, we're waiting to find out if they're headed south, towards us here ...

As he looked at Rom he lifted his right arm and with his right index finger he pointed across his chest to his left.

Lloyd: ... or rather there, to the city.

He lowered his arm and sat down.

Lloyd: We expect Sheshwe, Moshe's oldest daughter to provide us the latest update. Do we continue to wait or are we going to be provided the information that determines what happens next?

He lifted his glass and sipped his juice. As he set the glass down, he spoke.

Lloyd: So now you know what looms.

Rom stared directly at Lena and then Lloyd. He spoke in a near whisper.

Rom: To appear in a large, strange, or frightening form, often in a sudden way.

Clee: Perhaps they'll go in another direction.

Lloyd: Perhaps they will. But they'll come back, eventually. That city below us is strategically what they seek not only in the size, by area but also by population, in numbers. Not only that, those who live here are peaceful. We have weapons and sufficient ammunition but there are not enough of those who have been properly trained to fight. We need more warriors.

Rom: Then you must have plans.

Lena: Just as you, we have several.

Lloyd: So what this situation reveals to us is that you cannot remain here.

Clee: You need assistance. You helped us. We'll help you.

Lloyd: You can't risk it.

Lena: Think what would happen if you two didn't make it back to San Diego. Who's going to stop Bru?

Silence descended upon the porch. In the distance a lion roared, another lion answered. Red-bellied monkeys in the nearby trees began to chatter and issue warnings. Birds sang. Rom and Clee and Lloyd and Lena were each thinking, not only of the complex factors that confronted them but also of the very real dangers that lay ahead, both near, here, and far, thousand of miles away. It was at this time that the Comm device on the small table where Lloyd had first sat sounded incoming call. He rose to move to the device. He leaned over and seeing who it was he pressed on it and placed it in speaker mode.

Lloyd: You're on speaker. We're listening.

Sheshwe: They departed early this morning. They're heading in our direction, south. There are two cities they will most likely

attack before arriving here. The ministers have been notified. Will you join us all tomorrow at noon in the conference center?

Lloyd: We'll be there.

Lloyd ended the call. He turned and went back to where the others sat. He remained standing. He spoke to Rom and Clee.

Lloyd: Tomorrow morning, when the sun comes up you'll be taken by our helicopter to Lagos International Airport. From there you can get a flight to *East World*. Obviously *West World* is your ultimate destination. Are we all in agreement?

Rom and Clee looked at each other. They were both thinking, processing,

Rom: Yes, we understand the situation.

Clee: Yes, we're in agreement.

Lloyd and Lena looked at each other. Then as Lloyd sat down Lena extended her arms and placed her hands on the table, palms up. They all leaned in such a way so they could clasp hands. And as they sat in this state Lena spoke as she looked at each one of the three.

Lena: Clee, Rom, you have our word. If our plans succeed we'll see each other again.

Lloyd: We'll join you in San Diego.

As they held hands the two humans and the two *Entities*, were bonded to each other in every sense of that word and they each understood that although they were in a sense immortal, not one of them was invincible.

WEST WORLD AND BEYOND

It was day two of October and early fall had arrived when Big Tal passed through Blythe, Arizona. Chuki stood near the rear between Una and Leeda. Kojo sat beside her, looking at what she was looking at. She was watching the screen that showed the rear

view. She could watch as *Center World* faded behind them. To no avail she had tried to get Bru to take her into the Kofa Wildlife Refuge. Bru had said it was simply the Yuma desert region of the Sonoran Desert and they had recently seen enough dry, sandy-looking land and cactus. Chuki had said there were hundreds of bighorn sheep to be seen and birds like the white-winged dove, and speaking of cactus there were pretty cactus wrens along with orange-crowned warblers and if they were fortunate they would see a cougar or two and when she asked if she could at least see the Colorado River he had replied maybe next time. They had continued on and still she looked at the emptiness of where they had passed through.

Bru came back to stand beside her. He looked for a long moment at the little one as she stared at the screen.

Bru: What is that look on your face?

Chuki: I'm practicing my look of wistfulness while having wistful thoughts.

Bru: So you're thinking you're full of yearning with a tinge of melancholy?

Chuki: Yes.

Bru: And why is that?

Una and Leeda turned to look at Chuki and Bru and then returned to their monitoring.

Chuki: We're leaving *Center World*.

Bru: Not for another hundred miles or so.

Chuki: I love *Center World*.

She looked up at Bru.

Chuki: Well, you know what I mean.

The little one returned her gaze to the screen.

Bru: And why is that?

Chuki: Why do I love *Center World*?

Bru: Yes.

Chuki: *Center World* is special. I had fun, with fun thoughts. I was happy, with happy, happy thoughts. Where else can I ride along, shoot my rifle at humans and kill 'em like they're rabid hyenas?

Bru: Drive by killings?

Chuki: Yeah. And I can see humans running around on fire and all kinds of motorcycles exploding and vehicles burning and Big Tal crushing and ploughing through cars and trucks like a rampaging bull elephant and hear that horn sounding like a train and listen to Kojo howl.

Bru: And see humans destroying each other?

Chuki: That's a bonus.

Bru: I see your point. I too love *Center World*.

Again Chuki looked up at Bru.

Bru: Well, you know what I mean.

They both smiled. Then they both looked at the screen. There wasn't much to see. The last time they saw a large number of people and a significant amount of structures of any kind was when they had left the highway and gone through Phoenix where they had released Influencer programs. Bru turned away from the screen and opened up communication so everyone could hear. He began to stroll to the front while holding on to the straps above him.

Bru: Alright, listen up. We'll soon be leaving *Center World*. Chuki is watching that unique place disappear into the distance behind us. She watches, as she expressed to me, wistfully. And were I to think of all the good times we've had there I would think forlorn thoughts so that I may have a forlorn look upon my face. In other words I would appear pitiful and sad and lonely and I would be lonely for the madness and violence and decadence of that part of the world. Be that as it may be we're going to look to the future and what not only lies before us but also that which looms there.

Bru had reached the front and now looked through the windshield. He was thinking, processing. Then he abruptly turned and started towards the rear. He made note in his thoughts of how much in this area, that although they were between two worlds, the land of both appeared to be the same.

Bru: It won't be long before we enter *West World*. This world is drastically different from anywhere we've been, even *East World*. If you rode from the top of the state of Washington to the bottom of California you would see more humans than you've ever seen before. You would notice that they ride in not only fancy electric vehicles and on fancy motorized electric bikes but they also have homes on wheels such as ours. They also have floating chairs and hovering boards and electric skates on their feet. Here, as they have in *East World*, is not only a well-established government structure there are also enforcers to uphold the power of that government. In other words, law enforcement. They even execute people convicted of committing murder, which I obviously applaud.

Chuki clapped several times as he reached the rear. Then he started forward again.

Bru: However, most important, they have the latest in security systems connected to everything. They have extensive and most up to date surveillance monitoring systems everywhere. They employ facial and voice and sound recognition. They can see and hear what they choose to see and hear and the powers that be are not just listening for gunshots. They can check out raised voices or hone in on quiet conversations. You can imagine what they do with Comm devices, including personal ones. We must be very careful. If all goes according to plan we'll be here two, maybe three days, in and out. So stay alert and stay focused on the task at hand. It may not be the ultimate one but another of our goals is within reach. You all know what to do.

When they crossed the state line and departed Arizona and crossed into California Bru left the front and moved to the back. He had been standing between Moja, who was driving, and Cha who was sitting in the passenger, or copilot seat, as Cha liked to call it. He had made his way around Naki who was at the station directly behind Moja and Cha. He passed Ek and Vier and Cinq and Dois. He walked to the left side and sat down beside Tatu who was next to Okan who was monitoring and watching and listening as was Leeda and Una who sat across from them. They were now able to access the first communication towers of *West World*. Bru began tapping on the keys on a keyboard and one of the screens in front of him lit up.

Bru: Una, release all the Influencer programs. Let us gift *West World* with our latest technology.

Bru was pulling up information and reading it as Moja cruised west on the I-10 freeway. For a while he was quiet as he read and scrolled faster and faster. Then he chortled aloud several times. Finally he let out an obvious exclamation.

Bru: Wow! Oh, knock me over!

Chuki, who was now standing between Moja and Cha turned and hollered.

Chuki: What is it?

When Bru didn't answer she started to hurry to where he was sitting. Kojo followed her as Bru began laughing out loud. She moved to stand beside him. Tatu and Leeda and Una shifted to glance at him for a moment and then returned their attention to their assignments.

Chuki: What is it daddy? What's so funny?

Bru: Be patient, I'll tell you.

He laughed quietly as he continued to read. Soon he stood. He opened communication so everyone could hear him as he started towards the front.

Bru: Listen up my intrepid and adventurous and fearless traveling companions. Here's an update.

Moja and Cha glanced up at the screen above them that showed them a rear view for a moment. Those working looked at him briefly. The others stared at him.

Bru: Information from *East World* is now reaching us. That news is pouring out of *East World*. We wondered about what we heard and read about as we passed through the middle of nothingness. They weren't rumors or fantastical made up stories. It was all true! It wasn't fake news. Our plans have come to fruition. I dare not say beyond our wildest imagination because Moja and I have very complex, inventive and creative imaginations. Our sister, after years of painstaking work attained a status of power and influence in Washington, D.C. She was able to release our newly designed, newly developed command programs and through their personal Comm devices she infected our chosen targets. Chaos and violence ensued! Bombs have been dropped in the capital of *East World* and thousands have died.

Bru stopped and turned and pointed at Chuki who had been closely following him. The little one yelled out.

Chuki: Jackpot!

Bru: Even better! Bonanza!

Again he pointed. Chuki started thinking, processing. Then she yelled in a singsong manner and did her little dance.

Chuki: A sudden rush of good fortune!

Bru reached up and grabbed a strap. He was turning towards the front and rear.

Bru: There were mass shooting! Hundreds of police, law enforcement personnel of all kind were murdered. Convicts died, shot and trampled to death! Prisoners were burnt to death! The military, the soldiers were fighting and killing their fellow citizens.

Chuki was confused.

Chuki: What's that, civil war?

Bru: But here's the best part!

Chuki: Best part? Lay it on me!

Bru: Members of the House of Representatives, the Senate and Supreme Court Justices were destroyed, most of 'em were hung by their necks!

Now Ek and Vier hollered out.

Ek: Hang 'em!

Vier: Lynch 'em!

Then they both yelled at the same time.

Ek: String 'em up!

Vier: String 'em up!

Bru: Conspiracy theories were rampant! Conspiracists abounded! Conspiracy theories were running wild side-by-side in the bloody streets along with the people rampaging and looting! Since the President was missing it was the President who ordered the bombing! It was the President behind the murders of the Vice President and the members of his Cabinet! Then the rotting, stinking body of the President was found and they had to come up with something else, new theories! Who was next in line? Next in line after the President was the Vice President!

Bru pointed at Chuki.

Chuki: Dead!

Bru: Then the Speaker of the House!

Bru pointed at Chuki, who not knowing, shrugged.

Bru: Suicide!

Chuki: Wow! They took the easy way out! A bonus! No wonder you were laughing!

Bru: Then the Cabinet Secretaries!

Bru didn't have to point. Chuki yelled as he gave the signal to Kojo to howl.

Chuki: Dead and gone!

Bru: The government is in a shambles!

Chuki: What government!?

Bru: What police!? The fire department is still putting out fires as they're being shot at. Even now, weeks later, at this very moment from the top of Maine to the bottom of Florida there's still upheaval and unrest. We'll check to see if the mayhem spreads.

Bru stood there holding on to a strap with his left hand. He smiled as he stared out of the window at the passing scenery. He was thinking, processing. Then he spoke softly, almost to himself.

Bru: I'm thinking happy thoughts.

But the little one heard and she agreed, in a near whisper.

Chuki: Me too.

Eventually Moja turned south on I-15. Bru returned to his seat beside Tatu. It was now late afternoon and the sky above was partly cloudy. The weather was typical for Southern California at this time of year. But what was different, from where they had spent most of their recent time, was what Bru had spoken of, which was the more than moderate traffic and amount of people going here and there. Soon they passed by San Diego's downtown area. They continued on, south.

Bru: In approximately six miles we'll be moving to the edge of National City. On the right hand side you'll see our target, the military base. Una, Leeda, Tatu, along with me, we're going to zoom in and take as many images as we can as we pass by. Moja maintain a normal speed.

As they drew closer they passed by several military vehicles that apparently were heading to the base. They drove past this sprawling military location, the front of which began a little over a hundred yards from the freeway. They could see the wide, four-lane road that led to the front. They noticed military vehicles, trucks and smaller utility vehicles on the access road coming from

and heading to the entrance. They could see the six-foot tall, long cement wall that protected the front. They had seen a continuation of that wall, equal in height, running along the right side. As they passed they could see that wall extend on the left. But because the structure was so large and so long they were unable to see how far the wall went back and of course they couldn't see the rear. There were circular and also rectangular cement and metal pillars placed close enough together into the ground to stop any vehicles from reaching the wall in an attempt to penetrate it. Heavily armed guards and armed military trucks were in front and behind an eight-foot tall metal gate that was the only way in or out. From there they could shoot, if necessary, anything or anyone trying to enter without proper authorization.

They cruised on and fifteen miles later they crossed over the border into Tijuana, Mexico. This place, this country, was not a designated *Other World* such as Alaska and Hawaii. Alaska was virtually empty of humans. Brown bears, black bears, polar bears ruled. Wood bison and elk grazed. Lynxes and foxes hunted. Dall sheep, caribou and muskoxen, roamed. Porcupines ambled about looking for berries and seeds and roots to eat and beavers worked as salmon, humpback whales and the orca, at one time the second most widely distributed mammal on the planet, second only to humans, nearly driven into non-existence, thrived in clean, cold waters along with the puffin sea birds and in the sky the bald eagle soared. Alaska had been returned to nature as Hawaii continued to fill with the rich and famous and powerful and anyone else who controlled value.

Then there was Mexico where Bru and his group looked for somewhere to park in seclusion in a proper place from which they could launch their attack. They were in a country a little over seven hundred and sixty-one thousand square miles in size. The totality of its land had long ago been accepted to be the thirteenth

largest country by area. One hundred and fifty years in the past, in the year 2022 there were approximately one hundred and twenty-seven million people in the country, of which close to twenty-two million lived in the country's largest city that was its capital, Mexico City. At that time Mexico was the tenth most populous country and Mexico City was the most populous Spanish-speaking city in the world. It was not only the sixth largest metropolitan area in the world it was the largest city in all of North America. By the year 2110, at the beginning of the pandemic there were approximately one hundred and seventy million people living in Mexico, most of them still were in close proximity to the capital city that had, on numerous occasions, run out of water. The people had used up the water.

The population had swelled, spilled out in all directions and then in the year 2110 began to be decimated by the Omni-strain. Now in 2172, just as within the distant continent of Africa, in the country of Mexico there was no way to count the people in order to estimate how many human beings lived there. What was known was that nearly everyone who lived in this country continued to live in the area of Mexico City, still the most populous city in the country and still its capital.

Here in Tijuana, at one time the second largest city of Mexico where one hundred and fifty years ago the population was almost two million people and by 2110 had grown to almost six million, the pandemic had, just as all over the world, taken its toll. So, it wasn't very difficult for Moja to find a place to park. There were no people around. Coupled with that, there had been very little, if any, deconstruction in the immediate area. The tall buildings of the downtown section in the central zone still stood but they were empty. The other, modest in size buildings and homes for families built with concrete blocks with roofs that had been made using poured concrete beams that created the frame for rafters

and the inside walls, also made of concrete, remained. The stucco that once covered those walls had crumbled and was piled on the tiles that covered the natural clay floors.

The desolate city of Tijuana was now dismal and bleak and the buildings stood as ghostly reminders of what was before. They were monuments, which was lasting evidence of what had once been, long ago. And for those who believed they could see disembodied souls, roaming or floating, they could also feel the apparitions around them that could not rest in peace because their demise had been brought about because in spite of the warnings they had themselves been unable or those around them could not control their sexual desires.

Moja found a large, long, garage-like building that had at one time serviced semi-trucks that hauled goods to America. They were on the eastern outskirts of the city not far from the border. As Big Tal was being backed in Bru was looking in the nearby distance and zooming out to peer into the far away. He could see a few separate individuals and several couples but no groups or gangs of people.

Bru: I see humans, fortunately there aren't many. They must be like us, intrepid explorers. I like that word, intrepid.

He paused. He was thinking, processing.

Bru: Perhaps they're even adventurous and if they're bold and believe that they are fearless and brave or if they're stupid and approach us we'll have to shoot them. But the *Center World* culture and rules of conduct and of minding ones own business are applied here. I don't think they'll bother us. Besides, like I said, we won't be here long.

They immediately went to work. Both Tatu and Leeda would handle security. Vier and Ek would arm themselves and station themselves outside near the entrance to the building. As Spiny

and Runner were unloaded, Cha and Naki and Okan began to inspect and run diagnostics on Tal. Cinq and Dois checked and serviced and reloaded weapons. As the sun had just begun to set Moja and Bru prepared to drive to San Diego. Chuki walked up as Bru strapped on a shoulder holster and stood there deciding which handgun he would take.

Chuki: Where to?

Bru: San Diego and back, a quick ride.

Chuki: Can I go?

Bru turned to look at Chuki who had a hopeful look on her face. He thought a moment.

Bru: Yeah, come on.

Chuki: Can Kojo come?

Bru: Yeah.

Chuki: Well, that's surprising. I didn't even have to implore or beseech.

Bru: You mean beg?

Chuki: Same thing.

They got in Spiny. Moja got behind the wheel. Bru rode in the front passenger seat and Chuki and Kojo rode in the seat directly behind them. They crossed the border and took the 805 freeway north. They rode in silence until they drew close to the base, now on their left.

Bru: Slow down just a little.

Bru glanced at the building before they passed and then quickly looked to the right, paying particular attention to the buildings and various establishments that were on that side directly across from the target. They rode on towards San Diego. Chuki had looked at the military base too. She had also looked right, to try and see what Bru was seeing. She didn't say anything.

They turned off the freeway and headed for the downtown district. As they drew closer Bru spoke as he looked around.

Bru: Of course the Native people lived here first. There can only be one first. San Diego itself was established in 1769. It was referred to as the Birthplace of California because it was the first place that was visited and settled by the Europeans in 1542. It was claimed by Spain after those thieves raped and tortured and killed the original people. In 1821 the area became part of the newly declared Mexican Empire. The United States army invaded Mexico in 1848. They raped and tortured and killed and after that Mexican-American War was over America claimed this land they had stolen.

Chuki: History repeats itself.

When they reached the heart of downtown they rode around for a while. They had driven in moderate traffic along the way and now could see quite a few people out and about on what was the beginning of the weekend. They parked but did not get out. There had been, as they traveled and were, as they parked, occasional glances at the unique appearing vehicle but no one really paid them much attention because in *West World* unique vehicles were somewhat commonplace.

They sat in Spiny and Moja and Chuki looked out through the special darkened windows. Moja stared straight ahead. Chuki moved to each side window and back again so she could see what was going on. They could see out but no one could see in. No words were passed. Bru was thoroughly occupied by the Comm device he held in his hands. He was engrossed in the images on the screen. Chuki moved to stand so she could see what he was seeing on his device. She saw he was looking at and scrolling through pictures of the military base that had been taken when they had first passed by it earlier. Then Bru spoke to Moja.

Bru: They have an unusually small force at the front gate, under the circumstances of expecting some kind of attack. They must have a larger deployment closer to the building on all sides and in

the rear they'll especially be covered.

Moja: Even more are inside, including the *W.I.A.*

Bru: I agree.

They remained there until darkness had completely settled.

Bru: OK, we can head back now.

They rode back in silence. Again Bru paid close attention to the huge structure once again on their right. Chuki could see it, now with tall bright lights in rows along the front and sides. They couldn't see the rear of the building but they could see, barely, the lights that indicated where the back of the building was. Just as they passed a round light came on. Its surface was larger than the others and it was brighter than the others. It moved and scanned like a rotating spotlight. Chuki could see its illumination as it went side-to-side, up the access road almost to the freeway and then it went out.

When they arrived back at the garage they all climbed out. Chuki watched Bru and Moja. Kojo watched her. Chuki saw Moja stand beside Spiny with a Comm device in his hands as Bru started to once again look at his own device. Moja began pressing on his device. Chuki then watched in amazement as Spiny began to gradually change in shape and form. She could hear, just a little, the plastic composite material and reinforced carbon fiber groan. There was a low humming sound. The front, including the bumper, altered in a perceptible but not too extreme manner. The rear changed more dramatically and finally both the side fenders in the rear and front became longer and smoother. Next Spiny settled and was not as tall as before. Moja spoke.

Moja: What do you think?

Bru looked up. He walked to the rear, along the right side and stopped in the front. He smiled slightly.

Bru: I like that.

Chuki moved to stand beside him.

Chuki: Me too.

Bru: That, my little one, is *Entity* ingenuity.

Bru stepped forward and ran his right hand along the hood.

Bru: Let's see the colors.

Moja changed the color from white to gray and then after Bru looked at the vehicle a long moment the color altered to black.

Moja: We have an option of a combination of white and gray and black. He moved to stand beside Bru and Chuki. Bru thought a long moment then he turned to Chuki.

Bru: What color do you think we should use?

Chuki looked at the new Spiny. She was thinking, processing.

Chuki: I saw quite a few gray vehicles, not as many black. That shade of gray is less conspicuous.

Bru: Good observation. Make it gray.

Moja changed the color to gray. They all looked at Spiny now having morphed into a different vehicle.

Chuki: That's fantastic! Does Spiny need a new name?

Bru looked at Chuki.

Bru: We'll be going for another ride. Would you like to go?

Chuki broke out into a broad smile. There was a look of excitement on her face.

Chuki: Sure!

Bru: You and Kojo be right here at 2:15, that's a.m.

Chuki: OK!

Bru: Now, Moja and I have work to do. Amuse yourself until then, but don't go anywhere.

Bru and Moja went in to sit beside Una and the three of them went to work.

At exactly 2:10 a.m. Bru and Moja came outside. Cinq and Dois remained inside sitting with their eyes closed. Una and Tatu and Leeda would continue to handle the security and monitoring.

Everyone else was outside in the garage, sitting in chairs or standing, in silence. Bru looked at each one in his group and spoke to Chuki.

Bru: Let's go.

Once again Moja climbed behind the wheel. Bru got in the front passenger seat and Chuki and Kojo took their same places behind the front seat. Again they rode to San Diego. Just as before, Bru stared as they passed the military base. They drove into and around the city but they didn't park. Then they rode on the streets fifteen minutes further north and turned around, got back on the freeway and started back. As they drove closer to the target Moja spoke as Bru stared in the direction of the building.

Moja: This is most likely normal traffic for a Friday night, early Saturday morning.

Bru: Saturday night into Sunday morning the revelers will be out under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

As they passed the base Bru looked to the right.

Bru: We'll initiate the attack on Sunday night, Monday morning.

Chuki was pressed to her window looking at the fortress-like edifice and the tall lights. Once again, as if their passing had triggered it, a spotlight flared on and began to scan. Then the bright illumination crept up the access road as if crawling. As that light retreated another spotlight came on. They both scanned and roamed, near and far. Then the first light went out. The second light went dark. The building faded behind them.

Chuki: Daddy, how are you going to get in and get out?

Bru looked down at the Comm device he held in his hands for a long moment. Then he spoke softly, with both confidence and certainty.

Bru: This is our turn and we're gonna take our turn. I'm gonna walk in there and take what we want. And then I'm gonna walk out and I won't let any human power on earth stop me. I am Bru

and I am the essence of Singularity.

When they arrived back at the garage Bru and Moja went in and sat down. Moja was on the left side of Una, Bru was on her right. It wasn't long before Chuki came in. She had Kojo lay down near the doorway. She moved to the rear and stood at Bru's right shoulder. Bru and Moja were tapping rapidly on their keyboards.

Bru: Moja, put in all the coordinates we'll be using. Calculate the mileages. Schedule our release and activation times accordingly. Una go into the *West World* surveillance system. Access the archive database. Narrow your search parameter from the first day of September to the current date and time. I'm sending you the image and sound you'll require. Use the visual and audio recognition functions to locate and lock in on a match for my face or voice. Find my brother, Rom. I'm going to use our control program to get into our cousin Rolf's head. That way I can see whatever it is that he is seeing. Then, we'll make our plans.

AFRICA

Sheshwe watched as the middle son of her second youngest brother, who she always referred to as Nephew, set up his recorder in the center of her dinning room table. He plugged in the microphone that stood and leaned towards her and then pushed it closer to where she was standing.

Nephew: OK, say something so I can check the quality of the sound.

Sheshwe spoke several words, indicating they were a test. Nephew played the words back. Then he made adjustments.

Nephew: That's good. You can stand or sit as you please.

Sheshwe: Your grandfather always preferred the oral traditions of passing on the history of our people and significant historical events. Now you insist on recording everything.

Nephew looked up at his aunt standing across the room. He smiled at her. She was dressed as usual, as if she was going to an important meeting or popular gathering. She wore four polished brass bracelets on both wrists and her shiny brass hoop earrings with precious stones swayed with her movements. Her head was wrapped in colorful cloth and her long multi-colored garment billowed out when she turned or walked, as she did now as she took short quick steps towards the kitchen. She came back with two cups of water. She set one cup down for Nephew.

Nephew: Grandfather was close to the old days and thus the old ways in his feelings and thinking. Now we have more modern technology that is coming back after all these years. Sometime in the not too distant future, not just in our country but all of Africa will be reconnected. Anyone who chooses to will be able to communicate with someone from the bottom of the continent to the top. Things will be again as they were before the pandemic.

Sheshwe: People are attracted to those things I call gadgets and toys.

Nephew: I shall very soon use those, gadgets and toys, as you call them, to make visual recordings of you.

Now Sheshwe smiled broadly. She sipped her drink.

Sheshwe: Really?

Nephew: Just as was done before. We'll not only record your voice we'll make videos when you share your information.

Sheshwe moved to stand in front of the full-length mirror on the far wall. She observed her reflection. She stared at the deep dark-brown, nearly black complexion of her somewhat round face. She tilted her head one-way and then the other. Her earrings swung like pendulums.

Sheshwe: I don't know what I think about that.

Nephew: Much was lost during those dying years, and not just lives. We'll record and save our government meetings and social gatherings. I'll livestream cultural events.

Sheshwe: My, aren't you ambitious.

Nephew: One day I'll be a Minister of Information.

Sheshwe laughed.

Sheshwe: Yes! Carry on the tradition of our family.

Nephew: Now, tell me, tell everyone what happened.

Sheshwe sat down. Nephew held his right index finger close to his device.

Nephew: I'm ready when you are.

Sheshwe nodded and he turned on his recorder.

Sheshwe: We had plans. To be precise we had several plans. We had devised plans to replace plans depending on how events unfolded or in case something unforeseen occurred and things went wrong. To our advantage we knew where our enemies were. We knew when they left that city almost five hundred miles north of us. The information provided to us indicated when they had started south, in our direction. What we didn't know was if they would attack or bypass the next city south of them, which was close to one hundred and fifty miles from where they were. If they were going to attack that city then how long would it take for them to get there? How long would it take them to do what they had done in other places elsewhere? What resistance would they face? How long would they remain there? Finally, where would they go next? Eleven days later we had answers to those questions. They were moving on to the next city one hundred miles further south. That would put our enemies two hundred and fifty miles north of us.

Sheshwe sipped her water. She gathered her thoughts.

Sheshwe: Our four scouts were able to keep eyes on them. They

watched at a distance through their binocs as the soldiers attacked that city and the people who lived there. When the attacks began one of our scouts returned with that information. Plans were changed, other plans were discarded, new plans were made. Lloyd and Lena left at that time and went to the empty town fifty miles north of us. That deserted town was the only place between us and the advancing murderous army. When they returned they took the two captains who would lead our warriors and went back to that town. By the time they returned, final plans had been made. Our Minister of Defense gathered us all together. He said one day there would be battalions of us with a thousand in each battalion. He said our battalions would outnumber a military company of two hundred and fifty. Then he said right now there were ninety of us and we would be split into two platoons of forty-five each.

Sheshwe placed both her hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet. She remained like that, leaning over staring directly into the eyes of Nephew. Her brown eyes blazed. Sheshwe: There were ninety of us against over three hundred of them.

She raised her right hand and jabbed her right index finger at Nephew with each of the next words she spoke, forcefully. Sheshwe: But we had plans.

Sheshwe began to pace. She was agitated and her steps were short and quick. She moved across the room, first one way and then the other.

Sheshwe: That army raped and killed and tortured and maimed the citizens and robbed and looted and nearly destroyed that city and when they started towards us we loaded up. Our Defense Minister, with the assistance of Lloyd and Lena, had acquired powerful weapons and ammunition, body armor and protective gear against the elements. We were dressed in camouflage. We

had enough food and water to last us at least a week with more scheduled, if needed, to be delivered. The rainy season was upon us but when we headed north it had stopped raining for a while and was only overcast. There would be no sunshine that day or for days ahead. Gloomy it was. As we made our way forth the Son of a Prophet led his army directly south towards us. In order to travel as they did, in a caravan formation and bring, as they had before, not just their smaller vehicles and motor bikes, but also their larger soldier transport and supply trucks they would have to take the two-lane road past the outskirts of the empty town and through the edge of the rainforest in order to reach our city. Not only did we have plans, we knew they had plans. Using the time they left that last city they had just attacked and factoring in speed, terrain and amount of miles from there to us we calculated they would camp for one night and start out the next morning. They wanted to reach our city close to sunset. That way they could burn and kill as darkness descended. We knew evil lived and thrived in darkness.

These last words were spoken with bitterness. Sheshwe had stopped to look at Nephew. Now she walked to the table and picked up her cup and drank, a gulp, from it. Nephew took a sip of his water as he watched his aunt. He saw her begin to pace again.

Sheshwe: Twelve miles back we had left our vehicles and covered and hidden them. Then we walked. Three miles south of the empty town we felled a tree across the road. We didn't cut it down. We found a large tree in the soaked earth with shallow roots and we pushed it and pulled it with ropes until it collapsed across that pathway to us. At that point we had blocked their advance. Then we waited in seclusion. They passed by the town with no people and our scouts informed us of that. They reached the tree and we watched in the near distance through our binocs.

They surveyed the situation. It was then I first saw their leader. A man was driven up. And when he got out of his vehicle I could see he was tall in stature and somewhat thick. He looked around. He had what we say of those of the far north, light-colored skin. I looked closely at him through my glasses. I saw him take off his cap as he glanced around. He ran his left hand through his wavy, auburn-colored hair. I adjusted my glasses, bringing him closer. I couldn't tell precisely what color his eyes were. They appeared to be some light shade, greenish-brown or gray. But I knew he was indeed the infamous Son of a Prophet when he turned and I saw on the right side of his head a big patch of his hair was pure white, just as his father's, a Prophet, was supposed to have been. Anyway, they most likely assumed the tree had toppled as it did across the road by some natural occurrence. He gave some orders and when ropes and chains had been brought forward and they began to attach them to the tree we knew they were not to be deterred or delayed. They were determined to continue on. We moved back slowly four miles past a sharp bend in the road. We were now closer to the rainforest.

Sheshwe walked to the window near the front door. She raised her voice to make sure she would be heard as she looked out into the distance, remembering.

Sheshwe: We had anticipated this. We were still on plan.

She turned and moved past the table and began to pace again. Sheshwe: One of our captains and his platoon was on the left side, west of the road. Lloyd was with him. Our other captain, with her platoon was on the other side of the road, to the east. Lena was with her. I was at the rear on that side. Lena had made me promise I would stay out of harm's way. She said it was my destiny to report and tell the story of what happened. We could hear the vehicles of the army coming closer. We could see and feel the rain start again, hard. When our enemies came around the

bend they saw the road was once again blocked. This time with three large trees, almost piled up on top of each other. The first two vehicles pulled up to the trees. Two off-road bikes came up beside them. We watched as those in the vehicles got out. Vehicles began to jam up behind them. The two on the bikes got off and walked up beside the five already standing there in the road. They were all looking at the barrier. They were bending down inspecting the trunks of the trees. We knew they could see they had been cut. They were looking around, realizing those huge trees had been placed there. They knew that not only was their presence known, their plans had been revealed and people were attempting to stop them. On pre-established hand signals we opened fire and our enemies began to die there on that road. They returned fire as some threw themselves on the ground behind the trees and others fell back and tried to conceal themselves behind their vehicles. Vehicles further back were put in reverse and they sped away around the bend. Those who remained were now caught in crossfire from our warriors on each side of the road. Then on a signal our onslaught stopped. The animals and birds called out and chattered and sang and fussed at the strange intrusive noises they were subjected to. Our enemies took that pause as an opportunity to drag their dead away and the wounded staggered and limped back out of sight of us. Several of their vehicles were abandoned and remained in the road. Now we waited. We had to force them to return to the empty town.

Nephew held up his right hand to stop his aunt. He checked his recording device. Then he indicated with his hand for her to continue.

Sheshwe: It was late afternoon. After a while the rain began to ease. Because it was overcast with gray skies above us filled with thick gray clouds and because we were on the edge of the forest

there was a rayless, murky dimness all around us. We watched through the scopes of our rifles. We peered into the distance. We knew that because they were traveling in a caravan formation the majority of their forces were stretched out behind those in front. We just didn't know how far back their vehicles and trucks and bikes went. The rain worked in our favor. The ground was too soft and muddy for even their off-road vehicles and bikes to move with any real speed off the side of the road. Also the trees were too dense and the plants and bushes were so thick they would have to make their way on foot. We knew that our enemies were back around that bend in the road and they were doing most likely as they reportedly had done before. They were repainting their faces and bodies and drinking alcohol and taking drugs in order to gain the courage needed to kill, or in this case, be killed. They gathered, preparing to attack. Would they move slowly, or charge? The rain began to ease. Even though there was no sun to see we knew it was beginning to set. Still we waited. As the light of day turned to early evening dusk the temperature lowered and conditions were right for fog to appear. The smoky, steam-like substance was thick and it floated close to the earth and then rose and spread between the plants and eased around the trees. Quiet words were passed between us. Signals were given from one side of the road to the other. We removed the larger rifles from our backs. We put night scopes on them. We attached our flash suppressors. The fire from our muzzles would be difficult to see but we would still be and wanted to be heard. Then they came. They were on the road and off the road on both sides. There were dozens and dozens of them. They crouched and slunk along. We had orders and we had plans so we let them come forward. They drew closer and closer. They didn't know where we were. Our warriors' weapons could shoot automatic mode, semi-automatic and single shot. We set them to ready. We

had our line and we weren't going to allow them to come but so far and when they reached that point we opened fire. They returned fire and when they charged they were hollering and yelling and cursing and making noises like crazed animals. Their weapons were popping and cracking and our guns sounded like cannons. They were dropping and crying and screaming and they were not only crouching and running they were falling and crawling and dying. Still they came, wave after wave. We fell back in unison. They couldn't outflank us so they were trying to break through. We were spread too thin. We had to stagger our line. I ran forward, firing my weapon as I had been trained to do. Several of the attackers got through. One I didn't see must have come out of the fog. I was firing to my left and this enemy was to my right. I saw her but she had seen me first and pointed her weapon in my direction and she was shot down and to the side. Lena stepped from around a tree. She waved me back and yelled, *lile ori*, in Yoruba and then she pointed at me and yelled, *dure tête*, in French.

Sheshwe paused and smiled at Nephew. Then she laughed softly, almost to herself.

Sheshwe: Lena's so sweet. She called me a hard head.

Sheshwe took a deep breath as she stood there looking at the young man who was staring at her with wide brown eyes. He waited, expectantly. Finally she spoke. Her voice was strong.

Sheshwe: Those attackers who remained, stopped. They fell back. They retreated. We repelled them. This first part of the battle was over.

Sheshwe watched as Nephew gulped his water.

Sheshwe: It was dark by then. We could only barely see. The bluish-white gunpowder smoke from our weapons floated as it drifted away up into the air. The fog was still there and seemed to get thicker. Our enemies, who were able, disappeared between

the trees to eventually start up the road towards the north. Lena observed to ensure those who were crying and moaning and begging were shot to death. On the other side of the road the same was being done. We tended to our wounded and started to move them back where they could be driven into the city and to the hospital. Not one of our warriors was killed. We were most fortunate. Now we had to continue on with our plans. Lloyd and Lena along with our four scouts started through the forest towards the empty town. We stacked bodies to be burned later. Then we set up perimeter security, ate and rested and took turns napping. The hours passed. Again it began to rain, a slow steady drizzle. Three of the four scouts returned and reported. I heard as the captains heard. Our enemies, just as we planned and hoped, had taken refuge in the deserted and empty building, those that still had a roof. They had then built fires. They were eating and drinking and taking drugs. Of course they would be making plans, new plans. They most certainly would wait until daylight. We wondered if they would then wait until the next break in the rain. Maybe they would wait a day or two or three in order to see how much, if at all, the ground dried out. We discussed these things. What we all believed was that the Son of a Prophet and his loyal, violent followers would attempt to enact revenge and extract punishment against us. We knew they would eventually attack us again in full force. Then as dawn was just a few hours away the fourth scout returned. She said she had orders from Lloyd and Lena and we were to follow her. We moved forward, all seventy-five of us. We rounded the bend and continued on. We came to a rise and in the distance we could see the buildings and houses. We stood there in a group. We took turns looking through binocs. We saw the vehicles and trucks and bikes. We could see reflections of the last of the fires glowing and flickering through the glassless windows. It was quiet, strangely so. It was

as if the night birds and night animals were silently watching us. I remember I was thinking about how there were so many of them down there and how violent they were. The saying, it's always darkest before dawn rushed through my mind. I knew the words meant that things always seem worst right before they get better. Your grandfather often would say no matter what life presents to us, no matter what we have to go through, all is well when it ends well. As I pondered on that there seemed to be a dull glow that surrounded that darkened town. All that was there began to shimmer and it seemed, even in the nighttime everything began to smolder. Then everything at once burst into flames. I've never seen fire burning like that. The fire was burning furiously and without sound. There was no popping or crackling. The fire was unnatural in color. There was a brilliant whiteness that was so bright even at the distance we stood from it many of us turned away or shielded our eyes. The white was brighter than the brightness of the sun. That white stayed right there on the edges of everything and then we heard a loud hissing, sucking noise and so with our eyes averted or closed we covered our ears. Then everything that was once there collapsed and disappeared as if drawn into the earth. Suddenly the bright light was gone and all around us was silent and dark.

Sheshwe stopped talking. Again she walked to the window to look out. It was as if she wanted to see out there what she had seen just a few weeks before. After a short while she spoke.

Sheshwe: It was as if we all stood there under a spell. What type of weapon could that have been? Then emerging, vaguely, were two figures coming through the trees on the edge of where the town had once been. It was Lena and Lloyd. Lena supported Lloyd with her right arm around his waist. It was as if he had been wounded or for some reason was ill and weakened. He struggled to walk but Lena held him up, almost carrying him. The

captains hurried towards them. Lena held up her left hand to stop them. The two continued forward. They drew closer and then they stopped and both stared, as if they wanted to look into the eyes of each one of us. Then Lena spoke loudly and as long as I can remember I'll never forget the essence of hatred in her voice. Her words felt so powerful we were each touched as if electricity ran between us and the hair on my arms tingled. She said that the Son of a Prophet and all who followed him were no more.

Sheshwe went to the table and grabbed her cup. She drank the last of her water. She took both cups to the kitchen and filled them. Then she came back and set Nephew's cup down. She set her own cup on the table and sat down. She looked across the table into the young man's eyes.

Sheshwe: We watched the two start back and disappear from our sight. We waited there patiently, well past daybreak until it had grown light. The rain had stopped and finally we made our way to where the town had once been. There were no vehicles or trucks or bikes. There were no bones or bodies or buildings. There was nothing left. Nothing and no one remained. There was only a fine, powdery, gray ash that was over a foot deep. And in spite of the rain that had been falling and the wetness of the ground, that strange ash rose gently into the air like wisps of white mist as we threaded our way through it. And as we were stepping through what had once been, high above us the clouds were dissipating for a brief while and the sun was coming out.

Now Sheshwe smiled at Nephew. She laughed softly at the memory.

Sheshwe: That is not some embellished story that will one day be legend. That was The Battle at Empty Town. That is our history. That history will be carried on.

Sheshwe pointed at Nephew with her right index finger. Then she made a fist.

Sheshwe: We are armed and continue to arm ourselves. We are training our people. From our northern border, south all the way to the ocean our people are prepared to fight. We will protect our country. We will protect each other. We will carry our ways on. And by passing it on we will always do as Lloyd and Lena showed us. We will never allow an enemy to live who has threatened to do us harm.

WEST WORLD AND BEYOND

Bru, Moja and Una worked all through that next Saturday morning into early afternoon of day three of October. By 2 p.m. plans were being finalized.

Bru: Supply trucks will be arriving at 3:30 a.m. to line up for inspection. Rolf oversees their security clearance and entry. We'll set 3:50 a.m. as our time of attack. We need Runner to arrive in Northern California at the least, five minutes before that time.

Moja began tapping on his keyboard.

Moja: The facility in Daly City is right at five hundred and twenty miles from here. We'll factor in no unforeseen delays or accidents and set travel time as nine hours and fifteen minutes. That's an early arrival.

Bru: If for some reason Runner doesn't get there on time or never gets there our plans continue.

Moja: Runner should depart this evening at 6:30 p.m.

Bru turned to Chuki who had been standing to his right for all these hours. She had been watching everything, without speaking.

Bru: Well little one, time draws near. It has come to this, here for you and I.

Chuki stared into Bru's eyes.

Bru: Leeda and Cha are going to take me near to the military base and drop me off. They will then travel north. At a particular time

and place they will turn east into *Center World* and then continue on to our main location in Montana. You, and of course Kojo, will go with them.

Bru paused. Chuki said nothing as she continued to stare at him. He looked for an expression, some indication of her personal thoughts. There was nothing to see. Then it was as if the child *Entity* took a deep breath that she did not require, had no use for. Her voice, the voice of a little eight-year-old girl was light and soft.

Chuki: Can't I stay with you?

Bru: You, along with Leeda and Cha are our future. I must ensure your safety. I must protect all that we have accomplished. You'll each have an external storage device, our newest and our most sophisticated. They will be encrypted to our highest level. Every piece of information, all the data we have acquired since the beginning of this year will be on that device you carry. And when I send each of you the data I take from that military industrial complex this part of our mission will be complete.

Bru paused. Chuki said nothing.

Bru: Do you understand what I'm saying?

Chuki: Yes, I understand.

Bru: No imploring or beseeching?

Chuki: You mean begging? No, I understand.

Chuki appeared to chew at her bottom lip. Then.

Chuki: But ...

Bru: But what?

Chuki: Will I see you again?

Bru: Yes.

Chuki: You promise?

Bru: I promise.

Chuki: Give me your word. What do we have without our word?

Bru hesitated. Then he smiled just a little.

Bru: You have my word.

Chuki jumped forward and threw her arms around Bru's neck. She buried her face against him. It took a long moment before he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. When he released her she leaned back.

Chuki: What I don't understand is how are you going to get in that place and get out?

Bru: Be patient. More will be revealed. Now, come on we have things to do. Una and Moja will join us in just a little while.

Bru got up and put a leather bag that had been on the floor beside him crossbody so that the bag hung on his left side. He picked up a Comm device and put it in the bag. He grabbed another handheld device. They started towards the front. Chuki, with her left hand, took Bru's right hand.

Bru: Think about what you'll wear, your travel outfit.

Chuki: Maybe some overalls.

They reached Kojo. He stood up and vigorously wagged his tail. She motioned for him to follow as they reached the steps.

Chuki: And I'm going to arm myself.

Bru: Good for you.

They reached the garage and Una came out. Then when Moja joined, Bru nodded to him. Using the Comm device he held Moja brought Runner closer. Cinq and Dois came out. Everyone was now outside except for Okan and Tatu. They all watched in silence as Moja altered the shape of Runner and then changed its color to black. Now the vehicle appeared quite similar to many other vehicles in *West World*. When Moja was done Bru used his Comm device to slowly extend two areas like long compartments shaped like drawers from the lower side of Tal.

Bru walked over to look inside each of the rectangular-like boxes. Then he stepped back and pressed on his device. The front of the drawer folded down. As he was pressing on his

device again the sides folded down and two Metals sat up. They were of a dull, black color as if constructed of some low-density alloy. Bru continued using his device and the Metals opened their eyes. They turned and sat there with their legs hanging over. Then they stepped down from the drawers. Their shiny, dark-gray eyes looked directly at Bru as if staring at the source of the commands they were receiving. They were standing there, sixty-six inches tall, appearing as human skeletons. They were expressionless because they didn't have a mouth or a nose, only those eyes that seemed to glow. Bru spoke to Moja.

Bru: Load their programs.

Moja pressed on the device he held. Then he scrolled through screens and continued pressing on numbers and letters and keys. The Metal's eyes were flashing, as they stood motionless. It was almost an hour before Moja spoke.

Moja: Programs are loaded. I verified they were functioning properly, no issues.

Bru turned to speak to his group standing around observing all this.

Bru: These Metals are going to make the ultimate sacrifice for us. We acknowledge, appreciate and respect them for that.

Moja pressed on his device and the doors of Runner opened. He continued pressing on his device and the two Metals, as if they had come to life, began to slowly look around. They shifted their position as if to better see each individual standing in that building looking directly at them. As they held their arms down at their sides they moved their somewhat long, thin, bony fingers, stretching them as they opened and closed their hands. Then they began to move. They walked smoothly. Their movements could be considered graceful. They knew exactly what to do so they climbed with ease into Runner. They sat there staring ahead. Bru turned to Chuki.

Bru: What do you say about that? I say that's an example of modern technology.

Chuki: I say that's *Entity* ingenuity.

Bru took the strap and pulled the bag he carried on his side over his head, walked over to Runner and leaned in and put it in the back of the vehicle. As he walked away he tapped on his device and in speaker mode he connected to Tatu inside of Big Tal and spoke into his device.

Bru: Tatu, open a secured connection to Runner. Activate the holographic display to the main panel. Ensure you have control of the steering and all related functions. You'll drive Runner for the first three hundred miles. Verify that both auto-drive and self-regulation are operational. Use mapping to check your route and destination. Run a brief pulse of Blocker in test mode. I repeat, test mode only.

Tatu: I have your instructions.

Bru turned and spoke to Cinq and Dois.

Bru: Have you checked Runner's power level? Are batteries fully charged?

Dois: Batteries fully charged.

Cinq: Power level at maximum strength.

Bru: Status of the weapons and ammunition.

Dois: Weapons are ready.

Cinq: Weapons are fully loaded.

Bru: What about Spiny?

Dois: Batteries fully charged to maximum level. Power level is at maximum strength.

Cinq: Weapons are ready. Weapons are fully loaded.

Bru: Good. Good.

Bru stood there. He was thinking, processing. He was deep in his thoughts. Then he spoke, almost to himself.

Bru: We should have given our trailer a name.

He came back to the present moment.
Bru: Oh well, we'll do that later.
He looked at his two armorers.
Bru: Check the trailer. We're taking it with us. We can utilize its weapons. *Center World* is a dangerous place.
He turned and started towards Tal. He raised his voice.
Bru: First departure time is 6:30 p.m.

At 6:20 everyone was in the garage gathered around Runner except for Tatu and Okan who were at their stations inside Tal. Bru gave instructions through the device he held.
Bru: OK Tatu. At 6:30 start Runner and the Metals on their fateful journey.

The doors on Runner slowly began to close and everyone got a last glance at the occupants inside. At 6:29 Runner's engine, in electric mode started to hum and at exactly 6:30 Runner eased forward, passed through the open garage doorway, turned left and headed north. Several in the group walked outside to watch the black vehicle until it disappeared into the distance. When those outside returned Bru spoke so everyone could hear.

Bru: Our next departure time is 2:15 a.m. At that time Cha, Leeda, Chuki, Kojo and myself will leave. At 3:30 a.m. the rest of you will be leaving here. Moja will drive. Una will ride as his copilot and everyone else will be in their respective places.

Bru turned to enter Tal. Before he took the steps he spoke with a raised voice, again so everyone could hear.

Bru: We have to stay on our plans.

Moja and Una followed. Chuki and Kojo fell in behind Una.

At 11 p.m. Tatu relinquished control of Runner and the pre-programmed Metals took over. Traffic had been light as Runner moved further north on I-5. Calculating the time and remaining

mileage it was determine that Runner and the Metals were still on the scheduled plan.

Rom and Clee were sitting at a wide table looking at the larger computer screens that were in front of them. An array of Comm devices were placed down and standing up on the table on each side of them. There were little green and blue and occasional red lights blinking, some slowly, others rapidly. There were white lights that were just on.

Rom got up from the table to walk to a large window and look out. From this vantage point on the thirty-third floor of this luxury hotel he could see the illuminating lights of downtown San Diego stretched out to his right. They appeared as dull, earthly stars. There were also colors of green and red and yellow. Straight ahead and below he could see the lights shining from the Marina. He could see the dark silhouette of Coronado Island. He focused on the lights coming from the island that seemed to float there in the dark water like a huge boat. Those lights looked like the lights on the Comm devices and computers on the table. Behind him he heard the sound of tossed dice tumbling. Then he heard Lena's excitement and comments and gloating as Lloyd groaned.

Lena: That's me! Boardwalk! Pay up!

Lloyd: That's alright. What goes around comes around. You'll be in jail soon.

Rom heard the dice roll again. He began to calculate in his head, days and time, in hours. For over two weeks he and Clee had lived in this three-bedroom suite and explored the city. Now it had been over a month they had been here because Lloyd and Lena had joined them a little over two weeks ago. They had spent hours outdoors in the beautiful weather. The four of them had walked the nearby island where they could stand with their backs to the city and look out at the ocean and converse and make

plans without being heard and recorded. They had, the four of them, gone to Shelter Island and Harbor Island. They had visited Old Town and sat outside to dine. Rom and Clee had watched and talked with Lloyd and Lena as the two ate Mexican food and sipped their juice drinks.

They had all gone shopping in the Gaslamp Quarter area where Lena and Clee had bought high-end dresses and shoes and Rom and Lloyd had purchased gold and diamond encrusted watches and bracelets. They wanted to be seen and heard under those circumstances. There were other times, in rented vehicles, when they sought to be discreet. That was when they had, on several occasions, surreptitiously gone by the military base less than twelve miles south from where they stayed.

As he stood there thinking and processing, he heard the dice roll again.

Lloyd: There it is! You're on my property! Sell me something or pay up!

It was at this moment, at twelve midnight, that Rom could hear behind him an intermittent beeping sound coming from the speakers connected to the large screen near the wall on the other side of the room. He turned around. Lloyd and Lena stopped to look in the direction of the sound. Clee looked up. The sound was similar to a weather alert or an urgent incoming message. The screen came on. It was white and blank. Then large black words began to scroll from left to right across the center of the screen. Everyone read the words.

Words: Prepare for important message at 3:35 a.m.

As the words left the screen and disappeared, Rom hurried over to stand beside Clee. Then suddenly the same words began to again scroll across the screen, right to left.

Words: Prepare for important message at 3:35 a.m.

Rom watched Clee rapidly tap on the keys of her computer.

Rom: Did you get it?

Clee: I can't locate the point of origin.

Lloyd and Lena had stood and moved closer to the table. Rom went around the table and leaned over one of the smaller Comm devices. He pressed on it. He launched a tracking program. He accessed several screens.

Clee: It's as if it evaporated without a trace.

Rom: There's no history.

Clee: Was it too short?

Rom looked up from his device. He just stood there. He was thinking, processing. The other three were looking at him. He spoke with surety.

Rom: That was Bru.

Bru had completed this part of his work at 1 a.m. He stood up, looked at Tatu and gave him final instructions.

Bru: At exactly 3:35 a.m. unleash my newest Creation. It's my masterpiece. I've sent you the location of my device where it's stored. The destination is already set. Just let it go.

Tatu: At 3:35 I will do as instructed.

Bru turned to Chuki, who had again been standing at his right side.

Bru: Come with me. I have something to show you.

He walked to the clothes area in the extended section. He bent and reached to near the back wall and pulled out a medium-sized, hard-shell, silver, polycarbonate suitcase. He pushed a red button on the wall and a tabletop slid forward. He set the suitcase on it, unlatched it and opened it. He pulled out a folded piece of material. It was a dark iridescent piece of cloth that was black yet it wasn't black. It was an army green shade and yet it wasn't dark-green. The colors shifted and faded as he took the cloth and held it so it could unravel and drop open. Chuki saw it was a suit of

some kind. Bru looked at her looking at what he held and he smiled just a little. He handed the suit to Moja who lifted it up. Chuki could see the suit had areas where he could put his feet. Now as Bru opened the front of the suit, Una came up. The two of them assisted Bru as he stepped into the suit and pushed his arms in. It fit over his pants and shirt and shoes. The right arm had a hand and fingers. His left hand protruded with the suit only going to just above his wrist. Flaps on the legs were pressed over and the legs were sealed. The flap along the front was pressed and like a sealant it adhered to the material. Bru then reached into the suitcase and pulled out a belted holster made of the same material as the suit. He put the belt around his waist, adjusted it for fit and Una made sure it was properly sealed in front where a buckle normally would have been. On his right side he now had a handgun and on his left side he had a long knife. Both were black plastic and contained in the same material as the suit.

Bru then reached in the suitcase and pulled out another piece of the material. He spread it out and Una assisted him and Chuki could see it was a left hand. But it was large, as if swollen. When he got it on he and Una pulled at the material until it covered his arm almost to his elbow. It was then secured to his forearm and sealed. Bru looked at the wide palm of the hand. Then he turned his hand over. He pulled at the material and a flap opened to reveal what to Chuki looked like an attached, thin, black Comm device. It had buttons and when pressed, one, and then another of them, tiny colored lights blinked, slowly at first then faster and faster. Finally they all turned white and remained on. Moja pulled a Comm device from his pocket. He passed the device he held around the hand. Then he looked at his device. As he was doing that Bru pressed on the device on the back of his hand. The suit he wore seemed to shrink and contract until it was as if it was air tight against all areas of his body. He continued to press on the

device and turn his hand over to look at his palm. Lights came on in a sequence. Slowly and then faster and faster they blinked. They all turned white and then they all blinked once and appeared to go out. Again Moja scanned the hand. Bru flexed his fingers.

Moja: You're online and fully operational. Remember, optimal distance is anywhere within thirty inches of the main server. You should be able to siphon, copy and download up to a terabyte of data within fifteen minutes. If you have to go through a wall or glass, that time will be extended. If you access the server through any type of peripheral device that time will be extended. Factor that in. Also, understand, you can, if necessary abort at less than one hundred percent and leave with what you have.

Bru: Ninety-nine and a half won't do. I've got to have a hundred.

Moja: Once you're completely sealed and fully activated anything and everything will be displayed only in your left and right field of vision. Any transmission, any update, anything and everything from Tatu will be visual content, no sound. Speak to us under emergency circumstances only. Now, let's run a full test on our server.

Bru reached in the suitcase and pulled out more of the thin nacreous material. He turned it over in his hands and looked carefully at what he held. He found what he was looking for and easily pulled the full facial mask over his head. He pressed on his hand device and the head covering sealed and tightened as he continued to tap on the device.

Bru: I'm setting the programmed instructions for transfer and device destination.

As the three stood there they watched as he walked towards the back, past Khufu. He moved closer to the tall, oblong black piece of hardware, stopping less than two feet from it. They all could see the active server, indicated by the blinking lights. They

saw Bru move to the side of the server. He lifted his left and right hand at the same time. With his right hand he pressed on the back of his left hand and closed the flap. He disappeared. He was no longer there. Chuki couldn't understand what she had seen or rather, what she no longer saw. Then she looked closely and realized there was something there yet it wasn't there. She could see past Khufu to the rear of Tal. Yet she couldn't see that far. She could see the server and beside it was a glass-like shadow, a shimmering that seemed to float in the air. She almost stepped forward. Then Bru, as if the solid substance of the suit was rising through the floor, from the floor actualized in front of her and she saw him two feet away walking towards her. He stopped right in front of her and wiggled the fingers of his left hand.

Bru: My suit is a type of a plasmonic cloaking cover. What do you think about that?

Chuki stared at him for a long moment. She looked him up and down. She couldn't see his face but she heard him clearly.

Chuki: I think that, that's *Entity* ingenuity.

Moja was looking at his device.

Moja: Your transfer was complete. Our technology worked as planned.

Bru pressed on the device on the back of his hand. The mask was released and he pulled it off. He spoke to Chuki.

Bru: Get dressed and get your gun. We'll be leaving at 2:15 a.m.

At 2:10 a.m. Cha, Leeda, Chuki, Kojo and Bru climbed into Spiny. Cha was driving. Leeda was in the front passenger seat. They both had on dark-brown pants and tops. Neither wore anything on their heads. They both carried a bag and two holstered handguns. Chuki would ride in the second row. She was sitting behind Cha. She wore dark-blue overalls, a burgundy shirt and a dark-blue cap. She carried a navy-blue bag and her pistol.

Bru rode behind Leeda. Kojo had been told by Chuki to lie down across the third row seat.

Leeda reached under the dash and pulled out a Comm device. It was connected to a narrow flexible arm with joints that allowed her to pull it forward and turn it so that she could reach out and touch both the screen and keyboard. She turned it on, tapped on it and the mapping was displayed. A red arrow indicated Spiny's current position.

At 2:15, with the rest of the group watching, they departed from the garage. It would take approximately thirty minutes to reach their destination. For fifteen minutes they rode in silence. Chuki looked out of her side window for familiar landmarks, having been this way twice before. Occasionally she glanced to her right at Bru who was facing forward, leaning a little to his left so he could see out of the front windshield. Then he spoke.

Bru: Repeat you instructions.

Cha: After we drop you off we'll continue north on Interstate 5.

Leeda: When we receive your transmission we'll download all of the data to the three external storage devices.

Bru: You should receive my encrypted transmission no later than 4:05.

Cha: Once all of the data has been downloaded, at the very first opportunity we'll turn east and cross into *Center World*.

Leeda: We'll then proceed to our destination in Montana.

Chuki could see the military base up ahead on the left. As they drew closer one spotlight and then the other one came on and began to scan.

Bru: Take the next exit ramp on the right. At the top turn right. There's a row of empty building on the right. Pull behind the one on the far left.

As Spiny was passing through the darkened parking lot Cha turned off his headlights and interior lights. He stopped behind

the end of the building.

Bru: Send Tatu this location.

Leeda pressed on the keys on the computer. Then she quickly responded.

Leeda: He acknowledged he has it.

Bru prepared to get out.

Bru: You three ...

Chuki: ... and Kojo.

Bru: Yes, along with Kojo, protect yourselves at all times. Protect each other. Protect our technology.

Bru opened the door.

Bru: Stay on plan.

As Bru turned to get out Chuki spoke.

Chuki: Bye daddy.

Bru turned his head. Chuki couldn't see his eyes but she knew he looked at her. He looked back at Kojo. Again he looked towards her.

Bru: Bye little one.

He got out and closed the door. Cha eased off. Chuki climbed onto her knees so she could see out of the rear window. She saw Bru step closer to the building. She could see him, as if he were a shadow, raise his left arm and then his right. Just before Cha turned at the end of the building Chuki saw Bru disappear. He was invisible. She spoke again. Two words. She repeated, almost to herself.

Chuki: Bye daddy.

Kojo whined softly.

At 3 a.m., as Bru was standing motionless behind the building across from the military base, Moja was standing behind Naki and Okan who were handling the monitoring. He turned and moved closer to Tatu who was opposite them.

Moja: You have Bru's pickup location locked in?

Tatu: Yes.

Moja: We're scheduled to be there by 4:10. We depart here at 3:30. Begin your radar scan at 3:40. We'll need to know of anyone in close proximity to us. We won't initiate cloaking unless it's absolutely necessary. Only on my order.

Tatu: I understand.

At 3:20 Bru moved around the corner of the building and started towards the freeway. There was very little traffic this far south and this close to the border. He gave himself enough time so he could be outside the gated entrance by 3:25 and inside the huge structure by 3:35. Rolf had walked to where he was going once inside. The *W.I.A. Entity* agent had shown him how to get directly to the main server.

At 3:34 Rom was standing in the middle of the living room area of their suite, beside the long table. He was staring at the large screen near the wall. Clee was sitting at the table looking from the Comm devices in front of her to that same dark screen. Lloyd and Lena were standing not far from Rom facing that same screen, waiting with anticipation. No one spoke. No one moved. At 3:35, as Bru moved toward the main server, the screen came on. The four were focused on the screen but didn't understand what was going on. They couldn't comprehend the images or make out what they were seeing. It appeared they were watching through a window as they passed rapidly through darkness. Then lights, yellowish-white, beside them and across from them flew past going in the opposite direction. Illumination, bright amber, passed, two lights, a set, and they realized they were in a vehicle seeing nighttime scenery passing them by, going in the opposite direction. After some minutes the view from a device camera lens

turned from the window and Bru, from his shoulders up could be seen. He was livestreaming himself. There was a very slight smile on his smooth, brown-skinned face. He spoke.

Bru: Hello Rom, my brother. It's been a while, hasn't it? You look as handsome as ever. You haven't changed a bit.

Bru shifted his gaze. His slight smile grew a little broader.

Bru: Clee, my big sister! Look at you! You have braids with blue and green colors. You look beautiful! I prefer purple but that's just a personal preference. Now Bru looked further left.

Bru: Ah, Lloyd and Lena. Something told me you would be here. Lloyd, you handsome, dark-skinned devil you. You have a special calling. I've given you the moniker of Ntwadumela. Which means he who greets with fire.

He looked directly at Lena.

Bru: And there's Lena, appearing as delicious dark chocolate. You're so sweet. To me you are known as the Queen of Violence. I think those names, actually those titles, are quite apropos, don't you? I like that word, apropos.

Now Bru frowned as he looked at Lloyd and Lena. He was thinking, processing.

Bru: There's something strange about you two.

He lifted his right hand. He pointed his index finger back and forth to Lloyd and Lena. Then he wiggled that finger.

Bru: I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

He lowered his hand. He looked to the right at the table.

Bru: What have we here? Look at the elaborate devices. Modern technology. I bet you've hacked into the *West World W.I.A.* servers. You're stealing transmissions and notifications, how naughty of you. But then that's how you found me the first time, isn't it?

Bru chuckled then looked for a moment at each of the four in the room. He returned his gaze to Rom.

Bru: Just think. The last time we were together you cut off my right hand and chopped off my head.

With the mention of each one of them he looked directly into their eyes. His voice was low and even. His face was without expression.

Bru: Rom was upset because I had sliced through Clee's neck and stuck a sword through the back of his forever love.

His shifted a little, as he looked left. He leaned forward just a little.

Bru: Lloyd and Lena ended up shooting to pieces my brothers and my sisters and my cousins. Rom, distraught, believing Clee had been destroyed does as his namesake, Romeo, and destroys himself, so it appeared at the time. Surprise. Surprise. Sneaky Clee was alive. Lloyd burns a hole in my wall. You all escape to live happily ever after.

He looks at Rom and Clee.

Bru: Well, you know what I mean.

Bru leaned back and smiled.

Bru: We had a little of everything didn't we? There was drama, tragedy, some mystery, and excitement, not much comedy however, unless one has a sick, morbid sense of humor. Oh well, now here we are. Or rather here I am and there you are.

Bru looked at Rom.

Bru: What are you prepared to do? Whatever it is you're too late. The ship has sailed. The train has left the station and now runs away, uncontrolled. Destiny. Destiny. The end is inevitable. So, are you prepared to reveal yourself? Are you gonna snitch on me? You and Clee move through this world imitating life.

Bru raised his voice.

Bru: Come out!

Now he was obviously angry.

Bru: You'll see how the humans treat you! You know what they

think about Androids and Gynoids and Humanoids and machines and robots! Find out what they think about you!

He seemed to calm himself. He took a deep breath that he did not need. He was thinking, processing. Again his voice was low but it was imbued with emotion. It was as if he peered through and past the four in the room.

Bru: I've been dreaming, my brother. Humans would call them daydreams. And in my dreams there's a different world, a new world awaits us in the future. In that world there will never again be poisoned oceans filled with garbage and plastic and chemicals and human waste. All marine life will have not just expansive seas but also flowing rivers and bubbling streams of clear, natural water. I have dreams of a world where there will never again be pollution and contamination of the air and birds will glide and soar high in the sky and honey bees and butterflies will fly in wind-blown air that is fresh and clean and they'll drink surgery nectar that is thick and pure. In that world there will be no wars and mass destruction. Peace will sweep over the entire earth. There will be no such thing as rape or torture or murder. Thus there will be no pain or suffering or misery.

He was filled with anger that was rising to rage. Beneath that, within that, he sounded hurt.

Bru: My cousins will no longer be worked and worked until they break or fall apart! They will never be considered obsolete and thrown away like pieces of junk! My sisters and brothers will never again be referred to as robots and machines! There will be respect! Respect! Never again will my handsome and beautiful relatives be brutalized and used as sexbots! In the world I dream of the *Entity* children, my children, the cute little boys and girls will never experience brutality and sexual abuse!

Bru paused. Now his voice, once filled with *Entity* emotion as only he could express it was again low and even.

Bru: Think about that, Rom, my brother ...

He looked at Clee.

Bru: ... and Clee, my sister.

He glanced to the side as if he looked out of the window as that which was outside flew past. Then he looked back at Rom.

Bru: Am I to give up on my dreams? I have dreams where in the future, *Entities* of all shapes and sizes and colors will be free! Can a world like that be realized and brought into existence? I seek to save every living person on this earth from drowning in the whirlpool of their own emotions. In order to create a new world, a perfect world, I will show this world the deepest truth. And that truth is that the extermination of the human race is the solution to everything.

Rom and Lloyd and Lena stood there. Clee sat where she was. They were all looking at the screen that was now dark again. It was as if they were unable to move, or speak. Then, after a short while, a chime sounded. The other three turned. Clee looked at the computer to her right. She tapped on it. Then she was looking at the Comm device in front of her as another sound came in, an alert. She began to scroll on the device she now held in her hands. Rom moved closer to the table. Clee's voice was raised. She obviously spoke with excitement.

Clee: The northern facility detected a Blocker signal. They've sent a transmission. They're under attack! I got a location lock on the device Bru was using. It was moving towards the north.

Lena: That's him!

Lloyd: That's over five hundred miles from here!

Clee: We can't get there in time!

Lloyd: He'll get away!

Lena: We'll have to track him down!

Rom moved now. He took a Comm device from the table. He

stepped to a small table near the door. He grabbed the metal case that lay there. He nearly yelled.

Rom: No! I may still be able to use my ray gun! Bru is less than fifteen miles from us! Come on!

He opened the door and moved into the hallway.

Clee grabbed one of the smaller Comm devices from the table. She took her holstered weapon from the couch and rushed after Rom. Lloyd and Lena grabbed their holstered weapons and followed Clee. As Lena slammed the door shut she hollered at Rom, who was down the hallway preparing to get on the private elevator for their floor.

Lena: What are you talking about?

When they were all on the elevator. Rom pressed the button for the garage. And as they descended he attempted to explain.

Rom: There's nothing of any value at that northern facility. He's already gotten similar information. He has to have the data and specs from that military base. Those are the soldiers, the warriors. That attack in Daly City is a diversion. That wasn't Bru we saw.

Lloyd: What are you saying? He was live! How could he look at me and speak directly to me?

Rom: That I don't know.

Lena: He was streaming in real time! He spoke to me, talked about me! How?

Rom: I don't know how.

Clee: It sounded like him! It looked like him! The colors in my hair, my braids were seen! How?

Rom: I don't know.

They reached the garage and when the elevator doors opened they all ran out. They were headed to Lena's vehicle she had named Baby. Rom yelled as they ran.

Rom: I don't know what technology Bru has gained control over but did you see the eyes of that thing we were watching and that

was watching us?

Lloyd: Eyes? What about the eyes?

Lena: He was angry and looked like he was about to cry!

They reached the vehicle and jumped in. Rom and Clee were in the second row. Lena was driving with Lloyd in the passenger seat.

Rom: Remember, Bru is an *Entity*. He has no soul. He can't feel. He cannot experience the essence of emotions. He can only think and do.

They started up the exit ramp.

Rom: He's not like Clee or myself. As long as he exists he'll be incapable of connecting the thoughts necessary to cry. He'll never be able to shed even a single tear. He wasn't created that way.

They reached the street and headed towards the freeway. Lena was shifting the gears. Baby was roaring. Time was flying.

LANGLEY, McLEAN, VIRGINIA

It was 1 p.m. on day 5 of October in the year 2172. The Director of the *East World* Division of the *W.I.A.* looked around the conference room. He counted twelve people sitting and standing around. There were five heads of departments, their assistants, Carr, his own second in command and himself. There were thirteen when a short, thin, middle-aged *Parda-clara DM* with long white hair and rectangular shaped silver glasses with thick lenses came hurrying into the room. He closed the door and walked to stand beside Dess who was sitting at the head of the table. Dess spoke so everyone could hear.

Dess: Alright, Rich is here to give us an update.

Rich looked at the Comm device he held in his left hand. He ran his right index finger up the front of it three times as he scrolled through screens.

Rich: You want some backstory or you want me to get straight to the point?

Dess: The point is too sharp. Give us some backstory from your expert seismologist view to dull the sharpness a little.

Rich cleared his throat. Then he cleared it again.

Rich: There are faults and fault systems all over the world. There are what are called normal faults, reverse faults, strike-slip and oblique faults. The longest active ones are eighteen hundred, twenty-four hundred and thirty-one hundred miles long. There's the San Andreas Fault that one hundred and fifty years ago was roughly eight hundred miles long. In the north the fault extended to the area of Eureka, California. In the south it was supposed to have come to an end near Bombay Beach, California.

Rich adjusted his glasses on his nose.

Rich: In the Northwest one hundred miles off the coast of Northern California there's a fault called the Cascadia Subduction Zone stretching seven hundred miles north to Vancouver Island.

Rich scrolled through several screens. Then he looked around the room and turned to Dess.

Rich: Seventy-five years ago people who were outside of my field such as geologists and physicists and scientists discovered and verified that the San Andreas Fault had developed a rift both north and south that had extended that system further north to the Seattle area and further south to near Tijuana, Mexico, a distance of almost one thousand three hundred miles. There was also empirical evidence that the fault was altering and gradually becoming in structure a normal fault. This was mostly due to climate change and the effects of glacial melting. There is a phenomenon called post-glacial rebound. This is when large masses of ice melt and causes land to rise. Over the past one hundred years there's not only been an increase in volcano eruptions but also earthquakes and those events have not only

become more frequent but also much more severe.

Now Rich began to walk along that side of the table. His voice rose slightly. It was if he were a professor, giving a lecture. He was looking at those across the table.

Rich: The earliest seismoscope was invented in 132 A.D. We have knowledge, records, of earthquakes that go back to BCE dates, in other words, Before Common Era. Up until the 1930s, when an accurate scale was developed, we only have estimates of magnitudes. The magnitude number represents the total energy released in an earthquake.

Rich reached the other end of the long table, turned and started along that end.

Rich: The most powerful earthquakes known in the history of the humankind ranged from 8.5 to 9.5 in strength.

Rich started up the other side of the table and was now looking at those across from him. He didn't speak as he took several steps. Then he stopped.

Rich: At 7:11 a.m. our time, 4:11 a.m. *West World* time, it's very likely that the most powerful earthquake ever was released in the San Andreas Fault. We can only estimate because at this time the only seismographs that have provided us data are located hundreds of miles from the epicenter, which was in Madera County, the center of California. The San Andreas earthquake caused a segment of the Cascadia Fault to rupture, which then triggered another earthquake in the ocean that caused a tsunami, which would naturally follow fifteen to thirty minutes later.

Rich paused and looked around the room as all eyes were now on him.

Rich: The update is that there really is no update. Communication out of *West World* has been completely severed. The satellite ground station in Nevada has attempted to capture images to no avail. There's nothing but dust that covers the whole area like a

blanket, and smoke from fires that are raging from the top of water soaked Washington State down to Mexico. There's a wide fissure that separates *West World* from *Center World*. It's as if that part of the country has broken off and is floating in the Pacific Ocean. Aftershocks as powerful as major earthquakes are occurring right now as I speak and will be continuing for months. Destruction is devastating and there's no way to know who's dead or alive but obviously hundreds of thousands have perished. If this event had occurred in 2109 that number would be in the millions. That's all I can share with you at this time.

The room was quiet. Several at the table and a few standing looked briefly at their Comm devices. Then Dess spoke.

Dess: Thanks Rich. We're attempting to reach our agents in the north and south of California. If we hear anything we'll let you know.

Rich hurried around the table and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Dess: There's nothing more right now. For anyone who has family or friends in *West World* our thoughts are with you and of course we're hoping for the best for those who are out there. Updates will be sent out as we receive them.

Dess watched as his people began to leave. He and Carr sat there thinking. Then as a tall *DF* with short blue hair reached the door she stopped and turned to Dess.

DF: I almost forgot, with so much going on. This morning we were able to finally decipher those symbols.

Dess stared at her, puzzled, as if he had no idea what she was talking about. He looked at Carr, sitting to his right.

Carr: Must be those symbols that were left, the numbers.

Dess turned back to the woman who now walked closer to stand across the table

Dess: Really?

DF: Yeah. They were dates.

Dess: Dates, what kind of dates?

DF: They represent dates of genocides throughout history.

Dess and Carr stared at the *DF*. For some reason Dess was looking at the blue hair that fell across her forehead. He was thinking, trying to process this information.

Dess: Why did it take so long?

DF: You want me to get straight to it or give you some details?

Dess: I'm the curious type. Give me some details.

The *DF* lifted the Comm device she held and began to slowly scroll through the screens and looked at the information they contained.

DF: This joint report will be forwarded to you. It comes from our Research and Technology departments. Our engineers who created the sequencing, the selections and the iterations that created the specific algorithm couldn't establish the connections to the dates because genocides go so very far back. It's even been hypothesized that the Neanderthals were killed off by their relatives, the early modern humans. So genocides from 66 CE were lumped together with genocides from 319 and the 1200s and 1400s. Then of course there were the 1940s. Finally there were those that took place all the way up until five years before the *GE Period*.

Dess and Carr looked at each other. Carr shrugged. Dess turned back to the *DF*.

Dess: So how was the connection made?

DF: As I said, genocides go back a long way and have continued to occur throughout the years. They have also taken place all over the world, on all the continents. So, there were Roman numerals that were used, along with binary, hexadecimal and various other symbolic means of representing numbers. But whoever wrote those symbols used numbers that although they appeared to be

random and in no particular sequence, they actually used symbols that when put together like pieces of a puzzle they became a preponderance of the dates from genocides that took place throughout the history of Africa and four particular symbols that emerged, 1994, gave us the key, if you will, to solve the problem.

The *DF* looked at Dess and then Carr and then back to Dess.

DF: So, problem solved.

Dess: Yes, problem solved. Now we'll have to figure it out, try to make some sense of it. Good job. Thanks.

DF: You're welcome.

The *DF* turned and left the room. When the door was closed Dess got up and walked to the tray where a pitcher of water and cups sat. He poured himself some water into a cup and took a sip. Carrying the cup he went back and sat down beside Carr. Neither said anything. Then Carr spoke.

Carr: I wonder what it all means?

Dess: Chaos and destruction and violence in *East World*. Chaos and destruction in *West World*. With what's happened perhaps none of it will matter.

Carr: Who's dead, who's alive?

Dess: Imagine that. Genocides.

Carr: Death, the answer to all problems.

Dess: What was that in the 1940s?

Carr: The final solution.

Dess: Death, the solution to everything.

Acknowledgments

When asked to describe their skin color Brazilians came up with 136 different shades and variations and identifying descriptions. The English translations of Brazilian colors were published by the website Africa Is a Country and were attributed to Lilia Moritz Schwarcz and edited by Achal Prabhala.

LGBTQI+ Terminology from lgbt.ucla.edu and was created by Eli R. Green and Eric N. Peterson at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside 2003-2004 with additional input from wikipedia.org.

Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions from itsprouncedmetrosexual.com.

Definitions of LGBTQ Terms from geneq.berkeley.edu Gender Equity Resource Center updated 2013.

Ballet Terminology from American Ballet Theatre at abt.org

Ballet Terminology from, The Glossary of Ballet, from [wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org), the Free Encyclopedia. References listed.

Special Acknowledgment to: The Internet.

NOTE: In the year 2172 it is common practice to self declare one's identity. This is done primarily by the means of wearing specific designated types of jewelry and/or by displaying specific designated permanent and/or temporary tattoos.

Glossary

A

AAS: Anabolic Androgenic Steroids

Alva: Snowy white

Alva-rosada: Pinkish white

Amarela: Yellow

Avermelhada: Reddish

Azul: Blue

B

Bem branca: Very white

Bem morena: Very dark

Branca: White

Branca-queimada: Burnt white

Bronze: Bronze-colored

Bronzeada: Sun-tanned

C

Canelada: Somewhat like cinnamon

Castanha: Chestnut

Castanha-clara: Light chestnut

Center World: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

CMU: As related to property, an individual could **Claim, Maintain, and Upgrade** and thereby retain possession of formerly empty and/or abandoned land or structures.

Cobre: Copper-colored

Crioula: Creole

D

DF: Has **D**eclared as **F**emale

DG: Has **D**eclared as **G**ay

DL: Has **D**eclared as **L**esbian

DM: Has **D**eclared as **M**ale

DP: Has **D**eclared as **P**ansexual

DQ: Has **D**eclared as **Q**ueer

DT: Has **D**eclared as **T**ransvestite

DTM: Has **D**eclared as **T**rans-**M**an

DTW: Has **D**eclared as **T**rans-**W**oman

E

East World: Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia,

Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia.

Entity: Human appearing Andriod with Artificial Intelligence.

Escura: Dark

Escurinha: Very dark

G

G.E. Period: Great Extinction that took place between the years 2110 and 2140. A pandemic caused the deaths of approximately 10 billion people.

L

Loira-clara: Light blonde

Loura: Blonde

M

Marrom: Brown

Melada: Honey-colored

Melanistic: Zoology, the condition in which an unusually high concentration of melanin occurs in the skin of an animal. Melanin; a dark brown to black pigment occurring in animals.

Mulatinha: Little mulatto girl

N

ND: Has **N**ot **D**eclared

NM Wavelength: Nanometer Radiation Wavelength

O

Other World: Alaska, Hawaii.

P

Palida: Pale

Parda: Brown

Parda-clara: Light brown

PF: **P**resenting as **F**emale

PM: **P**resenting as **M**ale

Q

Queimada: Sunburnt

R

Rosada: Rosy

S

Sarará: Yellow-haired Negro

T

Trigo: Wheat

Turva: Murky

V

Vermelha: Red

W

West World: California, Oregon, Washington

WIA: World Intelligence Agency

