

COLIN
WYLY



The
Inevitability

"I'm sorry, Charles... It's only going to get worse."

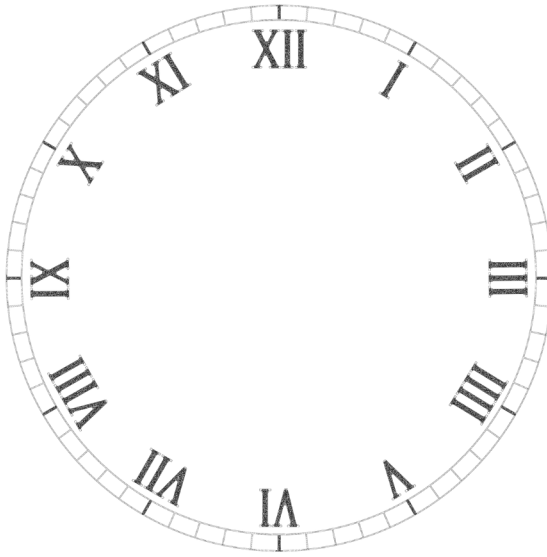
It was almost finally over for Charles Wilson—the young, death row inmate. After being given his last meal, he found himself weeping, miserably, at the thoughts of his terrible, pitiful life, all the while waiting to be sent to the execution chamber. But, it seems that fate had other plans in mind for him.

Thanks to the assistance of a mysterious benefactor, Charles managed to miraculously escape from prison with the help of a strange device that had transported him to a destroyed version of Earth—void of all life except for him... and the "creatures" that now roam the dead lands.

Having finally met with his benefactor, Charles learns of the horrific nature as to why he was freed in the first place. Now, he finds himself racing against the clock in an effort to help save the world from its inevitable demise. Can he pull it off? And, more important, does he even want to?



The Inevitability



Colin Wyly

The Inevitability
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Contents

Prologue Death — 1	Chapter Twelve Family — 130
Chapter One Choice — 5	Chapter Thirteen Flight — 142
Chapter Two Prisoner — 12	Chapter Fourteen Memories — 154
Chapter Three Silent — 26	Chapter Fifteen Captain — 168
Chapter Four Urgency — 37	Chapter Sixteen Prey — 181
Chapter Five Questions — 42	Chapter Seventeen Friend — 192
Chapter Six Interrogation — 57	Chapter Eighteen Predators — 200
Chapter Seven Sunrise — 68	Chapter Nineteen DC — 213
Chapter Eight Cooperative — 80	Chapter Twenty Underground — 219
Chapter Nine Creatures — 95	Chapter Twenty-one Twist — 228
Chapter Ten Mysterious — 103	Chapter Twenty-two Swarm — 238
Chapter Eleven Ghost — 114	Chapter Twenty-three Hotel — 248

Chapter Twenty-four
Priority — 258

Chapter Twenty-five
Crash — 271

Chapter Twenty-six
Fancy — 278

Chapter Twenty-seven
Revenge — 287

Chapter Twenty-eight
Liar — 299

Chapter Twenty-nine
Worst — 310

Chapter Thirty
Fate — 319

Chapter Thirty-one
World — 329

Chapter Thirty-two
Destiny — 341

Epilogue
Time — 357

Preface

I never intended to be an author. In fact, my skillset doesn't really lie in creative writing or having to deal with all the intricacies one must suffer to become someone listed in the libraries and bookstores. Rather, my skills are largely technical and digital. I've certainly spent more time writing and debugging software and code than I ever did writing this book. Yet, I felt compelled to write it for one simple reason: the nagging feeling wouldn't go away.

This adventure all began with a dream I had—believe it or not. This was back when I was living on Maui as a college student. At the time, I was working part-time for a small-business lady who provided shipping and office services. The job was fine and the pay was “okay”, but, often, I found myself with nothing to do except sit on my ass and “mind the fort”.

One night, after a typical day of work, the dream came to me. There wasn't anything special about that day or that evening (although, I *swear* I had too much cheese with my dinner). As I drifted off to sleep, I had visions of some kind of movie running in my head. In this “movie” was a death row convict whose lawyer was arguing for his innocence. The lawyer was played by James Spader—you know, the guy from that TV show “The Blacklist”? I guess the reason Spader was the lawyer is because I had watched him play one on the show “Boston Legal”.

As the trial continued, it became obvious that the lawyer couldn't save his client from the death penalty. So, for some *absurd* reason, he visited his client in his cell while pretending to be the chaplain. The two talked about what to do, for some time—about what, I simply don't remember. Then finally, the lawyer-turned-chaplain pulled out a strange device and told the prisoner to use it to escape; to which the prisoner nervously did as ordered.

The device had transported him to an alternate dimension—one complete with barren landscapes, dark skies, and strange, little circles of light on the ground being “generated” by staffs, standing tall within them. The prisoner was puzzled by the circles of light and didn't know what they were for, but he *did* know that they must have been made by some sentient lifeforms. Eventually he

figured out that they were meant to stave off the shadow beasts that roamed the land. He even managed to see a herd of them circling around him, before the device teleported him back. This time, though, he was outside of the prison and near a distant road.

Right about then, I woke up.

At the time, I couldn't stop thinking about that dream. I chatted with my parents about it and they were the ones who suggested I write it out as a novel. I nearly rolled my eyes and told them I would think about it, as I started to get ready and head out the door for work.

It was a typically slow day at the shop. As the hours dragged on, I thought about that dream and the (admittedly) cool premise of a story it had given me. At that point I'd had enough of being bored and decided to fire up the work computer next to me and bring up Microsoft Word. It didn't take long for me to realize that the story was practically writing itself and being fleshed out before my eyes. Sure, I had written pages of documents before (mostly for school) but never something this grandiose. While the dream had provided me something to go on, it was still up to me to write the rest and, of course, make the changes necessary so the story wasn't completely bat-shit insane. It was somewhat of a challenge, but I've always been technically-minded enough to make sure the book wouldn't have any real head-scratching nonsense or plot-holes.

Over the days and months, I fleshed out my story little-by-little, as I goofed off at my job, waiting for the new school year to start. The lawyer in the dream eventually evolved into who would become Mitchell Grayson, and I gave the convict the name, Charles Wilson. Later on, I noticed that, in my mind's eye, Mitchell always had a shadowy partner with him. This partner became Veronica Berkley. The names didn't mean anything to me; I pretty much just picked some random names and went with it. "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar" ~ Sigmund Freud.

Unfortunately, around this time, my life was upended. I was forced to move out, quit school and even had to return home to Canada. My book, meanwhile, was only half finished and I didn't resume work on it for nearly five years.

It wasn't until the pandemic that I was finally able to find the time (and the excuse) not only to work on my software engineering

skills, but also write the rest of my book. It didn't take much longer to finish. The editing process took way longer. It didn't matter much to me, as I wasn't really in a hurry, since I had already given my parents a copy of the final draft to read, which is all I *really* cared about in the end.

And now, here I am. And here you are, reading this very book that I never would've imagined I'd ever write. Like I said earlier, I never started out wanting to be an author. In fact, I still don't. Despite that, I know you will enjoy this novel from a fellow who would, otherwise, be spending his time trying to fix some stupid bug in his code.

Prologue

Death

That afternoon the bright sunshine cast its warmth over the rural fields of the French countryside. It was a peaceful place, far from the bustling city of Paris—or any large town, for that matter. The air was cleaner, the land richer, and the people, some might have said, better.

The continuous rain of the previous night had finally let up by early morning, leaving behind a dew that evaporated as the day wore on. A few farmers in the area had been up and at 'em since dawn as they braved the light pitter-patter of the rainfall, while a few others had decided to stay indoors until conditions improved.

Once the sun came out, however, everyone seized the day and set to accomplishing the usual tasks of the peaceful French-folk of the land. The cows needed to be milked, the chickens needed to be relieved of their eggs, and the homesteads needed tending. Yes, everyone was busy with the daily chores and the typical hubbub of the country fields.

Everyone, except Mister Lacroix.

You see, Mister Lacroix had just come back to his acreage. He had spent a good deal of time that morning making the trek to and from the forest beyond his property in his old beater of a truck. Since coming home, though, he seemed exhausted and wasn't really in the mood to talk to anyone.

That was around the time when his chipper neighbor, Mister Bordeaux, decided to take a pleasant walk before returning to his labor. As he strolled along, he spotted Mister Lacroix, who was

== Prologue ==

looking thinner than usual and oh, so tired. The poor old codger had just stepped out of his truck and adjusted his cap. Normally, Mister Lacroix was quite spry and nimble—even for an older man. But something was different about him today, and Mister Bordeaux wasn't sure if his friendly neighbor was even going to make it up the path to his house.

He couldn't help but be curious as to what could've caused his neighbor to be like this. "*Aha! Bonjour, Monsieur Lacroix!*"

The tired farmer looked up to see who could be talking to him right then. "*Oh!*" he said, smiling. "*Bonjour, Monsieur Bordeaux. Comment ça va?*"

"Ah, I'm doing quite well today, thank you for asking. The air smells wonderful after a good morning shower, does it not?"

"Yes... I suppose."

Mister Bordeaux twinkled his eye at the worn face of his friendly neighbor. "May I ask, how are *you* doing?"

"Ha—miserable, actually."

"Whatever for?"

The old farmer gazed out towards the forest he had just came from a moment before. "I had to bury my dog."

Mister Bordeaux almost gasped, wishing he hadn't asked. "Oh my! I'm sorry to hear that. You mean Beldoin? He didn't seem that old."

"That's because he wasn't. He got sick some weeks ago; had these little tumors covering his body by the end of it. Doctors said they weren't sure what it was."

"Oh, that's awful. I hope he didn't suffer."

"No, no—I gave him a farewell and had him put down. He was in a lot of pain by then."

"And they don't know what it was?"

"I'm afraid not. The doctor sent some samples of the growths to a lab somewhere in Paris, but he never got any word back from them."

"Bah! Blasted bureaucrats. Could be a bloody year before they get back to you with anything—if ever!" But then, just as Mister

Bordeaux finishes his rant on the government, a thought occurs to him. “Hold on. You said they were tumors, of a sort?”

“I did, indeed.”

“Strange, my wife mentioned to me that one of her brothers out near the mountains had a number of his livestock die from some ‘tumors’ or whatnot. Can’t quite remember, but it sounded very similar.”

Mister Lacroix looked at his neighbor, puzzled. “Really? You don’t suppose some kind of plague is going around? Granted, I’ve heard nothing of the sort—but I doubt tumors could spread like that.” Waving his hand dismissively, he let out a snort. “But what do I know? I’m a farmer, not a doctor.”

They both nodded as Mister Lacroix removed his cap and allowed the sun to warm his face. “It’s a shame. I could’ve sworn that dog was going to outlive *me*. Ha ha.”

“Well, don’t count yourself out! I’ve seen you smoking your pipe. It’s only a matter of time for you, my friend.”

The two men smirked, a feeling of sadness between them.

“I suppose it’s only a matter of time for all of us,” said Mister Lacroix. “Nothing lives forever.”

“True,” replied Mister Bordeaux. “Death comes for all. But we should still make the best of the limited time we have in this world. No sense waiting around for it—it’ll be here before you know it, someday!”

Mister Lacroix nodded as if he wasn’t really listening. “I’m going to miss that dog. He was truly my best friend—my *only* friend, really. I’m glad he lived as long a life as he did. I can only hope he’s chasing trucks and rats up in heaven to his heart’s content. And I hope I can play with him again, one day.”

“It’ll come soon enough,” said the sheepish Mister Bordeaux. Taking a peek at his wristwatch, he was surprised to see how much time had passed since deciding to chat with his melancholic neighbor. “Well, I’d better be going back to my work. You should take the day off—let yourself mourn.”

“Yes, perhaps I will.”

== Prologue ==

“Very good. Well, it was good seeing you again, Mister Lacroix.”

“Likewise—same to you, Mister Bordeaux. You have yourself a good day, then.”

The two farmers parted ways as Mister Bordeaux promptly walked back to his property down the road. He glanced back only once, to see Mister Lacroix put his cap back on and shamble towards his house. And, as he walked to his own home, Mister Bordeaux reflected on the conversation they had had—about death and life and much in between.

A week later, Mister Lacroix hanged himself. There was nothing suspicious. Police chalked it up to a death of despair. After all, Mister Lacroix was a lonely farmer who only had his dog for company. It was no real mystery as to why.

The old man did leave behind something for others to find, however—a short suicide note. And it read as follows:

Yes, death comes for us all. There is nothing we can do about the inevitability of our deaths. But, I ask, why? Why suffer through pain and peril and a hopeless existence if all that awaits—if all that is guaranteed by this ruthless universe—is the eventual ending of life? It is cruel to be forced to go on with what this wretched world demands of us, despite it all.

So... why delay the inevitable?

Chapter One

Choice

A whisper from a woman echoes across the quiet walls. “Are ya sure we can trust this guy? He’s a convict—an’ a violent one too.”

“It won’t be a problem, and it wouldn’t be a factor, anyway. We don’t have the luxury of choice anymore—we’re out of time.”

Mitchell Grayson stares out of the enormous windows of the high-roller hotel suite. Bright moonlight coming in through the glass hits him square in his clean, white, pudgy face; his mostly bald scalp reflects the rest. The view is spectacular, the brilliant lights from the city below shining every wavelength the human eye can see. The famous strip of Vegas, perfectly visible below, displays a radiance that dwarfs the surroundings of downtown. It’s clear a lot of money goes into this city. Greed, corruption and excellent marketing certainly play a big role in keeping the machine running. Ultimately, though, the biggest reason for the success of such a unique city comes from the common man’s inability to recognize that the numbers are completely against him every time he puts one more coin into the slot or one more hit on the table.

Mitchell ponders it all. *How disgusting. All these people trying to cheat, scheme and just plain screw each other, just to make an extra buck. I wonder how much money they’d ask for to sell their own mother into slavery. They’d probably lowball it, I’d imagine.*

Snapping back to reality, Mitchell wonders if he should draw the curtains. Being on the 39th floor, however, with no other tall

Chapter One

buildings in his line of sight, gives him the comfort of knowing that it would be pointless. No one could possibly be watching them—law enforcement or otherwise. Assured of his privacy, he turns his attention back to the woman he’s sharing the room with.

“Veronica, we’ve been over this. I’m sorry, but we really don’t have time on our side anymore. It’s not up for debate.”

“Huh. I never even knew there was a debate. You’ve always seemed to be callin’ the shots.”

Veronica Berkley steps out of the shadows to join Mitchell in the moonlight. He glances up and down at her. Veronica is a striking woman of African ancestry with a serious demeanor. She looks quite lovely in her nightdress, with her frizzled hair done up in a bun. She’s somewhat beautiful for a thirty-something-year-old, but that would be a side compliment. Her physique and obvious level of fitness show that she’s not just a pretty face and that she’s more likely to be dangerous instead. It wouldn’t be out of the question to think that she might have seen a certain amount of action in her past—or, at the very least, gone through some form of combat training.

Mitchell can never help but notice her as a woman, though, despite her iron-grit exterior. That said, there’s never been any real chemistry between the two beyond friendship; a bald, middle-aged man like him is just too old for her—and he’s not her type, anyway.

“Of course I call the shots, Veronica. It’s what’s kept us living this whole time, right?”

“Pfff! If you call hidin’ and runnin’ *living*, then sure, good for us.”

Mitchell smiles at her and briefly looks around the place in humble admiration. “Well, we’re in a nice luxury suite. We had a wonderful dinner together—my steak was *fantastic*, by the way—and we should be getting a good night’s rest tonight. God knows we both need the shut-eye.”

Veronica just gives him a look. The same kind of look a woman would give to any man who has taken her own argument and politely slapped her across the face with it.

Mitchell smirks at her stern expression and then gazes back out the window. “All in all, I’d say we’ve got it pretty good—at least for now, even with everything *else* considered.”

The two stare longingly out the window, both lost in thought, as the silence between them creates an awkward and tense atmosphere.

“I can’t believe we’re back in this godforsaken desert,” mutters Veronica, shaking her head. “After all this time, after what happened.”

Mitchell’s holier-than-thou smile fades to a melancholy of sadness and humble silence. “Yes, I know. It’s painful, isn’t it? But it’s all in the past. We won’t be here for long and we’re never coming back after this, so let’s just try and get through it without going nuts.”

Bringing up the past has forced some unpleasant memories to surface, for the both of them. Not wanting to feel the pain, Mitchell glides across to the suite’s lavish mini-bar and plucks through the stocked wine bottles. “Shall I get you something to drink? It’s all wonderfully expensive.”

Veronica walks over, but she’s not going to give Mitchell the satisfaction. She merely gives a smile that combines flirtation and seriousness. “Thanks, but I ain’t thirsty. An’ I’m not in the mood for gettin’ shit-faced, neither.”

“Oh, please,” Mitchell scoffs playfully. “You’re not going to be drinking this stuff to quench your thirst—and we both need the buzz to calm our nerves, especially since we’re so close now. Drink up.”

With a loud pop, he yanks the cork out of a bottle of red wine. The date on the label suggests that the vintage is older than him by a few decades. It even has one of those fancy French names: “*Pisse de poulet rouge sanglante*”. Whatever *that* means. He takes out

== Chapter One ==

two wine glasses, pours one for himself and then, while eyeballing Veronica, pours a glass for her too.

Veronica looks on, seeming not to paying attention, but her eyes say something different and Mitchell can easily tell. He puts the bottle down and sighs a bit.

“Look, Veronica. We’ve been extremely lucky so far. I understand that. It’s a miracle we haven’t been captured or killed, yet. Believe me, I get it. But we’re here now, safe and sound. You have to know when to relax. Getting these files made all the difference, and because of that, we’re not flying blind anymore.”

On the tabletop of the bar sits a pile of manila folders that look as if they originate from an office. Some of them are open, showing the paper documents within. A lot of them are marked as classified and seem to have come from a national database. Printed on the files are the mug shots of men and women who appear to be random people but on closer inspection fit a profile: they all reside in the Nevada area and have been admitted to a hospital at some point. The files also appear to contain significant amounts of personal and medical data on the people—things like birthdates, addresses, blood types, lists of known illnesses and, most intriguingly, the person’s DNA codes. It’s doubtful these files were ever meant to be viewed by a third party, or anyone without proper clearance.

Veronica sighs. “I know, I know. It’s just... why’d it hafta be someone like *this* guy?” She taps on one of the profiles on the bar top. It shows a seemingly ordinary young man. However, unlike in the other profiles, his picture is circled with a fresh red marking. “You realize he’s gonna set off some serious alarms once we go through with all of this, right? I mean, breakin’ into a prison? Christ.”

Mitchell takes his glass of wine and chugs down the entire amount in one go, like a thirsty animal in the desert. It is somewhat insulting, given the comment he made to Veronica about “quenching one’s thirst with wine,” but he’s a man who tends to do whatever he wishes, regardless of the hypocrisy.

“We’re not going to be breaking in, Veronica; he’s going to break *himself* out—assuming everything goes according to plan, of course.”

“See, that’s the thing. I just... Look, even if by some *miracle* this plan works, what’s stoppin’ him from, I dunno, tryin’ to kill us in our sleep an’ escape? Would he even listen to us? Do we threaten him if he doesn’t? I mean, I’m not exactly seein’ a solid follow-up once we have him in our custody.”

“I’m well aware of that. But I’ll say it again, for the millionth time: we don’t have a choice anymore—it’s now or never.”

Veronica straightens up, looking agitated and anxious. “That’s just it, isn’t it? We really don’t have time to piss aroun’ now. We should, I dunno, go with the plan immediately, instead of sittin’ here on our asses. We’re wastin’ time, Mitchell.”

“Yes, and it won’t matter how much time we’ve wasted if we get ahead of ourselves and the whole plan blows up in our faces. Tomorrow’s gonna be a big day. There’s not much else we can do right now but wait till then.”

Mitchell can see how antsy Veronica is. She clearly just wants to get this all over and done with—the sooner the better. “He’s not going anywhere, Veronica. At least not tonight, anyway. What’s important is that we do this *correctly*. We only get one shot at this, and it will all be for nothing if we screw up due to lack of rest. Alright? So let’s try and get some well-earned sleep tonight.”

Veronica is about to protest some more, but she knows he’s right. He’s always right. So instead, she concedes and eyes the glass of wine in front of her, lazily dragging it towards her. “Goddammit, Mitchell. This really had better—”

A loud thump suddenly echoes from outside the door of the suite, in the hallway. The atmosphere between the two switches from calm to high alert.

The thump occurs again; this time it’s even louder. It’s not a knock, and there are no other noises coming from behind the door. The two glance at each other and instinctively know what to do.

== Chapter One ==

Without making a sound, Veronica goes up to the edge of the door. She then reaches towards a table by the side and grabs a handgun with a silencer attached. This weapon belongs to her, no doubt.

Meanwhile, Mitchell lowers his drink and, surprisingly enough, draws his own pistol from his dinner jacket before strolling to the door to position himself opposite Veronica. She's cocked and locked, looking like a member of a SWAT team ready to bust through the door of a major drug dealer's pad. Her companion, on the other hand, has more of a dopey, limp-wristed "shoot from the hip" kind of stance going on—almost as if he isn't as serious about this as he should be. Veronica knows better, though.

After moving with surgical precision towards the peephole installed in the door, Mitchell looks through it oh-so-carefully and sees... nothing. There's nobody outside. It's just an empty hallway with dim lighting.

Alarmed, he knows that this can only mean a couple of things. Maybe the two didn't in fact hear anything and are simply paranoid. Or maybe, just maybe, there are very dangerous people on the other side, outside the view of the peephole, ready to kill when he conveniently opens the door.

Mitchell is a man who likes to bet from time to time; after all, that's partly why he's in Vegas. But he's also not a sucker. He knows a loser's bet when he sees one. Even though he and Veronica may be sleep-deprived and on edge, there's no way in hell they *both* hallucinated that sound.

As he backs away from the door, Mitchell gives his partner an ominous glance. She's seen that look before. It means get ready, because shit's about to happen *really* fast. Bracing for the storm, she gets in position and retracts the hammer on her gun while Mitchell turns the lock above the door handle with care.

Click.

With ridiculous amounts of dexterity, strength and speed, Mitchell bursts into the hallway in a display of a Navy Seal's

tactical training. His gun pointed straight ahead of him, he checks his nine-and-three, ready to pull the hair-trigger on anything that looks even capable of movement.

Adrenaline is coursing through his body, and tunnel vision sets in. It takes a few seconds before Mitchell sees that there is a figure stumbling down the hallway—a lanky-looking man with a bottle in his hand. The bow tie around his neck is loose and he appears to be having difficulty remaining upright. As he continues to grunt and to slur his words, he rams himself into a neighboring suite's door and, in doing so, makes a rather familiar noise.

Mystery solved, it seems: just a drunk guy being an idiot.

Still shaking from the rush, Mitchell slowly puts his gun back in his tux, then darts back into the suite just as Veronica pokes her head out to see what he was looking at. At the sight of the drunkard, she lets out an exhausted groan and rolls her eyes. There's some relief in her expression, but also incredible annoyance. She shuts the door, twists the lock and turns her gaze to Mitchell.

"We'd better get some sleep," he mumbles sheepishly.

"You fuckin' kiddin'?" hisses an angry Veronica. "No way I'm gonna sleep *now*!"

Mitchell ponders her response for a second, exhausted. "I think we have some sleeping pills in one of the bags. Grab one and down it with some of that wine."

Chapter Two

Prisoner

Due north of where Mitchell and Veronica are in Las Vegas, somewhere in the middle of the Nevada desert, lies a maximum-security prison for the state's most hardened criminals. Inside the complex exist the most wretched, miserable people you'll ever come across—some here for life, and others awaiting the death penalty.

One inmate in particular is going to be put to death tonight, the first the state has had in quite a while. The guards and inmates alike are all pretty excited about it. Everyone except for the unlucky hog about to be slaughtered, of course: Prisoner D-1021 in Cell 777—a man named Charles Wilson.

It's clear that poor Charles has seen better days. He's a thirty-something skinny-boy with chalky skin and lifeless eyes. His dirty, matted hair and unkempt beard make him look like a terrorist who's been in captivity for way too long. Just from the way he sits on his bed and stares blankly at the wall, it's obvious he knows as well as the others that his time on earth is down to the day—no, the hour. He's already cried his eyes out long before, back when he first got here. Now all that's left is his dead husk of a body, as he waits for the guards who will bring him his last meal before marching him to his death.

Suddenly, from across the prison walkways, Charles hears the loud and obnoxious yelling of a crazy fellow prisoner. He recognizes the voice: it's Cleatus, the stupid meth-head white-supremacist redneck lunatic. He can make out that Cleatus is

screaming Charles' name repeatedly, each rendition becoming louder.

The noise finally gets on Charles' nerves. He springs up off the bed and marches right up to the bars of his own cell, staring down the inmate from afar. "WHAT?! What do you want?!" he fumes.

Cleatus' eyes light up with glee and he quits with the yelling. "HEY! Charles! Guess what?! In a few hours, there's gonna be a DEAD MAN WALKIN'!" The little turd of a hick starts cackling.

Charles feels his face scrunch into a display of bitter anger and resentment. Thoughts race through his head—such as getting into Cleatus' cell and doing unspeakable things to him.

But before Charles gets the chance to yell any obscenities at the near-toothless hillbilly, a guard comes up to Cleatus' cell. Using his baton, he bangs the cell bars to get the attention of the inmate, who immediately stops and stares, wide-eyed and loony-looking, at the unflinching guard.

"Hey! Cleatus! Unless you wanna lose more of your teeth, I suggest you quit with the racket. Alright?"

Like a peasant before a king, the prisoner quickly backs down and bows his head, making sure not to make eye contact. "Yes, sir. No, sir. Won't happen again, sir."

Satisfied with the obedience, the guard walks away, a smug look on his face.

As his anger subsides, Charles begins to feel despair. He's felt that anger before. It's the most familiar feeling he knows—anger brought on by lack of power, control, freedom or even just a say in the matter. Ironically enough, it's this anger that drove him to do what he did. It's the entire reason he's locked up in this hellhole in the first place.

Charles walks back to his bed, shuffling his feet mindlessly, and plops down on the mattress, which crunches under his weight. Once again, he finds himself staring at the empty, dull-colored wall in front of him.

How long has it been since he got here? He can barely even remember what month it is, let alone what day. Time has just kept

going by, each passing day seeming more and more like a blur of memories strung together. His time in prison has been nothing but a combination of going through the motions and trying to stay alive, with varying degrees of concern for each. Anything that was even remotely routine inside the walls just became part of the blur. He doesn't have many memories that he considers distinct anymore.

But despite the foggiest that has resulted from his time in jail, there *is* one day in his life that he'll never forget: It is the day he made his final appearance in court. It is the day he was sentenced. It is the day he found out his life was over.

* * *

A judge is presiding over him. Charles, then a young twenty-something, is wearing his guilty verdict in the form of a correctional jumpsuit—complete with wrist and ankle chains cuffed to him.

Standing next to Charles is the hapless public attorney hired to save him from the death penalty. Goldberg is his name, and in Charles' opinion, it shows. A short man with wide glasses, a custom-cut suit and curly hair who sports a nose that would embarrass Pinocchio. In short, the perfect lawyer, or at least that's what Charles initially thought when they first met. So far, the defense has been all for naught. The value of a taxpayer-funded lawyer, indeed.

On the other side, in the back and among the people who are here to witness the sentencing, are Charles' parents: regular lower-middle-class folks who are clearly from out of state. The stress and sleepless nights have taken quite a toll on both of them, causing much grayer hair than what one would expect based on their ages. The guilty verdict has only made things worse; they won't even look at him now. As it stands, they are much too ashamed and disgusted with what their son did to even acknowledge his

presence. Charles can only imagine how they'll react to the sentencing, if they react at all.

It's a shame. It's possible he could've gotten away with it. His parents—or anyone else, for that matter—would never have found out. A jury of his peers may be the ones who've convicted him, but it was ultimately his backstabbing scumbag of an ex-wife sitting behind him who put him in this spot in the first place. He glances at her with a most menacing look.

Charles Wilson's ex-wife, Gabby Richmond, is the type of woman who looks more likely to be the wife of someone like Cleatus rather than Charles. Very thin, with yellow teeth, and has that trashy feel to her that makes you realize she's more trouble than she's worth—especially when you figure she's probably got a disease from every guy she's ever slept with.

At some point, it would have been reasonable of Charles not to ever hook up with a skank like her. But he did. He loved her. Hell, he even had a kid with her—the little bundle of joy sleeping soundly in Gabby's arms. A sweet baby girl named Jennifer. A real miracle baby, poor Jenny almost didn't make it. When she was born, there was a medical complication that threatened her life. Charles can't recall the exact details; all he knows is that the doctors were wrong and Jennifer is alive. She's almost two years old now.

His mind filling with a sense of dread, Charles realizes he might not ever see his daughter again. He turns back towards the judge, hoping that he'll be lenient and give him a lighter sentence. After all, it was clear from the court case that Charles did what he did entirely for the sake of providing for his family. Maybe the judge will see that.

The judge gives Charles a quick glance, snorts and then clears his throat of the snot. "Charles Rudolf Wilson, based on these crimes that you have been found guilty of committing by a jury of your peers, on behalf of the State of Nevada, I, the Honorable Judge Sampson, hereby sentence you to death via lethal injection."

The gavel drops with a slam, and the words ring in Charles' ears as if in an echo chamber. He spaces out for what seems like forever, until he feels the guard grab hold of him to take him back to the holding cells. His shock then quickly turns into a violent struggle. He whips around and screams at Gabby, all the fury that he had bottled up now unleashed. "You fucking bitch! Fucking whore!!!"

Gabby reels back while maintaining a tight hold on little Jen. Charles keeps trying to resist the increasing grip of the guard. At the same time, his lawyer comes up and politely tries to get him to calm down.

"Fucking Jew! You fucked me over!" Charles makes a move for the frightened public attorney, but the guard still has him in his grip.

The lawyer flinches like some nerd about to be hit by the schoolyard bully. It doesn't matter, though, as Charles can't move very well in those chains.

Meanwhile, the judge keeps slamming his gavel, but to no avail. "Order! Council, control your client!"

Charles begins to kick and scream. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees his parents calmly but hurriedly go out the exit, leaving their son behind without saying a word and to never see him again. He would've given it more attention, but he's too busy fighting off a meathead who's trying to restrain him.

A second guard rushes in to help the other. As the first guard grabs Charles from behind and the second approaches from the front, Charles lifts up his legs and kicks the second guard right in the face with the force of a well-built man who's high on adrenaline and fighting for his life. The guard goes flying back, nearly crashing into Gabby and Jennifer. The impact wakes up little Jen in a startle and she starts to wail. Gabby tries to comfort her baby, but it's not working. She looks up at her ex with malice.

Charles focuses all his energy on fighting, even though he knows it's pointless. The guards finally have him on the ground. They grab him and lift, carrying the still-violent convict back to the

cells. As they head for the exit, Charles gives out one last yell. “FUCK YOU, GABBY!”

“Go to hell, shit-bag!” she screams back while trying again to comfort poor, shrieking Jenny.

The door to the holding area opens and the guards are able to pull Charles through. The very last thing he hears coming from the courtroom, right before the door closes, is a statement from the judge. “Ladies and gentlemen, the State of Nevada thanks you for your time. You are free to go.”

In that moment, Charles finds a moment of clarity. *Free to go? I didn't think the others were also on trial.* He would have chuckled at his own joke if his situation wasn't so dire.

* * *

The memories from that time begin to fade, and once more, Charles finds himself staring at the worn-down wall of his cell. How long was he spacing out and just sitting like this? The perception of time has lost meaning to him, but it doesn't matter much anymore; he knows he's nearly out of time, anyway.

In the background, he hears a pair of footsteps marching right up to his cell. A shadow suddenly casts over him as the light from the walkway is obscured.

Two correctional officers—one portly, the other brawny—stand outside. You can tell from their builds what kind of people they are: middle-aged family men who simply hold a steady job. They're wearing identical guard uniforms complete with cuffs and a beating stick, and they also have ID badges. One of the badges reads “Barney”, while the other one belongs to “Frank”. Barney's got a pot belly and looks like your typical bubba, with a slack jaw, while Frank comes off as a muscle-headed bully type with a crewcut.

Held against Barney's waist is what appears to be a huge bucket of fried chicken. Seeing it, Charles now understands why they're here. *Oh, right—my last meal. How could I forget?*

Frank, the meathead, gets out his key ring, unlocks the cell door and opens it with a shriek. Charles looks bitterly at the two of them as Barney walks in with the obesity-inducing meal, while Frank just shakes his head at the inmate, smiling gleefully.

“Hey there, *skinny!*” says an amused Frank. “Looks like it’s your last day. Shame, too—you were so quiet compared to the other sacks o’ shit aroun’ here.”

Charles tries to hold back his rage. Over the time that he’s been here, this man has done nothing but pick on and hurt him any way he can. He’s been a victim of abuse at Frank’s hands, and whenever he’s tried to fight back against him, legally or violently, it’s always come back to bite him in the ass.

Transferring his seething attention from Frank, Charles takes notice of the quiet guard, Barney, delivering the food. He’s seen this guard around before, usually keeping the peace with his baton over some unlucky prisoner’s head.

Barney plops the bucket of chicken on the bed. Charles gazes at the gargantuan meal and then back up at Barney, who’s just been eyeballing the bucket like a hungry eagle spotting a trout. Looks like the fatso wants all this food for himself. You can almost see the drool dripping from his lips.

“Alright, dirtbag, this is yer last meal,” blurts out Frank in an abrupt fashion. “As per yer request, it’s a big-ass bucket o’ chicken.”

Charles looks away. He can’t keep eye contact with Frank, who’s towering over him with his hands on his hips—like a Superman wannabe.

“In approximately three hours from now, you’ll be escorted by both Barney, here, and I to the execution chamber. Upon arrival, you’ll be restrained and then administered a lethal injection after giving yer final words, if you choose to do so.”

The poor prisoner gazes on at the floor, not caring what comes out of Frank’s mouth.

“And then you’ll, y’know... die,” adds Barney, breaking the silence.

Charles peers over at Barney, and Frank does the same. Suddenly, Frank, amused by the off-hand comment of his co-worker, wheezes out a laugh as the two of them exit the cell. Frank then grabs the bars and slides the door back, letting out another shriek, which resonates inside Charles' teeth. The door closes with a metallic bang, and the guard removes the keys. Charles squints at the two of them while they prepare to leave: a real "Tweedle-Dick" and "Tweedle-Dumb", these two.

As Barney walks away, Frank goes right up to the cell door and puts his hands on the bars—with a menacing grin that Charles has seen too many times from him before.

"See ya in three hours, buddy! Try not to choke to death on that chicken; that'd be pretty anticlimactic!" Chuckling all the way, he follows after Barney.

Charles sighs, emotionally exhausted. *Thank fuckin' Christ, he's gone.*

Silence and loneliness once again creep up on him, but at least now he doesn't have to be hungry. He gazes at the rather large volume of the bucket and—for a brief second—wonders how much of that chicken will be going to waste. No way he could eat all of it.

Pondering his rationale, Charles almost snorts with laughter. Screw being wasteful. It's not like he's gonna be around for this world much longer, so why should he care about stuffing his face or thinking of the environment?

His stomach makes a bellowing rumble. He hasn't eaten all day, and the fasting is finally catching up to him. His tongue prickles at the thought of the mouth-watering goodness entering his mouth. He can binge all he wants until he pukes.

As he reaches to open the steaming container of fats, salts and carbs, a horrible realization dawns on Charles. This is really happening: he's really gonna die tonight. Right after he finishes this food, they'll drag him off to the gurney and kill him.

The convict takes a good long look at the bucket in front of him. His last meal. After this, there will be nothing left. He wants

to eat, but he's almost paralyzed with fear and despair. He leans back and presses himself against the cold, dark wall of his cell and feels like he might actually cry. He looks back on everything that's happened to him. All through his life, he has had very little say in much of anything. From his parents scolding him whenever he'd do something they didn't want him to do, to not being able to make enough money to support a family, to being forced to do what he did just so he *could* have money, to finally... not being allowed to be free and alive. Yes, there was always someone or something controlling his life, his fate, his destiny—it was just never *him*.

Charles' dead emotions start turning into vile hatred. *Why?! he asks himself. Why me? What did I do to deserve a life of misery and hopelessness?* He grits his teeth, his eyes filling with violent rage. Then he mutters under his breath and snarls in such a way that it almost sounds as if he's possessed by a demon. His only coherent thought is the wish that everyone would die.

Eventually, after this release of his unbridled anger, Charles feels his hunger return. Looking back at the bucket, he grabs it and slowly lifts the top off. As expected, he sees some greasy fried chicken.

What he *doesn't* expect to see, however, is a cardboard box stuffed into the center of the bucket.

Charles' mind locks up and the lid slips out of his hand and hits the floor. It makes no sense to him. There are a thousand reasons for why that box shouldn't be there—but against all logic, there it sits. A flood of questions begins to enter his mind. It's as if his world has been turned upside-down. He can't figure out if this is a dream, a nightmare, a mirage or even just a joke.

Carefully—and covertly—he plucks the box out of the bucket, letting the chicken pieces fall down into place. He's hoping to hell that he isn't somehow being watched. A quick look at the oily box shows that it isn't even sealed. Reaching inside the opening with shaky hands, he pulls out the item within and stares at it.

Charles is perplexed. He was expecting money, drugs, tools, a weapon—or even a prank from the guards. Instead, he observes an

object that can only be described as something military-like, or perhaps alien.

In his hand is a small, sleek, electronic-looking device that is clearly beyond state-of-the-art. It's curved and molded, and a large opening goes right through its sides, as if an arm is meant to fit inside. It vaguely resembles one of those blood pressure cuffs that used be at pharmacies, where you put your arm through and it constricts in order to measure your blood pressure. The top surface features a pitch-black screen covered with rounded glass, while the bottom surface is white, bare and glossy. The object reminds him of those mock-up prototype designs he once saw a long time ago on the Internet for arm-mounted touch screens—like a smartphone worn on the wrist.

Something about the apparatus sets Charles on edge, however. It's making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, and it all feels like a bad omen to him.

With the device held in his hands, he tries touching and poking it. Nothing seems to be happening, though. He just can't fathom what it's supposed to be, or even how to turn the damn thing on. But then, in a flash of minimum intelligence, he grabs the box the device came in and looks inside. Maybe there's more.

As it turns out, Charles is in luck. He can see a folded piece of white paper at the back. He digs it out and unfolds it with the finesse of an over-caffeinated drug addict. Scanning the unfolded page in his hands, he desperately tries to make sense of whatever might be written on it.

No question about it; it's a letter written by hand. The convict tries to calm himself down enough so that he can read the cursive properly, and his eyes move to the first line of the message:

"Dear Charles Wilson,

You don't know me, but I've been looking for you for some time now. I have arranged for you to leave the confines of your prison cell. You must follow these instructions exactly and to the letter. Failure to do so will result in death—one way or another."

Charles is shaking. His mind races with every word he reads. *This is insane. Is this really happening? Who wrote this? How does this person even know who I am? What the fuck do they want from me?!*

Desperately trying to focus his eyes and his thoughts, he struggles to read the rest of the note:

“Inside this box, you will find a device that will be used to assist in your escape. You are to attach it to your wrist. Don’t worry about what happens next. Instead, you must focus on leaving the prison grounds. Make your way to the junction at the highway and wait. I’m sorry I can’t be there with you in person to help, but I can’t draw attention to myself at the moment. You’ll have one hour to pull this off. Any more time than that, and I cannot guarantee your safety.

Good luck.”

There’s no signature—and no name, either. Charles flips over the page to see if there’s more on the other side, but it’s blank. *“Don’t worry about what happens next?” What the hell does that mean?* The words echo in his head. He reads and rereads the letter again, trying to comprehend the message more clearly.

However, the more he reads it, the more ridiculous it sounds. *“Leave the prison grounds”? How?! How am I supposed to leave when there are guards crawling all over the place? I can’t even leave my goddamn cell!*

In a fit of anger, Charles crumples the paper and throws it against the wall, then sneers at the device sitting lopsided on his prison bed. The whole situation is completely absurd to him. There’s no way this stupid piece of plastic can possibly help him. He can’t even turn the damn thing on.

But he knows he’ll be dead tonight either way. He thinks about what he should do. *I guess I have nothing to lose at this point, really. What’s the harm in trying?* he tells himself.

Charles grabs the device with reluctance. After rolling up his left sleeve, he slowly and nervously slides his arm through it. It doesn’t seem to fit. Some of the framework touches his skin, but

other places seem way too loose-fitting. He twists it around to get the screen to align with the top of his arm, feeling foolish.

Suddenly, a dim light of indeterminable color appears on the screen and brightens. His heart skips a beat as he looks wide-eyed right at it. There's a message displayed, with lots of weird numbers and symbols. It looks kinda like computer boot-code.

The screen displays more and more techno-jargon, until it abruptly stops and goes blank. Charles finds himself paralyzed with anticipation, wondering what's happened.

Then, almost without pause, the screen shows another message, this one more readable by humans:

"Loading AutoProtocol.xz"

The words puzzle Charles. *"AutoProtocol.xz"*? *What the hell is this?*

The screen changes again, this time drastically. A full graphical interface lights up. It looks nothing like a traditional operating system interface, but instead like something hardwired into the device itself. Various functions appear on it, including buttons for settings and the like. A readout on the screen shows what can only be described as system diagnostic information. Some of the words make sense to him, such as *"Version"*, *"Date/Time"* and *"Settings"*. There's even an entry for latitude and longitude coordinates.

It becomes apparent to Charles that this screen must be a touch-screen interface of some sort, just like those smartphones that everyone has nowadays. He curiously but cautiously reaches a finger out to touch it, right as a message pops up on it:

"Initiating User Competence Test"

He doesn't even get a chance to comprehend what that means. Before he can finish reading the words, the device's inner structure clamps tightly down on his arm. A shocked and frightened Charles lets out a yell and tries to remove the thing—in vain. It feels like the arm opening is molding itself to his very skin. At first the pressure is uncomfortable, but soon it becomes unbearable for him.

He recoils and collapses to the ground from the mind-numbing agony. In a panic, he tries his hardest to rip the device off his arm.

And then, in an instant, as though Charles has hit a brick wall, the pain stops. Sensation and clarity return to him, almost as if the ordeal never even occurred in the first place. He feels fine now, apart from the heavy gasping and the shocks of utter terror coursing through him.

He scrambles to get up and right away looks at the screen on the device, where he sees a new message:

“Testing successful: Initiating Activation Protocol & Firing Sequence”

Below the message appears to be the number “0” next to a percentage sign. The “0” doesn’t last long and turns into a “1” replaced by a “2” before rapidly increasing from there.

Charles panics as the percentage enters the 20s and soon the 50s. He races up to the bars of his cell and starts screaming for help. The inmates nearby don’t seem to care, though, and he feels totally helpless.

“98%... 99%...”

His gut wrenches. Every cell in his body is telling him he’s about to die.

But then a strange memory enters his mind. It’s of Gabby and his daughter, Jen. Gabby is yelling at him, telling him what a loser he is because he can’t find a job. They both get into a screaming match, and Charles ultimately walks away, defeated and feeling like a failure as his baby daughter starts to cry.

He wonders why *that* memory popped up. It’s from a long time ago, back when he was still with his family. He’s always hated that memory. It makes him feel worthless.

As the recollection fades, a vile anger passes over Charles and he spaces out for what seems to be forever. He doesn’t want it to end like this—not from the death penalty and not from this “thing” on his arm, either. He wishes he had another chance; he’s made too many mistakes and has too many regrets. *Please... not like this.*

== *Prisoner* ==

The silence in Charles' head is broken as the device on his arm gives off a soft, confirmation-like sound. The screen now indicates a percentage of 100, and the message changes once more—this time displaying only one word:

“Firing”

Chapter Three

Silent

The world outside Charles' cell seems to slow down to a stop and becomes horrifically silent. Without warning, a yellowish-white light envelops him, blinding him with its intensity. He can feel turbulence all around him—as though he's on a rocket ship or in the middle of an earthquake or a hurricane.

Then he suddenly finds himself in pain once again. The nerves in his body are going haywire, as though he's been set on fire. He screams out in sheer agony, and the pressure building inside his head seems capable of actually split his cranium in two any second now. Even his brain feels like its turning to mush. The whole experience is otherworldly, but most of all downright frightening and beyond painful.

But just as quickly as it all started, it ends. The world comes back into view in a near-instant.

Charles collapses to the ground, shell-shocked. A deafening ringing in his ears that sounds like extreme tinnitus numbs his mind. His body writhes along the ground, twisting and spinning. His eyes dart all over the place, while froth starts oozing out of his mouth. He's going in and out of consciousness suddenly and sporadically, vomiting every time he does. The convict doesn't have any control—and the moments of consciousness that he *does* have make him feel like he's going through a life-threatening seizure.

Again, however—similar to before with the light and turbulence—the seizing episode abruptly stops and Charles finds

himself lying on the floor and staring at the ceiling of his prison cell.

What happened? What's going on? he fearfully asks himself.

As he tries to piece together the events that have transpired, Charles begins to notice certain things about himself. The first thing he notices is that the ringing in his ears has stopped, much to his relief. But the second thing he notices is that his lips feel wet. He immediately wipes them, and discovers puke and foam... and blood.

Horried, Charles starts rubbing his nose, only to find even more blood. In a panic, he sits upright and looks around his body. The blood and vomit that came out of him is awful, and the floor is coated with his bodily fluids. The whole area almost looks like a crime scene. His shirt is stained, but not as much as his hands; and as he looks at them, he does a double take upon seeing the device attached to his wrist.

It seems to have completely locked itself to his arm—as though it is now a part of him. The screen is lit up, but empty of anything except what appears to be a timer counting down from 57 minutes. The device is once again counting towards something.

A rush of adrenaline surges through Charles. Trembling, he remembers what just happened to him and tries to tear the device from his arm, like before. Nothing changes, though; it still has a death grip on him.

As he sits on the cell floor, contemplating whether or not he should just chew his arm off, he becomes aware of some rather odd things about his environment. The air tastes stale and smells kinda bad, but it also feels dry—not to mention dusty. Most importantly, however, everything is quiet. Very quiet. Silent, in fact. He's the only one making *any* sound.

Charles pauses to listen for some type of background noise, be it from other prisoners or from anything else. But there's nothing—only dead silence. He freezes up. Something is *very* wrong. He slowly turns around to look through his cell door, and what he sees doesn't make any sense to him.

== Chapter Three ==

His cell door is open.

Almost as if in a trance, Charles gets up from the floor and begins to stumble towards the door. Confused and disoriented, he wobbles right up to the opening and carefully looks out.

The area is completely silent. You could drop a pin on the ground, and it would make a racket. Charles takes a look at the walkways in front of him. It's not only *his* cell that's open; the cells on the other side are as well. As he looks around, it becomes apparent to him that every last one of them is open, on both his floor and the floor below. And they're all empty.

There's nobody here. There aren't any prisoners, or guards, or staff of any kind. There's just Charles.

A sickening feeling envelops him. He doesn't understand what's going on or where everyone went. "H-hello?" he nervously blurts out.

His voice echoes softly throughout the empty block. With a faint glimmer of hope, he awaits an answer, but it soon becomes obvious that he's never going to get a reply.

Charles stumbles out of his cell and leans on the side railing of his floor to keep his balance. He lurches forward towards the staircase at the far end of the block while using the rail as a guide—all the while looking around for any clues as to what the hell's going on.

As he moves forward little by little, he makes an observation. The building's gone dark; the lights aren't on anymore. In fact, the only light around seems to be coming from outside, through the prison's barred upper windows. The ambient glow combined with the pervasive dust in the air reminds him of an old attic. It looks like late-afternoon sunshine, but this doesn't make any sense to him. He remembers that he was scheduled for execution in a couple of hours—late in the evening.

The convict continues to shimmy along the railing, darting his eyes in all directions. Every single cell has been opened in what appears to be a controlled fashion. Charles remarks to himself that the only way that would happen is if a mass prisoner release was

initiated for some reason. He racks his brain, trying to remember what exactly happened during that brief period of chaos and terror he experienced.

Maybe it's all just a nightmare and I'll wake up soon.

As he comes across some open cells, Charles gazes inside them. They look deteriorated, and the fixtures—such as toilets and sinks—as well as the bedding, look ruined. In fact, almost everything seems to be that way. He moves on while trying to ignore the unsettling environment.

After at last reaching the far staircase, he descends with care, one step at a time. And as he manages to plant both feet safely on ground level, a noise echoes from beyond the prison block.

Charles stops in his tracks and whips his head around in the direction of the sound. It was like some kind of metallic object hitting a floor some distance away, outside the cell complex. Shaking, he bravely decides to move in its direction, despite every sense in his body telling him to hide or run away. He walks forward and realizes that he has much better control of his body now. He doesn't need to use the railing as a crutch anymore.

Coming up to the prison block's security door, he creaks it open and peeks his head out. It seems the door's electronic lock systems aren't working, and neither is the alarm.

Charles moves cautiously through the maze of hallways and access points in the prison, but the lack of light makes it difficult for him to see where he's going. He notices, however, that the display on the device gives off quite a bit of brightness, so he makes use of it as a substitute flashlight.

Desperate to find an exit, he comes across a double door with reinforced windows that have light coming through them. He recognizes these doors at once. They lead to the main prison facility where inmates gathered, either to eat or to be lined up by the guards during a roll call. He carefully walks towards the doors and opens one of them.

As he enters, Charles can't believe what he sees. The whole area looks like a war zone. Bullet holes line the walls, and black

smears that look like they came from explosives cover the floor and ceiling. The table fixtures and chairs seem to have been blown right off, while the components of the building, such as the walkways and stairs, are bent out of shape or even outright destroyed. The walls are cracking and various sections have been ripped apart. Something serious happened here.

The whole scene sets Charles on edge, but what really disturbs him is what he sees lining the floor: clothes. Orange jumpsuits and guard uniforms lie scattered all over the place. The layout of the clothes reminds him of what the rapture would look like—as though people were whisked right out of them to join Jesus in the clouds before going to heaven.

None of this is making sense to the poor convict. Under normal circumstances, one could make the case that a major riot took place here, but this is insane. The walkways and even the walls look like they were hit with high-grade ordinance of some sort. That would be overkill for handling a riot. But what Charles can't grasp at all is the clothes. The clothes are here, but the people aren't. If there truly *was* a prison riot—or even a war—here, there should be some bodies filling those clothes. But there's nothing. Not even blood.

He then sniffs the air. Something smells foul in the building, and he can't locate it. The stench seems to come from every direction. He gags and nearly throws up from the putrid odor. Doing some quick thinking, he lifts up his prison garb and uses it as a makeshift mask. The smell lessens yet is still nauseating. He calms down a bit and looks for some type of exit.

Charles isn't sure how he missed it before, but there's a giant hole in the far wall. Something seems to have blasted right through the outer layer. *Probably the work of a demolition crew*, he rationalizes.

Trotting over to the gaping hole, he sees guard uniforms lining the floor—and they still have their utility belts. He also notices some combat uniforms that *clearly* don't belong to the prison. Some of them are black and unmarked and look like they might be

from a SWAT team. And some other uniforms carry a faded National Guard logo.

As he gazes around at all the “laundry” covering the floor, Charles spots an assault rifle near one of the military uniforms. Actually, the ground appears to be littered with all kinds of weaponry. He wonders why he didn’t notice that before.

He dashes over to the weapon in front of him and picks it up. No good: the gun’s ammo is depleted. He gets up with the rifle in hand and starts checking the other weapons. The total lack of ammo appears to be a consistent theme with all of them. None of the magazines has a single bullet left in it.

A chill runs down Charles’ spine, for he can only imagine why all of the personnel decided to empty every single one of their clips—and, more importantly, at *what*.

Frustrated, he grits his teeth and tosses the rifle out of his hands. As it hits the floor, it makes a racket that echoes throughout the large facility. The shattering of the silence puts him on edge, and his instincts tell him to run. He has to leave.

After darting his eyes back to the gigantic hole in the wall, Charles leaps through it and right away recognizes the area on the far side. It’s the prison lobby, where he was first given his prison clothes and assigned his cell, a long time ago.

He also spots another giant gaping hole, this time in the ceiling. Trying to put the pieces together in his head, he figures that maybe the military had to blow the roof off the same way as the wall. Maybe they couldn’t get into this area properly.

That’s when Charles remembers that there’s an emergency exit nearby. He sees the door just ahead and is perplexed by it; the emergency exit seems to be just fine. Why would the military need to blast their way in here? He ponders this for a second, but then he realizes that he doesn’t care anymore. He has to get the hell out of here.

His heart racing, the convict runs straight for the exit. He smashes his body into the door but ricochets off it. It feels like the door’s rusted shut. He gets up and tries again, unfazed, and the

door budes a little bit. With more confidence, he backs up once more and makes a mad dash right into it. The door finally blows open and an exhausted Charles stumbles out, nearly eating dirt.

He's done it. He's outside.

After catching his breath, he looks around—notably at the sky. No question about it: the sun is up, even if it's being blocked by some rather thick, dusty-looking brown clouds. Charles can't understand why this is. It was late evening when he was given his final meal; he's certain of that. He can't even tell what time it might be, given how hidden the sun is.

While he tries to get his bearings, he sees that the whole perimeter is barren. The fortified walls that surround the prison grounds are crumbling in certain areas and destroyed in others. For the most part, though, the structure of both the walls and the prison seems to be roughly intact.

The silence in the area once again gets to Charles, and a nerve-wracking fear envelops him. He is out in the wide open and has no idea where to go now. The prison itself is a long distance from the nearest town. He simply won't have enough time to get there before the device on his arm completes its countdown—and that's assuming that anybody would even be there. The very thought of it sends a chill down his spine.

Spotting a gap in the outer wall, he snaps back to reality and begins to speed-walk in its direction. Maybe he can get his bearings from there and figure something out once he's outside the grounds of the penitentiary.

As Charles walks, his mind tries to put the pieces of the puzzle together, but he knows that what's happening is truly inexplicable. He recalls the note that came with the device and that it certainly made no mention of any of this. He does remember, though, that it said for him to go to the intersection down the road from the prison. Given that he has no real choice, he continues to walk in that direction. Maybe he'll get some answers once he arrives there.

Once he's moved through the large opening in the fortified outer wall, Charles ends up in the prison parking lot. Around him

are decayed and rusted-out vehicles, some of which belong to the military. Just by looking at them, he can tell that they're not in working order; some of them, alarmingly enough, aren't even right-side up. The chill from before returns as he struggles to explain how that's possible. He shakes his head, continuing past the lot down the prison road, then breaks into a brisk jog.

Charles makes his way past the guard gate and follows the asphalt religiously, as if it's the Yellow Brick Road. With a sickening chill, he takes a look around and sees how desolate everything is. There's not just a lack of people, but a lack of shrubs and plants, too. He feels exposed, as though something might be watching him.

Finally, the convict arrives at the junction, where he turns his head in every direction, trying to find any indication of whether this is the right spot or not. There's nothing here, though, and nobody either. Just desert all around him, and some mountains in the distance. The only distinctive object nearby is a lone yield sign perched at the corner—dirty, paint-scratched and leaning at an angle.

After he checks the device, Charles realizes that there are about three minutes left. He starts to pace up and down the highway, getting more and more anxious. He tries to recall what the note said exactly, but he's pretty sure that all it told him to do was to wait at the intersection.

He keeps checking his wrist, as if it's a nasty habit, and he begins to dread what will happen when the timer reaches zero. Maybe it will be a repeat of the first time: light and turbulence—and immense pain and suffering. He recoils at the thought of going through the whole thing a *second* time.

"HEY! Is anyone out there!?" he screams, terrified. The yell echoes off the mountains, which creates a feeling of isolation and exposure. He knows it's pointless. He can see that no one else is out here but him.

Charles raises his arm to read the timer once more—thirty seconds left—and starts to shake. He's really not looking forward

to the idea of seizing up and shooting blood out of his nose again, assuming that's what will happen to him.

But then another gust of putrid air hits the convict, and he loses focus on the device, unable to think about anything other than the disgusting stench, which has worsened to the point where he can taste it. It smells like a massive pile of corpses rotting in the sun, or a seriously backed-up sewage line, or even a combination of the two. The shirt-over-mouth trick is no longer effective, and Charles is starting to have difficulty breathing. So he raises his free hand to pinch his nose with force and gasps through his mouth. As he does, he happens to gaze out at the mountain range in front of him, and he sees something in the distance that he hasn't noticed before.

There's some kind of object near the base of the mountains. To Charles, it looks like a black spot on the surface of the landscape. The hazy atmosphere makes it near-impossible to tell exactly what it is, though. He squints to get a better look and sees that it's pitch-black and blob-shaped.

He's amazed that he missed it before, given that it's very different from its surroundings. There's something about it that sets him on edge, and he can't take his eyes off it. It's churning up an unexplainable fear inside him. The blackness of it seems unnatural, as if it could swallow him up and suck him into the void—like a black hole. What horrifies the convict the most about it, however, is that it appears to be slowly getting closer.

It's moving. It's moving right towards him.

Charles can't believe what he's seeing. For a brief moment, he figures it's a mirage, or a trick of the light. But it's not. As the unknown mass approaches, its features become easier to distinguish. It seems to have arms and to be "crawling" towards him. From a distance, it *might* be a black bear, based on its size and its movement patterns. Yet he knows it can't be a bear—or any other animal, for that matter. The more he looks at it, the sicker he feels. There's something *wrong* about it; it's not supposed to be here.

The now unbearable stench is setting Charles' nose on fire and making his throat swell. It's as if his body is desperately trying to ensure the foul air doesn't find a way inside him. Every fiber in his being is screeching for him to flee and get as far away as he can, but he has nowhere to go to and he knows he needs to be here for when the timer hits zero. All he can do is stare in complete, utterly petrified horror at the black mass approaching him.

Charles suddenly hears a beep from his wrist. He forces his gaze downward to look at the device: the countdown has ended.

In an instant, the light and turbulence that he felt before return. The desert landscape vanishes and his nerves vibrate with pain, causing him to scream out once more.

Then, just as before, the experience ends abruptly and Charles hears the same shrill, deafening ringing in his ears. He collapses to the ground, his back hitting the cold, hard pavement while he tries to focus on staying conscious. The pain is intense, but it doesn't seem to be as bad as it was before; after all, he hasn't blacked out yet. The ringing, however, is mind-numbing. He grips the sides of his head and cups his ears, trying to make it stop.

After suffering for a nauseatingly long time, Charles feels the ringing and aching fade away and clarity begins to return to him. He remembers what happened last time and wipes his face, only to find that his hands are dry. No blood this time, which he's thankful for.

With the pain dispelled at last, Charles glances up towards the sky and sees a half-moon shining brightly among the stars. It's nighttime again.

Am I... back?

In a moment of awareness, he takes a look at the device on his wrist. The display has gone dark and he wonders if it has lost power. When he taps the screen, he sees a dim light being emitted from the glass. The interface has changed again. Instead of a timer, there's now a single line displayed in green:

"STANDBY"

"Standby"? For what?

== Chapter Three ==

The words puzzle him. Is he being told to stand by for further instructions? Or has the device been put into a type of idle mode? If that's the case, then it probably isn't going to be doing anything funny anymore, which would be a relief.

Becoming aware of the fact that he's still lying on the ground, Charles rolls over onto his belly and struggles to get up off the cold asphalt and balance himself. He looks up the road and stares at the prison in astonishment. It's fully intact and the lights are on. There's no question about it; he's back—back from *wherever* he was before. This time, however, he's on the outside of a maximum-security penitentiary.

He can't believe it. He's out, just like whoever wrote that note said he would be. So many questions begin to fill his mind and he doesn't even know which one to ask first. He tries to focus his thoughts, pondering what to do next and where to go from here.

It's at this point that Charles hears the distinct sound of a handgun being cocked behind his skull.

Chapter Four

Urgency

A part from the light breezes, that cock of the hammer is the only sound Charles has noticed—and every thought passing through his brain comes to a complete halt upon hearing it.

How is this possible? How was he not aware that someone was standing right behind him? Was he really that out of it?

“Put your hands up where I can see ’em.” It’s a woman’s voice.

Not wanting to get shot, Charles does exactly as he’s told. After carefully raising his hands as high as they’ll go, he turns his head with caution in order to get a glimpse of the person the voice is attached to.

This mysterious individual is a Black woman—probably Charles’ age. She’s dressed in some kind of combat uniform and, most importantly, has a pistol pointed right at the back of his head. He tries to make out her face better in the moonlight, thinking that maybe he somehow knows her.

Of course, the convict has never met this woman before. But she, Veronica Berkley, knows exactly who *he* is; after all, she read his classified medical profile just yesterday and perhaps knows more about him than even he does.

Regardless, Charles is absolutely stunned by what’s happening. She must have been waiting outside for him this whole time. As far as he’s concerned, there’s only one explanation for her being out here in the middle of nowhere: she must be the person who wrote

== Chapter Four ==

him the note and had the package smuggled into the prison for him—or, at least, he thinks so.

He has so many questions for her. But before he can even ask what's going on or who she is, the woman marches up and drives him to the ground in an impressive display of martial arts.

Once more, Charles finds himself belly down on the ground and eating dirt. He tries to talk as he spits out gravel. "W-who are you?!"

"Shut up and be quiet."

Veronica grabs a pair of cuffs from her belt and violently moves his arms together to snap them onto his wrists. The tight cuffs are very uncomfortable. Once upright, she takes a couple of steps back from Charles. He turns his head around to see that she has pulled out her gun again and has a bead on his back, just waiting for him to make any weird moves. He freezes, as he doesn't dare agitate her.

She then pulls out a simple flip-phone and auto-dials a contact number. The dialing and ringing sounds emanating from the cellphone contrast with the otherwise quiet and lonely environment.

The ringing on the other end stops and Veronica speaks into the mic. "Yeah, I got him. He's here, just like you said he'd be."

Charles tries his hardest to listen to the other side of the conversation, but all he's hearing is muffled sound.

"Well, he ain't *dead*, if that's what you mean. Yeah, looks like I lost *that* bet, huh? Alright, see you in a bit."

Veronica collapses her phone and holsters her pistol. She then breaks the phone with a snap and puts it away while she marches back over to the detained man. A surge of adrenaline rushes through Charles' body as she reaches down to his arms.

She makes sure the cuffs are good and tight—much to his discomfort—yanks him up to his feet and commands him to walk to the roadside, her gun jabbed right into his spine.

The walk is a mess. Charles trips all over himself as he tries to regain his balance. The gun barrel pressed against his discs isn't helping, either. "P-please, who are you? What's going on?"

Veronica ignores his pleas of inquiry and instead holds him steady with a firm grip on his arm while she gazes up the highway in expectation. Seeing where his captor's attention is, Charles instinctively looks in the same direction.

In the distance on the highway, a speck of light is moving closer to them: a sole hint of life on a lifeless road. As the light continues to approach, the roar of an engine becomes audible. Soon what was once a single speck turns into a pair of headlights and then slows down upon nearing the two. Charles squints to shield his eyes.

The vehicle comes to a stop right in front of them with a small screech of its tires. Now that the headlights are no longer in his face, Charles can see that the car is a black SUV—the kind that looks like it might belong to the Secret Service.

When he hears the driver-side door open and then close with a slam, his heart leaps into his throat in anticipation of finding out who on earth the accomplice of this violent woman is.

The driver walks around the front of the vehicle quickly and gracefully while taking a good look at the convict. Charles tries to use the moonlight to make out what few details he can about the person; as far as he can tell, it's a man in a trench coat, complete with a trilby hat on his head—a fashion choice befitting an agent for the feds in a 1940s film noir. His puffy face is clean and unremarkable, but also inviting and benign. Charles was almost expecting a gritty guerrilla mastermind, or even someone with a supervillain demeanor. He wasn't expecting someone who looked this pleasant and folksy, that's for sure.

This man, Mitchell Grayson, eyes Charles' entire figure. The worn-down prisoner looks just as he thought he would, back when he and Veronica were discussing how they would go about freeing him. Now that he finally has the convict in his hands, Mitchell couldn't be happier with the outcome. "Wonderful! You didn't

== Chapter Four ==

have to make me go looking for you! This is turning out *much* better than I anticipated.”

Charles is speechless. The man standing before him is actually polite and friendly—a direct contrast to the Amazon who has a death grip on his shoulder and a pistol to his pelvis. It reminds him of the typical good cop / bad cop routine that he was once very familiar with.

Mitchell walks over to the passenger side of the vehicle, opens the door and holds it like a valet waiting for a VIP. He then makes a graceful motion with his hand for the convict to enter. “Charles! If you’d be so kind...”

As he stands frozen, Charles’ thoughts turn immediately to what they’re going to do to him once he gets inside, and where they’re going to take him.

“I’m sure you have many questions for us, Charles, but we need to leave.”

A loud, echoing sound suddenly breaks the tranquility of the night. Charles recognizes it right away and turns his head towards the prison. The lockdown sirens have gone off, signaling an escaped prisoner.

Turning back to the driver, the convict notices that his expression has changed from pleasant to urgent.

Mitchell peers right into his eyes. “Now.”

There’s no time left. Charles knows that the prison will dispatch the guards to look around the perimeter for him. But his legs won’t move. He’s hesitating to do anything, much less get in a vehicle with armed strangers.

Veronica senses his reluctance and shoulder-bumps him with force. “MOVE!”

Charles stumbles forward as she keeps pushing him, until he trips into the car steps in front of him and his face meets the seats. She grabs his legs and thrusts them up onto the leather, leaving the escapee in a semi-fetal position.

After slamming the door, Veronica opens the front passenger side and gets in—training her gun right between Charles’ eyes

before he even has a chance to get upright. When he sees the barrel of the gun in front of him, he decides to remain perfectly still.

Meanwhile, Mitchell casually opens the driver-side door and gets in with a heavy sigh, as though he's finished with a long day of work. He looks back at Charles with a quaint smile. "Seat belts, everyone."

Mitchell snaps his belt in, and Veronica, her eyes still fixed on Charles, reaches back and yanks her seat belt into place. Soon after, the pedal hits the metal and the SUV roars down the road and blasts off into the night, with no one else the wiser as to what kind of incredible, *impossible* operation has just taken place.

Chapter Five

Questions

The pale moonlight shines across the barren, rural desert environment, while out in the distance, one of the dirt roads kicks up some dust from a vehicle in the shadows. As the SUV travels at speed across the bumpy, uneven surfaces, it rocks and cradles against the slopes, jostling the occupants inside it. Mitchell has to use finesse with the gas pedal and the brakes in order to make the shaking not too violent for everyone.

Veronica doesn't mind, though; she's busy keeping an eye on the person of interest they've taken.

Charles hasn't even moved an inch from his position when he was first thrust into the car. He still has the cuffs attached to him—in fact, they've been cutting into his wrists from all the rattling of the vehicle. Now he's more pissed off than scared. This long trip is seriously starting to get to him. He's been on this godforsaken dirt road for God knows how long, bound for God knows where, and no one has spoken a word since they left the prison area.

Mitchell glances into the rear-view mirror and notices the convict's vicious stare. Without a hint of care, he then shifts his eyes back to the road. "I'm sorry, Charles—it's only going to get worse."

The softly spoken words form a knot in the pit of Charles' stomach.

Suddenly, a hump in the dirt road smacks the car's bottom, and the three find themselves driving on smoother ground. The confused fugitive wonders what's going on and thinks that maybe

they're back on a main road of some sort. But soon they come to a stop and Mitchell puts the vehicle in park before turning off the engine.

There's a brief moment of deathly silence. Then both Veronica and Mitchell exit the vehicle, to Charles' alarm.

The door next to him opens, with Veronica once more pointing her pistol at him. "Get out."

Scared out of his mind, Charles obeys and scoots his butt to get out of the car. She grabs his arm to yank him out, holding him hard. He's annoyed and bitter at how she's rough-handling him, but then his attention turns to his surroundings. A small, ranch-style cabin sits on the desert floor out in the middle of nowhere—right in front of him. He can barely make out its features, even in the moonlight.

Meanwhile, Mitchell starts to walk up the porch stairs towards the door, the boards creaking with every step he takes. Veronica then shoves Charles, gently this time. He gets the message and follows Mitchell.

The door opens with a shriek, which startles Charles. Mitchell casually enters ahead of the convict. It's black inside the cabin, as the only source of light is the moon shining from beyond a nearby window.

The flame of a stricken match suddenly springs to life at the tips of Mitchell's fingers, illuminating his face. When he raises his other hand, Charles can see a large lantern dangling from his grip. The fire meets it, and the whole room brightens in an instant. A smile forms on Mitchell's pudgy face as he places the lantern on a hook attached to the ceiling.

The light's glow is rather soft, but at least Charles can now see what kind of room he's in. As far as he can tell, it's a hunter's den. Some furniture, including a recliner, dots the otherwise bare floor. The walls are covered with the kinds of placards, paintings and taxidermy animal heads that one would typically find in a man-cave. There are even some photos of an unidentifiable man holding

an enormous trout on a riverbank—the kind of man you’d want to have a beer with.

As he turns his head to scan the entrances to the room, Charles expects the very man depicted in the photo to come out to meet him. But the silence tells it all, and everything begins to click in. There’s no one else here. It’s just the three of them.

Sweating, the convict glances multiple times at both Veronica and Mitchell, who stare back with cold, icy eyes.

Handcuffed inside a creepy cabin out in the desert; held captive by two unknown people who, somehow, busted him out of prison in a way that defies all possibility—terror wells up inside Charles as he now realizes they finally have him right where they want him. The worst thoughts begin to enter his mind. “P-please, I don’t know what you want from me. I-I’m a nobody,” he squeaks.

Mitchell lets out a snort and raises his eyebrows. The tension in the room lowers significantly as he disrupts the silence with his booming voice. “Charles, have a seat.”

He motions to a spot right beside the former prisoner. It’s a very comfy plush chair with high armrests. Charles glances at it while Mitchell starts walking towards an identical chair opposite him. He doesn’t budge, though; he’s too afraid to make any movement.

A second later, Veronica shuffles in right next to Charles and shoves him straight into the chair. He almost gets the wind knocked out of his lungs, and it feels like he’s nearly broken his wrists on the cuffs from the impact. After a few deep breaths, he regains his composure to see Mitchell sit down comfortably while letting out a weary, half-assed sigh.

The two of them are sitting right across from each other as Charles quietly hyperventilates.

Satisfied, Veronica stands at the side, keeping a sharp eye on their “guest”. She lowers the pistol in her hands into its holster but doesn’t let go of it entirely. Charles glances at her in a state of panic, in between eyeing Mitchell, who’s now giving him a casual stare.

“Can I offer you anything?” Mitchell asks the convict.

Charles stops his heavy breathing and looks directly into Mitchell’s eyes. He’s not sure he heard those words right. Confusion and concern wash over his face.

“Tea? Coffee? Some biscuits, perhaps?” Mitchell continues. He pauses as if awaiting a response, then continues in a matter-of-fact manner. “Nothing? Good. Because I don’t actually *have* any of those things.”

An ever so slight smirk forms on his face but soon fades. In its place, a stern, commanding voice takes over. “We’re staying here for the night. At sunrise, we’ll be driving to Vegas and boarding my private jet for DC.”

Mitchell crosses his legs and gets into a more comfortable position in the chair, his pleasant demeanor from before returning. “But before *that*, I’m sure you have *many* questions that you’d like some answers to. So, to start off with the most obvious question, my name is Mitchell Grayson.” He makes a motion with his hand. “And this lovely lady beside you is Veronica Berkley.”

Charles glances back up at Veronica, who seems to have not taken her steely eyes off him—not even for a second.

“First thing you need to know about us, is that neither of us ‘officially’ exists. Not in databases, CIA, NSA, foreign intelligence—hell, not even Google or Facebook knows who we are. And neither of us is part of any organization, officially or otherwise. It’s just the two of us; there’s no one else.”

The words criss-cross after entering Charles mind, and he shakes his head in confusion. “W-wait... who-?”

“Second thing you need to know about us, is that if we wanted you dead, we would’ve just let the State handle it. Understand?”

An awkward silence fills the room.

“Well! Now that introductions are out of the way, tell me, Charles, what would *you* like to know—specifically?”

The convict gawks with a blank expression at Mitchell’s seemingly innocent question. Should he respond? How can he? So much has happened and he doesn’t even know where to begin. He

wants to know so many things—like who these people actually are, what they want with him and, most importantly, what the hell’s going on.

He thinks for a second and knows what he wants to ask first. “W-what is this thing on my arm?” Struggling to shift his body around, he shows Mitchell the device attached to his wrist.

Mitchell stares and then bursts out laughing. “Excellent question! Very specific! I like you, Charles. I was afraid you’d ask me something idiotic.” He leans forward in his chair and points to Charles’ arm. “That right there is one of *two* of the most valuable items on the face of this earth.”

“T-two?”

Mitchell raises his left arm up and pulls back his sleeve. “Yes. Two.”

Trying to make out Mitchell’s arm in the dim light, Charles is shocked to see a device similar to his, attached in much the same way. This one looks aesthetically different, though. Whereas Charles’ device appears to have come from a design factory, Mitchell’s looks like a working proof-of-concept. The bulky and irregular prototype is painted in a strange shade of greenish black. Its touch screen is nearly identical, however, and it seems to be sturdy enough.

Charles tries to get a better look and starts to get out of his chair, perhaps a little too quickly. Without warning, Veronica shoves him back into his seat, this time even harder. She yanks the pistol out of her holster, cocks the hammer, and trains it right between his eyes as he lets out a small yell of terror.

Mitchell halfheartedly raises his arms. “Now, now—we’re all friends here.”

Charles can only doubt that statement. People don’t point guns at their friends.

Veronica freezes. After a moment, Charles hears the click of the hammer pinch down and she re-holsters the deadly weapon.

The violent confrontation now defused, Mitchell looks at his device with a sentimental smile on his lips. "It's quite a trip, isn't it? I'd imagine it was rather terrifying for you."

Charles keeps his mouth shut; the memories of before at the prison creep up on him, and he doesn't want to show his fear.

Mitchell softly strokes the plastic on the device. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there to deliver it to you in person, or at least help you through your... journey. But trust me; I have my reasons. We're in enough hot water as it is with this prison break that we just pulled."

He turns his head away from Charles, a small hint of discomfort on his face, then waves his hand. "Never mind, you're better off not knowing. Just one less thing to think about—OK, Charles?"

With caution, the convict nods his head in agreement, and Mitchell continues. "Besides, it all worked out pretty well, didn't it? And, just for the record, I had *complete* and total confidence in you following my instructions—right, Veronica?"

He looks cheekily at Veronica, who breaks her focus on Charles to roll her eyes at him and grunt. She remembers that bet she lost. Good thing the two weren't gambling with actual money; it's usually a sucker's bet to go against Mitchell Grayson.

Mitchell winks at her with a winning smile, then looks back at Charles. "I'd like for you to think of that trip as a 'test' to prove your worth to us. Truth is, Charles, even if I had *wanted* to help you, I wouldn't have been able to—for reasons you wouldn't be able to understand. Just know that I took a *big* risk in getting that device to you." He pauses, mid-thought. "Which reminds me, I'm going to be getting a phone call soon from—"

Before he can finish, the air fills with a very loud and rather annoying jingle. Charles is almost startled by it, but he can guess the source of the tune.

Reaching into the breast pocket of his jacket, Mitchell pulls out a cheap flip-phone and smiles at Charles over the serendipity of the moment. He opens the phone and utters an almost joyous "Hello!" into the speaker.

On the other end of the conversation is a prison guard hunched over at his desk, trying his hardest to be as inconspicuous as possible. “Hey, it’s Barney.”

Charles can hear the correctional officer clearly through the cellphone’s rather loud speaker. But even still, he wonders if he’s heard it right. *Barney? The fucking fat-ass who was with Frank? It was... him?* He almost can’t believe it. He was all but certain it was Frank who must’ve smuggled in the package for him—or probably someone else. He never would’ve imagined it was the other guy, who barely said anything to him during his final meal. A look of disbelief washes over Charles.

“Barney!” chuckles Mitchell as he gets out of his chair to pace the floor. “I was wondering if and when you’d call.”

The guard starts talking in a low-key aggressive manner, with a hint of nervousness. “Can you explain to me just what the hell happened?! You told me I was giving him a gun—not something that can make a man disappear! I saw the empty cell. No way he could have gotten out. I-it’s like the guy just vanished or something!”

Barney then leans in closer to his desk, his face almost meeting the top of it. The slight tremble in his voice is a mix of menace and anxiety. “How. The hell. Did he escape?”

Mitchell lazily attempts to calm the guard. “Relax, Barney, I can assure you that everything’s fine. He’s with me now—”

“No, asshole! Everything’s *not* fine! Not on *my* end. The warden’s going nuts! We’re all going to be interrogated, and I don’t exactly have an alibi.”

Mitchel sniffs a little and retorts, “Oh, I see. Well, you probably should have thought about that before giving contraband to a death row inmate.”

The guard slams his fist on the desk, nearly knocking over a nearby coffee mug. “Goddammit, man! The plan, if I recall correctly, was for *me* to give that piece of shit the package, go home and pack up the family; then, after that, *you* would wire me

the rest of the money. That was the deal. That is what we agreed on—”

“*No*, what I *said* was, after Charles receives the package, I would wire you the remainder. Which, by the way, you should check with your bank right now; the money’s all there. I recommend using it to hire a decent lawyer, before they freeze your account.”

A long pause follows. Charles can only guess as to how many bullets the poor officer must be sweating. Mitchell’s right, though; Barney knows it’s only a matter of time before the evidence catches up with him.

“OK, OK,” pleads the guard. “Look, I know you paid me a lot of money, but I’m going to need more than that now. I want protection and a new identity—for me and my family. I-I know you can do that, r-right?”

An icy, uncaring chill forms around Mitchell. “That wasn’t part of the agreement.”

Mitchell can tell that Barney’s running out of options. He’s starting to beg now.

“Please! I have a family. I told you I needed the money! You *know* that!”

“Yes... yes, I do. I seem to deal with lots of men who commit crimes to provide for their families, don’t I?”

Mitchell glares at Charles, who notices his look. At first the convict doesn’t think much of it, but then he remembers that he too had a family, and that he also committed a crime in order to support them. An alarm goes off in his head and he begins to question just how much Mitchell knows about him.

Barney starts biting his nails, wondering what to even say at this point. But before he can talk, a voice booms over the prison loudspeakers. It’s the warden giving regulatory orders for the staff following the lockdown procedure. Alarmed, the guard tries to cover the mouthpiece with his free hand, but the voice blares through the cellphone in Mitchell’s hand.

Mitchell looks at the phone in mild confusion. “Barney, don’t tell me you made this call from the prison’s landline.”

“W-what was I supposed to do?” sputters Barney. “I needed to call you, and the whole place is on lockdown! I couldn’t even leave to get my cellphone, thanks to you.”

Stunned at Barney’s idiocy, Mitchell shakes his head.

But the guard gathers his nerve. He feels justified in his excuses and starts to get vicious. “If I’d known that the prisoner was gonna escape so quickly, I could have at least made a run for it when I had the chance! You screwed me, you little shit!”

Mitchell merely smiles, then chuckles in a gentle and devious way. “Barney, you *are* aware that those lines are being monitored and recorded, right?”

Barney’s earlier rage is now morphing into a horrible realization. His face turns a moon-shade of pale, and his body sits frozen.

Barely skipping a beat, Mitchell collapses his flip-phone—and leaves Barney on the other end with a dial tone in his ear, and proverbial dick in hand.

Mitchell eyes the phone in his palm and sighs. “Yeah, he’s a dead man—such a shame.”

He then reopens the phone and snaps it at the spine, making it impossible to trace. When he spots a nearby waste bin, he tosses the broken pieces right into it with ease.

Another heavy sigh comes out of Mitchell’s mouth as he sits back into his chair, trying to find the comfy spot he had before. “Now where were—oh, right! We were talking about these devices, weren’t we? Well, Charles, let me ask you: what do you think they are?”

Charles remains silent. He’s still dumbstruck by the absurd phone call that transpired between poor Barney and Mitchell.

“Portal generators, perhaps?” continues Mitchell. “Transporters to some parallel dimension? Or, maybe they’re compact versions of the TARDIS!”

He chuckles nostalgically. “Have you ever seen ‘Doctor Who’? I absolutely *loved* that show. Loved it!”

Charles has no clue what Mitchell’s talking about. What he *does* know, however, is that this man—who has essentially kidnapped him and destroyed some guard’s life—is coming across as somewhat unstable. He can’t believe that anyone could have a warm conversation like this under these circumstances.

Mitchell’s chuckling dies down, and a serious tone replaces it. “They’re time machines,” he says flatly. “You traveled approximately 20 years into the future.”

The convict’s eyes widen as he struggles to process what he’s just heard.

“Now Charles, I don’t peg you as being an intelligent man, but I’m pretty sure even *you* noticed something was a little *off* when you were there: Society seemingly gone and vanished, dilapidated infrastructure, and the smells. God, the smells... *ugh*.”

Charles shudders at the memory of the fumes he had to suffer through.

“Believe me, it’s the stench left by something you’d never want to encounter—*ever*.”

At these words, Charles recalls noticing the horrid odor at various points. However, he also remembers that it was at its strongest when he saw that *thing* crawling towards him—right before the device jumped him back.

“Well,” continues Mitchell, “I’m going to venture your next questions are going to be along the lines of ‘What happened in the future?’ and ‘Why is there no life to speak of?’ I’m sure you’re also wondering about all the stuff that was left behind, like the clothes and—”

“I-I saw something,” Charles interrupts in a lifeless voice. “When I was *there*. It was this big, black... creeping thing.”

In an instant, Mitchell’s calm and amused demeanor changes to one of serious concern.

“I-it looked kinda like it was moving and crawling along the ground, y’know, way out in the distance. It smelled so bad. At first

I thought it was, like, a bear or something. Wh-what the hell was that thing, anyway?"

Mitchell continues to stare at him in shock. Expecting some kind of response, Charles turns to Veronica, who's giving him the same look.

As he leans back in his chair, Mitchell lets out a sudden, uncontrollable belly laugh that echoes off the walls, with Charles nervously wondering just what is so funny.

"WOW!" blurts out Mitchell. "I guess I was really pushing it with that hour that I gave you, wasn't I?!" He goes back to laughing hysterically, before calming himself down. "You have *no* idea how close to death you were. I'm amazed you're even here at all, to be honest! In fact, now that I think about it, I'm surprised you didn't encounter more of them!"

Charles' face goes chalk-white. *M-more?*

Mitchell shakes his head, still getting some of the giggles out of his system. "You haven't got a *clue* just how lucky you are. And you really have no idea just how bad this is going to get, either. So, with that in mind, let me bring you up to speed on the severity of the situation: we don't have *time*. I need you to co-operate with us, without resistance. If you don't, then we have no use for you and we'll just toss you back to the State. Got it? We need you to trust us, Charles—and more importantly, we need to be able to trust *you*. *Comprende?*"

Mitchell's forceful attitude makes it into Charles' mind, and he finds himself nodding his head in frantic agreement.

"Good, because you are going to help us—quite literally—save the world, and I would prefer it if you didn't make this more difficult than it needs to be."

Silence settles between them. In an obvious state of shock and despair, Charles lowers his head. He can't believe any of this. He was on death row mere hours ago, and now he's apparently supposed to be the hero of the world? And it's all because these two were able to rescue him right at the last second.

The whole situation feels traumatic for him. He looks up at Mitchell, his face riddled with confusion and his eyes teary. “Why me?” he squeaks.

Mitchell curls his lip and frowns. “Boy, now *that’s* a good question, isn’t it? That’s the best question you could ever ask me.”

In a flash of agility, he springs up from his comfy chair and begins to pace the floor. “Yes, why? *Why* would we ignore the seven billion *other* people on this planet and instead go with a convict—who, I might add, was only an hour or so away from execution inside a heavily guarded facility? Good question, Charles. *Why would* we choose a low-life scumbag like you, and not some other unfortunate chump off the streets?”

Charles can’t help but look guilty and confused—and he’s not even sure why.

Meanwhile, Mitchell tries to regain his composure and goes back to sitting down. “Time travel, as you can probably imagine, is a very *poorly* understood theory. The truth of the matter is that *anyone* could utilize that device on your arm and transport themselves through time.”

Then he flinches. “The *problem* is that only a very small minority are able to travel successfully without turning into a drooling vegetable. I’ve seen that happen many more times than I’d like to admit. Ninety percent of the world’s population cannot survive the trip: Brain shuts down. *Boom*. Gone. The next 9.99 percent suffer from seizures, comas, critical brain damage and, in some cases, total insanity. The remaining .01 percent of the population are, well, people like you and me.”

A hush falls over a shocked Charles. “So... like, what? I’m special?” he whispers. “That’s the reason you chose me over some random douche-bag?”

Mitchell tries to ignore the vulgar comment. “Charles, do you remember when you put on the device? Did you happen to notice that it was checking your DNA? Well, I suppose you *probably* couldn’t tell—but it was doing that to determine if you had the correct genetic structure to survive the trip or not.”

== Chapter Five ==

Charles recalls something about a “user competency test”, but there was no way he could’ve known it was checking his genes. He *does* remember being in frightening amounts of pain, though.

At this point Mitchell peers into Charles’ tired and miserable eyes with an annoyed expression. “Believe me, if I could have gone with someone else—*anyone* else—I would have. And I would have liked for it to be Veronica here.” At his glance, she turns her head away in melancholy.

After standing up and walking over to Charles, who begins to tremble, Mitchell leans towards the convict’s face, the two men only inches apart. “You should be grateful. The only reason you aren’t in a body bag right now is because I happened to stumble across your medical history among *thousands* of others, looking for someone like you. It’s only because you have the correct protein blocks that I made a *valiant* effort to get you here, safe and sound. Got it? You won the lottery—simple as that.”

Mitchell straightens while Charles looks downward as he absorbs this information. His emotions have him at a breaking point, and he’s on the verge of crying from it all.

“Think of this as a chance to redeem yourself,” says Mitchell, glancing at his device as though checking his watch. “And, as much as I’d love to tell you more, we have a *big* day tomorrow—and I don’t need you to have any more nightmares than you’ll already have tonight.”

Tears begin to stream from Charles’ deadened eyes. His mouth gapes as he reels from all that has happened.

Mitchell looks away and walks to Veronica, then both move to the hallway, just out of sight.

“I’ll look after him and keep watch,” whispers Veronica.

“No, please get some sleep. We should be well hidden from law enforcement—”

“It’s not the goddamn police I’m worried about. Look, don’t worry—I got it, alright?”

For a brief moment, Charles looks back towards the two, wondering what they’re talking about.

Mitchell raises a finger at Veronica to protest but decides it's best not to argue. He needs the sleep, and someone really should be keeping watch, anyway. Without saying another word, he heads down the hallway, presumably towards a bed.

Charles is distraught. He can't understand how this is happening to him. It's as if he's caught in a "game of destiny" that he never signed up for. Maybe it's because he's been locked up for what seems like forever, but he hasn't been this deathly afraid in a long, *long* time.

The convict spaces out at the overwhelming trauma of it all, and it takes him a minute to see that Veronica is standing over him. He looks up at her blankly.

"Up," she commands, emotionless.

A little confused as to what she's asking, he starts to shuffle in his chair. Not wanting to waste time on this criminal, Veronica forcibly pulls him up, spins him around and slams him into the nearby wall. Poor Charles has no fight left in him. He's content at this point to just let her do what she wants to him.

A snapping sound comes from his wrists, and he's surprised to feel that one of the cuffs is undone. A hopeful thought crosses his mind that maybe she's going to actually take them off and let him be free a bit.

Veronica then spins Charles around again, keeping the other handcuff in her grip as she pushes him to the ground and forces him to fall on his butt. He barely has any time to react when she takes the free cuff, slaps it onto the nearby radiator and chains him to it.

"Aw, come on," he mumbles.

She moves to the lantern suspended from the ceiling and extinguishes it with a blow. Darkness returns to the cabin, the only light now coming in from the beautiful moonlit sky outside. Charles can barely make out Veronica as she plops onto the sofa next to the window.

After a brief scan of the area outside, she turns her attention to the miserable man sitting on the floor. “Go to sleep. An’ don’t snore, or I’ll kick your ass.”

All Charles can do is look away from her gaze. He tries to improve his position on the ground by scooting himself so his back is at a better angle to the wall. His movements make no difference, though. He’s going to be as stiff as a board when he wakes up. What’s worse, he’s also now aware of how much he misses his prison bed. At least it was comfy enough to sleep in, unlike the wooden floor that’s now making his backside ache.

The very thought of missing something about being in prison makes him feel disgusted. He was in jail for so long, just going through the daily routine, that he’s forgotten what it’s like to have something *happen* to him. For years he knew that he would be dying on a scheduled date and that his life would be ordered and set—and now his whole existence has been thrown into chaos. He doesn’t have a clue what’s going to happen to him tomorrow, but the idea of “tomorrow” frightens him to the core. He knows he should be happy, being off death row and all, and the fact that he isn’t makes him understand just how broken he truly is. The distress builds up inside, and he can’t take it anymore. He begins to weep and whimper to himself.

“Stop cryin’,” pipes up Veronica.

Charles looks at her as tears stream from his eyes.

Veronica interrupts her scan of the window to look at him with a most uncaring attitude. “Like Mitchell said, it’s only gonna get worse.” She turns to look out the window again for solace.

As the minutes go by in silence, Charles glances back at Veronica, who’s still surveying the area outside like a hawk. He grits his teeth at her. *What the fuck is her deal? Why’s she being such a ruthless bitch? Then again, maybe she’s like this with everyone she breaks out of prison.* The humorous thought almost makes him crack a smile.

More time quietly passes, and his eyelids droop more and more. *Maybe I’ll close them for a second—just for a second.*

Chapter Six

Interrogation

Throughout the night, a chilling wind blows gently in the desert air. It's the only sound that can be heard from inside the cabin.

Veronica lies still on the couch, her breathing soft in slumber, while Charles, in contrast, is shaking in his sleep, clearly suffering from a nightmare.

In the dream, he's yanked out of the trunk of a car and thrown to the ground. A blindfold covers his eyes, his mouth is gagged and his arms are tied behind his back. He scrambles to try and get a foothold but gets dragged away. The gag muffles his screams and he desperately attempts to fight off the grip of his captor, who continues to drag him along the desert ground before at last coming to a stop.

Charles then gets thrown onto his knees and the blindfold is ripped off—along with the gag. In a panic, he looks around, trying to figure out where he is. Unfortunately, he can't make out much in the moonlight, except that he's out in the middle of a haunting desert landscape.

Hearing a cough, Charles looks up at the three armed Hispanic men standing in front of him. They look like they're from the ghetto, or at least from prison. Each one has tattoos covering his face and arms. Two of them have metal bats resting on their shoulders, while the third—a man who goes by the street name Angel—carries a pistol in his hand.

The horror of what's happening—and more importantly, of what's *about* to happen—curdles Charles' blood. "Nononono, NO! PLEASE!!! I'M SORRY!"

The thugs don't say anything; they just stare at him, almost with pity. One of them blows into a piece of bubble gum.

"LOOK!! I can get the money, I swear to fucking Christ—"

"*No, no ese,*" interrupts Angel. "You've had way more time than you should." He goes to kneel down beside Charles, who hyperventilates in utter terror. "Me and my boys, we found out you was fixin' to skip town, like we wouldn't know about it."

Charles cries a little in between heavy breaths, his eyes wide and fixated on the thug.

"I guess I can't blame you," remarks Angel as he waves his gun around. "If I had the kind of debt you do, I'd take this piece right here and blow my friggin' brains out with it."

The thugs listening chuckle a little at their boss' joke.

"But you see, white-boy, that's the problem. It'd be bad for us if you left. It's not wise, y'know, to try and cheat your lender."

Angel stands up and walks away. Without even turning around to face Charles, he snaps his fingers, and the two other goons move in.

"NO! PLEASE!" screams Charles. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm—"

One of the thugs winds up his bat and smashes it across Charles' jaw. Charles flies sideways and drops to his belly, but not before being forced to spit out a tooth and some blood.

The other thug comes in as Charles tries to flip himself around. But he's too late. The bat makes contact with his shoulder, resulting in an audible crunch. Pitiful, broken-down Charles screams out in pain. The gangsters take turns beating him. His face, his body—all of it is bruised and mangled.

Meanwhile, Angel raises a cigarette and flicks a lighter. He does a deep inhale while admiring the sight of Charles' broken body. Then the blows stop and the thugs back off as their leader approaches once more.

Charles is struggling to breathe, his gasps for air raspy. Angel kneels down right beside him. With a puff of smoke, he calmly exhales into Charles' face. The gasps for air turn into coughs.

Angel's silvery smile glints in the moonlight. "Y'know, it's a shame. I actually like you, Charles. You come across as a... uh, good, hard-working man just trying to provide for his family. You remind me of my papa."

He holds up a bag of crystal meth and forces it into Charles' battered face. "But unlike *you*, my papa would've *never* gotten into the debt you did. And he sure as *hell* wouldn't have sampled the product—the product you were supposed to *sell*."

Charles grits his teeth, but the pain in his jaw forces him to relax his face. He wishes he could tell Angel that it was actually his wife, Gabby, who was using; but he can't—and he knows it's pointless now, anyway.

Angel pulls out his gun and aims it right at Charles' skull. He clicks back the hammer while Charles tries to scream through his unresponsive mouth.

"I'm done playing games with you, *pendejo*—say hi to my papa for me."

As Charles closes his eyes in anticipation of the bullet about to take his life, his wife's and daughter's faces flash before him.

A breeze passes over, picking up dust, and Angel licks his lips, absorbed in thought. Then he clicks the hammer down and pulls the gun back. "Actually, you know what? You're not worth the money this bullet costs. I still have an investment in you, after all." He turns to his homies. "Ain't that right, guys?"

Angel looks at Charles with an even wider, and crazier, smile. "It would be a *waste* to waste you, so instead, I'm gonna cut you a little deal. You help us with a job that we've been setting up to do, and then—*ONLY* then—will I consider the debt to be paid in full." He grips Charles' hair and yanks his head up, causing him to let out a painful yelp. "How 'bout it, gringo? Wanna make your time worth something, for once?"

With effort, Charles faces the gangster. "Y-yesss."

The thug releases a whoop and turns to his goons. “Ha HA! That’s what I like to hear!” He lets go of Charles’ hair, and his head thuds back to the desert ground. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I wanna hear. You’ve made a *very* smart choice, my friend.”

Without warning, Angel kicks Charles in the face—hard. Charles wakes up instantly and almost screams. A cold sweat covers his face as the nightmare fades. He gulps in between gasps of air, the sweat trickling down his brow.

It was all just a dream: a dream of a long-forgotten time.

Charles sighs in relief. Then he tugs at the cuffs that bind him to the radiator and groans, reminding himself of where he is now. He turns his head towards where he last saw Veronica; she’s comfortably asleep on the couch.

He breathes out another sigh and transfers his attention to his other arm. The device attached to it looks dormant. With mild curiosity, he lifts his arm so that he can touch the gadget with his fingers. He taps the screen once, twice and a few more times—fiddling with it, almost.

A second later, a faint glow emanates from the screen. The word “*Standby*” still shows, just as before. Still curious, Charles taps the screen again. This time, it changes to a different interface; *this* time, it has a numerical keypad and a code-entry bar with the words “*Admin Access*” displayed above it.

What the hell? Password protection? he asks himself. He taps on a number key, and it appears in the entry bar. A slight but determined smile forms on his face. He greedily taps on a few more numbers until the bar has all four digits accounted for.

A button pops up next to the entry bar with the word “*Confirm*” on it. Shaking a bit—and not knowing what to expect—he taps the button with caution. A message displays at once on the screen: “*Access Denied*”.

Then, breaking the tranquility of the night, the device emits a single, short and somewhat loud beep that makes Charles flinch. He instinctively looks back at Veronica, wondering if it might’ve woken her up. She’s still fast asleep, though—not moving at all.

Awash with relief, he focuses back on the device. *If I can just figure out this passcode.* He carefully tries again, this time with some common number patterns.

Charles almost feels like a hacker; trying to break into this device attached to his arm gives him hope, and a thrill. But every time he enters a code that he thinks will work, he's greeted with a failure message and that awful, loud beep.

Trying once again, he puts in yet another code. This time, however, he's greeted with a different message. For a split second, he thinks that maybe he's miraculously cracked the code, until he reads what's on the screen:

"Too many attempts. Lockout warning initiated. Further attempts will result in permanent shutdown."

It's hopeless. Frustrated and angry, he gives up. He sags back against the wall and looks away, lost in thought.

"Don't bother."

Charles nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of Veronica's soft voice. He whips his head around and sees her lying on the couch, relaxed.

"It's pointless," she mutters. "Even if you punched in the right code and escaped by jumping into the future, Mitchell would just track you down through his own device. They're linked up, or something."

Veronica rolls over on the couch, away from Charles. "Go back to sleep."

The convict wonders if he can even do that now; his heart is still pounding.

* * *

Meanwhile, back at the prison Charles has recently escaped from, an overhead light turns on inside one of the many dark and grungy interrogation rooms within the facility. It takes a second for Barney, the very recently fired and detained corrections officer, to look up at it while squinting in the blinding light.

A video camera on a tripod records his every movement, and Barney looks right into its lens, thinking about the number of times his colleagues have used it to record convicted criminals. He never gave it much thought before; he had no reason to. But this time is different. This time, *he's* the one in the hot seat, and nobody's going to save him now—certainly not the man who double-crossed him.

A pair of guards stand behind a one-way window, casually observing the distressed detainee.

“Dumb-ass didn't think he'd get caught, huh? He oughta known those lines were being tapped. Guess they didn't tell him when he signed up for the job,” cracks one of them.

The other guard smiles while rolling a toothpick in his mouth. “Yeah, no kiddin'. Did we ever find out who was on the other end?”

“Nah. They tried tracin' the number he called, but they couldn't triangulate it, or however that works.”

“Ah. Must've been using one of them burner phones, eh? Like those dope dealers on, uh, what's it called? ‘The Wire’?”

The first guard laughs. “Yeah, I've heard of that show. Never really seen it, just bits 'n' pieces.”

“Ah, well, my brother-in-law loves that show.” The second guard motions his thumb at Barney. “Too bad *this* guy didn't think to have a cellphone like that.”

“Yep. He's screwed, alright. They recorded him spilling his guts over the phone line. Way I see it, he's gonna be joining us in here pretty soon as an inmate instead of a guard.”

“Yeah, right—unless he's got some kinda fancy...”

The second guard looks past his partner's shoulder. His mouth slackens and the toothpick falls to the floor with a tap.

Understandably confused, his partner turns around.

“Lawyer, gentlemen?”

Coming into the light from the shadows is probably the slimiest-looking excuse of a human to ever grace their presence. His salt-and-pepper hair is slicked back, and his several-thousand-

dollar suit screams that he's made of money—money that he never earned *honestly*, anyway. He exudes the very essence of being a VIP. In his grip is a black briefcase, no doubt full of legal files for his client. The guards are about to ask who he is and who authorized him to be here, but they stop short when they see the pass-card hanging from his neck. "*Mayhue, Ronald*" reads the name on the card.

The slickest of grins forms on the man's mouth. "I'm here to speak with my client."

The guards glance at each other, unsure of what to do.

A moment passes and Barney nearly jumps out of his chair when a buzzing sound comes from the door into the room he's in. The door opens up with a creak, and the three men enter into the dimly lit area to face him.

Mayhue puts on a fake smile while reaching his hand out. "Ah! You must be Barney. We spoke on the phone. Pleasure. You're lucky I could make it out here at this ungodly hour."

Barney doesn't extend his hand in return. Instead, he looks up with concern in his eyes at the shrewd lawyer and opens his mouth, about to say something to him.

But Mayhue cuts him off and turns his attention back to the guards standing behind him. "Oh, gentlemen," he interrupts, "as per my profession, due to attorney-client privilege, I'm required to ask you both to kindly piss off."

While the lawyer makes a polite smile, the guards both stare at him, appalled. One of them then sighs in defeat and sluggishly moves back towards the exit. The other follows at once and closes the door with a loud clang.

Satisfied, Mayhue places his briefcase on the table and flicks the latches. He raises the lid with care and looks inside it before reaching his hand over to the video camera. Barney's neck hairs stand on end as he watches the man before him coolly fold the camera's side-door, ending the recording. Mayhue smirks, then pulls out the chair opposite him with a screech. The noise ricochets off the enclosed walls, and Barney flinches in discomfort.

Once seated, Mayhue collects himself and stares down Barney with an inviting smile.

Barney, nervous and a little scared, clears his throat. “I-I never spoke to any lawyer—certainly not you. I-I haven’t been given my phone call yet.”

Mayhue’s smile fades, and without saying a word he starts digging into his briefcase.

“Who... who are you?” asks Barney.

After gathering some papers, Mayhue returns his attention to the former guard. “I’m a very busy man with a long drive back to Vegas, and an even *longer* flight back to DC, so I’m going to make this quick. I’ll be asking you some questions, and you will be answering them. Understand?”

He slides one of the papers forward so that Barney can see it. It’s a mug-shot profile with some data on it. The picture in the corner shows a woman staring with a neutral expression into the camera. The profile name next to it reads “Berkley, Veronica”.

“Do you recognize this person?” Mayhue asks.

Barney glances down for a brief second at the photo. He looks back up at the visitor with suspicion before shaking his head.

Mayhue pulls the paper back and then slides the next one out. This picture shows a pudgy man with an almost cheeky smile. The name next to this one reads “Grayson, Mitchell”.

Barney’s eyes widen in horror.

“Do you recognize *this* person?”

Looking back up at Mayhue, Barney tries his hardest to contain himself.

“I’m here to help,” Mayhue says with a phony smile.

“Y-yes.”

“Yes *what?*”

“YES! I-I recognize him.”

For a brief moment, Barney contemplates whether or not he should’ve tried lying first. After all, he’s talking to a man who claims to be someone he *knows* he’s not, and who’s asking him about someone who got him to smuggle something to a prisoner.

Worst of all, that prisoner is gone without a trace. A sickening feeling grows in Barney's stomach as it dawns on him just how stupid he really is.

"I see," mumbles Mayhue, pulling the paper back towards himself. "Alright then, tell me: What do you *know* about this man? Did he *tell* you anything? Where he is? Was anyone with him? Any hints at all? Please be specific."

Barney doesn't want to answer. He doesn't even know which question to attempt first. Not that it would matter, since he knows absolutely nothing. Instead, he starts to shake and stutter from the fear this man is forcing him to feel. "I d-don't know anything a-about him," he stammers. "I didn't even know his real name. He just said to call him... Mr. Burling."

"Really," says an intrigued and suspicious Mayhue. "Mr. Burling" is the name of someone Mayhue knows from a while back and did business with—shady business, of course. Mitchell also knows this man, but for more sordid reasons. Mayhue can't help but be curious as to why Mitchell would choose *his* name of all people. "So, he didn't tell you anything at all?" he continues.

"When he a-approached me with what he wanted me to do, I almost called in the cops! B-but then, he told me h-how much money he would give me, and he even gave me half the cash up front! I nearly shit myself! It was more money than I'd ever seen in my whole life. Th-then he said there was more where that came from. All I had to do was s-smuggle in a box to some prisoner."

Mayhue raises his eyebrows in mild doubt.

"That's all I know, I swear!" finishes Barney. After a second, however, the gears turn in his head. "W-wait—wait! I've got his phone number. I can give it to—"

"No, no," says Mayhue, waving his hand. "There's no point. That number won't work anymore."

"L-look," explains Barney, "I swear, I thought this was just a c-case of smuggling in some, y'know, drugs or weapons for some prisoner. I d-didn't think it was a matter of national security."

The sweat starts to bead down Barney's oversized forehead. All he can do now is try and weasel his way out as best he can—by being useful and honest. "I mean, that's why you're here, right?" he asks. "You're like, FBI or CIA or whatever."

Mayhue responds with an empty stare, then smiles. "Yes—FBI, CIA or whatever." He puts the papers back in his briefcase. "I have two final questions for you, Barney. Do you actually know what it was you transported to the prisoner? I understand that it was a small box, correct?"

"Y-yes. But I don't know what was in it—was barely even allowed to t-touch the damn thing. But that's how he e-escaped, isn't it?"

"I see," says Mayhue as he collapses the briefcase lid. "Final question: Did this man seem... 'urgent' to you? Did he come off as anxious? In a hurry?"

Barney isn't sure how to answer the question. It's a strange one—one you wouldn't normally hear as part of an investigation. "Well, I mean, y-yeah?" he answers. "He was giving me contraband. W-wouldn't you be nervous, t-too?"

Mayhue sits eerily still while peering an eye at Barney. He smiles a bit more and gets up out of his chair with another screech. After locking the briefcase, he starts to walk back towards the door but stops short and turns around to face Barney. "Oh, one last question: Do you have a family?"

Barney's chest tightens. "A-a wife," he gulps. "And a daughter."

"Really? Ha! That's... rather interesting."

Barney remains frozen stiff, afraid to even ask exactly what he meant by that.

"You're a very lucky man. If I were you, I'd make sure our little conversation never leaves this room. Wouldn't want anything to happen to your family, now, would you? But maybe that's just me."

Mayhue smiles one last time at Barney and bangs on the door's metal casing. The buzzer sounds and he walks through, leaving

== Interrogation ==

behind a stunned Barney to wonder just who it was he was dealing with—and if his family is in danger.

Chapter Seven

Sunrise

Along the horizon, the night gives way to dawn. The sliver of sun shines across the land, hitting plants and rocks with a beautiful orange glow. The light barely makes its way into the window of the remote cabin, giving the inside of the living room the soft glow of daybreak.

Charles, mouth a bit agape, is snoring peacefully on the floor. But then a pair of jackboots marches along the wooden floor and comes to a stop in front of him. His pleasant snoring stops at once when a hand strikes him across the face.

Wide awake and disoriented, Charles looks up at the perpetrator.

“Oh, sorry,” says Veronica sarcastically. “I thought you were dead.”

“Goddammit, lady!” yells Charles, rubbing his cheek. “The hell’s your *problem*?”

Veronica doesn’t answer. Instead, she takes out a key and uncuffs Charles from the radiator, much to his surprise.

He gets up off the floor while massaging his sore wrist and giving Veronica a look of suspicion. A moment passes where the two lock eyes, their bodies mere inches from each other. Charles happens to notice that she’s no longer wearing her tactical outfit and is now sporting more casual wear, including a skin-tight shirt and baggy pants. He remarks to himself how much cuter she looks now.

Veronica suddenly shoves a heap of folded clothing into Charles' gut, almost knocking him back. Stunned, he checks out the items in his arms: a gray hoodie, a plain white tee, a pair of never-worn jeans, some generic white socks and, to his horror, a pair of "tighty-whities"—all of which still have their price tags and packaging. There's also something else in the heap: a consumer-grade buzz-cutter, still wrapped in plastic.

"Change outta your prison garb," orders Veronica, "an' get rid of that disgustin' hair, too—all of it."

Charles opens his mouth to protest the attitude she's giving him, but he knows that it would be hopeless. Besides, he'll be happy to no longer have to wear an outfit that screams "I'm the guy you're looking for!" Also, shaving off the ugly and itchy hair that covers his whole head will be a nice relief.

Looking down, Charles happens to see the dried blood on his hands. He forgot all about the bodily fluids that poured out of him back at the prison. He hadn't even thought about them during the night, since he couldn't see his hands that well; but in the morning light, they look rather damning—an ugly shade of red and black.

When she sees what Charles is looking at, Veronica points across the room. "Yeah, I got a bucket with some soap an' water. You can clean up your shit there."

He looks in the direction she's pointing and sighs. "Y-yeah, OK. Good. I, uh, wouldn't wanna be caught 'red-handed' like this." He then lets out a small, nervous laugh while avoiding eye contact with the imposing woman.

But Veronica just stares at him, emotionless.

Embarrassed, Charles clears his throat and looks around. "So, is there a place where I can change?" he asks innocently.

"You can change right fuckin' here, white-boy," Veronica states dryly.

"Wh—... Are you seriously gonna watch me change?! I don't want you seeing me naked!"

"Believe me," snorts Veronica smugly, "I ain't gonna be impressed or nothin', so you don't hafta worry 'bout *that*."

== Chapter Seven ==

Charles' cheeks redden and his eyes shift away. He grumbles a bit and begins to undress.

Meanwhile, in the crisp morning air outside the cabin, Mitchell admires the surrounding view from the dusty property. The scene is almost picturesque. The sunlight warms his face, the cup of coffee in his hands is nice and hot, and the peace and quiet of the environment is invigorating. He could actually get used to this.

A noisy front door breaks the silence, and Mitchell turns his head back towards the cabin. Out steps Charles, with Veronica following closely behind him.

The difference is striking. Instead of dirty orange prisoner attire, Charles now sports the stereotypical wear of a wannabe tech-guy from Silicon Valley. He even has new shoes. But the most conspicuous change is the peach-fuzz he has for hair—on both his face and his head. And his hands look much better and a lot less bloody, too. All in all, it's a massive improvement over the violent, savage appearance he had before.

Mitchell can't help but laugh. "Ha HA! There you are! Much better! You look, well, *civilized*."

Charles walks with care down the steps and right up to Mitchell. He notices the cup of coffee in his hand and remembers something from the night before. "I thought you said there wasn't any coffee."

"I'm a very good liar," says Mitchell nonchalantly. He takes a sip of the drink, not even bothering to look at the convict, who is giving him a perplexed stare.

"Well, c-can I have some?" Charles asks. "Is there any left?"

Mitchell extends his free hand and reveals a second cup of coffee—which he's had on him the whole time, as if he expected him to ask the obvious. As Charles hesitantly takes the cup, he wonders why he didn't see it beforehand. He shakes his head; it's too early in the day for this kind of crap.

"Try not to spill it," says Mitchell, focused on the sunrise.

Charles tries to ignore the condescending comment as he takes a sip and winces. Straight black, with little water. He remarks to

himself that even the coffee in prison was better than *this* swill. He takes another sip, eyeing Mitchell with intensity.

Mitchell is still enjoying the sunrise. "You must be pretty hungry. I hope you didn't actually eat that bucket of chicken."

Charles doesn't answer.

Mitchell takes a big gulp of his coffee and continues. "It's fine—we'll pick up something along the way."

Charles sips from his cup again, not bothering to acknowledge the comment. At this point Veronica walks up to the duo, while keeping her watchful eye on the convict in particular.

"How're you holding up?" Mitchell asks, seemingly earnest.

"What do *you* care?" replies Charles with mild disdain.

The sun rises higher above the horizon. Charles recalls that Mitchell said something about leaving at sunrise for DC—on board a private jet, no less. It won't be long before they have to leave, he figures.

He turns to Mitchell and struggles to come up with the right words to say. "So... why do you need me, anyway? You haven't told me how we're, y'know, supposed to save the world. What am I even supposed to do? I don't know crap about anything."

"Don't worry, you won't need to." Mitchell lifts his sleeve to show the device on his arm, then raises his eyebrows at it before rolling the sleeve back down. "We need to get going. Law enforcement will probably be sweeping this area soon, looking for you. I'm sure they've already subpoenaed the cellphone companies and have a general idea of where that phone call last night was made from. We can't be here when they arrive."

He dumps his coffee onto the ground, then tosses the cup while strolling towards the vehicle the three arrived in.

As Charles watches him walk off, a feeling of anger boils deep within him. He smashes his half-empty cup right into the ground, fuming. "HEY!" he shouts at Mitchell.

Alert, Veronica reaches for her holster, whereas Mitchell casually spins around to look at a rather pissed-off Charles.

== Chapter Seven ==

“Hold on!” bellows the convict. “I want answers! You want me to trust you, right? Then tell me. What the hell’s in DC, huh? Seriously, what do you want from me?! I mean, who *ARE* you people? Why do you have freakin’ time machine technology? What the hell happened in the future? And what was that black *thing* I saw, anyway? Give me some goddamn answers!”

Mitchell barely raises his eyebrows. He just doesn’t have time for this kind of nonsense. “You already got your answers—you’ll have some more once we get going.”

He opens the side door of the vehicle and holds it while staring down the agitated man.

The fugitive merely grits his teeth, and Veronica eases her grip on the holster.

“Charles,” says Mitchell in a lazy tone. “Don’t make Veronica drag you over here.”

Turning to Veronica, Charles sees her make a passive shrug at him. He shakes his head and with reluctance shuffles his feet towards the car.

* * *

Elsewhere, inside the private suite of a luxurious upscale Vegas hotel, Ronald Mayhue stands tall with a cup of fresh coffee in his grip while gazing out of his 39th-floor windows. The sun is starting to peek out from behind the distant hills, lighting up the clouds like flames. The beautiful view of downtown and the surrounding desert almost makes the extra hundred dollars a night seem worth it. Doesn’t matter much to Mayhue, though; he just got back from the long drive he took up north and hasn’t even bothered to get some shut-eye. He’s still wearing the same expensive suit that he interrogated Barney in.

As he sips some of his “Americano”-style coffee, Mayhue turns his thoughts from the enchanting desert to the task at hand. He eyes the overpriced smartphone that sits atop the glass table in his suite, then grabs it and brings up the contact number for a

person named Mark Tannehill. Placing the device to his ear, Mayhue stares out at the sun's captivating glow while the phone's internal ringing echoes softly throughout the room.

The dialing stops, and after a moment, the voice of a shady, gritty man makes its way into his ear. "Strange, I was just about to call you."

"Yes," Mayhue replies, "I've been known to have a sixth sense for that sort of thing."

The voice makes a laughing cough like one you would hear from a smoker. "It's funny—I had the phone right in my hands when you called. Almost couldn't believe it when your number popped up on screen."

Mayhue doesn't care much for the small talk; he wants what he called for. "Glad you're amused, Mark. I take it your contacts here in Nevada followed up on my potential lead?"

"Yeah, they did. You were right, too. There's a private jet, alright. Minimally passable, legally speaking, but it's enough for the bureaucrats, I guess. Took a bit of digging and a lot of back and forth between me and some idiot at the FAA, but I got a registered name, among other things."

The blood in Mayhue's body starts draining from his legs, giving a numbness to them. The anticipation is incredible. "What do you have?" he asks, barely containing his excitement.

"Well, the drift of it is, there's a private jet in Las Vegas, registered to a man who matches both the description and that photo profile you provided for me."

Mayhue is breathless; he almost can't believe it.

"The name isn't right, though."

"Th-that's to be expected," says Mayhue. "The man I'm looking for has eluded me for some time now, using false identification, as you know. It's made my job rather... difficult."

"Oh, I'm aware," coughs Tannehill. "Anyway, the jet doesn't seem to be registered to any 'Mitchell Grayson' at all, but instead to one 'Samuel Burling'."

== Chapter Seven ==

A tic of annoyance appears on Mayhue's face. It's that name again: the same one that Mitchell gave to Barney when he dealt with him. *That name should be buried in the past, where it belongs*, thinks Mayhue as he composes himself. "Th-that's fine, Mark. At least now we know what name he's been using for his transportation."

"Hmph, figured you'd say that. Anyway, the plane is just sitting there, for now. No personnel to speak of, either. According to the flight charters, it landed there a few weeks ago, and it looks like it's scheduled for takeoff sometime later today at the pilot's request."

"I-it is? Where's it heading?"

"Funny you ask—it's flying to DC."

Mayhue's grip on his phone tightens with each word. *Unbelievable*. He too is scheduled today for a flight back home to Washington.

He grits his teeth. It all seems too convenient—as if the cosmos is somehow finally intertwining the fate of the two, as if they're connected through destiny. After so much time and effort trying to find Mitchell and his cohort, Veronica, now Mayhue finally knows exactly where his targets will be today and, more importantly, where they will be going.

"H-how soon can you mobilize a team on the airport? If we strike quickly, we could have him eliminated right on the runway. In fact, we wouldn't even need a team—just a lone sniper would be more than enough—"

"Are you kidding me, Ron?" interrupts Tannehill. "No way. I don't have that kind of authority anywhere in the state of Nevada or at the federal level; neither do you, by the way."

Mayhue bites his tongue. He remembers just how much of a legal disadvantage he's at. There would be an uproar if an order was sent to perform an extrajudicial killing on a couple of "presumed" civilians. At the very least, there would certainly be an unwanted media circus. But most of all, if this all happened to drum up an investigation into who Mitchell Grayson really was,

after he was killed, it would point back to Mayhue—and he can't allow that, for it would be the end of him.

Then Tannehill hacks out a cough. "Look, buddy, the only way I can personally help you with this is if we use my own strike team here in DC. You said you wanted this done off the books, right? I'd say your best bet is to wait for him to get in the air and let me and my guys intercept him once he lands."

The gears spin in Mayhue's head and he unconsciously starts to bite his nails—a bad habit he has never really outgrown since his childhood.

"Ron? You still there?"

"Umm, yes. I think you're right; it's best to get him on touchdown. Besides, there's no telling what time today he'll be back at his jet, if at all—and, yes, I most *CERTAINLY* want this off the books."

Tannehill leans further back in his chair, making it creak. He breathes out a heavy, raspy sigh. "Y'know, Ron, I understand that you told me this is all classified, but I've gotten kinda curious: you're the head of counterterrorism at Homeland Security; why aren't you using your own resources for this?"

Mayhue lets out a small, frustrated sigh and shakes his head. "Because, Mark, this operation is unsanctioned. I can't use any of the agents under my command and I can't use any official intelligence for tracking or capturing him. As far as Homeland Security is concerned, these two don't actually exist. And, even *if* they did, they wouldn't be recognized as terrorists. The very fact that I'm telling you this man is alive, in itself is risky and dangerous—from a bureaucratic standpoint, anyway."

He begins to pace the length of his suite, along the windows. "I'm calling for your help because you're the only one I trust who has the resources and connections—and you owe me that favor from back when we were in the Gulf."

Tannehill chuckles a bit at his old war buddy's attitude. It feels like a lifetime ago, for both of them. He remembers fading in and out of consciousness while being dragged by Mayhue across the

== Chapter Seven ==

war-torn hillsides. He definitely recalls hearing the muffled explosions and the bullets whizzing by, and he also remembers the screams—not just of his dying comrades, but his own too.

The metal shrapnel still in Tannehill's knee starts acting up again at the thought, which makes him wince. "I know, Ron—I know. I was kinda hoping you would've forgotten all about that by now. Sure wish I could."

Mayhue smirks at his old friend's daftness. "I'll never forget those days, Mark. You got a Purple Heart instead of a three-volley salute, and I got a favor out of it. Seems like something you'd remember forever."

He can hear quiet grumbling on the other end.

"Fine," says Tannehill. "I won't ask questions, but I at least need some more intel on these two."

"Why? What for?" asks a surprised Mayhue.

"You've been hunting this Grayson guy for a while now, and you haven't caught him yet. You say your hands are tied and you can't actually do much to eliminate him."

"What are you getting at, Mark?"

"You've asked me to locate two so-called terrorists who aren't recognized by any agency. If I had to guess, I'd say this is actually a *personal* matter to you—am I right?"

Tannehill always *was* able to smell through the bullshit of any operation. He was never afraid to ask questions when he needed to, either—no matter how many toes he stepped on. Mayhue used to admire that about him, but right now it's coming across as arrogant.

"I just need to know what my task force would be getting themselves into, is all," says Tannehill.

"Alright, I suppose that's fair." Mayhue walks back to the chair at the table and leans forward, focusing his thoughts. "Are you aware of a break-in that happened a while back at one of our national data centers in Virginia?" he asks.

"No—should I be?"

Mayhue can hear some keyboard typing coming in across the phone. “I’d be surprised if you were, Mark, since it took place at a top-secret facility that falls under the jurisdiction of both the CIA and the NSA.”

The keyboard clicking stops. “Ah,” sighs Tannehill, “I guess that’s why you’d know and not me. Friggin’ red tape.”

“Exactly. Don’t bother looking up the incident—it never officially happened. The only reason I know about this is because of a tipoff I got from a friend that works there.”

“Oh yeah? Mind filling in your old war buddy on what happened?”

Mayhue starts to chuckle. “Same old Mark Tannehill—didn’t you just say that you wouldn’t ask questions?”

“Seriously, Ron?”

“I’m joking. It’s fine, Mark—just don’t tell anyone.”

After taking a long sip of his coffee, Mayhue clears his throat. “From what I heard, a security guard spotted someone inside the facility who wasn’t supposed to be there; apparently shots were fired. They had a full-on lockdown too, but the intruder was never located. They *claim* the person must have used a backdoor ingress of some kind, since none of the proper points of entry logged anything suspicious.”

“Excuse me?” Tannehill asks, flummoxed. “So this guy was able to get in and out of a highly secure area without detection, even after they had a lockdown? How is that even possible?”

Mayhue takes another sip of coffee, this time slightly burning the roof of his mouth by accident. “Well, I could tell ya, but then I’d have to kill ya.” He laughs as he puts down his cup. “Besides, you wouldn’t believe me even if I did; but that’s how I figured out it was him. Also, my buddy told me the only thing that was breached was a server access room that contained medical information on various people across the country.”

“Huh,” Tannehill grunts. “So he stole medical data—do you know what he was after, if anything?”

== Chapter Seven ==

“Sorry. I only have a suspicion, and I won’t bother you with that; you wouldn’t understand it, anyway.”

“Whatever you say, man. This guy must have one hell of a support network. He sounds like a goddamn spook.”

“That’s not even the half of it,” Mayhue says, gritting his teeth. “I presume you’re now aware of the prison break that happened in Nevada last night?”

A deafening pause follows. “You’re jokin’ me—that was *him* as well? I woke up this morning to see that junk on the news. He busted some prisoner out of death row?”

“Correct as always,” Mayhue says, his voice shaking a bit. “I just got back from that prison, too. I ‘interviewed’ the guard responsible for assisting in the escape. Found out Grayson and that traitorous bitch of his were behind the whole damn thing.”

Tannehill reels back in his chair, taking in all he’s just heard. He remembers it was only a week ago that Mayhue first called him up—asking him how things were going, how were the wife and kids, how was the career, and telling him that he needed his contacts to locate a target. Tannehill never would’ve imagined that his old comrade would point him towards a breach of highly classified data and a prison breakout.

“Jesus. Y’know, Ron, dealing with these two spooks is tricky enough, but throwing a highly sought-after fugitive into the mix makes this a different ballgame. How should my task force handle the new guy?”

“I fail to see how this would be an issue. He’s a wanted death row inmate. Handle him as you see fit. From what I understand, he won’t be missed.”

“Understood,” replies Tannehill. “One less thing for my team to worry about.”

Mayhue nods his head and smiles cunningly. “So... we’re on the same page now, I take it?”

“Yeah, sure,” mumbles Tannehill. “I’ll have my guy at the airport monitor that plane and keep me updated on it. What about you?”

“Ha, well, I’ve got a flight back to DC coming up pretty soon. I’ll call when I touch down.”

Tannehill coughs into the mic and then clears his throat. “OK, then. Safe travels and all that.”

“OK, Mark. Talk to you later.”

Mayhue almost terminates the call, but before he can, he hears Tannehill mumble something.

“Sorry, what was that?” asks Mayhue, pressing his ear to the speaker.

“Huh? Oh, nothing, I was just saying to myself that, well, I feel you’ve changed a lot over the years.”

Mayhue’s face tenses up.

“I mean, I know this ‘Grayson’ character has you worked up, but you seem different. Even when we were chatting about our families and jobs and all that shit, you seemed kinda distant and serious.”

“Is there a question, Mark?”

“Yeah, actually, there is. Ron, what happened to you?”

Mayhue breathes out his nose, hard. But instead of scowling or gritting his teeth, he smirks confidently, almost wishing Tannehill could see his face right now. “Times have changed, Mark. We’re fighting against terrorism and we must adapt. We have to do what we have to do.”

He then gets up out of his seat, coffee cup in hand. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a plane to catch.”

Without even so much as a farewell, he terminates the call, leaving Tannehill on the other end with a beep.

Mayhue knocks back the last of his lukewarm coffee and eyeballs the things in his suite that he needs to pack up—but not before admiring the beautiful sunrise in front of him one last time.

Chapter Eight

Cooperative

As the morning progresses, the sun shines down on Las Vegas. The city is already busy with setting up its trendy tourist activities for the day and well into the night. On one of the busy highways, however, a black SUV is roaring along towards downtown and dodging traffic as best it can, while also going *significantly* over the speed limit.

Inside the vehicle, Charles and Mitchell are sitting at the rear as Veronica—sporting sunglasses—drives the gas-guzzler with nerve-wracking skill and finesse, all while keeping an eye out for cops; needless to say, it’s not a good idea to get pulled over while harboring a highly sought-after individual in the back seat.

The radio has been on the whole time, dishing out news that keeps the three informed of what law enforcement is doing in its increasingly frustrating search for Charles.

“Turn that off,” Mitchell tells Veronica in a passive tone.

Veronica, in agreement, flicks off the radio dial.

In the back, Charles has been hunched against the car door, trying to scratch the itchy skin underneath the device that still has a lock on his left wrist. But no matter what he tries, he can’t seem to wedge his fingers in there. What’s worse is that it’s been bothering him all morning and it’s gotten to the point of anxiety-inducing annoyance.

“Sorry,” Mitchell says softly as he sees what Charles is trying to do, “that’s just something you’ll have to get used to, I’m afraid.”

Charles doesn’t listen. Instead, he tries harder.

“You asked me earlier about the... *thing* you saw back at the prison, yes?” asks Mitchell.

Taking his attention away from the itch, Charles darts his eyes to Mitchell with alertness.

“When you were there, in the future, I imagine you noticed that it wasn’t just people that were missing, right?”

“Yeah, I did notice. There wasn’t any, y’know, bushes or grass anywhere, and everything looked kinda like a wasteland.”

Mitchell sighs. “That’s because it *is* a wasteland. There’s nothing left *anywhere* in the world—just those vile, smelly black creatures.”

Charles starts to get goosebumps. He already figured that was the case—based on what he saw at the prison—but it’s still unnerving to hear it straight from the man with authority. “Then... what happened to everyone? What *are* those things, anyway?” he asks, staring intently at Mitchell.

Mitchell thinks for a bit, but finds himself at a loss for words. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t. They could be alien invaders, they could be the result of some diabolical experiment—golly, it may even be a satanic ritual, for all we know!”

The answer isn’t something Charles wants to hear—or *needs* to hear, either.

Mitchell looks down, almost as though he’s ashamed. “I don’t know what they are or where they came from, but I *do* know when they will show up.”

“You do? When?” inquires Charles, lighting up.

“Within the week,” Mitchell gulps.

Charles’ face goes white. “You shittin’ me?” he asks, absolutely floored.

“Fraid not,” Veronica chimes in.

Then Mitchell digs into his jacket and pulls out a baggie containing what seem to be printed-out photos. “I wasn’t kidding when I said we didn’t have time.”

After taking the pictures out of the bag, he hands them to Charles, who eyeballs them.

== Chapter Eight ==

“W-wait, were these taken in the future??” asks the convict, astonished by the snapshots in his hands.

“Look—don’t ask,” interrupts Mitchell as he points to various parts of the photos.

Charles checks again. He can make out shots of a building’s wall that seems to be covered with graffiti and debris. Everything looks gross and decayed and in a state of chaos. The writings on the wall are riddled with colorful messages ranging from “Fuck the police” all the way to a plea for help. One message even has detailed instructions from friends or family telling a person named Jacob to meet them somewhere—a safe area, no doubt. Charles has a lump in his throat, realizing full well that the idea of “safe” is simply non-existent given what he now knows about the future world.

He also notices that some of the writings on the wall have dates attached to them, likely written so that survivors would know how long ago a message was written specifically for them—in the hope that they would have enough time to reunite with loved ones. The dates all seem to center around the current year and the middle of September, with days varying by a week or two.

Looking further, Charles reads a few other messages, including one in particular that catches his eye: “*Europe under siege! Babylon is upon us!*” No doubt it was written by a lunatic. He gazes with fear at Mitchell, who plucks the photos away from his twitchy hands.

After tucking them back into his coat, Mitchell faces Charles with a more somber expression. “I’ve looked *everywhere* I could for more information, but almost everything’s destroyed in the future. You’ve seen it, right? The decay and destruction? You can’t exactly miss it.”

Mitchell taps his jacket where he put the pictures. “Those messages, along with some other evidence I found, are the only clues I have that *something* will happen this week. They’re also the only proof I have that there is *some* place in Europe that is, more or less, going to be ground zero for these creatures.”

Charles thinks for a moment, dumbstruck. “So, Europe, huh? I know this might be a dumb question, but... shouldn’t we be able to fight these things? Like, with tanks and predator drones and all that shit? I mean, as far as I can tell, they’re just big monster things, r-right?”

Mitchell looks flatly at Charles before turning his head out the car window, as if ignoring his question outright. “Look at all those people out there, Charles. Not a single one of them has any idea what’s coming. They’re all going about their daily lives like it’s just another day, never thinking that the world could stop so... *suddenly*. And why would they? They think they’re safe from everything—that any threat they might face could just be eliminated, if necessary.”

Charles raises his eyebrows at Mitchell and decides to look out his own window. All he sees, however, are regular people going about their day.

“These *things* are indestructible,” continues Mitchell. “They are unstoppable. Believe me, I have done *everything* to try and destroy even just *one* of them. Guns, explosives, chemical agents—I even tried flame-throwers once! Nothing. It all just passes right through them, as though they were made out of some kind of, I don’t know, tangible liquid.”

“Yeah? Did ya try nukes?” Veronica chimes in.

After letting out a chuckle at his friend’s playful question, Mitchell returns to his dead-serious demeanor. “I don’t think they can die. It’s as if their entire physiology defies nature itself. I’ve seen them slither along the tiniest of cracks. I’ve watched them plow through entire buildings, just to get to me.”

“S-seriously?” asks a nervous Charles.

As Mitchell has talked, Charles has become more alarmed. He almost came face-to-face with one of these creatures outside the prison, having no idea how powerful they were.

Mitchell sighs and looks down at his own clasped, trembling hands. “I won’t lie to you, Charles. If these creatures *do* eventually

== Chapter Eight ==

show up, then it's game over; I don't think there's anything we can do to stop them at that point."

Charles sits paralyzed with dread. At the cabin, Mitchell *did* mention to him that they were going to save the world, but he couldn't have imagined that they would have so little time, or would be going up against an outright impossible-to-kill enemy.

"Then... what do we do?" Charles asks, fearing what the answer might be. "How're we supposed to stop them?"

Before Mitchell can respond, however, Veronica breaks the tense atmosphere. "Alright, boys. We're here," she says.

Here? Where is here? Confused, Charles looks out the window and manages to catch glimpses of a gigantic airport tarmac as their vehicle drives along the road. Scanning between the roadside buildings, Charles can make out commercial airplanes taking off, landing and even taxiing on and off the runway. He also happens to catch a glimpse of some smaller planes parked near a few terminals.

Mitchell moves up right next to Charles and looks out the window with him. "My jet's, uh, *somewhere* around there," he says, pointing vaguely out the window.

Charles looks out to see the exact area he's pointing to, but he doesn't see anything noteworthy, just planes.

"You'll like it, Charles. It's nice and cozy, and I stocked up on some snacks and drinks ahead of landing in Vegas. Have you, um, ever flown on a private jet before?"

Charles glances at Mitchell with *heavy* sarcasm, then looks back out the window.

"Right—this'll be a treat for you, then."

The SUV weaves along the roadway to the private terminals, and after a few turns, they end up in a vacant area of one of the parking lots, well away from all the other cars.

"Here," says Mitchell, pointing to a spot.

Veronica skillfully angles the vehicle right into it, throws the gear into park and turns off the engine. In unison, all three then exit the vehicle.

The sunshine in the parking lot is making everything a tad too bright. Forced to squint, Charles finds that the silence inside the car has been replaced by the shrieking of distant jet engines and the sound of the wind itself. The other two open the hatch of the SUV and start to pull out the suitcases and other items they've brought with them.

As the breeze flows across Charles' fuzzy head, he gazes around. The tranquility washes over him, and a feeling of clarity and rejuvenation comes to him. It's been over 10 whole years since he last set foot on ground that wasn't inside a correctional facility. He's been locked up for so long that he's actually forgotten what it's like being out in a busy, bustling city. Even the ride through downtown felt strange to him, but he wasn't sure why until just now.

In the distance, he can see the jam-packed highways and the incredible show of novelty hotels, casinos and brightly lit splendor that make up "America's Playground". It all makes Charles feel very out of place. He's gotten so used to the dark, bland, horrid cell he called home for so long, that he can barely remember the days when he and his ex-wife, Gabby, walked around the Vegas Strip, taking in the sights for the first time.

Looking back at the airport, Charles eyes the barbed-wire fence down the way that separates the tarmac from the terminals. "So... private jet, huh? That's cool. You gotta be pretty loaded, right?" he says to Mitchell, who has just finished unloading the last bit of luggage.

"No, I'm just very good at getting what I want." Mitchell slams down the hatch of the car and looks over at Charles in confusion. "What're you doing?"

"Nothin'. Just lookin' around. It's just... been a while since I've been on the outside, y'know?" An awkward smile forms on Charles' mouth as Mitchell comes over to him, wondering what he's looking at. "Hey, uh, s'alright if I bum a cigarette of ya—if you got one? I've been pretty stressed 'bout everything."

== Chapter Eight ==

Mitchell assumes an almost comically blank expression, which he follows up with a cold stare into the sprung convict's eyes. "Smoking's bad for you, Charles," he says with a flat tone before walking back to the vehicle.

A hint of ire grows inside Charles as he grudgingly shuffles back to the vehicle. "Asshole," he mumbles to himself.

At that instant Veronica hands Mitchell a pistol, and Charles almost freezes at the sight of it. "Shoot him in the arm if he gets too difficult. We can always patch him up later," she mutters.

Mitchell chuckles at his friend's crude advice while tucking the firearm into his waistband. Charles, however, is alarmed by what he faintly caught and hopes that maybe he misheard her suggestion.

Stunning him even further, Veronica proceeds to throw the keys to the vehicle clean across the parking lot, after which she grabs the suitcases and turns to the men she's accompanying. "Alright, boys—I'll see you at the jet."

She starts to walk but gets interrupted by a confused Charles. "Wait, what is this? Why're we splitting up?"

Mitchell scoffs at him. "You don't *honestly* believe that I can get a wanted fugitive through a crowded airport, do you?"

"I don't know. Could you? You two probably got some, like, fake ID, right? Do you have one for me?"

Charles was asking in earnest, but Mitchell isn't amused. "I wouldn't have had time to have one made for you. Besides, you're all over the news, in case you didn't know. They even have computer-generated photos of what you would look like with different hair. I can't risk someone recognizing you—if only in passing. Veronica's the one who'll be going through the terminal, not us. I'll be escorting you to the plane, directly."

The statement doesn't make sense to Charles. How are they supposed to get to Mitchell's plane without going through the airport terminal? Jump the fence? He knows it's probably something obvious—something bureaucratic, maybe—but he

needs to know. “Uh, OK? Then how are we gonna get to your plane if we don’t go through the airport—”

As Charles asks the question, it dawns on him exactly what Mitchell meant—right as Mitchell raises his arm and points to the device attached to it, while smiling in an almost sympathetic manner.

Understandably, Charles freaks out and screams. “NO! NO!! Goddammit, no! NOT AGAIN!!” he shouts, pointing at Mitchell with aggression.

“You don’t get a say in this, Charles—I’m sorry.” Mitchell then taps around on his device, and the machine makes some strange sounds.

Right away Charles hears his own device making noises, so he looks down at his arm and lifts up his hoodie sleeve. The screen shows a bunch of technical jargon that he can’t, for the life of him, decipher; but he understands that Mitchell must now have control over his device.

Horrified, the convict looks up at the stern figure in front of him. “Don’t do this, man—please, I-I’m not ready for this.”

“Yeah?” Mitchell responds with frankness. “Too bad. We don’t have time to wait for you to grow a *spine*.”

At this point Veronica walks up to Mitchell’s side.

“I’ll see you on the jet,” he calmly says to her.

Charles is shaking. He’s remembered at once the time the device sent him to and from the future. No way in hell is he going through *that* horrific pain and suffering again.

He looks around in desperation, his mind racing about what to do. Behind him in the distance, he sees a highway where quite a number of cars are whizzing by. Irrationality and panic take over as he comes up with the ill-advised plan to make a break for it by somehow escaping his captors in the traffic.

While Charles is mentally pumping himself up for what he’s about to do, Veronica bids farewell to Mitchell. “Good luck and be careful. We haven’t got this place mapped out, so be on guard for—”

== Chapter Eight ==

Interrupting them, the convict makes a sudden mad dash in the direction of the highway. The adrenaline courses through his blood as he sprints like he's never sprinted before, determined to get away at top speed and leave the two in the dust.

Veronica and Mitchell stare blankly at the man they've kidnapped while he hauls ass away from them. Then they look at each other as if they both feel sorry for the ignorant half-wit.

Mitchell steps forward and shakes his head. "Ugh... idiot."

With his arm raised, he taps on the screen of his device just as Charles, still hoofing it, looks back to see what the two of them are doing. Unfortunately for him, he hasn't heard the soft noises coming from his own device.

A sudden blast of brilliant light and extreme turbulence engulfs the convict, who yells out in pain for a brief moment before the light and turbulence abruptly end. Still in motion, he trips all over himself while trying to find his footing on the slightly different terrain. It's all in vain, however, since he finds himself on an unavoidable collision course with a crooked metal pole that happens to be standing in his path.

Twang! Charles face-plants right into it and hits the ground with a thud, gripping his head in pain from the time-traveling journey he's just made. The intense ringing in his ears which he experienced previously has returned, and he rolls around on the ground, desperate for the pressure in his head to cease.

After what feels like forever, the ringing begins to fade and Charles slows down his rolling. He feels clarity and silence take over. It's just like before, back at the prison.

As he sits upright, he hears footsteps behind him. He twists around to see Mitchell, who seems perfectly fine, standing over him with a gaze of disapproval—and perhaps even pity.

To Charles' alarm, Mitchell pulls out the gun Veronica gave him and waves it around. "It gets easier the more times you do it. You build up a resistance," he says. He then sniffs the air and winces. "Can't say the same about the smells, though—ugh."

Making sure his hands are visible, Charles slowly gets up off the ground. Once on his feet, he bares his teeth and almost snarls at the man before him. “You... *fucking* ASSHOLE!!!” he bellows at the top of his lungs. His loud words echo out into the world and give it a vacant and lonely feeling.

Mitchell trembles a bit. “Use your inside voice, Charles. We’re not in Kansas anymore.”

In a delayed realization of where—or, to be more precise, *when*—he is, Charles looks around. Mitchell’s right. The parking lot they’re standing in is now dirty and decrepit. Black smears, decayed vehicles and faded, broken-down asphalt are the main things that remain.

The convict turns around to take a look at the highway he was making a run for. Debris and trash litter whole sections of the road, along with articles of clothing here and there. Parts of the highway are cracked or even crumbling outright. One side of the road is empty, whereas the lanes on the other side are jam-packed with what are clearly abandoned, unusable cars, as though people were trying to get out of town in a hurry.

He gazes upward and catches glimpses of lightning off in the distance, traveling between the brown-colored clouds that overcast the entire sky. The ominous, rumbling thunder from the faraway storm reaches the duo just as Charles looks over at the city’s hotels, buildings and other structures. Some of them are blown out, others are only a little damaged, and parts of the city, it seems, are eerily untouched. “My God,” he gasps, staring in amazement and horror.

The prison was nothing compared to this. Sure, the environment is similar, but for Charles, seeing the current state of the city makes it all feel truly apocalyptic.

“We have to get going now,” Mitchell says. “The sooner we’re out of here, the better. Oh, and try not to run away again, OK? It didn’t work last time, and it definitely won’t *this* time.”

Charles frowns at Mitchell, his anger back. “Screw you,” he says confidently. “You can’t make me go anywhere. That *bitch*

== Chapter Eight ==

isn't here to protect you, and you need me alive, don't you? So what's stopping me from bum-rushin' you right now?"

Mitchell seems unamused at the convict's poor logic, but he decides to humor him. "Well, I suppose I *could* just shoot you, like Veronica suggested, then jump back to our time and leave you here, stranded."

As he hears those words, Charles' confidence leaks out of him like water out of a faucet. *Is he bluffing?*

"Believe me, Charles—in this world, either you'll be killed within seconds, or you'll live long enough to die from dehydration." In a surprising move, Mitchell returns his gun to his jacket and stands in front of the alarmed captive. "But if you still want to attack me, fine, go right ahead. You'll be sealing your own fate, as well as that of billions of others."

He stands mere inches from Charles, who can't help but look away from his imposing figure.

"Listen, Charles, do you *really* believe this plan is a sure thing? 'Cause I got news for you: it's a long shot at best; there is *no* guarantee. When I had your device smuggled into the prison, I was fully aware that it was unlikely you'd be able to pull off your escape. You might ask the guards about the box. You could simply not go through with obeying my instructions. Or perhaps *Barney* could mess up somewhere in giving it to you. Trust me, I was *very* much prepared to give up. It's why I gave you a chance in the first place."

Trembling somewhat, the convict remembers his night at the cabin, when Mitchell said something similar to him.

"Charles, this whole mission rides on you being cooperative; and if you won't be, then we're *all* as good as dead." Mitchell stretches his arms out wide, as if daring Charles to try and take a swing, and continues, "So go ahead, do your worst—I already made peace with *my* creator a long time ago. And I'm certain you did, too, by the way, Mister Death Row Inmate. Come on."

Charles doesn't know what to do or say to him. Mitchell did come off as being a bit eccentric when he first met him, but he

didn't think he was a suicidal nut. The convict understands that his abductor is right, though. Nothing will come from attacking Mitchell; even if Charles won, he'd still be stuck in the future, with horrific monsters roaming around. After a few seconds of thought, he grudgingly relents in silence.

A smug Mitchell drops his arms and walks backwards, knowing he's won without throwing a single punch. "Yeah," he says with malice, then walks straight for the terminal.

Charles grits his teeth as he follows behind Mitchell, his pride and ego beaten by logic, facts and his own "renewed" survival instincts.

As the duo walk together across the large, spooky parking lot, the convict happens to catch a glimpse of the device stuck on his arm. Curiosity gets to him and he starts fiddling with the screen, tapping and rubbing it with his finger. It soon illuminates with a strange graphical interface displaying all sorts of information. One particular piece of data—the "*Destination Date*"—shows a very interesting value: "01/01/2035 – 00:00".

"January 1st, 20... 35?" Charles asks, bewildered.

Mitchell stops to peer back at the criminal, wondering why he isn't keeping up.

"Hey, dude," Charles says as he looks up from his device. "Back at the cabin, you said that I traveled about 20 years into the future. Is that what this is? The date?"

Mitchell wants to slap him for his obvious and pointless questions. "Oh, good. You can do basic math. Wonderful." Without skipping a beat, he U-turns back towards the terminal.

However, Charles decides to be more inquisitive. "OK, so here's a question: why 20 years? Why not, I dunno, 50? A hundred? Or maybe, y'know, use it to go into the past and—"

Mitchell cuts him off. "I didn't design these devices. I just know how to operate them. The destination can't be changed. I've tried; the 'administrative settings' are password-protected, and I'm not even sure if they work, to be honest."

== Chapter Eight ==

Charles is stunned by the candid answer. He recalls the events of last night, when he tried to crack that very passcode on his device. “OK,” he says, “this brings me to my next question: if you didn’t make these, then who *did*? Actually, y’know what? I wanna know just who the *fuck* you are. Where the hell did you get these things, anyway? How did you get—”

“You’ve picked a rather poor time to be asking questions, Charles. Think this can wait until after we get out of here?”

The criminal feels his anger rise once again, but he realizes that he’s not going to get what he wants, no matter how hard he whines. Also, he isn’t looking to get shot by an aggravated Mitchell. Figuring that it may in fact be better to ask him when they get to the plane, Charles opts to bite his tongue and wait until they get the hell out of this nightmare world.

As the duo finally arrive at the entrance to the airport, they observe the state it’s in. Broken glass and blown-out doors are all that remain of the sliding entrances, and the building itself shows signs of decay. Unfazed, Mitchell enters while taking care not to step on anything sharp or rusted, and Charles follows right behind.

Once inside, the convict sees more destruction and decay, rivaling what he saw outside. The lounge area looks as though a grenade went off in it, and more of those black smears he keeps seeing line the walls. The sections of the building that *had* amenities—such as a TV, a sports bar or even a day spa—have all been reduced to ruin. Certain components of the terminal have been ripped off, including sections of the roof and ceiling. Where that is the case, some outdoor light shines in and provides better illumination than in other areas.

Without meeting Mitchell, Charles would have figured that it was the police or the military who were responsible for all this chaos—same as for the blown-out walls and destroyed structures back at the prison. But he knows better now. It must be the work of the “creatures”, as his captor calls them.

“The exit’s on the other side,” says Mitchell, pointing down the way. “Be careful where you walk.”

Ahead, Charles spots what Mitchell is pointing to. It's a large open area where some light is shining in from outside. No doubt the airport tarmac lies just beyond.

Being careful not to step on anything that would cause medical intervention to be required, the two try to make their way to the other end of the terminal as speedily as they can.

"Have you been in here before?" asks Charles.

"No. Well, yes, back in the present—why?"

"I'm seein' something that looks really messed up," Charles says, pointing to his left.

Over to the side, in an adjacent area of the terminal and shining in the faint light, is a large pile of clothes on the floor of a corner area. Surrounding the pile are a variety of crude placards with desperate messages such as "*You can't keep us here!*" or "*Let us flee!*" and, most bizarrely, "*You don't own us!*"

Taking a few steps towards the pile, Charles steps on something and looks down. Tarnished-brass bullet casings litter the floor around him. He picks one up to inspect it, then limply drops it back down to his feet as he realizes what must have happened here.

Once at the pile, he bends down to grab an article of clothing that has caught his eye. It's a pink one-piece baby outfit similar to one he bought for his infant daughter a long time ago, except that one didn't have smears on it, or a large bullet hole blown through it. Distraught, he tosses the outfit aside.

Mitchell walks up and puts his hand on Charles' shoulder. "I imagine it got pretty nasty during the final days—hard to keep the peace in a situation like this."

He then lifts his hand off Charles and surveys all the tattered, bullet-riddled clothes. "And if you think *this* is bad, you should see some of the other stuff I've found over time. Genocide is a pretty good word to describe it."

Charles looks at Mitchell, concerned. "Yeah, but... why?"

Mitchell shrugs. "I found out the hard way that the creatures are attracted to life on this planet. I can only guess that the world

== Chapter Eight ==

governments must've come to the same conclusion I did, and dealt with the problem the only way they could think of."

"Oh," Charles mutters in a despondent tone.

"Awful, isn't it? But this is what we're fighting to prevent from becoming reality. In our time, this hasn't happened yet; we still have a chance. So let's get going, alright?"

But before the duo can turn around to head back to the exit, they smell something horribly foul, and the color drains from Mitchell's face. They both go deathly quiet at the realization of what that smell can only belong to.

After a second or two, they hear a faint noise somewhat like bubbling and sloshing, coming from right behind them. Wide-eyed with terror, Charles and Mitchell turn around to face whatever is making that unnatural sound.

Chapter Nine

Creatures

The terminal was silent but a moment ago, and now the two men whip around, desperate to see in the dim light whatever is making those freakish noises. Charles is on the verge of crapping his pants, and Mitchell isn't doing much better.

The frightened convict whispers in a panic, "MITCHELL?! Mitchell?! What am I hearing?!"

Keeping his composure and thinking fast, Mitchell reaches into one of his coat pockets and pulls out a handy flashlight. He clicks it on and shines the light all over the area in front of them in an effort to find the source of the sounds.

After a few sweeps, the flashlight illuminates something that seems to reflect the light back, like the watery reflection of a pool. As soon as he sees this, Mitchell aims the flashlight right back at it. Lying a dozen feet in front of the pair is something that doesn't belong—not just in the airport, but on this planet.

This "thing" is the size of a large house cat, but that's where the similarity ends. It looks and moves like a spiny, alien maggot, pulsating as it crawls across the floor. Its "skin" is pure black and has a glowing "veiny" texture that slowly changes across its surface, like the bottom of a swimming pool on a sunny day. The strangest part, however, is the lack of an obvious face or any appendages or features, apart from its shape-shifting skin.

None of this matters to Charles, however. He knows that this must be a "creature"; it can't be anything else. It's making him feel the same unnatural terror that he felt back at the prison.

== Chapter Nine ==

"It's fine," mutters Mitchell. "Just don't let it touch you."

Charles spins his head around to look at Mitchell with fright; he almost wants to ask him if he's crazy.

"Follow my lead," Mitchell whispers. "Move slowly and don't make a sound—and don't breathe in the fumes, if you can help it."

The convict is shaking badly, but he knows he has to do this, even though he sure as hell doesn't want to. Mitchell starts to navigate around the perimeter of the room, with extra care to keep his light square on the black, blobby mass. Charles follows right behind, trying his best to control his nerves.

With each step they take, the blob moves erratically—either towards or away from them and sometimes in a random direction, as though it were both blind and stupid. But at every unnecessary sound and every other step, the blob twitches in their direction while making a rather hostile noise. At the same time, Charles is having difficulty with his breathing due to the putrid stench coming off the damn thing.

After a few more steps, the light from Mitchell's flashlight abruptly leaves the creature. Charles almost has a heart attack, but then he sees that it's because Mitchell has just turned the corner. Charles tiptoes right behind him as they both watch their backs, waiting to see if the vile thing will decide to finally chase them down or do God knows what.

Once they're well away from the creature, the duo speed-walk in silence until they reach the outside at last. There, feeling as if he's been holding his breath forever, Charles takes a gulp of "fresher" air and bends over to recover. Between gasps, he gazes around and sees the tarmac and the main commercial airport. But it's all more of what he's come to expect. The tarmac is decayed and faded, with just a few large and small aircraft in varying condition still dotting the field. Meanwhile, the airport building looks as though a bomb went off that wiped out more than half the structure, revealing its inner layers.

Only a few areas remain roughly intact, and Charles then notices Mitchell headed towards the larger buildings further down.

He straightens at once and marches right up behind Mitchell in order to follow him to wherever it is he's going.

"What the hell... *ugh*... was that thing?!" the convict asks with difficulty.

"You know very well what that was," Mitchell replies, not even bothering to look at his rattled companion.

"Wait, that was a, uh, creature?" Charles' breath is returning.

"Yes, but I don't think I've ever seen one quite that small," says Mitchell as he glances back at where they've come from.

Charles is overwhelmed by a feeling of alarm upon a new realization. "Uh, wait—h-how big do these things get, anyway?" he asks, afraid of the answer.

Mitchell comes to a stop in front of one of the buildings, which happens to be a small airplane hangar, and looks right at Charles. "Well, I came across one not too long ago in New York City that was absolutely massive. Even if I *told* you how big it was, you wouldn't believe me, so I won't bother."

Stunned and a bit offended, the convict is about to ask him what he means. But before he gets a chance, he notices the structure they're in front of. The building seems still fairly intact, and the hangar doors have been left wide open. The ceiling has deteriorated and is letting in bits of light through various gaps. However, even in the faint light, Charles can tell that there's nothing inside—not even a broken-down airplane. The only noteworthy thing inside is the enclosed section at the back which was once meant for equipment storage.

Mitchell pokes his head into the wide opening and carefully looks around from one end to the other. Turning back to Charles, he gives him a half-hearted smile and assures him, "We'll be okay inside."

They both enter the hangar, and Charles looks all around him. Given what they just went through, he has every right to be concerned. "You sure it's safe around here? I mean, we just saw one of those things. Aren't there more around?"

== Chapter Nine ==

Mitchell turns to look at him and is about to speak, but Charles has a horrible realization.

“D-do they know that we’re here? Are they gonna come for us?!” he asks, panic in his voice.

Annoyed at his companion’s naive questions, Mitchell sighs and looks past him while pointing in the direction they’ve come from. “That *blob* we just saw? That would be what I call a ‘straggler’. You see, the big creatures have already come and gone. Most of them, as far as I know, aren’t even on the *continent* anymore. Some, however, stay behind and become somewhat... dormant. I don’t know why that *is*, and, frankly, I don’t *care*. Let’s just focus on getting back, alright?”

He turns to walk and leaves Charles behind but then stops only a few steps away. After a brief pause, he turns right back around and marches up to Charles. “Like I said earlier, these ‘creatures’ are inherently attracted to life forms. And since we are the only life forms left on the planet—yes, they know we are here and they *will* eventually come for us; it’s just a question of time. So let’s not be here when they show up, OK?” He continues to walk across the hangar’s barren floor.

Charles starts to feel lightheaded at the possibility of having to deal with more of them. “OK, so where exactly are we going, anyway?” he asks as he catches up to Mitchell.

“Inside that storage area,” Mitchell responds, pointing to the enclosed area at the back of the hangar. “It’s the only place where we can jump back to the present without compromising ourselves.”

Charles gives a snide glance towards Mitchell. “Really? A storage shed?” he says in disbelief.

“Hey, if you can think of a better place that’s close enough to my jet, I’m all ears.”

Flabbergasted, Charles asks the obvious. “Uhh, why not jump back right now? We’re here, aren’t we? And where’s your jet, anyway? I’m not seein’ it here, dude.”

Mitchell sighs again. He knew when he was planning to bust out Charles that he wouldn’t exactly be acquiring the brightest bulb

in an increasingly dim world, but this lack of understanding on the part of the former prisoner takes him aback somewhat. Walking out to the center of the hangar, he spreads his arms wide and moves them around in a circle. “Well, Charles, to answer your *second* question: my jet is right here—just not *here*. Catch my drift?”

It takes a few seconds for Charles to understand what Mitchell means, but then it clicks for him. He nods his head and looks away sheepishly, feeling kinda stupid that he didn’t figure that one out for himself.

“And as for your *first* question: if we jump back right now, we’ll be out in the open and some airport personnel might be here and spot us—and, more importantly, YOU. We don’t want to alert Homeland Security now, do we?”

Charles can’t argue with this logic. They’ve already come so far, and they seriously don’t need to return to the present only for some jackoff to recognize him from the news and sound the alarm. It seems that Mitchell has thought this through, including the possibility of facing something unexpected like that creature they saw earlier. He can only be thankful that Mitchell isn’t incompetent like he is.

At the other end of the hangar, they arrive at the storage section, which still has its faded “*Confined Space*” warnings and restriction markings. Looking at the size of it, however, Charles thinks there should be more than enough room for the two of them, even with all the stuff that may remain inside it.

Mitchell twists the knob on the door with ease, but the door is rusted shut. “Huh,” he mutters as he looks at the door frame.

Charles pushes him aside. “Here, I got it.” He twists the knob, smashes his body into the door and blasts it right open, almost toppling over in the process.

The area inside is dark and looks untouched—just very dusty and old. Various pieces of aeroplane equipment line the walls, the shelves and the floor in an orderly fashion. However, the space is

== Chapter Nine ==

also a bit cramped; there's barely enough room for both of them, let alone anyone else.

Cringing, Charles turns to Mitchell. "OK, so is this really the only place? What if somebody's already in here when we go back? How do we explain to them, 'Oh, hey! We just got back from the future. Turns out, everything's dead. Mind keeping this on the DL?' I mean, what if that happens? Please tell me you have a plan for that."

"No one's gonna be in here," replies Mitchell. "It's an enclosed environment. These doors are meant to be closed at all times, anyway. However, if someone *is* here when we get back, we'll have no choice but to kill them and leave the body here."

Charles is shocked at the blunt answer. "Wait—kill them? Are you serious? F-for real—"

"I don't need to hear that kind of talk from *YOU*, of all people," Mitchell says, loudly interrupting him.

The two lock eyes, and a tension forms between them.

Yeah, I guess he knows what I did, Charles says to himself before looking away from Mitchell. He's right—Mitchell's always right. After all, Charles is a man being searched for everywhere by everyone. It only makes sense that his captors will do what's necessary to keep him in their possession, given the effort and risk involved in stealing him away.

After briefly checking the inside of the storage room, Mitchell raises his arm with the device attached and hovers his hand over it. Right away, Charles feels his fear of time travel return to him. He gulps, panicked at the thought of the pain he's going to experience yet again.

"Well then, I'd say it's about time we finally got out of here, wouldn't you agree—"

But before Mitchell can finish his sentence, a monstrous bellowing noise comes from beyond the tarmac—way out in the distance, near the ruins of the main airport terminals. They both whip around to face in that direction.

"W-what the hell was that?" Charles asks, alarmed.

As they squint to get a better view, the pair see a large, billowing dust storm forming way out past the airport terminals. And it's getting closer to them—fast.

“Get inside—now,” Mitchell chillingly orders Charles.

“Wh-what—”

“I said get inside!”

Not needing to be told a third time, Charles dashes into the storage area as Mitchell walks backwards to join him. Mitchell then places his finger above the command button on his device in order to send them both back to their natural time period. Before he can press it, however, a loud, rippling shock wave rattles the two men.

They stare out in a daze to see that the main airport building has collapsed to the ground and that something utterly massive is emerging from within its debris, clawing and crawling as it does. Even more frightening, and also coming out of the newly demolished area, is a swath of creatures much like the one Charles saw at the prison—only this time, they are a bit bigger, and a hell of a lot faster.

Shocked and horrified, Charles sees dozens of—maybe even a hundred—creatures of varying shapes and sizes, racing right for them.

Their bodies change and converge like a blend between something solid and liquid, as though existing in a state between the two. Some of them crawl along the ground at a wicked speed, tearing up the asphalt with each grasp of the ground; others sprint like a cheetah or even slither like a snake. And some seem to have far-reaching and interconnected tentacles, rolling over themselves along the ground like misshapen, spongy tumbleweeds. But most eerily of all, Charles can identify human- or animal-like features here and there, in between the transformations of their bodies.

The howls, screeches and unidentifiable sounds made by the creatures shake Charles to his core, and the terror he felt before, both at the prison and at the terminal, returns in force. “Mitchell! Let's go!” he says in a desperate panic.

== Chapter Nine ==

But Mitchell doesn't respond. Charles, confused by his actions—or lack thereof—observes the man's wide-eyed terror and how the hand he has positioned above the device is shaking badly.

As the creatures approach ever faster, one of the larger ones runs straight into a decrepit jet plane still on the runway. Instead of slowing the monster down, however, the jet gets pulverized and is sent into the air, after which it tumbles across the tarmac and is torn apart, while the creature seems utterly unfazed by what it just hit.

Charles can only watch in amazement and horror. “MITCHELL!!!” he screams at his companion.

As if fresh out of a trance, Mitchell snaps his eyes down towards his device and immediately presses the button on the display, just as some of the faster and larger creatures bolt into the hangar, blowing off parts of the ceiling and collapsing the walls inward.

The devices attached to the two emit a synchronized sound—and not a moment too soon. The last thing Charles sees, right before the light and turbulence engulf him, is the alien, featureless “face” of a creature as it desperately lunges for him from many feet away at an alarming speed.

But in that brief moment, Charles *swears* that he can hear the screams of a woman emanating from inside the creature; and, most unnerving of all, the voice sounds strangely familiar.

Chapter Ten

Mysterious

The light and turbulence have faded away. All around Mitchell and Charles is nothing now but a near-silent, pitch-black void. It's so dark inside the storage area at this point that you can't even see your own hand in front of your face. Charles is struggling with the shock from the time-jump and tries unsuccessfully to maintain his balance.

Mitchell, who feels fine from the journey, suddenly hears the distinct sound of shelves and other metallic equipment crashing to the ground right next to him. From his coat, he pulls out his handy pocket flashlight from before, clicks it on and shines it near the ground—right into Charles' wincing face.

The first thing Charles realizes is how surprised he is at the lack of pain he's experiencing now compared to on the previous jumps, but he is still struggling with some of the effects of time travel and instinctively grips his head to cover his ears in the hope that the ringing will go away fast.

"Don't cover your ears—your body needs to adapt to the shock."

Charles has barely heard what Mitchell said, due to the deafening sound, but it doesn't matter now; the ringing has gone silent at last.

When he sees his partner in some difficulty, Mitchell reaches out a hand to help him off the toppled shelves and the mess that he created. In an open act of defiance, however, Charles ignores the hand-up and instead lifts himself off the collapsed equipment with

great effort. Mitchell just shakes his head and focuses on the door in front of them.

With the flashlight pointed down at the door knob, he unlocks it and then twists it before pushing open the door with care to get a peek beyond. As he does, the light and noise from outside make their way into the hangar's storage room.

The difference in the hangar is incredible. Whereas before there was apocalyptic ruin, decay and horrifying monsters hot on their tails, now there's sunshine, airplanes and signs of life. But also, a few yards away, is a lone private jet just sitting there, waiting for them.

Mitchell looks all over the hangar. There appears to be nobody else around. He smiles to himself, opens the door wider to let in some light and then turns to Charles. "See? We're here. That wasn't so bad now, was it?"

Charles, however—who is very pale and looks quite traumatized—turns around and, without saying a word, vomits right onto the floor of the storage area.

"Eww," Mitchell dryly comments and walks towards the plane.

Charles, however, wipes his mouth and runs up to Mitchell, all of a sudden gripping his sleeve. "What the hell was all that?!" he yells.

Stunned, Mitchell replies in the only way he can. "What was... what?"

"YOU! I saw you freeze up. They nearly got us. What the hell happened to you back there?"

Without taking his eyes off Charles, Mitchell swipes Charles' hand away from his coat sleeve. "Do you understand *now*? Why we're doing this? What we're fighting for?" he asks staunchly. "That trip should've been a serious learning experience for you. What you went through, I've had to go through many times before. Not very fun, is it?"

Charles stares in bewilderment at Mitchell, who then walks up to the plane and proceeds to hold down a button on the side of the

fuselage. As he does, the door of the aircraft opens and slowly unfolds into a staircase before them.

“How... how many times have you been to the future?” Charles asks, seemingly concerned for his abductor. “How long have you been doing this?”

Before Mitchell can answer, though, Charles looks towards the outside and sees some kind of airport worker wearing a uniform and a radio enter the hangar and approach them.

Seeing the whites of Charles’ eyes, Mitchell turns to check what he’s staring at and realizes that they may be about to face a serious problem. “Just let me do the talking,” he mutters to the nervous convict.

As the man walks up to the duo, however, it becomes obvious who he is: a private jet serviceman—and a fat one, at that. But that doesn’t really matter to Mitchell. What matters is that he isn’t airport security, TSA, police or anyone with any authority—just an employee whose sole purpose is to make sure that the owner of the private jet is happy before taking off.

Mitchell breathes out a small sigh of relief and smiles, while Charles, desperate to do what he can so that he isn’t so recognizable, pulls his hoodie’s hood over his head in a pale attempt at disguising himself.

“Hi there,” says the overweight serviceman, looking at his clipboard. “You’re already here, huh? You must be, uh, Mr. Burling.”

Mr. Burling? wonders Charles, his gaze shifting to Mitchell in confusion.

“I sure am,” says Mitchell in a chummy manner. “I take it you’re here to do pre-flight checks and such?”

“Yep. Your jet’s all set up and cleared with the FAA, so you’re good to go at your earliest convenience.”

Mitchell laughs. “Ah, excellent. We’re still waiting for my friend Sarah. She should be here soon, and then we’ll head out.”

Sarah?!

"Sounds great. Is your luggage all packed, or do you need assistance with—"

"No, no, that's fine," interrupts Mitchell. "Sarah will be bringing it to us when she gets here. But thank you for the offer."

"Ha ha, I wasn't the one offering; it's an extra service. Anyway, I'll do my checks and then get your plane towed out to the runway once you're ready to head out."

"How delightful!" remarks Mitchell.

At this point the serviceman looks at Charles. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," he says.

His heart almost leaping into his throat, Charles does his best to contain his fear as his mind races about what he should say.

"Oh, sorry, this here is Jacob," Mitchell interjects. "He's a friend of the family. He's also mute."

The serviceman looks back at Mitchell, and Charles silently thanks God that his companion is more on the ball than he is.

"He's also mildly retarded," adds Mitchell.

Now it's Charles' turn to shift his gaze. He wishes he could punch Mitchell for that unnecessary bit of false commentary. But instead, he continues to remain silent.

"Oh, I see. Sorry to hear that," says the serviceman. "I've got a disabled son, so I know how tough that must be for y'all."

"I'm sure you do," quips Mitchell, clearly wanting this chit-chat to be over. He then grabs the railing of the staircase. "We'll be heading out soon. You have yourself a great day," he says insincerely.

Charles and Mitchell start to climb the stairs while the serviceman gives a thumbs-up to the both of them. With his paranoia acting up again, Charles keeps his eye on him for a second and wonders if there's a chance that the lowly airport employee has recognized him from the news. However, as the serviceman continues to walk along the perimeter of the jet, it becomes apparent that he doesn't seem to know—or care, perhaps—about the fugitive hiding in plain sight.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Charles quickly climbs up the staircase to join Mitchell aboard his private plane. As he enters the fuselage, he gazes around inside. The interior is swanky and pristine, as to expected with a multi-million-dollar toy. The cabin features a number of fine leather seats with drink holders and media controls built into them, along with a table stand off to the side, and there are even a couple of flat-screen TVs.

The convict takes it all in, like a kid walking into a candy store for the first time. He's never been inside anything so luxurious and classy before. It almost makes him feel like a VIP, instead of some wretched nobody who was shitting into a toilet right next to where he slept not even a day ago.

Mitchell, meanwhile, treats the plane as if taking it for granted and plops right down into one of the seats, seemingly exhausted. "Oof, what a day—my knees are murdering me," he whines in a soft voice.

Charles gives him a condescending stare, thinking to himself that they didn't walk *that* far.

Mitchell then peers up at him while gesturing his hand to the empty seat in front of him. "Help yourself to a seat, Charles. The scary part of the mission's over—for now, anyway."

Charles sits down reluctantly and caresses the fine leather underneath his fingers. He could get used to this kind of treatment, were it not for the horrid circumstances that have forced him to be on board this jet in the first place.

"Are you alright?" asks Mitchell with a hint of sarcasm. "You've been through a lot today. It's horrifying, isn't it?"

Charles doesn't respond; instead, he shifts his gaze down to the floor, frowning.

"I must say, you're taking this much better than I did when I first encountered the monsters," says Mitchell, relaxed. "It's fine, though—don't worry, you'll get used to it soon enough."

"You mean like *you* did when you froze up back there?" Charles says, his eyes not leaving the floor.

Briefly looking away, Mitchell clears his throat a little, unwilling to make a retort to Charles' snide comment. But then, a moment later, he glances back at the convict only to find him glaring right at him.

"Who's Sarah? And who's Mr. Burling? I thought your last name was Grayson," says Charles as he decides it's time for another inquiry into the mysterious man who kidnapped him. "How many aliases you guys got, huh? Is your name even *really* Mitchell?"

"You're mistaken," replies Mitchell, smirking. "I can assure you my real name is, in fact, Mitchell Grayson."

"Oh, yeah? I'm not buyin' it," blurts out Charles. "Y'know, I've been doin' some thinkin'—"

"Oh, no—not that," Mitchell cheekily interjects.

Trying to ignore his disdainful remark, Charles continues. "B-back at the cabin, you said that the CIA and FBI—and whoever the fuck else—didn't know of your existence. Which means, I'm guessing, that if I were to ask them who Mitchell Grayson is, right now, they would just stare at me, wouldn't they?"

Mitchell doesn't respond but instead merely twiddles his thumbs and taps his foot on floor.

Charles presses further. "If Mitchell really *was* your real name—the one you were BORN with—they would have to have *something* on you, right? Like, uh, school records, or the DMV, or a birth certificate."

Mitchell continues to stare blankly at the wannabe detective, not saying even a word.

"Y'know what? I'm through with this bullshit," Charles steams. "I wanna know who you are and who that Veronica chick is—which, by the way, what is her *deal* with me?! It's like she hates my guts, or something."

"You're a convicted felon. The entire state of Nevada hates your guts," says Mitchell half-heartedly.

"Screw that! She's got, like, a personal grudge against me or something," responds Charles, fuming. "And screw you for

throwing *that* in my face! I did what I had to do in order to—” He cuts himself off, feelings of shame and embarrassment washing over him.

Charles then looks at Mitchell with an expression of anger and self-pity. “I have had *nothing* but crap happen to me ever since I moved out of my parents’ house. I’ve tried to make it in this world. I’ve tried to make something of myself. But all I ever get in the end is either a ‘no’ or a ‘fuck you’. And you think the way she and YOU have been treating me—the way society has been treating me—is somehow *justified*?!”

Mitchell raises his eyebrows at Charles’ loud voice but remains cold and apparently indifferent to him, even when tears start to well up in the poor convict’s eyes.

Charles sputters as he continues. “I’ve lost *everything* I’ve ever had, just trying to survive in this shithole of a world. I’ll never get to see my daughter again, I have no home or family to go to, my *bitch* of a wife was the one that threw me in prison in the first place, and now, thanks to you, I think I’m going crazy! I’m supposed to help you save the world from monsters and shit?! Me?! That’s rich! You know what, Mitchell? I don’t owe this world a goddamn thing—it owes *me*!”

Calming down a bit, Charles looks back out the window in pain. “At the very least, it owes me a goddamn apology.” The pressure and stress finally get to him, and he weeps a little while trying to cover his face in order to hide his tears.

A moment of silence passes as Mitchell tries to find the right words. “Is this all true?” he asks in a soft voice.

“Wh— of course it’s true!” barks Charles. “Do I look like someone who’s had a good fuckin’ life to you?!”

Mitchell calmly raises his hands at the enraged convict. “OK, OK. Don’t shoot the messenger—I was just asking.” He then rubs his face, thinking of what to say. “Look, I’m sorry the world’s been cruel to you, but there was a reason you went to prison and there’s a reason Veronica dislikes you.”

Charles frowns in anger. That's not something he needs to hear right now. But before he can say anything back, Mitchell continues.

"Listen, Veronica has personal reasons for treating you the way she does. Don't blame her too much; she has her own demons, even more than what you've got. I'll have a talk with her when she gets here."

His anger subsiding, Charles starts to feel a little better. He's never talked with anyone about what he's gone through before, but it also makes him sad to think that he's never really had anyone to speak to in confidence in the first place, until now. "So, where is she, anyway?" he asks, discreetly wiping away some tears. "We were gone for a while—shouldn't she have already been here by now?"

Flabbergasted, Mitchell scoffs at him. "Well, Charles," he answers, almost chuckling, "I *imagine* she's still in the parking lot where we left her. Do you not understand how fourth-dimensional time travel works?"

"No. They must've skipped time travel in my high school physics class," Charles sarcastically replies.

Mitchell rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on. Haven't you seen *Back to the Future*? The third one—where Doc tells Marty he's not 'thinking fourth-dimensionally'?"

"Uh, no. Never seen those movies."

Mitchell snorts and tosses a hand in the air. "Never seen *Doctor Who*, never seen *Back to the Future*—golly, the *real* crime here is how uncultured you are."

Charles doesn't appreciate Mitchell making fun of his lack of pop culture references and of him being a criminal, but he decides not to say anything in reply.

"Well, anyway," Mitchell continues, "simply put, when we went to the future, we arrived at a specific time—January of the year '2035', if you recall. But when we returned, we came back to the *exact* time when we had left. Time did not pass here *at all*

while we were gone. It's like we never even left! Amazing, isn't it?"

"I... guess?"

"Indeed," says Mitchell, almost excited, "that's exactly what these machines are programmed to do. Actually, there's more to it than that." He lifts up the sleeve on his left arm, looks at his device and points to it. "You see, these devices are technically meant for traveling through *space-time*, not just time itself. They're pre-configured to transport you not *only* to a specific time, but also to a specific location relative to where you are in space. With me so far?"

Charles shakes his head in disagreement while staring at Mitchell as if he's some kind of "evangelist" for these devices.

"Well, trust me. It's a good thing that they're configured this way," grumbles Mitchell. "If they weren't, we would just fly off into outer space whenever we wanted to travel through time. Earth won't be at this *exact* location in space 20 years from now, after all."

Mitchell then taps on his device so that it "wakes up". After a few more taps here and there, the screen displays something that appears to be an information page containing data such as hardware and software version numbers and the like.

"The Trans-dimensional Operations Device—or TOD for short—'Mark I'—*Alpha prototype*,'" says Mitchell, reading off the screen. "That's the more or less 'official' name for my device. Yours is the '*Beta*' version. Yours looks nicer than mine, in my opinion, and it has additional functionality built in, too."

Charles lifts up the sleeve on his hoodie and stares down at his own device before looking back up at Mitchell with suspicion. "You know, for a guy who says he didn't build these things, you sure know a lot about them and how they work, don't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose—is there a point to your question?" asks Mitchell as he rolls back down the sleeve of his coat.

"So... what? Are you, like, a KGB spy? A scientist? A government agent? Some kind of high-ranking official in a secret

== Chapter Ten ==

society that has crazy-ass technology? A Martian? Come on, man, who are you, really? Tell me.”

Mitchell ponders his answer for a second. “Would you believe me if I told you I was a tax accountant?”

Charles stares at Mitchell, almost dumbfounded. He leans back as far as he can in his seat and shakes his head disappointment. “You’re just not gonna give me a straight answer, are you? Stupid waste of time,” he mutters.

Lifting up his arm once again, Mitchell pulls back the sleeve to show Charles his device. “I had to pay a *massive* price for this thing, yours too. And the worst part is that I never wanted to pay it to begin with. I never had a choice.”

“See, what the hell does that even mean?” Charles blurts out. “What—did you buy them from some black market? Where did you get these things?”

Mitchell begins to open his mouth, but then his face goes pale. He looks away from Charles, who can tell that he may have just asked him a traumatic question without realizing it.

Once more, Mitchell pulls the sleeve over his wrist and looks over at Charles in angst, surprising him a bit. He’s never seen the man look so distressed before. It almost feels wrong.

“I know you have questions, Charles, but it’s not something I want to talk about, nor is it something you need to know.”

Moving his device-laden arm up to his chest as if hugging it, Mitchell trembles a little and gazes, absent-minded, at the flooring between the two. “I doubt you would’ve noticed, but I’ve been through *hell* these last couple years of my life. You think you’ve had it rough? You think the world has been mean and nasty to you?” He lifts his gaze to meet Charles’ with a fiery intensity. “You have absolutely *no idea* what it’s done to me.” Then he looks out his window, despondent. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

Mitchell’s glare from before resonates in Charles’ mind. It only makes him more curious about the mysterious man he’s sharing a private jet with—and, strangely enough, makes him feel sorry for

him, too. He wants to ask more, but he gets the nagging feeling that his captor won't budge.

All of a sudden, Mitchell rises out of his seat and starts to walk up the aisle to the cockpit. "I'm going to get this jet ready for departure. Let me know when Veronica arrives, OK?"

As Mitchell leaves, Charles nods his head without saying a word. Still reeling, he then puts his hands on his face and sighs deeply. Way too much has happened in the past hour or so; and the only thing that got accomplished—apart from deceiving airport security—was making him realize that he has way more questions than answers now about everything, and especially about Mitchell, and those creatures.

A shudder moves down Charles' spine at the very thought of the monsters. The more he reflects on those alien abominations, the less they make sense. But beyond all that, what makes him the most frustrated is not knowing who Mitchell and Veronica actually are. That, in itself, is a mystery. *Tax accountant? Does he really think I'm dumb enough to believe that line of crap?*

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Charles looks back out the window, curious as to when the other member of the trio will finally show up. "I wonder what *she* knows," he mutters.

He turns his attention back to his arm and, just like before in the car, fruitlessly tries to wiggle his finger underneath his device so that he can scratch that damn itch.

Chapter Eleven

Ghost

The gloomy, overcast sky hovers above a quaint suburb south of Washington, DC. It's a quiet, upscale neighborhood with lush, well-attended lawns, large "all-American" houses and trees that overhang the streets. The place feels as if it has never left the '50s, despite the remodeling and the upgrades over the decades.

This wonderful area features great schools, great neighbors and great middle-class living. All of its residents earn government money as either employees or contractors, so it's only natural that they want their homes and neighbors to be patriotic—or, at least, *appear* to be. Every house has Ol' Glory waving in the wind, but due to the expected showers, most of the residents have started putting their flags away.

One such family, living in one of the larger houses, has managed to do just that before anyone else. Inside this particular residence is an example of modern-day American greatness mixed with American nostalgia for "the good old days". The home is perfect both inside and out—a direct result of the home-styling skills of the housewife, Susan.

Susan has been sitting on the family-room sofa, watching TV, for the better part of the day, and she's noticed that her teenage daughter, Celeste, has been banging around upstairs. Susan considers getting up to see what on earth she's doing up there, but instead she decides to watch the end of the news segment about the escaped death row inmate from Nevada.

I hope they get him soon. Can't have a sicko like that running around, thinks Susan, clutching her pearl necklace.

Meanwhile, just as rain starts to drizzle outside, a luxury black sedan pulls into the driveway next to the soccer-mom van that belongs to Susan. Out steps Ronald Mayhue in a suit and overcoat. He's glad to be back home, but still angry about his predicament with regard to Mitchell and the two others. "Fuckin' rain, again," he mutters, gritting his teeth.

When she hears the car door slam, Susan turns her attention away from the TV and smiles, knowing who it might be. Mayhue walks to the front of the house and grabs the door handle, but his lovely wife is the one who opens it first.

"Welcome back, honey!" she says to her husband, who's damp from the rain.

"Welcome back, indeed," he says, smiling, as they embrace.

"How was Nevada?" asks Susan.

"Oh, dry and miserable," replies Mayhue humorously. "Is Celeste around, or did she run off to go play with her friends?"

"She's upstairs—doing Lord knows what."

"Ah."

After shutting the door behind him, Mayhue walks into his cozy home. As he removes and puts away his coat and suit jacket, Celeste tromps down the stairs and greets her father.

"Daddy!" she says to him, smiling.

Mayhue takes a look at his teenaged daughter as she trots over to him. Celeste just turned 15 a few weeks ago and had an awesome birthday party with her friends. Since hitting puberty she's grown quite a lot, much to his dismay. He wishes she could be "Daddy's little girl" forever, but he understands that time inevitably goes on for everyone. And he knows that, sooner or later, she'll be more interested in boys than in her own loving father.

While she brushes her long, flowing brown hair to the side, Celeste darts her eyes all over her father. "Didja get me anything?" she asks innocently.

“Celeste!” interjects her mother.

Mayhue can’t help but giggle a bit at his daughter’s assertiveness; she’s a real chip off the old block. “Hey, sweetie! How’ve you been? I brought something for you,” he says, reaching into his pocket.

“I hope you got me a gift card,” says Celeste. “I wanna download some songs.”

Like a deer caught in headlights, Mayhue pauses for a moment, his hand still in the pocket. With a smile, he then pulls out a toy of some sort. “Uh, well, not quite. It’s a cowgirl doll,” he says and shows the toy to his daughter. “Got it at the gift shop where I was staying. I saw it and thought of you.”

Susan is touched by her husband’s sweetness, but Celeste takes the doll and looks at it with a raised eyebrow.

“Geez, Dad, don’tcha think I’m a little too old for dolls?” she says, trying to smile a little. “I mean, thanks for getting me this. It looks... okay, I guess.”

“Glad you like it, then.”

Celeste looks at the doll awkwardly before beaming again. “Oh, hey! Daddy, is it okay if I go see Naomi later? We were gonna go to the park and practice.”

“Ha ha—sure, kiddo. Just be safe, OK?”

“I know, I know; I love you too, Daddy!” she says, abruptly taking her doll and racing into the kitchen down the way.

Susan shakes her head at her daughter’s behavior. “That is one spoiled teenager we are raising. First it’s gift cards, next it’ll be cash and cars.”

Mayhue grabs her by the hips and leans in to smooch her forehead. “I know. But, hey, we can afford it.”

Following her husband’s cue, Susan leans into him, her head resting on his shoulder. “Oh!” she pipes up. “We were just about to sit down for lunch. If you want, I can make you some of what we’re having.”

Mayhue laughs a little. “Oh, no, that’s fine. I had some grub on the plane. Besides, I need to get back to the office, right away.”

Susan's smile fades as she hears this.

"Sorry," he says quietly.

After breaking away from him, Susan crosses her arms and looks into his eyes with sadness. "Dammit, Ron, why do you always have to work? Can't the government just give you a breather with your family every once in a while? Is that *too much* to ask?"

Mayhue shakes his head, aware of her frustration. "Not in my line of work," he says, rubbing his wife's shoulders. "Lots of terrorists and bad guys out there—it's a never-ending battle. But hey, it pays for this lovely house so my lovely wife and lovely daughter can have the lovely life they deserve."

Susan smirks at her husband's wordplay. "Yeah, but still..."

In a spontaneous gesture, Mayhue leans in again, this time to softly kiss his saddened wife. "I'll be upstairs if you need me—I gotta make a phone call before I go."

"OK, honey."

As her husband ascends the stairs, he winks at her and she blows a kiss towards him. After he reaches the top, he goes into his home office and closes the door, making sure to lock it.

To say that Mayhue's office is a "mess" would be about right. But it's *his* mess, and he likes it just the way it is. Lining the bookshelf on the side wall is a plethora of government articles, training manuals, and even political tell-alls by Washington insiders and pundits alike. The desk in front of him is cluttered with stacks of documents on wars and targets of interest—but nothing classified, of course.

There's also his laptop, containing encrypted government access keys so he can connect to work from home for certain tasks if need be. He hasn't used it in a while, however—not much reason to lately. And, naturally, sitting on the desk corner is a framed picture of him and his family, from when they vacationed in Hawaii a few years ago.

After moving to his desk and sitting down in the chair, Mayhue opens one of the drawers and pulls out a cheap flip-phone that

looks as though it's been there for a while. There's a sticky-note attached to it that reads: "*ASSHOLE—SINGLE USE ONLY*".

He rips off the note and turns it over, revealing a phone number. Then he sighs and opens the phone reluctantly, waits for it to start up and dials the number that was written down.

Elsewhere, inside a very large and luxurious house, an old, obese, balding man named Robert Hershaw sits in his recliner, stunned by the news that he's seeing on the television. He grips the remote tightly in his sausage fingers, hoping to hear that the prisoner and whoever helped him escape have been caught.

Hershaw's death-stare at the TV is suddenly broken by the distinct sound of his smartphone vibrating on the table next to him. As he mutes the news with the remote, he grabs his phone and squints at the screen.

"Unknown Number"

Normally, Hershaw would just let these kinds of calls go to voicemail, but given what he's seen on the news, he can take a wild guess at who's calling him. "Hello?" he says after tapping his phone.

On the other end, Mayhue sighs again. "Yeah—it's me."

In a display of agility, Hershaw leaps out of his comfy recliner and immediately starts to pace the floor. "This line had better be a goddamn secure one."

Mayhue rolls his eyes. "You think I'm ignorant, or something? I'm on a burner. No one's listening, and I'll destroy it after we're done talking. There's no need to be paranoid, Mr. Secretary."

Hershaw almost fumes.

"Or rather," adds Mayhue, "I should say *former* Mr. Secretary."

"Don't you *DARE* start that crap with me!" booms Hershaw. "You've got a lot of nerve contacting me again, after all I did for you!"

Mayhue isn't interested in hashing it out; he just wants to get down to why he's calling. "Have you heard what's been happening? About the escaped prisoner in Nevada?" he asks.

“How could I not?! It’s all over the fucking news! I missed out on my Sunday-morning shows, for Christ’s sake!”

Mayhue rolls his eyes again, this time even more. “Sorry to hear that, sir, but I think we have more *important* things to discuss.”

“It was him, wasn’t it?” blurts out Hershaw, slightly scared.

A hush falls between the two. They both know what he means by that.

“Yeah, it was Grayson, alright.” Mayhue says quietly. “I talked with the guard he managed to trick at the prison; he got him to smuggle in a package to give to the prisoner. You only get one guess to figure out what was in it.”

The former secretary starts to rub his face in distress. He knows exactly what Mayhue is referring to. “Yeah, I know. That prisoner couldn’t have escaped without it otherwise. The media’s treating him like he’s fuckin’ Jimmy Hoffa, or Houdini—this ‘Charles Wilson’ piece of shit, whoever the fuck he is! Why him?!”

“Well, as I’m sure you’ve been made aware, there was a major security breach at one of our national data centers here in Virginia.”

“You mean the one several weeks ago? The eggheads only told me that some health care information was compromised. What does *that* have to do with this?”

Mayhue leans back in to his chair, trying to find the best way to communicate the correlation to the arrogant blowhard. “Do you recall a while back when I told you that, uh, only a very select group of people could time-travel safely—due to their genetic disposition?”

Hershaw *does* seem to remember hearing the details from him about a breakthrough he had made with the devices, including a perceived limitation with their usage.

Mayhue continues, “It seems Mister Grayson was finally able to find someone who can utilize the ‘beta’ prototype, and it looks like it was this prisoner.”

“Well, what good’ll that do? Is he tryin’ a start an army? With only two people?”

“That’s the only part of the puzzle I *can’t* figure out. It doesn’t make any sense for him to give someone else that device, and especially not someone who’s a hardened criminal. I’m guessing the only way to find out *why* is to either monitor him or ask him ourselves.”

“Christ,” mutters Hershaw, breathing into the speaker of his phone.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter, either way,” Mayhue assures him. “Thanks to his little ‘prison break’, we now at least know he’s in Nevada. That’s miles better than what I had before.”

Turning his head, Mayhue glimpses a picture on the wall of him and his family when they all took a trip to Vegas. “It’s funny, isn’t it?” he smirks. “After all this time of being hidden and on the run, he decides to show his face in the one part of the country where I’d never expect to find him again.”

“I fail to see the humor in this!” Hershaw states bluntly.

Mayhue leans forward in his chair. “Listen, I have a guy with contacts and informants in Nevada. They’ve already tracked Mr. Grayson’s jet to Las Vegas. Hopefully, once he’s in the air, they’ll be able to intercept the jet on landing and have him delivered to me on a goddamn platter.”

“I’m sorry, are we still talking about the same guy?” says a dumbstruck Hershaw. “The same guy that can travel through fuckin’ time? You’ve been trying to kill him for nearly a year now! He’s practically a ghost! What makes you think now is going to be any different, just because we know where he is?”

Mayhue smiles. He only ever smiles like that when he’s had a brainstorm, or when he feels he’s about to beat someone at their own game. “We know his location, Mr. Secretary, because he’s getting sloppy, and desperate. He’s exposed himself and thrown caution to the wind; he’s obviously fighting against the clock—and I think you know *why* just as well as I do.”

A silence falls between them as Mayhue puts the pieces together in his head about Mitchell's strange behavior. "Do you... do you remember when I told you about Mr. Grayson? About... his claims? From when we first—"

"Bullshit," interrupts Hershaw. "You said he was raving and screaming like a madman. You told me he was put in confinement because of it."

"Yeah—well, now I'm wondering if it really *was* a side effect of the experiments, or if he actually *did* see something when he was sent into the distant future."

There's a sudden knock on Mayhue's office door. He almost jumps out of his seat upon hearing it.

"Sweetie? Are you still on the phone?" asks his wife, her voice slightly muffled.

Mayhue winces. "God, bitch," he mutters under his breath. "Yeah, honey, I'm still on the phone," he says gently, turning to the door. As he waits for his wife's answer, he makes sure to cover the mouthpiece of the phone with his hand.

"Oh, OK, I'm taking Celeste to her friend's house and I'm gonna do some shopping. We'll be back later tonight, alright?"

"Yeah—yep, OK," Mayhue stammers. Then he waits until he can hear his wife going back down the stairs. "Ugh," he grunts as he puts the phone back up to his ear.

"That your *wife* I heard?" asks Hershaw.

"Y-yeah," Mayhue replies sheepishly.

"You're lucky to have a smokin' hot babe like her, unlike the fat, stupid cunt I'm stuck with. Your family owes me a lot. If it wasn't for me and the strings I pulled, you'd have seen the other side of a firing squad for what you've done."

Mayhue clenches his fist. He only wanted to inform Hershaw of what's been happening with Mitchell, not take a trip down the follies of his past—especially since the man he's talking to isn't much of a saint himself.

"I don't have any moral qualms over my leadership of the project, Mr. Hershaw," he retorts. "I was only elected to be its

director; if I recall, *you* were the one who approached *me* and had me take over, at the recommendation of the Pentagon. You have just as much blood on your hands as I do—”

“WHAT?!” screams Hershaw. “Fuck you! You know damn well I had *nothing* to do with the project itself! That was YOUR job! All I did was provide the funding!”

“No, Robert, listen—”

“NO! You listen to *me*, shit-breath! I turned a blind eye to that goddamn concentration camp you were running, and I even feigned ignorance when the Senate committee was crawling up my ass about the dark money spent, but I will NOT be held responsible for YOUR fuck-ups! Understand? I already paid the price by being forced to resign over it—or did you forget?!”

A brief pause ensues as Mayhue grits his teeth, trying to come up with something to make this jerk just as afraid as he is. “Well, sir, it doesn’t really *matter* if you think you’re at fault or not. I don’t know what Mitchell’s doing with this prisoner, but his end game is most likely the same as it’s always been: he’ll try to find me—and probably you too.”

A loud, unexpected belly laugh comes right into Mayhue’s ear via the speaker. He looks at his phone in disgust.

“He doesn’t have any idea that I had responsibility in that project,” says Hershaw defiantly. “No one does, except you. All information pertaining to that project was destroyed and classified, remember?”

Mayhue would most certainly know. After all, he’s the one who ordered the project to be shut down and wiped.

Hershaw goes on, “If he knew I was the one that supplied the dark money for that project, I’d be dead already. Hell, I’d be in prison right now for Defence spending violations, if the Inspector General ever found out about it!”

Mayhue finds himself bitterly agreeing with the old gasbag. If Congress ever got wind of the project and what it pertained to, they’d both be done for—regardless of Mitchell trying to hunt them down or not.

Noticing that he's not getting any pushback from his former partner, Hershaw continues, "Besides, it's **YOUR** head he wants more than anyone else's, right? He remembers **YOU** and what **YOU** did to him. This isn't my concern; it's *yours*. You said he's getting desperate, right? If I was you—and I'm *real* fuckin' glad I'm not—I'd go into hiding, fast."

The very thought of having to flee shakes Mayhue out of his silence. "S-sir, I have a wife and daughter. I can't just up and—"

"Oh, really? Why not? You've made plenty of people 'disappear' before, so why not try it out on your own family? Go ahead, tell them they need to start packing and tell them why! Tell them it's **YOUR** fault!"

Mayhue can feel his blood pressure rise at the increasing volume of Hershaw's voice. White-hot anger begins to boil inside him as the older man keeps yelling.

"Do you remember when you found out that he was still alive and you told me about it?! I nearly shat my thousand-dollar suit! That's the feeling I want your wife and daughter to have when you go and tell them that their lives are over!"

"Robert, how dare you—"

"No! This conversation's over. This is *your* mess, Mayhue—clean it up."

Simmering with rage, Mayhue struggles to come up with what to say to the pompous asshole on the other end.

"Don't ever call this number again," Hershaw says before tapping the button on his smartphone to end the call.

Ronald Mayhue's office goes eerily quiet, as if someone just died and everyone around has become frozen stiff from the event. Doing his best to control his rage, Mayhue removes the phone's battery and snaps the phone at its spine. With a heavy sigh, he then walks over to the door of his office, opens it and tosses the broken plastic into the waste bin nearby before walking out with a feeling of defeat and a burned ego.

* * *

Meanwhile, inside Mitchell's jet back at the airport in Vegas, Charles is pacing up and down the aisle of the cabin, more and more anxious to leave Nevada. He looks out from the open door of the plane yet again, wondering where the hell that Veronica "bitch" is.

The cockpit door opens without warning, and Mitchell spots Charles. "She's not here yet?" he asks.

The convict shakes his head. He's feeling worse now about Veronica's absence, given that Mitchell also looks concerned as to why she hasn't already arrived.

After walking to the plane's door, Mitchell glances out and sighs. "Oh, there she is," he suddenly says.

The two spot Veronica out near the entrance of the hangar as she walks to the jet, dragging a few roller suitcases along with her. Lighthearted as ever, Mitchell smiles at her while waving. Veronica, in kind, smiles back. And Charles, relieved that there won't be more problems, goes back to his seat. He can't wait to finally get out of this desert he's called home for way too long.

Veronica makes it to the top of the stairs, lugging those heavy suitcases. The display is a little unsettling for Charles, who is reminded of how much of an "Amazonian princess" vibe she projects.

"Ha ha. Glad you could make it," Mitchell tells Veronica with his charming sarcasm.

"Glad y'all aren't dead yet," she says, equally sarcastic, while embracing Mitchell in a friendly hug.

As the two get all buddy-buddy with each other, Charles grunts like a sourpuss and looks away. Veronica then pushes a button on the inside of the aircraft which magically raises the stairs, sealing the plane from the outside.

"I was starting to get worried," Mitchell says in a now quieter voice.

"I could say the same thing," replies Veronica in between stuffing suitcases into the overhead bins. "I was afraid y'all wouldn't be here."

Meanwhile, Charles is glaring at the two, his arms folded as he slouches in his seat with his hoodie up.

Veronica catches a glimpse of him giving her the stink-eye. "What's with him?" she asks.

"He's had a long day. Go easy on him," says Mitchell softly.

"Oh, by the way," Veronica tells Mitchell while loading the suitcases, "I saw a police mock-up of *him* on one of the TV screens back at the terminal; it looked just like he does right now, an' they're asking the public for assistance."

Having stashed the last of the suitcases, she slams the overhead bins shut and glances at Charles, who in turn glares at her with menace.

Veronica then turns back to Mitchell. "Is this really gonna be worth it, Mitch? Paintin' a target on our backs an' havin' to deal with a dickhead like him?"

Mitchell sighs. "Well, we won't know for sure until we get there, will we?"

They both gaze at the convict in their care with a look that concerned parents would give to a child they felt was being a burden to them. Charles turns away to look back out the window without even acknowledging them.

"So, what took you so long?" Mitchell asks Veronica. "I was afraid that your ID was compromised or the flight plans weren't authorized."

"Oh, that," she replies, chuckling. "Just some computer glitch; don't worry, wasn't a big deal."

She starts walking to a seat but is stopped by Mitchell, who has grabbed her jacket sleeve.

"Were you followed?" he mutters to her.

Charles barely hears Mitchell's question, but its tone sparks a curious look from the convict.

“N-no,” Veronica answers, also very quietly. “If I were, I think we’d all be screwed about now, right?”

Mitchell then lets go of her sleeve, not particularly satisfied with her response. And Charles goes back to looking out the window, unsure as to whether or not he should care about their conversation.

“Please tell me your trip was less eventful than mine,” Veronica says, exhausted.

Mitchell lowers his head as Veronica goes to sit in her seat. “This area isn’t as safe as I thought it was,” he states. “We encountered a straggler when we went through the terminal. Luckily, it wasn’t really ‘aware’ of us and we managed to slip past it to the hangar. But I’m pretty sure it’s what was responsible for summoning the horde.”

Veronica’s eyes widen. “*Horde??*”

“Oh, right, how could I forget,” says Mitchell, rolling his eyes. “There were a large number of them near the outskirts across the tarmac. One of them burst out of the central building and demolished it. God, it was enormous, one of the biggest I’ve seen. They were all tearing across the airstrip, just to get to us—it was quite a sight. They almost got us, too.”

Veronica sits dumbfounded at what he has said.

All of a sudden Charles sits upright and points at Mitchell. “Yeah, only because *this guy* froze up when we saw ‘em!”

“You... froze up? Again?” Veronica asks Mitchell.

Glaring at Charles, Mitchell wishes he’d told him earlier not to speak out of turn.

“Jesus, man,” Veronica says. “Y’know, every time ya tell me the stuff that happens with you over there, part of me has trouble believin’ ya; it’s beyond frightenin’.”

“Well, you’re preaching to the choir,” Mitchell says solemnly.

“I know, I know. It’s just, I can’t imagine what it’s like to be there, with everythin’ bein’ gone, an’ ya hafta watch your back all the time because some eldritch horror might be two seconds from

killin' yo ass—an' you have no way of defendin' yourself from it, neither. I mean, that shit's *scary*."

"You're lucky," Charles mutters.

Mitchell doesn't really blame him for how he's acting. That brief journey into the future—and the horrors within—have taken a big mental toll on the both of them.

"Heh. You boys look like you could use a drink," says Veronica.

"Oh, I'd *love* to drown myself in booze right about now, but someone has to fly this thing," Mitchell responds humorously.

That last bit catches Charles' attention. He's puzzled as to why Mitchell is flying the plane, and not some for-hire pilot or even Veronica. She looks like she could fly a plane—certainly more than some guy who claims to be a "tax accountant".

"Speaking of which, Charles..."

Breaking his stare, Charles turns his attention back to Mitchell.

"If you open that compartment by the table, there's a *lovely* selection of fine wines, spirits, liquor and other beverages."

Intrigued, Charles locates the cabinet and yanks it open. Mitchell wasn't kidding; the selection is expensive and classy. He eyes a small, fancy bottle of vodka and snatches it.

"We also have some cheap beer and other swill, if that's more your thing," continues Mitchell.

Charles can't tell if Mitchell is trying to insult him or not, and he honestly doesn't care. It's been a long time since he was last allowed to have some booze to drink, and he needs the buzz now more than ever.

"There's some glasses and ice underneath th—"

But before Mitchell can finish, Charles twists off the cap and guzzles the bottle like a greedy newborn on the tit—all while looking at the other man straight in the eye as Veronica shakes her head in disgust.

Mitchell seems a bit stunned by Charles' outrageous behavior. "OK, then," he says flatly, not wanting to bother with the convict anymore for the time being.

== Chapter Eleven ==

He suddenly hears some radio chatter coming from the cockpit. "Ah, perfect timing," he remarks, walking back.

Almost amused, Veronica continues to stare at Charles as he chugs down on the vodka bottle. She'd be impressed, but she already knows he's gonna be barfing that back up soon. "Bathroom's at the back, just so ya know," she says to him.

Charles doesn't react; he just keeps slurping the sauce.

Coming out of the cockpit, Mitchell takes a look at the two, as well as at everything else on the plane. "Alright, strap in, you two; we're getting out of here."

Good. Finally, Charles tells himself.

Mitchell re-enters the cockpit, and after a few moments, Charles hears the shrieking startup of the jet engines and then feels the tug of the plane being towed out of the hangar by one of those airport tractors. Once on the tarmac, the private jet thrusts forward along the path to the runway.

As Charles looks out the window and sees all the workers and the other planes moving around, he can't help but get a feeling of giddiness. It's been so long since he was last on an airplane that he's forgotten how exhilarating it is. For the most part, however, he feels a tinge of happiness at the prospect of being able to leave this godforsaken desert at last; he isn't exactly going to miss it here.

After finally lining up the jet with the runway, Mitchell guns the thrust. The engines roar to a deafening level, and before he knows it, Charles is up in the air. He looks out the window and gazes down at Las Vegas one final time as a faint smile forms on his weary face.

Meanwhile, back inside the airport terminal that Veronica left before joining the other two, an unassuming man in street clothes observes Mitchell's jet fly off into the sky. Then he pulls out his phone and dials a number. "Yeah, his plane just took off. I guess that means my job's done, right?"

On the other end, Mark Tannehill coughs heavily into the microphone. “Yeah, I’ll have your fee wired to you. Did you happen to make a positive ID on the three targets?”

“Well, I saw the woman, but the other two had already managed to board by the time she arrived. I have no idea how they got past without me seeing them, but either way, the jet’s in the air now.”

“Good.”

The line goes dead with a click, and the man puts his phone back in his pocket while turning towards the exit.

Chapter Twelve

Family

Inside a ritzy mega-home west of The Hamptons on Long Island sits an almost obese man watching the news on his huge television set. The unassuming man, Stanley Richmond, looks to be of retirement age and is probably thankful to still have a full head of hair. He's sporting his casual Sunday-morning wear and hoped to catch a bit of his favorite talk show before going to eat. But instead, he finds himself obsessively watching a broadcast of the East Coast morning news—having been informed by the police many hours earlier of today's top story.

“Breaking News: A nationwide manhunt is now officially underway for Charles Rudolf Wilson, the escaped inmate from the Nevada area...”

The program echoes along the walls of the living room, and poor Stanley clasps his sausage fingers to his mouth while gazing in mesmerized horror at a mug shot of his former son-in-law on the screen.

The whole house suddenly echoes with the sound of the doorbell being rung. Breaking eye contact with the news report, Stanley looks towards the front door as a sense of anxiety overcomes him; he has a pretty good idea of who might be visiting at this late-morning hour. He gets up, waddles out to the home's foyer and, without even bothering to look out the window to see who's there, unlocks the door and opens it.

Shocked but certainly not surprised, Stanley comes face to face with Gabby, his estranged daughter. With her healthy figure and

fake blonde hair, she has changed a lot since her ex-husband finally got locked up for good. She's no longer a trashy-looking sleazebag with a drug addiction, like she was back when she was with him in Nevada. Instead, she's since gone through rehab, at her parents' expense, and even managed to get a place of her own in Manhattan—not without having to work multiple grueling jobs for the privilege, however.

Stanley looks into the tired eyes of his little girl. He can tell she was crying all night, no doubt from the news they've all heard about Charles.

"G-Gabrielle! I thought you were going to call first. H-how are you? Are you okay?"

Gabby just stands there, unresponsive.

"I take it you've seen the news?" Stanley timidly asks his frowning daughter.

Gabby barely looks at her father and, her arms folded, shoulders past him into the house without saying a word. As she steps inside, she observes the grandeur of the mansion that belongs to her wealthy parents. A giant chandelier dangles from the second story, and a grand staircase rises from the entrance. The house has six bedrooms and six bathrooms, which is far too much for an old, retired couple, but they've repurposed those spare rooms for other uses, such as a computer room, a guest room and God knows what else.

The kitchen down the hall is large and almost like a commercial version, accompanied by a matching dining room with near-exquisite decor. And, of course, at the other end of the house is the living room, which has been transformed from a family room into a man-cave for Stanley, complete with a home bar and a big-screen TV. All in all, the materials and design of the whole house are decent, given the quality and price of the estate. It makes Gabby *really* envious whenever she compares it to her drafty, freezing, overpriced studio back in Manhattan.

"Are you hungry?" asks Stanley as he closes the front door. "We were just about to have brunch."

Gabby instinctively wants to tell him no, but the growling in her stomach forces her to rethink. The only thing she's had today was a pot of coffee. "Yeah, OK—what're you having?" she asks, half-caring.

Stanley beams, happy that his daughter has said something courteous to him instead of the usual menacing looks and hostile attitude she's given him over the years. "Um, we're having eggs Benedict. It's really well done, too—you'll love how the chef made them; he whipped up the hollandaise sauce himself!"

Gabby forgets nearly every time she comes over. Her parents really *are* rich; of course they have a personal chef. Hell, she grew up in this house and they almost always had a chef cooking dinner for her and her family. They could afford it, after all. In fact, they could afford most of what they wanted. It's these nice, enjoyable things that make Gabby miss living with her parents.

However, their lifestyle has also made her bitter and resentful, given her current financial state. But she knows that every time she comes here, she can at least indulge a little in their luxury. "Yeah, eggs sound good—sure," she says.

The two make their way to the dining room, where Gabby at once locks eyes with her mother, who's casually sitting at the table, texting away on her smartphone. Debra is an arrogant, entitled woman who has not aged with grace, despite the vulgar amounts of makeup she uses to suggest otherwise. Like her daughter, she enjoys the "peroxide blonde" look; but also, like her husband, she has been enjoying the good life and, as a result, has packed on the pounds like him. She's wearing an expensive-looking knee-length black dress and is covered head-to-toe in jewelry—some of it elegant, some of it off-putting. No doubt, this is a woman who dresses to impress any day of the week, despite her age and size telling her she should have thrown in the towel already.

Debra interrupts her furious texting and gets up from her chair to bark at her daughter. "There you are! Why didn't you respond to my texts?! Didn't you get them?? I must've sent a dozen! And now

you show up out of the blue an hour later?? What the hell is WRONG with you?! I was just about to call the police and have them make sure you didn't get kidnapped, or worse!"

Before the hour-long drive over, Gabby turned off her phone for this very reason. She didn't want to deal with her mother until she arrived in person. "Yeah, fuck you too, Mom," she retorts.

Debra's eyes and mouth widen to almost comical proportions. "EXCUSE ME??!!!"

"Shut up, just... shut up."

With bated breath, Debra awaits an explanation for her daughter's profanity and disrespect.

"Did you really not think to just *call*, instead?" Gabby asks with sarcasm. "Huh? Didja? Or did you really just not want to hear the sound of your own daughter's voice?"

"How dare you!" Debra replies sharply. "The reason I texted you is because you always send my calls to voicemail and you never respond! How am I supposed to talk to you if you won't stop being such a stuck-up b-bitch?!"

Now it's Gabby's turn to widen her mouth and eyes.

Standing between the two, Stanley sheepishly interjects. "She's right, Gabs. You don't get to complain about your mother not calling if you're the one who doesn't *want* her to."

Debra nods with approval at her faithful husband before turning back to Gabby with malice. "So, I take it you're only here because you want to see Jenny, right?" She then turns sharply back to her husband. "Hold on—she's not here for brunch, is she?"

Stanley looks away meekly.

"Yeah, I'm hungry," replies a defiant Gabby. "I don't get to eat good food anymore." If she was on the fence before about eating, she certainly isn't now—if only to spite her mother.

"I'll tell Anthony to make another plate of eggs Benedict," Stanley says, then he hurries his way to the kitchen while shaking his head.

The mother and daughter continue to stare each other down, neither of them so much as blinking, until Gabby breaks away.

“I’m just here to see my daughter and maybe get something to eat that isn’t from the dollar menu.”

Debra stammers at Gabby’s coldness. “Is-is that it?! How ’bout the fact that your ex escaped from p-prison, HUH?! Don’t you think maybe we should talk about THAT?! That’s the whole reason I told you to come over in the first place!”

Gabby sneers. “What’s there to talk about, Mom? They’ll catch him—he has nowhere to go, no friends, no money. Nothing I can do about it.”

Her mother is stunned by her daughter’s apathy. “I-I don’t believe what I’m hearing,” she whispers in disbelief. “Have you forgotten what he did to you—to our *family*? I mean, Jesus *FUCKING* Christ, Gabby! What if he somehow makes it to New York and finds you? What will you do? The prison people said that they have *no* idea how he could’ve possibly escaped! What will happen if he comes for us and—”

“OK, listen, Mom?” interrupts Gabby. “I didn’t want to tell you this, but the cops came by my place earlier and they said that they’ll put some guys on the lookout in my neighborhood.”

“What?! You talked to the *cops*?”

“It’s fine, they only asked questions about Ch-Charles. They asked if he had a safe house, and if he had made contact with me. Y’know, *that* shit.”

Debra tenses up and pries further. “So nothing about your drug history or the things *you* did? I’m VERY surprised.”

Gabby locks her jaw and curls her hands into white-knuckled fists. “It’s... FINE, Mother.” As her anger cools, she decides it’s her turn to inquire. “Have *you* spoken with the police? I gave them your address and phone numbers. They’ll probably call or swing by soon.”

Debra puts her hand on her forehead and sighs. “Oh Gabby, we don’t need that. We live in a protected community, and your father has his shotgun. We’ll be fine; it’s *you* I’m worried about.”

Gabby looks her mother in the eye with an appalling sense of disgust. “Really? You’re *actually* worried about me?” Looking

away, she shakes her head and almost chuckles. “Funny, I just don’t believe you. I haven’t seen you give me even a *hint* of concern in over a decade. What changed, bitch?”

“Ohhh, get off your high horse already! I’m your mother!” barks Debra. “You gave me a load of shit to deal with when you decided to run off and get *married* to that scumbag! Your two older brothers NEVER gave me the kind of grief *you* did! What was your excuse for shacking up with a high school dropout, anyway? Do you have *any* idea how worried I was when you left with him for fucking *Vegas*?! And then I find out that not *only* did you have a baby with him, but he was involved with those thugs and he... uggghhh.”

Gabby wants to scream at her mother, but she knows she’s right. Running off with Charles turned out to be the biggest mistake she’s ever made—no contest—and, worst of all, apart from stupid teenage rebellion, she had no excuse for being with him in the first place. It almost destroyed her family in the end.

“W-why couldn’t you have just supported us, if only for your granddaughter’s sake?” Gabby asks tearfully. “The whole reason all that shit went down was that we ran out of money.”

Debra slams her foot down and sticks her finger in Gabby’s face. “Because YOU needed to learn a lesson! Call it ‘tough love’! Now, if I’d known things were going to get as bad as they did, I would’ve *dragged* you and Jenny back from that scumbag! I can’t predict the future, Gabrielle, but I knew he was bad news from the start! What the hell did you even *see* in him, anyway? I mean, you’re my daughter and I *still* love you, but I hate the stupid choices you’ve made! I thought we raised you better, but I guess we didn’t.”

A silence falls between the two, and Gabby, now quite offended by her mother’s words, hisses at her, “Y’know what? I didn’t come here to talk to you, I came to see my daughter.”

Without skipping a beat, she marches away from Debra, then out of the corner of her eye sees her dad holding two plates of

breakfast—and looking flabbergasted. She doesn't care, though; she's too angry and hurt to eat now.

"Great—what did you do to set her off?" asks Stanley, turning to his wife.

"What did *I* do?? C'mere, let me explain something to you."

Gabby climbs up the grand staircase as her parents' arguing goes out of earshot. She then walks down the hall to one of the bedroom doors and knocks gently while opening it. "Sweetie? It's Mom." She walks into the large, luxurious room to find her daughter watching commercials on the TV.

At her mother's voice, Jenny breaks her gaze and beams with a beautiful child's smile at her. "Mommy! You're here!" she squeals in delight.

Gabby looks at her daughter's pale, bony face and winces. She does this every time she comes over to see Jenny—or at least, ever since Jenny started losing weight.

The sickly girl turns over with difficulty in her medical bed to get a better view of her mother. Her body says a lot. Frail, small and horribly sick is the *polite* way of describing it. Her brown, shoulder-length hair has started to lose its color, much like her skin. There's almost no muscle mass, and while she may be happy to see her mother, there's no doubt she's fighting through some pain.

Gabby is so proud of her daughter's spirit. She remembers when Jenny was born and how the doctors said that, due to her medical complications, she was unlikely to survive. However, despite the heartache and the crippling health care costs, Gabby was still so happy to have brought her into the world.

It was considered a miracle when Jenny made it past her first year; the doctors simply couldn't believe it. But later her condition came back with full force, and this time she's probably not going to make it. Gabby tears up every time she's reminded of her little girl's state when she sees her in that bed, hooked up to all sorts of IVs and various monitors. It's been this way for years. It's partly the reason Jenny had to live with her retired grandparents and not

her working mother—not that child services needed the extra excuse to keep the two separated from each other.

Gabby snaps out of her sadness and smiles at Jenny as she walks to her bedside and sits on it. “Hi, little angel. How are you doing? Have Grandpa and Grandma been taking care of you?”

“But of course, Mother,” Jenny says with a cheeky attitude, as though mocking her posh, wealthy grandparents. “Hey!” she then says abruptly, “didja get me my birthday present?”

Smiling, Gabby reaches into her purse and pulls out a cartoon-like toy horse, still in its store-bought package. It’s quite large and has a strange design, including a multi-colored mane. “This is the one you wanted—right, Jen?”

She snatches it from her mother, a bright smile on her face. “Yes, you got the right one! Thank you SO much, Mom.”

Gabby grins at the sight of her happy girl. Mom of the Year, for sure. “I’m glad it’s right; took a while to find it online.”

Jenny reaches to hug her mom, and the two embrace a little.

“Now sweetie, I know this is a little early to think about, but you’ll be twelve in a few days and I think we should go into the city and have a great time. Just us—mother and daughter. We can do whatever you want. How’s that sound?”

Jenny ponders this idea. “Can we get matching tattoos?”

Gabby raises her eyebrows and laughs a bit. “I’d be totally down with that, but I don’t think they’d let *you* get one.”

“Awww,” whines Jenny, still smiling.

“We can do other stuff, though,” Gabby assures her.

“Yeah,” Jenny says distantly. “Is this gonna be another birthday without my friends?” She looks up with melancholy.

“I’m sorry, Jen, about last year. But let’s be honest, they were *obviously* not very good friends—you don’t need ’em.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jenny says sadly.

As the TV goes back to its program after a lengthy run of commercials, Gabby and Jenny turn their attention to it and see two anchors about to give some news of the day.

“Ugh,” says Gabby, “you shouldn’t watch the news. Only ugly stuff these days, especially with the election coming up.”

“But I like the news, Mom. Have I told you that when I grow up, I wanna be an anchorwoman?”

Jenny has told her mother countless times about her dream career. But every time she does, Gabby gets quite depressed, given her daughter’s health prospects.

“B-believe me, sweetie, you don’t want to work in the news business as a woman. The fat cats up top will treat you like a piece of meat and ruin you if you don’t play ball. It’s not something you *really* want.”

Jenny doesn’t seem to bat an eye. “That’s fine. I’ll get paid a lot and be on TV. And... at least I’ll know I’m *pretty*, then.”

Gabby sighs in pain. Her daughter’s disease must be truly taking a toll on her self-esteem if she’s making *these* sorts of comments. “Oh, honey, I wish you wouldn’t talk like that.”

As she gazes with sadness at her hopeless daughter, the anchors on the screen go to a news bulletin.

“Breaking news: New details on the Nevada prison escape.”

Oh no, Gabby thinks to herself.

“An FBI spokesperson has released information regarding the escaped convict known as Charles Rudolf Wilson.”

A federal official then speaks. “We have determined that Charles Wilson was last placed at a remote cabin roughly 200 miles north of Las Vegas—thanks to circumstantial evidence and the search party tasked with pursuing the fugitive.”

Gabby leans in intently to hear more of the announcement.

“Evidence shows that Wilson was staying at this remote cabin, presumably during the evening hours. It also shows that he was accompanied by at least two other, unknown individuals. However, the fugitive remains at large and it is currently unknown *when* he left the premises or for *where*.”

Unnerved, Gabby starts to shake from the news. *How has he not been caught?! Who is helping him?*

The official spokesperson continues. “The cabin where the fugitive was staying belonged to a man named Kevin McCain, who, unfortunately, was found murdered outside some distance away, with a gunshot wound.” An aerial view of the cabin is shown, along with a family photo of the late Mr. McCain.

A feeling of nausea and terror overcomes Gabby, and she grabs the remote from Jenny and turns off the TV.

“Hey! I was watching that,” complains Jenny.

“Y-you don’t need to watch stuff like that. It’s not g-good for your health.” Gabby springs up from the bed and takes some deep breaths. “Hey, sweetie—I’m sorry, but Mommy’s gotta go. I have a shift to get to later.”

“What? But Mom, you just got here.”

“I-I know, it’s just... Look, I’ll be back for your birthday, and then we can have lots of fun. Alright?”

Jenny looks away and pouts. “Alright...”

“Good. Now, don’t watch the news, OK? It’s bad for you.”

Gabby opens the bedroom door and starts to walk out, but not before turning to look at her daughter one last time. “I love you—you know that, right? I’m doing all I can.”

Jenny smiles a little, looking like an innocent angel. “Yeah, I know. Love ya too, Mom.”

After closing the door, Gabby tears up and tries her best not to hyperventilate. She’s terrified: terrified for herself and for her daughter. Agonizingly, she wonders whether she should just take Jenny and run far away with her, but the idea scares her; she has nowhere to go, and the police would probably issue an amber alert for Jenny.

In a flash, Gabby recalls what her mother said earlier. She walks down the hall to her parents’ room, opening the door as she arrives. Inside, she flicks on the light for the walk-in closet and spots the tall gun safe that she knew would still be there. She leans forward and punches in the code to unlock it—her eldest brother’s birthdate. The safe unlocks, much to her relief; she was wondering if her parents had changed it since she left home over a decade ago.

As she quietly opens the door, Gabby spots the prize: a snub-nosed six-shooter revolver, alongside a box of ammo for it. She remembers how her dad used to take her out for target practice and how she got to shoot all his guns, including the shotgun and the hunting rifle. She always liked that little revolver best, though.

After turning around to make sure she isn't being watched, Gabby puts the gun and its ammo inside her purse and locks the safe back up. She knows what she's doing is highly illegal, but, much like her ex-husband, Gabby is no stranger to the wrong side of the law. Even still, she's a nervous wreck about it. All she can hope for is that she'll never have to use it and that she can simply wait for Charles to be recaptured. After what she saw on the news a few minutes ago, she's not going to take any chances when it comes to her criminal ex-husband.

Gabby then flicks off the light, leaves with her stolen items and closes the door to her parents' bedroom. After descending the stairs, she comes across her parents casually eating their gourmet meals.

His face stuffed full of eggs Benedict, Stanley spots her and motions for his daughter to come to the table. "Hey! Sit. We need to talk," he says as he swallows his mouthful of breakfast.

"Sorry, can't stay," Gabby says to them both. "I have an afternoon shift at my other job today."

"Oh, bullshit!" interjects her mother. "Tell them you want the day off! Tell them you have been traumatized by the news of your ex breaking out of prison! I'm sure they'll understand!"

Gabby grits her teeth at Debra. "Y'know, Mom? I know *you* 've never had to work a day in your life, but I don't get to have the same luxury. I *need* the hours."

Debra curls her lip in frustration at her daughter.

Meanwhile, Stanley tries to change the subject. "Actually, Gabs, your mother and I were talking and we agreed that perhaps you should stay here with us—at least until that rat bastard gets sent back to jail."

Gabby glares at her father. “No, Dad, I have rent to pay, and I’m not allowed to stay here with Jenny. *Remember?*”

As both parents look away, Gabby looks down at the spare plate of breakfast that was meant for her and grabs one of the two eggs Benedict sandwiches. “I don’t need your roof, or your money. I don’t need anything from either of you—I’ll be back to pick up Jenny tomorrow.”

Her half of a breakfast in hand, she heads out of the house, making sure she exits before her parents have a chance to retort.

Once outside, Gabby walks out to the lovely landscaped front yard and along the driveway to her beater of a car. She didn’t notice when she pulled in, but going back out, she sees how out of place her junker is compared to the luxurious surroundings. It all makes her feel that she just doesn’t belong, even though she grew up here in this neighborhood.

After getting into her car and closing the door with a slam, Gabby snarfs down the food she swiped. Her thoughts turn to the news reports. It doesn’t seem possible that her ex could’ve escaped, especially on the very eve of his execution. And then there’s the fact that some unknown party is apparently helping him—hell, even providing him with a safe house that they killed some unlucky guy for. And, to top it all off, he *still* hasn’t been caught, and *no one* knows where he is or might be going.

Gabby chokes down her meal as tears stream down her face. She’s not sure if it’s safe to return to her apartment, or even go to work. He could be at her front door right now, for all she knows. In a fury, she repeatedly bashes her car’s steering wheel while wailing with a mouth full of egg and muffin.

At last, tired from the beating she’s giving her car, she breaks down and cries hysterically, unable to hold in her anxiety, fear and hopelessness. After a whole decade of Gabby trying to forget her horrific time in Nevada and trying to salvage her life in New York and to better herself, Charles has somehow found a way back into her world and managed to restart the nightmare all over again.

Chapter Thirteen

Flight

Mitchell Grayson's private jet roars across the sky, ripping apart clouds as its wings slice through the upper atmosphere. Inside, Charles looks away from the window; the vast desert and the city that sat within it are now not visible below. Up here, a few miles in the air, he feels surprisingly at peace, as if the whole world and all of its problems are confined down there and he no longer has to be a part of it—at least, not for a while.

Thanks to having drunk all that vodka earlier, Charles has had to puke his guts out in the restroom, with Veronica cheekily telling him, “Told ya so,” once he got out. He's just thankful that he's only buzzed and not full-on plastered. *Never again. Wasn't worth it.* He reaches into the bag of tortilla chips that he nabbed earlier from the snack compartment and proceeds to stuff his face, making loud crunches with every bite.

Seated across the aisle from him, Veronica tries to focus on the tablet game she's playing, instead of on the unappealing sounds coming from her cabin buddy's mouth.

“Hey,” Charles abruptly asks, his mouth still full of chips. “You got, like, Angry Birds or Candy Crush on that thing?”

As she pauses her game, Veronica glares at him with annoyance but also mild surprise. “I'm amazed you even know about all that stuff. Weren't-chu locked up before smartphones were invented?”

“Huh? Y-yeah, I guess, but it’s not like I was livin’ in a cave that whole time. I had library privileges and shit. ’Course I know what Angry Birds is.”

Charles grabs another fistful of chips and pops them into his mouth while Veronica scrunches her face and rolls her eyes before going back to her game.

The awkwardness between the two is broken as Mitchell opens the cockpit door in front of them and steps out. He takes a look at his two passengers and nods his head, seeming rather pleased. “You two haven’t killed each other yet. That’s a good sign,” he says and walks to the drinks compartment.

Charles turns to gaze out the window and notices some dark storm clouds approaching on the horizon.

“I wish you hadn’t drunk all my vodka like that, Charles,” Mitchell says passively. “That was very rude of you.”

He proceeds to peer around inside the liquor compartment. “Ah, good.” Then he grabs a bottle of fine Scotch and a glass on the rocks. After twisting the cap off, he pours himself about two fingers’ worth of the glowing brown liquid.

Turning towards Veronica, Mitchell reaches back into his waistband and pulls out the gun that she gave him at the parking lot. “I meant to give this back to you earlier. Seems I didn’t need to shoot him, after all,” he says with a smirk.

Veronica giggles and puts the gun on the table next to her as Charles does a double take upon seeing the weapon.

While Mitchell grabs his drink, Veronica seems to suddenly remember something. She gets up out of her seat and opens an overhead bin. “Oh, hold on. Let me get out the map,” she says, pulling out and digging through a duffel bag.

“Oh, don’t bother,” whines Mitchell. “We’re never going to set foot in Nevada ever again. There’s really no point.”

After rummaging a bit, Veronica pulls out a very large and very worn-out world book atlas that looks as if it might fall apart at the spine. The colors have faded and the edges are rippled and torn, not to mention stained with a coffee spill or two. With care, she

== Chapter Thirteen ==

flips through the pages until she gets to the large map of Nevada. On it are a few written notes, some markings and lines that look like boundaries. Mitchell leans in with her and they study the map together.

Charles gets up out of his seat and looks over Mitchell's shoulder to see what they're poring over.

"Alright, show me where they were," says Veronica.

"Well, let's see..." ponders Mitchell aloud. "They came from the south, I think, past the airport." He taps his finger on an inset map of Las Vegas. "Right around here. We didn't even see them until the big one screamed just before they all came for us, which means they didn't have to travel very far. It was so strange that so many of them were clumped together that close to the airport."

Veronica pulls a fine marker from the bag and uses it to draw a large box near the airport on the map. "How many were there, anyway?"

Mitchell scoffs a bit. "Oh dear, couldn't tell. They came as a swarm. I'd say about a hundred, plus the big one inside the airport." He turns to Charles. "That sound about right to you?"

Taking his eyes off the map to look at Mitchell, a confused Charles changes the subject. "What the hell's this?" he asks.

Unfazed by the question, Mitchell lifts the map book and shakes it a little in front of Charles. "It's a map, obviously," he says with his trademark cheekiness.

"Mitchell, I swear to fuckin' Christ—"

"It's a map of where I've *been*... in the future," says Mitchell, this time more serious.

Veronica, meanwhile, ignoring the stupidity of the boys, squiggles in the number "100" and a "+" symbol beside it.

"Oh," says the convict, "so you map out where the creatures and shit are, right?"

"Exactly right, Charles," replies Mitchell. "As you've probably figured out, I've traveled all around the world, jumping in and out of the timeline—for well over a year, at this point—trying to find... something. Anything. Anything at all that might shed some

light on what happened, or if there were any safe places on Earth, or if there was even a soul left alive.”

A chill goes down Charles’ spine at hearing these words. He asked his captor back at the hangar how long he’s been using the devices, but he didn’t think it would be quite *that* long.

Mitchell returns to the atlas and gently flips the pages. “As you can see, Veronica and I kind of mapped out the world the best we could, marking which parts of the planet were relatively safe to move around in and which parts were... suicide.”

While Mitchell turns page after page, Charles gets glimpses of the markings on each section of the world.

“See for yourself.” Mitchell motions him to the map book.

Charles starts to flip through the book on his own, not even taking into account its fragility, and comes across a map of the Asian continent. There are areas that have multiple boxes and notes stuck all over the place, especially southern countries such as India. But the part that piques Charles’ interest is the huge box that covers all of Russia and China. There isn’t a number of creatures indicated in this box, nor are there any notes. The box contains only two words: “*NO GO*”.

Afraid of what that could possibly mean, he reluctantly asks, “What happened *here*?” pointing to the boxed area.

Mitchell sees what Charles is pointing at and reels a bit, as if a flood of distant memories has suddenly come rushing back to him. “Nothing *happened*, per se, but...”

After an uncomfortable pause, he sighs and continues. “A while back, on a trip we took to Beijing, I jumped into the future. The reason I went there was because I had good intel that there was a sealed underground military bunker containing a helicopter in good working order—even in a future where everything’s destroyed and non-functional. Turns out, that was true. Once I broke into the bunker, I started up the copter and got into the air. I wanted to get a bird’s-eye view and see whatever I could find.”

Wait, he can fly helicopters too? Charles is amazed.

== Chapter Thirteen ==

Mitchell goes on. “It was an incredible sight, seeing the lifeless, dilapidated city from up there. But what really caught my attention was what I saw once I flew west.”

“What did you see?” asks a nervous Charles.

“An ocean: a sea of unnatural blackness that stretched out well past the horizon. I was high enough that it looked like a shadowy void, and I couldn’t understand what it was I was looking at. So I descended to get a better view—and, well, that’s when the ‘sea’ began to change and stretch itself to try and grab me out of the air. I barely made it away from its grasp. Right then and there I knew I was dealing with some kind of ‘liquid amalgamation’ made up of the monsters themselves.”

A hush falls on everyone—especially Charles, who’s now almost sorry he asked.

Grasping his glass, Mitchell takes a gulp of his now-chilled Scotch. “I was so shaken by what I saw that I didn’t pay attention to the fuel gauge. I ended up having to go back to the city and land on top of the nearest building I could, and fast. That black sea was *literally* following me underneath, and I couldn’t waste a second to jump back once I landed. You remember what happened next—right, Veronica?”

Charles turns to look at Veronica beside him.

“Hell ya, I remember,” she blurts out. “You were clear on the other side of Beijing. Took me the whole day to come pick ya up.” She glances at Charles with a snide look on her face. “You have any idea how hard it is to get aroun’ in that city if you’ve never been there before and don’t speak a lick of Chinese? Fuckin’ A, man.”

Given that Charles has never even left the country before, he can’t say that he can appreciate the difficulty.

Mitchell then points to the opposite side of the box, where the edge meets eastern Europe. “Anyway, when I was in St. Petersburg, I encountered that very same ‘black sea’ to the east. I can only assume the entire continent between the two cities is covered with it.”

Charles shivers as he realizes the sheer vastness of how much land must be covered with these creatures. He continues to flip through the book and sees all the different markings and boundaries that Mitchell and Veronica have added during their year-long exploration. And he notices that it's not just Asia that apparently has one of these gigantic 'black seas'; there are also some smaller ones in Africa and Australia.

Upon reaching the end of the book, Charles closes it and marvels at how many places his captors seem to have visited. The more he thinks about it, the more he questions why these two were traveling so much to begin with.

"You would not believe some of the things I've seen, Charles," says Mitchell as he reaches into the duffel bag. After pulling out a small cardboard box, he opens it, grabs a stack of printed pictures from inside and hands them to Charles, who instantly understands that he must have taken these while he was in the future.

One photo is of a derelict Times Square; another one shows a ruined Paris with a tarnished Eiffel Tower in the distance, bent out of shape; many more depict the empty, lifeless and post-apocalyptic reality of both the cities and the countrysides of the world. It's the most depressing and miserable photo collection that Charles—or anyone else, for that matter—has ever seen, and the convict stares at the pictures in astonishment.

Mitchell goes on. "I've tried to study the creatures—tried to see if I can find a pattern to their behavior or why they attack life to begin with. But I've never been able to; they seem to move and act randomly. I don't even have a clue as to why they amalgamate into these enormous masses, or why they sometimes exist independent of one another. Their actions only make *any* sense when they find a life form and chase after it."

Clearly distressed, he pauses to take another sip of his Scotch. "The closest I've come to figuring them out was when I theorized that they must have a 'hive-mind' mentality—that they can communicate with each other somehow. I thought that maybe if there was a way to disrupt their communication, then hopefully

that would kill them. But they don't respond to sound waves or sensory overload. Nothing affects them; it's *infuriating*."

Mitchell then knocks back the rest of his drink and gently places the glass on the table. At this point Charles flips to the next photo to find something alarming. It's a crystal clear image of a large creature on a city street, crawling along the ground with outstretched arms. Wide-eyed, he turns to Mitchell and shows him the picture in his hand.

"Oh, that one," mutters Mitchell. "It's a bit of an interesting story. I was taking pictures of the black smears on the buildings in the area, and I spotted it when I turned the corner. Thankfully, I smelled it before I saw it, so I had my finger ready on the button to jump back. When I did see it, though, it was slowly moving away from me. So I hid behind some rubble and managed to take that shot without it noticing me—or maybe it *did* notice me and it didn't care, for some ungodly reason. Either way, I just watched it crawl away from me, before its smell and the terror I was feeling forced me to jump back."

"Hold up. It really just... ignored you?" asks Charles.

"Indeed, it did. If you can stomach the smell and the fear, you can stand right next to them as long as they don't, well, 'realize' that you're there."

Mitchell takes the pic from Charles' grasp and looks at it as if reliving the moment when he snapped the photo. "I confess, we simply don't know much, if anything, about them: what they are, why they're here, or why they want to wipe away all life on Earth. But what I find odd is that they still remain on this planet—even though life's already gone. They seem to just wander around aimlessly, without any purpose."

Deep thought shows on Mitchell's face as he unconsciously grips the time-traveling machine on his arm. "If it wasn't for these devices allowing us to go into the future, we wouldn't even know of their existence yet. That's the scary part: they haven't shown up, and no one—outside the three of us, anyway—knows they're coming."

Staring at the pics, Charles has an epiphany. “*Just* the three of us? Why? Haven’t you guys asked for help from, like, scientists? Or the government?”

Veronica and Mitchell look at each other with dread.

“Charles,” says Mitchell, “if we could, we would. But... people are stupid. They wouldn’t believe us—even if we showed them these photos and the devices themselves. And even if they *did* believe, then so what? All it would do is cause mass panic—”

“Yeah, dude,” interrupts Charles, “that’s why I said *scientists* and the *government*. I’m pretty sure they’d think of something, don’t you?”

Mitchell sighs, aggravated.

“Wh-what about the military?” blurts out Charles.

His captor nearly chortles at the question and then points to his own device. “Where do you think we got these things in the first place?”

The revelation hits Charles like a freight train. At a loss for words, he stares at Mitchell, shocked. “W-what?”

A flood of new questions make their way into his head, but before he can get them out, the plane rattles and shakes for a moment, almost making him lose his balance.

Mitchell gazes out the window and sees the growing storm clouds approaching. “Huh,” he states flatly, “looks like we’ll be weaving around some weather, after all.” He walks to the cockpit and opens the door. “We’ll be in DC in a couple of hours. Get strapped in—it’ll get pretty bumpy, I’m sure.”

The cockpit door then closes, and Veronica and Charles find themselves awkwardly together once more. Veronica strolls back to her seat and starts playing her tablet game again, while Charles, unsure of what to think, picks up the map book that Mitchell was looking at a few minutes ago.

As he flips through all the maps inside, Charles gains an insight into how many parts of the world are overridden with the creatures. He recalls Mitchell mentioning that most of them aren’t really in North America anymore, but instead in Europe and Asia.

Flipping further through the pages, he happens to land on the larger-scale map of Nevada. It has a few boundaries and notes scattered around the state, the majority of them in the Vegas and Reno areas. His eyes dart around the map, and he notices that, unlike on the other maps, there's a small, crude drawing of a skull to the far northwest of Vegas. *Why did she draw a skull out in the middle of nowhere?*

Charles glances over at her and sees that she's not focusing on anything except her game. He looks back at the map and wonders if he should ask her about it. But before he can even open his mouth, his eyes lock onto the handgun across from her on the other end of the table.

It's just sitting there, unattended. And it's a lot closer to him than it is to her. He gulps. He doesn't understand why she hasn't put it away yet. *Did she forget?*

Having just "died" in the game she was playing, Veronica breaks her focus on the screen to see Charles staring at the gun. "You gonna try an' shoot me, white-boy?"

Almost freaking out at the sound of her calm voice, Charles snaps his head over to look at her.

Veronica pauses her game and gently puts the tablet off to the side. "Try it. I know you must hate me for how I've been treatin' ya. Go ahead, pick up that gun—there's no way I'd be able to get to you in time before ya shot me."

Charles stammers incoherently and Veronica adds to what she's saying. "You'd hafta shoot Mitchell too, though—otherwise he'd come after ya. He's defenseless right now. Only thing he could try an' do is jump into the future, but this plane ain't gonna be here 20 years from now and we're about 30,000 feet up. I don't think either of you would survive the fall."

The convict is shocked by what Veronica is suggesting. He can't believe what's coming out of her mouth, given that she's hardly spoken to him so far. He feels like he's being accused of something he's never thought to do. Panicking a bit, he tries to deny what she's saying. "What? N-no, I'm not gonna do anything!

You guys saved my life. What makes you think I'd try to kill you two? That's insane! A-and, even if I wanted to, I can't fly a plane—I'd be dead as well!"

Unflinching, Veronica motions her head to the back of the plane. "There's some parachutes in the back—you could jump out an' land safely after you've killed us. You'd finally be free. You could spend your last days on earth bangin' hookers an' doin' coke before the world ends. What's stoppin' ya?"

"What?" asks Charles, stunned by her "helpfulness". "Why the hell would you think I'd do that? That's crazy. Y-you're crazy."

For a brief second, however, he looks towards the back of the plane and wonders if there really are parachutes and if he could actually pull it all off. It's like she said: he'd be able to go wherever and do whatever he wanted—at least, until the creatures finally showed up.

Charles eyes the gun again, weighing the pros and cons of the idea. After a moment of serious consideration, he realizes what he must do. "Look," he says earnestly, "back at the airport, when I was with Mitchell, I could've tackled him to the ground." He points to the weapon lying on the table. "I could've snatched that gun right out of his hands. But I didn't. I-I didn't want to. And I'm not gonna do it now. You guys told me that we, uh, need to save the world, right? So, th-that's what I'm gonna do."

He doesn't believe a word of what he's saying; he just doesn't have the nerve to test his luck against a combatant like Veronica, is all.

Eyebrow raised, she snorts and gets up out of her seat. When she grabs the handgun from the table, Charles backs up away from her, a little scared. A knot forms in the pit of his stomach and he sighs, feeling defeated by his own inaction.

"You made the right choice, buddy—I would'a wrecked you if you tried threatenin' me with *this*." Veronica suddenly unloads the magazine inside the gun and points the opening at Charles so he can see.

It's unloaded: there are no bullets.

“Wait,” Charles says, alarmed, “was that thing *empty* this whole time?”

Veronica smirks.

“Was it *always* empty?!” Charles asks, absolutely floored.

Veronica laughs. “You didn’t *really* think Mitchell was gonna shoot ya, didja?”

His mouth agape, Charles can only stare at Veronica as his brain tries to comprehend how much he got “punked” by these guys. He feels like a complete sucker.

“Maaan,” sighs Veronica, “prison must’ve fucked you up pretty good, huh, white-boy?”

She then goes to sit down on the seat across the table while Charles just stands there.

“I would’a thought you’d try an’ escape every chance you got. Don’t ya at least wanna see Jennifer again?”

Charles goes wide-eyed with surprise. “H-how the hell do you know about my daughter?”

“Please, white-boy. You’re in the public records. I know all about lil’ Jenny, your ex-wife and what you did.”

Her condescending tone makes Charles look away.

At this point Veronica gets up out of her seat again and grabs a bottle of whiskey from the liquor compartment, along with a couple of glasses. After sitting back down at the table, she sets aside a glass for herself, but first pours a drink for him as well.

As his instincts take over, Charles sits across from her and drags the glass meant for him to his side. Without waiting for her to finish pouring her own glass, Charles takes a sip of his. It tastes wonderful—like caramel or candy popcorn—and goes down smoothly, too. He realizes he’s never consumed any top-shelf liquor before, and he’s quite jealous that Mitchell gets to drink this stuff whenever he wants.

Having filled her glass, Veronica returns her attention to the convict-turned-partner who’s sharing a table with her. “Truth is, though, I only know a little bit about the details,” she tells him. “Some of the court records were sealed, but I pretty much got the

drift of what happened in the courtroom durin' your sentencin'— which, by the way, pretty crazy of ya to fight off the guards the way ya did. Fun read."

She pauses to take a sip while Charles flinches as he relives that insane, ridiculous event at the courthouse all over again in his head.

"Why don't you tell me *your* side of the story?" she says, clearing her throat. "What made you do what you did? How did it all go down? I'm curious."

Charles is stunned by her forthright honesty and interest. It wasn't even a day ago that she was cold and borderline hostile to him. Now she's opening up to him, for some reason.

Struggling with what to say, he figures that maybe he should be honest with her, as well. "I guess I did it because I really had no choice—or if I *had* a different choice, I sure as hell didn't know about it at the time."

While he thinks about what to say next, the plane carrying the trio vibrates sporadically as the weather outside becomes more intense. "You really wanna know my life story, or whatever?" he asks.

"Sure. Why not? We've got time to kill."

Charles thinks for a bit, unconsciously running his finger along the edge of his glass. "I already told Mitchell before we took off, but, I haven't had that great of a life."

"Yeah, no shit," Veronica says humorously.

"Wh— no, what I mean is, um, well... damn, where do I even begin?"

Chapter Fourteen

Memories

The convict ponders his thoughts. “Hmm, my upbringing was okay, I guess,” Charles says as he digs into his past. “My parents weren’t really strict or nothing. They loved me enough. I mean, they *did* at the time. During my sentencing, though, they didn’t even care when the judge handed out the death penalty—they just got up and left.” His bitterness is evident.

“Yikes. Ya wanna see your parents again?” asks Veronica, curious.

Charles merely huffs, then takes a swig of the delicious whisky in his glass. “Not unless you can bring ’em back to life. Last I heard, my mom got in a car accident and my dad put a gun in his mouth right after. I had to learn all this shit from the family lawyer when he came to declare their last will to me; can you believe that? And get this: everything they had was given to charity. None of it went to me—or even to their own granddaughter.”

Veronica’s face shows no emotion, but she is taken aback by this news. “Oh wow, that’s cold. Sorry to hear that.”

“Whatever—they can rot, for all I care. Fuck ’em.”

Silence falls over the two as rain drizzles against the outsides of the windows.

“Gabby,” mutters Charles. “She was the only one that ever really seemed to get me. I met her one night at a rave, of all places, and we kinda hit it off.”

“That’s your ex-wife, right?”

“Yeah. She was great back then—a total rebel against her rich, snobby parents. She liked me, but *they* sure as hell didn’t, especially not after I knocked her up.”

Veronica looks away while trying to stifle a chuckle.

As Charles recalls those old times, a faint smile forms on his face. “I remember when she called me up one night, crying because her folks were demanding that she get an abortion, or they would kick her out and cut her off. She was hysterical, but I totally got it; I was having problems with *my* parents, too. They wanted me to go to college, and pay for it by myself. Unreal, right? I would’ve killed myself rather than waste four more years at school and get a lifetime of debt, just so I could wear a suit to the office every goddamn day—if I was *lucky*.”

He takes another gulp of his drink, hoping that it’ll get him drunk enough to numb the painful memories. “What were we talking about?” he asks Veronica, confused. “Oh, right—yeah, Gabby hated her parents, and I hated mine, too. So we both thought we should just run away and get married somewhere.”

A distant flash of lightning illuminates the cabin, and Veronica gazes out to see distinctive dark clouds.

“I don’t remember why we chose Vegas, though. I think it was because Gabby wanted to be in the shows; or maybe I read somewhere that the Vegas economy was booming, or something.”

“Not a great plan, eh?” comments Veronica, still staring out at the weather.

“Yeah,” Charles agrees. “Soon as we arrived, we got ourselves a cheap place and I did some shit jobs for a bit, trying to break into construction work.” He smiles from his trip down memory lane. “Around that time, we decided to get married at one of those sleazy, Elvis-style wedding venues. It was pretty funny. We had Jenny soon after that.”

The smile on his face then fades into sadness. “Those times were some of the happiest of my life, but that’s when things started to go south, too.” He grips his glass so tightly that it might actually shatter while he talks. “Jenny almost didn’t make it—some kind of

medical complication. The bills we got didn't help, either, when we started running out of money. We were fighting a lot back then, me and Gabby. I thought about leaving and just going back to my parents, but I dunno, I guess I was stubborn; I wanted to do the right thing, to make it work."

Another flash of lightning rips across the horizon, and the rain starts pouring against the windows.

"I read the court files," says Veronica. "They said you were involved in some dope dealin'? Betcha wish that was the *only* crime you committed—you would'a gotten a lighter sentence."

Charles almost chokes on his sip of whiskey. "Y-cough-yeah. Fell on hard times, and I couldn't rely on Gabby or her filthy-rich parents to save us. I just had to do it, y'know? Couldn't have my wife and newborn baby out on the streets. So I got into some debt with the local thugs in Vegas, sold drugs for 'em, and that whole deal kept us afloat for a while—until they started demanding payment. It got so bad that I started making plans to abandon everything and just make a run for Mexico. How sick is that, right?"

He then points to a deep scar just above his left eyebrow. "I paid for it, though. Five stitches."

"Yikes, what happened?"

"My, erm, 'boss'—some big-time street hustler named Angel—somehow found out I was gonna flee. He and his friends kidnapped me in the middle of the night and beat the crap outta me in the desert. I still get nightmares about it. They would've shot me dead, too, if I hadn't agreed to help them out with a job they wanted doing."

"A job?" asks Veronica. "You mean when—"

"Yeah," Charles interjects. "They said it would wipe away my debt." As he leans back in his seat, he stares out the rain-drenched window in thought. "Looking back, though, I should've just taken the bullet."

* * *

The convict recalls this time over a decade ago. A younger, terrified Charles finds himself in the back seat of a generic rental car that's parked in some back alley—close to where he lives, actually. Accompanying him are three street thugs his “boss”, Angel, sent to pick him up earlier.

The gangster sitting next to him lights up a joint and huffs it before blowing the odorous smoke out the cracked window, while the two thugs in the front seats just gaze around. The radio's been blasting some trashy rap music, which only makes Charles more agitated and nervous. Anxiety overwhelms him and he starts to shake uncontrollably.

“Hey, cheer up, gringo,” says the thug with the weed. “Angel says today's the day you lose your virginity—but, like, it's your *debt* and not your *virginity*. Celebrate!”

The “high as balls” passenger then offers a hit to Charles, who shakes his head in response. The thug smiles a bit and goes back to enjoying his blunt; it just means more weed for him.

A nervous Charles looks downward and runs his hands over the items the two thugs have given him: a ski mask and a gun. Going over the plan, he feels utterly distraught and can't believe he's doing this; it seems insane. But he knows he doesn't have a choice—something that's been par for the course in his life so far. All he can do is hope that he'll get away with it, because not only will his debt be wiped, he'll finally have his financial freedom back and be able to leave this town with his family.

The goon in the driver's seat suddenly gets a text on his flip-phone and takes a deep breath. “Alright, guys, we got the green—let's rip.”

He starts up the car, and the guy sitting next to Charles tosses his blunt out the window as he pulls down his ski mask and racks the small shotgun in his grip.

The driver floors it into traffic, and the four of them make their way to a shopping mall area with a bank out front. Along the way, Charles, who's now a near-total wreck, shakily puts on his mask

and checks his gun to make sure it's loaded. The quiet thug in the passenger seat does the same.

After arriving at the bank, the driver comes to an abrupt halt at the side of it as Charles' back-seat partner taps him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, man—we've done stuff like this before. Just be cool, and it'll all be good."

Charles doesn't reply to him, but instead simply shakes his head in agreement.

"Alright, GO!" yells the driver.

The two shotgun-wielding gangsters kick open their doors and hop out, and Charles clumsily follows behind them. The pair of thugs then sprint up to the bank's doors and yank them open. As they enter, one of them fires a single shot into the air and tells everyone to hit the floor.

There are only a couple of women here, lining up for banking services. They scream and instantly do as they're told, while the bank teller at the first counter raises her hands in response, but not before pressing the button under her desk which tells the local police that a robbery is taking place.

Although Charles is sweating bullets, he knows it's his turn to act. He races up to the first teller, sticks his gun in her face and screams for her to open the bank register and put the cash in the bag that he's throwing at her.

Meanwhile, one of the thugs points his shotgun at the customers on the ground and screams at them to stay down. The other thug grabs the second teller and forcibly shoves her towards the vault, shouting at her to do as he says.

As if by a miracle, everything seems to be going smoothly for the criminals. Charles tries to remain calm while the frightened teller shoves several thousand dollars into his bag.

However, paranoia begins to creep up on him; this is going *too* well. Whipping his head around, he spots his partner keeping guard, but a split second later he sees one of the customers pull out a revolver from her purse while his partner's back happens to be turned away.

Before Charles can yell for him to watch out, the woman fires round after round into the unaware thug's back, dropping him as he screams out in agony.

Having dealt with one of them, she instantly twists her prone body to point her gun at Charles.

But Charles is quicker. Without even realizing what he's doing, he almost empties his entire magazine into her in self-defense. She's gone by the third bullet.

The shrill ringing in his ears caused by the gunfire is the only thing he can hear while he stands completely paralyzed by what he's done. He didn't even mean to do it; he was just defending himself. A sickening terror washes over him as he freaks out at just how horrible this situation has become.

The screams of the people in the bank are shut out when Charles feels a hand slap down on his shoulder. The thug who went into the vault with the other teller has finally emerged with a giant briefcase filled with money. "LET'S GO!!!" he screams at Charles.

Getting his head together, Charles whips around to the teller who has his bag and swipes it from her, not caring if she's finished stuffing it or not.

With the job done as best as possible, the two men sprint out of the building to their getaway car. Getting in, they hear sirens in the distance.

The driver looks at the two in terror. "Where the fuck is Tio?!" he yells.

"DRIVE, DRIVE!!!" screams the thug.

Before Charles can seat himself properly, the driver floors it out of the mall lot and weaves through traffic, leaving the crime scene behind.

Not a word is spoken as the car finally arrives at the safe location a short distance away. The driver pulls into the back alley, and the three of them wait as the sirens around them start to fade into silence.

Charles almost can't believe that they've gotten away. He was sure the cops were right behind them. In any case, he's feeling like a wreck and wants to throw up, scream and cry—all at once. Instead, he takes off his mask and tosses it on the ground, his nerves completely rattled.

"The hell happened?! Where's Tio?" demands the driver.

"Dead, man," mutters the other thug. "Some bitch with a piece iced him."

"Ah, fuck!" yells the driver, slamming the steering wheel.

"We got the money, though," says the thug as he grabs Charles' bag and shows the briefcase.

While the scumbags look at the cash they've stolen, the driver speaks up. "Get out."

Charles isn't sure if he's talking to him.

"Your debt's paid—get the fuck out!"

After scrambling for the door handle, Charles bursts out of the car just as the thugs drive off, the door swaying in the wind.

He watches the car drive off and realizes how screwed he is. The job was botched, and it's only a matter of time before the police ID the gunman who was left to die. And that'll mean Charles will most likely be a suspect—and he doesn't have an alibi, or any friends who'll back him up.

With the realization that he still has his gun in hand, Charles tucks it into his pants at once and starts running to his house—which, thankfully, is not that far away.

Having run a considerable portion of the distance, he finally arrives at his home. He sees the clunker of a family car that's parked in the driveway and assumes that Gabby must still be home, much to his relief. There's still time for him to get everyone packed and out of the city.

"Gabby? Gabby?" Charles says as calmly as he can while entering his house.

Although the outside of the residence looks normal and unassuming, the inside is a pigsty. Clothes and trash litter both the floor and the cheap furniture, while ashtrays filled with cigarette

butts and blunts stink up the place. Worst of all, on the coffee table he sees a used needle, a crack pipe, some coke and bits of meth crystals.

Charles is horrified; there's no way she's using again—not after the health scare she got when she gave birth to their daughter. His thoughts turn to Jenny, who's probably been exposed to all this stuff, breathing it in.

He looks up from the mess of illicit substances and sees the TV blaring the local news channel. It's showing live helicopter footage of the bank that Charles and the others have robbed, along with photos and details of the car they drove away in.

The poor bastard shakes in fright—it really is just a matter of time before they get to him. After exiting the living room, he races down the hall to their bedroom. As he enters, he sees Jenny in her crib, sleeping soundly.

What he also sees, right after, is two pairs of eyes on the bed, staring at him in shock. One pair belongs to his skinny, trashy wife, and the other belongs to some big, muscular Black guy who's currently balls-deep inside her.

The bedroom is so silent that the only thing you can hear is the TV from beyond the hallway.

“Sooo... this guy's yo husband, right?” the man whispers into Gabby's ear. “Shit.”

“Tyler, sh-shut up. Wh-why are you home early? Did they clear your debt?” she asks Charles as nonchalantly as she can.

A white-hot anger blazes through Charles' entire body. He wants to ask the universe if his life is somehow a sitcom, even though he's not hearing a laugh track right now.

“Really, Gabby? With a Black guy?”

“Ch-Charles, please, let's talk about this—”

“How long have you been cheating on me?! How many guys you been screwing?!”

Every word coming out of poor Charles reveals how hurt and betrayed he feels. His whole world has been continuously flipped

over the course of a couple of hours, and he just keeps suffering the blows that life won't stop dishing him.

Meanwhile, Tyler casually gets up off Gabby and tries to locate his pants—while not exactly doing a good job of hiding his prized possession from Charles. No wonder Gabby hooked up with him.

“Eey maaan. Sorry, bruh. Didn't know she wuz married. Though, looks like ya wuzn't satisfyin' her enough, ya feel me?”

Charles seethes at the stranger in a most menacing tone. “Shut the fuck up, you worthless nigger.”

Stunned, and justifiably enraged, Tyler stops looking for his pants and puffs himself up at Charles. “What dah FUCK did you just call me, white trash?!” he bellows as he marches with vicious intent towards the venomous husband.

Without batting an eye, Charles reaches back and pulls out his gun.

As Tyler stares down the barrel of the pistol, his attitude changes in a flash and he raises his arms, apologizing profusely. And Gabby, still in bed, screams and begs Charles to put down the weapon.

Unwilling to listen to his cheating wife or the guy who was banging her, a livid Charles points the gun directly at Tyler's chest and pulls the trigger again and again.

Tyler drops as he briefly screams in pain, while Gabby shrieks bloody murder.

Gazing at the corpse of the man who was nailing his wife, Charles can see his trigger finger shaking violently out of the corner of his eye. This is now the *second* time he's killed someone. Unlike the first time, however, this wasn't in self-defense, and the thought petrifies him as he contemplates how he's going to make this all go away.

Should I kill Gabby? I guess I'll have to, now. What about the bodies? His mind conjures up one insane thought after the other, but he isn't seeing any easy answers.

“9-1-1, what's your emergency?”

Hearing a faint voice, Charles turns to stare in fright at Gabby, who has her cellphone up to her ear.

“Y-y-yes, m-my husband just k-killed someone. P-please send help.”

Charles gazes in utter shock as Gabby gives the operator their home address. He looks at her and sees that she’s curled up against the bed with the sheet covering her naked body. She’s frightened out of her mind at what Charles might do to her—he can tell. And part of him likes it.

Without so much as a second thought, he raises the gun once more, this time at his unfaithful wife, and again unloads.

There are no bangs this time, though—only clicks of the hammer. Dumbstruck, Charles realizes that he must have used up the last couple of rounds on Tyler.

Gabby, meanwhile, is still shrieking into the phone that her husband has a gun. But despite the screams of his wife, Charles suddenly hears the crying of his infant daughter in the crib next to them. He looks over, horrified at the sounds coming out of poor Jenny.

It doesn’t take a crystal ball to see what’ll happen next. Charles knows that it’s over—for his family, at least. The only hope he has now is to make a run for it, if he still can. In an enraged panic, he flings his now empty gun right at Gabby. The gun hits her squarely in the forehead and she cries out in pain as he sprints down the hall and bolts out the door.

Charles sits down inside his crummy car and puts his key in the ignition. But as he repeatedly tries to start his car, he finds that the engine won’t turn over—the result of a bad battery that he’s been meaning to change out soon, when he can afford it.

Panicking even more, he screams at his car in frustration and gets out. He then starts sprinting down the neighborhood street—as the sound of sirens becomes more audible.

After managing to get pretty far down the street from his house, Charles looks back and sees a speeding cop car turn into his driveway and then a policeman exit the vehicle. Unfazed, he

continues his sprint for survival, but soon he comes to a stop when he sees what's ahead of him.

Two cruisers have pulled up in front of him, and the cops inside exit their cars with their guns drawn. Charles just drops to his knees, crying and bawling. He knows that the end of his freedom has come, and all he can do is wonder what he's done to deserve the scorn of the universe.

* * *

As Charles' memories fade away, Veronica tries to digest everything he has said to her. She actually feels a little sorry for him and for the unfortunate circumstances that led him down the path he took.

"Rough day, huh?" she says almost comically.

"Pffft... rough *life*, more like."

The rain outside continues to shower the jet as Charles goes on with his story.

"Anyway, after that, I got to stay in jail, while Gabby's parents arranged a *real* lawyer for her. She ended up getting a sweet plea deal: no jail time, some community service, rehab. And once she was done with all that, she got to go back home to her parents in New York and be with our daughter—happily ever after."

He takes a gulp from his last bit of whisky. "And *aaalll* she had to do was rat me out to the prosecutors, telling them that I was working with those dealers. I, of course, got the book thrown at me, and, well, you read the court docs; you know the rest. Great fuckin' life, eh?"

Veronica twists her glass on the table, thinking of what to say. "It's pretty awful whatcha did—specially with Tyler," she says to him lightly.

"Yeah, I'm aware."

Veronica frowns while smirking. "I mean, the 'n-word' was a little much—"

“Yeah, I-I get it; sorry. Trust me, if I could go back in time and do it all differently, I would—in a second.” Charles absentmindedly stares down at the device gripping his arm. “Funny, I’ve got a real-life time machine here, but it just doesn’t go in the direction I want it to. Sick fucking joke, eh?”

“You believe in destiny?” Veronica asks halfheartedly.

A feeling of irony washes over Charles. “I guess I kinda have to now,” he says, looking at his device again.

“Didja ever have any remorse while you were in prison?” Veronica then asks, changing the subject.

“Ha. No—if anything, it only made me hate the world even more.”

“Yeah, I getcha. Sorry the world’s been lousy to ya, by the way.”

Puzzled at hearing her feeling sorry for him, Charles isn’t sure if she’s being sincere or if it’s just the alcohol talking. Either way, he won’t look a gift horse in the mouth. “Thanks—Mitchell said the same thing earlier.”

He turns around to look at the cockpit door and quietly wonders how Mitchell is doing.

“So,” he says, turning back to Veronica, “that’s *my* story—what’s the deal with you and Mitchell? I haven’t exactly gotten to know you two since y’all *kidnapped* me.”

Veronica smirks a little without taking her eyes off her empty glass. “Not much to tell, but we’ve known each other for a while now. We’ve always had each other’s backs, ever since we, er... How much did Mitchell tell you, anyway?”

“Nothing,” Charles shrugs. “He barely said anything about these ‘devices’ we’re carrying, let alone his life story. Oh, he mentioned he was a tax accountant, but I think he was just screwing with me.”

Veronica snorts. “*That’s* what he told you?” she says, barely containing her amusement.

Charles rolls his eyes, thinking she must be in on the joke.

"It's true, actually," she says, now serious. "He used to be an independent tax accountant. But I guess he didn't mention that he was also a United States Air Force pilot before that, huh?"

When he hears this, Charles' jaw almost hits the table. Then he recalls Mitchell hinting to him that these devices came from the military, and it all begins to click for him. "Wow. OK, so you guys are military, right? I guess that explains why you got these time machines, right?"

"No, it doesn't," Veronica replies bitterly. She looks away, almost saddened and guilty. "I guess he also didn't tell ya he had a family, too, huh? A wife and daughter—just like you."

"He did?!" Charles says, absolutely surprised. "Wait—you're saying he *had* a family?"

Veronica sighs. "I suppose none o' this is gonna make sense unless I tell you from the beginnin'." A moment passes as she gathers her thoughts. "You ever heard of somethin' called Project UMBRA?"

Charles shakes his head.

"I'd be amazed if you did, since it was top secret. It was a project that was created under the Bush administration as part of the *Patriot Act*."

"The *Patriot Act*?" asks Charles. "Wasn't that, like, after 9/11? Took away all our rights 'n' shit?"

"Yup, the very same. Anyway, the *purpose* of the project was to develop new technology for the military—to help combat terrorism. Lots of people were involved: scientists, top generals an' a whole bunch of other groups all had a hand in the early stages. It was incredibly secretive, though: stringent security clearances were required, an' most of the faculty an' staff were restricted in movement, includin' who interacted with whom. They *claimed* that it was to make sure terrorist spies an' foreign adversaries couldn't get a proper picture of the place, but I found out later what the *real* reason was."

Charles takes it all in. He now knows that the devices are US military, but he still has so many questions. “Hold on—what place?” he asks. “Where *was* this?”

Veronica smirks. “Ironically enough, the project was held at a black site back in Nevada—not too far from where we got you, in fact. Ya get only one guess to figure out what this place was.”

Thinking for a second, Charles draws a blank and shrugs.

“I’ll give ya a hint: it’s got aliens.”

He nearly jumps out of his seat.

Chapter Fifteen

Captain

The hapless idiot can't help himself. "A-Area 51?!" Charles blurts out. "You shittin' me right now?! You two're from Area 51? Are there really aliens and—"

"Alright, alright—calm down, white-boy," Veronica says to the overexcited convict. "First off, no, there's no aliens—never were. It was mostly Air Force stuff an' military testin'. Sorry to disappoint. An' second, believe me, I WISH it were aliens, but it's not. It was somethin' far worse."

"Worse?" questions the former prisoner.

She exhales a deep sigh. "How much d'ya trust the government, Charles? Think they'd ever do anythin' *really* bad? Like, to their own people?"

Charles shrugs. "I, uh, remember my history teacher said stuff about how we did some bad crap to the Indians and, erm, Black people like you—and they had, like, Japanese internment during World War Two. But, aren't there supposed to be checks and balances these days?"

Veronica is surprised by Charles' knowledge of these things. Then again, she thinks to herself that most Americans *should* be aware of this stuff to begin with. "Checks an' balances only work if the right people know 'bout the shit that's goin' on under their noses. Project UMBRA was top secret; so, nobody—outside of those involved with it—ever found out."

Charles shrugs again. "OK, then, tell me. What did they do that was so bad?"

Pausing—and holding Charles in suspense—Veronica reaches over to the bottle of booze and pours another drink for herself. “Well, maybe I’m gettin’ ahead of myself,” she says. “Let me tell ya about how someone like *me* ends up at Area 51 in the first place.”

Charles shrugs once more. “Uh, sure, go ahead.”

“Right, so I started this stupid game of life as an orphan. From what I found out, my ma slept aroun’ a lot for money, an’ fuck knows who my daddy is. So, she gave me up. I was in an’ out of projects an’ shit before I got myself a stable home. Couldn’t afford college, though, so I looked into the military.”

She takes a large swig of her drink. “I went with the Air Force. I heard good things ’bout ’em—was hopin’ they would foot the bill for my schoolin’. Funny enough, I ended up likin’ bein’ in the USAF so much that I pretty much said to hell with higher education.”

“Huh, no kidding? Maybe I should’ve joined.”

“Ha, lemme finish, an’ *then* tell me if it’s still a good deal.”

Charles begins to get goosebumps as Veronica goes on.

“So anyway, I did my basic, became a pilot, then an engineer—ended up doin’ a couple o’ tours in Iraq.”

“Whoa, you’re a war vet?” responds Charles. “So was my grandpa. Did you see any action?”

“Not really, I was mostly blowin’ up children in the Middle East with drone strikes.”

“Oh,” Charles says in a quiet voice.

An awkward silence fills the cabin as Veronica takes a nonchalant swig of her drink. “They own your soul, y’know. They don’t tell ya that when ya sign up. Usually, ya just normalize it and keep followin’ orders; I did that shit for *yeeaaaarrrs*. An’ then one day, about two years ago, I got picked for security-clearance processin’ and was offered the chance to do some field testin’ for a certain ‘top secret military project’ out at Groom Lake.”

“Project UMBRA, right? Wait, where’s Groom Lake?” Charles asks.

Veronica rolls her eyes. “That’s where Area 51 is located—in Nevada. Surprised ya didn’t pick up on that.”

Shut up, bitch, thinks Charles.

“So, after I get there,” continues Veronica, “first thing they told me is that I’d be livin’ there for days at a time and would only be allowed to leave on the weekends. Now, that shit scared me, sure, but not as much as the *second* thing they told me.”

Charles gulps. “Second thing?”

“Yeah, they said I’d be under full surveillance at all times an’ had to abide by all security codes an’ regulations—an’ if I stepped out of line, or made a mistake that compromised the secrecy of the project, they’d straight up execute me as a traitor, right on the spot.”

The words echo in Charles’ head as he listens, baffled.

“Remember when I asked ya how much ya trust your government?” Veronica asks with a smirk.

Charles merely swears under his breath and looks at her in disbelief.

“It sucked, for sure,” says Veronica. “But I was already accustomed to followin’ orders without question. So I did my job—checkin’ aircraft an’ weapons, an’ even doin’ a few fly-’rounds in the desert with some pretty state-of-the-art stuff.”

“Oh, well, that sounds pretty cool.”

“Oh, it was. Great pay, too. But eventually, someone else was brought in for the fieldwork an’ I ended up advancin’ in the project. I got moved—to deep underground inside the base—an’ was given a new commandin’ officer to serve under.” A faint smile appears on her face, which expresses a wistful sadness. “Back then, he was known as *Captain* Mitchell Grayson.”

Listening to Veronica, Charles almost doesn’t believe her. The man who captured him is not just from the military but also apparently high-ranking—or at least, Charles *thinks* he has a high rank. In fact, the convict doesn’t know how high up the chain a Captain is, if he’s honest with himself.

As he shakes his head from everything he's learned so far, Charles eyes the near-empty bottle of whiskey that the two of them have been guzzling and pours himself another glass.

"I'll tell ya this right now, man: The Mitchell ya know today ain't the same as the one I met back then," Veronica continues. "He used to be a serious, by-the-book, no-nonsense officer that pretty much only did whatever he was told to do by the higher-ups.

"Uh, I don't really know him well enough to make a comparison," Charles says, honestly. "I mean, I've only been with him for a day."

"Trust me, he was different. At first, I actually didn't like him at all: too much of a guy with a stick up his ass. Didn't matter to me, though—I was just there to do what he said an' report to him."

She sighs with melancholy. "When I was assigned to Mitchell's command, my role had changed from bein' a pilot/mechanic to bein' part of... internal security control."

Hearing her voice quiver and trail off, Charles looks at her with concern. "Yeah? And what's *that* mean?" he asks, suspicious.

"It means I was one of the personnel tasked with managin' an' guardin' the t-test subjects."

A sense of alarm creeps up on Charles. "Test subjects? What do you mean by 'managing' them—"

"It was a concentration camp, alright?!" Veronica shouts. "They were forcin' people to be used as guinea pigs for all the weapons an' tech that was bein' built. A-at first it was terrorists that they brought in from Gitmo, but then it became regular citizens that they could make 'disappear': homeless people an' prisoners an' other folks who 'wouldn't be missed'. Orphans too—little kids, just like how *I* used to be."

A dreadful fear rises in Charles. "S-serious? What exactly were they doing to these people?"

"Like I said, test subjects. Certain parts of Area 51 are what you might call 'Constitution-free' zones. Anythin' goes when it comes to progressin' the military-industrial complex and securin'

America's interests aroun' the world. That's the bullshit line they fed me when I was promoted."

Shaking a little, Veronica brings her glass up to her lips and gulps down some more of her drink. "I've seen some shit that'd make the Nazis blush. People being tortured with a 'microwave gun' an' bein' injected with experimental chemicals that can dissolve you from the inside-out. And what they did to those orphaned kids."

She grabs the device attached to Charles' arm and yanks it upward while glaring at him with a clenched jaw. "Mitchell told ya that only a few select people can go into the future with these things an' not go brain-dead—remember?"

"Y-yeah?" says Charles, nodding nervously.

"Well, how do ya think they figured *that* out?" Veronica tosses his arm back onto the table with a plop. "They originally built those devices for special operations. They were made so that soldiers could *theoretically* use them to transport themselves to different locations usin' some kinda 'quantum entanglement' bullshit. Later on—I dunno how—the scientists discovered that you could *also* transport yourself through time using some kinda algorithmic modification they created."

"Traveling through 'space-time', right?" Charles asks. "Mitchell told me it wasn't just time-travel, but space-travel too—that's why we don't get stranded somewhere in outer space when we jump into the future."

"Yeah, sure," says Veronica. "Anyway, it was a major breakthrough for the whole project like ya wouldn't believe—the defense contractors an' administrators couldn't have been happier. But then the project hit a roadblock. Ya see, they could send objects anywhere on earth an' even into the future. Robots, cameras, sensory equipment an' everythin' would be intact and fully functional, but life forms largely couldn't survive, for some reason; they never did find out exactly *why*."

Charles watches her reminisce as she nurses her drink.

“What they *did* discover was that not everyone came back dead; some were in a coma or had some kinda mental deterioration. An’ that’s when they began testin’ people in droves, just tryin’ to find a pattern or a solution.”

Veronica looks away from him. “I was one of the officers assigned to the subjects bein’ tested for those devices. I was supposed to restrain an’ escort them to the testin’ area. An’ I complied, fully, thinkin’ I was just doin’ my job. But in the back of my head, I knew I was sendin’ people to their graves.”

A hush falls over the two, and after wiping her eyes a bit, she struggles to continue. “All I could do was watch. I can still hear their screams, man—every night.”

Charles feels sick. He can’t believe that Veronica was willingly involved in such horrific experiments. “No way this could’ve happened. S-someone would have done something—someone would’ve broken the story that this was happening.” He frowns up at her. “Someone like *you*,” he adds.

Veronica scoffs at her drinking buddy’s accusation. “Oh, yeah? What was I supposed to do, HUH?!”

“SOMETHING!” he yells. “I mean, shit, you were marching people to their death!”

“You don’t think I know that?! I’ll *never* forgive myself for bein’ a part of all that! An’ *you* don’t get to lecture me! You’ve got blood on your hands, too!”

“Are you out of your mind?! Compared to what you were doing, I’m a fuckin’ saint!”

Gritting her teeth, Veronica understands she’s on the losing side of this argument but still presses on. “S-so what should I have done, then, *huh*? Go to the press and tell ’em what was goin’ on at a top secret facility? The military would’a simply denied everythin’ an’ then killed me. Or, maybe I should’ve just gone up to the heads of the project an’ demanded that they stop using live subjects, right? Cuz I got news for you: that’s EXACTLY what Mitchell did, an’ they...”

She stops and cries a little. Charles' anger subsides as he sees how distressed she is.

Gathering herself, Veronica continues, "I saw the look on Mitchell's face the day his superiors dragged him out an' locked him up for insubordination. It was a week before I saw him again, but this time, he was a test subject. An' his wife and daughter were there as well—also subjects."

"My God," mutters Charles, astonished.

"Yeah, I know, right?" says Veronica, sniffing. "An' I was the one who had to escort him to the testin' area. Goddamn, it's like it was yesterday. I can still see Mitchell beggin' for mercy as his family was bein' strapped in and tested."

She knocks back the rest of the booze in her glass. "Mitchell was forced to watch both of them—one after the other—come back to the present as corpses. His own *daughter* had to watch her mother's lifeless body get dragged away like she was garbage. An' then... she was next. I had never seen a man get so broken down an' destroyed; he truly loved his family, y'know? It made it that much worse."

Reeling, Charles starts to feel foolish for how he acted towards Mitchell when he said he didn't want to talk about his past. He understands now that what happened to his captor was monstrous and cruel—and certainly more horrible than what Charles himself has gone through.

"Hey, man," says Veronica as he focuses his attention back at her, "I'm sorry I've been treatin' ya like dog shit, 'K? I know I have no right to look down on ya for what ya did, when I was doin' way worse. I know I don't really have an excuse for all that, but that's why I'm tryin' to make up for it by helpin' Mitchell with his plan to save the world."

Charles hangs his head, thinking about her apology. She may have mistreated him initially, but what's he gonna do about it? Scream at her and call her a hypocrite? He knows that won't solve anything. "Yeah, whatever. I don't really care."

Veronica senses that Charles is simply trying to hide his ire towards her, but she'll take the forgiveness anyway. "Th-thanks. Y'know, it's nice to be able to talk to someone about all this—other than Mitchell, that is; I've kinda been holdin' it in, so... thanks for listenin'."

Gazing out the window, Charles sees the rain coming down hard again. A thought crosses his mind, about him and Veronica and Mitchell and how the three of them have been brutalized in their own ways. "Hey," he asks her, "you ever wonder if maybe these monsters are coming for a reason? Like, maybe the world kinda deserves it?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Forget it. I was just thinking about something," he lies.

Veronica sips her drink, knowing—partly, anyhow—what her new friend across the table is implying. "Well, I dunno if we *deserve* it, but we still live on this ball of rock an' we gotta at least try."

"Do we, though?" Charles asks, emotionless.

The words send a chill through Veronica's body and she gawks at him a bit.

But before she can ask what he means by that, he changes the subject. "So what, uh, happened after? With Mitchell?"

"Oh, right. Well, after they were finished with his family, they strapped Mitchell in. But this time, one of the scientists accidentally changed the date on the device. You see, they'd been sendin' people an' things only a few minutes, hours or maybe days into the future, an' the devices were pre-set to jump the person back only after they'd been there for an hour. This time, though, they set the date 20 whole *years* ahead."

Charles looks down at his device, and it all starts to click for him. "So that's why our devices are pre-set for 20 years, then—just because some scientist screwed up the date, huh?"

"Yeah. Mitchell must've already told you that the date can't be changed, either—not without administrative access."

The convict nods, remembering his conversation with Mitchell back at the airport.

As she trails off, Veronica lets out a faint, despondent laugh. “Mitchell was puttin’ up such a fight—screamin’ all the way to the gurney like a champ. But after they activated the device, he didn’t come back the way they thought he would.”

“H-how do you mean?”

“I saw it with my own eyes. Mitchell fired off into the future an’ came back in an instant, but this time he was on the floor and clear on the other side of the room. I guess it was because that gurney he was strapped into was broken down enough in the future that he could get out an’ move aroun’. I remember we were all *stunned* by that.”

She shakes her head, then takes a greedy sip of her drink and coughs. “Anyway, Mitchell regained consciousness and started screamin’ an’ shit. They all thought he was just gonna be another case of serious insanity—until he started yellin’ at them about how the facility was destroyed in the future and that there was *somethin’* crawlin’ aroun’ in the area. Right then an’ there, they dragged him off to solitary confinement an’ suspended the device testin’ indefinitely.”

Gazing out the window, Veronica wobbles her glass on the table in a lazy fashion. “It’s funny you asked why no one put a stop to that madness. It was because everyone was scared of the top brass—especially the director of the project itself.”

“Who’s that?”

“No idea. Never met the man or got his name. Everythin’ was classified. But Mitchell told me he met him for the first time, and only time, while in solitary. He’s the one who was responsible for the horror show. He’s the one who authorized the kidnappin’s an’ experiments.” She shakes her head in disgust. “Evil piece o’ shit.”

Charles gulps.

“Anyway,” Veronica continues, “as luck would have it, I was assigned to look after Mitchell in solitary, while the researchers poked an’ prodded him—tryin’a figure out what made him

different from the others. That was when they found that he had some kinda protein blocks in his genetic code which allowed his brain to recover from the trips. It's the same for you too."

"Man, that's crazy," comments Charles. "How long was he kept like that?"

Veronica huffs. "*Indefinitely*. He was never meant to leave—it was a nightmare for him. They kept testin' away, an' they eventually made a second, more 'refined' version of the device; it even had a genetic analyzer built in." Raising her hand, she points to the device that's latched onto her co-passenger's arm.

"Oh," mutters Charles as he rubs his hand on his device.

"Mitchell kept askin' me to kill him."

Charles does a double take. "Wh-what?"

"I was the only one aroun' that talked to him like he was a goddamn human bein'. He said that he had nothin' to live for an' nothin' mattered, an' that all that was left was for him to die. I really felt for him an' tried to talk with him about stuff—like his hobbies an' what his life was like, y'know, from before. I dunno, I guess I felt guilty."

"Damn. What sorts of things did he tell you?"

Leaning back, Veronica stares up at the cabin light overhead with a gentle smile. "Hmm, he talked 'bout his time in the Air Force, during the Gulf War. After that, he was discharged an' then went on to marry the girl he grew up with an' start a family an' a tax business. Typical 'American Dream' nonsense. But, thanks to the recession, his business started to go south 'til it finally tanked. Mitchell got pretty desperate. An' then he got a phone call from an old buddy of his. The military was lookin' to reinstate him an' have him work on the project. Needless to say, Mitchell jumped at the chance—he needed the income. If only he'd known..."

The smile on her face fades away. "His wife's name was Julia, an' his daughter's was Ashley. Mitchell told me that she had barely turned 18—still just a kid."

Charles shakes his head, feeling a frustrated anger rise within him. “I can’t believe this shit was happening—wait, is it *still* happening?”

Veronica tilts her head down so that her eyes meet Charles’. “Not anymore. Turns out, you were right to think that *someone* shoulda done *somethin’*.”

“What do you mean?”

She smiles again, but just as weakly as before. “I dunno *exactly* what was goin’ on under the surface, but I knew that a few soldiers weren’t too pleased when their ‘Captain’ got brutalized the way he did. Maybe they feared they were next—who fuckin’ knows. So one day, sometime durin’ the evenin’, a riot broke out an’ the local security was overwhelmed. The whole place turned into a war zone, an’ I honestly didn’t think I was gonna make it out of there. If it weren’t for Mitchell, I’m sure I wouldn’t have.”

“A riot? Like, a prison break?”

“Nah, more like a wave of anarchy. I remember Mitchell got sprung from confinement by a fellow soldier an’ he somehow managed to get ahold of both those devices.”

A shiver runs down Veronica’s back and she trembles. “Next thing I know, he’s tellin’ me to come with him, an’—I swear to God—he picks up a machine gun an’ starts using his device to jump in an’ out of the present, all over the base, killin’ everyone in his way. He basically cleared a path for me, an’ we both got the hell outta there.”

Charles leans back in his seat as he takes in the incredible story. “Man, that’s nuts. So, wait—is Area 51 gone now? I know I was locked up for a while, but I never heard any news about something crazy like that.”

He can see a great sadness deep in Veronica’s eyes. “The reason ya never heard ’bout it is cuz they cleaned the whole mess up an’ swept it under the rug—it was an absolute order from the project director. We were lucky it was nighttime when we escaped, otherwise we would’a been snuffed out by the special forces units

sent in to destroy everythin' related to the project. I know *for a fact* that nothin' else survived."

"Oh yeah, how?" asks Charles, curious.

"Cuz that's what they told me on my first day. Everythin' gets burned, an' it all goes away. No survivors, no evidence, no nothin'—an' no one left to claim that somethin' happened. All those people that were tortured an' killed: gone... an' forgotten. Me an' Mitchell are the only ones that made it out of there that day."

The rain outside slows to a stop at last, and the two passengers gaze out to see some sunshine crack through the dark clouds.

"It's been over a year, an' we've been in hidin' ever since," explains Veronica as she stretches her arms out. "Not much else to say, except that without these time machines, we would'a been fucked before we even left the desert."

Finishing her trip down memory lane, she lets out a deep sigh. "It's weird. The only reason Mitchell came to help me was cuz I didn't treat him like some number. But even still, he didn't hafta—specially not after how complicit I was in everythin'. I owe that man my life."

Meanwhile, Charles is left almost speechless. He knew that the people who kidnapped him must've been involved in something big due to having time machines in the first place, but he never would've thought that their backgrounds would be so shockingly terrible and evil.

"Well, that's *my* story—an' Mitchell's too, kinda. Aren't ya glad ya asked?" says Veronica with sarcasm.

"Not really, no," says Charles in earnest.

Veronica chuckles. "Yeah, well, I guess we learned a li'l bit 'bout each other today, didn't we? I wanna believe that means somethin'."

The overhead speakers on the plane suddenly crackle to life, and Charles hears Mitchell's voice.

"Alright, you two; we'll be descending soon, so buckle up—and Veronica, make sure everything's put away."

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Chapter Fifteen

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With a smile, a slightly drunk Veronica raises her empty glass.
“Aye aye, Captain.”

Chapter Sixteen

Prey

A chilling wind blows through the streets of the nation's capital. People are back outside now that the rain shower has finally stopped—even though the dark, gloomy sky still threatens those below with a second downpour.

Driving down Washington's freshly wet roads is Ronald Mayhue in his luxury black sedan. He admires the freshness of the buildings and the landscape as he turns off his wipers, but he finds himself unable to enjoy it all. Mitchell is still beyond his grasp, and he's been anxiously awaiting a phone call from his lifelong partner, Mark Tannehill, to give him some good news as to when and where they can intercept the plane being flown by his elusive prey. Moreover, he's still angry about his one-sided shouting match with his former "benefactor", Robert Hershaw.

A bitter clench forms in his jaw as he pulls his car up to the security gates of the Department of Homeland Security headquarters, a place he has called his "home away from home". The window rolls down and Mayhue fumbles a tad with his magnetized passcard. The scanner reads it and emits a loud, obnoxious beep, signaling that he now has the privilege of entering the restricted area.

The front gate opens slowly, much to Mayhue's annoyance; he's in a hurry to get inside. At last there's just enough space for the impatient G-Man to squeeze on through. After weaving around the parking area at a reckless speed, he parks in his executive spot

and exits the vehicle, then locks up without so much as a glance behind him.

When he reaches the parking elevator that'll take him up to his office, he is greeted by an overly chipper colleague.

"Good afternoon, sir."

Mayhue barely masks his eye-rolling as he glances at the man next to him. "Not now, Brett," he says, tapping the elevator button. "I'm very busy."

"Oh—sorry, sir," says the suck-up employee.

They hear a ding, and the door opens to reveal a vacant elevator waiting to take him to the top. Mayhue starts to enter while giving Brett a fiery stare.

Almost reading his mind, Brett backs off. "I-I'll get the next one. I'm h-heading down, anyway."

"Good," says Mayhue as the door closes quietly.

On a top floor of the building, in a large room surrounded by busybodies in an endless grid of cubicles, the far elevator opens and Mayhue resumes his march. A few of his fellow employees try to get his attention about the various happenings and topics of the day, but their words fall on deaf ears; Mayhue is laser-focused on arriving at his desk so that he can get to work on the only real issue on his mind: Mitchell Grayson.

Having reached his corner office, he closes the door right away once inside, hoping to drown out the background noise from the worker drones outside.

"Nice to finally see you again."

Mayhue whips his head around to see where that voice came from, only to find an old friend sitting patiently on his guest sofa. The bald man stares back at him with tired, almost lifeless eyes, then lets out a hack and a wheeze from his crinkled smoker's mouth just as his pal recognizes him.

"Well, well, well—Mark Tannehill," Mayhue says with a fake smile. "This is a pleasant surprise." He knows that Tannehill can see through his little lie, though. It's a gift of his that Mayhue

knows all too well, ever since the days when they fought in the Gulf War. “How’d you get past security?”

“I have my ways—not that I need to tell YOU,” says Tannehill with a smirk.

“Right, of course.” Mayhue peers out his window to see if anyone may have been watching from the cubicles, then draws the blinds before turning his full attention to the uninvited guest. “I take it you’re here because you have something for me that you couldn’t bother to relay over the phone, yes?”

Tannehill snorts. “Maybe I just wanted to stop by and see my old war buddy again.”

Mayhue raises an eyebrow in disbelief at such trite nonsense.

“Truth is,” Tannehill continues, “I came here to set up your network for encrypted remote communication.”

Mayhue eyes his desk. “You tampered with my computer?”

“Just needed to install some software. It’s all ready to go. You’ll have an open line with us during the operation: live cameras, microphones, field data. You’ll be with us—virtually—during the mission.” Tannehill then points to a headset with a microphone piece of sorts plugged into the computer.

A sudden skip in his heart, Mayhue looks at Tannehill with an almost sickening glee. “So... it’s happening, then? They’re going to be here in DC soon?”

Seeming to struggle to get up off the couch, Tannehill raises himself and walks to Mayhue. “Got the call from my contact over an hour ago. The bird’s in the air; flight path hasn’t changed, either. He’s comin’ right for us and’ll touch down within an hour. Stay near your computer—I’ll be calling you for a diagnostic check before we start.”

“OK, good,” says Mayhue, barely containing his excitement. “Can you and your team mobilize by then?”

“It’s already done. I just need to meet up with them, and we’re green. Thought I’d come see you first and make sure things were good to go here.”

Mayhue exhales in palpable relief. “Glad you did, Mark.”

Tannehill frowns at his friend. “So, there’s nothing I *really* need to know about these guys, right? It’s just a bag, tag and sweep—right?”

The smile on Mayhue’s face tenses up. “I’ve told you all I can. You *know* that. Everything else is classified,” he says, his fake smile returning.

“Well, thought I should ask, is all.” As Tannehill moves to the door, he puts a smirk on his grizzled face. “After this is over, how ’bout we go to a sports bar or something and celebrate? My treat. My favorite team’s hot this season.”

In your dreams, you fat old windbag. “Sorry, Mark,” smiles Mayhue, “I have plans this week with my daughter. She’s playing against her rival school’s soccer team and wants her daddy to cheer her on. How could I say no to that? Rain check?”

“Heh... fine,” says Tannehill. “Family comes first, I get it. But I’ll hold you to that rain check.” He opens the door and laboriously walks out, being sure to close it behind him.

In the now quiet office, Mayhue waltzes up to the door and clicks the lock, then sits at his computer, wondering what exactly his “war buddy” has done to it. When he taps on the keyboard, the monitor lights up to show a desktop with a foreign interface already loaded. It seems to be some kind of surveillance software. There are screens for video feeds and audio channels for microphones, along with other settings.

Out of curiosity, Mayhue picks up the headset that Tannehill has left and puts it on. Adjusting the earphones, he lowers the microphone piece and breathes into it. “Testing, testing.”

With each word, the audio-input levels jump up and down. Leaning back in his overpriced executive chair, Mayhue folds his arms and chuckles. And a smile forms on his face, but not like the fraudulent, friendly ones he’s shown to other people. No, *this* smile is quite authentic—yet deadly and sinister.

* * *

After some time, outside one of Virginia's small airstrips, Mitchell's private jet comes screaming towards the runway. As the plane descends, Charles looks out his seat window and observes the ground coming closer and closer to him.

With a jolt, he feels the plane bonk the ground and slow down. The roar of the jet engines reversing thrust rattles the cabin, and upon the safe touchdown Charles starts to breathe a sigh of relief, but also of disappointment. He almost wishes he could have just stayed up in the air forever—away from all the people, their problems and a society that wants to kill him. But he knows that's a fantasy that'll never come true.

Reluctantly, he clicks open his seat belt and gets up, just as he sees his co-passenger, Veronica, do the same.

Following the markings on the runway, Mitchell guides the plane along the lone airstrip until it reaches the only hangar on the field—conveniently located near the rural road that'll take them to Washington.

When the plane finally comes to a full stop and the engines begin to wind down, both Veronica and Charles do some stretching to alleviate the effects of their long flight.

The intercom speakers suddenly crackle back on. "OK, you two, start unloading. I'll be out in a sec."

As the speakers turn off and the inside lighting kicks on, Charles peers out the window. The tiny, single-runway airstrip is surrounded by forest and fencing and seems incredibly rural and vacant. He thinks to himself that this airport must not be used all that much and is probably only meant for the locals. It would be unusual for a private jet to land in a place like this, as opposed to at a regular airport with terminals and such—like the one they left in Vegas. Shaking his head, he figures that Mitchell maybe knows the people who run the place, or perhaps it's just smarter to use a more secluded airport rather than a large public one.

"Yo, Charlie—mind givin' me a hand with this?"

His thoughts interrupted, a mildly shocked Charles turns to Veronica to see her wheeling a large suitcase, with another one behind her.

“Hey,” he says to her, half-smiling, “you called me by my name—I don’t think you’ve done that before. You always just called me ‘white-boy’ an’ shit.”

Veronica smirks a little from embarrassment. “Well, uh, guess I better start then, huh?”

Charles smiles and even laughs a bit—the first time he’s genuinely done that in a very long time—and grabs one of the suitcases.

Mitchell then bursts out of the cockpit and looks back and forth between the other two. “Are we ready? We need to head out as soon as we can.”

Charles nods and Veronica pushes the button to open the cabin door of the plane. As light from the overcast sky enters, she sees an overweight service attendant sporting a jacket and a trucker’s hat come marching across the strip to greet them.

“Yo, Mitchell,” says Veronica, tapping on his shoulder.

“Huh, wha—?” After peering out, Mitchell spots the man Veronica is conveniently pointing out. “Oh, right—be a dear and handle that for me, would ya?”

Veronica sighs as she watches Mitchell go back inside to look over the things he needs to bring. They won’t be coming back to this plane for a while at least, so everything they’ll need has to be taken from it.

At this point Charles scoots past Veronica and briskly descends the staircase. He stretches some more, takes a huge whiff of the fresh, rainy air and gazes all around him, including at the beautiful, wet forest across the airstrip.

He feels a sudden firm grip on his neck and instantly turns to see Veronica peering into his eyes.

“Didja forget, while we were up there? Your face is on the news, dude. Cover up,” she says, frowning at him.

The stern warning makes its way inside his brain as he remembers that he's a wanted fugitive. So he bitterly flips his hood back onto his head.

Veronica elects to ignore her grumpy ally and instead turns her attention to the attendant.

"Hi there!" the attendant says, laughing. "Uh, I guess you're not Sam Burling, eh?"

"He's still on the jet, but you can talk with me, if ya want."

"Oh, uh, nah, that's fine. It can wait; I'll come back later when he's ready."

Veronica just snorts and looks away. "A'ight, s'your call."

After giving an awkward smile, the attendant spins around and marches back to the hangar he came from.

Once he's left, Veronica looks around and notices the forest beyond the fencing, which Charles was admiring. A strange feeling of suspicion engulfs her. Years of training in military combat scenarios have given her a keen sense of perception. It was a skill needed for determining if an area was safe to traverse, or if it was rigged with traps or surrounded by enemies.

And right now, those senses are coming back to her and telling her that she may be in danger. *It's too quiet, an' we're out in the open. Shit.*

The blood drains from her face, and in a flash she leaves Charles and sprints up the staircase back into the plane, almost smacking into Mitchell.

Confused, he watches her move down the cabin and open one of the duffel bags. "Forgot something?" he asks.

"Just a hunch—hope I'm wrong."

Having reached in, Veronica pulls out a loaded handgun and tucks it into her pants. Then she opens an overhead bin, yanks out a large, hard case and quickly unlocks and opens it to reveal a high-powered assault rifle.

Mitchell shakes his head at seeing what his partner is doing. He's seen her act this way a few times before. The suspicions and

paranoia were rarely warranted when she acted up, and he's pretty much chalked it up to PTSD at this point.

"Well," he says, about to descend the stairs, "just don't forget *my* suitcase—with the clothes in it. I need some clean undies for tonight."

Oblivious, Veronica grabs the rifle, loads it with a magazine and eyes it over, then puts it back in its case, ready to go.

Charles, meanwhile, continues to enjoy the rain-washed environment and wishes to himself that he could get a cigarette to smoke. Spotting Mitchell reach ground level, he walks up to him. "So, you really don't have any smokes on ya, huh? Could we, maybe, I dunno, get some at a store, later?"

Mitchell doesn't even bother to validate Charles' question with a response.

* * *

Back at DHS, Mayhue bites his nails in his office, anxiously awaiting the phone call from his friend. *He'd better not have already gotten himself compromised. Wouldn't be the first time.*

The silence of the office is abruptly broken by the sound of his phone vibrating on his desk, rattling like a drill on concrete. The sudden shock almost makes Mayhue jump out of his chair, and he eagerly snatches up the phone and mashes the call button on the screen. "Yes?" he says, exasperated.

On the other end is Tannehill, who is hunkered down inside a surveillance van. All around him is enough high-tech gadgetry to make an FBI van look underfunded in comparison. He's also sitting with a tech assistant, and there's even a driver in the front seat smoking a cig while waiting for his orders.

"You there, Ron?" Tannehill asks in a raspy voice.

"I'm here. What do you need?"

"Ah, good. Alright, I need you on your computer; we're about ready on this end."

Not wasting a second, Mayhue fervently taps a key on his computer to wake it up. The screen brightens and shows the software interface from before, just as he left it. “Now what?”

“OK, go into ‘Connect’, and I need you to type in a username and password that I’m gonna give you.”

“Done. Give it to me.”

“Two, six, five, three, nine—all numbers.”

Mayhue clacks the correct keys on the keyboard and moves on to the next part. “Password?”

“Yeah, uh, it’s ‘pussy slayer six nine’—all one word.”

Raising an eyebrow, Mayhue taps the keys. “How crude.”

“Heh, yeah. You can blame my tech guy for *that* one.”

Tannehill glares at the grunt sitting next to him, who merely looks back at his surveillance monitor, embarrassed.

Hitting “Enter” on the keyboard, Mayhue sees the software trying to connect with... whatever it’s trying to connect with. After a moment, the video feeds and audio come online and Mayhue can see his old partner through the van’s interior camera, looking back at him and waving. Tannehill then taps a button on his phone and ends the call, but not before clicking a different button on the side of his headset. Mayhue takes the hint and grabs his own headset and pulls the installed microphone down.

“You in? Great. Can you hear me on this thing?”

Mayhue smirks, almost giddy at being able to see and hear his friend in real time. “Loud and clear,” he replies.

“Good. Now I want you to look over the feeds. You should be seeing what the personnel and snipers are able to see. Does everything look clear?”

After clicking on a few windows, Mayhue sees multiple views. Some cameras show the inside of an armored car with a small team of heavily armed men in tactical uniform; others show footage from their body cams. A few cameras seem to be capturing footage from outside, looking straight at the airstrip from different angles on ground level and also from rooftops. As he studies the images,

Mayhue understands that this must be rifle-scope footage that shows what the snipers are pointing at.

Amazed, he marvels at how far wartime technology has come since his days in the military. Not that he needs to be reminded; after all, his own leadership helped see the breakthrough of space-time technology—technology that has since been stolen by the very people he’s trying to kill.

Eyeing one camera feed in the top corner of the screen, Mayhue sees what one of the snipers is scoping. It’s two men, next to the plane. There’s no mistake: that sniper is aiming right at Mitchell Grayson, with Charles Wilson standing beside him.

Mayhue’s jaw and fists begin to clench at the very sight of the pair. All that remains of his secretive work is in the hands of a former test subject and his death row convict “partner”—and he feels a sense of revulsion. After all this time searching for him and hunting him down, after all this time regretting the errors he made with this trench-coated man, he now has Mitchell right where he wants him: in the crosshairs.

“Target Two—the female, Veronica Berkley—is still aboard the jet,” Tannehill informs him. “We’re not sure if she’s armed, but we’ll send in a tactical squad once—”

“Which sniper is looking at the man in the hat?!” interrupts Mayhue rather loudly. “That’s Grayson!”

“Uhh, that would be Sniper Delta. Why—?”

“Tell him to take the shot—NOW!” The alarm in Mayhue’s voice throws off both Tannehill and the other crew members.

“Whoa, hold on—there’s protocol to this. There’s also been a confirmed sighting of a civilian—”

“I don’t care! Shoot him right now before he moves out of range!”

“Uhh, Ron, slow down,” says an increasingly concerned Tannehill. “We need to wait for confirmed sight of Target Two. She’s still aboard the jet—”

“I don’t care!” Mayhue screams into his microphone. “The other two can wait; Grayson needs to be killed, RIGHT NOW!”

A chill runs down Tannehill's back at the anger, fear and desperation in Mayhue's voice. "Ron, I'm the commander of this mission, and I'm telling you that it isn't a—"

"I DON'T FUCKING CARE!!! I'm paying you a small fortune to do this, and you *will* do as I say! TAKE THE FUCKING SHOT!!!"

Tannehill reels. He's *never* heard Mayhue talk like this before—to anyone. He almost wants to ask him where the hell he gets off with this attitude, but then he remembers that Mayhue is, in the end, a client who's paying handsomely.

Moving calmly over to the audio control panel, Tannehill presses down on one of the many audio buttons and speaks straight into the panel's built-in standing microphone. "Sniper Delta, engage Target One—you have the green."

Just beyond the airstrip, hiding in the bushes and trees, a lone sniper peers through his scope, prone on his belly. "Sniper Delta, acknowledging. Engaging Target One."

The scope lines up, zooms in and focuses right on Mitchell's chest as the sniper makes adjustments for wind and gravity. After releasing his finger from the side of the rifle, he slowly squeezes the trigger that will fire the bullet meant to blow Mitchell away for good.

Meanwhile, time feels as if it's slowing down for Mayhue, whose heartbeat quickens from excitement as he observes Mitchell standing about, totally unaware of what's about to happen to him. His eyes glued to the camera feed of the sniper's hapless prey, Mayhue knows that with just one pull of the trigger, his biggest problem will at last be put to rest. He can hardly wait.

"Hi, there! You're Samuel Burling, right?" Without warning for the sniper, the airstrip attendant Veronica spoke with earlier strolls right up to Mitchell and reaches out to shake his hand.

Unfortunately for him, he's made the ill-fated decision to stand right between Mitchell and the forest—and the sniper has made the ill-fated decision to not check his target's perimeter before pulling the trigger.

Chapter Seventeen

Friend

The blast from the rifle ripples and echoes along the tree line and clear out into the field. The bullet fired from the weapon, however, arrives much faster than the sound. As a result, the poor attendant feels his death sooner than he hears it.

The force from the shot causes his body to fall right into Mitchell. But before Mitchell can react to the blow, he finds himself falling onto his back, with a very fresh corpse lying on top of him as if it were some kind of intimate lover.

The pulse of the shock wave rattles and confuses everyone in the area. Inside the jet, Veronica jolts upward after loading her gun and begins to fear the worst. And Charles goes from casually standing next to Mitchell to full alarm at seeing the attendant force his partner to the ground with a thud.

After a split second, the shock from being knocked over subsides and Mitchell can't help but wonder why he's suddenly on the ground and staring into the lifeless eyes of the man he was just about to have a chat with.

The sniper, wide-eyed and mouth agape, looks up from his smoking rifle and instantly realizes the mistake he's made. He *knows* that he's screwed up. But he also knows that the only way to make this right is to still complete the order he was given. Unaware of the state of his target, he prepares to fire another round—with the intent of hitting the man through the flesh of the dead bystander.

“Mitchell!” yells a stunned and alarmed Charles. A flood of adrenaline courses through his bloodstream as he tries to race to his companion.

But before he can even get close, a surge of light and shock overwhelms the fugitive. He barely has time to realize what’s happening to him, just as the light dispels and is replaced by near-darkness and a sense of imbalance.

It has happened again. The device on his arm has jumped him into the future—no doubt on Mitchell’s command. But this time, it’s not Nevada, it’s the East Coast.

The temperature is quite a bit cooler than it was back in the West, and the sky of the future is no longer a late-afternoon brown overcast but rather an evening twilight complete with a bright moon that is blocked to some extent by an eerie, blue-ish, all-encompassing fog. Thankfully, visibility is still quite reasonable, even with the lack of sunlight.

Before Charles can even make note of his new, unfamiliar environment, the ringing from the time travel resurfaces in his ears and he instinctively tries to cover them—but not before recalling what Mitchell said a while back about allowing his body to adapt to the shock.

So, as unpleasant as the experience is, Charles struggles—successfully—to keep his hands away from his ears in order to try and tolerate the shrill noise. And, just as before, the ringing fades away and he feels mild relief. He also hears a muffled voice scream his name amidst the ear-splitting deafness.

“CHARLES!”

Hearing the sudden yell of his name, he whips around to see poor Mitchell on the broken asphalt with the attendant’s body still crushing him. Without a second thought, he dashes to Mitchell’s side and contemplates what to do. However, he can only stare in deep shock; his mind is a flurry of questions as to what the hell just happened.

“Well? Are ya gonna help or not?” asks Mitchell with effort.

Charles snaps out of his trance, but it doesn't matter now: Mitchell has already managed to shove aside the heavy body. Feeling a little guilty about his inaction, he extends a hand—in a way, similar to when Mitchell offered him *his* hand, back at the airport in Vegas, when *he* was down on the ground. Unlike Charles, though, Mitchell graciously accepts the hand-up. He gets to his feet and pats himself down, hoping to God the bullet didn't somehow manage to hit him as well.

As Mitchell checks himself and his device, Charles is overcome by anxiety and fright. “What the hell happened?!” he asks, shaking. “Why are we here? And why is *he* here?!”

Mitchell peers at the corpse that Charles is pointing to. The unfortunate attendant is now nothing more than a mess lying in a tiny pool of his own blood, with a large hole blown through his back. If the sniper's bull's eye hadn't killed him, jumping into the future most certainly would have, anyway.

Turning his eyes away, Mitchell is *clearly* not interested. He's more concerned about something *else*. “Shut up,” he says to his partner with authority.

Charles is about to complain, but he sees what Mitchell is doing. They then both stare out into the distance all around them, in a state of paranoia. Just as in Nevada, the future version of Virginia is sickeningly quiet and unnerving. It's also devoid of life, as indicated by the absence of the forest that used to lie beyond the now-dilapidated airstrip.

It takes a second for Charles to realize that Mitchell's jet is also no longer sitting next to them. In fact, it's nowhere in sight. He figures it must have been moved in the present, just as was the case back when they were in the airport hangar in Vegas.

All things considered, the environment is what Charles has come to expect. Even on the other side of the country, it's still nothing but a hopeless, barren wasteland. It would surely depress him, if he wasn't on high alert. After all, nothing in the future world requires greater attention than *them*.

“OK, it should be safe,” says Mitchell.

“Y-you sure??”

“Uh, y-yeah. This whole area’s supposed to be clear of creatures for dozens of miles, at least. We should be okay, for now. But keep an eye out, and shout if you see anything that moves.”

With some relief, Charles nods in understanding. “OK, cool. So you gonna tell me what the *FUCK* happened back there?!”

Mitchell winces at the convict’s temper and looks away. He’s not sure how to explain this, since he hasn’t spoken to him about the man pursuing them. “Well, we were being shot at, but I guess that’s obvious, huh?”

Charles sputters. “Yeah—ya think?! By *who*?!” Like a light bulb, he brightens up with a sudden realization. “Wait, is it the people from Area 51?”

Mitchell almost does a double take. He certainly wasn’t expecting to hear *that* from Charles. “How much did she tell you?” he sighs.

Charles wants to look away from the sadness in Mitchell’s face. “That Veronica chick told me a lot. You were a captain on this ‘Project UMBRA’ thing. And, like, you had a family—a family like mine, actually: y’know, a wife and a daughter. She told me what happened to ’em.”

Mitchell lowers his head and stares blankly at the deteriorated tarmac underneath them. “Then you understand why I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Yeah, I get it, man. Don’t worry.” It feels strange to him, being friendly with Mitchell. It was only a few hours ago that he was suspicious of him, but now he feels that he can get to know him better, and trust him more. “So, are these the same guys?” he asks.

“Not exactly. That whole ordeal was wiped and buried after Veronica and I managed to escape. We’re being hunted by the project’s former director. I can only assume that the hired guns don’t have a clue who they’re shooting at—they’re just following orders.”

“Oh yeah,” says Charles, “she told me how you met this ‘director’ guy when you were locked up and experimented on—”

“God, don’t remind me, please,” Mitchell interjects. “Anyway, we’ll need to deal with this ‘problem’ before we can get going to DC, so... follow me.”

“S-sure,” says Charles, unwilling to object.

Mitchell then starts to saunter in a straight line out towards the forest.

Before Charles follows suit, he glances back at the forgotten body just lying there. “How’d that guy end up *here*, anyway?”

As Mitchell turns around, he keeps his eyes peeled for anything unnatural that moves. “Same way our clothing and accessories got here. These devices create a warp bubble that sends everything inside it through time.”

Puzzled, Charles looks at Mitchell and then gazes down at his own clothing. “Erm, how does it know to send clothes and not, like, entire chunks of the ground—or a whole football field of stuff—with us as well?”

Mitchell continues his speed-walk towards the remnants of the forest while smirking at the curious Charles. “Why do you care? At least it works. Isn’t that good enough?”

Charles almost smiles as they keep walking together. He feels he’s getting used to Mitchell’s quips.

“But, if you *must* know,” continues Mitchell, “the leader of the science team that made these devices once told me—in between the painful rounds of testing—that they neurologically connect with the user to ‘psychically’ determine what the warp bubble should encapsulate. Then again, he may have been screwing with me, for all I knew.”

Charles raises an eyebrow and listens contently while Mitchell prattles on.

“What I *do* know is that our devices have complementary differences—for testing and diagnostic purposes.”

“Cool. What the hell does *that* mean?” Charles asks sarcastically.

Mitchell rolls his eyes while smiling a little. “It *means* that our devices have different properties. And, in the case of what gets sent with us through time, *my* device allows me to have a bit more control of what gets sent with me in my vicinity.”

Charles does a double take. “Hold on—you mean mine doesn’t?”

“Sadly, no; shame, too. Understand that *my* device was initially made for testing military transportation of groups and equipment. Yours, however, was meant to be more fine-tuned for individuals and experimental features.”

“How so?”

Mitchell looks down at the ground as he begins to pick up the pace. “Well, I’m honestly not sure. Doesn’t matter, though, since the administrative settings for both of our devices are all locked away behind a passcode.”

Charles thinks for a bit and remembers his night in the cabin, when he tried to crack that very code. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I tried guessing what the code was last night, but couldn’t.”

Mitchell comes to an instant halt, almost gasping at Charles. “H-how far did you get? Did a warning screen come up?”

“Y-yeah. Don’t worry, I stopped once it threatened to shut itself down.”

Mitchell breathes out an exasperated sigh of relief. “OK, good—don’t mess with it. If your device gets disabled, or shuts down, then we’re done for.”

Charles nods. He’s not about to jeopardize the mission just because he’s curious to see if he could unlock whatever it is his device might be hiding. “What settings do you think *my* device has? I’m thinkin’, if we could change the time-travel date, we could go into the past—y’know, buy us some more time.”

Mitchell chuckles at his criminal friend’s naivety. “Sorry. One thing I overheard was that going into the past required an additional ‘algorithmic’ program for the devices—something about it being a potential paradox creator. From what I gathered, I doubt it was ever even tested, let alone implemented.”

“Ah, damn,” mutters Charles. “Would’ve made this whole thing a lot easier, I bet.”

“HA! You’re telling me!” Mitchell blurts out. “I could’ve been buying lottery tickets, instead of breaking into bank vaults at night!”

Charles almost trips over at what Mitchell has just said. “Hold on—you’ve been robbing banks? Like what I did? Is that how you can afford a jet? I thought you were just rich.”

“Hardly! A ghost on the run like me couldn’t exactly cash in his military pension, let alone use it to afford a private jet.”

The words sink in and Charles shrugs, agreeing with Mitchell’s excuse.

“It’s fine, I suppose,” mutters Mitchell. “It’s not like I was threatening bank tellers at gunpoint, unlike a *certain* someone.”

Normally, the convict would be offended by this snide comment aimed at his sordid past. But it feels like Mitchell was saying it in jest. Charles can hardly believe how close he feels to him. He only met the guy not even a full day ago. Maybe it’s because of the tragic life stories they share, or the destiny they are forced to endure together, but he realizes that he may have a friend in Mitchell after all—even if it is under awful circumstances. On the other hand, maybe Mitchell is some kind of sociopath with an incredible charm about him who can get anyone on his side. Either way, Charles can’t help but crack a smile. “You sure talk a lot once you get going, don’t ya?”

Mitchell laughs. “It gets lonely being on the run, away from other people. Not that I need to tell YOU that.”

Charles almost chuckles.

After walking together for what feels like a lifetime, the duo come up to the fencing that separates the airstrip from the unclaimed forest. Luckily, the fencing has collapsed, which allows the two men to walk across it with ease.

It all seems surreal to Charles. He knows that in the time *he’s* from, there’s a healthy, lush forest where he’s currently walking;

but here in the future, it's just dry, cracked, dusty, wide-open wasteland with every step he takes.

They continue their speedy walk while keeping an eye out, until Mitchell finally stops. "I don't know where the shooter *is*, exactly, but given the accuracy and distance of the shot, he should be right around here... somewhere."

Charles looks around at the lifeless plains.

When he sees his faraway stare, Mitchell continues with a hint of sarcasm. "I mean in the *past*, Charles. He's not actually *here* in the future—"

"Yeah-yeah, I get it," says Charles, rolling his eyes in disgust. "Man, stop with that 'fourth-dimensional' bullshit already. Damn."

"Sorry. Just wasn't sure if you understood."

Mitchell rolls back his left sleeve, then holds his hand over the device. "Tell me when you're ready."

At the sight of Mitchell's hand hovering over the button that'll send them back to when they're from, Charles reels in shock. "Whoa, whoa—hold up. What exactly are we gonna do? I don't know what the plan is."

"Well," says a smiling Mitchell, "the *plan* is for you to do exactly what I say and not get shot at."

Charles shakes his head in astonishment. "That's not a plan, Mitchell! Seriously, what do I—"

"Look, just follow my lead. I'll handle everything. Veronica's safe on the plane, and she knows to wait for me. I don't know how many of *them* there are out there, but I know who *will*."

The confused convict squints his eyes in thought. "Wait, who would—"

But before he can even finish his sentence, Mitchell hits the touch-screen button and the two flash out of existence—leaving behind two pockets of air that get filled up with the free-floating dust that blankets the doomed world of the future.

Chapter Eighteen

Predators

A cold sweat drips down Mark Tannehill's forehead. "Ron, you mind tellin' me just what the hell's going on?"

In his office, Mayhue gawks at the screen in front of him in horror. He was certain that the shot from the sniper would be a wrap for his elusive prey. But instead, fate has had other plans.

"RON?! Talk to me—where the hell did they go?!"

The headset attached to Mayhue's skull vibrates from the sound of his old partner demanding answers to impossible questions. Instead of responding, however, Mayhue takes off his headset in defeat. He knows it's over. After they all witnessed Mitchell and his cohort give off a flash of light and seem to vanish without a trace, he understands what that means: the mission's done. He has lost. Mitchell's escaped his clutches once again.

Or, at least, he initially thinks so.

* * *

Meanwhile, right at the nanosecond when Mitchell and Charles disappear from the timeline, they arrive back inside it. But now, they're well away from the action: inside the woods, near where the sniper has just now fired his second round into nothing but air.

No way—impossible, the rattled gunman says to himself. Mesmerized and confused, he looks up from his scope to try to see where his targets could've possibly gone. But there's no sign of either target—or of the unlucky casualty, for that matter.

The world feels as though it's stopped for him. Something incredible has just happened to him, and between the fright and awe, he's at a loss for words. Unfortunately, he doesn't hear the pair of soft footsteps coming up behind him until it's too late.

Turning his head to meet the noise, the sniper finds himself rolled over onto his back in an instant, with Mitchell's loaded pistol stuffed barrel-first into his wide-open mouth. Instinct takes over, and the gunman raises his hands to show he's no longer a threat. It's not as if he can do much else; one wrong move, and the back of his skull will be nothing more than fertilizer for the forest floor.

"Good afternoon, sir!" Mitchell says jubilantly. "I was wondering if you could give me some information."

The flabbergasted sniper stares with saucer-sized eyeballs into Mitchell's bubbly, smiling face and then looks over to see his other target standing right next to Mitchell—almost out of sight and out of mind. The second target's expression, though, is one of alarm at seeing what his partner is doing with that gun.

Mitchell cocks back the hammer of his pistol, and the smile fades from his pudgy face. "Better start talking. How many of you are there, and where are they positioned?"

The sniper knows better than to answer—not that he could, anyway, with Mitchell's gun down his throat. However, in an unconscious move, he darts his eyes to the gear bag that he's brought for the mission.

Mitchell can't help but notice the accidental gesture. "Charles, be a sport and check the good man's bag, would you?"

Doing Mitchell's bidding, Charles snaps out of his shock and grabs the bag and opens it. Inside, he finds some extra ammo boxes, a notepad and a government-issued laptop.

"Oh, that looks promising," quips Mitchell. "Open it up and tell me what you see."

Charles lifts the lid on it and is greeted by a surveillance program showing the cameras and audio feeds of the whole

mission, including where all the personnel are and what the snipers are seeing.

“Well? Anything? Does it need a password?”

Without answering, Charles spins the laptop around in his arms to show Mitchell—who, with a hint of glee, understands exactly what he’s looking at. It’s just what he was hoping for, and more. He gets up off the ground laughing, his eyes still on the screen, and removes the gun from the poor sniper’s mouth—much to his relief.

“Yes... yes, that will do nicely. Thank you, sir,” Mitchell says to the humiliated gunman.

The sniper feels like a fool. He’s obviously gotten way in over his head with this mission, but it’s not as though he had any way of knowing exactly who these people were. It was supposed to be an easy job, but instead, he screwed up the shot and ended up getting compromised. Bitter, he lowers his hands to make a reach for the sidearm holstered on his leg; he’s not about to give in to some terrorist.

At the same instant, Mitchell glances back at the sneaky sniper and sees what he’s about to do. “That’ll be all,” he says to him dismissively. Without hesitation, he raises his gun once more and blows a hole right through the incompetent marksman’s face.

The blast ricochets through the trees, and Charles yelps and almost drops the laptop.

“Here, give me that,” mutters Mitchell as he swipes the hardware from his partner.

Shocked by the quick and impersonal murder, Charles is about to comment on what he’s just witnessed, but then Mitchell reaches down and grabs the firearm attached to the deceased sniper and plops it right into the convict’s grasp.

A stunned Charles feels the grip of the pistol and almost can’t believe it. He never imagined that Mitchell would ever give his untrustworthy sidekick a weapon. However, he understands why he was given the gun—and he can feel the dread creep up on him.

“Hope you’re a better shot than he was,” says Mitchell.

Charles has just tucked away the gun when Mitchell unceremoniously taps the button on his device, whisking away the duo back to the future.

* * *

Meanwhile, inside the van housing mission control, Tannehill stares at the motionless feed of Sniper Delta in abject silence. He feels as if he's jumped into a comic book complete with unexplainable events and extraordinary powers.

His personnel aren't doing much better, either. As they start to panic, all of the other snipers in position scream into their microphones, asking their team leader for guidance and new orders in a fruitless attempt at trying to regain control of the situation.

At a loss for words, Tannehill presses his headset mic and speaks as calmly as he can. "Ron, when I asked you if there was *anything* I needed to know about these targets, this is the sort of thing I had in mind. Can you explain ANY of this??"

On the other end, Ronald Mayhue elects to remain silent. He can tell when he's being accused, and he knows that it's pointless to tell them anything at this juncture. They've all heard the audio transmission of Sniper Delta's unfortunate fate.

The lack of movement of the sniper's scope confirms Mayhue's suspicion: Mitchell isn't running from this fight; he's going to try and take out the entire bloody team. And Mayhue suspects that has to do with his friend Veronica, who's still trapped on board the jet. *He's gonna try and save that bitch, again—just like he did last time, back at Area 51.* He wonders what Mitchell sees in her, or if maybe he owes her a favor.

Mayhue gets an idea. He puts his headset back on and taps the mic button. "Alright, listen to me," he says to Tannehill. "If you wanna live, you'll direct your ground troops to target the woman in the jet. Take her alive—trust me."

Tannehill fumes in between gasps for air. “Trust YOU?! Ron, this mission is FUBAR; we’re pulling out NOW and I don’t care what you have to—”

But before he can finish yelling at his dishonest friend, the audio feeds suddenly crackle.

“OH MY GOD NO—” One of the snipers screams into his mic but is cut off by the explosive sound of a nearby gunshot.

A moment later, another gunshot is heard on the feed of a different sniper—this time from the other side of the airstrip.

Tannehill is horrified at what he’s witnessing. His whole squadron is being effortlessly slaughtered by a pair of stealthy predators who seem to be able to disappear at will.

Another sniper can be heard over the airwaves, yelling. Unlike the others, however, he manages to turn around in time to aim his rifle. For a brief instant, the scope—and, by extension, the camera—shows the face of a scared-shitless Charles to the viewers of the feed. His pistol is raised and pointed squarely at the sniper’s head.

It feels like slow motion for both armed men. The terrified and desperate sniper tries to pull the trigger, but he finds that his weapon has fatefully jammed. In a panic, he yanks again and again on the bolt of his rifle to re-chamber the stuck round.

Wide-eyed, Charles finds himself paralyzed with fear. Even though it’s been over 10 years, he just doesn’t feel ready to start shooting people again, and his hand begins to shake. But then, with a simple pull of the trigger, he kills the adversary standing in front of him, like the unwitting winner of a duel.

The sniper’s body drops with a thud, along with his rifle.

It all feels wrong to Charles. He could see the terror in his foe’s eyes, and it reminds him of the two people he shot dead long ago, whose deaths landed him in prison to begin with.

Standing next to his rattled companion, Mitchell looks back and forth between the two. “You okay, Charles? I mean, it’s not like you’ve never killed someone before.”

“Yeah,” Charles replies, distant. “Just never thought I’d be doing this shit again.”

"I see. Good thing you haven't lost your touch, then," Mitchell says dryly.

Without skipping a beat, he activates his device once again. And the world around them vanishes in light and turbulence, and the hellish future re-emerges.

Charles is happy to find that, thanks to all the frequent jumping through time, the horrible effects of time travel on his body have almost completely ceased. The only thing he feels now when going through time is a light, "buzzy" feeling in his skull for a brief few seconds. But even with the relief, he's still shaken by everything that's been going on. He wasn't expecting all of this to happen so fast, or with so much death and intensity.

"All right, that's the last of the snipers. Feeling any better, Charles?"

Snapping out of his trance, Charles does a double take at the cheeky Mitchell. "You mean from the time-traveling, or from the fact that I just killed a guy?"

Mitchell shakes his head. "If you hadn't killed him, he would've killed you. Then I would've had to kill him and then myself, because the world would've been done for at that point."

Charles looks away. He knows that Mitchell's right, despite the cruelty of his comment. There's too much at stake for some grunt to get in the way of saving the world.

After grasping Charles' shoulder to get his attention, Mitchell points to an area at the far end of the wasteland, housing the remains of the airstrip. "There's a rental car waiting for us in the parking area. We'll be using it to escape."

The convict is perplexed. "Hold on, what about Veronica and those guys in the armored car? Remember? That whole SWAT unit we saw on the cameras? They're still out there."

"Yes, but there's nothing we can do about them just yet. They're waiting for us to make a move for Veronica, I'm sure."

"Oh, so what do we do, then?"

With a wink and a smile, Mitchell begins his merry stroll across the hell-scape towards the edge of the airstrip. And Charles, always the follower, marches to catch up with him.

“Don’t worry,” says Mitchell, “I’ve dealt with worse than this before. This isn’t my first rodeo with heavily armed would-be assassins.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Charles replies with a sarcastic glare.

After walking some distance, he glances back at Mitchell. “Hey, dude,” he mutters, “how are you okay with all of this? Being hunted, and killing these guys like it’s no big deal—I mean, God, I took out one of ’em and I feel sick.”

Mitchell chuckles as he comes to a stop before taking a whiff of the dry, rancid air. “Well, I guess it’s something you have to get used to. That’s life: kill or be killed. I suppose it helps that we have a major tactical advantage in the form of these time machines. Killing those snipers was, for us, kinda like a game of hide-and-seek.”

Puzzled, Charles looks as though a wire got crossed in his head due to Mitchell’s comparison. “No it wasn’t,” he replies, matter-of-fact.

Thinking it over a bit, Mitchell raises his eyebrows. “Hmm, you’re right. It wasn’t, was it? It was more like... Duck Hunt.” He then makes a trigger-finger motion with his hand. “You ever played that Nintendo game? Duck Hunt? You know, with the ‘Zapper’?”

Charles peers at Mitchell as if he’s nuts and merely shakes his head.

“I used to love that game, back when I was in college,” says Mitchell, reminiscing.

As they continue their walk to the parking area, Charles rolls his eyes at the thought of not knowing yet another one of Mitchell’s cultural references.

* * *

Meanwhile, back in the present, Veronica, still on board Mitchell's jet, squats below the cabin's windows, trying to avoid being hit by any possible sniper fire. A trickle of sweat drips down her forehead as she keeps her assault rifle pointed sharply at the plane's open door, just waiting for anyone unknown to dare to try and outflank her.

Throughout the tense standoff, she criticizes herself for not being more attentive of a possible ambush. They were so close to getting back on the road, and now they're sitting ducks—or, at least, until Mitchell takes care of this mess.

Veronica realizes that this is now the third time that he's saved her, using time-jumping. She's always known that she can rely on him; however, she wishes he could rely on her, for once. She resents it sometimes.

Suddenly hearing the noise of a distant vehicle approaching, she breathes out an exasperated sigh of relief. She gets up right away and moves to the door, only to see that it isn't Mitchell driving the rental car to pick her up, but rather an armored truck carrying heavily armed tacticians.

"Shit," she mutters as she reels herself back inside the cabin.

The truck opens with a bang and a flood of grunts swarm the underside of the plane as they get ready to breach the aircraft.

Veronica doesn't understand. She would've guessed that Mitchell had gotten everyone—especially these guys. And as she puzzles over this, a horrible feeling surfaces. Maybe they've actually managed to kill him. Rattled from the very thought, she raises her gun to meet the door, ready to fire at the assailants in a fury of hatred.

But before even one of them can manage to climb the stairs leading into the cabin, Veronica hears the blast of a gunshot and the scream of a dying man outside. Raising their assault weapons in a panic, the mercenaries whip around towards the area where the shot has come from.

In the forest beyond the airstrip, Mitchell lies on the ground, grasping the rifle he snatched from Sniper Delta, whose body is

== Chapter Eighteen ==

just off to the side. Through the scope, he can see that the target he shot at has dropped to the ground. He smiles at seeing the successful kill.

Charles, meanwhile, standing close to Mitchell and covering his ears, prepares for the next round of gunfire.

“That’s one duck,” smirks Mitchell as he readies himself for his next shot at another gunman.

Confused by what’s happening, the mercs try to pinpoint exactly where the gunfire came from. But it’s too late. They don’t know what to do. There’s no cover, and they’re too far away to get a proper shot at Mitchell, who begins to kill them one after another—the hapless tacticians all screaming and dying like the faceless enemies they are.

“That’s two ducks... that’s three ducks...” It’s fitting that Mitchell calls them that, since they basically *are* sitting ducks.

Soon after, the gunfire stops. Taking his eye off the scope, Mitchell smiles with satisfaction before getting up off the ground and turning to his partner. “See, Charles? Duck Hunt! Looks like I’ve still got it.”

“Yeah—yeah, you do,” replies a perturbed and exhausted Charles.

“Only thing missing is that blasted dog,” remarks Mitchell.

“Huh?”

“Well, you see, in the game ‘Duck Hunt’, there’s this hunting dog that flushes out the ducks so you can shoot them. And, if you miss, he laughs at you. I always wanted to blow him away whenever he laughed at me, but the game won’t let you do that, and...”

But then Mitchell sees Charles’ perplexed look. “Never mind. I forgot who I was talking to,” he says sarcastically.

Raising his arm, he taps on his device, and he and Charles are whisked away to the future.

Veronica, now thanking her lucky stars for Mitchell’s tactical experience and time-jumping capability, peeks her head out the door to see all the dead bodies littered along the ground. Just as she

starts to wonder if her two partners were able to get them all, she hears the faint roar of an engine beyond the field.

From the airstrip's parking area, an unassuming pearl-white rental sedan blows through the chain-link gate and rips down the tarmac until it rolls right up to the jet, after which Mitchell and Charles triumphantly emerge.

"Your chariot awaits, Madam!" laughs Mitchell.

Grinning, Veronica breathes out a massive sigh of relief and grabs all of their luggage in a fierce display of agility. "I was worried they'd killed you an' Charlie," she says, descending the stairs.

"Not a chance! We've been through worse—you know that." Mitchell smiles.

Charles feels horrible and queasy from the whole ordeal. He can't fathom that these two have actually dealt with even worse situations than this one.

Mitchell raises his arm to get Veronica's attention and points back at the road leading out of the airstrip. "Get everything loaded up in the car; looks like we'll have to abandon the plane. Once you're done, meet us down the road—there's a surveillance van down there. Charles and I are off to take care of them."

"Ah, OK, got it. Just be careful—"

Veronica can barely get the last word out before Mitchell and his time-jumping pal instantly vanish from the world.

* * *

"Ron... they're all dead. All my men are dead."

From inside the van, Tannehill speaks into the microphone with a hostile tension in his voice.

However, there's no response. Mayhue, understanding that the mission has unequivocally failed, knows that there's no more reason to talk. As he listens to the desperate pleas for answers from his old friend, he heartlessly terminates the connection with the mission and rips out the ethernet cord from his computer—

severing its connection with the outside world and leaving Tannehill to his presumed fate.

The driver of the van and the tech assistant sitting next to Tannehill both look at their boss in terror, dreading what happens next.

The driver suddenly hears a small tap on his side window and turns to look, only to stare down the barrel of Mitchell's pistol beyond the glass. At the deafening gunshot, Tannehill and his assistant almost jump out of their seats. When they whip their heads around, they see the driver fall to the side, blood pouring from his face.

The two of them have no time to react before the van's side door opens violently and Charles points his gun at them. Shocked but not surprised, Tannehill carefully raises his arms. The assistant, mirroring his boss, does the same, just as Mitchell finishes his lazy walk around the van to join Charles.

Tannehill eyes both men. He feels revolted by what has transpired. When he got the call from his old war buddy about a possible job, he thought it would be a slam dunk. Just two nobodies on the run? With a fugitive? If Sniper Delta hadn't botched the shot, this mission would be over by now, even when you factor in that these two can somehow vanish and reappear at will. But now, Tannehill is frozen at the sight of their guns, and the man he used to call his "friend" has left him to fester.

He snaps back to his dire situation as he sees Mitchell raise his own gun alongside Charles'.

"Is this the guy, Mitchell? This, er, 'director' guy?" asks the convict, his eyes fixed on the old, worn-down military man.

One glance is all it takes for Mitchell. "No. It's not him, but I'll bet he knows who I'm talking about." He cocks back the hammer of his handgun and smiles at the team leader. "I need the name of the man who hired you—you have five seconds."

Tannehill sneers at his two enemies. He's not an idiot; they'll just kill him once he gives up Mayhue's name. He knows it's over for him, but he's not going to give them what they want—and he

ain't going down without a fight, either. "Go to hell," he says in a menacing manner.

In a display of dexterity and speed, he reaches down to his left ankle and grabs a hidden-away snub-nosed revolver. But before he can even point it at either Mitchell or Charles, he is met with a hail of bullets bursting out of both of their guns.

The assistant, covering his ears from the sudden bangs, can only watch, horrified, as the bullet-riddled body of his boss slides off the chair and plops onto the floor of the van.

With the head honcho down, both men turn their sights towards the only member of the group left.

"No, please!" begs the assistant.

Charles waits for Mitchell to do something while the assistant begs further.

"I-I'm unarmed," he sputters.

Frowning, Mitchell ponders what he should do, before coming up with an answer. "Do you like Jazz music?" he asks the assistant.

Both Charles and the assistant send their own weird stares towards Mitchell.

"Er, s-sure?" answers the assistant, confused and scared.

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Mitchell puts his weapon away. "Good enough for me. Off you go, then."

Not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, the assistant, his arms still above his head, carefully moves out of the van and then sprints towards the forest without even daring to look back.

Charles wants to ask Mitchell just what the hell *that* was all about, but he figures he's not going to get an answer that'll satisfy him. Instead, he looks up the road to see Veronica in the rental car, driving towards them.

When he climbs into the van, Mitchell manages to find and grab a working laptop—but not before giving the late Mark Tannehill one last look. *All I needed was his name, you fool. He's the one that left you to die.*

After backing out of the vehicle, Mitchell hears Veronica incessantly honking the car horn at them; he can't help but laugh as both he and Charles briskly walk up and get inside.

"Alright," says Mitchell, "let's get out of here before the police get wind of this... mess."

Veronica glances at the laptop he has swiped from the van. "Think there's anythin' useful on that?"

"Well, we won't know until we check it out at the hotel, but I doubt it."

Charles' eyes pop out at hearing what Mitchell just said. "Hotel?" he asks, surprised.

Ignoring his question, Mitchell leans around to gaze at the both of them. "Seat belts, everyone."

Veronica rolls her eyes, puts her belt on and then floors it down the road, leaving behind a one-sided massacre.

The trip out of the woods is uneventful, and after some time, the car makes it onto a main drag. Charles, looking out the window, spots a road sign:

"Washington—46 mi"

They're just one short car drive from their destination—and it seems that there won't be any more surprises waiting for them, either.

Charles lets out a sigh of relief. He feels so tired and exhausted from the lack of sleep and all the terrible things he's had to endure—all in a single day that, ironically, spans 20 years of time travel. He can't wait to finally be done with this godawful mission he's been forced into. At this point, all he can do is hope that they're not too late to prevent the nightmare that's inevitably coming.

Chapter Nineteen

DC

The flash of a camera—then another—illuminates the inside of the blood-stained surveillance van. The corpses of Mark Tannehill and the driver haven't yet been moved from their final resting positions.

"Damn," mutters Ronald Mayhue as he looks all around inside. When he catches sight of Tannehill's wide-eyed stare of terror, he lets out a sigh of faint discomfort. *Sorry, Mark—you should've hired better guns.*

"Sorry for your loss."

His thoughts interrupted, Mayhue turns to one of the men on the forensics team. "S'cuse me?"

"Oh, it's just, he was your old war buddy, right? I overheard it from my supervisor. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Replacing a sneer that *screams* of annoyance, Mayhue forces his face into a faux-friendly smile. "Yes, but I'm also head of counterterrorism at DHS. My department will be taking over the case." He looks around. "Speaking of, could you point me in the direction of who's in charge?"

The plucky young forensics agent points across the field—to a grossly overweight man yelling at other members of his unit. Mayhue at once begins the trek over to the airstrip containing Mitchell's abandoned plane, county law enforcement, the feds and a whole bunch of dead mercs.

The mustached federal agent in charge, who has a beer belly that jiggles with every move, is barking into his cellphone—

something about keeping the press at bay—just as he spots an unfamiliar face marching towards him. “Call ya back,” he mutters before ending the call.

Mayhue reaches out a hand, and the agent does the same.

“I take it you’re with DHS?” he asks Mayhue.

“I *am* DHS. So, what do you think happened here?”

The agent comically shrugs and throws his arms up in the air. “Your guess is as good as mine! One minute I’m eating lunch; the next, I get a call about a goddamn massacre!”

“Yes, I got the same... sort of call,” lies Mayhue.

The agent gets around to looking Mayhue over. “DHS, right? What’d you say your name was?”

“I didn’t, but it’s Ron Mayhue.”

“Mayhue—dang, I *thought* I heard someone mentioning your name. Weren’t you friends with that Tannehill guy? My condolences.”

“Thanks, but he was just a war buddy from the Gulf. Hadn’t spoken to him in years. I thought I should be here and see if I can make any sense of what happened to him.” A flicker of a smirk flashes across Mayhue’s face as he tries to hide his lies as best he can. “Now, then, uh, Agent Silverman,” he says, spotting the agent’s identity badge, “what have we got so far?”

The agent points at all the hot spots surrounding them. “Well, there’s a whole group of dead, unidentified mercenaries near the underside of the jet, there’s a few of ’em scattered around the area with sniper rifles—one on the rooftop of that hangar as well—and the ones in the van, which is where your buddy—”

“Yes-yes, I’ve already seen him,” interrupts Mayhue. “Do you have any clue as to who Mark Tannehill and his group may have been targeting?”

“HA! Not a goddamn clue.”

Mayhue then sneers at the man with a sinister thought. *Good. I’ll make sure it stays that way.*

The agent, meanwhile, rambles on. “Hell, we’re still trying to decrypt their hardware—see if there’s anything useful on them—

but my guess is we won't be able to crack it. These guys were professional."

"Not professional enough," says Mayhue bitterly.

"Huh?"

"N-nothing. Uhh, what about local surveillance?"

"All garbage. Only the office area has any video feed, and all we saw was the one guy—some airstrip attendant—make his way to the field." The agent rubs his forehead, clearly distressed. "We tried looking around for him, but he must've fled once the bullets started flying. That's what I'd do."

Silverman points to the jet. "Right now, all we really got is a name—for the owner of that plane. Some 'Samuel Burling'. We're collecting prints and DNA, to see if anyone on the jet was in any kind of local or national database."

They aren't, except for that goddamn convict, Mayhue replies in his head.

The agent goes on, "Considering the firepower that was brought to take this guy out, he must have some pretty powerful enemies."

"Indeed, he does," says Mayhue, clenching his fists. "Now then," he continues, having cleared his throat, "my department'll be taking over. I trust this won't be an issue?"

The agent scoffs. "Hey, you DHS chuckleheads want this case? Be. My. Guest."

Mayhue frowns. "I would've accepted a simple 'No problem.'"

Without waiting for a retort, he pivots and walks back to his car on the other side of the airstrip while digging into his jacket and pulling out his phone. Just as he's about to make the call to his goons to come clean up the mess, a thought crosses his mind: Mitchell Grayson is still out there, but this time he's in DC, where Mayhue hangs his hat at night. *This can't be a coincidence—has he somehow found out my identity? Is he... after me?*

A head-pounding ache forms in the back of Mayhue's head and he looks at the phone in his shaking hand, eyes glazed. *Maybe I should call Hershaw again. Maybe I can convince him to pull some*

strings with the bureaucrats or DC Metro—maybe have Grayson tracked through surveillance.

The very thought disgusts him. He was hoping he'd never have to ask another favor from that windbag again as long as they drew breath together. But he can see that the situation is dire. Mitchell's in DC, and that can really only mean one thing.

Suddenly, however, a chill travels down Mayhue's spine as he questions Mitchell's motives. *But if he's not here for me, then why the hell would he come back here again of all places?*

Unconsciously, he begins to bite his thumbnail.

* * *

"C'mon, Charles, you sleepyhead. Let's get going."

Unable to tell the difference between reality and a dream, Charles becomes aware of Mitchell rocking his shoulder to wake him up. Initially, he thinks that he's being attacked by a tentacle from one of the creatures he saw back in Vegas, and he yells out in terror. "H-wh-?" he gurgles out. "Whas goin' on?"

A voice from the driver's seat in front of him gets his attention. "We're here, Chuck," says Veronica.

Waking fully, Charles looks around and realizes he must've fallen asleep. He peers through the windows and sees the hustle and bustle of people walking down the streets of Washington.

Mitchell backs away from the car door and motions for his still-weary friend to hop on out. Outside the vehicle, Charles stifles a yawn and turns his head to get a better look around. The sky has cleared of the looming rain clouds somewhat, and the ground has dried out from the shower earlier.

As he sees some of the historic architecture of the city, a small wave of nostalgia washes over Charles. He hasn't been to DC since he was a little kid, going on his school's field trip to the nation's capital. He wonders if he can see some landmarks from where he's standing—like the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial, or even the Capitol Building. However, there don't

appear to be any notable tourist attractions within his view. In fact, all the buildings seem strictly for government and business.

“Wait,” he asks Mitchell, puzzled, “I don’t see a hotel. Isn’t that where we were going?”

Mitchell shakes his head in disagreement. “Later, hopefully. Right now, the two of us have to get moving.” Grabbing Charles by the hoodie, he flips the hood over his head to conceal his appearance.

Annoyed at being reminded of his “wanted” status, Charles frowns at Mitchell and adjusts the hood.

“Do you still have that gun I gave you?” Mitchell asks.

“Why *wouldn’t* I? Where *else* would it be?” responds Charles condescendingly.

“OK, good. Depending on what happens, we may have to shoot our way out.”

“*W-WHAT?*”

“I’ll explain later. Try not to worry.” Walking swiftly to the driver’s side, Mitchell leans in to talk with Veronica.

“No, hold on,” sputters Charles. “What’d you *mean* by—”

But before he can finish, Veronica talks over him. “Ya got everythin’ ya need—right, Mitch?” she asks.

“God, I hope so. Won’t know until we know, y’know?”

Veronica giggles at his wordplay as Mitchell continues.

“Give us ten minutes. If we aren’t back here by then, well, you’re on your own. Sorry we couldn’t prevent the end of the world,” he says, almost laughing in despair.

With a saddened look on her face, Veronica responds in kind. “Yeah, I already know. Good luck, an’ be careful.”

The way they are talking—as if saying goodbye to one another forever—raises fear and alarm in Charles.

Mitchell turns to walk away, but not before Veronica extends her hand out the window. Seeing this, he smiles despondently and reaches out to shake it. As they touch, they gaze into each other’s eyes. They both seem aware of what the other is thinking. They continue their gaze for what seems like a blissful eternity, until

== Chapter Nineteen ==

Charles decides it's time to send an "impromptu" cough in their direction.

Snapping out of his trance, Mitchell glares at Charles and then begins to speed-walk down the road. The convict hurriedly trots after him. And Veronica, just sitting in the car, clasps her hands together, hoping this is the last time she and Mitchell ever have to do this.

Chapter Twenty

Underground

The ignorant masses bustle their way along the sidewalks as Mitchell and Charles speed-walk and weave around the clumps of passers-by. The fugitive takes care to keep his hood over his head while trying not to make eye contact with anyone, for fear of being recognized as the escaped convict from the news who “Houdini’ed” his way out of prison.

Everywhere around, Charles notices that people aren’t even paying attention to him and that his disguise might not even matter. They all seem to be busy with their own lives—people traveling along, workers in a hurry to and from the rat race—and there are even some tourists just taking pictures for their digital scrapbook, which they’ll probably never look at again.

To Charles, their lives are the essence of vanity and frivolity. It’s something he never noticed about people until he began rotting in prison—only to be subsequently freed and wrapped up in some destiny to save the world. He believes that, out of everyone in this place, he and Mitchell are the only ones who are doing *anything* that’ll truly matter in the end. And, worst of all, not a single one of the others is even remotely aware, nor would they even care.

It almost makes him feel sickened by so-called civilization. Why should he want to save it, when—just yesterday—it was all but ready to destroy him? Assuming the two of them succeed, it’s not like anybody will ever know that it was *him* who valiantly saved all their sorry asses. And it certainly won’t stop them from trying to send him back to prison, anyway.

Charles begins to grit his teeth in anger, but then a thought crosses his mind: he still doesn't even know what he's supposed to be doing. All he knows is that he has to be here in Washington, and he never got a straight answer from Mitchell, back at the cabin, as to why he's needed in the first place. He's on the verge of asking about his role in all of this, when his face bumps right into Mitchell, who's come to a halt.

"Here," he says to Charles.

Following the direction that Mitchell is pointing in, Charles looks into a dark, dingy alleyway filled with trash cans, rain gutters and, frankly, not much else. "In there?" he asks. "There's nothing in there."

"Exactly."

"Oh, right."

The two enter the alley—away from the prying eyes of others. They then stop at one of the corners.

"We don't want to create a panic by jumping in and out of the future on a busy sidewalk, now do we?" asks Mitchell.

Charles shrugs. "Why not? Sounds kinda hilarious at this point."

Mitchell rolls his eyes and unbuttons the sleeve of his trench coat, exposing the device on his arm. "Well, Charles, if our mission fails, then you have my *full* permission to undress and scare everyone with your nudity and time-jumping capabilities."

Charles cracks a confused smile. "Why would I be naked?"

"Why *wouldn't* you be?" asks Mitchell, tilting a brow.

"Fair enough, I guess."

The lighthearted banter between the two stops when Mitchell raises his arm to activate the device. Charles instinctively gulps in his nervousness. He hasn't seen what future DC looks like, and he's shaking in anticipation.

"Just so you know, Charles: I've been here plenty of times before, but... this isn't going to be *pleasant* like the airstrip in Virginia, or even Vegas. There won't be room for error this time;

you really *will* have to be quiet and follow my every command, without hesitation.”

Charles nods in understanding.

“Good. Now, the area around the path we’re taking is mostly void of creatures, but the second we jump into the future, the ones in the outskirts will become aware of our presence and will start moving for us. Nothing we can do about it.”

Mitchell then points behind Charles. “There’s a building a block down from here; that’s where we’ll be going. Once we’re inside, we’ll have about 2, maybe 3 hours to do what we need to do before the creatures zero in on us. And I’ll tell you this right now: If we have to jump back prematurely before we complete the mission, we don’t *get* a second chance. It’s now or never.”

Charles gulps again, this time harder. “OK—good to know, man. Thanks for the heads-up,” he quivers. “Also, I’ve been, y’know, meaning to ask since the cabin, but... what exactly do you *need* me for? I remember you said I didn’t need to know anything, but I’m curious. Does it have something to do with what’s inside the building?”

Mitchell pauses. “We’ll be there soon enough, then you can see for yourself. I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you.”

Sneering, Charles scoffs at him, “Yo, man—at this point, I’d believe you if you told me I could shit unicorn blood.”

Mitchell shows a hint of disgust and gives Charles a stern look. “Ugh. I don’t know who is more vulgar: you, or Veronica.”

Moving his finger to the command on the touchscreen, he activates both his and Charles’ devices. The light and shock of time travel return to Charles, who by now has almost gotten used to it—a far cry from his first experience, which left him seizing, messy and in frightening pain.

After a near-instant, the time bubble collapses and Charles feels the chilly, dry air run over his skin, just as the blinding light dispels and is replaced by the near-darkness of twilight.

The alleyway the two of them are standing in has been utterly demolished and wiped away. Buildings that once stood tall and

== Chapter Twenty ==

clean have been either turned into skeletal husks or erased outright from the bedrock. Charles can tell that at least *some* of the destruction is the work of the horrific creatures, but a terrible suspicion grows in him that maybe the government had something to do with the rest. The whole city looks as if a nuke went off; he shudders at the country thinking that the annihilation of its own populated capital in order to quell the monsters could even be *close* to a good idea.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Mitchell marching away from him towards the street they just left, so he follows as quietly as he can. The two make their way along the decrepit street as Mitchell checks behind for Charles every so often. The convict, while keeping his focus on where he's going, can't help but look at the incredible devastation around him.

Mitchell was right: this is *nothing* like Vegas. Everywhere he looks, there is only overwhelming decay and destruction. The pavement under their footsteps is pulverized, warped and nearly unwalkable. And the empty shells of once-used vehicles dot the streets—many blocking the path the two men need to follow, which forces Mitchell and Charles to shimmy around them.

As the pair march further, they come to a stop at the foot of a wide, gaping hole in the ground which seems to lead to the basement area of what was once an office building.

Mitchell leans in to Charles. "This is the part where I need you to be quiet and follow close to me," he whispers, barely audible. "I don't know if your presence here will make them act differently." He then lowers himself with care onto the level below, leaving Charles wide-eyed with alarm.

As he shakes the fear out of his head, the convict follows—albeit much more clumsily and loudly than Mitchell. After a click on Mitchell's handy flashlight, the two begin to walk through the maze of crumbled infrastructure, one man hovering his finger over the device on his arm, and the other trembling from anxiety.

With each step that Charles takes in whichever direction Mitchell moves, he keeps his eyes and ears open to all sides. The

silence and darkness is sickening, and he reels at the thought of the monsters that might be just around the corner.

In the next room, he suddenly spots something black moving right next to him. He's about to scream but clasps his hand to his mouth just as Mitchell whips the flashlight at the unknown object. It's a straggler, like the one the duo saw back in Vegas. *This* one is almost the size of a car, however, and it squeezes and squirms inside the corridor, blocking off access. Luckily, it doesn't seem interested in the two and just lies there, pulsating in a revolting fashion against the walls.

Mitchell doesn't pay it any heed and instead moves in the opposite direction. Trying not to freak out, Charles slowly backs up behind him. When he feels Mitchell grasp his shoulder, he turns around to see him raise his hand, as if telling him to stop. Just as he wonders why, he notices a menacing claw stretch out and reach across the ground right in front of them.

His eyes like dinner plates, Charles witnesses a man-sized creature crawling along at a slow but steady pace. The smell it gives off is almost suffocating, and the two can hear it emit low noises that sound like muffled shrieks and growls. Its body doesn't seem to have legs of any sort, and its "face" looks disfigured and alien—all Charles can make out is a gaping mouth that appears to be edged by razor-sharp needles.

As with the other creatures, the experience is terrifying and otherworldly for Charles. After what seems like a lifetime of standing still and holding his breath, the creature gets far enough away that Mitchell lowers his hand and the two silently trot towards a blown-open wall. Inside, Charles sees a broken elevator and a stairwell entry with its door busted off the hinges.

Stepping with care over the framing that separates the main area from this hidden away area, Mitchell begins the descent of the stairs. Charles, confused as to why an office basement has a stairwell and an elevator that both appear to only go down, quickly and quietly sticks to Mitchell—like ass on toilet seat.

The descent is pitch-black, save for Mitchell's light. Charles tries his hardest not to hyperventilate, and he desperately wishes he could see if those creatures from above will decide to come for him. He tries to reassure himself, though, that he'd hear them coming before he'd see them—and that Mitchell would send them both back to the present, if it boiled down to it.

Each step down and each second that ticks by becomes more anxiety-inducing, and a terrified Charles wants to ask Mitchell just how much further down they have to go, since they've been descending for what seems like an eternity.

Flashlight in hand, Mitchell stops abruptly and turns to him. "Have you ever used a StairMaster before?" he asks.

Charles squints and covers his eyes from the blinding light. "What?" he whispers, confused and annoyed.

Mitchell turns around and continues his march down the staircase, speaking at a normal volume. "I used to have one of those machines. I absolutely *hated* that thing. Cost me a bloody fortune, too. Never was able to get in shape with it."

Charles wonders if his comrade has flat-out lost his mind.

"I'm just glad we're heading *down* the stairs and not up," Mitchell says, chuckling like a moron.

"OK," says Charles, his voice full of anger and fright, "what part of '*be quiet*' am I missing here? Or is that rule just for me? Like, *you* get to be loud, because fuck *me*, right?"

Mitchell looks back as they descend another story. "Sorry, I should've mentioned earlier that, since the creatures upstairs seem to be behaving normally, they won't be going after us. I just wasn't sure at first, since you're now with me and I thought that would be a factor. Turns out, it isn't—lucky us."

"Oh."

Mitchell pauses at the base of another story. "Again, sorry. I'm sure you were terrified during that whole ordeal, but I couldn't say anything until we made it down far enough."

"Why?" Charles asks, curious. "Can't they still hear us, or 'sense' us?"

“Yes, they can.” Mitchell sighs. “But those ones upstairs have never given me any trouble, even when I was making lots of noise. Down here, we can be as loud as we want.”

“Huh—no shit, eh?” says a relieved Charles.

“Don’t push it. I’m still not convinced that you being here makes no difference to their disposition.” Mitchell then points his light further down the never-ending stairwell. “Come on, we’re nearly there.”

Charles nods in anticipation and continues behind him. After a few more flights of stairs, Mitchell opens the rusty door at the bottom of the stairwell. Looking in, Charles sees nothing but blackness, except for what Mitchell’s light happens to catch. Looking upward, he tries to count in his head how many flights the two of them have come down. It felt like he would never reach the bottom.

They move past the broken-down elevator to the far end, where Mitchell’s flashlight focuses on a large, secure door. It’s marked with faded signs indicating that only strictly authorized personnel are allowed beyond this point—and that lethal force is authorized to enforce this restriction.

Charles gulps. “Hey, how far underground are we anyway?”

“Further down than the United States Government would have you believe.”

Mitchell yanks out a credit card-shaped object from his inner pocket. It has tape on it and some writing from a black marker and looks crude and worn. To Charles’ astonishment, he then swipes the card against a pad on the side of the door, lighting up the attached panel.

“Whoa-what?” blurts out the convict. “This thing has power? I thought you said everything in the future was—”

“Yes, I know what I said,” interrupts Mitchell.

A faint beep emerges from the speaker attached to the panel, and a green light flickers on. Inside the door, a jumble of moving bolts and sprockets can be heard, before a final, very loud click brings the room back to silence.

After grasping the door handle, Mitchell yanks backwards with significant effort, and the door grinds open against the shrieking of rust. Beyond the door lies nothing but a sea of darkness. The flashlight in Mitchell's hand zips around, but Charles can't make out anything coherent, apart from something in front of them that looks like a walkway.

Mitchell then reaches to the side, flashes his card against another panel and flicks a large switch just below it. Suddenly, like a flash-bang, the area begins to illuminate sequence-by-sequence with large, industrial-strength overhead lights, some of which flicker and burn out.

As he adjusts his eyes, Charles' mouth gapes at what he's seeing. The room he's now standing in is enormous. The ceiling is at least 10 stories high, and the whole area is easily twice the size of a football field.

Right in front of them, a wide, rusted-out catwalk—suspended maybe dozens of feet above the barren flooring below—extends far out towards the most peculiar feature of the giant room: a large, vault-shaped structure at the center of everything and also sitting perched high above the surface level.

Utter confusion and stupefaction overwhelm the former criminal. The vastness of the area seems almost ridiculous. The whole place has the vibe of a tech-supervillain's lair, and it's absurd to think that it was hidden underground below an unassuming government office building. Plus, that vault in the center reeks of ominousness.

"OK, what the absolute *fuck* is this place?" Charles asks. He points to the center of the area. "And what is *that*?"

Mitchell sighs. "That, my friend, is a United States military 'OMEGA-class' vault—the only one in the world of its caliber. It's also the only place left on Earth that, as far as I can tell, is still fully functional and operational. Very few people even know about it."

"V-vault? What's so special about a vault?" asks a wide-eyed Charles.

== Underground ==

Mitchell points ahead. “That vault, Charles, is the only hope we have left. What’s inside it will determine the fate of everything.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Twist

The strange and eerie atmosphere of the underground facility permeates its catacombs. The air feels cold and artificial, as if from an overused air-conditioning system. Everything's dry, and the metallic walls and beams are chipping away with rust and decay—except for the vault that stands before the two men.

Eyeing it over, Charles comments to himself how strange and costly it appears. If the military did, in fact, commission its construction, they certainly spared no expense. “How did you find this place?” he asks, mouth still agape.

Mitchell smiles under the soft lighting. “It’s a long story. *Funny* story. Maybe I’ll tell you once we get back. But right now we’re on the clock, so we gotta move.”

“Right,” says Charles as the two march off along the catwalk in front of them.

After a long and sketchy crossing, the two at last approach the face of the vault, and Mitchell trots ahead to a control panel next to its massive, powerful door. He then takes out his bootleg keycard once more and swipes it against the panel. A small touchpad emerges from within, all covered in dust.

Mitchell digs into one of his coat pockets and pulls out something that looks rubbery and hollow. He slips it onto his thumb, which he presses onto the pad. It lights up at Mitchell’s touch, much to the convict’s amazement.

Charles isn't sure what Mitchell just did with the rubber thumb thing, but he still can't believe that all this equipment remains operational. "Where's this stuff getting its juice from, anyway?" he asks. "Like, is it a battery or something? And how does any of this still work? Everything above ground is junk."

Mitchell pauses his tapping to turn around. "Well, Charles, have you heard the saying that the military always has 10 to 20 years of advanced technology that everyone else does not?"

Charles understands what he means, even if he's never actually heard that saying before.

Mitchell, seeing the gears crank in his head, smirks at him. "Having a moment of cultural enlightenment, are we?"

Charles rolls his eyes and huffs at him. "Dude, c'mon. I've been locked up for a decade, and I didn't get out much when I was younger, either. Gimme a break with the references."

Mitchell shakes his head, still smiling, and goes back to fiddling with the control pad. "I swear, once this is over, I'm gonna make you sit down in front of a computer and browse the Internet... watch some movies, too."

"Fine by me," retorts Charles. "As long as I never have to set foot in this nightmare world ever again."

"Cheers to that!" laughs Mitchell.

As his better half works with the touchpad, Charles gazes back at where they left from. The distance they walked along the creaky, rusted catwalk is considerable when you think about how unsafe it is to even cross it. He hopes that it'll still be okay to walk on when they journey back—if they still can, that is.

When he looks up towards the ceiling, an ominous chill runs down Charles' neck. He wonders, truly, if there's enough time before *they* arrive for them.

"Here we go," says Mitchell.

"What?" asks Charles, snapping back.

All of a sudden, a bright yellow alert light pulses from the top of the structure as two small sections open out on opposite sides of the vault, each revealing a type of latch-handle system.

“What’s all this?” asks Charles.

“The final—er, well, I *hope*, final—security check for this vault. I’ve already gained access using my card, typed in the correct password and security questions and given an authorized thumbprint, and everything’s gone smoothly, so far—just like it has the last few dozen times I’ve been down here.”

Charles raises his eyebrows. “Hold up, you’ve been down here *that* many times? Just trying to get this vault-thing open?”

“Yes, and I’m hoping this’ll be the *last* time. These latches are part of the security control mechanism. They both need to be turned at the same time in order to finally open this blasted door—I hope.”

Mitchell points to the latch-handle that’s close to his companion. “Now, do me a *massive* favor, Charles, and grab onto that handle over there.”

Confused and suspicious, Charles moves to the protruding handle and places his hand on the cold, dirty steel.

“OK, when I count down from three—and right at zero—I need you to twist that handle *counter-clockwise* as fast as you can so that our twists line up. Alright?”

Charles looks down at his hand gripping the handle and then back to Mitchell as he too grabs the handle on the opposite end. A daunting thought occurs to him. “Th-this is what you *needed* me for??” he asks, seemingly appalled.

“What?” asks Mitchell, leaning his good ear in Charles’ direction. “Speak up, I didn’t catch that.”

Charles repeats himself, this time with more force.

Mitchell’s expression changes from confused to somber. “Well, what were you expecting, Charles? What *other* possible reason would I have for needing you?”

Shocked and flustered, Charles responds with the obvious. “Seriously, Mitchell?! When you told me you needed my help to save the world, I thought it would be for more than opening a friggin’ door! I mean, is this a joke?!”

Mitchell shakes his head at the convict's emotions. "I'm not laughing, so no, this *isn't* a joke." His hand off the handle, he continues. "I've been trying for *months* to get inside this infernal thing, and I've tried *everything*. Explosives, chemicals, computer hacking—I even shot a rocket at the door. Nothing! The designers of this place made the vault impenetrable."

Hearing his words, Charles raises his device to show Mitchell. "OK? So? Didja try jumping between times to get inside? You have a time machine! Just—"

But Mitchell raises his hand, signaling for Charles to shut his mouth. "You don't think that's the very first thing I thought of? What do you think this place is? It's a top-secret, highly secured facility. In our time, there are alarm systems, checkpoints, and guards armed to the teeth crawling about. I wouldn't last two seconds."

As he comically points to various spots in the area, Charles sees something that he hasn't noticed before. All along the walls and beams are what look like long, rod-shaped machines.

"Do you know why this place is out in the open? Why there's only a single catwalk here that goes to and from the vault? It's to make sure that anyone who isn't supposed to be here can be easily shot from anywhere—by *those* things."

Charles squints to get a better look at one of the machines in the light. "What... are those? Er, what *were* those?"

"Automated turrets. They're designed to instantly kill anything that isn't supposed to be down at this level."

The convict glares at Mitchell, slack-jawed. "For real, man? I know you said the military's got awesome tech, but c'mon."

"Oh, they're *very* real, and I'm sure they're still operational. They'd turn us into Swiss cheese in a second if they weren't dormant right now. In our time, this vault is normally locked up tight, and we wouldn't have time to dodge the bullets. Trust me, the only way in is from here—in the future—while those turrets are currently offline. And in order to get inside, I need you to help me open this vault door. Please."

Shaking his head, Charles can't believe this crap. Part of him really thought that he'd at least be playing a larger role in all this rather than being relegated to being a glorified "doorman" for Mitchell. Just as in the rest of his life up to this point, however, destiny seems to have other plans. Resentment boils inside him. He realizes that Mitchell would never have busted him out of prison and saved him from execution if he could've gotten into this vault without his help. He understands that he *should* be grateful in the circumstances, but his pride won't let him.

"OK, so let me ask you something," he barks. "Was I *really* your last shot at this? I mean, all it needs is for both handles to be turned at the same time, right? Couldn't you have just hooked up a rope or something to it and turned it *that* way?"

"Well, if I could've, I would've. But it's designed so that it needs an actual human grip. It's remarkably complex. A cheap trick like that isn't gonna cut it. The people who built this place took every precaution. You know why? Because this vault is probably the single most valuable place in the whole world."

"Uhh, it is?"

"YES, Charles! State actors, spies and entire nations would *kill* for what's inside this thing!"

Charles turns to look at the imposing structure next to him. "Why? What's inside there?" he asks, trembling somewhat.

"Help me open the door, and see for yourself," Mitchell responds, almost huffing at him. "Look, we're running out of time, and I don't know how much we have left. Please. I need you for this. I am *begging* for your help."

Charles looks away, sulking, then walks towards the latch meant for him.

Seeing his companion's despondence, Mitchell rolls his eyes and thinks of something to say to him. "Look, I hate to tell you this, but I really only needed you so that I could open the door. I'm not sure what you were expecting—maybe you had visions of grandeur, I don't know. Sorry to disappoint you, Charles, with

something so “mundane”. But at least it beats *death row*, doesn’t it?”

As Charles sneers back at Mitchell, they each grab hold of their respective latches. The other man’s words about “beating death row” echo in his mind. To him, after all the hell he’s been through in the last day, lethal injection doesn’t sound so bad anymore. “Yeah, yeah—whatever,” he says softly. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Shaking his head, Mitchell marches back to the other handle. “Are you ready?” he asks.

Charles nods back at Mitchell, gripping his handle tightly.

Mitchell responds with a nod of his own, and Charles can see him close his eyes and mutter something under his breath which looks like a prayer.

“Right on zero, OK?” says Mitchell.

Charles nods once more.

“3... 2... 1...”

His hand twitching, Charles gulps, ready for the last number; and even Mitchell shakes a bit in anticipation.

“ZERO!”

In perfect unison, the duo twist their respective handles halfway around, just as the latches lock and click into place.

Charles isn’t sure if he was too early or too late, but then he sees the spinning overhead light turn red and a loud siren blares, echoing across the distant walls. “Christ, that siren is loud! Mitchell, is that supposed to happen?!” he asks.

In a panic, he looks over at Mitchell for a sign of what to do, just as he hears the scraping and clanging of steel and wrought iron rubbing against each other. He stares at the door and sees a significant plume of dust burst out from the seal, and the vault itself rumbles while the door slowly and ominously opens.

Ignoring Charles, Mitchell gazes at the door as it opens further. A smile beams across his face and he laughs in happy victory, at the same instant he notices a glint of pulsing light coming from a turret on one of the far walls. The turret flickers and twitches, and

== Chapter Twenty-one ==

his smile disappears when he realizes what must be happening. “Get inside now, Charles—now! GO!”

Charles whips his head around to see what Mitchell was staring at—then, with terror in his eyes, he clumsily bolts right into the barely open vault. Mitchell darts in behind him.

The inside is almost pitch-black, save for some mysterious blinking lights clustered in the nearest areas. Charles doesn’t know what to make of them—he’s too busy thinking about the turrets outside that now threaten to mow him down.

“Just stay away from the door,” Mitchell reassures him. “They can’t detect us while we’re inside.”

Meanwhile, the vault door opens fully and its hull booms against the metal stopper designed to hold it in place. The siren outside winds down just as the spinning lights shut off.

Silence returns. Charles can see a bit better thanks to the vault door letting in some light from outside, but it’s nowhere near enough to get a good look around—and that scares him. “There aren’t any in here, right, Mitchell? The creatures?”

Suddenly, the vault’s internal lighting system kicks on and the area brightens up to a huge degree. At first look, the whole room appears to be a huge computer server area—like those facilities used by big tech companies to store all their data. The walls are lined with server cabinets and racks that seem to blink at random. The place is remarkably clean and spotless; there’s no trace of dust, debris or decay. And the air feels cool and dry, indicating that there’s some serious climate control going on.

Mitchell darts around and inspects everything he can; the more he looks, the wider his smile. “Yessss, it’s all still working,” he says to himself.

He motions for his companion to follow, and the two walk briskly forward. Charles stares at the equipment. He was almost expecting to find weaponry, or even some sort of “magical” technology, like the device strapped to his arm—something that could be used to fight the monsters. Instead, it looks like a typical server farm kept in pristine condition.

“OK—seriously, Mitchell, what the hell is—”

Before he can finish his question, Charles looks ahead and sees a giant machine on the floor. This imposing monolith seems similar to the server racks they saw earlier, but there is definitely something different about *this* hardware. Unlike the other machines, which were boxy and smooth, this one is cylindrical and has wires and tubes entering it from all directions, especially the ground. It is also surrounded by a number of computer monitors, along with a terminal interface.

Charles stares at the monitors and notices that a few of them show footage of the area outside the vault, but he can’t tell if it’s real-time or recordings.

Mitchell fumbles with his inner pocket and pulls out a large, high-tech object with a cord attached to it. After a second, he locates a port on the strange machine and plugs it right in. *Please, let this work*, he implores.

A painfully long pause brings bated breath. But then, as if by the flick of a switch, one of the monitors lights up with computer jargon that gives Charles a headache from just looking at it. Mitchell, grinning like a madman, begins to input commands through the keyboard interface.

Standing awkwardly, Charles gawks at Mitchell’s eagerness. Soon he sees the screen display some indecipherable code. After a heavy sigh and a smile, Mitchell steps back, slides down the front of an adjacent machine and sits on the ground with obvious relief and exhaustion.

Confused about what’s just happened, Charles wants to ask a bunch of questions, but then the sirens start up again, as does the grinding of metal from the vault door outside. With shock and horror, he whips back around. “Yo dude! The door—”

“Don’t worry,” interrupts Mitchell with a lazy hand wave. “It’s supposed to seal itself—it’s on a timer.”

“Wh-then how do we get back out?!”

Mitchell gives his accomplice a sarcastic sneer. “It’s much easier to break *out* of a vault than it is to break *into* one. Like I

said, don't worry. In five to ten minutes, we'll have what we came for, and then we're outta here. We did it, Charles." He rests his head against the cold, metal framework of the machine as he lets out an exasperated giggle.

"OK," says Charles, calming down. "What exactly *did* we do?? And what *is* this thing?"

"You mean that trillion-dollar piece of taxpayer-funded hardware I was messing around with? That, my friend, is a genuine, fully functioning quantum computer—the only one in the whole world."

"I don't know what that means."

Mitchell chuckles. "Of course you don't. But I don't blame you for this one—hardly *anyone* knows what that means." Gazing up at the ceiling, he smiles. "I can't believe we've made it this far. I really was prepared to just give up. So far, I'm glad I didn't. I really can't thank you enough, Charles. I mean it."

"Erm, you're welcome," responds a sheepish Charles. "So, what does this 'quantum' computer have to do with anything?" he asks, mystified.

"The computer itself? Nothing. What's stored *on* the computer? Everything."

"OK, so what's stored on the computer?"

Mitchell smiles cheekily. "*Everything*."

Charles squints in confusion.

Mitchell snorts. "Every phone call, every email, every text, every location, every website, every archive, every video, post, sound, log and digital recording *ever made* is stored... right there, on that *gold mine* of a data server."

"You're kidding. That's gotta be a crazy amount of data."

"Yes, hundreds of zettabytes' worth."

Not even bothering to try and guess what a "zettabyte" is, Charles simply nods his head.

"That's why this place is so heavily guarded," continues Mitchell. "The computer is able to decrypt and store any and all kinds of data. It's designed to collect on everyone and everything

—including foreign intelligence and even data that was never even *meant* to be sent out. In a world where data is more valuable than oil, this thing is *priceless*.”

Charles raises his eyebrows, clearly impressed by the tech. Then he looks at the strange object that Mitchell attached to the machine. “So what’s *that*?”

“Ah! That would be a hard drive, of sorts, built specifically for the quantum computer. I stole one of them with the help of Veronica. At the moment, it’s downloading some of the data stored on the quantum computer—everything from a few years ago—in *our* time—right up until, well, the very last bits of data it received in *this* time.”

The gears crank in Charles’ head, and it all clicks together for him. “Holy shit. This thing’s gonna tell us when those creatures get here, o-or how to stop them, right?”

Mitchell sighs. “Among other things. But, yes, that’s mainly what we’re here for.”

“Wait, *what* other things? Why else would we be here?” asks a suspicious Charles.

Opening his mouth to answer, Mitchell pauses as he notices something strange on one of the monitors. He springs his ass up off the floor at once to get a better look.

“What? What?” asks Charles, alarmed.

The two gaze at the screen above and observe the turrets all behaving oddly. They seem to be pointed straight at the entrance to the underground area and are blaring warning sirens.

When they dart their eyes to a different surveillance monitor, they see what it is the turrets are threatening to fire at, and they both stare, eyes wide.

“Oh no,” gasps Mitchell. “Why is *that* one down here?”

Chapter Twenty-two

Swarm

Charles recognizes it right away: it's one of the creatures from the building above them—the human-shaped one that crawled around on its belly and almost gave him a heart attack. It seems that this creature has somehow been able to dig a hole all the way down and has fallen onto the barren ground below the catwalk, no doubt to attack Mitchell and Charles.

Despite the warning blares coming from the turret defense system on the area's perimeter, the frightening monstrosity pays no heed to the noise; instead, it snarls and hisses as it rapidly claws up the edges of the walls, positions itself on the catwalk and makes a beeline for the vault.

In an instant, the turrets open fire on the creature with a merciless firestorm of bullets. However, just as Mitchell predicted, the bullets merely pass right through its mass without causing so much as a flinch. The turrets might as well be spitting at it.

"Holy hell," says Charles, "you weren't kiddin' about them bein' invincible."

Outside, in a show of raw power, the creature smashes headfirst into the vault's door with a ground-shaking slam, but finds that it isn't able to even dent it.

Watching with surprise, Charles raises his eyebrows. "Guess you weren't kiddin', either, about this *vault* bein' invincible, huh?"

Charles remarks to himself how this feels like an example of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object.

Meanwhile, Mitchell rushes back to the display showing the progress of the data transfer to the hard drive. “The ones above us aren’t supposed to ever come down here—*ever*,” he says, panicky. “So it was either the sirens, or your presence with me, that lured it.”

Charles sneers. “Hope you’re not saying it’s *my* fault that thing decided to follow us down.”

“Oh, please, spare me the victimhood mentality,” retorts Mitchell. “Right now, we’ve got bigger problems.”

A flicker on the screen updates the progress of the data download, but Mitchell isn’t happy about how slow it is. “Argh! It’s too soon—we need more time,” he says frenetically.

As he looks at the monitors, Charles is both frightened and fascinated by the creature outside trying its hardest to get inside. Ramming its body into the sides of the building does nothing except cause it to squish upon itself from the impact. And yet, it still tries—desperately. He understands that Mitchell has never found a motivation for why they go after life the way they do, but the way they act is truly unlike anything he’s ever seen. “Yo, how long we got left till that thing’s done?” he asks.

Mitchell glances at the screen to see how much has been downloaded. “Minutes!” he replies, flustered.

“I think we’ll be okay,” says Charles as calmly as he can. “I mean, it can’t seem to get in here.”

Mitchell scoffs at him in mild annoyance. “We don’t *know* that, Charles. I was hoping to leave the same way we came in—but not with *that* thing out there. We’ll have to jump back to the present from in here and then jump right back to reset everything.”

He looks back at the screen and sees minimal progress in the data transfer. “If that creature gets inside before I can safely unplug this drive, then we’re finished. The data’ll become corrupted and the drive won’t operate correctly anymore—and I can’t get my hands on another one. So this is our only chance. It has to finish.”

Charles quivers. Didn’t Mitchell say they’ve already won? He thought the mission was over and victory was imminent—but it

looks like this creature's really thrown them a curveball. "W-well, it should be okay," he says reassuringly. "It's been ramming the door like a moron this whole time. Let's just run out the clock."

Mitchell snorts with sarcasm. "You say that like we have a choice."

The two men listen for any sounds on the outside and notice that the blast of gunfire from the turrets has stopped. The clicks coming from their barrels signal to the duo that they've exhausted their ammunition. And the monster outside doesn't have a scratch on it. Charles can't help but be amazed; all that firepower was for nothing.

Unfazed and unsurprised, Mitchell continues, "Truth is, you're right, Charles. It's just the one out there—and it can't figure out a way in. I'm more concerned about the ones *outside* the city. Those ones are still coming for us."

A shocked Charles realizes that he's completely forgotten about the other creatures far away that Mitchell mentioned earlier. "W-when do *they* get here??"

Mitchell waves his hand dismissively. "*Those* ones are at least another hour out or so. There's a ton of them all together, but we'll be gone long before they arrive."

Another bang rattles the structure, and they both watch the mindless, violent monster crash itself again and again, fruitlessly, into the vault's impervious walls.

"Still," remarks Mitchell, "it's bad enough that we have to deal with *this* one being here and—"

He's interrupted by a loud, violent shock wave that seems to come from right above them. Shifting their eyes to a different surveillance screen, the pair watch as massive chunks of debris come crashing down from the area's gigantic ceiling like a rain shower of broken infrastructure—and of tons of blackness, as a result of most of the lighting being destroyed, and also from a blackness that moves about erratically.

"No!" exclaims a terrified Mitchell. "There's no way—they shouldn't have gotten here this fast."

Splattering onto the bare ground below is a giant sea of unnatural darkness that soon takes the form of seemingly countless creatures of varying shapes, sizes and features.

“No, no. We’re so close—not now, please,” Mitchell begs as he stares at the data-processing screen.

Charles understands that the data transfer must be almost complete, but as far as he can tell from looking at Mitchell’s anxious face, it might as well be an eternity.

Outside, the innumerable swarm of creatures crawl over and smash into each other as they orient themselves towards the last two life forms on the planet. They claw, slither and jump with all their might in the direction of the vault while hissing, screeching and growling their unnatural sounds. The ones across the way tear through the catwalk as if it were tinfoil, and the ones below climb over each other like a zombie horde as they race up to the vault and enclose it with their collective mass.

Trembling, Charles notes that a gradual silence has fallen. He starts to hear the unmistakable sound of metal twisting around them. As he stands horrified at the foreboding noises, a thought crosses his mind. *Are they... trying to crush the vault?*

He turns to his companion, who also hears the metal surrounding them screech and collapse.

“Do you remember when I told you about my theory? About *them*?” Mitchell asks, trying to mask his fear. “That I believed they operated with a hive mind?”

Charles nods his head.

“Well, this is why. They seem to be smarter when they’re together, almost sentient.” Gazing back at the screen, Mitchell sees the pattern of code change and gasps. “Oh, thank God! Charles, get ready! We’re out of here.”

In response, Charles stumbles backwards and readies himself for the time jump—just as he looks up and sees the ceiling above them start to crack.

After inputting some commands on the terminal keyboard with hectic speed, Mitchell darts to the hard drive and rips the plug right

out of the socket. Then, without wasting a second, he pounds the button on his device, whisking them back to their own time—and probably not a moment too soon.

The blasts of light and the tremors from the warp bubble cease, and Charles opens his squinting eyes to his surprisingly familiar surroundings. The inside of the vault in *their* time looks no different from the one in the apocalyptic future, no doubt due to meticulous climate-control and air-filtration processes.

As he breathes in the air, he glances over at Mitchell, who's wobbling a bit from the hectic time jump but otherwise is totally fine.

"Y'alright, man?" asks Charles.

"I *will* be, once the room stops spinning," blurts out Mitchell.

Sighing in relief, Charles looks around. Hardly anything is different. He marvels to himself how impressive the vault must be to survive almost 20 years without upkeep in a ruined world. He also finds himself staring at an alarmed older man standing nearby in a lab coat.

Mitchell sees him, too, and his mouth gapes in shock. "Oh, you have *GOT* to be kidding me," he says in disbelief.

All of a sudden, a young woman, also in a lab coat—and carrying a clipboard—waltzes into the room. "Hey, Frank, I heard you shouting. Is everything—" She stops upon seeing the two men who don't belong. "Wh-wh-," she stutters. "Who-who are you?? How'd you get in here?!"

Her voice trembles with fear and confusion. There's no way either of them could've possibly gotten inside this vault, and she knows that.

Mitchell doesn't wish to waste his time with explanation, however. Instead, he smiles and addresses the woman. "My friend here and I would like to apologize, in advance, for shattering whatever beliefs about reality you may have had. Ciao!"

Charles looks back at Mitchell, and before he can ask what he's talking about, Mitchell taps on his device and the two flash out of existence in a blaze of light and wind gusts. The two hapless

technicians, jaws almost on the floor, shake in terror and absolute silence, then gawk at each other. Not knowing what else to do, the man orders his younger, panicking colleague to raise the alarm and tell security forces to lock down the area.

After blasting back into the future, Mitchell and Charles find that the vault they're in is, again, pitch-black. There's no sign of damage or of the creatures. It's as if everything has been reset.

The sudden, unannounced jump into the future doesn't sit well with Charles, however. He wishes Mitchell would be more considerate of him whenever he activates his device.

Nonetheless, there's now something more important on his mind. "Were those guys *supposed* to be there?!" he yells, just as the vault's internal lighting kicks on from their presence.

"I'd imagine so," replies Mitchell. "It's there *job*, after all." He furrows his brows in thought. "Actually, wait—isn't today a *Sunday*? Golly, doesn't *anyone* get weekends off anymore?" He turns to the dumbfounded Charles. "If we hadn't gotten the data in time, we'd be done for. Those two saw us and most likely called for a lockdown, which means they would've changed all the passwords and security, which means, even in the future, we would've been locked out of not just the vault but also the quantum computer."

Breathing in, he tries to calm himself. "I can't believe how close we were to failing. I did *not* expect those two to be there, or the creatures to attack us so soon—not that it matters anymore, I suppose."

"I thought you said this mission was a slam dunk once you plugged the hard drive thing into the computer," argues Charles.

"Yes, it *was*, right up until that swarm of creatures showed up." Mitchell then shakes his head as if a bad thought has crossed his mind. "Either way, we're golden—for now. Come on, let's leave before our dumb luck runs out."

The two trek down the corridor of the vault, and Mitchell reaches the door. "Hold on, I wanna check something." He taps on the touchpad control at the side, typing something into it.

In response, the machine emits a faint, digitized voice saying “Access denied.”

“HA! I knew it,” exclaims Mitchell. “They really *did* change the passwords—jerks.”

“Then how do we get out??” Charles asks with concern.

After waltzing over to the wall on the other side of the door, Mitchell raises a lid covering a lever switch and grabs the lever. “Emergency door release!” He smiles. “Like I said, it’s easier to bust out of a vault than into one.”

The two men look at each other as the color drains from Mitchell’s face. “The turrets... I forgot about the turrets.”

After a second, he shakes his head. “Never mind. They should still be off-line—at least, until we open the vault door.”

“And if they aren’t?” Charles asks, alarmed.

“Then I guess we’ll have to go back to our time and politely ask the staff to let us out. Maybe threaten them with our guns. Like I told you earlier, we may have to shoot our way out.”

Charles stares at him, slack-jawed. *Is he serious?*

Mitchell pulls the lever in one swift motion, and the door begins to reopen. Air is sucked through the tiny opening due to the pressure difference, along with a blast of dust. Charles can now hear the blaring of the sirens and see the pulsing of flashing lights, until the door fully opens with a metallic bang.

The whole vault echoes with the fading noises—and a deathly stillness creeps through the air. The outside area is pitch-black again, just as when the two first entered the underground section. The switch for the overhead lights is on the other side of the catwalk, but that doesn’t concern Mitchell, who pulls out and turns on his ever-handy pocket flashlight.

“Charles, go outside and check if those turrets are up and running.”

The fugitive almost doubles back. “WHAT?! N-NO!” he squawks.

“OK, fine. *I’ll* do it, then,” grunts Mitchell.

Charles can't believe what he's seeing: out goes his partner, casually walking into the crosshairs of danger. However, the convict doesn't hear anything. No warning sounds, no spray of bullets. Nothing. "A-are they not on?" he asks, terrified.

Mitchell turns around and smirks cheekily. "That emergency release is designed to automatically shut down the turrets, for safety reasons. Sorry, I just wanted to see the look on your face."

Rolling his eyes and sighing, Charles grudgingly exits the vault and checks the turrets on the far walls. They aren't on, that's for sure. "For fuck's sake, Mitchell."

"Oh, hush, you potty mouth. It's a clear stretch from here. We're about to save the whole world. Cheer up!"

The two walk back across the catwalk towards the exit, and Charles glances back at the bright light coming out of the vault. He can't believe they've pulled it off. This was quite the operation, and a lot of things could have easily gone catastrophically wrong—hell, they almost *did*.

"How'd you know that emergency lock—er, whatever—was gonna shut down the guns?"

Mitchell smiles. "I had a *very* helpful informant give me the details of this whole place after I discovered its existence."

"An informant? How? Er-who?"

Mitchell smiles again as he looks at his curious companion. "It's a long story—maybe I'll tell you once we get back."

Charles shrugs and nods as they go through the door leading them to the stairs going back up. Mitchell mentions to him that it's better to just keep quiet till they reach the alleyway they came from, to which Charles wholly agrees.

* * *

Above ground meanwhile, Veronica, still sitting faithfully in the driver's seat of their rental sedan, keeps darting her eyes towards the mirrors while nervously tapping on the steering wheel. A fleet of Metro police cars with their sirens blaring rips by and

she exhales a tense sigh. “Dammit, Mitchell,” she mutters under her breath, “you’d better be alright, or I’ll fuckin’ kill ya myself.”

At a sudden tap on the passenger-side window, she almost leaps out of her seat but is held in by her seat belt. She whips her head around and, mercifully, is greeted by Mitchell’s warm, charming, pudgy-faced smile. He points down to the door lock.

Smiling back in relief, Veronica unlocks the doors.

“I know I said for you to give us no more than 10 minutes—were we close?” asks Mitchell.

“You were cuttin’ it pretty tight.”

Charles, meanwhile, opens his door and sits in the back, ready to have another nap in the car and not talk to anyone.

“I’m guessin’ those cops were meant for you?” she asks.

“I’d be *shocked* if they were meant for anyone else,” replies Mitchell, laughing. “We’ll talk at the hotel. Right now, let’s not be around for when Special Forces manages to show up.”

Veronica nods and starts the car.

Mitchell sits down in his seat while groaning in pain. “Might also need to get some ice for my aching knees—they’re acting up again.”

With Veronica hitting the gas, the trio peel out in the opposite direction of the police, and Charles gazes through the windows in a dazed state as he thinks about the last, surreal, 24 hours of his life:

These two have managed to break a death row inmate out of a maximum-security prison using secret military time machines, and then use said inmate to break into a top-security underground military facility. And *why*? Merely so that he could help them open a door to get some computer data. It all seems ridiculous to him, and the more he thinks about it, the less plausible it sounds. Destiny really is weird, sometimes.

Still, he’s happy the mission was a success—despite the absurdity. But a gnawing thought in his mind refuses to leave him in peace: *All we did was steal some data. How’s that seriously gonna help us?*

== **Swarm** ==

Charles then gazes out the window at all the people outside, going about their business. *Is this world really worth saving?*

Chapter Twenty-three

Hotel

Giving an insincere smile, the desperate G-man speaks into the microphone. “OK, thanks for this. Good work.”

After pressing the button on his smartphone to end the call, Mayhue slumps in his office chair and tosses the phone onto his desk. He’s just finished talking with a goon who’s been working for him inside DC Metro. They discussed tracking down Mitchell from within the city, using camera surveillance and facial recognition. It’s been a chore to set up, but Mayhue can only pray that it’ll be enough to figure out where he might be staying in DC; an ambush is Mayhue’s best chance of eliminating the threat that is Mitchell Grayson, once and for all.

As Mayhue lets out a deep sigh, a sneaking sense of anxiety and terror, like a foreboding omen of his own demise, looms over him, but he’s not sure why. All he knows is that something isn’t right and that the longer Mitchell is still out there, the more the tides will turn against him. It’s just a question of time.

He grabs his phone and then again wonders if calling Robert Hershaw would be a good idea or not. The last time they spoke, Hershaw made it quite clear not to ever recontact him. However, that was when Mayhue was certain his target was finally in his grasp. Now, things have changed, yet again.

Exhaling another sigh, he takes his phone and starts dialing Hershaw’s personal cell, when the phone in his hand vibrates and blares out a ring tone. An incoming call. Mayhue looks closely at the caller’s number and sees that it’s from the very same henchman

he was just speaking with. “Hello?” he says, answering the call. “I thought we were done. Was there something else—”

“Mr. Mayhue, sir, we got something going on out here. There’s been a situation.”

Having leapt up from his chair, Mayhue begins pacing his office. “What do you mean? What’s happened?”

“There’s been an infiltration at a secure government building downtown. I don’t have the details, but it’s big. They’re calling in the Guard, the feds—shit, everyone. They think it’s some kinda terrorist attack.”

Mayhue opens his window blinds to look out at downtown DC across the river. “You’re kidding? Terrorism? My department hasn’t been informed of anything. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely, sir. I heard a few of the guys saying they couldn’t believe this was happening today—on the friggin’ anniversary of 9/11! Unbelievable.”

Mayhue turns to look at the little pocket calendar on his desk and sees today’s date. *That’s right, it’s the 15th anniversary of the terrorist attacks.*

The door to Mayhue’s office abruptly springs open and an alarmed employee looks at Mayhue’s shocked face. “Sir, we just got word that something’s happened in—”

He waves his underling away. “Yeah, yeah, I’m on the phone about it right now.”

The employee nods her head frantically and closes the door to the office.

Mayhue talks back into the phone, his teeth gritting a little. “I don’t care if the country’s under attack from God *himself*. I need you to analyze all surveillance and inform me at the first sign of Grayson. I wanna know where he is, where he was last seen and where he’s hiding out.”

“Yes, sir, but the country—”

“It can go to hell. I need Grayson captured or dead. My counterterrorism department will handle whatever bullshit went down today, but I need you to keep eyes out for *MY* mark.”

“Understood, sir. I’ll—oh my God.”

“Wh-what?”

“You should... turn on the news.”

After reaching for his office TV’s remote, Mayhue fumbles with the buttons until the screen in front of him turns on. The room fills with the sound of the news broadcast, and he stares in disbelief at what the anchorwoman is telling him.

“We’ve since received reports of a potential terrorist attack that occurred earlier near downtown Washington. It appears that a government facility was breached by unauthorized persons of interest.”

Mayhue’s eyes widen and his jaw hangs at seeing the surveillance images of Mitchell and Charles walking away from the area of the building, just as the anchorwoman explains that they are wanted as potential suspects.

Stunned but still alert, Mayhue raises his phone back to his ear and speaks. “Get me everything you can from the surveillance in the area of that building. I want no less than a mile’s radius. I’ll make some calls to find out what’s going on.”

“S-sure, Mr. Mayhue.”

The line goes dead, and Mayhue trembles from the event. *Why the fuck did he expose himself like that?! Does he not care anymore? It’ll make it way easier for me to get him now—his face is gonna be everywhere. Why?? What was in that building that was so important?*

The thoughts echo throughout Mayhue’s desperate mind. He feels like he’s playing fourth-dimensional chess with Mitchell—in both the figurative and the very-much *literal* senses. Scratching his head, he sits back down at his desk and prepares to call up some friends who’ll know what he needs to know about that facility. But before he can, a feeling creeps up on him. It’s the same feeling of dread he felt moments earlier: a feeling that something’s coming for him. However, he isn’t sure if it’s Mitchell, or if it’s something else entirely.

* * *

Meanwhile, inside one of Washington's finest and ritziest hotels, Charles looks around the suite he and the other two are sharing. Veronica checked them all in a few moments ago, and the impoverished convict can't help but be mesmerized at the decadence and the appalling display of luxury and wealth.

The room has two king-sized beds, a full-sized sofa that looks made for 18th-century royalty, a lavish foyer with a fully stocked minibar, and a bathroom so large and exquisite that it might as well belong to a sultan.

Charles knows that Mitchell likes fancy stuff—like his private jet—but this hotel makes him feel so outside his class that his emotions teeter between inspired awe and deep envy.

Seeing the star-struck common man, Mitchell addresses him. "Don't get comfy. We won't be staying long, sadly. Soon they'll be tearing this place apart, looking for us."

Nodding in agreement, Charles lets out a faint sigh. He knew it was too good to be true, and Mitchell's right. They've seen the news bulletin with their faces all over it. It won't be long now before the long arm of the law catches up with the three. Luckily for them, though, they're well armed and have the powers of time travel on their side.

Charles looks back at Mitchell and Veronica and sees them seated at the fancy table, typing away at the computer they stole from Tannehill back at the airstrip. Turns out, they had no luck trying to crack into it and they determined that there wouldn't be anything of value stored on it, anyway. So Veronica wiped its drive clean and it now functions as an everyday computer.

"So, how much longer till ya get the stuff from that 'quantum drive' or whatever you called it?" asks Charles.

Mitchell raises an eyebrow at him. "Talk to the expert here. When it comes to this sort of tech, I'd be lost without *her* help."

Smirking at her friend, Veronica punches a few keys into some kind of command line terminal on the laptop and then plugs the

drive into one of its ports. “Alright,” she mutters, “think we’re good to go.”

The three gather around the screen, and Mitchell holds his breath in anticipation; it looks like he’ll faint from the pressure.

After a moment of intense silence, a window pops up with strange-looking data files and tech jargon, and Veronica produces a gleeful smile. “Data’s lookin’ pretty good—no corruption or fragmentation. We’re in, gents.”

Laughing and sighing in relief, Mitchell reaches over and hugs her playfully. “Oh, you are an absolute *gem*, Veronica.”

She blushes and giggles a bit as she hugs him back, while Charles rolls his eyes at them.

“OK, OK,” says Veronica, patting Mitchell on the back. “So, what are we lookin’ for?”

He sits down next to her and eyeballs the screen. “Uhh, well, let’s start with the last data entries that got stored. That should give us an idea of how long that quantum computer was collecting data—before everything *stopped*.”

Veronica taps away on the keyboard, and a new window containing the relevant data appears onscreen. “Huh. Accordin’ to the entries, it looks like the very last piece of data that made it into storage came from a radio transmission. Date received was... August of 2021. Almost a full five years from now.”

“Interesting. What’s the radio transmission?”

“Nothin’. Just a repeatin’ SOS signal in Morse code—I can tell by the wavelengths.”

Charles, meanwhile, tries to ignore how useless his presence is and merely dawdles around the room as the two geniuses work out the data logs. He feels a bit jealous of how smart and knowledgeable they are, but he’s also glad that he doesn’t have to do anything anymore. His end of the bargain is done—and he’s quite grateful for *that*, at least.

Veronica scrolls backwards in time through the data files and notices that the radio transmissions were going on for years. Eventually, however, she reaches a point in time where the data

entries start to offer something else. “Hold on,” she mutters. “There’s video data here. It’s dated... Shit, this video was made a *few months* from now.”

“Play it,” orders Mitchell.

Nodding, Veronica executes the video feed, which shows up in another window. Charles, interested, waddles up to see the video just as it begins playing.

“I think this’ll be my last one of these ‘logs’. I don’t really see the need to make any more—there’s no one left around to watch them, anyway.”

The three find themselves staring into the face of a tired, horribly depressed woman talking to a webcam. She looks worn down and malnourished and is clearly suffering from lack of sleep. But what’s even more interesting is the environment surrounding her, as well as her attire.

“Holy crap,” says Charles. “Is this chick an *astronaut*?”

“My God, you’re right,” says Mitchell. “She must be aboard the ISS.”

“The what?”

“The International Space Station,” explains Veronica.

As the video plays, the astronaut abruptly turns around in fright for some reason. She then rises up and floats out of the frame, leaving the trio with halted breath.

“Incredible,” says Mitchell, leaning back. “The last video humanity ever made, and it’s from an *astronaut*, of all people.”

Veronica shrugs. “Makes sense. Only place left on Earth that’s safe from the creatures isn’t actually *on* Earth.”

The astronaut comes back into view suddenly and navigates her way back to her webcam, like a blimp coming to dock.

“Ha ha, sorry about that. I thought this room was leaking pressure again. Not sure why I still give a crap anymore. Old habits—maybe I’m just a stickler for my duties.”

Rolling her head back, the distraught woman twists her body lazily and from side to side in the zero-gravity environment, as though she doesn’t have much of a care left in the world.

"It's crazy how long it's been since we needed to adjust the station's trajectory. Ever since we lost our food, I've been hoping that some more space junk would cut through the rest of this metal prison and finally put us all out of our misery."

She tilts her head back down and stares into the camera with an almost manic face.

"Oh, yeah! How could I forget? Carol finally had enough of starving to death, and she chowed down on one of those cyanide pills. So, she's gone. Now, it's just me here, alone. Sooo... yeah. I guess I'm the last person on Earth—well, y'know what I mean. I'll be joining the rest soon. Think maybe I'll put on my suit an' go out for a spacewalk, see how far I can get before I run out of air. Won't THAT be fun!"

Veronica shakes her head in empathy. "God, that poor woman," she says as the astronaut goes on with her monologue.

"Y'know, I grew up in a Midwestern Christian household. My parents were real Bible-thumpers: sinners, rapture and all that fun shit. I used to be one, too, until I became a scientist and left all that garbage behind. But, I gotta say, after everything that's happened because of those... 'demons', I can't tell if my time as an atheist has now been vindicated, or contradicted. Guess I'll find out once I die. Maybe."

The astronaut chuckles in despair and then looks into the camera with a most saddened expression.

"Well, no more point in delaying the inevitable. Guess I'd better dust off that suit with my name on it. If there's anyone left still out there, just know that I tried my best—and, if you watched my previous logs, you'd know that too. This is Doctor Millie Jenkins signing off. Oh, and fuck you, God."

With tears in her eyes, the woman reaches for the webcam and smiles insincerely one last time before the video cuts out.

The hotel suite fills with a horrible silence, and the three can't help but feel bad for the suicidal astronaut.

"Well, shit. Now what?" Charles blurts out.

Mitchell looks at Veronica. “We need to find her other videos. Her name was Millie Jenkins—see if you can narrow down the search.”

Looking back at the data entries, Veronica updates her search. “OK, this is all I got for her. Huh, looks like a lotta her data and videos came from Google’s servers. She must’ve been pretty active on YouTube—her uploads go back for years.”

Charles tries to recall if he’s ever heard of a website called YouTube before. But all he can guess is that it must be one of those Flash sites with the silly videos and celebrity parodies—like the Internet had back when he was still in high school.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mitchell says to Veronica. “We just need the most recent ones. Hopefully, she’ll tell us what we need to know. She must know *something* about stopping the creatures.”

“And if she doesn’t?” mutters Veronica.

“Then we’ll look elsewhere. She’s not the only one out there that made videos signaling the end of the world.”

Sighing, Veronica randomly pulls up one of the older videos made by the late doctor and plays it. The video player springs up onscreen, and the trio look once more at the woman known as Doctor Millie Jenkins—only now she looks much more healthy and well rested than in the other video they watched.

“Date log: 15:16, September 12, 2016. This is Doctor Millie Jenkins. I don’t know what to make of all this. I’ve been checking in with NASA every hour for updates on the ‘Europe’ situation, but all they can tell me is that the plague I discovered is becoming something else, and it’s accelerating on a MASSIVE scale. I’ve heard rumors on social media that it’s taking on a life of its own. I didn’t believe them at first, but then Europeans started uploading live streams on Facebook, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out this one. We’re finished.”

With their eyes glued to the screen in suspense, the three watch the astronaut, who presses on with her video as she rubs her eyes in distress.

"I never could've imagined it would get this bad. All my research and data, and for what? When this 'plague', as the locals called it, first came to my attention, I thought it was going to be an outbreak of a viral or bacterial agent, man-made or natural. I guess I was wrong. I tried formulating a vaccine with the data I was given, but I soon realized how laughable it is to think there's a cure for something that doesn't behave like a disease in the first place. My colleagues in Paris, who were studying it, couldn't make heads or tails of what they were dealing with, either. Even with the help of the WHO, the best we could come up with was that it might be—God forbid—our first contact with an alien pathogen."

Charles raises his eyebrows. "Aliens, huh? Crazy—"

"Shush," interrupts Veronica.

"Unfortunately, in light of what's going on down in France and the rest of the continent, I no longer believe it's an extraterrestrial disease. I read the reports; the physiology of their samples didn't add up on the periodic table. It doesn't have a proper atomic structure in the same way everything else does. I feel it's not just something otherworldly, it's something that shouldn't even exist to begin with. Well, whatever—just a pointless theory. What matters is, this plague is now apparently sentient and bulletproof. It's been taking on the shapes of other life forms and attacking anything with a pulse, on a continent-wide scale. Entire nations have already been wiped out, and I've heard talk about nuking the whole landmass."

The astronaut then looks out the window at Earth and orients the webcam to show the viewers what she sees. It's a beautiful shot of Earth from space. The ISS is orbiting above northern Africa, and a blackened Europe is visible. It looks like a tar puddle surrounded by an increasingly black ocean. As she turns the camera back towards herself, poor Millie Jenkins lets out a heavy sigh.

"It's spreading so fast. I can't believe it's only been a year since we first discovered it in the French farmlands. I don't understand why it even exists, or why it's been so slow to spread

until now. All we can do at this point is hope that nuclear fireballs will be enough to destroy it. Huh—how ironic. The tools of our destruction may just be what saves us. Well, I'm nothing if not an optimist. Ha ha."

Directing an empty smile to the camera, the doctor reaches to turn it off, but not before muttering something inaudible. As the video player closes, the hotel room becomes icy quiet.

"Did she just say she was studyin' 'em... for over a *year*??" asks a horrified Veronica.

The three remain frozen in place, all terrified, until Mitchell rises out of his chair awkwardly and limps away from the other two, a fraught and distant look in his eyes.

With worry in her own eyes, Veronica stares at Mitchell's back. "What if... what if we watched the other videos? Maybe there's... somethin'."

But Mitchell ignores her as he keeps shuffling away.

"D-dude," stutters Charles, "y-you told me that if those creatures ever showed up, th-then it'd be the end of the world. Wh-what do we do now?"

As Mitchell turns to glance back, Charles can see the tired and depressed face of his partner. "You heard the woman. They're here—they've *been* here for the past year, at *least*."

He walks shakily over to one of the hotel suite's large windows and looks out at the city in despair. "We were doomed before we even started."

Chapter Twenty-four

Priority

Ever since the three finished viewing the video of the late Dr. Millie Jenkins essentially telling them their efforts have all been in vain, they haven't spoken even a quip to each other. It's been too much. Not only has the mission to stop the creatures been a total failure, but they now know that they only have a day or so before the end of the world comes. Their hotel suite, as lavish and cheery as it is, has been tense and deathly quiet—save for the occasional audio coming from Veronica's computer.

She's been sitting at the table, browsing all the videos and information from the future she can find. For the last several minutes, she's viewed live streams of people capturing footage of the monsters and the floods of blackness engulfing entire towns. She is quite horrified by it all, but she can't help herself, either; she's never actually seen video footage of the creatures before—just the static pictures of them that Mitchell has taken.

Earlier, the three watched helmet-cam footage of a paramilitary group emptying entire magazines at one of the smaller creatures, but leaving it utterly unfazed as the bullets blew right through it. But what happened next really shook them: the creature leapt onto one of the soldiers and seemingly “absorbed” the screaming man into its body like gelatin—leaving only the man's equipment and clothing behind.

Despite going to and from the future and actually having to deal with the creatures, neither Mitchell nor Charles knew, until then, *exactly* how the creatures were ending life on the planet.

Thanks to these videos, however, that piece of the puzzle has been solved—not that it matters at this point.

The video viewing continued until the third soldier was left behind by the others to be “eaten” by the creature. At that point, Mitchell and Charles couldn’t stand to watch anymore.

Since then, Charles has become friendly with the suite’s minibar. He’s found the top-shelf whiskey and has poured himself a few glasses, while thinking long and hard about his situation and, more importantly, what he should do about it.

Mitchell, meanwhile, has been pacing around the suite, lost in thought. He’s been absentmindedly checking everywhere he can, as if searching for something. “I can’t believe this place,” he mutters. After slamming one of the cupboards shut, he walks over to Veronica. “I paid top dollar for this room, and there’s no coffee. Unbelievable.”

Charles, half-buzzed, sneers at Mitchell as he bitches about *coffee*, of all things, to his loyal partner.

Rolling her eyes, Veronica pauses the video she’s watching—a video showing a military group shooting a huddled group of civilians dead. “I dunno, maybe the cleanin’ lady forgot to restock?” she says to him.

Mitchell shakes his head—and so does Charles, but for a different reason. The convict then goes back to nursing his nerves and his sense of despair with quality booze.

“Anyway,” says Mitchell, “if you’re done indulging yourself with those *snuff films*, I would like for you to check the results of that search query.”

Veronica snaps away from the gruesome footage she had her eyes glued to. “Yeah, look, I doubt we’ll find much, if anythin’.”

Charles overhears their discussion while she clicks back at a window on the computer. A considerable amount of data appears—but about what, he doesn’t know. Curious as to what the two could possibly be doing at a time like this, given that the apocalypse is only a day or so away, he decides to get up off the bar stool and waddles over towards Veronica.

“OK, there’s a lotta stuff,” she mumbles. “But I’m not sure how much’ll be relevant.”

“It’s fine. Start with July of last year,” says Mitchell.

Streaming through the data, Veronica spots something. “Wait, this looks like a confirmation order,” she says, opening the file. “It says: ‘Priority: Terminate Project UMBRA—burn notice’. Authorization of order and confirmation is from... Director Ronald Mayhue.”

Mitchell’s eyes light up and he smiles almost maniacally. “Yesss. Thank God, we finally have him. You’re the greatest, Veronica.”

She smiles, too, knowing how valuable this information is to the both of them. “I can’t believe it—we finally got the son of a bitch.”

“Hey,” Charles speaks up.

Having momentarily forgotten about him, the pair turn to face the confused criminal.

“What’re you guys even *doing*?” Charles asks, slightly drunk and with drink still in hand. “You know the world’s gonna end in, like, tomorrow, right?”

Mitchell and Veronica look at each other and then back at the screen, utterly ignoring him.

“Run his name,” Mitchell orders Veronica. “There must be more.”

Charles sheepishly tries to get their attention again. “Yeah, uh, hey, I’ve been thinkin’...”

Mitchell glances back at him, while Veronica furiously types some commands into the laptop.

“Sooo... like, you guys don’t actually *need* me anymore, right? The whole reason you busted me outta prison was to help you guys open that vault; you said it yourself, Mitchell. So, like, uh, are we *done*?? Can I go now?”

Mitchell scrunches up his face almost comically, as if he’s eaten a sour candy. “Go *WHERE*??” he underlines.

Charles looks down in embarrassment. “T-to go see my family—m-my daughter, mostly. Maybe I can still make it before, y’know...”

Mitchell shakes his head. “They don’t want to see you. Your ex-wife certainly doesn’t, I bet; and I doubt she’s told your daughter anything *pleasant* about you. It would be a waste of time—time that you don’t even have left to spare.” He goes back to looking at the screen.

Charles can almost feel his blood pressure rise. “Screw you, man. Just because *your* family’s dead—”

At once both Mitchell and Veronica look back at Charles, who picks up on their offended expressions.

“S-sorry,” the convict mutters. “Look, I-I have nothing left. Please, just let me have this. I *need* this.” Getting an idea, he raises his arm and points to the device strapped to it. “I can give this back to you, if that’ll make a difference. You can have it—I don’t want it anymore.”

Mitchell closes his eyes and sighs. “It’s locked to you, Charles. You can’t just ‘take it off’. Only way these devices are coming off is either through administrative access, or if the user dies—in which case, the device would automatically reset and release.”

Charles is stunned. He knew the device had a death grip on his arm—he just didn’t imagine it would be so literal.

“Besides,” continues Mitchell, “I believe we have one final mission.”

Now it’s Charles’ turn to scrunch up his face. “What the *HELL* are you talking about, man?? Everything’s gonna be killed in the next few days or so. You said it yourself—we were doomed from the start. Remember?”

Mitchell nods his head. “I know; and it seems we still are. Truth is, stopping the creatures from showing up was always going to be a crapshoot, Charles.” He then points to the laptop. “Remember what I told you? Back at the vault? About how we were collecting data to see if we could somehow stop the creatures? I *also* said that it wasn’t the *only* reason.”

Charles looks at the screen that he's pointing to.

"We just got the name of the director of Project UMBRA," Mitchell says to him.

Charles is surprised. "For real? The guy that killed off your family and—"

"Holy shit, I just hit the mother lode!" shouts Veronica.

Both men look at her in confusion as she points to what's on the screen. It's a file containing personal information on an individual associated with Project UMBRA. Most importantly, there's a profile photo of the person; the name of this person is none other than Administrative Director Ronald Mayhue.

Veronica watches her friend, awaiting his reaction.

As he stares like a deer in the headlights at Mayhue's slick, evil face, Mitchell starts to get flashbacks. He recalls the first and only time he ever laid eyes on that man. He was strapped to a gurney inside a private and secure section of Area 51, as part of Project UMBRA. The only other person, except for Mitchell and the leader of the UMBRA science team, was Mayhue himself. Mitchell remembers his terror—being blinded by the overhead lights and in revolting pain from the experiments that were done to him. Above all else, he remembers Mayhue's sinister smile, and the only words he ever spoke to him:

"Shame about your family. But, hey, it's your own damn fault. You couldn't keep your big mouth shut, could you? We're fighting against terrorism, and I will NOT tolerate insubordination. Enjoy being a lab rat for the rest of your life—you've earned it."

The memories wash away from Mitchell while his blood pressure rises. A tic forms on his lips, and his eye twitches at seeing the smug expression on the screen in front of him.

"Yo, Mitch," says Veronica, snapping him out of his silence.

"Yeah, that's him—that's the man who ruined my life," Mitchell squeaks.

Veronica nods humbly. "There's an address on file," she says. "The bastard lives around here, in DC."

A silent moment passes, then Mitchell clasps his hands and regains his nonchalant demeanor. “Good, excellent. Let’s get going before the cops find us.”

With cold emotion, Veronica quickly packs the equipment they had lying about, and Mitchell moves towards the door.

As for Charles, standing around like an idiot, he glares at Mitchell in simmering anger. “Oh, so what? *YOU* get to have revenge for *your* family, but I don’t even get to see *mine*??”

At the door, Mitchell lowers his head when he hears his whiny partner. “Sorry, Charles, getting to Mayhue takes higher priority over you seeing your estranged wife and daughter.”

Flustered and aggravated at how unfair it is, Charles stomps his foot. “I don’t CARE about your revenge trip. I’m *done*! I did what you asked already. I wanna see my family!—”

“Charles, *stop*,” interrupts an annoyed Mitchell. “This isn’t up for discussion. I may end up needing you again once we find this ‘Ronald Mayhue’, and I *certainly* don’t want to have to go looking for you again. Come on, you might as well stick with us—we’re practically family at this point.”

Bewildered, Charles bellows at Mitchell. “We’ve only known each other for a *DAY*! You’re not my family! And I wanna find Gabby for the same reasons you wanna hunt down this ‘Mayhue’ asshole.” He paces along the floor, fuming. “That bitch *ruined* my life! She— Look, above all, I really just wanna see my daughter again. Is that so wrong?!”

Mitchell shakes his head in disgust. “You want to *punish* your ex for *your* bad choices. Last I checked, your daughter was still an infant when you were locked up. She probably doesn’t even know you exist. So, too bad. You’re coming with us.”

He opens the door, but Charles’ silent rage gets to him and he almost sympathizes with him. “Look, he’s here, in DC,” he says. “Once we’re done with Mayhue, we’ll go to New York and see if we can help find your daughter—if we have time.”

Charles isn't budging; he's not interested in tagging along anymore when the end of everything is so close. "No, Mitchell. I'm leaving. You don't need me for this one. I'm out."

Mitchell frowns. "Not with that device still strapped to you, you aren't."

"What?"

"Ever since it was initialized, it's been synchronized to mine. And that means that whenever *I* jump in and out of the future, you'll be jumping with me—no matter *where* you are."

"Wh— Then turn it off! Get this thing off me! Let me go, already!"

"I can't disable the synchronization, not without the administrative passcode."

Charles lets out an aggravated sigh.

Mitchell thinks of what to say. "If you want that device removed, you'll have to ask the man we're going to visit. *He* was the one who set up the passcode—that, I'm sure of."

Surprised, Charles looks down at the device on his arm. "So... he set the code? No bullshit?"

"All but certain. The science team was rather adamant about how much administrative control the director should have for the devices—and their software."

"Any idea what he might've set it as?"

"Not a clue. Could be a birthday, a holiday, an event—anything. But now that we know who he is, we can certainly *beat* it out of him. Now, go help Veronica pack up, would you? Clock's ticking."

Charles opens his mouth to object, but then they both see Veronica approach them while lugging huge, heavy suitcases as though they weigh nothing.

"Nah, it's fine. We're pretty much all set to go," she says.

"Ah!" says Mitchell. "OK, then. I'll be back in a moment. Make sure *he* stays put."

Charles feels offended at how Mitchell addressed him as if he's some hyperactive little kid.

Veronica squints in confusion. "Where ya goin'?" she asks Mitchell.

"To get some blasted coffee!" he says, irritated. He marches out the door and leaves the other two standing awkwardly.

Breaking the silence, Veronica walks across the hardwood floor in her loud boots and gently closes the door. Charles, unsure of what to do apart from stand around, eyes the bathroom and heads to it.

"Now, where're *you* goin', huh?" she asks him.

Charles glances back and tosses up his hands. "I've been holding it in this whole time. Gimme a break!"

Veronica is somewhat taken aback. "F'real, dude? You didn't even go when we were on the plane?"

The convict glares at her condescendingly and closes the bathroom door before locking it. He quickly undoes his pants and then plops his lily-white ass down on the fancy, pre-warmed toilet seat. And as he does, nature takes over.

Upon hearing the fantastic assortment of noises coming out of the bathroom, Veronica smirks a tad from the second-hand embarrassment. She waltzes over to the flatscreen TV to turn it on; if she's forced to wait for the dude to do his business, she might as well check the news and see if the cops have identified them yet.

The TV turns on right at the beginning of a breaking-news segment, and the suite fills up with the sounds of an anchorman informing his viewing audience that the City of Washington is now asking the public for assistance in identifying the unknown person who was spotted with the fugitive Charles Wilson.

Veronica snorts. She knows they'll never be able to identify Mitchell or her, since they're both ghosts from Project UMBRA.

Meanwhile, inside the luxurious bathroom, Charles finishes up and washes his hands. However, instead of heading out, he finds himself sitting back down on the crapper and he has a moment to himself to think. Then he grips his face with his shaking hands and almost weeps into them.

After everything that's happened to him, after all the impossible things that have occurred and how he's made it through every single one of them, he just can't believe how futile it has all been in the end. He knows that he can't leave to see his daughter before the coming apocalypse, and it saddens him. How cruel: to be given a second chance to see her, only to still be under the control of a man who is tying Charles to his own, now seemingly personal, agenda.

Veronica can hear Charles quietly crying, and she rolls her eyes in annoyance. When she grabs the TV remote and cranks up the volume, the anchorman goes on about how incredible and timely it is that this terrorist infiltration has happened on 9/11.

Charles can barely make out the TV broadcast outside; it might as well be background noise. He does, however, remark to himself about today's date. *Oh yeah, it must be the 15th anniversary.*

As he thinks back on his life, he remembers the very day of those terrorist attacks. It was when he was still in high school, and he recalls that everything closed down that day. At the time, he didn't give the event itself much thought; to him, it was just another excuse to stay home from school and play video games all day.

The memories fade, and the convict shakes his head; it felt like a different life back then.

Looking down at his device, Charles taps on the screen, which brightens up with the "*Stand by*" message he's become familiar with. With a loud sigh, he lazily taps the screen again to bring up the "*Admin Access*" panel, complete with the keypad and the passcode field. It also displays a warning that there have been too many attempts at entering the passcode and that device lockout is imminent.

The ex-prisoner shakes his head in regret, remembering all those guesses he made at the passcode, back at the cabin. If he'd known then what he knows now, he would've waited until he had a better idea of what the code might *actually* be.

But the more he thinks about it, the more Charles picks up on certain things, mostly as a result of hearing about today's date from the TV. He recalls Mitchell saying that the passcode was set by the project director, a man Mitchell claims punished him for insubordination in his fight to combat terrorism—the very sort of terrorism that happened 15 years ago.

Staring at the four empty slots on the passcode screen as if straight into their souls, Charles feels that maybe the code won't be so difficult to crack. Nonetheless, while his mind eggs him on to enter the four digits representing today's historic event, he shakes his head at how ridiculous it seems. *There's no way. It couldn't be that—it's too easy to guess.*

But it doesn't matter either way to him. The device is ready to shut itself down if he dares to put in an incorrect passcode. And yet, he can't help wonder. *Why not? The world's ending, anyway. And there's no way that bastard'll take me to New York so we can find my family. I don't care anymore. Fuck it.*

As Charles slowly moves his fingers to input the numbers in the keypad, he grins ever so slightly, and maniacally. He almost can't wait to see the horrified look on Mitchell's face when he tells him he's locked out the device—while sitting on the toilet, no less, just to rub it in his pompous face.

"0911"—the numbers are all punched in, and the confirmation button appears again, just as it did before, back at the cabin, when he last tried this crap. Holding his breath in anticipation, and without a second thought, he taps the button.

A second passes. Then another, and another, and so on.

Stunned, Charles stares at the screen in confusion. He was expecting the device to do what it did last time, which was to display an "*Access Denied*" message and emit that awful beeping noise.

Instead, the screen abruptly goes black, and Charles almost freaks out at what's happening. Then, a split second later, the screen brightens again—with a brand new message:

"Authorization Confirmed—Welcome, DIR. MAYHUE"

Wide-eyed and trembling, Charles smiles so gleefully that light would reflect off his teeth. He then silently leaps off the toilet and does a fist pump in absolute victory. He just can't believe it. He's not sure if it was dumb luck or genius that pulled this off, but if he wasn't feeling like a hacker before, he sure as hell feels like one now. He chuckles hysterically at how amazing this is. He's just beaten the authentication system inside a priceless piece of government technology. And he can't believe how easy it was.

After sitting back down, he watches with excitement as the next screen comes up. It looks similar if not identical to what he saw when he first put on the device back at the prison. He can see all the settings: the "current" and "destination" dates and time information, geo-coordinates, test initiators and—most interesting—the settings interface, which he promptly selects. *Come on, there has to be something in here that'll help me.*

Meanwhile, outside the bathroom, Veronica is hearing strange noises coming from Charles that aren't related to his bowel movements. She gets up, mutes the TV and marches up to the bathroom door. "Yo, Charlie, y'all right in there?"

Charles freezes at her curious inquiry. He's not sure if she could hear the beeps and boops coming from the device, but he's not taking any chances. He racks his mind for a lie to tell her—it has to be convincing. "I-I'm jerking off! Go away!"

Taken aback by the blunt and honest answer, Veronica responds with embarrassment and raised hands that simply say, *I'm not touching this with a 10-foot pole.* "A'ight," she says to him, "I didn't need to know *that*, but OK, you do *you*, boo."

Charles sighs in relief and thanks God that she's bought his haphazard fib.

As she shakes her head, Veronica goes to grab the remote and unmutes the TV—while increasing the volume some more. She looks back at the bathroom door and thinks to herself, *Guess it makes sense. Locked up for as long as he was—no pussy, neither—and the world's endin', anyway.*

In the bathroom, Charles hears the news broadcast increase in loudness, which signals to him that the coast is clear. Right away he goes back to fiddling with his device. As he scrolls and goes further into the device's settings, he notes how many there are, and how obscure and technical they seem, too.

But one of them catches his eye. He taps on the setting that shows "*links*" to his device. There's only one, to something with a strange serial number that contains the word "alpha".

A memory flashes across Charles' brain—of when he and Mitchell were on his plane in Vegas and Mitchell explained to him that Charles' device was classified as the "beta" prototype, and his own was classified as "alpha".

Charles leans back in shock as he takes it all in. *No way—this must be the link between our devices.* Mesmerized, he taps on the button labeled "*Unlink*". It asks for confirmation, to which Charles—smiling—presses "*Yes*".

The device makes a soft noise, and a message onscreen confirms the link separation. Almost laughing, Charles can't wait to see the look on Mitchell's face when he tells him he's just removed the chain that was binding them together.

But then a thought crosses his mind. *Wait, is he gonna know about this? Like, right now?* Horrified, he looks frantically through the rest of his device's settings, hoping for something that'll allow him to manually jump through time before Mitchell gets wind of what he's just done.

Despite how hard he looks, however, Charles can't find anything relevant in the settings. But what he *does* find is a setting called "*experimental*"—whatever *that* means. Wondering what could be inside, he's about to tap on the setting, when he hears the door of the hotel suite burst open.

Still on the bed, Veronica whips her head around to see Mitchell, wide-eyed and desperate, searching in all directions.

"Where is he?? Where's Charles?!"

Stunned and stammering, she points to where he is. "Uh—b-bathroom. Why—?"

== Chapter Twenty-four ==

Before she can finish, Mitchell races to the door separating the two men. “Charles! Charles, open up!” he yells as he bangs repeatedly.

Freaked out, the squatting convict races through his mind about what to do. He looks at the device’s screen and accidentally taps on the “*Backwards*” button, which takes him to the main section. At this point, he notices a button that he must’ve missed before: this one says “*Fire*”.

Outside, Veronica, upon seeing Mitchell’s panic, rushes to the door and tells Charles that they’re coming in.

For Charles, it feels like the whole world is slowing down. He’s not certain that pushing this button will send him into the future—free from Mitchell—but he has to see for himself. He has to try and see his daughter before everything comes to an end. Nothing else matters to him anymore.

After wrenching the door handle violently and finding that Charles has no doubt locked it, Veronica takes a step back. In a sudden burst of Amazonian brutishness, she kicks the outrageously expensive door almost off its hinges—only to lock eyes with a terrified Charles just as he gives a light touch on the button on the device’s screen.

For a split second the whole bathroom is weirdly quiet. But then, while a soft little noise emanates from the device, Veronica and Mitchell both witness the frightened Charles blast away in a shock of turbulence and blinding light.

The bathroom returns to silence as the two comrades find themselves utterly paralyzed as to what to do regarding their escaped ward.

“Oh dear,” says Mitchell.

Chapter Twenty-five

Crash

The gasps coming from a rattled Charles are the only sounds that can be heard in the otherwise still environment. After he tapped the big “*Fire*” button, the light of the world disappeared, to be replaced in an instant by the expansive darkness of the decrepit future bathroom he has time-traveled into. All around him is nothing but a blackness so intense that he can’t even see his own hand in front of his face.

But then, having regained control of his breath, he gazes down at the only source of light still available: his device’s brightly lit screen. The interface has changed somewhat; the current and destination dates are now reversed from what they were. But the biggest change is the large button used to activate the device: it now says “*Return*” instead of “*Fire*”.

After a moment of staring blankly at the screen, Charles comes to his senses about where—or rather, *when*—he is. Still sitting on the toilet, he raises his arm and uses his device’s bright screen as a makeshift flashlight, just as he did back in the dark corridors of the prison. He sweeps all around and sees the decay and rot of the once-pristine luxury bathroom.

He sighs. A wave of relief and smugness washes over him. It was worth it, at the very least, just to see Mitchell’s planet-sized eyeballs and his shocked expression.

Then he hears a strange noise underneath his butt: it sounds like putty being slapped against dry porcelain, over and over again, and it’s coming from inside the toilet.

Leaping clear off the seat as if he's a basketball player making a three-point jump, Charles smacks his back against the adjacent wall and shines his device squarely at the innocent—albeit dirty-looking—toilet. The seconds feel like hours, and Charles, too scared to move an inch, waits in fear for whatever it is he heard coming from inside it.

All of a sudden, the toilet's lid flips upward and a shrieking, growling straggler plops out onto the dusty floor and starts moving towards him, pulsating and convulsing.

Charles screams like a banshee, bolts out of the bathroom and makes a beeline for the suite's door at breakneck speed. Then he rips it open—as the door shrieks with rust—and races out into the derelict hallways.

Luckily for him, he's already been through this hotel in the future with Mitchell, earlier. They all knew it wouldn't be a good idea for a wanted man like Charles to be seen in the lobby, so he and Mitchell went ahead of Veronica and waited for her inside the suite.

That said, Charles was under the (now obviously mistaken) impression that the building didn't have any creatures inside it. He figured Mitchell would've told him if there were, especially since they actually got to their suite from inside the future. *Guess he didn't think to check the friggin' bathroom, goddammit*, he says to himself as he sprints down the hallways towards the exit.

Outside the hotel, the eerie tranquility of the lifeless future is interrupted by the loud blast of the emergency exit door being blown open by the human battering ram known as Charles. With no time to stop, he hauls ass down the vacant roads until he's well away from the hotel, then comes to a dead stop to rest.

As he draws raspy breaths, he comes to the slow realization that Mitchell is truly no longer with him. It's just him now—alone. The other two aren't around to save his skin.

Part of Charles is happy to be free, but another part of him is petrified at the absence of the “hand-holding” he's come to appreciate from being alongside Mitchell. After all, *he* was the

expert on everything in the future world. But now, it's up to the convict to navigate on through and not get killed—as he almost was, back in the hotel suite.

He contemplates his strategy. *I'll just stick to the open roads. That should be okay.*

When Charles looks around, however, it dawns on him that he's actually lost. Due to the twilight and the ground-level fog, he can't even tell which way is north. Frustrated, he glances at the big “Return” button on his device. *I'm away from Mitchell. He should still be inside the hotel. I'm okay.*

A horrible feeling occurs to him. *Would he be able to track me down? What if he tries to get this device back—would he kill me for it?*

He shudders at the thought. But then he remembers that he still has the gun that Mitchell gave him. Reaching back, he touches the pistol tucked in his waistband and sighs in relief, feeling a renewed sense of confidence.

At this point, though, a slight breeze dances past Charles, who sniffs the suddenly putrid air. He almost gags, and his frightened instincts at once tell him what he already senses, based on the smell. He wants to whip his head in all directions to look for the strange movements of any creatures, but he knows that would be futile.

Instead, he presses the button in swift reaction. A split second later, the device activates and he's violently whisked back to the time he belongs in.

Blinded by the sudden afternoon daylight, Charles squints ahead—only to see a car coming right at him. “Whoa! Whoa! WHOA!!!” he yells.

The driver—a grumpy old fart of a man—screams in confusion at Charles suddenly popping out of thin air. He slams on his brakes, and the car comes to a screeching halt mere inches from the flinching convict.

The shocked and enraged driver exits the vehicle, ready to deliver a load of expletives at Charles. “Are you stupid?! Why the

== Chapter Twenty-five ==

FUCK are you out in the—” He stops on seeing the face of the man he’s chewing out. “Holy shit, you’re that prisoner from Nevada.”

Stunned by what’s happening and not knowing what to do, Charles just stands there like a deer in headlights—his mouth agape.

The old man pulls out his smartphone, and Charles, reacting in the only way that makes sense to him, pulls out his gun.

When he sees the barrel, the old man almost craps his pants and promptly lifts his arms, all before he can call the authorities.

“G-gimme your phone!” Charles screams.

Shaking, the old man reaches his hand out to Charles, who swipes the phone away.

“Now get the fuck back!” Charles orders.

Doing as he was told, the man scampers backwards; Charles then bolts into his car. He throws the vehicle into gear and burns rubber down the road, leaving the old man with his hands still above his head—along with a few witnesses to the crime.

“*FUCK!!!*” screams Charles, bashing his hand on the steering wheel.

He hyperventilates in a fear-fueled rage and darts his eyes every which way. He doesn’t know what to do. He knows that the cops will come for the car he just stole—not to mention that the old man correctly identified him as the escaped death row inmate from the news, *and* he’s one of the two who broke into that highly secure government building, causing a city-wide panic. It’s only a matter of time before holy hell comes raining down on him from law enforcement.

As Charles calms down, though, he starts to laugh at his own silliness. He has a freaking time machine. What’s *he* worried about? He’ll simply jump into the future when the cops try to nab him. He just needs to be careful, is all.

As he continues to drive around aimlessly, he spots an interstate sign pointing north to Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City. His heart pounding, he turns onto the loop and follows the directions.

Then he hears something ringing and realizes that he still has the old man's phone. After rolling down the window, he tosses the phone out onto the highway, where it'll get smashed to bits by the traffic.

Finally out on the open road, Charles feels surprisingly at peace as he drives onward to the city where he's certain his family is located. All he can do now, apart from keeping an eye out for the police, is hope that he can see his daughter—and that there's still enough time to do so.

* * *

"Are you kiddin' me with this bullshit right now?" blurts out Veronica.

"Yeah, I know what you mean—*believe me*," says Mitchell.

"How'd he guess the code? Doesn't he know it'll lock his ass out if he gets it wrong??"

"Yes, he does, in fact. But I don't think he cared at that point. More importantly, I'd like to know why *you* weren't watching him."

"Wh—He was takin' a shit! An' he told me he was rubbin' one out."

"Beg your pardon?"

"N-never mind. Look, I didn't know he was tryin' a crack the device's security, OK?"

"Well, from what Charles told me, he *attempted* to guess it before, back at the cabin—to the point where it gave him the lockout warning."

"Yeah, I know—I was *there*. But I didn't think he'd be stupid enough to try it *again*."

"You *knew*? And you didn't tell me?"

"I... Goddammit, Mitchell."

Inside the hotel suite, Mitchell and Veronica argue in the bathroom that once contained their kidnapped prisoner—before he vanished into the future.

“Maybe we should just let him go,” suggests Veronica.

Mitchell rubs his forehead. “We don’t really have a choice now. My device isn’t linked to his anymore, and it looks like I’ve lost his location, too.”

Veronica does a double take. “Excuse me? I thought you told me you could track him with *yours*—even if he somehow managed to unlock *his*!”

“That was my impression, as well. Seems I was wrong—sue me.” Mitchell shrugs.

Veronica sighs and clasps her head.

“We need to leave,” says Mitchell. “You have that address, I take it?”

Veronica nods. “So, what about Charles?” she asks.

“He’s off to go find his family in New York,” Mitchell replies, shrugging again. “All I care about right now is getting to Mayhue.” He then walks out of the bathroom and hovers his hand over his device. “I’ll see you at the car.”

And, just like that, he flashes away from existence, leaving Veronica to glance at the suitcases she has to carry back down.

* * *

A few hours have passed since the two men went their separate ways, and Charles—by some minor miracle—has finally arrived in New York City as the afternoon turns to evening.

The trip has been tense, strenuous and, above all else, dangerous. He was justifiably certain that the journey in his stolen ride would come to an end as soon as it started. By some impossible odds, however, Charles hasn’t even so much as been pulled over yet. He’s hardly seen any highway patrol cars, and the ones he did see went roaring past him with their lights on—in the direction of DC.

Charles can only guess that it must be because of the events that he was a part of while there. But for a brief moment, he wonders if maybe there’s something else going on—something

that requires the attention of law enforcement far more than some carjacking committed by an escaped convict. Eventually, though, as he drives on, he understands that he no longer cares. All he cares about is finding his daughter, and he's grateful that he doesn't have to waste precious time with the police.

The day is growing late as Charles makes it into Long Island. He doesn't know where Gabby and Jenny are living, let alone if they're even in New York—or if either of them is still alive. But he *does* know where her snooty parents live; and if anyone knows the whereabouts of his family, it would be them.

Driving through town after town, he has found himself bewildered by the thought of seeing his ex-wife and grown daughter. It's been ten long, horrible years since he last saw either of them, and even longer since he last said anything to her parents. And now, here he is: escaped from prison, in a stolen vehicle, armed with a gun—and a time machine—and going to his in-laws' house to get the information he needs.

Charles soon realizes that his eyelids feel droopy. *I think I'll kill them, just so I can get some shut-eye in their huge-ass mansion afterwards.*

His mind wanders from one murderous thought to the next as he continues to drive down the road while fighting off his fatigue; and, for just a second, he closes his eyes. Unfortunately, he can't quite manage to open them in time to see the tree he's about to crash into.

Chapter Twenty-six

Fancy

Despite the alarm of terrorism on a day like today, the tranquil night has arrived in Washington as it always does. All the well-to-do of the cocktail circuit and the higher-ups of the Beltway have retired from their duties of screwing over the nation's people for their own self-interests. Some of them have gone home to their families; others have left for supper, or to a party.

And Ronald Mayhue wishes he could do any of those things instead of what he's about to do. After bursting into a high-dollar downtown restaurant for the elite, he scans the dining area for the person he knows will be here.

The restaurant, established inside a luxurious hotel near its top floor, showcases its atmosphere of fine dining as an attractive woman plays beautiful music on an exquisite harp. The servers are dressed for the fancier folk they serve, and the meals are all deliciously gourmet—albeit just a tad overpriced.

“Hello there, sir.”

Interrupting his intense examination of the area, Mayhue looks at the maître d’.

“Do you have a reservation?”

Mayhue glares right at the man with an uncomfortable aggression. “Fuck off.”

Stunned and frozen stiff by the remark, the maître d’ watches as Mayhue, now having spotted his target, walks away.

Meanwhile, in the dining area, a waiter arrives with two elaborate dishes for a couple sitting at the coveted window table—the one with the view. He places the expensive meals in front of them and smiles ingratiatingly at the pair. “Here you are, sir, madam. Your typical repast for the occasion. Now then, is there anything *else* I can get for the two of you?”

The older woman, dressed in a fine gown that she’s almost too big for, waves away the server, smiling. “No, no, that’ll be all, *garçon*,” she says with a cringeworthy faux-French pronunciation. She then turns to her husband. “Unless there was something *you* wanted, dear.”

The man across from her, dressed in a tuxedo, shakes his head politely at the server.

“Ah, very good then, Mr. and Mrs. Hershaw,” he says before taking his leave.

The wife looks gleefully at the fine meal in front of her. “Ah! This is *so* wonderful. It’s nice that we could make the reservation; I was afraid they’d be closed because of what happened earlier today. Did you see the news? Dreadful what’s happening—and on the anniversary, no less!”

The husband, Robert Hershaw, is paying only half-attention. He rolls his eyes and responds as though he’s bored. “Yes, dear, I heard the news. I may be retired, but I’m still very up-to-date with—”

His words trail off as his mouth hangs and his eyes grow fiery at the sight of Ronald Mayhue standing right at their table with a similarly vicious glare directed right back at Hershaw.

The wife, ever the socialite, smiles at the stranger. “Oh, hello! You must be a friend of Robert—”

“Beat it, you fat, stupid cunt,” blurts out Mayhue.

Hershaw can’t believe the words coming out of Mayhue’s mouth. He looks as if he could pop a blood vessel.

“E-EXCUSE ME??” the wife stammers as she nearly spills her drink.

“What? It’s what your *husband* calls you behind your back,” grunts Mayhue.

Shocked, she glances at her husband, who seems to be about to suffer a stroke.

“H-honey,” he mutters to his wife, “c-could I have a moment with my... ‘friend’?”

“Er, I’ll go wash my hands for supper,” she says, expediently getting out of the chair and walking towards the restrooms.

Without skipping a beat, Mayhue slides into her seat and stares at Hershaw’s maddened face with intensity.

“Boy,” Hershaw seethes, “you’ve got some *fuckin’* nerve doing—”

“Shut up, moron; we’ve got a situation.”

Hershaw is taken aback. Mayhue’s never spoken out of turn like this to him. “We shouldn’t even be *seen* in the same room together,” he hisses. “I’m here with my *wife* for dinner; how the hell did you even find me? Who told you??”

Mayhue clenches his teeth and shakes his head. “Every year—every *fucking* year—you come to this stupid fucking restaurant and order the same fucking food on the anniversary of 9/11 with your fat, ugly wife. It’s not hard for someone like *me* to track you down, you stupid blowhard.”

Gripping the fine tablecloth in feverish rage, Hershaw tries to keep his cool and his sense of strategy. “I told you: *NEVER* contact me again. And if you’re gonna be an asshole, then I’ll tell the waiter you’re harassing me and the other patrons. I suggest you leave.”

Mayhue doesn’t care about the empty threat; he has a bigger problem—and he knows that so does ol’ Robert Hershaw. “Mitchell Grayson broke into a restricted building with his criminal buddy,” he states. “I assume you saw it on the news?”

“Of course I did—everyone in this whole fucking city did. Are you here because you need my help in finding out *why*? Tough shit.”

“No, Robert, I’m here to tell you that we may be screwed.”

Hershaw looks at Mayhue as if he's lost his marbles.

Mayhue continues to speak. "I've got intel from a mole saying that the building he infiltrated was harboring a massive data center with a quantum computer, deep underground. Apparently, this computer was capable of capturing, storing and decrypting any data that passed through our country's infrastructure, including foreign data, from what I understand." He pauses to rub his forehead.

Hershaw takes the opportunity to interject. "There's a quantum computer? And it can collect any sort of data?"

"Yes, Robert, and that includes data that's since been destroyed—like from Project UMBRA."

As Hershaw's eyes widen at what Mayhue is implying, he begins to shake from the revealing news. "NO! No, w-wait a minute," he sputters. "Are you tellin' me that, even though you ASSURED me that *everything* related to the project was destroyed and classified, this computer retained all that information? And now that Grayson asshole has it?"

"I have reason to believe it's likely, yes."

The table goes silent as the beautiful melody played by the harpist flows softly over the extreme tension between the two.

"Th-then that's it," mutters Hershaw. "He's probably already sent the evidence to the press. Congress'll hang us both!"

Mayhue frowns. "If he had done that, we'd already be in handcuffs. But we're not, so I don't think that's his intention. We'd be able to fight the charges, and maybe pull a few strings to get the case dropped and forgotten; and I'd bet my life that's what Grayson's thinking, too. No, he wants *revenge* for what we did to him—not a show trial."

"*WE??* What do you mean 'we'? *You* were the one that destroyed his life. It's *YOU* he wants."

Mayhue shakes his head. "You're the one who made it all happen, Robert. You supplied the funds—and I'm certain whatever data Grayson stole from that computer will show as much."

Hershaw fidgets and darts his eyes around the restaurant; paranoia has definitely set in. “Christ, this was *your* mess, Mayhue—*YOU* were supposed to deal with it. Now what the fuck do we do?”

“I don’t know—the ball’s in *his* court. I’ve already pulled in some favors with DC Metro and a few other agencies; I’ve told them to drop everything else and pool all resources into hunting them down. I even disclosed who they are and that they were responsible for the terrorist scare that happened earlier today. The agencies are combing the whole tri-state area.”

Hershaw is shocked. “Y-you told ’em their identities? That’s going to raise questions. Mitchell Grayson and Veronica Berkley aren’t supposed to *exist* anymore, remember? That’s what you said!”

“I know, but we’re out of options; Grayson has our necks on the chopping block. We still have a chance if everyone goes after him before he spills the beans on us.”

Hershaw feels sick. “Are you forgetting this guy can travel through time? How are the cops gonna kill him if your own mercenaries couldn’t?”

“Same reason he’s been flying under the radar for as long as he has. Quantity over quality. He can’t hide from everyone. He may have a device that can let him leap through time, but he’s not a god. That device can only send him 20 years into the future, or back to the present. And that makes him—”

Mayhue’s words fade as he spots a glowing red dot bounce around all over Hershaw’s body.

“Makes him *what*?” asks the oblivious blowhard.

Mayhue can only stare in slowly realized horror at what he’s witnessing.

At that exact moment, outside the restaurant, across the street and on top of an adjacent building, the scope of a rifle zeroes in right on Hershaw’s head from the wide-open view.

Mayhue barely has time to look outside at where the dot is coming from, before Veronica Berkley, the trained sniper, smiles as she gently pulls the trigger.

The bullet blasts through the window and clean through the side of Hershaw's skull. His body flops limply in his chair, and Mayhue flies backwards from the table to avoid the line of fire. Flinging himself out of his chair, he ducks under the table behind him. All those years of combat training and of dodging enemy fire in the Gulf are paying off for him; there's no way Veronica can shoot him now.

Not that that was her intention. When the shot ends up as a confirmed kill, she moves her face away from the scope of the rifle and confidently looks over to the side.

Accompanying her is Mitchell, who is observing—through a pair of binoculars—the target who just had his fate sealed by Veronica. He lowers his binoculars and smiles. “Excellent shot, as always, Veronica.”

She thanks him as he puts away the binoculars and taps on his device to wake it up.

“Mayhue's hidin' like a coward, somewhere,” she says to him. “Can't get a shot.”

“That's fine. I want the dirtbag to squirm a little. I'll be going ahead now. I'll see you at the rendezvous; and you'd better get a move on—fast.”

“Got it. Just be careful—”

But before she can finish, Mitchell taps the activation button on his device and blasts off into the future, leaving Veronica to her quiet lonesome.

“Man, I hate it when he does that,” she mutters to herself.

Moving quickly, she packs away the rifle and runs for the roof's exit.

Meanwhile, the people in the restaurant are utterly terrified—including Mayhue. When the shot was fired, the patrons and staff were initially confused by the very loud gunshot, but then the

scene devolved into chaos as soon as they saw Hershaw's lifeless body emit a stew of blood and brains from his head.

People panicked and nearly trampled each other as they tried to desperately rush for the exit. Some diners chose to hide under their tables—hoping to God that they weren't next. Others cowered against the walls as they cried and whimpered about their carefree evening turning for the worst. And the harpist, stricken by the thought of a beautiful, privileged woman such as her being killed by gunshot, simply fainted and fell off her chair onto the stage.

As the dust settles, Mayhue, paralyzed with terror, has no idea what to do. For all he knows, Mitchell and Veronica are still out there, just waiting for the right opportunity to end him.

At first, one could argue that it was merely a coincidence: just a crazed gunman who decided to open fire on rich people inside some fancy restaurant. But that theory goes out the window for Mayhue the instant he realizes that only one round was fired—and it clearly hit the intended target. There's no way it was a coincidence.

He understands now that his situation has gone off the deep end. Hershaw *can't* have been the only target. If Mitchell and his friend know about *Hershaw*, of all people, then they certainly know about him. Maybe they killed Hershaw and not him just to make a point that his life was done for.

It's over; the hunter has now become the hunted. And all Mayhue can do at this point is wait for law enforcement to arrive and save him—if they even can.

All of a sudden, from inside his pocket, Mayhue hears the ring tone of his cellphone. He frantically reaches inside, thinking it might be a colleague or an official he can relay for help. But as he pulls out the phone, he looks at the caller ID in puzzlement. "Celeste?" he says out loud. He's surprised his daughter is calling him; she usually just texts him.

He answers, shaking his head and thinking that he'll just tell her to call back later. "Hey, sweetie. Look, can I call ya back?—"

"Hello, Director Mayhue."

The color drains from Mayhue's face. That's not his daughter's voice; and no one calls him "Director"—no one, except for those who were involved with Project UMBRA.

"M-Mitchell Grayson."

"Oh, good, you remembered my name. I figured you'd forgotten it after all this time."

Scared out of his mind, Mayhue puts on a tough-guy act and cuts through the crap. "Where's my daughter? Where is she?!"

"Oh, don't worry. I have you on speaker. She's right here."

Standing in the Mayhue family's living room, Mitchell eyes the wife, Susan, and the daughter, Celeste, huddled together in the corner and frightened at the stranger with the gun. He points the stolen phone in his hand at them, as if waiting for one of them to say something.

Celeste takes the initiative. "DADDY! Please! He's got a gun—"

Mitchell quickly points the gun back at the two women and they both gasp in terror. Then they get quiet. Very quiet.

"I take it we now have an understanding?" pipes up Mitchell.

Mayhue is seething with hatred and horror. He wishes he could strangle Mitchell with his bare hands after what he's making his wife and kid go through. "If you touch a *hair* on them I'll—"

"You'll do *WHAT*, exactly?" Mitchell smirks.

Mayhue grows silent, knowing how powerless he is right now.

"Here's what'll happen, *Ronald*," states Mitchell. "You're going to come home, and we are going to have a nice little chat. No cops, no guns, no nonsense. If I catch so much as a *whiff* of the law, I'll start shooting. And I'll make sure they suffer."

He eyes the women in the corner with an air of confidence about him as they cower and shake. Celeste then starts to bawl and scream, and Susan tries to calm her down while fighting back tears of her own.

Mitchell smirks. "You have 30 minutes. Try to be early, would you?"

== Chapter Twenty-six ==

He then taps the end-call button on Celeste's smartphone and tosses the phone across the room, leaving Mayhue on the other end to stew.

As Mayhue puts away his phone, he trembles at what'll happen. He briefly ponders if maybe he should contact the feds and negotiate a hostage situation. But he knows that Mitchell won't be fazed by the presence of heavy law enforcement—he can simply jump into the future to escape after killing his family.

He contemplates what to do. *He said he only wants a chat.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Mayhue spots a fancy clock on the wall. Seeing the time, he knows he has to go right away if he wants to make it.

After getting up off the floor, he races out the door of the restaurant, exits the building and sprints for his car—all the while thinking of the many different ways he will torture Mitchell once he gets his hands on him.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Revenge

Looking all around, the pudgy home invader can't help but smirk. "This is a rather lovely house you have—very attractive. I take it that this is *your* doing?"

Mitchell, standing in the center of the living room, looks directly into the eyes of Susan, Mayhue's faithful homemaker wife.

Holding back tears and terror, she nods her head.

Mitchell smiles. "It's fabulous. Shame to say, it's all for nothing, though," he says to the woman. "I hope neither of you had any plans for the future, since there isn't going to be one."

Susan quivers in confusion. "Wh-what do you mean? What're you gonna do to us?!"

Mitchell almost laughs. "Oops, sorry. Didn't *quite* mean to phrase it that way; I'm just saying there isn't going to *be* a future—for anyone."

Both the wife and her daughter look at each other as if to say that the man who's keeping them captive has lost all sense of reality. Little do either of them know just how right he is.

Mitchell suddenly pricks up his ears at the sound of a nice car pulling into the family's driveway. He directs a most sinister smile at the two women. "Ahhh, *Daddy's home*."

Outside, Mayhue cautiously approaches the front door of his house. He gulps at what he might find inside, but he's prepared to do whatever he needs in order to protect his family.

Then he hears the sound of footsteps coming from behind.

“Hands up, shitbag.”

Mayhue grits his teeth at the sound of the militant woman. He doesn’t even need to turn around to know that it’s the traitor, Veronica.

“You want me to shoot yo ass? Hands!”

Mayhue does as he’s told and puts his hands on the door of his house, while Veronica starts to pat him all over—and ends up finding a revolver strapped to his ankle.

She feels disgusted with him. “Were ya plannin’ on shootin’ Mitchell with this? You’d risk your own family’s lives just like *that*?”

He sighs. “Never surrender to the enemy, and show no mercy. That’s how we trained our soldiers—you know that.”

Veronica sneers in anger as she whips out some handcuffs and locks Mayhue’s wrists with them.

“Veronica Berkley,” he mutters to her. “You had so much potential—more than the others.”

“Yeah, an’ if it weren’t for Mitchell, I’d be dead like the rest of ’em, too.”

“I see, so that’s why you’re so loyal to him.”

Veronica grits her teeth and flings the door open—shoving Mayhue forward, which forces him to stumble clumsily into his own house.

“I got him, Mitchell!” she shouts, forcing Mayhue to walk towards the living room area.

As the two enter, Mitchell gets a good look at the man who destroyed his life. He sees that Mayhue appears considerably older than the last time they met, only a year or so ago. But then again, so does Mitchell. Seems that hiding from and outsmarting each other has taken a toll on both of them.

Regardless, Mitchell smiles at seeing how much grief he’s caused his tormentor. “Well, well, don’t *you* just look awful,” he says as Veronica pushes Mayhue towards his wife and daughter. “You remember Veronica, yes?” he cheekily asks.

Veronica shoves Mayhue, hard, to the ground, right into his family.

“DADDY!” cries Celeste.

“Oh my God! Honey, are you okay?” Susan is concerned.

Mitchell beams. He’s finally got the son of a bitch in a corner—and at his mercy, too. “Hello, Director Mayhue. Been a while, hasn’t it? Good to see you’re... *not* doing well,” he says, almost sadistically.

Mayhue remains silent and still, glaring at his captor with a fiery hatred.

Mitchell frowns at the silence. “Your family’s fine and unharmed, by the way—thanks for asking. Not that you *care*, clearly.”

At this point Veronica walks up to Mitchell and hands him the snub-nosed revolver that Mayhue was packing. “Found this strapped to his ankle.”

Mitchell takes it from her while laughing. “It’s a revolver!” he says humorously. “Just like the one that ‘Mark Tannehill’ gentleman had on him. Remember him? The man you sent to kill us?”

Mayhue looks away.

“You two were quite chummy during the Gulf War, yes? I read all about you and him, earlier today. Both of you, decorated war veterans—and yet you thought it would be a good idea to throw him at me. He would’ve gotten us, too, were it not for that incompetent sniper.”

Mitchell chuckles as he clicks open the revolver and dumps out all the bullets. Then he tosses the empty gun straight at an adjacent wall. “I almost got him to give me your name,” he continues. “Would’ve made finding you *much* quicker. But instead, he chose *death*. He died to protect you from me; what a true friend he must’ve been. And *YOU*—*you* left him to die. How deplorable.”

Confused, Celeste starts to question her father. “D-Daddy, what’s he talking about??” she asks, shaking.

“Ron,” says a frightened Susan, “wh-who are these people? Wh-what do they want?”

Mitchell perks up at the family’s line of questioning. “Yes, Ron—tell them. Tell them why we’re here.”

But Mayhue refuses to speak.

Mitchell’s left eye twitches. “Well, now, what do you know? The man of the house has lost his tongue. Fine, *I’ll* tell them.”

“WAIT!!” shouts Mayhue. “P-please, just let my family go. It’s me you want, right?”

“No, Mayhue, it’s *revenge* I want. There was a time when I *also* wanted to save the world from the coming Armageddon, but it seems that ship has sailed. So now, there’s nothing left for me but this.”

Mayhue’s stomach churns in terror at what he’s hearing. “So, it was true, then? When you were with us at the project—what you saw when we sent you into the future?”

“I’m afraid so. And it’ll be upon us come tomorrow, not that it’ll make any difference to you.”

Mayhue’s shaking. He’s not sure if Mitchell is lying about it being tomorrow when the world ends, but he knows he’s dead either way, unless he does something. His mind thinks about what to say—if only to spare himself from Mitchell’s wrath. “What about that convict?” he says to Mitchell. “I don’t see him anywhere.”

Mitchell frowns. “He’s no longer with us; he escaped, funnily enough. He actually managed to guess the administrative passcode and manually de-link his device from mine. He’s long gone.”

Mayhue figured something was off. No way Mitchell would’ve just let the fugitive leave with that invaluable device still attached to him. Moreover, he understands how the convict was able to guess the passcode, given that today’s a very special date. The gears crank in his head. He feels like he’s playing a game of poker with Mitchell and all the chips are down. With this new information, however, he’s thinking that there may be a way out after all.

Through all this, Susan and Celeste have been flabbergasted by the two men's conversation. Time-travel this, apocalypse that—none of it is making sense to the poor women, who feel that they've been cut out from very important information.

"Wh-what is he talking about, Ron??" Susan asks, fretting. "Why is he saying the world is ending tomorrow?!—"

"SHUT UP!" yells Mayhue with a fury of emotion. "Just... just let me do the talking."

Paralyzed with a newfound fear of her husband, Susan nods fervently.

But Mitchell shakes his head in disapproval. "No, Mayhue. There will be no talk—"

"H-he took off with the 'beta' device, am I correct?" interrupts Mayhue, sounding desperate. "Do you *SWEAR* on your family?"

"What are you talking about??" asks Mitchell.

"Do you swear that you will let me and my wife and daughter go—if I tell you the passcode? You can use it to track down the other device and get it back from that prisoner." It's a gamble, but it's the only play Mayhue has. And he's hoping Mitchell will take the deal.

"Sorry, Ronald. I'm not interested in spending my last day alive hunting down a criminal for what is now ultimately a worthless time machine. Anyway, time's up."

Mitchell raises his gun, but then Mayhue, for some insane reason, starts to laugh.

"What's funny?" asks Mitchell, suspicious.

"*Worthless* time machine?? God, that sounds absurd," chuckles Mayhue. "You don't know, do you? Am I right to assume that the late Doctor Samuel Burling never told you?"

Mitchell's hand clenches on the gun in his grip. "He hardly told me *anything* in between the experiments he tortured me with. The only good thing about him was how useful his name was for my new identity."

"Yeah, I'll bet," mutters Mayhue. "It certainly had *me* fooled. I only found out when that guard you screwed over told me. Barney,

right? I still can't believe you went with Doctor Burling's identity, considering what he did to you."

"I know," smirks Mitchell. "Makes for a convincing cover, since he's dead and forgotten."

The room becomes quiet, but Mitchell hasn't pulled the trigger yet.

Feeling bolder, Mayhue stares into Mitchell's cold, ruthless eyes. "Listen to me," he says with intensity. "Those tests he did on you served a purpose. They culminated in the experimental features that got installed into the beta device. I'm sure you know that."

"Where are you going with this?" asks Mitchell.

"One of those features was an upgraded quantum-tunneling algorithm. From what Dr. Burling said, it 'theoretically' solved the issue of sending the user into the past. No paradoxes."

Mitchell, his breath paused, lowers his weapon as if egging Mayhue on to tell him more.

"Have I got your attention *now*, asshole? Saving the world is still on the table. If you can get that device back, you can access the algorithm modifier and set the date to take you into the past. Then you can stop whatever's coming."

Stunned, Mitchell scours his mind about what to do. He was planning to kill Mayhue and wait out the apocalypse; but now his "revenge and retire" scheme has been dealt a wild card.

"So, how about it?" asks Mayhue. "You let us go, and I'll give you the passcode for your device and you can go find him."

Mitchell can't believe it. The man he wanted to destroy so much is now positioning himself to be his savior. He feels cheated by it all, but he can't pass up the opportunity to save the future; at the very least, he could flee to the past before the end arrives. And, maybe, he can save his own wife and daughter from their fates. That alone is worth everything to him.

He lowers his weapon. "Is that all? I just need to find Charles and simply activate the experimental algorithm?"

Mayhue almost grins. “Well, actually,” he says, pouring on the charm, “there’s something you should know about the experimental features on that device: they were never tested. We didn’t have time before everything went tits up at the base. The science team understood how risky the features were, so Dr. Burling secured them behind a *secondary* passcode—just to make sure they couldn’t be accidentally switched on by the testing faculty.”

Mitchell bats an eye. “OK, give me both passcodes and we’ll be on our way.”

Mayhue nods his head. “The administrative passcode is ‘0911’. I’m not surprised that convict was able to guess it.”

Realizing what day it is today, both Mitchell and Veronica let out an audible groan.

“Goddamn,” says Veronica, rolling her eyes. “No wonder. He must’ve figured it out when I was watching the news and... ugh, never mind.”

Without hesitation, Mitchell taps his device to wake it up, then flicks and swipes the touchpad until he’s on the passcode screen. Sure enough, after he’s put in the four digits, the device reboots and unlocks itself—just as Charles’ device did for him. “Excellent,” he says, almost laughing. “Now, what’s the *other* passcode?”

Mayhue glares at him. “Do I have your *word*?”

The phrasing echoes in Mitchell’s mind. He can’t believe this slimeball is really trying to pull the honor system on him, after the hell he put Mitchell through. But he knows Mayhue won’t give him what he needs unless he plays along.

“Say it, Grayson. I know you’re a man of honor. I’ve known it ever since you went to the higher-ups and demanded that human subjects not be used for our tests.”

White-hot anger bubbles just below the surface of Mitchell’s mind. “Yes, I know. And you punished me and my family for it. You destroyed everything I cared about.”

Mayhue gulps. “Then don’t tarnish their memory. Just let us go, and I swear on my wife and daughter that I’ll give you the passcode.”

Mitchell sighs. “Fine. Let’s have it.”

“I wanna hear you say their names. *SWEAR* on their souls!”

“I-I swear, for Julia and Ashley,” Mitchell says, with a heavy heart.

Mayhue nods and takes a deep, anxiety-filled breath. “The passcode for the experimental features on the ‘beta’ device is... ‘0822’.”

Mitchell sneers. “And how can I trust that this passcode is *real*?”

In response, Mayhue turns to his daughter. “Sweetie, tell him your birthday.”

In between her tears and whimpers, she recites the day she was born. “Au-August 22nd.”

Mayhue turns back to him. “It’s my daughter’s birthday.”

Mitchell rolls his eyes and scoffs at him. “Honestly, people need to stop using birthdays as passwords.”

At this point Mayhue looks down at the carpet, carefully choosing the right words. “So, you’re going to go stop the end of the world, right?”

“I hope so.”

“So... we’re done then?”

Barely able to contain his anger, Mitchell nods his head. “Oh yeah, we’re done here.”

Mayhue, unsure about Mitchell’s tone, decides to nod his head once more in agreement. It feels as if a massive weight of anxiety and terror has been lifted from his being. The gamble seems to have paid off, albeit not exactly as he thought it would.

“I just have a question,” he says. “Why did you help that prisoner escape? Why give him the other device? What could you *possibly* have needed him for?”

Mitchell stares at Mayhue’s genuinely curious expression and snickers. “I needed him to help me open a door.”

“What?” asks a horribly confused Mayhue.

“You heard me—a door,” chuckles Mitchell.

His casual manner strikes concern in Mayhue. “You know, one of Doctor Burling’s findings, when he studied you, was that your brain could recover from the trips, to the point where you built up a tolerance. I take it that’s true?”

“Yes. Why?” asks Mitchell.

“Well, what he also found was that the brain couldn’t recover to the same extent after each jump. He said that repeated jumps could eventually lead to psychosis and insanity.”

Mitchell raises his eyebrows. “Are you... are you *actually* saying what I think you are? After all you did to me and put me through, you’re *really* asking whether or not I’m insane—from the *time-jumps*, of all things??”

Mayhue finds himself afraid to speak, and the room fills up with a deadly tension.

“Good question,” adds Mitchell. “Let’s find out.”

With no time to respond, Mayhue watches Mitchell raise his gun and pull the trigger, repeatedly. It’s all over so fast that he doesn’t react until both his wife and daughter fall over, dead.

Mayhue’s expression can only be described as rattled and confused. But as he realizes what’s happened, he starts to scream in terror and rage.

Veronica, meanwhile, finds herself utterly shocked by the horrible slaughter that her partner has just committed. “Holy shit, Mitchell—what the *fuck*?” she says, agitated.

In a flash, Mayhue’s screams turn to violence and he gets up onto his feet and races towards Mitchell to do whatever damage he can. However, with his arms cuffed behind his back, he isn’t much of a match for Mitchell’s well-placed pistol-whipping.

As blood spurts from his mouth, Mayhue crashes to the ground and then frantically writhes around, trying to regain his balance—to no avail.

“I *told* you I wanted revenge,” Mitchell seethes. “Did you really think I was gonna let your family go free? After what you did to *mine*?”

Putting the gun away, he delivers a powerful kick into the gut of the poor bastard, who collapses and nearly pukes from the impact.

Mitchell proceeds to get on top of him while pulling back his sleeve. “I think it’s time you were given a taste of your own medicine.” He then taps his device to wake it up.

Knowing what Mitchell must be about to do, Mayhue begs for mercy.

But Mitchell merely ignores him as he flashes a vile, psychopathic grin. “Now then, Director Mayhue, let me show you your future.”

“NO! PLEASE!”

“Your future... is death.”

The device emits a confirmation signal, and as Mitchell wraps himself around his victim, they both get encompassed by the instrument’s warp bubble.

The violent turbulence and blinding light vanish in a near-instant, and the bright, lovely living room is replaced by darkness, decay and a feeling of hell.

Right after the collapse of the warp bubble, Mitchell leaps off Mayhue, just as the broken man begins to seize and spasm from the shock of the time jump.

Almost gleefully, Mitchell witnesses the excruciating pain and suffering that Mayhue is going through. In fact, he’s almost delighted by it. “Sorry, but jumping through the timeline didn’t make me go crazy—you did,” he says.

Unaware of what his enemy is saying, Mayhue ends his seizure with foam coming out of his mouth—followed by motionlessness.

Mitchell, seeing that his adversary has stopped moving, knows that it’s finally over. “Well, goodbye, Director Mayhue.”

As he looks out the stained windows of the living room, he gazes around at the twilit neighborhood. What used to be a

beautiful and pristine all-American suburb is now nothing more than a graveyard containing the ghosts of houses and land that was once full of life.

But that doesn't matter to Mitchell. All he cares about is the fact that, despite being on the run and in hiding and having his life torn apart, he has won. Yes, he's won. He has bested the monster who took everything away from him. And he couldn't be more glad. *I did it. Julia, Ashley—I got him.*

After a moment of solemn silence, just as he's readying his device to take him back to the present, Mitchell hears movement coming from behind him. Whipping around, he at first thinks a creature has somehow managed to sneak up on him. But that's not what's happening. Instead, he sees something almost as revolting.

Rising from the floor laboriously, Mayhue is trying to get to his feet. His body feels awful, and his head feels as if it could explode from the pressure. It takes a second for him to get upright, but when he does, he looks around at everything in absolute shock, before turning his attention back to Mitchell.

Mitchell can't believe what he's witnessing. The time jump should've killed Mayhue. And the fact that it didn't can only mean one thing. "No... *YOU*, this whole time," he says, floored.

Frightened, Mayhue stutters and stumbles. "I-I didn't know—I never tested myself."

Mitchell is utterly shocked by the sight of the man still standing in front of him. He thought Mayhue simply wouldn't survive the trip. But here he is, upright and cognizant. There's only one explanation: Mayhue himself had the correct genes this whole time—and neither one of them even knew it.

However, as stunned as Mitchell is, he realizes that it's not something that ultimately matters. He understands what a coward Mayhue is: sending all those people to their deaths; torturing him to figure out why he could time-travel safely; and, even after getting the answer, never bothering to test himself to see if he was a potential candidate.

The whole situation feels like cosmic irony to Mitchell. But he doesn't care anymore; he's gotten his revenge. And he knows that nothing can survive in this hellish future—not even a demon like Mayhue. Giving him one last vile look, Mitchell raises his arm to activate his device.

Mayhue, freaking out, races towards his foe. “NO! NO! DON'T LEAVE ME!”

But it's too late. As he tries to dive into Mitchell, the man whisks away in a flash of light, leaving Mayhue with nothing but a pocket of air to hit.

After smashing back onto the floor, Mayhue starts to yell and cry. A gut-wrenching panic overtakes him, and his survival instincts take over. He stands up in an instant and runs out the rotten doorway of his house.

As he comes out to the street, Mayhue can see that all around him is nothing but bleak lifelessness. It's just like Mitchell told him—the world really *is* destroyed.

“HELP! SOMEBODY HELP!” screams the desperate man.

There's no answer. Instead, Mayhue hears the rumbling of what sounds like something heavy pounding at the pavement from further away. Upon hearing the pounding, he turns around, horrified, to see what is coming out of the fog.

Down the road, an enormous, frightful-looking creature is sprinting after him like a lumbering alligator—screeching and snarling, too.

With every cell in his body telling him to run for his life, Mayhue bolts in the opposite direction. However, even if his arms weren't cuffed behind his back, he simply wouldn't be fast enough to outrun the beast that's now quickly closing the gap.

He never even has the chance to scream one last time.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Liar

As the light dispels, Mitchell finds himself standing, once again, in the beautiful—but bloodstained—living room in the time that he belongs in. He also finds himself being greeted by the stern and ugly glare of Veronica. “It’s done,” he states to her.

“So ya left his body there, huh? Did he suffer?”

“He’s... worse than dead.”

“The hell’s *that* s’posed to mean?”

“Let’s just leave it at that.” Mitchell almost feels he should tell her what he witnessed with Mayhue: how his former boss survived the trip and how he left him to die in the cold, creature-filled wastelands. But it seems like something she doesn’t need to know, given how upset she clearly already is with him. Instead, he decides it’s best to keep it to himself.

Veronica continues her icy glare, at last getting to Mitchell.

He sighs in response. “Out with it, Veronica.”

“How could you?” she asks almost hurtfully. “I get wantin’ to kill that Mayhue bastard, but *they* didn’t have *anythin’* to do with this.”

“An eye for an eye,” shrugs Mitchell. “If anything, I saved those women the misery of watching me kill their breadwinner; and, if we fail in our mission, I saved them from the horror of getting consumed by the creatures. It was a kindness I did.”

Close to appalled, Veronica shakes her head and sighs. There’s no point in dwelling on it; what’s done is done. “So now what?” she asks.

“Well, we have the code to activate the experimental features on the other device. Our only hope now is to pray that it can take me into the past and that I’ll be able to do something about those monsters.”

“*YOU* goin’ into the past—what about the rest of us? How do we know that it won’t create a paradox, or somethin’? Will we even *exist* anymore?”

A deafening pause follows as Mitchell hesitates to answer before finally looking away from her. “Right now, let’s just focus on getting to New York and finding Charles.”

He begins to walk away, and Veronica follows behind towards the door—but not before taking one last, saddened glance at the two dead women in the corner.

Mitchell then raises his device and scans through the settings to find the one showing the global coordinates for the location of Charles and his device.

“You got a lock on him?” Veronica asks as they step out of the house.

“Erm, we may have a problem,” he says.

“*What?!?*”

“I have his last coordinates. He’s somewhere on Long Island, but these last entries are at least a couple of hours old. Something must’ve happened to him—or to the device. He could be somewhere else by now; and until we get an update, I don’t think we can find him.”

“Seriously? How’d this happen?!”

“Good question. The device may have gone into a suspended state, or it may be damaged.”

“Damaged? That thing’s invincible! How’d he manage to bust it?”

“Maybe he didn’t—it’s possible he’s dead. The device would’ve reset and gone dormant if that were the case.”

“You kiddin’? He’s only been away from us for a few hours—how could he have gotten himself killed already?”

“Good point, but this *is* Charles we’re talking about. Although... how much trouble could a time-traveling criminal *possibly* get himself into?”

* * *

A loud gasp. That’s the first thing Charles manages to do as he regains consciousness. He starts to hazily look around at his surroundings, finding that his mind is a dizzy whirlwind of alarm and confusion. The last thing he remembers is when he found himself barreling towards a tree in his stolen car—right after feeling very tired from the trip to Long Island. After that, nothing but blackness.

His eyes adjust to the artificial light around him, and his brain cranks into high gear as he now sees where he is. It’s a hospital room, and he’s lying in a bed while wearing a gown.

Charles doesn’t need to think very hard as to how he ended up in a hospital; that car crash was, no doubt, very real and very much responsible for him being here.

The feeling in his nerves starts to return to him and he can sense his head throbbing in pain. He understands that he probably has a concussion, but he’s hoping that the result is just a headache. Luckily, that seems to be the *only* thing messed up about him, apart from some mild bruising and cuts.

As he tries to reach up to his skull to quell the throbs, Charles discovers that his right arm is cuffed to the bed; looks like law enforcement finally caught up with him once he got admitted to the hospital.

Panicking, he checks the device on his other arm. No surprise: it’s still there. And it doesn’t seem to be damaged. Again, no surprise: after all, he beat it all up to hell back at the prison and wasn’t able to so much as scratch the damn thing.

When he taps the screen, Charles sees that the device appears to be in working order and is ready to fire on his command. A sigh of relief escapes his mouth, but it is quickly replaced by a gasp of

fright as he glances out the windows of the room. It was nearly nighttime when he was driving; but now, the sun's up. *How long have I been here?!* he screams in his mind.

The fugitive whips his head around as he hears the room's door open. From the hallway stroll in two officials, complete with badges and guns. One of them is a scrawny, older white guy who looks hot-headed and may or may not be a wife-beater; and the other is a tired, fat, balding Black man with a mustache who looks like he's been working harder in life than anyone could guess.

"Well..." smiles the leaner and meaner of the two. "Rise and shine, turd-bucket."

"Who the hell are you? Where am I?" asks Charles, cautiously.

"FBI. This here's Agent Jacobs, and I'm Agent Masterson. And *you*, my friend, are sitting pretty inside a Long Island hospital. But, I'm sure you figured *that* one out."

Charles doesn't have time for these pigs. "What day is it??" he asks, frantic. "How long was I out??"

"Whooooaaa, slow down there, *bro*. You've been asleep for over 16 hours. Slept through the whole night like a baby."

Charles feels sick. He can't believe how much time he's lost. He needs to find his daughter before later this afternoon, when the creatures are destined to arrive in New York.

He's about to tap his device in order to send himself into the future, but then he realizes that he's wearing only a hospital gown. "What'd you do with my clothes? Where's my gun—"

"Nuh-uh," interrupts Jacobs. "We answered your questions, now *you* got some explaining to do."

The two agents hover imposingly over Charles as he lies back to avoid being so close.

"Charles Rudolf Wilson—man, never thought I'd live to see my career take such a twist," cackles Masterson.

"How'd you do it, anyway?" asks Jacobs, bemused. "How'd you escape from a maximum-security prison on the night of your execution? The warden's been beggin' us to ask you."

Charles briefly remains silent. Being a criminal has forced him to know that you *never* talk to the cops without a lawyer. But of course, that was *before* he was given a time device and made aware that the world was ending; so why should he care anymore?

He flashes a sarcastic and cynical sneer. "I time-traveled 20 years into the future from within my cell. All life on Earth is gone and everything's been destroyed in that time. So, I just walked out of my cell and off the prison grounds and then jumped back to the present. No big deal."

The two agents stare, slack-jawed, before turning to each other and bursting into laughter.

"Damn! I've heard some *real* horseshit in my life from scumbags like you, but I think you've won the contest!" blurts out Masterson.

"I hope you don't expect us to buy that," says Jacobs.

Charles shakes his head while smirking. He's not dumb; he knew they wouldn't believe him, even if it was the unvarnished truth (except, of course, the part about it being "no big deal").

Masterson finishes his chortling. "OK, wiseass, tell me: how does a little shit-flake like you have the power to time-travel?"

Shrugging, Charles waves his left arm around to show the device attached to his wrist.

"Ha ha, what—*THAT* thing?" chuckles Masterson. "The nurses couldn't get it off of you; told us it was stuck on you tighter than a drum."

"Yeah, it's a time machine. The real deal."

The agents feel almost silly engaging in the lies and tall tales of a criminal; but, honestly, this is the most fun either of them has had all week.

"Wowww," says Jacobs sarcastically. "Must be fun, having a time machine."

"It's scary as hell, actually."

"Yeah, sure, buddy. So, where'd you get that hunk of plastic, anyway? Doesn't look like something you'd trade for cigarettes in prison," says Jacobs.

“I got it from a guy and his, I dunno, ‘girlfriend’. They smuggled it into my last meal and hauled me off to a cabin once I got out. Oh, by the way, they’re both from Area 51.”

The two agents burst into belly laughs. They knew they were going to have some fun with this pathetic liar, but they didn’t think it would be quite so comical.

Seeing them chortle, Charles smirks deviously. *Yeah, yeah—keep laughing it up, assholes.*

The duo decide to keep going, stifling laughter. “Oh yeah? So, do your ‘partners’ have little antennae and green skin, too? They from Mars or something? They got a name?”

“Yeah, Mitchell Grayson and Veronica Berkley.”

Masterson raises his eyebrows and lowers his smile. The lack of hesitation on Charles’ part makes them both wonder whether he may be telling the truth about his partners.

“That was quick!” says Jacobs. “You really gonna rat out your pals just like that, eh? Guess I shouldn’t expect anything different from a piece of trash like you.”

Charles tries to hide his hatred for these two.

Masterson is finding that the amusement has gone stale. “Alright, no more games, kiddo. You’re going to tell us exactly what we want to know. No more BS. It was funny the first time—it *won’t* be funny the second time.”

“We ran your clothes through forensics,” says Jacobs. “Found lots of gunshot residue. Who you been shootin’?”

“And we ran your gun through ballistics,” sneers Masterson. “We matched it with a *looot* of dead people. Care to explain?”

Charles shrugs. “Not my gun—swiped it from Mitchell.”

Glancing out the window, he sees the sun rising a little higher in the sky, then sighs in distress. “So, am I right in thinking that I’m not gonna get my stuff back? Cuz if that’s the case, then I’m leaving. I got things to do before the world ends.”

Jacobs smirks a bit, but Masterson isn’t having it. “Are you *still* making jokes, cocksucker? We already told you to knock that

crap off. You don't seem to get it, do you? You're *fucked*. You're going back to prison—and you're getting the needle.”

Charles rolls his eyes. “Hey, tell me something,” he says. “Has Europe been taken over by black monsters yet? Should’ve happened by now.”

Both agents go pale and look at each other in alarm.

“How the hell do you know what’s going on in Europe?” asks Masterson, almost trembling. “Th-that news popped up only a few hours ago. No way you could’ve known while you were knocked out.”

Charles smiles almost maniacally as the two cops start sweating from the existential crisis they’re both sharing. “Like I said, I can travel through time. And, just so you know, those things’ll be *here*, later today. They’ll kill *you*, and your *friends*, and I’ll laugh when they kill your worthless *families*—”

Masterson suddenly curls his fist and punches Charles right in his mouth, causing Charles’ head to hit his pillow. “FUCK YOU!” he shouts. “I swear I’ll buy a plane ticket to Nevada and watch them execute you myself!”

As Charles tries to sit upright again, he spots the gun holstered to his assailant. After thinking for a second, he comes up with an idea.

“You deserve the death penalty, alright—you are disgusting, and a liar,” states Jacobs.

“Oh, am I?” Charles asks sarcastically. “How about I prove it to you, then?”

The two feds glance at each other while seeming both doubtful and curious.

“All I have to do is press a button on my time machine, and I can go off into the future—wanna see?” Charles asks, almost beaming with malice.

Masterson’s anger subsides at the prospect of this criminal making a fool of himself, but he also has a feeling of fear. He’s wondering if maybe, just maybe, Charles is telling the truth. “Yeah, OK—let’s see it then,” he says.

Smiling, Charles looks up at the ceiling and spots a smoke alarm. “You’ll wanna have a good view. So, stand under that smoke detector. Trust me.”

Masterson, finding no reason to object, does so.

Charles then moves his left arm to his right hand, which is still cuffed to the hospital bed. After doing a quick scan of the two agents and the surrounding room, he taps on the screen of his device and braces for the time-jump.

But nothing happens. The device isn’t firing.

Charles’ expression of confidence quickly morphs into one of terror. He checks the screen on his device to see what’s wrong.

Agent Masterson, smug and impatient, folds his arms. “Well? We’re waiting,” he says sarcastically.

Charles appears to be on the verge of panic. But after looking at the screen, he smiles. “Sorry, I guess I didn’t press the button right—thought I did.”

With a more accurate tap on the screen, he hears the device emit its familiar tone, and he happily warps through time.

Upon his entry into the future, Charles’ deteriorated bed instantly collapses under the sudden weight of him coming into existence, and he clumsily rolls out onto the floor. He wasn’t expecting the bed to give out—but then again, he’s just glad his ass didn’t smash down onto the floor instead.

Rubbing his back, he notices that the handcuffs that were chaining him to the hospital bed seem to have been severed, leaving behind glowing, molten stubs on the chain still attached to the cuff on his wrist. *Man, time travel’s weird*, he thinks, staring at the glowing metal bits.

He then stands up and dusts himself off, while trying to ignore the stench of death all around him. Carefully, he looks outside the hospital room and in both hallway directions. There’s nothing noteworthy; he’s pretty sure there aren’t any creatures around, but he knows he still needs to be very cautious.

After turning around, he looks up at the—now decayed—smoke alarm and tries to gauge where that agent would be standing

in the present. He then positions himself “behind” where the agent should be and, with a gulp, activates his device.

The light and turbulence ripple through Charles as he recognizes the sudden shift in his environment. For Charles, he’s been gone for maybe a minute or two. But for the agents, they haven’t even *registered* that Charles has just suddenly left for the future and then instantly come back. They certainly can’t comprehend how he is now standing behind one of them—much less figure out what he is planning to do next.

In a move of precision, Charles manages to yank Agent Masterson’s pistol away from him. Figuring the gun has its safety on and probably doesn’t have a round in its chamber, he flicks the safety off and pulls back the slide.

The two agents feel as though everything is going in slow motion. Their looks of confidence turn to ones of shock, horror and panic. But there’s nothing either one of them can do against a fugitive with a time machine.

With only a hint of hesitation, Charles then fires a few rounds into Agent Jacobs—and watches him go down without even realizing he’s been shot.

After doubling back, the convict points the gun squarely at the other agent, who can now only raise his hands and plead for mercy.

Charles actually smiles when he blows a round through Masterson’s gut, but not as much as he smiled when he blows another one right through the poor agent’s face.

At the sound of the gunfire, the hospital staff have started to scream and run away from the area. The shrieks of terror are almost music to Charles’ ears. For the first time in what feels like forever, he’s finally in control again—not just of his own life, but of the lives of others. It feels better than he ever could’ve imagined.

Having walked over to the fresh corpse of Agent Jacobs, Charles pats him down for the key to the busted shackle still attached to his wrist. After using the key and tossing aside the cuff, he then taps his device to send himself back to the future.

The screams of people and the security alarms are instantly replaced by the eerie silence that Charles has come to love. As he breathes in the putrid air, he smiles while heading out the door.

The building is incredibly dark, but he can still navigate his way through and make use of the staircase nearby. On his way to the building's exit, though, he finds defunct military equipment and makeshift medical bays, along with signs of significant gunfire and the desperate writings of survivors. He ponders what happened here.

They must've used this place as a holdout. Long Island probably lasted longer than some other places before the creatures finally snuffed them out. Sucks to be them.

Charles starts to think about the creatures and their truly strange behavior. He would've figured that the whole East Coast would get wiped out wherever there was life, but it's clear the hospital somehow lasted long enough for people to stay here for days, at least.

Why do they behave this way? And why are they still here? Guess I'll never know.

He then wonders what Mitchell and Veronica are doing. Are they coming for him? Have they let him be? Are they even alive anymore? He starts to realize how lonely he feels now that they're gone. They were the only ones who seemed to care about him—even if they really were just using him like a tool.

As he finally makes it outside, Charles shakes his head. *There's no point in me trying to figure anything out, anymore. Only thing that matters is that the mission failed, the creatures are already here, and everything's gonna die soon because of them.*

Sighing in despair once more, he gazes all around. There are no creatures in sight, and the smells have lessened. He contemplates how far he could get in the future world before inevitably having to return to the present. He figures it doesn't make a difference either way, since he can easily jump between the two times and reset the future whenever he does. As far as he's concerned, his device is simply a means to an end in order to see

his daughter. He might not have a future to look forward to, or money, or a job, or a house, or a loving wife—or anyone for that matter—but he does have a gun, a time machine and, hopefully, a chance to see the daughter who never got to know him. That's all that matters to him now.

All of a sudden a sharp gust of dry, cold wind hits Charles' bare backside and he shivers—and it forces him to snap back to the fact that he's still wearing a flimsy hospital gown. *Well, if the world's ending, guess I should get some decent clothes. Wanna look my best for Jennifer.*

And then Charles' stomach makes a gurgling noise. *Guess I'll grab some food, too. It'll probably be my last meal—for real, this time.*

Chapter Twenty-nine

Worst

The hours pass by in New York as though it were any other day; little do the masses know, however, that the impending cataclysm is almost upon them. People have found themselves so afraid and so used to routine that most of them can only hope that whatever is going on in Europe will simply go away—or be dealt with by the government.

Some think it's a sign of God bringing his unholy wrath; others figure it was just a hoax from the "Lame Stream Media"; and a rather alarming number simply haven't waited around for things to get worse and have outright killed themselves and even their own families.

The "Europe situation" has, over time, become a one-sided victory for the creatures. The infectious takeover has been so sudden through the previous dark night that it was basically over before anyone knew what was going on—and it has destroyed pretty much everyone and everything in Europe in the process.

Since then, panic has begun to set in everywhere else. Despite the efforts of the world's governments to censor and massage the gruesome truth, it has becoming apparent that nothing can be done to stop them; nukes were ordered to glass the continent—to no avail. Even worse, the satellite images have shown the blackness spreading out to other land masses and also across the dying oceans, signaling to the world that it isn't going to end with Europe.

Soon afterwards, the lawlessness begins.

Meanwhile, inside a crappy Manhattan studio apartment, a TV flickers with live updates from across the country. The broadcast shows footage of rioting and looting, and even arson attacks by those wanting to watch the world burn. The police can only hold back and subdue the frightened mobs so much. It isn't long before the shooting and killing starts on both sides.

But despite the obvious writing on the wall about the state of the world, some people have chosen to ignore it and to bury their heads in the sand, thinking the crisis will blow over soon. One of these people is Gabby Richmond—Charles' ex-wife.

The news is echoing morbidly around her apartment when the door opens and Gabby stumbles in. She looks as if she's had a really bad day so far, given the dried tears on her cheeks.

After entering her apartment and locking the door, she turns to the TV in the corner. *Great—can't believe I left that on.*

With a lethargic sigh, she plops down on the pullout sofa and tosses her purse to the side. She then takes the remote and cranks up the volume.

Unbeknownst to her, though, the nearby bathroom door creaks open and a shadowy figure emerges.

Feeling disgusted by the news coming from the screen, Gabby is about to mute the TV when, out of the corner of her eye, she spots someone who's come out of her bathroom.

"Hey," says the voice.

Gabby shrieks in terror, not knowing initially if the voice belongs to a rioter or just a common home invader. What she does know is that the voice came from a man—and also, it sounded familiar.

It isn't until she focuses her eyes that she sees the face of her ex-husband staring back at her. She can't believe it. Against all possibility, Charles, the escaped convict, stands before her inside her crummy apartment.

Charles walks a little closer to her while standing tall. He's traded in his hospital gown for a nice T-shirt, slacks and a decent pair of shoes—all of which he's clearly stolen.

Gabby can tell just by looking at him that the past decade hasn't been as kind to him as it's been to her. In fact, he looks rather awful. She can see dark circles under his eyes and how much he's aged since she last saw him. His expression of despair mixed with sickening rage tells her everything about his state of mind.

"You're looking good," mutters Charles. "Wish I could say the same about me. It's nice to see you again, Gabby-Gab."

Shaking in fear, she darts her eyes to her purse right next to her; she remembers the loaded revolver she left inside it.

Still standing a good distance from her, Charles forces a pained smile. "Remember when we used to call each other that stuff? I'd call you 'Gabby-Gab' and you'd call me 'Charlie-Char'—I miss that about us."

He looks around. "Surprised you'd choose to live in a dump like this, but I guess it beats going to prison, doesn't it? You totally deserve to rot in this shithole, you ratchet *bitch*."

Anger seeps into Gabby as she slowly reaches into her purse. In an act of bravery, she quickly pulls out the revolver she stole from her parents and tries to point it at Charles. Seeing the loaded gun in her grip, he yelps and instantly dodges backwards towards the bathroom.

A pull of the trigger, followed by another, rattles the apartment with deafening gunfire. Gabby aims as best she can at her frantic ex-husband, but by the third round it's clear that she's hit nothing but the shabby walls, and Charles frantically makes it back into the bathroom.

Gabby hasn't had much practice with that little revolver since she was younger, and it shows. That doesn't matter now, however. She still has three rounds left, and her bastard ex has nowhere else to run or hide.

She springs up off the couch and rushes to the edge of her bathroom while pointing the weapon at the opening, waiting for Charles to try something.

As the seconds pass like minutes, Gabby becomes more and more terrified. Her trigger finger shakes and her hands throb on the grip of the gun. There's nothing but tension and silence all around.

Suddenly, a bright flash of light and a strange shock wave of sound pulse out from the bathroom and then dissipate. Alarmed, Gabby doesn't understand what she's just seen—a trick of the lighting, perhaps? Maybe she's so rattled that she imagined the sounds too.

"Drop it," comes the voice of Charles, who's standing right behind her.

Horried, she carefully turns around to see her ex pointing a gun of his own straight at her. Not comprehending what's going on—and realizing she's absolutely screwed at this point—she does as she's told and loosens the revolver in her hand so that it falls on the floor, then she raises her shaking arms above her head.

"Good," says Charles. "Now, walk backwards and sit your ass down on the couch. I won't tell you twice."

Trembling from fear, she wobbles back to the couch and sits. As she cautiously looks back at Charles, he goes and picks up her revolver before tucking away his own gun.

At the feel of the new toy in his hand, he smirks. "Lemme guess—this is your dad's? I'll bet you're not even allowed to own a firearm. I remember you told me your family had some guns in a safe, after they took you shooting one day. Y'know, the day we left for Vegas, I thought about asking you to swipe those guns for me. Funny, huh?"

Gabby isn't interested in talking about firearms; she's interested in something much more important. "H-how the hell did you d-do that??" she whimpers.

Charles looks at his device and smirks. "Oh, you mean *this*?" he says, tapping on the screen.

He vanishes at once in blinding light and turbulence, only to reappear right away on the other side of the room.

It's as though Gabby's whole world has been flipped upside down. She doesn't know what to make of it all, other than it being a clear cosmic joke at her expense.

"It's a time machine," Charles states. "I can jump in and out of the future. That's how I busted out of prison."

The words barely register for Gabby as she deals with a world-shattering crisis in her mind. Of all the people to have the technological ability of time travel, why'd it have to be her violent ex-husband? If she believes in God, then she has to conclude that God must hate her. There's no other explanation.

"Why? How?" she squeaks in between tears.

Charles smiles. "Because the people that gave me this thing needed someone who could survive traveling through time; most people can't, y'know. I'm one of the lucky few, as it turns out, and I was needed to help save the world—can ya believe that?"

He glances at the television, which is still on and broadcasting the terrible news. "Or, at least, I *thought* I was gonna save the world."

Charles sighs despondently. "Want me to show you the future?" he asks his frightened ex. He points to the news on the screen. "That's it. That's the future. There won't be much of anything left around by the end of today."

The shocking revelations rattle Gabby to her core. Her mind is a flurry of confusion and questions about all the things he's just said. And yet, she feels the most important questions to ask have nothing to do with any of that. "H-how did you f-find me??" she asks.

Charles sneers at the question. "Your *parents*—how else? I had a little talk with them."

Gabby freezes up.

"I asked them where you were living these days. Oh, by the way, your parents were total dipshits, just like they were to me back then."

"*W-were?*"

"Yeah—I killed 'em," he tells her frankly.

Hearing the grim news, Gabby looks like she's going to have a meltdown. She breaks down in tears.

"Hey, c'mon. I thought you'd be happy. You *hated* them, remember? You told me practically every day. Did things *really* change that much while I was gone? Or did you just become a weak little bitch once you realized how much you needed mommy and daddy?"

Gabby starts to sob and Charles can't help but feel a hint of glee.

"Anyway," he says, smiling, "your dad was a coward. I had fun cutting up his throat with his chef's knife. He choked on his own blood. And your mom? All I needed to do was stick my gun in her mouth, and she told me where you lived pretty darn quick. I guess she was thinking I'd spare her life if she gave up her own daughter. Boy, was *she* wrong. I hated your mom more than your dad, y'know; so I took a can of gas and coated her with it. She screamed *real* loud once I struck the match."

Through uncontrollable terror and misery, Gabby hurls vomit all over her carpet while sobbing and wailing.

"And I loved every second of it. Those rich assholes got what they deserved."

Charles then raises the revolver at her and she screams.

"Now I'm gonna give you the same choice. I wanna see my daughter—I wanna see Jennifer. And don't bullshit me; your parents already told me she was with you for her birthday."

Gabby tries to gather herself and gazes at Charles in a fierce and frightened manner. "Sh-she's not here. And e-even if she was, she wouldn't know who you are. She doesn't know you e-exist. I made sure she'd *never* know."

Charles grits his teeth. *How dare she*, he thinks. How dare she write him out of his daughter's life—especially since Gabby herself isn't exactly a saint, either. "Tell me where she is, right now, and I'll let you live."

As tears stream down her face, Gabby shakes her head in malice.

Baring his teeth and seeming to snarl, Charles marches up to her and plants the nozzle of the gun right on her forehead. “Tell me right now, you *FUCKING WHORE!*”

“I’ll never tell,” she cries, shivering. “You’ll never see her, and if that’s what it takes to hurt you, then that’s all I care about.”

The revolver shakes in Charles’ grasp. Suddenly, he whips the gun clean across Gabby’s skull, forcing her off the couch and onto the ground. She grabs her head from the pain induced by the blunt-force trauma and whimpers, while Charles, not knowing what to do, thinks about how he can torture her for Jenny’s whereabouts.

But then something on the table next to him catches his eye. It’s a “get well” card of sorts. Curious, he picks it up and opens it. Inside is a message wishing for Jenny to get better—from the staff of a nearby hospital, by the looks of things.

A horrible realization washes over Charles, and he looks at his ex-wife on the floor with a nasty and enraged stare. “Is she in the hospital? Is she... sick? *Again?*”

Gabby can hear the pain and the accusatory nature of his words. She doesn’t dare look back at him.

“IS SHE EVEN ALIVE?!” he yells.

Gabby weeps at the guilt she’s feeling.

Pacing the room, Charles almost starts to cry himself as Gabby continues to weep.

“Sh-she started seizing when w-we were out, earlier,” she squeaks. “I-I stayed with her at the hospital until she... stabilized.”

Charles looks back at her. He feels a hint of relief and hope. “So she’s alive, then. Thank God.”

However, as quickly as his relief comes, it is just as quickly replaced with violent anger at his ex-wife. “This is all your fault. *You* were the one doing all sorts of drugs and getting *high* while you were still pregnant with her—even when I told you what would happen! But no, *you* were an addict, *you* needed your fix, and then you gave birth to Jenny when she was, y’know, premature.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabby mutters.

“Fuck you being sorry! What about our daughter?! How much has she had to suffer over the years? I don’t even fucking know, because I was locked up on death row the whole time! And what about *ME?! US?! All those medical bills killed us! And your shitty parents never helped; I had to sling dope and work with fucking wetbacks all because of you!*”

“I’m sorry,” she says again, in a louder voice.

“I busted my *ass* for this family! And what’d I get for it? *Nothing*—even *worse* than nothing! I got the death penalty! And *YOU* never helped out! You were busy screwing guys behind my back and getting high on the stuff I was supposed to sell. **FUCK YOU!** I lost *everything* when I got locked up, and you got off scot-fucking-free! Does that sound *fair* to you, you fucking bitch?! You have no right to be with our daughter—it should’ve been *ME!*”

“I’M SORRY, OK?!” screams Gabby. “I get it! I’m the worst mother in the world.”

Charles backs off at hearing those words. He wasn’t quite expecting such an honest confession from her.

“But... you’re the worst father.”

A tic forms along Charles’ eyelid, and his expression turns to sorrow. “Yeah, maybe I am... but at least I *tried*.”

Looking away, he gazes at the television screen and sees all the chaos around the world being broadcast for all to watch. “I was thinking of killing you, Gabby; but I’ve decided not to. I think you should suffer instead—I think you should live to see the end, just like I will.”

Before Gabby can even guess what he means, Charles raises the revolver in his hand and fires a round. The bullet blows through her leg and she shrieks in intense pain. Walking up to her as she rolls around on the floor, he then puts the nozzle right on the kneecap of her other leg and fires again, point-blank.

Gabby screams in agony, while Charles, without so much as a word to his former wife, marches out the door and leaves. He doesn’t even look back at her.

== Chapter Twenty-nine ==

After he closes the door behind him, he contemplates whether or not he should've taken away her phone. Smiling, he reminds himself that emergency services aren't likely to be available anymore. *If someone helps her, it'll be too late by then.*

As the cries of suffering from his ex echo through the apartment door, Charles digs with shaking hands into one of his pockets and pulls out a lighter and a pack of cigarettes. He promptly lights one up and takes a long, soothing drag—all while Gabby continues to scream in horrible pain.

Walking away towards the building's exit, Charles knows that nothing matters anymore—nothing, except seeing his daughter again. He wonders if she's still okay. Regardless, he knows he'll run out of time either way if he doesn't hurry.

His walk becomes a run, and the sounds of his shrieking and wailing ex-wife merely fade away into the background noise.

Chapter Thirty

Fate

Reports flash across social media and the mainstream news saying that the unknown threat in Europe has now traveled halfway across the Atlantic, gobbling up even the very seawater along with it. It will only be a matter of time before the creatures finally make landfall on the East Coast.

Ignoring the reality of it all is now no longer possible for the masses. Breaking news of government officials and wealthy, well-connected people having already taken shelter sears the minds of the lowly, average American. Violent protests fill the streets, along with looters and rioters. Stores have been set afire and pillaged of anything that could be useful in the coming collapse, while entire families try to escape west in their cars along jammed highways. And the president, meanwhile, has been relocated without so much as a reassuring televised speech—or even a tweet.

Law and order have nearly crumbled, as the police have either abandoned their duties to flee with their loved ones, or started shooting the masses and themselves. Madness has taken over and chaos rules the streets. Morality and civility mean nothing in the face of inevitable extinction. In these times, there are no good and bad people, just scared animals.

The only few places left that could be considered relatively safe and orderly would be the hospitals. Doctors, nurses and first responders have remained honorable and have been transporting patients out of the buildings to evacuation areas. But even then, the hospitals are a frantic and chaotic place to be.

== Chapter Thirty ==

At one hospital, the doors burst open and Charles races up to the reception area only to find that no one is manning it; everyone is running around, helping with the evacuation. He darts his eyes in every direction and marches all over the lobby area—desperately looking for someone in charge who would know what he wants to know—until, finally, he spots a nurse.

“Please, I need help,” he begs. “I’m looking for a little girl; her name’s Jennifer Wilson, er, R-Richmond. She’s 11 or 12 years old, and—”

“I-I’m sorry,” the frantic nurse tells him.

He freezes in shock as she marches away after giving him a sad gaze. She wanted to help, but there’s no way she could.

Turning his head every which way, Charles is amazed and terrified by what’s going on around him. He can’t even focus on what to do, and a deep panic sets in. He’s horrified to think about the possibility that they’ve already moved Jennifer, or that she might have never even been here in the first place.

His every brain cell going into overdrive, Charles then has an epiphany. He races back to the reception area, where he checks the books on the desk, plus the computer. As luck would have it, the patient records are wide open on the computer screen, so he grabs the mouse to scroll through the entries.

As he scans the near-endless alphabetized listings, he miraculously happens upon the one entry that matters to him. It’s Jenny’s patient information, including her current room.

Clasping his hands as if to thank God, he takes note of the number and starts to race through the building, dodging people and equipment as best he can.

A few flights of stairs later, Charles arrives on his daughter’s floor. He’s sweating bullets now—not just from the sprint up the stairwell but also from sheer anxiety about seeing her again for the first time since she was a baby.

He trots past all the doors, being sure to check each and every number. The panic coursing through him gets more intense as he

starts to realize how vacant the floor is. *Maybe they've already moved her.*

Tears well up in his eyes at the scary thought, until he finally comes up to the room that's meant for her. He stares at the door and, with a gulp, grabs the handle.

"Excuse me, sir? Are you looking for someone?"

Charles does a double take at the doctor marching towards him. "I-I'm looking for Jennifer Richmond. I-Is she here?"

The doctor points to the door. "Not for long—we're moving her right now."

The anxiety drains out of Charles considerably.

"Are you family?" the doctor asks.

"Yeah. I'm her f-father. Is she okay?"

"Stable, for now. But we need to move her—things are getting nuts outside," says the doctor, trying to get to the door.

But Charles blocks him. "No. You're not moving her. I-I need to see her and talk with her, in p-private."

The doctor shakes his head; he clearly doesn't have time for this. "Sir, the whole facility is evacuating. You can talk with her once we get her to safety."

Charles blocks the doctor again, this time with a crazed look on his face. "No. *No*. Listen to me! There *is* no safety. The world is ending! There's no future for anyone! We're *all* gonna die!" he states as a matter of fact

"Sir, with all due respect, you don't *know* that."

Charles can hear a comedy laugh track play in his head right as the doctor says that. With a dumbfounded expression, he almost laughs at the ignorant man in front of him; if only he knew what Charles knows.

"Look, I need you to stand aside and help me transfer her," says the determined doctor.

As he moves once more towards the door for Jenny, Charles shoves him backwards and yanks out the revolver that he stole from Gabby. "Back the fuck up, asshole!" he bellows.

== Chapter Thirty ==

Shocked, and wide-eyed with fear for his life, the doctor does as he's told, raising his arms in terror and backing away slowly. Then he takes off in the opposite direction, like an animal with its tail between its legs.

Charles lowers the gun and sighs when he tucks it away. Trying to calm himself, he takes a deep breath before opening the door to the room.

The walls echo with the beeping of a heart monitor as he peeps inside. He can see all the medical equipment attached to the sickly child in the hospital bed. There's also a TV hooked up from the corner of the ceiling, showing a news channel that's still broadcasting on the West Coast.

Jenny, lying on her side and watching the news, turns over to stare into the saddened eyes of her estranged father. It's worse than Charles feared, even though he knew he could never be prepared for this. She might as well be a total stranger to him. After all, *he* is a total stranger to her.

"Hello? Who're you?" she innocently, and fearfully, asks.

But before Charles can even respond, she starts coughing up a lung before finally settling down. There's no question that Jenny is worse off than she was even just yesterday.

"W-well, uh, I-I'm..." he stammers.

A nauseating knot forms in his stomach. He doesn't recognize her at all from when she was a baby. Even her face is unfamiliar to him. A pang of sorrow rises inside him, and his eyes tear up as he struggles with what he should say to her.

A distant blow of gunshot suddenly echoes from beyond the hospital into the streets below. On the alert, Charles looks out the room's windows and hears more gunshots. The chaos outside is creeping towards the hospital.

He shakes his head at how fast society is falling apart; however, he's not surprised. And a part of him even likes it.

"What's going on outside? Where's my mom?" asks the scared little girl next to him.

"She's, uh, you'll see her, soon. Don't worry."

"I heard guns."

"Y-yeah, things are getting kinda crazy out there, right?" says Charles, putting on a brave face for her. "Don't worry, though—it'll be over soon, and you'll get to see your mom. I promise."

Jenny gazes at the man with puzzlement and concern. "Are you a doctor? You aren't dressed like one."

"Uh, nah."

"Then, who are you? How do you know my mom?"

Charles' gut wrenches at the questions. "I'm... well, I'm a 'friend' of your mom. Gabby, right? Your name's Jennifer Richmond."

Jenny sighs with relief. "Oh, OK. I thought you were some creep at first!" she smiles.

Charles almost wants to laugh, but he feels that he should be crying instead. It sickens him that he can't tell her the truth, but he knows it's for the best; it's not as though it'll make a difference—not with the world ending, in any case. He just wants to talk to the daughter he never got to know.

"Yeah, I was friends with your mom a long time ago—and I just got back in town. I talked with her and she, uh, wanted me to come visit you and see if you were alright."

Jenny nods her head and looks away despondently. "The doctor says I'm probably not gonna get better. I guess that's fine. My life kinda sucks, and I'm not much to look at, anyway."

"Th-that's not true! You're a beautiful and strong girl."

Jenny rolls her eyes and grins. "Sounds like something a pervy old man would say."

Charles is a little put off by his daughter's cheek. He wonders if she got it from his side or from Gabby's.

Unexpectedly, some screaming and yelling echoes up into the room from outside the hospital, then dissipates.

With a sense of anxiety, Jenny becomes concerned. "Hey, where's the doctor? He said that they were gonna move us all out of the hospital. Do you know where he went?"

Charles coughs awkwardly. “He’s busy with, uh, other stuff. But, uh, I’ll be staying here with you till then—if that’s okay?”

Jenny looks at him with a raised eyebrow and grins. “Are you *sure* you’re not a pervy old man?”

“Ha ha. I’m not—and it’s *Charles*, by the way. Charles Wilson.”

Jenny looks at him, puzzled, and then coughs some more. “W-weird. I think I’ve heard that name somewhere. Are you, like, a celebrity?”

Charles shakes his head at her. “Nope,” he chuckles sadly, “just a regular Joe.”

He wants to smack himself for telling her his full name—since he’s a wanted fugitive the nation has just spent the past day organizing a manhunt for. He figures that’s why she recognized his name, and he hopes she doesn’t put the pieces together. The last thing he needs now is for his own daughter to see him as a monster.

“What’s that thing on your arm?” Jenny asks. “It looks awesome.”

“Nothing—just some electronic crap. It’s worthless, now.”

The news footage on the TV screen in the corner switches to a satellite shot of the darkness spreading westward across the ocean. It won’t be long before it hits the coast. The creatures are coming, and Charles and Jenny can only stare at them through a television as they threaten to throw the planet into the abyss.

Strangely, though, Charles seems more fine with it now than he did before. He almost feels like he has more in common with these omnicidal monsters than he does with people, at this point.

“They look really scary,” says Jenny. “D-do you know what they are?”

Charles breathes out a sigh as he looks for the remote. “No, I don’t—wish I did, *believe me*.” Then he mutes the broadcast. “You shouldn’t watch the news—it’s bad for you.”

“Geez, you sound like my mom.”

Charles chuckles. “Well, I’ve known her for a while. She, uh, never really talked about *you*, though.”

Jenny folds her arms and looks away. “I don’t blame her,” she says. “Who wants to talk about their broken kid, anyway?”

Charles goes over to a rolling chair on the other side of the room and pulls it up to Jenny’s bedside. “Hey, don’t be hard on yourself. You’re more awesome than ya think,” he says, taking a seat. “If you wanna talk, I mean, I’d *love* to get to know ya.”

Jenny looks at her father with suspicion before turning her gaze to the door behind him.

“Don’t worry, Jenny. The doctor’ll be here soon, I’m sure. And your mom’s probably on her way.”

Hearing his reassurance, Jenny loosens up a bit and gets more cozy in her bed. She then giggles awkwardly, like a schoolgirl would during a class presentation. “Um, not sure what to say. There’s not much.”

Charles giggles along with her, his deep pain and sadness hiding just below the surface. “That’s okay—say whatever comes to mind. We got all the time in the world.”

Jenny notices Charles’ emotional behavior and giggles some more. “Just so you know, I still think you’re a bit of a creep.”

“I get that. I don’t mind, really,” he says softly.

“But, you’re pretty cool, too.”

A blush forms on his cheeks. He wonders if he’s ever felt this way about a compliment before.

“Y’know, today was my birthday.”

“Really? That’s great—how old are you?”

“Twelve,” she answers, giggling.

The number really hits Charles. He last saw her when he was being dragged out of court—and she was just a two-year-old baby at the time. The number of years that has passed since then seems revolting to him. He wishes he could’ve had another chance. And as he wishes that, the device on his arm catches his eye and he looks at it in disgust. *If only...* he thinks to himself.

“You okay, *Charles*?”

== Chapter Thirty ==

The broken fugitive snaps his attention back to his daughter. “Uh, yeah. Just... surprised at how old you are. Um, did you invite lots of your friends over for your birthday?”

Jenny shakes her head. “I don’t have friends—been out of school for a while. My mom’s my only friend left.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay. I love my mom. I got to spend the day with her around the city, until...”

The room fills with silence, and Charles finds himself twiddling his thumbs.

“She got me a birthday present, though. A pony toy from my favorite show. Wanna see it?”

Charles smiles stiffly. “S-Sure. I’d love to see it!”

Jenny reaches across her bed and picks up the toy horse. “See? Isn’t she so cool?”

His daughter seems happy, and that’s all that really matters to Charles. However, he can’t help but cynically look at the toy as nothing more than cheap, Chinese junk capitalizing on a kids’ show. It reminds him of when *he* was little and they made and sold action figures in a similar manner.

Growing up has only made Charles more cynical about the world and about life in general; now that everything’s facing the apocalypse, his opinions seem to be all the more solidified.

Jenny is busy making her toy prance in front of her father. “See, she’s a pony with special powers. Her name is—” She’s interrupted by a spell of violently coughing.

The horrible noises coming from her mouth send alarm signals through Charles. “Are you okay??” he asks.

The coughing eventually dies down, and Jenny nods her head while breathing heavily. “Y-cough-yes... ugh,” she groans.

Charles sighs in relief as she seems to stabilize.

But then she starts to cry a little. “Wh-why couldn’t I be normal? Wh-why is th-this my life? Where’s my mom? I-I want my mommy.”

The heart-wrenching questions cut like knives into her father sitting next to her, and he doesn't know how to respond. He wonders if Jenny even knows that it was her "best friend"—her *mother*—who was responsible for putting her through this hellish life she's had.

But he feels guilty. He feels that he bears at least *some* responsibility, too. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

As Jenny cries a little more, Charles happens to see that the news broadcast showing live feeds of the tidal wave of creatures has gone off the air. Then he hears the distant sounds of screaming people and the waves of anarchy coming from outside on the streets.

The end is almost here.

Taking a deep breath, Charles turns to his daughter and smiles softly at her. "Um, I lied to you."

Jenny looks back at her father in confusion.

"I actually *knew* it was your birthday—your mom told me. So I went out and got you something."

"You did? Thank you," she sniffles.

"Yeah. I got it right here with me, actually. But... I want it to be a surprise."

"Ah, gotcha," winks Jenny. She turns around in her bed and faces away from Charles.

"Good. Now close your eyes," he whispers.

She does so, smiling and imagining what kind of toy he must've gotten her. Instead, she suddenly hears the click of a revolver being cocked behind her head.

It's the last thing she ever hears.

Jenny's lifeless body droops into the bedding as the bullet rips through her skull. The gunshot rattles the room for an instant, before everything returns to a gut-wrenching silence—minus the sound of the heart rate monitor, now flat-lined.

While the depleted gun shakes violently in his hand, Charles feels his mouth gaping and quivering. Tears pour down his face,

== Chapter Thirty ==

and he finally lets out a sustained yell filled with terrible agony and misery.

As more screams come one after the other, he whips the gun away from himself and it craters against one of the room's walls. Then he grasps his daughter's limp arm and cries into it.

Despite the sickness of what he's done, he knows deep down that it was a kindness. There was no reason for Jenny to stick around, only to be eaten by the creatures. And yet, Charles can only hate himself. He just wishes that things had been different, and that he could've chosen a different path. He would have been there to raise his daughter—maybe even prevent her from getting sick in the first place. He could've helped her with school, taken her to some activity, had Christmas mornings with her and maybe gotten her that stupid toy horse for her birthday himself. Then, at least, he would never have gone to prison and become aware of the future to be—and they could've died together in peace once it arrived.

He weeps, knowing that it's not meant to be. Maybe it never was. How sad: the man with the power to travel through time can't turn back the clock—and can't prevent his own fate, either.

All around the floor of the building, the only audible sounds are coming from the crying father. The whole hospital seems to be empty and quiet at this point. There's no one left to hear his torment.

Chapter Thirty-one

World

The time passes by silently inside the abandoned hospital. Charles doesn't know *when*, exactly, the monstrous wave of creatures will arrive in New York, but he knows it'll be soon—if they haven't arrived already. And he's hoping he'll finally have the courage to end it all once they do.

For the past hour, he's been alternating between caressing his dead daughter's hand and putting his pistol in his mouth while trying to pull the trigger. But every time he inserts the gun, a flood of emotion overwhelms him and he finds that he just can't do it. He curses his new-found survival instincts. He almost wishes Mitchell and Veronica had never found him and given him a chance with the time device. It's made his life nothing but hell ever since he put it on for the first time in prison. Sure, it may have saved him from the death penalty—and it even granted him two extra days alive that he was never meant to have—but, in his opinion, it simply hasn't been worth it in the end.

After stroking his daughter's hand once more, Charles tries yet again to blow his brains out. He stuffs the barrel of the pistol in his mouth, puts his thumb on the trigger and closes his eyes. Just as before, however, he starts to shake from deathly fear—and then cries at how weak he is, after pulling the gun out.

Between his bitter tears, he hears footsteps approaching rapidly. Before he can react, the door to the room swings open. Charles leaps out of his chair and points his gun at the opening,

ready to blow away the probable looter or psychopath. “GET THE FUCK OUT!” he screams at the intruder.

The stranger puts his hands up while yelling back in near-panic. “Stop! It’s me! Don’t shoot!”

As his adrenaline rush fades away, Charles recognizes the figure of the person, and the voice belonging to it. Standing in the doorway is Mitchell, who’s hoping that the convict has the sense not to immediately pull the trigger.

Once he’s adjusted his eyes, Charles almost can’t believe who he’s seeing. “Wh-?! *Mitchell*?! H-how—”

Then out from behind Mitchell steps Veronica, looking at Charles with concern and surprise. “Heyyy,” she says cautiously. “How ya doin’, white-boy?”

The sight of the two of them with their hands up tells Charles that they aren’t here to hurt him. He wasn’t sure how they’d react to finding him, given how he just sort of “escaped” from them with a priceless time machine.

He tucks his gun away while wiping the tears off his face. “How... how’d you guys find me?”

“How do you think?” Mitchell sneers as he shows Charles his own device. “The *real* problem was tracking you down once we got a signal—you were jumping through time all over the place. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to get here by car, given what’s going on outside? I could’ve jumped ahead and gotten here instantly, but I couldn’t just leave Veronica behind, and—”

He stops when he sees the dead little girl with the bullet hole in her head. “Good Lord, what happened here?” he asks flatly.

Veronica walks up to the bed and looks closely at the girl. “My God, she’s been shot,” she says.

It dawns on the two of them who this girl is—or rather, *was*—and they both stare at Charles in concern and confusion.

“She was s-sick. She wasn’t gettin’ better,” he squeaks.

Veronica looks back at Jenny’s corpse and then again at her father. “I remember ya told me she had problems when she was

born—back on the plane ride,” she mumbles. “Did you... seriously shoot your own *daughter*??”

Charles can’t bear to look into her judgmental eyes. He turns away and starts to weep. “I-I didn’t want her to suffer. I didn’t want her to get... eaten.”

Mitchell nods his head in understanding. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he says.

“It’s okay—she’s in a better place, right? A place way better than this *shithole* of a world we live in; she *has* to be. And we’ll all be going there soon. I have to believe that.”

“Actually, about that...” pipes up Mitchell.

Confused, Charles gazes into Mitchell’s calculating eyes.

“Veronica and I had a little chat with Director Mayhue. We forced him to tell us what he knew about these devices.”

“*And??* So what?” Charles asks almost angrily.

“It seems there may be a way to save the world, after all. *Maybe*,” states Mitchell.

Charles is speechless. He’s already given up hope, and now, right at the last minute, Mitchell springs in with this new information. A flood of skepticism washes over the distraught man. “How?” he asks. “The world’s finished. Did you see the news an’ shit? Did you see the satellite footage? How do we stop *THAT*?”

“I said we may be able to save the world—I didn’t specifically mean *this* one.”

The words don’t make sense to Charles. He gawks at Mitchell like a dummy as he continues.

“Do you remember when we were talking about our devices? About how yours had experimental features? Well, turns out you were right.”

“Right about *what*?”

“You were right to think that your device could allow you to travel into the past.”

The hairs on the back of Charles’ neck stand on end at what he’s hearing. It’s as if he’s been given a final chance to make

things right. He dares himself to have a little bit more hope. It's almost too good to be true.

Tapping on his device, the convict moves through the settings to find that "*Experimental*" menu he saw earlier. When he touches it, a passcode screen comes up, much to his surprise. He puts in the code he used to unlock the device initially, only to have the device display an "*Access Denied*" screen and emit that awful, loud beep he last heard at the cabin. Confused, he looks over to Mitchell for guidance.

"A different code is needed to use the experimental features. Luckily, I just so happen to have it."

Charles nods. "OK, what is it?"

Mitchell's lip curls as he gives Charles a stern look. "I need you to go into the settings and tap on the function that releases the device from your arm."

Even more confused, Charles stands frozen. "What?"

"You heard me. I'm going to use your device to travel into the past and stop all this from happening—if I even *can*. Now hand it over, would you? Clock's ticking."

"W-w-wait," stammers Charles. "Why just you? C-can't we both go together? We *both* got time machines, and—"

"That won't work," interrupts Mitchell. "Even if we re-linked, my device doesn't have the capability to go backwards in time like *yours* does."

Charles racks his brain. This is nuts. He's not about to give up the device now that he knows he has a chance of using it to go into the past. He thinks of what else to do. "OK, uh...oh! Wh-What if you tagged along with *me*? We could both go together using just my device. Y'know? Like, remember that guy at the airport who got sent with us into the future?"

Mitchell merely shakes his head. "Yeah? And do you remember when I told you that only *my* device was capable of sending other people with the user? *Yours* can't do that."

Charles gulps. He does sort of remember Mitchell telling him that. He can't believe how ridiculous the situation is. Both of them

have time machines, but Mitchell's can't go into the past—where they need to go—and Charles' device can barely send anything except for the user wielding the damn thing.

As silence befalls the three, Charles has the sneaking suspicion that there's going to be an impasse. It almost feels like a hostage negotiation—or a potential Mexican standoff. “Look, Mitchell, just give me the code and I can do it, I swear. Please.”

“Absolutely not. You don't have a *clue* how to stop this; I, at least, have an idea of where to start.”

Charles can feel his emotions starting to take over. “No, you don't! You're just as clueless as I am! You don't give a shit about any of us, do you? Y-you just wanna go back and save your wife and daughter and live happily ever after!”

“And you expect me to believe *you* would do anything different?!” Mitchell yells.

“No, I-I promise I'll go back and save you and your family—Veronica too! I'll save everyone! Just let me have the code.”

“*NO.*” Mitchell's firmness sends the room into a chill of silence.

Charles starts to tremble. “It's not fair,” he mutters. “Why should it be you, and not me? Haven't I suffered enough?! You, at least, got to have a good life with your family up till a year ago—I never got to have any of that! I was locked up like an animal for years and had my whole life ruined! I want a second chance! *Please!*”

“Too bad. This isn't up for debate. You're staying, and I'm going. I'm... I'm sorry.”

Tears well up in Charles' eyes. He feels cheated and defeated. “Then, at least tell me what happens when I give this to you. Will things change at all for us? Or do we, like, cease to exist, or something?”

Mitchell rubs the back of his neck, wondering what to even tell him, if not the truth. “I don't know, Charles. It's possible the universe may be destroyed and a new one will be created at the point in time I arrive at. I seem to recall one of the scientists who

tested me mentioning *that* to a colleague. But I can't be certain. It may result in a paradox, it may not; we won't know until we try, and—"

"You mean until *YOU* try!" Charles bellows.

He looks at Veronica, who finds it hard to look back at him. "How is this okay with you?!" he asks desperately. "If I go—or Mitchell goes—you'll still be stuck here either way! You can't time-travel like we can. How are you okay with this??"

Veronica exhales a sad sigh and shrugs. "I'm *not*—but I don't have a choice, now do I?"

She looks at the two bickering men with a cynical smile. "Y'know what the one thing is about us three that we share in common? We were all s'posed to die. *You* were gonna die in prison a couple o' days ago, an' *we* were gonna die durin' the cleanup of Project UMBRA. An' yet, we're still here. We're livin' longer than we were ever s'posed to."

Trying to control her anxiety, she draws in a slow breath. "I'm angry that thing's turned out this way—hell, I'm pretty scared too. But hey, we all gotta die *someday*. I've made peace with that, I think."

Charles looks away; he feels he understands what she's getting at. It's like when Mitchell told him that he had already made peace with God when he said that he wasn't sure if the mission to save the world would work.

A loud, distant and horrifically alien roaring sound suddenly reaches them from somewhere to the east. The three immediately go up to the room's windows and look out to see what it is.

A thought occurs to Charles. "They're coming for us," he says.

"Yes, they are," agrees Mitchell. "You, me, Veronica and everyone else. And they'll destroy everything if you don't give me that device so I can stop it."

No—I mean, they're coming for *us*."

Mitchell doesn't follow.

"Don't you think it's a strange coincidence??" Charles asks. "What are the odds that these creatures would just *happen* to show

up at around the same time when we have time machines? Didn't that astronaut chick from the videos say that these things were discovered, like, a year ago or so?"

He turns to Veronica. "And didn't *you* tell me on the plane that these devices were made around a year ago as well?"

Mitchell looks at him with suspicion and annoyance. He feels irked that Charles, of all people, may have picked up on something that he hasn't. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm just... I'm thinking, what if these creatures exist for a *reason*? And what if the reason is... *us*? I mean, *one* of us is about to go into the past, and we're talking about paradoxes and other universes and shit."

Looking back out the window, Charles feels like he's on the verge of figuring out something truly earth-shattering. "Don't you find it crazy that these creatures are, y'know, *active* right now?" he asks in a foreboding manner. "They've been here for so long, but they haven't *done* anything till now. I think, maybe we're not supposed to travel into the past, maybe this was always meant to happen. It's destiny—it must be. So—"

Mitchell interrupts the wannabe philosopher. "Charles, I didn't bust you out of prison so you could '*think*'. I did it so you could help me open a blasted vault. Remember? Now take off your device and give it to me."

But Charles locks his menacing eyes at Mitchell. "N-no."

"What do you mean, 'no'?! I hate to break it to you, but we have an entire army of indestructible monsters heading right for us. If you care at all anymore about saving the world, you'll do as I tell you."

Charles starts to chuckle. And then he starts to laugh hysterically. "Care about saving the world, eh? You know what, Mitchell? No. I don't fucking *care* about the world. I don't think I ever have. And even if I did, it's not like going into the past is gonna change anything *here*, right? Isn't that how your 'fourth-dimensional' time-travel multiverse bullshit works? So what's the point?"

Mitchell gawks at him, slack-jawed. “Have you lost your *mind*??”

“Have I?! I don’t think so. In fact, what you’re asking me to do is what’s *really* insane. You think I should sacrifice myself for *people*? For a world that took *everything* away from me and left me to die in a cage?! I don’t fucking think so!”

Charles looks at the body of his daughter, Jenny, still lying on the bed. “The only thing I ever cared about anymore is gone. She’s dead now. So, y’know what? Fuck it. This world can go to hell—and all the other ‘worlds’ can go along with it.”

The words shock Mitchell to his core. He never could’ve imagined that Charles would say these things. But in hindsight, it certainly isn’t far-fetched that a broken man like the convict would harbor these feelings.

Mitchell shakes his head in frustration. “This is not the time to be selfish.”

Charles laughs again. “Oh, really? I’d say it’s the perfect fuckin’ time; and as long as I still have this thing strapped to my arm, you can’t force me to do *anything*.” A mad, twisted smile forms on his mouth.

Mitchell furrows his brow and curls his fists. “Charles, I—”

Before he can continue, a loud shock wave shakes the hospital. They all look outside again and find themselves staring at a building out in the distance that’s crumbling and collapsing amongst the others on the Manhattan skyline. And then another. A chain of destruction is slowly making its way inland.

Just as a large plume of dust kicks up and dissipates into the atmosphere, the three hear the unmistakable roars and noises of the tidal wave of creatures that has no doubt made landfall. But what sends chills down their spines is not the screams of the creatures; it is the screams of the people, and the gunfire from the military that follows soon after.

Mitchell grits his teeth. “Charles, we are out time. Give me the device—I won’t say it again.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Charles asks condescendingly. “I thought you were supposed to be smart.”

Leaning in towards Mitchell, he gives him the look of a mad dog. “I don’t *care* anymore, Mitchell. If I’m not allowed to escape, then neither are *you*. I’m fine with seeing the world die off, so either you give me the passcode, or we can all just fucking die—right here in this hospital.”

A tic appears on Mitchell’s eyelid as he glares at Charles. “Tell me, Charles, do you recall when I told you how to remove your device? I told you there were only two ways. The *first* method was to use the administrative passcode and unlock it from there. Do you remember what the *second* method was?”

A feeling of unease creeps into the half-witted convict.

Mitchell, after reaching into his trench coat, pulls out his pistol and points it squarely between Charles’ eyes.

With all his bravado draining out of him like a power-flushed toilet, Charles raises his hands as his survival instincts take over once more.

“Whoa, Mitchell—hey,” says Veronica, alarmed. “What the hell you doin’?!”

“What I *should’ve* done when we finished up back at the vault. You do *not* get to decide the fate of the world, Charles—I don’t *care* how ‘mean’ it’s been to you.”

“Wait—don’t!” yells Veronica. “You seriously gonna shoot him?!”

“That’s *his* choice. If he doesn’t take off that infernal machine in the next 10 seconds, I’ll do what I have to do. I refuse to let some screw-up with a track record of bad decision making be the one to go back and *fail*, like he inevitably will.”

Clicking back the hammer of the gun, Mitchell starts counting down.

“So, what?” Charles asks, gritting his teeth. “You gonna just shoot me? Just like that? After what we’ve been through? You just think I’m worthless, huh? This whole time, you never fuckin’ respected me!”

Mitchell abruptly halts his countdown right at the last second and almost laughs at Charles' stupid face. "Of course I never respected you. You are nothing more than a violent, ignorant imbecile worthy of the death penalty. Why would you think I'd *ever* respect a degenerate like you? I thought I made that perfectly clear back at the cabin, but I guess not."

He lowers his gun a little as he continues his brutally honest tirade. "Truth is, I was planning on killing you once the job was done. I always assumed—correctly, it seems—that you wouldn't just give up your device once the mission was finished. The only reason I haven't killed you yet is because of what we've discovered about the future. I figured, if the end of the world's coming, there's no point in wasting a bullet on you."

The words pierce Charles like javelins. The betrayal and hurt he feels is depressing. He thought he truly had a friend in Mitchell; but it was always gonna be a lie, even now. He's always known that he should never trust anyone, after all the crap he's been through—and Mitchell's words really solidify that notion for him.

"You son of a bitch. You piece of shit," Charles whimpers.

He gazes at Veronica with pain-filled eyes. "Did you know? Did you know he was gonna do this to me?!"

Veronica waves her hands defensively and shakes her head. "No! Of course not!" she yells, before turning to Mitchell. "Seriously, Mitchell, are you crazy or somethin'—"

"I am NOT crazy!" Mitchell barks at Veronica. "I've never, in my whole life, been more rational and—"

All of a sudden the distracted gunman realizes that Charles is bum rushing him. The convict desperately grabs hold of Mitchell's hand and tries to yank the pistol away while pointing it out of range of his body. But Mitchell manages to hold on for dear life, and the two find themselves trying to gain control of the gun.

"STOP!!! Both of you!" screams Veronica.

Her words fall on deaf ears, though. The two hotheaded men twist and turn, and wave their arms every which way until, not surprisingly, Mitchell ends up accidentally pulling the trigger. The

loud bang of the gun freaks out Charles just enough that he loosens his grip and stumbles backwards.

Feeling victorious, Mitchell immediately points his gun back at the convict, who has once again raised his hands in surrender.

“M-Mitchell...” The weak, frightened voice of the woman next to the two men breaks up their showdown with each other.

His eyes widening in horror, Mitchell looks back at his friend and companion; she’s holding onto her chest, where the bullet has passed through.

The whole room goes deathly quiet—until Veronica slowly collapses to the floor with a thud.

“Oh my God, no,” gasps Mitchell in disbelief.

Unfortunately for him, he’s spent too long staring at his fallen friend to notice what the other member of the trio is up to. When he looks back at his enemy, he sees Charles quickly tap on his device, then it emits the familiar activation sound.

Driven by instinct, Mitchell instantly fires a round right at Charles. However, the blinding light envelops him just in the nick of time, and the only thing Mitchell’s bullet manages to hit is the soon-to-be-shattered glass window behind Charles.

Enraged, Mitchell breathes an angry sigh. But he quickly turns his attention back to Veronica and kneels down beside her. She’s now struggling to breathe; a modest check of her blood-soaked bullet wound shows that she must have punctured a lung.

They both know what that means.

“I’m sorry, Veronica—I’m so sorry.”

“It’s... okay. I’m okay... with this. I’d... rather die... like this... than be... eaten by the... *them*.”

In a jerking motion, she grips Mitchell’s coat and peers into his eyes with terror and sadness. “Just... promise me... you’ll save... everyone... and... Ch-Charles... too.”

Mitchell fights back his tears and tries his best to look strong for her. “I-I promise.”

“G-good,” chokes Veronica as she tries to smile at her friend.

The two look at each other with a longing for things to have gone differently. It sickens Mitchell that this has happened to her—all because of Charles being a selfish prick.

“D-don’t l-let them eat me... don’t let th-them eat m-me...”

The words stream repeatedly from Veronica’s mouth like a broken record, until they stop coming and her eyes close for the last time.

Leaning over his friend, Mitchell stays still for what seems like forever. It isn’t until he hears another round of gunfire and screaming out in the distance that he manages to snap out of his state.

He rises shakily from the floor and checks his device for Charles’ current location. It shows that the convict is clear on the other side of Manhattan—he’s obviously heading west and trying to escape the creatures for as long as he can.

After a final glance at his lost comrade, Mitchell activates his device and finds himself careening through time into the future.

Upon arrival, he notes the state of the hospital room. Everything is decayed, and it’s dark all around. Looking at the bed behind him, he sees nothing but ruined sheets, along with unclean clothes that once belonged to a preteen girl.

And at his feet, Mitchell recognizes the USAF uniform that Veronica was wearing when she died. He leans down to pick up the stained uniform and can barely make out the faded name tag sewn into it. “*BERKLEY*” it reads.

He made a promise to Veronica that he would save everyone in the past—including Charles. However, that doesn’t mean he isn’t going to get revenge for what the convict has done.

Dropping the clothing, Mitchell begins his walk out of the hospital to go hunt down the rogue criminal, but not before looking out the window and seeing the hellish and apocalyptic world that he must venture out into one last time.

Chapter Thirty-two

Destiny

Running at a brisk pace, Charles keeps his ears and eyes open in all directions as he witnesses the chaos on the city streets. Everywhere he looks, he can see the last of the frightened and desperate people of New York trying to escape from the city island as best they can. Abandoned cars clog the roadways and have made it nigh impossible to get out in a vehicle. In the case of those who have had the sense to make a run for it, some have already fled across the bridges to the mainland—with entire families, even—and others have bravely plunged into the chilly waters below in the hope of swimming to Jersey.

The sight of all the people desperately fleeing for their lives is unnerving to Charles; but what mesmerizes him the most is seeing the people who chose *not* to flee. For instance, behind the windows of the buildings and structures, he can sometimes make out the faces of despair within—the faces of people who know they wouldn't make it, even if they tried—because they are either too old or too weak. In fact, he's certain he saw someone inside one of the buildings blow their own head off just a moment ago.

As he continues his futile running, only one thing stands out to Charles about the whole situation: he is kind of enjoying all the chaos and madness. It feels good to see the world get flipped upside down; the same world that sent pain, misery, and hopelessness his way for so long seems to now be finally getting what it's had coming. Everything is crumbling down around him. No more structure, no more systems, no more oppression, no more

institutions, no more society, no more of any of those nasty things that have ruined his life and made him a slave. In a way, it's the most free he's ever felt—and the most free he could ever imagine being, too.

He remarks to himself that it's such a shame it won't last long. Then again, he could say the same thing about life in general. "Life sucks, and then you die," right? No phrase has ever held more meaning and truth for the time-traveling former death row inmate.

Coming up to the edge of the island's artificial shore, Charles contemplates what to do from here. He knows that the creatures are hot on his tail and probably only a few minutes away, but he's far more concerned about Mitchell, knowing that he can't hope to outrun him.

He's racking his brain as to which direction he should go in, when his train of thought is suddenly broken by the sound of a gunshot and a bullet whizzing by his head. He spins around to see a cold and determined Mitchell marching towards him while firing round after round at him from the middle of the street.

However, as luck would have it, other people close by have been running around screaming, and that has thrown off Mitchell's aim somewhat. Before Mitchell can get a straight shot, a panicking Charles manages to dive behind an overturned car that's been destroyed by arson.

Frustrated, Mitchell halts his gunfire and attempts to slowly move in Charles' direction, just as the criminal draws his own gun and "blind-fires" at wherever his enemy might be.

Thinking quickly, Mitchell copies Charles and crouches next to a nearby vehicle that's still idling right beside him.

The two take turns dishing out potshots at each other, until the only sounds coming from their respective guns are the repeating clicks of the hammer.

As both men realize that the other is out of bullets, each one takes the opportunity to activate his device in order to ambush his foe. The light from their warp bubbles collapses, and then, almost at the same time, each man realizes that the other has jumped

through time at the same instant. It takes a full second for the two of them to comprehend that they've essentially traded places with each other. It actually would be quite funny for them—Mitchell, especially—were it not for the tension and danger of the situation.

Charles then tosses away his empty gun and tries to take a peek at where Mitchell is, behind the broken-down car. But what he sees is Mitchell ejecting his spent magazine and replacing it with a fresh one.

Oh crap, Charles thinks, petrified. Not waiting for Mitchell to get another chance at shooting him, he punches the button that'll send him into the future.

After arriving, Charles runs north to get as far away from the crazed gunman as he can. However, he has only covered a block when he happens upon a small creature around a corner, taking notice of him. In a flash it starts tearing after him with erratic fury and violent movements. Screaming in terror, Charles pounds the button again and warps back to the present.

As he recovers from the trip, he manages to sprint a little further into the city, only to find himself staring into the blinding light of Mitchell's warp bubble. The brightness dispels, and Charles desperately presses the touch button again on his device, just as Mitchell spots him and raises his gun.

Luckily, before Mitchell can take the shot, the device activates once more for Charles and he finds himself back in the quiet and doomed future. He turns to look behind him in fear. He knows that the small creature from earlier is nearby and that he needs to run, fast. But he also knows that he needs to come up with a plan—like, right now—while he still has time.

This is ridiculous! he screams in his head. To Charles, this whole mess he's in feels like a temporal game of cat and mouse—and he's the mouse.

Sprinting further into the city, he suddenly screeches to a stop as he sees something of interest to him. And then, he gets an idea.

Meanwhile, back in the present, Mitchell watches the afterglow of Charles jumping into the future. With a sneer, he checks his

device again for the location of where Charles is now—hoping he hasn't managed to get too far away.

He's a block over—in an alleyway.

After tapping his device, Mitchell disappears from the present and then reappears, this time just around the corner from where Charles is. Acting swiftly, he raises his gun and dashes into the alley, ready to shoot his prey at first sight.

But Charles isn't there. Stunned, Mitchell checks his device once more. Maybe he got the location wrong, or maybe Charles has already jumped again.

Unbeknownst to the irate Mitchell, though, his target is very much *there*; Charles is standing just above him atop the fire escape, ready to pounce.

Upon hearing the slamming of rickety metal, Mitchell looks up, only for it to be too late as Charles topples right onto him while wrapping his arms around the pudgy man's neck and taking him down.

Both men hit the ground, and Charles shifts himself underneath, violently trying to squeeze the life out of his pursuer like some enraged, sadistic killer.

Unable to get a proper shot at Charles with his gun—and feeling his consciousness slip away—Mitchell, in an act of panic, taps on his device.

Unexpectedly, the warp bubble happens to encapsulate not just Mitchell but Charles along with it, so both of them end up traveling into the future together.

As the brightness dispels, Charles grits his teeth from the shock. He can feel that he must have been sent through time, but something about the journey has really hit him—hard. The shock takes its toll and he can't hold his headlock on Mitchell, who elbows him right in the rib cage. Struggling to get up, Charles leg-sweeps Mitchell clean off his feet and onto his ass.

Now it's Mitchell's turn to struggle to get up; and Charles, not wasting one precious second, jumps to his feet and hits the button on his device.

But it's not doing anything. It's only giving off a loud beep. Confused, the convict looks down at the screen—and sees that the normal interface has been replaced with something that makes his hair stand on end.

It's an error message.

An avalanche of terror sweeps over Charles as he tries to figure out what is wrong with his device. Unfortunately, he can't for the life of him make sense of the techno-jargon. What he does see, though, is that the device's firing button is still available; and so he tries again and again to activate the machinery.

It's not working, though—and Mitchell has now finally gotten up and has his gun almost pointed at him. Giving up, Charles panics and starts to sprint in the direction of a nearby tall building with its main doors knocked off. He manages to make it inside just as Mitchell fires multiple rounds—each one missing his target by a hair.

Inside the derelict building, Charles legs it up the stairs to the top. He doesn't know what he'll do once there, but he knows he needs to buy some time to fix whatever is wrong with his device. He finally makes it up to the roof and spots a corner behind some rusted-out air conditioners where he can hide.

After crouching down, he tries to get a hold of his breathing and his nerves. He knows that Mitchell certainly won't be far behind, and he needs to figure out what to do before his pursuer reaches him. Focusing on his device, he tries to make out what the error is. But all it seems to tell him something about an “*Unknown Destination*” error—whatever *that* means.

Charles suddenly hears the rooftop door bang open, and out steps Mitchell, who's clearly having problems with his sore knees. Turning his head, Mitchell scans the area for his elusive prey. But all he sees is a relatively vacant roof with some now-worthless heating and air-conditioning infrastructure taking up the remaining space. He knows that Charles must be near, as indicated by the geo-location data on his device.

Charles, meanwhile, is frozen stiff and has no clue what to do now. His only means of escape lies unsolved behind an error screen—and he can't outrun a bullet, either.

"CHARLES!" bellows Mitchell.

On alert, the convict peers through the thin slits in the casing of the air conditioner he's crouched behind and catches glimpses of his assailant.

"I know you're here—you can't hide. There's nowhere left to go now."

Charles asks himself what he can do at this point, but he's not finding any answers.

"I'm not sure why you thought it would be a good idea to come all the way up *here*, but my knees aren't *THAT* bad," Mitchell says humorously. Walking with care, he cocks back the hammer on his gun and darts his eyes all around the area for a hint of his foe.

At the same time, Charles, trying to remain calm and still, happens to catch the dull glint of a long metal pipe lying next to him on the ground.

As he walks around, Mitchell hears the unmistakable screech of something metallic scrape along the ground. He whips his head in its direction and slowly, and unknowingly, walks towards Charles, who by now is scared out of his mind.

"This could have been avoided, you know!" shouts Mitchell. "All you had to do was give me your device and accept your fate. Isn't that what you told me? That this was all *meant* to happen—like it was *destiny*, and such? But, no; instead, you crossed the line. I will *never* forgive you for what you made Veronica go through."

You're the one that shot her, you shithead! Charles screams in his mind.

Mitchell goes on. "However, I'm giving you a choice: you can come out and surrender the device to me—and I'll give you a *painless* death—*OR*... you can keep hiding, and then I'll *find* you and rip that thing off your arm myself, and I'll make sure you get swallowed up by the creatures after I blow your legs off."

The voice is getting louder; Mitchell must getting closer. "I'm going to count to 10."

And, true to his word, he starts counting. "1... 2..."

With every number, Mitchell inadvertently walks a little closer to Charles. The man in the trench coat and the trilby hat keeps darting his eyes all over, just waiting for his prey to show himself and give up.

"7... 8..."

It's now or never. Charles readies himself for a fight to the death.

"9..."

But all of a sudden, in the distance, an enormous rumbling is heard. It sounded like a building collapsing. His curiosity getting the better of him, Mitchell turns around to see where that explosive noise came from—just as he finds himself nearly on top of Charles.

With a burst of energy, the convict seizes the opportunity to rise from the ground and swing his newfound metal bat with all his might. His aim and stance aren't very good, but they're good enough to knock Mitchell to the ground with a strike across the body.

Stunned from the blow, Mitchell watches his gun go flying out of his grip before sliding across the dusty flooring. Charles tosses aside the pipe and bolts right for the gun, picking it up in speedy fashion. With the ranged weapon now in hand, he doesn't hesitate to point it at Mitchell, who now tries to get up and find his footing but stumbles all over the place.

The two lock eyes for a moment, and Mitchell, seeing his own gun pointed at him, raises his arms in surrender.

Charles can only smile like a freak. He can't believe it; he's won—for real, this time. "What now, *BITCH*?!" he mercilessly mocks.

Mitchell tries to keep his calm, barely succeeding.

Charles beams with a sense of victory. "OK, asshole, here's how it's gonna go. I'm gonna give *YOU* a choice, this time: either

you give me the code, right fuckin' now, or I'll shoot *YOUR* legs! What's it gonna be?!"

Fighting through the pain in his torso, Mitchell sneers at his enemy. "I'd rather die—you'll have to shoot me."

Charles shakes his head with menace. "Nuh-uh, fucktard. You don't get off that easily. I'm gonna make you pay for all the bullshit I've had to go through because of you."

Upon hearing his words, Mitchell can't help but be perplexed and offended. "How dare you." Walking forward, he glares even more at the gunman. "You were about to be executed mere *hours* before I got to you first—and *this* is how you repay me?? I saved your miserable life, you ungrateful swine. If it wasn't for me giving you that device in the first place, you'd have been tossed in a dug-out hole somewhere!"

Charles lashes out in anger at the man dissing his existence. "Oh yeah?! Well, if I'd known things were gonna turn out this way, you wanna know what I would've done?! I would've chucked this fucking time machine right out of my cell! At least then I'd have died peacefully and not have had to go through with this hell—and not be your *slave*, either!"

Mitchell freezes, his hands still up in the air. "Is that what you think? You thought you were my slave? Ha! Well, I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. Unless you give me the device, we're *both* going to be annihilated by the monsters that are coming as we speak—" He stops himself short as alarm and awareness overcome him, then looks up at the sky.

Charles, gun still pointed at his foe, screams at him. "No, asshole! *YOU* tell me the code, or I *swear* I'll shoot you and beat your ass with that pipe, so help me God. I'll—"

But before he can finish his threat, a deafening roar of alien origin erupts all over the area. The sound is utterly terrifying, to be sure, but what scares Charles more is the sheer loudness of it. It felt like a sonic boom or an explosion of pure sound.

"What the hell was *that*?!" Charles asks, stunned.

Lowering his head to stare at Charles, Mitchell, hands still raised, almost wants to laugh. “Remember when you asked me how big these creatures could get? Back in Vegas? And I told you the biggest one I’d ever encountered was in New York?”

“Uh-huh,” says Charles, who finds himself concerned by the sudden change in direction of the conversation.

Mitchell nods his head and then, with a single finger pointing upwards, turns his gaze back up to the sky.

With a sense of dread, Charles follows the direction that Mitchell is pointing in. Upon seeing the darkened sky, he realizes something that his mind can’t quite believe—something that he hasn’t noticed till now.

That’s not the sky—it’s the underbelly of a creature.

Wide-eyed, confused and beyond horrified, he stares up at the mile-high monster. Its body is unimaginably massive and completely blocks out the twilight sky from where he’s standing. In terms of area, the creature is roughly the size of Manhattan itself, and its body is supported by eight gargantuan legs. The pitch-black hull doesn’t have much in the way of features, but the underside is “bubbly” and has an enormous mouth-like area in its center.

This “abomination” captivates Charles, and he can’t seem to take his eyes off it. He wonders how it can possibly be so big—and why. Truly, if these creatures aren’t meant to exist on Earth in the first place, then this one has absolutely *no* business being here.

“W-was that thing here before?!” asks the amazed convict. “Has it been here this whole time?!”

He gazes back at Mitchell for an explanation, only to be shocked at seeing him quickly tap on his device.

Desperate to not let him get away, Charles shoots at Mitchell in a fit of anger and insanity—just as he’s engulfed by the light around him and whisked back to the present. He keeps shooting mindlessly until the last bullet fires out of the now depleted and useless pistol.

Filled with bitter rage, Charles throws the empty weapon, which hits the wall that Mitchell was standing in front of. It is then

that he feels some wind coming from above—along with the sensation of tremors rumbling all around him.

Looking up again, he can see the huge creature seemingly getting closer. Its body appears to be moving downward.

In a panic, Charles raises his device and looks at the error screen. He knows he has no time to try and fix whatever the problem is—and nowhere to run, either. Touching the button repeatedly with the feverishness of some crazed person on drugs, Charles maddeningly tries to get the device to fire once more.

No, not like this—it can't end like this!

But his internal prayers aren't working. Whatever has caused the glitch in the device is making sure it can no longer work properly.

As the creature from above quickly descends—no doubt to consume the hapless life form below—Charles screams in terror and starts bashing the device for dear life, shrieking at it to send him back to his normal time.

Then, miraculously, the device activates and fires off a blast of light and turbulence, transporting him through time and space until he safely re-emerges back into the present.

Something was different this time, however. The time-traveling experience was wrong. It wasn't the same. The shock of the time jump has knocked Charles off his feet and forced him to the ground.

Something was *very* wrong.

As he recovers, Charles glances around while fighting off the familiar ringing in his ears, along with a splitting headache. Everything seems normal again—relatively speaking; he's definitely back in the year 2016, where he belongs.

But then he spots Mitchell standing right where he last saw him—when Mitchell activated his own device and left Charles with that gigantic monstrosity.

Getting a better look, he sees Mitchell suddenly grip his gut. There's blood pouring out of him.

And Mitchell, horrified, trembles at the sight of his own blood-soaked hand. He understands now: Charles has managed to strike him with a bullet, after all. Wobbling, he leans against the wall and presses on his wound. With heavy breaths, he realizes at this point that there's no way he can fight back. Somehow, he—the intelligent, conniving former soldier—has been bested by a vulgar, brutish criminal. It feels disgusting to him.

Meanwhile, Charles slowly gets to his feet and looks over at the dying man he once thought of as a friend. “Just... just tell me the code, so I can go back in time. Please—I can save you all, I swear.”

Mitchell, defiant, ignores him and gazes out in despair at all the screaming people in the distance; he can also hear the roars and sharp screeches of the ever-approaching creatures.

Charles suddenly hears a loud beep coming from his device, so he looks at the screen. It's got a red hue and is displaying some kind of technical message:

“Fatal Error: Temporal date out-of-range exception.

Reboot required for proper operation.

ID:0x0000004C4F4C

0x536E61706520

0x6B696C6C7320

0x44756D626C65

0x646F72652121

Contact firmware management if issue persists.”

The message makes no sense to the layman Charles. It's obviously meant for people much smarter than him.

However, he can see that the button for activating the device is still there, though he's not sure if it even works anymore. He taps it. Nothing—it's not showing any indication of firing. Feeling his desperation rise, he starts to furiously tap the button again and again.

“What are you doing?” Mitchell asks in a weak voice.

== Chapter Thirty-two ==

Pausing with the taps, Charles peers at Mitchell's frail expression. "I-it's not working. My device isn't firing anymore. It says I need to reboot it. H-how? Is it in the settings?"

A long pause between the two follows, until Mitchell decides to speak. "Oh my God, you broke your device," he mutters, as if consumed by a terrible revelation.

"Screw you! I didn't break shit. I-it just started doing this all of a sudden, ever since you sent us both into the future at once. Now it's giving me errors an' shit."

"Oh, so that's why," says Mitchell half-heartedly.

"Just tell me how to restart this thing—and fucking give me the passcode already! I can save everyone, I promise!"

But then Mitchell starts to chuckle to himself, confusing Charles in the process. "Do you hear all the screaming?" he asks the dumbfounded convict. "Can you hear those people dying and wishing this wasn't happening to them? Can you hear what's coming?"

Charles, wondering what Mitchell is talking about, pricks up his ears as he hears the rumbling of something coming for them.

After running up to the edge of the building they're on, he peeks out and sees a wave of blackness in the distance, from which individual creatures are emerging. They roar and screech, while splitting off and traveling in many different directions towards anything that still draws breath.

One man, fleeing in fright from what's coming, finds himself swallowed up in the wave of darkness, his screams instantly cut short.

Another—this time a woman with her children—grabs and hugs them as a creature seems to tackle them all, leaving behind nothing but clothes and accessories.

Somewhere, a dog barks non-stop at the creature approaching it, only for its barking to be violently replaced with yelps and then silence.

“Well, Charles—you win,” mutters Mitchell. “You’ve got what you wanted, in the end. You’ve made the world pay for what it’s done to you.”

While the creatures continue their one-sided slaughter of mankind and all other life, Mitchell begins to walk again. This time, though, he’s heading for the edge of the roof—and Charles takes notice.

“What’re you doin’, man? Hey! Tell me how to fix this! Give me the code!”

Mitchell gives the pleading man a tired, depressed glance and shuffles his feet forward without slowing down.

“Where’re ya goin’?! Dude!”

As the heavily bleeding man steps up to the lip, it becomes obvious to Charles what Mitchell is about to do and he dashes to him like an Olympic runner.

“MITCHELL!!!”

But it’s too late. After giving one last, hurt look to the criminal he once saved from justice, Mitchell steps off the edge, just out of Charles’ grasp, into the abyss of dark waves below.

The last thing Charles sees of him is his hat, which—along with his trench coat, his other clothes and his now owner-less device—is all that remains of the former Captain Mitchell Grayson.

In utter shock from what has just happened, Charles nearly falls off the roof, but then he scrambles back onto stable ground.

His mouth gaping and his eyes wide, Charles can see all the creatures and their essence wash over everything, like a cleanse of death. With Mitchell—and the passcode for the experimental features—gone, a revelation overwhelms Charles: There’s now no way to stop this, or run from this. This is it. It’s over. He’s dead, and so is everything else at this point. The realization brings a daunting thought:

No—I didn’t want this. I never did.

As he tries to gain control of his sense of devastation, Charles hears the roars of the creatures throughout the area abruptly change

tune. He looks back over the edge and sees them all turning their attention towards the lone man on top of the building. Then they begin to rush towards him.

Snapping out of it, Charles panics as he thinks about what to do. After all, he still has a time machine. There *must* be something that can be done. But really, all he can do at this point is try to send himself into the future—only to get attacked by the creatures over there. It all seems hopeless.

Meanwhile, the creatures have started to scale the building with wicked speed. Charles, desperate to not get eaten by them, begins to furiously stab at the button on his device in the faint hope of activating it again—just like he was able to last time.

Unfortunately, it's now only producing error sounds.

As the creatures get closer, his panic grows more intense until, finally, some of them arrive on the roof and “lock eyes” with the terrified man. Screaming, Charles smashes his finger onto the screen where the button is. Just as one of the creatures leaps for him, the activation miraculously goes through and the sudden burst of light and turbulence overtakes the time traveler once more.

Just like previously, Charles notices that this time-jump is different, also. Something is wrong. It's lasting longer than it's supposed to—much longer. The experience is becoming unbearable for him, and he feels like he'll pass out from the crippling pain.

But the light and turbulence instantly dispel and Charles finds that he's no longer standing on solid ground but rather is falling in mid-air. The building he was standing atop isn't there, and Charles has no idea why.

After a short free fall, he crashes down onto what feels like a hilly cushion of snow, then rolls down the hill like a log before reaching the bottom and coming to a stop. He tries to get up as his consciousness fades in and out; every time he tries, he hears the wind howling and feels what he thinks are grains of sand hitting his face.

Finally, after what seems like forever, Charles slowly but surely rises off the ground. And, as he gets to his knees, he notices that his hands are grasping nothing but sand, as if he is on a beach somewhere.

While the turbulent wind blows over him, he struggles to see amidst the near-blinding sand particles that are blasting around. But as his sight recovers, what he's looking at is impossible for him to comprehend.

The building he was on isn't here anymore, and neither are any of the other buildings. It's as though the whole city has just vanished. This isn't the future world he was expecting; this is something else entirely. And what he sees—all he *can* see—is only endless stretches of sand dunes beneath a dark, stormy night sky.

There's so much sand. Everywhere around Charles is nothing but sand—both on the ground and in the very air itself. The sky above flashes with immense lightning strikes, and the wind picks up just as he manages to get to his feet. This new environment is sending shakes of terror through his body. He doesn't understand what's happened; the time machine activated, so it should've sent him into the year 2035.

Examining his device, he tries to make out what's on the screen. It's still showing the same error message, but then he notices something in the corner of the screen, where the “*current*” and “*destination*” dates are.

The *destination* date looks completely scrambled with junk—like something glitchy one would find on a corrupted computer. But what alarms Charles the most is the *current* date:

“23:59 December 31, 2147483647”

His mouth gapes in confusion. He's not sure what to make of it. He can't tell if the current date is also a glitch, or if the machine really *has* sent him to this particular date.

As he struggles to comprehend the sheer gravity of being possibly *billions* of years into the future, Charles realizes that he's having trouble breathing. The air feels thin and seems to lack oxygen—as if he's on the summit of Mount Everest.

Trying to take deep breaths without inhaling the sand in the air, he focuses his attention back on his device and taps the button to send him back—or to any other time, as far as he’s concerned. But this time the device isn’t responding at all. In fact, with each tap of the button, Charles sees the screen go all wonky and glitchy.

His anger overcoming his logic, he starts to bash the screen, hoping *that* will somehow fix things. Instead, the device responds with a slew of error logs before the screen goes black.

Time feels frozen still to Charles as he tries to tap the screen to turn it back on. But it’s not turning on; it’s not doing anything anymore, no matter what he does or how much he does it.

A realization dawns on him: he can no longer go back, and he can’t go forward; his time-traveling journey has come to an end. And he understands, now, what that truly means.

A flood of emotion roils inside the poor man, and he can’t help but burst into tears and cry in misery as he drops back to his knees. His mind is haunted with regret and shame. Everyone’s gone, and so is everything else. It’s just him, now—the last remnant of anything in the whole wide world. A world of nothing but sand.

Time passes as Charles alternates between weeping and gasping for more air. But eventually, his tears dry up and he starts to accept his fate—or his destiny. At this point, he feels there’s never been a difference; in the end, it hasn’t ever mattered. There’s no hope left for him: he’s alone and lost. Nothing can save him anymore, and he knows that now.

His mind feeling hollow and empty, Charles slowly rises to his feet again. The only thing left to do at this point is to simply walk. Just walk.

Putting one foot in front of the other with every heavy breath he takes, he begins his trek towards his inevitable end, with only a single pause to look back one last time at where he has come from. He then continues to lurch his tired body further and further into the endless sandstorm—and the infinite darkness that lies within.

Epilogue

Time

I think my life is what some people would call “ironic”—in the sense that I have cheated death many times, but, in reality, it was death that cheated me. I could have died peacefully in prison, but fate chose this path for me. It forced me to continue living my hellish life, much as I didn’t want to anymore. Even now, it still pushes me to move on, although there’s no longer a point. It’s over; I know that—and the worst part is that nothing in my life made a difference in the end. It was all hopeless. Nothing mattered...

And now, I’m doomed to walk across this endless desert that was once a city. But, for how long? Hell if I know. I’m kinda surprised the creatures haven’t already jumped out of the dark and killed me. Well, whatever. I know I’m reaching the end no matter what. It’s getting harder to breathe and my legs are getting weaker with each step. And there’s no one out there who can help me. I’m the only thing left in this world.

The only thing left alive, anyway.

Traveling without thought through the seemingly eternal sandstorm, Charles kept shuffling onward in an aimless manner, with no destination or sense of where to go. His feet became weary, and his gasps for air, raspy, as his mind began to slip. He had no one to speak with, and no one who would listen; so all he’d done so far—apart from stumble forward through the twisted night—was silently talk to himself, like a crazy person, while he waited for death to finally find him.

== Epilogue ==

After what felt like an eternity of being barraged by a relentless combination of lightning, sand and wind, Charles could sense something change in the air. The wind started to slow down, eventually dying, and the dark, thunderous clouds broke away to reveal the most amazing display of stars he had ever seen. The whole night sky was brilliantly lit with the shine of a trillion stars. And he gazed at their magnificence as tears streamed down his face.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm still on earth, or if I really have been transported a billion years into the future—I wouldn't doubt it if I have. I can feel how thin the air is, and I've noticed that the chilly wind has been warming up a lot, even though the sun isn't up. And the sand—nothing but sand. No rocks, no canyons, just... sand. I guess this too is "ironic": a guy that could travel through time, meeting his demise in a world filled up like an hourglass."

As the wind came to a standstill and the silence reverberated all around, Charles took his eyes off the stars and lowered his head while continuing his exhausting death march to nowhere.

The creatures are still here, that I'm sure of—otherwise I would've run into something else by now. Even a puddle of water would be all the proof I need to see that they're finally gone. But, I know better; I know they're still out there, hunting me down at this very moment.

I've thought about them for a while now, and I think I've kinda figured out what they are and why they still crawl along the earth. At least, I'm pretty sure, anyway. I wonder if Mitchell ever tried to connect the dots, or if he was so busy trying to save this shitty world that he never bothered. Maybe he already knew what I know now, and he chose to ignore it. Guess I can't really blame him.

As time passed, Charles could see the air changing color. Everything seemed to be getting a little more visible; the black void of the night was slowly lifting. He stared ahead, and what he saw was awe-inspiring.

The sun was rising above the distant horizon; but it wasn't a sunrise that any human being had ever seen before. The rim of the

sun slowly gained height, but he could easily tell that its size was far larger than it was supposed to be. And its color was far more red than it should have been, too, and quite foreboding.

What caught his attention, however, was not the glow of this engorged star, but the intense heat that it was already giving off. It was starting to feel like he was actually being baked in an oven. His skin felt hot and dry, and the air was almost too warm to inhale. The life-giving sun and the very air he needed to breathe were now threatening to kill him.

But then, far away, Charles saw something else come up over the horizon. It was black and in harsh contrast to the red, glowing giant. Squinting, he could make out the movements of creatures racing towards him. Big ones, small ones, strange ones, too—and they were all wickedly fast and vicious-looking. There were so many of them, like a massive army charging forward.

His breathing still heavy, Charles began not only to violently shake from fear, but to smile too. He was right that they would still be here; he was right that they were waiting for him this whole time.

I wonder where God is in all of this. I remember my parents taking me to church when I was young. I was taught “God loves us” as a kid, but as an adult, I’ve been forced to believe the opposite. And now, with this ruined world as proof, I know it to be true. Part of me believes that maybe this was all just divine punishment from the get-go, but the rest of me knows it’s not.

That astronaut chick on the space station was wrong. They aren’t aliens—not really. And they are here for a reason. They are here for me; or rather, they are here to eliminate the threat attached to my arm.

They are... a self-defense mechanism. They must be. They aren’t life; they are the opposite of life: a tool of the universe to destroy whatever threatens its existence. Like an autoimmune system. We were never meant to travel through time and space like this. The universe won’t allow it. All that talk of going into the past and causing paradoxes must’ve been true. That’s why they came

== Epilogue ==

after us, why they destroyed all life on Earth, why they are still here now, for me. I get it—this was always meant to happen. Well, I'm here now, and I'm not scared of them anymore.

While the enormous sun rose further above the horizon, the air became deathly hot and Charles could feel his body begin to burn. As for the creatures tearing straight for him, they seemed unfazed by anything other than the prospect of erasing the last bit of life on this desolate planet.

Dropping to his knees in defeat and exhaustion, Charles smiled gently with regret and braced for the wave of death that was gunning right for him.

I feel kinda guilty for taking so long to get here, though. If I'd known things were gonna end up like this, then maybe I would've killed myself back in New York—instead of doing that last leap into the future. Maybe that would've changed things. Maybe these monsters wouldn't be here anymore and the world might've recovered over time. But, who knows. It's too late now. All I can do is wait.

Through the silence, Charles began to hear the thunderous stampede of the creatures—their roars, screams and snarls becoming more audible with every second.

I wonder if they can even die. They came into existence—can they stop existing? When I'm gone, will they still be here? Will they vanish? They won't have a purpose anymore once they finally kill me. They seem... cursed. Cursed to live forever, or die without a reason. In a way, I almost feel sorry for them.

I don't know if they will ever die, but I know I will—and now... I can finally... cease."

As the broken man closed his eyes in acceptance, the flood of blackness crashed into him and the monstrous swarm engulfed him into its bottomless pit of darkness.

Once the dust settled, the creatures, as if changing their very personalities, started to freeze up before crawling, slithering, rolling and otherwise moving away from where Charles was.

And what of the creature that managed to get Charles? That one dragged itself away as well, leaving behind only a pair of slacks and boxers, a T-shirt, socks, shoes and, most notably, a broken-down piece of junk that used to be a time machine—whose touchscreen just then flickered one last time.

Am I dead? Charles faintly asked himself.

He couldn't see, despite having eyes. He couldn't hear, despite having ears. He couldn't sense anything, either; he seemed to be paralyzed by the cold, empty void that infinitely surrounded him. Above all else, it felt like he was losing his mind and his consciousness—as if slowly drifting off to sleep.

"Was it worth it, Charlie?"

The voice was barely recognizable to him, but even in his fading mind, he could tell it was Veronica's.

"Was it worth it, shitbag?" asks another.

This time it was Gabby. He wished he could laugh at her, but he couldn't anymore.

"Was it worth it, Daddy?"

As the sound of Jenny's voice echoed in his head, he found himself wishing he could cry and tell her how sorry he was.

Gradually, Charles started to hear the voices of what seemed to be billions of others, all asking him the same question—in some manner or another. The sounds became maddening and deafening, until he could suddenly make out one of the voices as clear as crystal.

"Was it worth it, Charles?"

All the voices stopped at that one. It was Mitchell.

"No, it wasn't—it never was," Charles replied.

Then silence fell over him. His eyes closed for the last time and his existence began to fade into the dark.

With Charles' final thought, the world finally went silent once and for all. Life would never return to the planet, for that is the punishment for threatening the very cradle that carries all of existence.

== **Epilogue** ==

If the universe could have spoken, it would probably have said:
“*All is right with me.*”
And it was so.

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Most of all, I thank YOU, dear reader, for taking the time to enjoy this story, written by a man who is just "another guy" in this silly world.

About the Author



"It used to be called a self-portrait—now it's just called a selfie. The future fucking sucks."

Mr. Colin Wyly (the tense-looking guy pictured above) is an American-Canadian self-taught programmer and novelist. When he isn't busy trying to figure out how to write an artificial intelligence algorithm, he's doing stuff like playing video games, browsing the internet, and—*gasp*—going outside to hike around in the woods.

While this is (so far) his only book, you can find some examples of his non-literary work on a handful of websites. If you would like to see the software he's written, check out his repositories on GitHub (<https://github.com/cwylycode>) or visit his web-developer portfolio (<https://cwylycode.github.io>).

He's actually a software developer at heart, so he enjoys writing code as much as he enjoys writing stories. He's not quite sure which of his talents is superior. Also, you can connect with him on LinkedIn (<https://linkedin.com/in/cwylycode>) and he'll be delighted by any offer of employment or opportunity.

