

Effacement

by

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“I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.” – Falsely attributed to Albert Einstein

Prologue - About to Catch Fire

Phillip Chestnut didn't understand why things had started to go sideways. The first couple of assassinations had gone perfectly. Smugness mixed with irritation. His news feed had been bouncing stories all day long about mysterious deaths. That pissant reporter from The New Yorker had nailed it. The reporter had just made the list. Somebody would be writing a story about his death in the very near future.

The SIG Sauer tucked in Phil's armpit dug into his ribs as he rode the elevator to the fourth floor. The pistol gave him an extra sense of security, even though he rarely had to use it. He likely wouldn't need the pistol today either, but having it filled him with a measure of bravado. The same measure he got when someone asked him where he worked. He was proud to serve, and the new Federal Department of Fidelity had been good to him.

The elevator doors of the old brownstone opened into a wide hallway painted deep red with dark mahogany wainscoting. Despite the rich colors, the white carpet and ceiling made for a brightly lit corridor.

He flexed his gloved hands, then knocked on the door of apartment number 406. It was late. This unannounced visit would no doubt be a surprise.

A ping echoed in his mind, asking for a response from his Vitasync neurochip, a sort of handshake to confirm his identity. Phil ignored it. He knocked again.

Shadow covered the peephole from inside the old door. Phil stood to the side so Slater would have to open the door to see him. Old habits.

After another ten seconds, the door opened a crack, and just beneath the security chain an eye peered around the edge.

“Oh, it’s you. One sec.” After removing the chain, Slater opened the door to let Chestnut inside. “What are you doing here so late?”

Slater wore dark-blue sweatpants and a wrinkled, white T-shirt; atop his head a mass of disheveled brown curls completed his unkept look.

“We have a problem,” Phil said.

“You mean *you* have a problem. I’ve been reading the news feeds. You guys sure are bloodthirsty.”

People had been dying mysteriously, and blame had been vying for a place to land. The Vitasync was emerging as a candidate, unfortunately.

“We didn’t target all those people,” Phil hissed. “Your piece of shit code is responsible for all those deaths.”

“Oh, no. You aren’t pinning this on me. I designed the Nexus tool exactly as you asked.”

Phil wandered about the studio apartment. White walls and light-colored hardwood flooring gave the place a vanilla flavor. Curtained windows perched above the couch on the opposite wall, with an unmade bed in the left-hand corner. Clothes were strewn across the floor.

Slater was untidy.

Phil didn't do untidy.

The only table in the room was littered with opened Chinese takeout and pizza boxes.

The place smelled of pork fried rice and sweat socks. Phil fought the urge to let in some fresh air.

The apartment painted Slater as undisciplined. If he lived this way, it may very well have leaked over into the way he wrote code. Phil had obviously made a mistake hiring this guy.

“Your code is malfunctioning. I need to know if you can fix it. Think carefully now.”

Phil left the rest unsaid.

Slater walked over to a dresser and opened the top drawer.

Instinct had Phil's hand moving to his gun, but no way this kid had a weapon. Phil had done thorough research.

Slater pulled out a derm and applied it to his upper arm. Weak. Phil had never resorted to drug use, despite some rough action in Mashhad and Donetsk during the war.

“Your Vitasync not working?”

Slater laughed. “Are you kidding? I had that thing removed right after you hired me for this job.”

Slater wasn't stupid, Phil had to give him credit, but lacking the chip also complicated his plans. He couldn't use the Nexus tool on Slater now. “You're breaking the law, Slater. How is your lifelog being recorded?”

“See the green light on top of the screen?” Slater said, gesturing to the screen on top of the dresser. “It covers everything except the kitchen and bathroom. I have AR glasses for everything else.”

Phil scanned the room again and spotted the glasses on a stand next to the bed. Now he

was working against the clock. He needed to do what he came for quickly before the recording software sent an update to Slater's Lifelogger account. Good thing Phil had disabled the cable interface in the basement. The local internet would not be working. Cutting off access would slow them down, and all the recordings of his entrance into the building were wiped. It gave him a small window of opportunity if things went as expected.

"I don't think you understand what you're asking me to do," Slater said.

"You don't think I'm smart enough to keep up?"

Slater snorted. "Intelligence has nothing to do with it. Experience writing code is what matters. I would have to review every line to figure out what went wrong. Then I would need a closed system to test my fix. Which would mean a live test group or an intricate and nuanced simulation." Slater sat down at his desk. "Both of those solutions cost money. And depending on how long it takes me to figure out which part of the code is wonky, best case solution, assuming one of those solutions was backed, we're talking about a week at the very least. Probably several weeks and several million dollars."

"Hmm." Phil was taken aback. And even though he didn't need any reassurance from this kid, a lot was riding on what happened next. His initial impulse was to come here to clear up a loose end. After giving it more thought, he had concluded it would be worth trying to fix the code. "You didn't have those resources when you wrote your hack."

"Obviously, that was a mistake."

"Obviously."

"I did ask for those things when you hired me. Someone chose the cheaper path. My guess is that person is going to be scapegoated when all of this comes out."

That person was well above Phil's pay grade. But he knew how to clean up a mess. "I

think hiring you was the mistake.”

Slater laughed. “There are maybe a handful of people in the world who could do what I did. But you already know that. Allez is a bitch to work with. BioNarratus holds on tight to the proprietary rights of their software. Honestly, I’m surprised someone hasn’t already figured it out. Tesla Carrick may be a pain in the ass to work for, but she’s wicked smart. Pretty much everyone there is brilliant.”

“Says the former employee,” Phil deadpanned. “So, what you’re telling me is you can’t fix it.”

“I was meticulous with that code. I’m happy to find out what went wrong. But guessing if I did it right? With no way to test anything? Hey, it’s your nickel.” Slater grabbed a fidget from his desktop and spun it. “Could make it worse, though.”

Word was already spreading through the department. Only a matter of time before Phil got called on the carpet. Rance Firestone was a prick, but an important prick. The director of National Intelligence had handpicked Phil to execute the assassination plan. Discretion went without saying. Now that things were going off the rails, something would have to be done. The question was, could they keep the profile low enough to prevent it from blowing up in their faces? The way Phil saw it they had two choices — quietly fix the code or burn it all down and distance themselves from the fallout. Spending millions of dollars didn’t qualify as doing it quietly in his mind. He made a decision.

“Do you have notes on the first version?”

“Of course I do.”

“Show me.”

Slater froze. The fidget spinner slowed to a stop. The air in the room thickened. “No.”

Phil pulled his gun. He didn't want to do it this way. "I just found the software writer for the hack at BioNarratus."

Slater put his hands up, letting the spinner fall to the floor. He stood and backed away.

"Show me your notes," Phil repeated.

Slater sank back into his computer chair. After a few strokes, the notes opened for Chestnut.

Phil handed him a wafer. "Put it all on here."

Slater started to object, but Phil poked him in the back with the pistol. "Are you close to your mother?"

He could shoot Slater, but that would create the wrong kind of questions. But he had other options. Four stories should be enough. Federal jurisdiction on this case could lock up the evidence for years, and they would have someone to put the blame on if needed.

"Get up. We're taking a walk."

Slater obliged, then pointed to his feet. "Can I put my shoes on?"

"Sure. Over there." Phil gestured toward the far corner, then sat down at the computer. Better to take care of business now in case he got locked out later.

"What are you doing?" Slater said as he fumbled with his shoes.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Does your lifelog feed get stored anywhere?"

"Why would I tell you that?"

"Because I still haven't decided to kill you," he lied. "Do you think that is a bargaining chip worth dying for?"

Phil had some familiarity with how lifelogs worked with AR glasses. The bandwidth and storage requirements made it impractical to store locally for most people. Slater was a tech

expert and might've set up an alternative.

“Where are we going?”

“Just answer the question.” Better to keep things simple, Phil thought.

“It goes directly to the AR glasses, which do their normal upload.”

That was the answer Phil hoped for, but Slater could also be lying. Phil didn't have time for an extensive search. He did a quick scan on Slater's computer. When he finished, unsatisfied but out of time, he opened a new note and began to type.

“Payback can be gratifying, but remorse is a more powerful emotion. I'm sorry to all of those I hurt ...”

Phil read the suicide note back, surprised at how good it was, and left the note open on the desktop.

“Okay. Let's go.”

“Where are we going?”

“To get some fresh air.” When Slater turned his back, Phil grabbed the AR glasses and slid them into his pocket.

The stairwell at the end of the hallway had a ladder to the roof. “Up,” Phil ordered.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Why?”

“I told you. I need some fresh air.”

“You're insane.”

“Calling me names will not help your cause.” Nothing would, but the longer he kept Slater cooperating, the better.

The hatch wasn't locked. Slater pushed it open and went through.

"Step away from the hatch five paces." He put the pistol away and followed Slater. As he reached the top, Slater swung a snow shovel at his head. Phil almost laughed. He had expected Slater to try something. He ducked back, and the shovel smashed against his right hand, edge first.

He ignored the pain with practiced determination and launched himself up and out. He pulled the shovel from Slater's hands easily enough and threw it to the side. He flexed his fist. It still worked, but his hand would have a nice color tomorrow. He walked up to Slater, and with expert proficiency, hammered a blow into Slater's gut so fast the guy didn't have time to react.

The wind went out of Slater, and he gasped for breath.

Phil put a guiding hand on Slater's slumped shoulder and walked him forward as he wheezed for air; frosty mist formed from his exhalations. At least the air here was crisp and untainted by stale Chinese food.

The roof was covered with snow. Fortunately, others had been up here and trampled a lot of the snow. Several spots were shoveled off where someone had set up lawn furniture and a raised firepit. It answered the question of where the shovel had come from. Empty cigarette packs were mixed into the kindling. Smoking had been illegal for more than a decade, but that didn't stop people. "You a smoker, Slater?"

"No," he wheezed. "Is that why we came up here? To look for renegade smokers?"

Phil bristled at the sarcasm. "I want to show you something."

Phil walked Slater to the edge of the roof and pointed. "Can you see that bridge in the distance?"

"What? What bridge?"

Phil continued pointing as he backed up. “Right there. Look closely. It’s about to catch fire.”

Slater stepped to the edge of the roof and searched for the bridge.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner ...,” Phil said.

“Sooner?” Slater started to turn, but Phil put his foot on Slater’s ass and kicked with all he had.

“... to stop your suicide,” the enforcer finished.

Slater flailed, but there was no stopping his momentum. He tried vainly to catch his balance, but within moments plummeted from view, screaming as he fell.

Phil stepped away from the edge and flexed his hand again. It hurt. Strangely, the pain took away some of the sting from what he had done. He pulled out the AR glasses and used the butt of his gun to smash the memory chip and then tossed them over the side to join Slater.

One bridge to solve the problem had been burned, but it also closed the loop. He still had other options. Time to sweeten the pot for old Lounis Belrose. Money wouldn’t work on him, but there were other things besides money.

Chapter I - Fractured Reality

Consciousness crept up on Cole Westbay, and it wasn't kind. Sharp pain, like an ice pick being driven into the back of his head.

Nausea racked his body, but he didn't remember drinking.

He wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep, to make reality go away, but the excruciating pain refused to be ignored. The time in his visual overlay ... was dark! What the hell?

He tried to open his eyes, but bright light streamed in through a window. He rolled to his side to avoid the painful light. He reached for the center of pain at the back of his head and winced at the touch. His hand came away splotted with blood.

What the hell was going on?

What did he do last night?

Blank.

Panic struck. Where was he? How did he get here? Just like that, he bloomed into full consciousness. He wanted to get up and check out his surroundings, but the idea of moving was

on par with climbing out from underneath an avalanche. But he couldn't simply lie there forever. And the pain, fuck, it hurt so bad.

No web connection. His Vitasync neurochip was offline. That was not supposed to be possible. Oh, God.

The disorientation nearly overwhelmed him. His Nubo was instant and always there, like a warm blanket, but now it was gone along with so many bits of his memory. He had lived with the memory assist for ten years, and the neurolink had become a part of him. Without it, pieces were missing. Not just in his memory. He was only partly here.

What day was it? He still had a few things that anchored him, like where he worked, and that the month was February ... Shit, he was late for work! Lounis would kill him. Did he have a meeting this morning?

He began to hyperventilate and struggled to catch his breath. He'd felt this many times before, an anxiety attack. An adrenaline rush increased the throbbing agony. Eyes shut, he inhaled deeply and slowed his breathing. His pulse punched at his eardrums.

He sat up slowly, deliberately, afraid his head would shatter into a million pieces if he moved too fast.

A dark-red smear glazed the pillow.

He was in his bedroom. At least that much made sense. But how did he get there? He began to shake uncontrollably.

He lay back down and yanked the sheet up and curled into a protective position. Fetal and pathetic. A miniature miner burrowed away in his head, trying to dig a way out through his right eye.

This all had to be a bad dream ... or an aneurysm. Was he dying?

Cold and alone. The shaking got worse. His teeth began to chatter.

Get your shit together!

He sat up again, pushed the comforter away, and stumbled to the bathroom in his boxers.

The lights came on. He squinted into the mirror, half expecting to see pieces missing, but he appeared mostly normal — bed-headed and bleary-eyed, but all there. He focused on getting his breathing under control and stood with his eyes closed. With his anxiety spiraling out of control, and the MyPharm app offline, he needed one of his pills.

After fumbling with the lid, he washed the pill down with a handful of water from the sink. The Xanax started taking the edge off almost immediately.

The pill did nothing for the pain, however. He searched the shelf but found no ibuprofen, acetaminophen, nothing. The MyPharm app normally did the job using the body's own chemicals to manage small issues.

The pain was sharpest at the back of his head. He probed the wound again, flinching from the spasm of hurt. Only a little blood. He checked the spot with a hand-mirror, revealing red, swollen skin.

Holy shit. Something had ripped through the skin at the access port and mangled the Vitasync interface. Congealed blood coated the wound. He examined more closely — the chip had been pulled out.

He couldn't possibly have done this to himself. Somebody did this to him. Why?

He put the mirror on the countertop and clutched the sink with both hands, head down, trying not to think, as if that would stop the agony.

After a futile minute had passed, pain still hammering away, he looked up and studied his face in the mirror. The surreal moment fractured reality. This couldn't be happening. The person

looking back at him looked familiar enough. So, why did he feel so disconnected? He was a ghost inhabiting his own body, tenuously connected. Having the neurolink ripped from his body was akin to having a body part amputated. Or part of his brain went with the missing chip.

Get a grip, man. He was not going to let whoever did this to him win. That part of him still survived. In the debris of his psyche, the fighter fought his way forward.

He needed a plan of action.

Were they missing him at work? His Fone app wouldn't work, along with everything else, and he didn't own a cellphone anymore. Nobody could call him, either. *Wait a minute.* His old tablet had a calling app, and there should still be a set of AR glasses somewhere. Where did he put them?

He returned to the bedroom and searched the drawers, but no luck. Maybe the shelf in the closet. Ever since he'd installed the implant, the need for any other device evaporated. Funny how he could remember that, but not what happened yesterday.

He turned the corner into the walk-in closet. Disaster.

Shoe boxes and clothes were heaped haphazardly on the floor. His pulse quickened, which only made his head throb harder. He squinted hard, trying to limit the pain.

The mess could mean only one thing. Intruder in the apartment. Someone had done this to him. Had they robbed him, too?

Were they still here?

He froze in place and listened intently, straining to hear anything, any sign that someone might be in the condo. There weren't too many places to hide in a one-bedroom apartment. He slowly squatted and tuned-in to the sounds of the condo until he was sure nobody else was there.

He stood to investigate further when a loud clatter shook him. His heart leapt into his

throat. He didn't own any weapons, had nothing to protect himself.

The sound came again.

The ice maker. Damn it. Better than an intruder, but the moment frayed his nerves even further, if that were possible.

Cole crept out to the living room, and although the room was much larger than the closet, it followed the same motif there — chairs overturned, pillows scattered, and lamps lying on their sides.

The quiet lingered. He was alone. Relief. His heart rate slowed a little. But the mess ... His OCD kicked into high gear. Too much chaos.

Start somewhere. Keep moving.

Cole reluctantly resumed his search of the closet.

It was like a bomb had gone off. Rummaging through the piles revealed nothing useful.

He gave up, went back to the living room, and inspected the damage on his way toward the front door. The lock appeared to be broken from the outside. Someone had used a crowbar on the doorjamb, and the door wouldn't shut all the way.

The disaster in his living room touched everything. All the drawers in the desks and chests were pulled open. Fragments of broken lamps riddled the floor. He could not find the most obvious thing of value in the apartment, his one-piece mediaclient.

The safe! He darted back to the bedroom, stepping carefully in bare feet. The throbbing in his head swelled again.

He moved the rug that covered the floor safe and then pulled the tab for the little door that hid the tiny vault. Palmed the lock and heard it click. Reached in, turned the handle, and pulled the door open. *Thank God.* Everything was here.

He pulled out the small, red box. Inside, the priceless wedding ring that Grandma had left him was still in place. The ring held a one-carat, marquise-cut stone with a gold-weave pattern in an antique style. It had been passed down through four generations. He still planned to put it on Tesla's finger someday.

He grabbed the packet from the safe and dumped the contents on the floor — his will, lien paperwork for the condo, passport, birth certificate, old-fashioned ID card, and a few photographs of Grandma fell out. He picked up one photo. She wore her favorite blouse, with her hair all done up. Had it already been a year since she passed away?

Again, his memory surprised him. He remembered his grandmother clearly. However, when he tried to remember the day of the week or events from the last few days, his mind was vacant.

He grabbed the ID and birth certificate and set them aside since he wouldn't be able to integrate with anyone, then stuffed everything else back into the safe.

Afterward, he dug through the jumble of clothes to find a pair of jeans and a dark-blue, quarter-zip sweater. He put the folded birth certificate in his back pocket, along with the ID card.

He needed to call the police but had no way to do it. If he could find one of his old devices and activate his account, at least partially, he could make some calls. And maybe they could reactivate his lifelog.

Twenty minutes later, after searching everywhere he could think of, he admitted defeat. The only thing left was to ask the next-door neighbor for help. He patted his back pocket — making sure the ID was still there, just in case — and then stepped out into the hallway and down the few feet to the neighbor's door. Knocking on his door without warning broke several social taboos, especially without projecting a quint, but he didn't see any alternatives.

Society had evolved over the last fifteen years once augmented reality became all the rage and the price of AR glasses came down. When the Vitasync hit the market and the Quintessence app went online, everyone wanted a quint. Something to project into augmented reality that the chip would interpret as a virtual representation of the person. You didn't see other people out in public anymore — only their icons, or quints.

The custom embodied stupidity in his opinion. Being instrumental in the development stained his soul, but despite that, he was still beholden to the practice. His already hyper pulse rate jumped even higher. All this anxiety was going to give him a heart attack.

Cole paused briefly, trying to control his breathing, then rapped tentatively at the door. Chris Gustafson worked in finance, and though they'd been neighbors for five years, Cole had never seen anyone visit him. Gustafson's reputation among the tenants surpassed the average level of geekdom into weird. But Cole gave him the benefit of the doubt. He preferred to think of Gustafson as eccentric.

Nothing happened, so he knocked again, more forcefully. In the middle of the third knock, Gustafson opened the door. The sour expression on his face spoke volumes, adding to Cole's embarrassment at his lack of a quint and his rumpled appearance. Gustafson was assuredly displaying his quint, but Cole couldn't see into the AR world without his chip. So, a short, balding man wearing a bright-green body suit with matching green slippers stood in front of him.

Cole suppressed a laugh. He needed Gustafson's help.

Gustafson couldn't know that his normal quint didn't show, and so he continued to work on something in his virtual space. He spoke without looking up. "I want nothing you're selling."

"I'm so sorry to bother you, Mr. Gustafson, but I need help."

“Who are you?” He wore a voice augments around his neck, so his speech came out deeper.

Gustafson wouldn't recognize him.

It never dawned on Cole to consider that, without his quint up and without the automatic greeting interface, even people he was close to might not recognize him right away.

“I'm your neighbor, Cole Westbay. Someone robbed me and disabled my interface. I don't mean to alarm you, but I have no way to call the police.”

“Disabled? I didn't know that was possible.” Gustafson didn't bother hiding his disgust.

The heat rose around Cole's neck. “I didn't turn it off, someone else did that for me.” He showed Gustafson the damage on the back of his head.

Bad idea. The gruesome wound would turn most people's stomachs. Gustafson sucked in a breath.

“Please, I don't know what else to do. Can you at least call the police for me?”

“It's done.” Gustafson slammed the door. So much for the sympathy vote.

“Thank you,” Cole shouted through the door. At least Gustafson made the call.

The surreal episode continued uninterrupted.

Burning with shame, Cole returned to his condo and pushed through the broken door. He stopped just inside and surveyed the mess again. Why would anyone break in? He couldn't remember hearing about a robbery in the last couple of years. Since the Vitasync had gone into widespread use, petty crime had become a thing of the past.

What he wanted to do was crawl into a corner, curl up with an oversized blanket, and make the world go away, but he needed to deal with this mess, this wildly confusing drama.

His assailant did a good job making a shambles of his condo, but they'd left his medicine

cabinet alone. Xanax would bring a high price on the street and would be easy to sell, from what little he knew of such things. Sloppy work for a thief.

A shower sounded fantastic, but the police would be here soon, so he sat on the living room sofa and waited. The headache relented slightly.

With nothing else to do, he racked his brain to remember anything from the recent past. It was like trying to capture a cloud. He had memories of last weekend's date with Tesla. Pretty sure it was last weekend, anyway. They went out to eat at L'Etoile and then shared drinks with a few friends at a local bistro. They went home early to her house and got cozy.

That memory made him keenly aware of the lack of the Nubo. Ordinarily, he could relive a memory from his lifelog.

Instead, he focused on trying to determine where his memory dropped off.

As far as he knew, nothing like this had happened before. Chips malfunctioned on rare occasions, but there were lots of fail-safes built into the system to warn a customer if something had deteriorated in the chip.

Malfunctions didn't cause severe memory loss. None of it made any sense.

Eerily quiet, the room provided no distraction. Since he started using the Vitasync ten years ago, he hadn't been this disconnected. Usually, he would be surfing social media, or watching a movie, or revisiting a memory tranche from his or a friend's lifelog. And not just that, but he'd lost access to basically everything known to man — how to fix anything, completely trivial tidbits, or historical events back to the stone age. All that knowledge was gone. He felt like a junkie coming down from a bad trip.

Cole was fairly well connected before they invented the chip, having bought into the new wave of augmented reality. He was excited about installing the Vitasync. He had grown

accustomed to the Nubo for mundane things. Nobody memorized stuff anymore. Shit! He didn't know anyone's contact info. As close as his secretary Kathy and he were, he didn't know hers. Not even Tesla's.

Kathy must've been missing him. Was this the week of her vacation? Damn, the annoyance.

He shifted, unable to get comfortable on the couch. Where were the police? Why were they taking so long?

He went to the window. The world appeared normal from here but with no augmented reality overlay. The tags, pop-ups, and neon highlights were absent. The city looked undressed.

Scuffling came from the doorway.

He pushed the door open and peered down to find a uniformed policeman standing there, a good six inches shorter than Cole's six foot four.

The scene was laughable. The cop looked way too young. And the uniform resembled a hand-me-down from the cop's big brother. The clothes were at least two sizes too big, and the belt stuck out five inches past the buckle. His scuffed shoes and pathetic plastic nametag were icing on the cake.

Had their local police deteriorated this far? Cole didn't know what to expect, but not this. With hardly any crime, he shouldn't have been so surprised. Had being a local cop turned into the equivalent of working at a fast-food joint?

No telling how long the cop might've been waiting for Cole's automatic protocol reply.

"Come in, Officer."

The word "officer" perked him up a little. He tipped his cap and stepped inside. Based on the astonished pout on his face, the scene was apparently not what he was expecting. The look

turned to puzzlement, which disappointed Cole. Surely the police could handle a burglary. The police-boy's reaction left Cole unconvinced.

The officer glared at Cole. "I'm not getting your signal. I need your baseline info for the record."

"Someone attacked me and damaged my Vitasync. They removed my chip. I'm offline, and I don't have any backups here."

The astonished expression returned. "What? I need access to your lifelog."

"I don't have access to my lifelog. Everything is down."

"This is bad." The policeman shook his head. He started scanning the room with his face, letting his eyes take everything in for the record. "Can you tell me what happened? Start by giving me your name and citizen number."

"My name is Cole Westbay, and my number is ..." Damn it. He couldn't remember it for the life of him. He kept that kind of stuff on the cloud. His citizen number would be right at the tip of his tongue, a mere thought away.

The young cop glared at him as if Cole were intentionally provoking him.

"I'm afraid I don't remember it." *The ID card in my back pocket!* He pulled out the ID. "I have this, though." Cole inspected the card, which fortunately contained his citizen number, and then handed it to the cop. By the sneer on the cop's face, he was still unsatisfied.

"This is very unusual, Mr. Westbay. Just a moment." The young officer's eyes darted back and forth as he must have been preparing a contact with his superior — hopefully someone competent.

He put his back to Cole and took a few steps away and began speaking in a hushed tone.

Cole couldn't make out anything and then the cop got more animated.

“Really. I’m not making this up ... yes, sir. Yes, sir. Okay.” He mumbled more before turning back to face Cole. “I have to take you down to the precinct, sir.”

“For what?”

“Well, for starters, you don’t have a lifelog, and from what you told me, it still isn’t active. I’m afraid I have to arrest you.”

On top of everything, this was too much. Cole clenched his fists. He wanted to punch the punk cop, but that would only compound his problems. “Are you fucking kidding me? I get robbed and assaulted, and I’m the one going to jail?”

The police-boy stepped back. “You can take it up with your attorney. Do you understand your rights, or do I need to read them to you?”

“I don’t believe this is happening.” Sudden exhaustion swept over Cole. He got light-headed. Cole sagged onto the couch.

“It’s happening. Let’s not add resisting arrest to the charge.”

“Unbelievable. Fine. Whatever. Obviously, I can’t call an attorney now.”

“There’ll be time once we get to the station.”

“Aren’t you even going to check the apartment for clues?” Cole said, in disbelief.

“Someone is coming over to do that while I book you.” The cop pulled something from his belt.

“Book me?”

“You might want to grab a coat.”

February in Wisconsin? Hell yes, he would grab his coat. He found his boots and his parka in the mess and then returned to the living room.

The young officer followed him impatiently. After Cole pulled his boots on, the officer

addressed him again, “Please turn around and put your hands behind you.”

“Why?” This was way beyond anything he could even imagine. The ordeal felt like a boxing match, and the blows kept coming.

“Normal procedure,” the cop said.

“I can’t believe this,” Cole blustered in anger.

The policeman held a plastic band about an inch and a half wide and maybe a foot long. He turned Cole around and then placed the strip around Cole’s wrists. The band tightened automatically.

Cole wanted to hide his face somehow. Impossible with his hands behind his back.

“Let’s go, sir.” The boy cop grabbed Cole by the arm to lead him out. “You have the right to remain silent ...”

Chapter 2 - Sheer Force of Will

Two weeks earlier ...

Cole surfed Throng, his social media app, via his neural interface to kill time.

One of his friends had shared a pic of the dog he recently adopted. Cole's family dog, Watson, had died a few years back. Cole missed Watson, but living alone made owning a dog impossible. A dog needed to be let out and played with, not left alone all day. He'd mentioned getting a dog to Tesla, but she shot him down every time, claiming to not be a dog person.

Thinking of Tesla spurred a better memory from this morning, pushing thoughts of dogs aside. He scrolled through the virtual Nubo storage file until he found it and hit run.

Tesla snuggled her naked body against his. He relished the skin-to-skin warmth. It didn't happen often enough. After too short a time, she pushed herself up and kissed him on the cheek before climbing out of bed, providing him a view of her incredible ass as she headed for the bedroom door.

He ended the playback before he got more aroused. He could have selected something

more salacious, but sitting in his boss's outer office, he thought better of it. Stupid. Her sex appeal forgave a lot of her faults. But it was his sin for being the carpet, not hers.

Cole held up his wrist and glanced at his virtual watch. He'd been sitting there for twenty minutes. Why the hell would Lounis call him in like this only to make him wait? Multiple projects in the research and development lab required Cole's attention, any one of which would have been a better use of his time. He put a hand on his leg to keep it from bouncing up and down.

Patience had never been his strong suit. After a few minutes, he walked the short distance to the secretary's desk. Her quint was down. They kept the virtual avatars offline at the office.

"Still no word," Flavie said. "Please sit down, Mr. Westbay. I promise I'll tell you as soon as he's off the call."

Frustrated, Cole returned to his seat. He checked his email queue for the fourth time. He sat, then immediately stood again. He needed to wipe the sweat from his face. Lounis's secretary, Flavie, kept the room pit-stainingly warm. Normally when Lounis called, Cole went right in.

He and Lounis had grown close over the past decade, but their working relationship had become strained in the last few years, and the stress leaked into their personal lives. The burden of running one of the largest companies in the world had taken its toll.

There really shouldn't be anything to worry about, Cole reassured himself. His research division recently finished the augmented reality upgrade to one of their more popular apps, set to roll out in the next patch. In order to see into the augmented reality world, you needed to have the chip installed or use AR glasses. The new addition to the Quintessence app would allow a person to project an avatar into augmented reality with the use of AR glasses, instead of the

Vitasync chip. With this new change, Quintessence would drive BioNarratus stock even higher. He wasn't a fan of the app. You only showed your real face to family, friends, or colleagues. A whole new set of social protocols fell out of that.

Finally, Flavie spoke up. "He's ready for you."

"Thanks." Cole straightened his tie and took the few steps to the inner office door. He knocked before entering.

The office was spacious and well-appointed, befitting one of the wealthiest men on the planet. Floor-to-ceiling windows made up two of the walls and revealed a spectacular view of Madison, with Lake Mendota to the left and Lake Monona to the right. Books and mementos of Lounis's trips from around the globe filled the shelves. The most recent souvenir was a picture of Lounis with the president of the United States and his chief of staff. The photograph sat prominently on the front edge of Lounis's massive, mahogany desk.

Lounis had been spending a lot of time with global power brokers, more and more as time went on, and less time with the firm. It worried Cole that Lounis had lost his focus. But he was brilliant. He must know what he's doing.

A broad smile lit Lounis's face. He came around the desk to greet Cole.

"Thanks for coming," Lounis said, with a touch of French lilt in his accent, revealing his Algerian roots. After a warm handshake, Lounis led him to a pair of oversized, leather chairs that faced each other.

Cole's posture relaxed. The normality of sitting with Lounis relieved the anxiety.

"I'm sorry about making you wait," Lounis said. "I got an unexpected call. Crisis in the Tokyo office."

"Everything okay?"

The drive to maintain their global position forced Lounis to become more pragmatic, and he'd confided in Cole that having to answer to the board of directors took all the fun out of running his brainchild.

Lounis waved his hand. "Parts issues. They're running behind schedule, but I assured John we were working on another supplier. I spoke with the prime minister earlier this morning."

Cole chuckled. No big deal, Lounis was talking to one of the most powerful men on the planet like it was lunch with the local mayor. "No worries, then."

"I told him about our new app. He was excited. I had a couple sets of glasses with the new upgrade installed for his daughters."

"Nice touch."

"He wants to meet you next time he visits."

"What?" No. That could not be right. Why the hell would the Japanese prime minister want to talk to Cole?

Lounis laughed.

"Is that why you asked me to come by?" Cole asked.

"No. Not directly. Maybe I haven't said it, but I've always thought of you as a protégé. I'm very proud of you. This new app upgrade is a perfect example."

That was nice to hear, except it felt more like a setup to a "but." Cole hadn't been a fan of the new app, but as head of research and development, the responsibility fell to him to ensure everything went smoothly with the roll out. So far everything was going well.

"I'll let the team know. They did the real work," Cole said. Lounis probably expected a different reaction, but something was up.

"I want you to move up another rung. I'm creating a new position. Think of it as career-

broadening. Special Projects Officer lacks elegance. We'll change the title later."

The last thing Cole wanted was another promotion, one that would take him further from the lab. "But —"

"No buts. Taking this position will mean a lot to me. I know you would rather be in the bio lab, but I need your help running things. I need someone I can trust."

Cole *would* rather give up the R&D directorship and go back to doing hands-on work with a new app or fine-tuning how the Vitasync used the limbic system. That was the stuff that made him want to come to work and stay for eighteen hours, not running through financial balance sheets or holding hands with people to make them feel better. In the lab he could focus on one thing, notably not people.

But he'd never figured out how to say no to Lounis. Cole was compelled to please, and there was nobody on the planet he wanted to please more than his mentor. Realizing he had this character flaw hadn't made it any easier to ignore.

People would kill for this job offer. Why wouldn't Cole jump at the chance for another promotion? Maybe something was wrong with him. But Cole didn't want to move up again, and it must have shown on his face.

Lounis's eyes narrowed as he leaned in. "I'm bumping your pay."

"You know I don't do this for the money." Lounis paid him more than he ever thought possible. The work had never been about getting rich. Lounis should understand that about Cole by now. But they were making a lot of money, and it changed people. Even great people.

"Then do this as a favor to me."

"Shit, Lounis." He had used his trump card. Lounis was not above playing dirty from time to time to get what he wanted.

Cole could say no. That was a path he'd never gone down, and he didn't know how Lounis would react. Would he have to give up being part of something he loved? Or used to love. When they started the company, he'd worked side by side with Lounis, developing new projects in the bio lab, and they did amazing things together. But Cole had not seen Lounis in the lab for years.

Was it time to change careers? Cole never considered doing anything else. Surely, he could find work easily enough. "Do I have to decide right now?"

"What's to decide? I need you, Cole."

Cole sat back and looked to the ceiling, as if the answer might be there. But no. Just an immaculately ornate tile that didn't offer him any hints.

He looked back at Lounis. The determined expression on Lounis's face suggested he was trying to convince Cole to take the job by sheer force of will.

They had done amazing things together. Was he ready to throw it all away? As close as they'd become, he still retained a fear of disappointing Lounis. He'd seen Lounis at his worst, angry and cruel when things went sideways. Lounis had fired people on the spot for failing to see things his way. Cole worked hard to keep Lounis as far from those outbursts as possible. Cole's career was a symbol for his success in that regard.

Most days he still enjoyed working at BioNarratus, and he liked the people he worked with, but he didn't *love* it anymore. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly, giving in again. It was a bad habit. "Fine."

Lounis laughed and clapped Cole on the shoulders. "Fantastic! I already set up office space on the floor below this one. Kathy goes with you."

Lounis knew Cole would say yes, which pissed him off even more. Having Kathy was a

relief. Kathy Stokes had been his assistant since the beginning. Maybe the new job wouldn't suck.

Lounis went to his liquor cabinet and retrieved an eighty-year-old bottle of Karuizawa scotch and poured two glasses.

Cole started to stand, but Lounis stopped him and handed him a glass, then sat back down across from him.

"To us." He clinked his glass with Cole's.

Cole tried to smile. As usual, Lounis got his way. His infectious energy was impossible to ignore.

