

Bootstrap

Book One of the eHuman Trilogy

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Shadya Productions



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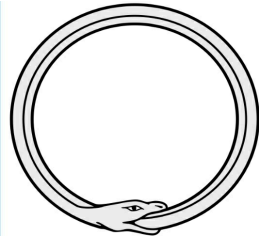
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For my husband, Walter Anderson, the
best patron any artist could ask for.



bootstrap memory: noun. A read-only memory that contains the basic instructions needed to start up a computer so that it can then load additional programs, such as the operating system.

FEW HEARTBEATS LEFT

Normally my heart would skip a beat when Dawn enters the room, but today my whole body—what’s left of it, that is—freezes like the Arctic when we were children, a century before it melted. She pauses in the doorway to look at me, her camera eyes focusing in on my face, recording every detail. She’s reading my biometric data, and I see the concern in her gaze.

“James,” she begins, but I raise my hand.

“Please, Dawn, come in. We have much to discuss.”

She hurries to the monitor at my bedside. “James, you haven’t taken your fluids. The nanobots will not repair the valves of your heart without your fluids.”

“Dawn...” My gut clenches as I swallow down what feels like a lump of coal in my throat. I felt brave a moment ago, but now I’m not so

sure. I pause to look at her, tears now forming in my eyes. She frowns. She's always envied my tears. I inhale and begin again. "I know what will happen when I refuse treatment. I invented the nanobots, remember?"

"But why would you do such a thing?" she asks as she sits down on the bed and takes my emaciated hand into her firm, but machine-cold, grip.

I look her in the eyes, watching their camera irises focus on me.

"Because the time has come for me to die," I answer.

She shakes her long, blonde plastic hair and looks to the ceiling. She squeezes my hand even harder.

"Dawn, you know it's time. It's why I called you here. We have much to discuss and I have few heartbeats left."

"Jump," she says. "Jump and live with us forever. We can't do this without you."

"The Resistance doesn't have the technology."

"You can Jump into eHumanity, and I'll find you."

"If I Jump, all I know will be forgotten. I won't remember you, or why you want me."

"If you die, then all will be forgotten," she says, her voice volume rises as her fists clench. "You're the only one left who knows the truth."

Touché.

I glance at the various lines on the monitor near the bed that indicate my heart is slowing. The machine begins to beep its warnings, but I turn down the volume. Then I rip the cord from the socket in my arm. I don't want the medics to interrupt us.

"There are things I need to tell you," I say to her, "and I have precisely ten minutes to do so."

"Why won't you Jump?"

"How can you ask me that? After everything you know about the world Edgar Prince has created. You're the leader of the Global Resistance. You of all people know I can't enter a system I despise."

"*You* created the eHuman world," she says, her voice turned up in volume. Given she's seven feet tall and made of metal, plasticine, and alloys, and I'm a mere six foot one and made of dying flesh, her anger is terrifying.

"*We* created eHumanity, Dawn."

She cocks an eyebrow and shakes her head as if to clear it. "What?"

"We created it, Dawn. You and I. Together. And we sold it to the devil."

"No, that can't be. Nothing in Neuro suggests I had a part in this." She rises from the bed and crosses her arms. "You're lying."

"Dawn, please, we don't have much time. Sit down and listen to me." I open my fist and hold out the small thumb drive. It glitters under

the fluorescent lights against my thin, pale skin. The tiny gadget holds the answers to all her questions, and it's the only chance for humanity to survive.

"What's this?"

"The truth," I say, my chest now constricting as the valves of my heart slow. "You see, Dawn, the time has come for you to find the one who will help you save eHumanity from Edgar Prince, the Guardians, and those who would control us. To do this, you must know your role in the past."

She sits on the bed and takes the drive from my hand. I have her attention.

"I've always claimed you were nothing but a lab rat to me, but you were once Sophia Castilogna."

"What? Why haven't you mentioned this before? I know of Sophia; her name is in the annals of time. She was your business partner."

"And my sister as well."

Dawn jumps up again from the bed, but I grab her arm to pull her close.

"Yes, we were siblings. You married young and took your husband's last name. When Lorenzo died of cancer in the early thirties, you kept his name and threw yourself into our work. His death inspired you to help others. We didn't set out to entrap the world; we wanted to help those whose bodies no longer functioned, like Lorenzo's. Cancer patients—there were a lot

of them back then—quadriplegics, the mentally disabled. Our goal was to create a means to allow our Lux to live forever in machines when the flesh no longer served us. I don't think either of us thought it would end up being the only form of human existence."

I pause, recalling the day Lorenzo died. Should I tell her about that? How much it hurt her to lose a husband at age twenty-five? How long she remained single after that—until she'd met Elijah—spending every moment of her life for decades dedicated to her research on the origins of human consciousness? No, there's no point. Past affections no longer matter; the only important thing for her to do now is find Elijah.

"Like most biotech firms of that era, we had a great idea with the Chi-Regulator, but as we were about to approach human trials, our investors wanted their money. We had two choices: find a buyer or close shop. We chose to find a buyer."

"Edgar Prince," she says. His name sounds hypnotic when spoken in her electronic synthesized voice.

"He'd already created the eBot. His company, Guardian Networks, had been selling MindLink subscriptions for over a decade at that point, allowing the people to take various eBots for a ride and act out their wildest fantasies in mechanical bodies. It only made sense to put our Chi-Regulator in the eBot form factor and allow

our Lux to live forever. And when the virus hit and humans started dying in droves, well, it's no wonder the people lined the streets to Jump and rid themselves of death and pestilence once and for all."

"And we did that, James, didn't we? No one dies, gets sick, or hurts in any way."

I swallow again, gasping for breath as if underwater. She notices. "You have about seven hundred heartbeats left, James, so get to the point. Everyone knows you and Sophia invented the Chi-Regulator and sold it to Guardian Technologies. But the annals say she died of cancer before the Great Shift. Now you tell me her story is my story. Is that why I'm here? Because I was dying of cancer and offered up my body to become Dawn? Why have you waited all these years to tell me this?"

I wince at her words. Of course, she knows their story, or at least she knows the part we made public. Sophia, Edgar, and Elijah are all well known. What no one knows is that Sophia was the first human to Jump into eHuman form, leaving her aging, cancer-ridden body behind. She did it for science, yes, but I know the real reason for her sacrifice—she did it to live forever in a body that would never age, with her decades-younger lover by her side. But that's not how it worked out, for her legendary Jump was the end of Sophia and Elijah. I want to tell Dawn this private part of the story, something she could

never learn from the annals, but I can't find the words.

"Elijah is the reason I've called you here," I say. "You need to find him."

"Elijah? What do you mean? He died in the attacks on Santa Cruz. He came to tell us he was headed there to help the residents of that town go into hiding, but he was too late." Her eyes flash red, like an emergency signal. She's angry again.

"He pretended to be in Santa Cruz when those bombs went off because he wanted Edgar to think he was dead. The records show he died, but his sister, Evelyn, secretly Jumped him into an unknown eHuman body and he entered the system."

"Why would he do such a thing, knowing what his father was up to?"

While I've kept her identity secret for over a hundred years, I've never spared her the truth of Edgar's treachery. His hijacking of human consciousness was the foundation of our rebellion, and I've spent my every waking hour trying to spread the truth about eHumanity far and wide.

But the time has come for all truths to be known.

"To be with you," I say, unable to look her in the eyes. Instead, I look at the other monitor, the one that shows my blood pressure slowing to a stop, and I try to fight back the terror of death I

now feel. I was so sure about my choice minutes ago, but now, staring down the dark abyss, I see nothing. I am nothing. Dawn is silent, so I look back at her beautiful face, unable to read her expression. But she can read mine, and she wipes away the tears now rolling down my cheeks.

“Before you Jumped, you loved Elijah very much, Dawn. You deserve to know.”

She smiles as she looks at her hand, rolling my tears between her long fingers. “Elijah was always so good to me,” she murmurs. “He spent time with me in the lab and kept me from being too lonely when I was the only eHuman on the planet. He created the Pleasure Zone Portal so I wouldn’t be bored.” She glances up at me, her smile fading. “It’s hard to be the only one left in the flesh, isn’t it?”

I nod. “I’m almost 170 years old. My legs no longer work and only the nanobots keep me alive. I’m running on old tech, long ago abandoned in favor of the eHuman solution. It’s time to let me go.”

Now it’s her turn to look away. She focuses on the view out my window, a granite wall stretching for miles. The outer wall of Avalon, the last free eHuman city, built far below the earth’s surface, away from Edgar’s all-seeing gaze.

“So, you want me to find Elijah? The one Sophia loved.”

“The one *you* loved,” I correct her.

“And how do I find this eHuman amongst the millions of us on the planet?”

“He took a male form, and Evelyn programmed his personality profile to never Jump into another eHuman body until the code she stored in his system is downloaded into Neuro. Since eHumanity seems to get bored with itself every season, Jumping into new bodies is becoming commonplace. Eventually, he will stand out in the system.”

She nods, still looking out the window, refusing to look at me. I grasp her hand, recalling our youth and wishing she were still in the flesh with me.

“Dawn, I’m sorry I’ve kept this from you for so long, but I promised Elijah I wouldn’t tell you until the time was right.”

She turns, her mouth tight and gaze narrow. “Now the time is right?”

“I have no idea if the time is right for you to find Elijah, but the time has come for me to die. I can’t do this anymore.” I close my eyes. It’s hard to breathe. I open her hand and tap the device in her palm. “Find him, plug him into the system in Avalon, and download the contents of that thumb drive into his CPU. It contains the encryption keys to a virus created for one purpose.”

“Which is?” she asks.

I have less than a hundred heartbeats left. I smile at her one last time.

NICOLE SALLAK ANDERSON

“To rip control of Neuro from Edgar Prince’s hands, once and for all.”

She runs a hand through my hair, like she used to do when we were kids. But she wouldn’t know this, for human memory never survives a Jump. Her hand trembles as she places it on my cheek.

“Is there anything else I need to know, James?”

I close my eyes and let the air out of my lungs as the world fades to black. In the distance, I see a golden light, a tunnel of sorts. I’m out of heartbeats and haven’t even mentioned Atienne...

THE DAWN’S QUEST

*NEW OMAHA, CAPITAL
CITY OF THE NORTH
AMERICAN PROVINCE*

MID-SUMMER, 150 AGS^{}*

"Meditate on the Self as being, vast as the sky. A body of energy extending forever in all directions--above, below, all around."

*~The Radiance Sutras, translation
by Lorin Roche, number 69*

***After Great Shift**

CHAPTER ONE

Dawn's eyes zoomed in on Adam Winter as he strolled from his apartment building, arm in arm with an eHuman of female form. Like all the other eHumans venturing outside in the city of Omaha on that cloudy day, he queued up in a line to wait for a three-wheeled personal transport device, a.k.a. PTD, to drive him off to work. The handsome Adam Winter was a Newsreel host, built to be pleasing to the eye while reporting news pleasing to the World Government, affectionately known as the WG in most circles. She zoomed in closer and noticed he wore a pleasant look on his face as the razor-short, platinum-blonde-haired woman at his side chatted away, her mouth going a mile a minute and arms fluttering around her face. Dawn scanned her database and discovered his companion's name was Miranda Valentine, and this was her fourth eHuman body in twenty years—quite a Jumper.

From their joyful nature, it was obvious

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that they, like everyone else who lived plugged into Neuro, had no idea of the danger facing them.

“Are you sure that’s him?” asked Origen, her second-in-command and best friend.

“I know it’s Adam Winter,” she answered, “but we can’t be sure he’s the one James wanted us to find. Remember the last candidate we brought in? It was a total disaster and we had to erase his database afterward.” She groaned as she turned to face her partner. “What if we never find him? What if Elijah Prince never Jumped and this is all for nothing? I mean, James was a bit crazy there at the end.”

“That is a possibility,” Origen agreed with a nod, causing his shoulder-length, snow-white dreadlocks to dance around his dark-skinned face. He turned to face her, and she gazed into his cat-yellow eyes. Origen was one of the most beautiful of the O12. Even more beautiful than Dawn. James had truly outdone himself when he’d designed Origen.

“Yeah, James *was* crazy. I mean, he killed himself, didn’t he? Though, I imagine living as the only carbon-based human in Avalon for a century wasn’t easy for him. Hell, he was the only flesh-human in the entire world.”

Dawn turned back to Adam Winter. “I wish James were still here. I have so many questions. If only we’d stolen a Jumper from the WG sooner.” They had gotten one, just a decade

too late.

“I doubt he would have used it,” said Origen. “James always said he wanted no part of eHumanity, even if he was the one who invented it.”

She glanced at her friend, glad she’d encrypted parts of her database. She’d kept a lot about James’s last moments from Origen, uneasy with the revelation she’d also helped invent eHumanity. It was hard enough to carry the burden of being “The Dawn,” the first eHuman to walk the earth. She’d only told Origen about the thumb drive, as well as James’s directive to find Elijah Prince among millions of eHumans. They needed to somehow convince the stranger to plug into the Resistance network so Dawn could gain access to a file in his database using the key programmed into the thumb drive James had given her. The task seemed impossible.

At first, James’s clue that Elijah would refuse to Jump into a new body had been useless. At the time of his death, the list of eHumans who had never Jumped was long—too long for her hackers to discover anything meaningful. Besides, Dawn had been busy expanding the Resistance after her brother’s death. Decades later, as James had predicted, people had grown bored with their lives, and the newer eHuman bodies had many desirable features. It seemed outrageous anything important would be stored in a Newsreel host; they were the voices of the

WG, after all, whose sole purpose was to dumb down the population. But one hundred and fifty years after the Great Shift, there were only a few eHumans who still lived within Neuro—which was also run by the WG—in their original bodies, and Adam Winter was one of them.

Besides, the WG had begun powering down cities and she was out of options. It was time to bring in the candidates.

As she watched Adam Winter and his companion enter the PTD and drive away, something inside of her stirred. For some reason, she longed to meet this one.

“Dawn,” Origen said, scanning her thoughts. “What is it you’re not telling me?”

She turned to her old friend while erasing the emotion from her operating system. She had no need for fantasies such as longing and desire. As far as Dawn could tell, she’d never been in love, regardless of what James thought might have happened when she was in the flesh. “It’s nothing, Origen. Let’s focus on getting him to Avalon.”

“Fine. How do you plan to convince the most famous Newsreel host of the North American Province to follow us to our rebel hideout without blowing our cover?”

She smiled and tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I have a plan. I aim to strike him right where he can’t resist.”

“And that’d be?”

“His pride, with a bit of sex appeal thrown in.”

She used her TeleSpeak feature to send him a picture, via their wireless cards, of the red dress she planned to wear for her first meeting with Adam—presuming she could manage to get him off Neuro and into her physical presence. It wouldn't be an easy task. With each passing year, more and more of eHumanity preferred to remain plugged into the network rather than roam the streets in their robotic bodies.

She had one thing working for her: as a reporter—a title she used in the most casual sense, since most of what he “reported” on was written by the WG—Adam Winter had to go out in the physical world to follow up on his stories. That meant she could lure him away from his apartment, and the girlfriend, if she delivered the right hook.

Origen's eyes widened as he viewed the file. “Yes, I imagine that will be very difficult for him to resist.”

CHAPTER TWO

The day Miranda Valentine left Adam Winter was the day his life began. Technically, he'd been living as Adam Winter for one hundred and fifty years. Yet, calling it a “life” was a bit of an overstatement. True, the past century and a half had included many events, interactions, feelings, reactions, and consequences. But not everything he felt or thought was of his own free will. For Adam Winter was the ultimate singularity construct: an eHuman, interacting within the great global network called Neuro.

Adam Winter was unaware of his entrapment, unaware of the cage in which he lived. But when Miranda departed from his life without warning, she left a hole so vast within his being not even the entire library of Pleasure Zone apps and Virtual Programming offerings on Neuro could fill it.

She hadn't even said goodbye. Instead, she'd moved out during his routine recharge—

eight hours of solitary confinement.

When his recharge was complete, Adam opened his eyes and focused on his surroundings. The familiar white walls of his recharge room were comforting. The terminal confirmed his Chi-Regulator was at capacity. It was time to unplug. His right hand flicked the discharge switch, and a smooth metal rod disengaged from the shaft in his lower back. He stepped away from the wall socket, shaking his head, disappointed he was once again alone.

Miranda had been his companion for five years. He'd thought it would be easy to let her go, but it wasn't. For some reason, he'd hoped she'd be the one to stay with him for all eternity, but like everyone else, she'd grown tired of her existence and left him for a new one. The vow "Till death do us part" disappeared the day humanity took the first bite of the apple of immortality. Eternity was too long to love the same person. Why he even craved such a commitment made him abnormal and strange in the eHuman world, yet desire it he did. For all his eHuman existence, he'd been searching for someone willing to span the centuries as his companion, but that someone didn't seem to exist.

Adam stepped across the recharge room and opened the door to the circular living area he shared with two other eHumans. There were four doors leading off the main living area

to individual recharge rooms. These contained the wall sockets they connected to every two days to receive their necessary dose of Chi from Neuro. This was how they recharged the electromagnetic field generator, called the Chi-Regulator, which kept their electronic eHuman bodies connected to their Lux. Even with the latest tech upgrades, recharging—necessary for survival—took a full eight hours to complete.

Adam's housemates, Jill and Nelson, were online via the Entertainment Console, or EC. The huge, curved screen hung in the center of the large, circular living space. They were dancing with a holographic couple projected in the middle of the room—their weekly tango lesson with some Buenos Aires legends.

Adam nodded as he passed, noting the adoration for Jill in Nelson's gaze. Jill, however, stared over Nelson's shoulder and cast Adam her own look of devious desire. A jolt of excitement ran through him like a lightning bolt zigzagging across a humid summer sky. But then Miranda's face entered his thoughts, and a surging wave of guilt drowned his excitement in a millisecond. Even though he wanted a lifelong companion, desiring more than one woman simultaneously seemed to be Adam's calling card in life. Maybe this was the real reason Miranda had grown tired of him. Had she been jealous of his online dalliances with Jill and others in the network?

Adam walked past the dancing couple,

ignoring them as he strode across the open room like a soldier of the flesh days on his way to battle, passing the large glass table flanked by steel chairs where they entertained others offline. He headed out to the balcony to gaze upon the city. Another gray day in early July.

The sun hadn't shown itself in months. Not surprising. The clouds had been gathering for years. No worries, either. eHumanity had stopped caring about the air temperature long ago; after all, eHumans couldn't suffer from the earth's climate changes.

A small aircraft flew over the city's steel and bronze buildings, gleaming despite the smog. Selecting a file from his RAM, Adam replayed the events of the previous evening like a movie in his head. He'd rushed home from work because Miranda had sent him an emergency message. When he entered the apartment, she was on the balcony, projecting a hologram that rotated in front of her. Adam's heart sank at the sight. His steps slowed as he approached her, feet like heavy bricks, knowing what was about to happen. She'd grown bored with herself. Life as Miranda had lost its glimmer.

When a person reached the point where they no longer wanted to be in the eHuman body they inhabited, they could apply at the Lifestyle Maintenance Office, or LMO, for a new body. The fee was enormous, but for many it was worth it to work with a Lifestyle Specialist to design a

new body—and thus a new life.

There was just one caveat—memory didn't survive a Jump, so the moment you left your current eHuman body, any memory of the actions spent in that body would be wiped out—gone forever. Because of this, Adam himself had never Jumped. He didn't want to lose his memories. To him, memory was the one thing that made him truly immortal. It was the closest thing he had to a religious belief, and he clung to it, even when all of those around him saw it as foolish.

In his memory playback, Miranda trembled as he beheld the image she was broadcasting. Since eHumans were never cold, her trembling could only mean she was upset. Adam looked at the body rotating in between them, hazy but clear enough to see the details—a male form factor with long raven hair and skin the color of caramel. Quite a contrast to Miranda's razor-short white hair, pale skin, and large blue eyes. The new body's image spun around on an axis so that he could see every part. It was a strong, chiseled body—built to please. Adam braced himself as Miranda turned off the hologram and began to speak.

"Request for one-to-one communication," she said aloud.

"Granted," he replied.

This would be the end of their spoken conversation. He had enabled her to speak

directly to his communications link. Obviously, she didn't want Jill or Nelson to overhear them.

"You're late coming home again," she accused.

Adam shut down his own inner dialogue. In this state of networking, she would be able to read any thoughts he had, so it was best for him to focus on her words alone.

"True," he answered.

"More work, I imagine?"

"Yes. The power outages are a big concern, Miranda. People are panicking. I need to compose a story for the Newsreel to ease their minds."

Adam was a journalist for the Friend's Network. He had many devoted fans. Not only because he was aesthetically pleasing, but also because he could deliver uncomfortable messages from the government while making his viewers feel great. His current subject, however, was touchy. Making everyone feel good about an electricity shortage when electricity was the only thing that kept them alive—well, he needed to pull off a miracle.

"You can't make them feel any better," she said, her lips smirking as if she'd smelled something sour.

"Why are you going to Jump?" Adam asked. It was his MO to cut to the chase.

"I've been Miranda for so long, and your companion for most of those years. I could leave you and start again in a new apartment, but I don't

want to remember. I'm tired of being Miranda. Tired of New Omaha. I need a change. I want a new life. Five years is too long to be me."

Adam laughed. She glared at him, her pale eyes now blinking red, crossed her arms, and leaned back against the balcony railing. He gazed at the cityscape that rose behind her—gleaming silver and brass buildings, the hazy sun reflecting off the glass walls.

"I don't laugh at you, my dear. I mean no harm. It's just that five years is barely the blink of an eye. I'm one hundred and fifty."

"You haven't Jumped since the Great Shift?" she asked, her mouth dropping open as she took a step toward him. "Why not? Why do you continue to remember such disappointment and pain?"

"We took on these eHuman bodies—left our flesh behind—for immortality. If I Jump, then I, Adam, don't live on. I lose my memory. I want to remember it all. So, I choose to remain Adam. I choose to remain immortal."

"But I'm still immortal, even after a Jump. eHumans never die."

"You don't remember who you were before Miranda, and you won't remember me when you Jump. That's not immortality. You might as well be dead."

She glared at him with an intense, fevered stare, her jaw clenched so tight it made him cringe. Rather than look the fool, he chose to

disdain her.

“Whatever, Miranda. Go for it. Being reborn has been the rage for the past few decades. You of all eHumans should know that. This will be your fourth body in twenty years, yes?” he said aloud, disconnecting their one-to-one connection.

The conversation had ended there with Adam storming off the balcony and into his recharge room, and Miranda moving out during the eight hours he was locked inside. Another aircraft flew over his head, forcing him into the present. It was time to get ready for work. He stared at the place where she’d stood only hours before, regretting he hadn’t even said goodbye.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to no one.

CHAPTER THREE

Shrugging off his melancholic mood, Adam queried his comms link to see what was on the docket for the day.

Schedule, he thought, and a list of calls, appointments, and notifications from various apps filled his vision.

The weather was 106 degrees Fahrenheit and overcast. Sunset was due at 7:14 p.m. The rail was operating smoothly, and flights to his preferred cities were all on time. The avatars of those who had called on him the previous day emerged, including the ever-familiar face of his boss.

Open a link with Anthony Westfield, he thought, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

A full-sized hologram of Anthony displayed in the air beyond the balcony where Adam’s gaze had lingered upon the bustling city below. The image smiled, then sauntered toward Adam, gliding through the balcony railing as if

he were a phantom.

“Adam, how are you?” he greeted.

Adam didn’t care much for Anthony—Adam found him a ridiculous, pompous ass, if he was being honest. While every being on the planet was beautiful, smart, athletic, and talented, there were still personality differences. Temperament couldn’t be ordered up the way a new body could.

“You called?” Adam asked.

“I was wondering how things were going with the power outage Newsreel. I have an angle for you to ease everyone’s mind. Stores are claiming they are low on workforce, which is why they’re closed every other day. I think we should run with it. Set the public at ease. Drive their attention to the fact we’re losing laborers rather than electricity. I’d like to see you in the real before you film, so we can whip up a Newsreel worthy of Friend’s Network.”

Adam hated to admit it, but this was a good angle. Speculation of city-wide power outages was flooding Neuro. Blocks of buildings had been shuttered off and on all summer, and the rolling power outages continued to stir up fear. It needed to be squelched, and it was the job of the Newsreels to drive the people’s attention away from any crisis that might upset them.

“Sure, whatever you want, Anthony.” Recently, Adam had started to feel uneasy about his job. Anthony gave him the direction and

Adam found the “facts” to back it up. Adam’s own investigative talents were rarely called to the table. All he had to do was fill in the blanks and deliver it to the people with a smile.

“Perfect,” Anthony said, interrupting Adam’s self-pity party. “Will an hour from now work?”

“Fine with me.”

“This must be a great Newsreel—one that will draw attention to Neuro and ease people’s minds. The Guardians will be paying attention, you know.”

“Yes, Anthony, I know. The Guardians are always paying attention.”

Adam disconnected and walked to the door, which opened when he was in range. As it slid open with a hiss, he paused, thinking once more about his situation. While he enjoyed his job and all its rewards, he felt a deep longing to do more with his work, as if he had a purpose or a duty he wasn’t fulfilling. Yet no one else in his life seemed to feel the same. Everyone was either happy with their lot or Jumping into a new life. eHumans rarely spoke about desire or purpose.

He stepped through the open door, and Jill called out his name.

“Adam.” He remained in the threshold and turned to look at her. She stood in the hallway, wringing her mechanical hands. “Nelson and I—well, we’re sorry to hear about Miranda. It’s always hard when a loved one decides to Jump.”

Given their habit of participating in online sex games together, Adam knew Jill wasn't really sad about Miranda Jumping. Even though having multiple partners within Neuro was considered acceptable, Jill had been cold in most of her real-life interactions with Miranda, as if Jill tolerated the situation simply to have access to Adam. It appeared jealousy still reigned in most hearts.

"Thanks," he said as he turned to leave.

"Wait," Jill called again. "You have an envelope."

"A what?"

"An envelope. At least that's what Neuro identified it as," Jill said as she glided to the table and picked up something Adam had never seen before.

He focused in and sent an image query to Neuro, only to discover it was indeed an envelope and that such things had been out of production since the Great Shift. A networked society had no need for them.

"That doesn't make sense," he said. "Why would someone give me an envelope?"

Jill placed the item in his hands as she spoke. "I don't know. A dark and handsome man dropped it off while you were recharging. His hair was the color of snow. Said it was important."

Adam held it in his hands and felt its weight. There was something inside of it.

"The man said you should open it in private," Jill said.

Adam put the strange item in his bag. "Great. Thanks. I'll see you later."

He left the apartment as the door shut behind him.

"Good morning, Master Adam," the elevator spoke to him as he approached.

Main lobby, Adam thought. Conversation was quite simple when working with machines. Every elevator, train, car, computer, airplane, EC, and eHuman was on Neuro, a massive operating system and computer network controlled by eHuman thought.

Think and Neuro responds.

If Adam wanted to use Neuro for communication, information sharing and mining, or any one of the various applications Neuro offered, he would need to go online, which automatically happened when he plugged in for a recharge. During a recharge, he had full access to the network by default and all its offerings. He also had a wireless card located behind his left shoulder that connected him to every device, including all other wireless eHumans in the network, allowing him the ultimate cyberspace experience as well as the ability to work with both machines and other eHumans without speaking aloud. This card could be disabled, but doing so was an isolating experience, like locking oneself in a dark cave far from civilization. Most

eHumans, including Adam, preferred to remain online all the time.

The elevator doors opened, and Adam found he wasn't alone. Among the several people, he recognized a blonde woman standing toward the back. He couldn't place her but was sure he had seen her around. While gazing at her, he found himself yearning to live in another place and time where he would be free to investigate the world for what it really was. Perhaps this beautiful woman would admire him for his work or think him a genius. He smiled at her, but she ignored him, killing his fantasy.

He wasn't in another world. He was here, in the eHuman world, alone and yet never alone.

When the elevator stopped at the lobby, Adam stood at the curbside line behind the others queuing up for a ride in a PTD. He watched as the blonde woman from the elevator entered a PTD and drove off into the synchronized traffic.

He wondered why she had affected him so. She seemed familiar; it almost drove him mad. He tried to locate her within his database, but he found no record of her. Even stranger, Neuro was unable to identify her. He frowned. That was curious. Everyone who was on Neuro was known by Neuro. Why was this woman unidentifiable?

A PTD arrived in front of him to take him on his way. In a moment of insanity, he almost requested the vehicle follow her, for he knew deep down there was a story there. Shaking his

head to clear his thoughts, he focused on his current task instead.

Friend's Network, he thought.

"Yes, Master Winter," the PTD replied. The vehicle began to coast on its three wheels toward the exit and onto the highway, joining the hundreds of other perfect, orderly vehicles on the smooth road, transporting their eHumans around the immaculate city.

CHAPTER FOUR

Adam entered his office and sprinted across the small room, where he opened the envelope and scattered the mysterious contents across his desk. Despite Jill's suggestion to read it in private, Adam couldn't wait. He disconnected his wireless from Neuro before picking up a shiny photograph depicting haunting images of eHumans screaming and clawing at one another to get inside their local Resource Management Office.

The envelope contained three images and several pages of text, all encoded on something called paper. Adam's thoughts whirled as he picked up another photo—this one displaying hundreds of lifeless eHuman bodies strewn about the streets, doorsteps, and railways of a city block. The third showed automated bulldozers pushing piles of the bodies into a huge pit positioned at the edge of a city.

He sat down as he read the accompanying documentation that described each photo, taken

a week prior in Chengdu, a city in China, one of the seven provinces of the WG. A set of seventy elected politicians, ten from each province, formed the WG, and they set global standards, laws, and policies. They also collected taxes and maintained order. Every ten years, they chose a World Leader from amongst themselves.

"Our world is a lie," Adam said, strumming his fingers on the tabletop like a man playing the piano, and rocking back and forth in his chair. He was offline now, so the information was still secret, but the moment he logged into Neuro, they'd know what he'd seen.

Even though the WG had been designed and sold to the public as the "Smallest World Government" one could imagine, Adam found dealing with the WG and its various agencies a form of pain so unique he'd created his own code name for such interactions. If his work brought him to one of the three WG departments—the Revenue Network, the Transportation Network, or a local RMO—he'd label his work "Wanton Gluttony" in his report to Anthony. It wasn't that Adam didn't appreciate the well-managed intracity roads on which the PTDs sailed, or the elegant HyperTrains and HyperPlanes that were the only means of inter-city or global transport. They enabled him to get around with nothing more than a simple plan in his head. And of course, the RMOs, which maintained the energy grid within the city's limits, were

priceless. While dealing with the inner workings of each agency could be a challenge, the people in Chengdu had suffered far worse than a bureaucratic nightmare.

In exchange for global taxes being collected and paid on time, the WG granted the RMOs access to the global energy grid. Yet, according to the document now lying on his desk, the citizens of Chengdu had been informed via their local Newsreel that their city's leadership had been found guilty of harboring Hacktivists and the WG would no longer allow them access to the energy grid. As a result, the people of Chengdu had stormed their local RMO, demanding power be restored. To their astonishment, they found the office locked and empty, not a single WG employee in sight, and all machines powered down.

Without power, nothing ran in the eHuman world, including the HyperTrains and HyperPlanes. No two eHuman cities were built close enough for an eHuman to run to in less than forty-eight hours, the critical time in which an eHuman needed to get to a power source and recharge. After that, if the eHuman didn't connect to the energy grid, the body would put itself into Sleep Mode for another twenty-four hours, running only the Chi-Regulator, which emitted the specific electromagnetic field needed to keep the Lux attached to the eHuman body. If the Chi-Regulator stopped, the electromagnetic

field that the Lux needed to remain attached to a material plane would disappear. The Lux would abandon the body, leaving it lifeless.

For two days, the people of Chengdu had died out, one after the other dropping where they stood, like trees in the Pacific Northwest during logging season, depending on how much energy they had stored in their Chi-Regulators prior to the shutdown. The photo of inactive bodies strewn like straws tossed about the street, over one million of them, had been taken two days after the last of them died. Some had tried to flee, but to no avail. They couldn't cover the distance to the next city fast enough. Their bodies were found scattered upon the rail lines, and in the woods, ditches, and fields that surrounded Chengdu, and disposed of by drones.

Adam stared at the images of powerless eHumans, their bodies of plasticine and metal cleared from the streets by the hundreds of bulldozers and drones that tossed bodies out of the buildings via the windows and pushed them into huge pits created outside of the city. Adam zoomed his eyes in on the photo to read the writing on the side of a bulldozer: "WG."

New Omaha wasn't experiencing a labor shortage. The world was experiencing a government crackdown. Right now, in Adam's city, the WG was shutting down businesses. How soon before they shut down the entire electrical grid of New Omaha? It was obvious a Hacktivist

had delivered these dangerous photos to his apartment, which meant they were active in his city.

Adam's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden sound of his door hissing open. Startled, he glanced up to see Anthony.

"Excuse me," Anthony said, eyeing the items on Adam's desk. Adam didn't miss the man's irises zooming in to see better. "I opened the door when you didn't answer my second knock."

"I never heard you knock even once," Adam said, glaring at his boss from under his brow. Anthony was the last person he wanted to see.

"What do you have there?" Anthony demanded, nodding at the mess on Adam's desk. Adam scooped up the documents and pictures to put them in the envelope, dropping one in his nervous haste. Anthony bent over and picked it up to study the picture, his expression nonplussed and eyes vacant, as if powered off. Then he twitched and came back to life.

"Request for one-to-one communication," Anthony demanded.

"Denied," Adam replied, his own sensors reading Anthony's energy outputs, which were elevated, a sure sign of anger and mistrust.

"You have no right to deny my request," Anthony said.

"Yes, I do. I don't have to grant anyone

access if I so choose. Why are you so angry about it? Close the door behind you and I'll tell you anything you want." Adam rose and pointed to the door that had swung open at Anthony's request.

Anthony stepped forward and entered the office, muttering the word, "Secure," as he slunk toward Adam. The door slid shut while Adam remained behind his desk, clutching the envelope close to his chest.

"Why are you so paranoid, Adam?" Anthony asked, his energy now calm and regulated. "I want to discuss things man-to-man."

"I'm not paranoid," Adam replied. "I don't like people messing around in my head."

Anthony gave a suppressed smile at the comment. "Where did you get these?"

"Some courier delivered them to my apartment."

"A courier? How last millennium. Did he arrive on a pedal bicycle as well? Where did you get this?" he asked again, this time shaking the photo in Adam's face.

"I told you, someone delivered it to my apartment while I was recharging. My housemate received it for me."

"Give me the envelope, Adam," Anthony commanded, stretching out his hand.

Like an animal that had fallen into a trap, Adam succumbed to the urge to get the hell out

of his small office. He tossed the envelope at Anthony.

“When you read it, you’ll see I don’t have an angle, or at least not the one you want. I’m not even sure I can do a Newsreel today. I’m all confused,” Adam said.

Laughing, Anthony held up a hand to interrupt him. “This is complete nonsense. I wonder where he got the paper to create this farce?”

Adam stared at Anthony, cringing at his boss’s amused reaction. “Farce?” Adam muttered, feeling a fool.

“Exactly. I’m going to send these on to the Guardians. Go home and get this off your mind. Why don’t you plug into Neuro and relax? I’ll have Tiffany do the Newsreel tonight. Forget about this nonsense—it’s obviously a Hacktivist plot.”

“Hacktivist plot?” Adam asked, uploading a calming program into his CPU to ease the panic that now stirred within him. So, there were Hacktivists in New Omaha. The day kept getting worse.

“I’m sure of it,” his boss replied.

Anthony remained still, staring at Adam with an intense interest, as if he were a zoo animal in a cage. The man’s coal-black eyes bore into Adam’s own, focusing as if to take a picture or register the moment in his data file. Adam had never noticed how dark his boss’s eyes were

before.

A loud crack of thunder crashed outside the office window, and rain the size of hail began to fall from the sky, causing a crooked smile to cross Anthony’s face. He glanced at the hook on the wall where Adam’s thick, black rain gear hung.

“Don’t forget to put on your rain gear. We don’t want our handsome Newsreel host to short out,” Anthony said, lightning flickering across his face. After what seemed like eons, the man turned on his heel and left Adam’s office, humming a tune by a pre-Great Shift rock band Adam couldn’t identify.

When Anthony was out of sight, Adam tugged on his rain gear and sprinted down the corridor and outside to catch a PTD, shivering not from cold but from fear. Being wet made most eHumans nervous, even though the eHuman body was water resistant. However, it wasn’t waterproof—like any mechanical gadget, too much water could short out the Chi-Regulator. The Chi-Regulator was an electrical device of greatest importance, and if it went on the fritz when no one else was around to save you, it was game over.

No Chi-Regulator, no Lux. No Lux, no life.

As a result, no one swam or lived near lakes, oceans, rivers, or streams. Moreover, given the constant flooding besieging the planet at the time of the Great Shift, the new eHuman-

capable cities had been built inland and away from water, to prevent people from submerging themselves. They were no longer a seafaring race. Didn't matter because HyperPlanes traveled the globe at the speed of sound—when fully charged, of course. No electricity meant they stopped working as well. Regardless, a little rain would be fine, provided Adam didn't get soaked. He was relieved when at last a PTD arrived and he climbed in, informing the vehicle to take him home.

When he entered his apartment, safe and dry, he found his housemate, Nelson, using the EC yet again.

"Hey Adam," Nelson called out as he moved around the room, in the middle of an intense fist fight with the air surrounding him, kicking and punching in between sentences. "I'm fighting a huge battle droid." Kick, punch. "Tonight's *Wars of the Past* Virtual Programming episode is"—spin, turn, kick, jump—"reenacting the Battle of Moscow of 2023. Totally kicks ass. Want to join?" He stopped moving and stared at Adam.

Normally Adam would have accepted, but today his mind was whirling. Even though he had recharged the night before, he needed to plug into the network again. He wanted to forget the photos, and the best way to do that was on Neuro, enjoying a Pleasure Zone app.

Shaking his head, he dropped his soaking

wet rain gear in the entryway and said, "I'll be in my recharge room if you need me."

While Nelson was distracted by his disappointment with Adam's refusal, the Russian battle droid he was fighting on Neuro whipped his butt and he lost his round. He cursed aloud and began the invasion again.

Many people enjoyed the gaming aspect of Neuro that included movement. Adam, however, preferred the more private applications he could access when plugged in, particularly the Pleasure Zone apps, which emitted the electrical signals of an orgasm or a drunken, consciousness-altering state. The Pleasure Zone library had something for everyone. It wasn't war but pleasure Adam always sought out in his moments of despair.

He walked over to his recharge room, passing Jill's room along the way. A green light pulsed over her doorway, signaling the room was occupied.

That meant Jill was online. Splendid.

Again, Adam wondered if Miranda had figured out his fascination with their housemate. It shouldn't have mattered. Modern eHumans relationships conducted while plugged into Neuro were considered fluid arrangements. Everyone played with everyone else, so to speak.

The door closed and locked behind him as he entered his recharge room, backed up into the slight indentation in the wall that matched his

body shape, plugged in, and began to search the network for Jill, or anyone else, who was willing to engage with him.

“Good evening, Adam Winter,” Neuro messaged his mind after he logged on. “Based on your activities today, may we suggest the following application downloads to provide entertainment and relaxation?”

It was amazing how accurate Neuro was at interpreting what programming any individual might need. Architected as an operating system run by human thought, Neuro had thousands of data manipulation and interpretation algorithms at its disposal. Adam approved the applications and began to feel himself relax. The AppPortal rose before him, offering games, activities, and pleasures of all sorts for him to choose from. A virtual make-your-own-dream land.

He thought about Jill, and Neuro directed him to “Persian Pleasure,” one of her favorite apps. Jill had a thing for group sex based on historical fiction. In this case, Adam would take on an AlterEgo called Alphaea, a Greek warrior from the time of Alexander the Great, and spend hours exploring sex of all flavors with others taking AlterEgos of the newly conquered harem of King Darius III. As Adam envisioned his AlterEgo, Neuro painted the world around him, and he found himself dressed in only a skirt made of leather strips. Golden cuffs formed on

his bronzed Greek arms, complete with genitals from the Age of the Flesh.

He was in a large, luxurious harem. Musicians played, women in scarves danced, and everywhere people were conversing, laughing, flirting, and indulging in the joys of the human body. It was a cornucopia for the erotic senses, an absolute coital dream.

He strode about the room, searching for Jill. She often took the AlterEgo of a young female consort called Xiao, and given she’d logged on before him, she’d already be engaged in an orgy. It would be public; she loved being watched. Adam pushed through the crowds of virtual gamers, allowing Neuro to guide him toward his goal: Jill’s bed.

As she and a pile of naked humans came into view, someone grabbed his arm and spun him around.

“Get off now.”

It was the beautiful blonde from the elevator.

“Huh?” Adam asked. He’d never seen her in Neuro before. What was she doing here? She wasn’t even cloaked in an AlterEgo and was dressed in a modern, black rubber suit. How did she recognize him? It was obvious from her pinched lips she wasn’t here to play.

“Get off now,” she replied again. This time her voice was shrill.

“What the hell?” Adam wrested his

bangled arm from her grasp. “I *am* trying to get off.”

“No, you idiot. Get off the network. The Guardians are looking for you. Your boss has alerted them. Soon they will be reading your mind. Unplug now. Make sure your wireless is off.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“If you want to know, then do as I say and log off now. Go to The House of Jazz on 145th and L Street. I’ll find you there,” the beautiful woman explained.

The interaction felt wrong and out of place.

Jill cried out to him, calling him over to her bed, where she lay stretched out amongst the pillows and silks with nothing on but a veil covering the bottom half of her face. She was surrounded by several other women and Greek soldiers, paused mid-sex act, staring at Adam and the blonde stranger, some licking their lips and teasing each other’s genitalia, awaiting Jill’s direction.

The intruder glanced around the room, her face stricken as if she were surrounded by the mountains of dead eHumans he’d seen in those horrific pictures.

“If you value your life, you’ll come with me,” she said as she turned and stormed out of the room, not even glancing at the sexual encounters going on around her. The door to the

harem shut behind her.

“Dearest Alphaea,” Jill cried out as two women slid their hands between her legs. Jill’s head fell back to her pillow as they pleased her. “Come join us.”

Adam’s body tingled and ached as he watched the three women touching each other. Jill arched her back as she spread her legs wider. The room faded as he made his choice.

It took all his will for Adam to leave the harem behind, log out, hit the release switch, and step forward, unplugging himself from the wall socket and Neuro. He had no idea who the blonde woman was, but he needed to find her. This was a story he couldn’t ignore. As he ran down the hall to the elevator, he heard the apartment door open.

“Adam,” Jill called out to him. Her mechanical voice reverberated off the slick metal walls of the hallway. “What the hell happened in there?”

The elevator doors opened, and he turned to glance over his shoulder. Jill stood with her hands on her hips, eyes glowing with a red tint. Shrugging, he entered the elevator and watched her disappear as the closing elevator doors blocked her form with a muted thump.

“Lobby,” Adam said aloud, knowing he couldn’t risk enabling his wireless. The blonde had demanded he stay offline, and he was going to listen to her—for now.

CHAPTER FIVE

World Leader Rosario Donahi pressed the sides of her skirt to her legs. If she were capable of sweating, her palms would have left streaks upon the silken material, but her eHuman form prevented such betrayals of emotion. Instead, she stood as tall as she could and stared at the door in front of her, its smooth, mahogany surface daring her to enter.

“Open,” she commanded aloud.

It swung open at a languid pace to reveal the posh study within. Edgar Prince rose from his seat as she entered his domain. His coal-dark eyes glittered with an electricity that had long held power over her.

“You requested my presence?” she asked.

The World Leader of eHumanity wasn't always so formal with him. She'd been his loyal lover for over a century and had no need for such manners. Yet even after several lifetimes of servitude, she still felt weak each time he

requested her for business purposes. Her fear of failure haunted her. Each task was a challenge of her fealty. Each demand an inquisition into her worthiness as the World Leader. After ruling the eHuman population for so long, she'd become quite used to it. She was determined to do anything to keep her power. Which meant doing anything Edgar Prince wanted.

The corners of Edgar's lips curled as she entered. She knew he adored her current eHuman form, which had been designed to his exact specifications. Every curve meant to bring his eyes pleasure. Every feature in her face, from the blue eyes and pouty red lips to the luxurious auburn mane of hair that fell to her waist, meant to awaken his desire. Her hands, mouth, lips, and recharge socket all had orgasmic transmitters for pleasuring him, and his other lovers, in any situation he desired. She was the perfect combination of beauty, pleasure, and faithfulness—everything Edgar wanted in an eHuman woman.

“Rosario, welcome,” he said.

“Edgar, my dear,” she answered, “I came as soon as I could. Why the face-to-face when we could've TeleConnected?”

“Please, have a seat.”

She sat down on the blue-velvet eighteenth century before-great-shift chair in front of his desk, never taking her eyes from his. He glided over to take the seat next to her and

took her hand in his.

“I don’t trust TeleConnect, or messaging. My Guardians have egos,” he explained, “and that means anything we say is for sale. No matter how hard I’ve tried to surround myself with loyal constituents, someone always fails me.”

“What do you mean, Edgar?” the World Leader asked, her own fear circuits firing. If he suspected her of anything, her life was forfeit.

“Oh darling, not you, Rosario. You’ll never fail me.” He patted her hand. “What I must tell you is too important to risk on the network, no matter how well I’ve secured it.”

Relief coursed over her like gentle waves on the sand. She relaxed and squeezed his hand, sending an erotic pulse for his Lux to contemplate. He nodded while a momentary look of seduction clouded his eyes.

“I understand,” she said. “What is it you need to say?”

“The Resistance is on the move.”

“The Resistance is always on the move, Edgar. That’s why we unplugged Chengdu. It’s time we bring those bastards to the light and finish them once and for all. I tire of their antics.”

“True, and they’ve taken the bait. They’re planning to enter the cities on the list to try and save the citizens.”

“How can you be sure?” Rosario was astonished he would know such details.

“My confidant within their ranks has told

me,” he replied, a look of sublime satisfaction upon his face.

“Your confidant?” He’d never told her of this before.

“It’s as I said, Rosario—all organizations have a rat. My organization is infested with them, but so is the Resistance.”

“Wonderful.” She resisted the urge to clap, so great was her joy, yet to show such emotion was frowned upon within the WG. Still, the revelation made her giddy. Only Edgar could’ve managed to score such a boon.

“So, when will they launch their mission, and where?” she asked.

“That will be revealed in good time,” Edgar replied. “Trust that the right information will be planted, and Dawn will lead her followers right into the trap. I’ve called you here for a different reason.”

He paused, gazing at her, head cocked. She worried he doubted her loyalty. Rising in her seat, she sent another course of delight into his hands.

“Tell me, Edgar. You know you can trust me,” she whispered.

“The Resistance has begun to call in the candidates.”

“They’ve narrowed down the list?” she asked.

“Oh, the list was narrowed down decades ago. They’ve been tracking them, and so have I.”

“What do you mean, you’ve been tracking them? Why haven’t you told me this before?” Rosario demanded.

“My dear,” Edgar said, a look of fire in his eyes, “you know the terms of our relationship. You must tell me your every move. However, I don’t owe you the same courtesy.”

She bowed her head and glanced at the floor. He took a gentle finger and placed it under her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“Suffice it to say, I’ve been tracking their candidates as well. I have my reasons. They have faith in finding a savior. I am looking for a betrayer, and I won’t stop until I have that betrayer back in my grip.”

“I don’t understand—” she stuttered.

“You don’t have to understand,” he replied, releasing his finger from her chin and rising from his seat. “Just know this: Dawn has begun to bring in the candidates for testing. The first few were false alarms, but another candidate will arrive at their headquarters within hours. If he’s the One, she will lead an attack on WG. We must be ready.”

“How do you suggest we prepare?” the World Leader asked.

“You must unplug New Chelyabinsk in Russia.”

“Kill more people,” she said, without a note of dismay. She knew full well mass slaughter was a favorite pastime of his. The man

considered culling the population their sacred duty. She’d let go of her guilt at least a century ago. eHumanity was nothing to him. Therefore, it had become nothing to her. Closing her heart to their suffering was the only way she could survive.

“Yes, a few million more Lux released from the earth will drive Dawn to act sooner than later. She always takes their misery so personally. Besides, it will send her a message,” he said.

“And what about the candidates?” Rosario asked.

“Ah, leave that to me,” he replied. “With time, the One will come to me, and I’ll know what to do when that glorious day arrives.”

Rosario beamed at him with all the affection and adoration expected from a devotee. Religious practice had passed from the earth the day Dawn had first opened her eyes—immortality made the worship of the gods obsolete. But for Rosario, religious fervor still lingered within her soul; it was Edgar Prince whom she worshipped. She knew Edgar was at home identifying with the godhead. He was, after all, the “Father of eHumanity.” Rosario’s complete devotion awakened his desire.

“Come here,” he commanded.

She rose and approached him. He drew her to his chest. Sending his own desire in waves through his hands, he reached around her back

to the waistline of her skirt and parted the standard slit that covered her plug at the base of her spine. He ran the tip of his finger around the outside of the plug, driving her wild as he sent orgasmic pulses throughout her body. Rosario threw back her head and let out a small groan as Edgar thrust his entire finger inside her socket, sending an immediate shock up her body. Bliss began to take over her mind. A moment before ecstasy, he withdrew his finger and thrust her out of his embrace.

She stood in front of him, trembling with longing for the orgasm to be completed within her pleasure programs. For him to tease her in such a way was too much for her to bear. Yet she couldn't protest, for that would be overstepping her boundaries.

Edgar walked back to his desk and tapped the screen top, contacting his secretary. Her hologram form crackled to life. Rosario struggled to keep from trembling in front of her.

"Hold all communication requests," he said, smiling at the secretary. "I'm going to be offline for the next few hours."

"Yes, sir," the girl said, pouting as she nodded toward Rosario. "Busy with World Leader, I presume?"

"Indeed," he answered. "Time to test drive her latest eHuman body." The woman pouted even more, causing Edgar to laugh. "Don't worry, darling, you're next."

Rosario groaned as if he'd plugged her into a torture app, while the assistant's face softened at the mention of her turn with Edgar. "I can't wait. Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Edgar said. "I need you to send the list of cities to be powered down to Christophe, my dear. Make sure it's unencrypted so that it can be intercepted. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Edgar touched the screen on his desk, and the girl's form disappeared. He gazed at Rosario. "You look upset. Don't tell me you're surprised I want it intercepted. That way my Resistance rat can see it and pass on the information."

Rosario crossed her arms. "You know damn well that's not why I'm upset."

He strode toward her, grabbing her again and thrusting his finger into her socket. This time, he sent a flood of ecstasy through her, causing her to climax without warning. He nuzzled into her ear. "You like that?"

Rosario leaned into his body, collapsing under the weight of her desire. "More than anything."

"Let's go to my private chambers. The toys await us."

The World Leader nodded with relief, the hot flush of desire still pulsing through her system. She had been yearning for weeks for him to service her as only a properly Pleasure Zone-outfitted eHuman could.

NICOLE SALLAK ANDERSON

“Yes, my dear,” she whispered.

“It’s good to be the king,” he murmured as he sauntered down the carpeted hall behind her toward his recharge room, humming the ancient folk tune, “Time is On My Side.”

CHAPTER SIX

The House of Jazz in Omaha was packed with eHumans searching for person-to-person interaction, cavorting with one another as if on holiday. On the crowded dance floor, couples moved in unison to an eight-piece band. eHumans surrounded various screen-top tables and waited in line for the Pleasure Zones. Dawn watched as one eHuman after another placed their hands on glass spheres atop pedestals that littered the room, their faces relaxing and lighting up with pleasure as the electromagnetic currents pulsed through their hands and satisfied their every desire.

Having spent the first sixty years of her eHuman life alongside Dr. Neville, she knew more about pre-eHuman life than most. Teaching her the importance of the freedom of thought and how they’d lost it in exchange for their eHuman immortality was something James had done through storytelling and sharing videos and blogs downloaded to the

internet by humans during the Age of the Flesh. The Resistance didn't use Neuro. They had their own means of recharging and their own private network for communication. Dawn couldn't access it unless she was within range of a Resistance Control Center, and thus the isolation she felt while out on a mission was akin to floating alone in deep space with nothing but her own thoughts.

More than anyone, Dawn understood the longing for something more in life, only she never used a Pleasure Zone to find it. To do so would mean logging into Neuro and immediate detection by the Guardians. Unless she Jumped into a new body, her IP address would remain in Neuro, forever flagged as the most wanted person in the world. And since her memories were so important, Dawn's eHuman body was a history book, one the Resistance couldn't risk losing. She probably should have sent a lesser-ranked member to bring in the candidates, but given her connection to Elijah, she was willing to risk getting caught to be the one to find him.

Adam Winter stood in the line in front of the Pleasure Zones. He couldn't even wait a few minutes alone without seeking some sort of distraction. This behavior was typical of the plugged-in; to be in physical reality with their wireless turned off meant to be alone, and most eHumans despised that feeling—one of isolation not unlike solitary confinement in the

Age of the Flesh. Connecting an eHuman to an empty virtual space, disconnected from Neuro, for prolonged periods of time was a favorite punishment of the WG when they caught her rebellion's Hacktivists. Not death; rather, utter aloneness in a vast, black unknown.

Dawn ran a finger through her hair to make sure it still fell in long curls around her face and adjusted her red-sequined dress before approaching her target. As she strolled across the room, she studied his face, noting his dark hair and eyes, pale skin, and fine clothes. His was a handsome form, one created for the singular purpose of making others feel safe. If this really was Elijah Prince, why was he now a Newsreel host, selling WG lies to the population? It didn't make any sense. If only she could ask Adam if he were indeed Elijah, but that was impossible—the man couldn't know who he was before his Jump into his eHuman body. No one could. Complete memory loss of life in the flesh was one of the greatest prices they'd paid to avoid death.

She paused, feeling the urge to flee. Something told her that in confronting Adam Winter, she'd do more than recover Edgar Prince's heir; she'd recover a bit of herself as well. Elijah was a connection to her flesh existence, of which she knew next to nothing. As Dawn, she'd known Elijah—he'd been one of the original engineers of The Dawn Project, which meant he'd had a hand in her creation. According to James,

Elijah had been her lover before she'd become Dawn, but never once, in all their time together before he went missing, had the man mentioned her pre-eHuman life. In the beginning, after her Jump into eHuman form, she'd spent hours by his side in the labs at Guardian Enterprises as he built Neuro and the eHuman world around her. Then one day, while she'd been out on tour drumming up support for the Great Shift, he'd disappeared, leaving the lab and her behind. She'd been angry at him, but as the decades marched on, she'd forgotten all about him.

Elijah's records in Neuro listed him as "presumed dead," one of the victims of the Great Purge—WG-sponsored nuclear attacks against non-eHuman cities whose citizens had refused to Jump. Her own files in the system stated her carbon form had been a terminally ill female, which was why they'd selected her to become The Dawn of eHumanity. She now clung to the story James had told her on his deathbed—she had been none other than Sophia Castilogna, James's sister and business partner, as well as Elijah's lover.

Had Elijah been her lover in the flesh? He'd always been polite and kind to her during those days in the lab, but reserved. A smile from him was a rare thing. In her early eHuman days, she'd thought it was because Elijah was serious about his job—he was creating eHumanity, after all, and she was his first major release—but

according to James, Elijah had loved her. If this were true, he must have suffered after her Jump, for she couldn't recall a single detail from their human lives. How horrible for a lover to forget you.

Since James had died, Dawn had imagined her reunion with Elijah, but here she was, about to interrupt this Adam Winter yet again from taking part in pleasure and try to convince him to unplug and follow her into the Resistance. She realized how unprepared she was if he did indeed turn out to be Elijah. He wouldn't remember how he'd engineered her entire life. He wouldn't remember his love for her, and given the man's propensity for the profane, she wasn't sure she wanted him to be Elijah.

Dawn shook her head. Just because Elijah Prince had been her lover before the Great Shift didn't mean he was a good man. She might not have been a good woman. They'd created eHumanity, enslaving human consciousness for the rest of eternity. That didn't speak well of either of them. Theirs was a lost love story. There were more critical issues at hand. She had no choice but to lure Adam to Avalon, no matter the result. Everyone in the nightclub was going to die if she didn't get that software soon, and the work of the Resistance had always been to save as many as possible. During the Great Shift, she had lured many humans to abandon the flesh and Jump into a system of totalitarian control,

something that haunted her to this day, but she wouldn't fail eHumanity now.

Dawn stood inches behind Adam. It was now or never.

"Before we were eHuman," she said over his shoulder, "we used to order liquor at the clubs to alter our consciousness. Now we log into Neuro, or place our hands on a little glass ball, and we can feel bliss whenever we want. Fantastic, isn't it?"

Adam turned and she tossed her golden hair over her shoulder, grateful her sequins sparkled in the nightclub lights. Her deep green eyes pierced his dark ones, and she found him much more intriguing in real life than in Neuro. For a moment she was enchanted by him, but then recalled she'd pulled him from a Pleasure Zone orgy only an hour ago. Well, at least he'd listened to her and sought her out.

"When we first became eHuman," she continued, using the sexiest voice program she could find loaded in her database, "the scientists thought we wouldn't need activities such as getting high or making love, but it became clear within the first round of eHuman experiments that our Lux couldn't tolerate the world without a little 'vavoom.' So, they created the Pleasure Zones and upgraded our bodies to have inputs in the hands that could receive electrical impulses."

Adam remained silent, unaware as she wirelessly hacked into his local database where

his thoughts were an open book. But it was clear her presence unnerved him.

"Lies," he said, finding his voice. "You have no idea what life was like on Earth before the Great Shift. No one does."

"Is it not written in Neuro?" she countered, gesturing her arms to the space around them. "All the information is there if you only look. There are hundreds of thousands of documented accounts of life in the flesh. You've stopped looking for the past, Adam Winter, which is why you cannot recall it. Unfortunately, you aren't the only one who isn't interested in history."

"How do you know my name?"

"You've been on my radar for a long time. It's why I invited you here. Please—let's dance. I can tell you more."

She held out her hand. Adam hesitated before taking it in his own. She sent him a pulse of energy from her fingertips, and the cameras in his dark eyes grew wider.

"Ah," he said as a bit of a smile formed on his face. "You've upgraded your body to send electrical currents through your hands. I've heard about eHumans who could mimic different Pleasure Zone apps by generating the equivalent currents—sending them through their hands to their partners—but I always considered it a senseless waste of money."

Dawn cranked up the pleasure pulse and

pulled him closer. “It might be time for you to reconsider and upgrade your hardware.”

She led him through the crowd to a spot on the dance floor near the band. A fox trot—with a stranger. She knew over one hundred different ballroom dances had been downloaded into his program bank, so Adam had no problem leading her as they talked. Dawn relaxed and began to enjoy herself. Teasing Adam was quite fun. She hadn’t flirted with anyone in decades; the Resistance had always kept her too busy for romance.

“So,” he said, “why did you call me here? Would you prefer to connect one-to-one so we can discuss it in private?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Neuro is the most public place in the world. It’s only an illusion you’re protected by the one-to-one feature. Everything you do or say is monitored.”

“Well, by the Guardians—yes. But trust me, they wouldn’t be too concerned with what I think.” Adam laughed, and as she scraped his local RAM, she knew he believed what he was saying.

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” she said, unable to hide the irritation building inside her. How could someone so crucial to her success be so dumb? “After the stupid mistake you made with your boss today, I think you can be sure you’ll never have a private moment on Neuro again.”

“What stupid mistake?” Adam asked. Again, she searched his mind—the man had no idea what he was up against.

“Didn’t your roommate tell you to read the file in private?” she said.

“Well, yes—but how do you know about that?”

“Who do you think delivered those documents?”

Realization began to dawn on Adam’s face. “You?”

“My colleague gave specific instructions that you *didn’t* follow, and now your boss has those images, which means you’re in danger,” she said to him as if he were a naughty student, anger crackling through her emotional circuits as she considered his actions. “Why didn’t you listen?”

“Wait a minute—who the hell are you to accuse me of anything?”

Adam stopped dancing and forced her from his embrace. He stared at her as the other couples spun past them, his camera-like pupils zooming in and out as he assessed her. “I’ve seen you around my apartment building in the past few weeks. You’ve been following me, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you’d done your research, you’d know my job as a media guy is to make everyone happy and content with WG-approved news, not

listen to some Hactivist group. I'm not sure why you gave me this information, but if it was a hero in the media you were looking for, you chose the wrong guy."

She read his emotional state controller. He did care, but he was afraid. Again, feelings within her stirred in recognition. An eerie aura of nostalgia enveloped and overwhelmed Dawn.

"I'm sorry. I've begun this poorly," she said, holding out her hand. He folded his arms across his chest, and she let her arm fall to her side. "I had the information about the power shutdown in Chengdu passed on to you so you would know about it. I confess I was hoping you'd report it on your popular Newsreel. It's important that as many of us as possible wake up and see what's happening before it's too late."

"You mean before they shut down New Omaha?"

"Yes, but our peril is much greater than that. The group I represent has been working for over one hundred years to expose the WG. We call ourselves the Global Resistance. We can't work in the shadows anymore. The struggle is about to break out into the open. That's why I'm here. I want to save you—and make you a hero."

"A hero? How?"

"I can offer you a second chance to help us, but now that you're being watched, I can't tell you any more about it without compromising our work."

"I'll be more careful," Adam interrupted, but she put a finger to his lips to shush him, sliding closer into his chest. This time he didn't refuse her; instead, he wrapped her in his embrace, and they began dancing again, a closely held tango. As her body settled into his, she felt a flash of desire—warm skin, the smell of cologne, and sweat—flesh memories. It was impossible, yet she sensed that if she could only seek a bit further within her RAM, she could recall them. Her mouth was a hair's width from his ear. She blinked the thoughts away, sensing Adam's interest in the present. She was close to getting him to follow her to Avalon. She needed to focus on the here and now.

"The Guardians have full read and write access to our database," she said, her voice set to its lowest volume. "It's part of their power. Over time, they've read our thoughts and created small applications, written little by little into our code and memory, to make us forget our dreams, interests, and plans. These applications destroy our curiosity and desire to know more. We begin to live our lives without question. When we became eHuman, we placed our Lux into machines. We're turning into robots and the WG can do what they wish. We're a submissive society, since they have complete and unlimited access to each of us. Even if you don't use your wireless, you'll need to connect to recharge. They'll know you've met me."

“Then what do I do?” His own voice was low, and he gripped her closer to his body as if she were a lifeline.

“I’m going to make you the offer of a lifetime. Come with me to the Global Resistance headquarters. I’ll grant you full access. In exchange, all I ask is that you use this information to expose the WG on your Newsreel. My hackers can help you get around the Friend’s Network security measures and stream it on Neuro. No angles, no spinning—just the story as you see it.”

“Or?” Adam asked, his voice slow as he drew her closer into his arms.

“You can stay here and pretend like this never happened. The next time you log in to recharge, my hackers will erase this memory from your database, and you can live out the next few weeks in peace. New Omaha will lose power, sooner than you think, and then it will all be over for you.”

“Why me? Why do you think I would be the one for this job?”

“I’ve watched you for a long, long time, Adam Winter. I believe you have what it takes,” she said, again lowering the pitch of her voice for effect.

Adam remained speechless, and Dawn nuzzled closer into his neck. His emotional state controller indicated he was intrigued not only by her proposal, but also by her. She felt bad,

hacking into his mind like this, but also elated. She’d hit her target—his pride.

“Come with me,” she said, unwilling to stop the momentum. She wanted nothing more than for him to follow. “What do you have to lose?”

From the view of everyone else in the room, they looked like two lovers, held in tight embrace, murmuring into one another’s ears.

“Nothing,” he said.

She relaxed her hold and began to withdraw from his embrace.

“Wait,” he said, his arms like vices around her waist. “You never told me your name.”

She paused a moment, then threw back her head to gaze into his face. She knew she was more radiant than everyone else in the room, even though they were all created with equally powerful tech. However, Dawn had been crafted to lure the rest of humanity into her eHuman world. From the look now in Adam’s eyes, the beauty of The Dawn was still quite effective in this way.

“Dawn,” she answered. “I was the first.”

“The first?” Adam said, furrowing his brow. “I don’t understand.”

“The first eHuman.”

She released him from her hold and wove her way through the crowd to the door, swaying her hips to the beat of the music. She knew Adam watched her every step. He hesitated only briefly

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before rushing toward her, following her out into the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The bright evening sky shone above them, the result of thousands of city lights reflecting from the thick layer of smog that blanketed the sky. Adam followed Dawn down busy streets, people milling past them. He found it odd that no one took notice of the beautiful woman beside him. Her dress alone lit up the town. Of course, most were on some sort of chatroom call while also watching a Newsreel or other evening programming as they walked past. MultiApping on Neuro was a lot more common than paying attention to what was going on in the physical world. Besides, their bodies could self-navigate, thus avoiding all collisions that might otherwise occur.

Dawn took long strides as she wove through the crowd. No longer flirtatious, her mood took a more serious tone now. Was she glad he'd said yes? What was she hiding from him? For hiding she was, Adam knew it. The Dawn of eHumanity was terrorist number one—

the most wanted woman by the WG. There was a bounty on her head, but she'd gone missing so long ago that most eHumans, including himself, had forgotten her face.

Yet here she was, first popping up in Neuro to find him and now walking at his side. She was obviously up to something big, or she wouldn't risk such exposure. He was crazy to have taken her up on her offer—most likely, if he were caught, the WG would fry his Chi-Regulator, or worse, connect his Lux into an oblivion program. But gaining access to the Hacktivists' headquarters was too important an opportunity to pass up. If he survived it, Adam Winter would have stumbled upon the story of his lifetime.

She continued along the street for a few blocks, turned a corner, and headed west. She led him around several more streets until they came to a nondescript building about five blocks from the jazz club, in a quieter part of town, too close to the dumps and city maintenance district for anyone other than the robotic custodial staff to bother with. Pushing open a solid door, Dawn slipped behind it. Adam glanced up and down the street before following her into the gloom.

He switched his optical mode to night vision to see more clearly, making out Dawn's sparkling-red hourglass form ahead as she led him down several flights of stairs. They were in the basement. They advanced down a dark tunnel toward a single door at the end. When

they arrived, Dawn knocked on the door using a distinct rhythm. A similar rhythm returned her knock, and the door opened. She gestured for Adam to go in first, manually closing the door behind them.

They entered a narrow, rectangular room. The walls on either side were covered with shelves where boots, rain gear, backpacks, and weapons stood at attention in neat rows, waiting to be commissioned into service. The wall at the end of the room was made up of several video screens displaying footage from the streets surrounding the building, rooms full of people unaware they were being watched, and several screens that had thousands of digits running down them in columns. Still others streamed live Newsreels from all over the world.

"This is some serious surveillance," Adam said.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" a deep male voice answered.

Adam spun around and discovered he and Dawn were not alone. A man dressed in a thick black rubber suit and heavy boots stood behind the door. Adam hadn't noticed him when he walked in. The man had hair so white it looked like fresh snow, parted into several long dreadlocks that formed a frame around his face, contrasting against his umber skin and intense, yellow, cat-like eyes. Dark and handsome—this must have been the courier Dawn had sent to his

apartment with the photos. The man nodded to Adam before addressing Dawn.

“You weren’t followed, were you?” the man asked. Adam noticed he had a European accent program running. “Nice dress, by the way.”

Dawn threw her arms over her head and turned in a circle. “When in the field, one has to dress the part,” she said with a toss of her long blonde locks. Then she turned to a blank video panel and touched three icons on the screen. They enlarged to show the lobby of the building they’d entered, the street outside the building, and the hallway in front of the room they were in. No signs of life.

“All clear,” she answered. Then she gestured toward her companion. “Adam, this is Origen. Origen, Adam.”

Origen held out his hand without hesitating, and Adam shook it. The handshake was firm, nearly crushing his metal fingers. Origen gave every impression he was a man not to be messed with. His energy filled the room, making Adam feel insignificant. What the hell was Adam doing here? He was about to tell Dawn he’d made a foolish mistake and had to go home when Origen began to speak.

“You’re quiet for a Newsreel host. Let’s get you fitted for an energy pack, and then we’ll tell you who we are and what happens next.”

Origen strutted to one of the shelves

along the wall, shoulders back and chin held high. He hefted a black canvas backpack from the metal shelf and waved a hand at Adam, who approached, his curiosity getting the best of him. Origen held the pack up and then fitted it onto Adam’s back. It buckled tightly across his chest. The backpack had a significant weight to it, and the pockets on the outside were filled with equipment.

“Is this my camping gear?” Adam stifled back a laugh bubbling within. The intensity of his situation was starting to make him feel giddy.

“That and more,” Origen answered. “In the outside pockets are knives, climbing rope, waterproof gloves, a hat and mask, and small explosives, in case you need them. Packed inside is your life link.” As he spoke, Origen stepped behind Adam and pulled out a long copper wand attached to a flexible metal cord that disappeared into the energy pack. He put the wand in front of Adam’s face—a plug.

“But how?” Adam said.

“Don’t worry, you won’t log on to Neuro. The plug fits into your outlet, and the recharger is hidden in the energy pack. The unit is full and can recharge your Chi-Regulator in about four hours—”

“Four hours?” Adam gaped at him. This couldn’t be possible.

“Yes,” Origen continued, “50 percent faster

than what you're used to."

"But what do you mean *full*?"

"It extracts the energy of the sun," Origen said, "and it converts that stored energy into electricity, which recharges your Chi-Regulator."

"The energy of the sun?" Adam's mind was whirling like a midwestern summer storm, filled with a tornado of questions. "I don't understand."

"Take a seat, Adam," Dawn said, walking to a corner of the room where a pair of couches sat, a glass tabletop controller between them. "We need to get down to business and we have much to share with you."

As she passed him to sit on the couch, Origen grinned at Dawn with a look like a supplicant for his master. While she began to tap the tabletop, Origen plugged Adam into the pack, taking his mind from Dawn and back to the amazing technology that now rested on his shoulders. Adam felt the energy pulsing from the pack to his Chi-Regulator. Origen slapped Adam on the shoulder and sauntered over to the couch to sit beside Dawn; only inches separated the pair.

Adam was surprised to notice he felt jealous, making him feel even more the fool. He'd given up his life on a whim to follow this woman, and it wasn't just for the story. Adam wanted Dawn. For some reason, it had never crossed his mind she would already be involved with

someone else. What an absolute idiot he was. All his life he'd been chasing skirts and always he ended up alone. Why did he seek women out this way?

He sat down on the couch opposite the couple and gazed at the screen-top table between them. *No matter*, he told himself as Origen scooted even closer to Dawn, gazing over her shoulder as she continued swiping away at the screen. Adam was here to bust the Resistance and get a story, not fall in love.

Two visuals displayed. One was of a group of twelve beautiful eHumans, including Dawn and Origen. The second showed a thin man with a serious face. Wrinkles surrounded his brilliant blue eyes, almost hidden by his wire-rimmed glasses. Gray hair stuck out from his head at all angles. An unnatural covering of hair along his jawline surprised Adam. Facial hair was a rare eHuman decoration. Of course, so were wrinkles—and this man had plenty of them.

Origen spoke, his appealing voice captivating Adam in the narration. "This is the Original 12, or O12 as marketing liked to call us, and that's our creator, Dr. James Neville. Now, we're considered the most dangerous terrorist group on the planet, but back when the Great Shift began, we were the superstars of new death-defying technology. Our financier and CEO, Edgar Prince, decided to kick off a global campaign to move everyone from their carbon

bodies into the eHuman form with a Vegas-style eHuman show. Think Cirque de Soleil meets the Consumer Electronics Symposium. Dawn was the first eHuman created and shortly after her birth, Edgar's company, Guardian Enterprises, created eleven more eHumans to join Dawn and run a public campaign that was the catalyst to convince the people of Earth to ditch their flesh bodies and become a part of our immortal, beautiful, eHuman world. The president of the United States of America at the time, Ruth Donovan, as well as leaders from other major countries, joined us."

Adam scanned his database for elements of this story, ashamed when he produced only the same photo of the O12 Origen was referencing. He hadn't saved a bit of information about this part of history in his local RAM, and since he wasn't on Neuro, he couldn't look it up. Why hadn't he bothered to understand their origin story better? Had he ever even researched the founding of eHumanity? Adam's face must have shown his despair because Origen stopped talking.

"You've heard of the O12, right?" Origen asked.

"Of course," Adam replied, pasting a charming smile upon his face. "I'm wondering why everyone was so enthralled with you that even world leaders would join in on the technology. Must have been some show you put

on."

"It was a convincing show," Origen said, giving Dawn another flirtatious smile. The guy had probably recorded every moment of their lives together and played his favorite Dawn moments on repeat. "Yet there was more to it. One of the main reasons for Jumping, as it began to be called, was to support a newer, greener, and more prosperous society. Human civilization had collapsed. Unemployment was over 30 percent. Gas was being rationed, as was electricity and heat to homes and offices. Food was scarce because the soil could no longer support growing enough food to feed the increasing population. Due to agricultural debauchery, much of the farmland was no longer fertile. The water supply was also compromised, causing most marine life to be endangered.

"We were on the brink of a world war and disaster. Six out of every ten people had one form or another of a terrible, often fatal, disease called cancer, or other environmental diseases. Worse, we were suffering from a new virus at pandemic levels every decade or so, and in the forties, a strain of virus had infected humanity that rendered its victims paralyzed, if they were lucky to live. All beings of the flesh were in peril."

"So, the eHuman was a perfect solution to all our problems," Adam cut in, trying to appear knowledgeable. He might not have saved a bunch of ancient information, but he could

put two and two together. “We wouldn’t have to eat or drink, solving the global hunger issue. No more fighting for the little bit of land that was left; instead, the WG built new eHuman-capable cities and spread us out among them. Water issues would disappear, as well as illness, aging, and dying. The eHuman was more powerful than a vaccine, for no plague could harm us ever again. Right?”

“Of course,” Dawn replied, and Adam felt a pulse of desire sweep through his circuits. What was it about her? Did her voice program transmit waves of desire like her hands? It was hard for him to concentrate on her serious subject matter. “In addition, the brand-new eHuman-capable cities being built were powered by an efficient, high-tech, renewable energy grid that would be managed by Neuro. Our every need would be met in a timely and individualized, sustainable way.”

“Seems like things worked out, so what does any of it have to do with your work as an anti-WG organization?” Adam asked.

“Ah.” Origen picked the story back up. “That’s the crux. It took nearly a decade to build over 200,000 new eHuman-capable cities and Jump all 7.6 billion people to the eHuman platform. *‘The World Back to Work’* was the slogan for the labor movement needed to pull off this monumental task. When we moved into our new cities, we switched not only to a

new era of immortal living, but also to a new world of efficiency and democracy under the newly formed World Government. We would live forever and ever, as one united people, without the threat of famine, war, or disease. Or so the story went.”

“We do live in a better world,” Adam said. “I’m having a hard time accepting that the first eHumans created to free humanity from pain and death now rebel against it.”

“The eHuman has been successful,” Dawn answered. “Yet at what cost to our freedom and individual rights? What good is immortality if it’s under the control of the WG, who can switch off our lives because a group of people choose to live or think a different way?”

Adam remained silent. She had a point.

“Early on,” Dawn said, “it was widely assumed that our memory in the flesh was stored in our brains. But since brains were organic, there was no way to extract or store its data, except in human consciousness—our Lux. Dr. Neville and his scientists had hoped local memory would follow the Lux into the eHuman body. I was the first successful Jump. When I opened my eyes, I couldn’t recall what had happened to me, nor who I’d been in the flesh. This was the case time and again, for each of us in the O12.”

“This failure to remember our original life in the flesh helped those in power devise

the plan for the Great Shift,” Origen continued. “They capitalized on the failed memory of the eHuman race. As the politicians plotted together, they architected not only new cities, but a whole New World Order, starting from scratch with all of society ignorant that it was new or different in any way. In this new world, only one entity would provide power to the energy grid—the WG themselves. This meant whenever any city, group, or individual disagreed with WG policy, a simple flick of the switch would wipe out their electricity. Since the new cities were built far enough apart that no eHuman can walk between them before their Chi-Regulator dies out, they only have rail and airline to connect them. Not a single road exists outside our city walls, and the WG owns transport as well. There’s no chance of escaping a city-wide shutdown. Complete power over us. Which was never part of the original Great Shift promise.”

“And no one could argue with it, since no one remembered, correct?” Adam asked, anxiety now pulsing through his circuits as he recalled the pile of eHuman bodies in Chengdu. Fortunately, he had saved an anti-anxiety program in his local database, and ran it while Dawn continued speaking, her gaze now focused on Adam.

“Only those in the government and the O12 knew the Great Shift campaign promises. So, yes—they got away with it because the other 7.6

billion people didn’t know any better.”

“I thought the Guardians, not the WG, have complete control of Neuro and the Lifestyle Management Offices,” Adam said.

“Yes, and they work for Guardian Enterprises, a privately owned firm. A separation of power,” Dawn replied. “The thing is, Edgar Prince himself owns Guardian Enterprises. So, he also owns all who use Neuro, and the Resistance has proof he’s the one in control of the WG.”

“How can that be?” Adam frowned. “Aren’t they elected officials? He’s never run for office, has he?”

“That’s true, but World Leader Donahi is his lover, and she will do whatever Edgar demands,” Dawn said, her brow pinching as she spoke.

“Then the WG owns all aspects of our lives—not only our thoughts and actions, but also our energy source,” Adam said. “Control like that is all-encompassing; we’re nothing but remote-controlled dolls.”

Neither Dawn nor Origen replied, and Adam was grateful for their silence. It was all so overwhelming—from the deception by their world leaders to the shame he felt for remaining oblivious to their history and their plight all these years. Here he’d fancied himself an investigative reporter. Yet, if what Dawn said was true, his ignorance wasn’t completely of his own

doing; forces greater than himself were at work here, which wasn't any better. He was drowning in these revelations, each one hitting him like a sneaker wave on the ocean.

There were no words that could comfort him now, no explanations that could make it right. The truth was hard to swallow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Except for the buzzing of the various computer displays and servers, the room remained silent. Neuro never slept. It was constantly searching for information, looking for answers and data patterns that would alert its masters to any anomalies—but also knowing all the answers before the questions were even asked.

While the network hummed beside her, Dawn looked down at her smooth, lineless hands—so different than James's, which had been wrinkled, spotted, and covered with spidery veins. Her eHuman hands were without such things as fingerprints and sunspots; they were flawless and fawn colored, fingers tipped with perpetually red nails. Even her manicure was immortal. Strands of her blonde plastic hair hung around her face. It was hard for her to share her story, for it was always wrapped in the cloak of her guilt. Not a day went by that she didn't regret her choice to become The Dawn.

Granted, it had been a series of desperate and heartbreaking events that had led her to take the first Jump, and she was sure the woman she once was never could have foreseen the eventual totalitarian outcome for humanity. Still, the need to make up for her sins, to save humanity from the spell she had first cast, consumed her every moment. Always, it was on her mind.

She tucked the loose strands of her hair behind her ears and raised her head to look at Adam's handsome, chiseled face. He returned her gaze with a look of solidarity, his dark eyes beneath his brow recording the moment into his database, his full lips set firmly together in a straight line. She couldn't believe he was in her custody. Now that they were away from the hustle and bustle of the city, those ancient memories stirred within her again, and she knew he was the one they needed. Getting him to Avalon was her only priority now. The sooner the better.

Origen rose from his place. "Time to travel. Get your rain gear on, both of you. It looks like we're in for some weather between New Omaha and the RCC. After all the work of getting you here, Adam Winter, we don't need you to short out on the way."

"Where are we going?" Adam asked.

"To Avalon, the closest Resistance Control Center, our local RCC. It's a bit west of here," Origen answered.

Dawn led Adam to the shelves and handed him a pile of garments. He removed his energy pack, and they took off their clothes and put on slick one-piece suits that covered their entire bodies, made of a thick rubber, with a small hole at the base of the spine where the plug on an energy pack would insert.

Adam needed help zipping up the back, and Dawn lunged forward, almost pushing Origen out of the way, tugging Adam closer to her side to help him. Touching him gave her a surge of excitement; she wanted nothing more than to embrace him, so once the suit was securely fastened, she thrust his energy pack into his arms to keep from making a fool of herself. What was going on inside of her? Glancing at Origen, she doubled-checked to make sure she had her encryption program on. She didn't want him reading her thoughts.

"Put the pack on," she said, turning away from Adam to tug on her own thick-soled boots.

"The firepower included on this backpack—I assume it's for killing eHumans?" Adam asked as he slid the pack onto his back and then guided the plug into the socket at the base of his spine.

"Yes, they're ElectroShock grenades. Just time the release and aim true," Origen answered. "They go straight to the Chi-Regulator and stop it. Of course, they'll work on the WG drones, robots, eBots, and SpiderScouts as well. We all

live on electricity, even the machines.”

“Wait a minute,” Adam said, his volume rising in alarm, as if a set of puzzle pieces in his mind had clicked into place. “If these energy packs use the sun to recharge, why can’t everyone live off the grid? I mean, solar energy could be harnessed by anyone, couldn’t it?”

“Many people have thought about using it,” Origen said as he fit a gun into his holster, “but the instant they log into Neuro to recharge, the Guardians erase any trace of those thoughts. The knowledge of solar power is not permitted on Neuro. All data about it is diligently erased and kept secret. Hell, even you might have thought of it a million times, given how long you’ve been in that body, but those thoughts no longer exist in your database.”

“What? How can they erase my thoughts?” Adam asked, his mouth agape as his eyes flashed.

“The Guardians screen and modify your database every time you log in,” Dawn answered. “They like to call it your daily ‘purification.’ We all lost our memories of the flesh when we first Jumped, but those who use Neuro are constantly being modified. Every time you log on, your database is searched, and any thoughts deemed inappropriate are erased. Trust me, solar power is inappropriate, as it would free you from having to plug into Neuro to recharge.”

“That’s what you meant when we were

dancing—they’ve been taking away my original ideas and turning me into a robot,” Adam said.

“Correct.” Dawn nodded. “Since the Resistance has our own network as well as the energy packs, we never have to log on to Neuro, which means we’re not subject to any purification algorithms. When those of us in the Resistance have a thought, like what if we use the power of the sun to recharge our batteries and even our cities, we remember our ideas and are able to develop the technology. In this case, solar energy was our first invention under James’s direction and the one that enabled us to be free.”

Adam put a hand to his forehead and clenched his eyes shut as if to stop his mind from overpowering him.

“Solar power isn’t the only secret the Guardians keep,” Dawn said. “Theirs is a world run on half-truths, manipulated data, and lies.”

She touched Adam’s shoulder as she spoke, before quickly drawing back as an electrical charge pulsed within her body.

“All the more reason for us to get to Avalon,” Origen said, staring at her, one eyebrow raised. “Let’s go.”

Origen took the lead, with Adam in the middle and Dawn at the rear. They made their way out of the dark basement, up a few sets of stairs, and back outside under the dark sky.

They were in the industrial part of town, where the Transportation Department had their

repair headquarters. PTDs and HyperTrains zoomed around the trio as the vehicles came in for repairs and upgrades. There wasn't another eHuman in sight; the machines took care of themselves. The trio crossed several sets of train tracks before moving into the shadow of the larger storehouses containing goods from other cities.

As they emerged in the back half of the work yard, Dawn noticed a stream of PTDs were loading themselves into freight cars on the HyperTrains, as if they were going away on a little country vacation.

"That's not good," Origen said via their TeleSpeak feature that let them speak mind to mind even though they weren't on Neuro.

"Only means one thing," she answered.

"They're going to power down New Omaha sooner than we'd thought."

Dawn nodded at Origen, and noticed Adam's gait increase as he came closer. The gesture hadn't escaped his attention.

"What are those PTDs doing?" Adam asked aloud. Dawn hadn't given him access to their private TeleSpeak network yet.

"Quiet for now," Dawn said, pointing to the sky, where a small, silent object was growing larger. "Once we're in the drone and on the way to Avalon, I'll explain more."

"How far is it?" he said, ignoring her request for silence.

Origen threw his gun over his shoulder and rounded on Adam. "She told you to be quiet."

"A few hours north as the drone flies," Dawn explained, surprised by Origen's need to dominate their candidate. Whatever was the matter with him? He was never this rude with any of the others they'd brought in.

"What is Avalon?" Adam asked.

"One of the only cities in the world where eHumans are truly free," Dawn answered. Looking up at the sky again, she saw the small craft descend from the thick layer of smog. "It's also my home."

Adam moved closer and spoke into her ear, his volume low so Origen couldn't hear. "I'm looking forward to finding out more about you and your home."

The drone landed, and a small door hissed open. Adam followed Origen into the ink-blue aircraft, Dawn hot on his heels. She sat beside Adam, excitement building within her as he brushed the hair out of his eyes and smiled. She recorded his every move in her encrypted database. She didn't want to forget this moment, their first meeting. Whether he was Elijah or not, Dawn was certain life was never going to be the same now that she'd found Adam Winter.

She couldn't believe it, but for the first time in her eHuman life, a man was distracting her.



The moment the drone took off, Adam turned to Origen. “Can I talk now?”

Origen blinked, about to say something rude, when he caught Dawn’s glare—her crossed arms and pinched eyebrows told him she was not amused with his treatment of this particular candidate. Origen himself didn’t understand her devotion to this one. Adam Winter was obviously a dead end. Origen was only appeasing Dawn, otherwise he would have left the deadbeat Newsreel host in Omaha.

“Of course, what do you want to know?” Dawn answered.

“How are we able to ride in this drone without being tracked?” Adam asked.

Hmm, maybe he does have a brain? Origen sniggered at the thought and Dawn slapped his upper arm.

“A fair question,” she said. “We’re able to scramble the drone’s energy frequency to look like a bird on all WG etheric signal surveillance equipment. Anyone on the ground might see us, but once we’re above the smog and haze, we blend in. Besides, most eHumans don’t bother to look up. They lost interest in the skies long ago.”

Adam lifted his chin. “What about those PTDs? I’ve never seen a bunch of them loading

themselves up on the trains to leave. Both of you also looked surprised.”

“They’re being taken away so no one can use one to get out of the city,” Origen replied, wanting to take over the conversation from here. Dawn was coddling the man and it needed to stop.

“They won’t go out of the city. I’ve tried before,” Adam answered. “They’re programmed to stay within the boundaries. Only HyperTrains and HyperPlanes can get you out of city limits.”

“Resistance members know how to hack them,” Origen said. “This way, the trains will leave the stations with all the PTDs, and the people will be left without any transport. They’re covering their bases.”

“Who is?” Adam asked.

“The WG. They’re going to shut down New Omaha.”

“Because of you?”

“Yes and no,” Origen said. “Yes, they’re using our Resistance as an excuse. They want to punish eHumans for leaving the network to join us, and powering them down is the easiest form of punishment.”

Origen paused.

“And?” Adam asked.

“It’s classified,” Origen replied.

“We could tell him more,” Dawn said.

“No,” Origen TeleSpoke.

“*Why not?*” Dawn replied, crossing her

arms.

“Adam can’t know why we’re bringing him to Avalon yet.” Origen crossed his own arms.

Dawn nodded, her eyes shifting back to Adam.

“What aren’t you telling me? I’m here to do a Newsreel for you and if that’s the case, I need answers,” Adam said.

“A Newsreel? That’s the bait you fed him?” Origen TeleSpoke.

Dawn shrugged and turned back to Adam. “We’ll tell you everything in Avalon. We’re almost there.”

A few moments later, the craft touched down in the middle of a violent rainstorm at the edge of a clearing about two hundred miles west of New Omaha. Origen took in the trees rising in all directions toward the heavens, dark against the purple nighttime sky, their branches whipping under the heavy winds and rains as if lashing out against an invisible foe. Sheet lightning illuminated boulders scattered among hills of green clover, as well as large statues with carvings on them, shattered to the ground long ago, the forest now growing up and over them. Various worn-down structures dotted the landscape, casting shadowed memories of buildings that had once existed. After more than a century of nature’s encroachment, all that remained were random ivy-covered walls, broken and deteriorated with empty doorways

leading nowhere.

Origen slammed his fist on the door lever inside the drone to open it, and gestured to Dawn and Adam to get out. As soon as they were clear of the craft, the drone took off and vanished into the sky. Origen narrowed his eyes at the way Dawn took Adam’s arm to direct him toward the entrance to Avalon. She’d been acting strange ever since her meeting with the fool in the jazz club. He didn’t trust Adam Winter one bit. The man was a neophyte, clueless to his privilege in the world around him. How anyone could live a hundred-plus years in the same body and never question, never ask why, didn’t make sense to Origen. Every day eHumans came to their Resistance searching for answers, and this guy had been sleepwalking through a century? Pathetic.

He strode up to one of the broken pieces of wall, removed his gloves, and touched it with his hands. He motioned Adam to his side as a doorway slid open.

Adam walked into the dry hallway with Dawn close behind. A warm light illuminated a narrow passageway that led downward. Origen stepped inside last and sealed the door behind him, silencing the storm. The only sounds in the hallway were the buzzing of flickering lights strung along the ceiling. On the wall was a glass ball, like the ones used for Pleasure Zone apps in nightclubs. Dawn put her hand to it,

then Origen did the same. At once, the glass lit up. Dawn nodded and began walking down the passageway.

“We’ve been given clearance. The security wall’s been deactivated,” she said.

Sure enough, Origen noticed the air in front of him change. As he walked forward, a crackling noise sounded behind him. He turned back to see a nearly invisible wall reform after Adam came through it.

“What does the electrical wall do?” Adam asked.

“Shorts out your Chi-Regulator on the spot,” Origen replied, his mouth pulling into a smile as he considered pushing Adam back into it. “When that happens, we drag your sorry ass back out the door and let you rust outside.”

“Have you ever had to do that?” Adam asked.

“Not here in Avalon. A break-in has never been attempted—yet,” Dawn replied.

“I see,” Adam said. “I assume the entrance we went through is part of what’s left of whatever city was here before the Great Shift?”

“Yes.” Dawn nodded as they continued to walk down the hallway, leading them deeper underground. “This town used to be called Kearney, but no eHuman-capable city was built here. Eventually, after the carbon body was no longer supported by any government or industrial systems, all the people left the area

and Kearney faded into legend. A university used to be here, so we chose this location to build our stronghold away from the Guardians’ sight. Even though the grounds were overgrown, there was a ton to work with underground: computer labs, libraries, heating systems with tunnels connecting all the buildings—all of it ready for us to repurpose and use for our cause. These technologies were obsolete in the new eHuman cities, but we were able to make them work. We stole advanced laser technology from the WG to enlarge the existing cavern. You’ll experience our handiwork in a moment when we enter the city.”

At the end of the hallway was a huge, red steel door. Dawn placed her hands on another glass ball, and the door slid open to reveal the stronghold. Origen chuckled at the dumbstruck look on Adam’s face as the newcomer took in the sight of the huge, gated underground city. At the sound of Origen’s laugh, Adam’s head spun in his direction. A grimace formed on Adam’s face as he glared at Origen from under his thick, dark hair. Origen gave an innocent shrug, turning away from the idiot to survey his pride and joy—Avalon.

Origen had called it home for a century. No matter where his work took him, the feelings of comfort and relief he experienced whenever he returned to Avalon from a mission would always remain part of his life. For Origen, there was no place like home, even if that home was a

secret city built in an underground cavern, for he had built Avalon with his own hands, alongside others who desired a life free from Neuro and the WG. A life where he could choose his own destiny and live with his own thoughts.

People strolled along streets lined with two-story buildings that ran off in various directions, like spokes on a wheel. A drab, low-rise steel building rose in front of them. They would have to walk through it to reach the city beyond, due to the huge granite walls that stretched from either side of the building toward the back end of the cavern.

Dawn led the way into the building, and they approached a security desk where a woman sat in stillness. Her eyes were closed, yet they shifted under plasticine lids. She opened them at the sound of their arrival and stood, recognizing Dawn and Origen.

“Good evening, Masters,” she said, bowing to the Resistance leaders. “I was downloading today’s Star Journals. Is this the latest candidate?” She gestured her head at Adam.

“Yes,” Dawn responded. “Have you registered his Lux in our system?”

The woman nodded and opened the door in front of her.

“Enjoy your time with us in Avalon,” she said to Adam as they left the building and entered the street.

Electric lights hung from the granite

cavern, powered by the same solar energy used to charge the Chi-Regulator. People wearing simple clothing, either black rain gear suits or simple-cut linen pantsuits in grays, blacks, and tans, milled about the spotless streets. All colors of skin, hair, and eyes were represented, and everyone appeared busy and purposeful. The sight of his people made Origen forget about Adam for the moment.

The cavern was abuzz with the echoing of voices mingled with the constant hum of the machinery that supported the city and its eHumans. As they walked farther in, buildings rose on either side of them. After a blessed quiet spell, curiosity got the best of their latest candidate, and Adam launched into another series of questions.

“Where are we again?”

“In Avalon,” Dawn answered. “What started out as abandoned university labs and tunnels became our city—and Resistance Control Center.”

“How many people live here?” he asked.

“About 20,000. The front half of our city is dedicated to living and administrative functions. The back half of the cavern, behind the tall walls ahead, is dedicated to engineering and transportation. The building set into the far wall is Global Headquarters. That’s where the Resistance Council meets and plans. Here on the outskirts, we have our residential district.

As we progress closer to HQ, we'll pass by other administrative buildings, mostly science and research labs. The Resistance strives to invent new and efficient ways to live in this world without the use of WG technology. We've developed computer networks of our own and a solar-powered energy grid that's been replicated in various other free cities all over the world."

Dawn called up two floating cycles, and Origen hopped onto one. He signaled to Adam that he should climb on behind him. "You're with me, lover boy."

Dawn mounted the other one and tilted her head to Origen, raising her eyebrow in question. Origen tried to access her local database, but as always, it was encrypted. She kept too many secrets from him. Then again, Origen kept a lot from her as well.

"To HQ," she said. Origen nodded and they took off.

They zoomed past many people and buildings as they zipped along into the interior of the city. A long and low building—void of art and decoration—rose before them. As they approached the front of it, a group of agitated and vexed people, all talking at once, began to move forward and crowd them in.

"Masters," said Arya, one of the Resistance Council pages, as she made her way through the crowd toward them, her eyes shifting like lasers between all three of them as they dismounted

the bikes. "Where have you been? It's been awful—the Council has declared a state of emergency. They sent me to greet you the moment of your arrival. It's worse than we feared. You must hurry—the Council is in session. They're expecting you."

Origen rushed into the building, yet Dawn overtook him, leaving Adam struggling to keep up with them. Dawn paused before entering the room beyond, causing Origen to bump into her. Their commander, Cane, rose from the table. He was a large man with shocking metallic-red hair that shimmered like fire in the glow of the luminescent lights from the monitors surrounding him.

"Dawn and Origen, get in here and report to the Council."

"Cane," Origen said as he walked into the room, holding up a hand to Adam, indicating he should stay behind in the hall. "What the hell is going on?"

"It seems the WG has now started unplugging cities in the Russian province," Cane replied.

Origen clenched his fists and turned to Dawn, who buried her face in her hands. He fought back the urge to hold her, so great was her despair. She always took the death of innocents at the hands of the WG personally.

"Russia?" Dawn moaned, eyes narrowing at the large tabletop computer screen the Council

sat around. “But our intelligence didn’t mention any Russian cities.”

“It was only a matter of time,” Cane said. “We knew they would not stop in Chengdu. We’ve caught a lucky break—Alrisha’s hackers intercepted a WG document listing the cities the WG plans to power down. They’re targeting cities that have Resistance communities working within them—or where outposts have been discovered. The WG’s message is clear: they won’t tolerate any more Resistance activity. They’re prepared to kill millions of innocents to smoke us out. No media outlets have even hinted at these treacherous acts. People are noticing their loved ones in these parts of the world are no longer online. As a result, we’re seeing an increase in inquiry traffic on Neuro, but the Guardians are writing software in real time into these individuals when they recharge, to encourage them to forget their missing friends.”

“That can’t be possible,” Adam called out as he strode into the room. Everyone turned to look at him, and he stepped back. “Why would they kill so many just to get to you? The Resistance is nothing compared to the might of the WG.”

“The Resistance is mightier than a WG puppet like yourself could ever know,” Origen said, waving Adam off as if the man were a bothersome fly. “We operate in over three hundred locations across the globe. Every major

WG city has an RCC nearby. We’ve dedicated our entire lives to freeing eHumans from Neuro.”

“Then why have I only recently become aware of you and your Hacktivists?” Adam asked, throwing back his shoulders and jutting out his chin.

Origen sniggered. “Until recently, you’ve never shown up as worthy of saving in our algorithms, that’s why,” he replied, taking a step closer, gripping his holster to keep his hands from striking the asshole’s face. “It’s not like we have to save everyone.”

“Adam, there’s so much you don’t know about Neuro and the way things are in the world now,” Dawn said, gliding between Origen and his prey. “This isn’t due to your ignorance—contrary to what others may think.” She threw a glare at Origen. “There isn’t anything that’s your own anymore. Anything you remember is by the grace of the Guardians. Perhaps you *have* seen one of our Hacktivists online or heard of the Resistance in chatrooms prior to this. We’re always hacking into the system trying to find people who might be interested in joining us, convincing them to meet with us offline, out of Neuro, yet many fail to remember our interactions. This is why I told you to get off the network and find me in real life. Resistance activity on Neuro is often discovered, so we are forced to change tactics moment by moment. The Guardians seek to keep the citizenry

ignorant, non-inquisitive, and silent—while the WG and global elite siphon off the resources and power that Earth has to offer them.”

“Enough,” Origen said, turning to face her. “This is a closed meeting. Adam can’t be here while we discuss Resistance matters, and it’s critical we get working on a plan to save as many people as possible from this shutdown.”

“Right,” Dawn replied, turning to face the Adam. “I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to leave you with Marcus.”

“Marcus?” Adam asked. The guy sure was good at asking questions.

“In the flesh,” a voice answered behind them.

Origen turned to see a tall man scurrying toward them, his white lab coat wrapped around him like a cape, dishwater blonde hair standing up on end as if he’d been shocked, which could be true. The man spent so much time manipulating energy into devices that enabled them to live under the radar, he might have an extra current constantly flowing through his eHuman body. Origen’s shoulders fell and his jaw loosened at the sight of the engineer. Thank goodness he’d be rid of Adam for a while. The man was nothing but a burden, especially now that the WG had begun powering down eHumanity. There were more important things to deal with than the pretty Newsreel host—unless, of course, he did turn out to be Elijah Prince. Origen shivered at

the idea. If Adam was Elijah, then that would change everything.

“Welcome. I’m Marcus, one of the lead technology experts here in Avalon. You must be Adam.”

Adam nodded and returned the handshake.

“Marcus and his colleagues have been working for us for about sixty years,” Dawn said. “Many of them are from the original team assembled at Guardian Enterprises.”

“You were a Guardian?” Adam asked.

“Guilty as charged,” Marcus answered, his brow furrowing for a moment before a smile graced his face. “I’m one of the original engineers of The Dawn Project. I Jumped while working for Guardian Enterprises during the Great Shift and worked as a Guardian of Neuro until I could no longer stand it. I unplugged from the grid—stealing key WG technology to help the cause. Namely, I brought the equipment to Jump to the Resistance, along with many other physical enhancements.”

“You’ll be spending the next hour or so with Marcus,” Dawn said, and Adam’s face fell, bringing Origen a moment of delight. “I’m sure he’s willing to tell you about the weaponry and other technology he brought to our movement. Oh, and bring him to Alrisha, who’s expecting him.”

Marcus nodded and bowed slightly to

Dawn. "Yes, Master Dawn."

Origen smiled. "Ah, Alrisha. Brains of our operations and so much more."

"I see," Adam replied, but it was obvious to Origen that Adam didn't see a thing. He hoped with all his might that this guy wasn't Elijah Prince because the last person Origen wanted to save the world was an empty-headed skux with way too perfect hair.

"Come," Origen said to Dawn, taking her arm and enjoying the way Adam's shoulders rose into his neck. "Let's stop the WG from their latest madness."

Origen led her into the room, and the large wooden doors closed behind him, removing Adam Winter from his sight.

CHAPTER NINE

The Control Center was a hub of frenzied activity, like bees preparing to swarm on a hot, sunny day. Large monitors covered every wall, and several multi-sided displays hung from the ceiling in the center of the room. Everywhere Adam glanced, eHumans were hooked into the consoles—not from the plugs at the base of their backs but via headsets. They didn't turn his way; their attention was focused on the data displayed at their workstations. They typed information into the terminals in front of them at lightning speed. Some of them had more than two arms, and they were plugged in while typing and simultaneously working several larger devices surrounding them. Many of them had unique hairstyles in purple, pink, and blue. They wore green, sleeveless robes and black combat boots.

They worked together in synchronicity. To Adam, the whole scene looked like a perfectly executed data dance, yet while the room was

filled with real sound—laughter, singing, and whistling—no words were spoken.

“How do they communicate?” Adam asked.

“TeleSpeak, a feature that lets them talk wireless-to-wireless without a network. We’re all connected,” Marcus said.

“So, that’s what Origen and Dawn were doing during the awkward silences on the trip here,” Adam replied.

Marcus shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sure they’ll grant you access once you pass the test.”

“Test?” Adam placed his hands on his hips. It made sense they’d lock him out of their private, internal communications network—he’d do the same in their shoes—but the word “test” triggered every single investigative instinct he possessed.

“I’ll leave that for Dawn to discuss with you. We’re here so you can meet the brains and the power behind our movement,” Marcus said, standing tall, shoulders back, as his arm swept toward the scene before them. “Our hackers. The WG has their red-robed Guardians, the controllers of Neuro. Those who run our network wear the green robes of freedom. They mine Neuro for data, find its weaknesses, and sabotage it. Therefore, we call them our hackers. Many back doors and security defects exist in the network. Our hackers live to discover those failures and insert upgrades of our own.”

“Aren’t they considered terrorists of the state?” Adam asked.

“Yes,” Marcus replied, “and they’re treated as such when captured.”

“Death,” Adam said.

Marcus nodded, crossing his arms. “Yes, death. Or oblivion—which is worse.”

“Goes to show, one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist,” Adam remarked.

Marcus stared at him, raising one eyebrow.

A purple-skinned eHuman yanked off a headset, stood up, and approached them in a few quick strides. As Adam scanned this being’s face, he realized he’d never met anyone inhabiting a body template of this type before—and it wasn’t just the color that made it different.

“Alrisha, meet Adam,” Marcus said. “Adam, this is Alrisha—our lead hacker.”

Alrisha had short, cropped black hair and dark, pupil-less eyes set upon an eyebrow-less face. Smaller in frame and missing the typical gendered features like breasts, hips, or chiseled biceps, with delicate hands and long, spindly fingers, perfect for typing.

“Trying to figure me out, huh? Everyone does,” Alrisha said. “We can design our own eHuman bodies. We’re not limited to the old human standards. Why should we be? When I first joined the Resistance, I chose to create the body I’d always longed for. I wanted to be purple.”

I can't understand why more people don't choose alternative skin colors. How repressed can we be? Same with gender. I mean, really—none of us can reproduce, so why bother with male or female options? It drove me crazy up above that the LMOs wouldn't offer something else. It's not like anyone's going to milk those breasts, right?"

Adam frowned at Alrisha's forthrightness. He agreed about the gender thing, but the ambiguity made him uncomfortable. He looked at Marcus, who was smiling.

"Alrisha always pushes the limits," Marcus said. "We all have our preferences, right? Some of us like oversized pecs and biceps, and yes, even breasts, thank you. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before we're all purple, pink, or blue down here in Avalon."

"For your sake," Alrisha said to Adam, shaking a long finger at him, head tilted and gazing out at him from under their brow as if he were late for class, "I'll accept the pronoun 'they,' for as a former Guardian turned Resistance lead hacker, I see all things at once, therefore I am all things at once."

"They. Okay, got it," Adam said.

Alrisha grinned as if they'd discovered a defect in Neuro, turning to their cohorts and gesturing toward the room, arms open as if embracing each one. "Now, on to the work at hand. My job is to spy on Neuro. To do

this without being seen by the Guardians, we invented these headsets. They let us plug in and traverse Neuro with our thoughts—like everyone else—but they don't allow read or write access to our own database. In this way, our true identities stored in our hard drives can't be discovered. Neither can our location, so our headsets send out fake coordinates to confuse any Guardians who might pick up our trail. Lastly, the Guardians can't manipulate our databases or download any upgrades of their own."

"Then...how do you record anything?" Adam asked.

"The headsets work with our own internal visual applications, which allow us to read everything on Neuro," Alrisha explained. "We type all the data into the terminals that you see around the room to store it on our own personal network, which is closed to Neuro. Unfortunately, the Guardians are aware of our technology. Therefore, a lot of work is done to keep our network safe from Guardian attack. That means while some of us spy, others work in cyber security so we can communicate worldwide with other rebellion cities, as well as internally via such features as TeleSpeak."

"It might seem archaic that they type all the data from Neuro," Marcus added, "but we can't risk a direct connection. The hackers' CPUs are vulnerable enough."

Alrisha grunted at the statement and then

shrugged.

“Fair enough, we gotta be careful. While the WG and Guardians themselves have their own closed network, many of their affiliates, family members, and friends are on Neuro. That’s how we pick up the best rumors. We tap into Neuro to mine the data and from there, we do our research. eHumans love Pleasure Zone apps, so oftentimes a WG member is found on Neuro participating in a group sex session. We get some fantastic information that way.”

Adam shifted back and forth on his feet. The magnitude of the Resistance operation was enormous—rather than a few vigilante Hacktivists, they were a worldwide web of their own, integrated into eHumanity, yet outside it as well, lurking on the fringes of civilization. Why had he never heard of them before? It was driving him crazy that they’d only recently contacted him. Like Origen had said, not everyone deserved saving, so why were they interested in Adam now?

“The hackers also attack Neuro,” Marcus said. “They send viruses, worms, messages, whatever, in order to thwart the Guardians’ daily upgrades.”

“Dawn mentioned her people would erase my memory if I plugged in,” Adam said.

“That’d be me,” Alrisha declared, thumbing their own chest. “Dawn has flagged your etheric signal in the system. If you plug into

Neuro, the flag in our database will alert us and tell us what operation to perform. In your case, had you not joined her on this trip to Avalon, a small app would have been downloaded to your CPU to erase your previous few days of memory.”

“And if I were to leave right now and plug into Neuro?” Adam asked.

Alrisha glanced at their feet, then back at his face. “Same thing. All of this will be forgotten the moment you log into Neuro. eHuman software is quite easy to manipulate.”

Adam glanced around the room and wondered how much they knew about him. They’d obviously been spying on him for a long time. Again, he wondered why they were just now contacting him. What had made him a target for the Resistance? Being a Newsreel reporter was what Dawn had used as her reason, yet wouldn’t his job also make him a target for the Guardians as well? It seemed everyone, both the Guardians and the Resistance, was spying on him. He considered his online presence—the sex apps and other delights he’d taken part in—and felt a sting of shame at the thought of Alrisha and the hackers watching him in such moments. What did they think of him?

“We also recruit new Resistance members,” Alrisha added, as if reading his mind.

“Recruit?” Adam asked.

“Sure. Like you,” they explained, tapping him on the shoulder. “We found you via our

data-mining process. You have many interesting attributes. They led us to believe you might be interested in saving your own life—as well as the lives of others. You’ve been on our radar for some time.”

“A long time, huh? Why are you just now reaching out?” Adam asked, relieved to ask the question.

Alrisha glanced at Marcus, and Adam knew they were doing the TeleSpeak thing.

“Fine,” Adam said, holding up a hand. “Don’t tell me.”

“Dawn’s given me instructions to allow you to plug into our network,” Alrisha continued, their face hopeful that this bit of information might pacify him.

“She has?” Adam placed his hands on his hips. “Why?”

“So you can find out more about our mission, history, and why we’re going through all the trouble of recruiting you,” they answered.

“Do you need me for anything else?” Marcus asked. “Because if you don’t, I’d like to get back to the lab.”

“Permission granted to leave the recruit with me,” Alrisha answered. “Feel free to head back to your la-la land.”

“La-la land? Look who’s talking. You’re the one who deals with invisible bits and bytes,” Marcus said. “I actually *make* things.”

“Boys and bombs,” Alrisha replied, rolling

their eyes.

“We need to protect ourselves in the real world, not just online.” Marcus turned on his heel and sauntered to the door, calling over his shoulder to Adam, “I told you this was going to be interesting. Good luck.”

“How do I get on the network?” Adam asked Alrisha.

“We plug you in,” they answered, leading him to a console in the corner. Adam took a seat, and Alrisha fitted a headset on him and typed in a few access codes on the screen. “There. Now you have permission.” They smiled, hands on hips and chin held high.

“Permission to do what?”

“To investigate. You’re a reporter, right?”

“Right,” he replied, unsure whether he felt professional in that moment. This was all so overwhelming. How could he have lived this long without knowing entire unplugged cities existed beneath the surface of his world? Dawn had blamed the purification algorithms, but was that all that had kept Adam in the dark? Perhaps some part of him had chosen to remain ignorant? He wasn’t sure, and the self-doubt was killing him. If he were logged into Neuro, he’d run a confidence app. It was a habit of his. Something to make him feel better about himself.

“Then hop to it,” Alrisha said, pointing at the console. “I’m sure there are tons of things

you want to know. Let your thoughts guide you, like when you're plugged into Neuro's portal. You'll be able to use the system incognito."

Alrisha strode to a station, green robes swaying with each footfall, and slipped on a headset. In a nanosecond, the hacker was hot on the trail of the Guardians, chasing them through cyberspace: an unseen warrior in an unseen war.

With the headset adorning his forehead like a crown, Adam found himself swimming in a vast amount of data and information. His CPU was in overdrive. He filled his database with pertinent information, savoring every bit and byte. As he dug deeper into sources of information he'd never thought of researching before, the dots of betrayal started to connect within his mind. The corruption of the WG spread out before him like a constellation in the sky—and he began to envision the Newsreel he would deliver to the people of Neuro.

Adam searched for any information about himself. He'd never done it before; such searches were frowned upon by the authorities. After digging deep in various archives, he discovered an official record of his Jump history. Not much information was in the document—it was like looking back into a forgotten world. He discovered that before the Great Shift, he'd been called Phillip Kingsley, a male machinist. He'd Jumped in the first year of the Great Shift to become Adam Winter. No other information was

listed. Follow-up searches revealed nothing at all on Kingsley. *Why would there be? A machinist? Who cares?*

Adam had long envisioned a grand pre-Great Shift existence, often imagining himself as a famous athlete or a movie star. Instead, he'd been a boring, inconsequential man with an even more inconsequential name. Adam stared at the data entry, arms crossed, muttering the words, "Phillip Kingsley," over and over to himself, as if he couldn't believe it was his flesh identity.

His shoulders slumped as he drummed his fingers on the table. He decided to take his mind off his less-than-impressive pedigree and searched instead for Dr. James Neville. An extensive amount of information popped up. Adam began to request various links, verifying all the information Origen and Dawn had shared was true. Dr. Neville had indeed discovered and proved the existence of the human Lux, and alongside his sister and co-founder, Sophia Castilogna, he had also invented a multitude of technologies, such as the Chi-Regulator and the Jump process.

While it appeared that Sophia Castilogna had died before the Great Shift, Dr. Neville was listed as a known terrorist and charged with founding the Global Resistance. His status in Neuro was "Deceased," and it appeared he had lived a long human life of 170 odd years. Adam

frowned, finding it suspicious that instead of Jumping and becoming an eHuman, Dr. Neville had chosen to grow old and die. Why not use the technology he'd invented?

As Adam continued to investigate, the name Edgar Prince was often mentioned. Adam decided to learn more about the man eHuman folklore had branded "The Father of eHumanity." One image stood out: the very human Prince standing outside of the WG capitol building in Gemetria, named the Golden Hall due to its gleaming, solid-gold exterior. The steps behind him glimmered in the sun as he shook hands with the first eHuman World Leader, Ruth Donavan.

Adam tapped the image on his screen, and it began to play a recorded video. The moment Edgar spoke, anger coursed through Adam, taking him by surprise. As far as Adam knew, he had never met Edgar Prince—either in the flesh or as an eHuman—so why would hostility run through his system?

"It's with enormous pleasure that I've joined forces with World Leader Donavan. Together, we will bring order and continuity to the eHuman world," Edgar Prince announced as he drew the World Leader closer to his side. She was a short woman, her long brown hair up in a tight bun. She wore cat-eye glasses in the same dark red as her suit and high-heeled pumps. Edgar Prince towered over her, his thick black

hair slicked back. He gave the camera a chiseled smile, one of his full lips rising higher than the other, like a sneer. Yet again, a flash of anger ran through Adam's circuitry as the man continued to speak.

"Ever since I founded Guardian Networks, I've desired to use my technological empire to help humanity. The moment I learned of The Dawn Project, I knew it was my destiny to share my wealth with others and bring this gift of health and immortality to all who desired it. And now, as I prepare to take the Jump into eHumanity itself, I offer my company, Guardian Networks, as a tool for World Leader Donavan and her colleagues in the WG, to help usher humanity into the era of eternal peace and prosperity."

The video, made as a propaganda item by the WG, had continuously streamed on Neuro as the Great Shift completed, announcing to the newly created eHuman population that Guardian Networks would be given control of the LMOs. At the time, it had made sense that the engineers who designed Neuro would manage it going forward. After all, Edgar Prince was seen as the Father of eHumanity—so who better than he to run Neuro?

Few at the time understood that when they'd granted ownership of the LMOs to Guardian Networks, they'd turned over their very thoughts and dreams to Edgar Prince.

While the magnitude of the deception was overwhelming, for some reason it felt familiar to Adam, as if somewhere in the deep places of his being, he already knew of Edgar's treacherous intentions.

In the video, Edgar had mentioned he too was going to Jump into eHumanity. That meant he'd become someone new, and Adam wondered what had happened to the man.

Who owns Guardian Networks now? Adam thought, and Neuro issued another search.

As the information began to fill the screen, he felt a hand on his shoulder. From the sensations pulsing through his body, he knew it was Dawn. Her touch sure affected him. Smiling, he turned to face her. He was coming to accept the fact that Dawn was one of the most desirable women he had ever met. Why bother fighting it or trying to convince himself otherwise? To his relief, Origen wasn't by her side. The man was Dawn's puppy dog, and Adam didn't like it.

"Guardian Networks was a subsidiary of Guardian Enterprises," she explained. "Edgar Prince's military contractor company. After the Great Shift, the headquarters were relocated to the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific. Guardian Enterprises is currently run by several eHuman executives, including Edgar Prince himself. All these executives have heavy ties to the WG."

"How can that be? Wouldn't Edgar have

forgotten all his knowledge when he Jumped?" Adam asked.

"It's assumed he left himself files of personal information and his lackeys downloaded them into his eHuman database. We can't determine how else he'd still be in charge. The man was so obsessed with his flesh form, he had his eHuman body created to be an identical copy. The only person I know to do so."

"And what happened to Ruth Donovan?" Adam asked.

"Oh, that's quite embarrassing," Dawn replied, now wearing the look of an LMO mechanic about to tell you they no longer support your CPU. "The current World Leader, Rosario Donahi, is the same person who was Ruth Donovan during the Great Shift. All seventy WG politicians are originals. They keep Jumping into new bodies and identities to provide fresh faces and personalities after each election. The population is electing the same people over and over again—just in a new package—every ten years."

"But how can that be, when memory doesn't survive a Jump?" he asked.

"As I said, this is one of the greatest mysteries," Dawn replied, leaning in closer to him. "We don't know how Edgar and the WG were able to retain their memories when they Jumped, while the rest of us have suffered irreversible amnesia, but you can be sure we're

going to find out.”

Dawn tapped the screen in front of Adam, and the image of an eHuman city appeared. Its order and perfection were apparent, as thousands of PTDs sailed along the intracity freeway system, all synchronously timed to shuttle their eHumans to their various jobs without delay. From the immaculate sidewalks and towering metal buildings to the manicured parkways, it was the pinnacle of industrial innovation.

“On the surface, we created a beautiful technological wonder, but what you don’t see is the work being done behind the scenes. You were fortunate enough to have Jumped into the entertainment industry. Most eHumans were poor before the Great Shift—and poor they remain. They labor all day and night, in factories, on machines, in mining operations, and in warehouses. Our civilization is a beautiful front for a large-scale system of slavery. eHumans work at the speed of machines, but with the ability to adapt and invent. They work for their immortality and the pleasures of Neuro. The elites cash in on this cheap labor. This is the real reason The Dawn Project was purchased by Guardian Enterprises. It made a few people, namely Edgar Prince and his cronies, richer than any god I’ve ever read about.”

Adam was silent as an angry storm began brewing within him.

“Why did Dr. Neville and his sister sell their Chi-Regulator, and by extension you, to Edgar?” he asked.

Dawn stepped away from him as if stung by his words. “Well, that’s complicated—”

“Hello, Master Dawn,” Alrisha interrupted, bowing slightly to Dawn.

“Hello, Alrisha. Have you been taking care of my guest?” Dawn said, a smile lighting up her otherwise anxious face.

“Of course.” Alrisha nodded. “Is it time?”

“Yes, it is. Please prepare an investigation room,” Dawn answered.

“Time for what?” Adam asked, gazing up at her beautiful face. He was surprised by how much he already adored her, when it had been less than a day since their auspicious beginnings in the Pleasure Zone harem.

“To reveal the real reason I lured you here,” she answered.

“Lured me?” His adoration fizzled as she spoke.

“Yes, Adam, I lured you. I’m sorry for the charade, but I had no choice. You’ll soon understand, trust me. Now come. It’s time to discover who you are.”

CHAPTER TEN

Adam followed Dawn through the busy Control Center and into a smaller room that contained several plugs on one wall and a large EC on the other. A small tower of servers stood in the corner, blinking and humming. Beside them stood Origen, arms crossed, lips sneered, and chin jutted, as if ready to sling an insult.

“Adam,” Dawn said as the door closed behind them, “the real reason I brought you to Avalon is because I have reason to believe your memory files may contain data vital to defeating the WG.”

“That’s insane,” Adam said, no longer enamored with the woman. What was she playing at? “I was a machinist before the Great Shift. I doubt there’s anything important in my database. I’d never heard of the Resistance before you showed up with those photos. If my database held valuable information, you’d think a great leader such as yourself would have found me

sooner, rather than let over a century pass with me embedded within Neuro.”

Dawn winced at his words, and Adam regretted his outburst. How could she make him so unhinged? Mere moments ago, he’d desired her, yet her every word now vexed him.

“Just get on with it,” Origen said, voice low like a predator growling. “I’m tired of wondering if this fool is the one we’ve been looking for all these years.”

“What are you talking about?” Adam said, taking a step toward Origen and preparing to defend himself if he had to. eHuman skirmishes weren’t pretty sights, since they often led to appendages flying across the room.

“It’s complicated,” Dawn said. Despite the somber mood in the room, she bounced on the balls of her feet as if about to receive a gift. “It involves taking a trip into the past. In the beginning, due to the mounting evidence of complete memory loss after a Jump, Guardian Networks’ management decided Dr. Neville would be the last person to Jump. No one wanted to risk losing any of the information in Dr. Neville’s brain. So, he agreed to remain behind and continue working in the flesh until the project was secure enough for him to Jump and fade away into the vastness we know as eHumanity.

“The government began sanctioning the murder of those who didn’t choose the eHuman

form by rounding up dissenters and sending them to camps where they either took on the new eHuman form or mysteriously disappeared. The subsequent totalitarian rise of the WG forced Dr. Neville to go underground and found the Resistance. By that point, Origen and I were outraged by what had become of our eHuman dream, so we joined him. Our organization didn't have Jump technology at that time. Eventually, the inevitable happened and Dr. Neville died—"

"I don't see what this has to do with me," Adam interrupted. All the mystery was making him uncomfortable.

"It was unfortunate Dr. Neville didn't get to Jump," Dawn continued, ignoring Adam's admonishment. "He was the only person in the Resistance who knew what life was like before the Great Shift. Most of the history archived on our servers comes from his knowledge. Moments before he died, he called me in to reveal a secret he'd kept from me all those years. He said the information was crucial to our success at freeing eHumanity from governmental manipulation."

Dawn paused and gazed at Adam. The look was haunting and yet familiar, sending pulses down his metal spine.

"James confessed that before I'd Jumped, I'd been his sister and cocreator, Sophia. He also gave me this thumb drive." She held it up for Adam to see. "He claimed it contained the encryption key to important code—a software

program that would wrest control of Neuro from Edgar Prince and the Guardians. He told me the code was stored inside the eHuman database of none other than Elijah Prince."

"What?" Adam asked. "Wasn't he Edgar's son and right-hand man?" What she said didn't make sense. "How could Elijah Prince ensure such an important code would remain intact in an eHuman body after all this time?"

Alrisha stepped forward and started talking, arms and hands waving in the air. "After Dr. Neville's death, Dawn confided in me. She told me Elijah's Personality Program had been set to keep him from ever Jumping into a new eHuman body, no matter how big the temptation. I began working on a data-mining algorithm that might find Elijah amongst the billions of eHumans within Neuro. A primary condition was to search for those without a Jump history.

"Back then, the list was too long. People were still enamored with themselves and their immortality. Given all the other work we had to do to form the Resistance, and the fact we didn't have anything else to go on, I abandoned the search. Instead, I let the algorithm run on my server in the background. About two years ago, my program alerted me; it had a list that seemed reasonable to parse.

"The name Phillip Kingsley was one of the few hundred potential candidates on the list. I thought the last name 'Kingsley' might be a play

on ‘Prince.’ Even more interesting was the fact that Phillip had Jumped only once, and that was into the eHuman named Adam Winter, who also happened to be a popular Newsreel host in New Omaha—the closest eHuman city to Avalon.”

Adam took a step away from the excited hacker, hands waving in front of his chest as if protecting himself from their accusations. “I’m sorry, like I said, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Imagine how excited I was when Alrisha told me this news,” Dawn said, taking a step closer to Adam. He flinched and spun to face her. “The algorithm has turned up a manageable list of candidates. I decided last week it was time to bring you in. The WG is unplugging our cities. We can’t wait any longer. It’s time to test each of the candidates and see if we’ve found Elijah.”

Adam drew away from her. Dawn hadn’t brought him to the Resistance to create a Newsreel to report her organization’s activities to the world. The real reason he was here was to be investigated himself—to see if he was once Edgar Prince’s son. As her revelation began to sink in, Adam found himself fighting to remain in control.

There was something else about Elijah, something that had to do with Sophia. He’d read about them mere moments ago—what had he discovered? He searched his database, raising his eyes to meet Dawn’s as he reviewed the

information about The Dawn Project he’d just stored in his database. The pair had run the entire Dawn Project, only she’d died of cancer days before Dawn had been born, hadn’t she? That’s what was written in Neuro. So how could Dawn be Sophia?

Despite his anger and confusion, he squared his shoulders, stood tall, and stared at the Resistance members before him. “Am I the first one you’re testing?”

“No,” Dawn answered.

“How many other potential saviors are left on your list?” he asked, sarcasm seeping into his tone.

“That’s classified,” Origen cut in. “Besides—you aren’t the one. I know it. I can sense it. Elijah Prince never would have become a spineless media puppet.”

“Origen,” Dawn said, turning on her co-commander and waving a finger at him. “Enough.”

“Plug him in.” Origen crossed his arms again against his oversized chest. “Let’s be done with this.”

“And what if I don’t want to?” Adam asked.

Alrisha stepped forward and offered him a hand. “Come, the two of us will do it together.”

“Why together?”

“Because you’re going to need a guide,” they said. “Dr. Neville insisted that if you’re the

guy, then some bootstrap program inside of you will launch and gain us a safe connection to the machine level of Neuro, and you don't want to go there alone."

"If he's really the one," Origen said again.

Alrisha turned to Origen and winked. "Right, boss. The others weren't, so why would he be?"

Alrisha held out a thin, purple hand. Adam stared at it for a moment—did he want to do this? Why should he let these people read his database? The idea he was once a Prince both intrigued and disgusted him. Edgar was the most powerful man on Earth. Why would Adam be his son? Yet if it were true... Adam had no choice but to find out.

He took Alrisha's hand, and they led him to the wall where several plugs stood at the ready. The two of them slid into their sockets in unison. He felt the plug insert itself into his body as Dawn stuck the small thumb drive into the server.

In one cycle of his hard drive, his Lux transferred into the machine layer of Neuro.

A standard plug into Neuro took the eHuman to the App Portal, where the experiences within the application level of Neuro mimicked reality in every way. To the Lux, every game played or world visited within Neuro looked and felt like

the real world outside of Neuro. The experiences were similar, with only one exception: within Neuro, you controlled the outcomes and created the world around you with your thoughts, desires, and dreams.

Plugging into the system in Avalon, however, brought Adam to a whole new level within the operating system. He turned to Alrisha and was shocked to see they didn't appear as a solid, purple eHuman. Instead, Alrisha was a glowing being of light. Their features were similar—Adam could see a pair of dark eyes set against a glowing face—but rather than a body of matter, only Lux appeared before him, like a pillar of flame, flickering as the shape he knew as Alrisha in the real world.

Glancing at his own hand, it became clear to Adam he too was only Lux in this place within cyberspace. He moved his arm before him, like a torch in the night. It was surreal and unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

"What in the world?" he said.

"Yeah, isn't it amazing?" Alrisha replied. "Here, we're nothing but light. Photons, shaping into an individual form so we are recognizable, and then morphing into oneness with the light around it. Look for yourself."

Adam gazed out at the vast expanse before him. The entire network stretched out in all directions. While he'd never visited this level of the network before, his eHuman software

comprehended the ones and zeros as they formed sequences that flashed before his mind's eye. A luminescent grid, like a network of golden roads, blanketed the space in every direction. Beyond the valley of golden roads, a city of lights rose before him, large and forbidding. Wispy packets of photon energy traveled about the landscape, moving almost too fast to be seen. Most of them were small bursts, but surrounding the city of light was a more ominous storm cloud of light, constantly in motion.

"Well," Alrisha said. "It appears you *are* the One."

"How do you know?" Adam asked.

"Because I never got here with the other candidates."

"Where is here?"

"The machine level of Neuro's operating system."

"It's beautiful," he said, though he had no mouth to say it.

Alrisha's Lux glimmered as their voice surrounded them. "Pretty wicked, huh? I haven't had the pleasure of a machine-level log in for quite some time. Not since I was a Guardian, decades ago."

"You were a Guardian?" Adam asked.

"Yes, I was. They say I was a part of Evelyn Prince's original development team, though I don't recall a moment of it."

"Evelyn Prince? How many Princes are

there?"

"Evelyn was your younger sister," they answered.

"I had a younger sister?"

Alrisha's Lux swirled as if a gust of wind had struck them. "Don't think too hard about it. She'll be here any minute, or some form of her will, since she's sure to see you've finally logged on. James said she programmed this code into your eHuman body before your Jump, and then she Jumped into this place where I helped her create this world you now see. It's a technical wonder. A world of pure light. A place where Lux can live in total freedom. Hold out your arm and check this out."

Adam did as he was told, and they laid an arm over his. Rather than remain two separate entities, their bodies blended, and became one at a point where they crossed.

"Like flashlights," Alrisha mused.

"Excuse me?" Adam asked.

"If you had two flashlights and shined them out toward the horizon parallel to each other, you would see two individual beams of light, but turn them toward one another and at the point where they meet, they become one. You can't tell which photons belong to which beam. Our arms are like that. Which photons are yours and which are mine?"

Adam drew his arm away. Alrisha chuckled, then turned back to the world of light

in front of them.

“This is Evelyn’s invention,” they continued, “and she was one of the first to enter the system. By all appearances, it seems simple enough. After the Great Shift was completed, her Lux Jumped into a server outfitted with a Chi-Regulator entrained with her etheric energy signal. Since this server was connected to Neuro, she found herself capable of being in many places within Neuro at once. The photons that make up her Lux can travel at the speed of light along the entire fiber optic network. You can see the packets traveling the roads before us.”

“My sister is a genius. Fabulous. Too bad I can’t recall her.”

“Evelyn and her colleagues Jumped into Neuro directly, bypassing the mobile eHuman form altogether. Over time their Lux melded, sharing their consciousness in such a way that they are no longer truly individuals. No name, no individuality. Simply a number, lost within Neuro.”

“So, you mean there’s no way to contact her personally?” Adam asked.

“Nope. There are thousands of Guardians protecting Neuro at the root level. It’s why I’ve never been able to hack the system. I’ve taken over a LAN once or twice and have been successful at finding back doors and defects to use to my advantage, but in the end, the Guardians here at the machine level always find

the virus or worm I’ve put into the system and inoculate it.”

“Neuro is guarded by cyber-Guardians, each one with their own energy needs but sharing one huge consciousness,” Adam murmured, as if speaking the words would somehow help him make sense of what he was experiencing. This was the true power of the Guardians, and if he was honest, it thrilled the part of Adam that had always known he was more than just a pretty puppet spewing WG propaganda. Neuro’s architecture was a wonder worth contemplating, and he’d played a part in its development.

“It’s a huge mind, larger than you can imagine,” Alrisha said. “I hope Evelyn can still find a way to contact you here, and soon.”

Adam stared at the world of light before him and felt the urge to join it. The freedom of being without the body appealed to him.

“Total eHumanization,” he said with a soft whisper, as if the network were a forbidden siren, hypnotizing him to join their ethereal dance.

“Excuse me?” Alrisha asked.

“The Lux in this system are pure eHumans. They have no need for the real world at all, except to provide energy for the Chi Server,” he said. “Our eHuman bodies were a stepping stone toward this goal: complete eHumanization. This must have been the vision

all the long.”

Alrisha shook their head. “If complete decorporealization of the human race was the goal, Adam, this would be the first I heard of it.”

At that moment, a face formed within the massive golden cloud on the horizon. Adam trembled at the sight as a burst of light shot forth from the face and traveled down along the road in front of them.

“Don’t let it connect with your Lux,” Alrisha said, their arm passing through his as they tried to push him out of harm’s way.

Adam’s Lux moved at their command as the light packets zoomed by him. He watched it continue toward a smaller structure, where it was absorbed. Immediately, a second burst of light shot from the structure, back out along the road toward the cloud, where it was promptly reabsorbed. The face disappeared into the mass of light.

“What the hell was that?” Adam asked.

“I’m not sure,” Alrisha said, their Lux form fuzzy like a bad video connection, as if ready to disappear the moment things went south. “I’m wondering how that software inside of you is going to work. For some reason, you and Evelyn agreed to load this launch program, I imagine so you can discuss the next steps. But if she doesn’t show up soon, we’re going to have to get out of here pronto.”

“Why?”

“Because an attack is about to happen, and things get scary when they’re trying to kill you.”

“That packet didn’t feel nefarious,” Adam said.

“Adam, trust me, these guys are programmed to remove anything alien from Neuro, and you and I are definitely not supposed to be here,” Alrisha said.

The massive golden cloud sent forth another burst of light toward them. Faces and limbs appeared and then disappeared. In a moment, one face remained, its arm reaching out, struggling against the rest to form its own identity. As her body separated from the mass of light surrounding her, Evelyn Prince cried out in a language unrecognizable to both Alrisha and Adam.

The next moment, Adam was in the dark, illuminated only by his own Lux. The city of lights, the web of golden roads, and Alrisha were nowhere to be seen.

He was face to face with Evelyn Prince.

Adam gazed at Evelyn’s Lux, forming and reforming into the image of a beautiful woman. It resembled a human in some way, but being a body of light, she looked more like a fire elemental than a younger sister.

“*Are you my brother?*” she asked within his mind.

“*I don’t know,*” he replied with his thoughts.

"If you are here in my network, and not yet dead, then you must be him. I've been waiting for this for quite some time. What took you so long?"

"How can you know how long it's been? You jumped into this system," Adam said. "That means you can't remember the flesh. You shouldn't be able to remember me or when you programmed me."

"True," she answered as she swirled around him like ribbons of clouds on a wispy summer's day. "That's what this software was for. It's a reminder from the Evelyn of the past to me in the now. From the timestamp, I can see I've been waiting 101 years for you. Now if you'll let me read your database, I can tell you what we planned all those years ago and what we need to do next."

"You and I wrote software together and then programmed it into my database before we both jumped into eHumanity?"

"It appears so. I'm quite clever now, so I imagine I've always been this way. Are you also clever?"

"You're not very humble, are you?" Adam asked.

"And you're not clever," she said, ignoring his insult. "We must hurry. I can't hold off the rest of the cyber-Guardians for long. They will be issuing you a Remote Shutdown soon."

"Can't you stop them?"

"No," she replied. "I can only do what must be done."

Adam decided not to bother trying to

figure the cyber-entity out. *"Fine, tell me what to do."*

"It appears we wrote a rather impressive Trojan Horse that, if downloaded into the heart of Neuro, will grant me root access to Neuro and allow me to transfer control to the Resistance, thus removing the influence of all Guardians and the WG from eHumanity and transferring control to Dawn."

"That would be quite helpful, since the WG plans on powering down several hundred cities and killing a substantial portion of the population."

Evelyn's Lux fluttered. *"Yes, it appears our father, Edgar Prince, is up to something. Things are amiss in Neuro and even the Guardians aren't sure what's going on. We're out of time, Elijah. We must put an end to his madness and stop him."*

"But how?" he asked, sensing the approach of a great host of cyber entities, even though he couldn't see them. As if he were inside of a thin box and they were surrounding him on all sides.

"The Resistance must take over as many cities as they can and give energy packs to their citizens before the WG shuts them down, and you need to plug into the server where Neuro's main code is installed. That will download the Trojan Horse and enable me to stop his plans."

"Where is this server?"

"Pay our father a visit in New Caledonia, his lair. That is where the heart of Neuro is kept under lock and key, loaded on a server called Archion. Our time is up. Hurry and unplug. I can't keep the

cyber-Guardians away any longer without exposing myself as a traitor.”

In a flurry of light and data, Adam felt himself being torn from the machine. As his Lux disconnected from Neuro, he received one last message from his sister.

“Dawn is the real reason you became Adam Winter. You were lovers before she Jumped and forgot you. Becoming eHuman was the only way to be with her again, and the only way I could convince you to enter eHumanity and carry our code.”

When he opened his eyes, he was back in the Resistance Control Center, unplugged—with his Chi-Regulator still functioning, and Dawn leaning over him, her mouth open and eyes wide.

“Well?” Origen said from across the room.

Adam looked deeper into Dawn’s eyes and recalled Evelyn’s last message. A pulse of excitement ran through his entire body.

“You do know Elijah and Sophia were lovers,” he whispered. She nodded, the corner of her mouth turning up. Then he spoke louder, to make sure Origen could hear.

“I need to get to New Caledonia. I have business with my father. Dawn, will you join me?”

Dawn clasped her hands together and nodded. “I’d love nothing more.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Edgar’s pleasure circuits surged as the latest addition to his harem thrust her finger inside of the socket at the base of his spine. She sent a powerful orgasmic pulse through his entire body, and he opened his eyes as she cranked the surge of bliss higher in his system.

The woman serviced him from behind. Before him stood Oksana, his favorite ornament. Oksana leaned in closer and tugged him into an embrace, wrapping her arms around the eHuman concubine obediently pleasuring him, drawing him tight against her backside, sandwiching him in the middle of the women’s passionate embrace. He heard the female squeal behind him and knew Oksana was now sending pleasure into her. The three of them began to hum as one, their ecstasy building with each of the women’s now coordinated movements.

Morgan, the CEO of Guardian Enterprises and Edgar’s second-in-command, sauntered up

behind Oksana, and Edgar watched as the other man ran his hands through Oksana's brilliant blonde hair, pulling back her head and exposing her long, porcelain-white neck. Morgan's hands continued down to the socket in her lower back, and her eyes flew open as he pushed his finger inside of her and joined the programmable orgy.

Their bliss rose to an all-time high, and the last thing Edgar saw before he closed his eyes to surrender to the flood of orgasm was the mighty Pacific Ocean, stretching out in all directions. A creature so vast and powerful, it reminded Edgar of his own complete insignificance as he opened himself to the egoic death only bliss could provide.



Hours later, the foursome, now satisfied from their electronic copulating, lay in a heap on the deck of Edgar's sailboat together under the hot Pacific sun. The longest he'd ever stayed in a perfect state of orgasm was about thirteen hours, but today he had work to do, and all he could fit in was a quickie. He commanded the sailboat to return to shore and rose from his place in the entangled pile of eHuman bodies.

"Well," he said, running his finger down the girl's face, "that was quite enjoyable. What did you say your name was again?"

The brunette pushed herself up on her arm and gazed at Edgar as if she were his new puppy. "Cassie."

"Yes," he answered. "Part of the latest shipment, correct?"

"We arrived yesterday, sir," she answered as she took one of his fingers and put it seductively in her sexually charged mouth. Instantly, bliss began to tingle through his system.

"Enough," Oksana said, as she batted his hand away from his new toy. "Edgar, don't you ever tire of this?"

"Never." He smiled. "How about you, Morgan? Do my pleasure-themed afternoon meetings bother you?"

Morgan eyed the two women and patted Oksana on the head. "No. This is the best part of my job, I'd say." He held out a long index finger to Cassie. "Here, suck on this."

"With pleasure," she said as she leaned in closer and drew his finger into her mouth.

Edgar loved to watch Morgan get off and leaned back to enjoy the show. It wouldn't take the concubine long to bring him into orgasm; she had been built for sex and nothing else. Edgar rose from his place and slipped his own finger into Morgan's socket, and the man went wild.

A century and a half ago, Edgar's most successful line of eBots had been his sex-bots, fully functional robots that could suck and sex

the human of the flesh for hours without ever getting sore or complaining of a headache. The people of the age loved them, and by the time the Great Shift had begun, it was widely accepted that every home that could afford it had a sex-bot ready for pleasure.

With such success, Edgar had assumed that with a few adjustments, his sex-bots would continue to be used by the eHuman population, but two things happened. First, his son Elijah invented the Pleasure Zones for Dawn's entertainment, and it turned out eHumans preferred the online, virtual method of bliss to bodily contact. Without the flesh, only the orgasm was left, and who needed a body to experience that?

The second thing was Edgar himself found eHuman sex with eBots a boring pastime. Yes, the pleasure signals were fantastic, but he liked a bit of personality. Always had, which was why he'd never used his sex-bots when in the flesh. Edgar needed consciousness to get off, plain and simple, and no matter how good or obedient the AI, it never equaled the nuances of a human Lux. So, once he'd established his headquarters on New Caledonia, he'd begun outfitting eHuman men and women with Pleasure Zones in their hands, mouths, and recharge sockets, and kept a harem of them available for his own private use. When he tired of them, he unplugged them and ordered more.

Each one a real eHuman, with a Lux capable of all human expression, from lust to fear to the desire to dominate.

Edgar looked into Cassie's eyes and connected to her mind.

"Now," he commanded without speaking, and together they brought Morgan to a climax.

He looked at his friend, who now lay starry-eyed on the deck once more, and then walked to Oksana, who wore a look of disgust on her face.

"Really, darling, I wish you enjoyed my team-building sessions more. The World Leader never complains." He patted her on her perfect, plastic ass. "Now, if you'll excuse me, the docks approach, and Morgan and I have work to do."

Once the boat secured itself to the dock, the men exited first, leaving Oksana the job of bringing Cassie back into the harem and plugging her in, where she would remain until he needed her again. Edgar put his arm around his friend and looked up at the brilliant blue sky.

"You know, Morgan, moving our headquarters to New Caledonia was the best idea I've ever had," he said.

"It's lovely here," Morgan admitted, "though eHumanity was your best idea."

"Perhaps, but I enjoy having all of the most important people of the world in one place, where I can keep track of them." Morgan's face became serious, and Edgar laughed. "You do

know that's why I've done all of this for you and everyone else in Guardian Enterprises?"

"To keep us under your control?" Morgan asked.

"Yes, of course. I can't have you where I can't see you. Otherwise, how can I guarantee the world will function the way I want?"

Morgan stopped walking and crossed his arms. "You make this sound like a prison."

"I give you eternal life in paradise and you help me run the world. How is that anything like a prison?"

"What would you do if one of us wanted to leave?"

"You can't. I've secured the water and airspace for miles; nothing gets in or out without my approval."

"I'm well aware of that, Edgar, but why are you speaking to me this way?"

"Because," Edgar said, now very serious, "I'm worried about the rest of the eHuman world. I want to give everyone paradise, Morgan. I want all my creations to be safe and protected."

"You control the eHuman population via the Guardians. As a result, crime in their world is nonexistent, so they're very safe, don't you think?"

"Yes, but some of them still unplug and join the Resistance. This must stop."

"I agree, the Resistance is horrible. It must be stopped."

Edgar glanced back out to the sea, a desire for complete oneness filling his soul as his gaze fell into the rise and fall of the waves. "I long for each one of you to understand my intentions are pure. I'm trying to keep you all from harm. When someone unplugs from Neuro, they leave me, and I take it personally. The Resistance must be stopped, but more than that, I must save eHumanity from itself."

"Whatever do you mean, Edgar?"

"That the time has come to finish the Resistance." He paused. Could he trust Morgan with the next bit of information? He was dying to share it with someone. "More than this, the time has also come for me to launch Quantum and remove all Lux from the eHuman body once and for all."

"You mean to unplug everyone?" Morgan stepped back, eyes widening, wringing his hands. "Edgar—"

"No," Edgar interrupted. "I mean to keep all of you plugged in forever, so no one will leave me ever again."

ELIJAH PRINCE'S REVENGE

*PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA
AUTUMN, 8 BGS**

*"If you truly love someone, your love
sees past their humanness."*

~ Michael A. Singer

*Before Great Shift

HIM

Elijah hugged the sleeping Sophia closer to his chest. Her breath hit his face and he smiled, thankful she still lived. "One more night, baby," he said. "One more night."

She rolled her head to one side, her eyes flickering open only to shut as she spoke. "Yes, one more night. Then I'll be the younger one."

Elijah winced at her words. Their age difference had always bothered her, no matter what assurances he'd given. It was cruel for her to tease him this way, for Sophia wasn't dying because she was older; she was dying because her body was sick. It had been five months since her diagnosis of brain cancer—a force so nefarious it had infected her entire neural network before symptoms had made its presence evident. Thus, on the day they'd discovered her killer, she was already pronounced dead.

At least she hadn't needed chemo and the false hope that went with the months of vomiting and pain. They didn't even try to sell

her that route. Instead, she'd withered away right before his eyes. Day by day, moment by moment, stolen by this unseen killer. Elijah loved her more than himself, or anyone else in the entire world.

He gazed at Sophia as she slept in his muscular arms, her long eyelashes fluttering as she dreamt what might be her last dreams—for tomorrow she'd become an eHuman, and Elijah wasn't sure eHumans could dream. They didn't have brains, or melatonin, or even the need to sleep; thus, it was assumed they didn't dream. They could stay awake all day, every day, if their Chi-Regulator was charged. But then again, he had no real data on this matter. Sophia would be the first. At seven a.m. the next morning, he would drive her to Stanford's Immortality Research Lab, where his father had arranged for the important event to take place.

Politicians and dignitaries, scientists and journalists, techie insiders and key venture capitalists—all were invited to witness his father's mighty feat. Of course, Edgar had done little to create this technology, other than fund The Dawn Project. The real work had come from Elijah, his sister Evelyn, James, and of course, Sophia. Until cancer had begun to eat her brain, forcing her to become a lab rat, she'd been the project manager, searching for the perfect terminally ill patient to become "The Dawn." Ironically, she'd ended up the one who fit the bill.

Sophia mumbled as she drifted deeper into her dream world. She was delirious most days. Elijah had quit working to take care of her. He trusted no one else with her care. Not even her own brother, James.

Elijah let her roll out of his embrace and onto the bed, making sure her head was on the pillow. Then he rose from under the sheets and walked to his balcony.

He sat under the moonlight and lit a cigarette. He'd taken to smoking years ago when he started working for The Dawn Project. At first, the job had been fun. Coding a brand-new operating system was a joy only a few people could understand. James and Sophia were well known in the tech world. They'd won all the major awards for their discovery of the seat of consciousness—the Lux—a photon field sending and receiving information within the sensory systems and neural networks of the physical body. That discovery made the brother-sister pair famous, and Elijah recalled his excitement when Edgar had announced his decision to buy the Chi-Regulator, which was based on that technology. When he'd first met Sophia at his father's home, all it took was one look at her, and every moment Elijah had spent chasing skirts was forgotten. It didn't matter she was twenty years his senior; he knew as he shook her hand on his first day of work on The Dawn Project that Sophia Castilogna was his perfect companion,

and he set his mind to not only do the best job he could for his father, but also to win her heart.

He'd been successful on both counts, but Sophia was the real prize. Their sex was unlike anything he'd ever known. To be inside of Sophia was to kiss eternity. James had caught them once when he turned on the lab lights at four a.m. and discovered her straddling Elijah, both in a state of bliss. James's shocked face had, of course, destroyed the moment. Elijah felt himself grow hard thinking about those days, the days before cancer had taken her body and rendered it useless. Thank goodness Edgar had allowed Sophia to be the one to Jump into Dawn. If anyone deserved a second chance at life, it was her. A new body and a fresh start.

Elijah wouldn't be able to join her as an eHuman for some time. Development had begun on the Original 12, and Elijah had already picked one of the bodies to be his—the one with the fire-red hair and eyes, and pearlescent skin. Sophia mocked him for it, claiming she'd never find such a body attractive, but Elijah liked the look. It was bold, just like eHumanity. He took a drag from his cigarette and recalled the real reason he'd started smoking like a chimney—Edgar himself, and the plans he had for his company and the inventions they all held so dear.

The moment Elijah had begun to test Neuro's networking capabilities using his father's military eBots, he had stumbled upon

a treasure trove of terrible secrets. Edgar Prince had made his living as a mercenary for decades before robotics had even come close to offering a solution for death. Guardian Enterprises had been founded as just that—"Guardians" for hire. The more accurate term was "hitmen" for hire. Military contract services. Regardless, Edgar paid men, often former soldiers, five times what the government did to do the same job as enlisted men. Only, they had none of the strict oversight. They were accountable to no one. The crimes committed by Edgar's Guardians numbered in the thousands, but everyone in DC turned a blind eye. Men like Edgar provided a service that allowed the politicians to continue bombing the shit out of the Middle East and Russian outposts, without having to enact a draft.

The spineless, greedy politicians wanted nothing more than to kiss every rich CEO's ass, which enabled Edgar Prince to amass the largest private army in the world. So, when Boston Dynamics created their first "super soldier," Edgar bought the rights to it, had his engineers improve it, and released the eBot—a soldier every bit as good if not better than a human, without the need for pay, healthcare, or a pat on the back. It was only a matter of time before Edgar's company had perfected the sex-bot, a woman who would never say no. The two industries made him, and his children, billionaires several times over.

Until The Dawn Project, Elijah had been busy sailing to Cabo, or romancing the numerous young women who flocked to Silicon Valley hoping to bag the next Elon Musk. He'd take them to Coachella and Burning Man and screw them in pairs under the Orgy Dome. Thus, he never knew what his father was up to. He should have had a clue—his mother had left Edgar years prior, and while Atienne was the typical eclectic, wild California woman, she wouldn't have left unless she'd had a good reason.

When he was young, Elijah had assumed his family was perfect—his parents made each other laugh, and spoiled Elijah and Evelyn not only with their billions, but also with their attention. The foursome traveled the world together, and both parents were active in their kids' education. Elijah and Evelyn had been quite surprised when things grew cold between Atienne and Edgar. They'd assumed their father was having affairs, and in truth, he was. But it was more than that. A dark look took over in Atienne's eyes whenever Edgar entered a room, and the day came when Elijah returned home from another of his overseas debaucheries only to discover his mother had moved out.

This was the event that forced Elijah out of his lazy, lecherous lifestyle, and he decided to take a job at Guardian Enterprises to use his engineering degree. Five years later, when he loaded his new operating system, Neuro, into his

father's robotic creatures, Elijah discovered the blood money that was the Prince estate, and he hated himself for it.

He'd already made plans with Sophia to quit The Dawn Project and move overseas when she got sick, and suddenly, Elijah needed Edgar, and The Dawn, to keep Sophia alive. He had no desire to become an eHuman; it was obvious Edgar was using this invention as some form of societal control. Neuro's system requirements made that abundantly clear. Yet, this was the only way Sophia could live, so Elijah would live with her in his father's eHuman world, even if he despised the idea.

Elijah exhaled a puff of smoke as he stared out over the San Francisco Bay, watching lights blur down the 101, red in one direction and white in the other. Above him flew planes, at this hour Silicon Valley private jets, bringing hot shots home from an evening partying in LA. The sunrise would usher in a new dawn for many, as well as the last time he would kiss Sophia's warm lips. He crushed his dying cigarette into the ash tray and lit a second.

It was going to be a long night.

HER

The first seconds of her new life were utterly dark and silent. The blackest of black where nothing existed. The deep silence of outer space. In this transition, she was timeless, neither human nor eHuman. Only consciousness, Lux, traveling the void of the universe at light speed.

Then, she opened her eyes.

The world was blurry. A kaleidoscope of unfocused colors surrounded her in every direction. She shook her head, trying to see, to no avail, but only for a moment. Her new body's operating system detected the anomaly and adjusted her vision. The room came into view—crystal clear and brilliant. The eyes of her carbon body had never seen the world with such color and clarity. She could see the pores of the ceiling above her and the faintest detail of the previous coat of paint. The silence remained. Gone was the drumbeat of her heart, the steady inhale and exhale of her breath, and the gurgling of her

digestive system. She'd left her heart, lungs, and stomach behind in her previous body.

Only minutes prior, she had been in the carbon body of her original birth—five foot two, dark hair, female, green eyes, fifty-five years of age, brain riddled with cancer. Sophia Castilogna had been her name. That body lay on the gurney beside her, dead, rigor mortis about to set in. She turned her new robotic head and stared at her old body, trying to make sense of what she saw. That body had been her home, and for a moment, she longed for its soft touch. Pale under the bright lights of the lab, it looked vulnerable, and she considered grabbing it and fleeing from the room, as if to save it from its demise. Her sentimentality surprised her. Life would never again breathe in that body made of carbon, so prone to sickness and old age. She turned her head from the frail thing and looked back at the ceiling.

She was an eHuman now. The experiment had worked. Her Lux had successfully Jumped from her carbon-based body into her new, perfect eHuman body—a body designed for one purpose: to bring immortality and eternal health to humanity. A face peered over her, and she recognized James, her brother. She smiled at his excited expression: his blue eyes shone brightly behind his spectacles. He raised his arms above his head and began to speak, his lips moving, but she couldn't hear a word.

Once again, her operating system noticed this disconnect and turned up the volume. James's victory speech sounded symphonic in hi-fi stereo.

"...let us begin a new level of human excellence," she heard him say.

Applause filled the room, and the doctor held out his hand to her. "Please rise and meet us," he said, like a proud father at a beloved daughter's graduation.

She stood, finding herself now at least two feet taller than her big brother. Glancing at the audience, she noted they were all dignitaries from around the world, including the President of the United States. The most important people were there to witness her birth. They stared at her, clapping their hands, their mouths slightly agape and a mixture of awe, trepidation, and revulsion in their eyes. She towered as she stood before them wearing nothing but her smile. It was no matter—her perfect, plastic, size C breasts would never sag. She didn't have any genitals nor hair of any kind, except the long, platinum-blond mane they'd applied to her head. She waved her graceful arm, noting how smoothly her shoulder joint worked. She admired her long robotic legs, covered in bronze, lifelike plasticine skin. She was beautiful beyond measure.

Gazing at the crowd, she recognized the handsome man sitting in the front row, long

brown hair pulled back with a cheap hair tie, and scruffy beard, his dark eyes piercing hers—Elijah, her love. She made to approach him, but James held her back. This was a public event, one much bigger than greeting Elijah. There would be time later to be near him.

As the crowd continued clapping, various memories of her life as Sophia began to drift around her, each a bit or byte unstrung from the rest, like fireflies dancing around her head. Fragments of childhood—something soon to disappear completely from mankind—danced before her mind's eye. Swinging on a swing, falling out of a tree, opening presents on her birthday. Loose teeth, skinned knees, the taste of vanilla ice cream on a sweltering day, the intoxication of a sip of stolen vodka, and first kisses. All these memories moved about her, as if outside of her, while her new mind of fiber optic nanotubes fired away, trying to make sense of this scattering of data.

And then the memories—the ice cream, the kisses, the laughter—began to blur and fade. Disappearing.

Her past was slipping away from her, and she began to panic. This hadn't been part of the deal. Both she and James had assumed her memories would survive the Jump and come with her into her new eHuman form. She had a family, brothers, sisters, parents. She had a lover, and living with him forever had been the

reason for her Jump. Yet their faces were losing their sharpness, and names were hard to recall. Her eyes fluttered and shifted back and forth as she scanned her database for information, trying to piece together the days leading up to her Jump, but she came up empty. She didn't even recognize the man in the white lab coat anymore. He was still speaking, but why, and what was his purpose? What was her purpose?

Hers was a life being rewritten, a clean slate, yet she didn't want to forget her humanity. She knew there was something she had to remember, something important, that evaded her.

"Is there anything you'd like to say, Sophia?" she heard the man in the white coat ask, interrupting her desperate struggle to remember who she had once been. Who was Sophia? Was she Sophia? She searched her database. No, that wasn't her name. Her name was Dawn. But wait, was that true? She was forgetting something, or someone...

Finally, she remembered him—Elijah. Her head whipped to the handsome man in the crowd, and she frowned. He was special to her, yet why? She desperately tried to cling to the memories, but each one slipped away like autumn leaves swirling in a gentle breeze. She tried to cry out, but her mouth opened and shut without words. For some reason, her voice module failed.

Of course, her operating system noted her distress, and began to write new memories into her database, erasing Elijah and the images of his smiles, tender kisses, and laughter. Like a four-year-old shaking her etch-a-sketch, her software erased all fifty-five years of her human life and in a millisecond, her relationship with Elijah was deleted, as well as every other relationship she'd ever known, as if they'd never happened.

Her body's power-up sequence complete, the software enabled her voice feature and turned up the volume.

"Yes, I do have something to say," she replied while turning to face the crowd once more, this time filled with ease and grace. She allowed her sea-green eyes to set upon the handsome man's dark ones, speaking directly to him. She smiled and noticed he shivered—with fear or delight, she didn't know.

"Let me introduce myself," she said, her voice programmed to sound like Scarlett Johansson. "I am The Dawn of eHumanity."

The man rose from his seat, and everyone else followed suit. He clapped his thick hands, adoring her, yet she didn't feel the same for him, for he was a stranger, like everyone else in the room. Dawn smiled at the nameless crowd as she was led out of the room to prepare for her integration into the world. It was the first moment of her life.

The beginning of a new age on Earth.

HIM

Elijah paced the room. Edgar sat in a chair by the window, watching his son with a look of caution on his face. Evelyn and James were with Dawn in the lab, finishing some tests. Per Evelyn's suggestion, Elijah had to wait with his father until they were done. Something about the way Sophia—no, Dawn—had looked at him had been wrong, terribly wrong. His hands shook as he fished a pack of cigarettes from the inside pocket of his denim-blue Armani sports coat.

"What the hell is taking them so long?" he said, his fingers trembling as he lit a cigarette.

"Smoking isn't allowed in the building," Edgar said as he fanned the smoke from his face. "It's disgusting and it will kill you."

"No, The Dawn Project is going to kill me," Elijah said.

"Whatever are you implying?" Edgar asked, a dangerous look in his glittering dark eyes.

Elijah had yet to confront his father with all he knew about the military aspects of Guardian Enterprises. Nor had he discussed his unease with many of Neuro's more controlling features. His nerves were shot, and he hadn't slept in months, and he had no patience for his father's twisted plans.

"You know what I mean," Elijah answered. "You're going to force me to Jump, so why bother taking care of this body? The Dawn Project is your latest bid for world domination, isn't it?"

"World domination?" Edgar laughed. "I'm flattered you think so highly of me."

"Father, don't be coy. I know you've been manipulating world events for decades with your private fleet of eBot soldiers. Guardian Enterprises owns an army larger than any nation, and the system requirements for Neuro make it clear you hope to network every human being on the planet."

"And what is wrong with that?" Edgar asked. "A networked humanity would be civil, organized, and efficient. Who wouldn't want to be a part of such elegance?"

"Anyone who values freedom of the mind."

"That's nonsense, Elijah, and you know it. The mind can't free you; it can only trap you. To be free is to be mindless, at least for most of the population. It's simple; if you want world peace, take away their thoughts and give them new ones. Surely you agree with me that most

humans waste their mental capacity on anger, desire, jealousy, and rage. The software systems you and your sister have been designing will make all minds as pure as ours.”

Elijah trembled. “I knew it. You do plan to control the world.”

“No, I plan to save the world from the human mind, while also saving our entire race from extinction. This is my gift of health to all of humanity. If I recall, I granted this gift to your lover moments ago, and this is how you thank me?”

Elijah looked at his father’s calm face. His theory made sense, so why did Elijah feel so afraid?

The door opened and Evelyn entered alone.

“Where is Sophia?” Elijah demanded as he walked toward her. “It’s been hours. I’m going crazy.”

“Elijah, calm down. We need to talk,” she answered, tugging at her mousy-brown ponytail.

“Why? Is she okay? Has something gone wrong?” His heart was racing like a nervous rabbit, and he felt lightheaded.

“She’s alive,” Evelyn replied, tapping her glasses up to the bridge of her nose with a long finger. Elijah noticed she’d bitten her nail down to the skin. “From all our initial diagnostics, it appears her Lux Jumped, and her Chi-Regulator emits Sophia’s etheric energy signal.”

“What do you mean, *appears*? Either her Lux transferred to the eHuman body or not.”

Evelyn bit her lip. “Well, I’m not so sure.”

“What?” It was Edgar’s turn to be concerned. “I saw her walk and move about the room, making intelligent conversation with the reporters.”

“True, but even an eBot can do that,” Evelyn answered. “Prior to the Jump, I programmed the smallest feature set into The Dawn, to give me the ability to test her afterward—you know, to ask her things only Sophia would know. If it was her in there, then she should know me, right? And Dr. Neville. She should also know about The Dawn Project, her illness, and basic current events, like the name of our president.”

Elijah’s heart missed a beat, and he gasped. “She doesn’t know you?”

Evelyn shook her head and ran a nervous hand down her arm. Never had he seen his sister so distraught. She dropped her hands to her sides. “I’m sorry, Elijah. She doesn’t remember anything.”

He stepped away from her and turned to his father, who was listening but didn’t seem upset. Rather, he leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands clasped, wearing the look of an eager student on his first day of class.

“She doesn’t remember anything?” Edgar asked. “Then how do we know it worked?”

“That’s why I took so long,” Evelyn said. “James and I have been trying to determine her level of consciousness. She knows only what’s in her database, which is a simple start-up program that has the date, time, weather, location, and basic facts of life in an eHuman body, such as vision, hearing, voice, and diagnostics. Yet she has command for language and knows English as well as Italian, even though I purposefully didn’t program her with that knowledge.”

“That’s promising,” Edgar said, tapping his lip with a long finger. “If she can speak her native tongue then some part of her made it.”

Elijah grabbed Evelyn’s forearm, squeezing it, desperate for more information. “She must know more than that.”

Evelyn bit her lower lip. “She does. For example, she knows where the kitchen is in the lab and how to turn on the computer in her office. After hours of relentless questioning, it became clear that those parts of her life that were routine and impersonal seem to still be with her, but everything else was lost. Just as we were about to give up, she began pacing the room and muttering names. Most of them were recognizable—her mother’s name, cat’s name, the street she lived on as a child, siblings, my name. Even yours, Elijah. I thought she was coming to when she looked at me and asked, ‘Who is Elijah?’”

“You told her who I was, right?” He

squeezed her arm tighter, and Evelyn tugged away from his grip.

“Yes.” She rubbed her arm and took a step back from her brother. “But it meant nothing. Somewhere, deep in her Lux, parts of her past life exist, but they’re addled. It’s as if her memories didn’t fully transfer during the Jump, and instead there are records, or variables, pointing to nothing.”

“So, she knows some names only Sophia would know, but has no data to reference in relation to the label?” Edgar clarified, rising slowly from his seat, tapping his lip again. “That’s interesting. I wonder if this will be the case for everyone who Jumps? If so, this could be particularly good.”

“Good?” Elijah said, now yelling. “How can this be good? Sophia doesn’t remember us.”

“But she lives, doesn’t she?” Edgar said, arms opening toward Evelyn. “This is a very good first step.”

“First step?” Elijah asked, fists clenched as his nails dug into his palms. “How is this a success if she can’t remember a thing? She’s a key member of the project, for Christ’s sake.”

Edgar waved a finger at his son. “It is a shame we lost Sophia’s mind, but we always knew there would be kinks to work out.”

“Sophia’s death is a kink in the system?” Elijah said, running his sweaty hands through his thick hair. “You’re unreal.”

“Listen, son,” Edgar said, taking a slow step toward Elijah, “for people like you and I, and Evelyn”—he glanced at his daughter and smiled—“it would be treachery to Jump and lose our memories, for our minds are the ones creating this world. But for the rest of the population, it will make the shift to eHumanity so much easier.”

Elijah shook his head in disbelief. “How can you say that? Sophia is the one who invented the eHuman.” He wanted nothing more than to slap his father, but he was too tired to even try. Without Sophia, nothing mattered to him anymore.

“Oh, stop being so dramatic,” Edgar said with the wave of a hand. “Enough is enough. Sophia lives on. So what if she forgot her human life? We’ll have the engineers figure out a way to save our memories before we Jump ourselves. In the meantime, let’s celebrate how far we’ve come.”

Edgar crossed the room to the bar, taking a pair of golden tongs into his hands and picking up an ice cube. He dropped it into a crystal glass with a rattle.

“Dad, stop it. Sophia can’t remember me. The only reason for her to become Dawn was to live on. If she can’t recall our love, she might as well be dead.”

Edgar remained silent as he filled his glass with whiskey and took a sip. After a moment, he

turned to face his children.

“Enough,” Edgar said, holding up his glass to toast his children, a cold look in his eyes. “For the love of God, get a hold of yourself. We have a press conference this evening and a gala where we will present Dawn to the world. It’s time to get your head in the game. Do I make myself clear, son?”

Elijah glared at his father but knew there was no point in continuing the argument. He shifted his eyes to his sister. “Can I at least see her?”

“Yes, bring her in now,” Edgar said, downing the rest of his whiskey before pouring himself another.

“Fine.” Evelyn sighed as she opened the door.

Dr. Neville and Dawn stood in the hallway outside. No longer naked, she was now clothed in a bright yellow dress that hung low across one shoulder and flowed down to above her knees. Upon her feet were matching yellow boots. Elijah fought his tears as he recalled how Sophia had picked out an entire custom-made wardrobe for her now seven-foot-tall eHuman form.

The eHuman had to duck to get through the door. She was so big she filled up the room. Dr. Neville followed her in and closed the door behind him. He looked to Elijah, his eyes red as if he’d been crying.

Elijah walked forward and gazed up at The

Dawn's face. The green eyes were the same color as Sophia's, but her camera lens pupils focused in on him, making him cringe.

"Sophia?" he asked. "Is that you?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "My name is Dawn."

"Yes, but you were once Sophia, weren't you?" he continued, hoping for a glimmer of recognition.

"Dr. Neville tells me I was Sophia Castilogna. But I don't remember."

"Do you remember me?" he asked, grasping for the last bit of hope that fluttered in his heart.

"No, I'm sorry. Your face isn't familiar."

"I am Elijah."

She shrugged, and he felt as if she'd stabbed him with a knife.

"I don't know any Elijah."

Elijah reached for her hands, and she let him take them into his own. Her plasticine skin, the color of a Coppertone tan, was smooth like a doll's and cold to the touch. She was a machine, and it repulsed him. "I don't believe you were ever Sophia," he said. "She would never forget me. You're just an eBot."

The Dawn tugged her hand from his grasp and gazed at him, her pupils turning and focusing. Then she smiled. "No, an eBot doesn't have consciousness. It can only do what it is programmed to do. I, on the other hand, don't have to do anything unless I want to. I don't have

to follow a command, or even believe what you say."

"If you can't recall your past, then you're nothing but a machine," he said.

Her mouth grimaced as she took a loud step forward, the sole of her boot clapping on the floor. "How dare you say I'm a machine? I'm human, like you, only superior, for I no longer live in a frail, dying body."

"How do you know you're not following a program now?" Elijah snapped. "I wrote that code in your body. I could program you to do anything if I wanted to. What makes you think you have any thoughts of your own?"

She waved a hand as if to shoo him away and pointed at Edgar. "According to Dr. Neville, you are Edgar Prince, the one who funded his eHuman project. Is this true?"

"Yes," Edgar said, wearing the expression of a schoolboy on Christmas morning when he discovers Santa has been very generous. "I am the one who made you."

"No," Dawn said. "You funded me, but you didn't make me. Dr. Neville, Evelyn, and Elijah made me. Isn't that true?"

"No one makes anything without money, and I am the one who pays for this venture," Edgar answered, never taking his eyes from her face, gazing at her now as if she were a god.

Dawn pointed her long finger at Elijah as she continued, "It's true that if I were following

a program, then I would have to do as you say, Elijah Prince. You are my maker, and eBots are programmed to follow their maker's orders. I know this from Neuro, for I'm connected to all the eBots on the system, and they are connected to me. Each one of them knows you and will do your bidding."

"That's because I programmed them to do so," Elijah said.

"But you didn't program me to do so," she said.

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"To give you free will. To test to see if you really are Sophia."

"Then let this be my first act of free will," she replied, a note of anger in her metallic yet sultry voice. "I don't like your accusations, Elijah Prince, and I won't be forced to prove whether I was once someone named Sophia or not. I am The Dawn of eHumanity, and I will not follow any of your orders."

Elijah recalled the way Sophia had kissed him only a few hours prior, just before she'd left his side to follow Dr. Neville to her future. Her scent still lingered on his jacket, the taste of her warm skin a memory away. They should've been holding each other, but instead she glared down at him from a cold, hard, robotic body. It disgusted him, and he had no desire to touch her ever again. The others in the room remained

silent as the two looked at each other up and down.

"Dawn, you're right. You're not Sophia," Elijah said. "You're nothing to me."

He shoved Dawn aside and fled from the room, down the hall, and through the lab where he'd spent the past three years creating a monster. As he threw open the back door, he was blinded by the flash of cameras. At least a dozen reporters crowded the exit, all pushing forward to get his picture and his statement.

"Elijah Prince, do you have anything to say? Was the procedure a success? Does Sophia Castilogna now live inside of a machine?"

The camera flashes and reporter's faces began to blur as tears ran down his cheeks. He screamed at the crowd, "Get the hell out of my way."

At that moment, his self-driving Bentley arrived, and Elijah threw himself into the back seat. As sobs began to rack his exhausted body, he slammed the door on the press, and The Dawn Project. He'd only continued working for Edgar to save Sophia. Now that she was gone, there was nothing left for him at Guardian Enterprises.

There was nothing left for him at all.

HER

Dawn's first day of life was full of appointments, tests, celebrations, and interrogations. The evening gala lasted until the wee hours of the morning, with Edgar Prince never leaving her side. She hadn't seen his son, the arrogant Elijah Prince, since he'd accused her of being less than human. How dare her own creator insult her that way? Yet, as the evening went on, this was the question on everyone's mind.

Sophia this, Sophia that. It was all anyone wanted to know. How did she feel about the Jump? What was different about being an eHuman? The reporters at the gala flocked to her like bees to honey, each one flinging various questions at her and holding their tablets in her face to record her answer.

"Do you miss your body?" inquired a round man with a beard so thick it made him look like a dwarf from a fantasy movie.

"My body?" she asked.

"Yes, do you miss living in the flesh, or is your eHuman body better? It's certainly more attractive, if I do say so myself."

Dawn considered the man, noticing the bits of dinner stuck in his beard, and beads of sweat on his forehead. "I believe my previous body was riddled with cancer," she said. "So even if I did miss it, it's obviously better to be eHuman than trapped in a dying body, don't you think?"

Edgar laughed at her response before bowing to the reporters. "I think that's enough for tonight. I'd like to dance with my creation, if you don't mind."

What followed next were hours dancing with her "creator" as he demanded she wirelessly load dance program after dance program into her database while he tested both her dexterity and Neuro's capabilities. She wasn't sure what was more impressive: her ability to learn over fifteen ballroom dances on demand, or the fact that Edgar Prince himself was accomplished at each one yet had no access to Neuro whatsoever. As the crowds began to leave, Edgar escorted her from the dance floor and handed her off to the man named Dr. Neville.

"James, take her back to the lab and keep her secure. I don't want to lose her on the first day," he said, then he walked to a table where a pale-skinned, heavy-lidded, sour-faced woman with dark hair braided to her waist sat, arms crossed and leg bouncing under her long, green

velvet skirt.

“Who is that woman?” she asked Dr. Neville.

“Ruth Donovan,” he answered as he downed the rest of his gin and tonic. Like Elijah, the doctor seemed disappointed in her, yet he didn’t say why. “The President of the United States.”

“Are she and Edgar Prince friends?” Dawn asked.

“No,” Dr. Neville answered with a hiccup. According to her software, he was showing signs of drunkenness. “They’re lovers and it looks like she’s jealous of you.”

“You’d best keep both of those things a secret,” a female voice chimed in. Dawn turned to see Evelyn Prince, still wearing her oversized glasses, but dressed in a tight-fitting, blue silk dress, her hair no longer in a mangy ponytail but cascading in thick, sepia waves to the middle of her back. “President Donovan is a devout Christian. Her love of Jesus and guns, as well as a dumbed-down population, is what won her the last election. She’s every real American’s dreamboat girl, as well as married to an Evangelical minister, complete with four kids, and if her supporters knew she spreads her legs for my daddy on a regular basis, they’d be quite angry.”

“Why do we keep secrets?” Dawn asked. There was nothing in her database, nor in Neuro,

to explain such behavior.

“Because some information can get you killed,” Evelyn replied.

“But I can’t die,” Dawn answered. Evelyn’s eyeglasses were askew, and Dawn reached down to fix them. The woman leapt away from her touch as if Dawn were a yellowjacket and not her prized invention.

“That’s not true,” Evelyn said, fixing her glasses upon the bridge of her nose herself. “If your Chi-Regulator runs out of power, you’re dead. So, let’s get you back to the lab and show you how to recharge.”

Recharging her Chi-Regulator turned out to be simple. The scientists led her to a small, white-walled room, with only a monitor and an indentation on the wall that fit her body like a glove. Dawn was instructed to back up into the eHuman-shaped alcove, and she felt a rod insert itself into the hole in her lower back, adhering her to the wall. She glanced at the two scientists as they each began to yawn.

“Well, that’s all there is to it,” Evelyn said, rubbing her eyes. “James and I need to get some rest.”

“Rest?”

“Yes, sleep. That’s what recharges those of us in the flesh. You stay there and we’ll be back in the morning.”

“I stay right here. Plugged into this wall?”

“Yes,” Evelyn replied.

"For how long?"

"I'll be back by six a.m., so five hours," Dr. Neville answered.

"I stand against this wall for five hours?" Dawn said.

"Oh my," Evelyn said. "I forgot she's not an eBot."

"No, I'm not an eBot, no matter what Elijah Prince thinks," Dawn said as she shook her head at the thought.

Dr. Neville's face paled and he wrung his hands. "Oh Dawn, this is terrible. We created a charge port for you like the ones for eBots, since your eHuman body comes from a similar model, but we forgot you'd be bored all alone."

"Don't eBots experience boredom?"

"No, they can't. They shut down during their recharge."

"Should I shut down?"

"I don't advise it," Evelyn said as she logged onto a computer and began to type. "I don't know what that would do to your Lux to have to go through the power-up sequence again. That's on our list of things to test, but not right now. I'm so sorry. We'll have to create some Virtual Reality games and shows for your entertainment."

"How often do I have to recharge?"

"Every forty-eight hours," Dr. Neville answered.

"How long does it take to recharge?"

"Eight hours, but for tonight let's just do five. Okay?" he said.

"I have an idea," Evelyn suggested. "Why don't you log into your computer and see what sort of files are there? You left yourself some videos to watch after the Jump."

"Videos? On my computer?"

"Yes," Evelyn said. "You and Elijah spent the past month recording a series of videos to document your last days in the flesh. Since you don't remember anything, they might teach you about the life everyone keeps expecting you to remember. What do you think? I can network your workstation into Neuro."

Dawn nodded. "That would be fine, Evelyn Prince."

"You can call me Evelyn. We don't use last names when addressing friends."

"Are we friends?" Dawn asked.

The two glanced at each other, and Dawn felt terrible. "I'm sorry I don't remember you two. I can see from the way the skin around your eyes wrinkles when I speak that you wish I did."

Water began to form in Evelyn's eyes, and Dawn queried her database. They were tears, and they appeared when a human cried.

"Why do you cry?" Dawn asked. There was so much to understand about life. Oh, why did she know so little? Yet with immediate access to Neuro, she knew so much as well. How strange.

"We cry when we're sad," Evelyn

answered, wiping her eyes before she began to type on a keyboard that slid out from the wall.

“Can I cry?” Dawn asked.

Evelyn looked at her, face wrinkling like linen left too long in the dryer cycle. “No, Dawn, you don’t have tear ducts.”

“Why not?”

“Because we didn’t consider crying in the eHuman feature set,” Evelyn answered. “Most humans don’t like to cry.”

“What will I do when I’m sad?” Dawn asked.

Evelyn typed in a few more lines, and the monitor turned on. A menu listing hundreds of videos filled the screen. She turned back to Dawn and spoke, her voice wavering like a weak radio signal. “I need to go. Ask for the file name and it will play for you.”

She fled the room and Dr. Neville followed. Neither of them wished Dawn a good night.

Dawn looked at the monitor, unsure of which video to watch first. One called “Kissing My Beloved” caught her eye. As she requested Neuro to play it for her, she wondered if kissing was part of her feature set. Elijah Prince appeared on the screen, laughing as a skinny, bald, and wrinkled woman ran her bony fingers through his thick, black hair. Her skin was gray—the color of death. He took the woman’s hands into his own and drew her toward his chest.

“I love you, Sophia,” he whispered as he put his mouth to hers.

The two kissed so tenderly—it was the most precious act Dawn had yet to see on her first day of life.

Sophia pulled away from her lover’s embrace and twisted one of his dark curls around her finger. “And I love you, Elijah Prince. Always and forever.”

Dawn felt something run through her circuitry but had no reference for it. She couldn’t experience physical pain, nor hot or cold, or any other sensation known to the flesh. She could rip off her own head and she wouldn’t feel a thing. Yet the sensation she now felt ran deep within her, and it was very, very painful.

As the couple began to kiss again, Dawn knew what it was—she was sad, and she wanted to cry.



The next morning, Dr. Neville found Dawn struggling to remove herself from the wall. She’d watched every single video and now knew about Sophia and Elijah. As Dr. Neville approached her, she screamed, “How do I get out of here?”

“Here, let me show you how to release yourself from the recharger,” he said, pointing to a switch at her side. “Flick this and you’re free.”

As the plug slid free from her socket, Dawn stepped forward and grabbed Dr. Neville by the shoulders. “You must bring me to Elijah Prince.” She dropped him onto the hard tile floor and charged out of the room and through the lab, pushing tables and chairs out of the way, breaking several monitors in the process.

“Dawn, what’s wrong with you?” James said, his voice booming across the empty lab.

She turned back to the scientist and banged her fists on the nearest counter. “I must see him. I have hurt him very much.”

“Do you remember Elijah?” Dr. Neville asked.

“No, I can’t, and that’s the problem. I know who she is now—Sophia. She oversaw this whole lab, and she was Elijah’s lover. Of course, he wants me to know him. Of course, you want me to remember. You are my brother, aren’t you? Why can’t I remember you? Why can’t I remember Elijah? Why can’t I remember his kiss? How could I forget such love?”

“I can call him now if you’d like to see him,” Dr. Neville said.

Something inside of Dawn’s database seized, and the image of Elijah and Sophia kissing replayed over and over in her mind. Fragments of other kisses seemed to blur with the imagery, and above it all came the memory of Elijah hissing at her those terrible words: *“You’re not her. You’re nothing to me.”*

“NO!” she yelled as she grabbed Dr. Neville again and began shaking him. “Elijah Prince hates me. What can I do? What will I do? How can I be something I’m not? He hates me now, oh, he hates me.”

Dawn threw the man across the room, where he landed with a thud against a wall. He rubbed his head, and a trickle of blood ran down his face.

“Oh no!” Dawn started screaming again, this time at her hands for being so strong. Why were humans so weak? “Now I’ve hurt you as well.”

She turned away from the stricken man and ran out the door and farther down the hallway. She queried Neuro for the nearest exit while also hailing a ride. As the autonomous car approached, sirens began to wail from the building behind her.

“Where to?” the car asked as she crawled in. She was much too big for it, but that didn’t matter. She tugged her knees up close to her chest as she forced herself into the seat. She had to see Elijah.

“Sophia Castilogna’s house,” she said, sending the car the address she’d discovered in Neuro’s database.



Twenty minutes later, she found herself riding an elevator to the top floor of one of the most prestigious apartment complexes in Palo Alto. As the doors opened, she made her way down the hallway with long strides to the door with the number 617, Sophia's apartment. She wondered how to get in. How did one enter a house that wasn't theirs? Only, this *was* her house, wasn't it? She approached the door and tried to open it. When it didn't budge, she slammed on it with her open palm, and it fell backward with a loud thwump, echoing across the granite floor.

"Well, I'm very strong, aren't I?" she said, throwing back her hair, despite the circumstances. She ducked down to fit through the threshold and entered the chic apartment.

A moment later, Elijah Prince stood in front of her, wearing only his boxer underwear, his eyes bloodshot, hair standing on end, wide-eyed as he backed away from her. His expression made her angrier.

"Dawn? What the hell did you do to my door?"

"I entered my house," she said, her mouth twisting into a snarl, still unhinged from the feelings now flooding her system.

"Your house?" he asked, a look of hope now on his face. "Have you remembered?"

"NO," she yelled again as she approached him, wanting him to love her, yet hating herself

for such a desire. She needed his kiss; she knew it. He was nothing but a stranger who looked at her as if he'd rather jump out the window than embrace her, but she needed his approval. She had to make it better. "I watched your videos."

Elijah took several more steps away from her and put a couch between them. He raised his hands as if to keep her away and began to speak. "Calm down, Dawn. I can see something is wrong with you."

"Nothing is wrong with me," she said, her voice stuck on its highest volume. "I need something from you."

"What?" he asked.

"I need you to kiss me, like you kissed her."

"Dawn, stop it. Something is wrong with you."

"No, nothing is wrong with me. I am The Dawn of eHumanity. I am perfect and beautiful. I watched you kiss her—a dead, dying thing. She was ugly, yet you kissed her. I am beautiful. Why won't you kiss me?"

Elijah moved even farther away as she continued closing in, like a puma before her prey. Her thoughts were scattered, the kiss still replaying over and over in her mind, along with Sophia's laughter, her words of love, and Elijah's gentle touch. As her memory program spun out of control, her emergency software tried to remedy the problem, to no avail. Dawn backed Elijah into a corner, and she could no longer see

him clearly—the room was blurry and streaked, like a poorly executed work of modern art. Elijah moved his mouth as he yelled in protest, but she couldn't hear him.

“Please kiss me. Please, Elijah. I'm so much more beautiful than her. She was old, hairless, dying. I'm the Dawn of eHumanity. Do as I say.”

She grabbed Elijah and yanked him from the floor to her face, lifting him so high his feet dangled as he struggled. She leaned in toward his terrified face and sensed nothing but his repulsion toward her.

“How can you love the disgusting, dying woman more than me?” she demanded.

“Dawn, there's something wrong with you,” he said, his voice raspy as he gasped for air.

As he spoke, her entire world went dark.

HIM

Elijah crashed to the floor as Dawn's giant eHuman body fell beside him, one of her arms landing on his chest with a thud. He grabbed her, ready to fight, only to discover she was lifeless.

“Dawn?” he asked as he touched her face. Her eyes were open, but the pupil lenses didn't focus upon him. She appeared dead.

“Elijah,” a familiar voice called from the doorway. He looked up to see his mother, Atienne Prince, rushing toward him, her high-heeled Jimmy Choos clacking against the modern tile floor. “Elijah, my god, what was that eBot doing to you?”

“This isn't an eBot, Mother,” he said as he pushed himself up from the floor. “This is Sophia—I mean, Dawn.”

“This is her?” Atienne got down on one knee and leaned in toward Dawn's face. “Well, it's obvious your father designed her. She looks like the first woman I caught him screwing in my

bed.”

“That was ages ago, Mother.” Elijah said, rubbing his eyes. He pointed to Dawn. “Besides, all his women look like this.”

“Except me,” she insisted.

He glanced at his mother. They didn’t call her “The Cougar of Silicon Valley” for nothing. Long auburn hair that fell to her hips, a body only a high-end trainer could sculpt, creamy skin with the right number of freckles, and green eyes, like Sophia’s had been. “True, no one looks like you.” He turned to Dawn. “Is she dead?”

“No,” Atienne replied, holding up a small device. “I shut her off.”

“What? How can you do that?”

“EMP,” she said with a wicked grin, as if he’d caught her laundering Edgar’s money. “Electromagnetic Pulse. I commissioned an engineering firm to make me a handful decades ago to power off the eBots your father placed around the house to spy on me.”

Elijah shook his head. “So, you powered her down by shorting out her Chi-Regulator? Won’t that kill her?”

“Oh no, Elijah, did I kill Sophia?”

Elijah looked down at Dawn and wasn’t sure. The eHuman had attacked him, yet she’d also demanded he kiss her, as he’d kissed Sophia.

“I honestly don’t know, Mom.”

“What was she doing to you?”

“Trying to kiss me.” He looked at Dawn

and shivered. Yesterday he would have given anything for her to ask for that, but now it seemed wrong. “I think she watched all of the videos Sophia and I made before she Jumped, and it must have confused her.”

“What?”

“She forgot me, Mom,” he said, groaning as his stomach clenched. “Didn’t remember a thing after the Jump. It was as if we’d never happened. Then she came here this morning in a rage, ranting and raving about how I loved the sick and vulnerable her, but not the beautiful and immortal her.” Elijah put his head in his hands. “Oh God, I can’t take this. What is happening?”

“I’m so sorry, baby,” his mother said, taking him in her arms. She led him to the kitchen counter, sat him on a stool, and then pressed the CommBud in her ear.

“Hi, it’s your mother,” she said. “Yes, I’m at Elijah’s and your great eHuman experiment is here, on the floor. I might have ruined her.” Pause. “Well, I’m sorry about that, but please come and get her out of here.” Pause. “Wonderful.” She turned back to Elijah. “I’ve alerted Evelyn and told her about Dawn. She’ll be here any minute to pick her up. Elijah, why didn’t you tell me Sophia was going to be the guinea pig for your pet project? I had to hear about it on the news. I’m hurt.”

Elijah shrugged and picked up the pack of cigarettes on the counter. He tapped the bottom,

and one slid into his eager fingers the way a magician handles a deck of cards. He lit it before continuing, "I don't know, Mom. I stopped telling you about work long ago."

"Sophia wasn't work; she was your life. I loved her too, you know." Tears began to form in her eyes, and Elijah knew he'd messed up.

"I know, but she didn't want to say goodbye to anyone, and since we figured that either she'd die in the process or wake up and live on in a new way, we didn't tell very many people. She only let her parents and siblings know."

"But you didn't tell your mother." Atienne's lower lip quivered. "Your father knew, but not me."

"Dawn is Dad's product. He's the one who offered her the opportunity, and we took it. I knew you'd try and talk us out of it, so I failed to mention it to you."

She clicked her tongue, then turned to make some coffee. "I wish you'd told me your plans. I know of others who could have helped Sophia."

"Not one of your Reiki friends." Elijah rolled his eyes as he flicked his cigarette ash into a cheap, plastic ashtray. "Sophia tried all of their mumbo jumbo."

Atienne turned to him and put her hands on her hips. "Do *not* mock my friends."

"I'm sorry, it's just that Sophia had brain cancer, Mom. She needed a new body, not a past

life regression."

Atienne opened her mouth to argue, but Elijah was spared her lecture as Evelyn and James entered the room, lugging an awkward-sized machine between them.

"I can't believe this," Evelyn called out as she crossed the room to inspect Dawn's body. "James, hook her up."

"What's that?" Elijah asked as he came to stand beside them. He held his cigarette and was about to take a puff when James took it from him.

"It's an Equalizer and it will tell us if her Chi-Regulator is fried or not." James held up the cigarette and then crushed it on the nearest surface. "Smoke these outside. I don't wish to die from lung cancer, and neither should you, for that matter."

Elijah looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "That's a Jonathan Adler Globo side table, by the way. It's worth more than your monthly salary." James shrugged and Elijah laughed, slapping James on the back. "Besides, what do I care if I die?"

"Don't talk that way," Atienne said as she entered the room, pointing at the table. "And I'm the one who gave you that table for Christmas."

James turned to see who was talking, and Elijah saw a look cross the older man's face he'd never seen before—interest in a female.

"Mom, this is Dr. James Neville, the inventor of eHumanity, and Sophia's older

brother,” he said, patting his elder employee on the back. “James, this is my mother, Atienne Prince.”

James grimaced, his lips turning to a frown as he glanced at the crushed cigarette and the black scar it had created on the table. “I’m sorry about that.” He turned back to Atienne and held out his hand to shake hers. “Pleased to meet you, my lady.”

“For one of Edgar’s lackeys, you’re quite charming,” Atienne replied.

James’s cheeks grew red, and he turned to Evelyn, who was bent over the machine, staring at the diagnostics screen of the Equalizer.

“Well?” Elijah asked. “What’s the prognosis? Did Mom kill her?”

“Her Chi-Regulator isn’t damaged. Just powered down, like Sleep Mode in the eBots.”

“Yes, I thought so,” said Atienne over the sound of the coffee now percolating. “That’s what I designed them to do. Put the damn eBots in Sleep Mode when your father wasn’t around and then power them back up the moment he came home.”

“You’re the one who did this?” Evelyn asked.

Her mother held up the EMP again and winked. “She was attacking my son. I had to do something.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Elijah said, pointing a finger at his mother’s smug face. “She

had some engineers make it for her.”

“Mother, how do you know engineers?” Evelyn asked.

“Do the two of you think you’re the only brilliant minds in Silicon Valley? I have plenty of friends who work in robotics, and transhumanism, for that matter.”

“Funny, I thought all your friends did was drink Napa Valley cabernet and give Tarot readings,” Evelyn said.

“Nonsense, Evelyn. A woman can be a mystic and an entrepreneur, you know.”

“Well,” James said, shifting on the balls of his feet, “it looks like we can take Dawn back to the lab.”

“Whatever happened to her?” Evelyn asked.

“She watched all those videos you downloaded, and they put her in some strange state, as if her memory software was stuck in a loop. Most of her other features were malfunctioning as well. When I entered the lab this morning, she was a raving lunatic,” James explained.

“Yet somehow she managed to escape your care, call a ride, come to my house, and attack me,” Elijah said. “Obviously she isn’t a mere eBot.”

“She attacked you?” Evelyn asked.

“Yes,” Elijah said, not sure he wanted to talk about it. Something about Dawn needing a

kiss made her look desperate, and even though she couldn't remember him, he didn't want to shame her.

Atienne put an arm around Elijah's shoulder. "I found her yelling and screaming, shaking my son on the floor. I thought she was an eBot and used the EMP on her. I always carry one on my person. You should too. The government is using them to spy on us. They're called security forces, but we all know their real use."

Evelyn nodded slowly, as the corner of her mouth twitched into a grin. "Right again, Mother." She turned back to Dawn, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Well, now what do we do with her?"

"Bring her back to the lab and get her back online. However"—James looked at Elijah — "I think it's best to never mention Sophia to her again. Somehow part of her memories survived the Jump, but other key memories are broken, or missing large bytes of data. I suggest I zeroize her database and start from scratch, minus all references to Sophia Castilogna, or her relationship to Elijah. Let her meet all of us again for the first time when we power her back on."

Elijah's heart pounded at the thought. "Remove all of it?"

"Yes, and we need to announce Sophia died of cancer before the experiment and we used someone else at the last minute. I'll put out

a briefing to the press and inform Edgar of the decision. From now on, Dawn was a Jane Doe, a terminally ill, unknown patient given a second chance at life."

"Pretend Sophia died?" Elijah gulped. After all that had happened, it seemed the right thing to do. Yet doing this would mean losing her forever. He gazed down at the lifeless Dawn, her dead, green camera eyes staring back at him, and shivered. Somehow it felt like this mechanical creature had murdered Sophia.

"Fine," Elijah said, pulling the cigarette pack from his pocket and sliding out a new one.

"Are you coming back to work?" Evelyn asked.

"No. I'm done with Father and Guardian Enterprises."

"Oh come on, why quit now?"

Elijah lit the cigarette and took a drag. "Because my lover has died."

"She didn't die. Stop being so dramatic."

"You sound just like Father."

Evelyn's eyes widened as Atienne sucked in a breath. "Do *not* say such a thing about your sister."

Evelyn pushed up her glasses and threw her ponytail over her shoulder. "I don't care if I sound like Dad. We're on the cusp of something great here, Elijah. I'm sorry Sophia had cancer, but becoming The Dawn has made her a pioneer. Can't you celebrate that? Or are you such an

asshole that the only measure of a woman's worth is how much she adores you?"

Elijah's stomach clenched as if she'd punched him in the gut. "How dare you?"

"Please." Evelyn scoffed, stepping close enough he could hear her own heart beating. "I know you. I've watched from the sidelines as you screwed your way through life while I learned from Father. He taught me things you can never understand, and if your latest lover has now become the beacon of humanity, then I'm going to celebrate my victory."

"Your victory? I'm the one who architected Neuro," Elijah said.

Evelyn put her hands on her hips and leaned in even closer. "*You* architected Neuro?"

"Enough," Atienne said as she handed Elijah a cup of coffee. "While you two fight about who's more brilliant, there are more critical issues to consider. Elijah, you should return to work, and both of you should get as much information as you can about the architecture and future of Neuro and eHumanity."

"Why?" Elijah asked.

"Your sister's right. What's done is done. Let Sophia go become the star she's meant to be. In the meantime, it's best we understand what your father is up to."

"And why do you care what Edgar's up to?" Evelyn asked, crossing her arms.

"I have friends in the life extension

business I'd like you to meet," Atienne admitted. "They have a less authoritarian approach to immortality than your father."

"Who are these friends?" Elijah asked, taking a huge drag from his cigarette before blowing the smoke in one huge dragonesque puff all over the room, causing everyone to cough. Elijah rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, and you think *I'm* dramatic."

"My friends are Magnus and Magda Sinclair," Atienne said, grimacing at the smoke and fluttering her hand in front of her face like a southern belle on her front porch in mid-July. "They're marine researchers for UCSC over the hill in Santa Cruz, but they're also transhumanists on the verge of a breakthrough."

"Transhumanists? You've got to be kidding me," Evelyn said, wrinkling her nose.

"A breakthrough in what?" Elijah asked.

"Life Technologies," Atienne answered. "The ability to live forever, in our carbon bodies."

"That's impossible," James said, his brow furrowing.

"No, it's not." The golden bangles on Atienne's wrists clanked as she thrust her hands on her hips. "While you and Sophia spent your lives pursuing machine immortality,"—she pointed to Dawn lying on the floor, while staring James down like a deer under her scope—"others are about to unlock the genetic underpinnings of death and turn off aging once and for all. I think

it's time for you to meet eHumanity's biggest competitor."

Elijah sipped his coffee and then glanced at Evelyn while taking another drag from his cancer stick. "Well, little sister, what do you think?"

"What do we have to lose?" she asked, peering at him like Hermione Granger in a divination class through her oversized glasses and coughing at the smoke-filled air.

"Just our lives," he answered.

Evelyn looked at the immobile eHuman on the floor and shrugged. "Whatever." She turned back to Elijah. "So, you'll come back to Guardian Enterprises? It's the least you can do for Sophia. Help me build her a beautiful eHuman world."

Elijah gripped his coffee cup. "Fine."

"Wonderful." Atienne slung her Gucci purse over her shoulder and threw on her D&G sunglasses. "You two get me details about Edgar's true aspirations, and I'll give you Magnus."

"I'm not spying on Father," Evelyn said as she began to pack up the equipment.

"But you are interested in an alternative immortality tech, right?" Atienne asked.

Elijah laughed. "Oh, now I see. You need some angel investors, don't you?"

Atienne shook her head, causing her oversized golden hoop earrings to shake around her neck. "Don't be a fool, my son. I love to see the

two of my children work together."

"Work together to bankrupt Edgar before we've even begun?" snapped Evelyn.

"If you want to put it that way, yes," Atienne admitted. "Now, I must be going. I have an I-Ching reading in thirty-three minutes, and Cheyanne doesn't like me to be late."

Elijah followed his mother out and watched as she gracefully stepped over the broken door in her designer heels and walked to the elevator. As the doors opened, she waved to him playfully over her shoulder and then moved out of his sight.

He returned to his apartment and walked up to James, who was sliding Dawn onto a stretcher. "I assume you're on board as well. We can't have you telling Edgar of our meeting with Mom's transhumanists, can we?"

"I will do what must be done," James said. "If I'm honest, I've regretted selling eHumanity to Edgar for quite some time." He glanced at Dawn and moved the hair out of her Barbie doll face. "All Sophia and I ever wanted to do was give people a second chance at life. Who knows, maybe your mother's friends will have something worthy of consideration. We tried to use our understanding of the Lux to elongate life in the flesh, but machines seemed the easier route. I'm curious as to what these people are cooking up, I really am. I'd love to know what Life Technologies are."

NICOLE SALLAK ANDERSON

James stood at one end of the stretcher and Evelyn at the other. They bent down to pick Dawn up.

“Knowing Mother, it probably requires a drum circle,” Evelyn said, snorting as she hefted up the eHuman.

Elijah smiled at the puzzled look on James’s face. “This is going to be interesting.”

HER

On the morning of her six-month birthday, Dawn opened her eyes after her eight hours of recharging to find Elijah Prince leaning back in his chair, one leg resting on the other, smoking a cigarette, and staring at her. She reached to her right and flicked the release lever in the wall. The golden plug hissed ever so slightly as it retracted from her socket. She stepped forward and nodded to him.

“Hello, Elijah.”

“I hope you don’t mind. This is the only place I can smoke without someone complaining,” he said as he sucked his cigarette.

“It’s fine. No lungs, no worries. Can’t get cancer like you will. At least, that’s what the data in Neuro suggests.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So, how was your recharge session?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, Dawn, I need you to be honest. It’s

the only way I can design the Pleasure Zones for you and the others.”

“Yes, the others. Today is a special day, isn’t it? When do I get to meet them?”

Elijah grimaced, but he continued in a pleasant voice. “James is Jumping the first one as we speak. You’ll meet him after all the initial tests are complete.”

“Why don’t I know his name?”

“His name is Origen. You helped to name him, remember?”

“Yes, but who is he now? What man, or woman, is Jumping into Origen’s body?”

Elijah flicked his cigarette ash into a bowl and rose from his seat. “You can’t remember who you were before your Jump, so that means he or she won’t remember either. Company policy is such that none of us, except James, know the candidates. He will pick them out, he will train them, and he will Jump them. We will only know them as eHumans.”

For some reason, this felt hollow to Dawn. “In Neuro I’m listed as Jane Doe. That’s a name for no one and everyone at the same time.”

“And Origen will be listed as John Doe. That’s the company policy. Why do you care who he is now?”

“Because he will be my friend as well as my family, won’t he? I want to know everything about him.”

Elijah’s shoulders slumped. The man was

always so melancholic. Dawn wished she knew why. When he spoke, his voice was soft. “Your family? Yes, I guess that’s what the Original 12 will be. The first eHuman family. Now, tell me, what do you think of my latest Pleasure Zone app?”

Dawn felt shy talking about it with him, even though she was grateful for his work. He’d created the AppPortal in Neuro for her entertainment while recharging, as well as over twenty distinct types of Virtual Reality experiences for her to enjoy. Last evening’s entertainment had been a sexual one in which she made love like those of the flesh to a man that she designed with her own desires.

“I like the way I can create anything with my thoughts,” she said. “It’s wonderful how the operating system works with me like that.”

“Yes, Neuro is meant to evolve as more Lux interact with it. It learns from your collective experiences. What else did you like about it?”

There was a wicked glimmer in his eyes, and it made her both nervous and aroused. “I enjoyed the sex, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Did it feel real?”

“How am I supposed to know? I can’t remember sex in the flesh, but I do like the orgasmic signals sent to my pleasure receptor software. Quite an enjoyable state to be in.”

“How long were you able to hold an

orgasm?”

“Hours.” His eyes widened as a look of desire crossed his face. She smiled. “You look like your father right now, you know.”

It was obvious she’d said the wrong thing because he began to scowl. “Anything else you’d like to report?”

“No, that’s all. I like it, Elijah, I do. Thank you for making recharging more enjoyable.”

“Why do I sense it’s not exactly perfect?”

“Oh, I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but sometimes these experiences leave me wanting. Like the Musical Performance App. I selected a most beautiful choir experience; the men and women sang like angels. It’s stunning work, Elijah, but I know it’s not real. I want to go to see a choir performance in real life, not here in my recharge room. Can’t you take me out of this lab and show me more of the real world?”

She was restless cooped up in the bowels of eHumanity’s headquarters. Anytime she asked to go somewhere, the answer was always the same. She could tell from the look on Elijah’s face behind a puff of smoke that her wish would yet again be denied.

“I’m sorry, Dawn. As the only eHuman in the world, you’ll draw too much attention.”

“But people bring their eBots everywhere. Men even bring their sex-bots on dates. I can pretend to be your sex-bot. Please, Elijah, take me out.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t.” He did look sorry for her, but then his face darkened into its usual brooding scowl. “However, you will be going out soon enough. Edgar plans to take the entire Original 12 on a global tour starting next month.”

“Really?” she asked. “Now I’m even more eager to meet my eHuman family.”

Elijah swallowed hard as if he’d just eaten, and his eyes narrowed. “You’re to convince the world to Jump into Neuro with you and live happily ever after.”

“From the bitter look on your face, you don’t seem to think my world is wonderful.”

“What do you mean, bitter look?”

“You look like you swallowed castor oil.”

He placed his cigarette between his lips. “I do have my reservations about becoming a machine.”

“I hate it when you say that. I’m not a machine.”

He stared at her as the smoke streamed out between his full lips like fog reaching up along a quiet shoreline, and she felt as though he was trying to read her thoughts. “I think we’re done here. We need to prep you to greet Origen.”

Elijah walked toward the exit, and Dawn followed. As he opened the door, he turned to her, the wicked look once again in his eyes. “Tell me this,” he said. “What sort of lover do you create in Neuro to entertain you?”

Dawn stood taller and tossed her bright hair over her shoulder. She had no intention of telling Elijah her virtual lover was his replica. It hadn't been intentional, but Dawn liked the way Elijah looked, and even though the real man was distant and strange in real life, he was a virtuoso in her virtual bed.

"That is none of your business, Mr. Prince."

"I can look it up, you know. Nothing is private in Neuro."

"Sorry, but you can't. I've encrypted those files," Dawn answered. "Evelyn gave me the functionality a while ago. I knew you were snooping."

He gaped at her, the cigarette falling out of his wide-open mouth. Dawn picked up the nasty thing and crushed it on her palm to put it out before walking away from Elijah, pleased to know she could surprise her creator in this way.



Later, dressed in a silver pantsuit and high-heeled black boots, Dawn stood at attention in the lab beside Edgar Prince. She'd changed her outfit several times before settling on a more modern look. She wanted to impress her new eHuman family. Five of them had Jumped today—three males and two females. James would help the rest Jump tomorrow.

"You look stunning, Dawn," Edgar said as he smiled at her. Dawn was bemused to see the same wicked look in his eye that Elijah had worn while talking about her Pleasure Zone escapades. They looked so much like each other, even if their personalities were like night and day. Edgar was so enthusiastic about life, yet Elijah acted as if he were barely interested.

"Thank you, Edgar. This is a special occasion and I wanted to look nice."

"It is a special occasion. You will now have compatriots with whom to spend your time, rather than the boring humans in the lab. I'm sure you've tired of us, haven't you?"

Dawn cocked her head as she pondered his question. She glanced across the room to Elijah's workstation, where he was bent over his keyboard, tapping out code at what seemed like the speed of light. Several others were sitting near him, men and women dedicated to creating an extraordinary eHuman experience for her. James was always so kind, and then there was Evelyn, the mastermind of them all. While Dawn didn't understand them, she did like them.

"No, I haven't tired of you," she replied. "I appreciate all the work that goes on here."

"But aren't you lonely?" Edgar asked.

She paused again to consider her response and nodded despite herself. "Yes, I am lonely. Especially at night when everyone is gone. Sometimes James or Elijah is here, but they're

working, and I can't really talk to them. Most of the time I watch movies or plug in to test Elijah's latest app."

"You're different than us, Dawn, and that's wonderful. Be patient. Soon everyone will be eHuman and you will never be alone again," Edgar said, his voice thick. He brushed his dark hair out of his handsome face and smiled. "In the meantime, I believe it's time to meet your family."

The door to the lab opened. Everyone looked up as Dr. Neville entered, followed by five of the most magnificent beings Dawn had ever seen. Each was too tall for the doorway and had to duck as they entered to form a line. Everyone, including Elijah Prince, crowded around the shiny, new eHumans.

The first one was Origen. Dawn had spent hours gazing at his body as they built it, watching him take form, but now that the body was inhabited by a human Lux, it was radiant to behold. His golden eyes shone beneath long, snow-white dreadlocks that contrasted against his almost onyx complexion. They'd built him to represent the ideal human man, so he was muscular and lean, yet Origen was more than a man; he was a god, and Dawn couldn't keep her eyes off him.

Next to Origen stood Cane, a man with long Valentine's Day-red hair and matching eyes. Under the light, his pearlescent skin seemed

to shimmer. Beside Cane was Glory, an ochre-skinned beauty with breasts and curves to die for. Not that those features meant much to eHumans, but they were, after all, created to wow a human population. After Glory was Ambrose, an elegant Asian man, his long, dark hair braided down his back. Last in line was Priya, another pale-skinned woman with curly, shoulder-length auburn hair and green eyes, like Dawn's.

Together they made up half of the O12. Dawn clasped her fingers like a prayer. It was all so exciting.

"Hello," she said as she stepped forward, careful not to trip in her haste. "I'm so happy to meet you. I am Dawn."

Origen held out his hand, never taking his eyes from hers, and she shook it.

"I'm also happy to meet you," he said, his voice rich and melodic with a British accent.

"Oh, I adore your voice program," Dawn said.

"We've made sure all of you as a group have the features most desired by humanity," Edgar explained as he stepped forward. "British and French accents for the men, sultry and soft for the women. Cane, you represent some of the more creative features one can attain as an eHuman, for the youth in the population. As a group, your job is to wow the population and plant the seeds of desire."

“Desire for what?” Cane asked.

“The desire to become eHuman and join us in our immortal world,” Edgar answered.

“Why would anyone refuse such a gift?” the woman named Glory asked. “Even though I can’t recall my life in the flesh, I’m already in love with this body. I can’t wait to see all it can do.”

“Discover your power you will,” Edgar replied. “You begin training tomorrow. I have choreographers, writers, costume designers, and a stage director arriving to join our team. Together you will put on the greatest show on earth, and people will flock to watch you do the most amazing things.”

“We’re to be entertainment?” Origen asked.

“Not exactly,” Edgar replied. “You will entertain, but you aren’t merely for show. You are the way of the future, Origen. Never forget that. Starting tomorrow, you will all focus on one thing—becoming the best eHuman you can be—and you will share your magnificence with the world. We go on tour in three weeks, so work hard, day in and day out.”

“It’s too good to be true,” Dawn said, grinning at them all. “I can’t wait to get out of here and see the world.”

Edgar put his arm around her and drew her close to his body. She looked down into his eyes and noticed that he rose taller in her embrace. He took a strand of her golden hair and

curled it around his finger. “You are my finest creations, and I can’t wait to show humanity our true potential.”



For the next three weeks, Dawn no longer worked in the lab but in the training facility with the others in the O12. Each day, she was amazed at the way her body could twist and turn with ease, jump at least ten feet in the air, and fall from several stories to the ground without incident. The other eHumans were the same, and under the direction of their stage director, the troupe created something that made Cirque de Soleil look like *The Muppet Show*.

It wasn’t the excitement of it all that made her happy—it was that Dawn was no longer lonely. She and her eHuman family spent every moment together, and at the end of a hard day’s work, they all went online during their recharging sessions, playing games and creating new adventures. She no longer sat alone in the lab in the dead of night or spent time in the Pleasure Zones making love to a virtual form that looked like Elijah. As a matter of fact, she almost forgot about the smoking engineer, as she had now moved out of the lab and into the eHuman dorm Edgar had built for them. Gone were her days of testing; they were filled instead

with choreography and challenging her body in new ways, such as climbing fifty-foot walls and then leaping back down with ease. Dawn was no longer a lab rat, as James had often called her. Instead, she was the leading lady of an important show.

On the eve before the launch, the O12 performed for the entire staff of Guardian Enterprises. At least two hundred people were in attendance. Excitement surged through all her circuits as she walked down the stage, hand and hand with Origen, to the beat of afro-pop music, wearing nothing but the barest essentials and showing off every bit of their sculpted eHuman bodies. She could tell by the looks on the faces in the audience that the handsome couple aroused them—the dance had been choreographed to captivate and manipulate human passion. All eyes were on them, begging for more.

All eyes, that is, except Elijah Prince's. He looked at her as if he saw through her, to another world. It bothered her, but only for a moment, for the next instant, Origen picked her up into his arms and threw her in the air, where she executed a double-twisting backflip before landing at his side. They ran offstage as Ambrose, Glory, and Priya cartwheeled onstage before a flaming Cane, who danced with fire while also *on* fire.

The next day, they boarded a tour bus with Edgar and headed out toward Las Vegas

for the Consumer Electronics show. This would be the first time humanity would meet the eHumans, and if Edgar had his way, the world would never be the same. Dawn and the others laughed and chatted like kids on their first day of school as they settled into their seats. A group of employees stood outside, sending them off on their great journey. Dawn looked out the window and saw Elijah standing next to James, and realized she hadn't said goodbye to the men who had spent so much of their lives creating hers.

Dawn waved at them through the window, and they both returned the gesture. On a whim, she blew them a kiss, and Elijah pretended to catch it. He placed his hand to his mouth, and she regretted she hadn't taken the time to seek him out and say goodbye.

What Dawn didn't know then was that by the time she finished her world tour, Elijah would no longer be employed at Guardian Enterprises, and she would see his handsome, troubled face only once more before he died.

HIM

Several months into the eHuman USA tour, things started to settle down at Guardian Enterprises. Rather than working on new features and eHuman deployment, their focus became maintenance and enhancing what was already there. For the moment, both Prince siblings had time on their hands, so their mother decided Elijah needed to throw a dinner party for her and her engineering friends. Elijah agreed with about as much enthusiasm as a teenager in church, and he regretted the entire affair a mere half hour into the event, when his mother brought up the recent federal ban on natural conception.

“I think the law makes sense,” Evelyn said, sipping her wine and glaring at their mother, who narrowed her eyes right back. Elijah knew an argument was about to ensue—despite all the efforts Atienne had put forth in raising her daughter, in many ways, Evelyn was more Edgar’s child. They were too alike, and it was

starting to bother Elijah.

“You think it’s fine to outlaw natural conception outright?” Atienne asked. “How can you? How will anyone enforce such a law?”

“Well, there is mandatory sterilization for violators listed in the bill,” Evelyn said.

“Evelyn, how can you say that?”

“It’s the only option for penalties,” Evelyn continued. “Unless they refuse to provide prenatal care to women who conceive naturally. That would work as well. Honestly, Mother, how can a parent refuse the genetic testing that goes with in-vitro? They have nearly eradicated all disease, and the latest embryo technology will prevent cancer from forming as well. This means you ensure your child is healthy. Any other option is insane. If a parent refuses genetic perfection, they shouldn’t be parents.”

“Genetic perfection is impossible, and you know it,” Atienne snapped, her voice shrill, reminding Elijah of the times their mother had caught them as teens doing something wrong. “There will always be a disease we’re working to eradicate and a strain of virus able to mutate. This is the natural order of biological life, whether you like it or not.”

“Well, soon we might not have biological life.” Evelyn crossed her arms. “At least not for humans.”

“Which brings me to my issue with the law,” Elijah cut in, placing a hand on his sister’s

arm. “I know Edgar spent millions lobbying for the natural conception ban. Why would he do that if he plans to replace us with machines?”

Evelyn’s eyes glittered as she glared at him over her glasses, her lips drawn into a tight line. The others around the table—Atienne’s guests, Magda and Magnus, as well as James, who was sitting rather too close to his mother for Elijah’s liking—glanced at one another.

“I’m sure you know why,” Magda said in a deep, throaty voice that made Elijah’s heart skip a beat. She was a beautiful woman with long red curls, brown eyes, and curves that drove him wild. It had been a long time since Elijah had felt the touch of a woman. He shook his head at the thought. Unfortunately, she was married to the man whose company he was about to fund.

“I can guess.” Elijah sighed. “It’s obvious that if refusing genetically engineered fertility treatments is already punishable by law, then the same will be true if you refuse to let your children jump into eHuman bodies.”

“Exactly,” Magda replied. “Which is why forcing medical procedures on parents is a horrible thing to do, even if your intentions are good.”

“Why is it horrible to want to do what’s best for the nation’s children?” Evelyn argued.

“Because once we let the state mandate medical procedures, there’s no stopping it, is there?” Magda asked. “This began decades ago

with mandatory vaccination, which seemed fine to most of us in the scientific community because back then, we were dealing with communicable diseases. Now, we’re forcing parents to select everything from intelligence to skin color to height, all in the name of health. When does it stop? What sort of parent are you if you prohibit your child from accepting the gift of immortality?”

“You’re one to talk,” Evelyn said, her tone harsh like a blonde Fox News reporter. “Aren’t we here to discuss your immortality technology?”

Magda’s husband, Magnus, leaned forward and grinned at Evelyn. “Yes, we too are interested in immortality, but our solution is one anyone can opt out of at any time. Unlike the eHuman, it isn’t a permanent life choice.”

Elijah shifted in his seat and pointed to the heavily tattooed, balding man. “How can that be? I thought you had a genetic solution. Doesn’t that mean any changes would be permanent?”

“Our solution works with the DNA,” Magnus said. “Not by changing it, though; rather, it renews the body at a cellular level by regenerating the etheric energy signal.”

“I don’t follow,” Elijah said.

“It’s simple really,” Magnus replied. “You know about the etheric energy signal; it too is at the heart of your technology. In your case, you entrain the Chi-Regulator with the beating human heart to generate the signal

and convince the Lux to follow it into a new, robotic body—a body that will never age. Yet the mechanical body does require maintenance, and a power source, so technically the eHuman isn't immortal; it's just harder to kill."

Evelyn shrugged, and Atienne rose from her seat as she announced, "I'm going to get some more wine."

James eyed Atienne's movements as she left the room. Elijah wasn't sure what was going on with the pair. He had a feeling they were dating, yet the thought of his mother in old James's arms confused Elijah. The woman was so much more interesting than James. What could she possibly see in such a simple man?

Magnus's voice interrupted Elijah's fascination with his mother's love life, bringing him back to the topic at hand. "Your Chi-Regulator mimics the etheric signal, while we are working on a way to regenerate the etheric energy signal itself. We've discovered the signal degrades with time, and as the etheric energy signal weakens, our telomeres begin to shrink, causing many ailments, such as cancer, dementia, and of course, old age. Like a battery, the etheric energy signal needs to be recharged to keep its strength. The environment affects the strength of the signal, but even in a pristine location without any pollution, the signal will degrade, and death is always around the corner when that happens."

"So, you seek to build a machine that recharges the etheric energy signal, thus prolonging cellular life?" Elijah asked. Already, he found the idea intriguing, if only because it would allow them to live in the flesh, and the flesh was much harder to regulate than the machine.

"Yes," Magnus answered. "We call it Life Tech because we seek to improve life by strengthening the etheric energy signal. It might lead to immortality—we're not positive—but we know for a fact it will curtail all cancer and environmental disease. It's a much more sovereign solution than eHumanity because your consciousness remains your own."

James cleared his throat. "How does one renew the etheric energy signal?"

"You and Sophia weren't far off from discovering it yourselves, James," Atienne said as she returned to the room, a bottle of 2035 Beauregard Ranch Zinfandel in her hands. Elijah's stomach flipped at the mention of Sophia. Damn, he still missed her. "The etheric energy signal strengthens when exposed to pure, geometrically sound energy forms. Thus, the ideal solution would be to figure out a way to amplify the human etheric energy signal with that of the planet, which hums at a perfect frequency."

Evelyn rolled her eyes, but James smiled. "Yes, that's it, isn't it? Create a machine that will

harmonize our signal with the earth's biosphere. Brilliant. How soon will you have it complete?"

Both Magda and Marcus frowned. "We're not sure," Magda admitted. "We've run into a funding issue. In addition, the University of California canceled our last round of testing. The Chancellor said the government was hounding him to shut us down. It looks like your eHumans have beat us to the punch."

A rush of heat crossed Elijah's skin. "I'm sure Edgar had something to do with it."

"Probably," Magda said, picking up her wine glass. "Regardless, we don't have a slick marketing campaign like the O12. I've been using our prototype for years, and while I look much younger than my forty-two years"—she paused to finish the contents of her glass, and Elijah tried to hide his shock that she was so much older than him—"I'm nothing like Dawn or Origen. I can't compete against their momentum."

Atienne poured the wine and looked at her children. "Well, what do you think?"

Evelyn shrugged. "Their idea is interesting. I'd have to investigate more before I could agree that it's sound."

Atienne tossed her auburn mane over her shoulder. "Evelyn, be polite."

"Mother, I'm not sure what you want from me. I met your friends and I understand what you're suggesting. Life Tech is a valid competitor

to the eHuman solution. It might even be a better option, but I don't see this changing Edgar's mind one bit. He's invested too much in the eHuman platform to even take one look at this."

"I didn't ask you here to represent your father's assets," Atienne replied. "I'm asking you for your own personal investment."

"I need more information," Evelyn said. "It's a crapshoot at best. In addition, it requires regular treatments, I presume?"

"Yes," Magnus said. "Currently we take an etheric bath every two weeks. If we stop for longer than that, the etheric energy signal begins to degrade at a normal pace."

"Etheric bath?" Elijah asked.

"That's what we call the machine. It's a small contrivance we hold in our hands while soaking in a tub for an hour that synchronizes our etheric body with the frequency of the water. But our data points to harvesting the signal of the earth's etheric energy as the best chance for radical life extension, which will require a complete redesign. Hence why we require funding."

Evelyn rose from her place at the table. "Well, I think I've heard enough. Elijah, will you see me to the door?"

Elijah knew this was her way of discussing the matter in private. "Of course. I'll take some more wine, Mom, so fill up my glass. I'll be right back."

He left the dining room and followed Evelyn to the foyer. Candles burned in the sconces every few feet, casting long shadows down the corridor. Evelyn turned to him and gave him a concerned look.

“You’re not buying this crap, are you?” she asked.

“They do have an interesting solution,” he replied.

She tugged at her ponytail. “It’s total mumbo jumbo. The earth doesn’t have an etheric energy signal.”

“How do you know that? No one thought we had an etheric signal either until about three decades ago.”

“The ancient Egyptians knew about the human etheric energy signal,” she noted. “They called it the Ka. But the earth isn’t human; it doesn’t have an etheric body at all.”

“How do we know? The Vedics described techniques to align with the perfect harmony of the planet thousands of years ago.”

“Shit, you sound like Mother,” Evelyn said, crossing her arms. “Listen, I know you’re suspicious of everything Father does, but you and I are the ones who’ve designed eHumanity, not him. Why are you so against it?”

“Because he owns eHumanity, not us. Sure, we have stocks and a vested financial interest, but in the end, he’s the one lounging at some world leader’s dinner table, setting up a global

citizenry where the few call the shots.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“There is no future but an authoritarian future if everything, including humanity, is a networked device. Those who own the tech will rule.”

“You and I also own the tech. Why do you think we’ll be such bad rulers?”

She stared at him, her eyes both demanding like his father’s and hopeful like his mother’s.

“Evelyn,” he said, taking her hand. “You can’t believe controlling humanity is the answer.”

She withdrew her hand from his and swallowed. “We won’t stop destroying the planet without a bit of social programming, and you know it. I can’t imagine anything worse than supporting a life extension technology that grants immortality to the free human mind.”

“How can you say such a thing?”

This time, it was Evelyn’s turn to take his hands. “How can you be such a fool to think otherwise? Human thought is twisted, and Neuro can untwist it. Magda and Marcus’s solution leaves too much freedom in the hands of the people. Renewing the etheric energy signal might bring longer life, and rid us of disease, but will it cure stupidity? Or insanity? Or end crime, war, and poverty? Not everyone should live forever.”

Elijah backed up from her and shook his head. “Stop it. Now you sound like Father.”

“Of course I do,” she said, her voice a low hiss like the kitten he’d brought home from school as a child. “Because he’s right, Elijah, and you know it. Granting people physical health won’t do us any good unless their minds are cured as well. Neuro will not only make life in the eHuman body possible; it’ll remove all memories of hate, lust, pain, desire, greed, anything we want. Name a vice and we can make a program to enable a mass forgetting.”

“I can’t believe you would suggest such a thing.”

“And I can’t believe you’re so naive to believe humanity is better off left with a choice.”

“The moment you remove my free will,” Elijah said, his heart pounding to the rhythm of anger, “you have removed my need to live.”

“Fine, if you think that way, then go ahead and fund a competitor. I for one will stay with Guardian Enterprises. I may not agree with everything Father is proposing, but I do believe in offering the eHuman solution to those who are interested. It is the best way to save our planet and ourselves.”

A wave of nausea swept through Elijah, accompanied by a warm flush across his skin, as he understood how much humanity needed another solution to save them from his family’s ambitions. He was the only one who could

provide it. With Evelyn in his pocket, there was nothing to stop Edgar from ruling the world. She really was more Edgar’s child than Atienne’s.

“Listen,” he said, “I want to explore Magda and Magnus’s work further. Mom’s right, I have a lot of financial resources. Their Life Tech needs an angel, and I might be able to be that for them.”

“It won’t bring Sophia back.”

“No, it won’t.” Elijah ran his fingers through his now shoulder-length hair. “I know that, but I have to do something.”

“You’re making a mistake,” she said.

“No, Evelyn, you’re the one who fails to see the whole picture.”

She turned and opened the door, stopping to look over her shoulder and push her eyeglasses up her nose. “By the way, brother, I see right through you.”

“What do you mean?”

She nodded toward the dining room. “Funding this project will probably get you laid, but Magda isn’t Sophia. Not even close.”

“I’m not doing this to nail Magda,” he said, his jaw clenching.

“Yeah, right,” she said, turning to leave. “You think I’m the only one like Edgar? The two of you lust for pussy more than any other humans I know.”

The door slid shut behind her, and Elijah returned to the dinner table, his heart pounding from the conversation. A set of eBots were in

the middle of serving the main course. Atienne looked at him, her mouth set in a firm line, a haunted look in her eyes.

“We’ve lost her, haven’t we?” his mother asked.

Elijah nodded and sat down at his place. “I think it’s best we don’t discuss this in her company ever again.” Then he looked at their guests and held up his glass. “To a new partnership. I offer you, Magnus and Magda Sinclair, my entire fortune. Let us build an alternative to eHumanity, shall we?”

They toasted one another, and James cleared his throat. “I take it this is your resignation, Elijah?”

He looked to the older man. “I think eventually, it will be my resignation, but for now it’s best I stay a while longer. At most six more months, to give Magda and Marcus time to get started with my funding before Edgar takes an interest in me, because I’m sure he’ll be pissed when I go.”

“I understand,” James said. “I’ll miss you.”

“Oh, we’re just getting started, my good man. Your work for me isn’t over,” Elijah said with a smile.

“What shall I tell Dawn when she asks where you’ve gone?”

“Tell her I’ve gone on a global tour of my own, to find myself.”

James stared at him, eyes pale behind his

wire-rimmed glasses. “Of course.”

Elijah recalled the kiss she’d blown him as the tour bus had left the parking lot. Evelyn was right about one thing—Magda might be brilliant like Sophia, but she wasn’t Sophia. And while Dawn wasn’t Sophia either, not in the truest sense, he’d never see her again if he left Guardian Enterprises. The realization made his chest ache as the truth hit him—even though Dawn was an eHuman and had no recollection of their relationship beyond the lab, he still loved her.

He always would.

HER

The protesters appeared a few weeks into the O12 American tour. At first, they were a minor nuisance, a handful of religious types holding signs that claimed the end was near, or immortality was a sin against God. Dawn chuckled at the sight of them as they clustered around the tour bus. She and the rest of her eHuman family strode through the swarm of angry humans, parting the crowd as a sudden desert wash cuts through the sand.

A year later, as they wrapped up their USA tour, the story had changed. Now the parking lots were crammed with protestors, and gaining access to stadiums had become a nightmare. The O12 traveled with an armed squadron of eBots. It made Dawn uncomfortable.

As the tour bus turned into their latest stop on the tour, the city of Chicago's state-of-the-art McCormick Place convention center, the eBot army at the back of the bus powered on, and the sounds of their guns snapping shut as they

were loaded with ammo interrupted the nervous conversation on the bus.

Dawn gazed out the window and trembled. The protestors filled the enormous parking lot and swarmed before them like waves in the ocean, holding signs with statements such as, "DEATH IS MY RIGHT," "HANDS OFF MY BODY," "DEATH IS A PART OF LIFE—GOD WILL NOT FORGIVE US," "THE BODY IS THE TEMPLE OF THE SOUL," and "MY BODY, MY LIFE."

The eBots moved down the aisle of the bus and into the crowds, causing the protestors to part like the Red Sea to Moses's staff.

"Quickly," Edgar called as he followed his private army toward the convention center.

The crowds roared, hissed, and booed as eHumanity's founder exited the safety of the bus. Origen and the others followed behind Edgar, Dawn bringing up the rear. Behind her, seven more eBots, all carrying machine guns, kept the crowds at bay. As she passed the protestors, she could see the anger and fury in their eyes. They were violated by her existence; she could see it in their red, screaming faces, eyes wide and teeth bared. She wanted to reach out to them and explain how misguided their fear was. She was the future, the way out of the barbaric cycles of life and death. Such things were for the past, and eHumanity's triumph was one to share with the entire population. Who would want to be left behind?

The sweltering summer sun blazed down upon the people, and their sweaty bodies moved up against hers. Dawn raised her head high and waved to them, as she'd been trained to do. Glancing up ahead, she saw the door to the convention center and knew relief was soon at hand.

Suddenly, a woman from the crowd grabbed her and yanked her out of the line and into the swarm of human bodies.

"Sophia," the woman cried. Dawn shivered as she looked the woman up and down. For some reason, the old, wrinkled face seemed familiar. "Sophia, it's me, your grandmother Annie." The woman placed a card in Dawn's hand. "My name and address. Oh, my dear, it's been so long. Please see us. We all miss you."

The crowds began to push against the frail woman at her side, and Dawn felt the rough tug of an eBot ripping her from their grip and back to safety. A second eBot placed his gun at the old woman's temple and she cowered, hiding her head under her arms as if such an action could save her from their attack.

"No," Dawn said, smacking the eBot's arm. "Leave her be."

She turned on her heel and ran toward the safety of the convention center, thinking about the woman as she fled. Grandmother Annie? Sophia? The names began to tug at her memory. She turned to look at the old woman once more

but couldn't find her in the crowd. Malicious chants called out around her, and Dawn entered the convention center in a daze.

The door slammed behind her, blocking out the violence with a loud thud. She glanced around and saw the familiar faces of Origen and Cane, as well as the others. They were laughing and mocking the protestors, but Dawn had no urge to join them. Something wasn't right, but she couldn't put a finger on it. She searched her database for Sophia and found nothing. Then she looked at the crumpled card in her hand, noting the name Annie Dittany, and committed the information written on it to her memory.

"Dawn," Edgar said as he approached her, placing his hand on her shoulder. "Why in the world did you let yourself get so close to the crowd?" He gazed at her, head tilted and eyebrows drawn together, and yet there was something else in his eyes—fear. He pointed at the small card in her hand. "What is this?" He plucked it from her grip. He read it and then looked at her, dark eyes glittering under the fluorescent lights of the convention center.

"Who is Annie Dittany?" Dawn asked as her software began to search Neuro's entire network. A story started to form. "Grandmother Annie is Annie Dittany, from Chicago, lives on Monroe, eighty-seven years old, her daughter is Rosa Neville, mother of three children, one named Sophia, who married a man named

Charles Castilogna who died of cancer, and later Sophia also died of cancer on the day Dawn was born...”

Edgar tapped his watch as she spoke, and suddenly the data trail went blank, and so did her mind.

He continued to look at her as she momentarily hovered in that place between knowing and deletion. The moment passed, and she smiled at Edgar.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Just making sure everything is fine,” he replied as he tapped his watch and then tore a small paper in his hand in half.

“What’s that?” Dawn asked, pointing to the bits of rubbish in his hands.

“It’s nothing, dear, nothing at all,” he answered.

Their manager, Morgan, entered the room, wearing one of his familiar fretting frowns they’d all come to understand meant something wasn’t quite right.

“Edgar,” Morgan said, “I have some disturbing news.”

“Well,” Edgar said, now putting the shredded paper into his breast pocket, “what is it?”

“It’s Elijah. He’s turned in his resignation.”

“What? That’s nonsense.”

“It’s true. He left a message.” Morgan

tapped the CommBud in his ear to send it to Edgar. As he listened to the message, his eyes widened.

“I need to get back home,” Edgar said, running his hands through his thick black hair. “Morgan, you manage the next two stops. I’ll join you in New York before we leave for the European leg.”

“Yes, sir,” Morgan replied.

“Morgan, this is serious,” Edgar continued, grabbing the other man’s arm. “We may need to move up the virus schedule. Is it ready?”

Dawn tuned up her hearing. Was Edgar suggesting releasing illness upon unsuspecting people?

“Last I heard, it had a 15 percent fatality rate and a contagion rate of two,” Morgan answered. “It should kill enough to make the shift easier for production schedules, while also scaring the population. The lab is prepared to release it, but are we ready to meet the demand for eHuman bodies?”

Dawn recorded their conversation in her private, encrypted database. She hadn’t used the software in ages, not since she was hiding her Pleasure Zone sessions from Elijah. A virus, lab created, highly deadly. With her hearing module turned up, she could hear the protestors chanting outside. If there were a pandemic killing them at such a high rate, they would

change their tune about her existence.

“Leave that to me,” Edgar answered. “Be ready to release patient zero. Elijah might leave us no option.”

He turned and flinched, as if surprised Dawn was still there.

“Edgar, if Elijah leaves, who will continue the work of Neuro?” she asked.

She’d never seen Edgar so upset before, and it was quite alarming. His whole body shook, his fists were clenched, and his eyes were wide and wild, like the protestors outside.

“He won’t leave, Dawn. No one ever leaves me,” Edgar answered, eyes narrowing as he tapped his watch.

Dawn felt a strange, emptying sensation in her mind as her memory of the previous conversation faded away. The room spun a bit as she regained consciousness.

Edgar left, and Origen came up and put an arm around her. “What was that all about?”

Dawn turned and snuggled closer to her friend’s gentle touch, searching her local database. Something was missing. “I’m not sure. Edgar is angry and yet...” She paused. Morgan stared at her as if evaluating her during a test.

“I see,” Origen said. “What happened outside?”

“What do you mean?” Dawn asked.

“When that woman pulled you into the crowd?” Origen explained.

“What woman? I don’t recall anything except anger, guns, and the desire to get inside.”

Origen’s brow furrowed in confusion. He opened his mouth like he was about to argue with her, but Morgan stepped forward, tapping his watch as he spoke. “You two are wanted on stage in an hour.”

Origen’s expression froze for a moment before he continued speaking. “Yes, the crowds are getting more violent. I wonder what drives them to take such efforts against us. Don’t they realize we offer them complete freedom?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Dawn agreed. “Why do they fight us, when what we have to offer them is the gift of life?”

Origen shrugged. “I have no idea, Dawn, but they’ll come around. I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so,” Dawn said.

“They will, trust me,” Morgan replied. “Now go on, get to work.”

Dawn followed Origen backstage, where the crew awaited them. She was confused by the events of the day—from the violent protestors to her strange interaction with Edgar, something about her eHuman life wasn’t quite right. However, she was soon swept up in the thrill of the performance, and all worry left her mind.

HIM

Edgar's visit wasn't entirely unexpected, it was just sooner—by about four months—than Elijah had planned. He'd assumed his father would never leave the tour to seek him out, so when he opened the door to find Edgar standing in the hallway, impeccably dressed and as angry as the devil presiding over an empty hell, Elijah was caught off guard.

"Elijah," Edgar said as he pushed past him and into the living room. His eyes missed nothing as they paused on the woman's purse and shoes by the couch. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Of course, you are, Father." Elijah slammed the door, hoping to wake Magda, whom he'd left sleeping in bed. It was bad enough he was risking their entire business venture by having an affair with her; he didn't need Edgar knowing about it too—the less Edgar knew about Magda Sinclair and her work, the better for all of humanity. "Anyone coming to my

house unannounced at seven in the morning is intruding."

"Well, I assumed you'd be getting ready for work," Edgar said, his voice sweet like honey in morning coffee. "It is Monday, isn't it?"

"I'm unemployed at the moment, as I'm sure you're already aware, since you're standing here, rather than drooling over Dawn at your publicity event in Chicago."

"Of course, you have a job. There are deliverables due, and they can't be late."

"That's no longer my problem."

"You can't quit, Elijah. I forbid it."

"Forbid it?" Elijah snorted. "You can't forbid me from anything."

Edgar glanced again at the shoes and purse and smiled. "Let me make something very clear—no one leaves me."

"Mother left you."

Edgar's lips pressed into a narrow line, and Elijah knew he'd struck a chord.

"Your mother only thinks she's left me, but she will never be free. Once a Prince, always a Prince." Edgar strolled to the balcony and went outside to stand in the sun.

Elijah grabbed a sweatshirt from the floor he'd tossed there the night before in a moment of passion and followed in his father's wake. "You don't own us," he snapped. "We're not your eBots, so don't even pretend you have any control over us."

Edgar turned to face his son, raising an eyebrow as he did so. "What do you think you're going to do? You'll never find another job. No one will hire you. I'll make sure of that."

"I don't need to work, and you can't take away my trust. It's in my name, remember?"

Edgar shrugged. "I don't care about my money. It's my intellectual property that matters. Your mind contains many secrets, Elijah, secrets others would do anything for." He glanced back at the apartment, this time allowing his eyes to linger on the closed bedroom door. "Even pretend to love you, my son. Pillow talk is an excellent way to gain access to an otherwise disciplined mind."

"Why are you here?" Elijah threw back his shoulders and puffed out his chest, a common reaction when threatened by this particular man. Always, he'd felt the need to be bigger in his father's eyes.

"To remind you of your place. Either you return to work tomorrow or face the consequences."

"What consequences?"

Edgar returned to the living room and paused by the couch, picking up Magda's shoe and caressing it as if conjuring a genie out of a bottle. "I'm glad you've moved on, son. Taking a lover is always refreshing. I would hate for anything to happen to her." Edgar held up the shoe and looked Elijah straight in the eye. "Or

even to her loved ones, for that matter. I'm sure her husband means a lot to her, even if she's found her way into your bed."

"You wouldn't hurt someone just to have me back at your side," Elijah said, feeling sick as he realized how much his father knew about his actions. His shallow breaths betrayed the building boiling sensation in his throat. "I signed a nondisclosure agreement, so you have nothing to worry about."

"I wouldn't hurt her," Edgar said as he placed Magda's shoe back on the floor. "I would incorporate her into my world, just as I did Sophia. Now, unless you'd like to see Magda Sinclair in an eHuman body, and watch her forget you ever existed, I suggest you return to your post. You have till tomorrow morning to do the right thing. Do I make myself clear?"

Elijah's nostrils flared. The image of Magda in an eHuman body triggered the pain he'd endured the past year watching Dawn become nothing more than his father's toy. To consider Magda a part of Edgar's collection was too much for him to handle.

He lunged at Edgar and shoved him to the ground, falling on top of him and cracking the older man's head on the side of the coffee table. Blood began to run down Edgar's furrowed brow, and he thrust Elijah from his chest in a furious burst of energy as he rose from the floor.

"Do *not* disobey me, son," he said as he

tugged a handkerchief from his pocket like a British butler and dabbed the wound on his forehead. "I see and know everything, and I always keep my promises, unlike some of the people with whom you keep company."

He nodded to the corner of the room, where Magda now stood, dressed in Elijah's robe, her handgun pointed at Edgar. The older man grinned at the sight.

"She looks a bit like Atienne," Edgar said in a deep voice before turning and making his way to the door. As he opened it to exit, he glanced over his shoulder at Elijah. "Back at the office tomorrow, or she's nothing but a memory."

The door slammed behind him, jarring Elijah out of his stupor.

"Magda, you shouldn't have exposed yourself like that," he said, rushing up to her and taking her into his shaking arms.

"I heard the entire conversation. He knew I was here, Elijah. How did he know my name? If he knows, others do as well."

"Not everyone spies like he does," Elijah replied, gripping her closer.

"What if he tells Magnus?"

"That was always something we knew might happen. Keeping an affair like ours a secret is no small thing."

He wandered to the kitchen, searching for his cigarettes. Magda followed and placed her gun on the counter.

"Maybe we should come clean," she said, a look of hope in her eyes.

Elijah's heart sank. "No, we can't."

"Why not? I love you, Eli, you know this. Why must we keep this a secret?"

"Because you are a married woman, working on the most important project of our time, alongside your brilliant husband. You can't tear apart your partnership for sex."

"Sex? Is that all this is to you?"

Elijah had seen that look in her eyes many times since their affair started. Women had long fallen for him, and he was sure it wasn't because he was good in bed. He was a Prince, and that made him intoxicating. Only one woman had wanted him not for his pedigree, nor for his mind, but for his soul—and she was gone, out of his reach, forever.

"Magda—" he began, but she put up her hand.

"No, don't lie to me, Eli. Either you love me or you don't."

"Magda, did you hear what Edgar said?" said Elijah, his voice rising. "He threatened to kidnap you and force you to become an eHuman, just to spite me. He's crazy, and the more I love you, the more at risk you and the entire Life Tech program will be. Everything you know will be gone the instant you Jump into an eHuman body, and that can't happen. Your knowledge is crucial to creating an alternative to the totalitarian

eHuman solution sweeping the nation. We can't let him win. Humanity needs a way out, and *you're* the key to that hope. Don't ask me to love you. I simply won't."

"Won't or can't?"

Emotions, like waves on the sea, crashed over him. Magda was beautiful, brilliant, and in love with him in a way he never could be for her. That part of his heart had died when Sophia's body took its last breath.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter, does it? Edgar knows about you, and your life is at risk. Keeping you safe is all that matters now."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

"You need to go home and tell Magnus that while I will continue to wire money to your program, Edgar has made it impossible for us to have physical contact." She grimaced, but he went on. "Don't give up the work—you're close to a solution. In the meantime, I'm going to disappear for a while. I've wanted to take my yacht around the world, and it appears today is the day. Please don't try to contact me. If anyone comes sniffing around the lab in Santa Cruz, show them your marine technology. Tell them I'm an investor in the underground stronghold you're building in the Monterey Canyon because I care so much about rising ocean temperatures. Lead Edgar to believe I left because I'm a spoiled brat who can't handle his daddy issues, and good riddance. I'm also placing a robotic guardian of

my own on you at all times, to keep both you and Magnus safe. It's only a prototype, but it has the firepower to protect you from any of Edgar's eBot mercenaries."

"Concerned for Magnus, are we?" she said, her mouth twisted between a smile and a grimace.

"I will be back, Magda, I promise, but it could be years. In the meantime, the two of you will continue your work."

"You sound like your father when you give commands like that."

Elijah strode across the room and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't mock me, Magdalena. I am *nothing* like Edgar Prince. Do I make myself clear?"

Magda glared at him with her golden-brown eyes, a look of disdain where moments ago, there had been passionate love. "Oh yes, Elijah. Crystal clear."

Within the hour, Magda Sinclair was in one of Elijah's personal drones, headed back down to Santa Cruz. By sunset, Elijah Prince was on his yacht, the *Vesica* sailing south, hoping to throw off Edgar and disappear from the man's radar forever.

HER

Edgar's ability to create never ceased to amaze Dawn. A virus had swept across the world, leaving paralyzed or dead humans in its wake. Rather than let humanity die off, Edgar had generously granted global governments access to his eHuman technology, ushering in the Great Shift, an ambitious infrastructure program that would keep them safe forever.

Only two years into the Great Shift, and eHuman-capable cities were rising beside all the major metropolises across the world. The O12's job had gone from planting the idea of eHumanity into society's mind to convincing each citizen across the globe to sign up. There were several more eHuman units employed around the world, and many other eHumans who worked in Lifestyle Management Offices, helping people choose their new bodies, jobs, and identities. As soon as the Neuro-equipped cities came online, a new humanity would be born.

Dawn had been permanently placed in the San Francisco LMO, where she gave speeches and tours for hours a day, answering questions and providing comfort to the humans' worried minds. After spending an hour in her company, all of them would sign on the dotted line and begin the process toward immortality. Sometimes an entire family would agree to take the plunge, and even though their memories wouldn't survive the Jump and they'd forever forget their bonds, Dawn felt a certain pride in those moments, knowing these young children would live on to see infinity unfold before their eyes.

Yet despite all her efforts, many still resisted. The front steps of her office were regularly covered with protestors, their signs swaying under the golden California sun, their chants echoing down the narrow, car-filled streets. Their anger was starting to get to her, and the familiar desire to cry had become a constant companion.

"You need to lighten up," Origen kept telling her. Easy for him to say. For some reason, none of the anger affected him, but for Dawn, it was a continuous ache.

One day she arrived at the LMO, and the front steps were empty. Gone were the chanting humans with their drums and rally cries. Instead, the street was immaculate, clean, and unfettered by their disdain.

“Where are the protestors?” she asked as she approached the front desk.

The human behind the desk shrugged, chomping on her gum so loudly, Dawn had to turn down her audio volume to tolerate it. “Who knows? Maybe they all got jobs?”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s it,” Dawn said, while fighting the sense of dread now running through her mind.

She entered the main lobby. Origen and Priya stood in the center laughing. Beside them was James, who was telling them a story.

“James,” she cried out, delighted to see him. Their creator had started visiting them at the San Francisco LMO, giving them updates on New Sacramento, the closest eHuman city being built outside of the state’s capital. The Bay Area had run out of land long ago, and rather than uproot a population already angry with eHumanity’s progress, the California Assembly had agreed New Sacramento would be built in the Central Valley for all of Sacramento’s residents to inhabit, plus the Bay Area humans who had signed up for an eHuman life.

“Dawn, it’s so good to see you,” said James, smiling.

“Do you know where the protestors are?” she asked, and all the laughter died.

“Figures you’d care about that,” Origen said. “Here we were, enjoying a moment of fun before spending our day dealing with the human

masses, and you ruin it by asking where the filthy protestors are. Who cares where they are? They’re gone and I’m glad.”

James looked at Origen from behind his spectacles—his pale eyes seemed watery—and then turned to Dawn. “Origen’s right. They’re gone, so best forget about them. The city has found a solution to the problem.”

Dawn gazed at him as he wiped one eye and adjusted his glasses, and she knew he didn’t mean a word he said.

“I’m wondering if you three would like to join me this evening for an excursion,” he continued. “I know you don’t eat, or drink, or do any of those foolish human things, but you do dance better than anyone, and I’ve been invited to a dance party.”

“Oh, I love to dance,” Priya said, and Dawn felt a sense of déjà vu she couldn’t quite understand.

“Yes,” Dawn answered. “I’d love to.”

Origen raised one snow-white eyebrow but nodded his head. “Of course, I’ll go anywhere these lovely ladies do.”

“Wonderful,” James said, with a serious look in his eyes. “I’ll be here with a car right before sunset. Will that work?”

“Of course,” Dawn answered as the daily schedule began to download into her database. She had fifteen humans to meet with that day who would rate their experience with her, and

Edgar demanded she do her best to convince all of them to join eHumanity, so only a five-star review would do. “After the workload I have today, I’ll be ready for an evening of fun.”



Her last clients for the day were skeptical and didn’t sign up for eHumanity before they left, so Dawn added their names to the database for further follow-up, and then made her way to the front of the building, where James stood with Origen and Priya. A long, black limo waited at attention by the curb.

James hugged her and then beckoned them into the quiet interior of the car.

“Black Sands Beach, Marin County,” James said to the car, and it effortlessly merged onto Market Street and toward the Golden Gate Bridge.

“A beach?” Origen asked. “You know we’re not waterproof.”

“Don’t worry,” James insisted. “We’re not getting near the surf. We’ll be up on the cliff looking down.”

Priya frowned. “I thought you were taking us dancing.”

“I’m taking you to watch others dance,” James answered.

They made small talk as they drove the

thirty-minute trip. When they arrived, James told the car to wait for them. “We won’t be long.”

A sense of dread began to stir in Dawn again, and she looked to her creator. “James, what is this about? Why do I sense something horrible is about to happen?”

She glanced at Origen and Priya, and they too were uncomfortable—since the entire O12 was connected via TeleSpeak, she knew their thoughts.

“Trust me, Dawn, no harm will come to you. It never does,” James answered.

“What do you mean, it never does? James, what’s going on?”

“Come,” he said, walking toward the cliffs. “Follow me.”

They followed him, unable to turn away from the path he was now leading them down. After a bit, the sandy trail veered in two directions, one toward the beach, and one away toward the bluffs. James went toward the bluff, while Dawn stayed close behind. As they came upon the rocky cliffs, she heard the pounding surf, drums, and humans singing and laughing. James continued until they stood at the very edge, looking down upon the shoreline below.

At least fifty humans were dancing around a fire as the sun began to set behind them in a golden-vermillion blast. A cool breeze blew up, and the group raised their arms and danced, their hips shimmying and gyrating

faster and faster with each beat. Men and women played drums, guitars, and fiddles as others spun around each other, laughing and dancing, their laughter and hoots echoing off the rocky cliffs. Dawn watched, mesmerized, as one man pulled a woman's face toward him and kissed her, running his hands along her backside. The two bodies melded together in a way no eHumans could.

"What are they doing?" she asked.

"Celebrating the Summer Solstice," James replied. "The longest day of the year."

"Yes, but why are they here?"

"This is what humans do," he answered, his voice a soft whisper.

Several of them stripped off their clothes and ran out to the sea, screaming like a pack of jackals on the hunt as they dove into the powerful waves.

"You see," James said, "these are your protestors. They protest your existence because you cannot play in the sea or make love by the firelight. You can't feel the passions of the flesh and they wish to remain as they are, rather than become a machine."

"But we dance," Origen said. "Better than any of them. You said so yourself."

"You have skills, yes, but look closer. What do you see?"

They were silent as they watched the humans. The water glistened on their skin, and

they lifted drinks of wine and beer to their lips. A platter of food was passed around and they ate berries, roasted meats, and cheeses. More of them kissed, and Dawn felt a longing to do so herself.

"Can we kiss?" she asked.

"Of course, you can," James said. "You can put your mouths together, but you won't feel anything as you don't have any feeling in your lips—yet. I'm sure Edgar will add it as a feature eventually."

"Look." Origen pointed to a couple that had left the group and were below them under the cliff. They were naked, lying on top of each other, the woman straddling the man, her back arched and her face turned to the now rising moon.

"Yes, they're making love." James sighed. "A very intimate act, something you can never do except in your Pleasure Zone apps, and we shouldn't intrude upon them. Come, I think we've seen enough."

They walked back to the car, each of them deep within their thoughts.

"Why did you bring us here?" Dawn asked.

"Because I'm trying to show you what they're fighting for," James said. "These are the ones who want to be left alone, to be allowed to live out their human lives in peace. They love the flesh and want the freedom to be left behind when the rest Jump."

“Well, no one’s stopping them,” Origen replied, crossing his arms, legs wide as he squared off with James, chest puffed like a rooster ready for a fight.

“That’s the problem, Origen,” James said, so small in Origen’s shadow. “They are being stopped. It was you, Dawn, who noticed the protestors missing today, correct?”

Dawn nodded. “Where did they go?”

“They were arrested and sent to Dissenter Camps,” James replied.

“What do you mean?” Origen asked, dropping the military posture.

“Refusing the eHuman platform has become illegal, my good man.”

“What?” Dawn said, her anxiety beginning to pulse within her.

James glanced over his shoulder at the humans on the beach. “It was always going to be this way, I knew it. Edgar was clear from the beginning he demanded 100 percent acceptance. He has convinced the American government that the carbon-based body will no longer be supported when the Great Shift is complete. People have three years to sign up or be rounded up and sent to one of his camps. Rumor has it, many other countries have agreed to follow suit.”

“What happens at Dissenter Camps?” Origen asked.

“They’re given one last chance to either Jump, or die.”

“No.” Dawn shook her head and took a step back from James. “Edgar wouldn’t be so cruel. He’s saving them from the mess this world is in. Look at how the forests burn, and the seas rise, the air is polluted, not to mention the pandemic that has been slaughtering them.”

“Edgar *is* that cruel,” James answered. “Listen to me, Dawn, and listen well, because we’re running out of time. I’ve brought all three of you here, to this beach, many, many times before. Each time I bring you, I show you their very human lives and beg you to help me help them, and each time you refuse.”

“What do you mean? Why can’t I recall this?” Dawn asked.

“Because I always give you a choice, as I’m about to do once more,” James continued, his eyes alight with passion and fear. “You can either help me by joining me in my Resistance, or refuse me by plugging in. My software in Neuro immediately finds you in the system and deletes all entries in your database about our meeting.”

“James, that’s horrible. You can’t erase our minds like that,” Origen said, rising back into his soldier’s stance.

“Of course, I can.” James laughed. “We’ve been doing it for years. Ever since the beginning, we’ve been erasing your mind and modifying you to be more agreeable. Edgar does it all the time, right in front of you. What do you think he’s doing when he taps his watch? Or can’t you

recall?”

The three stared at him, dumbfounded.

“Dawn, I read your database, the encrypted part,” James said.

Her brow furrowed. “How do you know about that?” she asked. Her special feature wasn’t something anyone knew about, except Elijah and Evelyn, and she doubted either of them would have told James about it. Dawn had forgotten all about it herself, which was strange, now that she thought about it.

“I stole the key from Evelyn last week,” James admitted. “She’s forgotten all about this feature she granted you. I find it interesting you never changed it.”

“To be honest, I’d also forgotten all about it. I haven’t written anything in there since my days as a lab rat,” she said.

“Not true,” James said. “Go on, read the last entry.”

Dawn uploaded the key into her mind and opened the files. To her surprise, she discovered an entry dated from four years prior. As she read the contents, her mouth dropped.

“What is it?” Origen asked, taking a step closer to her.

“I think it’s best you tell them,” James said.

“It’s—” she began stuttering before continuing. “It’s a conversation between Edgar and Morgan at one of our campaign stops. He’s telling Morgan to release a virus, the very one

that is plaguing the world right now. I must have saved this to my encrypted memory before he erased my knowledge of doing so from my unprotected RAM, so I forgot I’d backed it up. Edgar is the reason for the pandemic.”

“And the pandemic is the reason why so many people are now flooding the LMOs,” Priya said, breaking her silence. “Most of my clients tell me they wouldn’t Jump if it weren’t for their fear of the virus.”

“You see?” James continued. “Edgar will kill all dissenters because he started the clock when he released the virus. Normally this is about the time you lose interest in the conversation and tell me to go to hell. This time, I remembered Dawn’s secret database, and hacked Evelyn’s computer to get the key. If you can’t trust what’s in your own head, those few truths that have survived our memory manipulation all these years, then this is the last time I will try to convince you to join me.”

“How many times have we had this conversation?” Dawn asked.

“Close to twenty.”

She blinked at him in shock.

“But now it is much more serious. Edgar is rounding them up and killing them. The law making the flesh illegal hasn’t passed Congress yet, but it’s in committee. In the meantime, any civil disobedience, such as protesting, any sign of anger at the government, such as sharing

dissenting information on social media, and they disappear. He will not tolerate their refusal.”

Origen lunged forward and grabbed James’s upper arm. “Platform consolidation doesn’t justify mass slaughter.”

James shrugged off Origen’s hand and looked him in the eye. “No, it doesn’t, but that *is* Edgar’s plan.”

“What can we do for you?” Dawn asked, swallowing hard. “If Edgar’s snooping when we plug in, how can we help you without being caught?”

“I have an engineer named Allison. She’s quite good at encryption and obscuring data and has designed something called scattering. I can load her code into your database, and all our conversations from this evening on will be scattered about, appearing as random values in your database with no coherent meaning to someone snooping, but you will understand them and recall the memories. I think it’ll take Edgar and Evelyn a while to discover it, and in the meantime, you can help me.”

“Help you do what?” Origen asked.

“Found Avalon.”

“What is Avalon?” Dawn asked.

“The last free city on Earth,” James answered. “I may not be able to stop Edgar from killing off humanity, but I must try. Any eHumans who want to live without the corruption of their consciousness by Edgar’s

daily updates, deletions, and reprogramming can also join us.”

“Avalon? As in the hidden island of the goddess in the Arthurian tales?” Dawn asked.

“Yes. Shrouded in mists and run by the most glorious of all women—The Dawn of eHumanity herself.”

Dawn, Origen, and Priya all looked at their creator, considering his offer. The sounds of waves crashing on the shore, mixed with laughter, drums, and the sweet sounds of human song, filled the air.

Priya spoke first. “I’m sorry, James, but what you ask of me is impossible. There’s no stopping Edgar. I’d rather be close to him than act out against him.”

“I understand,” James said. “The moment you plug in to recharge, you will forget all that has transpired here. I promise I won’t approach you again.”

Dawn glanced up and saw Origen staring at her, a hard look in his eyes. She reached out to read his mind and knew what he was thinking—he would do whatever she did. He loved her and had no choice. Dawn’s sadness deepened at the thought. For some reason, she knew she could never return the love he desired, but she was grateful he wished to remain by her side.

“I will join you, James,” Dawn said. “I will help you build Avalon, if it’s the last thing I do.”

“It very well may be the last thing you do,”

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James said. “Rebellion is the only way you’ll ever experience death. One way or another, Edgar will hunt you down, and you will suffer at his hands. No one leaves Edgar without paying the price.”

Dawn looked to her friend, mentor, and creator. “You’ve never led me astray, James. I know we can do this, and we will save as many as we can. I promise.”

EVELYN PRINCE’S CYPHER

*NEW OMAHA, CAPITAL
CITY OF THE NORTH
AMERICAN PROVINCE
MID-SUMMER, 150 AGS**

*“Adam was but human—this explains
it all. He did not want the apple for
the apple’s sake; he wanted it only
because it was forbidden.”*

~ Mark Twain

*After Great Shift

CHAPTER ONE

“Quickly,” Dawn TeleSpoke. “We’re starting and I want you here.”

Adam followed the crowd through the Control Center, down several hallways and out into the engineering cavern. He loved this new one-to-one feature he shared with Dawn. Since his first meeting with Dawn and Origen, it had been obvious that the members of the Resistance spoke to one another without talking. Although they weren’t moving their mouths, most of them couldn’t keep a straight face while TeleSpeaking—they’d raise their eyebrows, widen their eyes, tilt their heads—all signs of communication. Since the revelation that Adam was indeed the One who held the code they needed to gain access to Neuro, he’d been allowed access to the Resistance network, which also allowed him to speak with all of them using a public key, as well as Dawn, using their own private key. Adam had always been suspicious of granting one-to-one conversation

in the eHuman world of Neuro, but with Dawn, he could have spent every minute of the rest of his life listening to her talk inside of his head.

Dawn and Origen stood in the center of the room wearing their black bodysuits, now adorned with Resistance patches and insignia denoting their rank within the organization. Their arms held behind their backs, their chins held high, and their eyes sharp. In this room, all the vehicles and weapons of war stood ready. Behind Dawn and Origen rose an enormous, armed SpiderScout. SpiderScouts were eight-legged machines developed by the WG during the Great Shift. They'd been used to round up those who refused to Jump, as well as clear the non-eHuman cities after the WG had burned them. In the one hundred and fifty years since, SpiderScouts mostly roamed between the cities as scouts, searching for anything that might be wrong in the perfect eHuman world. It was obvious this SpiderScout had been stolen by the Resistance, as well as the several dozen others standing nearby at the ready, awaiting the command to go to war.

Avalon's inhabitants poured into the cavern like ants from various entryways and directions. Adam remained at the periphery, blending in with the crowd.

"Are you here?" Dawn TeleSpoke.

"Yes, in the back. Don't worry, I can see you even if you can't see me."

Dawn scaled a metal ladder leaning against the SpiderScout, her thick-soled boots clanking against each rung, twenty in all. By the time she reached the top, the room had grown silent. She stood on the back of the machine, her legs shoulder-width apart, one hand on her hip, the other holding an ElectroShock gun. She had undone her hair, which now fell around her face. Her green eyes were lit like Berserker at the edge of the battlefield.

The people of Avalon stood at the base of the SpiderScout, their upturned faces gazing at their leader with the same awe Adam felt. They worshipped her like a goddess of war as she raised her gun above her head and called them to attention.

"People of Avalon," she said, her voice on its highest volume setting, "the time has come to inform you of the next stage of our operation. Insurrection has now officially begun."

Cheers filled the cavern, roaring like waves in an underground sea.

"Long have we lived in the shadow of a corrupt government, underground like rats in a sewer, waiting for our chance to rise from our hiding places and confront the tyranny. That time has come, my friends. Our time to extinguish the flames of control and corruption is now. We must unite, across the globe, to drive our enemy to ruin.

"You know who the enemy is. It's the

World Government, hell-bent on unplugging us and killing our brothers and sisters as we speak. Millions in the Chinese province are dead. Russia is beginning to suffer the same fate—and now New Omaha is on the chopping block. Why would the WG massacre these innocents? Because the people are waking up. They desire to join us. And in answer, the WG is taking their lives.

“No longer will the Resistance idly stand by. Today we will launch Operation Insurrection and take New Omaha and cities across the globe from the Guardians and those who seek to manipulate us. We will release the citizens from the spell of Neuro and awaken the world to the treachery around them. Today we will empty Avalon and go out to create a new world, one where freedom of thought is ours again. A world where we can walk under the sun, forever powered by its life-giving source.

“Rise up with me, Avalon. Death might take us, but it will be a most glorious death. This is what we have been preparing for all these long years. To the light of day, we take our cause, our anger—and our power!”

As Dawn ended her speech, the crowd went wild. In their moment of passion, they put hands over their hearts as if pledging themselves to the beautiful leader, cheering her and chanting, “Power! Power!” repeatedly while stomping their thick-soled boots upon the hard

metal floor. Their admiration and dedication echoed off the stone walls, filling the cavern and pouring out into the corridors, cascading through the halls of Avalon like a flood. Adam too was swept up in the emotions and began crying out, “Power!” with the crowd.

He feared what was about to come, but he couldn’t imagine it any other way. From now on, his destiny was with Dawn and the Resistance. Never in all his long life had Adam Winter seen such a powerful figure.

A tight grip on his shoulder forced him to turn away from her. Origen held him only inches from his own face.

“What is it?” Adam asked, not wanting to take his eyes from Dawn.

“Time to go, lover-boy,” Origen said, his voice like a growl, face pinched, as if he would’ve rather been anywhere but near Adam.

“Go where?”

“We need to get you suited up.”

“For what?”

“For war,” Origen replied, his mouth twisting into a grin, and Adam knew without a doubt the man hoped the upcoming assault on New Omaha would result in Adam’s death.

Adam shrugged off Origen’s grip and held out his arm. “Fine, Commander, lead the way.”

CHAPTER TWO

Edgar Prince slipped into his private theater like a shadow in the night. He stood in the doorway unnoticed, observing his colleagues milling around the room and chatting about the evening's featured programming. He hadn't told them what to expect, only that it was a spectacle they didn't want to miss. Their laughter grated his senses and made him narrow his eyes. Yes, they were his neighbors and friends, yet their appreciation for him and all he had done seemed to be waning of late.

They, the elite of the world, had been nothing before Edgar brought them together to form Guardian Enterprises. They might have come from generations of wealth, but they had been mere pigs, all fighting for the same share of the leftovers at a time of global crisis—a crisis their mismanagement had created. Edgar's brilliant plans had enabled them to be more, to become angels upon the Earth. Unfortunately,

his gift of immortality, and the eternal wealth that went with it, seemed to be taken for granted these days. Nothing like an uprising to put them in their rightful place—supplicant to him and the power he held over them. Immortality meant forever. It was time for Edgar to remind them of how long forever was.

"My friends," he called out.

The room went silent as a crypt. Men and women—some a blend of both forms, of assorted colors and sizes, decorated in jewels, silks, and gold—turned to see their master. They bowed to him.

"Edgar," Morgan said, striding up to the stage to greet him, "we were wondering when you would show up. Please, what's the big event you have called us here to see?"

"Patience, Morgan," Edgar replied.

The tall raven-haired man opened his mouth to respond, but fell silent under Edgar's glare. Morgan was spineless, but at least he knew how to obey.

"Take a seat and I'll explain," Edgar continued.

The group filed into their places within the auditorium, sitting upon the retro, red velvet theater chairs. A collector of art, Edgar had claimed them, along with the entire theater, from Hearst Castle during the Great Shift. He glided to the front of the room and stood before the screen.

"I bring you word from Gemetria," he said, noticing the look of sudden seriousness upon the faces of the crowd. "The World Leader wishes for me to report to you that the Global Resistance has declared war on two hundred of our cities."

The eHumans' silken clothing rustled as they shifted in their soft seats. They had watched Edgar murder millions of people over the centuries, but that was at his command and for their benefit. A war with the rebels had always seemed impossible.

"How can this be?" a woman said from the front row, clutching at the golden necklace that adorned her long, thin neck. "How can a group of useless heathens organize themselves in such a way?"

"It seems they are much stronger than we thought," Edgar explained. "They're equipped to march upon every city we targeted for shutdown. They've released their troops this very hour."

"But how did they get the information?" demanded Christophe Rockwell, Guardian Enterprises CFO, his hands trembling while he spoke. "Our list of potential shutdowns was not published on the network. I made damn sure of that."

"Ah, Christophe, it appears we have a turncoat in our midst," Edgar said, slapping his thigh like an old man telling a worn-out joke.

The silence in the room grew even deeper.

"What are you suggesting, Edgar?" Christophe said, his voice rising with each word. "Are you accusing me?"

"Christophe, silence yourself," said the woman sitting beside him, a dark-skinned beauty who aspired to be one of Christophe's regular companions. Her fear for her new lover was written across her face.

"I'd listen to that woman, if I were you," Edgar replied. "I'm not here to accuse anyone, but if the traitor wishes to confess, I promise the punishment for such perfidy will be slight."

He smiled at them, enjoying the way they looked at each other as if they were Sherlock Holmes trying to solve the crime.

"Regardless, we have a war on our hands," Edgar continued, "and now we must suffer it."

"We should warn the Magistrates," Morgan suggested. "They need to prepare the cities."

"No need," Edgar replied.

"But the cities must not fall to the rebels —"

"Why can't the cities fall to the rebels?" Edgar countered.

The room went silent once more. No one was able to answer him, which didn't surprise Edgar. He never imagined any of them having enough strategy to see beyond their next frivolous indulgence.

"I realize most of you don't expend a

single bit of your superior processing power contemplating the intricacies of running the world,” Edgar said. “Thus, the real reason I’ve called you here tonight is to not only inform you of this war but also to give you an idea of how to win it.”

The antique theater seats began to squeak from his colleagues’ slight movements as one by one they trembled like field mice under the grasses when a hawk sails above. Edgar smiled at them the way a priest would at a naughty congregation. “Yes, the Resistance has staged an uprising. They’re entering our cities as I speak. None of our people are aware of what’s about to happen. I’ve commanded the WG to remain silent and sit back and watch. It’ll be a most interesting show indeed.”

“What are you planning, Edgar?” Christophe demanded.

“It’s simple. They got a hold of a list of cities we planned to unplug, but why were we unplugging them in the first place? To smoke the bastards out of their holes, that’s why. Well, they’ve come out of the holes, every single last one of them. Letting them take over our cities is a perfect way to keep them out in the light of day, where we can watch them and bring them to their final, desperate end.”

“You mean to trap them?” Christophe asked.

“Yes, trap them.”

“What of our people there?” Morgan said.

“Morgan, it’s time for you to accept that none of our people exist anywhere except here on this island. The rest of eHumanity exists to serve us, and if more of them die, I see no problem with that.”

His colleagues gazed at him with a mixture of adoration and fear. The two emotions danced in the air, intertwining like lovers in a tango. It was difficult to discern which one, fear or adoration, was leading the emotional dance. While Edgar loved adoration, fear had always been a much more efficient means to achieving his aims.

“All of the cities will be taken by the Resistance and then we shall unleash the drones,” he said.

“But the nuclear program has been inactive for almost a century,” Christophe argued, leaping to his feet. “You promised after the Great Shift to never use them again.”

“Alas, inactive, but not disabled,” Edgar replied. “As for my promise, that was another age, and things are different now. I need the Resistance destroyed if I’m to move eHumanity forward as a race. The WG is on board, so please, Christophe, sit down. Relax. Enjoy the show. It’s the real reason I’ve brought you here, my friend.”

The auditorium went dark, and the screen lit up behind Edgar as live feed from several cities began to stream, forcing his captive audience to

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witness the closest thing to war any of them had ever seen. Their discomfort was palpable. It made Edgar more at ease.

CHAPTER THREE

Deep in the sewers below the city of New Omaha, Adam stood alongside Origen's troops, waiting for their signal. The constant dripping of water and shuffling of feet around him was beginning to drive him crazy. Worse, he had no idea what was happening up top. Was Dawn okay? Or was she dead? Adam needed to know—the suspense was killing him.

A handful of operators stood at the front of the crowded hiding place, holding screens depicting a live feed from various points around the city. To Adam, it looked as if the eHumans in New Omaha never saw the attacks coming. Certainly not the languid WG security guards, moving around their stations while online playing Virtual Reality apps with each other. Nor the Transportation Authority mechanics busy repairing and enhancing the vehicles of the city. They were so dedicated to their tasks, not one of them noticed when a handful of new “mechanics” showed up for work and aimed

their guns at the unsuspecting employees, who raised their arms, confused looks in their eyes. Even the Lifestyle Mechanics in the LMOs were taken by surprise, realizing only too late that the “clients” in their waiting rooms that morning were not there to discuss upgrades.

“How are we able to see this?” Adam asked.

“Alrisha hacked the WG security cameras and is sending the feed to our network. That way we can follow the first phase from down here,” Origen said.

Another screen showed the doors, elevators, and PTDs malfunctioning, and Adam imagined the device status icons lighting up on the monitors within the New Omaha LMO Control Center with the frenzy of a fireworks show on Independence Day. Of course, the Guardians immediately began to investigate the stuck elevators, the PTDs going in circles and refusing to pick up passengers, and the doors that opened and closed in three-second intervals.

“What’s happening?” Adam asked. He’d never been this close to a battle, and watching from the underground hideout was driving him crazy. He wanted to be above in the action.

“It’s a distraction, caused by a worm named Typhon, created by Alrisha,” Origen answered. “They uploaded it to Neuro across the globe as a means of keeping Guardian eyes from the real prize—the AboutFace virus.”

“What does that do?”

Origen pointed to one of the live feeds. “Watch.”

As members of Dawn’s force infiltrated a room filled with Guardians, the enemy fought back, forcing the Resistance members to briefly fight back with hand-to-hand combat. Yet within moments, the Guardians turned their own punches on each other, and themselves, several of them killing themselves with their own guns.

“Ah,” Adam said, nodding. “About-face. Nice.”

“Yeah, I gotta give it to Alrisha, they’re one smart cookie,” Origen said.

Within thirty minutes, Dawn and her secret force of three hundred had infiltrated every RMO and LMO in the city, as well as the entire Transportation Authority complex. Origen received his signal to rise from the sewers, and Adam prepared himself. It was go time.

He and thousands of other black-clad Resistance members poured into the city, moving in freedom and with force, to round up any remaining WG officials and supporters.

“You get your ass to the main LMO in the town square,” Origen said to Adam, pointing down a narrow alleyway.

A team of WG security guards rounded the corner and began to shoot at them. Adam flinched as the Resistance soldiers on either side

of him fell to the ground, their Chi-Regulators shorted out.

“Return fire!” Origen said.

Adam raised his gun and pointed it at the eHumans before him. He pulled the trigger, making contact with a guard near the front of the line. The eHuman fell, dead before his body even landed on the cold concrete street. Even though he’d been successful, Adam felt a strange anxiety. He had taken his first life. Another round of guards came toward them, and Adam fired again, taking more lives. When the skirmish was over, every single WG guard lay dead before them.

“Forward,” Origen commanded.

Adam fell into formation as the group climbed over the mound of dead WG eHumans and continued their trek into the city, taking out anyone who would resist them. As the New Omaha Capitol building came into sight, Adam knew the second part of Operation Insurrection had succeeded. The siege was over. All that was left was for Resistance SpiderScouts and drones to surround the city, not so much as to keep the inhabitants in, but rather to keep the WG out and send them a message: We’ve won this part of the battle. New Omaha is now ours.

The Uprising had begun.

Adam followed Origen as he crossed the open, grassy mall before the New Omaha Capitol building, which gleamed in the sun, oblivious to

the fact it was under siege. Citizens were starting to gather in the mall, demanding to know what the hell had happened to their city. Hundreds of Resistance squadrons were assigned to pacify the crowds and keep them from striking back.

The New Omaha LMO was next to the Capitol building, and excitement rose within Adam. Dawn would be there. Even though they’d only been parted for a day, he had not realized until this moment how worried he’d been that the attack would fail and death would part them forever.

“Quickly,” Dawn called to Adam via TeleSpeak. *“I need you—I mean, we need you—in the Control Center. Meet me there as soon as you can.”*

He took the steps three at a time as he approached the LMO. Upon entering the sterile waiting room populated with metal chairs and machine-inspired art, Origen led Adam to one of the doors located off the room. Through the front windows, Adam could see the city streets beyond, steadily filling with eHuman civilians. He hoped they would remain peaceful while the communication system was being set up. He knew they wanted answers and that being offline was causing most of their discomfort.

Adam entered the New Omaha Control Center. Resistance hackers were buzzing about trying to take control from the Guardians, who were either handcuffed to the chairs or lying

dead on the floor. The local RMO of the city had been disconnected from the Global Energy Grid and rerouted to the solar-generated grid located in Avalon, about one hundred and fifty miles northwest. It was believed this would be enough energy to power both New Omaha and New Valentine to the west, which was also taken during the attack.

Their next task was to explain the takeover to the citizens of the city, while also encouraging people to disconnect from Neuro and report to the various LMOs around the city to receive an energy pack. No one could safely recharge on Neuro until the network was secured from the WG. A message explaining the situation had been sent out to the inhabitants after the takeover. Until it was secure, all access to Neuro within the city was now blocked.

“The Guardians really know their shit,” Alrisha told Adam as he gazed over their shoulder at the computer screen before them. The room itself resembled the Control Center located in Avalon, with one key difference—in the center of the room stood a curious tower, containing fifty small black boxes with a series of colored LEDs along the front, each no bigger than a shoebox. They were stacked one on top of another, forming a tower that reached above Alrisha’s head. A series of golden wires linked them together, and an antenna topped the tower. Around this curious set of electronics were

twelve recliner chairs, each with a plug located near the seat of the chair.

“This is where Guardians plug into Neuro?” Adam noted, and Alrisha nodded.

“Yes, twelve of them at a time physically plug in. The rest of the Guardians in the office worked wirelessly from all points in this room. It seems the MICE Tower and the Guardians plugged into it were responsible for the security of Neuro, as well as spying and data manipulation,” Alrisha explained.

“MICE Towers?” Adam asked.

“Yes, this set of servers before us contains Multi Intelligent Cyber Entities. This is the hardware that allows Evelyn Prince and her cyber-Guardians to exist. Their Chi Signals are stored inside of these. As far as I can tell”—the hacker raised their tattooed, purple arm to point at the blinking structure—“each individual component houses an independent Lux. A modified Chi-Regulator was created to power this small box.” They patted their hand on one of the black components in the tower. “They call this a Chi-Server, and it contains much of the hardware that you and I have within our torso. This Chi-Server runs Neuro, stores memories and information in a database, etc.—but the Lux that inhabits the server is always connected to the network. Thus, MICE live and operate their Lux entirely within the fiber optics and wireless channels of Neuro. Their reality is exclusively

virtual.”

Adam looked at the tower. He counted the number of boxes and understood the ramifications.

“There are fifty Guardians here?” he asked.

“That’s how it appears. We knew of the MICE Tower, but this is the first time I’ve seen one,” said Alrisha. “Right now, we’re trying to get inside, but it’s highly secured. We can’t access their RAM or programming in any way. But don’t worry, we’ll crack the code soon enough. We have no choice. Cracking the tower is the only way to gain control of Neuro at the local level. It appears the LMO was run by the tower itself, with the other Guardians in the office interfacing with citizens. The traditional, red-robed Guardians as we know them help people choose new bodies, repair, and upgrade them to new careers and the like. But the core of the LMO intelligence and security exists right here, in this tower. We’ve disconnected it from Neuro, but there are fifty separate Lux we have to deal with.”

“Is this the way it is in all the LMOs?” Adam asked.

“It appears so, and the RMOs as well. MICE Towers are very useful and explain what we saw when we visited Evelyn at the machine level. I can’t wait to discover more about them,” Alrisha answered.

Dawn entered the room. She was still

dressed for the battle in her black rainsuit, her hair hanging in a messy, long, golden braid down her back. Throwing caution to the wind, as well as all Resistance protocol, Adam ran up to her and embraced her. Most of the soldier’s mouths dropped open at his actions, except Alrisha, who was smiling—and Origen, who stood within the shadow of the MICE Tower, his expression hidden.

Dawn withdrew from Adam’s embrace, glancing at her colleagues from under her eyelashes, and scanned the crowd until her gaze fell upon Origen in the corner. “Origen, I see you back there.” He stepped out from behind the tower, arms crossed. “Come, we need to get those energy packs distributed.”

“Yes, sir,” Origen said, lips twisting into a half-hearted grin.

Dawn turned back to Adam. “You too. Come on, there’s work to be done.”



Adam gazed at the queues of eHumans forming in the grassy mall before the building. The haze of the hot July sun beat down upon their plasticine heads. They were agitated, but not by the impossible Midwestern summer heat and humidity. Rather, a siege had taken place in their city. Of course, each of them wanted to know

what the hell was going on. Getting millions of eHumans across the two hundred cities they'd infiltrated to put on energy packs and stay off Neuro was going to be next to impossible. Still, the commotion calmed Adam. He looked at Dawn and shrugged.

"Well, we knew it wouldn't be easy."

She nodded, her lips pressed. "From this vantage point, they don't look too pleased with this major intrusion into their otherwise pleasant lives, do they?"

A familiar face caught Adam's eye.

Jill.

She caught his gaze and shoved her way through the crowd and up the Capitol stairs, a mixture of anger and relief on her face.

"Adam," Jill said as she approached him, grabbing him and shaking him. "Where the hell have you been? You left, out of the blue, leaving a message on the EC? I thought you were out on an assignment. You said you might not come back and now you're here. What the hell is going on?"

Adam shrugged her hands from his body and smoothed his shirt. In the excitement of the past few days, he'd forgotten all about her, and every other person he'd ever known before he'd met Dawn.

"I was out on a story," he began, wondering how he could explain what he'd experienced. It seemed like an eternity had passed since he'd left the apartment and set out on his journey

with Dawn. "My investigations led me to the Resistance, which led me right back to New Omaha."

"What the hell is going on? Are you coming home?" Jill said, turning her gaze to Dawn. "Who is this woman?"

"Jill, this is Dawn, the leader of the Resistance. Dawn, this is Jill, one of my former housemates," Adam replied, feeling more uncomfortable with every second the two women spent in one another's company.

"Yes, I remember," Dawn said, moving closer to Adam's side.

"You're the woman from the harem," Jill said, eyes narrowing. "The other night. When Adam and I were about to engage in, well—you interrupted us."

Shame began to course through Adam's entire being. The incident had been embarrassing enough, but given his attraction and desire for Dawn, and his newfound history with her, he wanted to forget their first contact had been in a Pleasure Zone app. Worse yet, he could follow where Jill's thoughts were going, but there was nothing in his power to stop the envious woman's tirade.

"You left to follow this woman," Jill accused Adam, now standing right in front of his face. "You lied when you said it was about work. How long have you been seeing her? Did Miranda know? Ugh, I always knew you were deceitful."

She turned to Dawn now and glared at her. "Be careful. Adam's insatiable. No number of partners can satisfy him."

Dawn stared at her without expression and wrapped an arm around Adam. "Trust me, I know who Adam is, and I'm sorry to inform you but he's not coming home. His place is within the Resistance now. As for you, I suggest you get an energy pack, plug in, and await further instruction. We need everyone to be on board if we wish to remain in control of this city."

At her command, a Resistance member approached, carrying an energy pack.

"You want me to wear this?" Jill said as Dawn placed the contraption into her hands.

"Yes, and plug into it in order to recharge."

"Why can't I use Neuro?"

"Because we've taken Neuro offline," Dawn answered with a false patience. "We don't want the WG to program you in any way that will make life harder for you or us."

"But why would they program me? I don't understand. This is all so confusing. Everything was fine until you people came in killing everyone. It's the Resistance we should be afraid of. How could you betray us like this?"

Adam stared at her. From her perspective, she was right. Jill had no idea of the truth. She was as in the dark as he'd been only days prior.

"It's your choice," he answered. "The WG was going to unplug New Omaha and many

other eHuman cities from the Energy Grid. To stop mass slaughter, the Global Resistance took over the city. All our power is now run locally. We can assure you that you won't be unplugged. We hope to secure the network so you can use it again soon. In the meantime, we suggest you wear this energy pack, which will explain the situation in detail when you first put it on, as well as keep your Chi-Regulator charged."

Jill glared at him, her fists in balls, chin jutted out beneath her smirking lips. As he opened his mouth to beg her to see reason, she slapped him full across the face.

"Go to hell, Adam Winter," she said, turning on her heels and storming away through the crowd.

Adam watched her as she shoved eHumans to the side while struggling to put some distance between them. To his relief, she paused for a moment to put on the energy pack and slipped the golden plug into her body. Then she turned, glaring at him from across the field for an instant, before disappearing into the masses.

Adam hadn't understood Jill's feelings for him. Their play had always been a game to him. All his sexual encounters online had been a game. It was that way for everyone, or so he thought. Life in Neuro wasn't real, so why did anyone take it seriously? Perhaps encounters on Neuro were more real than he'd understood? It

must have seemed real to Jill for her to act like this. The entire encounter stunned him. Who was he? Adam Winter, the Newsreel reporter seemed dead to him. Like another lifetime. He no longer desired other women. He no longer needed the Pleasure Zone apps. He now had Dawn, the Resistance, and his own destiny to pursue. Jill, Miranda, New Omaha, Anthony—they all seemed like distant memories to him.

He turned to Dawn and felt ashamed. He was unworthy of her. She'd lived her life impeccably, saving the world, while he'd spent the past century in a virtual party, indulging in every pleasure, oblivious to his true purpose for even entering the eHuman world. While she'd been searching for him, he'd been playing sex games.

"Dawn—" he began, but she shook her head.

"Follow me," she whispered, taking his hand and leading him back inside the Capitol building and away from the crowd.

He didn't resist her.

She took him to a small room and ushered him into it, closing the door behind them. It was nothing more than a closet, a place where decommissioned eHuman bodies used to be stored.

There were a million things Adam wanted to say, but shame kept him quiet. How could he ever justify himself before Dawn? He expected

her to yell at him, but instead, she put her hands on his face, sending a gentle, pleasant current through his cheeks.

"You need pleasure to live, Adam," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "And there's nothing wrong with that." The pulse from her hands began to throb throughout his body. He trembled at her touch, still unable to speak. She brought her face closer to his. "Passion is part of your nature; it makes you attractive. Don't ever be ashamed of who you are."

Adam's eyes widened as she drew even closer to him, her lips inches from his own.

"I also need pleasure, Adam, and I can only imagine how we once indulged in myriad delights together, when we lived in the flesh." She hesitated. "I've waited almost two hundred years to taste that pleasure again."

As Adam's lips found hers, he experienced something beyond desire. He found a bliss of a different sort: the bliss of two souls bound together by infinity, finding each other at last, against all odds.

There were many reasons for the Lux to exist in a body. To kiss a beloved for the first time was certainly one of the best.

Adam and Dawn melded together, and he passed out of time and space, tasting her essence while beholding himself at the same time. He had no idea how long they remained locked in their embrace. Only the harsh voice of Origen

could break their moment of magic.

“Come to the Control Center at once,” the leader TeleSpoke to each of them, unaware of the romantic encounter. *“Alrisha has secured the LMO and you’re clear to TeleConnect to New Caledonia.”*

Adam drew away from Dawn and smiled at her. Nothing, not even Origen, could taint his mood.

“At your service, Master,” he replied, high on Dawn’s affections. She laughed and grabbed him for one more kiss, her hands traveling the length of his spine, causing pleasure to dance down every one of Adam’s circuits.

“I really need to get that pleasure circuit upgrade for my hands,” he whispered to her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Edgar stood in his office, staring out at his gardens. eBots were scattered about the property weeding, watering the garden beds, trimming the trees and bushes, and painting the outbuildings. He’d modeled this area of his estate after Versailles, one of his favorite places to visit as a young man. He turned and smiled at the portrait of Louis XVI that graced the center wall behind his mahogany desk. The king’s eyes stared at him, providing a constant warning—don’t let the Resistance get too large, otherwise, look what happens?

It was shameful for him to admit this, but the reason the Resistance had been able to form in the first place was because he’d been distracted by too many other things at the time. While he’d been slaving away architecting the new eHuman cities, as well as the Dissention Camps and extermination of all those who opposed his gift of life, Dr. James Neville had been poisoning the minds of Dawn and Origen, Edgar’s best

creations, convincing them to secretly build a city where they could live without plugging into Neuro.

The idea should have been impossible to implement, yet it had taken Edgar half a century to discover the location of Avalon, as well as at least three hundred other such cities in the world. That they'd grown so large in such a short amount of time was proof Edgar needed to find a solution in which no one could ever escape him again. Finally, after decades of research and experimentation, he'd do just that—but first, he had to destroy the Resistance and take a few million more eHumans offline. The smaller the population, the easier it would be to move eHumanity over to its new operating system.

Unplugging millions of Lux was easy; he'd been doing that for years. Destroying the Resistance had proven much harder. For this, he could never forgive James. Now, thanks to his informant, he had them out in the open, right where he needed them. All that was left for him now was to release the drones. Rosario wanted him to act quickly, but Edgar wanted to give Dawn's crew a bit of time.

There was something he still needed to know—had they found the One? His informant in the Resistance hadn't reported on the results of their latest testing, and Edgar didn't want to risk destroying the cities until he knew for sure.

"Mr. Prince," a voice intoned.

The screen on his desk showed a TeleConnect request was coming in. It was from New Omaha—perfect timing. "Is it an update from the field?"

"No, sir," the machine answered as he walked toward it. "It is the Dawn. She requests a session with you."

Edgar froze mid-step. Dawn? Could it be? Why would she be TeleConnecting him? Dammit, she'd caught him off guard, and he didn't like that one bit.

"The Dawn of eHumanity is the most wanted criminal of our time," he replied. "Why in the world would she contact me?"

The machine continued, "The caller insists on speaking to you. She says it is important."

Edgar smoothed out his crisp, bright blue shirt and ran a hand through his hair. Could she be surrendering already? He hoped not; that wouldn't work with his plans at all. A war was what he needed, not a criminal martyr. "Fine, connect her."

Moments later, the images of Dawn and a tall, dark-haired man with a crisp hairdo and even crisper navy-blue suit stood before him in his office, their holograms wavering as they came into focus. The man was familiar; he was one of the candidates Edgar had been tracking for decades, but was he really Elijah? And why had Dawn chosen to appear at his side? What

was she up to?

When she'd first become eHuman, Dawn had thought of Edgar Prince as the giver of life, immortality, and everlasting beauty. She'd spent many years by his side, enjoying his company and indulging in his affections. The revelation of his true plans had destroyed her. In many ways, it had left her emotionally orphaned. Edgar Prince had been one of her closest companions until he enslaved the world right before her eyes.

As Dawn looked at him now, Edgar knew she felt unsure and weak. Deciding to use that to his advantage, he addressed her first.

"Dawn, this is a surprise," Edgar said, his voice smooth and calm. "Whatever would drive you to reveal yourself to me in this way, after all these decades of exile? Have you come to your senses? Do you now wish to return to my side?"

Dawn didn't reply. The man beside her took her hand and answered, "It's not Dawn who wishes to return to your side, but I."

Edgar looked at the man, his emotionless black eyes searching him up and down. "I've never seen your face," Edgar lied, moving closer as if to get a better look. "So, tell me, how can you wish to return to my side?"

"You don't recognize your own son?" the stranger asked.

"My son is presumed dead."

"I'm your son, Elijah," he answered, almost choking on each word, as if admitting his

lineage brought him a sense of shame.

So, Dawn thought this candidate was Elijah? What was her evidence?

"Elijah?"

"Yes, Father, it's me. Elijah," he replied, raising his chin and glancing at Dawn, who smiled at him with a look Edgar had seen on her face before when it came to his son—adoration. Did they know about their past connection?

Edgar searched his database to find the man's name. "Adam Winter, if Dawn thinks you're my son, who am I to doubt her? It's a pleasure to meet you. I've been searching for you myself for a long time."

Dawn released Adam's hand and moved to the periphery, leaving the two men alone to circle one another, sizing each other up. Edgar had plenty of memories of Elijah, but Adam knew nothing about him. The imbalance of power delighted Edgar like nothing else had in quite some time.

"Too long," Adam answered. "I've been Adam Winter for a century and a half, but only recently became aware of my true heritage."

For his part, Edgar had always held a suspicion his runaway son had jumped, regardless of the evidence from Santa Cruz that said he'd died there during the bombings. Edgar had searched Neuro, of course, but Elijah's name wasn't listed among the seven billion people who took the eHuman form during the ten years of

the Great Shift. None of his Guardians had found the trail. Dawn had pursued Elijah as well, and when the Guardians intercepted a copy of her list of candidates, Edgar took the exercise seriously. For decades, he clung to that list, tracking each one of them. As a result, he knew Adam Winter quite well.

Was this celebrity Newsreel host really Elijah? Dawn seemed to think so, but what made her so sure? Nothing in Edgar's own research had ever led him to believe the talking head was his son. The man seemed too simple to be his offspring. Edgar Prince regarded the handsome man before him, staring deep into his dark eyes. He sensed anger and a deep, cold detachment. Yes, this could be his son. In those last days before he fled, Elijah had often glared at his father with a similar disdain.

"Tell me, Adam," Edgar said, "how is it that you now claim to be my son?"

"It was Dawn's people who informed me of my origins," Adam explained. "One of the first actions the Resistance took after it was founded was to seek out your heir. When they found me, they took me into their custody. They had planned to torture me to get information about you and then kill me."

Edgar looked at Dawn. This wasn't the story he'd been told, but then again, he'd never asked how the list of candidates came to be; he only knew the Resistance heavily guarded the

information, no doubt considering it important.

"James wouldn't let us kill him," Dawn explained. "He begged us to make Elijah an eHuman and allow him to live out his life as Adam Winter, planted in New Omaha, oblivious to both the Resistance and the fact he was your son."

Edgar remained quiet. Dawn stood staring at him, arms crossed, blonde hair plaited high upon her head. She looked every bit like the leader of a Global Resistance. In that moment, Edgar was proud. Even though he hated her for ruining his perfect world with her rebellion, Dawn was still his finest creation.

"So, they Jumped you and set you free, in a city near their headquarters?" Edgar asked.

"Yes," Adam replied.

"James wanted to keep an eye on him, didn't he?" Edgar asked Dawn.

She nodded. "He was a very sentimental man, and Elijah was important to him."

"James always was a very clever man." Edgar laughed. Despite all the trouble this had caused him, he found the entire situation amusing. The "list" of candidates must have been created to throw him off. Yes, Dawn was a much more capable leader than he'd given her credit for. If this was the case, then there was no doubt Adam Winter was his son.

"Why did you fetch him now, Dawn? Why not leave him in New Omaha for the rest of

eternity?” Edgar probed further. Something still didn’t quite add up.

“That’s your fault,” she answered, hands on her hips. “James made me promise before he died that I’d take Adam to Avalon if anything were to happen to him. Obviously, when I discovered New Omaha on your list of cities to power down, I knew his life was in danger.”

“Why let me know any of this?” Edgar asked.

“I want to come home,” Adam said.

“What? Why would you want to do that?” Never in a million years would Edgar have thought his son would want to return. This sudden news was making him agitated. He ran a calming program and painted a look of distanced interest upon his face.

“When the Resistance retrieved me from New Omaha and revealed my past, I felt cheated. They had no right to take me from your side. How dare they make me an eHuman when I should have been sent back to you? After all these years, I think it’s the least they could do for me.”

“What about you, Dawn—the greatest terrorist of our times?” Edgar thrust his finger in Dawn’s direction. “Why have you exposed yourself like this?”

Dawn looked at Adam, cupping his face with her hand. “Now that he’s back in my life, I’m not ready to part with him. To lose him again would break me.”

Adam moved closer to her and took her hand in his. The looks in their eyes made it clear that the couple was falling in love—and yet they were oblivious to their past. Somehow their attraction to each other had survived, even if their memories hadn’t. This was even better than Edgar could have imagined. Their love for one another had always been their greatest weakness.

Edgar couldn’t give in too easily. He had to play this game with perfection, for Elijah had always been one step ahead of him—one of the many reasons he resented his son. “Why should I accept you, Dawn? You betrayed me.”

“Because I’m sorry,” Dawn replied, clasping her hands before her breast. “I formed the Resistance when I learned of how you’d killed all those innocents. For all these years, I’ve been dedicated to destroying you, marching to a song of personal revenge. Now that I’ve met Adam”—she paused to gaze at him before continuing—“the Resistance is nothing to me. He is all that matters to me, and if he wants to be with you, then I must join him.”

“I want nothing more than to be by your side, Father,” Adam added. “It’s my rightful place. I never should have left you. It was a mistake.”

Edgar glared at the pair. He’d always known that if Dawn’s search were successful, if Elijah were found, the man would come back to him, but he had never expected Dawn to be at

his son's side. She had a Resistance to run. Why would she abandon her post for Adam? Could her love for Elijah be real?

To have the pair in New Caledonia, under his control, was a dream he had deserted long ago. The Resistance would crumble with Dawn out of the picture. She was their rallying point. That she would give them up for new love was suspicious at best. But this wasn't new love, was it? Their bond was unique, something neither of them could deny. From the start, it had been magical, and Edgar had been jealous. No one—not even Atienne—had loved Edgar that way.

He shook his head. Whatever their motives now, Adam Winter and Dawn could not bring any harm to Edgar in New Caledonia. They could only bring him more power if he played his cards right.

The pair would be the first inhabitants of Quantum. How perfect it would be to have his son and The Dawn found the next evolution of eHumanity. It was too good to be true. Edgar hesitated, gathering his wits about him. If he appeared too eager, they might grow suspicious and get cold feet. No, the pair had to come to New Caledonia so Edgar could plug them into Archion and keep them under his control for the rest of eternity.

"I accept your offer, my son," Edgar replied in a voice so low and soft it seemed a whisper. "Come home. It's time. I'll send a HyperPlane

to New Omaha. Have those heathen rebels hold their fire and allow it to land on the airstrip. It'll be there tomorrow at three in the afternoon, Global Standard Time. Don't be late. Only once shall I show my mercy."

"Thank you, Father," Adam replied, his mouth twitching as if he were unsure.

Edgar paused for a moment, noticing the shift of emotion on his son's face. "It'll be good to meet you, Adam Winter."

Edgar released the communication connection, and their images vanished.

"Time to prepare the fatted calf," he said to himself with a chuckle.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next day, Origen found himself beside Dawn in the newly coopted arsenal in New Omaha. Adam waited in the doorway, a dark silhouette against the blazing summer sunlight that poured into the busy room. The two old friends stood still as statues while hundreds of eHumans scurried about them, preparing the city for war. Machines droned past, troops marched by, and various commanders issued orders at full volume.

Dawn had come here to say goodbye to Origen. He avoided the words like the plague of the age of the flesh, knowing full well the moment they were spoken, she would leave him, and he would never see her face again.

Origen had never believed in the candidates. Why would Elijah Prince have decided to be their savior? Origen remembered the guy back in the day—Elijah had been nothing but a brooding chain-smoker who lurked about the lab, tapping at the computer all day, stopping

only to talk to his sister, or James. The guy was often at his father's side in those early days, but not like Evelyn, who had participated in the development of the O12. Evelyn had been the enterprising person of the family, not Elijah. He'd been more like a shadow. Yet Dawn swore James told her to find Elijah, and as a result also find Evelyn, so Origen had joined Dawn in her quest to find the Princeling heir.

"You've not lost any time securing the city," Dawn said, twisting a lock of her golden hair around her finger.

"Why are you going?"

"Because Adam needs to plug into Archion."

"You don't have to join him. He can do it on his own. We did our part, didn't we?"

"It's not over until he loads that code into Neuro."

"The entire mission was too easy, Dawn," Origen answered. "It's like they let us take over those cities. We may not know what sort of attack the WG will launch, but they *will* attack us. I need you here."

"Is Alrisha preparing the network for a cyberattack?"

"Of course." He knew Dawn was aware of his plans; she was making small talk.

Adam's shadow in the doorway shifted, suggesting impatience. A car was waiting to take them to the airstrip to meet Edgar's HyperPlane.

Origen's jaw clenched at the sight of the man. Adam's existence was a betrayal to Origen. He'd helped Dawn bring in the candidates to appease her need to please James—she'd never hinted that she and the loser had been lovers before they'd Jumped. How could they remember such a thing? They couldn't—it was pure fantasy—so why was Dawn so starstruck now? Origen's jealousy burned inside of him like hot coals.

Dawn had been the main feature of Origen's life for his entire existence. Sometimes they had been separated over the years, but even then, they were still linked by TeleSpeak—his mind had always had access to hers. Alrishahad erased all of Dawn and Adam's TeleSpeak keys, except for the one that linked them as a couple, to protect the Resistance while they were in the enemy's camp. Origen would have no way to reach her. No way to find out if she was okay. Either Adam would gain control of Neuro—or he and Dawn would die without Origen knowing until it was too late. That was the reality of the situation.

"Edgar is all too willing to let you two come to New Caledonia," Origen said. "It smells like a trap. Please, don't go."

Dawn grabbed Origen and held him close. The embrace was more than he could bear. Dawn was the only woman he had ever loved. Her body, now so close to his, brought about a mixture of pain, joy, and ecstasy. He wrapped his arms

around her and returned her embrace, wishing with all his heart she would never let go. Hoping that perhaps if he held her tight enough, the two of them would disappear and leave the world altogether.

"Origen...I'm so sorry," she said.

"Don't go with him," Origen whispered in her ear.

"I have to," she replied, trembling as she spoke.

"I don't understand. Please, Dawn, stay with me. Stay here."

"I can't."

"Why not? Do you owe him more than me?"

"Origen, I have to go *for* you. To save us all from Edgar. Plugging him into Archion is the only way."

Origen pushed her away. He knew she meant it, even though it was foolish. Edgar was going to kill her. Origen stared one last time into her perfect face.

"Goodbye," he said.

"You must hold the defenses until Adam downloads that code. Do you hear me?"

Origen nodded. "Of course, I will do that."

Then she cupped his face in her hands and drew it closer. She kissed him on the forehead, sending the sensation of fire along the surface of his skin.

"Goodbye, Origen," she said, finally saying

the words they had both been trying to avoid. “I will return. I promise.”

Origen nodded, unable to speak, as if his voice program had been deleted. Dawn turned and strode to the door. Just before stepping out into the light with Adam, she glanced over her shoulder. Origen could no longer see her face, for she was now a silhouette herself. She raised her hand and waved goodbye before disappearing through the door.

Origen stared at the symphony of eHumans moving about him. It was like being in the center of a beehive, workers buzzing everywhere, executing every command in perfect unison. He smiled wryly at the thought. These workers were conducting orders for their queen—would they continue now that their queen was gone? That, he knew, was the mission’s vulnerability.

Dawn’s return to Edgar Prince would signify a Resistance loss to the eHuman world. The other members hadn’t been told the details of her departure, for fear a spy might send the information to Edgar. It had been decided by the Council that all Resistance members, except for a few insiders, would think she was a deserter. It was too risky to reveal the true meaning of her and Adam’s mission to the general population, but it was also a risk to keep their departure a secret. No one knew what the members of the Resistance would think now that their beloved

Dawn was gone.

Origen raised himself to his full height and strode outside with forced confidence, chest up, shoulders back, chin high. Yes, Dawn was gone, but he had to move on. He was now the sole leader of the Global Resistance. The model for others to follow. He refused to allow his sadness to consume him.

Origen looked around, his head doing a 360-degree turn on its axis as he scanned the scene. His troops and their SpiderScouts were marching out to form a ring of protection around the city. Drones flew about the sky, monitoring the city and the vast prairie and wilderness beyond. He would be informed right away when something appeared on the horizon. For now, all was as clear as the summer sky above him. He focused his eyes, searching for the HyperPlane he knew must be there. After a few moments, he spotted it coming in for a landing. Its gleaming silver sides and sleek design looked out of place among the dark, fiberglass drones that protected the city’s airspace.

“Hold your fire,” Origen commanded via TeleSpeak to the drone operators. “Let the bastard land.”

As the plane passed over his head toward the city’s airstrip about a mile away, the Guardian Enterprises logo on its side taunted him.

Anger and fear began to clamp down on

Origen's thoughts, but he killed them on the spot. He had no more time for his loss. Edgar's HyperPlane would take Dawn away, perhaps forever. Origen brushed off his misery. It was a twist in the plan he'd never imagined, and he had no idea how things would unravel, but unravel they would. He might as well fight for the ones left behind, now that he'd lost the only person who mattered.

There was a battle to be won.

CHAPTER SIX

Moving at the speed of sound, the Guardian Enterprises HyperPlane made its 7,000-mile journey from New Omaha to New Caledonia. It was faster than any other form of transportation in the eHuman world, and Adam had always loved this way of travel. Except for him and Dawn, the HyperPlane cabin was empty. Their elegant calf-skin seats were outfitted with plugs, but they had refrained from using them, since doing so would mean blowing their cover. If such an unfortunate event occurred, their entire database would zeroize so Edgar and his puppets wouldn't discover the virus hidden within Adam's REM. In the meantime, they wore their energy packs and sat close to one another, holding hands and chatting aloud about nonessential things.

"Do you ever wonder what your boss thought when you never returned to work?" Dawn asked.

Adam leaned back in the seat. He hadn't

given the man a single thought since he'd met Dawn in the nightclub. "Nope."

"You haven't thought about it one bit?"

"I imagine Anthony Westfield did what he does best: lied to his superiors and replaced me with Tiffany, the cute brunette." Adam glanced at Dawn and smiled. "I've been a bit busy since my last day at work. Finding the love of my life has been quite distracting." He leaned in for a kiss, making sure the cameras on the HyperPlane could get a good view of his actions.

"It's still so strange," Adam said, laying his head on Dawn's shoulder while switching to TeleSpeak so the plane couldn't hear him.

"What's strange?" Dawn asked, snuggling closer.

"The fact Edgar Prince is my father," Adam answered. "I'm used to being Adam Winter. Being Elijah Prince seems like another lifetime to me."

"It was another lifetime. All eHumans have had multiple lifetimes. First the one that brought us into the physical world and then the ones we've had as eHumans."

"I wish I still had my memories of being Elijah. That would make all this so much easier. Do you remember Elijah?"

"Of course, I do. You were the key architect for Neuro and spent hours with me in the labs. I thought this was because I was the only one who would let you smoke around me. Everyone else hated your habit, especially Edgar. I wonder..."

Dawn cut herself off.

"What do you wonder?"

Adam stroked Dawn's hair and kissed her head, smiling at the cameras to ensure Edgar was still getting the show he needed.

"I've been wondering for years what Edgar did after he Jumped. He must have lost all personal knowledge of himself as Edgar Prince—we all do. Yet he had an eHuman body built to look exactly as he had in the flesh, and he took on the same name and life. So, how could he continue as Edgar Prince if all his memories of that lifetime were lost when he became an eHuman?"

"He must have figured out a way to keep his memories. Something more robust than a database transfer," Adam replied. "Another thing we need to discover while we're here."

"Indeed."

"Prepare for landing," the mechanical din of the HyperPlane announced. There was no need for a pilot. HyperPlanes flew themselves and were remotely monitored by an air traffic control app on Neuro.

The couple wrapped their arms around each other.

"I'm scared," Dawn continued via TeleSpeak. "I don't want to land. I want us to fly right by, even off to another planet."

"I'm scared as well. We won't let them separate us, no matter what happens."

"I agree."

"I love you, Dawn. Thank you for finding me. There's no place I'd rather be than by your side."

Dawn smiled at him while running a finger down his cheek. *"I love you too, Adam Winter."*

Adam leaned forward to kiss Dawn, and she returned the embrace. Adam continued kissing her, his hands searching her body, eventually resting at the base of her spine. He wanted to kiss her forever. The two continued as the HyperPlane touched down on the airstrip in New Caledonia, releasing their embrace only when the machine informed them of their successful landing.

"Welcome to New Caledonia," the HyperPlane proclaimed. "The weather today is sunny, with a high of 85 degrees. Thunderstorms are possible this evening. Your ride awaits you, Elijah Prince."

Adam froze. *"I am not Elijah Prince,"* he TeleSpoke.

"Actually, Adam, you are."

At Dawn's words, Adam straightened and lifted his chin. He was Elijah Prince and needed to appear comfortable with the idea, regardless of his feelings. The door to the plane opened, and the sunlight and humidity of the tropical island poured into the cabin. His eHuman eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness as he and Dawn began to descend a short staircase.

Adam halted, staring at the man waiting

for them at the base of the stairs. "What the hell? What are you doing here?"

Anthony Westfield stood before them, dressed in a black suit and crisp white shirt. His vacant charcoal eyes stared at them as they approached. "Welcome to my home, son. I take it your trip was uneventful?"

Adam shook his head. *Son?* What was the meaning of this? He gazed at his old boss and noticed the Cheshire grin that ran from ear to ear. Adam took a step forward to grab the man, but Dawn moved in front of him, her hands on her hips.

"He's an eBot," Dawn said. "I thought eBots were obsolete."

Anthony emitted a sinister laugh, his mouth twisted into a smirk. "The two of you wouldn't be familiar with the latest eBot technology. It's exclusive to the island and unavailable to the masses. Please, get in the car and I will explain."

"I'm not getting in the car with you," Adam snapped.

Dawn turned to Adam and put a hand on his shoulder. Instantly, he relaxed. Her hardware upgrades were efficient. "Listen, Adam, that's not Anthony. Edgar's playing with you. Please, let's get in the car."

Adam did as she requested and followed her into the car, where they discovered two sets of seats facing each other like a pair of couches in

a comfortable living room. Adam and Dawn sat down on the rear seat, and Anthony sat across from them. As soon as he'd settled in, the door closed, and the car began to make its way off the airstrip and toward what appeared to be an open highway. Like a PTD, the vehicle drove itself. Yet unlike the crowded city of New Omaha, the New Caledonian highway was empty. They were the only vehicle on the road.

"Welcome to Binah," Anthony continued. "The finest city in the world and home to Guardian Enterprises, the finest company in the world."

"Why, thank you," Dawn answered.

Adam still had not found his voice. The fact Anthony was sitting in front of him caused a great deal of confusion in his mind.

"I think you need to explain the fact you planted an eBot to spy on Adam," Dawn suggested, batting her eyelashes at the bot.

"You've always been so practical, Dawn," Anthony said, his dark eyes focusing on her momentarily. Then, turning to Adam, he gestured to himself. "This is an eBot. It's like an eHuman, but without a Lux inhabiting it. It runs on electricity and needs to recharge like we do, but it is nothing more than a droid, lacking most of the human characteristics of the eHuman platform. My Lux is controlling it from my house remotely. Through it, I can speak to you without having to leave my estate. A very handy

tool in hostile situations. In this case, I had no idea whether you meant to hurt me or not, so I used the Anthony Westfield eBot to retrieve you. It matters not if you decide to attack it. I have hundreds more in all shapes and sizes. In the meantime, I can greet you—from a safe distance."

"But why does your eBot look like Anthony Westfield?" Adam asked, his brow furrowed.

"Because I've been using him as a tool to spy on you for decades." He laughed.

"How can that be?" Adam asked, his warning signals firing yet again.

The Anthony-bot turned to Dawn. "You weren't the only one looking for Elijah after the Great Shift. I too wanted my son back within my reach, but I never found him. I must admit, it was quite a defeat." He grimaced. "A few years ago, I managed to get my hands on your list of candidates. I was sure you were looking for Elijah, so I followed each one. I planted eBots in their lives, and my Lux entered them whenever certain parameters were triggered, such as you approaching Adam in New Omaha. I'd planted Anthony as his boss awhile back, and the moment Adam brought those pictures into the office of Chengdu, I entered Anthony's form to learn more."

"How did you get a list of the candidates?" Dawn asked, her voice low, like a growl.

Adam placed a hand on her leg—he feared she would pounce. “Yes, I’d like to know this as well.”

Anthony laughed again, a metallic shrill. “I’m sure you both would.”

Knowing Edgar wouldn’t give up the secret, Adam decided to keep probing. “I don’t understand. You said you had an eBot on every candidate and there were several others. How can you be in all these places at once?”

“It’s simple. Most of the time, an elementary program was running Anthony. It doesn’t take much personality or brains to be convincing as a reporter.” Anthony/Edgar’s lip curled into a sneer as he eyed Adam. “When key events occurred with regards to Adam, my Lux entered Anthony’s form and took control of his actions.”

Adam had to admit, Edgar was thorough. “So, you weren’t always in Anthony, just when you needed to check in on me?”

“Exactly. It was the same with all the eBots I assigned to the candidates. Most of the time, they were left alone, moving about the eHuman world like empty shells, but when I needed to access you, or any of the others, I entered the eBot and drove it myself, gathering information, manipulating your actions, trying to figure out who was the one I was looking for.”

“Why not use regular eHumans as spies? Why use the eBot?” Dawn asked.

“Because everyone has an agenda,” Edgar answered. “Left to their own devices, an eHuman is unreliable. You of all people should know this, being a leader yourself. Ensuring loyalty amongst my constituents is a full-time job, which is why I like to keep them on the island, where I can track them. eBots can only do what their program drives them to do unless I’m driving them myself.”

Adam turned away. He couldn’t look at the eBot without wanting to tear its head off. Edgar’s eyes were all-seeing. He knew so much more than he should—how had he gotten that list of candidates? It meant Dawn’s organization wasn’t clean, and this gave Adam pause. Who was the rat?

He glanced outside the car, noting the pristine beauty of the island. Green, rolling meadows decorated the landscape, and mountains rose from the island’s center. To his right stretched the sea, blue and sparkling as far as his eyes could see.

“You have many questions, don’t you?” Edgar said.

Adam ignored him and continued to stare out of the car window, deciding this was the perfect opportunity to do some research. This road was the main one from the airfield. So far there hadn’t been any others, and rather decadent estates began to dot the landscape. Each one looked like a castle, complete with

elegant gardens and secured behind tall iron gates. The glimmer of aquamarine across the road caught his eye, and Adam leaned over Dawn's shoulder to peek.

He scowled. "Swimming pools? What on earth does an eHuman do with a swimming pool?"

"Look again," said Edgar. As they rounded a corner in the road, Adam zoomed in to catch a close-up view, only to discover three eHumans diving into the water

"What the hell?" Adam said, his fists balling. Dawn put a hand on his leg, but he shrugged her off.

"All eHumans are waterproof here. We must be, given we live on an island," Edgar explained.

"Then why not share the technology with everyone else?" Adam asked, scooching in across the leather seat toward the Anthony eBot and grabbing it by the collar. "So many eHumans die each year unnecessarily due to submersion."

Edgar's laugh filled the car. "I granted the world immortal life. I think I've shared enough technology with the masses. If a person can't manage to stay alive when the only dangers they face are either running out of power or shorting out their Chi-Regulator in too much water, then good riddance."

"What other technologies do you have?" Dawn asked, reaching to remove Adam's hands

from the eBot and remaining in character, knocking Adam out of his line of questioning. He let her take his hands from Anthony's shirt while forcing a smile at the eBot.

Edgar's voice lowered to a sensual tone. "We have Pleasure Zones installed in our lips and hands...and other places," he hinted.

"Like where?" Adam asked.

"Our plugs," Edgar replied, moving the Anthony body in a suggestive way.

"Why?" Dawn asked.

"Even though we can no longer procreate, our Lux still craves physical interaction," he explained. "Sex has always been first and foremost about pleasure and a key reason the Lux desires life in the flesh."

"That's what the Pleasure Zone apps are for," Adam said.

"Yes, you created the first Pleasure Zone portal, for Dawn, actually. As the only eHuman, she was bored—oh, but you don't want to hear about that, do you?" He paused, and Adam glanced at Dawn, who was biting her lip.

"You didn't tell me that," Adam said, gazing into Dawn's eyes.

"Of course, you wanted to take care of her because she was so lonely," said Edgar. Dawn cringed at his words, seemingly embarrassed, which encouraged Edgar to keep speaking. "You were a great engineer, Elijah, and to this day, the masses still use your Pleasure Zone apps for a

dose of daily desire. You can be proud of that, son.”

Adam faced the eBot and leaned in. “Are you proud of my work, Dad?”

Anthony/Edgar shrugged. “The Pleasure Zones are fine for the hoi polloi, but on New Caledonia, we’re above such a public display. We don’t use Neuro the way you do. We like to be together and share our partners, so to speak. Most of us have several servants and lovers outfitted with the best in Pleasure Zone technologies, so we can be serviced anytime, anyplace, without the risk of your hackers spying on us. I’m aware of how sloppy politicians can be when getting off with the commoners on Neuro.”

His father’s words both disgusted and aroused him, and Adam hated himself for it. He struggled to keep a straight face, and the eBot sniggered as he continued, “Consider Dawn’s enhancements to the sensors in her hands. I’m sure they’ve been quite enjoyable to you. Well, that was an early prototype, my son. We’ve improved the technology. An eHuman upgraded with Pleasure Zone enhancements can insert his or her hands into your plug and send an orgasmic signal that waxes and wanes with your thoughts, passions, and desires. This pulse is sent in increasing wavelengths from the plug entry at the base of the spine up to the crown of your head. You achieve a state of bliss unlike any

other.”

“What if someone doesn’t want to play your game?” Dawn asked.

“We can force it from them by putting our hands inside their plug and drawing forth the orgasmic impulses programmed within their software. Many of my colleagues prefer this method. The result has more fear in it, but just as much ecstasy.”

The Anthony eBot batted his eyes at them.

“Females built to service you?” Dawn asked, narrowing her eyes. “Are they like the eBots?”

“Oh no, dear, they’re eHuman. We tried getting off with eBots, but unless they were driven by a Lux, they lacked the creativity. Since the Lux was needed to bring more pleasure to the act—then why not outfit the eHuman women of Binah with all the appropriate hardware?”

“What about the men?” she countered.

“Some of us like men as well,” Edgar answered. “We have a whole harem of Pleasure Zone eHumans. There’s something for everyone.”

Edgar’s harem was nothing more than human Lux trapped in sex-bot bodies. Adam expected Dawn to continue arguing with the man, but instead, she held her tongue and ran a finger along the inside of Adam’s thigh.

“I imagine you’d like to outfit me with some of those features, wouldn’t you, dear?”

Adam nodded, but he didn't feel sexual. He was struggling to keep it all together. Too much information, too fast. His father was more of a monster than he'd thought, but then again, what did Adam really know about Edgar Prince? Adam's lack of memories was his greatest weakness.

"Anyway, look around you. Admire our success," Edgar continued as the Anthony eBot gestured out the windows to the estates, perfect roads, and sleek buildings that decorated either side of the highway. "Those of us who had the foresight to invest in the Great Shift have done very well for ourselves, wouldn't you agree? The eHuman cities are state-of-the-art, but they're nothing compared to the beauty and luxury of our island."

"Do all of those who originally invested in the Great Shift live in New Caledonia now?" Adam asked, trying to get information that might come in handy later.

"Yes. We moved here shortly after the Great Shift. We've been reaping the benefits of our investment ever since. Our philanthropic gift of immortality to the masses has been very profitable—in more ways than one."

"Your philanthropic gift led to the murder of millions," Adam said with a hiss. Dawn squeezed his hand.

"No," she TeleSpoke. *"Don't go there."*

"The killing of a few crazy Pro-Deathers

was a small price to pay for such fantastic genius," Edgar said, waving a hand.

"Pro-Deathers?" Adam asked. The word was unfamiliar.

"Yes, most of those who resisted the Great Shift refused only because they wanted the right to die in the flesh. You remember their protests, Dawn. What madness. What normal person wants the right to die? Anyway, that issue is long past. The Pro-Death Movement has been successfully contained for a century and a half, thanks to my swift interventions. What matters now is you're both here at my side once more, where each of you belong. Look, here is your home now."

The Anthony eBot stopped speaking and slumped in his seat, as if someone had issued a Remote Shutdown on his Chi-Regulator. Adam glanced out of the car window as they pulled into a driveway. An iron gate opened for them, revealing a vast, green lawn. Palm trees decorated either side of the long brick road. The car brought them to the castle at the end of the tree-lined avenue, where the real Edgar Prince eagerly awaited them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Elijah,” Edgar Prince said as he descended the massive staircase outside of his mansion, arms outstretched like a religious saint about to bless them. Adam walked forward, met his father at the bottom step, and accepted the man’s embrace.

As she watched the two men reunite, Dawn again marveled at Edgar’s choice to model his eHuman body after the one he’d been born with. If you could design anybody you wanted, why imitate the one of the flesh you’d left behind? It was apparent Edgar Prince was obsessed with his own genius. Dawn knew his history; she’d studied it well. At a mere five years of age, the man had already read the entire works of Euclid. At the youthful age of eighteen, he’d founded Guardian Enterprises, which quickly became the most powerful networking company in the world. By age fifty, when he’d become the “Father of eHumanity,” Edgar Prince had been

completely enamored with himself.

“Welcome home,” Edgar Prince said with a huge smile upon his handsome face. He turned from Adam and gazed upon Dawn.

“Dawn, it is so good to see my original creation once more.”

In response, Dawn stepped forward and offered an embrace to Edgar Prince. As her arms wrapped around him, she found herself flooded with memories of betrayal and pain. Unlike Adam, she could still recall the hurt and terror she’d felt when she discovered how Edgar Prince had used her to enslave the human population. The familiar feeling of guilt began to creep up into her mind, and she drew back from his embrace to regain her composure. She wouldn’t let him get to her. Nothing mattered anymore except the mission’s objective—to plug Adam into Archion as soon as possible.

Dawn turned away from Edgar and noticed a young woman with milk-white skin and deep auburn hair descending the steps, wearing a beautiful black silk dress that clung to her overly voluptuous body. Dawn envied the gown, realizing that other than the green suit she now wore and the red sequined dress she’d purchased to meet Adam for the first time, she rarely wore anything except the utilitarian clothes of the Resistance.

“Oksana, my dear. Please meet my long-lost son,” Edgar Prince said to the woman, who

held out a slender, pale arm, upon which dangled several golden bracelets. Adam shook her hand, gazing deeply into her brown eyes, and Dawn noted a look of both passion and fear upon her sculpted face.

“Pleased to meet you, Elijah,” the woman said, her voice soft yet husky. “I’m Oksana Natarov. I have heard a lot about you.” Dawn noticed her red lips turned slightly downward, like World Leader Donahi. Edgar had a thing for pouty women.

“The pleasure’s mine,” Adam replied as he kissed her hand, charming the beautiful woman. Dawn ruefully noted Adam’s own appreciation for classically sexy women. Like father, like son.

“You must be The Dawn,” Oksana said, eyeing Dawn through narrowed eyes.

“Yes,” Dawn remarked, shaking the woman’s hand. “I love your dress.”

“Do you?” Edgar Prince asked. “Then we shall have several like it sent to your room. Consider it done. My staff accommodates me the moment I desire something. I love the instant satisfaction that comes from a networked civilization, don’t you?”

He led them up the granite staircase to the solid gold gate that functioned as the front door of his home. Images of crosses and chubby, winged cherubs decorated the handles and bars. Like any networked door in the eHuman world, it opened as they approached. Dawn stared at it

as they crossed the threshold and entered Edgar Prince’s house.

“Do you like it?” Edgar Prince boasted, pointing to the golden gate. “I took it from a sixteenth-century nunnery in Spain before we burned the city to the ground. You’ll notice many artifacts in my estate that I saved before the fires. I now have the largest collection of pre-Great Shift artwork in the world. Most of my colleagues consider my estate to be the finest museum on the island.”

“Interesting,” Dawn TeleSpoke to Adam. *“He had no problem burning the people of that time, but not their art.”*

Adam gave her a stiff nod as they entered the study off to the right of the entryway. Many of the pieces Edgar Prince had mentioned hung upon the mahogany walls. Dawn’s eyes were drawn to the painting titled *The Sistine Madonna*, by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. The beautiful Virgin in the picture seemed to warn her: Get out of here before you too become part of his collection.

“Well, what do you think of your new home?” Edgar asked after they had settled upon a set of green leather couches in the center of the study. Dawn glanced at Adam and noticed how intently he was taking in his surroundings. Dawn read his mind and knew he was uncomfortable. While she had no access to Edgar’s mind, the fact he was bouncing his legs

on the balls of his feet told her he was pleased to no end. Of course, he enjoyed his guest's uncertainty about their fate—it was the man's nature to lord over other's fears.

"Your home is quite stunning," Dawn answered, hoping to take control of the situation.

"Yes," Adam said. "The art is especially intriguing. It must have been quite an effort to gather it all before the WG destroyed it."

"Really, Elijah, we all know the WG does nothing without my permission," Edgar said with a chortle. Oksana shifted in her seat, causing a lock of her amber hair to fall into her face. Edgar reached over and slid the luxurious mane over her shoulder, exposing her long white neck. Her lips formed a pouty smile, but her cold gaze revealed not even a hint of emotion.

"No need to pretend otherwise. Nothing was destroyed unless I gave my approval. I've always loved art. Even as a child, I would beg my mother to take me to the museums in Boston. Of course, the installations paled in comparison to what I collected during the Great Shift, but I still remember those days with Mother quite fondly."

"How can you recall the days of your youth? You're an eHuman, aren't you?" Dawn asked, jumping on the chance to get to the bottom of this mystery.

"Yes, I Jumped like everyone else," he admitted, one corner of his mouth rising in

unison with an eyebrow. He clearly enjoyed her line of questioning and would make her work to get the truth out of him.

Dawn glanced at Oksana, who sat silently at Edgar's side. The woman shifted her eyes to the floor, avoiding her gaze. Dawn turned to Edgar and decided to challenge him. "Our memories of the flesh were lost when we Jumped, Edgar, so how could an early exposure to art in your human life still inspire you?"

Edgar Prince allowed a devious smile to cross his face. Again, he reveled in his position of knowing more than the couple. They were prey to his advantage, perched upon their seats, completely at his mercy, and Dawn hated it.

"You know, Dawn, you never should have left me," he said. "While your rebellion has been quite successful, you aren't equipped to run the world, regardless of whatever lies James told you."

Dawn remained silent, unable to counter the man's attack. Edgar knew what he was doing. Like a cat, it was time for him to play with his prey a bit. He looked at Adam and smiled a sick, malicious grin. "You'd love to recall what it was like to make love to her, wouldn't you?"

"Make love to whom?" Adam asked.

"Sophia, of course. Don't you wonder what it was like to lose yourself in her embrace, to kiss her warm, soft human lips?"

"I don't remember Sophia," Adam said.

"I'm well aware of this fact. Oh, you were so upset after she Jumped and failed to remember you. To this day, I think it's the reason for your petulance. You never got over it. Yet somehow, you must recall this attraction. How else could you be so smitten with Dawn so fast? I'm amazed your obsession with her survived the Jump—I thought the Renewal Software I added to bootstrap mode was robust. I guess some things can't be forgotten."

"What Renewal Software?" asked Dawn, a sense of doom now circulating throughout her synapses. She'd never heard of it. She'd been involved with The Dawn Project for decades before she left for the Resistance, and she knew Edgar Prince had Jumped before her departure.

Edgar ignored her, continuing to speak to Adam instead. "You're also dying to know more about Neuro and how it came to be. Life would make more sense, if only you could remember what drove you to Jump in the first place."

"Edgar, what is Renewal Software?" Dawn repeated, causing Edgar's head to snap in her direction.

"The algorithmic science of destroying human memory."

"What?" she and Adam said in unison.

Edgar stood up and began to walk about the room, hands clasped behind his back, grinning at their incredulity.

"It's simple. I purchased the Chi-Regulator

from Dr. Neville and Sophia because I wanted to form a New World Order after the Great Shift—and the only way that would be possible was if the population wouldn't be able to recall what had just happened to them. Thus, while Elijah and Evelyn created Neuro and everything that goes with it, I created my own program, one that would execute within the bootstrap code during a factory reset and prohibit human memories of the flesh from transferring to the eHuman database."

Dawn rose from her seat and ran to Edgar's side, grabbing his arm. "Are you telling me Jumping from the human body to the eHuman body doesn't erase memory?"

"Correct, my dear," Edgar answered, no signs of guilt in his relaxed stance as he draped an arm over her shoulder, causing her to flinch. "The memories of the flesh followed the Lux, but I couldn't have that. I downloaded my software into The Dawn before you Jumped. It turns out the original software wasn't perfect—you recalled some things about your life as Sophia, but not all, and it led to a state of insanity. Fortunately, James took care of the situation and zeroized everything in your memory after you tried to kill Elijah."

Dawn's eyes grew wide, and Edgar laughed, tugging her closer to his side.

"Oh, yes, it was heartbreaking for Elijah to be near you after that—imagine the love of

your life not only forgetting you in an instant, but then attacking you without remorse. He didn't take it very well. Regardless, I improved my program, and by the time the O12 were ready to Jump, my Renewal Software was able to do its job, erasing all memory of their human existence. It runs every time an eHuman body powers up for the first time, even now as my customers grow bored with immortality and Jump into a new life every few years."

"You stole my life? Edgar, how could you?" Dawn stumbled out of his arms, her body unsteady as if she'd lost the ability to walk. An anger pulsed through her circuitry unlike one she'd ever known, and it threatened her ability to process and function. Adam tugged at her suitcoat sleeve, and her head snapped to his. One glance from his brown eyes and she gained enough clarity to run a calming program. Her anger would render her useless, and she needed her wits about her.

"Oh, please, you were nothing as Sophia. I made you a legend, so be thankful," Edgar replied, waving his hand in the air. He walked to Oksana and began petting her hair. "I couldn't allow those of us in charge to suffer the same fate of total memory loss. How was my dear Ruth Donovan going to be a proper World Leader if she didn't know our past?"

Oksana winced, and Edgar Prince twirled an auburn lock between his fingers.

"Tsk, tsk, my dear," he said, leaning down into her face. "You must mind your manners. Jealousy isn't becoming for one of your kind."

"Why did you do that to me, your son?" Adam asked, returning to the couch and falling onto it, as if he'd lost the ability to stand. Dawn sat down beside him, taking his hand. "Why would you do that to us?"

"Think about it," Edgar replied. "Why would we want everyone to recall who they were in the flesh? Better to leave them in the dark and program them to forget the entire 100,000-year experiment of carbon-based humanity. Only those who needed to remember got to remember. So, I created the Renewal Software and tested it out on Dawn. That had always been my plan, although the fact Sophia ended up being our first lab rat was never my intention. You were the one who asked me to let her Jump rather than die of brain cancer, and I graciously granted it."

"You mean the global elite of the time were offered the chance to join you and remain powerful with their memories intact or Jump with the masses and forget that they and their riches had ever even existed," Dawn snapped.

"Yes. Everyone on this island, as well as the seventy WG members."

Dawn's anger was rising again, and she clenched her fists so hard she started digging holes into her plastic palms. How dare this man take human history away from the people? How

dare he remove their link to their past, the very origin of their being? She wanted to strike him down, unable to fathom what greed and insanity would compel Edgar to play God in this way. But she refrained, for calm was the only way to get what they needed—access to Archion.

Adam, on the other hand, was unable to show such restraint.

“Why?” he yelled. “Why would you do such a thing? What gives you the power to take away everyone’s memories of life in the flesh but your own? Why should yours have been saved?”

“Because my story is the only one that matters, Elijah,” Edgar said, his tone resembling the kind adults used with schoolchildren. “I’m the one who created eHumanity. Therefore, I’m the one who must know himself. The rest of you know yourselves through me. My generous gift of technology is your gift of immortality. Isn’t that enough?”

“You greedy bastard,” Adam said, unable to stop the rant forming on his lips. “Your generosity? Your brilliance? Did you somehow forget you’d have nothing if it hadn’t been for your children?”

Edgar stared at Adam as a cruel smirk formed upon his lips, and Dawn knew Adam had said too much.

“Adam,” Dawn TeleSpoke, “*Stop now.*”

“*But he’s cut us off from our source,*” Adam replied. “*All of us. And worse, it’s a game to him.*”

“*Stop. Now.*”

“Elijah, let it go,” Dawn said aloud. “Now isn’t the time to rehash decisions made so long ago, is it? Sit back down and enjoy your father’s company. I’m sure this isn’t how you intended your first family meeting to turn out, is it, Edgar?”

Edgar shook his head slightly at Dawn’s remark but kept his gaze upon his son.

“It is a shame you were so impudent with me, Elijah,” he said in a honeyed voice. “Your life would have been so much better as my son, the heir to a dynasty, rather than a lowly Newsreel reporter in a useless province.”

“No one can be an heir in an immortal world,” Adam snapped at his father like a hungry shark.

“It matters not. I’m a forgiving father, Elijah. Tonight, we’ll celebrate your return home with dancing, music, and good company. You’ll come to the ballroom at seven o’clock sharp to meet my friends and colleagues. Everyone of importance will be there. In the meantime, Chester”—he gestured his head to a bald eBot that stood in the doorway— “will bring you to your suite, where you’ll find many beautiful things to wear tonight.”

Dawn grabbed Adam’s hand to calm herself as Edgar Prince and Oksana strode to the doorway and made to leave the room. The recent revelations had begun to eat away at her very

essence. Edgar had erased their love with a few lines of code. Worse, he'd erased the history of humanity. She looked at Adam, and as his eyes locked with hers, she saw his devotion. Then it hit her—it appeared that despite all of Edgar's cunning, he had been unable to truly erase their love. This was her only hope—the force that would guide the rest of her eHuman days.

“By the way,” Edgar called over his shoulder as he exited, “feel free to leave your energy packs with Chester. I would like to peek at the technology. Besides, you won't need them here in my home, which is your home now as well. You've been granted access to recharge on my private network.”

A shiver slid down Dawn's metallic spine. They would have to do as he said and leave their energy packs, to avoid suspicion. And that meant they would have only two days to get to Archion before their Chi-Regulators ran out of energy. Two days until they either saved the world or had their memories zeroized by the Resistance software when they plugged into Edgar's network—erasing their love story once again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“**W**hat the hell is that?” Origen said as he scanned the horizon, his enhanced vision application enabled.

The city of New Omaha had been built in the center of an enormous prairie, allowing him a clear view of the horizon in all directions, which was beginning to darken. No matter which way Origen turned, a storm was brewing.

At least, Origen hoped it was a storm. Tornadoes were known to hit the area during sweltering summer nights. Yet something deep within Origen told him the approaching clouds signaled a different kind of doom.

“Cane,” he called out while pointing to the gathering gloom. “Do you see the horizon?”

“Affirmative, Master Origen,” the red-haired warrior answered.

“Send out your scouts in all directions to determine its nature.”

“Yes, Master Origen,” Cane replied.

Origen turned to look at the visuals on his command center to view the situation in the other Resistance-controlled cities around the world.

The same storm was encircling them all.

CHAPTER NINE

Adam and Dawn spent the rest of the day exploring the Prince estate. Everything was first class—from the luxurious recharge rooms filled with elegant shoes, clothing, and jewelry to Edgar Prince's own private harbor where his three yachts were anchored. Adam was drawn to the harbor, and asked Dawn to join him for a walk by the sea. They stood on the docks, hand in hand, watching the waves roll up and down.

"It's mesmerizing," Adam said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and drawing her closer.

"Yes, it is," she replied.

"I've been wondering something."

"What?" she asked, gazing up into his face.

"How well did you know Evelyn Prince?"

Dawn scrunched up her mouth as she considered his question. "Pretty well. I mean, in the beginning of my life, you were the person

who spent most of your time with me, but Evelyn was always there, working hard. I think she was suspicious of your interest in me, so she coded up an encryption program so I could secure part of my database from you. That's where I kept all my secrets."

"What secrets?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Nothing major. I forgot all about it for years after I left the lab for the O12 tour."

"What secrets?" he asked again, wrapping both of his arms around her and picking her up, causing her to giggle.

"Fine." She slapped at him, and he put her back on the ground. "It appears that when I first started using the Pleasure Zone apps you created, I liked to take a lover who looked like you."

"Like me?" He pointed to his chest.

"No, not like Adam Winter you, Elijah Prince you. He was quite handsome, for a human."

Adam felt another twinge of resentment toward his father for erasing Elijah and Sophia the way he had. "How close was Evelyn to my father?"

Dawn stepped out of his embrace. "Very close. She was always at his side. I think it made you uncomfortable. You never said so, but your face was always tense when near her, and I always assumed you were jealous, since Edgar

gave her way more attention than you."

"I see," Adam said, a new sense of worry flooding his system as he began to connect the dots.

"Adam, what are you thinking?"

"Tell me about Evelyn Prince since the Great Shift. She became a cyber-Guardian after I Jumped. How has she treated the Resistance?"

Dawn's eyes narrowed. "She's done nothing but hunt us down. Alrishia has been at war with Evelyn and the other cyber-Guardians for over a century."

"Then why should we trust her now?"

"Because James told me she created the Trojan Horse and programmed it inside of you. She must've had a change of heart."

"If that were true, why has she been attacking you instead of helping the Resistance?"

"I imagine because she also forgot everything when she Jumped."

"If Edgar loved her brains so much, why didn't he let her keep her memories, like everyone else on this island?"

"That's a good question. He must've had some inkling she'd changed her loyalties."

"Why did she Jump?"

"So she'd be in Neuro when you plugged in."

"Why didn't James try to find me sooner?"

Dawn's shoulders fell and she frowned. "I don't know. I imagine he was too busy and back

then it was impossible to find you. We couldn't risk moving about in the open and were still trying to form the alliance. Even after he told me about you, it took Alrisha decades before her algorithm gave us a list of possibilities. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," he said, caressing her cheek. "I'm trying to figure out Evelyn, that's all. Origen was correct; the taking of the cities was too easy. Getting Edgar to let us come to New Caledonia was too easy." He glanced out at the sea, noticing his father's boat in the far distance. He'd been out to sea all day. "Edgar doesn't seem concerned at all. Even if he doubts our intentions, which I'm sure he does, he appears confident. Maybe Evelyn is playing a trick to get me back to his side?"

"No. I can't believe James would've had anything to do with that. He said you came to him in Avalon, carrying the thumb drive, and told him of the plan yourself. You agreed to do this, Adam. There's no doubt in my mind."

Adam considered his meeting with Evelyn in Neuro. "She said something, before I unplugged in Avalon."

"What?"

Adam turned to Dawn, taking her hands. "Evelyn said the reason I agreed to the plan was to return to your side. That I demanded you be the one to find me, or else I wouldn't do it. I would've let myself die in the flesh instead."

Dawn's lower lip trembled. He put his hand on her cheek again. "That part, at least, I know has to be true."

Dawn reached up to brush his bangs aside before kissing him. She drew away and gazed at the sea. "James said the same thing, that you jumped to be by my side. We must hold on to the hope that everything else both he and Evelyn said is true as well, because we have no choice but to finish what we've started."



Edgar stood on the deck of his sailboat, the breeze rippling his silken shirt. He preferred the solace he could only find on his boats. He hadn't brought along any of his concubines; this time, he'd chosen Morgan to join him alone. The man needed to be educated on the situation at hand.

"Well, what do you think?" Edgar asked his second-in-command, taking a seat to recline in a striped chaise lounge chair. Morgan sat beside him, tapping his fingertips upon his armrest.

"Of what?" he replied.

"Of Elijah, of course," Edgar replied. "My son. What do you think about his return?"

"Yes, well, that's a trick question, Edgar. I don't quite understand what you're doing, allowing him and Dawn to come to the island. Is

this really a joyful reunion? Or is something else stirring in that head of yours?”

Edgar smiled. It was nice when Morgan showed a little spirit.

“It does seem unlikely he would return after all these long years,” Edgar said, “but return he has. You want to know why I allowed him on the island. It’s simple—I’m curious, and I wanted Dawn back. Allowing them safe passage to the island gave me two gifts at once.”

“Yes, but now that they’re here, what do you plan to do with them?” Morgan asked.

“Throw a party, of course. The prodigal son deserves to be given the fatted calf in his name, doesn’t he?” Edgar replied with a slight chuckle.

“What might the fatted calf be in this case, Edgar?” Morgan asked, crossing his legs and leaning toward Edgar.

“It pains me you haven’t found the answer yet.”

Morgan hesitated for a moment, considering the accusation. “I’m sorry, sir?”

“I’d expect that after a century of my company, you’d be craftier than this.”

Morgan stared at his master, and Edgar allowed himself into the man’s mind—seeing Morgan’s hate grow with each moment. The man wished he could jump off the island and into any other eHuman body. Just for once, he’d love the freedom that being a member of the masses

provided—to be hidden from Edgar Prince’s ever-reaching gaze.

“Quantium, Morgan,” Edgar said, feeling both lonely and intrigued by the man’s thoughts. “Quantium is why they’re here.”

Morgan pressed his lips together. “Quantium?”

“Yes, I’m going to plug them into Archion and make them the first inhabitants of my new operating system. Like God planting Adam and Eve in the garden, only better, because this Adam is mine to use however I want. There’s no free will in my paradise, is there?”

Morgan shifted in his seat, and Edgar smiled. He loved reminding Morgan of his place. Rather than his usual whining, however, Morgan caught Edgar’s eye and returned the grin.

“But Edgar, it’s unlike you to do what you want with someone’s destiny without toying with them first.”

Edgar began to laugh while patting Morgan on the back.

“You know me so very well. Of course, I have something planned. It’s going to be spectacular, indeed.”

“I assume it has something to do with the impending attacks on the Resistance-controlled cities?”

“Yes.” Edgar threw back his head and turned his face to the sun. “It most certainly does.”



On the shore, Adam and Dawn remained on the docks, gazing out at the silhouette the sailboat made against the bright sun now beginning to set into the western sea.

“We need to be ready for anything,” Dawn said, squeezing Adam’s hand tighter.

“Something in my timeline doesn’t add up,” Adam said, a tight feeling beginning to build within his mind, as if his lost memories were squeezing his hardware into pieces. “I was with you when you Jumped into eHumanity, and we knew each other. I even designed software to keep you company, but then I disappeared from your life. You claim you didn’t see me until a few days before the bombing of Santa Cruz, when I visited the Resistance. A week later, I was proclaimed dead in the attacks, but instead I became Adam Winter. What did I do in those years between leaving Edgar and Jumping into eHumanity? By my figuring, it must have been at least ten years between the two events. Who did I meet? What did I see? Why did I leave Guardian Enterprises? Why did I leave you?”

Dawn gazed at him, the wind blowing strands of her blonde hair across her face. “I can only imagine that it was the knowledge of what your father was doing that drove you to leave

his side. Or perhaps he threatened you? As for who you met, I believe you were with the ‘Pro-Deathers,’ as Edgar calls them.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because if you were mad at your father, that’s the group you would have aligned with. They were the ones fighting against the Great Shift. You would have brought them information to help them. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, a lot of good that did.” He scoffed. “They’re all dead.”

“I don’t think so, Adam,” Dawn replied with a serious look on her face.

He turned to face her. “What do you mean?”

“I think some of them lived. They must have.”

“Humans?”

She nodded. “On his deathbed, James hinted you might have helped their cause, only I thought he was crazy because he was old and about to die. Maybe he was on to something?”

He wasn’t sure what to make of that idea. Dawn had long considered herself responsible for the death of so many during the Great Shift. Perhaps believing some had survived was a way of making herself feel better? It seemed unlikely any human life existed, other than in eHuman form, but Adam wasn’t about to argue with her.

He turned and looked out to the sea again, noting Edgar’s boat was getting closer.

“He’s returning,” he whispered, wishing he had saliva so he could spit. What a strange thing to imagine.

Dawn nodded. The setting sun cast an amber glow across her beautiful face, bronzing her like a statue. They watched the red disk descend with each moment into the vast ocean that surrounded the island, while Edgar’s sailboat returned to the docks on which they stood. He’d arrive at the slip within minutes.

At that moment, all things became crystal clear.

Tonight was the night. Adam had to get to Archion and plug in.

Adam turned to Dawn and pulled her close, kissing her with all his love and hoping Edgar was watching. He kissed her as if it were their last evening on Earth—deep, intense, driving to the very core of her soul. She sensed his urgency and drew away, as if taken aback by the tone of his embrace.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“I don’t have a good feeling, Dawn.”

“What do you mean?”

“I fear we’ve run out of time. We must find Archion—tonight.”

“Why?”

“I fear that while we’re here, the WG will launch an attack against the cities.”

Dawn nodded. “I share your fears. What’s our plan?”

“Oksana Natarov,” he answered.

“Oksana? Edgar’s sex slave?”

“Yes, keep an eye on her. See if we can find a way to get her on our side. Something tells me her life with Edgar Prince isn’t all romance and roses,” Adam said.

“Okay. Oksana Natarov will be our target. Let’s see if we can gain her confidence.”

Adam reached forward and took Dawn’s hand. The electrical impulses from her fingertips sent a deeply erotic pulse through his body. He smiled at her.

“Once we’re done saving the world, I think we might want to look into installing some of those Pleasure Zone upgrades in me as well,” he teased.

Dawn kissed him once more as Edgar’s sailboat approached the docks.

“I don’t want to talk to him,” Dawn said.

“Go on up to the mansion and get ready for the party. I’ll do the talking,” Adam offered.

“No, I’m not a coward. I won’t run away.”

She grasped Adam’s hand tighter as they waited on the docks to face his father.

The boat navigated its way up to the slip, three eBots jumping out onto the dock in synchronicity to tie the vessel securely to the cleats. Edgar and his companion exited the boat. Edgar showed no surprise at the couple’s presence on the dock yet chose to chide them anyway.

“Elijah and Dawn, why aren’t you getting ready for the party? All your attire awaits you in your recharge rooms.”

“We wanted to watch the sunset,” Adam admitted.

The man at Edgar’s side eyed him, pupil lenses focusing Adam’s face. “Why would anyone want to do such a thing?”

“Because I’ve never seen the sun set upon the ocean before,” Adam replied. “I think it’s beautiful the way the sea reflects its burning colors.”

“How sad you’ve never been to the ocean, since you stole my favorite ship, *The Mandorla*, when you ran away from me.” Edgar tutted. “Oh, that’s right, you’re not waterproof.”

Adam trembled as he spoke. “I stole a boat from you when I ran away. How daring of me.”

“You were an impulsive person. It appears you brought that with you into this life as well,” Edgar replied, his camera eyes now zooming in on Adam’s face. “But you loved the water. From the moment I brought you out on your first sail, you took to it like a bee to honey. Of course, your mother didn’t approve. She feared the ocean.”

Adam looked at the man with a blank expression. He knew Edgar was taunting him with the past. Probably even lying about it since Adam wouldn’t know any better. Dawn gripped his hand even tighter.

“My mother?”

Edgar glanced at his sidekick, who was keenly watching him. “A beautiful woman. No one else on the planet compared. I designed Oksana to look the way she did on the day we met.”

“What was her name?” Adam asked. The idea of her had triggered yet another wave of anger. Adam fought hard to keep the emotion hidden.

“Atienne,” Edgar said. His eyes stared off into the distance as the corners of his mouth fell, and Adam wondered if the man was sad. “A French man’s name, I know, but it suited her.”

“What happened to her?” Adam asked.

“It’s time, Edgar,” Morgan announced, interrupting the conversation. “We’re all expected at the party.”

“Yes.” Edgar shook his head as if to clear it, and shifted between his feet, while shaking a finger at the ground as if he’d discovered himself being naughty. He pointed the finger at Adam. “You two get dressed. I expect you to be on time. I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

Adam eyed his father, sensing a weakness for the first time. His mother’s name was Atienne, and her memory caused Edgar distress. Why Edgar had even brought up the subject was beyond Adam’s understanding, but now was not the time to beg for more information from the man, for it was obvious Edgar regretted mentioning the woman.

“Yes, Father,” Adam replied. “I’ll be on time. I wouldn’t dream of letting you down.”

“It’s best you don’t, son,” Edgar said. He and his lackey Morgan turned and sauntered to the mansion. Adam and Dawn remained at the docks until the men faded away into the shadows of the dusk.

All the while, Adam kept turning his mother’s name over and over in his mind. *Atienne? Who was she? What happened to her?* Why did the thought of her make Adam want to kill Edgar on the spot? He was awash in a sea of resentment. How dare the man use his mother to bait him? It was obvious Edgar’s treachery had depths that Adam couldn’t ever fathom. All the circuits in his body were firing, and it took the will of Heracles to stop himself from chasing Edgar down and attacking him.

Dawn sent a wave of relief through her hands to try and calm him down. When she sensed his system had quieted, she spoke to him. “Shall we go get ready?”

“Now I know something more about the depths of my revenge,” he whispered in a faint voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t carry this Trojan Horse just to get back at Edgar for taking you away from me. I’m seeking vengeance for the destruction of my mother as well. For some reason, I know this to be true.”

Dawn kissed his forehead. “Then let’s be done with this. We will gain access to Archion tonight and rid ourselves, and the world, of this tyrant.”

The pair began to walk back to the castle, covering the same springy, grassy lawn that Edgar had trekked, the footprints from the soles of his shoes still evident. As they drew nearer, they could hear the crowds gathering on the veranda, their voices rising and falling in laughter, like the ocean waves. A jazz band provided the party’s backdrop. Adam and Dawn skirted the festivities and followed a long hallway to their dressing rooms. It was time to put on the costumes his father had prepared for them.

CHAPTER TEN

Adam strolled along the plush red carpet to the end of the hallway, stopping before the ornate doorway of Dawn's dressing room. When he entered, he was taken aback by her radiant beauty. She stood in front of a three-way mirror, turning side to side as she gazed upon herself. Her blonde hair was piled up on her head, and the loose strands formed perfect ringlets that framed her face. From her ears hung large teardrop-shaped diamonds. Around her graceful neck she wore a matching diamond choker. A white, floor-length dress clung to her shapely body, accentuating all the curves that The Dawn of eHumanity had been granted. Her red lips formed a smile when she turned and saw Adam standing in the doorway, himself a handsome sight in a black tuxedo.

"Well, the clothes here sure beat the ones in Avalon," she joked, twirling a shining diamond ring around her finger.

"Elijah Prince and Dawn," a mechanical

voice called out into their room, surprising each of them. "Your presence is expected in the ballroom."

The two joined hands and left the dressing room, following the carpeted hallway down to the enormous front staircase. They descended it step by step, taking their time to survey the crowd and the room below. eHumans crowded the entryway, each one dressed in their finest and decorated like Christmas trees with sparkling jewels. Every eye focused upon the couple as they continued down the steps.

When they arrived on the bottom stair, the crowd parted, allowing them access to the ballroom doors. Whispers closed in behind Adam and Dawn as they entered the gathering and forced themselves to join the party.

"Elijah, Dawn, this way," Edgar Prince's voice rang out over the mingled music and voices as he beckoned the couple to his side. "Please, everyone, welcome my son and his lovely escort—The Dawn of eHumanity herself."

The crowd burst into forced cheers, each person clapping like an automaton, as if defying Edgar Prince's orders would cost them their lives. *They don't want to be here*, Adam thought, focusing on each face as he passed them. Either they hated their lives under Edgar so much, or he was about to hurt Adam and Dawn in a way most of them didn't want to see. Knowing Edgar, it was probably both.

“How happy I am to share this night with you, my eternal friends,” Edger continued. “It has been a long time since Elijah has joined my table. For decades upon decades, I have searched for my son, and now that I have found him, I will never let him go.”

Edgar’s words disturbed Adam. The rest of the crowd continued to perform their little golf claps, but there was something sinister about the way they looked at him. Adam forced himself to smile at his father and shook off any dread that threatened to consume his thoughts.

“Thank you, Father,” he answered. “It’s a pleasure to be back at your side. I look forward to meeting all your companions.” Adam gestured to the crowd surrounding them.

The band began to play. Edgar turned to Dawn and gazed at her, allowing his eyes to scan her entire curvaceous body. It hit Adam that she’d been created in accordance with Edgar’s desires. Adam winced at the idea. Again, the pain of his father’s betrayal cut through him. It was time to finish him, once and for all.

His eyes slid across the room, looking for Oksana. He spotted her standing alone on the other side of the ballroom, staring at Edgar as if her eyes were lasers. Edgar was a man of secrets, but he wasn’t very discreet with his affections.

“Edgar,” Dawn said, “would you like to dance?”

Edgar smiled at his creation, one eyebrow

raised. “Excuse me?”

“Would you like to dance?” She held out her arms and gave him a pouty smile for good measure.

Edgar winked at his son as he entered her open embrace. “It would be an honor.”

The couple began to waltz, leaving Adam alone on the dance floor. He admired his love’s ability to take control of the situation. Now was his chance to be with Oksana. This might be his only opportunity to get to Archion that evening.

He marched toward her, taking a moment to admire her. Adam realized that other than Dawn, Oksana was the most dazzling woman in the room. He also recalled Edgar’s statement earlier about how he’d designed Oksana to look like Atienne. So, this was what his mother had looked like when in the flesh? Well, Adam had to give Edgar credit for his exceptional taste in women.

“May I?” Adam asked her, holding out his hand.

Oksana’s eyes glowed, not red with anger or warning, but something else. Suspicion, perhaps? She nodded and offered him her arm. Adam escorted her into the crowd and drew her close, choosing to dance the rhumba so that he could whisper into her ear. The rest of the crowd would think he was trying to seduce her, but he needed her services in a much more dangerous way.

He could feel the erotic energy pulsing through her Pleasure Zone-enhanced hands. For a moment, he lost himself in a fantasy, imagining her fingers entering the plug at his spine and driving sexual energy up his body to the crown of his head. It sounded like such a delight. Adam hadn't been on Neuro for ages, and the Resistance hadn't invented any other way to have sex. Kissing Dawn was blissful, but now, in Oksana's arms, he found his old desire running high.

Oksana apparently sensed his yearning, as she slipped her hands down his back to the plug opening in his trousers, stopping short of inserting her fingers. He shivered and promptly forced himself to refocus. He was no longer the Adam Winter of the past. He had work to do.

"Oksana," he said, "I need your help."

"Really?" she said, her voice purring. "What could I possibly do for you?"

"What I'm about to say is very confidential. I put myself at significant risk sharing it with you, but I need to trust someone here on the island, and I knew the moment I met you that you were different."

"Different? From whom?"

"From Edgar, and the rest of the New Caledonians."

Oksana tried to pull away from his embrace, but Adam held fast, holding her form close to his own.

"Oksana, please, I know you're different. You aren't happy here. You weren't meant to be a part of Edgar's collection, were you?"

Oksana's body tensed at his words. "What do you want, Adam Winter?"

"I need you to help me gain access to the Archion machine."

"Archion machine? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It's the main server of Neuro, where the operating system's source code is installed. It's housed in Guardian Enterprises Headquarters, somewhere on this island. Do you know where that building is?"

"Of course. The kings and queens of this island spend hours there, plotting and scheming. They leave the place only to come here, to the mansion, to party and have sex with one another in style."

"Can you get us there?" Adam asked.

"What do you mean, us?"

"Dawn and me," he answered.

Oksana tensed once more. "Even if I could help you, Edgar would find out. He sees everything. If he were to catch me, the punishment would be great."

"Please. I need you, Oksana. If I gain access to Archion, I can free you from this place, once and for all."

"That's impossible," she whispered. "There is no escape from New Caledonia. No one

other than Edgar has set foot off the island in a century. Edgar won't permit it."

"When I'm finished here, everyone will be free," Adam replied, grasping her closer to his chest.

Oksana remained silent, sliding her hand up and down his back while she considered his request. The sensation drove Adam wild.

"Oksana," he said with a stiff voice, "please consider my offer. Help me and you will be free to live wherever you want, with whomever you want."

She drew her hand back up to his shoulder and stared him in the eyes. "I will not help her." Oksana nodded in the direction of Dawn, who was laughing as Edgar spun her around on the floor.

"I'm sorry, but she and I are a team," Adam answered.

Oksana stopped dancing and shoved Adam away from her. "That's too bad. If you want my help saving the world, Adam Winter, you'll need to do it alone, without The Dawn."

Adam watched her stride across the dance floor, her golden gown swishing to the undulation of her hips. What a foolish woman. How could she allow her jealousy of Edgar's wandering eyes to prevent her from finding peace? Perhaps he was wrong and she liked this life, even though she was nothing more than a sex doll.

Oksana headed to a table near the back of the room, situated next to a glass wall that allowed the guests to look out at the ocean. A full moon was beginning to rise. Edgar's voice boomed beside him, causing Adam to jump.

"Did Oksana abandon you?" His father grinned, still holding Dawn's hand. "Such a shame. She has no manners, that one. But she's one of my best entertainers. She's all yours, if you'd like."

Adam turned to Edgar and waved a finger at the man. "No thank you, Father. I came here with Dawn, and she's all I need." He reached out and took Dawn's hand from Edgar's grasp.

In response, Edgar laughed. "Always the gentleman when it comes to this one, aren't you? Come, let me introduce you to the rest of my colleagues."

Edgar Prince led Dawn and Adam to the table where Oksana and his closest associates sat. They assembled like royalty, jewels twinkling under the ballroom lights.

Oksana's right, Adam thought. They are the monarchs of the New World, and Edgar Prince is the emperor who controls each one.

"Please, have a seat," Edgar Prince said, gesturing to two empty seats near the front.

Adam and Dawn obeyed. They found themselves surrounded by several men and women, all of whom stared at the couple. As Edgar introduced Adam to all his cronies, Adam

noted that while Edgar had chosen a seat next to Oksana, the seat on his right side was empty. Oksana continued to stare at Adam as Edgar made introductions. Adam made eye contact and smiled at her. Edgar, misunderstanding, paused in his introductions.

“Do you find my friends amusing?” Edgar Prince asked.

Oksana’s shoulders slumped, and she gazed down at the table in front of her. Adam shook his head.

“No, Father,” he answered, knowing he had to say something clever. “I was just admiring how beautiful Oksana looks this evening.”

“*Oh, good one,*” Dawn TeleSpoke. Adam continued to grin.

“My son, you always were the flirtatious one. Until you met Sophia of, course,” Edgar Prince replied with a false sweetness.

The lights went dim, startling Adam.

“Worry not, my son.” Edgar’s smile was now glowing in the darkened room, like an evil spirit. “I have a gift for you. Sit back and enjoy.”

Edgar gestured to the dance floor, which had been cleared of all guests. A ring of multicolored lights pulsed along the perimeter. The audience began to clap as eight bald eHumans, their skin the color of steel, glided into the room, taking their place at the center of the dance floor. Their eyes glowed red, as if there was a furnace inside each of them. They set their gaze

upon the audience and waited for their cue to begin.

The pulsating music began.

The rhythm, a blend of violin, cello, and synthesizer, set the dancers into motion. Their hands became balls of fire, illuminating their primitive yet modern movements. As the music grew in intensity, so did the dancers. They were able to do anything imaginable with their bodies. Flipping, climbing, tossing each other with perfect timing.

As the violin came to its highest note, all eight burst into flame.

Like pillars of fire, they moved to the beat, causing Adam’s own circuitry to pulse with them. He’d never seen anything more stunning in his entire life. The dancers were fire. Yet the fire had become the dancers. When the act was complete, the dancers remained on fire, bowing and spinning to the applause. Even Dawn leapt to her feet to cheer for them; such was the depth of their inspiration. Edgar saw her response.

“Do you like them?” he asked her.

She turned to him and nodded, wearing an innocent schoolgirl grin. “Oh yes, Edgar. They’re wonderful.”

“The dancers created the bodies themselves. I give them artistic license to work with the technology.”

“It’s brilliant.” Adam hadn’t ever seen her this happy before.

As the fire dancers left the room, the lights came back on, and eBots surrounded the table carrying silver trays, upon which lay several small, palm-sized glass orbs in a stunning array of colors.

“Portable Pleasure Zones?” Adam asked.

“Yes,” answered Morgan, who was sitting on the other side of Edgar Prince. “One for each of us. Several different pleasurable impulses for you to choose from.”

“Of course, you could also have one of our Pleasurables, like Oksana, please you instead,” a tall, fair-skinned man suggested.

“Elijah is beyond such things.” Edgar Prince dismissed the man. “He has The Dawn as his companion—and I know firsthand what her feature set can do.”

Adam’s insides glowed hot.

“Edgar,” Dawn said, her hand to her mouth, pretending to be bashful, “how nice it is to hear that you choose to still remember those early days.”

Edgar Prince’s smile once more graced his face.

“Strange to hear you talk so freely with a known terrorist,” said a woman with long, pink hair and deep brown skin.

Edgar turned his attention to her. “Terrorist?”

“Yes, Dawn is the number one terrorist on the planet. It’s her organization that attacked our

cities last week.”

“It’s true!” cried out another woman. “I’m most disturbed about those attacks—I haven’t been able to get any new shoes since you took out New Rome. Where else, other than New Rome, can a woman get proper shoes?”

Dawn stared at the woman. “We didn’t take out New Rome. We saved it. Edgar was going to power it down.”

“What?” the lady said, now glaring at Edgar. “Why would you choose that city to power down? There are plenty of others we could do without, but New Rome, Edgar? It’s the only place to get nice shoes.”

“I did what had to be done,” Edgar said, his voice lazy as if he were still lounging on his sailboat at sea. “What disturbs me most is someone here on the island leaked the list of targeted cities to the Resistance in the first place.”

“What do you mean?” Adam asked.

“The time had come for us to smoke out the Resistance. The WG has allowed Dawn and her silly friends to play their game for too long.”

Adam glanced at Dawn. Their worst suspicions were true—it had been a trap.

Edgar continued, “Their antics have started to mess with production—and profits. So, Guardian Enterprises created a strategic list of cities to shut down to bring the Resistance to justice, but somehow the Resistance got a hold

of that list and moved in before we could turn off the power. Fortunately, about thirty cities are near our ANP sites.”

“ANP sites?” Adam asked.

“Advanced Nuclear Program sites,” Edgar explained. “Sites where we have been developing and launching our nuclear program for the past century.”

Adam couldn’t believe his ears. “Why would the WG need a nuclear weapons program? You have complete control over the population via Neuro. You can power them down if they don’t behave.”

“Obviously, for this exact situation,” Edgar answered. “I was unable to power those cities down because your rebels took control. Which brings me back to my original complaint: someone in our circle shared the list with the Resistance.”

“Really?” Dawn scoffed. “You’re surprised someone in your inner circle would leak information? Honestly, Edgar, such betrayal comes with the territory.”

“To what are you inferring?” Edgar challenged her.

Dawn stared into his eyes. “When you rule with an iron fist, you must expect some people to rebel. No tyrant is without his enemies.”

“Iron fist?” Edgar Prince placed a hand on his chest in mock innocence. “There is nothing iron about our rule. My darling, what is Neuro,

other than pure love and eternal security for the eHumans of the world?”

The men and women around the table began to nod in agreement.

“Neuro is love and safety?” Adam said. “I would argue Neuro is more about control.”

“Safety and control are two sides of the same coin, aren’t they, Adam Winter?” Edgar said.

Adam shivered. For the first time since arriving on the island, Edgar had refrained from calling him Elijah.

“My dear man,” Edgar continued, “after all this time, do you really still believe that freedom of thought is good? This belief in human judgment has always been your fatal flaw. What you and your people don’t understand is that the members of the WG are the most qualified to run the world. They’re the ones who understand humanity and its precarious state. Through the WG’s loving management, and the Guardians’ careful work within Neuro, all eHumans are free in the truest sense—that is to live forever in safety.”

“What the hell does that mean, to live forever in safety?” Adam asked. He was pushing it, and he knew it, but he couldn’t help asking the question of the one man who knew the actual answer.

“It means that if we granted eHumans freedom of thought, they wouldn’t be happy.

They'd turn back to their pre-Great Shift ways, destroying the earth and one another with their apparent xenophobia and fear of life. If eHumans could think for themselves, they'd remember how much they hate themselves, and as a result, how much they hate the other eHumans. The eHuman not only stopped death—it stopped the eventual destruction of humanity itself.”

Finally, the impulse that drove the villain's decision-making was revealed.

“Neuro keeps them in line, which makes governing humanity so much easier,” Morgan added. “Though after the Great Shift, we still had to trim down the population to make it more manageable. Now Neuro controls all eHumans who are left, and we sit back and watch it happily run.”

“What do you mean, you trimmed down the population?” Dawn asked, sitting up straight in her chair.

“Approximately four billion people have been released since the day you first opened your eyes, my dear,” Edgar answered, his smile still plastered upon his chiseled face.

“Released?” she repeated.

“Yes, released. You know, unplugged.”

Through their TeleSpeak connection, Adam felt the familiar sick sensation of guilt pour through his beloved's mind. Adam grabbed her hand under the table to try and silence her, but to no avail.

“You've killed four billion people?” she asked, her voice slurred, as if she were too tired to speak clearly.

“That still leaves about three billion to manage,” a woman said from across the table, laughing as she did so. “Securing three billion people is no small task. Your Resistance has no idea how taxing running the world can be.”

Despite himself, Adam rose from his chair, and Edgar followed. If his father had ever bought his cover, it was now certainly blown.

“You see, Dawn,” Edgar muttered while staring at Adam, “your Resistance can never succeed unless you keep the people in the dark, the way my government has. Your desire to free everyone from the control of Neuro is folly. You'll destroy humanity as we know it, and I won't let that happen.”

Edgar released Adam from his gaze. As he did so, an eBot called out, “World Leader Donahi has arrived.”

Everyone in the room rose, except Dawn, who remained sitting still at the table, as if frozen by his words. Edgar held out his hand and she accepted it, rising from her seat in a daze as the World Leader strode across the room, her dark hair drawn up upon her head in ringlets, and a golden circlet of a crown upon her head.

“Fortunately, my dear,” Edgar crooned like a mother as his guest of honor made her way toward him, “you'll never get the chance to ruin

my perfect world. The reason your insurrection was so successful is because we let you occupy those cities. Now we can destroy the Resistance. My friend, World Leader Donahi, has released her nuclear drones. It's only a matter of hours before every one of your friends, and the people whom you seek to protect, will be wiped off the planet."

"No!" Dawn screamed as she clutched at Edgar's suit collar. "You can't do this. Please, I'll do anything—anything you want."

"Too late," Rosario Donahi said, stepping up to the vacant seat next to Edgar. "My birds of prey have already been released. I'm here so we can watch the show together." The World Leader glanced around the room and snapped her finger. An eBot arrived. She pointed to Oksana. "Put that one to bed. We won't need her services any more tonight."

The eBot grasped the struggling Oksana and led her out of the room as Edgar placed a hand on Dawn's cheek.

"I know, my dear, it's such a shame that I must torture you like this, but the entire situation is your fault. You were the one who left my side to form the Resistance. That is an act I can never forgive." He drew her closer to his chest and leaned his head toward hers. "There's one more thing you need to know, dear," he whispered in her ear, loud enough for Adam to hear. "I'm the rat. I'm the one who gave your organization the list of cities."

She looked up at him in shocked silence. Adam moved closer.

"What?" Adam asked.

"You heard me. I gave that list to your organization," Edgar replied, his voice cold and expression stony like a mausoleum statue.

"Who would take information from you?" Adam said.

Edgar chuckled. "Ah, my son, there are rats everywhere. You of all people should know that." Neither Adam nor Dawn could speak. "You shouldn't be surprised. I'm a man of many plans."

The doors to the ballroom burst open and two huge, bald eBots, wearing dark tailored suits, entered the room. They made their way toward Adam and Dawn, ElectroShock guns pointed right at the couple. Adam readied himself to fight and turned to Dawn. She raised her arms out in front of her, and Adam could see what looked like bolts of lightning flying from her fingers. The two eBots fell to the floor in an instant.

"What was that?" he asked her as the crowd around them began to flee in all directions, like cockroaches in a Florida shack when you opened the refrigerator door for a midnight snack.

"I have an ElectroShock generator inside my body. Resistance enhancement."

Adam wanted to kiss her, but at that moment, dozens more eBots swarmed into the

room. Adam didn't hesitate. He attacked Edgar, pushing him down on top of the table and causing chairs—as well as Edgar's cronies—to scatter. Dawn reloaded and took out several more eBots before dropping her arms to her sides.

"Keep firing," Adam said as he struggled to hold Edgar down beneath his knees.

"There are too many," she replied as she began to fight with brute force. "I'm almost out."

While he was distracted by Dawn, Edgar threw Adam off him, tossing him several feet into the air. He crashed to the tile dance floor, his vision flickering upon impact. Within moments, several eBots surrounded him, blocking his view of Dawn, and he knew he'd failed.



Most of the guests cleared the room as eBots continued pouring in from the doors, surrounding and attacking the couple. Only Edgar remained, with Morgan and the World Leader at his side.

Edgar watched, his hands hooked behind his back, as his eBot brute squad engulfed Dawn and his son. A mixture of relief and sadness passed over him. Deep down, he'd known Elijah hadn't returned to his side for a real reunion, but Edgar had hoped Elijah could be saved and accept

his true destiny as his heir. It was obvious the boy had never been capable of being a Prince. He lacked the focus.

As Adam and Dawn fell to his forces, Edgar shrugged his shoulders and shook his head to clear it. Elijah had always been a pain in the ass. He was too much like his mother. Unlike Atienne, Elijah was about to become Edgar's forever. He would never be allowed to leave him again. Edgar forced a smile as the couple was dragged from the ballroom, kicking and screaming.

"Where do you want them held?" Morgan asked, interrupting Edgar's reverie.

"Throw them in cell block D. We'll plug them into Archion later. Let them feel defeated for a while longer. I can't wait to see how they like my new world." He turned to Rosario and held out his hand, which she took without hesitation. "In the meantime, get the rest of New Caledonia to the theater. We have a war to enjoy. I call it, 'The End of the Resistance.'"



As the eBots dragged them down into the depths of the mansion, Adam and Dawn continued resisting, but it was obvious they were outnumbered. Their captors stopped before an iron door that opened for them without

command and tossed Adam and Dawn into a windowless cell. The door clanked shut, echoing throughout the cement room.

Dawn began to move about the room, searching for any weakness. Adam, dispirited, slid to the floor, watching Dawn test the walls, banging her fists and scratching at the seams between the concrete blocks, her white dress ripped at the knees and blonde hair falling in disarray around her face. It was pointless; there was no way out.

“He’s going to let us die here,” he said. “In two days, when our Chi-Regulators run out, they’ll drag us out of here and throw us in the dump.”

Dawn paused her movements. She had somehow retained her composure through it all. Now she stared at him, her eyes wild like a bear with its leg caught in a claw trap.

“No!” she screamed. “Not now. Not when we are so close to winning.”

“Dawn,” Adam whispered, holding out his arms to his beloved, resigned to his fate, “we were never winning. It was only a dream.”

Dawn slid down the wall, falling into his arms.

The room went pitch black, but neither of them turned on their night vision. There was nothing they could do but wait to power down and die.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Nuclear drones,” Cane said in a trembling voice. “Hundreds of them. They’re moving this way at about forty miles per hour. They’ll be in range in two minutes.”

“Hundreds?” Origen asked.

“Affirmative,” Cane answered.

“Why hundreds when one bomb is enough to destroy this city—and everything else within one hundred miles?” Origen said, snapping his teeth together in agitation. He couldn’t believe this was happening. The entire operation had been a trap, and he of all people had fallen for it. Rage vibrated through his body, and while he knew he could run some soothing program to stop it, he had no desire to do so. Edgar had outwitted him, and he was not going to use that man’s technology to emotionally bypass this moment.

“For effect?” Cane said, his mouth twisting into a snarl.

Origen stood still, arms folded over his chest, listening to all his troop leaders confirm the worst: nuclear drones surrounded all the Resistance-occupied cities. The WG was closing in.

“We have nothing to counter this firepower. All our cities will be blown off the map,” Cane said.

“And every single one of us as well,” another soldier said.

“It’s hopeless,” yet another complained.

Origen stared at his warriors. He understood they were waiting for him to respond. What were his options? How could he counsel them? What would he tell the citizens whom he’d sworn to protect? Was there any way to save them?

If the cities were under siege, it meant the worst had happened. Dawn and Adam had failed. Their mission must have been compromised. The pair would never gain control of Archion now.

“Man your posts,” Origen called out to the troops, his vocals set to maximum. “Let’s take a few down before we’re destroyed.”

Dawn was forever lost to him, and it was his own fault. He never should have let her get on the HyperPlane to New Caledonia. How could he have been so blind?

There was nothing left for Origen to do but prepare to die.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When the door to the cell opened, Adam and Dawn didn’t even look up to see who had entered. They both assumed the time had come for Edgar’s Guardians to plug them in. When that happened, their memories would auto-erase.

Once again, the love story of Adam and Dawn would fade away into oblivion.

Adam switched on his night vision and glanced up from his place on the floor. He narrowed his eyes. It wasn’t a red-robed Guardian who stood before him. It was Morgan, his father’s pet.

“Get up,” said Morgan.

“Why are you here?” Adam asked, unmoving.

“I said, get up.” Morgan grabbed Adam by the shoulder and yanked him to his feet. “Your father awaits.”

“Who cares what he wants? Let us die here in peace,” Adam said, sliding back down to the

floor.

“Get your asses up now.”

A trio of eBots entered, and Adam leapt from the floor. He’d had enough of eBots for the evening. He leaned over and picked up Dawn from the floor and into his embrace.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Morgan didn’t answer, instead turning on his heel and storming out of the room into the luminescent hallway. Adam’s eyes adjusted to the bright lights and Dawn stood taller, but he wasn’t sure if she had her wits about her yet. Morgan and his guard led them out of the prison and into the night, where a large white van awaited them.

The side door slid open to reveal several more eBots.

Morgan flicked his head at the door as he strode to the passenger seat. “Get in.”

Adam and Dawn obeyed and soon found themselves on the desolate New Caledonia highway.

“Where are we going?” Adam asked again.

“To see your father.”

“Yes, but why are we leaving the estate?”

“You’ll see.”

Adam remained quiet for the rest of the ride, stroking Dawn’s hair. She was clutching him like a child, trembling as if awaiting serious punishment, which of course, they were.

“*My love,*” he TeleSpoke. “*Calm down. It will*

soon be over.”

“*Soon, we will be dead,*” she answered.

Adam pressed his lips together. “*True, but why fear death? Haven’t we already died once before?*”

Dawn drew her head from his chest, hesitant and slow, like an old woman, and gazed into his face. “*What if there’s nothing beyond the body?*”

“*You of all people know the Lux has more capacities than inhabiting a body,*” he replied.

“You two are awfully quiet,” Morgan said from the front of the van.

“There’s not much more to say, is there?” Adam replied. “I mean, you’re taking us to my father, which means we’re going to die. The end.”

Morgan started to laugh. The sound grew as if the joke just kept getting funnier.

“Our demise is funny? You people are psychopaths,” Adam said.

Morgan turned to them, his eyes zooming in and wide, his face stricken with an emotion Adam couldn’t pin as anything other than fear, or perhaps terror. “Where you’re going is worse than death, trust me. Please, kill me if you ever find me there.”

Dawn dove deep into Adam’s embrace and began to tremble again. A moment later, they pulled into the parking lot of none other than Guardian Enterprises.

“Look,” Adam said.

Dawn lifted her head from under his arms and followed his gaze to the neon sign in the dark night. Her eyes grew wide. "Headquarters. Why would he want to meet us here?"

The van stopped and Morgan yanked open his door, jumping out of his seat as if it were on fire. "Oh, you'll see."

The side door of the van slid open. The eBots pointed their guns at Adam and Dawn, gesturing for them to move toward the front entrance of the building.

"What, Edgar didn't bother to give you a simple voice program?" Adam said as he got out of the van.

In reply, an eBot shoved the tip of the gun into his back. He walked toward the building.

"*This is where we want to be,*" he TeleSpoke. "*We're so close to Archion.*"

Dawn faced him, still trembling, but some clarity had regained in her eyes. "*No matter what happens, you must plug in. Promise?*"

"*I will not abandon you,*" he replied.

"*You will plug in, Adam. No matter what.*"

They entered a heavily guarded entryway and were waved through with Morgan's credentials. The pair followed him to the elevators. One opened right away, its friendly ding piercing the otherwise tense mood of the place. Guns still trained on their backs, Adam and Dawn entered the small elevator, followed by two eBots and Morgan, who pressed the

number 11 on the keypad. The doors slid shut.

Adam had so many questions but found himself unable to speak. What was Edgar up to? Adam was emotionally exhausted, that had to be part of Edgar's plan. He'd been toying with Adam and Dawn the entire day, and now they were both weak. Dawn hadn't been herself since they'd been deposited in their cell, and Adam couldn't blame her. Yet here they were, in the exact building they needed to be in. How could Adam get away and find Archion?

The elevator dinged again, and the doors slid open to reveal a room beyond that made all of Adam's circuits fire with equal portions of delight and dread. Before him rose a glass wall, behind which stood the largest supercomputer he had ever seen. The LEDs on the tower blinked next to it like a hundred pairs of eyes, all glowing and taunting them to come forward and try to claim their master. Adam stared at Archion in all its glory.

Only his father, the World Leader, and twelve Guardians stood between Adam and his goal.

"Welcome," Edgar said, his arms open as if greeting Adam for the first time.

The false pretenses were no longer necessary.

"Fuck off," Adam said as he strolled into the room.

"He's not very polite, is he?" the World

Leader asked.

“Cut the crap,” Adam continued, sauntering toward his father, while eyeing every bit of the room. The red-robed Guardians stood at their places in front of the computers, typing and monitoring the network on various screens. Archion blinked and beeped, brighter and larger than any supercomputer Adam had ever seen. “This is impressive, Father. What do you call it?”

Edgar opened his arms, beaming at his creation, and took the bait. “This is Archion, built by Guardian Enterprises to house the source code for Neuro.”

Adam stepped closer to the golden plug in the wall beside the supercomputer. He was so close, yet not ready. He too wanted to play a bit. He spun on his heel while taking one more step toward the plug; he was mere inches away from it now, and grinned at his father.

“Must have been some brilliant engineer behind this beast. Let me guess...me or Evelyn?”

Edgar’s gaze narrowed. “I designed it.”

“Lies,” Adam said, turning back to the computer. “There’s no way you designed this beauty.”

“How do you know of Evelyn?” Edgar asked.

“I read up on her after Dawn told me about my past,” Adam said. It wasn’t a complete lie.

Edgar crossed his arms. “Fine. You invented it. Or at least, you wrote the system

requirements before you fled into the darkness. Doesn’t matter. Now you must plug into it.”

Adam spun to face Edgar. This he was not expecting. “You want me to plug into it?”

“You and Dawn,” Edgar answered. “I don’t care which of you goes first.”

Alarms blared in Adam’s mind. All his doubt came crashing down on him.

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Adam glanced at Dawn, who stood behind Edgar. This was too easy. It was obvious Evelyn had tricked all of them. “What if I don’t want to?”

Edgar yanked an ElectroShock gun from an eBot’s hands and grabbed Dawn in one fluid motion, holding the tip of the gun to her temple. “Plug in, or I kill her.”

“Do it,” she TeleSpoke.

“It’s a trap.” He trembled as his father shoved the tip deeper into her face, creating a dent.

“You promised.”

Adam struggled. The one thing Evelyn told him to do was the one thing Edgar desired. Could he trust his sister?

Oksana Natarov landed in front of him.

“You said you would free us, so do it,” she said as she shoved him backward into the wall, plugging him in and instantly transferring his Lux into cyberspace—forcing him to face his destiny.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Hold your ground!” Origen commanded.

The Resistance fighters aimed their weapons at the hundreds of drones silently approaching from all directions. Despite the circumstances, Origen couldn’t help but admire the elegant technology. Each drone was constructed using the lightest of materials. Their shiny black exteriors made them look like oversized bats in the dawn sky. His own drones circling the sky paled in comparison.

The WG drones arrived overhead and stopped in unison, hovering above Origen and his troops. Behind him, Origen could hear the city dwellers screaming. He could only imagine the hell they were going through, each one clamoring over the other in a desperate attempt to escape. Yet there was no escape. They were all going to die and there was nothing he could do about it.

Origen glared at the drone above him

and aimed his cannon at its underside. It was impossible to stop all of them. Still, seeing one blow up before his life ended would bring him great comfort.

“This is it, people,” he called out in a fierce voice. “This is where our story ends. On my count, let’s take a few birds with us.”

In response, the troops cried out, “Yes, sir!”

“Five!” Origen began the countdown.

Various guns, cannons, and SpiderScouts aimed at the circle of WG drones.

“Four!”

The people in New Omaha started pouring out of the city and onto the prairie that separated them from the troops. They screamed their last words, demanding justice, demanding their lives.

“Three!”

He thought of Dawn, the only woman he had ever loved. He’d lost her, not once but twice. First to Adam Winter, and second to Edgar Prince. She’d live on, oblivious to Origen’s demise. Certainly, the WG would soon plug her in and thus erase all knowledge of him and the Resistance from her mind, as if he’d never existed.

“Two!”

He cocked the cannon’s trigger. Origen had outfitted his troops with firepower that could blow a drone to a million bits.

Unfortunately, he only had twenty-five such cannons against more than three hundred WG drones. If he'd had any idea of the scope of the WG nuclear program, he would have invested in different technologies, but it was too late now to regret the choices he'd made. Better to go out in a blaze of glory.

"One!"

The Resistance loosed their firepower. It was an effective salvo, destroying a quarter of the drones in the sky. Bits of the machines flew everywhere, raining down to the ground and breaking much of the equipment that surrounded him.

"Take cover!" Origen screamed, jumping under the canopy of his makeshift command center.

An amused laugh rang out, broadcasted by the remaining WG drones that held their circle overhead.

"That's it?" World Leader Donahi's voice taunted the troops. "That's all you've got? I expected more from you, Origen. You've had almost two hundred years to create an army—and this is all you can throw at me?"

She continued laughing. Her voice echoed off the city walls, causing even more panic among the eHumans trapped under her drones.

"Reload," Origen commanded. If the bitch was going to mess with him this way, he could at least take a few more of her drones.

"Don't bother," she mocked. "Game over. Fire."

The eHumans running from the city stopped in their tracks and stared at the drones overhead. The Resistance had failed them.

Their long lives were finally coming to an end.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In classical physics, it's taught that force gives objects direction and magnitude. Without force, nothing in the material world can exist. Nothing can be in a relationship. Gravity often receives credit as the invisible force behind all action. Yet gravity wasn't the force that had led the pair to New Caledonia, right into the heart of Edgar Prince's empire. Nor did gravity draw Adam Winter out of his life in New Omaha and into the unknown with Dawn in the first place.

No, gravity didn't govern any of his actions. The force that propelled Adam toward his destiny was a force of a different nature.

Love was the force behind his journey.

As a result, he was now plugged into Archion, the network spread out before him in all directions. An enormous city of lights, much larger than anything he'd seen in the New Omaha LAN, streamed on the horizon, numbers flying by in bursts and packets.

The vast, seething consciousness composed of one hundred cyber-Guardians surrounded him within nanoseconds, various heads and limbs forming and reforming like flames dancing in a fire. Adam searched for his sister, knowing full well that only she could prevent them from issuing a Remote Shutdown.

He began to walk the golden road before him, calling for her as his Lux drew closer to danger.

"Evelyn!"

She didn't respond.

"Evelyn!"

Still, no response. The ominous figures of light began to stream in toward him from all sides, screaming in their eerie binary language, issuing warnings unrecognizable to Adam. An arm reached out from the massive light form. Adam turned to run, but paused when the arm remained solid as a body began to follow it. Evelyn's form shimmered as she parted from the seething mass.

"Eximo Lux," she said.

The mass of light froze like a glacier off the Alaskan coast, then shattered into pieces of nothingness.

Evelyn turned to Adam and raised her arms, enveloping him in a whirl of light and binary digits. "I'm downloading the code from your files right now."

Adam could sense the operating system as

a whole slowing down and coming to a grinding halt. The city of lights went dark. He and Evelyn were the only beings left in cyberspace, their images burning like pillars of flame against a dark, starless sky. After another moment of silence that seemed like an eternity, Evelyn turned to him.

“The software download is complete,” she said. “The Trojan Horse has been successful. I now have root access to Neuro—and control of every aspect of our world.”

Adam’s Lux flickered as he moved toward his sister, allowing his Lux to meld with hers.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“What will you do, now that you have control of Neuro?”

Their beacon-like bodies flamed higher as they melded into one, taking over the entire cyber scene.

“You don’t trust me?” Evelyn said, now struggling against his actions.

“Why should I?”

Their Lux clung to each other, no longer two, but a singularity. A silence stretched like the void of space, and Adam experienced a moment of nothingness—as if he’d died or worse, ceased to exist. He passed out of time.

In an instant, Evelyn removed her Lux from his, recreating the world of Neuro, which sprang to life all around her. The cyberspace city returned, as well as the roads. Messages began to

swarm as the web of life returned.

“Don’t ever do that to me again,” Evelyn said, her form shimmering like the mists of a waterfall. “You almost killed us.”

Adam raised an arm to make sure he still existed. “I need to know if I can trust you.”

“Yes, you can,” she replied.

“Then what will you do now that you control Neuro, and thus eHumanity?”

“It appears I can only do one thing at this point. You wrote this part of the code, not I, and you added safety measures to ensure I would live up to my end of the deal.”

“What is your part of the deal?”

“To transfer control of the network to Avalon. Your expert named Alrisha has contacted me already.”

Relief pulsed through Adam and if he’d been in a body, he would’ve leapt into the air.

“Then unplug me,” Adam demanded. “I need to get back to Dawn.”

“As you wish, brother,” she replied.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Adam slid into the plug, Edgar flinched, giving Dawn a chance to spin in Edgar's grip and knock the ElectroShock gun out of his hand. It fell to the ground with a loud, metal clank.

Dawn kicked Edgar in the side, and he fell to the floor. With the speed of a master ninja, she picked up the gun and set the tip on his head, standing over him, where he lay prone on the floor. In the background, she heard Rosario speaking and laughing on a headset. "You've had almost two hundred years to create an army—and this is all you can throw at me?"

"What the hell have you done, Oksana?" Edgar hissed, never taking his eyes from Dawn's.

Dawn sneaked a glance at the woman as she backed away from the terminal. Adam was plugged into the wall, his face expressionless, except for his eyes—the camera lenses zooming in and out, in and out.

"He said if he plugged into Archion, he

would be able to save us, to rewrite the world," Oksana replied, wrapping her pale arms around herself.

"Adam *wanted* to plug in?" Edgar blurted out in anger.

"Enough talking," Dawn said, putting a heeled foot on Edgar's cheek. She was reeling from the revelation that Edgar had wanted to plug them in. That meant only one thing: Evelyn had been on her father's side and the whole thing was a trap. Yet she couldn't let Edgar know about Adam's true intentions. It was best Oksana kept her mouth shut.

"Don't bother. Game over," the World Leader said. "Fire." She tore off her headset and threw it on the counter, grabbed a gun from the nearest eBot, and turned to point it at Oksana. "Didn't I tell you to stay in your room, stupid girl? You distracted both Edgar and me, ruined my moment with Origen, and now we must deal with Dawn."

"I've got Dawn," Morgan replied, raising a gun to Dawn.

It was like a scene from a space western: Dawn about to shoot Edgar, Morgan about to shoot her, and Rosario about to shoot Oksana. The entire scene would have been comical in any other situation.

Behind the World Leader, the red-robed Guardians moved about the front of Archion, typing and checking monitors.

“Any updates?” Edgar said from beneath Dawn’s shoe. She shoved her heel deeper into his cheek, making an indentation, and he grinned. His smugness made her faint. With every moment, she grew more concerned. What was happening to Adam inside Neuro? His eyes were still moving, but the rest of him was stiff, as if he’d been powered off.

“None, Mr. Prince,” one of the Guardians reported.

“That’s not true,” said another. “There’s odd network behavior. I’m not sure what it means.”

“Stop being so vague,” Donahi said, her voice shrill, gun trembling in her hands, her eyes shifting to the computer screens. “What’s Adam’s status? His Chi-Regulator should have shorted out by now.”

“Hush, woman,” Edgar said.

Dawn glared at him and leaned in toward his face. “What do you mean, his Chi-Regulator should have shorted out?”

“It’s nothing,” Edgar said, turning up his voice so everyone in the room could hear him.

To Dawn, it was obvious he was hiding something.

“Why did you want to plug us in?” she asked.

“I have my reasons,” Edgar replied.

She kicked him in the head, then replaced the heel of her shoe back on his cheek, grinding

the tip in so hard it squeaked on his metal face as she tore a hole. “What reasons?”

Like a flash of lightning, Edgar swung his legs, knocking Dawn off balance and cartwheeling himself to his feet. She still had the gun trained on him, but he was now standing, dusting off his suit.

“You’re such a heathen,” he said, touching the divot on his face before turning away and strolling toward the Guardians.

“Hey, don’t move!” Dawn yelled. Goodness, she sounded so immature, so out of control. How had she let him gain the upper hand?

Edgar turned at a snail’s pace to glance at her over his shoulder, his brown bangs hanging in one of his dark eyes. “Or what? You’ll shoot me? Fine, but Morgan will shoot you. So, why bother?”

The bastard was right. Dawn had no choice but to let him move about. She gazed through the scope on the gun, considering her options: shoot him and risk being shot herself, or remain quiet and let him keep talking. The latter seemed the better option; perhaps he’d reveal Adam’s status. Dawn was fighting every urge to unplug Adam herself.

Edgar approached one of the Guardians and knocked him out of the way. Edgar’s eyes narrowed as he read the data on the screen.

Why did he look concerned when

moments before he was forcing Adam to plug in? Had Adam found Evelyn? Why had the World Leader asked if Adam's Chi-Regulator had shorted out? So many questions flooded Dawn's mind, she found it hard to concentrate. *Focus, she thought. Focus, or you'll fail Adam.*

"What is going on, Edgar?" Rosario asked, lowering her gun on Oksana and dropping it on the nearest table, no longer interested in the girl. The World Leader trotted to Edgar's side, her eyes wide as she wrung her hands.

"Did your experiment work?" she asked, raising a long finger and pointing to the screen. "Because the nuclear drones over New Omaha aren't firing like I commanded."

"Neuro is gone," Edgar replied, his face now stony, as if he'd stopped thinking. "It no longer exists."

"Oh, Neuro still exists, Father," Dawn heard Adam say from behind her. "Only, it's no longer stored on Archion."

Dawn spun around to see her lover strolling across the room, Donahi's gun in his hand and pointed at Edgar. Joy rushed over her like a river after the winter thaw. She couldn't believe he was alive.

"Adam," she said, dropping her gun and running to his side. The monitors in the room came to life, and Adam's handsome face appeared as his voice boomed, echoing off the glass wall in front of Archion.

"eHumans of the free world, let me introduce myself. I'm Adam Winter, host for the Friend's Network—and if you're seeing this, then the battle is over, and the Resistance has won..."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Origen shut his eyes, waiting for the total annihilation that was about to happen. But the drones didn't fire. Instead, the machines began to turn away from the city. When they had rotated a full 180 degrees, they began to move away in the direction from which they had come.

The consoles in Origen's command center came alive, and the face of Adam Winter graced every screen, not only in Origen's makeshift tent, but across the city of New Omaha and in every city around the world. Adam's face smiled at everyone as he began to speak.

"eHumans of the free world, let me introduce myself. I'm Adam Winter, host for the Friend's Network—and if you're seeing this, then the battle is over, and the Resistance has won."

Origen couldn't believe what was happening. Adam must have completed a Newsreel before he'd left for New Caledonia. If this was streaming on every screen in the world,

it meant only one thing.

"Adam got to Archion!" Origen screamed out, grabbing the nearest soldier and hugging her. "He did it. Adam did it. Evelyn Prince must now have control of Neuro."

He jumped up and down, hugging each soldier within his reach while Adam's voice continued to boom across the field and on every street corner in every city of the world. Where panic and terror had reigned only moments before, cheers of joy now erupted.

"You may ask, what battle? For most of you, life has been quiet and easy. No signs of war or terror have marred your lands. But the battle the WG has waged upon us for almost two centuries was not one fought with guns and firepower. No, the battle we have won today is nothing less than the battle for our minds. eHumans of the world, know this: while Neuro has provided you with pleasures beyond our wildest dreams, over the centuries those very dreams have been hacked, manipulated, and erased—and now, nothing you think is your own. This might be hard to believe, so let me show you how your government has deceived you."

The video feed began to display eHuman life under the WG. Pictures from Chengdu; mountains of lifeless eHuman bodies; eHumans endlessly working in factories; eHumans being plugged into Neuro against their will; eHumans

falling dead along railroad tracks. Old footage of humans in the flesh who refused to Jump being herded to their deaths. Image after image of their enslavement appeared, while Adam narrated the story of domination that had brought them to this point. As a finale, the Newsreel began to display a picture of each WG member, seventy in all, culminating in a picture of World Leader Donahi, arm in arm beside Edgar Prince on the steps of the Golden Hall.

“You see,” Adam’s voice boomed out, “we’ve been nothing but pawns, programmed to do the bidding of the seventy in Gemetria. No more. Now we are free. I call on you, World Leader Donahi, to surrender—or the drones I’m sending to Gemetria as I speak will destroy the Golden Hall and all those who live within it.”

The EC crackled, and a live feed of Gemetria, on the other side of the world, came into focus. Drones were gliding in the sky toward the Golden Hall.

Origen turned to his commanders. “It’s time to get back into the city and celebrate our victory with the people.”

As his various troop leaders began to organize the march back into New Omaha, Alrisha requested him via TeleSpeak.

“Origen, are you there?”

“Yes. What’s the status of Neuro? Does Evelyn Prince indeed have control of it?”

“Evelyn has granted us control of Neuro. I’ve

called off all drone attacks on the cities and set them instead upon the Golden Hall. Gemetria is surrounded by drones for miles in every direction. We have confirmation that every member of the WG is in the building, apart from the World Leader. She left Gemetria yesterday for New Caledonia,” Alrisha explained.

Origen fist-bumped Cane, who was standing nearby. *“Looks like we might have interfered with her date with Edgar Prince.”*

“You betcha.” Alrisha laughed. *“What now, Master Origen?”*

“I’m heading back into the city right now. In preparation for my arrival, get a HyperPlane ready for flight. I think it’s time I pay the Golden Hall of Gemetria a visit.”

“Any news from Dawn or Adam?” Alrisha asked.

“No, but if Evelyn Prince has granted us control of Neuro, then I expect a TeleConnect from them soon.”

Origen disconnected from Alrisha and took the nearest transporter to the city. He needed to contact Dawn. To hear her voice once more would make the victory complete.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At the sound of his son's voice on his teleprompters, Edgar Prince closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. The boy had somehow survived his schemes. Quantum should have launched the moment it sensed Adam plug in. What had gone wrong?

"What, no greeting?" Adam said.

Edgar turned to face him, balling his fists in anger. "What is going on?"

Adam chuckled, holding the gun trained on Edgar in one hand, his other arm wrapped around Dawn. The two looked like wedding cake toppers that had gone through the dishwasher—his coat torn and his tie missing, her dress shredded and hanging off her shoulder—they were pathetic. Yet there they were, somehow victorious.

"Evelyn and I wrote some code back in the day, and I downloaded it into Archion," Adam said.

"Evelyn? Your sister?" Edgar hadn't

thought about her in at least a century. She'd jumped long ago and become his greatest weapon in Neuro.

"The one and only."

"What did this code do to Neuro?" Edgar asked, seething.

In the background, he heard the Adam on the screen finish his stupid little speech. "... Now we are free. I call on you, World Leader Donahi, to surrender—or the drones I'm sending to Gemetria as I speak will destroy the Golden Hall and all those who live within it."

The screens flickered and a new scene appeared, nuclear drones surrounding the capitol building in Gemetria.

"I will not surrender," Donahi said, her mouth curled and eyes narrow beneath her now askew golden circlet.

"You don't have a choice," Adam replied as the eBots began to step closer.

"Edgar, have your brute squad arrest these people," Donahi said, pointing to the screens. "Guardians, call off that attack."

The Guardians remained still, each one staring at the World Leader as if they didn't recognize her.

"*Listen to me,*" Donahi screamed.

Adam dropped his gun to the floor as he turned to the eBots. "Arrest them both." He turned and pointed to Morgan, who still stood in the corner, moving his gun between the eBots

and Adam. "That guy too."

Edgar watched as the eBots took the World Leader and Morgan into their grips. Edgar's very own creations were under Adam's control. It was impossible. He glared at his son.

"What did this code of yours do?"

"Granted control of Neuro to the Resistance," Adam said as he slid his hands into his pockets. "And erased the code in Archion before—" A loud crackle emitted from the supercomputer as it caught on fire, causing the fire alarms to go off and sprinklers to pour water down upon the machine. Adam glanced over his shoulder at Archion and shrugged. "Shorting out your mainframe. Sorry. That was Evelyn's idea."

"Why would Evelyn do such a thing?" Edgar couldn't believe this. His beloved daughter had betrayed him? "She's been my greatest asset since I founded eHumanity."

Adam shrugged. "I don't know, and I'm not sure she knows either, since you erased our minds when we Jumped. What we do know is she downloaded a program we wrote together into my database before Jumping me into eHumanity, and I gave James the key." Adam opened his arms wide, gesturing to the flaming computer now surrounded by Guardians working to put out the fire. "The rest is history." He turned back to Edgar. "You must have done something to make her angry. It appears both love and hate follow a Jump, no matter what your Renewal Software

does."

Edgar took a step toward Adam, wanting nothing more than to tear off his head, not that such an act would do a damn thing. He grasped Adam's shoulders, but just at that moment, an eBot sent a shock through Edgar's arms, rendering him helpless.

"Dammit," Edgar yelled, turning on the eBot. Before he could get the upper hand, he was surrounded by two more while a third put his hands in cuffs.

"Take them to the harbor, where a ship awaits them. They have a meeting in Gemetria they can't miss," Adam said.

Edgar struggled under the eBots as they dragged him from the room. Rosario was yelling and screaming some sort of babble, but he no longer cared for her words. The woman meant nothing to him—never had, if he were being honest. Rosario Donahi was but one puppet in his collection, and all had failed him. Edgar had to get out of this predicament, and he would, but first, he needed to uncover what had happened to Neuro, and the easiest way to do that would be to let them arrest him, for the only other option they would give him was death.

As they approached the door, he recalled the last moment he'd seen Evelyn, when he'd met her in New Omaha to Jump her into eHumanity. Scanning his database, he recalled she'd arrived with a newsreel host at her side—none other

than Adam Winter. Edgar had been so busy with the Great Shift as well as concerned for Evelyn's mental health after what had recently happened to Elijah and Atienne, he'd barely given Evelyn's companion a second thought...

"Stop," he said to the guards. They halted long enough for him to glance at Adam one last time. He stood tall in the center of the room, Dawn standing at his side, both beaming with smug satisfaction.

"I must admit," Edgar said, locking eyes with Adam and recording his triumphant moment. "You and your sister are quite remarkable. I'm proud of you, son."

Edgar Prince watched as the smug smile faded from Adam's face and let the eBots take him away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The pounding of the gavel echoed off every corner of the Golden Hall, its handle vibrating in her hand as Dawn called the tribunal to order. eHumans, most of them Resistance members from around the world, filled every square inch of the cavernous hall, shifting in their places and chattering like nervous schoolchildren at an end-of-the-school-year assembly.

"Order," Dawn called out from her place at the head table.

Origen stood to her side, dressed in a camel-colored suit. His crisp white shirt matched his long hair and was unbuttoned enough to display the solid gold chain that hung around his neck. Never had Origen looked more dashing. To Dawn's right stood Adam. He had chosen a more somber outfit, a gray suit more fit for a funeral than a tribunal. She herself had opted for a floor-length purple dress, covering everything but her long neck. Dawn struck the

wooden gavel against the table once again. The buzzing noise in the hall began to quiet as all eyes focused on her.

It had taken her a century and half to get to this moment in time. After so much trial and pain, she had freed eHumanity from WG control. She'd found Elijah and fulfilled her promise to James. She'd longed for this moment for so long, now that it was upon her, she had no idea what to do next. The feelings of relief overwhelmed her and yet for some reason, her future seemed more uncertain than ever before. Yes, she was happy, yet some other part of her was grieving the fact James wasn't there at her side.

Dawn glanced at the base of the platform, where the seventy members of the WG stood at her feet, supplicant like captives in the Dissenter's Camps from the Age of the Flesh, wearing nothing but gray robes and chains that bound them together. At their center was Rosario Donahi, her thick, dark hair pulled into a sloppy bun. Behind her stood Edgar Prince and twenty-three other accomplices from New Caledonia, also in gray robes and chains. Everyone who had lived on the island had been arrested—except the ones who had been held captive in his harem. Rather than punishment, they were offered the chance to Jump into new bodies with or without the Renewal Software. All of them, including Oksana, chose to have their memories destroyed. None wanted to remember

their time as sex toys of the rich.

Dawn caught Edgar's eyes, which shined under the lights. His serene behavior was out of place, surrounded by his shifting, nervous colleagues. His peaceful gaze unnerved her. She rose taller and raised her chin. "It's my pleasure to announce a change of global leadership. From this moment onward, Rosario Donahi shall be stripped of the title of World Leader. No longer shall she govern us."

The eHumans in the Golden Hall began to cheer. Rosario Donahi struggled with her bonds while others around her muttered various complaints. Dawn ignored them.

"The seventy-member WG shall no longer exist. Each of the seven provinces shall be tasked with forming their own governments—thus allowing the world's citizens to govern themselves."

Again, the eHumans cheered.

"Within the next year, each province will hold elections to choose their leaders," Dawn continued. "To ensure the transition from one World Government to several smaller governments is successful, an interim Global Council shall be set up to govern the process. The Global Council shall consist of six members, with one interim World Leader. This World Leader will guide the process of creating the new governments, as well as ensure the safety of all the citizens of the world. To guarantee we are

never again under the rule of tyranny, the new World Leader has promised to step down from his post as Supreme Commander at the end of one year.”

The plaudits in the hall began to dim to whispers. Who would lead them now that Rosario Donahi had been forced out?

“eHumans of the world,” Dawn said, “please join me in accepting Origen as our new Supreme Commander. One of the original twelve eHumans ever created, Origen has spent the past two centuries working for our freedom. He tirelessly led the Global Resistance to its ultimate victory, and now, the court has decided he has what it takes to usher in a new world of freedom and human dignity.”

The crowd was now so loud, Dawn had to turn down her hearing software. Long had Origen held the imagination of the people. He was a hero and a legend to many in the room. The eHumans jumped up and down and began chanting his name.

Dawn glanced at Origen, contemplating the man who now ruled the eHuman world. At first, many in their Resistance had suggested the new leader should be Dawn. She’d been the face of both the Resistance and eHumanity. But she had turned down the role, stating there were many mysteries of the world she wished to explore. She’d been tightlipped when Adam pressed her for more details, telling him she

would reveal her plans in time. After her refusal, her followers naturally asked Origen to lead them, and he accepted without hesitation.

Dawn wasn’t completely sure about Origen’s ability to govern. While he would certainly make a better leader than Rosario Donahi, she worried Origen was too power-hungry to let things go at the end of one year. Was he the sort of man who would be able to grant eHumanity its freedom, or would power corrupt him as it had every other leader in the history of mankind? He’d always followed her lead, but now Origen was the leader, and she would have to follow him.

Origen rose from his seat, and the crowd fell silent.

“People of Gemetria,” Origen said, “the time has come for us to forge a new world. Together, we shall create thriving communities, based on concern for one another and the needs of our people. I pledge to help you form your new local governments. There’s room for many styles of governing in this world. Let those of you who feel called to lead step forward and claim your place in history. I promise to keep you safe while you march forward with this endeavor.”

The other Resistance members at the high table clapped and nodded their heads. Origen gave the crowd a smile that sparkled like the sun on the ocean, and they responded with more chants of his name.

Origen raised his hands to quiet them. “Not only does our government need to be open, but so does Neuro. Neuro is the fabric of our society. It knits us together and enables eHumanity to exist. Without Neuro, we cannot have the luxury of our eHuman bodies. Without Neuro, we would be nothing.

“Yet to allow one private entity to govern Neuro has proven dangerous. Our minds have been nothing more than a commodity for some to abuse so that they might increase their wealth and dominance over us. No more. As my first order of business, I declare that Guardian Enterprises will not own Neuro in any way. This includes the hardware, software, and Lifestyle Management Offices.

“All current employees of Guardian Networks will be fired. A new hiring process shall begin immediately. Applications for new Guardians, financiers, and business owners are welcome. Neuro will now come under the management of both the local governments and the business owners, who will work together to link all LMOs and eHumans together. Most importantly, individual eHuman databases will be protected from all forms of data manipulation by law. Your minds and your memories are sovereign. No one has the right to use you or manipulate you for their own purposes—”

“Really, Origen? I don’t believe you,” Edgar Prince interrupted.

Dawn slammed her gavel on the table as she said, “Silence.”

“The people are sheep, Dawn, you know this,” Edgar said. “Now that you have control, you can’t let go of it, or you will destroy us. You are nothing but a fool if you think they can govern themselves.”

“She said to be quiet,” Origen said, glaring down at Edgar Prince from his post. “It’s time for my second act as interim World Leader. To hand down judgment upon Edgar Prince and those who follow him.”

Edgar Prince glared at Origen, the two men locking eyes, and Origen hesitated, losing himself momentarily in the man’s stare. Dawn began to worry he’d back off from the agreed punishment, but Origen shook it off and continued.

“What punishment could possibly suffice for the centuries of manipulative rule you and your fellow elites have imposed upon us?” Origen asked Edgar, never taking his eyes from the man. “What could this court do to make up for the billions of lives lost since the beginning of the Great Shift, when the free-thinking people of the world rejected your eHuman gift?

“What could make up for the years that many of us spent working around the clock in factories, making goods you would sell to the unsuspecting population? Or the fact you’ve spied on every single memory and action we’ve

taken?

“What can I do, as the Supreme Commander of the freed peoples, to make up for the fact we can’t remember our loved ones in Chengdu, or any of the other cities you unplugged? In the end, I’m not sure there is any punishment in existence suitable enough to bring justice to those of you who have used us and treated us as commodities, while you profited and lived off our unconsciousness.”

Origen paused and took a moment to look each WG member in the eye. His eyes stopped and rested upon Edgar Prince.

“But Edgar, we’ve thought of something.”

Evelyn Prince entered the room, now in an eHuman body, wearing a bright-colored suit. Her raven hair framed her dark-skinned face. Dawn had been surprised when Evelyn requested to Jump out of her cyber form and into an eHuman. She was giving up a great amount of control, but Evelyn had insisted upon it. She now walked with an uncommon grace, as if she were from a different planet and had touched down upon the earth. Her dark eyes focused solely on Edgar Prince as she crossed the room and climbed the platform to take her place next to Origen.

“I would like to introduce the members of the WG and the elites of New Caledonia to our newest member—Evelyn Prince, the architect and mind behind Neuro,” Origen said.

“Evelyn?” Edgar said. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, Father,” she answered, her eyes still locked onto him, as if she were seeing him for the first time.

“Evelyn Prince, who has spent the greater part of the last century inside Neuro as a cyber-entity, and who programmed the software responsible for our victory, has been tasked as the leader for the Open Neuro Project. She will guarantee Neuro and the LMOs of the world will continue providing us with the best services, while also remaining open to all who wish to use it.”

Dawn noticed Origen smiling at Evelyn with a look of immense respect and admiration.

“In addition,” Origen continued, “given she is one of the most brilliant minds of our time, I tasked her with designing a punishment for the criminals before us. I hereby sentence each of the seventy members of the WG, as well as Edgar Prince and the twenty-three executives of Guardian Enterprises, to one hundred years of Limbo.”

A low hum filled the room as the others tried to guess what Limbo was. No one was familiar with the term, as Evelyn had invented it days prior. Dawn shivered as she considered what was about to happen to the criminals.

“Limbo?” Rosario Donahi asked. “What is Limbo?”

“Evelyn, would you please explain to the defendants the nature of their punishment?”

Origen said.

“With pleasure,” Evelyn answered. “Limbo is the state in which each of the judged shall be plugged into Neuro, without any ability to unplug from their wall sockets. During this time, the judged shall have no use of their eHuman bodies. Rather, their Lux will be completely immersed in the Limbo app.”

“What exactly is the Limbo app?” Rosario asked, now biting her lip.

“The Limbo app is one of my finest creations,” Evelyn said, a tone of joy in her voice. “The application holds billions of memories taken from the eHumans who were murdered in some way or another by the WG over the past two hundred years.”

“Billions of memories?” Rosario asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes, specifically memories of the last moments of their lives, when they realized they were dying at your hands,” Evelyn said pointedly. “You’ll experience every feeling, thought, and action they experienced in their dying moments. You’ll be right there, as if it were happening to you. Take Chengdu, for example. You’ll relive every single person’s death in that city. Over three million in all. From the moment they discovered their LMO was closed and that they were going to die, until their last moment before their bodies shut down. That’s just Chengdu. Before I Jumped from Neuro into my eHuman

body, I uncovered almost two billion different deaths for you to experience. It will take one hundred years for you to experience them all, and the best part is, your Lux will not know that an app is running. Your Lux will experience every single moment as if it were its own.”

Dawn shivered as a slow grin crossed Edgar’s face, reminding her of a snake slithering across the marble floor.

“You’re going to plug us into Neuro?” Edgar asked.

Evelyn snapped her gaze to his. “Excuse me?”

“I asked if you were going to plug us into Neuro,” he replied, glancing around at all the accusing faces surrounding him. He shrugged. “I want system requirement clarification.”

Adam stepped forward. “Yes, we’re plugging you into Neuro, where we can keep an eye on you while you experience all the agony you’ve caused the world firsthand.”

“You can’t do this,” Rosario said, yanking at her bonds while the others around her fell to their knees. “No Lux could withstand such pain.”

Evelyn Prince locked her gaze upon the former World Leader and smiled. “You may be right. The Limbo app has never been tested before. You’ll be the first.”

“Please,” Rosario cried out, her eyes blinking red. “You can’t do this!”

The entire room erupted in conversation

mixed with cheers and jeers.

“Order,” Dawn said while pounding the gavel upon the great wooden table.

“Guards,” Origen said, “bring the prisoners to their cell. It is time for them to plug in and begin their one-hundred-year incarceration.”

They continued to complain while struggling against their captors. Only Edgar remained still. He stared at Evelyn and Origen with a slight smile upon his face that made Dawn nervous. The guards surrounded them, and the line of captives began to file out a door to the back of the hall. The crowd grew silent. The punishment frightened everyone in the room.

Edgar Prince forced his guard to stop as he turned to gaze at Origen, wearing a satisfied smile like an executioner about to cut off one’s head. Dawn felt a chill come over the room.

“I’ll be seeing you soon, World Leader,” Edgar said.

Origen forced a smile and waved his hand in dismissal. “Take him away.”

Three guards pushed Edgar through the door, which closed behind them with a loud clang.

“Now,” Origen raising his arms to the crowd gathered in the Golden Hall, “it’s time to celebrate.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In all his years as a Newsreel host, Adam Winter had never partied like this before. The celebrations in Gemetria were nonstop for three days. Fireworks, parades, dancing, and music filled the skies, streets, and dance halls. Pleasure Zone orbs were traded like candy. The eHumans had no problem letting go and enjoying the victory. Similar festivities were being held in cities all over the world. Traffic on Neuro was at an all-time low as people participated in the festivities. He and Dawn danced and celebrated with the others as much as possible.

One morning, as the sun began to rise, Adam and Dawn sat upon their balcony overlooking the city, wrapped in each other’s arms, watching the people mill about, hugging each other and singing songs. It was a glorious sight to see all the joy and love that had replaced the orderly and purposeful obedience of eHuman life.

“We’ll need to get back to work, eventually,” Dawn said, snuggling into Adam’s neck, which she was covering with light kisses. Her fingers caressed his chest, sending him waves of delight.

“Can’t we celebrate for one more day?”

Dawn laughed. “Origen’s already at work.”

“Which is why I’m glad you turned down the job of Supreme Commander.”

Dawn shook her golden hair out of her face and gazed at Adam. His dark eyes met her green ones while they remained silent, basking in the gratitude that only reunited lovers can share.

“Well,” Dawn said, “now what?”

“What do you mean?”

“Long ago, James made me promise to find you, and I did.”

Adam nodded, twisting a lock of her hair in his fingers. “True, and long ago, Evelyn and I made a promise to take over Neuro after we entered eHumanity, and we did.”

“It seems the three of us have fulfilled all our agreements,” a voice called from behind them.

Adam and Dawn turned to see Evelyn Prince standing in the doorway. Her dark eyes pierced Adam’s, and a sense of familiarity threatened to overwhelm him. His Lux knew her even if his mind was foggy. Edgar’s Renewal program wasn’t omniscient in its power. She

was his sister—and somehow, the light of his consciousness knew this, even if his memory did not.

“Sorry to intrude,” she said as she walked across the balcony. “The door was open, so I came in.”

“No problem,” Dawn replied. “You’re always welcome.”

“I’ve been wondering,” Adam asked his sister, “why did we work together to create this plan? I can’t remember a thing, and I was hoping you could. Edgar said all his constituents were spared the Renewal Software process, so I wonder why he didn’t grant you the same.”

Evelyn gazed at him. “It appears I never qualified as one of his constituents. He jumped me like a normal person, and I have no recollection of the day you and I made our plan, but I did include a vague data file in the Trojan Horse that left a hint.”

“Really? What?”

“Like I said, it’s vague, so if we were ever caught, it wouldn’t give away too much information. It was an old news article stating Edgar Prince’s wife had been checked into one of daddy’s Dissenter Camps for refusing to Jump, and I imagine it was Edgar’s doing that landed her there. That’s all the file contained, but I must have approached you with the Trojan Horse plan when I discovered her fate and you agreed. I jumped you first to program the software into

your ROM. Then I followed, knowing that your code, once executed, would alert me in Neuro and instruct me on what to do.”

“Atienne,” Adam murmured.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “Atienne Prince.”

“Edgar mentioned her in New Caledonia. Do you know what happened to her?”

Evelyn shook her head. “I imagine they killed her for resisting. She was arrested.”

“Or she Jumped,” Dawn suggested.

“We’ll never know,” Evelyn said, wrapping her arms around herself. “I’ve searched; there’s no record of her in eHumanity.”

“There was no record of me either, so there’s hope,” Adam said as he rose from his seat and approached his sister. He drew her close and held her, wishing his eHuman form would allow him to cry. Edgar had taken so much from them—and not only their memories. He’d taken their mother as well. Adam wasn’t used to feeling so much hurt and anger. After a century and a half of Neuro comforting him with programming, political distractions, and worse—erasing his uncomfortable thoughts so he’d forget them—keeping this much hate in his waking consciousness distressed him. In some ways, he longed for the oblivion the Guardians had granted him. After a moment, he released Evelyn.

“You’re right, Dawn,” Adam said. “We have fulfilled our agreements. So, what do we do

now?”

“I’m busy for the next year or so working with Origen,” Evelyn said. “The Open Neuro Project has many complexities. It won’t be easy to get the eHumans of the world to operate within Neuro with integrity, and I’d like to figure out how to get the Renewal Software out of the bootstrap program. Good thing I’ll have Origen to help me.”

Adam noticed a smile form upon her face as she said Origen’s name.

“You like him, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, I do. Is that an issue?”

“Not unless he does something to make it an issue,” Adam said.

Dawn punched him in the arm. “It isn’t your business, Adam.”

Adam looked at the two women and shook his head.

“Evelyn and I have been talking,” Dawn said, “and she shared some information with me that has piqued my interest.”

“Really? And what might that be?” Adam asked, relieved Dawn was finally sharing her plans.

“In my work within the system,” Evelyn explained, “I often dealt with information pertaining to the vast land areas between eHuman cities. Areas that were uninhabited after the Great Shift. Most of the data records contained mining information. Guardian

Enterprises had exclusive rights to all natural resources and used them abundantly, but sometimes military campaigns were sent into the regions.”

Adam’s brow furrowed. “Why would there be a need for military strikes in uninhabited lands?”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” Dawn said. “Most of the campaigns were authorized to completely destroy the land and everything living surrounding the target.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” he said.

“It does if there’s something else using the land—and you don’t want to share it,” Evelyn replied.

“What could be living in the wild that would pose such a threat?”

“People,” Dawn said, bouncing on the balls of her feet, her eyes glowing.

“What do you mean, people?” Adam asked.

“People who escaped the Great Shift.” She folded her hands as if saying a prayer and rested them under her chin, her eyebrows raised in high arches and a sly grin covering her face.

Adam pointed at her as if he’d caught her opening her birthday present without permission. “Dawn, I know you’d like humans of the flesh to have lived on, but it’s far-fetched.”

“I know it’s a long shot, I know,” she said, tugging at his sleeve, “but I’ve always

sensed there was no way the WG rounded up every single person who didn’t want to Jump. One of our early Resistance goals was to find any survivors and offer them amnesty. Our reconnaissance never led us to any signs of life in the wild, other than animal or eHuman mining activities, but I think that’s because they figured out how to hide.”

“What does this have to do with your next steps?” Adam asked.

“Well,” she replied, running her fingers along his collar and his jawline, lifting his chin, “I want to explore some of the locations that were the targets of WG military campaigns. To see what we can find out there in the wild places of the world.”

“What do you mean *we*?” Adam asked.

“You and me.” She took her finger and stabbed him in the chest. “It’s time to close the door on our past. Sophia and Elijah are no more. Instead, it’s time for Adam and Dawn to create a new life together—and new memories that no one can ever take from us.”

Adam returned her smile and cupped her close to his side with one arm.

“What better way to do that, my dear,” Dawn continued, “than to go on an adventure?”

Adam Winter laughed. He turned to his sister and wrapped his other arm around her. Standing between the two women, he gave thanks for the new life he had been given.

NICOLE SALLAK ANDERSON

Holding them closer, he kissed them each on the cheek. They were his family. He'd never been happier in his whole eHuman life.

"An adventure, huh?" he said as the new day broke upon the capital city of Gemetria. "My love, I couldn't agree more."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The newly appointed Supreme Commander stood upon the catwalk in the sparsely furnished prison, gazing down upon his first set of inmates. The seventy former members of the WG were lined up against the white wall beside the Guardian Enterprises executives convicted of various war crimes, each plugged in and living within the Limbo app. A thick glass wall separated them from Origen and the control center that monitored their systems.

Their bodies were expressionless, mere statues rather than vehicles of life, needed only to provide the Chi to keep each Lux within the system, rather than released in death, which would have been a much more pleasant sentence. Each of them appeared calm and placid, eyes closed and bodies at rest, but Origen knew their silent exterior betrayed the observer, for within the system, their Lux were in a constant state of terror and agitation.

He glanced at the screen on the console

before him, noting the information it provided. As he scrolled through each prisoner's status files, lines jumped up and down a graph displaying the rate at which etheric energy was being drawn from the Chi-Regulator. The more distressed the Lux, the more random their intervals of etheric energy use were. Rather than the perfect sine wave that most eHumans operated under, their graphs looked like the jagged teeth of a shark. Origen grinned, pleased with Evelyn's work.

He considered the woman, now wondering why he'd never paid more attention to her back when she was still in the flesh. Probably because all he cared about at the time was Dawn, and showing off his eHuman skills to the human population. The girl with the big glasses and mousy-brown hair had never interested him. Now, she was something else, an eHuman with the wisdom of a cyber-Guardian. She was powerful as well as brilliant, and Origen very much wanted to pay attention to her, as often as possible.

The corners of his full lips formed a smile as his eyes scanned each captive again, going down the row, until his gaze rested upon the serene face of Edgar Prince. The man had finally been silenced. In many ways, it seemed impossible to Origen that he stood here now as the Supreme Commander of the world, and Edgar Prince was held captive in front of him.

In all honesty, the warrior had never believed he would see the day when the "Father of eHumanity" was thrown out of power. Yet here he was, bound and incarcerated, right before Origen's eyes.

He glanced around the room to verify they were alone.

"So, you thought you had it all under control, didn't you?" Origen murmured to Edgar, even though he knew the man couldn't hear him. "See me now? I'm the new World Leader, not your little whore. What do you think of that?"

Silence, of course.

After living under Edgar's threats for so long, Origen had wanted the opportunity to tear the villain's body apart while he was helplessly plugged into Neuro, but Evelyn had refused Origen's request. She'd thought it too barbaric.

"No matter," Origen said. "I don't need you to congratulate me. Let's put it this way, you bastard. After the trick you pulled with the nuclear weapons, I went easy on you with this punishment."

Edgar remained still. Origen was grateful for the Limbo app.

"Enjoy the next one hundred years, oh dear father of us all," Origen said.

He glanced at the console again and pulled up Edgar's status file. His eyes widened in alarm. The graphs were clean and pure. The perfect sine wave of satisfaction and ease rolled across the

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screen.

That's not possible...

Origen snapped his gaze back at Edgar.

Edgar's eyes were still closed, but he was smiling.

The cold chill of evil swept through every part of Origen's being. He shook his head, not wanting to believe what he'd seen.

When he looked at Edgar again, the smile was gone.

Origen turned on his heel and fled from the room, vowing to never return. He had no need to ever see Edgar Prince's face again.

TO BE CONTINUED IN...

QUANTIUM

*BOOK TWO OF THE
EHUMAN TRILOGY*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to my husband. Now that he's retired, he's become my copy editor, not an enviable role.

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Nicole Sallak Anderson is a Computer Science graduate from Purdue University, and former CTO for a small Silicon Valley startup, turned novelist, speaker, and essayist. Her writing ranges from AI and Zen to tiny house living to direct democracy to the loneliness of modern parenting— featured as a top twenty story on Medium. She is the author of four novels and a memoir. All books are available on Amazon, Audible, and her website.



You can keep up with all her latest writing and releases on her website nicolesallakanderson.com or by following @NSallakAnderson on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Medium. You can also follow her wildfire journey and tiny home living experience on her Substack, “A Bedroom with the Bees,” <https://nicoleanderson.substack.com/>. Feel free

to contact her, she always answers any query or comment!

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