

To my family and friends

Thank you for always being there for me

Chapter 1: Overture

"Greetings everyone, and welcome to this special lecture on the most interesting of subjects, the topic of Nothing. I am Professor Gerald Nullo, Doctor of Nothing. I hope you are very excited to learn more about this amazing domain of study!" As the rail-thin man started his lecture the lights in the room dimmed and all focused on him. The lights followed him as he walked around the room as if laying out his path on the ceiling.

"I have spent a long time studying nothing. I have written countless papers, chaired various seminars, and authored several books on the topic. Among those are some you may have heard of. These include *The Art of Nothing*, *How to Talk with Your Partner About Nothing*, *Throw That Donut into the Nothing-Zone*, *Nothingnomics*, *92 Tips about Nothing for the Stock Market*, *How Nothing Led to the Fall of Rome* and others." While he spoke, holographic projections of each of his books manifested around him. Tomasz was able to count over a dozen.

"I have been featured on many news shows, been a guest on many late-night shows, and toured around the world. I have made it my life's mission to bring my message of nothing to people across all walks of life. To people who span the breadth of the human experience." Videos of Professor Gerald Nullo, Doctor of Nothing, popped in and out of existence next to him. The first couple of videos showed him speaking on various news channels like INN and America! News. The next showed him appearing on *The Show at Night with Jonesy Gerry*. It then switched to him speaking to people in various remote locales around the world. The last video showed him in deep conversation with Pope Pius...whatever number they were at now.

"This is a topic that is very near and dear to me. I hope that by the end of this lecture, you will come to appreciate a bit more about nothing." He made sure to place special emphasis every time he said the word *nothing*. It was clear that this man was very passionate about nothing. Of the dozen or so students in the dim room, only about half seemed interested in what he was saying. That did not seem to faze him at all.

"You may ask what the study of nothing focused on. What exactly do we mean by studying nothing? What does nothing encompass? You may say 'You mean to tell me you study nothing and think it is worthwhile? That there is anything valuable to learn from nothing?' Well, to that I

say, yes! I say that the study of nothing is without comparison. It transcends time, it transcends space, and it transcends all fields of study. There is nothing quite like it!" He laughed at his clever remark. It is one Tomasz was sure he used every time he talked about the topic.

"One of the greatest discoveries in mathematics was the idea of the number zero. Zero? A concept first conceived in India over two thousand years ago represented by a simple dot. You are telling me that is one of the most important ideas that humanity has devised? A dot that means nothing is a great idea? Something so simple, something so ubiquitous, yet this was a great discovery?" The man looked wide-eyed around the room.

Tomasz looked over to Monique. In the dim room, her face was hard to see, but it was enough that he noticed how enthralled she was in the lecture. Although Tomasz found the lecture more interesting than he cared to admit, he was more interested in looking at Monique. Her hazel eyes were fixed intently on the presenter. Whenever she showed interest and focused on a topic, she would purse her lips and play with her long dark curly hair. Tomasz never got tired of seeing it. As Tomasz kept staring at her, she turned her head in his direction and smiled at him. Being in a stupor, Tomasz smiled back at her. It was then that he realized how long he had been distracted. He snapped out of his trance to focus back on the lecture.

"...happened before the big bang, they will say that it is not worth studying. That there was nothing of interest there so do not even bother with it. Nothing, you say?" The professor looked beyond incredulous at what he had said. He peered around the room and pushed his glasses further into his face. With a smile, he added, "But to that, I say no that nothing IS interesting!"

"But it does not stop there, because the study of nothing impacts many aspects of our daily life as well. Let us consider several questions. What were we before we were born? What do we become after we die? Is there a purpose to this daily struggle we go through that we call life? What is that agonizing feeling we sometimes feel deep in our souls that wrenches at us?" He looked around the room with a self-satisfied smirk. Tomasz was unsure if he was waiting for an answer or if this was a part of his speech.

Tomasz could not help but roll his eyes at the professor. People who claim they have simple solutions to complex problems always irritated him. Despite this, Tomasz did find the man entertaining.

"Is the answer nothing?" a weak disinterested voice in the back of the room replied.

"That is correct! The answer to all those questions is nothing. And when you realize just how ubiquitous nothing is you realize that you have to study it. Because the study of nothing is quite unlike any other."

Even though the lecture went on for around another hour, the professor's enthusiasm for the subject never wavered.

At the end of the lecture, some students stayed behind to talk to the professor. Tomasz was only interested in talking to Monique.

"Tomasz, wasn't that amazing?" she said as they walked out of the dim room into the well-lit hallway. The sparkle in her hazel eyes shone brightly. While looking deep into her eyes Tomasz forgot what exactly was going on.

"Oh yes, wow!" Tomasz replied, coming to his senses. "Um, I uh, I never thought about nothing that much before to be honest."

"I have read a lot of his books, but to hear him talk in person, it was nothing short of amazing! I was happy to see you come to his talk. I did not know if you would find it interesting or not." Monique smiled as she spoke to Tomasz. It was that smile that Tomasz could not help but think about on a near-constant basis. Well to be fair, it was not just the smile, but that was a big part of it. There was also her dark skin, her hazel eyes, and her long dark brown hair tumbled into curls.

"Well, when you first mentioned it to me, I thought it sounded kind of well, crazy? But I would be lying if I said that by the end, he did not have me convinced. As of now, I proclaim myself a true believer of nothing!" Tomasz declared which Monique laughed at with glee. He always loved any opportunity to make her laugh.

"You are always so silly," she said.

"Oh well, it's easy when you have nothing to work with," Tomasz responded, which again caused Monique to laugh.

"By the way, I hope your plans for later tonight do not involve nothing," Monique said with a reserved look.

Tomasz knew exactly what she was referring to, but he did not want to make it seem as if he had been preparing for this very night for over a month now.

"Tonight, umm, what's going on?" he said as he gazed into the air as if in deep thought.

"My show starts! You'll be there right?" Monique beamed with joy as she spoke.

"Oh yes, of course! Your show starts. The show! What was it called, hmm was it *The Nothing Burger*?"

"Hah hah, very funny," Monique replied.

"Oh, I remember—*The Thieving Raven*," Tomasz said.

"Sometimes you think you are cleverer than you are," Monique added.

"Oh don't worry I know the limits of my cleverness," Tomasz replied.

"Hmm, I don't know about that. But yes, it is at the Starlight Theater," she said.

"Oh yes of course. Good because I was getting ready to head to the Starship Dealer. Completely different location." Tomasz had looked at the map many times and knew that it should take him approximately forty-five to forty-seven minutes to get there from his apartment. That was of course accounting for the average traffic expected at 7 PM on a Tuesday. "Yeah, I'll be there."

"Great! Did you see if there was anyone else that wanted to come watch it?" Monique asked Tomasz with a curious look.

"Oh yeah, well I, um, oh that's right I forgot to ask anyone, sorry," Tomasz replied in a soft tone. The truth was that he could not think of anyone to ask. He considered asking two of his classmates. But he did not know them well enough to think that it would have been anything but awkward.

The only other person he considered was his neighbor, Francisco. But it had been a while since he last saw him. This brought the total to zero people who could accompany him to this musical.

"Oh well, at least you are coming." Monique smiled.

They continued down the hallway and out into the open air of Cahuilla Tech. It was a warm, clear sky, sunny Fall day. The kind of day where nothing of note should happen.

"Oh, I have something to show you Tomasz! It's something that my cousin sent me from one of his recent trips. Do you mind if I share it with you?" she asked Tomasz so that he would give her permission to share direct to his interface. The truth was that Tomasz had added her as a trusted user a long time ago.

"Oh yeah sure, I need a quick minute." Tomasz acted as if he was going to update some settings on his interface. While looking at his display he saw a request for a delivery. Not something he expected, but that could wait until later.

"Um, ok, access granted." Tomasz tried his best to be as convincing as possible.

"Ok, there you go! What do you think?" Monique asked as an image was being processed by Tomasz's occipital lobe.

Tomasz studied it for a second and his only reaction was confusion. The image he was looking at seemed like any starry sky he had seen his entire life. What the picture showed were different arms of the Milky Way high up above the sky. This was visible every night in Cahuilla City, provided by the city's artificial nature initiative in an attempt to make citizens feel closer to nature. Tomasz looked at it for a while trying to determine what about it was so impressive that Monique felt the need to share it.

"Well, this seems like the Milky Way..." Tomasz began.

"And?" Monique replied.

"Well is this a display from another city? New York?"

Monique shook her head.

"Los Angeles Display?"

Monique shook her head again. Tomasz studied the photo a bit closer and tried to see if there were any discerning features. At the bottom of the image, he could see large craggy mountains. They reminded him of those in the VR worlds he frequented.

"I see mountains, so was this taken near Denver? Do they have constellation lighting over there as well?"

"No silly! This is not from artificial constellation lighting, what you are seeing is the real deal! This is the actual Milky Way!"

Tomasz spent a second or more trying to understand what Monique was saying.

"Wait, I'm confused. So they are not using artificial lights?" Tomasz asked.

"That's right!"

"So are these like some sort of modified lantern flies in the atmosphere?" Tomasz asked as he studied the image more.

"No!" Monique laughed at Tomasz's confusion.

"What you are seeing are the stars from the Milky Way. There is no human intervention here. No modified lantern flies. No drones. No fireworks. No satellites. This is what you see on a clear night sky. It's impossible to see it anywhere in the US anymore. My cousin ended up going to the Andes in South America to get a glimpse of this."

Tomasz was completely astounded at the revelation.

"So was this taken with a filter? Is this in infrared? Did they do some post-processing to get this?"

"No. You can see this exact image with your plain old eyes, no enhancements are necessary. No need for filters, interfaces, or any of that. As long as there are no clouds and there isn't any light pollution nearby this is what you would see above you in the night sky."

Tomasz couldn't believe it. It seemed so much brighter than the lights he saw over Cahuilla City on a nightly basis.

"So?" Monique asked.

"Huh? Oh right, I mean I have a hard time wrapping my head around it. I always thought you needed some sort of visual aid to see this. This is amazing. I bet your cousin must have been awestruck." Tomasz himself was in awe. Even the artificial replicas did not seem as impressive as the image he was currently seeing.

"Ugh, I am so jealous. I hope one day I'm able to see it myself."

"Yeah, no doubt. Now I want to see them too," Tomasz added, still engrossed in the image.

"Well, maybe one day you and I could see what we need to do and then plan for it. It seems like it would be great." Monique said.

"Well I guess, but traveling that far seems kind of hard right?" Tomasz did not even think while he spoke as he kept staring at the image.

"Oh, yeah that's true I guess," Monique said, a bit less enthusiastic than she had been a second ago.

"It's a shame," Tomasz replied, still unaware of what Monique had been suggesting.

"Hey, Monique! You coming with us?" Someone from afar called Monique. There was a group of about ten people huddled together trying to get her attention.

"Oh, that's some of the other cast members from tonight's show. I almost forgot we were meeting here at ten past the hour. I can't wait for you to see us all. I'll see you then!" Monique waved and she walked away to join the rest of the group.

Tomasz replied in an almost inaudible voice, "See you then."

He looked at the time on his display, 1:12 PM.

Tomasz thought for a second. It seemed as if there was something important that he was about to miss. The concert!

"Oh crap!" He said as he started a mad dash.

Tomasz dashed past the stone buildings that composed the Cahuilla Tech campus, going straight to the music hall. Although the campus itself was only around thirty years old, the façade of the various campus buildings was designed to resemble stone buildings that had been standing for centuries. As he ran, he kept an eye on the time: 1:12:45, 1:12:46.

Tomasz had a show that was about to start broadcasting to a global virtual audience in less than three minutes.

He finally saw the main auditorium and went straight through the doors. The inside of the hall had more people in it than usual. Musicians on different instruments blared dissonant symphonies. A cello occupied in the front row by Rebecca played a slow melody, while Ren played a fast-paced melody on a keyboard. Around the corner, a fiddle player wailed away, while someone else banged on a xylophone. Without taking much of an interest in the cacophony occurring Tomasz spotted his favorite drum set. It was empty so he ran to it and as soon as he sat down his vision completely changed.

Instead of being in a crowded music hall, he found himself on a floating platform in what seemed to be outer space. Around him, he saw a singer with a keyboard, a guitarist, and a bass player who were glaring at him. He struggled to adjust his seat while ignoring the glares from the people he was playing with for the first time.

"Great timing there." The singer's comment dripped with sarcasm.

"We start now, so hurry up!" the guitarist shouted at him.

"What are we starting with?" Tomasz shouted back.

"This guy! You're killing us!" The singer shouted at no one in particular.

"It's Denial by Fantasy of Rhodes, you know them?"

"Ah got it," Tomasz replied.

With that Tomasz started the count off.

Tomasz led into the performance with a wild drum solo that is unique to Denial. The others would then come into the song at different times. They would all start unsynchronized on purpose. It sounded as if multiple groups were playing at the same time. Over several minutes, the intricate song would meld together the melodies. At that point, the second part of the song would begin. It was one of Tomasz's favorite songs, a very challenging and complex piece. Despite its complexities, Tomasz could play it without much effort. There were a handful of things that Tomasz was good at, and this was one of them. When he sat there and his kit surrounded him, he felt as if he was away in a different world. And to anyone looking at him in the auditorium that is what they would have seen: a guy banging away at the drums, feeding off of some unknown energy and reacting to invisible cues. But what Tomasz saw was different. In his field of view, he was at the back of a stage, surrounded by bandmates on either side, all playing to the same tune now.

The band found themselves in the center of an arena composed of a cosmic palette of colors that floated in outer space. The crowd, made up of thousands of virtual avatars floated and flew around the band, enjoying the show. Some of the crowd would push against each other, moshing around in space. Others held hands and made big circles that would rotate at a slow pace, flying in front of the band. There would be amazing creatures flying through the crowd. Tomasz saw whales, elephants, and even a fire-breathing dragon appear in front of him. He also saw other fantastical creatures that he could not even identify. The stars in the background would pulse in and out of existence. As they did so they would radiate different colors while they orbited around the band. It was an amazing experience. But it was an experience that Tomasz wanted to be done with.

Tomasz kept pounding away at the drums, knowing that each beat got him closer to the end of the show. Anytime there was a break he would sit in silence. He did not have much interest in interacting with the other band members, he wanted to leave. There used to be a time when he enjoyed this when the thought of playing to live audiences around the world thrilled him to no end, but that time had passed. Tomasz did not know when or what happened, but at some point, he stopped caring for it. It had become another thing he had to slog through. Another meaningless chore. He hoped one day he would feel excited about it again. But he was not sure if that was ever going to happen.

The thrashing continued for close to an hour. Mechanical motions one after the other as Tomasz banged away, waiting for the whole affair to end. Once his set ended, he looked towards the crowd. Floating and mindless, with no awareness of anything but this little virtual world they now occupied. This virtual world would continue even after Tomasz left. As soon as he did another group would come on and the show would go on.

Right on cue, Tomasz disconnected and he found himself back in the real world. He sat covered in sweat and the former occupants of the music hall had all changed. Now the piano was playing a soothing slow melody. Instead of a cello, there was a group of trumpets, all blaring. And now there was a choir singing in the middle. The discordant rhapsody continued, with everyone connected around the world and disconnected in the room.

Tomasz had enough of Cahuilla Tech and decided to make his way back to his apartment. As he walked past the front gardens of the music hall a familiar voice greeted Tomasz.

"Well, do my eyes betray me, or is that Tomasz I'm seeing?"

"Hey Zeno, what is the weather looking like today?" Tomasz asked the school AI mascot. Even though Tomasz did not feel like talking, he did not mind Zeno's company.

"Well it's looking like it's going to be rather warm today, no clouds and very sunny. If you like the heat, then today is your day. But I know that is not your thing, so no luck for you! But hey I understand your predicament, I'm sweating a storm up over here myself," Zeno added as he walked next to Tomasz. As always, he was smiling. His appearance was of an old barefoot balding man with long hair and a colorful toga that matched his personality. The AI mascot would manifest in people's interface. This meant that at times it could seem as if the entire campus was talking to themselves. Zeno always ranked as one of the best things about Cahuilla Tech.

"So you got any plans for later on today, Tomasz? Perhaps frolicking through the Fox Botanical Gardens? An intense FoxFit session later? Or maybe even a nice evening stroll down the river walk?" As Zeno spoke to Tomasz about the different activities his outfit changed to reflect each occasion.

"Oh well, I do have some plans. But I had to push my frolicking back to tomorrow because I'm going to go see a musical later today." Zeno faked laughter at the reply.

"I even got myself a nice outfit for it and everything. It seems like it is going to be a good time," Tomasz mentioned to Zeno who now hovered next to him, sitting down on an old worn-out chair and reading a book titled *Zeno's Paradoxes* by Zeno. Zeno was one of the few people that Tomasz spoke to regularly. Well, that was not true, but because Zeno was not a person.

"Oh, might this be Monique's musical you are going to see?" Zeno asked with a knowing smirk. His gaze did not move away from the book he pretended to be reading.

"How did you know about that?" Tomasz asked.

"Oh me? Well what can I say, you're not the only one who loves talking to your friendly holographic school mascot! I don't know if it's my elegance or my carefree attitude but I can't help but have everyone's ears! It's always Zeno this, Zeno that, Zeno I may have invited a certain someone to a musical I'm starring in on this particular warm fall day. You know, those are the kinds of things a dear devoted mascot such as yours truly gets to around these halls." Zeno added with an exasperated tone.

"Or I don't know, it could be that my language processing model misheard what words were uttered. Maybe someone was handing out invitations to a nice relaxing reading session in the Crow District Fish Factory." Zeno now looked pensive as he stared beyond his book which now bore the title *Zeno's Book of Happenings*.

"Did she say anything else? Did she mention me?" Tomasz came to a sudden halt which made Zeno's chair screech to a halt. The hologram appeared to be struggling to hold on to his holographic chair as it stopped. Zeno took a couple of seconds to collect himself.

"Oh dear me, Tomasz, you know I could not tell you anything about that. Just think about it. If I did how could others bring themselves to trust their friendly school mascot Zeno with their thoughts?" Zeno smiled as he looked at Tomasz. His book now bore the title *Zeno's Secrets*.

Tomasz eyed the holograph.

"Well one last question, what do you think of my outfit for later tonight?" Tomasz asked as he transmitted to Zeno a photograph of himself wearing the outfit.

Zeno studied the image for a second.

"I must say Tomasz, I would not have expected you to be so bold and wear something like this!" Zeno remarked as he got up from his chair.

"Is that good or bad?" Tomasz asked.

"Well, my opinion of it is that it is fierce and dangerous," Zeno replied.

Tomasz looked at him confused.

"Yes, I do like it, Tomasz. If I may say, Monique will like it as well. But I'm sure I'll hear about it later anyway."

Tomasz was happy to hear Zeno's approval for his outfit. The outfit was not anything Tomasz had planned for but it was what he ended up with.

"Thanks, Zeno," Tomasz said as he continued toward the train station.

Along the way to the train station, Tomasz encountered a smattering of people here and there. Whenever he did come across someone they did not even bother to look in his direction. Everyone acted as if they were the only person out in the open. He did not see a single person acknowledge or greet anyone else. Tomasz reciprocated and did not acknowledge any of the people that were around him.

Looking above, Tomasz could see the clear sky dotted with various screens. These would flash advertisements to those passing underneath.

"FEELING HOT? PICK UP A HEALTHY TURBO-HYDRATING LORENA TEA!" One of the ads read as it flashed an image of a woman enjoying an ice-cold drink.

The floating screens would hover near the train station and move to where the majority of the people were gathered. The tall glass-paned train station mirrored and distorted the hovering images, producing a rainbow-like effect from the reflected advertisements.

As he approached the doors of the train station the advertisement changed once again.

"Do you have a date in mind? How about—"

Tomasz walked into the train station only to have the advertisement follow him in without any pause.

"—a night at Drusilla's Ristorante?" the ad continued. Now it showed Tomasz dressed in a fancy suit in front of a candlelit dinner sitting next to a beautiful woman. She looked so much like Monique that it made him uncomfortable.

"Having trouble with love? Met the woman of your dreams but she isn't paying attention to you? Well, I have what you need! If you want to learn what women want to hear and how you can get the girl you deserve, subscribe to my world-famous winner's club!" The man pointed straight at Tomasz, doing everything he could to grab his attention. He followed him as he walked down the train station continuing to blab on about his secrets to romance. Tomasz thought he recognized him from somewhere. He was sure he saw him in the news recently getting arrested for something.

Tomasz saw the train approaching the terminal. The train made no sound as it neared the stop. He got in and his interface alerted him that his preferred seat was open. Once he sat down a virtual store appeared in front of him.

Tomasz went for his go-to drink, RED MOON, a tea brewed with leaves harvested from soil mixed with lunar minerals. A virtual acknowledgment from Tomasz and soon an ice-cold can of his favorite drink fell into his hands.

As Tomasz sipped the drink his entire view changed in an instant. One second, he had been seeing the inside of the train and now he was in a room with two women sitting across from him behind a desk. They engaged in a conversation as the letters INN floated above and behind them, the Cahuilla River flowed in the background.

"Teresa with the weather. That's right citizens of Cahuilla City, this week we expect it to be warm. So don't get rid of your summer clothing just yet." The woman speaking was Lucilla "Lucy" Kassa. She was a local celebrity, one of the city's most well-known anchors. Tomasz met her once and always remembered her charming personality.

"Sophia, what else are we expecting tonight for Cahuillans?" Lucy turned to the woman next to her.

"Well Lucy, authorities say that those in Crow District should be on the lookout tonight. There has been an increase in reports of violent gangs around certain neighborhoods. Some businesses have had their windows smashed and their patrons harassed. Authorities have warned people in Crow District to be careful if they go out later in the night."

"That sounds very serious Sophia, I hope authorities can catch those culpable for this soon. Do we know if the city is looking to do something about them?" Lucy asked.

"Lucy, as of now City Hall has not given a definitive answer on what their plans on this matter are. But I have heard reports that Madam Sonali herself has begun to take a personal interest in the matter. We are still unsure of what sort of statement we can expect from her, but if she is to be involved with this we can expect that City Hall will make some sort of formal statement soon."

"Well if Madam Sonali is already on alert with these groups then I already feel more at ease. But I understand there are some other serious news that we are hearing, is that correct?" Lucy uttered every word with the utmost gravity. Tomasz sat dazed and enthralled.

"Lucy, that is correct, we have breaking news. We have received confirmation that Kayden Clemens, the star linebacker for the Cahuilla City Ranchers has been spotted in Monaco with Jennifer Von Hofen, the heiress to the Von Hofen Jewelry Empire." Sophia stared straight at Tomasz as she said this.

"What?" Tomasz replied in disbelief.

"Wow Sophia, in all my years I would not have expected this. To think that the one ranch hand who is notorious for his constant breakups and juicy late-night escapades is now official with a member of the Von Hofen family? I don't think I could have ever imagined this."

"Well, it's not just you Lucy. Most Cahuillans say they are flummoxed by the news. We expect that Jennifer Von Hofen will be at the next game that the Ranchers—"

"Reminder! Unread Message!" A notice read on Tomasz's interface, interrupting his broadcast.

"What?" Tomasz looked through his interface. He remembered the delivery request he had received earlier.

Oh, that's right! I got a job! he thought to himself as his view returned to his actual surroundings. It had been quite a while since he had gone on a job. He was glad to have something else to do instead of just waiting until Monique's show.

The alert read: "Delivery requested by: Caring Angels Organization. Pickup destination: Strawberry Plains Apartment Complex at 21 Charleston Court, Apartment 37B, Fox District. Pickup time, 4:00 PM. Package Description: Seventeen by two by one inch. Twenty pounds. Delivery Destination: 101 Lowray Street, Crow District. Delivery time requested: 7:00 PM."

"The Caring Angels?" Tomasz read to himself in confusion. On his interface, he looked up 101 Lowray Street. The image he saw must have been wrong. All Tomasz could see was a rundown bar with a sign that was half-lit between other derelict businesses.

This does not seem like a good idea, Tomasz thought to himself. He was about to deny the request when another message came in.

"Alert Updated. Pay for delivery: \$10,000. Requestor note: 'We looked up other services but we think you are THE MAN for us! The Caring Angels! Hope to hear from you soon!'"

Tomasz read the update several times. He wanted to be sure there were no details he was overlooking. He checked the distance from the bar to the theater.

Well, I guess it's not too much more that they are asking for, he thought to himself.

He accepted the request and smiled.

It was only several more minutes before his train arrived near his home. The apartment complex Tomasz lived in was like a city in itself. The complex included four gargantuan parallel buildings,

each of which was two miles long and thirty stories tall and housed around twenty thousand residents. Each had a grocery store, a shopping mall, a suite of restaurants, and any other type of amenity the residents could want. It had taken him a long time before he was able to tell without any help which entrance was the one nearest to his room. To Tomasz, it seemed as if someone had designed a single segment of the building, built thousands of those, and placed them all next to each other as far as the eye could see. One of the enduring legacies of the post-Conflict building boom. The only discernible features around the various entrances were the different trees. Outside of the entrance near his apartment, there was a row of fiery red royal poinciana trees in full bloom.

Inside the building, just as it was on the outside, Tomasz saw no activity. He made the five-minute trek to his hallway without even once seeing another person. As he neared his apartment door he saw his neighbor walk up to their door at the same time. For no particular reason at all Tomasz acted as if he had not seen him. Tomasz had lived in the same complex for the past three years. Despite that, he only knew around five people by name. Two of them he mixed up regularly.

"Oh hey, Tomasz! It has been a while since I last saw you." The man smiled wide at Tomasz.

Tomasz turned towards his neighbor with a feigned look of surprise.

"Francisco? Wow, it's been so long since I saw you that I thought you had moved out!"

"Oh yeah, something came up and I had to go stay with my parents for a while. Thankfully everything is fine now so I was able to get back here yesterday." Francisco's reply made it seem as if some heavy burden he had been carrying had been lifted.

"Oh, I see," Tomasz replied with no idea of what else to say.

"What have you been up to?" Francisco asked.

"Oh me? You know, um..." Tomasz had to think for a while for anything of note that he might have done since the last time he had seen Francisco.

"The usual?" Francisco smiled as Tomasz was still caught up in his world.

"The usual," Tomasz replied in a defeated tone.

"So you got any plans for later today?" Francisco still smiled at Tomasz in his usual friendly manner.

"Em, nope didn't get the best sleep yesterday. I finished a gig about thirty minutes ago so I was hoping to start resting early today," Tomasz replied without even thinking. Francisco looked disappointed.

"Oh ok, well one of these days we ought to meet up!" Francisco mentioned, still clinging on to whatever shred of friendliness he could muster. It was more than Tomasz could muster even when he tried his best.

"Great idea," Tomasz said and went straight into his apartment. He had lost track of how many times he had promised to meet up with someone and didn't follow through.

Once inside his room, Tomasz went to the beanbag splayed across the floor and plopped face down on it. With his head still buried in the bean bag, he scanned his interface to check the time: 2:48 PM. He rolled over staring at the plain white ceiling. On any other day, Tomasz would scan his interface for a live event and spend hours without even moving one inch. But he had actual things he needed to do today, and he needed to prepare for those. And one of the things he needed for tonight kept eating at him.

The outfit for tonight's event. He had tried to convince himself that it was not that bad. That it was a unique outfit and would make him stand out but in a good way. He even received Zeno's approval, which he thought would have quelled his doubts. Instead, he found himself feeling nervous about the whole thing. There was only one solution to his current conundrum.

He scanned the inventory of nearby garment stores, trying to see what was available in his size. The first option was from a store in his building. It was a black and white pinstripe suit with a red pocket square and red tie. Tomasz saw a virtual display of how he would look with it. The virtual Tomasz walked around in his room showing the real Tomasz all the angles of him in the outfit. Tomasz was sure his virtual counterpart was more handsome than he was. His face was more chiseled, his cheekbones more pronounced, he stood a tiny bit taller, and seemed to have more muscle mass than his real self. Tomasz did like this outfit and he could have it in his room in the

next two and a half minutes if he wanted, then he saw the price—\$3000. He looked at his bank account. It was not even half that.

"Ok, let's see." He muttered to himself as he ignored that option.

The next store he looked at was out of stock on the outfit he liked, the next could not deliver in time, and the last one was even more expensive than the first.

Tomasz looked toward his closet with dread. A quick scan showed him that aside from what was in the garment bag, the fanciest clothing he had in there were khaki pants and a tropical-themed shirt.

Maybe I'll just stay in today, he thought.

But then he quickly remembered Monique's smile, remembered what Zeno had told him and decided he would go through with his original outfit. With a defeated gesture Tomasz waved at the closet. A robotic arm came down from the ceiling, brought out a single garment bag and placed it on his bed. The bag was emblazoned with *Angelica's Fine Wear and Tailor Shop*.

Tomasz rolled off the bean bag and made his way to the bed. He stared at the garment bag.

"You are my last hope," he sighed as he reached for it.

He zipped it open and pulled out the clothing within. A tailor-made, sleek, silky smooth, custom fit, dazzling **Pink Tuxedo**.

"How the fuck did I end up with this?"