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Orange 5

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by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PART ONE: *END OF ARAM*

I.	Ogres on the Hill	2
II.	Orange Five	15
III.	Simon's Choice	31
IV.	The Pharmacist	37
V.	The Train Ride	54
VI.	Aunt and Uncle in Alder	59
VII.	Inter-Regional Security	66
VIII.	Sumatra	80
IX.	Gateway	87
X.	Closer to Heaven	101
XI.	The Journal	114
XII.	The Warehouse District	122
	Between Time	128

### PART TWO: *AFTER GRACE* (seven years later)

XII.	In love with Tyllah	129
III.	The Woods	135
XIV.	Slice of Cake	155
XV.	Lilly	169
XVI.	Home	184
XVII.	The Last of Alder	

## I.

### OGRES ON THE HILL

From the top of the hill at the end of his village, Kyrrick Loudin could see for miles. Out beyond the shaded orchards, the darkened valleys and the winding blue streams, out past the farms, the lowlands and the distant hills. Out to a place where the sea touched the horizon. It all belonged to a world that Kyrrick did not know. The top of the hill was the furthest he had been. It marked the western edge of his town. After the hill came farms, the lowlands, estuaries and an ocean that Kyrrick had never seen. To the east of his village, winding byways weaved in and out of small quiet towns like his. Directly north were woodlands and a narrow graveled road that led to a few rundown government facilities and a prison. On the southern side, a long straight highway connected one town after another then went on to the suburbs until it sped past city after city from Manchester to Birmingham to Northampton and finally London. Kyrrick had no thoughts of these places. At the age of ten, he was content with his village, his family, school and the top of the hill where he played and made up games with his brother.

He faced the open expanse with his back to the wind. He wore a silver cape fastened around a knitted wool sweater and he held a sword made from a stick. On his head sat a helmet made to look like one a Viking would wear. Across the landscape he saw cows grazing like specks of salt and pepper. The trees were black silhouettes, like black paper cutouts, flat and bare as if drawn by a pencil, as if they were pencils. In the sky, the clouds meandered. They lazily moved across the sky, shaping sheep then rabbits, then a rabbit with long ears and whiskers. Kyrrick's eyes searched for a tall mast on the

horizon, the mark of pirates. He kept a careful look out for imaginary Ogres dropping by parachute to the valley beneath or even to the hill where he stood on the graveled top waiting for his brother. Kyrrick looked to the angle of the sun, wondering if there was time to wipe out the battalions, recover a treasure, and restore peace before dinner.

The engine of his brother's scooter revved and whined as it climbed the steep hill. The bike coughed and sputtered, and as Kyrrick expected, it gave out before reaching the top. His brother ran the rest of the way, through the trees and scaling the incline. He flew with great speed. When he reached the top, his cheeks were red, the buttons on his coat were undone, and the stick in his hand was raised high. He planted his feet and beamed. His voice broke through the chill.

"The legions have been destroyed and there is no one left to battle the Ogres of Theradoom, save us two. Are you ready to fight?" He called out.

Kyrrick turned with a smile to match Aram's. He could hear his heart, feel his blood. His words came out quickly, the front of his sentence mixing with the back.

"Coming the enemy you saw where?"

Aram laughed. He jostled at invisible foes and teased Kyrrick who ran at full speed, throwing all his weight forward. He tackled Aram to the ground. They rolled in the dust and gravel of the hilltop. The two flattened thin patches of wild flowers just missing clusters of rocks and the trunks of small trees. Sometimes they shouted, sometimes they laughed.

"You're late, Aram! What if they killed me?"

"Can't you handle an army of Ogres on your own?"

“Of course I can.”

“Good. Cause we’re surrounded.”

The boys stood quickly. They suspiciously scanned the perimeter.

“Shh. Do you hear them?” said Aram.

“How many?”

They both listened. A flock of birds flew into the trees and perched themselves as if they had come to see the boys play.

“What do we do?”

“Why we fight, little one.”

Kyrrick’s eyes widened waiting for Aram to lay out the rules. His own imagination and his keen sense of play filled in the details. He charged to the top of the large boulder. His imagination was sharp.

“You’re the lookout, brother. Tell me the situation and I’ll make us a plan.”

Kyrrick scouted the valley. A thick mist was rolling in. He looked for the Ogres who sometimes rode on wild stallions twice the size of normal horses, but they weren’t there. “I’m not sure where they are, Aram. There are boats on the sea and a mist in the valley, but –“

Aram was sharpening his stick with a stone. “Check the trees.”

Kyrrick jumped off the boulder, kicking up dust and rolling to where the trees started down the mountain. The birds were still perched on the branches, but no enemy, no danger. He wondered if his imagination was concocting something new. He considered the clues like a puzzle – ships at sea, a mist on the ground, the trees quiet and



still. He looked up. Ah! He thought. The Ogres had developed a new flying technology. A silent helium dirigible plated in mirrors so it would appear invisible. Kyrrick was fascinated by what he had created in his mind.

“Aram, I think I’ve got it.”

“There’s a new enemy coming to the border of Theradoom, isn’t there, mate?”

Aram drew a circle in the dust with his stick. “We’ll have to be especially careful of the priests this time. They lie, brother.”

Kyrrick wanted to tell his brother his idea. Wanted to tell him of the vivid image that sprang into his head of the black Ogres hiding in a storm cloud, actually forming the storm cloud and tumbling heavily across the sky towards their hilltop. He didn’t need to tell him because it came to Aram as well.

“Where?” asked Aram.

Kyrrick turned to look into the distant blue and imagined the look of a hundred dark, sinister monsters folding over and through each other. He heard it first, then Aram did. It was a deep rumble far off and coming.

“I see them, Kyrrick.”

But Kyrrick knew he hadn’t told his brother.

Aram continued. “You fashion they’re from here, but in a different time.” It was a story that Kyrrick was making up in his mind. Kyrrick thought of how the Queen of the Ogres had several beautiful heads that appeared as one and were constantly transforming in and out of each other.

“Be especially careful of the one with the orange hair,” said Aram.

But Kyrrick hadn't told Aram what he was thinking in his head alone.

"I've got you covered, little one. I'll always be one step ahead. I see better than you."

Kyrrick lunged for him, but not before Aram could jump to the side. He always knew. There was nothing Kyrrick could do or think that wasn't already in Aram's head. One of these days, he'd be able to trick his brother. He'd be old enough and wouldn't be as transparent. Kyrrick was proud of the enemy he had imagined. Black Ogres like wheels on a chariot barreling across the horizon.

But when he shot a glance in the direction of his brother, there was something that distracted him. Something real that interfered with the game. Aram caught the sense at the same time.

His brother lifted his head and slowly focused his eyes towards the road. Kyrrick watched Aram turn as if it was in slow motion. His smile changed to a frown even slower. Then his brow furrowed, and his legs, one by one, raised his body to a stand. There was a sound coming from beyond the bend in the path. Not an imaginary sound. A real one. Kyrrick was closer. All he had to do was pivot his body by a single step to see what it was.

Not a real Ogre. Couldn't possibly be real.

Aram ran passed to see for himself. "Buggers!"

Making its way up the path was a black all terrain vehicle. It dug into the dirt as it climbed, sinking and lifting heavily through the dust that surrounded it. Its wheels rolled over daffodils and poppies. The bank of the hill was not meant for vehicles. No one was

supposed to drive to the top. Kyrrick wondered if what they saw might just be a pack of black armored Ogres so tight in their formation that they took the shape of a motor vehicle. Then he thought about the things his mother said that very morning. “These are strange times. There are many things that will happen that will not be safe for you. You have to be careful of the world we are living in. It’s changing, and it’s not friendly.”

The ground beneath them shook. The birds in the trees flew into the sky. The sound of their wings flapping merged with the sound of the vehicle getting closer.

“Are they good people or bad, Aram?”

“You don’t want to find out.”

“Where did they come from? Surely they couldn’t have made it through town without someone seeing them.”

“There are many roads to this hill.” Aram crossed the graveled top holding Kyrrick by his arm.

“What are you going to do, Aram? Maybe they’re scientists collecting rocks.”

Aram pulled Kyrrick to the boulder. “This is serious. You have to do what I say.” The sun was in Kyrrick’s eyes. It shot across the hilltop from the other side of the valley and put his brother in shadow. Aram pushed Kyrrick to his knees behind the large rock. He covered him with leaves from the overhanging tree.

“Hide with me, Aram.”

“They’re not here for you.”

“What do you mean? Who are they?”

“I saw two men. One was on the other side of the school yard during recess and a second I saw at the end of the day when I was leaving.”

“What do they want?”

“Me.” Aram pulled a branch over the top of Kyrrick’s head.

“I don’t understand.”

“Keep quiet. I can take care of it.” He turned from the boulder.

Kyrrick threw the branches to the side and hurried to follow. He tripped over his speed, maneuvering to his brother’s front. “Stop! You have to hide with me.”

“I can’t.” Aram put his hands on Kyrrick’s shoulders. “Listen to me. You can’t let them see you. Not ever see you, not ever in your life.”

“You’re scaring me, Aram”

“There’s nothing to be scared of. I’m older than you and I know what to do to make it all right. Trust me. I’m not who they think I am, but it will be okay. It will be fine. In time, all will be right.”

The words felt wrong in Kyrrick’s head. He wrapped his arms around Aram’s waist and hugged him tightly.

“You have to promise me that you’ll tell mother –,” Aram stooped so that their eyes met. A warm and pleasant smile came over his face. “Tell her that the Ogres of Theradoom out did us this time, but will not the next.” He kissed the top of Kyrrick’s head. Then his body became stiff and his words cold. “Return to your hiding place.”

The sound of the engine was getting louder; Kyrrick tasted the gray dust. He didn’t have much time. Not enough time to be angry with his brother for taking charge,

with himself for being too young, with his parents for not being there to help, and with the world for being unfriendly and frightening. He had only enough time to grab onto his brother's sweater to keep him from going on without him, but Aram's will was stronger, and it forced Kyrrick to let go.

“No, Aram! Stop it!”

It was one of the things that Aram could do. With a suggestion he could cause someone to do something they had no intention of doing. Kyrrick had tried pitting his will against his brother's to defy his commands, but it never worked, and Aram would only laugh. So Kyrrick had no choice but to turn from his brother and struggle against the force that sent him back to where Aram pulled the foliage over the large rock. All he could do was fall to his knees, peer out from the boulder and be a spectator. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. Tears filled his eyes and his fingers trembled as they parted the leaves so that he could see.

The black vehicle churned gravel into its axle and strained heavily as it hauled itself up the last rise. It stopped fifty feet from Aram. Each of the four doors opened, and out of each came an adult dressed in a dark suit. Only one was female and all of them moved in a slow and definite motion that was trailed by a cloud of pebbles and dust that had been there since before the crusades.

Kyrrick thought they were moving out of normal time. He could see every detail – the folds in their clothing as their gait cut steadily into the wind. Lines in the neck of the black man when he glanced behind him at the younger one with wire glasses, who had been a Bolshevik a century before. He heard the soft pounding of their shoes on the dry

earth. Heel first then toe; he could see how the reflection of their faces in the shine of their shoes was distorted. The dark scarf covering the woman's head. Kyrrick didn't miss any of it. What his brother could do with words, Kyrrick could do with his senses. He saw, heard, smelled, and felt everything. He saw the woman's hand swinging along her side from front to back repeating with every step, and he saw the parched lips on the quiet guy with the long hair, the one who fell into the background. He heard the rhythm of their walk. It was solid and continuous. They were ominous, faceless. Kyrrick looked at Aram and could sense he wasn't afraid.

Whatever was going to happen already had. Even as nature was on edge, unsure of what would be required for that anthropogenic skirmish, Kyrrick felt his brother's calm. He felt the sun's heat fall from the air, heard the wind gust in silence, and watched the insects draw back to let the people have their space.

Two of them stopped -- the one with the long hair and the younger Bolshevik with the wire glasses. The female and the black man advanced. There was no negotiating with Ogres. They were the enemy, and there would be no chance for compromise. The woman didn't ask him his name. There were no words between them. Kyrrick looked away from Aram to the hill's edge where the open sky led to distant scenes of a world that was complicated and strange. He had never seen the world from that angle -- peering helplessly through dark foliage, his brother surrounded by people who didn't love him. Kyrrick was unfamiliar with that moment. He had never been there before. He had only known about playtime, school time and bed. From where he came from, problems had solutions and conflicts were temporary. But that wasn't what he saw a few feet away on

the top of that hill. The backdrop was as still as he. The sun was quieter than it had ever been. It was removed and sat blazing and round against a white sky. It looked like it was watching, but not watching over. If it had disappeared in an eclipse or even exploded into trillions of light beams, it could have made a difference. It had the power to make a difference and to stop the black man from grabbing onto Aram's hair wrenching his neck upwards so that his eyes saw the same sun as did Kyrrick. But even if the sun were to do something, it would react eight minutes after it should, and it would have an effect on the hill a full sixteen minutes too late. Aram's present was the sun's future as much as the sun's present would be Kyrrick's past. So it was then that the boy hiding in the foliage began to understand the role of nature. The sun saw but wasn't able to do anything because time didn't work that way. It's why Aram couldn't run. There was nowhere to go, nothing that he could do. Time was affected by distance. It meant that what was about to happen already had. The future was there – if not on that day, then on another. And Kyrrick knew that Aram preferred the tangible present to an elusive tomorrow. His brother was prepared for that afternoon, that moment. It had been part of his life from the beginning. So there it was. When the round blaze of the sun blurred his vision and time paused allowing itself to be the past and present all in one, Kyrrick knew his brother was going to die.

It took several minutes before Kyrrick's attention to the horizon was interrupted by the sound of a fourteen year-old boy tearing from the grip of an adult. Aram dodged their large bodies and hurled rocks until he was thrown against the boulder and his stick shattered close to Kyrrick's hiding place. Kyrrick could almost touch him. Almost save

him. He could hear his brother's lungs expel carbon dioxide, hear the flow of his blood thickening as it ran down the side of his face.

The rear passenger door opened. The woman disappeared inside. She emerged with something small in her hand. Two things. Aram rolled to the ground. The two white men lifted him to his feet, and the black one raised the boy's head and looked into his eyes.

"I have kids of my own," he said. "I have a daughter almost your age." It never occurred to Kyrrick that the enemy had children. Aram smiled at the man.

"I'm sure you love her," he said and closed his eyes.

Kyrrick wondered why his brother didn't speak to him with his mind. They were brothers and were able to do that. Kyrrick wanted to hear Aram tell him that it was going to be all right. That he loved him and would never leave him. Then he noticed that Aram's hand was opening slowly, and with a slight and undetectable movement, he raised his arm ever so slightly and offered Kyrrick his opened palm. His brother was telling him that everything really was all right. He told him it was okay to remember how they played for hours and days and years on that hillside, and how they had invented games that would make them laugh and roll in the grass. Aram's opened palm reminded Kyrrick that their years together were good ones – they found a lost puppy and gave it a home. They listened to stories their father invented on summer nights. They built a go-cart, climbed trees, chased after sheep, and watched a thousand sunsets. It was the same sun that hadn't moved from its spot above them. It all came into Kyrrick's head so fast – everything they had done together. Then it stopped. Kyrrick's inner world became black



and silent, like the reel of a film had ended. He could almost hear the whir of a projector's wheel spinning alone, the images no longer passing through the light. He looked out and saw that Aram was still. Hardly breathing. Barely alive. The black man's hands supported him. He held him steady to keep his legs from buckling.

“Are you ready?” The black man whispered in his brother's ear. Kyrrick felt Aram's calm sweep through the distance as if it were a dandelion adrift in the breeze.

The woman was there again. The device in her grasp was a pharmaceutical needle. She took Aram's arm, pushed away his torn shirtsleeve and readied the instrument. A spurt of blue serum shot into the air. She didn't look into the boy's eyes as did the black man. She simply depressed the syringe into Aram's soft young flesh, and injected. With a second syringe, she extracted the last of his life, a dark burnt blood that was thick and filled the tube to the top. It stung. Kyrrick nearly cried out. She folded plastic wrap around the needle, placed the vial of blood in a protective cylinder, and returned to the vehicle. The men carried Aram to the edge of the hill, released him and let him fall.

He fell from the same part of the hill where Kyrrick had been able to see the entire world. It was on that same edge where he had looked into the place where the sea touched the sky. It was from the part of the earth where he had planted his feet just an hour before. The sun moved slightly. It was getting on with its trek across the sky and wouldn't know that Aram was dead for several more minutes. It wouldn't know, as did Kyrrick, that his life would be different and that his small world was gone. The larger world that he was told was vast and complicated and out of his grasp was coming into

perspective. It was the Ogres all along and Kyrrick knew they would never back down. As cruel and as merciless as he might fight them, they would know that he would never be done for he would never be able to pay them back for that afternoon.

He sat and waited for the black man and the two others to tidy the hilltop, close the doors to their vehicle, and for them all to go back to the place that had sent them. He listened until the sound of the engine faded. The sun was spreading thin at the far edge of the horizon. The sky was pink, and the clouds had fashioned themselves into the long thin wisps of a broom from a fairy tale. It was there to sweep away the things that had been done that day. Kyrrick stood quietly. He walked to the place where his brother's body was thrown off the hill and was lying in a pile of flesh. It was a long way down. He knew the climb would be difficult, but he didn't want to leave his brother alone – not for his heart and liver and stomach to be ripped out and the pieces devoured by the large dark birds that had already begun to circle.

## II. THE ORANGE FIVE

The airport was deserted.

The eateries were dark. The gate counters quiet. A single security guard glided through the food court on an electric motion scooter, which washed the terminal in a low steady hum like seismic waves vibrating beneath the earth. The polished floors and blue stainless walls echoed the footsteps of the few passengers who were tired, nondescript and at the airport at two in the morning because of a mechanical problem in Brussels. Most of the passengers were day travelers returning to their homes. Only a few took the corridor to baggage claim. The five who arrived at the conveyor spread themselves thin, too tired to talk to people they didn't know. One was a businessman. Another was a pregnant woman in an orange dress that bunched over her belly. A small boy at her side was asleep in a stroller. There was an older woman from an eastern country who wore a wide skirt and rubber boots. Most alone was a musician who was separated from the world by purple headphones. He held a guitar case and stood close to a black man, the black man who spoke the last words that Aram had heard. The man stood wide, his arms folded over his trench coat. His eyes, fixed ahead. Across the carousel stood an older man in a dark leather overcoat. His gloved hands were clasped at his front. He had shoulder length silver hair. The black man didn't remember him from the plane.

It took awhile for the belt to ramp up. The pregnant woman used the time to rub blush on her cheeks. The businessman tapped words into a phone, which reminded the

black man to check his. The text said “good night,” followed by a smiley face. The black man smiled wishing it hadn’t been too late to send a reply. Finally, the metal conveyor screeched into its rotation. A red hard-shell Samsonite that had been sitting unclaimed went around by itself. It went around several times before a valise with a leopard print emerged at the shoot, teetered then tumbled through. It was picked up by the pregnant woman who struggled to get it over the edge. Any other time, one of the men would have helped, but the late hour had put the room in a trance. The Samsonite completed two revolutions before the second bag was thrust up and out. Slowly, the third and then a fourth, and a fifth piece of luggage popped up, tumbled down the metal transport and were lifted off the belt. Only the black man, the strange man in the leather coat, and the Samsonite remained.

If he had been waiting for his own bag of clothes, the black man would have come back the next day or in a week or filed a missing luggage report, but he was waiting on a duffel for his next assignment. He was to deliver the bag, marked with an orange 5, to a man he didn’t know, at a time and place also unknown. He preferred assignments to be given like that, a little bit at a time, on a need-to-know basis. It kept things simple. Riding in the black vehicle to the top of the hill on the outskirts of an outlying village was need-to-know. It was why he wasn’t familiar with the three who were with him and why he expected he would never see them again. The woman was the one who knew the job. The others were operatives like him with orders to obey orders. That was that. They were the guns in case there was resistance or opposition. Not until they made the climb did he realize they were up against a fourteen-year old boy.

It wasn't the first assignment that had given him a strange feeling. Much of his work for Special Forces had been unorthodox. Always a little unreal and out of sync with familiar customs and patterns. Death was like that. To be around it, to cause it, to be close to it, to barely escape from it – death triggered a heightened mental state which soldiers were accustomed to, but on the afternoon that they killed the boy who said “I'm sure you love her” -- your daughter, a new perspective seeped to the forefront, and the world wasn't as he had known it. He had always believed that the work he did had a specific purpose. But since that afternoon, his assignments seemed to be bigger and broader. They came without explanations or reason. There was a momentum beginning to take form like the start of a storm far out at sea.

The baggage claim area was too quiet. There had been other times when only a few people from a late flight waited for the last bags to come through. But this night was different. There was something eerie about the room and the things in it. The fluorescents, the carousel, a water fountain, and a sign to the toilets. There was a distancing between the objects and the space they occupied. The things were more inanimate and the room more alive. The world was changing, and as the black man looked around, he wondered what role the few passengers played. He wondered how he would fit in - and the dead boy. He knew in his head that his family would also be given a part, especially his daughter. He wondered why he had thought of her when he steadied the boy for the needle. He was trained, like every other operative, to keep unrelated sections of his life from overlapping. He was no one when he was working. He knew of nothing beyond his assignment when he was killing. Never, did he judge. But when he

lifted the boy's head and looked into his eyes, he saw his daughter. Her name was Grace and she was in the fifth grade. It wasn't a projection or an error on his part. The two had identical eyes. They were blue with large pupils that could see in the dark with the same precision with which everyone else could see in the light. The boy and his daughter saw the same past, lived in the same present, and with each choice they made, they were able to create the future.

He wasn't supposed to have had that assignment. It was a job assigned to a rookie soldier named Nelson, but the kid was killed when a saw-scaled viper crawled into his tent in Punjab. The chain of events, what led the black man to that afternoon and then again to the deserted terminal had nothing to do with the boy's death. They would have killed him whether he was part of the four or not, but by being there – by thinking of Grace, by being aware of the sun on his back, by hearing a rustling in the foliage at the boulder, by way of all that he felt shifting out of place -- the man who had always known his role in life, who had always chosen his part, was setting out on an unfamiliar course.

He saw himself lifting the boy. "I have a daughter almost your age."

He was recalling it, picturing it -- the birds flying out of the trees, the kid's stick shattering, the wind kicking up the dust in silent bursts -- when he noticed the duffel coming towards him as if it had already been around a few times. The red suitcase passed first. There was red on the boy's shirt from a gash in his head. He glanced across the carousel wondering what the man with the silver hair was waiting for. He grabbed the duffel, made a check of its contents and turned easily towards the exit doors. Behind him, he heard the conveyor stop and the lights dim. As he headed through the glass doors, he

saw a reflection of the man on the other side of the baggage ramp. He hadn't moved. The Samsonite was untouched.

Outside the airport, the London suburb was cold, dismal and asleep. An hour had passed since the regional airbus from South Charleroi landed. Not a taxi or a bus ran from the airport this late. City curfews should have caused the jet to stay in Brussels, but air security gave the flight special permission for night travel. It wasn't that unusual. Brussels had its own curfew and since all of the passengers marked England as their residence, it was better to send them on their way. The flight attendants handed out the Curfew Passes, which would allow those on board to arrange transport from the airport and ward off interference from the Street Patrols. Being given a Curfew Pass was fairly common. Doctors had them. So did utility workers, emergency personnel, street cleaners, some of the driving services, and a few shopkeepers, especially the bakeries that needed to begin prep when it was still night. The black man held out his hand. Special Forces were exempt, but he took a pass so he wouldn't draw attention. The special ops soldier was aware that the people were the ones who wanted the curfews and they kept unconscious tabs on those who didn't accept a pass when it was offered. Had the black man waved the flight attendant on, the other passengers may have reasoned that he was a transport engineer or an ER nurse, but it would also cross their minds that he could be a Regional Security Marshal or a subversive.

England was fairly new to mandated curfews. The country was removed from the International Security Commission's directives and took their time in adopting ISC's suggestions. They watched somewhat passively but with empathy at the wars and revolts

abroad; but as a country, she held to her identity as an island uninvolved in the upheaval everywhere else. Her stoicism held up for a time, but when the fear came -- the explosions at the National Opera, the newborns thrown through the glass walls at the Royal Hospital and the rash of flesh eating amoebas released into the lakes in East Yorkshire -- each act monstrous, savage, and inhumane even for terrorism; when the people dying weren't just decorated soldiers but neighbors, the government had no choice. It had to show it cared for its people, because it did. Finally, it stopped playing the part of a mother closing the drapes and locking the doors to shield her children from a bad neighborhood. England kicked into gear and picked up its pace.

The modern times were no longer someone else's problem. In just under three years, London became a model for the world without doing away with her afternoon tea. The Queen consolidated factions quicker than Germany; she spent more money than America, and she created a security infrastructure that surpassed Israel. Reaffirming the pomposity that led her to defeat the Spanish Armada, oust Catholicism, and lay claim to America, England re-established her position as a world power. Out of nostalgia and egoism, she hung on to the Beatles, Bowie, Twiggy and Princess Diana. But overall, England had decided that she was not going to be messed with. In no time, Parliament dusted off its bureaus and invested in state of the art surveillance and munitions. It increased autonomy for Special Undercover Services and modern technology. Like before, England bet its future on its Navy, which was rebuilt to include stealth destroyers. She was back. The same sovereign mother who had colonized nearly half the world and ruled over more than a quarter of its population just a few centuries before rose again to



wield power with little effort and without a hero. No Napoleon. No Christ. No Alexander. No Bin Laden. The country rose with neither dictatorship nor marshal law, but via consensus. Then with clean streets, a substantial decrease in crime and restored confidence, investment money swept through London's top architectural and environmental firms launching the city into a limitless future in which it was offered top seats in every global organization and whole world task force.

The black man knew this about his resident country. He watched most of it transpire, but he didn't have the genetic predisposition of a Brit. He was an American. His country was clearly the more dominant, but it had far less experience with nationalism and the unification of history. America's supremacy was like everything it brought to the world landscape -- movies, silicone valley and baseball. America was glitzy, trendy, temporary, and adolescent. Blatantly adolescent. The black man was aware that America's position was simultaneously powerful and precarious, while England was setting herself up for another millennium of reign, and he was on loan as one of her soldiers.

He flipped the Curfew Pass between his fingers, rubbing the raised surface of the European Union's security seal and the motto *we are one*. Most prominent on the card was the embossed insignia of bright blue interlocking squares that signified the interconnectivity of the world. The squares and the motto also appeared on his Special Activities Division identity card, as did his name – Simon Hayes.

Simon slid the pass into the security turnstile outside the terminal where the April wind blew in swirls across the wet pavement. Lights clicked on across the vehicle lane

and an escalator leading to the street beneath silently cycled. He turned the collar up on his trench and stepped off the curb. He had been out in the streets many times after curfew. In the early part of the night there was an electric energy. It was the time of night when trash was thrown, keys turned in locks, and actors and musicians hurried home. It was when the runaways scrambled for nooks and those who were too old to remember where they had put their things were led to cubicle housing. The first hour of curfew was energized with patrol cars, teenage excuses, and barking dogs. After the first hour, only the cats and the wild ones stayed out.

Simon smiled at the thought of the hoodlums dodging surveillance; they were the neighborhood renegades who sprayed paint on train trestles, sold drugs to each other, trespassed through parks, and occasionally cut off a finger or severed an ear. They thought they were dangerous. The people thought they were dangerous. He smiled. The curfew wasn't implemented to keep the local bad guys from committing crimes. It was in place to reduce the number of victims. Even the neighborhood thugs understood this, which is why they had their own curfew. Simon called this time of night Deathwatch, because it was when strange things happened.

When Simon pulled out of the daily parking garage, the hoodlums' curfew had been in effect for an hour. The silent airport was in his rear view mirror and his car was the only one on the motorway. A cold mist blanketed the landscape. His headlights skimmed the woods catching a figure, a man, darting out of the shadows and into the blackness of the trees. He ran with something in his arms, like a child. Simon wrapped

his fingers around the steering wheel. He felt surrounded by the night and burdened by the weight of the things that could happen, an infinite amount of things.

He was uneasy as he drove. The wet wind blew dry. Bright clouds thinned across the moon and animals howled from the tops of distant hills. Simon had worked in Delta Forces long enough to know that anything could transpire at this time of night. There were no rules. Yet it was his imagination that had the upper hand. After two days without sleep, his thoughts conspired with shadows to devise monsters as large as mountains unfolding from behind barns and sweeping away years of civilization. He looked to the starry night considering the possibility that space ships might cover the sky or that the sun might not rise. He was astutely aware of the condition that just because something hadn't happened in the past, there were no assurances that it wouldn't happen in the future, or then – right then.

Simon was familiar with these thoughts. He was sensitive to them; he made them, imagined them, created them with his mind. He knew that at the same time every night a window opened between the physical world and somewhere else. He wasn't able to describe it. He only knew it as a sensation, as an awareness that the world and he were being watched. He told his wife, Ruth, who gently advised that if he slept through that part of the night there'd be no need to worry about it. But the idea that things could happen that weren't possible made him anxious. The idea that a sandstorm could swirl into town like a tornado and bury houses, the hospitals, and the library; the idea that someone other than himself, could be living in his house with his family and that the people he loved could think it was him; the idea that a rabid dog could spring into the air

from the bushes and smash into his windshield. It was the only thing that frightened him – a world without explanation. In that dark nightly hour, Simon understood that reason had no power because it was man-made and had nothing to do with the way things really were.

He veered off the motorway onto a long stretch of ancillary road that narrowed around several hedges then widened onto a cobblestone entry drive flanked by cream-colored arches. Edenbrock, his community, was one of the ordained neighborhoods springing up throughout England and most of Europe. The communities were built to be self contained like modern-day kingdoms, each with their own energy sources, medical facilities, education, construction, arts, recreation, security personnel, and food distribution. The sectors varied in size, though most were one-to-two square miles with 4,000-10,000 people in each. Living in one was new and exciting. It meant you were part of a safe future.

The iron-gated entrance was well lit and taller than it needed to be. From each side, a sleek stone wall stretched around the perimeter of the community. The wall was eight feet in height and set with gas lanterns every hundred feet. It was draped in tiny purple flowers. By encircling the 2 square mile community, the wall provided a backdrop for yards, the park, the school, ball fields, running paths, woods, and the water plant. It dropped off at the man-made lake that went beyond Edenbrock proper. The lake was used for recreation and boating. Underwater sensors kept it free from contaminates. On its far side were a dozen two room cottages for holiday breaks, then several hectares of woodlands and marsh. Simon swiped his identity card, and pressed his thumb to the pad.

The electronic field switched off and a small section of the entrance gate opened. There was no rabid dog pouncing from the bushes or flying saucers hovering overhead. The spellbound hour had come to an end and morning, about two hours away, would soon arrive. The pink from the gas lamps and the quiet glow from the moon washed the streets in a gentle stillness. The homes, tucked under weeping birches and trellised gardens, were peaceful. The people who had planned and built these sectors knew what they were doing. Coming home, for Simon, was nice.

His house smelled like the cupcakes that had been baked the previous evening. Simon ran his finger through the confetti decorated icing and swallowed some milk from a glass jug. The rooms were clean and quiet. In the master at the top of the stairs, his wife was in a white nightgown sleeping under cotton sheets and a cream comforter. Her phone was on the night table with the text and smiley face she had sent hours earlier. He touched a kiss from his finger to her temple. She was in a deep sleep. On the other side of the stairs, Simon opened the door to the nursery to find Henry tossing in his crib and about to cry out, so he clicked the door shut and tiptoed down the hall to where lavender scrolled letters and dancing fairies bid those who enter to leave their worries outside. Sparkling stars dotted the ceiling and hung over his daughter's lilac canopy. Around the perimeter of the bed were stuffed animals, all kinds – predators and prey. It was a nightly ritual to line the bravest of the toys in a semi-circle to keep away bad spirits and things not wanted near. He wondered how much longer she'd believe that stuffed toys protected her. Some of her friends had already begun to tease her about them and she made sure to keep the fluffiest ones hidden. Her schoolbooks were spread across the coverlet. On top

was Grace's quarterly 5<sup>th</sup> grade report. Simon scanned the check marks. As always they were all on the left in the column that said his daughter was exceptional. The comment section noted helpful, leader, team player, responsible. His fingers touched the words, her name, the school seal, the signature at the bottom, the small orange five in the corner. He pulled his fingers back and looked at the imprinted 5 again. He knew the marking. He had seen it before, but it wasn't on her last grade report. There was nothing in the corner on any of the reports she received in the past. No orange number of any kind. He studied it, trying to remember where he had seen it. In a file. On documents. The duffel. Simon sank into the rocking chair next to a table set for a child's tea party.

"You can't give me this assignment, Paul," Simon remembered saying.

Simon's supervisor slowly pulled his head out of his paper work and removed his orange-tinted glasses. Simon held out the file. "I don't get assigned anyone who's not a grownup. You guys screwed up on the assignment with the boy. Let's not make it a habit."

"It's a bag of clothes, Hayes. You're an errand boy on this one. You pick up a bag of clothes, you drop off a bag of clothes. You're like a laundry lady."

"The contents include pharmaceuticals."

"You don't need to touch anything but the handles on the bag."

"Damn straight I don't."

"It's a delivery. Just deliver the bag."

He hadn't recognized the names on the documents, but he remembered them because it was second nature, part of his early training. Emily Bruns, Courtney Lochman,

Salem Gallagher, Peter Mitchell – a half dozen more. Yes – his assignment was pick up a duffel, drop off a duffel. Simon's last real gig was firing at Alawite rebels in Damascus, but Ruth preferred him close to home and used her connections to keep him out of the desert. She wanted her husband to be more of a family man. He thought he'd at least give it a try. He liked the lingering scent of vanilla and sugar late at night, and he only occasionally missed the smell of nitrate and dust.

The orange designation wasn't unusual. It was the five that threw him. The color alone could have meant attention deficit or even a slight social lag. Most parents understood that if either was the case, it meant their child would be more successful and less stressed in a private school funded by tax dollars. The system was notably effective. The kids in the private schools had smaller classes and more attentive teachers. The numerical designations were typically one through four. Simon had a vague recollection of the significance of a five. Ruth's friends, Christy and Gary Meyers talked about it. Their child, ten at the time, was exceptional in math and it was recommended that he should attend Oxford. Ruth was very excited for them and the family was given free counseling on how to raise an exceptional child and how to cope with a ten year old away at a university. Ruth explained that it was like sending a son to a boarding school and it was prestigious. Then the boy didn't come back for the holidays because of a special project. Summer came and then it went, and the school assured Ruth's friends that the boy had been transferred to an esteemed science university in Switzerland and was doing well. By autumn, he had been adopted by a family closer to Geneva so he could work on wireless energy transfer for I-CERN. The boy's new family had his interests and his

work as their primary concern. The sporadic updates stopped as the years passed.

Apparently, the counseling was successful. The Meyers were content that the boy had found his happiness. Otherwise, the psychiatric report predicted suicide by the time he was in his late teens.

Simon wondered if Grace was happy. The past filled his mind like a slide show-- Grace chasing a new puppy, the puppy chasing her, flips on a trampoline, her brother in her arms, icing on her nose, hugs and kisses, laughing an octave too high, friends with nail polish and blue face cream and speaking so close to the speed of sound that her words whizzed out and beyond auditory tracking. Grace didn't know how to be unhappy. Unlike the Meyers boy, Simon's daughter was excited by life and just average in math. She received good marks because she worked hard and studied more than was expected.

He looked again at the paper – the five was in a fancy scroll. It curled up at the top and swept into a thin wisp at the bottom. It felt flat on the paper. When had he seen it? Yesterday, when he picked up the duffel in Brussels. He checked the contents – cellophane wrapped clothes and small silver cases. Scrolled on each surface was an orange five. Each was raised, embossed, and rough against the tip of his finger. Inside the boxes were pharmaceutical needles and a vial of amber serum securely embedded in a gray foam mold. A flash came to him of the boy on the hill. There was a silver case with a needle on the front seat of the car, but no cellophane wrapped clothes. The serum, he remembered, was a deep blue. On the cover of the boy's silver box was a purple swirl and a small circle. They were different – the boy on the hill and the one sent to I-CERN. The latter was valuable like Grace, and the boy at the bottom of the ravine wasn't.



Simon wondered who made those decisions. Not a who. It was never a single person with a pen and a box to check. This one will be thrown over a cliff. This one will win a Nobel Prize. This one will live on a farm in Germany. Did they know what they were doing? Changing lives with a scroll on a school document, on a silver box, with an injection. He became aware of his fingers digging into his thighs. Sweat was at his hairline. He was frustrated and beginning to feel powerless. His daughter would likely be sent away to Oxford or Switzerland or some other place and maybe she would be adopted by another family, maybe she would grow up with only a vague memory of her earlier life and of him or maybe she would forget everything. He was slipping into a mental state susceptible to impulsive actions and bad decisions. He had been awake for more than 24 hours, and he was aware that his emotions were eager to be at the forefront, to be what mattered most, and he wanted to be sure he wouldn't respond from an unstable context. He had the mental compartments, the medals, the training, the skill. He was prepared to think it through.

As a single bird chirped from the branches of yellow laburnum outside Grace's window, Simon realized he didn't have much time. He had three options: One - Play by the rules, continue to be a company man, a citizen of England who trusted his government to do what was best. Two - Take Grace away. Go into hiding and stay there for an indefinite or even an infinite amount of time. Three - Trust someone he didn't know; turn his daughter over to an underground network he knew only by the name of Gateway and nothing more. He was vaguely aware of its existence from a note he saw on a kid's file at the office and because of something he heard at the black market

apothecary when he bought the vial of blue serum. It was when he handed the woman in the white lab coat an envelope with money and the order. She looked him up and down scrupulously and said she had him figured wrong cause she thought he was with Gateway and not with Inter-Regional Security. “They both give kids new lives,” she said, “but only the government orders the purple.” He didn’t ask what she meant. Knowing more than what was necessary never seemed to pay off.

He put Grace’s grade report in his pocket and dozed. He dreamt of her slipping in and out of trees like she was playing hide and seek. He followed her laughter, came to a slender trunk where her voice called to him, then she was gone. All that remained was the light cotton edge of her dress hastening away. As the game went on, she grew. She was a teenager, a young woman; she was with a man. She was pregnant, then with a child in her arms, then the child at her side playing the game as well – always skipping ahead, slipping away. Their eyes never meeting as if he wasn’t there. But he could almost touch her. Then the child turned, saw him. It was Grace when she was younger, but she didn’t know him. She had never seen him before. She took a twig from the ground as a sword and swung it at her father. She hit him with it. Jabbed it into his skin and he began to bleed. He looked at his arm and the twig was a needle. A blue liquid flowed into his veins, mixing with the red blood gushing out. The little girl was surprised. She didn’t want to hurt him, but it was already done.

### III.

#### SIMON'S CHOICE

Simon didn't want Grace to go to school but he couldn't think of a reason to keep her home. She had the lead in the school play and loved the after-school rehearsals even more than building the replica water treatment station for her environmental science project. She was all smiles when she planted a kiss on her mother's cheek and skipped out of the house forgetting her dad was also in the doorway, because he usually wasn't.

"You must have gotten in pretty late to still be hanging around with us," said Ruth as she tucked her arms around Simon's waist and pressed against him. "Henry goes in for his morning nap in an hour."

Simon was trained in lying. "I have a meeting that I'm already late for." He lifted his wife's chin and kissed her. "I miss you."

"You know where to find me."

Between the time he woke from the rocking chair and dried his shampooed hair, he had a plan in place. It had come quickly. It was formed instantaneously without rumination, like a chess master moving his knight around a chessboard.

"I'll pick Grace up after play practice and take her for an ice cream."

"You sure?"

"She's getting older, baby. I'm trying to connect like you wanted. I'm spending time with my family."

This is when the compartments in his head came into play. He could visualize them like digital folders on a laptop. Scroll down to security, click; kidnapping, click; This approach to making decisions was familiar to him. It gave him the ability to get on top of situations and think unimpaired. Ironically, compartmentalizing is what led him to that very morning, and it was what prompted him to seek out Ruth 13 years before.

Scroll to Career Advancement, click. Marriage, click.. It was just after he completed a three year stint in the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment which was also planned, as was his time in Delta's Special Operations Group going up against the Taliban's New Zirid in Kandahar and blowing out caves in Bora, an interminable exercise in a wasteland as eternal as its history. Simon's life wasn't a result of luck or fate or which way the wind blew on any given day. It lined up and got him to that very moment, because he made it that way.

The first step was getting a degree from Ohio State in Intelligence and Security. He then went through training in basic combat, special tactics, land navigation, survival, evasion, emergency medicine, and hostage rescue. After dozens of missions, silver and bronze stars, unit commendations and unofficial recognition for his tactical leadership in blowing up an Al-Zawahiri scion in Kabul, the American soldier thought of the next rung, of getting out of the desert, of a promotion, some extra cash, and the opportunity to wear a suit and tie on occasion. There were a hundred other guys hoping for the same future. But Simon worked out an angle to give him the upper hand. For him, the detail was to fall in love. It had been the one thing he avoided so he could stay focused on his career path. Then suddenly, it turned out to be the very tactic to get him his next job.

The idea came to him when he was on leave in St Martin. He rented an open-air villa so he could feel the sea air from a chair on his balcony and watch the hazy sun move across the clear Caribbean water. He smoked cigarettes, drank gin, and kept a game of solitaire spread out on the bed. The cards shifted as the blades from the overhead fan spun like those on the helicopters he dropped from in Mogadishu. He was tired of tents and lugging fifty pounds on his back. He didn't want to go back to the States and thought about settling in England, but he had no in. He didn't know anyone who could pull the strings. Crushing a cube of gin drenched ice between his teeth, Simon realized that the top guys, the generals calling the shots and giving the orders to wipe out villages, drop bombs in public squares, release chemicals, and move money had families and private lives. He used a variety of passwords and illegal access codes to do the research, and within a few hours he had outlined the family trees of the upper echelon in the Unified Combatant Command. He synthesized the family connections to three photos of three women. They were between the ages of 21 and 25, educated, attractive, and connected by blood to the people, the generals and directors, who Simon needed to know.

Ruth was one of the three, but to him it wasn't a matter of love at first sight. Any of the three women would have served his purpose equally as well, so he decided to leave the choice to a straw hat that sat on his lap. Tipped slightly on the back legs of a wooden chair and with the beach air blowing against his bare chest, Simon watched the sun drop into the Ocean. He rolled a small glass of freshly iced gin over the day's burn on his forehead. He listened to the hum of the fan, to the surf, to the silence of the three photos as he dropped them into the hat on his lap. On each face was a smile. Within each set of

eyes was the knowledge of a world organized by social events, shopping, and family obligations. He shuffled the photos with the blade of a knife that was polished and inculpable, not responsible for anything it had done, not even the last time its serrated edge lacerated the thoracic aorta of an Arab soldier just left of midline. He stabbed the knife into the hat and lifted the first picture touched by the blade to the flame of a flickering candle. The woman's face shriveled to black ash then blew into the salty air. The second photo came out of the hat on the knife's tip. He flung both into the mirror over the dresser, shattering the glass into shards of silver that shredded the woman's face. The remaining photo, the one still in the straw hat, was Ruth. He held her between his fingers. She was dressed in a pale pink pantsuit and wore a short strand of white pearls. As the granddaughter of the man who headed the CIA's Special Activities Division out of London, it meant Lieutenant Hayes was going to purchase a one-way ticket to Heathrow and take an assignment with TF-88.

General Tschirhart saw the truth in Simon's intentions from the start, and he marveled at the young man's ability to take on the personae of a man in love. Simon's deception actually helped his appointment to the General's staff. During the 18-month courtship, it never occurred to the woman in the photo, the General's own grand daughter, that Simon Hayes was using her. Even when he fell in love with her for real, which was when she went into labor with their daughter, he made no change in how he spoke, listened, looked into her eyes and made love. The only thing that changed was that a new compartment was created which he opened and filled. He was still able to think clearly and make decisions that had to be made.

Deciding to hide Grace within a secret underground organization was one of those decisions.

He knew what it meant. He was removing Grace from her world, from his world, from Ruth. She could be gone for many years, maybe forever. He also knew that he was going against command, and he was violating his oath. He was setting everything at risk. Kidnapping his own daughter then turning her over to strangers and being utterly and completely responsible for all of it. It was such an immediate decision that he wondered if the seed had already been planted. Perhaps(,) it had been part of his breeding or genetic makeup. But Simon had no family stories about the fight for freedom. His ancestors weren't involved in hiding Jews, transporting POWs, or smuggling slaves through an intricate network of people connected by a cause. His relatives were from Delaware, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. They weren't the ones who wrapped a child in the dark of night to pass her over to a neighbor who had a friend who knew someone who knew someone else who could make her disappear down rickety steps on the other side of fake floors and hollow walls so that she would reappear months later in other places like an old woman's attic or a snow covered field or a deserted train station. Those were other people's stories. The famous ones described in books, alluded to in poems, dramatized in songs, and shown in movies. None had been part of Simon's connection to the world. His decision, quick and cool, came because Simon didn't trust the system he had been trained to protect.

For the intelligence officer, his decision quickly transformed into a plan, one without holes and with no room for error. Only one other person needed to be involved. It

was the person Simon had made an appointment to see that afternoon. The rest of it, the whole of the plan, could be carried out by Simon alone. Ruth wouldn't know. She would have to feel the pain and anguish that all mothers experience when their child vanishes without a clue or a cause. Simon's love for her couldn't change that. It wasn't safe to tell her the truth.



#### IV.

#### THE PHARMACIST

It took forty-five minutes for Lieutenant Hayes to get to the east side of London where there remained one of the few areas that still had neighborhood cafes, cobbled sidewalks and corner galleries. It was a small bohemian section that was mostly underground. It was wedged between what everyone feared would be the future and what actually was. On one side was a labyrinth of alleys that narrowed into dark and muddy tunnels as they wound round to blown out warehouses for the free-spirited insurgents who were mostly young and vile. On the other side, the antique underground paths met up with polished steps that led to shiny white sidewalks, moving escalators, polished trams on invisible tracks, and suspension motorways that fed into pockets of work-live collectives. Simon was always surprised at how quickly the city was being transformed. He would check out of town on a quick two-week assignment and return to sleek glass buildings at new heights and green parks planted on the tops of hotels. The new London was bright and clean.

Simon descended into the Victorian terraced streets on foot. He passed a fashionable artist on a balcony and a child eating a pastry on a stoop. He registered every glance, every face, made note of the footsteps, the conversations, the music from windows, the smell of clean laundry, flowers in boxes, and pots of steaming orange tea. The last time he was there, he was undercover, wearing heavy padding under a running suit and a baseball cap. This time he was in his trench with sunglasses. He didn't think

he'd be recognized, but he wanted anyone watching to believe his business in the quarter was official. He didn't want to be messed with. If it got back to the agency, he'd say he was after a lemon scone. Still, he didn't want to make his presence obvious so he avoided the surveillance system, sometimes with his timing, otherwise by using the electronics in his pocket to erase his movements. His walk was ingenuous. He knew precisely where he was going. He swept across the uneven street, turned the corner at the small bookshop, and took four cellar stairs to a narrow wooden door with a speakeasy grille. He looked into the surveillance camera hidden in the wisteria. He would erase the recording of his image after he was cleared. The woman who answered the door was in a white lab coat and sneakers. Her red hair was pulled back and she wore blue cat-eye glasses.

She studied Simon's face, trying to place where she had seen him. She didn't recognize him as one of the few who bought her most dangerous drug a month before. "I have a terrible memory for faces, but names I can do."

From his pocket, Simon raised a black square device to the security camera and pressed a key. He quickly pushed through the door before the camera could grab his image a second time.

"Can you remind me how we know each other?"

Simon took the door from the woman, closed it and turned the latch. "Is the front open?"

"It's a bakery. Can't have a business running a bakery if we're not open. Mrs. Mulligan made a fresh batch of her special cakes, but I'm guessing you didn't come for a crumpet."

“That’s right.”

“Then we’ll go down the back stairs. Would you like a cuppie anyway? What about a heap of clotted cream in a saucer? Maybe a tea?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Is this a professional matter? Or should I be worried?”

“I think you should always be worried, Dr Colbert.”

Simon ducked under the low overhang as he circled down the spiral stairs to the floor below. The stairs skimmed shelves crammed with baking ingredients, plants, lab equipment and boxes. At the bottom, a small cluttered hallway led to a room that had the look of a greenhouse. Plants covered several long tables. They were washed in purple lights or plastic wrap or partially dug out of dirt containers. To the side was a stainless steel counter over which hung monitors, fluorescents, and shelves of beakers and tubes. A glass flask on a burner bubbled brown liquid. Books, electronics, all sorts of measuring devices, powders, and protective eyewear were spread across the stainless top.

“Explain to me how we are acquainted.” The scientist sat on her stool, adjusted goggles over her glasses and scooped a solid burnt blob out of the brown bubbling liquid. She set it in one of a dozen microwaves and pressed a pre-programmed button. “Did you buy something from me, maybe?”

Simon’s eyes took in every inch of the room, matching it with the memory he had of it. It looked the same. “How come no one’s ever shut you down?”

“Are you kidding?” The microwave beeped. “People need me. I’m not illegal. I’m actually funded. I just have more freedom to make mistakes and try things out.” Smoke

was seeping through the seal around the oven. When the woman opened the door, a billowing cloud poured into the room. Dr Colbert waved the smoke to the side.

“So no one bothers you or gives you any trouble?” said Simon.

“People do all sorts of things, but I’m probably the most agreeable scientist you will ever meet.” She smiled. “No sides. No borders. Not even any ethics. Just science and me. Eventually, folks realize my expertise might come in handy some day. Don’t want to burn any bridges, you know.” She used tongs to remove the mass from the microwave. It was dark brown and wiggly. She dropped it into a Petri dish then squirted three drops of a blue gel into its center. “You aren’t here to burn a bridge, are you?”

“No.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want one of Mrs Mulligan’s cupcakes?”

“No.”

“And nothing formal? No acquisition forms or brief case filled with cash.” She laughed. “Wouldn’t that be something? Except even the black market takes credit cards these days. I can’t recall the last time I saw paper money.”

“I need to get someone into your network.”

“My network?” The scientist looked through the goggles into Simon’s eyes. “It isn’t mine. Nothing is mine. It’s all rented and borrowed. That way I can turn on a pin.”

Simon couldn’t. He had a house, a car, bank accounts, insurance and paychecks. The more you own in the world, the more entrenched you are and the harder it becomes to relocate, to pick up and leave, to start over.

“This is important,” he confided. “The last time I was here you thought I was with a group associated with the Omega Institute. You asked me if I was with Gateway.”

“That was a bit sloppy of me.”

“Tell me what it is, how it works.”

She took in a slow breath and exhaled, smiling. “You’ll be wanting to buy some pharmaceuticals, so coming here you got it partly right.”

“What else?”

Dr Colbert put the petri dish on a shelf next to others and wiped her hands on a stained cloth. “Are we talking about a child?”

“She’s ten.”

“That’s good. Ten is a good age.”

“She was coded as an orange five. It was on her school report.”

Dr Colbert had already switched gears. She rolled her stool to a tall file cabinet. “Must be a smart little thing. Basically, she’s gone through all the testing the local schools and doctors can do and they’re concerned.”

“Why weren’t we told she was being tested?”

“Why should you be?” She pulled out a file folder and flung the drawer shut. “Not a big deal really. Not until you get to the higher security levels where you find the people who know what they’re actually looking for. All they’re saying in classifying her orange is that she has to be removed from the mainstream and get fixed.”

Simon thought of the Oxford boy. He had a vague memory of Grace talking about a girl from her class last year who was transferred to a school for athletes. She ran a mile

in 4 minutes. She said her legs were a blur as they circled up and over in a 360 rotation like a cartoon character.

“What happens to the kids when they’re moved?”

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you? You must have some level of security clearance. What’s your post?”

“Special Activities Division.”

Dr Colbert raised her eyebrows. “That’s pretty high up. You can find this out on your own, soldier.”

“I’m in the field. Phones and interactive white boards aren’t my style.”

Dr Colbert plopped the file on the table, took off the goggles, and pulled a plant out from under a fluorescent bulb. She snipped the leaves with her fingernails and placed them in a mortar. With the back of her wrist she rubbed at a tickle on her upper lip, then pushed her glasses to her face with the heel of her hand.

“On the surface, these classifications have come through the New Council on Educational Reform,” she said. “Further into the ranks, it’s a procedure outlined by the World Security Council, and it’s pretty secretive for being a stamp on a school report. If you notice, the news agencies don’t touch it. It’s usually pretty simple. A kid gets transferred to a better school on the Council’s dime. When families go along with it, everything’s cool. If a parent makes an inquiry to the school board, however, they’re given the run-around while the authorities use the time to get the kid out of the community and tagged as a runaway. Those tagged one through four return home. The fives get a new clan to grow up in.”

Simon ran his fingers through his hair.

“No fret,” she continued. “I’m telling you this so you know the organization of this procedure includes law enforcement, Inter-Regional Security, Media and even field ops when it gets heavy. It’s all for the good of the kid and the future of the country. Win-win; except for the feckin shit the original parents have to deal with. But I hear the State tries to make up for it in their own little ways.” She smiled broadly. “It’s actually a good thing, all this.”

She readied another specimen out of the bubbling beaker for the microwave and pounded the leaves in the mortar with a pestle.

“You’ve got a lot going on here, Doctor.”

“Most of it’s top secret, they tell me. The leaves in the mortar are for tea.” She wiggled the second scooping of the brown glop prepped for the microwave and sniffed it. “You wouldn’t want to confuse this with orange pekoe, however.” She slipped it into the oven. “I actually have more to do with the kids than I’d like.”

“Why do they take them away?”

“Some of them are encouraged in their specialties. Most are just de-programmed and acclimated.”

“What are they de-programmed from?”

“Alternative functioning.”

“Alternative?”

She filled a beaker with clear water and set it to boil next to the one filled with what looked like swamp mud. “How is your girl in math?”

“Average. We hire a tutor when she needs it.”

“Languages?”

“She speaks English. A little French. I – I don’t see her too much.”

“She has to have something more than that going for her. It takes a year or two to work with these kids and it costs a few hundred thousand pounds for the reprogramming. It’s not a cost they take on just because someone has a high IQ and above average academic test scores. How about transcendence or metamorphosis?”

“I’m not following you.”

“Can she read your mind? Start a fire with her eyes?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You really don’t know her very well.”

Simon wasn’t sure if the doctor was kidding or being serious. He thought that he would know if his kid could pull a rabbit out of a hat, even if he did work overtime.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Most parents are okay with the State looking after their children. That way they know they’ll be safe. They’ll turn out normal, be given a good life and an education, and they’ll be alive. Parents want what’s best for their kid and by letting go of the selfish notion that the kid is theirs, they do the right thing.”

“Look Dr Colbert, I know full well that if I go along with this, if my daughter goes into one of their programs, she won’t come home for spring break.”

“If you give her over to Gateway, she won’t come back either. This child is dead to you either way. Certainly a man with your connections would have a better chance



keeping up with a kid who's in the system. Renegades in the field can be pretty unruly. They're already committing a crime; one more is nothing to them."

He wanted to know more. "If they stay in the government system, and after they fix these kids --"

Dr Colbert interrupted, "You mean reprogram them."

Simon was growing agitated. "Whatever you call it. Why aren't they given back to their families?"

"The experts aren't sure what causes the children to be so individual. Nature or nurture -- the same dispute over and over. They figure there's no sense putting them back into the environment that set them off to begin with. The training they get is mostly behavioral conditioning with some chemical enhancements. It can all be for naught if their memories are triggered and they fall back to familiar relationships, surroundings and routines."

"Is that what you do -- provide the chemicals?"

"Me? Not all by myself. Some of the laboratories are a hell of a lot more funded than this. Mostly in countries where it's nationalized. When nothing is privatized -- not the medicine, education, or media, the government has more control and they know what they're doing. Their research, production and distribution is official so it's all appropriated and approved. I'm on the outskirts, soldier. You know that."

Dr Colbert's left hand grabbed a packet of chemical sweetener from the shelf while her right hand pressed a few buttons on the microwave. "Do you mind turning the flame down on the burner?" she asked.

“What are you cooking here? It looks like a bad cup of coffee.”

“Epigenetics. Manipulation of DNA footprints.” She pressed the start button and listened for the comforting hum of radioactive heat. “I just put a cat in there.”

She laughed at Simon’s quizzical wince. “Her DNA. She’s a fantastic hunter. Reflexes that defy the time/space continuum.” The oven beeped. “How’s your girl on reflexes?”

Simon had to think about it. When was the last time he saw Grace catch a ball? Keep a glass from spilling at dinner? Do anything that seemed out of the ordinary? “Like I said, she’s fairly average, Dr Colbert.” He couldn’t recall anything special about her. “She’s smart in her own way. She has a lot of friends, the lead in the school play. She likes to draw.”

“There’s a fair amount of testing before they’re coded. Psychological, biological.”

The seconds continued longer than on the first round of baking, causing a small explosion that created a spark inside the microwave. Brown glop splashed onto the oven window and a small fire was visible inside. Dr Colbert took a tiny fire extinguisher, the size of a coke bottle, from under the counter without pausing her explanation.

“Those new immunizations they’ve been requiring parents to get before the school year aren’t really immunizations, you know. The labs are doing blood work and protein analysis. From the results, some of the kids are marked for observation and psychological evaluation. Next they look at their DNA and do brain scans. No one’s coded until they’re pretty sure the life of the kid and his family has to be adjusted. The government isn’t evil. They’re doing their job. Looking out for the best.”

“How do they keep the children from wanting to go home?”

“Their memories are wiped clean.” Dr Colbert sprayed the inside of the oven with a cleaner and began wiping the cat’s hunting chromosomes and the nitrogen foam off the glass. She nodded towards the refrigerators. “You see the tubes in the third fridge? The ones with the amber serum?”

Simon walked to the case where a release form was incased in a plastic sleeve and attached to the door.

“It works well on the ones with an orange designation and kids that are normal. Not so good on other kids.”

Simon wondered who she meant.

“For the orange and normal ones, the serum goes directly into the hippocampus. They don’t remember anything of their previous life. Sort of like giving them a shot of amnesia.”

“Too bad you don’t have the same thing for the families.”

“Yes, that’s a bit of an awkward side affect for the parents — heartbreak over a missing offspring and all. The kids themselves do fine. They’re usually sent to another country to start things fresh. It’s like they’re completely re-born. They don’t look the same. Don’t talk the same. Their own mum wouldn’t recognize them if they were swinging side-by-side on the playground. It works out. The kids fit in with the rest of us out here. If you put this child into Gateway there are no assurances of anything. If you let government do its job, take her to one of the centers, they’ll watch her and take responsibility for her.”

“For the rest of her life.”

Dr Colbert smiled. “For someone in the military I’m surprised you have such a high regard for personal freedom.”

“It seems you do as well.”

“Which is why I work in the basement of a bakery making off brand drugs that aren’t MCA approved.” She threw the brown cloth smeared with the cat’s DNA into the trash and poured the tea water into a china cup. She wrapped the leaves in cheese cloth, tied the gathering with a string and dropped it into the steaming water. “I support individual choice and the free enterprise system.”

Simon wondered if the woman knew that the needle and blue serum he bought from her a few weeks ago was used to kill a boy. Was that part of her allegiance to free enterprise? The freedom to make an illegal drug and to sell it; the freedom for someone to buy something that was intentionally created to end a life, to murder a boy.

“When you do something for someone, like sell them a chemical or put a kid into the network, how can you be sure their intentions are well meant?”

“I don’t think judging intentions is my responsibility.” She poured the sugar additive into the tea, swirling it into a tiny whirlpool. “I’m getting mixed signals from you.”

“You can do a lot of harm from all the stuff in this little room of yours. I’m looking for your moral compass.”

“You think I should have one? You think I’m equipped to have opinions on someone’s actions? Why would I do that? Adolph Hitler started out as Man of the Year.

Mr Rockefeller is a philanthropist who funded sterilization projects and a secret biogenetic de-population experiment in Africa. There's a list circulating out in the world. What is now statutory rape used to be status quo. Cannibalism – a way to eat. Human sacrifice. Incest. Atomic bombs. Selling a country weapons one year then declaring war against them the next. Your soldiers killed by your weapons. Just because something isn't considered to be ethical in one place at a single moment in time, who am I to place on it an objective and timeless moral standard? You ever read the Old Testament? Why do you think God's moral compass was so screwed up? Cause there's no such thing. Right and wrong is for society, not you and me." She watched the spiraling tea form a hole in its center.

"But when people die as a result of your actions, Dr Colbert –"

"What kind of soldier are you?" She paused "You should go. If you aren't going to purchase anything, I have work to do."

"I'm talking out of line. I'm here to do business with you. I've already made this decision, Dr Colbert."

She opened the file, which wasn't as top secret as it should have been. There were coffee stains or perhaps chromosome stains on the pages that listed numerical references and symbols. She sipped her tea.

"You still want to go through with this?"

"Yes."

"Even though it would be easier to let the government take responsibility for her?"

“I didn’t ask for easy.”

“It’s going to take a few minutes,” she said. “Explore if you’d like.”

She rummaged through a pile of cell phones strewn amongst the beakers, electronics, and stainless tools on the shelf. Simon returned to the refrigerators. He scanned the labels on the serums. He hadn’t paid enough attention the first time he was there.

“What’s the procedure?” He was looking for a long thin vial filled with the blue liquid that matched the one he laid on the front seat of the black vehicle. A shrill sound came into his head, a familiar one he heard over and over. The sound of the kid’s stick splitting against the rock. Then a flash of the boy’s eyes. Grace’s eyes. He wondered if the boy had seen the same things as his daughter. She didn’t worry about the polar caps melting and the environmental news reports claiming there were fewer polar bears. She said there were the same number as there had always been. The bears just weren’t in the places where the scientists were looking. It was the same with the bees, she told him. Simon wondered what the boy had thought about the number of bees.

Simon knew Grace saw things about the world that others didn’t. There was something in the small comments she made and the look she gave things that made him think that she had seen the universe before the big bang, that she had seen the world when it was a singular black point exploding into whiteness and stars. It was the same with the boy. If only he hadn’t stood so close to him and had hung back by the van. None of the others spoke to the kid. But when he did, he understood that he set into motion every action and thought that led him to that very morning with Dr Colbert; that prompted him

to wander to the refrigerators and to find the vial of blue that he bought a few weeks before with twenty thousand pounds of government money.

It wasn't the orange five on his daughter's school report that bothered him. Wherever they would send her, he could find her. She could go into the system, be transferred and re-programmed, and he could still figure out how to be part of her life. He was in the basement of the bakery that day, making plans to turn Grace over to strangers because he knew that someday, another field op – perhaps four of them, would find her. She would be playing or studying. One would hold her frail arm, while another would inject it with a blue serum then throw her out a window or over a cliff. In the system, Grace had no chance.

There were two thin single tubes in the only refrigerator without a light. They sat in a plain tray, blue and cold like the air around them. The door was locked.

“What's in here?” He jostled the door.

Dr Colbert dropped one of the phones into her teacup. “Damn-it.” She looked at Simon standing by the darkened fridge. The angle of his face with the darkness of the fridge behind him triggered her memory. She remembered that he had already been there. She shook the sweetener and tea from the phone.

Simon's hand was on the door's handle.

She watched him and flipped through the previous introductions lying dormant in her memory's files until she got to his name. “Lieutenant Hayes, right?”

“What's in these vials?”

“They really don't tell you soldiers anything. It's for kids coded purple. It

wouldn't show up on a school report. Not many of the high-ups in Education Reform know about it."

"What does the purple designation mean?"

"That the person is better off out of the mainstream. Too much of a security risk. They don't make the call in the regular schools which is why it doesn't come up on school reports except once in a blue moon." She laughed at her pun. "That's funny isn't it?"

"How does someone get labeled?"

"A very small number of those being reconditioned come close, you understand. When someone's tagged as purple, they're sometimes moved to a military school. But not always. Sometimes they're just --" She shrugged her shoulders, "you know."

"What does the serum do?"

"It zaps out everything. Pretty much explodes the mental processes and lights everything up. We capture what it does to the cells and proteins through a blood sample taken when the recipient is in survival mode and at the split second between life and death."

"Who authorizes it?"

"A few weeks ago, you did."

She was right. He had come alone, dressed not like himself. He had identification, an authorization document and money. He hardly spoke a word. Most of the conversation came from Dr Colbert who had promised Mrs Mulligan that she could reverse engineer her latest baked good to determine to the morsel, every drop and pinch of ingredient. The



pharmacist was thoroughly engaged in the task which wasn't so much a test of skill as it was a way to reconstruct a recipe that had fallen out of the baker's apron pocket and flushed down the commode. Simon was ordered to purchase the vial and deliver it to a woman at the Carlisle train station by noon. It wasn't until Simon had placed the vial in the silver box on the front seat of the woman's SUV that he became more involved. "It wasn't supposed to be my assignment," he confessed to Dr Colbert.

"Isn't the world a grand place? So many coincidences. If you hadn't come here then, you wouldn't be here now. I'd say that was convenient."

Simon wiped the condensation off the dark glass and looked again at the two vials that stood so still and alone as if they knew their purpose. Like so many things throughout history – the blade on the guillotine, the knot in the noose, the switch on the electric chair. The molecules in the serum that floated heavily like molten had one thing to do – one simple and basic purpose. "You have a strange job, Dr Colbert."

"So do you."

She took another phone from the shelf, one of the older models with a pink cover and jeweled stick-ons. She keyed in one of the sets of numbers from the file and followed it with a few text lines of symbols and hieroglyphics.

The phone lit up and responded with a five-note spaceship theme from an old science fiction movie that Simon couldn't quite place. Dr Colbert read the screen and smiled. "Everyone's a comedian, even when we're breaking apart families and erasing lives." She removed a chip taped to the paper next to the number sequence, and she inserted it into the phone.

“Do you understand the costs? Specifically the monetary one?”

“I think so.”

“The first thing you’ll receive is a bank routing number which will be every other digit on the display in reverse order.”

“What is the exact cost?”

“Think of it as a university education.”

“They move the money immediately and delete the account.” She pressed the phone into his palm. “If this is going to happen, it will happen today or not at all.”

“Today?”

“After you send the money, you’ll download an obscure song by a band named Lost Soul. It’s how you’ll get the rest of your instructions.”

“From a song?”

She handed him one of the vials with the amber liquid. “This is the tricky part, Lieutenant. It’s all about timing. It’s what our government would’ve given her once she was transferred to a new school. The amber serum you need to give her is called Lethelyn and it’s designed to make her sleepy 30 minutes after it’s injected. Before she falls asleep, she still has her current life and you. Afterwards, both will be gone. She needs to be on her way to her new placement, you understand. Seeing you after she goes under will keep her memory intact. Usually she’ll start off via train or sometimes by way of water. There will be a string of contacts who will meet up with her and move her around. You can’t follow her. If anyone in the stream thinks the route has been compromised, they’ll abandon her. Everything about her.”

Dr Colbert prepared a package with a syringe, cotton and antiseptic. “Once you do this, you have to convince yourself she’s dead. Do you understand that? The girl is dead.”

Simon wondered if the compartments in his head would work for a daughter. Could he separate from her that easily? There would be no blaming the education system or Inter-Regional Security or Dr Colbert. None of them could be held responsible. He considered for a moment if he could live with himself and wake every morning knowing that it was his decision alone to never see her again?

He turned from the refrigerators and took the plastic bag with the syringe and antiseptic.

## V.

### THE TRAIN RIDE

Simon's daughter was asleep when the conductor tapped her shoulder. He tapped again. "It's the end of the line for you, miss."

She hardly moved, not even to brush his hand away. Only her chest very slightly expanded and released. There were three other passengers and all of them were asleep, soothed by the quiet countryside whizzing passed the windows, by the slight arc to the right or left as the train followed the tracks. It encouraged a half sleep where dreams had to do with moving, running under a soft afternoon sun, and the warmth of pink lights rushing across closed eyelids then fading. It was a fast train that went on and on. It knew only of the tracks that carried it forward; knew nothing of the scenery that blurred in its peripheral, knew nothing of where it had been. Its existence was in the moment. The smells came and went in blasts like the opening of a refrigerator. The train barreled through pastures of dung, meadows of heather, farms of chickens. It passed through the smells of industry, poverty, civilization. Over bridges that were connected more to the sky than to the earth. The train went for miles through the entire country of England. Through Northampton, Manchester and Glasgow. Fishermen in boats at low tide. Old stone tunnels. Hills covered with wind turbines. Thatched roofs, depots, chimneys. Rain.

"You've got to get off at the next stop, miss." The Guard's index finger jabbed again. And again, the girl didn't move.

The train barreled into and out of a tunnel. A few seats away, a young woman blinked her eyes open. “Are you trying to wake her?”

“It’s her stop.”

“She’s alone then?”

“Irresponsible if you ask me. Even if she is visiting an aunt or a slew of cousins, it shouldn’t be my responsibility, don’t you think? They’re trying to pass a law, but they’re so bloody idle about it. Like I took this post to be a nanny.” He looked into the young girl’s sleeping face. “Come on, now.” But because she wasn’t really causing the conductor any aggravation his tone turned charitable. “Half of em are runaways, you know.”

“Is she?”

“They got her stamped.”

The woman crinkled her brow as if reducing the space in her temple would help her understand what *stamped* meant.

“They interviewed her at the station when she was likely with someone from her family. They put a stamp on her hand so I don’t have to think about identifying whoever she is to Regional Security when they come around asking.”

The woman straightened up and rubbed her palm over her cheek hoping it would freshen her skin. She took a clip from the pocket of her coat and pulled her hair back. A few wavy strands hung free. “It wasn’t like this when we were young.”

“Some of it was. We sure enough had the rail when we were young. First got it in 1837. Well before my time.”

The woman shifted in her seat and leaned forward. “I meant it wasn’t so frightening. Folks like us breathing down a young girl’s neck every minute, asking for passes and stamps and papers.”

“Only doing what I’m told and hoping it helps keep the country from running amuck and falling into the wrong hands. All this hollering about rights and freedoms when it don’t matter a poke if we’re blown to smithereens.”

“I suppose you got to be on edge working in transportation.”

“It’s what they’re blowing up, you know, which is why we don’t make all the stops we used to. We’re cutting out this route next month.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“That’s the ruling, miss. Only making runs between the secure communities. You can tell the difference. Passengers that get on and off in the ordained towns know their manners, so it’s okay with me to keep it between the planned sectors.”

“Does that mean you won’t be going beyond the main arteries anymore?”

“That’s a good thing, miss.” He bent down to study the girl’s eyelids. “I think she’s on a drug.”

“I believe I’m getting off at her stop. I’ll make sure she don’t miss it.”

The conductor nodded his head and moved on. The girl felt the woman slide into the seat next to her. Her breath touched the girl’s cheek. Her words tickled her ears. She smiled, snuggling into the warmth of the stranger. Her eyes still closed, she imagined her mother though no face came with the image. It was unsettling and she began to stir out of her deep sleep. The girl’s hand rubbed her eyes open. She didn’t recognize the woman

that was next to her. She had never seen her before, not even in a dream. The girl wanted to pull back, but the woman had a tight hold on the top of her arm.

“Shhh,” she said. “The train guard was concerned you’d miss your stop.” The woman moved the girl’s hair to the side of her face and gave her space.

“What stop?” asked the girl.

“Are you visiting your aunt maybe?”

“My aunt?”

The bleary voice on the loudspeaker let every third syllable escape into the jostling of frequencies. “Next -- at -- form – and on to --drum -- chy – orrur ...”

“I told him I’d help you. We’re at the start of the outer district. Do you have any bags?”

The girl had a flash of someone putting a train ticket and a slip of paper in her palm. He was a large man in blue medical scrubs with a nervous smile. He placed a satchel in her grasp and told her very carefully, “You’re seeing your Aunt. Your stop is third in the upper district. It’s on this paper. Everything you need to know.” He called her Tyllah.

“That’s right,” she repeated to the woman. “I have a bag.”

“Then it’s probably up top.” It was a large purse with paisley swirls of dull purple and orange. “Is that all?”

The girl smiled. She wasn’t sure. The train pulled into the station where it glided to a stop. She fell into the glass, hardly keeping her balance. The woman, who had a hard enough time managing her own luggage, helped her to the door.

“You remind me of when I first took up ice skating,” the woman said.

She had a large suitcase that looked like it had been through a bombing. She also managed a small tote and a box wrapped in cord for a handle. She never wore more than two inch plain heels, but the bulk from the luggage, box and girl made dismounting the train awkward. The train guard was nowhere in sight so she tossed the suitcases down the steps to the platform. She shifted the box and their purses to one side leaving an arm free to guide the girl a step at a time off the train.

“I just come from seeing my sister in the city,” said the woman. “I’m headed to my house in Alder.”

“I’m seeing my aunt, ” said the girl. She checked the piece of paper in her pocket. “My aunt also lives in Alder.”

“Does she?” The woman looped the paisley purse over the girl’s arm. “Does that paper you’ve got there tell you the name of your aunt?”

“Yes, mam. Her name is Clarisse Keenan.”

“Is it? Well then. I suppose I ought to offer you a ride.”

“Do you know her?”

“Yes, dear. It’s me. You must be Tyllah.”

The name didn’t feel familiar enough to Grace for it to be hers, but she shook her head yes just the same.



## VI.

### Aunt and Uncle in Alder

Eliot Keenan was limping from the detached garage to the double story stone manor house when Clarisse and Tyllah wove round the circular drive in a Suzuki hatchback that had seen better days. The house was far nicer than the automobile, an observation that pleased Tyllah who thought that if the pattering hour-long drive was an indication of her Aunt's interest in material possessions, the house was bound to be a hovel and the lawn a mere patch. While the house didn't have flower boxes or a garden, there were three chimneys and clinging ivy, and it was one of a dozen in the entire district with slate roof tiles, a small pond, and a copper-cock weathervane. Compared to the rest of the village, the house and yard were quite large. Most especially on the large side was the front door which was painted bright blue with a knocker in the shape of a centaur's head. Tyllah wondered why she was able to remember a mythological story about a group of Centaurs who got drunk at a wedding, yet she couldn't remember anything about her life. She noticed that only the head of the beast was carved into the center of the wooden ring, so someone else could mistake the knocker to be that of a man's head, but since no one would think of having a man's head carved into their door, Tyllah believed that it had to be a centaur's head.

The limping man crossed the driveway in front of the car. He was thin and caramel colored. He wore black-framed glasses, a bow tie and a shirt with a pocket

protector that was loaded with pens. Held close to his chest was a stack of books balanced on a clipboard with a calculator teetering on top. The car shook a few times before hissing into silence which is likely what set off the chain of events that caused a book to slide out from the middle of the man's pile, and in bending to pick it up, the pens in the protector scattered across the path.

"Is that your husband?" giggled Tyllah.

The man stooped to gather his things.

"Not a good first impression, is it?" Clarisse deposited the keys in her purse.

"He's not always that awkward. It's not like one leg is shorter than the other or anything. He gets clumsy and develops a limp when he's stressed, like when he has a deadline coming up. It's a compulsive disorder, and it comes and goes. Nothing serious." Clarisse patted Tyllah's thigh. "You'll like him. He's very sweet."

"No. It's not that. It's just that during the drive I was wondering if you were really my Aunt."

"Not your Aunt? Were you thinking that I wasn't telling the truth, that I might be kidnapping you or something? You poor darling. Why wouldn't I be your Aunt?"

"Because you're younger than I imagine Aunts to be, and you're – you know."

"White?"

"Whiter than I am."

"Ahh. So now you understand after getting a good look at my Mr Keenan. We're related by marriage, you and me. But it doesn't mean we won't get to loving one another as if we had the same blood."

Tyllah rubbed her temple.

“You okay, honey?”

“I wish I could remember is all.”

“From what the doctors said, being discharged with a bad memory is the best thing that could’ve happened to you. It was a terrible explosion, dear. You were in the hospital for over a month.”

“But –“

Clarisse patted the girl’s thigh a second time.

“Come on. I’ll make us some tea. You can meet your Uncle Eliot.” She became serious for a moment. “It’s sort of unfortunate that it takes a tragedy like this for us all to finally get together.”

“I know I should know this, Aunt Clarisse, but I wonder if you could remind me which one of my parents is related to -- ”

Clarisse interrupted her with a consoling smile “was related to.”

“Oh, yes.” Tyllah rummaged through sections in her brain -- sights, smells, a memory of what her mother’s hug felt like, how her father laughed. Maybe a toy or a swing. But there was nothing. Not a glimmer, not even a sense that there might be something that would one day surface in a dream or a déjà vu. Occasionally there’d be a flicker in her mind, of herself in a bed, of a man standing over her, of someone feeding her, of traveling. She had images of trees blurring past car windows, of trains racing through moonlit nights. There was something very small and hazy that looked like a

bright sun against a white sky, then the smell of fish and the sound of sails flapping, casting shadows, her face cold.

Clarisse opened Tyllah's car door.

"Am I supposed to see a counselor or something?"

Her Aunt offered her hand to help her out. "Why would you do something like that?"

"I don't understand how I can be sad that my parents are dead if I don't remember anything about them."

"It'll be all right in time, dear."

Inside the bright open kitchen, Clarisse uncovered a glass dish of scones and poured three cups of tea. Eliot Keenan, who Tyllah thought shouldn't be blamed for being awkward since having such a name would trigger an awkward personality in anyone, creased a smile three times at his new niece while entering numbers into a calculator with the eraser end of a pencil.

"Your Uncle is working on an important project for the government. He's the Administrator of Inter-Regional Numbers."

"I didn't know there was such a thing," said Tyllah.

"Your Uncle is a statistician. He was actually born with the ability to consolidate any situation into a statistic. Once, when he was six years of age, he ran to the playground at school with several of his classmates, and he says that he stopped himself in mid-gallop because he experienced an epiphany."

“I remember it to this day, Delilah,” said the thin man dabbing at jam in the corners of his mouth.

His wife corrected him. “Her name is Tyllah.”

Eliot formed an apology by creasing his mouth into a quick smile.

“It’s all right,” the girl said. “My memory’s probably worse than yours.”

“Well, Tyllah,” he began again with enthusiasm. “I stood at the edge of the playground while a remarkable thing happened. It was a sudden thing that happened, you understand. It was an epiphany.”

“I said that, dear.”

“It’s a good word for it, Clarisse. While I was standing there on the edge of the lawn I looked out and didn’t see swings and teeter-tots and slides. What I saw was a bombardment of statistical pie charts, histograms and line plots.”

Tyllah giggled. “You mean you saw charts and graphs running about on the playground?”

“It was a fascinating experience. There were numbers and percentages and bell curves and triangular pie shapes. I watched my friends running around the playground and the numbers came to me, shot out at me from under the slide, exploding from out of the sand box, encircling the jungle gym. Forty-three percent of the kids ran to the swings. Out of those, 96 percent were female, and only 12 percent brunette. 79 percent of the males held sticks. 26 percent were in a constant state of running and 3 percent played alone.”

“Your uncle was six when that happened, and he even calculated a margin of error.”

“Fourteen percent, which was mostly due to the fact that I couldn’t decide whether or not I should be included as a participant in the analysis.”

“Isn’t it the most mathematical thing you ever heard.”

“I did the same thing on several concurrent days with other classes.”

Aunt Clarisse poured more tea. “But that’s not the strangest part of it, Tyllah.”

“No indeed,” said her uncle. “When I compared the results, I realized that even as the participants in each activity changed from day to day and from class to class, the percentages did not.”

Clarisse gave him a kiss. “He’s a real genius. Good thing he isn’t a boy nowadays, though. They’d have him stamped some orange this or that like they do all the kids who’ve got something going on.”

Tyllah took in Clarisse’s words with little thought.

“By the time your uncle was 15, he had accumulated over 26 thousand pages of statistical data on all kinds of human behavior.”

“My university studies were in regression model matrix statistics, and by the time I met your Aunt, who was working on the Educational Reform Project . . . “

“Terrible idea that was,” Clarisse interrupted

“. . . I was hired by the Numbers council.”

“Would you like some apricot marmalade with your biscuit?”

Tyllah looked around the kitchen. Yellow flower curtains hung from the window, a skirt covered the area under the sink, and the wood cabinetry was painted white. It looked like a home that belonged to an Aunt and Uncle. “Do I have any cousins?” she asked.

“Your Uncle and I let that part slip right out from under our noses. We love kids, though. Yes, we must have had six or seven come in and out of our doors over the past several years.”

“From where?”

“The city mostly. There’s a school nearby so you’ll have some friends of your own age in no time. I teach home economics classes.”

“What’s that?”

“Cooking, sewing, and home decorating. You don’t find it in the cities.”

“Will I be able to go to school, Aunt Clarisse?”

“Of course, dear.”

“I hope I don’t have to start all over. Do you think we could make sure I still know things like dividing fractions?”

“Your Uncle would be the one for that, but I’m sure your intellect is just fine and dandy.”

Tyllah asked if she could recuperate a little longer before going into a classroom. She wanted to make sure that she could count, read compound sentences and write in cursive.

She did just fine according to the parish's 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Noel Dunn, who Clarisse had hired as a tutor to boost Tyllah's confidence. On a subsequent Monday, which was three months after Tyllah began her new life, she rode a yellow bicycle with a basket and bell to school. She had practiced the two-mile journey for several weeks at the exact hour of recess so she could get familiar with how the kids grouped themselves. She wasn't as nervous as she thought she'd be. She already knew her teacher and had figured out which kids to stay clear of and which she would probably have as friends. She even picked out the kid who would probably be her best friend. His name was Kyrrick Loudin.



## VII. INTER-REGIONAL SECURITY

Paul Dugan's office had been the same for the 5 years that he was Simon's boss and for the ten before that. The only parts of the interior that changed were the names on the folders, the view out the large double paned window and the top of his head which, because he worked so close to the surface of his desk, was how his coworkers tracked the number of years he had until retirement. In just the five years that Simon worked for the 6-foot-7 Special Air Service Colonel he watched the shiny spot in the center of his commanding officer's head widen from the size of a quarter to that of a coffee mug. The rest of his hair fell loose and thin over his ears. He didn't have the look of a typical intelligence officer. He wore John Lennon issue orange-tinted glasses, and had his own uniform – all black with a vintage black vest from the seventies, a black t-shirt, and black socks and sandals. He was an amalgamation of flower child and assassin. He didn't socialize with anyone in the department. He had no family, one distant acquaintance, and a woman he occasionally met at a pub in Hillsdale, one of the border communities.

His past was just as stark. From what Simon could piece together, his boss grew up on the streets of Liverpool until he joined the army at the age of 15, having lied about his age. He was known for blowing things up in North Korea and running a terrorist ring as a cover in Iraq. Most annoying to Simon, however, was that his commanding officer spoke in crossword puzzle vocabulary, like when he mumbled at the watercooler that “the Ministry of Defense had a fatuous mania to foster crisis-management as an adjunct to the

military's fundamental utility." It was clear to Simon that the man didn't have a soft spot, which is why he rarely went to his office.

A long series of seconds after Simon knocked, Dugan pressed the button under his desk that unlatched the steel door. It slid open and clanked into place. Simon stepped through the wide opening, immediately noticing that the circle on the top of his commander's head was shinier than usual. He looked to the bright light on the ceiling.

"You want to see me, Sir?"

"Not particularly, Lieutenant, but it doesn't look like I have a choice."

The door stayed open. Dugan sat back in his chair and pushed his orange glasses to the bridge of his nose. It was rare to see his face. "Your anachronistic efforts to undermine our country's initiatives are pernicious."

Simon glanced out the window to a clean London skyline with its new glass architecture, and its bright green trees and crystalline parks set on rooftops and levels midway up skyscrapers.

"You don't know what you're doing, Lieutenant. More precisely, you're a dullard for doing it in my line of sight."

Between the silver arc framing the World Finance Complex and the dark cast made by the massive Sustainability Tri-hold, Simon thought he caught a glimpse of the mint green Caribbean washing over the streets like it did against his villa the day he picked Ruth's photo from the hat. The gin was cool that day, and the air was still.

"I've had a tough few months, Colonel, and I've completed all my assignments on schedule. I don't know where I've let you down."

Dugan pressed the switch under his desk and watched the large door slowly shut tight.

“Why haven’t you screwed up your assignments, Hayes?”

“What?”

“You’re indefectible. Dotting your I’s and crossing your T’s.”

“I’m good at what I do, sir.”

“Internal Security reported that your productivity increased as a result of your need to escape the trauma over your daughter’s disappearance.”

The words Internal Security hung in his head. “You had me investigated?”

“You squeaked through, soldier, but I’m not buying their conclusions.”

“Why did you have me investigated?”

“Talk to me about Gateway.”

Simon paused. “Me? I know less than you, sir. I’m not cleared for that level of intelligence.”

“Like the underground railroad in America isn’t it?”

“How would I know?”

“Everything is at your fingertips, Simon.” Dugan opened a folder containing photographs. He scattered them on the desk.

The only one Simon recognized was Grace. She was in a bright blue dress. It was taken at the school rehearsal the day she disappeared three months earlier. Simon picked up the photo that had been enlarged to an 8 by 10, and he smiled at her smile as if she could see him. His hand brushed over her face and touched her eyes; only the sensation

of a slick two-dimensional surface was returned. There was nothing about the last few minutes he had with her that he didn't remember. The case file had most of it. When play rehearsal was done, Grace Evelyn Hayes never made it to the car where her Dad was waiting to take her for ice cream. He waited in his car until everyone had cleared out of the school then went into the empty building to ask her teacher, who was turning out the lights in the auditorium, where his daughter was.

“She left with the rest of the kids. Was one of the first out the door as she told us her Dad was home this week. She had a great rehearsal; knew all her lines, and had a big happy grin on her face. But you should know it's nothing new, Mr Hayes. You should be proud of her.”

It was the same smile as in the photo. It beamed across her face when she walked towards his car and even when he opened the boot to put in her rucksack. It only lost its sparkle when he slipped a cloth of chloroform over her mouth so he could slide her quietly into the back. The maneuver was so fast and smooth that not even the girl walking with her knew what happened.

“Hello Agnes,” Simon had called to his daughter's friend. “Where's Gracie?”

“She's –“ Agnes looked puzzled. “She was right next to me, Mr Hayes.”

“Did she go back inside? Maybe to use the restroom?”

“We walked out together. I could've sworn I was just talking to her.”

“I saw you two side by side on the other side of that oak tree.”

Agnes squinted at the tree. “She must've gone back in I suppose.”

“Was it a good rehearsal?”

“Oh. Super. The show’s on Friday. You’ll love it.”

“Of course I will. You tell your parents hi from me.”

“Yes. I will. Cheers.”

The police interviewed Agnes so many times that the same explanation that made her sob and shake in the first weeks, left her in a catatonic stupor three months later. The last time people had seen Grace – Agnes, her teacher, Simon, the school janitor, the other parents picking up their little actors and actresses -- they said she was happy and talkative. There wasn’t a broken twig, a tire mark, or even a footprint to indicate any possibility other than that she vanished. Just completely disappeared. Simon went into high gear as a father trained in Special Forces recognizance and combat. He was demanding in the investigation and he obsessed over minute details, which enabled him to deflect the remotest of clues. During those weeks after his daughter’s disappearance he believed Dr Colbert was right. Grace was dead. He felt it so deep in every part of him that he cried when he was alone. He was angry when he was with others. He was anxious, determined and often distracted. He was like an actor in the role of Hamlet. There was nothing he would have done differently if she had actually so oddly disappeared, which is why he was cleared by Internal Security.

Dugan slid a second 8 by 10 his way. It was a small boy, about 4 or 5. “This boy was at Gatwick on the late flight from Brussels on March 7<sup>th</sup>.”

Simon looked at the print, thinking he must have been the boy in the stroller at baggage claim. “I didn’t get a look at him. He was with his mother.”

“She wasn’t his real mother. Just part of his transportation route.”

Under the picture of the young boy was another. Simon recognized the kid's eyes.

Dugan didn't need to analyze Simon's reactions. Both were too professional to let anything out, and Dugan already had his underling pegged. He pulled the photo of the boy from Alder to the top. "February. You remember this one. It was supposed to be on Nelson's detail, but the twit wound up dead in Punjab so I gave the errand to you."

Simon ignored it and flipped through the others strewn across the desk. "Who are the rest of these?"

"They're filed as runaways, but for most of them it's not their doing. Some of them are dead."

"Did we do that?"

Dugan heard a rebellious intonation. He opened another file and took out a stack of forms; each had a thumbnail print of a face in the upper right corner. Grace was on top. The boy from the airport was next. His name was Peter Mitchell. On the left was a classified stamp, and centered across the bottom was an orange five; the same that was on Grace's quarterly school report.

"You ever seen these before?"

"No."

"What about the symbol here at the bottom?"

"I don't work this stuff, Paul. Why are you pushing this? Is this an assignment? Background for something?"

Dugan leaned forward and spoke as if making an accusation. "Talk to me about the pharmacist where you bought the serum for the Loudin kid."

Simon took in a deliberate breath. “You’re the one who sent me.” He stepped back from Dugan’s heavy breath. “I don’t know anyone named Loudin.”

“The boy you threw off the hill.”

Simon breathed audibly a second time. He knew Dugan was testing him. “You are aware, sir, that we live in a world where the agencies we work for move people around, civilians – without their permission. And sometimes they kill them.”

“Governments have always killed people. You have a duty and an oath, Lieutenant Hayes.”

“Not to that kind of an authority.”

“So you have an opinion on which government procedures should be followed and which not?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Insubordination turns quickly to treason.”

“You have the wrong man here.”

“You crossed me. You went out on your own and outside the parameters.”

“Do you even know who’s above us, who we’re reporting to? Who paid for the glass and steel out there? The new education? The new environment? The new infrastructures? This isn’t the world I grew up in.”

“Yes it is.”

“This is not what I signed up for.”

“You signed up to serve this country, to follow orders, and not to second guess the motives of the people who know more than you do. You are to protect and serve.

That's what you signed up for and nothing about that has changed. If you run solo here, ever, you're in a bad place, doing a dangerous thing."

"You authorize the purchase of illegal pharmaceuticals that aren't on any list."

Dugan stood. "You're putting lives at stake. Grace is one of them." He turned from his desk and leaned his outstretched arm against the glass window. His upper body was as muscular as it had been when he was in the service. He could bench 350 pounds and did 150 pushups a day on top of kitchen chairs. His view of the city wasn't the same as Simon's. His eyes shot past the Thames and the new city skyline to where sleek bridges cut through buildings then arched high over old gray trestles that lowered into the flats of the warehouse district.

"You're not a hero, Hayes. You need to think of these kids as weapons."

"They're not."

"Under the right conditions. With certain training. The boy Peter, at four years of age, he can understand 15 languages and speak 4 of them."

"Kids that age hardly do one."

"There's a girl in that stack. She can simultaneously process multiple conversations at distances up to 45 feet around her. She recalls every word."

Simon watched Dugan study the darkness at the edge of town.

"Some of them have photographic memories, and not only for documents. Complicated locations like The Louvre and Palace Square at St Petersburg. We just recovered a 12 year old who was able to sketch a sight from her memory, which perfectly



matched a frame in a video we had taken the same day. Nothing was out of place. Every shopping bag, eyeglass, shoelace.”

“You kept her alive?”

Dugan turned slowly. “Yes. That’s our job. Alive and out of the wrong hands. If we had to go up against an army amassed and trained from the kids in those photos, it would be like fighting Grendel, her children, and the gods that made them, which is what our enemies are banking on. Man against god. Theirs versus ours.”

“But we have none.”

“I believe that’s the point, Hayes.”

“What about those kids then?”

“Some of them could cause more problems than others. Most, the slightly gifted ones, we diffuse and assimilate. Some we take under our wing, either because of a specific skill or their disposition; sometimes it’s their popularity. A few, as you know, go missing. Like Grace.”

“Grace doesn’t have a photographic mind. I know my own daughter. What did she do to wind up in your file and now missing because of it?”

Dugan paused. “We don’t have a full report on her. She wasn’t marked for anything more than observation and a few tests at a private school. Odds are she was precocious and cursed with having the likes of your blood in her veins.”

“What about the Loudin boy?”

Dugan's lip turned up and creased into a smirk. He scanned Simon's body language, which was no longer stiff and on guard. Dugan took a step towards his desk. "He was a curious one all right."

"What was in his file?"

"Nothing specific."

"Then why did you have him terminated?"

"Intelligence had him marked as the next prophet. A messiah. It wasn't clear for which God or platform, but this isn't the right time for that kind of risk."

"He was a threat?" Simon's body tensed.

"I don't know."

"Who called it?"

In his peripheral, Dugan caught a streak of green light shoot across the southwest edge of town. It marked a security raid in the rail yard. A green icon on his terminal screen would soon flash and he'd be tapped into the activity.

"Was it your order?" Repeated Simon.

His boss pressed a key to open the graphic on his screen. "If you wanted your daughter to be free and on her own, you should have killed her, Simon. You should have given her the same shot you injected into the boy." He turned to the window surveying the distant jettisons of light. "You failed. You didn't stay detached, and now you've made a mess of things."

Simon lunged forward gripping Dugan from behind in a chest lock. They smashed against the glass and fell back onto the desk scattering the photos and files across the

room. Grace spiraled highest and dropped quickly, landing face up. Peter Mitchell and the others made their own mark within the empty space in the room. Loudin's picture circled, then floated back and forth with one end up then the other. He floated like a gondola at a carnival. The photo hovered over Grace then slipped to rest, laying flat over the girl's blue dress. Their eyes were side by side. Four eyes that saw the same world. Four deep blue portals that saw all at once what had been, what is and what would be. Four that could not blame nor praise nor even explain because as far as cause and effect were concerned, the state of things had nothing and everything to do with it. The four eyes were totally aware, even in their two dimensional representation, even as a photo -- eyes without cells, without sensation, and without connection to a brain.

Simon flipped his superior and pinned him. "I was your backup in Tora Bora," he said. "Every time you orchestrated strikes on the caves in Afghanistan and the iron ore mines in Myanmar, I was right there."

The Colonel didn't go in for the bonds soldiers created when they were taking bullets for each other. It was the kind of connection that meant someone would carry another man's secret through all of life and take it with him when he died. It was too close and had too much weight. Dugan smiled. Simon had done nothing for him in Tora Bora and he meant nothing to him. They just happened to be on the same side that day. Pressed against the desk with his underling's elbow wedged into his throat, Dugan had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. As a result of his life experiences, he had developed a specific and unwavering code of law which over the years had become hardwired into his brain as the foundation upon which he was able to excuse the things he did, justify the

horrors he saw, make the decision to take action or walk away. He was a man-made man, built from the ground up, piece by piece. He was the last man able to accept people for who they were and the last man capable of absolution. No different from the men on the other side of his C8 Carbine and in ground Claymores, Dugan was a man of precise ideals. He accepted human suffering, understood that it couldn't be avoided and held that it wasn't something you shared over a coffee or a communion cracker. No person could make the trek from birth to death without pain and there was nothing that religion, government or drugs could do about it. This way of thinking made it possible to move between experiences without grudges. He could as easily share a shot of whiskey with a man as shoot him in the back.

Dugan had a reason for why he thought as he did. Simon and the others slipped in and out of the same kind of cruel objectivity, but only in the field and mostly due to training. Somewhere in each was at least a morsel of a soul, often a damaged or shriveled one – but a stake in the cosmos nonetheless. Dugan didn't appear to have a soul because he really and truly didn't. He could have come into the world with as much heart and faith as every other newborn, but a strange thing happened on his journey from the womb to the hospital room. As he plummeted through the birth canal and spiraled his way to that small dot of light at the slope's end, his source of life in the womb -- the umbilical cord, looped itself around his chest and the throat of his twin quickening towards the exit just behind. As he emerged with a face blue and slithery, his sudden gasp of earthly air occurred when the other one in the canal felt the choke from the cord. It jolted him back to where he had just come. And it was there, thrust against an edge where converged at

one place all that there is – creation, life, death. When his soft head pounded against that of his twin, his eye pressed to hers, his lips against hers, the breath he expected of air to come from her who had not made it out; when the atoms making her were as close to him as the atoms making him so she was at once all and none of him, that teeny-tiny percentage of weight that people lose when their soul leaves their body at death, left then. It got confused and there was a mix up. At the wrong instant, his soul thought it belonged to the other, so in one moment two souls disappeared from the earth. Then the mother cried and the doctor bent his head and the nurse wheeled the dead one out of the room. When Dugan could crawl, he crawled away. Alone.

Even on top, the only advantage Simon had over his commanding officer was that he was 20 years younger. Dugan pulled out a knife strapped inside his vest and ripped it across Simon's shoulder, kicking him into the chair. He adjusted his Lennon-style glasses and sat on the corner of his desk.

“The world is in a tenuous state. There's a lot of shit going on now and things have to be in their place. Not one person unaccounted for. Nothing can be out of place.”

Simon tore his shirtsleeve to use it as a compress for the bleeding. “What place is that, Paul?”

“To be on our side or not on our side. Right?” Dugan could make things simple when he needed to. “Bad guys and good guys. We aim and fire. That's how it's always been. It keeps you employed and the world safer. You really think it was smart of you to turn a member of your own family over to people you don't know anything about? What

is it, Hayes? You starting your own thing? You thinking this is maybe Big Brother and you're going to bring back liberty? How about you stop reading Bradbury."

"You ordered me to murder a boy."

"I did the same in Nepal. There was a group of them. You had an MK-14. It didn't phase you then. Look, Simon, I read reports and write-up scenarios. Same plot, different cast. Names don't matter. You think it makes a difference who we're up against? You pick – Zirid, Kony, Goldfinger, aliens, maybe the Anti-Christ. You think your assignments would be different if we were working for God instead of the ISC? Go ahead and tell me it's Yin up against Yang. Do I care? Do you care? There are always good guys and bad guys, Lieutenant."

Simon didn't respond. He reached under the desk to press the switch that opened the door.

"I'm one of the good guys, Hayes. This building, we're all good guys. What are you?"

"The only mistake I made was killing that boy."

"How do you know?"

"When I make a decision, my own decision, it's too late for it to be a mistake."

He walked through the span of the open door as Ruth was walking in. The two stopped and looked at each other for what was a long time in the scheme of everything else that was going on. In their pause, in the time when their eyes connected, they both found the same thing -- closure. It came to them all at once: Her photo in the hat, his decorated uniform on their wedding day. Her pregnancies, their house in the planned community,

friends, family cookouts, family graduations, family funerals. It was a family Simon had borrowed for a short period of his life, and he would remember it as nothing more than a movie trailer. Dugan slipped the knife back into its sleeve under his vest and greeted the General's grand-daughter with a smile and a kiss on her cheek. Simon heard their friendly salutations fading as he pressed the button to the elevators. He wasn't on his way home. He wasn't going to get into his car, turn the knob on their front door, grab a photo album or hold his son. The only thing he would think about from those years in his borrowed life would be Grace. While everything else would slip into an irretrievable past, she was the only thing that would be part of the future.

## VIII.

### Remembering Sumatra

Walking out of the Inter-Regional Security Counsel's glass high-rise and onto the congested London streets, Simon was surrounded by a silence he first encountered on the front line in Syria. It had happened a few times and he had not been able to make sense of it. It was as if his senses weren't able to process the multitude of stimuli coming at him, and his body was out of sync with what was happening around him. He could walk past the explosions and the carnage, and none of it would actually be taking place. But if he slipped, if he heard the helicopters or felt the ground quivering under the mines, a bullet would graze his sleeve and there would be blood somewhere.

He had only talked about those experiences of the world falling into silence one time before. It was when he was in an open air Tikki bar in the jungle of Guadalcanal. The bartender was pouring free rounds of whiskey because everyone except a French man in a beret, the bartender and Simon was scattered about dead, across tables and in trees. When the Frenchman lifted his glass from the small bistro table where he sat, he said "our inability to experience something does not mean it doesn't exist."

"When I'm walking through a field of enemy fire without taking cover and I come out alive, do you think it's cause all those bullets killing every one else and the explosions taking out tents and cars aren't really part of my situation?" asked Simon.



The bartender, wiping the inside of a glass with a white rag, wondered if it might instead be true that the bullets just missed. “When we thought the world was flat, it was round -- cause that’s what the world is. And it doesn’t much matter what anyone else thinks about it.”

“No,” Simon had said. “If it was known to be flat, then for all purposes and at that time, it was flat.”

The bartender laughed. “Ahh. So you think truth moves around and is never really set, which means if one of these dead men’s wives thinks her husband is alive then all we got here is a lot of unpaid bar tabs.”

Simon recalled putting his credit card on the bar to pay the open bills. Then he remembered how angry Ruth was when she saw a \$650 credit card charge from a place called Smuggler’s Cove. How hard it must have been for her to love him. To even know who he was.

He placed his dark hand on a Plexiglas rail and hastened up a wide circular flight of sky blue steps through an outdoor mall, then slipped without notice into a polished white tram. It was the start of rush hour. Simon heard nothing. He was alone with millions of others. He sat near a window feeling the warmth of a fading day as he watched a city both old and new blur across his view. The high bridges that whipped through the skyscrapers glistened as much as the graffitied tunnels on the outskirts of the city tumbled into darkness.

The train took the curve through the fashion complex at a high torque shifting its electronic gliders to the walls. It gave commuters the experience of traveling sideways.

The tram bustled through large-scale metal replicas of celebrity ball gowns, then straightened at a white billboard advertising fresh strawberries and bright green limes the size of cars. Eating healthy was important. Fresh, organic fruit grown locally, though no one knew where, was the trend.

He got off at Central Station, not realizing there was no longer a connection set up for the outlying districts. There were a few hours of dimming light left to the summer sky so he decided to walk. He took the escalators to the lower street level. There was less activity, fewer pedestrians, and it was quieter. Most of the noise, still silent, came from the commuting above. Simon felt the air rattle – it came in a series of aftershocks from the tram letting off and loading up. The weight of the vibration stirred a memory of an earthquake in Sumatra a decade earlier when a series of tectonic plates shifted away from each other 30 miles beneath the ridge of the ocean floor. It fractured the earth's surface firing a crack 900 miles up the coast tearing the land like a fish spilt open and deboned. The memory unfolded in his consciousness like a war story he had forgotten.

Simon had just been promoted to Lieutenant when he was deployed to Sumatra because his division knew the earthquake was going to strike. It was a profound experience. Simon had been part of the third invasion into Afghanistan and the violence in Ichkeria, but a minefield was man-made and no comparison to the devastation and horror caused by a shift in the Earth's crust. He saw rows of homes engulfed, boats flung into the sky and new islands suddenly lift out of the sea. He watched a power plant sink, an oilrig explode, and school buses on an evacuation route topple off a cliff. A photojournalist he knew was buried under a steel beam. Her camera was tossed into the

dust at his feet. He picked up the camera to record her last plea for life as another building crumbled and the action faded. That was when the noise stopped just as he described it to the bartender and Frenchman at the Tikki bar. Shielded from what was happening around him, Simon swept the camera across the devastation to document the work of nature. He wondered how his commanding officers knew the earthquake was going to hit. They had satellites and tables, but not oracles.

The lens of the camera stopped at a young mother sitting on a bench. She was holding her three children. The younger ones squirmed, but the mother and the boy were as still as he was; and like he, they let the world fall in around them. But as soon as Simon brought them into focus and the mother lifted her head to make contact with the lens, a great wind came up and tore her children out of her arms. It sucked them into a crater the size of a neighborhood. Simon lifted his focus from the eyepiece and the camera was ripped out of the silence and thrown into a surge of debris where it swirled then fell to the ground. Simon watched the mother at the edge of the crater, her hair was loose and wild in the storm that whipped around her. The dark clouds took the shape of a dragon's head; its breath was monstrous. Simon watched the loss of her children consume her, watched as her life seemed to fall away, and he saw an image of her spiraling down the abyss into the liquid molten at the Earth's center. She would have jumped had not thunder rolled across the blue sky that was just beginning to appear. She looked up, then back to Simon. Their eyes connected a long way off as if from the distant end of a telescope. She stood stoic and solid, compelled. A strength came to her. Simon saw that it was something sudden and omniscient. It was an awareness like the knowledge that came

to Eve when she took up the apple and Eden was torn from under her feet. It came like a brilliant spark, an acumen from some astonishing vision that made itself known in such a simple and indifferent manner -- The mother understood that one of the three, the older one, her son - was still alive. More empowering was that she knew she would find him. She knew it the way Simon knew he would find Grace, and the way others separated by war or disaster or time knew they would one day find the part of them that made them live. Simon picked up the camera waiting no more than a split second for the present to resume its place in time.

The woman peered under a flimsy silver shell of an oil truck. The shutter on the lens clicked. She parted the drapes on a window in a crumbled house. Simon captured it in a frame. He watched her look for her son under building rubble and in the Earth's crevices when the ground was still shaking. He saw her swimming in the waters after the tsunami hit. While Simon helped with the rescue, the heavy construction, and law enforcement, he would run into her near the worst of the ruins. She would sometimes need a bandage or a bottle of water. Once he tried to speak to her, but she wouldn't look at him, so she never knew who he was.

As the months lingered on and reconstruction on the island was underway, he lost sight of the woman on the streets and in the campgrounds set up by the New Red Cross, but he kept a careful watch within his thoughts on how she searched for her son. At night in his dreams, he saw her looking for the boy in unlit rooms with flaking plaster. Then there came another order from his commanding officers, the cold decorated men and woman who gathered at slick oval tables surrounded by interactive military models and

geological maps. They could see their own faces in the reflection of the surfaces where they planned invasions and disasters. Their faces were faded, almost transparent with no distinguishing features, which is how they recognized themselves. If their conference tables had been blown into splinters, they would have been gone as if they had never been. Only their orders existed. The text to Simon's cell phone dispatched him to a second set of islands in the Indian Ocean. He was told to go to Nias, 80 miles east of Sumatra. It was a week before the second set of tectonic plates slipped within the subduction zone, another disaster that his commanding unit had full knowledge of.

He saw her there - not in his mind but in a fishing village still looking for her son. As a result of the two disasters, nearly 100,000 children were dead. Simon tried to convey this statistic to the woman when he stood close to her in a makeshift hospital under white tents. He hoped she would move on with her life, perhaps take in one of the homeless children who had lost their own parents. With his hand in hers, unfolding a ration of rice cake and dried papaya, the black man in uniform explained that there was nothing she could do, that her son was gone. The mother didn't acknowledge him. She just kept turning up rocks and peering into sewers, calling the boy's name over and over as if it was the only word she could speak, *Kali*. Simon didn't realize she wasn't sad and that she was merely looking.

Two years later when Dugan sent a team that included Simon to Mentawi, 300 miles south of Nias, it was a few days before the impending strike of another earthquake. So again, the blurred reflections of commanding officers knew what Earth herself wasn't aware she would do. Three quakes in two years to a third world region that had grown

too independent and spiritual for the pragmatism of western civilization. Suddenly, without homes and economy, the islands were driven to be dependent on the rest of the world, on the UN, the New Red Cross, the ISC, and the Global Initiative.

In Mentawi, Simon saw the woman again. This time she had a grown boy at her side, the one she had been looking for. She didn't remember the American soldier who had come twice before, but she accepted the photo that he carried of her sitting on a bench with her three children in her lap. She smiled and wrapped her arms around the man with warmth and love. As many times as he had felt Ruth's hugs, it was never like the one given by the mother from Sumatra. From her arms, from the touch of her cheek on his shoulder came complete forgiveness – forgiveness for everything in the world. For everything he had done and seen and thought and for everything he had not even been a part of. It was so completely uncomplicated that it generated a lightness, and gave Simon freedom from being born into who he was. He felt himself lifting into something that wasn't him and was all of him at the same time. What came as a flash of perfect acceptance -- the mother's trust and belief and thankfulness is what Simon remembered when he turned off the polished sidewalk and paused at the Victorian section of town. He wondered where that feeling had gone, why his decisions since had become so complicated.

## IX. GATEWAY

Simon stood at the top of the cobbled steps leading to the streets that housed antique bookshops, quaint bakeries and Dr Colbert's lab. He didn't have to worry about dodging security visuals or deleting his image from the lens hidden in the wisteria above the pharmacist's door. It would be his last time in London and no one would have time to trace him.

"You understand that I don't have any information on where she is." The doctor was clipping the nails on a kitten. Beakers bubbled in the background and several microwaves were engaged in radioactive humming and beeping. Simon noticed that the tray in the dark refrigerator was stocked with several long vials of blue serum.

"Can I get into Gateway?"

She looked up from the kitten. Studied him. "No."

"Can you help hide me?"

"Me? Me hide you? You're Special Activities, Lieutenant. You already know how to disappear from the world and turn up as someone else. It's part of your training, yes?"

"They know me, know how I think. I need to do it someone else's way. Follow someone else's plan."

The kitten was small against Dr Colbert's white lab coat. She gently rustled the animal's fur with her fingers and coiffed it into little pointed tufts. "You must have

connections, Lieutenant. People who owe you something.” She flattened the fur with her palm, guiding the kitten to sleep.

“That’s where they’d go first.”

“Have you thought of Africa? It’s a big place with lots of jungles and quite a few bad people. It should be a good place to hide.”

Colbert opened a door to one of the microwaves and removed a saucer of warm milk. The kitten had fallen asleep, but stretched and purred as the saucer was placed where she could take in the steam. Simon didn’t think he would get anywhere with the pharmacist; didn’t think bribing or even torture would do the trick. Dr. Colbert had the unique ability to filter out everything except the immediate task at hand. That morning her attention was on a kitten and as a result it had been perfectly groomed, cuddled and fed. A few months earlier, her focus was to get Grace into Gateway.

At the time, it surprised Simon that she had acted so quickly grabbing files and cell phones and entering codes to help someone she knew nothing about. He found out later that she acted with such efficiency and haste because helping Grace would help her recoup money the group owed her from a previous misunderstanding. It was agreed that a certain mix-up involving unallocated funds was to be handled during her next business arrangement with the group, but an arrangement hadn’t come. When Simon showed up, his timing was perfect. Dr Colbert didn’t care about diverting the child from the clutches of the Educational Reform Initiative. Her motives were entirely selfish, and she didn’t care whether or not the girl was in a government program or having tea with Clarisse and Elliot Keenan. The woman was goal oriented. If something struck her as necessary it



would be done. It was clear to Simon that if he became her focus, he'd be fine. Golden. Completely off Dugan's radar. He just needed a way to win over her interest.

"I'm not looking for a disguise and a room in an attic, Dr Colbert. I need a new identity. Something that can last a long time."

"You want an injection of Lethelyn?"

He chuckled. "I need to remember my past so I can kill the guy assigned to kill me when he shows up. What I want is a way to change who I am."

"Then you want a surgeon."

"I don't have time. I need something modern."

There were two things that motivated Dr Colbert – cutting edge science and money. Simon could see Dr. Colbert's mind engage. Her eyes scanned the room without taking it in. As if dialing a video into fast forward, she turned pages in her head, tuned into twenty years of conversations at fundraisers, replayed key points at lectures, reviewed flashes of faces, handshakes, bank deposits, experiments, and injections.

Gene therapy was her first love. She left the work she was doing on gene silencing with a research team at the International Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg to pursue a private, well-funded position to make gray area pharmaceuticals. The team was on track for a Nobel Prize, but she was driven by work not prestige. Stem cell science had been well underway to treat cancer, birth defects and repair abnormal cell differentiation, so it was no longer new. Other scientists were working with athletes and the rich who sought minor physical enhancements and age-limiting therapy, but Dr. Colbert liked state of the art and wanted to go the extra mile. She had been involved in

the Jekyll-Hyde project at IMBL until the World Bank refused loans to the countries financing the initiative and basically pulled the plug. She didn't know it at the time, but it was the team's stamp of approval. It meant their research, already top secret, was being moved into a black market basement lab like the one she operated for the Inter-National Security Council in London's Victorian sector. The only downside was that it had been turned over to one of her colleagues and she wasn't included on the short list. Colbert was left out of the top secret DNA modification initiative mostly because she was a loner, not a team player, and certainly not a follower. She left the group angry and jealous and determined to find better, different and more creative processes by which to understand human biology.

Over the years, her silent jinxing and curses worked. The stem cell team hadn't gotten as close as they should have in creating ways to change the genetic makeup of a living person, or even in understanding why the genome likeness between a human and a monkey is 98% and between a human and a cat is 90%. Even a fruit fly and a man are 60% the same, and the DNA of a cat is 82% similar to a dog and 80% akin to a cow. So, as she recalled the deepest of biological inquiries – the question on what actually gives the rabbit its shape, she realized she was beyond the wherewithal of her rival group. Five years after its inception, the department was slated to be shut down. Colbert had been far more successful with less money and two part time assistants working on unconventional DNA analysis, and in her ancillary work in isolating memory functions. Lethelyne, the amber liquid that was shot into Grace's veins wiping all social connections out of her life, was her most lucrative accomplishment, and it was supposed to be exclusive to INSC.

The only reason The Gateway group had the privilege of purchasing the serum to facilitate their underground resistance to the Educational Reform movement was because of a friendship Colbert had developed with one of the group's supporters. Dr Colbert's involvement was peripheral and it led to supplemental funding. Still – no one had the chemicals that Simon was after. An injection to turn a 6 foot 2 inch black man with a resting heart rate of 45 and better than perfect vision into a small Caucasian, nearsighted, sweaty librarian was science fiction. Colbert would have jumped at the opportunity to adapt Simon's molecular makeup if she had known how. Still, the lieutenant believed there was an alternate plan to keep him hidden, if for no other reason than the doctor didn't like to admit that she couldn't make something happen.

“If anyone actually had the chemistry you're after, he or she would be very rich,” she said.

“You must have some way for a person to become someone else.”

“Yes, but its not very scientific.”

“I like the idea of keeping my amygdala and hippocampus in tact.”

Dr Colbert laughed. “Not me. But the only way I know to hide you Lieutenant is without vials and shots. It's old fashioned.”

“How does it work?”

“I make a call to a friend inside the Gateway network, just like you wanted me to do in the first place.”

“All I'm after is a long term, secure and infallible identity.”

Both of them knew he was also hoping he could get a name or an angle that would put him on the path to Grace.

“It’s very important, “ explained Dr Colbert who set the sleeping kitten on a pile of paper in the corner of the table, “you need to understand that you can’t get to the girl this way, and you are not to find out anything about her. You won’t even try. If anyone catches on that you’re connected to someone in the system, they’ll get rid of one of you.”

“I understand.”

“Then this is the fun part.” The pharmacist was rearranging the flats of potted plants on the long narrow tables. She adjusted the fluorescents and picked here and there at unkempt seedlings. “You get to create yourself from ground zero. My friend will put you in with others who will integrate you into their community as if you’ve always been there. No questions asked.”

“You have nice friends.”

“We help each other out.”

Colbert shifted a few flats so they were perfectly symmetrical. “Who would you want to be if you could do it all again and not be a soldier? Keep in mind the skills you have, what you know, and how much you can get away with.”

He had already thought this through and responded quickly. “I could be a personal trainer.”

“Except it’s too close to home which makes it risky.” She zeroed in on a drooping purple aster and pulled it to the front of the table. “What skills have you got that aren’t similar to what you currently do?”

For the first time in the three that Simon had been to Colbert's lab, he pulled a stool across from where she sat. He realized her hands were always in motion. She was constantly engaged in several things at the same time. It would be those kinds of behaviors that betrayed a disguise. It would be a habit, an allergy, proclivities, self-esteem, sense of humor, temper. Only a person with little personality and very few of his own unique traits could get away with completely transforming himself.

"People do what they're good at," Simon answered.

"How about repairing air conditioners? Or you could go into Christmas tree farming. Or baking? A lot of people can bake and come-up with new recipes off the top of their head, and they don't even know they have it in them. It's just something they picked up from their mums when they were little and barely paying any mind."

Mrs. Mulligan came into Simon's head. Her shop, the shelves piled with layer cakes, cheesecakes, scones and pies in deep dishes. He wondered if she had she always been a middle-aged woman in an apron.

"Think to how you may have spent your time when you were young -- as a kid. You weren't always killing people, were you?"

Dirt was up to her forearms, and the plant she was in the midst of transplanting slipped from her grasp and fell behind the table. She didn't notice that he hadn't answered. "What was your childhood like?" The last of her question faded as she bent under the table to find the plant.

"I grew up in Delaware. In the States. I was born in a small industrial town."

"What did your dad do?"

“He was a minister.” Simon felt silly having a conversation with a lab coat and pair of stockinged calves, but if she hadn’t been partially hidden, he probably would’ve directed the conversation away from Delaware. He avoided personal questions and never spoke about his childhood. Even Ruth didn’t know about his upbringing.

“Protestant?”

“A priest actually.”

She emerged with a salvageable section of the purple aster. She seemed satisfied with his background and smiled. “Catholic.”

“We didn’t see eye to eye.”

“Did you go to church?”

“Not willingly.”

“You never forget what you learn when you’re a kid. He practiced his sermons in front of you; spent dinners talking his point of view about the world. Maybe you didn’t like it, but you sat through it. You took it all in, and it’s still there.” Her finger touched his chest, the spot that covered his heart. “Right inside there.”

Simon hadn’t thought about his childhood since he joined the service. His mother died during his first year, and his sister moved to Ohio with a degree in psychology, two hyper-active kids and a divorce. The only person left in Delaware was a father he didn’t want to see, so just after he was brought into Special Forces, he pulled a few strings to trade his old name for a new one. Then he had his dog tags sent home with an American flag. It was like he had injected Lethelyne. It was a life he had left behind to be completely forgotten.

The purple aster was back in its dirt but tipping to one side so Dr Colbert tied it to a glass pipette that she stuck into the pot. She had a cursory knowledge of the bible, but reasoned that Simon's recollection would be better than he expected. "Do Psalms 23:4."

"What?"

"Psalms." Dr Colbert repeated.

He wasn't sure why or how, but words came to him. It was the way it happened with music when he would suddenly find himself reciting lyrics to songs he hadn't heard since high school. In the case of Psalms, he didn't recall ever hearing 23:4 or even reading it. He didn't have a bible and considered himself an atheist. "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death --" he paused.

"Don't look at me," said the scientist. "My father was a fisherman. You could be wrong as far as I know." She picked up a spray bottle to hydrate the transplanted Astor. "Try to go on."

He didn't think he could.

"If you don't think about it, it will come to you easier."

He relaxed in his chair and thought about a dinner his mother had cooked nearly every week which he hadn't had since her death. Corned beef and roasted potatoes with green beans. It surprised him how clear the image became. He straightened a crease in his pants and was able to go on. "I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort." He started from the beginning. "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort." He looked up and stopped.

Colbert misted the soldier with her spray bottle and laughed. “I think you have yourself a new identity, Father.”

“You think I should put on a Cossack and show up at a neighborhood church as a priest. What do I do? Kill the real one in the confessional and take his place?”

“It’s a good thing I like you, ya know. My friend’s organization doesn’t work the way you might think. There’s no hierarchy, no procedure manuals. Only a few of their ventures, like kidnapping and the use of Lethelyn, are actually illegal, so of course those are closely monitored and orchestrated. For the most part, I’m talking about an intelligent, self-operating network of regular people who happen to see a dark forecast of things to come. You need to understand that Gateway pretty much runs itself.”

“You want me to trust my future to an unorganized group of idealists and intellectuals?”

“It’s what I am able to offer you.”

“You underestimate my boss. Something off-the-cuff is not going to keep me off his screen.”

“Maybe you underestimate idealists and intellectuals.”

“You’re saying there’s no plan. Not even a code word.”

Dr Colbert smiled. She placed the repotted purple aster on the shelf above the kitten who she gently swept back to her lap. “Are you okay with being an Irish black Catholic?”

“Do I at least contact someone?” He asked.



“Not officially, but you’ll be looked after all right. My connection is a woman who runs a sheep farm in Kerry County. That’s the pretty part of Ireland. She can get you some training, a solid background, and papers. When you’re ready, she knows someone who can get you a church – a very old friend of mine. Before you know it, you’ll have yourself a new life.”

“It’s not exactly what I had in mind.”

“I suppose you would you rather be a karate teacher in Detroit or a safari guide in Kenya.”

“Yes.”

“You know you wouldn’t last four months. Six tops.”

He nodded.

“You don’t have to believe in God to make use of him, Lieutenant. The Church has been hiding people for centuries. It’s very good at it. You just need a little faith in the institution. It’s pulled itself through a lot of history. It knows things.”

“I’ve been fighting against God for the past twenty years.”

“Which one?”

Simon leaned forward to touch the kitten’s fur. It purred and reached its neck forward. “Is this my only option?”

“Through me, yes.” The kitten opened its eyes. It was ready for activity. “You’re main task is to get yourself out of London without being followed. Then I promise you’ll be in good hands.”

Simon had already prepared to leave the city without being noticed. He had routes, money, and contacts. The difficult part was that Dugan didn't take well to insubordination so Simon knew his commanding officer would mark him as a renegade agent in order to heighten the priority level of his capture. In his favor, Simon had recently been cleared by Internal Security, and while Gateway was being watched by the Inter-National Security Council, it had not been officially identified as dangerous or subversive. Simon was betting that his superior officer wouldn't get a great deal of assistance tracking him down. In fact when Simon logged into the Interpol's Angel data base while still in Colbert's lab, he discovered that he ranked 115<sup>th</sup> on the local hit-list for the UK and over 750<sup>th</sup> on the INSC's worldwide assassination-log.

It was simply a matter of time before the significance of his disappearance would wane. He had played it right during the investigation. He was loyal, but exhausted, and his marriage was weak. Simon's plan was to be off the map for 10 days, forcing Dugan to widen his geographical coverage, which would thin out the local search. After ten days, his boss would hit the top end of his budget and Ruth wouldn't ask for anything more. The search for just another worn out agent who wanted to be left alone would dwindle to a listing in the e-news bulletin and a bi-monthly surveillance scan.

As far as Dr Colbert was concerned, Simon was to check in at the Eden View Inn in Titengal, receive a key to a room where behind the mirror or under the flower vase or in a hat box on the closet shelf would be the address to his next stop where he would be directed several more times with the greatest of precautions up the coast and across the Celtic Sea until a Fed Ex delivery truck would give him a lift to an intersection in which

the road west would lead him to where he would spend the next 16 to 24 months. He would receive increments of his new identity at various junctures of his journey. The invoice at Eden View would be charged to a credit card registered to Thomas McLelland. Him. On the train ride from Cardiff to Haverfordwest , the uniformed ticket taker would slip him a cell phone with a list of contacts and addresses. His new friends.

When their meeting came to a close, the Lieutenant wasn't particularly careful walking out of the apothecary and up the broken cobbled steps. Both he and Colbert knew she would be paid a visit, but neither was worried. She could handle Dugan and anyone else from the department by skipping a few doses of her ADD meds. Hayes knew that she was foolproof as an accomplice. Outside of her scientific research, forgetting what she did and who she spoke to came natural. She could distract herself so well during an interview that she would exhaust her interrogator. She was also especially valuable to the INSC and she wasn't going anywhere, so Dugan's approach would be congenial. Ally to ally. Piecing together her information, the Inter-Regional Security Council team would learn that a black man stopped by to see about purchasing some chemicals, but the doctor would say she wasn't sure if it was the same guy they were after.

"You wonder about that, don't you?" Colbert would ask Dugan's agent standing in her doorway. "If a guy has the kind of face you can't remember anyway why does he need a chemical to change his features? With a little makeup and a hat, he could look like anyone. What you can't change is the way you think and what you do."

"Did you sell him anything, Dr Colbert?"

“Who?” and then she would offer the agent one of Mrs Mulligan’s scones and discuss a new recipe for lemonade that was made without lemons.

For the agency, Colbert was a dead-end and worse. Her information actually confused the investigation: “His French accent was sometimes difficult to understand,” she told them. “His clothing had a faint smell of petro. His shoes squeaked like they had been in the sea. He liked my cat, but was allergic to her, and he seemed like a nice enough man. Wasn’t he from one of the Eastern countries?” She would smile when the agents left closing the door quietly to leave her alone with her sleeping kitten, vials and plants.

The Lieutenant was mostly right assessing that Mira Colbert’s choices were motivated by science and money, but there had been two distinct times in her life when her actions were a result of emotion. Her connection to the underground Gateway network came about because she had fallen in love with a man she met at St Andrews when she was 16 and who she still loved twenty years later. Her decision to help Simon Hayes was because she genuinely liked him. Actually, she liked most people since not to like them would require a greater emotional commitment. But for Simon she felt the same nurturing tug that surfaced when she thought of her kitten, chemicals and plants.

Turning the lights in the lab to various levels of illumination, Colbert found the ambiance that was most pleasing to her brain for musing over the kind of DNA manipulation that might have turned Simon into a Caucasian librarian. He was much more suited to the priesthood, she thought; but she wondered if it was time to take a fresh look at the big picture. If there is only a .5% difference in the genomes of people, what

makes a person who he is instead of someone else? What makes Simon Simon? She dug to the bottom of her desk drawer and pulled out a leather journal from her days as an undergraduate. Her fingers brushed over the initials MC – her, and NM. They were written in a heart etched into the cover. Inside, she knew what she'd find – immature theories and half-finished equations. Pink ink scrolling her first name with Massey as her last. Mira Massey. Two lines of a poem she tried to write about love. A drawing of a house with a large oak in the front yard and smoke spiraling out of a chimney. She'd find happiness in the first pages of that journal and sadness at its end. It was a bit ironic, she thought, as she untied the frayed leather band -- the only two people she cared about – one romantically and the other like a brother – she had let the Church take away.

## X

### Closer to Heaven

Mira Colbert met Nicholas Massey at St Andrews University when she was 16 and he was ten years her senior. She was in a wide-rimmed hat and a knee length coat tied at the waist creating the aura that she was an out-of-town starlet dropped in the middle of Times Square. Close. She was just off a train from Clovelly, North Devon, and though she didn't dream of seeing her name on a marquee, she had hoped to see it followed by a PhD and printed on an article in a scientific journal. She held on to the top of her hat and spun in a complete circle taking in the green courtyard, the tree-lined walkways and the stone buildings that made the University look like a post card. She had arrived a day early and except for a bicycle on an adjacent path and a gardener in an electric maintenance vehicle, Mira felt she was in a world just the way the Earth was in the Milky Way. She was surrounded and encased and protected by the University's buildings and trees. She was part of something bigger than her but she felt special all the same. Cobbled paths led outwards and inwards from her spinning feet. It was an intellectual haven, a sanctuary, and someone who must have been looking out for her gave her a full scholarship and a living stipend.

As she spun a second time, the foliage blurred and she felt dizzy. The clouds began to sway, and the sky became a messy whirr of blue. She teetered off balance, falling into a man. He was a young teaching assistant who had Irish-red hair and was dressed in black robes. As their eyes met, the light green of hers became mingled with his

for she thought she had four sets of eyelashes and lids forgetting that her dizziness brought on doubles and triples.

“Oh,” she said grabbing onto his robe.

His hand scooped under her back to keep her from hitting the ground. The spinning slowed, and she inhaled a minty coolness from his breath. She reached for his chest then up to his shoulder and steadied herself against him. As she pulled herself to a stand, one vertebra atop the one below, he gathered her hair from her face and moved it to the side.

“Lots of excitement the first day,” he said. “Ye have to make sure to stay on ya feet.”

“I’m very sorry. It’s my first time here and I must have gotten carried away.”

“Do ye have a brother or sister attending?”

Mira smiled. She knew she was exceptionally young looking for her age which was already two years younger than the rest of the incoming freshman. “I’m a student. A science student,” she said.

“As I get older, the rest of ye get younger. I thought you were a sibling in a family.”

The idea of being in a family didn’t register. Not even in Clovelly had she been part of a family. After her parents drowned, or as she preferred to think -- decided to sail very slowly around the world, Mira was assigned to grow up in the home of her mother’s friend, Mrs Donnelly who would knit her sweaters and take her temperature when she was sick, but who had too many grandchildren with black ringlets to consider red-haired

Mira one of her own. The advantage was that Mira was so used to feeling out of place and on the outskirts that losing her balance in the middle of the St Andrews quad wasn't as embarrassing as it should have been.

She tried to adjust her hat, but couldn't get it straight so she took it off and brushed leaves from her coat.

"Are you a professor? Not that you look old. You've just got on fancy robes, and I thought teachers stopped dressing like that after Rome fell."

"Most of them did. I'm Nicholas Massey, and I'm with the divinity school. They've got a plan to reinstate the old ways so they're bringing back reverence and decorum by having us wear long black dresses."

"That's funny, Professor Massey. I've never met anyone from a divinity school so I'm happy to have this opportunity. You study God, yes?"

"Yes."

"Does anything come of that? I mean anything real, like to advance our civilization?"

"Most definitely."

"Then I should like to take one of your classes."

"And I would like to teach you, but I'm transferring out this week. I'm heading to Seminary at St Patrick's just outside of Dublin."

"Really? What will you do there?"

"Become a priest."



“Oh my. Well then. I’m Mira Colbert. And I suppose I should say it was nice to have had this chat. I hope you have a happy life, Father Massey.” She turned at the close of her very mature and confident statement and skipped off, leaving her suitcase behind.

At the end of the quad, a lone skateboarder flew by. He had bright blue hair, purple sneakers and wore a sport coat. She saw a few other people, but not many. There was a young couple on an adjacent path who had no idea she existed and a woman throwing a ball to a Setter. Mira was enamored with her new environment. She felt alive and free. It wasn’t until she reached a parking lot where a few other early registrants were hauling boxes of linens and posters that she realized her feeling of freedom may have been a result of not having lugged an oversized suitcase with a broken wheel across campus. In her mind, it was just as well. The case had a tag with her name on it so it would likely be picked up by one of the electric maintenance carts and delivered to her door.

The welcome letter in her coat pocket told which dormitory was hers. The clip in her hair provided the key. It couldn’t have been a better room if she had drawn it into her diary from an imagined picture in her head. It was on the third floor with two dormer windows, and it was larger than most. A veritable castle by her standards, which she would only have to share with one other person. She lifted the sash of the window and closed her eyes. She felt the warm afternoon sun and thought of all the chemicals she’d be pouring in and out of test tubes. She imagined white chalk scribbled on a blackboard that was overcrowded with equations. She was at a desk taking notes. The breeze off the North Sea brushed her cheeks pink.

“Miss Colbert.” It was a man’s voice below her window. She blinked against the glare, seeing his hand shield his eyes from the high sun as he called again waiting for Mira to realize that she should say something in return. His voice registered as did the black dress he wore. She noticed her large suitcase at his side.

“I thought you might be needing your things,” he called out.

“Oh, yes. Yes of course. I’ll be right down.”

The first thing he said when she got to him was about there being no elevator and that it wouldn’t be possible to get the case up three flights of stairs without a crane.

“Maybe that’s why I left it behind,” she said. “It almost seems more bother than it’s worth.”

“I don’t think you’ll be sayin’ that once the first snow covers the ground and ye be looking for a sweater. Not to mention, of course, a blanket and a pair of gloves.”

His eyes were bright blue, the color of periwinkle, the same hue as the sky. If she had been older or had been experienced in romance, she would have realized that she was in love with Nicholas Massey from the moment he saved her from falling. But it was a tricky situation and difficult for a novice to assess. It was her first day at the University, the afternoon was warm and her dorm room had been perfect. With everything going so well, she couldn’t have known that the lightness she felt came explicitly from the falling of her heart and not the conditions around her.

“We can bang it up the stairs together or carry up the contents in piles,” he said.

“Piles suits me just fine cause then I could be done with the contraption entirely.”

“Except you’re going to need it when you pack up.”

“Why on earth would I pack up, Father?”

“You shouldn’t call me that just yet.”

“Well, you’re the most religious looking person I’ve ever seen. Almost like a Saint though I’ve never really seen one first hand.”

“There aren’t many saints just walking around. It’s not an easy thing to be canonized.”

“Isn’t it like anything else – that if you work really hard, you’ll make it.”

“Except if one aspires to be saintly one is already not.”

“Oh. That’s a drag. I thought it was like getting a Nobel Prize. That’s what I hope to do you know. So maybe we should make a pact that I will be a Nobel Laureate and you a Saint.”

Mira cringed at how her youth so awkwardly stumbled into their conversation.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t see why good things shouldn’t always happen. You could make a plea for that, couldn’t you?” She felt that his smile was a form of an agreement.

“I’ll strike a compromise with ye about the suitcase,” he said. “We’ll ditch the case but the contents you hang on to. I’m afraid that since we live in a world comprised of possessions, you’ll be more comfortable with a few of your own.”

They each made three trips up and down the three flights of stairs with their arms full of everything Mira owned. It was still easier than if they had to bump the case up the wooden steps. After they situated her things in the wardrobe and made up her bed, they threw her broken case into a bin, and he bought her a sandwich. They sat on a bench

outside of St Mary's, tearing bread from their crusts to scatter a feast for the birds, mostly pigeons.

Mira was still in awe. The college looked smarter than anything she had ever seen. It was over 600 years old and built out of piles of stone and timber that had been on Earth for thousands and millions of years when lava had bubbled where the pigeons picked on their lunch. Massey told her that when the school's bricks were first formed, then stacked and mortared, ancient stories were imbedded into the University's walls. As the buildings were erected floor by floor, and the beams bolted to create rafters and rooftops, the great halls, the same ones that led to classrooms and lined the stairwells, held remnants of the civilizations that had come before Christianity, and it carried the conversations of the scholars that came after.

"It's a good thing for an institute of higher learning," he said, "the walls themselves are filled with lectures in Latin and lessons in logic."

Mira was fascinated. "Do I need to buy any books then?"

"Here's a trick," he went on. "When ye professors drone-on in the mid afternoon with the sun streaming through the tall windows and you are half-lulled, you'll be able to hear famous quotes and philosophical musings seeping out of these very walls and you'll hear them whispering to ye from down the halls."

"Not so," she said.

"Listening hard won't do it. If ye don't think about it and don't expect to hear a word, that's when it will happen."

"What will I hear?"

“As if Don Quixote himself was reciting stories from down the corridor. Duels over love. Plots to overthrow kings. Maybe from a stint in the distance, you’ll be able to make out voices discussing mathematical proofs and arguing about the nature of man.”

“Oh I already know that. Man’s nature is to become better and better.” Her eyes lifted to the tower where the church bell sat quiet against the bright afternoon sky. She wondered how many times it had rung over the centuries and where the metal had come from that was forged to make its shape.

“The stones in the walls are like little radio programs,” said Massey. “They’re filled with every word and thought that drifted into them throughout history. Even riddles and jokes – though most of them aren’t funny to us nowadays. Sometimes the stones are all talking at once as if the past was one cockeyed cocktail party.”

Mira’s eyes widened, half in disbelief and the other with scientific curiosity. It was implausible but not impossible for sound waves to be stored and retransmitted through organic material such as rocks and minerals. Sound is simply a form of energy, she reasoned. It’s created when vibrating materials produce waves. For the waves to be transmitted at all, they must move through a medium. So it was very possible that stories had been imbedded and that the walls could talk.

Massey explained that those who had become accustomed to the University no longer heard the incorporeal conversations and most visitors were deaf to them as well. “It’s only when a student’s mind is ajar, open to exploring truth, that the voices can be heard.”

Mira asked about Copernicus.

“How did he explain why a spinning Earth didn’t cause raging storms?”

She asked about Churchill.

“Didn’t he know all those soldiers would die?”

That is how it went everyday during that one momentous week when she was beginning a new life at the University and her new friend was preparing to leave. Massey’s friendship was especially appreciated when Mira’s roommate didn’t show. He helped arrange her room and loaned her the decorative things that Mira had hoped the girl from Windsor named Shelia would have provided. He contributed a lamp, a hundred books to fill both shelving units, and a poster of Phil Collins when he was in Genesis well before their time.

Massey also mounted the two desks together for ample study space, and he turned the second bed into a love seat by covering it in a furry purple spread and adding throw pillows. He also helped her secure part time work at a laundry press within walking distance of campus, and he introduced her to his friends. He had so many that she depended on sketches and descriptions in her diary to keep them straight. In return, Mira helped pack his things into boxes, then into a second-hand green Renault. Every minute that Mira wasn’t in class or figuring out where her class was being held, she was with him. When they talked, they kept to simple things like music, food and books, though their conversations were never dull or superfluous. In the late afternoon, they did crossword puzzles and imitated bird calls.

On the day that Massey slammed closed the trunk of his Renault preparing for his eight-hour drive through Glasgow followed by a ferry across the Irish Sea, he and Mira

exchanged postal addresses and a handshake. Their good-bye was ephemeral just as their time together was trivial. The only thing between them that was deeply emotional was how they truly felt, but neither could let on, even to themselves. Mutually, they believed their time would soon fade into a memory that would be relegated to a blurry image of her first and his last week at St Andrews. Neither had intended to write or to receive correspondence from the other, and they expected to read great things about each other's accomplishments. A few days after Massey left, it hit Mira that they were 300 miles apart so she buried herself in taxonomy and soon forgot about him.

The next time she saw him, she was in her last year at St Andrews and had already been accepted into the biogenetic doctorate program at Oxford. She saw him in the faculty parking lot two spaces away when she was pulling a box of glass beakers from the trunk of a professor's Saab. She saw that he looked older and so did his Renault. He still wore a black dress, but this one was pleated, pressed and official. A small silver cross hung from his neck. His hair was longer. Mira's impulse was to rush towards him, but the mere thought of it caused her to lose hold of the box in her arms. Noticing the unsteady carton, the Priest rushed over to help catch the bottom before it fell.

This time, Mira was truly embarrassed. "Oh my God. I really can't believe it." If he hadn't recognized her voice or her face, she believed his hand under the box touching hers would be enough for him to turn back the clock to the same scene four years before.

"Have you got hold of it?" his voice was more serene than she remembered.

“Yes, yes.” When their eyes met, she knew he recognized her but not in the same way that she did him. She stumbled while he hardly paused. There was not even a beat in his breath. It was as if he had seen her yesterday.

“I suppose this is confirmation that history repeats itself,” he said.

“After all this time, I’m just like you left me.”

“Not at all, Mira Colbert.”

Hearing her name in his seafaring brogue made her feel important.

“Ye must have grown taller and gotten at least a we bit older?”

“Yes. Yes I have. And the University actually made me a smidge smarter.” She rested the box on the edge of the Saab’s bumper. “Still in a dress, I see.”

“Can’t help it.”

“Does that mean I can call you Father Massey for true now?”

“I was ordained last month. And you?”

“Heading to Oxford to start on my PhD”

“Congratulations.”

“You too.” A flutter reverberated just under the surface of her skin and it startled her. She still hadn’t any experience with love beyond reading of it in books. From what she knew through authors like Emily Bronte and Victor Hugo, the tingling sensation in her wrists and the weakness she felt in her ankles were definite signs

“Have you come back to teach?” she asked.

“To visit old friends. I’ve been given a church in Milton Reynes, and I’m making the rounds before settling myself in.”



“I didn’t know churches were handed out like that – a bit like toasties, hunh? Do people still go?”

“Not really.”

“Seems like talking to an empty room is a waste of good information when you could just as easily say the same thing with tenure and a lecture hall.”

“Except I couldn’t say the same thing, Mira.”

She was embarrassed, thinking she must have said something wrong. His pitch was reproachful. Seminary had changed him. It taught him to take responsibility without burden, and she realized he was free from what others thought, from their judgment. It came from what he wore, the way he moved, and the ease in which he signed the cross. Mira hadn’t meant to erect a wall between them. She hoped to connect to his eyes. Apologize somehow, but he didn’t need her to. He adjusted the weight of the box on the bumper so that she could have full hold of it. She realized that if it had been her suitcase with the broken wheel instead of a box of glass beakers, he wouldn’t suggest they sprint up three flights of stairs with their arms full of her clothes. He was less of the person she first met and more of the institution he pledged to support. His goal was to dole out the meaningfulness of life as if it was a meal at a shelter.

She shuffled a bit, diverted her eyes from his. Her cheeks reddened. How like her to fall in love with someone who wouldn’t love her in return. “My roommate, Sheila, never showed my whole first year, ya know.” She wondered if he remembered carting her clothes up the stairs, nailing the desks together, and all the nights they drank ale and talked.

He hesitated and his eyes left hers.

If she hadn't been looking for it, she wouldn't have noticed. It was a slight break in the façade that kept him closer to Heaven than Earth. He hadn't thought of her in all those years, but at that moment there was nearly a glimmer, the minutest spark, when he might have remembered enough to imagine what any other man would have thought naturally. Mira had grown into a woman. But God stepped in. Mira saw it. He dropped in, the way gods do, and took hold of the priest and told him what to say.

"That was an odd year for incoming students," he said, his attention turned to the sky where a flock of swallows were returning from their winter rest. "Twenty-three percent of those who had paid their deposits didn't show up."

Mira raised her eyes to the sky as well. The red was gone from her cheeks. She was willing to let him go, so she said something like "it worked out for the best."

The Priest invited her to visit anytime she was in the vicinity of Milton Reynes, and he even invited her to take some of her holiday at his sister's sheep farm in Kerry County. "You'd like Elaine," he said. "The two of you seem to have a comparable way about ye."

Mira made a note of his sister's address on the side of the carton of beakers, which she later transferred to the journal that she dug out of the file cabinet in the bakery basement.

He placed his hand on her shoulder the way priests do and told her "good luck at Oxford and with that Nobel Prize thing, and know that I'm always at your call, Mira."

She wanted to say "and I at yours," but it wouldn't have made sense.

“Nice seeing you again” is what she had said instead.

## XI. The Journal

She remembered all this as the frayed leather band fell half-heartedly to the journal's side. The cover was stuck to the first page, and the first page to the next. It could have been the heat and mildew over many summers or the honey that was in the tea that spilled over the cover when Mira cracked the binding ten years before. She remembered it was when she and Mrs Mulligan were setting up their dual-shops and she had opened the journal to the address of Elaine Massey, the one she had copied from the carton of beakers the last time she saw the priest. She promised herself she would keep in touch with the people for whom she had addresses by sending holiday cards. It helped her to keep up with events that would have an impact on her life. For instance, when she learned that Mrs Donnelly died, her life felt lighter and a layer of guilt lifted from her heart. She was suddenly less lonely. In another holiday writing, she learned that her grandfather fell in love with a woman half his age who loved him in return. It fulfilled her emptiness as if the presence of love somewhere in her family, the last family she had, was enough.

After Mira sent the first Christmas card to Kerry County, she and Elaine became friends. Their bond first came as a result of needing to love a man whom neither woman would ever get close to, then their camaraderie solidified when Elaine hooked her up with the group working at the molecular biology lab in Heidelberg. Massey's sister provided the newly inscribed scientist with an introduction to private funding sources. In return, the Irish woman had hopes that Mira would help the efforts of a research group called the

Omega Institute which was the original source of Gateway, an obscure and elusive underground network that had risen in response to a strong and focused government that planned to control all aspects of the world. Elaine knew the group to be quite harmless. It's leadership was fleeting and its members quixotic. As Mira built up her small research lab with contributions and projects sent by anonymous sources, Massey's sister sent regular reports and clippings of her brother's accolades. One called him the youngest priest to lead mass in St Peter's square before the Pope. Another said he was assigned by Rome to work on the Inter-Faith Counsel. Through Elaine, Mira loosely followed the alliance that was quickly forming between the world's governments and religions. It confused her and she paid it little mind since she believed it was against the nature of most of the gods she had heard of to compromise. Each faith had their own books, procedures and beliefs. She didn't understand how different religions, even those with slight deviations in menu restrictions, could fuse into one.

But the clippings made one fact clear: Father Massey had gotten further than she had. Even as they were equal in that she hadn't received a Nobel Prize and he hadn't been canonized, the competition wasn't completely fair. She would have to attain her victory during her lifetime while he could become a Saint well after his death.

Colbert had forgotten about the journal and became nostalgic when she touched its surface. The pages retained the equations she had jotted down with regularity when she woke from her young and idealist Darwin-esque dreams of dissecting stub-footed toads on the Galapagos Islands. Her unorthodox equations were aimed at stabilizing fictional compounds comprised of strange phosphate molecules, adenine and arsenic. She

flipped through the pages, remembering her idea to go off the beaten path into the pseudo-science of ontogenics. She knew she had matured into a good scientist and her scientific research and experiences had served her well, but the journal was filled with the innocence that comes with having neither success nor failure. Anything was possible for her younger self. Combinations of chemicals and processes that she wouldn't think of entertaining in her more mature work were delineated with confidence and precision in that weathered diary where she had written Mira Massey inside a heart in the margin.

She found notes taken from philosophy classes on the evolution of thought. They were merged with data pertaining to autism and theories on neurotransmissions and quantum mechanics. There were sketches of molecular structures represented in morphogenic patterns and mathematical formulas. Within the honey-stained pages laid flat in her hands, Dr Colbert reclaimed a part of her younger self. In a cartoonish illustration of a carbon atom's electron shell, Mira had written *a single human brain has a greater number of possible connections among its nerve cells than the total number of atomic particles in the universe*. Twenty years ago, she had drawn a line from the second energy level of an electron to a pink squiggle depicting a neuron with the claim *the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts*. Then in the lower corner, forming a circle around a shadowy drawing of a mouse in a maze were letters spelling Entanglement. She turned the page. A small paper fell to the ground. On it, Colbert found a drawing she sketched when she was still in Clovelly under Mrs Donnelly's icy care – a naked leg surrounded by the words *don't be lonely, the universe is inside you*.

Mira pulled an old processor from out of one of several well-organized closets. The grey terminal, heavy but clean and wrapped in plastic, was labeled St Andrews. She unwrapped the cellophane, uncoiled the attached cable and inserted it into an old monitor she had pulled off the top shelf. She flipped on the switch and listened for the swell of the ancient hum. The lights in her laboratory dimmed. She waited patiently for the machine to warm itself. It was a simple Pentium that she carried over from her elementary school days, a simple green screen that illuminated her face. She marveled how it would do just as well in transporting her to the past as an HG Wellsian time machine from the future.

In the file search function, she typed *ontologenesi*s and *subparticle mimetics*. A list of files appeared. It had been too long she thought. Too many years following the path established by her graduate studies, textbooks, and her professional relationships. She opened a document. Twelve-point courier single-spaced. It was a description of a microscopic slide containing red blood cells from a stigmatic. She clicked on a second document entitled *Molecular Signaling in Cells* Then came *The Non-Reductibility of DNA* and a third file titled *The Biological Existence of Saints*. Mira was refreshed by her younger, experimental and perhaps more intelligent self. Scrolling down the page she opened a file called *God is not a Mechanic, an argument against Reductivism in Science*. She vaguely remembered writing it as the start of a larger paper on evolution which she substituted at the last minute with a summary on speciation so she wouldn't fail the course.

*God is not a Mechanic,  
an argument against reductivism in Science*

*Some of the smartest people I know say there's no place for God in science. I believe them. But I don't understand why this wise premise must force us into a universe built out of separate, discreet and the tiniest of things. Is it necessary for the world to have a god for complex life forms to come about whole, all at once, and connected?*

*Just because we scientists say there is no god, does it have to be true that a man evolves from a gorilla, or an atom is built out of quarks or the universe comes from a single point? I'm new to these studies but I wonder why we start with the premise that all things come into being derived from another, because of another and then lead to another.*

*God is certainly not a mechanic. If he had built the world piece by piece it would have taken him longer than 6 days. He created the universe all at once. Adam didn't first swim about as an amoeba. The sun didn't explode out of condensed hydrogen and helium which came from alpha particles which came from protons and neutrons and quarks and forces. But just because God is not a mechanic, does it mean science must be?*

*The reductionist premises underlying the sciences as an argument against God seem to force us into a corner and into the very place that we don't want to be. A beginning. A first. A god. I do not believe in god, but I have a friend who does and it seems we agree on everything except when we get to the question of how. How did everything come to be?*

It was written only a few weeks following Nicholas Massey's departure when in the early part of her courses she had carried Massey's views into her assignments and class discussions. Her enthusiasm garnered strong critique and poor grades. Her professors were clear on the matter that the separation between church and science was more important than that between church and state. At sixteen, it didn't take long for Mira to take hold of other perspectives. Massey wasn't around to answer the questions and help her fend off the intelligent attacks that rose up against her open mindedness. She knew little of Christ and the Holy Spirit. She knew nothing of faith, so the idea that the body



wasn't simply comprised of enzymes and cells and particles of physics had begun to make little sense and everything she had learned from Massey was soon forgotten.

Now in front of her on an oscillating green screen, she once again understood the words she had written when she was in love with a priest: *my microscope sees little of what is truly in a drop of blood on a glass slide*. It was in Leviticus, she had written, that *the life of the flesh is in the blood*; and on another page -- *the soul of every sort of flesh is its blood*.

Lifting her attention from the flickering computer files, she focused on the cold gray refrigerator where Simon had recently stood. The glass on its front was shatterproof and the lock was set with an alarm. Aside from housing the blue toxin, it was also where the doctor had later placed another more interesting vial. It was when the tall, silent woman from the black vehicle came into her lab months before. The woman had worn a scarf wrapped around her head and spoke in a solemn Mid-Eastern accent. She didn't laugh at Mira's light-heartedness and had shown no affinity for kittens.

She held a vial of blood.

"I don't know what's in it without tests," said Mira fixing the nametag on her lab coat and rubbing at a small stain with her finger. "I can tell you, however, that it won't last very long in your hands."

"There's a change of plans."

"I wasn't aware there was a set of plans that needed to be changed."

"My colleague was mistaken to employ your services for an analysis of these contents."

Mira gave up on the stain and began to preoccupy herself with pipettes and petri dishes, keeping her focus off the woman. “Looks like blood.”

“My colleague purchased a classified compound from this lab. A blue serum and one of your collection kits.”

“Yes. I recognize the packaging.”

“I need to transport the sample to another lab and require you to perform the process that will make that possible.”

Mira swiveled her stool to face the woman. “The money that he paid covered analysis.”

“In place of analysis, we require you to perform the process that will . . .”

“What lab?”

The woman looked around the room. “I don’t understand.”

“Where are you taking the sample?”

“I cannot say.”

“Then I cannot guarantee the results will be correct.”

“That’s not your concern.”

“My compound, yes?”

The woman kept silent.

“It introduces chemicals and processes into the body’s system to provide for the very purpose for which you purchased it. I’ve done extensive testing on rodents, but not humans. Not many, if any, labs will be able to detect the variables that might have an affect on the analysis.”

“We will take that under advisement.”

“I know my work and I know better than other labs how to recognize interruptions and nuances that might be caused by measurement.”

“Other labs, Dr Colbert, have better resources, more money and more qualified scientists. I’m sure they have the wherewithal to figure it out.”

Mira smiled. “Oh well then, that should more than compensate for knowledge.” She took the vial from the woman. “With what’s potentially in this tube, I have to rule out glycerol-based vitrification. How long do you need it in route?”

“Two days is best scenario.”

“I can give you four, but it’s an extra \$20,000.”

The woman nodded and Mira set to work using her own cryoprotectant agents. She knew her movements were under close scrutiny and took amusement in her skill at slipping a portion of the sample into a secret tube. When the process was complete, the woman in the scarf paid the money and left. Mira had wondered when the opportunity would arise to key the 12-digit code into the refrigerator’s alarm system, pull up on the door’s lever, and carefully remove the false bottom that hid the sample.

She held the tube, looking passed it to its transparent reflection in the glass. Even as she could see through the boy’s blood to the vials of blue liquid on the other side of the door, Mira knew precisely what the tube in her hand contained -- the last of the blood that a boy’s heart had manufactured from the enhanced enzymes, amino acids, chemicals and the minutest of particles created in that quantum realm present at the exact moment of death when the body loses a small percentage of weight. That’s what the blue serum that

Colbert called Atarum was designed to do. To flip the switch so in a specific and immediate moment in time, life would be transferred to death.

Colbert's technique was unique. She was aware of the more common uses of magnetic imaging and brain scans to tap into the transgression between life and death. She even explored future advancements in cryogenics. But her years of research led her to off-the-grid processes aimed at trapping specific biological and chemical processes that took place at the precise time when the brain was shutting down, and in the case of the boy -- at the split second, when from a heightened state of survival, his conscience would be emptying, his neuro-transmissions dimming, his memory entangling, and his heart done. Her ability to analyze these chemical changes was tied to the Ataram serum which, similar to the rain forest drug Ayahuasca, disinhibited the unconscious and sparked unusual neuro connections.

Examining the vial in the green light of her computer screen, Mira realized she held the essence of a boy who was far more important than Simon and the others who had killed him could have possibly understood.