

B O O K O N E



ATHENA'S LAW



RISE OF THE INCITERS

The women have the power. The men want it back.

K. A. RILEY

ATHENA'S LAW: BOOK
ONE

RISE OF THE INCITERS

K. A. RILEY



Published by Travel Duck Press

© 2018 K. A. Riley

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.



CONTENTS

Epigraph

Preface

1. Victor
2. Marion
3. Victor
4. Marion
5. Victor
6. Marion
7. Victor
8. Marion
9. Victor
10. Marion
11. Victor
12. Marion
13. Victor
14. Marion
15. Victor
16. Marion
17. Victor
18. Marion
19. Victor
20. Marion
21. Victor
22. Marion
23. Victor

24. [Marion](#)

[Also by K. A. Riley](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

EPIGRAPH

“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

The 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1791)



“Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone,

these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again!”

Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?”
(1851)



“Men are 49% of the population and account for 98% of mass shootings, 92% of overall gun violence, 100% of forcible rapes, every genocide, and all of the world’s wars. This isn’t gender politics. It’s math.”

Athena’s Law, Preamble to Article 1 of the
1st Testimony (2065)

PREFACE



I'm crouched in my little booth, gathering all the intel I can, trying to stay alive for another day. The three Tracers are a few feet away, talking shop over high-end whiskey.

That's when I hear one word:

“Shotgun.”

That crazy bastard Ned charges across the room, shoves the business end of his 12-gauge Pancor Jackhammer three inches from Marion's face, and pulls the trigger. Twice.

The three women stand up. Ned goes down.

And my mission goes sideways.



ANY ONE OF a thousand Tracers could have shown up at Persephone's tonight. One of a thousand of the Temple's worker bees, with their fancy bio-tech and those sensor-filled body suits they wear when they're out scouting the area for scum like me. It could have been one of the tough-as-nails militant types, the ones who are always out for some kind of sadistic revenge. Or one with a chip on her shoulder and a pointless hatred of all men, keeping her eyes peeled for prey.

So, what are the odds that *she* would walk

through the door on the night when I'm running surveillance?

I guess they're exactly a thousand to one.

Just like her to beat the odds. Same old Marion. Ahead of the curve and finding new ways to drive me nuts from across crowded rooms. I've put up a lot of walls over the years. I had to in order to survive. Marion walks in, though, and just like that, every one of those walls turns to particle-board and crumbles to dust.

If this were one of those old romance movies that are contraband nowadays, I'd stand up majestically, shoulder my way through the crowded bar, and she and I would lock in some passionate *Darling, I thought I'd never see you again* embrace. All the problems of the past would be forgotten in one fairy-tale moment. Hell, it'd probably happen in slow-motion while the orchestra plays and the audience cheers. But there's no such thing as romance in our world. No lust. No desire. No moment is sweet, and nothing winds up happily-ever-after.

This story doesn't begin with locked eyes across a crowded bar or end with long-lost lovers being reunited as the credits roll. I'll be lucky if it doesn't begin with Marion catching me spying on her and end with a steel-toed boot to my balls.

She strides into Persephone's with her two pals like they don't have a care in the world. Probably

because they literally *don't*. Tracers don't need to care; in fact, it's better if they don't. They're essentially machines. They track men, hunt us down, reprogram us, and go on their way. We're livestock to them, nothing more. A means to an end. And someday when we've devolved just a little further, we probably won't even be granted that lofty status.

They say Tracers don't get off on the power. I don't know, maybe it's true. I can believe it with Marion. She carried her power on the inside, at least when I knew her. Never had anything to prove, because she *was* the proof. Always managed to get off on doing the right thing, like an infuriating saint. A rebel with shitloads of causes, each of them noble. It would be enough to drive a man to drink—that is, if he had access to hooch. Like so many rights, from where to live and who to love, booze is a long-gone thing of the past for us males.

Marion and her Tracer partners stop to chit-chat for a minute with some woman who's sitting at a round table next to one of the front windows. I've never seen the table lady before. She looks like a civie, or possibly a femme-tech. Could be one of those agri-techs from way out in the Cultivate who's in town to take a break from her endless farms and fields.

The guy sitting next to her must be her manservant. Probably assigned as a nanny for her

kids, or a shopper or a farm-hand, or maybe as a clerk to do her grunt-work. Whatever the case, he's dressed for the job: a plain baby blue button-down jumpsuit that doesn't fit him too well. An old-fashioned twentieth century prison uniform from those movies that my grandfather used to watch, that's what it looks like. But with trackers installed, of course. Trackers under his skin, trackers in his clothes, like a good boy.

He's got his head down, and he's making himself invisible by looking busy, pushing around some pile of orange and purple leaves on his plate. We've all got a place, and I've got to give this guy credit. He obviously knows his. I almost wish I could talk to him and tell him about our plans.

Keep your head down, Buddy, and in forty-eight hours, you might just live to see your upside-down world turned right-side up again.

The waiter stops by my table and asks for the third time if I'm ordering any food. Hell, no. The last thing I need is a full belly if I have to sprint out of here. Can't imagine I'd keep anything down anyway. The butterflies in my stomach have butterflies in *their* stomachs.

I tell him I'll take a drink, though. Surest way to get made is to sit here doing nothing.

The waiter flicks at the holo-pad in his arm and taps his temple and just like that, my order is in. A

yellow timer lights up above the table giving me an exact countdown to when my drink will arrive. The guy glides away to serve a booth crammed with giggling girls, and I lean back, trying to look casual.

Marion's eyes scan the seating area where she's headed, like she's casing the place. Always on the look-out for problems or prey. I scrunch myself into my threadbare pea-coat, collar up, like a chipmunk hunkering down over a nut on a cold day. My only protection from her predatory gaze is the synth-steel half-wall next to me, and a few tall plants that shield my booth from a full-on view. The plants are real, not the fake pastel ones that you see in a lot of dives back in the Bricks. They do things nice in the Core.

Marion finishes her quick scan and slides into an open, semi-circular booth with her pals. She's not in uniform. Her dark jeans and a tight leather jacket are definitely not standard issue. It's strange to see her looking so casual. But I also know her well enough to know that she's always on duty. Either way, she'd better be here to talk shop with her Tracer partners. If she doesn't have intel on offer, then I've got nothing to report back to the Inciters.

Which means that they don't have any real reason to keep me alive.

The mission they threw my way was to gather specs on the NTS's new bio-imprint law and, if

possible, anything about the protocol upgrade that's supposed to happen in less than two days. Parker assured me a dozen times that his source was good. Three Tracers were definitely planning to get together tonight over drinks at Persephone's. And I couldn't have asked for a better source for intel than Marion. No one knows more about the workings of the Temple than she does.

Of course, no one's less likely to reveal secrets than she is, either.

I turn away and busy myself by staring at my wrist-reader, checking out the glowing stream of information that scrolls above my forearm in a constant, mind-numbing sequence of trivial morsels of the world's news. Not much going on today. Some guy got pinched for keeping a couple thousand merits in a secret bank account. There's a story about the upcoming roll-out of the new security protocols for our implants. Interesting, but not exactly filled with the details I need to know. And big surprise: more hetero men are complaining about getting passed over for jobs. The guys are threatening to strike, but they don't dare protest formally, so nothing will ever come of it.

Nothing ever does.

I do a quick scan of a few more headlines as the waiter brings me my drink, which pulls me up to a slightly more civilized position. I take a quick sip. The beer here's good. No alcohol in mine, of

course, but they use nutmeg, so you get a little bit of a buzz. It's the most pleasure I've had in months.

Occasionally I peek over to catch a glimpse of the three Tracers, but for the most part I keep my face out of sight. For now, I'm probably safe, although if Marion's got an updated ocular scanner activated and happens to glance my way, she'll know instantly that it's me who's tucked into these folds of ratty wool. She's probably got x-ray vision by now, like one of those guys who used to wear tights in the comic books and movies before superheroes were banned.

She and the two Tracers are still chatting it up. When I dare to take another look, I see that they've ordered whiskey. The good stuff. Single malt. They must be celebrating something, probably a fresh catch. One more foolish man taken into custody, one more male who will show up for his monthly shots like a good little submissive dog.

I'm not really close enough to hear their conversation. Not with my own ears, anyway. Fortunately, the Inciters hooked me up with a handy little add-on for my wrist-reader. Not exactly top of the line, but it gives me enough, and it's totally undetectable. The little gizmo casts a directional sound pulse at the ceiling. The pulse drops down to the floor and captures ambient sound in whatever direction I've programmed it for.

And then the subsequent compression waves get absorbed by the floor, directed to the receptors in my boots, and travel up through my body and right to my inner ear. So, basically, I can hear Marion with my bones.

Whatever it takes, right?

Right now, though, they're going on about their boss lady, Harper. Just dull office gossip. I have to hope they'll talk about the good stuff while they get toasted on their expensive booze. I need a success here. Going back with nothing will paint me as weak. Useless.

Marion skims her fingers over the holo-pad to order food—I hear her tell the others she's asking for hummus and a veggie tray.

My ears perk up after that when I hear her voice go soft and serious. I'm picking out a few words and phrases here and there. The cochlear transmitter is good, but it's sketchy, and I'm only able to grab hold of a combination of full sentences and fragments. But it's enough. The Tracers are finally talking about the upgrades, and they're dropping all kinds of intel. This is it. It's what I've been waiting for. What I'm risking my life for.

You know things are bad when your life depends on snippets of someone else's conversation. I'm living on scraps, like the dog that I am.

Marion's voice is even and cool, but luckily, it

carries just enough. Comes to me in little clusters, on the waves of sound running through my boots and bones: “Gen-Five auto-markers...volter model...metaphase eukaryotic chromosome reprogramming... multi-plaisic sub-routine...digital access location...validation code RL388VT... terminals three and four at the Temple Command Center...neuro-algorithmic patch...and don’t trip the tertiary-level firewall...” She and the others go on like that for fifteen minutes. Marion even shows her partners a few schematics on the projection implant built into her forearm. I can’t make out the specifics of the diagrams, but I manage to snag a few clicks in on my wrist-reader that I can enlarge and analyze later on.

As I’d hoped, after a couple of scotches, the three Tracers begin to talk openly. And why not? They run everything, so they see no real need to keep their plans quiet.

But I’m going to make sure they wish they had.

After a while they start talking geneti-tech, the NTS’s genetic algorithmic code, which probably sounds like a foreign language to everyone else in here. But not to me. I’ve been learning their lingo for a long time now.

I’m sucking it all up. We’ve got a forty-eight hour window to carry this thing off. After that, the window might as well turn into a brick wall. My job is to listen, memorize, and report back everything I

hear. I plan on doing my job. But there's some info I may just keep to myself. Knowledge is still power, and I'm going to hang onto a little bit of both for as long as I can.

They're just getting into some juicy details about security at the Armory, and I'm fully focused, taking it all in when, for some reason, Marion slams her mouth shut and goes silent.

I recognize the look on her face all too well from our days at the Academy. Chin up, shoulders back. She's gone from relaxed to high alert in a split-second. Maybe one of her internal sensors went off, shooting a warning signal straight to her brain.

Or maybe she knows I'm here.

I really don't wanna get made, especially not by her. She'd have my balls on a platter. Not literally, but close enough. If she *has* made me, I may as well remove my balls myself and hand them over in a little baggie.

But she doesn't turn my way. Instead, her eyes lock on the front door, like she's morphed into a hungry lion scoping the savanna for a gazelle.

It takes me less than a second to see that my mission has just changed status from *Ongoing* to *Royally Screwed*. I follow her gaze to the doorway, where a man has stepped through and into the bar. He's standing just inside, staring over at the Tracers. He's got dark eyes, hair like a tangle of

black crab grass, and an angry glare that says he's looking to kill someone.

I realize with a violent hit of nausea that it's not just any man. I know him—it's that asshole Ned, one of the guys the Inciters recruited when they snagged me. He shouldn't be here. I was in the room nearly a week ago when they gave him some light-weight recon job to do. He's supposed to be miles away, checking video feeds at one of the Temple's decommissioned maintenance docks.

Instead, he's screwing with my mission. Not only that, but he's screwing with every man who has everything to lose if I fail here today.

I knew from the first time I ever laid eyes on him that Ned must've had it rough. No job. No permanent place to live. No doubt he's been off the grid, too. He's got a scruffy beard going now, which is against the law. Same with crew-cuts. Makes us look shifty. To be honest, I can't believe he didn't get picked up the second he stepped outside with that Yeti-looking face of his. He must've got here the back way, slipped by the patrols.

There are eyes in the alleys, too, but the Temple's gotten slack, I guess. They're all too aware that in a couple of days nothing we men get up to—least of all our facial hair—will matter much anymore.

While I'm processing all this, I look back at Marion, trying to figure out what she's going to do

about the situation. Ned hasn't actually done anything yet, except stare narrow-eyed at the three women. Glaring at Tracers shouldn't be a crime, but I know perfectly well that if it's threatening enough, it probably is.

But as if to prove in no uncertain terms that he's a proper criminal, he storms into the place on his stumpy legs and heads right for the table where the three women have been sitting.

Marion says one word, and I don't need the cochlear transmitter to hear it:

“Shotgun.”

There's no fear in her voice. No strain. No panic. It's just a statement of fact.

When I see the weapon, I let out a huff of nutmeg-laced breath that's been caught up like a prisoner in my chest. I'm impressed with Ned's balls. I can't really help myself. Who woulda figured he'd be resourceful enough to find a gun, or dumb enough to try to use it? But here he is, his sawed-off blaster of a plasma projectile firearm pointed square at the Tracers' faces.

I once got to handle that exact same gun back at the Academy. It's a modified version of one those old-school 12-gauge Pancor Jackhammers from way back before the Affirmation. I fired it a few times at the range. Kickback nearly took my arm off. And that was with the dampener stock on. But it won't hurt Ned. He won't get a shot off, and

if he had any sense in his damn crazy head, he'd know it.

He slides to a stop in front of Marion. He's short, kind of pear-shaped, tunnel-visioned, and dumb as a box of hair. Once he's close, he jams the shotgun in Marion's face and calls her a bitch, but she doesn't react. None of the women does. Ned doesn't seem nervous, though. He doesn't shut his eyes. Doesn't brace for the kickback or the explosion that I know he thinks is going to blast Marion's head wide open. He just smiles and pulls the trigger.

Nothing happens.

He pulls the trigger a second time, and the gun gives a second mousy little click. Other than that, it doesn't do shit.

Idiot always thought he was special. Well, he's finding out real quick that he's not.

He drops the gun and shrugs, like it was all a joke anyhow. Like he didn't really mean it. The gun clatters with a couple of loud thunks to the floor, and then the place goes dead quiet. Even the gaggle of giggling girls in the next booth over has gone stone still.

The tall Tracer next to Marion stands up real slow. I don't have to see her clearly to know that the scanners implanted in her body are already telling her everything she needs to know about Ned. She probably made him before he even

walked in. Knew his name, his shoe size, his sex kinks, and the eye color of his first-grade teacher.

She taps her forearm, flicks a glowing button that hovers just above her palm, and poor stupid Ned grabs his crotch, hits the floor, and goes into spasms like he just took a shit on the third rail.

The alarms in the place go nuts, like they've been waiting for this. Women are running over to see what happened, and every man in the joint makes for the doors quick so they don't get tagged.

Ned drags his slobbering body towards the door like a beached dolphin trying to get back to the safety of the sea. He manages to get up to his knees when the black-haired Tracer who'd been sitting with Marion grabs him by his scruff and launches him the rest of the way out the door. The last thing I see of Ned is his twitching body going stock still.

Me, I head for the back exit. I wasn't supposed to leave until I got the full round of intel. But that's all in the toilet now. I've got to get out with what I have. No way are the Tracers going to get back to talking about classified information when they've got a man to bag. Besides, I think I may have gotten just enough to keep myself useful.

I duck down and crab-walk past the kitchen, down the hall, past the bathrooms, and towards the back door. Seems like I spend most of my time these days in a crouch. I'm devolving into something that never walks upright.

A glowing display tells me there's an alarm on the door, but I already know there isn't. I stand up, push the blue photon crash-bar, and duck out into the alley.

I'm halfway down the delivery lane and just about to let myself breathe when everything goes dark. Hood over my head, massive hairy arm in a strangle-hold around my neck, the whole bit. It's the most human contact I've had in months, and if I were any more of a masochist I'd probably find a way to enjoy it.

The voices come at me in hard, sharp whispers, like a couple of teenagers working out how to slip back into the house after curfew.

"He got emotional. Screwed up the timetable. We need to move now."

"It's too soon."

"It's never too soon to survive."

Something hard smashes against my skull just behind my ear. The voices, as well as everything else in the world, disappear.



“WHAT HAVE YOU GOT, MARION?”

Mika doesn't need to ask. I know she's already assessed the would-be shooter via her own scanners. All three of us already know everything about him. This is just her way of reminding me—and herself—that I'm the one in charge. I appreciate it, but it's an unnecessary gesture. I don't get off on being on top.

Before I get a chance to answer her, I get distracted by something moving overhead. I look up to see a flock of disc-shaped drones, roughly the

size of mayonnaise jar lids. They're hovering in the air, their bright spotlights shining down on the body that's lying on the sidewalk in front of me.

Sometimes I forget the little silver flyers are even there. That is, until moments like this. I forget they're everywhere. Not so long ago, the sky was filled with birds. Now it's machines. Of course, there are still some birds around. It just took a delicate combination of genetic engineering and tech programming to persuade the birds and the drones to get along and share their air space without crashing into each other.

That was my little project nearly a decade ago, and so far, so good. The birds keep roosting. The drones keep watching. Eyes on the bad guys.

Eyes on us, too.

"Marion?" Mika says again.

"Sorry," I reply, turning my attention to my colleague. I slip a finger over the sensor in the palm of my left hand and the intel slides into my cerebral cortex, an encyclopedia's worth of information accessed in the blink of an eye. It's a lot to process all at once, and it used to overwhelm me. Not so much anymore, though. It's like living next to a waterfall. It's always there, a rushing torrent, but after a while you just don't hear it anymore.

"Ned Horton," I say. "Former Academy grunt—back when they were still accepting males. Expelled for Unsavory Behavior. He did eight

months in the Grind.”

Most guys don't make it through the Academy's preliminary program. A lot of them don't even pass the profile exam. But Ned apparently washed out in spectacular fashion. He got a hard-on for an instructor, then said it was an accident when he brushed up against her backside. After he was expelled, he did his mandatory eight-month stretch in the Grind—the not-very-pleasant incarceration facility out on the edge of the Core—to teach him a lesson.

“He's quite the idiot,” Mika says, rifling through Ned's pockets as we watch the retrieval crew's mag-van glide up to the curb. “As far as I can tell he's an Inciter now, though he doesn't have the usual tech on him.”

“None of this explains how the bastard got his hands on a shotgun,” I mutter. The system's database tells me that the weapon once belonged to a woman living on the southern edge of the Bricks, one of the low-income parts the NTS's second ring, mostly occupied by men. The question is whether she lost the firearm or if she donated it to him. She could be a Mannist, one of those little sneaks who supports a system in which men are treated as our equals. Somehow, though, I doubt it.

There are still some older weapons around, guns that our systems failed to locate after Athena's Law and before the Affirmation. It's just like those

mortar shells they found buried all over Europe after the Second World War. Today, civilians still find old, unregistered guns from time to time, though usually they turn them in for fear of retribution. They know that if they're caught with an unreported weapon—even one that doesn't work—the punishment will be both swift and extremely severe. Especially for men.

The good news is that Ned's weapon was new enough that it had been fitted with a detector. There was no way he would have gotten a shot off. Not with a Y-chromosome in his genetic makeup. The thing is, he knows all this. He knows the rules, and he knows the consequences. But the asshole decided to pull the trigger anyway.

I'll never understand men.

“So the question is, is he actually an Inciter?” I say out loud, “or is this just another case of a misplaced hard-on?”

Mika shrugs. “He probably found the weapon a while ago and decided there was nothing to lose if he went nuts on a bunch of Tracers. Who knows, maybe he's looking for more free room and board in the Grind. It is cold out these days, and the guy's not exactly in a state to pay rent. Anyhow, it doesn't matter. We all knew it wasn't going to fire.”

I'm trying to listen to her, but the truth is I've become distracted again. My eyes are still locked on the limp, lifeless form currently being lifted

unsuccessfully off the ground. Two Swampers in grey uniforms are trying to slide Ned into the black mag-van like a heavy, clumsy piece of furniture, not a care in the world if they happen to break a few of his bones or rupture his kidneys in the process. They can't afford to care; it's enough just to try and move the hefty jackass. At this point he's just an inconvenient slab of meat.

We never really talk about it, but lack of physical strength is one of the problems with being a female who's tasked with taking down Inciters. No matter how hard we might wish for it, two of us still aren't quite strong enough to lift one chunky male body off the ground. We may be powerful as hell politically and socially, but we'll never be gifted with brawn. Not until evolution works some kind of mutational miracle that gives us biceps like Arnold Schwarzenegger circa a hundred or so years ago. Sure. We work out. Stay in shape. We have to. It's part of the job. As much as we hate to admit it, size matters. But we'll never be as big as men, try as we might to shrink them down to our size.

Erin steps up in front of me. "Hopefully we didn't miss any of his friends while he was busy threatening us with his fancy toy." She looks around, two fingers on her temple, and scans the rooftops. She finally seems satisfied that the action is over. For now, anyway. "Inciters never work alone," she mumbles. "Someone had to be

watching.”

“Nah. If he’d had any friends, they’d have told him he was committing suicide,” Mika says, her arms crossed over her khaki canvas jacket. “The guy was a lone wolf. He was unhinged. No Inciter would have wanted to work with a liability like that.”

Was, was, would have. She’s talking about him like he’s already dead. Well, he may as well be. Any perp who’s come that close to committing a violent crime against a Tracer will never see the outside world again. There’s not really such a thing as rehabilitation from psychotic breaks, not as far as the NTS is concerned.

“Whatever the case,” Erin says, “he should know the penalty for possession. I mean, *everyone* knows. It’s not like we keep it a secret.”

“At least he didn’t grab someone’s boob,” says Mika, laughing. “I’m not sure these days which is worse: pulling on a trigger or a tit.”

She’s right. It’s a fine line, with zero tolerance for either crime. At least the guns are carefully controlled and registered, with the vast majority of them locked away in the Temple’s Armory. Who knows? Maybe someday we’ll need to keep our tits under lock and key, too. I remember reading once about how men used to pay women hush money after they’d groped or otherwise violated them, like they were instituting some twisted form of

retroactive prostitution:

Hey, baby, I know I assaulted you behind a dumpster, but here's a little something in exchange for your silence.

I can't quite imagine engaging in a mind game like that. But then, I don't think women realized how little control they really had. Back in the days when men were the wealthy ones, they wielded their money like a weapon to keep women down. *Doesn't work anymore, fellas. We control the flow of cash now. We control the guns. And we control you.*

"The amazing thing," says Mika, pulling a simulated herbal cigarette out of her pocket and perching it on the edge of her lower lip, "is that for all our attempts to teach them nicely, the dense meat-heads haven't figured out that they can't win this war. They'll *never* win. The system is rigged against them, and the sooner they stop fighting it, the better off they'll be. They're not in charge here, and unless something cataclysmic happens, they never will be again."

I can't argue with her. We've learned from history. That's the whole point of the NTS. We're a fair and reasonable society. In our world, there's no more oppression allowed, at least not of women. No such thing as patriarchy. Those of us who are in charge will die before we agree to return to the old ways, and a multitude of systems are in place to

ensure that the old days fade into obscurity where they belong.

The algorithms developed by techies like me see to it that men will never be allowed to take charge again. They may hate us for it, but I'm okay with that. They hated us before. Now it's just that they hate us for different reasons.

“Anyhow,” Mika says as she pulls the artificial ciggy out of her mouth and blows out imagined smoke, “it's not like they got the short end of the stick; we provide them with everything they need. They're bitter, but it's only because they have no understanding of how good they have it. Things could be worse for them if we'd decided to make life rough. They're lucky we only go after the ones who are being total shits. You have to do something pretty bad to get yourself tagged.”

My mind travels to the memory of a guy in a public marketplace a few years back who managed to get his hands on a knife. It was a good one, too; a nice, sharp chef's blade, the kind that's been outlawed in male shops for close to two decades. He lunged at a woman like he was out for revenge on our entire gender. I don't think he even knew her, but he sure as hell wanted her dead. He was likely off his meds, trying to let off some kind of steam that had built up for reasons that even he didn't begin to understand. Men who get regular injections don't go ballistic like that.

When I spotted him, I reached for my twitch-stick, ready to take him down, but by the time I was on the case, so were about a dozen other Tracers. So, I kept my mouth shut and let the guy with the knife commit suicide by instant firing squad, just like I've done a hundred times since.

It's the new Darwin's Theory:

Survival of the rational.

Death of the stupid.

The truth is, even if we hadn't been there, the city's tech would have taken him out quickly. There were eyes on him from literally every corner where a camera could be installed, drones flying overhead, automatically set to take down any male wielding a weapon. The tech's good at it, too. Success rate so far sits at exactly one hundred percent.

I should know. I didn't just pilot the drone project. I created the programs that take most of the male criminals down. I taught the eyes how to see, how to read, how to predict actions based on body language, gait, you name it. My machines never fail, because they're equipped with all the intuition of a woman who's being hunted, and then some. Every camera in the NTS is an A.I., blessed with the gift of suspicious female eyes.

I don't feel bad in the least about any of it, either. The deaths, the incarcerations, the injections. I can't afford to doubt, to regret. For the

first time in history, thanks to cold-hearted Tracers like me, women run our world. Which means we're safe from harm at the hands of men. Safe from the threat of unwanted contact, harassment, abuse.

Which also means that we're safe from everything else, including threats of intimacy or sex. Then again, we're not *supposed* to want those. A horny woman, they say, is a liability. She's distracted, compromised. The first thing you learn when you walk into the Academy as a recruit is that it's best not to want. They turned us into a tightly-wound cult of sexual Buddhists, denying our own biology, our own desires, all in the interest of the greater good.

Our mantra should be *Hey, bitch—rid yourself of all desire so you don't do something stupid like fall for the enemy.*

“What do you two want to do now?” asks Mika when the van's doors have finally slammed shut, Ned's body firmly ensconced inside its synth-steel walls.

She's already acting like nothing's happened, like no semi-dead guy is being carted off to a punishment center to have his genitals shocked, his mind settled into a drooling state of vegetation. She's so good at that. So good at shutting down her insides and forgetting what we are.

Almost as good as I am.

Or maybe we're just deliberately oblivious, like

workers in an old-fashioned slaughterhouse, back when people killed animals daily. I've always thought those employees had to have found a way to block out the carnage around them. The suffering, screaming animals. People say that blood is no longer blood, not when there's enough of it. It's just a little more paint on a daily canvas.

Ned is just a tiny brush stroke in the corner of today's painting.

"I think I'll head home," I reply once I've reminded myself that it's good to be hard-edged. "I'm tired. I've got an early morning tomorrow."

"You've got the same schedule as you do every day," says Erin, a smirk twisting her lips. She's annoyed, but she's trying to hide it. She doesn't like when people admit weakness, and being tired is a *definite* weakness in her book.

"Yeah, well, every damned morning's early," I tell her, letting out a cynical chuckle.

What she doesn't know is that my day starts at four a.m. She doesn't know that I live another life, one that starts before most of the NTS is awake.

Erin fiddles with the glowing purple reporting-sensor embedded in her palm just below the skin. "Damn thing's misfeeding again. I'll file our report later. So, what's so special about tomorrow?"

"Well," I sigh, "on top of the protocol upgrade, I'm working on software for the Wasps and our latest recog software. I need to be bright-eyed and

bushy-tailed if I don't want to screw it up and get my ass kicked by Harper. She's all over this. Wants me to work ten times faster than I can, and that means no more whiskey tonight."

"Fine, buzzkill Betty. Have it your way. There are more bars in this town. Mika and I are going to go out and get shit-faced. Damn it, we're not technically on duty, despite all appearances to the contrary. We'll see you at work."

"See ya. Have fun, you two," I tell them as they start to move away. "Don't forget to drink for me."

Mika calls back, "Count on it!" But she stops and spins around to face me again. "And, Marion... maybe watch yourself, okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's Ned. That guy didn't come into Persephone's at random. And he wasn't looking for us. He was gunning for *you*."

I just nod and tell her I've got it.

I watch until my partners have disappeared around a corner, then push up my sleeve and slip two fingers over my forearm in a rapid cross pattern, forming an X symbol over the upper ridge of my extensor muscle to call for a Rocar. The system already knows to send me a Desmond, the male version of the vehicle. Seconds later, the Rocar's pulling up where the van was a minute ago, his passenger side door flying open and nearly taking out my kneecaps in the process.

“Seriously?” I chastise. “Watch where you’re aiming that thing, you metal douche.”

“Apologies for the rapidity of my actions,” crows the Desmond in his stupidly cheerful mechanized English-accented voice as I crawl inside. “I hadn’t factored in your level of inebriation and the subsequent slowing of your reflexes when I opened the hatch.”

“It’s a door, not a hatch. And I’m not inebria... oh, stop yammering, already,” I snap. All right, maybe I’m a *little* drunk. God, I miss the days when a car couldn’t read a woman’s blood alcohol level from a mile away.

“I am assuming that you are safely ensconced inside, Marion of the Tracers. Be advised that I am now sealing the doors. Do indicate if you wish to be sick, as I would prefer that you not vomit on my interior.”

Instinctively, I pull my knees together and cross my arms over my chest, shrinking myself and ensuring that no part of me is outside of the car. “Did I mention that you’re a jerkoff?”

“I don’t think you did. Destination?”

“Rez Zone. Clio. Partition 11. Number 808, you judgmental self-driving bastard.”

“Tsk. Such language! On our way, Marion of the Tracers.”

Desmonds are named mostly for their programmed voice, which is a cross between an

anal-retentive robot and the way I picture old movie stars sounding when they're trying to seduce a woman. The overly emotional range of Laurence Olivier meets C-3P0's stick rammed hard up the ass. Annoyingly uptight, yet far too excited to see you. Still, they're better company than most men made of flesh and blood.

I don't actually know why I choose a Desmond over their female counterparts known as *Sheilas*, come to think of it. I suppose I get tired of listening to women all day. Sometimes, I'll admit, I want change. For a few minutes here and there, I want a man to take the wheel. It's an admission that would probably get me thrown into a cell, accused of blatant Mannist propaganda.

Thing is, I don't exactly want to be ordered around by a deep, testosterone-laden voice that belongs to some jag who thinks he can bark commands at me just because he has a dick. It's more that I get tired. Tired of looking after everything and everyone. Tired of having the weight of the world on my shoulders. Sometimes I need someone strong to stand beside me and tell me he'll take over, just for a little.

There's another thing, too. Even though I'd never say it out loud, I'll admit that sometimes I sort of miss interacting with adult males. I haven't had a real, "getting to know you" conversation with a non-A.I. man in over a decade.

In the right place at the right time, a man's voice can be the most pleasant sound on the planet. Like melting chocolate. Of course, I'm not supposed to think so. I'm supposed to be all but repulsed by men, not seduced by a long set of vocal cords.

That was their power once. They appealed to all of a hetero woman's senses. They reeled us in like we were fish attracted to shiny bait. But not anymore. We've grown too intelligent. Or else men have diminished too much in our eyes.

I guess it's a good thing they don't try to flirt anymore. It's proof of the NTS's success. We made them this way, after all. We turned them into rats, shocking them each time they chose the wrong path in a maze. We reconditioned them into a new sort of entity: a man without the drive to kill, to seduce, to overpower.

We castrated them without actually castrating them. Of course, a lot of the douchebags deserved it.

Not that all males are douchebags. I know at least one of them who's a pretty good guy. He's my favorite person in the world, in fact.

And I can't wait to get home to see him.



SOMEONE BIG PUTS two massive hands on my chest and shoves me backwards. I half expect to fall and crack my head open, but instead my back slams into a cushy chair. It's a magna-grav, hovering two feet above the floor, so I fly backwards and wind up slamming my head against a wall anyway.

Goddamned technology. Always finding a way to bite me on the ass, bash me in the skull, or otherwise make my life miserable.

Someone who lacks a delicate touch yanks the canvas hood off my head. A blast of light assaults

my vision, and for a few seconds my eyes feel like hot white stones.

Well, at least I know where I am:

The Bricks. 3rd Parish. The Underground.

That's what the Inciters call these little hideouts of theirs. Ironic, since the locations are usually about twenty floors up in the air, in old office buildings.

They call it hiding in plain sight.

After the women took over the world, a lot of these buildings were pared down to skeleton crews. The NTS figured that the traditional nine-to-five workday was just another way for men to keep women in high heels, within their reach, and under their control. Work days were whale-bone corsets, and women wanted to tear them off and burn them. So, they took away that power from men, just like they took everything else. Started working from their comfortable suburban homes in the Rez and in the massive Temple at the center of the Core, while the rest of us learned to struggle for survival. Well, *some* of us learned, anyway.

A lot of the bigger office buildings got torn down. Others got turned into low-income housing units for anything unfortunate enough to have been born with a dick. Most of those buildings are derelict, crumbling, devoid of heat or clean water. The NTS doesn't much care, though; what they care about is keeping us in the corsets they so

happily disposed of.

Some of the high-rises are still used for offices. They even have banks and coffee joints on the ground floor. Big atriums, glass elevators...relics of the past. There are still businesses in some of them, mostly low-level techies and architects and city-planners and stuff, scattered around the remaining buildings. I worked in the printing offices at a place like this a few years back. Actually moved pretty high up in the world of journalism for a time, before I was brought on board and given partial Temple access.

That was back when I wrote about criminals, and just before I became one.

You'd think a rag-tag band of vigilantes, mercenaries, and freedom fighters would be holed up somewhere dark and subterranean. Maybe we should meet in one of those caves with stalactites or stalagmites—I forget which is which. Either way, you'd think it'd be someplace cold, damp, and shadowy, way out of the reach of drones and microphones.

But the guys who grabbed me last night? That's the last place they'd go.

I guess the Inciters still have that corporate board room ethic buried somewhere deep in their DNA. They need to be in high-up rooms with big windows and telecoms and conference tables the size of an old football field, because it makes them

feel like somebody. Next thing you know they'll all be wearing dark blue suits and ties with matching belt and shoe combinations. They'll want to get things back to the old idea of normal, back to when an office building was a man's natural habitat and women fetched the coffee.

When my eyes have adjusted to the light, I take a look around. I'm still reeling and trying to shake off the fog in my head. This may be a typical boardroom, but there's nothing typical about this scene. There are six men and one woman looming over me like they're about to have a meal. This is probably the last thing a Thanksgiving turkey used to see before the hatchet came down on its neck.

I've got a headache behind my eyes like someone is grinding sheet metal in my brain. A week ago, I was quietly under the radar. Now I've got a bull's eye on my back.

Funny thing is, this is exactly where I was hoping I'd be nearly a year ago when it looked like the Inciters might finally turn all their quiet talk into some pretty loud action. Okay, getting bashed in the head wasn't exactly part of the plan. But if I'm lucky, the rest of it might just fall into place.

I take a quick inventory: I'm down to my well-worn khaki cargo pants and the white short-sleeved button-down I've been wearing for three days straight. They must've chucked my military surplus pea coat somewhere, though, which is too bad. I

inherited that coat from my dad, who got it from Gramp, who, according to family legend, got it from the lead detective in one of the last mass school shootings in the Old United States back in 2050.

One of the six hazy figures comes into focus.

“Parker,” I mutter.

He balls up a fist and unleashes a sharp jab to my jaw. My head snaps to the side and feels for a second like it might pop clean off of my neck.

If this keeps up, I’m going to start taking it personally.



WHEN I OPEN my eyes at some ungodly hour of the early morning, I'm greeted by a face, planted about two inches away from my own. It's too close for me to make out features. All I can tell in my addled state is that the intruder is male.

I let out a shriek and shove my hand under my pillow, ready to grab my twitch-stick and fry the hell out of him.

That's when the giggling begins.

Maniacal, joyful, adorable, infuriating giggling.

"Jesus, Declan, don't do that!" I snap. "I

almost..." I shut my mouth before I say it, and the ugly, unspoken words hover like particles of acid in the air.

...killed you.

My instincts are honed for nothing less. I do two things really well in this world: develop tech and take down men. Only an idiotic man with a death wish would get in my face.

An idiotic man, that is, or my twelve-year-old genius kid.

"Sorry. I thought it would be funny," he says sheepishly, dragging his chin down. It always blows my mind when he does that. Somewhere along the way my son discovered how to be cute, despite the fact that he's spent his entire life isolated in the secret apartment tucked into the top story of this house. Despite the fact that he's never once encountered another human child.

Not a real one, anyhow.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't funny," I grumble. I'll admit that I'm having a hard time pretending to be genuinely cheesed off. I may as well yell at a puppy for licking my face.

I lift the covers, drag Dec into the bed with me and roll him up tight like a Cuban cigar. He lets out a laugh that sounds like wind chimes. It's everything good and warm, and I make a conscious effort to remind myself that I shouldn't take it for granted. Even if I don't get to raise him the right

way, I should be allowed to revel in his laughter while he's still a kid. While he remains a secret.

While he's mine.

"I always forget how small your room is," he says, looking around as he lets out another perfect laugh.

His voice is still that of a boy soprano, but I know that won't last. Because he's not on the grid, he doesn't have the chip that all boys are implanted with now. Nor does he receive the injections that would scale back his testosterone levels. At some point before too long, he'll turn into a deep-voiced man.

I have no idea what will happen when he becomes that guy. All I really know is I can't keep him locked up in this secret place forever, even though the most selfish parts of me want to.

"I have the small room," I tell him, "because for some silly reason I thought you should have the big room. I don't need more than a bed and a dresser, anyhow."

"True," he mutters as he drifts off to sleep.

To any visitor, the third floor of my house seems to consist of my bedroom, a bathroom, and my study. What he or she wouldn't see is the apartment hidden behind the holo-screen at the end of the hall. That's where Dec lives. As far as secret lairs go, it's not bad. We keep it clean and uncluttered. The entryway opens onto our little

kitchen with mag-chairs at the counter where we cook together and eat our meals, often alongside my mother, who lives in a suite I set up for her on the second floor. The kitchen appliances in the secret apartment are all red and black and glistening stainless steel. Then there's the living room. It's sparse, just a sofa and a couple of chairs. Dec's bedroom is pretty basic: a bed, a dresser for his clothes, and a puke-green antique bean-bag chair where he can loll around without a care in the world. And, of course, his own personal bathroom. The floors are all silver-synth, perfect for looking as smooth as glass and, more importantly, for absorbing sound. Can't have him stomping around when I've got company downstairs.

There are no windows. No way or Dec to see outside. No way for anyone on the outside to see in. But it's the room at the end of the hall that really makes Dec's place special. One-of-a-kind, in fact. Other than Dec, it's this room that's my pride and joy.

We call this chamber the Sanctuary, and it's all Dec's. The walls, pure white when they're not illuminated, are made of high-res screens, as are the ceiling and floor. When my son's not in it, it's nothing more than a big white cube with a single high-tech chair in the center where Dec can plug in. That's where he makes his magic happen.

When he gets his hands—or I should say his

mind—on it, that all-white room transforms into a universe full of everything imaginable. My gift to my imprisoned son is the ability to create a new world of his own every day. In this place he's something of a living god, though I would never reward him with such a title. He has plenty of time to fight the urge to think of himself as God when he's older. For now, I just want to let him be.

Some kids don't know how good they've got it, but Dec doesn't realize how bad he's got it. He doesn't know he's being deprived of a life outside his lair. And I plan to keep it that way for as long as I can.

There aren't a lot of rules. Dec knows he's not allowed into the rest of the house. All his life I've tried to be honest about the reasons for his imprisonment, and to his credit, he doesn't push back, doesn't protest.

Much.

"People can see you in the main house if you walk in front of a window," I told him when he asked once. "You don't want them to see you, believe me."

"Why does it matter?" he asked. "Why don't the people like me?"

The question broke my heart, I'll admit. No one would dislike him; no one could. They would only dislike what he *is*, because it would terrify them. If they knew, their first instinct would be to destroy

him. Truth is, if he weren't my child, I would want to do the same.

I've never gone so far as to explain what those people would do if they spotted him. Never told him what would happen to his—*our*—world. Never explained that his very existence is an anomaly, one that could set my world back by decades, if not centuries.

So, he remains obediently tucked away in his third-floor hovel, entertaining himself with little more than his extraordinary mind.

The thing is, the Sanctuary is more than mere projections. The room is a virtual world, like the ones they began to develop back at the turn of the century. The difference is the level of sophistication. Having a mother who's in charge of the most intricate technology on the planet probably helped with that, though Dec is responsible for most of his worlds' creation. I set the stage. Dec writes the script, casts the characters, directs the action, and plays the lead.

On any given day, his routine is as follows:

He wakes up.

We eat breakfast together. I drink my coffee while he chugs synthetic orange juice, and we talk about what he might create while I'm at work.

When I've left, he enters the *Far Away*. That's what he calls his virtual world.

He fabricates his surroundings. The weather,

the landscape. The system is equipped to teach him about Earth's ecosystems, so he knows what rain and snow look, feel, and even sound like. He knows about the sun, clouds, blue sky. He's seen the massive trees that used to grow in the United States and South America. He's seen the plains and deserts of central and northern Africa. He's seen tides rise, oceans roll, and skies go dark grey before a storm. He's even seen black rhinos, Sumatran tigers, lowland gorillas, monarch butterflies, and hundreds of other animals that have gone extinct over the last fifty years. But I left the creation of the world mostly up to him.

He walks and runs through his strange universe as an avatar that looks remarkably similar to himself. It's grown with him, developed with him, even dresses as he does, in clothing that looks like it might have been sewn by my mother's secret machine, an old-fashioned Singer that she loves.

I've watched him getting ready for his trips to the Far Away. He sits in the center of the Sanctuary, shuts his eyes, and his avatar appears somewhere on the wall, even as the room morphs into a wild world filled with buildings and flora that I've never seen before.

When he's plugged in, he controls his surroundings like he's moving pieces around on a chess board. The difference, of course, is that he doesn't use his fingers. Doesn't control the action

with a flick of his wrist, or a look. His avatar moves through the universe as if in a strange dream. The little boy I see projected on those screens is Dec, only it's not.

It's hard to admit, but I don't know how my son controls him, not exactly. Don't know how he can see without using his eyes. All I know is that he can and does. Somehow, for reasons that even I don't understand, my son seems to become one with his otherworldly creations on the screen.

I used to worry that he might get lonely, particularly when I leave for work. So when he was three, I created Henry to keep him company. Henry's a complex A.I. who lives inside the system. He started out as a three-year-old as well, and he's aged alongside Dec's avatar all these years. They interact, they explore, and they play. They've made friends along the way—all of them Dec's creations, naturally.

At the end of the day, his worlds disappear. Everything, that is, except for Henry. He can save his creations if he likes, and he knows it. But he never does. He's the most intellectually inquisitive person I've ever known, and he absorbs everything. Solves problems. Builds bridges and communication systems where they're needed. Sends messages to Henry when they're apart, and Henry replies.

Somehow, my son has grown up with more of a

social life than I had at his age, despite the fact that the only actual humans in his life are his far-too-busy mother and his uptight grandmother, who keeps a close eye on him when I'm not around.

Only once in nine years has he done anything inside the Sanctuary that disturbed me.

I returned home from work around five p.m. one day to find him sitting in his chair, a post-apocalyptic hellscape surrounding him on all sides, horrific and frightening. A tower that looked a bit like the Temple stood at its center. It had begun to crumble, massive chunks falling off towards the ground, sending people screaming and scattering below. The once-pristine building looked like it had been the target of a dozen atomic bombs. Fires burst like dragon belches from the shattered foundations up into a dark and foreboding sky. The streets were cratered, littered with Rocars flipped upside down.

The most frightening thing was how much it all looked like the Core, which Dec has never seen. He's never seen the Academy, the Grind, or the massive tower that is my workplace. He's never even seen the Rez where we live. He's sure as hell never seen the Bricks or the Cultivate. I left them out when I designed his virtual reality software. I didn't want him exposed to the workings of our society. Didn't want him seeing the division between the sexes, or the weapons that we Tracers

use. I've never wanted him to know how men are treated, injected, imprisoned. I didn't want my son exposed to violence against his gender and made to feel like a bad guy before he'd even lived.

Yet here he was in the middle of it all. The Capitol in chaos, my son's trembling avatar standing at its center, looking around helplessly.

Even though I knew it was only a projection, the sight terrified me. I ran to him, still sitting in the middle of the Sanctuary, his eyes shut tight. His lips were moving slowly. But I couldn't hear any words.

When I managed to get him to snap out of his trance, he told me he couldn't recall any of it. He thought perhaps he'd fallen asleep and had a nightmare.

I don't know what it was, but to this day, I can't quite bring myself to believe it was merely a dream.



I'M TEMPTED to keep snuggling with Dec and maybe even fall back asleep myself. I peer over my kid's head at the clock face projected on the wall. It's 3:59 in the morning. Impressive that he popped into my room just before four a.m. Dec's internal chronometer is even more finely tuned than mine. He has no sense of early or late, despite the fact that he's been living in a mostly windowless world

all his life, the daylight hours controlled not by nature, but by me.

I suppose it helps that this is the only life he's ever known.

"Hey, I have to go to work in a couple of hours," I tell him, waking him from his shallow slumber and trying my best to sound cheerful. For some reason, today I'm dreading the Temple more than usual.

"Again?" he asks. He's just a head, his body all swaddled up in the duvet. His plaintive, floating face looks kind of hilarious.

"You say that every morning, you know," I tell him.

"You go to work every morning."

"I know. I suck. I'll make it up to you tonight, though."

"How?"

"I'll come home, make sure there's a roof over your head and food in your mouth. How's that?"

He thinks about it for a second. "Yeah, okay," he says.

"Thanks for your approval, Mr. Disembodied Head," I reply. I plant a kiss on his forehead before I make a move towards the door. "Maybe a movie with you and Nana tonight."

"The one about the girl?" he asks.

I nod, even though I have no idea which one he's talking about.

The fact is, every movie is about a girl now.



“YOU WEREN’T SUPPOSED TO MOVE,” Parker shouts as I check my mouth for loose teeth and try to shake off a second round of haze. “You weren’t supposed to run.”

“I know,” I say with a hard glare. “But what did you expect me to do? Sit around and get tagged?”

“You and Ned working together? Trying to fuck this up?”

“Ned’s your problem, not mine.”

“Those Tracers. You knew one of them, didn’t you?”

“I know I want this to come off as much as you do, and I’m the only one out here risking his ass on the front lines of this thing.”

Parker is a pretty big guy. Not huge, but he’s got some muscle on him. Broad shoulders, lantern jaw, and tendons like synth-steel cables jutting out from the sides of his neck. He steps towards me like he’s going to lean down and throw another punch. I go to put up my hands, but they don’t move. Son of a bitch zipped-tied my arms to the chair.

“Listen,” he hisses, “you have as much to lose as the rest of us if this thing goes sideways.” He cracks his knuckles and leans down over me with his hands on the arm-rest of the mag-chair. The chair dips under his weight and rocks until the stabilizers kick in. I don’t need to see the purple vein throbbing in his forehead to know that Parker is stressed to the gills. I can smell his musty breath and the ripe funk of desperation on his skin. “In fact, I’d say you have more to lose, don’t you?” he says.

I turn to the side and spit a glob of blood on the floor. Then I glare back at Parker, refusing to give him the satisfaction of looking scared. He blinks first and turns away.

Andy, his wild-eyed little brother, takes his place in front of me.

“Oh yes, Vic. We know all about you. What you’ve done. What you’ve been up to. We know

everything. You may have been able to fly under the Temple's radar, but not ours."

He's a weasely little piece of shit. I give him a deep look right into his shifty eyes, but I can't tell if he's bluffing or not. As if he's reading my mind, he gives me a condescending pat on the cheek. "And before you try to convince yourself that I'm bluffing, maybe you want me to remind you about that little back-alley info session you had with that coder from Temple security a couple months back. Or the little remote surveillance job you pulled on the Armory."

Okay, so I'm busted. I've been doing some of my own detective work. Of course, if they knew how much I really know and what I've been up to the past few months, I'm pretty sure I'd be face down and mangled in a ditch right now, instead of zip-tied to this relatively comfy chair.

Andy's grinning at me with his dopey crooked-toothed smile like he's just beat my full house with a royal flush.

The woman tells him to back off. He hesitates a minute but then joins his brother and the five other guys behind him.

The woman's name is Tally. She's on the tall side and broad-shouldered with dark brown hair hanging down in long braids on either side of her head. Even if we weren't conditioned to let women walk all over us, she's the kind of female who'd

inspire a certain amount of passiveness anyway. She has dark eyes, a face full of sharp angles, and a “don’t screw with me” aura from head to toe.

She’s technically the one who gave me the Marion assignment a few days ago. Parker may have spoken the actual words, but she’s the one who was calling the shots.

She paces in front of me and shakes her head. “We’ve got ourselves a delicate situation here, Vic. This plays out one of two ways: things go perfectly, or else they go nowhere. Ned threw a monkey wrench into the works, but, believe it or not, it may have made the works run a little smoother. But we need to know what you’ve got.”

The men behind her look fidgety. One of the guys is a giant. Must be close to seven feet tall, with shoulders as broad across as a billiard table. He’s antsy, like he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do with his massive body crammed into this crowded conference room. The other men are milling around, probably itching for a fight or at least *some* kind of action. This is supposed to be their show. But despite Parker’s planning and Andy’s knowledge, Tally is clearly the one in charge. A woman in a room full of men is always the boss.

Of course, it won’t be that way for long. I may be tied down, but I also know that I’m the most important person in the room. I’m the key the

Inciters need to get into the Temple and into the code. I've got the knowledge, and I've got the skills they need to succeed. I've also got a secret or two.

Andy was right about a lot of things, but they don't know everything. They're not holding as many cards as they think, and I still have a half-dozen aces up my sleeve.

Parker stands next to Tally and starts asking me questions about the intel I gathered. He wants to know everything I heard back at Persephone's. What did Marion say about the new code? What does it mean for our implants? Did they say anything about the Armory? Any chance the Tracers are onto us? It's a good old-fashioned grilling, and I can't help but admire him for it. He can't shake me, though. I've handled way worse than him. But I know he wants to impress Tally, so I throw a little quiver into my voice just so he thinks he's doing well.

"They're still piggybacking off the old system," I tell him. "Right now, the implants operate on the volter model. They're going to switch to a eukaryotic chromosomal response model."

"Meaning?"

I let out a sigh. "Meaning that in two days, our brains all go bye-bye. The implants will go cold, and we'll be completely programmable sheep with genetically-installed subroutines that our lady friends in the Temple will use to keep us under total

and permanent evolutionary control. The DNA codes we're born with won't mean shit."

One of the men whose name I don't know steps forward and asks what the hell I mean by "permanent."

I look up at him. He's got a beat-up yellow shirt on and a pair of matching fluorescent yellow pants that look about three sizes too small. My brain is still marginally foggy from getting bashed in the head, and it's like I'm looking at the guy through wet glass. "I'm talking about permanent control," I say. "Not legal control. Not political control. If this happens, they'll have molecular control. They'll unwrap that double-helix of yours and put it back together any old way they want."

Parker tells the guy to step back. He's given up on trying to sound menacing. Now he seems like he just wants a few answers and maybe some stability in the room.

"That's it?" he asks me.

"That's it," I say. "Ned rolled in before I could get the rest."

"Bullshit. What about validation codes, firewall breach...?"

"There's no way he could've known that Ned would jump the gun," Tally growls, her voice taking on this feral tone that shouldn't arouse me but does.

I let out a chuckle in spite of my predicament. *Jump the gun.* Funny choice of words.

People used to debate about whether guns were the problem or the solution. After Athena's Law, it stopped mattering anymore. When the machines made the calculus, when our society was analyzed through numbers and statistics, it became pretty damn obvious that we men were the problem.

Women? They were the solution. It was the simplest thing in the world, and even if it wasn't, it didn't matter. There was no way to fight algorithms. No protesting numbers, because numbers were the king, queen, and the lord of the universe. No one questioned digits, because to do so was to beg for a prison sentence or worse. DNA used to be the ultimate code. That was before binary code took over the world, and we turned ourselves over to ones and zeroes. Once we started letting computers solve all our problems, all our problems were magically solved. Or so we thought.

Who'd have predicted that the Y-chromosome would be declared a threat to humanity?

But that's all in the past, and right now I'm getting a good dose of the present. I need to focus here, or this could get worse in a hurry.

Tally tells Parker to relax. I don't know her that well, but I'll admit that I'm glad she's sticking up for me. A guy like me in a group like this could get taken down pretty easily. I'm okay in a fair fight, but the Inciters are like a bunch of beaten down dogs. You don't know if they're going to whimper

away with their tail between their legs or turn around and chew your face off.

Tally pulls a knife the size of my forearm from a sheath slung to her thigh. She puts one hand on the arm rest of the mag-chair and spins me 180 degrees. I feel the whoosh of the blade as she slices the zip ties off my wrists and spins me back around. When she leans over me, that feeling of arousal hits me again, but I shake it off. I need as much blood in my brain right now as I can get.

“She’s right about Ned,” I say as I rub the red, raw grooves in my wrists. Reaching into my pocket, I fondle the silver ring that I keep permanently buried there. Like this building, it’s a relic of the past. It’s got the image of a gun stamped on its face. Gramp gave it to me a long time ago, along with the pea coat. Told me not to forget that fucking someone else is always better than getting fucked.

I never really understood what he meant then, but I sure as hell get it now.

Of course, my mom told me not to listen to him. “It takes a real dick to be a true asshole,” she liked to say.

I keep the ring as a reminder that the man you never thought you’d turn into is only just around the corner. I could be a true asshole by now if I let myself. Hell, there are probably a good number of people in the world who think I’m already there.

All I know is that my intentions are noble. Kind

of.

I look up at Tally. “I was only with Ned for ten minutes in the Grind,” I say. “You’re the ones who knew him. You shoulda known he’d go off. Shoulda stopped the sketchy bastard.”

Parker shakes his head, scowls, and plops down into another one of the floating black chairs with the padded arms.

Tally, meanwhile, is pissed. She’s pacing, and her fists are little knuckled wrecking balls.

Andy is cowering in a far corner. Guy looks half-nervous, half-furious, and all crazy. He’s chewing his fingernails like his hands are corn on the cob. “What’ll happen to the poor bastard?” he asks. “He didn’t hurt anyone. They shouldn’t kill him.”

The kid goes from zero to psychotic in less than six seconds. I’ve got to say, the thought of him with access to guns kind of scares the shit out of me.

Tally unclenches her wrecking balls and sits down hard on the edge of the table. She’s tall, but so is the table, and her feet swing like she’s an infant in a high chair. Pretty funny to think that this “infant” is the most powerful person in this place.

“Nothing good will happen to him, I promise you,” she says.

“The Grind?” the man in yellow asks.

“And then some.”

“You think they’ll give him MPA?” The man’s

voice rises in pitch, betraying his fear. It's like he's picturing Ned in his mind's eye, having a waking nightmare over the whole thing.

“Count on it.”

Medroxyprogesterone Acetate. It's not a killer, but it'll suck out whatever life your balls have left in them—after the mandatory injections, I mean. Messes up your sex drive, but who cares? You're not supposed to have one anyway, not if the other drugs are working their magic.

If by some miracle he doesn't spend the rest of his days in the Grind, any time Ned goes near a gun, or anything else that could possibly be used as a weapon, the Tracers' sensors will go off like it's the Fourth of July in the old country. It'll be red alert, battle stations, and all hands on deck. One push of a button, and they'll be able to make Ned shit his pants from the other side of town before he melts into a puddle of organs and eyeballs.

The huge guy shoulders his way in front of me. I notice he's careful not to touch Tally when he walks past her. Even by accident. He knows what side his bread's buttered on.

“Let's not panic,” he says. His voice is a resonant instrument. “Ned went off the rails, but all the logistics aren't compromised, and Victor still has plenty to offer.”

The guy is a gigantic freak of nature. Looks like a superhero but sounds like a scientist.

He starts ticking off points on his banana-sized fingers one at a time like a grocery list. “Victor’s been in the Grind. He’s been in the Temple. He knows their routines. He’s reported on the NTS doctrines. He’s a journalist. Heck, he was the only man allowed to comment in Parliament on the proposed amendments to the gun registration laws when they became a thing.”

“Lot of good that did,” I say. I’m still pissed that the Temple Matrons made a lot of noise about letting me talk, and then didn’t spend a second listening to anything I had to say.

“You did all right,” Tally says. She hops back down from the table. “It’s not about getting anything done. It’s about finding the flaws. We need to know where they’re vulnerable.”

“They’re not vulnerable,” I say. “We are.”

Parker has been shuffling around the room and is now planted at the far end of the table. His white shirt sleeves are rolled up to the elbows, and his black pants are clean and pressed. The rest of us are a pretty scruffy bunch with cobbled together outfits like a band of post-apocalyptic misfits. Him? He looks like he could be a CEO if it were allowed. But it’s not, of course.

He drums his fingers on the table. “The political stuff is an illusion. It doesn’t count, so why focus on it? The real power’s in the Temple.”

Andy spits a fingernail across the room. “But

even without the tech, they've still got Parliament and the Tracers..."

Tally cuts him off. "Maybe a decade ago. But they rely on the system so much now that if we knock that out, we knock them out." She stands and walks over to the window. The glass dimmers are off, and the light streaming in turns her whole body black in silhouette. "Parker. You know the tech. Victor knows the people. I can get you inside. Maybe. But we need to get this shit right. No more Ned-style fuckups."

Tally walks back towards me, and I can see her face more clearly now. She's attractive. Great hip-to-waist ratio. I'm not supposed to notice stuff like that, but I can't help it. When you're about to walk into the lion's den, you tend to check your gender politics at the door.

Andy crosses the room until he's practically nose-to-nose with her. "I can go. I know tech, too."

"Sorry, kid. You know the rules. No groups of three men or more." She pats his crotch as she walks past him. Not because she's attracted to him, but because she knows she can get away with it. It's a power play, plain and simple. Like an alpha wolf gnashing its teeth until its beta rolls over to expose a submissive belly. "The three of you'd get tagged in two seconds, and next thing you know, we're on the radar of some Tracer with a gun a whole lot bigger than yours."

Andy scowls but doesn't say anything.

Tally stands in front of me and tells me to get up, so I do.

"Listen," she says, "we're the good guys here."

I give her a smirk and hope she doesn't use it against me later on. "That's what all the Mannists say."

"I'm no Mannist, asshole. I just don't like top-down politics. I don't care if I'm technically at the top."

I stand up and look directly into her eyes. "You're talking about a full-on, balls out invasion of the Temple."

"Right."

"And a raid on the Armory?"

"Full-on."

"In two days?"

"Give or take," she says.

"Mass distribution of weapons, implant overrides, total takedown of the Tracers, and implementation of martial law from the Core to the Cultivate under—who? You and these six limp-dicks?"

Tally laughs. "Well, there are more than just us. A lot more. But yeah, that's pretty much the idea."

I shake my head. "It's suicide."

"It's sacrifice."

"You'll get these guys killed," I tell her, "and you'll get your reprimand and go home and live

your life. You don't have as much to lose as we do."

I've crossed the line, and I know it. You don't talk down to a woman. That's male survival 101. I know the rules. I've seen this thing metastasize from its early days. I've reported on it and even taught some history classes at the New School. But the guys in this room are old school, and old school is contagious. I can feel myself getting split down the middle: stand up and be a man or sit down and be a human being. Tally makes the choice for me and pushes me back into the chair. I must outweigh her by a good seventy-five pounds, but when you're conditioned to let yourself get pushed around, size stops mattering quite as much.

"You've done a lot of good for these guys," Tally says, "and for all of us who don't feel like trading one master for another."

"I'm not the savior of this movement."

"Vic, my friend. There are no more saviors. Only survivors. We're not asking you to save the world. Just help us tilt it back onto its proper axis."

I get ready to say something, but she cuts me off with a raised hand.

"This isn't about putting men back in charge. I'm not doing this so I can spend my nights worrying about getting date-raped or shot by some woman-hating hick."

Parker is standing next to her now, and Tally

nods to him.

“What can I say, Vic?” he says with a shrug. “She’s right. We can suffer as slaves, or we can take back what’s ours.”

“Better to rule in Hell...,” I say.

Parker looks confused. But Tally comes to his rescue.

“...than to serve in Heaven,” she replies. “Quoting Milton won’t help you, Vic. You can’t rationalize your way out of this. It’s not about Heaven or Hell. It’s shit or get off the pot.”

I stand up again and wait for someone to knock me back down. But no one moves. “Fine,” I say. “I’m off the pot.”

I spot my coat, crumpled in a ball in the corner. I grab it and head for the door.



I STARE out the window as the Desmond zips and darts along the glistening system of tunnels and skyways that thread throughout the four rings of the NTS. We've got another ten minutes on the mag-way before we'll arrive at my entrance to the Temple, the massive, half-mile-high double-helixed tower that twists like a giant chrome and synth-steel strand of DNA straight up into an often clear sky. Probably the last patch of blue sky in the world.

Jutting into that sky from the top of the tower is

the giant saucer-shaped collection of glass-walled offices known as the Command Center. Above that is the Custodial Needle, a giant antenna that houses all the monitoring systems that keep the NTS safe and operational. Which is to say that the entire central Temple, seen from a healthy distance, looks like a twisted, sinewy silver arm with a fat chrome and glass fist giving a giant, skinny middle finger to the world.

The two Temple legs sit on a monstrous cylindrical base at the center of the NTS where the three Triads of the Core meet up. The Temple itself towers over the Core, the 65 square-mile urban municipality where most of us work, attend the Academy, or, if you're a man who steps out of line, waste away in the notorious Grind. Just outside of the Core is the second ring of the NTS which contains the nine parishes known as the Bricks. It's where most of the men live, and it's where Dec will never wind up if I have anything to say about it.

Dec and Mom and I live in the third ring: the Rez. We're in Clio, the fourth and honestly most boring and middle-class of the nine residential precincts.

Then there's a whole other group of women out in the Cultivate. That's the fourth and outer ring of the NTS, the wide band where we grow food, produce energy, and construct all of the tech that keeps the system operational. I work at the Temple

where the tech gets designed; the Cultivate is where it all gets built.

Ours is an expansive world spread out six hundred miles to the east from the Temple to the ocean, four hundred miles west, and nearly five-hundred miles inland in every other direction. It's sprawling but connected. From one of the surveillance satellites we put up years ago, the entire nation looks like a meticulously-designed target that takes up what used to be southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States. The lush green of the Cultivate forms the outer ring, followed by the Rez, then the Bricks, and then the Core with the Temple smack-dab in the bull's eye.

Up close, though, it looks nothing like that. Funny how you can get so close to something that you can no longer see it. I've got my little space carved out in the world. The Core is where I work, and, if it weren't for Dec, it would be the center of my universe.

The Desmond slides to a silent stop at Leg 2, Gate 108 of the Temple. Sometimes, I have the Rocars drop me off at one of the hundreds of parks that encircle the tower. On the outside, it's idyllic. Trees, streams, benches. Everything manufactured to look like nature, to make one relax into the false sense that they're living in Eden without a care in the world. Original sin hasn't yet been discovered, and the whole world is chirping birds and flowing

water.

In reality, it's hi-res recordings of birds and flowing water. But just because it's not real doesn't mean it's not important.

On a non-cynical day, I like to head outside and sit, inhaling the piped-in clean air. I pretend I'm in another world, one where I'm not responsible for preventing its collapse. On a bad day, I walk through the grounds, all too aware of their artificiality in the shadow of the Temple, fully aware that it's all designed to convince us women that we live in Utopia.

As for Hell? Well, that's somebody else's problem.

I have every tool at my disposal to shut the whole system down if I were to choose to do so. I could set things back fifty years in the blink of an eye, switch off mag-power to the perimeter walls at the edge of the Cultivate, kill the city's eyes.

I wouldn't, though. I know what kind of mayhem would ensue. I would never wish that sort of devolution on my gender. For that matter, I wouldn't wish it on men, either. Thing is, I know what's out there. I know where things were going before the Affirmation. Not one of us would have survived it. Not even the men with the guns.

The world as we now know it relies on my hard shell, on the conviction that nothing can break me, nothing can persuade me to surrender my belief

that we're currently living in the best of all possible worlds. I'm not worried about a coup. There's only one way that anyone could compromise the system. But there's no way they know about it.



FOR THE NEXT few hours I mill about the oval pod that I call my office, situated deep in the middle of the Temple. It sits at the heart of everything, the center of the entire NTS. Sometimes it feels like I make the blood pump to the nation's organs. One wrong step, one small clog in an artery, and this whole place could suffer for it.

That's a lot of pressure. But I'm up for it.

Usually.

The holo-door pings. Two buzzes, a pause, then three more.

Harper.

I gesture in the air and the door dematerializes to let her in. She sidles up behind me as the door rematerializes behind her. Other than me, my boss is the only person allowed in the lower-level pod that I call my office. The only one who ever sets eyes on my monitors. And even then, it's only when I *want* her to see what I'm doing.

"You're working on the update, I take it?" she asks. The boss is already staring over my shoulder

at the screen of schematics hovering in the air above my work station. Harper's tight-cropped silver hair gives her the hard, angry-mannequin look that she loves so well. If she could find a plastic surgeon who could make her look like she was literally made of stone, she'd employ her in a heartbeat. She thrives on hardness. It's her way of rebelling against the old beauty norms of decades past. Softness? Youth? Harper spits on them. For her, "pretty" equals "fragile." It's not a good thing.

"The new system is more reliable," I tell her. "Much more specific. All but flawless, if I do say so myself."

My hands skim the air, and the schematic twists and morphs to follow suit. A flick of my finger. A slight twist of my wrist. A series of eye-blinks. It's an intricate dance, and not everyone knows the steps. I've had Tracers-in-training in and out of the Security Department's Coding Complex. Some of them have been brilliant techies, geneticists, coders, and even top-rated hackers. But they always treat the interface like it's all about control, like they're generals with an army of code that's just waiting to be commanded. They direct, it obeys. They program, it responds. They input, it outputs. But that's not how Temple security works. It's not how any of this works. At this level, programming is a partnership. You have to think of the code as a living organism. It responds to touch. It feels. It

approaches. It hurts. It recoils. It's more of a partner to be loved than an instrument to be played.

It's only a little after nine, but I've been engaged in this particular dance for a couple of hours already, getting this little presentation for the boss ready to go. But now that I'm giving her a demo, I'm all too aware that it looks pretty underwhelming. No wonder Harper never gives me pats on the head or tells me how devilishly clever I am when she looks at my work. To her, what I do is just a pile of coded gibberish on a floating screen. To me it's da Vinci. The *Mona-freaking-Lisa*. I'm a silent genius, and I know it. It's why they pay me the big bucks.

Then again, even geniuses screw up from time to time.

"Okay, but reliable how?" she asks.

"The old software only studied facial features," I explain to her in the simplest terms I can muster. "That made it useful for confirmed identifications only if the subject was facing the camera. It works okay when there are lots of drones floating around. But the new program identifies the subject from every angle, even from the back, even in the dark. By the swirl of his hair, texture, color. There's a lot more, too. It'll be able to I.D. a guy a block away based on his weight distribution and the pronation of his ankle. It corrects for passage of time, male pattern baldness, though that's not too prevalent

now, what with men being depleted of testosterone. Anyhow, it maps skull shape, scars, you name it. I basically get inside them and analyze their genetic makeup, without so much as a drop of their blood.”

Harper’s face relaxes into a rare moment of pseudo-pleasure, her stern expression melting into the very softness she disdains. “Good work. This is exactly what we need, especially after last night’s debacle. Short of implanting cameras inside every man’s irises, this is about as close as we’ve come to full voyeurism. Actually, make a note, would you? I’d like you to explore the iris thing.”

She issues the command so easily, like it’s the best thing in the world that men have zero privacy. In a few days, they’ll have far less than zero. They’ll be ours to manipulate, ours to mould. Blank slates, ready to be turned into a gender of puppets for our own personal use.

“I’m assuming the eyes—the drones and so on—will have immediate access to the updates?” she asks. “I don’t want to see a repeat of last night’s unfortunate business.”

I nod, grinding my teeth together. Of course they will. But Harper still insists on giving me the order, just to let me know who wears the pants in this pod. “In a few minutes I’ll upload the update.” I hesitate, then continue. “But let me clarify something: last night wasn’t a problem. Mika took the perp down without any issue; he never stood a

chance. The gun was disabled, of course. I don't know how would-be assailants don't understand these days that they'll never get a shot off."

"Because they may someday, Marion," she retorts, like I'm the one who's being stubborn. "If they get their hands on an older weapon, or if there's a glitch in your system—"

Oh my God. I'd roll my eyes if she wasn't staring into them in challenge. "The guns old enough to be useable are all accounted for, Harper. And most of the ones that aren't would be corroded to shit by now from being buried, anyhow. They're antiques, best displayed in a museum. The rest are in the Armory, which is all but impenetrable. They're no threat to us."

She waves her hand at me like I'm an annoying gnat buzzing around her head, rather than the top tech specialist in the entire Temple. "Doesn't matter. Last night was too close. I don't like a man feeling empowered enough to confront a Tracer, regardless of whether he has a gun or a butter knife. I saw Mika's footage; the bastard thought he was doing something incredible. I don't need to tell you that confident men are dangerous. There's no room for that sort of dynamic in the NTS."

"Dynamic? Equality, you mean." This time I do roll my eyes.

Sort of.

"Come on," she says, "you know as well as I do

that there's no such thing as equality between the sexes. Either they take the power and lord it over us, or we hold onto it. If they take it, we become weak. It's a simple equation. You know this. You've read your history books. It's not a myth that men want to be back on top."

"It doesn't matter. The system doesn't allow for..."

Harper puts a hand up to stop me. Jesus, she's really enjoying treating me like a trained dog this morning. "No more. I don't want to hear it. No system is infallible. The guy, Ned—he thought he could pull one over on you. Maybe the twat just wanted to stir up trouble. Maybe he wanted to inspire others to follow in his footsteps after he got thrown into the Grind. Or maybe he's a distraction, tossed into the mix to make us blink. Whatever the case, I suspect there's a reason he did it all in plain sight. I know how these fools work." She takes a long sip of her coffee, like she's adding a punctuation mark to her long-winded rant.

"I'll be vigilant, I promise," I tell her.

"And the implant protocols?"

I let out a sigh. That's a whole other issue. They keep calling it a "tweak" to the existing monitoring system, but let's face it, it's a total overhaul. Control requires force. And force means me. Once we've embedded the implant protocols into the men's DNA, the whole idea of force will become a

thing of the past. We'll have genetic control on the molecular level. First, no guns. Then, no rights at all. In two days, if things go right, we Tracers may be out of a job.

"It'll be ready," I promise.

"I'll let you get back to it, then," she says.

She's no idiot. She knows I'm stewing about all this, and that means I'm best left alone.

She's about to walk out the door when she spins around. "By the way, let me know when you've got the update on the new flyers."

With that, she leaves, the door sealing behind her.

"Shit," I mutter. I'd totally forgotten about the broken bugs that I was supposed to fix. Maybe Harper's right to get on my case. Maybe I've been slacking off a little lately. Damn it, I hate it when she makes a good point.

I lean forward and speak low into the stale air.

"Wasps."

In the air before me, a translucent screen springs to life and immediately, a series of images appears. Blueprints, drawings, photographs of intricate, beautiful insects. I call them my little friends.

Problem is, my little friends are a little broken.

I've got a lot of work to do.



I SPEND the bulk of the day working on my new surveillance code, tweaking and fine-tuning it to the point where an eye can predict what a two-week old puppy will look like once it's grown to full size, based solely on its fur patterns and the projected growth of its skeletal structure. This will go out in the next update of ocular software. Naturally, I'll be updating my own software tonight to give me the same power of foresight.

One of the perks of being in charge of the tech wing of the Temple is that I get to play with all the new toys first.

By three o'clock, I'm considering taking off early to work from home when my wrist-reader lets out a harsh buzz. The message that lights up in the air is from Erin. It reads:

Marion, we've found a nest. We need to head out.

Oh, for shit's sake. We're really supposed to go after Inciters right now?

"Crap," I groan. I know what this means. I'll be in the next Desmond to shit-town, guiding a crew of Tracers towards a group of Inciters who may or may not be anticipating us. We'll disable them, someone will drag them away and that'll be that.

It's a job any lower level Tracer trio could perform, but for some reason we've drawn the short straw today.

Before I leave, I upload the new I.D. software to my ocular unit. Every little bit helps. I grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and head up to the lobby, taking stock of my weaponry via a digital readout on a dog tag hanging from the shoulder strap.

Twitch-stick. Check.

Wasps. Check. I haven't had time to tweak them much, so here's hoping they don't malfunction today.

U.V. tech, just in case. Check.

In the good old days, someone in my position would have worn a bulletproof vest. But no guns means no bullets, which means no need for bulky body armor. That's one small blessing to be grateful for, I guess.

I leave my office and hop into the conveyor, which zips me two-hundred and twelve floors down to ground-level and the Tracer-dispatch hub. While I'm waiting for the other two members of my team, I reach into my shoulder pack and crack open a small box, checking its contents. Two first-generation Wasps lie dormant inside, awaiting my command. They're my babies. Perfectly designed, inordinately quick. They may look like little flying insects, but they're strong as a horse, quiet as a

mouse, and relentless as a shark. They're brilliant, if I do say so myself.

Other than their sometimes glitchy software. That's next on my agenda. I'll focus on it tomorrow morning. Right now, though, I've got a nest to take down.



THE THREE OF US get from the Temple to the 3rd Parish in less than twenty minutes.

The nest is in an office building like so many that surround it. *Papyrus Corporation*, reads the sign out front. It used to be a paper company, but spoiler alert: there are no paper companies anymore. Paper hasn't been a thing for decades, as the half-shattered sign can attest. There are some things from the pre-Affirmation days that I could see missing, but paper isn't one of them. It's a 2-D relic in a 3-D world. Nowadays, information gets transferred at the speed of light. I don't think there's ever been such a thing as "the speed of paper," unless it involved men in ill-fitting shorts hauling ass from one house to the next with a giant sack slung over one shoulder.

Well, even if the products are gone, a lot of the old buildings have stuck around.

As we step out of the Rocar in front of the

crumbling and nearly-abandoned building, I press my middle finger into the palm of my right hand and squeeze, looking for a reading.

The scan tells me the building's being leased by a group called Terra Corp. Nothing particularly shady there, except for the fact that they're delinquent on their heating bill. A lot of places like this in the Bricks get a pass. Sure, we may not allocate totally equal resources between the Rez and the Bricks, but that doesn't mean we want men living in total slum conditions.

"They're on the twentieth floor," says Erin as we advance towards the doors. "Maybe twenty-first."

My eyes move up the façade, like I'm going to be able to see what's going on. The Inciters are probably behind frosted glass, anyhow. That's usually the way. They know well enough to hide their faces from curious drones.

A man sits at a service desk just inside the front entrance. When we walk in, he sees our suits and instantly stands and raises his hands over his head. I advance and lean over the desk, scanning for contraband. Nothing, not even a plastic butter knife. Good boy. Submissive boy.

"You're fine," I tell him, quickly assessing him. He's got no history of rage, no nothing. He's just a guy looking to pay for food and shelter. A *Bobber*. A man without purpose, who never advances or

recedes.

“No one comes in, no one leaves,” I tell him. He nods silently. As if he’s going to do anything if someone tries to get past him.

We take the elevator to eighteen. No point in alerting our Inciter friends to our presence. When the doors open, we walk down the hall in silence. Having sound-suppressors built into our boots has gotten us into and out of some pretty sketchy places over the years. Strange to think that in my grandmother’s time, these halls would have been teeming with women in pencil skirts and blistering, uncomfortable pumps. Men in suits, making lewd comments despite the fact that they had wives waiting for them at home. Fortunately, those days are long gone. Now all I see are closed doors with I.D. plates on them. “Office 18-05.” “Maintenance.” “Conference Room B.” There’s even the old men’s and women’s washrooms. They really pulled a fast one on us back then: divide and conquer.

“No heat imprints on this floor,” I say to the other two. “Floor’s clean.”

“Not surprising. This whole building is a dead zone,” Erin replies, “which is probably why they’re using it.”

I pull open the door to the stairwell and we march two flights up to the twentieth floor in silence. I’m grateful for the high-tech black

uniforms, speckled with sensors that we wear on these missions out. Sure, I look like I'm in a motion-capture suit, but it's comfortable at least, and it'll help keep me alive.

"Open," I say in a hard whisper when we reach our floor, and Mika obeys. Extracting the small box from my bag, I crack it open and release the two Wasps, which go buzzing into the hallway as the door shuts again. They know their destination better than I do.

I push the small earpiece into my right ear and wait.

"Anything?" asks Erin a few seconds later.

"Activity in one of the conference rooms," I reply. "I'm not sure which, but they're on this floor." I can hear the faint sound of male voices, but no specific words. "Enhance," I hiss at the small insects. Immediately the volume cranks up to an audible level.

I hear a deep voice. "Fine," it says, "I'm off the pot."

It's an all too familiar voice, one that makes my heart accelerate its beat pattern in my chest. For a moment I freeze, trying to listen to the conversation, but the Wasps have gone glitchy again, which means that all I get is some garbled audio. Damn it, why couldn't this assignment have come tomorrow? One more day with my flyers, some lines of code, and some precision engineering

tools, and I'd be hearing every word like it was being spoken right into my brain.

"What's going on?" hisses Mika. I don't blame her for being impatient. But I'm still trying to listen. Trying to grab hold of that voice and hang on for dear life. I'm not supposed to react to men. Not supposed to have sudden emotional reactions, especially. But this is an exception I'm—*almost*—happy to make.

"Marion!" Erin says too loudly. "What the hell?"

"Sorry," I say, yanking the earpiece out. "The software's borked. We'll have to advance without help from the bugs."

"We're supposed to find out what they want before going in."

"It doesn't matter," I say, pushing the door open. "We'll just ask."

I stride down the hall, following the Wasps' signal towards one of the conference rooms at the end of the hall. I'm determined to get in before anyone else does. I want to make sure no one shocks Vic.

I want first dibs.

"Light 'em up," I direct my flyers. "He's mine."



I START WALKING towards the door, trying hard to make my knocking knees look like a swagger. I've gone three steps when the room fills with beams of green lights blinking in rapid-fire. Shit. That means Wasps. And that means that somebody just got ears in the room and maybe eyes, too.

Tally drops a violent gasp, which tells me that we've got serious trouble. The NTS has eyes everywhere. But they don't always have the best vision. That's conducive to sneaking around and joining up with a major rebellion. It's not so good

when it comes to knowing if you're invisible and safe or if the Tracers have locked you down and are closing in. There's nothing scarier than a predator with sketchy eyesight. The green lights could be a random Wasp recon. Or they could be a sign that Tracers are around but that they don't know we're here. Or they could mean the worst-case scenario: Tracers are in the building, maybe even on this floor, and they're making a bee-line to this very room. I'm afraid of their weapons. But the sense of uncertainty they inspire is just as deadly. I've done my stretch in the Grind. A lot of guys have. And their stories all start the same way: "I was just standing around minding my own business when the room went nuts with these beams of green lights and the next thing you know, I'm zapped all to shit, and I wake up in here." Ned's probably telling his version of it right now.

As for me, I've got no interest in telling that story. But right now, we seem pretty cornered. Sure, the old office buildings are tempting hideouts. Lots of space, lots of dark corners and sealed off levels. They're a lot like me: not a lot of female activity and doing just enough business to stay marginally relevant while the NTS decides whether or not to tear us down. A great opportunity to hide in plain sight, right in the middle of the Bricks and right under the noses of the Tracers. At the moment, though, hiding in plain sight doesn't feel like the

most brilliant plan in the world.

The Inciters are known for a lot of things. Bravery is one. Brains isn't. And standing here watching the men scrambling around, ducking behind furniture, and bumping into each other in a blind panic, I can see why.

The green lights start strobing. The pulse is meant to identify and disorient us. The good news is, it seems that the Tracers haven't confirmed our exact location or their entry plan just yet. If they had, they wouldn't need the Wasps to act as eyes. They'd just waltz in, snag and bag us. I figure we've got less than a minute before they synch their readers to the Wasps' signals and triangulate our position.

"You've got to get out now!" Tally shouts. She doesn't say "We." Sure, she'd get pinched too, Mannist or not. But she's got two X-chromosomes, and that goes a long way in the NTS.

Andy is dancing in place like he's about to piss all over the boardroom. "Where the living heck are we supposed to go?" he squeals. He's near tears and has a good-sized snot bubble inflating in his left nostril. The guy is half-baby, half-psychopath. A terrifying combination. He rushes over to the door like he's going to open it, but the giant banana-fingered guy grabs him by the scruff of his neck and hauls him back into the room.

"Bad idea," the giant grumbles. He points to a

faint red glow embedded in the wall around the door frame. “The door’s got a suppressor built in. Break that seal, and the Tracies’ll lock down on our position and be in here before we have a chance to finish this nice conversation.”

Parker meanwhile has scooted to the far side of the room where he’s sliding his hand along the wall. He shouts, “This way!” and smacks something on the wall with his palm. A panel no more than about three or four-feet high and built into the base of the wall slides open, and Parker and Tally grab me from each side and push me through with the rest of the men right behind. The panel slips shut behind us with a breathy whoosh, and everything goes pitch black. I can feel the crush from the other men behind me as we scramble in a crouch down a long access corridor that runs between the walls. It’s something else these old buildings and I have in common: we’re full of surprises.

Tally and Parker lead us through the dark maze of twists and turns. The corridor walls are ice-cold, and they suddenly narrow, forcing us from a crouch into a crawl. I’ve heard about these old ventilation shafts that the Inciters upgraded into a labyrinth of escape tunnels. I always figured they were just rumors passed along by the Inciters themselves to make it look like they had plans and that knew what they were doing. Now I’m smack-dab in the middle of it, hustling towards either liberation or

death. A rat crawling through a maze of rumors.

I can hear the echo of the Tracers' voices coming from somewhere behind us. Or next to us. Or is it in front of us? Or above us? We get only a few slivers of light from small breaks in the metal seams as we hustle along. I have illuminators built into my wrist-reader, but I don't dare activate them. The Tracers can pick up on pretty much any unauthorized use of bio-tech anywhere outside of the Core. So, I clamp my eyes tight and pop them open quick, hoping my strained retinas will gather up any lingering wisps of light. I'm disoriented as hell. My knees are taking a pounding, and my heart and lungs are fighting to see which one can leap out of my body first. I take a series of deep breaths to re-center myself.

I'm just getting a slight sense of my bearings when the bottom falls out from underneath me. Literally.

The corridor floor suddenly slants down on a steep angle, and all of us go tumbling into a cramped dark abyss. I've got Tally and Parker under me, Andy wedged in next to me, and the other four guys on top of the pile and forcing out any air my strained lungs had managed to draw in.

"It's okay," Parker whispers. He worms his way out from under me, and the rest of the men come sliding down behind us. "We're still in the access tunnel. Just a floor down."

“And how is that okay?” Andy hisses. I can feel his hot breath on my neck.

I stand up as best as I can, my back pressed hard against the top of the crawl space. Parker tells us we may have a few dozen more of these ramp slides ahead of us if we hope to reach the ground level and make our escape. Sure enough, a few minutes later, with my knees and back creaking like splintered wood, we hit another slide and down we all go, a fifteen-foot slide into the next abyss, crashing into one another in a heap of sweaty bodies. The pattern goes on for what feels like hours in the pitch darkness. Crouch. Run. Zig. Zag. Slide. Crouch. Run. Zig. Zag. Slide. Now I know what a lottery ball feels like.

We’ve got to be nearing ground level. We’d better be. If the Tracers do catch us, there won’t be much left except a pile of bruised, bloodied, and brush-burned corpses.

Up ahead in the dark, Tally calls back for us to hold up.

We screech to a halt, a sweaty tangle of terrified men. Instead of another steeply sloped ramp between the building’s floors, we’ve come to some sort of wall or dead-end. One of the men behind me says, “What the fuck?” and another man, I think it’s the guy in all yellow, shushes him.

Parker whispers for all of us to keep still for a second.

I can feel the other men shifting in the dark, trying to stay quiet while we pant like a pack of overworked sled dogs. Parker reaches back and puts a hand on my shoulder. At first, I think he's trying to console me or calm me down, but instead he leans in close and whispers in my ear that I'm the only part of this mission that matters.

"If me or Andy get tagged," he mutters, "you need to get us a disruptor badge. Stay with Spare. He's got certain skills. He'll take care of you. Tally can take care of herself. The rest of us..."

Tally hushes him, and his voice trails off.

I can just make out Tally's silhouette in the near total darkness. She's got her ear pressed against a wall. She holds up a finger and then nods.

"Listen," Parker says to me in a voice barely above a breath, "there's some shit you're not telling us, and I don't have time right now to get it out of you. We need you to carry this off, and that's all that's keeping you alive right now."

I nod, but I don't think he can see me.

It doesn't matter, though. Tally fidgets with her wrist-reader, and an access panel slides open to reveal an empty office hallway, dusty from disuse. We step out into it, relieved to be able to stand upright like real human beings for a change. I stretch my back, and my spine creaks and pops in happy relief. But that's about all that's happy right now. The hallway is a wretched sight. Wind

blowing in through long-ago shattered windows has pushed piles of rubbish into filthy dunes against the hallway walls. Rats scurry around, apparently not too worried about our presence. I guess they figure they have nothing to fear from a bunch of fellow rats.

Tally and the other men and I hustle in a bunch down the corridor. A quick look through one of the open office doors and out the large, dirt-encrusted window tells me that we've still got to be a good five floors up. Way too high to jump.

Parker points to the end of the hallway. "Freight elevator."

We rush over, and Andy sets about spastically pressing buttons on the obviously-dead panel.

Parker drags him off. "Forget it! This way!"

He leads us to an old corner office. The tables and chairs have lost their grav-supports and now sit derelict on the floor at rakish angles.

"It's one of our backup strategy rooms," Parker says. "This one can get us to street level."

He slaps a spot on the wall, and a panel opens up. *Oh, shit*, I think. Not this again.

Parker notices my hesitation and grins. "Don't worry. No way they've tracked us down here. In two minutes, we'll be long gone."

We start towards the panel, and I'm just prepping myself to breathe a final sigh of relief when all hell breaks loose. The office door

shudders, and the voices of a Tracer squad shout that we've been compromised and for us to give ourselves up. Resourceful little bitches.

In a flash, everyone's screaming "Go! Go!" and I have just enough time to toss my silver ring back into the room before we hustle into the tunnel and down a narrow corridor to a door that Parker shoulders open to reveal a rusted-out metal catwalk and a set of steps dropping down into the darkness.

We hustle down the stairs, smash open the rusted metal door at the bottom, and suddenly we're out in the sunlight and melting into a crowd of pedestrians like butter in a churn.

We've got Parker, Tally, Andy, and the giant banana-fingered man. The rest of the guys are goners. It's too bad. Three more men for the Grind.

This whole place was a death-trap waiting to be sprung. Inciters and their hideouts. What did they expect? Heck, what did any of us expect?

Plain sight? Dumbest hiding place ever.



BY NOW THEY know we're coming. Even as the faulty Wasps make their way back into my bag to tuck themselves away, I can hear the men's animated voices, riled up and frantic. We've tracked the bastards through the entire building, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let them slip through my fingers now. We should have had them twenty floors ago. But they've got this placed rigged up with who knows how many escape routes. Even on their best day, my Wasps can't read some of the suppressor tech running through half

the walls. The Inciters are getting a bit too clever for their own good. I'm trying my best not to take it personally, but they've got me running through this dirty labyrinth of rats, dust, and old offices when I should be back in my sterile pod at the Temple updating all those security protocols for Harper. Or better yet, back home with Dec and Mom and a glass of red wine.

Come on, Marion. Focus.

My team and I follow the last path input from the Wasps down to the fifth floor and up to a big door to one of those old corner offices that once meant status and power. The old natural habitat for a bunch of now-extinct suits. The irony of the Inciters being cornered and powerless in a corner power-office isn't lost on me. I press my cheek to the door, straining to listen, but all I can hear is shuffling. "You've been compromised!" I bellow out in my best *damn you for making this difficult* voice. "Come out within the next five seconds or we'll have no choice but to send the Wasps in." I strategically fail to mention that the little buggers are about as useless right now as dead fruit flies. They can track, but that's about it.

Someone shouts "Go! Go!" like the whole lot of them is going to come tearing out in front of us and somehow get away with it.

Erin sees me take a step back and laughs. "Don't worry. We've got their only exit blocked."

“Fuck!” I hear from somewhere on the inside.

That’s not Vic’s voice. Vic doesn’t panic. He has some incredible adrenaline-suppressing mechanism set deep inside his body that makes him a great—and dangerous—adversary.

Someone else is still moving around the room in a hurry. There’s a clattering of furniture. A man bellows in frustration.

Then silence.

Nobody’s surrendered. Nobody’s talking to me. Nothing’s happening at all.

The three of us standing in the hall look at each other, puzzled. I grab the door handle.

Locked.

“They’ve barricaded themselves in?” asks Mika. “Really?”

“No way,” Erin replies. “They wouldn’t be that stupid. They know they’re caught. I mean, what the hell? Have Inciters gotten more insane?”

“Apparently they have,” I reply with a quick shrug. I don’t really give a crap if they’re locked in. It makes our lives easier, anyhow. It’s not like I can’t open the door in two seconds flat, and once I do, we’ll have them tagged and bagged before they can say “rebellion.” The biggest pain in the ass will be getting a cleanup crew in here to drag their unconscious butts out.

I extract a flame key from my bag and insert it into the lock. Almost instantly, the entire locking

apparatus turns to liquid metal, dripping down the door. Heart pounding, I kick the door open and step into the room.

Three men are standing inside, staring at me. My eyes move from one to the next, then the next, my reader gathering every bit of information that it can even as I freak out silently.

Three Inciters I've never seen before are frozen in place before me, their hands held high. The guy wearing all yellow is even issuing me a shit-eating grin, like he knows what I know and then some. He's way too pleased with himself, though I haven't quite figured out why. He'll sleep in the Grind tonight, and for the next several hundred nights at least.

I want to ask him where Victor is, not to mention the others. How the hell did they pull another Houdini and disappear? The room is a solid box. Windows on one side, all sealed up tight. Dirty white walls everywhere else but the door we came through.

The ceiling is solid, too. I start making my way around the perimeter of the room and tap the walls. No evidence of a vent or a trap door. The floor looks like poured concrete. Not a crack or a scratch.

Ignoring the dumbass's expression, I reach the far wall and slide my fingers over its surface. I can't find a seam, can't find any sign of a door. But

I know it's got to be there. A single set of dingy grey fingerprints tell me so.

"On your knees," Erin says to one of the men. He goes down obediently. I swing around to focus on the back of his head, and my reader kicks in as it's supposed to, telling me everything, the words flowing into my brain.

Dan Simmons.

Twenty-eight.

No violent crimes. Two month-long stays in the Grind for deviance.

Turns out he's a moderate shit-disturber with an appetite for contraband 1980s hardcore porn films. Great. A guy who likes the classics.

The other two are also pretty clean. At least, they were until now.

Well, whatever went down here, there's nothing left in the place. No computers, no projectors. Not a single item except for a silver ring, sitting on the floor at one end of an overturned old-school wooden desk. As Erin and Mika cuff the prisoners, I slip over and grab the ring. A brief glance tells me it's a man's ring, a gun stamped on its surface. I recognize it immediately.

It's Vic's.

The bastard knew I was coming. He and the others left their three buddies behind as decoys.

"How did they get out?" I ask, striding over to stand in front of the prisoners.

The one nearest to me shrugs. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says.

“No? You realize they left you here like you’re worthless, right?” I ask.

“Lady, no one left nothin’,” another one replies. “We’re the only ones here.”

If my Wasps had worked right, I might have gotten video. Footage of the others.

Footage of Vic.

But as it turns out, I have nothing. I’m flying blind, and I’m pissed off.



I WATCH TALLY SPRINT OFF. She waits until she's across the park before she swipes her arm for a Rocar. The car glides up almost immediately, and she slips in without a look back at us. She's a tough one. Disciplined. Smart. In control. And surprisingly bold for someone who's working pretty actively to help take down the system from the inside. I'm surprised she's still low-management at the Temple. Based on what I've seen, she should be running the place.

Her Rocar zips silently away and disappears

into the distance.

That leaves four of us. I feel like I've got a good handle on Parker. The guy's all business, a born leader. His brother Andy is a bit of a wild-card. I've only known him a few days, but he's never had the same personality two hours in a row. Spends half his time as a nervous little mouse in the corner and the other half as a bigger, crazier mouse in the middle of the room. I'm glad it's Parker and Tally taking the lead in this little rebellion of ours. They've got a plan, they're level-headed, and they're relatively cool under pressure. If it had been Andy handling my interrogation, I might've wound up praying to get caught by the Tracers.

I never met the giant banana-fingered guy until tonight. He tells me his name is Spare and sticks out a hand. I shake it, and it's like putting my hand into a rock-filled duffel bag.

"Pleasure," he says in that voice that throbs like the thick string on a cello. "That was some scary shit back there."

"Nothing I care to repeat," I say.

Spare leans down and puts a hand on my shoulder. "We all appreciate what you did back at Persephone's. If this thing is a bomb, you may have just lit the wick. A good way to get hailed as a hero, my friend."

"Or get burned as an idiot," I say with a shrug.

Parker urges us to get going, and we jog for a

couple of blocks through a crowd of pedestrians before we're satisfied that the Tracers and their Wasps aren't still on our tails. We're breathing hard, battered, a little bloody, and covered head-to-toe in grime. But that's not the most conspicuous thing about our little gang. It's the fact that there are four of us. Four men on the street make for a dangerous prospect. Even though our implants and the injections and all the behavioral conditioning are designed to work in tandem to keep us docile and compliant, there's still the fear that runs through the NTS of the mob mentality of males. I remind the guys that, technically, even three of us out and about is enough to get us a citation.

Parker calls out for us to stop, and we screech to halt.

"You're right," he says. "Come on. This way."

Parker leads us across the mag-way, down a side road, and up to the small flight of stone stairs of a building called "The Melodrome." It's one of the V.R. Crash-Pads where some of the better-off men from the Bricks come to decompress and live out programmed lives that are better than their real ones. The sim selections are strictly governed by the NTS. But there are some sketchier places like this that have managed to get away with bootleg V.R. simulations. In those little gaps between injections and updates to the implants, men will skitter off to get themselves plugged in to fantasies

of power and independence. It's mostly sex stuff. Domination. Rape. Some really sadistic shit. I've never worked those, but I did do some off-the-books coding for a bunch of the form-tech simulations. Those were mostly power and escape fantasies. Guys could be truck drivers, boxers, athletes, politicians. I even wrote some gun-sims. That was all cop stuff, soldiers on the battlefield, snipers, school shooter games. Things like that. There are even a few suicide programs that let you end it all with the barrel of a gun in your mouth and a bullet to your virtual brain.

I get the allure, but I've never been a fan of the Pluggers. They're into escaping reality; I'm into changing it.

Ducking into the Melodrome, we encounter a sad scene: a dozen men are sitting on the mag-benches lined up along the perimeter of the foyer. Not one of them looks up when we walk in. Their shoulders are hunched, elbows on their knees, and an air of defeat looms over them like a slow-moving storm cloud. There's space between each of them as if touching, even by accident, might bring the weight of reality crushing down on them. These are men in limbo, a kind of purgatory between the real world of the NTS where they can live and the virtual world of the Crash-Pad where they can be alive. These are men whose despair will be lifted as they each get called in turn to enter one of the little

booths in the sub-basement where they'll step under a neruo-hood and have up to fifteen minutes, depending on how much they're willing to spend, to drive a truck, fight a war, shoot a gun, score a touchdown, molest a kid, kill a woman.

This is exactly what the new protocols and genetic oversights are going to end. In less than two days, the world goes one-hundred percent real. None of us will even have fantasies to fall back on.

As I step into the room with Parker, Andy, and Spare, I make a silent promise to these defeated men that I'll do what I can to take some of the virtual out of their virtual realities.

Parker leads us across the room where an old man sits hunched over at the desk in front of a door by the far wall. He's a pasty guy with a black t-shirt that has "Bless, bless the NTS!" printed in red script dripping with cartoon blood on the front. His veiny, bare arms are covered in the light brown blotches that sometimes remain after tattoo removals. He looks like he could be pushing eighty-years-old, which means he could have been a young frat-boy brander or a biker or a cruiser before the early lib movements got kicked off. He gives us a nod and asks if we want standard. "If not," he says under his breath, "we've got other options." Parker tells him "No thanks" and taps his wrist three times with his index finger.

The old man nods and taps his own wrist twice

with his thumb.

It's an Inciter distress code. Guys use it to I.D. each other, call in favors, or ask for help when a place might be bugged or have Wasps in the neighborhood.

The old man taps a few buttons on the display panel on his desk, and the walls shimmer as the room is cast in a deep golden yellow. The men on the bench don't seem to notice and continue wringing their hands and staring at the floor.

"That'll give us some privacy," the old man says. "But not much."

"How much?" Parker asks.

"We've got about five minutes. Maybe four. After that, the Tracers' alerts will go off and they'll know someone's under the screen and up to no good. And after that..."

"Yeah," Parker says. "We know all too well what's after that."

"So what do you need?"

Parker gestures towards me. "Vic here is off the grid. So are the rest of us. Kind of. But we need to really disappear...I mean really disappear. For 48 hours."

The old man chuckles. "I can't keep anyone off-line that long." He looks up at Spare and then takes a closer look at the rest of us. "Parker, right?"

Parker nods. "That's right. We've done business before."

“Right. Right. Okay. Listen. I’ve got some suppressors here that I can install. That’ll give you 12 hours. A day, max.”

Parker says, “Shit” and gets ready to bring his fist down on the old man’s desk. He takes a breath, though, and tells him we’ll take what he’s got. “It’s Terrence, right?”

“Thomas,” the old man says.

“Right. Thomas.” Parker taps in some input codes on this wrist-reader. “Thomas, I just transferred 1,200 merits to you for a V.R. riverboat cruise for the four of us here. Will that keep your books straight?”

Thomas beams a broad smile. “That’ll do fine,” he says. “Very fine!”

Thomas reaches under his desk and withdraws what looks like a silver stapler from back when there were still things written on sheets of paper that needed to be held together for some reason. He taps it twice, and the gizmo hums to life with flickering blue and purple lights around its base.

“This’ll hurt,” the old man says with an apologetic smile.

“That’s okay,” Parker says. “Everything already hurts.”

We each extend our arms in turn, and the man fires a small photon chip into our forearms.

Spare rubs the spot on his arm and grimaces. “He wasn’t kidding. That really stings.”

“It’s an I.D. blocker,” I tell him. “Now most of the exterior cameras won’t pick us up, and the drones overhead will see us as children.”

Spare laughs. “Children? Me?”

I size him up. “Well, three regular children and one very tall child. It’s not the most reliable tech. But it’s effective in the short-term. And definitely worth the pain.”

The NTS has the better technology. But ours is sneakier. It has to be. We may be engaged in a battle of the sexes, but this is also a battle over who is best at staying ahead of the technology curve. We’ve done okay so far. But the NTS has a lot of tech and a lot of curves.

Parker tells Thomas to give us a minute. Thomas slips out through the door behind his desk, and Parker calls Andy, Spare, and me into a little huddle.

“Andy and I have a few stops to make,” he says to me. “Can you and Spare follow these directions?”

He taps his wrist-reader, and a winding maze of street and mag-way grids glows pale green in the air between us.

I take a look and tell him that yeah, I can get us there. I’ve got one stop to make first, but I don’t say so. Parker flicks the display with his finger and the same pale green grid leaps through cyberspace and comes to a quivering hover over my wrist-

reader. It's a complicated map with some places on it I don't recognize, a few that I do, and some others that I'd just as soon not end up in after dark. At the end of it is some kind of house sitting on its own at the top of a hill. I know the place, but I've never been there. It's in one of those gray-zone areas between the Bricks and the Rez out in the 6th Parish. One of those places the NTS hasn't decided what to do with just yet.

"Listen. We don't know if this'll work," Parker says. He looks back to the front door like he's expecting a Tracer squad to come flying in. "And even if it does work, we don't know if it'll *really* work."

I understand exactly what he means. My pop never hunted, but Gramp did, so I got the stories passed along. Gramp had his famous tall-tale about his run-in with a brown bear when he was salmon fishing out in Old Wyoming. He told it to us years back for the last time at Thanksgiving, the only holiday left after Athena's Law and the last year men were allowed to drink. I was back from school. Pop was home after his surgery. Mom just retired. And Gramp was shitfaced on red wine and old stories. "Big as a tank and fast as a freight train," he said. "Barreled out at me from the tree-line by the river. Nearly shit my waders. I dropped my pole and grabbed my gun before you could say 'dead meat,' and I blew that asshole's head to kingdom

come.” He leaned back with his hands behind his head and his elbows flared out like angel’s wings. “See, the thing about trying to kill something that’s trying to kill you is that you got just the one shot. Things can be real simple that way,” he said. “Real simple. If you let them.” My pop said, “Shouldn’t a been there to begin with,” but it was under his breath, and I’m pretty sure that I’m the only one who heard him.

“One shot,” Parker says. “We kill the head, the body’s got to follow.”

We all nod. If only life were as simple as a story.

The golden shimmer that’s been keeping us camouflaged is starting to fade. Parker calls out to Thomas that we’re done and out of his hair. Thomas comes back in, gives us a wink and a “good luck” wish, and we head back out to the street.

Parker and Andy jog across the street and head south. Spare and I head north. I figure it will take us half an hour on the mag-train and then close to two hours of ducking, hiding, dashing, dodging, and backtracking to get to the rendezvous point that Parker’s laid out. For now, we’re heading in different directions to get to the same place.

Spare looks a little lost, so I step up to lead the way. I don’t know what he knows. But I know the streets. I take us on a jog down into the blue-line

transport tunnel. It's pretty quiet, so there must be a curfew in place. I'm a normal looking guy. Normal height. Normal hair. But Spare is broad as a barn. His hair's a little shorter than regulation, but not enough to draw any real attention. Thanks to the blockers, we should be off the grid's radar for a while, and if we'd done anything to arouse real suspicion, we would have been tagged already. So for now, we should be okay with our heads down and our mouths shut.

We get off the transport at 20th in the Brick's 5th Parish, and now it's the tricky part. We wait until the transport's gone around the bend by Oval Park. Then we run to the end of the terminal, drop down into the mag-track. Then back up on the other side. A mad scramble from there up an access embankment to street level. Cross to the south side. Then drop back down to sub-street level and cut down a winding series of back streets to the edge of the parish. After this, things are likely to get complicated.

And that means we need Xian.



MIKA AND ERIN get the fun job.

Right now, they're in the Tracers' van, riding with the three prisoners towards the Temple for processing. They'll get the three men settled into their unwelcoming temporary home before they get interrogated, processed and—most likely—sent to the Grind.

Meanwhile, I've offered to take a Rocar to the office so I can tell Harper what's gone down this afternoon. My two partners probably think I'm taking a bullet for them, but the truth is, I'm not

that nice. All I'm doing is saving my own ass, and possibly Victor's, too. The only problem is that I'm going to have to lie to my boss in order to do it.

But first, I tell myself as I stare out the window and clench my jaw, I'm going to have to lie to my mother.

"Desmond," I mutter.

"Yes?" replies the car's perpetually charming voice.

"Call home, please." I have no idea why I insist on being polite to a robot when I ask him to do things for me. Maybe it's the stick up his non-existent ass. Maybe it's some built-in human need to feel like I'm not a total twat. Either way, I feel a desire to show some modicum of respect to the machine that could slam me into a concrete wall if it so chose. These A.Is. are plenty of artificial with not a lot of intelligence.

"Calling Michelle." Desmond's words are like velvet coating my ears. How depressing. Other than my son, this stupid car is officially the most charming person in my life.

"A family should eat together every night, dear," my mother tells me over the netcom when I explain that I'll be home late again. "I need you."

"I get that," I tell her. The Desmond's rapidly making its way towards the Core, adeptly moving in and out of slower traffic along the mag-way that criss-crosses the entire NTS. Being a top dog gives

me special privileges, though right now I'm in no hurry to see Harper. "I'm sorry, but I don't have a choice. I have to go back to the Temple. I'll be home when I can. There's food in the fridge."

I don't mention Dec, and neither does she, and when we've said good-bye, I sever our connection. Even though I'm alone in the car, I'm not so stupid as to forget there's a monitoring device in this thing. If anyone were to find out about my boy, I'd lose him instantly. Not to mention what would happen to my career. The Temple would revoke my security ranking. They'd never trust me again if they knew what I know.

Dysfunctional and screwed up though it may be, my small family would vanish into thin air. And I don't think I could take that.

Mom means well. She's an old-fashioned type who was born in the 20s to even older-fashioned parents. Grew up in what they called a "traditional" household. Married a "traditional" man, which really just meant the sort who could never quite accept that things were changing, and that society wasn't going to accept it if he declared himself lord of the manor.

But for a time, Mom had the life that she'd dreamed of since childhood. The rift in ideologies in the old United States meant that girls in those days were taught to dream about one of two things: absolute autonomy or becoming a slave to a man.

My mother—who'd grown up reading too many romanticized novels about women in corsets who weren't allowed to vote or work but got to drink tea from morning to night—chose slave.

I'm pretty sure this is how her parents went about her brainwashing:

Step One: Dress your kid up in pink frilly bullshit. Tell her repeatedly that she needs to be rescued from a life of solitude by a rapey prince who will one day come along, plant a kiss on her lips and ensure that she never needs to lift a finger, read a book or expand her knowledge in any way. *Check.*

Step Two: Grow up. Earn a very moderate education. Just enough to convince yourself that you're properly liberated from the shackles of the Patriarchy. *Check.*

Step Three: Meet a man who's not quite Satan, but thinks he's God. *Check.*

Step Four: Marry him, thereby cementing his legal claim to your body and soul. *Check.*

Step Five: Pop out a kid. *Check.*

Step Six: Make banana bread at least once a week until bananas become contraband, while sporting a highly flammable apron that says, "*Kiss the Cook*" in big stupid red letters. *Check.*

The advancement of women's rights and my mother's brain were developed through two entirely incompatible streams of thought. She wore

blinders that kept her peripheral vision from spotting the changes that were happening around her, and her husband did a fine job of seeing to it that she would never conform to some left-leaning idiocy.

As for my dad, he was taken away in the early days of the Affirmation. He had an arsenal of semi-automatic weapons that would have been sufficient to arm a small country. To add to that, he was stubborn as hell.

Which is, I suppose, where I get it from.

When martial law was first enacted, Dad was only too happy to have an excuse to aim his guns at anything that moved. We hid underground while he emptied round after round at nothing in particular, screaming about how they'd never take the very guns and the ammo he was wasting shooting up trees and stop signs. To this day I don't know if he ever hit anyone.

When his ammo had finally run out, it didn't take long for the Libbers, the pre-cursors to the NTS, to take him down.

They didn't blame my mother for my father's behavior. There was no guilt by association, not when the new rules came into play. Females were victims. As far as the Libbers were concerned, we poor estrogen-laden weaklings had been thrown unwillingly into a cult that used us mercilessly, and the powers that be were offering us a new chance

at life. One where we had our own agency, our own set of rights.

For once we were being offered more power than men—provided we wanted it.

The only problem was, we had to prove our willingness to jump on board.

In the end my mother swallowed everything she'd ever believed in and passed with flying colors. All she needed to do was prove her submission to the NTS, and prove it she did. It's in her blood to be submissive; she's Canadian. Well, she was, anyway, when Canada was still a thing.

When they took Dad away, she thought she'd lost everything. She didn't have a steady job, not like he had. No serious income, no higher education. That would have been enough to put some people over the edge, but not Mom. I remember watching the fighter in her emerge, rise up to take on the world, to provide for her only child. Her new mission in life was not to be a wife, but a Mother. At least that way she could retain something of her femininity. It was what she was good at. It was the only thing she'd ever trained for.

It might make me a horrible person, but I looked at my mother with disdain from an early age. She couldn't see what was right in front of her face: that she could have everything. For literally the first time in the history of the planet Earth, women had the advantage. The male sex had been

so good for so long at brainwashing females into believing we needed them. We needed them to put a roof over our heads. To buy us shiny things and tell us we were pretty, because that was our only perceived valuable asset. Oh, and of course, they put babies in our bellies.

Screw that noise.

A combination of economic trends and the job market meant that I could exist very well in the world without a man. I embraced it; I reveled in my independence.

As soon as Athena's Law was in place, men learned pretty damn quickly what it feels like to be the submissive lap-dog in the relationship. Suddenly they were making less money. They had no health care benefits. No more dick-hardening drugs. No access to porn. No tattoos, no Harley-Davidsons, no sports, and for damn sure no guns. And if a guy was stupid enough to take his frustration out on a woman or anyone else, down he went immediately.

There was no such thing as impunity anymore.

No more special privilege for their gender.

Tolerance for sins against others went from a hundred to zero overnight, and it remains zero to this day. Rape doesn't exist in our world. Neither does domestic violence. No woman has died at the hands of a man in years.

Men, however, have died at our hands more than a few times.

That's how the system works. And I know it sounds cold, but it's far better than what used to be in place.

As I stare at the droplets of rain tracing uneven zig-zag patterns down the Rocar's window, I fondle Victor's ring in between my fingers, reminding myself that I once had feelings for a man. I know I sound like I've long since shut down my emotions, but it's not that simple.

All I ever wanted was a fair shot. An equal shot. Sometimes to get there, you have to push back extra hard for a few years, and sometimes that means pulling away from anything that makes you weak.

No, I don't hate men. I don't hate anyone. I only hate the memory of a world in which everyone who didn't have a penis was kept down for too long. I hated that a hundred and fifty years ago, my brain would have been declared useless, just because of its place inside of a female skull.

I hated that narcissistic idiots with serious insecurity issues ran the world into the ground and wreaked havoc on everything from the environment to the very concepts of kindness, generosity, and empathy. And they did it all with their limp dicks in one hand and a shotgun in the other.

Literally screwing over the world in any way that their impotent souls could.

That's what I hated, what I fought against. That's what we defeated when the Affirmation happened. Our world may not be perfect yet, but it *is* better this way. It's safer. It's more fair.

I press Victor's ring to my lips to feel the cold of the silver on my skin. I suppose that in a weird way, it makes me feel close to him. I shouldn't want that, but right now, hidden from the world, I'm willing to admit to myself that I do. It feels right but a little off at the same time.

Like today's raid.

Right now, I should be pressing my netcom, calling Harper and telling her about Vic. I don't quite know why I feel a need to keep this to myself. Victor happened a long time ago. The last time I talked to him was years back when we studied together. Back when he showed so much promise.

Before I rose up through the ranks at the Temple.

Before he disappeared.

Before Dec.

The Rocar finally pulls into the Temple's massive grounds, its twining central tower rising up in front of us. Tonight, it glows cobalt blue, its similarity to a DNA strand reminding me that we're constantly trying to evolve humans faster than nature intends. I check in with dispatch and then catch the conveyor up to 212.



“THE REPORT SAYS there were three in the nest,” Harper tells me when I walk into her office.

She’s sitting behind her massive desk. It’s a baroque monstrosity carved to the hilt with little fluted columns at each corner that are covered in gold leaf. The sort of furniture a person possesses only if they want others to think they’re rich and powerful. I feel embarrassed every time I look at it, to think that a woman would sit behind it without a trace of irony.

Harper’s eyes are fixed on the screen in front of her, which is no doubt showing her everything that we saw during the raid.

“Yes, we found three of them,” I reply. It’s an honest statement, after all, despite the fact that I’m lying by omission. “Took half an hour to track them through the old paper building. Thing is rigged with some kind of system of escape tunnels or something. We should send in a few teams to clear it all out.”

“And the men you tagged?”

“They’re being booked right now for their stint in the Grind. We’re trying to work out what they were doing in the nest; I’m sure you know by now that the Wasps malfunctioned, so I couldn’t gather much in the way of audio or video. But Erin and Mika will inject and interrogate the Inciters. I’m

sure we'll end up with something useful."

"I hope so," Harper replies, rising to her feet. Looks like she's dressed for a night out. A man's navy-blue suit and blue-and-white striped tie, tailored to fit a woman's body. She's covered herself from head to toe, convinced that by making herself look old-school masculine, she's exuding the same sort of power that her desk oozes. She has no idea how ironic a caricature she cuts.

But far be it from me to break the news to her.

"It's possible that the Inciters we caught were a misdirect, anyhow," I say, choosing my words carefully. I'm trying to give her as much information as I can without mentioning Vic. After all, I didn't actually lay eyes on him. I can't know with absolute certainty that he was there.

Or so I tell myself. I doubt there are two rings—or two people—like that left in the world.

"You think there's someone higher up involved," Harper replies. It's not a question.

I nod. "I do." I'm not talking about Victor now. Even if he was there, I know he wouldn't have been in charge. He's never been a leader. He follows orders; it's what he does best. He does it cleverly, though, keeping an ear out, an eye on the prize. If he believes in the cause he's fighting for, so much the better. He tries to keep out of harm's way and under the radar, which means never taking the reins. The guy's a pro at keeping the target off his

back, his face, or any other part of him, so that he can live to see another day.

“Well, you did good work today,” Harper says, an air of conclusion in her tone. “I don’t think we have too much to worry about. As you know, when these little pockets of rebellion crop up from time to time, we quash them. It actually works to our advantage. Word spreads quickly among the Inciter crowd that it’s a bad idea to screw with the NTS, and they quiet down for a time. Then the cycle repeats. But no harm done.”

“Right. Of course,” I mutter, not quite sure what I’m reacting to. I’m a little shocked that the woman who was so pissed off about the incident at Persephone’s is so calm about this. I suppose she’s finally grown confident that the protocol upgrade will be a success. Confident that her position at the Temple is about to become even more carved in stone.

“You seem distracted, Marion,” she says, pressing her palms to the surface of her desk and leaning forward, which pulls my eyes to hers. On a whim, I activate my scanner, and her information shoots to my frontal cortex.

Harper.

57 years old.

*Head of Security and Legal Enforcement,
Triad Hera of the NTS.*

1st Division Award for Distinctive Service.

1st Division Award for Exemplary Oversight.

1st Division Award for Special Project Management.

<<*Records Restricted*>>

Clean as a whistle that's been bleached a thousand times.

“Is there something else you wanted to tell me?” she asks. I know the look in her eye. She's trying to read me. Trying to get her tech to tell her what I'm hiding. Good thing I haven't invented a psychic chip yet.

I shake my head. “No. That's all.”

My sensor might tell her that my BP is elevated, that I'm sweating a little more than I should. That my breathing is shallow. That is, if I hadn't adjusted it weeks ago to always project normal levels.

The one advantage to being the head of tech is that I'm always three steps ahead of everyone else.



ONCE I'M LOCKED in my pod, I open an encrypted network, one that links directly to the systems in my house.

“Identification and Recon,” I say when I've pulled up the software I use for tracking purposes. “Victor Bradbury.”

The system works for a few minutes, searching

for his chip. If he's in there, it should find him immediately. Geo-locate him, tell me the last time he used a washroom, even. If I wanted it, I could drug-test his urine.

Except that nothing comes up. He's off the grid. Hasn't been to a clinic for his shots in ages. For some reason the system alert didn't go off when he took himself out. I guess Vic still knows a thing or two about how to slip out of his virtual handcuffs.

"Fine," I say, exasperated and impressed at once. "Triad Aphrodite. Facial recognition, October Fifteenth through Twentieth, twenty-eighty-eight."

A series of images flashes in the air before me in rapid succession as the system rifles through every single image taken in the Aphrodite section of the Core between those dates.

Nothing.

"Triad Athena," I say.

Nothing.

"Triad Hera," I tell the machine when the series begins to slow. "Public locations only."

The flashing images come to an abrupt stop. Hm. Possible hit. A view from above zooms in on a man walking down the street. He's wearing an army surplus pea-coat and cargo pants. "Stop," I say.

The video freezes and something in my chest threatens to burst out. Adrenaline, that's what this is. Something I'd forgotten about before just now.

Though the image is a little fuzzy, a little

distant, I'd know the back of that head anywhere. Victor may be a little older now, a little scruffier, but he still looks the same. His hair's a disheveled mess, hands tucked into his pockets like he's hiding something.

“Back up.”

The camera zooms out.

“Advance a few seconds.”

I watch him make his way in front of a generic variety store before he reaches a bar. Because of the tight view I can only see its windows, but no identifying features, not yet. “Stop. Time stamp this.”

I stare at the date.

Holy shit. That's Persephone's. Last night, he walked right into the bar where we took Ned Horton down. According to the stamp, he arrived nearly an hour before we did.

How the hell did I miss the fact that Victor is the Inciter that Harper was talking about, the one who got out the back way? How he managed to escape our gaze, I can't say. I guess we just weren't looking all that hard.

I did a seriously terrible job last night. That's what I get for trying to relax.

I advance the video until he's disappeared into the bar.

“Why didn't you come over and say hi?” I ask, a smile on my face that I can't quite fight back. So

strange to think he was so close for an hour or so after we arrived.

“What are you up to, Vic?” I mutter as I reach into my pocket and find his ring. “And where are you now?”

He should be a million miles away, but for some reason, he’s keeping himself just within arm’s reach.



SPARE FOLLOWS ME INTO “ASIAN FEW-XIAN.” Best restaurant in the Bricks, despite the fuzzy mold and goofy dragon paintings on the walls. It’s one of the only places in the 5th Parish of the Bricks that still gets away with some meat-flavorings on the side. It’s set up like one of those old dim-sum places with aproned waiters wheeling around silver carts laden with bamboo bowls of dumplings, wraps, fried veggies, domes of white rice, and an endless buffet of salty brown sauces. Xian’s even got chicken,

shrimp, pork, the whole deal. All synthetic, of course, and in violation of about a dozen laws. But in the Bricks, things slide. Xian's as famous for his payoffs as he is for his food.

A bald Andro greets us at the door. He/she's got the nebulous features of all the Andros: broad shoulders, narrow hips, thin face, high cheekbones, no eyebrows, and unblemished mushroom-colored skin. The Andros were always a problem for the NTS. They were pacifists by nature and not one of them had ever been accused of a violent crime. But they had a Y-chromosome, which made it possible for them to bypass the molecular security protocols that prevent the rest of us from using guns. So they got shuffled off to the Bricks with the men, although they have a kind of unspoken position of privilege with us. They get most of the clean, easy jobs. They're doormen, concierges, greeters, stuff like that. They get paid well, and they almost never do time in the Grind.

The Andro gives us a little bow and says, "Welcome to Xian's" in a cottony voice that makes me want to take a nap.

I tell s/him to tell Xian that victory is closing in but needs a hand. "Tell him exactly like that," I say.

He/she nods and sashays off to the back. Spare asks me what's going on, but I tell him to wait and to not move around too much.

"Guys get nervous in here," I whisper to him.

“Xian is pretty hard core. His favorite hobbies are cooking, mind-fucks, and revenge. And not in that order. The men in here are scared to death of him. That’s why he keeps them close. Besides, someone your size is going to mess with their programming.”

“I never went past my allotment,” he says. He sounds too embarrassed to be insincere. I wave it off. He’s probably sick of having to defend himself for being what he is. The NTS has got us under control, but it’s not absolute control. They haven’t figured out how to keep our DNA from having a mind of its own. Yet. So for now, that means that despite all the genetic, chromosomal, and metabolic manipulations, some men still grow to be unusually big. I’m not complaining. If there are going to be giants in the world, I’m just happy to know that this one’s on my side.

I have a quick look around. The Tracies will sometimes slum it in a place like this. But today’s lunch crowd seems to be fairly typical. The big, open room is jam-packed with round tables of mostly men with a few women scattered here and there. The entire Bricks is on a three-shift schedule with one-third of us working days, one-third working evenings, and one-third working nights, so there’s no such thing in the business districts as down time or rush hour. Which means, Xian’s, like most places, is open 24-7. Other than the orange and green peeling painted dragons, there’s nothing

fancy on the walls of the restaurant and no tablecloths on any of the dozens of round tables. The chairs are a hodgepodge of cobbled-together styles. There are a few mag-chairs and a lot of the old kind, with wooden or chrome frames and frayed cushions in a barf-inducing array of colors.

Classical music is playing through a piped-in system. It's pretty loud, Shostakovich I think. Or maybe Stravinsky. I get them mixed up. Either way, it's some kind of chamber piece that's loud enough that Spare has to lean down and raise his voice to let me know that the Andro is waving to us from over by the kitchen.

Spare and I catch some curious stares as we weave through the crowded dining room. We catch up with the Andro who takes us through the kitchen and over to a sleek stainless-steel refrigerator sitting pointlessly against a wall in a bleak back hallway. The narrow hallway is littered with white buckets, an assortment of mops and brooms, piles of old rags, and crates of purple heads of lettuce going brown along the edges.

The Andro leans against the wall. "Xian'll be a minute." He/she looks us up and down. "You two on the run?"

Spare stammers something unintelligible. "Well, we're...it's mostly...just out for...not exactly..."

"We're the health inspectors," I say.

He/she nods and points a finger back and forth

between me and Spare. “Ah. So you two are going to restore balance to the universe?”

I give s/him a smirk. “We’re just here to check the stock. If it’s good, you’ve got nothing to worry about. If it’s bad, someone’ll pay us off. And if we don’t get the job done, me and him’ll be dead.”

Spare and the Andro both stare at me like I’m nuts.

“Don’t worry,” I say to the Andro. “You’ll be fine either way.”

Now it’s s/him’s turn to smirk at me.

The Andro holds up a “wait a second” finger and speaks softly into a comm-implant in s/him’s shoulder. He/she says, “All clear,” gives us a nod, and shuffles on silent feet back into the restaurant.

So it’s just me, Spare, and the refrigerator.

“So now what?” Spare asks.

“Now we go in,” I say. I open the refrigerator door and step through.

I chuckle as I catch Spare’s open-mouthed stare out of the corner of my eye. I’m not sure if he’s hesitating because he’s reluctant to duck into another cramped space for another hunched-over run for his life, or if it’s just the thought of walking into a refrigerator. He hesitates but finally ducks his head and moves through, practically in a squat, behind me.

We walk down a small corridor and into a huge clutter of a room with cathedral ceilings and a

dozen or so holograms of chandeliers floating on mag-pads in the air, bathing the expansive space in a murky, grayish glow. The windows are covered over with large panels of plywood nailed into place. There are box seats up on the mezzanine on either side of the vast room, which tells me that Xian's restaurant was once some kind of theater or church or one of those places men went to for escape in the days before Crash-Pads. Xian says it's the cover for his hub that keeps the back-alley V.R. simulations running and lets men stay men for at least an hour or so a couple of times a year. He calls this place his "Phallus Palace." I've been in it a few times, but the shock of it never wears off. It's wall-to-wall with tech and has a constant hum that makes me worry that I'm being bombarded with invisible carcinogenic rays. If the top of the Temple is info central for the NTS, Xian's set-up is ours.

Xian is sitting at his consoles in the middle of the room with his back to us. His five 85-inch monitors are a hodge-podge of systems, graphs, and running lines of code with a multi-colored sea of cords snaking over pretty much every inch of the floor and up and down most of the walls. Most monitors in the Core are floaters or holo-screens. But in the Bricks, most of the tech is still solid and hard-wired. Xian's control room is bright with green light pouring from his monitors and long shadows cast by the white fluorescent display lights

over the dozens of bootleg paintings that are leaning rakishly against the walls around the perimeter of the room. They're all prints of the famous pieces we get drilled into our heads at the Academy: Picasso's "Guernica" with the screaming horse and the dead figures folded up like paper airplanes. Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son" with the headless naked man getting eaten by his paranoid father Cronus. The neck-biting battle of Bouguereau's Dante and Virgil in Hell. Ruben's chaotic carnage in "Massacre of the Innocents." And, of course, his "Consequences of War." That one's a fave of mine: a real terror of a scene with Venus, the goddess of love, trying in vain to hold back Mars, the god of war. In the apocalypse, love doesn't conquer all. Only conquerors conquer all.

Xian swivels around in his chair and tells us to "Come closer and mind the cords."

I can hear Spare take a weird breath. I figure he expected some cartoonish armed-to-the-teeth Asian warlord, not this five-foot-three cherubic fifteen-year-old with twinkling blue eyes, pasty skin, and mop of blond hair. Xian's one of those child geniuses you still hear about sometimes, although he's not all geekiness and innocence. Kid's got a serious mean streak and a way of working people like chess pieces to do his bidding. I've seen him bring peace to bickering sub-districts. I've also seen him mind-fuck his rivals in the underground hacker

movement until they're scared shitless and crawling all over themselves to make him happy. Come to think of it, maybe's he's a bit of a warlord after all.

"We need a badge," I say. Xian doesn't indulge in wasted words, and I know better than to try to grease him with flattery or formalities.

Xian crosses his hands behind his head and leans back to stare at the ceiling. "Then you need to see Clarence, Vic. I don't do badges."

"Do you do system take-downs? Because that's what we're talking about."

"So it's for real. The Inciters are finally ready to make their move?"

"Yes."

"How long? Two weeks? Three?"

"We move in thirty-six hours."

Xian kicks his feet in the air, bounces in his mag-chair and cackles a loud, tinny-sounding laugh. "Well, there's not much I don't see and hear, but I sure as hell didn't see or hear that, so you're either determined, desperate, or delusional.

"Is there an 'all of the above' option?"

"Ha! And you need...what? Virus?"

"Of course. The problem's programming, right?"

Xian looks at me and Spare. "Sure. But genetic, not digital," he says. "The problem's in our balls, boys, not in the binary."

"Maybe so," I say. "But I'd like to be in control

of my own balls for a change.”

“But that’s just it, see?” Xian does a full spin in his mag-chair. “We spent thousands of years in control of everything but ourselves. Do you think backwards is a real direction?”

“We can do things right this time,” Spare says. “Be a better brand of man.”

Xian laughs. “Says the man whose implants make him say so.”

Spare looks offended. “I’ve got tech, but I’m not programmed. I’m who I want to be.”

“Take it easy,” Xian says with a smile and a hand up like a stop sign. “I’ll do your badge,” he says to me. “But only because I owe you for the scramble job you did for me last time.”

Spare starts to ask me what that’s all about, but I give him a quick “don’t ask” shake of my head.

Xian fiddles around with his input pad. His fingers do a rapid-fire tap dance across a series of seven keyboards that he has set up in a half-circle on his central console. He pivots back and forth in his chair, his hands and arms a blur as he works. As Spare and I look on, a long string of scrolling code appears across two of the monitors with schematics and detailed floor-plans of the Temple popping up on the other three. The schematics spin around in three-dimensions and shrink or enlarge as Xian tinkers with the code.

“Hope you guys know what you’re doing,”

Xian says to us over his shoulder.

“We don’t,” I say. “But we know *why* we’re doing it.”

He laughs. “Well, I guess that’s half the battle. Of course, half the battle still gets you killed.”

“You’re our other half,” I tell him.

Xian gives a little giggle-grunt. He knows it’s not flattery. It’s the truth.

“And this’ll get us in?” Spare asks.

Xian nods his head as he continues to hammer away at his keyboards. “This will get you in. But once you’re inside, you’re out of my hands.”

“If we could use guns...” Spare starts to say, but Xian cuts him off and spins around in his chair to face us with a stern frown.

“If you could use guns, sure—you’d blast the place all to shit. Kill half the NTS, enslave the rest, build up your *new* New Thought Society, go too far, get reigned in and overthrown, and wind up right back here asking me to help you to break into the Temple to get your guns back.” Xian spins back to face his monitors. “If you’re in this because you think guns are the solution, then you’re stuck in that same swirly illogic that cost us the guns in the first place.”

Spare glowers at the back of Xian’s head. “Guns were never the problem. They’re just tools. Like any other tool. They can’t do anything without an operator.”

“Exactly,” Xian says with an oddly happy-sounding squeal. “And the women could ban guns, or they could ban the operators. And banning the operators would have meant banning all men.”

“But that’s exactly what they did,” Spare insists. “They didn’t just lock up all the guns or overhaul the educational system. They didn’t set out to make us better. They decommissioned us. They locked the guns away but us too. This isn’t about liberating a bunch of weapons. It’s about freeing ourselves as men.”

Xian stops typing for a second, but he doesn’t turn around. “Same thing,” he says quietly and with a shake of his head. “It’s the same damn thing.”

He makes a couple of final taps on his keyboards, stands up with his hands on his hips, and lets out a long moan as he stretches his back. He motions us over to a MiFF, also known as a micron fractal fabricator and extracts a small tap-disk the size of a lady bug.

“I’ll even throw in the chain,” he says. “Makes it harder to lose it.”

He hands me the small device with a silver chain attached. It looks more like something you’d see being sold at the Saturday market in the sketchy 7th Parish next to the Rasta bracelets and the dolphin toe rings, and less like something that might either save or else bring down the entire world.

“So, we’re even?” I ask.

Xian laughs and taps the input board in front of the center console. “You did me a four-point-eight-four last time. I’m doing you a twelve-point-two. Do the math. You still owe.”

Spare says, “Thank you!” and extends a hand to Xian. Xian looks up at him and smiles. “So what’s your deal, anyway, big guy? Shouldn’t you be off grinding some Englishman’s bones to make your bread?”

Spare says, “Huh?” which I find hysterical, so I laugh and grab him by the cedar beam he calls an arm and guide us back to the corridor that will lead us back to the refrigerator door.

“You’ll get your seven-point-three-six,” I holler back to Xian. “Plus interest. And maybe some serious freedom!” He gives me a salute and a wink and walks back to his keyboards and consoles.

After Spare and I duck out the back, I stash the badge inside my coat, and Spare is just congratulating me on a job well done when, in a literal flash, the alley lights up, and everything goes white.

There are three of them. Tracers. They always work in threes. I shoulda known they’d be on high-alert after our little escape back at the office building. No way we got I.D’d, though.

The lead Tracer has her flasher in one hand and volt zip-cuffs in the other. It’s a bluff. I know the routine. The policy is all about pre-emption. De-

escalate before it escalates. Anything violent is always a last resort. If they have to get tough, they know they've failed, and they'll hear it from their C.O. back at base. Tracers have gotten canned over use of excessive force, no matter how justified. Besides, if we were really getting tagged, they'd done it already, and we'd be on our way to the Grind for processing. So, we just need to not panic. Simple.

The lead Tracer smiles and says her name's Terry and that this is just routine patrol. They never use their last names. Part of the New Interaction Protocols from a few years back.

Spare's still got his hands up. He's got twice their size, half their power, and none of their rights. I almost feel sorry for him, but I know what a guy like this would probably be like without his implant: a pushy, privileged bully used to getting his own way. Maybe that's not fair to say, but a lot of times what's true and what's fair are a mile apart.

The Tracer to the left of Terry tells Spare to relax. Says her name's Carol. She's got jet-black hair with a streak of bright red dyed on both sides, and the typical healthy athletic build of most of the Tracers. They always look like superheroes getting ready to spring into action, bust some heads, and save the day. Pretty cool. Unless it's your head that's about to get busted.

Spare drops his hands, but he hardly looks

relaxed. I can tell that he's calculating. Two options: fight or flight. Either one gets us tagged. I'm sick of getting blind-sided, but anything other than a pleasant smile right now could throw our whole plan out of whack. There's a third option.

"I'm Puissant," I say.

The Tracer to the left looks at me, and her eyes get wide. She doesn't believe me.

"May I?" I ask.

Terry nods.

I call up my serial number on my wrist-reader. It's an old code, but it should still be good.

She gives it a look from across the alley and tells me to flick it over. I do, and she registers it on her own reader.

"You active?" she asks.

I shake my head. "On leave."

The three Tracers lean in and scroll through my code. They face us, and now they're all smiles.

"You two stay outa trouble." She looks back at her projection above her wrist. "Curfew's in two."

The Tracers head off to shoo away two open-mouthed boys who are watching from the far end of the alley. The kids scurry away and go on about whatever juvenile delinquent business they have.

Spare and I don't plan on hanging around. We still need to get to the rendezvous with Parker and Andy, so we hoof it quick the other way and do a bunch of zigs and zags over a good mile until we

pull up and lean on opposite sides of an alley wall to catch our breath. My heart's trying to decide if it wants to pump itself out of my chest or just give up and stop completely.

Spare's not sweating. He's not even out of breath. He must've found a way to work out beyond his allotment.

"How'd you do that back there?" he asks.

"I've got a few tricks," I pant. "Had some chameleon protocols installed on the sly back at the Academy. Updates my address, history, everything, even family, based on where I am. By the way, if anyone asks, you're my lover."

"Fuck," he says. "Wait. The Academy? You're really a Puissant?"

"Was."

"How can you be a 'was'? Puissants are set for life."

"Depends on what kind of life you want to be set for."

"Oh, wait. You're the Pussy from the bulletins from way back."

I bristle at the slur and get ready to growl and square off on him, but my conditioning kicks in, and I drop my shoulders and my voice. "It's not like how they show you on the bulletins. You keep your head down. Say your 'Yes, Ma'ams' a hundred times a day. Monitor the grid for illegal gun use. Keep the men in line. Basically, all the freedom in

the world to be anything other than what you really want to be.”

“What’d you really want to be?”

“Free,” I say. “Although I woulda settled for equal.”

He offers his duffel bag of a hand, and I shake it.

“Welcome to the Inciters,” he says with a big grin.

The way he says it sounds like “insiders,” and for a second, I feel a swell of comfort and nearly forget that we’re all likely to be dead by the end of the day.



I CALL up the visuals for Victor with today's date. Almost immediately, the system locates him near the Brizo Tunnel that connects the 5th and 6th Parishes. I tap on the video and watch an interaction that occurred just a few minutes ago with three of the Temple's employees. Stupid ones, at that, because it looks like they let him go.

I'm seeing him from the vantage point of the Tracer who's asking him questions. As always, Vic looks calm and collected, though inside I'm willing to bet he's losing his mind.

He knows what'll happen if anyone finds out where he was today. He knows there won't be another chance for him if he goes back into the Grind.

"I'm Puissant," he tells the Tracer. He looks her right in the eye with the kind of confidence that can only come from a man who's gone off his injections. But she's not experienced enough to pick up on it. I haven't yet built a sensor to read cockiness levels.

If I were any crazier, I'd say he's looking right at me as he's speaking. Well of course he is. He knows me; he knows how I work. He left that silver ring behind on purpose. He's been watching me this whole time. He probably even knows that right now, I'm sitting here, staring at him.

What he doesn't know is how I'll react. What I'll do. He doesn't know how loyal I am to the Temple. He doesn't know that I'm not likely to put my life on the line to protect him. If he's counting on me to cross over to the Inciters' side, he's not as smart as I've always thought.

From the looks on the other two Tracers' faces, they're a little skeptical of his story, and I can't say I blame them. Puissants are few and far between, especially nowadays. They may as well have stumbled upon a unicorn in the middle of that alley.

Vic tells them he's on leave, and after they've checked out his code to make sure he's not messing

with them, they're satisfied. Idiots didn't even look to see if he had an updated file, or if there's anything sketchy about the intel they do have. They just take the man's word for it.

To be fair, they don't know Vic like I do. They don't know his tells. But I know them. Like the fact that he grinds his jaw when he lies. I've seen him do it more than a few times. It's his survival mechanism kicking in. His walls going up. A self-defense tactic that usually means the other person is about to get hurt.

I still remember the last time I watched that jaw of his clench in a bold-faced lie. "I'll be right back," he told me. "Don't worry. I've got this. I'm looking after it, and everything's gonna be fine."

I never saw him again. Not until the footage from Persephone's. And even that was just me seeing him through the lens of a camera.

Seems appropriate, somehow. I never wanted to be the woman gazing lovingly into the eyes of any man. Never wanted to hold on to anyone, much as Vic might have assumed otherwise. I'm like a devout nun, loyal to her God, who just happens to be a very fair and generous deity. Because she's a woman.

Correction:

She's *all* women.

I could contact the Tracer team who's got him in their sights. With one touch of the mic that's

embedded in my jaw, I could be in the leader's ear, telling her what I know about Vic. That he was in a nest earlier, conspiring with a bunch of Inciters. That he's trouble, and that she shouldn't let him go for anything in the world. That he's too smart for his own good.

But, for all my conviction, for all my devotion to the Temple, I don't. For some crazy reason my instincts tell me to let it go for now. If I tell them, they'll drag him in, lock him up, and we'll never know what he's wrapped up in.

Whatever's going on with Vic, he's more useful to me if I pursue him than if I take him in. Besides, there's no point in locking the guy up; he won't talk. He'd probably take any form of torture with a cynical grin at this point. I get the feeling he's been through worse by now.

Or maybe that's just my way of rationalizing what could be a very bad decision.

I watch through Carol's eyes and she and the Tracers send the two men on their way, Vic and the behemoth he's with. The guy's some freak of nature who should never have been born, and who definitely wouldn't have grown that big if he'd had all his shots. Whatever's going on with the giant, I'll figure *him* out later. For now, I want to know where they're going, who they're talking to. Why they look like two men on a mission. I want to uncover the leader of this little Inciter group of

theirs, because it sure as hell isn't either of them.

It's kind of funny, really. As much as he could stir the pot from time to time at the Academy, I never pegged Vic for a real troublemaker. He's not a rebel, not really. Not a guy who wants to change the world, except to make it a little better for everybody. He wasn't like a lot of the other men; didn't talk down to me or make comments about me that pushed the sexual harassment envelope—much as I sometimes wanted him to. He was pretty civilized. He used to talk about the injections being a way to fight back his maleness. He described it as putting a choke hold on thousands of years of evolution.

Of course, now that he's back off his shots, he might revert to something more feral than he ever was. That sometimes happens with these guys. They feel shackled by the drugs. Shackled and submissive. Give them one taste of their freedom and they become energized pit bulls who want to bite anything that moves.

Speaking of pit bulls, on a whim, I do a quick search for his ridiculously huge friend. It can't be hard for the records to identify a male who's seven feet tall and easily over three hundred pounds.

Sure enough, the info pops up in a matter of seconds. There's a photo of his face, a list of his vitals. His name, apparently, is Spare.

Unlike Victor, the behemoth has shown up

faithfully for his injections. Good thing, too. The guy looks like he could break a woman in half with his pinkie if he flew into a rage. Yet there he is, waltzing around with Victor into the seedy part of the 1st Parish like a loyal little leashed dog. I wonder how different he'd be if he wasn't under the influence of chemicals.

As I watch them, I become acutely aware that an ugly choice is unfolding before me: pursue Victor, arrest him as an Inciter and try to bargain with him to turn in his friends, who are probably up to no good.

Or kill him.

Either way, I know I should inform my team of my plans. This isn't really a project that one Tracer should deal with alone. Harper would have my head on a platter if she even thought I was contemplating such a stupid move.

But instead of doing the responsible thing, I shut my machine down, grab my jacket and head out of the pod, securing its door behind me.

I need to sleep on this.



WHEN I GET home after 9 P.M., I head immediately up to the Sanctuary. Mom is sitting on the bed with Dec, reading a book called *The Way We Were*. It's

not based on the old Streisand film or vice versa; this is some sugar-coated storybook about the old days when women wore aprons and men wore fedoras. It's set up to look like fiction about some strange fairyland that's so far removed from our world that Dec doesn't actually think it's any more real than dragons. But I know better.

"This is how things really were, you know," I hear her telling him. "Mommies baked in the kitchen and Daddies went off to work." The words set my blood to a rolling boil.

I hear him asking, "Why are there no fathers anymore?" He's using his little boy tone, the one that only makes an appearance these days if he's tired or depressed. He's starting to figure things out. Starting to understand that there's a world outside these walls that he hasn't yet encountered.

No, Dec. The truth is that the world in that book never existed. The world in that book is a myth.

My heart is slightly broken right now, but mostly I'm pissed off. Mom shouldn't be throwing ideas about domineering male figures at my son; she may as well be telling him how great slavery was back in the good ol' days. Just because she didn't think it was so bad to be treated like a brood mare doesn't mean everyone wants to return to those days.

"Mom, I've told you before," I growl, glaring at

her. “No books.”

Maybe I’m a horrible mother for not wanting him to be exposed. It’s not that I don’t want him learning. The kid can read. I just don’t want him learning from outdated patriarchal crap.

“He should know about families,” she protests, doing her best to sound as though I’ve injured her gravely with my coldness.

“There were *never* any families,” I retort. “There were hierarchies. I repeat: No books.” There’s a reason I keep them sealed up. The damned things are contraband these days. The NTS sees anything written before 2060 as Mannist propaganda, which is basically what it is. “No one wants to read about a world where men imprison women in kitchens, anyhow. You’re feeding him a lie.” I look into Dec’s eyes, which are inquisitive as always. He absorbs everything, his mind a constantly evolving machine. “There were never any fathers,” I tell him.

“You had a father,” my mother chastises, returning my glare with a vengeance. It takes a lot to elicit a look like that from her, and I almost want to congratulate her on her newfound spine. “He was a very good man, in fact.”

“You married a trigger-happy sperm donor,” I retort. “Then you gave birth to me. That doesn’t make him a father. Not in the way you mean.”

It’s a cold thing to say, but I don’t want Dec

thinking he's missing out on a grandfather who's very likely fried, or even more likely dead. A man we only lost because he loved his disgusting guns more than he loved us. He clung to them like life rafts in the end, letting himself drift away from us. Screw guns. A better man would have held his wife and child in his arms.

Dec never had a father. But even if he had, the guy wouldn't have sat at home and played Monopoly with him. By the time he was born, things had moved too far too quickly. The nuclear family had already become a construct of the past. Oh, sure, it still existed here and there. It still does. But the fact is that ninety percent of the women of the NTS are single. They live alone. They choose that life because it's better. Because it signifies power and independence. They choose it because they've finally rid themselves of the shackles that were imposed on our gender for so many centuries. We don't need men for money. We don't need them for shelter. We realized some time ago that monogamous relationships were a thing of the past, relics of a time when an artificial hierarchy had been created by males. Women and minorities were kept down economically by white men in order to make us easier to manipulate.

If you're clear headed and look hard enough, you can always tell who the devil is: He's the one who spends all his time convincing you that

someone else is the devil.

I want to tell Dec that a man living and eating in our house wouldn't create a perfect Utopia. It would create complications and friction. It would create problems. Things don't work the way they used to. Everything's changed, and humans are no exception.

My mother looks like she's about to push back again but she shuts her mouth, knowing that my father's merits aren't up for discussion. It doesn't take a tech genius to figure out that my terrible mood was most likely inspired by entities with testicles. I have no desire to hear about how I'm missing out on a wonderful life by not having an adult male living under my roof.

Mom tells Dec to get ready for bed, closes the book and pulls herself up to her feet.

"I'll be back up to tuck you in in a few minutes," I tell him. "Do you want to say good night to Henry?"

"Yes, please," he replies. My mother and I follow him into the Sanctuary, watching as he takes his seat at its center.

Dec raises his palm to the wall, closes it quickly, summoning his young friend who lives somewhere in the world he's created. Almost immediately, Henry's freckled face is smiling at all three of us. He waves a hand, his smile fading when he sees my surly expression. *Sorry, Henry. You caught me at a*

bad moment.

“I’ll be quick,” Dec says, turning his head to look at me. “I’ll talk to him then get into my pajamas.”

“Good man.”

I follow my mother out to the staircase and open the holo-door with a quick scan of my hand. Once we’re through, the door seals up behind us, reminding me that every time I close that damned thing I feel like I’m locking my kid in a prison cell.

It’s no wonder I’m irritable.

“So, you had another long day?” Mom asks when we’ve made our way down to the kitchen on the first floor. I guess she’s figured out that it would be wise not to push any more wrong buttons.

“Too long,” I tell her, preoccupied with thoughts of my son as I grab a wine glass from a shelf over the marble counter. So strange to think that Dec hasn’t seen this counter since he was a week old. He’s never seen our glass refrigerator with its rotating shelves, our cleaning bots. He’s never sat on the 3D printed mag-stools surrounding the hovering island at the kitchen’s center. He’s never looked out these windows. “My day’s not over yet. I still have some work to do tonight. I’ll have to head down to the basement pod once Dec’s in bed.”

My mother makes a clicking noise with her tongue. It’s amazing how so much judgment can

live inside such a small sound. “You work too hard, Marion,” she says, shaking her head.

“That’s because there’s always something to look after, and I’m the only one who can look after it most of the time. The Temple relies on me for most projects that come down the pipe.”

When she asks, “Can’t you take a holiday?” I want to laugh.

“That’s like asking if people could just maybe stop eating or breathing for a few days, Mom. No, I can’t take a holiday. I haven’t taken one since I started at the Temple. Besides, where would I go?”

“Well, you could at least spend some time with your son. He spends altogether too many hours alone. Couldn’t you train someone to do your job and take a few weeks off? Maybe there’s another girl who’d like to learn what it is you do. At least then you’d—”

“*Michelle*,” I snarl, using her first name like a weapon, slamming my palm into the counter. “It’s so damned offensive when you refer to grown women as *girls*. There are no freaking girls working for the NTS.”

I know I’m being too hard on her. The post-1999 linguistic shift never kicked in with Mom’s brain, despite the fact that she was born in 2021. But maybe someday before she dies, she’ll get that those who carry shockers and ocular scanners are not pubescent little lasses in short skirts who

bounce around with coffee trays and pony tails. There is no such thing as a girl, outside of Early School students, and even that's debatable. Those students are trained from the age of five to code, to create weapons systems, and to hack into everything from tech networks to human DNA.

Hell, most of us women don't even like being referred to as women. Any word that contains the letters "m-e-n" is avoided like the plague. As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather be called a *Dickless*. I'd wear that title like a badge of honor.

"Sorry if I offended," she replies, the last vestiges of her combativeness deserting her. Oh, good. She's reverted to her former must-please-everyone self. "Can't you ask *someone* to help, though? What would they do if you were to disappear? Or..."

"Or?" I ask. But I know what she means. She thinks my job is dangerous. She thinks I might die any day. And I suppose she has a point, despite the fact that no Tracer has ever been killed on the job.

The fact that a whole lot of men want us dead is another matter, however. At some point, even in their hormonally-altered state, they may decide they've had enough.

I grab my wine glass and make my way into the adjacent living room, a massive space with floor to ceiling windows on one side that overlook a smallish wooded area. Throwing myself onto the

couch, I press my head back into its encapsulating softness. “It’d take my whole life to train someone to do what I do. Besides, the reason I’m so valuable to the Temple is that I’m the only one who can work with my code. I know things no one else does; that makes me useful. If I lose that usefulness I become replaceable, or obsolete. It’s best for us and for Dec that I keep myself valuable. More power, more money, more of this,” I say, flailing my empty hand around in an all-encompassing gesture. “Dec’s third floor wonderland wasn’t exactly cheap to put together. It’s worth millions, even without the rest of this luxury.”

Luxury, ha. I live in a house with a prison at its summit. I live in a house where I can’t take my son out to the back yard. I live in a house that’s its own sort of torture chamber.

“Maybe you could work less, though,” Mom says, relentless in her effort to solve an unsolvable problem. “Spend more time with your son...”

And there it is. That’s what she really wants. She wants me to become a 1950s, frilly-dress-wearing housewife who bakes muffins, wears ruby red lipstick and dotes over my boy like she tried to do with me.

“Dec doesn’t need me to spend more time with him,” I moan. “What he needs is...”

The truth is, I don’t know what he needs. I’ve never known a Dec. No one has. I don’t know if

this house is enough to satisfy his mind. I don't know if this world is.

I'm nothing more than the woman who gave birth to him.

"He needs a plan for the future," I say.

"A plan? How can he make a plan if he can't leave this house?" she asks.

I turn and lock eyes with her. She's so wonderfully naive, my mother. So utterly devoid of understanding.

"Dec spends all day every day planning," I tell her. "He just doesn't know it."

"So you think he could work at the Temple one day, maybe?" she asks.

I slam my eyes shut and rub my fists over them, trying not to let her see me wince in reaction to those words.

"He'll never work at the Temple," I say so softly that I'm not sure the words make their way to her ears. "Never."

I know how special he is. I know he's more valuable than I could ever be, to more people than I can possibly imagine. I know that there are people in this world who would love to get their hands on him.

It's not even that Mom's naive; she simply doesn't know the truth about my son. No one does; I'm not even sure I do. It would be too dangerous to let her in. Mom doesn't have the strength to hold

in a secret of that magnitude, even if it's to protect her grandkid. She'd gossip to the next person she saw in the grocery store and endanger his life before it's even hit her that's what she's doing. Oh, she wouldn't say the word "grandchild." She'd pretend it was about someone else. But someone would know. Someone would figure it out.

The woman's way too trusting, and she doesn't get that there are Listeners everywhere. Listeners that I put in place, filtering all language that meets their microphones. Listeners hell-bent on uncovering the hidden assets in this world of ours.

"I don't see why not," Mom says like I've insulted my kid. "He's such a bright boy. You know, today he was designing a new sort of pilotless flyer in that Sanctuary of his. He's never even seen a drone or a plane, not in real life. Yet he made one that was so fast, so efficient. He explained it to me in graphic detail, though I'll admit that I didn't understand a word of it...He could certainly do very well at the Academy."

"I know he's smart, but it's highly unlikely that he'd ever get accepted to the Academy," I say, cutting her off. "They're taking very few males these days. Men aren't considered trustworthy anymore, not since the last round of Betrayals."

"Well, that's a shame. I always liked having a man around, even if they weren't the most honest creatures in the world. I think you should talk to

that Harper woman. Maybe you wouldn't come home so stressed out if there were some in your workplace."

I take a huge swig of wine to avoid swearing. "Men don't make anything better, Mom. You never understood that, because you never figured out that Dad treated you like shit." I let the words creep out before kicking myself for being a total jackass. I crane my neck and stare at the white ceiling.

"That was a bit harsh, even for you," she tells me.

I know.

"Sorry, Mom. I'm just in a bad mood today. There's too much going on. Too much..."

I'm thinking about Victor now. Trying to tell myself that he's a dick, too. That he's a complication that I never needed. But the truth is that I still miss him sometimes, and seeing his face, his cocky, arrogant face, just reminds me that he's not completely without his merits.

I quickly remind myself that it's just old evolutionary traits telling me so. I find myself excited by his face because some part of my biology once thought he'd be a suitable mate. He's a preening peacock, nothing more.

I'm not a freaking hen.

"It's all right, dear," Mom says, trying as always to be nice rather than to risk an argument with her ogre of a daughter. I wish she'd grow a spine again

and tell her kid to go straight to hell. If I could ask for one gift to be granted to my mother, that would be it. A giant, rock-hard pair of balls that she could wield like a mace. Anger rising up inside her like flaming bile, erupting in a volcanic spew-fest of profanity at me once and for all.

I'd respect her so much more.



WE MAKE good time getting to the rendezvous point, but we're still a lot later than we should have been. The trip to Xian's was a necessary detour, and the run-in with the Tracers was an unexpected pain in the ass. That's a side effect of being on the run. Every turn leads to two more, and if you don't plan ahead, eventually all those turns run out along with all your options, and that's the end of the road.

For me and Spare, the actual road has ended, and we wind up pushing our way through what must be a mile of dense thickets until we finally get

to a clearing. The house is three stories of colonial decrepitude and sits on the far side of the Bricks' 6th Parish way over on the east side of the NTS on the Rez border right before Erato Precinct. It's an imposing structure, even in its old age. It dominates the entire top of a hill that rolls away from a long set of modular row houses and sits tucked behind a mini-forest of scraggly Dutch elms. It might have been a farm house a long time ago. There used to be a university around here somewhere before Upper Ed went all on-line, so it could have been a frat house or a dorm or a dean's house. It must have some sentimental value, or they would have torn it down along with all the rest of these buildings. It could also be one of the Temple's satellite communication facilities, which would mean we're about ready to put our heads in the guillotine and yank the cord ourselves.

I really hope it's just an old frat house.

Spare follows me up to the cast-iron gate built into the black spiked fence that runs around the perimeter of the overgrown yard. The gate sticks against the ground, and I have to lift it and push hard to get it open enough for us to slip through. There's a bunch of weeping willow trees with one of them leaned over almost horizontally so that its lines of feathered leaves are splayed out on the ground like the hair of a drowned woman.

We walk up the wide marble steps, but before

we go in, I pull Spare aside.

“The stuff with Xian, the badge, the Tracers, everything...”

“Yeah?”

“Never happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“How well do you know Parker and Andy?”

“All the way through.”

“And the other guys who’re involved? Trust them?”

“Absolutely.”

“We need to keep the Xian stuff to ourselves for now.”

“What? No way. We don’t turn on each other.”

“It’s not turning.” I take a deep breath and try not to sound too guilty. “It’s just not being face-to-face for a few more hours.”

Spare gnaws his bottom lip for a second. “At least tell me why.”

“I will. Just not yet. I need you to trust me.”

My large companion grunts. “Maybe that’s why I don’t.”

I decide to wait him out. Silence can be unusually convincing. Standing there on the old, vine-infested colonial porch, Spare looks more hurt and confused than angry. Which is fine with me. I don’t need someone his size being confused or angry with my face in easy punching range. Normally I wouldn’t worry. The implants and

injections override most of our aggression. Conditioning does the rest. But Spare's different. No man has been this big in two generations. They breed most of the size out of us along with everything else.

I look up at him. "Listen. I think there is more going on here than any of us knows. We're doing brain surgery in the back of a pick-up with a flat tire going through a minefield."

Spare faces me full on now. "All the more reason to make sure everyone knows all the details."

"Maybe," I say. "Unless the details we're sure about are details we really shouldn't be sure about."

Now it's Spare who waits me out. Finally, he sighs. "You got us this far. And you seem to know what you're doing. But if that changes..."

"If that changes, you might as well go ahead and blow me in because none of this will matter anymore."

Spare nods, and we step into the old house. It's dark and dusty, and there's as much ivy on the inside as there is on the outside. The windows are sealed up with synth-steel, so it's dark as a cave and jungle hot. There's a staircase that curves up to the second floor, but there are massive holes in the steps and a curtain of ivy hanging down from the ceiling. It doesn't matter, though. We're heading

the other way. We walk down a set of shoddy but intact wooden steps into a dark basement. There's a room with the door ajar at the far end and a thin right angle of light around the edges. I walk in first with Spare close behind. It looks like a storage room or an old wine cellar. There are no windows, but the far wall is one giant monitor, floor to ceiling and wall to wall like an old movie screen. I'm pretty sure those are Parker's legs sticking out from an access panel on the wall to the right of the monitor. Andy is sitting in one of four wooden chairs in front of the monitor, and he jumps up when he hears us come in. He's startled and jittery.

"Is that them?" Parker shouts from inside the wall.

Andy yells back that, yeah, it's us.

Parker says, "On my way" and drags himself out of the access panel as the wall monitor hums to life. It glows white and fills the gloomy room with some even gloomier shadows.

Parker invites us in and slides into one of the wooden chairs. Most chairs these days are synthetic and have wheels or grav-pads, so real wooden four-legged chairs are kind of rare. I put my hands on the back of one of the chairs. Its surface is rough but somehow soothing. Meanwhile, Parker starts tapping out codes on the input pad. His hands are a flurry of activity, and he busily flicks at the figures and symbols that dance around in the air in front of

the monitor.

“Glad you could make it,” he says over his shoulder. “You’re later than I expected, though.”

I exchange a look with Spare. He opens his mouth but doesn’t say anything.

“We ran into some Tracers,” I say. “No problems. But we decided to take the long way around. No sense stirring up any more attention than we need to.”

Parker looks from me to Spare and back to me. He seems satisfied and tells us to take a seat.

“Milton, Halliwell, and Jayse all got tagged back at the Underground. They won’t say shit, so we’re okay. For now. Most important part, though...they got us the finished mole.” Parker turns towards us and smiles broadly. “No one’s been able to get behind the damn propaganda machine and the firewalls.” He holds up a copper-colored sphere the size of a doorknob. “Until now.”

Andy looks positively giddy. He takes the sphere from his brother. “Fuckers control everything. News. Social Media. International comm-lines. Now we do!”

Parker smiles. “Well, not just yet.”

Spare stoops down under some duct work in the ceiling and steps up to Andy. He points one of his massive fingers at the copper sphere. “I worked on those in a tech lab with Halliwell. They can’t totally override an existing system. Plus, they’re

detectable. They'll trace it. Then they'll trace us."

Andy looks up at Spare and starts giggling. His face is practically in the big guy's chest. "That's where you're wrong, Tiny." He tosses the sphere to Parker. "See, we've made some modifications, haven't we, Bro?"

Parker shakes his head. "Not us. Tally. She's the brains. There's code embedded in the firewall. And then there's more code inside of that and another set of code after that. Triple redundancy. You're right. Flawed. Totally traceable. Unless you have someone on the inside who knows its weakness, which we do."

"If that's true," I say...

"...then we can see behind the curtain," Parker finishes.

He sets the sphere on a hover conduit above the input panel. The orb floats, rotating in place, slowly at first so I can still see the fine-line data grids on its surface, then it spins faster until it loses all detail as it hangs out, suspended in mid-air. Funny how a lot of motion can look like no motion at all.

Parker tells us to have seat while he gets the link going.

I sit, but Andy pulls Spare aside. He tugs his sleeve and mumbles something in his ear, and then they step out of the room with Andy whispering to Spare as they go. This is not good.

Parker is nearly done. If this works, we'll be

face to face with real people for sure. No worrying about whether we're being fed false intel by actors. Communication has been limited for a long time now. Travel, too. Can't have international flights anymore after they found out it was the air toxins that were breaking down the metal in the planes. Same for the ocean liners. None of the synth materials they came up with fared any better. So, the world became virtual. Not much of a transition. We'd been talking to monitors instead of to each other for the better part of a century. Before they went hard-core on men's rights, even the Inciters started out as a group who believed that most of who we thought existed didn't. Paranoiacs tend to be paranoid for a reason. They also tend to be right.

Parker completes the link-up just as Spare and Andy come back into the room. Parker sits in the chair in front of the camera.

“Now, let's find out what's really going on in the world. See if we can maybe ramp up this army of ours.”

The screen flickers alive, and a woman's face appears.

“Coles here,” she says. “Who's this?”

The woman looks confused, and she's squinting into her monitor. Her mouth doesn't synch with her voice. The language indicator in the corner of the screen says “German” in crisp white letters. The translator keeps her voice the same, but I know that

we're not hearing her actual voice. Just a digital version. In the years since the translators got installed in every system, I've heard the way I sound in Chinese, German, Catalan, and two different dialects of Xhosa. It does a pretty good approximation. I remember when it still sounded choppy and kind of computerized. The new system is way more organic. And just a little creepy if you asked me. If the systems can get our voices right, who knows what else they've copied.

Parker starts talking to the woman. He's spewing a bunch of bullshit about being a D-level tech doing a systems analysis from the Temple. She looks skeptical, but he projects an ID code from his wrist-reader, and she seems to relax. He asks her census stuff about her household, any problems with implants, suggestion of aggressive tendencies in the males. The usual crap. But the woman is all smiles and answers like she gets asked this kind of personal stuff by men every day.

Over the next two hours, Parker has a similar conversation with dozens of other people from all over the world. Men. Women. Young. Old.

Whatever apocalyptic version of the world he expected just isn't there. No hotbeds of radical activism. No obvious manipulation. No state propaganda. And no one ready to take up arms against an oppressive dictatorial female regime. Parker sighs and leans back in his chair. Then he

smashes his fist on the input panel and leaves a huge spider web crack in the black glass. Nothing pisses off a revolutionary more than finding out that things aren't that bad.

Andy puts a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Lotta help they were." He hits the end-comm button on the input pad and spits on the monitor. "Brainwashed. Every last one of them."

I nod. Something's off, but I can't put my finger on it. And now I'm starting to wonder who is really brainwashed.

"So what now?" Spare asks.

"Now nothing changes," Parker grumbles between clenched teeth.

Spare has his hands plunged deep in his pockets, and his eyes well up like he's the world's tallest six-year-old whose dog just died. "But you said we'd have allies."

Andy leaps over and grabs Spare by the seams of his bomber jacket and slams him hard against the rough wall. He glares up at Spare, daring him to resist, but Spare looks too stunned to move. Andy's eyes are pits of fire. He leans his entire weight into Spare, his fists and forearms practically burrowing into the giant's chest like he plans on pushing him clean through the concrete wall. "You gonna turn on us now?" Andy hisses.

Parker stands and storms towards the door. "Andy. Leave it. Now we go ahead as planned. We

take down the Temple. We open up the Armory. We get our guns back. Then we get our balls back. We've still got at least a hundred ready to go in with us and a million more counting on us. I'm not interested in living in a world full of sheep."

Andy releases his vice-grip on Spare's jacket, and we follow Parker up the stairs and out of the house. "We'll connect with Tally," Parker says. "And then we move on the Temple."

Before, I was worried about failing. Now I'm worried about succeeding. I'm not sure how pleasant it's going to be living in a world full of wolves.



WHEN MY MOTHER'S gone to bed and I finally find myself alone, I head down to my pod, situated in the basement beyond a security entrance. Like my office at the Temple, the pod is entirely isolated, a thick steel door locking behind me as I slip down the stairs.

My mother isn't allowed down here; no one is. Not a single person has seen it since the day it was built, before I set up my servers.

It's not so much that I think that my mother will prod her way into my work. She couldn't, even if

she wanted to. It's that I want to protect her. If something goes wrong, I don't want her prints on anything. I want her to have plausible deniability.

Yes, I'm an upper level Tracer in the NTS's tech wing. Yes, I oversee the software that determines which men's balls will get sautéed. Yes, I've killed people. And yes—I've done a lot to make sure that they can't get their hands on the weapons that would enable them to kill us back.

But Dec and my mother are innocent. If I die, they shouldn't suffer for my sins.

Not that I'll die. Things are about to become more secure than ever in the NTS, my status as a leader cemented. Heck, I might even have a shot at getting onto the Matrons' Council. Men like Victor will eventually have to come around to the idea that this is the new world. It's how things need to be, and it's for the best.

If I can just get through the next twenty-four hours, that is.

I pull up a chair to the glass desk, hit a button and a projection lights up in front of me, a 3D scan of the four rings of the NTS. I push it along, looking for possible destinations for Victor and his giant friend.

Problem is, there are many destinations. Although the NTS is set up logically and is easy to navigate by Rocar, there are still some undeveloped or neglected pockets, especially on the borders

between the Bricks and the Rez. There are big, open patches. Blind spots. I skim across the 4th and 5th Parishes. No activity. There are some old, abandoned structures we haven't gotten to yet, out at the southern edge of the 6th Parish. Old dorms. The odd church. All sitting vacant. None of them looks very hospitable, but there's no reason a band of Inciters couldn't make them cozy if they remained off our radar. Vic was always pretty handy. I'm sure he could insulate such a building without too much trouble.

A man like him with knowledge of the inner workings of the Temple is dangerous. I don't know if Harper realizes it, even. I don't think she gets how stupid we were to let our guard down and invite so many males in when we did. I get that it was a peace-keeping, good faith initiative. *Let the men in and they'll see that we don't hate all of them.* God knows it's more than they did for women over the centuries, giving our gender a false sense of security, of equality. We let them get away with that shit. Because we were weak.

Men can't make decisions for women now. No man can decide if a woman gets pregnant, or if she stays pregnant. No male bureaucrat gets to determine if a mother gets maternity leave, because of course she does. Five years paid, if she wants it. Some women don't want it, though. Some, like me, want to pop the kid out and get back to work as fast

as possible.

Of course, my reasons were different. I needed to be able to tell them that I'd lost my child. That I needed a week or two to recover physically and mentally from the trauma. That my mother was staying with me as support, when the truth was that my mother was helping raise my secret son.

She saved my life, I think. She certainly saved Dec's. Even though I have disdain for the instinct to nurture, to coddle, some part of me respects that she's a mother through and through. A caregiver. She would have made a great nurse, back in the day, before nurses were automated.

When my wrist vibrates I realize I've drifted off into a sort of nostalgic daydream of the time when Dec was tiny, when things felt simpler. When all I had to worry about was completing work on the Sanctuary and how to keep from blurting out to strangers that the love of my life was an infant living on the third floor of my house.

"Marion!" the voice speaks into my ear.

Mika.

"What's up?" I ask, slamming my fingers into the pad of my thumb to shut down the 3D model of the city outskirts that's floating in space in front of me. I could easily explain why I'm looking at it, but I'd rather not.

"Something strange has come up," Mika tells me. "One of the heads of the Intel Department

thinks there may be a Double working out of the Temple.”

My heart almost explodes, and once again I’m grateful that any readings on my adrenaline will be false. For a moment I wonder if she’s talking about me, but then I remember that I haven’t actually done anything wrong.

Well, not much, at least.

“Double?” I ask. “What’s the evidence?”

“There’s nothing concrete. A bit of sloppy comm work. Patchy audio, a bit of grainy video that shows someone—a woman, one of ours, based on her clothing—has been talking to an Inciter called Parker. We don’t have anything beyond that yet.”

Parker. I’m sure I heard that name when the Wasps were buzzing around the conference room. I also thought I heard a woman’s voice.

“I’ll do a bit of poking around,” I tell her. “Do you know his serial number?”

“No. Nothing, not even his surname.”

“Parker’s not his surname?”

“Apparently not.”

“All right, I’m on it. There can’t be that many Parkers around, certainly not ones who know Tracers.”

“I knew I could count on you. Thanks, I appreciate it. Especially since I’m going out tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Hot date.”

“Really?” I ask.

“With a *Mark*. I promised to beta-test this model for a friend. My night will probably end with my getting crushed to death with a very happy smile on my face.”

Marks are sex-bots. They come in every color and size. They’ll give it to you hard or gentle, depending on what you request and what they read in your mood.

“Just don’t fall in love,” I tell her.

“You know that’s not possible. I’m pretty sure this model has sensors that’ll make its dick explode if it detects too many endorphins being released. Anything other than raw lust is strictly *verboten*. So at the slightest hint of attachment he’d probably melt into a screaming puddle of male angst.”

I laugh, but Mika’s got a point. Intimacy is one of the seven sins under the NTS. Women have important work to do; too important for frivolous distractions. If we could figure out how, we’d hand over the baby-birthing process to men. Let them deal with the agony of labor for a few generations and see how they like it.

Maybe then they’d be a little more grateful for all that they have in this world.

“Well, he does sound far superior to the flesh version,” I tell Mika. “Less messy, and I mean that

in every possible way.”

“Tell me about it. Though you’d be surprised at how much of a mess this model makes, if you know what I’m saying.”

“I don’t,” I tell her, “and I’m damn grateful for small mercies.” Suddenly I’m very, very glad not to work in Sex-Tech development.

“Are you sure? Because I could absolutely describe it in graphic detail.”

I let out a disgusted chuckle. “Do it and I’ll kill you. Listen, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See ya!” she chirps before hanging up.

Mika’s always so freaking perky. I can never quite tell if she’s immune to the cynicism that infects the rest of us, or just has a better coping mechanism in place. Either way, cheers to her for not letting the bastards get her down.

When I was coming up through the ranks at the Academy, the hetero female recruits sometimes headed out to bars in the Bricks to get laid. They met a man, took him home, screwed his brains out, then kicked him to the curb and went about their business. In the rare cases where a woman wasn’t very ambitious politically, she and her plaything might even have stayed together, gone through some apocalyptic hellscape of a relationship, and maybe a kid or two popped out while they figured out how much they hated each other.

Those women never climbed through the ranks.

Never flourished politically. A man in a woman's life is considered a weakness, and worse, a possible influencer.

The most respected females are the ones who choose to live alone. The ones who've proven that they've evolved beyond the nuclear family.

In other words, she women who are like me.

Except for the fact that my life is a lie.

Pulling my mind away from dates with sex-bots and half-truths, I fling my fingers open, and the projection springs to life in front of me once again.

"Parker. Inciter," I say. A series of screens pop up on the wall and I scan them quickly. Nothing useful.

"Parker. *Victor*," I add.

A moment later, audio begins to play of a number of men engaged in a conversation. The sound is a bit garbled; they're obviously on the move. They're talking about their destination—some meeting place that one of them knows to be empty. Clearly, they've gotten sloppy and forgotten that even on the outskirts of town, there are Listeners.

I'm going to need to go check the place out. But in order to do that, I'll need a little help from my friends.

Stepping over to a small desk that sits against the far wall, I extract a faux-leather case and unzip it. Inside are three perfect, tiny Wasps. More

advanced than the ones I used for our raid, and more beautiful.

They're jet-black, even their wings. The only reason I've never used them is that I was saving them for after the protocol upgrade. I was thinking about experimenting, using them as border patrol drones to guard against infiltrators. But hey, why not pop the champagne early? All they need is a software update and a quick test, then they'll be my new partners.

I pull a mag-chair up to the desk, lay one of the Wasps on the flat surface and speak.

"Activate vespula 118-B," I say softly.

The Wasp begins to vibrate, its tiny legs and small body flailing around like it's just come out of a long sleep.

"Settle."

It pulls itself onto its feet, its wings flapping slightly.

"Seek."

The Wasp shoots itself into the air and flits about the room, stopping to take in objects of interest. The light in the ceiling, the images floating on the wall. Finally, it makes its way towards me, staying just out of my reach as its eyes focus on me.

"Project vespula's sight," I say, and suddenly my face fills the opposite wall. Horrifying to realize how large my nostrils look, but I don't care much

right now. “Record.”

I sing a little nursery rhyme into the air, one that my father used to sing to me about some stupid kids killing themselves by crashing down a hill and breaking all their bones.

“Play back.”

The sound of my own voice echoes around me.
My new allies have officially been activated.



SINCE THERE ARE four of us now, we need to get around mostly on foot. There's surveillance on every corner, in every building, in every store. But they do the updates on the mag-ways and in the Rocars first. That means we can stay just ahead of their face-rec tech in the the Bricks' less savory neighborhoods, the ones further down on their priority list. We can't get sloppy. Even the old tech can still pick almost any man out of a crowd. It's not perfect, but it's close enough to scare the shit out of anyone doing anything they shouldn't be

doing.

Before our upgrade at the Melodrome, Spare, Parker, and Andy had old-model blockers. They weren't perfect, but they'd throw off most scanners for nearly a minute, which was just enough time to get out of range of one scanner before you got into the range of the next. Kids call it "scanner-planning." We call it staying free for one more minute. Our new blockers will take care of most of that.

I worry about plenty, but not about getting I.D'd. I learned some good tech on the sly at the Academy and some more at the Media Corps. And with a little help from some friends in very low and frankly pretty foul-smelling places, I've been able to do my own modifications. The other guys don't know that, and I plan on keeping it that way. Knowledge is power. But so is keeping knowledge to yourself. If we get to the point where I have to come clean about certain things, I'll know we're at the point of no return. And by then, who the fuck cares?

After we do our best to erase any trace of our activities at the old mansion on the hill, the four of us do a zig-zag into the bowels of the 7th Parish. We do a few criss-crosses and double-backs. Parker's in the lead with Andy right behind and with me and Spare bringing up the rear. We make sure to stay far enough behind so that if Parker and

Andy turn a corner and run face-first into a Tracer patrol, Spare and I can drop down into a casual saunter, just an inactive Puissant and his towering lover out for a pleasant stroll. But we're lucky, and the Tracers aren't out in any kind of force. I'm sure a lot of them have been called back to the Temple or even to the Academy in preparation for the new system launch scheduled for tomorrow. Not that we're supposed to know any of that, but again, friends in smelly places.

It's not more than an hour before we get to the Castle. If Xian's Palace is one of the Brick's armpits, then the Castle is the other. Only without deodorant. Technically called the Logistical Operation Center, The Castle is an old synth factory that's now used mostly for storage. It's a cylindrical behemoth with four floors of dark rooms around a central atrium, with high industrial shelving and storage bays, and robot retrievers that don't work anymore. The Castle is User-central. The NTS keeps cleaning it up. But as soon as they clear out, the Users move right back in. Then the NTS cleans it up again, and around and around we go. There aren't as many Users as there used to be. It just gets too expensive, too dangerous, and too tempting to keep scrounging for the injections that counteract the effects of the implants. The feeling of feeling like a pre-implant man, even if it's just until the high wears off, is the best part of being a

User. And the worst. You just can't get right being a User.

I should know. I've been one. It sucks. It's weakness masquerading as empowerment. At my lowest, I've crashed out at the Castle. Gave myself the shots. Felt the high of being a wolf instead of a sheep. I got into a dozen scrapes, some pointless arguments with anonymous men. Arguments would escalate into shoving, which would escalate into a bare-knuckles slug-fest. We'd bash each other around until we broke each other's bones. Then I'd pass out in a piss-soaked hallway, my head ringing, my knuckles bloody, and a big stupid smile on my busted-up face.

I'm not proud about it. But, hey, it's the only way to get around the S.I.C. program that's been around in one form or another since before I was born. Screening, Implants, and Conditioning. The prenatal Screening ferrets out defects on the Y-chromosome. The Implants prevent us from using guns. And the Conditioning we all get at the Academy is the safety net. S.I.C. is why we are what we are. Honestly, it's also probably why we're alive to be anything at all. The Inciters and Mannists can scream and complain, but they're arguing philosophy in the face of a whole bunch of reality. I'm no fan of the NTS. But there hasn't been a single gun death in the New Thought Society for nearly twenty years. There's no rape. No war.

Total paradise.

And all we had to give up was half our civil liberties and all of our guns.

Oh, and sports. Other than getting their guns back, that's the one thing the Inciters mostly squawk about. I'm part of the first generation that can't participate in sports. Other than the V.R. sims at the Melodrome, the Castle's the only place you can still really see what it was like. Back at the Academy, when I was still on probation and shouldn't have risked it, I'd slip away from time to time to the top floor of the Castle and watch low-res pirate telecasts of old sporting events from decades ago. Football, rugby, soccer, boxing, wrestling, beach volleyball, and anything else we could feast our eyes on. We didn't care. Anything with men smashing and crashing into each other would do. It was barbaric. Neanderthal. Sub-human. It looked like Hell. It also looked like a hell of a lotta fun.

“Eliminate anything seen as a reflection or contribution to violence.” That's been the party line for as long as I can remember. Then there was the “This isn't for your own good – It's for ours” campaign. That one went on for years, until I guess they didn't need it anymore. I never knew if by “ours” they meant all of humanity or only just the women.

It's hard to blame anyone. After all, it wasn't

one person's decision. Hell, it wasn't any person's decision. "Full Algorithmic Computation," they called it. In 2050 alone, the last year before the FAC kicked in throughout the Old United Provinces, there were over 13,000 shooting deaths —of children. It was nearly ten times that number for kids aged 12-17 and fifty times that for everyone else. That's nearly 800,000 "deaths by firearm" in one year. One year. In one country. And that doesn't include suicides, injuries, the on-going Anglo-Asian wars, or the 300 school shootings that year, which started happening so often that they got their own category in the gun violence stats. And the comp-calc projections were on a steep uphill trajectory. Gun violence was public enemy number one and the leading cause of death among, well, everyone. 800,000 living, breathing human beings terminated, gone in the flash of a loaded gun, all in a single calendar year. The only thing every one of those deaths had in common? Guns and men.

As with any piece of code, if you want it to work, you've got to identify the glitches and eliminate the errors. Turns out the Y-chromosome is the biggest glitch of all. The algorithm was infallible, so every other variable was dropped, and the Y-chromosome went under the microscope. First, they pathologized maleness. After that came the NTS and The Temple. And after that came the perfection of a peaceful, civilized society.

Perfect? Sure. Tell that to the four chip-brains dodging scanners and hoping we don't slam into any Tracers in this forsaken slum in the middle of the night.

The four of us get to the Castle just as the shadows get as long as they're going to get before total nightfall. We slip down one small flight of exterior stairs where we scan ourselves in before heading up the metal steps to the second level where there's a little more light and a few clean rooms where we can settle in. One of the spaces has already been set up as the strategy room. It's the same place where I first met Parker and the Inciters less than a week ago. It's where they recruited me, and where my life went sideways.

Just as well. Straight on wasn't really working for me anyway.

Parker ushers us in, and we take seats in the mag-chairs around a floating holo-table in the middle of the room. Tally comes in right behind us, and she and Parker exchange pleasantries before we settle into business.

"First things first," Tally says. "I've got a team of med-techs downstairs. They're already starting with the injections that'll override the implants. Moving bottom to top. Should be here by the time we're done."

Parker holds up his hand. "Do we know anyone on this team of yours?"

Tally glares at him but then takes a breath and smiles. “*I* know them. Fair enough?”

Parker sighs. “Fair enough.”

“They’re not all Mannists if that’s what you’re worried about,” Tally says evenly. “But let’s say they have certain sympathies.”

Andy stops munching on his fingernails long enough to insist that Parker get things going. Andy’s been calm for the last hour, but he’s starting to shift into twitchy mode. He makes me nervous, but Parker just nods and projects a cobalt-blue schematic of the Temple from his wrist-reader. The image glows in front of us and attracts the attention of some of the men who have been huddling against the walls in the corridor just outside the door. Spare hops out of his mag-chair. The men in the hall scatter as he stomps towards the door and hits the control panel with the side of his fist. The orange steel door swishes shut as he takes his seat again, and Parker gets back to his plan as Tally jumps in with details about what to expect on the inside.

They call up lists of guys in the Castle who will make up three strike-teams. “Tech,” “Infiltration,” and “Armory.” I nod when they tell me that Spare and I are “Tech.” I have some connections on the inside, and a few agenda items of my own to tick off, so this could be interesting.

Parker spins the schematic and enlarges one of the smaller buildings situated just outside of the

Temple. “Andy and I will lead an Infiltration team into this smaller weapons depot Tally I.D’d for us. That’ll get us a few of the weapons we’ll need if we’re going to make it to the basement Control Room where our two teams will rendezvous. From there, we go together up to the Command Center, we unlock the Armory, get inside, and then...”

“And then,” Andy finishes, “the Armory team assembles, and we take this bitch down.”

“We’ll coordinate through these new wrist-readers,” Tally says as she tosses a reader through the hologram to each of us. The hologram shimmies like it’s excited as the readers pass through, and we catch them one at a time. “It took some doing, but I was able to get these specially coded. The Temple security will still be able to pick up the signals, but they’ll be scrambled with the voices of some of the low-level women from the Research Department recorded and scanned in. Just in case, though, don’t use them unless you have to. No visuals. And keep any communication short and as general as possible.”

Parker goes over more of the specs. Back and forth, he and Tally talk us through everything. The timing for the strike-teams. The coordination of weapons acquisition and distribution. The risks. The rewards.

They’re just finishing when the door whooshes open, and an older woman walks in.

We all stand up automatically to greet her. She and Tally exchange a hug. “This is Sonora,” Tally tells us. “She’s been leading the team that’s giving the injections.”

“I’ve got a ‘maybe’ here,” Sonora says, guiding a user into the strategy room. “Didn’t pass med-scan but insists he can help.” The user can’t be more than twenty years old, but he’s got the deeply sunken eyes and withered skin of an old man. His teeth are a hideous gray-brown combination, and the guy’s trembling like he’s just survived a lightning strike. “We roused out about thirty men who are too far gone to be reliable. Everyone else is under the limit,” she says matter-of-factly. “But this guy has overused.”

He doesn’t deny it. No point.

“I can still help,” he insists. His voice is barely a whisper.

Parker asks Sonora for permission to step in. She nods, and he steps over to the man.

He tells him that we need everyone clean. He puts his hand on the guy’s shoulder. It’s an intimate gesture, the kind of touching that’s encouraged. The man smiles and puts his hand on Parker’s.

“I’ll help here then, okay?”

Parker says, “That’d be great,” and nods him out the door.

It’s getting late, and we get ready to head up to the third floor where there are bunks and two fully-

stocked kitchens. We need to get our heads together and our bodies rested. According to Tally, we've got a window that opens tomorrow at 23-hundred and closes exactly fifty-nine minutes later. After that, the protocols turn over, the code redundancies are revised, the Temple's self-diagnostic goes full A.I., and we're stuck being what and who we are for the rest of our sheepish, subservient lives.



THE INCITERS' meeting place is old and musty. I can see why they chose it; it's in the middle of nowhere behind as many thorny brambles as Sleeping Beauty's castle.

The place was probably beautiful once. An old colonial in what used to be Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It's the sort of house now occupied by the occasional squatters making busywork for the lower level Tracers who have to chase them out. I've been saying for ages that we should tear all these old buildings down; they're too enticing,

too appealing for anyone who wants to hide without actually hiding.

I send in the three Wasps before I move, my hand braced on my twitch-stick. One heads in through the open front door; the others move to the sides of the house, making their way up to the second story windows to see what's what.

But when they feed my cerebral cortex, I get nothing. The windows are sealed up, and even through the few cracks where they can catch a glimpse of the inside, there's not a trace of movement, not a curtain blowing in the breeze. The place is a ghost town without the ghosts. Only the occasional footprint or slither-mark of a cord dragging along the ground tells me I'm not totally insane to have followed the lead to this godforsaken place.

The question is what the hell were Vic and the others even doing here?

I hit my wrist-reader and call up another image, this one from several hours ago. "Skyview of current location," I command, bending my elbow, angling my fist towards me to aim the back of my wrist at the wall. "Six p.m."

"Advance," I call out as the projection shows me the house from above. It zooms in twenty or so feet. "Advance. Come on. More. More."

Finally, I'm rewarded with a surge of motion. A bunch of kids leaving the place, one of whom

seems larger than the others. Some of the figures are carrying equipment under their arms. Computers, it looks like; laptops and some other paraphernalia. Basic tech, no guns. So, this isn't exactly an uprising. At first it appears to be nothing more than a bunch of delinquents getting together to play Pac Man or look at pirated sports or contraband porn.

But as I zoom in, I can't help but note the all-too familiar gait of the figure walking next to the largest of the group. So, someone's trying to pull a fast one. It would probably work with most Tracers surveilling the area, but not with me. I can tell that a blocker's being used from a mile away, and I know Vic when I see him. Small or not.

This group of miscreants is made up of Inciters with an agenda.

The "boys" disappear into the woods somewhere between the 6th and 7th Parishes. They're using the cover of treetops to hide from the surveillance drones, and my scanners are having trouble locking them down. They appear to have disbursed into groups of one or two, possibly finding their way into tunnels to avoid being seen. The chances of my finding them without a search party are slim to none.

Well, I can't really blame them. If there is porn on those machines and they run into a Tracer party, they'll suffer for it. If it's something else, even

worse.

“Check for infringements in Temple’s software,” I command. Immediately the image of the treetops is replaced by a list of data breaches in the last twenty-four hours. Zero. Everything is airtight.

“Safeguards. Attempts to communicate offland.”

Immediately one warning flashes on the screen. It seems that someone tried to access foreign contacts from this location. They succeeded, too.

At least they think they did.

I can no longer deny it, even to myself. This smacks of a rebellion, and Victor is at the center of it. I wouldn’t worry too much, except that he’s smart. Always has been. And he’s being led around by his balls, if his going off the grid is any indication. There’s nothing to hold him back if he’s not medicated. Nothing to keep his aggression at bay. For Vic, aggression doesn’t mean unjustified violence. It means laser focus. It means he’s getting something done.

I tell myself it doesn’t matter. There are no vulnerabilities in the System. Well, there may be one, but it’s highly unlikely that they’d know about it. You’d have to be an insider at the Temple, active within the last six weeks, to know even the basics of the protocols we’re running. Vic’s buddy Godzilla is highly unlikely to have gotten his hands

on our software imprints. He's not the sort who could go marching into the Temple undetected.

I know they're out there and up to no good. Trying to find a flaw in the system that they can exploit. All I know is that they're a serious pain in my ass right now. I wanted to enjoy this moment. I wanted to relax in the knowledge that the world was looking up.

But I can't. I already know it's going to be another long night. I'll probably go home, get a little rest, then I'll be heading back to the Temple first thing in the morning and going over weaknesses one last time before the upgrade.

Just in case.

Not that I'm really worried. Smart though Vic may be, he was never a mastermind type. He was a learner, a doer, but not a creator. Even if—and it's a big if—he knew about the temporary weakness in the system, he'd need an army to take the Temple down. Somehow, I don't think his band of lurchy Inciters is the sort of well-organized militia we need to worry about

After the upgrade's over, after all the dust has settled, none of this will matter. We'll wipe the Inciters' minds, they'll straighten up and fly right. The sins of Vic's past will be forgotten. No point in destroying him now, when he has a chance at a clean slate.

On a whim I dart out of the house, back through

the stiff iron gate and into the underbrush. I've got a sudden urge to see my son.



I PUT Dec to bed when I get home. He's already gone through the phase where he determined that he was far too mature for such ceremonies, but lately, I've been getting the impression that it soothes him.

For some reason it's me who needs soothing tonight, though—maybe even more than he does.

“What's going on, Mommy?” he asks in a voice that's so sleepy as to be adorable. *Mommy*. He hasn't called me that in years. Another time, I might have scolded him for it, but not tonight. Tonight, I want to be the simple entity that is Mother.

“Nothing,” I lie as I stroke his hair. I'm lying a lot these days. “I'm tired. There's a lot going on at work, and it's got my mind occupied.”

“I'd like to go to work with you one day,” he tells me, letting a big yawn find its way out of his small mouth.

“Why?” I ask, a pang of guilt assaulting me. “Don't you like it here anymore, with Nana and Henry?”

He shrugs. “This place is fine. I just want to see

where you spend your days. I want to see the outside.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve got news for you, kid. The outside’s not that interesting. Neither is my work, for that matter. Not nearly as interesting as your Sanctuary.”

“I still want to come. Can I sometime? Please?”

“We’ll see,” I tell him. Another lie. No boys allowed, certainly not ones who are supposed to be deceased.

“Where’s Nana?” I ask.

“Downstairs in her quarters, I think,” he tells me, his eyes drooping as sleep threatens to overtake him. Dopey, floppy little guy. I give him a gentle kiss on the forehead, then head downstairs.

My mother is sitting on the couch in her large bedroom, staring into space. Something in her body language freaks me out. Her torso is tense, her hands clenched in a strange, post-mortem way that makes me think of skeletons, zombies and dead parents.

A quiet moan tells me she’s not the latter, at least.

“Mom? Is anything wrong?” I ask, hesitant to step too close.

“Oh!” She jolts to attention, like she’s just been zapped out of a trance, and twists her head to look at me. “I didn’t see you there, dear.”

“Clearly not. Everything okay?”

She issues me a smile that doesn't exactly say no, but it definitely doesn't say yes. "Someone was outside earlier," she says. Her voice is distant, coated in a layer of ice, like she's describing a ghost.

"Well, yeah," I chuckle. "People are outside all the time. They have to get home somehow. It's called walking." I know perfectly well that no one walks around here, though. Clio is the least-populated, least-interesting, and least neighborly of the nine precincts of the Rez. That's why I picked it.

She shakes her head slowly. "No. That's not what I mean. I saw someone looking in through the window in the living room." I know the window she means. The one that looks out to the front of our property. "Right on the porch."

Silently, I stride out of the room and walk over to the front window. Naturally, I can't see much as it's dark out. A tingle makes its way down my spine, like when I was a kid and would leap onto my bed from the doorway to avoid monsters.

There's no reason that any human should have been near our place, not without permission. "Was it someone old?" I ask when I've made my way back to my mother. "They might have been senile, confused..." I begin, but I'm not even convincing myself that I could possibly be right. A Tracer patrol would have stopped someone wandering

about on their own if they'd been worried.

Another shake of her head. "It was a young woman. Maybe thirty. She looked completely in command of her faculties."

"A young woman?" I parrot, trying to decipher what this could possibly mean.

"She was wearing a Temple uniform. One of the grey ones, with the sensors and the emblems..."

I can feel my blood pressure rising. No Temple worker—especially one of the lowers—has any business looking into my house. If I find out who it was I'll have her fired and thrown into the Grind to remind the lowers that they're not welcome to trespass on the property of the uppers.

I'll look her up later; the security cams must have caught her face. But Mom's visibly shaken by the incident, and my job at the moment is to calm her down. "Don't worry about it," I tell her, throwing myself onto the couch next to her. "She was probably just curious. Besides, the security in this place is great. No one can get in or out unless we let them. Don't forget that your daughter is a tech genius."

"I know, dear. I guess it's just a feeling. It scared me." Mom lets out a quick sigh, then she's over it.

The thing is, I'm not. Someone was too close to my son. Too close to the truth.

"Anything on the idiot panel?" I ask. My

mother shrugs, so I squeeze my right wrist. “Scroll through Entertainment,” I say.

A projection comes up on the far wall, showing sneak previews of all the latest recorded shows. Pretty scenes of flower-filled fields with white horses galloping through. A man who’s wearing a jaunty yellow apron, baking a cake, sunlight pouring in through his kitchen window. Which has to be a set, because no man in the NTS lives in a house that looks that good. A program called *Best of the Best*, about Polyhymnia, the Rez’s nicest precinct. Of course, it’s also totally artificial. All manicures and lipstick, that place.

The houses, all white and pristine with splashes of joyful color, look like a unicorn ate a bucket full of multi-colored marshmallows then puked. Everything is designed to draw a feeling of euphoric calm from any person walking through it. Huge, unnaturally pert flowers spring from the ground. A weeping willow tree hangs over a main pedestrian thoroughfare, not because it grew there naturally, but because someone 3D printed a synth version.

If it’s pretty, it gets crammed in somehow, which only serves to overload the place with falsely idyllic wonder.

We live in a manufactured lie, meant to make us forget all the things we’ve lost. To make us forget that we’re human.

Because the fact is that we're not anymore.



THE TEMPLE IS a whole sprawling compound of structures that sits in the middle of what used to be rural Pennsylvania in the old United States. It's an organic fusion of glass and a lattice-work of white synth-steel mingling with huge swaths of green space around winding tree-lined trails. It's a lot of light, clean lines, and reflecting surfaces. Most of the buildings are cylindrical now or built with lots of curves. Some of the buildings in the Core are still under construction as part of an architectural reclamation project with the goal of limiting the

number of right angles in the world with the slogan “There are no right angles in nature” scrolling on all the ad boards. The NTS is all about what’s organic. We eat organic food in organic buildings in organic parishes and districts where we putter around in our useless organic little lives. The women say that we’re through fighting with nature, and we’re through fighting with each other. The problem is, if you don’t fight, how can you ever win?

Of course, even the entire concept of winning has kind of fizzled out over the years. “Cooperation is key.” That’s another one of those ad board slogans. The NTS is full of scrolling text like that. Brainwashing at its best. Seems like our lives are run by slogans. Slogans and women. To tell the truth, I’m sick of having my life run by anything. I’m sick of being held back. Sure, we’re going after our guns. But more than that, we’re also going after our freedom.

It’s 7 A.M., and I’m fantasizing about all the things I’ll do with that new freedom as Spare and I make our way through the Athena Triad and head towards the Temple. We’re able to keep a pretty even pace along the walkways and across the bigger East-West avenues as the Rocars swerve politely around us. There haven’t been any traffic accidents since the new upgrades to the mag-way NavTrack system a few years back, so I’m not too worried about getting hit. Besides, I’ve got plenty

of other things to worry about. Like the fact that it's hard to walk normal when you're sweating rivers and are closing in on either freedom or failure.

Spare is trying to slouch down, but his legs are so long that I still have to walk twice as fast to keep up with him. Which means I'm half-jogging and sweat-soaked, my heart tap-dancing in my chest while I'm trying to look like I'm on a Saturday stroll through the park. I tell him to slow down and walk normal. He tries. But it's hard. We keep moving and avoid as many people as we can. This close to the Temple means a greater chance of running into Tracers, which means a greater chance of ending the day with our bodies on one side of the Core and our balls on the other.

The building we want is easy enough to find, and we work our way around to the back to get to the Maintenance Access Port. It's here, in the shadow of the Temple's behemoth eastern leg, that Ned was supposed to do his recon. Access to the Temple isn't as easy as walking in through the front door. The plan was for Ned to infiltrate one of these smaller decommissioned buildings to confirm the existence of some of the pathways and access tunnels we could use to slip in undetected. Obviously, that fell through, so Spare and I are going to have to wing this. Security used to be a big thing, but it's been scaled way back. "Security is a

matter of trust, not force.” Another one of the slogans.

Yeah. Trust me. We’re using force.

The NTS has been doing some renovations throughout the Temple complex, and this is one of the smaller annexes that’s getting decommissioned, so it’s quiet with just some holographic caution cones and a few chunky construction vehicles sitting around like bored dogs waiting for someone to play with them. Spare and I hug the wall as we head down a long delivery ramp and cut left across a small walkway just before a set of big bay doors. The small corridor we slip into is dark and tight, and Spare has to duck his head and turn sideways just to follow me the twenty or so feet to the small blue door at the end. Now we find out if the codes Tally gave us are the real-deal, a bust, or worse, a double-cross that’s going to end with us in the Grind praying for death.

I tap out the code on my wrist-scanner and flick it onto the door’s access panel. The red border turns green, the door slides open, and Spare and I exchange a look of surprise, relief, and a hint of triumph. For the first time, it occurs to me that this might actually work. Spare must’ve been thinking the same thing because he gives me a big, toothy smile and puts his tree-trunk arm across my shoulders.

“We’re going to do this, aren’t we?” he grins.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I say. “We walk through this door and there’s no turning back, and there are about a hundred things that still have to go right for this to work.”

“Only ninety-nine now,” he says as we step into a long corridor that leads to more doors and more corridors. We navigate the basement hallways like two mice in a maze. The walls are curved, and I imagine we could just as well be running through an underground sewer. At least this place is immaculately clean and smells more like flowers than feces. I duck my head instinctively as we jog along. Spare ducks his head because he has to. The corridors have lights on timers, but they don’t activate as we move. That’s a good sign. It means the other guys have accomplished their first mission. It’s dark down here, but there are red emergency light pads embedded along on the floor, and Spare and I have the flashlights activated on our wrist-readers. As we follow the directions on the readers, we pass dozens of huge storage rooms that we can see into through the big glass doors. It’s mostly building materials and towering shelves of electronics in huge, clear bins. Everything is tidy and catalogued. Most of the retrieval system is automated, so even when the annex was running at full capacity, there really wasn’t a need for anyone to be down here. Which is good. Last thing we need is to get busted when we’re this close.

I'm just thinking about how smooth this is going when the gods of irony knock out our wrist-readers.

Spare says, "Oh shit" and starts tapping his.

I tap mine, too, but nothing. It's dead. "Uh oh."

Spare asks me what happened.

I shake my head. "One of two possibilities. Either our guys started the deactivation sequence but didn't separate our readers out..."

"Or?"

"Or we're about to have a really bad day."

"We need to keep moving," Spare urges. "The other guys are going to be at the Control Room any time now. Without you, this can't go down."

I look at him, then back the way we came. There are other corridors intersecting with the one we're in, although I can't see too far down any of them. Each corridor appears to be practically identical, and I get a monstrous knot in my gut at the thought of seriously getting trapped down here. After what I've been through in the last twenty-four hours, any claustrophobia I might have had has been wiped out of me. I'm not afraid of being in closed spaces, just dying in them.

"I'm all in favor of not staying here and waiting to get zapped," I say. "But without the map, I don't know where the hell we are, and there's still gotta be a half-mile left in this maze, and I don't think we're anywhere close to where we're supposed to

be.”

Spare winks at me. “If it’s just an oversight by the Tech Team, I can still get us to the Control Room.”

“And how are you going to manage that? Unless you have a photographic memory or something.”

“There’s no ‘or something,’” Spare says. “I have a photographic memory.”

My jaw drops. “Really?” I ask. “Photographic?”

“Pretty much. For visuals anyway. Don’t ask me to recite every word of the news ticker. But yeah, if it’s an image, it just locks into my head. Always has.”

“So you can still see the map...”

“In my head. Yeah. So, shall we?”

I make a sweeping gesture with my hand, and my giant sidekick takes the lead.

Without our wrist-readers, the corridors are lit only by the eerie glow of the red lights from the emergency floor pads. I follow Spare for turn after turn. I haven’t walked this much since, well, ever. The last twenty-four hours have wrecked my body. I’m in good enough shape, but I’m also tense, tired, and scared shitless. Not exactly the ideal combination for staying focused while scurrying around under your enemy’s nose. Literally. But Spare presses on, which means that I press on.

Nearly every corridor looks the same, and I hope Spare knows what he's doing because I have a weird feeling we're going to get lost down here and die, and it'll be years before someone accidentally stumbles on our decaying bodies.

I've pretty much lost any sense of time, but it's maybe another fifteen minutes of twists and turns before we find ourselves face to face with a white hinged door at the end of the corridor. Most physical doors slide these days. And even those are being constantly replaced by holo-screens. But there are still old-style swinging doors here and there like this one.

Spare looks back at me and smiles. "This is it."

I want to trust him, but this feels wrong. I don't remember Parker saying anything about this weird little door, and I have no idea what might be behind it. Besides, with our wrist-readers deactivated, we don't have any way to connect with the access panel. I take a chance and knock quietly on the door. Other than the hollow metallic clink of my knuckles on the synth-steel, nothing happens. I put my ear against the door. I knock a little louder. Nothing.

"I don't suppose you have an input code to go along with your photographic memory?"

Spare shakes his head.

"Any suggestions?"

He holds up both fists. "I've got these."

“You’re going to smash in the door?” I rap my knuckles on the door. “This synth-steel door?”

“Gonna try.”

I whisper some profanity under my breath, but since I don’t have any better ideas, I step to the side.

Spare stands next to the door with his back to the wall. He raises his arm across his barrel of a body with his right fist resting on his left shoulder. He takes a deep breath and uncorks his arm. His fist smashes with a thundering blast against the synth-steel. I’m standing there open-mouthed. The door is nearly off its hinges! A blast of white light streams through the space around the frame, and the crash of his fist is still echoing in waves like music down the corridor.

Spare says, “One more.” He smashes his fist against the door again, and this time it becomes completely dislocated and falls with a heavy rattling clang into the room.

I’ve got my mouth hanging open like an idiot. “That was...”

“Impressive?”

“I was gonna say fucking phenomenal. But sure. I’ll settle for impressive.”

We step into the room, and I think both of us are bracing to be shot or to come face to face with a swarm of Wasps followed by a platoon of Tracers.

But the only thing that greets us is the quiet of

the Control Room, just like Tally and Parker described it to us. Considering it's from here that we're going to both start and finish a revolution, it's a pretty uninspiring little room. It's all white synth-steel with a couple of temperature indicators built into the wall. There are no monitors or massive computer stations or anything. Just a small glass terminal squatting there like a mushroom in the middle of the room. Every hacker and coder knows about back doors. They're a requirement so you don't get locked out of your own system, and they let you bypass all the security protocols you installed to keep everyone else out. Kind of a built-in vulnerability that only you can exploit. This little room is the back door of the NTS. If the Temple has an Achilles' heel, this is it. The problem with attacking an Achilles' heel is that it makes it that much easier to get kicked in the face.

I cross to the center of the room and start tapping in access codes on the holographic input board that floats like a quilt of colors and keys just above terminal. My fingers are dancing along the hovering keys, and I feel like the concert-level pianist I used to wish I was. I get past the last level of Temple security code and figure that it's okay to breathe. I spent half my life in a panic, terrified that I might get caught while I was secretly learning the inner workings of the NTS tech and all their systems. But now it looks like it might just pay off.

The temporary bug I just put into the system should free up Parker and Andy to get in and out of the Armory without tripping any alarms. It'll also put a hold on all implants until I can restructure the security protocols, which will deactivate these things in our heads forever.

I'm maybe five minutes in. Since Tracers haven't come storming in by now, I figure we're safe. We just need to hope that the other guys were able to complete their mission. Getting inside the building was the easy part. Thanks to Spare, that is. Getting into the Temple security system is a bit harder. But getting into the Armory is the key to the whole plan. If that fails, we fail. If we fail, it's back to a lifetime of slavery. And that's not a life I plan on living.

Spare is antsy and keeps walking back to the doorway to look down the corridor.

"Can I help?" he asks.

I glance up at him and smile. "I appreciate the offer. But these are quadra-level encrypted compilers with probabilistic algorithmic syntax. There are two people on the planet who can infiltrate this system."

"Who's the other?"

"The one who designed the system. And she's not someone we want to run into anytime soon."

Spare nods and invites me to get back to work, which I do in a flurry of input signals. This isn't as

simple as circumventing firewalls in a bunch of linear strings of code. A six-year-old with a double-digit I.Q. and a scan-pad can do that. The days of Java and Python and object-oriented languages like Ruby are long gone. C++ and Lisp are a museum fodder. Dinosaurs. This is a 3-D job that requires my full concentration. The diagnostic models for the code appear and rotate in front of me as holographic projections. The pale blue and green schematics, figures, and formulas shimmer and shimmy like little hyperactive and slightly radioactive children. I spin the models and the equations in space, explode them, contract them, wind and unwind them, and activate the ocular interface so even my eyes are part of this dance. A glance here. A look there. A series of eye-blinks. A flick of the wrist and a series of taps with my fingers. It's controlled chaos. I'm a conductor, all these bits and bytes are my orchestra, and I'm playing them for all I'm worth.

It's an intense job, but I can't afford to slip up. Can't even afford to wipe the sweat off my forehead. The other guys are supposed to be here any minute. The plan is for them to grab what they can from the small munitions depot, meet up here, permanently deactivate all of our implants, and then make our way up to the Command Center. From there, the plan kicks into serious high gear, and we take the revolution outside where it can go

wildfire crazy. In my experience, though, plans often have a mind of their own. I tell Spare to calm down. His pacing is distracting me, and I've still got a couple dozen pathway protocols to override and another dozen more to rewrite and reconstruct.

I'm nearly finished re-routing the pathways that will disable every implant in every man throughout the entire NTS when we hear the blasts. Spare and I both jump. That wasn't the electric zap of a Tracer twitch-stick. And it wasn't the crash of a stunned man smashing through a glass wall or busting his teeth on the edge of a stairway banister on his way down. I've heard all those before. Another series of blasts. No. This is different. This is gunfire. Real gunfire. It's echoing from down the corridor, and the sound bounces around in our little room. It's thunderous. It's terrifying. And it's music to my ears.



AT AROUND 4:00 A.M., I pack a few things into my bag for the day ahead. I haven't checked on Dec yet; all is quiet from his end of the apartment and I don't want to disturb him until the last possible second. Since I have a little time, I head to my basement pod and take a quick scan of my property's cameras to try and figure out who was lurking on our property yesterday.

Almost immediately, I see the young woman that Mom was talking about. Light brown hair, pulled back in a bun. A gray Tracer uniform, as she

described. The woman comes up as a lower-level underling who's worked at the Temple for two years. I don't see any history of improper conduct; the only thing that seems odd is that her residence is in Thalia precinct, which is about as far from Clio precinct as you can get.

I make a note to find her tomorrow and ask her a few questions. If she gives me any trouble, I'll make sure she suffers for it.

I head back up to my room and lie down on my bed, a feeling of euphoria slipping through my system. In a few hours, I'll take a Desmond back to the Temple, double-check the upgrade from the source, and then late this afternoon, if I'm lucky, if I can avoid distractions and if everything seems to be running smoothly, I'll head out to a bar with Mika and Erin to celebrate the beginning of the New World.

Tomorrow will be our equivalent of what used to be called Independence Day. By the time morning comes, every woman in this country of ours will have something to celebrate. Yeah, sure, we've had freedoms before. We've fought a long time and achieved a lot, on political, social, and even sexual levels. But this will be *real* liberation. I'm talking on the molecular level. It'll be the difference between training your dog and implanting him with a new and improved brain that's already trained.

The men who've already absorbed and accepted our ongoing propaganda will embrace the changes. The others won't have a choice. Their cells will be ours, and there won't be any need to rebel. Implants will be a thing of the distant past, something to display under glass in a museum of unnatural history. All the training we do at the Academy, all the conditioning—it'll all go the way of phrenology and drilling holes in people's heads to release the evil spirits.

The Victors and Neds of the world—they're the ones who would never be happy until the whole world is burning. But the good news is that they won't have a chance to set the world on fire. Not anymore. We're putting every fire out before it even starts. Their entire existence is about to change, and that change will be irreversible. No more skulking around with other Inciters, trying to find a way to take down the Temple. No more scheming. No more trying to get back to what they once were. There will be no point. By this time tomorrow, they won't even remember that they once were anything other than the compliant, complicit, and complete human beings that we're about to turn them into.

I gather up the system scanners and the diagnostic tools I'll need to monitor the final protocol upgrade, pack them carefully into my satchel and change into my uniform before heading

over to Dec's section of the third floor. For some reason I feel a stronger than usual need to see that he's okay. I want to know that my son is at peace right now. It's more important than upgrades and controlling men's brains. It's the most important thing in the universe.

On a whim I start by heading back to the Sanctuary. By this hour, he's probably already up and creating some kind of inventive multiverse with Henry as the two of them giggle and run around in their usual state of bliss.

I tap the input panel, and the holo-door to the Sanctuary sizzles open. I poke my head in, but there's no sign of Dec. He must still be in his bedroom. I backtrack down the hall and tap the input panel by his room. That door sizzles open, and I take a look inside.

The room is dark, only the glow from a night light by the bed casting any light. But a single word breaks through the obscurity and tells me that Dec isn't at peace after all.

“Mommy?”

I stride over to his bed and balance myself on its edge, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. Slowly his form appears before me, silhouetted against the white backdrop.

He's sitting up, his body stiff, like my mother's was last night. Something has him on edge.

“What is it?” I ask him, reaching my hand out,

palm up. “You worried about something?”

He puts his small hand in mine and squeezes. “You’re really going back there,” he says. “You’re going to work.”

I nod. “Yes. I have a lot to do. But I’ll be back tonight, and I’ll wake up early in the morning with you like always. It’ll be a great time for all of us. A time to celebrate.”

“So, it’s a big day today,” he says, “isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s a big day. And you’re right, Dec. Something’s going to happen this morning that’s going to change the world forever.”

“I know.”

The iciness in his voice sends a chill through my marrow.

“What do you mean, you know?” I ask.

He shrugs, and for a second, he’s reverted to floppy Dec. “I just know,” he sighs. “You’re not scared of what’s about to happen?”

I let out a laugh. What’s about to happen is the greatest advancement in the history of the civilized world. What’s about to happen is that our nation will become the most evolved, the most developed, on the planet. There will be peace built right into our DNA.

“Now, why would I be scared?” I ask. “This is what I’ve been working on for years. It’s the best thing I’ve ever done, because it means the NTS will be safe and secure for people like me, and it means

I can protect you, too, because I'll be stronger. I'll have more power."

He shakes his head. I can just barely make out the forlorn look on his face. "You can't protect me, Mommy."

His voice has gone glacial again. I look into his eyes, which are no longer fixed on mine, but on something on the far wall. In a flash he's turned into the adult version of himself. Serious as a heart attack.

And far more frightening.

"Of course I can protect you," I say in my most consoling Mommy voice. "I've done it for this long, haven't I?"

He nods. "Yes. But I know what's coming. I know what's happening in the Temple. You can't win this war."

Wait—my child just said *war*. As nausea works its way through me, I begin to feel like I've walked straight into my own nightmare.

"How do you know that word?" I ask him. "I've never talked to you about war. War is a thing of the past; there's no more. Not here. We don't allow it."

"It doesn't matter if you allow it or not," he murmurs, his eyes clouding over. I'm losing him; he's fading, like he's moving into the Far Away. The frightening thing is that he's not sitting in his chair in the Sanctuary. "I know about the men. I

know what they're doing. I know all of it. What I want to know is who's going to protect you."

My chest threatens to explode, my heart throbbing with one hard, painful pulse after another. I grab him by the shoulders, shaking him, trying to bring my son back to earth. Back to me. "What do you mean, Dec?" I shout. I put my right palm against his cheek. "Tell me what you're talking about!"

"You need to keep them."

"Keep who?"

"Vic," he says. "You need to keep Vic and the giant. Only they can help you undo what's about to be done."

Vic? The giant? I know exactly who and what he means, but I'm more confused than I've ever been in my life. First war, now Vic? How does he know about any of this?

As I stare into his eyes, his face begins to glow blue, and it takes only a second to realize that his skin is reflecting every surface of this room. This isn't supposed to happen. Not outside of the Sanctuary. The walls, ceiling, even the floor have come alive with movement. I leap to my feet and spin around, taking in what's happening. All of a sudden, I find myself in the very core of Hell.

Bodies.

Blood.

I swear I can hear screams. Dec's mouth is

closed, and I know it's not me. But I can hear them in my head. It's the voices of the terrified. The horrified. The helpless. And the nearly dead.

Images materialize in front of me. Women in uniforms, their heads blown to pieces, lying on the floors of the pristine hallways that I know so well.

Men running about with guns, spraying bullets everywhere, like they're making up for lost time. Ammo rips relentlessly through a woman's flesh and bury themselves in the marrow of her bones. Her screams bring instant tears to my eyes.

Instinctively, I swing around, throw myself on the bed and grab Dec, pulling him tight to my body in an attempt to protect him from this madness. From this unforgiving carnage. But I'm all too aware that I'm trying to protect my son from the contents of his own mind. Is he making this happen? Or is he seeing it happen? Or, maybe worst of all, am I sitting here holding my son while he descends into an insanity from which he may never recover?

His face is rammed into my shoulder now, and I can feel his sobs as his body convulses, terror overtaking him just as it's begun to destroy me. I look up at the nearest wall, clutching him close, and that's when my eyes land on a familiar face among the throngs of ravenous men burning down the Temple from within.

He's standing over the body of a woman, a look

of focus hardening his features. He looks determined and horrified at once.

Victor.

This makes it real. And somehow my son has seen and felt it all.



PARKER AND ANDY burst into the little control room with two other guys right behind them. All four are armed. It's a crazy sight. Hand guns like small canons. Rifles the size of small trees strapped to their backs. Holsters at their waists. Bandoliers across their chests. Heavy with the potential to kill. Wisps of smoke are still spiraling from their guns. They must've had some fun on their way here. The men are breathing hard and happy. I'd forgotten the smell of sweat and the feel of steam that comes off a man's muscles when he's totally tuned in,

pumped up, and freaked out. Everyone talks about power as a feeling. But it's more than that. It's a smell that gets inside you and makes you hungry for more. It starves you until you feel like you can't stand and then feeds you until you're sure you'll never need to sit down again. It's a sound that bounces around the inside your body and shakes your bones to remind you that they're still strong. Power is a drug, and I'm smack in the middle of our very first fix.

Parker strides up to me at the little glass console. He beams a smile up at Spare and gives him a firm handshake. He puts a hand on my shoulder and taps his temple.

“Looks like you did your part. In and out in two minutes. Bitches never saw us coming. Even got some target practice in along the way! But we gotta get moving.”

“How'd you leave it with Tally?”

“Like we planned. Tally got us these four guns from the ammo depot for starters. Best she could do. Plus, she set us up with the entry codes for the Armory. We've got the word out, and a team of guys is on their way to haul it all out once we get into the Control Center. Got distribution set up and everything. By the time we get the Armory unlocked, we'll have a few hundred men ready to stir up a serious shit-storm for anyone who gets in our way.”

“It’s coming together,” Andy says. “This is the kind of mayhem people are going to tell stories about someday. And we’re the ones making it happen!”

The two other the men by the door are dancing in place and looking down the corridor. They’ve got that smell of power on their bodies and that sound of supremacy rattling around in their bones. They’ve tasted the pull of the trigger, and they’re hungry for more. One of the guys shouts out, “What now?” I think his name is Mex. His eyes are narrow black slits. He’s folded down the top of his powder-blue overalls and tied the sleeves around his waist. His muscles twitch under his tight t-shirt. What looked like a prison uniform yesterday has transformed into the outfit of a soldier today. He’s a panther, and the scent of blood is in his nostrils. The other guy’s name is Davis. I’m surprised to see him. I knew him from the Academy. Quiet guy. Always toed the line, took his injections, never complained about anything. Total lap-dog and scared of his own shadow. If the Inciters got him on board, they can get anybody.

Davis growls, “Yeah, what now?” It’s a crazy sound coming from such a mousy guy. Up until now, I’ve only heard him squeak.

Andy smiles and slings a massive black machine gun over his shoulder. “Now we head to the Command Center. From there, we unplug everyone

from the grid. Disable every implant at once and activate the new security protocols Victor wrote. Then it's back down to the Armory where we pull the trigger on the whole plan and free the whole fucking world!"

The guys pump their fists and let out a cheer as Andy pushes his way to the front to lead our six-man army down the hall and to the conveyor that will take us to the top floor of the Temple's west leg and into the giant dome that houses The Command Center.

Parker fiddles with his wrist-reader to activate the input panel on the conveyor. The holo-door fizzles open, and the six of us step inside. Parker keys in the code Tally gave us to get us past the hundreds of thousands of women who occupy the 288 floors of the Temple and we zip along undetected and undisturbed in the conveyor pod that carries us on its powerful magnetic coils up to the dome in less than two minutes. Sophisticated environmental regulators and auto-adjusting pressurizers prevent us from getting the bends as we ascend faster and higher and at more crushing g-forces than the human body was meant to withstand. It doesn't stop me from feeling a bubble of nausea in my gut or a wave of fog in my brain. Although that could be from the mission, too. It's not every day that you usher in a new world order.

The conveyor door fizzles open, and we step

out into an empty corridor. Normally, this place would be teeming with Tracers, administrators, government officials, and even the Matrons of the High Council themselves. But we're greeted by an ominous stillness.

From this point in the dome, the Command Center is only about a quarter-mile of corridors away. A couple of zigs and zags, and we should be there in just a few minutes. That's where we'll end this thing once and for all. Get our power back. Get our balls back.

The corridors are wide and white with a hint of a soft greenish light in the air. All the lighting is organic and seems to spill right out of the walls. In the Bricks, we still have the old hydroelectric lights. The grid hasn't been updated in decades, though, so it's a coin-toss if we're going to have good light most nights. In the Temple, it's all top-shelf. Same in most parts of the Core, the Rez, and all the way out to the Cultivate. They've all got the luciferin particle lights. A few million nanoparticles in the stomata of any leafy green plant and just like that—cheap light that's easy on the eyes and lasts forever. The NTS keeps talking about how it's only a matter of time before they start lighting up our neighborhoods. That kind of talk is a lot of things, but it's never about time.

As we jog along the corridors, Spare looks confused. He asks under his breath how come

Andy's in charge now instead of Parker. After all, Parker's been the lead man for the Inciters the entire time. Hell, he might've started them. He's the one who recruited all of us. He's the one we trusted. Andy's older brother. The man with the plan.

I whisper to Spare that yeah, it's a little weird. Parker's not the kind of guy to play second fiddle to anyone. At least to any man. I tell Spare not to worry about it, but inside, I'm kinda worried myself. Andy's got more energy than any ten guys I know, and he's tunnel-visioned about this mission. Maybe that's what's Spare's talking about. Maybe that's what's bugging me, too. Being tunnel-visioned is great for focus and being inspiring and all. But it's also a good way to get yourself blind-sided.

"Doesn't matter," I tell Spare as we fall a behind our little army of charging men. "We're in it up to our eyeballs now, and there's no way Andy'll let us go back to being slaves."

Spare nods.

The four men up ahead have slowed to a quick walk. We must be close to the Command Center. Andy calls back to me and asks why we aren't getting more resistance. He sounds disappointed. Even at 6 A.M., the Temple should be swarming with Tracers and around a thousand alarms by now. Six men running around with guns should bring the

full weight of the women down on our heads. But I had a few tricks up my sleeve, and I used every one of them.

“Tally did part of it,” I call up to him. “She initiated an evacuation protocol. Then I got inside the system. Used that badge I got from Xian’s place in the Bricks. Got the Temple to think it’s on lockdown, so the rest of the Tracers are stuck in offices and hallways, which gives us a clear path to the Control Center.”

Turns out “clear path” is a relative term.

We round a corner and run right into a lone Tracer. She’s tall with the olive-skinned complexion a lot of people have nowadays, and her long black hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail. She freezes at the sight of us and punches her wrist-reader to zap us out of commission. We all flinch, but when nothing happens, I almost feel sorry for her. Almost.

She’s got a “What the fuck?” look on her face. She tries her wrist-reader again, and we flinch again. But the stalemate stands, and we all just stare at each other for a split second that feels like ten minutes. The Tracer gets the idea quick and turns to run but doesn’t get more than two steps when Andy unslings the appropriately named Liberator submachine gun from his shoulder and blasts a hole the size of a sewer cover in the middle her back. The blast echoes in the corridor. My ears

are ringing so I don't even hear the Tracer's body hit the ground. But I can see as plain as day how the sterile white walls and Andy's face are polka-dotted with her blood.

It's a horrifying sight, and it shocks me that I helped to make it happen. Before I even have a chance to process it all, the red lock-down lights above a half-dozen doors up and down the hallway flip to green, and the synth-steel doors slide open. And just like that, there must be ten Tracers in front of us and another ten behind us. Most of them are in admin clothes. Others are in the high-tech Tracer black that they wear for tag and bag missions.

Parker shouts an *actual* "What the fuck?"

"Oh shit," I say. "They must've over-rode my badge."

And then all hell breaks loose.

The Tracers rush out into the corridor and scream at us to "Drop your damn guns!" They're shouting, "On your knees!" and "Nose to the floor!" It's a cacophony of orders. They don't give us an "or else." They don't need to. Well, they didn't *used* to need to. Their orders used to mean life or death. Now they don't mean shit. When they start punching furiously at their control bands to put us down, we all recoil again out of instinct. When nothing happens, we answer to a different instinct. Andy lets out a low growl. His lip is curled into a snarl. Then he goes into full animal mode

with the scent of blood in his nose and a taste for death in his mouth. He whips up his Liberator. It's a menacing looking firearm with a sleek gray stock, and a long black barrel. With its laser scope and automatic recoil buffer, it's a formidable piece of equipment. Andy takes a deep stare down the sight and squeezes the trigger. A thin buzz zips through the air, and the shot shears off the side of a Tracer's head. She drops to the floor like a boneless sack of skin.

A couple of the Tracers have dug out some old-style projectile guns, and a few of them have twitch-sticks. We're in a tight circle, surrounded, with Tracers in front of us and behind us and the hallway walls on either side. A gun blast takes out a chip of the synth-steel wall right by my ear. A smattering of blue sparks explodes from the wall, and I feel a warm trickle of blood start to drip down my neck. Mex gets a twitch-stick full in the chest and drops like he just got ass-fucked by a cattle-prod. I want to help him, but I know that if I touch him before about ten seconds, I'll be electrocuted, too. Ass-fucked by association.

Spare and I don't have weapons, so we slide behind Parker, Andy, and Davis as they fire their guns in an exhilarated panic. I can see as plain as day that they don't know what the hell they're doing, but that they're enjoying the hell out of doing it.

The Tracers are fearless, though. They charge at our group, right into the line of fire. They're not used to resistance of any kind, let alone the deadly sort. But they're well trained and highly composed, and they come at us like a swarm of Amazon locusts. Three of them get close enough to grab onto Spare. They're crawling all over him. One's got him in a choke-hold. The other two lock onto his arms and try to get zip-cuffs on him. He slings the one off his back, and she flies fifteen feet down the hall. I help him with the other two as best I can. They're fast as hell and a lot stronger than I'd have thought. One of them clips me good on the chin, but I stay up, drop my shoulder, and bull-rush her into the hallway wall. Her head snaps back, and she crumples to the floor in a twisted heap.

Davis drops to one knee with his Gel-Fuser on his shoulder. It's a neural disruptor and the only gun we have that doesn't shoot bullets. Instead, this beast of a weapon generates its own pea-sized balls of plasma gel specially designed to hijack the central nervous system of any biological lifeform that gets in its way. It's not meant to kill, but I know a couple of guys who got tagged with this thing, and afterward, they both said they wished they were dead. I see what they mean. Davis drops three of the Tracers in a row, and their arms and legs look like they're going to spasm themselves right out of their sockets.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Parker smash his fist against the side of his Rhino 5-7. It's an armor-piercer I tried out once back in the Academy. It's got an auto identification system, so once you lock onto a target, you practically have to be blind to miss whatever it is you're shooting at. The Rhino must be jammed, though. Or out of ammo. If it's retro-fitted and if my badge really got compromised, the gun could have reverted back to its chromo-ID protocols. That means that no one with a Y-chromosome can operate it no matter what. And if that's the case for all the weapons in the armory, this thing'll be over before it even gets started. It musta just been jammed, though, because Parker takes quick aim and drops two of the Tracers who are coming at him, and he clips another Tracer in the leg. She spins down and starts crawling towards me. She's leaving a trail of thick red blood behind her. I don't see how she can hurt me now, but I start scrambling back out of habit. Parker pounces over and stands above her, his legs straddling her on either side, and he puts two bullets in her back and one in the back of her head. I can feel the life whoosh out of her, and I'm suddenly a frozen mess of horrified and electrified.

I shake it off, mouth a quick "Thanks" to Parker and climb to my feet just in time to see Davis go down under a flurry of side-kicks and lightning-fast fist strikes from the few Tracers who

are left standing. With one arm pinned behind his back and with a Tracer's knee in the back of his neck, he manages to slide an ammo magazine across the corridor floor. The cartridge slides to a stop under Andy's boot. I don't know how, but Andy suddenly seems to know exactly what he's doing with these things. Quick as a flash, he grabs the cartridge, slams it into his Liberator and starts blasting away. He's got sniper-like accuracy as he picks off the remaining Tracers one by one. I don't care what the gun is called. This isn't liberation. It's not a fight. It's revenge. Pure and simple. Well, simple anyway. There's nothing pure about the insanity in Andy's unblinking eyes or the women's brains he's blasting all over the walls.



I CAN FEEL the communication implants in my body shutting down. I tap the comm-link behind my ear. Nothing. I tap it again. More nothing. It's like I've suddenly lost touch with the entire world. Well, maybe not the *entire* world.

I've still got my son.

With my nerves in a spasm of terror, I kiss him on the forehead.

"You're having a dream," I tell him. "Just a dream." We both know it's a lie. "Everything is fine."

Another lie.

The walls of his world have sprung to life only to show grand-scale images of death. For all I know, there isn't a "fine" left in the world.

"I've got to go to work," I say. I try to control the quiver in my voice. The apprehension. The gut feeling that this monumental day just became significant for all the wrong reasons. How did the start of a new life come to feel so much like certain death? I take a long look at my shivering son and make a silent promise to both of us that I won't end this day as a statistic from another time. That I won't wind up just another female body lying broken on the ground.

"I'll see you soon," I say at last.

I sprint out of his bedroom, hoping that the last thing I might ever say to my son isn't just another lie.

On a full run now through the house and down the stairs, I double-swipe my forearm for a Rocar. I dash outside and down the long tree-lined path to the mag-way where the Desmond I called for is already waiting. I leap in and blurt out "Temple. Dispatch." No time for chit-chat. At least the transit systems are still on-line. I call out my security clearance code, order the Rocar to override its speed protocols, and, in a flash, we're zipping around the Lachesis Halo and down the Bia Spoke on a lightning fast race to the Temple.

I still can't raise any of the Tracers. I keep trying to tap in, but every comm-link is dead. Not even static comes through.

This doesn't happen. Not in the NTS. Not under my systems. Not on my watch.

Between feelings of outright anger and terror, I'm trying to come up with a plan. Dec creates his worlds, but what we just saw was no fiction. I don't just feel it. I know it in my bones. In his vision, all I saw were bodies. The Tracers aren't fighting back, because none of them expected this kind of infiltration. They expected the systems—*my* systems—to kick in and to save them, but someone managed to break through and shut everything down.

If Dec's visions are even close to real, the Inciters may have won this war before it even starts, all because I was confident. Because I didn't think they had it in them.

But most of all because I failed.

I let myself go soft. I let myself trust that Vic would never find a way to outsmart me, and that even if he could, he would never lead a horde against me. A long time ago, in another life, he was my best friend. My confidant. My apprentice. And, for a while, even my lover. I never guessed that under all his layers of charm and skill and basic human decency, lurked the potential to become my worst enemy.

I was blinded by my reliance on the tech and all the conditioning we spent so much time putting into place. Ours was the right way, I told myself. The peaceful way. The better way. The only way.

I was wrong, and if I'm right this time—if my miraculous son doesn't just have some sort of gift of vision, but he also possesses the power of truth—my miscalculation could cost countless lives, and even end the NTS as we know it.

The Rocar is closing in on the Temple. Although you can see it from almost anywhere in the NTS, being suddenly so close to it takes away what little bit of breath I have left. The blue and silver lights that normally illuminate the long cylindrical rungs between the east and west legs are dead, and the whole majestic building has the despair of death around it.

The Rocar slides into the Dispatch tunnel and eases to a halt in Bay 442. There are way more people down here than I would have expected this early in the morning. Everyone's milling around in big pockets of chattering crowds.

I spot Aliza, one of the young Tracers I just finished training a couple of weeks ago. She and a bunch of her fellow grads are talking in nervous whispers over by one of the dispatch terminals.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask when I've hopped out of the Desmond.

Aliza looks shocked to see me. To see anyone.

Her eyes are wide and expressionless, like she has no idea who I am. She gives her head a quick shake and starts telling me about the evac alarms and the lock-down initiatives that have apparently gone into effect.

“How’s that possible?” I ask. “I should have been alerted through my link-up. Or through the public tele-comms, anyway. We all should have been.”

“That’s what we were just saying,” she mutters. “Something’s really wrong.”

Another young Tracer whose name I don’t know nods and bites nervously at the edge of her thumbnail. “It’s not a glitch. They would have fixed that in a split second. This is worse. Much worse.” She can barely get the words out.

Aliza puts her arm around the young woman’s shoulder and squeezes her close. “It’s system-wide,” she says to me. “They’ve got the entire tech crew, all the coders, everyone, on full alert.”

“What about the Command Center?” I ask. I can’t keep the quiver out of my voice.

Aliza shakes her head. “We’re locked out. No one knows what’s going on.” If my voice has a quiver, her voice is one tremble away from full-blown panic mode.

I tell the young Tracers to relax and stick together.

“I’ve got to get to the Command Center,” I say.

“You stay here. Find out what you can. Get me on the comm-link if you hear anything.”

“No one can access the conveyors,” Aliza says. “It’s shut down. It’s all shut down.” She can’t hold back her panic anymore, and her eyes well up with tears.

“Anything that’s been built can be broken,” I say with what I hope is an optimistic smile. “And anything that’s been broken can be fixed.”

The small group of young Tracers buzzes to life. “We’ll come with you,” they say practically in unison.

I shake my head. “I’ve got my team on their way,” I lie as always. “I need you to stay here. Find Vania from Temple security. Tell her I think the firewall’s been breached by the back door and that we likely have hostiles on their way to the Command Center.” I take a deep breath. “And tell her to round up as many squads as she can and get them over to the Armory.”

“The Armory’s secure,” Aliza says.

Again, I shake my head. “So was the Command Center.” Security just became a relic. “We lose the Command Center, we lose control. If we lose the Armory, we’re going to lose a lot more than that.”

Even as I say it, I know I may be signing a thousand death warrants with a single sentence.

Aliza nods at my instructions, and I give the young women an “everything’s going to be fine”

smile and sprint off to one of the express conveyors.

I'm angry. I'm terrified. I'm lost. I don't know what to feel, what to do. I try contacting Mika and Erin for the tenth time, to no avail. For a second, I wonder if Mika had a nice time with her bot. I hope like hell that she did, because it might have been the last pleasure she'll ever experience. She and Erin are probably in the Temple somewhere; they were both going to head in to keep an eye on things, maybe do some last-minute triple-checks to ensure that the new protocols would be glitch-free as they went into effect. I should have been with them. But Dec has always been my priority. I gave my word to him when he was born that nothing—not work, not friends, not the entire world—would ever come between us. That I would be there every morning when he wakes up.

I don't care if that entire world comes crashing down today. I'm glad I kept my word.

I try to swallow, but my throat is bone dry. Part of me still holds out hope that Dec's visions are wrong. Or exaggerated. Or that this communication drop is just a coincidence and that everything will be fine, just like I promised Dec and Aliza and myself. It's hard to feel secure in the face of so much terrifying uncertainty. I have no idea if my friends will finish this day alive. No idea where Harper is. No idea if anyone female is still alive

inside the Temple.

A lot of men have been desperate to return to their place at the top rung of society's ladder. And thanks to the animals that never went dormant inside them, it looks like they may just get their wish.

Just as Aliza reported, the conveyors are all off-line. I call out to one of the nearby techs to bring her gear over. She does, and I instruct her to open up the access panels. After she does so, she scuttles off to another Tracer who's calling desperately for help with her comm-link. I dig into the tangle of neutron emitters and photon cables that spill like angel-hair pasta from the open panel. I connect the transport override cables to the processor port built into my left hip, and the shimmering green schematics dance in a gentle swirl in the air in front of me. I blink fast to call up the lines of code that I'll need to rearrange, and in less than ten seconds, I'm connected to the conveyor's sub-routines. The door whooshes open, and I slip inside. Suddenly, I feel like a predator that just found out it's being hunted.

Only I'm not planning on making a run for it.

I take stock of what I've got on me. Twitch-stick, scanner, my Wasps. My uniform is packed to the gills with the latest and best tech. I've got detectors, retinal scanners, DNA-trackers, communication links, info processors, noise

dampeners. And, of course, I've got cyberlink implants in my forearms and shoulders with everything linking seamlessly right into my cerebral cortex. I'm a walking miracle of modern technology.

And one bullet to the head would end me.

Inside the conveyor, I turn my palm upwards and summon footage from the upper levels.

"Command Center," I mutter, terrified at what the cameras might show me. As naive as I've been, I'm not an idiot. I know where the men must be headed, to the only place in the Temple where they can gain the true advantage.

When the feed crops up in a gentle hover above my palm, my heart sinks.

It's Victor. He's there, he's working his magic. We trained him to be savvy. We taught him how crucial parts of our systems work.

We trained him too well, and he's not alone. There are five other men with him. Among them is one I recognize from before: the giant.

Shit. The clues were all there the whole time, staring me in the face. But I was too focused on my role in the NTS upgrades to recognize the signs. Too focused on my work and on Dec to consider this anything more than a minor scrum from a handful of disgruntled men. No. Scratch that. I wasn't too busy, and I wasn't too focused. I was too arrogant. Too caught up in my own self-righteousness and the

sanctity of my mission. Too mired in my memories of Vic.

I've got to get to him, but first I need some help. I press my back to the side of the conveyor and unleash the Wasps.

"Seek," I tell them. "Weaponry."

They go fluttering out when the doors slide open. I slip my fingers around the edge of the doorway, forcing the motion sensors to keep the doors open as the Wasps feed my brain.

All I see are bodies. So many. So much blood pooled around heads and shoulders. They're not real, I tell myself. They can't be. Because if they are I'll shatter, and I can't afford to shatter. I have a boy to protect. I have a future to fix.

I have a world to save.

The Wasps feed me enough info to know that I'm safe walking out into the war zone, so I dart out of the conveyor and reach down when I see the first weapon, snatching it up. A stunner. It's not exactly the nuclear device I'd love to have right now, but it'll have to do.

"Come," I call, and my small fluttering friends—the only friends I have in the world right now—come back to me. I stash them back in my satchel, and then do the easiest, dumbest thing in the world, the thing I was trained to do, the thing I swore on my son's life I'd always do if it meant keeping him from harm:

I head into the war zone.



THE WIDE WHITE hall leading to the Command Center is littered with women's bodies. Andy has been equal parts vicious, ruthless, bat-shit crazy, and pinpoint accurate. Parker and Davis managed to drop a couple of the Tracies, but for the guys, it was all business. For Andy, it was all pleasure. I'm talking about that kind of explosive cocktail of endorphins, conquest, and pure penetrative power that we've all heard rumors about but, outside of the V.R. sims, have never really felt ourselves. I didn't fire a shot, but I can feel it too. The jack-

hammer heart. The slightly blurred vision. The dizziness like a drug. The massive rush of realization that your life matters and that there's something in you that can't be contained. I feel it like I'm the one who's been pulling the trigger. Orgasm by association.

A cloud of blue smoke from the discharge of weapons hangs over the corridor like mist in a graveyard. We're all breathing hard. Spare is smiling, but I can tell he's a little freaked out, too. The coppery smell of blood is rising fast off the women's bodies, and I'm flashing back to my grandfather's explanation of hamburger meat. I get an angry gurgle in my gut, and suddenly, I'm thinking about bodies—our soft and sweaty bodies, the athletic women's bodies draped over each other on the floor. Free bodies. Enslaved bodies. And it occurs to me that, to the women, we're all just hunks of meat. And they've gone vegetarian.

We get ready to step towards the Command Center door when Spare asks, "What about Mex?" His voice is soft and worried.

Shit. Mex is still back there, half-buried under a pile of bodies.

We retrace our steps, and Andy drags him out by his ankle and rolls him over onto his back in the middle of the floor. I've seen guys get tagged before. Been tagged myself. But the Tracies must've used their top-setting on Mex because he

looks like he's been rolled by a mag-tram.

Without a stabilizer, which we don't have, the effects of the twitch-stick either wear off within sixty seconds or else the victim spasms himself to death. With his mouth full of foam, and his eyes glazed over white, we know Mex doesn't stand a chance. His shoulder and one of his legs start popping like he's trying to do some crazy dance. It's not a pretty sight, and Spare turns away. For all his size and smarts, Spare still sometimes resembles a gigantic, broad-shouldered baby.

I ask Parker what we should do, but it's Andy who answers.

“We do what men are supposed to do. We solve things.”

He points his Liberator at a spot right between Mex's eyes. I may be imagining it, but it looks like his eyes focus for just a second, like he's begging to hang onto his fading life just a single minute more. Maybe it's just wishful thinking on my part. Which is kind of sick when I think about it. Who would wish for someone to have to stay in that kind of pain?

Andy pulls the trigger. There's the snap of the hammer, the ejection of the casing, the zing of the bullet, and Mex's head explodes in a slurry of brain and bone. A stream of blood from his open skull mixes with the Tracers' blood that has turned the corridor floor into a slippery red river.

I'm not sure why I even give a shit, but I do. I know today is going to go down in history. This is a game-changer. It's epic. Legend in the making. When people look back at today, there will be holidays and picnics with flags flown high in celebration. It's the first day in generations that we've had guns and the first day in just as long that we've tasted freedom.

It's also the first time in a long time that we've killed one of our own.

That's the thing about anniversaries. They always push a memory or celebrate some kind of victory. Which means that someone somewhere else is trying to forget about some kind of defeat.

Spare turns back to the gory scene. He moves his lips, but no sound comes out. It looks like he's saying a quiet prayer over Mex's blasted body. I've seen guys mumble little wishes to themselves before, but praying has been outlawed for a long time now. There's no God in the NTS, so that means no churches, no prayers, no priests, no prophets, and no magical Heaven where everyone's equal. For us, it also means no hope.

Spare picks up Mex's Shadow-Tracker with one hand and deftly unclips the weapon's holster from the dead body with the other. He straps the holster across his own chest, taps me on the shoulder, and we leave Mex's shattered body behind and follow Parker and Davis the last few feet to the Command

Center door.

The door is white and synth-steel solid. It's got no markings, no windows, no visible locks, and no access panel. It's probably the most boring door in the NTS. But it's also the most important. There's a room on the other side of this door. Hell, it's not even really a room. It's a key. A key to opening up the Armory. A key to permanently overriding the implants. A key to getting us back to good.

Davis asks, "Now what? How do we get in?"

Parker nods at me, and I step forward. This is why they recruited me. Why they tracked me down after I'd spent over ten years underground. Why they sent me out to gather intel. Why they threw a bag over my head and kept me in the dark so they could find their way to the light. This is why they threatened to put me back on the NTS radar and reveal to the world who I really am and expose the shit I did in my past life. I've been on both sides of the Temple doors. I've been in the Academy, and I've been in the Grind. Right under the Tracers' noses, I've assembled a unique skill-set. I learned half of it with their help. That includes knowledge about NTS tech I'm not supposed to know and how to get into all the places I'm not supposed to be. I didn't do it alone. I had help. Help from the one person I'm half-hoping lives to see the dawn of the new world. The whole time, I knew that my skills were either going to save my life or else end it.

Standing here in front of the Command Center door, I'm still not sure which way things are going to go.

The men watch as I input a couple of codes into my wrist-reader. And then I do what I'm pretty sure is the last thing they expect: I bend down, take a hypo-needle from the small holster in my boot, remove the cap with my teeth, and jam the needle two inches deep into my neck.

Davis's mouth hangs open, and Spare says, "What the—?" as the thin medal spine slips through my skin and plunges into my carotid artery. I've practiced this move dozens of times. I had to. If I hit the venter superior or the sternocleid, then I'm intramuscular, and the drug will take up to ten minutes to work. Right in the artery, though, and I cut out the middle man. Get the juices into my blood and buried deep in my brain in the split-second it takes for me to push the plunger.

The men are looking at me like I just lost my mind, which, technically, I just did.

"It's a Y-chromosome inhibitor," I explain as I slide the needle back out of my neck and toss the empty syringe to the floor where it skitters to a stop against the far wall. "Same idea as the injections we've been taking all our lives. Only this one doesn't just suppress the Y. It amplifies the X. Makes the body—and the scanners—think there're two. And that..."

“Links you to the NTS network,” Spare says.

I nod. “It’s temporary, though. So, if you don’t mind...?”

The men step to the side, and I approach the door, which is suddenly no longer just a big white rectangle. Instead, it glows blue then green then yellow in a subtle swirl of colors around a small access panel with an eye-scanner in the exact middle that only I can see.

It’s true that when the Inciters recruited me, they’d done their homework. Parker knew everything about me. Where I’ve been. What I’ve done. Who I’ve done it with. My secret politics. Pretty much everything. Everything that is except for this. This is the one bit of intel that I kept to myself. And that’s this: all the conditioning, teaching, training, injections, implants...It doesn’t just change how you think. It alters what you see and how you see it. The women weren’t out to keep us down, suppress us, humiliate us, or enslave us. Of course, those things happened along the way. But no—what they were really out to do was screw with the way we see the world. And for the most part, it worked. They made us passive. One-dimensional. Bland. Sheep.

But no more. This will be the anniversary of us.

I put my eye up to the scanner and my thumb on a small recess in the door. A pinprick draws a drop of my blood and gives it an instant analysis.

With a whoosh like a whisper, the door opens, and we step out into the massive, glass and chrome Command Center, and, for the first time, men are about to be in control.

The lone Tracer at the elevated console in the middle of the room whips around as the doors open and we step into the huge dome. She's apparently been trying furiously and in vain to override my code. With all her commitment to monitoring, she's been up here, alone, blind, and with only blackened out monitors to keep her company while we've been running around below blasting her comrades' heads off. Her surprised mouth doesn't hang open long as Andy pulls his Liberator and blasts a dozen rapid-fire shots that nearly sever her head from her body. Her neck gushes blood, and she staggers down the console steps and slumps to a stop at the bottom. Andy crosses over and pushes her lifeless body to the side and calls for me to take her place at the console. With Parker, Davis, and Spare urging me on, I climb the three steps to the control platform and take a good, long look around.

The Command Center is enormous, the highest point in the NTS, not counting the Custodial Needle that rises another 3,000 feet above the dome. The room is nearly spherical with a high domed ceiling and a bank of slanted glass monitors circling the perimeter and offering a 360-degree view of the NTS below. Glass input panels hover in the air on

grav-pads in front of huge monitors that float around the central console like black clouds getting ready for a storm. There are no wires. No cables. No synth-steel brackets holding things in place. Nothing seems to connect anything to anything else. And yet, this room is all about connections. It's from here that they connect themselves to us, and it's from here that they keep us disconnected from each other.

A smaller panel floats up in front of me, and I lean in for another eye scan. I've fooled the system into recognizing me as a high-tier Matron.

The room glows blue and green and silver as the floating monitors sizzle back to life. Energy hums from the control systems, and the monitors hum with perfect, pure-def images of nearly every corner of the NTS. The men step aside as I get to work. The motion-capture protocols identify my hands and my fingers, and I begin sifting through the images from the cameras placed all around the city and in every building and back alley.

There's the Grind, and the Academy. There's a bird's eye satellite view of the Temple, and a series of corridor cams captures Tracers rushing around in this very building in a confused panic. A hundred floors below us, one squad is busy fussing with their wrist-readers. Pointless. Another squad, another hundred floors below that, is trying to input some code into an open access panel. Worthless. Another

dozen or so Tracies and a few civies, outside and a few buildings to the east, are just realizing that their perfect communications systems are all down. Helpless.

And, of course, there's the Armory. Down at ground-level is the huge cylindrical base, twelve-hundred feet in diameter, on which the Temple's two feet stand. It's the foundation for the entire twisted ladder that we're standing in. And in the heart of that foundation is the Armory, the largest stash of weapons ever assembled in a single place. Most guns were melted down a long time ago. But they kept a warehouse of them around kind of like a museum installation. I suppose the NTS thought they were being clever, building their New Thought Society right on top of a huge cache of the old weapons of war. They built themselves up directly on the bones of the past. But as they're about to find out, those bones may have been buried, but they weren't dead.

The monitors show a platoon of Tracies milling around the Armory and gnashing their teeth outside the impenetrable doors that they created to house all their mighty weapons. Powerless.

I call up the cameras that show the Armory's interior. The massive screens capture the enormous scale of the warehouse. Row after row, column after column, and floor to ceiling...the names of the weapons light up in green as I scroll:

Plasma-Retractors

Golan Corner-shots

.338 Trackers

Vector Blasters

Shoulder-mounted ordnance-launchers

Concussion grenade-launchers

Telescoping Sniper Rifles

22-inch barrelled Impact Rifles

Dissipaters

SPS Auto-loaders

Pump-action Jackhammers

And enough ammo to take a chunk out of the entire the planet.

And just like that, five grown men become kids in a candy store. Talk about going ballistic! I'm mesmerized. Parker rubs his hands together. Davis is beaming and wide-eyed. Andy is practically drooling.

I punch up a schematic that highlights the path from the Command Center, down one of the express conveyors, and through the maintenance ducts that will enable our men to drop down right into the middle of the Armory.

“We bypass the main entrance. See—these are access corridors,” I point out. “All automated. Auto retrieval units only. You won't run into any Tracers. Just in case, I've locked all the access ports. You'll have smooth sailing. But you need to get moving. There's an automatic override to the system going

through in about fifteen minutes. After that, the Tracers can get into the Armory themselves through the main gate, and if that happens...”

Parker slings his rifle over his shoulder. “If that happens, then we’re fucked in openings we didn’t know we had.”

Andy is chomping at the bit. He calls out, “This is war, boys! Let’s get this party started!” and he leads Parker and Davis to the door.

The door whooshes shut behind them, and I turn back to the bank of input consoles and get working at the communication network. From here, I can override every news scroll and info panel in the NTS. So far, all we’ve done is cripple the NTS. We’ve blinded them. Made them go deaf. Now I’m getting ready to turn the entire New Thought Society into a drooling quadriplegic vegetable. I get to work inputting my codes. At the same time, I keep one eye on the screen that follows Parker, Andy and Davis as they zip down to ground-level and navigate the small access corridors on their way to the Armory.

Spare steps over the lifeless Tracer and walks up the steps to join me on the central command platform. “They’re making good time,” he says. He’s standing behind me, taking it all in. He and I have lived a lifetime of adventure together in the past forty-eight hours, so I get the sense that he wants to finish this thing out by my side.

As if he just read my mind, he tells me what a good team we make. “Forget Parker and Andy,” he says. “When this thing is over, it should be you and me running the show.”

I tell him, “Yeah. Right.” It sounds sarcastic, but I really mean it. He’s a good guy, the kind of guy who could’ve been great if the NTS hadn’t shut him down.

I shake off a surge of anger and sadness over what might’ve been and get back to making things the way they should be. Security. Monitoring. Implant Control. I’ve got to take it all down. I figure I’ve been at it for a good five minutes straight. My fingers are a blur, and I’m in a sweat. They’ve got some serious protocols I need to override. The Tracers are still locked out of the top levels of the Temple. At least for now. I figure we’ve got another three minutes before they can get up to the Command Center, which means I’ve got to get this thing done so Spare and I can get down to the Armory and join the others.

Finally, I finish. On the central monitor, we see the interior of the Armory. A small access panel slides open in the ceiling, a knotted rope drops down into the huge warehouse, and the cameras show Parker, Andy, and Davis climbing down, shaking out their tense muscles, and taking their first steps inside.

I smile as I turn around to let Spare know that

everything's good.

Except that everything isn't.

The Command Center door whooshes open behind us, and I don't need to see past Spare's barn-broad body to know who belongs to the voice telling us to freeze.



“FREEZE!” I shout, the two unarmed men in my sights.

I don’t know what else to do. I’m powerless. Useless. The only thing giving me any sense of strength is the fact that I’m blocking the door to the Command Center, so Vic and his gigantic friend are going to have to pound their way through me to get anywhere.

Well, if that’s how this is going to end, so be it.

The big guy gives Vic a “What do we do?” look, and Vic shrugs.

I've got a twitch-stick in one hand, the white NPI stunner that I picked up in the corridor in the other. I light them both up with a tap of my thumbs, and threads of blue light dance on their ends.

The big man, Spare, takes a step backwards on the elevated platform in the middle of the room. He's like a frightened cat, unsure whether to claw the snake or to flee its venomous fangs.

Flee, both of you, I want to command. Smash through one of the glass portals and plummet nearly a full mile to your death, you bastards. You can both go to hell.

I look into Vic's eyes and I see something I haven't seen in another human in what feels like eons. Pain. Confusion. He's torn up inside, just like I am. He wants this—this world that he thinks he's creating—so badly. He wants to make things better for himself, for all of us, even the women. I know him. I know how he is. He never wanted my gender to feel inferior. The problem was, he never wanted his gender to feel inferior, either. He's fighting for his own liberty from shackles he thinks we've thrown on him.

If only he knew the truth. If he knew what we'd saved him from, things would be different. I know they would.

In a flurry of memory, Dec's words come to me, his voice so clear in my mind that he may as well be sitting right next to me. *Keep Vic and the giant.*

Only they can help you undo what's about to be done.

My knees threaten to buckle, the weight of my emotions forcing gravity to strengthen its grip on my body. I want to do it. I want to collapse in a heap, like all those dead bodies. I want to let myself end, because the pain of this is too much.

I'm split in two. I can kill a man I once loved. I can kill his friend, too. But to what end? I've lost. I know I have. The entire government is being taken out as I stand here. All our power gone in the blink of an eye.

There's only one thing I can do at this point. The only thing I can think of that gives me any hope for a future—for me, for Dec, even for Victor. The problem is, he's not going to like it, and his gargantuan friend won't like it, either.



NOTHING FOCUSES LIKE MARION. And nothing hunts like her, either.

I knew we couldn't lose her, not if she was serious about finding us. Besides, I lost her once already. And Marion isn't a big fan of second chances.

Without the injections and with the implants deactivated, we're a lot more likely to exhibit animalistic behavior. I've already seen it off the charts in Andy. Now, I feel it welling up in me at the sight of Marion: fight or flight. They should add

“fuck” to that list. Fight, flight, or fuck. Those are the *real* animal instincts. Those are the instincts that made us who we were, and those are the instincts the women took away to turn us into what we are now.

Either way, it’s not much of a choice. Marion’s blocking the door, so there’s nowhere to run. And the guys didn’t leave us with any weapons. Didn’t think we’d need them until later. I’m standing in the Temple Command Center, about to take over the world, and I’m still stuck in a no-win scenario.

When he sees the look on Marion’s face, Spare takes a big step back. No way he’s going out like Mex.

I tell him to take it easy. If she wanted us down, we’d be down by now.

“How’d she...?” Spare starts to ask, but I nudge him quiet. Marion’s got more tricks up her sleeve than a busload of circus clowns.

She motions us over. She’s alone, which is an odd sight. Tracers always travel in threes. Always. Then it occurs to me: two of the Tracers we put down in the corridor were her partners. I remember them from the restaurant the other night. Without access to their comm-link systems, no one knows, and there’s no backup on the way. We’ve got control of communication and the conveyors. And we’re about to control the Armory. That leaves Marion flying solo.

I do a quick calculus in my head. Two men—one of them as big as two men by himself—against one 120-pound woman with a twitch-stick and a stunner. If it had been any other Tracer, I might've tried for a fight. But Marion is a whole other class of something special. I nod Spare forward, and we both brace ourselves for the 50,000 volts that are about to light up our skin, seize our muscles, and sear us straight through to our marrow.

“I don't want to kill you, Victor,” she croaks out, her voice trembling.

I swallow a lump in my throat. “So don't,” I reply.

She lowers her weapons and tells us to follow her. “This way,” she says.

Before we have a chance to move, the monitors suddenly light up as they connect with the cameras stationed just outside of the Armory. Marion, Spare, and I stop and watch as Tracer squads gather down below at the main entranceway. Even with their comm-links down, they seem to know that this is the target, and they're fussing around like crazy trying to figure out how block the Inciters out, or at least get in before the enemy does. Of course, they don't know how late they are to this particular party. Most of them are facing away from the Armory doors. They're logical, expecting a straggle of Inciters to come busting in from the street side.

But that's not what happens.

As we continue to watch the scene playing out in larger-than-life size on the Command Center monitors, the women turn at the same time like a school of fish evading a shark. The Armory's massive synth-steel doors slide open. The startled Tracers are greeted with a hail of gunfire from inside the warehouse they thought they were protecting.

Nearly all at once, the women drop in a mass of blood and broken bodies. Despite all their training, barely any of them has so much as a split second to run, duck, raise a hand, or even take a step. Parker and Davis stride out of the Armory with Andy leading the way. Parker has a Vector Blaster in one hand and a Plasma-Retractor in the other. Davis is strapped into an ordnance-launcher harness with both hands on the massive rifle that he swings side-to-side, strafing the Tracers and blasting devastating holes clean through their stunned torsos. The glass walls of the atrium shatter into a million shards. Even through the monitors, the noise of it all is deafening, like thunder I can feel in my bones. In about three seconds, the large space outside the Armory's doors has turned into an instant post-war wasteland.

Andy steps into the mass of bloodied figures. He isn't taking any chances. He fires at every twitching body on the ground. He fires on the still ones as well. Outside, throngs of people, nearly all

women, are fleeing in a chaotic mass.

Marion is frozen by the horror of it. Her mouth opens, and she takes a step like she's going to leap through the monitors into the bloodbath taking place far below. Like she could. Like it would make a damn bit of difference anyway. All the old rules have gone out the window, and she seems to know it. Her eyes are red, but she doesn't cry.

I'm conflicted. I've fantasized about watching a platoon of Tracers get mowed down like this. At my lowest times, I've wanted them all dead. Wanted them to suffer like we've suffered. To live in the fear that we've lived in. To be afraid to walk alone at night. To feel the vulnerability, the precarious helplessness we've felt. I've wanted to see *them* targeted. I've wanted to see *them* harassed. I've wanted to see *them* stripped down to nothing. Ripped from their security. Stripped of their freedom. Raped of their dignity. I've dreamt of their pointless screams and their perfect uniforms soaked in their perfect blood.

But in none of my dreams was Marion standing there watching her friends get massacred before her eyes.

In the monitors, I see Parker talking into his wrist-reader. Mine lights up, and it's Parker's voice asking me how things are going in the Command Center. Marion gives me a look of warning, but it's not needed. She didn't kill me when she had the

chance, and I'd like to live long enough to know why. I try to keep the tremor out of my voice as I tell Parker that all's good.

"Nav-comm is under control," I say into my wrist-reader. "Override the security protocols, cameras on the grid. The works. Go ahead and start the take-down," I say and then disconnect before this turns into a conversation.

It's a simple message. Nothing special. Except that I'm basically green-lighting a revolution that will change the world forever and, as we've just witnessed, snuff out countless lives along the way.

On cue, we see maybe a hundred men come charging toward the Armory. It's the team that Parker and Tally recruited last night back at the Castle. The mob is running in as the women are running out. They step on and over the Tracers' bodies in their haste to get into the Armory. Andy is standing in the middle of the carnage. He puts up a hand to stop the incoming mob then tilts his head back and laughs. "Slow down!" he calls out to the anxious swarm. "Plenty of guns for everyone. And plenty of kills left for ya!"

The men slow down and start queuing up, straining to see over each other and into the Armory with its endless supply of weapons. They're all shapes and sizes. No one as big as Spare, but there a few pretty decent sized guys. Some of them have already stripped off their

powder blue scrubs. Some are shirtless, like they've already started to shed their city skin and mutate back into their animal selves.

Parker and Davis start leading them all into the Armory for the distribution of the weapons. After this, they'll head out on foot toward the Academy about fifteen minutes away on the other side of the Core. Once they control the Temple and the Academy, they'll pretty much have control of the entire world.

So why am I not happy?

Marion takes one last look at the massacre being played out before our eyes. "Let's get out of here," she says at last and leads us in a sprint out of the Command Center. Spare and I follow her back down the corridor lined with the bodies of Mex and the Tracers.

She's somehow done her own override of my lock-out, and the conveyor zips us down to ground level like it's just another normal day at the office. Marion stops the conveyor on the second floor and leads us along a long, dimly-lit corridor, down a back flight of stairs, and out to a narrow alley between two of the squat buildings that sit in the shadow of the Temple. She swipes her forearm, and ushers us into the Rocar that arrives almost immediately.

As Spare and I follow her in, we all hear the relentless symphony of gunfire and screams that fill

the Core. The normally pure air is already choked with smoke. It reeks of death.

The Rocar sweeps through the Core, and already the seeds of our liberation are taking quick root. Women are scattering. Power is flickering. Behind us, we hear the thunder of gunfire. No more waiting. No more wondering. No more suffering in silence. The storm's here. And it's unstoppable.

"How long before the transit grid's off-line?" Marion asks as we zip along.

I guess I didn't answer because she asks again. "Damn it, Victor! How long?"

"Five minutes," I mumble. "Maybe less."

We cruise along for another minute when "maybe" turns into "definitely." The Rocar eases to a full stop in the middle of the mag-way. The other Rocars around us are all dead, too, and confused people clamber out of their vehicles and mag-transporters and begin milling around in a daze. Things don't break down here. Ever. With all the NTS's preventative maintenance, though, they failed to prevent *us*.

Marion screams, "Shit!" and leaps out of the car. "Come on—we'll have to go the rest of the way on foot."

Spare asks, "The rest of the way to where?"

"My place," she calls back over her shoulder. She's already sliding feet first down the embankment. We scramble down behind her, and

she leads us on a full-on run through the woods. Branches and brambles tear at my clothes and leave long red scratches on my arms and face. Spare and I are panting pretty hard, and I'm wondering if she realizes how far ahead of us she's gotten.

There are patches of forest that the NTS has cultivated intermittently throughout the Bricks. It's through one of these patches and under one of the mag-ways that we race now as we slip through into the Rez ring.

We run for another few minutes and finally stumble through to a clearing overlooking a deep ravine. A series of large houses sits in a neat row along a wide parkway. Marion hurries us up to the house at the end of the row and scans the door open as Spare and I lurch up the porch steps.

But Marion doesn't go in. She just stands, frozen in the doorway. Once I'm standing next to her, I can see why.

We've left one massacre and leapt right into another.



THE INSIDE of the house is a wasteland. All my visible comm panels are smashed, and the furniture is broken and upended. The floors and walls are covered in holes, as if someone with a sledgehammer tried to bring down the house from the inside.

When I sprint up the stairs and into my mother's suite, I have to suppress my gag reflex. Her body is lying on the floor of her bedroom, her neck hideously twisted so that her face is almost backwards. My training kicks in, and I somehow

manage to shove my emotions away and summon the analytical part of my brain. I haven't got the strength for anything else right now.

Whoever did this must have been huge. Mom was no scrapper, but she would have fought for her life. She would have fought for her grandson's, too.

With that thought, it becomes far harder to hold back my desire to scream.

"Dec!" I shout, tearing towards the flight of stairs that leads up to the third floor apartment and my son's hidden suite. I run up as fast as my legs will carry me, holding my breath the entire way. I think Vic is behind me, but I can't stop to check. I can't care, not right now.

When I'm on the third floor I dash down the hall, past my office and bedroom, slamming to a stop once I reach the wall at the end of the hallway.

"Please...please...please..." I sob as I expose my palm and wait for the hidden door to open.

"Dec!" I scream as the space flickers to life before me.

"What the hell are you looking for?" Vic's voice asks from somewhere in the hallway behind me. "What is this place?"

I tear my son's bed apart, run to the bathroom. Into his Sanctuary. Nothing. There's no sign of him.

He's gone.

"They took him," I say, spinning around. My eyes land on Vic's. He's genuinely baffled.

“Who?” he asks. “Who took who?”

“My son. Declan. They stole my son from me.”

“Your son?”

I can tell what he’s thinking. He’s probably doing the math, trying to work out the odds that Dec was born after he and I were an item years ago.

“He’s not yours,” I snarl, darting back to the stairs, which I hustle down two at a time. “He’s not anyone’s but mine.” It’s the truth. Victor’s not Dec’s father. But what I don’t tell him—what I’ve never told anyone—is the *entire* truth.

Dec is the first—and, as far as I know, *only*—child ever conceived without a biological father. No sperm donor. Nothing. No man was involved in any stage of my son’s conception.

What I’ve always suspected, and what my son confirmed this morning, is that he’s nothing short of an evolutionary wonder. The first of his kind. It’s why I’ve always hidden him. Why even the Temple Matrons couldn’t know of his existence. He’s proof of something terrible. Something that I don’t want to unleash on the world, because of what it might mean for humankind.

What it might mean for the future of men.

“I didn’t ask that,” Victor says as he sprints after me in hot pursuit. “But what do you mean, they took him? You don’t think this was the Inciters, do you? Hell, I didn’t even know you had

a kid. I thought you were supposed to report that kind of thing.”

“It’s complicated.” I’m tearing through the first floor kitchen now, towards the hidden door to the basement. Once I’ve opened it, Vic and Spare follow me down. For once, I don’t give a shit if someone sees my secret space. It doesn’t matter anymore. Nothing matters except for my kid.

The door to my pod shimmers open when I’ve commanded it to do so. For some reason, the space remains undisturbed. Seems the bastards who took my son weren’t interested in my tech, which is just further confirmation that this wasn’t the work of the Inciters.

“What’s going on?” Vic asks. “What the hell are you doing now?”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I scan open one of my tracker programs, my eyes searching for signs.

The image of my house appears. Normally, there’d be a small yellow dot telling me where Dec is, and it would sit exactly where it always has. Where he’s been for twelve years now:

Safe.

But there’s nothing.

I flick my fingers out to broaden the view. I get an overhead shot of the Core. Nothing. The Bricks. Nothing. The rest of the Rez. Nothing. The Cultivate. Nothing.

But beyond the Cultivate, where there’s

supposed to be nothing, where our world is supposed to end—the yellow dot appears.

My voice, like my heart, turns to stone when I manage to speak. “I’ve got to go.”

“Go? Go where?” asks Victor.

“The Other World.”

“The what?”

Too exasperated to explain, I wave my hand at the far wall. It blinks to life, a series of separate rectangles each showing a different scene. I turn to the two men, whose confused faces tell me that they never suspected for a second that the world outside the NTS was a lie.

“The society you think you—*we*—live in isn’t the only one there is.” I gesture to the screens. “This is one reason I brought you two here with me. I could have left you at the Temple, but you’re no use to me there. If we’re going to work together, someone on your side needs to know the truth. We in the Temple have kept it to ourselves for too long, which was probably a stupid thing to do—a mistake. A fatal one.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” says Spare, speaking for the first time since stepping foot into my house. “We already know the truth. We know what’s out there. We’ve seen it. That’s why we’re trying to change the NTS. We know that it’s the same everywhere.”

“No, it’s not,” I tell him, shaking my head. “No

one else has what we have—or *had*. I know you hate us for it. We hid the truth from you. We drugged you. We tried to turn you into something pliable, something that wasn't going to tear down our society from the inside.”

As I'm speaking, each panel on the far wall lights up with a different image of some region outside the NTS. Some of the views look like they're coming from street-level security cameras. Others look like zoom-ins from satellite feeds. A few of the images are dark and grainy; others are more clear.

But they all show pretty much the same thing: Chaos.

A few thin towers, symbols of cities, of civilization, loom like clunky, asymmetrical giants over their territory. But the ground below is littered with shanty-towns. Ravaged slums that stretch endlessly into a hazy gloom. A field of corrugated metal roofs cover cramped neighborhoods that go on for miles. The roadways are little more than jagged strips of mud with rotted-out upturned metal cars and old buses strewn along the shoulders. It looks like it's daytime, but the air is dark and thick with ash. On one screen, there are four naked women running through a pock-marked street. There's no sound, but there's no doubt that they're screaming. A dozen or so men are chasing them, guns in hand.

Spare leans forward. “What are we seeing here?”

I step to the side so the men can get a closer look. “You’re looking at everything that exists outside the boundaries of the NTS. Out past the Cultivate. You’re looking at the world we’ve sworn to forbid, to protect ourselves from. You’re looking at what we would be if the Matrons hadn’t formed the NTS. You’re looking at a society without Athena’s Law.”

I can see that Vic is still trying to take it all in, and I can’t blame him for being baffled. It’s not every day you find out that not only is there more to the world than you thought, but that the prison you were fighting violently to escape from is actually a paradise, compared to what lies beyond its borders.

I’m leaning against the wall, my arms folded across my chest. I’m exhausted, but I need to fight. I need to move. I need to find out if these two men are going to help me, or if I’m going to leave them behind to crumble into chaos with the rest of the NTS.

“This all started out as something called the New Thought Experiment,” I tell them.

Spare is still staring at the screens, his brow furrowed. “An experiment?”

Vic turns my way. “You’re telling us we were the rats.” It’s not a question.

I plop down in my mag-chair, which bounces softly under my weight. My head is in my hands for a long time. When I look up, I fight to keep the tears from falling. I don't want them to see my pain. Don't want them to see me crumbling from the inside out. I don't want them to know I'm weak.

"No," I half whisper. "Not rats. We thought of you as patients, and we were responsible for helping to eradicate the disease that was killing you—and the rest of us. We made this world to save you from yourselves."

"From ourselves," Victor chuckles, a hint of menace in his voice. "You know, Marion, if I didn't know you better, I'd accuse you of being a condescending bitch."

"Accuse me of whatever you want," I tell him. All the color has been scrubbed from my voice and mind, to say nothing of my heart. "The truth is, I can't bring myself to care anymore. You know the truth, Vic. You know how things used to be. You know that we came to a crossroads and had to make a choice. Kill or be killed. Women chose the former. Just like you chose tonight, when you slaughtered my friends and my co-workers. We can hate each other for it; it doesn't matter to me. Only one thing matters. So I have to go out there, before it's too late." I nod over to the screens.

"What? You're telling us you're going to walk

straight into Hell?” Spare asks. “Because that’s sure as heck what it looks like.”

I stand up and nod. “It *is* Hell. But my son is somewhere in the middle of it, and I’m going out there to get him back.”

ALSO BY K. A. RILEY

For updates on upcoming release dates, exclusive excerpts and more:

[K. A. Riley's newsletter](#)

Athena's Law Series:

Book One: [*Rise of the Inciters*](#)

Coming Soon:

Book Two: *Into an Unholy Land*

Book Three: *No Man's Land*

Book Four: *Thoughts and Prayers*

Book Five: *May the Best Man Die*

Book Six: *Final Firefight*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A big thank you to J. K. for going above and beyond with your eagle eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. A. Riley is an author of speculative and science fiction, dedicated to creating worlds just different enough from our own to be entertaining, intriguing and a little frightening all at once.

For Riley, writing isn't a job. It's a laboratory where readers can wander into a land of ideas; it's a playground where they can scamper around, giggling, gasping, and freaking out to their hearts' content.

