Part 1

Chapter 1

He'd put on the gown and cap. He'd endured the speeches, both sincere and self-congratulatory. And now, having moved his tassel from one side of his face to the other, Tom was finally done.

A cheer rippled through the assembled crowd, and the band started playing again—thankfully a much quieter song than the last time. Tom smiled and shook the hands of his nearest classmates, along with everyone else. He excused himself as soon as decorum allowed, though. As much as Tom enjoyed the camaraderie, there were some people he wanted to speak with—at least before the pack of predators he called his family had a chance to descend upon him.

On the other side of the chairs, he could vaguely see Vicky and Amir meet up and embrace. He made his way towards them, around the front of the chairs instead of the back in order to avoid his family for a bit longer. When he finally got to them, Vicky gave him one of her usual bear hugs and Amir shook his hand warmly.

"Well," he said into the brief pause following that. "We made it."

"We sure did," Vicky said enthusiastically, and Amir nodded in his usual serene way. She pulled out the cylinder each of them had gotten up on stage. "Ready?"

As one, they opened up the cylinders and pulled out the papers inside. Each was a simple yet elegant announcement, belying the sheer effort and time necessary to reach the stated achievement. Thomas Penderton III, Andrea Victoria Brandt, and Amir Meir Hoberman had all just graduated. For a moment, Tom just enjoyed the feeling. Their actual diplomas wouldn't arrive for another few weeks of course, but they had survived, and triumphed.

"Tom, darling!" A voice filtered its way over to him from behind the chairs. "Do come over here, dear."

Tom grimaced. Well that hadn't lasted long. "Are we still on for tonight?" He asked his friends, glancing back at his mother and giving her a nod.

They both confirmed it, and reluctantly—as if going to some kind of execution—Tom turned to face his assembled family.

Vicky had to hold back a laugh as he tottered off. Tom loved the spotlight and always had, but his family was a bit much to handle. As she and Amir watched, his parents insisted on putting him in photo after photo, introducing him to various no-doubt-influential people. It was never too early to start peddling influence for their son, it seemed.

"You did well up there, with your speech," she said to Amir after a moment, and he grimaced.

For a moment he picked at his graduation gown—which was a little different from the rest. "I rushed through the last bit, I'm sure of it," he said regretfully. "I was supposed to be speaking *to* the student body, but I ended up speaking *at* them instead. Still," he added thoughtfully. "I didn't throw up or pass out up there, which were both genuine possibilities."

"Mission accomplished, then," Vicky said wryly, and he shrugged. The only other student in an altered robe was only a dozen feet away or so, and she shared a respectful nod with Amir before turning away.

"Was that your version of saying 'well fought?'," Vicky asked curiously, and Amir paused for a moment, "or are you still sore over being salutatorian instead of the other thing?"

"No, she beat me fair and square," Amir admitted reluctantly. "She deserves her laurels. Besides, I can compete with someone—even fiercely—and still respect them. I doubt we'll ever be friends though."

"More for me, then," Vicky said smugly, and grabbed his arm. She pulled him away from the assembling crowd.

Her father was approaching, and he gave her a warm embrace. "I'm so proud of you, Vic," he mumbled into her shoulder.

Tears appeared unbidden as they hugged, and she wiped at them quickly. "Thanks, dad."

Amir stayed back a respectful distance. His own parents wouldn't be here, of course. They had agreed to pay for his education, provided he became a doctor like they wanted, but they had disapproved of his choice to attend a college here in the States. To this day Vicky had no idea why, nor how he handled it so gracefully. If her dad hadn't shown up, she would have been devastated.

He let go of her and moved over to shake Amir's hand. "Good to see you again, Amir. You've done well, or so I hear."

"You too, sir, and thank you. Of course I have medical school, internships, and a residency to complete, so I'm nowhere near the finish line yet," he put in glumly. "Still, I'm glad to be here. At least Vicky can get working right away." He paused for a moment, looking at her. "Or at least I hope she can. Any bites yet on your applications?"

"You mean she didn't tell you? She got accepted by a company up in Chicago. She starts in two weeks!"

Amir smiled broadly, and Vicky blushed slightly. "I only got the letter yesterday. I didn't want to distract you," she said softly. "Besides, it's nothing to get excited over. It's a biotech firm called Etani, and my position is practically entry-level. I'll have to work my way up."

"Still," Amir insisted. "A chance to engineer the coolest new gadgets and implants of the future. With your skills, you'll probably be running that place in a few years."

Her dad and her friend kept on talking, mostly about her future, for the next few minutes. Or as much as they could, with an aspiring neurosurgeon and a long-time farmer in the conversation. Vicky had to admit she felt a bit of trepidation about the future. Sure, she loved her engineering classes, and she was good at it, despite the pretty blatant sexism she'd faced in a lot of those courses. A lot of the men in class had viewed engineering as men's work only. She had to wonder if it would be the same in a work environment, though.

Most of the graduating class had dispersed by now, but there were tons of friends and family staying behind to see Tom. As a Penderton, he had always borne a lot of expectations from his family. They had been politicians for six generations straight now: mayors, governors, congressional representatives, and even a presidential cabinet member. Tom had been pressured to follow that trend his entire life.

Vicky thought that most people in his situation would have either crumpled entirely and become disappointments to everyone, or risen magnificently and been exactly what everyone thought he would be. Tom had avoided both possibilities.

From day one he had been an activist—taking the political interest that had been instilled in him since childhood, and using it to further his own goals of helping people. In fact, that was how she'd first met him. She and Amir had been getting out of a shared class and they'd run across Tom holding a rally on the campus yard. He had been protesting the unreported sexual assaults happening on campus over the last year.

"I can’t do anything about a professor who trades good grades for sexual favors from one of the students," he'd said passionately, "or about the piece of shit who roofies some poor soul and drags them into a car. Still, we can and *must* do something about basic security, as long as Campus Safety won't protect all of us!" It was clear over the next few weeks that he meant what he'd said, and it had left an impression on both of them.

His activism was wider than just college, too. He had organized rallies, or taken part in ones already set up, all over the place. When the local police chief was accused of letting a black man die in police custody, Tom made a sign and marched right along with the protestors. When a fracking company was found to have contaminated the groundwater in a small community *two states over*, he spread the word, loaded up his car with bottled water and another homemade protest sign, and made the trip to join in there as well.

Tom had been arrested multiple times, and even beaten once, but none of that had even slowed him down. He seemed to have inexhaustible energy and drive, and Vicky and Amir had both felt a pull to join in. Those years had been truly extraordinary. Not for the classes or the work though, so much as for their friend, who was known to many as Hurricane Thomas.

As they watched, Tom's crowd grew. One side had his family and the influential people they wanted to endear him to, while the other side had all the activist friends he'd accrued over the years. Frankly, given their pretty radical differences, Vicky was thankful a fight hadn't broken out during the ceremony.

Pretty soon the crowd was calling for a speech, which caused Vicky and Amir to share a cynical glance. Unlike both of them, Tom loved being the center of attention. She would have found it galling, but he was also a genuinely helpful guy, and used that spotlight to elevate people instead of putting them down.

As he got to it, Vicky looked up at the green canopy formed by the nearby trees and closed her eyes. The unknown was ahead, but she refused to let herself be afraid of it.

Chapter 2

Her work computer beeped at her, and Vicky blinked in surprise. It was a video-chat request from Tom.

Vicky glanced at her watch. She still had about ten minutes until she'd be needed elsewhere. Wondering how this would go, she tapped at the keyboard. Tom's face popped up and smiled. "Hey, Vicky."

"Hey, Tom," she said cautiously. "Long time, no hear. How are you doing?"

He looked away for a second, showing a little embarrassment. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Things have been crazy over here. I'm doing fine, though. You?"

"For the most part. I just finished a new circuit design that's being tested now. From what I'm told, it could be included in several product lines."

"That's great. Good for you. I knew they would find you valuable over at, uh…"

"Etani Technologies," Vicky finished for him.

"Yeah, Etani." Tom didn't show any signs of chagrin. "I've actually got an announcement of my own to make."

"You mean your upcoming Senate run?"

That did give him pause. "Yeah," he said suspiciously. "How did you know about that?"

Shaking her head, Vicky pulled up the email she'd gotten the other day, and forwarded it to him. "Your mother sent out her own announcement. Actually, I'm surprised I'm still on her mailing list."

"Why is that?" He looked genuinely surprised at the possibility.

Vicky shook her head. How could she explain it to him if he refused to see it for himself? His parents, his staff, his donors, his lawyers, and everyone else surrounding him had been consistently cutting him off from his old friends for years now. They'd fed his ego and showmanship with grand promises that he would be able to effect change on a large scale, all the while grooming him to be their kind of candidate.

"Never mind, it's nothing," she said dejectedly. "So, what happened? Did you get tired of working in Senator Milgram's campaign or with his staff?"

Apparently grateful for the change of subject, Tom shook his head. "No, that was just to gain real-world political experience. Even Kevin himself said it was time for me to run for my own senate seat. It'll be a tight race, though. The primary would be hard enough on its own, but the current incumbent has a lot of support over here in Pennsylvania. But I'm sure you don't want to hear about all of that. I just called to invite you and Amir out to the official announcement next week. It'll be a mostly casual thing: photo op, meeting donors… and an open bar."

Vicky hid a grimace. She was glad that he felt fulfilled in his new life, but he obviously couldn't see the problems in it. "Sorry, Tom. I won't be available. I doubt Amir will be, either. He's finishing up med school, and will be worked to the bone for another few weeks." She felt a pang of sympathy over that. The last time they'd met had been over a month ago, even though his school was only a few hours away from where she lived. He'd looked exhausted and overworked—much worse than she felt these days. At least he would be done soon.

"I didn't know that," Tom went on softly. "I guess I should have kept a better track of his schedule. I probably shouldn't call him about it, then, at least until he's all done and ready for his internships."

"You should probably avoid calling Tina, Mike, Greg or any of the others, too," Vicky advised reluctantly. "They're all spread out, and probably won't be able to make it. Besides, it's not really their scene." There was no point in telling him that they didn't really think of him as one of them anymore.

Most of the old "Hurricane Thomas" crowd still kept in contact with her and Amir. They still participated in various events akin to what they'd done back in college, although for the moment Amir was unavailable. They'd understood that, but Vicky doubted they would react well to hearing from Tom himself after all this time.

Vicky exchanged pleasantries with Tom for a few more minutes before he signed off, leaving her with just a feeling of sadness in her gut. Tom had always been convinced that he would do a lot of good someday. Vicky hoped that was true, but doubted it. She couldn't judge him for his decisions—or for letting his parents make his decisions in this case—but she definitely didn't feel good about it either. Sighing, she grabbed her latest design papers and headed off to present them to her supervisor.

A few minutes later she got another email, this time from someone she didn't know.

*Good afternoon, Miss Brandt,* it started off simply.

*My name is Andrew Martin, and I work over in Manufacturing. I'm sorry to bother you with this, but I could use your help. I was tasked with testing product BT102, which is based partially on your designs. I examined one of them, but it didn't match up with the schematics I had on file. Clearly, I can't greenlight manufacturing until I'm sure BT102 is up to spec.*

*I would have asked my supervisor about this, but he's dealing with a family emergency at the moment. I didn't want to fall behind while he's away, so I looked up your name in the company registry. It's an unusual request, I know, but if you could look over the design and just let me know where the manufacturing error occurred, it would save me a lot of time. I'm no designer, obviously.*

*Hope to hear from you soon,*

*A. M.*

Well, his request was strange, but not unheard of. From what Vicky knew of the manufacturing facility on the north end of town, they were pretty much always overworked up there. Curious, she pulled up the attachment Mr. Martin had sent.

The product name was unfamiliar to her, but the circuitry definitely rang a bell. It was similar to a design she'd forwarded upstairs a few months ago—an idea she'd had for blocking nerve impulses to deaden pain. She had hoped it would be useful for people who suffered chronic pain. If specific nerve impulses could be deadened and the rest left alone, those people would be able to live normal lives again. The last she'd heard, her idea was nowhere near production.

The BT102 did seem to be designed for that, at least on the surface. It was covered with a polymer that wouldn't interact with blood flow and could be implanted for long periods. It was small enough to be unobtrusive, like most pacemakers. And it had a rechargeable power cell meant to run off a person's own bioelectricity instead of an external source, so it would never need to be removed and recharged.

That's where the similarities ended, though. This thing was also fitted with its own capacitor, right next to the signal receiver. Why would they need that?

Confused, Vicky pulled up her old design and attached it to an email in response.

*Dear Mr. Martin,*

*Sorry to hear about your deadline, and your production delays. I can help with your BT102 problems at least, though. I'm sending along my old designs, and how the circuitry was supposed to be wired at first. Frankly, I have no idea why your product was rewired in that way, but you should be able to fix it with what I send you.*

*If you have any further questions, I should have a few hours at the end of my shift today. Just let me know if I need to drive up to your neck of the woods.*

*Sincerely,*

*A. V. Brandt*

Vicky didn't hear back from him for the rest of the day, so she assumed he'd been able to fix whatever was wrong on his end. The design he'd sent her stuck in her mind, though.

There was no reason at all to put a capacitor in that kind of implant. It was extraneous, wasteful, and pointless. Granted, almost every company that manufactured products also put in design flaws so that they could 'upgrade' their products later on. That was how they bilked people out of more money. However, in a long term pain management implant? It seemed like a lot of effort on a product that wasn't used by many. By the next day, she'd decided to pay Mr. Martin a visit, and look at the BT102 herself.

Strangely, when she called Manufacturing at the end of her workday, she couldn't get through to him. His supervisor (or at least the man temping for him) told her that Andrew Martin had been fired the day before. That would have been mere hours after emailing her! He wasn't willing to give her Andrew's contact information of course; that was company policy. Vicky thanked him and hung up.

There could be any number of reasons Andrew had been fired, none of which she knew for sure. Something in the back of her mind insisted she find out for sure, though.

Thankfully Vicky knew someone in Human Resources, who she'd helped out a few times over the years. Neha had been new to the country when she'd started working for Etani Tech, and had needed a friend, which Vicky had been happy to be. Vicky called her next, and convinced her to look up Andrew's file.

It was ethically questionable, Vicky knew, but she resolved to delete his phone number the moment she was sure everything was fine. She'd always been a naturally curious person, if not to the same degree as Tina or some of the other reporters she'd known from college. Her conversation with Andrew was brief: he seemed quite distracted, and she could hear at least one baby crying loudly in the background. He did agree to meet her at a café downtown, though.

It was already getting dark by the time they finally met up. Vicky recognized him from the picture in his personnel file and gave him a friendly handshake. He responded in kind, but it was clear he was both distracted and exhausted.

Vicky gestured to the table. "I won't keep you long, I promise. I was just… concerned, that's all."

"I appreciate that, but I'm fine, really. I got a generous severance package, and I've already told my wife. We'll get through this in no time."

He sounded confident, but there was an edge to his voice as well. Was it fear? Vicky leaned in a bit and lowered her voice. "May I ask why they let you go? The impression I got from your fi—uh, from your co-workers, was that you were a good employee. Reliable, respectful, cooperative."

"I'd rather not talk about it," he said, glancing around them for a moment. "If I were you, I'd stop asking about it, too. I just want to put this behind me and get on with my life."

"Of course," Vicky said abruptly. "I apologize. I don't mean to seem rude. It's just, I designed parts of that product, and if there's a problem with the BT1-"

"Don't say it!" He whispered fiercely, looking around them again.

Vicky was shocked. He looked genuinely frightened now, but he quickly looked down and smoothed his features. "Listen. I am *not allowed* to talk about this with you or anyone else, you understand? I have to go now. Please never contact me again." He smiled nervously around them to the other customers, nodded at her, and then practically fled the room.

This was starting to make sense, in a scary kind of way. Andrew must have signed a Nondisclosure Agreement when he'd been fired. Most likely in exchange for his severance package. He was a family man and could definitely use the money—it probably hadn't been hard to convince him to keep quiet about whatever BT102 was really used for.

Was she in danger of being fired, too? The emails had been sent on company computers, so there was a record of that. She'd made a call to his department as well, so they'd know about that, too. Unless they'd tapped her phone or Andrew's, they wouldn't know about this meeting, though. Hopefully they didn't know about Neha in Human Resources either. Vicky's best bet was to go back to work tomorrow as if nothing had changed, and do her job as usual.

At least as far as everyone else was concerned.

It was night, and it was raining. Hard.

Amir looked out the window of his modest apartment and watched as the rain was whipped against the glass, as if trying to attack him. The cold, the rain, and the late hour all contributed to how empty the street was down there.

Breathing slowly and contentedly, Amir reveled in his newfound peace. For the past few weeks he'd been ground down, slowly but surely, by the relentless pace of his exams. His fellow students had suffered accordingly—and they'd been his only source of comfort. Now the testing was over, and the grading had started. Amir wasn't concerned—he'd always been good at studying for and taking exams.

He was just about to go to bed when the buzzer by his door rang. Who could that be, at this hour?

Amir lived in a pretty safe neighborhood. The poor soul out there was probably getting soaked to the bone right now, so he let them in. A few seconds later someone knocked on his door. Curiously, he peered through the peephole.

It was Vicky!

Amir hurriedly opened the door and she stepped right in, closing it behind her. She was dripping from the rain, but at least she was dressed for it. Before he could even ask, she went over to the window and closed the blinds.

Belatedly, Amir realized his place was a mess. He hadn't really done any kind of cleaning the past few days, and it showed. She didn't seem to care, though. Whatever was going on was clearly important.

"I'm sorry to just drop in like this, but I couldn't risk calling you," Vicky began, shivering despite her heavy coat. "I don't know who might be watching me, or who else might get in trouble, so I snuck out my window, flagged down a cab, and paid in cash to get out here."

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, Vicky," Amir insisted. "What is going on here? Are you in some kind of trouble?" He glanced at the window. "Should I be expecting police lights out there soon?"

Vicky shook her head, gulping for air. "No, no. Whoever is doing this wants it kept quiet. They wouldn't want the police involved." She closed her eyes for a moment, and then at his insistence, took a seat in his living room. He sat next to her, a mix of intrigued and concerned. "I'll explain as best I can."

Vicky's story seemed like the script for a bad B-movie at first, but before long Amir was starting to think she was overreacting. He'd heard of corporations getting protective about their products and patents before, but it was unlikely they'd actually broken the law in order to keep tabs on her. He heard her out to the end though, just to be considerate.

"That's why I came here," she finished up, looking a little more relaxed now. "I need you to help me figure this all out. If they are watching me at work, I can't look into this myself. They'd fire me on the spot, if they're not planning to already. But I can't just let this go, either. I helped design this BT102, whatever it is. I'm responsible for how it's used. If it's being misused, I have to know!"

Amir hid a smile at that. Same old Vicky—unwilling to tolerate shortcuts, excess credit, and moral compromises. He nodded slowly, trying to figure this all out.

"Ok, I'll help you look into this," he promised after a moment, and she sighed with relief. "But we're gonna need some help. I can't just walk into Etani and ask to see their product lines. Even if this thing was made for medical purposes, I haven't even started my residency yet! We should call—or rather, *I* should call Tom. He's got connections in the Department of Justice, right? He could help us investigate quietly, and see if there's anything sketchy going on at your company."

Vicky grimaced. "I don't think that's a good idea. Even if Tom wanted to help us, I doubt he could. He's pretty embroiled in his new senate race, and he probably can't even make a phone call without half a dozen people knowing what it's about." She paused for a moment. "What about Tina? She's still working for the Windy City Banner, right? She'd jump at something like this, even if it is just proving me wrong."

At least she was willing to admit it might be nothing. Amir thought about it for a moment. He was still a little surprised at what she'd said about Tom.

Amir had known for some time that their trio was closer to being a duo these days, but he'd figured it had more to do with him being busy at med school than anything else. If she was actually doubting Tom's willingness to help, though… it was a lot more serious than he'd thought.

Tina Rafferty had been a good friend of theirs as well, back in their college days. They'd first met at one of the many protests Tom had convinced them to join. She'd been reporting on the crowd and had bullied her way into an interview with Tom himself. After graduation, she'd bounced between several papers over the years, before being hired out here in Chicago. She had a pretty vicious streak in her writing, which no doubt caused all sorts of trouble with her superiors, but definitely drew a lot of readers. Tina would certainly want to be involved in this.

"All right. I'll call her in the morning." He peeked through the blinds. "It's still coming down pretty hard out there. You should stay here for the night. I'll get some bedding and sleep out here on the couch. You can have my room."

Vicky shook her head. "If someone's watching my place, I need to be back there by morning. I'll head out, flag down another taxi, and sneak back in the way I left."

Amir gave her an incredulous look. She was really taking this very seriously. "At least get something to eat before you head out. You look hungry, and I seem to remember you always liked Israeli cuisine. I could cook you something like back in the old days."

She smiled a bit at that, but didn't relent. "I'll eat when I get home. The longer I'm gone. the more chance they notice. Thanks for the offer though."

Reluctantly, he nodded. "All right. I still don't think your company has tapped your phone, but just to be safe, I'll get a pair of burners. I'll make sure they have each others' numbers, and then mail one to you. That way we can keep in touch despite Big Brother. Sound good?"

She agreed and left shortly afterwards, and Amir retreated into the bedroom, his head spinning. He trusted and respected Vicky, and would have helped her regardless of the situation, but this all seemed too unreal! Hopefully Tina would be able to help them make sense of it.

Chapter 3

Despite Vicky's desire for swift action, it was a couple of days before anything encouraging happened.

Amir's burner phone arrived during that time, and she used it to keep in touch with him about what was going on at work. Or rather, what wasn't going on. She'd seen no signs that anything had changed. No indications that she might be in trouble, or was being investigated over this BT102 situation. Of course, that could just mean that whoever was looking into it was being careful to keep her unaware.

According to Amir, Tina had responded immediately to his call, but she needed time to look into the matter. Vicky didn't question that: she'd learned years ago that Tina did her best work when left to her own devices. Finally Amir called back, just after Vicky had gotten back from work. In case someone had bugged her apartment, Vicky went into the bathroom and turned on the shower before answering. She was starting to agree with Amir that maybe she was just being paranoid, but something told her to be sure anyway.

"Hey, Vicky. I'm here with Tina," Amir said after she answered the phone. "She's got some news you'll want to hear."

"Hey, Vic," Tina spoke up. "So I got ahold of Etani Tech's shipping records for the last month, and there's no mention of any components called BT102 going out, or even being warehoused there. Your bosses really need to update their firewall, by the way," she added disdainfully, and Vicky smiled.

"Anyway, you thought there might be something fishy going on, and you were right. I compared the shipping records to the inventory at the time, and it looks like the records were altered. There was a batch of something manufactured but not put on the official list. If that's your BT102, it looks like they made six of them and shipped them out over three weeks ago."

Vicky shook her head. "That was just after my circuit design was completed! They must have just been waiting for the last piece of the puzzle, and my design was that piece." She sighed after a moment. "Still, that doesn't tell us where those six units went, or what the BT102 even does. We're back at square one."

"Maybe not, actually," Tina put in. "These BT102s, they're really small, right? Like a couple of inches long?"

"That's right," Vicky confirmed, wondering where Tina was going with this.

"Well, instead of mailing them, which would leave a paper trail from Etani Tech to whoever they're in business with, it's possible they just handed a box of these things over to their truck drivers with instructions to mail them from another location. That would bypass the paper trail. If they phrased it right, the truck driver probably didn't even know it was anything illegal."

That made sense. If the BT102 was dangerous or being used for something illegal, whoever was responsible at Etani would want to take precautions. Still, it was just a theory. Tina was just guessing that's what they did. "Ok, let's say that's how they got the devices out of Manufacturing. Can we figure out which truck they were on?"

"I think so," Tina said excitedly, and Vicky could hear tapping on a keyboard through the phone. "Yeah, Etani uses GPS tracking on all their associated trucks. There were… four trucks that left your Manufacturing department that day. Two of them were just going to your home office. I doubt they'd be used. Another went north, out of state, to deliver up here to Chicago. According to the GPS, he didn't stop anywhere on the way, so he's probably out too. The last truck made a delivery to Cincinnati before coming back."

"Wait, I knew my superiors kept track of most employees, but they also track the trucks and where they stop? Isn't that pretty invasive?"

There was a pause on the other end. "Well, unlike most shipping companies, Etani actually owns the trucks, the trailers, and the contents. I suppose they want to be sure their investments are safe. Besides, all that information was included in a release form signed by all the drivers. It sounds like they know about all that and are fine with it."

Vicky wasn't sure she would feel the same in their shoes. She'd read about the steady increase of cameras, GPS tracking, and phone surveillance across America during the last few decades. There was no question that it had made their country safer, but it had also made peoples' lives a lot less private.

"Here it is," Tina cut in. "The Cincinnati driver stopped three times. A rest stop, a diner… and a USPS just outside of the city itself! I think that may be it."

"Are you sure he was mailing something? Maybe he just needed to find a bathroom."

"I'm looking at the map of the area," Amir spoke up, probably feeling a bit left out after all of this. "It's a small road: two lanes only. Truck drivers don't park a big rig like that on such a small street without a good reason."

Vicky thought about it. This whole chain of reasoning seemed like a pretty long shot, but she had no better explanation. Besides, Tina had been investigating possible crimes for years, and had racked up an impressive list of successful stories. "All right," she said after a moment. "I don't suppose you can hack into the USPS too, and find out where that package was sent?"

"Uh, no," Tina admitted over the line. "It would be risky even to try. Ever since 9/11, government agencies have tracked the postal system just as much as their own people, in case of possible letter bombs. Besides, I think I know a better way. I'm gonna hang up and call you back in a few minutes, ok?"

Vicky had barely opened her mouth when the line went dead. She looked at the burner phone wryly, and put it down. Same old Tina. When she set her mind to a task, *everything* else became second priority, including politeness and consideration.

Amir watched with fascination as Tina finagled the information from the truck driver. Even though she was on the phone, and even though she wasn't a part of Etani's corporate structure, she was friendly, she was disarming… and she was effective.

It seemed she had been right. The driver hadn't been told the details of the box he'd mailed, so he obviously didn't know it was meant to be a secret. Tina convinced him that there had been a mixup at the office, and she just needed to confirm the address he had used, to make sure it was right. A minute or two later, she handed Amir a scrap of paper with an address on it, and called Vicky again using the burner.

While she updated Vicky, Amir looked up the address, and felt a sense of gloom settle over him. "It's a prison," he said despondently.

"What?" Tina was at his side in a moment, and then grimaced. "I thought that address looked familiar. That's no ordinary prison. It's Bellstock Penitentiary!"

Amir gave her a curious look, and she explained. "In 2005 a Supreme Court ruling cut down on the number of federal supermax prisons. Most facilities were ordered to downgrade their security measure to meet standard security for normal prisons. Unfortunately, the ruling didn't really have any teeth. A lot of places kept almost all of the little boxes they stick people in for 23 hours a day. Bellstock is one of them. It is a supermax, if not in name. A buddy of mine at the Crime desk has done multiple stories based on what goes on in there."

"Oh, God!" Vicky's voice filtered up through the phone.

Amir felt a stab of concern. "Vicky? Are you all right?" Images of Etani security people colluding with supermax prison officials hauling her off into the night flashed through his head.

"What? Oh. Yeah, I'm fine," she said after a moment, and he let out a relieved breath. "I'm looking at the altered BT102 schematics that Andrew sent me. I designed the circuitry for pain management in extremities. It was meant to cut off nerve impulses for a few hours, to help patients sleep. That explains why each BT102 has a radio receiver. Basically, you'd turn on a remote, and your aching arm or leg would just fall asleep, and you wouldn't feel the pain for a while. But what if they were redesigned for… prison control?"

A moment of silence reigned over the three of them. Amir didn't really follow at first, but it dawned on him soon enough. "Are you saying they use these things to shut off prisoner nerve impulses? Remotely?"

"Yes, but I doubt it's placed in a shoulder or a hip for extremities. More likely it's placed in the neck, so they can disable a prisoner with the push of a button." Vicky sounded ill just describing it.

"Wow," Tina said, sounding stunned. "That's human rights abuse right there. My paper's Legal department would have a field day with this. Illegal experimentation would just be the tip of the iceberg—anyone involved in this would be culpable!"

"We don't have any proof," Amir reminded her hastily. "We don't even know for sure there were BT102s in that package. If you want to write a story, or we want to press criminal charges, we're gonna need a lot more to go on."

Without even noticing at first, Amir realized they had slipped back into the same dynamic they'd had during their college days. Vicky followed her sense of responsibility and justice, which led her into the activist fray, Tina used her ambition and skills to get the word out to the world, and Amir was the voice of moderation as he tried to keep them from taking it too far. They all had the same goals: helping people who needed it, and holding the corrupt and powerful responsible for the lives they'd ruined.

The only difference was that Tom wasn't here to be the voice and face of their efforts.

Well, they had to do without him. "Vicky, to be effective on prisoners, the BT102 would have to be connected to what, exactly? The spine between the C4 and C5 vertebrae?"

"That sounds right," Vicky answered after a moment. "That way they could shut down all voluntary functions instantly. But it's worse than that. I didn't know what the capacitor was for, but now I think it's meant to hurt the prisoners! It charges up with bioelectricity—my design was meant to be powered by the body's own electrical current—and then discharges on command. They've turned my work into a damn shock collar!"

Her tone had morphed from sadness and disgust into something much darker. A cold rage which Amir could understand completely.

The placement of the implants did give them an opportunity, though. "Even if the surgeries were performed three weeks ago, there will be six inmates at Bellstock walking around with a visible surgical scar on the side of their necks. That itself could be used as evidence. Against the prison staff at least, if not the Etani people too!"

"I might be able to find out who they are," Tina put in thoughtfully. This is most likely just a test case; otherwise why would they stop at just six? They'd want to see if these implants were effective, and cost-efficient. That means they'd probably use them on the most disruptive, the most *expensive* inmates. That gives me a place to start." She looked up at Amir. "If you saw these inmates, could you identify them by the scars? I mean as opposed to some scar they picked up in a fight somewhere."

"Probably," Amir said hesitantly. "If you can get me pictures, I might be able to help you sort through them."

Tina shook her head. "Any pictures of these inmates would have been taken when they were admitted: months or years ago. No, what I have in mind is a little more… direct."

A trip to Bellstock Penitentiary had *not* been what Amir had expected.

Thankfully he was just there as a visitor, but Amir hated prisons in general. The very idea of caging people up like this—even people who were a direct threat to others and needed to be kept out of society—was an affront to basic decency. He'd objected when Tina suggested it, but he was the only realistic choice to go.

"You know what to look for," Tina had said implacably, after doing some research and finding out who the most likely surgery patients had been. "Vicky has to be kept as far away from this story as possible, and I wouldn't be able to tell an incision from a different kind of scar. Besides, I've got more evidence to dig up over at Etani's manufacturing division. Hopefully there will be records there of who received the BT102s, and how high up in the prison it goes. Maybe the warden himself is involved."

Trying not to look nervous as he filled out the paperwork, Amir took in the surroundings of the visitor waiting area. There was a good number of people there: mostly women with older children at their sides. How many of the prisoners had family who couldn't—or wouldn't—come to visit them? Amir didn't get along with his parents, but he was still glad they were around. Half a world away in Israel, perhaps, but at least he could go visit them if he wanted.

As it turned out there was a particularly violent group here in Bellstock, of six people from the same vicious criminal organization. They'd all been convicted of murder, manslaughter, and aggravated assault. Some of rape, and a great many lesser charges. Tina had been convinced that they were the most likely candidates.

Apparently they were causing a lot of problems for the guards here. They didn't have the numbers to control much of the inmate population, but were also so well-known as cold-blooded killers that most people steered clear of them. That gave them the freedom, such as it was, to focus their efforts on the guards themselves. In addition they were all lifers with very little to lose.

Then, apparently just a few weeks ago, the incident reports filed by the guards just stopped mentioning them. From what Tina had gathered, they'd become model prisoners, or at least quiet prisoners. Whether it was the BT102s or not, well… that was why he was here.

After a few more hours, Amir was admitted to the visiting room. His inmate, a Cameron Buchanan, came out a few minutes later, and looked at him with obvious contempt.

Amir hid a grimace at that. From what Tina had gathered, Buchanan and the others were part of an extreme white supremacist hate group. Given Amir's nationality, it was only natural that Buchanan would hate him the moment they could see each other.

And Amir could see him. He was bald, and had plenty of tattoos on his head and neck, but there was also a scar, relatively fresh, and exactly where Vicky had said it would have to be: between his C4 and C5 vertebrae. If it wasn't a surgery incision, it was about as close a fake as it could be.

Their conversation was brief, as expected. Amir told the lie he'd come up with earlier: that he was a geneticist, and that Buchanan had a rare genetic trait that he wanted to study. Buchanan responded by insulting him and leaving.

As he made his way back to the waiting area, Amir felt a little disheartened. He'd grown up in Israel, just outside of Tel Aviv. He'd only come to the States for college, and that had been well after 9/11. Most people on the street barely gave him a second glance. Unfortunately from what he'd read, before that fateful day, the people who did care about race would have just been uncomfortable around him. Now they were much more likely to do what Buchanan had done. Or worse, what he probably wanted to do.

All because of the way Amir looked. Nothing more.

It was a long drive back to his apartment. Vicky would be waiting for his call, and Tina was probably done with… whatever she'd been digging up over this time. Hopefully this would all be over soon.

Chapter 4

Tina stared across the living room at Amir and Vicky, trying to marshal her thoughts.

"Thank you for coming all the way out here again, Vicky," she began hesitantly. "I know it's a risk to your job, but I figured you'd want to hear this in person. You too," she added in Amir's direction.

"Thanks to Vicky's tipoff, your confirmation, and what I've been able to dig up, we have enough for a story. I've already submitted it to my editor, and he's going over it. It should be in the papers as early as next week. When that happens, Bellstock's warden and about a dozen others will be arrested. Buchanan and the other five patients will be interviewed, and probably be able to cut a deal to get their sentences reduced in exchange for their silence. That's usually how prisoner mistreatment cases end up going."

She sighed. "That's the good news. The bad news is that I found out more than I can put in the story. I planted a bug in the Etani manufacturing director's office. According to his latest call, he was told to build a hundred more BT102s and ship them out by the end of the week. I couldn't find out where to, exactly, but it's someplace out of the country."

Vicky and Amir exchanged glances. "But when your story gets out, won't the police find out about this batch too? Whoever gets them will be arrested, too. Right?" Vicky sounded equal parts hopeful and despairing.

"Not if it's the US government that arranged the whole thing," Amir said after a moment, and Tina nodded. "If it's our own military using the things, probably on foreign detainees, they wouldn't have the same rights—or any rights at all. Look at what happened at Gitmo; this is no different."

"He's right. The technology you helped develop is out there now. It doesn't matter that using it is a violation of human rights, there are people who will use it anyway, in the name of national defense. I'll do everything I can to slow it down, but I'm sure I can't stop it." Tina reflected on the truth of those words for a second before continuing. "I… thought you'd want to hear it from me, rather than from some random newscaster a few weeks from now."

Vicky just stared into space, at first. "This is all my fault. The prisoners, as vile as those six are, are suffering because of me. Detainees overseas will suffer because of me! It doesn't matter if they hate this country or not, they'll still be shock-collared by the BT102, and it'll be my fault!"

"You can't take this on yourself, Vic," Amir urged, and Tina smiled slightly at how quickly he came to her defense. "You said it yourself. They had the rest of the implant already completed. They were just waiting for your circuit design. If you hadn't given it to them, eventually someone else would have!"

"That doesn't make it right," Vicky insisted, now sounding angry, and Amir nodded understandingly.

"I need to head back up to Chicago tonight," Tina said quietly, trying not to be too intrusive on the moment they were having. "I'll talk to my editor and try to get this story some wide circulation. In the meantime, I suggest the two of you stay as far away from this mess as possible. My bug didn't pick up anything that suggested your bosses at Etani suspect you, Vicky, but that doesn't mean you're in the clear. Until the story comes out, just stay quiet. After that if the police track you down, you'll have to decide then if you want to go public with anything. I can advise you, if you want. Just give me a call if that should happen."

Vicky nodded, still looking grim, and Amir escorted Tina to the door. Tina got in her car and headed out, but she wasn't driving to Chicago yet.

Lying to her sources, and to her co-workers, was a professional necessity at times. She'd learned to do it without regret. After all if you live in a society where everyone lies, and you need to fit in if you want to get the truth out there, sometimes you need to lie as well. Deceiving her friends though… that one stung a little. In truth, she didn't have enough for a story at all. Even with Amir's confirmation of the surgery, it would take a lot more to get eyes on Bellstock.

And more she could deliver.

Tom was busy going over notes for his meeting with a particularly troublesome donor tomorrow. He was pretty sure he could nail down all the talking points, but he had to be careful. His donor was loaded, and had controlling interest in several tv stations across Pennsylvania. If this meeting didn't go well, he could sway tens of thousands of voters against Tom in the primary.

He was at his parents' house, ostensibly spending time with his nieces and nephews before getting back on the campaign trail. In reality, his parents had invited the donors to come here, both because of the opulence of the grounds and the historic reminder that it was *here* that all the power was brokered. At least in Pennsylvania. Hopefully, that would affect his would-be donor.

Tom's train of thought was derailed when the newscaster on the tv down the hall mentioned a familiar name. He walked into the living room to get a better look, but his niece had already changed the channel. He was sure about it, though. That had been Tina Rafferty's name he'd heard.

He went upstairs to his computer and typed in a search. Sure enough, Tina had written another story, this time concerning a prison riot. He pressed 'play' and leaned back to watch.

"Reports are still coming in, but we can now confirm that there has been a deadly standoff inside the Bellstock Penitentiary in southeastern Arkansas," the newscaster said placidly, belying the message he'd just given. "We've confirmed that four guards and five inmates were killed during the altercation, and at least a dozen more were wounded. The warden has yet to make any kind of statement, but the Department of Corrections is insisting that this was not a prison riot. According to their spokesperson, it was a coordinated attack by a handful of inmates, and has been contained successfully."

Another news anchor took up the story. "Less than an hour ago, a story from the Windy City Banner was released, concerning the events in Bellstock Penitentiary. According to the WCB reporter Tina Rafferty, the warden and at least nine other prison staff were involved in an experimental and extralegal form of prisoner control. Rafferty's report includes a detailed schematic of an implant, apparently called the BT102, which was surgically placed in the inmates' necks, and used as a sort of shock collar to control them. Details of the story are still being confirmed, but it appears that there were six prisoners subjected to this procedure, which is a clear violation of their civil rights, and it was those six who were involved in the attack."

There wasn't much more to the story yet—just unconfirmed rumors—so Tom shut it off.

He had to admit he was impressed. Tina had always been dedicated and driven. It had been obvious, even as far back as their activist days in college, that she was meant for great things. Being mentioned on national tv would be a huge boost to her career.

It could also help his. It was no secret they'd known each other back in the day, and having her endorse his campaign would be a big PR boost. He hesitated before grabbing his phone, though. Tina could be cagey and secretive, assuming she hadn't changed much. He'd be better off getting more details on both the prison attack and her own story before getting in touch with her.

When Tom called her a few days later, he was better armed with information, but at the same time dismayed by its possible implications.

Details on the Bellstock situation had continued to flow in. Autopsies of the dead prisoners had confirmed that they all had implants, just as Tina had said. The surviving prisoner hadn't released any public statement, but Tom had to assume he hadn't been a willing participant.

The major government agencies that would normally investigate this situation, like the CIA or FBI, had to walk a tightrope here. They couldn't appear to be covering anything up, but the massive publicity of this story forced them to investigate on their own. Thankfully, they hadn't interfered with Tom's own efforts to track down the truth.

"Tom, what a surprise!" Tina said cheerfully, when she finally picked up. "I'm glad you called. It's been too long."

"Hello, Tina," he answered carefully, trying to moderate his tone. "I'm glad I got the chance to speak to you, too. I wasn't sure I'd be able to reach you, given your newfound celebrity."

She laughed lightly. "Yeah, it's a bit more than I expected. Still, we all have to make adjustments for our careers, right? You know that better than most people."

Tom actually wasn't sure what she meant. His career had barely started, despite the groundwork he'd been laying for his campaign. "You should know I've taken a personal interest in this Bellstock story of yours," he put in, trying to change the subject. "I even hired a PI to go down there. He's been trying to get to the truth behind all the media hype. It's fascinating stuff, really."

"It's a pity you couldn't come down here yourself and see it with your own eyes," Tina put in with just the slightest edge to her voice, and Tom felt that same sense of confusion again. "Still, I'm curious what your guy came up with. Maybe he picked up something I missed."

"Oh, I doubt that," he said more smoothly. "I'm sure you left a lot out of your story, in fact. For example, that BT102 thing they dug out of the prisoners' bodies? It turns out it was manufactured upstate, at Etani Tech. Isn't that where Vicky's working these days?"

"Is it?" Tina responded, in a convincing and yet at the same time utterly unconvincing tone. "Wow. We really do live in a small world."

"And it's getting smaller. My guy got access to some of Bellstock's security footage. One of the dead prisoners got a visitor a few days ago. Someone who looks a lot like Amir, in fact."

"Well, you know that Amir's got one of those faces. A lot of people look like him."

Tom felt a flash of anger, and couldn't hold back any longer. "Cut the crap, Tina! They were both in on this and you know it. What's more, you probably got them involved in the first place! I know them—they wouldn't know the first thing to do in an investigation like this. They wouldn't have been anywhere near this thing if not for you!"

Tom realized he'd been nearing a shout by the end of that. He looked down the hall, but it didn't seem that anyone had noticed. His parents were still out on the lawn with the rest of the family.

"Wow. Do you feel better now that you've said that?" Tina asked politely.

Tom ignored the question. "Let me guess. You found out about these implants and tried to shine a light on it, but you couldn't get enough evidence to go to your paper. So you found a way to shut off the implants, and then told the prisoners. The resulting bloodbath was enough to get national attention, and then your story could be printed without any obstacles!"

"It wasn't quite that simple," she said a little defensively, finally showing some emotion. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to get hold of a signal jammer powerful enough to reach into a prison that size? And getting a secret message into a supermax like Bellstock, to tell them the implants weren't working anymore, was no picnic either. I worked hard for this, and it paid off."

"Paid off?" Tom asked incredulously. "Nine people are dead, Tina! Doesn't that mean anything to you?

"Of course it does! Do you think I don't care?" She paused for a moment, probably collecting her thoughts "I never wanted anyone to be hurt, Tom. I wish that there had been another way to stop what was going on there, but there wasn't. And I truly believe that all of them, guards and prisoners alike, are better off now!"

Tom couldn't believe his ears. "Better off… as corpses?"

"Yes! Those prisoners were slaves, Tom! They had no options. They couldn't remove the implants without bleeding out. They couldn't oppose the warden without being rendered helpless and tortured. They were all lifers, so there was no end in sight." She took a deep breath. "Look, I know about their crimes and their histories. They were monsters—there's no debating that. But even monsters don't deserve to be slaves! As for the guards, they were even worse. They knew what they were doing and did it anyway." Tina sighed. "Walter Scott was right. It is better to die as a man than live as a slave."

There was no immediate response to that. Tom, Tina, Vicky, and most of their old activist friends were all white. Unlike the black people who had joined them in the protests from time to time, they had no idea what it was like to have slavery in their ancestry. But those prisoners had all been the worst kind of white people: obsessed with so-called racial purity and willing to kill to uphold it. Tina clearly believed that what she had done was right. Could he?

"Vicky and Amir don't know you triggered that fight, do they?" He asked after a bit, mostly just to fill the silence.

"No," she said faintly, almost inaudibly. "You can tell them if you want. They might never speak to me again, but it's still worth it."

He could tell she meant it, too.

"Is that really what's bothering you, Tom?" She started to sound more sure of herself. "Or is it that we did all this without you?"

"You could have used me! I have resources and connections. I might have been able to get this story out without bloodshed. All you had to do was ask, and I would have come running!"

"Would you?" She asked bluntly. "If I'd called you and told you about what we suspected but couldn't prove, would you really have come all the way down here in the middle of your campaign just to help us? Would you have sent someone else instead, or even just tried to send us money to help? We were out on a limb with this. If we'd been proven wrong, and publicly humiliated, you would have been affected as well. Come to think of it, why are you even calling me now? Are you concerned for your friends, or are you hoping I might somehow help your campaign?"

Tom thought back to his first instinct upon hearing about this story. "Can't it be both?"

"No, Tom," she said in a painfully gentle voice. "I did a cruel and probably illegal thing to help other people. Amir did a terrifying and valuable thing to help other people. Vicky's done a bunch of both to help other people. What you did, and what you're trying to do now, is to help yourself."

"So that I can get elected! So that I can help people on a grand scale! I'm not doing this for me; you have to know that."

"Really?" She hammered at him again with that bluntness. "Back in the day, you were in some march or rally at least twice a month. More like twice a week most of the time. You gave speeches meant to inspire and uplift people at every one. How often have you given a speech to anyone but donors or sponsors recently? How many rallies or protests or demonstrations have you attended in the last… say… year even?"

He hesitated, and she went on implacably. "Face it, Tom. Even if you do win your primary, and then your coveted Senate seat, you'll be just as hamstrung then as you are now! You'll be a part of the system. You'll have power, sure, but you'll have to play by the rules of the system in order to hold onto that power!" She sighed. "Amir and Vicky want to believe that you're still the same man they knew, but I know better. Whether you win or not, you're Senator Penderton now. Hurricane Thomas died a long time ago, and he's not coming back."

There didn't seem to be much to say after that, so she hung up gently. Tom just sat there for a moment, before detaching the voice recorder from the phone.

Tina had admitted to inciting a prison riot, among other crimes. If he leaked this recording—or rather, parts of it—to any major news outlet, she would be discredited and most likely arrested. Vicky and Amir would probably get in trouble as well, for not taking this to the police themselves. Vicky would be fired, and Amir wouldn't get his residency anytime in the next century or so. In fact, he'd probably be deported. But Tom's name would be elevated to a national scale, and he could pretty easily leverage that into a senate seat.

Chapter 5

With the clink of two glasses filled with cheap wine, Vicky and Amir got down to their celebratory meal. He was right, too. Vicky had always enjoyed traditional Israeli food, and Amir was a pretty good cook.

She was finally able to relax, too. For weeks now, there had been an ever-tightening knot of muscles in her back, from her work anxieties. Sure, the story hadn't come out the way Tina had planned, but it was out there now. Vicky could stop being afraid of retribution at work.

Ever since the Bellstock riot last week, the government investigation had continued. They'd discovered the link between Bellstock and Etani pretty quickly, and four of Vicky's co-workers and superiors had been arrested. They hadn't approached her yet though, so Vicky assumed her role in all of this was either unimportant enough to skip over, or it had not been noticed at all.

Still, some anxiety remained. She had something to tell Amir, and wasn't sure how he'd react.

After the meal was over, Vicky got started. "So, I've been thinking about what Tina told us. And about the other BT102s out there, in government hands. She was right: even if word gets out, and the others are found and destroyed, there's nothing stopping the government or armed forces from just making more and using them. Nothing except me, that is."

Amir gave his typical 'I-don't-know-what-to-say' look. "What… exactly do you think you can do to stop it?"

"The only thing anyone can do to change someone's behavior these days. You give them a better option and then badger them into using it. Or in this case an easier option."

Before he could inquire again, Vicky went on. "What if I was able to design an implant that could do what the BT102 did, but didn't hurt anyone, and didn't have to be triggered remotely? In fact, it couldn't be triggered remotely at all. It would be self-contained and operate on its own, just like a pacemaker."

"Pacemakers handle an autonomic function in the body," Amir said skeptically. "If you want to design an implant that can handle a voluntary function, it would have to be able to think for itself, like some kind of artificial intelligence. We're decades away from a practical AI, maybe centuries!"

"I know," Vicky admitted. "I'm just spitballing here, but what if we don't need an AI to regulate this new implant? What if we use the brain itself as a regulation system?"

Amir was quiet for a few moments, and Vicky held her breath. The only reason she was telling him about all this was because she needed his help. His background in neuroscience would be essential if this harebrained idea of hers stood any chance.

"We still don't know nearly enough about how the brain works to make a device like this practical. We'd need to gather that data ourselves, in a controlled environment."

Vicky nodded slowly. "Which is why I'm quitting my job at Etani."

Again, Amir went quiet, but this time from shock. "Vicky, I know you feel responsible for the BT102, but it wasn't your fault. The people who perpetrated that experiment will be found out, and all the higher-ups in Etani who knew about it will be arrested. You don't need to quit just to work on this new project of yours. In fact, you'll need money for the materials. Even if you're just studying your own brain for now."

"This isn't just a side project, Amir," Vicky said gravely. "When I saw the news about the Bellstock riot, I knew it was at least partially my fault. I got into implant technology in the first place to make peoples' lives better! If I stay at Etani, or any other biotech firm, I'll have to keep working to advance their products, and their agendas. I won't risk that again."

She looked away, a bit embarrassed. "I know it probably doesn't make much sense to you, but this is something I've been thinking about ever since I first found out my work was being misused. From here on out, I have to be in control of my own efforts. If that means coming up with my own company and my own products, or even if it means working totally alone, I'll do it."

They threw around a few more ideas of what this new effort of hers would look like, as they washed up the dishes and set them away. Vicky made sure to be clear: this was something she was going to do, come hell or high water. By the time Amir's door buzzed at them, they were back in the living room.

Vicky looked over at Amir. "Did Tom tell you why he was dropping by?"

"No," Amir said, rising and heading over to the door. "He just wanted to be sure that you'd be here, and said he wanted to speak to both of us together."

Speaking of which, Vicky would be headed back home tomorrow. If she was serious about this new endeavor of hers, she'd have to find a cheaper place to live while she worked at it.

Vicky's eyes drifted over to the newspaper on the table. "Neither of our names ended up in the paper, but maybe he found out somehow. Could he be here about Bellstock?"

"I doubt it. Whatever it is, it must be important. Pennsylvania is a long drive from here." Amir pressed the buzzer.

Vicky snorted. "Maybe one of his new friends lent him a private jet. Whatever it is, we'll find out soon enough."

When Amir opened the door, Tom stepped inside hesitantly, looking a little relieved. He was carrying a brown backpack. "Thank you both for seeing me this late."

Vicky still felt a few reservations, but Amir smiled warmly at him and beckoned him into the living room. "Why wouldn't we? We're old friends, and as far as I'm concerned, it's been too long."

Vicky smiled too, but more at Amir than Tom. For as long as she'd known him, Amir had been blessed with a forgiving nature. Despite his parental troubles, he didn't seem to hold onto any grudges, ever. The world needed more people like him.

"I don't really know where to begin," Tom said, surprising Vicky a bit. He'd always been a polished speechwriter in her experience. "I guess it all boils down to last week. I had a long conversation with a friend… and then I had the chance to ruin that friend's reputation, and bolster my own in the process. Before that conversation, I wouldn't have even hesitated to do it. It would have been easy—a political maneuver with a lot of reward and a very low cost. But what we talked about, or what was said to me… really stuck with me."

At Amir's gesture, Tom took a seat across from them and took the glass of water offered to him. He looked haggard—or perhaps haunted. It was as if Vicky was seeing him, for real this time, for the first time in years.

Giving him a grateful look, Tom gulped down a mouthful, and then continued. "As I am now, I came *this* close to ruining a friend's reputation! If I actually gain real power, what might I do next, without thought or hesitation? Killing people, and telling myself it's in the name of law and order, or national security? Starting wars, and deluding myself into thinking it has nothing to do with my own economic interest? I… can't see any end to this path that doesn't turn me into some kind of soulless void!"

His voice hardened, and he looked between them. "I can't be this person anymore. I never should have been him in the first place. The kind of person who's so focused on obtaining and maintaining power… that he's long since stopped using it to help people! I've lost my way, and I need help to find my path again. I need your help."

Shocked at this outpouring from him, Vicky exchanged a glance with Amir. "Of course we want to help, but what exactly do you want us to do?"

At that, Tom smiled ever so faintly. "I don't know what form my life will take if you do help me. Back in college, I was in charge of our activism most of the time. I was in front, facing the cameras and waving the signs, but I was also in the back giving orders and organizing the others. I knew who I was back then, and I *liked* who I was! All I know for sure is, I can't be in charge again. I failed then, and I can't risk doing it again."

Vicky couldn't help but think of her own decision to alter her life. The similarities were striking, but for all she knew this was just Tom having a bad day. "Tom, you have a whole life back in Pennsylvania. Even if we did start up some kind of… activist organization here, eventually that life would call you back. Your campaign, your donors, your parents, would pressure you to come back."

Tom laughed out loud. "Well, you're dead right about that, which is why I burned my bridges before coming out here." He reached into his backpack and pulled out a newspaper, handing it to her.

Vicky spread it out on the table, and Amir looked over her shoulder. It was a local Pennsylvania paper, and unremarkable at first glance. At the bottom of the front page though, was printed, "Senate primary candidate Penderton drops out of race."

She couldn't believe what she was reading at first. Skimming the article quickly, Vicky confirmed it, and then looked up at Tom incredulously. "Whoa. Your parents must have flipped when they found out about this."

"Yeah, they're not speaking to me. They might get over it eventually, but I knew you'd need proof that I meant what I'm saying. I have a clean slate now, sort of. I'm just lucky I never got married—and believe me, my parents had plans for me in that area, too. I didn't leave a wife or kids behind this way."

For perhaps the dozenth time in the last few weeks, Vicky didn't know what to think. She was actually starting to get used to that feeling by now. Either Tom had gone completely insane, or he really did mean it. How often did anyone in public life ever give up everything and go live a life dedicated to helping others? Or rather, how often did they do that consistently and not end up drifting back into their old patterns? He was right—he did need them, at least to keep him on this new path he'd chosen.

It was like the Bible parable she'd read as a kid: the rich man coming to Jesus and asking what he could do to gain eternal life. When told that he would have to give up his riches, the young man couldn't do it, and had to walk away. Had Tom just contradicted that parable with his own life?

The parallels between her situation and his were also staggering. They'd both just decided to throw away their old lives and start anew. Vicky had never thought of herself as particularly religious, but the degree of coincidence here was hard to deny. It wasn't something she could just ignore.

"I'll help you, Tom," she said abruptly, and he gave an audible sigh. "You're in luck, actually. I'm kind of reinventing myself too right now. I'm starting a new… project I guess you'd call it. I won't ask you to be a part of it if you don't want to, but it would give you something to do. I could also use someone with your people skills, contacts, and sadly, money."

Tom looked a little worried about that last bit, but he nodded firmly. "Count me in. I'll help however I can. As long as you're there to keep me in line, that's all I need." He quirked a smile. "I suppose I need to live a simple life as well. Minimal expenses, basic nutrition, that sort of thing."

"That is how most people do it," Vicky agreed.

They were silent for a few seconds, and then Vicky remembered. Apparently Tom thought about it at the same time, and they both looked at Amir. "Amir, I'm sorry," Vicky said quickly. "I didn't mean to put any pressure on you at all. You have a life here, and it's very different from mine and Tom's. You don't need to-"

Amir raised a hand to quiet her. "I know, I know. Part of me wants to join up just to see where it goes, and another part of me is all nostalgic and wants that old feeling we had back again. The truth is, I would have joined you anyway. It all boils down to motivations. I only got into medicine to help people, and you both need my help. It's that simple."

The three of them spent the next few hours planning, joking, and catching up. Tom's relief was clear, and he was light-hearted through the whole thing. Amir was apprehensive by comparison, probably thinking how his schooling and career would be affected. Vicky was hopeful, actually. There was something precious in being in charge of your own fate, and she resolved to never stop valuing that.

Part 2

Chapter 6

It was already after ten AM when they arrived, but the inside of the building was still dark. The gates were all open for them at least, but electricity had been cut off years ago, so there were no lights to speak of. Tom and Vicky pulled out flashlights and swept the room.

Vicky shook her head. "Not good."

"You're wrong, Vic. It's perfect!" Tom said happily, moving forward into the dimness. He located the winch on the far wall, which was thankfully not electric, and pulled on it hard. The metal slats covering the windows far above slowly ground open, and light flooded into the yard.

Revealing exactly what Vicky had expected: a real fixer-upper of a prison.

She gave Tom another beleaguered look, and he just shrugged in response. "I know, but we can't exactly shop around for a better prison, can we? If we can get this one up to code within a couple of weeks, I've been assured we can start forwarding inmates here."

It was certainly large enough to hold everyone they'd enlisted in their brain-mapping project. Vicky estimated that they might be able to maintain this place with as few as thirty guards, given how many prisoners had volunteered so far.

The kitchen and pantry were picked clean, of course. The last private prison company to have worked here was no exception to any other business. Like any corporation, they'd cut corners all over the place to turn a profit, and when the time had come to abandon this place, they'd taken everything not nailed down and a bunch of stuff that had been.

These last few years had been a real eye-opener for Vicky, and from what she could tell, for Tom and Amir as well. Before Bellstock, she'd never thought that much about prisons or how prisoners were treated. The idea that social creatures like humans could be locked away for decades at a time, spending at most an hour a day outside their little boxes, had been a shock. No wonder they'd gotten so many volunteers that they'd had to pick and choose.

In one of Tom's more inventive ideas to get subjects for their brain-mapping efforts, he had made a deal with Oliver Corey, one of the supervisors working for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. He'd offered to start a private prison company like the others, but one that was effectively nonprofit. That meant better care for the prisoners, and a good PR example for Corey to point to when human rights activists started nosing around his work. After Bellstock, he'd certainly needed one. In exchange, Corey had allowed Tom to reach out to prisoners all over the country and offer a sort of sanctuary within his new company.

Vicky had insisted on nonviolent offenders first, to get a baseline reading for their scans, and the others had agreed. Basically, people who were in danger of being killed by other prisoners could agree to transfer to Tom's company, BPH Corrections. Vicky still didn't know how she felt about that, given how easily she'd been manipulated by her bosses back at Etani Tech, but Tom was quite clear about this. Unless they wanted to apply for government jobs and work their way into the BOP the slow way, their only option was to start their own company. BPH was actually a combination of their last initials: for all their initiative, it seemed that none of them had a gift for naming things.

"Hello?" A voice echoed down one of the corridors outside the empty prison block, and Vicky pointed her flashlight that way. It was Amir, making his way carefully through the darkness. Vicky lit up his path for him, and he was next to them a minute later.

"Sorry I'm late," he pocketed his phone. "Kyle was having trouble with one of the MEGs, and I had to talk him through adjusting it."

"Is there a mechanical fault?" Vicky said with some concern. MEGs, or magnetoencephalography helmets, had to be very precisely calibrated for the person wearing them. It had taken her a lot of time and effort miniaturizing the design so people could actually walk around wearing a MEG, instead of being hooked up to a wall like some kind of torture victim.

Amir shook his head. "He was just having difficulty getting a clear reading off of one of the inmates. It was just a misaligned lead."

Vicky felt a little relieved. They had twenty volunteers now, two technicians including Kyle, and four guards to help keep them safe. They had leased a portion of a prison back in Illinois, but their lease was up in a month, so they'd have to move here. She would have to build a few dozen more MEGs, too, for all the new volunteers who would join them. Assuming they got this place in working order, that was.

The MEGs were kind of like portable miracles unto themselves, too. Even five years ago they would have seemed like science fiction, but to have a noninvasive way to measure brain responses was exactly what they needed to make this plan work. Unfortunately they were also difficult to build, uncomfortable to wear, tricky to calibrate to each person's head shape and spine strength, and worst of all, expensive.

Speaking of which… "I don't know, Tom," Vicky felt herself say as they stood back in the cell block, looking around. "I'm gonna have to build at least a dozen EM coils just for this room alone, and maybe twenty more for the cells themselves and the kitchen facilities. Even with the low cost of leasing this place, can we afford all that?"

Tom grimaced. "It'll be tight for sure, but I don't see that we have any other options. You both said we need more data, from a wider range of people. That means a bigger facility like this one. As for the money, if you're considering my other suggestion-"

"I still don't think it's worth it," Vicky insisted. "There have to be other options."

"What's he talking about?" Amir put in, looking a little concerned.

Vicky hesitated. It wasn't exactly a secret, but the idea was controversial, at least in her mind. After a moment she gestured at Tom to explain, and went back to scanning the room for places she could put an EM coil.

Tom turned to face him. "When Etani Tech went belly up, they lost their claim on most of the patents they'd been using, including Vicky's circuit designs. They never actually bought those designs from her in the first place—it was more like they were renting her work. But now that they're out of the picture, she could sell them to other corporations, for a surprising amount actually."

"Would it let us get this place up and running?"

Tom paused. "Between the stipend we get from the BOP, the out-of-pocket costs I can cover, and the estimated price Vicky would get for her patents… I'd say we could run this place for ten months, maybe eleven. I might be able to stretch that a bit, depending on who's interested in buying." He glanced over at her. "Look, I know you have concerns about people misusing your designs again, but the only other option is filing for a good old-fashioned research grant."

"No," Vicky said firmly.

"Absolutely not," Amir said at the same time, and they looked at each other in surprise, before Vicky explained.

"The moment we ask for money from official sources, we lose control over the direction of our work. They could sideline us completely in favor of more products for their own goals. We have to stay independent for as long as we can."

Tom just looked at her mildly for a few more seconds, and she finally nodded. "Ok. I'll look over the offers you've had so far. Hopefully we can find some group that doesn't seem totally soulless."

Tom nodded and pulled out his phone to make the appropriate appointments, and Vicky couldn't help but admire his reliability. It had been over a year now since he'd bared his soul to them back in Amir's old apartment. Tom had been in charge of everything around him for a long time before that—it couldn't have been easy for him to be a follower instead of a leader. Still, he had made that promise and held to it against all odds. If Amir was the brains of their little triumvirate, and she was the engineering muscles to get things done, Tom had pretty much become the heart.

Looking back at the prison yard outside, Vicky felt her spirit wilt a little. No matter how hard she'd worked since starting down this path, it all paled in comparison to what they still had to do. Even with Tom and Amir working next to her day after day, and the help from the people they'd hired for their fake little company, it still felt like they were climbing a cliff with no summit in sight.

The bus ride from Illinois was a long one. Twelve-plus hours on a bus with twenty convicted criminals wasn't exactly what Tom considered to be a relaxing journey. Granted, none of them were violent offenders, but they still had to be secured for transport. The guards took care of that with practiced ease. There were two Correctional Officers or COs, a Lieutenant, and then Sergeant Greaves in charge with them on the bus.

Greaves was a longtime veteran in the BOP, having worked in at least a dozen prisons over the last thirty years. Still, during his interview Tom had gotten the distinct impression that Greaves didn't like his job much. The older man had seemed relieved to be in charge of a carefully vetted, consistently nonviolent group of criminals. That was just Tom's assumption, though. Greaves had never spoken much about his personal life, but according to his file his own father had died in a prison much like the one they were leaving here.

Amir was on the bus too, fiddling with one of the MEGs on one of the prisoners' heads. Tom watched him lean precariously over one prisoner as he did so. "Would you sit down already? If this bus does any kind of turn you'll be swaying all over the place."

Amir gave him a wry look. "This is a rare opportunity to gather data while we're traveling. Whatever they see and hear will affect the readings, so I want to make sure these four MEGs keep working for the whole journey. I just wish Vicky had been able to reinforce more for the trip." He paused. "Where is she, anyway? I haven't seen her since yesterday."

"She and the other technicians flew down to Archcrest—that's the new name of our Alabama facility—yesterday. It's livable enough for now, but she wanted to make sure those EM coil things were in place before we got there." Tom glanced back at the middle of the bus, where a cylindrical case had been bolted to the floor. "What are those things for, anyway? I never did get an answer from Vicky about that. Not one I understood, that is."

"Oh. Um… well, the MEGs are made to read electromagnetic changes in the brain as the subjects do whatever it is they do during an ordinary day. Trouble is, the earth has a pretty big EM field already, running from pole to pole. That coil is basically turning this whole bus into an electromagnetic dead zone, so that we can get clear readings. Vicky rigged it with a battery just like the MEGs themselves. She also had to alter the bus' own electronics so the engine could start with that thing nearby." He tapped his laptop. "She had to adjust these as well, so that the EM coil doesn't mess with the computers. That's why I asked you to turn your phone off, too."

Tom nodded sagely, pretending he understood all that. There was a distinct tone of admiration in Amir's voice, as there always was when he talked about Vic. It was clear he had feelings, but he was usually too distracted by their work, or just too shy to say anything.

Tom had entertained notions about her once too, just after they'd all graduated. She was kind, brilliant, and beautiful. Most people with her skills would have tried to get a masters in electrical engineering, but she had been eager to test her skills, and had gone looking for work as soon as possible. Sadly, she was also a farm kid from Minnesota. His parents had been pretty clear that they had set much higher sights for him.

Thinking back on those days still caused a twinge of regret, even though it had been years now. His parents had been incensed by his sudden decision to quit politics entirely. They hadn't understood, but then how could they? Tom himself had been terrified about the future, and those doubts had taken a long time to fade.

"Did you get a chance to look over those building plans I sent you?" He asked Sergeant Greaves, trying to pass the time and distract himself a little.

Greaves nodded curtly. "That place is built for hundreds, and we only have twenty for now. If the renovations are in place by the time we arrive, there shouldn't be any problems."

"They are. Part of our deal with Coleman-Saito Industries included their help getting Archcrest ready in time. Have you ever worked with any corporate security people before?"

"A few times, but they were basically rent-a-cops. I've never worked with that company before." There was a clear question in there.

"They're professional enough," Tom clarified for him. "I made sure they know you're calling the shots until we can hire more COs to pick up the slack."

Greaves' mouth twitched slightly: the closest he ever came to a smile. "Good call."

"I'm curious. What do you think of this brain-mapping project of ours? I never hear you or the other guards talking about it."

"I'm no scientist," Greaves shrugged. "If you want to tinker with peoples' heads and figure out how they work, that sounds good. As long as they're willing."

"They are. I went to a lot of effort to make sure they get shorter sentences and better treatment to make up for how annoying those headsets have to be. Did you ever consider trying one on, though? I did, when they were first being built."

"Not a chance. But Hartman and Khan were talking about it. You might want to ask them."

Those were the two COs Greaves had brought on when he'd been hired. They were young and inexperienced, but disciplined. Greaves had worked with both before, and vouched for them. Tom resolved to talk to Vicky about both of them when they arrived. Now that Coleman-Saito was on board, they had the resources to build a bunch more MEGs, and he was sure Amir would approve of having non-criminal subjects as well, even if they probably wouldn't wear the MEGs every waking minute.

Speaking of increasing their numbers. "We're gonna need to bring in more inmates—and guards, I guess—over the next few months. Some of them will definitely have violent crimes on their record." He paused briefly. "I'm not ashamed to admit I'll need help with them. Would you be willing to sit in on their interviews? I'm used to dealing with politicians and businessmen. They may be just as ruthless as the people I'll be meeting at Archcrest, but it's a different kind of ruthlessness."

Greaves looked at him in surprise. "If you think my input would be helpful, sure. Usually I'm just the guy watching them, not the guy deciding if they belong here."

"Trust me. When it comes to our inmates, I'll be needing your gut instinct a lot more than mine."

Chapter 7

The next few months saw a remarkable transformation take place at Archcrest.

As part of Tom's deal with Coleman-Saito Industries, CS technicians and security were all over the prison from day one. Vicky did her best not to interfere with their duties, and was repeatedly surprised by the deference they showed her. They worked with her as the prison population tripled.

Most of the new inmates took well to their new circumstances, but there had been a few incidents with some. One had even struck her hours after being brought in. She'd carried a black eye after that, and refused to cover it up. Vicky wasn't sure if she was just being stubborn or if it was some kind of statement that she wouldn't be intimidated, but she felt a strange sense of pride about it.

Tom had discussed terms with their CEO Kenshi Saito without consulting her, but he hadn't agreed to anything without her. It was stepping close to the line, but not over it. Vicky was willing to let it go.

One of those terms was that any advancement they made that could be used to treat physical disorders in the brain like epilepsy, or mental disorders such as schizophrenia, had to be handed off to CS once verified. That had been an easy one to agree to. It was ironic that her earlier work in dealing with physical pain had inspired designs which had been sold so that she could now work on mental pain.

While the behavioral centers of the brain were her primary focus—or actually Amir's because most of this was Greek to her—they were still gathering tons of data on the rest of the brain. That stuff could be handed off without any problems.

Most of the time, the prisoners were allowed to go about their business normally as long as they wore the MEG. Max—or Sergeant Greaves as he insisted on being called by everyone else—had set up a mostly normal prison schedule of activities for them. It included basic tasks for busy work, such as vocational skills ranging from landscaping to maintenance to laundry. It was important that every detail from those activities be recorded, so Vicky had put a camera and mic inside each MEG.

They also had to fill out questionnaires with what-if scenarios, and the cameras caught which answers they gave as the MEGs recorded any unusual activity.

In her research on behavior theory, Vicky had read about an infamous 'obedience test' back in the 60s which had caused a pretty big splash. It seemed perfect for their purposes, as the experiment required someone to think they were inflicting pain on someone else. She wanted to recreate it, but Amir had talked her out of it. Apparently it was still considered ethically questionable to this day, and even Tom was against it. He was worried that Mr. Saito might end their partnership if they got any bad press.

And it was a valuable partnership—Vicky had to admit that. Not only had they outfitted Archcrest with a ton of new equipment, they were also paying dividends on the potential cures to mental disorders that had been cooked up. Vicky, Amir, and Tom weren't rich yet, but they were definitively better off now than before.

That was what worried her the most, actually. Etani had been paying her, too. Vicky lived in constant fear that some news story would air someday, reporting that some Coleman-Saito product had been used to torture or violate people in some way.

It was why Vicky insisted on setting up the equipment herself. All monitoring data went through *her* first, before being divided and sent out either to Amir or to the CS people. It took up an extra few hours each day, but it was well worth it to her.

One of those nights she and Amir were in the archive room and one of them, or perhaps both, made a breakthrough. They had been studying the lateral frontal pole in the prefrontal cortex (a phrase which Vicky had learned only through repetition) for months now, and a trend was finally starting to emerge.

"We've gone through thousands of different incidents by now," Amir said tiredly, stifling a yawn. "From when Stillman hit you in the face all the way to Carson yelling at his wife when she visited, and everything in between. In almost every case, just before the act a corresponding spike is triggered right there. That has to be it!"

"I think you're reaching here," Vicky said, feeling gingerly at her eye. The bruise had faded, but the memory was still sharp. What Carson had done left an impression, too. His poor wife had been in tears by the time the guards had intervened. At least he hadn't struck her. "There are over a hundred cases here that should have triggered that spike and didn't."

"And we interviewed the inmates about each of them. When asked, they said they weren't sure about their intentions. This is definitely more than a correlation here." He yawned again, and Vicky smiled.

She enjoyed the time they'd been spending together in this room, though clearly he was oblivious about exactly why. And he had a point. From what she knew about statistics, this was definitely significant. "You're tired. Go on upstairs and get some rest. I need to process today's data and divide it up anyway."

"There you are," Tom said from the doorway before Amir could respond. "It's good you're both still up. I've got some… news from Coleman-Saito's legal department."

His expression was serious. Glancing at Amir, Vicky gestured Tom inside. "What's going on?"

Tom sighed. "Apparently the Federal Bureau of Prisons is ending their business arrangement with Coleman-Saito. As a result, CS is shutting us down. We've been instructed to get our inmates ready for transport to other facilities. By this time next week, Archcrest will be emptied out."

Vicky took a deep breath, not trusting herself to speak. "Why, though?" Amir asked angrily. "I thought they didn't care how many inmates we had here, as long as they were up to national prison standards."

"They don't. Officially, this is the result of a 'new direction' on the part of the Department of Justice, and has nothing to do with us. Unofficially, it seems they're not willing to risk legal liability by associating with my private prison company. My guess is they found out about your involvement with the BT102, and are panicking. The press they got from Bellstock was bad enough—they're probably not willing to risk it happening again."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. If their test subjects were being sent back, this project would grind to a halt. They'd been at it for months now, and they were getting close—she was sure of it. "We've already passed information to CS that allowed them to come up with treatments for four different minor brain disorders. Doesn't that count for anything?"

Tom shook his head. "Not enough, apparently. The BOP doesn't care about medical advances as much as their own reputation—and the funding they get by having it untarnished. I might be able to convince them to let us keep going, but only if I can give them something big—something that helps them with their prisoners." He looked back and forth between them. "I don't suppose you've got anything I can present to them in the next week or so?"

Amir sighed. "Nothing concrete. We've only got working theories so far." He waved at the computer screen, "and a lot of data to pore over still."

"Then we have no choice. Once our test subjects are gone, we'll have to go public. Ask the general population for volunteers. I'm not sure how into the idea CS might be, but we still have some funding," Tom looked around, "and a facility to house them. It might be enough."

Amir clenched his hands into fists. "The moment we go public, we'll have corporations and legal groups jumping down our throat. We'll never be able to get our message out there, much less have anyone believe it!"

To Vicky, the boys' argument faded a bit into the background. She was looking at the data from before, and feeling a sense of stillness. She knew what she had to do.

"Amir."

Both of them paused, possibly sensing the gravity in her tone. "I know you have the equipment for a sterile operating room here in Archcrest. How long until you can get it all unpacked and set up? So that the OR is functional, I mean."

"Uh, a day, maybe. Why?"

Vicky thought about the materials she also had here. "I can have one of these implants completed and tested by then. How confident are you in your ability to implant it?"

Amir's eyes widened, and Tom cut in before he could respond. "Whoa, whoa, there. Even if we can find a prisoner willing to volunteer for *brain surgery*, they're all still technically in the custody of the US government! There's no way the DOJ or the BOP would sanction anything like this. It would mean jail time for *us* to even attempt it!"

Amir nodded heartily. "I could perform the surgery, but I won't. No doctor with any scruples would risk an inmate's life like that, even with their permission."

"Who said anything about an inmate?"

It took them a few moments to grasp what she was saying, and Vicky enjoyed the flabbergasted expressions they gave her as they were adjusting.

Tom recovered first. "You mean one of us? Obviously Amir can't do it—he'd be the one performing this… insane procedure."

"I mean me," Vicky said firmly. "I don't have your connections or relationship with the BOP or with Coleman-Saito. I can't negotiate like you can. Besides," she added as the thought occurred to her. "You may have agreed to take orders from me when it comes to your path in life, but I'd never force you to go through a procedure like this. It wouldn't be right."

"Vicky-" Amir began, but she cut him off.

"You said it yourself. If they shut us down, we'll have to go public. The moment we do that, we'll be under nationwide scrutiny. I don't know which corporation or government entity would do it, but someone would definitely take control of this project immediately. All of our data would be sold to the highest bidder, and all of our work here would have been for nothing!" She speared them both with harsh looks. "I can't let that happen."

Amir turned around to his computer, and pulled up a list—somewhat frantically, in Vicky's opinion. "At least let us talk to someone else. Here. Dennis is up for parole in two weeks. He's one of our most cooperative subjects. I'm sure when that happens, he'll volunteer. We can make it worth his while if he's still not sure!"

Vicky gave him a sad smile. Ever the protector. He and Tom both behaved that way sometimes. It was sexist, but she couldn't really blame them for how society had raised them. She reached out and gripped them both by the shoulders. "Even if Tom can stall the BOP that long, there's no guarantee that Dennis will get paroled. If he doesn't, we're back to our public non-option. Face it, guys. I'm the right person for the job and you both know it."

It was clear from their expressions that they needed more convincing. "Think about it. I set up the equipment and helped you gather the data, Amir, but that's all done now. All this stuff just needs to be maintained, and Kyle can do that just fine without me. I'm basically just an assistant now, helping you both with *your* tasks. This is the next step for me, I'm sure of it. I'm willing to risk my life to test this." She paused. "I am afraid, sure, but I won't let that stop me."

"You might be risking more than just your life, though," Amir said softly. "This is experimental brain surgery we're talking about here. You're young and strong enough to get through the procedure, but who knows what kind of complications there might be? Have you heard of Locked-In syndrome? People with brain damage have been completely awake and aware of their surroundings, but utterly unable to move or speak at all! They could only lie there, for the rest of their days, with no conduit to the outside world, no agency, no communication. If I screwed up even slightly, that could happen to you! I'd be risking your sanity!"

"I trust you. I'll set up my will and sign a DNR beforehand just to be sure, but I know that you're skilled enough to do this. Just like I'm crazy enough to try it," she added with a smile.

They both looked like they wanted to continue dissuading her, but there was a sense of inevitability around them by now. She could feel their slow realization that it was basically either this, or giving up entirely. Tom especially looked pained at the prospect. Perhaps he had wanted to be the first human trial, or he felt that he'd be the one taking other risks. Risking your own safety was one thing, but standing by while a friend did it was much harder. It looked like he was just realizing that now.

Actually it took a few days before everything was ready. Once Tom was sure why the BOP was having cold feet about their arrangement, he was able to extend the deadline.

He helped Vicky arrange a living will, not something usually associated with people in their early thirties, and set up a Do Not Resuscitate order on her behalf. He did so reluctantly though, still hoping there might be another way. Her earlier points were all valid—she was the best person for the job, and it was basically now or never—but Tom did take some time to put out feelers for other people who might volunteer in her place. He even reached out to his old Private Investigator and had him look around.

As it turned out there were a few people in the area who were suffering terminal conditions and therefore might be willing, but they were all in pretty bad shape. It was doubtful any would survive the surgery. There wasn't enough time to widen the net, so Tom reluctantly admitted he would just have to resign himself to Vicky's decision.

Amir spent the time getting his equipment in place and prepared. He called one of his old friends to help, and even brought out some tools from med school to practice for the main event. In theory, the surgery looked straightforward. Rather than removing a brain tumor which could be very difficult to do safely, they just had to insert the lines from the implant into two specific locations near the top of her head. There were minimal complications, or so Tom kept telling himself.

He had a shock when he saw Vicky on the morning of the big day, though. She had shaved her head bald, with Amir's assistance. It wasn't strictly necessary, as only the area above the implant needed to be hairless, but Vicky had just shrugged and said she'd rather be completely bald than just partially.

All or nothing, just like her decision to start this whole project. That was so her.

Tom had insisted on watching the surgery, although Amir had warned him to stay in the observation room. He and his assistant, a friend from med school named Devin Chen, got to work. Chen sedated Vicky—thankfully this wasn't one of those brain surgeries that required the patient to be awake—and Amir reached for a scalpel.

Abruptly Tom realized he wasn't alone in the observation room. Sergeant Greaves was there too, along with Perkins and Hodgson. Two of their inmates.

Tom was about to object, but something stopped him. It was clear all three of them were here for the same reason he was. They cared about Vicky. Both inmates were the best-behaved of the whole group, and Vicky had spent a lot of time with them during the questionnaires and perceptual tests for the MEGs. Besides, despite his obvious concern for Vicky, Greaves was staying behind them and to the side. It was clearly in case they tried anything stupid. He had the situation under control.

Watching Amir cut into her skin and fold it back was disturbing enough, but when he brought out a surgical saw, Tom had to look away. He thought he'd had a pretty strong stomach. Back in college, he'd taken a few hits during the protests he'd joined. He'd even been beaten pretty badly once, but he'd never broken any bones. To just see Vicky's skull cut open like that was a truly visceral experience. As important as it was to be there for her, no matter what happened, and to see the surgery for himself, Tom doubted he'd be able to sleep well for the next week or so.

Both inmates looked a bit sick as well, and even Greaves looked grimmer than usual.

The whole thing took about three hours from start to finish. When Amir finally leaned back looking fatigued, and Chen started wrapping her head in gauze, Tom felt drained as well. He exchanged relieved smiles and handshakes with the other three, before Greaves escorted the inmates out.

They had just turned the corner on their little project. Or perhaps more to the point, they'd gone off the edge of the map. Only time would tell what wonders or monsters might be waiting for them out here.

Chapter 8

Tom was just finishing up Devin Chen's payment paperwork when he got a text from Amir. It was just two words: she's awake.

He hurried down the hallway towards the new OR and recovery room next to it, wondering briefly if Chen would be interested in staying on as a permanent staff member. If the surgery had worked as intended, they'd probably need new surgeons familiar with the process in the near future. If it didn't, he added grimly to himself, they might need Chen to help remove the implant.

There she was on her newish hospital bed, looking groggy but definitely awake. Amir was next to her checking her vitals, but he looked optimistic. "Hey," she said after focusing her gaze on Tom for a few moments.

"Hey yourself. How do you feel?"

She grimaced and pulled herself up a bit in her bed. "Like someone just cut a hole in my head and stuffed a chunk of metal in there."

Tom and Amir exchanged a relieved look. At least her wit didn't seem to be affected.

"How long will she be stuck here, you think?" He asked Amir.

"A few days just to be sure. The usual recovery time for brain surgery is four to eight weeks, but the procedure was pretty much ideal. A few weeks and she'll be back to work, I'm sure."

"Guys."

"How long until we can start testing the implant, though? Steven Perry at the BOP is breathing down my neck for results. I've got to show him something soon."

Amir hesitated. "As long as I can monitor the tests and they aren't too strenuous, maybe a day or two? It depends on exactly how well the implant is interfacing with her brain tissue. If there are any-"

"Guys!"

Startled, Tom looked back down at her, and saw more than a little indignation on her face. "Sorry," he said after a moment, and Amir echoed his statement.

Vicky grunted. "Being a female engineer gets me ignored enough already. Being in a hospital bed seems to make it a hundred times worse. Come closer, would you?" She beckoned him over.

Still feeling a bit chagrined, Tom obeyed. From her bed, Vicky raised her right arm, but then dropped it back down. Her whole stance changed, from alert to relaxed, and she leaned back against her pillow again for a second. Then she shook her head for a second. "Whoa. That's a real trip."

"What is?" Tom asked, glancing at Amir in concern.

"I just tested my implant. I tried to slap you, and it stopped me. How far did I get, anyway?"

Feeling a little surreal, Tom gestured to her side. "You raised your arm is all. Nothing more."

"At least we know the implant's working as intended, at least for now," Amir put in.

Tom thought back on the initial description she'd given him about the implant. It was attached to the part of the brain that controlled decision-making, so it could 'keep watch' on every action the patient tried to make. If she were to try to do something she knew was wrong—like slapping him, for example—it would trigger an electrochemical spike in her brain, which would trigger the implant, which would stop her.

Which left an interesting question. "How exactly did it stop you? It looked like you almost fell asleep again for a split-second. I assume it doesn't shock you like the BT102 modifications did."

Vicky shook her head, and then winced, holding a hand up to her temple. "Can I get an aspirin or something?"

"Sorry, Vicky," Amir answered. "There's a risk of complications. You'll need to wait at least a day before I can give you normal pain meds."

"It's not a problem; I can deal. As for the implant, it does generate a shock, but it's less than a milliamp, so you can't even feel it. Because it's administered right to be brain though, it kinda… resets you. You know that feeling you get sometimes when you're just waking up, and for a second you're not sure where you are until you remember?"

After a moment, Tom nodded vaguely.

"Well, that's called a fugue state. It's like a kind of waking dream. When my implant went off, it triggered that state in my brain, for just a second or two. It stopped me by forcing me to remember what I was doing and why."

Clearly there was a lot more to this implant's function than Tom had thought about before. He smiled, once again feeling a bit in awe of Vicky's skills. She'd only had a few days to put the implant together and test it.

"Let me try this," Vicky said suddenly, and turned to Amir. "I think you're an arrogant, self-important blowhard."

Not knowing quite what to do, Tom just stared at both of them for a second. Amir seemed to have a similar reaction—or lack of one.

"Ok, it seems that lying doesn't trigger the implant," Vicky added, looking a bit disappointed. "It's weird, because dad raised me with 'honesty is the best policy' being a pretty central part of my upbringing."

Tom was feeling surreal again about all this, but Amir seemed to be understanding what was going on. "Maybe the implant didn't go off because you knew I wouldn't believe you."

"That could be it." She looked over at Tom. "Could you go talk to Max for me? I need someone else to test myself against."

"Max? You mean Sergeant Greaves?"

Vicky gave him a look of exaggerated patience. "Yes, him. I need to talk to one of the new guards he's hired. I've never met either of them, so they can help test the implant."

Nodding, Tom left, and they continued talking in the background.

It didn't take him long to find one of them: Henry Rawlins, if Tom remembered correctly. He got permission from Greaves, and then brought Rawlins back to the recovery room.

"What's your name?" Vicky asked him immediately.

"CO Henry Rawlins, ma'am," he answered hesitantly.

"Well, Henry. I'm Vicky. And I think that your nose is-" she cut off mid-sentence, looking strangely relaxed again. After a second, she refocused on the room. "Wow. It looks like you were right, Amir." She glanced at the guard again. "Thank you, Henry. You can go now."

Tom nodded at him too. Looking deeply confused, Rawlins withdrew. Tom could sympathize.

"So I could lie to you because I knew you wouldn't believe it, but I couldn't lie to Henry because I don't know him, and therefore can't be sure."

"Seems that way," Amir agreed, "but there could be a number of other explanations. We are dealing with your subconscious here."

He paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Actually if this pans out, we might want to get a psychiatrist on our staff. Someone who could help us understand the interaction between the mind and the implant. Either way, we'll need to trigger your implant a bunch more times to figure out exactly where the limits are."

"How often does it go off?" Tom asked curiously. "How often *can* it go off?"

"I designed it to run on bioelectricity, just like the BT102. It'll never run out of power, not as long as I'm alive, anyway. It could trigger hundreds of times a day without ever wearing out." Vicky actually looked a bit smug about that.

"I don't mean to be a downer here," Tom went on, concerned about the growing excitement on both of their faces, "but if something goes wrong, is there a way to shut off the implant if necessary? Something less traumatic than ripping the whole thing out of your head, that is."

"Uh, yeah," Amir answered. "I'd want to sedate her just to be sure, but after that I'd just need to open up the top of the implant on her scalp."

"It's just a bit of circuitry up there," Vicky clarified. "If you cut the connections, the implant is dead. It's pretty simple."

"Good," Tom said with some relief. "I'm excited about the possibilities here too, but we can always build more implants. Your brain is one-of-a-kind."

Vicky smiled at that, and then put her hand to her temple again. "Let's expand testing. Can you get more people in here? We've worked together for a while, but I don't know much about Kyle's personal life. People I've only met once or twice, then? I can write up a list."

Amir raised both hands, before Tom could object. "Hold on a moment. You've just woken up out of surgery. You need time to rest, and to adjust to your new… uh, reality."

"He's right, Vicky. I've got enough for my report to Steven Perry at the BOP. You have to take it easy for now. There will be plenty of time for more tests."

She eventually nodded, and Amir turned back as he and Tom left. "I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but try not to say or do anything you know is wrong, ok?"

Giving them an overly patient look, Vicky gestured an 'x' over her chest, and then leaned back to get more comfortable.

Once they were out of the room and down the hall a bit, Tom reached out to stop Amir. "So… we're good so far, right?" He looked back at Vicky's room with some concern.

Amir nodded. "She's doing better than I thought. This is amazing stuff, too. I mean we planned on the implant being able to stop patients from being violent towards each other, but I was just focused on the biology of it. I never thought the implant might be able to stop someone from lying, too."

"You said the implant is connected to the part of the brain that controls decision making," Tom reasoned aloud. "So… basically you've given her conscience, I guess, control over the rest of her?"

"Not exactly. Think of it more like veto power. The implant can stop her from taking actions—or speaking words I guess—that she knows are wrong, but it can't *make* her do anything. Her implant is more like a circuit breaker than anything else. It can only stop things—not start them."

He sighed, and looked down at his tablet. "This is gonna take months or years to analyze, but I'm very encouraged by how this is going so far. I gotta go input her vitals into the archives downstairs."

As Amir went off, Tom made his way to his makeshift office to write up his report to the Federal Bureau of Prisons. His *preliminary* report, that was. He'd have to be careful about how to word this one.

Chapter 9

Finally, Vicky was back in her own room.

Sure, it was a converted prison cell in one of the abandoned wings of Archcrest, but it was hers. There was a small TV, an internet hookup that she'd rigged on day one, and a mattress that was definitely more comfortable than the slot on the wall. It wasn't exactly fine living, but it worked for her. She had even taken a hacksaw and cut the bars to the next cell, doubling her space. It required her to step carefully in some places, but it was worth it.

This room had been part of a temporary holding area before they'd come here, and they certainly had no use of it now. Amir had one like it just down the hall, and they both had access to a somewhat decent bathroom and kitchen formerly used by the guards. Tom did a lot of traveling, so he had opted to rent a room at a bed and breakfast about a mile down the road. It meant he had to be isolated and screened foor security reasons every time he got back to Archcrest, but it still seemed to be the best way.

Vicky smiled at remembering how her dad had taken the news she was moving into one of the cells. "I always wondered if my daughter would end up in prison with her wild ways," he'd joked upon hearing it.

It had been over two weeks now since the surgery, and Amir had finally allowed her out of that ridiculous room. And into this slightly less ridiculous one, apparently. At least it was hers, though. Relaxing a bit, she sat down in the lazy-boy she'd bought in the nearby town.

The implant still felt weird, just sitting there imbedded in her skull. The pain had mostly faded, and there hadn't been any other big symptoms from the surgery. But it was there, silently influencing her decisions.

It was small, only about one by one-half inch, but the plate on top was solid metal. Being metal, it got cold faster, too. It was still pretty early in the year, and got chilly, despite being this far south. Vicky would have to be careful to keep her head well covered, until her hair grew out again.

Vicky had wanted to test the implant right away, and Amir reluctantly agreed as long as she didn't do anything to tire herself out. They had brought in inmates and technicians and food suppliers, who she attempted to insult. In most cases, the implant stopped her dead in her tracks, but not the people she knew well. It seemed Amir's instinct had been right.

Physical tests were much easier to understand. She couldn't hit anyone, with an open palm or a clenched fist. Or kick anyone. Physical violence was officially off the table, which was good news for Tom and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

That still worried her. The BOP had been pushing for the details of her surgery for this whole time. Vicky had agreed to share the *results* of the surgery only, not wanting to risk giving them any information that they might use to make their own implant. Even before the BT102, they'd bungled handling of inmates for a long time.

Actually, she hadn't named this implant herself. The BT102 was a designation given by Etani—she'd had nothing to do with that name—but this was a bit more important. In a way, she felt maternal about it. She'd made it, perfected it, and was currently carrying it inside her body. Vicky didn't know if she ever wanted to be a mother, but so far this implant was as close as she'd gotten to a child.

The implant was based on her subconscious understanding of right and wrong. Or of wrong, anyway. It upheld her views, based on recent tests, regardless of circumstance. So far. It was hard to test whether she could hit someone in self-defense, since she'd been lucky and never been in that situation yet.

Tom seemed to think the implant used her conscience as a guide. Could she call it Jiminy Cricket? She'd loved that movie as a kid. Of course it was actually about child-freaking-trafficking of all things, but she'd been too young to understand that.

No, maybe she could call her own device that, but it was likely now that eventually there would be more implants made and installed. They would have to have a name that was more… streamlined, and less obscure.

Then it came to her. It was a code. In each case, it enforced peoples' *code* of behavior. It was simple, straightforward, and easy to remember. This was her code. Soon there would be others like it, but this one was hers.

Smiling, Vicky got up and made her way to the kitchen down the hall. Inventiveness when it came to design and circuitry had always come easy to her, but it was rare that she could be clever when it came to names.

There wasn't much food in the fridge right now, but Vicky wasn't after anything specific. She snatched a TV dinner and put it in the microwave, and then poured herself a glass of cheap red wine. She lifted the glass-

Wait. Where was she? Oh, right. The kitchen.

Her implant had triggered. Her code.

Frowning, Vicky looked around. She was alone in there—Amir was still in the archive room. He'd taken over her duties backing up the information until she was up to it again. There was no one else living in this wing right now. She couldn't have made any decisions that affected anyone else, good or bad. Why had her code gone off?

The microwave alarm went off, and she put the wine down to open it. Could that be it? The wine? That didn't make sense, though. She'd never been a wine snob or anything, but drinking a glass or so with dinner was quite common for her. Her dad enjoyed the occasional beer. Neither had ever drunk to excess, with the exception of the occasional party back in college or high school.

Cautiously, Vicky took a sip-

Again, she found herself having to remember what was going on. It *was* the wine! But why?

Then she thought back to her last physical, the year before. Her doctor had been complimentary, mostly, but he did have concerns about her liver function. He'd recommended she give up even casual drinking. Did harming herself count?

There was a way to test it. Hesitantly, Vicky went over to the notice board and pulled one of the tacks from it. Setting her jaw, she drove it into her finger and pulled it out again. A small bead of blood formed, and she sucked on it briefly.

So the code didn't stop her from self-harm. Or perhaps a pinprick wasn't enough, just like insulting Amir hadn't triggered it.

Then it came to her, just like the name for the code. Self-harm, or suicide for that matter, didn't just harm one person. It also harmed everyone who loved them! It was possible that deep down, she felt drinking was a risk to her health, and the code stopped it not because it hurt her, but because it would hurt her father! Or Amir, or Tom, or Max, or Kyle, or any of the others who had worked with her.

Whoa, that was messed up!

Troubled and excited at the same time, Vicky got back to her meal and poured herself a glass of *water* this time. They definitely needed that psychiatrist Amir had suggested. This was some pretty deep stuff.

“Are you sure about this?” Tom asked again, looking around nervously at the other intake prisoners. “These are actual inmates this time around. None of them are your carefully vetted test subjects. Who knows what could happen?” Ever since she’d proposed this idea Tom had been against it. She was allowed to take chances with her research, sure, but this was the second time she was recklessly risking her own life!

“For the last time, yes,” Vicky said stubbornly. “Look, we’ve gone as far as we can with testing my code in controlled conditions. This is the next step. We have to subject me to real prison conditions, with real prisoners, to measure just how effective it will be in *real* life! So stop being so overprotective and let me in there.”

Sighing, Joe stepped aside and let her through into the waiting area. It was useless arguing with her when she got like this—all he could do was stay nearby and hope everything worked out.

The prison experiment had been her idea initially, but Amir and Greaves had helped her iron out many of the details. The newest batch of inmates brought into Archcrest were female—bringing their total inmates up to one hundred and four by now. One quarter of Archcrest was still devoted to the MEG area, so they’d opened up a new wing for this test. No MEGs, no EM coils, no special conditions of any kind. This part of the prison was exactly that, including real prisoners. Some were incarcerated on drug charges, some for violent crimes, some for fraud—it was a cross-section of the female inmate population of America. As far as they were concerned, this was a temporary arrangement. They were only here for a few months before being transferred to other prisons, because Archcrest had the room, but was still being upgraded for more people.

Of course they’d had to hire more guards, too. Vicky had insisted that Greaves be in charge of that process, which actually made Tom feel better. Greaves had proven he knew what he was doing, and despite the added responsibility still seemed well in charge of the situation. The guards were also in the dark about the true nature of this experiment, and the old man had asked that everyone else keep it that way. The Archcrest wing dedicated to the MEGs was strictly off-limits.

Tom didn’t know much about the intake process for new inmates, but what he’d read didn’t sound pleasant. A physical examination done by a prison nurse was required, and delousing was customary as well. At least that wouldn’t be a problem for Vicky. Her hair had just started to come back, but the plate on top of her head was clearly visible. Tom hoped that it would make her look intimidating, and any troublemakers in there with her would stay away.

“She’s gonna be fine,” Amir said to the right, causing Tom to twitch in surprise. When had he arrived?

“I know that,” he growled in response. They were in the security office, looking at the cameras that had been installed in the new wing. Forty-eight women stood there, side by side, as one of the new officers that Greaves had hired and promoted lectured them about the new facility. The wing had been sealed off, but still the guards and Greaves were outnumbered in there about ten to one. Vicky had insisted on that, too. It had to be as close to real life prison conditions as possible.

“Vicky’s already dealt with violent prisoners before, remember? She can handle this.”

“A black eye is one thing,” Tom protested, and gestured at the camera. “For all we know, these people know how to make shivs! The next time we see her could be in a body bag!”

Amir just let the silence go on for a bit. They both knew she could handle herself well, and despite Amir’s confident words, they were both worried anyway.

“You have to admire her bravery,” Tom finally admitted, and Amir nodded. “I mean, I actually considered being next in line for one of those implants. Or codes, I guess. It’s a pretty cool name. But testing it like this, in actual prison conditions? I’m not sure I could do that. Someone will eventually have to, though, and in a male prison.”

Amir gave him a sideways look. “Has your guy at the BOP insisted on that already?”

“No, Steven’s content with what I’ve sent him so far, but he’ll eventually want us to give him data from another, uh, coded subject.” He let that term roll around in his mind a bit. It sounded right. “Frankly, I don’t think he ever expected the code to work at all. He was probably betting on the surgery being for nothing, and this whole place being shut down by now. Still, he recognizes the possibilities, so he went to bat for us with his superiors. We’ve got our chance. Now we just have to make sure it’s not wasted.”

On the cameras the women were dismissed, and split up to head to their new rooms. There was little or no privacy, by design. Also the cameras only had limited scope, as was the case in many prisons. Vicky went offscreen, and Tom felt his anxiety spike again. “The prison shrink has arrived,” he said more to distract himself than any other reason. “Have you met him yet?”

“No, I’ve been too busy with real work.”

Tom gave him a surprised look, and Amir sighed. “I’ve never really liked psychiatrists, or psych in general as a field. I deal with biochemistry, neurobiology, and actual surgical procedures. They deal with feelings and fears and… other unquantifiable things. I realize a lot of people think they’re necessary, but I’m just not one of them. They’re the cosmetics of the medical profession. Pretty, but not required.”

“Vicky insisted we bring one in. Apparently he could be useful in figuring out why her code goes off sometimes.”

“Well, I trust her judgement, and as long as we can afford it I have no objections. I’m sure not going to visit him as a patient, though.”

“Mr. Penderton? Dr. Hoberman?” Greaves’ voice came at them from behind. “Can I have a moment?”

They both turned to face him, and gave each other a wry look. “I think it’s time you called us by our first names. I’m pretty sure that’s what Vicky would want for all of us. Now, what can I do for you?”

Looking distinctly uncomfortable, Greaves, or Max as he should probably be called, pulled out a sheet of paper. “I needed to give you this.”

Tom took it and looked it over, before feeling a shock of surprise. “You’re resigning?”

“Not by choice,” he assured them quickly. “I like working here. It’s just I have a family situation, and need to get work up in New York state.” Max was practically wringing his hands, which was very out of character for him.

Amir examined the paper himself briefly. “Anything we can help with?”

“Not really, sir. Uh, Amir. It’s just, you know… family.” He shrugged helplessly.

Tom nodded at that. “I understand. It’s just not good timing, that’s all. With the new prisoners and guards, the experiment that has to be kept secret from most of them, and the new shrink, we need you now more than ever. Are you sure we can’t help? What happened with your family anyway? If you want to talk about it, that is.”

Max hesitated, and then went on. “It’s my daughter, and her son. She lost her job last month, and couldn't find other work. She was paycheck-to-paycheck before, and is going to be evicted in ten days. If I got work up in New York, I’d be able to support them more easily. If it were anything else I might be able to stay, but family…”

“Is important. No, I understand completely,” Tom said reluctantly.

“Why not just bring them down here?” Amir asked after a moment. “I mean if she doesn’t have a job anymore, and she’s about to lose her apartment, what else does she have keeping her there? There’s plenty of room here in Archcrest, and I’m sure there are jobs to be had in town. Or she could work with us if she’s got skills that can help.”

“She’s a waitress,” Max clarified darkly. “Besides, this isn’t exactly a safe place for her or for Joey.”

“Actually, it might be worth considering,” Tom put in slowly. “I assume… Joey’s father isn’t in the picture?”

Max shook his head. “He died in a car crash, four years ago.”

“Does she have any family or friends nearby who could take her in?”

“Not that I know of.”

Tom shrugged. “Then I hope she’ll at least consider moving here, long enough to see if there’s work in town anyway. Vicky’s room will be available for a while. It’s not exactly comfortable, but it’s safe enough. And if your daughter doesn’t want to stay here in Archcrest, which I totally understand, she can have my room at the Bed and Breakfast. It’s not like I spent much time there anyway.”

Max looked between them, as if he wasn’t sure if they were joking or not. To Tom and Amir, it was pretty clear this was the best option. It’s what Vicky would want for sure, and it would mean keeping Max around. “You’re still my bosses, though. This is a business, not a charity.”

Amir scoffed at that. “You may have noticed that we’re no ordinary business. Hell, we’re more like a family ourselves. As far as I’m concerned you’re part of that family, and so are your kid and grandkid.”

“He’s right. Besides, the key to starting any business is to have employees you can trust. I would hate to lose you, and you’ve already said you like working with us.” Tom gave it a moment. “I can’t tell you what to do, and if you really are leaving I’ll write you a killer recommendation. But please at least consider it. I believe it would be a good idea for all of us.”

Max nodded thoughtfully and returned to his duties. He left the resignation letter though.

Amir looked up at Tom with another sideways smile. “I’m proud of you.”

“For what?”

“Well, you agreed to follow Vicky’s instructions for your path in life, because you didn’t trust your own instincts not to pull you down again. But what you just did was *anticipate* Vicky’s instructions, and offer up an option we both knew she’d want to try. I’d say that’s progress.”

Tom shrugged again. “I wouldn’t read too much into it. I just don’t want to lose Max as an employee, that’s all. He’d be a nightmare to replace.”

“If you say so,” Amir said placidly, heading towards the door. Tom couldn’t see his face, but he could tell the smile was still there.

Chapter 10

Listlessly, Vicky stared up at her ceiling. There was faint noise from the background of the other women in the cell block, but the only other thing she could hear was cards flipping.

That was her roommate, LaShanda. Somehow she'd gotten hold of a deck of cards just after arriving here, and had several forms of solitaire memorized. She was civil enough to live with, but very closed off. Apparently LaShanda had been in and out of juvie, and then prison, most of her life.

Vicky scratched at the wall next to her bed with her pen. It was metal, and the back end made for an adequate tool. It was a trope to mark her days in jail, but Vicky had gone along with this for all those reasons, including tropes. There. Tomorrow would be the end of week three.

Despite the news coverage of Bellstock she'd watched, and her own understanding of Archcrest before joining the prison population, Vicky had still been surprised at just how stark things were for the inmates. Somehow she'd gotten it into her head that prisons were built to rehabilitate people, but so far there had been no signs of anything like that.

There were no vocational training courses, and no means of getting a GED. The library was laughably understocked. There was a weekly therapy session led by Dr. Shalmers, the psychiatrist she'd helped to hire, but interest in it seemed limited at best. In fact, most of the day was just busy-work in the kitchen, the laundry, the storeroom, or outside tending to the grounds.

For the first time, Vicky was actually regretting that she'd insisted on everything being as realistic as possible here.

The prisoners themselves seemed to accept the conditions without question. Most of them had done time in other prisons, but at least two were newbies like her. Max's guards were firm and direct, but at least they weren’t unfair. Vicky still shuddered to think about the male guards back in Bellstock, torturing people for fun.

As for Vicky herself, things had gone mostly smoothly. She had attracted a few stares, especially on day one. When LaShanda and one of her friends had asked about her code, Vicky didn't know what to say. She'd tried to lie, but the code had stopped her. That had been a valuable experience too. It wouldn't allow her to take shortcuts in social interactions by lying to people.

In the end she'd settled on, "I don't want to talk about it right now, but I'll tell you eventually." Which was technically truthful. As soon as this experiment on her was over, she'd be free to tell all of them if they cared.

Fortunately the code had never stopped her from telling the truth. Even when telling the truth did hurt someone's feelings. She guessed it only worked that way because lying to them would hurt them even more.

Another surprising thing was how factional their small community immediately became. None of them had known any of the others before coming here, but they immediately divided themselves along racial lines. Vicky hadn't understood that at first, but LaShanda explained it late at night after everyone had gone asleep.

"Out there, you got plenty of people telling you that race doesn't mean anything. That it doesn't really exist. People believe it because they've never actually been inside," she'd said bitterly. "In here, you got no choice but see how much it matters, because everyone's in your face every day. The guards here don't really care, but some of the places I've been, they're a lot harder on black folks and latinas than you guys. Nobody lasts long alone in prison, so you find your people right away. And skin is how you tell your people right away."

It was meaningful, if not exactly articulate. LaShanda could have been a philosopher or poet perhaps, if she hadn't been dumped into the system at age ten. And this wasn't even a supermax! Vicky knew if she was shut up in one of those, white skin or not, she'd probably have gone insane by now.

A baton rapped against the concrete partition on the edge of her cell. Groggily, Vicky looked that way. It was Henry Rawlins, the same guard who'd seen her just after the surgery. "Get up, Brandt. You got places to be."

"What's going on?" She mumbled, as she slid out of bed and down to the ground. Fortunately she was tall enough not to need the bunkbed's ladder all the time.

Henry sneered. "Just put on your shoes and come with me." He nodded to his left, and the cell door slid open.

Vicky shared a farewell nod with LaShanda as the door closed behind her. Henry moved behind her downstairs and out of the cell block.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am," he said hurriedly, once they had gone through the block door. "You know I'd never say that if-"

"It's fine, Henry," she assured him, gripping his shoulder. "You're doing your job. I'm sure you never thought your acting class back in college would come in handy on this job." She'd had a few conversations with him and the other guards before starting this in-person experiment.

He hesitantly smiled at that. "You're right about that."

Henry led her past the kitchens and into the old interview room, where she saw Max, Amir and Tom all waiting for her. There was also another man she didn't know, wearing an impressive suit and a cool appraising look on his face.

"Hey, guys. What's going on?"

Tom stepped forward. "This is Steven Perry, with the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Steve, I'm sure you know about our engineer and first human test case."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Brandt," Steve said professionally, shaking her hand and gesturing to the chairs around the interview table.

"Good to meet you, too," she said cautiously. She glanced back in the direction of the cell block for a moment. "Is there some kind of problem with the experiment? I'm not supposed to be pulled out unless there's an emergency. The others will ask questions."

"The experiment is over, Miss Brandt. Or Andrea, if you prefer."

"I go by my middle name, actually,” she said automatically. “Just call me Vicky."

"Right. Well, after discussing things with your colleagues and your head of security, I'm confident I've gathered all I need from this case study of yours. Our researchers back in DC will keep going over the data of course, but they're sure it's time to expand this implant technology of yours to include more human trials. You’ve all done quite well with this project. Especially you, Vicky. A lot of people in our headquarters didn’t think your company would be able to pull it off, but you proved them wrong. Well done.”

Vicky wasn’t sure what to say. The experiment was done—just like that? “I haven’t even been in there three weeks yet! I was told it would take at least two months to get an accurate picture of how the code interacts with inmates.”

“It seems those estimates were overly generous,” Steve said smoothly. He gestured to a pile of manila files stacked on the table. “Now, my people have a list of potential candidates, and those are the people we feel would benefit most from this technology. I’d like the three of you to come back with me to DC, and help us expand on your project. We’ll need at least a dozen of these ‘codes’, and details on how to implant them surgically. Any materials and equipment you need will be in place by the time we get there.”

This was spiraling out of hand quickly. “Now wait just a minute-“

“I’m afraid that’s unacceptable, Mr. Perry,” Tom put in, giving Vicky a warning glance. “Or Steve, if you still prefer that. The design for the codes is still the property of BPH Corrections, and we’re not interested in selling it just yet. The data we’ve collected is also our property, along with the MEGs, the EM coils, and pretty much everything else in Archcrest that isn’t nailed down or cast in concrete. This facility is already set up and running, complete with surgical rooms, diagnostic equipment, interview rooms like this one, and housing facilities for several hundred subjects. Wouldn’t it make much more sense to bring the test subjects here instead of rebuilding all of this somewhere else?”

Steve looked a little surprised. It was clear he hadn’t been expecting this kind of resistance. He’d probably assumed that they would be grateful for the BOP's support, and would go along with their plans or risk getting their supply of test subjects cut off. Vicky felt a moment of shame for not seeing this coming. Of course he would feel that way. He was part of an organization so used to getting its way that he would just assume he could steamroll over anyone.

Tom’s behavior was concerning as well. He had cut her off, but then everything he’d said was in line with what Vicky would say. He was speaking for her, and it was demeaning. Still, it was probably because he thought Steve would react badly to be dictated to by a woman, nearly bald and still recovering from brain surgery. Was it sexist to use your male privilege to bypass sexism?

Steve’s expression darkened noticeably. “You’re asking for flexibility, Mr. Penderton, but the people I work with don’t bend easily. If you push them, they might decide to try and do this without you. Now that Vicky here has proven it’s possible, the chances are even higher. Are you prepared for that?”

“The people you work with are also reasonable businessmen,” Tom answered calmly. “I’ve been communicating with your office for months now. Oliver Corey and I have developed a fine working relationship, and we’ve got a profitable thing going here. I don’t think either of you want to just throw that away over minor details like where this project happens, or who our test subjects are. There’s always room for negotiation, right?”

It seemed likely there was also a financial incentive at work here. Steve was probably getting some kind of kickback for being a liaison between the BOP and Archcrest. Inwardly, Vicky couldn’t help but smile. Tom really did use every tool at his disposal. His history in business and politics, his white-collar upbringing in the way that he spoke, his maleness. All of it was a part of his persona, and it was effective. Even Amir seemed impressed.

Fortunately, it didn’t look like they were at an impasse. Now that Tom had made it clear they would *not* give up control of this project under any circumstances, Steve seemed to adopt a more conciliatory attitude. It took them another hour of collective talks to figure out the details, but when Steve finally left, he looked at least somewhat satisfied with the results.

“This is bad,” Amir said after he was gone. “They may be willing to wait for now, but they want the codes, and eventually they will try to take them. Some kind of legal injunction maybe, or just straight-up theft.”

“They still need us for now,” Tom said thoughtfully. “And BPH is a licensed company. They can’t just steal from us without opening themselves up to massive backlash. Every private company currently doing business with the BOP would have a horse in *that* race.”

“Now that I’m not a prisoner anymore, I’ve got some extra time. I can build codes from memory. I’ll delete all the files on the codes just to be safe, and I’ll build extra safeguards into the server down in the archive room. If they want our data, they’ll have to risk destroying it,” Vicky added on bitterly, and then paused. “I wonder why they want the code schematics so bad, though. There’s nothing ingenious about it alone. It’s where it’s implanted that really matters.”

“I wondered that myself,” Tom mused. “They probably assume it’s some new revolutionary technology that you came up with, and it’s the implant itself that makes the decisions of when and how to stop any behavior that’s ‘wrong’. The BT102 wasn’t that long ago, and as much trouble as it caused them, Oliver did say he was impressed by its design. Maybe they think you laid another golden egg.”

Vicky snorted. “So they’re willing to ignore me or override my decisions because I’m a woman, but they still think I invented some kind of artificial intelligence despite that? Figures.” She paused for a moment. “Amir, could you give us a minute? I need to talk to Tom for a minute.”

Amir gave them both a graceful nod and left the room. Down the hall, Vicky could make out his friend and former assistant Chen, who beckoned at him and they headed towards the operating room.

Vicky turned to Tom. “I need to apologize to you,” she said immediately. “When you first cut me off, and started speaking on behalf of me, I took it personally.”

He raised a hand to stop her, but at least it wasn't like before. “I never would have done that without your permission, though. I hope you know that. I just didn’t have time to warn you. Steve showed up without warning, and insisted on seeing you right away. That’s probably part of his negotiating strategy—trying to keep us on the defensive.”

Tom did sound apologetic, but not panicky. At least he recognized he’d overstepped some boundaries.

“I know,” Vicky said reassuringly. “That’s why I’m not upset or anything. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. Actually, I’m proud of you for taking the risk and protecting our work regardless of how it might make you look.”

Tom quirked a smile. “People keep saying that to me. I’m not really sure what to do about it.” He opened the interview room door and waited until she was through before following. “Your room is waiting for you. Actually I’m set up down the hall next to Amir now. I’ll tell you about it on the way. Turns out Max is actually a grandfather.”

"How's it going in there?" Amir's voice filtered down into the server room.

It had been a few days since her incarceration, but Vicky was still glad to be back at work. She wasn't quite done working on the server, so she answered without scooting herself out to look up at Amir. "So far so good. I don't know much about encryption, but I can at least rig the server with one of those EM coils. If someone tries to download any of our information without shutting this off first, it all gets erased."

Amir's head hung down next to her, his hair balancing oddly sideways. "Can't they hack the server remotely once you turn it on?"

"Not anymore. I shut off remote access and removed the wireless connections from the machines themselves. It's like my code now: it can't send or receive information wirelessly."

"That's a relief. What about the specs for the code itself?"

"All erased. I can build more as needed, but as far as our oh-so-benevolent government overlords are concerned, my masterful ingenious world-changing invention exists now only in my own memory. I'm like the Eli Whitney of behavior modification."

Amir frowned, as he helped her up to her feet. "The cotton gin guy?"

"That's right. He didn't want his plans stolen, so he memorized and then destroyed them." Abruptly Vicky swayed a bit, and had to put a hand on the table to stay steady. "Whoa."

"Are you all right? Is it the code?"

"No, I remember what *that* headache feels like. This is just from me standing up too quickly. I'll be fine."

She turned on the servers to test if everything was all right, and started running a diagnostic program. Computer science wasn't her forte in any way, but she could at least upgrade the computers mechanically. "Any news on our new candidates for the code?"

Amir nodded. "One of them got here this morning. The other two are expected tomorrow. Dr. Shalmers will give them all a psych eval when they're here. Then we start brain scans and if everything checks out, pre-op procedures."

The diagnostic showed no problems, so Vicky shut it down and left the archives. On Amir's suggestion, they headed up to the kitchen to get a late meal. "Are we sure they're all volunteers? I doubt any of them is as crazy as I am."

"As sure as we can be. They're all lifers with violent histories, but each of their parole reviews indicated they've moved away from that. The last altercation any of them had was over two years ago, and it was minor. It looks like they're just trying to keep their heads down and not get in trouble anymore."

"If they're lifers, why did they agree to this? You think Perry offered them money to help test it?"

Amir flipped over a pair of chairs and set them at the table. The cleaning crew had been through here today, and lifted them up so they could vacuum. "I suppose it's possible. It's probably more of a plea bargain situation, though. From their files, it looks like their families have some trouble with the law as well. Oh, happy belated birthday, by the way."

Vicky smiled. "You remembered."

It had happened while she was still locked up with the other women, who had now all been told the truth. Vicky had then offered them the chance to join the study and get brain scans. Most had declined, and been shipped off to other prisons, but some were still considering it, including LaShanda.

Birthdays had always been a family affair in the Brandt household. Since she hadn't lived up in Minnesota for a long time, the more recent version usually involved a phone or video chat with her father. This year had been the exception. They'd talked for a while before she'd been 'locked up', but her birthday had passed unremarked.

By her, anyway. It seemed Amir was taking it more seriously. From one of the upper cabinets, he brought out a gift and placed it on the table. "I knew what to get, but Tom was the one who had it sent here. He's got connections that made it possible. He'd be here too, it's just he had to fly up to DC to meet with Oliver Corey to finalize details."

"I get it," Vicky said, picking up the box curiously. It was small but heavy. "He never really cared about birthdays as much as I do. Neither of you do, really."

On Amir's urging, she unwrapped and opened it. Inside was a clear crystal, square in shape but wider than her hand. Grinning, Vicky lifted it up and looked at the ceiling light through it. The light split in two, with shadings of red and orange between them. "This is great! Calcite, right?"

Amir nodded. "It's called Iceland spar. It was used by the Vikings to help them navigate back in the day. Given that you're setting the course for our proverbial ship, and you love geology, it seemed fitting."

Vicky moved the crystal to look at him, and suddenly there were two Amir faces, partially superimposed on each other. "Iceland, huh? No wonder you needed Tom's help to get it. Thank you so much. This will be a big addition to my collection!"

Amir smiled, his face coloring just a little, and opened the fridge. "There's a small cake, too, but it's not really complete anymore. I think one of the guards may have taken a slice or two. Or Max's grandson. His mom showed him around about a day ago.

"It's perfect," Vicky said, and meant it. A moment of silence passed between them, and Vicky knew that it was time.

"Amir, there's been something I've been thinking about for a long while now. It sort of ties into my code. I suppose I could use it to test the code."

Amir's eyebrows raised slightly. "We've put you through hundreds of minor tests by now. Did we miss something?"

Not giving herself any time to hesitate, Vicky moved close and kissed him. They were both standing, and he took half a step back, but she could tell it was because of balance and not reluctance or confusion.

It went on for a few seconds, before she stopped and pulled back a bit. With a breath of relief, she looked him in the eyes. "I had to do that. And I think I had to wait until I had a code. If it was wrong, in any way, the code would have stopped me. It didn't." She paused. "I know you don't usually take the initiative. You don't need to say or do anything about this. If it makes it easier I'll just head out right now, and go get some sleep. I just wanted you to know. That's all."

She started to move away, but he took her hand before she got too far. "I knew. Before, I mean. I've… wondered about it for a long time now." He took a deep breath. "I'm glad your code didn't stop you. And you're right: it's something that definitely needed testing. Physical and emotional relationships are an important part of being rehabilitated from prison life. The trouble is… if I had a code, it would have stopped *me*."

"Oh." Realization came over Vicky like cold water running down her spine. "Oh! Is there—someone else?" Visions of Amir's former classmates, friends from med school, even the other inmates she'd just left, flashed through her head one after another.

"No! Not in the way that you think, anyway," he said quickly. "A code would have stopped me… because I'm engaged."

Those last three words didn't quite get through at first. Of all the platitudes and rationalizations that he might have come up with to try and make her feel better, that hadn't been one of them. "You're what now?"

She realized suddenly she was sitting down on the table, with the Iceland spar next to her, as if mocking her with its presence.

He sighed. "Her name is Ruth Eigner. She lives over in Tel Aviv. Her parents and mine have been friends for a very long time. They made the arrangements a few years ago, and Ruth and I have been communicating ever since. The last time I saw her in person was when I was a kid, though. I doubt I could have picked her out of a crowd."

"And you agreed to this? I thought you hated your parents. Didn't they insist that you stay in Israel, and be a doctor there?"

"I don't hate them," he said helplessly. "I respect them. And I'm grateful for everything they've done for me. I had no reason to refuse. Despite what I said, I wasn't sure about anything until you… did that."

The pieces were finally coming together. Amir had been working with Devin Chen for weeks now, familiarizing him with the procedures. He would only do that if he knew he wouldn't be around to do them himself. Also, Amir had been willing to put his life on hold in the first place, in order to join her and Tom with this project. That hadn't been out of loyalty to them or a spirit of adventure, though. It was because he had known he had no future in this country, and wanted to help them before he left! Now that she thought about it, even his birthday gift felt more like a farewell!

"You said you've been communicating with her," Vicky went on after a moment. "Are you…" She couldn't quite bring her self to say 'in love'. "Are you going to marry her, as planned?"

Amir shook his head. "I can't anymore. A code would stop me," he joked. "I… was ambivalent about it before, but I decided there wasn't much to keep me here, now that the code has been proven at least partially successful. I told myself that I might someday come to love her, though it might not happen that way. She's remarkable: smart and driven like you, but a bit bossy too. Someone who could get along well with my parents. And I owe them a lot. Marrying her would have gone a long way towards proving myself to my father."

"You shouldn't have to-" Angrily, Vicky stopped herself. Just because she had a loving father who was perfectly fine with her moving far away didn't mean everyone did. Suddenly she was wondering if her father really was fine with it, or had just said that to spare her feelings.

Amir only smiled sadly. "I know. The wedding is scheduled for January, but I'll go back early. I have to cancel everything, and I have to tell them in person. They deserve that much. Ruth does too."

Feeling a mixture of relief and remorse, Vicky hung her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to throw your life into chaos like this."

He chuckled. "You already did that when you got us started on this path, remember? Sometimes chaos is exactly what people need. Besides, I'd rather walk a risky path with people I love, than a stable one with people I merely like. Or in my father's case, tolerate."

Suddenly he turned to her and his stance changed from joking and wistful to serious. "I don't know exactly how I feel about you. You're my best friend, and I value that deeply. I don't know if any relationship between us has a future. It may not—relationships are always risky in that way. But I do know I want to explore that possibility. Is that enough of an answer for you, for now anyway?"

Vicky nodded, again not quite sure what to say. As it turned out there wasn't any need for words. They just leaned on the table together, eating cake with tiny plastic forks. Vicky tried to relax there next to him, feelings of guilt over what she'd done to Ruth—a woman she'd never even met—mixing with relief that he wasn't actually leaving, mixing with joy that he might feel the same. It was a kaleidoscope, much like the colors filtering through that crystal on the table.

Chapter 11

The MEG data center was mostly empty when Tom arrived. Kyle nodded at him on his way out, and Amir was in the far corner looking at one of the computer displays.

His back was to the door and he was wearing headphones. As Tom approached, he could hear Amir humming under his breath. He tapped Amir on the shoulder.

“Hey,” he said, removing the headphones.

Tom handed him the files on the three new subjects. “Hey. Here are the files you wanted.” He looked around briefly, through the window into the MEG exercise yard. There were a bunch of inmates out there still wearing the nightmarish-looking headgear, but some hadn’t been fitted for one yet, or were taking a break from them. “Are your new guys out there right now?”

Amir shook his head. “They’re with Dr. Shalmers getting their brains picked for psych data. He says it’ll take a few days. I think he’s still sore he didn’t get a chance to shrink Vicky’s head before she got the code.”

“I still don’t get why all those interviews are necessary,” Tom said offhandedly. “I mean Vicky never went through anything like that, and she’s doing fine. At least from what I can tell.”

“You know how I feel about psychiatrists personally, but I’m glad he’s doing them,” Amir said thoughtfully. “Vicky’s procedure was practically an emergency. We only did it because it was either that or get shut down completely. Actually, I think we got very lucky with her. For all we knew, the code might have caused serious psychological problems. With these new folks we have more time, and can afford to be more careful.”

He leaned back from the desk for a moment. “I mean think about it. Every person’s mind works a little bit differently. For Vicky, her sense of right and wrong has been driving her for a long time now, so having that sense be suddenly enforced wasn’t that much of a change. Her conscious idea of what was the right thing to do already matched her subconscious version pretty closely. But what if these men have never really thought about what they’re doing or why? If their conscious understanding of right and wrong is undeveloped, or worse, warped by upbringing or trauma, having a code could be a nightmare for them. It might be constantly going off on them, for reasons they couldn’t understand!”

That was a troubling thought. Tom watched the exercise yard in silence for a few moments, as Amir went back to studying the files. Belatedly, he realized Amir had started humming again. His headphones were still resting on the table.

“Would you cut that out?”

Amir looked at him in confusion, and Tom sighed. “The humming.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

After a few seconds, Tom couldn’t help himself. “And wipe that grin off your face, would you? You’re not the first person to fall in love, you know.”

At that, Amir paused, and his eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Vicky, genius. It’s obvious to anyone who knows you. Hell, even Max commented on it.” Tom did little to hide the light-hearted scorn in his voice.

“Well, I suppose it would be naïve to think it would stay secret,” Amir admitted. "I don't want to oversell it. I don’t know if it’s love, but I am happy. We both are.”

Tom scoffed. His own romantic endeavors had never been very successful. "Who really knows what love is, anyway? I’m happy for you. Just try to keep from getting distracted by it, ok?” He tapped on the computer screen. “What you’re doing is kind of important. Oh, Vicky said you’re flying back to Israel tomorrow. Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, I’ve just got some family things to take care of back home,” Amir said in a more somber tone. “It should only take a week or so. It’s a pity that I’ll miss the surgeries, but the new surgeons coming in will have my notes, and Devin can advise them. They’ll do fine.”

“No, they won’t,” Tom said firmly. “We’re delaying the surgeries until you’re back. I’m sure they’re all competent, but you’re the only person who’s actually *done* this procedure so far. I can’t think of anyone more qualified.”

Amir looked a little embarrassed at that, but nodded after a moment. “Won’t Steven Perry and Oliver Corey have something to say about that? I mean, do you have the authority to just delay the procedures like that?”

“Not officially, but then none of this is really official,” Tom said confidently. “They know that you’re our best chance at duplicating your earlier success, so I’m sure they’ll agree. Besides, I wasn’t planning on telling them about your trip until after you’d left.”

Amir chuckled.

Peripherally, Tom was aware of someone else approaching them from the far door. It was Dr. Shalmer. “Hey, Doc. How go the interviews?”

“Straightforward enough,” the heavyset, bearded man put in. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Is Miss Brandt around here somewhere?”

“No, she’s over in the ‘prison’ wing, talking to some of the inmates from her previous experiment. Why?”

“Well, it’s nothing concrete yet, but I’m getting some unexpected variations in the answers from my three interviewees. I might need more time than I originally estimated before declaring them fit for the procedure. I was hoping to talk to Miss Brandt as well, to try and get a baseline comparison.”

Tom looked over at Amir with amusement. “Looks like you’re in luck, Doc. We just decided to delay for a few days. Looks like you’ll get that extra time, and you won’t even need to beg for it.”

Shalmers didn’t look amused.

“Just out of curiosity,” Amir put in, possibly trying to lighten the mood. “What if you need more time than that? What if the day comes and one or more of your patients aren’t fit?”

“Then I won’t sign off on the procedure,” Shalmers said bluntly. “The Bureau of Prisons can proceed without my approval, but they’ll get sued back into the stone age if they try. I won’t be pressured or rushed in my analysis. Unlike some people who call themselves professionals.”

Wow, this guy was a man after Amir’s own heart, Tom reflected for a moment. He was about to say as much, before realizing Shalmers had been looking right at Amir when he’d said that last part. His expression wasn’t one of idle chatter or disinterest. There was hostility there, and it was directed at Amir.

To his credit, Amir kept a straight face. “If you have something to say to me, say it.”

“All right. You’re a disgrace to the medical profession. You performed an experimental medical procedure on a vulnerable, desperate patient, without any thought of the legal or ethical consequences. You’re lucky Miss Brandt didn’t end up brain dead, or tortured by the implant.”

He took a moment, apparently collecting his thoughts. “I didn’t know about this procedure before Mr. Penderton hired me, but if I had, I would have wanted to be here all the more. Just to make sure you wouldn’t do something that reckless a second time. Not without a proper assessment done first. As far as I’m concerned you may be more of a threat to those inmates than they are to each other!”

Both Amir and Tom were stunned by the outburst. Tom had interviewed Shalmers personally, and had no idea about any of this. It said good things about him that ethics were his driving principle. He might have even made a good candidate for a code himself, if he’d been in prison. “Do you want me to take this?” He asked after a bit.

Amir shook his head. “Nah, I got it.” He smiled over at Shalmers briefly. “I admire your dedication to your patients, Doctor. Just as I am dedicated to Vicky. I’ve known her a long time, and this project is worth more to her than her life or her sanity. She proved that when she insisted on being the first. I'm quite certain that if I had refused, she would have found someone else to do it. Some back-alley former medical professional who neither knew her nor cared about her. Even if she did get the same degree of skill from whoever did it, she would have had to recover alone.”

That did sound right. If Amir had said no, Tom was sure that Vicky wouldn’t have just given up. She would have gone looking elsewhere. Her guilt over the BT102 and her determination to make it right would have demanded it.

Amir sighed. “If someone insists on diving off a cliff into dangerous waters, a professional can stand back and watch it happen, clucking his tongue at how unwise it is. If a friend is doing the diving, their friends will jump alongside them. And hopefully keep them from drowning at the bottom.”

“Thank you for your professional opinion, Doctor Shalmers,” Tom put in quickly, once he was reasonably sure Amir was done. He gently herded the man back towards the door. “It’s duly noted. I trust that your distaste for our resident neurosurgeon won’t affect your assessment of the three new candidates in any way.”

“You can count on it,” Shalmers said stiffly, giving one last look in Amir’s direction before leaving.

Tom sighed. He didn’t disagree with Shalmers entirely. The man’s attitude was valuable. It just felt like Tom was doing a juggling act right now, and Shalmers had just thrown his ego into the loop as one more thing to keep in the air.

Late during the next day, Tom was helping Vicky fit one of the newly cast MEGs onto one of her inmate friends, when she got a call. Her expression brightened noticeably upon looking at the phone, and Tom smiled sideways.

"Hey, Amir," she answered, but her eyebrows furrowed right away. She paused and looked up at Tom. "Yeah, he's here."

After a moment, she put the phone down and hit the speaker. Immediately a cacophony of noise erupted from it: a mixture of sirens and voices in the background. "Can you hear me?" Amir's voice added in.

"Yeah, we can," Tom responded immediately. "Are you all right? Where are you?"

"I'm on the tarmac in an airport in Tel Aviv. And I'm fine, mostly. There was a problem with the landing gear just after we touched down here. The wheels on the left side failed, and the plane kinda flopped down on its side. We had to do a belly landing. It mangled our left wing and shook us all up a bit."

"My God," Vicky said breathlessly. "Is everyone ok?"

"No one was killed as far as I've heard, but a bunch of us smacked our heads on the side of the plane when it happened. I've got a very colorful bruise forming already. Can't wait to explain that to my parents, too."

"Are you sure you're fine?" Tom asked anxiously. He'd never been in a plane crash, thankfully, but the idea scared him every time he got up there. Still, there were far worse times to crash than just after touchdown.

"I will be," the tiny voice reassured them. "I just wanted to let you know what had happened before you saw it on the news. Listen, I gotta go. They're taking us all inside now." The sirens got a little louder on his end.

"Be safe," Vicky said quickly, just before the line went dead.

Tom squeezed her shoulder comfortingly for a second. "Statistically, it's still the safest way to travel," he reminded her.

"Yeah, except when it isn't," she retorted.

It wasn't until much later in the evening that the most important news update came in. Vicky was asleep by then, but Tom was in his improvised office doing paperwork.

"It has now been confirmed that the malfunction onboard flight BC1447 has left at least one passenger dead, from injuries sustained when the landing gear collapsed," Tom listened to it idly. "The passenger died from a cerebral hemorrhage. He has been identified as Amir Hoberman, son of wealthy industrialist Tobias Hoberman."

Chapter 12

"No, no, no! You're not listening to me," Tom said severely into the phone, feeling his raw emotions bleed into his voice. "I don't care what it does to your timetable; we are leaving tomorrow, and that's that!"

The voice on the other end, some minor functionary working for the BOP, continued droning as if he hadn't heard, and Tom just sat there, stupefied. He felt the urge to laugh at the sheer pointlessness of it all!

"Listen," he finally went on flatly. "Your superiors can choose to go ahead without us if they want, but they'll be doing without our neural data, our experience, or," he choked up briefly, "or our best surgeon. They'll be flailing around in the dark. Not to mention Dr. Shalmers will never let them hear the end of it legally. They either give us a few days to say goodbye to our friend, or they go it alone from here on out!" He ended the call viciously, resisting the urge to smack his phone onto the table.

Almost unwillingly, he glanced through the window into the MEG testing area. Vicky was out there, working with two of the new inmates.

No matter how raw he was feeling inside, for her it must be a thousand times worse! Yet somehow she had kept her work going steady. Anyone who knew her could see the sadness in her eyes, but she still gave just as much attention to her work, and to the inmates around her.

Maybe she was using it as a distraction, or it was her way of honoring Amir. Maybe it was even her code keeping her from expressing the grief and anger she had to be feeling in destructive ways, so she only had the constructive things she'd been doing so far.

Tom sighed and looked back at the travel itinerary. They would be landing in Israel tomorrow, and have a few days to sit shiva with Amir's family. Amir was in the ground already of course; his parents were pretty traditional and it was Jewish custom to bury the deceased within a day of death. Tom was still somewhat amazed that he and Vicky had been invited at all. Apparently despite their estrangement, Amir had kept his parents informed on what he was doing. Though the invitation had been signed only by his mother.

Irritably, Tom scratched at his chin. According to Orthodox Jewish beliefs, the friends and family of the deceased weren't allowed to shave for a full month. They were also supposed to show up without jewelry or leather shoes, so Vicky was leaving her already limited earring collection here.

He sighed. It was going to be a long week.

Ordinarily shiva was supposed to be held at Amir's house, but as he didn't have one in Tel Aviv, they went to his parents' place instead. Amir didn't talk much—or *hadn't* talked much—about his childhood home, but Vicky had picked up clues about how wealthy his family was.

It was clear upon arrival just how much she'd underestimated those clues. The Hoberman estate was massive and opulent, complete with an immaculately trimmed lawn, topiary trees throughout the yard, and a stereotypical gated wall on the outside. There was even private security in place. Through the dull ache inside, Vicky couldn't help but be impressed.

It was packed, too. When they were escorted inside, Vicky could see the entire floor was flooded with people of varying heights. All the men were wearing yarmulkes, and the hairstyles were definitely orthodox in fashion. Kids were present too, but very reserved. The background noise was subdued despite the large numbers.

Vicky was actually wearing a wig. Her real hair was growing out, but it certainly wasn't long enough to cover up the code yet. To avoid awkward questions, she had decided to get something at least reasonably realistic-looking before leaving Alabama. For a moment she'd been afraid the code would keep her from putting it on, but apparently her subconscious didn't view wigs as something 'wrong.' It was actually strange to *not* get curious looks from people around her for once. Well, other than the looks they got just for being obvious outsiders.

Her group was larger than expected, too. Devin Chen had asked to come along as well, to pay his respects. It seemed he'd been a closer friend to Amir than she had known, which was comforting actually. Vicky knew they'd gone to med school together, but apparently they'd collaborated on many papers and training courses. Devin certainly looked as broken up as she felt.

Amir's mother Dina spotted them immediately and gently pushed her way through the crowd. Vicky recognized her from a picture Amir had shown her once. It seemed Dina had aged quite gracefully since then.

"Welcome," she said steadily, but Vicky could see that the skin under her eyes was still swollen. She'd been crying recently. "I know Amir would be glad to see you all here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hoberman," Tom said softly, after they had all been introduced. "I hope so too. I must say, we were surprised to get your invitation. I got the impression that we weren't that welcome in… this part of his life."

Dina shook her head. "We may have disagreed with his decision to stay, but Amir kept in touch with us every week. He kept us informed of what he was doing, and he spoke highly of you. All three of you," she clarified, looking at Chen. "He seemed to think that you would make a good successor to his work, Devin. Whatever that would be—he said he couldn't explain it."

Devin looked away for a moment. "I hope so, ma'am," he put in, his voice cracking a bit. "I'll try to be."

Dina gestured to her left, and a tall, quite beautiful woman in her thirties joined them. "This is Ruth. She and Amir were childhood friends. She's been helping me remember some of the best times we had back in those days."

Vicky felt like she'd been kicked by a horse. Of course none of them knew about Amir's decision—he hadn't had the chance to tell them. Ruth still saw herself as as Amir's fiancée, and practically a daughter to his parents! There was no reason to tell them now, though. All it would do is cut them up even more. Still, it was a crappy burden to carry, especially here.

Ruth spoke with them softly for a few moments, before an older man Vicky also recognized came over. Tobias Hoberman shook their hands solemnly. "Thank you for coming to pay your respects," he said stiffly. Dina looked up at him sharply, and Vicky started to think that maybe they weren't both happy to see Amir's American friends here.

"We're so sorry for your loss, Mr. Hoberman," Tom said respectfully. "Amir meant a great deal to us, and I'm glad to see so many people here felt the same way. He would be happy to see us all together remembering his life so fondly."

"Would he, now?" Tobias asked coldly. "I think he would be distressed at seeing his family sitting shiva with his so-called friends. As I am."

"Tobias," his wife said warningly, but he ignored her.

"I was willing to let him go to school in America, as long as he *came home* afterwards!" He said heatedly, but thankfully still in a low tone. "It was you people who convinced him to stay out there; to forsake his family. If you hadn't manipulated him into staying, he would have come home years ago! He was my only son! If it weren't for you, he would still be-" he broke off, clearly upset, and looked away.

Now they were drawing attention from the others. "Ruth, would you take him out to the balcony, please?" Dina requested quietly. "I'll be right out."

Ruth nodded and drew the poor man, nearly in tears, out of the room. Vicky felt, if possible, even worse than before. Tobias was right. Amir's life would have been totally different if he'd come home right after med school. If she hadn't come to his door that rainy night, he might still be alive!

"Please excuse my husband," Dina said, clearly embarrassed. "He's taken this very hard, but that's no excuse for rudeness."

"Not at all," Vicky put in right away. "We're all hurting right now. I can't blame him for how he feels. I might have done the same in his place."

"If you want us to go, though-" Tom added, looking nervously around them.

"No," Dina said immediately. "No. Please, stay for the day at least. I want you to get to know some of the people Amir knew here. He would want that, I'm sure."

The ceremony, or rather just the day itself, proceeded more smoothly after that. Sitting shiva was a strange concept to Vicky, but she did her best to fit in, sharing memories of Amir from America with the others. The kids seemed especially interested, peppering the three of them with questions about Amir's life in college and after. Vicky let Tom and Devin handle the majority of them.

Tobias kept his distance from them, but he didn't leave. From time to time Vicky could see him across the room, giving her the stink-eye. Perhaps he knew how Amir had really felt, or it was just his previous dislike of them. It didn't matter either way. Amir was gone, and that was something they'd both have to get used to, she reflected bitterly.

She still couldn't believe it. Not really, deep inside. He'd been there for her for so long: a kind of support beam holding her life up. The part of the house that's essential, but barely noticed at all until it's gone.

Late in the day, Dina took them aside into some kind of anteroom. It might have been for exercise or public presentations before, but there were no chairs in there right now. "I'm glad the three of you are here," Dina said sincerely, "but it might be better if you don't come back after today. Tobias is a man of strong convictions, and he might do something regrettable if he sees you again."

"Yeah, we got that impression," Tom said wryly, and Vicky elbowed him.

"There's something else you needed to know, and it's somewhat awkward. It has to do with your work, whatever that is," Dina said hesitantly. "Are all three of you involved in it?"

Vicky nodded. "Devin only recently, but yes, it's all of us."

"Good." Dina hesitated. "Years ago, my husband and I set up a trust in Amir's name. It was his to use as soon as he got his MD. When he chose to stay overseas, we stipulated that the money could only be used to start his own practice. We wanted that to happen here of course, but as long as he was running his own practice, we were content." She paused. "Well, I had to convince Tobias to be content, but in the end we agreed with Amir."

"Now that he's… gone, the money has no purpose," she said sadly. "Legally it became ours again, but I don't want it. I'm sure Tobias doesn't either. I think that Amir would want you to have it. For your mysterious project, whatever that is."

Vicky glanced at Tom for a second. He looked just as concerned. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Dina?" She had insisted they call her that in like, hour two of sitting shiva. "I mean, your husband doesn't exactly like us. Won't he object?"

Dina shook her head. "He doesn't even want to think about Amir's trust, much less talk about it. If I make it go away I can take that off his mind, and honor my son at the same time. Besides," she added in a wry tone, "Tobias' family is wealthy, but not as much as mine. I was the one who contributed most of that fund in the first place."

That made sense. Just like Amir's engagement to Ruth, his parents' marriage had probably been arranged as well. It partly explained how massively wealthy they were now. Vicky looked at Tom and Devin for a few moments, before nodding along with them. "Thank you, Dina," she said gratefully, turning back. "We'll put it to good use. We certainly need all the help we can get right now."

Tom gave her an annoyed look, probably upset that she'd given away too much information, but he gave a slight smile. "Thank you, really. We didn't come here expecting anything like that," he added hastily.

Dina gave a small smile. "Should I send it to your company, then? BPH Corrections? That way you could use it equally as needed."

Overcome by… everything, Vicky moved forward and hugged her. Dina seemed startled at first, but then gripped her just as tightly. An orthodox, traditional Jewish mother being embraced by a farm-kid engineer from Minnesota. It did seem ridiculous, but Vicky didn't care. It seemed Amir's spirit of generosity and kindness was alive and well, here in this home.

Tom got the email while they were in the air back to the States. He was using his laptop and the plane's WiFi, so it came up immediately. "Whoa."

Vicky turned slightly to look at him. She was next to him in coach, and they'd already been in the air for a few hours, so she looked a bit uncomfortable. "What is it?"

"I just got an email from the bank we use for BPH. They want to confirm the transfer of funds from Dina to the company."

"Already? That's diligent of them," she said, apparently disinterested.

"Not really. They wanted confirmation because the amount is slightly… larger than a usual company transfer of funds."

"How much larger?"

Tom turned the laptop to face her. Sighing, she leaned down and read through it from the top. Then her eyes widened. "Holy crap!"

"Yeah, I know," Tom agreed, still feeling stunned. "I knew they were loaded, but this is something else entirely."

The in-flight movie continued in the background, but Vicky's attention was clearly all on him and this email now. "What… does this mean for us? For our project?" She put a hand on top of her head briefly, feeling through the wig to the edge of her code.

Tom smiled. She couldn't hit people, or lie to people unless she was sure they wouldn't believe it. She could swear though, he realized. For a moment he wondered what a code would allow *him* to do if he ever got one.

"I'm not sure," he admitted after a moment. "It opens up a lot of options, but we'll have to think carefully about which one to take, and when. We owe it to Amir, and to his mom, not to waste this chance they're giving us."

Chapter 13

Vicky had hoped for a few moments to catch her breath upon returning to Archcrest, but she didn't get them. Steven Perry was there in person, apparently champing at the bit to get the coding surgeries underway. He practically abducted Devin the moment they got through security, whisking him away to brief the surgeons.

Dr. Shalmers was there too, and he appropriated Tom right away. Finally, Max wanted to talk to her, in private. He led her upstairs, into the security office where all the camera feeds were displayed.

Vicky had been in here a few times, but not for very long. Because only a fraction of Archcrest was in use, there were only thirty-four cameras installed and running. From what she could see, they were displaying ordinary activity from an ordinary day.

Until Max changed them, that was. He brought up a new set of feeds, covering the operating room, the recovery area outside of it, the hallway leading to her and… Amir's makeshift rooms, and the door outside the archive room.

"I thought that none of these cameras were installed yet," she said casually, as Max singled out one of the cameras and ran the footage back.

"Well, I'm a little more cynical, and I assumed they would be. The Coleman-Saito technicians were the ones who set up the cameras in the first place. They told you it was just thirty-four, but they've been watching these too, secretly. Like I said early on, I've worked for companies like CS before. Secretly recording you and your friends is the very least of what they can do." He paused the camera briefly. "And I was right."

That was a little disconcerting. Vicky remembered seeing the hemispherical black orbs on the ceiling when they'd first been installed. There were a bunch more than were needed, naturally. The point of a camera system wasn't just to monitor sensitive areas, but also to discourage inmates from breaking the rules. Because they didn't know which black orbs had cameras and which didn't, a lot of them behaved as if they all did. Some ignored them entirely, though.

"How long have these other cameras been on?" Vicky tried to keep her voice steady.

"As long as you guys have been here," Max said sadly. "I found the hidden feeds on day two. I would have told you, but they just show hallways and doors. Besides, for all I knew, you were in on it," he added wryly.

Vicky gaped at him. "You thought-" She took a deep breath and tried to keep an even tone. "If you thought that, then why are you telling me now?"

"Because now I'm sure you aren't. Look," he gestured at the camera positioned outside the archive room.

The time stamp on the footage was from the night before, when she and the others had been on the first leg of their trans-Atlantic flight home. A person walked down the hallway but instead of passing by the door, turned and unlocked it. Vicky had seen him before: he was one of the technicians working for Coleman-Saito. She didn't know his name. He looked one way and the other before going in.

"I'm the only one who has a key to that door," Vicky said angrily.

Max shook his head. "He didn't pick the lock. My guess is that they copied all of your keys before giving them to you. He was only in there a few minutes," he fast-forwarded a bit to where the door opened again, "before locking the door and leaving."

"He was after the brain scans, I'm sure of it. There's nothing else in there of value. I was wondering why the CS people stopped pressuring me to give them the rest of the data. I guess they just decided to steal it." Vicky wished she could be more surprised at this, but between her own paranoid streak and Tom's long experience with corporate backstabbing, she was clearly developing a cynical outlook on life. "Come on. Let's get down there."

Max switched the cameras back to their normal mode and followed her out. He seemed hesitant on their way to the archive room, but when they got there, he finally spoke up. "I don't know you that well, ma'am, but shouldn't you be more upset about this? They stole months of research from you and Mr. Penderton. And from Dr. Hoberman," he added sadly.

"I told you, call them Tom and Amir. And who was that technician, anyway?" Vicky asked, ignoring his question for the moment. "I've seen him around a few times, but we never spoke."

"His name is Richard Ellis. He's worked for CS for almost five years, as a second shift electronics guy. There was nothing in his personnel file that stood out, at all. No criminal record either. That's normal for people trained in corporate espionage. It's possible he's not even really a CS employee. He could be working for one of their competitors. They'd want those brain scans just as badly."

"Well, whoever he works for, he didn't succeed," Vicky said with some relief, after examining the computer tower underneath the desk. "I put in a failsafe a while back. If anyone turns this thing on but me, that EM coil over there was supposed to wipe the hard drive completely. It looks like it did its job perfectly."

"Oh," Max said quietly. "That's a bit of a letdown."

Vicky felt a stab of fear. Was Max working with this Ellis person? "Why do you say that?" She asked cautiously.

"Because I stole it back from him," he said casually, and pulled a compact hard drive out of one of his pockets. "I got one of the empty drives from storage, waited until Ellis was away from his locker, and then switched the empty with the one he stole." He looked at the drive in his hand ruefully. "I guess this one's empty now, too. Sorry about that."

Vicky chuckled as she took back the hard drive. "So Coleman-Saito, or whoever this guy works for, stole from me, and then you stole from him, but I didn't trust them in the first place, so both of you stole something worthless? Talk about self-defeating espionage! Still, why are you telling me this in the first place? And why did you take the risk at all? CS may not sign your checks, but they can give you a bad reference. They can make sure you never work in corporate security again!"

Max's expression darkened. "From what I've seen, that's no great loss. Besides, you and yours took my daughter in when she had no place to go. She and my grandson are doing much better now, thanks to Mr. Penderton, Dr. Hoberman, and you. It was, uh, Amir, who said I was family. Even though he's gone, I won't forget that."

Amir just kept on giving to them, didn't he? Vicky resisted the urge to wipe her eyes, and blinked instead. "Well, you may not have stopped a theft, but you did identify the person who tried to steal from us. That's valuable on its own." She looked around them for a bit. "Are you sure there are no hidden cameras inside this room?"

"As sure as I can be, really. If there were, they might not have had to send anyone in here to steal from you in the first place."

That was a good point. Feeling a little less apprehensive, Vicky nodded. "All right. I'm calling Tom down here. Could you stick around while I tell him what happened? I want you here with us, to help us decide what to do next."

At first, Tom wondered why he was in the archive room with Devin, Vicky, and strangely, Max as well. Then Vicky explained about the attempted theft of their data, and he felt a sense of growing disgust. Not just with Coleman-Saito's leadership for trying this stunt, but with himself as well.

If this had happened a year ago, or even a few months ago, Tom would have called it normal. Of course businesses try to cheat and spy on each other. That's how business works: you do whatever you can to advance your bottom line. If the law gets in the way, you either ignore it, cheat it, or pay someone to change it.

But he'd been out of that life for some time now. He'd been living with people who had no money to protect, no donors to appease, no public persona to carefully and fraudulently cultivate. Aside from the BOP and the CS people, neither of whom he considered himself to be a part of, the only people here were… actual people.

How had he ever thought of himself as happy being a part of that old life? Thank God for Vicky. If she hadn't agreed to help him, Tom was sure he would have slid back into old habits of greed and power brokering. Instead of being aware of all these problems, he would be a part of them.

"We've got bigger problems than Coleman-Saito, though," he put in after Vicky was done. "According to Dr. Shalmers, those three potential surgery candidates aren't actually inmates."

He pulled out the paperwork Shalmers had given him and laid it out next to the computer screen. "This is all Greek to me, but maybe you can make some sense of it. The doc says that all three of them have psychological traits associated with military training and service. A lot of it."

Devin frowned. "I looked over their files. One of them signed up for the army, but he was disqualified. There's no mention of any actual service for any of them."

"I get the feeling those files are about as truthful as Coleman-Saito's mission statement," Max said darkly. "But why would the BOP lie to you about these guys? It would be a lot easier to find inmates that actually fit the requirements you gave them, right? They have plenty to choose from, that's for sure."

"It's probably not the whole BOP," Tom put in. "Steven Perry is their liaison to us, and he answers to Oliver Corey up in DC. This could just be Perry himself. Either way it doesn't matter much. Right now you're the only successful case," he nodded at Vicky, "and they can't examine you without risking our goodwill. Those three candidates are military, probably under orders to cooperate. If we go ahead with the surgeries, then Perry or whoever else he's working with in the armed forces will use their new coded people to figure out how to create and install codes themselves."

A silence pervaded the room for a moment.

"Well, we're not gonna let that happen," Vicky said grimly. "You said on the plane that we have more options now, thanks to Amir and Dina. Do we have to move again, and abandon Archcrest?"

Tom thought about it. Just like with her decision to go ahead with the surgery, he had a sinking feeling they didn't have any option now but the nuclear one. "It's bigger than just moving now. We can't trust Coleman-Saito or the BOP. That means no corporate help, and no more inmate volunteers to study. That means… we have to go public. And we have to do it from somewhere outside the United States. It's the same as the situation with the BT102, only bigger this time. The only way we can maintain control over this project is to do it outside American jurisdiction. We just need to decide when to leave, and where to go."

He pondered several options, none of which seemed very attractive, and Vicky stood up. She went over to the other side of the table where Devin and Max were standing. "I trust Tom's instincts about this. That means we're both about to uproot our lives entirely. That's fine for us—it wouldn't be for the first time—but I can't ask you to do the same. I don't know much about you, Devin, other than what Amir told me. But Max-"

"As long as Angie and Joey are cared for, I'm with you," Max promised before she could finish. "Wherever you go, you'll need some kind of security. I can't make any promises about the guards who work for me, but if they stay behind, I can look into hiring others." He paused. "I hope we don't go to Mexico, though. My Spanish is awful. Even ordering Mexican food is a chore."

Vicky smiled. "And you, Devin? If you want to do this, we'd be glad to have you. Oddly, we can pay well for once in our lives, and we could certainly use your skills. If not I'll miss you, but I understand."

Devin was still for a long time. Idly, Tom tried to calculate his chances of sticking with them. For Tom, joining Vicky had been desperation and redemption. For Amir it had been love, whether he'd known it at the time or not. For Max, it was apparently grateful loyalty.

"A lot of those prisoners out there have been talking," Max put in. "Word about your code is getting around. I've been getting questions about why you did it, and what you get out of it. What their lives might be like if they didn't have to worry about right and wrong anymore. That's how it works, right?"

Vicky glanced over at Tom, and then nodded. "Mostly. It'll probably be a little different for each person."

Max shrugged. "Either way, they like you. They like how they've been treated here. How this place has been about hope and training and the future, instead of just being shut in a box until they die of boredom. Most of them will be done with their sentence in a year or less; or parole even before that. I'd bet a bunch of them would want to join you wherever you go. Unless it's on the other side of the world or something. Within reason, you know."

Vicky looked surprised at that. "Well, I don't suppose it'd have to be too far away. Canada, maybe. I'm not sure."

"I'll do it," Devin said abruptly. He looked up at them, his face serious and set. "I still don't know what that thing in your head means for the future, Vicky, but I get the feeling it's gonna be big. My mom would say I'm crazy for even thinking this, but I want to be a part of whatever's gonna come."

He took a deep breath. "If the DOP figures out how you and Amir did it, there's no telling what they'll do. Maybe they'll use another area of the brain—one that's easier to predict and control. Just like that," he snapped his fingers, "self-control becomes mind control! Besides, if you really want to keep this procedure and implant from being duplicated by them, you'll need to give me one of those codes. If I survive the surgery, then I can do the same for other people. Only coded people will be able to code people, and then only if they volunteer for it. That way we can keep it in house. Metaphorically speaking, anyway," he looked around. "I'm actually going to miss this place."

"Hold up there," Tom said carefully. "Joining us is great—especially for us—but getting a code is a much bigger decision. You know about the physical risks better than any of us, but I already went through this with Vicky. There's a mental component to this that you may not be able to handle. I still think we got lucky with her," he said to Vicky apologetically, and she nodded back understandingly.

"I didn't make this decision on a whim," Devin went on. "And it's not just to help you with your project, either. It's personal for me. Ever since Amir explained the procedure and how Vicky's implant works, I've been curious about it myself. For the first time in history, we have a means of regulating not just physiology, but actual behavior and decision-making! I want to get in on the ground floor of that." He winced. "Sorry, not in a corporate sense. That's a bad topic right now. I mean in an historic sense."

"We get it," Vicky assured him. "What about Dr. Shalmers, though? I never did get his first name," she added thoughtfully, looking at Tom.

"Oh, he'll hit the roof. He already went ballistic at Amir for doing your procedure. There's no way he'll sign off on this. As frustrating as it is to admit, we do need a shrink's evaluation. None of us is trained for that, and we can't expect another miracle."

"I still have my psych eval results from med school," Devin offered. "I could ask him to evaluate me just like he did those three fake prisoners. It would be like updating a resume."

Tom thought about it. There was always the chance that Shalmers would tip off the BOP, and then their move would be a lot more complicated. Shalmers didn't like the BOP very much though, especially after they had faked prison histories for three career soldiers. It was a chance worth taking. He nodded to Vicky.

"All right then," she said solemnly. "We're agreed. Tom and I will find someplace new to set up shop, and then we'll quietly make arrangements to move. We'll have to leave a lot of our equipment behind," she looked genuinely distressed at that, "but we don't have much choice. Max, could you talk to those inmates and try to get a feel for how many would volunteer to get a code, once their sentences are up? It would help us predict how many procedures we'll need to do in the next year or so."

Max nodded. "Could you plan to bring two more along, just in case, though?" He added. "I don't want to leave Angie and Joey behind. I don't know if people will be looking for revenge on them for what we're doing here, but I don't want to risk it."

"Of course," Vicky responded. "Just don't tell them what's happening until we're about ready to leave. And if they want to stay, you have to let them. Free will and all that," she added wryly.

Looking a bit more serious, Max headed out of the room. Vicky turned to face Devin. "And you, Dr. Chen, just have to have your head shrunk. May God have mercy on your soul, right?"

Tom chuckled with the joke more by habit than out of humor. Despite the constant challenges in the way, the backstabbing by their so-called friends, and the gut-wrenching loss of Amir, they were still moving forward. Vicky's sense of purpose had been blunted, but it hadn't been broken. Tom might not have much faith in God right now, but he had plenty in her. That would be enough.

Chapter 14

The operating room had been expanded significantly since her last time in there, Vicky reflected. She stared through the glass window of the observation room, at the three parallel surgical tables, each occupied and in use right now.

Tom was to her left, looking grim as the doctors cut into three heads simultaneously. To his left, Steven Perry and a bunch of his cronies looked on. She had no idea how many of those people were in on Perry's little plan, but he certainly didn't look distressed at all. As far as he was concerned, things were working perfectly.

It hadn't been easy, conning the con man. The first big hurdle had been switching out the medical data without those surgeons noticing. Thankfully they hadn't had much chance to study their patients' charts very closely, being focused more on the procedure itself first. Instead of the three fake inmates Perry was expecting, the men on those tables were Tyrell and James, two of the real inmates Vicky had gotten to know over the past few months, and Devin himself.

Even now after they'd opened up his skull, Vicky was terrified the surgeons might recognize him. Still, Devin had been confident they wouldn't. "Surgeons see faces and brains differently," he'd reassured her and Tom. "Right now I'm just an assistant to them, and other than the tips I can give them on your surgery, I'm barely even noticed. My head is about the same size as one of their intended patients, so as long as I'm already out and face-down by the time they get in there, we're golden."

Vicky wished she could be as confident. To his credit though, things had gone smoothly so far.

"I was sorry to hear about Dr. Hoberman," Perry said gently, moving behind Tom to stand next to her.

"Thank you, Mr. Perry. It was a big shock to all of us," she responded truthfully. Would the code allow her to lie to someone who was lying to her? Vicky didn't want to test it just now.

"I'm glad we were able to proceed even without him, though. His achievement with the surgery, and yours with the code itself, was like catching lightning in a bottle. I'm confident we'll be able to duplicate your success, and revolutionize the prison industry."

Vicky had to work hard to keep a sour look off her face. She didn't know exactly what Perry had in mind for her codes, but it had little to do with helping prisoners. Either he planned to sell a version of her codes to the military for experimental use on soldiers, or he was going to offer it to other private prison companies. Or both, perhaps. All he could see right now was dollar signs.

"I was surprised you agreed to having all three surgeries done at the same time," she commented, again truthfully. "I would have thought you might object for safety reasons."

"That was my first thought, yes. It was Dr. Chen who convinced me otherwise. He felt that the surgeons might benefit from using each others' work as a guide. It would cut down on mistakes and give us a better chance of success."

Actually it made it much less likely the truth would come out early. If they did them one after another, the chances that one of the surgeons might recognize Devin, or wonder where he'd gone, would be much greater.

Vicky grimaced. Another part of their plan had been to put the three fake inmates in solitary for a few hours. Max was back there now, keeping an eye on them. She didn't like the idea of locking people up without cause, despite the fact that they'd been lying to everyone, but they could upset everything. Max had assured her they would be released as soon as Devin and the others were out of surgery.

The last hurdle had been completing the three new codes in time. Vicky had insisted on keeping them on her person right up until the start. She didn't want anyone but the doctors themselves to get a good look at them. Not that they were anything special, despite the minor modifications she'd made that differentiated those codes from hers. She just had to keep up the charade that she'd discovered something incredible, and was keeping it to herself for now.

She would be *so* glad when all this deception was over. It was exhausting keeping everything straight in her mind and in her actions! Fortunately, she and Tom had decided on a place last week. It was an island called Darien Cay in the Bahamas—named for some explorer who had found it centuries ago. It was only about a hundred and twenty miles off the coast of Florida. Tom had been in negotiations with the Bahamian government, and they'd allowed him to lease the island for a few years, for a fair sum actually. Maybe that was because the Cay was uninhabited and pretty small in square miles. Still, it fit the criteria. It was outside of American waters, but close enough to the States to be viable.

Tom had suggested one of the islands in the Philippines first, but Vicky had nixed that idea. It might be cheaper over there, but if they wanted to appeal to average citizens here, they couldn't ask them to fly halfway around the world just to see what being coded was like. Besides, she didn't want to be that far away from her father. Unbidden, thoughts of Amir and his father floated through her mind, and she felt like crying again.

She'd been there. She'd said goodbye, in a traditional way that would please him. Why was she still seeing his face without warning, and why did it seem to feel worse now than the very day he died??

Maybe it was the code. If it could stop her from taking actions, could it also stop her from ignoring her feelings? Vicky had documented as much as she could about when it went off and why. She'd lost count of the number of times it had 'reset' her, but at least she had a good idea of why it did so. Mostly. Setting her jaw, Vicky tried to focus on the surgeries. That would provide her a few hours of distraction at least.

When Steve and Oliver found out what they had done, all hell broke loose. Tom had weathered the storm stoically, hiding his amusement at their false outrage. Even now, a full week after the surgeries and all the fallout, he still found it funny.

"I never agreed that the surgeries would be on those three specifically," he'd reminded them gently. "The codes themselves are our property, and the facility was leased to BPH Corrections. You may have brought in the surgeons, but we paid them. Regardless, we are ending our partnership with the BOP effective immediately. The inmates will all have to be sent to other facilities, and Archcrest will be shut down." He had to resist adding, *but that's what you wanted in the end anyway, wasn't it?*

Truthfully, the BOP had another reason to cut ties with Tom and his friends. If the coded experiment expanded and became popular enough, it would cut into the profits of other private prison companies. Coded people had pretty much no chance of recidivism after all, and private prison companies only thrived if they could keep their prisons full.

Kenshi Saito had been just as enraged as Steve and Oliver, but a lot more controlled about it. Unlike the others he didn't bluster and threaten, but Tom could tell he wouldn't forget about it either. His co-founder Dan Coleman apparently wasn't involved in this dispute, but Saito came down to Archcrest personally to try and talk Tom out of the split.

That itself had been an interesting experience. Saito was very traditionally Japanese, complete with honor code and strict personal pride. He might have made a good samurai back in the day. He knew all about Darien Cay, and Tom's arrangement with the Bahamian government. Clearly he had his own private investigators keeping an eye on them. A year ago Tom might have found that flattering, but now he just saw it as pathetically self-interested. In the end Tom offered him a parting gift. The designs for their MEG modifications so they could conduct their own brain scans, and a portion of the data they'd gathered so far.

Data which they still had, miraculously. In one of her more brilliant moves, Vicky had backed up the whole thing and brought a copy with her to Israel. When the CS rat had snuck into the archives, he'd wiped out the whole server, but because of Vicky they'd only lost about a week's worth of scans. Now that CS and the BOP were off their backs, it was finally time to go public.

So here they were, in a TV station in Miami, waiting for Vicky to go out for an on-air interview. It was just the two of them today. A construction company had already been hired and dispatched by boat to Darien Cay. They would get some infrastructure in place over the next few weeks, and then come back to the States. Most of the inmate test subjects were still at Archcrest. James, Tyrell and Devin were still recuperating, but seemed to be doing well. Devin had already started testing the limits of his code, just like Vicky had done.

*You'd be proud of them, Amir*, he thought to himself wryly. Tom still didn't know Devin that well, but he'd been willing to be coded. Clearly he was just as dedicated to the cause as Amir had been.

Vicky rocked back and forth, looking like she might be sick. Being a brilliant engineer and principled leader didn't necessarily make her any good at public speaking. "You'll be fine, Vic. This is a softball interview. The host in there won't be asking you any tough questions, so just take it easy."

She nodded and grabbed a glass of water from the nearby table. In truth, Tom had understated how important this interview would be. Sure, this one would be easy, but as soon as word got out about a viable behavior-modification implant, word would spread like wildfire. They'd have national attention in a day or so, and global a day after that. Vicky was about to be placed under a planet-sized microscope.

Tom was sure she knew all that, though. She was just trying to take it one day at a time, like any sane person. "You've had a lot of practice navigating your code, and you can explain that to them," he reminded her. "Just try not to be too wordy. Stick to the basics and tell the truth."

"I can do that." She smiled nervously at him.

The speaker from the stage started up again. "Our next guest is an engineer and inventor named Andrea Victoria Brandt. Come on out here, Vicky!"

Tom clapped along with the others, his mind already out in the Bahamas.

Part 3

Chapter 15

One of the rear wheels on the bus screeched a bit as it slowed down. Ray couldn't tell which one exactly, but it probably just needed a new brake pad. He leaned back, not looking forward to work, but glad he had a job all the same. In today's economy, it wasn't a sure thing.

The bus had about a dozen people this early on. It would be packed in about half an hour when the workday really got going, but Ray was lucky enough to go to work before all that. Another man, a bit shorter with blond hair and brown eyes, sat down across from him. Ray had seen him before a few times. He didn't always sit at the same spot like Ray did, but he probably had the same start time at work.

When he leaned down to fish something out of his backpack, something caught Ray's eye. There was a glint of metal shining from the top of his head.

That grabbed Ray's attention. He looked around to see if anyone else was close enough to be bothered. "Hey," he greeted the other man.

He looked up from his pack for a second. "Hey." Pulling a small notepad and pen out, he zipped it back up. He hesitated for a second, and Ray realized he was staring. "Can I help you?" He asked, his eyebrows a bit furrowed.

"It's nothing," Ray said quickly, feeling a bit embarrassed. "I was just… wondering, about your… you know-" he tapped the top of his head.

"Oh!" The other man put a hand up there, smoothing his hair over it. "Sorry, I thought I my hair was long enough to cover it up by now. It didn't bother you, did it?"

"No, no. I was just, you know, curious."

The stranger smiled a bit self-consciously, but leaned down again and parted his hair. "Ask away. I don't have anything to hide," he invited, but then paused. "Well, not about this anyway," he added with a wry smile.

Ray had been wondering about those things for a while now. It looked a lot smaller than the ones he'd seen on tv. "Are you ok? Does it hurt at all?"

"I'm fine. And no, it doesn't hurt anymore," he sat back up again. "It did at first, but you get used to it pretty quick. I've seen you before, right? We have the same bus route?" Ray nodded, and the man extended a hand. "I'm Toby."

"Ray," he shook it. He seemed friendly, for a cyborg. Actually, he seemed almost normal. For a second Ray couldn't believe he was even talking to one of them! It was like meeting a celebrity, but without all the crowds and stuff. "It's not just on top like I saw, right? It goes right into your brain, too?"

"That's right. It doesn't go deep, but it's not just a plate on my head," Toby gave him an amused look. "We call it a code. I am a 'coded' person."

Ray thought about that for a second. "What does it do, though?"

Toby hesitated. "You know how a pacemaker keeps your heart beating normally? This is kind of like a pacemaker, but for my whole life. It keeps me on the right path—keeps me from making the wrong choices."

That sounded pretty cool. "What kind of wrong choices? How does it decide?"

"That's the trick—it doesn't decide anything. I do. My code just keeps me from doing something I already know is wrong." He gestured outside, apparently thinking about it. "Say I was out in my car, in traffic. I'm frustrated, I'm tired, and I'm pissed off about something else, probably something at home. The lane finally starts moving, and I start to speed up, and then some jackass cuts me off!"

He waited for Ray to picture that, and went on when Ray nodded. "If things were bad enough, I might lose my temper. I might even rear-end that jerk for what he just did. I'd regret it afterwards, but I wouldn't be thinking about it when it happened. I would have just done it!"

"But not with your implant? Your code, I mean."

"That's right. With this I might lose my temper, but I wouldn't hit him. The code would stop me, and give me a chance to cool down."

Ray stared at him. "That is so weird."

Toby chuckled. "I know, right? It was really freaky when I got started. I still have a temper and all, but at least now I don't have to worry about hurting someone because of it."

"That woman I saw on tv, the one talking about the code, she has one too?"

Toby nodded. "Yep, that's Vicky Brandt. She's one of the people who got this whole thing started. I only met her once, just before I was coded, but she seemed nice."

Still thinking it was the weirdest thing he'd heard in years, Ray glanced at the top of Toby's head again. "What if it messes up or something? Can you take it out?"

"Uh, not really. Once you've had a code for more than a few months, the scar tissue builds up and it's dangerous to try get it out then. It can be turned off, though. If necessary. People who get it out early, before the scar tissue shows up, are called decoded. They're pretty rare."

Ray looked outside and quickly pulled the line asking for the driver to stop. He'd almost missed his stop. "This is me," he said as he stood up. "Listen, thanks for talking about this. I was really wondering."

"Anytime," Toby said easily. "It was good to meet you. We'll probably see each other again, right here." He shook Ray's hand again.

From her vantage point at the top of the hill, Vicky could see most of St. Augustine, Florida. Or what was left of it anyway.

Huge swaths of the city were underwater, a gift from the latest category 5 storm to roll through here. The winds hadn't been high enough to call it a hurricane, but the damage was real enough. Thousands of people had evacuated beforehand, but hundreds more were still trapped in or on top of their homes. At least three people had drowned when it first hit, and Vicky was sure there would be more.

Her radio crackled briefly. "Vicky, are you there?"

"I'm here, Alex" She tried to keep her voice moderate.

"I'm about four blocks north of you, outside a school. About thirty families are here with me. The auditorium was supposed to be a disaster shelter area, but it took a pretty big hit, and it's coming apart. We got everyone out, but there's not much room. People are climbing up onto the roof, and if it starts coming apart…" He let that thought hang in the air a bit.

Vicky sighed. "All right. I'll push your school to the top of the evac list, but you're going to need to hang on. We're stretched pretty thin here." That was something of an understatement. The boats they'd brought from Darien Cay were just a tiny fraction of what was needed. Angie Greaves had been able to convince a few of the boat owners in the marina to help out, but it was still nowhere near enough.

For a former waitress, Angie was proving remarkably good at organizing relief efforts. Even Joey was helping out with preparing food for the survivors back at the relief area.

"Uh, we got another problem here," Alex spoke up again. "Looks like we've got an asthmatic kid whose inhaler got lost on the way here. He has a backup, but it's at home… on the ground floor."

Which meant it was probably underwater. "Is he suffering an attack right now?"

"No, but it could start up at any minute. I don't have any CPR training, and it looks like no one else here does either."

At least this was one problem she could fix easily. "Hang on, Alex. Help is on the way."

"Miss Brandt?" A woman's voice spoke out from behind her, startling Vicky. She turned to see a well-dressed woman in her thirties holding a mic, with a cameraman behind her. "Kelly Anders, KQR News. Are you here to represent other coded people taking part in relief efforts?"

Vicky had to work hard not to sigh. "Hang on a moment, please," she said while holding a finger up to the reporter. Of course they knew where she was. Vicky had gone out of her way to be conspicuous. She kept her head shaved these days, proudly broadcasting the fact that she was coded to anyone who saw her. Ever since that first tv appearance she'd been a spectacle. She'd just come to embrace it now, that was all.

Vicky looked down at her laptop, which was thankfully powered by a nearby solar panel, and keyed in a command. This far above ground, she didn't have any trouble sending out the signal, and one of the drones carrying medical supplies (and as part of that an inhaler), was redirected.

It took a bit of effort to send it to a place where Alex could get ahold of it, but at least it didn't take long. The drones weren't powerful enough to evacuate people by air, but they could at least carry food, water, and medicine to people who were currently stuck. Vicky wished she had a thousand of them, but she'd only had time to build a dozen so far.

The reporter was still waiting. Vicky took a deep breath. *You're not just here to save lives*, she reminded herself. *You're here to be seen—as a coded person—saving lives.*

"Most of my people out there are coded, yes," Vicky answered, turning to face the camera and forcing a smile. "Like anyone else, we just want to help where we can."

Before the reporter could continue, Tyrell butted in. "I just got word from one of the FEMA coordinators," he said breathlessly, from his sprint up the hill. "They should have relief supplies here by nightfall."

"It's about time," Vicky said, letting out a tense breath. "Did they say what delayed them?"

"Yeah. The tail edge of the storm hit Palm Coast. They've been busy down there doing the same thing we are here." He gestured down to the camp. "Oh, the Red Cross people are finally here too. They're setting up a tent on the other side, there."

Vicky couldn't see it from her current position, but she trusted Tyrell. She would probably trust him even if he wasn't coded. Being an ex-con meant nothing to her after all this time. "Good. There's a list of our people who have first aid training in the boat I came in on. Go get it, and give it to them. Until FEMA gets here, they may need a few extra hands."

"Miss Brandt, this is the fourth natural disaster you and other coded people have been spotted at this year," the reporter continued doggedly. "Would you say that your people are drawn to places filled with destruction and death?"

For a moment Vicky didn't even process the question because she had so much else on her mind. Tyrell gaped at the woman, though. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"The evidence shows that coded people are drawn to disaster areas, as if you enjoy being there," Anders went on coolly, eying the top of Tyrell's head. "As a coded person, would you care to comment on that?"

Tyrell's eyes got dangerous, and his hands balled up into fists. Vicky held out a hand to him right away. She wasn't concerned he might hurt Anders, but he might say something heated that could hurt all coded people. "Thank you, Ty," she said pointedly, and he hesitated. Nodding, he took a deep breath and ran back downhill towards the camp.

Vicky smiled tightly and looked right into the camera. "I assume your news station is at least partially funded by the Humanity First movement. Truthfully, I don't really care. It doesn't matter what you believe about us, as long as you're aware of us. Now," she closed the laptop and with some difficulty, picked it and the solar panel up. "I'm going down to that relief camp to see what I can do for those people. Would you like to help me?"

Anders' face darkened slightly, and she waved a hand to cut off the camera. Apparently it was clear to her that she couldn't get a rise out of Vicky, and she didn't want to be seen helping her, so she just left.

For the dozenth time, Vicky wished Tom were here. Despite her increasing experience in front of cameras, Tom was still a hundred times better at it. He'd practically been born in the spotlight, and he loved it there. Though he had been able to give her some advice on how to deal with these Humanity First naysayers, he was still stuck on the other side of the country. When he was in the country at all, that was.

There was one uplifting thing Vicky saw on her way down, though. Two of her drones were returning. Working on them had been so much better than tv appearances, or disaster relief efforts. She'd been figuratively drowning in both for months now, but she was an engineer at heart. That was what she loved—that was where she thrived.

Sadly her other skills were much more in demand. Shaking her head, Vicky looked around to see where she could help. Until Alex got back with those other evacuees, that was about all she could do.

Chapter 16

"Mr. Penderton? You're up in thirty seconds." The assistant said from the doorway.

Tom thanked her and she left. He looked into the dressing room's tall mirror one more time, just to make sure. His jet-lag from the trip to Japan was mostly gone by now. There was no sign of soot or ash on his clothes or face from yesterday, but he had inhaled a bit of smoke. His voice might still be a little froggy. He took a few sips from the water bottle they'd left for him, and then squared his shoulders and stepped out into the hallway.

Unlike the original small-time interviews Vicky had done, or the more well known podcasts and radio broadcasts after that, this was national tv. Tom could feel the gravity of the room because of that. The seriousness and professionalism imbued everyone in the building. It affected how they walked, what they said, how they breathed, and everything else. Tom felt grateful to have been included, relative amateur though he was compared to them. It was a pity that so much of what he was about to tell them had to be lies.

"Good afternoon. I'm Alan Palmer, and my guest today is Thomas Penderton III, former Senate primary candidate and businessman, and the current spokesman for the coded people. Tom?" He extended an arm as an invitation. "Thanks for being here today."

Trying not to show his irritation, Tom smiled as he stepped up to the on-air desk and sat down. "Thank you for having me, Alan. First off though, you should know I'm not actually a spokesman for any coded people." He leaned down for a few seconds, so the cameras could see his scalp. "I don't have a code myself, so I can't speak for them. Mostly, I just try to answer questions people might have, so that everyone can understand them better."

"Point taken," Alan said wryly. "Well, it's been almost three years since people first started hearing about these brain implants, and the coded 'phenomenon' has spread pretty far by now. How many coded people are there, anyway?"

"I'm not sure, exactly," Tom admitted. "They don't keep a list or anything. The last I heard was over ten thousand, most of them living right here in America. That was last month though; it could be a few hundred more than that by now. There's a dedicated team back on Darien Cay who's job is to evaluate and then possibly code new applicants. They're averaging about fifteen procedures a day."

"Why don't they keep a list, though? Don't they want a record of who has a code and who doesn't?"

Tom tried to hide his discomfort at that. The questions had been asked innocuously, perhaps even innocently. Alan himself might not see what was wrong with that, but Tom sure did. "A list of coded people?" He asked, trying to tamp down on his bitterness. For this, he didn't need to lie at all. "What synonyms could we use for that? Dossiers on them? Profiles of them? A watchlist, perhaps? What about a full-on registry?"

He sighed, and went on before Alan could respond. "I am sure that there are people here in the States, very high-ranking military or government folks probably, who are already keeping tabs on all coded people. They are profiling these 'suspected threats' in case they might need to take action against them. Identification is, after all, the first step in that process."

Tom leaned forward, trying to project his earnestness. "Surveilling these people, profiling them, putting them on a watchlist—all of that is no different than assuming they're guilty before they've even been charged! What could be more hypocritical in a society that claims 'innocent until proven guilty'? What could be more despicable in a society that fought the Nazis in World War 2 than to behave just like their enemy?"

Tom leaned back, hoping he hadn't outstayed his welcome already. "Coded people don't keep a list because it would be used against them if it fell into the wrong hands. And make no mistake, there are plenty of 'wrong hands' out there right now."

Seeming a little taken aback, Alan looked over his notes again. He recovered quickly though, no doubt because of his long experience on air. "You mentioned Darien Cay earlier. For our viewers out there who don't know, that's the island you leased from the Bahamian government. From what we've heard, there are over five thousand people living there now. It's practically an island city. You call it Scheria, correct?"

Tom nodded, also feeling a little more relaxed. "Since most coded people are American, it made sense to call it something people here could relate to. They wanted to call it New Providence, because Darien Cay is even smaller than Rhode Island, but the Bahamians are already using that one. In the end they decided on Scheria because it's the last destination in the *Odyssey*. My friend Vicky Brandt and the other coded people have gone through at least four locations over the years, and now they finally have a home for themselves. After a few years the name felt right to them, so it stuck."

Alan gave him a carefully concerned look, no doubt entirely for his audience. "Some of our viewers have expressed concern that you—pardon me, that *they*—put their headquarters out there because coded people don't think of themselves as Americans at all. You've spent a great deal of time with them. Is there any truth to that?"

"Not at all," he assured the audience, yet again lying through his teeth. "Being coded doesn't wipe away your nationality. I was part of the decision to move out there in the first place, and it was all about our disagreements with our various business and government partners at the time. In fact one of the reasons we chose an island just off the coast, was so that we could be close to our home and still be able to work on the codes uninterrupted. Besides," he added, giving a conspiratorial look at the cameras, "who could say no to doing a job you love, while living on an island paradise?"

Alan smirked at that, but went on without much of a pause. "Well, the coded people have certainly made a big impression since moving there. They've been showing up at disaster sites all over the country, and participating in relief efforts. Tell me, why do you think coded people are so drawn to disaster relief specifically?"

This was going to be tricky. "Well first off, not all of them are. You have to remember, only a fraction of all coded people live in Scheria. Most people, once they get the code and go through orientation to get used to it, just end up going home. They live ordinary lives, send their kids to school, water their plants, pay their taxes. In almost every way, they're no different than the rest of us. For the few who live in Scheria, they can either help evaluate and code people, which takes a ton of education and experience, or they can find some other way to help. Given the rise in natural disasters especially this year, that's what they've chosen to do."

Alan looked down at his notes. "Yes, according to some sources, you were with a group of coded people just yesterday, helping local fire departments evacuate several communities just outside of San Diego. Are you saying those coded people came all the way across the country just to help out?"

"Most of them, yes. There were a few coded people living in San Diego. They were among the volunteers who offered to house people whose homes burned down. Vicky was doing the same thing for flood victims in Florida just last week. Personally I think she drew the short straw when it came to disasters. It's a lot easier to evacuate people if the roads aren't flooded," he added in an attempt to remind the viewers that this interview was about them and not him.

"Well their dedication is quite impressive, as is yours. As I understand it, you live on the island with them. Are you the only 'non-coded' person there?"

"Not at all. Uncoded people are here and there," Tom leaned back in his chair. "We have a few dozen technicians, analysts, computer experts, and other support staff who never got one. Most of us just do our jobs while we're there, and help out during our free time." More lies added to the pile.

"And what do you say to critics like the Humanity First movement, who claim that coded people aren't even human anymore, and don't deserve the same rights?"

Tom smiled. "So we're finally getting down to it, eh? Well, I could say a lot of things, really. For one, I find their hatred very conveniently timed. It's amazing how quickly some groups can switch between hating people based on skin color, to hating people based on gender, to hating people based on sexual orientation, and now to hating people based on having codes. It's almost like they only hate the thing that's most new and eye-catching. Or that they don't actually hate them at all, and are just faking it to get attention."

Alan hesitated. "So, do you think that groups like theirs will dial back their rhetoric eventually?"

Tom shook his head. "I hope so, but I doubt it. Unlike organizations based on mutual trust and cooperation, groups that thrive on hate aren't very sustainable. They have to keep switching what they hate because if they don't, their rank-and-file members will eventually realize that there's no real truth behind their claims."

He gave a genuine sigh. "As a species, we've never had any trouble coming up with reasons to hate people. Our instincts tell us to be afraid of new things. Animals never really get past fear and occasionally aggression towards things they don't understand, but we humans can take it so much further. We can base entire ways of life on fear and distrust, and for most of the people living like that, it's only because that's what they're told to believe!"

He paused. "I'm sorry. I can get a bit preachy about this sort of thing. Thanks for indulging me so far."

Alan nodded understandingly. "There's really only one more thing I wanted to ask. Where do you think this coded… movement of theirs is going in the long run? What will their future look like, do you think?"

Tom raised his hands helplessly. "I have no idea. When Vicky, Amir and I were just getting started on this, all we wanted was a better way to handle prison populations, and to help inmates get rehabilitated and returned to society. We had no way of knowing that the codes could one day be used for something bigger. Now the people of Scheria seem determined to prove to the world that coded people are trustworthy, friendly, and reliable. I may not know exactly where that intention will take us, but I'm *really* looking forward to finding out."

"What about sex?" Ray asked idly, as the bus started moving again. "Can you even have it, with that thing in your head?"

Toby just raised his eyebrows as he sat down. "Sure I can. Why do you ask?"

This was their third day in a row, going to work together. They had about ten minutes before Ray had to get off the bus, and he was still curious about his new cyborg friend.

"The other day you said you weren't married. Having sex with someone you're not married to is wrong, so your code should stop you. Right?"

Toby shrugged. "Well, I was coded a year and a half ago, and I've had sex since then without any problems, so apparently I don't think it's wrong. Not deep down, anyway."

Ray didn't get that. "Are you like some kind of hippie?"

Toby smiled. "Not really. My folks are evangelical Christians. They stopped talking to me when I got locked up, but I never really believed in that stuff anyway. After I got coded, I wondered how it might affect my sex life, so I did some reading and talked to a few of the others in Scheria. I wasn't the only one asking those questions."

He leaned back and stretched a bit. "Do you know about the very first weddings, way *way* back in the day?"

Ray shook his head. He'd been married twice himself, but all the details had been handled by the brides and their families. Which was fine with him.

"All right, how about marriage back in, say… medieval times. Like feudal European countries?"

"They were about the families, right? The kids married so the families would be allies."

Toby nodded. "That's pretty much it. Weddings and marriages weren't about the bride or groom at all. They were about what was best for the family at the time. Alliances between nobles and royals that were sealed with a wedding. Compared to marriages today, that's pretty barbaric, but it wasn't the worst in history. The further back you look, the more terrible marriage becomes."

He grimaced. "The earliest marriages were basically just slave auctions. The 'wife' was nothing more than property—first belonging to her father, and then to her husband. They had no say, and no future without a husband. They couldn't run away or speak out without being punished. Then they would have kids, and sometimes get punished if they couldn't, or had only daughters." He sighed at that. "The more I used to read about it, the more depressed I got. I think that's why I've never heard of any coded people getting married. They probably think it's just as bad as I do. Maybe even bad enough that the code would stop them from saying 'I do'."

Ray didn't remember any of that marriage stuff from the history classes back in school. But he hadn't really paid attention to that—his mind had always been out on the football field. Still, he had been raised with Sunday School. "What about the Bible, though? The Bible says marriage is sacred. That's what makes it wrong to have sex outside of it."

"And that is a good point," Toby agreed. "I can talk about history until I'm blue in the face. I can point to the glass ceiling, and bring up all the ways women are still discriminated against even today, but none of that matters if you believe it's wrong because of your faith. I can't argue with a man's religion, and I don't want to. Is that really what you believe, though? That sex outside marriage is wrong?"

Ray had expected argument, or maybe for Toby to get a little mad, but that hadn't happened. He thought back to the women he'd slept with, and how he never married most of them. "I don't really know," he admitted.

"That's fine. When it comes to faith, or belief, or religion, what-have-you, not knowing is perfectly fine. I sure don't know for myself. But if you think that coded people are godless or immoral for whatever reason, you're not alone."

He supposed that made sense, in a strange way, but Ray still wasn't convinced. "What about Mormons? Do you have any Mormons who have a code?"

Toby looked confused. "Probably one or two. Why do you ask?"

"They believe in polygamy, right? Or they did. Would a coded Mormon be able to sleep around, while a coded Christian couldn't?"

Toby leaned back in his seat for a few seconds. "I assume both of them would be able to sleep with whoever they wanted, as long as no one was being hurt. That includes keeping secrets, by the way. I doubt a married coded man would be able to have an affair unless his spouse knew about it and was ok with it. We have a bunch of faiths in Scheria. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hundu, Bhuddist, Sikh—and probably a whole lot more. I heard some discussions when I was there. They even got heated from time to time, but no one ever started shouting or swearing. Even if one person was mad enough to get violent about it, the code would stop them."

"That's so freaky. So… you think it doesn't matter what faith a person has?"

Toby gave him a sharp look. "Of course it matters. Sometimes faith is all a person has! It just doesn't seem to change what the code stops us from doing, or lets us do. From what I've seen anyway."

Ray nodded, taken a bit by surprise by his friend's fierceness. "Sorry."

"Don't be. This is important stuff to talk about, and I'm not upset or anything. It's just that we're still exploring what it means to be coded. All of these things are just my best guesses so far. If you have other ideas, please let me know." Toby squinted up ahead. "Your stop is coming up."

"But we just got started talking about this! What is your faith anyway? You were raised Christian; do you believe in God, even if you don't care about marriage?" Ray was strongly tempted to just miss his stop today, and show up late. Or better yet, not at all. He didn't really like his job.

Toby looked thoughtful. "I suppose we can talk about this more on Monday if you want, but here's the real short version." He took a breath. "I don't know if the Bible was just a bunch of lies written by old guys who wanted to keep women under their control, or a sacred document written by an all-powerful God who loves us all equally. I'm still trying to figure that out. What I do know is that the Bible is the main reason we even have marriage, and marriage has been used for some pretty awful stuff throughout history. It's impossible to believe what the Bible says without also accepting how much women were treated like property in it, and are still being discriminated against because of it. Just saying."

As soon as her boat got in, people practically stampeded off of it. Vicky was in no rush, despite the huge pile of tasks no doubt waiting for her in Scheria. One by one the embarkees were isolated and screened before being taken off to a waiting area.

Another boat had also docked a few minutes earlier, carrying relief workers from the Bahamas. They'd been doing the same as her group, just on the various islands hard-hit by the same storm. They were also cordoned off as soon as they stepped off the boat.

Just as any American citizen who wanted to fly overseas would do well to make sure that their immunizations were up to date, people here had to quarantine after arriving from other countries. After all, Scheria's population had grown by leaps and bounds, and the island was now packed with people.

It still took her breath away every time she got back.

The Cay was less than two miles in length, but what had started out as a small research station had exploded in size almost immediately. Only about one in ten coded people had chosen to live here, but that was more than enough to build a city. People who didn't have the schooling to help evaluate or code people had just found other ways to contribute. Hence the Need Board.

When she finally got to a place where she could plug in her laptop, Vicky sat against a wall, pulled up the local net, and looked at the Need Board. With a combination of both reluctance and relief, she removed her name from any active projects. She would have to decide how to help, but it couldn't be more relief work.

Someone tapped on her shoulder. Vicky looked up to see a smiling Tom looking down at her. "Hey!" She set the laptop down, jumped up and hugged him tightly. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," he said, gently lifting her off the ground for a moment and then setting her down. "I had a little smoke inhalation, and then I lied my ass off to the nation. Business as usual, really."

Vicky gave him a sympathetic look. "This is why I only wanted to do small-time interviews. I can't lie to strangers anymore like you can. But it is necessary. If they actually came here, and saw what this place is like… they just wouldn't understand. I mean I helped *build* it, and I sometimes have a hard time understanding."

Tom nodded, glancing out the window of the isolation rooms and onto the rest of Scheria. Amir's family funding had dried up almost immediately, but it had been replaced by donations from coded people. One of the things Vicky could have never predicted about coding was that it gave some people such a sense of purpose that it changed their lives completely. It seemed in a society where every single person could trust every single other person with their lives, and the whole community was devoted to the benefit of the whole community… money didn't mean much anymore. As such there had been a flood of donations at first, which had leveled out into a steady stream nowadays.

Vicky still didn't understand how the codes had caused Scheria to grow so fast, or be so different than other modern cities. She and Devin had thrown ideas around for a long time, trying to make sense of it. They couldn't say what was right and wrong for each coded person, but they could analyze trends. So far, coded people hadn't physically hurt anyone else, ever. Unless it was an accident. Being coded didn't make you omniscient or any wiser than you were before.

That much they had predicted. Amir had even hoped for it back when they'd gotten started. The no-lying bit had been a welcome addition, but it had quickly spread into a general sense across every coded person living here. If Vicky had to define it, her best guess would be: no coded person ever put themselves above anyone else.

However it worked, Vicky was just grateful that it did. Still, a society that put no importance at all on materialism was *so very* alien to the outside world, and to America especially, that Vicky was doubly grateful they didn't know about it. That was why Tom had to lie so often about them, and why he was literally the only uncoded adult living here. Even Max had been coded by now, despite his early misgivings about it. The only other uncoded person so far was Max's grandson Joey, who was only ten. According to Devin, it just wasn't safe to code anyone younger than twenty-one. As a result Joey mostly home-schooled, when he wasn't following Angie around and helping her organize things.

Coded people living in the rest of the world could fit in quite easily with the people around them. They were just nice people, according to most. Coded people living in tight concentrations like here… might as well be an alien species for all they had in common with the uncoded. Vicky didn't really feel like an American anymore, or even like a human, if that's what uncoded were. Maybe the Humanity First movement had a point, at least about that.

"So I pulled my name from the Need Board," Vicky said, trying not to dwell on dark thoughts like that, as she slid back down to the ground with her back to the wall. "I'm just burned out. I want to stay here for a while, maybe get my drone production going again. Those things were really helpful in Florida, by the way."

"I can believe it," Tom said, sitting next to her. She would be in quarantine for at least another day, and he was scheduled to head back to the mainland and then fly across the ocean tomorrow, so he seemed resolved to get comfortable for now. "Oh, I heard from Fai Tan on my way back here. Only because he couldn't reach you first," he added quickly. "Apparently they've had a breakthrough with their molecular… work or something. I don't speak scientist. He wanted you to drop by as soon as you're free."

Vicky nodded. Another thing she couldn't have predicted was how amazingly self-sufficient Scheria had become. At first they had used gas generators to power the original lab, but then they'd switched to solar power. When more people started living here, they'd eventually built a full-on tidal generator, which stored and used power every time the tides rose and fell. It was a lot more reliable than solar, especially when it rained.

The people here still had to trade with the mainland when it came to exotic substances like insulin or kidney disease medication, but food had become self-sufficient as well. It wasn't exactly gourmet, but algae and insects were easy to grow and process as food, and were amazing sources of protein. The main 'normal' plant that was used as food was potatoes. They were remarkably resilient and easy to grow, but kind of a delicacy here due to the limited space.

Vicky was grateful for the sustainable food, too. The sooner they could become completely independent from the mainland, the smaller the chance the uncoded would find out just how different Scheria was from the rest of the world. They would find out eventually of course, but the longer she could shield them from the full truth, the less of a blow it would be to them, and the less ammunition Humanity First and others like them would have.

As for other differences, Dr. Fai Tan was also one of many scientists who had joined in on the work. He wasn't a surgeon or neurobiologist like most of the early coded group, but it turned out that within a society that didn't value greed—and didn't actually have a military force at all—scientific advancement was a lot easier. Fai was a molecular chemist, who had originally worked on large-scale solutions to global warming before getting coded. Now he continued his experiments here in Scheria. Like Vicky, he tended to get absorbed in his work. She resolved to visit him sooner rather than later, and remind him to sleep sometime this week. If it weren't for his lab assistants, he'd probably forget to eat as well.

"So, any news on the new colony?" Vicky asked idly, her eyes sliding past the computer screen and towards the sky out the window. They had been looking into leasing another island about forty miles to the southwest, as a possible expansion location for coded people.

Tom nodded. "I finally got approval from the Bahamians just before heading out to Japan. It's a similar deal to the one we made for Darien Cay. We're lucky the Bahamian leadership knows a good thing when they see it. You coded people are much more valuable to them here than you would be somewhere else," he added wryly.

"Has anyone started living there yet?" Vicky ignored his tone.

"A few hundred. They started with tents and are now assembling some basic houses. Next up is a tidal power generator like the one you have here."

"That's good. I don't know how many more times we can do that, though. Eventually the Bahamians will get tired of letting us use their territory."

She and Tom passed ideas back and forth, as the sun lowered in the sky. It reminded her of all those late-night brainstorming sessions they and Amir had shared back on the mainland. Even now she felt his absence keenly, though it didn't really hurt anymore. It was more like a phantom limb. She knew what he would say some of the time, and added it for him, injecting it into their conversation.

Tom departed the following day. As part of their agreed-upon plan, he was heading out to Kiev, and then on to Moscow. It was just the most recent of dozens of international trips he'd taken in the last year, and it wouldn't be the last one, either. As comfortable as he was in all these meetings, it was clear he'd be glad when they were done. Tom's efforts would be vitally important to all the coded people here, but that didn't mean they didn't take a toll on him.

After she was finally cleared on the following morning, Vicky made her way into the city. She stopped at her home briefly for a shower and a change of clothes. It was only a home in that it had some of her things—she spent almost no time here.

That was another peculiarity of life among coded people. Sentimental attachment to objects was common enough, but to places was much less so. Most coded people here seemed much more attached to each other than to any specific 'home'. Vicky had heard a bunch of different possible reasons why, but there was know way of knowing which one, or if more than one, were true.

Vicky made a stop in the coding center itself, just to say hi to Devin. He was in surgery, but did wave hello at her through the glass. A voice called out to Vicky as she left the building, though. "Miss Brandt?"

She did a double take at the thirty-or-so year old, heavily muscled man who'd spoken. "Leon? Is that you?"

He smiled broadly and nodded. "I wasn't sure you'd recognize me."

"I can see why," she agreed, moving over and shaking his hand warmly. He looked much better than the last time she'd seen him, all shaking and clammy from withdrawal. He was also much more tanned, although Scheria residents made common use of sunblock.

Like any other recent coding patient, the top of his head had also been shaven. From the swelling around the implant, it had been done recently. "I had no idea you'd been scheduled for coding so soon!"

Leon shrugged. "I passed all the examinations with flying colors. I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but emotionally I'm as steady as a rock. Thanks to you, Miss Brandt."

"I told you before—call me Vicky. And you did all the work, Leon. You got clean all on your own, before you ever got coded. You can be proud of that; I sure am proud of you."

He looked a little self-conscious at that. "I guess now I find out what happens next. I'm supposed to go through orientation, but I don't know what that will be like." He rubbed at his arm absently, at the needle marks which hadn't quite faded even now.

"It's different for everyone," Vicky explained. "Some people need months to get used to their new situation, and others only a few weeks. Devin calls them codepacetic. He only thinks he's funny." At least Leon smiled at that. "Anyway, someone will be assigned as your guide, and they'll stick with you until it's done. Then, you just have to choose if you want to go home or stay here."

"I, uh, can't really go home," Leon admitted hesitantly. "I called my dad just before the surgery. He said he's glad I'm clean and all, but it would be better if I don't come back to Philly for a while. He's got his new wife and kids to think about. I guess I'm not really surprised. I did some pretty messed up things to him when I was high. I don't… deserve to just go home like that."

That was concerning. Vicky remembered her early experiences with the code, and how she couldn't drink wine, not because it was harmful to her but because it would harm her loved ones. If Leon didn't think he had anyone like that, would he fall back into old habits? "You're not alone here," she assured him quickly. "There will be dozens of other people in orientation like you, and your guide will keep you from messing up. So will your code, but you won't like it at first. Besides," she reached up and gestured to the whole city, "every coded person here is basically family. I'm sure your dad will be ok with you eventually, but until he is you've got the rest of us to lean on."

Leon gave her a disbelieving look, but eventually nodded and reached up to the top of his head. "I've gotten clean before a few times, but at least I can rely on this thing to keep me that way now. Oh, I'm sorry to keep you. If you've got somewhere to be, don't let me hold you up," he said suddenly.

Vicky shook his hand again, offering a few more words of encouragement, and then turned away. Before she got too far though, she came to a stop. She wasn't sure exactly what it was keeping her there, but it seemed like a better idea to stay. "Say, Leon?" She asked after a bit, and he turned back to her. "Would you be all right with me being your guide?"

Chapter 17

"So I was video chatting with my folks yesterday, and my code kept going off all the time! I could barely get a few words out before I had to remember what I was doing, all over again. It was super frustrating. I think they think I have brain damage or something. I got so embarrassed I just signed off and sent them an email saying I was ok."

Melanie did indeed look frustrated. Vicky had to hold back a smile at that, not wanting to trivialize her in front of the other coded people undergoing orientation.

She and Leon were attending his first Why meeting, which she'd had to explain to him. Like the NA meetings he'd gone to back in the States, Why meetings were about expressing your feelings and sharing your truth. They were also a forum, to help people understand 'why' their codes had activated when there wasn't an obvious explanation. And they were mandatory. Even if Leon had nothing to say, he still had to be here at least twice a week.

"What is it you were talking about with your parents?" The meeting coordinator inquired of Melanie.

She waved a hand. "Nothing big. Just how long until my hair grows back, what college they want me to go to when I get back home, what social circles they want for me when I'm there."

From their expressions, Vicky could tell that some of the others were also holding back snide comments. Melanie was clearly from a very different world than the one Leon and the others had known. One of them did speak up, though. "What do you want to do, though? When you're done with orientation."

Melanie shrugged. "I don't really know. I just wanted them to see I didn't need them. I can do this without them always telling me what to do."

There was just a little bit of anger in that statement, and the group apparently heard it. "If you didn't want them to tell you what to do, why did you call them?" The coordinator asked pointedly.

"Because I'm sick of them always making me feel useless!" Melanie said harshly. "I wanted to show them I don't need them anymore. I wanted them to feel helpless and worthless like I did!" She stopped at that point, and her eyes widened. "Oh…" she trailed off. "Okay, that makes sense."

The coordinator reached out and squeezed Melanie's hand comfortingly, and then looked around at the others. "Does anyone else have anything to say?"

Leon looked a bit uncomfortable, but he didn't speak up. From what Vicky had learned over the past few days, he'd gotten coded *only* to curb his addiction. He was still exploring the limits of behavior his code would allow, and probably wasn't ready to share in front of a roomful of people. Even if they were his peers.

The meeting was dismissed, and Vicky got up with the others and filed out of the room. When she and Leon were relatively alone again, she removed her wig and rubbed at her head absently.

"Why did you even wear that thing?" Leon inquired. "It's gotta be itchy and all."

"I'm pretty well known here," Vicky said sadly. "If they recognized me in there, it would have been a distraction. Maybe Melanie wouldn't have had her world-shattering breakthrough otherwise."

Leon chuckled as well, as they headed back to his temporary room. "Hey. She's on the path, right? Even a little breakthrough is still progress."

"That's right. Do you want me to come to the next one with you, or are you good going alone?"

"I'll be fine," he said in a less-than-convincing tone. "You can leave the wig behind and be yourself now."

Not wanting to push the issue, Vicky changed the subject. There was a lot of stuff to cover, and they chatted the whole way back to his place. Once there, she pulled out the community laptop that every new coded person could use and typed in a command on the keyboard.

"This is the Need Board," she gestured at the screen. It was less of a 'board' so much as a list, but it got the point across. "It's every task that coded people need to do, both here and on the mainland. It's always being updated, as jobs are completed, or new jobs are added. It's online too, so coded people elsewhere can contribute from where they live. This is how I got my group together when we went to Florida a few weeks ago. People over there got estimates of how bad it would be, and what would be needed, and put that on the Board. Then people here volunteered based on skills and availability. It's a bit complicated at first, I know," she admitted, "but it's one of our best tools. See there?" She pointed at the coded relations section. "That's where I signed up to be your guide."

Leon scanned the list slowly, taking his time. He was a pretty good student, actually. Vicky wasn't regretting being his guide. It also gave her a reason to stick around in Scheria, and she could use her extra time to work on the drones again. People still recognized her almost everywhere she went, but here she was accepted, not pestered with bad-faith interview requests from rude reporters. "What do these stars mean?" He asked after a bit, pointing to the scale next to each item on the list.

"That's how important the jobs are. Well, not important so much as urgent. All the jobs are important, but some need to be done sooner than others."

Leon clicked on a section of the Need Board labeled 'city maintenance'. It made up about a third of all the jobs on the Board. Hopefully it would be even less than that soon.

Vicky agreed that a portion of their efforts had to be about keeping the city itself running, but every bit of effort put out into the world earned them a little goodwill in return. Relief efforts were a good start, but they'd have to branch out soon as well. Mediation was the end goal. They had to earn enough trust with the uncoded that they would be willing to let coded people mediate for them.

Unofficially, of course. Having a coded judge or prosecutor was a chilling thought. How could you possibly do what you know is right when the law itself was influenced by a profit motive? It would be an impossible, doomed situation from the start. If they wanted to help, it would have to be if they were invited, and outside of the law.

"What if I need something other than a job?" Leon asked suddenly. "Like a sandwich, or a basketball or something. Would I put that on the Need Board?" His eyes brightened. "Or a surfboard. I used to surf all the time!"

"Food isn't an issue. There are cafeterias all over the island, though they probably don't serve anything tasty enough for newly coded people. For other objects though," Vicky gestured at the search bar. "Just type in surfboard and see for yourself."

Leon did so, and a map of the island popped up, covered in red dots. "There. Looks like there's a surfboard in this very building. Just two doors over. It belongs to a Jenna Tamby. Ooh, she's cute," Vicky added, as a picture popped up.

Leon gave her a patient look. "I can see that, thanks."

In an effort to get him more integrated with his community, Vicky had been playing a bit of a matchmaker for him. Perhaps she should back off on that. He was doing just fine as is.

"So, I can just go over there and ask if I can use her surfboard?"

"Pretty much."

Leon looked back at the info on screen. "It says it's in her hallway closet. What if she's not home?"

"Then you go in and get it anyway. As long as you put a note on the Need Board that you've got the surfboard now, it'll be fine."

Vicky smiled at his confused look. "The thing is, privacy doesn't mean as much here as it does on the mainland. There are some coded people who have a briefcase, or a chest or something next to their front door, and put all the Need Board stuff in there so they can keep their home clean and all. Most people are more easygoing, though. I put a bunch of my stuff up on the Board for people to borrow or take. Not my computer, though," she admitted. "I use that every day, and I really don't want to be without it."

Leon stared at her, and then back at the screen. "Ok, that is just freaky. How does this… Jenna know that I won't just clean out her place and take everything? Or how do *I* know that she didn't set a bear trap or something behind the front door?"

Had she been like this herself, back in the day? It seemed like a pretty suspicious way to live. "Because you're both coded," Vicky explained patiently. "No one puts an item on the Board unless they're willing to be without it. She trusts that you won't do anything to damage the surfboard intentionally, and you can trust that she wouldn't offer it unless it was sturdy enough to use. Besides, even if you did rob her place completely, you wouldn't get anything of value. It's just stuff."

Vicky scrolled down the list of objects on the Board. "Do you see any Fabergé eggs here, or any Rolex watches? Have you seen any Ferraris out on the street? Ok, that's a bad example," she realized aloud. There were no cars on an island this small, although there were a ton of bikes.

"Anyway, having stuff just isn't that important to us here. We have no status symbols, because the code won't let us put ourselves above anyone else. The only real reason to own anything at all is if it's sentimental like my photo album, or if it's useful like my laptop. That's it."

If anything, Leon looked even more incredulous. "I wondered about some of those things when I got here, but I had no idea. This is like a different world!"

Vicky grinned. "I should hope so. At first I thought I'd miss a lot of things from back in the States, but it turns out I'm *really* happy living here."

Leon gave a disbelieving sniff. After a bit though, he shook his head as if to clear it. "So… what if I don't want to do any of the jobs on the Need Board? What if I just take that surfboard and spend all day out on the waves? Would I be able to stay here if I was just doing that every day?" He asked cynically.

Vicky shrugged. "Probably. But would *you* want to be here, surrounded by people proudly working hard at advancing the whole society, if all you did was enjoy yourself all day? No one would insult you, or even look at you funny, but would you really be happy under those circumstances? From what I've seen, lazy people don't last very long if they're constantly surrounded by reminders that they're lazy. They either leave, or they find some way to contribute on their own."

She leaned back against the wall behind them. "Like I said before, most people once they've been coded and gone through orientation, just go home. It's only about one in ten who really 'sync' with their codes. They not only use their codes as a barrier to keep from doing something bad, but also as a motivator to live a good life. That's why so many people leave. Being a constant cooperative part of a community like this is *not easy*. But it's totally worth it, or at least it is to me."

It was late the next day, after a very rewarding afternoon of building drones, that Vicky got a message from Uptown. Apparently the Servant and the Allocators wanted to see her. Whatever it was must be important. After a moment's hesitation, Vicky decided to ask Leon to come along. He had no experience with Scheria's government, limited though it was.

In America, there was a President who had a Cabinet and Joint Chiefs, and there were Supreme Court Justices, Senators, and House Representatives. Here, they just had a Servant and two Allocators. All three were completely informal and had no official authority at all. They couldn't order a field mouse around, much less a person. But then, they didn't have to.

If you wanted a coded person to do something, all you had to do was convince them that it was the right thing to do. Because those three were so good at their jobs, most people here just did as they asked without question. Their codes didn't interfere, because they were requests originating from coded people. If any of the three started slipping, 'removing' them from their unofficial office wouldn't even be necessary. They'd probably remove themselves first.

Vicky dropped by Leon's place and found him sitting on the ground, perusing the Need Board. He seemed much more comfortable with it now, and had actually been contributing in the food service area, with protein processing. Limited duty of course. People still in orientation were allowed to serve, but only if it didn't interfere with the orientation itself. When Leon saw her, there was a trace of a smile on his face for just a moment.

"What is it?" Vicky asked, curious.

"Nothing. It's something funny I remembered from-" Leon cut off, his face going blank for a second. "Whoa," he went on, putting a palm to his head. "Still not used to that."

Vicky knew a code activation when she saw one. The only reason it would go off while someone was talking was if they were lying or saying something hurtful. Leon hadn't been insulting her, which meant he'd just tried to lie.

Whatever it was, privacy was his by right. Vicky extended a hand. "Come on. I've been asked to see the closest thing to government in Scheria. I figured you'd want to sit in on this."

Leon reached up and allowed her to pull him to his feet. "Yeah, I read about that last night. It's pretty weird that this whole city keeps on working with only three people in charge. And not really even in charge, at that. Just… helping."

"That's how we roll."

They wound their way through the city, taking maybe fifteen minutes to get all the way Uptown. The name was literal, actually, with these structures being the highest point geographically. Because they were so far above sea level, they held the most valuable tools. The labs where Dr. Tan worked were just on the other side of that building, and Devin's most irreplaceable research on code design and installation was just next door to it.

It was a valid concern. That storm in Florida could have easily hit Scheria first.

For some reason, Leon kept that strange smile on his face during the trip. Vicky made sure not to ask about it again, but she couldn't help being curious. As they walked, she talked about how the Servant and Allocators had gotten started.

"When our research station here on the island first started growing beyond the few buildings we started with," she gestured to where the old lab had been on the north end of the Cay, "we realized we would soon be a full-fledged community. At first it was easy. We all convened in one of the cafeterias, and talked through what we needed and how we would get it and use it. Even Tom contributed when he was here, though he's never been coded. Eventually it became a weekly meeting, open to any person living here. New problems were brought to our attention, and we decided collectively on how to deal with them. That's why we eventually built our tidal generators over there," she pointed out to sea.

"So no one was ever in charge, right from the beginning?"

"Not officially. I suppose I was running things at the start, but only because I've been coded the longest. Still, I don't know how to manage a city like this. I was grateful when others took up the task. It always remained a democracy though. A *real* democracy mind you, not that representative stuff they have on the mainland. One person, one voice."

Vicky smiled as she looked around. "Of course it got much harder as this place grew by leaps and bounds. Money may not mean much to us now, but it did back then. We were buying tons of stuff from the mainland, and none of us knew much about financial dealings or favorable negotiations. One of our foreign coded joiners, Hamedi Cisse, took to that like a duck to water. Maybe it's just how they do things overseas, but he was a natural. He was the one who came up with the idea for the materials portion of the Need Board, and handled the donations which have kept us going ever since."

"But he couldn't do it all alone, right?"

"At first he could, but yeah, we just kept on growing. He tracked down a statistician named James Conrad and convinced him to help with the 'allocation' of resources. Then he found a former professor of professional ethics named Holly Trainer to help them decide which departments needed more or less resources. She's the Servant now, but again: nothing official. I'm still surprised at how easy it all was. A new society of uncoded people would have probably had a bloody coup, or a long election process by now."

"Probably," Leon said, and there was a tone of humor in his voice. Come to think of it, people on the streets were giving her strange looks as well. It was more than just the usual stir she caused—they were whispering to each other as she passed.

They'd finally arrived. Vicky saw a few of the Allocators' assistants upstairs, moving efficiently from post to post. There was even a Need Board posting for that job. Anyone could be trusted to do the job earnestly, but not many had the stamina or concentration to keep up with the Allocators themselves. Hamedi and James were two of a kind. Wondering what was going on, Vicky led the way inside.

Each of the large rooms on the ground floor represented a different department: Desalination, Food Service, Waste Processing, Power Distribution, Healthcare, and about a dozen more. The ones she knew best were down the hall: Engineering and Uncoded Relations. Each room had people inside, dedicated to making sure that the city handled each concept smoothly and gracefully. Perhaps a building like this had already been constructed in the other island colony. They did have Scheria's history to look back on, and hopefully wouldn't make some of the same mistakes she and Tom had made here.

She was expected in Uncoded Relations, which was not to be confused with her actual uncoded relation, her dad. He was still up in Minnesota, retired and living a quiet life. They chatted from time to time, though he still disapproved of her lack of hair.

Vicky opened the door to find that Holly was already waiting inside. The Servant rose with a warm smile, and shook Vicky's hand fervently. "Vicky. Thanks for coming on such short notice."

"Not at all," Vicky responded automatically. It was just the three of them right now, and she stepped inside with Leon. "This is Leon. I'm his guide. What can I do for you, Holly?"

"So you haven't heard? Good. I wanted this to be a surprise," Holly said conspiratorially. "I take it you know what's going on here, Leon?"

"Yes ma'am," Leon said awkwardly, his eyes flitting back and forth between them.

"Then would you like to show her?" Holly asked, gesturing at one of the computers in the room. Leon nodded, and pulled up the Need Board on that screen.

"At the last townhall meeting, you were still in quarantine," Holly explained as Leon went through the list. "We decided that it's time to have an official representative, or ambassador really, to the uncoded people. We need to give them something they've already seen, a concept that will hopefully be a bridge for them to someday understand us."

That made a lot of sense. Trying not to think about why Leon of all people was involved in this, Vicky nodded. "I agree. They have a hard enough time just understanding the codes themselves and how they work. Throw in a greed-free society, and then a leaderless society? We might as well be trying to teach them Greek. I don't like the idea of any coded representative at all, but in dealings with uncoded people… I think it's a necessary evil."

Holly smiled. "Glad to hear it. Because there was a referendum put out this morning over the Need Board. Actually, it was more of an election. We asked people who they want to be our face to the uncoded world. Votes have been collecting all day."

Vicky didn't know what to say. Referendums weren't that uncommon here—usually one or two went out a month. For people who couldn't make it to the weekly townhalls, or weren't eloquent enough to be understood at them, it was an opportunity for them to voice their opinions through a vote. But they had never voted for a *person* before. She supposed it was a natural consequence of needing a representative, but it still felt weird to her. "I take it they chose Tom, and I'm here to tell you where he is?"

Leon chuckled briefly, and Holly shook her head. "I already know where Tom is, and what he's doing. I don't blame you for not telling anyone. After all, I wasn't even coded yet when you came up with your plan. And it's a good idea—what he's doing overseas will be necessary eventually. This isn't about Tom though, it's about you. We need someone to represent us to the uncoded. You have been chosen to be that voice."

Now grinning, Leon turned the computer to face her. Vicky's name, along with a dozen or so others, was displayed along with a collection of votes. She had more than twice the votes of any other.

"Me??" Vicky protested, aghast. "I'm no diplomat! I have zero experience in foreign policy and negotiations. That's one of the reasons I was glad when you started running this place!"

"It's not as bad as you might think," Holly said smoothly, reaching out to turn her away from the screen. "Your duties wouldn't change much at all. It's just now you'll have the official endorsement of Scheria. You just said how having a representative to the uncoded people is a necessary evil."

"Yes, but I never wanted to *be* that evil!"

Holly let that last word hang in the air for a bit. Eventually, she shrugged. "We're all coded here. The choice is still yours. If you don't want the job, I guess it goes to the runner-up: Anson Marsden."

Vicky had met Anson a few times over the last few years, while helping out in the Uncoded Relations office. He seemed confident, respectful, and dignified. But she had no idea if he could handle a tv spotlight. Good Lord, she still wasn't sure *she* could! Vicky knew that critics thought of her as endearing and unsure of herself in front of the camera, but that was all misinterpretation. She was still awkward as hell.

She tried to moderate her tone. "Holly, I was looking forward to staying here for a while, and getting back to basics. I wanted to guide people like Leon, and start up my drone program again. You saw how useful they were in Florida. Imagine me building dozens more like them—hundreds, even! They could help out a lot, no matter where you want them deployed!"

Holly nodded. "I've looked over the specs, and I've seen footage of them in action. They are quite a sight. Which is why I talked Hamedi and James into adding a drone program to the engineering department. They're looking into resources for it as we speak."

Vicky felt like the ground was eroding under her feet. Holly had an answer for everything. And how on earth had she known what Tom was up to? Perhaps she had guessed it, as she did have access to Tom's travel logs. It wouldn't be hard to find out who he was meeting during his foreign trips.

None of that mattered right now, though. It was still Vicky's decision, and always would be, but Holly knew her pretty well. She knew that first and foremost, Vicky's priority was the well-being of other people. Like it or not, Vicky was more useful representing Scheria than she was guiding individual people or tinkering away in Engineering. Damn her for knowing that. Damn the whole city for knowing that! Or at least the fifty-eight percent who had voted for her.

According to the vote tally on the screen, even if she hadn't gotten over half the vote, she was the second choice for nearly a third. Ranked-choice voting would have gone her way as well.

"I'll think about it," Vicky said at last, beckoning harshly to Leon, who hastened to her side.

It was a meaningless gesture; they both knew what Vicky would decide, but Holly gave her a respectful nod anyway. "I look forward to hearing from you, then."

Chapter 18

"Vicky! Wake up! Vicky!" A hand was rocking her at the shoulder, shaking her out of deep slumber.

Vicky squinted up in the direction of the voice, her eyes nearly shut against the sudden light in her bedroom. "Leon? What is it?" She rubbed her eyes and sat up.

Leon looked practically terrified. He deposited his phone in her hands, screen towards her. "The Servant just called you, but couldn't get through. She called me next, and said this just got posted online." He pressed play.

It was a recording of the inside of a bar, probably somewhere in the Midwest by the music in the background. The camera was centered on a tall, African-American man at the bar, looking relaxed and chatting with two other people. It was slightly unfocused though, as if the camera was a distance away from the man.

Then a commotion started offscreen. The sound rapidly changed into a fight, and the man turned to look. His friends hurriedly made their way out of the bar. In an instant there was another man right there in front of him, already bloody and looking crazed. He stumbled past the first man initially, but then turned and raised a fist.

He never got to throw his punch. In the blink of an eye the first man jabbed the heel of his palm into his attacker's face, temporarily blinding him and knocking him back. He stumbled briefly, holding his face, and then collapsed.

The video paused right there, and then rewound. A slow-motion replay of the hit followed, and it paused again just after the second man fell. A green circle was drawn over the second man, and a voice provided some context. "This is Billy Marks, resident of Indianapolis, and overall ordinary guy. He had a few too many drinks last night, and got a bit out of hand. He was taken to the hospital after this, and he'll recover, but his nose was broken by that hit. Some bits of bone were even driven up into his sinuses!"

A red circle was drawn around the first man. "This is Terrell Johnson. Former navy seal and decorated combat officer. Or he was, anyway." A tiny circle was drawn inside it, highlighting the unmistakable glint of metal from the top of his head. "Now he's just a coded cyborg zombie, under their control."

The bar vanished, replaced by a hawkish-looking thin white man wearing a brush cut and formal suit. "I'm Dale King, and I put Humanity First. For years we've been warning you that these coded freaks aren't what they say. They claim that their mind-control implants don't let them hurt anyone, but take a look at the tape! That thing put Billy Marks in the hospital, and look at it! Not a trace of emotion on its face. It might as well have been swatting a fly!" A shot of the altercation as it happened was superimposed to the left of King. Terrell's face did look quite calm, despite what he was about to do.

"Now the cops showed up a few minutes later and arrested… that thing that used to be Terrell Johnson, but the threat isn't over. There are thousands more like them, all over the world! For any of you blind, submissive sheep out there who still think that these monsters are cuddly little-" Leon paused the recording, still looking distressed.

"He goes on like that for a while, but that's the only footage he's got," Leon explained.

Vicky felt a dull ache that had nothing to do with all the walking she'd done yesterday. She pulled out her phone and turned it on. It was a good thing guides and their orientees were supposed to live next door to each other. Leon hadn't needed to run far to get her.

"Is that guy really one of us?" Leon asked, as she dialed Holly.

Vicky shook her head. "He can't be. There's never been any coded person capable of violence before."

Holly answered immediately. "Have you seen the video?"

"Yes. I know you don't keep a record of our patients, but do you know if any of the surgeons can remember his face?"

"I just spoke to them. None of them recognize him, but that's no surprise. They do surgeries like that all day long!" Holly paused for a moment. "We have to confirm this, don't we?"

Vicky grimaced. "Even if it's just to disprove it, yes we do. The video said he was arrested. Do we know where he was taken, and how long ago?"

Another voice cut in over the line. "Vicky, it's Max. Johnson was taken to the nearest police station, just outside Indianapolis. I've already got a boat down at the docks waiting for you, and I'm setting up a private flight from Miami out to Indiana. I've got a lawyer friend up in Cincinnati who will fly over and meet you there before you go in. If Johnson is one of ours, my guy will put the fear of God into those cops."

Vicky almost smiled. As usual, Max wasn't just reacting to the situation, but predicting what they would need to do next. And also as usual, taking it a bit too far in the process.

"I'm sending Dr. Harcourt down to the docks with you," Holly added. "He'll have the equipment you need to examine the code, if it is one. Let's all hope he's just some guy who had a plate put in his head. Or better yet, that this is some kind of setup by Humanity First and he's just a paid actor."

"Yeah, I'm crossing my fingers here," Vicky said earnestly, and hung up. She got out of bed and quickly looked around the room, thinking hard. Harcourt would have to bike down here from Uptown to get to the boat, so she had a little time. She had to pack some things though, quickly.

She'd forgotten about Leon! He was still standing there, looking angry now. "Leon, I'm so sorry, but I have to go. If it were anything else-"

"No, I get it," he said understandingly. "Don't worry about it. This is bigger than any one orientation. I'll just… keep on learning while you're gone. Here, let me help you pack some things," he added as if he could read her mind. He looked at her clothing drawer, and then moved over to her computer instead and started unplugging cords from it.

Vicky looked at the back of his head sadly. Leon was making progress, but he didn't deserve to be adrift, alone like this. She would have to call Holly from the plane, and make sure he had a temporary guide. "Of all the things to happen," she grumbled as she started gathering some clothes. "Fifty-eight percent of the island wanted *me* to be their ambassador."

"I was one of them," Leon said wryly from his side of the room. He paused suddenly. "You be careful out there, ok? Those Humanity First hate-peddlers know what you look like for sure. For all we know, they're expecting you to show up!"

"I know. Max is sure to hook us up with some security when we get there, but an ambassador's job isn't always safe." She sighed after a moment. Like it or not, she was doing the job. "It looks like I'm being pressed into service."

The boat and plane ride were both frustrating and uneventful. Terrell Johnson hadn't made (or perhaps hadn't been able to make) his phone call yet, so they had no way of verifying if he was coded yet. He was a black man, in a very white state, in a very white city, and in a police station on violent charges. Vicky wondered if the poor man was even still alive to examine.

During the flight, Dale King's video went viral. Despite the early hour, hundreds of thousands of people viewed it in just a few minutes. Other Humanity First spokesmen—and so far they were all men—began uploading their own excoriating takes on coded people. Vicky tried not to feel depressed about that. They had been hating her for a while now, she reminded herself. This wasn't anything new.

King's real name was Simon Beloka, but he'd really doubled down on his stage name and audience. He'd put out literally hundreds of videos, going back almost twenty years—long before coded people had been around. Just like Tom had said in his latest interview, it seemed that most hate-peddlers were able to switch targets for their hatred as easily as pressing a tv remote.

Max's lawyer friend Keith called them during the flight, and she instructed him not to wait for them to get there. Even if Terrell wasn't coded, he deserved some good representation. As if that wasn't irony, given her new job. Keith called back shortly, saying that Terrell was all right, and that he claimed to be one of them. After that, it was just a waiting game.

When they finally got to the police station at about seven am local time, there was a small group of protesters already present at the main entrance. From the signs and chants, they were definitely here because of Terrell. When they saw her the chants got louder, but there weren't enough of them yet to be a real threat.

The cops let them in to see Terrell and Andy (or Dr. Harcourt as he preferred to be called here) got to work.

His team had made a lot of progress with coding people. Not only had they reduced the side effects and risks of complications, they could now examine the codes without sedating someone first. Andy opened up the plate and read off the serial number inside into Vicky's phone. On the other end, Holly verified that it was one of theirs, and forwarded the medical data surrounding that particular surgery back to Vicky.

"I still don't know how it happened," Terrell said shakily, after Andy had downloaded the code's event history and closed him up again. Apparently, the code was working perfectly right now, and had been for a while. "I wasn't afraid or anything when the fight started. I knew my code would keep me from hurting anyone, but then I did! I remember it clearly!" He raised his right palm, still traced with dry blood. "I still can't believe I hit him like that!"

"Take it easy, Terrell," she said calmly. "We're just trying to figure this out. Now, when was the last time your code went off?"

"Yesterday morning, I think? I have a sodium problem, and I put a little too much salt on my burger. The code wouldn't let me eat it. My girlfriend is coded too, and it would hurt her."

"And you don't remember it going off at any time during the fight? For that matter, did you have anything to drink last night?" People in Scheria didn't really drink at all anymore, but some coded people elsewhere still did. Tests had been done on the effect of alcohol on the code, but so far all had concluded it didn't have any influence at all. But there could always be a first time.

"No, and no! I don't drink anymore; I was clearheaded the whole time. I even tried to help the guy after I knocked him down."

"Of course they wouldn't include that in the video," Vicky reflected darkly. "Ok. Thank you, Terrell. Keith here will see that you get out soon, but could you tell us where you live, and stay there for the time being? I don't want to put you at any more risk, and we may need to examine your code again."

Terrell nodded and gave them an address before they left him in Keith's rather zealous care.

Back on the plane, Andy displayed the results downloaded from Terrell's code. It had been online for nearly two years, and recorded a bunch of activations, especially early on, which had leveled out over the past year or so. It had never been deactivated, even for an instant. His code was normal. The admittedly hasty brain scans Andy had conducted also showed that Terrell didn't have any brain damage or trauma that might have affected his lateral frontal pole. He was clean, too.

"What does that mean for us?" Andy asked after they'd confirmed his readings.

"If it's not a problem with Terrell's code or his brain, then it has to be a design flaw in the codes themselves," Vicky reasoned out loud. "Something that allows us to hurt people in order to defend ourselves."

"But we tested for that. Before my time and after I joined. We have tens of thousands of coded people. If there were violent incidents, we would know about it by now!"

"Tens of thousands of normal coded people, yes." Vicky pulled out her phone and called Holly. "But how many of them have recent military combat training and the muscle memory to react instantly?"

Chapter 19

This time when Toby got on the bus, he was holding his phone and looking at it intently. He nodded to Ray and sat next to him.

"What's going on?" Ray glanced at the screen. It showed an empty podium with skyscrapers in the background.

"Vicky Brandt is about to give a speech in Miami," Toby explained, looking tense. "I'm sure it's about the fight last week in Indianapolis. I hope it goes well. There's a lot riding on public response to this."

"Why is that? Those Humanity First nutjobs have been yakking about that video for days now, but people get into bar fights all the time."

"Not coded people," Toby responded sadly. "We still don't know what went wrong, but we have to keep the public's trust. We got a message from Scheria just after this happened. All of us had to be examined to make sure our codes were fine. They sent a doctor out here and I had mine looked at just yesterday. It's important, though. If uncoded people start to see us as a threat, I might have to leave. We all might."

Ray hadn't been expecting anything this severe. Toby had to see a doctor, just because of some bar fight seven states away? "Leave? Where would you go?"

"No idea. Scheria is full up already. We'd have to find someplace safe, though. I wonder what's delaying her. Is she all right?" He stared even more intensely at the screen.

He had to distract his friend somehow. Ray tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, say you had a kid. A son, maybe. How would you discipline him when he messed up? My dad was big into spankings. 'Nothing learns a kid like a good whacking,' he used to say."

Toby gave him a disbelieving look. "I… don't think the code would let me spank anyone, even my own kid. My dad spanked me when I was little, and it worked fine. My brother barely noticed it, though. He just kept on doing whatever it was that got him in trouble. My dad had to fine him to keep him in line."

"Wait, fine? As in money?"

"Yup. Losing his allowance, even just once, was a really big motivator for him. Every kid is different, you know? There's no need to smack your kid around when there are so many other options. Have you heard of the Silent Treatment?"

Ray shook his head.

"I read about it years ago. All kids need rules and if they break those rules they should be punished. But all kids also want attention and love. If my 'son' were to mess up and I told him, 'I'm not going to speak to you, or even notice you're there, for two full days because you're being punished,' I bet it would leave a pretty lasting impression. Of course I couldn't starve him or anything; I'd have to make sure that he could eat and such, but no contact outside of that." He sighed. "I know a lot of parents connect corporal punishment (hitting people) with discipline and order, but kids may not understand that. To a little boy, that could send all sorts of messed up messages."

Ray had never thought about that. Growing up, getting the occasional spanking had been normal to him, and he'd done the same to his daughters when they were little. Maybe that had been a mistake.

"What about you? Can you break the rules with a code in your head? Like, you're always on time to work. Could you be late if you wanted? Or if you're at work. Could you put down the wrong time on your timesheet, to get a little bigger paycheck?"

Toby looked surprised by the question. "I haven't really thought about it. If I didn't want to go into work, I guess I could stay home. The code can't force you to do anything—only prevent you from doing things. But it might keep me from doing anything else *but* work. As for the timesheet, lying and stealing are wrong. But corporations steal from workers all the time. Wage theft is a huge problem in almost every state and in other countries. I suppose… if I was absolutely sure that writing in the wrong time wouldn't hurt anyone, I could do it. Never tried, though."

He smiled slightly over at Ray. "I don't have many friends here to try it on, but from what I heard in Scheria, I can only lie to someone if I'm sure they won't believe it. Otherwise, I can't even finish the sentence. It's pretty weird."

Up ahead, Ray could see his stop approaching. He looked back at the phone. "Damn. I gotta go, but I wanted to see what she says."

"Well, reporters said she is there in Miami near the podium. She should get up there soon. I was going to record it anyway. If you want, I can show it to you tomorrow."

"Thanks." As he stood, Ray gave him a comforting look. "Whatever happens, I'm sure things will be fine. It was just a drunken fight that got out of hand. Could have happened to anyone."

Toby nodded as Ray left, but he could tell his friend was still concerned.

Vicky was already on camera before even approaching the stage, so she was careful to keep her expression calm. This whole situation was a barely manageable disaster.

After she'd been back in Scheria for a few days, Vicky had attended an emergency townhall meeting, which had been packed full and overflowing. Despite the risk of illness from all the people traveling in and out, there hadn't been an empty square inch in that auditorium. Just to be safe, Vicky and Andy had worn masks and kept their distance.

Her suggestion to hold this press conference had been met with skepticism and resistance at first. Even Andy had objected, on the grounds that they simply didn't know enough yet. There had been a mad scramble to examine every coded person worldwide inside a week, and it had barely been possible. Vicky was certain that without the organizational skills of the Servant and Allocators, they would still be examining codes today, and nowhere near being done. Another advantage of living in a wholly coded society was dramatically increased efficiency. They'd had doctors on planes heading out across the world in a matter of hours!

Vicky had eventually been able to convince them to let her speak to the world like this. It didn't matter that they didn't have all the answers yet. They had enough for a preliminary explanation, which was worlds better than just keeping quiet. Uncoded people were panicky—Vicky remembered how she used to be—especially in large groups. Radio silence just wasn't an option right now.

It seemed she'd made her case. When the vote texts came pouring in to decide whether or not to go through with the press conference, there were just over a hundred against it, and several thousand in favor. Now Vicky just had to prove them right.

She cleared her throat and stepped up to the podium, the hot sun glaring down on her from above. "Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming out here on this… particularly muggy day." That was no understatement, and some of the reporters looked similarly miserable. She could already feel sweat on her neck and shoulders.

"I'm Vicky Brandt, and I'm here to say a few things on behalf of all coded people, about the incident in Indiana last week."

"First off: the facts. Yes, Terrell Johnson is coded. Yes, he did break William Marks' nose and send him to the hospital. No, this was not an innocent bar fight. As major news sites have already reported, William Marks was paid by members within Humanity First to attack Mr. Johnson, and others were paid to film it. This. Was. A. Setup." She punctuated each word with a light fist to the podium.

She tried to inject some sympathy into her voice, despite recently mentioning HF. "Mr. Marks is still in the hospital, facing criminal charges. Mr. Johnson was offered bail but refused, insisting that he stay behind bars until we can figure this out."

"Despite their obvious disdain for us, we coded people owe thanks to Humanity First. Yes, you heard that right," she added wryly to the reporters, who were murmuring about it. "They discovered something about the codes that we hadn't! Despite their cynical intent, they added to our knowledge, and I fully admit that. Because of your hatred for us," she looked right at the nearest camera, "you actually made us better. Thank you."

She waited a moment for that to sink in, and then relaxed a bit. "Now for the details. As some of you know, the codes prevent us from physically attacking anyone. We tested it rigorously for years, and it always held true until now. We didn't have any coded people with recent military training until a few months ago, though. They react to an attack the same way anyone else would respond to touching an open flame. They act instinctively, instantaneously! It's all muscle memory and no deliberate decision making."

Vicky sighed theatrically, but genuinely. "It seems we can physically hurt people, but only if it happens instinctively, in the blink of an eye. That's why this is the very first incident from tens of thousands of coded people worldwide. Nothing else has changed. In fact, nothing has changed at all! We're still your neighbors, your friends. We're still upstanding and law-abiding citizens. Coded people are exactly the same today as we were last week. We just know more now, that's all." She tried to convey camaraderie, or approachability, with that last statement.

"I'll take some questions now." That opened the floodgates, as reporters were waving and calling to her. They peppered her with inquiries, but despite the cacophony, Vicky felt optimistic. That had gone well enough. She'd gotten the message out there, and it seemed to be understood, at least here. There were a few heckler reporters out there as always, asking gotcha questions and trying to twist her statement into some kind of admission of guilt. There would always be a few.

As often happened, the press conference had to be cut short. If allowed, reporters would probably keep asking questions until the sun burned out. Vicky was escorted off the stage and into a van in the nearby lot. She still looked flushed, both from the heat and excitement, and didn't look around until she was inside the car and it had already started moving.

"Tom!"

Tom laughed as she gave him an enthusiastic hug. It was limited somewhat by the car, but her grip hadn't diminished at all in the past few months. "Hey, there. It's good to see you."

"You, too!" She leaned back, and raised an arm. Abruptly, she paused and her eyes got all unfocused for a second, before looking at her clenched fist. "Gah. I was gonna punch you for scaring me." She gave him a disgruntled look. "Just don't 'test' me like that again, ok?"

"No promises," he teased.

"Anyway, I didn't expect you to get back so soon. Wait, are you actually *back*, back?"

"Yup. Russia and Ukraine are in the bag. That's all the major players now, except America of course." He looked outside glumly for a second. This Johnson situation could be a problem.

"Wow," she said, looking somber. "I mean, you've been going on so many trips, and for so long, I guess I thought you'd never be done. But here we are, almost at the finish line!"

"I know what you mean. You looked good up there by the way," he put in, gesturing out the window. "Ambassadorship agrees with you."

Vicky rolled her eyes. "Don't even get me started on that. I only accepted the job because I'd already been doing it. And I only did this because of the mess in Indiana. Nothing will convince those HF jerks to see things our way, but hopefully now other people will be more understanding."

"Well, I'll be meeting with the State Department in a few days. Maybe when I'm done, it'll make coded people seem more legitimate in the eyes of the American people." He paused. "Did you hear back from Nassau, though? Did they accept my latest proposal? I didn't get a firm answer from them before I left."

Vicky nodded. "They're on board too. Not that I'm surprised. We've helped them with a lot of storm relief, and their tourism trade has gone way up in the past few years. Everyone's speeding past Scheria, trying to get a look at the oh-so-exotic coded zoo." She shrugged. "I try not to take it personally when I see it."

"Yeah, you're pretty thick-skinned. Maybe that's a farm kid trait."

"Oh, Holly knows what you were doing and why, by the way. She hasn't told anyone else yet, because she thinks it's the right move."

That surprised Tom. It didn't really upset their plans at all, as long as she didn't tell any uncoded about it, but he thought he'd been discreet. "Huh. She's pretty sharp, I guess."

"More and more obviously every day. She has a natural leadership gift that was being totally wasted at that university." Vicky smiled briefly, and leaned against him as the car sped up the highway. "I don't want to jinx anything, especially with the Indiana situation, but for once everything seems to be working just fine."

Tom raised his eyebrows at that, but said nothing. In his experience, those were the times it was most important to be vigilant.

About a week later back in Scheria, they were finally let out of quarantine. Tom came across Vicky sitting on the steps outside the auditorium. She was brooding about something, he was sure. It probably wasn't the upcoming townhall either. The Terrell Johnson situation was mostly handled, and had faded from the news cycle. Tom's task had been completed, or as close as he could get, and the Servant was backing them on it. The new drone production program was in full swing by now, which should please Vicky.

"Hey," he sat next to her on the steps.

"Hey, yourself," she said listlessly, gazing out at the ocean.

"It's starting to get pretty crowded in there," he said timidly, indicating the the people moving past them into the auditorium. "We should get some seats before it fills up completely."

Vicky arched an eyebrow at him. "We're both going to be speaking in there. I'm sure they'll find seats for us."

"Then maybe you should talk about what's bothering you before it gets started. Or doesn't your code cover mental health, too?" That came out a bit more accusatory than he'd intended, so Tom went on quickly. "When you're pondering some work thing, it shows in the way you sit. You're hunched but intent. When it's personal, like now, your whole stance changes. It's like you're… diminished somehow. Do you really want to address Scheria like that?"

She sighed. "Leon is leaving. His orientation finished yesterday, and he's moving back to Philadelphia."

So that was the reason she was so down. "Oh. That's a real shame. I never met him, but from what you've said he sounded like someone who would want to stay here."

"That's just it. He does want to stay."

"Then why-"

"He made a pass at me," Vicky interrupted, still staring out over the waters and apparently oblivious to the thinning crowd.

"He did *what*?! Are you ok?" For some reason, despite not knowing any of the circumstances, Tom felt the urge to find that little punk and hit him a few times.

"I'm fine," she clarified right away. "We're both coded, so nothing happened. When I told him I didn't feel that way, he said he understood, and now he's packing up to leave. I'm the reason."

That was so typical of her. "There you go again—taking all the blame on yourself. You can't control how other people think or feel, Vicky. That's all on him, and you shouldn't blame yourself for it."

"Why not? It should have been obvious. A reverse-Nightingale thing. I was taking care of him during orientation, and he fell for me. If I'd seen it earlier, I could have nipped it in the bud. I could have made it clear, early on, that I was his guide and friend and nothing more. Then he might not be leaving!"

"For all you know he has other reasons to leave. And he might come back some day." He hesitated. Vicky was one of the wisest people he knew, and this was pretty simple stuff. "You weren't coded yesterday, Vic. You know all of this already. What's really bothering you about all this?"

She gave one mirthless chuckle, and wiped at her eyes. "Nice catch. You're right. This whole thing… just brought Amir back a bit, that's all. It even happened almost the same way. Leon kissed me, out of the blue. I couldn't kiss him back because I knew my code would stop me." She looked down at the steps. "I'm just glad it happened in private. I'm pretty well-known, and the last thing Leon needs right now is gossip spreading about him being shot down by someone famous."

Spreading gossip didn't sound like a very coded thing to do, Tom thought, but Vicky was something of an icon here. Some coded people had started following her example and keeping their heads completely shaven. Loudly and proudly declaring who and what they were to the world.

"You know it's been almost a full week since I thought about Amir?" Vicky continued almost inaudibly. "That's a personal best."

"I know the feeling. I still keep in touch with Dina, but it's nothing too elaborate. Weekly emails, just like he did. I figure it's what he'd want."

"I'm sure she appreciates it. It's just so unfair, you know? We've built so much here—started a community that loves and trusts and cooperates seamlessly! He would be here too, if that landing gear hadn't collapsed. He deserved to see what his work would create."

"Now you're playing the what-if game. Don't go there, Vicky. That way lies madness. I think he would be proud of what we all started, and I take comfort from that. All we can really do is just keep at it." Tom stood and reached out a hand and slowly, Vicky took it.

Her steps didn't seem any lighter on the way in, but at least her grip was strong.

Chapter 20

The auditorium had been built over a year ago, back when Scheria was still an emerging phenomenon. Vicky hadn't been involved in the construction, but it was clear now that the builders had underestimated just how fast and large the coded population would grow. There wasn't a single empty seat here, and all the walkways were filled as well. Even so, not everyone could make it, so there were cameras broadcasting this to the rest of the island and to their neighboring colony.

As the Servant, unofficial or not, Holly was the first to speak. She stepped up to the podium in the middle of the circular building, and took the mic. "Welcome, everyone. I'll try to keep this brief so you don't have to stay packed in here like sardines, but we have a few important things to cover. First, our so-called colonists have finished a livable settlement over on Toman Cay. We're still shipping food and drinking water to them, but they have an electrical grid now, supplied by a tidal generator just like the ones we have here. They've decided to name their new city Elysia, and some of them are here with us today!"

Holly pointed over to a group of about forty people on the north end, who stood up and waved to the rest. A round of applause rippled through the crowd, before Holly raised a hand to quiet them. "We'll have plenty of time to celebrate their achievements, but before they go any further, we have some big decisions to make, as coded societies."

She gestured over to Angie, who stood up nervously and began speaking. Her voice couldn't carry at all, and Holly beckoned to her, smiling.

Vicky felt a warm sense of pride. Angie had come so far. Her talents had really been wasted back on the mainland: serving unhealthy food to even unhealthier people. Scraping by on a meager salary and tips, and always wondering if she had enough to pay rent that month. Here, where all her basic needs and those of her son were taken care of, she could focus on something she was really good at: preparing for and cleaning up after natural disasters. Or rather, organizing others to do that—she was only one person after all.

Angie took the stage, and slowly got over her nervousness as she got started. "So, hurricane season is over for this year, but we've had a clear trend for decades now. Every year it gets harder and harder to withstand these hits, both on islands and on the mainland. We've had to rebuild our sandbag wall on the east shore three times now! It's cutting into our relief efforts on the other Bahamian islands and over on the coast. No offense to you guys," she nodded deferentially over at the Allocators and their dozen-or-so aides, "but even if you did give us more to work with, all it would do is buy us time. Eventually one of these years, a really big hurricane will just wash us right into the ocean!"

Holly stepped in, and Angie went back to her seat, looked visibly relieved. "With how bad it's gotten, it's time to ask ourselves if we really should stay here. There are several options for relocation, from further into the Atlantic where the storms won't be as bad, to someplace desolate and uninhabited like the Sahara, or even halfway across the world. From what I'm told, one of the original options was an island in the Philippines. Each option would be a lot safer, but it would mean leaving a lot behind. There would be other problems as well. Vicky?"

Now it was her turn to feel self-conscious. As she approached the podium, Vicky could feel everyone's eyes on her, as if each was a tiny weight she carried on her shoulders. "One of the reasons we wanted to be here was to be close to our uncoded friends. We wanted them to think of us as a safe, convenient option nearby, as well as remind them constantly that there was another way to structure their society. It's true, we could do that somewhere else in the world, but I strongly believe we're doing the most good right here. We're the most *needed* right here!"

She looked down for a moment. "I know that if we move, we'll still be available to anyone, anywhere. Nothing will change about who we accept for coding, or why. But to them, it will be a change. Uncoded people don't see us objectively—if we move, it will be a sign to them that we aren't reliable. Humanity First will certainly paint it that way for them, and a lot of uncoded people will believe it."

A young man near the front leaned forward and whispered something into Angie's ears. She looked confused, but then put her hands over Joey's ears. Then the man stood up and called out to Vicky. "Why not call them out on their bullshit, then?" He asked loudly, projecting for the crowd. "They've demanded debates from you again and again, and I've seen you on tv. You'd tear them a new one! Why not debate them live, and show people why they're such idiots?"

Angie let go of Joey, looking relieved. The man's claims were flattering, but Vicky didn't feel as confident in her abilities as he clearly was. "Because that would only give them what they want," she said, looking at him but trying to reach the whole room.

Her first inclination had been the same, but Tom had talked her out of it early on. Now she needed to explain it to everyone else. "They're not interested in a real debate. If there were actual rules, like having a set time to speak, and being punished for interruptions, they wouldn't participate! All they want is a chance to shout over us, publicly. If we engage with them, all we do is increase their audience, and I won't do that. It'd be like wrestling with a pig: in the end we're both dirty."

Looking thoughtful, the man sat back down, and Vicky continued. "We can't do anything to oppose HF directly other than keep being ourselves. No, we have to decide to stay or go based on how much good it would do all uncoded people, not just the ones who openly hate us."

There weren't any more obvious questions following that, so Holly put it to a vote. All around the room, people pulled out devices.

Not everyone had a laptop or phone, but there were plenty of interface devices to fill in the gaps. She'd helped design them herself, and the boys over in Technology Adaptation had programmed the app that connected peoples' phones to the Need Board. Within two minutes, the votes had been collected and tallied.

Nearly ninety percent favored staying here.

"Very well," Holly said serenely. If she opposed the majority, there was no sign of it on her face. She beckoned over at Sam Kane in Architecture, and he moved up to take Vicky's place. She sat, and shared a commiserating glance with Angie as she did.

"More sandbag walls or other barriers won't do us any good," he began. "Storm surges can wash right over them, and then we'd be keeping water in, not out. Our only choice is to enclose the whole city evenly, and that means building a dome. Actually two of them," he added after a moment, looking over at their Elysian visitors.

Sam's voice was totally monotone, and surprisingly so. He was clearly no public speaker, but from what Vicky had heard, he was the best they had at design and construction. He'd come up with their tidal array along with dozens of other structures here in Scheria.

"A dome over Scheria would have to be 3.2 kilometers in diameter—the largest ever built by far. Another one over Elysia would be about three quarters of that. To say that we don't have the construction materials to do that would be… an understatement. Even if we did, construction would take years. Thanks to Miss Brandt," he nodded down at her, "we have remote-piloted VTOL drones that can be outfitted for construction. That would speed up the process, but there are about a billion other details needing to be worked out. If we do this, we're basically building an eighth Wonder of the world. And a ninth."

"Thank you, Sam," Holly put in, the seriousness of her tone underscoring the enormity of the task. He sat down, just as stone-faced as before, and his colleagues nearby all began whispering to him.

"Et les Bahamiens? Vont-ils nous permettre de les construire?" A tall woman asked from Holly's left. She held up a small device and cranked up the volume. "And the Bahamians? Will they permit us to construct them?" The automated voice asked from it.

Vicky recognized Danielle, one of their foreign 'recruits'. She didn't speak a word of English, but there had been a lot of advances in translation technology since Vicky had been in college, and her Lingo translator had an earbud that allowed her to keep up with what was being said. Mostly.

Holly smiled. It was a valid question. Technically they were all still on Bahamian soil, and a project of this magnitude would definitely need their approval first. "That won't be a problem, actually. Tom?"

Unlike all the other guest speakers, Tom looked totally at ease as he stepped up to the podium and took the mic. "The Bahamian people like you a lot. You've helped them time and again, and have brought a lot of business to the area. You're no threat to them militarily, and they know it. With the donations the Allocators have gotten from coded people here and on the mainland, you've bought a lot of raw materials from them. Not enough to build your new Wonders of the world maybe, but enough to get their goodwill. When I approached them last year, putting forward the idea of forming a new Coded Nation, they were receptive. It took a lot of negotiations since then, but we hammered out an agreement about a month ago."

He pressed a button, and a hidden projector pushed an image onto a white sheet above the north entrance. It was a map of Darien and Toman Cays, and the water surrounding them. "They weren't willing to let us have any more islands, not that I expected them to. Still, if we—sorry, if *you*—decide to found a Coded Nation, they'll recognize the following borders." He pressed another button, and an area stretching out about thirty miles from each island was highlighted. Tom looked troubled for a moment as he continued. "I had to promise that your trading relationship with them would remain the same, and that if you choose to expand your borders later, you wouldn't get any more territory from them, but it wasn't hard to assume either of those. Of course all of that depends on your decision here. If you don't want to be your own nation, then all of this disappears." He shut off the projector for effect.

The crowd looked mostly pleased with the idea. It wasn't surprising, really. They lived such different lives here than they ever had as uncoded people. Everyone's basic needs were taken care of by everyone else. Money was only useful as a means of dealing with outsiders, and had no value inside their society. Every coded person living on either island had a purpose they could be proud of, and the freedom to pursue it to the benefit of everyone.

Even their response to the increasing weather events was different: there were no cars here, and power was generated non-thermally. The nutrient bulbs people ate didn't need any plastic containers to later throw away, and any containers for liquids were exchanged and washed on site. They still had to burn gas to run their boats, but that was about the only carbon footprint they had left, and Engineering was working on that one next. And this was all in a community of over five thousand people!

It would probably take an act of God to change the rest of the world to match, but they were doing their part, and hopefully that would inspire others to do the same.

Switching screens on the projector, Tom pulled up another image, this one of a world map. A lot of the countries were highlighted in green. "Over the past year and a half, I've also made trips all over the world, making the same proposition again and again. As of last week, we now have over seventy countries that will recognize a Coded Nation if you choose to create one. That includes England, France, Germany, Israel, Ukraine, Russia, India, China, Japan, and South Korea. The only major player still to go is America, and I was delayed a bit on that because of the, uh, situation with the codes. They'll need more convincing, but most of the world is behind you."

Even though she'd known what he was up to, hearing his accomplishments aloud still impressed Vicky. She asked their pre-planned question anyway, just to make sure everyone knew. "There's no such thing as a free lunch, Tom. Especially with uncoded people. What did you have to promise them?"

Tom nodded deferentially. "You're right. Politics is give-and-take, and most of those countries needed an incentive. Their requests were money, for the most part. I put a full list on the Need Board if any of you are interested." Some people immediately pulled out their interfaces and began looking it up. "All told, it would take about a tenth of your yearly resources to make this happen. But they're all one-time payments. If you make this commitment, you get the legitimacy of an independent nation, and that's forever."

"Assuming you can get the US to sign on," Holly reminded him, and he looked a little chagrined.

"Yes, assuming that. I'm actually heading up to DC tomorrow to continue talks with the State Department. Unless you choose to stay the way you are, of course."

There was another vote, with an even more lopsided result. Over 98 percent wanted to go independent, and Vicky was one of them.

An older woman waved at Holly just as the vote had been announced and she nodded, beckoning her up to the podium. "This is Nadia Becker, and she has an idea that actually pertains to us becoming our own nation, and to our relationship with American uncoded people."

Nadia smiled at her, and cleared her throat. "Now that Elysia's up and running, we'll have a little more space here in Scheria. I know we don't have any kids here because the island is so small, but isn't it time we thought about changing that?"

"There are a lot of us who still have uncoded family who don't live here. I understand why uncoded adults can't live here, other than you, Tom," she said warmly to him. "But if someone is under 21, why not house them here? And not just our own kids would benefit from this, either. There are tons of overcrowded orphanages just in Florida alone. If we can convince them we can take good care of the kids, maybe they'll let us!"

"It would humanize us a bit, in the eyes of the uncoded," Vicky called out. She hadn't been expecting this proposal, as she had never considered having kids of her own, but it might be useful in more than just a humanitarian way.

Joey reached up and pulled on Angie's sleeve. She exchanged whispers with him, and they both smiled. It made sense he would be excited—he had been the only kid here for years now. The idea had to be comforting to Tom as well. He acted like he belonged, but he wasn't coded. There were some residents of Scheria who didn't want him around, despite his many contributions.

Holly looked over at Tom. "Would that help, or hurt, with the idea of a Coded Nation?"

After a moment, he shrugged. "I don't see how it could hurt, at least. We could pursue both ideas at the same time. Should I bring it up with the State Department?"

Holly shook her head. "No, we'd do better exploring it locally. We can reach out to orphanages in the Bahamas and Florida, as well as over in Europe and Africa. It'll widen our net." She looked out to the crowd. "If there are no objections, I'll put it to a vote."

"I don't think it's a good idea," a young man called out from the crowd, standing up. Vicky recognized the same person who'd asked her about debating Humanity First. He took a step up onto the platform and then waited. Holly obligingly beckoned him forward and put a mic in his hands.

That was another difference from uncoded people. Anyone could speak here, because everyone knew they spoke in good faith, and wouldn't lie or intentionally exaggerate.

"I understand your desire to be close to family," he went on, first to Nadia and then to the crowd. "I feel the same. But can we be sure that 'humanizing' ourselves is the right move? Think about it. Right now, coded people are being persecuted on the mainland. The same way women are being marginalized and objectified, or black people are being beaten and shot in the streets, or gay and trans people are being demonized on the news. Our natural instinct is to show uncoded people that we're not that different from them. Maybe then they won't mistreat us anymore."

He paused for a moment, and then started up with even more intensity. "But we *are* different from them! No one can choose to be female, black, gay or trans, but being coded is by definition a choice! We all wanted to be this way, and so we are! If we bring children here, we'll be raising them with our coded values. Maybe that'll be good for them, or maybe not. I don't really know. But Humanity First will use it against us. They'll accuse us of indoctrinating those kids, and they'll say we're a cult. For once, they'll actually have some evidence to back that up, too! Indoctrinating kids is part of what cults do."

All around the audience, Vicky could see people thinking about it. This man, whoever he was, did have a point. Did they have the right to raise kids with their own values, especially if some of those kids weren't actually their own?

"What's your name?" Holly asked after a moment.

"Abner Geller," he said hesitantly. "I know I'm a bit much. I've always been intense. It's just… being coded was the best thing to happen to me, ever. I'm part of something that's so much better than anything I had before. I've had a few years to get used to it now, and I don't want to go back. If we make ourselves like the uncoded people, we're sending a message that their way is better than ours, when clearly it's the-" he paused a moment, and took a breath. "When clearly it's not."

That hadn't been a code activation. Vicky got the distinct impression that Abner had been about to say the coded way was better.

Abner looked to the other side of the crowd. "I just voted for a coded nation because I think we need to cut the cord. We're not Americans, or Bahamians, or French, anymore. We need to stop being citizens of other nations, so that we can become equal masters of our own! I mean, look at us! Look at Holly!" He gestured to her, and she gave him a surprised look.

"She's the most powerful person in this room, and that means absolutely nothing here. She's an individual like the rest of us. There is no authority here, other than the will of the majority. The only reason she's our Servant is because she's the best at doing the job. If someone else could do it better—and wanted the job—they would be doing it, and she would step aside immediately! We live in a true meritocracy here, and we need to embrace that, proudly! I'm done pretending to be anything like the uncoded, and it feels great."

After that, Abner quietly—almost meekly—retook his seat. Again, the crowd mulled over his words, but this time the feeling was a little different. It had gone from an ethical pondering to a question of value—or of superiority. Clearly Abner had made up his mind. Vicky had been so busy the past few weeks that she hadn't put aside time to think about these things.

"I propose a compromise of sorts," Holly said after a few moments, proving again what an able administrator she was. While Vicky had been pondering the big questions, Holly had been keeping everyone on track. "I suggest that we create this child-care facility here in Scheria, but that we open it up *only* to biological or previously adopted children of coded people. At first, anyway," she qualified. "It would allow us to live near our children and families, as long as they're younger than 21, but not open us up to accusations of indoctrination. They can't blame us for how we raise the ones we already have, not without opening themselves up to similar ridicule."

Vicky wasn't sure how effective that would be. In her experience, Humanity First had never let little things like objective truth or being accused of hypocrisy get in their way. Still, a little bit was better than nothing.

"If there are no problems, we can discuss opening it up to more kids later, but for now, will that suffice?" She looked first to Nadia, who nodded, smiling gratefully. When Holly looked at Abner, he hesitated, but eventually nodded as well.

The vote came up at 63 percent in favor of children here. Holly promised that they would discuss what to do when those kids reached 21, before adjourning the meeting. Vicky hated being in a press of people, so she waited for the crowd to thin before leaving. During the wait, she thought back on what Abner had said.

In the early days, Vicky had been concerned that some people might not value their codes enough. That they might pretend it wasn't there, or resent the control it represented. She'd never thought about people who might value it too much.

Chapter 21

Time and again, Tom had tried to arrange a meeting with the President, but it looked like today would have the same outcome as before. He was sidelined, and sent to the State Department again.

The redirection was political. Tom was sure of that much at least. Being seen meeting with a known representative of coded people was probably just too controversial for the President right now. Still, that didn't mean the deal was off the table. It would just have to be done quietly, that was all.

Catherine Hegel welcomed him into her office as always, and offered him a seat. Her position within the State Department was something of a mystery, but as far as Tom could tell, she was some kind of fixer. Her authority and duties shifted to fit the situation, and she was by all accounts, very good at it.

She had unusual news, as well. "The President has authorized me to begin an induction process for your theoretical coded nation, Tom," she said out of the blue. "It'll require an inspection of Scheria, in person."

As surprised as he was now that it was actually happening, Tom nodded as calmly as he could. She would be the inspector, of course. "Every induction is different, though. What do you have in mind for your visit?"

Catherine smiled tightly. "Nothing unusual. I'll be visiting Elysia and Scheria to check for human rights violations. I'll have a few others with me, for security, documentation, and analysis. You're welcome to come along, if you want."

"Human rights violations?" Tom echoed with disbelief. "They're all coded! They can't hurt anyone except in self defense—and most of them can't even do that! You don't seriously think they have child labor or human trafficking or ethnic cleansing going on there, do you?"

"Of course not," she assured him. "This is just procedure. The first step in a hopefully short chain of events towards recognizing your new nation."

"Sure it is," he didn't bother to hide the cynicism in his voice. They had satellites which could keep watch on both islands 24/7. They had spotters both on American shores and Bahamian islands who could count, easily, the number of coded people coming to and from the islands. The only reason this so-called 'procedure' had been invented was so that she could get a look inside those buildings.

He hesitated for a second. He'd known Catherine for years. He'd had dinner at her house and met her husband, Air Force General Andrew Hegel. They were both pretty straight shooters, if he was any judge of character. That meant this trip was actually her superiors' idea. And since they weren't interested in showing their faces, he'd just have to deal with it.

It did give him leverage, though. If they were curious, maybe they could be enticed into a few concessions. "All right, but the people who go with you will be limited," Tom began again. "Security won't be an issue. Everyone on the island—save for me, one kid, and a few people still being evaluated—is coded by now, so you won't need any kind of escort, armed or otherwise. Analysis won't be an issue either. Each section of both cities is filled with experts, and I'll make sure they're cooperative. If you don't understand something, all you'll have to do is ask and they'll explain. As for documentation… I'll allow a film crew, but only two people. One camera operator and one sound specialist . And we'll inspect all their equipment before we even leave American soil."

That last bit was a bluff. There were a few former US military people who were now coded, and even some who'd served in the intelligence community, but Max was their best counter-intelligence guy, and he was a former cop. But Catherine didn't know that.

They haggled a bit before she agreed to those restrictions, but then she brought up another point. "I've been asked to bring one other person along, too." She tapped her intercom once. "Hal, could you come in here, please?"

After a few seconds her door opened again, admitting a somewhat overweight, middle-aged man. He was balding, and sweating a bit, despite the building's air conditioning. "This is Hal Drekker with the IRS," Catherine introduced him, and Tom shook his hand. "He'll be coming with us to the coded islands."

"And what possible business could the IRS have in coded territory?" Tom asked mildly.

Drekker's posture slouched even further, if possible. "I have no idea. I just got this assignment from my boss back at Constitution Avenue. I haven't even had a chance to read the full instructions yet."

"The IRS just wants to monitor the use of American equipment and material on the islands," Catherine clarified.

As if that was clear in any way. "What are you talking about?" Tom objected incredulously. "All the equipment and raw materials are private property. It was all purchased by coded people, *after* they were coded, and put to use only on those islands or in other Bahamian territory. What could he possibly be inspecting?"

Drekker looked even more uncomfortable. In a way, Tom actually felt sorry for the man. He was just a pawn here, moved into place by unseen forces and then attacked just for being here.

"That's not entirely accurate," Catherine went on, opening one of the files on her desk and turning it to face him. "According to our records, the original facility on Darien Cay was built by an American construction company, Builders Clio. American workers did the work, and they used American materials. There was also a full busload of equipment you brought over from your previous location, Archcrest Penitentiary. That equipment was registered to Coleman-Saito Industries."

This was ridiculous! "Builders Clio only put together prefabricated structures! They've all been torn down by now anyway, and replaced with more efficient coded designs. As for the CS equipment, it was all ceded to us as part of our negotiations over three years ago. When we cut ties with Coleman-Saito, that equipment became our property. They signed waivers saying so!"

Catherine opened another file. "As you may know, Coleman-Saito Industries is under investigation by the SEC for possible securities fraud. In this case, that includes tax evasion. As part of that investigation, we're required to examine that equipment to make sure it wasn't misreported."

Tom gave an exasperated sigh. It was all maneuvering and misdirection of course, but he had to give them credit. Going through an old business partner—and an untrustworthy one at that—was efficient and effective. Cold as ice, but effective.

"Fine," he said as calmly as he could manage. He turned to Drekker. "You come along, you observe, and you take notes. But most of that equipment was decommissioned years ago, and is gathering dust in some storeroom in Scheria. You're just there to confirm that none of it is missing. Hell, when we're done, you can take it all back with you if you want!"

Drekker flinched at his tone, and again Tom felt sorry for him.

He looked back at Catherine. "I have one further stipulation myself, actually." Reaching down into his briefcase, he pulled out a stapled document and dropped it on top of her cursed files. "That's a Nondisclosure Agreement drafted by a coded lawyer. Or actually a *former* lawyer because they don't actually need attorneys there. Everyone who goes to those islands, including me, signs one. It authorizes you to share what you see *only* with your superiors, and then only if it pertains directly to your job. Any public disclosure of anything you see there will open you up to the mother of all lawsuits. And you know me, Catherine. You know I'll do it."

Catherine hesitated, tapping one of her lacquered nails on the desk for a bit. "I'll have to look over this NDA, and I'm sure you'll want to pin down the details for the visit, and where exactly we're going. Assuming there aren't any problems with either of those… you've got yourself a deal." She extended a hand. Despite his apparently timid nature, even Drekker looked interested.

Tom shook her hand reluctantly, wondering if one of those nails would end up stabbing him in the hand. Or in the back.

They ended up scheduling their 'inspection tour' a few days after the first kids arrived in Scheria. From what Vicky told him, Tom imagined joyful reunions of over a hundred little ones with one of their coded parents.

Imagined being the operative word. He had been stuck in Miami, waiting for the State Department to actually get moving. Now they were *finally* approaching Scheria by boat.

As for the tour, their first and most important stop was Uptown, of course. It was where all the old material from Archcrest had been stored. Also, if there was any child labor to be found, Tom was sure it would be here, in Scheria's nerve center.

Now that he'd had some time to reflect on his earlier conversation with Catherine, Tom had gotten over most of his anger. She was State Department, after all. She'd had an entire career to master rules-lawyering and dirty political tricks. He just had to keep his eye on the ball here. If this went off smoothly, national recognition could be just days away!

Max had inspected their equipment before departure, as agreed. He'd put on a good show, despite being unqualified. If Tom hadn't known it was fake, he might have believed it. Now one of Max's trainees was standing beside them like some kind of overprotective pit bull, as they toured the Allocators' building.

Holly was there too, explaining the day-to-day operations as professionally as she could, giving an admirable impression of being *the one* in charge. At least Catherine seemed to be buying it, but Drekker looked apprehensive as always. Did that man ever relax?

Someone tapped Tom on the shoulder. "Mr. Penderton?" It was one of Holly's aides. "You have a call, sir. From the mainland." He pointed down the hall. Around the corner was one of their few land lines, which was dedicated to American calls specifically. Tom excused himself briefly, and headed down the corridor at a fast pace. Whatever this was, hopefully it wouldn't take long.

Max was just around the corner, on his own cell phone. There was another coded man there, who Tom didn't recognize. Max looked up as Tom arrived, and then said, "he's here now. Thanks," and hung up.

Tom looked at the phone on the wall in confusion.

"I asked a coded friend in Miami to make an official call for you," Max explained, peeking around the corner again. "That way I could get you away from them without lying or having it look suspicious. We have a problem," he went on, before Tom could even catch up with that.

He gestured to his companion. "This is Stan Harriman. He used to work with the NSA before coming here. When I was looking through their things back in Miami, something seemed off. So, once we got back to Scheria, I called Stan in to help me vet them. Most of them are on the level, but one isn't exactly legit."

Tom sighed. "What is Catherine up to now?"

"It's not her," Max said quickly. "The camera crew's fine too. It's the other one—Drekker."

"I asked some friends of mine to do some checking back in DC," Stan put in quietly. "There is no Hal Drekker on the IRS payroll, or in their employee records. There *is* a Harold Drekker working for the NSA right now, though," he held up his own phone.

The man depicted on the phone's screen was standing straight and proud, unlike the Drekker Tom had met a few weeks ago. The face and hair were the same, though. It was him.

Tom let out an angry breath. "Whatever he's up to, at least he's unarmed. Can you restrain him without your code going off? Either of you?"

Max hesitated. "That's just the thing. I'm not sure he is unarmed. When I was looking over his laptop, I think I saw a hairline seam. It might be a hidden compartment. That's why I got Stan up here."

"I saw the laptop when they came into the building," Stan added. "It's old and clunky, but even with all the defunding the IRS has had the past few years, they still send their people out with better equipment than that. If he's got a weapon, it's in there."

Tom cursed, and then winced. He was a good distance away, so it was unlikely he'd been heard. "You both worked at the NSA, Stan. Would Drekker recognize you?"

Stan shook his head. "I don't know for sure. I didn't exactly hide the fact that I was getting coded. He probably saw a picture of me at least. I don't want to risk it."

"All right. I want you to go to my quarters. It's room 46B in the Inner Ring. On the floor next to the door is a small black box. Get it back here to Max as soon as you can." Stan nodded and ran for the back door. He was remarkably fast, considering his age.

"Max, when he gets back, I want you to deliver the box to me, *nonchalantly*. I'll try and delay the tour until then."

There wasn't much delaying to do, actually. Catherine seemed fascinated with everything Holly described about their operations, and wasn't in any hurry to continue. Drekker kept up his pretense, apparently oblivious to anything out of the ordinary, but Tom thought he'd seen a slight stiffening of Drekker's shoulders just as Tom got back to the group.

Was Catherine in on it too? Tom hoped she was just a patsy in all this—he'd come to respect her work and her dedication, despite her unfortunate choice in colleagues. He tried to be his usual polite self as they took a detour to examine the storeroom in the basement.

Drekker pulled out his laptop and Tom had to fight the instinct to tense up at that. Fortunately, the taxman/spy just went about his cover, carefully comparing the contents of the storeroom with the list they'd confiscated from Coleman-Saito. Tom actually felt a little happy about that one—if it were true. No company deserved to be digitally dissected more than theirs.

Finally, Max appeared in the doorway. He looked around briefly, and then went over to Tom. "You asked for this as soon as it arrived?" He said calmly, offering the box.

"Right, thanks," Tom tried to respond dismissively. When Catherine and one of the camera crew looked at him curiously, he just said, "it's a gift for one of the kids. Excuse me a moment, I just want to make sure they sent the right model."

There was a bathroom just down the hall. Once inside, Tom blocked the door with his back, and yanked out his wallet. Inside was a small key, which fit the lock on the front of the box. Frantically, but still as quietly as he could manage, Tom unlocked and opened it.

Fit snugly into the foam casing around it, was his old handgun.

Tom loaded it as quickly as he could, old memories of early shooting practice flooding into his mind. Vicky would probably give him hell for this, but there was no way he was letting Drekker hurt anyone or steal anything. Tom tucked the gun into his rear waistband, checked to see if his coat fully covered it, and rejoined the tour.

They were just leaving the storeroom and heading back upstairs to the lobby. Tom walked fast to catch up. Once in the lobby, Tom tried to figure out the best way to do this.

There were a lot of coded people in nearby rooms, and Tom didn't know how many of the tour were in on it. He trusted Max though, and Max had said only Drekker might be armed.

Something in Tom's stance must have been off though, because Drekker paused for a moment, glancing at him. They locked eyes for the briefest of instants, and then Drekker was off, running for the door.

Tom didn't give himself any time to hesitate. He pulled his gun, aimed it over Drekker's head, and fired. "Stop!"

A window near the door shattered, and startled noises quickly became screams. Drekker's headlong flight faltered, and he came to a stop. His hand darted for his laptop, and Tom let off another round, this one out the ruined window.

Tom shouted over them. "Don't move, Drekker! I'm not coded. You know I can kill you if I want!"

Mercifully, Drekker obeyed. In truth, Tom wasn't sure he could kill the man, and he didn't want to find out. "Max, get his equipment, quickly," Tom ordered, moving close enough so that he could shoot one and not both. Once Max had the gear he backed away, and Tom ordered Drekker down on the ground.

The screams had finally faded, but the window was still broken.

Chapter 22

Vicky felt like her blood was boiling! "What the hell were you thinking, Tom?? You brought a gun here, and fired it? Have you lost your damn mind?"

It had only been about ten minutes since the incident. Vicky had been in a nearby building, ironically because Holly had thought that her presence with the tour might be disruptive because of the recent Terrell Johnson situation. *Her* presence!

Tom remained in place despite her ire, and raised his hands defensively. "I couldn't let him get away," he said evenly, as if he was blameless. "Who knows what he might have stolen?"

Max had explained the situation to her, but even he seemed shaken by what had just happened. Strangely, he was called away to the adjoining lab building, but Holly promised to fill him in on everything once he got back.

Stan was busy going over Hal Drekker's equipment, while Hal himself was a few hundred feet away, handcuffed to one of the guardrails. It was fortunate, or perhaps unfortunate depending on how you looked at it, that Max still had some of his old police gear on the island, including several handcuffs. Most of the building had been evacuated, but two coded assistants were keeping an eye on Hal. They couldn't do much if he somehow broke free, but they could warn everyone else.

Catherine Hegel and the camera crew were standing nervously to one side, also out of earshot. Perhaps they were afraid Tom might shoot at them, too. The gun was on the ground in between them all, but it was still loaded.

"We're on the same side, Vic," Tom went on in that same maddeningly even voice. "I want the coded nation to succeed as well. But those same codes handicap you when it comes to defending yourselves. You need someone to protect you."

"Protect us?" Vicky bit out. "There wasn't a single gun on this island until you brought one! Everything we are is nonviolent! Why do you think we reacted so quickly to the Terrell Johnson thing? You didn't protect us, Tom. Depending on how this gets out, you might have just destroyed us!" For a few terrible moments, Vicky wondered what else Tom might have done to violate coded principles. His negotiations overseas—had they included threats of violence as well? He claimed all they would have to give up was resources in order to get most major nations to sign on, but could she be sure of that? What else had he been involved in? Blackmail? Extortion? Murder?

"Uh, not to take sides here, but I found something," Stan interrupted her thoughts. He lifted up a panel from Hal's laptop, and slid back a bit. Inside was a compact but lethal-looking gun, apparently already loaded. "He was reaching for it when Tom took his second shot," Stan said quietly. "I saw it myself."

"If he really is a spy, than what was he doing here?" Holly asked quietly. Vicky knew she was angry too, but she was much better at keeping on topic despite that. "We never went into any of the offices, or the labs. The only room we stayed in was that storeroom downstairs, and all the equipment in there hasn't been used for years."

"He was using this," Stan lifted up a chip from the inside of the computer. "It's a wireless sniffer. Basically, it scans for computer networks nearby, automatically connects to them, and then copies as much information as it can. Its range is 250, maybe 300 feet. If you were anywhere near other computers, this thing probably downloaded their hard drives. He probably planned to just walk through the whole building slowly, and then leave with us being none the wiser."

Holly inhaled sharply. "The server room is only one level down from that storeroom! He was in there at least ten minutes. Chances are, he got everything."

"Well, I can probably confirm that," Stan said, lifting the chip up to the light and eying it. "Doesn't look like it's been modified beyond the version I used to use. Give me a few minutes to check." He paused, looking up at Holly and Vicky. "There is good news though. The range works both ways, meaning he didn't send out any of this information. Whoever sent him didn't get anything yet."

As Stan got to work with the chip and one of their own computers, Vicky offered up a reluctant sigh. "I can't condone what you did, Tom, but at least we know your suspicions were right. Your heart was in the right place, even if it wasn't connected to your brain."

Tom shrugged. "I'll take it."

Stan's analysis was quick, efficient, and thorough. The chip in Hal's computer had downloaded their entire database, including general coded statistics, architectural plans for the whole city as well as the theoretical domes, Vicky's drone spec modifications, and a whole hell of a lot more. There was no medical data thankfully—the coding facility itself was out of range—but just about everything else had been at risk!

"It figures," Holly said darkly after Stan had finished his report. "The only reason to spy on someone is if you can't trust them to tell the truth. There's only one thing they know for sure we can't do, and that is lie. Yet they assume we're lying anyway! I just don't understand how these people think!"

"That's because they're not thinking," Tom responded sadly. "They're operating on fear alone. For a long time now, and especially after 9/11, the American government has been driven by fear. It's been that way so long that it's become normal. Anything they don't understand—like coded people—is a threat by default. It's only natural that people who live their lives that way would assume the worst, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary."

"But none of what they stole is even valuable to them," Holly countered. "We have no military. The drone specs are unusual, but hardly groundbreaking. No offense, Vicky. We have no list of coded people out there. Our architectural plans are ambitious, sure, but totally theoretical at this point. Why would they want any of it?"

"They don't," Max said, arriving from the side. With him was a teenager Tom didn't recognize, and strangely, Abner Geller. Even more strangely, Max was handcuffed to the teen.

"I think this was all a distraction," Abner said somberly, and looked to the young man in custody. "This is Winslow Tan. As in Dr. Fai Tan's estranged son. He arrived with the other kids yesterday. And this is what he just stole from his dear father's computer," he lifted up a thumb drive. "While you were all busy dealing with your, uh, super-spy, 'Slow' here was busy getting the real goods." He shook the teen by the shoulders briefly, as a mock encouragement.

There was a moment of silence as everyone processed this news. As usual, Holly was the first to respond. "How do you know that, Abner? He could have just been visiting his father at work."

Abner smiled mirthlessly. "I don't trust uncoded people," he said bluntly, looking right at Tom. "I've been keeping an eye on the kids ever since they got here yesterday. When this brave little soldier asked to see his daddy, I knew something was up. When I saw him steal this drive, I called Max in to stop him."

"And you can do that? Even with your code?" Tom asked, surprised. Despite his earlier question, part of him thought it wouldn't be possible.

Max shrugged. "I already know a bunch of holding styles from my early days wrestling. After I was coded, I started learning Aikido. It's a martial art dedicated to nonlethal ways of taking people down. It seemed like a good fit for me."

"No kidding," Tom said, impressed. He looked at the drive. "What did he steal, anyway?"

Abner handed the drive to Holly, who took it gingerly, as if it was radioactive or something. She and Vicky exchanged worried glances. "I'll check with Dr. Tan to see if his data is intact. If it is, I'll have this destroyed," Holly finally said.

Tom looked around the group. No one looked surprised at all. Whatever was on that drive—whatever Dr. Tan was working on—was already known to all of them. Just not to him.

Tan was a molecular chemist. Tom even remembered him having some kind of breakthrough a while back, and Vicky being informed. Whatever he was doing probably had very little to do with the codes.

A wave of shame suddenly washed over Tom. He'd frightened innocent people, risked their lives, and possibly damaged the coded reputation, all to protect worthless information. And Abner, who was coded, had been perfectly able to stop the real threat! If coded people really did need protection, it was from *him*! No wonder they were keeping secrets from him.

Abner squared his shoulders. "Holly, under the circumstances, I have to insist that all uncoded people be taken back to the docks immediately. Two security breaches in one day—three if you count the shooting—seems like enough to me. I'd hate to risk a fourth."

Holly hesitated. "We can keep Tom here, I'm sure. After everything he's done-"

"No, he's right," Tom cut in sadly. "I fired a gun in a building filled with people. Twice! I almost killed someone. Whether I thought it was right or not doesn't matter. I did it, and I should be held responsible for it." He looked over at the main entrance. "There's just one thing I'd like permission to do first."

Vicky sat on the steps inside the administration building, looking out the front door and trying desperately not to throw up.

It was partly at what she was seeing. Up ahead, about a hundred feet away, Tom was hard at work replacing the window he'd destroyed. He had a ladder up there, and was clearing away the last bits of glass. A new pane was already leaning against the wall below him.

Vicky felt like the world's biggest fool. She had thought Tom had learned to trust her, so she had trusted him. That inclination had been there long before she'd been coded—she'd just assumed being coded would make it even stronger! But he still saw himself as a protector first. He was unwilling to rely on her wisdom and experience. Or Holly's, come to think of it. She was the more important person here.

As if summoned, Holly sat down next to her. "All the uncoded are back by the shore now. Except him, of course," she nodded ahead. "Winslow and the tour group are all locked up in one of the holding cells we had left over from when we thought we might have criminals still on the island. We're actually lucky we never tore them down. I wouldn't want to ask anyone to hold them at gunpoint."

"Why did he do it?"

Holly looked at her with concern. "Tom?"

"No, Winslow. Why did he steal from his father?"

Holly made a noise of dissatisfaction. "He wants to get into West Point. He was told that if he did this, he'd be a shoe-in."

"Figures. In order to get into a violent organization, all he has to do is steal from a nonviolent one. Fai must be devastated."

"I talked to him," Holly glanced to her right, over towards his lab. "He's doing ok, considering the circumstances."

"I thought I could trust him."

"Fai?"

"No, Tom." Vicky shook her head. "It was so easy to think of him as coded. So much of what he's done matches what we do. I let myself think of him as just my old friend—willing and able to help, to follow my instructions because I could keep him on the right path. But he is fundamentally different from me, and I can't ignore that."

"Are you all right?" For once, Holly was her friend, and not her unofficial superior.

Vicky laughed aloud, and even the sound sickened her. "No, I'm not. I don't even remember being all right! I mean, I'm happy at what we're doing here, and at what we represent. But if someone like *Tom* can let me down… how can I trust any uncoded? Abner was right! He saved our asses, and he was right."

Perhaps not wanting to dwell on that, Holly gestured ahead. "How did Tom know how to shoot like that? Come to think of it, how does he know anything about carpentry?"

"He doesn't," Vicky said dryly. "He's taking way longer at that than he should. He's trying to show me that he's willing to take responsibility for his mistakes. And he's doing it in the most futile way possible."

She sighed. "As for the shooting, his parents insisted on it. He got beat up during one of our rallies in college, and they wanted to make sure he could take care of himself after that. And they did it in the most destructive way possible. Apples and trees, I guess."

They sat in silence for a bit longer, before Holly finally spoke again. "Well, at least some good came out of this. We'll finally get recognized as our own nation."

Startled, Vicky looked over at her. "What are you talking about? There's no way the President will go for that now. Not after this debacle."

Holly smiled tightly. "We have camera footage and audio recordings of both thefts. We have documentation of who those people are, and a confession from Winslow. We have an enduring reputation to back it all up, too. I spoke to Catherine Hegel. She swears she didn't know anything about Hal's plans, or Winslow either. She's probably lying, but it doesn't matter. I'll send them all back to Miami tonight, with a message for the President. If the Coded Nation isn't officially recognized by the United States by noon tomorrow… this story will end up on every news desk in the country."

Vicky gave a disbelieving cough. "Blackmail?"

"Truth." Holly shrugged. "The codes don't stop us from harming organizations, just people. This has the potential to be a massive scandal, Vicky. Not just for the President's administration, but for the entire country. Government operatives recruiting a child, and stealing from coded people? I know there have been a bunch of big American scandals over the past few years, but this will definitely be up there on the list."

"I'd read it," Vicky admitted, still in a haze.

They saw Tom finally fitting the new pane in place, and then hastily catching it as it started to fall. Despite herself, Vicky smiled at that. "He has to go, doesn't he?" Just like that, the smile was gone.

"Yes." At least Holly sounded sad about that. "Despite everything he's done, he can't live on the island anymore. I'll have to put security precautions in place at the docks, too. And around the new creche. Anywhere uncoded people are staying."

"This isn't forever, you know," she added reassuringly. "You'll be able to see him again, just not here."

"I know. It's just everyone keeps leaving. First Amir, then Leon, and now Tom." Vicky sighed, and got up to leave. "Maybe we should forget about the codes and work on that next. How to keep people around."

Chapter 23

About a day later, Tom showed up at the docks with a heavy heart. Like the coded people living here, he had very few belongings—enough to fit in a single chest—which he pulled behind him. Holly had allowed him to keep the gun, provided it was unloaded and kept locked in its box. Tom couldn't really blame her.

He'd said his goodbyes, such as they were. Vicky was busy Uptown, working on the new security features. Holly had been cordial enough, but reserved. Little Joey was old enough to understand the permanence of this, though. He'd cried a little during the farewell.

Tom took that as an improvement. He'd gotten to know Max pretty well, and the older man had been raised in a pretty typical masculine household. Men or even boys crying, was a sign of weakness. The fact that Joey had been raised differently was an encouraging state of affairs.

Strangely, Abner was at the docks waiting for him. He also had a briefcase, and was already sitting in the boat. "Here to make sure I leave quietly?" Tom asked, not entirely joking.

Abner shook his head. "No, I believe you're a man of your word. I also have business in the States, so I'm traveling with you. Come on." He helped Tom load the chest onboard, surprisingly, and then went forward to get the boat underway.

It was natural that he knew how to handle himself on the water—it was a trait most coded people here picked up at some point or other. Even Tom knew the basics after all this time. Like most boats going in and out of Scheria, this one was now outfitted with an electric motor: charged at the tidal generators, and equipped with several spare batteries just in case. Abner set a course for Miami and evened off at about 50 knots. The boat was open-air, so wind whipped past them at a constant pace.

The trip was a long one. Several hours passed, with Abner still at the helm and Tom in the back trying to think about his future. Perhaps he could try getting back into politics. His association with the coded people, and their imminent status as an independent nation, had definitely increased his name recognition.

Or maybe he should find some place in a highly coded area. He could liaise with coded people living in the States, and try to help them. It wasn't as good as being in Scheria, but he could still contribute. He couldn't concentrate on those options very well, though. Flashbacks of what he'd done, and nearly done, kept running through his head.

The events themselves didn't sit right with him. There was something more going on here, and he resolved to find out what it was. Maybe Tina would help him. He'd kept in contact with her newspaper, and she did have a gift for ferreting out the truth.

Near the end of the trip, Tom heard Abner's phone chime at him. He pulled it out, and then beckoned back at him. As Tom got up, Abner slowed the boat a bit, allowing them to talk more easily. "Take a look at this. Terrell Johnson has been released."

That was a surprise. Given the significant hatred towards coded people in that area of Indiana, Tom had assumed Johnson would be locked up for as long as possible. Instead he'd been given a twelve hundred dollar fine and two months of community service. Tom might have been concerned that Johnson would be attacked while picking up trash next to a highway, but those activities were usually monitored by DOP guards. It also looked like Billy Marks, the man who'd attacked him, had been released as well.

One man, who'd been paid to assault someone, getting a lesser sentence than the man he'd assaulted. American justice at its finest.

"This must be gratifying for you," Tom told Abner, trying not to think about Johnson and Marks. "You must be glad I got kicked off the island."

"Believe it or not, I don't feel that way," Abner said coldly, adjusting their course slightly. "Despite your actions yesterday, you've done more than any other uncoded person to advance our agenda. Why didn't you ask to be coded? I'm sure they would have let you stay if you went through the process. I wouldn't have objected."

"There are still people, very powerful people in the US government, who will never take a coded person seriously. As long as I stay the way I am, I'll be able to interact with them on your behalf. You may need that in the future."

Abner shrugged. "Pity. You'd make a fine coded person. It's unfortunate that uncoded people can't be trusted to behave themselves in our society. Not over the long term, anyway."

Irritated, Tom shook his head. "You make it sound like coded society is perfect. As if you could do no wrong." Which actually defined the code's purpose exactly, Tom reflected suddenly.

"We're not perfect. We have flaws, like any other group. But we're closer to perfection than any group has gotten so far." Abner sighed, and he did look genuinely regretful. "No, a perfect society would look a lot like ours, but have no codes at all. Perfect people would be able to reach and maintain our degree of cooperation and harmony without training wheels." He sighed. "We're not there yet."

Tom scoffed. "And how would you control people in this theoretical perfect society of yours? What if someone acted like I did, and behaved violently while trying to protect the group?"

"They would be punished," Abner said without hesitation. "Like any child who misbehaves, their behavior would be curbed until they start behaving like an adult. Or in this example, a coded person."

For a moment, Tom only stared at him. "Is that really how you see uncoded people? As children?"

"There's plenty of evidence backing me up. How else would you describe people who are short-sighted, ego-driven, and self-destructive? What other word could you use for a group that starts fights with other groups? Over resources that they want, but don't actually need in order to survive? What about the media? Vicky was right in that townhall. Out there," he gestured ahead at the approaching coastline, "the winner of a 'debate' is decided by whoever interrupts the most, or can keep screaming at the audience for the longest. The substance of the argument, or the merits of either side, mean nothing to the audience. Just as they mean nothing to a child."

He sighed. "In your society, wisdom, experience, and education are all of little importance. The people with real power are the ones who have the most attention paid to them. The ones who can browbeat, or convince, or bribe others into doing what they want. How is that any different than a schoolyard bully being the most powerful person in the playground?"

"And worst of all, the average citizen is just as childish! The Democratic Experiment gave them more power to make changes in how their country works. Despite that, how many of them vote at all, much less at the state or local level? Only about half vote for the president, and that's arguably the easiest one of all! The founding fathers tried to set up a Democracy, but they failed to factor in greed and laziness. They were unable to realize that a society which commodifies people—starting out as slavery and eventually expanding into every aspect of their lives as capitalism—would end up being just as bad as the monarchy they were fighting!"

Tom had listened with a mixture of horror and fascination as Abner ran through his diatribe, and it looked like he was winding down now. "If I could change one thing about Scheria, it would be how often we code people. Right now codes are offered to anyone who asks for one and can pass a basic psych test. But we shouldn't just give them away, any more than we should treat someone as an adult just because they look like one. The code should be *earned*. It should be a privilege, not a right. Just like uncoded people shouldn't be allowed any power unless they can behave like an adult instead of just looking like one."

What could he say to that? Abner had obviously been bottling all of that up for a while, and he couldn't very well tell it to a coded person. Strangely, Tom was grateful he'd been here to be the proverbial sounding board. As mixed up as some of Abner's views were, he'd also made some good points.

As they maneuvered their way into the marina where their boat was registered, Abner's phone chimed again. His expression brightened a bit. "Looks like the announcement just went out. Twelve noon on the dot. The Coded Nation has officially been recognized by the United States. That makes seventy-nine countries."

"Congratulations," Tom said genuinely. He would have loved to take the credit for the lion's share of work he'd done for this, but he didn't want to antagonize Abner even further. "Do you think you'll end up joining the United Nations?"

Abner shook his head. "I hope not, and I'll speak out against it when the time comes. The UN does a lot of good things, but if we join up, we'll be subject to their rules. Parents don't usually let kids impose rules on them either."

Tom shook his head. So much for making headway with Abner.

Off in the distance, fireworks started shooting into the air in Miami. They couldn't be seen very well in daylight of course, but the sound was unmistakable.

"There aren't enough coded people here to set off that many fireworks," Tom commented casually. "At least some uncoded people support you."

"Uncoded support is fickle," Abner said dismissively, as he made his way into the slip. "In a month's time, those very same people could be shooting guns at us instead."

Tom grabbed his belongings with an increasing sense of relief. Travelling with Abner wasn't boring at all, but it was tiring. Bidding the man farewell, he tried to find a taxi.

"Here it is," Vicky said, presenting her latest contribution to coded science.

The sensor was only a few inches wide, but Vicky felt confident it would fit their needs. Max took it and carefully inserted it into the doorframe. They were in the Uptown offices for now, but if it worked, Vicky would need to make dozens more. And install them in the doors for every building down at the docks.

If they passed Max's inspection first, that was. He held up his interface, and then looked at the door suspiciously. "All right, here goes."

He walked through the open door, and then looked back at the interface. "So far so good. It recorded me passing, confirmed that I have a working code, and then went back into standby mode."

Then he beckoned to Gina, one of their new visitors. She wasn't coded yet, and obligingly passed through as well. Even from Vicky's position, she could see the red light appear on Max's interface. The sensor had recorded Gina passing, confirmed that she had no code, and sent out the warning signal.

"Thank you, Gina," Vicky said gently. "Could you go back to the waiting area over there? We may need you a few more times."

Nodding, Gina retook her seat. Vicky felt a knot in her stomach at that, remembering that Tom would have been ideal for this kind of security testing.

She couldn't dwell on that now, though. She had a job to do. Squaring her shoulders, Vicky went through the door herself.

"Wait a minute," Max put in, glaring at his device. "It says you have no code. Looks like it's not as ready as you said."

Vicky smiled. "Actually, it is. Almost every code sends out a constant but very faint signal. That's how I designed them. It can't be picked up from very far—I'd say only about five feet away at most. That way it can't be used to track us down, but it's always on anyway. As long as the code is working, at least."

"Why would you design the codes that way?" Max asked, cocking his head a bit to the right.

"Well, at the beginning I didn't know how many of them we'd end up making," Vicky admitted. "I wanted a quick and easy way to confirm if someone's code was working, or if it needed to be repaired. This seemed pretty easy. Now we can just scan for that signal. If the sensor picks up someone's body heat but no signal going along with it, it knows they're not coded and warns us."

"But it warned me about you."

"That's only because my code doesn't give out a signal. It was the first one ever made, remember? The next three: Devin, Tyrell, and James, don't have a signal either. All the others will work, though. You just need to make an exception for us four, or I could ask the surgeons to alter our codes."

Max nodded. "An easy fix either way. Good job, Vicky. How long until you can have thirty or so of these ready to go?"

"A few days, maybe? They're not hard to build." Vicky looked down the hall towards Engineering. "I'll give the specs to the boys down there, and then when they're installed in the docks, help you test them." She paused. "What exactly will happen if an uncoded person tries to sneak in, though? Will a cage drop down from the ceiling, museum-style, and trap them inside? The codes would probably allow that."

"I thought about that, but Holly talked me out of it," Max turned off his interface, and then pulled the sensor out of the frame. He turned and nodded at Gina, indicating to her that they were done for now. "That reminds me. We'll have to put these down at the coding center, too. Some nut could come here pretending to want to be coded, and then try to sneak in through there."

He handed the sensor back to her, and then walked with her down the hall. "No, the best security systems are the ones people don't even know are there. I'll set these up so that they tag any uncoded people coming in. We'll just keep an eye on them until they leave again. We can control what they see and hear, as long as we have enough warning ahead of time. If we're lucky, they'll either steal information that is all falsified, or they'll leave thinking there's nothing here worth stealing."

Vicky gave him a sidelong smile. "I think you might have missed your calling as a spy."

"Nah, too stressful. Spies don't get to go home and spend a quiet evening with their family. Well, maybe *a* family, if they're deep undercover. Not their own, though."

She could definitely agree with that. "Speaking of family, now that the creche is up and running, are you and Angie gonna move Joey down there?"

"Already did. I was going to go downhill and check on him now, if you want to come along."

Vicky didn't have anything better to do for now, and she wanted to inspect the creche herself, so she agreed. After they dropped the sensor off at Engineering, they made their way down towards the water.

The beach was fairly populated at this time of day. Coded people who were between Need Board jobs, and just relaxing for a bit, dotted the sandy shore to the east and west. Some were even surfing, reminding her of Leon.

Out beyond the cresting waves was the usual smattering of boats. A lot of them weren't from Scheria, though. They were mostly sightseers, favored by the Bahamian tourist trade, as they looked out at the supposedly exotic, *freakish* coded society. They had instructions not to come ashore unless they had official business here, but it didn't stop the tourists from peering at them from a distance.

Max peeled off to the left towards the creche, but Vicky delayed. She'd seen a pair of recently coded on the beach; people she'd met last week. They probably knew already, but she wanted to remind them not to go in the water until they'd had enough time to recover from surgery. Vicky still had some vivid 'brain freeze' memories from when her own code had been newly submerged.

After chatting with them for a bit, Vicky went to talk to the lifeguard briefly, before eventually looking back down the beach. About two hundred feet away, Joey was excitedly explaining something to Max. Holly was there too, talking with one of the older children.

A change in the tone of the voices on the beach caught her attention, and Vicky followed their gazes out onto the water. One of the speedboats out there had changed course, and started moving towards the shore.

It was moving pretty fast, too. Vicky grabbed a pair of binoculars from the lifeguard station and tried to get a closer look. There was a white sheet draped over the side of the boat, now whipping backwards as it sped up. After a few more seconds the sheet was torn off, revealing four huge words, painted in red on the side of the boat.

Better dead than coded.

The boat continued to speed up, but time seemed to slow down for Vicky. "Everyone back away from the water!" She shouted as loud as she could, evoking stares, and then obedience from those nearest. "Max!" She shouted over at him. "Get everyone out of there, now!"

He didn't hesitate. Scooping up Joey, Max ran into the creche. A few seconds later, people began streaming out the back entrances in a panic. Vicky started running towards them as fast as she could, but it was too late.

The speedboat crested the last waves, sailed through the air onto shore, and hit the building. As soon as it did a burst of flame billowed from it, and a massive shockwave rippled out across the beach.

Chapter 24

It was an upscale restaurant in Miami. Not top-of-the line, but definitely nicer than your standard eatery. About two dozen people were inside, listening to the lilting background music and enjoying their overpriced meals.

Not one of them showed any concern for disease, or for the political unrest in their own country. They showed complete and utter disregard for terrorist attacks, too, as long as they happened elsewhere. Tom might as well be surrounded by the dead.

Still feeling a dull ache of worry, Tom called Vicky once again. Once again, the call didn't get through. He couldn't even leave a message!

He knew she was alive. News stations were reporting that Holly had been killed, but there was also footage of Vicky on the beach after the explosion. There had been no statement from anyone in Scheria or Elysia, and since the Coded Nation was now foreign soil, reporters were forbidden from landing and asking questions.

News sources were estimating forty or more dead. And it had happened right in the middle of a week-long festival, celebrating the founding of their new nation.

Kenshi Saito appeared in the doorway and turned his coat over. It was raining outside: the wind whipping trees and water around in turmoil matching Tom's emotional state. Comparatively at ease, Kenshi spotted him and moved over to his table.

"Hello, Kenshi," Tom said, carefully controlling his voice and extending an arm to the other seat.

"Thomas. It's good to see you again." The older man sat gracefully. "I must say I was surprised you were able to make this meeting. Given the circumstances, I would have thought you'd be on your way back to Scheria by now."

"My reasons for meeting you may have changed, but they're no less valid," Tom hedged.

"I see. Should we order a meal, or is this conversation short enough for drinks only?"

"That's up to you."

Tom waited for Kenshi to order some drinks—non alcoholic, though. Kenshi never drank during negotiations, and he was clearly not here as a concerned former business associate.

"I take it you heard about the attempted theft last week," Tom said casually, as the drinks were being delivered. "Just before the President officially recognized the Coded Nation?"

Kenshi's stance didn't change, but his expression flickered just slightly. Tom had known him a long time, and that was all the confirmation he needed. "I may have gathered a few details. The coded people are being remarkably tight-lipped about it, though. Understandable, given the attack they recently suffered. Why anyone would want to steal from Scheria is a mystery, though. Everyone knows they have nothing of value."

Tom shook his head slowly. "You know, I gotta hand it to you. I had no idea you were still interested in coded affairs, much less willing to go to such lengths. I mean, manipulating the US government into trying to steal for you? That is next-level Machiavellian stuff."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Kenshi said in a remarkable display of false innocence.

"Save it. I've done some checking on Coleman-Saito's actions over the past few years. Which I'm sure you already knew. Do you expect me to believe it's just a coincidence that you set up CS's new head office right here in Miami? You've got ties to the State Department, the IRS, and the military. You've helped fund half of the election campaigns for the President's party, in at least thirty states. For all I know, you're bankrolling Humanity First, too!"

"You wound me," was the only response to that, but he didn't look all that hurt.

"I remember how you used to do business, Kenshi," Tom went on. "Now that your co-founder Dan has retired, you're in full control of CS. There's no way you'd be foolish enough get caught up in an SEC investigation. The loss of business alone is costing you what… two billion dollars? Three? Not to mention the damage to your image. No, the only reason you'd let that happen is if you needed to use the SEC. You planted information for them to find in their investigation—information that took them to Scheria. Then you could use the distraction to hire Dr. Tan's kid to steal from him!"

Tom shook his head. "You know, I wondered why the State Department was so willing to trade coded recognition for silence about Drekker's actions. It didn't make sense, until I realized you were behind it. The one thing more embarrassing than having one of your operatives caught, is having everyone find out that he was only pretending to work for you!"

"A fascinating theory, Thomas," Kenshi said approvingly. "Quite interesting indeed. Perhaps you missed your calling as a screenwriter, because that would make a thrilling movie. But a fictional one, as you have no proof."

"Of course I don't. You never leave fingerprints, do you? You've been that way ever since you stopped working with the BOP."

They both sat in silence for a bit, their drinks going mostly ignored. The background music and conversation seemed to seep into them instead.

"You're assuming I was working with them in the first place," Kenshi finally responded before taking a sip. "To extend your interesting fiction, what if I was only using the BOP back then, just as I was using the State Department now? Wouldn't that make for a more interesting story?"

Tom just sat there for a few moments, thinking about it. Could it even be possible? He knew Kenshi was manipulative and calculating, but he hadn't always been that way. Had he?

"Why are you doing this to us?" He managed. "I thought we had an understanding! When we cut ties with your company, we were very generous. We gave you a ton of equipment, and most of our brain-mapping statistics. We even forfeited any right to the patents for your cures based on those statistics!"

"Table scraps," Kenshi said, his voice finally starting to get heated. "Why should I be content with mere crumbs when there's a sumptuous dinner waiting for me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tom said stubbornly, uncomfortably aware of just how true that statement really was.

"Now who's claiming ignorance? We're more alike than you're willing to admit, Thomas," he went on fiercely. "At first I wondered why you gave up a promising political career in order to back such an insignificant little project. Even if it was being run by your closest friends. I began to understand later, after hearing about the codes. I saw the potential in the idea, as you did. That's why I have allegedly been willing to go to such great lengths, and bear such enormous costs, to acquire their latest research. You know how valuable it is!"

Tom tried to still look shocked from before, but something in his expression must have given him away. Kenshi's eyes narrowed briefly, and then a slow smile appeared. "But you don't know, do you? They never told you!" He leaned back, looking around the room, and laughed softly.

"Oh, that is delicious! So… that support you gave them? Was that a leap of faith after all? All this time I thought you were playing the noble protector, when you're really just the dupe!"

That was enough. "Whatever they're working on in there, I can trust them to handle it safely. A hell of a lot more than I could ever trust you. You're not coded."

"Neither are you!" Kenshi responded fiercely again. Nearby patrons glanced at him, and he looked down briefly, moderating his tone. "I respect what you've done, Thomas, but you have to stop pretending to be something you're not. You can't keep straddling both worlds. Either you're on their side, in which case you should go get a code of your own, or you're on ours."

"Their side and ours?" Tom repeated, feeling anger rise up and replace his embarrassment. "Is that how you justify attacking them? You blew up *children* on that beach, Kenshi! It doesn't matter if you were the guy on the boat or just the guy giving the order—there is no justification for that."

Kenshi gave him a look of surprise and shock. "You think that was me?"

He looked bewildered for a few seconds, and genuinely hurt. "I have children of my own, Thomas. You've seen me with them! If you really think I could do something like that… then you might as well take out that gun of yours and end me right here. I would deserve no less."

Despite himself, Tom was beginning to wonder if his initial suspicion was true. Kenshi was an expert liar of course, but he did look truly dismayed at the possibility. He loved his children, too. He had a boy and a girl, named after his grandfather and mother-in-law.

"Think about it. Now that the coded people are a recognized nation, the only chance I have of getting that research is by maintaining a relationship with them. Attacking them only drove them further away! It wasn't me, Thomas."

Grimacing, Tom slapped a couple of bills on the table and stood up to leave. "We'll see. One way or another, I'll find out who did this. If it was you, I can guarantee you'll pay for it."

Outside in the rain, Tom tried calling Vicky again.

All around the world, television stations would be switching broadcasts in the next few seconds.

Vicky stood on the beach and closed her eyes, feeling the wind rush across her scalp and code. Given the importance of what she was about to say, she was mildly surprised at her lack of nervousness. Then again, maybe it wasn't so unusual after all. For almost a full day, she'd felt the strange combination of rage and numbness.

A few coded people had on-camera experience in their pasts, but all of them had been quite firm in their opinions. Vicky was the one to represent them, experience or no. A few more were skilled with cameras and sound systems, and were busy preparing in front of her.

When the time finally came, one of them held out a hand with three fingers, then two, then one.

"Hello, world," she began, realizing immediately that she sounded a bit breathy. Fortunately the wind and waves weren't being too loud right now. "I'm Vicky Brandt, and I'm speaking on behalf of the Coded Nation."

She couldn't help but pause right there, and look to her left. At the burnt wreckage of the creche. "Exactly one day ago, we suffered a terrorist attack on this very beach. As many news services have already reported, our unofficial leader Holly Trainer… was killed."

Unbidden, images of Holly's face flew through Vicky's mind. Of her smile, her laugh, and her practically patented overly-patient look. Vicky swallowed, trying to banish them for now. "At first we assumed she was the target. That this was an assassination, a mindless and cowardly attempt to kill the Servant of Scheria. We were wrong."

Vicky nodded to one of the techs, who pressed a few keys and superimposed a website onto the broadcast they were sending out. "Just as the attack started, our Code Applications website received a manifesto, written by the attackers. It was clear from what they had to say, that they didn't know Holly would be here. They were after the building, not the person."

At her direction, the camera panned over to view the blackened site. All the bodies had been removed, but the damage was obvious. "This used to be our creche. For those of you who don't know, it was a hospital, combined with a school, combined with… an orphanage. Twenty-two children and five adults were killed here. Over sixty more were injured. By cowards. Murderers whose motto was simple: better dead than coded."

Now she'd started trembling again. Moving into the shot, Vicky stared right at the camera. "I lost people in this blast. One of my closest friends lost both her father *and her son* in this blast! A lot of people assume that coded people can't feel emotions. I can tell you right now, I am angry. I am furious. I'm-" Her voice broke for a moment, and Vicky swallowed again. "I'm cut raw and ragged over this! But what I am not… is afraid. None of us are afraid."

She knelt down on the sand, picking up the burnt remains of one of the window frames. "History has shown us how nations often respond to terrorist attacks. We've seen how countries which were founded on the ideals of freedom and hope endure terrorist attacks, and let it change them. Many times those same people, once open and inclusive, quickly embrace isolationism and xenophobia. They happily trade in their freedom for the illusion of security. And sure, they are a little safer from foreign extremism than they were before. But they're also a lot more vulnerable to their own leaders than they were before. That's how authoritarianism works."

Pointedly, Vicky dropped the frame on the sand. "That's not how we work. Terrorism isn't meant to kill people so much as change them, and we refuse to be changed. Who we are is more important to us than whether or not we are alive. We will never forget our dead, but we will also never forget that *we are who we are* because of them!"

"The creche will be rebuilt. The coding center will remain open, and applicants will not be turned away. Our relief efforts will continue. In every way we will remain the same, because while attacks like this often define people, it is *we* who decide what they mean to us. And we have decided that it has only made us stronger!"

Part 4

Chapter 25

It started at exactly midnight, local time.

Most of Mumbai was asleep, unaware of the fundamental change happening all around them. Still, in a city that large there was an active night life, and a few people coughed once or twice as the catalyst wave swept through their area.

The change wasn't immediately evident in the morning either, especially to foreign visitors. For anyone who had lived in Mumbai for years, the first thing they noticed upon leaving their homes was a very fine dusting of white powder on the ground. The motion of early-moving cars had collected it in some places on the roads, where it was slightly more visible. Particularly keen observers noticed the same layer of faint powder inside their homes as well.

When the sun started making progress in its upward climb, the difference became more pronounced. The sky itself was clear! The thick layers of smog which had pervaded the city for decades… were completely gone!

People wandered the streets at first, heedless of both their own safety and their daily schedules as they stared out at the sky. Birds which had flown their whole lives in the confined and choking space between buildings, were now lazily soaring far above, enjoying the view for the first time.

Eventually people returned to business as usual, but the change was all anyone could talk about. There was no official statement from Indian authorities, so speculation abounded all over the country. The world, too, after a few hours.

Power plants and industrial factories were still functioning. Fireplaces still churned out smoke. The emissions that had led to so much smog—and systemic breathing problems in so many people—were still there, but the smog itself was just gone.

Looking up at the sky, Vicky gave one of her rare smiles. Despite her misgivings about the plan, she had to admit the demonstration had been nothing short of astonishing!

Trying to focus, Vicky pulled out her phone and dialed the Ministry of External Affairs. "Minister Khatri. As you can see, it's a bright new day. I was hoping you could meet with me, and we could discuss how that happened."

The meeting was scheduled for that afternoon—probably an attempt by the minister to maintain an appearance of dignity in the face of seemingly impossible events. Frankly, Vicky knew how he felt. She'd seen Fai Tan's lab, and watched him assemble and explain the catalyzer, and it still seemed like it should be impossible.

Another bit of good news: Tom would be there for the negotiations. He spent most of his time in the States these days, trying to drum up support for various anti-hate-group bills. In the wake of the attack on the beach and the subsequent massive outcry against it, Humanity First had faded into the background, dialing back their hate-filled rhetoric. Tom seemed determined to keep them there. In fact, Vicky suspected he would like to take it even further.

Since the attack, the Coded Nation had made no demands for an investigation. It wasn't their way, despite how many people had died. Most uncoded people had no idea why, so Vicky had eventually been forced to make an other public statement.

"Justice means something different to us than it does to uncoded societies," she'd explained on camera. To you, it's about punishing those responsible. To us, it's about preventing the tragedy from happening again. We all know that punishment has never prevented fanaticism. In fact it usually has the opposite effect. Find the attackers if you want, and punish them if you want, but don't expect it to stop such attacks in the future."

Perhaps her statement had come across as overly morose, but at least she'd only had to make one. Still, a lot of the murdered kids had uncoded parents still living in the States, and they had insisted that the government punish the offenders.

After a reluctant investigation four people had been arrested, including Darren Hilke, the one who had remote-piloted the speedboat. He'd been on another tourist boat watching, and adjusting the course as it sped up. He was currently serving multiple life sentences in upstate New York. It was ironic that Darren—a private citizen who had chosen to be a terrorist—was being punished, while actual troops who had committed terrorist acts under orders from their superiors, were given medals and commendations. It was one of the reasons Scheria was now reaching out to other nations instead of the States.

After a heart-warming reunion outside Mumbai's MEA building, Vicky and Tom went up to meet the Minister. Raghav Khatri was almost exactly what Vicky had imagined from her phone conversations. He was middle-aged, partially balding, and a few pounds overweight. He was also dignified, polite, and apparently bursting with curiosity. It didn't take long for the pleasantries to end and the burning question on his mind to be spoken.

In answer, Vicky lifted her ancient backpack and opened it. She pulled the catalyzer out and set it carefully on the table. "This is a molecular catalyzer," she explained cheerfully. "In a nutshell, it separates oxygen from nitrogen, sulfur, and carbon in a small area around it, basically turning nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and carbon monoxide into harmless dust." To demonstrate, she turned it on. The battery inside wouldn't last long, but it gave a hum as the catalyzer began drawing power.

The device itself was conical in shape, about a foot tall and half a foot wide at the base. Rings of metal surrounded the middle, reminding her a little of a tesla coil, but that was about the only familiar thing about it. Vicky had worked on electronic devices for most of her life now, and she had no idea how the catalyzer worked. It was the culmination of over seven years of sustained effort by Fai and dozens of other scientists. It had taken almost a fifth of Scheria's resources over those years, and a massive, constant effort to keep the secret this long. Now, finally, it was time to show the world just one of the things this catalyzer could do.

A faint glow started to appear at the top, and Vicky gestured to it. "Right now the catalyzer is trying to find compounds in the air to separate. If it found some, it would start a sort of chain reaction. One molecule would be separated, releasing particles that would separate another molecule, and another, and another… you get the idea. The reaction can spread through a whole city in minutes, provided there's enough 'fuel' to separate and keep it going. That's what we did last night, and just look at this city today!" She gestured out the window. "Over 80 percent of the atmospheric contaminants are gone, fallen to the ground as dust."

Raghav looked a bit overwhelmed. "That one machine… did all this? In just a few minutes?"

Tom nodded. "It wouldn't work a second time because there isn't enough air pollution left to start another chain reaction, but just imagine one of these in every city in India. Each one would go off every month or so, and clean the air up. Heart disease, strokes, pulmonary obstructions, lung cancer, emphysema, bronchitis—all of them would be massively reduced. Over a million Indians die from diseases related to air pollution every year. This could change all that."

The minister was quiet for a few moments, staring at the catalyzer. "Once this… wave gets far enough away from the city, it runs out of compounds to separate, and stops?"

Vicky nodded. "Just like a brushfire running out of fuel."

He hesitated, and then looked up at her again. "As I understand it though, smog is also made up of ozone, particulate matter, and organic compounds. Can your catalyzer separate those as well?"

Vicky exchanged a surprised look with Tom. They knew Raghav had a background in environmental science, but that had been years ago. Clearly, he'd kept up with it. "Not yet. We've only been able to safely separate oxygen from nitrogen, sulfur, and carbon so far. Splitting up ozone safely is a lot trickier, and I doubt we could do anything about the other compounds. Not for a while anyway. Our scientists are working on it, though. You have to admit that even for a prototype, the catalyzer is quite something."

Raghav nodded suddenly. "Of course. My apologies. It's just that seeing the future take shape before my eyes has me somewhat overwhelmed."

"I know the feeling, minister," Tom put in understandingly, reaching down to shut off the catalyzer. "I felt that way myself. Perhaps we should talk about what it would take to make these catalyzers freely available to your people. I think you'll find our requests reasonable, given what we're offering."

Tom and Vicky spent the flight home catching up again. It had been years since they'd spoken in person, and he could see the subtle changes in her stance and attitude.

The Vicky he remembered had been unsure of herself, and easily stressed out. Though eager and friendly, she had also carried an air of unease with her surroundings. Perhaps because she had moved so many times since first leaving for college.

This new version was more confident and a bit more reserved, as she'd demonstrated back in India. Though she was still technically just an ambassador for the Coded Nation, Vicky had clearly developed leadership skills. It was an impressive, and frankly sexy, transformation.

Tom clamped down on that thought right away. Even if he was coded, he couldn't go after her, or give any indication of that interest. He didn't want to trample on Amir's memory, and even more importantly, risk his friendship with Vicky.

During the trip, Vicky described some of the unique situations arising from starting a new country. Nationality was the most obvious hurdle. There was now a coded nationality, and all coded people had it automatically. Unlike the States, where gaining citizenship could take decades, for them it was just the surgery itself. In fact, a lot of the people living in Scheria and Elysia had legally given up their home country's citizenship. Whether that was a statement of principle, for some unknown legal situation, or the result of something else was a mystery. Tom suspected the reasons were pretty evenly spread out.

One coded person hadn't given up American citizenship, though. "I was sorry to hear about Angie," Tom said regretfully.

"Thanks. I haven't heard from her in months, and I guess I don't expect to."

After losing Max and Joey, Angie had pretty much fallen apart. She had a massive support network around her—thousands of people who considered her to be part of their family—but it hadn't been enough. According to Vicky's emails, she had eventually asked that her code be turned off, and moved back to the States. For all Tom knew, she was dead in a ditch somewhere.

What made some people able to stand up and live again after trauma like that, while others crumbled like Angie? Tom had wondered about that for a long time.

Vicky also described various legal situations, especially between the Coded Nation and the States. Property disputes were the easiest to fix of course, but legal unions were a much stickier problem. As usual most coded people just ended up returning to their previous lives, but for a married person who got coded, and then decided to stay in Scheria or Elysia… it was a different matter. What happened to the spouse left behind in those cases, or any kids? How was alimony or child support decided between nations, if one nation believed in currency and the other didn't?

It had taken years, but eventually the US and other nations had adjusted annulment laws to allow for newly coded residents to dissolve previous unions if they wanted to. There had even been a case where two people had been unable to divorce their previous spouses, and had gotten coded to take advantage of that loophole. Their relationship hadn't worked out, probably because they'd gotten coded for all the wrong reasons, but Tom was sure there would be other cases like it in the future. As for the kids, sometimes they stayed on the islands—in new creche facilities which had been built further inland.

The kids themselves were an interesting outgrowth of those legal challenges. Despite Abner Geller's initial objections, both cities had started adopting kids from other countries. Both creches had been filled almost immediately, and the Need Board had been adjusted with hundreds of new child-care tasks. Each so-called orphan had a support system in the creche filled with people who cared for and loved them.

Tom hadn't actually heard much about that, so Vicky explained it further. "When someone in the creche reaches 21, they can't stay, but of course they don't want to go. We have problem kids of course, but you should see some of the caregivers we've got working there! Straight-up amazing," she commented admiringly, showing a bit of a flashback to her earlier, overeager self.

"We decided to follow the Amish example after a while. When their kids reach a certain age, they are sent away, into the 'outside world'. It's called Rumspringa, and it's been an Amish tradition for a long time. The kids get a taste of what the rest of the world is like, and then they choose whether or not to come back. No judgements, no recriminations. It fit with us pretty well, so our kids can leave as early as 18, and if they come back and are at least 21, we can evaluate them for coding."

Tom frowned. "Is it safe to just send them out, though? I'm sure they're very well educated, but coded life doesn't exactly prepare people for uncoded life. Depending on how long the kid's been there, he or she might have no experience at all with things like deceit and manipulation."

"You're right: it is a concern. Usually we send them to stay with coded people living in the States or Canada. That way they're not diving into the deep end before they learn how to swim. They're encouraged to find jobs, make social connections with other uncoded people, and feel it out to see if that life is something they want."

That made some sense. "What about experiencing other faiths? I know there are churches, mosques, synagogues, shrines and the like in Scheria. Are the kids brought there from the creches? Is there anything like a coded baptism, or circumcision for that matter?"

Vicky shook her head. "We had a bunch of meetings about that just as the new creches were being built. Naturally the code won't let us circumcise anyone. The rest of it was decided by majority vote. We can teach the kids the basics of all religions, but we can't encourage any one religion over any others until *after* they've reached 21. So, no child baptisms, bar or bat mitzvahs, nothing like that." She looked fatigued all of a sudden. "Those debates went on and on for weeks! I mean, it's easy to coexist with other faiths when you know the code will keep them from hurting you, but knowing what to teach your children? We still haven't worked it all out."

Tom tried to think about it as if he'd been there. "I guess a school curriculum wasn't easy to figure out either?"

"It was a nightmare! I mean flat earthers and anti-vaxxers are easy to dismiss, but what can we do when two coded people genuinely believe two different historical accounts, and each wants those accounts taught? I was there for some of the earlier meetings. These were experienced teachers arguing, and I saw their codes activate again and again, just during the talks! Imagine how much worse it could have been without the codes."

"Without the codes, you wouldn't have a society at all," Tom reminded her, and she gave a reluctant shrug.

That reminded him of Abner Geller's statements, years ago. "I still can't believe your people still support Abner as their Servant," he grumbled, and then immediately regretted it. For all he knew, Vicky supported the man.

She only raised an eyebrow. "I think you're being a bit harsh there, Tom," she said gently. "I had my doubts at first too, but he's proven to be a good fit. Different than Holly was of course, but he knows how to inspire and motivate coded people through his example. There's more than one way to lead."

"He thinks of uncoded people as children, though," Tom protested, now that he was more sure he wasn't going to offend her. "He convinced your people to stay out of the United Nations, and I'm sure this trade of the catalyzer technology for resources was his idea."

There was more he could say, but Tom held back. In addition to his political efforts to dismantle Humanity First, Tom had also kept an eye on Abner's comings and goings. Before he'd become Servant, he had made multiple trips to the mainland. From what Tom and his PI had uncovered, each time he'd met with various wealthy businessmen and politicians. Tom still had no idea what those conversations had been about, but he sure didn't trust Abner's new 'partners'.

Tom wasn't concerned that Abner's actions might hurt the Coded Nation, but he clearly hadn't told anyone about those actions either.

"Well maybe he has a point about uncoded people," Vicky responded evenly. "I know a lot of you aren't like that, but enough are. They've lied to us, stolen from us, killed us, and all because they don't understand that we're no threat to them. Sounds pretty childish to me. As for the UN, we go to great lengths to stay on their good side, despite never joining up. That way we can influence their policies by example only. You can convince someone to be better, or you can force them, but the only lasting way is to *be* an example of a better way and hope that they follow your example."

She sighed. "As for the catalyzer deal, I did vote against that. You know how I felt about the BT102 and the codes later on. I was outvoted though, and we really do need those resources. Plus there is the added benefit of wiping out large chunks of air pollution every month or so. Besides, from what we can tell, they're only a few years away from developing their own catalyzers, and we can get a lot of goodwill if we give it to them now."

Tom smiled grimly. "Minister Khatri's gonna be pretty pissed when he finds out what you have planned. So will the rest of the Indian government, I bet."

"Oh, no doubt. But we'll wait until the details of our deal are made public. That way they can't back out."

Tom shook his head. The deal itself had been pretty simple: schematics and details on the catalyzer in exchange for raw materials, mostly iron and steel. What they didn't know was that once news of the deal got out, the Coded Nation planned on giving the catalyzer to every nation at the same time, giving no one the advantage.

There would definitely be fireworks when that happened. Tom supposed he should be afraid about that, but he wasn't. Strangely, he was looking forward to seeing how it all played out.

Chapter 26

A few hours later they were on the water, approaching Scheria. They were using one of the electric motors, which were slightly less powerful, so the wind wasn't quite enough to drown out their voices.

"I want to thank you, Vicky," Tom called out over the noise. "I'm sure they wouldn't let me live on the island again if you were against it."

Vicky gave him a strange look briefly, before turning her attention back to their course. "Well, I argued for it, but you'll also want to thank Abner. He made a case for you as well."

That threw him for a loop. Abner had argued *for* Tom's return?

In uncoded politics, whenever someone did something out of character, they were either being stupid, being brazen, or they were doing a favor for someone else. At first Tom was inclined to think that Abner was doing that last one, probably trying to get some leverage over Vicky. That didn't make any sense, though. Coded people—especially people living out here on the islands—only did something if they truly believed it was in everyone's best interests. Abner must have actually believed Tom deserved a second chance. Or maybe he thought Tom might be useful in the future. Regardless, Tom wasn't about to pass up the opportunity.

Vicky slowed them down a bit on the approach, and Tom could see why. Man had this place changed. The beaches were still dotted with people, but all the tourist boats that had once sped by the island regularly were gone. In their place were huge slabs of concrete sticking out of the water. They didn't encircle the island completely from what he could tell, but gaps were few and far between. From their perspective on the boat, Tom guessed that the slabs would be about fifteen feet thick from inside to outside when completed.

He whistled slowly. "I had no idea the dome's construction had already started."

Vicky seemed to be caught up in his awe for the moment, and nodded. "And this is without any of the iron and steel we're expecting. Once those shipments start arriving, we'll really kick things into gear. Hamedi estimated that a full third of the Need Board will be construction tasks. He had to come up with a new training program just to prepare people for most of those jobs."

Tom chuckled. As usual, they were thinking a few steps ahead. "Assuming all the resources arrive on time, how long until the dome is complete?"

He was painfully aware that asking such a question of any uncoded construction company would get him angry glances in return, but here they could accurately predict things like that. Vicky confirmed it. "Maybe six months? We should be done before the next storm season. About time, if you ask me. Each year they get worse. I'll breathe a lot easier once I'm sure we don't have to worry about getting washed away."

There was something else, at the administration building. Tom squinted ahead, wishing he had binoculars. "Is that a helicopter?"

"Yup. We put a helipad on top of the Uptown offices last year, and brought in the chopper a few days later. It runs on gas of course, but it's only there for emergencies. We actually had to use it a few months ago, when we needed to get one of our people back to the States for an emergency surgery."

That did make some sense, but it felt weird. Tom was used to coded people being fiercely independent. They had developed manufacturing facilities here and in Elysia, which could be adapted to fit many needs. They could even synthesize some medications now, which was good news for diabetics especially.

Strangely, there were some people already on the docks as Vicky brought the boat in. One of them was Abner, and behind him stood a larger coded man Tom didn't recognize. There were about two dozen people in front of him, apparently listening to him speak. From their bald heads they were all recently coded, and they paid rapt attention. Vicky apparently didn't want to interrupt, so Tom followed her lead and helped her tie up the boat quietly as Abner went on.

"Think about it this way," he explained to one of the closer listeners. “In a society where everyone is selfish, and the vast majority believe only their first impressions of people, it’s necessary to lead from strength, and to never appear weak. In a society where everyone trusts every other member of the society, leaders can actually be themselves, and appear weak if they need to. In fact, it could be argued that such a society *has* no weaknesses. Every government in history has had to control their people, or at least tell themselves that they had to. Until we came along. Here, we can control ourselves, so we don't need anything like a government.”

He glanced at the boat for an instant. "Excuse me," he said to the group. "I need to welcome our ambassador."

As they dispersed, he and the big man behind him helped Vicky and Tom climb out of the boat. Even more oddly, Abner reached out and hugged her. "Welcome home, Vicky. You've been missed."

"It's good to be back," she responded before letting go.

Abner looked over at Tom, and extended a hand. "It's good to see you again, Tom. You look well."

Feeling a little surreal, Tom shook his hand. "So do you. I understand I have you to thank for my return. I want you to know how much I appreciate it."

With only a slight smile, Abner nodded. "Not at all. This is Mark Koenig," he introduced the big man, who also shook Tom's hand. Come to think of it, the big man hadn't taken his eyes off of Tom yet. His handshake felt just a little too firm as well.

Vicky seemed to pick up on the possible tension. "Everything went smoothly over there," she explained quickly. "They needed some assurances, but eventually the Indian Department of Commerce agreed to all our terms. They'll be delivering the iron, steel, and other components every few weeks, as we deliver the catalyzers and show them how to build more." She looked over at Tom. "I didn't say this over the phone because the Americans like to tap into our lines," she added in response to his confused look. "In fact the only reason I'm saying it now is because it's hard to listen in on people next to waves on a beach."

Tom felt a bit of a chill at that. Somehow he'd hoped that after the terrorist attack, his countrymen might back off a bit and leave these people alone. So much for decency.

"I'll get Tom settled in next to the coding center, and then head Uptown to give you more details," she said to Abner, and he looked relieved.

"Good work, you two. Now we can finally get this construction project in gear," he added, looking out at the concrete, before heading off. Big Mark followed in his wake.

"I assume you installed some security features after I left," Tom said casually, as they grabbed their bags. "Did you pick up any more spies? If they're willing to listen in on your phones, I assume they've tried worse."

Vicky nodded. "Ramon Diaz, Max's replacement, told me about a few incidents over the years. We keep an eye on them to make sure that they don't get near anything of value before they leave. Or if they do, that they steal the wrong information. I guess they're just keeping tabs on us, which is fine by me."

There were no guards here, and no guns. What other point of entry into any country had no security at all? Or just passive security. Even after all the coded peoople had suffered—even after Vicky herself had nearly been killed! When she said nothing would change, she *meant* it. Tom's opinion of this place jumped up another notch.

"So, what's with your new Servant's big guard… gorilla?" Tom asked as they made their way up the beach.

Vicky chuckled. "Mark does give that impression, doesn't he? He doesn't talk much, but I heard he was in the Air Force for a while, before coming back to the States. When he got coded, Abner was his guide during orientation. After that he just kinda stuck with him." She hesitated a bit. "I think Mark feels that this is his way of contributing to the Need Board. Our last Servant was killed, and even if it's a meaningless title, Mark seems to think it's his personal duty to make sure the same thing doesn't happen to Abner."

Maybe Tom had misjudged Abner after all. Vicky clearly trusted him, and he seemed to reciprocate. And there was no doubt he was beneficial to the Coded Nation.

"What are your plans, Tom?" Vicky asked suddenly. Her stance had changed, but it wasn't confrontational so much as direct. Another sign of her leadership skills emerging. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're here. But I need to have some idea of what you'll be doing. You're too well-known to go unnoticed, and I'm known as your friend."

"I get it," Tom said softly. "I'm putting you on the spot here. So far, the plan is to continue with business as usual. I'll live here, but I'll be going back and forth to the States. There are still tons of Humanity First fans out there, and I have to debunk them as publicly as possible. From what you told me, there are still plenty of legal situations that you still have to work out. I may be able to help you there. If invited by both sides, of course," he added hastily. There was also the matter of Kenshi Saito, who was no doubt incensed that they were releasing the very technology he'd been after. He wasn't a vengeful man as far as Tom knew, but everyone could change.

Vicky ignored those last words. "Do you plan on asking for a code, too?"

There it was. The fact that he wasn't coded had been like background noise for their friendship for years now. Was he ready? Did he really want that after all this time? Did he deserve it at all?

"There have been a lot of advances in coding," Vicky went on, looking up at the Uptown offices. "We built what we call auto-coders. They're amazing. All you have to do is wear one on your head for a few hours while it scans your brain's structure. Then you lie down, it sedates you, and when you wake up, you're coded. Devin keeps on complaining that we've made him obsolete."

That did sound impressive, but Tom didn't like the idea of a machine tinkering around in his noggin. If he did get coded, he'd want Devin to do it. "No, I'm not going ahead with coding. Not yet, anyway. If anyone asks, I'm here to help you as an ambassador of sorts to other uncoded people. Tell them I'll only be here as long as I'm welcome. All they have to do is say the word, and I'm gone. I hope that's good enough."

"It should be, as long as you stay on the outer rings of the island unless I'm escorting you." She gestured down the hall near the coding center. "Your room is down on the far end, on the left. 24A."

Vicky turned away, but came to a stop after only a few steps. "There's something else you should see," she put in after a few seconds, turning back. "Later on tonight I mean, after I'm done Uptown. It's a project of sorts we've been working on. Abner might not like me telling you, but I don't think I would have gotten through those negotiations without you. I think you deserve to know. Meet me down at the docks at nine pm."

At that she turned away again, and took the north exit. Intrigued, Tom grabbed his bags and headed to his new home.

He was only there a few hours before there was a knock at the door. Curious, Tom moved over there and opened it. There were no peep-holes in Coded homes. They implied that you might not be willing to speak to someone just because of who they were.

It was a young woman, recently coded. He guessed it had been a few weeks, given that she had no obvious swelling and her hair had started coming out again. "Hello?" He said tentatively.

She gave a massive grin and extended a hand, shaking his vigorously. "Mr. Penderton! It's so good to finally see you in person. I can't tell you how glad I am that they let you back on the island. I mean, I get why they kicked you out, but it just didn't seem right, you being gone from this place. You belong here, and they deserve to have you here. I mean we deserve it. You know what I mean. I didn't mean to imply the opposite—you know how it can be when you're still in orientation. I mean you don't *know* know, you've probably seen it a lot, though."

She finally ran out of steam at that point, and just stared at him momentarily.

"Thank you," he said hesitantly. "Miss…?"

"Sorry. I'm Alyssa," she said quickly, grabbing his hand and shaking it again. "I've just been such a huge fan of yours for so long. You're the reason I got coded in the first place!"

Feeling a little bemused, Tom tried a soft smile. "Even though I'm not coded?"

"I'm sure you have your reasons," she waved a hand dismissively. "Besides, you're basically an honorary coded person anyway. If I had to guess, I'd say you stay this way to better represent them—*us*—to the rest of the world."

"That's very astute, Alyssa," he complimented, wondering if she was going to start another rapid-fire speech.

She grinned again and opened her mouth, probably to thank him, but another voice echoed down the hall. "I'm looking for a Miss Tainer? I was told she lives in this complex, but not which room. Anyone know where I might find her?"

The voice was male, and authoritative, if a bit tentative. Tom leaned forward slowly, to get a look down the hall.

"That's me," Alyssa said, looking curious, and beckoning the man over. "Can I help you?"

He let out a sigh of relief and approached her. He was a few inches shorter than Tom, and a bit out of breath, but otherwise looked well enough despite the tropical heat. He looked familiar too, but Tom couldn't quite place him.

"I'm Simon Hawke," he introduced himself gravely, shaking her hand. "I have a sort of… offer for you, Miss Tainer." His eyes traced Tom's presence briefly, but there was no sign of hostility. "One you might want to hear in private."

"Call me Alyssa," she insisted, and gave another dismissive gesture. "And anything you say to me can be said to him. He's kind of my muse," she paused, looking troubled. "Now I have to become an artist, don't I?"

Tom smiled. He certainly recognized the man's name. It was Dr. Hawke, actually. He was one of Devin's more recent colleagues, coded about a year ago. Tom thought, but wasn't entirely sure, that Hawke studied blood disorders. Maybe.

"Very well," Simon said gravely. "I study rare genetic traits in the hopes they can be used to cure diseases both here and on the mainland. I got a look at the blood sample they took from you just before you were coded, and it seems like your DNA could be quite useful to some of my research. Unfortunately since we don't keep records of who we code, all I had was your DNA and the day you were coded. It took a few days to get your name."

"Wow," she looked impressed. "Sorry you went through all that, but they don't keep records intentionally. If someone-"

"Yes, I know. And I agree. It's just a little aggravating at times," he said with a tentative smile. "At any rate, If you'd be willing, I'd like to run some tests on you in the Uptown genetics lab. That is if it doesn't interfere with your orientation. Or your social life," he glanced at Tom again.

"How could my DNA help you?" She asked curiously. "I've never been sick a day in my life. In fact my coding was the first time I've even been in a hospital since my brother was born!"

"Have you heard of James Harrison or Henrietta Lacks?" Tom put in, hoping to allay any fears Dr. Hawke might have about him. Alyssa shook her head, so he went on. "Harrison's blood is so unique, it was used in transfusions that stopped a fetal developmental disease. His blood personally saved thousands of babies, and the research on it saved millions more. Lacks died of cancer over fifty years ago, but her cancer cells grew so quickly that they astounded researchers. They were used by Salk when he developed the polio vaccine, and then later with Zika and HPV. Neither of these people had any medical training or expertise, but they saved countless lives anyway."

"That's right," Hawke said, obviously surprised, but he turned back to her quickly enough. "If I'm right, your DNA could help with muscular dystrophy or other protein production disorders." He looked down at the file he was holding. "According to this, you're working in the food processing center making nutrient bulbs, when you're not in orientation. Any one of a thousand coded people could be doing that, but you are literally one of only two who could help me with this. The other is living in California. I contacted her last week, and I'll be flying out there in a few days."

"Wow," she said again, sounding a little more serious. "You don't need to take like, my bone marrow or anything, do you? It's just blood, right?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Uh, we might eventually. It all depends on what we find. I don't want to put you under any pressure, believe me. Just please think about it?" He extended his interfacer, a little tentatively.

After a moment, she nodded and tapped it with her own. Just like that they exchanged contact information, without any need for business cards. But then again there was no business here, so that made sense.

Unlike the phones offered in America, these were free, standardized to be reliable, not loaded up with invasive spyware, and most importantly not the center of everyone's lives. They were used for voting and polling, but other than that were purely for communication. If any coded person lost their interfacer, it would be nothing more than a mild inconvenience and they could function without it just fine for however many days it took to get another. How many others in the so-called modern world could say the same?

After Hawke thanked Alyssa and left, she looked somber. "Ok, so this is… a lot. Is this how it feels to be coded all the time?"

"You're asking the wrong guy," he reminded her. "But Dr. Hawke wouldn't be asking for your help if he wasn't sure he needed it. That *is* a coded thing."

"Right. Thanks." Her gravitas faded a little, as she shook his hand again. "It was really great to meet you, Mr. Penderton. Tom, if I may. Hopefully I'll see you around."

"I'd like that," he responded genuinely as she made her way back down the hall. He didn't have an interfacer of his own yet, or he would have followed Hawke's example. Closing the door, he laid down on the couch sideways.

Amir had told him about James Harrison and Henrietta Lacks, years ago. He'd found it fascinating, how people with no real education or business acumen had been so beneficial to so many people, just by being who they were!

Ever since Scheria had been founded, he'd been putting more and more thought into medical ethics. Specifically how medical research was justifiable.

During World War 2, Dr. Mengele had performed barbaric and entirely unacceptable research on the many condemned prisoners in Germany. His subjects had died en masse, horribly and gruesomely documented by his team of sociopaths. Still, as terrible as his methods were and as obvious as his disdain for the value of human life was, there was no debating his experiments were effective. The same concepts extended beyond medicine as well. Why else would so many German scientists be snapped up by America and Russia after the war; given immunity for their crimes in exchange for their knowledge?

There was no concern of that happening here. If Hawke needed bone marrow for his research, he could only get it if Alyssa Tainer was willing. Any pain she experienced would be her choice, as mandated by the code. He was literally unable to do any more than that.

But did that make it right to ask her? She might want to do any number of things in the Coded Nation, but now that she knew her DNA was valuable, the code might compel her to do nothing but cooperate. Tom knew it wasn't actually her code forcing her to do anything—it was actually her own sense of right and wrong—but the result was still the same.

Was this progress? Forcing people to participate in their own deaths was horrible, but this was also forcing people in another way. It was only compelling them to live up to their own ideals maybe, but force was force. Troubled, he tried to focus on other things for the moment.

Chapter 27

When Vicky saw him later on that night, Tom looked as though he hadn't gotten any rest at all.

Frankly, she knew how that felt. The Indian government had put out a press release that same afternoon, explaining the catalyzer to the world, and claiming that they were in the process of building more. Though the spokesperson hadn't actually said the words exactly, it was heavily implied that they had developed it themselves. Certainly that's how most of the world would see it at first.

As a result Vicky had been stuck in the admin building all afternoon with Tanya Elkins, a strategist with Uncoded Relations. She and Tanya's team had come up with over a hundred variations on speeches that they might give, when the time came to tell the whole truth. Unlike that initial, rage-fueled speech she'd given on the beach years ago, these were carefully worded, painstakingly timed messages. They were drafted to be understanding, yet firm, in the face of what would no doubt be an outraged Indian leadership.

Vicky was relieved to finally get away and meet up with Tom. She checked the boat's batteries with him, and then jumped aboard. When they got going, Vicky glanced at his face, and was rewarded with a surprised look. It was understandable, given that she was steering the boat *around* Darien Cay, instead of away from it.

When she started picking up speed out towards the open Atlantic, Tom finally spoke. "Why do I suddenly feel like Old Yeller being taken away to get shot?"

"Nah, I don't like guns," Vicky joked in turn. "Even if I wasn't coded, I'd probably use poison instead. It'd be a lot less hassle."

Tom only raised his eyebrows, and Vicky just sighed. "It's only about twenty miles away. Be patient."

The sun had set already, and the boat's forward lights didn't illuminate much, but Vicky had been here many times before. It wasn't hard to navigate from memory, even if their destination was out of sight range from Scheria.

When she caught sight of the generators, Vicky slowed the boat down and drifted closer. Tom leaned forward, trying to get a better look. He'd seen structures like this before. "More tidal generators? What are they doing all the way out here? I thought you had plenty of power back in Scheria."

"They're not for Scheria, or for Elysia," Vicky explained, putting a little more juice in the engine and maneuvering around the generators. "We started building these years ago. It's no joke building a support structure on the bottom of the ocean and then expanding it up to the surface. It's needed, though. Tidal generators only work if they're at the surface." She pointed at the metal struts just under the nearest turbine. Fortunately the tide was currently low, or he wouldn't be able to see them. "We can adjust the height by up to twenty feet, to account for rising sea levels."

Tom slowly looked around at the collection to their right and behind them. "You sure need a lot of them for… I'd say an oil drilling operation, if I didn't know you used renewables only. Barring that, I'm guessing this is some kind of deep-sea research station?"

Vicky chuckled. "I suppose it has become that, sort of. Hold on. I'll give you the full tour."

Beyond the generators was the floating platform, nearly three hundred feet across. Or about ninety meters, she reminded herself. One of the most recent referendums in the Coded Nation was about the metric system. Because so many coded people had started out American, it had been a minor debate, but the metric system was a lot easier, so they'd decided to adopt it. Fortunately there were very few signs to change. And they still used English, at least for now.

That brought up another series of problems. English, like a lot of things descended from ancient Rome, had sexist roots. The very words 'woman' or 'female' were merely derivatives of man or male. The species was called humanity, or mankind. There had been some progress, such as businessperson, or congressperson, but those didn't include the rest of the rainbow either. Vicky guessed that eventually a whole new language would have to be created that included everyone. That could take decades though, and they had more immediate problems to solve, which was one of the things she was here to show Tom.

The platform was modular, and could be deconstructed in bad weather. James and Hamedi had arranged to 'rent' a weather satellite in geosynchronous orbit overhead, so that Scheria had its own meteorological service. They couldn't predict storms as accurately as the NOAA did, but it helped. From what she heard, they weren't expecting any high category storms or hurricanes for months yet, so this platform would probably remain intact for the whole span of the construction project.

Two coded construction workers she didn't recognize waved to her, looking surprised, and she pulled the boat alongside the platform. She explained what she was doing here, and they seemed fine with it. They helped her tie up the boat, and then escorted her and Tom over to the more solid generator structure. Built into the iron and concrete… was an elevator.

Vicky still was impressed at how this place was laid out, even after she'd seen it built. She was an electrical engineer, not an architectural one, but it was amazing how they'd managed to build a *collapsible* elevator shaft, extending all the way to the ocean floor!

"I've got it from here, thanks," she told the others, and gestured Tom inside.

His expression was still a mixture of suspicion and amazement, and Vicky smiled. He hadn't seen anything yet. Wordlessly she pulled the inside lever, propelling them both downward.

This close to the Cay, it was only a few thousand feet—*meters*—down. As they neared the bottom, the lights came on automatically, illuminating their ocean floor project. The transparent walls of the elevator allowed them both to get a good look at the full scope of it.

Tom gasped, looking out as if his eyes couldn't take it all in fast enough. From the position of the lights, the edges of their new barrier were clear. It was another circle, just like the ones they were constructing around Scheria and Elysia.

Then they were inside the warehouse facility at the bottom, and their view was obscured. The elevator doors opened quietly, revealing a darkened room beyond. By rote memory Vicky stepped out, reaching for the control panel to the side, and began flipping light switches. "Until the first few shipments of iron and steel from India arrive, this was as much as we could build. Those two guys upstairs are the only ones here for now. Their job is to monitor power utilization, mostly. They're probably up there for the fresh air. We're still fine-tuning the air filtration system in this place."

"This is no research station," Tom said breathlessly, staring at the wide corridor surrounding them. Doors lined the walls to their north and south, and there was a clear cafeteria and sleeping quarters to the west. "I saw the circle of concrete and steel out there. You're building a dome here, underwater! Or you will be, anyway. I couldn't really tell the size, but it looks like it might be at least as big as Elysia!"

"That's right. Once the dome's complete, we'll pump out the seawater, pump in some air, and have ourselves the world's very first seafloor city."

Tom seemed to be at a loss for words, for perhaps the first time in years, so Vicky continued. "We're still workshopping possible names. Atlantis seemed a bit on the nose. Kasskara was another idea, but that's over in the Pacific."

"And this building is where you suit up construction workers to go outside and build up the dome?"

"Somewhat," she hedged. She gestured to the other side, where the control room was currently situated. "Most of the work was done by remote-piloted drones actually. We only need to suit someone up and send them out if there's a problem we can't fix remotely."

She turned on the lights in the control room, and started up one of the computers. After a short wait time, it displayed a systems map of the entire seafloor project.

"So this is why you asked for so much more iron, steel, and concrete than you needed just to build the two domes up there! I figured you were willing to get bargained down on the amounts, but you didn't budge on that. This isn't the only underwater city you plan to build, is it?"

"Assuming we can get this one built and working right, yes. We don't exactly have a lot of surface land to work with, and asking uncoded nations to give up territory *really* wouldn't go over well. This is the next logical step."

Tom gave a short laugh. "I figured you'd set up shop in Antarctica somewhere, or maybe get your hands on more Atlantic islands. This… I did not expect. But how do you plan on getting air into this place? I didn't see any umbilical to the surface on the way down. I take it you plan on building one after the dome is completed, so that people can actually breathe?"

Vicky hesitated. This was one of the more closely guarded secrets which Abner wanted kept that way. But Tom had proven repeatedly he could be trusted. Not with a gun maybe, but at least with overall strategy. If he could be convinced that they could still expand the Coded Nation, he might be willing to be coded himself, and stick around. "Actually no. We aren't going to build an umbilical at all. We're going to harvest oxygen straight from the ocean itself, using the catalyzer technology."

Surprisingly, Tom smiled at that. "I knew it! I knew Tan's research wasn't just about air pollution. Not at first anyway. This was about the domes all along." He paused briefly. "Has he figured out how to separate oxygen from hydrogen? Without causing a chain reaction, that is."

"He did, about a month ago. The air-clearing stuff was mostly an accident. Still, it got us what we needed, so I'm not complaining. Fai's testing his design right now, converting samples of water into breathable O2, while letting the hydrogen float up into the sky. He should have a working O2 factory long before this dome is built. We might even be able to tie it into our desalination efforts."

Tom shook his head. "Leaps and bounds. You people never stop being amazing, do you?"

Vicky looked away, a little embarrassed despite herself, as Tom took a closer look at the screen. "Wow, Tan's O2 harvesting process must be a real power hog. I'm no city designer, but it looks like you've got enough power running through here to keep three cities lit up."

Suddenly, Vicky realized this place's secondary purpose. For years she'd wondered where all those samples were being sent. It made all the sense in the world that they would end up here at the bottom of the ocean. Where else could things be kept at low temperatures and completely out of sight at the same time?

Trying to act casual, she reached over and shut the computer off. "I don't know much about the separation process," she said truthfully, once again grateful that her code allowed her to stop at that and not say any more. "Come on. There are a pair of suits with our names on them. Care to walk the ocean floor for a while before we head back?"

Tom smiled at that, looking enthusiastic. He seemed to lose interest in the power requirements, which was good. Vicky didn't like misleading him, but even she hadn't been told what this place really was, and for good reason. Those samples weren't just valuable—they were irreplaceable!

Over the next few months, the construction of the domes began in earnest. Almost the instant the first shipment of materials arrived from India, there were dozens of drones in the air, buzzing like bees as they constructed their new hive. With Vicky as an escort, Tom saw the rooms in the admin building converted into a transmission center. From there, each operator controlled an individual drone.

Given how new and complex this technology was, the coded operators were remarkably quick learners. There were a few accidents at first, such as drones trying to balance a load and then dropping it. Abner had wisely recommended that areas literally underneath construction be evacuated before the work began. It led to some cramped quarters, but everyone agreed: better a short-term inconvenience now than an accident killing someoene, or a storm just washing their whole nation into oblivion.

Tom watched the construction process with fascination. The operator only controlled the drone as it was up there, placing and welding the materials. When the man at the computer released control, the drone was sophisticated enough to fly back down on its own, avoiding any stationary obstacles or other drones on its way. Then it would pick up a load, or team up with another drone to pick up a large load, and fly back up before waiting to be controlled again.

He had only limited understanding of computer science, but it made sense that they could be programmed with simple tasks like that. Tom had never seen robotics, computer programming, construction, and molecular chemistry all seamlessly integrated together before, though. It seemed like a perfect analogy to the coded people. Everyone had different skills and weaknesses, but they all had equal value and an equal say. When everyone agreed like that, cooperation wasn't something that needed to be forced on anyone.

Again, Tom considered getting coded. As time went on, he was becoming less and less valuable to Vicky and the others. There were still people back in the States who hated coded people, but Humanity First had mostly faded into the background these last few years. This new leap forward in technology had ruffled quite a few feathers, especially to people who still insisted on thinking of coded people as a threat, but most people were approving of it.

Tom smiled as he remembered the Indian government's outrage. In the days after the catalyzer technology had been sent to every major nation in the world, Tom had gotten at least a hundred calls a day from various officials. Threats had been leveled, and complaints registered. They'd even mentioned condemning the Coded Nation before the UN, but that had been an empty threat. It would mean admitting that they had never intended to share the catalyzer in the first place.

As for the rest of the world, reactions were mixed depending on where you went. The Chinese people had been mostly for it, given the high rates of air pollution in many of their cities. A lot of European countries had started using their catalyzers first, perhaps hoping for some kind of prestige from being the first people to trust in Dr. Tan's research.

Like any other coded person, Fai Tan had been eager to share credit with the rest of his team. Molecular chemistry was his greatest strength, but he was quite clear that each of his forty-odd people had contributed and was valuable. After a townhall vote which Abner had supported, the Coded Nation revealed that the catalyzer was just a happy accident: a byproduct of the real work Tan and his people were doing.

Splitting molecules had been a thing for decades, from what Tom had read. He remembered high-school lessons on electrolysis, if only vaguely. Fai's research went beyond that and into large-scale applications. His breakthrough into harvesting oxygen directly from seawater was still a secret. When Tom heard that, he immediately thought of that underwater city they were building offshore, and it all made sense. Vicky, Fai, Abner, Holly, and God-only-knew how many others had all been planning this for years now! Even back then, they must have known how fast coded society would grow.

Come to think of it, it couldn't just be those four. Keeping secrets from other coded people just wasn't done. Given how long ago this project must have been started, Tom estimated at least four hundred coded people had known about it right at the beginning. And yet not one of them had told a soul—even him. Tom had come to terms with being kept in the dark, and he didn't blame any of them anymore. If word had gotten out to the US government, they would have done whatever they could to acquire this molecule-separating technology, and to control the coded people who developed it. They'd done the right thing keeping it quiet.

What other nation in the world could trust its entire population with a secret, and have that secret kept for years in perfect silence? Abner was right: these people weren't even human at all. They were better!

As the domes took shape, it also became clear that the catalyzer wasn't the only happy byproduct of Fai's work. His people had developed a way to align carbon molecules, at least that was how Tom understood it, making steel harder and stronger. Ordinarily a dome the size of the one they were building over Scheria would need a bunch of support pillars, but with the altered steel they were using, only one pillar was needed. It was right in the middle of town, shooting straight up to the top. Tom set up a camera to take pictures of the sky over Scheria every four hours. He submitted those pictures to the website, and people all over the world watched time-lapse construction of the dome.

Nearly eight months after he'd returned from India, Tom found himself in rural Louisiana, at a small town meeting. It was for an unusual reason, to say the least.

By now, global response to the catalyzer and to the recent dome completion had been pretty clear and very predictable. Heavily populated areas like major cities had the most to gain from having clear air, and had generally been in favor. Rural areas had been against this new technology in general. Somehow, being able to *breathe* had become political.

There were stories all over the internet. Benign ones claimed that being exposed to the catalyzer triggered ADD in their children, and more serious ones ran the gamut between claiming the catalyzer was killing livestock off, to assuming that the catalyzer was secretly coding people by the billions. Tom had examined the auto-coder Vicky had mentioned. It did seem a bit sinister, but that was nothing compared to the rumors circulating on the web.

The town of Dunhall seemed to be one of the few exceptions to this general rural distrust of coded people. The mayor here, Rene Hofstadter, had been an outspoken supporter of coded people for some time. Rene had invited Tom to speak on behalf of the Coded Nation, and when he'd first heard that, Tom had actually been flattered.

Then Rene had announced that he would go through a coding surgery, on live tv.

It turned out he was also planning on a gubernatorial run for Louisiana next year, and that this was a prequel for it. He claimed that the people of his great state deserved a politician who would never lie to them, and that only a coded governor could be guaranteed to live up to that standard.

The whole thing was ridiculous. All codings took place in the Coded Nation for this very reason. People had to be able to trust their doctor, and only coded doctors could be trusted to perform such an important procedure. The idea of an uncoded doctor doing such a thing on live tv was almost laughable back in Scheria. Still, there was a chance that Hofstadter had stumbled onto success, so Vicky and Abner had asked Tom to come here. Devin had come along as well, for a medical analysis.

They'd gotten into town last night, but Devin had gone ahead and in secret. One of Tom's old contacts had helped sneak Devin into the hospital where Hofstadter was recuperating. He wasn't well known as a coded person, and he had enough medical experience to fake being a doctor there. He only stayed long enough to scan Hofstadter's skull while he was sleeping.

Now Devin was in the crowd, as a bandaged Hofstadter addressed his people. He clapped along with everyone else when Tom was introduced, and sat back down when he took the podium. "Thank you for your generous invitation, Mr. Mayor," Tom began, trying to project to the back of the crowd. "I appreciate the chance to speak to everyone here in person, given the importance of what we all saw on tv last week."

"Coded people have started to gain a reputation these last few years, for being trustworthy and reliable mediators," he put in a little background for them. "Everyone knows that people from the Coded Nation don't give a damn about money, and therefore don't have a stake in either side. They're the ultimate outsiders, and while most of them are pretty blunt, they'll always be straight with you. You can count on that."

Tom glanced over at Hofstadter. "You have to be pretty brave to go through brain surgery… and to do it on camera is quite the gesture. It's not something I've been able to do yet, that's for sure. Unfortunately, that surgery we all saw on tv was a fraud. You're not coded, Mr. Mayor. You just wanted people to think you were."

Hofstadter blanched and took a step forward. "Now see here, I won't be insulted-"

"A coded friend of mine examined you," Tom cut him off loudly. "Your skull was never opened up, and you have no connections extending into your brain. All you have is a metal plate glued to the top of your head!"

Tom took a deep breath, and refocused his attention on the crowd. "I know this comes as a shock to all of you, and I'm sorry if it's also a disappointment. The Coded Nation has been completely absent from American politics for years now, and he was gambling that they wouldn't call him out on this bullshit. It must have seemed like a safe bet, but while the Coded Nation does want to stay clear of our conflicts, they will not let people use the codes to advance their own personal agendas. I regret that this had to be done publicly," he looked at Hofstadter again briefly, "but it's no different than lancing a boil. A little pain now to save a bunch of pain later."

At that, Tom abruptly left the stage and walked out of the building. Devin joined him on the way, and they could hear loud voices raised behind them. He wasn't sure what Hofstadter's mayoral future looked like, but his gubernatorial one was probably dead. Then again, in a country where so many people would rather elect a criminal than a member of the opposite party, anything was possible.

Chapter 28

When Toby got on the bus that morning, he took his usual seat next to Ray. Based on his uncoded friend's questions yesterday, he'd done some reading and was now prepared to discuss coded philosophy. He was about to get started when a murmur began from the back of the bus.

They both looked that way. "What's going on?" Ray asked curiously, as they saw the other passengers all staring out the window to the west.

"I'm not sure," Toby answered after a moment, standing and taking a look for himself. The sky had turned a shade of light green in the past few seconds, and it seemed to be getting darker.

"What's going on?" Vicky said wearily, rubbing at her eyes. She was in the Uptown offices, having just been woken and brought here by one of the Engineering staffers. Apparently whatever reason they'd only allowed her four hours of sleep was urgent.

"We're not sure," Abner answered, looking out the window at the pre-dawn dimness. "Half an hour ago, I was on a call with the Secretary of the Interior over in California, when he just hung up on me. I tried calling him back, but there's no answer. Just a few minutes ago our sources in Washington said the US just went to Defcon 1. I've tried to reach half a dozen people in the Cabinet, but no one's taking my call."

Defcon 1? Vicky felt a chill. That kind of military readiness had never happened before. From what she knew, the President was also in California, preparing to give a speech that morning to the people of San Diego.

"We got something," one of the technicians to their left said, pulling up a datastream on his computer screen. "They just repositioned four satellites over the Rockies and the Midwest. Looks like they're all IceSAT models. Those are satellites designed specifically to measure atmospheric density and composition."

"Atmospheric density? Could this have something to do with the catalyzers?" Vicky realized aloud. "How many catalyzers do we have in California?"

"Just one," Abner responded after a second. "It's in Los Angeles, but it should be inactive. It was used four months ago, and then again last month." He looked back at the technician. "We have a NOAA satellite, right? Can we take a look over there?"

The technician shook his head. "Mississippi is about as far west as we can look with that bird." He paused. "I… could try to tap into their feeds. If they set this all up in a hurry, they might not have updated their security, and IceSAT isn't known for high-end military encryption."

Vicky and Abner shared a concerned look. Hacking into a US government satellite might be interpreted as an act of aggression. Still, given the circumstances, it looked like they had much bigger fish to fry than the Coded Nation. She nodded, and Abner looked back at the tech. "Do it."

As he got to work, Vicky regretted that she'd never learned the young man's name. His code looked recent. Perhaps he'd just now finished orientation before coming to work Uptown. There had been more and more young science and technology experts coming here these days.

"Got it," he finally said, and pulled up the westernmost feed, showing a map of the continental US.

"Good God," Vicky breathed, staring at the screen.

An enormous green circle was blotting out most of California, as well as parts of Nevada and Arizona. It extended out over the Pacific, and into the Baja peninsula. Inside the circle, yellow-green swirls of cloud were moving in a slow pattern across the sky.

"What the hell is that thing?" Abner asked harshly.

Apparently unable to answer, the young man switched feeds. The second satellite was looking more to the east, and it was closer to the ground. It showed the edge of the circle over Arizona, and that the edge was moving. "Whatever it is, it's getting bigger," he said unnecessarily, running some quick calculations. "It's expanding at about 60 miles per hour. And it's not slowing down."

The entire room was transfixed by the sight for a few long moments. Vicky was suddenly aware that Fai and James were here too, and Hamedi was entering behind them.

Abner seemed to come out of the shock first. "When all this started, I asked them to call some of our coded friends living in southern California." He looked over to the other side of the room. "Any luck?"

One of the other engineers shook his head. "We've tried forty different numbers, but no one's picking up. The phones are working fine… it's just there's no one around to answer them."

"Then we have to assume that whatever that green gas is, it's unbreathable," Vicky concluded, hearing how dead her voice sounded.

"How could this have happened?" Abner demanded, looking at Fai. "It's got to be the catalyzer, but how can we undo this?"

Fai shook his head helplessly. "I don't know. The catalyzer was designed to split molecules apart, not convert them into something else! We don't even know what that gas is, and unless we can reach someone underneath the cloud, we can't find out! I have no idea how it's being created, or how to reverse it! Certainly not in time to help anyone out there."

Out there. Tom and Devin were still in New Orleans, and her dad was up in Minnesota! "If we can't stop it, then we have to prepare for it," Vicky put in quickly, trying to snap everyone out of their shocked state. She looked over at the other engineer. "Get in touch with Elysia, and let them know what's going on. We both have to check our domes and make sure they're airtight. At 60 mph, that wave will be here in a few days, so we have to hurry."

Abner nodded, took a breath and then turned to Fai. "Doc, get one of the boats and hurry out to the underwater colony. There's no way we can finish that dome in time, but they have something we'll need. Get the oxygen harvesting gear and bring it back here right away. I want you to set it up here and in Elysia before the gas gets here."

Fai hesitated. "I'm not sure that's even possible. Scheria has over five thousand people, and the O2 splitter is only built for a few hundred. I have several other prototypes, but they haven't been tested yet!"

"No time like the present." Abner looked back at Hamedi and James. "You two need to retask the Need Board. Everyone in the city who has any experience with engineering or metalworking needs to be out on the walls right now, making sure they're airtight. We need to check the sea-door as well, so that when it closes, it keeps us safe. Unless that conversion process can affect seawater as well, in which case we're all screwed."

"I don't think it can," Vicky said, pointing back at the screen. "We can still see waves and crests through the cloud. It looks like it's gas only."

"Good. Oh, and anyone who knows how to pilot a drone will be valuable too. They need to come in here and check for cracks in the upper levels of the dome." He paused. "Can drones even fly in that gas?"

Vicky thought back to her earlier designs. "They should be fine. They're electrical, so they don't need oxygen. I doubt it'll be good for them, but it's better than on human skin. We should outfit the maintenance hatches on the shore, too, to double as airlocks. Assuming we survive the wave, we need to be able to send people out in suits to check for damage."

Again, there was that sense of overwhelming pressure in the room. So dire that it couldn't be ignored, but also couldn't be comprehended at first. "Move it, people! Every second counts!" Abner insisted, and everyone seemed to snap out of it.

He caught Vicky's arm as she turned away, and lowered his voice. "When word of this gets out, there will be a stampede of refugees coming to the Coded Nation. We need to prepare for them, and I want you in charge of that. You have more experience with relief work than anyone else."

Reluctantly, Vicky nodded. "I'll reach out to my old crew. Most of them should still be living here."

She had one more thing to do first, as she left the room. Pulling out her phone, she dialed Tom.

Something strange was going on here. Tom and Devin had just finished breakfast in New Orleans, when suddenly all the tv broadcasts began describing some kind of communications blackout from out west. Looking around, Tom could tell that no one else knew what was going on either. Devin was still in the bathroom, but it was doubtful he could shed any light on this. Then Vicky called.

Tom was still in shock when Devin joined him outside. He couldn't comprehend at first, and even describing it to Devin sounded like he was playing some kind of prank. But he had to think.

Their plan had been to rent a boat in New Orleans which would take them all the way out to Scheria. That plan was shot to shit now. When news of this got out, everyone would be taking or hijacking boats to get out there while there was still time. The marinas would be swamped with people. The same would be true if they tried to drive to another town and get a boat there.

"Come on," he said to Devin, as another idea occurred to him. He hurried to get into the car before the roads got blocked. "There's a naval refueling station just outside of town. If we're lucky, there's something there we could use." The car didn't have much gas left, but thankfully they didn't need to go far.

"Won't everyone go there, too?" Devin asked anxiously. "There have to be hundreds of thousands of people here, and they'll go anywhere they can to get a ride out to Scheria and Elysia!"

Tom shook his head as he navigated the roads. From the attitude of the other drivers, the news was just beginning to break. "The main naval base is near Algier's Point, and everyone knows about it. The refueling station is only used for training drills, and is disguised as an old fishery."

At Devin's surprised look, Tom only shrugged. "My dad has friends in Naval Intelligence. He took me there once when I was a kid. He grew up in New Orleans."

His parents. They were probably both in Maryland still. He wanted to call them, but they were pretty well connected. They probably already knew what was going on. Perhaps they'd already boarded some chopper or jet out to Scheria. Tom was peripherally aware of Devin calling his family out in Raleigh. He couldn't get through.

Cars sped past them, but they were all streaming south, towards the ports. Tom and Devin had no problem reaching the supposed fishery. The lot looked empty, at least, as they pulled in. When they opened the double doors, Tom took a second to identify the ship docked inside.

He let out a low whistle. "That's a Los Angeles-class nuclear submarine!"

"That's right," a voice said to his left, and Tom heard the cocking of a handgun. "Now turn around and walk away."

Very slowly, Tom raised his hands and Devin followed suit. As he turned, he caught a glimpse of two other people coming around from behind the sail and pointing their guns as well. When he looked at the man who'd spoken, he could see a very nervous-looking naval lieutenant. Behind him, a tv on mute was broadcasting the latest news.

"What's your name, sailor?" Tom asked, trying to sound friendly.

"Lieutenant Cole. Now back up and get the hell out of here."

Tom ignored him, not because he didn't believe the man would shoot, but because leaving wouldn't be any better. "I assume you know why we're here?"

Cole grimaced. "I have a pretty good idea," he jerked his head back at the tv.

"Then you know we're not going anywhere. How about you lower the gun, and we talk for a bit?" Cole tightened his grip at that, and Tom raised his hands just a little bit higher. "Do you recognize me, Lieutenant?"

After a moment, Cole's eyes brightened. "Yeah. You're Penderton. The spokesman for those coded people."

"That's right. This is Devin Chen, he's one of the coded surgeons who lives in Scheria. We're your ticket to safe harbor, Cole," he tried to emphasize that last bit. He knew nothing about this man save for his occupation, and people joined the military for all sorts of reasons.

"Uh, Tom?" Devin cut in, looking out the open door. "We're about to have company."

Following his gaze, Tom could see a dozen or so other cars speeding up the road. "Looks like we're not the only ones who know about this place. What do you say, Cole? Take us on board and we'll make sure you get to a place where you'll have air and food for the foreseeable future. Or shoot us, and die in a few days along with everyone else."

Cole shook his head defiantly. "We only have a skeleton crew here. Besides, I'm not authorized to cut and run. Not without the Captain."

"Your Captain is either on the way or dead already. Your chain of command is gone, Lieutenant. The President was only a few miles away from ground zero, and anyone else who could give you orders is busy fending for themselves. It's your call, whether you want it or not. A sub like that can hold over a hundred people."

"Why did you join the navy, Cole?" Devin put in, still sounding strained. "Was it to follow orders, or was it to save people's lives? Cuz here's your chance!"

The cars had stopped and people were approaching the doorway. Cole's face contorted briefly, and then he lowered his gun. "Stand down."

Tom let out a relieved breath as Cole holstered his weapon and moved towards him. Instead of forcing him and Devin onto the sub, he moved past them out the door. Curious, they both turned to look. About fifty people were out there, and none looked armed. Some were children, and one little girl darted out of the group and ran towards Cole. "Daddy!"

Cole swept her up in a fierce hug, as the rest approached more confidently. With his free hand, he shook the hand of one of the women near the front. "Mabel. Thanks for bringing her."

"Anytime," the elderly woman responded, looking past him at the 'fishery'. "Are we… going with you?"

Cole hesitated, looking back at Tom and Devin. "Yeah. Yeah, everyone should come inside, quickly."

Chapter 29

The Mississippi was deep enough for them to stay submerged on the way through New Orleans. As curious as he was about what was going on up there, Tom was kind of grateful that Cole insisted on no one using the periscope. There were kids on board, and they were scared enough already.

It took a few hours before they were out at open sea, and then Cole had a look around. His sailor's expression was mostly unreadable, but Tom could tell he was feeling grim. Tom gave him a questioning look when he was done, but he shook his head and nodded to the side.

He kept his voice quiet as Tom stepped aside with him. "It's a mess up there. I counted at least twenty boats swamped and in pieces, and I saw a lot of bodies. But there were people alive. It looks like they're going around Florida and through the Keys like we are." He sighed. "Some of them might make it; I don't know."

"Will *we* make it?" Tom asked bluntly. "I mean the power plant on this thing will probably run for a hundred years, but do we have enough fuel?"

Cole gave him a strange look. "That won't be a problem, but we're under a third of our full crew. If anyone takes a shot at us, we won't last long in a fight."

"Who would be shooting at us with all this going on?"

"You'd be surprised," he said darkly. "With enough chaos, people are capable of just about anything. Even military folks."

Tom took a deep breath. As much as he wanted to get back to Scheria quickly, there were other concerns. "You said you saw survivors up there, right? And that most of them were in trouble? We should go up there and bring them on board."

"That's crazy. The only advantage we've got right now is that no one knows we're down here!"

"It's the right thing to do, Cole. In less than a day this whole area will be underneath that cloud. Whatever it is, it's not breathable. If it was, we would have heard from survivors by now." He considered reaching a hand out to the man's shoulder, but thought better of it. "We can't save all of them, but we have a lot of room in here. We can save *some*."

"The moment we surface, every boat in sight will swarm over to us. We can only take on eighty, maybe ninety people at most. We don't have enough air for more."

"Look, if I'm wrong, then the Coded Nation is gone and we're all doomed anyway. If I'm right, there's plenty of air where we're going. Saving ninety people is better than saving none, right? Like it or not, you're in command now. It's time to make the call."

Deep down Tom had suspected Cole was a good man, and it seemed his instincts were right. Growling, the sailor issued the orders, and the *Leighton* began to surface.

He hadn't been kidding: it really was a mess up there. One of the crew let Tom look through the periscope briefly while they were organizing the rescue, and he could see at least a dozen floating wrecks. The fastest boats had already sped on south and out of sight, but the slower ones were converging on them now. Cole tapped him on the shoulder. "Ninety people. No more."

"Then we go down again," Tom agreed with relief.

"Hello, you've reached the voicemail of Terry Brandt. I'm not at home right now, but if you…" Vicky tuned out the message, angrily. She'd tried her dad's cellphone repeatedly, but there had been no answer. Now she was calling his home phone. If she could get ahold of him, she'd send the chopper for him right away. With a full tank of gas, it might be able to get up to Minnesota and bring him back in time.

"… I'll try and get back to you. Don't expect it soon, though," her dad's voice continued, "because I'm on vacation in Portland and I won't be back until at least the twentieth. Have a good day." The message ended.

Her hands shaking, Vicky turned to look at the satellite feed. The green circle had expanded north into Oregon, covering most of the state.

Across the room, Hamedi was also on the phone. He tapped the shoulder of one of the technicians, and the young man pulled up another satellite feed. This one was their own weather satellite, and it showed the water between the two islands. The ocean was already getting choppy, as shockwaves from the gas conversion process were rippling out ahead of it.

Hamedi turned to her and said something, but Vicky was just staring at where Portland used to be. He closed the distance to her. "Vicky!"

She shook her head briefly. "What?"

"The refugee camp is set up and ready, right?" He gestured out the window towards the docks. "We've only got a few minutes before the first boats arrive."

Trying to focus, Vicky nodded. "Yeah, the supplies are in place and the bedrolls are all set up. One of my old disaster crew Morgan is down there with a bunch of other volunteers, and they know what to do." One advantage to living in a domed city was that there was no need to protect from rain or wind.

"It's getting pretty bad out there," Hamedi looked back at their own satellite feed, his own voice ragged and stressed. "The wind speed has increased wave size as well, and it's capsized a bunch of boats already. The rest are packing together in convoys. The first group from Miami and Nassau is the fastest and the smallest—no more than a few hundred. The second one will be here in a few hours, and that'll be much bigger. There are thousands more people coming in after that-" he was cut off by a noise from above.

Vicky followed him outside and looked up, at the chopper lifting off from the ceiling. It hovered for a few seconds and then leaned forward, moving away. It sped towards the massive sea-door, and then out like a fly escaping a home. Hamedi looked at Vicky, who saw her own confusion mirrored in his eyes.

"That was Abner, and his guy Mark was flying," James said from behind them, coming downstairs. His usual monotone voice was even flatter than normal. "He went to Fai's lab and took one of the O2 splitter prototypes. I just saw it on camera. He also took one of the auto-coders before heading up to the helipad."

"What the hell is he thinking?" Hamedi bit out, glaring at James for some reason. "He's the Servant! His place is here, with us! Besides, where could he go? The whole world will be covered in toxic gas in just a few days!"

"Maybe he knows something we don't," James put in. "He didn't take that splitter without a reason. He must have known that Fai would make the other ones work in time to keep us all breathing."

"It doesn't matter," Vicky said tonelessly. First this disaster, then her dad, and now Abner had abandoned them? "We have to keep going without him. Hamedi, could you get some people out to check the sea-door's servos? We've never had to close it before, and I want to make sure it works before that gas gets here. James, could you do the same for Elysia? I'm sure they have people familiar with it, but the wave won't hit them at the same time."

They both hesitated for a moment, before nodding and heading out. Abner was their Servant, but that didn't matter anymore. If it ever did at all. They had a job to do, and people depending on them to keep a clear head.

The next day and a half were the most stressful times Vicky had ever known. Even the time following the terrorist attack was tame by comparison. The first convoy arrived and she was there to greet them at the docks. Most of the families were offloaded first, and then she insisted that the boats be taken out through the sea-door and abandoned to the left or the right of it. There were many more boats incoming, and they didn't have enough space at the docks for even a fraction of them.

Helicopters and sea-planes were arriving too, and an area near the docks had been cleared out for the former. VIPs, mostly from America, stepped out, but Vicky made sure Morgan treated them the same as everyone else. If these uncoded people wanted to come here for sanctuary, they'd have to get used to the coded way of doing things.

Stan Harriman, Max's old friend who used to work for the NSA, was handling security at the Uptown offices for now. He had very wisely blocked off the helipad after Abner's departure, making sure that none of those American VIPs had access to the control room. Not until they could run all the way up here at least.

So here they were: Vicky, Stan, and Hamedi in the control room, as the next convoy approached. Fai was over in Elysia, setting up the O2 splitters there with James' help. They'd lost contact with the control room in Elysia nearly an hour ago. Vicky could only hope they were okay.

The wave was still over an hour away, but they had another problem. Fai's O2 splitters had increased the possible population of the dome to about twelve thousand, but they were already over nine. The next convoy was already arriving, and it would push them over that limit—far over.

They had no choice but to close the sea-door early, trapping most of the convoy outside.

"Do it," Vicky ordered Stan, trying not to think about what would happen to the rest of them. Stan reached for the controls, and then froze. He shook his head briefly. His code had gone off.

Of course it had gone off! The sea-door would certainly hit one or more of the boats on the way down, crushing them. "Get an uncoded person in here," Vicky said quickly to Hamedi, who was nearest to the phone. "There should be a few coding trainees in the next building over!" Hamedi reached for the phone, but paused as well. He couldn't call someone to do their dirty work, any more than he could do it himself!

It was over. They might be able to close the door after the last boat got in and before the wave, but it didn't matter. In a few days everyone in here would die of suffocation. Humanity as a whole would be gone, and it was all because the three people in this room were all coded.

"Look!" Stan pointed at the camera feed of the harbor. The sea-door had begun to close, its servos pushing one surface up from below, and the other down from above. The top one reached the convoy first. Smaller boats slipped past it into the harbor, but one much larger one clipped the descending mass and was slowly pushed under. They all watched, horrified, as people began jumping overboard before the boat was crushed.

"Someone is controlling the door from down there," Hamedi said, looking at the door controls on his computer.

An uncoded someone, whoever it was. Feeling both nauseous and grateful, Vicky stood up. "I'm going down there to meet our new guests. Lock the system completely. The wave will be here soon, and we can't open that door ever again."

It took her about half an hour to get to the docks on her bike, because the streets were packed by now, coded and uncoded people mixing freely and staring up to the sky. Just as she started to brake to a stop outside the docks, the howling wind outside became a shriek audible even through the dome.

Then, as Hamedi had predicted, the wave slammed into Scheria's barrier. The ground shook, raising screams from all the uncoded people onboard those boats. Vicky slid off her bike as it toppled, and spread out her arms to lessen the impact. At least thee shaking stopped right away.

The dome was mostly translucent, aside from the central pillar and the support struts on the sides, so everyone watched in awe and terror as the clear sky above them became green. The gas swept over the dome in seconds, and then continued out to sea. From what Vicky had heard, the people outside were choking to death by now, with their skin blistering and their eyes bleeding. Twelve thousand people here, plus hopefully another ten thousand or so in Elysia. Out of seven billion.

The welcoming speech would have to wait. Picking herself up and quickly checking for bruises, Vicky retrieved her bike.

She checked the northern access hatch first, and was relieved to find the Need Board people had done a fine job. It was a functioning airlock now, tied into the power grid and everything. They had a few hazmat suits here in the city, and the people on those boats had probably brought some of their own. They would be able to inspect the dome from the outside at some point. The drones were all still out there in positions all over the exterior, looking for damage.

The harbor was a mess by comparison. As she approached, Vicky could barely make out any water at all. The whole space was packed with boats, as people jumped from ship to ship on their way to shore. Some were swimming between them, and she saw at least two people get crushed between some of the boats by accident.

There was a preacher just outside of the refugee camp, reading to a packed crowd. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." He caught sight of Vicky, and his eyes darkened with recognition. There were a lot of bald coded people here, but none as well-known as her.

Some of the people in the crowd followed his gaze. A young man spoke out from the group. "You're Vicky Brandt! You did this! You and the other coded people—you did all of this!"

"We don't know how this happened," Vicky tried to answer as other people from the crowd joined in.

"What else could it be?" Another shouted. "Your precious gift to humanity—to clean the air—and you used it to kill everyone while you stayed here, safe and secure inside your domes!"

"The code would never let any of us do that," Vicky insisted. "And even if we could do it, we would have closed that sea-door hours ago and kept everyone out!"

"My son is still out there!" A woman shouted at her. "He's dead now because of you! All those people—a whole world full of people dead—because of you!"

Vicky's words might as well have been spoken to the deaf. Everyone was feeling the same loss here, and the urge to find someone to blame was overpowering. Vicky had felt it herself, just after the attack on the creche. Coded people might be able to ignore that urge, but these people wouldn't.

"Babylon has fallen," the preacher spoke out, and the crowd quieted a bit. "This was foretold as well," he raised his bible for emphasis. "And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened."

He looked up at the green clouds outside for a few moments, before focusing on her again. "We were also told what to do to those responsible," he went on, opening the bible. "Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her."

The crowd was slow to respond at first, but as more and more of them started shouting out against her, the group soon took hold of the pastor's words. She had nowhere to run as they surged forward towards her, gripping her tightly and lifting her off the ground. As they carried her away, Vicky looked up and tried to remember the comforting green canopy of trees at her graduation ceremony.

Chapter 30

The trip from New Orleans to Scheria was just over a thousand miles long, cutting around the tip of Florida, through the Keys, and then out into the Atlantic. Tom had hoped they could make it before the wave, but there were some serious delays. Getting out into the Gulf of Mexico wasn't hard, but both the wind and waves got much worse once they did.

Normally a sub like like the *Leighton* could do about twenty-four knots, but with a limited crew, the waves, and stopping to pick up stranded people on the way, it took them almost three days. By then the sky was a uniform, yellow-green color through the viewports. Cole said it wouldn't be a problem, as they had a locker full of hazmat suits on board. It would take a few trips back and forth, but they should be able to ferry everyone into the city safely. Assuming the city was safe, anyway. Vicky had said they would outfit the northern maintenance hatch as an airlock, but there was no guarantee it had been done. Tom hadn't been able to reach her since their brief conversation back in New Orleans.

Devin insisted that he and Tom be in the first group. Not only would he be recognized as coded, but he was the most likely to be able to get past any security. Apparently he knew some of the security procedures. Cole objected at first, but eventually agreed. He gave the two of them a primer on how to use the evacuation suits, and then the three of them swam to shore. Fortunately, there were a few electric-powered boats lining the shore which could be used to make the back-and-forth a lot faster for the rest.

During the trip, they’d taken in a quantity of the gas for study, but they didn’t have the equipment on board to figure out exactly what it was. In addition to being unbreathable, it was also caustic. Fortunately it looked like it would take several hours of exposure to be a risk to their hazmat suits.

As they approached, Tom could see the upper parts of the dome. There was a concrete layer about twenty feet high on the ground, but above that was translucent material. He couldn't be sure because it was so late at night, but it looked like the inside might be breathable.

Swimming and then walking in the suit was not easy. Tom was breathing pretty heavily and sweating a lot, and he could hear Devin having similar troubles over the radio. Cole was trained in this, and guided them safely to the edge of the dome. Once there, it only took them a few minutes to find the hatch.

Apparently there were no security measures. The room was closed but not locked, and released air once they opened it. They clustered inside, clumsily because of how small it was and how big they were currently, and closed the outer door. Air hissed as the green stuff was replaced with oxygen and nitrogen, and then the inner door opened.

Tom knew this place fairly well. Vicky had given him a tour, just as the domes were being finished up. They were just north of the docks. He took off his headgear and sniffed around. There was the distinct smell of burning in the area, but no sign of flame. He nodded at the others. "Lieutenant, it should be safe here. Safer than it is out there anyway. We'll take off these suits and you can take them back to the *Leighton*. Use one of the boats outside to start ferrying people inside. Devin, stay here and make sure everyone is inside the dome before heading out. If I know Vicky, she's set up some kind of relief area near the docks. Try and find it."

Cole looked a little surprised at being ordered around, but nodded with good grace. "What will you be doing?" Devin asked, as he took off his own gear.

"I'm going Uptown, to check in at the admin building. I know I'm not technically allowed without an escort," he put in quickly, "but I bet there are uncoded people all over the city. I'm the least of Abner's problems right now. Maybe I can help coordinate between him and the refugees. Keep hold of your radio, Devin. Once I find out what's going on, I'll let you know."

After giving his gear to Cole, Tom made his way south towards the docks. The burning smell got stronger, and when he rounded one building, he came across a terrible sight.

A post had been set up, and wood had been burned up against it. He could smell residual gas fumes from the pyre… and see a burned body tied to it. No one was around, so he got closer. There was a piece of metal propped up against the pyre—probably from the hull of one of those boats—and a message had been spray-painted onto it.

Here died the worldkiller, Vicky Brandt. May she burn forever.

As he wandered further south into the city, Tom was in a haze. Rage and grief swirled together in his head, just as destructive to his mind as those gases above had been to the world.

For the past days, he'd been so focused on just getting here that he hadn't thought about what might be waiting. Of course the uncoded people would blame the Coded Nation, but to burn someone at the stake like that? It was beyond the pale.

His anger wasn't just because she was dead, either. She would probably be remembered as the greatest mass murderer in history! A fitting legacy, he reflected bitterly, for someone who'd spent most of her life trying to help people.

He'd been hearing distant gunshots and explosions since leaving the docks, but it was imminent danger that cut in on his hateful thoughts. There was a group of people marching his direction, about a block away. So far most of the houses seemed to be packed full of refugees, and they had locked all the doors from the inside. Everyone else on the street was mostly military from their stride. As he got closer, he recognized their uniforms. They were Coleman-Saito Security people!

Tom ducked behind one of the larger equipment chests, trying to stay hidden. Now this nightmare was starting to make sense. CS headquarters was in Maimi. They'd probably swarmed the boats as soon as word got out. Tom had looked into how Kenshi Saito was running his company these days, and it seemed he'd hired private military contractors to train his people. There were probably a bunch of corpses out there on the water—people who'd died well before the wave hit so that these people could have room on the boats.

If Vicky was any indication, the coded people were probably being slaughtered at this very moment. Trying to stay out of sight, Tom made a beeline for the Uptown offices. His plan was a bit of a long shot, but it was all he had left.

The upper levels of the city weren't that well guarded. Tom assumed that the CS people were off murdering his friends, and had already 'secured' this area. Inside the building was a different story. From his exterior vantage point, he could see the main control room, and it was guarded. He didn't see anyone down the hall in the engineering room, though.

The front door was locked, but the patio to its side was unguarded. It was a good thing he was a terrible handyman. Pulling himself up onto the second level, he carefully pushed the glass pane he'd failed at replacing inward. He caught it before it could fall, and then eased himself inside, pushing the pane back into place. From there, it was just a few steps down the hall and into the semi-private engineering room.

They had radios in there. Tom snatched one up and tried to set it to the right channel. "Devin, are you there?" He tried to keep his voice low, but the urgency made that a little hard.

There was only static, but that didn't mean his message had gone unheard. "If you can hear me, you have to get out of here right now! The others should be safe here, but you won't be. Get back to the boats on the beach as soon as you can, and head for Elysia. I don't know if you can make it, but it might be safe for you there."

There was still no response, but Tom kept the radio with him just in case. Fortunately he had access to the cameras from here. A few seconds and he could see the new one overlooking the airlock. All of the people from the *Leighton* had apparently made it through, and Devin was ushering them south into town. He was staying put though, and looking at the camera. Apparently he hadn't heard Tom's message, or was unwilling to leave without him.

Tom moved over to one of the drone control stations and started issuing commands. He couldn't see their locations from this building, but it looked like the gas outside wasn't preventing them from following simple instructions. When they were in place, he tapped the intercom. "I'm assuming Kenshi Saito is somewhere in this building," he broadcast to everyone in all three Uptown offices. "If he's not, then I'd like whichever *other* murderous psychopath in charge of those goons to come to the engineering room."

Apparently Kenshi was in the main control room. It was only a minute or so before he and a gaggle of his minions were at Tom's door. They were aiming weapons, but Tom raised his left hand. "I wouldn't shoot if I were you." He kept his right hand poised over the keyboard.

Kenshi raised a hand warningly, and his guards lowered their guns. "Hello, Thomas. I must say I'm surprised to see you. When we didn't find you yesterday, I assumed you were out there," he gestured at the dome. "I'm glad you made it."

Tom felt a surge of rage, and was tempted for an instant to just press the key and end it all. After a moment, he glared back at Kenshi. "Look up there," he pressed another key and there was a flash of light up on the third level of the dome.

"That was a drone self-destructing. Vicky built them that way so that people like you couldn't steal them. Now look further up on the fourth level. See that dark spot? That's all the other drones, all clustered together. One of them might not damage the dome, but all of them in the same place, going up at once? That'd crack this place open like an egg!"

Kenshi's expression went blank. "You wouldn't do that. My children are here—as are thousands more. You wouldn't be that cruel."

"I'm not coded, remember?" Tom reminded him. "I can do anything I want, and I will kill everyone here, unless you let my friends go. I don't know how many of them are left, but you will *let them leave*, or you'll die right along with them."

The older man didn't say anything at first, and Tom tried to moderate his tone. "I assume you're going after them because there are too many people in the city right now. Vicky said that it can keep about twelve thousand people alive for now. You know, before you burned her to death!" His hand twitched over the keyboard.

"I had nothing to do with that," Kenshi said hastily, extending his own hand briefly. "I only control about a third of the city. If I'd been there, I would have stopped them. You know how this goes, Thomas. We had to reduce the population or everyone here would die. Everyone may die anyway, despite what we do! Any one of a hundred things could spell disaster in here!"

Kenshi shook his head slowly. "All my plans and intricate moves. Years of effort, and sweat, and worries, trying to understand and use this coded movement of yours, all undone. Probably by some idiot tinkering with something he didn't understand! All of it was for nothing if my family doesn't survive."

"Then let them go," Tom insisted, pointing towards the camera feed showing the airlock. "Let them try and reach Elysia. At least give them a chance! You may want them dead so your children have a better chance at surviving, but give them that much. Please."

Suddenly the drone control screen went dead. The other screens as well.

Kenshi took a deep breath, and relaxed a bit. "My people have overridden your control. They're returning the drones to safe positions." He paused for a bit and then gestured, dismissing his guards. "Out of respect for you, Thomas, I will allow the surviving coded people to leave. Like me, they dedicated their lives to benefitting others. But you are another matter. You threatened my children, and there is no excusing that."

He actually looked sad as he pulled his gun, aimed, and fired.

Epilogue

From space, the astronauts on the ISS and Tiangong watched the green wave envelop the globe. From periscope stations on board the *Leighton* and other subs like it, sailors wondered what to do next. From bunkers ranging from the Svalbard Seed Vault, to continuity of government shelters, to any number of single-household fallout shelters, people cowered in silence and worried about the future.

The end of the world, predicted by so many for so long, had finally come to pass. Sooner and for a different reason perhaps, but it had happened anyway. Many people wished or hoped that this was just an extended nightmare, from which they would soon wake. Some saw no purpose at all in living in such a world, while others clung even more fiercely to their desire to live no matter the cost. Some people blamed whichever gods they worshipped, and some prayed for deliverance and mercy from those same entities. Others wished they had faith, so that they could make sense of it all.

Kenshi was no different. His family was alive, but their survival hung by a thread. Most of his people were security or risk management; he had no scientists to speak of here in the city. He also had no idea if the people he'd sent to Elysia had been successful. The coded were all dead or gone, and their technology which was keeping everyone alive… was a mystery. Only time would tell if he, and by extension humanity, could survive in here.