

LADY IN RED

A painting of a woman with dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a vibrant red hooded cloak. She is looking slightly to the left of the viewer with a subtle, enigmatic expression. The background is a textured, greyish-brown surface, possibly a wall or stone, rendered with visible brushstrokes. The overall style is reminiscent of a classical or expressionist painting.

BRADLEY PEARCE

Lady in Red

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Dedicated to:
Linley

Alfred Nobel dreamed of building a weapon so powerful that it would
deter any future wars.
Einstein, Rutherford, and Oppenheimer would come to materialize his
dream.

“I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

J. Robert Oppenheimer

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Prologue

All of us are capable of killing someone. Or at least wishing someone was dead.

Few of us are capable of killing everyone. Or at least wishing everyone was dead.

Seth Adison was such a person.

At conception, his soul descended from heaven.

While other souls would settle on the earthly plane. His would continue to the bowels of the earth. There to encounter God's greatest critic. The Devil. Filling the empty vessel with an *all empowering knowledge*. Before releasing it vertically to fuse with the embryo that lay waiting in his mother's womb.

Knowledge is a power. With it, one can create anything. With it, one can destroy everything. Oppenheimer had proven testimony to that. Freewill. The covenant between God and the Devil. Would ensure neither would interfere hence forth.

Would the seed grow to the light and blossom to a beautiful flower? Or would it grow to the darkness and become to a jagged thorn?

Seth was passed between nannies. Between Private Schools.

Until finally he reached Ivy League Colleges of Princeton, and Harvard. Exhibiting autistic traits as a child. In time, these would dismissed as a misdiagnosis. He would never know his parents that travelled from one social retreat for the rich, to another. He was but a mere photograph in a frame. Void of being love. Isolated from those that could.

A prodigy and insanely intelligent. Nothing was beyond Seth's intelligence. Or eventual knowledge. Knowing things without knowing why. Growing older, he assimilated with the world about him. And silently blended into society. As if he was one of them. Which he was not.

Attaining multiple Doctorates in Bio-chemistry and Advanced Software Engineering. His unique record had attracted the attention of a

secret research agency. There is a fine line between genius and insanity. As history has shown. Being well paid by the Agency, he would be considered a genius.

Background checks revealed his father, despite being a retired Merchant Banker, had no criminal convictions. His mother, despite being a member of a Baptist Church group, had no ties to al-Qaeda. Seth was a loner. Harboring no political or religious affiliations. Appearing on no one's radar.

No one's but the Agency's.

Unseen by the outside world. Beneficial, yet expendable. The perfect candidate to head a clandestine research team at a subterranean laboratory in New York City.

The year is 2048.

Medical advancements had slowed the death rate. The world's population had passed seventeen billion people. And continued to climb. The earth groaned with each new birth. Skies stained with industrial emissions. Oceans saturated with human effluent and toxins. The planet struggles to feed the existing mouths. Only to have another million new mouths begging for food each new day. And the next. And the next.

The earth, a finite petri dish, was overflowing with multiplying human microbes.

America, crippled by reparation payments. Just as Germany had been a century and half before. Oh how the wheel had come full circle. America and North Korea had rattled their sabers. One taunting the other to cross the line. America blinked first. Unleashing fire and fury. Only to be delivered the bill for damages. Found guilty by a jury of their peers for starting the unsolicited war.

The United Nations collapsed as members abandoned the impotent institution. Failing to address the global issues it had been established to prevent. Preferring to pamper the militant Security Council, than aid the passive majority. Protecting industrialists, than prevent climate change. A new organization, one they was said never existed, emerged from the shadows to take control.

The New World Order.

Its ever-seeing eye emblazoned on the blood red banners hung from government buildings around the world. It had won, not on the battlefield.

But in the boardrooms.

Its headquarters based on the shores of Lake Geneva. Comprising of seven global economic provinces known as the G7. Controlling much of the world's wealth. Industrial dynasties governed the vast territorial *Provinces*. Lessor nations now reduced to subservient puppet states. Indentured to their big brother. Too weak to argue otherwise. Surrendering democratic rights in exchange for protection and economic survival.

If Dante had envisioned nine stratum descending to the frozen pit of hell. Then the Order had echelons that ascended to an equally sinister pinnacle. At the peak was the Chairman. John Patmos. At the base. The plebs living in limbo.

Patmos had maintained the G7 in a state of harmony. His iron fist crushing anyone who opposed him. But now the growing social unrest was proving disruptive to the Order's authority. Underground resistance movements had surfaced. Demanding freedom and rights. The Social Network was unplugged. Leaving the world disconnected for the first time in half a century.

The people protested and global civil disobedience was on the rise.

Augustus Braun was the Order's Secretary of State.

And John Patmos' right hand man. Braun was a mysterious man of substantial wealth. He had an origin into which no one dared to inquire. His father had crawled from the rubble left by the Allied bombings to forge a dynasty of industrial wealth and power. His own son Nero was equally as enigmatic. Having a reputation as a playboy and womanizer. His father's position having protected him on several occasions.

Braun and Patmos were cut from different cloth. Though Patmos ruled with a firm hand. Braun preferred a more ruthless approach. Alex Noren was Braun's right hand man and head of the Order's Secret Service. With impunity to interrogate and kill. Known as the Bogeyman as he had become effective at infiltrating the Resistance. But even Noren was struggling to stem the rising tide of agitators pounding at the Order's door.

Patmos and Braun were the two most powerful men in the modern world.

They were facing a situation growing out of control. If left unchecked, the ants would soon over power the Beast...

Chapter 01

The room was dark.

A heavy silence befell those watching from within. In anticipation of something special. A haze of cigarette smoke hung in the air. Unable to settle. A vintage sound track, *Lady in Red*, began to play. Colored lights blinked in unison to the romantic rhythmic beat. A tall silver pole stood erect in the center of the stage. The polished surface reflecting the lights that shone about the stage. A drifting layer of mist blanketed the stage, before cascading over the edge. A spotlight projected a large white disc onto the artificial cloud.

Then Chelsea stepped into the floating white orb.

Exposing vibrant red heels that penetrated the translucent surface. She had stepped into her world. And for that moment, ceased to be the other person. Liberated from the demands of the outside world. In her world, she demanded complete attention. The allure of sex stirred as she began to gyrate in time with the music. Lost in the rhythm. Lost in a temporal world of desire. Her slender East European body moving in seductive ways. Taunting and seducing the depraved souls that watched on. Her near naked body beginning to glisten with sweat from the heat of the lights.

Lights that would capture her. Only to release her. Teasing those who wanted more. Following her every move. It would not allow her escape.

Reaching for the pole, grips the cold steely shaft. And swings around it. Letting the momentum and the mood take her to forbidden places in her mind. Grinding herself along its icy length as though to relieve an irritation. Luring the watching eyes closer. Only to push them away. Their nostrils flaring. Taking in the sweet smell of exoticness and fragrant cigarette smoke.

Unfastening a clip between her breasts, released them from their confinement. The spot light illuminating the near perfect pillows. Sensitive buds excited by the rush of warm air upon them. Illicit eyes feasted on her youthful Romanian beauty. Long legs and smooth curves

excited the watching imaginations. Allowing their fantasies to dance with her. To possess her.

Just for that moment. She was theirs.

Soon the titillation would soon be coming to an end. She had a captured her prey the moment she had stepped onto the stage. Now she it was time to put the prey out of their misery. As easily as she had released her breasts. She released the slim red silk panties. Revealing what made her different from most of the leering voyeurs. Moving her fingers over her body as if to suggest the simulation of arousal. On occasions stimulation would replace simulation. Few would ever be allowed to go there.

Those that did, would pay handsomely for the pleasure.

By night she was Chelsea, an exotic dancer at a Gentleman's Club called *Rudi's*. The nocturnal world offering a gratification for her sexual desires.

By day she was Kristina. A New York Police Detective. Tired and beat. Tying back her long dark hair she could transform herself. Little or no make-up would complete the disguise. *Rudi's* clientele would struggle to recognize her.

Catching the subway Downtown to the crowded Ninety-First Precinct.

Suspects sat handcuffed, wrestling with restraints. Protesting their innocence. Demanding their lawyers. Demanding their rights. Her desk littered with files of unsolved cases. Only to have another appear the next day. A rubbish bin littered and overflowing with paper coffee cups. Discards of her daily diet.

Only to have another discarded a moment later.

To the officers in blue around her she appeared as burnt out as they were. Her nocturnal existence sapping her diurnal energy. She wondered how much longer she could hold the façade of balancing the two worlds. To satisfy the craving for each.

Getting into the minds of murderers and drug dealers. They would be arrested and charged. Only to have their cases thrown out of court on a technicality. A judicial dance of inequity. One step forward. One step sideways. And two steps back.

It was a dance she knew all too well.

Several of her clientele at *Rudi's* had criminal associations.

On occasions, after weakening their inhibitions, they would confess their secrets to her. Their Sins. Appearing inept. She would listen to their confessions in silence. Unsure whether they were boasting, or seeking absolution. Crimes of passion she could almost excuse. It was not her place to judge. If a John found redemption in talking. As though verbalizing the misdeed would vindicate it. Then let them talk. Satisfied that they had excised their demons.

She would look into the little boy's eyes. Offer a kiss of atonement. Then arouse them to make them a man again...

Chapter 02

“You can’t be serious Augustus?” Exclaimed Patmos in horror at the proposal just spoken by his Secretary of State.

“Why not? It would solve *all our* problems.” Stated Braun calmly, as if he was exterminating ants.

“You want to eradicate most of the world’s population and begin again? ... Have you gone completely mad Augustus?” Patmos exclaimed again, looking directly at Braun hoping this was just one of his sick jokes.

It may have been sick. But it was not a joke.

Braun had already thought the idea through months earlier. It was just a small matter of informing his superior. The idea came to him one day while watching his housekeeper spraying ants. It did not take much for Braun to extrapolate the eradication further. And apply it to the human populous. He reasoned, sooner rather than later, there would need to be a similar *correction* in the world’s population. As though to sanitize the word.

All it would require was a *vaccine* for the Order’s *chosen* few to survive.

Braun had given the scheme much thought. And had come to the opinion that the easiest way was to release a cocktail of deadly pathogens. Poisoning, sterilization, infectious diseases, were all on his Correction Menu. The Bubonic plague, Small Pox, Anthrax and the Spanish Flu had proven effective in eliminating vast portions of the population in the past.

If money could buy power, it could also buy death on a grand scale.

The Dynastic Families would pay handsomely for the privilege to participate if it meant eliminating the pests biting at their ankles. Not be ones for getting their hands dirty with killing, nor the toil of labor. Others would need to survive. Those that had proven themselves worthy by way of the Arts and Sciences. Braun was not totally inhuman. A myriad of minions to provide civil services, to work farms and factories. The *Chosen* would be the new beginning in a less over crowded world. Assuming any survived at all.

That was a premeditated risk the Braun was prepared to take.

“Think about it John... The world’s population is growing faster than we can deal with it... We’re losing control of the Provinces... China is on the verge of toppling. We need to exterminate these, these ...” Braun stuttered for a suitable word, “... These *cockroaches*... Before they over power us.” Pushing his suggestion further into Patmos’ thoughts.

“I understand that... But we can’t play God with people’s lives Augustus... It’s immoral for God sake... Who am I to order a global eradication?” Asked Patmos of his Secretary of State.

“I’m afraid you’re the only one who can make the decision John...” Braun hesitated before continuing with his next declaration, knowing it may strike a nerve, “...I’ve been in quiet discussions with the Heads of the G7 and they’re in favor... Pending your approval of course...” Then added a further codicil, “... I’ve also been on contact with Robert Mueller... Head of our Bio-Tech Lab in New York. His team working on a vaccine as we speak.” Advised Braun hesitantly, wondering if he had said too much.

“You’ve been busy behind my back Augustus I see?” Patmos questioned suspiciously.

‘What else had Braun been up to?’ He thought

“Just doing my job John... I wanted to feel it out before approaching you with it... Of course none of this can come about until the Heads of State officially pass the resolution... And even then it would ultimately require your signature to enact.” Braun stated the procedure required to the enact annihilation. Stroking Patmos’ authority.

“I should hope so... If any of this gets out there’ll be global pandemonium and riots to a degree not even your blessed plague could stop.” Warned Patmos shaking his head in disbelief.

Placing hands on his desk. Feeling the cold ceramic surface beneath aging fingers. He gazed into the distance. Imaging a world of innumerable dead bodies lying about. Rotting on the streets. Men. Women. Children. Visions of Dante’s hell appeared. Damnation. Screaming tormented dying bodies. Arms reaching out for help. For a salvation. That would never come.

The thought disgusted him. Yet it was a thought that could resolve the Order’s quandaries. Patmos was a ruthless man. But not a heartless man. Braun however would not lose any sleep over the thought of sixteen and

half billion dead souls. He saw a glory in his grand scheme. A chance to begin again with a clean slate. Minus the undesirables.

“I’m just asking you to think about it for now John... Mueller’s team work on vaccines as part of their on-going research... I’ve scheduled a meeting with the Heads in three months’ time... They will be awaiting your decision as to whether you want to go ahead or not.” Braun advised his superior who sat numb staring in to space.

“Hmm...” Patmos groaned, “... Give me three months and you’ll have your answer... But be warned ... I am reluctant at this stage to proceed.”

“I understand John. I just ask you to think about it for now.” Said Braun, backing away from the discussion.

Patmos dismissed Braun from his office to contemplate the proposal. Numbed and shocked by it.

The earth was not getting any bigger. Mars was out of the question. As it had been for the past three decades. Man’s attempt of leaving a dying planet to colonize a dead planet had failed. The costs had simply outweighed any benefits. Of which there were none.

Tapping frail fingers on the desk he watched the setting sun outside the window. Glowing red hues, as it filtered through the layers of pollution. As a child he recalled the sky being an amazing deep blue.

There was nothing amazing or blue about it now.

‘What had happened? ...’ He asked himself? *‘... How could man have done this to himself?’*

Selfishness. Wealth. Power. And greed, came to mind. He was the King of Kings. Patmos was Chairman of the Order.

And now he was being asked to play God. To wipe the planet clean to make more room for a chosen few. Dynastic Families. Ironically, the very ones who had polluted the planet accumulating their fortunes. He reflected.

‘Perhaps it would allow nature a chance. To lick its wounds. To heal. Perhaps the blue skies would return’, he thought.

Though it seemed wrong. He sensed a global good could come from the insane cost involved to obtain it. He had three months to deliberate the Braun’s dark proposal to reset the doomsday clock...

Chapter 03

A telephone rang. Kristina was reluctant to answer it, and she lifted the handle.

“Tepes speaking.” Knowing it could only be dispatch calling her out on another dead-end scene.

A bloody murder. Unusual circumstances. A drug deal gone wrong in Midtown.

“I’ll be there soon. Don’t touch anything! ... And keep the media clowns away.” She instructed and hung up.

“Worland! ...” Calling out to a rookie detective in battle with the coffee machine, “... Grab your coat! You’re coming with me!”

“Where we heading boss?” Asked Worland, keen to get out of the office.

“Midtown... Bake house of some sort... One dead. Land lady found him this morning when she went looking for the rent... That’s all I know at this stage. I want you to stand back and observe? Keep out of my way while I look around.” She barked at the underling.

“Yes boss.” Responded Worland, keen to get into the field.

Initiating the propulsion system of the unmarked squad car.

Kristina set coordinates and the automated piloting system took over. An artificial voice advised an arrival time. The vehicle hovered and joined the flow of traffic heading uptown.

With lights flashing the squad car pulled to the curb of the apartment building.

Curious bystanders had gathered as to what might have happened. A lone officer stood frigid at the front entrance. Flashing their badges, the officer waved them through with little attention to their credentials.

The cold wind ceased once inside. People were milling about. Mostly media loitering for leads. They would have to wait. An officer indicted the top floor. Heading to the elevators hoping they were worked.

“Press seven would you Worland...” Instructed Kristina, “...Remember, stand back and keep everyone else away. I don’t want the crime scene messed up any more than it probably has already... Forensics should be here soon.” Knowing the heavy footed officers who would have trampled all on over it by now.

“Yes boss.”

Stopping at the top floor and the elevator doors opened.

Another officer stood at the doorway of the apartment. Flashing their badges at him they entered. The front door suggested no forced entry. Police tape marked out perimeters and Kristina quickly surveyed the crime scene. She had little time to assess how it could have gone down before Forensics would arrived.

A uniformed officer stood outside the bedroom door. But this was no longer a bedroom. It appeared to be a laboratory of some kind. A bake house. A twisted body laid face up on the floor. Its chest riddled by several bullets. White powder covered the floor, having spilt from an upturn table.

‘A struggle.’ She thought.

Enquiring why the room felt unusually cold. An officer explains the land lady found the window open when she discovered the body. And had closed it before calling the police.

‘The perp had opened the window to contaminate the crime scene... Smart...’ She thought, *‘...He knew what he was doing, and how to get away with it.’*

Patting the man down discovers an empty wallet and pulls out an identity card.

“Scan this Worland.” Handing him the white identification card.

Waving the card over his sensor, Worland waits before the deceased details appeared on screen.

“Boris Beckett... Male... Thirty four... Unemployed... German national. Drug conviction, trafficking and possession...” Worland recited Beckett’s record, “...I’ve scanned the room... Analysis reveals the white powder is a combination of Cocaine and K9... Commonly referred to on the street as *Candy*.”

“He’s a long way from home... Wonder what brings him to town? ... Seems he’s stepped up in the world, and moved into production. Profile the room for prints and run them through the database. Scan the body for

bullet fragments and other injuries... Oh, and find out the location of his known associates... Forensics can take it from here.”

“Yes boss.” Responds Worland, unsure where to begin.

Red beams radiated from Worland’s scanner. Digitally mapping the room and its contents. Capturing three dimensional imaging of the scene. Kristina looked about for anything that looked out of place. Unless she had solid leads the case would go unsolved. Not that it matter. Boris was just another low life perp and probably got what he deserved. No one would lose any sleep over him. It was her job to do the paperwork and tie off any loose ends. Beckett’s demise would be entered into the database and serve as a holistic synopsis of his criminal activity.

“Done.” Called out Worland.

“We need to speak with the land lady who found your friend Boris. Then we’ll get out of here.” Informed Kristina, keen to leave the cold room and back to the warmth of the Precinct.

Just then forensics appeared at the scene.

“All yours Ramen... Let me know if you find anything interesting.” Kristina instructed the Lead of the forensic team.

“I’ll keep you posted.” Said Ramen stepping around Beckett’s twisted body.

The land lady sat in a large comfy arm chair.

A cat was curled up on her lap purring contently as she stroked it. The room felt tropical after being in Beckett’s apartment.

“Ms Hutchinson I presume? ... I’m Detective Tepes. This is Detective Worland. I understand you found the body? Boris. Boris Beckett?” She asked, showing her badge briefly.

“That’s right.” She confirmed.

“What can you tell us about Boris?” Hoping the landlady would fill in missing pieces.

“I hadn’t heard from Boris for a while, you see... And he’s always so prompt with his rent you know... He always pays in cash, such a nice man... Then I goes upstairs to check on him... And there he is... On the floor... Oh I didn’t know what to do... Poor Boris... I don’t know how long he had been there. His room was very cold... He’d left the window open ... Such a lovely man you know... Always paid his rent on time.” The land lady began to repeat.

“Did you see any suspicious people go upstairs before today?” Enquired Kristina further.

“No_ not really...” She hesitates trying to recollect. And draws a blank. “...Guests and visitors coming and going all times of the day and night... So long as they pay their rent and keep to themselves... I keep to myself... He was such lovely man you know... Our Boris.” Responded the land lady.

“Did you know he was involved in drugs?” Kristina enquires.

“Oh_ no_... Not our Boris... He was such a nice man... He would never be involved with drugs ... Not our Boris... No_...” She replied shaking her head refusing to believe the possibility.

But wondered what the powder was that had spilt onto the floor. Laundry power perhaps.

“Who would have done this to him?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out. Do you have any security cameras in the building?” Inquired Kristina.

“No_... I don’t understand technology these days. It left me behind years ago.” The land lady looked at Kristina confused.

“I understand... If you recall anything... Here are my details... Contact me on this number if you do?” Handing a card to her.

“Would you like some tea? My nephew sent me some from England you know.” The land lady urged Kristina to stay a little longer for company.

“I’d love to... But we have to get back to the station... Maybe another time.” Responded Kristina reluctantly declining the offer. Hesitant to leave the warmth of the room and back into the frigid environment outside.

The squad car joined the flow of traffic heading downtown.

Automatically gliding itself to the allotted parking space outside the Precinct. Back at their desks Worland ran the scans and traced the locations of Beckett’s criminal associates. While Kristina assembled a report into the death of Boris Beckett. A database search revealed his past criminal record and activities. Piecing together his legacy of crime. Drugs and arrests over his brief demised life-span.

The G7 having implemented Global Surveillance Protocol, GSP. The ever-seeing eye of big brother was everywhere. Bio-metric recognition had made it possible to track people. Making it almost impossible for people

to hide. Knowing the location of a criminal's associates at the time of a crime made it easier to eliminate them. Or incriminate them.

The algorithm revealed Beckett's *associates* were half way around the world in Germany at the time of his death. Their alibis were rock solid. Accessing the street cameras around the apartment block also revealed very little. People's faces were covered with scarfs. Snow drifts and fogging hampered any clear images.

'Whoever had killed Boris was a user...' She suspected, *'... And had killed him for his stock of Candy... Why buy it when you can get it for free?'*

"Anything back on the ballistics of the bullet fragments?" She quizzed Worland.

"Just running them as we speak... Should have something soon... No residual prints other than the Beckett's... The person who did this knew what they wanted. Where to find it. And got out. Given how he always pays his rent in cash we can assume they also emptied his wallet." Worland added his own thoughts.

Just then a computer spat an image onto the screen. And immediately shared it with Kristina's. The image showed the fragmented bullet in its reconstructed state.

"Hmm ... an EMP-Semi-Forty-Five." Kristina read the specifications displayed to the side.

A common enough weapon among perps. Tracking it down would take time. History was everything with the GSP. Time may pass, but historical data remained. The ballistic will come up again sometime in the future. A match would be found and the database would be interrogated. Placing the wrong people, at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

"Get forensics to run ballistic match through from the database ... We'll see what turns up." She advised Worland.

"Already onto it boss." Advised Worland busily taping his keyboard initiating the search.

"We better wait for forensics to come back to us... Stamp it up as *Pending* for now."

Kristina conceded the momentary defeat.

But knew in time the perp would reoffend, reappearing like a blip on the radar to be pulled in. Locating the individual would not be difficult.

Apprehending them, was another matter altogether.

Worland stamped the case file "PENDING" in bold red ink.

"What next boss?" He asked keen for another assignment.

"Coffee! Now!" She orders her deputy...

Chapter 04

New York. The City that never sleeps.

An incessant drone of perpetual activity sang out twenty-four-seven across the five ancient boroughs. Night owls crawled from night clubs as the day shifts crawled to their offices. The ebb and flow of tidal souls flushed through the city streets. Worm holes called subways shunted living corpses about the giant apple. Coffee, the life blood of the nocturnal vampire. Virgin bagels, the flesh into which they sank their teeth.

As long as Wall Street was trading, America was trading. Today was a good day. Tomorrow was another story.

Kristina's secret life would remain a mystery from all around her but Cindy.

With whom she shared an apartment. In exchange for a vow of silence she would have tacit police protection. Cindy also worked at Rudi's. A world after dark. A world where the ordinary person feared to thread. A world infested with suggestive looks and illicit sex.

Cindy understood Kristina's duality. Law enforcement and sexual addiction.

She was addicted too. Having hooked up at Rudi's one evening, it was not long before they became lovers. And Cindy soon moved into Kristina's apartment on the East side. They would find pleasure in each other's arms on cold New York winter nights. And sweltering summer evenings. Their love making embellished with an assortment of vibrating toys.

Cindy had stripped in Los Angeles. But found the clientele boozy and rough. The Wall Street clientele appreciated a lady. Often rewarding them, simply for being beautiful. Her contacts out east had told her about the exclusive Gentlemen's Club on Upper Fifth Street.

Gentlemen there had money. Lots of money.

Cindy's current boyfriend Tony, had been hired to redecorate their apartment. Willingly seduced by his quaint English accent, his long dark curly hair and half-naked sweaty body. Which half was uncertain. The

moment their eyes met the contract of indecency had been signed. And sealed with hot dripping wax. What had started off as a working relationship, soon ignited into an affair of entangled limbs. The task of redecorating would be completed some weeks overdue.

Much to Cindy's satisfaction.

At first Kristina mutely objected to having Tony staying there. Wanting Cindy all to herself. There would be rules of engagement. Canons to be upheld if fidelities were to be maintained. He would be allowed to watch. An observer to the heated feminine chemistry. After satisfying herself upon Kristina's spent limp body, Cindy would take to Tony's swollen tool. And finish what Kristina could not. Ejaculating Tony's frustrations as Kristina lay watching on.

It was an open relationship. Tony was temporal. Assigned to projects all over New York City. There was no doubts in Cindy's mind he would be painting for some other woman. Internally. She accepted that. So long as he came home, it was all that mattered to her. She had her cake on the side with Johns at Rudi's. Tony knew the game.

To Tony, Kristina was forbidden fruit. It would be a deadly sin if he ever took a bite. She belonged to Cindy. She touched her in a way, and places that no man, or woman had ever touched her before. Physically. Emotionally. Sexually.

There was a mystique that took Cindy's breath away. Where had Kristina come from she wondered? Kristina knew about Cindy's unpretentious beginnings, but what was Kristina's beginnings? Born in Romania. How did she end up New York? And there was the faint birthmark on her neck? As if a bite mark. A sinister thought came to mind. Cindy dismissed it for something less evil. She would ask her one day. When she had weakened her in their love making.

When not working the evenings at Rudi's, Cindy waitressed at *Café Le Becks* on the West-side.

Not far from the apartment. It balanced her nocturnal life. Just as Kristina's police work balanced hers. The café offered a different kind of clientele. Tips were smaller, but always appreciated. And the small talk did not involve getting laid. Unless Cindy initiated it.

“Ding-ding.” The café doorbell sounds.

It was mid-morning, and a man enters. A tall, dark and mysterious man. The sort that intrigued her. A retro styled hat covered his dark straggly shoulder length hair. At first it reminded her of Tony.

But this was not Tony.

This was someone very different. Something tingled within her as she observed the stranger. A weathered tan leather satchel hung from his shoulder. Looking about the café he takes a table against the wall. Cindy approaches him to take his order.

The man examined at the menu.

“Black coffee, bacon and eggs on bagel.” Replied the man, not looking up.

“How you like your eggs?” She asked.

“Surprise me.” Came the enigmatic answer.

His concentration was elsewhere. His mind was lost in a complex thought. He did not want another. Taking a note book from a pocket regurgitated the resultants of his mind onto a blank page. Logic to him. Scribbles to anyone else. Closing the notebook and returned it to the pocket to be interrogated later.

Coffee was now his main priority. That and a bagel.

Having finished an extended shift. Cycling back to his apartment several blocks away in Greenwich Village. The compulsion to stop for a hot coffee and bagel had gotten the better of him. Initiated by the bleak December weather outside. One could have mistaken him for an unemployed stock broker who had seen better days.

But this was no stock broker.

If he had been, he would have formulated his wealth well before now. His intelligence was unrivalled. Insanely unrivalled. Able to create anything he desired from the knowledge he possessed. Having predicted the last seven economic crashes. To him they were obvious.

Almost elementary. Even a fool could see them coming.

But the fools did not see them coming. It was pointless to warn the people of the impending calamities. Never learning from their mistakes. Only to go on and do it again. Which they did. It was only fitting they should inherit the outcome of their own stupidity.

His thoughts embroiled something more destructive than a mere global economic collapse.

The coffee and bagel arrived. As did the bacon and eggs, sunny side up.

Cindy stood behind the counter biting her lower lip. Watching the mysterious man quietly eating his breakfast. Or dinner. As the case may be in New York. There was a smell about him. That attracted her to him. She wanted him. In her loins a fuse had been lit. And she began to fantasize. An occupational hazard for her. Remembering his features. His hair, his voice, his hands and fingers. Storing these in her memory bank to be withdrawn that evening with Tony. Tonight this stranger would be in her bed.

Noticing the man had finished she goes over to his table.

“How was everything? ... Would you like anything else?” She enquired hoping the stranger would stay longer.

“Fine thank you ... The check will do.” The man responded.

“You from around here then? Haven’t seen you before.” She enquired further.

Trying to catch the stranger’s eyes. The hat still obscuring them. It was as if he was avoiding looking up at her. Or the cameras looking down at him.

“Was just passing.” The man said, leaving it there.

Cindy presented him the check and the man paid in cash. Leaving a generous tip.

“Thank you mister! Come again soon!” Responded Cindy enthusiastically in a near Californian accent.

Stepping back to the counter Cindy slipped the tip inside her bra.

Watching the man about to leave. Throwing the satchel over his shoulder. She could see his face now. His eyes were dark. As if from lack of sleep. Or mental anguish. Either way he looked beat. Releasing him from her tracking beam, she allowed him to exist the café.

Tonight he would return. As she made love to Tony. She would close her eyes and allow the mystery man take her. It would his hands on her. His voice whispering nasty things in her ears. His hair falling on her face. On her breasts. And his dark tired mysterious eyes looking at her when the uncontrollable flood of erotic convulsions overcame her body...

Chapter 05

5:30AM Seth weaves his bicycle between the lanes of stalled traffic, along Broadway towards the aging Woolworth Building.

A hat securely pulled down over his brows. A faded Princeton scarf wrapped several layers about his face and neck. Exposing only his eyes that were straining to see in the early morning darkness. A biting breeze snapped at him from behind. Dark grey clouds hung low on the ancient skyscrapers above. Shielding the early light from penetrating the streets below.

Seth's unkempt clothing gave nothing away as to his occupation. To anyone observing him, he was a New Yorker out for an early morning ride. One of only a few that still rode bicycles. Relishing the independence it gave him. Separating him from the crowds.

He disliked crowds.

Claustrophobic commuter shuttles suffocated his reclusive spirit. He required space to function. Space to think. Space to breath. Living in Greenwich Village, near Washington Square. The bohemian culture appealed to him. Offering him a sanctuary from the prying eyes of the Agency. On a good day he would take him twenty minutes to reach the Woolworth Building.

But this was not a good day.

Icy roads and the cold breeze made it difficult to negotiate traffic. Turning off Broadway and onto Barclay. Then onto the pavement. With precision timing, guides the bicycle through the heavy revolving doors and pass two hefty uniformed security guards.

They knew Seth worked in the building, but not where. His security pass stated he worked for Black Crow Pharmaceutical Corporation on the twenty sixth floor. His attire did not match the dark suits that also visited that level. It was a mystery as to them what the ragged individual actually did. It was not their place to question people's dress code.

Appearing to work his odd hours. Coming and going at will. Twenty-four-seven.

Waving a security pass over the sensors, an elevator door opens. Seth enters the mirrored interior. Having left his vanity at conception there was no need to look at himself. Elevator doors securely closed, he presses *star-twenty-six*.

Within moments the elevator started to descend.

Though Black Crow Pharmaceutical's headquarters operated on the twenty sixth floor. The surreptitious research laboratory operated twenty six floors below ground level. There, in an isolated environment sealed off from the outside world, bio-chemical research teams conducted advanced studies into infectious and contagious diseases.

Body scanners ensured nothing arrived, or left the premises.

Seth's advanced research had attracted the Order's attention.

And shortly after, was soon subpoenaed to work for the elite research group. His work on Pathogen Genomic Microbiology and Advanced Software Engineering of Genetic Sequencing made him the perfect candidate to head the team Robert Mueller was putting together. Money was to be no object. And Seth's team would be given access to unlimited resources.

But they would be working to a deadline.

The team was made up of a dozen souls. Seth had handpicked three particular members against Mueller's wishes. Mueller needed the best, and allowed Seth his selections. Isaac Newman from Cambridge England. Nancy Kwang from the newly unified Korea. Both had excelled in research of pathogens and contagious diseases.

And an odd fellow. Stan Smith from Australia completed Seth's elite group. Unsure why Smith had been chosen was beyond Mueller.

Seth had covered much of the research himself years before. The team was simply a façade. If only to keep Mueller distracted while Seth completed his own work on chemical mutagens initiating gene immunization.

The foundation for his own treacherous virus.

The Team would be responsible for creating a vaccine. To inoculate not against one, but three lethal pathogens at once. A deadly cocktail of plagues currently stored at research facility in Wales. To tame one pathogen was difficult enough. To tame three at once was asking for a miracle. Seth was capable of creating such a miracle.

A deadline of six months had been given to complete the vaccine and subsequent trials.

On entering the laboratory, red radiating beams scoured Seth from head to toe.

Sterilizing uninvited microbes coming or going. Replacing his tired overcoat for a tired white lab coat. A pocket rimmed with pens. Tying back his hair into a neat pony tail, he headed to his office. Transforming himself from feral man, to laboratory technician.

Stan was completing a night shift. Isaac and Nancy would not arrive until 9:00AM. Allowing him several hours to go over the results of culture simulations that were spewing to encrypted data files on his tablet. Much of the output only Seth could understand. Looking about, sees Stan reviewing the previous night's results.

"How's it look Stan?" Asked Seth curious to know status results.

"It's all very interesting... A few cultures showed anomalies... But the others returned positive". Stan stated his findings. Tired from the long shift that was about to end.

"Why don't you get out of here and go home... You look beat. Get some sleep... I'll finish this up for you." Ordered Seth of his charge.

"Thanks boss." Stan yielded and headed to the lockers.

"It's cold out there... Wrap up!" Seth warns him.

"Thanks boss. Will do boss... Catch you tomorrow!" Leaving Seth alone in his office.

The results had proven what Seth had always thought.

The blue print of God, the human genome, had imperfections. God had imperfections. With the right key, immune receptors were capable of being switched on or off. It was just a matter of cutting the key to fit the right receptor. And identifying the right receptor for the right pathogen. Unlocking the right receptor would enact the immune system against specific pathogens.

Seth mind conceptualized the Human Genome as no more than a giant jigsaw puzzle. Pulling it apart and piece back together again. And substituting one of God's pieces with his own. Grinning to himself as he saw the picture fit together in his mind. Opening his note book, studied the scriblings he had captured at the coffee shop the day before. His mind

unravelling the hieroglyphics and compared it to the data on the screen. Still encrypted, but readable in Seth's mind.

If he was right, and he generally was, he was close to finding the second key.

"What you grinning about boss? ..." Called out Isaac arriving. About to throw his rucksack into his locker. "...What you found out?"

"I think we're getting close to the first key..." Seth lied, "...But we need to run more tests. You got those results from yesterday?" He quizzed Isaac, already knowing the answer.

Seth would direct his team down paths of research to find what he had already discovered himself years earlier. Seth needed time. And keeping Mueller at a distance with a steady stream of misdirected reports would see to that. Stalling him long enough for him to perfect his own virus that would tamper with the unlocked receptors.

Making the Order's vaccine ineffective.

"Whys he smiling?" Asked Nancy arriving just after Isaac.

"Boss thinks we're getting close to the first key." Responded Isaac pulling on his white lab coat.

"Oh that's good ... What's on the cards today boss? ..." Asked Nancy, observing the encrypted data scrolling on Seth's screen. "...I don't know how you can read that machine language boss... It's ancient... You know we have compilers that could translate that in a seconds?" Suggested Nancy hoping her boss would live in the twenty first century.

"I don't have seconds..." Joked Seth. "... I'm old school Nancy... Give me a bit and byte any day..." He responded, as he scribbled notations into his notebook. "...You can finish scanning those cultures and slice the DNA samples for receptor partitions... There should be a few hundred among the nucleotides on the Chromosome Twenty-One... Mark them off and run them through the simulator for potential keys."

Nancy was bewildered as to how Seth already knew how many there would be available... It was not in any research paper she had read. Then again, much of Seth's work was unpublished.

"Yes boss." Nancy accepted her marching orders, and wandered off to re-confirm Seth's suspicions.

"How did you get on matching the dipoles from the pathogens samples Mueller sent down?" Seth asked Isaac who was going over a printout.

“Good, good, good... About to write it up for you.”

“Great. You work on that and I’ll write up Stan’s findings.”

And with that, the white lab rats scurried off to their respective corners and microscopes.

Ionized air filled the clinically bleached environment. Placing on a pair of rose tinted computer enhanced goggles, Seth called up images. T-lymphocytes memory cells that had been cloned from B-lymphocytes cells. A three-dimensional image appeared on the lenses surface. Rotating the image with hand movements, looking for oddities from the original parent cell.

“*Perfect.*” Seth said to himself acknowledging the successful cloning.

And taps his tablet to download the data through an encrypted neural pathway.

There would be no need to risk taking live samples. The data would be sufficient to create the virus he was modelling in his own laboratory at his apartment. Experiments could be conducted in the safe environment of the subterranean laboratory.

Until time came to release his virus on the unsuspecting public. Seth would work on both projects simultaneously. One complementing the other. Neither discernible from the other. Even to the educated eye. But his own.

Just then Mueller appeared at Seth’s door. His dark office suit in contrast to the clinical surroundings. Isaac and Nancy froze their movements when they saw him. He made people anxious with his presence. Seth was no exception. To him he was the enemy.

But an enemy he had to work with to fulfil his goal.

“How’s it going Adison? ...” Mueller asked from the door way. “...I haven’t had the last report.” Mueller growled his frustration.

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir...” He began to humble himself, “... Isaac is just writing it up as we speak Sir... From the results so far we’re close to finding the first key. I’ll drop it on your desk before I go tonight.” Hoping that would appease Mueller’s appetite for progress.

“That’s good to know. I’ll pass the news on... Well done... Keep it up.” Snapped Mueller, resuming his cold demeanor and turning to leave.

In his fifties, Mueller had been with Black Crow since its inception.

But at the end of the day he was nothing more than a glorified paper shuffler who signed the pay checks. Leaving the clinical work to Adison and his team. It was all a little beyond him. It was beyond everyone.

Except Adison.

“Oh... Before I forget... We may be getting a visit from Geneva soon... The big chief is coming to check the place out... To see how we’re progressing. Make sure we have all our ducks are in a row Adison... I want to look sharp and show we’re on top of this understood?” Mueller instructed Seth.

“Yes Sir... Sorry Sir...” Seth yelped his automatic submissive response, “...We’ll be ready for any visit... Thanks for the heads up Sir.”

With that Mueller looked about the lab and found himself incongruent with the surroundings. And left to return to his palatial office on the twenty sixth floor.

To play with paper clips and sign pay checks.

Seth would spend the rest of the day going over the results.

Confirming what he had already run in his head over the past few days between the coffees and bagels. Content the jig-saw puzzle was coming together. Isaac and Nancy had gone home. Leaving Seth to finish up. He had already found one of the three keys for the Order’s vaccine. As far as Mueller knew, they were only close to finding the first.

But Seth was already close to finding the second.

He had his own timetable. His own deadly deadline. The Agency’s vaccine would not save them against his virus. The day had drawn to a close.

Tomorrow he would roll Einstein’s dice again...

Chapter 06

Rudi's was now owned and operated by Anthony. Antony Rossi.

The son of the founder, Paolo Rossi. Paolo had bought the run down bar late last century and turned it into a strip joint. A titty-bar. Patrons then were mostly immigrant construction workers with families back home. Missing feminine company. Anthony managed the bar while his father managed the strippers. He had plans for the place once his father either died, or sold him the business.

The former happening before the latter. When one evening Paolo suffered a heart attack while enjoying one of his own merchandise. The day after his father was laid to rest Anthony cashed in his father's life insurance policy.

And stripped the strip-joint bare.

Having frequented Vegas and other up-market establishments, he knew it was time Rudi's stepped up to a different class of clientele. Seeing Benjamin's where his father could see Nickels and Dimes. High class ladies would attract high class clientele. High class liquor and high class profits. New York was a city with more millionaires than anywhere else in the world. It was a cash cow for the milking.

And all it needed was the teats.

11:00PM and two large bouncers stood quietly erect either side of the entrance.

Like big black marble statues. Imposing, yet unnoticed. Unanimated, but ready to crush anyone who stepped out of line. The evening shift had just begun. The night owls would soon be prowling the streets looking for Clubs and sensual entertainment.

"Evening boys." Kristina acknowledged the two brothers.

Matthias and Ruben gave Kristina a nod and smile as she entered the plush entrance. The floor carpeted a magnificent rich Persian rug. Spot lights sparkled from the polish brass railings. Heavy rogue drapes restrained by thick gold cords, hung from the windows.

The bar was busy with married men buying the single women drinks. Or was it busy with single young women plying married men with drinks? It was always hard to tell. Kristina was Anthony's favorite. Allowing her to work her own hours. He knew she could bait the clientele. And have them returning the next night evening looking for more.

Kristina made her way past the lustful stares of men tracking her presence. And slipped through to a narrow corridor that connected to the changing rooms. Young women preparing their makeup and costumes. Sarah looks up gives Kristina a smile. Shaking her boobs at her as if to say, *thank you for good time the other night*. Her stage name was Paige. And she had enjoyed Kristina's body as much as Kristina had enjoyed hers.

"How's business tonight ladies?" Referring to the girl's personal takes from tips and private dances.

Anthony provided the girls private rooms to entertain any client that wished to take a lap dance to the next level. Punching a ticket for the ride and allowing the girls to pocket the balance.

"Same old..." Replied Sarah looking at Kristina's reflection in the mirror. "...Same Johns different day... Can't complain... Beats freezing our tits off outside on the street."

Rousing a series of giggles about the changing room like an old fashion Mexican Wave.

"Tell me about it." Kristina takes a seat before her mirror, warming to the room.

Looking at herself in the mirror, appearing exhausted from the day's investigation. Half beat from lack of sleep. Half empty from sexual deprivation. She needed the spot light as much as the spot light needed her. She stared at the face staring back at her. The birthmark now purple with the cold. Make up will cover that she thought. As a child living in Romania, her grandmother had told her the tale of the legacy of a long distant ancestor.

Kristina she was of royal blood line. His name was Vlad Tepes.

The world would know him only as Dracula. But to the Romanian people, he was a hero who gave his life defending their beloved country. It is said Vlad had the same birthmark. Shaped like a bite. As did her mother. And grandmother. In the appearance of bite mark. Fingers reach for the disfigured birth scar. Sometimes it would ache when the moon was about. More so at full moons.

Dismissing the lunar thought, she focused on the tired face staring back at her.

Taking a deep sigh. Changed into her scanty costume. A silky red bra. Silk red panties. And long vibrant red heels. After applying the delicate layers of makeup. Transformed herself from a weary New York Detective to a high class exotic dancer.

The transition was seamless.

She would wait for several girls to complete their routines before performing herself. Afterwards, working the tables. Enticing the players into something more private. There was no rush at Rudi's. These gentlemen not only had money. They had patience.

They also had wives waiting patiently at home. The next day their wives' credit cards would show patience they had for their husbands.

It was time for her to take to the stage.

Her world floated upon a cloud. A white beam from a single spotlight tracked her every move. Bright colored lights pulsated in time with the rhythmic beat of the music. Her music. Her song. She would capture the famished eyes. Only to release them again shortly after.

They could see her. She could not see them. Making out faint features. Heads and glowing cigarettes. That was all. Not that it mattered. The dance was more for her pleasure than theirs. Afterwards, she would circulate tables making small talk.

Accepting tips in appreciation for her performance.

In a far corner she could see a dark figure. Dim lighting did not allow a clear impression of him. The small table candle had been extinguished. As if deliberately. Making the corner darker than usual. There was something mysterious about him that was pulling her in his direction.

"That's the man I meet at the café the other day... Delicious isn't he?" Said Cindy appearing from no-where. Seeing Kristina was held captive by her dream lover.

"You know him?" She asked trying to look anywhere but there.

"He came to the diner for breakfast one morning looking pretty beat... Must have finished a night shift, or something... Didn't say much ... But he doesn't have to. Oh_ he makes me wet just looking at him." Confessed Cindy unashamedly.

Remembering the heated sexual encounter with Tony that morning. Still aching in places from the fantasy.

“Maybe I pay him a visit.” Said Kristina, easing away from Cindy.

And wandered seductively towards the secluded corner. As she approached him she could make out an empty short glass on the table. Next to it, a hat and scarf. A satchel lay on top of an overcoat. His hair tied back. The meagre lighting cloaking him in darkness.

“Cigarette?” She asked him.

“I don’t smoke... And neither do you.” Seth had already sized Kristina up.

“That’s right...” Caught out, but now engaging him in conversation. “...Would you like a drink?” Hoping to could hold the engage him longer.

“I thought we are supposed to buy you the drinks?” Replied Seth, inviting her to take a seat in front of him.

“You will be.” She responded, intrigued by the game of cat and mouse. But who was the cat, and who was the mouse she wondered?

Cindy watched on in envy. Kristina stealing her dream lover from her. She is soon distracted by a gentleman at a table looking forlorn. Looking for *company*. The sort that paid well for a sympathetic ear. And warm young body.

Leaving Kristina unsupervised.

Seth waved down a waitress and order two whiskeys. Neat. Tipping the waitress well for her efforts.

‘*Obviously well paid.*’ Thought Kristina, though his appearance suggested otherwise.

“Hard to find these days... Rudi’s is one of the few places that still serves it.” Said Seth examining the whiskey in his hand.

Carefully thinking how much he should say. The drink unhinging his inhibitions.

“I didn’t catch your name.” Said Kristina, slipping into her detective mode.

Seth could sense the change in tone.

“You can call me ...” Momentarily wondering if he should disclose it, “...Seth... And what can I call you?”

“You can call me ...” Kristina caught herself from slipping, “...You can call me *Chelsea*... for *now*”.

Seth knew the girls had stage names and would not enquire further. Kristina did not want to get too comfortable with Seth. Like her stage performances she would wet his appetite. When it was time to go all the way, she would know. For now, it was time to leave and let him enjoy the show.

Kristina sees Sarah approaching and saw it as an opportunity to excuse herself, to on pass the baton.

“Paige... Let me introduce you to Seth... He doesn’t smoke.” Informed Kristina.

“It was nice meeting you... *Seth*... I hope I see you again soon. Thank you for the drink.”

“You’re welcome *Chelsea*.” He watched her walk away.

Seth’s eyes still fixed to her as she disappeared behind the curtain of the stage.

Sarah noticed his prolonged focus on Kristina’s departure. And decided to move onto the next table unnoticed. Something inside him stirred. He did not know what it was.

It did not fit into any paradigm he had experienced before. It felt nice...

Chapter 07

1:00AM and Seth cycled back to his apartment.

Hauling the bicycle up the seven flights of stairs was a pleasure after fighting the unrelenting attic breeze that had impeded him from returning home. The room sensed his imminent arrival. Lights and heating switched on automatically. There was still an hour before he would need to sleep.

Work was required to be done on his virus.

Surviving on a few hours' sleep a day. And whatever naps he could steal between running tests at the lab. Throws his coat and hat onto a stand and went in search of a snack from the refrigerator. Taking out what appeared to be a left over sandwich, shoves it in his mouth before washing it down with a large glass of milk. Having satisfied his immediate hunger made his way to the hallway again and checked that no one was about.

Taking a key not too dissimilar to his own apartment and unlocks the door of the apartment opposite. The room lit up. It was warm. It was warm for a reason. Filled with computer processes generating surplus heat. Walls displayed intricate hand drawn schematics of genome sequencing. The blueprint of the human DNA. Schematics covered the entire walls and ceiling. A continuous flow of alphabet soup to the un-initiated.

But not to Seth.

Having unraveled God's enigma code long ago. He was now playing with it as a child would play with building blocks. Discovering what would stand up. And what would fall down. What could be pulled out? And what could be substituted. Seth surveyed his domain. Nothing was out of place. Motion cameras would have alerted him to any intrusion during the day.

The apartment, his private laboratory, belonged to a private corporation. Having bought it through a series of subsidiaries and undisclosed bank accounts. Making it impossible to trace back to him.

Seth booted his tablet to life. And requested it to upload the test results that had been gathered during the day. Processors came to life. LED lights flashed in unison as data was consumed in a cyber feeding frenzy. Like piranhas, computer servers tore at the data. Leaving nothing behind in a

matter of nanoseconds. Configuring the processors such that when combined they constituted a rudimentary quantum computer. It could beat the Agency's quantum computer for processing. But not for speed. Nanoseconds were the least of Seth's concerns.

The downloaded test result data now integrated with the stored data. Adding to the giant jigsaw puzzle Seth was piecing together.

Dimming the lights and requested imaging. A three dimensional hologram projected itself into the center of the room. Not even the Agency had this enhancement and were years away from perfecting it. Sitting in the central arm chair he began to visually interrogate the blue and green and red configuration that floated before him. Sensors picked up subtle movements and gestures of his fingers. Rotating the image with his hands.

The puzzle was coming together nicely.

Seth could see the key they had found the week before. Unbeknown to Mueller and the team. He had a good idea where the second key would be. Pulling his fingers apart, the projection zoomed in on the strand of DNA and isolated the vacant receptor.

"Nice." He said quietly to himself.

In another couple of weeks he would have cut the key for it. Turning his hand over the glowing schematic rotated. Searching for a possible third location. There were several possibilities. Each as appealing as the other. The projection rotated like a planet system in the center of the room. From the satchel he retrieves a note book. And begins scribbling notations beside the existing hieroglyphic text.

Most people use one side of their brain, barely utilizing ten percent. Seth could use both side at once. Capable of cognitive holistic conception and analytic reasoning simultaneously. The synergy of which, was exponential.

2:00AM and it was time to sleep.

That morning he wanted to visit a *friend* before heading to the lab. It had been a good day. What day it was he was not sure. Days were a blur. With one flowing into the next. Working seven days a week. It made no difference.

Every day was Monday to him. Every evening was Saturday.

Visits to Rudi's provided the only release from the sterile internment of the laboratory. Seth had seen Chelsea on stage in the past, but had never

spoken with her till that evening. He was unsure about women. They were the one thing in the universe he could not explain. As if that part of logic had been left out of his psyche. Or perhaps, they were unfathomable. There was something about their anatomy that aroused a primal urge.

There was something primal about Chelsea that aroused him.

Returning to his own apartment he fell on the bed and quickly succumbed to sleep. His mind went dark. Like a light bulb that had been switched off. His body would allow him a few hours rest. His subconscious mind would never slept. It would access the vast knowledge he had been endowed with at conception.

Ensuring he would not fail at his task.

5:00AM and Seth awoke to a lit room.

Eyes open and he became immediately awake. All tiredness had left his body. It was as if he had a foreboding agenda. His first priority though was coffee. Strong and black.

Pulling on an overcoat and scarf. Heads onto the frozen streets of New York. Overhead street lights punctuate the early morning darkness as he headed down Broadway. Even in the early hours traffic filled the streets. Fighting the cold breeze slapping his face, pulls the hat further down. And the scarf up over his nose.

This day he deviates from his usual route.

Turning off Broadway, and heads a few blocks east to a series of terraced homes. Ancient buildings from another time. Before the tranquility had been lost to the bludgeoning chaos of over population.

He was early.

But Seth new the residents would be up. Leaning the bicycle against the railing and secures the bolt. Climbing the thirteen frozen steps to the large black door above. He waits on the top step. Looking about to see moving traffic and a long row of parked vehicles. Sensing it was safe. Knocking a presubscribed sequence.

And buries hands deep in his overcoat pockets to escape the chill that was wrapping itself around him as he waited. Stomping feet to prevent the freezing. Breath pierced the thin woolen scarf covering his face. Fogging the cold morning air before him.

He waits.

Looking about again. Scanning for vehicles that looked out of place. A large white van stood out among the sedans. Blanketed in snow it appeared inert and asleep. His visit was a surreptitious in nature. A series of heavy deadbolts could be heard unlocking from inside. The solid black door opened tentatively.

A head appeared from the side to inspect Seth standing there.

Several thick chains guarded it from being opened further. Chains unleashed, Seth quickly steps inside out of the cold. And out of sight. The door closes quickly behind him. Shutting out the unwanted cold and unwanted prying eyes.

“Good to see you *Diablo*.” Said Virgil.

Wearing an oversized grey hand spun woolen jumper with an ironic large peace badge pinned on it. A pair of thick rim glasses framed Virgil’s small grey weasel eyes. A weak moustache. Desperately in need of nutrition, or weed killer, struggled to grow on his upper lip. Looking more like a closeted beatnik than the leader of a global apocalyptic cult. Heavy metal music blared in the background.

Filling the room with the satanic rhythmic rhetoric.

Virgil was the apparent head of a doomsday cult hell bent on world annihilation. A perfect global network system for Seth to distribute his treacherous virus. A small group of individuals sat around a large table. Looked up and scrutinized him, then resuming their hushed discussions. Before them a map of the world. Fingers busily pointing to key locations. Beside them a tall stack of colored protest pamphlets. Walls displayed apocalyptic posters of nuclear mushrooms clouds and screaming melting bodies.

Seth felt strangely at home.

“Can’t stay long.” Allowing the warmth of the room to seep into his bones.

An open fire was blazing in nearby. He walks over to it and removes his gloves. Holding out hands as though toasting marshmallows and felt the immediate warmth. Virgil turned up the speaker amplifier further. Allowing the satanic music to drown out any conversation that may be being monitored from outside.

“How you getting on?” Virgil began.

“Good... We’re getting there. You’ll have your potion soon.” Seth advised without specifics.

“Coffee?” asked Virgil.

“I’m good... How you doing? You holding up? ... Any issues?”

“Not really ... China is proving difficult though... Security there is too tight ... We’ve made contact with our people in the other provinces ... Distribution channels are in place.”

“And the warehouse?” Seth asks, checking Virgil was on top of things.

“Warehouse is being converted for production as you specified ... We’ll be ready when you are.”

Virgil looked nervously at Seth wondering if *it* would be. The apocalyptic cult was relying on Seth to answer their prayers. Albeit the *final absolution*. No one knew Seth’s name. And only that he went by the name *Diablo*. It made no difference to Virgil who he really was. As long as he could deliver their destructive pestilence. *Diablo* could be whoever he wanted to be.

“Be careful... You never know who is watching or listening.” Seth scrutinizes Virgil for confirmation.

Virgil was vital for his plan to work. Without him, there was no plan B. Seth could not risk exposure on two fronts.

“I’ll be in contact closer to the time. Have your networks ready okay?” Replacing gloves and securing the scarf about his face. Hesitant to leave the warmth of the fire to battle the bite of winter outside.

But there was work to be done.

‘Planets won’t kill themselves.’ He thought.

Pulling the scarf up over his nose and pulling his hat firmly down, headed to the door prepared to leave.

“We’ll be ready... Leave it to us.” Virgil confirmed.

Stepping back into the exposed environment.

The chill of the December air was brutal. Waving a scanner over the bolt to release the bicycle from the railings. And headed down a deviant side street. Not before spying a set of lights being switch on some distance behind.

The van he had noticed had woken.

Knowing the Virgil’s group maybe monitored, he always ensured his own incognito appearance. The lousy weather would hamper the vehicle’s

mobility. Unlike his own he thought.

The van hovered waiting for an entry point to the hectic traffic.

“We’re going to lose him! We’re going to lose him! ... Can’t we get going?” A frantic voice called out from the back.

But the driver was trapped. The van was trapped. Unable to merge with the traffic before Seth turned down the side street. Then into another.

“Tell we got a scan of the guy?” The voice cried out in desperation.

“Nothing boss... His face was covered.” The technician reported back.

“What did we get on their conversation?” The annoyed voice asked.

“Nothing ... The music was causing too much interference.”

“Filter it and find out what they were talking about. Let’s hope the cameras can track him.” The frantic voice echoed back.

“Not in this weather boss... There’s heavy fog moving in.” The technician pleaded the impotency of their surveillance.

“Damn!” Cursed Alex Noren, Head of the Order’s Secret Service.

Noren had been monitoring the house for months on a tip off that something big was brewing.

Those that knew Noren also knew him by his other name. The Bogeyman.

His unique ability to creep up on suspects and scare the hell out of them with his interrogated methods. Virgil would be getting a visit in time. But not before Noren had gathered surveillance data on the underground cult.

Relying on his informants until then.

“Who was the guy on the bicycle boss?” A voice asked but wishing he had not.

“That’s what I’m going to find out... He looks local... Possibly one of *them*. He’s not just stopping by for coffee... He’s peddled a long way for a short black...” Trying to piece it together, “... He’ll show again. He won’t get far on a bicycle in this city... Let’s get out of here. I want to see Mueller.” Said Noren wishing to get Downtown sooner rather than later.

Eager to escape the van was becoming stuffy that was packed with surveillance equipment generating enough heat to warm a small apartment.

Seth weaved his way through a series of random streets.

It took a little longer. But would evade the van that may have tried to follow. The early morning fog that had drifted in from the East River aided his escape.

'That was close.' He thought. Only the weather and traffic had saved him today. Next time he would need to be more vigilant. Drifting his bicycle to the pavement and glided it quickly past the security guards who waved him through the large revolving doors. Seth entered the elevator and descends to the subterranean laboratory to begin the day's research.

Not soon after he had entered the laboratory, a large white van pulls up outside the building...

Chapter 08

Noren adjusts his hat and coat, frustrated he had let one get away.

Looking up and down the street. As if hoping to spy the bicyclical man among the traffic. Sighing heavily, abandons the chase and walks briskly through revolving doors. Security guards recognize him immediately as the Bogeyman and dared not look at him as he passed. Knowing too well his brutal nature. Noren was not one to be engaged.

Waving his security pass over a scanner, elevator doors open and he enters and waits for it to climb to Mueller's office. Noren was visiting for a briefing. As to who was briefing whom was another matter. Both Noren and Mueller reported to Braun. But not to each other.

"Mueller!" He calls out walking into the Mueller's office. Throwing his overcoat onto the large brown leather couch before taking a chair before the desk.

"Have a seat..." Mueller suggested after the fact, knowing Noren as a contentious individual. "...Would you like a coffee?"

"Already have your secretary getting me one... But thanks for the offer... How's the *project* going?" Noren asked fully aware of the Braun's secret proposal.

"Oh... You *know* about that?" Mueller asked surprised by his awareness.

"Of course ... Braun told me *everything*. A *wonderful* plan... Don't you think?" Bragged Noren. The one man who enjoyed death more than anyone.

"It's coming along nicely. Very nicely... I'll take you down to the lab afterwards and introduce you to the team... Ah_ your coffee has arrived." Seeing his secretary appear with two coffees in hand.

Handing one out to Noren.

"And how are your investigations coming along? You're up rather early... What brings you to town?" Mueller begins to quiz him about his sudden appearance in New York.

“The early bird gets the worm Robert... I was actually following some leads from an informant... Apparently an underground movement is up to something... We’re only gathering information at this stage. I’ll be pulling people in shortly for *questioning* once we know who the players are.”

Noren sipped on the hot black bitter coffee.

“Damn its cold outside! ...” Feeling the heat of the cup in his hands. “...Nothing like Geneva though... The lake is frozen over again.”

“The weather has turned fierce. Even the Hudson and East Rivers are icing up... First time in a hundred years they say...” Mueller engaged Noren with small talk. “...I’ve been told Braun will be visiting the facility soon... Any dates you know of?”

“*Wasn’t* informed of the visit... I’ll ask my next report to him and let you know.” Noren conceded but taken back by his Superior’s surprise visit.

“Appreciate that.” Mueller nodded with a grin having one over him.

“How’s security here?” Quizzed Noren.

“State of the Art... Nothing goes in or out without being detected... Body scanners and security clearances at very door. Armed guards at the elevators.” Mueller beamed with confidence.

“Only at the elevators?” Noren asked taken back by the token security.

“The lab facility is twenty six floors underground. The laboratory is fitted with incineration protocol should there ever be a compromise with contamination.”

“Oh I see... I’ll like to have a look.” Asked Noren hoping to add his expertise.

“I appreciate that Alex. Of course... After all this is done... The staff will need to go.” Mueller suggested to Noren cryptically.

“Oh_ It’s *that* kind of project is it?” Responded Noren, unaware of the extent of the Braun’s intentions.

“Yes unfortunately...” Advised Mueller. “...We can’t have these people going about talking ... Can we?”

“No I guess not... Have you got that in hand? ... When the time comes?” Noren asked anxiously.

“I was hoping you might help in that department... You have a natural talent for silencing the unwanted.” Mueller looked at Noren with a grin.

“It would be my pleasure...” Said Noren contently, “... Thank you Robert.” As though being offered a piece of cake.

“Of course it would have to look like an accident.” Suggested Mueller.

“Yes of course...” Conceded Noren, “...But at twenty six floors underground... Would anyone know otherwise?”

“I suppose not.” Accepted Mueller on reflection as though wiping his hands of the messy *administrative* procedure.

Mueller sipped the coffee and stared out the frosted window into the breaking New York morning.

The grey clouds hung low again. The morning fog blanketed the streets below. Another bleak day lay ahead. Mueller sighed at the thought, then remembered.

“Come Alex... I’ll show you the lab.” Directing Noren to follow him.

The elevator fell the fifty-two floors to the underground lab. Doors opened. Without warning, intense red beams scanned the two individuals in their dark suits. Mueller and Noren continued on their way unaware of the violent salubrious intrusion. Two hefty guards stood motionless either side of the elevator doors. Ear pieces relaying information of regarding Noren’s arrival.

Noren turned and inspected the stolid gentlemen.

“Good.” Noren voiced his approval, nodding to himself.

“This way...” Said Mueller leading him through a series of bio-security doors to the lab facility proper. “...As you can see its state of the art... Cameras everywhere.”

“Very impressive...” Said Noren looking about the pristine environment in which he found himself, “...I can see the *Families’* money has been well spent.”

Pale individuals dressed in white lab coats stood about benches peering into large microscopes. Some stopping to look around at the new face among them.

“The entire floor is designated to the *Project*... I’ll take you to the Team Leader...” Said Mueller leading him to a far corner of the floor. “... This way.”

Isaac was the first to see Mueller arriving with another gentleman.

And elbowed Nancy to look around at the two men approaching. Turning about to examine the gentlemen in dark suits approaching them. Looking out of place with the clinical surroundings.

Recognizing Mueller, but not the other gentleman.

“Good morning Isaac... Nancy.” Greeted Mueller sounding awkward.

“Morning Sir.” Replying in unison like school children to their headmaster.

“Is *Adison* about?” Mueller asked.

“He just arrived... Should be in his office Sir.” Isaac stammered, looking towards the office.

Just then Seth appeared around the corner. Now changed into his white lab coat and hair tied back. His appearance different to one that he had arrived with.

“Good morning *Adison*. I’d like you to meet Alex Noren... Head of the Order’s Security... I’m just showing him about the facility and the work you’re all doing here.”

“Ah, pleasure to meet you Sir.” Said Seth extending his hand, fully aware who Noren was.

Seth allowed Noren to over squeeze his fabricated weak grip. Noren’s grip was cold. An awkward tension was sensed by the two. Both felt it, and hands quickly detached.

“Mueller tells me your team is doing good work down here... It’s all a little beyond me all this bio-chemistry *stuff*.” Gesturing a cold hand about the laboratory.

“Let me show you about.” Knowing he could show Noren a cup of tea and explain it away as nuclear-fusion reactor.

Leading him about the Team’s laboratory explaining in very technical terms the very redundant equipment. Mueller followed helplessly behind equally confused. Nancy and Stan grinned to themselves amused, listening to Seth playing with Noren. Then led them conveniently back to the elevators. Hoping to encourage their departure.

“Well I guess I best be off.” Said Noren somewhat over-whelmed by the technical jargon and the array specialized equipment.

Seth grinned and offered Noren his hand. Only to be left hanging and so offered for the two men to step into the lift in a seamless gesture. Doors close behind them, leaving Seth ponding Noren’s appearance in New York. His cold hand giving away his prolonged exposure outside. The large white van comes to mind. Seth grins at the thought.

“What you smiling about boss?” Nancy asked curiously.

“Nothing...” He lied, “... Back to work lab rats! How those tests going?”

The two men returned to Mueller's oversized office.

"I'm quite impressed Mueller. Adison seems to know his stuff." Said Noren, ignorantly baffled by the technical jargon still ringing in his ears.

"He's probably *the most* brightest bio-chemist on the planet. His research is unparalleled. The Order is very lucky to have found him when we did. Otherwise there may have been less favorable options taken... It will be a shame to lose him when the time comes ... Loose ends and all that." Mueller declared.

"All good things must come to an end sometime Robert... Call out when you're ready and I'll be happy assist..." Said Noren, pulling on his coat and hat. "...I better be off... I have a few *interviews* to attend to. Thanks for the tour". Gesturing a wave, about to leave.

"My pleasure Alex..." Said Mueller, glad to have bonded briefly with Noren. Glad to see the back of the Bogeyman,"...Come again!" He lied, never wishing to see him again.

Mueller sat down behind his desk and looked out at the bleak New York skyline. Lit up like a Christmas tree with the vehicle lights. Lincoln Bridge congested with the steady flow of traffic to and from New Jersey.

Mueller checked his daily calendar and asked his secretary for another coffee.

It was going to be a slow day in the office. Pleased with Noren's visit. More so to see him leave. They were small cogs of a far greater machinery. The Order. Would they be among the *Chosen*? The list had yet to be finalized and no one was safe from elimination.

Not even Mueller. Fantasying his chances if he could deliver Braun's vaccine on time...

Chapter 09

“Anything back from Forensics on Beckett?” Kristina asked out from across her desk to Worland.

“Not yet, but they did say it would be today.” Worland offered back.

“Make yourself useful and find me some coffee.” She ordered him. Feeling jaded from the previous night’s performance. Having only managed a few hours’ sleep before arriving at the Precinct.

“Yes boss.” He jumped, eager to please her.

Worland returns with the steaming black brew.

“Any ballistic results through from the GSP Database?” She enquires.

“Yeah... We got a partial trace on one of the bullets. The others were too shattered to re-composite... I’m running the partial against what’s on file. Should have something back any moment... Systems running slow today. Must be the weather.” Said Worland staring to a frosted window.

“Keep me posted the moment you have something ... And get me a list of K9 dealers.”

“Yes boss.” Worland squawked from his desk looking more like a cage by the moment as files continued to mount about him.

“I want to piece Beckett’s last movements from any surveillance tapes we have.”

Tapping the key board Kristina searched for cameras in the area. Finding a camera on the street corner. Fast forwarding the recording. Nothing appears until just after 3:00 AM. Then a long black car pulls up. Poor street lighting makes the plates impossible to read. Enhancements show no better detail.

The vehicle’s transponder unit had been switched off.

“Damn!” She curses to herself.

She continues to watch. A man gets out of the dark car. His head covered with a hat. The face is buried between the large fur collars of his coat. The man looks about and then shuffles quickly into the building. Sometime later, enough to commit the crime, the man reappears with a bundle under his arm and drives off.

“We might have something here Worland...” She encourages him with a probable suspect, “... Got someone coming and going just after three AM. Package under his arm. Can’t make out the plates... Transponder switched off... Definitely our man I reckon.”

“Might have something on the ballistics... I have partial match with a robbery-murder up in Harlem about a month ago... Also involving K9...” Advised Worland, then added his thoughts, “...Seems our man doesn’t like paying for his Candy”.

“So it seems... Why don’t we pay our fellow officers uptown a visit? I could do with getting out of the office... I want to see what surveillance tapes they have on this fella. Hopefully, by the time we come back ... Forensics would have come through with their report.” Kristina advised, “...Grab your coat... You’re driving”.

“Thanks boss.” Chirped Worland.

Worland had the squad car hovering when Kristina appeared at the top of the Precincts steps.

Traffic was bedlam. But then it always was. Arriving in Lower Harlem some twenty minutes later at the steps of the One Hundred and Twenty Second Precinct. Worland smoothly hovered the vehicle in sideways into an available parking space.

“Nice driving Worland... Think I’ll keep you on as my driver.” She complimented him. But more pleased that she did not have to drive.

“Thanks boss”.

Climbing the thawing Precinct steps Kristina notices the scared revolving doors. Pitted with bullet holes.

“Tough neighborhood.” She looks street, void of protestors. The weather keeping the beasts at bay. Thoughts of other beasts cross her mind and she re-examines the etched doorway as if for claw marks. Then dismisses the dark thoughts. That was another place. Another time.

They enter the precinct proper. Looking about, it was not much different to the Ninety-First. Noisy and crowded with shackled protesting perps. Each protesting their innocence. Each asking for a lawyer.

Kristina approaches the Duty Sergeant’s bench.

“How may have I help you lady?” The Duty Sergeant asked, wondering where he had seen her before.

“Detective Tepes from the Ninety-First Downtown...” Holding out her badge to the Sergeant. “...Like to speak to the detective in charge of this case.”

Handing the Sergeant a small chip with case notes. Placing the disc on top of his processor. Data streamed to the Sergeant’s console displaying the case details.

“Yeah I remember this one... You’d be looking for Gatland... He’s over there.” The Sergeant pointed to a middle aged man in the distance. Hunched over a desk, tapping on at keyboard. Shaking a head with frustration.

“Thank you Sergeant”. Kristina sees the man and makes a bee line for him.

Making their way through the chaos, arrived to find the man battling with the key board. Sensing a presence about him. And turns to see who would dare interrupt him.

“What do you want lady?” Gatland asks abruptly.

Then sees her badge on her hip.

“Oh sorry Detective.” He apologizes too late to catch Kristina’s glare.

“Detective Tepes. Ninety-First Downtown... This is Detective Worland... You investigated a case you a bake-house murder about month ago... Seems *your* man has turned up on *my* patch.”

That caught Gatland’s attention and he looked up at Kristina. Wondering where he had seen her before.

“Have we met before Detective ...?” Gatland asked, struggling to place the face.

“Tepes... No I don’t think so. I do get that a lot... I must have one of those faces I guess.” She lied.

Handing him the disc of his case file to re-focus his attention.

Waiting briefly as data was downloaded and re-appeared on his screen.

“Yeah... I recall this one... Quite nasty. Whoever it is... Did a number on the dealer. Didn’t spare the bullets. Tried to match associates... But nothing.” Gatland regurgitated the findings.

“We’ve got a similar case, same MO, same ballistics. We have surveillance on someone coming and going. But couldn’t get a facial, or vehicle number... Transponder was disabled.”

“Yeah... We have the same issue here... The riots have caused people to disable their transponders in protest...” He added. “...It’s getting out of

control... You saw the doors when you came in?" Gatland looked up at the pitted wooden doors.

"Your ballistics match ours... We think he's the same guy... Took out a K9 dealer Downtown two nights ago." Kristina cited her own case.

"I think you know as much as I do on this guy." Handing back the chip to Kristina.

Kristina looked about the office in thought and turned to Worland.

"We better be heading back... Hopefully Forensics will have something for us... Thanks for your time Detective Gatland. Let me know if anything comes up with this guy. He's not afraid to use the same weapon twice...He's got balls alright."

"Likewise Detective." Said Gatland and resumed speculating where he had seen her before.

Making their way back to the scarred entrance. The Duty Sergeants looked up momentarily as they left to get a second look at the familiar face. He too, unable to place her.

"Tough neighborhood." Admits Worland.

"It's tough everywhere Worland and it's going to get tougher. Get the car ready... I'll be down in a moment".

Worland readied the squad car as Kristina surveyed the street. What was it all coming to she wondered? Taking a breath of the cold morning air. Allowing it to revitalize her.

The world was over crowded.

'Law and order was falling behind the population curve.' She thought. Climbing into the squad car, signals Worland to return to the Precinct.

Forensics had found nothing that Kristina did not already know.

Knowing the guy would surface again. They always did. He had a serious K9 habit. It was not her place to protect drug dealers. But she would not allow a murderous junkies to walk the streets. He would slip up eventually.

And when he did, she would be there to catch him...

Chapter 10

The roar of the shuttle's massive ionized engines were inaudible inside the cabin.

The thin air at eighty thousand feet struggling to resonate any sound. Augustus Braun was reading the latest updates of the recent riots in London and Istanbul on a tablet. Swiping the screen to one side to take a call coming in from Robert Mueller.

"Mueller. How's it all going?" Braun cheerfully responded.

"Very well Augustus... Very well. And how are you?" Mueller enquired.

"Can always be better. These damn riots are getting more frequent. We'll be needing your vaccine soon. Will it be ready I time my good friend?" Braun stoked his deliverer of death.

"Everything is on track for a February completion date... Trials can begin March. Our man here is doing a great job."

"I'd like to meet him. We should be at JFK in about an hour... If the weather holds. I've brought Nero with me. Hopefully New York will keep him occupied while I'm there... I'll be meeting with Noren and then the heads of the families. Won't be staying long... Then back to Geneva in a few days."

"I'll have a car waiting at the airport Augustus." Mueller coddled his superior.

"Thank you Robert. Don't know what I'd do without you. I'll see you tomorrow morning." Said Braun before swiping the screen to disconnect the call.

Braun resumed reading the status reports streaming in from London.

Riot police were being attacked. Molotov cocktails being thrown one way by protestors. Tear gas and Taser bullets back at them by Security Forces. Braun quietly shook his head knowing it would soon be over.

'Let them have their riots and their protests. Their games... Soon I will have mine.' He thought to himself grinning.

Nero sat two seats back from his father. Staring at his own tablet. Rocking his head to a blaring sound track of racket through the cordless headset. Looking much like his father. Nero was short with broad shoulders. Dark hair. But unlike his father. Nero was of pale complexion. A man desperately in need of a tan. But incapable of one.

Making plans to hook up with his friend Hector whilst in New York. Hector had access his favorite recreational substance, Candy.

Unsure as to the extent of his freedom while his father talked business with the G7 Families. Already on a short leash after the last debacle his father had savaged him from. Hoping enough time had passed since the last *incident* to allow him some grace.

It was not entirely his fault he had shot dead a bouncer. Things just got out of hand. People over reacted. Or so the amended official police report read, now re-classified as an unfortunate *accident*. Braun had pulled strings. Called in favors. And made subtle persuasions. Threats. Nero was acquitted, and exonerated of all charges. By all, but his father who maintained a watchful eye on him.

Nero tracked the flight's movements on his tablet.

'Another hour, then *party time*.' Thinking to himself, before deciding to message his friend Hector.

'*You there?*' Nero taped the message cell. *Send*.

'*What's up dude?*' A reply ricocheted back moments later.

'*We set for tonight?*' *Send*.

'*All set to go... Got some sweets for you.*' Hector replied cryptically.

'*I look forward to it... Arriving in the hour... Contact you when I get there. Out.*' Nero swiped off, not waiting for Hector to reply.

Nero never involved himself directly with drug dealers. He would leave it to Hector to source the Candy for him. Hector was a friend. A friend with connections. And where was the harm in hanging out with a friend?

The upper atmosphere unbuffered. The shuttle descended smoothly to sixty thousand feet.

And made ready its final approach for its arrival at JFK after two and half hours from Geneva to New York. Winter was particularly harsh this year. Harsher than the others before.

As if nature knew something was amiss with the world. And was trying to correct it.

“Fasten your seatbelts gentlemen...” A voice came over the intercom. “...We’ll be experiencing some turbulence coming into JFK... We’ll do our best to minimize any disruption.”

Nero frantically begins to fasten a seatbelt as though his neurotic life depended upon it. Struggling with the magnetic latch in a panic attack. His father however was more leisurely, having flown to JFK on countless occasions over the past decades. He would wait a while later before securing his.

The first buffer however came as a surprise. And bounced the craft violently sideways.

“Must be bad outside. Haven’t experienced a bump like that for a while. You buckled up back there Nero?” Braun enquired calmly of his son.

“All good Sir.” Nero responded anxiously. Though capable of consuming a lethal narcotic and not blink an eye lid. The slightest bump made Nero cautious.

“Shouldn’t be much longer... There’s a car waiting for us to take us to the Hotel.” Advised Braun hoping it would calm his son’s anxiety.

Several more bumps and jolts struck the shuttle. Stabilizers helped minimized the impacts. Peering out the cabin windows through the snow drifts, Nero could make out the bright lights of New York City. The shuttle’s speed reduced before coming to a halt. Hovering momentarily then slowly descending and gliding sideways into a private hanger.

Reserved exclusively for G7 private shuttles. Red rubber wheels extended from under the fuselage to cushion the landing. Propulsion engines shut down their harmonic whirr.

And there was silence.

Moments later the shuttle door tipped open. And Augustus Braun, The Order’s Secretary of State, stepped out. Followed by Nero now relieved to be on the terra-firma. Cold air circulated the hangar through the open hangar doors. Nero felt the bite of the New York after the warmth of the shuttle cabin. And quickly headed for the waiting black limousine.

8:00PM and traffic was no different to any other hour of the day.

Congested, it was moving. Taking an expressway under the Hudson, the executive limousine made its way to Downtown. The bright lights of the tall buildings dazzled Nero like a child. Having not been to New York for some time. Unlike anything he had experienced in Europe. The city was alive. He could feel its pulse.

Hector would help him find a few more pulses that evening.

With that thought he sent a message notifying Hector of his arrival. Informing him to wait at the bar in the Hotel lobby and that he would down in an hour. Moments later, Hector confirmed the rendezvous.

Sitting opposite Nero, on the plush leather seats. His father was receiving updates from London. Wishing it not to escalate, that it could be *contained*. Riots seemed to be erupting everywhere. London, Tokyo, and even Moscow. Every week, another riot would emerge from nowhere. The underground movement was well organized. Braun knew Noren would eventually infiltrate and squash them.

It was only a matter of time. The dooms day clock was ticking.

The sleek black limousine pulled into the hotel basement.

A scarlet dressed Bellboy stood waiting for the imminent arrival. A resplendent gold band ran down the side of ebony trousers. Loading the few bags the Braun's had brought with him onto the baggage trolley, the Bellboy accompanied them to the private suite reserved for the Order's executives.

Entering the palatial suite, Nero deviated immediately to the mini bar. Making two shift drinks to welcome them home.

"Thanks son..." His father acknowledged the gesture and took a heavy sip from the crystal tumbler. "...That's nice after the flight we've had". Collapsing leisurely into a large leather armchair.

Nero thought it was good time to inform his father he was heading out for the evening. Hoping he was now off the leash and permission to roam again. Too tired to argue otherwise, Braun relented. He would allow his son a parole period in light of his recent good behavior. And confinement in Geneva.

What harm could he possibly cause in the City? Already full of misfits and criminals.

"Just don't go shooting any bouncers this time, okay?" He advised his son seriously.

“Yes Sir... I’m not packing...” Nero joked, and wondered if he should have. “...Won’t be too long Sir... Just catching up with an old friend I haven’t seen for a while.” Nero added to embellish a story that he would not be alone and *unsupervised*.

Conceding to the boundless energy of the young. Braun reclined in the arm chair and surveyed the room. All too familiar with it from his previous stays. Nothing was out of place. Other than the arrangement of flowers. A voice command ignited a large screen on the wall. Causing it to flare with preselected multiple channels. And he gauged the events unfolding around the world.

Three isolated riots. Several hundred dead.

‘A few less to worry about later’, he thought. He could live with that.

Turning to look out the window. The distant lights of New Jersey and Stanton Island translucent through the snow drifts.

Nero in the meantime had showered and changed.

Having groomed himself for an evening of narcotic pleasure on the town. A black credit card allowed him access to an unlimited funds. He would need some of it tonight. What he was buying did not come cheap. Though he often wondered how his friend Hector acquired it.

Taking one last look at himself in the mirror. Satisfied with his appearance. Slips out the door unnoticed.

His father pre-occupied with world affairs and snow drifts to notice his son’s muted departure...

Chapter 11

Slipping passed his pre-occupied father focusing on world affairs and snow-flakes.

Nero had more insalubrious affairs on his mind. Ones that involved his nostril. And his mind. A hundred and seven floors below in the foyer of the Hotel. Hector sat waiting at the bar. Looking out of place. He did not fit with the décor. Nor the clientele.

The large fur collared overcoat making appear more as a pimp. Than a guest. Short cropped blonde hair thinning at the temples. Hector's mouth twitched in conflict with his twitching nostrils. Rubbing a finger under his nose to relieve the annoying irritation. A large diamond stud sparkled from an earlobe to siren his presence at the bar.

The Concierge had looked at him suspiciously. And when questioned. Hector had mentioned Braun's name. The Concierge smiled and nodded politely and backed off. Any friend of Braun's was a friend of the hotel. And waited anxiously for Nero to arrive. Turning his back as police squad cars roamed pass outside the window.

"You okay Hector? ..." Asked Nero, "...You look jumpy." Appearing suddenly from no-where.

"Let's get going. This place gives me the creeps." Hector stood and headed to the door.

"Not staying for a drink first?" Nero asked hoping to have a shots before venturing into the night.

"I know a place we can get one." Said Hector signaling Nero to follow.

Much to the keenness of the Concierge and clientele to see the pimp like creature leave the premises.

"We can grab a cab." Hector said pulling up the thick fur collars and lighting a cigarette.

"Those things will kill you mate." Nero humored him for the habit.

"A lot of things can kill you Nero... This is the least of my worries..." Inhaling deeply, allowing the warmth of the smoke to fill his chest.

Signaling an arm to hail down the first passing cab, "... Jump in. I know this place Midtown... Called Rudi's, classy joint... You'll love it!"

"Did you get the Candy?" Nero asked anxiously, keen to get the party started.

"Of course... I wouldn't leave home without it." Hector chuckled back.

"Is it always this busy?" Nero asked looking out the cab window.

"Mate ... This is quiet compared to what it get like at midday..." Shaking his head in disbelief. "...Don't you get traffic where you live?"

"Yeah but nothing like this... We're shut away from the rest of the world." Replied Nero coming to grips with the intensity that was New York City.

"We're almost there... Just up ahead." Hector pointed to the large blue neon sign hanging from the side of the building.

"Nice ladies here... Play nice and we might be able to take one home... And for God sake don't upset the bouncers..." Warned Hector, "...They're big black bastards... And I mean *big ... Really big...* You don't want to mess with these guys".

"I'll try my best okay... No promises... Let's check these bitches out." Said Nero.

"Now you're talking big boy." Egging Nero on.

The cab pulled to the curb outside Rudi's. A few souls lingered on the street mostly waiting for cabs to arrive. Young women lingered in the cold, soliciting business from gentlemen too intoxicated to know better.

"I'll fix this." Said Nero waving of his black card over the meter.

"Cheers mate." Hector accepted and dragging himself onto the frozen neon lit street.

Pulling up the fur collars of his coat, burying his hands deep into the pockets.

"Let's get inside... I'm freezing my balls off out here." Hector complained.

Rudi's large frosted glass doors opened automatically.

Matthias and Ruben stood motionless staring down upon the two young gentlemen as they entered.

"I see what you mean..." said Nero staring up at the giant monuments of black stone. "...Fuck me." He quietly said to himself.

But Matthias had heard him and glared at him with an appetizing grin.

'Perhaps later.' Matthias thought.

"Follow me. It's all good... They run a tight ship. Not like the place it use to be." Said Hector removing his overcoat and handing them to an attractive check-in girl.

Music could be heard coming from behind thick plum curtains of the adjoining room. Nero looked about and weighed up the place. Looking over the patrons. Mostly gentlemen and several ladies. All well-dressed. And with money to burn.

He was in the right place. He was home.

"I need some Candy." Pleaded Nero eagerly.

"This way my son... This way... The rest room is perfect for a line or two." Hector led the way.

The rest room was quiet with only a couple of gentlemen doing their business at the urinals. Giggling their equipment in time with the music. Brightly lit by a central chandelier hanging from the ceiling. White tiled walls and red mosaic tiled floor the room echoed with voices and footsteps. Massive mirrors hung over the large porcelain hand basins and polished brass taps.

Entering a cubicle, Hector indicated for Nero to follow. Locking the door behind him.

"Welcome to my office..." Extending his hand around to show the extent of his domain. "...Have a seat please sir".

Nero sat on the only seat available. To one side a wide polished ledge.

"Allow me to show you the merchandise". Informed Hector.

And with that Hector pulls out a small plastic bag and places on the tiled edge.

Pink flecks of K9 appeared amidst the white powder. Taking a dainty silver spoon from a pocket, scooped out an amount onto the tile. Nero pulls out the black credit card. Cutting the powder down into three short lines with short sharp strokes. The tapping sound of the card on the tiles echoed around the rest room.

"Steady down old boy... No rush... You have all night..." Hector began to caution his benevolent friend. "...Take it easy on this stuff, it's pretty potent... It will blow your balls off man."

Nero pulls a hundred dollar note from his bill-fold. And rolls in to a tight tube. Blocking a nostril, he inserts the rolled Benjamin into the other.

Then snorts sharply.

An immediate rush fills depleted neurological senses. A flash of light momentarily blinds him as the Candy took effect. Inflamed receptors willingly greeted the mind bending narcotic. Nero felt alive. Neuro-electric shock waves ran through his body from head to toe.

And back again. And back again.

“Whoa that’s good shit!” Nero exclaimed coughing and squinting whelming eyes.

And went down for another line. Repeating the process with the other nostril. The same debilitating effects followed. Compounding the first hit. Nero sat back dazed on the porcelain throne. He was king of his domain. Staring dumbly at Hector with a growing grin on his face. Allowing the narcotic enlightenment consume him.

A heart thumped erratically inside his chest. Unsure sure if it was beating to live. Or beating to survive.

“That’s enough for now big boy.” Cautioned Hector.

Nero leaned back and let the drug take him to a happy place. While Hector finished the final line for himself. Hector had grown accustomed to the drug. There was enough left in the line to put him in the mood.

Tonight they would find a classy lady. Perhaps entice her back to his place for a good time. The night was young, there was no rush to get going. Nero sat back with a silly grin on his face. Pupils dilating as the waves of electric shocks ricocheted through his body. The K9 layering upon the intense ecstasy of the Cocaine. Hector had lit up a cigarette. And stood standing watching his friend Nero.

Venturing down the Alice’s Rabbit hole to Wonderland.

It was almost time to bring Nero back to planet earth.

“Come on mate... Time to go and watch the pretty dancers.” Hector directed him.

Nero stirred, feeling his extremities again.

“Told it was good stuff. Scored it a couple of days ago”. Without saying how. Or who he had to kill to get it.

Pulling Nero to his feet. Allowed him time to familiarize himself with the concept of gravity again.

“Welcome back to planet Earth... You good mate?” Hector asked gauging Nero’s mobility.

“Yeah, yeah, good... You?” Asked Nero, feeling a little woozy.

“Always good mate. Always... Now let’s go and check out the babes... Hold yourself steady. I don’t want those two bouncers coming onto us... I know what you’re like with bouncers.”

“That was self-defense man.” Nero pleaded.

“Yeah, yeah... Tell that to the judge mate.” Hector jested.

Laughing loudly they re-entered the foyer and headed to the bar.

Matthias and Ruben scrutinized them from a distance. Hector refused to make eye contact with them. Nero was incapable of making any eye contact with anyone. And ordered two tequila shots to wash down the bitter taste of Candy from their throats.

“Thanks for showing up mate... Thanks for the Candy...” Said Nero handing Hector a shot glass of a honey colored tequila. “...Cheers mate!”

“Cheers mate! ... It’s good to see you too.”

Nothing was free in Hector’s world. Everything came at a price. Nero’s black credit card would assure him of that. The *thought* had crossed Hector’s mind.

‘Why kill the golden goose that laid him the golden eggs.’ And dismissed the perfidious thought.

“You ready to party hard?” Hector asked his translucent friend.

“It’s been a while, but I’m ready... Bring it on!” Confessed Nero, relinquishing the restraints his father had placed on him for the past six months.

“This way... And I’ll show you what Heaven looks like.” Said Hector leading Nero through a pair of thick curtains that separated the bar from the stage.

Darkness and music engulfed them as they entered.

Colored lights flashed sporadically. Unsettling Nero, unsure if it was the effect of the Candy. Or the stage lighting. Eyes taking some time to adjust to darkened enclosure. A bright spot light shone on a cloud of dry ice that hovered the stage.

“You like this one Nero... She’s a real honey...” Said Hector watching Cindy about to take the stage. “...Sit down over here.” Indicated two seats and Nero followed the commanding voice.

Cindy danced in time with the music. The lighting accentuated her petite voluptuous body. Her petite breasts holding their perfect shape as

she danced, imitating seductive postures. Swinging herself around the polished pole.

Nero watched transfixed by the alluring creature that was dancing about the stage.

“What do you think mate?” Hector asks.

“Classy joint.” He responded, acknowledging Hector’s choice of clubs.

Watching as dancers come and went. Generously tipping the ladies that stopped by the table and chatted with them.

Seth had assumed his usual corner table. Shrouded by the darkness it provided. The irritation that had puzzled him the night before had returned. Keen to see Kristina again. But Kristina was not working that evening. And his irritation would go unscratched. This was not something he could easily scribble in his note book and solve algebraically.

Thoughts of the perplexing irritation were soon distracted by two young gentlemen at the table ahead of him that were becoming more vocal by the minute. Management arrived to inform them to keep it down. Or they would be asked to leave. From a mirrored office window above, Anthony kept a watchful eye on the rousing pair. Nero had tipped the girls well. And for the time being they would allowed to stay.

Paige appears on the stage.

Hector had become smitten with her from his previous visits. A Southern belle with long hair red hair that rocked his world in more ways than one. He had a *thing* for red heads. Especially ones with freckles. The ones he could play join the dots.

“You’ll like this one.” Leaning over to encourage Nero to watch.

But the colored lights had long since captured Nero’s attention. Following them about the room. Hector followed Sarah movements as she went through her routine. Before finishing with a tasteful round of applause. Making her rounds Paige arrives at Hector’s table. She had never spoken with him before, but had heard he had a reputation for a *good time*.

“How y’all doing tonight?” She asked the two gentlemen reclining leisurely in the padded leather armchairs.

“We’re doing just dandy love... Can we buy you drink?” Hector offered his favorite dancer.

“Why thank you... What’s your name Sugar?” Asked Sarah in a deep Southern accent hoping to know more about the mysterious gentleman.

“Hector... And this here is my good friend, Nero... Visiting from out of town for a few days.”

But Nero was still out of town. Having been pulled down a narcotic rabbit hole. Too sedated for dialogue. Other than with the voices inside his head. With his thoughts elsewhere, raising a hand slightly to acknowledge Sarah’s presence. Before resuming a blank stare at the stage and the floating white cloud that had now captured his attention.

“What’s your name young lady?” Hector asks suggestively.

“People called me *Paige*.” Replied Sarah.

“That’s a lovely name. What you doing later? ... We’re thinking of having a private party at my place. You’re most welcome to join us... There’ll be slow music. Slow dancing. And some ... *Candy* if you like.” Hector said the magic word.

“*Candy* you say?” Sarah’s eyes lit up. She looked around hoping no one had over-heard their conversation.

“I have one more routine... But if you boys want to wait around a little longer... We could go after that”. Hoping not to miss an opportunity for a good time.

“Sounds just fine to me Paige.” Hector slides a hundred bill into her silk panties as three shots of expensive tequila arrived.

Tapping them together. Throwing the shots to the back of their throats and swallowed hard. Causing distortion of faces followed by wide grins of satisfaction and growling exhalations.

“See y’all soon.” Walking away, ensuring Hector had a good view of her leaving.

Hector would wait another hour before she reappeared to strip from her skimpy panties and bra. Only her heels would remain on. Anxious to get Paige back to his apartment and enjoy the pleasure of her appetizing body.

Seth watched on from the darkened corner.

Relieved Hector and Nero were about to leave. But were surprised to see Sarah following obediently behind them. Matthias and Ruben looked down at her as she left with the two intoxicated gentlemen. It was not their place to sanction the girl’s behavior.

She knew what she was doing. And was not being the first time she had left with gentlemen. Or women. They let her pass without caution.

But not before making a mental note of the two gentlemen escorting her from the premises. Matthias looked up at the overhead cameras...

Chapter 12

Sensing their departure, Rudi's doors opened automatically.

Allowing the three to leave. The North Wind sneaked stealthily inside. As though to momentarily seek shelter from the cold outside. Waving down a cab the three headed to Hector's East Side apartment. Sarah nestled between the two men. Her arm intertwined with Hector's.

He had the Candy. He was the one she would have to stroke and win-over.

With the effects of his recent intake beginning to wear off, Nero began to fidget. Anxious to be sedated again. Arriving at Hector's Fifty-Ninth Street apartment. Nero waved his black card over the meter and dragged himself out of the cab.

"Nice place." Remarked Sarah looking up at the building.

'These guys had some money.' She thought. It was time to let her red hair down and party.

"Wait till you see inside." Said Hector proudly.

Taking a stylish elevator to the top floor. They entered a grand hallway carpeted with a long Persian rug. Waving a key over the lock. Hector opened the door to his humble abode. The apartment was spacious and luxurious. Nero did not question how his friend afforded the place.

'The drug trade must be good.' He thought.

Sensing its master was home, apartment lights and heating switched on automatically.

"Fuck me!" Said Sarah as she saw the extent of the lounge and view of the city through the large floor to ceiling windows.

"Soon enough Paige... First a drink to celebrate... And then some Candy I believe." Suggested Hector heading to the liquor cabinet.

"Celebrate what?" Sarah asks inquisitively.

"Nero is back in town!" Hector declares returning with the drinks.

"Oh... To Nero then!" Toasts Sarah raising her glass to Nero.

Another voice command and soft music began to play through hidden speakers. Lights dimmed. And the mood was set. Hector pulled out a small

bag from his pocket. Spooning a small quantity of Candy onto the glass coffee table.

It took little encouragement for Paige to try some.

“Use this sweetie.” Said Nero offering his plain black card to Sarah unaware of its intrinsic value.

Followed by a crisp hundred dollar bill. She would know what to do with both of them. Skillfully Sarah cut the white pink powder into lines then rolled the bill into a neat tube. She looked briefly at the two men looking back at her. Titled her head to one side and snorted the first line, then taking a deep gasp.

“Woah!! That good shit!” She said as her eyes suddenly opened wide.

A heart racing beneath her swollen breasts. Then went down for the second line. The same effect followed.

“Fuck me! Woah!!” She called out loudly.

“Thought you might like it.” Said Hector pleased to have Paige passively sedated.

Passing the bill to Nero, who refused it and told her to keep it.

‘I’ll take it out of her ass later.’ He thought, grinning in anticipation.

Laying back, Sarah allowed her inhibitions to dissolve. Hector spooned two lines for Nero who promptly sliced like a Michelin Chef and snorted the two longer lines quicker than he had at Rudi’s.

“Steady down young cock! ... Pace yourself.” Advised Hector about to cut his share of the Candy.

Candy would have less of an effect on Hector than the other two. Albeit a mild narcotic buzz. He now required something extra to get his kick. Pulling another bag from his other pocket and spooned a pinch from it. Mixing it in with the line left by Nero. A synthetic cyanide, commonly referred to as *Little-Brother*. A pinch was not enough to kill anyone, but it would still stimulate the nervous system into tricking it was dying.

“What’s that babe?” Sarah asked from a drug induced psychosis. Eyes beginning to glaze over.

“Not for you Paige ...” Responded Hector continuing to cut and blend the powders, “...This stuff can kill you sweetie... Stay with your Candy for now.” He warned her, returning the zip lock plastic bag back to his side pocket of his trousers.

Sarah’s eyes following the bag’s every movement.

Satisfied he had mixed the two together sufficiently.

Hector took a silver tube from his other pocket and snorted the mingled line. That was all that was required. Little-Brother would do the rest. The *hit* instantaneous. Death would be cheated. Not by much. The three laid back and stared out the windows at the yellow and white lights of the city outside.

Snowflakes drifted by the windows. Adding to the drug induced fairy tale wonderland in which they found themselves. Paige's body began to rock gently in time with the music. And she found herself growing warmer. Though the central heating was creating some heat. Her libido was generating its own. Standing up and began to dance gracefully as if on stage. Removing her clothing in a slow erotic striptease.

"Hope you boys don't mind? ... I'm feeling a little... Warm." She teased the two gentleman reclined before her.

"Whatever you feel like Paige is fine with me." Encouraged Hector. Feeling rather warm himself, now opening his shirt down to his waist.

Nero was unaware to anything happening around him. He had stumbled down the rabbit hole again. Eyes rolling from one side of the room to the other in search of Alice. A white rabbit. And two little fat boys. Tweedle-Dum and Dumble-Dee.

"Color!" Summoned Hector.

The room became alive with colored lights dancing aimlessly over the walls and ceiling. Adding to their psychedelic hallucinations and pulling Nero from his wonderland. Watching Paige dance before them. Knowing her youthful body would soon be in their hands. Paige swayed gracefully in time with the music.

She knelt before Hector. Slowly pulling down his trousers as if not to awaken the beast that laid within. But the one eyed beast had already stirred and stood erect. Endowed with a tattoo of a snake that wrapped itself around his swollen member.

"Careful mate... You'll take someone's eye out with that thing." Nero joked envious of Hector's endowment.

"I've got an eye you can poke sugar." Encouraged Sarah.

Hector rubbed the swollen head of the snake up and down her blossoming flower. Sarah moaned. The trinity of naked bodies tangoed and entwined as colored lights waltzed across the walls. It was all becoming

too much for Nero who could no longer control the vertical. Soon followed by Hector.

“Oh fuck! ... Oh fuck!” Hector cried out as an uncontrollable tremor came over him and the rigid elongated snake spat its venom into Paige.

Sweaty bodies fell exhausted and limp where they lay.

Incapacitated from sexual exertions. Tranquillized by Candy. Hector spread himself on the floor of plush carpet. Drained of all energy. Sarah laid down beside him. Her leg shielding the venomous snake.

The spinning colored lights dancing on the ceiling had captured Nero’s attention and like a child enchanted by the Pied Pipers flute followed them lethargically back down the rabbit hole.

In search of Alice. A white rabbit. And two little fat boys. Tweedle-Dum and Dumble-Dee...

Chapter 13

Hector was the first to awaken.

Outside, the sun was struggling to rise above the distant skyline. A faint yellow red light broke across the horizon. Nero lay comatose from the previous evening's narcotic consumption. Hector looked over to Sarah reclined in the large arm chair. Her head tilted back. Looking at peace. Her naked body as perfect as the night before.

But something was amiss.

The mind knows when things are not as they should be. He continued to look at her. Puzzled by what was awry. Then it struck him between the eyes.

She was not breathing.

“Oh fuck!” Hector called out and awakening Nero with the sudden outcry.

“What's happening man?” Nero asked confused, awakening to the dimly lit room.

“She's not breathing man!” Said Hector again, trying desperately to reconcile the nights events.

“Who's not breathing?” Nero asked puzzled by Hector's words.

His mind desperately trying to piece together the previous evening's events.

“Paige! ... She's not breathing man!” Hector exclaimed frantically.

Getting to his feet Hector moved hesitantly towards Paige. As if to deny the horror that lay dead in the arm chair. Hoping she would suddenly breathe. Hoping he was mistaken.

“What do you mean? ... She's not breathing?” Nero queried confused as to how it could be possible.

He was already in enough trouble with the last incident. He really did not need another for his father to deal with. Hector approached the body. Hoping there was some movement in those beautiful breasts.

“Breathe bitch... Breathe.” He muttered to himself. On the brink of prayer.

But there was nothing. He touched Paige's body. It was cold.
Dead cold.

"Fuck! ..." He exclaimed. "...Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

White froth showed around the corners of Paige's gapping mouth. As if she was gasping for a breath. That never came. Her eyes staring into open space. Red painted lips contrasting her pale skin. Her body pale from the lack of warm circulation. Now looking like a discarded sex-doll. Hector looked about and saw the open bag of Little-brother on the table and an incomplete line.

"Oh shit! ... Fuck me! ... She must have found it in my pocket. The bitch!" He exclaimed with the discovery.

"Let's not panic okay... Let's think this through..." Nero tried to calm the situation. "...You sure she's dead?" Looking at the pale lifeless body from a distance.

Unable himself to stand closer.

"She's dead! Look at her! ... She's fucken dead!" Hector exclaimed trying to think of a way to make it all go away.

"We'll get rid of her... Put her in a dumpster or something... She's a junkie man... Had some bad shit and died ... Shit happens man!" Nero coldly rationalized.

Hector frozen with indecision.

"Easy for you to say with your father's connections." Added Hector without immunity.

"It was self-inflicted man." Trying to ease Hector's growing anxiety.

"Yeah, yeah... She did do it to herself... Right ... But how we going to get rid of her?" Confused as to what to do next. Usually he just left bodies where they fell. But this one was his apartment.

And the last thing he needed was police in his apartment.

"Tip her down the garage shoot... She'll be recycled man... No one will know where she came from." Said Nero calmly.

But then this was not his apartment. Or his drugs.

"Got it all figured out haven't you mate ... You done this sort of thing before?" Asked Hector.

Nero looked on from an armchair. A stiff drink in his hand calming his nerves.

"I'd rather not say... Rather not say." Said Nero wishing to avoid any questioning.

Nero had a dark past. And some things are best left unsaid. Europe was far more brutal than the bright lights of New York City. Life was cheaper there. People died for less than half a line of Little-Brother.

“Okay... We’ll wrap her up in a bed sheet and get her to the dumpster before anyone sees us.” Nero instructed finishing his drink.

Hector hurried from the room and returned with a fresh bed sheet and spread it out on the floor.

“Grab her feet man.” He instructed Nero.

Awkwardly Nero took hold of Paige’s cold dead ankles. While Hector grabbed under her arms. Gently. As though not to hurt her. Carrying the body onto the edge of the plain brown bed sheet. And began to roll her over and over and over to have the sheet wrap about her.

“What about her clothes?” Asked Hector.

“Bag ‘em up and I’ll toss them on the way home...” Advised Nero now in control. “...Let’s get her over to the rubbish shoot... Check the hall way for people.”

“What if we’re seen?” Asked Hector nervously.

“Bad luck for them I suppose.” Replied Nero beginning to show his true colors.

As though if he was lugging a heavy roll of carpet, Hector lifted Paige over his shoulder. Nero looked about the hallway for people. Momentarily listening for sounds that gave away activity.

“Clear!” He called back to Hector standing behind him.

The garbage shoot door swung freely. Sarah’s wrapped body slide head first through the opening. The bedsheet offered little resistance against the polished metal walls. Her body accelerated smoothly down the shoot. Making a banging sounds as it bumped against the thin metal sides. After what seemed like eternity, a “*thud*” that resonated back up the shoot.

“Sweet dreams sweetie.” Hector uttered a farewell prayer for her. Relieved Paige had been laid to rest.

“Hopefully she’ll be covered in muck before anyone discovers her...” Said Nero returning to the apartment, “...Grab a rubbish bag for her personal belongings. Use gloves or socks to handle it. Don’t want to leave any prints okay?”

Hector returned wearing socks on his hands and holding a large green rubbish bag.

“Grab her stuff and throw it in it... I’ll make us some breakfast ... Got any eggs?” Asked Nero.

“How can you eat after this?” Asked Hector, uncertain of the man before him. Hector may have lived in the shadows, but Nero seemed to live on the dark side of the street.

Nero did not reply. He was too busy looking through Hector’s refrigerator. Sometime later he returned with two plates of plates of bacon and eggs.

Hector struggled to swallow a mouthful of breakfast. The coffee slowly reviving his senses and settling his troubled stomach. Finishing up breakfast, Nero pulled on his fine leather gloves and thanked his friend for a great evening.

Suggesting they should do it again tonight.

“See you tonight at the bar... Then we’ll head to that Rudi’s joint again ... I liked it there.” Nero said calmly about to leave.

“You can’t be serious man? ...We can’t go back there... Not after this?” Said Hector alarmed at the thought.

“We’ve got to act as if nothing’s happened... If we don’t return, they’ll pin it on us immediately once they discover her missing... Not that anyone would miss the whore.” Said Nero.

Nero had already thought out their alibi.

“Our story is simple... We picked her up. We partied. And she left... End of story...” Nero began to explain. “...What she did after that? Is not our concern okay? She OD’d man... She wasn’t murdered... Junkies die all the time man.”

Nero let the cold hard facts sink into Hector’s muddled mind.

“By the time she’s incinerated there won’t be enough of her *to find*. Now just relax ... I’ll catch you tonight okay?” Nero looked into Hector’s eyes with a cold stare that demanded an answer back.

“We’re good mate... I’ll see you tonight... Party-time okay?” Replied Hector with a hint of hesitation in his voice.

“That’s my man... I’ll catch a ride back Downtown and ditch the bag on the way. A long way from here... Good luck with anyone finding it.” And with that Nero headed out the door.

Waving down a cab down in the early morning darkness.

At the last moment he spies a dumpster down an alleyway, Nero instructs the driver to wait. And goes over to it and casually throws the rubbish bag in. As if he were throwing out the rubbish. Returning to the cab still waiting for him.

'One less thing to worry about.' He thought.

In his mind, the incident with Paige was over the moment he came in her mouth. The Candy had numbed any emotion towards her. Having left any sensitivity in the restroom at Rudi's the night before. He had seen people die from overdoses before. Unfortunate. But those were the risks junkies took.

It could well be him in a dumpster somewhere around the world.

Arriving back to the hundred and seventh floor of the One World Trade Center.

The sun was beginning to rise over the horizon. The red orb penetrated the polluted haze and began to penetrate the dull grey New York skyline. Security men stood either side of the entrance. They understood the young man's nightly lifestyle and acknowledged Nero with a nod and grin. Having bailed him out of police cells across Europe in the past. And they were expecting to again soon.

His father was already up and finishing his morning coffee. Looking over the reports of previous night's riots. But more so, to await Nero's return. Despite death tolls on both sides, the Order had quelled the uprising. Tonight, as London and Istanbul licked their wounds, he was sure there would be further unrest in other cities. His visit to Mueller that morning would hopefully bring good news. And bringing him closer to his ultimate goal.

Just then Nero entered the room.

"Good morning son... I thought you said you wouldn't be too long?" Braun asked over his glasses.

Reminding his son of his words from the night before.

"Yeah... Sorry Sir... Got caught up with Hector and crashed at his place. Had a bite there before I left... What's the plans today?" Nero asked hoping to deflect the attention away from him.

"A meetings with Mueller and Noren this morning... Then I have a meeting with the heads of the Families this afternoon." Lowering his paper and looked at Nero sternly.

Hoping some of what he said had registered with Nero.

“You going to be alright by yourself till I get back?”

“Yeah... Though I might catch up some sleep.” Nero replied, having avoided an interrogation.

“I’ll see you when I get back then.” Braun advised firmly, about to make himself ready for his meetings.

“Catch you later Sir.” Agreed Nero walking to the bedroom before collapsing on the large soft bed.

A lethargic voice command closed the heavy drapes.

And the room darkened. Allowing Nero to slip into a deep sleep. His conscious was clear. This time the smoking gun was not in his hands. But Hector’s...

Chapter 14

Sandwiched between two large black security SUVs the sleek limousine pulled up almost unnoticed outside the Woolworth building.

Passing pedestrians stopped and starred at the small convoy of black vehicles. Wondering the identity of the important dignitary that was visiting. Limp red flags on the bonnet, betrayed their affiliation to the Order.

Braun's visit was unscheduled and away from the media's prying lenses. Stepping onto the pavement, he surveyed the street absent of reporters and protesters. Thankfully so. He could proceed unimpeached. Another cold grey New York morning, he was keen to find shelter in the warmth of Mueller's office. Security guards exchanged lances with the Braun's personal body guards. And watched on impotently as they strode pass them. Entering the large open foyer, the marble floor echoed with the sounds of Braun's steps.

Waving an identification card over the sensor an elevator immediately opened and Braun entered. His guards would remain at the entrance. Taking their positions either side of the doorway.

And awaited the return of the Package.

Elevator doors opened to a large open reception on the twenty sixth floor.

The receptionist immediately stood upon recognition of Braun.

"Mister Braun, Sir. It is good to see you again. Please come through. Mister Mueller is through here... Coffee? ... Or tea perhaps?" Offered the secretary politely.

"Coffee would be fine. Thank you... I'll show myself through if you don't mind..." Braun suggested. "...Mueller!" Braun calls out from the doorway seeking Mueller's attention. "...How are you?"

"Augustus... I'm good... It's good to see you again. Hope you had a good flight? Settle in alright I hope?" Asked Mueller extending his hand to greet an old friend.

“Weather was shite... But we made it... I swear the weather is getting worse each year.” Braun stated.

Unsure what had upset the earth’s weather patterns this time.

“I brought Nero with me. He’s sleeping it off after a night on the town. But I see New York is still in one piece... So that has got to be a good sign. He has a habit of leaving a trail of disaster behind him” Braun confessed of his son.

“He’s young. He’ll grow out of it... He has wild oats to sow.” Mueller said not catching himself in time. Wondering if the last statement was too much.

But Braun nodded in agreement.

“I know what you mean Robert... But still, I have to watch him like a hawk... He can be a devious little bugger sometimes...” Allowing himself a chuckle. And realized Nero reminded him of himself when he was his age, “...The apple doesn’t fall from the tree.” Braun conceded.

And then got directly to the point of his visit.

“So... How’s the project going? ... That *fellow* of yours getting results we need?” Braun’s eyes tightened and glared keenly at Mueller, “... What’s his name?”

“*Adison*... It’s going to timetable... We will soon have the first of the three keys.” Mueller informed his superior.

“Keys?” Braun asked. Unaware of the processes involved to create the vaccine.

“Yes keys... They will trigger the antigens that tag the three pathogens.” Trying to explain the bio-chemistry involved to his superior who knew less than Mueller did.

“If you say so Robert... It’s all a little beyond me this *anti-gen*... *Thing*... Will these *keys* be ready in time?” Asked Braun hoping the vaccine was on track.

“I believe so... *Adison* is confident it could be before then...” Said Mueller stroking Braun’s desires. “...There will need to be trials of course... But it *will* be ready.”

Content with the progress, Braun’s attention was now distracted by the distant New York sky line now unfolding morning light and life. The fog having burnt off, activity on the streets below becoming visible. Ants move about their day.

'How appropriate.' Thought Braun observing the ants scurrying about, unaware of their certain demise.

Mueller's secretary brought in two steaming cups and placed them before the men.

"I'll take you down after we finish these... You have a busy day no doubt so I won't hold you too long." Mueller surmised.

But Braun had turned now his attention to new reports streaming to his tablet of unrest from Sydney Australia.

"Damn these riots!" Cursed Braun.

"It will soon be all over Augustus. Let them have their fun." Mueller tried to console his master. Ultimate head of the yet to be sanctioned project.

"I suppose you're right... But they are an annoyance in the meantime." Braun tried to reconcile.

"A distraction only to themselves for them. Let them amuse themselves." Consoled Mueller, focusing on the final solution.

"Suppose you're right." Conceded Braun.

Everything to date by Mueller and his team was no more than routine research.

Until the Patmos signs off the proposal that's all it would be. *Routine research.* For the betterment of Mankind. And not the Order. Braun sighed deeply before sipping on his strongly fragrant coffee.

"You okay Augustus? That was deep sigh?" Mueller noted with concern.

"I'm fine Robert. Just thinking ... Let's go down and visit your *wonder-boy.*" Suggested Braun finishing the Espresso.

Braun stood and regained circulation into his wary legs. Throwing his coat over an arm. He would not be returning to the Mueller's office after the visit to the lab. Time was valuable and he had little to spare this day. He needed to meet with Alex Noren, then face the American G7 Families Uptown.

"This way." Instructed Mueller, walking over to a special elevator that accessed the subterranean laboratory.

Green digits flashed on a crystal display as they descended the floors above ground. Then changed to red.

Braun's body guards looked at each other as they heard the sound of a passing elevator only to hear it disappear below them. Then resumed their attention to the large colorful mural opposite them that had captured their attention.

Elevator doors opened to the bright clinical environment.

"Is it safe?" Asked Braun sensing another world existed. Unsure of the contagious atmosphere he now found himself in.

"It's all good down here Augustus... State-of-the-art... Everything is self-contained. Sealed incubators... Nothing can get out without us knowing about it. Sections can be locked down and incinerated to avoid any spreading." Mueller advised.

Braun was impressed where the Families' money had been invested. And the deadly dividend it would yield.

"We'll need to send our man to Wales to confirm the parent cultures and bring back up samples at some point... Sooner rather than later... This way." Mueller informed Braun to follow further.

"Yes ... of course. Do what you have to Robert." Accepted Mueller looking about the white wonderland.

Gauging the health hazard passing a piece of equipment. The two technicians in white lab coats halted their movements as the two men in dark suits walked pass them.

'Peculiar creatures.' Thought Mueller. Not unlike the microbes they were cultivating.

Arriving at an office door they found Seth with his head bent looking into a microscope.

Mueller knocked on the door frame and Seth looked up.

"Mister Mueller ... Sir." Seth responded to Mueller's presence and then noticed Braun's presence standing beside him.

"Mister Braun I presume? Sir." Seth added with surprise extending his hand.

The two men shock. Seth contrived a weak grip and allowed Braun's to overpower his own.

"How did you know?" Asked Braun.

"Mister Mueller said you may be visiting and he rarely brings anyone down here... To the dungeon." Said Seth, adding his description to the subterranean house of evils and torture.

"Your man is good Robert." Braun beamed a smile to Mueller.

“*Adison*... Let me officially introduce Mister Augustus Braun... You know his credentials.” Said Mueller.

“Mueller said you’re making progress with these ... *Keys*?” Braun asked adding his limited knowledge to the question.

“That’s right... You’ve caught us at a good time... Stan over there found the first key last night. He’s just writing up the results as we speak... The report will be on your desk by this evening Mister Mueller.” Seth added stroking to his superior’s procedural authority.

Seth had found the key weeks before. Only to let Stan discover it again later. Albeit having to point it out to him as they went over the results. The team was close to finding the second key. Like a hidden chocolate egg, Seth would keep it from them for another month.

“Fantastic work *Adison*... I look forward to reading it.” Said Mueller. Not that much of the Seth’s research made sense to him. So long as the report came across his desk showing progress then that was all that mattered.

“Well done *Adison*. Glad we have you on the team.” Braun added.

“Not just me Mister Braun... I have a good people behind me.” Said Seth, deflecting his brilliance to Nancy and Isaac who were listening intently nearby.

Unaware that their entire research was the climax to the foreplay Seth had already clandestinely covered at Princeton.

“I better be off Robert... Meetings call...” Braun abruptly ended his visit. “...Thank you for your time *Adison*... Keep up the good work.” Acknowledged Braun.

“Thank you for the visit.” Seth lied.

Mueller led Braun back to the elevators.

Technicians froze as the two men in dark suits neared their proximity. Only to reanimate after they had passed by.

“How much do you think this man *Adison* knows about the *purpose* of the project?” Braun asked concerned about of leaks of Intel.

“I doubt he knows much as all... He’s basically a bio-geek. *These... People*... Live in a world of test tubes and research... Politics is foreign to them Augustus.” Said Mueller surmising the people in white coats, and pens in their pockets.

“I think you’re right... The man’s handshake was as weak as a wet rag... I doubt he has had a conviction in his entire life... Nonetheless, keep an eye on him... He’s key to the project. We can’t afford to have him go AWOL on us... We’ve done back ground checks on these people?”

“All came back clear. Like you say. All loners, all ... *Expendable.*” Advised Mueller coldly.

“Send him to Wales and pick up the samples you need. Keep me posted of any new developments... I have to report back to Patmos and the Families... *Don’t bring me bad news...*” Warned Braun, “...It will be a shame to lose him when the time comes. But we can’t afford to have loose ends with consciences walking about.”

“I understand... We can’t have loose ends as you say.” Agreed Mueller.

Elevator doors opened on the ground floor. The body guards looked around and saw the package stepping out pulling on an overcoat. Preparing to expose himself to something they could not protect him.

The bite of the winter chill that was picking up pace outside.

The rear door of the limousine automatically opened.

Without looking back to farewell Mueller, Braun climbed into the spacious back leather seats. Mueller stood at the opening of Woolworth Building. Dwarfed by the large black frame of the doorway. Mueller raised his hand as a farewell gesture at the vehicle’s tinted windows. The gesture goes unnoticed. Braun’s mind was focused elsewhere.

His next visit was to Alex Noren. Head of the Order’s Secret Service. Located back at the One World Trade Centre. Noren had his fingers in many pies. His fist in many faces. It was Noren’s responsibility to infiltrate underground groups. To weed out agitators. And exterminate if necessary.

Mueller cut a solitary figure on the frozen New York pavement. A hand still raised as Braun’s convoy speed away...

Chapter 15

The motorcade made its way back to the aging One World Trade Centre.

Large blood red banners hung down either side of entrance fluttering in the growing morning breeze. The insidious emblem of the Order. An ever seeing eye stamped within a central white disc.

Without stopping, the motorcade drove into the basement. Automatic sensors raised security bars and lowered ground spikes. Large roller doors opened as the motorcade navigated deeper into the building's bowels.

Gathering his tablet, Braun made his way to the elevators. Security men in black suits flanked him. Noren was expecting him. He was to brief Braun on the infiltration of the global underground network.

Doors opened on the twenty seventh floor to a spacious open foyer. Recognizing Braun immediately. The receptionist stood to attention, as if a senior officer had entered the room.

The floor a hive of activity. Worried faces carried case files marched to and fro. The office ran twenty-four-seven. Staging a relentless battle, keeping a step ahead of an underground that was growing more sophisticated by the day. High end hackers had recently infiltrated the Order's mainframe. Only to be shutout at the last moment by a sophisticated firewall.

Next time the Order may not be so lucky.

Braun turned and saw the receptionist standing behind her desk.

"Good morning Dorothy." Said Braun welcoming the receptionist by her first name.

"Mister Braun. It is good to see you." The receptionist lied.

Braun's visits always made her uneasy. His visits only spelt something terrible was about to happen.

"You're a little early Mister Braun... Mister Noren wasn't expecting you until 10:00AM. He's just ah...*Interviewing* someone at present." Trying to find an appropriate word.

"I understand completely... I'll just make myself comfortable in his office... And wait there for him shall I?" Suggested Braun, knowing it was

his intent and not an invitation.

“Certainly Mister Braun... May I bring you a coffee?” The receptionist asked.

“I’m good for now thank you Dorothy.” Declined Braun heading towards Noren’s office.

Noren’s office was for all sense and purposes, his office.

Noren worked for the Order. And Braun *was* the Order. Making himself comfortable at the large desk. Perusing the files that laid scattered about its surface.

‘Busy man.’ Thought Braun.

Files stamped with large red lettering indicating interrogation. Or elimination. Noren held the power of life and death over people he thought held divergent views to the Order. He had proven effective in infiltrating subversive groups, before they became more troublesome.

Braun would not meddle with Noren’s files. The secrets within were best kept buried. Along with the bodies. Braun looked about the office. Not too unlike Mueller’s. Though Mueller had a better taste in furnishings. Other than that they were almost identical.

“Hmm.” Sounded Braun reconciling the two.

Swiveling the chair towards the window, looks out over northern Manhattan. Central Park was hidden behind the towering sky scrapers. The old Empire State Building now dwarfed by the surrounding sky scrapers. Braun thought back to the turn of the Century when he was kid growing up in Germany.

Things were a lot simpler then. Since then, advancements in medicine prolonged people’s lives. Cancer had been beaten. As Small Pox had been a century before. The difference between the birth and death rates now widened drastically.

‘Why did we have to interfere?’ Braun thought quietly to himself.

Was what he was about to do much different? Should he be interfering? Perhaps he was simply correcting a wrong. A wrong that should never have happened in the first place. The reconciling thought eased his conscious.

His mind came back as Noren appeared at the door.

“Mister Braun. Welcome... My apologies. I was just *interviewing* someone.” Noren stuttered out seeing Braun sitting at his desk.

Confidential files scattered across it.

“You’re secrets are safe with me Alex...” Declared Braun, dismissing Noren’s concerns. “...Good to see my friend... But it is I who must apologize... I seemed to have arrived a little earlier than anticipated. Just admiring the view... How was the *interview*?” Braun enquired curiously.

“Good intel. Have an informant in one of the cells operating out of Greenwich Village. Something is brewing but we don’t know what... There’s a mysterious gentleman about... Going by the name of *Diablo*. Made visual contact the other day... But we lost him in the traffic. Made off on a bicycle of all things” Noren informs.

“A *bicycle*? Do they still exist?” Braun asked with some surprise as to antiquity of the vehicular contraption.

“Apparently people still use them about the city... You’ve seen the traffic. He’ll show up again. They always do.” Noren added confidently.

“You’re up to date with the riots brewing in Australia?” Braun asked keen to know the status of the crisis unfolding on his tablet.

“Nothing to worry about there... Isolated incident. We’ve detained the leaders. They’re being question as we speak... They won’t be surfacing again.” Advised Noren cryptically.

“Reports of riots in San Palo? ...Argentina... What’s happening in Moscow?” Braun asked wanting to know the extent of emergent disorder.

“From the Intel gathered so far... There is a cell based in the Ukraine... Russia is having trouble tracking them. Their encryption code is advanced. But we’re working on breaking it... They seem to be the ones coordinating these riots worldwide... It’s just a matter of time and we’ll have them.”

“Let’s hope so. Keep on top on it. I want a status reports every week... Find this Ukrainian cell and crush it. I have enough on my plate without global anarchy.”

“Yes Sir.” Said Noren, accepting the lethal directive.

“Saw Mueller this morning... Making very good progress on the Project. Should be completed by end of March.” Braun disclosed.

“Saw him the other day as well... Impressive team they have there.” Noren shared his visit.

“Yes... Quite taken by that *Adison* guy... A bit wet rag though I think ... The Order could use him after the...” Braun searched for the appropriate word, “... *Transition*”.

“May I be so bold to enquire as to whether the *Lists of the Chosen* have been compiled yet?” Noren asked hesitantly knowing it was not of his place to ask.

“I’m meeting with the heads of the American Families this afternoon to discuss this... Their people no doubt have started collating a list of names. Besides... All this might amount to naught if Patmos doesn’t sign it off...” Braun expressed doubtful concern. “...But we must be ready once he does.”

“Oh I see.” Said Noren feeling left in limbo as to his own safety.

“Ah... Don’t worry Alex. I have my own list too and your name is at the top. I can’t afford to lose a man like you”. Braun added with a chuckle and grin, having strung Noren along for so long.

“Thank you Sir... That is good to know.” A relieved Noren added.

“Well I better be off. I just wanted catch up and see how you were doing... I have lunch with the seven Families Uptown. Then we’re into meetings all afternoon to discuss logistics to release of the virus by the sixth of June.” Braun admitted to Noren, now safe from being eliminated.

“Why then?” asked Noren inquisitively.

“It just seemed an appropriate date ... Almost destiny ... Don’t you see? The sum of the digits. The sixth of the sixth of the sixth.” Braun tried to explain the dark comedy of the numerology.

“Oh... I see now. Yes. Very appropriate...” Said Noren now comprehending the demonic sequence. “...Very clever indeed”.

“I thought so... Right, like I say I better be off and let the *Bogeyman* get on with his investigations.” Braun was aware of Noren’s nickname and was not afraid to use it.

Braun stood and shook hands with Noren who stood to face him across his desk.

“I’ll keep you posted and see what I can find out about this *Diablo*... I don’t think it will amount to much. He’s seems to be involved in an apocalyptic cult... Sounds like we should be recruiting him.” Noren added with little laugh.

“Make sure you *interview* him before you hire him Alex.” Seeing the funny side to the recruitment, “... I want weekly reports Alex. *No bad news*.” Braun iterated walking away.

Noren raised his hand to wish Braun farewell.

But the gesture went unnoticed much as Mueller's had. And the elevator doors closed behind Braun...

Chapter 16

Security men flanked the elevator doors either side.

Waiting for the package to return. Four brawly guards in black suits and sunglasses walked in unison with Braun. Two ahead and two behind. Shielding him from potential attackers. The limousine's door opened and Braun resumed his position in the back seat.

His thoughts now tuned to the seven Families of the Americas. Powerful industrial dynasties that had help shape the world after the United Nations had collapsed. Their economic influence coming at the price of global power.

And Global Authority.

They would no longer risk their wealth in the hands of incompetent politicians. Amounting to no more than civil servants. Lacking any business acumen. Lacking royal dynastic blood.

The motorcade travelled north along Broadway towards a towering glass edifice piecing the grey blanketed sky.

Over a hundred and fifty stories high, it overlooked Central Park which for the time being, was still sanctioned as a Natural Reserve. Looking idyllic. Its parklands covered with a blanket of snow. The Order's red banners hung heavily from above the entrance.

'Impressive building', Thought Braun.

The power within was even more impressive. His position as Secretary of State gave him immense power. He had nothing to fear from the intimidating people that had gathered to meet him today. They feared him. More than he feared them.

On entering the large golden marble foyer the security that had flanked him soon dissipated to the sides. Watching as the Package conducted affairs of state. Aging old men. Propped up with medication and oxygen bottles. And young trophy wives.

Each came forward to greet Braun in turn. Bowing as the best they could to the Secretary of State. Offering their hands to the great man

before them. Old family names that had survived innumerable financial crashes.

Only to come out stronger than before.

Some by being shrewd or manipulative. Some having orchestrated the collapse in their favor. It was not personal. It was just good business. Buying from those that could not afford to hold any longer. Pressuring others to sell low. Controlling banks. Manipulating stock markets. They were simply brokers. Punching a ticket on someone else's poor judgement.

The American dream was dead. And the only dream left was survival.

Braun had informed the Families of his *proposal* months before he had Patmos. It was not beyond Braun to act without Patmos' knowledge. Braun was answerable only to himself. And had done some for years. Patmos was a figure head to the Order. A puppet in Braun's eyes. Sitting at his desk in Geneva assuming control over global affairs. Knowing very little of the realities of what it took to run the organization.

Braun had made built *relationships* among the G7 Families. Thinking it only a courtesy that they should be kept informed of pending opportunities. Initial discussions had proven favorable. And Braun ventured deeper down the apocalyptic rabbit hole. Soon he was nearing a point at which there would be no return.

An event horizon.

Rather than talking about it. The Families would soon grow impatient and demand the correction take place. Growing riots had disrupted the status quo. Growing social disorder had culminated in civil disobedience. This could not be tolerated much longer by the Families. They wanted tougher measures.

And Braun had the measure they desired.

Formal introductions concluded, and it was time to gather in the large meeting hall on the penthouse floor.

An illustrious room. With a magnificent elongated mahogany wooden table running almost the entire length. Braun assumed his position at the head of the table. A large black leather chair affording more comfort than the lesser chairs that surrounded the table. Each of the seven families took their respective positions carefully shielding their dossiers from prying eyes.

“Ladies... And *Gentlemen*... Welcome to this special gathering... You all have been informed of its purpose.” Braun allowed the introduction resonate off the polished surroundings. It had been a while since he had last spoken here and rekindled his relationship with the room’s unique acoustics. Heads bowed in unison to his presence and nature of the meeting, “... Let us begin.”

Accentuating the negative, Braun outlined the extent of the global riots. Before discussing the progress being made towards the vaccine.

“I hope you all have your lists ready by the end of March. At that time, the inoculations will take place.”

More heads bowed up and down in agreeance.

“Are there any questions?” Braun surveyed the table for hands.

There was a deafened silence in the room. Then an elderly gentleman raised his hand to gain Braun’s attention.

“Yes Senior Astor... You have a question?” Braun asked of his old friend.

“The bodies... What will happen to all the...” Then thinking of the innumerable dead, “... The bodies?”

And a series of nods motioned about the table.

“A very good question... I should have elaborated earlier... My apologies... Specialized mobile teams with fusion incinerators will be assigned to each major city... Hospitals will be equipped to handle the larger *capacity*...” Braun explained as though it was production line. “... We expect the whole clean-up operation to take less than... A month”.

Another a series of nods motioned about the table.

“Are you sure the vaccine will work?” Queried a concerned voice at the table.

Heads turned quickly back to Braun who sat relaxed in his chair looking about the aging faces staring back at him.

“We will conduct trials... But I am confident it will... We have the world’s best working on it... We will not begin inoculation until it has been thoroughly tested. And we are absolutely certain it works.” Braun admitted to the nodding heads.

“What of Patmos? Is he closer to making a decision?” Queries a voice from another quarter back to Braun, listening with intent.

“I am confident Chairman Patmos will see this is the only solution possible... And that with your encouragement he will sanction the

resolution I have proposed to him.” Braun admitted the grand scheme as being his, and his alone.

The Families would not have blood on their hands. Nor guilt on their conscious. There was another series of nods in admirable agreeance with Braun’s ability to do the job.

“I think Ladies and Gentleman, you can appreciate this a great opportunity for us all to begin again. In a world less cluttered... Purged of the *undesirables*. A new world built on your wealth and experience. Leading a new populous into a new age... People will look back and thank us for our courage to save the human race and this planet we call Earth.” Braun projected his voice.

The acoustics of the room provided the amplification. A rousing applause erupted and the meeting was adjourned. It had been a long day for Braun. He wanted to get back to his apartment. Not only to rest. But also to check on Nero whose late arrival home this morning had left him on edge. Braun had accepted his son’s youthful energy. But he did not accept his choice of friends.

One in particular, Hector Hades.

Braun had gotten Noren to investigate Hades. Only to come back with profile very little different to Nero’s description of him. Someone who likes to party and an appetite for drugs. Drugs spelt trouble in Braun’s books. Drugs were the social stimulant of the young. Braun could not understand why. Providing a temporal escape from the perpetual reality. Braun only dealt with realities.

Life was difficult enough without drugs.

It was getting late and Braun wanted to catch Nero before he headed out again.

The motorcade headed down Broadway. Only to be delayed by congested evening traffic. A voice command lowered the tinted glass barrier between the driver and himself.

“Alternative level thanks Barry.” Advised Braun to his driver.

The glass barrier slowly raised. And with it, the motorcade rose several levels above the stalled traffic. Then sped on their unimpeded way.

There were benefits to being an Executive of the Order...

Chapter 17

Braun arrived in time to catch his son preparing to leave for another night on the town.

Nero stood grooming himself in front of the large mirror. Impeccably dressed and admiring himself. His mind now alert after twelve hours of sleep. A stiff drink with ice rested on the bench to calm any residual nerves. Bloodshot eyes had recovered. Though his nostrils still twitched in anticipation of the night's entertainment. Or the previous evening's abuse.

"Going out again son?" Asked his father, feeling tired after a day of intense meetings.

"Yeah... Want to catch up with Hector again. Only in town a few days... Would be shame to miss him." Said Nero, hoping there would be little resistance to his plans.

"That's Hector Hades?" Braun asked his son.

"That's right. Do you know him?" Nero asked with some surprise his father would know of him.

"It's my job to know everyone Nero... Just be careful around him okay. I don't want to be having to bailing you out again of another misdemeanor. Understood?" He advised his son.

Knowing Nero could handle himself. He would allow him some discretion. It was good to have such friends. Sometimes they can become useful when called upon.

"Understood Sir... Thank you Sir." Said Nero confirming his father's orders. Knowing he had been given a leave pass for the evening.

"How'd you get on last night? ... You get lucky?" Braun teased his son.

"Nah... We ended up at a classy club in Midtown then crashed back at Hector's place."

"Well don't be too late tonight... I'm heading back to Geneva tomorrow to meet with Patmos. You coming or staying?" Braun asked.

"I wouldn't mind sticking around here a few more days. It's been a while since I've been in New York. I could do with a change from Geneva." Nero proposed. Hoping to have the leash lengthen a little longer.

“I suppose you’re right... Geneva could do with a break as well... Let matters settle down over there while you’re away.” Said Braun was starting to see logic to Nero’s plan to stay.

He had served his parental parole period. Maybe it was time to give him some freedom.

‘What could be worse than shooting a bouncer?’ Braun thought.

“Thanks Dad...” Nero called out from a distance. “...Don’t wait up.”

“Oh you can rest assured... I won’t” Declared his father, taking a seat in the large arm chair and reclined his head back.

A glass of single malt rocked in his hand. A large single ice cube rattling against the sides.

“I won’t.” Braun repeated.

If only to assure himself he would not. He grinned at the insalubrious mischief Nero would get up to that evening. Himself having long since lost the youthful urge and energy.

The room was dark. And Braun dozed off in the chair. An empty glass on the side table beside him. With only the faint speckled lights of the sky scrapers outside illuminating the room. Nero had departed somewhere between two of the intermittent snores. A security guard outside the door acknowledged his departure as he entered the private elevator to the lobby.

Hector sat waiting at the bar.

Looking more nervous than the night before. Twitching involuntarily. Pupils already dilating after a recent hit of Candy sprinkled with Little-brother. His anxieties still on edge after Paige’s death. Her rapid dumping in *his* garbage shoot had troubled him. Usually indifferent to death. On this occasion it had become personal. It had occurred in his apartment. Now realizing how much he had implicated himself.

His bed sheet. His dumpster. His drugs.

There would be guilt by association. Nero would be implicated. And Hector wondered how far Nero’s father’s influence and protection extended. Would Nero walk free? And Hector be the patsy?

Tonight he would drink to forget.

Nero’s little black card would ensure a good time. The golden goose was not looking so golden. If he fell, he would be taking Nero with him.

“Hector. You okay? You look beat.” Nero asked, surprising him at the bar.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here... These cameras are not good for my complexion.” Hector cringed becoming paranoid.

The more he looked. The more he thought the cameras were watching him.

“Don’t go Section on me now... Have a drink here first... Just one.” Trying to calm him sensing a panic attack.

And ordered two very dirty martini’s to annul Hector’s fears.

Hector skulled the first and quickly ordered another. Nero sat with ease at the bar. Eyeing the ladies. Married and single as they walked pass. Having stayed at the apartment on several occasions. And picked up women who sort company of a younger man. Only too willing to accommodate their needs. To satisfy their sexual appetites. Often with more than one at the same time.

Tonight the ladies would need to wait. Tonight his attention would be given to Hector. Nero intended to paint the town pink. And Hector had just the powder to do it.

“Finish up and let’s get going. I’m keen to check out that joint again.” Nero advised Hector of his plans.

“We can’t go back there man!” Hector pleaded reluctantly.

“Mate... You’ve done nothing wrong okay... We have to act normal. They won’t find her... And if they do... All they’ll find is a dead junkie... Okay? ...” Nero tried to excise Hector’s demons, “...You’re with me mate. Now let’s get going.” Gently tugging at Hector’s arm to follow.

Pulling on the overcoats and walked outside.

Another dismissal cold evening welcomed them. Nomadic snow drifts settled on anything that stood stationary for too long. Pulling up there collars. Breaths frosting before them. Hailing a cab, one pulled to the curb.

And they quickly climbed in.

“Midtown... Rudi’s!” Nero called out confidently to the driver who knew the location.

Driving north. And taking whatever streets that were not congested with traffic. Nero looked over to see Hector rocking his head to a musical beat playing through his ear plugs.

“Might get lucky tonight mate.” said Nero.

Hector was deafened by the music screaming between his ears and the chaos of lights and people outside his window. The cab pulled up outside

Rudi's. Nero wave his magic black card over the meter and the cab guided away to be consumed by the traffic. The two young men adjusted their warm overcoats, as the brisk arctic breeze brutally slapped their faces.

"Hurry up man... It's freezing out here." Pleaded Hector keen to get inside.

Two large black marble bouncers stood frozen looking down upon them as they entered the foyer.

No words were required this time by Nero. Matthias grin still burnt on his memory from the night before. Nero avoided eye contact. Dispensing their overcoats they headed to the restroom.

Hector pulled the pink bag from his side pocket and served a line for Nero to snort. His face contorted with the assault of the drug on his neuro-pathways. Sending his mind into overdrive. And his imagination into another land. Wonderland.

Sparks of colored lights flashed though his mind. Time slowed down. The room became an extension of his body. Nero's body was no longer his own. It was as though he had been abducted and was being pleurably probed by aliens.

And smiled at the thought.

Hector took the remaining line. Adding a pinch of Little-Brother. The effect was opposite for him. He was returning to planet earth. Rekindling his senses to normal. Fear and anxiety had left him. Taking another snort, wiping a finger under his nose to relieve the irritation. Satisfied he had had his measure.

Nero took a little longer to collect himself, before finally came about. Leaving the cubicle they composed themselves in the mirrors. Confident they had regained enough of their senses to walk a straight line. Or so they thought. Heading for the bar. Nero would ensure their routine was the same as the night before.

Nothing must seem amiss.

Ladies approached them. Attracted like flies to rotting meat. Sharing banter with the men before moving on. Money was no object. Hector basked in the attention. Several rounds later they made their way through the heavy plum curtains into a darkened room of hushed silence. The silence suggested something, or someone important, was about to happen.

Then she appeared. An old classic from the previous century began to play. *Lady in Red*. The patrons never tired of it. They only wanted more. Chelsea danced gracefully to the romantic ballad as if the song had been written for her body. No man, or women, could deny her that. It was Nero's turn now to be transfixed with the dancer before him. Hector sat numb beside him. His mind distracted somewhere beyond the stage. Nero was held captive by the alluring creature moving about before him. The audience was completely silent unlike with the others.

'This woman is obviously someone special.' He thought.

The finale came and he was not disappointed. He would reward her well should she venture to his table.

Tonight Kristina felt a little uneasy. Her intuition told her something was wrong. Sarah had failed to appear as scheduled. And though it was not uncommon for the girls to sleep with clientele and miss a performance. She knew the dark side of her profession. Feeling an obligation to protect the girls from perps who thought they could take advantage of them.

A strange feeling came over her as she approached the two gentlemen she had not met before. As though a ghost had crept insidiously into her soul. Whispering, *'be careful'*. A chill crept over her body.

"Gentlemen... I don't think I've had the pleasure. I hope you enjoyed the show? I'm Chelsea." She introduced herself to Nero.

"Excuse my friend... He's a little away with the fairies... If you know what I mean. And yes ... We did enjoy the performance... You were..." pausing to find the word, "...Astonishing." Nero added and he slipped two one hundred bills into Kristina's hand.

"Why thank you... That is most gracious of you... I didn't catch your name" Kristina asked keenly.

"My apologies... I'm Nero and this mellowed gentleman beside me is... Hector."

Hector again raised hand. The Little-brother had taken Hector down a dark hole from which he was struggling to crawl out of. Moving colored lights only adding to his confusion.

"I hope to see you again boys... Enjoy the show." Said Kristina keen to move onto another table.

"Stay for a drink. I am sure the other tables can wait a little longer." Encouraged Nero her.

Kristina hesitated. The unease she had felt earlier had grown stronger. But Nero had money.

'It would not hurt to help him part it.' She thought.

She knew Seth would be watching from his corner. He could wait a few moments more.

"Why thank you... I'd appreciate that." Kristina waved to a waitress. "...Three of whatever these gentlemen are drinking." Taking a seat before Nero who was eyeing her over. "...First time here?" She asked curiously.

"Second time actually." Nero replied leaving it there.

"Oh... Must have been away that evening... Welcome back. I hope to see more of you... You from around here?" Kristina asked hoping to know more about the pair.

"Out of town actually... Geneva. Just in town for a yesterday... Catch up with my good friend Hector here... He was the one who introduced me to your fine *establishment*." Nero explained.

"I thought Hector looked familiar." Said Kristina.

The drinks arrived and Kristina took a sip of the green cocktail. Her face twisted with the strength.

"Whoa! ... What is this drink?" Asked Kristina gasping with the strong taste.

She had many drinks over the years, but never one like this.

"A special cocktail involving Absinthe... The little green fairy. It would pay not to have too many of these if you've not had them before." Advised Nero.

"But they are Hector's favorites... So when in Rome ..." Nero dispensed the cliché.

"I can understand why. I'll make a note... Well gentlemen ... I must be going. A girl has to make a living... I hope I'll be seeing you again Mister Nero, and Mister ... *Hector*."

With those words she bid the two reclined gentlemen farewell. And slipped into the darkness behind them. Kristina came to the one table she hope to catch that evening. But it was empty. She stared at the empty chair. An unfinished drink sat on the table.

'Had he been here?' Kristina wondered.

"You looking for me?" A voiced surprised her from behind.

Seth towered over her petite frame before taking his seat and resuming his drink.

“Was just passing.” She added struggling to find the right words.

“Just went to... Powder my nose. So to speak.” Seth replied cryptically.

“Well... I see it’s well powdered... Did you catch the show?”

“I never miss it... It’s one of the reasons I come here” Seth added to the other reason.

“You seem to have a lot of reasons for coming here” Kristina played along.

“Just two so far... If my math is correct.” Corrected Seth. And his math was never wrong.

He was pleased to see Kristina again. Having missed her the evening before. The irritation was becoming an intolerable. And it needed scratching.

“You okay? You seem not yourself tonight.” Seth asked intuitively.

“That’s very observant of you Seth...” Catching her off guard.

“One of the girls... Paige... I introduced the other night ... She hasn’t shown tonight...” Wondering if she had said too much to a person she barely knew, “... Sorry. I shouldn’t trouble with this.” Worried she was dragging Seth into her worries, gathered her professional demeanor added, “... I hope you enjoyed the show.”

“You’ve already said that.” Seth lied.

“Did I?” Responded Kristina confused.

“Well actually... No. But something is troubling you... Have a seat.” Seth encouraged Kristina to sit beside him, offering his glass to her.

“Thanks.” Kristina accepted the drink to wash to the taste of Absinthe from her mouth.

Looking at her was making him feel awkward for a reason he could not explain.

“I saw her here last night... She left with those two gentlemen you were just talking to.”

“Did she now?” Kristina asked curiously.

She looked into Seth’s eyes trying to connect. But nothing came. There was something mysterious about them. She could not tell the color from the darkness in the room. Her own eyes shone like green crystals with the flicker of the candle light.

Kristina turned about and looked at the two gentlemen again. Sarah always enjoyed a good time. Though while it was not Kristina’s scene.

Sarah was also known to enjoy certain substances. Hector was strung out something more than the green fairy. And Nero was not too far behind.

“Thanks for the heads up. I owe you one.” Offered Kristina getting to her feet.

“You owe me nothing Chelsea. Just happy to help... I hope you find her. You know where to find me.” Said Seth readying himself to leave.

“Thanks Seth.” Said Kristina, moving on to engage with the next table. And looking back at the two suspicious gentlemen.

Hector had animated himself back to life and becoming more vocal. She would give them the benefit of the doubt for now. And await Sarah’s return. It was not the first time Sarah had missed a curtain call. Though this time she had an eerie feeling about it.

Kristina dismissed the thought and made her way to the cashier to deposit her takings for the routine. A tidy sum thanks to Nero’s gratification. She took one last lance at the pair. Profiling their faces for reference.

About to deposit her takings with the cashier she suddenly hesitates. Deciding at the last moment not to deposit one of the hundred dollar bills Nero had given her. Instead, she asked for a small plastic bag. And carefully slipped it inside. She would scan it prints and find out who this *Nero* gentleman *really* was.

If he had a record. And any known associates by the name of *Hector*.

Before disappearing back stage to the warmth of the changing room.

Kristina turned and looked over to Seth’s table. But he had left. An emptiness filled her. A void. Something inside her ached. This mysterious man was pulling her into his world. Until now, it was always her who was in control. She shook herself and brought herself back to the present.

She had rules.

‘*You don’t fall in love with the Johns.*’ She told herself...

Chapter 18

The ices of January and winter had sunk its teeth into New York's frozen flesh.

Icy tentacles reached into people's homes, over coats and pockets in search of warmth to steal. The homeless lay dying on the streets. Frozen stiff. Only to wake up dead. Not even Wall Street could not escape the brutal burial rights. Stocks were left frozen. The blizzard would keep anything that moved at home.

All but Seth.

His flight to Wales was scheduled to leave that morning. Wearing several layers for insulation, waited patiently for the company Limousine to arrive. It was to take him to Newark Airport in New Jersey. Pacing to and fro trying to keep moving. Before he too seized up like the homeless outside his door.

The Limousine arrived and he climbed quickly to enter it. Eluding the icy tentacles grappling at his heels. Strong winds funneled between the towering super structures. Buffeting the vehicle as it moved along the barren streets. Stabilizers dampened much of the beating. But the vehicle did not escape unscathed. And he wondered what the flight to Wales would be as bad.

He was being sent to the Welsh secret facility to retrieve samples of the Order's deadly plague. First in part for vaccine research. But also to be used in trials on human subjects. Condemned prisoners who had *volunteered* in exchange for their sentences to be commuted, from death to life.

His task to liaise with the Welsh team handling the pathogens. And return with samples of the parent cultures back to New York. To ensure the keys his team were identifying fitted the pathogen's locks.

Arriving at Newark, the Limousine pulled inside the Order's private hangar.

A corporate shuttle sat hovering. Awaiting Seth's arrival. The Limousine doors hinged open and Seth stepped out into the fog of the morning air. Dim light filtered through the open hangar doors as the morning sunlight struggled to pierce thick cloud of fog outside.

"Morning Mister Adison. This way please..." Greeted an Agency man dressed in a dark suit.

Gesturing for him to enter the craft. Seth took his seat and felt the immediate coziness of the interior. His cheeks regaining a sensation of warmth.

"We'll be taking off very shortly Mister Adison. There be some turbulence as to be expected. But we'll do our best to minimize it... Flight should take just under two hours... If there is anything need please press that button." The attractive blonde hostess indicated a small overhead button.

He smiled and acknowledged the instructions. Making himself comfortable, looked about the cabin familiarizing himself with its dimensions. The man in the dark suit sat one seat back. No doubt to keep an eye on him. Seth was the package to be protected. And the man in the dark suit was a minder. Seth was vital to the Order's plans and he knew this. There was no one else in the world capable of doing the research he was doing at Black Crow Pharmaceutical.

He immersed himself in the satisfying thought and grinned. More so that the agency knew nothing of his own research.

The craft glided sideways from of the hangar before heading towards a runway assigned to corporate shuttles. Feeling himself being pushed into his seat as the craft steadily accelerated. Rising above the turbulent cloud cover before breaking through to a deep blue sky. Straining eyes as strong beams of sunlight pierced through the cabin windows. The craft climbed higher, and the sky changed color from blue to turquoise. And then gradually to a blue-black. Seth thought he could make out several faint stars. An unease came upon his stomach as he felt the effects of sub-gravity.

"Would you like a drink Sir?" The hostess asked politely.

Looking about as if to seek someone's approval. Seeing only the man in the dark suit. Seth looked back at the hostess.

"A whiskey perhaps?" He asks hesitantly.

"Certainly Mister Adison. One moment please."

A few moments later the hostess returns with a tumbler of single malt. A large cube of ice rattles against the sides of the glass.

“Thank you.” Accepting the drink.

Taking a satisfying sip and inhaling its subtle earthy characters.

“Very nice. Thank you.”

Relining back, Seth contemplated what was installed for him at the top secret Welsh Facility.

He had rarely travelled during his brief life. Having spent much of his time in study and research. This would be his first and only trip to the United Kingdom. Held together in part by an ancient British Monarchy. King George VII currently ruled. Having ascended the throne from his father King William V who had stepped aside for the more popular son.

The British were a strange lot thought Seth. A dogged nation that had once ruled three quarters of the globe. Over an empire on which the sun never set. He had to admire them for their stubbornness. And sheer determination to survive. Having survived the black plague centuries before. But not even they would withstand what was about to be thrown at them.

For no reason. Seth’s mind drifted to Rudi’s. He wondered if Kristina was working that evening. If Paige had returned. The whiskey had dulled him his sense of time that had passed unnoticed. Peering out the window he viewed a colored blue and white marble below. The marble looked dirty and chipped. Scarred and bruised. Black and blue bruises appeared among the towering Cumulonimbus clouds. Evidence of man’s continue indifference to nature. And himself. Like clotted arterial veins, dirty brown rivers leached their poisons into the brown-green oceans.

Man’s abuse had finally caught up with him.

The earth’s climate had vomited its distaste. Sea levels rose. Island nations swamped and ceased to exist. The world became smaller by the day. Squeezing man closer together. As though to squeeze man from the surface of the earth. Destructive cyclones became more frequent. More intense. Unleashing their scorn upon man who hid in shame.

And refused to change his ways.

His eyes detected the subtle variation in light as the shuttle descended.

Changing gradually in color from black to dark blue to deep sky blue. He could see clouds some distance below. The country side lit green with

the mid afternoon sun. Winter had been kind to Wales. Seth could see a glacial pitted landscape. There was a harshness about the place, an ancient scarring that had not healed.

Snow covered the lowlands in the distance.

The craft angled itself for a landing. Making out the airfield, he readied himself. Losing forward momentum, the craft descended slowly before gliding to the front of hangar doors. Wheels extended to cushion the landing.

Inside the hangar another black limousine awaited him.

Shuttle and limousine doors opened simultaneously. As if they had talked to each other. Reaching for his satchel and carry bag, Seth steps onto Welsh soil for the first time. He feels the bite of the Welsh breeze slap his face.

'Welcome to Wales'. It whispered to him.

Stepping inside the limousine. The man in the dark suit sits opposite. Seth suspects his chaperon would be lost once they arrived at the Welsh Facility. A laboratory full of nasty pathogens was not a place for men in dark suits. Gradually the limousine moved from the hangar and made its way along a narrow country road. Heavy forested woods bordered both sides.

Seth peered out the window and thought what he saw was a drone. Then another. They must be close he thought.

"Hornets..." The man spoke. "...Armed surveillance drones... Don't mess with them and they won't mess with you. Don't run ... They shot to kill." He advised in a cold voice.

"Thanks for the heads up." Said Seth.

"Nothing moves without being detected. Don't run. They will ..." But before the man could finish.

"Will shoot to kill... I've got it." Seth completed the warning.

"That's right. We're almost there."

The limousine slowed and pulled along-side a control booth manned by armed guards.

A patch displaying a black crow on white uniforms. White sunglasses concealed eyes. Only frozen breaths through white scarfs gave any sign of life behind them. The limousine's tinted window opened and the man passed a document from his vest pocket. The guard inspected the interior

of the limousine for the allotted person stated on the document. Scrutinizing Seth and the document in his hand. Passing the document back to the man, along with an additional item.

Tinted window raised slowly as large iron gates ahead opened to allow them through. More guards could be seen standing nearby. Shuffling their feet in the frozen ground. Large menacing dogs, possibly wolves, pulled at their chains. Sensing Seth's presence. Hornets circled above as the limousine edged towards a large white facility that was looming closer.

Pulling beside the steps to the ominous white facility.

Armed guards stood either side of the entrance. Watching the vehicle. Fingers at the ready on heavy automatic weapons. Stark black crows silhouetted snow white jackets and berets. The man in the dark suit passed the item he had received from the guard to Seth.

"Put this on... Don't go anywhere without it on. It has a RFID... The Hornets can read it. All your movements about the facility here can be tracked... *We* will know exactly where you are every second of the day." He warned Seth.

The man looked to the sky wondering if the card had been activated to avoid an *incident*. Seth examined the playing card sized pale blue identification card.

'*Primitive*' he thought. Having designed more advanced prototypes himself whilst at Harvard.

A holographic image of himself appeared in the corner. Gold circuitry appeared in the opposite corner. Name, rank displayed in the remaining corners. Clipping the card to his lapel. The limousine door of opened. Seth peered outside hesitantly. Wary of the armed guards and hornets hovering suspiciously above. Stepping on to Welsh soil for a second time stretched his stiff joints. Throwing the satchel over his shoulder, looks about to get his bearings.

The man in dark suit remained seated in the limousine. He had delivered the package. It was now over to the Facility to take ownership. The door closes and the vehicle drives unhurriedly away. Leaving Seth on his own. He watches it disappear from sight.

Looking about as though expecting someone to welcome him. There was no one.

He looked up at the entrance and the two heavily armed guards looking down at him. Watching his every move. Hesitantly Seth climbs the steps. Hearing the incessant buzz of drones above and behind him. Sensing his presence. Eager to discharge their lethal sting.

Standing motionless before the large white doors. Red scanners scour him for weapons and identification.

Then the large white doors opened...

Chapter 19

Kristina killed the alarm on the bed side table.

Cindy stirred briefly and rolled over. Pulling at the blanket that covered Kristina's naked body and exposing her to the chill of the early morning in the air. Forcing herself to sit upright, stared at the darkened window. Duty called. Cindy reaches out to keep her from leaving. Her hand unable to grasp a hold and it falls helplessly onto the bed.

Stepping into the steaming shower, Kristina allows the heated water ran over her body. Revitalizing her senses. Resurrecting her to life. Dressing, she assumes the role of detective for another day. Returning to the bedside reaches over to Cindy. Kissing her closed eyes softly. Cindy stirs and pulls at Kristina's pillow before folding her arms around it.

Kristina smiles watching her cradle the feathery substitute.

"Sweet dreams Cindy." Kristina whispered before leaving her to continue sleeping.

They would often share a bed on cold winter nights when Tony did not return home from an upstate decorating assignment. No doubt, cradling someone else's pillow.

Worland was already at his desk when she reached the Precinct.

Her own desk unchanged from the day before.

"Coffee!" She orders Worland, who jumps to fetch a cup to satisfy her craving.

Returning with the steaming drink he places it beside her.

"This came in last night." Advised Worland placing an analysis report in front of her.

"Where you find it?" Worland asks curiously.

"Just found it" said Kristina, suggesting no further questions were warranted.

She examines the report closely. Forensics had analyzed Nero's hundred dollar bill she had been given as a tip.

“That’s the guy alright”. She said recognizing the image of Nero showing on the report.

What she read next was surreal.

“You’re kidding me? ...” She said to herself. “...What the fuck?” As she continued to be amazed at the discovery. Nero’s profile revealed him to be the son of Augustus Braun. The Order’s Secretary of State.

‘*What the hell was he doing at Rudi’s?*’ She thought to herself.

She continued to read. Traces of K9 were found on the note.

“He only came up on the search because of a *misdemeanor*...” Worland began to explain. “... Apparently he *accidentally* shoot a bouncer at a bar in Geneva and they slapped him with a warning... But not before they took his prints.”

“They must have soft laws over there.” Responded Kristina trying to reconcile why the case would be dismissed.

Knowing the charges would have been dropped with his father’s connections.

“I’m surprised we got this much with his father’s connections.” She adds.

“What’s the interest in this guy boss?” Worland asked curiously hoping it was lead to follow up.

“Nothing at this stage... Just curious.” Kristina left it there.

Not wanting to involve Worland any further than she had already. Rudi’s would remind a secret for another day.

“He’s in Geneva at present... Happy to go there and question him.” Worland suggested hoping for a European excursion.

“Nice try... But not on our budget you won’t.” Scoffed Kristina.

Filing the report in a red jacket with no identifying labels. Her mind drifted back to the evening she last saw Nero and his friend Hector.

‘*Hector who?*’ She wondered.

Nero Braun was in Geneva and easy to find. But where was Hector? Assuming Nero was visiting New York then Hector would have to live here. Assuming he had not travelled with him from Geneva. Then she had an insane idea. It was long shot, and would be a long list. But for Sarah it was worth it.

“Worland... Run me a list of all know New York criminals... First name *Hector*. Fair hair. Twenty-five to thirty-five!”

“You serious boss? ... That could be thousands?” Worland’s mind extrapolated the possibilities.

“Just do it... I want it on my desk by noon!” Kristina ordered.

“What case do I quote on the search?”

“Any case will do for now... Use your imagination.” She tells him.

“Yes boss.” Worland disappeared his behind his computer screen to initiate the massive search.

Kristina sat back and enjoyed her coffee.

‘Mister Nero Braun... What were you doing in New York? Come to play under daddy’s protection did you? ... We’ll see.’ Her mind began to question.

Waiting for Worland to return with the listing, she flicked through the case files of Boris Beckett and the John Doe found up state. What joined these two? Revisiting the surveillance tapes showed nothing more than the first time. Enhancing the magnification reveled even less.

K9 was the drug of choice on the streets.

‘Who was supplying it now, now that two bakers had been killed off?’ Thoughts crisscrossed Kristina’s mind, always coming to blank conclusions.

The phone rang abruptly. Bringing her mind back to her desk and the chaotic noise of the precinct.

“Detective Tepes.” She coldly responded.

She listened intently to the dispatches report.

“Can’t one of the other detective handle this? ... Jersey’s not my patch.” She protested hoping to pass it on.

Then she listened intently as dispatch described the crime scene.

“I see... White female... *Red hair*... Twenty to thirty.” Iterating the details.

Catching Kristina’s attention and she froze in hope of disbelief. Scribbling down the details in her pad.

“I’ll be there within the hour!” She said replacing the receiver.

Wishful thoughts of denial ran through her mind.

“What’s up boss? We going somewhere?” Worland asked keenly to get out of the office.

“Nothing... You stay here and run that list... I need to go somewhere.” Grabbing her coat and heading towards the Precinct doors.

“Please don’t let it be her.” Kristina asks an unseen God.

Climbing into the first available squad car she accelerates towards New Jersey.

Lights flashing and sirens blaring. As though Sarah's life depended on it. This was out of her precinct. But records showed the deceased had resided in Midtown. Where Sarah lived.

'What was she doing in New Jersey? ... What was she doing at a recycling plant?' Kristina asked herself.

"Please don't let it be her." Kristina prayed again.

Frustratingly slow traffic hampered her efforts to get to the plant.

Fearing blue collars would be trampling over the crime scene. Pulling the vehicle to a screaming halt. Raising dust and metal with the sudden breaking. Officers looked over to see who had arrived with sirens screaming. One or two thought they recognized Kristina. Her badge hanging around her neck gave her away as a NYPD. She was on Jersey turf now. But still out ranked the officers that had gathered at the scene.

"Over here." A blue collar indicated.

A forensic team had gathered about a body laying contorted like a broken doll. Limbs protruding from a pile of rubbish. The chill of the winter air stifled the putrid smell of the decomposing flesh.

"Kristina? ..." Asked the Forensic lead, "...What are you doing here?"

"Not sure yet... Just got a call... Thought I'd pop by ... What you find out?"

"The operator noticed something unusual sticking out of the pile of rubbish... Went to get a closer look and found this..." Looking at the extended white arm.

Fingers reaching out into space as if to signal for help.

"Prints match a Sarah Alysha Albright... Twenty-three. Minor drug possessions. Last known address Midtown... Seems the recent freeze has delayed any decay. Initial scans reveal a she OD'd on a synthetic drug called Little-brother... She had also consumed K9 beforehand. She appears to have been wrapped up in a brown bed sheet and thrown in a dumpster before ending up here... That's all we know at this stage until we get her to the lab." The Forensic Lead regurgitated the findings.

Male officers were gathered around to get a look at Sarah's naked body.

"Okay officers... Enough of the peak show... Back to your stations! ... Give the lady a little decency!" She warned the blue collars.

Her eyes foretelling a fire and fury if they did not.

“Run the tests and keep me posted okay?” Kristina asked knowing it was not her patch.

“Will do... You got an interest in this one?” Asked the forensic lead.

“This one is personal... Look after her.” Said Kristina as she walked to the squad car.

Not wanting to look back at Sarah’s pale twisted body.

Suddenly Nero and Hector became *persons of interest*.

Kristina was hoping Worland had compiled a list by the time she had returned. She phoned him nonetheless from the squad car.

“Worland? You got that list?” She asked eagerly.

“Working on it... There are thousands of Hectors boss.” Worland pleaded at defense.

“Good... I want the list on screen when I get back.” And she hung up leaving Worland wondering how to create a miracle.

Arriving back in time to see Worland completing the list of names and profiles.

All three and half thousand of them.

“Woman just turned up in Jersey... OD’d on Little-brother... Heard of it?”

“Yeah... But it’s for the heavy weights. Wouldn’t see it on the streets... Why we interested in a Jersey junkie?”

Then Worland realized this was not just a dead junkie. But a friend of Kristina’s.

“Sorry boss.” He apologizes, letting the question slide.

“I’ve got an idea how we can match a face... Leave it to me. I’ll get the tapes this evening.”

“Tapes? ... What tapes?” Asked Worland growing more in the dark than he was before.

“In the meantime... Find out more about that Nero gentleman in Geneva... I want his contact details. We might be making a long distance phone call.”

“Couldn’t we just go visit him?” Said Worland hoping for a junket to Geneva.

“Nice try junior... Get to it.” Worland went back to his computer to continue his search.

“And one more thing.”

“What’s that boss?” Asked Worland keenly for a new assignment.

“Coffee! Now!” Snapped Kristina, frozen to the bone from the New Jersey excursion.

Worland completed the profile search.

Then headed home for the evening. The forensics’ lead had pulled all stops out for Kristina. Coming back with details of Sarah’s toxicology. As initially discovered K9 had been consumed. Followed hours later by Little-brother, the principle cause of death.

“What were you doing snorting Little-brother girl?” Asked Kristina herself trying to understand Sarah’s motives.

That was out of her league.

‘But whose league was it?’ She wondered.

Traces of DNA was found in her mouth and vagina. But these had decayed too extensively to be of any use.

‘DNA was too much to be hoping for.’ Kristina told herself.

For now, she would pin her chances on finding Hector. There had to be a connection between Hector and her disappearance.

11:00PM. Kristina arrived at Rudi’s as usual. Frozen.

But rather than heading to the changing rooms out back. She made her way to Anthony’s office knowing the meeting she was about to have would expose her. This was no time for secrets.

Knocking on the open door she entered. Anthony was at his desk. Head down and going over the accounts. Looking up he is surprised to see Kristina standing there and waved her in. Indicating to take a seat at his desk.

“Hi Chelsea... What’s up?” Anthony asked curiously of his favorite girl.

“Sarah.” Kristina replied in one word.

“Yeah she seems to have disappeared all of a sudden... Do you know where she is?” Anxious to have one of his girls back working for him.

“Yeah... She’s at the city morgue ...” Kristina replied as coldly as the weather. “...I was wondering if I could see the security tapes from the night before she went missing.”

“City Morgue? ...” Anthony questioned, shocked by the news. “... What she doing there? ... I think the cops would come asking for them

soon enough.” Responded Anthony, confused by her interest into something that did not concern her.

Kristina reaches into her bag and pulls out her badge.

“I am the cops.” She declares looking Anthony squarely in the eye.

Anthony sat stunned. His eyes bulged staring at the Badge and Detective ID.

“*Detective?* ...” Anthony spluttered back. “...Am I busted?” He asked anxiously.

“Should I bust you for something Anthony?” She played with him.

Anthony appeared confused. Worried eyes portraying an uncertain nervousness.

Then she released him from the suspense.

“No you’re not busted... *This*, is just a moonlighting job for me... If you know what I mean... The *dancing* that is. Not the detective work.” Though sometimes it was difficult for her to distinguish one from the other.

“Do any of the other girls *know?*” Anthony asked inquisitively.

“Only Cindy... Best it remain *our* little secret.” Kristina suggested.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Our secret. Right.” He quickly agreed.

Looking at Kristina, his mouth open in surprise to have discovered his best dancer was a New York Detective.

“Are you undercover?” He asks curiously.

“No... Like I said... *This* ... Is just moonlighting.”

“You do this for *fun?* ... Well fuck me.”

“You know the going rate Anthony...” Said Kristina leaving it there. “...Now what about those tapes? Think you could find them for me?”

“Yeah sure. No worries. I’ll get them to you before you leave...” Anthony sat shaking his head in disbelief. “...After all these years I never suspected once.”

“Remember... Not a word to anyone... Too many Johns in this place with too many secrets. They find out you have a cop on your books...” Not finishing the sentence, “...If you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, yeah... I know what you mean. The tapes will be ready tonight... I’ll see to it myself personally. Was it someone from here? ... Who took Sarah away?”

“Can’t go into it at stage other than I’m following a lead regarding two certain gentlemen she may... Or may not have left with that evening.”

“Anything else you need you know the door is always open for you.” Offered Anthony.

Kristina stood. Relieved to have told Anthony about her secret life.

Wondering if Seth would be in this evening. She had not seen him in a while. As though he had disappeared as well. He had seen Sarah with Nero and Hector that night she disappeared. What else had he seen?

And why had he too had disappeared so suddenly?

“Best we not break the news to the girls until it is officially announced by the police and next-of-kin have been informed.” Said Kristina assuming her official detective tone.

“Right... I understand... By the way... Are you working tonight?” Anthony called out as she was about to leave. Wondering about her future at Rudi’s.

“Of course... The show must go on Anthony.” Said the playful Chelsea.

Tonight she would dance for Sarah. A dance in membrane to a friend. A lover...

Chapter 20

Detecting Seth's presence, white doors opened.

Walking sheepishly inside. He enters a world of white. Floors, walls and ceiling. Technicians in white uniforms walking about. Turning briefly to inspect the new arrival. Seth stood out. His pale blue jeans and grey overcoat starkly contrasting the clinically bleached surroundings. A gentlemen with a clipboard approached and stood quietly before him. As if assessing Seth before speaking.

"Doctor Adison? I am DeMeer... Administration Officer of this Facility.

"That's right." Seth replied.

"Welcome..." DeMeer added in a clinical monotone tone. "...Let me show you to your quarters and let you settle in... I'll introduce you to the team... How was your trip?" DeMeer asked as if an afterthought.

"Good thank you... Surprisingly smooth considering the blizzard hitting New York at present." Said Seth opening his thick overcoat to allow the warmth of the facility to permeate his body.

"This way if you please. I understand *Mister Jones* has explained the *importance* of keeping the identification tag with you at all times... As you aware, we have hornets patrolling outside. But inside we also use *Wasps*... You may see one. But it will see you first." DeMeer warned.

"Wasps?" asked Seth.

"Yes... Minute surveillance drones we use that patrol the corridors... But never the laboratories for obvious reasons."

"Of course. I understand." Said Seth looking about for their presence.

"Wear your tag at all times and you will be *fine*..." DeMeer completed the preliminary precautions as they arrived to Seth's quarters. "...We are here."

DeMeer gestured his hand to the compartments door.

"Voice commands on all controls. I will return in one hour to allow you to change and familiarize yourself with your room before I take you to the meet the team."

DeMeer looked at Seth for an acknowledgement. Seth nodded. DeMeer turned and walked away leaving Seth before a closed door in search of a sensor.

Then recalled the instructions.

“Open.”

And the large plain door slid open. Seth grinned pleased with himself and entered the sleeping quarters. The door closed silently behind him.

Looking about to gauge its dimensions.

‘It will do’, he thought to himself.

Unpacking the few garments he had brought with him. His stay would be a brief five day visit to evaluate the Order’s plagues genetic profiles and storage procedures with the Welsh production team. It would be their task to mass produce the virus for distribution and release in six months’ time. It was Seth’s task to formulate the vaccine to counter the virus for the *chosen*.

Being the most experienced among them, no one could question his authority on the plagues involved. Seth wondered how much the Welsh team knew about the New York team. And how much they knew about the Order’s agenda for its ultimate use. The facility stored the world’s deadliest pathogens on the planet. All kept under one roof.

Seth grinned.

Changing into the provided white uniform and lab coat, Seth transformed himself to look like everyone else in the place. Sterile. The doored opened again and DeMeer re-appeared satisfied Seth had acquainted himself with his new abode.

“Good...” Assessed DeMeer. “...This way please.” Expecting Seth to follow behind.

Explaining the layout of the facility and the various levels. Unlike the subterranean laboratory in New York, the Welsh facility was several levels above ground. Arriving at brightly lit glass walled offices and laboratories. Large round windows of thick glass allowed a view of the snow covered forested compound outside. A heavily armed in a stark black uniform guarded the refrigerated storage room. Within, racks upon racks of small yellow colored bottles. Sitting on shining silver shelves. Each bottle containing a deadly pathogen.

Security doors with laser senses stood between Seth and the veils of death.

Looking more like a candy store than a storage facility of death. Seduced by the sight of the illuminated venomous nectars. Imagining the destructive power if they were ever unleashed upon the unsuspecting population. A strange feeling came over Seth. A memory was returning to him. An urge. He could not recall it. He could not fight it either. It felt appealing as it taunted him. Tilting his head in a struggle to remember.

But the memory would not come.

“Impressive isn’t it? ...” DeMeer asked. “...Imagine you could kill an entire planet with this. One bottle alone could wipe out an entire country... Two would be exponential.”

And with that single innocuous comment, DeMeer had shown the Facility’s hand. They were ignorant of the Order’s goal to rid the world of himself and all those around him. Unaware of the true purpose of the vaccine other than for research and the benefit of mankind. Albeit unbeknownst to the Chosen few.

“Very.” Seth quietly replied.

“This way Mister Adison. I will introduce you to the team.” Said DeMeer leading the way.

Entered a large room, people leaning over microscopes and engaging in clinical talk.

The room fell silent as DeMeer entered. Reminding Seth of how Mueller had the same effect on his team.

“Afternoon everyone... Listen up if you please...” DeMeer waited momentarily as he gained the team’s attention, “... As discussed earlier... This is Doctor *Adison*... He is from the New York facility... He is here to assess the parent pathogens his team there have been working on a vaccine for. Give him your full cooperation when requested... No one is more qualified than this gentleman.” Advised DeMeer.

Team members scrutinized Seth.

Seth’s shoulder length unkempt hair gave them no confidence at all to trust a test tube of water in his hands. Seth could sense the uneasiness among.

Then he spoke.

Stepping forward and introducing himself. Citing his credentials and the research they were doing in New York. Speaking in *their* language. He *was* one of *them*. And they accepted him into the fold.

Clinicians moved forward. Keen to introduce themselves and know more about his research work. It was DeMeer's turn to stand back and wonder who this prodigy was.

"Well... I'll ah... Let you get acquainted with the group then... They'll show the mess hall and other facilities." Said DeMeer unnoticed, now out of his depth, he backed away unseen. Paper clips needed counting somewhere.

Leaving Seth surrounded by excited technicians.

"Hi. I'm Hannah." An attractive blonde Swedish woman said.

Introducing herself as the team leader.

"You'll be working *closely* with me."

But there was something between the lines Seth thought he might have heard.

"Why don't we leave this lot play with their test tubes and I'll show you the coffee machine... The one piece of equipment in this place they spent the least money on... I swear the stuff in those bottles would taste better than the coffee it makes." Said Hannah seriously.

"I'll remember that... Thanks."

Seth followed her tight fitting uniform that accentuated her well-proportioned firm body. Wondering if she was wearing a size smaller than she should be. White heels completed the uniform. Licentious thoughts crossed Seth's mind. Thinking she would not be out of place at Rudi's.

'Perhaps a word to Anthony for a new act for Marilyn?' He thought.

"How's your research going in New York? They don't tell us much here... They said some big shot was coming over to pick up some samples... I guess that's you?"

"Sounds about right... Not sure about the big shot though... I do have a team behind me... The research is going well. We're on track to finding the keys for the vaccine."

"Keys?" Hannah asked curiously.

Seth's work was revolutionary and unpublished. His Genetic-Immunity research had eclipsed others in the field who were struggling to keep up with his theories.

"Yes. Elementary really once you strip the DNA down to its skeletal components... Basically there are molecular receptors that sense infection which in turn triggers an immunity response. .. Cloning mutant DNA we have been able to mimic the response to fit the infection... Those are the

keys which we're trying to cut." Seth tried to surmise the process knowing much of his work had yet to be confirmed by the medical fraternity.

"I haven't read about any of this in any on-line journal?" Hannah looked at Seth in wonderment.

"You won't for a few years yet... And even then... It's all very confidential of course... Black Crow has a huge investment in this... You'd understand."

"Yes of course... I understand... We must talk more. I am fascinated by your work... Perhaps I could stop by after dinner and talk more."

"I'd like that." Said Seth following Hannah's tight fitting uniform down a long white corridor.

Mounted surveillance cameras monitored their every move.

More so Hannah's, than Seth's.

"And this is the illustrious mess hall. Coffee machine is over there..." Hannah pointed out the large black device sitting on a bench looking out of place in the stark white room. "...How do you have it?"

"Black. Thank you." Replied Seth.

"Place your cup here... And press this button... It's a throw-back to the dark ages I know, but it still works."

"Maybe I should make some notes." Seth joked.

"You're the big shot here. You'll figure it out".

The machine began to grind and whine and groan before spitting out a black substance that could have been coffee. Seth examined the black substance before tasting it.

"Not bad. I've had worse... Think I could survive on this for a few days. Might need to take a sample and cross reference its genetic profile with some of the pathogens back home."

"I doubt they let that stuff into the country." Hannah joked.

Suddenly, muffled shouting voices could be heard through the thick glass windows coming from outside.

People rushed to the windows looking in all directions hoping to catch what was happening. Protesters had broken into the compound again. It had become a regular occurrence with the rioting becoming more frequent. Dogs could now be heard barking loudly, agitated by something, or someone.

“Over there! ...” A person watching calls out, pointing towards the tree line. “...They don’t have a chance!” Then looked away, knowing what was to come next.

Hornets buzzed overhead. Red laser beams targeting the group of individuals that had been cornered by growling dogs straining at their leashes of the handlers. Suddenly one of the protesters began to run.

‘*Don’t run, don’t run!*’ Seth thought loudly to himself.

But it was too late. A hornet open fire. Striking the individual in the chest and head. The white snow was sprayed with rich red blood and dark pieces of brain tissue. The protester ceased to protest. Stood motionlessly still. Then collapsed on the snow. Dogs were released and allowed to salvage the warm corpse. A reward for their patience.

Other protesters raised their hands to surrender. Dropping to their knees in submission. White uniformed armed guards arrived, their dark menacing weapons at the ready. Hannah pressed herself against Seth body. He could feel the warmth of her body. The softness of her breasts against his back.

A guard approaches the small rebel band. Their heads looking about wondering what would come at them next. The guard shouts something at one of them. His hand gun pointed at their head. There was silence and the protester refuses to give up their leader. Suddenly a crack is heard and the back of the protestor’s heads explodes onto the snow behind him. And the body falls forward face down. Dead. Dark blood stains the snow about their head.

Seth looks away and pushes his way from the window through the group that had gathered to watch the horror show. Hannah senses his disgust and follows him. Another crack was heard, followed by a collective sigh from the onlookers. One by one they returned to their stations. Sickened not only by the indiscriminate justice being handed out. But that they were part of the system that pulled the trigger. Having long since reconciled their guilt with the food and shelter the Order had provided them.

“What’s that all about?” Seth asks almost sensing the answer before Hannah could reply.

“Protestors... It’s becoming a common occurrence... The Order wants to send a *message* to them. But as you can see they’re not listening.” Hannah replies dejected by the protestor’s persistence to be killed.

Seth's mind struggled to reconcile the cold blooded executions. Returning his mind to the relative peace of the mess. Accepting that collateral damage was beyond his control.

"Let's finish up here and head to the lab... I'll show you where you'll be working." Hannah suggested distracting Seth from the brutalities outside the window.

Seth's attention was again distracted by Hannah's tight uniform that telegraphed pressure was building and needed to be released. Allowing her to suffer a while longer. Hannah squirmed in her seat. Crossing legs repeatedly trying to relieve a discomfort.

"I'll show you your work station... This way... I'll take you the long way in case you ever find yourself lost".

Hannah routed Seth along a series of corridors and glass windows. Technicians could be seen working on equipment similar to that in New York. Walking pass the sleeping quarters again. Hannah came to her door.

"Open." She commanded and the door opened.

"Come in." She commanded Seth.

He followed.

The door closed and the room remained dimly lit. Hannah made no command to lighten the room. She turned and found Seth immediately close behind her. Looking at him, eyes cited the mutual understanding they had shared over coffee. Removing Hannah's lab coat without resistance. Brushing hands against her sensitive body. Remaining motionless she allowed him to undress her further. Turning about, lowered the zip down her back. Bare flesh greeted him. Allowing the dress to fall from her shoulders and onto the floor at her feet. Holding her waist, hands moved up to cradle warm breasts.

"Your hands are cold." Said Hannah. Finding words between the breaths that were quickly being taken away.

Seth remained silent.

As Hannah stood naked with her back to him. Sensing he was removing his uniform. And soon she felt the warmth of his body pressed against the warmth of hers. Nipples swelled with excitement as her breath quickened with the mounting passion. It had been a long time since a man had touched her. A long time since anyone had touched her. Feeling a hardness growing behind her. Turning around, allowed her hands to roam Seth's firm body.

Looking into his eyes. She kissed him and tongues engaged in a primal dance. Seth bite her lip and her eyes flinched at the receipt of the pain inflicted. She bit him back as if to add to the satisfaction. Scratching her fingers down his back to accentuate the pleasurable pain.

Hannah's surrendered herself to him and the two naked bodies began the primal dance. Then suddenly Seth imagined Chelsea laying beneath him. And it was all too much to hold back the uncontrollable longing, as thoughts of her ran through his mind.

Sweat dripped from Seth's forehead and he collapsed next to Hannah's spent body. Hannah rolled over and nestled onto Seth's shoulder. Kissing him on the cheek. Finding a peace and intimacy long since overdue. Seth laid looking up at the ceiling. His mind was elsewhere. Telling himself this was simply a release of pressure that had been building up.

Just as he had visited Rudi's for a release of a primordial curiosity. Chelsea was a player. He knew that. He would not feel any guilt. The divergent thought of Chelsea still lingered nonetheless. Hannah regained the feeling in her loins. Her mind still sparking with electric shocks after Seth's sexual intrusions.

"We'll talk more after dinner." Hannah instructed Seth, keen to carry on the sexual dialogue.

Sharing a shower. Cleansing the other of their sins. They dressed and composed themselves as if nothing had happened.

"Open." Hannah instructed, and the door opened.

Allowing a burst of fresh air to enter the sexually heated compartment.

Only the security cameras were aware of the probable illicit sexual act between the two team leaders. But what, or how, two team leaders discuss behind closed doors was not their concern. Wales was a cold lonely place without surveillance making it more so. Returning the way they had come, made their way to Seth's work station.

"This will be your work space, you'll have full access to everything. The team have been advised to give you full co-operation. I'll let you get set up. Anything you're unsure about. You know where to find me." Advised Hannah.

"I do indeed. Thanks." Replied Seth after a rather unorthodox introduction to the facility.

“Oh ...” Hannah turned back, as if a little late to say, “...Welcome to Wales”. She smiled a grin of satisfaction. Mindful that the welcoming process was not all entirely over.

Clearing a space for his the tablet and notebook. Having already configured to the cyber-pathways to the Black Crow servers back at the New York facility. The latest encrypted test results came streaming through. Able to monitor the progress his team had made with the second key and his own virus.

The two projects ran concurrently. And would appear as one.

Only Seth could differentiate between the two. The keys appeared where he expected them to be. And already knew where to find the third key. Disclosing that when it was time.

Seth had his own virus to perfect first.

Eyes dilated as he looked at the screen. Hannah had sapped more out of him than he thought. Tonight would be another story. It would be his turn to sap her energy.

“Coffee... Need more coffee.” He said to himself.

Hoping the crude tincture was sufficient to keep him alert.

The Welsh Facility held a phenomenal array of deadly pathogens.

Everything and anything that ever stalked the planet was stored there.

‘Impressive’, Thought Seth examining the inventory list.

Microscopic alien life forms capable of destroying mankind. Identifying the pathogens selected by The Order. Seth uploaded their genetic blue prints. He would give these micro-organisms a visit and conduct his own series of tests.

No one could question his findings. Seth was operating at a level beyond everyone else’s comprehension. And wondered how much he should tell Hannah about his plan. Then dismissed the thought. The best way to keep a secret is simply not to tell anyone. Hannah would perish with the rest of the world unless she had been chosen.

Seth had his own final solution. That included exposing Hannah.

“Dinner?” Hannah’s voice called out from behind, startling him briefly.

“That time is it?” Seth looked around seeing her standing there.

Her uniform re-conforming tightly to the contours of her body again. Naked underneath if he recalled. The hurried initiation coming back to him.

“Afterwards we can discuss your work in more *detail.*” Suggested Hannah.

“I look forward to that” said Seth. “Let’s eat... I’m hungry.”
Deferring the sexual innuendo for dessert...

Chapter 21

Finishing dinner, Seth returned to his work station to examine the list of pathogens the facility held.

The who's who of Death's fraternity.

Fluorescent lighting illuminated the shining vials of golden venom sitting behind thick refrigerated glass walls. Appearing harmless and benign on the silver shelves. A lone armed guard stood braced outside the first of the two doors. Seth looked about the floor and noticed he was the only technician present.

His mind played out ways on how to access the bottles. Two keys were necessary. He had one. Hannah the other. Thoughts refocused to the list before him. And identified the pathogens the Order had selected.

'*Hmm*', Seth thought, having dissected and rebuilt them many times.

He knew them better than anyone else in the world. And soon everyone would know them. Seth smirked at the thought of the prospect. Shaking his head with disbelief.

Knowing they paled by comparison to his own virus.

"What you smiling about?" Hannah had approached unseen.

"Just thinking about New York" Seth lied.

"I'd like to go one day..." Hannah daydreamed momentarily with the thought. Then remembered why she had tracked Seth down, "...Hey... It's getting late... Better get you to bed." Hannah suggested keenly.

"Good idea." Said Seth taking a final look at the floodlit yellow vials calling his name.

Hannah escorted him back to her compartment and relieved herself of her clinical uniform. Or it relieved itself of her. Then relieved Seth of his. It was not long before the two were entangled in each other's bodies. Lusting, thrusting and heaving in unison.

Hannah moaned loudly as Seth aroused her to greater sensual heights. The drought had been broken and she was taking full advantage of the flood that was about to be unleashed into her. Falling exhausted beside

each other. Hannah's head lay on Seth's shoulder and he found himself falling into a deep sleep with the warmth of her body against his.

3:00AM and Seth opened his eyes. Awoken by a hissing sound.

He listened for it to occur again. A distinctive hissing sound. The hissing continued. It was coming from outside the door. Pulling on his pants and lab coat. Bare feet feeling the cold tiled floor.

"Open." Seth commanded and the door slid open.

Looking back he sees Hannah still sleeping. Her key was lying on the side table. Without knowing why he grabs it, together with his own. Peering into the hallway he looked about. Seeing no one. He looks about for Wasps, only to see cameras pointing to the ground. As though they too were asleep for the evening.

Hearing the hissing sound again. It was coming from further down the hallway. Towards the Lab. Something moved on the ground. He watched and waited.

Then saw it again.

A large putrid colored snake. Stopping, turned its head to look back at Seth. Hissing at him as if asking him to follow. He followed at a distance. The snake edged its way into the laboratory. Stealthy Seth continued to follow.

The guard stood distracted by an overhead muted television.

Unaware of Seth's or the snake's presence. Concealed beneath shelving, the snake slivered closer to the guard. Wanting to call out to warn the guard. His voice would not come. As if something was preventing him from speaking.

Suddenly, the snake rears up exposing its fangs.

Sounding a malicious snarl. Striking repeatedly at the guard's legs. The guard fell helplessly to the floor as the venomous toxins rapidly entered his blood stream. Death was swift. Falling to the floor, the guard twitches involuntary as neuro-toxins overran his nervous system. Stopping his heart. Bulging eyes and a protruding swollen purple tongue. Evidence to the violent death suffered.

The snake slivered under a cabinet and waited.

Its eyes and sporadic darting forked tongue visible. It looked up at Seth. Then to the store room door. Then back to Seth. Projecting thoughts

to Seth's mind. A feeling of familiarity came over him. It was as if he knew this... *Creature*.

Hands touched the keys around his neck. Waving Hannah's key over the sensor and a green light appeared. Then waving his own. Another green light appeared. The locks released their hold on the door that slid quietly open. The snake slithered from under the cabinet. Between Seth's legs and into the storage room.

The snake hissed incessantly for Seth to follow it.

Coming to a glass refrigerator with racks of colored vials. Seth eyes the labels identifying the lethal microbes contained within each. Wrapping itself around his legs the snake hissed another sadistic command. Its bulky weight and leathery skin brush across his feet. Instinctively without thinking, reaches into the cabinet and seized a handful of bottles. Filling his pockets with as many as they could hold.

With pockets now laden with vials of deadly contraband. It was time to leave before anyone arrived. The snake eagerly lead the way. Hallway cameras had come to life. Staring directly at Seth. Tracking his every move. Walking calmly as he could to the stairwell that would take lead to the ground floor. Guards milled about. Their attention drawn to the game on a television as the first guard had been. Anxiously he walks to the front door. His pockets rattling with glass vials of death. Afraid to look at the guards and draw their attention. Doors opened automatically.

A wall of icy air slaps him, revitalizing him.

Seth steps outside. Had anyone noticed him? He feels the icy steps burning the soles of bare feet. The chill of the evening air penetrating his inadequate clothing. Suddenly a spot light falls on him.

Then another.

Looking about, sees armed men approaching. Waving at him. Shouting at him to stay where he was. The snake slid swiftly down the steps and hissed at him to follow. Feet sank into the ankle deep snow. Running as fast as he could. Dogs barked and snarled among the assailing shouting voices.

Spot lights and Hornets pursued him relentlessly.

His heart raced in his chest. Lungs burning with every breath.

"Stop! ... Stand still!" A voice shouted from behind.

Seth continued to run blindly into the night.

Vials falling from his pockets. Breaking and staining the snow yellow before eating their way through to the frozen earth. Feet feeling like wooden stumps pounding the rough frozen turf beneath them. Relentlessly the voices shouted at him. The barking grew closer. Dogs had been unleashed.

Wands of red laser light waved through the air searching for him. Targeting him.

Suddenly, shots spat from the Hornets above. Hot penetrating sharp pains punched into Seth's back and he falls prostrate onto snow. Numb with pain.

Hearing the snake approaching. Hissing. Drawing closer.

Feeling the weight of the snake as it slivered over his pitted back. Smearing its underbelly with his blood. Rubbing its putrid leathery skin against the pale skin of his face. Seth feels no warmth from the scaled hide as it passes.

"Why do you forsake me?" Seth pleads with his dying breath.

Watching the snake abandon him. Without looking back. The snake screeches a final sinister hiss and disappears into the woods. Leaving a fading trail of blood in its wake. Sounds of the encroaching dogs grew nearer.

Gasping for a breath. Seth closes his eyes and surrenders to the engulfing darkness. Savage dogs begin to pull and tear at his body. But feels nothing. He was dead to the excruciating pain.

"Seth! Seth!" He hears a voice calling his name, Hannah's voice.

Suddenly, he awakens in a cold sweat. And sits upright gasping for the breath, feeling for the bloody wounds. None. Stunned and confused. Looks about the compartment. Searching the floor for the snake. No longer there.

"You okay baby? ..." She asks having awakened him from his nightmare. "...You must have had a bad dream." Kissing his forehead.

"Yeah... Must have." He accepts quietly still confused between what was a dream and what felt real.

"Let me make it all better." Suggests Hannah affectionately, beginning to gently kiss Seth's heaving chest.

Before moving down further.

Seth laid back, allowing Hannah to resuscitate him back to life.

Nursing fatal wounds, tried to recall the dream. The snake. The vials.
The hornets. The wounds. The pain. It felt so real.
Closing eyes, surrenders to the engulfing darkness...

Chapter 22

Seth arrived back to a city frozen. Relieved to be home on American soil again.

A Black Crow limousine waited to take him to a meeting with Mueller to report his findings. He carried with him a silver metallic briefcase containing the samples of the Order's deadly cocktail of plagues. From these samples he would cultivate more.

Unbeknown to the frozen wary commuters travelling about him. He held in his hand the equivalent of several atomic bombs. Capable of killing several millions of people.

But not today.

The limousine made its way through the early morning traffic and arrived at the Woolworth building. Seth climbed out and stared up at the ancient building. Re-familiarizing himself with its gothic features. The security guards looked at him wondering if he had traded his bicycle for a limousine.

"Boys." Seth quietly saluted the two frozen guards.

The innocuous metallic brief case swinging at his side. Made his way to the twenty sixth floor. Wondering if Mueller had arrived for the day. The receptionist ushered Seth to Mueller's office to find him was savoring a morning coffee. Scanning the reports of riots across Europe on a tablet.

"More bloody riots." Mueller chanted.

"Sorry sir... I don't get involved with politics." Seth replied in response.

"Yes... Of course you don't Adison... We have you buried too far underground don't we?" Humored Mueller.

"Yes Sir... Sorry Sir." Seth countered Mueller's weak attempt to be funny.

Mueller turned about and looked at Seth.

"How was your trip? ... Did you get everything you needed?"

"The trip was very productive thank you very much." A sexually sapped Seth replied.

“That’s good to know... Not sure what your team was up to while you were away though.” Mueller wondered aloud.

“Had them running tests that would have kept them busy for a few days longer than I was away.”

“Good, good... Are we any closer to finding any more of those *keys* things you’re after?” Mueller asked eagerly. Keen to report to Braun new progress.

“Yes we are... Isaac and Nancy are close to isolating the second key as we speak... I will know more once I get down to the lab Sir.”

“Good, good... I better let you get on with it then...” Mueller glared at the silver brief case, “...Is that it?” He asked hesitantly wondering if he should be sitting so close to *it*.

“Yes it is...” Advised Seth, “...I’ve taken a sample of the parent culture to trial the vaccine with... Strands mutate as you know... So best we be working with the original.”

“Yes, yes, of course...” Mueller agreed, keen to have Seth leave the office. “... Best you be off and do what you do best Adison”.

“Thank you sir... Sorry Sir.. I’ll have a report on your desk this evening after I brief the Team and review their findings”.

Seth left Mueller’s office as if the brief case was hand luggage. Mueller watched on nervously, wondering if the room was safe from any residual contaminants.

“Boss! You’re back!” Nancy called out and the others looked up with some relief.

Their findings had puzzled them and they needed him to unravel the mysterious reading they were getting. The findings were as Seth had expected. As they were mostly for his Virus. Not that any of them could tell the difference.

“How’d you guys get on without me?”

“Lost... Some of this stuff is beyond us. We’re having trouble keeping up with you... How did you get on? Did you bring back some treats for us?” Nancy asked eager to see the source pathogens first hand.

“Yes I brought back some treats for you Nancy... There’s enough to go around.”

“How was Wales?” Stan enquired curiously.

“Cold” Replied Seth. Rousing a round of laughter from them.

“Did you meet the team over there? ... What they like?” asked Isaac.

“They were very *accommodating*... But not as good as you guys...” Hoping that would please them. “...Okay... Enough small talk, let’s get back to work. How close are we to the second key Isaac? Nancy? Anyone?”

“Reports on your desk... Indicators say we found it on the twenty-third chromosome. We need your eyes to confirm it. We got some crazy data output a few days ago... We can’t place what it relates to... Did you run *something* while you were away?”

“I ran a couple simulations...” Seth said keeping the team in the dark as to experiments around his own virus. “...Let me get this to quarantine and I’ll go over the results... Isaac... Get me coffee before I die of dehydration.” Indicating the briefcase.

“Right boss.”

Seth had already found the second key. One was on the twenty-third chromosome. There was another on the twenty-fifth, had they looked further. One was enough. He would spend the morning going over the test results and the genetic profile of the parent strands. Having formed a close relationship with them in Wales. He understood what made them tick. And knew their Achilles heel. He could pull them apart and put them back together again with them none the wiser of the bio-genic intrusion. Seth was not afraid of the deadly microscopic monsters.

They were his friends.

Kristina played Rudi’s surveillance tapes.

Fast-forwarding until Nero and Hector enter the frame. Though the room was dim, the cameras compensated for the lighting. She make out two docile men ply themselves and ladies with drinks. Nero appeared to have consumed with more than just alcohol that evening. Reclining back in a chair and far less animated than Hector.

His eyes glazed over.

‘*Candy no doubt*’, thought Kristina.

Observing Sarah arriving at the table. Watches her engage in small talk. Sarah appeared to be particularly interested in Hector. Consuming shots, she leaves and returns to the back rooms. Fast-forwarding again, she reappears after her final performance. Dressed and about to leave with the

two men. Switching to another channel, Kristina picks the trio up again in the main foyer. Fully lit.

Matthias and Ruben made no effort to stop Sarah from leaving. Nor should they. The two men gathered their overcoats and Sarah walked casually from Rudi's for the last time. Kristina froze the frame. Enlarging the image. She takes a final look at Sarah as she left with the two strangers to her death. Burning the image of Sarah's face into her mind. Recalling the times she had spent with her and the last words spoken. Memories now frozen in time.

Kristina refocused and brought herself back to the screen. Remembering why she was looking at the tapes. Tapping the screen the frame zoomed out and she tapped on Hector's face.

"Freeze frame." She commanded, touching the screen she poked Hector's face.

"Mister Hector... Gotcha."

'So this is the face of the devil.' She thought to herself.

"Enhance facial." And a thin red box appeared around Hector's face.

"Run facial diagnostics."

Sitting back she waited. Tapping her fingers impatiently on her desk. While the system grinded its way through the thousands of stored profiles. Within moments an alert flashed on her screen.

"Match found". Flashed on the screen.

Kristina leaned keenly forward and spoke.

"Report."

A police record immediately appeared on the screen.

"Hector *Hades*." Kristina spoke aloud as if addressing him in person.

His record revealed mostly drug possession. Cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines. Assault to cause grievously bodily harm.

"How appropriate... You're a nasty piece of work aren't you? ..." She questioned staring at his image on the screen. "...Where do you live?" She asked sarcastically. Keen to get her hands on him.

Displaying no known address. No vehicle registration either. This guy was off the radar. And for a good reason. She had a name. If he was ballsy enough to show his face the night following. She knew he would show his face again.

"Worland!" Kristina hollered across the noisy precinct floor trying to catch Worland struggling with an agitated perp.

“What’s up boss? ... I’m kind a busy here.” He tried to protest his required presence.

“The others can handle that one... Grab me the jacket on Sarah Albright.” Kristina eyes returned to the screen.

“Print.” And a thin glossy sheet of paper spat out of the top of the computer screen.

“Any progress on this one boss?”

“Yeah... We just got lucky. We have a face and a name... But no address... It was ballsy for him to show up a second night after the disappearance. But he’ll pop up again.” She added confidently.

“How’d you know he showed up the second time?” Worland wondered how his boss knew.

Kristina frantically tried to think of a cover story having just recalled the non-event from memory. The tapes would show her in them at Rudi’s.

“The tapes show him returning the next night.” She responded knowing she did not have those tapes at hand.

“Of course.” Dismissed Worland.

Looking up in time to be distracted by the agitated perp wrestling with fellow officers on the other side of the room.

“Better help them out Worland.” Ordered Kristina distracting her underling further.

She contemplated the events. Nero and Hector left with Sarah early that morning. Only to return the following night. But Sarah doesn’t. Nero is in Geneva. Hector is somewhere in New York. Nothing to go on except a brown bed sheet. And spoiled DNA. She could have scored the Little-brother anywhere. But without a link to Hector or Nero, she knew she could not pin it on either of them. Girls leave with Johns all the time. It was an occupational perk.

Knowing that Hector would show his face again. And no doubt with his brother in arms. Nero. She would be waiting for them. Perhaps with the help of Matthias and Ruben. This had become personal. Hector Hades gave her the creeps. A chill came over her. She took a sip of the coffee hoping to excise Sarah’s spirit from the room.

“Leave this one to me girl...” Kristina spoke into space. “...Leave this to me”.

11:00PM and it was business as usual at Rudi’s.

There was little difference what day of the week it was. People were just happy to be off the streets and someplace warm. Even if it was just a high class titty-bar. Seth wandered in just after eleven having finished up the report for Mueller. The rest of the team had left hours before. Stopping at Rudi's to unwind after a long day and having arrived back from Wales that morning.

There was another reason, Kristina.

Hannah had been no more than an enjoyable distraction during his time in Wales. It was Chelsea who occupied his mind during their love-making. It was unexplainable. Women did not fit any branch of mathematics. Commonsense fought with primal urge.

Taking his regular table in the darkened corner, throws his overcoat and satchel to one side. The first whiskey slid down smoothly and memories of the place came flooding back. A jazz song was playing. One of Seth's favorites. His mind isolating the distinct instruments. Subtle tones and jumbled tempos. Jazz was liberating, it had a pulse.

Much like pathogens, though less deadly.

Unsure if Chelsea would appear. He had been away for nearly a week and knew she only worked odd days. Hoping their paths would cross that night. Something told him they would. The lights dimmed. The music changed to a slow saucy beat. And Marilyn appeared. A young Latin-American beauty with long legs. Teasing the fetish eyes with her body. Her moves. Her gyrations. The crowd applauded followed by an interlude of soft music played while patrons awaited the next performer.

Then Chelsea's song began.

The song that was becoming his favorite. A musical incarnation of her soul. She stepped into the spotlight. For a moment, had forgotten how beautiful she was. Breathless. He watches in awe. The music and the body became one. The exotic dance became personal. Something inside him had changed. Watching on with longing eyes. In an entirely different way. He could control the most dangerous pathogens on the planet. Yet he could not control the feelings he was starting to feel for her.

A round of applause erupted as her routine ended. Seth waited as she circulated the tables. Then she turned and saw Seth sitting looking at her. As if waiting for her.

His eyes spoke before he did.

“Chelsea... It’s good to see you.” Looking at her as if he had not seen her for a hundred years.

“It’s good to see you too Seth... You been away? I haven’t seen you for a while.” Kristina enquired.

“Business trip. Long distance.” He informed briefly.

“Oh I see.”

“Did Paige return?” Seth asked curiously.

“Truth is... She did turn up.” Wondering how much to tell him.

“And? ...” Seth could sense there was more from the tone of Chelsea’s voice.

“She was found dead... Overdose... Something called Little-brother.”

“I’ve heard of it... Nasty stuff in the wrong hands...” Struggling what to say next. “...Did it involve the two gentlemen she left with?”

“The police are still investigating. No connection yet to them... They said they found traces of DNA. But it was so badly decomposed to be of any use.” Deflecting her involvement.

“Hmm. I see ...” Thinking of a possible solution, “...Maybe I might be able to help.” He offered.

“How can you help?” Asked Kristina curiously.

“It’s my job... DNA ... It’s what I do.” Disclosed Seth plainly.

“Really... So what could you do that the Police Forensic people couldn’t?” Keen to know the extent of his capabilities.

“You’d be surprised... I have a couple doctorates in Genetic Engineering.”

“Oh only a couple... Of your doctorates? How many do you actually have?” a stunned Kristina asked?

“Four... Or five, I think.” Unsure if the other three honorary doctorates counted. “...Depends how you look at it.”

“Oh... Only four or five?” Kristina sat stunned by Seth’s qualifications.

“I *think* so.” Responds Seth.

Kristina stared at Seth. Confused that this ragged man before her was a rocket scientist. Or the nearest thing to one she had ever seen. The urge to tell him she was a detective was over whelming.

She held back the confession.

“Do you have a card? ... Or something I could pass onto the officer in charge to contact you on?”

“Sorry. They don’t issue lab rats cards... Why don’t you get the officer in charge to drop off a sample to this address? Mark it my attention.” Beginning to scribble his name and Black Crow’s address onto a napkin.

“Thanks. I’ll pass it on... But I don’t know how much more you could find that the police couldn’t already.” Kristina asked with uncertainty in her voice.

“You’ll be surprised... We have the latest toys... Decades ahead of what Police Forensics Departments are using. We have substantial private research funding... If you know what I mean.”

“Thanks... I contact the officer and get them to drop off a sample.” Kristina sat stunned.

“Of course they would need to eventually match it to somebody... What about the two gentlemen that left with Paige that night?” Seth asked quietly hoping no-one as overhearing their conversation.

“They located one... In Geneva apparently... Can’t imagine him returning too soon.” Kristina wondered how much more to tell Seth.

But since he was helping with the DNA profiling, she thought she may as well go all the way.

“The other has no last address... We know his name. But can’t trace him... I’m guessing he’ll show up here again one day.”

“Be good if he does... Then we could get some DNA samples off them.”

“You don’t seriously think they’d volunteer their DNA do you?”

“Of course not... What I mean is we could get saliva samples from their glasses” Seth advised clinically.

“Oh... I see what you mean. You can get enough from that?”

“All we need is a molecule and we let nature do the rest.” Said Seth, making it sound easy.

“Hmm... Let’s hope they show their faces again... Drinks will be on me.”

“That would make a change...” Seth joked, “...Get the Forensics people to drop off a sample to that address and I’ll be happy to do the rest.”

“Thanks Seth... Glad you came in tonight.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world...” Glad that he had returned that evening as well. “...I did miss the whiskey and you of course.” He confessed. Then wondered if he should have told her.

“Why thank you... So where did you go for a week if I be bold enough to ask?”

“Of course you can ask... Wales.” Seth admitted.

“Wales? What was it like?”

“Cold... I stuck in a lab for week with technicians and test tubes... So didn't see much of the place other than the arrival and departure.” Leaving the insatiable Hannah and the killer Hornets best unsaid.

“I better get moving... Do the rounds. Girl has to make a living you know. Good seeing you again... *Seth Adison...*” Said Kristina reading the name scrawled on the napkin. “...Thanks for *this.*” holding up the napkin.

“My pleasure Chelsea.” Seth raises his glass in farewell.

Studying her graceful movements as she walked away. He wondered could there ever be anything between them. The Order's virus soon dampened the thought.

As well as his own priorities to consider.

Seth cycled back to Greenwich Village.

Weaving through the frozen traffic. Jet lag was catching up with him. Still operating on Welsh time. His apartment and laboratory had remained in incubation. Monitored closely through his own security network. It was as if he had never left. Throwing his coat and satchel on the couch.

“Upload.” A voice command was given and data files transferred from his tablet to the processors across the hall.

Too tired to look in on the lab. And fell across the large soft bed. Moments later he was asleep. Taken to a world where Chelsea was in his arms.

Seth had begun to dream again...

Chapter 23

2:00AM and Noren's team waited outside the apartment building on the outskirts of Greenwich Village.

Mueller had tipped them off that a lab technician had been identified taking prohibited items from the building. Noren had waited patiently for the lab rat to return. The lights of the apartment darken.

Noren gave the Order.

"Go! Go! Go!" Noren signaled the heavily armed men about him.

A white emblem of the Order the only contrasting feature on their hefty black vests. Helmets, masks, gloves disguised their identity. Scrambling to position. The team shuffled quietly up the stairwell. Thin alien beams of red light penetrated the darkness and dust of the hallway. Reaching their red bloody tentacles on the apartment door. The Squad Leader stood steady. His fist raised to halt his troops, awaiting Noren's order to proceed.

"Roger that..." The leader acknowledged. "...Go! Go! Go!"

A heavy metal ram slammed into the door. Shattering it open. The armed intruders rushed in with weapons shouldered. Beams of light crisscrossed the empty room. The bedroom door suddenly opens and the men found themselves confronted by the bright light. And a man standing in the doorway with a gun in his hand about to challenge the intruders.

"He's got a gun!" The Leader cries out.

'*Thud-thud-thud... Thud-thud-thud... Thud-thud-thud... Thud-thud-thud.*' Suddenly rang out.

Then there was silence.

Noren could hear the sound of muffled gunfire through the headset.

"What happening up there?" He called out to the squad leader through the head set.

"Subject is down. Repeat. Subject is down..." Came back the response. "...Subject was armed Sir. Over."

"Very good. Secure the premises. Bio-Hazard Team are on their way up." Noren advised impatiently. Keen to get in and out before local

authorities arrived.

“Roger that Sir... And the body?” Asked the squad leader.

“Leave it.” Said Noren. Wanting to leave a message to the accomplice cult members to find.

“Roger that.” The Squad Leader confirms.

The Bio-Hazard team arrive on the scene and begins clearing out a laboratory.

Leaving nothing that would incriminate Black Crow Pharmaceutical. Noren could hear sirens wailing somewhere in the distance. His time had been cut short.

“Torch the place and get out of there.” He commanded.

Within moments the apartment was a blaze.

Immune from prosecution and indifferent to the imminent danger to other residents. Noren destroys any evidence of his presence. Shrouded by the early morning darkness he and the squad flee the scene.

Residents, awoken by the sound of breaking glass from the erupting fire, see two white vans drive away. Firemen arrive too late to save the apartment and desperately try to contain the blaze from spreading. Police would begin their investigation as soon as it was light enough to pick their way safely through the smoldering ruins.

“It began over here...” A forensic officer pointed out to Kristina who had been called in to investigate. “...We found a badly burnt body... Riddled with bullets. Male. Twenty to thirty.” Pointing to a body bag about to be taken away.

“Neighbors heard glass breaking just after 2:00AM. But no gun fire... Some said they saw men wearing black uniforms loading several large plastic bags into two white vans before leaving... That direction.” The officer pointed towards Downtown.

“Whoever did this was organized... Left us little to go on.”

“Looks like a lab of some sort... Shelving... Test tubes everywhere. Thought you might be interested in this one.” Said the officer.

“Yeah. Thanks. There’s been a couple of lab raids recently... Have your boys check for traces of drugs. Particularly K9... Seems to be the flavor of the month.”

“Will do Detective.”

Kristina looked about the burnt out premises. Worland stood at what remained of the doorway going over the preliminary scans of the crime scene.

“What you got Worland?” She asked abruptly.

“Not much to go on. Manage to profile the room... What’s left of it... Definitely another lab. No traces of K9 at this stage. If there was... It’s long since been incinerated. From the caliber of the casings left behind... These were military gauge weapons. Likely MMP assault rifles. No street thugs here boss... Suspect silencers if no one heard the shots.”

“Good going Worland... Any ID on the body?” Kristina inquires further.

“Destroyed... But I ran a cross reference to the buildings tenancy database. Seems the apartment let out to a one.... *Isaac Newland.*”

“Hmm ... Run him through the database. Let’s see what comes up on him.”

“Already have ... No records. Squeaky clean boss.”

“Find out where he works... I want his records on my desk by noon.” Ordered Kristina surveying the scene before leaving.

The smell of burnt flesh was beginning to irritate her.

“I see you back at the Precinct. I need to head to Forensics on the *Albright* case.”

“Yes boss.” Worland confirms.

Investigative thoughts ran through Kristina’s mind.

‘Someone wanted something from this guy... But what and who? ... If it was not a drug lab, then what was it?’

Her intuition told her it was a Special Op. It was too well executed. There was the probable danger she could be crossing swords with big brother. The Order. She would need to tread carefully.

Kristina arrived at Forensics and signaled Ramen, the lead handling Sarah’s case.

“What’s up Kristina? I hear they have you on that apartment fire up Greenwich Village way? Another lab raid.” Ramen enquires.

“So it seems ... But I’ve actually come about the *Albright* case. You’re holding the spoiled DNA samples taken from the body?”

“That’s right... Not much we can do with them... What’s the interest?” Ramen asked curiously.

“Let’s just say I know someone who says he might be able to make something of them... Private Pharmaceutical Corporation... Apparently they have the latest toys.”

“I’d like see them try... The DNA we have is completely useless.”

“You might get your chance... Here’s the name of the guy and the address of the place. Would it be possible for you to take a sample over and drop them off for me? He’ll be expecting it.” Kristina asked. Not wishing to unnecessarily expose her identity to Seth.

“Yeah. For you... Anything.” Ramen replied with an affectionate smile for Kristina.

“Thanks, I appreciate that...” Kristina smiled back. “... Should you get any profiles, run them through the database for matches.”

“I’ll keep you posted... But I doubt very much anyone can unravel it.”

“Let’s see how clever our boy is shall we?” Wondering whether Seth could unravel the damaged DNA.

She had nothing to lose but to try. For Sarah’s sake.

Kristina returned to the Precinct, and found Worland compiling her requests.

“Coffee!” She cried out.

Worland hurried to the machine to mollify his boss’s addiction. Moments later returning with a cup of the black narcotic substance.

“Well done Worland... How’s Mister Newland’s profile coming along?”

Worland handed her the jacket. Opening it she saw a holographic image of an unburnt Isaac Newland. Twenty-seven. Originally from Cambridge, England. Graduated Columbus University, PhD in Genetics.

That halted Kristina in her tracks.

But what came next gave her goose-bumps. Letting the coffee cup fall from her hand. Splashing its steaming contents about the floor.

“You alright boss?” Worland called out. Concerned she had burnt herself.

“I’m okay Worland... Cup slipped.” She lied, staring at the report.

‘No...’, she thought, ‘...No.’

The report read that Isaac Newland worked for *Black Crow Pharmaceutical*. That was where Seth worked. Awkward questions

detonated in her mind. What was Seth's connection to the Isaac? She had just dispatched Sarah's DNA from Forensics to him.

Their *relationship* had suddenly become complicated.

She knew she had no choice. Like a black hole was pulling her inescapably closer. There was no going back. Taking a deep breath she picked up the phone.

"Black Crow Pharmaceutical..." Came the command. And the call was connected.

The phone rang several times before being answered by Mueller's receptionist.

"Black Crow Pharmaceutical... How may we help you?" A polite voice answered.

"Detective Kristina Tepes of the Ninety-First Precinct... We're investigating the death of one of your employees... I was wondering if I could speak to someone who is in charge."

There was a brief silence, while the receptionist considered her options.

"One moment please... I put you through to a Mister Mueller. He is the Head of the Black Crow. Hold the line please."

Then there was another silence. But longer. A discussion was no doubt taking place. After a series of clicks Mueller answers.

"Hello... Mueller Speaking. How may I help?" Mueller sang out as if it was a routine call. As though no one had been killed recently.

"Hello Mister Mueller... Detective Kristina Tepes of the Ninety-First Precinct... I was wondering if I could have a few moments of your time to discuss the death of one of your employees."

"Death? ... Oh dear... Yes of course... Who may I enquire?" Mueller spluttered a reflex response.

Noren had yet to inform him of the early morning raid but he could deduce that Isaac had been killed nonetheless.

"*Isaac Newland* is one of your employees?" Kristina asked plainly.

"Isaac Newland? ... Oh dear... Yes... That is correct." Mueller contrived sounding surprised.

"What can you tell me about him?" Asked Kristina again.

"From memory Isaac has been with Black Crow for just under a year now... But I would need to check. Our research here is private and I can't discuss that... I hope you understand."

“Yes of course. It seems... He had a laboratory set up at his apartment. Were you aware of that? ... Was he involved in drugs?” Kristina fired questions at Mueller.

“Drugs. I do not know... Young people these days... You know how they are... I was unaware he had a laboratory. Company policy prohibits such things... Perhaps you would like to meet his team members. Perhaps they could help?” Mueller deflected the questioning.

“That would be most helpful... Thank you Mister Mueller. Can we organize a time to meet? ... Say... Today?” Kristina added pressing home the point.

“Today? ...” Mueller faltered.

Hoping Kristina would defer only to buckle to her silence.

“Today? Yes, why not. How does 2:00PM sound?”

“Perfect. I have your address... Twenty-Sixth floor. I look forward to meeting you Mister Mueller. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Thank you Detective... I hope you find the person who did this terrible thing to Isaac.” Mueller lied knowing there was little chance of Noren ever being caught.

Mueller had nothing to lose by meeting with the detective.

Knowing nothing about the death. He had nothing to hide. Blind her with bright laboratory lights and shining test tubes. Allow her to interrogate a few lab rats who knew less than he did. And eventually she would give up on Isaac’s demise.

Kristina had an appointment with Mueller, and possibly Seth. How did Seth fit into Black Crow? How was Isaac connected to Seth? Should their paths cross at Black Crow, then there would surely be an uncomfortable meeting at Rudi’s that evening.

In the meantime she had another investigation on her hands.

“Worland!” She called out to get his attention.

“I know. I know... Another Coffee?” He pleaded in his defense.

“Be a good boy would you... And as a reward we’re going to Black Crow at two. We get to talk to Isaac Newland’s colleagues and look at their laboratory... How’d you like that?” She stroked her underling like a puppy wagging its tail.

“Sounds like fun boss... Thanks boss.” Worland yelped happy to escape of the Precinct again.

“Don’t thank me yet.” Said Kristina, hesitant to face Seth just yet.

Kristina was reluctant to leave the Precinct.

More so her expose detective role to Seth. But it was not be the first time she had come out. Having already told Anthony. It would be an uneasy situation to play out. One she would have to. She also had the issue of keeping Worland unaware of her connection to Seth. And her moonlighting at Rudi’s. Somehow she knew that Seth would understand. Had they gained that much trust in the little time they had known each other?

She wondered.

“Worland... Where’s that coffee?” Kristina called out in search of her minion. Desperately in need for her fix.

“Coming boss.” Frantically scurrying across the Precinct floor at the amusement of the other officers watching on...

Chapter 24

The tower of grey granite threw an ominous shadow over the smaller neighboring buildings.

Its architecture was of a bygone era. Framing the grand entrance, large red banners that fluttered in the morning breeze. Each stamped with the emblematic ever-seeing eye of the Order. Tall chiseled stone columns completed the building's facade. Armed guards patrolled the entrance, hornets hovered menacingly above. Profiling visitors and passers-by. Daring them to run. No one would get within a hundred meters of the building without authorization.

Some would try. None would succeed.

Barricades had been erected several blocks back. Already thousands of protesters were beginning to gather to regurgitate their daily claim for civil rights. Armed police in heavy riot gear had established a front line. Equipped with large black shields and long black heavy wooden battens. Tinted visors pulled down hiding their faces. Behind them, foot soldiers, and rows of armor personnel carriers. Each equipped with powerful water cannons. Large Alsatians barked and growled in response to the protesters chants.

Handlers straining to hold them back from the unprotected demonstrators.

On the penthouse floor. There was silence.

Patmos looked out from his office window. And watched ice skaters in the distance glide about on its crystal surface of the frozen lake. In his hand a small cup. His lips pinched as though he was about to kiss. Taking a sip the savory black elixir.

"These riots are growing by the day ..." Patmos informed Braun who was sitting in a nearby leather chair. Himself swirling a large glass of cognac in his hand. "...Marseille, Paris, Lyon... I've spoken with the G7 heads and they're wanting tougher action before it gets out of hand."

“You know my solution to that John...” Said Braun calmly, “...How’s the decision going by the way? ...” Not looking over to Patmos. “...You sure you don’t want one of these John?” Raising a large bulb glass of cognac in his hand.

Swirling it gently about. Watching the golden liquid coat the walls of the glass. Smooth rich characters evaporating beneath nostrils.

“You know I never drink before noon Augustus.” Said Patmos, wondering where it would lead if he did.

Being intoxicated was a weakness to be avoided.

“I’m still deliberating ... *Your* proposal... I’ll let you know... By the end of March. But at this stage I am not in favor of it... I still think there are *other* ways to handle the situation other than the annihilation of the human race.” Taking a sip to settle his anxiety and thoughts.

“I understand John... No rush.” Accepted Braun dismissing the proposal for the time being.

“How was New York?” Patmos enquired.

“Good. Meet with the families. They’re concerned about the increased rioting. As they should be... Caught up with Noren. He’s been busy investigating several underground cells... Apparently there is a hive in the Ukraine coordinating the riots. Noren is on top of it... He recently uncovered a terrorist laboratory in Greenwich Village of all places.” Braun stroked Patmos with recent successes.

“Hmm... That’s good to hear. Noren is a thorough despite his... *Methods*... We could do with more of him.” Remarked Patmos.

Resuming his observation of the ice skaters in the distance. Recollecting back to a time when he was a child and his father would take him to the local rinks. A small smile broke on his face.

“What you grinning about?” Braun asked, wondering if Noren’s work had appealed to him.

“Nothing... Just a passing thought.” Patmos turned about to face Braun.

“What’s happening with your man Mueller in New York?” Patmos asked getting to the point. Broaching the subject Braun was happy to avoid for the time being.

“Research as usual... The vaccine will be ready whether you use it or not...” Inferring it would ultimately be Patmos’ who would pull the

trigger on mankind. "...They've located the necessary *keys*." Said Braun wishing to sound technical.

"*Keys?*" Patmos asked curiously.

"Something to do with accessing the immune receptors on the DNA ... It's all a bit beyond me, I'm afraid ... They have a brilliant man there working on it. Years ahead of anyone else".

"Really? Hmm... Good to know they have the best." Patmos conceded.

Patmos wondered where it was all heading.

He felt he was being lead down a path by Braun. A path on which he did not wish to be on. For now it was just *research*. He hoped it would be for the greater good. But at this stage it seemed to be for a *chosen* few.

Patmos looked at Braun. And Braun looked back. Each unable to read the other's mind. The two bulls rarely locked horns. But on *this*, they agreed to disagree. Braun was bowing to his superior.

'*Or was he?*' Thought Patmos.

He knew his Secretary of State too well. What did Braun have up his sleeve he was not telling him about? G7 families had already begun making inquiries regarding the apocalyptic eradication. He had swerved them for now. His voice still held an authority. Many members backed away in subservience and fear with what he could do if they did not.

"The vaccine will be useful should there ever be an outbreak in the future." Said Braun to support the continued research.

"Yes I suppose you're right... The Facility in Wales is secure? ... I heard of reports of a recent breach?"

"All under control John... A few protestors cut through an electric fence but were captured and detained to questioning. Nothing to worry about... We have the facility tightly locked down. No one has ever made it inside." Braun advised. Omitting the summary executions after their brief detainment and questioning.

"I hope so..." Then Patmos turned his attention elsewhere, "...What's happening in China? Guangdong terrorist cells active again... I thought we squashed them last year?"

"We did..." Braun conformed, "...But it seems a splinter group has established itself in Hong Kong and now peddling their faith throughout China and Southeast Asia... Noren has Intel on the number of cells operating... Australia and New Zealand have been targeted already."

“New Zealand? ...” Patmos shook his head in disbelief. “...What’s there that they would want?”

“Isolation I’m guessing...” Braun pondered himself what they would want with the small island nation. “...They can’t go anywhere. Surrounded by water... We know where to find them when the time comes to silence them.”

“True... I’ve asked the G7 to step up their response. Harder measures for harder times... Not just water cannons and tear gas... They’re to increase the price of grain. But not the wine or oil... I want to hit these people where it hurts... Their stomachs. Not the G7, understand?”

“I couldn’t agree more John. We need to crush these groups before they get a foot hold somewhere... Could the military not step in and take charge?”

“I don’t want to enforce martial law at this stage. I won’t up the ante until I feel it is right.” Responded Patmos.

“You know my opinion on that John. But if those are your wishes... Then so be it. Noren’s team will capture to the ring leaders and soon their deck of cards will fall about them.”

“I hope so...” Wished Patmos, “...I hope so.”

Patmos stared out the window again.

The sun reflected off the frozen lake. The chaotic ice skaters gliding effortlessly about. His mind overlaid his worldly problems upon the ice rink. He saw an enclosure. The earth. The skaters moving in chaotic directions. As the rioters. One by one. The amateurs would fall over. Only a few stayed on their feet. Those were the ones to watch he thought. Could Noren catch them in time? Braun’s proposal would wipe the entire rink clear. Leaving only the professionals. The Order.

He took sip of coffee that had gone cold.

“How’s Nero? Is he behaving himself?” Patmos changed the subject again.

“He’s been good to the best of my knowledge... He went to New York with me. But he’s back home now. I have my eye on him though.”

“Good. Good. Wouldn’t want a repeat of that last... Incident... Noren informed me a New York police department had made a search on him recently.”

“*Really?* Do you know what for?” Braun was unaware of the search.

“Didn’t say... Just said some detective from New York had accessed his records.”

Braun’s eye brows knitted together. His mind grew concerned over Nero’s recent visit to his friend Hector Hades what Noren had warned him about. Patmos could see Braun’s concern and realized Braun was unaware of the search.

“You didn’t know? Sorry ...” Patmos enquired with concern.

“No... I’ll follow up with Noren. Thanks for letting me know John...” Braun advised keen to contact Noren to discuss the circumstances. “...You know my concerns for Nero.”

“I am sure it’s nothing. Probably just a nosy detective being curious over Nero’s recent encounter.. We would have heard more by now if it had been anything serious.” Said Patmos trying to abate Braun’s concerns.

“Hmm... I guess you’re right...” Allowing it to rest in the back of his mind until he had questioned Noren and Nero further. “...With that piece of good news I best be off and locate my son...” The glass of cognac now consumed and warming his insides, “...Thanks for the drink.” Braun raised his glass in appreciation.

“You’re welcome my good friend... My door is always open.” Said Patmos.

Resuming his philosophical study of the distant ice skaters.

Braun made his way to the waiting limousine to be taken back to his hotel suite.

Outside he could hear the chants of the protesters. Soon followed by screams as water cannons unleashed fury upon them. Braun shook his head wondering why Patmos persisted with not taking a firmer hand with these people. The limousine door closed and sealed the Secretary of State in silence within.

“Noren.” Braun directed his phone to connect.

“Noren speaking.”

“Noren... Just been with Patmos. Informed me about a search made by NYPD on Nero... Why wasn’t I notified about this?” Braun spat furiously into to phone.

There was uneasy silence.

“Well!?” Braun spat again.

“It was a routine check. Some... *Detective*... Ran a match on a fingerprint. But there was no case sighted against it... Until they do we don't have much to go on. I thought it best not to trouble you with it.” Noren hoped that was sufficient to annul Braun's anger.

“Anything to do with Nero I want to know about. Understood? ... I don't want a repeat of the last incident. He's been up to something there. I want to know what... Find out *who* the detective is and what they want with Nero. Understood?” Braun demanded.

“Yes Mister Braun... I understand completely.” Noren cowered to his superior's voice.

Braun hung up abruptly. Leaving Noren hanging in the air.

Braun would interrogated his son when he got back. It was too good to be true he thought. It had not taken long for Nero to find himself in trouble again. But how much trouble? Who was this detective looking into Nero's prints and why? At best it was nothing. A worse, Braun knew he had the resources to make the situation go away.

But that path was always messier.

Braun had more pressing concerns than Nero for now.

Patmos was on the fence and about to fall the wrong way. G7 families were looking to Braun to remedy the situation. The vaccine would be ready with or without Patmos' consent. Beginning to sense a weakness in Patmos' leadership. There was still time to convince Patmos that his proposal was the only solution.

Either way, Braun was going to get his way. He always did...

Chapter 25

“Noren.” Mueller spoke into the sleek black handset.

The dial tone rang longer than usual before it was answered.

“Mueller... How can I help?” Noren answered knowing the purpose of the call.

“You’ve been a busy man this morning?” Mueller prodded Noren directly.

“The early bird gets the worm they say...” Noren surmised contently, “...Is there a problem?” Now questioning the purpose of the call.

“The NYPD are investigating the death of the lab rat... *Isaac Newland*. What do I tell them?”

“That was fast. How did they? ...” Noren reflected and dismissed the discovery as elementary investigative work, “...Nothing to worrying about... We covered our tracks. Unfortunately the rat came out blazing and my men took him out... I really wanted to *talk* to him about his associates before his untimely demise.” Noren had felt cheated.

Unable to interrogated Isaac in his unique painful way. He had loosened the most stubborn of tongues in his time. Isaac’s would be no different.

“I have a Detective *Tepes* coming over at two to question me about him... What do I tell her?” Mueller asked hoping to evade the hangman’s noose.

“Tell her you know nothing... Tell them he was a model employee... That he will be nearly missed. Tears would help if you could manage them...” Noren teased Mueller. “...If this Detective *Tepes* causes a problem. Let me know... I’ll take care of her”.

“I’ll let you know if there are any issues.” Mueller advised.

Phones went silent and the two men went about their days. Noren to investigate who was looking into Nero’s prints.

Mueller to await the arrival of Detective *Tepes*.

1:55PM. Worland pulled the squad car up outside the Woolworth Building.

Kristina looked up at the giant structure. The ominous stone gargoyles perched high above looked down at her. Her skin crawled sensing an eerie presence of evil. A gust of cold air brought her back to street level. Two guards dressed in dark suits stood erect either side of the large entrance. If the squad car did not telegraph their arrival. Kristina flashed her badge for identification.

“We’re been expecting you.” A guard responded to the badge.

Escorting them to the elevators. The guard waved his security pass over the sensors and returned to his position at the entrance.

Thoughts of coming face to face with Seth tortured Kristina’s mind. She had run his name through the police database, but it had come up blank. With some relief. Seth was getting to her. Though she had had *liaisons* with suspicious clientele at Rudi’s, she was hoping Seth would be different.

Worland had run a back ground check on Black Crow Pharmaceuticals. But that too had come back blank. Nothing at all. It was as if the company did not exist. How does a major pharmaceutical corporation stay off the Wall Street registers? Private enterprise perhaps. Even they would have records. Was Black Crow connected to the raid on Isaac’s apartment?

They were about to find out.

The ride up had felt motionless and the doors opened to a luxurious reception. They stepped out and were greeted by a conservatively dressed prim receptionist.

“Detective Tepes I presume?” Spoke the polite voice from the phone call earlier.

“Yes... We’re here to see Mister Mueller at two.” The two detectives looked about comparing the contrast to their own crowded precinct.

“Please have a seat... Mister Mueller will be out shortly.” Suggested the polite voice.

“Thank you.” Sinking into two large arm chairs. The receptionist soon returned with two cups of coffee.

“Oh_ Thank you... You could read my mind.” Said Kristina keenly.

Taking a sip she wondered momentarily why Worland’s brews tasted so different. The receptionist smiled and disappeared to retrieve Mueller who was clearing his desk of important paperwork. Satisfied everything was sufficiently buried Mueller went to greet his guests. His desk and

conscience were clear. His knowledge of Isaac's demise was at best stained. Noren was no more than outside agent.

Mueller would allow his ignorance to do the talking.

"Detective Tepes. Welcome... It good to see you." Lied Mueller. Extending his hand to the detectives getting to their feet.

"Mister Mueller..." Kristina addressed him, "...This is Detective Worland who is assisting with the inquiries. Thank you for taking the time to see us." Said Kristina.

"Anything for NYPD... Please come this way." Said Mueller escorting them into his large office.

The walls adorned with modern art and his office windows spectacular views of Long Island to the east, Lower Manhattan and Stanton Island to the south.

"Please take a seat... Make yourself comfortable. More coffee perhaps?" Mueller offered his uninvited guests.

"We're fine for now..." Kristina countered, "...I have a few questions about one of your employees who was found dead this morning at his apartment." Kristina waited momentarily to observe Mueller's body language.

Words are not the only untruthful things that could be said. Kristina could sense an awkwardness about him. Like a worm on a hot tin roof. Mueller was uncomfortable with them being there despite his warm assurances.

"Yes. Yes. Most unfortunate this... Incident." Mueller was reaching for words to portray the feelings he did not possess.

Hands clasped together on his lap and eyes staring into space avoiding Kristina's.

"What can you tell me about Isaac Newland? ... How long has he worked for Black Crow?" Kristina began.

"Isaac was one of our best... He has been with us for about a year. I would have to check. He was recruited specifically for his research work in genetics... From Columbus I believe."

"That's right... We checked. I just wanted to confirm the facts." Said Kristina throwing Mueller off balance. "... Is it usual for staff to have their own laboratories Mister Mueller?" Kristina asked curiously.

“Most definitely not... Company policy prohibits such things... As I advised earlier over the phone.” Mueller offered in his assurance.

“Yes of course... Which brings me to the question of why Black Crow doesn't appear on any company registers... It's like it doesn't exist?”

“I wish I could answer that question Detective... All I can say is that we operate as a branch of the Order on special research projects... Again, these are all too highly classified to discuss... If you know what I mean.” Responded Mueller growing more anxious with each question.

A mild sweat broke across his brow and wipes it away with his handkerchief.

“Yes of course I fully understand...” Agreed Kristina confirming her suspicions about the company, “...Do you know of any reason why Isaac was killed? ... Or why he would have a laboratory at his apartment?”

“None what so ever I'm afraid... He was a model employee. The hours are never easy... But he never complained. Maybe his work colleagues can help you ...” Responded Mueller hoping to find a reprieve from the questioning, “... I don't think I can be of much help... I really just sign their pay checks.” Said Mueller conceding the extent of his involvement to the Lab Team.

“I understand. That would be most helpful... Would it be possible to see them? ... Today?” Kristina asks reluctantly.

Knowing she was opening the gate to the lion's den.

“I should think so. They should be in lab as we speak... I will take you down for a personally myself, if you like...” Mueller offers anxiously to rid himself of the detective's presence, “...Please come with me and I will arrange some passes.”

An unease came over Kristina. The moment she had been dreading was approaching fast.

Unaware of the number of floors the elevator had descended, they entered the clinical white laboratory.

Red laser scanners passively scoured them and allowed them to pass. Mueller led them down a series of identical hallways and then into Isaac's section. Nancy and Stan froze as they saw Mueller approaching with two strangers behind him. It was not until Mueller stepped aside did they see the detective's badges.

Isaac had yet to arrive. And he was rarely ever late. On seeing the detectives they wondered if something was amiss.

“Nancy... Stan.” I’ll like to introduce you to Detective Tepes and Detective Worland. They have a few questions regarding Isaac... I’ll let them explain.” Mueller stood aside hoping he had passed the intrusion onto someone else.

Kristina began to explain their visit and Isaac’s fate. Nancy began to weep and Stan stood in shock. Both lost for words. Stan placed his arm around Nancy trying to console her. Unable to stand. Nancy takes a seat.

‘Their behavior was more believable than Mueller’s had been.’ Thought Kristina.

Looking back over her shoulder. She could see Mueller standing benign. Indifferent to Isaac’s death. Feet shuffling nervously. Appearing eager to escape the confinement and interrogation.

‘He could suffer a little while longer.’ She thought.

Nancy and Stan described their relationship with Isaac and had been to his apartment. Unaware of the laboratory. It was all a surprise to them, and it showed on their faces. Adding nothing more than what Kristina already knew. She could rule them out of the inquiries.

“Perhaps you could speak to Seth...” said Stan, “...He’s the Team leader... He and Isaac were pretty tight.” Stan stammered out.

The mention of Seth’s name caught Kristina off guard. She had been expecting it, yet she still froze. She was hoping it was not *him*.

‘Please let it be some other Seth.’ She thought. Knowing there could only be one *Seth* at Black Crow.

“This way ... His office is over here.” Said Stan leading Kristina on a path she was reluctant to thread.

She followed him nonetheless. Worland trailed innocently behind. Looking about curiously at the array of equipment. They came to a doorway. Seth was bent over a microscope looking at the DNA sample from Sarah’s case.

“Seth... There’s a Detective Tepes here investigating Isaac’s... *Death.*”

That last word caught Seth’s attention.

Seth suddenly looked up and saw Kristina standing in his doorway. In his lab. The lack of makeup could not disguise her from him. The detective badge on her hip gave away another identity. If he was surprised by her sudden appearance. He did not show it.

The two looked at each other. Trying to gauge the other's thoughts.

'*There would be words spoken later at Rudi's.*' They mutually thought to themselves.

"Detective... *Tepes* ... You say? ..." Seth played along. "...What's that you say about Isaac's... Death?"

"That's what we're trying to establish." Responded Kristina.

Her voice only confirming to Seth it was her.

"Early hours of this morning... Were you aware he operated a private laboratory at his apartment?"

"No... Private laboratories are prohibited by the company." Seth parroted the company policy.

"How well did you know Isaac?" She asked.

Then realized the two sided blade she was swinging. And got caught squarely between the ribs with Seth's thrusting reply.

"How well do we know... Anyone?"

He moved towards her closer. She wished he had not. The distance between them became uncomfortable. He looked down at her. It was Kristina. He looked at her badge and examined the identification. She knew exactly what he was doing.

"Detective... *Kristina*... *Tepes*". Seth pronounced the two names separately. And distinctly.

There was an awkward silence between them.

"Any relation to ...?" He began to ask enquiring the connection to a mythical vampire.

"A distant relative." She replied to satisfy his curiosity.

And in a way as a warning that he should tread carefully. Or he too would be bitten. Her eye brows lowered and green eyes focused sharply on Seth's.

"Hmm... Really?" His head tilting slightly as he looked at her heritage. A faint birthmark clearly visible.

Seth quietly examined Kristina in her raw beauty. She could feel him peeling away the layers skin from her body. She was lost for words. Worland stood behind her wondering why his Boss had gone suddenly silent. They stood staring at each other. Like two western gunfighters about to draw.

Then Kristina drew first.

“Thank you Mister Adison... If I have any more questions I’ll be in touch.” Said Kristina looking into Seth’s dark brown eyes.

“You know where to find me.” Seth replied cryptically.

“I certainly do.” She fired back.

Both turned about and went back to their respective corners. Seth to his microscope to continue to rebuild Sarah’s suspect’s DNA. Kristina to the elevator. Followed by Mueller and Worland, struggling to keep up. Discs of red laser light flashed over the exiting group. Eradicating anything that may have hitched a ride. Mueller to return to his office unscathed, thinking he had evaded conviction.

“You didn’t ask him a lot of questions boss.” Worland asked curiously.

“It’s what he didn’t say that I was interested in.” Replied Kristina. Only confusing Worland further.

Back in the squad car Worland asked another question that had bugged him.

“How did you know his name was *Adison*?”

“It was on his name tag... Pay more attention Worland.” Kristina ordered her young charge.

But had Worland been paying attention, he would have noticed Seth was not wearing a name tag.

“Sorry boss.” Worland apologized. Feeling he would need to pay more attention next time.

“Back to the Precinct... I want piece this puzzle together... Government research labs. Special Ops all over a lab rat? ... There’s more to this than meets the eye... Isaac was into something bigger than Candy. Probably the secret project they were working on... Go through his bank accounts, phone records, emails, contacts. Savage anything from his computer drives. I want to know more about him than he did himself.”

“Yes Boss” Worland responded wondering how he was going to pull another miracle from thin air.

Kristina sat quietly deliberating what Seth was thinking at this moment.

In reality he was not. His mind was focused on the minute twisted strand of DNA under his microscope. He was playing with it like a toy. Pulling it apart and letting it replicate itself over and over again. It was a game to him.

As to Kristina's intriguing new identity. That could be discussed privately at Rudi's that evening. Seth was patient man. He could wait. He had waited his entire life. What was a few more hours? ...

Chapter 26

The afternoon passed slowly for Kristina.

Her mind would not let go the thought of meeting Seth that evening. She watched the clock on the wall. The clock watched her.

“Tick... Tock... Tick... Tock.” Said the clock.

Taunting Kristina’s patience further.

“Tick... Tock... Tick... Tock... Tick... Tock.”

Time had slowed down. Coffee only made it pass slower.

“Anything yet on those records Worland?” Kristina called out in frustration. Hoping to distract the clock’s attention of her.

“Almost there now. I’ll patch them through.” Worland calls out.

His head was buried among the growing pile of printouts.

Kristina skimmed her eyes over the listings for patterns and repartitions. A number keep reappearing. Located in Cambridge England. Probably his mother she thought. Bank records showed no large or irregular payments. Reviewing the list of emails. She sees an encrypted subject line. Then another.

“Who were you talking to Isaac that requires to encrypting?” Kristina asked inquisitively to herself.

“What’s that Boss?” Said Worland.

“Good job on the listings.” She commended him.

“Thanks boss.” Worland responded relieved he got one thing right for the day.

“Don’t get too comfortable... I need to get these emails unencrypted. Run them down to the IT Lab... Seems Isaac was chatting to someone... I want to know who and about what.”

“Yes boss.” Said Worland accepting his marching orders to conjure up yet another miracle.

Kristina pulled Sarah’s jacket from her bottom draw.

And stares at the holographic images of Sarah’s exposed body entangled in the refuge. Seagulls had pecked at her frozen corpse. Leaving

it with black open wounds. Her face saved by the wrapped bed sheet. Then she examined at Hector Hades profile sheet hoping to gleam something she had missed.

She was pinning her hopes on Seth reconstructing the DNA. But would he now? After the visit to the lab? He seemed distant. Then so was she. Until now, there had been an unspoken understanding between them. Neither wishing to impinge on the other's private life. Finding security in their anonymity. Feeling safe in being invisible.

Now they were both exposed. Albeit only to each other. More so her than Seth. She was moon lighting, Seth was not.

Should she go to Rudi's that night? She could avoid it for a few nights. But not forever. Sooner or later she would have to face her fear. Seth. He held the cards. And the DNA. He had openly disclosed what he did and where he worked. It was her that had concealed her detective work.

Kristina stopped thinking.

"Why am I trying to rationalize this to myself? ..." She asked herself under her breath. "...Just do your job girl. Just do your job." She repeated to regain her focus.

"What's that boss?" Worland had reappeared from the IT lab.

"Nothing... That was quick?" Kristina asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"They couldn't unravel it. Nothing they have seen before... They ran all sorts of algorithms over it."

"English Worland." Kristina pleaded for plain words.

"*Their* fancy computer code could not read *this* fancy computer code." Hoping that was sufficient enough to say it could not be translated back to anything that could be read.

"Thanks Worland... Good job. Go home. It's been a long day" Kristina suggested.

She was tired. An early start what with Isaac's investigation. Then the charade meeting with Mueller and the confrontation with Seth. There was not much more she could do at her desk. She had only one more interview to attend.

And for that she would need to change into something red.

10:00PM and Kristina was in no rush to get to Rudi's.

Subconsciously she was trying to avoid the inevitable. Matthias and Ruben stood tall either side of the doorway.

“Boys.” Kristina acknowledged their presence and welcoming grins.

Without looking towards the entrance to the stage made her way to the changing rooms and spied Cindy preparing for her routine she walks over to her.

“Has *he* arrived?” Kristina quietly enquires.

“Who?... *Oohhh him?* ... Not yet. You’re awfully keen on that one these days... I’ve seen you talking to him.” Cindy grinned and looked at Kristina’s reflection of her mirror.

“Strictly professional.” Kristina added in her defense before realizing what she had said.

“Of course it is.” Cindy winked. Envious Kristina was stealing her dream man away from her.

Kristina leaned over and whispers in Cindy’s ear.

“He’s actually helping with Sarah’s case... It’s purely professional.” Kristina declared unsure herself.

“Oh! I didn’t know.” Cindy smiled. Perhaps she had not lost her dream man after all.

“Keep that between ourselves okay?”

“Of course... My lips are sealed.”

And with that Kristina leaned further forward and kissed her lips.

“Good girl.” Said Kristina leaving to get changed.

If Seth appeared she would approach him.

If he did not, then perhaps she would call him into the Precinct for questioning.

‘*Hmm, that would be interesting.*’ She thought to herself.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her reflection stared back indifferently. The birthmark had darkened with the cold. Placing her hand over it hoping to warm the region. She could feel the contours with her fingers. Slowly massaging it in small circles the color changed gradually to pink.

“Why do you cover it up? ... It’s beautiful...” Cindy confessed on her way to perform her routine. Placing her hand on Kristina’s shoulder. “... I’ll let you know if I see *him*.”

“Thanks... Break leg kid.” Kristina wished her lover.

“You too!” Cindy pinged back at her.

Kristina applied the delicate layers of cosmetics that would transform her from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Emerald green eyes sparkled under the mirror’s lighting making them look like polished emeralds. Feeling the warmth of the mirror lights on her skin. Was she in the mood to dance she wondered? Seth was on her mind.

Recalling his features from their meeting that afternoon. The strong clinical lighting revealing his features more clearly. Almost unflawed. His dark brown eyes. His voice. His assurance and confidence. Was he capable of killing Isaac? The dark thought brought her attention back to the reflection looking back at her in the mirror.

Hearing her curtain call inhaled a deep sigh and exhaled her naked inhibitions.

Her song began to play. And audience went silent. The white spot light awaited her manifestation. The audience awaited with anticipation. Closing eyes, stepped onto the floating cloud, allowed the music to take her by the hand and lead her into the dance. The spot light held her as long as it could before she escaped into darkness.

Only to find her again.

The pursuit would last over five minutes. To Kristina it would seem a lifetime. The feasting eyes would dine upon her exotic body. On her sensual movements. The music faded. As did the lights. As did she. Spellbound eyes were left longing for more.

Returning to the changing rooms where Cindy was waiting.

“He’s here! He’s here!” She exclaimed excitedly.

As if Santa Claus had just come down the chimney and filled her stocking.

“Think I’ll pay him a visit.” Said Kristina.

Changing quickly into a short red skirt and white shirt tied at the front. Kristina turned and examined her ass in to mirror.

“Sexy! ...” Cindy proclaimed jealously. “...You sure it’s strictly professional?” She asks curiously.

“Tonight it is... I can’t promise tomorrow though.” Said Kristina.

Leaving Cindy wondering if she had lost her dream man again.

‘Maybe she’ll bring him home.’ Cindy thought to herself. Squeezing hands between her legs.

“Oohhh! Why does she do that to me?” She exclaimed in frustration walking away.

Circulated the tables making small talk, through the dim light she could make out Seth sitting quietly in his corner. Having seen her perform. A whiskey at his hand. She could sense his eyes were burning holes into her. Tracking her every move. His eyes would not let her escape as the spotlight had.

Slowly she egged closer. Eventually running out of tables to avoid him any longer.

“Seth.” Kristina spoke first.

“Chelsea.” Seth replied without a hint of awkwardness. If he was playing with her it was not showing.

“I can explain ...” Kristina blinked first.

Reaching for words to explain the conspiracy of the life she was leading.

“You don’t need to... I understand. We all have an itch we have to scratch... A life we wished we lived instead of the one we have.” Explained Seth calmly.

As though he was leading a secret life too. With those few philosophical words released her from the bondage she had entangled herself with that afternoon.

“Oh...” Taken back by Seth’s calmness and consoling words.

“Have a seat. You look tired... You need an early night... *Kristina.*” Seth waved down a waitress and ordered two whiskeys.

“I think you’re right.” Accepting his absolution.

Drinks arrived, taking a mouthful she swallowed. And let a peace come over her. Maybe it was the whiskey. Maybe it was the Seth’s understanding. Maybe she had unloaded a burden to someone she was beginning to care about. She could barely reconcile it to herself. How could Seth?

“Good news.” Seth declared hoping to ease Kristina’s dilemma.

“What’s that?” Kristina asked curiously confused.

“I managed to exact the DNA from the sample *you* sent over.”

Seth handed her a large yellow envelope containing the detailed DNA report.

“You did? ... But the Forensics lab said it was damaged beyond recovery.” She examined the envelope and placed it on the table.

“True, it was... Damaged beyond *their* recovery ... Not mine. Remember we have the all fancy toys. Speaking of which... What’s this about Isaac? You left without questioning me? I hope you don’t do that with all your cases?” Interested in her interviewing procedure.

“Isaac. Yes... Sorry about that. I was sort of distracted if you know what I mean.”

“I was a little distracted myself.” Agreed Seth.

“Well it didn’t seem like it... I am assuming you didn’t kill him... Did you?” Asked Kristina as though Seth would say that he had.

“No... I did not kill Isaac for the record... *This is off the record?*” Seth enquired to the extent of Kristina’s questioning.

“*Everything we say here is off the record...* God help me if it ever was *on the record...* I’d have a lot of explaining to do... Did you know he had a private lab?”

“No... That was the first time I’d heard. Company policy...” Seth never completed the sentence.

“I’m sensing your Mueller could be involved... His body language didn’t tell the truth today.”

“You read body language can you?” Seth asked curiously.

“I get it from my mother... She was a gypsy you know. Back in Romania.”

“Ah... That explains a lot...” Helping Seth to piece together Kristina’s origins. “...Gypsy you say? ... What can you pick up on me?” He asked curiously. Intrigued to know how much she knew.

“You’re a dark horse Mister Adison. Something is shielding you. I’ll get through it eventually.” Kristina sensed a dark presence around Seth. A chill ran over her skin and she hoped it was just the chill in the air.

“I am sure you will.” Allowing the psychic intrusion.

“I suspect Mueller is involved with Special Ops somehow.” Kristina continued with Isaac’s demise.

“What makes you think it was Special Ops?” He asked inquisitively.

“Ballistics and caliber of the shells left behind... Silencers probably used. No one heard anything until two white vans left the scene... Can only suggest an organized team ... Not amateur hoods.” She explained.

“I see what you mean. And Mueller? How does he fit in?” Seth asked.

“Black Crow. Government Laboratory conducting highly sensitive Research Agencies and Special Ops go hand in hand.” Kristina concluded.

She looked about for prying ears. The pulsating music drowned out their conversation and Khloe tantalizing body distracted everyone’s attention.

“Obviously I can’t discuss any research... But I see your point. I’ll keep my ear to the ground and if I hear anything I’ll keep you informed.” Seth offered.

“We recovered some fragments of emails from his computer. But they’ve been encrypted. Our IT people can’t unencrypt them.”

“Perhaps I can help?” Seth looked blankly at Kristina.

“Don’t tell me you have a couple *Doctorates* in computing as well?” Kristina joked in amusement.

But Seth just stared back at her. Waiting for the pennies to fall. Then they fell.

“*Clink, clink.*”

“Oh_ Jesus Christ! Is there anything you can’t do?!” She exclaimed.

Several heads turned to see what the commotion was about.

“I make a bad cup of coffee.” Seth confessed his weakness.

“Well I guess we can never be together then.” Said Kristina.

Before realizing what she had said.

“Oh I guess that settles that then...” Seth added surprised at the sudden rejection. “...Now, about those emails... Burn me a copy and I’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

“Burn?” Said Kristina lost in the jargon.

“Ask that junior Detective... Worland. He’ll know.”

“How do you know he’s a junior?”

“He jumps every time you talk to him.”

“He does, doesn’t he? ... I like a man who jumps when I call.” She beamed a smile.

“I’ll work on it... I better be off home... Just wanted to drop off the DNA report.”

“Thanks for that... Really appreciate your help. Sorry to drag you in on this. Be careful Whoever killed Isaac plays by their own rules.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” Said Seth.

“Yeah. That’s what Isaac thought too.” Kristina warned.

“You be careful yourself Kristina... Okay?”

His voice conveyed a concern for her. Seth's hand touched Kristina's as she stood to leave. Holding her hand long enough to feel how fragile she was. It was the first time they had ever touched.

He knew too well the power of the men involved. Their purpose and the lengths to which they would go to attain their goals. People were expendable, as Isaac had proven. He took a napkin and scribbled a number and pushed it towards her.

"What's this?" She asks looking at the strange number.

"My number if you ever need to contact me." Offered Seth.

"Strange looking phone number." Said Kristina examined the sequencing.

"It's a secure line... No one can trace it, or listen in."

"Thanks." Quietly staring at the mysterious number before folding it.

Pondering how he would even begin to have such a line. But accepted that a guy of his intelligence would.

It was Kristina's turn to watch Seth walk away.

Who was this mysterious man wanting to help her? Why were their lives becoming entangled? Involved. Endangering himself for her. A strange feeling came over her as she allowed herself to fall into a momentary trance.

Her gypsy intuition sensed a darkness. Something sinister was about to happen. And it involved Seth. Why was he helping her? Could she trust him? For now, she needed him. Isaac's emails would not unravel themselves.

He had delivered what her own department could not, Sarah's suspect's DNA.

Confused, she roused herself from the trance. Unsure of Seth's motives. Unsure of who Seth was, or *what* he was. She sensed a momentary longing for him. Then reminded herself.

'Don't fall in love with the Johns. Don't fall in love with Seth.' ...

Chapter 27

“Worland!” Kristina cried out.

His cry echoed about the Precinct floor, several officers chuckled waiting for Worland to respond to his master’s voice.

“Yes boss ... I know, Coffee” Worland jumped to his feet.

“Before you do that... *Burn* me a copy of Newland’s emails. I might know someone who can help with them.”

“But the IT Department said...” Worland tried to get out before being stopped in his tracks.

“Forget what the IT boys said... Just do it!” Kristina ordered her junior charge, “...And Worland ...”

“What’s that boss?”

“Coffee! Now!” She barked, desperate for her morning fix.

“Yes boss.” Hurrying away to the coffee machine and wondering if life would be easier if he brought the machine to her.

Kristina leaned back in her chair and thought. How could Seth do all these miracles? Was he really the genius he said he was? He was connected to Isaac’s death and in a round-about way to Sarah’s.

‘Where do you fit into the puzzle Mister Adison... And why are you helping me if you’re involved?’ She thought, struggling to reconcile his involvement.

There was something dark about him that made her wary. Yet in a way, she trusted him. Seth was a person of interest in more ways than one.

“Coffee boss...” Worland returned handing her the paper cup, “...I’ll get those emails for you.”

“Thanks Worland... Good job...” Stroking her charge. “...I’ll drop it off tonight”

“Anyone we know boss?”

“Private enterprise. They have all the *best toys* apparently.” Kristina hinted at source of her new found resource. “...Oh that reminds me...”, Reaching for a large yellow envelope for her desk, “...Have Forensics run a match on this DNA from the Albright case.”

“How’d you get this? I thought it was...” Worland began.

The glare from Kristina told him to stop talking and get moving.

“Yes boss... Sorry boss.” Worland surrendered willingly and disappeared again.

‘Let’s see what comes back on that.’ Thought Kristina.

Until she could connect Hector or Nero, or *someone* in the database, she really had nothing to go on. For Sarah’s sake she hoped someone would show up and allow her haunting soul to be laid to rest.

Noren had been making his own investigations as who was making enquiries about Nero’s fingerprints. He sat confused staring at the name staring back at him on the screen.

‘Detective Tepes.’ He thought weighing the name in his mind. Why did it sound familiar?

Lifting the handset, called out, “*Mueller.*” And waited impatiently.

“*Mueller.*” The head piece answered a few moments later.

“Noren here... What’d you say the name of that detective was that was sniffing around there yesterday?” Noren asked abruptly.

“Ah_ *Tepes...* Detective Tepes... Why? Is there a problem?” Mueller asked with concern in his voice.

“Nothing I can’t handle. Any_ issues when she came to call?” Noren asked curiously.

“None. She asked a few questions. Nothing untoward... Questioned a few of the team. Then left in a hurry. I was pleased to see the back of her.”

“I see... Could be just a coincidence.” Noren sounded aloud.

“A coincidence?” Mueller asked.

“Maybe... Thanks.” Noren hung up leaving Mueller hanging in the air over the unscheduled call and wondering what the *coincidence* could have been.

Noren did not believe in coincidences. Staring out the window overlooking the snow covered city. The dirty blue sky was a nice change to the dirty grey clouds that had blanketed the city for the past month. There was something warm about the giant bright orb that brought life to his veins.

His mind focused on the name on the screen.

‘Tepes... What are you doing meddling in my affairs? ... What is your interest in Nero? ... I think we will need to talk.’ And with that thought, he

grinned.

Savoring a taste of his now cold coffee and returned to view the idyllic view outside.

“There you go boss.” And Worland handed a small plastic stick over to his Boss.

“This is it? ...” Kristina asked staring at the small piece of red plastic. “...All of it?” As if to question its validity.

“Yeah. That’s all of it... The IT boys have wagered fifty bucks your fancy boy won’t find anything... So I took some of the action.”

“Glad you have confidence in me Worland.”

“After the DNA result who am I to question your ability boss?”

“Thanks Worland... Now get me a coffee.”

“Yes boss.”

Kristina wondered if Seth was as clever as he said he was.

Had her confidence just cost Worland fifty bills on a punt with a stranger. Dialing Seth’s profile on the computer again. It showed the same as before. Nothing. It appeared she knew more about him than the database did.

‘How do you manage to stay off the radar Mister Adison?’

At least he was on the right side of the law. Or so she hoped. Her mind shifted to Sarah. Where were Nero and Hector? Nero was currently residing in Geneva under his father’s protection. Outside her reach. Hector had not re-appeared since the night she had last encountered him. It was just a matter of time before they would return.

Over confidence was something she was banking on with them.

Seth began piecing together the final strands of his virus.

Like an orchestral symphony. Layered with intricate instrumentals. Each tuned to perfection. Each building upon the previous movement. Ironically as Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* played through headphones as he rocked in time with the racing classical melody.

In the lab outside he had kept Nancy and Stan busy finding the third and final key. He had sent them down a rabbit hole that would lead them to re-discover what he already knew. Once the vaccine was complete, trials would begin on human Guinee-pigs to confirm its effectiveness.

His own virus was nearing completion and would also be tested alongside the Order's vaccine. Only he would know the difference between the two. A dead infectious human Guinee-pig was the same as another dead infectious Guinee-pig. They all look the same to a pathologist. There would hardly be a need, nor want for an autopsy. The cause having been the deliberate ingestion of plagues. Content in the thought, Seth continued to rock rhythmically to the soothing music.

Forensics soon reported back with a match to Sarah's DNA suspect.

Kristina examined the large yellow envelope labelled *SARAH ALYSHA ALBRIGHT*. Opening it hesitantly. As if to delay the inevitable. Knowing her search for Sarah's suspected killer had come to an end.

An image of Hector Hades displayed in the top corner. His face now becoming all too familiar. Sighing a sense of relief. Closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She had him that night. Why did not she nab him then? She knew the answer before she had asked.

"Worland." She said slowly and despondently.

"Coffee?"

"No... No coffee... I'm going to need something a little stronger. Later..." Gathering her thoughts and regained her sense of duty. "...Put an APB out on our friend Hector Hades as a person of interest regarding the death of Sarah Albright." She ordered Worland.

"Yes boss."

Worland quietly disappeared behind his screen to register the All-Points Bulletin. He sensed a despondency in his bosses' voice.

"You okay boss?" He asked with concern.

"Yeah... Just tired" She replies, relieved Sarah she could be laid to rest knowing they had found the person that could be responsible.

And the case finally closed.

She allowed the thought of Hector's participation to feaster. Visualizing him with Sarah and imagining her last moments. She still could not tie him to her death. No one had ever been murdered by having sex. Or so she thought. She needed to tie him to the drug that killed Sarah. Little-brother was a rare narcotic.

If she could tie the drug to Hector, she might have a case.

Even then the case may not hold up. Knowing that he could well evade conviction on a technicality. She examined his file. The list of prior

offenses was long and varied. Assault with a deadly weapon. Robbery and drug possession. Jails were overflowing. Sentences had been reduced and offenders soon found themselves back on the streets and lost among the unsuspecting populous to re-offend.

Would Hector surface again. And she knew one place to find him if he ever did.

Business was brisk at Rudi's that evening.

The snow drift that day had been trampled to slush by the passers-by. Inside the hallowed foyer married men gather at the bar. Chatting small talk with scantily clad single women young enough to be their daughters. Lavishing them with complements and expensive drinks.

Kristina looked about for Cindy. Seeing her at the bar with a tall dark gentleman, old enough to be her father. Content to ply her trade and relieve the gentleman and his wallet of their burdens.

Today, she was his. Tomorrow, she would be someone else's.

Kristina grinned at her protégée at work. Then thought of Sarah and recalled the dangers involved. Cindy looked over and saw Kristina standing there appearing troubled. She whispered something into her surrogate father's ear, touching him on the forearm telling him not to leave before walking over to Kristina.

"You okay?" She enquired looking at Kristina with concern.

"Yeah... Just tired I guess...." Kristina confessed quietly. "...We'll talk later. Go back to your ..." She almost said *father*, but caught herself in time, "...Gentleman." Then winked.

Releasing Cindy back to her man for the evening.

'*Why can't they all be gentlemen?*' She thought.

With heavy steps, she climbed the stairs and stood at Anthony's doorway. She did not knock. Her shadow casting her presence. Anthony sensed a darkness in the doorway and looked up.

"This is becoming a bit of a habit. What's up?" Reaching for two glasses and the bottle of whiskey from behind him.

Sensing she needed it more than he did.

"The DNA results came back from Sarah's suspect... There was a guy in the tapes that matches."

Pulling out a photo of Hector from that evening from her hand bag and timidly handed it to Anthony.

“This the guy eh? ...” Anthony studied the image carefully. “...Mind if I keep this... I’ll show Matthias and Ruben.”

Kristina nodded quietly and swallowed a heavy mouthful of whiskey.

“I was hoping you would.” She said, staring into Anthony’s eye conveying a message that could not be spoken.

“I understand...” Anthony said quietly. “...Leave this with me.”

That was all that would be said.

The two sat quietly. Kristina drank down her last swallow. Took a deep breath and stood to regain her balance.

“You okay?” Anthony asked hesitantly unsure how she was handling the pressure of Sarah’s death.

“The show must go on Ant.” Chelsea bravely jested back.

Anthony understood her dancing was her release valve and grinned.

“Get out of here... Go make me some money.” He softly ordered.

“Yes boss.” Said Kristina becoming Chelsea and smiled.

Leaving Anthony to enjoy the last of his whiskey and contemplate Hector Hades fate should he ever return. This had become personal. Sitting back in his chair and eyed Hades’ features. Burning every last detail of the weasel infested sadistic face into his memory.

Unforgiving thoughts filled his mind. A quiet word with Matthias and Ruben would be had.

Kristina completed her routine as if nothing was untoward.

Patrons erupted with their usual enthusiasm before releasing her from their captivation. Changing into a scanty costume she made her rounds about the tables. Edging ever closer to Seth’s who sat patiently in his darkened corner. A whiskey at hand. His eyes tracked her as she approached.

She sensed a yellow aura around him. Then a red aura.

‘Not possible? ...’ She thought. *‘...Must be the lighting playing tricks on me.’*

Trying not to focus on it. But the less she tried, the more the bright auras appeared. Her eyes flamed momentary in the dim ambient light.

“Your eyes?” Seth spoke first. Noticing the strange aberration.

“My eyes?” Kristina replied, wondering what Seth had seen.

“Nothing...” Said Seth puzzled. Dismissing it as a reflection. “... Drink?”

“Thanks... Thought you’d never ask.”

“Did you bring the emails?” Seth asks.

“I think so.”

Kristina reaches inside her top and pulls out the small plastic strip wondering if the size matched the size of the data it contained.

“Still warm.” She added.

“Hmm... It is. Thanks.” Sensing the lingering warmth of Kristina’s breasts. “...I’ll look over it tonight”.

Kristina sat quietly looking at Seth. Now having lost the aura connection.

Then remembered.

“We got a match on the DNA you found.” Troubled by the findings. Unsure how to continue. Sarah’s death was still a raw wound.

“And? ...” Seth probed further.

“Appears it belongs to Hector Hades as we suspected... I’ve informed Anthony.”

“Oh, I see.” Seth replied, understanding the consequences if Hector ever reappeared again.

“And the other gentleman... Nero?” Asked Seth hoping the two would be incriminated by association.

“Nero.... Nero *Braun*... Seems to be in the clear for now. Tucked away in Geneva under his father’s protection.” Kristina qualified his full name knowing he was outside her reach. For now.

A worried look came over his Seth’s face. And it showed.

“What’s up?” Kristina asks seeking the cause the concern appearing on Seth’s face.

“Did you say *Braun*? As in... Secretary of State... Braun?” Seth asked hesitantly. Hoping for a different answer to the one Kristina was about to give him.

“That’s right... Seems his father has a certain influence clearing up his son’s misdemeanors. Why... What’s the matter?”

Menacing thoughts ran through Seth’s mind as to how she had become involved with two cases. Both of which were connected back to Braun. One through his son Nero. The other through Black Crow.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this...” Seth looks about for prying ears. “...But it’s for your own safety.”

Seth hesitates again. Kristina was entering a mine field and had to be warned to step carefully. If she was onto Braun. Then Braun would be onto her. They could even be under surveillance as they spoke. He looked about again. Seeing no one suspicious looking back at them.

Kristina looks about. Wondering what Seth was looking for.

“Braun is involved with Black Crow... Mueller reports to him. That’s all I can say...” He let the information register, then added, “...It may just be a coincidence... But I don’t do coincidences.”

“Neither do I.” said Kristina aligning their thoughts.

“Thread very carefully Kristina... He won’t play nice to get what he wants.”

Kristina tried to rationalize Braun’s involvement. In some way, Seth was connected closer to the cases than what Braun was. Braun was in Geneva. Seth was sitting in front of her.

Could she trust him? Why was he helping her? Yet he was.

“Thanks for the warning...” She conceded graciously. “...Now, there is the small matter of your friend *Isaac Newland* to clear up.” Said Kristina appealing her sense of urgency.

“Leave this with me... I can’t imagine it being too complicated...” Holding the small strip in his hand. “...I haven’t seen one I haven’t written myself.”

“You make it sound so easy Seth.”

“I wish sometimes it wasn’t.” He confessed wanting a challenge in his life.

He looked at Kristina and realized some challenges do not come by way of a small silicon chip. At that exact moment of thought, his auras flashed brilliantly and blinded Kristina temporarily.

“You okay?” He asked seeing her suddenly taken back by something.

“Yeah. Sorry. Just... The light.” She declared.

“The light?” Seth looked about but could only see the spot lights of the stage. And Kristina had her back to it.

“We’re got to stop meeting like this...” She joked, “...Thanks for the drink.”

“Remember... Tread carefully... I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Seth watched as Kristina walked away. Pulling him with her.

‘*What light?*’ Pondering the lighting around him.

Then focused his eyes on the small red plastic strip.

‘What were you hiding Isaac?’ His lips purged.

Taking the last swallow of whiskey. Allowed it to sit in his mouth. Letting it burn his cheeks. Savoring the complex flavors before swallowing hard and exhaling flammable vapors.

It was time to go home and play.

Sensing the subtle change in the seasons, Seth threw the satchel on the bed, searched the fridge for anything that resembled food.

Consuming what could have been another sandwich. A coffee machine spat out a black solution that could have been coffee. Accessing the private laboratory places the small red strip on a dull black disc atop of a processor.

“Interrogate”. Seth commanded, and the processor came to life.

LED lights flashed in sequence as it dissected the strip and surgically removed its contents.

“Display”.

A large screen displayed the strip’s skeleton. Ribs of files scrolled down the screen. Each one an email transaction.

“Unencrypt”.

And waited as the processor wrestled with the encrypted code.

Knowing of at least a dozen prime numbers that were yet to be discovered. He had played with deciphering code as a child. For fun. Developing a form of artificial intelligence. If only for intellectual companionship.

And it was this that was currently working its way through the compilations. Seeing the code on the screen, manipulated it in his mind. As the processor was manipulating in its.

It was race as to who would win.

“*Complete.*” Flashed a message on the screen.

“Bastard.” He muttered aloud.

This time the machine had won. Dismissing the small defeat, voiced another command.

“Open.”

Layers of now readable email strings cascaded down the screen.

“Save.”

Processor’s lights blinked in unison as it burned its discovery onto the disc.

“Copy.”

“Now let’s see what you were hiding Isaac shall we?” Seth said to himself eager to infiltrate Isaac’s secret world.

“Scroll.”

A listing of subject lines scrolled slowly down the screen. Seth interrogated each line in his mind.

“Stop!” Seth called out suddenly, seeing a name he recognized.

“Display 137”.

The contents displayed itself on the screen.

A message between Isaac and his friend Virgil. It seemed Virgil was double dipping. Seth wondered who else Virgil had enlisted to deliver a deadly virus. Isaac had been careless and sloppy. He gotten caught with his hand in the pathogen jar. In some way, whoever took Isaac out, had done Seth a favor. It was only a matter of time before Isaac would have exposed himself and those around him with a deadly strand and sabotage Seth’s plan.

Spending the next hour reading every email searching for key references to people and places. Coming across the name *Diablo*. Knowing this was referring to him. But little else was disclosed. He contemplated whether to release the deciphered messages back to Kristina.

There was nothing in them that gave away Virgil’s location. Nor his own direct participation.

Kristina’s observation about the raid being a Special Op was becoming a reality.

She would write Isaac’s death up as part of a doomsday cult. Of which there were hundreds within New York City alone. And the Order had shut it down. But how far down the rabbit hole did she intend to go? Hector was one thing. Isaac would exposed Kristina to a whole new level of danger. He would need to watch her back.

Their relationship was becoming *complicated*...

Chapter 28

“Talk damn you!” Noren spat at Virgil strapped to a solid wooden chair.

Seated in the middle of a vacant concrete room. No windows. Only a single door allowed any escape. Sitting rigid. Fists clenched fighting back the pain of Noren’s beating. Two large impassive thugs stood behind Virgil. Watching their master at work.

Grinning with each bloody blow.

“Just tell me who Diablo is and you can go free... You’d *like* that wouldn’t you?” Noren appealed to Virgil’s will to be rid of further pain.

Virgil remained silent.

His battered face bearing the swollen bruises of the hefty blows of Noren’s fists. A heart pounding in his chest. Blood and sweat streaming down over his face. His breath quickening with each vicious assault.

After two hours of brutal interrogation he had remained silent.

“Wire him up!” Noren hollered at his henchmen familiar with his array of torture equipment.

One placed a metallic cap on Virgil’s struggling head, while the other attached metal braces to his legs.

“Clear!” Called out Noren.

Then casually flicking a switch as if turning on a light.

A relentless buzz resonated about the room.

Lights flickered as the current drew its violating energy from the main supply. Virgil’s body reacted violently, immediately becoming rigid. Muscles clenched and bulged. Fighting the cruel convulsive current coursing through his insubstantial body. Thick leather straps restrained any possibility of escape.

Noren watched on. Taking a sip of his coffee. Insulated from the pain being inflicted. He had seen it all too often before. Eventually he would break Virgil’s will. He would talk. They all do. Eventually. However Virgil was proving difficult.

He had to commend Virgil’s spirit and fortitude.

‘*A moment longer*’, Noren thought.

Taking another sip from the delicate porcelain cup. Whiffs of burnt hair drifted from beneath Virgil’s metallic cap. Sensing he could be losing him.

Flicked the switch off.

Silence. Other than Virgil’s gasping breaths.

In a composed voice Noren appealed again to Virgil’s need to be free of pain.

“Who is he? ... This, *Diablo*?” Noren whispered deftly in Virgil’s ear.

Virgil’s eyes struggled to focus on Noren. Labored breathing making it almost impossible for him to speak. Lips trembled. Fighting the fear of betrayal. Faltering at first.

Then finding a voice through the entangled agony.

“I... I... I... Isaac!” Virgil spat out looking ashamed.

“Oh... my dear Judas.” Noren leisurely labelled Virgil’s betrayal.

“Why didn’t you say so sooner? You would have saved yourself a lot of pain. You see... Your friend Isaac... Is already *dead*.” Noren titled his dead at an unbelieving Virgil.

“Oh? ... You... You didn’t *know*?” He chuckled to himself.

Virgil looked through his swollen bruised eyes into Noren face. Puzzled by what he was saying.

“Isaac is dead?” Virgil struggles to ask.

“That’s right. Saw to it myself. Oh Virgil... My *dear* Virgil. You’re a foolish man. All your pain for naught.” Noren shook his head in wonder and content.

“Go play with you little doomsday buddies... Yours will be nothing compared to what is about to be unleashed!” Noren spat out more than he should have.

It did not matter to him. He was now among the chosen that would survive the Order’s virus.

“Get this piece of shit out of here!” Ordered Noren now disgusted with Virgil’s presence.

“You don’t want to? ...” One of the men was about to suggest.

“Don’t waste a bullet on this one... He’s useless without his *Diablo* to help him.” Said Noren with a sinister laugh.

Watching Isaac was being dragged to the boot of the waiting car to be dumped onto unknown frozen street. Virgil had given Noren what he had wanted to hear. Unaware him-self of Diablo's true identity and Isaac's name was the only one he could give up.

The pain suffered was worth the price if it meant the real Diablo lived. So Noren had killed Isaac. He was no more than a backup plan. Groaning in pain as he was thrown into the booth. The wounds heal in time. He wanted to die anyway and take everyone with him. His face swollen with black and blue bruises. Eyes sparkling with delight before painfully closing. Noren had revealed his hand.

His doomsday cult had competition.

"The more the merrier ... The more the merrier." Virgil chuckled to himself.

Then began to laugh. Audible to the two men riding up front. They looked at each other confused.

Noren still had another loose end to tidy up. Detective Tepes. He did not like loose ends. This one needed to be tied off for good if he was to keep his master Augustus Braun happy.

Seth arrived at the lab earlier than usual.

Unable to sleep with thoughts of Isaac's connection to Virgil. If they found Isaac, could they find him? What if they got to Virgil, would he talk? There was no way of getting in touch with Virgil.

Then he had a thought. Use Isaac's email account.

'It would be like talking beyond the grave.' Thought Seth humorously. Not to mention, scaring the hell out of Virgil. Seth made a mental note to contact Virgil that evening.

"Nancy? How you going? If you want some time off Stan can cover for you." Seth offered.

Stan looked up puzzled with how he was to manage the extra chores. Then realized Seth was joking.

"Funny boss." Stan whips back smiling.

Nancy sat despondent with thoughts of Isaac still fresh on her mind.

"Nancy?" Asked Seth.

She looks up. And sees Seth next to her, his hand on her shoulder.

"Go home... You are of no use to me here. Stan and I can manage for a few days... We're pretty well there... You can help stitch it together when

you get back. Okay?"

"You make it sound so easy boss..." Nancy replied. "...Maybe a couple of days."

"That a girl. We'll be fine. Don't worry about Stan. I won't work him too hard." Said Seth.

Stan looked up again wondering if he was still joking.

"Thanks boss." Nancy replied.

"Get out of here. Now... You too Stan if you like. I can manage." Seth ordered them both.

"I'll be fine boss." Said Stan reluctant to leave his assigned task.

"Good on you mate... I have to head Downtown to drop something off. You can hold the fort while I'm away... Finish off the sequencing on the mutant RNA strain Isaac was working on."

"Right boss." Stan confirmed.

"When I get back we'll make a start on cloning the parent pathogens I brought back from Wales... I want to begin trials next week."

"Next week? That's earlier than planned" Stan asked curiously.

"We're ahead of schedule I'm afraid..." Seth added ironically, "... We'll use the extra time to make any tweaks"

"Tweaks?" asked Stan curiously.

"Fine tuning Stan... Fine tuning. Now get to it. I should be about an hour". Replied Seth disappearing with Nancy towards the elevator.

10:00AM and Seth was taking a chance Kristina would be at the Precinct.

Her identification badge had showed she was based at the Ninety-First Precinct. A short bicycle ride from the Woolworth Building. He wanted to drop off the deciphered emails and see her again in her raw beauty. At Rudi's she was disguised as Chelsea. At the precinct she was disguised as Kristina. He wanted understand the two pieces of her personality puzzle and how they fitted together.

Pulling his bicycle up outside the Precinct he locked it against nearby railing.

"Hey you! ... You can't leave that there!" An officer calls out.

"Won't be five minutes... Just here to see Detective *Tepes*." Seth pleaded his defense.

"Oh... Why didn't say. Up the stairs to your left... Good luck."

'*Good luck? ... What did that mean?*' Thought Seth puzzled.

Climbing the stairs to the main entrance, before stepping into another world. Looking about felt feeling lost among the perps and the officers. Unsure which was which.

From a large central bench a Duty Sergeant calls out to him, “Can I help you?”

“Detective Tepes?” Seth calls back.

The Duty Sergeant points to the corner desk. Then calls back, “Good luck!”

‘Good luck? ... Why do people keep saying that?’ He wondered again.

Unsure what to expect. Treading consciously edged his way through the desks covered with case files. Suspects sat wrestling their handcuffs and demanding their lawyers. Then heard a voice above all the others.

“Worland!”

And followed the voice to its source.

Worland looks up and sees Seth standing behind his boss. A paper coffee cup in her hand and a picture of Hades on her screen.

“Psst! Boss! ...” Worland tries to quietly get her attention, “... The guy from the lab.” His eyes motioning to indicate Seth was behind her.

Kristina swivels the chair around and finds Seth looking down at her.

“Mister Adison... What a surprise... What brings you here?” Questioned Kristina grinning. Playing innocent to his appearance. And their acquaintance.

“I was just passing and thought I would drop this off.” Waving the small plastic strip about in his hand before handing it to Kristina.

“Still warm.” Kristina jokes with him.

“Boss... Is that what I think it is?” Worland asked eagerly.

“Go collect your fifty bucks Worland... And while you’re at it... *Two coffees.*” Handing Worland the stick for processing.

“Thanks boss! ... With pleasure!” Quickly disappearing from sight to collect his wager.

Kristina sat observing Seth taking in the disorder unfolding about him.

“Quiet day in the office is it?” Seth asks out of his depth.

“You could say that... Nothing as fancy as your laboratory I’m afraid. So... What did you find out?” Asked Kristina cutting to the chase.

“Seems Isaac was linked to an innocuous doomsday cult. Someone called... *Virgil*, whoever he is...” Seth lied. “...It’s all there in the emails. I’ve unzipped a copy for you.”

“Unzipped?” Kristina asked bewilderedly.

“Worland will explain... It’s all there in plain English.”

“Thanks. You didn’t have to drop it off.”

“I know... But I really wanted to see you in your *natural environment*... And you as you.” Seth admitted.

“Well... This is it. This is where it all happens... And this is me.” Kristina waved her hands about gesturing her penned in enclosure.

Just then Worland returns proudly waving a fifty dollar bill about.

“Well done Worland... This is the man you should thank”. Kristina turned her eyes to Seth.

“Thank you Mister Adison. But how did you crack it? The IT boys...”

“It was elementary really. Let’s just say our budget is bigger than theirs.” Hoping that would satisfy Worland’s curiosity.

“Well thanks again.” Worland accepted examining the fifty dollar bill.

“Haven’t we forgotten something Worland? Hmm? ...” Kristina gestured her empty coffee cup.

“Oh sorry boss.” Quickly disappearing again to the coffee machine.

“Must warn you its potent stuff. Have a seat... You’ll going to need it.”

Worland returned a second time with two paper cups steaming from their tops. Seth eyed the blackened substance. Suspicious as to its appearance. It looked like coffee. It smelt vaguely like coffee. Then he tasted it.

Eye brows knitted together.

“Whoa! ... Mind if I take a sample of this back to the lab. It might prove useful as a disinfectant.” Exclaimed Seth taking in the strong taste.

“Feel free to take as much as you like.” Said Kristina, taking a mouthful as if it was water.

“How you coping without Isaac?”

“We’re managing. Sent Nancy home. She’s still beside herself. Seems you may have been right about the Special Op raid. No doubt involved with the doomsday cult... Mueller spotted him. Security is pretty tight as you can imagine. It’s fortunate they closed him down when they did... Before there was an accident.” Seth suggested, hoping she would write the case as closed.

“I guess my hands are tied trying to find the killer then. Those government agencies are answerable to no one... But if Mueller is involved then he may know who pulled the trigger.”

“Be careful Kristina...” Warned Seth looking about the Precinct wondering who-else knew her secret life. “...These people are above prosecution.”

“I know... But I don’t like a case going unsolved. We owe it to Isaac.”

“You owe it to yourself to stay alive... You’re of no use to anyone if you’re dead... I’m asking you to let this one go.” Said Seth speaking quietly leaning forward, to avoid being overheard.

“It’s just too dangerous for you to pursue any further. I don’t want to see you hurt.” Seth added.

“Do you know something you want to tell me Mister Adison?” Kristina became the detective for a moment.

Then realized who she was talking to.

“Sorry ... I shouldn’t have said ...”

“That’s okay. I understand... It’s what you do best... If you can’t drop the case ... Then at least ease back on it.” Pleaded Seth.

His eyes showing a concern he had for Kristina’s safety.

“Okay. For now... Unless something appears on the radar.” Surrendering her authority momentarily.

Seth took a mouthful of coffee.

“Hmm... This stuff grows on you...” His mouth twitched with the tarry taste. “...Get Worland to send me the recipe. I best be on my bike... I know my way out.”

“Thanks again Seth...” Looking about to check for unwanted listening ears, “...I’ll see later”.

“Look forward to it.” Seth replied, touching her momentarily on the hand as he stood to leave.

“Survive did we?” The Duty Sergeant called out as he was leaving.

“Yeah. Just... Best stay away from the coffee though.” Replied Seth offering a piece of advice.

“Really?” Replied the Duty Sergeant, examining his coffee mug.

Unsure what to make of the remark.

A large white van pulls up outside the Precinct steps.

Noren steps out in time to see a cyclist heading into the traffic. A feeling of Deja-vu came over him. But could not place it. Climbing the steps looked over his shoulder to the stalled traffic to see the bicycle that

had disappeared. The Duty Sergeant sees Noren stranded in no man's land and calls out.

"Can I help you?"

"Detective *Tepes*" Noren recited the name.

"Over there... To your left... Good luck..." He said, pointing in the direction of the far corner desk. "...She's popular today." Still pondering the coffee.

Noren makes his way through the cluttered desks. Ferrell suspects stare at him sizing him up. Only to be stared down by Noren. They could sense he was not afraid of them. And cowed back into their shells. Coming to a desk with the only woman detective sitting at it stood looming over the Kristina.

His shadow going unnoticed until Worland called out.

"Psst! ... Boss."

"What's up Worland?"

There was an awkward silence. And another motion of eyes that someone was standing behind her. She turned about. Thinking Seth had returned. But was surprised to see a drab middle aged man in a grey suit and overcoat.

"Can I help you?" Kristina enquires to his presence.

"Detective *Tepes*?" Noren inquired coldly.

"That's right. Who is asking?"

"Alex Noren. Secret Service. Is there a place we can talk?" States Noren coldly, flashing his credentials.

She had heard stories about Noren. The Bogyman. His reputation foreshadowed his appearance. Just looking at him gave her the creeps.

"Certainly. This way... Worland... Hold the fort". Worland watched on silently as his boss marched to an interrogation room.

"This will be most suitable..." Inspecting the interior before closing and locking the door. "...Take a seat Detective" He ordered.

Lighting a cigarette before Kristina could stop him.

"How can I help you Sir?" She asked curiously as to what it was all about.

Fearful thoughts of Braun surfaced and she recalled Seth's warnings.

"Your name came up on a couple of reports... I was curious as to your interests in them." He asked as an introduction. He would need to tread carefully. He was on her turf. But he still held rank.

“What cases would they be? I have so many pending.”

“Yes. Of course... The first has to do with a Mister Isaac Newland.”
Noren threw her the bone.

“Isaac Newland. Yes that’s one of mine... I’m the Investigating Officer. Appears to be a raid on a drug lab. Been happening a lot recently. Victim shot and premises touched. That’s all we know Sir. Not much to go on... The case has been suspended until we get a further led.” Stated Kristina, misleading Noren.

“Hmm... I understand... A drug lab... Most disconcerting.” Said Noren dismissing the case.

“The second case has to do with a search made on a Mister Nero Braun... You do know who he is Detective Tepes?”

“Not at the time... No Sir.” Kristina knew she was treading on thin ice. “...But I do now.”

“And? ...” Pressed Noren, keen to know her interest.

“Well... It was a routine search on a print found on a bank note... We were following up suspects to a death of a woman December last year... He was seen leaving with the woman at her place of work with another gentleman... A Mister Hector Hades. At this stage we would like to question them both... Mister Braun has left the country and Mister Hades is unable to be located... We found traces of Mister Hades DNA found on the body... She had died of an apparent drug overdose... But we’re not ruling out foul play... It is just a preliminary enquiry at this stage... Sir.” Kristina regurgitated the facts.

Hoping Noren would be satisfied and leave.

“I understand. You are very thorough Detective Tepes... I wish I had you on my team.”

The thought made Kristina skin crawl.

“As you can appreciate Mister Braun is very concerned about his son.”

Noren waited for Kristina’s mandatory response.

“Yes Sir. Of course, I can see how he would.” Came the expected reply.

“It seems to me you should focus your attention on finding Mister Hades rather than pursue Nero... Do you understand me Detective?”
Noren led Kristina down a thorny path.

“Mister Hades is our key suspect... But I would like to question Nero regarding his involvement in this case.” Kristina refused to be told how to conduct her investigation.

“Detective... Listen to me... And listen well! ... I will say this only once!” Noren sounded his authority, “...You are to cease investigating Nero Braun! ... Ex-sponge him from your records... He never existed... Do you understand me?”

“But Sir...”

Before Kristina could complete her sentence. The back of Noren’s hand struck her across the face. Cutting her lip making it bleed. Stunned by the sudden attack reached for her bleeding lip. The taste of blood seeped into her mouth.

“That’s an order! You hear me!?” Noren shouted at her.

The time for playing nice had ended. She was too good at her job and Noren wanted the investigation ended.

“We know about your *dirty little secret Detective* Tepes... Or should I call you... *Chelsea*? ... You wouldn’t want your *nocturnal* activities to see the light of day and become public knowledge? ... Would you *Detective*?” Noren described in a nasty voice.

Noren had shown his hand. She had been followed. Watching her every movement.

‘How could I not have noticed?’ She thought to herself.

“No Sir.” She whimpered submissively.

“I shall inform Mister Braun his son is of no concern to the NYPD shall I?”

“Yes Sir... Thank you Sir.”

Kristina’s head bowed. Feeling Seth’s warning swelling on her face.

Noren left the Interrogation Room as calmly as he had entered it.

His job was done. His master Augustus Braun would be pleased. Nero had escaped another scandal. Again. He would personally call Braun and inform him of the good news.

Worland saw Noren leaving and rushed to the Interrogation Room only to find it empty.

Kristina had headed to the restrooms to run cold water over her face. It was not the first time she had been struck. Perps frequently lashed out. This time it was different. She would let Nero slip for now. Hector was her main suspect. Nero could wait for another day. Her mind unable to play out how. Only that it would.

Making her way to the alleyway at the back of the Precinct. Several officers stood around smoking. One came over and threw their coat over Kristina's bare shoulders. Having seen her go in with Noren. The bruise on her cheek swelling and beginning to color. They had heard stories about the Bogeyman as well. She scooped a handful of snow and plastered it against her face. An officer offered her a cigarette. But declined it, despite the urge to take it.

No one spoke. They respected her too much as a cop. They had heard stories about her. But no one was without sin. Worland was about to post a missing person bulletin when she reappeared. Make-up now covering the darkened hues. Her lip swollen and looking sore.

"You okay boss. You look ..." But stopped there.

"I'm heading home. I'll see you tomorrow." Leaving Worland looking confused as to what had just happened.

Standing atop the Precinct steps Kristina looks about.

Her mind was racing with only one thought, '*Noren.*'

Why was he concerned about Isaac? She had lied about Isaac operating a drug lab? And Noren had not questioned that. And she was beginning to think Noren may have been the one who had raided Isaac's apartment. She could understand Braun's want to cease of any investigation into Nero's activities. A senior statesmen protecting his over privileged son.

But what was Noren's interest in a *drug lab*? When it was not one.

How much did Seth know? Whose team he was he on? He had proven himself to be helpful when he need not have been. Sensing a good about him. But then she also had sensed an over-powering darkness.

As if good and evil were battling for his soul.

A gust of icy cold air slapped her bruised face and whispered advice in her ear.

'*Wake up girl ... Wake up.*' ...

Chapter 29

Noren returned to his office hoping to catch Braun before it was too late in the evening in Geneva.

Settling into his comfy leather chair. Looked out at the setting sun. Red and yellow blades of light pierced the punctured clouds. Sending rays of the colored light across New Jersey and into Manhattan. It had been a good day. Virgil had squealed like a pig. And he had slapped the detective into submission.

Noren waited for the phone to be answered.

“Braun speaking.”

“Mister Braun. Alex Noren... I hope I didn't catch you too late.”

“No. I was just watching the news... Riots, riots bloody riots. London, Amsterdam and Istanbul... When will it end? Do you have good news for me?”

“I believe I do Sir...” Noren paused to allow it to register.

“Well? What is it?” Demanded Braun killing the moment.

“I've been looking into why NYPD were interested in Nero.”

“And?” Barked Braun keen to know.

“Seems Nero and his friend Hector Hades were seen leaving with a whore-junkie who later overdosed. They found DNA matching Hades. But nothing on Nero... I have *persuaded* the investigating Detective to drop their interest in Nero... Seems the Detective was a moonlighting whore herself.” Noren quietly chuckled to himself.

“Is that so?”

Braun thought for a moment. ‘*Bloody Hades... Nothing but trouble*’.

“You say she's a whore herself? Her bitch buddy OD'd?” Braun enquired further.

“That's right Mister Braun.” Noren smirked at the thought.

“If she finds Hades... He'll want to take Nero down with him.”

“I see what you mean... What would like me do?”

“I want that *Whore of Babylon* dead... Understood?” Braun spat out the execution warrant, “...And while you're at it... Get rid of Hades as well...”

He's caused enough trouble already.”

“Yes Sir... Thank you Sir.” Rattled Noren.

The phone went dead as Braun hung up.

Reluctantly, Kristina made her way to Rudi's.

Paranoid that Noren's men were following her. Watching her every move. Who she meets. Reporting back to Noren. The cold was getting to her bones. Or so she thought. It could well have been the shock of being struck by Noren. Her face now numb with the cold. Or pain.

It was difficult to tell between the two.

'A consolation.' She thought.

The back alley was dark. A few gentlemen had gather out back to smoke a joint. Scuffing their feet on the frozen ground to keep warm. Hands shoved deep into their pockets. Only to take them out to partake in the twisted cigarette. Inhaling deeply before passing it on. Parting ways as Kristina approached and opened the door for her.

“Thanks.” She managed to say weakly.

Her head bowed from sight and covered by a hood from the cold. She would not be performing that evening. Of all the times she needed Seth. This was it. She hoped he would be there. He was the only one she could trust. He had been right about Braun and she had refused to listen. She was afraid of what Noren could do to him if he ever found out their connection.

Wondering if Seth would show. Or if Noren had not already gotten to him. Creeping up the stairs to the office. Anthony recognized the steps before she appeared at the door.

“We're got to stop meeting like this... Shit! ... What the fuck happened to you?” Anthony asked surprised.

“I walked into a door...” Kristina lied, then qualified the door, “...Had a visitor... Didn't like the way I was investigating Sarah's case.”

Reaching for the glass, Anthony was pushes in her direction.

“You aren't going on tonight girl” He told her.

“No shit? ...” Looking into her glass as if to find the answers. “... Thought I'd clear my head here... Someone I need to talk to.”

“Seth?” Anthony replied, catching Kristina by surprise, “... I've seen you two talking... I like to know my regulars.”

“How well do you know him?” She asked hoping to gleam more of the man seeping into her life.

“Funny thing is... I don't... He's bit of a dark horse.”

“So it seems... He's been helping me piece together some evidence.”

“Looks like a vagrant.” Remarks Anthony.

“More like a rocket scientist... Then some.” Qualified Kristina jokingly.

“You want to wait up here till rocket-man arrives?”

“Would you mind? I may have been followed?”

“Really? ... I'll get Matthias and Ruben to keep an eye open for any suspicious gentlemen.”

“Be careful Anthony... These people belong to the Order's Secret Service... They don't play nice.” Showing her bruised face.

Anthony just smiled.

“Neither do Matthias and Ruben... You would not want to meet those two on a dark night... Or any night for that matter.”

“Thanks Anthony... Mind if I take a nap on the couch. Been a hectic day”

“Sure. Knock yourself out kid... Excuse the pun”.

Killing the light and leaving her in the peace of his office.

Kristina tried to smile but it hurt too much. Sculling down a swallow of whiskey, pulled her body to the large soft couch and slips her shoes off. The couch was soft and the closest thing to heaven. Music drifted up the stairway and she imagined the girls going through their routines. Closing eyes she fell into a sleep that carried her onto the dance floor. A bright spot light went in search.

But tonight, it would not find her.

Cindy and Tony had found time to be together that evening. Alone.

He had been upstate redecorating an apartment. The smell of the other woman was still on him but that only added to his sensual appeal. Cindy tore overalls from his taunt body. Releasing his pony tail of long brown curly hair. She jumps up on him. Wrapping her legs around him. Kissing him wildly. Their tongues danced erotically. Her nails clawed down his back with a primal urge to inflict pain.

And to mark her mate.

Pulling the oversized T-shirt from her petite blonde body and to reveal perky breasts. Tony buried his face into one and suckled the milky nectar. Cindy's loins were aching. She gasped for breath and rubbed a hand

between her legs to ignite the flame. Tony groans as she worked over his swollen member. Mounting him moaning dirty words as gyrations grew more urgent.

Then Cindy suddenly imagines Seth.

“Oh my God!” She exclaimed and violent convulsion overcame her.

Tony could not hold back and falls exhausted beside her. Wrapping his arms around her petite heaving body. Rapid breaths slowly subsides as fell asleep in each other’s arms. Moonlight filters through the window. Illuminating their sexual haven with dim recycled sunlight.

And bliss descended upon the lovers.

Kristina awoke to her song being played.

And wondered who was dancing to it. She sits up and walks over to the two way mirror Anthony used to view the patrons below. No one was dancing. It was signal by Anthony that Seth had arrived. Looking over to his corner, she sees him. And studied him for a moment trying to sense his aura. But nothing. Tired and emotionally drained she gave up trying to connect. Taking a deep breath, steadied herself to face him.

What would she say? What could she say?

‘*Help me... You were right... I was wrong.*’ That would be a start she admitted.

Kristina continued to look down at him. Suddenly. He looks up. As if he could sense someone was watching him. She pulls back from the window.

‘*How?*’ Thoughts became tangled and knotted.

Looking over the patrons, no one stood out. Only Seth.

And made her way down the stairs to face him. Seth could feel a presence standing next to him. A woman in a suit. Not a dancer. Then recognized the suit and looked up at Kristina. Her face obscured by the dim lighting. He could sense something was wrong. Taking him by the hand she leads him back to Anthony’s office. Some things could not be said in public. Allowing himself to be led. Following her every step. Closing the door. Turned and faced Seth.

He could see the faint bruise on her cheek and split lip.

“What the... Who? ... When?” Seth asked concerned.

Only to have one reply.

“Noren... After you left he showed up... Told me to drop any investigation into Nero... Said he knew about... *This...*”

She looks towards the window to the dance floor below.

“Said he would tell if I continued... You were right... I was...”
Kristina began to shake, eyes whelming with tears.

“Shh...” Seth stepped forward wrapped his arms around her, to comfort her. But more to tell her she was safe.

“I am sure Noren killed Isaac.”

“Are you sure?” Seth asks with his own suspicions growing.

“No... But it makes sense... Sorry I doubted your warning.”

“You weren’t to know Kristina... *This* could have been a lot worse...
What you going to do?”

“Not much I can do... Drop Nero from the case. Hector is the main suspect... It’s his DNA on Sarah... And God help him if he shows up here.” She adds her warning.

“Best get you home Kristina... We’ll take a cab”.

“You don’t have to... I can manage.”

“Piece of mind for me... Okay? No arguing.” Seth ordered.

“Kay.” Kristina replies meekly surrendering to Seth.

Cindy was once again in the saddle as Tony surrendered his prowess.

Moaning in unison with Tony’s lengthy intrusions.

At the base of the stair well, Noren’s team waited. Armed men cloaked in black vests. Flashlights fitted to their weapons. Silently they creeped up the stairwell. Noren would not be there. He would be hidden inside a van nearby monitoring it over his headset. Blood would not fall on his hands.

Half a dozen men stood waiting outside the apartment door awaiting the order to proceed.

“Go!” Noren called out into the mouth piece.

“Go! Go! Go!” Echoing back to him through the head set.

There was a loud explosion and the door burst open.

Moon beams were overcome with beams of piercing red light. Searching for their prey. Finding a couple engaged in a carnal act upon the bed. The confused lovers stare back, like stunned animals caught in the head lights. Suddenly there is an eruption of automatic fire. Barrel stuttered thunderous cracks and flashed sporadic lights.

Cindy screamed. Only to be silenced as bullets tore through her petite torso.

The lovers danced. Giggling like string puppets. Their arms flapping spastically as their bodies were being torn apart by the hail of bullets. Fragments of flesh and blood sprayed across the walls behind them.

The sound was deafening. It was meant to be.

Noren wanted to scare off anyone watching. When it was all over, the smell of cordite and silence filled the air. Noren had heard it all, even without with the head set.

“Subjects down... Subject down.” The team leader advised.

“Torch the place and get out of there.” Noren instructed.

Accelerant was spread about and lit. And the apartment erupted in fire. Armed men scurried down stairs into waiting vans before disappearing into the night. Noren remained behind to enjoy the show. Standing amongst the crowd of people who had gathered to watch the inferno raging above them.

Flames broke through windows. Sending showers of broken glass to the frozen pavement. A smile grew over Noren’s face watching on.

‘Braun would be pleased. Detective Tepes was dead... Nero had escaped another incident.’ Noren thought to himself.

Police squad cars arrive on the scene followed shortly after by Fire Department trucks.

Hoses tried to contain the upper level blaze. But with little impact. The accelerant was winning the battle. Smoke drifted over the onlookers irritating eyes and lungs with tears and coughs.

A taxi pulls up. A passenger looks out, curious as to the flashing lights and cauldron that had closed off the street to her apartment. Dancing yellow flames reflected off the cab’s windows and obscuring the occupants from outsiders.

Seth restrains Kristina from opening the door.

A face among the crowd stood out. One that did not belong. One that was smiling. Not traumatized like the others by the sight of the apartment being consumed by flames.

“Noren! ...” Kristina exclaims to Seth, “... Over there!”

She watches him. Then looks up and sees it is her apartment on fire.

“Cindy!?” Cries out reaching for the door handle.

Seth holds her back once again. Fighting her new found strength and determination.

“There’s nothing you can do Kristina...” Seth glared at Noren laughing with delight, “... Driver... Uptown, Greenwich Village.” He calls out to the driver.

“Where we going?” Kristina asked looking at Seth.

“You can’t stay here anymore... Noren thinks you’re dead... You’re coming to my place”.

Helplessly, Kristina sank into the back seat. Her head falls on Seth’s shoulder. Holding his hand. Unsure who was holding whose.

She was not letting go.

The drive seemed an eternity.

Traumatized, she gazed out the cab window as the street lights flashed by. Her world slipping from her. One street light at a time.

The cab eases to the pavement of the apartment building. Seth peered about checking for Noren’s men and any suspicious vehicle. Sees nothing. Noren thinks he has killed her back at the apartment. It would be unlikely he or his men would show up here. Pulling Kristina from the back seat. Shattered by the day that had gone from good to bad. To worse. Throwing his coat over her shoulders she feels the warmth of his body it still contained.

Her mind spinning with confusion from the traumatic forces that were after her.

“This way. Watch your step.” Leading her to the foyer.

Waiting for the elevator which Seth hoped would come having never used in it in his entire stay. The doors opened and entered at Kristina’s pace. The elevator groaned as it rose the seven floors as if to protest its sudden usage.

“This way ... Not far now.” Seth encouraged Kristina to keep moving.

His arm around her holding her up.

Kristina looked about the strange hallway. Seth opens the door to his apartment and she steps into room no other person had ever stepped. Looking about the simple apartment. Still dazed, spies the bed and heads towards it. Without removing Seth’s overcoat lays on the bed. Curles up in a ball and closes her eyes. The shaking subsides and breaths become calmer.

Removing her shoes, Seth throws blanket over her and turns off the light.

Sitting opposite, Seth watched over her.

Hopefully he had kept her off Noren's radar long enough to avoid detection. He began thinking of how Noren would play this out. For now Noren would have thought he had killed her. But when he discovers otherwise, things would intensify again.

He had to keep Kristina safe.

His mind played out a dozen scenarios. Something he had done all his life. Life was no more than a giant chess game. Action. Reaction. Noren was no more than an evil black bishop chasing a defenseless white knight. A piece that needed to be removed from the game. Seth would always be in control. What was to become of Kristina? His master plan could not stop because for her.

Watching her on the bed. His mind playing out the chess game he started the moment he was conceived...

Chapter 30

Seth awoke the next morning slumped in the arm chair.

A blanket had been thrown over him during the night. Kristina laid on the bed and goes to sit beside her. Eyes already open as though she was expecting him. Gazing into the distance before her. Her mind grappling with something larger than she had ever dealt with in her entire life.

The Order. They were untouchable.

They had just tried to kill her. And they would not stop until they did.

“Thanks.” She offers in a sleepy voice.

Seth shook his head. As if to say as if no thanks was required.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Came another tired response.

“You’ll be safe here for now.” Said Seth placing his hand gently on her shoulder.

“Then what? ... I can’t run forever... From *him*.” She looked into space, imaging eventually being cornered. Unable to escape. Unable for Seth to save her, again.

“I know... Leave it to me.” Seth said simply.

“You can’t fix this Seth.” Now looking at him.

“We’ll see...” He responds calmly, “...No office for you today... You can call in sick. Phones over there... Better give Worland the day off too.”

“*They’ll* trace the call.” She said hesitantly wary of being found.

“Not on that on phone they won’t.” Giving her grin and a wink that suggested he was a step ahead of *them*, “... Noren will be after you as soon as he discovers you’re not dead... But for now, you’re safe here. Now... How do have your coffee?”

“Black.” Kristina called out eagerly.

“Good... cause I have no cream.” Seth called heading to the kitchen.

Kristina picks up the phone and hears no dial tone.

“I think it’s broken.” She calls back to Seth.

“It’s supposed to be... Just dial the Precinct.” Seth directs, sounds of crockery echoed from the kitchen.

“You okay in there?” Worried about the noise.

“Yeah, yeah... Never had to make two cups before.” Seth confesses innocently. Searching for a second cup wondering if he even had one.

‘Interesting.’, Thought Kristina regarding his bachelor status.

Dialing Worland’s number into the handset. Manually pressing the buttons as if it was toy.

“This phone is ancient? ... You sure it works?”

“It’s a classic... Don’t knock it.” Said Seth returning with two steaming cups.

“Worland speaking.”

“Worland... It’s me. Listen...” She began to speak only to be cut short by Worland’s shock.

“Boss! You’re! ... You’re! ...”

“Not dead... Thanks for asking... Now listen. Don’t have much time... Call could be traced...” Looking up to see Seth shaking his head in disbelief, “Or not... I’m fine. Not sure when I can return to the Precinct...” Sensing Seth shaking his head again in disbelief. “...Or not... *He’ll* soon discover it wasn’t me in the fire.”

“Who boss? ...” Asked Worland anxiously, “... Who’s after you?”

“Noren... The *Bogeyman*... Just be careful. The least you know the better... Got to go.” And just for amusement to put Worland at ease she called out one last time, “...And Worland! ...”

“What’s that boss?”

“Get yourself a coffee... On me”.

“Thanks boss.” And the phones goes dead.

Kristina looked over to Seth sitting in his arm chair.

“Welcome to my modest abode.” Stretching out his arms to present his lounge.

“Thanks. I don’t know what I would have done without you Seth... You seem to be my knight in shining armor.” Offering her gratitude.

There was no reply Seth could give. His mind had already planned the next few days. And if all went to plan, Kristina would be safe a few days longer.

“What’s the plan Rocket Man?”

“Rocket Man?” Seth asks inquisitively.

“Sorry... Anthony’s nickname for you... Long story.” She lied.

“Oh I see...” Seth reconciled the label. “...Interesting... Never dabbled in rockets...” Then entertained the thought momentarily.

“Just as well.” Said Kristina struggling to imagine the additional doctorates.

Seth smiled.

“I need to go to the Lab... And you need to stay here... Tonight we’ll head to my parents place. Up Long Island. No work for you tonight young lady.”

“No shit.” Kristina tried to grin, but her face still hurt.

What had not died with Sarah’s death, had died with Cindy in the flames last evening. Thoughts of Cindy came flooding back to her.

“What would Anthony be thinking?” She asked looking at Seth preparing to leave.

“I’ll talk to Anthony on the way to the lab. I need to pick up my bicycle... You get some rest. Okay?”

“Yes boss.” Kristina surrendered to the Rocket Man’s order.

“I need to jump on line. Have a chat with a ... *friend*”.

“Won’t they trace it? ...” Kristina began to ask, but let the question die.

Seth dialed into Isaac’s email account and typed a simple two word message which would send shock waves through the recipient’s underground cult leader’s mind.

“Hello Virgil.” Then waited.

It didn’t take long to get a reply.

“Who is this?” Seth read. Sensing the panic between the words.

“Diablo.” Came the reply.

“How did you get this? Isaac is dead.”

“I know... Did you kill him?” Seth played with Virgil.

“No. Noren did. The Bogeyman... Nearly killed me too. I didn’t talk, I swear.” Not letting on he had gave up Isaac’s name.

“I know.”

“What do you want?”

“You were double dipping Virgil... But I understand your position... Noren was watching you. I can’t risk another visit. Understood?”

“You can still deliver?”

“Of course my dear friend... Of course... We have a mutual interest don’t we? Will your people be ready?”

“*Yes Diablo.*” Virgil eagerly replied.

“*I’ll be in touch soon... Stay alive.*” Replied Seth before killing the encrypted link.

“Right. I best go play with some *rockets* then.” Said Seth about to leave.

Placing his hand on Kristina’s shoulder and for an unknown reason, kisses her forehead.

“Hmm!” He said to himself looking into her green Labrador eyes becoming brighter by the moment.

“Stay.” He commanded her.

“*Woof!*” She barked softly back at him. Struggling a small smile.

Content with the thought she was safe for now.

“I’ll call you later to check on you... You have my number... It’s all safe, okay.”

“I know. I trust you.” She had surrendered her trust the moment he had sheltered her.

Seth tilted his head sideways in thought. Trying to grasp the meaning of the word.

Trust.

He had never let anyone close enough to trust. Until now.

Hailing a cab.

Headed to Rudi’s which was still opened for business. Matthias and Ruben frowned at Seth with suspicious eyes. Seth wondered if they ever slept. They had heard stories about the fire.

“Anthony in?” He asked the two large black statues.

Eyes look up to his office to indicate he was still about.

Two short glasses greet him. Anthony had stayed up all night anxiously worried about Kristina’s safety.

“A little early for me. But why not... It’s been one hell of a night” Seth reached for a glass swallow the contents whole.

“She okay?” Anthony asked uncertainly.

“She’s fine...” Said Seth, leaving it there. “...Can’t say the same about Cindy though... Sorry.”

“Yeah... Me too...” Said Anthony struggling to comprehend the events of the past twelve hours, “...Here’s some cash.” Anthony pushes a roll of notes towards Seth, only to have it pushed back.

“I’m good. But thanks anyway. Just stopped by for the bicycle... She wanted you to know she was alright. She won’t be coming into work for a while... A long while.”

“Understand... Look after her Seth.” A relieved Anthony asked.

“You might get a visit from the Bogeyman.” Informed Seth. Wondering if Anthony knew.

“I know who he is. I’ve got a couple bogeymen myself.” Grinned Anthony, looking towards the doorway.

“Just be careful.” Warned Seth pulling down his hat and extending his hand to Anthony.

“You too.”

“I’ll be touch...” Turning to leaving then added, “...Might need a favor.” Seth asked unsure how much Anthony wanted to be involved.

“Anything... Just say the word.” Anthony responded without hesitation.

Seth nods to the mutual understanding and heads down the stairs. Mounting his bicycle and losing himself among the traffic moving heading south.

There was still much to complete before the ides of March.

The vaccine had yet to be tested in clinical trials. Condemned prisoners waited impatiently in their six by four cells to become involuntary guanine pigs. On the false promise of commuted sentences.

Seth eased his bicycle onto the pavement, into the building, guiding between the two stolid guards. His arrival going without interest. Thawing Gargoyles dipped their icy saliva on those passing below.

Nothing untoward so far thought Seth.

The lab was as he had left it. Nancy had returned and Stan was bent over a microscope.

“Got those receptor locations boss. Just where you said they’d be... How you know?” Stan asked curiously about his boss’s intuitive intelligence.

“Just a hunch.” Said Seth dismissing his earlier discovery.

“How you going Nancy? Thought I told you to go home?”

“I tried. But my mind is best focused here thanks boss.” Said Nancy appearing perkier than the previous day.

“Thanks Nancy... Good to have you back on deck.”

Seth took his position at his desk. Every so often looking up and expecting Noren to appear at any time. His skin crawled to think of him.

Recalling his hideous face laughing amongst the horrified crowd.

By noon, reports had reached Noren that neither of the bodies retrieved from the apartment building belonged to Detective Tepes.

“Damn that whore!” He cursed aloud.

Knowing she had escaped and having already informed Braun of her certain death the night before.

Men looked away so as not to draw attention to the failure. Noren thought long and hard as to where she could be hiding. But nothing came. He had burnt her apartment. Where would she hid now? Who was hiding her? She could be being shielded by her own kind. The officers of the NYPD. Or by the other whores at Rudi’s.

Both would be questioned. Privately.

Instinctively his mind recalled the Deja-vu he had had from the day before as if it had to do with her disappearance. Where had he seen the pony tail man before? The bicycle? His mind was battling with two incidences.

But only one would shine brighter.

‘Adison... *What was he doing at the Precinct?*’ He reasoned aloud in his head.

Adison was Mueller’s key technician and essential to Braun’s project. He would have to thread carefully. The Order was relying on him to deliver the vaccine. But after that, Adison was fair game. For now Noren wanted the whore, Detective Tepes.

Adison would keep.

“Get the car!” Noren ordered aloud.

“Where we going Sir?”

“Going to plan our friend Adison a visit at his fancy lab... I have a few questions for him.”

Pulling out his mobile, and calls out “Mueller.”

And waits irritably for him to answer.

“Mueller.” The voice came back at him.

“Meet me in the lobby of your building in fifteen minutes... I want to talk to Adison about a whore.”

“I’m sure there are others that would know more about whores than...”
Mueller began to say.

“There’s one particular whore I have in mind.”

“Oh... I could call him to my office...” Mueller began.

“No... I want to surprise him in his lab.” Said Noren added sinisterly, and the phone went dead.

Leaving Mueller hanging and wondering who the whore was. And how it could ever involve Adison.

Mueller stood waiting at the main entrance as the Noren’s white van turned the corner and pulled to the pavement. Noren stepped out and walk briskly into the foyer.

“He still there?” Noren asked.

“Of course. What’s this about a whore?”

“More of a thorny whore” Noren joked.

“Oh I see.” Mueller replied, still confused.

Red digits flashed in sequence as the elevator descended to the clandestine laboratory.

The doors opened to a bright hallway. The guard stood mute. Allowing Mueller and Noren to pass without showing their credentials. This visit, Noren was leading Mueller. And at a hurried pace. Mueller frantically tried to keep up. Technicians stopped their activities. Turning to watch the two dark suited men walk briskly and thankfully past them.

Seth could hear them coming before he could see them. The soles of their heavy leather shoes telegraphing their looming presence. But did not look up.

Nancy and Stan called out.

“Boss.” To indicate someone was standing at his door.

“Mister Mueller... What brings you here?” Seth said acting surprised and deliberately ignoring Noren standing to the side.

“Actually... You recall Mister Noren from Security... He has a few questions about ...” Interrupted by Noren stepping forward before he could finish.

“Mister Adison... A word if we might.” Noren cagily asked, trying to gauge Seth hidden thoughts.

“Oh... Certainly... Please come on in. Is it about Isaac? I told the officer yesterday at the Precinct everything I knew... I dropped off a

rucksack he had left in the locker.” Seth began misdirecting Noren’s line of questioning.

“You can wait outside.” Noren instructed Mueller.

Closing the door behind him and leaving Mueller stranded in the sterile environment of technicians and test tubes.

“Don’t play with me Adison... How well do you know Detective Tepes?” Noren slapped him in the face with a direct question.

“How well do we know anyone?” Seth recycled an answer.

“Don’t be smart with me Adison! ...” Noren threatened. The veins on his neck beginning to bulge, “...Did you know she was whore at a Titty-Bar called *Rudi’s* on Upper Fifth?”

“Oh dear... I did not know that Sir...” Seth began to lie, “...I don’t frequent those... *Sorts of places.*” Then pulls a face that suggested the thought revolted him.

“Hmm.” Noren grunted believing Seth was too prudish to understand such places.

Thoughts of his weak handshake lingered on his mind.

‘*What a wimp*’, Noren began to think.

“What did you talk about yesterday? ... At the Precinct” Noren began to probe.

“About Isaac... His coming and going. His work... He was one of my best technicians ... And like I say to drop off the rucksack... You can ask the Detective... She can confirm all this.” Said Seth playing Noren along.

“I would... If I could *find* her. Seems she has disappeared...” Noren said disgusted with himself. Then wondered if he had said too much, “... You wouldn’t know where she was would you?”

“No, of course not.... I hope she turns up Sir. Are you investigating Isaac’s death as well?” Playing Noren along.

“No! It’s not my job.” Becoming frustrated by Seth questioning.

Noren knew he had drawn a dead end. Adison was just too naïve to be involved. Buried to far underground, away from the real world above.

‘*What would he know about whores?*’ Noren thought about to leave.

“Thank you for your time Mister Adison.” Said Noren, not apologizing.

Noren turned and opened the door to a waiting Mueller who was keen to distance himself from the technicians. Noting many were wearing breathing masks and he was not.

“Thank you Mister Noren. Sorry I could not be of help...” Seth waved off the frustrated prosecutor.

Watching him hastily walk away. Seth waited a few moments for Noren to disappear from sight. Then rushed back to the office. Nancy and Stan watched in surprised as he rushed to access his personal phone.

“Home!” Seth desperately called out.

It rang and it rang and rang and rang and rang.

“Come on, come on, pick up. Pick up... Damn it.” Then it answered.

“Hello?” Answered a meek voice afraid of who could be calling.

“Get out of there now! Noren’s men could be on their way.” Seth exclaimed with a panic in his voice.

“Where do I go?” Kristina asks frantically.

“Cindy’s old Café on the west side.”

“How do you know that place?” asked Kristina curiously.

“I’ll explain later. No time now. Take the cash from the bed side table drawer. Don’t use your cards. They’ll track you faster than a lightning bolt... Get out of there now!!” Seth called out and the phones went dead.

Knowing he was vital to the Order’s goal. If Noren found Kristina at his apartment all that would come to naught...

Chapter 31

Growing suspicions threaded through Noren's mind.

Under and over and through. And back again. Wrestling with incongruent thoughts of Seth as a meek closeted loner. Returning to the surface, his men stood about awaiting his orders.

"Find out where this Adison lives and search the place... Now!" Orders Noren in a rush to pursue another growing suspicion.

"What we looking for boss?"

"The whore you should have killed last night!"

It was only a speculation. But one that was becoming more certain by the minute.

Kristina gathered her few belongings and opened the bed side drawer.

Finding a bill fold of cash, all hundred dollar bills.

"Christ Seth! Only you..." She said with disbelief at the amount of cash she was holding.

Opening the apartment door, could hear burly voices coming up the stairwell. And not sounding like residents. Hastily closing the door heads to the fire escape.

Struggles briefly with the stubborn window. It finally opens.

Hurriedly steps out onto the landing. Closing it just as the door is busted open. Noren's men rush into the apartment. Guns drawn ready to kill on sight.

Only to discover a sparsely furnished room.

"Search the bedrooms." She could hear one man call out.

Kristina clings to the fire escape. Bare hands gripping the icy steel railings. A frigid wind blew. Slapping her about worse than the back of Noren's hand.

"Boss. No one here..." A man reports back to Noren. "...Just two half drunken cups of coffee. Other than that, nothing".

"The bitch was there." Noren exclaims speculatively.

"You sure boss? This place is pretty bare. You sure this is the guy?"

“I can smell whore through the phone. Keep looking!” Noren protested.

“Where boss?”

“Everywhere... Comb the streets... She can't be far. The bitch will raise her head sooner or later... And when she does... I'll be waiting.”

Afraid to look up. Kristina clambered down the metal steps as quietly as she could.

Allowing herself to fall the final meter to the snowy patch below. As she lands, a foot slips on the ice buried underneath. And twists an ankle. Fighting off the pain, hurriedly limps down the nearby alleyway out of sight from passersby.

A vagrant leaned against the wall looks suspiciously at her. Grubby fingers protrude through grey mittens gripping a brown paper bag. She looks at him with equal suspicion hoping he would not tell. The vagrant's eyes look up to the window and then back to her. This was no time to negotiate a price and she handed him a note from the bill fold. The tramp examines the notes and smiles.

“Thanks lady... Have a nice day!” Before taking another squig from the brown paper bag and resumed the contemplation of life as he knew it.

Without looking back. Kristina limps down the alleyway to the adjoining street. Hoping it was clear. Looking about for Noren's men. Waiting to regain her breath. The cold bites of her exposed flesh. Seeing the way was clear, waves down an available cab. And throws herself low onto the back seat.

“West Side... Café Le Beck”. She struggles to say.

Her breath and ankle wanting for reprieve.

“You okay lady?” Asked the driver with concern. Eyes appearing in the rear vision mirror looking at her sitting frightened and shaking. The cab driver checked his mirrors sensing the lady was being chased by someone.

“Fine thanks.” She lies shivering with cold.

Driving off and calmly blending in with dozens of identical cabs. After countless anxious stops and deviating turns, the cab arrived outside the café.

“Sorry I took you the long way lady. Just in case we were followed... If you know what I mean?”

“Keep the change”. Peeling off a note, she hands it to the driver. Not wanting to delay any longer than she had to.

“Ghee thanks lady...” And the driver’s eyes lit up with a smile. “...Do I know you?” The driver asks, sensing he had seen her before somewhere.

“No I don’t think so... I get that a lot.” Pulling herself from the cab.

Too afraid to look over her shoulder.

The thought too dark to think about. She knew the lengths to which Noren would go to find her. Le Becks was Cindy’s café. Despite her love for coffee. And her love for Cindy. She rarely ever visited the place.

A doorbell sounds her arrival.

Customers turn to look out at the new intrusion. And who was letting the cold in. Limping as quickly as her swelling ankle would allow to a corner booth, collapses to the seat. A fantasy that Cindy would take her order quickly evaporated when a waitress who was not Cindy appeared.

“Can I take your order?” The waitress asked in a monotone.

“Coffee, black. Strong... That’s all for now.” Kristina desperately replied.

Ripping the chit from the pad the waitress walked away.

She had no idea when or if Seth would appear. She dared not call him. Noren could well have gotten to him by now. She would have to wait and see. For now, she was on her own. Thoughts to going to Rudi’s crossed her mind, only to be dismissed as foolish. Noren’s men would be scouring the streets. Rudi’s in particular. No matter how big or dark Matthias and Ruben were, they were simply no match for Noren. Less so the Order. Noren was immune from prosecution.

As she had witnessed from Cindy’s and Isaac’s deaths.

Thoughts of Cindy re-entered her mind. Tears screamed down her face. The past twenty-fours had finally caught up with her.

“You alright?” The waitress asked placing the coffee beside her.

“A friend of mine died last night.” Kristina admitted.

“A friend of mine died last night as well.” And a tear came to the waitress’ eye as she reached for a napkin from their pocket to dry it away.

“I’m so sorry... I forgot.” Kristina corrected herself aware that Cindy must have been the waitress’s friend as well.

“How could you have known?” Said the waitress wiping her eyes. Dismissing Kristina’s words as a moment of confusion.

‘Who are you Seth Adison? ... That would want to save a wretch like me?’

But the answers never came.

Taking a mouthful of coffee. Tasting the bitter-sweet aromas and wondered why Worland never made coffee like that. Sitting with her back to the door. Not wanting to see the people coming and going. The small bell above the door resonated ten times louder than normal. Making her jump every time it opened. Having placed her complete faith in Seth. If he said if he would be there. He would be there.

Her life depended on it.

The clock displayed 2:00PM.

It could be hours before Seth arrived. She would wait. With no place else to go. The second hand ticked away the seconds. And the more she watch it the slower the hand seem to move. Her ankle throbbed with pain. That was the least of her problems. And her body began to thaw to the temperature of the room.

“Keep it coming...” She told with the waitress. “... I’m just waiting on someone.”

“Aren’t we all honey? ... Aren’t we all?”

And the waitress walked away to get a fresh cup.

The day grew dimmer and artificial light supplanted the dying sunlight.

Kristina’s mind drifted to a daze. Every so often being alerted by the ambient sounds. The door would ding and clatter. Muffled voices spoke placing orders. Cups rattled on ceramic saucers. The chaotic sounds fused into one.

A juke box played old rock ’n roll songs. Her mind drifted to Rudi’s. She imagined the girls and the spot light on the stage. It would be searching for her. Tonight it would not find her. Imagining herself sitting in front of a lit mirror. Reflections of Sarah and Cindy staring back at her. They were smiling at her. As though to say they were alright.

They looked so beautiful. At peace.

She had become numb to the passing time.

Suddenly she is brought back to café when a cold hand was placed upon her bare shoulder. Shaking her from the twilight zone that had captured her. Startled. She gasps. Afraid to look up. She was too weak and too tired to run anymore.

But the hand was not forceful.

The touch was gentle. And it was cold. It was cold for a reason. Only one fool would be out in this weather. On a bicycle. Gently shaking her head with relief. Her eyes began to whelm over with tears and fought back the pain of a smile.

“What kept you?” She reprimanded him.

“Traffic...” Seth calmly replied, “...And the weather doesn’t help.” Hoping that would be an adequate defense.

“Do you think you were followed?”

“Not in this weather... Winter’s final bite... Traffic is almost frozen outside.”

“How did know this was Cindy’s place?” Kristina enquired curiously.

“Cindy is not difficult to recognize... With or without...” Seth began to say.

“Yeah... I know what you mean... What’s the plan rocket man?” Asked Kristina keen to get moving. “...I’m not riding your bicycle if that’s what you’re thinking.” She protested.

But after her day anything seemed plausible.

Seth chuckled, “Not in this weather you’re not”.

“Thanks for the call... They arrived soon after. Had to leave by the fire escape. Taxi to here... You shouldn’t leave that amount of cash lying about Seth... What if? ...”

“It’s only money. It can always be replaced... You can’t.” Seth declared.

The simplicity of his truth stunned her leaving her wondering who, or what he was? Realizing her Knight in shining armor had become her Guardian Angel.

“Why you helping me Seth? People want me dead and you want to take a bullet for me? ... What’s your angle?” She could not help asking.

“Long story... But you’re not alone. I have a score to settle too.”

“You can’t beat the *Order* Seth.” She pleaded to his common-sense.

Seth just sat there and gave one of his looks that said he could.

And somehow Kristina sensed he could too.

“We better get you out of here. Finish your coffee. We have a long drive.”

Extending a hand to help her up from the booth. She needed it. Her ankle had swollen and darkened. Struggling to support herself. Seth

realized something was amiss.

“What wrong?” Looking down at her ankle.

“Slipped on the ice... Fire escape.” She explained sharply as the pain of the ankle surfaced again.

“Here... Hold onto my arm.” Said Seth leaving a bill on the table to cover the tab and tip.

Waving down a cab they settled into the back.

“Whare to people?” The cab driver calls out in a New York drawl.

Looking in the rear vision mirror at the couple in the back.

“The lady okay? ... Hasn’t been drinking has she?”

“Just coffee... Twisted her ankle ice skating.” Seth mused with the driver.

“Funny day to go ice skating.”

His eyed fixed on her as if he knew her from somewhere but could not place her.

“Do I know yah lady?”

“I get that a lot... One of those faces I guess.” She explain to Seth’s amusement.

“North Hamptons... Long Island.” Seth called out hoping to break the conversation.

“That’s going to cost you Mister.” And his eyes shifted to Seth holding up several notes.

“Hamptons is nice this time of year I hear.” The cabbie replies switching the cab to hover drive.

“Liar!” Corrected Seth laughing with the cab driver.

The joke was lost on Kristina who had ever gone north of Queens.

Anything above that was above her pay grade. But obviously not Seth’s. The street lights flickered pass the cab’s frosted windows. Safe in the belly of an anonymous yellow cab. Lost in the school of yellow metal fish swarming the arterials of New York City.

Leaning her head on Seth’s shoulder she closed her eyes. Allowing the warmth of the vehicle and harmonic hum of the engines sooth her. As Seth directed the driver to take various turns and taking them North by the quickest route.

“Didn’t know this road existed.” The cabbie exclaimed quietly.

The traffic thinned as they crawled their way along Long Island. Seth's parents had a retreat on a peninsula. Away from prying eyes. More so the Order's.

An hour later they arrived.

The cabbie eased the cab inside the private basement. Shielding them from the bitterly cold wind howling off the Atlantic. Taking a couple notes Seth handed them to the driver's extended drive.

"Thanks Mister... Nice house don't mind me saying... Yah don't see a lot of dese in the city." Said the driver pocketing the notes.

Kristina stirred as the vehicle came to a stop. Wondering where the bright lights outside were coming from.

"We here?" A tired voice asked looking about the strange surroundings.

"Yeah, we're here... You okay to walk a bit till we get you inside?"

"Think so." Eye brows pinched together as she struggled to find her legs.

The pain rekindling the momentarily forgotten memory.

"Hold my arm." Seth instructs Kristina.

Helping her from the cab. Looking about the basement, sees three deluxe vehicles parked to one side.

"Yours?" She asks curiously now lost in a world well above her pay grade.

"That one is." Pointing to a classic red Ferrari.

"Of course it is. I should have known... You like old things."

"Classics..." Seth reminded her with pride, "...Better get you inside out of the cold... You're becoming delirious."

Cautiously leading her to a small elevator that would take them to the ground floor.

"I haven't been here for months. Parents are away for the winter at some tropical resort somewhere."

"You don't know where?" She asked interested as to how Seth would not know.

"No... Not really... We rarely speak."

"Oh..." Kristina replies, leaving his family relationship left unsaid.

Her own parents were equally as enigmatic. She never knew her father. Only that he was an Englishman passing through Romania on a train to Istanbul. That her mother had had a mysterious liaison with him. Perhaps

by accident, perhaps by fate. Her mother had described the night they *meet*. The train. The gypsy camp fire by the tracks. And the strange beasts that ravaged camp that distant moonlit evening. Her father escaping to the departing train, and her mother into the woods.

Kristina would only know his name. Arthur. And wondered what had become of him.

Realizing the pain of her ankle was more than she was admitting.

Seth stops and without asking, scoops Kristina into his arms. Cradling her. She felt like a feather in his arms.

“What the? ...” It was too late to resist his gesture, but was relieved he had.

“Let me give you a tour”. He said entering the ground floor.

“Kitchen... Cupboards you’ll find everything you need...” Then spying the most essential piece of equipment, “...The coffee machine.”

“Ah! ...” Kristina’s eyes lit up with glee. “... I thought you’d never ask.”

“Not yet ...” Seth asked for patience.

“Ohh? ...” She whimpered, watching the coffee machine disappear from sight behind her.

Seth continued the tour. Arriving in a large open room mounted animal heads. Beneath them a full rack of hunting rifles.

“My father’s Den”.

“Interesting... *Sport*... Your father has.” Searching for the right words to explain the massacre of the endangered species staring back at her with dark glassy eyes.

“I’m not sure he thinks of it as sport.” Seth replies carrying her from the room of death into a spacious lounge.

A menacing tiger hug complete with a head lay on floor. Its teeth appearing to snarl up at Kristina.

“Aren’t they... Extinct?” She asked curiously.

“They are now.” Seth replied indifferent to his father sins.

Seth stepped around the head and walked towards a set of large wooden double doors. Kristina looked back that the tiger’s head that was tracking her every movement. Nostrils sniffing the air and sensing her presence.

She gripped Seth closer and looked away.

“And this is where you will be sleeping.”

He carries her into a palatial bedroom. A huge bed sat against the far wall.

“Bed there... Bathroom over there... Think that’s about it?” Said Seth, laying Kristina gently on the bed.

“Why don’t you freshen up and I’ll go make you that coffee.”

“Okay... Thanks.” Replies Kristina meekly.

Stunned by the grandeur of his parent’s humble homestead.

Seth returned with the drinks.

Each laced with a shot of aged Irish whiskey. Kristina sat wrapped in a soft white robe. And small white towel wrapped about her head.

“I see you found everything.”

“Almost everything ...” Spying the coffee cups in Seth’s hands. Eyes becoming larger at the prospect.

“Oh sorry.” Handing her a cup.

The aroma hit her senses before the taste did. Taking a sip her eyes lit up like saucers. And energy surged through her depleted bruised body.

”God this is good! ... I thought you said you couldn’t make coffee?”

“Been practicing...” Said Seth reluctant to reveal the secret ingredient. “...You can sleep here. I’ll be over there.” Pointing to another smaller bed in the corner.

Kristina looked at the smaller bed and offered an exchange,

“You should have this one, I can sleep...”

“That’s okay... That’s where I sleep when I stay here.” Seth accepted the humble crib.

“Oh...” She said confused by strange sleeping arrangement, “...Are we safe here? I’m afraid ... He’ll find us.”

Looking at the large dark window. Wondering who was watching them.

“Shh...” Seth responded, “...You’re safe here. No one knows of this place. I have to return to the lab tomorrow morning. I’ll be gone by the time you wake... You have number. Don’t be afraid. They can’t trace you here okay?”

“Okay.” Came the accepting reply.

“Now get some sleep...” Seth ordered her. “...You’ve had a busy day young lady.”

“Yes boss.” She surrendered.

The bed consumed her tired beaten body, yielding to its soothing warm comfort.

Turning off the lamp, Seth threw a blanket over her. Moonlight filtered through the window. Kristina's hand reaches to annul the growing ache on her neck. He senses the connection and closes the heavy curtains. Loosening the moon's grip on her legacy. The hand falls by her side.

Gradually she drifts into a dream she had not had since her days as child in Romania.

In her dream she was standing in an endless field of long grass and colored wild flowers. A brilliantly white light shone from the deep blue sky. It felt divine. She was not alone. Beside her stood her grandmother holding her hand. No words were spoken. A serene peace came over her. A sense that all would be well. With no sense of time. Only the moment of time. Her grandmother let go Kristina's hand and she found herself being pulled back from Other Side.

Kristina awoke to sun drenched room.

Seth had opened the curtains before he had left. It was safe. The moon had fallen below the horizon. What had seemed like but a moment, had been ten hours. She looked about the strange room she found herself. Then across to Seth's empty bed. A cup of coffee sat on the bed side table he had left for her that morning. Sitting up, stretches and sips the now cold coffee. Caffeine rushed through her veins and life re-entered her body.

Moving her foot a sharp pain reminded her it needed attention.

'A long hot bath would take care of that...' She thought, *'...Bath salts and bubbles... Lots of bubbles.'*

Her ankle now strapped, limps her way into the lounge.

Avoiding the Tiger's head. Fearing it had crept closer during the night. As she passes Seth's father's den she could not help but look in at the mounted animal heads covering the walls. Beneath them the rack of hunting rifles. An empty space had now appeared. She wondered momentarily if there had been a rifle there the night before.

Dark thoughts came to mind. Tring not to imagine the possibilities that would transpire if she was right. It was all outside her control. Having surrendered to Seth's protection. Who was she to question him?

Collapsing in a large leather arm chair, she looked in awe at the spacious room. The walls adorned in colorful modern art. Each piece

worth more than her entire life's salary. Large tinted windows gave panoramic views of the tempestuous Atlantic Ocean. Dumping angry waves on the barren Hampton shore line. A gusting wind buffered the massive resilient homestead.

And she felt safe. Insulated from Noren.

She watched the battling elements outside. Reminiscent of the turbulent events of the past twenty four hours...

Chapter 32

6:00AM and an awkward looking Janitor walks awkwardly to the entrance of a tall building.

Dressed in virgin white overalls. A white security pass dangled freely. Straining to hold the thick lens glasses on the bridge of his nose. A face disfigured and contorted. A red woolen beanie on his head. The only color to his otherwise bleached appearance.

Moving with some difficulty. His right leg shift and unable to bend. Struggling to carry the bucket and mop. Almost tripping on the steps as he entered the building. Two security guards standing at the door allow him enter unchallenged.

More out of pity than authority.

“Poor bastard.” One guard whispers to the other.

Swiping the security card over the elevator’s sensor. The guards observe his entry and return their eyes to the frozen street outside. Content that the Janitor has authorized access. Once inside the elevator the Janitor removes the bulky glasses. Regaining his natural focus of the immediate surroundings. Then presses a button that will take him to the roof some fifty stories above.

Elevator doors open to an exposed chilling environment. The Janitor looks about the barren roof scape. Wanting no witnesses. Large bill-boards and telecommunication towers shell him from any nosey observers from neighboring buildings. Setting aside the bucket unzips the overalls. Carefully removing a high powered hunting rifle that had been strapped to his right leg. Before taking a position between two bill-boards and unfolds a thin grey ground sheet.

If this Janitor was correct, and he generally was, there would be a meeting.

Noren was not the only one with surveillance equipment. Seth had planted software of his own into the Black Crow’s computer system. Enabling him to access much of Mueller’s communications.

And today. Mueller had a meeting with Noren at 6:00AM.

The distance was just over three hundred meters. That made little difference to the high powered rifle in his hands. Tilting his head to the left and then to the right. Easing the stiffness in his neck. Splaying his legs to brace himself in a locked position.

Unfolding a small tripod supported the long heavy barrel.

Taking sight through the scope. Began to search the Woolworth building windows methodically for activity. It did not take long to come to Mueller's elevated office. Reclining in his large chair talking to Noren sitting opposite him. Adjusting the headset, flicks a small switch.

Suddenly voices could be heard.

Mueller's telephone picking up the conversation. As if Seth was in the door sitting among them. Relaying every word, he listened on intently from a distance.

"I know Adison is protecting her! ..." Noren exclaims, "...Has he come in yet? ... I want to question the bastard. He never went back to his apartment... I had men watching all night!"

"He should be in shortly... He's a creature of habit that one..." Mueller tried to dismiss Noren's suspicious concerns. "...I find it difficult Adison to believe is capable of any of *this*... Ah_..." Gesturing with his hands trying to describe whatever Adison was involved in. No less with a whore of *any* kind.

Seth grinned with satisfaction that Mueller had played him for a fool.

"Just don't touch a hair on his head... Understand!?" Mueller warned before adding, "...We need him to complete the vaccine... And then you can take care of him personally... Him and his team if you like."

"I want to find out where that bitch of a whore is!" Noren continues to exclaim.

"For God sake why Alex? ... She's gone! She won't be coming back! ... You got Isaac... *Diablo*, or whoever he was meant to be... And we're on track with the vaccine." Then added a cold warning. "...You wouldn't want Braun to hear Adison is unable to complete his pet project... Would you?"

Noren sank back into his chair bitten by Mueller's warning. He had been put on notice. Few have ever warned him in his life. And few had survived to warn him again. He looked out the window into the distance sky line. Cross-hairs now fixed on Noren's face. His eyes seemed to

looking directly at Seth. If only he knew that death was staring back at him in the face.

It would have wiped the smirk from it.

Seth's finger was itching. His mind was willing. But he would not deviate from the plan.

"Not yet..." He said to himself, "...Not yet."

Shifting the scope back to Mueller's face. Wanting to pull the trigger on him. He needed Mueller, as much as Mueller needed him. His own virus was all but a week away from perfecting.

He could wait until the time came.

"I guess you're right... I'll have my men watch his apartment for the time being" Conceded Noren. Disgusted with the thought he had let one getaway.

"Whatever makes you happy Alex, just don't touch Adison. He's mine until the project is finished... Understand?" Mueller ordered him. Fearful of stepping into Noren's territory.

"Okay." Noren accepted reluctantly.

Seth switched the headset off. He had heard enough. And waited.

Hearing a sound beside him turned to discover the source. Surprised to see a group of pigeons had settled on the ledge next to him. Cooing and strutting about to find a warm position among themselves.

Regathering himself. Refocusing the scope back on Mueller's office. Only to discover Noren had left. Seth quickly calculates the time it takes to exit the twenty sixth floor to ground level. And refocuses the scope on the entrance to the building. Noren's men stood about with hands buried deep into their heavy overcoats to keep warm.

"... Three... Two... One..." Seth counted quietly backwards to him as Noren appeared on que from entrance.

The cross hairs centered on Noren's head. Noren talked with his men. No doubt giving them orders to watch his apartment. Seth exhales slowly as he squeezes the trigger ever so gently.

Noren looked up at the clear blue sky.

Breathing in the cold morning air. The last breath he would ever take. And spies a group of pigeons scattering from a distant roof top. Wondering for the few brief moments that he had left what had startled them.

That was the last thing he would ever see.

The memory would be fleeting and one he would never remember. The high velocity bullet reaching him soon after the pigeons had been startled. Striking Noren squarely in the middle of his forehead. Creating a small insignificant entry wound. But an explosive exit wound at the base of his skull.

A sudden pink mist of brain tissue sprayed the pavement and men nearby.

Noren was dead before he had time to realize otherwise. The fragmenting bullet removing much of the back of his head. Together with him much of his brain. He stood frozen. As if his body had forgotten how to fall. Which it had. Before finally knees succumbed to the weight of his body. Buckling beneath him.

And fell to the pavement like a rag doll.

Instinctively his men crouched anticipating another shot. That never came. The crack of the rifle shot echoed off the surrounding buildings as Seth had intended. Making it almost impossible to detect its source.

Pigeons soon returned to the ledge. Seth looked at them and cooed at one. Pigeon was not his first language. Still, a pigeon tilted its head curiously trying to understand him. Laying stationary. Taking in what he had just done. A burden had been alleviated. Not only from Kristina. But from other who had been under the Bogeyman's thumb screws.

Resetting the cross-hairs on Mueller's office. Then on Mueller's face. It would not take long for Mueller to be notified. No headset would be required to listen in. Mueller's body language would suffice. Mueller lifted the handset for an incoming call and Seth watched his face change from placid to surprise. Then shocked. Mueller's eyes search the surrounding buildings for an open window. Or a lone figure on a roof top.

Suddenly realizing he may also be a target himself. In a panic swivels his chair to face the wall behind him. Hoping that would protect him from an assassin's bullet.

Pleased with the alarm he had created in Mueller. Seth grinned to himself. With Noren out of the way, he knew he would now be Mueller's pet. It also pleased Mueller that Noren would not interfere with Adison.

It would not be long before the Order's drones would be scouring the skies looking for a shooter. Not wishing to alert straying eyes to sudden movements. Calmly gathers the ground sheet and returned to the elevator.

Sliding the rifle back into a leather sleeve secured to his leg. Adjusting his overalls and secures the bulky glasses.

News travels fast in New York City. But not fast enough that day. Re-appearing at the entrance, nods to the security guards to allow his departure.

“Poor bastard.” A guard said again to the other.

The Janitor hobbles his way around the corner. Out of sight from the guards. And climbs into the back of a waiting van.

“All sorted then?” A voice called back to him.

“All sorted...” Seth replied beginning to unpeel the overalls from his body. “...Take care of this for me... I pick it up tonight on the way home.”

“Will do”. Anthony replied.

Resuming his natural ragged appearance.

Seth exits the van with his bicycle. Pulling down his hat and throwing the satchel over his shoulder. Looking up, he could see security drones beginning to search the roof tops. Dismissing them, a hand taps the side of the van to get going.

Turning his bicycle onto Barclay Seth is confronted by the expected police cauldron.

Hundreds of people had begun to gather to see what had happened. Pushing his way through the crowd an officer holds up his hand to halt him his progress.

“Get back! ... Nothing to see here! ... Keep moving! ...” An officer calls out. “Hey Yo! ... Back up!” The officer directed his attention to Seth.

“I work here.” Holding up his security pass.

The officer eyed him over assessing the identification to the unkempt individual before him. He had been given orders to let Black Crow staff through.

“Okay then...” The officer turned yelled at another some distance behind him, “Hey yo! ... Let this one through!”

“Hurry up! ... Get moving! ... I haven’t got all day!” The officer barked.

Seth makes his way towards the entrance and death scene.

A Janitor in virgin white overalls waited patiently to one side. His skin almost as pale as his uniform. Noren’s twisted body lay on the pavement.

A black dot the only mark on his otherwise unblemished face. The back of head was a different matter. Much of it was missing and distributed over the pavement behind him. Detectives were pointing to several buildings they had deduced the shoot had come from.

Only one of them had it right thought Seth. Then changed his mind.

Seeing Worland leaning over Noren's body. Sent to investigate the shooting. Looking up to see Seth standing at the entrance. Their eyes met. Worland recalled their meeting in the lab and the Precinct. Seth was no more than a pawn in a bigger game he thought. Mush as his boss was. Was she a suspect in killing Noren? Not in his watch. Nor any of the other detectives who had witnessed Noren's visit her that day. All of whom wishing they had pulled the trigger on the Bogeyman themselves.

Worland's returned his attention to Noren being placed into a body black bag.

"Excuse me sir." The Janitor asked as he stepped by Seth.

His asthmatic breathing sounding as a wheezing hiss. Seth turns and briefly looks hesitantly at the man. Now mopping the darkened blood and brain tissue into the heavy metal bucket. Maintaining a horrified look and tries to look away as Mueller appears at the crowded entrance.

"Adison! ... Adison!" Mueller called out getting Seth's attention. "... This way!"

Seth approached Mueller with unease.

"You're a little late today? ... Unlike you?" Mueller eyed Seth over, looking meek and afraid.

"Yes Sir, sorry Sir... Traffic Sir." Seth stuttered out appearing afraid to look back at the body. "Is that who I think it was Sir? ... Will he be alright?" Seth teased Mueller.

"No Adison! ... He won't be *alright!* ... Now get down to the lab finish the job you're paid to do." Charged Mueller.

Dismissing Seth in disbelief that he could be so naïve. And yet be capable of leading an advanced research team.

"Yes Sir. Sorry Sir." Came Seth's automatic response.

Seth hurried into the foyer leaving Mueller to watch over Noren's departing remains. Word of which would have already reached Braun.

Mueller would be expecting a call any moment.

With trials just weeks away, Mueller wanted no more disruptions.

Noren was not the most pleasant man on the planet. He had made a lot of enemies over his lifetime as Head of Security. More so as the Bogeyman. Making it almost impossible to narrow down the assassin.

Adison was the last person that would appear on any suspect list.

'Incapable of hurting a fly...' Thought Mueller, *'... A wimp'*, Noren had called him.

And on that Mueller agreed with his deceased associate.

Seth entered the lab and spied Stan and Nancy talking to each other.

"I hope that's work you're wasting company time talking?"

"Of cos not boss... What's happened up top? ... They won't let us out" Stan asked curious to know of the event that had transpired twenty six levels above them.

"Some guy got shot outside the entrance... Not sure who. A suit I think."

"Oh... That's okay then." Dismissed Stan, hoping it was not another lab technician.

Resuming their speculation while Seth headed to the lockers to change.

"You two... Get back to polishing those node calibrations... I want them by the end of the week. Trials coming up. Mueller will be on our asses if we get behind schedule."

"Boss... We're already over two weeks ahead of schedule!" Stan echoed back to him.

"Yeah... But Mueller doesn't know that." Seth said leaving Stan stunned with the inverted logic.

"Snap! Snap! Lab rats... That's why you get paid the big bucks".

Closing the door to his office Seth reaches for his personal phone.

"Hamptons." He calls out.

And he waits for the encrypted software to place his call.

"Hello?" A timid uncertain voice answered.

"How you going?"

"Hey... Yeah... I'm good thanks... You?"

"I am now..." Came the two-fold answer. "...Made yourself at home yet? Find the coffee?"

"Found your secret ingredient... Cheat!" Kristina called him out.

"Ah...Old family recipe. You should be a detective."

"Retired now." Kristina admitted.

“Congratulations on your retirement Detective Tepes... I’ll see you tonight.”

Seth kills the encrypted link as Kristina submersed herself in a heavenly scented bubble bath. A hot cup of Irish coffee in her hand.

“Ooh... I could get use to this.” She said to herself.

Mueller returned to his office and the call he had been dreading sounded.

Braun would want answers to questions he did not have.

“Mueller.” He answered knowing who was calling.

“What happened?” Braun queried the last man to speak to Noren alive.

“A shooter from a building... They’re investigating it as we speak.”

“You met with him before hand?” Wanting to know the sequence of events.

“That’s right... We spoke about the detective he was after.”

“I know the whore he’s after... She’s dead now.” Mueller advised with some content.

“Well... Actually...” Mueller struggled to know how to say otherwise, “... Possibly not.”

Regretting the words spoken knowing they would hit a nerve.

“What? ... Noren told me she was dead?” Braun began to rant.

“Apparently not... Appears to be someone else. Mistaken identity... But the good news is that she has disappeared... Seems the Bogeyman must scared her well and good.” Hoping that would mollify his master.

“Hmm... I’ll have the new man there ensure she stays that way.”

Unsure how much Mueller knew about Nero’s nocturnal escapades. Then changing tact.

“How’s the vaccine progressing?”

“Very well Sir... A few more weeks before the trails begin.”

“Good, good... Focus on that. Keep me posted. I don’t want bad news. Understood?” Braun directed before adding, “Oh... Mueller?”

“Yes sir.” Mueller answered nervously.

“Keep your head down... I don’t need it blown off until after the trials are complete.” Braun ordered.

“Yes Sir, I will Sir... Thank you Sir.” Relieved the conversation was over and Noren’s ghost could be forgotten.

The phones went dead.

‘His head? Blown off? After?’ He thought to himself.

Mueller had almost dismissed the thought of himself being a target until Braun had mentioned it.

Braun turns to Patmos who was listening in on the conversation.

“Who’s the whore?” Patmos asks curiously.

“Some NYPD detective sticking her nose into places that doesn’t concern her. Moonlights as an exotic dancer of some kind...” Braun explains leaving Nero’s involvement out of the discussion, “...Seems she’s, disappeared... Noren must have scared her into hiding before... I don’t think we’ll be seeing her again... Or Noren for that matter.”

“Hmm... Interesting...” Patmos pondered the dual occupations. “...Is it necessary to kill her?”

“To Noren it was.” Braun replied, albeit at his own bequest.

“I guess he knew best.” Conceded Patmos.

Patmos dropped the questioning. Concerned more with the ever increasing rioting that was erupting in the Provinces.

“Noren made a lot of enemies in the process... A good man. Will miss his service... You have someone to fill his shoes?” Asked Patmos.

“I have a short list of suitable candidates. An appointment will be made today” Braun replied.

“Good. I don’t want a vacuum there for too long.” Patmos urged.

“No John. I’ll get on it immediately.”

“China and India are struggling to hold the rioters back... There’s just too many of them Robert.” Patmos said looking out the window over the thawing lake below.

The skaters had abandoned their playground. The sun had risen a little higher and it felt a degree or two warmer. Or so he thought.

Turning to resume the discussion.

“Africa is showing signs of unrest. And New Zealand could be on the verge of falling.”

“I know. I know. I’ll speak with the Families to step up their efforts.”

Braun knew his solution would play ultimately into his hands when the time came for Patmos to make his decision.

He would wait for the trials to be completed before pressing him for an answer. Allowing Noren’s ghost to distract Patmos’s from his apocalyptic proposal.

And seed Patmos’ fears of global rebellion...

Chapter 33

Seth had found the final key.

Stan and Nancy could be distracted with routine testing until he was ready for them to discover it, again. Mueller could be stalled until the deadline arrived. Giving him enough time perfect his own virus until trials began. There was also the small matter of tidying his apartment. Seth's hidden surveillance cameras had shown Noren's men had ransacked it.

With Noren no longer on the scene to pursue personal vendettas and assigned elsewhere to mitigate the growing social disorder. Seth was free to roam. Also needing to stop by Rudi's to pick up the rifle before heading to the Hamptons.

Anthony had a personal interest in Noren where his girls were involved.

Having secured a unique patronage, the previous evening's cab returned Seth to the Hamptons.

Avoiding detection on entering he disappears to his father's den to replace the rifle taken from its vacant rung. Arriving in the kitchen to the smell of something mysteriously delicious.

"I didn't hear you arrive." Kristina asks curiously.

"What's that smell?" Seth asks deflecting her astute observation.

"It's called cooking... Didn't your mother ever cook for you?" Kristina asked inquisitively.

"No. Why should she? ... We had maids that did that? ... But I've never smelt *that* before."

And his nose sniffs the air. Trying to scrutinize and dissect the tantalizing scents.

"*That*... Is an old Romanian recipe... We didn't have maids."

"Hmm..." Hoping it would taste as good as it smelled. "...How's the foot?"

"Better thanks... Nothing that a long hot soak with bubbles wouldn't fix."

“*Bubbles?*” He asked curiously.

Making himself a drink he eased back into chair and watches Kristina go about something very foreign to him.

“You could help me!?” She protested suggestively.

“Don’t think so.” Knowing he was better at slicing pathogens than carrots.

“No PhD’s in cooking?”

“None whatsoever thankfully.”

“What are those green things?” Seth joked.

“They’re called vegetables.” Looking at him suspiciously wondering if he was serious.

“Hmm. Interesting.” Struggling with the concept that food came unprocessed. And unfrozen.

Two lonely figures sat at a large dinning. Eating in silence.

Seth was intrigued by the dish. Marveling at what he had been missing up until now. Kristina watched him curiously, pleased that she had done her grandmother’s recipe proud. In the background a television could be heard.

Both half listening to it.

Reports of civil unrest in major cities around the world. As the protestor’s demands went unanswered.

“It’s going to get worse... Before it gets better.” Kristina declares her thoughts.

Suddenly a news flash appears. Noren’s death had been withheld for security reasons. Somehow a leak had gotten out. She looks over to Seth not wishing to eye contact her.

“That’s fortunate.” Seth states awkwardly. As though he had nothing to do with it.

“You know... Anything about that Mister Adison?” Kristina asked in her detective tone.

“You... Still retired?”

“For the time being.” Her eyes burning holes into him.

“Heard he had a lot of enemies... Could have been any one of them.” Quietly shaking his head.

“I can imagine.” She replied.

Relieved the man was dead. She would not lose any sleep over his death.

“So what now rocket man?” She asked looking to the future.

“It’s getting late Detective. Past your bed time.”

Without protest, Seth scoops Kristina into his arms and carried her towards the bedroom. As they passed his father’s den open doors. She peers in to see the heads on the wall. And beneath them, a full complement of rifles.

Then she looks at Seth.

“What?” He senses her eyes glaring at him again.

“Nothing...” She replies knowingly. “...I could get use to this.” She said softly and let her head rest on his shoulder.

“Let me make you your night cap.” Placing her on the bed.

“That would be nice... I’ll go freshen up while you do that.”

Seth disappears from the room and Kristina hobbled to the bathroom. And begins to run a deep hot bath hoping to alleviate the growing ache in her ankle. Seth reappears with two cups. And catches her sliding into the tub lowering herself deeper into its steaming foaming surface.

Seth places a cup beside the sunken bath.

“I could get use to this.” Dismissing the intrusion and sinking into bubble and bath salts.

“So you say.” Placing her cup beside her.

“You could join me?” She teased him.

“Perhaps later.” Unsure what to make of the invite.

Kristina returns to the bedroom having soaked her pains away.

Dressed in the white bath robe. She spies Seth already showered and laying in his bed. Apparently asleep. She could have imagined his long day and the dramatic events that had occurred. Climbing into her bed and switches off the lamp. Noren was gone. With a sigh of relief dissolved the last of the tension that had not dissolved away with the bath salts.

Unable to sleep. Her mind would not allow her to. Sensing the moon’s presence. Despite the drawn curtains. Its rays were penetrating the walls. The ceiling. And her. Like a worm on a summer pavement she struggled to find a comfortable place to lay. Restless. She looks across to Seth's darkened corner.

Without thinking she shuffles over to his bed.

Pulling back his covers to reveal a half-naked man. And slipped her half-naked body beside his. Seth sensed a presence beside him and rolled over to face her. He had been pulled from a vision that had stalked him his entire life.

Relieved to be distracted by her laying there.

With silence between them. Thoughts and touch would transcend words. Eyes spoke of the gratitude she owed him. Pulling her close. Their lips but a breath apart. Kissing her gently. A moment he had imagined countless times. She returned his kiss. Their hands explore the other's body. Nestling his head onto her breast and kisses them. Running his hand down her body. Gently stroking her and igniting a desire that was building deep inside her. Fulfilling her own imaginings of this moment. Sensual pleasure overcomes her as his hands cup her sensitive breasts. Squeezing them enough to entice both pleasure and pain.

Kissing him as she continues with a slow rhythmic grind. Their breaths in unison. Their intertwined bodies the communion of two souls. Moans grow as her breath grew quicker, creating a greater urgency. Sending her body went into spasms of uncontrollable tremors.

Outside, thunderous waves could be heard climaxing, crashing upon the Hampton shore. Collapsing with exhaustion. Seth kisses her and she feels the warmth of his breath on the shoulder.

Rolling over, she looks into his eyes.

“Don't be afraid.” He tells her.

“I'm not... Not when I'm with you.”

“Noren is gone... He won't come back.”

“I know...” She kisses to thank him for the tacit sin.

Seth hesitates and she senses he is holding something back. An even darker secret.

“There's something I need to tell you... You'll not going to like it.” He waits to see the reaction in her eyes.

Kristina senses a burden he needs to relieve himself of.

“You can tell me... Your secret is safe with me.” Kissing him softly to continue.

He begins to tell her about the Order's Virus to wipe out much of mankind. And how he is leading the team to perfect a vaccine. She looks at him in horror. Shocked by the confession.

Then, as if not to allow angels to hear. He whispers his own dark secret into her ear. Stunned and confused, she looks at him. Wondering who this person was who was about to unleash hell upon the world.

He allowed the dilemma to be comprehended.

“It’s better if it’s me...” Then added, “...I was born to do... This.”
Recalling the dark visions.

“Is there nothing? ...” She began.

“No.” He softly replied. Quelling her hope.

Pulling her close. Kristina tried to grasp the global atrocity that was about to unfold.

“When?”

“A few months... Perhaps.”

“And the vaccine?”

“Yeah... We’re good.” Seth lied.

But he had no intention of using the Order’s vaccine. If the thought gave her peace of mind. Then so be it. The vaccine would not provide any immunity to his virus. He kissed her. Then kissed her birthmark. Now less dark and sensitive than before. Embraced in his arms she falls into a deep peaceful sleep. Her body unable to stay awake a moment longer.

As though pulled from the waking world.

3:00AM and Kristina awakens and senses an unease.

The full moon’s pale yellow fingers had reached through the far window. Unable to reach her in Seth’s bed. Rolling over. She places her hand gently upon his back. Suddenly see a brilliant kaleidoscopic of colors flash through her mind.

Closings eyes, allows herself to connect to him.

Opening her mind’s eye and finds herself standing in a field of long green grasses and wild flowers. Just as the night before. In the near distance she sees her grandmother. Beside her stands a little girl. Kristina wonders who she is. Her grandmother reaches out.

As if to call her closer.

Kristina floats effortlessly through the long wavering grass. Her hand brushing the idyllic colored tops. Nearing her grandmother she reaches out to join hands. She looks down at the little girl with long dark hair and emerald green eyes. A faint birthmark is visible on her neck.

As hands touch, she hears a rumble of thunder above her.

Looking to the sky to see it change color from a brilliant blue to an ominous grey. The sun violently explodes with bright light. Cracks appear across the shell like sky. Cracks grow wider and large black crows fly from them. Squawking a deathly shill. Another sun appears and violently explodes. Relentlessly more suns appear and explode. Releasing blinding white light before blistering into mushroom clouds.

Perpetual detonations shake the earth beneath her feet. The sky violently erupts. Spitting lightning bolts, crackling deafening thunder. Fierce heat wilts the long grass turning it brown. The field catches fire to leave a blackened scorched earth. Sparks and cinder swirl high into the air with the howling wind.

The little girl calls out to Kristina. Cries that are lost in the sound of the deafening thunder and wailing wind. Her Grandmother stands unconcerned by the turbulent storm that swirls around them. Eyes fixate on Kristina's. Suddenly the wind falls away and there is silence.

And the child's cry could be heard.

"Mommy! ... Mommy!" The child cries out to her.

She looks to the child calling out to her. Suddenly, surroundings begin to spin about her and she awakens gasping for fresh air. The vision vanishing from her mind. The smell of the charred field still fresh in her nostrils.

Looking about the darkened bedroom and Seth lying beside her.

Seth slept on. Oblivious to the tempest that had just raged beside him. Fearing to touch him again. Reaches out, but senses nothing. He stirs briefly by the touch. Seth's plan running through her mind. Help him, halt him. She had seen the future. It was all beyond her control. It was all beyond anyone's.

A tempest from which no one could survive.

Then remembers,

'Mommy... Mommy.' Recalling the child.

She had frequently dreamed of her Grandmother. This was the first time a child had appeared. She reaches for her lower belly. Feeling an inner warmth, and wondered.

Kissing Seth's shoulder as if to accept her fate. Or atone the cross he choose to bear...

Chapter 34

Stan turns apprehensively to Nancy with a worried look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” She asks nervously thinking he had released a lethal pathogen into the air.

“Found it.”

“You sure?” Nancy knew the question without asking.

“Yeah.” Looking looked again at his findings.

“Been over it a dozen times already this morning... This is it.”

“Does Seth know?” Nancy asks.

“Not yet... I wanted to make sure first.”

“Where is he? ... He’s been arriving later than his usual these days...”

Nancy looked about hoping he was in his office. “...He’s usually the early bird of all of us... Wonder what’s keeping him?”

“A woman?” Stan speculates keenly.

“Unlikely... I think he’s gay?” Nancy postulates her own clinical observation.

“Gay?” Asked Stan trying to recall Seth’s behavior.

“Who’s gay?” Seth asks walking in on them at a crucial moment in of their conversation.

“Stan.” Declares Nancy jokingly.

“Good on you Stan... You should visit Greenwich Village sometime.”
Seth played along with Nancy.

“I’m not gay!” Stan protests.

“You sure?” Asks Seth.

“I think I’d know.” But wondered if he would.

Then remembers the discovery.

“Boss!” He calls out abruptly. “Think we found it... The third key.” He announced proud as Punch.

“Well done... Was it where I told you to look?” Seth asked, deflating Stan’s moment of glory.

“Exactly where you told me... How’d you know?”

“A lucky hunch.” Seth replied.

“Boss. You don’t do hunches.”

“I know... I still needed you to find it... Well done guys... Write it up and get it on my desk. I’ll give Mueller the good news.” Heading to his office to resume work on his own virus.

They had found the vital three keys that would stimulate the immune system against the Order’s deadly cocktail of plagues. Trials were scheduled to take them through to ides of March. His own preliminary findings had proven the vaccine’s effectiveness. Production and inoculations would follow after the trials had been completed. Making them on target for Braun’s demonic deadline of the Sixth of June.

“Mueller” Commanded Seth, lifting the handset.

“Mueller here.”

“Adison Sir... I have some good news... Stan has just found the third key.”

“Well done Adison... How soon can we begin trials?” He inquired curiously.

“I’m thinking as early as next week... If that’s suitable to you?” Seth teased Mueller’s desire to proceed.

“Excellent. I’ll inform Mister Braun... I want the report on my desk by this evening understand!”

“Yes Sir. Right away Sir. Sorry Sir.” Seth spat out the scripted reply.

And the phones went dead.

Seth carried on his day as if nothing significant had happened.

Operating to his time table. Not Mueller’s. Seth had called the shots all along. Feeding Mueller information on a *need-to-know* basis. Fueling Mueller’s ego for success. Keeping him on the twenty sixth floor.

And away from the laboratory below.

Trial One Day One, 10:00AM.

In a far corner of the subterranean laboratory, a sealed quarantine ward had been constructed. A dozen beds lined the walls. Each bed equipped with thick leather straps. A second sealed environment existed inside the ward. A large clear plastic tent. Heavily armed guards lined the corridors awaiting the arrival of the volunteers. Their black uniforms conflicted with the clinical white surroundings.

Making them look out of place.

The elevator doors opened and shackled volunteers shuffled out. Stan took a step back at the sight of the large burly men, accompanied by equally burly guards. Condemned prisoners promised, albeit falsely, that their sentences would be commuted to life. In exchange for their participation in the trial of a new vaccine. With nothing to lose, many signed up at the chance of living past their expiration dates.

Seth was indifferent to their plight. Most were the dredges of society. Murders and pedophiles. If they survived they survived. If not, then the world was better off without them. One by one, the ten men and two women shuffled to their respective beds. There they were asked to change into long green gowns before being instructed to lay on the bed. To be restrained by the leather straps.

Guards leveled automatic weapons at them a short distance away.

There would be no thought of escape. If the straps were not enough to restrain them. Each would be administered a dip to sedate and pacify them.

Seth stepped forward pushing a large stainless steel trolley. One wheel wobbled, as though it knew something was amiss. On the stainless metal tray lay six vials of vaccine bottles. Each with a yellow label. Beside which lay twelve syringes. Standing before the first of the volunteers reads the medical record ensuring they complied with Seth's specifications.

Satisfied that the specimen was healthy enough to die.

If they had failed the stringent health standard, they would have remained on dead row and been given a bullet to the back of the head. Seth takes an elastic strap and binds the volunteer's upper arm. Sterilizing a small patch on the man's inner elbow with an ionized emission. Filling a syringe to the prescribed measure, carefully injects the pale yellow serum into the protruding vein. Blood spurts out of the small punctured wound as he removes the needle. This soon coagulates.

Releasing the elastic tourniquet, Seth scribbles notes onto a clip board. Then repeats the procedure on the next volunteer. No words were spoken. Volunteers now sedated in a state of deliria. And would remain that way until the end of the trial.

Assuming they survive.

Completing all twelve. Seth walks back along the row of the beds and inspects them one at a time. Glassy sedated eyes unable to fix on him as he

passes by. Former muscular bodies now flaccid, incapable of resistance they thought they might have had.

Seth turns to face Mueller who was watching the process. Unsure if it was *safe* to be present. Albeit two layers away.

“Done Sir.” Seth advised his superior.

“How long before the virus can be admitted?”

“It will vary... But it should take a few days for the vaccine to infiltrate and bond to their systems completely.”

“How long to complete the Trials?”

“About twenty eight days... Give or take... We’ll know within a day of administering the virus if the vaccine will work effectively.”

“For your sake Adison it better... Braun will be fuming if it doesn’t.”

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir. Understand clearly Sir... *Mathematically* it should work.” Seth toyed with Mueller’s ignorance.

“Mathematically? ... We’re dealing with people’s lives here Adison... Not some high school algebraic equation.”

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir.” Whimpered Seth.

Trial One, Day Three, 10:00AM.

It was time to administer the lethal pathogens. Technicians dressed in large white quarantine suits. Box shaped helmets misting as they breathed. Looking more like alien spacemen than technicians. Anxiously watching on, unsure what to expect.

Seth appeared holding a small innocuous yellow cylinder, blaring bio-hazard symbol. Screaming at everyone to keep away. Guards looked anxiously on from outside the quarantine tent. Their weapons now pointed to the ground. Bullets would not halt what the canister contained.

Seth gave a nod to Stan that he was about to administer the Virus. Stan makes notations on a clip board of the time.

An oxygen mask, attached to a tube, attached to the shiny canister. This would not deliver oxygen. It would deliver a deadly inhalation of pathogens. One breath is all that would be required. One pathogen by itself would be all that would be required. This inhalation would contain three.

Methodically, Seth placed the mask over the docile volunteers. Coughing on the foul tasting vapor. Some struggled, but all succumbed in the end. Satisfied the volunteers had been exposure to the pathogens, Seth stepped back and gauged the immediate effects. He would expect none. It

would take a further twenty-four hours before the pathogens had any noticeable effect. Satisfied with what he saw, calmly returned the empty deadly canister to Stan, who held the canister as it was an unexploded bomb.

Out-stretched arms distancing himself from it.

Seth shook his head in disbelief.

An intensive scrub down followed. A chemical spray would wash away any contaminated residual dust. Red lasers scoured the outer layer of the quarantine suit. An assistant helped remove the helmet. Uncoupling the upper and lower halves of the suit. The process would be repeated every five days with each new set of volunteers. Seth returned to the Laboratory.

There was little to do, but write up Mueller's reports and wait.

Watching from outside the quarantine ward window, Seth could see technicians tend to the volunteer's needs. Food and bed pans.

Monitors displayed vitals for any deviations from the norm. Several showed slight fluctuations, but was to be expected. He would wait until the end of the day before making a final assessment. The clock ticked slowly for Nancy and Stan who watched on anxiously as their research pumped through the veins of the human Guinea-Pigs.

Seth returned to his office to make two calls.

"Mueller here." A voice abruptly answered as if something had upset him.

"Adison Sir. Reporting in..." Intentionally silent, as though to annoy Mueller further.

"Well, what is it man. Speak up!" Mueller demanded.

"Yes Sir. Sorry Sir. So far... *Most* of the volunteers are responding well to the vaccine." Seth lied.

"*Most?* ... *Most?! Braun doesn't want to hear most!*" Mueller bellowed through the mouth piece.

"It's still too early to say sir... It's been less than twenty four hours. We know for certain by the end of the day." Seth continue to bait Mueller.

"Very well... Call me when you know for sure and don't waste my time with uncertainties! Understood?"

"Yes Sir, Sorry Sir" Seth replied. And the phone went dead.

Satisfied he had riled Mueller enough to keep him on edge for the rest of the day, pulled out his mobile out called Kristina.

“Hello you.” Kristina answered knowing the only caller.

“How’s retirement suiting you?”

“I could get used to it... How are you going?” She asks curiously.

“Good... The vaccine is working as planned. Still early days.”

“I’ll see you tonight then?”

“Of course. Need to tidy up a few things at the apartment. I was going to stop in at Rudi’s to catch up with Anthony... Fill him in on your retirement.”

“Break it to him gently okay... You know how sensitive he is.”

“Will do... See you soon.” And the untraceable link went dead.

Seth returned to the ward in no hurry to know the results he already knew.

Simulations had already proven the vaccine’s effectiveness. The volunteers that had faulted on their earlier monitoring soon fell into line with the others. They would be kept for observation overnight and the next morning be transferred to a secure quarantine unit upstate until they had been cleared. From there they would return to their six by four cells on death row.

To serve out the rest of their ill-fated and ill-promised sentences.

Satisfied with the day Seth dismissed his team and headed to Rudi’s.

The weather was warming. Leaves were beginning to bud on trees lining the streets and parks. He thought he could smell spring in the air. Though it could have been the scent of freshly baked bagels steaming through the vents on the pavement.

Making his way through the back entrance. Seth looked up the stairs to Anthony’s office. Matthias gave him a nod.

Anthony stood overlooking the floor below. Incurable gentlemen entertaining enticing young ladies entertaining them. And Anthony punching a ticket for the ride.

He hears a knock at the door that slowly opens.

“Seth! Good to see you. How is she?” Anthony calls out delighted to see him.

“She’s good. She’s getting use to... Being retired.”

“*Retired?* Hey_ let’s not be too hasty about this....” Anthony chokes out anxiously.

“I’ll let you discuss that with her. I’m keeping out of it.”

“Fancy a drink?” Already heading for the bottle.

“If you twist my arm.” Seth grinned, taking a seat beside the window.

“Does she miss the place?” He asked to enquiringly.

“She can’t stop talking about it.”

“Liar!” Shot Anthony handing him the short glass.

“How you coping?” Wondering if Noren’s men had come visiting.

“It all went quiet after... Um ...” Anthony began to say.

“Thought it might... That man had his own agenda. Hopefully that’s the last of it.”

Seth savored another swallow.

“How’s business?” Seth asked to change the subject.

“Good_... Old married men can’t get enough of young single women.”

“I can see that.” Said Seth looking down to the floor below.

“You miss the place?” Anthony mused him.

“I miss *this*...” Gesturing the glass in his hand. “... I better be off... Still tidying the apartment after Noren’s men turned it over.”

“Stop by anytime... Bring a friend if you like.”

“Will do. Thanks for the drink.” Finishing the drink and stands to leave.

“Anytime... You know where to find me.” Calls out Anthony, releasing Seth back to the thawing streets...

Chapter 35

Trail Two. Day One. 10:00AM.

The second group of condemned souls arrived and the process is repeated again. Seth stepped forward pushing the large stainless steel trolley. Its wheels squeaked and wobbled as it progressed along the line of beds. Six vials of vaccine bottles. Each with a red labels. Twelve syringes lay beside these. After administering each in turn he steps from the ward and allows the monitoring technicians to take over.

Seth waited anxiously for the vaccine to infiltrate the prisoner's immune systems. Within hours of being administered all began to show violent reactions. Fever and pains erupted over the inmates. Each struggling with their restraints to be free of the torture and the festering pestilence that had been unleashed within them.

Watching on unconcerned for their suffering, Seth smiled with content. As if he had expected the violent reaction. Technicians and medical staff rushed from bed to bed tending to the restrained inmates. They could do little to alleviate their suffering. Word spread quickly to Mueller who then called Seth.

Wanting answers to the apparent failure.

“What’s happening down the Adison? I’m hearing reports about a *reaction*?” Mueller demanded.

“All under control Sir. Nothing to worry about... Side effects are to be expected. Must have been a *bad batch* or something.” Seth calmly replied.

“*Bad Batch?! ...*” Mueller yelled down the phone. “...Sort it out before Braun does... Understand?!”

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir. It won’t happen again Sir.” Seth parroted what Mueller wanted to hear.

“It better not!” Mueller threatens back down the phone.

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir.”

And the phones went dead.

Another two days would pass before the suffering and torment passed and the volunteers had returned to normal vital signs.

“What was that all about?” Asked Stan worried the research was all for nothing.

“I trailed a *variation* on the main vaccine strand.” Seth explained calmly.

“You did what? ... I didn’t know we had one?” Stan exclaimed. “... That wasn’t in the protocol specs.”

“I know... I was playing a *hunch*.” Dismissing Stan’s concerns.

“You and your bloody hunches boss.” Stan replies shaking his head with disbelief.

“Seems they’re all falling back into line again...” Eyeing the dozen monitor’s displaying the inmate’s vital signs. “...We’ll administer the virus tomorrow as scheduled okay?”

“Okay” Stan agrees becoming suspicious of his boss’ behavior.

“It’s getting late... Why don’t you head off home? The others can handle it until then.”

“Thanks boss. See you tomorrow.” Stan disappeared towards the lockers.

Trail Two. Day Three. 10:00AM.

It was time to subject the volunteers to the Order’s cocktail. Stan stood by watching nervously hoping his boss’s *hutch* would not back fire on him. One by one Seth administered the lethal dose. After their recent vaccination issues, many were reluctant inhale the deadly cocktail. Only to surrender to the sedative.

Seth watched the monitors intently. Anxiously pacing up and down the hallway. More so than the first Trial. Stan could see something was troubling him.

“What’s up boss?” Stan asks curious to know his boss’s anxiety.

“Nothing... Just playing a *hutch*...” Came the reply trying to deflect Stan’s interest. “...Don’t you have something to write up?” Suggesting he could be elsewhere.

“All done and dusted.” Stan affirmed.

“Hmm... Then keep an eye on this lot and keep me posted of any... *Thing*.” Seth instructed and returned to his office.

Seth refused to go home until he knew the outcome.

After sending his team home for the evening returned to the Ward to watch over the inmate’s progress. Nurses looking like futuristic astronauts,

moved between beds. Guards had succumbed to the boredom. Reclined in their comfy seats. Weapons now leaning against the wall.

Only the sound of muffled chatter and periodic beeps from monitors. Despite the prolonged monotony Seth refused to leave. Refusing to sleep until he knew the outcome. Somewhere in the night.

After 26 hours of continuous observation. He had fell asleep.

And awoke the next morning with people moving about. Standing upright regained the feeling in his stiff body.

“You’re awake.” A voice calls out. It was Stan.

“Yeah.” Seth’s tired voice replies. Dry from the ventilated air.

“Seems your hunch was right. Other than their initial reaction they show no signs of reaction to the virus. In fact they scored better than the first test group.”

“Well done Stan... Write it up. I’m going to bed.”

“Who’s going to administer the next in-take?”

“Guess who? ... Think you can handle it Kangaroo boy?”

“Thanks boss!!” Exclaimed Stan eagerly.

“I’ll see you in twelve hours.”

Seth discharged himself from the Ward and headed home.

The trials would continue for a further three weeks.

With intermittent trials of Seth’s *hunches*. Each causing an adverse reaction before returning to normal. He had one more hunch to play. After administering a vial of yellow vaccine, followed it up three days later with a red virus.

This caused some confusion with Stan who had monitored the sequences closely.

“What you doing boss? This isn’t protocol.” He whispered hoping no one would hear.

“Stand easy Stan... I have a *hunch*.” Came Seth’s usual reply.

“You and your bloody hunches boss.” Said Stan standing back as if to distance himself from the decision.

Waiting a further three days to return to administer the yellow labelled virus. One by one Seth worked his way down each row of beds. Allowing each inmate to inhale a fatal breath. Then returned to his office and closed his door. Going over his research notes to mentally calibrate the amounts of the vaccine that would be required for production.

It was time to message Virgil again.

"You there Virgil?" The message read.

He waited patiently, but knew Virgil would reply.

"Who is this?" Pinged back the reply unsure who could be messaging him.

"Diablo."

"What's up?"

"Close to delivery... Your team ready?"

"They've been ready for months."

"Good... I'll send instructions soon."

"Roger that."

"Stay on line. Over. Out." Seth disconnected the encrypted link.

Stan came running to his office on cue.

"Boss! Boss! Come quickly! ... Your hunch just went south!" He pleaded for Seth to hurry.

Seth was in no rush to see what he already knew.

Casually making his way back to the ward with Stan racing steps ahead. Showing no concern for the health of condemned prisoners. Reacting violently to the virus Stan had administered to them. Fever and major organs were shutting down. Contorted twisting bodies straining at their bindings. Seth passively ran eyes over the beds as nurses held down their dying patients.

"Must be a bad batch..." Seth responds unemotionally. "...Hmm!"

"Bad batch? What do we tell Mueller?" Panicked Stan.

"Collateral damage." Seth suggested.

"Boss ... This is serious! ... They could die!!" Panicked Stan.

"Perhaps... They were going die anyway from a lethal injection, or a bullet anyway." Seth dismissed Stan's concerns.

And with that Seth began to walk away indifferent to the volunteer's wellbeing. Then at the last moment turned back and makes a suggestion to Stan.

"You could administer the red vaccine... Or you could let them die... Your call." Said Seth trivially.

Placing the power of life and death in his underling's hands. Stan stood shocked with indecision. Then realized Seth was not joking.

"Injection or gas?" Asked Stan keenly.

“Either will do.” Replied Seth, as though it made no difference.

Stan hurried off to administer the red vaccine. It took a few hours for the vaccine to take effect. Gradually the inmate’s vehement symptoms subsided as their bodies overcame the mélange circulating in their veins.

Stan re-appeared at Seth’s door.

Angry and alarmed at Seth’s earlier dismissive behavior and disrespect of protocol.

“What the hell was that all about!?” He demanded an answer.

Seth looked up from his production calculations surprised to hear a tone in his voice above his usual submissive self.

“I was playing a hunch.” Seth repeated his catch phrase.

“That was no hunch boss... What you playing at?” Trying to make sense of Seth’s game book.

“Can’t tell you Stan. A need to know basis.” Seth lied, looking to the ceiling as if to suggest Mueller was behind it.

“Oh... Sorry, I didn’t know.” Stan began to apologize.

“Yeah... You weren’t to know... Sorry to keep you in the dark... Just following orders. Both of us.” Said Seth hoping the lie had not bruised Stan’s feelings too much.

“Tomorrow we’re back to usual yellow-yellow combinations okay?”

“Right then... No more hunches then... Okay?” Asked San seeking confirmation.

“No more hunches... Promise.” Seth confirmed.

Seth called it a day.

He would write it up as a bad batch. Saying that the vaccine was susceptible to mutation. Using the appropriate words to stroke Mueller’s wanton agenda. Bad results would be written off as technical glitches and erroneous data. Heading to the lockers to gather his overcoat.

And headed home.

Home he thought.

Where was that now? His bachelor apartment had given way to a homestead in the Hamptons. His parents would not appear for months. If they would at all. Enjoying early retirement among the social elite.

For now he had privacy. And a place where Kristina was safe. Time would come when he would have to release his virus upon the world.

Kristina's hope that the Order's vaccine would save her was a lie waiting to be uncovered.

Seth shock his head and grinned at her innocence...

Chapter 36

Hector Hades had avoided Rudi's for a deliberate reason.

Though time had healed his aversion and drugs had eroded his good sense to stay away. Having reconciled Paige's death as simply an unfortunate accident. It was not like he had pulled the *trigger*. This time. His conscious was clear. As he walked casually into Rudi's as if nothing had happened.

Two large dark shadows looked intently down at him as he entered. Their presence going unnoticed by Hector who was under the influence of several substances and as many tequilas. Matthias gave Ruben a quiet nod. Ruben gave Matthias a quiet nod. They would inform Anthony and wait instructions.

Hector walks into the restroom to snort a line of Candy and Little-brother. Memories of Nero flash at him as he enters the cubicle. Taking his throne. Surveyed the glistening tiled dominion through rose colored eyes. Cutting colored powder on the tiled ledge.

Calling out Nero's name, waited for the phone to answer.

Nero's face appeared on the screen.

"Hector! ..." Nero exclaims, "...What you up to you old cock?"

Desperately trying to concentrate. Hector's tranquilized face struggles to focus on the tablet's screen.

"Just reminiscing the old days my friend." Responds Hector, before disappearing from view to snort a line.

Nero could hear the sound of the long harsh snort. Then Hector's face reappeared. Eye's squinting forcefully then bulging widely as the drug rushed to his brain. Kaleidoscopic sparks erupted before Hector's eyes as dying neurons fought off the overwhelming narcotic assault.

Nero laughed at his friend's unexpected call.

"Where you at man?" Asking curiously eyeing the familiar tiled restroom.

"Thought I'd check out the dancing ladies for the evening my old friend."

“Oh man! ... You didn't go back *there* did you!?” Nero beseeched him.

“Ah... It's okay man... Water under the bridge... No one remembers that bitch.” Vaguely recalling the unfortunate affair.

“Get out of there man!” Nero pleaded with his numbed friend, growing senseless by the moment.

“Nah... It's all good man... You should be here to... P_ar_ty!!” Hector called out excitedly. His mind now drenched with ecstasy.

“Mate... I'm a tight leash again... I think my father knows something. But he's not talking... I'm sure it has to do with bitch's disappearance... It doesn't feel right mate. You have to get out of there!” Nero continued desperately to plead for Hector to leave.

“Chill man... Chill! ...” Dismissed Hector as a state of euphoria over came him. “...Got to go man... Girls are waiting for the *Snake Man!* ... Stay cool man!”

Hector killed the link before Nero had time to warn him a final time.

Leaning back against the cold tiled wall.

Allowing the ceiling to spin above him. And wondered if he should give Nero a call. Maybe later. Levering himself to his feet. Regaining grace and poise that was all but in his mind. Swaggers to the bar to order a tequila shot. The barman looks quietly over to Matthias who gives in a subtle nod to serve him.

Hector's nostrils twitched. Running a finger under them to alleviate a growing irritation. And makes his way to the stage pushing aside the thick velvet curtains. The room is in near darkness. Red colored sirens penetrated the haze of smoke, flashing their warnings for him to leave. Finding a table he reclines in the chair. And orders a drink from the passing waitress. Unaware of the watchful eyes above.

Anthony looked down upon the condemned docile creature.

No doubt under the influence of something stronger than a tequila shot he had just consumed at the bar. He watched on and thought. The opportunity may not arise again.

Matthias stood in the doorway casting an ominous shadow. His large frame presenting an outline of a menacing giant. Anthony thought of Sarah, Cindy, and Kristina. And then of Noren. Now lying in a city morgue. A toe tag a fitting tomb stone. Thinking of Hector's associate

Nero. And his high powered father. Nero may be out of reach. But Hector, the low life scum that he was, had presented himself on a silver platter.

Thinking again of Sarah and how Hector had discarded her as a piece of trash.

A chill ran over his body. The decision came easily.

Anthony closes his eyes for a moment longer than usual and turns to look at Matthias. And nods to him once. Matthias returned downstairs to inform his brother. He would allow Hector Hades his last moment of pleasure on this earth.

Before sending him back to Hell.

Enjoying the show with perverted pleasure.

As though the girls were performing for him. Endowing them with tips for their performance and company. One by one the girls lavished him with attention. If only to see the man who had killed Sarah.

Or, as though to say good bye.

Finally Marilyn approached him. Seducing him. Knowing which buttons to press. And where to press. Hector suggested she could come back to his place to share some Candy. Marilyn played along with to his lines. Suggesting they could share a joint out back first.

Pulling him to his feet, lead him into the foyer. Feeling an unease as if something was missing from the foyer. Unable to place what, or who. Squeezing his hand she regained his attention. Pulling him close to her warm near naked body. Leading him down the long narrow corridor to the back entrance. Hector places his jacket over her as though to provide some protection from the cold.

Opening the door, allowed him to step through first.

Then closed it behind him, as she stayed inside. Letting the jacket to fall to the floor in disgust. And went to shower herself of the filth that had touched her.

Reaching into his pocket to pull out the joint, turns about expecting to see Marilyn standing behind him.

All he saw was a closed red door. An overhead bulb illuminated the immediate area. And the wavering solitary figure.

“Where’d you? ...” Hector began to say.

Then he sensed he was not alone. There were faint steps. There was faint breathing. Approaching him. A short distance to one side. Hidden by

the darkness of the alley. Stood a huge dark menacing shadow. A short distance to the other side stood the other huge dark menacing shadow. The two huge dark shadows stepped menacingly forward. They were in no rush. Their prey was going no-where. Other than to Hell.

“What the fuck? ... What do you to want?” Hector asked taken by surprise.

The ghost of Sarah flashed before his eyes.

“Boys... Boys I can explain...” Hector pleaded.

Matthias and Ruben were not there to talk. The only talking Matthias had in mind was with his fist. Hector stood helpless. Sandwiched between the two towering giants. They had already flipped for beating rights the moment he stepped inside Rudi’s that evening.

Matthias had won and wrapped a massive hand around Hector’s scrawny neck and lifted him from the ground. Almost throttling him. That would be too easy. Hector thrashed about. Legs kicking into thin air. Arms struggling to support himself. Holding Hector against the brick wall. Hector’s feet kicking out in protest but to no effect.

Brutally, Matthias slams his fist into Hector’s face.

‘Slam!’

Causing for it collapse inwards. As if that was not enough.

‘Crush!’ He does it again.

‘Crush!’ And again.

Hector’s drug induced medication beforehand was of little help to numb the relentless punches. His bloody fractured face beaten beyond recognition.

Satisfied he had redeemed Hector of his sins. Matthias handed him to his brother like a rag doll. Hector’s eyes rolled in their broken sockets unable to focus on anything. Struggling for breath. His mouth hung open unable to close from a broken jaw.

But those were the least of his injuries to come.

Ruben raises Hector above his head. Suspending him for a moment before slamming him violently down onto his bent knee. Followed by the sound of an almighty thud and breaking ribs.

‘Crack!’

Hector groaned painfully at the impact. Incapable of resistance. Wheezing for breath through punctured lungs. Ruben held Hector by his feet. Dangling him upside down. Shaking him effortlessly. A small plastic

bag falls from his pocket. Matthias picks it up and recognizes the substance within. And grins at Ruben.

The two huge minds thinking alike.

Righting Hector vertically, his head falls backwards. Too weak to support itself. Matthias pours the contents down Hector's throat. Incapable of resisting. The substance dissolves with blood and mucus before swiftly entering Hector's bloodstream. Within moments, Hector begins to convulse and buckled as the nerve agent takes effect. Eyes dilated for the very last time and he becomes motionless.

Taking him by the neck. Ruben looks into Hector's distant eyes wondering if life still existed behind them. Gripping his head with two huge hands.

Breaks it like a brittle twig.

'Snap!'

A distinctive snap echoed about the ally. And whatever flame that was left in Hector's demonic soul had been extinguished. Anthony steps from the darkened corner where he had witnessed the Hector's dispatch. Matthias picked up Hector's flaccid body by his foot and casually swung him into a nearby dumpster. The three walked back inside content that Sarah's death had not gone unpunished.

"Job well done boys." Anthony thanked his security.

"It was our pleasure boss." Matthias replied calmly as if he had just thrown out the thrash.

Returning to resume their placid positions either side of the entry waiting to fall on anyone who stepped out of line...

Chapter 37

Geneva, and the Grand Square outside the Order's headquarters had been sealed off.

Awaiting the arrival of a shuttle of an important dignitary. A crowd had begun to gather to see who would be arriving. Patmos stood atop the steps and watched as the white shuttle approached from the east. He had not seen his old friend for a very long time and he was keen to find peace with him.

Braun however stood beside him with divergent thoughts. This was a visitor he wished not to see. He was in no position to question his superior. Slowly the sleek white shuttle descended and maneuvered into position on the prepared landing zone. Sending up a cloud of dust and debris. The whirl of the ionized engines ceased. Two large crossed keys emblazoned on the fuselage the only indication of its origin.

The crowd fell silent. Unsure of what to expect next.

There was a sudden release of pressure as the door began to open. A gantry extended to the square's cobbled surface. One by one. The Holy entourage walked briskly from the craft. Except one. An elderly ninety two year old gentleman. Appearing to be no rush. Cardinal Cassini had served a lifetime under numerous Popes. In his day, he was considered the James Bond of the Vatican Secret Service, The Entity. These days he was less agile. And now served as an emissary to the Holy See. Pope Francis II.

"Cardinal Cassini... It is good to see you after all these years... Welcome my dear friend." Patmos welcomed the Vatican emissary.

Patmos stepped forward to greet the senior statesman along the long red carpet. The Chairman of the Order would go to greet him. And few would ever have that privilege. Patmos bows to his esteemed friend reaching out to kiss the hand of the great man.

Braun watched on quietly in disgust. He was but a young man at the time. His father had told him stories of Cardinal Cassini. His father Julius Braun was a notorious relic collector who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Having had encounters with the Cardinal in the past.

Many of them bloody. And every time losing valuable relics back to the Cardinal. Back to the Church. Though his father had long since died the memories were still open wounds for Augustus.

The Cardinal held Augustus in as much contempt as he had held his father Julius. He would work with Braun as part of the G7 alliance nonetheless. He did not have to like him.

Braun stepped forward and mimicked his superiors welcome. Cassini sensed the awkwardness. And waited for Braun to step aside before moving forward.

The Roman Catholic Church had survived two thousand years and was one of the wealthiest organizations in the world. Equal among the G7. Though the Order held the controlling hand economically. The Church held the controlling hand spiritually. With billions of worshipers obedient to one master. The Pope. Church and State had battled each other for millennia. And today was no exception.

Cassini had heard whispers. Rumors. And wished to clarify them in person with the Chairman of the Order. John Patmos himself.

Arriving at Patmos's spacious office.

Cassini eased himself into a large leather chair. It was smaller and less ornate than his own. A rose colored glass of sweet sherry awaited him on the table beside him. He looked about the grand office to see large portraits of various family heads of state. Recognizing many of them and enquired about the few he did not. Making small talk before the main purpose of his visit was raised.

"That will be all thanks Augustus." Patmos turns and requests Braun to leave the Cardinal and himself alone to discuss the Cardinal's visit.

"But John...I thought..." Braun begins but is cut short by the Chairman.

"That will be all thank you Augustus." Patmos repeats in a tone suggesting he should leave.

"Very well John... I am in my office if you need me... Cardinal." The rebuffed Braun accepts his marching orders.

Bowing to the Cardinal before leaving quietly.

The large double doors closed behind Braun. Leaving the two senior statesmen to discuss the world's affairs without him. Uncertain of the

purpose for Cardinal's visit, no doubt would be informed by Patmos afterwards.

"How can I help you Cardinal" Patmos asked sincerely.

"People are talking John." Cassini began warily.

"About what?" Intrigued to know himself.

"*Lists... A virus of some kind... A correction...* Tell me this isn't so? ..." Cassini beseeched looking sharply into Patmos' eyes for the truth. "... His Holiness is very concerned."

"Ah_... Braun ..." Patmos began letting Braun's name slip.

Unable to find the words to surmise Braun's outrageous plan.

"*Braun* is behind this?" Cassini looked towards the doors through which Braun had disappeared. "... I should have known... His father..." Cassini began, deciding best not to speak the dark thought.

'I should have killed him when I had the chance.' Allowing the thought to continue in his mind.

"God forgive me..." Spoke Cassini seeking absolution for the transgressive desire. Suppressing his regret. Cassini takes a sip of sherry to compose himself. And begins again, "... Sources tell me the Families are preparing lists for those to survive this... *Correction.*" He exclaimed in wonder as to the extent of the scheme unfolding. "...Tell me it isn't so?"

"I can assure you myself. They are unfounded rumors Cardinal..." Patmos began to explain. "...There can be no substance to them... I promise you." But wondered how much Braun had been keeping from him.

"What's *this* all about?" Asked Cassini more directly.

"A few months ago Braun suggested a hair brain scheme to... Solve all our problems..." Began Patmos, avoiding more direct words such as eradication. "...But I said I would think about it."

"Think about it? ... What is there to possibly think about John? It would be sacrilege to even consider the thought."

"I know... That's what I told him... Obviously what you are hearing is but an echo of that proposal. Nothing could possibly proceed without my signature... And that will never occur on my watch." Declared Patmos.

"I certainly hope not." Cassini added reclining into his chair contemplating the possibility of such an annihilation.

“I will speak to Braun... I am sure it’s just Family gossip... Braun has a habit of jumping the gun sometimes.”

“I hope so. For everyone’s souls... I will inform his Holy Eminence the Pope of your words...” Cassini replied before adding, “...Despite all the worldly troubles we face... And we have many John ... Man’s destiny is in the hands of God... And His alone. Do you understand? ... It is not Braun’s place to play God.”

The Cardinal recalled memories of Braun’s father and the extent to which he would go to get what he wanted.

‘The apple does not fall far from the tree.’ Conceded Cassini.

“I understand Cardinal.” Patmos accepted, nodding his head in agreeance.

He would need to speak with Braun about his project to purge the world of the undesirables. It had gone too far. He would pull the plug the on Braun’s ill-conceived plan.

“I will inform his Holiness... But he would prefer to hear it in person. You must visit soon... It’s been a long time John.” Cassini urged encouragingly.

“I will soon Cardinal... Soon. I promise...” Said Patmos accepting the invite. “...More sherry Cardinal?” Patmos asked hoping to change to the topic.

“Augustus! We need to talk...” Patmos called out to Braun once Cardinal Cassini’s shuttle had begun its journey west to the Vatican City. “...My office. Now!”

And this was not a request.

Braun appeared at Patmos’s doors like a misbehaved school boy being summoned to the Head Masters office for reprimanding.

“What is this about John?” Braun wondered aloud still unsure of the Cardinal’s visit.

“Seems your little idea of wiping out the world’s population has found its way to the Vatican... Tell me nothing has changed from our earlier discussion?”

“I am sure it’s all gossip...” Braun began to lie. “...You know how word spreads...” Hoping this would annul Patmos’s concern. “...We agreed it’s your decision.”

“That is what I told the Cardinal...” Patmos looked at Braun’s poker face. “...Close down whatever research you’re doing in America with that... Mueller guy.” Patmos ordered his Secretary of State.

“Certainty John. Right away.” Braun lied again, consoling the Chairman.

“Thank you Augustus... I know how much it meant to you... But I can’t go ahead with it. You understand don’t you?”

“Of course I do... The research has been useful. Other than that, I don’t know what I was thinking... Sorry John...” said Braun looking for forgiveness. “...I will talk to the families personally myself about these rumors and have them cease immediately before they reach the ear of the public... We have enough trouble with the rioting”. Braun deflected the discussion more nearer to home.

“Hmm...” Patmos turned and stared out the window. “...The numbers are growing larger and they’re becoming bolder by the day... What can we do?” Patmos asks honestly.

“We can only do our best... God willing.” Braun replied hoping to touch a religious nerve with Patmos.

“Indeed... That is what the Cardinal had said too.” Said Patmos accepting that Braun had seen the light.

Braun’s face did not betray his thoughts to the contrary. He would pacify Patmos and send him on his way. Braun was not deeply religious and what God could not deliver, he would deliver himself. With, or without Patmos’s signature.

Braun returned to his office contemplating the discussions he would have with key members of each family.

But first he would call Mueller.

“Mueller speaking” a distance voice echoed down the line.

“Braun here... How are the trials proceeding?”

“Good timing. I was just about to call you.”

“And?” Braun barked back impatiently.

“Success Sir! ... The trials were a complete success!” Mueller replied, leaving out details of the rouge reactions.

“Excellent... How soon can we begin production?”

“As soon as tomorrow.” Mueller responded.

“Well done... Begin immediately ... We have no time to lose.”

“Yes sir. We have a facility up state that can handle production.”

“Good... I’ll send through the numbers and distribution details. I want production and distribution completed within three months... Can you handle that?” Braun beseeched.

“I think so Sir.” Mueller stuttered a reluctant reply.

“I don’t want to hear *think so* Mueller! ... I want results! ...” Then added, “...Have that clever man of yours... What’s his name again?”

“Adison Sir”

“Yes *Adison*... Have him get onto it.”

“Yes Sir.” Mueller accepted his orders.

Knowing his own survival depended on his ability to deliver on time. And the phones went dead.

Seth stood overlooking the production floor.

The new facility was massive. Covering an entire football field. Rows upon rows of parallel white tubular lighting hung above him. Rows upon rows of elongated incubators lay on the floor before him.

“Your offices are over here... This way... Keep up!” Mueller barked at the team that would perform his miracle.

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir.” Replied Seth following his master’s voice.

Stan marched with Mueller. Hoping that would appease him as Seth and Nancy lagged deliberately behind.

“You have state of the art equipment here. I’ll introduce you to the people you’ll be working with. This way ... Keep up will you!” Mueller repeated frustrated by the team’s tardiness.

Section Heads that stood about awaiting the prodigy they had heard so much about.

The Heads looked at Stan curiously in awe. Then Mueller stepped forward and introduced Seth as the Project Lead. The Heads quickly dismissed Stan back to the lower ranks of lab rat. And began to marvel Seth curiously in awe.

Seth stepped forward and outlines the timetable to meet the necessary production quantities. Informing them he would personally be overseeing the entire process. Mueller was taken back by Seth’s thoroughness and organizational abilities.

“I’ll leave you to get settled in Adison. Anything you need ... You know where to find me.”

“Yes Sir. Thank you Sir. Sorry Sir.” Responded Seth subserviently.

“I want weekly reports. Quality and production counts. Understood?” Barked Mueller.

“Already onto it Sir.” Seth replied.

Surprising Mueller wondering how he could be. But had to assume he was.

Once Mueller had left, technicians relaxed and Seth was able to discuss in technical slang what he anticipated would happen.

The Section Heads nodded in unison. None knew the purpose of the vaccine they were producing. Just that it was to go into storage. That was all they needed to know. An ignorant worker is a happy worker.

“Cultures are being delivered this afternoon. I want to be up and running by tomorrow morning. Understood?”

“Yes Sir!” Came the unified chorus.

“Find your stations. Have them ready... Off you go lab rats! ... Snap! Snap!” Said Seth clapping his hands.

Groups scurried away like white rats back to their clinical nests. Seth looked at Nancy and Stan.

“We need to talk... My office.” Seth ordered his two charges to follow.

“Boss... By the size of this place... How much of this stuff are we producing? What the hell are we vaccinating? The world?” Asked Stan, not knowing how close to the truth he had spoken.

“It’s to go into storage apparently.” Seth looked to the ceiling.

Which Stan picked up on but was lost on Nancy. Now looking up at the ceiling in search of something she could not see.

“I’ve done the math. Its doable if were keep to schedule.”

“Okay. So where do we fit into all this?” Asked Nancy curiously feeling they were being left out somehow.

“You’re to keep an eye on this lot...” Indicating the Section Heads that had scurried off. “...You guys know the vaccine better than any of them... I will personally handle any bad batches. You guys handle the rest... Okay?” Said Seth looking for confirmation from his suspicious underlings.

“You playing one of your hutches boss?” Stan asked wondering about his boss’s motive for the keen interest in bad batches.

“Always Stan... Always.” Replied Seth, then looking up to the ceiling again.

Stan shook his head in disbelief and Nancy looked up again wondering what was up there she was missing.

“I’ll explain it to you later Nancy.” Consoled Stan hoping she would understand.

Day after day. Week after week.

Vaccine cultures grew and multiplied at exponential rates. Seth separated the rouge batches that seem to have appeared from no-where. Personally watching over their removal. To await a disposal that would never come.

Large white trucks would arrive. Emblazoned with bright red bio-hazard symbols to keep most brazen inquisitive security guard at a safe distance. At Seth’s bequest, Virgil’s contacts had secured the contract for disposal. And who was Mueller to question Seth’s logistics. Production numbers were ahead of schedule and everything was on track. Within the first month over a hundred million vials had distributed globally with ever increasing numbers to follow.

Virgil’s underground cult had renovated a derelict warehouse in a remote industrial suburb in New Jersey. On the outside it was run down and dirty. On the inside was a pristine clinical environment. Diablo had overseen the construction personally. Money was no object with wealthy trust fund members contributing towards the mutual apocalyptic goal. The Jersey team constituted a handful of trained scientists. The balance made up of volunteer cult members. Prepared to get their hands dirty at the coal face.

White trucks would arrive daily to the New Jersey facility. Relieve their tainted consignments and depart to retrieve another load. Production lines were established. White suited minions would watch as robotic arms handled Seth’s virus. Placing minute amounts of the yellow solution into small red canisters labeled ‘*Rat Poison*’. Before sealing it with a lid.

These would continue of a conveyor belt to a packaging room. Where they would be boxed and labelled for distribution around the world. As a white truck was arriving at one end of the complex, a black truck would be leaving at the other. Dispatching the biological contraband globally.

Seth stood with Virgil on a raised platform overseeing the production line.

“How’s the distribution going? ... Any problems?” Seth enquired.

“So far so good Diablo?” Said Virgil checking his counts for the day.

“Keep an eye on quarantine... We don’t want any of this stuff leaking out before the time.”

“Why can’t we just release it now?” Asked Virgil, keen to start on killing everyone.

“You’d only end up killing yourself before you did the rest.”

“Oh...” Said Virgil, having not thought it through.

“It must be synchronized to maximize its effectiveness.” Seth suggested.

“Of course... When can we begin?”

“When distribution is complete... the Ides of May.”

Seth wanted to pre-empt the Order’s Virus release by a few weeks. Virgil nodded his head. That was in a month’s time. He could live with that until then.

“I’ll inform the *Janitors*.” Virgil confirmed.

“Where are they?”

“Major airports, railways, schools, stadiums, and shopping malls... Everywhere you instructed...” Virgil began “...And then we’ll let human contact do the rest.” Then asked curiously, “...How long will it take for it to...?”

“Not long... A few day’s tops...” Seth lied, “...How’s security? ... Anyone nosing around?” Hoping to change the morbid topic.

“Not since The Bogeyman went down... Whoever did it, I’d like to shake his hand.”

“Well I guess we’ll never know... I best be off.” Said Seth extending his hand to Virgil. “... Send the word mid-May... No later. Okay?”

“Mid-May. Confirmed.” Virgil parroted the deadline.

Seth’s entire plan was now in the hands of a doomsday cult leader and his global distribution network.

With distribution already underway, the dooms day clock was ticking. It was now a race to head off the Order’s release date. No sooner had the Order’s first vials had come off the production line. They were dispatched around the world to mysteriously storage facilities. Behind closed doors the Chosen were being secretly inoculated.

Inoculation was one thing, the release of the virus however was another matter. Patmos would need to be persuaded one way or another despite his assurances to the Vatican.

In the end, Braun was confident he would have his way...

Chapter 38

“Well done Robert.” Braun congratulates his deliverer of death.

“Thank you Sir. It has been an honor.” Mueller humbled himself to his superior.

“It’s time we ah_... Tidied away the loose ends... If you know what I mean?” Unsure Mueller was up to the task.

“I understand. It will be my pleasure.” Mueller acknowledged what needed to be done.

“Shame we can’t keep him. But he knows too much.” Braun contemplated the retarded possibility.

“He’s served his purpose Sir... Best we cut him loose... Him... And his team. He’s in the lab today. I’ll see to it personally.”

“Thank you Robert. I knew I could count on you.” Commended Braun with content.

“Oh... And by the way sir... We discovered where he was hiding that detective woman.” Mueller added hoping to add icing to his cake.

“That bitch whore!? Why wasn’t I informed earlier?” Exclaimed Braun down the phone.

“Sorry sir... Seemed Adison *had* gotten into bed with her and ah... We needed Adison to complete production before we could touch her... Otherwise...” Mueller tried to explain hoping it was not an issue.

“Hmm! I understand... I want them gone today! ... Both of them!” Braun ordered loudly.

“Yes sir. I have Noren’s men are already on to it as we speak.”

“Very good. Keep me posted Robert.” And the line went dead.

Mueller walks boldly through the semi-vacant laboratory and into Seth’s office.

On closing the door behind him, hears a series of bolts clunking into place. Looks back at the door unsure what to make of the muffled sound. Seth leans over a microscope indifferent to Mueller’s sudden appearance. And makes no attempt to look up at him.

“Where is everyone? Where is your Team?” Mueller asks abruptly.

“I gave them the week off.” Seth replies without concern still focused on the microscope.

“You what?” Mueller exclaims angrily.

“Gave them the rest of the week off.” Seth repeated as if Mueller had not heard him the first time.

“On whose authority?” Mueller barked.

“Mine.” Seth said calmly continuing to peer down the microscope at something apparently more interesting.

“It doesn’t matter I suppose...” Dismissing the minion’s absence. “... It’s you I’ve come to... For God sake man! ... Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

“Yes Sir... Sorry Sir.” Came automatic response. And he continues to stare into the microscope. Disinterested in Mueller’s presence.

“We know about your little hide away in the Hamptons... And that bitch whore you keep up there...” Mueller allowed himself a smirk of disgust in wonder. “...Now that everything’s... Complete ...” Hesitates briefly for the appropriate words. “...We no longer need you and... Your team... How fortunate them they’re not here.”

Kristina squeezed Seth’s hand while she watched on. Seth turns to look out the large windows to the wild Atlantic surf and raising sun in the late spring sky.

“You how fortunate.” Seth agrees with him.

“Don’t be *smart* with me Adison!” Mueller threatened.

Suddenly sirens sounded a warning. Clinical white lighting suddenly replaced by strobing lights. Speakers broadcast in a calm female mechanical voice of a death-knell warning.

“Evacuate the building... Self-destruct will begin in sixty seconds.”

Panic spread through the technicians on the floor, now beginning to run towards the single elevator hoping to escape in time. Mueller looked out at the pandemonium. And then back at Seth unsure who had initiated it.

“Look at me you *bastard!*” Mueller shouted him, pulling a short barrel gun from his pocket.

Seth looks up and the sight of Seth’s face shocks Mueller. Two dark sockets appeared where his eyes should have been. His skin a putrid color.

“Yes Sir. Sorry Sir ... Yes Sir. Sorry Sir ...” A robotic voice repeats incessantly.

“What the fuck?!” Exclaims Mueller trying to comprehend the bizarre freak staring back at him.

Mueller takes aim at the head and fires off two deafening shots in the enclosed office. Bullets striking it squarely in the face and forehead. The head tilts violently back with each impact. Before resuming its hollowed stare at Mueller. White fluid bleed sluggishly from the wounds. Followed by sparks and fumes into the air.

“Yes Sir... Sorry Sir.” The robotic voice continued unabated.

Initially confused at what was happening. Mueller realizes that the Adison before him was no more than an advanced android.

“Evacuate the building... Self-destruct will commence in thirty seconds.” The calm feminine voice warned from the overhead speakers.

Realizing he had been tricked, Mueller struggles hopelessly to open the heavily bolted door.

“Evacuate the building... Self-destruct will commence in twenty seconds.” Told the death knell.

Standing back fires a shot at the office window hoping it would shatter. Only to create a scratch. He fires again and again. To no avail.

‘Bulletproof glass?’

Time was running out. Trapped like a feral animal in a glass cage, Mueller stares stunned and confused into the laboratory. Turning to look at the Adison looking back at him.

‘Wondering how did you know? ... What was this all about?’

“Damn you Adison!” Shouted Mueller knowing Seth would be watching from some safe haven.

“Evacuate the building... Self-destruct will commence in ten seconds.” The calm voice continues before counting down the final seconds.

“Ten ... nine ... eight ...”

Desperately, Mueller throws a chair at the splintered window in one last bid for escape. Only to have it bounce back at him. Pounding his hands against the glass he shouts for help. The muffled screams go unheard by the technicians scrambling for own escape outside.

“Three ... two ... one.”

And then there was silence.

Technicians stopped panicking. Looking about anxiously. Waiting for what was to come next. Nothing came. The lights returned to normal and

the sirens ceased.

Mueller stood transfixed. Relieved that it had been a false alarm. That Adison had failed. He begins to laugh loudly. Suddenly fierce flames spewed relentlessly from all corners. And the office erupts in a ball of fire. Mueller becomes a human torch screaming in agony. The intense fury continues. Staggering to the window pleading for salvation from the technicians that watch on powerless to help. Skin peeling from his body. Bloody hand tracks smeared down the blackening window. The thermal blast raged on. Incinerating the office. Cremating everything to ashes. Nothing would be left of anyone. Or anything.

The android reduced to melted circuitry.

It would be reported later, albeit a company internal memo as an unfortunate accident. The tragic loss of the team leader Doctor Seth Adison and his superior Mister Robert Mueller.

He was about to kill the switch on the remote viewer when something caught Seth's eye as it eclipsed the morning sun.

He watches the object as it moved across the sky and become more clearly visible. A Striker drone armed with missiles coming straight at them.

"Oh shit! ... We're got to get out of here... Now!" Seth exclaimed grabbing Kristina by the arm pulling her with him as he rushes towards a large bookcase.

Frantically entering a sequence onto a key pad. The bookcase slides sideways to reveal a hidden passage way.

"Down here!" Seth shouts looking back seeing discharged missiles heading his way.

The heavy doorway sliding closed behind them just as the first missile struck.

Scrambling down a circular stair case. They can hear thunderous explosions above them. Dust and concrete fragments fall down on them as they continued deeper into the dimly lit abyss. After what seemed like an eternity they came to a sealed metal door. Seth opens the heavy door slowly. It had been years since he had been there.

Kristina follows instinctively, unsure what to expect of the hidden compartment. Lights flicker to life allowing her to see the strange surroundings as Seth secures the door behind him.

“What is this place?” She looks around and sees shelves upon shelves of supplies of every description.

“My parents had a fallout shelter built when I was a kid... I use to come down here to... *Think.*” Seth goes quiet recalling a childhood memory. The isolation. His plan.

Reverberations above bring him back to the room.

“We can’t stay here?” Kristina wonders aloud.

“Why not? ...” asked Seth, “...They think we’re dead... We just have to wait out the storm that’s coming.”

Not knowing how close to the truth the words cut to Kristina’s visions.

“What about... The vaccine?” Asked Kristina thinking that all was lost.

Seth looked into her green eyes beginning to whelm over with tears. And wraps his arms around her and holds her close. The room was completely silent with all but the sound of Kristina’s erratic breaths.

“Shh...” Seth soothes her. “...Everything will be alright.”

And from his pocket pulls a small red aerosol canister.

“What’s that? ...” She asks curiously taken back by the bright red bio-hazard symbol. Wiping away the tears.

“Do you trust me? ...” He asks. Looking into her eyes for assurance.

“Of course”. Kristina replies without hesitation.

“I want you to breathe this in.” His eyes seeking a willingness that took a few moments to come.

Taking the canister without hesitation sprayed an amount into her mouth. The unpleasant taste causing her to cough as the yellow gas irritated her lungs.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” Asked Seth curious she had taken it so easily.

“I trust you.” Came her reply.

Then he kissed her.

Softly to begin with. And then more passionately as the fury of unheard explosions sounded overhead. They made love as if it was their last moments on earth. Their tainted kiss sealing the other’s fate...

Chapter 39

The ides of May arrived.

Virgil's Doomsday Janitors around the world opened their canisters of *Rat Poison*. Allowing pathogenic fumes to escape and circulate through ventilation systems of airports, railways stations, schools and shopping malls. Within days people fell ill with fever and unbearable pains. Spreading indiscriminately from person to person. Young and old. Rich and poor. All would succumbed to Seth's virus. Hospitals overflowed with the mystery virus.

For weeks the earth suffered with moaning groaning bed bound humans.

"Is this your doing Augustus?" Patmos asked furiously.

"I can *honestly* say it is not John..." Braun replied as surprised as Patmos was. "...I have a team monitoring it... Despite its apparent aggressiveness... Only a few deaths have been reported. Mostly among the elderly... And even those could have been from natural causes."

Patmos eyed his Secretary of state cautiously unsure if he still trusted him.

"It's a shame Mueller and his man Adison aren't still around... We could use his expertise. Unfortunate accident." Braun said shaking his head in disbelief at the untimely fire that had consumed them.

"Yes... It would have been helpful to have them with us... But they're not." Said Patmos wondering when or how the pandemic would end. "...I had the Vatican on the line this morning... *Cardinal Cassini* no less!"

"Oh really?" Said Braun wondering the nature of his inquiry.

"He thinks it is all part of the whispers they'd heard earlier. I assured them it wasn't... Only you would know about that." Looking suspiciously back again at Braun.

"I have already said *this* has nothing to do with me John... Trust me. Please." Braun pleaded the truth with his superior. "...That facility has long been stuck down." Braun lied the truth.

“Very well Augustus... I’m flying off this afternoon to kiss the Holy Ring and give my assurance in person... It seems the only way to appease *them*.”

“What time you leaving?”

“Just after One. Why?”

“I’ll see you off. I have a nice bottle of Sherry for Cardinal.”

“Very thoughtful Augustus... You’re all heart.” Patmos mused of his secretary of state otherwise stone demeanor.

“Just don’t tell anyone.” Braun responded seriously.

“Your secret is safe with me Augustus... See you at One O’clock.”
Dismissing Braun to his office.

Patmos resumed his chair and contemplated the view overlooking the glorious Lake Geneva.

Large black swans had returned. The fountain had thawed. Sending a tall column of water towards the heavens. Trees now in foliage. Color had returned. Bright green leaves telegraphed new life. New life? The world was bed bound. Would there be new life? His mind wondered further. What was Braun up to? Was it him?

For once he actually sounded as though he was telling the truth.

Braun had little time to organize what he had in mind.

Strings would need to be pulled. And quickly. He had contacts in low places that could delivery his every need. Loyalty was the upmost in his line of business. Having lost two good men already under suspicious circumstances, Mueller and Noren. The only connection between them was Adison and the whore detective. But they were dead. Or were they? No bodies were ever found? Then neither was Mueller’s. Cremated to ashes in the inferno.

A scratching doubt ran nails across the blackboard of his mind.

Soon it would not matter. Soon everyone would be dead. Leaving only him in charge of the new Order. His Order.

He still had a small matter to attend to. Patmos.

“Valarie.” He called out to his secretary in the next room.

Appearing at the door with pad in hand, “Yes Mister Braun?”

“Can you go to the cellar and bring up two bottles of Sherry. For the Cardinal and his Holiness. You know the one?”

“Of course Mister Braun. The Cardinal’s favorite” she replied.

“Yes. That’s the one.” Confirmed Braun and waits for his secretary to leave.

Picking up the phone he dials a number reserved for contingencies. It was answered by one of his men in the basement.

“I need a *suitcase*. Before One. Remote.” Braun relays the cryptic instruction.

No more needed to be said. The listener had heard those words before. The phone went dead.

Braun reclined in his leather office chair and a waited patient for delivery of the two packages.

Staring out over the same scene Patmos was viewing. He did not see the beauty as Patmos had. He saw the black swans as angels of death awaiting their call to duty. The Sixth of June would soon be upon them. Time was of the essence now. Everything had gone to plan. Barring the unforeseen deaths of those that who had served their purpose.

Coincidence or fate he wondered? Then dispelled it as fate. The G7 Families had already acknowledged their willingness to proceed. Only Patmos stood in his way.

One O’clock arrived. And Braun escorted Patmos to the waiting Shuttle.

“You sure you don’t wish to come Augustus. I am sure His Holiness would love to see you again.”

“Another time perhaps John... I have pressing matters concerning this pandemic and the riots erupting in Cairo... I don’t know where they find the strength.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow... You can hold the fort while I’m away?”

“I have you on speed dial if anything difficult crops up... Can you give this to Cardinal on my behalf? ...” Handing Patmos a light brown leather brief case embossed with the Order’s emblem. “...There’s two bottles in there... One for the Cardinal... One for His Holiness. I would not want them fighting over one bottle.” Gestured Braun.

“Your generously knows no bounds Augustus.” Patmos accepted the case feeling the apparent weight of the two bottles.

“Give my blessings to them both.” Braun extends his hands and embraces his old friend. Have a safe flight. See you when you get back. We’ll sort this out John... God willing.” And then at the last moment kisses Patmos on the cheek. As though a Judas kiss.

“You surprise me by the moment Augustus.” Patmos taken back to see a new side from Braun.

Perhaps he was wrong to doubt him.

“See you tomorrow Augustus.” Said Patmos turning to walk up the ramp into the Order’s black executive shuttle.

Braun stands back and watches as the shuttle rise slowly into the sky before guiding smoothly to the west towards the Rome. Higher and higher. Further and further it flew over Lake Geneva. Without looking back. Braun reaches into his pocket and flips the lid covering a suspicious small red button.

Hesitating momentarily.

“Sorry John.” Braun utters the short prayer beneath his breath.

Then pushes the button.

Screams could be heard before the thunder of the explosion arrived moments as the flash and smoke appeared. Onlookers cried in disbelief at the tragedy falling from the sky. Braun did not look back. Not that anyone noticed. Traumatized by the shuttle falling from the sky.

From which nothing could possibly survive.

Patmos’ death would be reported as tragic accidental death.

The wreckage sinking to the icy depths of the Lake Geneva. It would be weeks before any investigation would uncover the cause. By which time Braun’s *correction* would have been unleashed. In the end Braun’s personally appointed investigators would write it up as a malfunction of the engine’s ionization core. An unforeseeable accident waiting to happen.

The bigger the lie, the more the people would believe it.

Returning to his office to await un-assumedly. Calls would be made to heads of G7 Families. A meeting would be convened, after the funeral of course.

To discuss the appointment of a new Chairman.

“All those in favor... Say Aye.” The secretary of the meeting sounds out around a large oval table.

“Aye!” Echoes a combined response.

“Those against... Say Nay.” The secretary’s voice asked.

A deafening silence echoed back. The voice waited for stragglers.

Then one spoke.

“Nay.” Sounded Cardinal Cassini suspicious of Braun’ involvement in Patmos’ death.

Eyes turn to inspect Cassini. The G7 always operated unanimously. But today it was divided. By one.

Only one dared to challenge Braun’s new position.

“The motion to appoint Augustus Braun as the Chairman of The Order has been carried by majority. Forty eight to... One.” The voice cited.

As though to isolate the lone critic.

A rousing round of applause erupted for the new appointee. None more so than his son Nero who had been sitting quietly behind him. Braun stood to accept the gratitude. Leaving his Secretary of State chair he moved towards the Chairman’s Chair. Hesitating briefly. As though the ghost of John Patmos would appear sitting in it.

An eerie chill came over him.

Those watching assumed the hesitation was from respect and awe of the great man who had sat there for many years. Standing before the chair. Braun looks over the elongated table that reached the length of the room. All forty nine members were present. Seven from each region. The seeds of fear he had sown months earlier had germinated.

And now awaited his harvesting.

“Esteemed Ladies... Esteemed Gentlemen...” Braun began slowly, but deliberately.

The members listened intently to each syllable sounded.

“Thank for the honor of leading you into the new age...” There was a moment of silence again, “...No one can fill John Patmos’ shoes... He was a great man... And his passing a great loss to the Order... He was a *Founding Father*... And we who carry on his mission, salute him... As he forged a new beginning, so shall we... He saw hope where others saw despair ... In the face of adversity... He stood strong.”

Braun allowed the significance of the words to resonate about the room. Only one listened on un-fooled by the Serpent’s lies. Cardinal Cassini’s thick dark eye brows pinched together with dark thoughts brewing behind them.

“The time to grieving has passed... And the time act is upon us”.

Inciting members to recall the world riots knocking at their fortress’ doors.

“We have in place a solution that will end all our woes... Imagine a world free from burden. Free from food shortages... Free from sin.” Braun envisions aloud.

“*Judas*” The ghost of John Patmos whispers in Braun’s ear.

Recalling the kiss he had unconsciously given Patmos on the cheek. Another chill ran over Braun again. Looking over his shoulder expecting Patmos to be standing there. Only sees Nero.

Shaking off the distraction. Resumed his glare back to the attentive members looking on. They were expecting him to deliver a miracle.

“With your approval I wish to release the answer to our prayers.” Not wishing to use the word *virus*.

“Are we sure the vaccine is effective?” An old voice spoke up.

“Entirely safe... Trials were proven one hundred percent successful.” Braun declared confidently.

Ancient industrial heads nodded in union. Braun would not be putting his own life at risk if it was not.

“All bar one of the G7 have been inoculated.”

Braun turns to eye the Cardinal who looks away in disgust.

“And those chosen to serve... Let us complete this pact for mankind... Our grandchildren’s grandchildren will look back and thank us for being brave enough to make this heavy decision... Our backs will bear the cross Gentlemen for the salvation of those that follow.”

Rapturous applause erupts around, from all bar one.

Braun takes seat in the large heavy chair of the deceased predecessor. Feeling the coldness of the wooden arm rests. Feeling like an ill-fitting suit. It felt wrong. Inhaling deeply, then exhaled. Hoping to excise the demons that were filling his mind with doubt.

The secretary of the meeting sounded Braun’s motion.

“A motion has been put forward by the Chairman... Augustus Braun... To release Virus One-Twenty-Six.”

Both names would be recorded in the pages of history for prosperity.

Cardinal Cassini pulls himself up and abruptly strikes a walking stick upon the solid wooden table. Sending a loud sharp crack around the room to gain everyone’s attention. No-one had ever reacted in this manner towards a Chairman in the history of the Order’s meetings.

But this just no-one. This was Cardinal Cassini.

A veteran of God's Holy Order. He had killed more people than everyone put together in the room. All in the name of God. He was one to be revered. And one to be feared.

"Objection!" The Cardinal hollers out as loud as his voice would allow to protest.

"Cardinal... Please... What is the matter?" Braun tries to calm the Cardinal, knowing to well his reasons of his objection.

"Augustus... I beg of you... You know full well John Patmos' opinion on the release of this... This... Virus! ... He was opposed to it. He told me himself!" Cassini pleaded Patmos' case from beyond the grave.

Hoping the words would register with the Industrialists about him. Listening on with deaf ears.

"But John is not here... Is here?" Braun said with a sly smirk.

"How convenient... You weren't involved with his... *Accident*... Were you Augustus?" Cassini fired the loaded accusation at him.

"What are you trying to say Cardinal? ... That I would kill my dear friend? ...The Chairman? ... I loved John like a brother... How you dare accuse me of his death..." Braun lied coldly. "... Early reports show a faulty ionizer to be the cause... It could have happened to anyone of us... I was scheduled to be on that same flight..."

Then Braun realized the hole he was digging for himself and let the response go.

"How convenient for you that you weren't?" Accused Cassini catching the slip of tongue.

"How indeed..." Knowing he had been caught out by his father's nemesis. "...If there are no further objections Gentlemen... And Ladies... Shall we continue?" Asked Braun quickly dismissing The Cardinal's disruption to proceedings.

Braun looked about the malignant faces and saw eager eyes wishing to move forward. Each wary of the Cardinal's reach and sting.

"All those in favor say Aye_." The secretary's voice sounded out over a large polished table a second time.

"Aye_!" Echoes a unified response from earlier.

"Those against, say Nay." The voice repeats.

"Nay!" Came the lone solitary voice loudly.

All faces turned again to the lone conscientious objector. Cassini would have no part of this fowl evil plan. It stank of the Devil. He had refused the

inoculation. As had every clergy on the planet.

“His Holiness wishes me to convey his upmost objection to this monstrous proposal. Gentlemen... Please... Reconsider.”

But the Cardinal’s plead continued to fall on deaf ears and turned faces.

“His Holiness’s objection is noted in the records Cardinal.” Braun replied.

Then turned to the secretary keeping the minutes who nodded to say it had been.

“The motion to release Virus One-Twenty-Six has been carried by a majority vote. Forty eight... To one.”

The Cardinal stood and excused himself from the room. He would play no further part of the apocalyptic plan. His Bible had foretold of this day.

The Devil now had a name. And the name was Augustus Julius Braun.

An uneasy silence fell upon the room of industrial elites. No one sure what to say next. Braun could sense it. A world without the Church was almost unimaginable.

‘Almost.’ Braun thought.

In time, a new religion would fill the void.

Then a member spoke and broke the awkward silence.

“*When* can we expect the release? ...Are there... *Measures* in place for the... *Clean up?*”

“Everything has been planned to the letter... I thought the sixth of June would be appropriate.”

The significance of the date was lost on most of the members other than Braun.

“And the *clean up?*” The voice asked again.

“Everything is ready I assure you.” Braun spoke confidently.

Months of planning now coming to fruition. The member withdrew back into his shell and faded among the aging faces. Only to be replace by another.

“What do you make of the current pandemic? How will it affect the... *Correction?*”

“A good question Marcus...” Braun responded recognizing the member. “...It will actually play into our hands. The population is weakened by this... *Pandemic*... Whatever it is... Reports show it to be harmless despite the initial symptoms... Ours will be far superior... We will

achieve what Mother Nature could not... *Hmm!*” Braun grunted as if to ram home the fact.

This brought a round of smiles and laughter to the table.

“If that is all Gentlemen and Ladies... We will adjourn this meeting... Thank you for your attendance.” Concluded Braun. Dismissing the aging members back to their waiting shuttles, hotels and mistresses.

Nero approached his father and extended his hand.

“Congratulations Sir.” Formally acknowledging his pleasure, knowing he had moved up the ranks of the social elite.

“Thanks son... You know you have be on your best behavior from now on... I can’t have you running havoc now that I am Chairman.”

“Yes Sir. I understand.” Said Nero accepting his privileged position.

Nero had not heard from Hector since the night they last spoke.

And wondered what had come of him. No doubt stoned.

‘And cradling a couple of ladies either side of him.’ He thought to himself with a smile.

Letting the erotic image pass he looked about the crowded boardroom. His father circulating with powerful family heads. Discussing the future that would be built upon ashes of the cremated.

And from the ashes a Phoenix would rise and make America would be great again...

Chapter 40

Seth's pandemic spread like wild fire around the globe. Leaping from person to person.

As he had anticipated it would. No-one but those vaccinated by the Order were left uninfected. People laid bed ridden. Wrestling with debilitating pains and fever. Fighting a death that would never come to relieve them of their suffering.

The initial assault of the contagious virus excited Virgil. Days grew into weeks it became apparent Diablo's promise of death to all would not eventuate. Virgil's apocalyptic nightmare had would never be realized.

Virgil was at a loss as to how the virus could have failed. It had spread so vigorously. Consuming all in its path. Only to fall over when it mattered most. Death. Diablo had disappeared since their last meeting at the Jersey facility. Perhaps he had been killed. Perhaps he had gone into hiding. Perhaps the virus could have been stronger. There were too many *perhaps* to satisfy Virgil's depleted spirit.

The fact remained. His doomsday cult had failed. The less hardened members were relieved the end had not come and slowly returned to their former lives. What the past nine months had not burned out of them. Diablo's virus had. Sapping them of energy and their will to protest any further.

Virgil decided that Diablo was not the devil he thought he was after all.

06.06.2049 and Braun's day had arrived. [6.6.6]

The sun raised over the Alps surrounding Lake Geneva, sending a brilliant ray of light into Patmos's former office.

'A good omen...' Thought Braun watching the spectacular sunrise. *'... Shame Mueller was not about to see the fruits of his labor'.*

Mueller had delivered Braun's solution on time. Only to be rewarded with an untimely death.

'Him, and his clever scientist... Adison... Now conveniently cremated.'

The pandemic ravaged the population. Softening it. Now it was time to strike while people were at their weakest.

So as not to alarm people. The Order had announced it would begin spraying to *contain* the pandemic. To relieve them of their pain. The rioting subsided. Many now simply too weak to fight anymore.

Braun lifted the handset and answered the incoming call he was expecting.

“We’re good to go Sir... On your mark.” Said a voice from command headquarters awaiting instructions.

Braun checked his watch and waited.

6:00AM and Braun gave the command.

“Proceed.” Braun pronounced the synchronized death sentence upon sixteen and half billion souls.

Around the world hangar doors crept opened in sequence.

Through the growing cracks large black shuttles appeared. Their bellies laden with the Order’s deadly plague. One by one like large black crows. They took to the skies and unfolded their tentacle wings. But these were not wings. They were lethal wands of death. The sky begins to darken with the ever growing numbers circling in formation awaiting to move to the killing fields. Cities and towns. Nothing would escape their untouched.

They begin to spray. A fine yellow mist drifted on the unchosen below. Infiltrating homes and offices. Schools and factories. Leaving no one unstained. Leaching into ventilation systems and through cracks in the walls. No place was safe to hide.

Those that had the energy to look up. Saw an intimidating sight.

Virgil was one of the few to see the distant crafts spraying something from behind. Opening arms to welcomed salvation from the pandemic that had failed him. Breathing the distasteful yellow fumes deeply into his lungs.

Coughing violently before returning inside and awaited to be cured.

Seth and Kristina stood among the debris and rubble of his parent’s former homestead.

Skies swarmed with black crows spraying the lethal cocktail. Kristina has recollection from her vision. Holding Seth’s arm close at the sight.

“You okay?” He asks unsure of the sudden shock.

“Yeah...” Replies Kristina, “...This is it?” She asks.

Watching the swarm of shuttles. Their tentacles spread like dragon fly wings heading towards New York City.

“Yeah... This is it” Seth replied quietly.

“How did you know?” She asks wondering.

“I just knew.” He sensed a memory. A thought appeared, but passed too quickly to be held.

“You saved the world Seth... You know that don't you?”

“Not yet I haven't... We'll have to wait and see how the pathogens react to the anti-virus.”

“I thought you tested it?”

“I did... But sometimes my friends don't play nice.”

“Friends? ...” Questioning his choice of play mates. “...You seriously have to get out more.”

He wrapped his arms around her as though to protect her. And grinned. Kissing the top of her head. Perhaps she was right. He had dedicated his entire life to this one day. What had he sacrificed during that time?

But he knew he would not have changed a single thing.

Kristina spied something looking at her through the rubble. Stepping through the debris of charred timber and lifted a piece of wood.

“You're kidding me?” She said surprised by the find.

The Tiger's head staring back at her with its large glassy black eyes.

“I think he likes you.” Seth joked.

“Yeah...” Dismissing the mutual affection, “...So what do we do now?” Unsure of the future as she knew it.

“We can live here until this blows over.”

“There more to come isn't there?” Kristina asked, recalling what Seth had whispered to her that night.

“Yeah.” Seth responded reluctantly.

Looking about at blackened charred ruins of his parent's former home. And then to the contrasting clear blue sky. Squawking sea gulls darted about battling the gusting Atlantic breeze.

“How you fancy a trip to the city?” Seth asks to change the scenery.

“Is it safe for us?”

“They think we're dead...” Looking again at the debris lying about them, “...I doubt anyone will be looking for us after *this*”.

“Yeah I suppose you're right.”

And for a moment a feeling of complete freedom came over her.

'Being dead was quite nice.' She thought.

"So where you want to go?" She asked curiously.

"Thought we'd catch on some old friends. See how they are holding up." Said Seth smiling, and about to call a cab.

The city was dead.

The streets were bare but a few souls that had recovered quickly. A ghost town in an over populated city. Slowly the numbers would return to the streets. A little worse for wear. But also more resilient than before.

The cab pulled up outside Rudi's. A strange feeling came over Kristina. The place that had been a second home, now felt distant and foreign. The same façade. The same blue neon sign. Just as she had remembered it.

Now she felt like a stranger. An outsider.

Seth could sense her awkwardness after being months away. Stepping from the cab, she looks about. Wary of that could be watching her. No one. A cool summer breeze had replace the winter wind. Green grass was growing through the cracks in the pavement.

The doors opened automatically. And she peered into the familiar interior.

Tentatively she steps inside and felt the presence of two tall dark shadows either side of her. She grinned. Eyes begin to whelm with tears. She moved forward a couple of paces and turned to face the two brothers smiling down upon her. Ruben's eyes beginning to glisten.

"Boys..." She echoed an old response, "...Did you miss me?"

"Every day Miss Chelsea." Responded Matthias.

Ruben, rendered incapable of coherent speech remained silent and simply smiled. Chelsea felt safe. Kristina took their giant hands in her own. And squeezed them.

"You boys okay after that... *Bug* going round?"

"That isn't no bug Miss Chelsea... Been word on the street... Think the Order was behind it". Replied Matthias.

"Really?" Trying to sound surprised.

"Is the *master* in?" Seth asked looking up the stairwell.

Ruben nodded. Now able to join the conversation.

Seth led Kristina by the hand up the stairs. Allowing her to fill the doorway to cast a shadow into the office. Anthony looked up and saw Kristina.

“Well fuck me.” Came the only polite response he could think of.

“Sorry Ant... Retired.”

“Shit... Seth wasn't joking was he?”

“No.” Kristina replied quietly looking about the cluttered office, its familiar features now coming back to her.

Anthony gets to his feet and hugs Kristina with the thought of never letting go. Seeing Seth he extends a hand.

“What no hug?” Asks Seth.

“Take a seat... I'll fix us a drink.” Said Anthony heading for the booze cabinet.

“How you been? ... Hope you weren't knocked about to much by that *bug* going round.”

“I'm good thanks... Not your fault”. Anthony declares.

“Well... Actually...” Seth began, not sure how much Anthony would understand.

Anthony stops pouring the drinks and turns to look at him with a confused look on his face. Besides Kristina, Anthony was the nearest to family he had. He was there when he took out Noren.

So Seth informed to tell Anthony what he had told Kristina months earlier.

Kristina looked down over the stage. A few new girls were about. Same John's though. They never knew when to go home to their wives. The placed seemed smaller than she had remembered it. The spot light was there and for a moment she had an urge to step onto it. Her mind drifted with the music. Thoughts of Cindy and Sarah dancing. On hearing Anthony's voice, she snapped back to the office.

“Do you miss it?” Asked Anthony curiously.

Kristina hesitated momentarily searching for an answer.

“I don't know.” Came the only answer she knew.

Part of her had died the night Cindy had been killed. The heart was longing, but her mind had doubts.

“I hear you two have been busy.” Anthony declared over his short glass.

The morning's spray having left a strange taste in his mouth. More so now that he knew of its lethal potency.

“Did he tell you about the homestead? ... And just when I was getting used to it too.”

“I’ll build you a new one.” Said Seth to conciliate her.

“Mind if I pay the girls a visit before I go... You boys carry on, I’ll be back soon.”

And Kristina slipped out the door.

Moments later a chorus of screams reverberated up the stairway.

“You’d think there’d been a murder by the sound of that...” Said Anthony shaking his head in disbelief. “...Oh, speaking of which... Had a visitor a month or so ago... Hector Hades made the mistake of showing his smug face in here... Matthias and Ruben had a quiet talk with him out back... Let’s just say he won’t be showing it anywhere, ever again.”

“I’ll pass the unfortunate news on... She’ll be devastated”. Seth grinned.

Seth sat quiet rocking in his chair staring into his glass. As if a seer. His psyche was envisioning the future. A detached look came over his face. He had an easy feeling that something more was about to unfold. Having thought he had done everything that had to be done.

A voice in head was beginning to tell him otherwise.

“You okay Seth? ... You look distant.” Anthony asked concerned for the man that had saved him and countless billions from certain death.

“Yeah...” Seth replies with unease in his voice. “...Just a passing thought... I better go find Kristina before she decides to change.” Wanting to divert the dark thought that was germinating by the moment in his mind.

“Hey... Let’s not be so hasty rocket man.” Anthony protested jokingly.

“Stay by the phone in case I need get hold of you.” Seth warned.

He was not sure when the deck of cards fell.

But when they did, they would fall quickly. Running scenarios in his mind. The giant chess game played out again. The distant look returned and he began to rock gently in his chair. Trying to anticipate his opponent’s next move.

And did not like what he saw.

Anthony looked on. He had seen the same look in Kristina some evenings when she was transfixed on the mirror. She was there. But not there. Kristina appeared in the door way, startling Seth back to the room.

“Best be off...” Said Seth, “...Stay close to the phone, okay?”

“Will do... You take care of yourself... You too Missy. Keep an eye on *Rocket Man*.” Anthony raised his glass in farewell.

“Where to now?” Seth asked.

“Well... Since it’s my big day out...Thought I might surprise Worland.”
Wondering how her underling was coping without her...

Chapter 41

The cab pulls up outside the Precinct's steps. She sat back in the seat of the cab almost shielding herself from view.

"What's the matter?" Seth asked puzzled.

"Is it safe?" She wonders. Wary of Noren's men that could be lurking waiting for her.

"Only one way to find out." Seth opened the door and stood outside the cab.

Waiting. Nothing.

"I guess we know now." He informed her.

"You'd take a bullet for me?" She asked inquisitively.

"Hey... The bullet could be meant for me too... Don't think it's always about you... Come on. Worland is not getting any younger... Is he?"

Climbing the steps she had trod a thousand times before.

This time they felt steeper. Familiar structures brought back familiar memories. The building's harsh scars now clearly visible in the light of day. And a less cluttered mind.

Through large revolving doors that seemed to go round forever, she entered bedlam. Seth stood back and watched as she stepped deeper into her former world. The morning spraying had gone unnoticed by many still weakened by the effects of the passing pandemic. Coughs could be heard echoing about the large room from perps, lawyers and officers alike.

The Duty Sergeant looks up from his bench and sees a woman standing looking lost. There was something about her that seemed familiar.

"Shit... It can't be?" He quietly said to himself now recognizing Kristina after months away.

Not wishing to attract attention. Steps down and quietly approaches her as though she was a long lost daughter that had come home. Looking into eyes now welming over with tears.

Without words he embraces her. Wrapping his large bulky arms around her.

“Welcome home Kristina... Welcome home.” The Sergeant said softly. Other than with Seth, she felt safe at the Precinct.

Officers began to look up at the scene wondering what was happening. And who the woman was that had captured the hardened Sergeant’s heart. Perhaps his daughter. But he did not have a daughter. The sound of circulating whispers soon turned to applause as they realized who it was.

Turning towards the growing group of officers said the only thing she could say.

“Worland!”

Everyone laughed. Including the one man for which it was directed at.

“Rest of you get back to work!” She had no authority over them. Today she had risen from the dead. And Lazarus trumped all ranks.

“Yes boss?” Asked Worland stepping through the departing group.

Wiping a tear from his eye. Expecting an order for coffee that never came.

“Come here you big lug!” And she hugged him.

Surprised. Worland hugged her back as though a delicate porcelain doll.

“You look good boss.” Worland struggling for words.

“Liar.” She shot him down quickly.

Worland searched for something to say then remembered.

“Good news... The Sarah Albright case you were working on... You were right about that Hector Hades being involved... His body turned up in a dumpster outside a Gentleman’s Club called... *Rudi’s*... He was pretty well beaten to death... Forensics say whoever did this must have been very large and very strong gauging by the bruise marks around his neck and battered face... They were unsure about the cause of death tough... It could have been the overdose of Little-brother... Or it could have been the broken neck. Either way... I’m writing it as one for the good guys.”

“Really?” Responds Kristina now turning to look back at Seth who was now avoiding eye contact with her.

Words would be had later wondering what he knew about that. Already she had two very large black suspects in mind.

“Also ballistics from a gun found at his apartment matches Boris Beckett’s shooter... As well as Gatland’s John Doe... Hades seems to have

pulled the trigger on both... So what's next boss?" Worland asked expecting to return to his subservient role.

"Don't ask me Detective... I'm officially retired."

"What? ... Retired?" Worland responded shocked, looking to the Duty Sergeant for confirmation.

Then looked to Seth standing quietly behind her. Seth gave a quiet nod to confirm her decision. Worland recognized him from the laboratory. And Noren's crime scene that fatal morning. How had he *suddenly* become *involved* with Kristina?

His mind struggled to join the opaque dots.

"You take care boss." Said Worland accepting his call to step up.

"You too Worland... Things are could be going down."

Then looked over to Seth. Nodding his approval.

"*What's going down?*" Worland asked instinctively in detective mode.

Seth stepped forward to complete what Kristina could not.

"Meet us at Café Le Beck's West Side... Tomorrow at ten." Seth looked for eavesdroppers, instilling a secrecy about the meeting.

"Tomorrow. Ten... Okay." Echoed Worland bewildered as to the mysterious meeting.

"Where to now rocket man?" Kristina inquired.

"Home."

"Where's that?" She wondered given how Seth's parents homestead was now non-existent.

"My apartment." He replied.

"Forgot about that place." Recalling her night of her close escape.

"Can't go to yours'... You have a habit of..." Seth caught himself, but not in time.

"Come on say it." She encouraged him to finish.

"I'd rather not." Seth said wisely.

"Chicken..." She teased him. "...Speaking of which... What did you know about Hades? You had a look in your eye back there."

"Only what Anthony told me... I was going to tell you but Worland go the jump on me."

"Would have liked to have been there."

"We all would have." Declared Seth.

Taking the elevator to the seventh floor.

Seth checked the hallway for Noren's men who might have lingered too long. Noren's men were growing fewer by the day. Incapacitated by the Order's virus.

"I think we're good." Looking up and down the hallway.

Reaching his apartment. He hesitates.

"What's the matter?" Kristina asks unsure of Seth's sudden behavior.

"Best you wait in here a moment."

Opening the door to his laboratory he nudges Kristina inside.

"Whose place is this?" Kristina asks.

"Mine... Just wait here." Closing the door behind her. Leaving her confused by the strange room lined with computers.

Slowly he opens door to his apartment.

Sensing for anything untoward that might lay in wait. Hesitantly, he steps inside and inhales the stale smell of a room long since vented. Looking about, everything was how he remembered it. Taking a device from his pocket he scanned the immediate area for hidden surveillance devices.

Detecting no trace. Seth opens a windows and allow the breeze to ventilate the dormant compartment.

"Oh shit!" Seth calls out. Remembering Kristina's solitary confinement across the hall.

Opening the door he finds Kristina standing bemused.

"What was that company policy again on *private laboratories*?" She questioned him curiously.

"I thought of them as more like *guidelines*." Dismissing the seriousness of the rule.

"Guidelines that got Isaac killed." Kristina reminded him.

"Isaac got sloppy... And just as well... Best I seal this place up for a while." Seth led Kristina from the room and locked the door on his lab for the final time.

"You know where everything is. I need to make a couple of calls."

Booting the tablet to life. Seth messages Virgil. Hoping he was still alive despite his best efforts to kill everyone else.

"*Knock, knock.*" Seth begins the sequence of lines.

"*Whose there?*" Virgil plays along.

"*The Devil.*"

"The Devil who?"

"Diablo."

The next reply took longer than the others. Seth waited. It made no difference to him if Virgil replied. He understood how despondent he would be having failed to wipe out the mankind.

Who wouldn't be?

But not as despondent as the Order would be when they discover they had been played.

"What happened?" Virgil eventually asked.

"It didn't work." Seth lied to console Virgil.

"The Order is spraying." Virgil informs Seth of the obvious.

"I know... But that's not pesticide they're spraying."

"What?"

"Trust me... Tell your people to go underground... DEEP underground."

"What are you saying?"

"The End is Nigh my friend."

"When?"

"Once the Order implodes.... It will only be a matter of weeks."

"What can I do?" Virgil asked.

"Spread the word through your networks."

"I'll try... Was there ever a virus?"

"No... Just an anti-virus." Seth finally admits.

"Did you ever mean to help us?"

"I just did."

Seth disconnects the line.

Kristina places a drink beside him and returns to lounge to allow him privacy.

Whatever he was planning it was beyond her. Seth had been right up until now and had saved her life. On more than one occasion. He had saved everyone's lives.

She loved him and trusted him.

As a child, her Grandmother had foretold her of a man who would cross her path.

'Trust him... And you will save the world...' Recalling the distant words she had once dismissed as ramblings of an old woman. Skepticism had

become reality.

A chill ran over her body at the thought.

Seth reaches for the phone and dials a number. And waits.

“Hello?” Came an uncertain reply.

“Stan.” Seth responded briefly.

There was a pause as the voice was calibrated in Stan’s mind.

“Boss!? ... It’s you? You’re supposed to be... The lab accident... *You and Mueller?*”

“Dead? ... Mueller perhaps... But I’m fine.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Be at Café Le Becks West-side... Tomorrow at ten... I’ll explain all then. Bring Nancy.”

“She’ll beside herself. After Isaac...” Stan began to say.

“Let it be a surprise, okay?”

“She’ll like that... See you tomorrow.” And the phones went dead.

Kristina lay on the bed with Seth exhausted.

The Order’s plague would have little effect on them. Unfortunately for those who had been inoculated the impact would be far more lethal. Seth foresaw security forces being stretched and then eventually depleted as rioters took eventual control.

It would only be a matter of time, perhaps weeks before the Order acted again.

For now he would watch over the mysterious woman that was percolating into his life. The puzzle that had perplexed him since they had first talked at Rudi’s could not be expressed by numbers and symbols. Nor algorithmic equations. It could never be expressed by words. It could only felt.

Love...

Chapter 42

Seth awoke with Kristina in his arms.

The early morning light filled the room, and he looked at the perfect contours of her face. He kissed her. Her lips responded instinctively to his and she rolled towards him. Looking into each other's eyes. Communicating with thoughts and the touch of fingers upon the other. Relaying the messages of love between them.

Pressing her forehead against his hoping to sense his thoughts. Nothing came. She was none the wiser than the day before. And smiled. Happy he was there with her.

"Morning." Said Seth in a sleepy voice.

"Morning ..." Came an equally sleepy reply, followed shortly by an anguished cry, "...*Coffee!*"

Kissing here again, Seth dragged himself to the kitchen to make the elixir for his master. Now pulling herself upright to await her man-slave to return.

"What's happening at the café?" She asks as he returns with two cups with steaming tops.

"Thought I'd get a few friends over." He replies deliberately evading the point.

"And? ..." Kristina probes.

"I guess we'll have coffee and talk."

"About? ..." She continues to probe.

"Oh nothing much... Just the *end of the world* as we know it." Seth replied coming to the point.

"I thought *this* was it?" Kristina tried to reconcile the situation outside the window.

"So did I." Seth thought aloud.

"So what's changed?"

"The Order's reaction once they discover all *this* has been for nothing."

"What can they do?" She asks hesitantly. Worried by the answer she did not want to hear.

“Play the only card they have left.” He surmised without specifics.

“You mean... *Nuclear?*” Kristina’s vision of exploding suns return to her mind.

“Mm-hm...” Seth confirms her thought.

“How do you know?” She asks.

“I don’t. I just... *Know.*” Came Seth’s only response.

“You could be wrong...” Kristina tried to deny the outcome.

“I could be. I hope I am. But...” Seth was never wrong.

He wished for the first time in his life that he was. He was now playing the biggest hunch of his life. There was no time to manipulate the coming event as he had the Order’s plague of plagues. The best he hope was to safe guard enough people. Without sending the world into panic and chaos. He had done the math. Knowing if enough stayed alive, the human race might have a chance of survival.

Kristina knew at worst Seth was right. At best he was wrong. Those were good odds.

Café Le Becks. 09:50AM.

They were the first to arrive. And secured the corner booth Kristina had sat while escaping Noren’s men. Making themselves comfortable, they waited for the others. Kristina recalls her last visit. Battered, bruised, her ankle twisted, and the chill of that day. The memory of Cindy surfaces like a ghost and she looks up.

But this was not Cindy. Just a waitress to take their order.

“Two coffees. Two bagels. Thank you.” Kristina orders, then added, “... There’ll be others joining us.”

“Very good.” Said the waitress taking the order, before walking away.

Worland arrived first. Feeling a little awkward about the secret rendezvous. He had not slept well. The thought that ‘*some things was going down*’ had aroused his suspicions.

His mind shifted into investigative overdrive. The thought of his Kristina being involved only making him more curious. Worland spots Kristina seated in a corner booth with Seth. And approaches them wary of watchful eyes.

Seth indicates for him to take a seat opposite.

“What’s this all about boss?” Worland directs his concern to his boss.

“Don’t look at me... I’m just a pawn in all this... As we all are.”

“More of a white knight actually.” Seth corrects her.

“Pawn? White knight? ...” Worland grapples with the words but fails to get a grip on them.

“I’ll explain once Stan and Nancy get here.” Seth advises, only to extend Worland’s growing anxiety a little longer.

“Your lab technicians?” Worland recalls.

“That’s right... Good memory.” Seth confirms.

“Best we wait for the other two.” Responds Kristina.

Stan arrived with Nancy in tow.

Seth kept low until the last moment and then turned to face Nancy. She immediately burst into tears upon seeing him.

“Surprise!” Stan declared hoping the shock was not too great for her.

“Boss! I thought... You were...?” Nancy asked through the tears.

“Good to see too Nancy... And you too Stan. Take a seat... You remember Detective Worland?”

“This is all confusing boss...” Stan begins, “...Why we sitting with two Detectives? We in trouble?”

“If you were... You wouldn’t be sitting here. They’re just... *Family*.” Seth tried to qualify the group’s identity.

“This is one of your hunches isn’t it boss?” Stan asks.

“Yeah...” Seth replied wondering how to begin. “...For Worland’s sake I best explain what you were working on at the Lab... And what had gotten Isaac killed.”

Worland leaned in closer hoping to glean some evidence.

“We were working on a vaccine.” Seth begins explains.

“We already knew that boss.” Stan interrupts.

“Yes I know... But that vaccine was to be given only to a *selective group of people... The Order’s people... Called the Chosen... And not the rest of us.*”

Seth allowed the implication to penetrate.

“The Order would then release the virus for which vaccine was developed... That virus was released on the sixth of June... Yesterday... The *pesticide* the Order said it was spraying... Was actually the plague of all plagues.”

Worland sat stunned. Nancy looked over to Stan, and Stan at Nancy.

“So you’re saying... We’re all going to die?” Worland interrupts making his own assessment.

“Not today you’re not.” Seth replies with a grin.

“I don’t understand... We were never given the vaccine.” Worland queries.

“Well... While Isaac, Stan and Nancy were busy working on the vaccine... I was working on an anti-virus.”

“Ah_ha! ...” Stan comes to life. “...So that explain all the weird data I was getting.” Looking at Seth who just grinned back at him.

“Yeah.” Seth confirmed.

“But how did you administer it? We didn’t get jabbed? ... Did we?” Stan asked inquisitively.

“No... The pandemic that’s been going around the world... That’s the anti-virus that will inoculate everyone from the Order’s virus.” Seth confessed.

Seth sat quietly and waited for their reaction.

“You caused that?” Asked Worland comprehending the magnitude of pandemic that Seth had created.

“Do you want to arrest him... Or should I?” Asked Kristina looking at Worland.

But Worland was too confused to arrest anyone.

“How?” asked Stan curiously?

“You recall those red labelled vials and canisters? ...” Directing his question to Stan, “...That was the anti-virus we trialed.”

Stan started to recall the alternating canisters.

“Yellow, red, yellow... Red.” Recited Stan. The pieces of the puzzle fell into place. He was starting to see the picture the others were missing.

“Your anti-virus spread like wild fire... Immunizing the population before the plague can be released... Bloody brilliant boss... But how did you know the Order was going to wipe everyone out?” Stan asked inquisitively.

“I don’t know... I just did.” Came the enigmatic reply. As if it had been a distant memory. Wondering if there had been a higher power that had guided him.

“Okay... You didn’t need to bring us all to a café to tell us that. No matter how good the coffee is.” Worland added.

“You’re right... I didn’t... There’s more.”

Seth took a sip from his cup and thought of how to broach the next steps towards their salvation.

“The inoculated Order and their security forces will soon be dropping like flies. Their mighty empires will collapse under the strain... And they’re going to be *pissed* off... Like... *Really* pissed off.”

Taking another sip he continued.

“Their objective was to wipe out much of the world’s population leaving only a handful of people... The Chosen... That plan just went south as of yesterday.”

Kristina already knew the answer and finished what Seth had started to say.

“They have only one card up their sleeve to finish what they couldn’t yesterday... Nuclear annihilation.”

An apocalyptic chill came over the small group. It sounded preposterous. It sounded absurd. But then so did the Order’s virus.

“Nuclear *annihilation*? ...” Worland questioned. “...You can’t be serious? Tell me you’re joking.”

“We’d all be dead or on the verge of dying if Seth hadn’t intervened when he did... These people have shown how far they are prepared to go... Soon they will hide in their underground bunkers and wait for the rest of us to be vaporized... Now we can sit around and wait for that to happen... Or we can do something about it.”

“Lovely... Slap on the SP one million.” Stan jokes.

“It’s not funny!” Nancy exclaimed taking in the monumental consequences.

“So we hide out in this café until it’s all over?” Stan continued his comical line.

“Not quite... But I *do* know one place you can survive.” Said Seth looking at Stan and Nancy who looked blankly back at him.

Seth continued his stare until the penny dropped.

‘*Clink*’. The penny dropped in Nancy’s mind.

“The Lab!” Said Nancy winning the race.

“Well done Nancy.” Seth rewards her.

“How do we get in?” Asked Stan, knowing that their access had been blocked.

“That’s what we’re going to find out today... Thought we’d pay the old place a visit... I have access keys.”

“No one has access keys to that place now.” Declared Stan, not wanting to deflate Seth’s hope.

“They don’t have *these* keys.” Informed Seth, pulling a several cards from his pocket.

“What are they?” Asked Nancy curiously.

“Something I knocked up in my spare time... I over wrote Black Crows security system...” Seth looked at Worland reading his thoughts, “...These will get us access to much of the building as we need.”

Kristina looked at Worland with a smile.

“Do you want to arrest him? ... Or should I?” Kristina asked again.

“Guess I’ll be taking early retirement too.” Worland conceded shaking his head. And just when he was about to be made senior detective.

“We’re going to need supplies... Lots of supplies... To last at least six months. There’s another three floors below the old lab we can use for storage.”

“I didn’t know that.” Said Stan surprised at the discovery.

“I’ve seen the schematics.” Seth replied confirming his discovery, “... It was purpose built to withstand a nuclear attack... Lead lined on all levels... The granite bedrock will also deflect much of any radiation and shock waves... It has advanced air filtering and ventilation systems... Storage and refrigeration facilities on the lower two floors... Enough to support a thousand people for six months”.

“You’ve been busy boss...” Said Stan, “...And thanks.”

“For what?” Seth asks oddly.

“For including us”.

“Couldn’t leave the team behind... We’re going to need top bio-tech people on the other side.”

“On the other side of what?” Asked Stan curious to the innuendo.

“The apocalypse of all apocalypses Stan... *Armageddon.*”

Seth walked away leaving Stan stunned struggling to visualize inconceivable obliteration that was about to be unleashed upon them.

The cab pulled up down the street from the Woolworth building.

The absence of security guards confirmed Seth’s thoughts that the Order was becoming weaker by the day.

“I’ll go first...” Said Seth, “...They won’t be expecting me to show my dead face.”

“I’m coming with you...” Worland jumped in quickly, “...I can flash a badge if it helps”.

“Okay. Good idea... Worland with me... I’ll give you lot a signal to follow once we know it’s clear.” Said Seth looking at Kristina standing alongside Stan and Nancy.

Seth and Worland walked casually towards the entrance.

People were returning slowly to the streets. Standing in the entrance, Seth momentarily looks up at the security camera’s looking a back at him. Worland watched the street for approaching security vehicles. Nothing. It was like the Order’s security simply disappeared. Feeling an unease of how Seth’s words were playing out. The thought of an actual nuclear strike was becoming a reality by the minute.

“All clear.” Seth instructs Worland who waves to the others to follow.

Seth passes the security card over the sensor that flashes a green access light. They elevator doors open and they step into the mirrored interior. Pressing a sequence of buttons the lift begins to descend. The doors opens to a darkened environment. Leaving the others to wonder how they would see.

“Lights.” Calls out Seth.

The group is momentarily blinded by the stark white environment.

“Home sweet home...” Seth looked about gauging the space and equipment. “...Stan, Nancy. Check out the chillers and the emergency generators. Take Worland with you... Check.”

“Check boss.” Stan confirmed and wandered off to survey the floor.

“We going to safe down here?” Asked Kristina looking about the sterile clinical environment.

“*They’re* going they be safe down here... Better than *up there*”. He indicates tilting his head back.

“Where are *we* going to be?” Kristina asked already knowing the answer.

“My parent’s bunker will be fine for us... I hate crowds.” Seth confesses.

“I can live with that. Let’s check out your old office... *The murder scene.*” Kristina pulls a reluctant Seth to follow.

“Whose murder?” Seth asked wondering.

“I haven’t decided yet.” Detective Tepes replies.

Arriving at Seth’s old office they discover the *murder scene* had obliterated.

Any trace of the fiery inferno had been, now white-washed by maintenance months ago. Seth smiled at the pristine office and turned to look at a puzzled Kristina.

“Any questions detective?”

“No... But you do have the right to remain silent.” She warned.

“Let’s see how the others are doing.” Said Seth.

“All good boss...” Stan confirms. “...But how we going to stock this place without anyone noticing?”

“Seems all security has been dropped since they moth balled the place, after the completion of the virus and Mueller’s death. I doubt anyone will question us coming or going. Worland can flash his badge if they do...” Seth turned and looked at Kristina, “...Perhaps a couple of large bouncers to keep law and order.”

“I know a couple that would only be too happy to help.” Nodding her approval.

“We can use one of Virgil’s trucks. Make it look like we’re delivering office supplies and bottled water.”

“Who’s Virgil?” Asked Stan.

“Just a friend. Owes me a favor.”

“What about money? It’s going to cost a small fortune to stock this place.” Worland asked knowing his savings could not begin to cover a fraction of the costs.

“Here’s a list of items, quantities and some cash to begin with...” Seth pulls out a hefty fold of hundreds handing it to Stan. “...We start today... We start now... Every minute counts.”

“What about our friends... Our family?” Nancy asks thinking of her parents living upstate.

“Bring whoever you can Nancy... That goes for the rest of you... There’s enough space for a thousand people. Use it, or lose it... We need to fill this Ark by week three at the latest. After that... We’re on our own.”

“You guys check out the lower floors.” Said Seth returning to the elevator, “Kristina and I will go pick up the truck and some homeless people.”

“Homeless people?” Asked Kristina wondering why.

“They can help unload... Besides ... Soon we’re all going to be homeless.” ...

Chapter 43

The spraying continued for seven days and seven nights.

Braun had retired himself to his private hotel room and waited for the first reports to filter through. Expecting mounting death tolls among the general populous. Only to hear the contrary. Reports of the *Chosen* dying. The initial pandemic had done little to soften the people's resistance to the Order's Virus. If anything, it had made them stronger. And more resilient to the Order's plague of all plagues.

Reports were coming through of resumed rioting. Dwindling G7 security forces were struggling to contain the growing resistance. Barricades were falling. Front lines were collapsing. The Order was on the back foot and looking to lose control.

Negative reports piled upon Braun's desk.

Each one more devastating than the last. His phone rang continuously from G7 families asking questions for which he had no answers. Mueller and Adison were dead. Both incapable of being raised from their ashes.

Any hope of the devastating deletion of the population grew less with each passing day.

The calls continued to go unanswered. Then came the call he could not refuse.

"It seems God has answered our prayers Augustus." The aged Cardinal Cassini began. Weakened from the pandemic.

Strengthened by new found spiritual hope.

"It seems so Cardinal... How you feeling?" Braun asked zealously.

"Never felt better... *You?*" The Cardinal responded.

"Fine, thank you." Remarked Braun realizing he had not ventured outside the Hotel since the aerial assault had begun.

"Good... I look forward to our next meeting." And the Cardinal hung up the phone leaving Braun in Limbo.

Eventually Braun had to resign himself to the fact that the Order's virus had failed.

He struggled to comprehend its ineffectiveness. What had gone wrong? The trails had gone so well. Had Mueller tricked him? No. Mueller had everything to gain from its success. His life.

The only troublesome variable in the conundrum was... *Adison*.

Braun began to untangle the perceived knots Adison had tied him in. Slowly the knot fell apart. That *clever* man. Had played him for a fool. But how did he know? Then realized clever men know everything. Braun laughed. Adison was dead.

Or was he? Probably not. Clever men do not allow themselves to die needlessly.

Braun would call a meeting the Cardinal suggested. He would have his pound of flesh. Adison would die. This had become personal.

"How we going Worland?" Seth asked checking the progress made.

"Coming together... But we're on track."

"Where's Stan?"

"He's down below checking the generators and ventilation systems on the lower floors... Nancy and her crew are packing the food supplies and organizing bedding... I've *borrowed* some radio equipment from the Precinct."

"Good thinking... People arriving?"

"We've put the word out... They arriving... Anthony sent over two very large security guys... They seem to be keeping the peace."

"Yeah those two would..." Seth began. "...We won't be here when... *It* happens."

"Where you going to be?"

"My parents have a bunker in the Hamptons... We'll be fine there... Anyway, you know how Kristina hates crowds."

"Yeah I know... Never one for the spot light."

"Yeah... She has a thing about spot lights... You'll be fine... I've told Anthony you're in charge."

"Seth..." Said Worland getting Seth's direct attention, "...Thanks for... All this. Look after her ... She's... She's special."

"I know... I will. " Seth extends his hand and pulls Worland in for an embrace. Patting his back with assurance he would.

“How much time do we have?”

“Another week tops... Seven days from now be underground... Don't wait for the sirens ... By then it will be too late.”

“Right. Lock down seven days... I'll inform the troops.” Worland confirms the dead line.

“I'll be back.” Replies Seth.

Another week of dismal failed reports.

Braun calls an emergency meeting to squash the growing rumors of mistrust in his leadership. With each passing day the public had grown stronger. While the G7 Families had grown weaker. Many Families now incapable of containing the rioters. It was quickly becoming apparent that the virus was targeted towards the G7.

And not those to which it was intended.

“Gentlemen! ... Ladies! ... Please!” Braun began calling for silence among the group family heads.

Larger than life holographic projections of anguished faces appeared around the giant board table. All looking at Braun with contempt. Each wiping their fevered brows. Only one member choose to appear in person. Unafraid to venture outside on such a beautiful day.

The Vatican's Emissary, The Most Reverend Cardinal Cassini.

“Let me begin by explaining...” Braun grappled with what he understood had happened. And how he was to sell it to the transparent projections before him, “... It appears our clever man in New York played *us* as fools.”

“Played *you* for a fool more like it.” A challenging voice heckled from a back projection.

“Wasn't Mueller *your* selection?” Another hologram points a ghostly finger.

“Mueller was one of us... It was the Scientist that was the root of all our evils gentlemen... *Adison*.” Braun announced hoping that by putting a name to the beast would quell any conspiracy theories.

“You're looking *well* Braun.” A lone voice fires a loaded question at Braun.

“As well as the rest of you.” Braun fired back at the instigator's inferred accusation.

“*Your man... Adison... Got us real good... Our security is struggling to maintain order... Soon we’ll be outnumbered... What are we expected to do? ... Hmm!?*” Another member retorts fearful of a collapse.

“Adison was not *my* man. He was Mueller’s man... And Mueller was a *patsy* in all this! ... Paying his loyalty with it with his life! ... Likely at the hands of Adison. Both of whom died in the laboratory fire.” And leaving out Adison’s possible survival to avoid even further questions and accusations.

Braun let the statement of treachery be absorbed.

“Gentlemen... Ladies. We met here a month ago and passed a resolution to eliminate these... Pests... From our sight.” Braun reminded the elite group of industrialists. “...*So* Adison played a trick on us... He was a very clever man and he led us down the path of self-destruction.”

“Lead *you!*” Came the first voice again.

“Lead us all!” Braun bellowed back. Shutting the voice down with his authority. Hoping it would be silenced once and for all.

“What do you propose Braun? ... We *nuke* the cockroaches?” A senior voice suggests jokily.

“*Exactly!*” Braun said coldly and stamping his fist onto the table nailing home the fact.

“No Augustus! Not again! Have you learnt nothing? ... In God’s name no!” Cassini cried to Braun from his seat.

“Your objection is noted in the minutes Cardinal.” Braun nodded to the secretary taking minutes.

“I will not be part of this evil subversion. Not even your father... God rest his soul would scoop to this level of Evil! ... I implore the rest of you to come to your senses!” Cassini protested to the malignant projections. Each staring back immune to his plead.

To them. Braun *was* God.

“I will not permit this to happen... I beseech you Augustus! In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ... I beg you to reconsider!”

“Your vote is duly registered Cardinal.” Braun stated calmly, unmoved by the Cardinal’s ecclesiastical pleads. Motioning to the secretary to record the vote.

“What *vote?*” The Cardinal asks surprised. Looking about the projected faces knowing something he did not.

“I move we retire to our personal bunkers. Taking those with us... And wipe this planet clean... Once and for all Gentlemen.” Braun proposed in an orderly business manner.

“All those in favor say *Aye* .” Called out Braun.

And he waited.

“I must protest!” Cardinal Cassini shouted.

Slamming his walking stick onto the large oak table.

The protest went unnoticed. The response did not come as quickly it had for the virus. But it did come. One by one. As each member saw the futility of the ever growing masses besieging their fortress walls.

All but one. But his vote had already been recorded.

The Cardinal stood and began to walk from the boardroom to his waiting shuttle.

“May the Lord have mercy on your Souls!” Cassini cries out raising his hand and making the sign of the Cross before the projections.

Hoping God could find the forgiveness in His heart for them that he could not. Cardinal Cassini left the boardroom for the final time. He would inform his Holiness that the end of the world was upon them.

None of the faces turned to watch him leave.

‘Leave him to his God. Leave us with ours.’ They thought.

“Very well them Gentlemen... And Ladies... Prepare yourself for the end of the world... Let’s kill these damn cockroaches once and for all!”

“When?” A voice asks tentatively.

“One week from today... It will give you time to prepare and before we get too weak... Have your commanders target major cities and provinces.”

One by one. Much as they had voted, holograms faded each member adjourned themselves from the meeting.

It was not long before the noxious whispers had begun to spread again.

Many families were not satisfied with Braun’s answers. It was *his* man Mueller. And *his* man Adison that had tricked them. How convenient they had *died* in the fire. Or had they? Who was to say Adison was not on Braun’s payroll?

Some suspected Braun had the *real* anti-virus.

“We’d be wiping out ourselves while Braun sits back and laughs at us.”
Circulated a conspiracy whisper.

Solidarity was giving away to Factions. Trust was giving away to suspicion. Promises were giving way secret arrangements. Accusations gave way to threats. And counter threats. The Order's mutual resolution had imploded. The pledged accordance crumbled.

The deadline was fast approaching.

International incidents were beginning to occur as ailing and disgruntled provinces disputed their old territories. Braun had lost control of the G7 who now failed to respond to his orders for peace. Provinces had begun acting unilaterally and Braun wondered how much longer the collective would last.

Nero had taken a shuttle from London and was returning to Geneva when a radar pick up his craft as belonging to Braun.

The opportunity was too good to pass up, thought the commander of the submarine passing under the English Channel. Unbeknown to Braun who had telephoned Nero at that critical moment.

"Where are you?" Braun asked, seeing Nero on his tablet.

"Leaving London as we speak Sir."

"Get your ass back here quickly." Braun instructed his only son.

"Yes Sir... Is there a problem Sir?" Hearing a concern tone in his father's voice.

In the back ground Braun could hear loud voices. The pilot was shouting out something. Panic showed on Nero's face as he heard the words.

"Father!" Nero exclaims.

"What's happening?" Braun demands to know.

"Missile! ... Missile!" The pilot's voice called out in panic.

"Father!" Nero exclaims again frantically. Quickly comprehending what was about to happen.

The missile struck.

Suddenly the screen flashed. Colored static raced across the glass tablet surface. Then the tablet went black. The connection went dead.

Nero went dead.

Braun placed the tablet down. Trying to comprehend what had just happened. Trying desperately to disbelieve what he had just witnessed with his own eyes and ears. Pounding it with his fist. Wanting to crush its face. Denying what he had seen. Hoping it would bring Nero back.

Sobbed heavily, Braun coughed into his clenched fist. Examining his hand and sees traces of blood. The mild sweat that morning had now festered into a fever. What had begun as dull pains had become more severe. His immune system struggling hopelessly to fight the very plague he had released. Slowly condemning him to a painful death.

Braun knew it would be but a matter of time before he would lose consciousness.

“Damn you Adison! ...” He curses aloud. “...Damn you!”

One man had brought down an Empire. His Empire. And for what. No one would win in the end. In that thought, Braun found some consolation that Adison would lose as well. The G7 had killed his son. It was only a matter of time before they would come for him. Braun had only one option left open to him.

First strike. Before others struck at him. Picking up the phone gives the command to launch.

“But Sir? We won’t have time to get you to the bunker if we launch now.” The Commander advises.

“Don’t worry about me... I’ll be fine.” Replies Braun surrendering his fate.

“Yes Sir... If you say Sir... It has been an honor serving you... Sir.” Responded the Commander knowing Braun’s final intentions.

“Fire at will.” Commands Braun a final time.

And Braun hung up the phone and waited.

The game was over.

Braun had lost everything. His dream. His son. And control. One man had destroyed it all for him. A large portrait of Patmos hung on the wall behind him. Glaring down upon him.

‘*Judas.*’ It whispered down at him.

Silence would rein for the thirty minutes.

Then trumpets blew. Sirens wailed loud incessant screams. Screeching their warning to take shelter from an imminent danger. In the distance Braun could see faint missiles rising upwards. Their tails aglow with fury.

They looked beautiful.

‘*Angels of death reaching towards the heavens.*’ He thought.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. Braun straightens his tie and jacket. Calmly composing himself. Opening a desk

drawer he removes a revolver. A gift from his father. A relic from a forgotten war. Examining it briefly. Reflecting upon of the events that had led to this day. Patmos continued to whisper in his ear, as the trumpets blared out their warning.

Suddenly Braun was overwhelmed with remorse.

“What have I done?” Braun mutters his final words on this earth.

Placing the barrel under his chin. Squeezes the trigger without a moment’s thought to the lethal consequences. The deafening sound reverberated through his head. Spraying the portrait of Patmos behind him with bloody fragments.

And the haunting voice of John Patmos fell silent.

*And from the oceans rose large black beasts.
Their backs spiked with ten great horns.
And they unleashed the great horns unto the heavens.
Death and Hades had returned as prophesized.*

Others had gone underground the day before.

Seth stood with Kristina looking up at the vapor trails of missiles being thrown across the sky like giant lances. Recalling her visions of this day, her surrounding begin to spin about her. She begins to faint and Seth catches her before she falls. Looking up at the heavens. The sky a deep and unforgiving blue.

And he wonders if he would ever see it again.

“God help us all.” Utters Seth in prayer.

Carrying Kristina’s limp body down the shelter steps. Closes the hatch for the final time.

Suddenly to the south. A brilliant flash of light and massive fireball erupts over New York City.

The city that never slept, had been put to bed...

Epilogue

On a pier, on a lake, on a warm late summer's evening Eve sat with Matthias by her side.

Eve's toes straining to skim the water's surface. Matthias' feet submerged, as he enjoyed the coolness of the glacial waters.

'An odd couple if there ever was one.' Thought Seth watching on.

Eve was dressed in a simple white cotton dress with a chain of white daisies about her long dark hair. She was writing something in a notebook she always carried with her. Seth looked at her and grinned. She reminded him of someone.

But also, where his pencil had disappeared to.

"What you doing sweetie? You ready? ... We're about to start." Her father asks.

"Nothing Daddy... Just thinking." Quickly closing the note book having captured a thought to be interrogated later.

Eve looks up at her father and smiles. Seth could not help but being infected her smile. And smiles back. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. An Angel perhaps. If they existed. The ancestral birthmark clearly visible on her neck. Refusing to cover it. Wearing it as a badge of honor. Emerald green eyes identical to that of her mothers.

Kristina walks down from the small cottage. Dressed in a similar long white cotton dress. A crown of wild flowers sat around her head. Her long dark hair falling over her shoulders.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Eve exclaims.

Eve skips to her mother and jumps up for a hug. And another smile. Seth looked at them embracing each other. It was a love he had never experienced before. His own childhood devoid of any affection. Perhaps it skips a generation he wondered.

Hoping it would not skip another.

"You ready sweetie?" Kristina asked.

"I've been waiting a life time mommy." Eve replied with words beyond her years.

Seth takes Kristina's hand and leads her beside the lake to where the group of survivors had gathered.

"Who's the man over there Daddy?" Eve asked looking back to the woods where a figure was standing among the distant trees.

"What man?" Kristina looks about. But she sees no one.

Seth sees him. Recognizing him from a distant memory.

"No one sweetie... No one all".

Eve looked again. But the man had vanished.

Kristina stood on the edge of the lake with her back to the late afternoon sun.

An aura of sunlight glowed surrounded her. Magnifying her beauty further still. Eve stood between them. And silence fell upon the group that had gathered about them.

A ceremony was about to begin.

Father Francis stepped quietly forward. A simple wooden cross hung about his neck. Wearing a thin cotton shirt and home spun cloth trousers. He had humbled himself. A far cry from the richness and luxury of the Vatican. In the brave new world that laid ahead, there would be no place for Popes. Like the many survivors around him, he had found his way to the shores of the remote lake in Northern Canada.

But for him it was a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage to the man who had saved mankind.

"*Salvator Mundi.*" Francis speaks to himself in Latin. He had known only one other.

From his finger he removes a dull silver ring.

Taking Seth's left hand, gently places the ring upon a finger. Seth smiles with curiosity as to the symbolic gesture. Its significance lost on him. He ponders the relief of the two crossed keys. Unsure what to make of them. There was a warmth about it. It felt comfortable. As if it belonged to him.

A burden of over 30 years had been lifted from Francis' shoulders. Its destiny had been fulfilled. Recalling the past distant journey in search of the ring. Francis turns to look at Father Cassini who nods his approval. The ring had been returned home.

To the Savior.

Francis feels a familiar hand upon his shoulder and a faint glow appears momentarily around him. Eve witnesses this and thought she saw someone standing behind him. A small white feather drifts to settle at her feet and picks it up to examine it. Placing it in her hair.

“Sshh...” Whispers Francis and winks to Eve, placing a finger to his lips.

Eve smiles and winks back.

“Let us begin...” Francis begins.

Seth and Kristina join hands. Eve stood before them to complete the trinity. Looking into Kristina’s emerald eyes Seth saw his soul mate staring back at him.

“Seth...” Francis began, “...Do you take Kristina to be your wife? To love, honor and cherish... Until death you do part?”

“I do.” Seth replied.

“Kristina... Do you take Seth to be your husband? To love, honor and cherish... Until death you do part?”

“I do.” Kristina replied softly.

Francis looked down at Eve, beaming a smile from ear to ear and nodded her approval.

“Then... In the sight of God... And before these witnesses... I now declare you husband and wife.” Francis pronounced. “...You may kiss the bride.”

The gathered cheered and egged the newlyweds on to kiss. None more so than Eve. Lifting her up between them they embraced as a family. Eve smiles a Cheshire grin. In the back ground a vintage song begins to play.

Kristina looked inquisitively at Seth.

“Where... How...?” She began to ask. Puzzled by how he had managed to arrange it.

“Wasn’t me.” Seth admits reluctantly.

Kristina looks over to Anthony with Marilyn on his arm. Anthony winks accompanied by a growing grin.

“Thank you.” Kristina whispers to him. A tear comes to her eye.

“Why you crying mommy?” Eve asks curiously.

“It’s my favorite song sweetie...” Then added, “...And your father’s”.

Wiping the tears from Kristina’s cheek Seth embraces her, as if never letting go. With their foreheads touching, the three danced slowly as one

to the romantic tune. Eve smiled. Unaware of the dark history that had brought them together.

She decided it would be her favorite song too.

For days following the release of the anti-virus in the Hampton bunker.

Seth and Kristina were overcome with fever and excruciating pains. Not once did Kristina doubt Seth's word. He could have exposed himself to the anti-virus beforehand. He had chosen to wait to be with her. Her fate would be his fate. Her agony would be his agony. Her joy would be his joy when they recovered. Days would pass to weeks. And gradually they overcame the torment. What had not kill them had only made them resilient to the Order's deadly cocktail of plagues. Though the *Chosen* had been inoculated, exposure to the anti-virus unraveled any protection to the Order's plagues. And assigned to die a horrible death.

Such was the cruel roll of nature's dice.

The collapsed of the G7 and launch of nuclear missiles was something Seth had not foreseen until too late. Perhaps it was an Act of God? Perhaps it was an Act of Man? Either way, one hundred and forty four thousand souls would survive the nuclear holocaust that soon followed.

Mother Earth sweep aside the nuclear aftermath. The earth would heal. It always did when scarred by man. As a living organism, it had kept itself in balance since creation. And would do so for eons to come. The world would begin again. But not with those protecting their own self-interests. If people were going to die, it was better it was by chance. Than by choice.

Seth looked out over the lake.

Haunting memories flooded back to him of a place, and a time before time. Lingering memories from before his soul had fused with his human corpus. Memories of a journey to a place of suffering. A creature that had gifted him with knowledge. In reconciling the macabre gift, he sensed an intense evil. A dark force pulling him away from a bright light. He also felt an overpowering good. A guiding presence. Faced with the decision of which path to take. He choose the only path that he could.

Extrapolating the governing utopian's psyche. It was not difficult to know which way the world was heading. Opportunities were made. Opportunities were taken. Seth was always in control. It was just a matter

of placing himself before the right people, at the right place. At the right time. Allowing their greed and self-indulgence would do the rest.

From within the dark damp shadows of the distant trees a creature lay watching.

Its face bore a devilish grin. A forked tongue piercing the moist forest air. Content that it had played its role. Giving an insidious hiss before it slivered sedately back to the underworld.

Man had tried to annihilate himself. And had failed. God would not allow that. The Devil would not allow that.

For what is Earth? But the Devil's playground. And what is a playground, without children? ...

About the Author

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton New Zealand, Bradley's first book was a Self-Help book *E is for Effort*. That led to his debut novel *The Ring*. And so began the "End of Days" trilogy. The fuse had been lit and one book lead to another, and as they say the rest is history. His books reflects his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, adventure and romance. When not writing he enjoys innovating new products, hearty workouts and hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children Harry, Emily and Rebecca. Then again, he could be found at his local enjoying a craft beer with good friends.

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