

MOON SHADE BLUFF

THE VEXTON SERIES

BOOK TWO

MOON SHADE BLUFF

THE VEXTON SERIES

BOOK TWO

Paul A. Trinetti

Copyright © 2016 Paul A. Trinetti

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

CHAPTER 1

Could it be? I kept asking myself as I gazed into the ether. For my entire life I'd refused to give credence to the notion that there was any truth to those old tales.

Foresee the night, the emergence of light. A trio of stars, glowing bright. Sanctuary from the spirits of doom. Healed by a gleam. Enlightened by truth. Reaching out to the angels above. Standing atop Moon Shade Bluff.

– *The Book of ZeZ*

“Heath, what happened to you?” Sharon asked as I reentered the house from the porch.

“Sorry, honey; I just needed a moment to digest the incredible news from Dr. Holt, and I guess I lost track of time,” I replied. “It sure is a beautiful evening... We’re truly blessed,” I added, pulling Sharon close to me.

“How do *you* think Riley was cured, Uncle Heath?” asked a curious Kayla.

“Why don’t you both sit down,” I replied, indicating the sofa. While they got comfortable, I thought about how I’d say what I wanted to say.

“I’m sure you’ll think I’m crazy,” I began, then paused as they focused on me intently. *Will they?* I wondered nervously. *No choice now but to continue.* “I believe Riley was cured the night Wyatt and I brought him to Moon Shade Bluff to witness

the Vexton Gleam.” They *now* looked at me as if I was from another world.

“Oh, come on, Heath, you don’t actually believe that... do you?” asked Sharon, though the hesitation in her voice suggested she may actually have been thinking the same thing.

“It’s always been said that that mountain has magical powers, Aunt Sharon,” said Kayla.

“Come to think of it... since that night, Riley hasn’t had a single LRS episode,” Sharon mused. “Well, I don’t care how he was cured, I’m just thrilled that our beautiful little boy will no longer have to suffer.” She looked at Riley’s picture sitting on the living room mantel and smiled.

“Are you going to tell Riley how you think he was cured?” Kayla asked me.

“I think that would be far too overwhelming and confusing for him. Heck, *I’m* still trying to figure out what happened,” I replied.

The following morning when Riley awoke, we all gathered in the living room. “Hey Riles, we have some really amazing news for you,” I said. I glanced over at Sharon and Kayla, who waited with eager expressions, anticipating how Riley would take the good news.

“Is Uncle Skip going to bring us to another Androids game?” Riley asked, his voice high with excitement.

“Actually, this is even better news than that,” I replied.

“Are we going back to the Freedom Home?” Riley shouted.

I nodded toward Sharon, allowing her the opportunity to take over. She opened her arms, and Riley came running to her. “You’ll have plenty of chances to go see the Androids play again, and maybe someday we’ll go back to the Freedom Home, but what we want to tell you means more to us than anything in the world.”

“What is it, Mommy?”

“Last night Dr. Holt gave us some amazing news.” Sharon blinked back the tears of joy that filled her eyes. I lifted a surreptitious finger

and wiped away the tears filling my own eyes. “He told us—you no longer have LRS!”

Grinning, Riley immediately gave Sharon a big hug. Kayla and I stepped forward and joined in.

“I knew the angels would make me feel better,” Riley exclaimed.

“Angels? What angels, Riley?” Kayla asked. We all looked at each other in amusement.

“The angels Mommy told me about. I pray to them every night,” he said, smiling. “I ask them to make sure they take care of Grandpa Dennis, and Jumper. I guess they care about me, too.”

“Hey Riley, since the weather’s really nice, how about we take your pony for a ride?” Kayla said, sensing the conversation was becoming a tad awkward.

“Okay, but I don’t want to call him General anymore.”

“Oh?” said Sharon.

“General Sims is a bad man. He tried to kill the president!” Riley exclaimed. “I want to call my pony Sunny, like the butterfly that followed me and Daddy.”

“Okay, let’s go take Sunny for a ride,” Kayla said as she took Riley by the hand.

Sharon chuckled. “Knowing Riley, he’s going to go around telling *everybody* he was cured by angels,” she said as they exited.

“Maybe he was, Sharon... maybe he was.” I gazed at the photo of Dad standing beside Riley’s picture on the fireplace mantel.

The next day, while Sharon and Kayla took Riley to buy him a cowboy outfit that had recently caught his eye, I tuned in to UCIT to watch Hunter Talbot being interviewed by Cryptic, at the Talbot farm.

“I must say you’ve been through quite an ordeal,” the robot said to Hunter. “You’ve battled LRS, discovered its cure, and then you were present in the Freedom Home on that dreadful night. How are you doing, Mr. Talbot?”

Hunter ran a hand over his hair. “It certainly has been a whirlwind of events, but I’m just glad a cure was found, and that no one was harmed at the Freedom Home,” Hunter replied. His eyes

looked heavy, I noted; new lines on either side of his mouth revealed his fatigue.

“You are quite the hero, Mr. Talbot.”

“I’m just glad to have done my part.”

“After these recent events, how do you feel toward the Westgale Administration?”

Hunter sighed. “There are several things about President Westgale that I sincerely admire.”

“Such as?”

“Being a farmer and an avid environmentalist, I admire how he recently came to the aid of America’s farming community by providing financial assistance. I also highly appreciate his dedication to environmental issues. But these recent events have made me question his leadership,” Hunter added, slowly shaking his head.

“How so?”

“I was very disheartened to learn how the Vexton-Tech scandal unfolded under his watch. I mean, the fact the director of an important governing body like the American Technology Safety Standards Association was open to being bribed—that’s just unacceptable. And then there was the Anya Ahar hearing—he should have been front and center, backing Nicole Kratz’s request, but he stayed in the background and placed politics over human well-being. On top of all that, his own defense director was plotting behind his back, and he was totally blind to the fact.” Hunter’s tone had grown heated.

“Do you think it’d be best for America if he were not reelected?”

“Yes, I do. That being said, an MAA government is definitely not the answer.”

Later that evening, I asked Hunter to come by for a visit. “There’s the hero,” I said as I opened the door to let him in. “You, my friend, are an expert at keeping secrets,” I added with a grin.

“I’m sorry, Heath. I really thought about telling you about the teal-berries, but with all the craziness going on at the time, I figured

it was vital to remain secretive, especially after what happened to Kurt,” Hunter said solemnly.

“What I can’t figure out is how in the world *you* ended up with LRS,” I said as I led Hunter into the living room.

“The Farmhand robot. I used one of those machines while working for Kinsley. He was totally against Forever Green purchasing it, but I nagged him so much that he gave in,” Hunter replied as he plopped down on the sofa.

“And what about Dr. Ahar?” I asked. “I guess you must have been rather shocked when he contacted you.”

Hunter rose to his feet, agitated. “I had no clue what I was supposed to do.” He paused. “But I needed his assistance, Heath, and thankfully, everything worked out. Now, have you registered to pick up the teal-berries for Riley?”

“No, I haven’t.”

Hunter gaped at me, eyes wide. “Are you crazy, Heath?” he shouted. “Your son’s life is at risk—that illness will kill him!”

After calming Hunter down, I explained the change in Riley’s condition.

“The Vexton Gleam?” he said with a snicker. “I’m glad to hear Riley’s doctor confirmed he’s been healed, but if you’re trying to tell me it’s because he stood atop that cliff with his arms raised in the air under some beam of light, well—” he slowly shook his head “—that’s just a little too far out, even for me.”

“Believe me, Hunter, it’s something I’ve been questioning in my own mind,” I said calmly. “But it has to be the reason. I can’t think of any other possible cure.”

Hunter shook his head again. “And here I thought Kinsley was the only one left who was all caught up in that myth.”

I lifted an eyebrow, interested. “Hmm... maybe I should have a word with the professor.”

“All I can tell you is that he’s a strong believer in the *Book of ZeZ*. I’m sure he’d be very fascinated by your claim. In fact, he’s going to be arriving in Vexton within a couple of days.”

“Oh? What’s bringing him back to Vexton?” I asked.

“Personal reasons. He’s also decided to set up a Forever Green operation, here in town.”

* * *

“Oh my goodness, look at him, reaching to the heavens... This little fellow is quite a performer; very enthusiastic indeed,” said the man Hector and Vincent referred to as Mr. Sylvain. Sylvain and his associates sat in an old, run-down theater in front of a large flash-screen. “Hector, what is the name of our friend?”

“Riley. Riley Claremont,” replied Hector.

“So, what do we know about our little mountain boy?” Sylvain asked Vincent, seated on his left.

“I sent a view-file to your flash-pad, sir. It contains everything you need to know,” Vincent replied.

Sylvain consulted his flash-pad. “Oh yes... here we are. Ah... Excellent work, Vincent.” He looked up. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

The two men rose to leave. “Oh, Hector,” Mr. Sylvain called, making both men stop and turn, “I’ll be personally handling the next shipment. The organization has informed me our work is nearing completion,” he added as he too stood and straightened the jacket of his white designer suit, chosen, no doubt, because it matched his neatly coiffed white hair.

* * *

A day after the professor arrived in Vexton, we met at my office. I’d already told him about the night the three brilliant stars had briefly appeared as a V over Moon Shade Bluff—and that I thought Riley being present during that rare, once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon was linked to his recovery from Lethargy Reaction Syndrome, or LRS. I’d been relieved when he agreed to meet with me, rather than dismissing my theory out of hand.

“I was so disappointed not to be here the night those stars cast their glow on this town,” Kinsley said. “I heard stories about it afterward, of course; descriptions like the one you related to me over

your flash-pad, but... you are so very privileged to have been a witness to such majesty. Please, play the view-file for me.”

I played the file on the flash-screen located in my office, and together we watched Riley atop Moon Shade Bluff.

“Hmm... wow... very fascinating.” Kinsley leaned closer to the screen. “Right there—that has to be the magical moment.” He froze and enlarged the image on the screen. A luminous streak of light had engulfed Riley.

“Is there any explanation for this, Professor?” I asked after we watched the view-file several more times.

Kinsley turned around and looked out my office window, his brows drawn down in thought. “That’s a very interesting question, Heath,” he said. “In a way, I’m actually glad I don’t have an answer. I personally find an element of beauty in mystery, in uncertainty.” He chuckled once. “And that’s coming from a man whom society refers to as a professor.” He continued to stare out the window.

“So, does that mean you think my conclusion might be wrong?” I pressed.

Kinsley turned around and looked me in the eyes. “Oh no, there’s no doubt in my mind that your son was healed by the Vexton Gleam,” he said firmly.

I sat back, at once validated and conflicted. “What do you think I should do about this?” I asked. “Do you think it’s wise to share our theory with the rest of the world?”

“That’s your call, Heath,” Kinsley replied. “Unfortunately, most who hear your theory will likely think you’re out of your mind, and it could have a negative impact on Riley. And with the phenomenon occurring only every 135 years, we’ll never be able to actually prove the theory.”

“I hear you, Professor. I don’t want our lives to turn into a circus.” Kinsley nodded in agreement. I thought for a moment. “There is one thing, though, I’d like your help with,” I said.

“That being?” Kinsley asked.

“Help me perform a thorough analysis of Moon Shade Bluff,” I replied. “As the man in charge of preserving the land in this town,

I'm usually not in favor of disturbing a single speck of it, but in this case, an exception must be made. If that beam of light cured Riley, then I think I'd be negligent not to learn what else is happening with that mountain."

"I'd be more than glad to help, Heath."

The following day, Kinsley and I set out in the VLP robo-copter, en route to the top of Moon Shade Bluff. "It must be difficult for you to come up here, knowing this was where your father met his end," Kinsley said gently as we flew above the picturesque forest surrounding the cliff.

As if his voice were a trigger, I felt my throat tighten. "Yeah... it's now been thirty years, but it's still heartbreaking," I replied after a moment, blinking back tears. "So much has happened since his passing. It especially saddens me that he never met Riley." The tears began to seep from the corners of my eyes. *Time to shift focus, or I'll be bawling next.* "On the other hand, I'm actually glad he wasn't around to witness the War Within. I know it would have crushed him to see this country torn apart the way it was."

"Among the many things I admired about your father was how proud he was to be an American." Kinsley frowned. "Sadly, that war has left so many of us pondering who and what we really are."

Moments later, we landed atop Moon Shade Bluff. "My goodness... It's been far too long—it seems to have become even more magnificent over time," said Kinsley as he stepped out of the copter. Personally, I felt as if I owed the cliff some form of gratitude.

Kinsley walked over to the edge of the cliff, a gentle breeze teasing his long, stringy hair. I followed behind. He rested his hands atop the cliff's protective rail and scanned the terrain below. Forest and farmland stretched to the horizon, with Vexton off to the right. "There's no doubt that this place is magical, Heath," he said as he fished an elastic from his pocket and gathered his hair into a ponytail. "Every time I read that book, I feel a sense of euphoria."

"*The Book of ZeZ?*"

"Yes. Have you read it?" Kinsley asked as he began to walk back toward the center of the cliff.

“I must admit, I haven’t had the pleasure,” I said, following behind.

“I’ve read the thing so many times that I can recite a large portion of it from memory,” Kinsley said as he leaned forward and began examining the ground at our feet.

“I realize we’re both here right now because we believe somehow that that beam of light miraculously healed my son, but do you seriously believe in all that other stuff about spirits of doom, angels, and cosmic gods?” I asked politely.

“Well, Heath, some questions simply cannot be answered, but it’s vital we have an open mind.” He straightened, and his eyes widened. “And when a mystery is solved, sometimes there’s elation... or sometimes the discovery leads to fear or disappointment. I’ve always believed the important thing is the exploration: embracing the mystery.”

Kinsley returned to the robo-copter and pulled out his equipment. Roaming over the top of the bluff, he began gathering samples from the ground. I followed him, waiting to lend a hand where necessary. As he began digging underneath the surface, we noticed something strange.

“Wow, what in the world are these?” I exclaimed as his trowel revealed layer after layer of glittery pebbles.

Kinsley shook his head, also staring at the glittering strata. “I’ve never seen anything like this before,” he admitted. “Very interesting. I’ll definitely have to perform some in-depth analysis back at my lab; hopefully that will determine what we’re dealing with.” He turned to the sack he’d been carrying with him and pulled out three cylinders. He held them up. “These are miniature versions of our recently developed electro-suction tubes. They do a great job of maintaining the surrounding earth during excavation. They’re state of the art,” he said with pride. “I want to make sure I obtain an adequate supply of samples for the testing I’m planning to perform.”

“Do you need a hand with that?” I asked.

Kinsley was already positioning one of the tubes. “No, I can handle this,” he said absently.

Deciding to give the professor some space to perform his work, I headed back to the robo-copter to call Sharon. “That is very

interesting news,” she said after I told her about our discovery. “Did Vexton Land Protection not have any record of this?”

“To my knowledge, the VLP has never performed any type of analysis on Moon Shade Bluff, other than some soil testing in and around the mountain’s base,” I replied.

“Does the professor know what kind of rocks they are?”

“No. He says he’s never seen anything like them before.”

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the professor frantically waving me over. “I have to go, Sharon; I’ll catch up with you back at the house.”

When I rejoined Kinsley, I immediately noticed his perplexed expression. “What is it, Professor?”

“Look at these, Heath!” He pointed to a series of large patches of displaced turf at the southwest corner of the cliff.

“Yeah, I see them—what are they?”

“It appears someone’s already been here doing exactly what I’m doing,” Kinsley responded. He pulled aside one of the patches of turf. “Give me a hand with this,” he said, and we pulled aside more patches and began brushing away the loose dirt. After several minutes we sat back on our heels and stared at several deep crevices; we weren’t even close to reaching the bottom.

“Let’s see if these others are the same,” Kinsley said, rising and moving to another area. We checked out several areas on the mountaintop.

“It can’t be,” I said, staring at the last area we’d cleared. “Let me check something.” I returned to the copter and called up the VLP database on my flash-pad. I rejoined Kinsley a few minutes later. “Just as I thought. I’ve thoroughly checked the VLP database, and there’s absolutely no history of any excavating being performed up here. In fact, the only thing on record that the VLP has ever done up here is construct the railing.” I waved vaguely toward the guardrail running around the perimeter of the bluff.

“Yeah, but your data would only account for VLP activity,” Kinsley said with a raised brow. I had no reply. Kinsley dusted his hands off and looked down at the samples in his bag. “Perfect; that

should do it. This will allow us to perform the proper testing.” He remotely sealed the suction tubes.

“I think it’d be wise to bring this to the attention of Secretary Gibson’s office,” I concluded. The professor nodded in agreement.

* * *

“I hope this is important, Hector,” said Mr. Sylvain.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to come here if it wasn’t, sir,” replied Hector. His Adam’s apple bobbed nervously. “Here, see for yourself—the tree-eyes just picked this up an hour ago.” He turned on the large flash-screen at the front of the room.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Mr. Sylvain shouted. “What are they doing up there? The organization will not tolerate this!” His anger continued to grow as he watched Professor Kinsley excavate portions of Moon Shade Bluff. He also watched as Kinsley and the director of the VLP studied the patches of displaced soil and turf. “This is what we’ve dreaded. Damn it!” he growled, his face flushed with rage. He threw his flash-pad against the wall; it shattered, the pieces clattering to the floor.

* * *

Since the night the Vexton Gleam cast its beauty over our county, many scientists had become fascinated by the mysterious phenomenon. One such man was Dirk Zarbo, an old acquaintance of Dr. Kinsley. The professor invited me to attend a seminar Zarbo was presenting at the Vexton town hall. “I think you’ll find him somewhat entertaining, Heath,” Kinsley said. “I know *I’ve* been viewed by many as being eccentric, but this guy, he’s straight out of another galaxy.”

“Yeah, I’ll check it out. Why not? What’s he going to be speaking about?” I asked.

“I couldn’t tell you because he probably doesn’t even know himself.” Kinsley laughed. “He’ll probably speak on a variety of topics, but I’m certain it’ll all be very interesting.”

When we arrived at the town hall, its tiny auditorium was crammed. We squeezed inside and took places against the back wall. A few minutes later, Dirk Zarbo trotted out to the stage. He had a spring in his step, and that and his wiry body kind of reminded me of a rubber-man toy I'd had as a child. He was dressed in a brown and white checkered shirt, brown corduroy pants, and a pair of black and green rubber boots; he obviously paid very little, if any, attention to fashion. *He probably can't see what he's putting on*, I thought, eyeing the silvery gray bangs that seemed to completely cover his eyes.

"Hello, everyone. It's wonderful to see you all," he said to the audience. "Your town is absolutely incredible—oh, and there's an old friend of mine, the one and only Professor Trent Kinsley." Kinsley stood up and acknowledged the audience as they gave him a warm reception. "I can't believe what I've been missing. I guess it took a large trio of glowing stars to finally bring me down here. Now, speaking of the Vexton Gleam, has anybody figured out how it came to be?" Dirk asked with a wide smile.

"Aliens... it's the work of aliens," a female voice called out from the audience.

"Whoa, I hope I get a chance to meet one of those guys," Dirk said with a straight face. The audience laughed. "I'm serious. It would be quite exhilarating—provided I lived to talk about it," he added as he began pacing the stage. He stopped suddenly and turned back toward the audience. "I often wonder what the aliens think of us. For example, they must really get a laugh out of how many types of shampoo we need. And I'm sure they find the whole bare-knuckle fighting thing to be quite peculiar," he joked.

At this point, I leaned over to Kinsley and whispered, "I thought he was a scientist, not a comedian."

"He's just warming up the audience. Trust me, he has a brilliant scientific mind," Kinsley whispered back.

He was correct. For the next hour, he dazzled us with several intriguing scientific observations. He spoke of issues relating to climate change, the environment, and medicine with a passion and level of excitement I'd never seen before.

In the final section of his presentation, he issued a warning. “The other day I brought my grandchild to the same park that my younger brother Basil and I used to frequent when we were kids. I hadn’t been there for more than forty years.” He laughed. “As little Nicky ran off to the playground area, I sat watching him from a bench. Suddenly, several birds landed on the large field in front of me. Shortly after, a second wave appeared, followed by a third. Eventually, there had to be close to three hundred birds on that field. The interesting thing was, they all milled around the field in their own little space, with no regard for one another, none whatsoever.” I laughed with most of the audience as he imitated a strutting bird.

He stopped and faced us, one forefinger raised, a thoughtful frown pulling his eyebrows down. “This really got me thinking. Basil and I used to watch what seemed to be the same small gaggle of geese parading around the very same field every time we were there. There was usually about fifteen, maybe twenty of them. We were fascinated by how closely they interacted, how they took care of each other.” He shook his head as if in awe, then began pacing slowly up and down the stage again. “That certainly wasn’t the case the other day, as I watched all those birds in such close quarters, sometimes even fighting for their own personal space. The problem was there were simply too many birds filling up a limited space. There was no real interaction, no looking out for each other as there’d been with that gaggle of geese of yesteryear.”

He stopped abruptly and turned to regard his audience. “And that, my friends, is what has happened to *us*. There are simply too many of *us*, in a large, but still limited space.” His expression turned grave. “There is no way this planet will be able to sustain the mass of humanity we have placed on its surface. If we do not seriously address this issue, our extinction will be inevitable, and it will be of our own making.” The auditorium was silent.

After a moment that somewhat annoying smile returned to his face. “God bless you,” he said in conclusion and, to the crowd’s amusement, he repeated his bird strut off of the stage.

Afterward, Kinsley introduced me to Dirk. “That was a very interesting presentation,” I said.

“Making science seem interesting isn’t always an easy task, but it’s extremely rewarding when you succeed,” Dirk replied with feeling. “I envy you, Heath,” he added with a smile, “for your good fortune in viewing that phenomenon from atop that mountain. It must have been a breathtaking experience, one I’m sure you’ll never forget.”

I nodded. “There really are no words to describe it.”

“Even the low quality view-files that I’ve seen have left me speechless, so I can only imagine the feeling you must have had,” Dirk said. He looked at Kinsley. “What do *you* think it was that brought such wonder to Vexton?”

“I don’t know, Dirk. Maybe that young lady in the audience was correct. I’ll tell you what: if I happen to come across one of those aliens, I’ll send him off to your lab,” Kinsley replied with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 2

As Dr. Jack Ahar waited for his daughter, Anya, to be brought into the visiting room of Washington's Federal Justice Prison, he studied a photo of her on his flash-pad. The photo had been taken the day she graduated from Summit University. He'd now come to realize that her academic achievements and innocent half-smile hid the fact that Anya lived in a world of utter gloom. He'd always known that she was extremely nonconforming and very rarely showed any type of emotion, especially of a joyous nature, but learning she'd reached such depths of anger that she'd manufactured the deadly toxin helcin, and helped to fund and form the extremist group AXE had come as a complete shock.

By the time Anya was born, Dr. Ahar had become the most celebrated scientist in the world. In order to maintain this incredible life he'd worked so hard to achieve, he had little available time to spend with Anya. Although Anya was cared for by highly paid nannies during her childhood years, and the numerous condos she and her father lived in all contained state-of-the-art amenities, there was one thing missing: true love between father and daughter.

The life of the world's premier scientist revolved around solving problems. But there was one problem that none of his science degrees or his advanced scientific textbooks could help with, and that was how to tell Anya how her mother had met her end. From the day of Anya's birth, he'd dreaded that, even

questioned whether he should tell her the truth. On Anya's thirteenth birthday, he'd decided to tell her. Until that day, Anya was led to believe her mother had died peacefully in her sleep, of natural causes.

"She's incredible! Can we watch it again?" thirteen-year-old Anya asked her father after they'd watched a view-file of Anya's mother at age twenty, competing in the World Gymnastics competition.

Jack smiled. "Your mother took great pride in everything she did, Anya," he said, and Anya turned back to stare at the screen with great reverence.

"How come they only gave her the bronze medal?" Anya asked.

"Actually, it's a good thing they didn't give her the gold," Jack replied.

Anya looked at him. "Why's that?"

"She wouldn't have accepted it. Just like she didn't accept that bronze medal," Jack replied.

"Why didn't she accept it? Was she angry at the organizers of the competition?"

"Oh no, your mother didn't have an angry bone in her body. You see, to your mother, gymnastics was her art. She didn't see it as a competition, so for her the whole idea of being judged and rewarded was irrelevant."

"Look how healthy she looks," Anya said as she watched her mother perform incredible physical feats on the still rings and the parallel bars. "I still can't believe how she just went to sleep and died." She frowned suddenly, and a moment later tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Seeing that, Jack knew it had to be done, that now was the time to tell her. He held her in his arms as he explained the true circumstances of her mother's death.

Intense anger transformed Anya's face. "Oh no—why are you telling me this now, after all these years?" she wailed, pushing herself away from him.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'd always planned to tell you, but I just didn't know when or how," Jack cried.

"How could they have done this? How could they have let my mother just die in the street? And you—you're supposed to be the best doctor in the world. How could you have let it happen?"

"Believe me, Anya. I did everything I could. That war ruined so many lives." He reached for her, but she drew away, confronting him. He dropped his arms in defeat. "I loved your mother with all my heart," he said, his throat tight with impending sobs. "And I'm so grateful she gave me such an incredible gift—you."

A continuous clanking in the hallway outside the visiting room jarred him from the painful memory. The sound sent chills down his spine. It grew louder by the second, and then the large door swung open, revealing two burly prison guards standing on either side of a shackled Anya, dwarfing her. They slowly led her to the seat across from her father. Every clank from the shackles felt like a knife jabbing into Jack's heart. The guards turned wordlessly to leave, and one of them looked back at Anya with a menacing grin before the door shut behind him.

Jack studied his daughter. Anya was wearing a bright lavender prison jumpsuit and her normally long, jet-black hair now barely reached her shoulders. The new hairdo made her oversized horn-rim glasses appear even larger. She sat with her head lowered, gazing into her lap.

"Hello, Anya," Jack said with a hesitant smile.

"Father," she replied, slowly raising her head.

"I'm glad you agreed to see me. How are you?" Jack asked gently. She lowered her head again. "I have some news for you. Arthur was able to get you a temporary stay of execution." Anya didn't respond. "I don't know if it'll be successful, but he's even going to attempt to file for a permanent one." Anya remained silent. It suddenly hit Jack that this was the first actual one-on-one conversation he and Anya had had in years. Sadness filled his entire being, and although he did his best to hide his true feelings,

he finally broke down. "I'm so sorry, Anya," he sobbed. "I failed you; I didn't provide you with the care and love a parent is supposed to provide. I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart."

Anya raised her head and pushed her glasses up on her forehead. She stared blankly at Jack. Her eyes were big empty spaces. She didn't utter a single word. She pressed the buzzer on the table between them, requesting the guards' return to take her back to her cell.

Jack watched the guards march her away down the hallway, back to her segregated cell. He listened to the clank of her shackles fading with distance, and he cried.

* * *

A few blocks away, recently appointed US Attorney General Champ Sutton met with Agent Gil Robichaud to discuss the findings related to both the AXE case and the recently thwarted political uprising.

"I wish we didn't have to go public with this, but we have no choice," Champ said as he handed Gil the official National Investigation report on AXE.

"This matches exactly what Dwight Wagner told us," Gil said, shaking his head.

"Unfortunately, we took Sims's word over his," Champ replied.

"I'm afraid now that the public has learned AXE was actually targeting six of our animal research labs, it'll severely lessen the impact of their crimes. And sadly, they may actually receive support and sympathy," Gil said.

"According to my staff, that's already happening," Champ replied.

"Now, with regards to the attempted uprising, what have you learned about Vexton-Tech?" Gil asked.

"I've spent quite some time reviewing all the info on Gerald and Skip Levin," Champ said, "and I've yet to find a single thing linking them directly to anything criminal. Is there anything that has caught *your* attention?"

Gil shook his head. "My team is still sifting through several Vexton-Tech files, but to date, with the exception of the fact that

Gerald Levin politically supported Devan Bedlam, we have not found any evidence that would lead us to believe they were directly connected to the uprising.”

Champ blew out a sigh and looked down at his notes. “Yeah. I must admit, the goodwill they’ve shown toward the government by helping to harvest those teal-berries and reimbursing our LRS Compensation Program has been most impressive. Not to mention the compensation they’re preparing to pay the victims.” He paused and loosened his tie. “Unless something else comes up down the road, I think we can officially clear their names and release them from twenty-four hour surveillance. But if they decide to continue operating the business, I will request that the business be closely monitored for an entire year,” he added.

* * *

After receiving official clearance from the US government, Vexton-Tech held a meeting of its key players. Concerned major shareholders, the company’s board of directors, the executive committee, and a large faction of employees gathered in a spacious conference hall, waiting for Gerald and Skip to appear. Father and son looked nervous when they entered the room, their movements uncharacteristically agitated, their expressions solemn. A lukewarm reception as they made their way to the stage only heightened the tension.

Gerald took the podium with Skip at his side. After adjusting the sound-blast, more a ploy to gather his wits than a necessity, he looked quickly around the hall. “Thank you all for attending. Whoa... it’s difficult to know where to begin,” Gerald admitted, his voice subdued. He paused, and the stillness was overwhelming. He wiped the sweat from his brow and continued. “As I stand here in front of you, I want you to know that I accept full responsibility for this recent tragedy. I failed everybody in this room, including my son.” Gerald turned to his right and nodded toward Skip. “Although Vexton-Tech has been officially exonerated by US Federal Justice, I personally remain imprisoned by my own conscience. But the past

cannot be erased. The only option left is to embrace the future with optimism and purpose.”

His words were greeted with mild applause, but he still saw anxiety and concern on the faces in the audience. Gerald continued. “I want to take the time to address our Consumer Robot Victims Compensation Program. I know there is concern about the financial impact this will have on the company. Let me assure you, all the funds used to compensate the families and the government have come from my personal holdings. This will not have a direct impact on *you*—”

Before Gerald could finish a middle-aged lady shoved past security and approached the audience’s sound-blast set up in front of the stage. “Will you guarantee us that our wages won’t be lowered? Will you, Mr. Levin?” she asked, her tone tinged with panic. Security rushed in to escort her away, and the audience jeered angrily.

“It’s okay, gentlemen,” Gerald said, waving the security personnel away. “I’ll gladly answer the question.” The crowd fell silent. “Yes, as I stand here right now, I guarantee you that when we resume operations, your current wage rates will remain unchanged.” The room became a little less tense as frowns of concern turned to faint smiles of relief.

Gerald continued. “I also want to announce that although I will remain the company’s majority shareholder, I will be stepping down as chairman, effective immediately. As voted by the Vexton-Tech Board, the position of chairman will now belong to Skip. Replacing Skip as CEO will be our former CFO, Bruce Kingston.

“Before I turn over the sound-blast to Skip, I can see Mr. Fuller wishes to speak.”

Clyde Fuller headed toward the audience’s sound-blast. His company, CF Investments, had emerged as the largest shareholder of Vexton-Tech, behind only Gerald and Skip. Clyde was not the usual suit-and-tie banking mogul. He came from a farming family, and an extremely successful one, at that. In fact, Fuller Farms had emerged as America’s largest farming operation. With his sons and daughters

and their families all involved with managing the enormous operation, Clyde had retired from farming and set up CFI with the idea of assisting the financial management of fellow farmers across America.

With the rhythmic tapping of his gold cane preceding his every step, the burly Clyde took time to shake hands with several of those in the crowd on his way to the audience sound-blast.

“Wonderful to see you, Mr. Fuller,” said Gerald as Clyde methodically adjusted the microphone.

“Well, my friends, I’m going to get right down to it,” Clyde said solemnly. “Does your stepping down as chairman of Vexton-Tech have anything to do with the fact you’ve been speaking with the Militant Alliance of America about potentially becoming an executive member of the party—or perhaps its leader—in hopes of becoming president?”

The entire room grew eerily silent.

“Ah, you sure are a master at silencing a room, Clyde,” Gerald said with a mild chuckle. His tone quickly became serious. “Devan Bedlam and Dao Sloan’s recent criminal acts have left the MAA in a state of turmoil. And yes, at his request, I will be consulting with the party’s interim leader, Earl Pemberton. But to answer your question, it is *not* the reason I am stepping aside.”

“Do you really think it’s in Vexton-Tech’s best interest for you to be associating with the MAA after the party attempted to overthrow our government?” asked Clyde, his voice rising in anger.

“Mr. Bedlam and Mr. Sloan were not acting on behalf of the MAA. Just as General Sims was not acting on behalf of the PBA. The Outer Commission’s formal report on the matter has substantiated that,” Gerald replied confidently.

Clyde still looked uneasy. He pulled out his handkerchief and ran it across his forehead. “I don’t know about everybody else in this room, but I’ve yet to receive a business plan telling me how the company plans to move ahead. I mean, are we still going to be making consumer robots? What is this company going to be? We need to know!” The crowd cheered in approval.

“Perfect timing, Clyde,” Gerald responded as he nodded toward Skip. “Please give a warm welcome to Vexton-Tech’s new chairman, Skip Levin.” Once again, the crowd responded with only mild applause.

“Thank you, Gerald. And thank you, Mr. Fuller, for expressing your concerns. From the day my father and I became aware that our company had been sabotaged, we have given great thought to the future of Vexton-Tech. There was even a point where we wondered if we could rebound. However, we strongly believe the same determination that enabled the company to become this country’s leading technology firm will also drive us to further greatness, following this tragedy.” He paused to gauge the response. The crowd’s applause was still lukewarm, but seemed less forced. “As far as what we’re going to be? I guess the only way I can answer you, Mr. Fuller, is by telling you we are going to continue being Vexton-Tech. A company that prides itself on quality and innovation.

“Bruce Kingston and I were speaking just this morning about how difficult it will be to win back the trust of consumers, but our plan is to *earn* back that trust through complete resiliency and corporate transparency. And yes, we are planning to continue with our line of consumer robots, along with developing many other exciting products.” Again, he paused. The applause became stronger and seemed more genuine. Even Gerald couldn’t resist applauding from the wings, gazing at Skip with admiration.

After answering several more questions from others in attendance, Skip concluded with, “At your convenience, in the coming days, please refer to our corporate view-file for an outline of Vexton-Tech’s exciting plans for the immediate future. We will also be sending a formal flash-message to our board of directors and executive committee. Thank you all very much for attending, and please enjoy the delicious food and beverages being served at the back of the hall.”

The mood in the room had become far more relaxed and pleasant. As those in attendance indulged in food and beverages, Clyde Fuller

approached Skip. “You seem very confident that this tragedy will be forgotten. I wish I shared your optimism,” he said.

Clyde’s mood didn’t match the hall’s positive atmosphere; in fact, the large man’s gruff demeanor made him somewhat intimidating. Skip invited him for a drink in the hall’s lounge, where they could talk privately. “I don’t disagree with you, Mr. Fuller,” Skip said. “I realize this tragedy will never be forgotten, but Dad and I are not quitters. And believe me when I tell you that Goran Rackert being able to sabotage our business the way he did was humiliating to us.” He poured Clyde and himself a glass of wine, then took a deep breath. “I guess you could say we learned a difficult lesson in a very difficult way.”

“When I think of my good friend Neville Hollis... to know his son was murdered in the midst of that madness.” Clyde shook his head sadly. Through their farming connection, Neville was the person who’d first introduced Clyde to Gerald and Skip, many years ago. “To think Fuller Farms utilized hundreds of those Farmhand robots, and all my grandkids seemed to have had one of those robot dogs. Thankfully, they all ended up being immune to that damn poison.”

“Obviously, we wish we could erase the past, but all we can do is move forward, and we both hope you’ll remain with us on our journey,” Skip said in his most pleasant tone.

“I have to think about it, Skip. I’m very concerned by the fact your father is once again aligning himself with the MAA. I seriously don’t think it will bode well for the company, especially considering recent events,” Clyde said as he reached toward the basket the waiter had left for a piece of garlic toast.

“Though I don’t share his enthusiasm, politics have always been dear to Dad’s heart.”

“I used to share the same interest, until I lost an uncle and two cousins in that bloody war,” Clyde responded, lifting his glass. “A large group of Militant Alliance guys decided they were just going to take over their farm. Of course my uncle and my cousins told them to go to hell and resisted... well, it cost them their lives.” He guzzled the wine, then set the glass firmly down on the table, his hazel

eyes on Skip. “There was no victor in that war, young man, but there sure was a loser—and that loser was the United States of America.”

Rising, Clyde tapped Skip on the shoulder. “Stay well, son,” he said as he picked up his cane and slowly walked away.

As hard as Gerald and Skip tried to remain optimistic regarding Vexton-Tech’s future, reality was rolling in like dark clouds before a storm. A week following the meeting, while Skip was studying financial reports, Gerald called him to his office, saying it was urgent.

“What’s going on, Dad?” Skip asked uneasily as he closed the office door behind him.

“Here. Look at this,” Gerald replied, pushing a stack of letters across his desk toward Skip.

Skip’s eyes widened as he began to read the first one, then the next two. “Well, I had a feeling Clyde was going to back out... but I didn’t think eight of our board’s ten directors would go along with him.” He set down the resignation letters.

“That’s not all, Skip,” Gerald said before running his hands over his face in frustration. He showed Skip his flash-pad, which displayed the results from a recent survey in which seventy-three percent of Americans surveyed said they would never again buy a Vexton-Tech product.

“You know these surveys, you never know what to believe,” Skip said, passing the flash-pad back.

“It’s crazy, Skip; public opinion of Vexton-Tech is so negative, yet, in another recent survey, seventy-eight percent of those asked think I would make an excellent president.” Gerald snorted and shook his head. “Absurd.”

“I guess it’s really resonated with the public that you’ve gone to such lengths to compensate both the families of the victims and the government,” Skip said, feeling a surge of pride for his father.

“I simply did what needed to be done,” Gerald said.

Skip moved to one of the chairs in front of his father’s desk and sat down. “Tell me, Dad: was Clyde Fuller on the right track when he spoke of your political aspirations?”

“At this point I’ve accepted a request to meet Earl Pemberton, and that’s all. Right now my focus is on trying to save the company we’ve worked so hard to build.” Gerald shifted the subject. “Have you heard back from Step 1 Health regarding our proposal?”

“Yes—I’m glad you asked. Nora called me this morning; she’s asked us to meet with her and her father at their head office tomorrow,” Skip replied.

“Good. Let’s hope they respond favorably. It might be our only hope to salvage this thing.”

CHAPTER 3

Even a company as powerful as Vexton-Tech considered it a true privilege to be afforded the opportunity to do business with Step 1 Health. The company's chairman, Lawson Pierce, and his CEO, daughter Nora Pierce Davidson, took great pride in the fact that the company had earned several business and medical achievement awards over the years.

Thirty-five years ago, an American entrepreneur named Kenneth Pierce created a pharmaceutical company called Step 1 Medicine. After developing several highly innovative medications, the company was emerging as a legitimate player in the industry. This initial success attracted the interest of the Fryman Group, an American investment firm, and Kenneth was thrilled to receive the financing necessary to bring Step 1 Medicine to the forefront of the pharmaceutical industry. But Kenneth died suddenly a short time afterward, leaving his son, Lawson, who served as the company's VP of Business Affairs, in sole control of the company.

Eventually Lawson decided to mold the company into a unique multifaceted medical operation called Step 1 Health, or S1H. He intended that S1H would assist individuals with all their health care needs, via a personal contract. The business plan called for the company to manufacture and sell medications, make available all types of licensed practitioners and technicians, arrange for medical testing and hospitalization, provide transportation to those in need,

and assist with health care insurance programs. To do all this, his plan required the creation of a series of one-stop medical clinics.

Once his business plan had been fully developed, a young and ambitious Lawson met with Edgar Fryman, chairman of the Fryman Group, at the firm's Chicago headquarters, hoping to obtain the necessary funding for his plan.

Fryman was speaking on his flash-pad as his secretary opened the door and led Lawson into his spacious office. He waved for Lawson to have a seat. Lawson sat stiffly on the edge of the proffered chair, trying not to fidget while he waited for Fryman to finish his call.

"To think those imbeciles were winning two to nothing with twelve minutes left and they still managed to lose that game," Fryman said to the person on the other end of the call, punctuating his words with wild gestures of his other arm. "I could see it coming. That's what happens when you fall into a defensive shell." Fryman continued his rant as if Lawson wasn't even in the room. "They literally let that Sorensen kid take the game over. Well, like they say, better luck next time, my friend."

Fryman finished the call and spent the next minute or two inputting data into his flash-pad. Finally Fryman looked up and asked, "So, how you keeping, Lawson?"

"I'm doing well, sir; working hard to build on my father's legacy. I'm looking forward to executing my new game plan for Step 1 and making Dad proud," Lawson said with confidence.

"I expect I'll be the one 'executing' your plan." Fryman paused, looking at Lawson expectantly, then exclaimed, "It's a bloody joke!" He guffawed, then grew serious. "When your father died and left you in charge of his company, I hope he never imagined that you would destroy it."

"With all due respect, sir, I'm planning to take this company to the top, and I'm confident my plan will work. Since the day my father asked me to join him at Step 1, this has been my vision for the company," Lawson replied unwavering in his certainty.

Fryman leaned over his desk and said bluntly, “Your plan has not received the required approval from the AMO; it will destroy your company and get you arrested at the same time. That’s what it’ll do.”

“That’s probably true, and the publicity will be of great value.”

Fryman’s eyebrows rose. “Tell me, Lawson, have you been dipping into your company’s giant vats of pills?” he sneered, then laughed.

Though Lawson pressed on with his pitch, Fryman remained vehemently opposed. “When I gave your father all that money, it was meant to help turn the company into a formidable pharmaceutical company, and he did that,” Fryman said sharply. “And now you’re going to destroy all of that by thinking you can change the entire health care industry.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Mr. Fryman, but I’m going forward with my plan, with or without your support. I guess I’ll just have to look elsewhere for the funding.” Lawson rose.

Fryman placed his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. Surprisingly, he laughed. “Very impressive, my friend,” he finally said. “You’ve passed.”

“Passed?”

“Yeah. I was testing you, Lawson, and you passed with flying colors. Entrepreneurs of all ages come in here looking for funding and more often than not, they don’t even have faith in their own business plan, and expect *me* to get all warm and fuzzy about it. You’re the kind of person I want to invest in—I *need* to invest in.”

Fryman grinned. “Since you sent me this plan of yours, I’ve been reviewing it day and night. It’s brilliant—a tad risky, but nonetheless brilliant. I’ve had my top people reviewing it as well, and they’re all in agreement.”

Lawson slowly exhaled. “Phew... I seriously thought you were going to pull your support from the company.”

“If you’d succumbed to my badgering, I most definitely would’ve. I’ve always believed three-quarters of success in life is based on believing in oneself; the final quarter is usually based on a combination of luck and fate,” Fryman said matter-of-factly. “Now, I think it’s safe to say you’ll be shut down rather quickly when you

open that first clinic which, as you've suggested, will create all kinds of attention. And that's what we need—to be heard by the American public.” He lifted his flash-pad, saying, “Let me see my calendar...” He nodded, tapped its screen, and looked back up at Lawson. “I'll have the financing in place to at least help you get the ball rolling within the next few weeks. And if and when we receive the government's approval to move forward with the venture, I'll get you the rest of the money.”

Lawson couldn't wait to give the news to his younger brother. “Hey Cam, can you meet me at the Last Frontier in a half hour?” Lawson asked when Cameron answered his call.

“I'm just finishing up here at the office. Give me an hour, and I'll be there.”

When Cameron arrived at the chic New York City steakhouse, Lawson anxiously waved him over to his table. “Bring us a bottle of your best champagne,” Lawson said when the waiter approached.

“What's the occasion, Laws?” asked Cameron.

“It looks like he's fully on board.”

“Fryman?”

“Yessir, the Money Man himself,” Lawson answered with a smile.

“That's fantastic news!” Cameron exclaimed.

“That's not all we're celebrating.”

“Oh?”

“I'm so proud of the work you've done at L&B,” Lawson said. Cameron nodded but waited, unsure where this was going. “And now Judith Lilly has moved up the corporate ladder,” Lawson added. Again Cam nodded carefully. “So—” He paused to draw a deep breath. Cam lifted an eyebrow, waiting. “—I'm granting you your wish: you're the division's new managing director.”

Cameron gripped the edge of the table as if about to leap to his feet. “No way! Is this for real?”

“It sure is, Cam.” Lawson raised his glass. “Like I said, I'm so proud of what you've accomplished at L&B, and I'm even more proud of how well you've done with the program.”

“It hasn’t been easy,” Cameron sighed. “But with the help of my family, especially you, I’m certain I’ll get through this.”

“Dad would be so proud of you,” Lawson said softly as they tapped glasses.

“Yeah ... when I think of how I let him down—”

“Forget it, Cam. It’s all in the past.”

“You know, Lawson, as angry as I was at the time to discover he left the company solely in your hands, I now look at it as a blessing in disguise. It really helped me see the light.”

During the next meeting with Edgar Fryman, the initial financing was officially put in place, and soon after, Step 1 Health opened its first clinic in New York City. As expected, within a few days, the American Medical Organization shut the clinic down, and Lawson Pierce was charged with operating an unlicensed medical facility.

Pierce and his associates at S1H immediately began a massive campaign on the World Connect, educating the American public on the company’s game plan, and making a mockery of Lawson’s arrest. Over the next few months, the formulated hype enabled the idea to gain popularity with the American public, finally forcing the president to establish a commission to study the pros and cons of S1H’s concept.

After spending weeks examining the merits of the plan, the commission decided the matter should be presented before Congress. As expected, the hearing was filled with high drama. Those members opposing the concept argued vehemently that it was definitely not in the best interest of the American public. The rich would be served and the poor cast aside.

“This is nothing but an attempt to monopolize the medical industry,” went another protest, “and we all know the harm that’ll cause! If this concept is adopted, it’ll lead to rampant corruptive business practices, and American citizens will suffer like never before!”

Advocates countered, “The health care system in this country has been broken forever. If something doesn’t work, you fix it. This model is a solution.”

Strengthening the argument for the concept's acceptance were several of the country's esteemed business professors and doctors, who claimed it was structured in a manner that would provide proper and adequate health care to all Americans, regardless of whether they were rich or poor.

After four months of rigorous argument, rumors circulated that Congress would not be voting in favor. But after a final fifteen-hour meeting, the tide turned and the bill passed, permitting Step 1 Health—or any other enterprise, for that matter—to function as a “multifaceted medical company” in the manner proposed by SIH. This groundbreaking ruling drastically changed American health care forever.

Over the next few years, other businesses established similar “one-stop medical clinics,” but by being the innovators, SIH remained the frontrunner in the industry, with three-quarters of the market. Although suggestions that SIH had established a monopoly led to legal challenges, there was never any direct evidence proving this to be the case. In fact, more than three decades later, the American public and the medical community continued to embrace Step 1 Health and its eminence in the field.

* * *

Since Step 1 Health's headquarters was only a couple of blocks away from Vexton-Tech's, Skip and Gerald decided to walk to the meeting. “Hey, there's Andy and Bryant up ahead,” Skip said, pointing out the two young men who had worked at Vexton-Tech during the past summer.

“Oh yeah, the Summit marketing interims,” Gerald replied. “Very impressive young men.”

“Hey guys, how's it going?” Skip asked as he and his father passed the young men.

“Okay,” they murmured simultaneously, then briskly walked away.

Skip watched them go with a sour expression on his face. “Three months ago, both of them were literally begging Brandy's assistant for a job, just so they could experience what it'd be like to work at Vexton-Tech. And now it's as if we have the plague.”

“Don’t let it get to you, Skipper. You know we’ve always had detractors, and now we just have a few more,” Gerald said, though he looked uneasy as he watched the young men moving into the distance.

When they reached the SIH building, Nora Pierce Davidson’s assistant intercepted Gerald and Skip and put them through a thorough security check. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but it’s mandatory. Please, allow me to lead the way,” she said when it was done. She led them to the elevator, then escorted them directly to the company boardroom. “They’ll be with you shortly.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever be sitting in a more exquisite boardroom than ours, but this is really something to behold,” Skip said as he admired his surroundings. “Look at that wall carving; the detail is incredible.” He nodded toward the back wall, which displayed a carving of the company’s insignia: a phoenix rising, outlined in gold.

Gerald nodded in approval. “Great craftsmanship. Very impressive, indeed.”

Minutes later, the double doors opened and Nora’s assistant entered with a shiny silver tray containing pastries. She exited and returned seconds later with four cups of coffee. Nora and Lawson then entered the room together.

“Gentlemen, it’s been far too long. If my memory serves me correctly, I think one of the first major business deals I ever made was purchasing those mobility assistance machines from you and the professor, back in the day,” Lawson said with a smile. “Please, help yourself to some pastries—Nora made these. She’s not only a remarkable businesswoman, but she also happens to be a passionate pastry chef,” Lawson added.

“Your father’s right on the money; these are absolutely delicious,” Gerald said after taking a bite of a lemon danish. He smiled politely at his hosts.

“Sometimes I wonder if I made the correct career choice,” Nora quipped, gazing at her father. The comment brought mild laughter.

“All right, let’s get down to business,” said Lawson as he turned on the flash-screen at the front of the room. “First of all, I must commend both of you for the professional manner in which you’ve dealt with your most recent tragedy.”

“Well, I’ve always told Skip the same thing my father always used to tell me: the true colors of a man show through in his darkest hour,” Gerald said.

Nora rose and approached the flash-screen on the left wall. “We like to play this view-file for all our prospective business partners. It’ll help to give you a full understanding of what Step 1 Health is all about. Please, sit back and enjoy.”

The view-file began with the image of a gold phoenix slowly rising from the ashes, followed by the company slogan, We’re here because we care. Next came a chronological history of the company, including highlights from S1H’s Supreme Court victory. Also included in this segment was a description of S1H’s most groundbreaking medications and an impressive list of esteemed medical doctors and scientists who had been involved with S1H in the past, including US Medical Chief Dr. Charles Muller.

The final segment of the view-file showed the inner workings of S1H’s medical clinics. With their spacious concourse areas, warm and friendly observation rooms, state-of-the-art medical equipment, and elaborate medical stores and pharmacies, the clinics were comprehensive entities.

When the view-file ended, Lawson rose, drawing the eyes of Gerald and Skip. His associates referred to him as Perfect Pierce, and indeed, his stylish clothes, his charming smile, his gift of gab, and even his posture naturally commanded attention. “As you just witnessed,” Lawson said with a wry smile, “it’s been quite the journey. Although the view-file provides an overview, it doesn’t acknowledge all of our many business partners who have contributed to our success.” Lawson paused. “We’re truly hoping to once again do business with Vexton-Tech.”

“So, I’m thrilled to learn our medical robots have piqued your interest,” Gerald interjected.

“Yes, I think the time has come for those robots. We prospered from many of your medical machines in the past, so why not now?” Lawson replied with a smile. “I was also quite an admirer of your consumer robots. It’s a shame they met such an untimely demise. Those Home Servants really came in handy, especially at our many corporate galas.”

Getting right down to business, Skip asked, “Would your interest lie in a licensing agreement, or are you more interested in directly purchasing the robots?”

“We were thinking of making a *very* large purchase,” replied Lawson.

Gerald leaned back on the sofa and slowly exhaled. *This is exactly what we need*, he thought.

“Considering the scope of your operation, it will be a real challenge to meet your demand, but it’s something I’ll be more than glad to *personally* oversee,” Skip replied.

“If there’s one thing about Skip, when he sets his mind to something, he displays the determination of a bulldog. I guarantee you that when Step 1 is in need of those machines, he’ll deliver—and on time,” added Gerald, patting Skip on the shoulder.

“Yeah, but it’s not just your robots we’re interested in purchasing,” said Lawson.

“Oh?” Gerald said.

“What we really want is... Vexton-Tech,” Lawson announced.

Gerald and Skip looked at each other. *What’s this about?* Gerald thought. “And what would make you think the company’s for sale?”

“Just like your father used to pass on his words of wisdom, so did mine,” Lawson said calmly. “Mine used to tell me, ‘In the business world, everything is for sale—if the price is right.’ And I trust you’ll find our offer of \$30 billion to be more than fair.”

Gerald stood up, his face flushing with rage. “You ignorant jackass. How dare you make such a ludicrous offer? We are

the leading technology company in this entire country; we're worth at least six or seven times that amount, and you know we are."

"Now, I don't mean to offend you, but the reality is, you *were* the leading technology company in America," Lawson replied calmly. "And yes, if we were sitting here before your consumer robots poisoned over 400,000 young Americans and killed ten of them, then our offer would be substantially higher. But sadly, the past is what it is, and it sure isn't going away." Lawson looked smug.

Skip interrupted what looked like a building standoff. "Would you kindly allow Dad and I a few minutes alone?"

"Most certainly. Take all the time you require. Please press this panel when you're ready." Lawson pointed to a gold panel on the wall beside the large doors.

Once Lawson and Nora left the room, Skip leaned toward Gerald and said, "Dad, please, I think we should at least try to negotiate. After all, we're dealing with the largest and most powerful corporation in the entire country. And unfortunately, we're currently sinking like a stone into an endless pit."

"Wait a second... you knew this meeting had nothing to do with them wanting to purchase those robots," Gerald said, his hushed tone making his anger come out as a hiss. "You knew this piranha was going to try and ravage our business with some ridiculous lowball offer!"

"Hold on, that's not the case! I had no idea," Skip replied, stunned by his father's accusation.

"Goodbye. I'm getting the hell out of here," Gerald sneered as he grabbed his briefcase and exited the room. "Tell him he can take his offer and shove it."

Skip remained. Nora returned to find him sitting at the table, staring into space. She approached him. "I'm sorry, Skip, this was not fair to you and your father," she said gently.

"Then why in the world did you do it? Why did you lie?" His voice was calm, but stern. He frowned up at her. "You told me this meeting was going to be about your company's interest in our medical robots."

“That’s truly what I thought. At no time did my father mention to me that it was his wish to actually buy Vexton-Tech. You must believe me, Skip. I was totally in the dark.”

Skip studied her for a moment. Nora’s face was red with embarrassment. “I believe you, Nora.” He rose. “Have a nice day,” he murmured as he exited.

Later that afternoon, while Skip was sitting at his desk reviewing documents, Bruce Kingston knocked on his office door. “Come on in,” Skip said, and directed the company’s newly appointed CEO to the chair in front of his desk. Bruce looked as fit and energetic as ever, a far cry from the way Skip felt at this moment. He smiled and shook his head. “How do you do it, Bruce?”

Settling himself in the leather armchair, Bruce froze and looked up in surprise. “Do what?”

“Security has informed me you arrive at six every morning. And I know for a fact that most evenings you’re not out of here until eight at night.”

Bruce relaxed and shrugged with a shy smile. “As far as my early arrival goes, when you play professional soccer for as many years as I did, it becomes second nature to maintain a high level of fitness—and I enjoy having the gym to myself.” Bruce had been a star player for the Washington Androids professional soccer club. “Besides,” he added, “with all the stress around here lately, that hour of vigorous exercise helps me clear my head.”

Skip nodded his agreement. “I hear you,” he said wryly. “Speaking of stress, how did the sales meeting go?”

Bruce sighed deeply and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I have to be honest with you, Skip; in all my years with Vexton-Tech, I’ve never seen things appear so grim.” He straightened long enough to loosen his tie and sighed again, slowly shaking his head. “The numbers are a disaster. Even our bread-and-butter items—the flash-screens, the flash-pads, the data-chips—are taking such a massive hit, I don’t think even one of Brandy’s clever marketing plans will pull us out of this mess.”

Frustrated, Skip leaned back and ran his hands through his hair. “I guess that survey was dead on,” he said unhappily. “What about the World Connect retailers? Are they abandoning us as well?”

“Unfortunately, they are.”

“Even Starcrest?”

“Yes. They informed us yesterday that they only plan to continue ordering our data-chips.”

“Wow, it’s obvious the market has lost all faith in us.” Bruce nodded, his expression glum. Skip looked at Bruce and said bluntly, “Step 1 Health made a lowball offer to buy the entire company for \$30 billion.”

Bruce sat back. “Whoa. A year ago the market had the company worth over \$200 billion. I can only imagine how your dad responded to that offer.”

Needing time to formulate what he had to say next, Skip rose and walked to the window to stare outside. Several seconds later, he turned and said, “As you’re well aware, my father’s a proud man, and this has been difficult for him, but we need to accept that offer, Bruce. If we don’t, no matter how large this company is, I’m certain it will fall to pieces.” He paused. “I need to find a way to convince my father, before it’s too late.”

“Whatever you and your dad decide, you can count on my unwavering support,” Bruce replied.

Back in Vexton, Gerald was meeting with Earl Pemberton, the MAA’s interim leader, at the palatial Levin estate. “Time just flies, doesn’t it, Gerald. I mean, it seems like this was only a couple of years ago.” Earl nodded toward several wall photos of him and Gerald on a hunting trip fifteen years previous.

Gerald smiled and nodded. “I’ll never forget that trip. That’s when this big guy was hunted down.” He turned toward a moose head mounted on the opposite wall.

Earl stepped beside him, also looking at the trophy. “When I think about the last hunting trip I took—with that son of a bitch, Bedlam—it really sickens me, Gerald.”

“I know how you feel. I praised the idiot right here at our last Vexton-Tech gala.”

“He set the MAA back so much. He ended up being nothing but a lowlife thug who only talked a good game,” Earl said as he removed a laser-rifle from the wall to examine it.

“And to think the Strategic Council so one-sidedly voted him over *you*—it’s mind-boggling,” Gerald said.

Earl looked up and shrugged. “I wasn’t surprised. His celebrity status as the world’s former premier bare-knuckle fighter seemed to give him a big advantage.” He carefully set the gun back in its place and walked toward the moose head. Looking at it intently, he said, “I remember you told me you were going to get this big fella, and sure enough, seconds later, bam! Down he went.” He smiled as if reliving the moment.

Gerald grinned, then beckoned for Earl to follow him into the living room, where he poured them both a glass of red wine.

“I also remember you telling me years ago that you were going to build Vexton-Tech into the largest tech company in this country, and sure enough, you pulled it off!” Earl looked directly at Gerald as he handed him his glass of wine. “We need you, Gerald,” he said firmly. “The Alliance needs you. This country needs you.”

Gerald stared down at his glass. “You’re correct, Earl; my goal was to turn the company into a giant, and that I did. But then I got stupid and gave way too much control to one man, who destroyed my company.”

“None of that was your fault—you were totally blindsided, Gerald. Besides, what you’ve done in the aftermath to rectify the matter has been remarkable, and the people of America are well aware of that,” Earl replied. “This is our chance to finally take back America, put it in the hands of those who will make this country supreme once again.” Gerald was listening closely. Earl continued. “Westgale and his cronies have met the end of their road. They can create all the spin they want, but the reality is, they’re finished. This amazing country that used to shine so bright has become nothing but a tiny flicker in the wind!”

Gerald took a deep breath and said solemnly, “Well, I guess it’s time to reignite that flame. I’m in.”

The next morning Gerald flew to New York to meet with Skip at the Vexton-Tech headquarters. For the first time, a feeling of emptiness settled over him when he entered the building. The specialized robots that used to greet visitors at the entrance were now a thing of the past. The main concourse seemed hollow, his footsteps echoing off the marble floor to bounce around the cavernous space.

As Gerald headed toward the elevators, he noticed an image of himself being displayed on the flash-screen on one wall. Vexton-Tech’s VP of Marketing, Brandy Noble, approached. She waved one hand at the screen. “How come you didn’t tell us about this, Mr. Levin?” she asked.

“About what?” he asked, staring at the screen but drawing a blank.

“The UCIT network just finished airing a feature on you. It was quite the story of a remarkable man.” She beamed at him. “You should be very proud of all you’ve accomplished.”

“Thank you, my dear. Actually, I didn’t know anything about the feature. But from what you’re telling me, at least they decided to display my good side.” Gerald chuckled. “Oh, while I’m here with you, I guess I should inform you of this afternoon’s meeting of our executive committee. Two o’clock. It’s a very important meeting.”

“Two o’clock,” Brandy repeated. She gave a sharp nod, and moved away. Gerald continued on to the elevators.

Skip’s office door was slightly ajar, so Gerald peeked in and knocked simultaneously.

“Come on in, Dad,” Skip said, looking up from a report he’d been reading on his desktop flash-screen. Gerald moved to a chair across from Skip’s desk and sat down, then stared into space, deep in thought. The silence was powerful. Skip shut down the report and moved the screen aside, saying, “That’s enough bad news for one day.”

Gerald looked at Skip and blinked back tears. “I’m sorry, son. I was absolutely wrong to suggest you were going behind my back with S1H. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“I know you don’t see it this way, Dad, but you’re only human,” Skip replied. “And yes, human beings are permitted to make mistakes. I’m disappointed that you accused me of such a terrible thing, but I understand how stressful things have been for you lately.”

Gerald leaned forward in his chair and asked, “Does this mean all is well between us?”

“Of course! But when it comes to this business...” Skip glanced meaningfully at the flash-screen and sighed.

“Well, I think what I’m about to tell you is definitely going to improve your mood, son.”

“Unless you tell me you’re willing to accept Lawson Pierce’s offer, I don’t think there’s anything that will improve my mood.”

With a sly grin, Gerald said, “Should I make the call, or would you like the honor?”

Skip leaned back in his seat and let out a loud holler of relief. “I’ll be darned! Why the change of heart?” he asked, barely able to contain his joy.

“Sometimes I guess you just need to face reality,” Gerald answered, rising and pacing away from his chair. “As much as I truly wanted to keep the business going, it’s become very clear that there is no way we can totally rebound from this disaster.” He stopped and poured himself a glass of water. “The crazy thing is, as much as the people in this country are turning away from Vexton-Tech, it’s like *I’ve* now become some kind of hero in the aftermath of the tragedy, simply because I’ve tried to make amends.”

“It just goes to show this is a very fickle society, Dad,” Skip replied. “Now, I must ask: does this sudden change of heart have anything to do with your political aspirations?”

Gerald turned toward Skip and looked him in the eyes. “As will be made official in the coming days, upon approval from its council, I will be the new leader of the MAA. But no, my final decision to sell the company is simply a business decision,” he added.

“You’ve made the correct decision,” Skip said.

“There is one caveat that goes along with the sale. And I will not budge,” Gerald warned.

“Oh? And what might that be?” Skip asked.

“If Lawson Pierce wants this company, he also keeps its new chairman in place,” Gerald answered firmly.

Skip came out from behind his desk and slowly walked toward the side window. “Sometimes, I look down there,” he said in reference to the hustle and bustle below, “and I ask myself what this all means... The other day my kids were in a school play, and I gave them my word I’d be there to watch them.” He paused and undid his tie. “But of course I got caught up in some R&D meeting and totally forgot about the play. My kids were devastated—and so was I.”

“What are you trying to tell me, Skip?”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that I want out. I made this decision directly following our meeting with Step 1 Health. I’m afraid I’m losing Dora and the kids,” Skip said, “and if I continue on this path I know for a fact I *will* lose them.”

“Come on, Skip, you’re being way too hard on yourself. You’re a wonderful husband and father, as well as a wonderful provider. Besides, you’re way too young to be put out to pasture,” Gerald quipped.

“I guess when you’re one of the wealthiest people in the entire country it’s not very difficult to be a ‘wonderful provider,’ but by no means have I been a wonderful husband and father... and I desperately need to change that,” Skip said softly.

“Well, considering how things went awry between your mother and me, I guess I can understand your concern,” Gerald said solemnly. “So, what do you plan to do, son?”

“For the time being, I’m going to take Dora and the kids, and spend some time with Mom in California. Actually, although I don’t plan to let it consume the bulk of my time, this’ll also give me a chance to address some pending matters relating to our real estate operation,” Skip said.

“Very well, but what about the children’s schooling?” Gerald asked.

“I’ve already made arrangements with a highly acclaimed private school. They’ll be just fine,” Skip replied. “So, once the Vexton-Tech sale is completed, we’ll be off.”

* * *

“Keep your head up, Riles. When you’re passing the ball, make sure you have your head up so you can see where you’re passing it to,” I called out to Riley as he and Skip’s son, Matthew, worked on their soccer skills at the Levin estate.

“Doesn’t this remind you of two other little guys from years ago?” Skip asked.

“It sure does—and on this very field. I remember we sometimes stayed out here until it became so dark we couldn’t see a darn thing,” I replied with a chuckle.

Skip laughed, then looked down at his flash-pad. “Oh great, they’ve arrived,” he said with a wide smile. “Hey boys,” he called out, “turn around!”

Riley and Matthew dutifully turned around—to look directly at four of their favorite Washington Androids. The boys screamed with excitement.

“Now, this *really* reminds me of our past,” I said, recalling the day Skip and I’d been fortunate enough to have the same experience. “This is one day the boys will never forget,” I said, smiling. As Riley and Matthew ran over to the four athletes, I said, “So, I heard about the sale of Vexton-Tech to Step 1 Health. How are you feeling?”

Skip kept his eyes on the field, even though it was empty now. He sighed. “It’s been difficult to accept, but it had to be done. We could never have fully rebounded after the robot tragedy.”

“How long before you’re off to California?” I asked.

Skip turned toward me and we slowly walked over to the boys and their heroes. “The sale should be finalized in a few days. That will give me time to tighten up some loose ends before we leave.”

“Well, I hope you still plan to come back and visit your home town once in a while,” I said, feeling a whisper of sadness.

“Oh, I’ll be back. I could never forget this place,” Skip said with pride.

CHAPTER 4

Several weeks had passed since Nicole Kratz's heroism had helped to thwart the attack planned by General Sims. President Westgale and his people were trying their best to restore order within the Freedom Home. But the stress of everything that had happened had taken its toll on Dr. Muller. "I'm so glad it was only a mild heart attack and that with some rest you're going to be fine, Charles," Westgale said during a visit to his hospital room.

"Yeah, but I'm the country's number one doctor; I'm not supposed to get sick," he replied, and they both chuckled.

"I'm just saddened that you'll be stepping down," Westgale said. "You've done such a wonderful job representing this country, Charles."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I'm glad that you and your executive committee recommended Jack to replace me. He's the best there is," Muller said with enthusiasm.

Three days later, after the Strategic Council officially voted in his favor, Dr. Jack Ahar was announced as America's inaugural Chief of Medicine and Science.

"I'm so honored, Mr. President," Jack said during a one-on-one meeting with Westgale following the announcement. The fact that you and your executive committee would consider me after I lied about the cause of LRS, not to mention after my daughter's indiscretions came to light... well, it really touches me," Ahar said.

“You lied because the life of your daughter was being threatened. I understand that, Jack. And as far as Anya herself is concerned, I think her story touched a lot of people, even with those indiscretions,” Westgale replied. “While I have you here, there’s a matter I need to discuss with you.”

“I’m all ears, Mr. President,” Ahar replied.

“Agricultural and Environmental Safety recently received a report from Professor Kinsley,” Westgale began.

“Brilliant man. I think it was a very wise move on Beverley’s part to bring on Kinsley as a consultant,” Ahar said.

“Yes, I totally agree. Now, this has to do with some kind of mineral he and Heath Claremont recently discovered in Vexton County,” Westgale said as he handed Ahar the report.

“Hmm... very interesting—and very mysterious,” Ahar said as he perused the report. He looked up. “I’ll perform an analysis immediately.”

Colonel Mitchell Peters was also announced as the country’s new interim defense director, replacing the soon-to-be-executed General Sims. “This is without doubt the greatest honor that has ever been bestowed upon me,” Peters announced to the American people over the World Connect. “I pledge to honor, protect, and defend this country with my heart and soul.”

Peters had his work cut out for him. Westgale and the rest of his Administration were on edge over news of recent political upheavals in Pinia, a country rich in natural resources. Of great interest to Westgale and his associates was Pinia’s highly coveted fera-bean. Westgale expressed this during his first meeting with Colonel Peters in his new role. “The timing of this uprising could be disastrous. If Cobra Pix and his Iron Lotus take over Pinia, we’ll never see those fera-beans,” Westgale declared, scowling. He pounded his desk with a fist. “If this deal doesn’t come to fruition there’s no chance we’ll meet the commission’s deadline. And you know what that means, Mitchell.”

The colonel wiped the sweat from his brow. “I’m sure Cobra Pix has calculated this entire thing. You can bet that long before we

began talking to the Pinian government about fera-bean biofuel, he and his militia were preparing a complete takeover.”

“All our reports indicate that that biofuel is the real deal. It’s a game changer. There’s never been anything like this here in America—or anywhere else, for that matter. We need to make this happen,” Westgale said firmly.

“If Pix’s uprising is successful—and by all accounts it appears it will be—I highly doubt we’ll be doing business with Pinia,” Peters warned.

“Damn it, Mitchell! Is the rest of the world just going to stand by while this demented maniac takes over that entire country?” Westgale shouted, throwing his hands up in frustration that the Outer Commission was not permitting America to intervene. “And what about his ties to the HKM?” he exclaimed. “If they join forces, they’ll do whatever they can to crush us.”

“Military Intelligence is continuously monitoring the situation, sir,” Peters said. “We’re also attempting to get our American aid workers out of there. I realize how anxious you must feel, with your daughter leading one of those teams.”

Thinking of Jessica, Westgale sighed. “Stay on it, Mitchell,” he ordered, his tone more subdued.

* * *

April Westgale was preparing for bed when she noticed a flickering of lights through the blinds of her bedroom window. She walked over to the window and peeked through the slats. “William, look at this,” she called, her voice high with shock. The president joined her at the window.

People were assembling along the perimeter of the Freedom Home. The whole crowd wore balaclavas and all black clothing, and carried torches.

“Oh my Lord,” Westgale groaned. “What in the world is going on here?”

Seconds later, his flash-pad buzzed. “Yes, Gil.”

“Sir, there’s a large group of—”

“I know. I can see them outside my window,” Westgale said.

“I’ve ordered security to begin securing the property,” Gil responded. “I’m sending my agents to escort you and the Lady of Honor to the basement bunker.”

Until the detail arrived, Westgale and his wife kept their eyes on the group, which had now formed a large circle, three rows deep, outside the gates. Torches held high, they stood quietly.

When the security detail arrived, Westgale put his arm around his wife’s waist, holding her close, as they turned wordlessly from the window. “Keep me informed,” he said to Gil before tucking his flash-pad into his pocket and exiting the room with the guards.

With the president and his wife safely tucked away, Gil met with Executive Director Dave Perry and Colonel Peters. They regarded the crowd through a second-floor window. “There has to be at least a thousand of them out there. Are we just going to let them do this?” Perry asked.

“I’m not interested in initiating a riot, David, but if they do anything that warrants it, they’ll be dealt with,” Gil assured him.

“I have our riot unit on standby,” added Peters.

Ten minutes passed as the tension mounted. The group stood their ground, completely silent, until suddenly one member thrust his torch three times into the air, prompting the group to shout out in unison, “Free Anya! Free America!” Then, in what seemed like a choreographed move, the entire group peacefully turned away.

A day later, out in Los Angeles, Cryptic had the opportunity to interview a man who claimed to be the new leader of AXE. The young man referred to himself as Blackheart. He requested that he be interviewed at dawn, on a remote beach. When Cryptic and the UCIT crew arrived they saw a figure sitting on a boulder in the near distance. Cryptic led the way over the cool sand, the rising sun glistening off its metallic body.

“Hello, Mr. Blackheart. I am Cryptic. Thank you for agreeing to this interview,” the robot said as a way of introduction.

“I hope to enlighten the country,” Blackheart replied, still sitting on the boulder. To protect his identity he wore a black balaclava. He was shirtless, and AXE was tattooed in black across his scrawny chest. He wore camouflage pants and a pair of battered army boots.

“Is it AXE’s goal to bring an end to America’s current political structure, by bringing down both the PBA and MAA?” Cryptic asked.

“All I can tell you is that our immediate goal is to continue gaining strength in numbers and following the course set out by the AXE doctrine. As we do so, those establishments will eventually cease to exist, and true freedom will reign supreme.”

“An America governed by AXE?”

“We think of it as an America that’ll be governed by the people. A land of equality. No rich. No poor. No beautiful. No ugly. No judgment,” Blackheart said with feeling.

“Do you seriously think this is attainable?” Cryptic asked, its eyes flashing back and forth from red to blue.

“It’s very attainable, Mr. Robot,” Blackheart replied. “Just listen to what people are saying. They’re fed up. It is time for the country’s youth to take control.”

“Dwight Wagner and Anya Ahar had planned to blow up government buildings in order to establish a footing for AXE,” Cryptic said. “Can we expect violence from your current group?”

“Sadly, war is violent,” Blackheart replied calmly.

“War? Will your group be declaring some kind of war on your own country?”

“Our government is not our country. Free Anya! Free America!” Blackheart said, pushing himself off the boulder, effectively ending the interview.

“What do you make of this, Gil?” Westgale asked as the interview ended and he turned off the flash-screen.

“We must take this seriously, Mr. President,” Gil said.

Westgale put his head in his hands and shook his head, then looked back up. “Are you fearing they’ll try to pick up where Dwight Wagner and his group left off?”

“Well, as history has shown us, we can never be certain of anything,” Gil answered. “But our Homeland Anti-Terror group believes their focus at this time is solely on recruitment.”

“And then what? Are we just going to stand by and watch a group of anarchists come together and pose a threat to the country?” Westgale growled.

“Under Section 33.9 of the New Order Treaty, there isn’t anything we *can* do to prevent them from actually forming an alliance,” Gil said. “Now, if and when we gain intelligence indicating something sinister is in the works, we’ll do whatever it takes to eliminate the threat.”

“I just hope it won’t be too late,” Westgale muttered.

“I’m very concerned with this report, sir,” Gil said as he handed Westgale the results of a political survey that had been conducted at universities across the country.

Westgale studied it a moment. “Wow... I figured recent events would have set us back quite a bit, but this is crazy.” He looked up. “It’s one thing to feel the heat from a throng of anarchistic thugs, but seeing *these* youngsters feeling so jaded about life in this country...” He looked back down at the report. “This is extremely disconcerting,” he said solemnly.

CHAPTER 5

The next day a ceremony had been planned to honor the courage of Nicole Kratz for the key role she played in helping to thwart General Sims's attack at the Freedom Home. Nicole's excitement however was slightly tempered by the fact it was also the day her father's cohorts were celebrating his retirement at New York City's Fair Justice Courthouse. Nicole felt terrible about having to disappoint her father. "Dad, I can't believe the timing. Tomorrow is the one day I wish I could be in two places at once," she'd said as her and her mother helped the judge pick out his suit the day before.

"Don't fret, honey. You're being honored by your country for your incredible bravery. Go and enjoy yourself. You deserve it," her father had said as he hugged her. "Besides, *my* celebration is going to be filled with a bunch of grumpy old judges and boring attorneys. Soon we'll celebrate my retirement in real style!"

As a massive group, which included the entire Westgale Administration, many dignitaries, and more than two thousand past and current military personnel began to assemble on the Field of Honor grounds, Nicole was overcome by a whirlwind of emotions. She felt immense pride in being an American, yet at the same time memories of that horrific evening still haunted her.

The ceremony opened with the American national anthem, played by an honorary military band composed of former soldiers. Following the anthem, several dignitaries were introduced and

honored. Executive Director Dave Perry then took to the podium. The crowd cheered loudly.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “This is an incredibly special ceremony, and it’s wonderful to see everybody here today. When this event was being planned, I made a special request. That request was to be the person who would introduce this afternoon’s special honoree, Nicole Kratz.” Perry stepped back from the sound-blast and began to clap along with the crowd, then ducked forward to add, “I’ve been privileged to have worked alongside so many outstanding people during my time with the Peace Bringers Association of America, with former Director Kratz being right at the top of that list.

“Nicole’s bravery on that dreadful evening is something that will continue to resonate within my heart for the rest of my life. I, like everyone else who was in that conference room, owe you a debt we can never repay. Honoring you at this event allows us to show you our deep appreciation for the courage you displayed by risking your life. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present, as a token of that courage, this beautiful gold eagle statue to an amazing former PBA executive director and my dear friend, Nicole Kratz.” Again he took a step away from the podium and clapped along with the crowd.

On her way to the stage, Nicole stopped to acknowledge many of those in the crowd. The cheering reached a fever pitch as she approached the podium and accepted the gift from Perry. Slowly dabbing her tears with a tissue, she began to speak. “It’s with immense pride that I stand here today accepting this honor. I want to thank everybody in the Administration who contributed to this event, especially Director Perry and President Westgale.” She looked in their direction and clapped.

“In my opinion, the word *hero* is often overused. To define my actions on that awful night as *heroic* is a perfect example of that overuse. I simply did what I had to do. The real heroes are sitting over there,” she said, pointing toward the military faction of the crowd. She addressed them with heartfelt emotion. “You are

incredible people. You are a major part of what makes this the greatest country in the world. Your dedication and sacrifice are beyond words.” The crowd roared with applause.

“Unfortunately, many of you have also paid a terrible price for your patriotism. You did what you did and do what you do for your country; for our children, and our children’s children. Hopefully a day will come soon when peace will—”

A military man rose and stepped into the aisle. “Today, truth will be judge and jury!” he shouted into a sound-blast attached to his collar. “In honor of Anya Ahar, I will lead your father to eternal damnation!” He started pouring a liquid over his body; before anyone could stop him, he flicked open a lighter and set himself ablaze.

Total pandemonium broke out. Those nearest the man charged away from him in a wave of panicked humanity; everyone else scurried away to stand in a circle at a distance as event security and paramedics rushed to dampen the flames engulfing the man. What remained of the man was instantly declared dead.

A terrifying thought had entered Nicole’s mind the second she heard the words *In honor of Anya Ahar*. She immediately thought of the three young men in New York whom her father had tried in his final court case. Recalling how one of them used that very term in praise of Anya Ahar on his view-file conjured a very recent conversation she’d had with her father.

“Hey Dad, do the authorities have any leads on the fourth person believed to be involved in the attempted school bombing?” Nicole asked.

“Nothing solid, but they’re certain that he’s several years older than the others, and they also believe he has extensive military experience. The explosives they had planned to use were very sophisticated.”

What that conjured next threw Nicole into a near panic. She turned to Gil Robichaud, who happened to be standing by her side, and said urgently, “Gil, contact the Fair Justice Courthouse

in New York and tell them to immediately evacuate the building! I fear my father and everybody in that building could be in danger!”

Minutes later, after quickly informing a concerned Westgale that she was okay but the emergency wasn't over, she and the president joined Robichaud in his office.

Robichaud looked up at Nicole as they entered. “I couldn't get through to the courthouse, Nicole, but I made a call to the nearest Justice Center, and they're on it.”

“Damn it!” Nicole blurted in frustration, then her thoughts turned to the extremist. “Who was that guy?”

“I have my people trying to identify him as we speak,” Gil said as he took off his jacket, tossed it aside, and rolled up his sleeves.

Looking at Nicole shaking in terror, Westgale asked, “What is going on, Nicole?”

“We need to get hold of that courthouse!” she ordered, ignoring him.

“Nicole, tell me what is going on,” Westgale insisted, his voice anxious.

“How come the damn courthouse isn't responding?” Nicole shouted.

“We've got the guy's name,” Gil said, eyes on his flash-pad. “Sergeant JD Wren, twenty-three years of age. He served in Unit X8. He was an artillery analyst specializing in explosive devices.” Gil paused, then he looked up, his eyes wide with alarm. “Oh no! There's been a massive explosion at the Fair Justice Courthouse!”

Fighting panic, Nicole grabbed her flash-pad and attempted to reach her father. She trembled uncontrollably as the signal flashed. Six flashes, no response. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her face as she continued to let her flash-pad buzz. And then she heard a familiar female voice on the other end, and her knees nearly buckled: “Nicole, is that you?”

“Mom! Are you okay?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“How come you’re answering Dad’s flash-pad?”

“Your father’s outside with the grandkids.”

“With the grandkids? What about the retirement party at the courthouse?”

“Sadly, it was canceled. Apparently there was some kind of plumbing issue.”

“Oh, thank God!” Nicole said, gripping the desk for support. She exhaled and wiped the tears from her cheeks, then informed her mother of the explosion.

“My goodness! We would have been killed! Who did this?” Her mother started sobbing.

“Mom, listen to me. Stay calm. Get Dad and the kids in the house and tell him what I’ve told you. I’m going to have New York Justice send a group of agents over immediately,” Nicole said, now able to speak calmly.

“Nicole, what in the world is happening? Is someone trying to kill your father?”

“Please, Mom, just do what I say. The agents will be there in a few minutes. I’ll be in touch.”

Nicole then turned her attention to Gil. “Was anybody in that courthouse?”

“I’ve been told the building was empty. A crew was on its way to repair the plumbing problem and got there five minutes or so after the blast.” Gil stopped and shook his head. “My God! This could have been so tragic.”

Still shaken, but comforted by the knowledge that her parents were safe and no one was hurt, Nicole suddenly felt drained. She sat down and put her hands over her face.

“Thank God nobody was hurt, Nicole,” Westgale said gently as he handed her a tissue. He looked up as Dave Perry entered the room. “David, please take things from here. I’m going to address this matter with Colonel Peters.”

“We have to find out everything we possibly can about this guy, as well as anybody or any group he may have been associated with,” Perry said firmly to Nicole and Gil.

“This has to be linked to those three punks in New York who tried to blow up their school. Dad’s the judge who sentenced them,” Nicole said. “When that sick bastard uttered the words ‘In honor of Anya Ahar,’ it really hit me. Those words were found on the flash-pad of one of those kids. Plus, Dad told me they were still searching for the actual mastermind behind the planned bombing.”

Gil quickly pulled up a view-file on the thwarted school bombing. “Hmm... the investigators who interrogated these punks believe there is no way they were capable of creating the bombs that were discovered,” he said. He switched the flash-screen over to Sergeant Wren’s military bio. “And since this Wren character was an explosives expert, your intuition may be right on, Nicole. I’ve sent my top agents along with our bomb squad to check out his apartment here in Washington. Maybe they’ll turn up a link.”

“Do either of you think there’s a chance that Anya Ahar may be holding back some valuable information concerning these guys?” asked Nicole.

Gil switched the flash-screen back to the case file. “Well, it says here, in the midst of all this appeal stuff going on with her, she’s been questioned several times about the case and claims to have no knowledge of anything related to it. The report concludes these kids were AXE sympathizers, and became highly influenced by the doctrine.”

Gil went back to studying Sergeant JD Wren’s military file. “Wren’s record was very impressive, to say the least. His educational background and military performance ratings are both stellar, and several of his superiors stated he was always well-mannered and respectful, especially toward his fellow soldiers. One of his superiors described him as being quiet and reserved, yet displaying leadership through example.”

“What in the world could possibly have set him off to be involved in such heinous acts?” Nicole wondered.

Gil just shook his head, deep in thought as he continued reading the file. “I may have found the answer,” he said. “The report says that Sergeant Wren’s twenty-year-old sister, Tammy, recently died.

It stated the cause of death as heart failure, caused by Lethargy Reaction Syndrome, also known as LRS.”

Nicole’s eyes met his. She nodded.

Meanwhile, Gil’s specialized bomb squad unit entered the low-rise apartment building where Wren had been living and ordered an immediate evacuation. After carefully inspecting every inch of the rest of the building, Agents Gallio and Herta were given clearance to enter Wren’s apartment. They gathered whatever evidence they could and immediately headed to Gil’s office.

“Come on in,” Gil said at the knock on his office door. Agent Gallio and his assistant entered. “Please, place the box on the desk at the back of the room.”

“Thank you, Madison. That’ll be all,” Gallio said to his assistant as she placed the box of evidence on the desk.

Pulling on a pair of gloves, Gil joined Gallio and began examining the box’s contents. “Was this flash-pad checked by the bomb squad?” he asked, pointing to it.

“Yes it was, sir.”

Gil contacted Shamir and asked him to perform a thorough analysis on the flash-pad. He continued searching the box. “It looks like our friend was quite the swimmer... and quite the soldier,” Gil said as he removed several trophies and military badges from the box.

“It appears he also liked to ski.” Snickering, Gallio pointed to a black balaclava.

Gil thought back to a few days prior, when a view-file reached his desk. It was made during a UCIT feature called *Pulse of the Nation*, recorded directly outside of Washington’s famous Brave Land Shopping Center.

Cryptic appeared with its eyes flashing blue and white, its chest displaying a bright red beating heart. “Excuse me, ma’am,” it said as it approached a young woman. “With an election around the corner, I’d like to know how you feel about the state of the country, after the events of this past year.”

“Wow... I’m going to be on UCIT,” she gushed as she pushed strands of lime-colored hair away from her face. “The country’s okay, I guess. I really don’t follow politics. I mean, I was a War Within baby, so I’m pretty jaded when it comes to all this political stuff. I just don’t know why we can’t all just live as one.” She threw a kiss and walked away.

The robot then approached a middle-aged man wearing a business suit, and asked the same question. “I’m concerned, I’m very concerned. I’ve always been a PBA supporter, but after what’s happened this year, Westgale’s lost my support. There’s just been way too much mayhem within the PBA,” the man said harshly.

“Does that mean you’ll be supporting the MAA in the next election?” Cryptic asked, its eyes now matching the red of the beating heart on its chest.

“Well, with the current turmoil in both Pinia and the HKM, I’m afraid we’ll need a government that will be able to—”

A man dressed all in black, wearing a balaclava, jumped in front of Cryptic. “Damnation awaits he who brings injustice!” the man shouted into the camera. He then jumped on the back of a robo-cycle and was gone.

Gil gave his head a quick shake. “My Lord, I could’ve been responsible for the deaths of so many innocent people,” he said to Gallio, and sighed heavily.

“What the heck are you talking about?” Gallio asked.

“JD Wren. There’s no doubt that’s him in this view-file,” Gil replied, and played the clip for Gallio.

“That’s definitely his voice,” Gallio agreed.

“Even though my staff brought it to my attention, I just let it go, like a damn fool.” Gil slammed his fist onto his desk.

“What are you supposed to do? Bring in every one of these extremist nutcases?” Gallio said.

Shamir came back into Gil’s office. “I think you might like to see this,” he said, holding Wren’s flash-pad out to Gil. It displayed a floorplan of the Fair Justice Courthouse.

Gil looked up from the flash-pad and nodded once. “Nicole was correct. We have our man,” he said. “Let me see what else we have here...” He returned to looking through the contents of the box. “Do you have any idea what these are?” Gil asked Gallio as he held up a container of heart-shaped green pills.

“I have no idea,” Gallio replied, taking the bottle to study the pills.

Gil tapped his flash-pad and contacted Dr. Ahar’s secretary. “I’ll let him know, Agent Robichaud,” she replied.

Moments later, Ahar entered Gil’s office. Gallio handed him the pill bottle. “Any idea what these are?” Gil asked.

“Hmm... I’ll have to perform an analysis,” he said, looking curiously at the pills. “Heart-shaped? That’s interesting,” he added before exiting Gil’s office.

Two days later, Dr. Ahar called for an emergency meeting with Gil and Champ Sutton regarding the pills. When Ahar walked into Sutton’s office, his expression was glum. “In all my years performing scientific analysis, I’ve never come across a more bizarre predicament,” he said, sounding and looking bewildered.

He held up a container of tiny, glittery stones. “These are the minerals discovered at Moon Shade Bluff.” Gil and Champ looked at each other, confused. “I was asked to perform an analysis on them soon after they were discovered.” He then reached into his pocket and pulled out the container of heart-shaped green pills. “Now, these green pills are a combination of those minerals mixed with a low-grade painkiller,” he said, “creating the most potent narcotic I’ve ever come across.”

Sutton abruptly rose from his seat. “Whoa—are you certain of this?” he asked Ahar.

Ahar nodded. “One hundred percent.”

Gil rose and began to pace. “Were you able to determine the brand of painkiller being used?” he asked.

“It would help us a great deal if I could, but the extract from the mineral completely masked the pill,” Ahar replied.

“This is crazy.” Gil ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “Secretary Gibson’s report notes that Professor Kinsley said that several areas of that mountain have been excavated.” He pulled out his flash-pad and summoned Agent Gallio to Champ’s office.

“I need you to contact Narcotic Policing to see if they have any matches to these pills in their database,” Gil said to him as he scanned a copy of Ahar’s report.

Twenty-four hours later, Gil received a call on his flash-pad.

“Agent Robichaud, this is Federal Narcotic Policing’s lab manager, Vanessa Childress.”

“Yes. I’ve been waiting for your call. Were you and your people able to find a match?” Gil asked.

“Sir, we have no record of anything even close to resembling the makeup of those pills.”

CHAPTER 6

The thing I loved about my job was the opportunity it gave me to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the Vexton farmlands. If there was one thing I didn't enjoy about my job, it was the annual autumn report filing. My assistant Wyatt and I set aside an entire week to tackle this tedious, but highly necessary task. Our plan was to begin the process at 7:30 a.m. so that we'd still be able to work on outdoor assignments later in the day. By 9:30 of the first day, boredom had already settled in. Wyatt was feeling it. "You know, Heath, there has to be some kind of machine out there that could do this for us," he said with a sigh.

"There probably is, but I don't think Custodian Tolliver is going to be opening up the money vault to get us one anytime soon," I answered. "Like every fall, we'll just have to work our way through it."

"Well, I guess—"

A powerful thud interrupted Wyatt. It almost knocked me out of my chair. The VLP office door crashed to the floor. When I turned around all I could see was a blur of helmets charging toward me. "We're the Federal Narcotic Police; put your arms in the air—now!" their leader growled.

I stared along the barrels of five laser-rifles pointing at my head. Five more were pointing at Wyatt.

I finally found my voice. "Wha—what is going on here?" I asked. I got no reply. Wyatt and I were handcuffed and whisked away to a van, where we were ordered to provide the codes to all the VLP

flash-screens, and our flash-pads were confiscated. Two agents guarded us while the others left to search the VLP building. The team leader and a driver sat in the front of the van. At a nod from the leader, the driver started the van and guided it away from the VLP building.

The van took us to the Vexton Justice Center, where we were taken to separate interrogation rooms. As I was being led into the room, I crossed paths with Sharon. We exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“Heath! What in the world is going on?” she asked. My guards gave us no opportunity to talk; the one behind me nudged me in the back and I stumbled forward.

Moments later, while I sat in the dreary interrogation room, waiting to learn why I was there, I heard the door slowly open. I looked up and saw Sharon. She pulled up a chair and sat in front of me. “It’s going to be all right, honey,” she said in a hushed voice, trying to calm me down.

“What is going on? What am I doing here? Can they do this?” I asked, my heart pounding.

Sharon looked at me with concern. “Under the New Order Treaty, the Federal Narcotic Police have immense power. It seems crazy, but they’re allowed to search any premises, even without a warrant,” Sharon said.

“Why in the hell are they searching the VLP office?”

Sharon bit her lower lip. “They’re not just searching your office; they’re also searching our home.”

“Our home?” I exclaimed. “What in the world is going on?”

Sharon sighed. It sounded shaky, belying her calm façade. “Poor Kayla; they scared the hell out of her. They just came charging into the house. Thank God Riley’s at school.”

“But why? Why is this happening?”

“Those glittery minerals you and Kinsley found at Moon Shade Bluff—well, the authorities believe they’re being used to create a very potent narcotic. Apparently they found the drugs in the apartment of the extremist who set himself on fire at the event honoring Nicole Kratz.”

“What? And they think I have something to do with this? That’s insane. I’m the one who had Kinsley send the report on those minerals in the first place.”

Sharon glanced back toward the door. “Heath, I have to get out of here. I’m not supposed to be in here speaking with you. Just answer their questions. We’ll get this straightened out.” She reached across the table and gave my hand a squeeze, then hurried out of the room.

Minutes later, I looked up and saw Gil Robichaud standing in the doorway. When I was testifying in the Anya Ahar hearing, I’d briefly met Agent Robichaud and realized very quickly just how passionate he was about his job. When he entered the room he removed his jacket and hung it on the wall. He was physically powerful, with arms the size of most people’s legs. I remember Beverley once telling me that he used to compete as a bodybuilder. Considered tough but fair, he was far more emotive than analytical.

“Good morning, Mr. Claremont. Now, I’m hoping you’ll be cooperative and answer my questions. Of course, I must inform you of your right to have an attorney present, if you so wish.”

“I won’t need an attorney, Agent Robichaud,” I replied. “I’ve nothing to hide. In fact, I have no clue why I’m even here.”

“Very well. Let’s begin,” he said. “Please tell me, Mr. Claremont, what it was that led you and Professor Kinsley to perform the recent excavation at Moon Shade Bluff?”

As much as I wanted to keep my theory that Riley was cured by the Vexton Gleam a secret, I knew I had to be honest, so I explained.

“You believe a beam of light above that mountain cured your son of LRS?” Robichaud responded, his voice carefully neutral.

“That’s correct, sir. I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m convinced, and so is the professor. There is absolutely no other way my son could have been cured of that horrible, life-threatening illness,” I replied.

“Has this *theory* of yours been reported to the authorities, or at least to the office of your town’s custodian?” Robichaud asked.

“No, I didn’t want my son’s life to become some kind of freak show,” I replied.

Robichaud thought for a moment before responding. He sighed and chuckled lightly. “Over the years, I’ve been involved with many mysterious events. I’ve had witnesses and even my own men claim to have had encounters with flying saucers. I even had one agent tell me he once encountered a three-headed monster with purple eyes. I’ll have to add this one to the list.”

“I’m being honest with you, Agent Robichaud. The other day when I was with the professor was the first time I ever saw those minerals. And right away, we both agreed it’d be best to bring the discovery to the attention of Secretary Gibson. If I was involved in something criminal, why would I have done that?”

“That was a wise thing to do. Now, your assistant, Wyatt Murphy: what can you tell me about that young man?”

“He’s dedicated to the VLP, a diligent worker, always respectful, gets along well with the residents of Vexton. I’ve never had a single problem with him.”

“Does he have autonomy within the VLP?”

“No, he reports to me.”

“What can you tell me about his personal life?”

“Not a heck of a lot. He’s twenty-four years old and he’s single. Let me think... I know he occasionally helps out at his family’s candy company, Vexton Sweet World Candy, and he has a strong interest in magic. My son always gets a kick out of these magic tricks he performs.”

“Are you aware that he has a brother out in Florida who’s had past arrests for drug trafficking?” Robichaud asked, his brows pinched with concern.

“Yeah... a brother he hasn’t spoken with for the last eight years,” I replied. “Is that what this is about? Is this why the Narcotic Police came charging into my office and my home?” I tried to remain calm, but my anger was starting to get the best of me.

“Please understand, Mr. Claremont, this is not a personal action against you. This has to be done. The Federal Narcotic Police, as

they do in all cases, will not leave a stone unturned,” Robichaud said solemnly. “Once the raids are completed we’ll examine all banking records pertaining to the VLP, and belonging to you and Mr. Murphy, and we’ll know where things stand. And if you and your assistant have nothing to hide, as you claim is the case, then you’ll be fine.”

For the next couple of days, while the raids were being conducted, Neville Hollis let us stay in one of his guesthouses. “To put you guys through this is absolutely insane,” Neville said as we spent the afternoon strolling about the sprawling farmland. “I can’t believe they actually suspended you, Sharon.”

“Well, I could’ve appealed, but since it’ll only be for two days, I didn’t feel it was worth it,” Sharon said matter-of-factly.

Nathan Hollis caught up with us. “Wow, I was just by Moon Shade Bluff, and you should see what’s happening,” he exclaimed. “They have soldiers surrounding it, and it looks like they’ve brought in the entire Department of Agriculture and Environmental Safety. Secretary Gibson was even there.”

Two days later, I was permitted to return to work. The sergeant in charge of the case was waiting for me when I arrived. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Claremont. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I hope you can appreciate the fact we had a job to do,” he said. “You and your assistant have been cleared, and are permitted to carry on business as usual, with the exception of the area atop and in and around Moon Shade Bluff. It is currently under the jurisdiction of the federal government. Actually, Secretary Gibson has requested that you and DA Claremont meet her at the base of the mountain at noon.”

When we arrived, Sharon and I were astounded at what we saw. Rank upon rank of soldiers guarded the mountain, and under Beverley Gibson’s direction, several areas of the mountain were being thoroughly inspected. To see such a glorious area of Vexton, synonymous with freedom and innocence, being

engulfed by paranoia and bureaucracy was unsettling, to say the least.

When Beverley came down to the base of the mountain to meet us, I immediately noticed how worn out she looked. “Sharon, Heath, wonderful to see you. I heard you went through quite an ordeal,” she said as if apologizing.

“Yeah, let’s just say I’m glad it’s over,” I sighed.

“We’ve been at it like mad out here. My people have been trying to gauge when those holes were made,” Beverley said, sounding frustrated. “Whoever did this, sure did an amazing job at covering them up.”

“Any progress?” Sharon asked.

“So far, all anybody can conclude, including Professor Kinsley, is that the excavations had to have taken place within the last fifty years or so,” Beverley replied.

“Whoever did it certainly was a professional,” I said, gazing up at the mountain. “It took Kinsley’s trained eye to notice something wasn’t right.”

“The other question that’s been pounding in my head is, why in the world Moon Shade Bluff? Did they come to the mountain knowing that specific type of mineral lay below the surface?” Beverley said, perplexed.

* * *

“You know, Hector, this old, run-down theater is actually considered a historical landmark,” Mr. Sylvain said. He sat on an old wooden chair, front and center on the Regal Show Room’s stage, addressing Hector and Vincent, who sat in the first row. “Personally, I’ve never had any interest in the arts. I’ve heard it said that *true art* is a personal expression of angst. Now, why would I, why should I, care about the musings of tortured souls who want the world to share in their misery?” He looked directly down at Vincent and asked, “How about you, Vincent; do you enjoy the arts?”

“I must admit, I do enjoy a good movie, sir,” Vincent replied with a subtle smile.

“And what is it you look for in a movie?” Sylvain asked.

“Uh... a good plot with lots of suspense, and really good acting,” Vincent replied.

“Ah... and what is it you feel makes a good actor?”

Vincent pinched his eyebrows together, wondering where this was leading. “Hmm... I guess it’s simply about convincing people you’re somebody other than who you really are.”

“Is that what you are, Vincent, an actor? A two-bit fake?” Sylvain shouted, rising.

“I don’t know what you mean, sir,” Vincent blurted.

Sylvain pointed to the wooden chair he’d been sitting on. “Do you see this chair?” he shouted. He threw off his suit jacket. With a roaring growl, he lifted the chair and began slamming it against the floorboards, again and again, until its mortise and tenon joints loosened, skewing the chair’s form. He threw it to the floor and stomped on it until it lay in pieces on the stage. He stood glaring at the remnants, breathing heavily.

Vincent and Hector sat frozen in their seats.

Sylvain pulled a container of green, heart-shaped pills from his pocket and held it up. “Why did you sell them to that soldier?” he demanded of Vincent. “Who else have you sold them to?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, sir—honestly,” Vincent said. He began to tremble.

“If you continue selling these pills here in America—” Sylvain paused and pointed to the pile of wood “—that’ll be you!”

Sylvain stepped down off the stage to stand in front of Vincent. “Get up!” he roared. As Vincent rose from his seat, he grabbed him tightly by his shirt collar and yanked him forward. “Do you understand?!”

Vincent quivered like a leaf in a tornado. “Yes, sir,” he mumbled. “I understand.”

“Now get the hell out of here, and wait for future instructions,” Sylvain growled.

As Vincent left, Sylvain sat down in the seat beside Hector. He took another deep breath, and sneered. “If I were permitted to,

I would've killed that little ingrate, right here and now. God help us. Those we serve will not stand for this foolishness. That'll be all, Hector. I'm waiting to meet with our employer."

Hector nodded once, and left quickly.

The meetings with his "employer" were always conducted in the same manner. Mr. Sylvain, whose real name was Evan Sylvester, would step into the back of a grand-electro and be driven to the meeting. At no time would he see the driver. When the vehicle reached the building, directions would be sent to Mr. Sylvain's flash-pad, directing him to a waiting room where he would sometimes sit for over an hour.

Another message on his flash-pad would order him to enter the room on the far side of the only other door in the waiting room. When he entered the room, he'd sit in front of a large plastic partition. He could not see his employer through the partition, but his employer could see him. The employer's voice was altered; Sylvain always felt as if he were speaking to a young child. An opening at the bottom of the partition allowed for an exchange of items.

The mysterious nature of the arrangement made Sylvain uneasy, but he wasn't complaining—the pay was beyond his wildest dreams. Plus he thrived on the excitement and challenge of managing the organization's lucrative drug-trafficking operation.

As Sylvain waited for the grand-electro in the theater's backstage area, he received a flash-message informing him that the car had arrived, and that he should exit through the back door. As he opened the door latch, he heard footsteps, and froze. Something was not right. The door was yanked open, revealing two large men, brandishing, of all things, shining swords. He turned to run, only to find another man behind him. Sylvain did the only thing left for him to do: he pleaded for his life.

Hector was sitting in his apartment, watching a feature on grizzly bears, when he received a message on his flash-pad: his employer wished to meet with him. Minutes later, he left his apartment and entered a royal blue grand-electro.

After sitting nervously in the waiting room of a luxurious office suite for thirty minutes, he received another message ordering him to enter the office in front of him. He paused as he entered the room, both afraid and confused. A partition divided the room in half, and he found the result oppressive.

“Welcome, Mr. Carlos... Hector. Have a seat,” a child-like voice said from behind the partition. “You look very nervous; there’s no need to be.”

“Can you see me?” Hector asked, feeling very uneasy.

“Yes, as clear as day,” replied the voice. “Please, accept this.” A gloved hand slid an envelope through an opening at the bottom of the partition. “Go ahead, open it,” the voice instructed.

Hector gaped at the contents of the envelope then looked up at the partition. “Whoa... is this for me?”

“Yes, and it’s made from pure gold. Please accept it as a token of our appreciation,” the voice replied.

“I thank you very much, but I don’t understand... Where’s Sylvain? How come I’m here and he isn’t?” asked Hector.

“Well, Hector, there’s been a change within the organization. Evan Sylvester, or Mr. Sylvain as you know him, will no longer be with us,” the voice answered.

Suddenly a view-file of Sylvain berating Vincent began playing on the side wall. “Absolutely disgusting. Behaving like a rabid animal—this is a perfect example of how *not* to behave,” the voice said as the view-file played. Hector again watched Sylvain stomping on the wooden chair, then threatening Vincent. “The organization expects far better from our people, and we’re certain you’ll replace that *wild dog* behavior with the dignity we’re looking for. We’ve been watching you, Mr. Carlos, and have been very pleased with what we’ve seen,” the voice added as the view-file ended.

“Please be assured, I will continue to serve the organization in a most professional manner,” Hector said.

The gloved hand slid a flash-pad under the partition. “This device will now act as your brain, your conscience, and your heartbeat,” the voice said, strangely high with excitement. “It will

contain all the essential information you require to fulfill your duties to the organization, updated regularly. You will be expected to input your weekly reports into the device. Take some time over the next couple of days to become familiar with the data contained within.” Hector stared at the pad, as he listened. “Every byte of data entered into this machine will be encrypted with an impenetrable code, and from afar, the organization will maintain control of the device at all times. If anyone other than you touches this flash-pad, it will automatically fade to black.”

“And if I have questions?” asked Hector.

“Hopefully, all will be in order, but if you are ever uncertain of something, you’d be best advised to send us a flash-message. Whatever you do, Mr. Carlos, don’t make the same mistake Mr. Sylvain consistently made,” said the voice solemnly.

“And that was?”

“He forgot that his duty was to *serve* this organization, and not try to *control* it. If you remember this one simple yet ever so important piece of advice, you’ll do absolutely fine.

“Thank you, Hector. Your car is waiting outside.”

When he arrived home, Hector was too wound up to sleep. Instead, he decided to connect his newly acquired flash-pad to the large flash-screen in his living room. As Sylvain’s underling, he’d come to understand the basic framework of the organization, but more often than not, Sylvain had kept him in the dark on most issues.

The information contained in the flash-pad was highly detailed and very organized. Within minutes of studying the data, a message appeared on the screen: *Welcome Hector, congratulations on your appointment. You should be very proud of yourself.* A series of beeps followed. And then the words: *Alert! Tomorrow morning, you will discover several boxes in the backstage area of the theater. Twelve are for you and the other box is for Vincent. Further instructions will follow. Good night.*

The next morning, as directed, Hector made his way to the vacant theater. When he entered the backstage area, he immediately

noticed the boxes piled up in the corner. He lifted the topmost box—it was heavier than he'd thought it would be—and placed it on a nearby table to open with a laser-stick. He looked inside. It contained several bags filled with heart-shaped green pills. The contents of the next eleven boxes were exactly the same.

A few minutes after he'd finished weighing the contents of the bags, he received a flash-message from his employer.

Vincent entered as he was reading the message. "Whoa, that's a lot of sweet candy!" he said with a grin as he gazed at the pills.

"There's a box for you. Over there in the corner," Hector said, gesturing toward the box.

"For me?" Vincent replied, surprised. "My own batch of sweet candy," he almost crooned, walking toward the box. "Where's the Polar Bear?" he asked as he opened the box, referring to Sylvain by another of his monikers.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Hector answered.

Vincent looked inside the box, and abruptly grimaced in disgust. "What in the world—oh my Lord!" he whimpered, closing the box and turning away. "I guess that answers my question," he murmured as he headed into the theater. Hector followed. Vincent plopped himself down on a Victorian-era sofa and sat with his head in his hands, trembling. Hector stood before him. Vincent dropped his hands and looked up at Hector. "What in the hell is going on?" Vincent cried. "How could you let me open that box, knowing what I'd find inside?"

"Honestly, I had no idea—you have to believe me," Hector said sincerely.

"Do you know who killed him, and why?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, I do... Let's go grab a coffee at the diner," Hector replied.

After making certain the pills were safely stored, they exited the theater and headed to the nearby diner. Vincent was a bundle of nerves, every stride tentative, eyes surveying the area around him. As a police robo-cycle soared past with its siren wailing, he shivered with fear. Hector was mildly surprised at this reaction from the streetwise and hardened Vincenzo Bruno; although quiet and reserved, his record was the main reason the organization had brought him on board.

When the two men entered the diner they headed toward a private booth in the corner. Still anxious, even with his back to a wall, Vincent leaned forward. “So, who killed Sylvain, and why?” he whispered.

“The organization,” Hector murmured.

Vincent surveyed the surrounding tables to ensure there were no patrons within earshot. “You’re telling me our employer killed the Polar Bear,” he said, his brows pinched with concern. “Why would they do that?”

“They caught him, Vince. *He* was the one who sold the green-hearts to the soldier, here in the US. And the shipment you saw at the theater—that was the next load he was planning to move,” Hector explained.

“Here in the US?”

“Yes, and by selling those pills on American soil, Sylvain broke the organization’s number one rule.”

“And to think that jackass was trying to place the blame on me,” Vincent sneered.

“I don’t know, Vincent... something tells me this entire thing could implode at any time.” Hector frowned. “I’m very concerned,” he admitted.

Vincent leaned forward and looked him directly in the eyes. “You’re not thinking of abandoning ship, are you? Because if you think—”

Hector interrupted. “No, no, don’t get me wrong; the day I entered into this operation I was well aware there was no turning back. Sometimes I just wish I actually knew who I was working for. It would also be helpful to know where in the hell those damn pills are actually being shipped.” He paused. “But it’s all so financially lucrative... well, I guess that outweighs the negatives.”

“Good, because we’re stuck in this together,” Vincent said.

* * *

“Good morning, Ms. Wren,” Attorney General Champ Sutton said gently. “I really appreciate you meeting with me during such a

difficult time.” After reviewing the file sent to him by Gil, Champ had decided interviewing JD Wren’s mother was the logical next step.

Patricia Wren sat in front of Champ, but her eyes were empty, her expression bleak. Having lost her daughter and son in such a short period of time, and both in such horrific manners, it was no surprise she was distraught. Champ placed a glass of water in front of her, and she finally leaned back in her chair and sighed. “I really messed up, Mr. Sutton. I should have seen the signs,” she said. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Such as?”

“His anger. The day his sister was diagnosed with LRS, JD became filled with resentment. Then when I accepted that money... well, I guess that was the point of no return.”

“What money are you referring to?”

“The \$12 million Gerald Levin paid as compensation for Tammy’s death. JD was furious with me for accepting that payment. He said I made ‘a deal with the devil,’” Patricia replied with feeling. “I would trade every cent of that damn money to once again see the smiling faces of my beautiful son and daughter.” She broke down in sobs.

“If you would like to continue this at another time, I understand,” Champ said gently, moving a tissue box closer to her elbow.

Patricia Wren shook her head, blew her nose, and regained her composure. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Sutton. Please continue.”

“So you were saying JD’s anger started when your daughter got sick...”

“Yes, after Tammy was diagnosed with LRS. You see, JD blamed her illness on her Home Servant robot right from the beginning—well before it was proven that those bloody machines were actually making young Americans sick.”

“Did he have some kind of inside knowledge about the machines?”

Patricia quickly shook her head. “Oh no. But when he heard the robots were being made in the HKM, he became very suspicious. So suspicious, in fact, that he personally contacted your ATSS Director, Rosemary Crisp, with his concerns,” Patricia answered.

“Did she turn him away?” asked Champ.

“Oh no, she was actually very obliging. She invited him to her office, where she even went as far as showing him the supposed specs for the robots. Unlike most people, JD understood all that technical jargon—and of course, being the crook she was, what Rosemary Crisp showed my son were fake specs. JD didn’t know the specs were fake, but his intuition told him something was not right, so he pursued it further,” Patricia said solemnly.

“How so?”

“He sent a flash-message expressing his ongoing concerns directly to the president’s office.”

“Did he receive a response?”

“Yes, he did. The response came from Nicole Kratz’s office and stated that his concerns had already been addressed by the ATSS, and that there would be no further review.”

Champ sighed. “It still pains me to think that Rosemary Crisp acted in such a heinous manner, and was part of such a sinister scheme.”

“I realize it’s no excuse for my son to have done what he did, but I know he felt betrayed by a government he was so dedicated to. I guess he lost control of his emotions.”

Champ broached the next subject carefully. “Now, we discovered a container of highly potent drugs in JD’s apartment,” he said gently. “Were you aware of your son being involved with narcotics?”

Patricia shook her head in disbelief. “Not at all. JD was as wholesome a young man as you’d ever meet. He was a champion swimmer, and a very dedicated soldier. These awful things he did... they were definitely not a reflection of my son’s true character.”

“I believe you, ma’am, and I appreciate the fact you’ve enlightened me as to *why* your son spiraled into a world of darkness, but to help ensure the ongoing safety of the country, my associates and I must learn everything we can about your son, and those he was involved with,” Champ said. “So, if anything—and I mean anything—comes to mind, I ask you to please contact my office.”

Patricia Wren nodded, looking down at the tissue wadded in her hand. “Of course,” she said.

CHAPTER 7

Over the years, the highly educated Cobra Pix had remained a polarizing figure. Said to be ruthless, and extremely wealthy, he treasured his homeland and disdained America, which he'd demonstrated by threatening to build his own terror group within the country. When his father's longtime reign as Pinia's leader came to an end, he'd hoped to follow in his footsteps. Many praised him for his personal achievements and believed he was the man to lead Pinia into the future. However, accusations that he'd used intimidation tactics and violence to gain political attention quickly dashed that dream. He maintained that these accusations were unjustified, and that he had had to fight fire with fire when it came to dealing with what he claimed was a highly corrupt Pinian government.

The Battle of Oria was the key event that established Pix's hatred toward America, and his obsession with taking over Pinia. Oria was a small country just outside of Pinia. Due to geographic proximity, a majority of Pinians believed Oria should be a region of Pinia. When Pix's father received inside information that the western region of Oria was rich in metal ores, his government brought the matter to the World Coalition in an attempt to merge the two countries. His request was denied, and he was warned that if his government attempted to take over Oria, it would have to answer to the rest of the world. He retreated.

Years later, a friendlier Pinian government made a goodwill gesture by donating state-of-the-art mining equipment and manpower

to Oria's Land Development Program. To the previously poor country's delight, enormous quantities of highly valued metal ores were discovered in the western part of the region.

When Cobra received word of this, he was outraged. He believed it was his father's regime that had discovered this mine, and that the information had been stolen. He decided to plan a surprise attack on Oria, but little did he know, the Orian government had struck a deal with a large American broker. American Intelligence got word of Pix's planned attack and felt it was vital to intervene.

After receiving permission from the Outer Commission, Westgale ordered his own surprise attack on Cobra Pix and his army, the Iron Lotus. The Lotus refused to retreat, and in the ensuing battle, six of Cobra Pix's seven sons were killed by US forces. Pix's aspirations to become president were crushed, while his hatred of America reached an all-time high.

Pix believed those who opposed his quest for power were engaging in a form of "hideous propaganda"—he was being punished by those who despised his tyrannical father, he claimed. However, over the years, Pix continued building up his military and through his own propaganda, established a powerful opposition to the more diplomatically minded Pinian government, while at the same time, vowing to seek revenge against America.

The Iron Lotus sent a notice to the UCIT network indicating that Cobra Pix had an urgent message for America, and that a view-file of that message would be relayed within the next hour. The Freedom Home was informed immediately, and the Administration's key players assembled in the main conference room to view the message.

As it began, the view-file, which had been recorded three days prior, showed giggling youngsters, boys and girls, picking fruit from a tree, while four uniformed men watched over them. The scene suddenly switched to a powerfully built man dressed in a red and black uniform, sitting cross-legged on a large red blanket in the heart of a dense forest. On either side of him stood flags bearing the Iron Lotus insignia: a red and black dragon emerging from silver flowers.

“Good day,” he said. The camera moved in closer. His head was cleanly shaven and his eyebrows plucked away, replaced by thinly penciled red lines. “I am Cobra Pix. I’m here representing the Iron Lotus, and the treasured people of Pinia.

“Soon Pinia will again be a land of greatness. A warning to America: do not attempt to impede the awakening of the Pinian spirit; this will not be tolerated. If we have even the slightest suspicion that you are interfering with our quest to resurrect our sacred country from the depths of indignity, we will have no choice but to begin executing the dozen Pinian government officials we are currently holding captive.”

The scene shifted back to the children, still joyfully picking fruit, and the view-file ended, to gasps of disbelief in the Freedom Home conference room. The tension was palpable. “That rotten bastard. He just told us he’s prepared to kill his own people—his own people!” Dave Perry blurted.

Westgale stood to address the group. “It sickens me that in this day and age, people like *that* are still walking the Earth.” He sighed heavily, then looked across the room, trying to calm his escalating anger. In a more relaxed tone he added, “The sad reality is, I don’t believe he’s bluffing. We’ll definitely need to keep all eyes on this maniac.”

* * *

After receiving overwhelming approval from the MAA Strategic Council, Gerald Levin was now the official leader of the Militant Alliance of America. Considering Cobra Pix’s recent takeover of Pinia, the MAA believed the timing was perfect for Gerald to stand before the American public, and he did so in the groomed front yard of the MAA’s newly renovated headquarters. Dressed in a navy blue designer suit, Gerald stood on the stage backed by the MAA’s Strategic Council.

“What an honor,” he began. “There are no words to define how I am feeling at this moment. It’s time to reignite the flame of America! The American people deserve far better than they’re getting!” he

exclaimed. “I think we’ve all had enough of the Westgale circus, haven’t we? I think it’s time the Freedom Home welcomes a new tenant.

“I’m proud and honored to lead the Military Alliance of America, and I’ll be even more honored when I’m leading the United States of America!” he added. The council gave him a standing ovation.

He then spoke of his past accomplishments, and relayed his vision for America. “Once again, we will lead the world! I’m tired of this great country having to answer to some international commission. Under my presidency, this will no longer be the case. Sure, we owe a massive debt to the Outer Commission, but unlike the inept Westgale, I will have that debt paid off by that ever so crucial deadline. I guarantee you, I will not sit idly by and watch this country fall into the hands of the outside world. I will restore America’s treasured independence!”

With red flashing eyes and its chest displaying a neon Mount Rushmore, Cryptic made its way toward the podium. “Are you concerned about your lack of political experience?” the robot asked.

“Well, to answer your question, all one has to do is consider President Westgale. Here’s a man who’s been a career politician—and look at the mess he’s made,” Levin said, his tone deprecating.

“How do you answer those who may be concerned you’ll turn the Freedom Home into another Vexton-Tech?” Cryptic’s eyes suddenly stopped flashing.

Gerald remained relaxed. “First of all, leadership is about accepting responsibility in both good times and bad. My son and I built Vexton-Tech into the largest tech company in the country,” he said, his tone confident. “Unfortunately we fell victim to an elaborate and sinister plot masterminded by President Westgale’s very own defense director. And yes, I do accept responsibility for the pain and sadness it caused, but in the aftermath, I believe I’m doing everything humanly possible to sincerely address the matter.”

Cryptic then displayed an image of the Iron Lotus insignia, and asked, “Do you believe America should be concerned about Cobra Pix?”

Gerald thought for a moment and then leaned toward the sound-blast. "It's really not my intention to address specific issues today, but I realize this particular matter is of great importance," he said, raising his voice. "Yes, America should be highly concerned. The fact is, the Westgale Administration should have eliminated Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus back when the Outer Commission gave the approval to do so."

"If you become president, how will you deal with Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus?" Cryptic asked.

"I guess you'll have to wait and see," Gerald replied with a grin. His entourage swept in, whisking him away from further questions.

* * *

"Ha... leave it to Gerald Levin to end things in such a dramatic fashion," Dave Perry said to Westgale as they watched the press conference come to a conclusion. Then he sighed and rubbed his eyes before he looked up and said seriously, "Do you see this all leading to a war, sir?"

Westgale laced his hands together behind his head and sat back in his chair, exhaling slowly. "That'll all depend on whether Levin and the MAA win this election. If they do, it'll be a certainty."

Perry stood up and stared at the American flag behind Westgale's desk. "And with the HKM supporting Pix's Pinia... well, we'd probably be talking about the war to end all wars."

Westgale suddenly leaned forward and peered earnestly up at Perry. "We need to win this damn election," he said firmly.

"We're counting on *you* to do that very thing, sir."

Westgale stood and began to slowly pace. "Thanks, David." He stopped and looked at Perry. "But... I've been giving it some deep thought, and I fear my time is done. After all that's happened over the last year, I've lost the one thing every leader requires: the confidence of his followers." He stopped and stared out his office window. "I have to step aside. It's the only chance the PBA will have."

Perry was speechless for a moment. "Wow, that comes as a shock, sir," he finally said.

“Well, there’s no time for lamenting. We must move forward with renewed energy. And *you*, my friend, are the perfect person to bring us that energy!” Westgale insisted. “I’d gladly give you my endorsement.”

“Thank you, sir; I’m honored,” Perry replied. “I must admit, there was a time I dreamt of being president, but now that dream turns into a nightmare thanks to my past troubles,” he said quietly. “And I’ve come to accept the fact that my past will always be a part of me. I’ve also come to realize I’ll never live that dream because of it.”

Westgale nodded. “I understand, David. I don’t think constantly having those past indiscretions thrown in your face and those of your family would be fair to anyone,” he agreed reluctantly.

It was Perry’s turn to pace, deep in thought. “I believe the person best suited to run this party and this country is Nicole,” he said with conviction.

A smile spread across Westgale’s face as he thought that over. “I couldn’t agree more,” he replied.

“Well, since we’ve both been invited to her father’s retirement party, that’ll give us an opportunity to address the matter then,” Perry suggested.

* * *

Nicole and the rest of the Kratz family were thrilled to finally have the opportunity to properly celebrate the judge’s retirement. The celebration took place at the luxurious New York City Prestige Hotel. The praise Judge Kratz received came primarily from those he convicted, for the compassion and care he showed them. He always made certain those who deserved to be punished were punished adequately, but he also made a point to make sure the punishment fit both the crime and the person who committed the crime.

After his family and several colleagues had finished telling their favorite Judge Kratz stories, a lady named Kendra Jenkins took the podium. “As many of you in this room are aware, my son Darius was recently in the news when he and his friends planned to blow up their

high school here in New York City,” she said, holding a tissue ready between her fingers. “I’m the mother of three boys. Darius is my oldest. Two years ago, my husband lost his life in Oria. He was a soldier. The loss of his father sent Darius into a dreadful tailspin which resulted in his delinquent behavior.” She dabbed her tears with the tissue and continued.

“Sadly, having to work two jobs, I wasn’t able to be there for him like I needed to be. After Judge Kratz penalized Darius for his crime, he reached out to him. He spent hours speaking with him, trying to understand his pain, helping him to find a light from within his world of darkness.” Tears now flowed down her cheeks. “This incredible man then made a point of visiting me and my sons, providing us with a shoulder to lean on... to cry on. He even went so far as to help pay the soccer registration fee, out of his own pocket, for my two other sons, which I couldn’t afford.” Smiling, she looked directly at Judge Kratz. “I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

During the event, Westgale and Dave Perry, both surrounded by security personnel, did their best to maintain a low profile. And after, Nicole secured a private conference room in the hotel for the Kratz family and invited guests to spend time with the country’s two most powerful men. When Nicole and Judge Kratz entered the room, they headed over to exchange pleasantries with Westgale and Perry.

Tears filled Dave’s eyes. “It’s been far too long, sir. The legal world is losing a great man,” he said, reaching out to embrace the judge.

“David, I’m so glad you and the president were able to attend, especially considering what’s been happening recently back in Washington,” the judge said. He gestured toward the buffet table in invitation, and he and Perry moved toward it. “I’m sure you gentlemen barely find time to breathe.”

“I wouldn’t have missed this event for the world. If it wasn’t for your faith in me back in my addiction days, the only chance I would have had of getting into the Freedom Home would’ve been taking one of those boring tours—and even then, they probably would have denied me access,” Perry quipped.

He and the judge rejoined Nicole and Westgale for some food, drink, and conversation before the judge excused himself to return to the main party room.

“So, Mr. President, I thought by now you would’ve officially announced your candidacy for the upcoming election,” Nicole said with a raised brow.

“There’s a very good reason why I haven’t,” Westgale said with a sheepish grin.

“Yeah, I guess that whole Vexton crime thing has left everything in limbo,” Nicole responded.

“It certainly made life at the Freedom Home a little crazy, but that’s not the reason,” Westgale said.

“Oh?” Nicole prompted.

“The reason I haven’t made an announcement is because I’m not running for reelection,” Westgale said.

Nicole turned to Perry. “Is he serious, David?”

“Regrettably, he is,” Perry answered.

“Well, President Perry sure has a nice ring to it,” she said, smiling.

“Not going to happen,” Perry deadpanned, exchanging a glance with Westgale. She instantly realized what they had in mind. “Oh my Lord. Are you gentlemen serious?”

Westgale took her by the hand and led her to a sofa, where they both sat down. Perry remained standing in front of them. “The PBA needs you, my dear,” Westgale said firmly. “This country needs you. As I told David the other day, after what has transpired within this Administration over the last year, it’s obvious I’ve lost the confidence of the American public.” Nicole looked up at Perry, who was nodding in agreement. “With Gerald Levin now being seen as some kind of hero for handling his company’s tragedy the way he has... well, unless a drastic change is made within the PBA, there’s no doubt in my mind that the Militant Alliance of America will be taking over the Freedom Home.”

Looking both serious and confused, Nicole rose. “You’ll have to forgive my puzzlement, but have you forgotten I resigned as your executive director, sir?” she said calmly.

“Forgotten? It’s a day I’ll never forget. It was one of the most honorable and courageous things I’ve ever seen a person do. And that’s what this Administration needs: honor, and courage,” Westgale said.

She looked at Perry. “And David—are you forgetting our battle in the Judicial Triangle?” she said sheepishly.

“Ah... It’s very difficult for me to forget a battle I clearly lost,” Perry replied.

“Lost?” Nicole retorted.

“Oh yeah; based on the arguments you made in that courtroom, there is absolutely no way your request should have been denied. In all honesty, I was completely shocked it was. But then again, at the time, just as it is now, the entire PBA was in a very fragile state. We need to change that, Nicole, and I agree with the president—you’re our only hope!” Perry said.

“But what about Justice Malone, Gloria Lee, and the three other candidates?” Nicole asked.

“Oh, they’re all good people, intelligent and hardworking, but there’s one problem. They’re not presidential material,” Westgale said with conviction.

Nicole took a deep breath. “Wow. I honestly didn’t see this coming.” She exhaled. “Please give me a few days to think this over. I’ll need to address this with my family. I just don’t know...”

“Okay, but please understand, time is of the essence,” Westgale replied.

A few days later, Nicole requested a meeting with Westgale, who ordered the presidential jet to pick her up and bring her to the Freedom Home. It was a fabulous autumn afternoon, so they decided to hold the meeting in the Field of Honor.

“I must say, your father’s gala was an impressive event,” Westgale said as they walked through the field.

“Yes, and he was honored to have you and David join in the celebration,” Nicole replied with a smile.

“So, what’s he going to do with his time, now that he’s hung up the gavel?”

“Oh, knowing my father, he won’t be sitting around the house watching time slip away. I know he’s planning to become more involved with his charities. As a matter of fact, he’s in the process of setting up a new foundation to assist ex-cons and those with substance abuse problems.”

They reached an area of the field that paid tribute to American politics and paused to watch a view-file depicting the history of the PBA. As anxious as Westgale was to hear Nicole’s answer, he didn’t want to pressure her.

“Are we ever going to get it right?” Nicole lamented. “We’re supposed to learn from the past, yet we’re always so caught up in the present that we forget the valuable lessons of history.”

“Yeah, and it’s amazing how poorly we sometimes treat each other. We become so self-absorbed that we lose proper perspective. And boy, have I been guilty of that lately,” Westgale said.

Nicole chuckled, but said, “That’s not true. You’ve done an outstanding job, under very difficult circumstances. I’m certain there’ll be quite a lengthy view-file playing in this field, displaying your achievements. I just hope I’ll be able to continue where you left off.”

“Whoa—does that mean what I think it does?”

Nicole nodded. “I’ll do it. But under one condition.”

“That being?”

“You give Anya Ahar the opportunity to be granted a permanent stay of execution.”

Westgale ran his hands over his face. “My Lord, Nicole. Do you realize what you’re asking?”

“Yes. I’m asking for the chance to help redeem the life of a very special young lady.”

“A young lady who has inspired hatred toward everything this country stands for.”

“And do you think executing her will solve the problem?”

“No, but it will send a message to those who think it’s okay to go around creating anarchy, and living through that bloody doctrine.”

“We can send all the messages we want, but if we don’t attack the root of the problem, we’ll forever be chasing the solution.”

“That being?”

“We need to begin listening to our youth. If we continue to suppress their right to be heard, this country will never progress.”

“Where’s the line, Nicole? Are you suggesting we should also free Dwight Wagner, and just sit back and let anarchy rule the day?”

Nicole shook her head. “Anya’s case is different. I believe that underneath all that anger and sorrow, there’s a bright light waiting to shine. She’s proven herself to be someone who could contribute so much to this world.”

“And what leads you to believe she’s capable of coming out of that darkness?” Westgale asked. “We’ve sent Dr. Durant to attempt to speak with her on several occasions and she’s been totally despondent. And he’s the best in the business. For God’s sake, she barely spoke to her own father before she asked the guards to bring her back to her cell.”

“I won’t deny she’s troubled, but she was a victim of a dreadful tragedy. Her mother’s death was a horrific event, brought about by the turmoil of political divide,” Nicole said.

“And sadly, there’s nothing we can do to go back and change that,” Westgale stated.

“You’re correct. We can’t change the past. When my father visited the many criminals he’d sent to prison, he told me he could always figure out who could be reformed and who was past the point of no return by looking into their eyes—the windows to the soul. When I looked into Anya’s eyes I saw deep remorse for what she’d done.”

“Is it possible that you’re just seeing something you want to see?”

Nicole took out her flash-pad. “I’ve been doing my research on Anya, sir. Are you aware of how many awards she won during her time at Summit University?”

“Considering her academic brilliance, I’m sure she won many.”

Nicole pulled up a view-file on her flash-pad and showed it to Westgale. “Many of the awards she won were financial. Here’s what

she did with her money before turning herself in. She tried to be anonymous, but I was able to find out the truth.”

Westgale looked at the view-file Nicole had created. It showed an extensive list of donations Anya had made to charitable causes across the country. He looked at Nicole and smiled. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll set forth the motion in the coming days.”

When Justice Malone, esteemed civil attorney Gloria Lee, and the three other potential PBA leadership candidates became aware Nicole was vying for the position, they instantly dropped out of the race. “Why would I even think of running against someone who is far more qualified and capable?” said Lee.

“I’ve known Miss Kratz for a number of years, and given her intelligence, political experience, and character, this country couldn’t ask for a better commander in chief,” Justice Malone added.

With unanimous approval from the PBA’s Strategic Council, it became official: Nicole Kratz would be up against the MAA’s Gerald Levin in the upcoming federal election, ushering in a new American president.

Cryptic caught up with Levin in front of the MAA’s headquarters, for reaction to the news. “Are you surprised to learn President Westgale will not be running for reelection?”

“After what transpired over the past year, I’m not at all surprised. He made the correct decision, and I wish him well in his retirement,” Levin answered.

“How do you think he’ll be remembered as president?” Cryptic asked.

“President Westgale is a good, decent man, with sincere intentions. Unfortunately, he’s been an awful president,” Levin replied. “Consider the fact his own defense director plotted to have him thrown out of office. Then there was the Anya Ahar debacle, which put the entire Westgale Administration’s ineptness on display. We Americans must count our blessings that our country is still in one piece, considering Westgale has so severely diminished our military.”

“What are your feelings regarding Nicole Kratz?”

“She’s a quitter, and quitters aren’t leaders,” Levin said dismissively. “She turned her back on her country, all because she believed in Anya Ahar—a domestic terrorist.”

“What about the fact that she recently placed her life on the line to save the president and others inside the Freedom Home? Is that not a sign of commitment and leadership?”

“I commend her for that heroic act, but it doesn’t make up for the blatant disrespect she showed this country when she so abruptly resigned from being executive director,” Levin replied.

The following day, Nicole had her chance to respond to Levin’s comments as Cryptic interviewed her, amidst a high security contingent, outside Summit University. “It was Gerald Levin’s sheer negligence that was responsible for causing close to half a million young Americans to become ill, and sadly, caused the death of ten. Is this somebody we can trust to be in charge of America? I think not!” Nicole exclaimed.

“Are you surprised so many Americans have praised him for his efforts in providing assistance to the families of the victims, and to the government?” Cryptic asked. The Summit University crest, an eagle over a mountaintop, flashed on its chest.

“I’m not surprised at all. Forgiveness is a great American trait.”

“How do you feel about Mr. Levin calling you a quitter?”

“If being a quitter means standing up for one’s beliefs, then I guess I’m a quitter.”

“Does it bother you that many people believe your support of Anya Ahar has led to the AXE doctrine’s massive popularity, and fueled the fire of youth extremism?”

“I supported Anya Ahar in that hearing because it was the right thing to do,” Nicole said firmly. “I was willing to do *whatever* it took to help bring healing to those suffering from LRS.”

“How concerned are you about the growing number of young extremists across the country? And what will you do to solve this problem if you are elected president?”

“I’m very concerned. It’s my wish to see *all* Americans live in harmony. As politicians we often spend way too much time dictating and preaching, rather than listening and trying to understand the concerns of those we’ve been entrusted to serve. This has to change. I guarantee you, this will be a priority within my Administration. That being said, I will not tolerate the actions of those who wish to create mayhem by acting out against the government or the citizens of this great country. Whether you are a lone wolf or part of a collective, you will face the full penalty of the law.”

CHAPTER 8

On a splendid autumn Saturday afternoon, Kayla and her boyfriend, Aaron, offered to take Riley riding on the open land just outside of Hislep Farms. “Be sure to keep your eye on him,” Sharon said to Kayla and Aaron as Riley jumped up on Aaron for a piggyback.

“Have fun, guys,” I called as we saw them off. Then I turned to Sharon. “We’d better get going. Mom wants us at the home by four o’clock.”

“Did she tell you who the new resident is?”

“No; she wants to surprise me. All I know is, it’s not only their first day at the retirement home, but it’s also their birthday.”

When we arrived at the home, Sharon began helping Mom with some last-minute preparations while I sat on the patio with Uncle Zack. “You’re looking rather dapper today,” I said in praise of Zack’s powder blue tuxedo and red bow tie. “I just hope you don’t burst out of it,” I added with a chuckle, noticing the jacket sleeves barely made it past his elbows.

“There’s a comedian in every crowd,” Zack drawled, grinning.

“You’ve always told me that to you, fashion is comfort. Now, you surely don’t look comfortable,” I said.

Zack laughed. “A few months ago, this thing actually fit me perfectly.” He tugged at the sleeves. “But since I’ve started devouring your mom’s caramel rice pudding, it seems my whole wardrobe has started to shrink.” We both laughed.

“On a serious note, thanks again for helping with the dismantling of the robots,” I said sincerely.

“I’m glad I could assist. I just can’t believe how Gerald Levin came away so unscathed. But then again, he’s a master of deception,” Zack sneered.

“Well, at least we know the authorities thoroughly investigated him and cleared him of any wrongdoing,” I said.

“Trust me; Gerald Levin getting out of bed in the morning is a crime in itself. What I can’t believe is there’s now a chance he’ll be the next president of this incredible country.”

“I guess it’s safe to say he won’t be getting your vote,” I said with a grin.

“I’d vote for a one-eyed donkey before I’d vote for that pompous imbecile,” Zack grumbled.

Seconds later, Mom called us into the common area. The lights were turned off; Mom stood silhouetted at the front entrance. “Okay, don’t forget to yell Happy Birthday as soon as I hit the lights,” she said in a stage whisper. A minute later, tears filled my eyes as Dad’s former VLP secretary, Linda Washburn, entered the building to a roaring cheer. It’d been thirty years since I’d seen her.

After Linda spent time meeting and mingling with the residents, Zack announced that dinner would soon be served—a dinner that featured his very own special roasted red pepper pasta. After dinner, Mom delivered an eloquent speech, welcoming Linda to the home. It was fantastic to see everyone enjoying the evening. Later on, Mom finally had an opportunity to bring Linda to our table.

“Oh my Lord, there you are!” she exclaimed with joy. “Wow! He’s the spitting image of his father,” she added, turning to Mom. I rose and invited Linda to sit in a chair beside Sharon. “To think it’s been thirty years since I’ve seen you guys,” Linda said as she sat down. “Time surely does fly. I’m so glad to learn you’ve followed in your father’s footsteps, Heath. I guess all those occasions he brought you to the VLP headquarters ended up having an impact on you.”

“I did enjoy those visits, especially when you brought those amazing chocolate cupcakes to the office,” I said with a chuckle. “In

all seriousness, when I think about it, watching my father perform his duties really inspired me.”

Linda nodded. “He was an incredible man,” she said. “His tragic death touched so many people. I remained at the VLP for a few more weeks after his death, but it was never the same. And shortly after, my husband and I left for Paris.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it here at the home. Between Zack’s gourmet dishes and Mom’s delicious desserts, you’ll certainly be well-fed,” I quipped.

“It’s amazing and appropriate that they named this place in honor of Dennis. I don’t think any of us will ever meet a more caring person,” Linda said sincerely.

“Yeah, that’s for sure. He was always there to lend a helping hand to those in need,” Mom said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

“I just wish I’d had the chance to meet him,” Sharon said, gently rubbing Mom’s back.

“I can never forget the care he showed to poor old Sally. It really touched my heart,” added Linda with a wistful smile.

“Sally? Who was Sally?” I asked.

“Wait a second, wasn’t Sally a dog that you guys were taking care of at the headquarters?” Mom asked. “I actually remember that coming up in the last conversation I ever had with Dennis.”

“That’s correct, Grace,” Linda replied. “Sally was an old stray Alaskan Malamute. She was very ill when Dennis found her.”

“Knowing Dad, he must’ve made it his mission to take care of her,” I said.

“That he did. And that dog, let me tell you, she ended up being a miracle dog,” Linda said, shaking her head.

* * *

Thirty years ago, Vexton Land Protection Headquarters

“Dr. Langford made it very clear that Sally here doesn’t have much time left,” Dennis Claremont said as he gently stroked the large gray and white Alaskan Malamute.

“Do you think that’s why her owner abandoned her?” asked his assistant Fergus Macintosh, who was also the Vexton Land Protection medic.

“It could be, Fergy. All I know is that I’m going to make sure this big girl’s comfortable for whatever time she has left,” said Dennis as the dog began to rub her head against his leg.

“What about your son, Heath; isn’t he allergic to dogs?”

“He sure is; that’s why I spoke with Custodian Millen, and he’s agreed to allow Sally to stay right here,” replied Dennis. “We’ll give you a nice home, Sally,” he said to the dog as he caressed the top of her head. She closed her eyes in pleasure, then drifted off to sleep.

“What time are we on for tomorrow, Dennis?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, Moon Shade Bluff—to inspect the new railing.”

“Well, I have a few things to tend to in the morning for my upcoming trip, so be prepared to head out just after lunch. Hey, I’ve got an idea, let’s bring Sally. Maybe it’ll do her some good.”

“When was the railing actually installed?” Fergus asked as they exited the robo-copter and began their inspection.

“It’s only been about a week,” Dennis replied, turning to throw a ball for Sally to fetch. The large dog didn’t budge. She just wandered about the bluff, eating grass and whatever else happened to appeal to her. “At least her appetite seems to have come back,” Dennis observed with a chuckle.

“You’re not kidding,” Fergus answered, shaking his head in amusement as they watched the dog munching greenery.

As they inspected the railing, Fergus asked, “What do you make of all the folklore surrounding this place?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really given it much thought,” Dennis replied, “but I do know one person who swears this place holds some kind of magical power.”

“Oh, who would that be?”

“The professor, Trent Kinsley.”

“Trent Kinsley? Isn’t he the guy who co-owns Vexton-Tech?” asked Fergus.

“That’s him. With the long blonde hair,” replied Dennis.

When they returned to the VLP headquarters, Dennis tied up some loose ends and left instructions for Fergus. “I’ll only be gone a few days, so I don’t expect you to complete the entire list, but at least this will give us a good head start.”

“Don’t worry about a thing; just go and make sure you and little Heath have a good time. I’ll keep things in line, and I’ll make sure Sally here is fully taken care of,” Fergus said, gently stroking Sally’s head.

“Good morning, Fergy,” Linda said the following morning as Fergus strode into VLP headquarters at 8:00 a.m. “I think you might want to take a look at Sally. She doesn’t seem like her usual self. In a good way,” she rushed to add, at Fergus’s look of alarm.

“How so?” asked Fergus.

“Well, since I arrive before everybody else does, I’ve been making it a point to check on her,” replied Linda. “Usually, I find her just lying around, uninspired about the prospect of a new day. But today—” Linda rose and led Fergus to Sally’s kennel. “As you can see, she appears ready to take on the world. It’s like she’s discovered the fountain of youth.”

“Wow, you’re not kidding!” Fergus watched in disbelief as an energized Sally frolicked with the same toys that, in prior days, she’d only ignored.

Linda’s flash-pad went off. She gave Fergus a finger wave and headed back into the building. Fergus opened the kennel door and Sally burst out to charge off into the adjacent field. *What in the world has happened to this dog?* Fergus wondered. “Come here, Sally,” he called.

Sally got in a few more darts and dashes, then returned to her kennel, practically bouncing with energy. Baffled, Fergus walked to his office, thinking back to yesterday’s visit to Moon Shade Bluff. *Could it be? Dennis and I both saw her feasting on the vegetation on that cliff. What in the world could be in that mountain?*

For the next couple of days, while Dennis was away, Fergus continued to observe Sally. Here was an animal that had appeared to be on her last legs, now displaying a level of vigor beyond comprehension. When Linda let her out for her morning run, she bounded effortlessly through the field, sometimes chasing after squirrels, birds, and any other of Mother Nature's creatures that crossed her path.

Dennis could hear Sally barking when he returned to the office. He went to take a look and saw her jumping up on the kennel gate, filled with excitement.

Fergus followed him around the corner. "Hey, when did you get back?" he asked.

"Late last night," Dennis replied. "What's up with the old girl?"

Fergus scratched his head. "Yeah... I guess I should fill you in."

His curiosity piqued, Dennis followed his assistant into his office, where Fergus related all that had transpired with Sally, including his theory regarding Moon Shade Bluff.

Dennis raised an eyebrow, and thought for a moment. "Hmm... that's very interesting, Fergy. I think it would be wise to take her to Dr. Langford for another visit. We should also check out that big old mountain as well," Dennis added.

"Are you certain this is the same dog?" Dr. Langford said with a chuckle, watching Sally prancing around the room. "This is truly remarkable."

"I hear you, Doctor. I'm still in shock myself," replied Dennis. "My assistant and I took her up to Moon Shade Bluff with us, and the next thing you know, it was like she was born again. I don't know what's in those plants up there, but whatever it was, it's given her a new life."

Dr. Langford continued to observe the dog. "Amazing... truly amazing," he said as he tossed Sally a treat. "You won't mind staying here for the next little while, will you, Sally?" he said as he lifted her onto his examining table. "We'll do some observation and

analysis and run some new tests, then compare them with the prior tests. Now, I have to head out to the AMO medical conference in a couple of days, so once we get things started I'll be leaving Sally in the very capable hands of my assistant, Maria. Then when I return I'll complete the review and call you with the results."

"I guess you're looking forward to the conference. I was reading about it the other day. It sounds like it'll be quite an event," Dennis said.

"Yeah, it will be a massive gathering of the medical community. I'm just thrilled they've finally acknowledged us veterinarians."

Two weeks later

"Did you see how thrilled he was when you told him he could go, Dennis?" said his wife, Grace.

"Oh yeah, I'm certain Heath's been counting the days," replied Dennis. "And I'm sure the Android players will be giving him loads of attention, since he'll be with Skip."

"Go figure on our Vexton weather. Just when it looks like it's clearing, the sky's overcast again," Grace said as she looked out the window.

"Well, at least they're now only calling for some light showers," Dennis replied. "Anyway, I should be getting to the office. I've fallen way behind on my latest batch of farming reports—mostly due to the attention we've been directing toward the VLP's new canine friend, Sally," he added with a chuckle.

"Sally? You never said anything about a dog."

"I'll tell you all about her when I get home."

"Wow, it's looking more ominous out there by the second," Dennis said to Linda as he arrived at the VLP headquarters.

"In case you're looking for Fergus, he told me to tell you he had to step out and that he'd be back in five minutes or so," said Linda.

"Have you heard back from Langford's office regarding Sally?" Dennis asked.

"Not yet," replied Linda.

Moments later, while tending to his stack of farming reports, Dennis heard distant thunder. He gazed out his window and saw two rapid flashes of lightning. He could hear Sally's empty kennel being rattled by the gusting winds.

"Oh my Lord, it looks like this is going to be a wicked one!" exclaimed Fergus as he entered.

"Yeah, and unfortunately, since Emergency Rescue is dealing with that crazy strike, all emergencies will fall into our hands. I just hope it doesn't get too nasty out there," said Linda, her brows pinched in concern.

Minutes later, Linda's worries came true. The VLP's central flash-screen let out a piercing siren sound. Fergus rushed over to the screen, then whirled around. "Oh no!" he said urgently. "We're receiving a distress message from the forest surrounding Moon Shade Bluff. Someone out there is claiming their brother is trapped under a fallen tree!"

Dennis hurried out of his office, Fergus on his heels, and headed to the VLP robo-copter. Lightning arced across the sky to the east, followed almost immediately by booms of thunder. The robo-copter trembled on its helipad. Dennis and Fergus looked at each other in fear. "I just hope the main thrust of this storm holds off a little longer. At least so we can get over there," said Dennis as they took off.

The sky grew darker by the second, only to be lit up by frequent flashes of lightning. The thunder roared. Dennis gripped the controls as the wind shook the copter like an angry child with a toy. Although the robo-copter was specifically built to withstand the effects of potent storms, this storm was at a level neither Dennis nor Fergus had ever witnessed. "I think we'd better contact headquarters for backup—just in case," Dennis said in a tight voice.

The blackened clouds suddenly opened up, unleashing a torrential downpour along with hailstones the size of golf balls. Visibility dropped to near zero. They reached the area where the distress signal had come from, and started desperately scanning the ground below, hoping against hope that they'd see something.

“There—look!” Dennis suddenly shouted, pointing through his side window. On the ground below, a boy was frantically waving his arms. The force of the wind was so strong, the boy was struggling to maintain his balance.

“If you can hear me, wave your right hand only!” Dennis shouted, turning the copter’s powerful sound-blast to full volume.

The boy fell over. After a couple of failed attempts to stand up, he finally got to his feet and began waving his right hand.

“I see his brother—there, to his left, under that fallen tree!” Squinting, Fergus pointed through the same side window.

The copter descended to about thirty feet above the boy. “We’ve gotta get you down there to help this kid,” Dennis said to Fergus. He called out through the sound-blast, “I’m going to lower this rope. Take one end of the rope and tie it tightly around that tree trunk pinning your brother, then move away, toward the cliff.”

Just as Dennis finished giving the instructions, a powerful gust brought down three more trees, not far from where the boy’s brother was pinned. “God help us!” cried Fergus.

After being knocked to the ground a couple more times, the boy was finally able to secure the rope. “Good. Now move toward the cliff,” Dennis shouted. The copter rose slowly, lifting the tree from atop the boy. “Okay... I see a perfect spot where we can drop it...” Dennis said, guiding the copter carefully away from the injured boy. “We’ve gotta get you down there,” he said to Fergus. “I pray to God the kid’s still alive. All right, when I tell you to, release the rope. On three—one, two, three, now!”

Seconds later, Dennis sagged back in the pilot’s seat. “Phew. Good work, Fergy.” Even better, the storm had begun to abate.

But then—all of a sudden—the robo-copter began flying out of control. Dennis grimly fought the controls, to no avail.

Moments later, when the backup team arrived, one of the two responders headed for the boys, while the other went in search of Dennis and Fergus in the wreckage of the robo-copter.

The boy who had called for help was found safe and sound. His brother lay unconscious, severely injured but still alive. When all was said and done, Vexton County Custodian Walter Millen pronounced Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh dead.

* * *

After Linda related the story of Sally, Sharon and I looked at each other in sudden revelation. “So, Dad and Fergus actually believed this dog found life again after chomping away on the vegetation at Moon Shade Bluff?” I said, wanting to make sure I’d heard that correctly.

“I must admit I thought they were both crazy. Even they had a difficult time believing it themselves,” Linda replied. “But now, after learning about that mineral coming out of the mountain...”

“Do you know what they learned about Moon Shade Bluff when they went back up there?” I asked.

“I don’t even know if they had the chance before they died. If they did, they never told me about it,” Linda replied.

Again, Sharon and I locked eyes. “And do you know where Sally ended up?” Sharon asked.

“I think, if I remember correctly, Dr. Langford’s assistant... ah, her name escapes me.” Linda paused in thought. “Maria, that’s it. Yeah, she ended up taking Sally home. I have no idea what happened from there.”

Sharon and I both admitted to an uneasy feeling by the time we got home. As Sharon plopped down on the sofa, I paced the living room. “You heard that story; what do you make of it?” I asked. Sharon didn’t respond. I could see she was thinking. “Is it possible my father and his assistant had discovered the minerals in that mountain?” I wondered out loud, trying to sort out my own thoughts.

Sharon sat up, deep concern etched on her face. “When you think about it, what do we really know about the crash that killed your father?” she asked.

“Well, besides the fact it happened while he and his assistant were coming to the aid of two young boys during what is considered one of the worst storms this town has ever seen... not a heck of a lot,” I admitted. I’d been told the facts, and my imagination had filled in the rest. What else could the surviving family do?

Then it dawned on me. “Hold on a second, are you thinking that maybe it *wasn’t* an accident? My Lord, Sharon... Do you think my father may have been targeted—murdered?” Dread seeped through my body like ice water.

“I don’t know, Heath, and I don’t want to be hasty, but based on the timing of that supposed accident, and what we learned today, I think it is something worth exploring. Your father and his assistant may have known something extremely valuable, and may have lost their lives because of it,” Sharon said. She rose and I followed her into the kitchen, where she prepared us some tea. I sat down at the kitchen table.

“Do you think it’s worth bringing this to the attention of Gil Robichaud?” I asked.

“Before I’d go that far, I think it’s best to perform our own due diligence.”

As much as I tried to sleep that night, I found it impossible. What I’d learned earlier in the evening had left me feeling shell-shocked. Finally I gave up on sleep and headed to the kitchen to make a quick sandwich. Settled in an easy chair in the living room, sandwich waiting on the side table at my elbow, I opened up my flash-pad and looked up the *Book of ZeZ*.

The book was generally regarded as one giant fairy tale about a civilization nobody could prove existed. However, there were also those who strongly believed the ZeZ were the first civilization to call what we now knew as Vexton home.

The book explained that the ZeZ were divided into two groups. Translated into modern English, the first group was called the “Sun Children” and the second, their leaders, the “Moon Lords.” In a daily ritual, the Sun Children would climb the trees around Moon Shade Bluff to absorb the cosmic energy from the Vexton sky.

They believed this would bring healing and protect them from all forms of illness and evil.

As I continued to read, I noticed a glimmer of light shining through the door from the patio. The door was closed, but unlocked. When I looked out, to my utter surprise, I saw Riley sitting at the patio table beside his extremely bright night-light.

I opened the door and stepped outside. "Riley, what in the world are you doing out here?" I asked in a hushed voice, hoping not to wake Sharon and Kayla.

"I was just finishing my drawing. I didn't want to turn my night-light on upstairs," he replied.

"You know you're not supposed to be out here alone at night," I said firmly, accidentally raising my voice.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I just wanted to finish my drawing. I wanted to surprise you with it tomorrow morning," he said excitedly.

"Okay, Riley. Now, promise me you won't do this again."

"I promise."

"So, what is it you're drawing?" I asked as I moved closer.

"It's Gordon, your old angelfish," Riley replied with a smile.

I was stunned. How in the world did he know about Gordon? Dad had given me that fish for my seventh birthday. I knew for a fact I'd never mentioned that fish to Riley.

"That's a very good drawing, Riley," I said as he showed me the gold and blue colored fish he'd drawn. "How did you know I had a fish named Gordon? Did Grandma Grace tell you about it?"

"I know Grandpa Dennis bought it for you and—"

Sharon and Kayla came charging outside. "What's the racket out here?" Sharon almost shouted. "My Lord... what's going on?" she asked when she saw Riley and I sitting at the patio table.

"All right, back to bed you go, Riles," I said. "Remember, you promised you won't ever do this again... okay?"

"I know. I promise I won't," he replied. He rose and stopped before Sharon and Kayla on his way to the patio door. "I'm sorry for waking everybody up," he said. Sharon smiled at him, took his hand, and led him back into the house.

“Do you know anything about this?” I asked Kayla as I held up Riley’s drawing.

She chuckled. “Oh yeah, Mr. Shelby told him all about the angelfish your father gave you all those years ago. Riley was really taken by the story of your saltwater aquarium.”

“Who’s Mr. Shelby?” I asked.

“Apparently he’s the person who actually helped your father pick out the angelfish and the aquarium,” Kayla replied.

“Shelby? I don’t remember that name,” I said.

“We met him at Hollis Farms. He told us how he used to work for Mr. Hollis back when your father used to perform inspections. He happened to be visiting today when Aaron and I took Riley to get some of those amazing honey-dipped strawberries and bananas,” Kayla explained.

“And what got this Shelby fellow talking about my childhood fish?” I asked.

“Riley was telling him all about Jumper, and how he couldn’t have a real dog because of your allergies. And that’s when Mr. Shelby told us about your father having to buy you an aquarium instead of the dog you wanted,” Kayla replied.

I laughed. “Yeah—at first I said I didn’t want a bunch of stupid fish, but then I came to really find those little guys fascinating. Especially Gordon. I loved the way his colorful stripes kind of glowed in the dark,” I said on reflection. I looked at the drawing again. “Whoa, Riley did a really good job with this. It actually looks like Gordon.”

“When Riley told Aaron and me he wanted to draw the fish for you, we showed him some actual angelfish photos,” Kayla said.

“I want to thank you so much for the care you show to Riley,” I said sincerely. “You mean the world to him... and to us.”

“He’s an amazing little boy,” Kayla said. “I’ll always be there for him.”

CHAPTER 9

Early the next morning, Sharon was eager to begin investigating the matter of Dad's death, and still reeling from the information Linda Washburn had relayed to us, I tried to find some solace by visiting Dad's monument at Vexton Memorial Garden, only a few miles from where he'd met his end. With the idea that he may have been murdered running wildly through my mind, I felt tears begin streaming down my cheeks. Nothing seemed the same. My footsteps were now heavy, my heart anguished, and even the clouds conjured images of, as Riley referred to them, monsters.

As I approached the monument, a strong gust of wind sent waves of leaves in my direction. Some stuck to my jacket, and others formed a pile at the base of the monument. I began to peel them from my jacket and clear the others away from the monument, while I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Dad the night before he died.

"So, Heath, what are you working on, buddy?"

"Our teacher wants us to write about what we want to be when we're older."

"Oh, and I bet you're writing all about how you want to play for the Androids, win the NSL Championship, and be the most valuable player!"

"Not really."

"No? I thought you wanted to be like Brent Shale."

"That was when I was younger."

"Younger? You're only ten, Heath. What, now that you're an old man you don't like Brent Shale and the Androids anymore?"

"No way. I love the Androids, and Brent Shale's my favorite player. I'm going to meet him at school tomorrow! But I don't wanna be like him."

"Okay, then. Let me see... I know how much you and Skip like to play tennis."

"No, I don't want to do that, either."

"Well, I give up."

"I want to be like you. I want to take care of Vexton and help all the farmers."

"Is that so? Well I'm certain you'd do a tremendous job... I'm so proud of you, son, and I love you more than you can imagine. And tomorrow after school we'll take one of our long walks, and you can tell me all about your day with the Androids."

I reflected for several minutes, sitting in the shade of an old oak that stood just yards away from the monument. Then I felt a powerful surge of adrenalin run through my body. If my father *was* killed, I was going to do everything in my power to find out who killed him, and why. I was ready to find out what Sharon had learned. I paid my final respects, and after leaving the grounds, I contacted Sharon.

"I'm glad you called, Heath. I was just going to call you." She sounded eager.

"What is it, honey?"

"Can you meet me at the location where your father's copter went down?"

"Of course," I replied, my curiosity piqued.

When I arrived at the scene, Sharon waved me over. She was speaking with one of the soldiers on site. As they talked, they were looking curiously at the tree directly in front of them.

"Heath, this is Sergeant Evans," Sharon said, turning toward me. "Sergeant, this is my husband, Heath Claremont. Sergeant

Evans's men discovered something very interesting yesterday morning."

"Oh?"

Evans hesitated, appearing concerned about relaying official information. Sharon interjected. "It's okay, Sergeant, my husband's the director of Vexton Land Protection."

The sergeant relaxed. "Yes, we did make a very unusual discovery," he said, holding a device toward the tree. "Now, when I place this scanner in front of the tree, you'll see a pattern... right in the center of the tree." He guided my eyes toward what looked like an oval-shaped carving.

"Oh yeah... I see it. Is this the work of some kids horsing around?" I asked.

"Actually, Mr. Claremont, this is the remnants of a laser blast," Sergeant Evans responded, his tone serious.

"A laser blast?" I said, stunned.

Sharon pointed toward two soldiers about one hundred yards away. One was up in a tree, and the other was standing beside it. Both appeared to be inspecting it. "That's where Sergeant Evans and his men believe the laser beam came from," she said.

"I don't understand," I said. "Did this happen recently?"

"Oh no, the scanner indicates we're looking at somewhere in the area of twenty-five to thirty-five years ago."

I froze. For a moment my world came to a halt. "Uh... could this have been some type of military exercise or weapons testing?" I asked, struggling to find my words, wanting to believe that was actually the case.

"At this stage, I can't answer that question, Mr. Claremont. I highly doubt it, but in order to understand what we're dealing with here, the first thing we need to do is determine the type of laser weapon that was used. I'm going to be submitting a formal report to—"

Another soldier who was inspecting a tree about twenty yards away called out, "Sergeant Evans, check this out."

We followed Evans over to him. "My scanner shows this tree used to have eyes," the soldier said.

Sergeant Evans took the scanner from the soldier and aimed it at the tree himself. “Hmm... very interesting... tree-eyes.” He turned to Sharon and me. “They were recently deactivated.”

“Please forgive my ignorance, but what in the world are tree-eyes?” Sharon asked.

“They’re simply miniature, yet immensely powerful, data-chip cameras that are placed in concealment on the outside of a tree. They’re typically used in battle. From this tree, these eyes would be able to capture images from the mountain,” Evans replied. “They’re an extremely effective spy tool.”

“But if they’re no longer there, how could you detect them?” I asked.

“A faint signal always remains for a short period after they’ve been deactivated. As with the laser beam, it would be wise to determine their origin as we move forward. I’ll be submitting a full report to Agent Robichaud and our weapons experts. Agent Robichaud is scheduled to arrive in Vexton the day after tomorrow,” Evans added.

“It’s been nice meeting the both of you, but you’ll have to excuse me,” he said. “It looks like we have a lot more work to do around here.” He headed in the direction of the camp at the base of Moon Shade Bluff.

Sharon and I stood there, astounded by what we’d just learned. “Wow, what do you make of all this, honey?” I asked.

“Truthfully, none of this surprises me, Heath,” she replied. “It’s obvious something covert has been going on around here.”

“And you think the murder of my father and his assistant is part of that... don’t you?” I said, my heart pounding.

“I’m sorry, Heath... but a rather disturbing scenario is beginning to develop in my mind,” Sharon replied, frowning. “This needs to be addressed with Robichaud.” Sharon spent the next day and a half studying every nuance she could discover regarding Dad’s death.

* * *

When Gil and his team of agents arrived in Vexton, they set up their headquarters for what was now being referred to as Project Vexton in

the Vexton Justice Center's main conference room. Sharon invited Gil to her office for a meeting, and relayed the information Linda Washburn had provided. Her theory that Dennis Claremont had been murdered roused Gil's interest. "Were you able to obtain the accident report and the weather report for that date?" he asked.

"Yes, I was," Sharon replied as she sent the two reports to his flash-pad. "As you can see, it cites inclement weather as the reason for the crash. But if you look at part three of the accident report, you'll see a note and a photo of an oval-shaped burn mark on a piece of the copter's fuselage."

"Hmm... that is very interesting, considering it looks identical to the pattern burnt into the tree. I'll forward the file to our experts," Gil said, still perusing the accident report.

"To this day it's still considered the most powerful storm in Vexton history, but when you compare the time chart of the weather report with the established time of the copter crashing, you'll notice something very interesting," Sharon said.

Gil switched to the weather report. "Ah, I see... if I'm reading this correctly, it's telling me the storm had subsided prior to the copter actually crashing, which is another interesting aspect to consider."

Sharon rubbed her hand across her chin. "The more I go over this whole thing, the more convinced I become that these men were murdered."

"This vet who cared for the dog... Dr. Langford—is he still around?" Gil asked as he studied another formal report Sharon had presented after relating Linda Washburn's story. "Oh... I see your report indicates he's currently serving time. Hmm... for using unapproved medications."

"Yeah, I had no choice but to prosecute him. Most of the farmers here in Vexton were furious with me." Sharon sighed. "He's highly revered, and not for a moment did I ever think he would intentionally do anything to harm the animals he treated, but I felt it was incumbent upon me to uphold the law."

Gil continued to read the report. "I'm thinking it'd be worthwhile to visit him and see what he can recall about the Alaskan Malamute.

You could be correct. The story surrounding that dog could very well be at the core of this entire case. Then again, it could also mean not a single darn thing, but it's worth looking into," Gil said, turning away from the flash-screen. "Being the astute DA you are, I'm sure you've considered the possibility that we may end up learning something about your late father-in-law that we might wish we hadn't," he added carefully.

Sharon nodded. "Believe me, I've played out all the scenarios in my head—and I pray to God that the treasured memories Heath has of his father aren't swept away by some deep, dark secret. If he *was* murdered, I'm hoping he and his associate were just incidental victims."

"In a couple of days, I'm expecting our weapons and high-tech devices experts to have answers regarding the laser beam and the tree-eyes," Gil said as he politely led Sharon out of the room.

"I look forward to hearing what they've discovered," Sharon said upon exiting.

The next morning, Gil paid a visit to Dr. Langford. When the prison guard brought Langford into the interrogation room, he was whistling happily.

"Hello, Doctor, I'm Special Agent Gil Robichaud, Chief of Security for the Peace Bringers Association of America," Gil said, removing his jacket and placing it on the back of his chair.

"Wow, the PBA's number one cop. I guess my criminal profile has gained momentum," Langford said with a grin.

"I hope you do understand it is within your rights to have legal representation with you during this interview," Gil said as he sat down across from Langford.

Langford laughed. "Legal representation—ha! The idiot I hired to represent me during my trial ended up getting me three years in prison," he sneered. "Oh, he knew all the fancy legal jargon, and he wore the best suits, but what he lacked was *heart*—the will to fight." Langford's ire became more intense. "If he'd spent less time picking out his fancy ties, and more time arguing my case with true

determination—well, I wouldn't be here today.” He paused as if willing himself calm. “So, what brings you to my current residence?”

“I'd like to ask you a few questions.”

“Well, it's a good thing you got me on one of my better days. I'm always much happier on Fried Chicken Fridays. It's such a relief after the mush we're served the other six days of the week. Okay, enough of my rambling. How can I help you?” asked Langford.

Gil offered a reminder of Sally. “What can you tell me about that dog?” he asked.

“Whoa, you're talking about something that happened many, many years ago,” Langford said. He thought for a moment. “That dog was on death's door when Dennis Claremont brought her to me. He was adamant that the vegetation on Moon Shade Bluff was what brought her back to life. I actually found it quite amusing.” He paused again, then with raised brows, added, “But come to think of it, now that it's been established that that mountain contains some kind of mystery mineral, he may very well have been correct.”

“That's exactly why I'm here right now,” Gil responded.

“I don't understand. What does this have to do with me?” Langford asked.

“Our Administration is very concerned that the mineral discovered in that mountain has been made into a potent narcotic for the last thirty years,” Gil said. “We think there's a strong possibility that the story of Sally is at the root of this. Are you aware of anyone else who may have known about this?”

“My former assistant, Maria, was definitely aware of the situation,” Langford replied. “In fact, she ended up caring for Sally along with another nine or ten dogs that lived on her farm. Very sweet lady. Very caring toward the animals. Definitely not the drug-trafficking type.” He laughed.

“Is there anyone else you can think of?”

“Hmm... if I recall correctly, I think that was right around the time I attended my very first AMO conference.”

“I realize it’s quite some time ago, but I need to know if you recall telling anyone at the conference, or anywhere else for that matter, about that dog,” Gil said. “Even if it was just in passing.”

Langford leaned his head back and thought. He sat forward. “Actually, there was one guy sitting at my table that I recall speaking with regarding that dog. I remember him being very intrigued by the story. Far more than I actually was.” He thought harder. “The only reason I recall this is because, as the night went on, the guy kept bringing it up. And he kept speaking of the wonder of Mother Earth. It started to become rather annoying.”

“Can you remember any specifics?” Gil asked.

“Well, he kept asking me to clarify that I’d given the dog a very poor prognosis at first—a few weeks or so to live—and that it found a whole new life after eating a bunch of plants off of some mountain in Vexton—he kept asking what the name of the mountain was.”

“Anything else?”

“Just going on about Mother Earth and her special healing powers—and that he was fascinated by alternative medicine. He sounded like he was going to look into it.”

“Do you remember this fellow’s name?” Gil asked.

“Hmm... I remember his first name: Jeremy,” Langford replied.

“Can you recall if he was at the conference representing a company or a government association?”

“He claimed to be in the business of alternative medicine, but I don’t recall him mentioning the company name; nor do I recall asking.”

Gil nodded and rose. “Thank you for your help. If there’s anything else that comes to mind, please have a prison official contact me on your behalf. It might be of great benefit to you.”

Langford lifted an eyebrow at that.

That afternoon, Gil ordered Agent Gallio to visit the AMO headquarters in Washington, to determine whether or not they still had records related to the conference Langford had attended. When he met with the AMO’s Secretary of Business Affairs, she

was surprised by his request, but cooperative. She led him into her office. “The AMO is very meticulous when it comes to keeping records on file,” she said with pride as she searched her flash-screen. Gallio waited patiently for her to retrieve the data. “You’re in luck, Agent Gallio,” she said with a smile. “We not only have the conference’s attendee list for the last forty years, we also have the accompanying seating charts.”

Gallio scanned the seating chart onto his flash-pad. “Thank you, ma’am, and please remember this is a very sensitive matter. Your discretion is expected and much appreciated,” Gallio said.

“Come on in, DA Claremont,” Gil said, and directed Sharon to the seat in front of him. He let out a sigh, part fatigue, part relief. “I just received the report from our weapons experts this morning, which tells me both the tree-eyes and the laser weapon are from the HKM. At least now we know none of this had anything to do with some kind of American military exercise. That laser beam was definitely fired at someone or something,” he said. “We also have a match with the oval burn mark found on the tree and on the copter.”

Sharon slowly exhaled. “I knew it. Somebody had that copter shot down. Somebody wanted Dennis Claremont and his associate dead, because they had discovered there’s more to Moon Shade Bluff than meets the eye.”

“If your theory’s correct, then who the hell’s been behind this all this time? After all, we’re talking close to thirty years ago,” Gil said.

“Well, considering the lengths they’ve gone to, to get what they want, we must be looking at an extremely powerful entity, wouldn’t you concur?” Sharon asked.

It was Gil’s turn to take a deep breath and exhale. “Yes. Whoever it is has gone to great measures to monitor that mountain—those tree-eyes are highly advanced pieces of technology, and prohibitively expensive. Whoever is behind this has to be not only sophisticated, but extremely wealthy. And if *your* theory is correct, they’re also more than willing to commit murder.” Gil rubbed his tired eyes.

As they concluded the meeting, Agent Gallio, who had returned from Washington, joined them. “Good work, Nick,” Gil said to Gallio as he began reviewing the conference data.

Gil immediately looked up what table Dr. Langford had been seated at: table seventeen. He then searched the list of those seated at table seventeen for anyone whose first name was Jeremy. “Here we are. This has to be our man—Jeremy Reasoner, owner of a company called Earthly Remedies. Let’s see what Shamir can dig up on him.”

The next morning, Gil requested Sharon meet him at the base of Moon Shade Bluff.

Sharon surveyed the area. “How long do you think it’s going to take before things get back to normal around here?”

“I wish I could answer that, Sharon, but until we start getting some answers, it’s impossible to say. Keeping this mountain secure is a directive coming right from President Westgale himself,” Gil explained.

“So, how did your assistant make out with his research?” Sharon asked.

“Apparently Earthly Remedies was some fly-by-night seller of alternative medical products. Here today, gone tomorrow. The company was only around for just over two years. The only reason this Reasoner guy was at that conference was because he bought his way in. Actually, not long after the conference, he dissolved the business,” Gil said.

“From what we’ve learned so far about the guy, there doesn’t appear to be anything linking him to this madness. It seems he and his wife are living a quiet life in Oklahoma.” Gil’s flash-pad began to buzz. He read the flash-message, growing increasingly intrigued. “I’m being called back to Washington. It appears Dr. Ahar has called an urgent meeting with regards to this very case,” he said.

“Before you leave, I’d like to ask a favor of you,” Sharon said.

“Well, I’ll do my best.”

“Please allow me the opportunity to go to Oklahoma and speak with Reasoner. Something tells me he may know more than we think he does.”

Gil thought for a moment. “As you’re well aware, this is a federal investigation. I realize this case is close to your heart, as it should be. So, if I or one of my agents ends up paying a visit to Reasoner, you’ll be welcome to come along. First, though, I want to hear what Dr. Ahar has to say before I make any further decisions.”

Later that evening, Gil returned to the Freedom Home, where Dr. Ahar was to speak in front of Westgale and his executive committee.

Ahar entered the main conference room looking like he hadn’t slept for days. Silence filled the room as he made his way to the podium. He stood there a moment, then exhaled. “Good evening, everyone,” he said, exhaling once again. He pulled a small bottle holding the glittery minerals that were found at Moon Shade Bluff from his pocket, and held it up. “Upon completing my initial analysis of these minerals, I’ve determined that not only can they be utilized to help create a powerful narcotic, but due to their makeup, they have potential applications as a specialized medicine, or perhaps a groundbreaking vaccine. In the coming days, I will begin initiating a program to study this in detail.”

“How long will it take to get some answers?” Westgale asked.

“By the time all the clinical testing has been completed, I’d say we’re looking at eighteen months to two years,” Ahar replied.

Gil listened attentively, like everyone else in the room, though now the investigator inside of him felt overwhelmed. *Did the same party who’s been using the mineral to create a potent narcotic also know that it could be used in a positive manner?* he wondered. *If so, have they been keeping this a secret?*

After Ahar exited the conference room, Gil approached his superiors and expressed his concerns.

“I guess the mystery surrounding this mountain just became that much more compelling,” Westgale said.

“Come on, Gil, do you actually think somebody else knew about this and has been keeping it a secret for thirty years?” Attorney General Sutton said. “Using the rocks for the purpose of narcotics I can see, but what you’re suggesting is almost impossible to fathom.”

“I think I have to side with Champ on this one,” Perry added.

“I beg to differ. I think somebody knew about this. In fact, I’m certain of it,” Gil retorted.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen... even though the focus must be on moving forward,” Westgale said, “I agree with Gil. This needs to be fully addressed. As this Administration has learned over the last little while, complete transparency is vital to our good standing with the American public. I won’t have it any other way,” he added with conviction.

Later, Westgale met with Beverley Gibson and ordered her to begin putting in place a fully coordinated plan to study Moon Shade Bluff.

“This is wonderful news, Mr. President. I’ll get on it right away,” she said with enthusiasm. Noticing Westgale’s uneasiness, Beverley asked, “Is something wrong, sir?”

He stood and moved from behind his desk to begin pacing. “As great as this news is, we could also discover it’s bittersweet,” he said.

“How so?”

“Gil’s of the mindset that somebody, or more likely some group, has known about this for thirty years. We’ve confirmed the mineral’s been used to create a powerful narcotic, but to think somebody also knew it could be used in a positive manner and kept it a secret... it’s so inconceivable.

“And if that’s true, it looks like whoever’s behind all of this may have gone so far as to kill Dennis Claremont and his assistant in order to maintain that secret.”

CHAPTER 10

“You made a great choice, young lady,” Joe Hislep said. “This big gal has a great temperament and she’s sharp as a tack.”

“Thank you, Aunt Sharon. Thank you, Uncle Heath. This is so gracious of you,” Kayla said with a smile, stroking the head of the chestnut filly Sharon and I had just purchased for her.

“It’s the least we could do after all you’ve done for us,” I replied while Sharon gave Kayla a hug.

“Now we can go riding together!” Riley shouted. “What are you going to name her?”

“How about I let *you* name her, Riles. Do you have a name in mind?” Kayla asked.

“Uh... how about Jumper?” Riley said with a sheepish grin.

“Excellent! Everybody, this is the new Jumper!”

Everyone smiled. Seconds later, Sharon’s flash-pad began to buzz. It was Gil.

“Hello, Sharon. Pack your bags; it looks like we’ll be heading to Oklahoma after all. I definitely want to speak with Jeremy Reasoner,” he said, before relaying the latest revelation.

“Wait a second here. You’re telling me Ahar believes the mineral actually could be used in a medical capacity?” Sharon said, astonished. “How could that be?”

“I guess God only knows,” Gil answered. “You know, I must admit I thought your husband had really lost it when he told me how he believed your son was cured, but now I’m left to really wonder.”

“Is Westgale going public with this?” Sharon asked.

“I’ve asked him to hold off until after we interview Reasoner,” Gil replied.

“I’m in. When are we leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

When Sharon and Gil arrived in Oklahoma, they were picked up by a black grand-electro from the Justice Department. The vehicle drove along a series of long and winding dirt roads, passing fields of corn, and rows of ancient weeping willows. More of a city person, Gil was instantly taken by the picturesque scenery.

“We really take it for granted, don’t we,” he murmured.

“Huh?”

“The beauty. Look at the limbs of those trees swaying in unison, as if they’re dancing to nature’s own little symphony,” Gil said as the cool autumn breeze guided the willow branches. “And that golden sunlight on the fields... incredible.”

“Whoa—look to your right,” Sharon exclaimed.

“Wow! It looks like an endless red velvet blanket,” Gil replied as they passed a vast expanse of red soil.

“We’re here, sir,” the driver said. The vehicle pulled into the lane and slowly drove toward the Reasoner house and farm buildings in the distance.

“Look at all those apples,” Sharon said, indicating an apple orchard running along the lane. “It looks like an artist’s rendering.”

“Very idyllic, indeed,” Gil agreed as they passed a large herd of cattle peacefully grazing in a field on the opposite side.

The grand-electro stopped in front of the house. Gil and Sharon exited the vehicle and walked down a sandy path toward the front door. When they were a few feet away from the door, a man appeared. He was wearing a dark blue flat cap and matching overalls. He was average height and looked very fit.

“Hello, how can I help you?” he said, looking over the heads of Gil and Sharon toward the grand-electro.

“Are you Mr. Jeremy Reasoner?” Gil asked as they approached.

“Yes, I am,” he replied.

Gil and Sharon took out their identification badges. “I’m Special Agent Gil Robichaud with US Federal Justice, and this is Sharon Claremont, District Attorney for Vexton County.”

With raised brows Reasoner replied, “Well, I don’t know if I should be honored or afraid.”

“We’d just like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Reasoner,” Gil said.

“I don’t have the slightest idea why you’d want to speak with me. Will I require a lawyer for this?” Reasoner asked.

“You have every right to an attorney, Mr. Reasoner. You can even ask us to leave right now, if you so wish. However, I guarantee you, we will be back and our questions will be answered. It’s entirely up to you,” Gil explained.

“I have nothing to hide. Come on in.” Reasoner led them into the house. He was extremely calm, considering the situation. “I’m sorry the house is a tad more untidy than it usually is. That’s what happens whenever my wife goes out of town to visit her sister,” he said as he removed a couple pairs of gloves from the living room sofa. “Please have a seat. Can I offer you some apple juice and biscuits?”

“We’re fine, thank you,” Gil replied.

Reasoner sat in a recliner across from them. “Vexton County? I’m certain I haven’t been there, but it sure sounds familiar,” he said matter-of-factly.

“How about the name Dr. Frank Langford? He’s a Vexton veterinarian. Does his name ring a bell?” Sharon asked.

“Langford? I must admit that name sounds familiar,” Reasoner said, rubbing his chin. “If I’m thinking of the right guy... he’s rather tall, like six-foot-five?”

“Yes. Do you recall meeting him at an American Medical Organization conference thirty years ago?” Gil asked.

“Whoa... thirty years ago. You’re really taking me back in time. I definitely remember going to that conference. Unlike most of the people who attended, my company had to literally buy a seat,” Reasoner answered.

“I do realize it’s quite some time ago, but I need to know if you recall speaking with Dr. Langford regarding a dog... an old Alaskan Malamute?” Gil asked.

“Ah, yes, the story of a dog and a miracle mountain—that’s it, Vexton. I knew the name of your town seemed familiar,” Reasoner said to Sharon.

“According to Dr. Langford, you were rather taken by the ‘dog and a miracle mountain.’ In fact, did you not insinuate you were going to investigate the mountain?” Gil asked.

“Yes, I actually gave it some thought, but I guess you could say that was at a time when I was blinded by my own entrepreneurial spirit. Fortunately, I saw the light before I ended up losing everything I had. The little guy is so up against it in business,” Reasoner explained with a chuckle.

“I take it you’re referring to your business, Earthly Remedies?” Sharon asked.

“Ugh—the memory of that business still haunts me. Bringing an end to that fiasco was my salvation. Sure, I was ambitious, but I was also very naïve in thinking I had all the answers,” Reasoner replied. He waved the memory away.

“Do you recall ever relaying Dr. Langford’s story to anyone else?” Gil asked.

Reasoner thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I may have, but I don’t have any particular recollection. It was all so long ago.”

“If your business was such a failure, please tell me, Mr. Reasoner, how you were able to purchase such a stunning farm,” Gil asked.

“After I dissolved Earthly Remedies, I took some finance and investment courses, and then I got lucky with a few international stocks—before the War Within raised its ugly head,” Reasoner replied calmly. He rose. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like some of my freshly made apple juice and biscuits?” he asked.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Reasoner, but we’re going to be on our way,” Gil replied.

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t have been of more help to you,” Reasoner said as he led them to the door. “Has something serious happened in Vexton?”

“Actually, there’s quite a lot going on. You’ll be hearing about it soon, Mr. Reasoner,” Sharon said on her way out.

“If anything else comes to mind, please do call me,” Gil said, handing Reasoner his card.

On their way to the airport, Gil sensed Sharon was feeling anxious. “You still think there’s more to this guy, don’t you?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Gil. The timeline of events leaves me feeling a tad uneasy,” Sharon said, staring out the window at a grove of weeping willows.

“Yeah, I agree. He also appeared a little *too* prepared when it came to answering our questions. It’ll be interesting to see what Shamir uncovers from his banking records,” Gil replied.

“I think it was a wise idea to tap his flash-pads and keep him under surveillance,” Sharon added. “I don’t think the guy was telling us everything he knows.”

“I’m certain, after tomorrow evening’s press conference, we’ll eventually find some of the answers we’re searching for,” Gil said.

* * *

While Sharon was in Oklahoma, Riley and I visited Mom.

“He’s getting bigger and more handsome every day,” Mom said as she bent down and gently pinched Riley’s cheeks. He was decked out in his new cowboy outfit. “And in a few days, my little cowpoke is going to be nine years old!”

“I hope you come to my birthday party, Grandma,” Riley said, bouncing with excitement.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the entire world. Now, what do you have in that envelope?” Mom asked.

“It’s a drawing I want to show you,” Riley said with a sheepish grin.

“A drawing? I didn’t know you like drawing, Riley. Grandpa Dennis used to love drawing... Well, let me see it,” Mom said, beaming.

Riley slowly pulled the paper from the envelope.

“Wow—that is one neat-looking fish, Riley!” Mom exclaimed.

“It’s Gordon. Daddy’s old angelfish. Mr. Shelby told me all about him,” Riley said.

“Who’s Mr. Shelby?” Mom asked.

Zack chimed in. “Good ol’ Don Shelby. He was one of Neville Hollis’s farmhands, back in the day. A real hard worker and a great storyteller. I’m surprised to hear he’s back in town.”

“Apparently he was just visiting,” I replied. Wanting to speak privately with Mom, I asked Zack to entertain Riley while we went into her unit.

“Come here, cowboy,” I heard Zack call out to Riley as we left. “I want to hear all about that pony of yours.”

I knew I had to tell Mom that Sharon and I now believed Dad was murdered. I’d thought practicing *how* I’d tell her would make things easier, but it didn’t. Nervousness made my breathing rapid and my palms sweaty. I could never forget that dreadful day when Mom held me in her arms and told me Dad had died in that crash. Now I realized just how difficult it must have been for her to break the news to me.

“So, why does my normally relaxed, loving son look so anxious?” she asked in her usual pleasant manner. I took a deep breath and moved closer to her on the sofa. “Come on, Heath,” she said seriously. “I know when something’s bothering you.”

I ended up stammering, “Do you remember how I told you Sharon and I believed Riley was cured the night of the Vexton Gleam?”

“Yes, I do. And do you remember me telling you you were crazy to think such a thing?” she asked in response, grinning.

“I surely do.” I chuckled. “Well, we’ve recently learned there’s a whole lot more to Moon Shade Bluff than we think.”

“Heath Claremont. Don’t tell me you’re becoming a believer in all the folklore surrounding that old pile of rock,” she said with a raised brow.

I reached out to hold her hands, and said, “There’s much more to all of this than some old tales from the past.” I proceeded to explain in detail. As expected, she was completely stunned.

“Murdered? Your father was a good, decent man. Who would want to kill him?” she cried.

“The federal authorities are still attempting to piece everything together. We think Dad was murdered because he and his assistant knew the truth about Moon Shade Bluff,” I said, slowly caressing her shoulders as she wept.

“And this all started with that dog?” Mom asked, attempting to regain her composure.

“When we combined the discovery of the mineral with Linda’s story about Sally, I guess a light went on in our heads,” I said, handing Mom a tissue.

When Sharon returned, she informed me Westgale was planning to hold a detailed press conference regarding Moon Shade Bluff the following evening. “Is he going to speak of Riley being cured by the Gleam?” I asked.

“Fortunately, he isn’t. But he is going to speak about your father. After a thorough examination of the laser beam burn that was discovered on the photos of the robo-copter, Federal Justice is now regarding your father’s death as a homicide,” Sharon said.

“Hopefully this will lead to finding the bastards who killed him,” I said firmly. Sharon looked at me and sighed. “What is it, honey? Is there something bothering you?” I said in response.

“I’m just concerned about all the speculation this is going to lead to,” she replied. “You have to remember, the minerals from that mountain have been used to manufacture a potent narcotic—”

“And people are going to speculate that my father may have been criminally involved. I can see where you’re coming from,” I calmly interrupted. I instantly thought about Mom, and what this would do to her. And then there was Riley, who’d recently become so interested in learning about his Grandpa Dennis. Anyone who truly knew my father would know he wouldn’t have been involved in criminal activity. But the outside world obviously didn’t know Dennis Claremont like we did, and the idea of this incredible man’s memory being tarnished left me feeling

sickened. After all, our memories of him were the only connection we had left.

“When the story’s made public, it will have a drastic impact on all of us,” Sharon warned.

“I guess that’s the price of justice.” I sighed. “I’m certain you and I will be able to handle whatever’s thrown at us, but Mom and Riley... that’ll be quite a challenge.”

“Well, hopefully the positive news of the mineral’s capabilities will take the headlines away from the investigation.”

I nodded. “By the way, how did things go with Jeremy Reasoner?” I asked.

“Actually, he appeared to have all the right answers, which in a strange sort of way left Gil and I feeling rather uneasy. So, Gil decided to monitor his flash-pads and banking records. He’s also placed him under 24-hour surveillance,” Sharon replied. “That’s all that can be done for now.”

CHAPTER 11

The following evening, Westgale addressed the nation about the discovery of the mineral on Moon Shade Bluff, and all aspects relating to it, including the suspected murder of my father. “My Chief of Medicine and Science, Dr. Jack Ahar, and his associates believe this mineral is an important discovery that may lead to a medical breakthrough of substantial proportions,” he proclaimed, his demeanor upbeat. Then his expression turned grave. “My Administration is offering a \$10-million reward for information leading to the arrest of those individuals who are behind the manufacturing of this narcotic, as well as the murders of Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh.” He looked intently into the UCIT camera and declared, “Mark my words. We will find you, and you will be punished to the full extent of the law.”

I listened to Westgale speak, yet still found it difficult to comprehend that my father had been murdered while saving the lives of two young boys. I had no choice now but to accept it as fact. My feelings must have shown on my face because Sharon asked, “Do you want to talk about it, Heath?” She gently caressed my arm.

“I just can’t believe how evil and heartless these people could be,” I said, my throat tight.

“It appears whoever did this was prepared to do whatever it took to protect their secret... including murder,” Sharon said gently.

“At least Westgale didn’t tell the world how we believe Riley was cured. Whatever we do, we just can’t put him through that, Sharon.”

"I fully agree with you, but I do think we have to tell him about your father being murdered. If he hears the news from somebody other than us, it'll be even more difficult for him."

"Since his birthday's tomorrow, let's at least wait until the day after," I said.

She nodded. "That's a wise idea."

"Hi Grandma. I'm so glad you came to my party," said a beaming Riley as he came running to the door.

"Somebody else is here with me," Mom said with a grin.

"All right, Uncle Zack!" Riley exclaimed as Zack appeared beside her.

"This is my grandma. And this is Uncle Zack," Riley said to his friend Christopher, who had followed Riley to the door.

"Is he the man who made those neat robots you showed me?" Christopher whispered.

"Yes, that's him." Riley turned back to Mom and Zack. "I showed Christopher the pictures of the robots you used to make."

"That was many years ago, boys," Zack replied with a chuckle. "Now I make food instead of machines."

"I want to open Grandma's present first," Riley exclaimed after the birthday dinner and cake.

"Here you are, my little prince," Mom said as she handed Riley a box gift-wrapped in Washington Androids paper.

Riley tore at the paper. "Laser Flash Frenzy! This game is amazing! Thanks, Grandma. Do you remember when we played this game at Uncle Skip's place?" Riley shouted to Sharon.

"I remember, Riley. You were the champion that night." Sharon laughed.

"Hey, Riley, there's something else in there," I said, noticing another wrapped package at the bottom of the box. I handed it to Riley.

Once again, in a mad state of euphoria, Riley tore off the paper. "Wow, my own American flag!" Riley bellowed as he unfurled the flag.

"And that's not just any American flag," Mom said with a smile. "That flag was given to our family in memory of your

Grandpa Dennis for saving those two young boys at Moon Shade Bluff.”

Riley looked at the flag and said solemnly, “Thanks, Grandma.”

After Riley had enthusiastically opened gifts from the other guests, including the very latest top-of-the-line soccer ball from Kayla, it was time for the grand finale. I nodded toward Aaron and the two of us went into my locked office and retrieved Riley’s last gift for the evening. “I can’t wait to see what Mommy and Daddy got me,” Riley said as Aaron and I carefully carried the covered gift into the living room.

“Okay, Riley, on the count of three, you and I will pull off the cover,” I said. “Take one end, Riles. Okay, here we go. One... two... three!”

“All right!” Riley exclaimed. “An aquarium—with my own angelfish!”

“It’s a saltwater aquarium. We’re going to keep it right here in the living room,” Sharon said.

Riley looked in awe at the fish. “Look, Grandma... that one looks just like Gordon!” he exclaimed as he pointed at the gold and blue angelfish.

“Oh my goodness, he does,” Mom said, pulling Riley close to her.

Once the celebration came to an end and everyone had gone home, I walked by the living room and noticed Riley staring listlessly at the aquarium.

“Hey Riles, you know we can add more really neat rocks and even toy scuba divers in there if you like,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess that’d be okay,” he murmured.

“What’s wrong, Riles?” I asked.

“Christopher told me.”

“What did Christopher tell you?”

“He told me he heard on the World Connect that Grandpa Dennis was murdered. Why did they kill him? Why? Why did they kill him?” Riley cried. Sharon, who had been lingering in the doorway, now came in and held him as he wept.

“It’s okay, Riles,” I said gently. “Most of the people in the world are kind and caring people. But unfortunately there are also bad people in the world. Sometimes they do really bad things that we can’t control. Now the only thing *we* can do is try our best to be the kind and caring people. That’s all we can do.”

“You know those angels I told you about?” Sharon asked. “The ones you told us you pray to?”

“Yes. I still pray to them every night,” Riley said softly as Sharon dried his tears with a tissue.

“Tonight, how about you, me, and Daddy pray to them together? We’ll say a special prayer for Grandpa, okay?” Sharon said.

“That’d be really neat. Maybe I could tell them to tell Grandpa I have an angelfish that looks just like Gordon.” Riley smiled.

* * *

“I knew I should have done it,” Hector said, pacing the backstage floor at the Regal Show Room.

“Done what?” Vincent asked.

“Got out of this bloody mess. They’ve been deceiving us all this time—hiding some type of special medical potion. I always figured this was a helluva lot bigger than selling drugs,” Hector growled. He stopped and turned to point a finger at Vincent. “And you know who’ll be the first to go down! This is not good, Vincent.” Hector shook his head and resumed his pacing.

“Relax, Hector,” Vincent said calmly, though he was grappling with his own fears. “The fact they’ve come out begging for the public’s help, offering \$10 million—that just goes to show they have nothing on us, or the organization.”

Hector’s flash-pad buzzed and he quickly read the message. He looked up. “There’s a car waiting for us out back.”

“I’ll be there in a second,” Vincent called out as Hector headed toward the back exit. The timing of this made Vincent anxious. *The organization will do whatever it takes to avoid leaving any trace of itself. If I get in that car, I’m a dead man!* Vincent was certain of it. In fact, concerned he’d have to one day make some kind of getaway,

Vincent had concealed a wig, a pair of sunglasses, a cane, and a jacket in one of the theater's lockers the day after he learned of Sylvain's murder. Now he hurriedly donned the disguise and darted toward the front door. Hector's screams followed him. *Adios, Hector*, Vincent thought as his companion begged for his life. *I'll never see you again.*

Vincent walked down a narrow walkway and stepped into a large alleyway frequented by homeless men and women. He joined a group gathered around a fire in an old drum and waited until he believed the coast was clear before leaving the vicinity and checking into a nearby motel. He felt like a trapped man with nowhere to turn.

The organization had been very selective when it came to choosing those they employed, and as such, performed extensive background checks. They looked for those with no personal life, people who could function in a clandestine manner. This meant they more often than not brought in ex-cons who were literally alone in life. The organization told them that when, for whatever reason, their services were no longer required, they'd be given a new life outside of America. Whether this was true or not, no one really knew. To Vincent, it had become evident that it wasn't.

In Vincent's case, there was one acquaintance he knew he could turn to in times of trouble. In the criminal underworld, he was referred to as Samson. For a period of time, Vince and Samson had worked together as debt collectors for a ruthless racketeering crime syndicate known as the Eternal. On two separate occasions, Samson had saved Vincent's life. A bond had formed between the two men; Vince felt indebted to his friend—but he also trusted him above any other.

The following day, Vincent took an express train to Detroit, where Samson had resided since his release from prison three years earlier. Although he was traveling incognito, whenever the train stopped and passengers boarded, Vincent put his chin to his chest to hide his face. As each passenger entered, Vincent trembled with fear, waiting for a moment of discovery that never came.

Samson's residence was a five-minute walk from the train station. When Vincent arrived he checked his time-pin and realized he was

earlier than expected. Before making his way up the walkway to the house, he anxiously checked his surroundings to make sure he hadn't been followed.

At that moment, his flash-pad buzzed. It was Samson. Vincent answered. "Hey, good timing. I just got here," he said.

"Vinnie, my man. Looking forward to seeing you, bro," Samson said. "I'll be closing the diner in half an hour, so I should be home in about forty-five minutes. Make yourself comfortable. Here's the code to open the door," he added, and reeled off a series of numbers and letters.

Vincent opened the door without problems, and stepped into Samson's abode with a sense of relief. That lasted until he reached the entrance to the living room, where a man in a brown, pinstripe suit sat in front of a flash-screen.

"Who the hell are you?" Vincent blurted.

"I can either be your best friend or your worst enemy—that all depends on you," the man replied. Vincent reached for his laser-gun, and pointed it at him. "So I guess it's not your wish to be friends," the man observed calmly.

"Who the hell are you?" Vincent asked again, his voice cracking with fear.

"My name's Dirk. I'm a scientist by trade, and sometimes a public speaker. But I much prefer my role as the organization's Director of Operations. Now, I think it'd be wise for you to lose that gun, Mr. Bruno. My associates outside would hate to have to come in here and mess up your friend's cozy little house."

Vince cast a fearful look out the window. Three men were standing unobtrusively in the street in front of the house. Vincent slowly set the weapon on an end table.

Dirk grunted and turned his attention back to the flash-screen, where UCIT was presenting a feature on Moon Shade Bluff. "Wow, who would've thought that a large heap of rock could be so interesting," Dirk observed, flashing a sinister grin at Vincent. His silver hair and beady eyes shone in the light from the flash-screen.

"Does Samson know you're here? Is he somehow involved in this?" Vince asked.

“Oh, no. Your friend has really turned his life around. We wouldn’t dare think of luring him back to the dark side. I hardly recognized him from the photos I had seen... Oh yeah, that long, messy hair he used to sport is now trimmed nice and neat, and those wild eyes look very tame,” Dirk replied.

“Have you been following him?”

“Actually, before coming here, we paid a visit to his lovely diner,” Dirk said, reaching for a bag on the end table to his right. “I figured you’d be hungry, so I picked up a couple of burgers. Come on, let’s go into the kitchen.”

Vince reluctantly followed Dirk into the kitchen. “Sit,” Dirk said. Vincent sat. Dirk handed him a burger. “I hope you don’t mind that I took the liberty of ordering your burger with the works,” he said with a wide grin.

Vince stared uneasily at the burger.

Dirk took a bite of his. “Mmm, delicious!” he bellowed. “Come on, enjoy.” He waved his hand at Vince’s burger. “I’ve never seen someone so afraid of a hamburger.” Dirk laughed.

“It’s just that I’m not very hungry. I had a large lunch on the train,” Vince mumbled.

Dirk pushed his own burger aside. “It’s okay. I fully understand your apprehension. But to ease your mind, you must believe me when I tell you my cohorts and I have not come here to do you harm, Mr. Bruno.”

“What about Sylvain and Hector? Not long ago, I opened up a box and found Sylvain’s head in it. And yesterday, I heard Hector screaming for his life. How could I not be anxious?” Vince said, glancing out the kitchen window. One of Dirk’s menacing-looking henchmen was standing in the yard.

Dirk sat back in his chair with his hands laced behind his head. “Well, the only reason those gentlemen ended up in such an unfortunate predicament was because they disobeyed the organization. Severely.”

“I’m aware of what Sylvain did, but Hector... why was he killed?” Vince asked.

“Ah, Hector. What a shame,” Dirk murmured. “He was so close... so close to completing his duties. But once again, fear proved to be man’s worst enemy.”

“I don’t understand,” Vince said.

Dirk turned on his flash-pad and displayed a photo of a picturesque home someplace in Italy. “Venice,” Dirk supplied. “This would’ve been Hector’s new home—if he wasn’t so stupid.” Dirk shook his head.

“Please, tell me what he did that made you guys kill him!” Vince asked anxiously.

“We discovered he was on the verge of going to the authorities. Therefore, he needed to be eliminated,” Dirk said as he turned off the flash-pad.

“So, where does this leave me?” Vincent asked.

“Well, sometimes one man’s misfortune is another man’s lucky break. I hope you like Venice.”

“You’re sending me to Venice?”

“Yes, in a few days, after your final deed is done, the idyllic home I just showed you will become *your* new home. We’ll also be setting you up with a \$5-million money fund to help you begin your new life.” Dirk leaned forward. “You will absolutely fall in love with Venice. The people are free-spirited and very sincere, and then there’s the breathtaking architecture.”

“Please, tell me: this final deed... what does it entail?”

“It’s very simple. You will be responsible for arranging our final shipment of green-hearts. You’ll receive a set of instructions tomorrow afternoon. Once you have completed the assignment, you’ll receive the itinerary for your move to Venice,” Dirk explained. “Now, go on—eat your burger. It’s getting cold. Oh, and Mr. Bruno, do enjoy your evening with Samson. True friends are so hard to find, and even more difficult to keep.”

In Vincent’s mind, the last few weeks had felt like years; the last few years, an eternity. He’d completed his final assignment and would be ever so grateful to never see one of those pills again. He was hoping to finally be free of this madness. Although, in the back of his mind,

he wondered if he ever would. Even though he wasn't party to the organization's inner workings, he still knew the core of their secret. He also knew the lengths they'd go to in order to keep it hidden.

For two days, he'd been waiting patiently for Dirk to contact him. On this day, he'd spent the better part of the afternoon sitting out on his apartment balcony, looking at photos from his youth. One photo in particular caught his attention: he was holding up a trophy shaped like a bronze fist. The photo had been taken when he was fifteen years old, and he'd been named Best Up and Coming Bare-Knuckle Fighter at his community's local gym. He would never forget the weeks that followed that day. It had all begun the next morning.

"Come on, Vincent, smarten up. Hit the damn bag like a real man. I won't accept this garbage. Just because you won some trophy by beating a bunch of local punks doesn't mean shit to me. If you're going to eventually compete as a professional, you're going to have to do better than this!" his stepfather, Angelo, yelled.

Vincent continued pounding the worn-out punching bag.

"You've gotta get a rhythm going—pace yourself, then bam! Put your fist through his face! Stop punching like a frightened little child!" Angelo exclaimed. He demonstrated. *"Do you remember when I showed you those view-files of Devan Bedlam? Do you remember how the second he sensed his opponent was losing steam he'd go in for the kill? That's how you do it, my boy. That's why he's been World Champion for the last five years."*

As the relentless badgering continued over the next few weeks, Vincent began feeling lost and confused. He decided to quit going to the gym, and gave up the idea of becoming a professional bare-knuckle fighter. Realizing his stepfather wouldn't understand, he turned to his mother, hoping she would. But she was furious with him.

"You want to quit? After all the time and money Angelo has spent on training you, you're just going to quit? He's trying his best to make you into something!" she shouted.

“Make me into something? Oh no, Mother. This is all about him. He’s trying to turn me into something he wanted to be,” young Vince replied.

“You’re a pathetic little bastard. You’ll end up just like your lowlife father, sitting alone in a dark prison cell!” she shouted.

Vincent had had enough; he knew he had to get away, and that’s exactly what he did. And at the age of fifteen he discovered an entire new world—a world of crime. A dark, gypsy existence filled with buying and selling guns and drugs, gambling, loan sharks, fly-by-night girlfriends, and, as his mother had predicted, several visits to prison.

As he sat on the balcony with a bottle of whiskey, reflecting on his past, his flash-pad buzzed. The flash-message read: *You’ve made it, Vinny! Great work on the final assignment. The organization’s work is done, and now we can all move on. For you, this means a new life in Venice! And for your friend Samson, his lovely new girlfriend, and her two adorable daughters, well, they’ll be able to live happily ever after without some mysterious men watching their every move.*

A grand-electro will be waiting for you in front of your building at 8:00 a.m. sharp. I will be escorting you all the way to your new home, on a luxurious private jet. Oh, and a new designer wardrobe will be waiting for you in Venice.

P.S. We’re proud of you!

After he read the message, he shook his head and looked up at the sky, wishing he could somehow escape into the ether.

It was a warm autumn evening and the sky was peppered with glittering stars. Every sound Vincent heard echoed through his entire being, and everything he saw gave way to a memory from his *early* childhood. Those were the days he cherished, the days before his stepfather tried to turn him into a bare-knuckle champion, and the days before he entered that cesspool of corruption that became his life. As hard as he attempted to

remain positive, he couldn't squelch the memory of how his downward spiral began.

"They simply don't need me anymore, Vinny," his father Piero sighed as he and Vinny sat on the ground beside a bed of rose bushes. The air was heady with their scent.

Nine-year-old Vincent replied, "But you can fix electros and robo-cycles better than anyone!"

His father reached over and placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Thanks, son, but you see, they have machines that can get the job done twice as fast as I and my friends at work can," he said in his husky voice.

"I don't care, you're better than some stupid machine," Vincent said, frowning. "How will you get money if you don't work?" he asked.

"It'll be okay, Vinny my boy," Piero said with a smile, hugging Vincent.

Vincent had come to learn that whenever his father used the expression "Vinny my boy," it meant he was concealing the fact that he was actually feeling anxious. "Come on, let's go get you one of those new neon soccer balls."

"Uh... I really don't need one," Vincent said sheepishly, out of concern for his father's financial situation.

"Vinny, come here," Piero said to Vincent, standing before him. "Stop frowning. Everything's going to be fine. I'm your father and I will always take care of you," he added, looking Vincent directly in the eye.

The next day, while Vincent and his father were kicking around their new neon soccer ball in the park, two mysterious men showed up. One was carrying a brown envelope. "Give me a minute, son," Piero said, and went over to the men. He spoke with them for a few seconds, handed them a small package, then took the envelope and stuffed it in his back pocket.

Vincent watched this type of thing go on for a good part of a year. Sometimes Piero would be the one handing over an envelope and receiving a package. Vincent began to feel uneasy about the

situation, but did not confront his father, who had told him these people were friends and business acquaintances.

Then came the July afternoon Vincent would never forget. It was the warmest day of the year—so warm that there was no way they were even going to attempt to run around kicking a soccer ball. Instead, they picked up two cherry-flavored Freeze-Blasts and sat in the shade of a large tree.

“Dad, is there a chance your work might call you back?” Vincent asked hesitantly.

Piero sighed. “Not a chance. In fact, they just released another twelve employees over the last two weeks.”

“What about other repair shops?” Vincent asked, trying to be optimistic.

“They all have those damn machines, Vinny. We humans have lost the battle,” Piero replied with a huff. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine, Vinny my boy,” he added, as if he could sense Vincent’s worry.

Moments later, they saw a man in the distance, waving his hand. “Just give me two minutes, Vin. I have to go and see one of my associates,” Piero said nervously. “Hey, do you want me to grab you another Freeze-Blast on the way back?” he asked Vincent.

“Uh, no... I’m fine,” Vincent replied, keeping his eyes on the man.

He watched his father approach the man and remove a package from his pocket. As he handed the package to the man, two police officers emerged from the bushes nearby. It was a setup, Vincent realized, as he watched his father being arrested.

Frozen in place in a state of shock, he jumped when he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned to look up, a female police officer said softly, “You’ll have to come with me, young man.” She offered an encouraging smile. But as he watched his father being taken away, he wept uncontrollably.

Vincent came back to the present, tears streaming down his cheeks. *How did I let my life come to this? Did I not learn anything*

from my father's transgressions? he asked himself. If only he'd said no when Sylvain came to him with the offer to work for the organization. If only he'd taken that job at Samson's diner upon his release from prison... It'd always baffled him, why Sylvain had targeted him in the first place. The few times he asked Sylvain, the answer was always the same: "I simply did what I was told to do. Your name was on the list."

On several occasions over the past few weeks, Vincent thought about taking his own life. But something gave him the strength to face another day, as bleak as it may have seemed. In his head he kept hearing his father's words: "Everything's going to be fine, Vinny my boy." He kept trying to convince himself that those words were true, but it was becoming close to impossible. He knew it was very likely he'd be killed the following morning when he met with Dirk. But he also knew if he attempted to run away, he'd certainly be killed.

Since the day of the Vexton press conference, a battle had played out in Vincent's mind about whether or not he should go to the authorities and surrender, or take his chances with the organization's promise, which he believed was a giant lie. He realized that if he were to now go to the authorities, he'd be placing the lives of Samson, his girlfriend, and her daughters in serious jeopardy. How could he do that to someone who'd saved *his* life, twice? Vincent felt like a man trapped in a cage. A cage of his own making.

The following morning, a silver grand-electro pulled up in front of the apartment. "Call his flash-pad and let him know we're here," Dirk ordered. His associate, Army, complied. Vincent didn't respond. Dirk pounded the dashboard in frustration.

Army tried to calm him down. "I wouldn't worry, sir, we've had eyes and ears on this clown since he returned from Detroit. I know for a fact he's still up there."

"Go get him. I'll wait here. I told the son of a bitch 8:00 a.m. sharp," Dirk said.

The burly Army entered the building and took the elevator to the fifteenth floor. When he came to Vincent's apartment the door was

slightly ajar. Equipped with a mini laser-gun and a styngor, he slowly entered the apartment.

“Mr. Bruno,” he quietly called out as he knocked on the bathroom door. There was no reply. “Mr. Bruno, we’re waiting for you,” he said, raising his voice. He turned to his right and saw strands of dark brown hair protruding above the back of the living room sofa. He drew his gun and took a couple of quick steps toward the sofa.

Vincent Bruno was indeed sitting there. He was dead. An empty bottle of whiskey and an empty container of pills lay on the sofa by his side. Army pulled out his flash-pad and called his superior.

“What in the hell is going on here!” Dirk growled as he stormed into the apartment. He looked toward Army, who nodded toward Vincent’s body. Dirk moved in closer and checked to confirm Vincent was dead. “Well, I guess it beats the hell out of being thrown from a plane,” he said with an evil grin.

CHAPTER 12

In the Freedom Home's main conference room, Attorney General Champ Sutton was presiding over a meeting of the country's top law enforcement officials. "Have your people made any traction regarding the green-hearts, Sergeant Starks?" he asked.

Sergeant Tanya Starks, Director of Federal Narcotic Policing, looked up and shook her head. "Amazingly, we have no record of them anywhere in the US, outside of the batch found in JD Wren's apartment," she replied. "We've had undercover agents across the country put word out on the street, and not a darn thing turned up. They're nowhere to be found."

"What about internationally?" Gil asked.

"I'm glad you asked, Agent Robichaud," Starks replied. "If these drugs are being sold anywhere, it has to be in the HKM."

"Oh? Why's that?" Sutton asked with a raised brow.

"If they were being shipped and sold anywhere else in the world, we would've tracked them down by now," Starks answered confidently. "But as everybody in this room is well aware, the HKM government has become a massive bed of corruption, and the country has found a way to really prosper from legalizing and selling a variety of narcotics."

"That makes sense, considering the laser-gun that left the blast and the tree-eyes were from the HKM," Gil replied. "I think we should check with the Action Express depots across the country and have them look into their HKM shipments."

“We’re on it. We’ve asked their security team to perform a review and be on alert for anything strange regarding HKM shipments,” Starks answered.

After working day in and day out on Project Vexton, Gil realized he had to find some time for an evening with his family.

“Okay, Dad, you’re all ours tonight,” his daughter Pauline said.

“That’s right, honey. Keep that flash-pad tucked away and out of sight,” his wife, Kia, added with a chuckle.

“All right, all right... Here, look—I’ll set it on emergency mode. There... are you all happy?” Gil laughed. “Now let’s get to the restaurant; we don’t want to be late for our reservation.”

“Oh my Lord, Dad, that steak could feed an entire family!” exclaimed his son, Sammy, a short time later as the waiter slid Gil’s order onto the table in front of him.

“This is a good old-fashioned porterhouse steak, son. I lived on these during my bodybuilding days,” Gil said as he cut into the steak. He put a piece into his mouth. “Wow... cooked perfectly—a taste of heaven!”

“I guess our kids take after me,” Kia said with a chuckle; the three other plates all contained baked salmon fillets with a side of spinach.

“Hey Dad, is that story about the dog in Vexton true?” Pauline asked.

“Now, now, Pauline, I thought we were going to give your father a break and not talk about that stuff tonight,” Kia said with a grimace.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Gil said to Kia before turning to his daughter. “Yes, Pauline, from all accounts it appears the story about the dog is true.” Something drew his gaze to a man sitting alone on the other side of the restaurant. The man was staring at him, and seemed extremely fidgety.

“Will you take us to Vexton one day?” young Sammy asked. “That place seems really neat, with that mountain. And they say there’s all kinds of ghosts and aliens,” Sammy added, dropping his voice as if scared, though it was still tinged with excitement.

As much as Gil tried to pay attention to his son, the stranger across the restaurant distracted him, and he watched the man from the corner of his eye.

“So, will you take us, Dad?”

“Huh?” Gil replied.

“Vexton—will you take us to Vexton,” Sammy said, raising his voice.

“Maybe... someday. Now, settle down and finish your food,” Gil said.

Stabbing his fork aimlessly into his salad, the man across the room continued to stare at the Robichaud table. Gil had had enough. “Have you noticed that guy across the room and how he’s been staring at us?” he whispered to Kia, not wanting to alarm the kids.

“Yeah; he’s kind of giving me the creeps,” she whispered back.

“Well, I’m going to have a word with him,” Gil said. “Get the kids out of sight,” he added.

“Hey guys, let’s go check out the gift store in the lobby,” Kia said to the kids.

Gil waited for them to exit the restaurant before he walked over to the man. “Hey partner, is everything okay?” Gil asked politely.

The man had dropped his head to focus on his salad when he saw Gil approaching; now he slowly raised it. “I need to speak with you,” he replied in a somber tone. “Please have a seat.”

Gil studied him a moment. He noticed the man was wearing an American military pendant. “Army?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” the man replied. “Seven years of service, and proud of every second,” he added with conviction.

“Well, on behalf of myself, my family, and this country, I want to thank you... I didn’t get your name,” Gil said.

“Tyler Monroe—Major Tyler Monroe,” he said with a nervous look around the restaurant. He reached into a pocket and displayed his military ID.

“Hmm... all looks in order,” Gil said as he quickly scanned the records. “Now, you said you needed to speak with me. Did you follow me here?” he asked.

“Yes I did, and I apologize if I made you and your family uncomfortable, but I desperately need to speak with you,” Monroe replied.

“I don’t understand. You could’ve easily contacted my office rather than having to follow me around the city,” Gil said.

“I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“I have important information about JD Wren, and I’m afraid they know I do,” Monroe said, his uneasy gaze sweeping the restaurant.

“Who are *they*?” Gil asked. He noticed Kia standing at the entrance, her expression concerned. He gave her a quick nod to assure her all was fine.

“JD bought those drugs from someone who called himself the Polar Bear.”

“Polar Bear?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s some kind of nickname.”

“Do you know his actual name?”

“No.”

Gil nodded; it had been worth a try. “This could really be the break we’re looking for. I’m glad you came forward.”

“I was just about to head back home to my wife and kids in Atlanta when I saw the Vexton press conference.”

“I’m going to have one of my agents come here and pick you up,” Gil said. “He’ll then escort you to the Prestige Hotel. We’ll get you a room, and make sure it’s continuously monitored. Then tomorrow morning I’ll have my agent escort you to the Freedom Home where we’ll meet with the Attorney General.”

“Uh, is that necessary?” Monroe asked.

“I think it’s a wise precaution,” Gil said, and Monroe nodded.

Gil stepped away and contacted Shamir, instructing him to look into any connections between the “Polar Bear” moniker and the criminal world.

Early the next morning, Tyler Monroe was brought in to meet with Gil and Champ Sutton. He spoke of his time spent in the army

with JD Wren. “JD was the kind of friend and soldier who always had your back, and his intelligence was extraordinary. That being said, I was always concerned for his mental state.”

“And why was that?” asked Sutton.

“JD was paranoid about the HKM,” Monroe replied. “He believed that one day the HKM would swallow America and spit it out for its own amusement.”

“He said that?” Sutton asked. Monroe nodded.

“Did he ever speak to you about Vexton-Tech and the fact that its consumer robots were being made in the HKM?” Gil asked.

“Every chance he had. He was furious that the largest tech company in the country chose to make those machines in the HKM,” Monroe replied. “Then when his sister, Tammy, became ill he immediately blamed it on her Home Servant robot. He even contacted the government with his concerns.”

“Yes, we’re well aware of that. Now, did you ever hear him speak about blowing up any schools or government buildings?” Sutton asked.

“Oh, no; I would have definitely alerted the authorities if I did,” Monroe answered. “One day I did see him reading the AXE doctrine and he shrugged it off, saying he just wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Little did I know he’d become obsessed with it.”

“Now, Agent Robichaud informed me that you have information regarding the narcotic. How do you know this Polar Bear was the person who sold JD the drugs?” Sutton asked.

“One day when JD and I were on leave, he received a call on his flash-pad. He asked me to answer the call because he was busy tending to something,” Monroe began. “When I said hello, a voice said, ‘Hey JD, this is the Polar Bear inviting you to a game of green-hearts. Same location as before.’ JD got real nervous and grabbed the phone from me and went into another room. When I asked who it was, he told me he was being invited to a card game. At the time I believed him, but after I saw the Vexton press conference, I came to realize there was no way he was being honest with me that day.”

“And you’re concerned that whoever this Polar Bear is knew it was you who answered the call. Is that correct?” Sutton asked.

“That’s correct, sir,” Monroe replied.

Gil tapped his flash-pad. “I want to thank you for coming forward, Major Monroe, and please be advised we’ll do everything in our power to ensure your safety.” Two of Gil’s agents arrived to escort the major from the building.

“So what do you make of it?” Sutton asked when the young man was gone.

“We’ve got to find this Polar Bear,” Gil replied. “I’ve got one of my analysts working on it.”

Two days later, after spending countless hours conferring with law enforcement offices across the country and a number of undercover agents, Shamir called Gil to say he’d found out who Polar Bear really was. He briefed Gil in his office. “His real name is Evan Sylvester. A lifetime criminal,” Shamir said, displaying photos of Sylvester on the flash-screen. “He’s also known as Mr. Sylvain. The guy has spent more time in prison than he has in the outside world. He’s been involved with every form of racketeering you can name.”

“And I take it the ‘Polar Bear’ moniker comes from his white hair,” Gil said as he studied the photos.

“Yeah; apparently he also got the name because he’s considered bipolar, and he can be as ferocious as a bear,” Shamir said. “The man’s been described by many as a savage beast.”

“Is he currently behind bars?” Gil asked.

“He was last released from prison three years ago, and there’s been no sign of him anywhere since,” Shamir answered.

“Were you able to identify any crime organizations he’s actually worked with?” Gil asked.

Shamir shook his head. “That’s the crazy thing. It’s like he’s some kind of itinerant criminal. My staff’s going to dig a little deeper to see if they can get some actual names,” he added.

Gil ran his hands through his hair. “I’ve ordered our National Investigation people to run a full probe on the guy,” he said. “I’d hate to put out an APB and possibly tip him off, but we may have no other choice.”

“With all due respect, sir, if he’s still part of the scene, I’m sure he’ll somehow be made aware of the fact that we’re investigating him,” Shamir said.

Gil sighed and nodded. “Great work, Shamir. I’ll be briefing the president and Attorney General Sutton in an hour or so.”

Two hours later, a worldwide APB was put out on Evan Sylvester.

* * *

“Oh my Lord, for a country we’re on such bad terms with, it’s amazing how much business we actually do with them,” Narcotics Policing Agent Will Pope said to the junior agent accompanying him around New York City’s enormous Action Express shipping depot, as they looked over packages destined for the HKM.

“This is the sender,” said the depot’s chief of security, indicating five large boxes. “It’s the fact they’ve been making this mad rush of shipments out to the HKM lately that really caught our attention.”

“May I see the sender’s name and the description of the contents?” Agent Pope asked.

“Of course.” The chief handed him the shipment form.

“Thank you, sir. That’ll be all,” Pope said. The man nodded once and stepped away. “Hmm... L&B Products is the company,” he said to his fellow agent. “This says that the product inside is a children’s vitamin called Fun Drops.” He cut open one of the boxes and pulled aside the protective cushioning that lined the carton, revealing fifty containers of pills. Twenty-five of them were labeled Fun Drops, each containing 150 pills of various shapes and colors. The other twenty-five containers were filled with pills that were heart-shaped and green in color. “Whoa... I think we may have just found exactly what we’re looking for,” Pope said with a raised brow, lifting one of the containers to study its contents. “If these are what we suspect they are, this is big news.”

The two agents began gathering the evidence to send to Dr. Ahar’s Washington lab for analysis.

Gil and his team were elated to finally have a concrete lead in this perplexing case. “You’re telling me L&B Products is a subsidiary of Step 1 Health?” said a shocked Gil as Agent Gallio presented him with a report on the company.

“Yeah, one of their many,” Gallio replied. “They specialize in infant and children’s health care products. And what I found interesting is that Lawson Pierce’s brother, Cameron, manages the operation.”

“Have you been able to find out where in the HKM those boxes were heading?” Gil asked.

“All I can tell you is that they were being sent to the central health care depot in the northwest region of the country,” Gallio replied. “Shamir’s looking into it further.”

“And these Fun Drop vitamins, do they come in the form of green hearts?” Gil asked.

“No. From what I’ve been able to ascertain, there are no green-colored or heart-shaped Fun Drops whatsoever,” Gallio replied.

Gil took several deep breaths, then, “Step 1 Health... damn it!” he yelled. The veins at his temples throbbed. “I can’t believe this. We’re still all reeling from that bloody Vexton-Tech mess, and now this? What the hell is happening to this country?” He buried his face in his hands.

After being briefed by Gil, Champ Sutton called for an emergency meeting. Looking beaten, Westgale entered the conference room and poured himself a vodka on the rocks. He loosened his tie. “If we determine SIH is behind this, it will be the end of us, David,” he said to Dave Perry, who was in the midst of studying Gil’s report. “There’ll be no coming back from this one.”

“It doesn’t look very good, sir,” Perry had to agree. “Now that Ahar has confirmed that the company was shipping the narcotic.” He shook his head and continued to read the report.

When the others arrived, Westgale made his way to the front of the room. He looked solemnly from face to face. “There are no words to express what I’m feeling at this moment,” he said. “To think that

Lawson Pierce was in some way involved in this disastrous turn of events breaks my heart and soul.” He paused. “Without that man’s assistance, I wouldn’t be president. He supported me in every way imaginable. And now, through his actions, he’s completely destroyed my legacy, and more importantly, that of the PBA.”

Champ Sutton rose. “With all due respect, Mr. President, are we not being premature? Maybe we’re looking at another corporate sabotage like what we saw with Vexton-Tech.” He didn’t sound convincing.

Dave Perry rose. “The more I think about this case, the more convinced I become that S1H is behind the entire thing. I believe they knew about that mineral, not just that it could be used as a narcotic and make them loads of money through drug trafficking, but that the mineral’s medicinal potential could put a real damper on the company’s business of healing people.”

“All we have to do is look at the scope of this criminal operation. There is absolutely no way this is the work of some corporate moles. Oh, no... this has to be the work of a substantial, highly corrupt organization—and unfortunately it looks like it’s one this country has admired for many years.” Anger flushed Westgale’s face red. “How will we ever rebound from something like this?”

In another conference room down the hall, Gil was meeting with the heads of the government’s law enforcement agencies, preparing to coordinate a full-out blitz on S1H. “This all has to take place simultaneously,” said Martin Stevens, the director of the National Department of Investigation.

“I agree. It’ll be quite an undertaking, considering the scope of S1H’s business. But it’s paramount that we approach this operation with complete synergy,” Gil said.

Stevens rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “I’m concerned about the danger our men and women could be facing when executing these raids,” he said with a grimace. “After all, we’re talking about a group who’ve gone to the extent of using a very rare high-tech laser-gun and tree-eyes.”

“Are you thinking we should involve the military?” Gil asked.

“As insurance, I think it’d be wise to have units on standby,” Stevens replied.

“What are your thoughts, Colonel?” Gil asked Colonel Peters.

The colonel thought for a moment, his face etched with concern. He sighed heavily. “I agree. But what I’m fearing far more is the *public’s* reaction if and when we confirm Step 1 Health is involved in this madness, especially considering how close Lawson Pierce and his daughter are to this Administration.”

CHAPTER 13

It had been a long day for Step 1 Health Chairman Lawson Pierce. He'd just finished his third business meeting and was looking forward to returning to the office to tie up some loose ends before he and his wife, Brooke, flew to Australia for a much-needed vacation.

His luxurious white grand-electro was waiting for him when he exited the building. "Back to the office, Timothy," he said to the driver as he got in. Then he noticed the driver was a much larger man than Timothy. Before he could do anything beyond gasp, the passenger door opened and a very skinny man slid into the backseat beside Lawson. He was holding a laser-gun.

Startled a second time, Lawson turned toward the man. "Wait a second—Dirk? What is going on?" he asked in shock.

"Don't be alarmed, Lawson," Dirk replied as the electro pulled away from the curb.

"Where the hell is Timothy?"

"He'll be fine, providing he can find a ride home. I guess next time he'll know better than to leave such an impressive vehicle unlocked."

"What are you doing, Dirk?"

"We're just going for a little ride. So, you just sit back and relax."

"Listen to me, you little runt, I need to get back to the office. So tell your thug to turn this damn electro around, right now."

"Now, now, now... You're not used to taking orders, are you?" Dirk answered with a sneer, moving the gun as a reminder to

Lawson. “All your employees cater to your every whim. Always the king of the castle, huh, Lawson?”

After driving for twenty minutes, the driver pulled the grand-electro over to the side of a dirt road. Lawson had no idea where he was. Dirk waved the laser-gun, indicating that he should get out. The driver and Dirk followed suit. Dirk waved the gun toward the rear of the white electro and Lawson noticed for the first time a dark green van waiting for them. “In you go, Lawson,” Dirk said.

“Where the hell are we going?” Lawson demanded as they climbed into the van.

“Please, Lawson. Army here likes quiet when he’s driving,” Dirk replied calmly, nodding toward the driver.

* * *

Two dozen National Investigation agents stormed Step 1 Health’s New York City headquarters, part of a simultaneous blitz on the entire operation. Once the agents had secured the building, Director Martin Stevens entered and escorted CEO Nora Pierce Davidson into her office.

“Oh my God! What is happening?” she exclaimed once her initial panic had passed.

“Have a seat, ma’am,” Stevens said politely. “Where’s your father?” he asked.

“He’s not here. He’s been on the road all day,” Nora replied. Her eyes flitted to the activity beyond the glass of her office wall before focusing on Stevens. “Why are you and your men here? Did something happen to my father? Are you looking for him?”

Calmly, Stevens pulled up a chair and sat directly in front of her. He then explained, in detail, what was taking place.

“There has to be a mistake, sir,” Nora cried. “There’s no way my father could have known anything about that mineral, let alone the fact it could be made into a narcotic or be used for medicinal purposes. And as far as L&B Products is concerned, it’s one of our most valued divisions. It’s our health care line for children.” Her voice rose toward hysteria; Stevens maintained his calm.

“Before this raid took place, I spent quite some time studying your company. I must say, it is a rather enormous operation,” Stevens said.

Nora took a moment to gather herself; when she spoke again, her voice was calmer as well. “That it is,” she agreed. “And we take immense pride in our accomplishments. Dad and I have worked tirelessly to build the company into not only the largest, but the most important health care company in the country.”

“So large that I guess you may not be privy to all that is going on,” Stevens suggested. “Would you not agree, ma’am?”

Nora gaped at him a moment, then stood and walked toward the door. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m not speaking any further without my lawyer. We have a business to run here,” she said. “So, unless you’re placing me under arrest, I’m asking you to leave my office.”

“I’m going to ask you again: where is your father?” Stevens asked, a hard edge to his voice.

Her façade of control crumbled; Nora grabbed her flash-pad and tried to contact her father. There was no response. “He’s not answering,” she informed Stevens, hysteria tingeing her voice again. She sat down at her desk, face blank with shock.

Seconds later, two agents entered her office and began methodically gathering data. Nora stepped out into the reception area, and watched as the agents made their way through the building, moving from office to office.

By now, the company’s chief legal counsel, Robert Capella, had arrived. “Are they allowed to do this, Robert?” Nora asked the attorney.

He slowly exhaled. “They have a federal warrant,” he replied. “They could take a wrecking ball to this building right now, if they so wished, and there’d be nothing we could do about it. Where’s your father, Nora?” Capella asked.

“I have no idea. I tried reaching him on his flash-pad, and I had no luck,” Nora replied. Her flash-pad buzzed, and she scrambled to answer it. She read the message. “Oh my, that’s Dad’s driver. Dad’s grand-electro was stolen,” she told Capella.

“This is insane, Nora. As we speak, every facility this company owns is being raided, and we have no idea where the hell your father is,” Capella said, shaking his head in disbelief.

One of the agents approached. “Excuse me, ma’am, but we require access to your father’s office, and it appears we need a code to enter,” he said.

Nora turned to Capella, who gave her a nod encouraging her to comply. Walking slowly to the panel by the large steel doors Nora pressed a series of buttons with a trembling hand. The doors opened. Nora stepped inside.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll have to ask you to leave the room,” the agent said.

Nora reluctantly stepped out of the office. “Can’t you do anything to stop this?” she asked Capella, who gently took her arm and led her back to the reception area.

“Do you realize how serious these accusations are?” he said, eyebrows pinched in concern. “Believe me, Nora, I know how these things work. This wouldn’t be happening if the government didn’t have just cause. Now, I need you to be honest with me. Do you have any idea why this is happening?” he asked.

“Damn it, Robert, I have absolutely no clue whatsoever what is going on, or what my father’s done,” Nora exclaimed. “I mean, the things they’re accusing us of are beyond comprehension.”

Not far away, in Jersey City, Gil and his team were preparing to conduct a full inspection of SIH’s L&B Products. “Gentlemen, how can I help you?” Cameron Pierce said as he came out to the reception area at his receptionist’s summons. When Gil presented the search warrant, Pierce growled, “This is private property. You just can’t come barging in here!” he yelled. “Do you realize this company is owned by Step 1 Health?”

Gil had studied the profiles on the Pierce family. Although they were brothers, Cameron and Lawson were different in many ways. Whereas Lawson was known for his relaxed and analytical disposition, Cameron was hyper and emotive. Even their choice of

clothing style was worlds apart, Gil noted—Cameron had shaggy hair and was dressed casually; Lawson had an extensive collection of designer suits and was always perfectly groomed.

“Please step aside and allow my agents to perform their work,” Gil said sternly.

Mumbling wordlessly, Cameron grabbed his flash-pad from his desk and made a call.

“Is it true, Uncle Cameron?” Nora cried when she picked up. “Have you been shipping drugs from the L&B warehouse? And where the hell is my father?”

“I don’t know where your father is. But what I do know is you’d better get Robert Capella down here, now,” Cameron hissed.

“I’m not sending anybody anywhere until you answer my questions!” Nora shouted.

Cameron didn’t respond. He simply dropped his flash-pad to the floor and anxiously watched Gil’s team tear the place asunder.

“Jackpot!” called out one of the agents as he pulled a container of green-hearts from the back of the safe in Cameron’s office. Cameron watched numbly as a Narcotics Policing diagnostic machine confirmed the pills were a match, and offered no resistance as his arms were pulled behind his back and handcuffs clicked around his wrists. In a state of shock, Cameron Pierce was taken away.

* * *

“Ah, here we are,” Dirk said as the van pulled into the back entrance of the Regal Show Room. “I’m sure you spent many an evening in this very theater, wining and dining your elitist friends,” he sneered. “My being just a run-of-the-mill scientist, struggling to get by, it was always a little out of my league.”

“Is that what this is about? Are you looking for some kind of ransom payment?” Lawson asked with a raised brow.

“Always thinking about money. What is that slogan at S1H? Oh yeah: ‘We’re here because we care.’ Such beautiful words from such an ugly organization,” Dirk sneered.

“After all this time, I still can’t believe you’re so bitter at the fact I didn’t give you that contract.” Lawson laughed. “You see, Dirk, you may be a brilliant scientist, but you’re also a slimy little snake, and what you’re doing right now proves my point. I’m actually shocked that laboratory you’ve been running all these years has withstood the test of time.”

“Oh well, I may not be ‘Perfect Pierce,’ but I do my best,” Dirk scoffed in response. He nodded to Army to lead Lawson into the theater.

“Right there will be fine, Army,” Dirk said as the big man led Lawson to a black leather sofa situated on the stage. “Now just sit tight.”

“Just what in the hell are we doing here?” Lawson asked.

“We’re waiting for a mutual friend. According to the message he just sent me, he should be here shortly,” Dirk replied. “Keep your eye on him, Army,” he added as he exited the theater.

* * *

Back at the Freedom Home, Attorney General Champ Sutton was busy reviewing the information sent to him during the SIH raids when his secretary informed him he had a visitor who claimed to have important information.

“Come in, Shamir,” Sutton said to Gil’s lead investigator.

“I’m sorry to be bothering you at such a busy time, but I think I’ve discovered something very important,” Shamir said.

“Please, pull up a chair,” Sutton said, indicating the chair across from his desk. “So, what do you have for me?”

“It has to do with Jeremy Reasoner,” Shamir said calmly.

Sutton leaned forward. “I thought there was more to this guy than what he wants us to believe,” he replied. “What were you able to learn?”

“I had our forensic financial people meticulously analyze the investments that he’s supposedly been living off of over the last thirty years, and they discovered it’s all been a sham.”

“The numbers were forged?”

“The entire portfolio and the deed to the farm were forged. He’s been fooling the government for thirty years. And it’s no surprise, considering how well this was orchestrated.”

“How in God’s name has he been able to pull this off?”

“He’s had loads of help.”

“Do you know who was working with him?”

“Yes, sir. It was the Fryman Group. It appears Edgar Fryman himself was the actual orchestrator of this charade.”

“Is this for certain?”

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“This shouldn’t surprise us, Shamir. After all, it was the Fryman Group’s financing that enabled Lawson Pierce to see his vision through, and in turn enabled the Fryman Group to become such a powerhouse. Now, please tell me we’ve maintained our surveillance on Reasoner.”

“Oh yes. As we speak, our agents are secretly watching him shop at his local supermarket.”

“Great. They’ll need to bring him in. I’m also going to add Fryman to our APB list.”

* * *

Jeremy Reasoner sat in handcuffs on a plane, headed to the Federal Justice Center in Washington. He shook his head. Life had been good. He’d thought it would last forever. But when Moon Shade Bluff became the focus of the nation’s attention, he’d feared his life would never be the same.

He had once been young and determined to make a real difference in the world. After spending months researching the concept of alternative medicine, he’d created a company called Earthly Remedies, investing his life savings in the business. It didn’t take him long to realize how challenging it would be to see his dreams come to fruition. The obstacles were enormous. Money was going out much faster than it was coming in.

He’d kept seeing features on the World Connect regarding the American Medical Organization’s yearly conference. Come hell or high water, he’d decided he was going to get there, even if it meant paying his own way. Somehow he’d pulled it off. He found himself in a room with the most important medical minds in the country. He

was also thrilled to find that, amongst the purveyors of traditional medicine, there were also many in attendance who supported alternative medicine.

Veterinarian Frank Langford's story about Sally the Alaskan Malamute had intrigued him. When he got home, he read everything he could about Vexton and the supposedly magical powers of Moon Shade Bluff. He was excited about the possibilities, but what could he do about it? Just recently married and struggling to keep his company afloat, he desperately required financial assistance.

After stumbling across a documentary on the Fryman Group, he'd made several calls, hoping to set up a meeting with Edgar Fryman, to no avail. There was no way Edgar Fryman was going to take time from his busy schedule to meet with someone he didn't even know. Accepting that, he made an appointment to see one of his underlings. On the plane ride to Chicago he had gone over his presentation time and time again. Although he was most interested in the prospects of Moon Shade Bluff, he also had ambitious plans for other projects.

When he arrived at the Fryman Group's luxurious office tower, he realized he was early for his appointment and decided to grab some breakfast. Entering the lounge he recognized a man sitting at a corner table, by himself. Those long dark sideburns, that pug nose on a face that resembled a bulldog's—there was no doubt it was Edgar Fryman himself. Jeremy began to approach, then noticed Fryman was speaking into his flash-pad—no, yelling: “And I want every damn cent! Do you understand?”

Jeremy had stopped a few feet from the table, unsure what to do next. Should he turn and retrace his steps? Close the short distance between himself and Fryman's table? Fryman made the choice for him. Looking up, he asked, “Can I help you, young man?”

“I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to intrude on your space,” Jeremy had said nervously.

Fryman waved that away. “So, what brings you to Fryman Towers?” he asked.

Jeremy took a deep breath. “I'm hoping to attain funding for my business.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I have an eleven o’clock meeting scheduled with Allison Murray.”

Fryman leaned back in his chair. “Ah, Allison. She’s my newest investment specialist. A very bright young gal.”

“I’m really looking forward to meeting with her.”

“Have a seat, friend,” Fryman said, directing Jeremy to the seat across from him. “I’m Edgar Fryman,” he said as he put out his hand.

“I’m Jeremy Reasoner. It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” Jeremy said as they shook hands.

“Now, you look like you’re starving. How about you join me for the breakfast special?” He consulted the menu lying on the table. “Let’s see... today it’s a bowl of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, and toast.” He looked up. “How does that sound?”

“That sounds great,” Jeremy replied, enthused by the happenstance meeting.

Fryman tapped his flash-pad to place the order, then looked at Jeremy. “So, what type of business are you running?”

“It’s called Earthly Remedies; it’s an alternative medicine company.”

“Hmm, that field really continues to flourish,” Fryman said. He thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what. Since I’ll have a free hour or so after breakfast, why don’t you make your presentation to me instead of Allison? To receive clearance, anything you propose to her would have to go through my office anyway.”

“Uh... yeah, I would really appreciate that, sir,” Jeremy replied, amazed at his good fortune.

“Okay, I’ll inform Ally.” Fryman messaged her from his flash-pad. “There we go. Now, before breakfast is served, tell me a little bit about yourself and what your goals are.”

Jeremy told Fryman about his life and his aspirations for the future. “My dream is to one day own a farm like this one,” he said as he displayed a photo of a picturesque farm on his flash-pad.

As Fryman was admiring the photo, his flash-pad buzzed. “Just give me a minute,” Fryman said. Jeremy waited. Fryman appeared

agitated by what he was hearing in his earpiece. “The answer’s no. The deadline is tomorrow noon. I already gave the bastard an extension,” he said angrily. He abruptly ended the call and leaned forward with a piece of advice for Jeremy. “Never, ever be sympathetic in business. It’s the surest way to guarantee failure.”

After breakfast, Edgar brought Jeremy to his office on the top floor of the building. When he entered, Jeremy was taken aback by the office’s lack of extravagance. “Surprised?” Fryman said, watching him. “People always expect lavish decor—expensive furniture, paintings, and sculptures—but that’s just not me. In fact, even young Allison’s office down on the sixth floor is far more exquisite than mine,” Fryman said with a grin as he tossed his overcoat onto a chair.

“That being said, I think this guy here definitely adds some pizzazz to the decor,” Fryman added as he directed Jeremy’s attention toward a tank containing a large lizard in one corner of the room. “This is Romeo. He’s a *Uromastyx*. He’s a good guy, but as you can see, he’s very shy,” Fryman said as the lizard cowered at the back of the tank. “Come on, Romeo. It’s feeding time.” Fryman tapped on the glass, prompting Romeo to come to life. The lizard hissed aggressively as Fryman lifted a jar of crickets and dumped them into the tank. “It’s hard work taking care of this fellow, but he’s well worth it,” he said, smiling as he turned away from the tank. “Now, it’s time for you to show me why I should give you my money.”

Jeremy asked Fryman if he could use his flash-screen to display the view-file he’d prepared.

“By all means.” He sat back, placed his feet up on his desk, and watched the presentation. When the view-file ended, Fryman clapped his hands. “Very impressive... very interesting stuff,” he added.

“I also prepared these financial projections,” Jeremy said as he handed Fryman the document.

Fryman took a few minutes to study the numbers. “Hmm... you’re an impressive young man, Jeremy, and your business plan is rather fascinating,” Fryman said, rubbing his hand along his chin. “But I’ll be honest with you and tell you that the only aspect of your

presentation that really piqued my interest was your thoughts on the mountain in Vexton County. Yeah, it's quite strange, but there may be something to that."

"Actually, that's the project I'm really planning to focus on," Jeremy said enthusiastically.

"What? Are you planning to climb the mountain with some garden tools and start digging?" Fryman laughed. "If there is something to this, it will be a major undertaking." He paused and headed back toward the lizard tank. "I'll tell you what. I'll call on one of the mining companies that I control, and I'll also call on an associate of mine who happens to be a brilliant scientist, and we'll get you the answers you're looking for. And then, if we discover something of substance, we'll discuss the matter further."

* * *

As Lawson Pierce sat in that cold, damp theater with a menacing giant watching his every move, he remained surprised by—no, totally unprepared for—this turn of events. He feared for his life. "Do you realize what the men you work for have done?" Lawson asked the hulking Army.

"I do what I'm paid to do," Army replied gruffly.

"Don't you realize that eventually they're going to have to eliminate you, considering you know their secrets?" Lawson said.

"Please, just remain quiet and everything will be fine, Mr. Pierce," Army calmly replied.

Lawson sat quietly, surveying the once grand theater. Dirk was correct; he used to frequent the Regal Show Room, back when he began mingling with society's elite. In fact, he'd been in attendance during the theater's final play, *The Heart Within*. It was a year to the day after the War Within was declared over, and the play had been presented in an attempt to erase the feelings of horror the war had left by focusing on a future America seen through the eyes of children and the elderly.

During the play, youngsters were paired with seniors and given a general topic, such as family, school, war, and so on, then asked to

engage in conversation by asking each other questions about the topic. The final segment of the play saw a ten-year-old boy named Willis share the stage with a one-hundred-year-old man named Albert. What intrigued Lawson and the others in the theater was the fact that these were real people sharing their heartfelt thoughts on life during a very difficult period.

When young Willis was asked by the narrator why he was proud to be an American, he responded by saying, "I'm proud to be an American because we care about each other so much. Like my mother—she's a doctor. During the war she helped so many strangers who were hurt. She did everything she could to make them feel better."

When Albert was asked the same question, he slowly rose with the aid of his walker, and made his way over to young Willis. He gave the boy a hug. "What makes me proud to be an American is knowing there are youngsters in our society, like little Willis here, who will honor the future of this country with compassion and respect," he said into the microphone. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

To end the play, Willis was asked to make a wish and tell the audience what it was. "Okay... I wish Albert could live another hundred years," he said with a grin. When Albert was asked to do the same, he joked, "My wish is that Willis's wish doesn't come true." As expected, the reply brought smiles.

A door creaked open, followed by the sound of a gravelly voice, bringing Lawson back to the present. He quickly turned his head. Dirk was standing in the entrance with Edgar Fryman. Fryman was wearing a black leather overcoat. The passage of time had left only a few strands of gray hair struggling to span his large head. He'd maintained his long sideburns, but they were now salt and pepper. Again, Lawson slipped into the past. This time he recalled his follow-up meeting with Fryman.

"So, now that this government has finally cleared the way, how does it feel to be on the cusp of reinventing the entire health industry?" Fryman grinned.

Lawson shook his head with a wry smile. "For a while there, I was really concerned the whole concept was going to be shot down."

"The people of America spoke, Lawson. And finally our friends in Washington took their heads out of the sand and saw the light." Fryman paused to light up a cigar. "I usually refrain from smoking in my office, but since this is such a special occasion, I can't resist. Here you are," he added as he handed Lawson a cigar and reached over to light it for him.

"I really hope our being the innovators of the concept will enable us to get a firm grip on the market," Lawson said.

"Firm grip? With the resources Step 1 Health will now have behind it, it'll be more like a stranglehold," Fryman said as he puffed his cigar, blowing rings of smoke toward the ceiling. "Now, regarding the finalization of our deal, there is one more thing we need to agree on," he added.

"And what might that be?" Lawson asked with a raised brow.

"Well, in order for that bill to pass, I had to use my connections with the HKM."

"The HKM?"

"Do you recall hearing about the fourteen American undercover federal agents who were recently released by the HKM government after being detained for the last ten months?"

"Of course, I'd have to be living under a rock not to have heard."

"Well, you're looking at the man who made that happen."

"How did you become involved in that?"

Fryman had described his meeting with Vice-President Michael Scott:

"I'm sorry I had to drag you all the way out here, but I'm sure you understand why we couldn't meet at my office," said Scott.

"It's actually quite nice out here. Sometimes it's rather refreshing to get out of the office and enjoy nature," Fryman replied, nervously twirling a twig between his fingers.

"I'm going to be frank with you. It doesn't look good, Edgar. Personally, I think the idea is solid, but right now there's absolutely no way the bill will pass," the vice-president said, frowning.

"Even after all that expert testimony?" Fryman sneered. The twig snapped in half.

"As usual, conventional thinking is stifling innovation."

"And the president?"

"Like me, she's most definitely in favor of the bill passing, but our hands are tied."

"So tell me, Michael: if this is all you have for me, why in the world did you drag me out into the middle of nowhere?"

"Because the president and I believe you can help us get the bill passed."

"I'm all ears."

"If our government isn't able to get those fourteen federal agents out of the HKM within the next few weeks, we're done—without a doubt. In fact, those in Congress who voted to risk the lives of those fourteen men and women are the very same people preventing the bill from passing."

"Ah... let me see if I have this right. I use my HKM connections to get those agents released, and then innovation somehow finds its way into Congress."

Lawson remembered Fryman concluded that story with a grin.

"And there you have it," he said.

"That is truly amazing... and somewhat disturbing," Lawson replied, startled by the revelation.

"That's how it works, my friend. Self-preservation is every politician's greatest motivator."

"How did you pull it off?"

Fryman looked Lawson in the eye, then tapped a few buttons on his flash-pad. Within seconds a cabinet at the back of the office opened. Fryman walked over and retrieved a container of heart-shaped green pills. "Now, when I was reviewing your company's

subsidiaries, I came across a company called L&B Products," he said.

"Yeah, that's our children's line of health care products. It's being run by my brother, Cameron," Lawson explained. "The company's Fun Drop vitamins are very popular. They're being distributed worldwide."

"Yes, I noticed that you're even shipping them to the HKM's central health care depot," Fryman said, puffing his cigar.

"That's something that was dear to my father's heart. He believed that the welfare of children around the world shouldn't be restricted by political conflicts," Lawson explained.

"That doesn't surprise me. Your father was a very caring soul."

"So, are you asking me to ship these to the HKM?" Lawson asked as he picked up the container and studied the pills. "Is this part of the deal you made?"

"Exactly."

"Are they some type of vitamin?"

"Some people might refer to them as that, but most people simply call them drugs or narcotics." Fryman laughed. "The great thing is, the HKM government wanted these drugs so badly that not only did they agree to release the agents, but they're also willing to pay me a very fair price, on a continuous basis, for years to come."

"Ha... that's a good one." Lawson chuckled and puffed on his cigar. When he looked at Fryman, he noticed he wasn't laughing. "You are joking, aren't you?"

"Just consider them a new and improved version of your Fun Drops," Fryman said.

"Wait a second. You aren't joking. These really are drugs."

"Yes, they are. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that a good business deal also shouldn't be restricted by political conflicts."

"Yeah, but this isn't a business deal; it's drug trafficking."

"Actually, once the pills find their way to the HKM, they're legal. I'm relying on you to get them there," Fryman said with a smirk. "It'll be very simple for your company. I will have boxes of these

pills discretely shipped to L&B Products on a periodic basis, and you will send them along with your Fun Drops to the HKM."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"So I take it you're refusing to oblige?"

"I can't believe this. Did you seriously think I would agree to this?"

"You ungrateful little idiot. If it weren't for me that bill would never have passed. But if you don't want my money, you don't have to take it. I'm sure you won't have trouble finding another investment firm that will gladly hand you all that money," Fryman said sarcastically.

"This is sheer blackmail."

"That's such a harsh term. I view it more as a very enticing business proposition."

"So, you're telling me that if I don't accept this 'proposition,' you're going to renege on our deal?"

"Yeah, and unfortunately, because the investment community is such a close-knit group, I'd have to make sure everyone's aware of your brother Cameron's gambling issues."

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you think I don't know why your father left the business solely to you?"

"My brother's gambling issues are in the past."

"I certainly hope so, considering he once owed the Eternal close to two million dollars."

"How do you know about that?"

Fryman sighed and leaned forward. "My friend, I am the Eternal," he said calmly.

Lawson sat back in his chair, stunned. "Uh... did you just admit to being the person behind the largest racketeering outfit in America?" he mumbled. "I know you've never been recognized as the most ethical businessman in the world, but—the Eternal?"

Fryman rose and came around his desk to pat Lawson on the back. "Don't fret, my friend. Eighty percent of what I do is legitimate. It's the other twenty percent that makes the real money."

He stubbed out his cigar in a marble ashtray on the corner of the desk and tossed it into a wastebasket.

Still stunned, Lawson watched Fryman feeding his pet lizard. "How have you gotten away with it all these years?" he asked.

"I work very hard at it. You see, having a wise exit strategy is the most important part of any business deal—legitimate or otherwise," Fryman answered, unloading a bag of worms into the tank. "Come and get it, Romeo... that's my boy." He laughed as the lizard devoured the worms.

Lawson stood abruptly and ran his hands over his face. "I can't believe this!" he bellowed.

"Shh," Fryman said. "Quiet. You're frightening Romeo."

Lawson slouched back down in the chair. "I worked so hard to make this happen, and now you're telling me I'm about to borrow money from one of the biggest crooks in this country," he groaned.

"Give your head a shake, man. Big business is ugly. It's corrupt. It's dog eat dog. Do you think one becomes a multibillionaire in this society by being a nice guy?" Fryman waved an arm at the door. "If you wanna walk out that door and end up like the worms I just threw to Romeo, go ahead and be my guest."

Lawson's senses reeled, confusion scrambled his mind, but his ambition to succeed remained strong. He'd worked so hard to get where he was, and without Fryman behind him, he'd be done. He wouldn't dare think of exposing him. He'd heard stories of the Eternal's wicked ways, and betraying Fryman was now a terrifying prospect. He also realized that finalizing this deal was the only way to prevent his brother's former gambling problems from being made public. Lawson slowly exhaled. "I know one day this will probably come back to haunt me... but you have a deal," he said somberly.

"I believe in you, Lawson. Think of what you've accomplished. It's absolutely amazing," Fryman said with conviction. "I know for a fact your father would be extremely proud of you."

"Hello, Lawson... it's been a while," said Fryman as he and Dirk each pulled up a chair.

“You sick bastard,” Lawson replied with disdain.

“Is that the appreciation I receive for helping you turn your company into the largest in the country?” Fryman said. “Judging by that suit you’re wearing, I’d say our partnership was extremely beneficial to you.”

Lawson could barely contain his anger. “I regret the day I ever accepted a single dollar of your blood money!”

“Oh my, where’s all this anger coming from? There may be a gun pointing at you right now, but there sure wasn’t the day you accepted my money. It’s amazing, how the desire for success can cause someone to sink so low,” Fryman sneered.

“The fact that I got into the gutter with somebody like you sickens me. You and your slimeball associate are nothing but vermin.” Glaring at Fryman, Lawson stabbed a finger toward Dirk.

“You know what sickens *me*, Mr. Perfect? The way you became all political after *my* money put you on the map. Placing your financial support behind the wretched Peace-Bringers when you knew how strongly I was opposed to their inane political platforms. Helping to enable that weak and delusional yes-man, Westgale, to deplete our military down to a group of useless, pimple-faced cadets,” Fryman snapped.

“The last time I checked the return you made on your S1H investment, it was by miles the biggest your firm has ever seen. Wasn’t it, Edgar?”

“Yeah, but it’s such a shame you’re now going to be viewed as the biggest *fraud* this *country* has ever seen.”

* * *

A tall lady with wavy red hair ran into the New York Justice Center, paused and looked around, then strode over to the front desk.

“So, what brings you here, ma’am?” asked the officer on duty.

“I thought it was important to bring this here,” the woman said. She showed the sergeant an identification card.

The officer looked at the ID card. It bore a photograph of a man with neatly coiffed white hair. The name on the card was Evan Sylvester.

“And your name is?” asked the sergeant, reaching for her flash-pad.

“Sandra—Sandra Overton,” the woman replied. She looked anxious.

The officer spoke into her flash-pad, then looked at Sandra. “My superior would like to speak with you, Ms. Overton,” she said, and led Sandra to his office.

“Where did you find this, Miss Overton?” the officer asked, looking at the ID card the sergeant handed to him when they’d entered.

“I found it outside the old Regal Show Room,” Sandra answered.

“What in the world were you doing there?” the officer asked. “That theater is nothing but an empty shell.”

“I run a New York City theater group for young children and I was taking them on a bus tour of past and present theaters in the city,” Sandra explained.

“Where exactly did you find the card?” the officer asked.

“When we came out of the bus to take photos, I found it in the ravine along the east side of the building. I remembered seeing this man’s photo on the World Connect.”

“Hmm...” the officer said as he turned the card around and noticed a dark red blotch on the back. It looked like blood.

CHAPTER 14

After Cameron Pierce was arrested and the L&B Products building had been secured by his agents, Gil made his way by robo-copter to join Martin Stevens and his group at the Step 1 Health headquarters. “Do you think Nora was aware of any of this?” Gil asked Stevens when he arrived.

“She’s claiming she was completely unaware any of this stuff was happening, but that’s all we were able to get from her. The company’s attorney has now advised her and all of her executives to avoid speaking with us,” Stevens replied, his frustration clear in his voice.

“What about Cameron Pierce?” Gil asked.

“He has also heeded the attorney’s advice,” Stevens replied.

* * *

Tension hung heavy in the air of the Regal Show Room. “How could you?” Lawson shook his head in dismay. “How could you have held back the truth about that mineral? And then killed two innocent men in the process!” he shouted.

“Sadly, those men knew more than they needed to know. And as I’m sure you can recall, before the New Order Treaty was established that mountain would have been property of our wretched government, with no chance for *anyone* with half a brain to have prospered from it,” Fryman answered calmly.

“You’re pathetic!” Lawson growled.

“You have it all wrong, Lawson. I actually did both you and society a favor,” Fryman answered with a grin. “Now, sure, if that information had been made available to the public all those years ago, I would have lost most of that precious money I put into your greedy hands. But there would have been far more for *everyone* to lose.”

“What are you talking about?” Lawson snapped.

Fryman turned to Dirk. “Enlighten our friend, Dirk.”

Dirk rose and began pacing, as if he were lecturing. “You see, I’ve been studying that mineral for more than thirty years, and what that arrogant, self-worshipping Jack Ahar and his associates have discovered about it is only the tip of the iceberg. In time, as they continue their research, they will learn that that mineral has the power to turn the human body into an impenetrable shell against *every* serious illness known to man.”

Lawson sputtered for a moment. “You’re both psychopaths!” he yelled. Army pulled the gun closer to Lawson’s body as a warning. “How much has he paid you to go along with this sick plan?” Lawson asked Dirk.

“Actually, this may come as a shock to someone as money-hungry as you, but my motivation was purely altruistic,” Dirk replied, smiling.

“And I guess the manufacturing of illegal drugs has nothing to do with making money, does it?” Lawson retorted.

“Illegal? Those drugs are perfectly legal—in the HKM. I still laugh when I think of Edgar asking me to make them into green hearts. I remember him saying, ‘Green is for money, and the heart shape is for my love of money,’” Dirk said in a gravelly voice, mimicking Fryman. Fryman snickered.

“You sick bastards,” Lawson murmured.

“I’m sure most people would agree with you. But then again, you and most people wouldn’t understand. When fully utilized, that mineral would increase the average life expectancy of human beings to approximately 120 years. Do you realize what that would

mean? It wouldn't be a giant asteroid or a nuclear war bringing about man's demise. Oh no, mankind would meet its end from the chaos created by an uncontrollable mass of humanity!" Dirk said with feeling.

"It's a real shame we're having this very thought-provoking debate while the authorities are raiding your business," Fryman said matter-of-factly.

"You set me up! You rotten son of a bitch!" Lawson growled as he stood up, only to be pushed back down by Army, whose breathing was becoming heavier by the second.

"That's correct. As I've always said, 'Every business plan requires a solid exit strategy,'" Fryman sneered. "The authorities must be wondering where the big boss is. And then there's your daughter and your brother. They must be ashamed that you knew all about that mineral for all these years and kept it a secret, solely for your own greedy reasons." He laughed.

"And you think you're gonna get away with all of this?" Lawson replied.

"Well, as they say in the world of fixed gambling, 'I think that's a sure bet.'" Fryman laughed again.

* * *

"Mr. Reasoner, let me get this straight," Champ Sutton said. "After Dr. Langford told you about that dog appearing to be miraculously cured, you met with Edgar Fryman, hoping he would provide you with funding, so that you could perform your own inspection of Moon Shade Bluff. Is this correct?"

"That's correct, sir," said Reasoner, his expression somber. "After our initial meeting, he called me back several weeks later. I was very surprised to hear from him.

"When his secretary brought me into his office, he was speaking on his flash-pad. It sounded like he was arranging to collect funds from some restaurant owner. As he was wrapping up the phone call, he became quite belligerent. I can still remember him telling the guy, 'This is your last chance. If those funds aren't transferred to me by

Friday, you'll become an instant widower. Do you understand, boy?" To tell you the truth, it terrified me."

He recounted the rest of that follow-up meeting:

"He ended the call and looked at me, shaking his head. 'Sometimes it's awful, Jeremy. These people make promises, and then just like that—' he snapped his fingers '—they break them. Me, I take pride in keeping my promises. Just like I promised I'd call you back. And here we are.'

"At that point he told me he was prepared to make me a deal. I was thrilled thinking he was willing to lend me the money. But instead, his plan involved paying me off by handing me a deed to a farm in Oklahoma, a load of money, and a fake investment portfolio.

"I was totally caught off guard. I figured he must have struck gold in that mountain. 'With all proper respect, Mr. Fryman,' I said to him, 'why are you doing this? What did you discover in that mountain?'

"He told me that wasn't my concern. 'You can either accept my deal,' he said, 'or walk out of this office just as you came in: a young man with big dreams who will always remain a dreamer.'

"He was getting angry, which scared me. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. Reluctantly, I accepted his offer. 'Where do I sign?' I asked.

"He laughed. He said, 'Where do you sign? Oh Jeremy, you're so naïve. The only thing you need to do, my friend, is walk out of this building and never mention any of this to anyone. Now, if you decide to do otherwise, well, I promise you'll be a very busy man... attending funerals. Is that understood?' I told him I fully understood.

"The last thing he said as I left the room was 'Just remember: I never break my promises.'"

Reasoner sat back with a heavy sigh, as if the confession had taken all the air out of him.

"Do you realize what your negligence and selfishness has contributed to?" Sutton asked Reasoner.

"I had no idea what was going on, sir. And after he threatened me I figured it'd be wise to keep my mouth shut," Reasoner replied.

“Did you not wonder why he was being so gracious with you, and why he demanded your silence?”

“Of course I did. On a daily basis. Years went by, but I never heard a single word about Moon Shade Bluff, until I watched that recent press conference from Vexton,” Reasoner said. “I realize I should have come forward. I guess fear got the best of me.”

* * *

“There’s an empty dark green van parked behind the building,” Agent Gallio reported to Gil as he flew above the theater. “I checked the license plate, but it’s not registered.”

“Keep your eyes on that van. Our scope’s been able to capture some images through one of the windows,” Gil replied from a fake delivery truck parked at the side of the theater. “From what we can see, there are four people inside.”

“Are you able to identify any of them?” Gallio asked.

“As expected, we’ve got Edgar Fryman, Lawson Pierce—whoa, this is interesting. There’s a rather large somebody, holding Lawson Pierce at bay with a laser-gun that’s on kill mode,” Gil said.

“And the fourth individual?”

“We can’t identify him.”

“Can you tell what’s going on in there?”

“It appears rather intense. It looks like the other three are holding Lawson Pierce hostage.”

“Are you going in?”

“We currently have four of our bomb-detection robots checking each side of the building for any signals. If and when we receive clearance, we’ll be going in.”

* * *

“For God’s sake, how can you support these rotten bastards, knowing what they’ve done?” Lawson said, looking Army in the eye. The burly henchman’s eyes were beginning to water, and the sound of his breathing was more a grumble.

Suddenly, he let out a roar that made everyone stumble back a step in shock. “You bastards!” he yelled, turning the gun toward Dirk and Fryman.

“What are you doing, you overgrown child?” Dirk yelled.

“I’ve been waiting for this opportunity since the day of that Vexton press conference, which I was watching with my wife—who, as you’re well aware, Uncle Edgar, suffers terribly from three separate autoimmune disorders,” Army shouted.

“Put the gun down, Army!” Fryman shouted. “This isn’t going to do anything to help Kathy.”

“For thirty years, you bastards have been playing God. But now you’ll be exposed as two pathetic, self-absorbed liars!” Army shrieked.

“You’re making a big mistake, fat man,” Dirk said evenly.

“Ha! You’re such an idiot, Dirk. Did you seriously think my uncle was going to make an exception to the rule?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Dirk asked, glancing over at Fryman.

“You see,” Army drawled, “according to good ol’ Uncle Edgar’s script, you’re scheduled to be eliminated, right after Mr. Pierce here.”

“Don’t listen to him, Dirk. He’s out of his mind,” Fryman said, his gravelly voice a note higher.

“Don’t feel bad, Dirk. I’m certain after you and Mr. Pierce were dealt with, I would have met my fate through some unfortunate fatal accident, leaving, as usual, the great Edgar Fryman the only man left standing,” Army sneered.

“I’ve heard enough of this garbage,” Dirk said as he took a couple of steps toward Army.

“Take one more step and I’ll turn you into my *own* science experiment,” Army warned.

Seeing Army distracted by Dirk, Fryman reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his own laser-gun.

“Fryman has a gun!” Lawson shouted.

Army whirled toward Fryman. A split second later, *pew-pew-pew-pew* rattled around the old theater, the reports of each shot pinging off the walls. Fryman’s lifeless body hit the floor with a thud.

Dirk lunged at Army, but the much larger and more powerful man easily tossed him to the floor, dropping his gun in the process. As Army went for his gun, Dirk scrambled toward Fryman's gun and snatched it up. "Well, I guess now *I'll* be the last man standing," Dirk drawled, the gun trained on Army.

Again, a laser blast pinged around the room. Dirk Zarbo instantly crumpled. Behind him, Gil Robichaud stood in the front entrance of the theater, his laser-gun still buzzing from the blast.

Army dropped his gun and raised his arms. After a moment, Lawson Pierce hesitantly followed suit.

As he sat waiting with his attorney to be interrogated at Washington's Federal Justice Center, Lawson Pierce's mind reeled with consequences and implications. How could he have tarnished his father's memory the way he had? Then there were all the honest and dedicated employees of Step 1 Health, including the many doctors and nurses and support staff. Last but not least, he thought about his pride and joy, Nora, and how he'd let her down. A sob crept up the back of his throat, but he suppressed it viciously. He thought back to the day she was appointed Step 1 Health's CEO.

"So, how does it feel to be CEO of the largest company in America?" Lawson asked her with a smile.

Nora blushed. "Wow, I still can't believe it. I guess it helps when your father's the chairman."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Wait a second," he protested. "Those men and women in that boardroom would not have voted you in if they didn't fully believe in your abilities. Over the last twelve years, you've worked your way through every department in this company to get to where you are today. Everybody involved with this company realizes you deserve this."

When the doors of the interrogation room opened, Lawson raised his head and saw Westgale standing in the doorway, scowling. "How? How could you have done this?" he demanded as he entered

the room. He pounded the table in front of Lawson. “You’ve humiliated not only me, but this entire country! When this news breaks—God help us!”

Lawson sat listening, feeling dazed.

“I won’t have you speaking to my client in such a manner. In fact, Mr. Pierce will not be speaking with anyone at this time,” Robert Capella said firmly.

“Thank you, Robert, but I’ll speak for myself. Actually, I think it’s best you leave,” Lawson said.

“Leave? You’re in no position to speak to anyone without legal representation,” Capella replied.

“That’ll be all, Robert. I’ll call you if I need you. Right now, I need to deal with this matter personally,” Lawson said. Robert reluctantly left the room.

Seconds later, Champ Sutton entered. “I think you’d better see this,” he said to Westgale. He turned on the flash-screen at the front of the room and scanned a data-chip. “This was just confiscated from Dirk Zarbo’s Manhattan lab,” he said as the screen displayed a detailed report on the Vexton mineral. The report’s summary described a mineral capable of curing cancer, autoimmune disorders, diabetes... and any other number of medical wonders. “Ahar and several of his associates are reviewing loads of material from his lab as we speak,” Sutton added.

“Oh my God. Is this for real?” Westgale said as he continued reading. He suddenly turned back to Lawson, his face red with anger. “How could you be so evil, to keep something like this hidden away?”

“I don’t know anything about the mineral or this report. You have to believe me, William,” Lawson pleaded. “I’ve dedicated my life to health care, to helping people. I would never have withheld the medicines that mineral could make possible, let alone have people killed in order to do so.”

Sutton turned to Pierce. “Now, before we go any further, you need to tell me who you’ve been selling those pills to.”

“I wasn’t selling those pills to anyone,” Lawson answered. “Edgar Fryman blackmailed me into shipping the drugs to the

HKM's central health care depot. I know where our Fun Drops ended up, but as far as the drugs are concerned, all I know is that they were in some way being directed to the HKM government."

"Blackmailed by Fryman?" Westgale asked. Lawson explained the deal Fryman had forced him into.

"You're telling me the HKM government traded those fourteen agents for drugs?" Westgale asked, stunned.

"Precisely. And the crazy thing is, they've continued to buy the drugs off Fryman for the last thirty years," Lawson replied.

"I was a member of Congress at that time, and I was one of the few members strongly in support of the bill from the beginning, but I was certain there was no way it was going to pass," Westgale said. He shook his head. "I always wondered how in the hell it did. Now I guess I have the answer."

"I just can't believe how blinded I became by my own ambition. I never meant for any of this to happen," Lawson said softly, head bowed. "I've let so many people down, including you." He looked up. "I'm so sorry, William."

"Before I can accept an apology or a single word you've told me, a full investigation of this mess will need to be conducted," Westgale said.

"If you choose to believe anything I'm telling you, please believe me when I tell you Nora had absolutely no knowledge of Cameron and me shipping those pills," Lawson said.

Down the hall, Gil was interviewing Army, whose real name was Houston Armstrong. Emotionally distraught, remorseful, and furious that he'd been kept in the dark regarding the secret of Moon Shade Bluff, he was more than willing to divulge everything he knew, even if it meant incriminating himself.

"Please tell me the role you played in all this madness, Mr. Armstrong," Gil asked.

"I've been the Number Three person in the operation for the last fifteen years," Army replied.

"Behind Fryman and Dirk?"

“That’s correct. Because I was Fryman’s nephew, I was one of the few people he felt he could trust.”

Already deeply entrenched in Fryman’s racketeering operation, the Eternal, Army had been asked by Fryman to oversee what was being referred to as “the organization.”

“He brought me to a warehouse and showed me these heart-shaped green pills,” Army said. “I said I’d never seen them on the street, and he said, ‘That’s because they’re not. This is a very special project. I was able to broker a deal with a rather large partner, and it’s been running as smooth as silk for fifteen years.’ I asked him who the partner was and he said it was the HKM government—since they’d legalized and began overseeing the sale of certain narcotics, they’d become an important partner.”

“So, I take it, all this time your uncle never mentioned how that mineral could not only be used as a narcotic, but could also be used as a miracle drug,” Gil said.

Army took a deep breath. “I knew my uncle was a wicked person, but keeping that secret—that’s beyond belief; that’s evil.”

“To your knowledge, is there anybody else other than your uncle and Dirk Zarbo who knew or knows about the medicinal properties of the mineral?”

“No. I’m very confident there isn’t.”

“If the green-hearts were not being sold on American soil, how did they end up in the hands of American soldier JD Wren?” Gil asked.

“That was all Sylvain’s—Evan Sylvester’s—doing... and it cost him his life,” Army replied.

“What was Sylvester’s role, to begin with?”

“He worked under me, along with two other lifetime criminals—Hector Carlos and Vincent Bruno. They were enforcers for the Eternal, but eventually their main responsibility became managing the inventory and the logistics for the green-hearts. They were also responsible for monitoring the area in and around Moon Shade Bluff... until my uncle ordered their murders.”

CHAPTER 15

The entire Westgale Administration spent the next several days behind closed doors, piecing together evidence and planning a strategy for moving forward. “We can’t just shut them down, gentlemen. We’re talking about the most important corporation in the entire country, and one of our largest investment firms,” Westgale said to Dave Perry and Champ Sutton. As the investigation was still ongoing, they had managed to keep the details as to why they raided SIH out of the public domain. But for how long could they do this?

“So far, other than the fact they were shipping the narcotics, there doesn’t appear to be any other issues with Step 1 Health. And as far as Nora Pierce Davidson is concerned, after I thoroughly interviewed her, I believe she’s telling us the truth: she had no knowledge of what her father and uncle had been doing,” Sutton said.

“Are you suggesting we allow the company to continue to function with Nora maintaining her role as CEO?” Perry asked.

“Yes. I think it’d be in the best interest of everyone,” Sutton replied confidently.

“I agree, David,” Westgale added. “We must make certain Lawson Pierce and his brother are held accountable for their actions, but unless our investigation turns up something different, the way I see it, it is not necessary to go any further.”

“I concur,” Perry replied. “And the Fryman Group?”

“That’s a little trickier. It’ll probably take quite some time for that investigation to be completed,” Sutton replied, shaking his head.

“The fact that Fryman was operating the largest racketeering operation in the country alongside one of the largest investment firms... well, we’re looking at some very complex dealings. Fortunately, some of his key executives have come forward and are more than willing to speak. And they’ve agreed to keep the details surrounding his death under wraps, for the time being.”

Westgale frowned. “Our past government set this entire thing in motion by giving Fryman free rein to make a deal with the HKM government. That really sickens me.”

“That’s the other thing I wanted to discuss with you, sir,” Sutton said. “I’m of the opinion we also need to hold accountable those from our government who contributed to this madness.”

“Since former President Montgomery is no longer with us, I’ve arranged to meet with former Vice President Scott this evening,” Westgale replied.

“I’m sure it’ll be very interesting to see his response when you break the news to him,” Perry said in a droll voice.

Now seventy-two years old, former Republican, American vice president and current MAA supporter Michael Scott appeared much younger than his age. Still healthy and actively managing his own consulting firm since leaving politics twenty years earlier, he was a gregarious man who always enjoyed being in the public eye. Along with running his consulting firm he was also part owner of the New York Billionaires professional soccer club.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation, Michael,” Westgale said, leading him to the presidential drawing room. “Can I fix you a drink?”

“Oh boy, could I ever use one,” Scott replied. “My Billionaires really took it on the chin last night.”

“Now, let me see if I remember correctly... vodka and cranberry on the rocks?” Westgale asked.

“It still works for *me*,” Scott replied as he plopped down on a sofa. “Wow, I must say this is a pleasant surprise. It’s been way too long, William.”

“Yeah, I do miss those hard-fought political battles we used to have.”

“You were quite a stubborn little bugger, back in the day.”

“We Democrats had to be, or else you guys would’ve shredded us and fed us to the lions.”

“Oh no, we never would’ve taken the time to shred you, we’d have served you up whole,” Scott said, snickering. “All kidding aside, I was really surprised to hear you’ve decided not to run for reelection.”

“The last few months have really taken their toll on me.”

“Now, as a former Republican and of course, current Military Alliance supporter, I’d be lying to you if I told you I agreed with your presidential platform. However, I fully admire and respect your perseverance. And I can understand why you’d be so worn out, considering you now have to worry about Cobra Pix and Pinia, after dealing with that whole Vexton-Tech scandal.”

“I know you’re definitely no stranger to having to deal with turmoil. To this day, I’m still amazed at how you and President Montgomery handled that HKM hostage ordeal all those years ago.”

The former vice president suddenly sat up. “Those poor, but lucky souls. They were two days away from being executed. That we got them out of there was a miracle. I still make a point once a year to meet up with the eleven of the fourteen who are still living. As I’m sure you can imagine, there’s never a dry eye in the house.”

“What always amazed me is how, after that whole dreadful ordeal, those agents were suddenly released. It came out of nowhere. Did the HKM government ever give you and President Montgomery a reason why?” Westgale asked as he poured himself a cup of tea.

“When push came to shove, I guess they figured it’d be in their best interest to comply with our request,” Scott answered, a hint of nervous tension in his voice. “To be honest with you, William, when the president and I received word those fourteen men and women were on their way home, we really didn’t care why those twisted HKM bastards decided to release them.”

Westgale glared at Scott briefly, then pulled a small container of pills from his pocket and placed it on his desk. “Now, would *these* have had something to do with why those agents were released?” he asked sternly.

Michael Scott stared at the container. It conjured a vivid flashback.

“Are you ever on time for anything?” he snapped.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Michael, but I think what I’m going to tell you will make it worth the wait,” Edgar Fryman replied with a grin.

“You sly bastard. You did it, didn’t you?”

“They should all be released about six hours from now.”

“I don’t even know if I should ask, but I will. How the hell did you pull it off?”

“Very simple—my friends in the HKM government really took a liking to my exquisite little pills. My associate did such a fabulous job,” Fryman replied.

“So then it worked, just like you said it would,” Scott said, laughing.

“Before you contacted me, they’d already been checking out the pills for a few months, but I figured they’d come around. Those babies are more valuable than gold! Now that the HKM government has become the country’s primary drug dealer, I think it’s safe to say that the Eternal will be of great importance to them.”

“Great work, Edgar,” Scott said. He reached into his pocket and took out five one-hundred dollar bills and handed them to Fryman. “Now, since I’m feeling lucky, I figure it’s time to give the Billionaires another chance. Hopefully they’ll finally find a way to get out of their rut this Sunday, and I’ll see your man on Monday to collect.”

“Oh, I just love it when my customers bet with their heart instead of their head,” Fryman quipped. “Good luck, Michael.”

“What in the world are those, William?” Scott asked as he continued to stare at the container.

“Thirty years... even you had to have known in the back of your little scheming mind that one day this would come back to haunt you,” Westgale growled.

“I realize how stressed you’ve been lately, but you really need to calm down,” Scott said, blinking uneasily.

“Was President Montgomery in on this, too? Was she?” Westgale demanded.

Scott loosened his tie, leaned back on the sofa, and let out a gasp. “How in the hell did you find out?” he asked, his body trembling.

“The secret deal you made with Edgar Fryman—it’s no longer a secret,” Westgale replied. He then described in detail the course of events.

Scott listened intently, his face etched with fear and confusion. “Fryman was killed?” he said in shock.

“He was killed by my very own chief of security.”

Still stunned, Scott asked, “You mean to tell me this is all linked to that mountain in Vexton County?”

“Precisely,” Westgale answered. “Why is this so shocking to you?” he asked. “I even held a press conference about those pills.”

“Look, I’m not going to deny I was aware Fryman made a large drug deal with the HKM government in order to free those agents, but I knew nothing about where the drugs came from, or the fact that this Dennis Claremont and his associate were killed in the process,” Scott exclaimed.

“What about the Eternal? Are you going to tell me you weren’t aware he was running the largest racketeering operation in the country? Some of Fryman’s associates recall seeing you quite often.”

Scott sighed. “Yeah, I was fully aware of what Fryman was about, and so was President Montgomery,” he said. “But you see, he was very useful to our government, especially when it came to brokering deals internationally and helping us track down foreign terror groups.”

“You corrupt bastard!”

“Come on, William. You know as well as I do that the entire world is corrupt, and always will be. When the president and I made that deal

with Fryman all we cared about was bringing those fourteen American men and women home, where they belong. And we did it.”

“And of course, because the world is ‘corrupt,’ it was okay for you to bribe Congress. How are you able to look in the mirror at night? I’m sure your guilt must gnaw away at your conscience on a daily basis.”

“Oh, look who’s talking. If I recall correctly, wasn’t Lawson Pierce not only your favorite golfing buddy, but also your campaign’s special piggy bank?”

“And he, like you and those members of Congress, will face the consequences.”

“You’re a hypocrite, Mr. President. Look at the mess you created. Nobody wants you around here anymore. And now you’ve so badly alienated the youth of our country that they’re collectively clinging to a doctrine that spews out sheer hatred.”

“Wow, even in your twilight years, you haven’t lost the ability to come up with a good rant,” Westgale said as he tapped his flash-pad.

Seconds later, Gil Robichaud entered and walked over to Scott. “Michael Scott, you’re under arrest,” he said calmly.

“Hold on here. You can’t do this to me!” he exclaimed as Gil cuffed him.

“Don’t worry, Michael, you won’t be alone. Soon you’ll be reunited with some of your friends,” Westgale said as Gil escorted him out of the room.

“You’ll never get away with this!” Scott shouted on his way out.

* * *

Once Westgale was confident due diligence had been performed on the case, he and Gil headed to Vexton, where Westgale planned to go public with news of recent events. However, before doing so, he and Gil requested a meeting with Sharon and me at the Vexton Justice Center. We met in the main conference room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Claremont, it’s wonderful to see you again,” Westgale said as we all shook hands. “And how’s that adorable son of yours doing?”

“He’s doing very well. Thank you for asking,” I replied. “I don’t know if you recall the flash-message you sent him, but it really thrilled him.”

“Of course I remember sending him that message. And I also remember the kind thank you that was sent to *me*.” Westgale smiled. “I must tell you, the little, but important things like that really help me get through the day.” He gestured for Sharon and me to be seated. “Well, before I address the country tomorrow, Gil and I thought it’d be best for the both of you to learn, firsthand, the details of this most peculiar case.”

Sharon and I expressed our appreciation, adding that we wanted to learn everything we could about the case, no matter how difficult or painful.

As Gil began giving us the details, I realized that if Linda Washburn had not returned to Vexton, this entire investigation may still have been at a standstill. But as I listened to what Gil told us, my anger also grew.

“Now, when my agents went to search the Regal Show Room, they discovered two data-chips of great importance to this case,” Gil said as he took one of the chips and scanned it to the flash-screen at the front of the room.

Unsure what the data-chip might reveal, I took Sharon’s hand and held it tightly. The view-file began with a distorted image of a night sky. After a few seconds, the murky image began to come into focus. The screen suddenly went black, then shifted to an image in a forest. Slowly, the camera began to move eerily from tree to tree. We heard the hooting cry from an owl. After scanning the forest, the camera shifted toward a mountain. From there it ascended, displaying a shimmering turquoise light. Seconds later, the camera panned slowly across the mountaintop before coming to a standstill. In a flash there was Riley, his arms reaching for the sky, standing atop Moon Shade Bluff. The screen quickly faded to black.

“Those bastards!” I shouted in anger. *Who had recorded my child?*

“Are you sure you want me to carry on?” Gil asked gently as Westgale poured us both glasses of water.

“Yes. We would appreciate that,” I replied, as Sharon flashed me a sympathetic glance.

Gil approached the flash-screen again, and scanned the second data-chip. We watched images of leaves, tree branches, and all kinds of litter swirling through the air. Giant hailstones relentlessly pounded the ground. The piercing wind sounded like a thousand screaming demons. Every few seconds, thunder boomed like a cannon blast. The sky was black as night, although the time stamp said it was noon. Sharp-edged bolts of lightning began piercing the sky. I knew what was coming. I started trembling, and my eyes watered.

Suddenly, the footage moved to a robo-copter that emerged from the blackened clouds. “Oh my God,” I heard Sharon murmur as she held my hand as tightly as she could. And then a flash soared across the sky and hit the robo-copter. The screen faded to black.

I sat speechless. Then I wept. Sharon held me in her arms.

“Would you like some time alone?” Westgale asked us gently.

“I’m okay... thank you, sir,” I replied as I quickly regained my composure.

“As I’m sure you can tell by what you’ve seen and heard today, this entire cover-up was meticulously executed,” Westgale said.

“The really bizarre thing is, from what we can tell, the operation was in its final stage. The shipments of green-hearts we were able to track down were the last they had planned to send out,” Gil said.

“Has Narcotics Policing been able to track down the drugs in the HKM?” Sharon asked.

“No, and it really doesn’t surprise me,” Gil answered. “That country is so large, those drugs could be going anywhere.”

“What I’d like to know is how Dirk Zarbo fits into this madness,” I said. “Am I correct to assume Fryman was paying him large sums of money to take part?”

“Actually, that doesn’t appear to be the case. It looks like his involvement had to do with his scientific belief that overpopulation will be the demise of mankind,” Gil answered. “Fryman was driven by greed, whereas Zarbo was driven by paranoia.”

“And what about his claims regarding the mineral?” Sharon asked.

“Dr. Ahar and his team have been working day in and day out on this,” Gil replied. “He’ll be arriving here tomorrow to brief the president.”

“How could something so wonderful have come out of something so horrific?” Sharon said as she took my hand.

* * *

When Ahar arrived the following afternoon, he was filled with excitement. “This is incredible news, sir,” Ahar said as his assistant presented Westgale with a flash-pad. Westgale read the report’s lengthy summary.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed after he finished reading. Tears of joy filled his eyes. “This is amazing!”

“It sure is, sir. A single injection by the time the child is two years old will provide an unprecedented level of biological immunity,” Ahar said with conviction.

“And what exactly does that mean?” Westgale asked.

“Unfortunately, the body would continue to age and eventually die, but the average age expectancy would rise to 120 years,” Ahar replied.

“Are you and your associates one-hundred percent sure of this?” Westgale asked.

“Ironically we’re fortunate that Dirk Zarbo’s been performing such extensive research and analysis over the last thirty years. As demented as he may have been, he was a brilliant scientist. From the info we gathered from his lab, it appears he performed a series of clinical trials. I and several of my associates have cross-referenced his work and everything’s checked out perfectly. We’ve even located and analyzed many of his human guinea pigs. We’re ready to go,” Ahar replied. “As of now, it appears we’ll be able to inject every newborn in this country for approximately the next ten to fifteen years, depending on how much of the mineral we can get out of that rock—veins could run deeper than estimated. The amazing thing is,

the mineral can cross the placenta, conferring the same immunity to a fetus, so once a female is injected, any child she gives birth to won't require an injection."

"This is totally incredible."

"I'm still having difficulty believing it myself."

Westgale rubbed his chin as he thought. "I need you to be honest with me, Jack. Are you concerned about any ramifications? Like overpopulation?"

"I don't know if I'm the person you should be asking," Ahar replied. "From the moment I decided to dedicate my life to science and medicine, my goal has been to assist my fellow human beings to live the healthiest and longest lives possible, and I feel that goal is justifiable. That aside, in a strange way, I share Zarbo's concerns."

"The eventual demise of humanity?"

"I like to remain optimistic that we'll be able to find solutions and deal with the situation accordingly, but it'll be a challenge." Ahar paused and looked intently at Westgale. "You're not thinking of holding this back, are you?"

"Never. Now, I realize you and I won't be around long enough to witness the full effects of how this all plays out, but I believe we can only deal with what we know," Westgale said. "The fact that we'll now be able to protect every infant is a miracle. And I'm not about to turn my back on a miracle."

* * *

Westgale, Gil Robichaud, and Dr. Ahar remained in Vexton, and three days later they were joined by Dave Perry and the rest of the Administration's executive committee. Westgale thought it would be an interesting political move to relay this incredible news from atop Moon Shade Bluff. The PBA desperately needed some positive attention, so why not turn it into a memorable event? Sharon and I were invited to join them, and we watched from the sidelines.

A robo-copter landed on the mountain, and Westgale exited with Dave Perry. As the UCIT camera projected their smiling faces on to the World Connect, Westgale approached a makeshift podium. With

American flags on either side of him waving in the breeze, he spoke sincerely to the American public. "My friends, this is a day to celebrate. This incredible gift, *wherever* it came from, is a true miracle!" He smiled, looking to the heavens as a rush of wind made his suit jacket flap wildly. Removing the jacket, he handed it to one of his staff and rolled up his shirtsleeves. "That's more like it," he said with a laugh. "This is for our children, and the generations to follow."

The sound of another robo-copter drew all eyes upward. It began descending toward the cliff. The president saluted the copter and continued. "It is my honor to welcome some very special guests."

When the copter landed, a man and a woman exited. In the arms of the woman was a baby, nestled in a blanket. Exiting the copter behind them was Dr. Ahar. Westgale looked toward them with a nod. "I would like to introduce Tina and Gary Nickerson, and their beautiful baby boy, Daniel." The small gathering atop the cliff applauded, along with those below. "I would also like to introduce America's Chief of Medicine and Science, Dr. Jack Ahar."

Ahar stepped forward. "In this cylinder is what will now be referred to as the VX drug," he said, smiling. "What you are looking at is without a doubt the greatest medical discovery in the history of the world. Seconds from now, I will be performing the first ever VX vaccination on young Daniel."

Ahar stepped back from the podium and approached a bassinet that now held baby Daniel. The baby remained calm. Removing a small cylinder from his medical kit, Ahar adjusted the baby's position, removed the blanket, and held the cylinder about six inches above the baby's chest. He smiled at the small audience waiting with great anticipation. "Here we go," he said, then pressed the button atop the cylinder, sending out a flash of light. The process lasted seven seconds. The baby remained calm as Ahar tucked the blanket back around him. The proud parents stood over their child, crying tears of joy.

Westgale returned to the podium. "There you have it, my friends. A truly moving moment, and a little slice of history." He turned to embrace Tina and Gary Nickerson before the family was escorted

to a waiting robo-copter. Westgale looked up to the sky with tears in his eyes as the copter ascended high above.

“And now,” he said when the copter was gone, “I think Vexton’s DA, Sharon Claremont, said it best when she asked how something so wonderful could come out of something so horrific.” And he gave a detailed account of the crimes related to the miracle mineral.

The attention leveled at Vexton was something we’d never seen before, nor thought we’d ever see. Our small town had become a tourist attraction. People traveled from all over the country to view Moon Shade Bluff, which was now being referred to by some as the eighth wonder of the world. The Federal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Safety had continued to maintain complete control over the mountain, with the assistance of the military. Secretary Gibson estimated it would take several months before excavations were complete, and until then access required permission. As expected, this angered many visitors who had wished to climb or be brought by robo-copter to the summit to take in the marvel firsthand. However, even knowing they’d only be able to view the mountain from the base or via a robo-copter tour, people were still arriving in droves.

Meanwhile across the country, people were asking questions about the mountain. Had it been blessed by a higher power? Was it under the control of a benevolent alien race, coming to the aid of humanity? All this attention increased interest in the *Book of ZeZ*, as people set out to learn more about the legend of Moon Shade Bluff.

Personally, I was torn when I thought about Moon Shade Bluff. On one hand, I had watched my son being cured of a life-threatening illness while standing atop the mountain. But on the other hand, its magnificent power had indirectly caused my father’s death.

One aspect of the attention the town fully embraced was its positive economic impact. After a long day at work, I paid a visit to Hollis Farms to pick up a couple of their apple pies. The lineup

to purchase the pies seemed to go on forever. The amazing thing was, in this whole crowd, I didn't recognize a single soul.

Neville Hollis saw me from a distance and walked over as I stood at the back of the line. "Wow, Nathan was right, this is getting crazy," he said.

"Who'd ever have thought our small town would garner such attention?" I replied.

"Yeah, to think there was a time the name Vexton wouldn't make it onto even the most detailed maps," Neville said, shaking his head.

"It's amazing how that big ol' rock ended up becoming a national sensation," I said.

"Come on, Heath. Let's go into the main house," Neville said, leading me away from the lineup. "I'll make sure Nathan grabs a couple of pies for you."

"Wow, I don't think I recognized a single face out there," I said as we settled in the living room.

"Tell me about it; the guys are having a tough time keeping up," Neville responded. "I'm sure it's just a passing craze. Pretty soon we'll go back to being just another small American town that's known for its lovely scenery." He chuckled. "Now, on a more important note, how are you coping after learning about your father?"

I exhaled and ran my hands over my face. "It's a challenge, Nev," I replied. "It's not easy, but I know I can handle it. It's my mother who's really having a difficult time. But Sharon and I, along with Zack and the rest of the group at the retirement home, are there for her."

"It really is terrifying to think there are human beings out there who could be so wicked, who would cover up such an incredible discovery," Neville said. He changed the topic. "By the way, Kayla and Riley were here the other day."

"Oh yes, I know. They told me they met one of your old farmhands."

"Yeah, Don Shelby. Great guy; lots of fun, and a real dedicated worker."

“So I’ve heard.”

“Riley really took a liking to him. He told him all about Gordon.” Neville chuckled. We both looked up as a worn-out Nathan dragged himself into the living room, balancing pies in one hand.

“It’s complete madness out there. I think we’ve sold more of these things in the last week than we have in years,” he said as he handed me the pies.

CHAPTER 16

Back in Washington, Westgale decided to address some of those questions regarding Moon Shade Bluff, so his office set up an interview with Cryptic. With a neon Lady Justice flashing on its chest, Cryptic and a UCIT cameraman were escorted through the Freedom Home hallways into an area that honored past presidents. Westgale arrived a few minutes later.

“Is there a particular reason you chose this area of the Freedom Home to conduct this interview?” Cryptic asked.

“Sometimes I think it’s important to honor those who have served in this important position,” Westgale said, his admiring gaze shifting to a shrine honoring those who’d served before him.

“Will the plaque honoring the late President Montgomery be removed?”

“That’ll be up to the Strategic Council.”

“Do you think it should be?”

“If it’s proven that she was guilty of what she’s been accused of, then yes, I think it must be.”

“Now that it’s been established that Step 1 Health was shipping drugs to the HKM, why should the American people trust or support the company?”

“I’m not about to tell the American people who or what to trust. All I can tell you is that once we discovered what had taken place, we took immediate, appropriate action. At this point in time, we have no evidence suggesting anyone from Step 1 Health was

involved in that cover-up, or the murders of Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh.”

“What do you say to those who see this as another black mark on both capitalism and the American government?”

Westgale thought for a moment. “I completely understand how angry and disillusioned these crimes would leave people feeling. However, I prefer to look ahead and learn from the past,” he said firmly. “It goes without saying that as long as humans walk this Earth, the battle of good versus evil will live on. In this particular instance, in the end, I’m glad to say goodness prevailed.”

“There are some who suggest that the release of the VX drug will eventually lead to severe overpopulation, which in turn will lead to the end of humankind. Do you agree?”

“No, I don’t. I remain optimistic that humans will make the necessary adjustments, through education and strong governance, to maintain human sustainability here on Earth.”

“Who will own the rights to the mineral?”

“The man who brought the discovery to the attention of our government. The Director of Vexton Land Protection, Heath Claremont.”

* * *

At the same time Cryptic was interviewing William Westgale, Dave Perry, who had flown to Vexton on the presidential jet, was meeting with me. “Well, Mr. Claremont, as per the New Order Treaty, since you are the person who initiated the discovery of the mineral, you now legally own its rights.” I stared into space. “Did you hear what I said, Heath?”

“Uh... yeah... I heard you. I don’t know what to say,” I stammered.

“I understand this is all rather overwhelming,” Perry said as he opened his briefcase and took out several documents. “I highly recommend you receive some professional guidance as soon as possible.” I was still lost for words. “I hope you realize you are on your way to becoming a billionaire.”

“Are you certain the rights belong to me?” I asked, still in shock.

“When those minerals were sent to Director Gibson, and our government wasn’t able to match them with any others in our database, you became the rights owner.”

“But Kinsley, he was the one—”

“Even though we know the professor did the actual work, you were the person who initiated the exploration of that mountain. My office has spoken with the professor and he’s in agreement with this. The proof of this is included in the documentation, along with an offer from our Administration. There is also more pertinent information in the package.” Perry paused and looked me in the eye. “I realize that by no means will this eliminate the pain and shock of learning your father was murdered, but you should be very proud of your discovery. My office will be in touch within the coming days.”

I escorted Dave Perry out of the house, and took a seat on the front porch. It was a starless night, and even the usually prominent Vexton moon was covered by a blanket of haze. With the exception of a faint rumbling sound that I assumed was distant thunder, the night was eerily silent. Sharon was still at the office tying up some loose ends, and Kayla and Aaron had taken Riley to a special dinosaur exhibit.

The last few months had been such a whirlwind it was nearly inconceivable that it had all been leading to me on my way to becoming a billionaire. Most people would have been jumping for joy. Not me. Not in this case. After all, my father’s murder was at the root of my good fortune.

Exhausted, I felt my eyes start to close, only to snap open when a thunderous roar shook the porch. Several flashes of lightning sliced through the sky. Seconds later, a heavy downpour chased me inside. When I entered the house, my flash-pad began to buzz.

“Heath, it’s me, Wyatt,” my VLP assistant said. He sounded nervous. “Are you aware of what’s happening?”

“Yeah, it looks like we’re in for one of our nasty storms—”

He interrupted. “No, no, not that. Moon Shade Bluff.”

“Moon Shade Bluff?”

“Yeah, we have to get over there. I’ll come by and pick you up in my copter.”

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know; my flash-pad received an emergency signal from headquarters.”

Several minutes later, I heard the copter approaching and threw on my jacket. The copter was waiting in an adjacent field. By now, the weather had cleared.

“What do you think is happening? Do you think it has to do with the storm?” I asked him as we took off.

“I guess we’ll soon find out,” Wyatt answered.

As we approached the forest around Moon Shade Bluff, I immediately noticed how the Vexton sky had changed from an empty, pitch-black sheet to a canvas filled with winking stars surrounding a luminous moon. When I looked down, to my shock, I saw rows and rows of flashes below us, at the base of the mountain.

“What the hell is going on?” I said to Wyatt as the copter began to descend.

When we came closer, we saw a mass of people dressed in black, wearing balaclavas and holding torches. The military unit in charge of guarding Moon Shade Bluff was standing its ground.

Sergeant Evans approached us when the copter landed. “Good evening, Mr. Claremont.”

“Sergeant Evans, what on God’s earth is going on here?”

“I wish I could tell you. It appears to be the same group that did this same thing outside the Freedom Home the other evening.”

“Have they said anything?”

“Not a thing. They’ve just been standing there, silent. We’ve given them five minutes to clear out,” Evans said, checking his time-pin, “or else we’ll be forcing them out.”

Seconds later, a member of the group raised his torch, prompting the rest of the group to call out in unison, “Free Anya! Free America!” The entire group then calmly left the area in an orderly fashion and made their way toward waiting buses.

“Well, I still have no idea what that was about, but thankfully, it all ended peacefully,” Evans said, relieved.

Still alarmed at what we’d just witnessed, Wyatt and I made our way back to the copter, at which point my flash-pad began to buzz. It was Sharon.

“Are you aware of what’s been going on?” she asked in a panic.

“Yeah, I’m actually here right now,” I replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m here at Moon Shade Bluff. I saw those characters in full force.”

“Moon Shade Bluff?” she said. I explained. She had no idea what I was talking about.

“Wait a second, what are you talking about?” I asked.

“Turn on the copter’s flash-screen and tune in to UCIT, and you’ll see what I’m talking about,” Sharon said nervously.

“I’ll turn it on,” Wyatt said. He then tuned to UCIT.

“What in the world?” I exclaimed as the screen displayed two large buildings, both on fire. Cryptic then appeared on screen, and began providing a recap. “I’m here in New York City, in front of Step 1 Health’s headquarters which, as you can see on your screen, has been set ablaze. The other building you are looking at is the Fryman Towers in Chicago. I have a young man here with me who claims to have witnessed the Step I Health building being set on fire. And what is your name, sir?”

“Peter,” the young man answered, eyeing the camera nervously.

“Would you kindly tell us what you witnessed?”

“It was crazy, man. I counted six robo-cycles in a row. They just soared past the building and started throwing what I’m guessing were fire-zaps.”

“Are you able to describe what any of these people looked like?”

“All I can tell you is that they were all dressed in black leather.”

Eyewitness accounts in Chicago were exactly the same. Fortunately, both buildings were empty at the time of the crimes.

Minutes later, UCIT received a view-file relating to the arsons and aired it. The footage showed a man dressed in black, wearing a

balacava. He was sitting at a table in what appeared to be an old basement. “Blackheart here,” he said. “This evening AXE took pride in setting two corporate pigpens on fire. Soulless, capitalist swine have no place in this country. Let this serve as a warning that a new movement is on its way. Free Anya! Free America!”

* * *

“Who the hell does this Blackheart son of a bitch think he is?” Westgale yelled as the view-file concluded. “Mitchell, has your team been able to make any headway into this new group?” he asked Colonel Peters.

“I have my grandson leading a covert operation, but after the way Johnny T brought down Wagner, this group is being extremely cautious,” Peters replied. “In all honesty, we’re not sure what we’re dealing with here. We don’t even know how, or if, Blackheart is connected.”

“Come on, Mitchell, I agree we need to address the problem, but you know as well as I do that these street thugs have nowhere near the resources or manpower to pose a real threat,” Westgale replied.

Peters grinned and nervously tapped his fingers on the desk. “We’re not just talking about street thugs. Whoever’s at the core of this has been recruiting a wide spectrum of youngsters, including some of the brightest university students from across the country, and surprisingly, it’s working. Just look at the size of these mass gatherings.” Peters paused. “This is a true youth movement, and I’ve concluded it’s their wish to start a revolution—tear down our entire system.”

“Wait a second here. You’re telling me many of the country’s university students are also falling for that garbage?”

“Yes, very much so. In their minds, this country is severely broken, and they’re going to do whatever it takes to fix it, on their own terms.”

“And this obsession with Anya Ahar, do you believe this is for real?”

“Her tale of woe, and her performance in the Judicial Triangle, really resonated with this country’s youth. Combine her brilliant

scientific mind with that doctrine, and strangely enough, we have a tragic hero who's become some bizarre symbol of hope."

"How do we combat this insanity, Mitchell? I mean, for God's sake, we just can't let them go around setting buildings on fire, and I'm sure as hell not going to put up with their intimidation tactics."

Peters shook his head and sighed. "I wish I had an answer for you, William. I agree we have to nail whoever is responsible for those fires, and any other laws they break, but if we're overly aggressive without cause, it could very well harm us."

"In what way?"

"I'm afraid we'd be throwing fuel onto an already raging fire. The less attention we give these fools, the more difficult it will become for them to achieve their immediate goal."

"A revolution?"

"The way I see it, that's their long-term goal. For now, their strategy revolves around gaining strength in numbers."

"What about the fires?"

"Look at them as commercials—a way to gain attention."

* * *

When I arrived back home, Sharon greeted me with a cup of tea. "What an eventful night," I sighed as I took a seat on the sofa.

"Yeah, it looks like this whole AXE thing is starting to really get out of hand," she said, shaking her head. "This is the last thing the country needs right now." Obviously, she hadn't been told that I'd been granted the rights to the mineral.

"Sharon, I think you'd better have a seat," I said. When she sat down beside me, I explained. "Westgale even spoke about it in an interview this evening," I finished.

"Wow... all along, I just assumed the government would be claiming the rights," Sharon replied after a stunned moment.

"Prior to the formation of the New Order Treaty, that would have been the case—but here are the official documents saying otherwise."

"Oh my... this is rather complex stuff," she said as she began scanning the material. Then it dawned on her. "Whoa—this

proposal they've made is incredible. These rights will be worth billions of dollars!"

"We're going to need some solid professional advice from someone we can trust, and I think I know who that person is."

"Oh?" Sharon said with a raised brow.

"Skip," I answered.

CHAPTER 17

When the War Within ended and the Outer Commission had been established, it immediately began deploying officers—or guardians, as they became known to America. Their purpose was to continuously assess the state of the nation, report to their superiors in the commission, and meet with the US president if deemed necessary. After his meeting with Colonel Peters, Westgale was summoned by the commission to meet with one of these guardians for breakfast the following morning in the Prestige Hotel’s dining room.

“Good morning, Mr. President. I’m Macdonald,” the guardian said when they met.

Westgale looked around the spacious dining room that Macdonald had reserved for the two of them. “I feel so guilty that the two of us are taking up this entire room.” He chuckled.

“I made the arrangement understanding how important your privacy is, Mr. President,” Macdonald replied.

“I’m actually surprised this meeting wasn’t called several months ago,” Westgale commented as a waiter presented a tray of muffins and fresh fruit.

“I hope you don’t mind if I indulge,” Macdonald said, reaching for a banana muffin and a handful of grapes.

“Not at all,” Westgale replied as he studied the youthful, British guardian whose bright orange hair and big green eyes reminded him of the face etched on his childhood blow-up punching bag.

This was only the second occasion since becoming president that Westgale had been called to meet with a guardian. The first time was when the US asked to be allowed to enter the Battle of Oria and aid the Orian government in taking on Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus.

“Let me see here... hmm... Considering this report from my superiors, it’s actually shocking that you’re sitting here right now,” Macdonald said, lifting his eyebrows as he popped a grape into his mouth. “Those berries... teal-berries—it looks like they not only saved a load of young Americans, they also saved your presidency. The last few months have been rather tumultuous, I must say. Sometimes that can be a direct sign of inadequate leadership,” he added as he continued reading from his flash-pad.

Taken aback by the comment, and the fact that the only time Macdonald moved his eyes away from the device was to take a bite of his muffin, Westgale glared at the guardian. “What are you insinuating?” he asked, his scowl deepening.

“Well, the fact you’ve decided to not run for reelection tells me quite a lot,” Macdonald replied, still reading from his flash-pad, dropping muffin crumbs all over the table. He then signaled the waiter to bring over two coffees.

“Do tell me: what exactly does it tell you?”

“That your ambition outweighs your capabilities. But I wouldn’t fret, you’re certainly not the first American president to fail their country, and sadly, you won’t be the last.”

“And who the hell made you judge and jury?”

“Now, now, Mr. President, let’s not get all defensive. Keep in mind who you’re speaking with,” Macdonald said sternly.

As much as Westgale wanted to tell him to go to hell and storm out of the room, he realized he had to restrain himself. After all, without the Outer Commission coming to its aid, America would most likely have become part of the HKM. “With all due respect, did you call this meeting to tell me what an awful job I’ve been doing, or is there actually something you wish to discuss?”

“My goodness, this coffee is appalling.” Macdonald grimaced. “Is it not possible to get a fresh cup of coffee around here?” He called

for the waiter to replace the coffees. “I’m so sorry, Mr. President, but I wouldn’t serve that coffee to a rat in a sewer. Now this... VX drug... that’s a rather extraordinary discovery,” he added, once again turning his attention to his flash-pad. “How does your Administration plan to proceed?”

“We’ve made a proposal to the person who owns the rights to the mineral that enables us to make the drug. We’re confident he will agree to transfer the rights to our government.”

“And if and when he agrees?”

“The AMO has already set in motion several programs that will enable us to get the medication distributed throughout the country.”

“What about outside the country?”

“Right now, our focus is solely on America.”

“Well now, I hope all those sweet, innocent little infants will actually still be Americans when they’re ready to leave their cribs.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“That last time I checked, there’s a deadline that is rapidly approaching, and if that giant load of money isn’t paid to the commission by that day, well, we’ll be calling in the debt and America—will be no more.”

“You’ll be getting your money.”

“Great. And then your country will once again have its complete independence. And if that happens... let’s just hope you and the rest of your countrymen don’t screw it up again.”

* * *

“I guess my timing was spot on; what brought you back to Vexton?” I asked Skip.

“This old mansion is in dire need of plumbing work,” he replied, referencing the Levin estate, “and since Dad’s so busy with his campaign, he asked me to come back for a few days and deal with the matter.”

“A lot has happened around here since you headed off to California.”

“I know. I heard all about it. I’m still in shock over the news about your father.” Skip shook his head. “And Moon Shade Bluff—who would’ve thought? You, my friend, are going to be one wealthy man.”

“And that’s why I contacted you, Skipper,” I said as I handed him the government documents pertaining to the minerals. “You’re the only person I know I can trust to help me with this,” I added as Skip began to scan the documents.

“Whoa... this is some heavy stuff,” he said. “I’ll need some time to go over the material in detail, but based on my first impression, I think it would be wise to accept the government’s offer. I’ll get back to you.”

“Much appreciated. So, did you also hear about AXE paying a visit to Moon Shade Bluff, the same night they set fire to those buildings?”

“Yeah. It looks like these guys are more than a bunch of street thugs breaking windows and spraying graffiti.”

“I hope I’m wrong, but I’m thinking this could get very ugly.”

* * *

Westgale’s meeting with Macdonald got him thinking about the Outer Commission’s deadline. He was particularly concerned about the tension mounting over Cobra Pix’s conquest of the Pinian government.

“My God, Mitchell, this is what I was afraid of!” the usually calm Westgale shouted. He turned his flash-screen on, leaving Colonel Peters to read the Outer Commission’s decision prohibiting American forces from intervening in Pinia. Westgale sat at his desk with his head in his hands.

Peters shook his head and sighed heavily. “Can we not appeal?” he asked.

Westgale rose and strode to the back of the office, where he sat down on a sofa. “It’s a unanimous vote; we can’t appeal, Mitchell,” he murmured.

“Are these people insane? Do they not realize the ramifications of this lunatic taking over the world’s richest country in natural resources?” the colonel exclaimed.

“They have us where they want us, and they know it. Under Pix’s command, Pinia isn’t going to stop doing business with the rest of the world. But it will stop doing business with America, and without the Pinian deal we’ll never get close to paying that debt by the deadline. I don’t want to give up the VX drug, but in order to save this country we may have no choice,” Westgale said.

He sighed. “As a country, we were so naïve when we started that bloody War Within... so naïve to think we could rip this country apart like we did and continue to garner the respect of a superpower,” he added, his face tight with anguish. “And now it’s been more than two and a half decades and we remain a mere shadow of our former self; we’ve become servants to those who once feared our very existence.”

“What angers me is that we’ve come so far with the World Harmony Program, and now something like this will give the MAA the fodder they’ve been searching for,” Peters agreed, his face flushed with anger.

“Yeah, and things were progressing rather well with the Pinian government. But I guess we all know how unstable it is over there. The thing that really concerns me is that the HKM has backed away from the Harmony Program; that surely doesn’t bode well for anyone,” Westgale said, frowning. “Is there any word on the American aid workers in Pinia, Colonel?”

“The reports I’ve received show that most will have no problem getting out of there,” answered Peters, “but the group in the north... I’m sorry to say that’s a whole other story, considering Pix has a real fixation with that part of the country.”

“And if he finds out it’s my daughter leading that group, God only knows what he’ll do,” Westgale said anxiously.

Peters headed to the door, where he paused. “I’ll make certain everything within this government’s power is done to keep Jessica and her fellow aid workers safe, William,” Peters said solemnly before stepping out.

Westgale moved back to his desk, fear for his daughter’s life conjuring the conversation they’d had just a little over a year ago,

when she'd made her decision to go off to Pinia. They'd met at the Field of Honor.

"Come on, honey, you can't seriously be thinking of taking your team to Pinia," he protested. "For heaven's sake—you've just been offered the position of VP of Strategic Planning at Step 1 Health. Lawson Pierce has told me himself how much he covets your management skills."

"Yeah, and I'm sure the fact I'm the president's daughter makes him covet my 'skills' that much more."

"In most instances you'd probably have a valid point, but not with Lawson. When it comes to his treasured company, the man is all business. He would not have offered you that position if he didn't believe in you," Westgale said with pride.

"Thank you, Dad; I appreciate your vote of confidence—and your concern. But I need to do this. I need my team in Pinia to help those children. The country has come so far, but the northern region is still way behind, and I want to do my part—give them the basic education they'll require to live a productive life," Jessica said as they approached a flash-screen displaying a view-file of the War Within. As images of the old White House and many other treasured buildings and monuments were shown burning to the ground, Westgale put his arm around his daughter and held her tightly.

"It's just so difficult to watch," he sighed. "A country so blinded by apathy. I'll never forget the day the Militant Alliance waged war on our government. This can't happen in America—that's what it seemed everybody was thinking. After all, our way of life was untouchable." Jessica's gaze was full of empathy. "We had everything freedom could provide, but we failed to nurture that freedom and appreciate it. Instead, we became far too preoccupied with the materialistic aspects of life." His voice was rising.

"Once technology started to override both human intellect and emotion, an impenetrable shadow was cast over our existence. It was only a matter of time before absolute chaos would stare us in the face like the devil himself—and then we had this," he added as they

watched a news clip showing many of the country's hospitals and schools being converted into detention centers. "Listen to the excitement in her voice, Jessica, and look at the smile on her face!" Westgale said, referring to the eager, militant-leaning reporter in the clip. As she watched several zap-grenades being launched at a New York City courthouse, her fervor grew. "We're watching a courthouse here in New York City being attacked from all angles—being lit up like it's the Fourth of July," she exclaimed. "Although I do feel for the poor souls inside that building... I must say that red, blue, and white blast powder surrounded by those raging flames is a rather breathtaking sight—so American!"

As Jessica was well aware, one of those "poor souls" inside that courthouse was Westgale's brother, Joseph. "He was such a tremendous human being... I lost many dear people to that senseless war," Westgale said quietly.

"Why do they show this, Dad?" she said, shaking her head. "It's so horrific to watch."

"Sometimes we need a lesson in history to help guide us into the future. And though we'll never truly know what the future holds for us, at least our past can provide us with fair warning of what lies ahead," Westgale said, wiping at his eyes. "And that's why I hope you'll reconsider taking your team to Pinia. If you're not going to listen to me as your father, then listen to me as the president," he said firmly. "Pinia is a slow-ticking time bomb and with Cobra Pix and his militia in control of that time bomb, soon all the progress that country has made in terms of becoming a democracy will be destroyed."

"I hear you, Mr. President," she replied with a chuckle, "but as my dad always told me, there's no reward without risk."

CHAPTER 18

Jessica Westgale always took immense pleasure in helping others. Like her father, her dream was to see the world live in peace. As an American, she believed it was actually her duty to bring positive energy to the rest of the world. After graduating with an MBA from Summit University, she quickly began climbing the corporate ladder at Step 1 Health. Although to many, including her father, it seemed difficult to believe she would walk away from the corporate ranks of S1H, for Jessica, providing aid to the children of Pinia was far more important.

Several years ago, Assistance America set up a specialized program enabling American corporations to donate food, clothing, flash-screens, and educational tools to foreign countries in need. Jessica had worked diligently over the last couple of years, maintaining and even helping to expand the program to Pinia. When delivery day came, Jessica and her team would bask in delight as they watched the Pinian children's usual expressions of sadness turn to ones of complete joy.

Today was delivery day. As the children lined up to receive their share of the items, the excitement was palpable. "At least some of them are actually lining up for the healthier food," Jessica joked to her associate, Trevor Larsen.

"Thank you, Miss Jessica, and thank you, Mr. Trevor," a smiling child said as she showed them a flash-pad she'd received in her package.

“I’ll help you set it up tomorrow. Okay, Ulu?” Trevor said.

At day’s end the team headed back to their camp, settled in, and gathered for a campfire dinner. As usual, while sitting in a circle around the fire, they began singing *God Bless America*. As they finished the last verse, they heard a loud humming in the near distance.

Jessica looked up, only to be blinded by the headlights of a large bus. Four gun-toting men dressed in red and black military clothing rushed out of the vehicle and ordered Jessica and her team into the bus. Terrified, shaken, and confused, they obliged. What choice did they have?

“Everybody relax. Remain in your seats. We are just going for a little ride,” one of the men bellowed from the front of the bus. Jessica looked out the window, attempting to gauge where they might be heading. But even though she knew the area well enough, it was far too dark, and the lack of street lighting made it impossible to tell.

“Do you know what’s going on, Jessie?” Trevor whispered.

“I have no idea... but this can’t be good. This is definitely the Iron Lotus,” Jessica replied.

The bus rumbled on for the next fifteen minutes. The anxiety inside the bus was growing by the second. Finally, after turning into a large parking lot, the bus suddenly stopped. Jessica again looked through the window. This time she saw a large neon red sign that read *HOL*, which were the letters representing the country’s only hotel chain. “Everybody exit,” called out one of the men.

The men ushered the group of twenty into the concourse area of the hotel, where they were told to sit down. Jessica looked across the room and saw faces etched with terror watching the dozen members of the Iron Lotus who stood before them. Other than the heavy breathing and whimpers coming from the frightened group of American aid workers, the room was eerily silent.

One man pointed in Jessica’s direction and two others walked down the aisle to where she was sitting. “Jessica Westgale,” one of them said as they raised her from her seat. “We need you to come with us.” They marched her out of the building and stopped her

before a stylish electro minivan. She was blindfolded, then guided into the van. One man sat in the operator's seat and the other sat in the back with Jessica.

"What is this? What is going on?" she asked, her voice quavering with terror. "Where are you taking me?"

"Please relax, Miss Westgale," the man beside her said.

"My friends back at the hotel, what are you planning to do to them?" Jessica asked. "I don't care if you kill me, but please, let them go! They've done nothing wrong. All they've tried to do is help your people!"

Back at the hotel, a dozen armed guards stood over the group seated in the concourse. A large flash-screen was wheeled to the front of the room and the lights were turned off. All that could be seen was the bright neon glow from the laser-rifles. Up to this point in time, the group had not been spoken to. This only heightened the uneasiness.

As Trevor sat in the dark, his thoughts were with Jessica. He began praying for her. He admired her deeply, especially for the fact that she was so humble and treated *everyone* equally.

Trevor had never forgotten his first meeting with her, when she'd come to speak about finding direction in life at the large group home where he'd been living in Washington. Orphaned at nine and at that point seventeen, Trevor had admitted he'd been arrested three times for stealing. When he told her he'd really changed, and wanted to help others like she did, she believed him—a year later, when Jessica was assembling her team to go to Pinia, she remembered Trevor. After talking to his personal social worker, she invited him to be part of her team. Trevor was thrilled. He finally had his opportunity to help someone—in this instance, the children of northern Pinia.

Now, Trevor wanted more than anything to help the woman who had turned his life around. But how could he get her out of this awful dilemma? Like the others, all he could do was sit and await his fate.

An involuntary gasp escaped him as the flash-screen suddenly lit up, illuminating the dark concourse area and drawing all eyes

to it. Images of the Pinian landscape, including its rich green forests, majestic mountains, and plentiful lush valleys, were displayed, accompanied by the haunting notes of classical music. *Is this some kind of strange ritual before the slaughter?* Trevor wondered.

Guilt consumed Jessica as, still blindfolded, still being jostled in the back of the moving van, she felt she'd failed her fellow aid workers and put them in harm's way. Sure, they were all well aware of the risks involved, but as the team's leader, Jessica felt responsible for their well-being.

The van suddenly stopped and the two men exited the vehicle, leaving Jessica inside. She heard them speaking to each other in their native tongue outside the van, and she was able to make out some of what they were saying. She could hear one of the men telling his cohort that his father was waiting for them.

The side door slid open and she was guided out of the van and the blindfold was removed. She blinked rapidly, momentarily blinded by a bright laser-light one of the guards held. When her eyes adjusted, she realized she was on a side road in the middle of nowhere. As the men began to guide her through the dark, misty forest, her anxiety grew with every step.

"Where are you taking me? Damn it! Please, tell me something!" she shrieked, her fear overwhelming her as a faint howl echoed through the trees.

"Please relax, Miss Westgale," the larger man said as they continued to march her through the leaf-carpeted forest, their trek punctuated occasionally by twigs snapping underfoot and accompanied by the humming of insects, a sound that seemed to become more intense as they moved deeper into the underbrush. Again, she heard the howling. She shivered, but said nothing.

They came to a clearing surrounded by giant pine trees. When Jessica looked up, through the mist, it appeared as though the moon was touching the tips of the trees. The men guided her along a brightly lit pathway with tall neon poles radiating a red glow.

Memories of her life ran through her mind. A privileged life that had afforded her the opportunity to do things and travel to places most people could only dream of. However, Pinia wouldn't be on most people's lists. She could still hear her father and mother warning her to stay away from that "forsaken place," but the children of northern Pinia needed someone, and she wanted to be that someone. Her father had suggested full-time security guards while in Pinia, but that would have been in opposition to all she stood for. It always preyed on her mind, how much her father's influence presented her with opportunities that would otherwise have been beyond her reach. The posh private school growing up, the lucrative job offers after graduating university; how much of it was because of the person she was, how much of it was due to the fact she was William Westgale's daughter?

"Please stop, right here," the larger man said to Jessica. She heard footsteps coming through the trees, to the left of her.

"Good evening, Miss Westgale. I'm Cobra Pix," a voice said. He took a few steps into the light. On either side of him walked white Pinian mountain wolves. They began to hiss, displaying razor-sharp teeth, their golden eyes picking up the red glow of the neon lights.

Jessica struggled to remain calm, but dread engulfed her. Here she was, standing before a man whose claim to fame was his hatred for America, and in particular, *her father*.

"Please don't be afraid," Pix said as he settled the wolves by slowly caressing the tops of their heads; he seemed to have complete control over them. "There's not many of these around anymore... such beautiful creatures," he said with a smile. Two more of his guards appeared, and rolled out a massive red and black blanket for him to sit on. The wolves retreated toward one of the pine trees and lay down peacefully. "Look at that moon... so magnificent," he said, gazing upward in awe. "It's as if it's there for our eyes only. Please, have a seat, Miss Westgale."

Jessica moved hesitantly forward and sat a few feet away from him. Being so near him filled her with fear. That powerful physique,

bald head, and thin, red-penciled eyebrows made him look alien. She struggled to find the courage to speak.

“Please,” she begged, “I don’t care what you do to me, but my associates, back at the hotel—I beg you, please let them go!”

Pix studied her for a moment, then signaled for the wolves to come over to him. They immediately responded to his call, slowly trotting over to lie down beside him, their intense eyes fixed on Jessica. Pix gently coaxed one of the wolves closer, and it lay its head on his lap. “A wild beast,” he said. “That’s how most people would refer to my four-legged friends here. When in actuality, I can guarantee you they’re far more civilized than the humans who label them. Now, if they were to feel threatened, or their personal space were to be invaded, well, that would be an entirely different story. But then again, I’m certain that would be the case for all creatures on this planet... including me. Would you not agree, Miss Westgale?” Pix asked.

“I’m not here as an intruder, sir. I’m here in Pinia to bring aid to the children of the north,” Jessica explained.

“I see you’ve met my son, Shadow,” Pix said, inclining his head toward the larger of the two men who had escorted her to the woods. Jessica looked up and nodded in his direction. “Now, Shadow has spent the last few days learning everything he can about you and your fellow aid workers.” Pix paused to take an apple from a sack he’d been carrying over his shoulder and threw it for one of the wolves to fetch. Jessica looked back up at Shadow. He acknowledged her with a nod.

Pix continued. “I want to commend you on your tremendous work. Permitting you to come over to Pinia and help our children is probably the only wise thing the Pinian government has done in the last ten years.” He launched another apple from his massive hand. “From the day my father was forced out of office, Pinia has remained oppressed due to a weak and directionless government. We’re the richest country in the world when it comes to natural resources, and yet one of the poorer countries overall. Under my direction, I can guarantee you that will no longer be the case.”

“I wish you and your country all the best, sir. I’m just thrilled to be able to help the children of Pinia, and I surely couldn’t have done any of this without the aid of my team,” Jessica said earnestly.

“I understand, Miss Westgale, and that’s why your friends are currently being treated to a delectable three-course meal back at the hotel. They’ve earned it.”

Jessica was confused. *What in the world is going on here?*

“I’m sorry to have singled you out, but you’re the one I needed to meet with... And the blindfold—well, given the current situation here in Pinia, I’m sure you realize that secrecy concerning my whereabouts is paramount,” Pix said calmly as he removed another apple from the sack and offered it to Jessica. “Please, accept the apple.”

Even though her anxiety was easing, she was still in shock and highly confused. “I guess my friends and I should start arranging our departure out of Pinia,” she said nervously as she accepted the apple.

“Well, I was hoping you and your team would fulfill your commitment and remain for the three more months you’d planned to stay... as my guests,” Pix said, rising to his feet. The wolves sat on either side of him.

Jessica was taken aback. “You want us to stay? I mean, with all that’s going on, would it be safe?” She also rose.

“Shadow and his men will see to it you’re fully taken care of, and now that I’ve taken control of the northern part of the country, you’ll be completely free from danger. It’s your decision, Miss Westgale,” Pix said, sounding surprisingly sincere. “Shadow, please ensure Miss Westgale is brought safely back to the hotel. It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Westgale. I look forward to seeing you in the village, if you should decide to stay.”

Shadow studied Jessica on the ride back to the hotel. “Are you okay, Miss Westgale?” he asked. “I fully understand you feeling disoriented.”

“I’m still trying to figure out what happened tonight... and please, call me Jessica.”

“I apologize for not being candid with you, Jessica, but I was simply following my father’s orders. This all had to be executed in a surreptitious manner.”

“You had me fearing for my life—blindfolded and taken to some forest in the middle of nowhere to find wolves hissing at me.”

“My father was testing you. He wanted to make sure you weren’t here in Pinia on some kind of spy mission,” Shadow explained. “To be honest with you, there were several of our soldiers hiding throughout that forest, in case you were being tracked by the American government.”

“But your father, he despises my country and most of all he despises my father... he could have had his revenge and had me killed right there, in that forest.”

“You’re correct when you say my father despises both your country and your father, but he doesn’t despise *you*. He has a great deal of respect for you.”

When they reached the hotel and entered the concourse, Shadow turned to Jessica with a subtle smile, and said, “I sincerely hope you choose to stay in Pinia. If you do, we’d like to have you stay at this very hotel, as our guests, for the remainder of your stay. We’ll have one of our buses bring you back and forth from the village on a daily basis. I’m certain it’ll be far more comfortable than your current accommodations.”

When Jessica settled into her room, she realized Shadow was correct when he spoke of the difference in comfort compared to the village, for the room matched the life of luxury she’d been used to back home. With its plush wall-to-wall carpeting, elegant furniture, and a giant state-of-the-art flash-screen, the room was a far cry from the tiny, dreary cabin she’d been staying in at the village.

Jessica was tired, but her mind was racing. *Am I to trust Shadow and his father? Or are they setting me up for something?* She was also baffled by the fact that the topics of America and her father hadn’t come up during her meeting with Cobra Pix. Although still uncertain about their motives, she went to bed committed to completing her Pinian mission.

The next morning, before returning to the village, Jessica contacted her father and explained what had taken place. As she expected, Westgale was irate. “If he harmed even a single hair on your head, I’ll—”

“Actually, both he and his son are requesting we stay the remaining few months and complete our mission, as their guests,” Jessica interjected.

“Don’t be a damn fool, Jessica. Don’t believe a word that man says; he’s a complete megalomaniac. You have to get yourself out of there. Please, Jessie, come home. If not for me, do it for your poor mother. She’s worried sick about you,” Westgale pleaded.

“Please believe me when I tell you all is calm here in northern Pinia. I don’t sense any danger whatsoever. If I did, trust me, I wouldn’t be sticking around. The Iron Lotus seems to have taken over the region without facing any resistance. I think the Pinian government as a whole realized its time was up,” she explained.

“My Lord, Jessica. Do you realize how this looks?! If word gets out that you’re staying in Pinia as a guest of that madman—” Westgale said.

“Relax, I don’t plan to accept his offer, but I do plan to see this through. I just can’t quit on those children, regardless of politics. I’m sorry to disappoint you, Dad, and I will explain my decision to Mom as soon as I have a chance,” Jessica insisted.

Her father knew how determined she could be. She heard him take a deep breath, and exhale. “You be careful, honey. Be very careful. And if you should change your mind, be sure to contact my office and I’ll personally see to it that you and your friends are brought home safely.”

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, when the group returned to the village, Jessica was surprised to see Shadow and a couple of his Lotus soldiers playing soccer with several of the children. When Shadow noticed her, he acknowledged her with a nod. She nodded back.

Minutes later he came over to her, huffing and puffing. “Wow, I haven’t done something like this in years. It feels really good to see the children so happy,” he said, smiling as he wiped a towel across his face. It was the first moment Jessica had seen him as a real human being, who could actually laugh and smile. “Please, would you join me for breakfast?” he said, indicating the small patio café next to the field.

“Sure, as long as you allow me to treat you,” Jessica said with a smile. “That’s the least I can do, considering how you and your father fed my friends last evening.”

Once they settled at a table with their two glasses of fruit punch, Shadow produced a small packet and handed it to Jessica. “This is for you. Please accept this as a token of my appreciation for the work you’ve done for our children,” he said, studying her.

“Uh... thank you,” she replied, surprised by the offering. When she opened the packet she discovered a necklace containing six small rocks. She set it on the table and examined it. The stones were exquisite, each containing fluorescent particles of blue, green, and yellow.

“I hope you like them. They’re called dragon-stones. They say you should have one of these stones with you at all times. It’s

supposed to keep you safe from harm. Other than when I'm on duty, I keep one with me," Shadow said, admiring the rocks with her.

"Oh? Why not when you're on duty? Wouldn't you want them to protect you?" Jessica asked.

"It's against our warrior code," Shadow answered.

"How did they get their name?" Jessica asked as she picked one up and studied it.

"It's believed winged, red and black dragons known as Sortars once roamed this very land. And that's how these stones got their fluorescent glow—from dragon-fire," Shadow replied.

"Do you believe in that legend?" Jessica asked with a small smile.

"Yes, I do. It's sacred to our people. It's why my father chose red and black for our colors," Shadow said as he gently tugged at the sleeve of his uniform.

"So, these stones, are they considered valuable?"

"They carry great sentimental value, but it is illegal to sell them. Only my late grandfather and a few other important Pinian people had access to them."

"Were these a gift from your grandfather?"

"Yes; before he died, he presented me and my six brothers each with our own collection. After my brothers were killed in the Battle of Oria, their wives each gave me a stone from their collections, in their husband's memory. And now I want to bestow them upon you, for your kindness."

Jessica was lost for words. "Uh... I can't... I mean, it's very kind of you, but these are special—they belonged to your brothers."

Shadow reached across the table and gently held her hands, caressing them with his thumbs. "My brothers died fighting for Pinia, and since you've come to our country, you've also been fighting for Pinia—the children of Pinia. I know my brothers would want you to have them," he said, blinking back tears.

As he held her hands, Jessica looked into his eyes and saw his sorrow. She was surprised to realize she was developing feelings for him. Sure, she was taken by his big brown eyes and broad shoulders, but she was even more attracted to his kindness

and warmth. "Thank you, Shadow. I will cherish them forever," she said with a bright smile.

"So, you haven't told me: are you planning to stay?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Yes, I and another ten members of the team will be staying," Jessica replied.

"I'm so glad. I will call the hotel and make all the arrangements," Shadow said enthusiastically.

"That won't be necessary, Shadow. I thank you and your father for the offer, but it's our wish to remain in the village, with those we are assisting."

"That doesn't surprise me," Shadow replied with a smile.

As Jessica and the group continued to work with the children, she was frequently surprised by the kindness Shadow continued to display to her and the group as well as the children. In fact, as part of the next delivery day, Shadow personally donated a few hundred pairs of running shoes and wool sweaters to the children, which touched Jessica deeply.

The fondness they felt for each other had begun to develop into a full romance. One evening Jessica invited Shadow to join her and the others for their campfire gathering. After enjoying an evening of food, drink, and laughs, the group, as was their custom, was about to start singing *God Bless America*. However, with Shadow sitting amongst them, Jessica felt it would not be appropriate. Shadow would have nothing of it. "Please, sing your song. America is your country. You should be proud of your country and treasure it," he said with fervor. After singing a few lines in a very tentative manner, a sudden surge of passion came over the group and they began singing with gusto. Shadow looked intently at Jessica. Still feeling uneasy about singing the song in his presence, she gazed into her lap while singing. When the song was completed she looked up, and they exchanged tremulous smiles.

When the others retired for the evening, Jessica and Shadow remained by the campfire. She felt so at ease as she lay back in his

arms. Gazing at the Pinian moon in its full glory, Jessica commented, “Your father was correct—sometimes it’s as if it’s there only for our eyes to see.”

Shadow pulled her closer. “How does your father feel about you being here?” he asked her softly.

“I’m sure it’s breaking his heart, but he realizes how determined I am to carry on with my work,” Jessica replied, gently caressing his hand.

“Have you told him we’ve become involved?”

“No. I actually haven’t spoken to him since we started seeing each other. And what about *your* father—is he aware?”

“Yes. My father was very happy when I told him the news. He admires you, Jessica.”

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but your father seems to be a very complex man.”

Shadow chuckled. “Yes. My father is probably the most complex human being you will ever meet.”

“Is he as brutal as he’s portrayed to be?”

“My father lives by his own code of justice. He will do anything to protect Pinia, and he will kill anyone in the process of doing so. But you saw, Jessica—he can also be very gentle and caring.”

Jessica slowly slipped out of his grasp and turned around to look him in the eyes. “Those government officials the Iron Lotus is said to have killed with helcin, were you part of that?” she asked.

Shadow shook his head and sighed. “My father never ordered that slaughter. It was orchestrated behind his back. And those members who were involved, well, my father had them executed,” he replied calmly.

“And this current threat to kill government officials?”

“Like I said, Jessica, my father will do anything to protect Pinia,” Shadow replied. “He also places Pinia over his own personal feelings. For example, most people think my father will refuse to distribute our vast supply of natural resources to America.”

“Is that accurate?”

Shadow laughed quietly. “No, it’s not.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Well, I should be; after all, I’m in charge of the distribution of our natural resources, including the fera-beans. As a matter of fact, the new deal I plan to propose to your government will be far more cost-effective than the current one.”

“That’s great to hear. I’m just surprised your father still wishes to maintain a relationship with a country he so strongly despises.”

“All he wants is for Pinia to matter in the world. He wants our country to have a voice,” Shadow said as he pulled Jessica back into his arms. “He also wants you and me to join him for dinner tomorrow evening. I hope you’re okay with that.”

Jessica thought for a moment. “Okay... as long as he doesn’t have those darn wolves with him.” She laughed. He gently kissed her forehead. She looked deep into his eyes. “Stay with me tonight, Shadow,” she said as she took him by the hand.

The following morning, Shadow was up at dawn, claiming he had an extremely busy day. A couple of hours later, Jessica made her way into the village square. As she headed toward the area containing several mini soccer fields, she noticed something fascinating. Instead of the usual pairs of shoes being used as goalposts, there were now soccer nets spread across the field. “Hey Bobby, where did these nets come from?” she asked the groundskeeper, perplexed.

“A gentleman arrived here at the crack of dawn, and then a few minutes later a truck arrived with a crew of men and they began installing the nets. He said it was a gift,” Bobby replied.

“Did he tell you his name?” Jessica asked with a raised brow.

“No, he didn’t, but he sure looked familiar. He actually gave me this note to give to you, Miss Jessica,” Bobby replied as he handed Jessica an envelope.

She opened it and read the words. *My sweet Jessica, an electro will be by to pick you up at 7:00 – Love, Shadow.* With a broad smile etched upon her face, Jessica watched the children hollering with joy every time a ball entered one of the nets.

As content as Jessica felt in Pinia, and as much as her affection for Shadow continued to grow, her mother and father remained on

her mind. When she returned to her cabin after spending the day teaching the children how to use their new flash-pads, she decided to contact her father back at the Freedom Home.

“Jessica, my darling, it’s wonderful to hear your voice. Your mother sends her love. She’s traveling across Europe for the next few days with Secretary Gibson. They’ll be attending several conferences relating to environmental issues. Now, please tell me you’re ready to come home,” Westgale said eagerly.

“I’m sorry, Dad; that’s not happening. At least not until my mission is complete.” She went on to break the news of her newfound love. As she expected, her father was furious.

“A relationship with Cobra Pix’s son? Have you lost your mind?” he bellowed. “Open your eyes, Jessie. You’re being set up. How many times do I need to tell you? Pix is a deranged megalomaniac. His entire purpose in life is to bring America to its knees, and once he cuts off our supply of resources, he just may accomplish his goal.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Jessica responded.

“Of course it’s going to happen. It’s the major reason for his takeover. That son of a bitch has been aligning himself with the HKM for years. Together they will do whatever it takes to crush us, and since we’ve already done a damn good job at destroying ourselves, it won’t be very difficult,” Westgale shouted.

“Trust me, Dad. I understand why you feel this way, but Shadow has informed me his father is not going to breach the agreement your Administration made with the Pinian government. He’s going to be the man in charge of those very resources, and he actually hopes to establish a better deal for everyone involved, especially when it comes to fera-bean biofuel,” Jessica said calmly.

“Are you listening to yourself, Jessie? You’re blinded by love. These are the same men who used helcin to kill a group of government officials,” Westgale said, his tone growing angrier by the second. “They also planned a brutal surprise attack on a small neighboring country for the purpose of stealing their limited riches. How could you believe a single word from the mouths of such criminals?”

“You can’t believe everything the prior Pinian government has said. I’m not going to tell you Cobra Pix is somebody you should believe, but what I can tell you is that, from what I’ve come to know of Shadow, *he* is very caring and honorable. I don’t expect you to accept how I feel toward him, but I hope you will at least trust my judgment.”

Westgale slowly exhaled. “You be very careful, Jessie. And when you’re ready to come home, let me know.”

Jessica was nervous about the evening ahead. As much as she trusted Shadow, she remained concerned about his father’s intentions. During her conversations with Shadow she couldn’t recall him saying anything negative about his father, but she also never received the impression he admired him, either. It was as if this was the life he was born into, and he was just going to accept whatever came along with it.

Jessica’s anxiousness grew the closer 7:00 came. *How am I supposed to dress? Should I wear makeup? Will I be able to sit in the same room as Cobra Pix and not be afraid for my life?* All these questions raced through her mind. As she slowly placed the dragonstone necklace around her neck, she thought of Shadow.

At 7:00 sharp, she saw the lights from an electro shining through her cabin window. She grabbed her coat and was greeted at the door by the driver, who was dressed in his Iron Lotus uniform. “Hello, Miss Westgale. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Shadow and his father are waiting for us at the compound,” he said with a smile—a smile that seemed forced. He led her to the vehicle and opened the back door. Jessica nervously entered.

Seconds after they drove off, the clouds opened up and rain began to pound the roof of the electro. “We don’t have many autumn rainstorms here, but when they do occur, they can be quite powerful,” the driver said as the torrential rainfall intensified.

“Are you sure we should continue on in this storm?” Jessica asked fearfully.

“You need not worry, Miss Westgale. This vehicle is equipped to handle the worst weather imaginable. Now, just to be extra safe,

I'll take an alternate route, through the back roads," the driver replied calmly.

"Won't that be worse?" Jessica asked. "What about the darkness?"

"Ah, we can fix that," he replied as he tapped a button on the electro's front panel. Suddenly a neon red glow surrounded the vehicle.

"Wow, that is quite a sight," Jessica exclaimed as she watched the rain through the glow.

"So, what's it like being the daughter of the president of the United States?"

"I don't know. I'm being honest when I tell you I really don't give it much thought."

"You must receive loads of attention everywhere you go. I imagine people always want to be your friend."

"I guess it depends how they feel about my father." Jessica chuckled. "America is a much-divided country."

"Are you close with your father?"

"I love my father dearly. He's an exceptional man. And yes, we are very close. Considering how busy he is performing his duties as president, I'm grateful we've been able to remain as close as we have."

"And is your father aware of your affection for Shadow?"

Jessica was beginning to feel uneasy. *Who is this guy and what's with all these questions?* "With all due respect, I hope you understand that's a personal matter," she answered calmly, trying not to show her anxiety.

"I apologize. What's wrong with me?" the driver exclaimed. "I just hope and pray Shadow can find happiness. He's had to endure loads of sadness with the death of his six brothers... such a tragedy," he murmured sadly. The electro continued through a long stretch of dirt roads. The raindrops had now become sporadic. The driver lessened the luminosity of the neon red glow. Jessica didn't respond and wondered where this was leading. "Whenever I think of Hadar, my heart begins to crumble," he sighed.

"Hadar?"

“Hadar was Shadow’s oldest brother. He was my best friend... a true warrior. I’ll never forget how he had my back during the Battle of Oria. He gave up his life for his friend and his country,” he said. His voice cracked. “That’s a real hero. Would you give up *your* life for *your* country, Miss Westgale?” he asked in a sarcastic tone.

By now, Jessica feared for her life. Her body quivered. She struggled to reply, searching for the words he’d want to hear. “I don’t know... I don’t know if I could be as brave as Hadar, or you,” she answered apprehensively.

“I guess it would have been more appropriate to ask you if you believe your country’s worth it,” he said sardonically. “After all, we’re talking about a land of wickedness and corruption. For the love of God, your people came so close to destroying their own country, all in the name of greed!”

As he continued his rant against America, Jessica secretly sent a flash-message to Shadow, informing him she was afraid for her life. She held the flash-pad for Shadow to listen in, while clutching her necklace with her other hand. “It’s a shame that the general and his cohorts weren’t successful when they tried to oust your father from power. Are you proud to be the daughter of a cold-blooded killer, Miss Westgale?” the driver asked in a husky voice. “Let me tell you about the Battle of Oria...”

Jessica received a return flash-message from Shadow: *Jessica, place your earpiece in your ear. I urgently need to speak to you.* She quickly complied.

“Listen carefully. That’s not the man who’s supposed to be driving you,” she heard Shadow say in her earpiece. Panic edged his voice. Jessica trembled. “His name is Jolio,” Shadow said. “A man named Alton was supposed to be the person picking you up. This is not good. Judging by your coordinates, it appears he’s heading toward Oria.”

Sensing Jessica was communicating with someone, Jolio sneaked a quick look through the rearview mirror.

Why’s he doing this? Jessica asked via a flash-message. She could hear a faint humming sound coming from the front of the electro.

“Revenge—revenge against your father for the Battle of Oria. I hate to alarm you, but I want to make sure you’re aware of who you are dealing with. The guy’s totally deranged. My father released him from the militia months ago,” Shadow said, his voice edged with fear.

“Don’t fear, Miss Westgale. Every ending brings a new beginning. The cosmos awaits our souls,” Jolio said euphorically. Suddenly the humming sound grew increasingly louder.

Shadow knew that deadly sound. “There’s a green emergency lever on the door. Pull it and jump out,” Shadow cried as the humming turned into a roar. “Now!” he shouted.

With a trembling hand, Jessica pulled the lever and jumped out the door, hitting the ground and rolling from the road into a pile of leaves. The car traveled another thirty yards or so, then—*KAPOW!*—it burst into flames. Jessica watched in terror, frozen in fear.

She heard Shadow crying out from her earpiece, now lying in the leaves a few feet away, “Jessica! Jessica! Please tell me you’re okay.”

She followed the sound of his voice and retrieved the earpiece and her flash-pad from under the leaves.

“Jessica! Jessica!” Shadow called out again.

“Shadow! The electro—it blew up! Oh my Lord,” Jessica sobbed. She crawled to a nearby tree and sat leaning against the trunk as once again sheets of rain began to fall.

“Whatever you do, keep your flash-pad on and turn its light up as bright as it can go. We have your coordinates, and we’re coming for you. Just try to remain calm,” Shadow said.

She sat frozen. Even the nearby howls from a pack of Pinian mountain wolves weren’t enough to shake her from her trancelike state.

“Is everything okay, Jessica?” Shadow asked.

She didn’t respond. She began praying as she held the dragonstone necklace in her hands. Her father’s words kept playing in her mind: “*you’re being set up... you’re being set up.*”

Breaking twigs and the loud rustling of leaves brought her out of her daze. She turned to her right, and there they were—three Pinian

mountain wolves, standing about ten yards away, their golden eyes staring directly at her. They made that awful hissing sound. She turned the bright light from her flash-pad directly at them. They backed up a few feet, but it also appeared to anger them, as the hissing turned into even more frightening growls. She held the necklace tighter and continued to pray. She was certain she was going to die.

Before coming to Pinia, Jessica had done her research on these animals and learned that, unlike most other wolves around the world, these beasts felt highly threatened by humans because for years they had been the most hunted animal in the country. She recalled one of the Pinian children, frail little Ulu, telling her of her encounter with a Pinian mountain wolf.

“There weren’t supposed to be any wolves in the area the camp guide brought us to, but me and one of the counselors, Miss Rita, were gathering fruit when we heard a howling, and then saw two wolves running at us. I was really scared.” Ulu cringed as she relived the encounter.

“Oh my Lord, Ulu. What did you do?” Jessica asked.

“We climbed a tree. The wolves can’t climb, Miss Jessica,” Ulu said.

“Did they run away after you climbed the tree?”

“No, they began growling at us, but then Miss Rita threw a couple of apples from the tree and they ran away.”

Even with the flash-pad’s bright light shining on them, the wolves began to move in slowly, as if calculating their every move. Ulu’s words came back to her: *wolves can’t climb, Miss Jessica*. Naturally athletic, Jessica knew she could easily climb the tree she was resting against. However, she would have to spring to her feet, then turn and start climbing. Would she be quick enough? Those ominous golden eyes and razor-sharp teeth seemed to become larger with the wolves’ every step. She sensed an attack was seconds away. She tensed, preparing to move—

Then sirens cut through the night air, and Jessica heard the double *whump-whump* of two robo-copters descending from directly above. She glanced up, then back at the wolves. They were gone, melted back into the night.

As soon as the robo-copters landed, Shadow darted straight toward Jessica, who stood shaking on legs that would barely support her. "It's okay... it's okay, I'm here with you," Shadow soothed, holding her tightly.

They returned to the village, and Jessica cleaned herself up, had something to eat, then sat with Shadow by the campfire. "Maybe my father was correct after all," she sighed. "After what happened this evening, I really need to think things over."

"I'm so sorry this happened," Shadow said as he kissed her on the forehead. "I'd completely understand if you wanted to go home, but I'm really hoping you stay, and see your mission through."

"And face the possibility of something like this happening again?" Jessica huffed.

"I'll give you my personal guarantee that you'll remain completely safe," Shadow answered with conviction. "I'll even have a couple of our soldiers watch over you day and night."

"What about Jolio?" Jessica replied. "He was once one of your soldiers, and he's the one who tried to kill me."

Shadow sighed. "You see, Jolio and my brother Hadar were friends from childhood. Actually, Hadar was closer to Jolio than he was to any of his brothers. After Hadar was killed, Jolio viewed America as pure evil." Shadow paused. "But now he's dead... which means you'll have nothing to worry about," he assured her. "I promise you, everything will be fine."

"But how in the world did he end up in that van instead of Alton?"

"Alton had been trying to help him overcome his problems. On the way to pick you up, he was giving Jolio a ride back from the hospital where he'd been receiving therapy. Jolio forced Alton out of his own vehicle, stole his flash-pad, and left him in the middle of nowhere." Shadow scowled at that.

Jessica slowly exhaled and gazed into her lap. “I need to ask you a question,” she murmured.

“Sure. Ask away,” Shadow replied.

“Is it possible your father was behind this?”

“I hate to be so blunt, but if my father wanted you dead, it would have happened the very first day you arrived in Pinia, and he would have done it himself. He knew who you were from day one. He sincerely admires you. He’s hoping we’ll try visiting him again tomorrow evening.” Shadow hesitated. “How about it? And this time *I’ll* be the one escorting you—oh, and I promise you, there’ll be no wolves around,” he added with a chuckle.

Jessica smiled. “Yeah, I think I’ve had enough of those things to last me a thousand lifetimes.” She thought for a moment. “All right... I’ll go with you.”

CHAPTER 20

Unlike the prior evening's stormy weather, this evening was perfectly clear. As Shadow's driver drove them to the compound, Jessica admired the glowing stars surrounding a blood-red harvest moon. "What an incredible sight," she exclaimed.

"Yeah, when I was a child I always wished I could go up there and fly from star to star, then land on the moon and just watch the world from above," Shadow said, looking out the window of the grand-electro in awe.

As they approached their destination, Jessica's attention shifted from the Pinian sky to the enormous Iron Lotus compound. "Whoa... I figured it would be quite elaborate, but this is beyond belief," she said as they passed by several buildings and open areas.

"My father likes to oversee all aspects of our operation, and this setup enables him to do that," Shadow responded. "We're coming up to his palace now," he added.

A red light illuminated the massive entrance, which was flanked by two dramatic waterfalls. An intricately carved marble dragon in the center of the circular drive towered over the vehicle as it pulled up behind it, in front of the tall double doors.

Shadow noticed Jessica's nervousness as they stepped out of the grand-electro. He took her by the hand. "Come on, Jessica. Dad's been really anticipating our arrival."

As hard as she tried to go with the flow, in her mind she still had doubts about dining with a man who had so devotedly vowed

revenge against her father and country. *Well, I'm here now*, she thought. *I guess I'll just have to make the best of this.*

They entered a grand foyer of gothic design, with pointed arches that seemed to go on forever. Jessica felt as if she'd been transported back to another time. Sortar Dragons in red and black were everywhere, from sculptures to murals.

"Those are my brothers... actually they're half-brothers, and that is my grandfather," Shadow said, directing her attention to a series of gold-framed photos on a side wall

Jessica stopped to acknowledge the photo display. When she came to the photo of Shadow's eldest brother, Hadar, she was amazed by his resemblance to Shadow. Both had big brown eyes, a prominent jawline, and even a birthmark on the right cheek—they could have been twins. A tribute plaque underneath the photo read: *A true warrior, Hadar Pix fought and died for his country in the Battle of Oriá. Hadar's spirit is now at peace in the cosmos, amongst the eternal embers from the flames of the Sortar Dragon.*

"I'm sure he was an outstanding person," Jessica said, glancing back toward Shadow, who smiled and nodded.

"My father's waiting for us in the living room," Shadow said as he put out his hand to lead the way.

When they entered the cavernous room, it was dark. Within seconds of the door opening, the room lit up. Cobra was sitting on a red, gold-trimmed throne. Today he had glittering silver eyebrows. He was wearing a black designer suit, black shirt, and red tie, in honor of the Sortar Dragon; red and black were by far the palace's most prevalent colors.

"Welcome, Jessica. Please make yourself at home," he said with a cheerful smile as he directed her and Shadow to a sofa across from him. Once they were seated, he pressed a button on his throne and two servants appeared within seconds, carrying dishes of fruit, cheese, and crackers. "Delicious," Cobra exclaimed after biting into a peach. "Go ahead, don't be shy, Jessica," he added, waving his hand, encouraging Jessica to indulge.

Jessica looked at the plate with trepidation. *This could be poison, for all I know*, she thought. It felt like a noose was being pulled tighter and tighter around her neck every time Cobra said her name. She couldn't take it anymore, she decided. She loved Shadow, but she had to confront Cobra regarding the uneasiness she continued to feel in his presence. She set the plate of food aside.

"Is everything okay?" Cobra asked, silver eyebrows raised.

Shadow immediately looked over at Jessica and frowned.

"I'd be lying to you if I said it was," she replied.

"I understand," Cobra responded in a sympathetic tone. "The ordeal you went through last evening has to have left you feeling very afraid for your safety." He rose. "Jolio was an excellent soldier... an excellent soldier, indeed. My son Hadar personally took him under his wing and trained him well." Cobra began to pace, frowning in thought. "But you see, sometimes even the toughest and most well-trained soldiers can break. Hadar actually died in Jolio's arms; Jolio was never the same again. We tried to help him overcome his anguish, but it was to no avail. He'd become extremely deranged. One of my lieutenants, Alton, continued to try to help him after he was dismissed from my militia, but I guess it was a futile endeavor." He rubbed his hands over his face.

"And you—what about you?" Jessica asked. "You've vowed to seek revenge on America, and here I am, the daughter of the US president, sitting in your palace being catered to by servants. Please forgive me, sir, but I'm very confused. Just what is going on here?"

Cobra stopped pacing, grinned, and sat back down. "You know, over the years, I've often wished the men who served under me would have the courage to challenge me, just like you have," he said as he began to file his nails. "Of course, the fact I've been referred to as a vicious and vindictive tyrant who's more than willing to kill his own people is probably why they never do," he added sardonically. "But you, Jessica—well, you've earned my full respect. The fact you remained in Pinia after I had you blindfolded and brought into the woods tells me how

determined and committed you are to your beliefs.” He raised his head and looked into Jessica’s eyes. “Honesty is the most important virtue of all.”

“Can I trust you’re being completely honest with *me*?” Jessica retorted. She saw Shadow looking anxiously back and forth between her and his father.

“Like I just finished saying, there is nothing more important than honesty. So, yes, you can count on my honesty,” Cobra replied.

“Do you still blame America for the deaths of your six sons? And is it still your wish to see the country be ‘brought to ash,’ as you’ve so often been quoted as saying?” Jessica asked.

Cobra rose again, appearing deep in thought. He walked over to a large wooden chest and slowly opened the top drawer. “My son Dorval made this for me when he was a child,” he said as he took out a wood carving of a Sortar Dragon. He placed it on the table in front of Jessica and Shadow.

“It’s stunning; very beautiful,” Jessica remarked as she studied the carving.

Cobra slowly exhaled. “I used to keep it on my desk, and every day I would look at it and think of my dead sons,” he said, eyes glittering with tears. He paused. “And yes, the thought of revenge against America and your father had become my reason for waking up in the morning. It became my lifeblood.”

“And now?” Jessica asked.

“My focus is on leading Pinia,” Cobra replied. “It’s vital that this country be given the chance to prosper without interference from the outside world... including America,” he added. He pointed toward the carving. “When you leave here this evening, I would love for you to take the carving with you as a gift.”

“I surely can’t take this from you; it’s a reminder of your son,” Jessica responded.

“My sons are always with me. They reside right here.” He placed his right hand over his heart.

“Okay, I’ll take it with me under two conditions,” Jessica answered with a sheepish grin.

“And what might those be?” Cobra asked.

“First of all, you allow me to donate it to the children’s recreation center, and second, you and Shadow tell me all there is to know about Pinia and the Sortar Dragon,” Jessica replied with a smile.

“You have a deal,” Cobra replied, laughing.

Shadow walked over to his father and embraced him. “Thank you, Father,” he said with a wide smile.

“Now, my chefs have prepared one of their delicious vegetable stews. So, shall we?” Cobra said, and led the way to the dining room.

By the time dinner was served, Jessica was feeling more relaxed. Cobra had won her over. During dinner, Shadow and Cobra spoke of their country with deep reverence. “Pinia’s a magical land, Jessica,” Shadow said as he dug into his bowl of stew.

“And we owe it all to the Sortar Dragon,” Cobra added. “Those stones around your neck, the beautiful Pinian pine trees, and our highly coveted fera-beans—they’re all gifts from Sortar Dragon-fire,” he said. Jessica found it intriguing that the people of Pinia believed so strongly in this legend, to the point where it had become like a religion.

When dinner concluded, they returned to the living room. Cobra made his way to a vast collection of phonograph records. “My father has such great appreciation for all forms of art,” Shadow whispered to Jessica. “He refers to art as the ‘universal healer.’ He’s particularly fond of classical music.”

“Ah, I think this one should do the job,” Cobra said as he held up a record. “This is called *Starlight Serenade*. It’s by my favorite Pinian composer, Minaldi.” He placed the record on an antique phonograph and seconds later the first notes drifted into the air. He closed his eyes, put his head back, and began swaying it from side to side, completely absorbed. A moment later, he sauntered over to Jessica with an outstretched hand. “May I have a dance before dessert is served?” he asked her politely.

Jessica felt her face warm. Smiling, she looked over at Shadow. He nodded and smiled, and she took Cobra’s hand.

* * *

“As expected, Heath Claremont accepted our proposal,” Dave Perry informed the president. “The AMO’s going full throttle in determining the most cost-effective ways to get the VX drug out across the country.”

“That’s good news,” Westgale said. “And what about Cobra Pix’s proposal?” he asked.

“According to our finance and economics people, it’s an extraordinary deal, far better than what the prior Pinian government was proposing. Even the Strategic Council gave it overwhelming approval. All it requires is your acceptance,” Perry replied. “With this deal we’ll be able to pay off the Outer Commission’s debt prior to the deadline,” he added happily.

“And if we don’t accept the deal?” Westgale asked.

“Our only recourse would then be to work out international deals for the drug, and even that wouldn’t guarantee anything.” Perry frowned. “I can understand your concerns in dealing with Pix, Mr. President, but this proposal is too solid to pass up. Besides, more evidence is coming out every day, proving the prior Pinian government that we thought was so democratic and caring was completely corrupt.”

“Yeah, but supporting Pix and his militia would be going against everything this Administration has stood for,” Westgale replied solemnly. “Cobra Pix used brute force to take that country over. The people of Pinia didn’t have a say. If we make this deal, David, we’d be supporting a dictator. We’d be compromising our values and beliefs, the concept of democracy.”

“And sadly, if we don’t make the deal, the people of *America* may no longer have a country to call their own,” Perry sighed.

Westgale slowly exhaled. “Before I make any decisions, I want to meet with whoever Pix has put in place to negotiate,” he demanded.

“That’d be his son Shadow,” Perry explained. “I’ll have my staff set something up.”

“Very well, but it’s important the meeting takes place in a secret location,” Westgale said firmly.

* * *

For years, like everyone else around the country, I found it interesting to watch Cryptic interview all the so-called “important people.” The robot, although loathed by most people in its early years, had actually become a trusted American figure. The day after Westgale announced that I’d become the exclusive rights owner of the mineral, a member of the UCIT staff contacted me and asked if I’d be interested in being interviewed by Cryptic. I gladly accepted.

The interview took place in front of the VLP headquarters. When the UCIT crew released Cryptic from their van, its eyes were gold and its chest displayed a neon image of Moon Shade Bluff.

After a casual greeting, the robot asked its first question. “How difficult has it been for you, discovering your father was murdered?”

“It’s been very traumatic,” I replied. “The thought of such a good man being murdered in such a gutless, cowardly manner is very upsetting.”

“What are your feelings on the VX drug?”

“It’s an incredible thing. At least something positive came out of this ugliness.”

“And the concerns regarding this leading to unsustainable overpopulation?”

“I’ll leave that one to the experts.”

“How will becoming a billionaire change you?”

“I am who I am, and I believe what I believe, and no amount of money will ever change that,” I replied.

“Does that mean you’ll continue on as Director of VLP?”

“Of course.”

“And your wife? Does she plan to continue on as the town’s DA?”

“If she is reelected, then by all means, she will.”

“During the Anya Ahar hearing, you spoke lovingly about your son, Riley. I’d be remiss to not ask you how the young fellow is doing.”

“He’s doing terrific. Thank you for asking.”

* * *

“Hey, Mr. Shelby. It’s nice to see you again,” Kayla said as she and Riley arrived at Hollis Farms.

“Wonderful seeing you again too, Kayla—and there’s my man.” Shelby bent down to be on the boy’s level. “How’s it going, Riley?”

“I’m nine years old now,” Riley announced.

“Nine years old!” Shelby repeated with a smile. “I bet you received some real nice presents for your birthday.”

“I got a really neat aquarium. I even have a fish who looks just like Gordon,” Riley said as he took out his flash-pad and showed Shelby a photo of his new angelfish.

“Wow, he does look like Gordon,” Shelby replied.

“And there are lots of other fish, too.” This time Riley showed him a photo of the entire aquarium.

“Whoa... it’s like your own little ocean. Look at those scuba divers. They must really enjoy being surrounded by all those amazing fish,” Shelby said.

“Tell Mr. Shelby what else you received for your birthday,” Kayla said, smiling.

“Kayla got me this amazing soccer ball. It’s an official Washington Androids game ball.”

“I bet you’re a really good little soccer player,” Shelby said, tousling Riley’s hair.

“I’m going to play for the Androids one day. They’re my favorite team.”

“The Androids? That’s my favorite team, too. I used to really enjoy taking my son to see them play.”

“What about the special gift Grandma gave you?” Kayla said.

“She gave me this really fun game called Laser Flash Frenzy,” Riley answered.

“And what else did your grandma give you?” Kayla said softly.

“Oh yeah, the American flag that was given to my Grandpa Dennis when he saved two boys at Moon Shade Bluff.”

“That’s a wonderful gift. I’m sure your grandpa would be thrilled to know you’ll be taking care of his flag,” Shelby said sincerely.

“Now, I have a feeling Kayla brought you here to buy you one of those white chocolate toffee apples,” he said, winking at Kayla.

“How did you know?” Riley replied.

Shelby chuckled. “Just a lucky guess. Since I missed your birthday, I’d like to buy one right now for both you and Kayla, if that’s okay.”

“All right!” Riley shouted.

“What do you say, Riley?” Kayla interjected.

“Thank you, Mr. Shelby,” Riley said as he ran to the counter.

CHAPTER 21

Prior to their meeting, Westgale looked into Shadow Pix's past. Although information was scarce, he was able to learn that Shadow was the so-called "brains" behind the Iron Lotus. Unlike his six deceased brothers, his military experience was very limited. Westgale also learned Shadow was highly educated and fluent in several languages. What caught him by surprise was the contempt Shadow felt toward his grandfather. In his only documented American interview, Shadow commented that his grandfather's "barbaric tyrannical approach to governance set Pinia back centuries."

The clandestine meeting took place just before dawn at New York City's Gladiator Arena. For the last twenty years, the arena had been home to most of the country's premiere bare-knuckle championship fights. Many men and women had entered the pugilist diamond and not come out alive. In the years following the War Within, bare-knuckle fighting had begun to challenge soccer as the country's most popular sport.

Once in New York, Westgale boarded an unmarked robo-copter along with Agent Gallio. A second copter with Gil and Shadow Pix followed. The copters landed in a large field behind the arena. The group entered the arena, where Gallio set two chairs in the middle of the diamond.

Normally, the Gladiator Arena was a raucous place, as the fighters gave everything they had, both physically and mentally—while fans frantically screamed for their chosen fighter to destroy

the other. Every move they made was highly calculated and more times than not, the mental battle became more important than the physical. It seemed that this might be true for this contest as well, as Westgale and Shadow sat face to face, and tension built to a level that had not been seen in this particular den of madness.

“So, you’re the young man who has captured my daughter’s heart,” Westgale began, intently studying Shadow.

“Yes. I care deeply for Jessica. She’s a very special person and I love her with all my heart,” Shadow replied sincerely.

“Even though her father happens to be the man responsible for the deaths of your six brothers?”

“My brothers were soldiers, sir. They were killed fighting for a cause they strongly believed in.”

“Ah yes, the invasion of Oria. Tell me, Shadow: was that a cause you yourself believed in?”

Shadow thought before answering. “No... I’ve never believed my father should’ve invaded Oria. That all began with my very nonsensical grandfather.”

“Is your father aware of how you feel?”

“Of course. I am not my father’s puppet. We share a very close bond, but I am very much my own person.”

“And what about that deadly helcin attack on the government officials? Was that something you opposed as well?”

“My father did not order that mission. Members from one of our secondary military units decided to commit that heinous act of their own accord, and once my father found out who they were, he had them executed. The Pinian government knew the truth, but they covered it up, as always. They fed off many forms of propaganda. This is how they kept the people of Pinia trusting them.”

“And what is the future of Pinia with the Iron Lotus in charge?”

“Our country is very wealthy in terms of resources, but we’ve been very lacking when it comes to our overall development. It’s our goal to do a far better job of educating and providing for our people. We want to make them feel proud.”

“That sounds very noble, but what about the close ties your militia has with the HKM?”

“We will do whatever is in the best interest of Pinia, and that includes the proposal we’ve made to your government.”

“Yes, that is a very generous proposal. Far more generous than our recent dealings with Pinia.”

“As leaders of our country’s new regime, my father and I felt it was important to reward and retain America as a valued international business partner. I’m confident this deal, if you accept it, will provide a high degree of mutual satisfaction.”

Westgale nodded his approval, and unlike other meetings inside the pugilist diamond, this one ended in a draw. He stood and extended his hand to Shadow, who also rose and accepted it. “You have a deal,” Westgale said with a smile. “I’d like to seal it by inviting you to dinner at the Freedom Home this evening.”

“That would be a true honor and a privilege, sir,” Shadow replied.

Escorted by Gil and Agent Gallio, Westgale and Shadow left the building and crossed the field to the copters hovering above.

“It’s amazing how much Jessica has come to enjoy traveling over the last few years,” Westgale said with a chuckle, “considering how much she used to—”

“Get down, Mr. President!” one of the agents above them yelled.

A man stepped out from behind a large hay bale.

“Alton, no!” Shadow shouted, and quickly leapt to shield Westgale. Laser blasts rang out. Shadow and Westgale fell to the ground as the agent in the copter fired at the shooter. The shooter fell to the ground, dead. As agents ran to the man, Gil and Agent Gallio sprinted toward Westgale and Shadow.

“Oh my Lord, he’s been hit!” Westgale exclaimed as he rose to his feet.

“He’s still alive,” Gil said as he checked Shadow’s pulse.

Shadow stirred. “Who’s Alton?” Westgale asked.

“He said... he wanted to... watch my back,” Shadow gasped, and slipped into unconsciousness.

“Are you okay, Mr. President?” Agent Gallio asked.

"I'm fine. I wasn't hit. Thanks to *him*," Westgale replied, pointing to Shadow.

"He's alive, but we need to get him to the nearest hospital immediately," Gallio said.

"He's stabilized for now, but I've ordered tests," the attending doctor informed Westgale and Gil in private.

Westgale called for Dr. Ahar to be brought to New York, then contemplated his flash-pad. He was dreading calling his daughter with the awful news.

"Oh no!" Jessica cried as Westgale explained that Shadow was fighting for his life. "I didn't even know he was meeting with you. He told me he had to go away on business... Oh my God!"

"I was the one who requested complete secrecy for this meeting," Westgale replied.

"What happened? Who tried to kill him?" Jessica asked, sounding disoriented.

"They weren't trying to kill *him*," Westgale sighed. "It was *me* they were trying to kill."

"Was this one of those punk extremists?"

"No. After Shadow was shot we discovered a sensor-chip on his belt. It appears he wanted somebody to know where he was at all times. But it appears that same somebody wanted me dead," Westgale replied.

"Do you know who the person is?" Jessica asked.

"The man's name was Alton," Westgale said.

There was a moment's silence as she digested that. "Oh, wow. He's probably Shadow's most trusted soldier."

"Well he *was*."

"You mean Alton's dead?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. If Alton was attempting to kill you, then how come Shadow's the one fighting for his life?"

"Shadow saved my life, honey. He made himself into a human shield."

Jessica sobbed, then said, "I need to see him."

"Just hold tight, Jessie. I've already made arrangements."

"What about his father? He needs to know."

"My people are preparing to contact his office with all the details."

"Please, Dad, before I come there, let me personally tell Cobra what happened. He's here visiting the village as we speak."

Shortly after the call with her father ended, Jessica was able to track down a member of Cobra's security staff and explain how urgently she needed to speak with him. She waited anxiously at the patio café, by turns anguished and confused. She mentally rehearsed how she would divulge the news. This wouldn't be easy.

When Cobra arrived, he saw her red eyes and frowned. "Jessica, is there something troubling you?" He sat across from her.

As she explained what had happened, tears streamed down her face. Cobra was stunned. "I had no idea Shadow was in the US meeting with your father," he said, handing Jessica a tissue.

"It was regarding your proposal for the natural resources. Dad had accepted the offer just prior to Alton attempting to kill him."

"And your father is certain it was Alton?"

"Yes. Alton was killed by my father's security."

Cobra shook his head. "When I learned Alton was still spending time with Jolio I was concerned, but Shadow insisted he remain a trusted lieutenant."

"Obviously he trusted him enough to tell him about the meeting with my father," Jessica said, dabbing at her tears. "I can arrange for you to visit Shadow in the hospital, if you so wish."

In frustration, Cobra ran his hands over his scalp. "As much as I wish to be by my son's side, I cannot leave, Jessica. Go—be with him. Give him my love."

* * *

"Is he going to make it, Jack?" Westgale asked Dr. Ahar as they sat in the hospital's private boardroom.

“It’s too early to know,” Ahar answered with a sigh. “The next thirty-six hours will tell.”

“That young man saved my life, and in the process might very well lose his own,” Westgale said solemnly.

“Let’s stay positive, William. Fortunately, Shadow Pix is a healthy, strong young man,” Ahar replied. “Right now, this rests in the hands of God. All we can do is hope and pray.”

Westgale wanted to remain at the hospital so he decided to hold a press conference there revealing the most recent course of events. He began by speaking about the Pinian deal and the positive impact it would have on the country. “This deal will enable the United States to attain levels of efficiency in terms of our energy and resources that once we could only dream of. It will also allow us to regain our complete independence—that’s right, our complete independence! When the Outer Commission set that deadline ten years ago, it seemed impossible that we’d be able to meet it. Well, in the near future, the only law we will be answering to is the American Constitution. Like the dinosaur, the Outer Commission and the New Order Treaty will be something we read about in history books. And I don’t know about you, but those are chapters I might skip.”

Westgale moved to the next segment of his speech. “If not for Shadow Pix, I would not be standing here in front of you right now. As I address you, Mr. Pix is fighting for his life. I have brought in America’s Chief of Medicine and Science, Dr. Jack Ahar, to care for Mr. Pix, and I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure he receives the best possible care.”

The reaction from Gerald Levin was immediate as he angrily spoke into the UCIT camera. “Tonight we’ve learned President Westgale has made a deal with a militia whose leader’s greatest wish in life has been to see America burn to ash. Of course Westgale has the nerve to stand there and brag about meeting the Outer Commission’s deadline. Well, let me tell you, if he’d been doing what he was supposed to be doing for the last several years, he wouldn’t have had to sink so low!” Levin exclaimed.

“This is a man who wasted billions of taxpayer dollars on the useless World Harmony Program, along with several other hopeless programs in the areas of environmental science and agriculture. The only reason Westgale needed to go running to Pinia for its natural resources is because he was desperate, and desperate leaders do stupid things. He could have worked out a sufficient deal for resources with our Canadian neighbors, back when he had the opportunity, but he chose to embrace an enemy instead of a friend.” He paused and slowly shook his head in disgust.

“What I find most disturbing is this: not only is the president being hypocritical and irresponsible in dealing with the Iron Lotus, he has not been fully transparent. My sources tell me Westgale’s daughter, Jessica, became romantically involved with Shadow Pix while performing humanitarian work in Pinia. Now, we all know as Americans, our greatness is constantly being threatened by outside sources. What I’ve come to realize is that our biggest threat comes from right here in America. It’s called the Peace Bringers Association!”

“Don’t listen to a word that idiot says, Dad,” said a teary-eyed Jessica as she met up with her father in the hospital boardroom. “Have you been here all this time?”

“Yes,” Westgale replied. “And when did you arrive?” he asked.

“Just soon enough to hear that insensitive imbecile spew out all his insecurities,” Jessica replied. “Is there any news on Shadow?”

“Dr. Ahar’s paying close attention to him, but his condition hasn’t changed,” Westgale replied.

“Do you think the doctor will let me see him?”

“I know they’re still running tests, but I’m sure in time you’ll be allowed to see him.”

“I need to tell him how much I love him.”

“I’m certain he’s well aware of that, honey. And I’m also certain of the love he feels for you.”

“Aw, come on, Dad, you don’t know that.”

“Oh, I saw it in his eyes when he told me so. He’s a fine young man, Jessie. I’m so sorry for doubting your judgment.”

“Believe me, Dad, I didn’t go over to Pinia looking to fall in love. But Shadow... I see something in him that’s just so genuine.”

“And Cobra? What is your take on him?”

“He strikes me as a very complex person.”

“How so?”

“I think he’s torn between his father’s quest for power and Shadow’s more compassionate side.”

Westgale smiled fondly. “That’s what I admire about you, Jessica.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The man had you blindfolded and brought into the woods, then frightened you with wolves, and you don’t seem at all angry about it.”

“Oh, believe me, I was,” she exclaimed. “But he did what he did because he thought our government was using me to infiltrate his administration and his militia. From that day on, he’s actually been very gracious to me.” Jessica moved to a window to stand silent, looking at the lawns below.

“Is something wrong, Jessica?” Westgale asked.

“Come here—look,” she said nervously.

Westgale moved to the window and looked outside. Hundreds of torches lit the perimeter of the hospital, held by a human chain. As they had done on prior occasions, they stood silently.

“This is becoming ridiculous,” he said in frustration, lifting his flash-pad to contact Attorney General Sutton.

“I wish I had a solution, Mr. President, but unless they’re causing some kind of disturbance there isn’t much we can do,” the general said after Westgale reported the silent protesters.

“Disturbance? My Lord! They’ve admitted to setting two buildings on fire.”

“Unless we can get our hands on this Blackheart character, or determine who the punks were that started those fires, we’re really up against it. Even though it appears this is one gigantic gang, we still don’t know how together they actually are.”

Westgale heard pandemonium down the hall. “I’ll get back to you, Champ,” he said quickly. “Something’s going on here.”

Security led him down the hall into one of the hospital's cafeterias, where several people milled around the large flash-screen on the wall. Two burning buildings were being shown on the screen.

"They said we're looking at the MAA headquarters and the PBA's Central Immigration Center. Apparently, some extremist punks have launched fire-zaps from their robo-cycles at both locations," said a nurse.

Westgale and the others stared in horror as the two fires raged like savage beasts, destroying everything in their path. Thankfully, as was the case with the two corporate buildings, there was no one inside.

Outside the hospital, once again the group performed what was becoming their well-known ritual: thrusting their torches into the air, they called out, "Free Anya! Free America!" before peacefully turning away.

As expected, while the fires raged, a view-file was discreetly sent to UCIT, in which, once again, AXE claimed responsibility: "Blackheart here. Welcome to the new age. As you sit back and watch two more pigpens turn to charcoal courtesy of AXE, please find joy in the fact that our movement will emerge as your redeemer. We will bring an end to all injustice, as we bring this country together as one. Free Anya! Free America!"

"Enough is enough," Gil said to Colonel Peters during an emergency meeting directly following the most recent events. "We have to figure out who's behind this craziness. Has your grandson and his team come up with anything that can help us?" he asked.

Peters sighed. "The organizers of the mass gatherings have been thoroughly questioned, and they claim to have nothing to do with the fires, or know anything about this Blackheart character."

"Do you believe this to be true?"

"Well, if they *were* behind those crimes, they surely wouldn't admit it. This movement seems to be emerging more as a lifestyle, like one large, generic form of rebellion. I'm certain throngs of these individuals are loosely connected to each other, but for the most part we're talking about a widespread group of *individuals*."

Gil shook his head in frustration. “You said their goal is to repair America by starting a revolution. My question is, will we be able to stop them?”

Peters sighed heavily again. “If we don’t want to end up where we ended up twenty-five years ago, we’d better.”

Jessica had now been sitting by Shadow’s bedside for hours. Fatigue was overwhelming her and she struggled to stay awake. Sometimes she would drift off, gently resting her head on his chest. The entire time she held the dragon-stone necklace tightly in her hands. Seeing the man she loved just lying there, lifeless, tore at her heart.

She thought about the promise she’d made to him regarding his mother.

“Now that I know so much about your dad, what about your mother?” Jessica asked as they sat arm in arm by a warming campfire.

“She’s a very kind and caring person. She used to play piano to get me to sleep,” Shadow replied with a nostalgic smile. “She was an incredible pianist. That’s actually how Dad met her.”

“Oh?”

“Dad funded a theater in central Pinia where she was performing in one of the plays. He was really taken by her kindness, and not long after, they married. I’m their only child. It was Dad’s second marriage.” Shadow chuckled.

“And how did good ol’ Cobra mess that one up?” Jessica asked with an impish grin.

“According to my father, Mom tried to persuade Dad to get away from my grandfather, who was running Pinia like a possessed tyrant. She wanted no part of that world, and when Dad became chief commander of his military, well, Mom couldn’t take anymore,” Shadow explained.

“Is that when she left for the US?”

“Actually, it was about a year later. She decided to get away from Pinia and get a fresh start somewhere in America. I haven’t heard from her since.”

“So, you haven’t spoken or seen your mother since you were a young boy?”

“No. And unfortunately, because of who I am, traveling to your country has been next to impossible for me. Anyway, I don’t even know if she wants to see me.”

“Do you know her whereabouts?”

“I don’t even know if she’s still alive,” he sighed. “All I know is that I’d give anything to be able to reach out to her and see her again.”

“Well now, being the president’s daughter, I think I can help you with this one. In fact, I know I can help you,” Jessica said as she pulled Shadow closer to her.

“That’s one promise I’ll gladly hold you to,” he replied.

The hospital room door opened, bringing Jessica back to the moment. “Dr. Ahar,” she said as she gave her head a shake. “Do you have an update for me?”

“I’m still waiting on some very important test results to come back,” Ahar replied. “Look. Why don’t you go and get some rest? I’ll contact you immediately if there’s any change.”

“Please, Doctor, I want you to be honest with me. Is he going to come out of this alive?” Jessica asked as tears filled her eyes.

“Honestly, I just don’t know, Jessica,” Ahar answered softly.

Jessica nodded glumly and left. She hadn’t had anything to eat all day long, so she headed to the cafeteria. Setting her tray down at an empty table, she took a few bites out of her grilled veggie sandwich, then her mind began to drift. She couldn’t stop thinking about the promise she’d made to Shadow.

As she sat at the table, deep in thought, aimlessly stirring her iced tea with a straw, her flash-pad buzzed. When she noticed it was Dr. Ahar calling, her heart jumped as fear instantly gripped her. She released the straw, reached for the flash-pad with her right hand, and clutched the dragon-stone necklace with her left. “Yes, Doctor,” she said, barely able to say the words.

“I have an update for you, Jessica,” Ahar replied.

“Is Shadow going to survive this?”

“Yes. He awoke a few minutes ago. He seems to be improving by the second, and his vitals are exactly where I want them to be. I expect a full recovery.”

“Can I see him?”

“Not at this time. He’s fallen back asleep and it’s important he gets his rest. By this evening it’ll be fine.”

“I knew I should have stayed,” she moaned. “I could’ve been there for him when he woke.”

“I wouldn’t fret, Jessica. Somehow, he knew you’d been by his side all this time.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“He actually told me to tell you to make sure you get something to eat.” Ahar ended the conversation with a chuckle.

Jessica decided that now was the time to try finding Shadow’s mother. She spent the next couple of hours searching on the World Connect, and received a lucky break when she came across an article about the history of the piano. The writer had interviewed several piano teachers across the country, and one of those happened to be a lady named Luanda Rollins, Shadow’s mother. From the article, Jessica learned that Luanda was teaching piano at a music studio in the heart of Manhattan. She contacted her driver and told him she’d like to go to the studio.

When she arrived, she was greeted by a young lady with waist-length, sandy brown hair. She was overflowing with energy. “How can I help you on this gorgeous afternoon?” she asked sweetly.

“I’m looking for a lady named Luanda Rollins,” Jessica replied.

The young lady led Jessica across a large room filled with an assortment of musical instruments, then stopped and pointed. “You can find Luanda down the hall in room 1W. Just follow the sound of her exquisite playing,” she said, beaming.

Jessica walked down the hall, listening to the clear and melodic notes of a tune she recognized: *Starlight Serenade*, the same song she’d danced to with Cobra. She waited for the playing to stop, then knocked on the door.

“Please come in,” a voice responded.

A grand piano dominated the room. A stunningly beautiful woman in a white dress with a silk burgundy scarf around her neck looked up. “Yes? What can I do for you?” She wasn’t wearing a speck of makeup, yet she looked half the age of her contemporaries.

“Hi, I’m Jessica. I could hear you from out in the hallway. I really enjoyed your playing.”

“Thank you very much. That piece of music is very special to me,” Luanda replied.

“How so?” Jessica asked.

“I used to always play it for my little boy back home,” she answered. Jessica noted her slight Pinian accent. “So, Jessica, how can I help you?” Luanda asked, studying Jessica for a moment. “Have I seen you before?”

“I’m Jessica Westgale, the president’s daughter,” Jessica replied.

“Hmm... I thought you looked familiar,” Luanda said. “And I think I know why you’re here,” she added, turning and directing Jessica to a chair across from her.

“I’m a friend of your son, Shadow.”

“Yes, I’m aware of your relationship with my son...” She hesitated. “Is Shadow going to live?” she asked. “I’ve been following the news on the World Connect, but...”

“Your son is expected to make a full recovery,” Jessica replied with a smile.

Luanda let out a sigh of relief. “What made you come and see me?” she asked.

“I made a promise to your son that I would help find you.”

“That was not a wise idea, Miss Westgale.”

“Why not?” Jessica replied, surprised. “It would mean so much for your son to see you again.”

“I appreciate you coming here, and I’m so grateful to learn Shadow is going to be okay, but I must ask you to leave and not tell Shadow my whereabouts,” Luanda said sadly.

“Why, ma’am? Why don’t you want to have contact with your son?” Jessica asked calmly. “He’s devastated by the fact you haven’t reached out to him.”

Luanda began lightly playing the piano, as if to avoid Jessica.

“Please, ma’am, talk to me,” Jessica pleaded.

Suddenly, Luanda stopped playing the piano and sat frozen. The silence was powerful. “It’s all because of that rotten bastard,” she murmured, shaking her head.

“Who are you referring to?” Jessica asked softly.

“My ex-husband, Cobra Pix,” she replied forcefully. “He’s the one who drove me away from Pinia, and he’s also the one who drove me away from my son.”

“Are you saying he threatened you, forced you to leave your country and abandon your son?”

“Of course. He’s a wicked, despicable man who only cares about himself and his endless need for power,” Luanda said angrily.

“How did he threaten you?”

“When I separated from him he called me a disgrace, and told me if I didn’t leave Pinia he would ruin my entire family, and perhaps even have them killed. He also warned me that if I ever even spoke to Shadow, he would also have him exiled from Pinia,” she replied. There was a catch in her voice.

“And am I correct to assume Shadow doesn’t know about this?”

“Yes. And I don’t want him to know. I ask you to please leave this alone. It’s my understanding Shadow and his father have grown very close over the years... Maybe Cobra’s a changed man.”

“All I ask of you is to please come to the hospital with me and see your son, just this one time,” Jessica pleaded. “I promise I won’t divulge anything you’ve told me.”

“Please be on your way, Miss Westgale,” Luanda said, pointing to the door. “And take good care of my son.”

Jessica walked toward the door and turned before exiting. “If you should have a change of mind, he’s at NYC General,” she said. Then she left the room, leaving the door open.

As she walked down the hallway, she heard the opening bars of *Starlight Serenade*, and then it stopped. Jessica walked back toward room 1W and saw Luanda leaning on top of the piano with her head in her hands, weeping.

When Jessica returned to the hospital, security immediately informed her that her mother and father were waiting for her in the boardroom.

“I guess sometimes prayers do get answered,” Westgale said, hugging his daughter.

“Jessica, honey, can I get you anything?” her mother asked.

“Just the fact you’re both here means the world to me,” Jessica replied. “Are we allowed to see him yet?”

“According to what Dr. Ahar told us, we should be good within the next hour or so.”

CHAPTER 22

“I call this council to order,” said the Strategic Council secretary. “Today we are here to vote on Request Docket SC-9J7, with the purpose of determining whether the Judicial Triangle will hear arguments for the grant of a permanent stay of execution for Anya Maria Ahar.”

Nicole Kratz wished she'd been permitted to stand up and make a passionate plea, but she was well aware this was not part of Strategic Council protocol. In these cases, members of the council were presented with documentation pertaining to the request one week in advance, then required to vote on the day of the meeting. As she nervously scanned the members of the council, Nicole feared the worst, especially considering the fact that Anya Ahar was now being viewed as more than just an angry and confused young lady; she was regarded as some kind of demented, iconic rebel.

Dave Perry, who in the past had adamantly opposed anything to do with Anya, sat beside Nicole, showing his support. “It's those charitable donations she made that got me on board with this,” he said quietly. “It really shows a sense of contrition on her behalf. There's no reason why we shouldn't get the majority vote and get this brought before the Triangle,” he added.

“Please commence voting,” the secretary called out. The room went silent.

“Come on, show us those blue lights,” Nicole murmured. As each member took their turn, Nicole let out a sigh of relief with each blue

light. But even though the first seven members turned on their lights, she needed twenty more.

On the thirty-seventh vote, the twenty-seventh blue light flashed. The request was granted. In the end it was forty in favor and thirteen against.

"I knew it, Nicole," Perry said, smiling. He saw her face and gave her arm a nudge. "Come on, I thought you'd be thrilled."

"It's a good start, but success in the Triangle is all that really matters."

When Westgale received news of the vote, he was immediately fearful of Gerald Levin's response. He was right to be. Westgale and Lady of Honor April turned on the flash-screen in the hospital boardroom and watched with concern.

Levin came out with all guns blazing. When he arrived at the podium, he appeared ready to explode. "This is complete insanity!" Levin bellowed. "This country is being attacked by throngs of young brainwashed anarchists and our government is sympathizing with the person who helped to design this movement." His face had flushed red. "Does Westgale think these out of control punks are going to conform to the laws of society because an attempt is being made to spare the life of their leader? Or did he initiate this action simply to pander to the PBA's new bleeding-heart extremist supporter, Nicole Kratz, or the recently appointed Chief of Medicine, none other than Anya Ahar's father, Jack?"

"Consider the fact that we now have it on record that Westgale received massive financial support from a drug dealer—Lawson Pierce—and made a ludicrous deal with Cobra Pix, a man who has vowed to destroy America, and now he has voted to spare the life of a diabolical anarchist! Whose side is he on?"

As Levin concluded his speech, April turned to her husband. "How do you plan to counter this awful attack?" she asked.

"By doing nothing," Westgale said firmly.

"Nothing?" April replied. "That ignorant jerk just berated your Administration and called you a criminal."

“His feathers are all ruffled because I found a way to do what *he’s* been promising to do.”

She relaxed and nodded. “Ah, give this country back its independence?”

“Bingo. He’s desperate, honey. He knows we’ve turned the tide.”

“What about this AXE thing? How do you plan to deal with that?”

“Little by little. It’s difficult to fully defend against that type of rebellion, but Nicole’s assured the Association she has a solid plan to rectify that mess. She’ll be laying it out in the coming days, as part of her campaign. I completely trust she’ll get to the bottom of it.”

* * *

“Okay, Jessica, you can see him now,” Dr. Ahar said to Jessica, who was seated in the waiting room.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she replied, jumping to her feet.

When Jessica entered the room, she was amazed by how well Shadow looked. “Hello, my sweetheart,” he said warmly.

“You gave me quite a scare,” Jessica said, scurrying over to give him a hug. “It’s a good thing I had this with me.” She touched the dragon-stone necklace. “Do you realize what a hero you are? You saved the president of the United States of America—who of course also happens to be my father.” They both chuckled.

“Yeah, I may be seen as a hero for saving your father, but if it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have been shot at in the first place,” Shadow said.

“Don’t be silly. How could you have known Alton was going to attempt to assassinate my father?”

“I should have put two and two together.”

Jessica frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The night Jolio tried to kill you, I’m betting Alton orchestrated the whole thing. My father warned me about both of them, but I truly believed in Alton,” Shadow said, his face solemn. “He never displayed any animosity toward America or your father. In fact, he’d always tell me how he thought it was wrong for our militia to

have invaded Oria, especially after I met you. I guess that's how he won me over."

"If that's the case, why didn't he try to kill me himself? Why did he send Jolio to do the deed?"

"It was far more personal for Jolio. Not only did he lose my brother Hadar, who was like a brother to him, he also had two cousins whose living quarters were mistakenly bombed by American forces."

"Well, at least that's all history. And the main thing is that both you and my father came out of this alive."

"Yeah, and we were able to make a deal that will be of great benefit to both our countries," Shadow said. He paused before continuing. "What about my father? Was he not permitted into America to visit me?"

"When I left Pinia, your father told me he wished he could come along, but I guess he had other important matters to deal with. So he told me to send you his love."

"I guess that's what happens when you're busy running a country," Shadow quipped, turning his head to the side to hide a grimace.

Jessica's mind was still reeling from her meeting with Luanda. She was finding it difficult to comprehend how a father could go to such lengths to keep a son from his mother. However, as she had promised, she would not divulge what she had learned.

As Jessica and Shadow caught up, Westgale arrived with his security. "Dad, come on in," Jessica said. "Let me give you gentlemen a few minutes alone." She gave her father a big hug on the way out of the room.

Westgale gave Shadow a nod of acceptance. "I want to thank you, Shadow. You were willing to sacrifice your life for mine, and I will remain forever grateful." He approached with an outstretched hand.

"I simply did what any honorable human being would do for another," Shadow replied as they shook hands.

"While we were waiting for you to recover, Jessie showed me the charming necklace you presented to her. She also told me the story

behind it,” Westgale said, smiling. “That really tells me how much my daughter must mean to you.”

“There are no words to describe the love I have for your daughter.”

“I’d like you to have this,” Westgale said as he leaned over and handed Shadow a gold star military pendant. “It’s my late brother Joseph’s. He was killed during the War Within, coming to the aid of several civilians.”

Shadow studied the pendant reverently. “Wow... I accept this with honor and will forever cherish it.”

Jessica was at the front desk speaking with Dr. Ahar when she noticed a lady emerging from the nearby elevator wearing a burgundy scarf around her head. She appeared extremely nervous, which immediately caught the attention of security. Jessica motioned to them that all was okay. “Luanda, is that you?” Jessica asked as she approached.

“Hello, Jessica,” Luanda replied, shoulders sagging as if in surrender.

“What made you change your mind?” Jessica asked softly.

“Shadow is my son. He’s my flesh and blood. I can no longer lie,” she said as she removed the scarf from her head.

“Does this mean you’re going to tell him the truth about Cobra?” Jessica asked with a raised brow.

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself any longer if I didn’t,” Luanda said solemnly.

Jessica led the way to Shadow’s room. It was a short distance, but the walk felt like a marathon. The tension built with each step. Both were nervous, but Jessica suspected they shared some exhilaration, as well. They stopped at the doorway and Jessica peeked inside and said, “You have a visitor, Shadow.”

“A visitor?” he replied, bewildered.

“Yes. Her name is Luanda,” Jessica announced as Luanda entered the room. Jessica and Shadow exchanged smiles before she gently closed the door.

* * *

“Thanks for doing this, gentlemen. It means so much to our family,” I said to Joe Hislep and his long-retired father as we wrapped up a special event honoring my father at their farm.

“Dennis was an incredible man. He deserves to be honored. It’s just awful that people would even think that he was involved in something criminal,” Joe’s father, Richard, replied. “Hopefully, with UCIT covering this event, the rest of the country will discover what a terrific man he was.”

It had been touching to hear all the wonderful stories about Dad and how he always went the extra mile to aid the farmers of Vexton. As one farmer after another took the stage to recount their Dennis Claremont story, Mom and I found it impossible to hold back our tears. Richard Hislep told the story of how Dad spent eighteen hours straight searching for one of Hislep Farm’s prized thoroughbred horses that went astray. “The incredible thing was, the day ol’ Gypsy Heart went missing was the day Dennis had planned to go away on vacation. No matter how I tried to convince him to stick with his plans, he wouldn’t have it. He led my farmhands in the search, and in the end Gypsy Heart was tracked down in the forest around Moon Shade Bluff. Oddly enough, the horse was in the same location where Dennis’s copter was shot down.”

The next speakers were the two brothers Dad saved on the day he was killed. “I don’t know what made Marty and I venture out on that crazy day. I guess you can put it down to the crazy things kids do. Our parents thought we went off to school. After I heard the projected storm had been downgraded, I convinced Marty to head out to the forest with me and help me create a view-file for a science project. Once we arrived at the area around Moon Shade Bluff, these black, threatening clouds started racing across the sky, and then all hell broke loose. The next thing I knew my brother was trapped under a tree, fighting for his life, and I could only stand there, helpless.”

Marty picked up the story. “I was lucky that tree didn’t instantly crush me. As I watched several of the surrounding trees being

pummeled by the raging wind, I thought for sure they were going to come crashing down on me. I was certain I was going to die. Then I heard the sound of the copter, and saw Tom desperately waving his arms, trying to get their attention. I wouldn't be here right now if Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh didn't risk their lives to save mine. What they displayed that day was incredible heroism and human compassion."

After the speeches concluded, the party commenced. Delicious food and beverages were everywhere. As Richard Hislep was telling Mom and I about a couple of Dad's hilarious practical jokes, Riley came running over to us. "Daddy, me and Kayla were just talking to Mr. Shelby. He was telling us how one time he was with Grandpa Dennis and there was this mean fox chasing a little white bunny, right over there." Riley pointed to the field just outside the Hislep gates. "And Grandpa Dennis started making noises so the fox would run away, but the fox kept chasing the bunny. So he went to his robo-copter to get his special whistle, the one that makes scary animals run away. Mr. Shelby said that when Grandpa Dennis blew the whistle the fox ran back into the forest and the bunny ran over to Grandpa Dennis."

"I know that story, Riles. In fact, your grandpa gave that bunny as a gift to the Vexton Children's Hospital," I said, smiling.

"Do you have a whistle like that, Daddy?" Riley asked. "You should have one in case a scary animal comes out of the forest."

"Ah, you're right, Riley. That's why this button here on my flash-pad makes a sound just like that whistle," I replied as I tousled his hair. I tapped the button and everybody laughed as the sound pierced through all the background noise.

Sharon and I were impressed with how well Riley had dealt with the tragic murder of his grandfather. During breakfast the next morning, Riley took us by surprise when he asked us if we would take him to visit Grandpa Dennis's gravesite. In the past, whenever we had suggested the idea, he always said he was too afraid. But this time was different. "I know he's not really there because he's with the angels in heaven, but I would like to go anyway."

“You know, Riley, Grandpa Dennis’s spirit isn’t just with the angels in heaven,” Sharon said tenderly. “His spirit can be wherever you like it to be.”

“Can it be with me when I go for a ride on my pony, or in my aquarium swimming with the fish?”

“Sure,” I interjected. “As long as you are a respectful young man and you treat everybody the way Grandpa Dennis would treat them, then his spirit will always be with you.”

It was a sunny, albeit windy autumn afternoon, though an early morning shower had left the leaves heavy with moisture, and they created a colorful carpet on the ground. When we arrived at the cemetery there were no other visitors. As we approached Dad’s monument, Riley became nervous, clutching Sharon’s pant leg tightly, and only occasionally peeking at the stone. “There’s no reason to be afraid, Riley,” I said as I picked him up and held him in my arms. “Why don’t you tell Grandpa Dennis about your aquarium?”

“Are you sure?” he asked, peering at me.

“Yes. Tell him about the fish who looks like Gordon,” I whispered.

I lowered him to the ground and he walked right up to the monument. Sharon and I stood behind him, each with a hand on one of his shoulders. As Riley began describing his aquarium, a sound from the trees caught my attention.

“And I have an angelfish that looks just like...”

Again, a sound. This time it was louder. It sounded like several twigs being stepped on at once.

“Daddy got me all kinds of neat rocks and scuba—” This time Riley heard it too, and jumped back toward me.

“It’s probably an animal, Riles,” I said. I felt him trembling.

The sound became louder by the second. The footsteps sounded heavy.

“Maybe you should get your flash-pad and make the whistle sound,” Riley half suggested, half pleaded.

“It’s Mr. Shelby!” Riley exclaimed.

I turned and looked. A man had stepped from the trees. My heart thumped rapidly. I opened my mouth, but for a moment, no sound escaped. Then—"Oh my God! Dad?"

"Come on, Riley," Sharon said urgently, taking Riley's arm and pulling him away.

"I want to talk to Mr. Shelby!" Riley bellowed.

"You come with me now, Riley!" Sharon yelled, ushering him to the electro.

"Take him home, Sharon," I said, barely registering anything beyond the man in front of me. "What in the world is going on?" I groaned, my senses reeling. "Dad... is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me, son," he replied, his voice cracking.

I stood frozen, looking into his eyes. Although I was only ten when I'd last seen him, I recognized everything about him—his eyes, his expression, the minor stuttering step in his walk, and even the scent of his aftershave. He took a few steps closer, and again my heart pounded in a way I didn't think it could. I fell to the ground, weeping uncontrollably.

I felt his hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, son," he said, standing over me.

"Sorry!" I shouted, glaring up at him. "What the hell is this? How could you have done this to me—to Mom? And on top of it all, you've been parading around, talking to my son and my niece, pretending to be some guy named Shelby!" I rose to my feet.

"I understand your anger, Heath, but I had no choice," Dad began. "For thirty years, I've been in hiding, living in constant fear. If they knew I was still alive, you and your mother would have been killed."

I didn't know what to think. The impossible dream of being with my father again had come true, and yet I felt like I was in the middle of my worst nightmare. "That crash? I mean, your copter was hit with a laser blast."

And my father told me what had happened, that fateful day...

"Damn! It looks like we only have the one escape-vest on board," Fergy said to Dennis.

"You take it, Fergy."

"Oh no. It's all yours. After all, you're the one with the wife and child. I'm sure my pet hamsters will go on to live quite the life without me."

"Fergy, I'm the boss of this outfit, and I insist."

"Well, there's one problem. I need an XL. This thing won't even fit over my shoulders. Here, put it on—it's crazy out there!"

"So, Ferguson didn't make it?" I asked as we moved together to a nearby bench.

Dad shook his head sadly. "Without the escape-vest, he had no chance."

"What about your body? I know Mom was too freaked out to identify it, but Neville—wait a second; all this time, Neville's known you were alive," I said in disbelief. "Now I get this whole Mr. Shelby thing."

"It's the only way, Nev. If they find out I'm still alive, they'll kill Grace and Heath. I have several flash-messages warning me. You have to help me—I beg you."

"First of all, who are 'they'? And why are they after you and your family?"

"I don't know who they are, and right now, other than the possibility that Ferguson and I discovered something of extreme importance, I can't tell you why they want us dead."

"What did you discover?"

"It's far better for you if you don't know. Look at what just happened to me. Please, Nev, sign the form, so I can get the hell away from here and allow my family to live in peace."

"And thankfully, Custodian Millen was of great help to me. He helped me establish a new identity and set me up in Canada," Dad explained.

"Canada? Is that where you've been living all this time?" I asked, struggling to take this all in.

“That’s correct, Heath. I’ve been managing a large farm out in Calgary, Alberta. Really fine people.”

“After a few years, did you not think that maybe it would’ve been safe to return?”

“I couldn’t risk it. I didn’t know who these people were, or what they discovered on that mountain. All I knew was that they tried to kill me—and my family may have been next, if I stuck around.”

“What made you come back now?”

“When I watched the Anya Ahar hearing and saw the love you had for Riley, it moved me. Even though I did what I did to protect you and your mother, I realized how wrong I was to have taken off.”

“I understand why you did what you did—you did it for us. That’s the kind of man you are,” I responded, my throat tight.

“Oh, believe me, every day I thought about returning. Being away from you and your mother nearly destroyed me. Thankfully, Neville did a good job of keeping me up to date, and even sent me view-files of you guys.”

“So you finally decided to come back as Don Shelby,” I prompted.

Dad nodded. “Don Shelby’s been living in England for the last twenty years, so Neville suggested I take on his identity. I was just waiting for those bastards to be brought to justice before revealing my true identity. I didn’t know how to do it, so I intended to leave this note, addressed to you, on the monument—but now... here we are.” Dad began to cry. “But I’ll gladly walk away if you think that’s best, and you can tell Riley Mr. Shelby had to go back home.”

“Wait a minute. This has been thirty years in the making,” I said gently. “You think I’m going to let you out of my sight? Now that Riley’s had the pleasure of meeting Don Shelby, it’s time he enjoys the pleasure of meeting Dennis Claremont. But first there’s a lady named Grace who’s also dreamt of this day for thirty years.” I looked around. “Hey, since Sharon took the electro home, I guess we’ll have to take one of those long walks... just like the good old days.”

* * *

A reconciliation of another kind was taking place in the HKM.

“Mr. Pix, it’s been a while,” a soldier greeted Cobra as his private jet landed at the HKM central airport. “President Woi has been waiting for you,” the soldier added as he opened the back door of a black grand-electro and ushered Cobra inside.

Zigzagging through narrow alleys before motoring along a series of roads, the electro at last reached a vast military compound surrounded by a high electric fence. The vehicle stopped before a building in the center of the compound, and Cobra and the soldier made their way up to the fifth floor. They rode along a long hallway on a track that moved just above the floor. On the walls, a series of murals depicted the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. They stepped off the rolling track at the end of the hallway to stand in front of a towering set of steel double doors.

Keying a signal into his flash-pad, the soldier opened a panel on the face of one door. A screen appeared. The soldier tapped a code into the screen, and the doors swung slowly open.

“Ah, Cobra, wonderful to see you, my friend,” President Woi said from behind a large marble desk. He pressed a button on his desk and like the rolling walkway in the hall, the floor moved forward, bringing Cobra right to a chair in front of his desk. “A great engineering feat, I must say. Really saves the wear and tear on the legs,” he said with a grin.

Woi rose and sauntered over to a cabinet on one side of the room. He wore a military uniform custom-tailored to his short, thin frame. “We have some celebrating to do,” he added as he reached for a bottle of champagne and two glasses. “I was so relieved to hear your son is going to be fine.”

“Yeah, and thankfully Westgale’s still alive and well... I would have hated for him to have had such an easy way out,” Cobra sneered.

“Well, here’s to a new beginning and the end of an old enemy!” Woi bellowed as both men raised their glasses.

“Now, before lunch is served, let me give you a tour of our enormous treasure chest down in the warehouse,” Woi said, directing Cobra to the wall behind his desk. Mounted on the wall was a forked scepter, hanging above an HKM flag. Woi punched a code into his flash-pad and the wall opened, revealing an elevator. The two men entered and the high-speed elevator dropped them rapidly to a warehouse that stretched the length of the building’s basement.

“So tell me, Cobra, how do you feel about Shadow’s involvement with Jessica Westgale?” Woi asked upon exiting the elevator.

“Well, I never thought I’d see the day when my son’s lust for a woman would become my country’s greatest weapon,” Cobra answered with a chortle. “Or at least its second-greatest weapon,” he clarified as he gazed at bag after bag of heart-shaped green pills.

= END OF BOOK TWO OF THREE =

