

Metamorphosis: The Reckoning (Book 2)

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Dedicated to my kids Faithe and Matt

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Book 1 Recap

For those of you that for some unfathomable reason are unable to read Book 1 of this adventure, here is a quick recap.

Much of the book is focused on three plot-lines. First, we discover the wondrous genetic science Mannix developed with the power to cure sickness, evolve human abilities, and overcome violent tendencies. Second, we journey with Genne as he undergoes a procedure to genetically enhance him. Third, FBI agent Glenn Abbot pulls us into a murder investigation surrounded by government secrets. All these pieces connect in a number of historical locations around Boston in an unexpected climax.

Here are a few character highlights and journeys that take place:

Mannix Haldanne is a genetic genius, billionaire, and idealistic post-humanist captured by the vision to genetically evolve humanity from the worst of us to the very best of us. For the last few years he has partnered with various governments to experiment on dying and death-row prisoners to reform them and re-integrate them... noble but endeavour with far too many problems and secrets. Oh yeah he also cured cancer and has a secret facility in International waters, which he now owns.

Innes is one of Mannix's first subjects now protege with a very dark past. She grew up as an assassin in Japan serving many Yakuza families. Yet this lifestyle choice is but a fraction of the atrocities her father has committed while serving for Unit 731. As reformed agent, she serves as an informant to FBI & CIA while also working for Mannix trying to "repay her life debts." She is determined. She is resourceful. And she discovers she has feelings for her boss, mentor, and saviour Mannix.

Anne is a devoted wife of Genne who Mannix selected as the first candidate for a first historic public "genetic upgrade". She is soul-searching for her own identity and purpose while deeply aware of her weaknesses and insecurities. As her husband undergoes various genetic enhancements, she finds strength to deeper understand herself and her place in this world. Eventually, as her husband turns against her, she stands firm conquering his physical strength with her new-found conviction and confidence. Genne disappears from her life taken by Mannix's chief scientist, JHJ.

Glenn is an atypical FBI agent. With a troubled childhood filled with rebellion, he excels in his 20's and joins the agency trying to create a better world. After he goes through divorce, he questions his life's direction when a bizarre case drops on his lap. How do you find a murderer among deep government secrets especially. His multiple interactions with Innes turn to a final confrontation when he discovers an unlikely truth... and he pays dearly for it.

JHJ is first a scientist, second a mother. When Mannix reforms her son, she in turn chooses to serve his cause. As a secular humanist, she has deep clarity and conviction when making difficult choices. She is an expert advisor to Mannix and handles the most difficult cases including Genne's enhancements, his recovery, and unfortunately also his extraction. JHJ's past and even her name is still quite a mystery.

For more information on the book and characters, please go to

www.metamorphosisbookseries.com

Chapter 01: Prometheus

Mannix was looking out of a large window of The Palais Des Nations in Geneva. He was waiting just outside the Council Chamber in Section C of this vast building. He was admiring a unique sculpture located in a slightly wooded area in front of the building. It was the largest and arguably the strangest sculpture created by Michaelangelo Pistoletto, a late Italian artist. Made of almost 200 large stones, each approximately half meter cubed. Together, it was 42 meters long and 20 meters wide made up of three circles. He knew the name of the sculpture, 'Rebirth'. Its meaning was well rooted in the reconfigured infinity sign, typically consisting of two circles, but here altered to include a third one signifying a rebirth of humanity... of society... a new world.

Not too far from it stood another sculpture, a large Armillary sphere. This unique celestial model had earth at the center of the universe with the sun and other planets rotating around it. However, instead of planets it incorporated Zodiac, Chinese, Greek and Latin symbols. This four-meter art piece weighed close to six thousand kilograms. Although functional and rotating during its official inauguration in 1939, it has been stagnant since 1942. The motor was not in use since 1945. Mannix reflected at the irony... the only time the sphere did work, was during the height of Nazi regime in Europe. He reflected on the meaning of these two sculptures. One was a reminder of the infinity of human potential. The other, a reminder of human arrogance and antiquated thought based on pure dogma once opposing science.

An attendant approached and interrupted him "Dr. Haldanne I presume." He was a clean-shaved man in his 30's formally dressed in a black suit with a white shirt, a bowtie, and name tag bearing UN insignia.

Mannix connected eyes confidently and answered "You presume correctly."

The attendant directed "Very well, sir. The United Nations and World Health Organization are awaiting

you in the Council Chamber. They are eager to hear your proposal on Project Prometheus." He lifted and pointed his entire arm sharply in the direction of a large two-door entrance then led him in saying "Right this way..."

The entrance to the Chamber was guarded by heavy bronze doors created by legendary Raymond Subes. He entered confidently and scanned around the hall. Multiple rows of tables and chairs were ordered in a boxy semicircle all facing the large front table where a committee of international representatives were sitting impatiently. This large square space was known for its remarkable life-size murals by the Catalan artist José Maria Sert. The chamber also features a balcony that was currently being vacated by various visitors and media, no doubt from the session before him.

Mannix walked up to the main table to greet each UN and WHO representative. He placed a small metallic container on a table nearby, then moved to the open area in front of the committee.

He started "Thank you all for agreeing to meet with me." He scanned their faces watching which of them were paying attention or still in thought from their previous session. He continued maintaining eye contact with each one of them "Today I wish to present you with a new hope for humanity. I call it 'Project Prometheus'." Some of his audience was still distracted. He paused and walked to his container. He opened it removing a large spherical gadget. He then placed it on the floor between himself and the committee.

He paused dramatically, causing some of his audience to refocus. Then he exclaimed "This device is your key to overcoming global population crisis, global poverty, and global education."

He finally got their attention. They started whispering to themselves before posing a formal and slightly sarcastic question voiced by a Kenyan representative "I'm sorry Mr. Haldanne but we fail to understand how a device

can feed the hungry and prevent population growth. Perhaps you could enlighten us further.”

Mannix took that as his cue to shine “Here is why nobody has been able to solve any of these three key global crises... because they are all related to each other and affect one another. You can’t resolve them independently. Population growth commonly decreases as poverty is alleviated. One of the key ways to address long-term poverty is education. Globally, various organizations including yours currently invest billions of dollars to gradually improve these three. My solution will resolve all three crises within a few years...”

The Indian representative interrupted with an insulting laugh “I’m sorry... I thought you said you can remove global poverty, substantially decrease global population growth, and raise global education level in the next few years. Is this a joke, dear sir?”

Mannix savoured his response “I assure you this is no joke. I would not waste your or my time on a joke. This is real.”

The British representative addressed both Mannix and the rest of the committee “I wonder if some of us are not familiar with who you are, Mr. Haldanne. I personally have been following your career and genetic engineering advances for some time now. I am certain a man with your stature, fortune, and influence would not come here under false pretenses.”

The French representative interceded “Before you explain to us exactly how you intend to do this... I would like to ask the obvious question: ‘How much will this plan of your cost us or the global population?’”

Mannix punched his answer with charm and confidence “Not a dime. I’ll cover all the costs.”

UN committee members exchanged some looks then glued their eyes to Mannix. The Kenyan delegate invited “Proceed Mr. Haldanne. You have our full attention. Though admittedly, we are expecting there is some kind of... how you say... CATCH... to this...”

Mannix smiled and began, “There are three components to this plan. First, in approximately four weeks I will finish manufacturing a billion of these Prometheus devices. They will be air-deployed throughout the world focusing on third and second-world countries. There are enough of them to reach 99% of the population currently living in poverty.”

Indian representative jumped-in, “And what exactly are these devices?”

Mannix interpreted the inquiry as genuine interest and responded “Essentially, they are self-powered internet-enabled education terminals. They provide self-adaptive educational curriculum on everything from how to read, to how to make deep-water wells, to building houses, to electrical engineering, and all the way to nanotechnology. Content is served in over 2000 of the world’s most common languages. I will be providing them and shipping them at no cost...” After a pause he added “This is simply a small piece of my legacy to this world.”

The Russian delegate interjected “Many of these people will simply be unable to use the device... they don’t have that level of intelligence... some even motivation.”

Mannix was expecting this line of questioning “That’s precisely why I’ve developed the second component of this plan. Approximately a week before deployment of Prometheus devices, I’ll be releasing a genetic mutagen I called Accendo. It has the ability to progressively alter human DNA to increase their overall intelligence, focus, logic, memory, recall, comprehension and other brain enhancements. It is otherwise harmless to the human body and the rest of the world’s organisms.”

The World Health Organization representative joined in somewhat shocked “I’m sorry... Did you just say you plan to release an untested DNA-altering mutagen to the world’s general population?”

Mannix smiled “Yes I will be releasing the mutagen. However, you are incorrect in assuming it has not been properly tested.” Mannix touched his comms device and in that same moment, all the committee members

received both information on the mutagen as well as details of human testing trials.

The British delegate defused “We will need more time to investigate this information. I am certain we will also need to involve the larger scientific community to verify these tests.” He checked his comms device for time then continued “Perhaps in interest of time, we best let you finish describing the last component of your plan.”

Mannix didn’t wait for other objections “Of course. It will take the mutagen about two weeks to reach and alter 99.9% of the world's population. This will increase everyone’s capacity to learn and change. At just the right moment in that process, the Prometheus devices will be air-dropped around the world. This will give our new humanity the answers on how to evolve.” Mannix paused dramatically before providing the last part of his plan “The third component is the new communication network used by Prometheus allowing all members to communicate with each other, share their ideas, and form communities. It also monitors and reports on progress of each person using it.”

The French delegate asked curiously “You’re using the Internet?”

Mannix grinned again “Nope. I’m replacing it. The current Internet is a highly-regulated grumpy antique money-pit... Prometheus will provide a new way of communicating and collaborating, one the current Internet is simply not capable of. It’s an ancient dinosaur whose time has come. This is its ice-age event.”

The American representative injected “Yet you independently control this new communication technology. I guess this is your catch.”

Mannix fully expected this question “Once more, no. This is an intelligent distributed technology. The power is not in my hands. It’s in the hands of people using Prometheus devices.”

The American delegate probed further “What is your gain then?”

Mannix answered dismissively... “Isn’t it obvious? You are all members of the United Nations. You are sitting in a historic room where our forefathers gathered to shape human history. The walls are filled with murals depicting the progress of humankind through health, technology, freedom and peace... yet you all doubt my motivation.” He punched the last sentence “I’m doing this to save the world, plain and simple!”

The WHO delegate finally stood up and exploded after boiling in their seat for a while now “Are you mad, Mr. Haldanne? First, you are planning to release an unknown genetic mutagen into the general population. That is completely reckless. You don’t have FDA, EMA, or any other approval. Secondly, you will be effectively disrupting and challenging the current fundamental structures and powers that make this world function. Lastly, you will be disrupting our current fragile economy by destroying many global telecommunication and Internet companies.” He climaxed on “This will not fix our issues. This will create world-wide chaos and...”

The previously quiet delegate from Brazil stood up and attempted to manage the heat of the situation “Friends and colleagues remember the quotes engraved on the doors you came through. Here is where we solve our differences. Not through force. Rather, through reason and peaceful discussion.” As voices and whispers died he continued “Mr. Haldanne... I happen to know you prefer to be called by your first name... Mannix, I truly respect and honour your motivation. You are no doubt investing most of your fortune into this noble effort.” He continued as others settled down “You must understand however, this Prometheus project of yours, while quite brilliant, comes with significant risks and economical costs. Perhaps the benefits outweigh them, but you would agree of course this decision is not one a small committee like this can make.” He saw heads nodding and continued “Much less, can the world prepare for this level of disruption is such a short timeline.” He turned to address the committee “I have no doubt members of the UN, upon detailed investigation, can partner with you and together usher

a more reasonable solution. However, I'll speak not only on my behalf, you will find us all resistant and even opposed to the timing and methods you're proposing here." His hand gestures signaled both hope and concern as he finished "There must be another way to achieve the same end without so much disruption and global chaos."

Mannix pushed back "I'm not sure I understand your point, sir. We all know that if I provided the UN or even WHO with the power to make decisions about the Prometheus project, it will either die a slow painful bureaucratic death or it will be altered to make the rich richer. I also resent your line of questioning about releasing the mutagen while all your countries invest in biological warfare and test their concoctions on the global population yet hiding behind government policies and hazmat suits..."

That last statement angered The French delegate who interjected "Why have you come here then? Are you not here to ask the UN and WHO to sanction and endorse this project?"

Mannix exclaimed defiantly "No mam. I already know you will never sanction it. I am in no way asking your permission to do what is right. And I know you have no courage to sacrifice your political influence nor wealth over this. I am here to make you aware of this plan... one I intend to execute with or without your help."

The committee was floored, stunned, and silent at the audacity of this last statement. Mannix has foreseen this climax. He didn't fight it. He simply took his container, the Prometheus device, and walked toward the exit giving his final words "This is the notice I'm giving to the powers at be, corporate giants, and political influencers. Get ready. Too long you slept in your lavish complacency while others suffered. I will right the wrong you are in the world and I will save it with or without your help!"

As Mannix disappeared, all the delegates rushed to their comms devices alerting various agencies and individuals of what they just saw & heard. Security was

alerted as well. Unfortunately, Mannix exited quickly and was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 02: The Motley Crew

A well dressed gentleman entered the boardroom filled with an eclectic collection of military and civilian experts. He started right away “Welcome. My codename is Eddy. I’m from Interpol and I’ll be spearheading this covert operation. Why don’t we all introduce ourselves.”

He pointed to his left where a woman in her 40’s started awkwardly “Hi... my name is... my codename is ‘Russo’.” She was embarrassed about stumbling then regained her confidence “I’ve spent several days in Mannix’s facility. My husband underwent the procedure there a few months ago.” Anne paused unsure what else to say so Eddy helped her wrap it up “Russo will provide us with valuable insights about the location, security forces, operational protocols, and key staff involved.”

Eddy pointed to the next person, an unshaved man in a wheelchair with numerous bruises and scars. The man introduced himself “Codename ‘Abbott’. I’m from the FBI. I know what you’re all thinking... The FBI does not get involved in affairs outside of US borders. This scenario is an exception. I have extensive knowledge of Mannix’s Genetic Prison Reform Program taking place in the facility.” He ended and looked toward the left.

The next person jumped in “My codename is ‘Hothead’. I lead a small team of Navy Seals available that specializes in zero-casualty extractions. We are few but we are the best. We know this mission is very risky. That’s how we like it.” He took a sip of his drink then placed his glass on the table confidently.

Eddy pointed to a classy business dressed woman. She spoke with a English accent “My codename is ‘Charlie’. I’m a senior agent at MI6. I specialize in counter-espionage as well as self-guided micro-explosives... it’s a sexier more elegant way of blowing things into thousands of tiny pieces... and a great side-hobby” She smiled and gently pointed to the next person.

The next person was a sharp geek wearing a HUD device on his head. “Hey my codename is ‘Monnty’. DPSD sent me here to assist with this mission. I’m an expert in digital bioengineering, human genetics, as well as quantum computing... and don’t get me started on my IQ.” Eddy added “Be careful with Monnty. He has a sharp narcissistic wit.”

Ed moved to the next person standing quietly “Last but not least we have the captain of this unique vessel... We just call him ‘the Captain’. While he is a man of very few words, he is also a great chef.” The grumpy man barely grimaced in acknowledgement.

Eddy took off his leather gloves and pressed his hand onto the large circular table in the middle of them. The table scanned his hand imprint and DNA, then began to project 3D tactical information as he continued “Here are our orders: First, gather intelligence on Mannix’s secret and heavily guarded facility. Second, infiltrate and sabotage the facility with minimum to no casualties.” He saw some frowns around the table so he explained “We don’t know who is currently undergoing treatments there. Likely, the world’s richest and most influential individuals.” He took a visual pulse check of their faces then continued “Third, extract unharmed Mannix and deliver him to Interpol for interrogation and incarceration. During this mission, we have unlimited access to Interpol financial resources, espionage equipment, satellite surveillance, etc. Any questions?”

Charlie raised her hand and asked “Why the secrecy? Why not simply attack and take over his facility?”

Eddy smiled expecting the question “Three reasons dear Charlie. First, Mannix has numerous government contracts protecting him. Actions you just described would put all these at risk, not to mention a global PR nightmare. Second, remember these waters are no longer international property. He owns them. Essentially, an invasion on this facility would be deemed an act of war. That’s the last thing we want. Third,

shared agency intelligence agrees: covert mission is the only way to safely extract Mannix. He is too heavily guarded.”

Eddy continued now with less confidence “To be honest, our intelligence about this facility is extremely limited. Interpol estimates less than 7% of mission success.”

Agent Abbott grimaced and contributed “Perhaps we can improve our chances...”

Eddy asked curiously “What did you have in mind?”

Abbot rolled towards the table in his wheelchair and pressed a few buttons. A photo appeared as he answered “Let’s get Innes Tannah on our side...”

Chapter 03: Awaken

In a distant location, a strange room emerges from darkness. Not really a room. This one has cellular multi-colour membranes as walls, ceiling, and floor. They move as if breathing. There is no light except for a creepy glow dancing in these membranes, moving from place to place and pulsing like heartbeat. There is no furniture except a large cocoon right in its middle. It's pulse matches that of the walls. But instead of walls, the pod also has membranes shining bright white. The surface is strong but soft. Its texture resembles a massive oval golf-ball.

Cocoon walls begin to indent... first slowly... then with more depth and energy... and finally with violent contractions. The room pulsates faster and faster. Suddenly, the pod cracks open into pieces like an egg. An adult male body slowly awakens and emerges from inside. He is disoriented and confused. His eyesight is hazy and blurry. He strains his eyes to refocus. He lifts himself to sit. Slowly regaining his sight, he touches the floor around him. He feels the membrane floors indenting under his weight and responding to his fingers. He senses the pulse running through them. He realizes the pulse matches his own heartbeat. That pulse is making him feel safe and calm as if it was a part of him.

His eyesight returns as he squints and scans around him. He smiles somehow instinctually recognizing his surroundings. He finds them calm and familiar. He raises to his knees, stumbles, then raises again. He finds balance and gains confidence. He instinctively approaches one of the walls. As if sensing his presence, the membrane opens revealing a short hallway. He strains his eyes to see the distance. He sees a light pulsating in the direction of the hallway as if inviting and directing him. He takes a few steps and stumbles back on his knees. The pulse grows faster and stronger, matching his heartbeat. He looks back for a moment,

noticing that egg-shell pieces of his cocoon are sucked into the floor behind him and disappear. He looks back again and fights to stand on his legs. He gets up and walks slowly propping himself up on the right wall. Bit by bit, he traverses the hallway. As he nears its end, another membrane opens to his left. Once again, pulsing light is directing him. He is somehow connected to it.

He pauses as a rush of confusion floods his mind. He realizes he does not know his name nor his age. He drops to his knees scared of what this could mean. He searches his mind looking for memories. He finds none. He only sees blurry visions with broken voices, fragments of a great puzzle he has far too few pieces to complete. Just as his mind loses focus, walls begin to pulsate stronger as if giving him strength... as if they somehow could transfer energy into him. He feels invigorated and raises to his feet. Walls call onto him, calling him to follow the pulse. He rushes forward answering their familiar call. He walks through another hallway, then another, then another.

He suddenly pauses stunned at the sight. A large hallway reveals a wall with a transparent membrane. Behind it he senses vast amounts of water and creatures. He doesn't necessarily see them. He doesn't know how but he actually senses them, their presence, their heartbeat, their smell, and even their mood. He is astounded and amazed. He approaches the wall and touches it. Although much stronger than the other walls, this one too somehow senses his presence and responds to his touch. He traces the wall with his finger. Suddenly the area in front of him brightens. He senses a large creature nearby. It's approaching quickly from beneath him. It's somehow aware of his presence as well. He looks toward its location, waits for a few moments then finally sees it. A 25-meter 150-ton female blue whale blasts a penetrating song towards him. Soundwaves travel through the wall and hit him straight on. At such close distance, his entire body is vibrating. He grins somehow knowing deep inside this massive mammal is simply saying "Hello...". He

responds by simply saying “Hi” and admiring the creature as it soars upward above him at 50 km per hour. As the whale's dorsal fin passes him, he touches the wall trying to touch the fin through it.

As the whale passes him, he realizes he just spoke. He realizes he didn't even know he could speak. He has no memories of himself speaking. He looks at his hands, his feet, his body. Suddenly a rush of thoughts paralyzes him. He falls to his knees. His brain fights to remain calm. He vomits from the mental strain. He begins to fade as he hears voices in the distance. He senses their heartbeat coming closer. He hears them calling him “KN”. He senses they are coming to help him. He senses they are somehow familiar to him. Weakness and fog takes over his body as one phrase leaves his lungs “Who am I?”

Chapter 04: The Nautilus

Eddy led the team out of the boardroom into the ship's main hall. As they walked out, they entered a small control center where a six-person crew operated everything on the ship. He pointed to various stations "Here we have propulsion, navigation, weapons, communications, energy reactor, and..." He hesitated then continued "... to something complicated I'll have to explain later". The room was filled with various types of monitors and 3D holographic projectors. The central table was displaying a sonar image of the ocean around them. Sonar image was extremely precise showing a detailed visualization of the ocean floor and a number of nearby creatures.

Monnty pointed out immediately "This is not a regular sonar image. What technology are you using to create this image?"

Eddy rushed "That's another thing I'm sure I'll have to explain later." He rushed everyone out of the control room into a long hallway. He provided a commentary as he showed different areas of the ship "This vessel is about the size of a medium military submarine." He pointed toward the end of the hallway ahead of them "This main floor features guest living quarters, mess hall, small gym, and entertainment... in addition to the control center and situation room... aka conference room we all met in." He directed everyone's attention to doors on both sides of the hallway "You've all been appointed guest-quarters for the time of your stay here. As you can see, the doors have signs with your code names on them." He opened his door and everyone packed in. They were surprised at the large room with rich mahogany and leather modern interior. Eddy grinned and explained "As you can see, this feels more like a hotel room than a submarine cabin. It's spacious and well equipped including a large working area, a private bathroom, and a well-stocked bar." He pointed back to the hallway walls "During tactical alerts, these

walls turn transparent allowing us to communicate easily with the control room and each other."

Hothead jumped in talking to the Captain "Hey Cap maybe you could show me where the switch is. I wouldn't mind having those walls off when Charlie is taking a shower."

The Captain returned a cold unamused look and a short answer "Absolutely not." While Charlie replied with her middle finger.

Eddy smiled slightly amused then continued "All your equipment has already been brought into your room."

Eddy led them back into the hallway directing their attention to a large monitor on the wall "These screens are located around the ship and provide its general status... including any areas affected by damage." He pointed to the schematic of the ship and ran his finger down to the bottom "As you can see here, there is another floor right underneath us. The 'basement' of this ship houses propulsion, weaponry, probes, crew quarters, engine, several infiltration vehicles, a small cargo area, and more..."

Charlie pipes in pointing at another part of the map "The design of this vessel is quite unique. Can you explain the purpose of these side engines and small wings?"

Eddy and the Captain exchanged a quick glance before Eddy explains "That's correct... This vehicle is equipped with several surprises including..."

Monnty interrupted and finished the sentence "... this ship can fly?"

Eddy confirmed reluctantly "That is correct."

Monnty continued "... And based on design of the front haul as well as propulsion... this vessel is also capable of space travel."

Eddy once again confirmed reluctantly "I guess there is a reason why you're all experts." He continued cautiously "Yes need be, this ship is also capable of short flights in space."

Hothead jumped in “Very interesting. I bet this ship also has a kick-ass arsenal.”

Eddy deflected noticing Captain’s increasing discomfort “That’s classified. This is after all, a privately owned vessel.”

Abbot filled the uncomfortable silence that followed that last statement “What types of engines does this beast have?”

The Captain finally joined the conversation becoming more and more irritated with these questions “That’s also classified”

Russo diverted the tension “What’s the name of this ship?”

Eddy obliged “It is called the Nautilus...”

Russo popped in excitement not waiting for the rest of the answer “How appropriate...” Then looking at the Captain, she asked “Are you the famous Captain Nemo taking us for a ride...” grinned wide “... 10,000 leagues under the sea perhaps?”

The Captain grimaced unamused.

Eddy took over the conversation “I’m sure you will find this ship uniquely equipped to handle what’s ahead of us.” He pointed to people’s rooms and wrapped up “Now I’ll give you some time to unpack and setup your equipment.” He looked around to connect with each person’s eyes. I’ll see you back in the boardroom at exactly 13:00.”

Everyone dispersed although Russo noticed Abbot having issues opening his door while being in the wheelchair. She walked towards him and assisted “Agent Abbott, can I help you unpack? I’m afraid I have no fancy equipment to setup.” She opened his door.

Abbot replied “Very much appreciated Russo. I’m really not used to being this dependent on people.”

Russo didn’t hesitate. She grabbed the wheelchair from behind and pushed him in. She walked in and closed the

door. She broke the awkward silence with a question “So what exactly happened to you Agent Abbot?”

He replied “Please call me Glenn. Behind these doors I would prefer to drop formalities of this mission.”

Russo responded while extending and shaking hands “Me as well. I’m Anne.”

Glenn replied “I read your file Anne. It’s terrible what they did to your husband.”

Anne avoided eye contact “Ex-husband. He is not at all the man he used to be...” She lightened the situation with a forced joke “I kicked him out after he tried to kill me.”

Glenn assisted “Yes that’s a sure sign of a relationship gone bad... someone destroying your china, your vase, and your life.”

She smiled then turned, hiding a tear in her left eye. She wiped it quickly hoping Glenn didn’t notice.

He knew he knew more about her then she knew about him. She had no access to personnel files. So he took a turn sharing, perhaps overcompensating or perhaps just to take the focus off Anne’s recent life struggle “Don’t worry. As far as failed relationships go, I’m holding all the records...”

Anne was happy to redirect the conversation “How so Agent Abbot?” She corrected herself “... Glenn.” She sat down on a nearby armchair.

Glenn began “I am divorced as well. Was married for 13 years... but more to my work then my wife... blind to how much my work consumed me...” then looked away unsure whether to expose himself “... and since we’re being so open... My wife wants nothing to do with me. Even after she kicked me, she got a restraining order on me. Now we don’t even talk.”

Anne encouraged “At least you admit to your problems and are open about them. In this scenario, I read that second relationships are far more successful... the person knows themselves better and has clearer expectations...”

He wasn't sure how to answer...

Anne filled in the awkward moment "So is this why you're in a body cast? Did you have a fight with her new boyfriend or something?"

Glenn replied "Oh no. That's not what happened..." He grinned then continued "... but I guess you could say this is from another failed female relationship."

She followed-up "Since I don't have your file handy... Strange all of you know everything about me and I know nothing about you... But please do tell how another woman broke your heart and your bones."

Glenn obliged, enjoying Anne's sarcasm "It's true... although she never broke my heart." He turned his wheelchair to face Anne "It's actually quite relevant to this case. Innes Tannah worked for Mannix and ran the Genetic Prison Reform Program. She is a reformed Yakuza assassin and convict..."

Anne interrupted "Wait I met her. She was elegant, beautiful, and controlled. I had no idea she had such a dark past. This is starting to make sense..."

Glenn continued "As I investigated a murder, I must have gotten too close to several program details including her old identity. She retaliated quite..." He paused trying to decide which word to use "... effectively."

Anne frowned, smiling "Is that not the same woman you just recommended to join our mission?"

He grinned "I guess I did..." Anne noticed his boyish charm and sense of adventure sparkling in his eyes.

He continued "She could have easily killed me..." Strangely curious he finished "... not sure why she didn't. In some ways she too was trapped in her unusual circumstances."

He redirected "How about you Anne? What have you been up to since your now ex-husband was effectively kidnapped by Mannix's team? I'm afraid there is not much in your file about that."

Anne reflected "Strange... That whole experience made me realize who I really am and what's important to me." Now her eyes glowed energized "I used to be so insecure and unsure of everything. This procedure Genne, my ex, went through made me accept and love myself. It allowed me to reconnect with my passions and my faith. I lost everything except for myself. At the same time, I realized all these things didn't really matter..." She got up and became animated "I love who I am now. My faith in God that created me is growing in leaps. I feel so liberated of all the stereotypes and pressures of this world. I have so much passion and energy in me. I am ready to start my life all over again..." She paused connecting eyes with Glenn "... not expecting perfection... rather expecting divine beauty in imperfection... living whole with eyes wide open."

Glenn watched Anne as she lit up and glowed. He wished he had the same peace and joy as she seemed to have. He grew silent and reflected on his own life.

Anne noticed Glenn silence and filled it "Do you need any help unpacking?"

Glenn grinned and said "Do you always come to the rescue of needy single men in full body casts?"

She teased "Only if they are rugged and good looking..."

He answered unsure where this was going "I checked the crew manifest... none of those on board. Hothead is close minus the body cast."

She looked into his eyes affirming "I guess you will have to do for now..."

Glenn wasn't expecting this last one "Hmm... It's quite alright. I've been in this cast for almost two months. I'll be getting out any day now. I know I look terrible but I'm eager to be self-reliant again. It's very frustrating..."

Anne noticed his new discomfort "Look, I'll be happy to help... not like I have anything to do here."

Glenn "I really appreciate it but I would rather spend some time alone and prepare for our next briefing at 13:00... and I'm afraid you don't have the clearance to see some of my files."

She returned a confused look. He clarified “At least not yet...”

She rebutted with sarcasm “See, I think you should get used to that cast for a while longer... After all, we are going to try to recruit that Innes woman again.” Then she got up and moved toward the door.

He returned enjoying her humour “In that case... I do trust you Anne to defend me.”

She exited grinning “... with my trusty automatic vacuum and a frying pan. Somehow I doubt that will be enough with Innes.”

Chapter 05: The Briefing

Mannix was working at a large conference table displaying a geographical weather map of the area. After a few moments he was joined by a thin man in his late 40's. He wore a clean tight pressed gray turtleneck with a plain black jacket and dark trousers. His moves and mannerisms were precise, optimized, and calculated. His head was completely bald and face clean-shaved. Even the nails on his hands were trimmed very short and very clean. Everything about him was fine-tuned, organized, minimalist, and efficient.

He approached quickly, exchanged minimal pleasantries, and got right to the point while trying to hide his Germanic accent "Mannix I was not expecting you back so soon. Things did NOT go well?"

Mannix's response was paced "They went as expected... Nothing to worry about, Warden." He took his eyes off display to look directly at the man "We've dealt with far worse before..."

The man pressed on "Yes but in the past all our 'tenants' had no legal rights and their governments gladly passed the burden of their continuous incarceration to our hands..." Germanic accent became more apparent as his emotions surfaced "... Thiz time we're imprizzoning a US citizen and even a few high-profile visitorz. How long will take before variouz governments come knocking on our door?"

Mannix's responses remained calm and controlled "Warden, I don't have to remind you..." He paused to connect with his eyes "... leave politics to me." He punched the last statement "Please focus on the program in this facility. That is your speciality."

The Warden suppressed his emotions and rebutted "Yes Dear Mannix. You hired me 2 years ago to run this state-of-the-art prison facility currently houzzing over 2,000 prizzoners... or should I say lab ratz?" I've connected you with over two-dozen governments who

paid good money to house their worst tenants, all with promizzes of full mental and moral recovery. But thiz facility is far more. It is a sophizticated genetic experiment that requires my unique experience and precizzion operations..." He reasserted himself "... Mannix, I need to know who you are bringing into thiz program. Else, I cannot enzzure their safety."

Mannix reassured him "Mr. Genne Manning is stable and secluded. He will NOT be released into the general population." He explained further "Genne will require... my personal attention."

The Warden pulled back "Very well." Then added "But be careful Mannix. As the wise man said, 'When you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.' "

At that moment, JHJ walked in to join them. Sensing some previous tension, she jumped right in "Hello gentlemen. Should we get right into the report?" Both men nodded and JHJ started "Here are our latest updates..." She pressed a few buttons on the table surface to display various information she was sharing. She continued "Total prison population including yesterday's delivery from Russia is 2,117. Over 80% of them are still in Level 1 where we do most of our genetic experimentation then assess and monitor their physical and mental stability. With 3 prisoners recently graduating to Level 2, we now have another 18% going through various behavioural recovery and indoctrination protocols. Approximately 2% will graduate to level 3 this month. Those few truly reformed people, we can actually utilize to run the program and our research.

Mannix contributed "I need a higher number of prisoners of Asian DNA to ensure the development of genetic alteration processes completes as per schedule. Right now our sample size is insufficient to ensure compatibility." He looked toward the Warden and inquired "Warden can you connect me with any Chinese or Korean prisons?"

The Warden complied “Of course. I’ll arrange some meetings for tomorrow. They will be happy to make space in their overcrowded prisons.”

JHJ refocused the meeting back to her report “Mannix we are projecting a 7% failure rate with our next set of tests. Most of these failures will result in death.”

Mannix was surprised “Why so high?”

JHJ replied “Because dear Mannix, we’re trying to cure Crohn’s disease and this specific disease is quite unpredictable. Its manifestations and symptoms vary greatly from person to person. Also, most of our subjects are terminally ill already. In their mental state, some of them are already giving up and do not wish to fight.” She raised her hands gesturing frustration “We believe some of them may simply not survive the procedure.” She hesitated before adding “We are also projecting approximately 13% chance of mutation. Again, this disease DNA sequence is large, complex, and unstable.”

Mannix questioned “These losses are not acceptable. Perhaps we simply don’t know enough about the genome of this specific disease.”

JHJ rebutted “Respectfully, I disagree. 7% failure rate is a small price to pay to save millions. Especially when we consider those 7% are already on their death bed. At least their death will have purpose.”

Mannix turned away for a moment wrestling with this choice. He created the program to help people. He refused to believe that the end justifies the means. He perceived this thinking to be a failure and worked very hard not to resort to a sum-zero choice. However the alternative, simply letting these people die, was far worse. After a moment, he directed “I understand. Please proceed with caution. And for those that do not survive, please make their passing as comfortable as we can. We owe it to them...”

Warden decided to pivot and discuss the elephant in the room “There is one other pressing matter...” Mannix

and JHJ exchanged looks while the man continued “What happened to Innez? Unfortunately for us, she is both a great asset as well as an enormous risk to this program.”

JHJ recounted “Innes never met me at the rendezvous point.” She extracted a small blood vial from her pocket “This was the only item she left before disappearing.”

Mannix reached out and pocketed the item “This is for my safe keeping. Thank you.”

Warden prodded “What are we going to do about her?”

Mannix rushed “She needs time...” then added expecting Warden’s next question “... time to process her actions.” He exchanged looks with JHJ then continued “I do believe she will surface again soon enough. She has no place to hide. Her past continues haunting her...”

Warden added with dry humor “Between Yakuza, FBI, Interpol, and our informantz... I’m sure someone will run into her. It will be a reunion, one way or another.”

Mannix picked up “... and when she does, we’ll have to put her back into the program. She regressed. She is one of the few subjects we felt we didn’t have to wipe when reprogramming.”

JHJ joined in “A mistake in retrospect. Most of our patients recover far better if they are wiped.”

Mannix explained “You both know we could NOT wipe her. The arrangement we have with the FBI requires her to remain their Yakuza informant.”

Warden stuck it “Oh I do believe we understand just fine... Yet now we have a genetically enhanced unstable killer taking evening strolls in the general population. To make matters worse, we have absolutely no idea where she is.”

Mannix did not appreciate this last comment “Then perhaps dear Warden... you can use your vast international network to help us locate her.”

Chapter 06: Awaken again

The man awakes again with the same question that haunted him since his last foggy memory “Who am I?”

It takes a while for him to come to his senses. His vision is hazy again. With his touch he senses soft warm surroundings. He slowly recognizes he is in the same room he started before. He recalls the walls, the cocoon, the door, hallways ahead... just not his name. In fact, he doesn't remember anything about himself, his past, his family, nor his purpose.

He exits the square room and enters the hallway. He instinctually strides forward then stops suddenly and looks back. He ponders for a minute. What is more important... his destination or his past? Where will he get his answers? And which answers are more important? Should he seek to discover who he is or where he is? Which direction is more likely to provide him with those answers. His mind raced in all directions then finally climaxed “Who am I?”

A dormant memory finally bubbled “KN...” He said triumphantly “My name is KN!” Then he retracted “... but who is KN?”

His eyes refocused as he began to examine the walls and doors in the hallway. He noticed some holes at the bottom and top of the wall. They expanded and contracted. He watched them for a moment. The one at the bottom was exhaling. The one on the top was inhaling. Their rhythm matched. He wondered where they went behind the wall.

He backtracked towards the room where he emerged. Strangely the door didn't open as he approached. He touched it with his hands. Nothing happened. He combed the door surface for any bumps, levers, or abnormalities but found none. He pressed on it hard with his body. The door stretched and changed colour but did not let him in.

He stepped back to reconsider. He tried to recall what happened when he first went through the door but quickly realized his eyesight was quite poor at the time. He instinctively put his hand to his mouth and began nipping on his fingernails. His mind wondered how else he could get in. He asked himself “How does the door know whether to open or close for someone? Or maybe who is controlling it? And if someone is controlling it, why would they not want KN to enter the room?”

Something awoke in him. A sudden surge of energy and insight. He stopped biting his nails, reached out toward the door, then with force and precision he used his nails to rip a small hole in the door. He pulled his hand out and observed what happened. In a matter of a few moments, the door changed its colour, healed itself, then returned to its original state. KN repeated his assault yet this time making a much bigger hole. This time around he got a small electrical shock as he was pulling his hand out. He ignored the pain and kept observing the door. Once again it healed itself quite quickly. Yet this time he noticed that the pace of regeneration accelerated as hallway tubes exhaled and slowed down as tubes inhaled. He wondered if there is any correlation between the two.

He decided to try another experiment. He covered the inhaling hole with this hand. He noticed the wall around the hole relaxed to make the hole bigger. He then stuck his fist inside. Once again, the muscle around the breathing hold tried to relax and expand. At some point it could not expand anymore so it began contracting and convulsing. He quickly pulled out his hand, dashed to the door, ripped a big hole in it and squeezed himself through into the room inside. The door resealed but much more slowly.

He scanned around. He lowered to the floor looking for any traces of the cocoon but found none. He examined all the walls. Once again, he found breathing holes on two of the walls. He also noticed that the ceiling glowed with warmth. He tried to cut several walls but they were far more resilient than the door. Their shocks increased as KN attacked them and tested their

weaknesses. He pondered how long he could continue this siege and how much pain he was willing to withstand.

He turned his attention to the floor. He examined the surface and wondered how this hard surface swallowed large pieces of the cocoon he came out from. As he strained, a drop of sweat dripped on the surface in front of him. He watched as the floor changed colour then somehow absorbed the moisture. He collected a few more droplets of sweat on his body and strategically dropped them in the same location. Again the surface changed colour. He began poking around it and noticed it was more malleable while absorbing his sweat.

He got up and stood in the middle wondering if eventually his body would be sucked in as well. Nothing happened. He looked around for anything else he could use for his experiment. Nothing. Then he looked up and homed in on a large circle in the ceiling that emitted heat and light. He raised his hands to touch around the glow. He noticed the membrane was quite soft and thin. He paused planning out his next steps.

He hesitated, unsure both the outcome of his plan and the pain he may have to endure. He dismissed it, then jabbed his hands into the ceiling like blades. He grasped the pulsating object inside and pulled it hard down with the weight of his body. The object gave in a little, then resisted. He pulled himself up, planted his legs on the ceiling, then strained by straightening his legs. The strange disk gave in but also started to fight back with electric shocks. He knew he only had a few moments before the pain got unbearable. His adrenaline kicked in and he pulled with all his might. He ripped it out violently and fell down on the floor hard. The disk crashed on top of him and probably broke a couple of his ribs.

The room fell in darkness. The remaining heat the disk was providing slowly escaped the room. KN pushed the disk on his left then got up. It only took a second for him to realize that the floor beside him had begun softening. He walked toward the disk, raised it, then used his hands to touch the surface. It was more malleable but

as it sensed his hand, it hardened and rejected it. An epiphany overtook him. He placed the disk in the middle of the floor then stood on top of it. The circumference of the disk was slightly larger than the width of his body. He waited as the floor underneath him began swallowing the disk and him on top. He wondered if this process would somehow separate him or even kill him.

He sensed and heard noises in the hallway. Two sets of footsteps approached rapidly. They were agitated. Their heart rate was pulsing. Their muscles were tense. The floor began digesting rapidly. In a few seconds, the disk was completely in and the opening swallowed him already to his waste. It seemed that while it could recognize who to swallow and who not to swallow, it did not however have the ability to somehow separate the two in the process.

Light entered the room as KN's head was just entering the hole and the floor opening began to close. He barely noticed two human shapes rushing into the room. The hole around him closed up as one hand tried to reach toward him, failed, then pulled back. Just as the hole sealed completely, he heard one of his pursuants call out angrily "Wake up the Warden. One of the subjects is trying to escape!"

Chapter 07: An Assessment

Warden entered a room and sat across a small empty table. Both the sparse furniture and the room were white, almost clinical. Even walls were solid, cold, pure, and sterile.

He pulled out his tablet and began to watch a video of a recent interview he performed. He watched for patient's facial expressions as he ran through a series of well-rehearsed questions "What is your name?"

The man raised his head revealing a scared face, then quickly looked away to the side. He answered after a moment "My name used to be Genne Manning..." Warden paused to look at the patient's eyes. He wasn't yet sure if he saw confidence or fear.

He restarted the video as it showed a follow-up question "And what is your name right now?"

The man rushed back "I grew impatient of capturing an essence or identity of any being via a simple name or title. I grew tired of being defined or tied down to my family, my heritage, or my past." He faced the Warden "I choose to be defined by the opportunity of life that awaits me, by my limitless ability to evolve to a new level of perfection..." He slowed down, looked upwards and exclaimed "I have no name, no limit, no confining concept of identity..."

Warden paused the video again and observed body language. Patient was tense, fists clenched, face strained. These words demonstrated the battle inside him, his mind reasserting himself.

Warden continued playing the video, recalling his patience for this soliloquy wearing thin at the time "How would you like me to refer to you?"

The man looked down, thought for a moment, then faced the Warden again and answered "Thursday"

Warden was confused, "Why Thursday?" It was an answer he didn't expect.

The man explained "I was reborn on Thursday. My life changed from desperate agony to wondrous metamorphosis on a Thursday." He paused before explaining further "If there is anything I choose to define myself by, it is that very moment."

Warden stopped the video again. There was uncertainty in the patient's eyes. He was not satisfied with that name. It was simply the most acceptable label. He did not yet reach the point of deeply understanding, accepting, and embracing his new identity.

Warden noted something on his tablet then continued the video as the next question followed "Very well Thursday... Do you know why you are here?"

The man answered "You are helping me to process this radical dramatic change... You're helping me reach a higher level of my potential..." He rushed an addition "That is of course till I outgrow this place and leave to reach new heights."

Warden nodded whispering in the video "A good old German would say we are simply helping you become who you already are..."

Thursday connected "You're talking about Freidrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher that died in 1900."

Warden nodded again and continued "Why don't we talk about your face scars? Can you explain what happened?"

He paused the video again. He squinted, straining to read the facial expression. Was it anger or fear? Did he embrace the event, resent it, or questioned it. He still wasn't sure. He continued playing the video.

The man, still sedated, grunted and looked away "I did this... It was my choice... Extreme change requires extreme sacrifice..."

Warden wasn't buying the answer and probed further "Please explain why you felt you had to do this..."

Thursday opened up another monologue "This face reminded me of my past... Who I was... My idiotic naïve dull middle-class half-dreams... My life of quiet desperation... My continuous compromise and defeat... My morbid mediocre reality..." He paused then altered his voice intonation and accent when saying "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player. That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. And then is heard no more. It is a tale. Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing."

Warden added unimpressed "Shakespeare, MacBeth, Act 5, Scene 5."

He paused the video. He now noticed a hint of dark enjoyment, almost relishing the chaos and turmoil he went through... as if release of a suppressed self-deprecation. Perhaps a deep insecurity or traumatic childhood experience manifesting itself. On a separate screen, he opened a patient's file. He trusted Mannix's very stringent selection process. Perhaps they were not aware of some horrible life event. He didn't find any relevant details. They must have missed something, a skeleton that's just screaming to leave this man's closet. He proceeded playing the video seeking more answers.

The patient was expecting a stronger reaction. He followed up "Perhaps you prefer words of your old German 'One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.' "

Warden grimaced unsure if the meaning of the quote actually answered his question but then decided to continue "Perhaps you could tell me what you plan to do next. How are you planning to raise the next level of your potential?"

The man became visually tense when answering "I want to amass an enormous amount of knowledge..."

Dramatic pause followed as the patient expected awe and respect. Instead, the Warden purposefully rushed him "Then what?"

The man became animated but frustrated "Then I will use this knowledge to evolve myself even further..."

Warden pushed further "For what purpose?"

He paused the video again. The man looked to the left accessing his creative brain cortex. He didn't have a clear answer. He was still very much wrestling with this almost existential problem. Warden continued watching...

Thursday struggled to express himself "Into something far greater I am even right now... something humanly unconceivable... something utterly divine..."

Warden probed harder "Why? To what end?"

The man rose now raising his hands and climaxing "Because I can..."

Warden punched in almost insulting "As the old German said 'God is man's greatest blunder.' Why be God when you can be something much greater?"

The man retaliated verbally "I grow impatient with this interrogation and your mockery." Then he sat down straight and stared right into Warden's eyes "What is your purpose?"

Once again, Warden paused the video. He recalled this moment in their conversation. He searched the man's face to understand if he was simply trying to retaliate or was genuinely curious, perhaps even hoping to use Warden's answer to form his own. Perhaps both. He pressed the Play button.

Warden barely raised his eyes as if bored by this question "I am here because I have a very specific purpose. That purpose is not always wondrous or grand but it is very important. It is

that purpose that gives me identity and meaning. I embrace who I already am.”

Thursday welcomed more “And what would that noble purpose be?”

Warden grinned “Noble? No. I am here to simply tell people the truth about their life. As the old German said ‘People don't want to hear the truth because they don't want their illusions destroyed.’...”

He turned off his tablet, raised, and walked to the door wrapping up “My dear Thursday, you are a drifting directionless ticking atomic bomb. The moment you face your next limitation... which you no doubt will... you will once again erupt like a violent volcano destroying everything in your path. You are not ready to accept who you really are... an expensive, short-sighted, and failed experiment.”

Thursday shook his restraints to free. Instead he yelled raging “I am not a failed experiment! You just can't accept I evolved above you! You have no clue...”

The Warden took one final look and said “We evolved you genetically... yet completely failed to evolve your humanity... it was barely there in the first place.”

He didn't look back as he passed two guards on his way out the room. He looked at them, touched his com-device, and ordered “Blank Mr. Manning, create a new identity, and introduce him to Level 1 for observation.”

He paused for a moment debating which version of the procedure Mr. Manning should undergo.

‘Blanking’ was a crude term for a mind-wiping technique developed by JHJ to assist patients let go of their past and increase their chances of recovery in the Prison Reform Program. One of the main reasons these programs faltered were

emotional, feelings of either ecstasy or extreme guilt associated with past crimes. Both had a negative impact on recovery. Unlike common methods of selective mind-erasure episodic explicit memories, this program did not use mind-altering drugs nor memory-repression hypnotherapy. Instead JHJ developed a method of identifying and chemically tagging specific brain neurons involved in specific behaviour or memories... then disintegrating them using a modified Gamma Knife machine... then using hypno-therapy to reconstruct replacement memories instead.

In extreme cases however, this approach was too destructive. Patients with long-lived traumatic memories have wide-spread “behaviour infection” impacting a large percentage of their brain. Using a Gamma Knife machine would cripple them. Instead, JHJ devised a method where she would destroy synapses that connected neurons but not neurons themselves then put the patient on synapse-regrowth chemicals... and more extensive hypno-therapy. New synapses would regrow in completely different patterns, thus completely resetting the brain while hypno-therapy would alter how the patient connected and interpreted these memories. Patients undergoing this procedure were highly-suggestive. In the wrong hands, this approach could turn a gentle humanitarian or a wise priest into a merciless soldier or a blood-thirsty criminal and vice-versa.

The Warden pressed a button on his comm device and added “This time please use the ‘complete reset’ approach.”

As Warden closed the video file, he noticed a message on his comms device and whispered almost to himself “I have a more urgent matter to attend to... escaped subject.”

Chapter 08: Recruiting the Enemy

Innes was sitting on a small tight patio in a suburban Cairo coffee house. Egyptian coffee was dark and strong, but felt very familiar. Her mother used to make it late at night. The smell brought back many warm memories. She scanned the Café. Brown worn-out wooden and wicker chairs were full of squeaky character. Tables were small, primarily made of brass and glass. Streets were busy this late hour. Large antique mirrors hang on walls making the place seem much larger. Tiny ceiling tin lamps illuminated the table while allowing visitors to keep a level of dark anonymity. A few older men enjoyed their shisha tobacco from hookah pipes.

She always felt at home in Cairo. It wasn't necessarily her genetic background, her mother being Egyptian. It was the city's rich history that really connected with her. Roots grew all the way to 2000 BC when King Menes united Upper and Lower Egypt under his rule. Later in the 1st century, the city was violently taken over by the Roman empire building a massive Babylon fortress. That's how she felt growing up as a teenager under her father's strict rule... violently invaded, powerless, without rights. Yet as the Roman influence faded, the city flourished starting in the 10th century and became a major trade center. She also flourished as she rebelled and embraced her true nature. After resisting the Napoleonic rule, black death, and British occupation, Cairo declared independence in 1922. Similarly, she declared her independence, liberated her mother, and escaped her father's tyranny. In the late 19th century, Cairo became the largest city in the Islamic world and certainly one of the biggest cities in Africa. Innes proudly recalls her own ascension to the top ranks of Yakuza assassins.

The culture of people here was so familiar to her. They were all talented independent free-thinkers, wild and unpredictable yet deeply rooted in shared history and

heritage. History has under-estimated them many times. And many times they have proven history wrong. Some of these buildings and streets have seen Napoleon. A few have even seen Caesar. Yet none of these giants could subdue them.

She stopped reflecting as she spotted two men approaching from a distance. One of them was in a wheelchair. The other was pushing the wheelchair. She recognized the first man right away. She was the one responsible for putting him into his full body cast. She was more cautious with the second one. She pressed a few keys on her comms device. A moment after, she received a photo and details about the second man, an Interpol agent. She checked her small bag and secretly motioned to her spotter hiding on the first floor in the building in front of the café.

Glenn directed Eddy toward the corner table where Innes was sitting with her back towards the wall and face towards the entrance.

She greeted them forcefully "Welcome to Cairo, gentlemen. Now that our formalities are over, approach slowly then sit at the table with your both hands placed and remaining on the table surface." They followed her direction precisely as she took a sip of coffee holding it in her left hand. Her right hand remained under the table.

Glenn started straining to hide his fear and uneasiness "Hello Innes. We meet again."

Eddy added without a hesitation "Is that Desert Eagle handgun under the table really necessary?"

Innes answered coldly "That all depends what's your business here..." She took another sip of coffee.

Glenn got right to his point "We have a proposition for you... We need your help finding Mannix."

Innes hid her surprise well. She scanned around and quickly checked her comms device. She was suspicious it was Mannix that sent them in the first place. She asked sharply "Why?"

Eddy jumped in "Project Prometheus..."

Innes rushed in a sharp reply “No”

Eddy persisted “You haven’t even heard what our offer is...”

Innes checked her comms device again, then repeated with more force “No”

Eddy was about to reply when a waiter approached offering coffee. Innes interjected in fluent Arabic “No coffee for these two. They’re not staying...” She popped another phrase, no doubt something like “Bill please” or “Thank you”

Eddy pushed stronger “Innes it’s only a matter of time before one of the agencies or Yakuza tracks you down and...”

She interrupted him “Better them than Mannix. You are wasting your time.” She scanned around again then added “60 seconds...”

Glenn simply watched her as Eddy made an offer “Complete immunity, new identity, and choice of relocation.”

Innes connected eyes with Eddy and punched her response “Lies. You forget I was part of your program before.”

Eddy tried to persuade her “There is not a place on earth you could hide. This is your only chance at redemption...”

Innes responded with the same cold voice “No. 40 seconds...”

Eddy appealed to her in desperation “Innes, Mannix is about to release a genetic weapon into the entire population. I read your file. You care about right and wrong. You have to help us and stop Mannix.”

Innes paused then responded “Find him yourself. I’m not going into enemy territory on your account. Mannix is your problem, Interpol.”

Glenn noticed a facial tale when Innes mentioned Mannix’s name. Eddy continued explaining “I can’t even find his damn island facility... and we don’t have time to explore the Atlantic Ocean for his secret hideaway.”

Innes stuck it to him “You meant to tell me that all your satellites, spies, and sensors can’t find a 10 kilometer radius floating facility? You got 15 seconds.”

Eddy got stuck on “Floating facility” as Glenn took over “Innes, don’t do this because you’re scared and fearing for your life. Don’t do this because you owe me. Don’t do this to start a new life. Not sure you could. Don’t do this to save the world, for this country, or even for your family...”

She connected eyes with Glenn really listening and connecting with what he was saying. Glenn continued “Don’t do it to pay for your sins and get immunity...” His voice was filled with conviction and passion she never saw in Glenn. He escalated “Don’t do it because Interpol or anyone is asking you to. Don’t do it because they can protect you... because they can’t...” He climaxed on the final statement “Do it to save Mannix from himself...”

Innes showed a moment of emotion then regained control quickly as Glenn pushed this button harder “We know you care for Mannix... We just want to capture him with zero casualties. We have a specialized Seals team, experts in non-lethal extractions. But we know nothing about the facility and our governments are happy to simply order to nuke him. If you don’t help us, we risk killing him or others... those are our orders.”

Innes locked eyes with Glenn as he tried to close the deal “All we need is intel on how to capture him safely...”

Innes interrupted “Stop”, scanned the area, then responded “You know nothing of my personal relationship with Mannix. You’re making very desperate claims here.” She pierced Glenn with her eyes “... and if you like I could put your buddy here in a cute matching body-cast. I’ll even autograph them both so you remember who kicked your ass.”

Glenn and Eddy exchanged quick looks while she relished and continued “I will help you but for my own reasons. Last we met, I left Mannix in a hurry and I want closure between us. Afterall he did save my life.”

She took another sip of her tea and wrapped up “I will help you... but only information... and only if I can get a private session with him immediately after his capture.”

Glenn followed-up “That’s fine. Info is all we need.”

Innes provided further direction “Then immunity. Then you let me go. No program. I disappear...”

Eddy jumped in “Of course. You can disappear as soon as we capture him safely...”

Innes drank the last bit of her tea and interjected to wrap things up “No time to waste.” Then she looked directly at Glenn and spoke clearly and powerfully “If you cross me... understand... this time... I WILL kill you.”

Chapter 09: Prometheus Beginning

JHJ alerted Mannix via his comms device “General Anders is trying to contact you and he is quite... furious.”

Mannix smiled “General Anders was born furious.” He was currently located in a turbo-lift. He issued a voice command to change direction and directed JHJ “I’ll take this call in my office...” then added “... and please join me there immediately after.”

JHJ responded “Very well.”

Mannix stepped out of the turbo-lift, walked a few steps down a hallway, and entered his office. The office was a dark medium-size room with no surfaces. As he entered, a table emerged from the floor. After issuing a few voice commands, all walls lit up with various data. In the corner of the largest wall, a nagging red light was pulsating. He pointed to it. Immediately, a military uniformed woman in her 50’s stared at him angrily. Her makeup was sparse. Her medium-length hair was pulled tight using a large clip. Her demeanor and body language were very controlled. Years of service in a tough male-dominated US military made her both very determined, very resourceful, but also very tired.

General Anders roared “What the hell are you doing, Mannix?”

Mannix expected this opening salvo. As a rare woman in the male-dominated US military, she was one tough woman. She was one of very few female “Dark Seals” trained for highly covert and highly demanding international espionage missions. She was fluent in eight languages, held 3 PhDs, and knew over 200 ways to kill a human being with bare hands. Yet it was resourcefulness, persistence, and innovation that helped her to excel to a general position. She was extremely well connected. Yet unlike other generals, she had a healthy appetite for risk. And it was that

appetite that led her to many advancements... as well as her work with Mannix.

Mannix remained calm “Hello general. What exactly are you referring to?”

General continued shouting “In the last 24 hours I’ve received numerous threatening calls from over a dozen international agencies including NATO, UN, WHO, and even the President...” She temporarily lowered her voice hearing his secretary arguing with someone outside of the boardroom “... What the hell is Prometheus?”

Mannix avoided “General Anders... I don’t see how my non-military programs are in any way related to our advanced genetic weaponry contract.”

Anders shouted again “Bull shit Mannix! People are at my throat about your Prometheus mutagen. They think we developed it for the US military and are now going to release it to the global population...” Sweat drops started running down her forehead as he continued yelling “... This is a PR hell Mannix. Conspiracy weirdos and the public is not going to believe that the US government is NOT somehow involved. They will think it’s another American plot to take over the world.” She trailed-off swearing...

Mannix reassured “Calm down General. This is a simple misunderstanding. Prometheus is not a weapon...” For a moment he looked for an easy word he could use to differentiate it “... Think of it more like genetic treatment... a medicine.”

The general was indignant “I don’t give a flying monkey’s ass what it is... You have to stop it immediately!” Her hands became very animated reaching her crescendo “If you don’t, you’ll have the US military seizing all your offices and terminating all your funding.” She punched this last statement “You went too far! They will invade your precious international waters and decimate your ocean bases.”

Mannix stood his ground “General, that would be a clear violation of our agreements... and a declaration of war.”

Anders did a double-take then chuckled heartily “Don’t make me laugh Mannix... You are in no position to start a war. I could press a few buttons and in 10 minutes every single one of your ocean bases would be obliterated.”

Mannix smiled devilishly and answered poignantly “You are not going to do that dear General. Do you know why?”

General responded in turn with suspicion “Why is that... dear Mannix?”

Mannix raised his hand and spoke with absolute confidence “Because all of my facilities feature a very unique security system... one that IS using the genetic weapons I’ve created for you.” He paused dramatically then continued “I don’t need your antiquated missiles, I don’t need your overgrown armies, and I certainly don’t need your overpriced surveillance technology... Any damage to my facilities will poison and contaminate your entire supply of water, all oceans. And this genetic agent is unlike anything you have ever seen or can imagine. Your single-minded organization will take centuries to comprehend it and correct it!

Mannix hung up on the general just as she screamed “That is madness!”

He took a moment before refocusing on his next conversation. He motioned for doors to open and let JHJ in.

She started “I’m guessing the call didn’t go well...”

Mannix smiled “Call went as expected... It always amazes me how the US government has no qualms spending millions of dollars on weapons of mass destruction... yet have a massive meltdown when we are trying to do something very positive with the same technology. After all, we’re changing the world here and evolving the human race as we know it.”

JHJ nodded “Power is more exciting than charity... But they are right to worry. Prometheus will severely undermine US position as a global superpower.”

She noticed Mannix was lost in thought and tried to guess “Don’t tell me you want to cancel or even postpone Prometheus.”

He finally responded after a few moments “Not at all. In fact, perhaps we should accelerate it.”

JHJ objected “Accelerate it? I don’t think that’s even possible. Production of the mutagen is a highly volatile process...”

Mannix’s brain was working overtime “Yes but not distribution...”

JHJ asked in confusion “Mannix, it’s unlikely your Prometheus devices will be done earlier...”

Mannix was in his own world mapping and calculating something on one of the digital walls “What if we didn’t use these devices to deliver the mutagen?”

Chapter 10: Preparations

Eddy walked into the boardroom with almost everyone already sitting and preparing for the debriefing. He didn't hesitate to start "I just got off the comms with General Anders of the US military. She provided me with telemetry of Mannix's potential location. So far, satellite photos and scan of that area are inconclusive. We'll have to rely on our own reconnaissance. I've already requested our Captain to alter the course. We're currently on an intercept course."

Glenn piped in "How quickly will we reach their location?"

Eddy grimaced "That's difficult to ascertain... the Island is..." He scratched his hair then continued "Not sure how to explain this so here it goes... The island is moving."

Anne was confused "I don't understand. How can an island move?"

At that moment, Innes entered the boardroom escorted by a large armed guard. She looked at the scans projected above the boardroom table and relished providing the answer "Because the island is artificial. It was constructed to be mobile. Mannix wanted to avoid severe weather conditions... but also the world's prying eyes."

Hothead pointed to the image and asked "Why are these images so distorted? It's impossible to identify anything there."

Innes smiled "Because Mannix doesn't like uninvited observers. He monitors all satellites above. He then sends a wide laser beam to interfere with any prying cameras and distort their images... he blinds them."

Charlie had an idea "What about sound?"

Innes responded "The island is covered with an organic self-healing dome membrane. Sound cannot penetrate

it. It also serves as protection from adverse weather conditions and any attacks."

Eddy stepped in "That's exactly why we're going incognito to survey the island from underwater..."

Monnty questioned "And what's so different about our technology?"

At that moment the captain walked in and spoke in a deep voice "Because Nautilus uses green lasers instead of active sonar."

Anne once again was confused "What are green lasers?"

Eddy provided the answer reluctantly "It's a relatively new ocean scanning technology. Green lasers are unique. They can penetrate water yet remain quite undetected. And unlike active sonar, they don't easily identify the source..."

The captain added "Tell them about the probes."

Eddy continued "In addition, this ship is equipped with an array of probes that scan in unison and transmit a complete picture to the ship."

Charlie concluded "So even if a ship can detect green lasers, they would be identifying a dozen sources... and will not know which one to target."

Hothead whispered amazed "Super cool..."

Captain nodded to Eddy and left the boardroom.

Eddy refocused their meeting "Let's get to work people!" He then looked directly at Innes and asked her "Mrs. Tannah, would you be so kind as to enlighten us about the structure and configuration of this mobile island... so we know what to focus our probes on and what to look for."

Innes smiled "Aside from the layout of the top two levels, I'm afraid my knowledge is quite limited... especially when it comes to its construction." She thought for a moment then added "I can tell you it consists of both organic and manufactured substances."

Glenn probed "What are those levels you described?"

Innes picked up a special pen and began drawing in thin air and explaining as she went along. “What I CAN tell you is that there are five levels... three below the surface and two above.”

She first drew the bottom portions of the island “Below the surface is used for the Prisoner Reform Program. As patients successfully advance through the program, they move higher up. Bottom layers provide more privacy but also discourage ‘participants’ from attempts to escape. They would simply drown.

She used the pen to draw different sections of each floor and complemented them with a few labels. She paused as she started to draw the central section “The middle of each level has... various systems that run the island.”

She used her hands to zoom into the first level above the surface. She started drawing small pods surrounding various main central structures. “The main level floats on the ocean surface. It comprises many independent and inter-connected floating homes, used as quarters for all the scientists, doctors, and other staff. They are all connected via flexible and detachable bridges. Each pod is an independent self-sustaining habitat fitted with water filtration systems, solar panels, and hydroponics. This not only provides a wonderful living environment, it also serves as a safety vessel in case of any catastrophic failures. Mannix always prioritized his scientists over his science.”

She zoomed into central structures and drew additional details “Here is the main facility. The main tower has a first level housing sophisticated labs as well as the second level with Island controls and Mannix’s secure office.”

She drew and circled a specific location in the second level of the tower “That’s probably where Mannix will be...” then added a label for another location “... or the main boardroom. They are both very well protected.”

Eddy pointed to a large copula immediately beside the tower, which seemed to extend deep into levels below “What is this round structure?”

Innes connected eyes with his “That information is confidential and not required for your extraction.”

Eddy considered pushing the topic when Monnty broke the awkward silence “What are those legs you drew coming out of the bottom levels?”

Innes explained “Those are organic tentacle-like appendages. They intake water, safely dispose of organic excrement, and propel the island in any direction.”

Anne stepped back, tilted her head, then injected “This whole thing looks like some kind of a jellyfish... or a squid.”

Innes shrugged and reflected “I suppose so Anne...”

Eddy diverted “OK tell us more about the bottom three levels and how prisoners progress through them.”

Innes obliged “New prisoners that just undergone their DNA resequencing treatment go to the bottom level. Relatively small portion of them, those that successfully recovered, progress to the second level. Patients on that level are further augmented and stabilized. Small percentage of those ever make it to the third level where they are reimaged, reprogrammed, and eventually re-integrated into society...”

Glenn objected “What do you mean reimaged and reprogrammed?”

Innes looked back at him frustrated “I agreed to help you safely capture Mannix... but I will not reveal his methods or technology so you can use it for your own shady means.”

Short silence followed. Innes already felt like an outsider. She wasn’t expecting to make any friends, especially with Anne and Glenn. She was responsible for a significant amount of personal pain they endured. They tolerated her but also didn’t trust her. Innes couldn’t blame them but also simply didn’t care. Her purpose for joining the mission was singular to safely extract Mannix.

Eddy interrupted what would surely become a heated conflict “Thank you for this information Innes.” He then checked his comms device for current time and continued “We have approximately 45 minutes before we locate the island and get our probes into position... Let’s not waste it on arguing. Everyone, prepare your stations.”

As everyone exited the boardroom, Anne caught up to Innes. She gently touched her left arm, looked her straight in the eyes, then spoke with confidence and concern “I hate what you and Mannix did to Genne...” Her emotions surfaced “But I understand why you are here... We are both trying to save the men we care for.” She paused hoping for Innes to return the sentiment. In its absence, she wrapped up “I am glad you are here, Innes...” then went into her cabin.

Innes masterfully contained her deep emotions. A terrible war waged inside her. She knew she was personally betraying the man she respected and loved... perhaps the only man that could ever understand her and love her back.”

Chapter 11: In the Belly of the Beast

KN recalls the last words he heard from his pursuers
“Wake up the Warden. One of the subjects is trying to escape!”

Another detail of his identity surfaced as if triggered by this statement. First, he realized he felt very raw and almost overwhelming hate towards the person referred to as Warden. He was surprised by this emotion and its magnitude. He had no context for it, no memories, no insights why it was so profound. It was almost instinctual.

Second, he felt strangely at ease with the idea of escaping. In fact, it was affirming to him. It felt right. It energized him. It somehow identified his nature. It confirmed why he felt so easy in these surroundings and why he so desperately felt he had to leave them.

His thoughts were interrupted as the pipe he traveled on top of a disk ended abruptly in a large dark area. His crash was softened by water. He quickly stood up and looked around. He stood in some type of a hall about half the size of a football field. The ceiling was skewered with holes dropping various organic liquids. He recognized some of them to be human waste. On the walls, another series of holes was rushing in hundreds of gallons of water. Under his feet, thousands if not millions of thick tense strings run across supporting him but letting water through. Visibility was very poor with only one source of light emanating on one of the sides.

He was concerned his feet would get sucked in or trapped. He began his slow journey towards the light. He noticed a small fish swirling around with no control and sucked inside the floor. He noticed a few large objects not able to penetrate the floor. He stepped on top of them for security. He didn't really recognize them nor pay attention to them anyway. He slowly moved toward the light.

He was a few meters away when the water suddenly stopped rushing in. He instinctually sensed this was bad news and accelerated toward the light. As the water drained through the floor, he felt the surface began convulsing. Suddenly, a large opening appeared right in the middle of the area. Just as he reached the wall with the light, the floor began to bend downward and slant towards the hole. Large objects started sliding and getting swallowed into its dark interior. He frantically looked for something to hold on to but walls were quite solid and smooth. More items vanished sucked into the middle. He struggled to punch and pierce the exterior wall but it was too hard. In the corner of his eye he noticed a discoloration on the wall, perhaps a protrusion. He went towards it. Just as he reached it, the floor began to convulse stronger and water supply holes on the walls opened up again. They were washing off and forcing remaining waste down to the hole. His hands reached toward the growth on the wall. It was the size of his fist but large enough to hold on to. It seemed to support his weight, at least for the moment.

By now, all objects on the floor were swallowed up. The hole was closing up again and the surface was leveling out. His anxiety slowly subsided. He was once again able to stand on the floor without sliding down. As the hole in the ground tightened, he sensed a vibration coming out and reverberating strings on the floor. It was a curious sensation he never felt before. Its strength increased as the hole closed. For a moment he could have sworn that he literally saw water float in the air until the final climax. The opening finally shut tight with a massive baritone blast. He strangely recognized the tone. With the tone, he sensed an intelligent creature inside this massive structure. It called out to him in his mind. It knew him somehow. It sensed he was in pain and confused. He reached out back to it calling for help. He felt it. The presence was surrounding him. It knew exactly where he was and who he was.

He heard another blast but at a much higher frequency. He grabbed his head in pain. But after a moment the sensation gave way to a moment of clarity. A wave of

memories rushed into his mind. He sat down by the wall
and whispered to himself “I know where I am...”

Chapter 12: Prometheus Evolving

Mannix entered the boardroom full of excitement “JHJ here are my new distribution plans for the mutagen. We can release it immediately after releasing Prometheus drones...” He flicked his hand from his display towards hers. Various information popped out including the world geographical map including various ocean currents.

JHJ objected “You want to distribute Accendo using the world's natural water cycle? Are you mad? That’s the most uncontrolled method conceivable...”

Mannix interjected “Not if we alter and control how the agent is activated...”

JHJ was confused “Activated?”

In his mind, Mannix paused to reflect on just how much he trusted and relied on this unassuming yet remarkable person. In some ways he thought of her as an older sister, very talented but also full of wisdom. Within Mannix’s organization she was also his right hand. There were very few secrets between them and he trusted her implicitly. He knew she truly believed in their cause, that genetic modification can bring a new age in human evolution... uniting the world to overcome even the greatest global challenges like poverty and overpopulation. He trusted her skills as a medical doctor, psychiatrist, and geneticist. He knew she also trusted him completely. Her loyalty was a choice and a personal debt she felt she owed after Mannix saved and reformed her son. Her secular humanism allowed her to work in the “gray area” with clarity and conviction. She always believed science must replace religion. But in the strength of this conviction, she fell into the same dangers as faith and religion she or reverently prosecuted and criticised. He knew working with Mannix gave her a strong sense of purpose and belonging.

Mannix refocused and explained “Dear JHJ give me some credit here... We release an inert version of Accendo into the world's water supply. Within a month, it should reach most areas of the world...”

JHJ objected again “And mutated into unknown and unpredictable variety, some very dangerous.”

Mannix ignored and continued “... But we modify the DNA sequence to activate only when it’s temperature reaches 100 degrees Celsius.”

JHJ began to connect the pieces “Not a temperature normally occurring in nature...”

Mannix regained his excitement as JHJ caught on “... Except of course the one species in the world that boils their water prior to consumption...”

JHJ asked “What if it came in contact with other organic material such as cooked meat?”

Mannix waited till she connected the remaining pieces. She did “It would not matter because the sequence is customized to connect only with human DNA.”

Mannix filled additional gaps “I’ve also programmed these protein strands to disintegrate after a month if the host is not found. Ideally we would disperse the genetic materials directly into large formations in strategic locations. It would be distributed via rain and various existing freshwater systems.”

JHJ wondered aloud “Salt water probably has a destructive effect on the mutagen.”

Mannix added “I also built in a fail-safe mechanism...”

JHJ pushed “How?”

Mannix answered “A type of safety protocol I can execute using Prometheus drones in case anything goes wrong... Something on a sub-molecular genetic level.”

JHJ pushed further “Not my field of expertise. How does it work?”

Mannix explained “Think of it as a self-destruct mechanism on a key protein sequence. We can trigger it remotely...”

JHJ followed up “At what range?”

Mannix responded “It has no range. It doesn’t work like that.”

JHJ probed “What’s the risk? Why aren’t you telling me this?”

Mannix answered “Risk is minimal...”

JHJ probed harder “Mannix we’ve worked together for far too long...” Then she punched “What’s the risk? What aren’t you telling me?”

Mannix reluctantly obliged “The same mechanism in wrong hands can be used to trigger the mutagen... And I’m not telling you what it is to protect you. There are powerful people that will kill for this information.”

JHJ stared directly into his eyes “Fine... but what’s the Impact?”

Mannix responded, again quite reluctantly “Unknown. We haven’t had the chance to run real tests... only simulations.”

At that moment the Warden entered the boardroom, observed their serious faces, and asked “Do I even want to ask what this is about?”

JHJ concluded the first part of the meeting “Mannix, we need to run tests on real subjects immediately. I doubt these risks are acceptable.”

Warden piped in “Between you two, I would trust JHJ more. She prioritizes her reason over her conviction. As the old German says, ‘Great intellects are skeptical.’...”

He received no objections so he decided to introduce a new topic “Perhaps I can distract your planz for world domination with something clozer to home... One of our subjects is attempting to escape. I would handle this matter myself if not for the fact he is sabotaging this fine facility in this process.”

That got their attention so Warden continued “The subject succezzfully circumvented security systemz, evaded guards, and dizzappeared into the digestive system...”

Mannix interrupted “Where is he now?”

Warden pushed back “You tell me, Mannix. You are the one that engineered this bizarre island creature.”

JHJ asked with suspicion already sensing the answer “Who is the subject?”

Warden stated unemotionally “KN” then looked towards JHJ for her reaction.

JHJ immediately stood up immediately and left the boardroom.

Warden looked at Mannix and kept criticising “I do wonder how long you will keep creating these genetic wonderzz before they turn back on you, doctor Mannix.”

Mannix exhaled deeply to regain his emotion then attacked “Perhaps dear Warden you could stop mascaraing your noble narcissistic criticism as honesty and focus on keeping track of your subjects... and I will worry about making my genetic wonders. I have confidence in JHJ’s talent and our work.”

Warden connected eyes with Mannix and retaliated “Is it confidence or faith you speak of? As the old German said ‘Faith means not wanting to...’”

Mannix abruptly finished his sentence “... not wanting to know what is true.” He paused allowing the tension between them to grow then he finished “Your old German is long dead. Perhaps you should come to the land of the living instead.”

Warden didn’t waver “You realize this experiment of yours iz what will cost this man his life. As we speak, he was mozt likely ejected into ocean depths and drowned. And if he isn’t, then he muzt somehow be retaining memories. Your identity erazzing procedure failed...”

Mannix objected “That’s impossible. That process has been successfully tested on thousands of people...”

Warden insisted “I can show your proof. He is remembering his surroundings and even past experiences dezpite repeated wiping procedures...”

Mannix redirected “Send me the info for me to review later. The question is how you plan to find him.”

Warden added “Another strange thing... Island surveillance is showing him easily bypassing various security systems.”

JHJ joined in “That’s not possible. He has no way of controlling them.”

Warden offered “Could someone be helping him?”

Mannix exchanged looks with JHJ then pulled up relevant surveillance. He scanned footage and environmental controls. He hesitated evaluating results.

JHJ did a similar analysis and drew an early conclusion “The only correlation I can see is a series of coinciding failures in island systems... accidentally occurring, not manufactured or controlled by someone.”

Warden squinted “A series of fortunate coincidences? Unlikely...”

Mannix grimaced wrestling with his evaluation.

JHJ noticed “Mannix... What are you thinking?”

Mannix answered cautiously “The island is responding to him...”

Warden interjected “Pardon me, what?”

JHJ shook her head in disbelief “I know we genetically modified and literally grew this creature... this island... but are you suggesting we also somehow gave it consciousness?”

Mannix dismissed “Not at all. Consciousness is not required to respond to external stimuli... For some reason the island is interacting with him.”

JHJ advanced “We can track that! We can identify these disruptions to locate the patient...”

Warden smiled “I’ll get my people to try that. Either he will turn up somewhere or get ejected into the ocean. One way or another it’s just a matter of time before we find him... But when we do, I’ll be placing him in isolation till we figure out why your procedure failed on him.”

Mannix affirmed “Very well.”

Warden was about to leave. He paused just before the exit and asked cautiously “This Prometheus project of yours... Will it bring us more clients?... Or more enemies?”

Mannix smiled “Imagine a world where every human being embraces, not fears, genetic evolution... where everyone wants to enhance themselves... and of course one where we are the only ones with technology to do it.”

Warden exited whispering to himself “Either way... success or failure... it will be chaos... I like chaos. It’s good for my business.”

Chapter 13: The Island

Anne entered the control room with Glenn pushing his wheelchair. Everyone was already present and waiting for Eddy's orders. They were approaching Mannix's island and were about to scan its structure looking for potential vulnerabilities.

Ed said with excitement "The Island stopped moving. It's now or never..."

Captain received order from Eddy and nodded to the propulsion officer. Everyone felt the ship's motion changing as Nautilus cut its engines. They coasted carried by their momentum as the Captain nodded to the weapons officer. Numerous screens over his head began showing different video feeds. Central display showed 8 dots leaving the ship towards a large structure ahead of them. The Captain directed for the ship to stop behind a nearby ocean mountain so it would not be detected. Their coasting ended smoothly.

They waited about 3 minutes before probes reached their destination. Weapons officer nodded back to the Captain indicating readiness to begin scanning. The motley crew focused their attention on the central display as scanning began. First, the overall structure got displayed. The 10 kilometer diameter island was sizable, massive if you consider it was entirely constructed and in some cases literally grown out of genetic material. Tentacles were extraordinary, several kilometers long almost dancing in the ocean. There must have been over a hundred of them. There were several places where the scan was able to penetrate the outer walls and display part of the internal structure. The entire under-ocean part appeared organic with a thick round middle section maybe half kilometer tall.

Probes moved-in closer under the corona attempting to scan higher levels and surface closer. Display showed them as mere dots encountering a massive structure. Eddy zoomed-in on a series of hexagonal tiles on the outside ring of the island's surface. They were floating

only partly attached and connected via some type of flexible bridge. Each one was about 50 meters wide with a large transparent bulge under the surface. Innes moved towards him and began explaining "This is a living domicile housing scientists. This bottom section you see submerged is their bedroom. Glass walls can turn transparent for viewing various ocean life or opaque for privacy. The top part is far more sophisticated. It houses a small dome kitchen, living room, bathroom and small work area. Each dome is powered via solar panels. Just outside the dome is a small self-sustainable automated hydroponic garden. Each tenant decides on what vegetables it's programmed to grow."

Charlie piped in "I've seen this technology elsewhere. This thing can also serve as a lifeboat. It even has its own water filtration system."

Innes nodded and continued "Yes these bridges can separate and the entire piece can serve and sustain its tenants for months, even years. The dome is completely waterproof in cases of severe storms. Gardens can support up to 4 people, more if they are fishing."

Eddy interrupted "They discovered our probes..." He saw one of the large tentacles bending and rushing toward one of them on the display.

Captain barked to his officers "Move them off to safety."

Few alarms started to go off as several tentacles caught up with probes, grasping them, then pulling them toward the central structure."

Eddy directed "Keep scanning with this one..." pointing to one probe about to enter the island's belly.

At the same moment the video feed for that probe died. The officer looked up to the captain and explained "Electrical overload... they electrocuted the probe before entering the interior of the structure."

All except for two probes were captured. The rest would be swallowed within moments. The captain connected eyes with the weapons officer, pointed to

the probe furthest out and nodded twice. A moment after the probe exploded damaging the tentacle that was grasping it. The remaining two probes continued scanning the area as the Captain walked to the center console and zoomed-in on the scene of his crime. The tentacle was ruptured half way-revealing its insides.

Innes smirked "Dear Captain, you have about a minute before it heals itself... And probably about another minute before the island starts moving again... very rapidly."

Eddy injected "What are those pipes inside?"

Innes explained "As far as I know, there are multiple pipes there... one collecting water... one releasing waste... there are others but I don't know what they are."

Anne asked "Human waste? Isn't that unsafe?"

Innes smiled "No. The island consumes human waste and plankton... This is the waste that the island's organic components generate and it is completely safe to the ocean's ecosystem."

Eddy fired another question, "How is the electricity passed?"

Innes fired back "Naturally through it's nervous system and into the outer skin layer."

Eddy followed-up "How is the energy generated? Where is its engine room?"

Innes responded "Sorry but that's an aspect of the island I don't have any knowledge on."

Monnty joined the exchange "I'm not sure this island needs an engine room, sir. Based on what we learned so far, the entire propulsion is organic and does not adhere to traditional ship design. Energy could be created biologically similar to electrical eels or rays."

Eddy directed in frustration "We have two probes left. Can we send them above the ocean surface to scan the island walls and central tower..."

Captain refused "No. They already know we are here. We pull out, regroup, and plan to fight another day."

Monnty interjected "Actually, could we get one of these probes to collect any samples of this damaged appendage? DNA tests could reveal natural vulnerabilities... And can we send a small sensor down one of these tentacles?"

Charlie added "I agree with the cap and Monnty. There is no way in hell we are going in by knocking on the front door. This is primarily an organic creation. Biological data and any interior scans could be extremely useful."

Captain and Eddy exchanged looks and nodded to concur. Captain then nodded to his officers to retrieve biological samples from the ocean floor. The other probe fired a tiny sensor directly into the intake area of one of the tentacles. It got sucked in with some small fish.

Anne waited for a pause and asked the obvious question "But how much time do we have till they open up our probe thingies and figure out what we are up to?"

Almost on cue, the island tentacles began to move rapidly swirling and convulsing, propelling the island away."

Eddy commanded "We have an hour to come up with an infiltration plan... So we do this right now."

Chapter 14: Following the Light

KN grabbed onto wall protrusion again. He recognized it in a moment of lucid brilliance. "It's a conk fungus of some kind..." he told himself. He knew the presence of this plant meant there is a weakness and disease underneath it. He pulled hard on it. The wall cracked right under. He raised himself and kicked the crack to enlarge it. He repeated the procedure a few more times till the wall fractured and conk ripped off. He punched and bent the crack until he could fit through it... barely.

He finally got through and landed on a hard surface. The place was dark and unrecognizable. He followed walls using his touch. Eventually he saw a dim pulsating light in the distance. He cautiously followed it. His heartbeat accelerated as he approached it. He listened attentively for any voices. Instead, he heard only a strange type of crackling.

He emerged from darkness onto a large open area. In its center, he saw large organs. They looked like massive discs stored in large sacs. They were buzzing and zapping with electricity. He also noticed long blue cords connected to sacks. He wasn't sure if they were providing or extracting electricity. Perhaps both.

Another high-frequency wave flooded his area. He grabbed his head. He wasn't sure whether to fight or resist thoughts that flooded his mind. A memory surfaced. He was in this room before. Yet the room and these same organs were much smaller, less than half its current size. And he wasn't alone. There were other people with him. He tried to recognize them but his memories were still very hazy.

"How long ago did this happen?" he thought to himself. He grasped but could not answer his question. "Was it really here?" he asked himself again? Again, no clarity followed.

Another high-pitched resonance reached him showing him a vision of what's ahead... or perhaps a direction he should follow.

As directed, KN followed the outside walls of the hall into another opening he saw on the opposite side. As he looked up, he noticed sections higher up with transparent window-like sections. They were too high up to see anything through them but he wondered if behind them a group of scientists observed and controlled this bizarre creation.

As he reached the opening on the other side, he reluctantly entered into another dark hallway. Once again, he followed it slowly and cautiously. He only travelled for a few moments when he reached another large area. This time two large organs were hanged side by side, each one convulsing and contracting in an alternate rhythm. He also noticed large pipes connected to the organ's top and bottom sections. They rushed in some type of liquid with every contraction. This time he approached one of them. He placed his hand on the organ and sensed its life. It had no mind, no awareness. It simply existed subdued and controlled by whoever created it. KN moved back in, taken back by realization that this entire creation was not connected to any brain, even animal-like. Rather, it existed void of any feelings, memories, or thoughts. He rushed towards the next dark exit.

Once again, he had to travel for a few moments in darkness until another chamber opened up to him. He began fearing he will find no exit out of this area, no escape. He followed the corridor to another area. This time a single multi-part organ was sticking out of the wall membrane. It was... breathing. He recognized it. The organ expanded all around while inhaling then compressed forcing the air out. It paused for a few moments between these rhythmic events. He recognized the same cadence from holes in hallway walls. He rushed around the scene and entered another dark hallway.

This time he didn't hesitate walking in darkness. He trusted this corridor to be structured the same way as

others he just traveled through. He was right but he could not have expected what was on the other side. This chamber was filled with multiple large sacks containing various liquids. The largest one was especially noticeable. The red velvety liquid glittered as it moved inside. It was spellbinding yet he sensed great instability and danger emanating from it. The other sacks were smaller with various pipes running from one to another. He sensed one of them to be very hot no doubt using temperature as a type of catalyst whatever chemical reaction taking place. He walked around slowly admiring the configuration and sensing each liquid. Some felt lifeless. Others felt vibrant and alive.

He looked up to a transparent section higher up. This time he saw an older woman staring right at him. He froze in terror. But as they connected eyes, the fear was replaced by a deep sense of guilt. Strange thing was, she did not seem alarmed by his presence nor afraid nor hostile toward him. Quite contrary, he sensed they have some kind of connection... some history he could not remember at this moment. Someone must have distracted her because she quickly turned away. He used that moment to enter the next corridor. This time however, the empty void was interrupted by a single red blinking light. He paused, wondering if this was a trap or an answer to his prayers. He wanted to escape from this strange place so desperately.

As he approached the light, the wall opened and overpowered the hallway with brightness. He glued his body to the wall and waited for his eyes to adapt. He cautiously peeked inside. He saw a large area filled with small amphibian airplanes. He was shocked he recognized them so easily. He wondered if he knew how to pilot them. He peeked further inside. He noticed guards stationed by each vehicle and another two by a large door on the opposite side. They wore brown uniforms and carried multiple weapons. Some seemed familiar to him but others didn't. He wondered what in his past made him so familiar with vehicles and weapons. He decided not to dwell on it too much for now.

He hid back inside as one of the guards began turning to scan the area in his direction. The opening sealed silently as he did so. He waited for a moment then leaned in. The wall opened again sensing him. This time he risked being seen and jumped to the other side. This allowed him to have a better view of the area on the opposite side. He noticed another large door with two additional guards. The door just opened revealing some work men bringing-in cargo on a strange skid. He stuck out his head to gain a detailed look. Guards were distracted with their visitors. The area was a large half-sphere. He wasn't sure if the roof opened or if vehicles were meant to leave a large opening to his left. Perhaps both. He also noticed there were several security cameras installed around the area. He would be detected as soon as he entered this chamber. He wondered how quickly he would have been discovered.

He sat down on a side, allowed the opening to reseal, and told himself "Now we wait for the right opportunity..."

Chapter 15: Van Gogh's Starry Night

Anne felt out of place in a room full of experts plotting an attack to a highly-secure island facility. She focused her attention to a lone painting decorating one of the walls. Glenn rolled-in towards her and started "Stormy Night by Vincent Van Gogh".

Anne responded still captivated by the painting "My favorite... Interestingly he thought night is more richly coloured than the day."

Glenn added "Perhaps reflecting his own state of mind at the time... This painting is quite fitting of tonight's excursion - Both represent madness in the midst of great beauty."

Anne joined in "Because we're rescuing a genius out of a mental hospital?"

Glenn opened up "Not only that... a haunted moon brightens the sky... bewitching glowing stars observing us from a distance... a few clouds dancing with waves..." He connected with her eyes for a moment and noticed amazement. He decided to wrap up awkwardly "... and yes a genius."

Anne noticed "You got some depth to you Glenn... I didn't expect that."

Glenn smiled and redirected "It must have been something I ate..."

"Maybe Mannix is misunderstood the same as Van Gogh... genius well ahead of our time." Anne added.

Glenn joined-in "Vision, passion, talent, and determination untamed by culture and uncorrupted by common reason... perhaps."

Anne wrapped up seeing Eddy getting ready "... perhaps."

Eddy interrupted them "Everyone I need your attention here. We're going over the plan..." He began to display various information above the central table.

Eddy started "At exactly 400... in just over 2 hours... Charlie you're first. We need to draw their attention and security forces to outer walls."

Charlie was waiting for her queue "That's right. I will send my ace drones as a glorious distraction. We will blast their bloody side walls wide open. Then another series of drones to cheese them off. They are all ready for knees up to party with any ground troops. Zap Zap. Good night." She tried to sound posh but all the slang backfired.

Innes added "Ground troops are relatively small, perhaps two to three dozen per sector."

Eddy acknowledged and continued "Next, you're up Hothead. At precisely 405, you will storm the main tower and force Mannix to go underground."

Hothead came forward and traced his attack route "Uh huh. We saw whales circling the city. Beautiful creatures. Calm. Nobody is paying attention to them. We will attach ourselves to one of them, and when opportune, detach just under one of them floating dwelling tiles." He continued tracing now on the surface of the city, opposite from Charlie's drones "We run stealthy and right quick to the flight pads, pushing Mannix to exit the tower." He put his fist there hard "Here we set up non-lethal turrets and wreak havoc."

Eddy took over "The goal is to force Mannix down to the only underground exit we have seen on our scans."

Glenn piped in "You want him to go into the belly of the beast where we can't reach him?"

Eddy responded "He will go there whether we like it or not. The difference is... We'll be waiting there for him and accompany his exit."

Innes doubted "But there is no safe way for you to get inside."

Eddy rejected "Wrong. You're up, Monnty..."

Monnty approached the table and began displaying one of the tentacles that attacked their probes “Very well. Innes you said these appendages take in ocean water and release island excrements...” He showed a cross-section “That is precisely how we will get in... unnoticed... leaving at 350 ahead of Charlie.”

Anne asked concerned “Aren’t you going to get electrocuted? Isn’t that thing going to recognize you’re not plankton?”

Monnty replied struggling to maintain his English pronunciation “As our scans showed, no. Electricity only travels on the outside. Inside the tube is perfectly safe. And the tube is wide enough to fit multiple people... Certainly me, Eddy, and a couple agents... Also as a precaution I’ve developed a special gel... a coating to cover our suits... we will be recognized as fish or plankton.”

Eddy rushed “What happens once we get inside one of those things?”

Monnty continued “Sensor scans show we will end up in a large chamber right inside... Not far from the target area.”

Charlie nodded “That’s tidy. But how are you going to get through whatever wacky stuff comes your way inside?”

Monnty adjusted his HUD “In case our non-lethal tranquilizer and weapons prove ineffective, I’ve prepared a number of biological weapons to allow for... a quick exit.”

Innes injected “And if something doesn’t go exactly as planned?”

Eddy responded “We will take one of Mannix’s ships and exit.”

Monnty looked at Charlie “Not before planting a few explosives to sabotage remaining vehicles... so they can’t pursue us.”

Eddy nodded to Hothead then continued “When signalled by these explosions, the assault team will withdraw the same way they came in...”

Innes added “Hopefully by then the island is damaged enough that it cannot retaliate and fry you all.”

Eddy added in turn “And you Innes are staying here. You will help us all navigate our way through the island.”

She smiled and responded “Well planned suicide with a small chance of survival.”

Hothead piped in “That’s how we like it! Huah!”

Eddy corrected “This is not a suicide mission. This is a high-risk infiltration and extraction. That’s precisely why you all are here. You even-out the odds. And just in case things don’t work as planned...”

Innes pushed “Just remember our deal. I’m only cooperating as long as no harm comes to Mannix.”

Eddy responded “Absolutely. Our plan is to enter and extract... no casualties.” He looked everyone else in the eyes “Don’t want to start a war here.”

The Captain finished Eddy’s statement “But just in case Mannix retaliates, we have a backup plan... Plan C.”

Anne worried what ‘Plan C’ the Captain was referring to.

Eddy frowned at the Captain “I’m sure that will NOT be necessary...” and wrapped-up “Any questions?”

Anne asked “How do we know that Mannix is still inside?”

Eddy responded mysteriously “Same way we knew the last time

Innes probed “You have someone on the inside?”

Eddy didn’t reveal any details “Something like that...”

The Captain concluded “Get your gear ready. Man your stations. Prepare to attack ‘the beast’.”

Chapter 16: Severed Ties

Mannix was sitting in his office reviewing recent global news stories, particularly ones mentioning him. He peeked at his comms device as it beeped. He pressed a button then faked his surprise “General Anders, I wasn’t expecting your call.”

The general was visibly upset “Dammit Mannix, we have to talk.”

Mannix asked patiently “What seems to be the problem?”

Anders was direct “Consider our contract cancelled! Your Prometheus, or whatever his name is, is a significant PR risk. We’re pulling out from all our military agreements...”

He expected and prepared for this outcome. He partnered with the US government on a few projects to genetically enhance soldiers as well as on the lucrative Prisoner Reform Program. Both subsidized his high costs while providing a level of protection and security. However, numerous other governments were interested in these programs and the intellectual property opportunities they presented. A few of them were not part of the United Nations and had more lax regulations prioritizing scientific progress over public morality. In fact, China’s last partnership offer provided both increased financial support as well as highly secret facilities in Himalayan mountains. Of course it came at a price of exclusivity. Other countries were also interested in his mind-erasure methods, genetic construction material patents, and other highly secure pieces of his intellectual property.

Mannix interrupted while maintaining his calm “That’s fine General. Thank you for letting me know in person.” He paused, relishing seeing Anders dropping her jaw at careless dismissal of this breaking news. He continued “Isn’t there any other reason for this call?”

Anders was just getting unstuck and defensive “I don’t... Why?... What the hell are you insinuating?”

Mannix didn’t lose any time to pursue further “It seems General Anders you have a ship following us...” He watched for any micro-expressions on Anders “... and these calls help you triangulate our location, yes?”

Anders objected “That’s ridiculous Mannix. I have no reason...”

Mannix recognized the generals’ tell-tell eyes squinting and pushed further “I know this because we’re captured one of your probes. Technology is quite advanced, available to only a dozen or so corporations and government agencies around the world...”

Anders suspected where this is going “Mannix, since your crazy UN meeting about Prometheus... you’ve made many enemies. We’re the last one you should be worried about.”

Mannix suspected that last statement to be partly true “I see... And who should I be really worried about?”

The general completely regained herself “Mannix, you’re smart enough to know who would best benefit from your... disappearance.” Then he closed off “You’re on your own now Mannix. Without our contacts, I can’t protect you.” Anders hanged up abruptly.

Mannix was processing the conversation and wondered what other plots were in play. He wasn’t sure if he should be more worried about the government agencies representing countries he met in Geneva... or large corporate competitors he made over the years. He expected push back and drastic action from both.

He touched his comms device then directed “Security, prepare for a potential military assault. Go to tactical alert. This includes possible Amber protocol.”

A rushed military voice responded “Yessir. Tactical Alert. Potential Amber protocol.”

Mannix hung up, took a deep breath, then said “Your move general...”

Chapter 17: A Distant Dream

KN was holding his head while enduring light spasms on the floor. The island was connecting to him again, liberating waves and waves of hazy memories.

heard a hazy voice in the midst of his dream “Cathan... It’s time to go. Say goodbye to your father.” The voice wasn’t directed to him. Rather, he was simply a witness to it.

In his vision, KN saw an 8-year-old boy standing beside a hospital bed. Right next to him, a woman in her 40’s struggled to contain her tears as doctors rushed in to rescue the man convulsing on the bed. She buried the child’s horrified face in her embrace while pulling him away. He was screaming “No daddy! Don’t go! You have to stay here!”

KN recognized the woman’s face now seared into his memory. It was the same woman that stared at him from the window in the large cavern with the red glittering liquid. He sensed he knew her. He sensed that at some point they were really close. Right now she cried her heart out while holding him tight.

The dream transitioned to another scene where the Cathan was hitting his mother in blind rage. He must have been only 10 years old. His anger propelled his fists with unusual force, causing real damage to the woman trying to contain him. He was screaming “It’s your fault! You’re a doctor! Why didn’t you save him?!”

The scene faded and a new one appeared. This time the boy was stealing candy from a grocery store, running away indignant casting insults at a security guard chasing him. He must have been 12 years old.

Next scene appeared showing Cathan fighting while Police officers struggled to arrest him at home. His mother watched in horror and crying. The boy was belligerent and uncontained. Officers finding drugs and a handgun in his room.

The dream transitioned to another scene, this time taking place in a prison visiting booth as the mother tried conversing with her angry kid, now 19 years old. He was still stuck in his violent rage and blaming her through the security glass “All this is your fault! You bitch...” He dropped his comms headset and walked away.

Next scene fired quickly. First he hid in a street corner taking heavy drugs. Then he sat at a bar drinking and fighting with the bartender for not paying his bill. Then getting kicked out onto the street. Then stealing a car and driving drunk. A flash and scream as he hit a mom with a stroller crossing a street. Finally, in jail-cell vomiting on the floor being hands cuffed to the bars. He was in his mid-20’s.

The next part of the dream got darker as KN started to understand who Cathan really was. Cathan was in prison, lying on the floor again in a pool of his own blood after being assaulted by other inmates. But he didn’t feel any pain. He was so high on drugs he stole from them, he was barely conscious.

The picture got even darker, he was escorted to hospital for some medical procedures. His body was weak, bony, and yellowish. He had cancer. His chemo sessions were not effective and destroyed his body’s immune system.

The next scene was very dark but recognizable, a déjà vu of sort. A woman was standing beside a hospital bed, in tears, holding herself. This time no child was present. Cathan was the one on the bed. His body barely a resemblance of his former self. He was dying, withering away, unable to fight the disease that overpowered him. Even in these final days, he was still angry and defiant, turning away from his mother. He must have been in his early 30’s... but looking like he’s in his 50’s.

Then the scene got slightly brighter as Mannix entered the room talking to the mother. She signed some papers full of tears but also desperate hope. Strangely, KN sensed she expected Mannix to arrive at that moment. They knew each other somehow.

The dream transitioned to a completely different environment. Cathan was in a strange POD, his body in excruciating pain as it was being somehow altered. His vitals skyrocketing till his collapse and heart stopping... and moments after being resurrected, restored, and brought back to life.

The next scene was brighter with Cathan recovering both physically and mentally, yet still very angry and violent at people carrying for him. In a nearby observation room, Mannix and his mother agreed on the course of treatment. The woman, wearing insignia "JHJ" agreeing reluctantly but peacefully to some significant decision.

Next scene was bright, with Cathan exercising calmly. His body was fully restored. His mind was clear. He seemed confused but quite calm conversing with various doctors evaluating his recovery.

The dream transitioned to something unexpected, with Cathan standing next to a transparent underwater window. His hands were stretched out and touching the glass. On the other side, various fish approached sensing him... then he moved his hands almost directing their movement. He felt so connected and at peace with them. He felt finally free of anger. He felt deeply understood. He looked vibrant, strong, and young even though he was in his early 40's.

In the final part of the dream, Cathan was face to face with his mother yet not recognizing her. She contained waves of mixed emotions excited with her son's recovery yet saddened that he didn't even notice her amidst other doctors. She approached him and spoke to him. He paused before responding, somewhat confused by her question. In that same moment, KN noticed the insignia on Cathan's uniform. They were "KN".

That last scene startled KN out of his sleep. He was still sitting in the dark hallway beside the entrance to the landing pad. He recalled his dream, connected the pieces, and began to cry bitterly. His joy mixed with sadness. He felt a surge of love surfacing and rapturing for the mother he didn't know he had... one who stood

by him regardless of all... one who sacrificed so much for him. He felt loved. At the same time, this dream gave him a new perspective on the life he lived... one of violent rage and guilt... self-caused... yet directed at his mother and others around him. Such a wasted life! This dream gave him a fresh perspective on life. His emotions climaxed in a sense of profound hope for the future. He was free of cancer, free of anger, and free to live a new life.

At that moment, the door opened beside him. He inched into darkness hoping not to get discovered. However, the person stopped and stood in the doors as if somehow knowing KN was there. A whisper followed "KN..."

He recognized his mother but resisted unsure of her intentions or even the danger he was placing upon her. She must have sensed his hesitation and followed up "Cathan... son..."

He found himself answering "Mother..." as his voice shivered in tension.

Knowing she was being watched, she struggled to contain her emotion and tears. After a moment she spoke "Son you are not safe here. If they catch you, they will erase your memories again... or worse kill you." She paused as a guard passed by her. She continued after a moment "I'll distract the guards. You hide in the blue craft, OK?"

Cathan answered as tears appeared in his eyes "Yes mother..."

She continued "That plane is to leave shortly to bring in some scientists from Argentina... Run away there..."

He interrupted her "Mom, I'm so sorry..." His tears now flowed freely "It was not your fault..."

She stopped him knowing this conversation would reveal them both "I know son... I know." She took a look around anticipating a moment where guards were furthest away and directed him "Live a new life son... One not haunted by your past."

He spoke now liberated and ready for action “I love you, mom... I always did...”

JHJ ran toward the left cargo doors, exiting it, then triggering a fire alarm immediately outside. The fire suppression system hissed as it gassed the platform making cameras temporary useless and guards completely distracted.

Cathan used that time to sneak into the blue passenger plane. He didn't recognize the interior. He wondered if he should try flying the craft himself. Then he remembered JHJ's directions. He quickly scanned the interior for any crevices that could conceal him. His eyes landed on a floor hatch marked with the label “Cargo”. He opened it, stepped down inside, and checked a few spots where he could hide. He closed the hatch behind him and settled down in the area immediately behind the hatch itself. This way he had a fighting chance should anyone else try to enter the area.

“What is Argentina?” He asked himself.

Chapter 18: Infiltration

Anne was glued to the main screen back on Nautilus “I have a bad feeling about this...”

Glenn cracked jokingly “By your standards the agency would probably have cancelled 90% of tactical missions...”

Innes simply gave them a stern look as if watching naughty kids being loud in a quiet library.

Eddy’s voice came through the comms “Sitrep everyone.”

Charlie started off from her station “My birds are in the air. I’m good to go.”

Hothead followed over the comms “We’re riding a humpback whale. Beautiful creature! There must be something about this island that’s making him circle around it so much. So far we are unnoticed. Ready for action!”

Eddy continued “The island is approaching our location. We’re about to enter one of the tentacles.”

Innes added “Video feeds and comms are stable.”

Captain wrapped up “Ship is trailing your position just in the wake of Island’s water tail. This should prevent them from detecting us.”

Few quiet moments followed.

Eddy alerted “We’re going in... getting sucked in right now...” Some noise followed then Eddy’s voice resurfaced “Bumpy ride here... various debris... covering the distance quite fast... so far so good.”

Charlie followed-up “I’m on standby ready for attack.”

Hothead added “We should be coming up on our position in a few minutes.”

Eddy updated “Water current got stronger... losing formation... about half way there...”

Monnty joined in “Like a roller coaster ride... Hold onto your pants.”

The two agents accompanying Eddy and Monnty forced a short laugh.

Few moments passed again.

Anne interrupted the uncomfortable silence “Eddy your vitals are high...”

Glenn reassured “This is common during missions such as these...”

Eddy confirmed “We’re fine Anne. This is what we do...”

Innes injected “You’re about three quarters in...”

Captain joined “God’s speed everyone.”

One of the agents was ahead of Eddy and Monnty “I’m seeing the main opening. Prepare for arrival...”

Eddy ordered “Charlie attack in 10 seconds.”

Charlie relished the order “Birds leaving the nest. Impact in 10 seconds.” The screen showed hundreds of little drones dethatching themselves from the large monitoring drone... and plunging towards the island wall.

Hothead added “ETA 2 minutes 15 seconds based on current trajectory.”

Eddy’s comms began to break up. Innes reassured “This is expected. They are entering a heavily shielded area.”

Glenn inquired “When will their comms come back?”

Innes “Should be in a minute or two as soon as they get out of the digestive tract.”

Few moments later they watched as Charlie’s army of micro drones flew and attached themselves on strategic parts of the wall. A set of small strategic explosions followed liberating and exposing an entire section of the wall. Then another army of larger drones flew into the island and began attacking ground troops. One set of drones focused on establishing a parameter. Another focused on destroying some of the larger stationary weapons with foam missiles. Upon impact these

projectiles encased and immobilized objects into a large hard but breathable foam layer. Over time they began to secure an area and move steadily forward now focusing on defending the location. They camped around key buildings and pushed back on incoming waves of ground troops.

“Bloody Hell!” Charlie screamed as a laser weapon from the main tower began cutting her birds one by one. She withdrew and scrambled her drones, making their movements erratic and hard to predict.

Just in that moment Hothead voice came through the comms “Hell arrived! Huah!” Another screen showed feeds from a dozen or so Navy Seals emerging onto the Island and advancing on the main tower.

Hothead pointed and commanded to one of his soldiers “Buster, take down those laser towers.” The soldier holstered his primary tranquilizer machine gun then reached to his back for a projectile launcher. He knew it was only a matter of moments before laser turrets would begin to target them. Unfortunately even top-shape marines were not as fast or maneuverable as Charlie’s drones. It took him a moment to target the area. He fired sharply upwards. The projectile hissed, then changed its direction toward the target, then and accelerated through the air. Mid-way through it separated into several fragments. The laser tower began hitting them one by one hoping to eliminate them mid-flight. It blasted one... two... three... final 2 reached their destination and disabled one of the laser turrets encasing it and incapacitating it in a thick foam. Hothead pointed to Buster again “There are two more. Then go heavy on the tower.”

The resistance was higher than expected but nothing they couldn’t handle. Hothead pointed to another marine “WhamBam need to disable some of these ground troops... but foam them and keep them alive. I need their comms devices.” WhamBam used his HUD to triangulate dimensions of the immediate area. He then camped himself behind one of the houses. He removed the portable mortar from his back and set it up. He unpacked his rounds then selected one with a yellow

stripe. He loaded it then entered coordinates and configuration via his HUD. He yelled “Bombs away” to his friendlies. The mortar fired as the soldier watched a micro video feed of the round through his HUD. It flew high up, reached it’s top height, and began falling. The round automatically selected three armed security guards, fired 3 micro-charges, but remained hovering in the air continuing to monitor the area. Each micro-charge hit the upper body of the Island defence forces then exploded with some the same chemical that reacted with air forming a hard foam. It expanded quickly in each direction then suddenly solidified not only blinding the enemy but also disabling all their movement. As an added effect, the chemical released an effective neurotoxin putting its prisoner to sleep. The foam structure naturally produced holes and crevices to allow its captor to breathe. WhamBam reported to his team “Three down. Seven active...” He checked his HUD micro video feed “More turrets ahead.” Hothead commanded “Push forward. We don’t have much time.”

On the other side of the island, Charlie tried her best to keep ground troops busy while avoiding getting her drones shot by laser turrets. She knew she had to cause enough commotion to draw and keep most of their ground troops... without of course any civilian casualties, most of whom locked themselves in their pod homes. Main tower turrets were making this very difficult so she decided to try another tactic. She ordered a few of her drones to fly just under the surface of the water towards the tower. They would emerge right next to it and target those lasers trying to disable them. Another group was sent to flank on the right where industrial buildings provided better coverage and no doubt had less security personnel. Perhaps she could actually damage some expensive equipment and get more attention from Island forces. A small group of drones remained to keep current guards distracted.

Innes tried to reach Eddy but their comms were still blocked. She had some idea that the digestive system was quite complex, dangerous, but also not very well guarded.

Hothead ordered his team “We have two minutes. Hard forward! Decoys on!” Soldiers tapped their arms, small drones detached from their helmets, flew across and ahead projecting holographic images of themselves. They watched as security forces would attack projections, camera drones revealing their locations, then Navy Seals would circle around and disable them. This would repeat for about a few minutes till camera drones ran out of battery and returned to their helmets. Hothead approached one of the soldiers disabled by the non-lethal mortar round. He touched the foam with a device on his wrist and immediately part of the foam melted giving him access to the guard's comms device. He found a connection port. He pulled a cord out of his backpack, connected it to the guard's comms device, then directed “All yours. Hack in and let's get this over with.” Back on Nautilus, the comms officer was waiting for the connection and now scrambled to brake into the device. After a moment he reported “I'm in... downloading data.”

Innes observed something concerning on the video feeds. First she said it slowly trying to remember it's significance “Amber protocol?”

Hothead fired “What the hell is this Amber... protocol.”

Innes fired back “I'm trying to remember. I recall it from training but I've never seen it executed...”

Charlie also noticed the main tower and various light posts around the island started to flash an amber light “Is that some kind of exit protocol or lockdown?”

Innes' mind tried to reconcile and connect the little data she was provided during training “No... it's some type of mass defence system.” She watched as Charlie's drones destroyed one of the turrets. The guards around the tower seemed distracted. In fact, they began to put away their primary weapons and switch to secondary handguns.

Innes yelled out “Hothead attacked the tower right now! This is your last chance!”

Charlie was frustrated “What the bloody hell...”

Innes rushed “Charlie attack the tower with everything you have! Your birds are about to fall.”

Anne and Glenn simply watched the chaos gasping.

Amber lights began to pulse really fast while Hothead screamed “Could someone tell me what the hell is Amber protocol?”

Buster aimed his final projectile. He locked it and fired it. A large missile accelerated rapidly.

Innes said almost defeated “I think it's a massive EMP...” and at that very moment a large electromagnetic bubble emerged out of the main tower expanding and saturating everything it touched. First the missile, just a hundred meters from it's destination, lost it's thrust, fell down and damaged a large building in front of the tower. Second, all of Charlie's drones fell. Third, Hothead's HUDs and comms went down. He yelled to his group “Tactical Retreat! Back to point Gamma! Double...”

Innes turned to the Captain “This ship is in danger. EMP should reach here in about 5 seconds...”

The Captain finally connected and yelled out “Shut main power! All teams break for impact! “He turned back to Anne and Glenn and said quietly “God help us all.”

He rushed to provide additional orders “Shut all pressure doors. Repair crews, be ready for hard landing...”

Few moments after, the EMP ran through the ship, disabling most of its systems. All lights went off. Then only backup lights came back on. The ship was drifting and diving ever so slowly drifted. The Captain spoke loud enough for all his officers to hear “Here is the situation. We are in no immediate danger. Our hull is pressurised. We have air for at least a few hours...” He swallowed before giving the bad part of the news “But we are in deep ocean. Our ship will continue sinking until we return power to engines or crush into something. So for now put aside your fears and prayers... and work the problem!”

Anne's mind was elsewhere. She kneeled and embraced Glenn on his wheelchair "I worry about Eddy and Monnty. They are on their own now. I hope nothing bad happened to them..."

Chapter 19: The Altercation

Warden barged into Mannix's office. He was visibly aggravated about to burst "Mannix I want your Prometheus project off my facility immediately!"

Mannix wasn't sure whether to feel threatened or insulted. His patience with this man was running thin. He started "This is not your facility, dear Warden. It's mine. So I'll decide..."

Warden interrupted him livid with this response "You hired me to run this program. I cannot do so under these conditions!" He pierced Mannix's eyes "Are you blind? We were just attacked! These are not just some hired guns. These are..."

Mannix decided to interrupt him in return "I hired you because you are capable, resourceful, connected, and innovative... but I will not tolerate your condescending tone nor this attitude." He raised from his chair and approached Warden closer "You must understand we are dealing with a history disrupting technology. Of course we have enemies. Their opposition only proves the necessity for our purpose." He paused dramatically watching if Warden will challenge him, then continued "Yes we were attacked... and as you have already seen we were more than capable to handle the assault. This is the prize we must pay to change this world." He then pierced Warden's eyes and questioned "You have a choice. Either you are able and willing to work under these conditions... because you believe in the cause... Or you are welcome to give me your resignation and leave MY facility." He enunciated that last part.

The Warden got really quiet. Mannix wasn't sure if he was trying to be submissive or quietly defiant. After a moment he finally spoke "Mannix, this one attack is just the beginning. When are we getting your mutagen off this base?"

Mannix hesitated then answered "Tomorrow morning at 04:00." He watched the Warden for any micro-

expressions as he said "I've arranged for a special pick-up and immediate global distribution. It's the soonest I could arrange considering the attack and constant monitoring."

Warden's stare was solid and cold "Either get your secret potion out of this facility or I bet we will be dead in the morning." Warden turned around and added as he was exiting "This is a prophecy...."

Mannix wondered if there was something more to Warden's words than a prophecy. He wondered if maybe this German knew something more, something dangerous. He worried the Warden was planning to cut his losses and sell out to one of Mannix's enemies. Over the last few weeks he collected far too many of them: a few well armed Religious extremists, various governments threatened by Prometheus, and large pharmaceutical conglomerates. That last possibility was especially unpredictable. Mannix knew he literally decimated a dozen or so drug companies who made their living on cancer drugs and treatments. Their stocks crashed after he publicly released the cure to cancer a few weeks ago.

Mannix played his plan carefully. He only trusted the Warden to be himself, a highly talented yet power-hungry narcissistic opportunist. He suspected that the Warden had ulterior motives and a backup plan. That's why he gave the Warden wrong information about the pickup of the Prometheus project actually happening a couple hours later at 06:00. This should give Mannix enough time to find out Warden's intentions and take care of any unwanted visitors.

He intentionally kept details of the Prometheus program away from the Warden. There was no pickup by some distributor. There were no planes or ships that would meet them in the ocean then deliver Prometheus to various countries. That method of shipping was far too complex, regulated, costly, and risky. The real plan was to release Prometheus into the atmosphere as they reached the South Atlantic winds and ocean currents that would effectively carry it to Africa, South America, North America, Europe and the rest of the globe.

Mannix squeezed in a statement just as Warden was leaving “Perhaps you should change your profession to a prophet... just like your dead German.”

The Warden left Mannix’s office insulted and furious. In all of his highly successful career, he never felt out of control. He always enjoyed having the authority to dictate how to run his prison facility. He was always recognized and respected for evolving prisoner programs, their protocols, their security, and their overall management. His practices were sometimes questioned as too innovative but always proven to be highly effective. Association with Mannix, while initially great and very profitable, recently grew sour. The whole business around “Prometheus” was seriously damaging his global reputation. He knew he would have to leave. The recent attack confirmed it. He was simply playing his cards carefully to form the best and most opportune exit plan.

During his last visit to New York, he was contacted by an anonymous source. He was offered millions to leak information about the program. He refused at that time, still loyal to Mannix. Since then, the secret contact has been rising their reward. Warden was always curious who they represented and what their real intentions were.

He said to himself “Fear is the mother of morality...” once more quoting the ‘good old German’.

This last altercation with Mannix forced Warden’s hand. He hid in his office, selected a secure comms line, and punched in the address for his mysterious contact.

Cold voice answered on the other side “Glad you changed your mind, Warden.”

Warden got straight to the point “I have information about project Prometheus...” He hesitated then added “Will give you precise extraction details but you will have to double your current offer... I’m putting my entire career at risk for this.”

The voice answered slowly “Agreed. We’ll deliver half of the money now and half after you provide full project info including the formula itself.”

Warden responded “Very well. Mannix has arranged for overnight pickup at 04:00.” He punched a few numbers via his comms device “Here are our coordinates, current heading, and speed.”

The voice asked “Will Mannix be present during pickup of Prometheus? We would love to seize both the mutagen and their creator.”

Warden added “Most likely... He has been overseeing the entire Prometheus program in person.”

The voice relished the answer and said “Thank you Warden. You have been most helpful. Please provide time and coordinates where we can extract project info...” Then added “We’ll make sure there is a bonus for you if Mannix is present.”

Warden asked puzzled “Why does that matter?”

The voice answered ignoring Warden’s questions “I do recommend you distance yourself from this location as soon as possible.”

The Warden pushed further “What are you planning to do? Who are you representing?”

The voice answered somewhat amused “Does it matter anymore? I’m obviously not representing the feds reaching out to you with all this bribes? No... I represent an ‘investor’ of sorts, a globally-minded businessman.”

Warden was puzzled “One person?”

The voice revealed a bit more “That’s correct... And he’s about to become the richest man in this crazy world.”

The voice wrapped up “Safe travels, Warden...” and hung up.

Chapter 20: In the Belly of the Beast

Eddy took off his breathing mask and directed “Put your lights on...” They realized they got dropped into a massive dark room filled with water to their knees.

Monnty took off his face mask and quickly added “The floor is moving...”

They heard a scream from one of the agents accompanying them. They pointed their headlights in their direction. The man screaming was submerged halfway and raising his hands.

The agent was desperate “I can’t get out! The floor is pulling in my legs!” After a moment he rushed in “My partner got already sucked in!”

Eddy and Monnty stood beside him and grabbed his arms then pulled. Not only was the floor not giving in, they noticed their own feet going into the floor.”

Monnty acted quickly. He went down to touch the floor with his hands. He then scanned around the room and noticed some large items stuck in the corner. He pulled off the diving suit off his arm then emerged it again. He was able to free himself. Then he yelled to Eddy and the other agent now submerged to his chest “Diving suits! Take them off... Quickly!”

Eddy was straining to keep the agent above the water level but he himself was getting sucked in. Monnty removed his suit in record time.

Monnty put an oxygen mask back on the agent’s face and went under water to strap the oxygen tank back on him. He surfaced after a moment “We can’t help him.” He then focused on Eddy “You must take your suit off... Now!”

Eddy was already halfway submerged when they both strained to free him. As soon as the top part was off, Monnty pulled him out just in time.

The agent was already sucked in when Monnty pulled Eddy to the corner, on top of some debris. He then

went back to gather their two wet proof cases still floating on top of the water. He hauled them back and scanned the walls of the cavern.

Eddy caught his breath when he noticed items underneath him beginning to shake. Monnty also noticed the same and went straight for the wall trying to find any weak spots.

Eddy alerted “The water level is dropping...” and got to his feet. He grabbed the cases and followed Monnty.

The seasoned DPSD special agent was well prepared, even in these unusual circumstances. He detached a small gel canister from his utility belt. He proceeded to spray it on the wall forming a large circle. Gel foamed up eating into the wall. The middle part fell backwards creating a large opening. Eddy didn’t hesitate. First he threw in the cases then jumped in himself. Monnty followed just as the center of the floor opened up swallowing all the debris.

Eddy pulled out his hand-weapon and scanned the dark hallway. He then checked his comms “Nautilus respond!... Captain respond!... Hothead?... Charlie?” He got frustrated “What the hell is going on!?”

Monnty explained “Probably shielding of some type...”

Eddy looked back at the chamber they left. The wall was re-growing and sealing itself. He asked “What was that gel you used? How did you know what to use?”

Monnty frowned straining to provide an appropriate word “Not sure how to... in French it’s ‘la gale’... English I think it’s scab.”

Eddy needed a clarification “Like a scab that forms on a wound?”

Monnty nodded “Precisely... It’s a compound containing fibrin and other materials... tricks the body into thinking there is a wound and a scab... and it discards the scab... without any alarms... natural process.”

Eddy appreciated the ingenuity “Very nice.” He took a look at French agent’s gear as he started to unpack his cases “This... This is not a standard issue...”

Monnty was in the process of assembling his weapon “This is...” He snapped a large barrel to a shoulder support piece. He smiled “... Custom.” He attached a small screen to the right side “Unique... How do you say?... My own design.” He attached a pressurized canister right under the shoulder piece. “I call it...” He looked up and grinned as he attached two large boxy magazines underneath just beside the trigger of the barrel “...HBM Super Rifle 3001” He attached another two shorter smaller barrels underneath the large main one.

Eddy had to ask “HBM?”

Monnty placed the weapon down on the ground then removed pieces of his chest vest while explaining “Had to use English name... Want to sell the patent to the French or British Army... HBM is... Hazardous Bio-Material.” He didn’t wait for Eddy to respond. He removed the front hard-shelled part of his vest and asked Eddy “Please... help me remove the back piece... very careful.” He provided more direction “Unlock from sides.”

Eddy approached Monnty from behind, unhinged side locks and removed the first panel.

Monnty started to remove tall slim magazines hidden underneath his front panel. He showed one to Eddy “Remove these slowly. No shaking.”

Eddy repeated to himself as he gently detached a dozen slim cylinders and passed them carefully to Monnty... who confidently locked them into the top of the gun in a series of rows, two containers each. Eddy noticed they were colour-coded. As they went in, small LED lights appeared on top of the magazines.

Eddy popped another question “3000 and 1?”

Monnty turned his focus to assembling another separate component. He snapped the two detached vest panels together making a type of shield. He removed two additional pieces from his arm and another two from his legs. He snapped them side by side then attached them to the other pieces of shield now forming a surface big enough to cover his side. He

lifted the weapon and strapped it to his vest via short straps. Then he snapped-in the shield to the side of his vest. He finally began answering Eddy’s question “Third generation... Took some time to fine-tune the scanner and find non-reactive materials... This last version... I added some special features.” He grinned on the last point and added “I am sure you will see it in action really soon.”

Monnty got up, double-checked that everything was secure, turned on the weapon and reported “Ready to go!” He followed up by asking Eddy “Please take the backpack. It has some explosives to sabotage their pursuit vehicles.” He pointed to a small bag with three medium-sized canisters in one of the cases.

Eddy put the bag on his back complaining “Great. You get the super-gun and I get to carry explosives...”

Monnty didn’t wait and began moving into the dark hallway “We go... this way.” The monitor mounted on his weapon displayed information about their surroundings as they moved forward.

Eddy fired another question already knowing he will likely not like the answer “Why do you need this shield? Where is mine?”

Monnty glanced back, glanced forward, glanced at his weapon sensor screen then answered slowly “You don’t need one... It’s not for stopping... bullets.”

Eddy waited for further explanations and soon he got one as Monnty continued “It protects from splatter... from my weapon.” Eddy connected the pieces “Your weapon fires high-pressured bullets with biohazardous concoctions. These substances could ricochet and splatter back if the target is too close. Did I get that right?” Monnty nodded while quietly moving forward.

They were approaching an end to the hallway. A bright opening was right ahead. Suddenly, the entrance sealed and amber light started pulsing from a few dim lights in the hallway.

Eddy heard some noises just above them and quickly concluded “I bet Hothead is attacking the tower.” He

retrieved his comms device “Hothead can you hear me?... Nautilus respond!... Charlie?”

Monnty motioned to him to watch the back. Eddy positioned himself to do so. Monnty in turn ran toward the door, searched for any switches. Finding none, he put his back against the door, pressed a button on his weapon, waited for multiple rows of needles to extrude from the shoulder support, then stabbed it into the door. The scanner pinged a few times showing some type of a timer. After another beep the needles detracted and results showed on the screen. Weapon’s computer displayed results and colour-coded magazine LED’s as red, yellow, green, and purple. Monnty explained “The weapon can analyze any material for it’s weaknesses. It then reprograms itself to the appropriate ammunition.” He showed a roller beside the trigger finger allowing for rapid loadout changes.

Eddy followed-up “Exactly what kind of ammunition are you talking about?”

Monnty grinned again while taking a few steps away from the door then aiming at it’s center “Well you know... Incendiary... Freezing agent... Acid... Bacteria... Viral... and a few other surprises.”

Eddy shook his head then moved directly behind him “I’ll just stand right here while you blast these doors...”

Monnty smiled, aimed, and fired. A group of small balls hit and splattered on the door. Whatever substance they were holding literally ate through the door... then passed the door frame... then began to eat the walls. Monnty advanced quickly forward, careful not to touch the affected area.

They entered a large well-lit chamber about a football field in diameter and about five stories high. They stood dumbfounded looking at the massive creation in the middle. A number of giant sacks, about the size of a large freight container, hang straight from the ceiling. They looked organic because they had semi-translucent cell-like membranes with blood vessels that expanded and contracted periodically. The liquid that ran through them was more yellow, not red like blood. There must

have been about a dozen large sacs, each one containing about 16 to 20 irregularly shaped bluish discs, each at least two meters in diameter. Discs are arranged as an array with a small space in between them. Whatever reaction was happening between them, it made strange crackling and zapping noises. All the sacks were connected with a series of convoluted blue pipes. These were not contracting and it wasn’t apparent if they were organic or man-made. The whole thing created massive amounts of static and a lot of electric interference.

Eddy noticed Monnty scanning and studying the entire object very carefully so he asked “What is this? Do you think it’s responsible for our comms being down?”

Monnty was busy pressing various buttons on his scanner and took a while to answer “This is... fantastique...” He glanced back at Eddy. His face resembled a five-year old admiring his first Halloween candy collection. He realized that single observation was grossly insufficient so he began pointing and explaining “These organs... they are purely organic... they create and store electricity... chemically...”

Eddy commented “I’m not aware of any large animal that can do this...”

Monnty was mesmerized “Yes... No... This resembles structures in electric eels... but of course... much larger...” He waved his hands and continued pointing “Each of these disks stores massive amounts of electricity... maybe hundreds of thousands of volts each... but when connected in a row like these... each sack must be storing millions of volts...” He added quickly, still grinning “We are not safe here... We should leave before we get electrocuted.”

They moved back to the wall and traced it for a minute until they reached another hallway. This time the door was open. They noticed amber lights were pulsating in this hallway as well although more rapidly. They went in and took advantage of the darkness to regroup.

Eddy started "I'm surprised we weren't discovered yet. I guess Charlie and Hothead must be keeping security forces quite occupied."

Monnty replied "Not so sure... but this area secluded... very few entrances... maybe they simply have not reached us yet."

Eddy added "What do you think this amber light means?... Not a standard tactical alert."

Monnty thought for a second and guessed "Maybe not military... In hospitals amber alert means 'Assault'... typically refers to a hostile patient... but can also refer to an external assault."

Eddy checked his machine gun and desert eagle loadout, still full, then looked at Monnty adjusting some settings on his supergun. He asked "What else are you packing?"

Monnty detached his gun, stood up, and answered mockingly pointing to his utility belt "Couple of special bio grenades..." He pointed to his leg guards "Two hand combat batons... with bio sample storage inside them..." He pointed to his shoulder guards, clicked on one of them, and detached a strange mask "Biohazard mask... some of my ammunition produces toxic gas..."

Eddy snapped "Good to know..." He snatched the mask from Monnty's hand then added "You should have said that earlier..."

Monnty smiled, detached another mask from his second shoulder guard then continued "Mask also bulletproof..." He pointed to his right sidearm "This is custom... takes the same ammunition as the super rifle..." He turned to show the other more familiar pistol "This is boring... just a standard agency-issued pistol."

Eddy observed that all custom objects were made of the same black rough material. He touched the vest and said "What is this all made out of?"

Monnty grinned once again "Ah... my invention... carbon super plastic... military grade... 3d printed... then baked... very strong... light... also resistant to many hazardous materials..."

Eddy rolled his eyes "My Lord... all this gear can be created from a 3d printer in some kid's basement?!?"

Monnty shook his head "This is no big deal... I will show you real magic..." He removed one of the magazines from his rifle. He very carefully removed one of the bullets and held it in his hand. It was a perfect sphere, strangely resembling a paint gun ball. He spoke softer as if the strength of his voice could somehow set off the projectile. He motioned to Eddy to stretch out his hand then he carefully placed it on his palm. He ignored Eddy's reluctance and began squishing the ball while explaining "Magic is... creating a casing for most hazardous materials in the world..." He pressed the ball down while Eddy had an internal freak out and moved his hand slower "Every substance needs different casing... Hydrochloric acid..." Monnty took the ball, lifted it slightly, then dropped it for Eddy to catch in the last minute. He continued "... flesh eating bacteria... nitroglycerine... deadly neurotoxin..." Eddy was sweating buckets totally horrified with what he held in his hands. Monnty picked up the ball and aimed it at Eddy while he continued "... and also important... these casings and materials must be carefully crafted... optimize velocity of projectile... impact... and secure storage in the magazine..." Eddy lifted his hands and shook his head afraid of what may happen if the bullet hit him. Monnty was totally ignorant of his partner's fear and threw it at him. Fortunately, the bullet didn't break. Instead it fell to the ground and rolled back toward Monnty who decided to stop it with the tip of his army boot while wrapping up his monologue "... most important... is for you to know... which bullet is what substance..." He began squeezing the bullet down with his foot. Eddy moved backwards slowly afraid of the explosion. He even put his mask back on. Monnty wrapped up "Because some materials... will kill you in seconds... and some are meant to only disable your opponent..." He burst the ball. A large puff of green gas was released but quickly subsided as he explained "See... this one was just pepper gas... harmless to most military."

Eddy was considering kicking Monnty in the face for this scare but he quickly pocketed that idea and decided to do so only after this mission. In that same moment, the Amber lights flashed for a long period of time then stopped. Eddy followed-up “We should get moving.”

They pursued the hallway until the next door, once again sealed. The colour of this door was somewhat different from the previous one they penetrated. Same as last time, Monnty backed into the door, stabbed it with the back piece of his weapon, waited for results, reprogrammed his gun and magazines, aimed then fired. This time a series of small balls hit in specific spots on the door freezing those sections. He waited for two seconds for the reaction to stop then kicked the frozen parts off making a large hole for them to go through carefully not to touch any frozen areas.

They entered another huge chamber. This time two massive organs were convulsing and contracting in an alternating rhythm. Monnty began his scans while Eddy approached the object trying to understand it’s autonomy. For a moment he thought that his heart beat matched the frequency of this creation’s contractions. He guessed “This is... heart of sorts...” Monnty smiled looking at his scans “Yes... a heart... amazing... two sets of dual chambers... pumping maybe 100 gallons per second... I think the same liquid we saw in large amber sacks...” He suddenly grimaced puzzled.

Eddy was already connecting all the pieces “I bet it’s the same liquid we found in tentacles. And I bet it’s in the walls and in anything else that’s grown.”

Monnty agreed “Yes... this blood like liquid... delivers nutrients to all organic parts of the island...” He rushed a bit unsure of his absurd conclusion “I think... never seen anything like this... not human... reptile heart structure... amazing.”

Eddy turned around to move away from the organ. As he did that, he noticed a strip of windows in the upper part of the chamber. He quickly ducked and rolled towards the wall. He shared while moving towards the next hallway “We’ve been discovered.” Monnty

followed but this time they didn’t pause after entering the darkness. In fact, the hallway lit up with red lights blinking in their face. They both put their masks on and rushed forward with Monnty taking point and Eddy securing their back.

Within seconds they reached the other end of the tunnel. The door opened before them just meters of their approach. Unfortunately, the welcome party was not happy to see them. Six armed guards showered them with electric bullets. Monnty’s blast shield stood its ground. Monnty approached closer, moved his finder to change the loadout and released a short burst of bullets. What followed is a lot of coughing and guards falling to the ground. Monnty checked with Eddy “Masks on! Nerve gas!” Eddy checked his mask then tapped Monnty on the shoulder. They emerged from the hallways very carefully. A few guards in the top level monitored and reported their movement through another set of windows.

Eddy muttered through the mask “Keep moving to the next chamber... we’re almost at the underwater landing zone.”

Monnty sneaked a scan while moving forward. In the middle of this chamber was a single massive organ, larger than all previous ones. This bluish organ literally made sound, a deep long reverberation as it expanded and contracted.

Eddy recognized its purpose as well. He rushed “Lungs” as they were reaching the end of the chamber and another tunnel. He saw a dozen guards tailing them and directed Monnty “Switch sides!” who responded instinctually. Eddy took the front while Monnty faced their assailants. Seems their enemy was hesitant to use real bullets inside the chamber. They simply run towards the dynamic duo but this time with gas masks on.

Monnty called out “They are adapting their tactics” then quickly changed his loadout. He fired a volley of sharp small disks cutting but not killing any of the guards. Half of them fell to the ground instantly. He

fired a few more shots to disable the rest. Eddy observed and asked “What was that munition?”

Monnty responded proudly “Bioengineer first, secret agent second... Killing lacks ingenuity and elegance... neurotoxin... They will be down for 4 hours... wake up with a massive headache.”

Eddy rushed forward, scanned the hallway then entered it. He ordered “Switch sides” and Monnty took the point again. This time however the hallway prevented their progress by closing off a number of reinforced doors. Eddy asked “Any idea what’s in that last chamber? They really don’t want us to reach there...” Monnty tried to scan the area ahead of them but was somehow blocked “No idea but massive energy readings... probably NOT another organ.”

Monnty took down the first door with the freezing agent he used before. The next door was different. He had to stab it and analyze it before burning through it using some type of incendiary.

The last door resisted several rounds of various ammunition. Monnty took a deep breath and directed Eddy “Get ready for a blast! Hide behind me and the shield!” He then kneeled down placing the shield on the ground. He programmed the firing sequence. He prefaced “Here it goes” and ran the program. First a series of spikes launched out of the bottom rifle chamber. Spikes were connected to the gun via thin wires. They dug deep into the door. Following, the gun shot a set of three different bullets, each one hitting visible joints of the door. The last round landed multiple bullets around the spikes. Some type of chemical reaction followed from joints, releasing bubbles and gas. Finally, the program sent a large electric current through the spikes. The door simply fell down backwards. Monnty exclaimed in triumph “Vive la science”.

They entered the last and largest area with over 20 guards on their toes on both sides. This time however they kept their distance especially as Monnty pointed his super rifle towards the object in the middle... one

humongous sack of glistening red velvety liquid constantly moving and swirling. Monnty said alarmingly “This liquid has its own power reading! Close to a billion of gallons here!...”

Every time guards got a bit closer Eddy pointed his weapon toward the large sack. They backed off at this threat. This dance continued as Eddy and Monnty inched forward toward the last hallway. Guards awaiting them there didn’t budge, equipped with riot shields and gas masks.

Suddenly Mannix’s voice came confidently through their own comms systems “I don’t believe we’ve ever met... You are, I believe Eddy... clever codename Eddy Prendick... perhaps a fan of H.G. Wells novels?” Eddy scanned the windows trying to locate the real target of his mission. Mannix continued “Apologies but your little uninvited excursion here must come to an end.” Eddy grimaced in defiance as Mannix pushed further “I’m afraid your assault was unsuccessful. Your drones are down, Navy Seals on the run for their lives, and your other two agents captured...” Eddy bit his lip. Seems Mannix noticed this micro-expression as he relished the next few statements “You ship... interesting name Nautilus... has been disabled and is sinking uncontrollably into the depths of the ocean.” He added a dramatic pause before providing a climax “And you... You are completely surrounded.”

Eddy refocused his thoughts considering new information, although potentially untrue. He directed Monnty “Let’s even out this chess game... Fire a random volley on the wall beside these guards blocking our exit.” Monnty punched a few buttons on his gun and fired a round of various bullets, each hitting a different part of the wall. Eddy followed up “Mannix, next series goes into this red glowing sack and we all go to hell!”

Mannix responded after a moment, no doubt composing himself “You are bluffing...”

Monnty didn’t wait for Eddy’s direction. He detached one of his batons, pressed a button and a meter-long needle extended from it. While continuing to point the

gun at the sack, he plunged the needle into the sack, waited for it to extract a sample of the liquid, then slowly removed it. The sack quickly healed itself carefully preventing any liquid from escaping. Eddy kept his cool while his partner checked LEDs on his baton changing from red to green. Monnty whispered "Sample secure..." Eddy barked quietly "What the St. Joseph are you doing? We are playing with fire here!"

Monnty answered almost prophetically "Don't want to leave with empty hands..." At the same time Mannix blasted "Enough games here. What do you want Eddy? I know why you're here. I've already interrogated your two agents. I'm not going with you anywhere..."

Eddy retaliated "Just let us leave... Else this bizarre God-forsaken creation of yours... is going to hell." He took out the two explosive packs from his backpack and placed them slowly down close to the sack. He pretended to press a few buttons on their controls. Monnty grimaced doubting this plan.

A deadly pause followed, no doubt needed for Mannix to decide and prepare his next move.

Mannix's voice once more echoed in the chamber "What guarantee do I have you will not detonate these remotely after leaving the island?"

Eddy fired back confidently "We both know this area is heavily shielded. Our comms can't even penetrate it... As soon as we leave this area you will be able to disable or dispose of these explosives."

Mannix responded "Very well..." and a moment after the guards backed off. Eddy and Monnty proceeded forward being escorted on both sides although at a distance.

Eddy added re-establishing his position of strength "We pick the plane..."

Mannix responded calmly "You have my assurance the vehicle will be fully functional. No sabotage."

They slowly moved into the hallway. Guards ahead of them made sure all doors were open. Eddy pulled Monnty to the back and ordered "Keep scanning the

area near explosives." then yelled out to Mannix "If anyone approaches the explosives before we leave, we'll detonate them!"

Mannix ignored that last statement "Monnty. DPSD. I'm very impressed with your bio-weaponry." The agent nodded scanning his surroundings. Mannix continued "Perhaps one day, when you realize your job is far too risky and not nearly profitable enough... you could come join my efforts in evolving this world."

Monnty answered quite innocently "Thank you... But I promised my mom... I will not work with crazy evil geniuses." Mannix wasn't sure if he should take that response as an insult or a joke.

Guards opened doors to the landing pad and dispersed to the side.

Eddy directed "I want all the guards to leave this area." Within seconds all guards received matching orders and left the area through two large cargo doors.

Mannix's casual voice resonated even stronger in this room with most surfaces being either metallic or plastic "Pick a plane and run dear Eddy." He finished facetiously "I do hope we will never meet again."

Eddy snickered "There is a spot for one more. Why don't you come with us?" He scanned the hangar and spotted a fast passenger plane. He didn't recognize its design but had no doubt he would be able to pilot it. They boarded it through the back.

Monnty paused just before entering. He reprogrammed his rifle, checked his mask, then began shooting at the wheels, engines, and front glass of remaining vehicles. The acid corroded and ate through material quickly, crippling all other crafts. He rushed into their plane and closed the hatch.

Eddy rushed a question "Ready to go?"

Monnty responded "Yes. Good to go." Then checked his baton. The LED shifted from green to yellow. He alarmed Eddy "We're losing containment of that precious red substance."

Eddy probed further while initiating the plane “How much time?”

Monnty grimaced then responded “Maybe 20... maybe 30 minutes...”

Eddy blasted the ship's engines and began accelerating while Monnty jumped into the navigation seat beside him and strapped on his seat belts. The runway led them down into water. Eddy was disoriented only for a moment. After plunging in and exiting the island, the ship quickly surfaced about water, accelerated, gained height and took off.

Eddy reached an unfortunate conclusion “That’s not enough time...”

Chapter 21: Drifting

The Captain of Nautilus put away his quiet disposition in this time of clear crisis. This capable ship was able to withstand a barrage of various attacks but EMP of this magnitude was not one of them. All of this advanced vessel's systems were computerized and currently fried. His craft was disabled, drifting dead in deep ocean waters, and with very little remaining oxygen.

He shouted his orders quickly "Engine Status?!"

The Engine Officer replied "I was able to shut down the reactor in time for the EMP... but my controls are not responding. We are dead in the water." The Propulsion Officer added "Same here... controls are dead."

The Captain appreciated the first part of the report. He didn't need a reactor breach right now. He shouted to his next officer "Comm's?!"

Comms officer shook his head "Comms dead sir. No response. All fried. We can't even talk to the crew trapped in various parts of the ship. Hatches self-sealed for safety." After a moment he added "If we surfaced, we could release door seals or radio-in for help manually."

Captain nodded and moved on "Weapons!"

Weapons officer replied reluctantly "No response from any controls." He followed up just like the comms officer "Most torpedoes and missiles are computer targeted. The on-deck machine gun has manual mode but..."

The Captain finished that sentence "... but we would have to surface first." expecting that answer. He moved on to the next officer "Nav?! Give me some good news..."

The officer didn't sugar code it "Our last trajectory was taking us to the South Sandwich Trench. We are drifting right into it..." He checked his last readout and continued "I'm guessing we're at 2,000 meters' depth

now. This ship can withstand maybe 4,000 meters before it starts to buckle." He avoided eye contact.

Captain pushed further "What's the matter boy? Spit it out!"

The Nav Officer raised his eyes "We are heading straight for Meteor Deep..." He added regretfully "... recently discovered to experience tectonic shifts and volcanic activity."

The South Sandwich Trench is located just East of the Drake Passage and the Antarctic Peninsula in the South Atlantic Ocean. Within it, the Meteor's Deep is one of the deepest points on earth with a depth roughly equivalent to the height of Mount Everest. It is also one of the most volatile regions of the Atlantic ocean with eight active volcanoes, regular seismic activity from the subduction of oceanic crust, freezing temperatures, and very rough ocean currents. Nobody takes the risk to go there without a clear purpose.

Glenn probed "How much time do we have?"

The Nav Officer looked at Glenn, thought for a moment then answered reluctantly "Maybe 20 minutes... 25 depending on ocean currents and our rate of descent..."

Innes joined in "22 minutes to be precise. I was watching your calculations."

The Captain took over "Options, gentlemen?!"

Glenn posed the obvious answer "SEIE?"

Anne looked puzzled so Glenn explained "Submarine Escape Immersion Equipment used for evacuating from a submerged submarine."

The Captain responded "Real options! We need to rescue this damn ship, not just the crew!"

The Propulsion Officer started "We have replacement chips for most of the systems fried by the EMP... but can't access them until we can surface and various hatches self-release."

The weapons Officer jumped in "We get to the Bomb sir. Get oxygen and buy us some time."

Anne didn't like that phrase either. Glenn whispered to her "The Bomb is the main oxygen generator."

The Nav officer piped in "I may be able to surface her manually sir... from The Box... maybe even manually trigger RESUS."

Glenn whispered to Anne another explanation "That's an emergency surfacing system."

The Propulsion Officer added "I should go with him..."

Innes challenged "We would be alive yes... But also sitting ducks ready to be boarded."

Captain ignored Innes and ordered the Comms officer "Please escort our guests to their rooms."

Charlie objected "I'm not an air-breather. I can help with the engine... Whatever tech it is."

The Captain directed the weapons and engine officers "Go buy us some time. Not enough EAB's for all the crew." He then looked at Charlie "Please join my two officers in The Box and steer us away from certain doom."

Nav officer said "I'll stay here watching our Zulu Five Oscar." Innes grinned already knowing he is referring to her.

Crew dispersed. Comms officer grabbed Glenn's wheelchair and directed Anne "Please follow me." He led them to their quarters taking Glenn into his cabin first. Anne followed by objecting "I'm not going to sit in that tiny room all by myself!" The officer exchanged looks with Glenn who nodded in agreement. Prior to leaving Anne and Glenn, the officer opened a small cabinet and removed two air breathing apparatus. He handed them to startled visitors adding "Just in case things go wrong." He also pointed to a sign beside the bed "Here are instructions for emergency evacuation including how to operate the escape pod in this room."

Glenn responded "Thank you... I think."

He tried to cheer-up Anne "Let's get ready. Don't worry this will be like a roller-coaster ride..."

Anne's perspective didn't improve "I hate roller-coasters. It's like paying someone to intentionally inflict mental trauma."

Glenn tried again "What? But that's where I was going to take you to our next real date?"

Anne corrected "What makes you think there will be another date?"

Glenn responded "That's easy... You're stuck with me!" while getting out of his wheelchair and onto the bed.

Anne made a stand "I'm the one rescuing you as far as I'm concerned."

Glenn played along "Ah yes but this is all part of my elaborate plan. I paid the Captain to place us both in this situation to develop deep emotional attachment..."

Anne interrupted while moving Glenn to one part of the bed "Yeah that didn't work with my ex. His emotional attachment landed him a frying pan on his face and a divorce."

Glenn piped in suppressing pain from an uncomfortable position and the cast pressed against his rib cage "Yes but I have an advantage over your ex..."

Anne asked "And what may that be?"

Glenn answered "He knew you only on the surface and took you for granted... but I... " He connected eyes "... see and treasure the subtle gentle strokes and deep vibrant colours that paint your soul."

Anne got silent. In the distance she took one last look at Van Gogh's Starry Night.

Glenn intentionally interrupted the uneasy moment "Well, we are drifting dead in the water... in a prototype craft carrying enough weaponry to obliterate London... and heading for an active underwater volcano... What could go wrong?"

Chapter 22: Prometheus Endangered

Warden's comms device beeped for the third time. He was packing for a quick exit in the secrecy of night. The comms device beeped again. He picked up in frustration "What?!"

The familiar mysterious voice sent shivers down his spine "Are you still on the island, dear Warden."

"Yes!" He rushed impatiently.

The voice answered "Good. We have an additional request..."

Warden was curious but also concerned "What is it?!"

The cold voice answered unusually informed "We need you to disable the safety protocols in Accendo's 24-hour deactivation protein sequence."

Warden was confused, "How did you know?" He pondered for a moment then followed-up "Forget it. My answer is no. I have no idea how to..."

The voice stopped him mid-sentence by sending him schematics of DNA re-coding sequences "This change needs to be introduced in the next 20 minutes. It needs enough time to self-replicate across the entire compound."

The Warden was stunned at the details of the information and mumbled "I do not pozzess the necezzary accezz rightz..."

The voice "Actually dear Warden, you will find that you now have sufficient access..."

Warden continued to be reluctant "No. I will get caught. I am trying to leave this place. How do you even know about these protein sequences?" In the back on his mind he considered there are probably only a dozen or so individuals with access to this highly-secure information. He mentally ran through the names eliminating most of them but also pinpointing a few potential coperates. One name particularly startled him.

If these secrets were sold by General Anders, it means political pressures have indeed shifted against Mannix. This means his position, reputation, and even life was at risk.

The voice delayed before being more forceful "I'm afraid my employer will not take kindly to this news." He spoke the next few statements with elegant conviction "If you were to comply, I'm sure I could arrange for an additional bonus... However, if you do NOT comply, I could not guarantee your safety."

The Warden was indignant "How dare you? Are you threatening me?"

The voice answered unshaken "Oh Absolutely..."

The Warden took a deep breath before answering. He quickly considered his options. He concluded General Anders likely sold Mannix out. He felt he was playing a zero-sum game and needed to pivot so he negotiated "I want four timez the original offer and all up-front..." He reasserted himself "Else I'll alert Mannix and dizappear where you can't find me."

The voice answered after a moment "Done..." He pressed a few buttons on his comms device then continued "The money is in your Swiss account."

The Warden punched "No more zurprizez! Thiz hack and my accezz better work..."

The voice didn't wait for Warden's threats "Right now is 02:00. You must finish and leave the island by 03:00."

The Warden "What are you going to do? Are you planning to take control over the shipment or execute a military ztrike?... Not like there is a zzubway or train coming here every hour. They will be zuzpicious when I take one of the shuttles and dizappear zudenly..."

The voice ignored this last round and said "Good day, Warden."

Chapter 23: Surfacing

The Captain knocked on the door to Glenn's cabin.

Anne answered "Enter" without waiting for Glenn's direction.

The Captain entered with obvious worry on his face. He started "We are 10 minutes from the volcano and still sinking. We're getting close to manually initiating RESUS..." Looking at Anne, he rushed-in with a clarification "That's the ship's emergency surfacing system." He continued carefully "We do not want you to take any new risks... We need you to take the escape pod just in case we are not able to recover in time."

Anne was stunned "Are you absolutely sure?"

The Captain reaffirmed "Yes. We need to ensure your safety. If we are able to surface, we can come back and get you."

Glenn answered plainly "Very well. That's what we will do."

The Captain headed toward the cabin door while directing "The button beside your bed triggers the escape pod. It fits two plus gear, plenty of space for both of you." He finished while shutting the door "You have max 5 minutes to eject. Gather your belongings immediately. Do it no matter what's happening with the ship, good or bad."

Anne asked "And Innes?"

The Captain spoke through the door "She is staying with me."

Anne rushed to her cabin, packed her two bags, and was back in Glenn's room within two minutes.

Glenn struggled. His cast allowed only one of his hands with a limited range of movement. Anne jumped in to help him pack his single bag. He stopped her "I was wondering if instead..."

She paused and responded looking into his brown eyes "Yes?"

Glenn continued "I was hoping if instead of packing my dumb cloths. You could help me take off my cast."

Anne asked "Would that be safe?"

Glenn returned "I'm supposed to keep it for another 2 weeks... but I'm afraid I will not be able to maneuver the escape pod... or swim in worst case-scenario... if this dumb thing stays on."

Anne nodded then approached Glenn. She paused unsure how to start.

Glenn noticed her confusion "I brought special scissors. They are in my bag. I didn't know how long this field trip would take."

Anne got to his bag and removed large oddly-shaped cutters with one arm extremely thin, able to slip into the cast, and the other sharp and serrated, able to cut through fibreglass. She began cutting starting with his left arm. They rushed it with Anne forcing on fast incisions and Glenn ripping entire pieces of plaster.

Within a couple minutes they had his arm and one of the legs free. His skin was pale and wrinkled. Suddenly the boat shook and loud hissing went across all walls. Glenn finished tearing off a section of plaster around his thigh and said "Good. They reached the main oxygen tank."

Anne stepped back "Well, we just have your torso and neck left..."

Captain's voice blasted through the audio system "You must leave now! We're getting close to the underwater volcano!"

Glenn added "This is good enough. I have most of my mobility. Grab the bags..."

Anne didn't need any further encouragement. She grabbed their bags and dumped them on the bed.

Glenn climbed in trying not to be nervous "This is not how I imagined getting a beautiful woman into my bed."

Anne rolled her eyes jumping in on the other side “Don’t get any ideas.” She reached out, slid the glass to access the release button and punched it.

The bed began moving and folding. The surface lowered. Sides raised and closed above them. Belts automatically came across them to strap them for safety while a 10-second countdown raced to finish. Small soft light brightened a side-display and a few controls. Their pod shook violently as they were ejected from the ship. They looked up and noticed a few small windows. They strained to see through complete darkness outside while spinning. They heard a hiss and their movement stabilized. They felt the blood in their body moving down as they accelerated toward the surface.

Glenn was unphased having gone through various training and far more tense situations. He noticed Anne was quite shaken. He tried distracting her “I promise you I am not the kind of man that asks women to his bed after a first date...”

Anne didn’t wait to pull on that thread “Oh yeah? How many dates then?”

Glenn wasn’t expecting this line of questioning “Hmm... it’s not like that...”

Anne enjoyed making him even more uncomfortable “What is it like then?”

Glenn stopped looking for appropriate answers and just responded honestly “To me physical contact is a result of a great relationship, not a means to get there.”

Anne pushed further to give him a taste of his own medicine “You trying to compensate for something?”

Glenn tried to recover “No that’s not what I mean. I have to spend time with a person first... getting to know what they think and believe before I go... you know... further.”

Anne had him twisted around her finger “No I get it. You like big-brain girls.”

Glenn tried to compensate again “Not at all! I just mean I’m attracted to both the brain and the beauty... but the brain comes first.”

Anne injected “Are you saying I’m ugly?” already relishing the response...

Glenn was cornered “Not at all. You are brilliant and beautiful. I really really like you Anne... and I hope when this is all over, we could...” He cut short.

Anne now felt bad for leading him down this twisted trail, smiled, and re-affirmed him in this vulnerable position “Glenn I would very much like that...”

In the distance they heard a loud noise. Glenn looked to Anne “I hope that’s Nautilus... Too early for an explosion. They must have triggered the ship’s emergency surfacing system.”

Pressure was rising quickly. Their ears hurt. Glenn started to nose-bleed suddenly. Anne freaked out “Are you OK?!”

Glenn just noticed blood dripping onto his chest. He tried wiping it off using his hand. He explained “Yeah I get this all the time when I fly... or escape secret submarines.”

Anne reprimanded “Do you always make jokes when you’re in danger?”

Glenn fired back “Absolutely. In fact, that’s the only time my jokes are actually funny...”

He noticed Anne whispering to herself “Anne are you praying?”

Anne admitted unashamed “Absolutely!”

Glenn added “That makes sense actually...”

Anne reflected “What about you? Do you believe in God?”

Glenn reflected then answered “I’m more of a Baruch Spinoza guy...”

Anne added “Like Einstein...”

Glenn responded “Yes Einstein was also a fan of Spinoza’s philosophy on God.”

Anne now reflected herself “I do like Spinoza’s irreligious and more natural perspective in God... but I totally disagree with God being uninvolved and disengaged with his creation.”

Glenn expanded “Same as Van Gogh, Spinoza was wrestling with his messy past: Jewish beliefs conflicting with rationalism and empiricism trying to reconcile God & science... and a ton of personal issues as well. He may have felt neglected or abandoned and his philosophy reflects this...”

Anne interjected “Yes every creation in some way the nature of their creator. We are fundamentally social beings, unable to properly function independently. That’s why I believe God is also an engaged creator continuously interacting with its creation.”

Glenn agreed “Well Anne I hope you are right because right now we could really benefit from some divine intercession...”

Anne noticed water around them was getting brighter “I think we’re nearing the surface. It’s hard to see in the middle of the night.”

Glenn strained to look up but his neck brace was restricting him. He cracked another one “I hope so because I’m so tired of being stuck in a tin can... and I really have to go to the bathroom.”

Anne didn’t want to encourage him but ended up laughing regardless “Well, I’m not helping you with that one.”

They paused to listen for any explosions as five then six minutes passed. Glenn rushed the optimistic conclusion “Good. Nautilus must have gotten out safely.”

Anne was also encouraged “I think we’re about to surface. Can’t wait for some fresh air.”

Glenn has been watching controls for the last two minutes. He finally realized “Anne this escape pod has a basic radio... and I bet it’s working.”

Anne got excited “That’s great. We can call for help!”

Glenn added “Any idea what the weather is here tonight?”

Anne didn’t have to answer. Their pod surfaced hard. They popped out then landed back on the water surface. The pod converted itself automatically, opening the top hatch, releasing their restraints, and opening a back compartment. A small shelter roof popped up filled with air and covered them. A flare automatically fired above them and a beacon started to broadcast their signal over a secure frequency.

Anne unzipped one of the walls and looked around while Glenn removed his cracked torso cast. He was naked except for his shorts. They were in the middle of the open ocean. Waves rocked them calmly. She scanned the horizon in moonlight but didn’t see anything in the immediate area.

Glenn piped in “Wonderful night breeze. Far better than smelling everyone’s sweaty body odour in that tightly packed boat.” He added quickly looking at Anne “Except of course you Anne. You smell as lovely as spring flowers.”

Anne rolled her eyes “That flattery will get you nowhere.” She watched him trying to use the radio “Can you get it working?”

Glenn answered more seriously “Yes I can but...” He hesitated.

Anne asked “But what?” She found a small compartment with some food and water.

Glenn replied “This is a general broadcast signal. I would be sending a message in all directions. We may be rescued by our friends or... we may be letting our enemies know where to find us.” He added quickly “... and Nautilus of course.”

Anne thought for a moment then decided “We have to try. We can’t stay stranded on this tiny life boat. We don’t even know where we are.”

Glenn added “I agree. There is not even a washroom here. I’m dying to go...”

Anne grinned and threw a food ration pack hitting his neck collar “You are such a clown.”

Glenn responded while cracking another joke “I’m so glad they sent me with you. I was afraid they would throw me into a rescue pod with Innes instead.” He checked if Anne smiled then added “With her I would end up into a whole new body cast.” Anne didn’t want to encourage his shenanigans although she did find his humour adorable and heart warming, especially right now in the middle of an ocean.

He got the radio started “Hello? This is Anne and Glenn, survivors from Nautilus stranded on the Atlantic Ocean... somewhere near the South Sandwich Trench.” He paused, reflecting how tasty that sounded compared to his plastic-wrapped and plastic-tasting food ration. He continued “... requesting immediate rescue from any ships in the area.”

They both paused and waited for any response. They got static but no answer. Glenn tried again “I repeat we are stranded and in danger... somewhere near an active underwater volcano. Can anyone hear us? Please respond.”

An unfamiliar but welcome voice answered “This is a private craft Sierra Sierra Bravo Six responding to your SOS.”

Glenn interrupted them “I am so happy to hear your voice Sierra Sierra Bravo Six.”

Radio crackled again “Sit tight. We’re heading in your direction. Is anyone injured?”

Glenn answered “We were hit by a massive EMP blast. I’m afraid Anne and I left in a hurry. They gave us this fancy rescue pod. Best we know we are still drifting in the direction of the volcano. How quickly can you get here?”

The voice answered with some hesitation “Don’t worry Glenn and Anne. We will be there within minutes.”

Anne grimaced to Glenn “That’s strange... A private craft in these dangerous waters and so close to all the action?”

Glenn too became suspicious. He probed over the radio “We are so glad to hear you Sierra Sierra Bravo Six. What are you doing in this part of town anyway?”

No answer followed. Anne took the radio from Glenn’s hand and pushed “What kind of craft are you?”

A different voice responded through the radio “Let’s just say I’m a good friend of the captain of Nautilus ship you just escaped...” A small dramatic pause followed before the voice continued “... and we’re about to become really good ‘friends’.”

Glenn answered just as a small craft emerged from the ocean and began hovering above them “This date is about to get much worse...”

Chapter 24: Rushed Exit

Back on the plane, Eddy turned on the radio hoping to pick up SOS from Hothead any Nautilus survivors.

Monnty looked at his sample container stick “Yes... We have only a few minutes.” He held it with one hand. With the other, he used his weapon sensors to get some readings on the substance inside his container. He muttered to himself while doing it “Not good... Vaporous... Slightly radioactive... Potentially corrosive...” He couldn’t make any sense of scan results “What is this? Partly organic. Nothing like I’ve seen before.”

Eddy fired from the back impatiently “You’re our expert. What should we do?”

Monnty walked back and forth “Not many Options... No facility close enough... No sign of Nautilus...” He placed the baton on the seat beside Eddy and started opening various cabinets “Maybe there is something here we can use...”

Eddy got really nervous sitting side by side with the world's most dangerous mutagen “Do not place Mannix’s biological weapon in the navigation seat beside me!” The large stick began rolling off the chair. He sharply directed the plane up to prevent the container from falling down and breaking.

This maneuver sent Monnty flying to the rear of the passenger cabin. He fired back “Careful... We don’t want to break the containment.” He walked back, grabbed the stick, and attached it to his leg right guard.

Eddy fired back “Exactly!”

Monnty was back in the passenger section looking into all kinds of nooks and crannies. He was hoping to find a medical kit with a large sealed glass container. No luck. He went down to look under passenger seats. He found nothing. However, he noticed a small hatch in the door with “Cargo” written on it. His hope returned. He called

out to Eddy “I found a cargo area... under the floor... Hoping to find something there...”

Eddy’s attention turned to Nautilus. If it did encounter an active volcano, the sheer explosion of the ship’s reactor core would create a tsunami hundreds of meters high.

As if on queue, the ship surfaced on the horizon only a few kilometers away. Eddy changed his trajectory to head in that direction. From the distance he saw it was badly damaged and smoking at the rear. It wasn’t drifting straight. It’s right side and the back part were partly submerged. It was floating in no specific direction. “At least it surfaced.” he thought to himself. Crew began pouring out two escape hatches on top. Few life rafts departed in a hurry carrying dozens. He saw the Captain standing on top directing people out. He tried communicating with the ship but their secure comms were down, no doubt fried by the island’s massive EMP.

One of the officers noticed the plane. Unaware it wasn’t manned by Mannix’s guards, he ran for Nautilus’s deck machine gun and unleashed a volley of bullets.

Eddy jerked the plane to the left and called out to Monnty “We found Nautilus but they don’t know it’s us!” He then directed the craft back upwards to escape the gunfire.

Captain rushed the remaining crew off the damaged ship. One last officer emerged. After a heated exchange with the Captain, he was rushed back into the ship with a handful of other senior officers. Escape hatch was closed as Nautilus embarked on its mission.

With their plane now in safe distance, Ed changed focus “Where the hell are you Monnty!?! ”

Monnty emerged slowly from the passenger area. He wasn’t alone. A man behind him held Monnty’s gun to his back pushing him forward. He wore an island uniform but different from all the guards. It bore a type

of nametag “KN”. Monnty spoke softly and slowly “We have... an unexpected passenger...”

Cathan pushed Monnty to the navigation seat and pointed the gun toward Eddy “I don’t want any trouble.”

Eddy connected eyes with Monnty then responded “Well friend you got on the wrong bus. This bus is nothing but trouble.”

Monnty added “How did Mannix manage to sneak you in?”

Cathan responded “I am not...”

At that very moment, the baton on Monnty’s leg began beeping loudly and alarmingly.

Cathan escalated “What is that? Why is it...”

Monnty looked at Ed and rushed “Containment failing...”

Eddy tried to raise and grab Cathan’s arm holding the pistol. Cathan was faster. He pulled away then kicked Ed right back. The Interpol agent landed hard right onto the steering wheel. The plane dove hard down. Monnty took advantage of the chaos to extract his baton and knock the gun out of Cathan’s hand. Eddy regained his balance and reverted the plane upward. Monnty lost balance and landed hard onto their assailant. They heard a click and to their horror they saw the baton needle extending piercing Cathan deep into his chest. The red glistening liquid rushed down into the cavity. Cathan fell to the ground unconscious.

Monnty stepped back and whispered “I didn’t... mean to...”

Eddy yelled “Monnty, snap out of it! Check for containment!”

Monnty shook up, went back for his rifle and scanned Cathan’s body.

Eddy put the plane hovering steady on autopilot. He raised and approached Cathan’s body.

Monnty stopped him “Don’t touch the skin...” Eddy froze mid-track now noticing hitchhiker’s eyes “No, no, no, no...” They were two different colors.

Monnty finished “This man has been altered... Guessing he is one of the prisoners... DNA already modified...”

Ed interrupted “Is he alive?! Is the sample contained?!”

Monnty took a moment to analyze before responding “Yes... he is stable but heartbeat very faint... Sample... I do not know...” He was getting frustrated “I am getting very strange readings. I don’t understand them!” He refocused “We have to secure him... But no direct skin access... No fluid exchange of any kind... Even sweat.”

Monnty pointed to Ed to get a large emergency blanket from the medical kit. He slowly and carefully raised his legs, arms, and torso to wrap Cathan into the blanket. He then took off and placed his gloves inside with their patient. They moved Cathan to the passenger area and strapped him to the floor with cargo straps.

Ed stared horrified at Monnty as he went back to get his supergun and began scanning himself. The DPSD agent was visibly frightened, shaking and sweating.

Eddy forced an order “Monnty report. What’s our status? Are we contaminated?”

Chapter 25: New Agenda

Back on Nautilus, officers were desperately combing the ship for Innes who apparently took advantage of the chaos to escape their custody. At the same time, the Captain was able to replace chips recently fried by the massive EMP. The reactor and several other undamaged systems were coming back online.

As the ship's internal sensors came back online, two of the officers finally found Innes hiding in the engine room. She easily overpowered them and reached the secondary control room.

With the ship's comms now restored, she began to broadcast on all frequencies "Mannix, this is Innes!" She paused, firing a shot at another officer trying to enter the area then continued "Mannix, the facility has been targeted and is about to be destroyed."

She ducked anticipating a shot fired at her, fired back shooting that officer in the shoulder and blasted "Mannix you have to trust me! Get out before it's too late! You may have won the battle but you are absolutely going to lose this war."

She pulled up newly received orders on her monitor "Earlier they tried to extract you. Right now they're about to obliterate the entire island with you inside it." Another officer arrived exchanging more shots. Innes ducked, shot him through the knee then took another shot disabling his weapon and knocking it out of the officer's hand.

She rushed "Mannix I know I betrayed you..." Her emotions surfaced "But you have to trust me now..." Tears poured out freely "... because I love you... and I don't want you to get hurt."

She tried to wipe off her eyes, then shot another two rounds. She ducked to the right preparing for another attack. "They will do anything to destroy your Prometheus project..." she blasted louder as bullets

flew past her face "... and they don't care what the body count will be!"

Eddy's voice sounded through the radio "Captain you will stand down! I'm in charge of this mission and I gave you no such order."

The Captain replied grimacing "I got new orders..."

Eddy infuriated "From whom? I'm representing Interpol and combined agencies here?! Stand down, Captain!"

The Captain replied harshly "Directly from my boss." He added "Do not interfere!"

There were now four officers assaulting the secondary control room. Two of them were wounded but many more were closing in. Innes was clearly outnumbered. Typically they would avoid shooting inside the submarine but they surfaced and received strict orders to kill her.

Eddy blasted on the comms "The hell with you, Captain! This is my operation! You will stop even if I have to get down there myself and force it down your throat."

The Captain laughed "Unlikely... This is a private vessel and you no longer have jurisdiction."

Ed blasted again over all open frequencies "Any agent in the area... Engage to stop Nautilus..."

Innes rushed in "Nautilus is not the only..." A bullet hit her right arm. She ignored the pain and continued "There is an entire armada heading this way..." She fired her last three bullets as another round went right through her thigh. She strained to remain stable.

Unexpectedly, a few muffled shots followed from the hallway and officers stopped firing at Innes. She heard Charlie's voice "Innes don't shoot! I've disabled these officers. These new orders are shit. I'm coming to help." Charlie emerged through the entrance with her hands up high in the air.

Innes replied relieved but guarded "Thank you."

Charlie took over the comms to provide an update as Innes checked her bleeding thigh "This is agent Charlie from MI6."

Eddy responded “Charlie what’s your status?”

Charlie replied “Innes and the secondary control room are secure. She is shot in the arm and the leg but she’ll be fine. That’s the good news...”

Ed hesitated “What’s the bad news?”

Charlie answered reluctantly “I do not think they were shooting at Innes. They were shooting to disable various controls. Most of them are not responding.” She checked a couple still functioning security cameras then continued “I’m sure that bloody Captain has a dedicated control terminal in his private quarters...”

Monnty joined in “What kind of weapons are we talking about?”

Innes raised herself painfully and replied “Large mining laser drill... extremely powerful even under water... especially in these waters known for tectonic volatility and volcanic activity.”

At that moment, they heard the ship's engines starting up. They knew Nautilus couldn’t submerge but they also knew it didn’t need to. As long as the Captain could steer the ship and fire the main weapon, Mannix’s island was in danger.

Innes touched one of the screens to show Charlie some schematics. Charlie whistled and turned on the comms “Eddy, this ship is just the beginning... Mannix’s island will get blasted to kingdom come.”

Innes strained to ask in desperation “Ed, you must contact General Anders!”

Eddy responded reluctantly “I already did. Son-of-a-bitch must have been paid off. He told me to stay away and sit this one out.” He felt completely betrayed.

The Nautilus began to turn and accelerate north. Its main reactor was revving up building energy. The Captain blasted through the ship's comms “All crew onboard, you have exactly two minutes to exit this craft! This is NOT a drill!”

Innes responded in rebellion “You bastard! Come here and face me like a man!”

The Captain relished responding “Ha! Perhaps another day. For today is a good day to die!” He continued solemnly “The Captain always goes down with his ship.”

Ed directed “Charlie, get Innes out of there... now! Then sabotage the ship.”

Charlie followed orders quickly. She grabbed Innes by her left shoulder and led to a nearby escape pod. Innes didn’t resist as Charlie secured her, secured her, and punched the eject button. The escape pod flew a few meters and inflated immediately.

Another voice joined the exchange. It was Mannix “Captain, I must warn you. Attacking the island will not only result in the death of many innocent people in this facility...” His voice grew stronger “... but it will also release a number of extremely dangerous substances into the ocean.” He punched the last statement “You do not understand what Accendo will do to this world if released in an uncontrolled environment!” His voice began to shiver “Results would be... catastrophic on a global proportion.”

Eddy supported “He is telling the truth, Captain. We were inside the island and scanned the mutagen. You would be releasing it and dooming the entire humanity...”

The Captain blasted back “Get a room you two! I’ve got orders...” He continued spitefully “And it doesn’t matter if it’s me or the armada. Mannix is going to hell!”

Ed handed over the radio to Monnty who reluctantly confirmed “Captain, this is... the most volatile... biological substance... I have ever encountered.” He was in shock “Releasing it... would have an unprecedented ecological and biological impact... on the entire global ecosystem... people... animals... plants.” He continued almost pleading “Please... Call off the attack!”

The Captain responded coldly “Not my call to make... Nautilus comms out!”

Eddy returned a volley of curses unbecoming of any agent... but the Captain remained silent.

Ed watched his sensors as close to a thousand crafts appeared on his radar approaching the island from the north.

Mannix selected a secure channel directly to Ed's plane "Eddy if you can hear me, I realize I was wrong. I cannot force humanity into acceptance of the wondrous future I dream and always intended for them. Humanity is much too fear-driven... violent... not ready... undeserving."

His emotions surfaced "I created Prometheus and Accendo not to destroy our fragile harmony. I created it to overcome our greatest struggles... poverty... hunger... injustice... prejudice... fear..." He strained to control his feelings then added "I created it to help us evolve into something far greater we even thought was possible."

He wrestled with his anger "But humanity chose fear and that will be its undoing... Destroying this facility will inadvertently release their greatest curse..."

He broke down now weeping "And the only thing I can do... because I can't prevent it... is to take responsibility for the role I played... and to help find a cure for the very sickness it embraced."

He finished "Eddy now I need your help. Please pick me up. I have no safe way to get off this island. You sabotaged all my other planes. Use the same coordinates as the ones you provided me when you left the island."

Eddy responded "Acknowledged. ETA five minutes." He added "I must warn you, we have one of your patients on board. His uniform has a name tag 'KN' and he was accidentally injected with Accendo. He is currently unconscious. We may be contaminated..."

Mannix asked confused "You have Cathan on board? How? And you injected him?" He retracted "Never mind... Pick me up as soon as you can!"

Monnty interjected "I found Innes's life pod but we have very little time..."

Eddy spoke to Mannix "Give me eight minutes. We also need to pick up Innes before General Anders finds her. She is wounded..."

Mannix closed the conversation "Glad she will join us in this journey. We have some unfinished... business." He paused looking for words then regained his focus "I will see you shortly, Edward Prendick."

The dark night sky lit up as over a thousands of armed crafts approached the floating island city about to unleash its arsenal in a symphony of destruction.

Chapter 26: Weapons Free

Mannix touched his comm device. A moment after, alarm and purple pulsing lights warned all personnel to abandon the island facility. The island stopped moving to ensure all its tenants left safely. The giant wall surrounding the facility opened a number of doors. Living house pods surrounding the island, where most staff used for their living quarters, detached and drifted freely away into the ocean. It took a few minutes for the island to eject its tenants. Only the central tower and surrounding facility buildings remained. A number of smaller industrial ships and boats rushed out of them, fleeing the upcoming destruction. Various patients, recently undergone their procedures, were packed into personal escape pods and ejected into the ocean just outside the wall. Even the prisoners previously secured in the underwater levels, were packed into larger group escape pods. These were shot out from lower levels and surfacing just outside the island. Above the surface, various lights signaled a state of danger. Main factory roof opened releasing a massive swarm of Prometheus drones, as if locusts were alerted by an upcoming fire. There were thousands of them humming and buzzing. As they dispersed and reached safe height, they opened small wings and soared carried away by the strong wind. Few trailed behind slower either unfinished or damaged. Only the security personnel remained, ready to defend their floating city. Although they were quite successful during the last attack, they could not foresee the terror slowly approaching them.

A few kilometers away, an armada moved into a formation but held position waiting for an order to attack. The foggy night hid them well. A combined force of over 1,000 military water and air crafts slowly and secretly flanked the floating city. Eddy wondered if he could make a stand in the middle but instead chose to secure Mannix and the rest of his team. This was his mission, especially now.

The island looked so peaceful in the distance. Sun rays began creeping in the distance. The ocean quieted allowing for a moment of peace before the slaughter. Even a few whales surfaced to say their final goodbyes.

The assault began just before 4 am. Nautilus inched closer, wounded but determined to have his revenge. Ship's powerful mining underwater lasers had a different purpose this dark night. The ship arrived buzzing and shaking, fully powered despite severe damage to its outside shell. The front compartment opened slowly like a mouth. Then a wide highly focused beam sliced the water just under the surface cutting mercilessly into the second underwater level of the facility. It pierced violently through the island's organic flesh. The laser held strong as the captain steered to the side, continuing the carnage... cutting towards the middle of the island. The laser hit a large cavern inside the island discharging a huge amount of electricity into its surroundings. The powerful electric current pierced all fish within two kilometers, convulsing and in some cases ripping them into pieces. Two massive blue whales surfaced dead with blood pouring out of their blowholes and eyes. All the lights on the island extinguished in that moment and darkness fell. The only visible light was as Nautilus's deadly laser beam as it viciously cut into the island over and over and over again like an ax cutting chunks out of a massive tree. It now reached halfway point and pieces of the underwater structure began to fall off. Massive kilometer-long tentacles dropped lifelessly to the ocean ground. Various office furniture, medical equipment, and other objects inside the facility liberated into the liquid expanse floating to the surface or fell to the ocean floor. The laser hit another critical part of the level releasing strange chemicals and liquids into the water. Some of them mixed resulting in potent violent reactions, exploding parts of the island. The beam persisted mercilessly for over an hour until it finished its havoc. The bottom part of the island got swallowed by the dark depths of the ocean trench. The top part of the

island strained to stay afloat. The military armada in the fog waited eagerly for their orders.

But Nautilus wasn't finished. It wasn't yet satisfied. It waited as the top wreckage drifted towards an area known for its volcanic activity. In its defining act of reckless vengeance, it submerged its front and fired its weapon again. This time the laser hit the already weak tectonic plates rapturing them and giving birth to a massive volcano. Hissing, bobbling, and spitting hot molten lava, the entire area directly underneath the island became a melting pot boiling the island from underneath. Massive rocks shoot upwards tearing holes then landing back on the surface oozing lava. Few buildings collapsed exposing their insides and people hiding within. They were terrified but had nowhere to go. Fires spread throughout revegging whatever remained. As the new parts of the island detached and hit the bottom of the ocean floor, an even greater eruption followed. The island was enveloped and overpowered by the hell ravaging underneath. The armada still held their position.

But Nautilus wasn't yet finished. It knew it had to deliver the final blow. It took a moment to reposition or perhaps relish the moment. It stood still observing its destruction. It began humming, then pulsing, then vibrating. Its resonance filled the air building up... until it unleashed its final volley. A massive laser cut at the base of the tower sliced it effortlessly. For a moment the tower held frozen like a severed head realizing what happened or perhaps fighting to heal itself. Then its weight and doom prevailed. It slid by a few inches and slowly tipped. And then it could hold no longer. It fell down hard crashing into millions of pieces like it was made out of glass. A series of sounds emerged from it's base. Military satellites above that recorded the whole event zoomed-in to scan the strange internal organ. A massive brain the size of an entire building with folds the size of cars oozing and bleeding... was grasping to unravel its final moments of life or perhaps its future life. Strange high-frequency sounds began ripping

through the air. They were noises similar to whale calls. Some were sounds of quiet desperation and anguish. Others were that of pain and anger. Yet others were simply last thoughts of a dying creature knowing its end has come. A red shiny liquid now spilled out of the island now surrounding it. It pulsated with power and vitality. Accendo mutagen was now free. The island could hold it no longer. The fire didn't quench it. It liberated it. It invigorated it. Its shiny shiver rose above the waves escaping with the morning breeze into the clouds and from there, slowly spreading across the world.

As the sun began to raise beyond the horizon, remains of the island crawled carried by the ocean current. Underwater volcanoes continued their violent wheeling in the distance. The smoke and dust settled. The armada stopped their onslaught. What remained was already dead. Among the bodies were Hothead's Navy Seal team holding and protecting now dead scientists and patients. Their mission was used for information gathering for Nautilus' real mission of destruction.

Finally, the armada received their orders and moved in. Air crafts took their positions forming a massive circle just outside the island. Water crafts went after those that escaped, collecting them, imprisoning them, and even killing some that were trying to defend themselves. They were to ensure Mannix does not escape sneaking among them. The air armada began showering what remained of the island with destruction. For an hour they pounded the city with precision targeted missiles first obliterating the wall surrounding the island, then leveling whatever remained on the surface.

Chapter 27: Friend or foe?

Anne and Glenn were sitting on rigid uncomfortable seats inside a strange plane. Two guards sat directly in front intently watching them with hands on their weapons.

Glenn was suspicious asking his rescuers “I don’t recognize your uniforms. Which private security company are you with?”

Guards just smiled but didn’t respond... completely ignoring their questions.

Glenn popped another question “Can I talk to someone in charge please? I have critical information to provide to them...”

One of the guards looked at the other one. After a moment, the second guy punched a few buttons on his wrist comms device.

A few moments later, another security officer walked in. She got straight to the point “Can you tell us where we can find your team?”

Glenn probed “Anyone specific you have in mind?”

The officer pursued further “Eddy, Monnty, Innes... even Mannix?”

Anne exchanged looks with Glenn. How would a private company know about the operation and who was involved?

She asked “You didn’t ask about Charlie or Hothead?... Where are you taking us?”

The officer fired back “To a safe location. Can you provide me with whereabouts for any of these people?”

Glenn inquired cautiously “Which private security company are you with?”

The officer knew she wasn’t getting anywhere. She handed Glenn and Anne a small tablet with video feed already playing. She added “Watch this carefully. I hope for your sake it will make you more... cooperative.”

Anne took the tablet as they both watched and listened intently.

News reporter started confidently “This is News 45. My name is Emma Ward. Good morning everyone.”

Video feed began to show footage of the destroyed island as she continued “Breaking News. The Atlantic Ocean facility owned by the genetic genius and billionaire Mannix Haldanne... was completely destroyed by an underwater volcano near the South Sandwich Trench early this morning.”

The reporter paused waiting for footage to shift to rescue efforts “Both government and nearby corporate ships are undergoing a massive rescue operation. However, preliminary estimates suggest only a third survived. It is still unknown if Dr. Haldanne escaped this unfortunate disaster.”

She paused for a moment waiting for footage to change now showing various strange liquids trailing the drifting island “The government is also investigating claims that a dangerous mutagen was released into the ocean during this disaster. We are getting mixed reports here...” She paused receiving late changes to the story “Just a moment... I’m receiving new information... Some government sources claim this substance has been contained and is not dangerous... But another source, apparently an expert in the genetic field, is warning us this may be a biogenic weapon developed by Dr. Haldanne... and potentially very dangerous now that it’s released into the ocean.”

The officer took the tablet out of Anne’s hands and pierced their eyes “Are you going to answer my question now?”

Anne tried something, “Ask the captain of Nautilus. He would know better.”

The officer responded “We spoke to the Captain. He alerted us of your...” then stopped herself.

Glenn exchanged looks with Anne then whispered to her “I thought this date couldn’t get any worse.”

The officer raised her voice stepping right up to Glenn's face "You think this is funny? You think this is some kind of joke?"

Glenn met her eyes without fear "No mam."

The officer continued "You are knee deep in this global disaster. An international man-hunt is out for all your friends. Nobody knows which side you are on and how you are involved."

Anne interjected "Nor on which side you are on..."

Glenn turned to her "Be careful Anne..."

The officer grinned, raised, and answered "Have it your way..." She turned and continued "Looks like you will get your wish afterall..."

Anne asked "Which wish?"

The officer finished while walking away "You wanted to know who owns this vessel as well as Nautilus..."

Book 3 Teasers

One or more of these chapters will appear in the next book.

Uncertain Future

Mannix snapped at Monnty “Do you have any idea what you did to this man by injecting him with such a large volume of Accendo!?!”

He was moving quickly at a secluded bio-generic field lab where Eddy dropped them off just a few minutes ago. He grabbed a medical scanner and rushed to check Cathan’s vitals. He barked at Monnty “Don’t just stand there! Prep him for a cardiogram and full blood work...”

Monnty thumbed looking through different equipment clumsily and answered with frustration “I’m not... a doctor... I’m a bioengineer...”

Mannix snapped back “I don’t care! You’re the only one with any medical training.” He paused, collected himself, and continued calmly “Monnty I apologize for my crass behaviour...” He connected eyes “...I really need your help to save this man’s life.”

Monnty refocused “Sorry... Absolutely... Just not... what I typically work on.” He dove into the lab next door with renewed commitment. After a moment he exclaimed “Found it!” and rushed back to their patient. He used scissors to remove Cathan’s uniform. He paused noticing substantial scarring on the man’s chest. He looked up at Mannix with shock.

Mannix didn’t wait “Don’t draw your conclusions all too quickly. This man had a rich past long before he entered by program. There will be lots of time for explanations later.” His scanner beeped signalling scan completion. He directed his eyes to their results.

Monnty finished setting up the cardiogram and said “Ready.”

Mannix directed while still reviewing scan results “Begin.”

Monnty’s cardiogram beeped. He ripped the results sheet and passed it over to Mannix.

Mannix scratched his head “We need to cool him down... decrease his heart rate and metabolism to minimum...”

Eddy approached Cathan’s body and reached out to touch his forehead. Mannix snatched the hand right back “You’re not even wearing surgical gloves.” The geneticist faced the agent straight on “I am afraid we do not have the leisure of time for me to explain the finer details of this man’s condition. You will just have to trust me and follow my direction.”

Eddy rebutted “I’m simply not sure whether you’re trying to save your precious Accendo or a prisoner who escaped from your facility.”

Mannix paused “This man...” pointing at Cathan “He is not just any patient.” He accentuated the last word.

Ed pushed “Who is he then?”

Mannix reluctantly answered “Considering our current situation, I’ll have to share with you far more than this one secret.” He looked up at Ed and Monnty staring “This man is Cathan Huxley... troubled son of my top scientist Juliana Huxley.” Mannix wiped the sweat off his forehead before finishing “His DNA treatments had certain... unpredictable side effects.”

Eddy doubted “His name tag read KN.”

Mannix explained “Yes we do this for anonymity among other reasons. JHJ was determined that no staff are aware she is this patient’s biological mother.”

Monnty yelled from the back of the lab “I found a bathtub... Need help bringing it back.”

Ed disappeared to help Monnty and within a few moments they returned a large porcelain tub. Mannix directed to Monnty “Fill the tub with cold water... as cold as possible. Perhaps check the fridge for ice.” Then he directed Ed “Put on surgical gloves and assist me

moving this patient into the tub.” Both followed Mannix’s direction. As they lifted Cathan’s body and placed it in the tub, Mannix instructed Charlie “Charlie isn’t it? Could you please help remove any clothing from this man?”

Monnty returned with a long hose, handed it to Ed and returned back to it’s source to turn on the water. Ed was careful to pour the water away from Cathan’s body. Charlie used scissors to cut away remaining parts of the uniform leaving only underwear. Monnty returned with a small bucket of ice explaining “Sorry that’s all I could find.”

The tub filled out quickly. Mannix poured the ice carefully then paused for a minute.

Eddy pushed “What now?”

Mannix looked him right in the eyes “As your fellow agent Monnty reminded me a few minutes ago, he is not a doctor.” He took off his medical gloves and continued “Truth be told neither am I.”

Eddy frowned while Mannix continued “I bought us time... maybe a day or so. We have to find Juliana Huxley to save this man...” Mannix discarded his gloves in a nearby garbage “... because I will need to focus all my time and energy on saving the human race from the eminent biological extinction level event.”

Monnty piped in “What?”

Mannix stood up straining to control his temper “The attack on my facility didn’t destroy Accendo... Those ignorant fearful power-mongers... Those idiots weaponised it!” He sat down burying his face in his hands.

Eddy pushed hard “Mannix... You need to tell me... And you need to tell me right now... What the hell will Accendo do and how soon?”

Mannix answered reluctantly “The sample you obtained is pure. It’s relatively stable and predictable...” He looked up repressing horror in his eyes “... However, the substance released during Island’s attack has been... contaminated... completely unpredictable.”

Charlie joined in “Wouldn’t the volcano and fire destroy it?”

Mannix shook his head with tears appearing in his eyes “Unfortunately not. Quite the opposite...” He turned to hide his face “The heat likely activated it and weaponized it.”

Monnty asked fearfully “What’s the worst case scenario?”

Mannix sat down defeated “I’m not sure... But this mutagen has the ability to alter every strand of human DNA in this world.”

Eddy asked almost sarcastically “And how much time do we have to save the world?”

Mannix answered slowly “Based on typical ocean currents and weather patterns?... Accendo will reach over half of the world in approximately five days.” He finished really softly as if horrified by the very idea “... and I am quite certain we ourselves are also infected. Our time is running out...”

Guten tag dear Warden

“Guten tag dear Warden” said a man in broken German sitting on the opposite side of the bench in the observation deck of the Tegel airport in north-west Berlin. He was wearing a long rain jacket, a large hat, and dark glasses... making it very difficult to see his face. He added quickly “Please don’t turn. Your curiosity will NOT be rewarded.”

The Warden startled not expecting this encounter. He whispered scanning if anyone was looking at them “How did you find me?”

The man continued with a clear American accent “We’ve been monitoring your movements ever since you left the island.” He added almost teasing “Are you trying to disappear somewhere?”

The Warden confirmed reluctantly “Yes... although unsucceszfully.” He tried to shift the dynamics of the conversation. “What do you want now?”

The man relished continuing “My dear Warden, our sources at your facility revealed to us... just prior to their unfortunate destruction... that you were able to copy a considerable amount of Mannix’s genetic research prior to your departure.” The man paused watching for micro-expressions on Warden’s body. He grinned, finding what he expected he continued “My dear Warden your silence speaks more than words.” He paused “My employer would be very much interested in this research... but this generous offer expires rather quickly.”

They both paused as a mother with two kids rushed beside them to catch a flight.

The Warden probed “And if I refuse?”

The man grinned again. He quoted Nietzsche “Fear is the mother of morality...” He checked his comms device for time “You may find this hard to believe, but this world is about to be destroyed by a genetic plague.” He

pierced with his next sentence “A plague you helped to create...”

Warden interrupted him raising his voice “I did no such thing!”

The man scanned the area to see if anyone noticed. He continued calmly “The DNA sequence we gave you to sabotage Accendo... you didn’t simply disable the safety protocol... you also weaponized it for us.”

Warden was desperately containing his anger “What the hell?...”

The man continued calmly ignoring Warden’s emotions “Fortunately, my employer has developed a type of antidote... and he is willing to share a dose with in exchange for the information you have.”

The Warden was livid “And why would I trust you now? You threatened to kill me...”

The man turned discreetly showing the Warden a hidden pistol pointing directly at his head. He directed “You must calm down dear Warden. Of course instead of letting you die, we could release the security footage and documentation showing you’re the one that sabotaged the mutagen.”

The Warden lowered his voice “You’re framing me for world’s imminent genocide, one you orchestrated for your own financial benefit.”

The man snickered “Absolutely! We are framing you and your best pal Mannix.”

Two security guards appeared in the distance. They were slowly strolling in their direction.

The man continued “I accept your silence as confirmation. Do you have it with you?”

The Warden secretly dropped a key to an airport locker. The man noticed it, picked it up, and walked away whispering “Always pleasure to do business with you dear Warden. I’ll be in touch tomorrow. Do enjoy your stay while you can.” He took the next exit and disappeared.

The Warden whispered to himself “As the good German said ‘Of all that is written, I love only what a person has written with his own blood.’”

Transposition

Anne and Glenn were coming out of daze. Their heads were pounding. Surrounding became clearer by the minute. They scanned their surroundings. They appear collocated in a large transparent cell in the middle of some type of modern industrial compound. Everything was spotless and sterile. Walls appeared to be made of some kind of plastic and completely sealed. The cell had its own air supply and CO2 filter. Two gas-masked guards were standing nearby. Two metal plates with prison-like food surfaced from a trap door on the floor.

Glenn raised from his bed and whispered to Anne “I wouldn’t eat that.”

Anne responded still hazy “I wasn’t planning to...”

Glenn looked at the guards and said “Ex-military... Eastern European... Private security... Top grade.”

Anne asked “How do you know?”

Glenn replied “Non-military uniform but trained by army, custom weapons, arm tattoos, and a few other things.”

Anne probed further “How do you know they’re army trained?”

Glenn obliged “The pattern with which they scan the area, how they walk, how they hold their weapons... Do you want me to continue?”

Anne scanned the area again “Where do you think we are?”

Glenn responded sarcastically “Oh this is our second date. I arranged this especially for us. Our first date on that crazy Nautilus escape pod was such a disaster. I thought being trapped in a crazy facility with armed guards would be a much needed improvement...”

She stood up and smacked his head “No funny!”

Glenn fired back “Ouch. Don’t you remember I’m in a very fragile state? I’m still sore from my full-body casts.”

A voice in the ceiling speaker interrupted their exchange “Ah. You’re both awake. That’s fantastic. We can begin.”

Anne asked “And who are you? Why are you keeping us here?”

The voice didn’t answer immediately. However, a nearby door opened and two men approached their cell. The first was a slim short man, potentially of Indonesian background. The second was a large well-built white male, probably American. They were both extremely well dressed.

The shorter man spoke with a slight accent “Please understand this special room you are in is a necessary precaution. I assure you I mean you no harm...” He connected eyes with the taller gentleman and continued “We believe you have been exposed to Accendo, an extremely dangerous genetic mutagen created by...”

Glenn finished the sentence “... Mannix Haldanne” He continued scanning the two men carefully. He noticed the shorter men had metallic tape or wires running across different parts of his body.

Anne jumped in “What happened to the Island facility? What happened to Mannix, Innes, Eddy...”

The short man interrupted “Unfortunately, the H+ Island facility was destroyed in a joint military attack. We have not been able to locate Mannix. Could you tell us how you all got separated?”

Glenn probed “Who are you guys? What is this facility?”

The two men connected eyes again as the short man explained “We were able to extract you from the escape pods. We brought you to a privacy facility called ‘The Manor’. With Accendo quickly spreading around the globe, we had to retrofit some available industrial space. I apologize for these sparse facilities but we really had no time...”

Glenn pushed further “Why are we being guarded by high-paid ex-military security personnel? Seems like overkill for the two of us...”

The short man became a bit defensive “We have no way to predict what genetic changes Accendo will have on your physiology or aggression levels. And like I said we had very little time and personnel. We had to improvise...”

Anne as well sensed something is not right “Why are we here? What do you want from us?”

The short man unbuttoned his expensive black mandarin jacket as he approached closer. He became more animate with his hands “We need your help locating Mannix. We need to stop Accendo from destroying this world. People are getting sick very quickly...”

Anne responded with equal passion “We all got separated. Why was the Island facility attacked? We were trying to extract Mannix without any casualties...”

Glenn now stared directly at the larger man. He joined-in “You had plenty of time to do blood tests on us. I bet you didn’t find any Accendo in our bloodstream. I don’t think you’re being completely honest with us. In fact, it wasn’t your voice on the ceiling speaker when we woke up.” He pierced the eyes of the taller man and continued “Perhaps your friend here would be more forthcoming with answers...”

The two men connected their eyes again. The tall men nodded and took over the conversation as the shorter man walked away “Pretence is for politicians and I am certainly not one of them. I buy them, use them, and if necessary I destroy them. I am a businessman and pretence is a waste of time.”

He grabbed a nearby metal chair, moved it closer toward them, sat on it in reverse direction with his legs spread out, and continued “You are my prisoners. You have a single purpose here... to lead me to Mannix Haldanne.”

Glenn injected “You own the Nautilus ship.”

The tall men smiled charmingly, “That’s correct Agent Abbot.” then waited for a few moments giving Glenn time to connect all the pieces.

Anne jumped in “It was your voice in the ceiling speakers...”

Glenn took over before the large man answered “You are Mr. Smith... not just any Mr. Smith... you are THE Mr. Smith of Smith Pharma and Biotech.”

The large man waived his hand toward the short man then answered “That is correct Agent Abbot. Your FBI research is paying off.”

Glenn connected eyes with Anne then continued “You destroyed Mannix’s island. Why?”

Mr. Smith answered directly “How much do you want?”

Anne interjected “For what?”

At the same time, the short man brought a stylish generous glass of 50-year-old scotch on rocks.

Glenn already knew the answer “... To tell him where to find Mannix.”

Mr. Smith smiled and raised his glass to Glenn’s realization.

Anne continued “But we don’t know where he is... we got separated.”

Mr. Smith inquired “Where was Eddy planning to take Mannix after extraction?”

Glenn knew where this was going to go “Mr. Smith, I’m sure recent events have altered all previous plans. We’re not interested in your money. Just please let us go...”

Mr. Smith grimaced “Do you have a way to get in touch with the extraction team?” and took another sip of his liquor.

Anne whispered to Glenn “I don’t trust him...”

Glenn whispered back “We are prisoners here...”

Mr. Smith spoke impatiently “Looks like we played our opening moves. Pieces are on the board. Transposition worked well but the game is still young.”

He motioned to the shorter man “Proceed with Plan B and move them to the Vault. They will be more

cooperative there.” He turned to Anne and Glenn and added smiling “I don’t like to torture people in my Mannor. Their screams carry through the floors.”

At the same moment, green smoke appeared from the holes in the floor. Glenn reached out and pulled Anne’s arm to her mouth covering it. He then did the same for his own mouth trying to breathe through his sleeve. Unfortunately, the smoke raised and overcame them quickly. They resisted but collapsed within seconds.

Mr. Smith rose from the chair, gave the empty glass to his short assistant, and exited the same way he came in.

The Mutation

News reporter Emma Ward was exhausted and scared yet she took her role very personally. She chose to persevere and report unraveling events till she couldn't do it any longer. She finished her coffee and headed for the now barricaded windowless news room.

She gathered her strength as the producer counted her down. She kicked off strong "This is News 45. We're in day two of what seems like an apocalypse. This disaster started with the destruction of H+ Atlantic Facility owned by genetic genius and billionaire Mannix Haldanne."

She paused and looked at the green screen beside her before continuing "If you're only joining us now, let me recap quickly. In the last 24 hours we've received reports from all over the world our population is very rapidly evolving into strange creatures or dropping dead. Our current estimates are that over 60% of the population has been affected."

She paused again waiting for the green screen to change to another part of the footage "We just received reports of preliminary tests on one of the creatures. The genetic changes taking place are profound changing brain mass, intelligence, overall size, strength, agility, and overall appearance. These creatures have very little memory of their previous life and become quite hostile."

She paused again while the camera focused on her "The World Health Organization just released a statement that the genetic virus is spreading at an uncontrollable rate. We don't yet know if this terrible genetic disease is reversible. We urge everyone to barricade themselves in their homes. Report anyone turning into these creatures."

She paused collecting her thoughts then continued "Both the military and police are helpless as many of them are turned as soon as they come in contact with

any of these creatures. This station will continue broadcasting as long as our backup generators permit us to do so."

She continued "We urge the public not to panic. If you are trying to leave the city, we encourage you to take side roads out. Major highways are all blocked up. Take only what you need."

The display behind her revealed a map with two highlighted locations "Consider these two military bases as your safe harbour. They are well protected and equipped with medical facilities."

She finished her report but added a more personal commentary "Whether it is death or turning that will knock on your door..." Once again her tears flowed freely "... God be with us all!"

The Bunker

Mannix called out “Innes are you sure about this? Is there no other choice?”

She replied “Believe me I must be truly desperate to give you this location. This is the very last place I even want to be.” she paused containing her emotions then continued “... but right now this is the very best place for us to hide for a while.”

Mannix followed-up “Do they have the necessary facilities?”

Innes replied “That’s precisely why we’re going there. Do you know of any highly secret Biohazard Level 5 labs in the world?”

Mannix added “How secure is it?”

Innes paused wrestling in her mind on how much info she is willing to reveal... then continued “Only the highest-ranking Japanese military officials are aware of its existence...”

Eddy was not encouraged by this answer “Does that include your father, Innes?”

She shifted her head downward avoiding eye contact as she pushed out “Yes...”

Eddy moved to face her “Innes where exactly are you taking us?”

She raised her face with tears swelling up in her eyes “Unit 732 Secret Black Site...”

Eddy crashed down on a seat stone white.

Mannix froze barely whispering “We’re going to Japan...”

Monnty finally joined in, after primarily observing this exchange “Sorry what’s Unit 732? I don’t recall any of this in my briefing...”

Eddy looked at Mannix still frozen and Innes covering her face, then turned to Monnty to fill him in “Unit 731

was a well-guarded Japanese secret base responsible for human biological, chemical, and warfare testing even prior to World War II. They experimented and killed over half of million people during the 20’s century...”

Mannix took over “But after World War II the Allied forces took over the base and destroyed it. Both scientists and military personnel were prosecuted under War Crime Trials in the late 40’s. They were granted immunity in exchange for their research findings...”

Monnty piped in “I remember reading a book about this... Devil’s Gluttony?... no there were two books... a sequel...”

Innes “There were many books written about the horrors of what happened these...”

Eddy kept looking at Innes afraid of what secrets she was still to reveal “What was your father working on Innes?”

Mannix didn’t hear Ed’s questions and continued “Japanese government issued multiple formal apologies like one in 1984. Japan seized their experiments, didn’t they?”

Innes pushed out “No...”

Eddy got right to the point “Innes where are you taking us?”

Innes finally answered “During the war, Unit 731 actually operated two sites. The one you all talked about was located in Habrin, China... but there was a second even more secret site in Shinjuku, Tokyo.” She took a deep breath raising her head upwards “After discovery, war crimes tribunal, and world-wide disgrace... Unit 731 activities in China obviously stopped. However, disgrace turned to rage and hatred because the US dropped two nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Tokyo branch moved and their research continued in deep secret...”

Eddy pressed harder “Innes where are you taking us!?! ”

In the late 80's as the world launched Human Genome projects, Unit 731 gave birth to Unit 732..."

Mannix interrupted "Now focusing on genetic research capable of targeting entire nations and genetic profiles... a perfect and silent weapon..."

Innes now faced Eddy "Unit 732 built a highly secret and highly advanced black site in one of the remote islands of Japan."

Monnty connected the pieces "That's where your father was stationed?"

Eddy was silent processing it all...

Innes confessed "This black site is the very last place in the world I ever want to even visit... it is filled with horrors beyond your imagination and comprehension... but it is the only abandoned Level 5 Biohazard secret site the world doesn't even know exists."

Eddy was simmering his face tensing... his fists clenching...

Monnty grimaced "That's quite an irony... We are going to the most horrible place on earth... in hope to save this world."

Eddy screamed "This is madness! This is the last place we should be going to! This is a disaster waiting to happen!"

Mannix rose collected and confident "History of Eugenics is filled with violence and horror. But let that not define its bright hopeful future. What's different this time around? I do pray WE are different. I do pray that in our efforts to redeem this world, we are able to redeem this place... and ourselves."

Monnty waited for an appropriate pause then dropped one last question "So why exactly is this site abandoned?"