



# THE GAVEN

BY  
IRENE NORTH

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To Paul

and the tin-foil hat crowd

It was just before dawn, but Pelgrem was only half asleep. The incessant dripping of water through the tiny cracks in the window kept him awake. As much as he tried, in two years, he was never able to fully shut out the sounds of the camp. The water constantly reminded him of where he was and that he was helpless to stop the dripping or fix the cracks in the window next to his bed.

Camp 17 was the worst camp in America. It was where the worst offenders were sent. It was ideal, set in the outskirts of Lincoln, Nebraska, where few people visited. It was isolated, yet close enough to a major city to serve as a constant reminder to the local camp population of what they missed, what they had, and what they had lost.

Camp councillors reminded the men of 17 each day of the freedoms they had lost, but Pelgrem felt freer and more alive inside the camp than he ever did as a free man. He didn't like to think about it though, because there was still a small desire in him to discover what was happening in the world and what happened to his sister the day he left for the camps.

For now, he was silently cursing the rain for creating the droplets that kept him awake. Each time he began to slip away, a drop would hit the floor. It was as loud as a sonic boom in the silence of the overcrowded dormitory. Pelgrem squeezed his eyes tighter and tried to concentrate on a bright, sunny day. No rain, no droplets, no puddles to splash in. Just the radiant, yellow sun warming his face. The glow soothing him to sleep.

His feet. Something grabbed his feet. Pelgrem was wide awake now and he sat straight up in his bunk. Instinctively, his hand grabbed for what was grasping his feet. He couldn't see who it was, but he knew the voice.

“Shoes,” Damaes said as he shook Pelgrem's leg. “Five minutes.”

“Thanks,” Pelgrem answered as he reached down and began untying the laces on his shoes. Camp policy regulated that all shoes were to be replaced every three months. This was to prevent the residents from hiding weapons or other items, such as food, in makeshift compartments. However, shoes were replaced three weeks ago.

“Hurry Pel. There isn't much time,” urged Damaes as he let go of Pelgrem's leg and climbed into the cot next to Pelgrem. Pelgrem hurriedly pulled his shoes off, dropping the left one onto the floor between his cot and Damaes' cot. He took the right shoe and carefully peeled back the paper-thin insole. He reached into the shoe and pulled out a small magnetic strip card. The card read GCS33 on the top edge. Other than the number, the card was quite plain, a white strip card of seemingly grand unimportance. The card was rather large for its design. Three inches by one inch. Its length signified a locker. Pelgrem placed the card into his sock. He then replaced the insole and dropped the shoe on the floor.

Pelgrem then waited for the councillors. The wait was taking too long. Pelgrem was sure five minutes had passed. Maybe they weren't coming. Maybe they were already there, watching with night vision cameras and were waiting for him to panic. His heart was racing. Maybe they knew and were waiting for him to do something. Too much time had elapsed. Pelgrem's mind was racing. *The sock. They will look at the sock. They'll find it instantly.*

Pelgrem reached down and pulled the card from his sock. He felt its smooth surface in his hand while turning it over time and again. Where to put it? Under the blanket? No. Too easy to find. In his pockets? Too easy to see the indentations. Toss it out the window? No guarantee that someone else wouldn't find it. Then, a handsome reward

would be required to retrieve it.

Footsteps. They were near. Pelgrem could hear the door unlocking. Peril. In mere seconds he would be caught. The door opened, lights came on. In a panic, Pelgrem shoved the card in his mouth.

As the councillors entered, the residents immediately rose and stood at the ends of their beds. They were a smarmy bunch who strutted around in their black uniforms like the only roosters in a hen house. They took pleasure in abusing residents in any manner they saw fit. There were no repercussions for them. The residents didn't exist. Their suffering didn't exist. Most of the councillors didn't exist. The entire notion of camps in America only vaguely existed.

Camps were more of a threat to small children who didn't want to eat their peas. Parents used it as a threat and was as common as the bogeyman. The general population of American citizenry either didn't care, didn't know, didn't want to know, or outright denied the existence of any type of camp that horded people together like cattle if they stepped out of line. Thus, when a child was threatened, it was no more real to them than walking on the moon. It was all rumors and supposition.

They knew people disappeared for a while. Some never returned. Many people assumed that law breakers ended up in prison, but the rumors of the camps persisted enough to make some wonder whether they really did exist. It was enough of a rumor, however, that it kept most citizens in line.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Mayan pictorial calendar predicted that the world would end in 2015. For millions of people across the world it did. Concentration camps were constructed first in



America, then throughout the world. Millions of people, believed innocent in the past, were thrown into oblivion. Their names erased from history and the minds of their families and neighbors.

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the horrors of the Nazis and Stalinist Russia were a distant memory. History had been pushed aside for the convenience of ignorance. Students no longer learned the mistakes of the past. Scant survey courses were the norms of classrooms across America in an attempt to circumvent the standards the rest of the world had held. The false inflation of perceived evidence rippled through America until it cascaded into the rest of the world.

The world had willingly arrived at a new age by gleefully giving up its sacrifices of the past to the new security the world's last superpower could provide. In less than twenty years, America had control over most of the world. Her pressure and influence was welcomed among the many nations. Now, in 2047, martial law ruled, though many believed that the Constitution still held and people still had freedom of choice. Privacy, nearly non-existent, was no longer a concern of the citizens of America. Safety was all that mattered in a world where those in the camps realistically had more freedom and choices than those in the outside world.

Camp 17 wasn't on any map and Pelgrem knew that if he were caught that was it. No appeal. He no longer existed. But he had to keep his card and hope it would never be discovered.

Johnny was still rising when a councillor arrived at his cot. He was directly across from Damaes. Johnny was overweight and was always slow to get up. He was a mere five foot nine but weighed nearly three hundred pounds. Johnny never understood why

he was there and no one in all of camp 17, resident or councillor, knew how he continued to stay so fat. Speculation narrowed it down to either eating rats or other things in the morgue where he worked during the day, or sexual favors. Whatever it was, he didn't fit in with the rest of barracks 84 and probably never would.

Councillor Chadwick Drake began making his infamous stroll down the barracks. He enjoyed harassing and torturing the campers in barracks 84. He had a special distaste for campers like Pelgrem who knew too much about the inner workings of the government and the world in general. The campers in barracks 84 were special. They were not your typical criminal that murdered or robbed people of their food and credit. These campers defied the very system that was put into place to protect all Americans from all criminals. People like Pelgrem and Damaes were a threat, not to the good, law-abiding citizens, but to the government itself. So if councillors like Drake wanted to have a little fun, the government looked the other way.

Three other councillors came into the barracks with Drake, though Pelgrem didn't recognize them. He assumed they must be the councillors on night duty that were rarely seen. Occasionally, campers would be awake in the middle of the night, and possibly speak with their bunkmate or someone in the next bunk, but it was rare to see a councillor from the night shift unless you had been caught doing something wrong. Pelgrem had seen some councillors at night from his window, but it was always dark and he was never able to make out their faces. The only thing he ever saw were the red stripes, signifying their ranks, on the cuffs of their sleeves as they occasionally passed under the lamp posts outside.

Two councillors headed towards the right side of the barracks and Pelgrem could hear

some rustling from that end of the barracks. Barracks 84 was divided in two, with the bathrooms in the middle. Thirty men were forced to share the bathrooms, which held three toilets, a urinal, two sinks and two showers. Pelgrem disliked and barely tolerated most of the men on the other side of the barracks, mainly because they had lived there for many more years than the men on his side. Several of them had been there ten years or more and knew nothing of the outside world. They didn't care about it anymore and were considered useless by society.

Those men gave up trying to understand why they were even being kept alive since the government had already deemed them unworthy for a place back in society. They couldn't be re-educated and, thus, were useless. No one understood why they just weren't executed. After all, these men didn't exist and it would have been cheaper to kill them rather than continue feeding them year after year. Nonetheless, there they lived, in limbo, not knowing anything but the four walls around them and the occasional work they were allowed to perform.

Councillors hated checking that side of the barracks. It was useless to them and no amount of pain delivered upon the campers had any effect. Mostly, Pelgrem just heard mumbling and grumbling from that end of the barracks with the occasional “Fuck You,” or “Piss Off,” from a camper. Pelgrem's end of the barracks, on the other hand, was a whole other story. Most of the campers on his side had been there three years or less. They were still green and could be cajoled, kicked or beaten into submission.

Some of the campers on his side had actually ended up back in society working for the government. They were usually placed into secure fields where they helped catch people like Pelgrem. These were the people he hated most. They defied the law to try to bring

about change, but the smallest amount of pain, and they conformed right back to what society had expected from them. Pelgrem hated these campers the most and wanted to hurt them himself for betraying what he believed so dearly.

Councillor Drake stopped near Larry's cot. Larry had been in the camp nearly a year, yet only once did he show that he might crack. This was after Drake decided to beat him mercifully and then tie him to a rack out in the hot, summer sun. Larry appeared as if he was going to crack and repent from his imaginary infractions. However, Fat Johnny saved him. In the middle of the night, Johnny brought water and bread to Larry. He did this for three nights until Drake was bored with torturing Larry and let him return to the barracks.

After that, no one called him fat Johnny. He was just Johnny. Though everyone still wondered where he got the extra food and bread, no one asked. They were just grateful that Larry survived. Afterwards, Drake took pleasure in random beatings of Larry, just to prove that he was still in charge.

Drake stepped closer to Larry and inspected his clothing. "I see you still haven't managed to dress yourself properly," Drake said to Larry as he took a step back in order to have enough room to swing his billy club at Larry. Larry wanted to respond, but knew it was best to say nothing. Drake swung his billy club and it landed squarely on the right side of Larry's head. Larry fell down to his knees and, as he tried to get back up, Drake hit him again on the back. "I did not tell you to rise, you scumbag." Drake walked over to Larry's bed and stripped it, throwing pieces of his bed linen on the floor and onto other cots.

"You are indeed a swine. How is it possible that you are even allowed to sleep in a

bed? If I see you sleeping in your bed again for the next week I swear, I will kill you.” Larry, afraid to rise to his feet, nodded assuringly in response that he understood. Drake walked back past Larry and kicked him twice in the stomach, then hit him in the head until a cut opened up under Larry's left eye. “Go clean that blood up now,” Drake shouted as Larry hurried into the bathroom. That was the safest place to be now. No one ever went in to check the bathrooms at night.

Councillor Drake moved further down the line, kicking or beating people at random. Pelgrem still wondered why they were here. Councillors hated entering the barracks and only did so when they were forced to exact some punishment that someone higher up decided needed to be dealt with immediately. Councillors especially enjoyed beating campers outside for all to see. They believed it was a great deterrent as well as entertainment for the councillors who were stationed in guard towers and bored most of the day.

It was much more fun for them to have a camper ask permission to use the bathroom and then force them to run in circles until they pissed themselves. It was also reassurance for them that the campers were worthless because, during incidents such as these, there were always a few campers who would laugh. Councillors claimed that this was proof that even the campers had distaste for each other. Thus, the councillors have always said that they would consider it an honor to eliminate many of the campers.

Pelgrem stood as still as he could, trying not to draw the attention of Councillor Drake. He desperately needed to swallow but was afraid he might choke on his card. Drake walked slowly over to him. Pelgrem's heart began to race. He could feel it beating in his throat. He was in no mood to be beaten or interrogated tonight, yet he feared that Drake

knew he was hiding something.

“Good evening, Mr. Godschalk,” Councillor Drake said to Pelgrem.

“Mr. Godschalk? Oh no!” Pelgrem thought to himself. Drake was using his last name. That was worse than when his mother called him by his full name as a little boy. Pelgrem looked down to the ground, showing deference to Drake and signaling that he heard Drake and was admitting that Drake was the one in charge. He hated doing this, but Pelgrem knew as well as anyone, letting Drake think he was in charge was better than any punishment he might mete out upon a camper.

“I see your shoes are not properly placed together at the edge of your bed. Is there a reason for this?” Drake said as he began to circle around Pelgrem. Pelgrem wanted to reply but knew if he did, Drake would surely know there was something in his mouth. There was no way to remove it without being seen either. Pelgrem began to panic and he glanced over at Damaes, hoping his friend could give some advice.

Damaes motioned towards his own feet and placed them together. Then he glanced over towards Pelgrem's shoes. Pelgrem immediately moved away from Drake, bent down, and aligned his shoes as they should properly be. He then stood back up at the edge of his bed, waiting to be whacked with a billy club.

“You see, you filthy campers?” Drake shouted as he stepped back into the center of the room. “This man understands that there is no argument. He knows when he is wrong and corrects his behavior.” Drake walked back to Pelgrem and patted him on the head. “That's very good of you, but I have reports that you are hiding contraband. I cannot have the head of my barracks breaking the rules.” Pelgrem looked at Councillor Drake and couldn't hide his shock.

“If you tell me now, it will not be as bad for you.”

*“Yeah, like that's a true statement,” Pelgrem thought to himself. “Get bent you dirtbag. Try and find it.”*

Drake looked at Pelgrem as if he knew what Pelgrem was thinking. “Fine. Have it your way.” Drake motioned over to the other councillor that was with him, and they began tearing apart Pelgrem's belongings. They tore up his bed, sliced open the mattress, flipped over his closet, ripped apart his shoes, and made him strip naked but they found nothing. Frustrated, Drake whacked Pelgrem three times in the head and face with his billy club. Pelgrem fell to the floor, spitting out blood from his mouth. His card slipped part way out but he was quick to suck it back in.

Luckily, Drake had not seen this happen and was busy yelling at Johnny, who had taken a step towards Pelgrem to help. Although he stopped once he realized what would happen, Drake had already drawn his gun and was waving it towards Johnny. Pelgrem was had kept his card concealed, but was worried that Drake might go nuts tonight. Once the other councillor moved towards Johnny, Pelgrem took his card out of his mouth and slipped it in the fresh, open slit of the mattress.

“Do you want me to kill you? Do you?” Drake shouted at Johnny. “Because I'll do it right here. I don't give a shit about contracts or who's looking out for you. I'll blow your fucking brains out right now, you worthless piece of shit.” Drake pulled the hammer back on his pistol. Everyone thought he was going to kill Johnny. Pelgrem jumped over and stepped in between Drake and Johnny.

“So, what's the problem in the barracks?” Pelgrem asked as the barrel of the gun was now touching his forehead. “It can't be to kill Johnny. He doesn't do anything.” Pelgrem

could feel his hands shaking from fear, but he had to try something. Drake uncocked the hammer and put his gun by his side.

“Godschalk,” Drake said, keeping one eye on Johnny and the other on Pelgrem. “You'd better control your people better. Next time, I'm not giving a warning. I'll just shoot him.”

“Yes, sir,” Pelgrem said, again lowering his head in deference to Drake. He looked over at Johnny and signaled to him with his eyes that he should do the same.

“Thank you, Sir, for the warning,” Johnny replied with his head down. “I won't let it happen again.”

The two campers stood there waiting for Councillor Drake to decide what he was going to do next. It was only a few seconds, but, to the campers, it felt like a lifetime. Drake holstered his weapon and said, “New guy,” amid a response of low moans.

“Find a spot for him, Godschalk, or I will keep searching for whatever it is that you're trying to hide.”

“Yes, Sir,” Pelgrem replied.

“Oh, and everyone place your shoes at the door to the barracks. You'll get new ones tomorrow afternoon. That is, everyone but Mr. Godschalk. You can keep those,” he said, pointing to Pelgrem's now mutilated shoes. “Or you can go without. It's your choice.”

Pelgrem opted to keep the shoes, hoping that he may be able to repair them enough to make them wearable until the next time new shoes were distributed. The new guy, who was standing near the exit door, was pushed forward by one of the councillors. He stumbled forward a bit, but kept his composure. The new guy looked around for signs of where he should go while carefully keeping an eye to the ground so that Drake would not



hit him on his way out. Drake and the councillors left without further incident, relieving the campers of any further stress for the evening.

“New guy,” Pelgrem said as he motioned to the new guy with his hand. “Come over here and sit on my bed. We’ll find you a spot in a few.” Pelgrem picked up the various bits to his bed and threw them on top of his mattress. He put his shirt and pants back on and grabbed the card from the mattress, sliding it into his pocket. Then, he went into the bathroom to clean his face.

“Hey,” Pelgrem said as he greeted Larry in the bathroom.

“Hey,” Larry replied looking around nervously. “They gone?”

“Yeah, you can go back to bed. I don’t think they’ll be coming back anytime soon.”

“What did Drake want this time?”

“To harrass me,” Pelgrem paused for a moment. “And to give us a new guy.”

“A new guy? Geesh, we don’t need this crap. We don’t have room for a new guy. And who’s to say he’s not spying for Drake?” Larry asked.

“It’s okay, Larry. I’ll sort it out.” Pelgrem dried his hands on the lone towel hanging in the bathroom. “You shouldn’t worry so much. And stop being so paranoid. If he is a spy, he’s probably looking for me. They know I have something but they don’t know what, which means there’s already a spy around us who knows half the story.”

“Did they find it?”

“Nope.” Pelgrem replied with a coyish smile. “It’s right here,” he said tapping his fingers on his right pocket. “Go ahead, get some sleep. We’ll sort everything out in the morning.”

Pelgrem finished cleaning his face and then took the card out of his pocket. He

cleaned the remaining blood off his card and said to himself, "I sure hope this still works."

Pelgrem walked back to his bed where he found the new guy clutching his possessions and refusing to talk to anyone. Pelgrem shook his head and tried to take the new guy's stuff. The new guy responded by clutching his possessions even tighter than before.

"Come on, jerk. I don't have time for this crap tonight. Gimme your stuff." The new guy shook his head no and tried to move away from Pelgrem. "I hate jerks. I really do," Pelgrem stated as he looked at Damaes. Pelgrem shook his head again and then shouted, "Anyone here want the new guy's stuff?" A collective "NO" rang out. "See? No one wants your junk. Now give it to me or you can sleep outside."

The new guy thought for a second and then released his death grip from his possessions. "That wasn't so hard now was it?" Pelgrem asked as he began putting the new guy's belongings under the bottom bunk.

Pelgrem leaned over towards his left and looked down the row of bunks. "Hey, young jerk."

"Yeah?" came the reply from the far left hand side row of bunks.

"What's your name again?"

"Barney."

"Barney?" Pelgrem asked. "No shit? That's your name?"

"Yes," he replied.

"No wonder you never complained about being called a jerk. Well, I think I would have killed myself if my parents had given me such a stupid name." Pelgrem looked back at the new guy and said to him, "From now on, you're the baby jerk and, when we think

you're ready, you'll just be a jerk.”

“But my name is...”

“Don't care, jerk. You may not live long enough to get a real name anyway.” Pelgrem said this so matter-of-factly that, if you didn't know him, it would seem as if he didn't care about anyone in the camp. However, all the campers knew there was little time in the camps to make friends. Most people died or were re-educated before they made it to Barracks 84. Those that did make it to 84 were either turned into spies or couldn't hack the life in 84, thus making 84 the ultimate re-education facility in the entire camp.

Pelgrem didn't like inadvertently re-educating people but he also wasn't stupid enough to betray the other campers in 84 for some jerk who knew nothing of the rules, of loyalty, or even of life. He was kind when he needed to be, but otherwise never trusted any new jerk. Tonight however, Barney had earned his trust. Barney had spent nearly nine months in 84, never giving anyone trouble and generally being one of the more trustworthy men to have been placed there. Besides, having more than one jerk in the same barracks can be dangerous.

“I'm not sharing my bunk with a jerk so you're going to have to spend the night on the floor until we find other arrangements in the morning,” Pelgrem told the new guy as he helped create a makeshift bed on the cold, concrete floor. The new guy settled in to his new accommodations while everyone else busied themselves with returning to their slumber, dreaming of better days and a better life.

The next morning at 7am, BJ, short for baby jerk, another endearing term the men of 84 enjoyed using on newcomers, got up and began shuffling around to straighten up his bed. He shook Pelgrem and asked when breakfast was to be served. Pelgrem responded by rolling over to the other side of his bunk and going back to sleep. “But surely we will have breakfast today,” he naively said. BJ looked around for some reply, any reply, but there were no words. Instead, he was bombarded with several small projectiles tossed from around the barracks and told to shut up and go back to bed.

BJ was confused. He didn't understand why there was no breakfast and he didn't know why everyone slept so late. However, not wanting to be the torture victim in the barracks, he curled up in the fetal position and lie on the floor, waiting for someone to tell him what he should do. All he knew was that he was hungry, confused, and did not enjoy his new surroundings.

Several hours later, the campers of Barracks 84 began to rise. Some instinctively made their beds, while others rushed off to use the facilities. Pelgrem and Damaes sat up in their bunks and exchanged a few quips concerning the horrible state of each other's hair until BJ interrupted them.

“When do we get food here?” he asked.

“For crying out loud you jerk, you're not even here ten hours and half of 84 wants to kill you. Learn how everyone else does, by watching. Questions are only going to get your ass kicked quicker.” With that the two men left for the lavatory, leaving BJ frozen in place. He was sure someone was going to kick his ass today. There was no way for him to avoid it.

BJ did heed at least some of Pelgrem's advice. He picked up his “bed” and

straightened his belongings before placing them under the bottom bunk. He still had no proper bed but thought it best to clean up and be as neat as possible, otherwise the threats of forcing him to sleep outside might come true.

BJ kept quiet until just after noon when he again began asking questions about when they were going to eat. His stomach was growling. The empty space inside him was making him feel sick. He needed some sort of food to put in his stomach or else he was going to throw up. He continued to beg, asking again and again, when lunch was served.

“Shut the fuck up already, you god-damned pain in the ass!” Barney yelled. Everyone in 84 fell silent, stopped what they were doing and looked at Barney. In all his time in the camp, he had never raised his voice or caused any trouble, however, his sentiments were felt amongst nearly everyone. They were sick of the whining and the constant reminder that they, too, had not had breakfast today. They were all hungry and trying to divert their attentions away from their stomachs. BJ's constant grumbling only reminded them how hungry they really were.

Unfortunately, Pelgrem felt matters had to be taken a step further. He took Damaes and Barney with him outside to find a councillor and ask why breakfast was not served at the usual 8:30am. Pelgrem mentioned on his way out that he'd be gone ten minutes at most.

The three men wandered about searching for a councillor. It seemed that the only ones around were the guards up in the towers. This was not surprising since it was such a beautiful, sunny day. On nice days, councillors would often take the more pliable minds to the northwest end of the camp to show off to visiting dignitaries and display how great the re-education process was going. They would also take those that now wanted to help

society out of the camps and onto local farms where they would pick strawberries, detassle corn, or any number of other farming projects. The local farmers appreciated the free labor, especially since they didn't have to deal with paying college kids who sat around half the day taking numerous breaks.

Damaes walked over towards one of the towers and stopped just short of crossing the invisible line where those in guard towers had free reign to open fire. “Hey, you up there!” he yelled. “What's up with starving us?”

The guard looked down from his tower and replied, “I have no idea but none of you even deserve to be fed even once.”

“*That's some good grammar there,*” Damaes thought to himself. Pelgrem stepped in and added, “Where is everyone?”

“They're out working, making better citizens of themselves. Maybe you should try it too. Then you won't be coming over here to bitch about not being fed. Go back inside. No one here cares if you eat or not. You're just taking up space.”

Damaes opened his mouth to say something but Pelgrem stopped him. “It's not worth it man. Come on, let's go.” The three men returned to the barracks with no real answers to give their fellow campers.

This wasn't the first time this had happened. Sometimes they just forgot 84. Sometimes they were forgotten on purpose. Sometimes there wasn't enough food so those that weren't going back to society were left off the food line.

Whatever the reason was, it wouldn't be the last time they would go without food. Pelgrem knew how they felt. Who needs to feed anyone who won't be a productive member of society, who tries to circumvent every law, and has a genuine displeasure for

how their country runs. Like the guard in the tower said, no one cares if the campers in 84 lived or died. They were useless members of society and, as soon as the government decides that they really can be killed, the better. There were certainly no shortages of volunteers in the camp who would help further the execution of that decision.

When the three men returned to 84, they found BJ lying in the middle of the floor crying. He was bleeding from every opening on his face. When he saw Pelgrem, he got up, stopped crying, and went into the bathroom. Barney glanced at BJ as he passed by and smiled with satisfaction. "Afraid there's no news boys," Damaes said as he returned to his bunk. A few moans were heard but there wasn't much anyone else could do. They would simply have to wait until dinner and hope they would be fed.

Dinner came and went and 84 still had no meal. Pelgrem and Damaes knew something terrible was wrong. They had never gone a whole day without food. By nightfall, most of the campers in 84 were eating their hidden rations. Everyone was silent until lights out when some low grumbling could be heard. Maybe they had finally made a decision on 84 and there was no longer a need to feed its inhabitants.

Shortly after 3am, Wil, from the other side of 84, came over and woke up Pelgrem. "Meet me in the bathroom in five minutes," he said and quickly disappeared back to his side. Pelgrem wondered if it was some sort of elaborate trick to make fun of him. The other side of 84 were often bored and loved to play tricks on whomever they could find. Still, it might be serious, especially since there would presumably be no witnesses to any prank they would pull. There was also the understanding that everyone on Wil's side wanted nothing to do with Pelgrem's side. The only people he ever spoke to were Pelgrem and Damaes, so Pelgrem believed something serious was happening in Camp 17.

Pelgrem woke Damaes and the two went to the bathroom together. As they walked in, Pelgrem turned on the lights. Immediately they heard a shout, “Turn those damned things off, you moron.” Pelgrem responded and then tried to see who was in the darkened bathroom. There were two figures he could barely see and assumed one of them must be Wil, but he didn't know who the other camper was.

“So what's this all about?” Pelgrem asked.

“We've been doing some, uhm, snooping, yeah, just snooping and we found out a few things about 84 and you Pel,” Wil said in a soft whisper.

Pelgrem wanted to pretend he didn't care, but the truth was he did. And why hide it? Everyone knew there was no way out, so why not just admit you wanted to know. “What did you find?” Pelgrem questioned inquisitively.

“More shit than you could ever imagine,” Wil replied. “I've got a proposition for you, if you're interested.”

Pelgrem looked at Damaes for his reaction, forgetting that he could barely see in the dark. He paused for a moment to think about what Wil just said. Although he believed this would probably be a huge prank that would land them all in trouble, Pelgrem decided he was interested enough to find out what Wil knew.

“Go ahead. What did you find out?”

“Well, first, they are purposely starving you guys. Not just for today. It's going to be for an entire week. They'll bring some water in tomorrow morning but that's all there is going to be. Here. Eat this,” Wil said as he passed Pelgrem and Damaes two slices of bread each. “You've pissed them off big time Pel. They believe you have some secret card that can get you out of the camp.”



“But I don't. I..”

“Doesn't matter. They think it, so you're starving. Anyway, something's up with Johnny. He pissed someone off but Joe here hasn't figured out the details yet.”

“All I found out so far is that Johnny isn't holding up his end of the bargain, whatever that is or was,” Joe piped in. Joe was Wil's unofficial investigator. He always had the dirt on anyone and everyone in the camp. He knew almost everything about the residents of 84 as well as most of the councillors. He knew a lot about the other barracks but most of that was uninteresting banter. The other barracks residents didn't stay long enough to warrant knowing everything about each individual in it.

“You'd better be careful Pel,” Joe warned. “All hell is gonna break out soon.”

Pelgrem thought for a moment. There was a time when no one trusted Johnny, but since the time he helped out Larry, he had changed. Pelgrem had seen it. Others probably had too. Everyone knew a kid like Johnny didn't stay fat without help. So he must have tried to change the arrangement he had and now it was coming back to bite him in the ass, as well as the stomachs, of all of 84. “So what else you got?” Pelgrem asked. “We have enough rations stored for a few days. I'm sure we can stretch it out to a week.”

“Well, some of you might not make it to the end of the week,” Wil replied matter-of-factly. Pelgrem and Damaes were stunned. They knew this was a death sentence on someone in 84. “That young kid with the blond hair. The Russian. What's his name?”

“Val,” Damaes replied.

“Yeah that's him. Valentino. Joe wasn't able to find out what's going on, but the day after tomorrow he's done.” Everyone knew what “done” meant. The anger began to rise

from within the depths of Pelgrem's empty stomach. Surely, the only thing Val could have done is urinated on a building. He was always doing that. It was his way of getting revenge on the bastards that put him in camp 17.

“Before you get your knickers in a knot, there's more Pel.” Wil said with a slightly concerned voice. “There's talk in the councillor's offices that they finally decided what to do with us. Guys on your side are rumored to be split up into different barracks and possibly being shipped to other camps.

“Guys on my side are going to be tortured into submission or death. I know some of my guys aren't going to last long if that happens.” Pelgrem was dumbfounded. He was in utter shock. He didn't know whether to believe it as truth or take it as yet another rumor. He remained silent for several seconds, processing the information he had just received.

Pelgrem finally found his voice and asked, “Do you think it might just be that they know Joe is listening and are feeding us information to freak us into submission?”

“Joe's not the one checking that out. Val is,” Wil replied. With that statement, the four men found an eerie quiet in the bathroom. It was suddenly clear now why Val was a target. In the silence, Pelgrem began to think of a way he could devise to get Val to safety. Escape was the only way, but no one had ever left 17 on their own.

After a few minutes Damaes spoke. “We need to get Val out of here. This is bullshit. We can't let him die for something you made him do.”

“Hey, he did it all on his own accord,” Joe interrupted.

“Let's just all calm down here,” Pelgrem begged. “We don't need to be at each other's throats. We'll just have to figure out how we get him out of here.”

“Phil works in the laundry,” Wil said. “I'll ask him if he can help. I'll see what I can

do. I can't make any promises, but you're going to have to tell Val right away to be prepared at any moment to leave.” Pelgrem nodded in agreement. The four men then agreed that they would meet again in the morning as soon as Wil had more news.

Pelgrem lie in his bed unable to sleep. The news of Val's impending doom weighed heavily on him. It shouldn't, but it did. He swore he would never care about the people on his side but, somehow, he always did. He couldn't help himself.

And what about Phil? He was assigned to do a daily head count on 84 and report back to Drake. Pelgrem wondered if Phil could really be trusted. Pelgrem didn't trust anyone outside of 84 and some who were in it.

The next morning the campers again began to wonder what was going on. They were still denied food and wanted to know why. Some had no rations at all and were starting to complain that others weren't sharing. Small arguments began to break out, but some of the older campers managed to quell the rising tide of hunger by getting those with bigger stashes to share a little with the less experienced. Pelgrem told the campers to be patient and he would find out what was happening. He then asked Damaes and Val to join him.

The three men went outside the barracks and walked along 84 until they reached the far end where it was relatively quiet. There, Pelgrem stopped and told Val the bad news. Val took it rather well, commenting “shit” and “fuck” several times as well as leaning over as if to vomit.

“Fu-u-ck,” he exclaimed again, running his left hand through his dirty hair. “What am I gonna do?”

Damaes grabbed his shoulders and said, “First, settle down. It's going to be alright. We got something in the works.” Damaes tried to reassure him with his calming voice,

but Val continued to be agitated by the news he just heard. “Hey, come on, when has Pel ever let us down, eh? It’ll be okay. Just trust us.”

Pelgrem stepped closer to Val and put his arm around him. “Look we can’t guarantee anything, but our plan will at least give you a chance. If you do nothing, then you’re going to die anyway.” Pelgrem looked Val in the eyes. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” the doomed man replied. “I guess it’s better than nothing.” Pelgrem knew Val wasn’t convinced, but both men knew the futility of worrying. Pelgrem informed Val of the late night bathroom conversation while Damaes kept an eye out for any patrolling councillors. After an hour, they returned to the barracks.

“I have news,” Damaes shouted as he entered 84. “We’re purposely being starved to death,” he bleated out before Pelgrem could speak up with a better lie. Then again, why lie to them? They deserved to know why they were being starved. “Those morons out there,” Damaes continued, “are planning on our hunger turning us against each other. That way, we kill each other and rid them of the problem of us.”

This statement irked the inhabitants of 84. They all vowed to help each other out. They weren’t going to let the man win. Pelgrem looked around the barracks and smiled. The masses had won yet again. It was an old story, told many times before, yet, somehow, those who oppress never seem to learn. Whenever you try to control people who don’t want control they are going to push back. And it’s even worse if they know what you are doing. That just makes their resolve that much stronger.

“See?” Pelgrem said as he patted Val on the shoulder and headed back to his bunk. “It’s all going to be just fine.”

Several hours passed and it was well into the afternoon. A few campers were playing

cards made from old pieces of cardboard found within Camp 17, some were gathered in a corner chatting, while others were taking an afternoon nap. Pelgrem and Damaes were looking out the window near the back of the barracks.

There were other campers who were re-educated enough to be allowed to play soccer. Barracks 84 wasn't allowed to play games or even attend any type of sporting event in the camp. While this was an obvious pick-up game, the campers were, nonetheless, allowed to continue to play.

Pelgrem felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around to see BJ point down towards the other end of 84. Wil was leaning against the wall and, as soon as Pelgrem saw him, he turned around and disappeared into the bathroom. Pelgrem turned back towards the window and whispered to Damaes, "Let's go." The two men met Wil and Joe in the bathroom a few moments later.

"It's all set," Wil said reassuringly. "My boys are going to create a diversion five minutes after we enter the laundry."

"That's great," Pelgrem responded. "But I do have one question."

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"Why are you guys doing this? You could have just sat back and done nothing."

"Two reasons," Joe answered. "First, it's our responsibility. He may live on your side but he's always helped us out. Didn't matter if it was with extra food or info. Second, well, what the hell. We got nothing better to do today." Joe and Wil began to laugh. Pelgrem and Damaes grinned from ear to ear. They knew exactly what Joe meant. The old timers on the other side of 84 would have something to talk about for months after an incident like this.

“Okay then,” Pelgrem said. “What do we need to do?”

“Have your boy ready in ten minutes,” Wil replied. “And have him take some dirty clothes to the laundry, just in case anything goes wrong. Make sure Val takes only what fits into his pockets. Anything else has to be left behind. You two go with him like you're just helping him. We'll take care of the rest. Now go, before it gets too late.”

Pelgrem and Damaes returned to their side of 84. Damaes bundled up three piles of clothes while Pelgrem walked over to Val, who was playing cards. He leaned over and whispered into Val's right ear, “Time to go, my friend.” Val tried to hide the expression on his face. The other campers playing cards saw the terrified look in Val's eyes. They knew something was happening, but didn't ask what.

Val politely rose and said, “I'm a bit tired of cards today. Anyone wanna take my place?” A few responded and one hopped into his place. Val paused for a moment and then returned to his bunk. He gathered a few personal items, took a deep breath, then turned to Pelgrem and nervously said, “I'm ready.”

The three campers from 84 confidently walked towards the laundry. If any of them had monitoring pacemakers on, their heartbeats would have given them away. Pelgrem could feel his heart beating in his throat. It was so forceful that he felt as if he was going to be sick. He swallowed hard and tried his best to ignore it. As they approached the laundry, a councillor crossed their path. All three men felt their hearts stop for just a moment. The councillor, however, sneered at them and continued on his way.

Inside the laundry, they saw Phil at the counter waiting for them, as well as another camper who was watching the soccer game. Pelgrem, unsure of what he was to do next, looked blankly at Phil. Picking up this cue, Phil interjected, “Right boys, you want some

laundry done?" Silence. "Well, come on now. I haven't all day. Give me your laundry."

Coming out of his momentary shock, Pelgrem hastily gave him the bag of laundry and waited for his ticket to retrieve them later. Damaes and Val followed. Val gave his ticket to Pelgrem, since, hopefully, he wouldn't need to retrieve his laundry. They were nearly done and Phil looked a bit worried. Wil still had not arrived.

Phil and Pelgrem exchanged glances with neither knowing what was going wrong. Wil should have been there by now. Phil, trying to be casual, said, "Okay, you can pick this stuff up day after tomorrow." He was desperately trying to buy some time. It was obvious to all four men that they were left hanging now.

Just then, the camper watching the game spoke up. "Hey look at those idiots from 84. They're completely messing up the game." He was agitated and started yelling obscenities through the window. The four men pushed him aside so that they could see for themselves what was happening.

Sure enough, Wil kept his promise of a diversion. The men from his side of the camp had jumped into the soccer game and were playing keep-away with the ball, tossing it from one man to the next. This went on for several minutes before Wil burst through the door to the laundry and said to the camper, "Hey, kid, you'd better go find a councillor before this turns ugly."

The camper, ever obedient, left the laundry to find a councillor. As soon as he was gone, Wil motioned to Joe, who in turn, tipped his cap to the men of 84 who had disrupted the soccer game. Keep-away was now an all-out-brawl. Joe ran into the laundry. While the fighting continued outside, keeping the councillors busy, the men in the laundry readied Val for his departure.

First, they gave him a clean set of clothing. It was still standard issue camp wear but at least it was clean. Next, Joe gave Val a small atomizer of cologne. “Here, don’t use this until you’ve gotten well away from camp. I swiped it from one of the councillors. Once you’re on the outside, use it so people think you actually belong out there.”

Val took the small atomizer and shoved it in his front pocket. “Oh yeah,” Joe added. “Take this too,” he said as he handed Val a small travel-sized bottle of deodorant.

“No need to be smelly, eh?” Val responded with a grin. He put the deodorant in his left pocket as Wil turned to him and handed him a small wad of money.

“You’re going to need this to get where you are going. Just make sure you stay off the major transportation hubs and you’ll be fine. Val took another deep breath as he placed the money in his front, right pocket. Not many people used actual cash anymore, but it was still acceptable and Wil had silently hoped that no one noticed the missing money. He had obtained it from another camper who had liberated the cash from the councillor’s shower. It was unlikely to be noticed since the camper had taken only a few bills from each councillor.

While money was still accepted and legal almost anywhere, it was only used by a select few. Obviously, those who had something to hide used it as often as possible. Camp councillors also used cash while at work. Since their jobs were officially non-existent, the military and the government wanted as little evidence as possible to trace and track camps that they claimed didn’t exist.

Although cash continued to use RFID tags within them, it remained using the outdated version 2.7.3 to track where the money was used. The most the government could tell was that it was used on a Tuesday to buy a candy bar and on a Friday to buy beer.



Cameras in stores could link up to a picture of who used the cash, but there was no way of knowing if the cash was ever used in an illegal transaction.

It was time to move Val. Joe remained at the door to the laundry to keep an eye out for any councillors nearby. Phil remained behind the counter in case a camper wandered in and actually wanted some service for his laundry. Val, Pelgrem, Wil, and Damaes went to the back of the laundry. Wil and Damaes began to gather the old laundry that would be distributed to the poor and prepared the boxes for removal.

The laundry facility was run mostly by the campers. Those that were considered trustworthy were given a chance to prove themselves in one of the many facilities in the camp. Once they had proved themselves in places, such as the laundry or kitchen, they were moved to a less secure camp and prepared for reintegration into society.

Old laundry was removed when there was enough to donate to the poor on the outside. A camper would simply notify a councillor, who would, in turn, make a telephone call for a truck to come and take away the necessary laundry. The old laundry mainly consisted of articles of clothing a camper may have had upon entering a camp. If a camper never left, he no longer needed these clothes. Re-education required a minimum of one year in a camp and fashions typically changed during a camper's stay, so there was no need to keep the clothing. Upon leaving the camp, a camper would be given new clothing, thus, there was no need to ever keep their old clothing.

There were also campers that died in the camps, through no fault of the councillors, of course. Their bedsheets were considered taboo to use again and were tossed into the donation pile. It was amongst these articles that Val would make his escape.

Pelgrem took Val aside and began to instruct him on where he should go once he

managed to get free. Pelgrem had only hoped that his old contacts were still alive and well and that the location he knew of was still in use. If not, Val would be a goner in a matter of weeks. If his contacts were no longer there, Val could not survive without an identity.

“First thing you need to do,” Pelgrem began, “is to use your money wisely. Buy a loaf of bread and only eat two pieces a day. Get a bottle of water and sip it. A man can live up to two weeks on one teaspoon an hour of water. If you manage to make it to my contact, you will be a bit weak, but they will give you the food and water you need. Use the rest of the money for bribes to get there. Hitching on back roads is your best bet since most people there still sit on the fence when making decisions on the government. Some nearly untraceable money is always good for them.

“Now, you need to get to Chicago via Minnesota. This means you need to get to Grandma's coffee shop near the aerial lift bridge in Duluth. Go inside the coffee shop and ask for a small tea with no milk or sugar. Then, ask for the tea in a large to-go cup so you can drink it outside. If they question you, say that you need the large cup because it's easier to handle than the small cup.

“Take the tea outside and walk along the walkway for about twenty feet. Stop and lean against the railing, staring at the bridge. No matter how thirsty you are, don't finish the tea. Someone will eventually come up to you and say '*Aneen*' to you. Reply with '*a-ni-shi-na-bay na gi-dow*'.”

“What the hell is that?” Val asked.

“It's Ojibwe. It's an ancient Indian dialect that no one really speaks anymore outside of the Indian reservations. Don't worry. It will be okay. Now, he will respond to you '*a-ni-*

*shi-na-bay gi-dow'*. If you do not get that reply, walk away. Don't hesitate to run if you have to. If you get the right response, they will take you to Chicago. From there, you'll get a new identity and it will be up to you how you use your new life. Now, let's practice a bit so that you have it down when you get there.”

The two campers said the greeting and reply several times until Val was able to recite both without stammering. Then, they rejoined their partners in crime. They had organized the donations into two large boxes. One was large enough to hold Val if he crammed himself into the box. Everyone's heart rate was beginning to elevate, none more than Val, who was taking the biggest risk of all. He would be shot on sight if he was caught.

“Phil is going to put you in the truck with a dolly,” Wil said, “and then he will tap three times on the box, pause, then tap two times, pause, then kick the box once. From then on, you'll just have to play it by ear to know if you are out of the camp. I would wait at least fifteen minutes, so count your mississippis.”

“Okay,” Damaes said, placing his arm around Val, “once the truck leaves the camp, use this shank to cut open the box. Then, keep an eye out of the back window for an opportune time to get out. You must make sure that you reseal the box as best as you can so as to not arouse suspicion. Also, be careful that no one sees you exit the truck. After that, it's up to you to get wherever you need to be.”

Val took the shank from Damaes and stuck it into his rear, right, pants pocket. They all wished Val a safe journey, hugged him and then helped him into the box. Pelgrem tapped on the top of the box and whispered, “Best of luck my friend,” and then exited to the front of the laundry.

The campers took turns exiting the laundry. No one seemed to notice since most of the councillors were busy hog-tying many of the campers of 84. Pelgrem chuckled as he left the laundry, knowing that the councillors were clueless to the actions of a few men. He returned to 84 and his bunk, waiting, hoping, for what was to happen next.

The next morning, the entire camp was awakened by the sounds of the escape whistle. Pelgrem lie in his bed, smiling, knowing that it was only a few moments ago that the councillors had any indication that someone was missing. He counted in his head almost 15 hours that Val had on them. Surely that was enough time for him to be far away from the camp, out of the state, and well on his way to a new life. At least he hoped so. There was no bed check the night before, which wasn't unusual because the guards would often not do a bed check, even though they were supposed to. Why count when you could spend your time indoors playing poker or taking a nap? But now, someone was missing. Someone had grassed out. No count last night meant that only an informer could have told the councillors that someone was missing. Whomever decided not to count the night before would surely be in trouble this morning.

Pelgrem and the other campers of barracks 84 took their time lining up outside. It would take some time to get to their barracks and no one was overly ready to head out in their shorts to be counted in the cool morning air. Nearly everyone in the barracks knew why the whistle sounded and what was to happen next. They slowly lined up but, instead of complaining about the cold on their bare skin, they looked straight ahead, beaming with pride, knowing that they had bested the councillors and the guards.

If Val was truly free, there would be a major lockdown and a steep decline in activities until he was found. There had to be a body found, someone held responsible or a snitch found, otherwise, life could never return to normal. That is, as normal as being in a giant, open-air cell can be.

Pelgrem knew, however, that if one could get free, others could go as well. It would be more difficult each time, but it would be possible and he'd be there to stick it to them

every time.

The men of 84 slowly lined up, cold, tired, and hungry, waiting for the councillors to reach their barracks. They could hear the guards shouting orders in the distance to those that were more weak-minded. Pelgrem imagined that some were spilling their guts just to be allowed to return to their beds for a few more minutes of precious slumber. He was sure, too, that some were being beaten just for the hell of it, sheer pleasure for the guards who were always a bit more harsh on those they knew they could break.

Some of the guards had given up on beating those in 84, simply because it's no fun to beat a man who either enjoys it or won't give in to the desire of crying out in pain. Those guards found other ways to annoy those of 84. They'd take away food privileges. They would go into the barracks and randomly take items such as blankets, clothes, shoes, or whatever else they decided they wanted campers to be without. Stealing shoes was especially fun for them in the winter. It amused them greatly to watch a camper walk around in socks or bare feet in the cold, harsh, Nebraska winters. Beating never worked on 84, but thievery was a nice alternative.

Pelgrem could hear the guards getting closer. If they weren't satisfied by now, they would know that everything stemmed from 84 and there'd be hell to pay. No camper had ever left on his own accord. He either left in a body bag or was brow beaten into submission to the re-educators in the classrooms. Damaes leaned over to ask Pelgrem a question but saw the guards rounding the corner of the barracks and thought it best to keep quiet for the moment. One whisper seen could mean a relinquishing of food and Damaes was quite hungry already. The other members of 84 that knew what was happening tried to hide their pride as best as they could as the guards and councillors

stood in front of them.

“I'm willing to bet,” Councillor Drake shouted, “that several of you know exactly why we're here today.” He paused for a few seconds and then continued. “I'm also willing to bet that many of you know what happened and were probably involved in this incident.”

The silence of 84 could be heard throughout the camp as each member of 84 contemplated the pros and cons of talking or remaining silent. Councillor Drake began walking along the front row of men, while every now and then he dipped into the second row, just to make sure all the men were paying attention. As he walked, he continued shouting.

“Many of you here will never see the glorious world outside ever again. You know it is your duty to report anyone that has been guilty of misconduct, yet you refuse to play by the rules, set up by the majority of the people. They don't want people like you around them. That is why you are here. If you cannot get along with them, their patience will run out. They are losing more patience with you every day.”

Drake reached the end of the row and began walking back towards the guards. “When their patience is finally gone, you will be eliminated. Tell me what I need to know and I will guarantee that you will not face elimination once it arrives.”

The campers of 84 knew full well that their lives were in danger most of the time. For the last few years, those in power that knew what was really happening on the inside, had debated the usefulness of people like those in 84. They could not be re-educated and they were taking valuable time, money, and resources away from the healthy, productive members of society. There would come a day, and many in 84 feared that day was now sooner rather than later, when it was decided not to keep the undesirable, rebellious lot.

Drake gave the campers a few moments to decide what to do. Then, he motioned to a guard who, at random, walked into the column of the 84, pointed his gun at a camper's head, and pulled the trigger. The camper, Matthew, was dead. Joe, who had been standing next to him had a horrible ringing in his ear and it was now difficult to hear anything that was said. He only hoped Drake didn't ask a question of him.

The guard returned to Drake's side, allowing the shock to settle in. Drake returned to his shouting. "This is what will happen every five minutes until I find out who is responsible." Almost on cue, both Larry and BJ came forward and said they knew who arranged the escape. Pelgrem's heart began to race. He was sure this would be the way his life ended. He knew the others were just as nervous, but he was afraid that he would receive a harsher penalty. Drake had often relied on him to keep order on his side of the barracks and Drake would surely put the blame on him.

This was the first time in his life that he was truly scared of dying, not because he feared death itself, but because he felt that his death should be on his own terms and not by the whims of a crazy councillor that was power hungry, jumping at every opportunity to inflict pain on others. He was also upset that Larry had so readily turned on him. Pel looked out for Larry, took care of him, made sure that no one picked on him, despite the fact that he had been a BJ for so long. Pelgrem felt like he had been kicked in the gut and the pain was churning up his insides.

Drake cautiously allowed the men to step out of formation and stand a few feet from him. "Who was it?" Immediately, they both pointed to Matthew. Several of the 84 chuckled quietly. Pelgrem let out a sigh of relief. Wil looked at Joe and smiled. Drake was still a bit uneasy with the quick blame and what he thought was an obvious ruse so he



began to question the two men.

“You do realize,” he said as he stepped closer to the men, “that you admitted you knew what was happening and you didn't mention it to anyone?”

BJ quickly replied, “I had no solid proof that they were planning an escape. I only saw Val and Matthew with some papers and they hid them when I approached. It looked like the layout of the laundry room but I couldn't be sure.”

“And why did you not come to a guard to report this?” Drake asked.

“Because, they said that if I said anything, I'd be eating out of a tube the rest of my life or something worse. Not even the guards can protect me twenty-four hours a day in here.”

“What you fail to see is that if you had reported this, it would have been a sign that you are able to be re-educated and we would have moved you to another barracks.”

“But,” BJ replied argumentatively, “you still can't protect me there. These guys would still find a way to get me.”

“Stupid, insignificant fool!” Drake shouted as he whacked BJ in the face with the butt of his gun. Several of the campers cringed. BJ fell to the ground, wincing in pain. Drake kicked him twice in the gut and shouted towards the men of 84. “Get this piece of shit out of my sight.”

While several of the men of 84 took BJ back inside the barracks, Drake turned his attention to Larry. “What is your sorry excuse for not reporting this that will prevent you from dying next?” Drake had clearly lost patience now and wanted to lash out at someone, anyone. He was in charge and he was going to get blamed for the escape. Fortunately, Larry had had time to think of an answer that wouldn't get himself killed.

“I didn't put it together until this morning when you came. Yesterday, I saw Val and Matthew talking in the corner of the barracks. They were looking over a large piece of paper when I came in. They immediately hid it, but I'm now guessing it must have been that map that BJ saw. Anyway, they asked me if I wanted in on a little fun that was risky and I could get killed. I said no thanks and didn't think anything of it until now.”

Drake pondered what Larry had said and then asked him, “What do you think they were trying to do? They said it would get them killed. Why didn't you report to a guard or a councillor what had occurred?”

“Because everything you do here is risky and can get yourself killed. Hell, I'm surprised breathing isn't illegal in the camp yet.” Drake smacked Larry across the face with his hand.

“Don't be a wise ass,” he said.

“Why?” Larry replied, “Is that a killable offense as well?”

Drake didn't answer. He knew Larry had stated the truth. Most tiny infractions could get a camper killed. It all depended on the mood of the councillor that day. Drake shoved Larry and told him to return to the line, then he motioned towards another guard, who ran around the back of the barracks and returned with Phil.

“My sources say that this man was responsible for the escape. If he is, he is yours now to do what you want with. He will now live in 84, in the dead man's place. If he isn't responsible, you will share half your food with him for the next month. If he is, I do not care what happens to him.” Drake shoved Phil towards the men of 84 and he and his men left the area.

The tension that was hanging over the men of 84 subsided and everyone could finally

breathe easier. They all began to return to the barracks to get dressed and begin another day. As they filed in, they made sure to thank Larry and the injured BJ for their quick thinking. BJ wasn't going to lose his name anytime soon, but today, he had become a full member of 84.

The rest of the day was relatively quiet and uneventful, but Pelgrem could see that some of the men were a bit uneasy. Matthew's death had hit them hard in one way or another. Many were friends with him, while others liked him, enjoyed his company or generally felt horrible that it could have been them that had been picked at random. Several of the long term residents of 84 knew that you can't decide fate or chance and you surely can't change the mind of a councillor. They no longer felt guilty over the randomness in the camps.

Instead, they took it upon themselves to cheer up the others and remain hopeful in the knowledge that they were still alive. Life was hope for the long time campers. Life meant that there was still a chance to leave one day when all this madness was over. Life meant another chance someone would help change the system they were all slaves to.

\* \* \*

Night fell on the camp quickly that evening. Pelgrem wasn't sure if it was because he wasn't paying attention or if God had granted an early end to the day. Either way, tomorrow would be better, maybe brighter, and the men could begin to move on. Tonight, however, Pelgrem had decided to cheer the men up with the "How'd you get here?" game. It always lightened the mood and made the men smile at the ridiculous reasons that society had deemed you a criminal.

Pelgrem gathered the men together in the middle of his side of the barracks in an effort

to entertain them and help them forget, if only for a little while, what had happened that day. He enjoyed this game, especially when there were new faces in the barracks.

He called together the men and they began telling the stories of how they ended up in Camp 17 and, particularly Barracks 84. Pelgrem started, as he always did, in an effort to get things started and to lighten the mood a bit for those that may be a little hesitant to share their stories.

“I’ve been in here nearly three years,” Pelgrem began, “and in 84 right from the start. I was deemed 'not teachable' and placed here without any attempt to reeducate me. That suits me fine because I never would have given in anyway.” Pelgrem paused for a moment to gather his thoughts before he began to explain how his life had taken a turn to the road that led to the camp.

“I had been a courier for a group that wishes to remain unknown,” he said as many of the men knew what a courier's job entailed. It wasn't a respectable courier job where you had legitimate business contacts and carried important papers or items for corporations or even the government.” No, the men of 84 knew that this type of courier was the most risky job in the world. This courier would carry anything anyone wanted, legal or otherwise, to whatever destination was asked. This type of courier often skirted the law, constantly looking over his shoulder and went to great lengths to remain unknown, invisible and non-existent.

They knew that if Pelgrem was one of these men, these underground revolutionaries, that he had been someone important or known many important people in the underground. They rarely got caught and, when they did, they usually didn't live long enough to tell anyone about it. The government enjoyed putting couriers on public

display to proudly proclaim, “we are beating the illegal, underground world and we will win this fight.” It was all propaganda, of course, but it scared many young children into walking the straight and narrow for fear that they would disappear into the camps somewhere and never return.

As soon as the gasps, ooohs, and ahhs settled down, Pelgrem continued. “I wasn't however, ever caught for the things that I 'transported' from one place to another. No, the Man never touched me. That is why I am here. He suspects who I was and what I did, but he could never prove it. So, I've been thrown in here, in the hopes that, one day, I will reveal all.

“The problem is, as soon as I didn't check in at my proper time, all my codes, contacts, security clearances, if you can call them that, were erased. I now only have one contact who personally knows me and only one way to contact that person. Even if I wanted to talk, I couldn't. Nothing remains.” Pelgrem glanced around the room and saw that he had their full attention and proceeded to explain how he arrived at 84.

“I had lived with my parents until the time of their detention. When they were arrested, my sister and I were instructed to wait until their return or until they had sent instructions of where we were to meet with them. We had prearranged our meeting place and a code word, just in case. My parents were, at the time, major contributors to the underground and fought openly at the approved rallies against the government. I don't know why they were arrested,” he took pause to think for a moment of what he didn't know. “And I probably never will. Perhaps the government grew tired of people protesting. Perhaps they were more involved than I knew.” Pelgrem paused again, thinking of the consequences of his thoughts.

“Anyway, they never returned. Instead, a man from the DQA came to talk to my sister and I.” The Department for Quality Assurance. More feared than the NSA, FBI, CIA, and DHS combined. They alone were responsible for the camps, their integration out of society's view, and the requirements for gaining permission to leave the camps. Most people knew them as the propaganda wing of the government. They were what the DHS was hoped to be, but never was. The DHS turned into a bureaucratic joke, while in the background, the DQA gained the real power.

Its establishment in 2037 was attached as a rider to a much needed federal highway improvement system. New lanes needed to be added to keep up with the demand for the automatic car lanes. Most people had autodrives by then and the regular roadway system was becoming antiquated. There was a great need for new technology to be placed on the roadways to monitor the cars and ensure safety and security of America's driving citizens. The politicians knew that no one would fight against such needed improvements to infrastructure.

“So, in walks this guy in a spiffy new black suit and tells us that we need to pack a bag because we are going to see our parents,” Pelgrem continues. “We pack our bags and off we go in their shiny black limousine. It was real nice and I think it was meant to impress us so we would be too distracted to think about anything else. About halfway there, I suspect something is up. Of course, I don't trust anyone so I ask about the password and they haven't a clue. They give me the wrong one but I pretend it's the right one.

“I leaned over to my sister, who was playing some game on the new Boxy PlayCube, and told her it wasn't safe and we needed to get out of the car. She giggled at me and called me silly. She always called me silly when she was more interested in what she

wanted to do instead of paying attention to what was important. I told her we had to leave now but she refused. Then, I did the only thing I have ever regretted in my entire life.

“As the car slowed down for a red light, I jumped out and ran,” Pelgrem paused as his voice choked up and then continued with words that dripped with regret, remorse, and sadness. “I ran as fast as I could. I didn't take my sister with me. I didn't even look to see if she was following me. I just ran. I ran and ran until I was so tired and sick that I felt like I was going to throw up. I did throw up. Then, I kept on running. I spent that night alone for the first time in my life. I slept inside a cow barn. I awoke hungry and tired and wandered for hours until I finally figured out where I was and what I should do.

“I had one friend I could contact on the interweb. One single person I knew I could trust and could help me. She got me to safety, got me new papers and I slowly learned the ways of the underground until I became a courier.” Pelgrem stopped talking for a few moments. He didn't like telling the part about his sister but had always felt it was necessary to include it in order for people to understand what he had given up, even though, at the time, he didn't realize what he had done. In the silence, the jerk spoke.

“So how did they catch you?”

Pelgrem glared at the newbie and continued with his story. “I worked for many years with this group. I won't say how long, so don't ask. That would pinpoint too many things that the government doesn't need to know. One day, minding my own business, I dropped a package and then went to get a Vanilla Coke. I stopped at the first bodega there was and didn't think much of it. Unfortunately, a hold-up ensued. Yes, I was a chicken and hid near the back of the store with the other customers. The cops got there fast though.

Too fast. I was stuck. I had to give my account of what I'd seen and then they asked for my ID.

Pelgrem stopped, shook his head, and thought about the unbelievable stupidity that had gotten him caught. "I gave all the info and my ID came back as wanted. We had forgotten to change the main database and my identification was still linked with my parents." The men of 84 gasped again, then a silence fell upon the room. Each man knew that, once you are in that database, you're linked to it forever, no matter if it's right or if it's wrong.

"They were still looking for me years later. I had just assumed they would have given up on me and let me rot out in the world. I mean, according to the government's own preachings, it's impossible to live without your ID or your chip. I didn't have either when I jumped from that car, so I should, theoretically, be dead. That was it for me. Five days of interrogation and then I was dumped here. No explanation of my crime. No idea if I'm wanted for jumping out of that car, if they want to know how I lived so long without them knowing about me or if it's connected, somehow, to my parents."

"And what about your sister?" BJ asked.

"No clue," Pelgrem responded. "I searched for a while the first few years but I never found her. I still don't know if she's even alive or dead.

"But, enough about me. My story is depressing. I can give you exciting details of my life as a courier later. Some of these other fellows have great stories," Pel paused for a moment, looked around the room and then directed his attention to Larry. A huge grin came onto Pelgrem's face. "Why don't you tell us what you did?"

Larry smiled and began his tale. "Well, you see, I was a carpenter. Pretty good one



too. I could hand make just about anything and repair most things too. So, anyway, I have this little woodworking tool for fine carving. It's automatic and more precise than traditional tools and still does the job well. It's basically a small carving blade for fine and delicate items. Anyway, it came with the standard EULA, which I didn't read," He paused for a moment. "Then again, who does read them?" Of course BJ raised his hand. He didn't even know what a rhetorical question was. Larry ignored him and continued.

"So, I'm using this thing for about six months and a friend wanted to look at it and try it out to see if he could use it in his business. He was a carpenter as well. Since it costs a thousand bucks I said sure. Well, the stupid RFID chip inside said that his fingerprint didn't match the fingerprint of the owner and sent a warning out. A couple of hours later, the cops arrive and arrest us both.

"My friend apparently, spilled his guts to everything bad he's ever done, including lusting after some stupid movie star. He begs for forgiveness so they send him to Camp 5 where, I heard, he made remarkable progress. He was convicted of stealing woodworking technology and stalking a movie star but then became an exemplary citizen. I got sent to camp 5 for a few weeks but, refused to apologize for what I did. Hell, I refused to even admit I'd done anything wrong. They beat me a few times, but I didn't have anything to confess to. They concluded that, since I didn't confess to anything, that I must have done something else, more serious wrong. So they sent me here and I'll probably never get out."

Larry sighed deeply then said, "I was even told my marriage was annulled and my wife had moved on. I'm only grateful no kids were involved as they would have had to take extra classes after school to ensure that they didn't turn out like their father."

“Thanks for sharing Larry,” Pelgrem said, avoiding the long silence he knew was to come once Larry began thinking about his wife again. “Anyone else?”

Several more campers shared their stories from the ludicrous to the asinine, with everyone sharing their thoughts and ideas on how things got so twisted according to the law. Barney was particularly funny with his story of trying to outwit the law, which he was successful at many times.

“So, yeah, eventually the cops caught me,” Barney chuckled, “but they had a hell of a time catching me. I managed to elude them through seven states simply by switching out my ID with whomever was closest to me. You don't even have to be close to people anymore to temporarily swipe someone's ID.” Barney laughed and then continued.

“Once, during all of this, I went into a mall and sat in the food court. I sat there for about an hour switching my ID over to someone else and watched the police take people away, only to come back a few minutes later looking for me again. Wireless ID tags that anyone with basic computer knowledge can hack is wonderful. Of course, that only added to my sentence when they caught me. And when I told them to shove their tags up their asses, they sent me here.” Barney paused again, “Still, I don't care. I spent so much time living on the street that being sent here was a lot better. They actually did me a favor.”

“Great story kid,” Wil said. He had been listening to the stories from near the toilet's entrance. Joe was there as well. Both were smiling and seemed to be really enjoying the stories. Although some were serious, many were turned funny when the campers felt a collective victory that they had indeed beaten the Man even though they had ended up here.

“I've got a great story to tell you. It will put all your others to shame,” Wil continued. “That is, if you think you're brave enough to hear it.” Of course, this was a challenge to everyone and, of course, they wanted to hear Wil's story. Most of the campers on Pel's side of the barracks didn't know anything about Wil or the men on his side. All they knew was that they had been there for a long time, which meant they had to have done something terrible and would probably be spending the rest of their lives in the camp.

All the campers, actually, wanted to know what Wil had done, but they were afraid to ask. Not because they thought Wil wouldn't tell them, but because they felt that if they knew, it would mean an extended sentence for themselves.

With all the campers nodding their heads in agreement, Wil began his story. “I have been here longer than I can remember. I ran several locations within the interweb via IPv4 and IPv6.” Both structures had been abandoned once the government finally figured out how to make IPv8 work with identity chips. IPv10 had come out in the last few years and was simply an improvement on IPv8, which was only a minor improvement on IPv6. The only difference was that IPv8 included the use of positive identity, which was used to track all your movements and keystrokes.

There were now massive amounts of people working for the government in a small section of PQA whose sole job was to read all this information and search for anyone trying to subvert the government and send them for reeducation. IPv4 and IPv6 were simply abandoned and became part of the darknet that spread throughout most of the world. The government, in its continued foolishness, believed that the common computer user would simply remain connected to the Internet and the interweb in the manner that they had deemed was the only legitimate use.

Many people, from the legal to the illegal, began taking over the darknet via blatant theft of connections within the infrastructure. Most managed to stay one step ahead of the PQA but there were those that didn't understand they had to hide their identities, mask where they were logging in from or use one of the several dozen anonymizers that existed. They were the ones that got caught often and paraded on the news with the glee of a baby who takes his first step by himself. For someone like Wil to be caught though, that was news. That was important.

“I spent most of my life finding information, posting it, sharing it, reposting it, whatever was necessary to keep what should be public out in the world so that everyone could have the opportunity to see it. I ran spoofing sites that would add a few characters to an information site so that, say you wanted to visit the white house, it would redirect you to an almost identical site, but that had the truth on it. It was simply a matter of manipulating the data and how your computer read information. It was easily tricked into thinking it was at the legitimate site.”

Many of the men wanted to know how this was possible but, again, feared to ask. That would surely mean more time and there was no way Wil would divulge that information anyway. He knew that if anyone knew how to use this, his life meant less and he would lose what little leverage he still had.

“What people don't know, is that Joe and I ran in the same circles. We were both busted for similar crimes but, they were different....jobs...if you will. The problem the Feds have with us, is that they never caught our partners. The reality is, they have, but they don't know it.” All the campers laughed heartily, realizing the utter stupidity of the government and their inability to connect one and one.

“So we stay alive on that thin thread that the Feds believe our partners are still out there committing crimes. The truth is, we've been here for so long that there is virtually no way to connect us to each other anymore and it isn't possible for us to even know how to do most things anymore. You can't just plug yourself back in and expect people to recognize you and accept you. Hell, IPv12 didn't even exist yet when we came here. It was still in committee. Nah, there's too much technological change that has happened in the past twelve years for either of us to know what is happening on the underground anymore.

“But, you all want to know what we did to get caught. That's the good stuff and, at least for me, it was pure luck that they got me. You see, I had two identities; legit and not so legit. I made a habit of using my legit ID when I went outside, particularly on Sundays to visit with my Grandma and go to church. We had a lot of fun and, to be honest, she taught me most of my skills,” Wil thought for a moment of all the Sundays he had spent at his Grandma's playing, learning, teaching. There was a twinge of sadness for him, but he knew his Grandma didn't want him to be sad in here. They both knew what they were doing and had accepted the realities of the world before they began their not so legitimate endeavors.

“We had a lot of fun. Sometimes, just for fun, we'd swap our IDs. That was usually hilarious. I'd get senior discounts while the stupid clerks would look at me funny, which is why this stuff is inherently useless. I mean, I looked nothing like my grandma and she has a very feminine name, but, because my ID said I got the discount, they gave it to me. No one relies on their own senses, their own gut feeling or intuition. If the ID says so, then it's right.

“Anyway, one Sunday, after I returned to my place, I forgot to switch my ID back to my not so legit one. So, off I go posting my usual stuff to the world. However, on this particular day, I was setting up redirects for the US Senate. Myself and others, had spent considerable time dissecting the bills that had become law. Maybe, in hindsight, we should have gotten permission to register such a site, but that would have led to other headaches like takedowns and denial of permission to even begin such a thing.

“So, I'm happy in my apartment, drinking a Vanilla Coke and uploading away not realizing I'm doing it with my real ID instead of the fake one that automatically routes me through ten proxies, sixteen satellites, and four anonymizers. I go to bed quite cheerful that night thinking that we had gotten some information out and could inform the general, idiot public of what the Senate had really been up to. Instead, I was awakened about 2am to the sound of cocking rifles and seventeen PQA officers surrounding my bed.

“They didn't give me any time to change, so I ended up being interrogated in my shorts, which is what I had on the day I came here. For the next three weeks, they tried everything to find out what I had been doing. They had taken all my computer equipment but failed to get into it. Joe here, had given me a program he received from someone overseas, where was it?”

“Holland,” Joe replied.

“Right, Holland. Anyway, these brilliant Dutch guys created this program that, if you tried more than twice to enter your password, it automatically erased all your information and set off a chain reaction that would literally fry your drives so that they were completely unusable.”

“I had something similar,” Pelgrem interrupted. “Except mine was set to no more than

once. If you screwed up, you'd fry your own crap.”

Wil laughed. “Yeah I think they might be the same program. Mine was called fry-me-now.”

“Yeah, yeah, that's it,” Pelgrem replied. “I love that program.”

“Yeah, you can set it to different amounts of tries,” Wil continued. “I was just always paranoid I might type wrong so I set mine to two.” Wil took a swig of water from his water bottle and then returned to his story. “So, my computer is fried and I'm the only person that can tell them where I got my information, who my couriers were, what my connections were in the government, if I had any, how I learned my computer knowledge and a mess of other stupid stuff.

“I don't think I'd ever been beaten that bad in my life. Now, what I did wasn't exactly legal, but neither were their tactics. Plus, I only knew a few people personally, the rest were just names on my computer screen. Some weren't even in America. Although that doesn't matter anymore, I still wasn't going to rat anyone out.

“So, they shipped me out. First, I went to camp 42, but I was quickly moved from there when they changed that camp to one full of mathematicians and philosophers who thought they knew everything. Camp 42 is still full of them except now, they are broken down zombies doing menial work like making license plates and explaining how  $2+2=5$ . After about a month, I ended up here and, to my surprise, was deemed worthless and put into 84. They never have tried to re-educate me.

“Roughly a month went by when Joe showed up here. At first I was a bit scared, thinking they had found him and broke him. I spent the first three months ignoring him and he ignored me for fear that they knew more and were just waiting for us to get

together.”

“After a while though,” Joe joined in, “we started chatting and realized we were in for separate things and we took a chance the PQA had no clue. Our guess was right because, all these years later, they still pay us no attention. We are the eyes and ears of this place but we continue to be ignored by just about everyone with any power.”

“So, what'd you get stuck in here for?” Barney asked.

“File trading,” Joe said. Although it didn't need to be explained, as many people sent to reeducation were there for file trading, the boys of 84 were curious why a file trader was put into 84 with no hope of ever getting out.

“Oh, did I mention that I also curried most of the file trading via fifty year old hard drives in the back of a station wagon?” With that, 84 erupted in laughter. The definitive old school trading. After the laughter subsided a bit and Joe regained his composure, he laid out the details of his arrest.

“I'd set out doing this so many times that I really stopped counting how many times I'd gotten away with it. I'd been given an old junker station wagon that had been rebuilt so many times it's unlikely any two parts were from the same car. It still passed inspection though, so I'd drive out on the open roads, free from prying eyes. Most of my drops were on mile markers on the highway. This was easy enough since all the files I had, whether a computer, an old hard drive, a player, hacked phones, whatever, were all labeled by number. Number 5 drop on mile marker 27.2 and so on. I never really knew who was picking up what and, occasionally, I'd pick stuff up and take it back home for retrieval later or for moving somewhere else.

“I dropped a lot of stuff off to Wil, mostly small drives, like those old matchstick



drives, for him to upload his files onto and they were easily hidden. Sometimes, I'd even take them to his house. We knew a few of the same people, which made it easier. One time, I even dressed up as a woman at church and passed the files onto his grandma, who then gave them to Wil. Best granny I ever knew.

“Well, one day, I'm driving down the highway, minding my own business and I get a flat tire. I'm out there in the hundred plus heat trying to change this thing as fast as I can, when a patrol car comes up.” Joe elevated his voice to panic mode to get the campers into the feel of the situation. It was easy to do, especially since everyone knew, if you drive in the self drive lanes, you're only watched when you stop for more than five minutes.

“This cop, if you can call him that, was a real ass. I remember when the cops helped you out and genuinely felt like they wanted to help people. These days, stories like that are only in books. You want a little help, you're better off paying a homeless man.” He was starting to lose the crowd by his little rant against the police. “Like I was saying, this cop was really asking for it but I said nothing. He kept pushing me about what I was doing until I finally said to him, 'I'm changing a fucking tire, you moron. Are you blind?'

“Well, that was it. I called him a moron. That gave him probable cause to search my car. Fortunately, I only had two deliveries of seventeen left so the only thing they ever found was about five thousand songs in each package. If I had been caught with the whole lot, I'd have been executed after I sold all my possessions to the SIA.”

The Sound Industry of America, or Shady Idiots Association as some called them, was formed late in 2035 when what was left of the MPAA and RIAA merged. It covered all sounds produced by Hollywood, whether it was music, movies, or speeches. It had a

broad definition and, due to the fifth renewal and further expansion of the Patriot Act, was given much leeway in the courts when settling matters. Most people who were subjected to the tactics of the SIA were re-educated and then became TV spokesmen for the SIA.

They would give lectures at their schools, offices, churches, or where ever there were members of a large group and, as a part of their settlement and re-education, they were required to do this twice a year or return to prison. This did not excuse the monetary settlement that was reached, and one was always reached in the favor of the SIA. Most people that were caught trading had to have their wages garnished for life because it was completely unfeasible to pay the settlement fee upfront.

This, of course, had been fought roughly five times in the courts. All five cases were won, but even those victories were hollow. Yes, there was legal precedent now set, but one had to actually fight the case. Many people did not have the resources to fight back. Those that did, won, but at a high cost. They lost their homes, their jobs, and their ability to acquire loans, since your court costs were now tied to your credit report. Their lives were devastated in an effort to keep the free part of America free.

Many simply didn't want to have that cloud hanging over them the rest of their lives. It was easier to settle for an outrageous figure, payable until death. One hundred dollars a paycheck was easier to deal with than a lifetime of hardship. One hundred dollars a paycheck improved your credit score (for paying your bills on time). One hundred dollars a paycheck meant keeping your job, family, and house. One hundred dollars a paycheck meant a short few weeks in special re-education camp, during which time your employer could not fire you. This was, of course, the easiest option, despite the legal precedent that

said the SIA had no authority.

This was the trap that Joe fell into. He hadn't the money or the resources to fight. He had wanted to but he couldn't. He, and others like him, were forced to trade in this backwards, old school, desperate way in order to keep the hope alive that someday America would change for the better. He had believed that one day everything would be instantly available and at a decent price. So he walked the gray line in succession with others, dreaming of better days.

But, that dream died on the highway that blistering, summer day. He was taken to interrogation where he freely admitted to being more than he was. "That was my mistake," he said. "I told them all sorts of wild stories. Just enough to keep them on the hook. Just enough so they thought I was more important than I was. I probably could have gotten off with a few weeks re-education but I didn't have a job. This had been my job. I slept in my car or in a hotel along the highway. It was only a matter of time before they put all my data together and figured out I didn't have a real job.

"I only needed money for food. The hotels and motels I stayed at had people that were connected to the darknet and offered up food and shelter for free to me. I never had to worry. Many times, the maids, who all seemed to be Mexican.....I think that's a law now isn't it? I think they passed that stupid law a few years back." Joe drifted off into thinking of the Mexican-American Act that was passed roughly fifteen years ago, in 2032. It stated that all maids in all American hotels must be from Mexico. One could keep this job for life, if they wanted, but it was a guaranteed job for anyone that had recently emigrated or wanted to emigrate.

Some hailed it as racist but the government put its employment spin onto it and

convinced the country that a guaranteed job was good for the economy because then, hard working Americans didn't have to provide welfare for new immigrants. There were several other immigrant laws passed within a few years of this law. It sounded great on the sound bytes at six but the reality was, you couldn't leave these jobs. There was no unemployment or welfare for immigrants anymore. You could only leave this job when you had a better offer and if that better offer ever fired you or let you go, you *had* to return to your immigrant job.

This was the new American dream. Like it or not, it gave a small boost to the economy and saved millions of dollars for the welfare registers. “Yeah, these Mexican ladies, oh, how they can cook. I miss Mama Juanita's chili burritos,” Joe continued as he savored the thought of her burritos. “I loved those things. And she always made sure I had enough food and water to get me through my journey, just in case something happened and there was no food at the next stop.

“The short of it is, I pissed off this cop, who then searched my car, then I blabbed I knew more than I did, so they put me in here to keep me away from the 'undesirables' I associated with. I think they hope I'll tell them who these other people are, but, since I exaggerated, I really can't do that, not that I ever would. They really just don't know what to do with me.”

“So, Damaes, you haven't sung for us yet, have you?” Wil interrupted. “You really should. Yours is the one of the best stories I've ever heard. And I love the singing.” Will looked around the room, “Sounds like cats being killed.” The room erupted in laughter again.

Damaes knew that his story would lighten the mood a little bit. He was a good

storyteller and his facial expressions always got a good laugh whenever he repeated one of his tales.

“I ended up here because I'm stupid” he began. “I had just been laid off my job because it merged with another company and I was the low man so out I went. Of course I went to a bar, had a couple of drinks, then went to my girlfriend's house. I didn't call ahead like she had ordered me to...” He was interrupted by several of the campers asking why he took orders from his girlfriend. “Geesh,” Damaes replied, “I was only a kid. I did what she wanted because, at the time, I was desperate to be like everyone else and have a girlfriend.

“So, I walk into her apartment, unlock the door and there she is buck naked with her girlfriend. Not just a friend, who's a girl, her *girlfriend*. I didn't know what to do so I cleared my throat and said to her, 'Obviously, I should have called first.’” The campers were rolling with laughter. They all respected Damaes but the tale of he and his girlfriend was always hilarious and even funnier when someone new heard it.

“After a few moments, I got over my shock and stupidly asked, 'What's going on here.' Her girlfriend informed me nothing now that I had arrived. Her remark had taken me aback a bit and I threw my hands up in the air shouting that I didn't know what to do. My girlfriend then proceeded to chastise me for not calling ahead and then asked me if I had never even looked at the part of town she lived in.

“I was clueless. I never looked. I met her in a coffee shop. We were both disgusted with the treatment the employees were giving to the customers and we started chatting with each other about that. I never thought to look where she lived.” Damaes paused as he scratched his head in confusion to this dilemma that had overtaken him. “So, I pulled

out my handbook, did a little typing and voila! She lived in the bisexual part of the free sex section of town.”

The men of 84 were raucous with laughter now. Their laughter shook the barracks with the fervor of an unpaid prostitute's hand. After several minutes of laughter, Damaes resumed his story. “So, here I am distraught that, not only am I discovering my girlfriend is bisexual, but that she's cheating on me too! I was so embarrassed, I just wanted to find the nearest rock, crawl under it, and die.

“Instead, I said to her that I thought we needed some time to think about what had happened. She told me that she owned me. I didn't have a job and that she was my only connection to a proper place in society. She said that if I left I'd regret it. My life was hers to do with however she wanted.

“So, I went to this country and western bar around the corner, where I let some foolish individuals convince me that my life was mine and I could do what I wanted with it. They let me borrow a guitar from the stage and I went back to her apartment building, climbed over the fence into the courtyard and began singing this oldies tune up at her window.

“Soon, the cops are there whacking me with their batons. They smashed the guitar, smashed me and tossed me into the back of the paddy wagon. It smelled awful in there and I was stuck in the back of that thing for two hours with other drunken idiots who were smiling from ear to ear in their stupors even after they had puked on themselves.” The barracks had become even louder in their laughter and Wil and Pelgrem tried to quiet them down. 3am was not the time you wanted to anger the councillors.

“So, the only numbers I can remember is my girlfriend's and this 900 number one of

the guys at the bar gave me. I know that my girlfriend is not going to bail me out so I call this 900 number and, after convincing the lady on the other end I don't want sex but I'd love to talk to Randy, she gets my information and tries to reassure me everything will be fine.

“Three hours later, Randy and a few others from the bar, bail me out. They felt sorry for me but still had a good time making fun of me. Three weeks later, I have my trial and I get convicted of using a musical instrument without a license, singing a song I didn't have permission to sing, disturbing the peace, being drunk in public, being drunk under 21, and, after stupidly informing the court why all this happened, a charge of having sex without a license was added.”

Several campers were crying from laughing. Damaes, while still slightly embarrassed, grinned, knowing that he had helped them to forget that day's events.

“Sing for us Damaes,” Wil said as he shouted over the laughter. “Let the boys hear what you came here for.” Damaes shot Wil a look saying he hoped no one wanted to hear it but it was too late. In between the laughter, several men kept shouting, “Sing it for us baby!” and “We want to hear your cat voice,” to which more laughter erupted.

“Come on,” Pelgrem stepped in, patting Damaes on the shoulder. “I'll help you get started. Pelgrem began beating a beat on the side of Phil's footlocker. After a few seconds, Damaes, convinced he wasn't getting out of it, began to sing.

“This ain't a song for the broken hearted,” he began, as he started singing the anthem of the underground, unauthorized, out of tune, and loud as ever. He continued singing each verse, more and more out of tune, while Pelgrem kept the beat for him. Some of the campers, who knew the song, joined in at the chorus and began shouting, “It's my life.

It's now or never. I ain't gonna live forever. I'm gonna live while I'm alive, cause it's...my...life...” Each time they joined in, they were louder than the last time.

No one even knew if these were the right words. It was an oldies classic and even singing it was a punishable offense without proper documentation from the SIA. They were singing the chorus again as Joe saw several councillors coming towards the barracks. Joe and Will tried to quiet them down but there wasn't enough time. The councillors stormed in, at which point everyone stopped singing. For a split-second it was quiet. Then, Damaes looked at Pel and Pel looked at Damaes and they started the chorus over again. With no words spoken, the councillors began beating the two men and dragged them to the door of the barracks, all the while, Pel and Damaes kept on repeating the chorus, shouting it louder each time they repeated it.

The men of 84 could still hear them in the distance, bleating out their old song to anyone who would listen. After a few minutes, they couldn't hear anything and turned towards Wil for some advice. Surely, he would know what they should do without Pelgrem. “Guys, don't forget the fun you had here tonight. Don't let them win. Don't let this one moment, where Pel and D are taken away from us, to cloud your judgment. Don't forget, we're here because we all have something that *they* want. That's a victory. Tonight was a victory!

“Now, hop into your cots, dream of better days. Pel and D will be back. Don't worry. Okay?” Wil tried to be as reassuring as he could be. He hated giving pep talks, which is why he usually stayed on his own side and didn't mix with the new guys. He was just as worried about Pelgrem and Damaes. They were really the only two on the other side of 84 that he trusted and even remotely liked. He even respected them, though he respected



Pelgrem more for being a leader in 84 and especially for what he did on the outside before he arrived in the camping system.

Wil thought to himself that Pelgrem could still be an asset on the outside. He hadn't been inside long enough to become bitter, yet, there didn't seem to be a desire on Pelgrem's part to want to leave the camp anytime soon. Wil laid on his cot and began thinking that men like Pelgrem should be outside, doing the jobs he used to do. He thought Pelgrem would be good at it too. He had obviously done well as a courier, never being caught. For that to have happened, Pelgrem had to have been well connected. At least Wil believed it to be. It must be. He would talk more tomorrow about his thoughts to Joe. Only three hours left until morning and he wanted to at least get a nap in before being forced out of bed in the morning.

When morning arose, the councillors were there forcing all of 84 outside in their shorts. It was a brisk autumn morning, with a cool wind blowing from the west. Wil thought of the gentle air blowing off the Colorado Rocky Mountains and straight onto his face. His hair bristled slightly in the gentle breeze. Wil sucked in the morning air and smiled. His joy however, was short lived as the men were called to attention.

The entire barracks were told there would be no breakfast or lunch today. Then, the councillors took turns running 84 in circles around the camp. This continued all day. In the end, several men dropped due to heat exhaustion, dehydration, or the inability to keep up. Those that fell down were kicked and beaten until they got back up, either by themselves or with the help of men of 84.

By dinner time, most of the men were covered in mud from various places throughout the camp. They were tired, hungry, and angry. Last night, they were having a little fun. Today, they were being punished for their joy.

Though some were angered by this, no one said a word. It was clear who the slow ones were, who couldn't keep up, who was weak. But their combined hatred of the councillors and the cards that life had dealt them overrode their selfishness. The strong carried the weak. The weak, did the best they could and gratefully accepted the help that was offered. Wil, Joe, and all the others who had been in 84 long enough, knew, if you left someone behind on these sadistic runs, they weren't coming back. No one wanted that on their conscience.

That night, 84 was given bread and water. Most of the stronger men gave half their ration of water to those that were dehydrated or had suffered from the heat. When Wil found Larry, who had collapsed three times on the run, trying to drink the water out of the

toilet, he sent Joe out to talk to his contacts. Within a half an hour, Joe came back with a half gallon of water for Larry. It was all he could find. Larry, despite his obvious thirst, graciously split the water between himself and those that needed it.

The next morning, when Pelgrem and Damaes failed to be returned, Joe volunteered to go out and see if he could get any information. Johnny also volunteered. Wil didn't know if he could trust Johnny, but a few of the others vouched for him and Wil didn't have much of a choice, so Wil let him go.

Several hours later, Joe and Johnny told Wil what they had found. Joe had discovered that they were being questioned about missing food, trying to start riots, and several other things, such as how much meat was in a taco. These were ridiculous questions, meant merely to confuse the men and give the councillors an excuse to beat them when they couldn't, or wouldn't, answer.

Johnny, however, had even graver news. He had discovered that in five days, Congress was holding an unprecedented session of a joint House and Senate to decide, once and for all, what to do with people like those in 84. It had been talked about for many years. Some wanted them eliminated. Some wanted to keep the status quo, while a third group wanted to toss them out of the country, exiling them permanently. This usually meant bribing an official in an African country, which was now truly the last bastion of freedom.

A deadline was set, five days from now, and all the men would have to worry. Wil asked Joe and Johnny not to say anything for a few hours. He would tell the entire barracks. He just needed time to arrange his thoughts. He was also hoping that Pelgrem would be back by the time he had to tell the men. Pel was far better at diplomacy than

anyone he'd ever known. He knew Pel would come up with something. He had long since given up on real life and was no good at speeches to rile the troops.

Pelgrem and Damaes did return, but not as Wil had hoped. At some point in the night, while the campers of 84 slept, Pelgrem and Damaes were returned to them, outside, in a stockade, wearing only boxer shorts. 84 awoke to two of their own, clamped down by an ancient device that controlled their lives. The men came out, one by one, wondering what was going on. Wil went up to Pel to see how he was doing and was horrified at what he saw.

Pelgrem's face was slightly swollen, obviously the marks of batons or kicks to the head. Blood was caked on the right side of his face where a cut on his forehead had released the liquid some time ago. Wil, taking a moment to pause and fight back the angry tears that were welling up in his eyes, gently cupped Pelgrem's face with his hands. "Oh, my friend, what have they done to you?" he asked rhetorically. He didn't expect a response from his battered friend.

"Nothing that can't be undone, my friend, nothing..." Pelgrem replied with some difficulty. His mouth ached from being punched so often in the past day or two. Was it two days? He couldn't remember. He only remembered the pain. "How is D? He alright?" Wil smiled. That was typical Pelgrem. He's beaten to a bloody pulp and still he wonders if his friend is okay.

Wil took two steps to the left and checked on Damaes. He couldn't speak but he gave a half-smile to Wil, trying to assure him he was fine. Wil stepped back in front of Pel and said, "He's fine. As beautiful as ever. Actually," Wil paused, "he looks a little bit more handsome than before." Pelgrem smile as Wil continued, "He needs to rest a little though

so he can get better faster, okay?” Pelgrem nodded and didn't try to speak anymore himself, hoping that the pain would soon subside and the swelling would go down and return his face to normal.

Wil quietly shouted to a few of the campers of 84, “Get me some water and some towels, quickly!” The campers obliged. Wil and Joe took the towels and dipped them in water. They gently wiped away all the blood they could, trying not to make Pel or Damaes cringe in pain. The damage looked worse than it was and Wil was happy that the councillors thought so too. If they had realized that their blows weren't as bad as they appeared, it could have been much worse.

Larry, Johnny, Barney and even BJ took turns rinsing out the small buckets of water and towels and returning them as fresh as could be expected. This helped expedite the cleaning of their friends and allowed Wil time to even wash their hair. It had become matted with blood, a good calling sign for all the wild birds or other animals in the area. Wil and Joe had just begun to give some water to Pelgrem and Damaes when the councillors returned.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” shouted councillor Drake as he bounded over to the stockade. “None of you is to ever touch these!” He screamed. Drake shoved Wil to the ground. “You will remain at least ten feet away at all times. You will not clothe them. You will not feed them. You will not give them sponge baths. You are to leave them alone until I say so. Do you understand me?” he shouted once again.

“Yes, sir,” came a faint reply from the 84.

“I cannot hear you, you lazy bastards,” Drake bellowed.

“YES, SIR,” the men of 84 shouted.

“Good. Now get the hell out of my face and go get your breakfast before I decide you don't need it today.” Drake screamed. As he turned to walk away, he took out his baton and whacked Wil as hard as he could on the back. Wil immediately fell to the floor. “Don't you be getting any fancy ideas like this piece of garbage,” Drake said as he pointed to Pelgrem, “or you'll end up just like him.” Wil watched as Drake walked away. He stood up, holding his back, swearing to himself that he would bring down Drake, no matter what it took.

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After breakfast, Wil called the men of 84 together and told them of what Joe and Johnny had found. The men were torn between being furious that their lives could be so carelessly tossed away to being afraid for their lives. Wil talked with them for several hours, trying to reassure them that there was much they could do to resolve the situation at hand.

They discussed what might happen with the law and who could possibly be reeducated. They just needed a little coaching from the lifers like Wil on how to fool the system into thinking you're re-educated. The rest made a pact that, even if it meant death, they would follow Wil in his plan to reveal to the world what was happening in 84.

Pelgrem hung between consciousness and the dreamworld for several hours. He felt like he did that time he agreed to smoke with the Indians in upstate New York. He didn't know what it was but it made him feel like he was half in this world and half in another, with each half pulling at the other, intermixing reality with whatever was in that dream world. He wanted only to sleep but was unable to do so in the half standing position he was in now.

It was just after midnight when Wil came outside with Johnny to talk to Pelgrem. This was the only safe time to approach. Wil began to speak in whispers to Pelgrem and Damaes, who had now begun to show signs of life, while Johnny gave them some bread, a hot dog and some water.

“Listen boys. We're going to get you out of here. Now, we originally thought, meaning me and Joe, of just getting Pelgrem out, but I think you two work well together and Damaes certainly can't stay here. Plus, if Pel left, then D would have to suffer for it. This way, no one will suffer for it.”

Pelgrem and Damaes listened to Wil relay the information he had received from Joe and Johnny and told them to think about it. He would return tomorrow night to discuss it further. Wil wasn't sure he'd gotten through to either one of the men. They hung on the stockades like scarecrows. They had listened and they felt better than the day before. Both could feel their wounds healing and the aching subsiding. They thought about what Wil said and they would discuss it, but not now. They had to try to sleep. They could discuss it tomorrow, after some rest. Rest. And sleep.

In the morning, Wil arose to see if Pelgrem and Damaes were okay. He winked, they winked back. It was the best they could do while they were being watched by the guards in the towers. Wil walked past Johnny, who had both hands full, nodding as their eyes met. Immediately, a fight broke out twenty yards from Pelgrem and the guards began shouting and setting off their sirens. Johnny ran as fast as he could waddle to Pelgrem and Damaes, raised each hand, and shoved something into the mouths of Pelgrem and Damaes.

Pelgrem could taste the savory honey that was on what he believed was turkey

luncheon meat. It could have been ham or maybe chicken. He wasn't sure. But it was food. Glorious food. He chewed feverishly, as did Damaes. Johnny gave each a big swig of water and then shoved two hard candies each into their mouths.

“Try to suck on the candies as long as you can. That way you can make a bit of spit to swallow and keep yourselves hydrated. We'll try to get you something proper tonight okay.” The three men smiled at each other and Johnny hurriedly moved away from the stockade.

Later that night, during shift change, the men of 84 rushed outside and poured water from their small buckets and contraband cups onto Pelgrem and Damaes. It felt good, though Pelgrem had really wished it was some suntan lotion instead. He was happy that the men were pulling together, even though it would surely mean death if any of them got caught.

Drake had also become harsher over the past few months. Maybe it was his home life. Maybe it was his bosses. Maybe he was just a bastard finally showing his true colors. Whatever it was, it had been released onto many in camp 17, not just those in 84. 84 got it worst of all but none were immune.

“So, what do you think,” Damaes asked Pelgrem quietly. “You think we should try to leave here?”

“And go where?” Pelgrem responded. “We don't have homes or families or any kind of life we can get back to. Our identities say we're thieves and if we're caught on the outside we'll be shot on sight. There's no coming back to a place like this.”

“But places like this aren't going to be around much longer. You and I are becoming extinct and these morons here are more than happy to help us along. I'm willing to take



my chances getting out.”

“And where will you go? How are you going to get any food? Really, do you think Val made it out? I bet he made it two days before they killed him. I helped him because he wanted out and was going to die anyway. But he sure as hell didn't have a chance outside.”

“But you gave him a chance,” Damaes replied angrily. “You gave him hope with your fancy words and your codes, telling him to get somewhere and he'd be okay. If he didn't have a chance then you gave him false hope and that makes you no better than Drake and his cronies.”

It was silent for the next hour. Pelgrem and Damaes could hear the night. They heard the snoring from campers. They heard the guards moving about in the towers. They heard the rustling of wild animals just outside the camp. Pelgrem didn't want to admit it but Damaes was right. He'd grown complacent. He was almost happy with the routine that the camp gave him. He didn't have to fight for position. There was no position. He knew all the rules. He knew the only rule. Follow whatever Drake says that day and live to see tomorrow. He didn't like it but he had grown accustomed to it.

His complacency reminded him of an old book he read once about a Russian who lived in similar circumstances. But he didn't want to end up old and bitter, trudging through life doing what others said to do. He was still young and wanted a chance a life, even if that meant leaving his own country. His own country he thought. His own country didn't even know he existed much less care about him anymore. His own country was a far cry from the books he'd read about and the stories his friend's grandmother used to tell him. His own country existed only in his head. That world was gone now and,

soon, he would be too.

“D?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm sorry I yelled at you.”

“It's alright, man.”

“No, it's not. You deserve better. It's just...just that I wanted so much more for my life. So much more for my family. I did what my parents taught me. I did what I thought was right and I still ended up here.”

“You know, lots of people end up here. Most are just willing to do whatever it takes to be back in society where other people approve of them. We're not wired that way. And if we give up, then we can never take our dreams and the stories we read in books and return to make a difference. It will all end up just being stories told in secret. Most of the stories we know, most of the history we know, has already been rewritten, omitted or flat out erased. If we're not there to keep it alive, then they might as well shoot me now because I don't really want to live in a world like that anymore.” Pelgrem knew he was right. He was thinking of a plan, thinking they should listen to what Wil wanted to tell them when Damaes interrupted his thoughts.

“Besides, don't you want to know what happened to your sister?” Damaes hit a soft spot and he knew it. He knew he had to convince Pelgrem to escape, no matter what. “What if she's still out there, running or hiding. It's your responsibility to find out what happened to her.”

Pelgrem shook his head. He knew that he had failed to protect his sister. His one job in life he couldn't fulfill. His mind wandered for a moment and then he said hurriedly,

“You know, I do know of a place, not far from the camp, where we can go. I don't know if it's still in existence but if it is, there's a chance we could pull this off.” And there it was. A chance. A glimmer of hope. A carrot of life dangling itself just out of reach. It was all the motivation Pelgrem needed. He'd been beaten down in so many ways that he'd forgotten what it was to hope.

“Well, after we get to this place, can we travel?”

“If it's up and working....yes, definitely.”

“Then, after we find your sister, we can travel to a meeting point I know of and you and I will leave the country.”

It was a long shot. But there it was. A dream. A desire. A spark to life. And it was more fun to see if it could work than lying around waiting for your death. It was done. Now they waited for Wil to return, hopefully with some food, to tell him the good news.

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The next morning Pelgrem and Damaes were released from the stockade. Their humiliation, according to Drake was complete and he ordered 84 to pick a new spokesman as Pelgrem was no longer to be trusted. He then hinted that Pelgrem wouldn't be here for much longer.

The men of 84 ignored Drake and went to work on devising a plan to get Pelgrem and Damaes outside. Those that Wil felt could make it outside needed to be “re-educated” and went to his side of the barracks where Vladimir began teaching them how to fool the machines as well as the men who would be re-educating them.

While they began their plan, Johnny had been out scouring the camp for information. His news was only semi-disastrous as 84 was already preparing ahead of the

Congressional decision. Johnny decided that he should confess that his uncle was in charge of the camp and was ultimately the boss of Drake. He had been sent here, specially, because 84 did no work and his uncle could assure he wouldn't starve or be harmed. Johnny informed them that his uncle had just received a memo noting the secret law.

It was now deemed that those that were unable to ever rejoin society be eliminated. However, there were guidelines that attempts had to be made at re-education and campers were to be informed what would happen if they did not comply. Campers would also be required to sign documents stating their desire, or lack thereof, for re-education. Examples were to be made. Unfortunately, the camp had orders that Pelgrem and Damaes were to be the examples. Although they had committed minor crimes, their refusal to admit to further crimes meant that they defied any and all authority. Their example would pull the rest in line with little fanfare.

It was a wise decision, actually. Pelgrem admitted that. The announcement was to be made tomorrow, with elimination the following day. Johnny had gotten assurances from his uncle that Pelgrem and Damaes could have a last meal and say goodbye to their friends. By that, he was extending their lives, and unknowingly, their chances of escape by one day.

They had to work fast. No time for a well thought out plan anymore. They had to find the quickest way out for Pel and Damaes and it had to be done tomorrow.

“Oooo oooo ooo,” Johnny excitedly said. “Tomorrow after dinner, Matthew and some other kids' bodies are being picked up and taken away. Can we shove them into a body bag and toss them out?”

“That might work, except for the breathing part,” Wil said. “But nice try, kid.”

Joe thought for a second and then replied, “What about if we put them under the body? They can hold their breath while we toss them into the back of the truck, then when we close the doors, one of us has to distract the drivers long enough for them to climb out of the body bags.

“It should work right?” Joe continued, “After all, the morgue is next to the camp exit so it doesn't get checked a second time. Once you're out of the bags, you're on your own though. I don't know how to get you out of the truck.”

“Well,” Pelgrem said, “The road out of the camp crosses this trail I know of about five miles down the road. There's a building there that used to sell snacks but it's closed now. If we could get the truck to stop there, then we can get out of the truck, hide behind the building or maybe get lucky and get in the building. It doesn't have any scanners so we'd be okay until the truck goes on.”

“How long do you think it would take for someone to respond,” Damaes asked, “if, say they were leaking gas?”

“Well,” Johnny replied, “maybe five to ten minutes to respond, another five to figure out what's wrong and then, it all depends on how near the closest tow truck would be.”

“So, we're looking at maybe an hour right?” Wil asked. Johnny nodded. “Good that should work then.”

The men continued to fine tune their task until lights out. Pelgrem couldn't sleep. He wondered why these men were willing to help him when they could be escaping themselves. He felt a twinge of guilt knowing that, of this group of men, most of them would be dead within a few weeks. The guilt and knowledge of what was coming tore

him up inside. He cried silently for several hours until sheer exhaustion wore him out and he fell into a deep slumber.

Damaes didn't sleep that night either. He wasn't one to think twice about why people were helping. He found most Americans to be a generous lot, willing to give a hand whenever it was needed, even if it meant their own lives in exchange. People always had a reason why they did things. It didn't always make sense to anyone else but he found dwelling on these issues only created havoc. That's what he was doing awake. He was watching the best friend he ever had wreck havoc upon himself, worrying about what would happen to others. Damaes stayed awake only until he was sure Pelgrem was completely asleep. Then he closed his eyes, tucked his blanket under his chin, and went to sleep.

The following morning, the campers of 84 were awakened by boot steps coming into the barracks. Each man received a strike from a baton and ordered outside. When Pelgrem stepped outside into the morning sun, he saw supplies of wood, hammers, boxes of nails, and some other items he didn't recognize placed along the front edge of the barracks. Drake, as usual, began bellowing out to the campers.

"Today," Drake began, "you will construct a wall around your barracks and into the open area here in front of the barracks. We have taken the courtesy of painting a white line where you are to build the wall.

"This is an easy task," he said, pausing for a slight moment to glare around at the members of 84 with a vicious grin, "and if you cannot accomplish it, you will die." Drake now began walking back and forth in front of the campers. "You will construct this wall, paint it, and ensure its sturdiness in the next twenty-four hours or you will die. If you fail, you will die. If I think any of you are not doing the job correctly, you will die.

"Now, rest assured people," he screamed even louder. Then he stopped, took a long look at the men of 84 and continued, "Tomorrow, two of you will die. There is nothing you can do about this. It is a fact of life." But the men of 84 knew better. They knew who was going to die. And they were going to do everything they could to prevent it.

"Tomorrow, the rest of you will begin re-education. The United States Government has given me authority to do whatever is necessary to re-educate you and prepare you for a life back into society, possibly a nice job with the government if your skills are pertinent to their needs. If you cannot be re-educated, not only is it a failure upon me, my men, and the great institution of the United States, but it is a failure on your part. It is up to you to not be a failure. Any failures after tomorrow, will be erased from history."

Drake took a long look around at the men and could see their fear. Fear came mostly to the newer and younger campers. Older ones, such as Wil, had no fear. They had been expecting this day for many years. They almost welcomed it as it was a deterrence to the sheer boredom they felt each day in Camp 17. And, it was time for a change. It was time for America to finally put its priorities straight and decide a course of action.

Many of the men started work immediately on their assigned task. These were mostly the men that Vladimir had trained to be re-educated. They were not going to be involved in the plan, which was, according to Wil, better that way. Now, when they were being interrogated and re-educated all they could say is they heard rumors of an escape but knew no details.

The men directly involved in the escape attempt would never give in and most would die, if only to give satisfaction to the knowledge that Drake and the horrible camp system would never win.

A few hours later, Drake and two guards returned. He immediately walked towards Pelgrem and raised his hand as if he was going to smack Pelgrem in the face but instead rested it on Pel's shoulder, gripping it to the bone.

“Why, in God's name are you men standing here doing nothing. Did you not understand the directions I gave you?”

“No, we understood loud and clear,” Pelgrem replied, trying desperately to move his shoulder off Drake's death grip. “We were just discussing the feasibility of including that tree over there and what we should do about it.” Pelgrem pointed out towards the big oak tree that was off limits to all campers but had now been drawn into the area where the wall was.



“You see, Sir, if we build it as it's planned, it's easy for someone to get a bad idea. Once the wall is up, one could feasibly climb the tree, swing out to the wall and, if they balance correctly, could hold the very edge of that branch up there,” he paused while Drake followed Pelgrem's finger to the branch in question, “and then swing or jump over the fence and be out of the camp.”

Drake realized the mistake that was made and was furious. He lashed out at the guards for painting the lines wrong, despite the fact that these guards most likely had nothing to do with it. Drake screamed obscenities at them telling them to get someone who could repaint the lines immediately or risk becoming a camper themselves. When they took a step to go get assistance, Drake screamed even louder, “Where the fuck do you think you are going? Are you planning on leaving me here by myself?”

The campers around Drake chuckled at the thought that he was afraid of them. None of them had ever been violent and they really could have cared less for Drake. They were no danger. Drake looked back towards the men, who hurriedly put their best, straight face on.

“Fat boy,” he pointed, “You're excused from this duty today. They need you in the morgue. Bring two of your skinny friends with you. Bring a blanket as well. There's been an accident and several campers will be leaving today.”

This was good and bad news. They no longer needed to figure out how to get Pel and Damaes into the morgue but now there was something not right. There shouldn't be a lot of bodies. Something had happened. Johnny pointed towards Pel and Damaes and Drake grinned, allowing them to go with Johnny and the guards to work in the morgue. Drake was happy to let them go and clean up the mess. Tomorrow, he already knew, would be

their turn and there was no need to have to feed them now today. Nor was there a need to allow them to have a shower once they were done.

The three men walked into the morgue and saw a pile of bodies. There would be no forensic examination of what had happened. What happened was whatever Drake was going to come and tell them had happened. He didn't follow along so they assumed he would be there later to inform them of the cause of death.

“Well, let's get started,” Pel said. “What should we do?” The two waited for Johnny to respond but he was over at Matthew's body, thinking of a way to get Pelgrem and Damaes out later that evening.

“Hey, don't be thinking of that just yet,” Damaes said, “there's plenty of time later for that. Just let us help you so there's less work for you tomorrow, okay?”

Johnny nodded and turned around. “Well, the first thing we're supposed to do is take all their possessions off, if they have any. Catalog their clothing and put whatever personal items they have into a bag and label it. Then, after that, I usually wash their clothes by hand in the sink over there,” he pointed towards the back corner of the morgue where a dirty sink was partially seen in the glittering sunlight.

The morgue, as it was, looked more like a hothouse than a place for the dead. There was a large, flat-top freezer to the right of the sink where the bodies were kept like sacks of frozen vegetables. That's where Johnny had left Matthew the last time he was in the morgue. He didn't question why Matthew was on the table. It wasn't his place and questions only brought answers you didn't want to hear.

The dirty sink was just that. The sun reflected the few shiny bits of the faucet that weren't covered in grime. Pelgrem walked a bit closer to it and could see that washing

the clothes merely meant rinsing off anything that wasn't permanently attached to the dead. He wondered how much of these articles of clothing were given to the next man in the camp or if they were to be burned.

“So, what's going to happen to these clothes?” Pelgrem asked.

“Well, that depends,” Johnny answered. “I clean them in the sink as best as I can. If they are too bad, I have to go out back and burn them. If they are able to be saved, I send them to the laundry labeled as Guards' clothing. I don't know who washes them but they come back to me later and I add them to the pile for new jerks. Sometimes, I only get part of what I sent returned. I guess the guards take anything that might be nice.” Pelgrem and Damaes began pulling apart the bodies from the pile while Johnny got the bags ready for their personal possessions.

“All of Matthew's clothes were savable,” he continued, “There wasn't any blood at all on them so a quick wash and there ya go. Who knows, someone else may be wearing them right now. By the looks of some of these kids though, I'm going to have to do some burning.”

The three men each picked a body and began the lengthy task of taking off their items, labeling them on a piece of paper, and making sure to catalog everything correctly. Neither Pelgrem nor Damaes wanted to screw up. They knew that if they did, it would be blamed on Johnny. They knew his uncle ran the camp but how many guards knew? Was he really completely protected? They didn't want to take a chance, so they made sure to make everything perfect.

At lunchtime, they were brought a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and an apple. The food was for Johnny only. They were told if they wanted water there was a sink in the

back. The guards looked over their work in order to report back to Drake and left. Once they did, Johnny got up and headed towards the freezer. With all his might, he pushed the freezer slightly away from the wall and brought out three bottles of water.

“Here ya go boys,” he cheerfully said. “It's not much and it's not cold, but it's drinkable.” Pelgrem and Damaes laughed, thanking Johnny for being such a sly dog. Despite being fatter than a house in a camp of half-starved, skinny people, he was alright. Sometimes friends in high places do have rewards.

After lunch, the three coyly began talking about how the extra bodies just may give them an edge in getting out. They were hoping that they could get lost in the extra bodies. It could possibly work too. Johnny was sure he didn't have enough body bags and would be forced to double up. He was very sure of this after he shoved the extra body bags into the small hole where he hid his water bottles.

Pelgrem and Damaes continued to help Johnny until just before dark. They were beginning to get nervous when Drake came in. “Have you finished yet?” he asked of the men.

“Almost, sir,” Johnny responded immediately. Don't worry, we'll be done before the truck comes tonight.”

“It will be here in two hours so make sure you're finished. One of my men from the night shift will be here to oversee things tonight. I'm going to a fancy restaurant for my anniversary.” He looked towards the men to see if his bragging had affected them. When they didn't seem to care he said, “Write down that these men died in a fight in the cafeteria, fighting with each other,” Drake ordered. He walked over and looked at some of the notes Johnny made on a clipboard and said, “Fat boy, no one here died of gunshot

wounds and you didn't find any bullets in the bodies.”

“Yes, sir,” he responded. Nothing else was said. Drake looked at the three men and then left. Instantly, the tension in the room ratcheted up another notch. They were nearly done but still, they had to figure out how to get Pelgrem and Damaes into the body bags and still have two men help load the truck. In their haste this morning, they hadn't thought of that. If they couldn't come up with something, the plan was done for and they'd be in body bags before too long anyway.

“Okay, here's the deal. I'm going to go back to 84,” Johnny said. “I'll get whatever you need to take with you and figure out a way to get some help. Just keep washing those clothes in the sink and don't worry.”

“You sure that's going to work?” Damaes asked hesitantly.

“Stop worrying,” Johnny said as he put his arm around Damaes' shoulder. “It'll be okay.”

Pelgrem and Damaes told him of the few small items they wanted, then Johnny walked out of the morgue and towards 84 virtually unimpeded, proving that he could do many things without being questioned. He went inside and grabbed Pel and Damaes' things, put them in a pillow case and walked back outside.

Wil and Joe, who had managed to avoid physical labor all day, had watched Johnny enter and, upon leaving, took a long look at him. Johnny walked with his head to the ground and, then, just before he rounded the corner of the barracks, he put his head up and looked straight at Wil.

Wil and Joe waited a few moments and then went inside 84. They walked down to Pelgrem's bed and saw a small scrap of paper with the letters h-e-l-p written on them.

They stared at each other for a few moments and then went outside searching for Phil. They found him on the back side of the barracks, out of sight of all but one guard. They cooed like a dove and, without looking, Phil stood up, turned, and asked the guard if he could go to the bathroom.

Phil met Wil and Joe around the back of the barracks where they explained to him that they needed a distraction to get away. Phil, always ready, told them not to worry, he'd take care of it. As he turned to return to the fence building he said, "by the way, if you can get in the laundry, I left two clean sets of clothes for the boys." Wil smiled and he and Joe ran around towards the laundry. They waited long enough to hear shouting coming from the wall. It was perfect that only one guard could see what was happening and all the others were forced to leave their posts to come and help. Wil and Joe snuck into the laundry, got the clothes, and then clambered their way behind buildings and under buildings until they were at the back of the morgue by the fire pit.

A short coo alerted the men inside of their presence. Damaes kept a lookout at the front entrance while Johnny went to the back of the morgue and let Wil and Joe in. They both took a moment to look around since neither had really ever had the chance to spend any time inside the morgue.

"Hello boys," Wil said cheerfully. "Miss me?" The five men chuckled a bit and then began to talk silently. First, Johnny informed them of the ways in which to clean the bodies and bag and tag everything, just in case they were questioned about it later. Then, they discussed the plan.

The morgue was full of silent whispers as dusk began to settle over the camp. Wil and Joe practiced lifting the two bags that would each have one dead and one live person in it.

They wanted to be sure of the dimensions, weight, and sudden shifts so that they wouldn't drop Pelgrem or Damaes while loading them into the truck. After several attempts, they felt they were ready and the men began to say their goodbyes.

Wil and Joe had requests for Pelgrem and Damaes to try to contact a loved one outside. Wil gave Pelgrem a data stick and told him it contained a video of each man for their families to watch. Pelgrem felt it an odd request since neither had ever shown any regret for what they had done, nor did they ever speak of their families. However, after years of no familial contact, and the threat of death tomorrow, Pel believed their souls were probably touched by the chance to get a message, a real message, to their family.

Pelgrem wrote down the information of whom to contact and assured Wil and Joe that he would get the messages through. He wouldn't try. He would simply do it. Wil was at peace, knowing that Pelgrem would most likely die trying to get a message to his family. He was so sure that he hesitated at the very end and nearly didn't give the information. In the end, he knew he could trust Pel and that it was a good and necessary risk to try.

Pelgrem and Damaes didn't put their new clothes on right away. Instead, they placed them in a plastic trash bag, hoping to keep the smell of the morgue off them. They would change once they were outside. Damaes asked Will to thank Phil for the clothes. Each man hugged the other once more as they heard the truck backing up to the morgue.

“Right,” Pelgrem said. “On with the show.”

“Best of luck to you my friend,” Wil said to Pelgrem as he shook Pel's hand for the last time and then zipped him into the body bag.

Pelgrem closed his eyes and tried not to think of the dead man in the bag with him. Instead, he concentrated on shallow breathing. He was only in the bag for a few moments

but he could feel his heart racing and felt like it was pounding so loud that it could be seen through the body bag. He tried even harder to control his breathing and, finally, he felt himself being lifted into the air.

Pelgrem took a deep breath and held it, counting the seconds away. He knew he could hold his breath for 77 seconds but he also knew that he would blow air and gasp and wheeze if he did that. No, he had to count to sixty and then slowly let out the air he had. He had to control it. Then he would take a few short, shallow breaths before holding his breath again.

Wil, Joe, and Johnny loaded the rest of the bodies into the back of the truck. When they were finished, Wil and Joe casually tapped on the bags that contained Pelgrem and Damaes. That was their signal that the truck was loaded. Both men waited until they heard the doors of the truck slam then, carefully, each man reached towards the top of the body bag and unzipped it slightly, just enough to let in some fresh air. Neither said a word. They were now waiting for their moment. The moment that would define the rest of their lives.

Johnny walked up to the driver of the truck and informed him that these bodies had not been in a freezer at all and it was probably best if they closed the small partitioning window between the back of the truck and the cab. He then began to tell the driver about the smells and how it made people vomit in such great detail that the driver made him stop speaking. He jumped into the cab and closed the door without further hesitation.

Johnny smiled at the driver's willingness to do as he had instructed and, as a reward for saving the driver's stomach, the driver gave him a pack of smokes. Johnny didn't smoke but, given the events that were about to unfold, he gratefully accepted them with



plans to share them with the others later that night.

As Johnny had been talking to the driver, the two guards assigned to oversee the loading of the truck had joined nearby, keeping an eye on Johnny. Their concern was only to the driver and to prevent Johnny from passing a note or asking the driver for help escaping. This gave Joe plenty of time to sneak around the other side of the truck. He slid under the truck and slowly moved up under the engine.

In the meantime, Wil leaned in the doorway to the morgue, just in view of the guards that were watching Johnny. He moved his mouth as if he was talking to Joe, making it appear that Joe was there, just out of sight of the guard. A few moments later, Joe crawled out from under the truck and rejoined Wil at the door to the morgue. They waited a few moments and then approached the guards.

The guards, as well as the driver, took a step back as they approached. One guard, unclipped his weapon, but kept it holstered. Wil and Joe saw this and stopped walking. "Hey," Wil said. "Since we're finished and we cleaned everything, do we really need to stay here tonight? Can't we go back to the barracks?"

The guard thought for a moment and then told them to wait. The driver pulled out a clipboard to which one of the guards signed and then let him go. As he pulled away, Johnny noticed a small blob of liquid and quickly stepped over it with his feet. The guards didn't notice it as one was busy watching Wil and the other was actually looking up at a guard tower while calling on his radio.

Someone gave them the okay to let Wil and Joe go. Johnny had to stay behind to help burn the old clothes and then bag the good clothes for the laundry. Wil and Joe started to leave but were interrupted.

“Aren't you forgetting something,” Johnny said cautiously as he used his eyes to urgently signal that they'd forgotten something.

Wil looked at Johnny cautiously for a moment and then suddenly remembered the pillows. “Right, don't want to forget those,” he said looking at the guards. He grabbed both pillows and handed one to Joe as they headed back to the barracks.

Johnny finished his tasks and joined them soon after. The three men found Phil and, together, they each had a smoke. Smiles beamed from ear to ear in between the coughs from cigarettes that none of them were used to.

Pelgrem and Damaes took turns quietly unzipping the body bags until each was able to climb out of them. They sat near the doors to the truck, waiting for some sign that they could leave. It wasn't long before the truck came to a stop. Pelgrem looked at Damaes puzzled. By his calculations, they had already passed the trail building but he couldn't be sure. Damaes looked a bit worried, but Pel put his finger up to his mouth, signaling for Damaes to be quiet. He carefully moved near the front of the truck to hear what the drivers was doing.

“What do you mean I have to get under it to find out what's wrong?” Then there was a pause. “Fine, but if my uniform gets dirty, you're paying the bill to clean it.” There was a pause again and the driver began muttering to himself. Pelgrem motioned to Damaes to open the truck door.

Damaes opened one door only, with the greatest of care. He stopped momentarily when he heard the driver's door open. As soon as the driver was out of the truck, Damaes used his hand to tell Pelgrem to come to the back as well. Pelgrem grabbed the bag with the clean clothes and they both climbed out of the truck, but stood on the extended bumper that was on all emergency vehicles. The bumpers were originally placed there to allow ease of access into and out of a vehicle for short people. Pelgrem didn't know why they still existed since it was now illegal for anyone under five foot ten to be in the medical field.

They quietly closed the door to the back of the truck, although Damaes wasn't sure if it was completely closed. Pelgrem looked around to see if he knew where they were. They had indeed passed the building they were going to seek shelter behind. He tapped Damaes on the shoulder and pointed in the direction they needed to go. It was back

towards the camp. Fortunately, it wasn't returning to the camp.

When they heard the driver open the hood of the truck, they jumped down and bolted in the direction that Pelgrem had pointed. They weren't in the greatest shape before they had arrived at camp and the lack of proper exercise in the camp made it worse, but they had to keep running. They couldn't stop. They were too exposed on the road. Whomever was coming to help the driver would see them if they walked and they didn't know how long that help would take. So they kept on running.

Neither man looked back. They didn't want to see the truck or the driver. If he had seen them, surely he would have yelled for them to stop. But there was nothing. So, they kept running until they saw the building. It was about a quarter of a mile away and neither had ever run so fast or so hard before. They ran around to the back and waited a few moments, panting and wheezing with every breath.

When they were sure no one was coming, Pelgrem started to stand only to be pulled back down by Damaes. Pelgrem looked at Damaes, who was pointing towards the headlights coming down the road. There was a vehicle coming from the direction of the camp. It was a Jeep, meaning that no real help was coming for the driver. The two men waited for about ten minutes and then saw the Jeep return towards the camp with the driver of the truck inside.

As soon as it was clear and they couldn't see the tail lights of the Jeep, Pelgrem and Damaes checked the back door of the building. It nearly fell off its rusted hinges, so they carefully opened the door and went inside the back of the building. They found a bathroom that still had running water. There was no electricity, which was best anyway, as they didn't want to alert anyone who might come and investigate why the old building

was suddenly lit up. The water was cold but they did their best to wash their faces and arms. They had no washcloths so they tore up their dirty shirts and used them as best as they could to try to get a little cleaner. They got dressed in their new clothes and went back outside.

Pelgrem and Damaes discussed for a moment what they should do with their clothes. They whispered to each other and felt it was best to leave the clothes inside somewhere as hidden as possible. That way, they wouldn't drag the smell with them and, if the clothes were found, the guards would be forced to split into several directions to find them.

Pelgrem went back inside and found an old trash can near what used to be the front counter. He stuffed the clothes in the bottom and attempted to rearrange the items to make it appear that they were undisturbed. Then, he returned outside with Damaes and pointed him west, towards the city. The paved trail he knew of was only about a hundred feet away. An old sign still hung on one bolt welcoming travelers to the west end of the Walton Trail.

Pelgrem and Damaes walked along the old Walton Trail towards Lincoln. It was evident by the two foot high grass that no one had been using this section for some time. The trail used to be filled with joggers, bikers, and in-line skaters attempting the long hike between Lincoln and Omaha. But this portion was cut off from the new, main line. The new extension was safer and quicker and the police could respond to trouble faster. It was also lined with sensors and cameras, monitoring everyone who traveled on it. This section of trail was now covered in overhanging oak trees. It was useless and gave the people no sense of safety.

Pelgrem and Damaes exited the trail near 70<sup>th</sup> street. The streetlights shone a soft,

yellow glow, lighting up the street and everything around it. Pelgrem instinctively jumped back onto the trail, under the protective cover of the oak trees and looked around.

“Feels good to be free, doesn't it?” Damaes asked as he half heartedly slapped Pelgrem on the chest.

“Don't think for a moment that we are free. We are only on the edge of freedom and every single person on the planet is out to take it back away from us,” Pelgrem replied as he pointed towards the lake. “There. We can get some water from there. It's not the best tasting but it's better than nothing.” Damaes began to cross the street to the lake, but Pel held him back. “No. It's probably best to go under the street and not be seen.”

The two slipped down the gentle slope and under the street to the other side via a small underpass connecting to the lake's shallow end. While one cupped his hands and got a few sips of water the other was watching to make sure no one else had seen them. When they were finished, Pelgrem grabbed Damaes' arm and said, “Come here. I want to show you a great view.” Pelgrem led Damaes to the southern side of the lake. There were so many oak trees that it was difficult to tell a road was even there.

It was well past midnight and the gates were locked, however it was still possible to walk around the gates and up the hill into darkness. The two friends walked to the far end of the road, where it emptied out onto an open parking lot. Pelgrem chuckled as he kicked the tiny stones of the parking lot to one side. He thought for sure that after all these years it would have been paved. Crossing over the parking lot and back onto the grass, Pel led Damaes onto the small dock. It was more unstable than he remembered but Pel could swim so he wasn't worried if it were to break. And there was something there that he needed to retrieve.

“Look at that,” Pel said, breaking the silence of the night. Damaes looked straight ahead and could see all the lights of the city twinkling in the cool, night air. He said nothing, only staring at its brightness and its invitation of freedom. “I miss those lights,” Pel said, as he put his arm around Damaes. “The soft glow lighting the darkness, telling you it's safe.

“It's all a joke though. The lights. The city. The people. It's all just a different form of slavery. We're all slaves to it.

“Do you really want to be like them? They sit in it and don't even know they are slaves. They're happy with their fancy cars and remote control everything. They've eaten from the table of slavery and enjoyed it, asking for more. They happily gave away all their personality and freedoms for safety and comfort.” Pelgrem stopped for a moment, then patted Damaes on the back. “Don't ever wish to be like them D. You won't be happy. You know what it means to not be chained to the latest fashion. Take a good look and remember that.” Pelgrem turned and began to walk away.

Pel walked to the edge of the dock and lay prostrate at the very edge. “Hold my feet will you?” Damaes obliged, not sure what was happening. Pelgrem reached down under the dock and, with both hands, dislodged a small wooden box that had been nailed to the underside of the dock.

Damaes looked astonished and, before he could ask the question, Pel answered, “I'm amazed it's still here. Score one for the good guys. This is just what we need,” he continued as he held up the box, displaying a key hidden inside, “unless you want to get back to slavery.”

Pelgrem felt happy and, soon, he would have his tools that would allow him to find his

sister and be free, as free as one could be these days. “Come on. We haven't all night. It's still another seven miles away.”

Pelgrem and Damaes walked back through the park and around the lake. Being careful, they stayed off the main road and cut through the apartment complex near the lake. As they crossed 56<sup>th</sup> street, they were mindful of the relatively few cars on the road this late and hurried across to the bike path. Once on the path, it would be relatively easy to travel most of the way downtown unseen by any police patrols that would be out at night.

The two friends walked along the path, crossing under 48<sup>th</sup> street and along the path behind another apartment complex. They were getting hungry and thirsty, but dared not stop to find any food or drink. They had to keep moving and make it to their destination before daylight. If they didn't, their clothing would be a dead give away to their identities. They couldn't risk being caught.

Further down the bike path, Pelgrem paused near 27<sup>th</sup> street. There, he took a short detour to the Sunken Gardens. Pelgrem often visited them in the past with his friend Artemesia. They would sit near the top edge of the gardens and stare at the people who came to see the flowers in bloom. He spent many days here and couldn't resist the short detour. Most citizens missed the sunken gardens completely. People seemed to have too much to do to take any time and admire the many different flowers coexisting in a beautiful rainbow display of colors.

They spent their days shifting from one task to the next, ever afraid that they would lose their jobs, their spouses, or even their families. They didn't have time to be who they wanted to be. They could only be the same as the next man, worrying if they were fitting



in. The displayed exuberance of a blooming flower, however, announced to the world that it had arrived. Instead, people sat in their camouflaged tranquility, bemused at the little joys life had left for them.

After a few minutes, Damaes tugged on Pel's shirt motioning that they had to keep moving. Hesitantly, Pelgrem turn and continued on the bike path. They were now in dangerous territory. Officially, the bike path went off the specific five foot wide path on the sides of the road and under the road where it dumped out onto O Street. From here, it simply ran on the road, making it risky for anyone who rode, skated, or tried to hide on the path.

Pelgrem and Damaes rested alongside the tan brick building that housed a pawn shop. It was the end of the bike path where they could hide and they had to plan what to do next. As they were debating their next move, they saw a car heading towards them, swerving back and forth across the road.

It was an older Hyundai but Pelgrem couldn't determine the model due to the swerving about blurring the name on the side of the car. It crashed on the opposite side of the road into a light pole, but there seemed to be little damage. The man in the car looked around and saw Pelgrem and Damaes. He motioned to them to come and help, but Pelgrem was very hesitant to go over.

Damaes, however, crept alongside the old Hyundai. He thought about taking it, but remembered that foreign cars are outlawed in America to common people. The driver was obviously wealthy, most likely a politician. The man in the car asked him for help in pushing the car back onto the road.

“Whoah, you're drunk,” Damaes replied instead, smelling the vast amount of alcohol

emanating from the car. Pelgrem heard this and had an idea. He ran over to the car and began talking to the man.

“How about we drive you home, sir?” Pelgrem asked.

“No need for that, I know where home is,” the drunken man replied.

“But surely you don't want to be arrested for drunk driving.” Pelgrem continued.

“You don't want to ruin your career over one silly night.”

“You do have a point young man,” the drunkard replied, stumbling over his words.

“How can you drive anyway in your condition?” Damaes asked the drunkard. “Why didn't the automatic drunk clock shut the car down?”

Pelgrem cringed when he asked this question. He didn't really want to know. He just wanted to be out of there as fast as they could and now Damaes was asking questions that could get them into trouble or worse.

“I am a state senator, young man,” the drunkard said, flailing his left hand around and tapping Damaes with it. “I can do anything I want, whenever I want.”

“I'm sure you can,” Pelgrem said, casting his eyes over to Damaes to shut up. “But I saw a camera crew around the corner. They said they'd heard a politician was up to no good and they were going to get them.”

“Gawd damned reporters,” the drunkard slurred. “Always trying to mess up a good thing. I swear, tomorrow, I'm going to start legislation banning all of them.”

“And good legislation it will be too, sir,” Pelgrem agreed. He was trying to hurry the man into a decision before any of them were caught out on the road. “Let us drive you home and you can be safe, no one has to know of this.” The senator thought for a moment, with what little wits he had left. After all, saying he was two sheets to the wind

would be an insult to drunk people. Pelgrem was amazed at how wasted this man was and failed to even understand how he managed to get behind the wheel of a car at all.

“But what about the damage?” the drunkard asked.

Pelgrem thought for a moment and then responded, “Well, your car has no security devices so you can say some drunk kid stole it and you found it down the street from your house. Just make sure you get rid of the street video of you this evening.”

“Oh, you are a smart one,” the senator admitted. Then, he reached into his suit jacket pocket and pulled out a small card. “Here, take this. You boys need any help you give me a call. You both should be in government jobs with your quick thinking.” Pelgrem took the card and put it in his pants pocket. He and Damaes then proceeded to shove the drunken senator over to the passenger seat. Damaes hooked his seatbelt in and then climbed into the back seat. Pelgrem took the car and drove to their final destination, Robber's Cave.

Robber's Cave had once been the hideout of famous law breakers in the what was the Wild West. Such famous people as Jesse James used it often and even carved his name into the walls. Unfortunately, this type of behavior caught on and the walls were now filled with the names of idiot college students who used to rent out the cave in the late twentieth century for parties. Jesse James, as far as they were concerned, was just another college kid who had a good time there.

Robber's Cave was rumored to belong to the Pawnee Indians who had once lived in the Nebraska Territory and used part of Lincoln as a sacred place. Young Pawnee were initiated into the tribe's spirit world via the various sandstone caves that ran under Nebraska.

Though the Pawnee were later chased out by the white man, the caves, particularly Robber's Cave, remained. It was the perfect hideout when running from the law. This was true of Jesse James and other outlaws, those on the underground railroad, and it continued to the time of Pelgrem Godschalk. The cave was only five hundred feet long, but lie about sixty feet beneath the Earth's surface. There had been rumors of a well but Pelgrem had never seen it. Perhaps it had been destroyed by the time he first came across it. He wasn't really sure. He did know that it was used for a time to store beer before the outlaws came.

He also knew that the cave was longer than its current measurements, but that a brick wall had been put up some time ago. This was to prevent prisoners from the nearby state penitentiary from escaping along the tunnel that connected the prison to the cave. It was also a tourist attraction until the government decided it was too unsound to remain open.

The owners managed to open it again a few years later and many college parties were held within its walls. It was permanently closed several years later because college parties meant loud speaker systems, which damaged the soft sandstone walls. Many a college student went home with sand in their hair after a night of partying, including Artemesia's grandmother, whom Pelgrem had heard the stories from.

Concrete was poured into the current entrance at the end of the twentieth century and a business was built on top of it to ensure no one would ever get in again. However, as one entrance was sealed, another was opened. It was a closely guarded secret, so secret, in fact, that Pelgrem wasn't even sure who opened it up again. He suspected it was Artemesia's grandmother, but no one was talking.

All he knew was that four people made the new entrance half a mile away from the old

entrance. Two of them were dead, but they passed the knowledge to two people that would keep the secret. Pelgrem was sure Artemesia's grandmother was one of the original four, given her age and the fact that she told stories of parties there. She also passed the information to Artemesia, who, of course, told Pel. The grandmother was quite upset when she first learned that Pelgrem knew but once she learned what Pelgrem did for a living, her anger ceased and she would enthrall Pelgrem with her youthful adventures.

Pelgrem arrived just across the road from the new entrance to the cave. He pulled into the twenty-four hour McDonald's and parked the car. He thanked the senator for use of the car, despite the fact that the man was passed out. Pelgrem and Damaes got out of the car and crossed the street to get to the partially empty field ahead.

“Tell me again why we have to come here,” Damaes said.

“I need to get the second key to get where we are going,” Pelgrem replied.

“Isn't this a lot of trouble just for a couple of stupid keys?” he asked.

“That's precisely the point, my friend,” Pelgrem said as he tapped Damaes on the chest. “No need to leave all the keys together for the police to find. Plus,” he added, “this ensures that when I talk to my contacts they can be assured it's really me.”

The two men walked into the open field and over to a generator. Many of the modern tractors used the generators to hook up their machines and recharge them while out in the fields. Since gasoline engines were banned on all farm equipment in 2027, these handy electrical generators were lifesavers for farmers.

As they approached the generator, Pelgrem took a look around to make sure no one had seen them. It was nearly daylight and he could tell the sun would be up in a matter of

minutes. They had to move quickly as any number of people could see them from McDonald's and, worse, a farmer could come by.

“Here, help me with this,” Pelgrem asked Damaes. The two men placed their hands onto the edge of the generator and shoved with all their might. The generator moved several inches to reveal a small hole. It was big enough to fit one man in so Pelgrem jumped in and instructed Damaes to pull the generator back, wait ten seconds, then push it back open.

Damaes, who thought Pelgrem was nuts, gave him a puzzled look, a half hearted “alright” in response and did as he was asked. He was much stronger than Pel, so moving the generator was an easier task by himself.

Ten seconds later, Damaes shoved the generator again and was amazed at what he saw. There stood Pelgrem, about fifteen feet down, on another landing, with a lantern in his hand.

“Hurry, come on,” Pelgrem called out. Damaes looked around real quick and then jumped into the hole. “Your going to have to try to shut it yourself this time.” he yelled up at Damaes.

Damaes shoved with all his might, taking several tries to get it completely closed. Then he dropped down onto the platform where Pelgrem was standing. Pelgrem gave Damaes the lantern to hold and grabbed a long, silver rod that was hanging on the wall next to him. It had a hook on the end and he used that to push the original floor back into place and replace its hook. The floor was braced by heavy pieces of wood that automatically slipped back into place once the hook was locked.

Pelgrem replaced the silver rod and then moved around Damaes to the other side of

the landing. Damaes held the lantern towards where Pelgrem was and saw that there was a small, slightly rusted hand crank. He thought it was rusted due to lack of use and there was a musty smell in the air. It could possibly have rust due to the moisture in the air. Regardless, Damaes thought, it goes somewhere.

Pelgrem turned the crank and the platform began to move slowly downwards. He stopped turning the crank as soon as it touched the soft, sandstone floor. He motioned Damaes towards the rickety, spiral stairs about two steps ahead of them. Damaes went down the stairs slowly, fearful that they too might be so rusted that they would break. Fifteen steps later, they were at the bottom and Pelgrem took the lantern.

“Be careful here because there's probably some bats and you don't want them stuck in your hair,” Pelgrem joked as he rubbed his hand over Damaes' bald head. The two walked about twenty-five paces forward and then turned left. They continued down this path to the other end, where they had a choice to turn left or walk into a room with a picnic table in it.

Pelgrem continued into the picnic table room, pausing momentarily to tell Damaes that the concrete just to their left used to be stairs where college kids would drunkenly fall up or down, depending on the time of night. He then moved into the room and sat down at the table, placing the lantern in the center.

“We need to rest here a bit. Well, until nightfall at least. I'm sorry we don't have any food but we'll have some soon.” Pelgrem said in his most reassuring voice.

“It's okay,” Damaes replied. He was just as hungry as Pel, but there was no use arguing over something neither man had. Damaes took the lantern from the table and began to have a look around. It was mostly filled with carvings of people writing their

names. “Jimmy was here 88” and “Jack and Diane forever.” People relished leaving their mark just about anywhere they could. Today, however, if they had done this, it would be a trip to the re-education camps for them.

Damaes put the lantern back onto the table and Pelgrem asked him to turn it off. “Take a nap for a couple of hours. Then, I’ll climb to get the key and we can get some food.” Damaes wanted to argue, but he was truly exhausted from all the walking and wanted to rest as well for a little while.



Pelgrem awoke a few hours later. He couldn't sleep that well on a bench connected to a table and the sounds above kept dumping sand in his face. An office was now on top of this room and, apparently, no one ever told them to put supports in. He imagined that one day the office would just sink right into the cave. He chuckled at the thought of pretty office workers, all primped in their fine clothes getting completely dirty.

He got up and went around the table to awaken Damaes. "I'm going to need a little help getting the key."

Damaes turned the lantern on and the two left the small room and turned right, down the corridor they chose not to go to earlier. At the end of the corridor, where most people probably never thought to look, was a small opening about seven and a half feet up. Damaes knelt down on both knees and let Pelgrem use his back as a stepping stool. Pel jumped up and grabbed the edge of the opening and pulled himself in. He left his feet dangling for a moment, long enough for him to feel the weight of the lantern around his ankle.

Pelgrem crawled along the opening until he reached the other side. There the passage opened up into a large chamber. On one side of the chamber was a fireplace that was filled in and another wall had been blocked with bricks. Pelgrem climbed into the room and felt the brick wall. This, Pelgrem thought, must be the way to the prison.

He turned his attention to the fireplace. He walked over to the left side and felt along the edge. There, attached to the wall was a small key card. He took the card, put it in his pants and then headed back to the opening. Fortunately, the opening was slightly lower on this end, due to an old, wooden bucket, and he had no problems crawling back to a relieved Damaes, who was panicking in the dark.

The two returned to the platform, left the lantern, turned the crank, and headed back to the outside world. It was dark enough, though neither man really knew what time it was. They had to walk to a storage lot next, Pelgrem had told Damaes, but it wasn't far away.

Pelgrem and Damaes finally reached the U-Trust-It storage lot about twenty minutes later. It had been difficult to stay in the shadows and took twice as long to reach the storage units due to the patrolling peace officers. This frustrated Pel, especially since he could see the storage lots from the generator shaft. Still, he feared being caught so close to the end of his journey so he took the longer, safer route to the storage lot.

Pel was sure that they were looking for him since it was now about two days since they left the camp. If they were to be recaptured, they would never survive to be returned to the camp. He took solace in the fact that even the lowest, most feeble camper could remain outside for at least a day.

Pelgrem pulled out the key he had taken from under the docks and inserted it into the lock at the main gate of the U-Trust-It lot. Once inside he headed to the storage facilities that were partially underground. Walking along the rows of numbers, he stopped at unit #27. "Careful D. Don't touch anything or they could get your real prints off the walls." Pelgrem took out the key from the cave, inserted it and opened door. "Remind me in five minutes to check out, otherwise, being here will arise suspicion." Damaes looked at him slightly bewildered, but nodded his head anyway. He didn't understand what Pelgrem meant, but he didn't need to understand, only remind.

Pelgrem reached inside and felt for a light switch. Turning it on, he saw the dimly lit unit. It was ten feet by twelve feet and Pelgrem could see a lamp in the far left corner of the room. "Here, hold the door a sec," Pel said to Damaes. He walked over to the lamp

and turned it on, illuminating the entire room. It was much brighter than the overhead light, which was barely passable as light. “There, much better. Come on in D, but close the door quietly. Damaes obliged and entered.

As he looked around, he saw several things in the sparsely decorated storage unit. To the left of the door was a stack of three sleeping bags. Slightly farther along the same wall was a small table and then the lamp. On the back wall was a stack of five boxes. Damaes could only see what was in the top box. It appeared to be full of military rations.

In the right hand corner of the storage unit was a stack of cases with cans of Coca-Cola. Damaes grinned and, with a quick count, he believed there were five cases of the tasty soft drink. On the right side of the wall were three black bags, zipped up and locked. Finally, in the middle of the room, there was an old computer laptop, begging to be used.

“God this is great,” Pelgrem said, half laughing. “This is so much better than prison.”

“Well, at least there's Coke. I mean what else do we need besides that?” The two had a good laugh and then headed directly to the stack of boxes with the food. “You know how to work these rations Pel?”

“Of course. It's not hard but we do need some water.” They began unstacking the boxes. In the last box, they found three two-gallon containers of water. “There we go. See what else we have.” As Pelgrem poured the water into the rations and began insta-boiling it for their meal, Damaes began checking through the boxes.

“Okay, box number one has lots of crappy rations, but, I'm starving so I'll eat them. Bottom box had all the water. The other three boxes have some snacks like crackers and cookies and some other junk food. I bet it's all stale but who cares. I haven't had a cookie

in a year.”

“Any chocolate chip?”

“Yep. Oh and four rolls of TP. Definitely gonna need that stuff.”

“You like ham?” Pelgrem asked, changing the subject.

“I don't care what it is. I'm hungry.”

“Okay, well, this says it's ham and cheese with green beans. Eat up.”

“What do you have?”

“I'm going for the supposed roast beef stew.”

Damaes tossed a can of Coke to Pelgrem, then sat against the wall between the Coke and boxes of food and began to eat. “Oh my God. This stuff is awful,” he said as he rapidly ate every bit he could get out of the ration pouch.

Pelgrem busied himself with his roast beef stew. It wasn't half bad for meat that tasted like cardboard and vegetables that were so mushy they had no taste. When they were finished, Pelgrem rolled out the sleeping bags and prepared them. He laid one sleeping bag out onto the floor to give a little bit of extra padding on the cold storage unit floor. They would have to share this bag but it was big enough for both men.

Pelgrem opened the door to the storage unit, signally to the security systems that he had left, then took off his shirt and pants, balled them up and placed them at the top of his sleeping bag as a makeshift pillow. He climbed into one bag wearing only his underwear and a pair of holey socks and tried to settle in. Pelgrem, however, was still afraid of being caught and was unsure if he could sleep.

Pelgrem and Damaes awoke nearly ten hours later.

“Sleep well?” Pel asked as he rubbed the gunk from his eyes.

“Like a log, man,” Damaes replied. “How long did we sleep?”

“Too long, more than likely,” Pel answered as he put his clothes back on. “I really need to pee.”

“Me too. You think it's safe to go outside?” Damaes questioned.

“No. We've got to find a note from my friend. I'm sure she'll have left us instructions and I'd rather wet myself before I take a chance on being caught.” Pelgrem paused for a moment, then handed Damaes an empty Coke can. “Here, go in this. Then, we can look for a note.”

Pelgrem and Damaes searched through everything carefully. They looked in the obvious places and then began searching in the odd places. They felt the sleeping bags for signs of hidden notes slipped between the linings. They lined the Coke cans up, looking for hidden messages on the cans, but settled on the most obvious choice. The laptop.

Pelgrem opened the laptop carefully and adjusted the screen. It was a turn of the century laptop, approximately eight inches by ten inches, rather large for modern, portable computers, but standard for the early twenty-first century. Pelgrem had become accustomed to old technology because the people he came in contact with used it the most. They relied heavily on old technology that was so out of date no one taught it in schools anymore.

This enabled his associates to keep ahead of the authorities because they knew it was not cost effective to train every law enforcement official on every piece of hardware and

software that had existed from the last one hundred years. Only a few people, mostly those that had been caught and re-educated, knew how to operate ancient technology, giving Pelgrem and his associates plenty of time to move on before they were caught. Nearly all modern equipment could be hacked, cracked, traced, and tracked within a matter of minutes, leaving the modern crook holding the bag all too often. Pelgrem however, was happy to see this old clunker. He turned the power on and immediately received a password prompt. Pel hesitated for a moment and then carefully and methodically typed in the password.

“You type that slow all the time?”

“No, but we've always set stuff up like this so that if you make a mistake just once on the password, it self-deletes the hard drive.”

“Are you kidding me?” Damaes asked in disbelief.

“Not really. I have to type in two more passwords and I can't remember which way they go.”

Damaes began to panic. “Oh my God. What if you do it wrong? Then what are we going to do? We'll be stuck in here forever. We'll starve and when we get desperate enough to go outside we'll be caught and killed.”

“Relax. It's not really that bad.”

“What? I can't relax. My entire life now rests on whether or not you can remember the order of two simple passwords.”

“They're not simple passwords either.”

“Don't tell me this,” Damaes said as he got up and began pacing back and forth across the floor. “I can't handle this.”

“Damaes,” Pelgrem called to his friend. “Damaes. Stop.” Damaes kept pacing and mumbling to himself. Pelgrem leaned over and grabbed Damaes' leg. “Relax, we're in.” Damaes looked at Pelgrem with a distraught face. He was trying hard to calm down, but Pelgrem was laughing at him. “You get so worked up over nothing. Settle down. I never said the second and third passwords would erase the hard drive.”

“Oh,” Damaes replied. He paused for a moment, kicked Pelgrem in the leg and said, “I hate you Pel.” A huge smile rose over Pelgrem's face and he beckoned for his friend to return and look at the information with him.

Pelgrem began searching for an information file he was sure was there. “Why do you have to use such ancient technology?” Damaes asked disgustedly. “Why can't you use something more modern with biometrics instead of that old piece of crap?”

“Because,” Pelgrem replied, as he continued searching for the file he needed, “that is the easiest way to get caught. No one uses passwords and self-deleting hard drives anymore. I'd be surprised if anyone even knew how to use an old machine like this. It's just perfect for what we want right now.”

After looking through several folders he found what was the most likely file he needed. It was a rather large video file titled First Jailbird. “Besides, I know how to use it and that's all that matters.” Pelgrem opened the file, expanded it to full screen and began watching it.

Damaes saw a beautiful redhead in her mid-20s, with short, curly hair come on the screen. She smiled and then spoke directly to Pelgrem.

“Hey jailbird. Nice to see you've finally made it out. I'm sorry for the extra security but the guy who owns this place replaced all the cards so you need two cards for

everything. He's even more paranoid about the government than we are. He's also kind of creepy. Grabbing my ass every time I come here. Well what's a little ass grabbing for a friend though, right? You owe me for that Pel. Big time.” The woman chuckled a bit, leaned off camera for a few seconds, then returned, settled herself and kept talking.

“Hopefully, this video finds you well. If you've been shot, well there's nothing more than a basic first aid kit in the bags so you're kinda screwed. If you need to use the bathroom, you're going to have to remove the electrical plug from the wall just under the light switch.” Pelgrem and Damaes looked at each other with a “what is she, nuts” look.

“I've disabled and cut the wires heading into that socket. Inside, there's a key card for the bathroom in the main office. You can't use it except at night, which I'll get to in a minute. Also in there are the keys to the locks on the bags and a short note from me to you.

“Now, do not go outside of this place during the day. There are too many people around asking too many questions for it to be safe for you. Also, don't go out between 10pm and 4am. There are many mafia type guys in here then and you don't want to get mixed up with them. The manager of the place gets in at 8am so, if you need to use the facilities, you've only got a short window of time to do so. I know it's sick, but you're going to have to use empty Coke cans to pee in for the rest of the time.

“Now, these mafia guys aren't there every night, but they are there often enough that you don't want to take a chance of meeting up with them. Also, you're going to want to stick a blanket or your clothes or something against the door so that the light doesn't shine out. No need for anyone to know you're in here.”

Pelgrem and Damaes couldn't move fast enough to the door and shove a sleeping back



against it. “Why couldn't she tell us this before?” Damaes asked.

“Ah, she's probably trying to remember everything and getting it all mixed up. There's a lot we need to know to do before we leave here.”

“Can't you just do it and not have to worry about what she says,” Damaes questioned as he pointed towards the laptop.

“No way. I was just a runner for them. I really can't do a lot. I couldn't even set up the computer like she has.” Pelgrem returned to the laptop and skipped back to the last part to make sure he didn't miss anything.

“Okay,” the red headed woman said, “You're pretty safe for now. But, you're going to have to lay low for a while, so don't eat all your rations. You'll have to log on about 5am and I can give you instructions on everything else. I log on every day for fifteen minutes, hoping you'll be here. Oh yeah, use the bleach at the toilet to wash away you DNA before you flush. All you need is here Pel. You've just got to be patient so we can get you a new ID and get you to Vinnie. After that, everything will be fine. I've taken care of all the arrangements.”

Pelgrem looked at the clock on the top right of the computer screen. It was nearly 11pm. They'd have to wait a while before he could log on. He shut down the laptop and went over to the electrical socket.

“Is that the girl you were telling me about?” Damaes asked.

“Woman. And yes, that's Artemesia,” he replied.

“Artemesia. What an interesting name,” Damaes whispered as he went over to help Pelgrem take off the faceplate to the socket.

He and Damaes struggled a bit with the screws. All they had was the back end of a spork

they had used to eat with to loosen the screws. The faceplate fell off, revealing the small socket area where there should be wiring. Pelgrem pulled out the keys to the bags, the card for the toilet, and the note Artemesia had left for him.

Pelgrem let Damaes take all the keys as he sat down against the wall to read Artemesia's letter in the shadowy light. He carefully took it out of the envelope she had placed it in and unfolded it. A small nail fell out of the letter as he opened it and fell on the ground. Pelgrem picked up the nail with his left hand and looked at it for a few moments, then placed it on his left knee, turning his attention back to the letter.

*Hey old friend, the letter began, I have missed our merriment for quite some time. The world just isn't the same without you in it. I hope that this finds you a bit more peaceful than the last time we saw each other and I apologize for what I forced you to do. At the time, I thought it was right, but, stubbornly, I ignored the possibility that I would lose my best friend forever. I hope that you can forgive me and that we will see each other soon. I miss you. With Love, Artemesia.*

Pelgrem paused for a moment to reflect on the situation. He had long forgiven Artemesia, but she obviously hadn't forgiven herself yet. He would have to set things right as soon as he could reach her. Pelgrem noticed, in small writing at the bottom of the page, *the Mets: another late season collapse*. This was both amusing and oddly reassuring. She enjoyed teasing him about baseball yet, it was still nice to know that the outside world hadn't changed all that much since he was gone.

Pelgrem was drifting off and began to think about the last time he saw Artemesia. It had been a cool Autumn day like any other. Pelgrem had reluctantly agreed to carry a package full of papers for her. It was full of documents and passwords to some of the

most sensitive data collection agencies in the world. The papers were always closely guarded and Pelgrem had known that great lengths had been gone to in order to get copies of these. It was with these papers that many in the underground used to procure new identities.

Pelgrem didn't want to do the job because it was far too dangerous and the risk was too great. But Artemesia didn't trust anyone else and he couldn't let her try to deliver the papers herself. Damaes interrupted his thoughts by taking the nail off Pel's knee and asking, "What's this?"

Pelgrem grabbed at the nail, snatching it out of Damaes' hand. Damaes, a bit surprised by Pelgrem's actions, was taken aback. "It's a gift from a friend," he said softly. He quickly put it into his left pants pocket and started to look away. Damaes took it as a sign not to ask any further about it so he changed the subject.

"Look," he said, placing one hand on Pelgrem's knee, "there lots of stuff in these bags if you want to have a look."

"Yeah, sure," Pelgrem replied, still half thinking about his day with Artemesia and only half listening to Damaes. He got up and went over to the bags. The first bag, had several changes of clothes inside, along with the important items, toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, deodorant, shampoo, soap. They wouldn't be able to get a proper shower, but the washcloths, soap, and water they had were enough to at least wash up and appear a bit cleaner than they were now.

The second bag had a camera, ID card maker, some pens, cases for ID chips and a few other items that neither Pelgrem nor Damaes recognized. Pelgrem assumed it was all related to making fake IDs and he set the bag aside. The third bag had two rucksacks

stuffed inside. There was also another key card, marked with a triple Z, an alarm clock, some cash and flashlights.

Pelgrem, whose mind was still on the letter that Artemesia had given him, took the alarm clock and set it to 5am. Until then, he was going to try to get some sleep. He needed to be fresh, awake, and alert in the morning to be able to get all the pertinent information to get to Vinnie's. It was quite cold inside the storage area that night and Pelgrem and Damaes again snuggled close to each other for warmth. Pelgrem reached into his pants pocket, took the nail out and clutched it in his left hand. He then tucked both hands under his face and fell asleep.

The alarm sounded too early for both men as they wished that they could sleep just a little while longer. Pelgrem, in his semi-conscious state, smacked the clock against the wall, breaking it into several pieces. He climbed out of from under the sleeping bag and quietly told Damaes to go back to sleep. His task now was really a one-man job and there was no point in D being awake and doing nothing. Damaes gladly went back to sleep while Pel picked up the laptop and walked over to the doorway.

He had turned the computer back on and sat on the floor, holding the door slightly ajar with his back, clicking on netstumbler version 19.8.8, and instantly logged on. He immediately found five different open sockets to connect to the underground network. He chose one and then telnetted to 124.32.50.49.

He typed in his username, TheGaven, and password and checked to see if Artemesia was on. She wasn't but it was only a few minutes after five so he decided to wait. He looked around and checked on some of the "rooms" where people discussed various issues. He also found he had access to a new secret room called Jailbird. It was mostly

filled with speculation about what was happening to himself and the room info listed all information that could be accurately verified.

They knew what camp he was in, which was common knowledge as the storage place had been arranged before he disappeared from the world. After that, they knew very little, other than he was still alive and which barracks he had been assigned to. There were rumors that he had a friend inside, to which Pelgrem assumed they were speaking of Damaes, but none of them had a description or name of this friend.

He decided to make a post himself to let some people know what was happening. Pelgrem hit the “e” key and began entering a message. Good morning Folks, he began. I am sure that you are all reading this with smiles on your face. I have managed to get out, but I am not yet free. I hope all of you are still where I last saw you. If not, I'm sure that Jane (Artemesia's online name) knows where you are and, hopefully, I will see you soon. It's been too long since I've been gone and I'm determined now, more than ever, to continue my work, in whatever fashion or capacity you need me for. I'll see you all soon. Pelgrem hit the enter key twice and then the “s” key to save the message for everyone to read. When he had saved the message, he saw the “express message received from Jane” message and a jubilant welcome back to the world message from Artemesia.

Pelgrem smiled, knowing that she was somewhere, probably home, experiencing one of the happiest days of her life. Pelgrem hit the “x” key to send a message back to her. I am very happy to see you. Thought you might not log on today and I'd have to try again tomorrow.

Yes, yes, was her reply. But, we need to leave now or we will miss the bus to the monkey farm. Ah, yes, Pelgrem thought to himself. He had forgotten that there were more secret messages that he had to remember in order to prove that it was indeed himself as well as Artemesia communicating with each other. I really don't care to go to the monkey farm today, Pelgrem replied, because I heard that the red colobus monkeys are no longer there.

Artemesia replied, yes, indeed, they had some sort of sickness and had to be put down but the monkey farm is arranging for some more to replace them in about three weeks. we should wait until then. For now, how about some lunch?

I'd love to grab some donner kebab with sate sauce at the international mall, Pelgrem replied.

Nice to finally see you again Pelgrem. \*super hugs\* Artemesia replied. I have missed you a lot. The world is much too quiet without you.

Artemesia was always hinting that her world would end without Pelgrem. They had been friends for so long that Pelgrem could no longer remember a time when she wasn't in his life. She was the only person he ever trusted completely and the only person he would do anything for, even if that meant prison or death. He was happy to see her again and looked forward to seeing his best friend again. There was much to catch up on and he knew that she would guide him safely back into the world.

well, I am a much quieter person now than you remember. I'm not so sure I can be as I once was but I look forward to seeing you again soon. Pelgrem tried to be gentle in his reply. He didn't want to get her hopes up that they would be able to see each other again. There was still a lot of work that needed to be done and a lot of tasks that needed to be completed to get Pelgrem back to a full citizen again.

"ntalk, now," Artemesia typed and then she logged off. Pelgrem scrambled to log off and remember the shell account address as well as his login and password. By the time he remembered, Artemesia was already there, messaging him. Ntalk was a long-forgotten way of communicating over the Internet. In its early days, ntalk was the best way to communicate one to one with another person online. Instant messaging, then person to person voice activation and video feeds had long since replaced this antiquated mode of

communication. Pelgrem still preferred the old fashioned way of communicating because it was more secure.

In the early days of the Internet, ntalk was far from secure and messages could easily be intercepted if one knew what they were doing. Only technical people knew how to use Unix now and even less knew what a shell account was. To the layman, a shell account was where you hid your money offshore and this was good enough for those in the business that Pelgrem worked in. The less people that knew about it, the better. Even though all of its replacements from Instant Messaging and its voice messaging successor were controlled via an ssh connection, it still wasn't totally secure.

There were and always would be packet sniffers but, with the introduction of the Internet Communication Over the Net, or ICON, Act, of 2023, even ssh connections had to be accessible to the service provider before they were sent out. The government had forgotten about Echelon and Carnivore, instead creating ICON to control all the traffic, theoretically, on the Internet. In reality, they were only able to search for keywords that may be pertinent to the day. If a person chose to speak in code, then it would not be read until days, sometimes months later, by which point, codes had changed and tasks were accomplished.

ICON was the United States of America's reach into the online world where they picked information and shared it with other countries, usually to their own benefit. Still, nations enjoyed the Act because it bypassed many of their own internal laws restricting privacy on their own citizens. By forcing anyone sending any information to the USA to open their packets, it enabled the Americans to copy this information and send it back to the originating nation where that government could then build a file on a particular

citizen. It was all perfectly legal and many people felt that they didn't have anything to hide, so there was no reason to worry about a file being created that documented their online lives.

ICON, however, forced people like Pelgrem and Artemesia to be more creative with their conversations. They always renamed routes, landmarks, and safe points to new codewords, often the name of a city nowhere near where they were headed, as a way to divert attention from what was happening. This was also different from person to person. So, Pelgrem may call New York City, “the home,” to one person and “that place near the water,” to someone else, again proving that too much security creates more holes, resulting in following those that never needed following in the first place. Pelgrem and Artemesia practiced security by obscurity with great skill, ease, and amusement.

Pelgrem's computer screen split in half, neatly down the middle with a dotted line across it as a demarcation line. Whatever Artemesia typed showed up on the top of the screen while Pelgrem's appeared on the bottom half.

“What the hell is that?” Damaes asked. He had obviously awakened while Pelgrem wasn't paying attention.

“It's a secure way of talking at the moment,” Pelgrem responded as he was busy trying to ignore Damaes and get on with the pleasantries that were required before he could again be sure it was Artemesia.

“Fucking antiquated shite,” Damaes mumbled as he walked away and headed back towards the containers of food. Damaes fumbled around looking for some food while Pelgrem continued his conversation with Artemesia.

I'd love to keep talking pleasantries, but I'd really like to get out of this damned box and back into the



realworld.

Yeah, yeah, you'd think someone who sat on his ass for several years would be a little more patient. Artemesia ended that sentence with a smiley sticking his tongue out. Pelgrem smiled and replied back to her. \*kick\* was his reply.

Okay, down to business. We'll have to act quickly because Vinnie is moving camp in a few days and I'm not sure where to yet. First, you need to get the stuff I put in the black bag together and assemble the camera. It's not really difficult but I had to bring it in parts. Just take a photo the way I taught you against the wall. Then, stick the slot card into the laptop and change the color of the background to match the current ID cards. Actually, make the background red. That way your card will be a couple of years old and most idiotic officials won't look too closely at it. Then, copy the file over to the name you're going to use and make it print to the rice chip. I've already set it so that the chip identifies you as being an Original Descendant.

An Original Descendant had a few distinct advantages that other American citizens did not. All ODs were allowed the choice of having an ID chip permanently implanted under their skin or wear a chip, the size of a grain of rice, in a wrist band. The wrist band could be removed at any time, leaving the OD the opportunity to wander around unhindered and semi-private. This was a privilege only given to those that fought with the government, in several bloody battles, over the rights given in the Constitution.

Many of the OD felt that IDs violated the very freedoms given them in the Constitution and, in 2024, the government gave in to a compromise. All citizens must be implanted except for those registered as Original Descendants. It was a brilliant move, allowing President Chelsea to be reelected in a landslide. It was purely political so that she could retain her position but it also made the general public happy. They were tired of hearing about battles and skirmishes amongst themselves. After all, Americans prided

themselves on the principle of compromise and that they could all get along. So the president devised the Original Descendant Law.

The Law forced all citizens to be “chipped” with biographical information. This included the basics from the REAL ID Law of 2005, as well as adding a person's social security number, health information, retina scan, fingerprints, DNA, educational status (including grades earned), as well as minute details of a person's personal habits. This ranged from information taken from store loyalty cards to which books they preferred to read. In essence, this card was your identity in all manners except what you were thinking at any given moment. Given time, however, government scientists were sure that they would be able to tie that information into the chips as well.

The Original Descendants fought for, and succeeded, in retaining only basic information about themselves, such as their name and address. Any further information would not be included in the national database. This would, of course, delay medical care and they could not receive discounts at supermarkets, but the OD felt it was a good compromise, and the only solution to them all dying. It also allowed for two generations after them to be allowed the choice as well. In Pelgrem's line of work however, being an OD had distinct advantages. His real, original identity, labeled him as an OD, a label that he wore proudly despite the looks, kicks, banishment, and general discrimination he faced daily.

How many people did you bring with you?

Just one.

Can you trust him?

I wouldn't have brought him if I couldn't.

Good.

The two friends paused for a moment. Pelgrem waited, partly because he was tired and partly because he didn't want to interrupt. He wanted to get all his instructions as quickly as possible so he could leave and be on his way to Vinnie's. Artemesia stopped talking because she wasn't at home, she was at work and she needed to check again to be sure no one was watching over her shoulder. When she was sure no one was near, she continued.

Okay, so that's sorted. Do the same for your friend and then you can get ready to leave. First, you'll need to get enough supplies for the trip to Vinnie's. I've arranged a car for you, in another stall. You should have the card to unlock it. The car is registered to Vinnie so be sure to let people know that you repaired it and are returning it. That's it. Just pray that no one looks too closely and you should be fine. Oh, wait, let me check the database to see if it's safe to go.

Pelgrem waited a few minutes, staring at the blinking cursor, for news of whether it really was safe to leave or if he'd have to wait a little while longer. All clear, was the reply from Artemesia, but I'd wait until tomorrow morning to go. It's too late to go today and it may arouse suspicion. Leave as early as you can and I'll let Vinnie know you're coming. Until then, you're on your own, my friend.

Pelgrem paused for a moment and then typed, I need you to find my sister. Artemesia logged off without replying, followed almost immediately by Pelgrem. He wasn't sure if she received his message or not and there was no way of getting her back online to find out. He turned to tell Damaes what was happening but Damaes had already fallen back asleep. It was for the best, though. Pelgrem would need him to stay awake while they were driving tomorrow and it was the first time Pelgrem had seen his friend in a deep peaceful sleep since he had met him.

Quietly, Pelgrem opened up some crackers and a Coke and ate his meager breakfast.

Pelgrem took out the nail from his pocket and twirled it on his half bent knee, hoping that he would be able to return to a somewhat normal life.

Pelgrem awoke to Damaes' arm shaking him on his shoulder. He quickly glanced around for his nail, shoved it in his pocket and gave Damaes a half-hearted stare, letting his friend know he wasn't happy to be awake.

“Well, what happened?” his impatient friend asked.

“What time is it?” Pel replied.

Damaes looked around and, finding nothing that resembled a clock responded, “How the hell should I know?” Pelgrem grinned and stood up. He headed towards the laptop, which had an internal clock, and Damaes again asked him, “So what's happening and when can we get out of here?”

“Soon,” Pelgrem replied. The clock read 1600. Pelgrem knew they were going to be there for another twelve hours. “First I need to assemble the camera and get our IDs. We can leave in about twelve hours, okay?”

Pelgrem gave Damaes a look that said it didn't matter if it was okay or not. They weren't leaving for twelve hours. “Fine with me,” Damaes said. “What do we need to do to get ready?”

Pelgrem explained to Damaes everything that Artemesia had told him and they began setting up the camera. It was in three parts, but was rather easy to assemble. Taking the pictures, however, was not an easy task. Pelgrem was of the infamous “finger in picture” crowd, while Damaes was from the “can't hold a camera still” crowd. After several attempts, they had reasonably nice photos that Pelgrem transferred to the laptop. He changed the colors rather easily and, with a few commands, was able to get the computer

to do most of the work in creating a new identity for them.

When it was done, Pelgrem attached the printer module and printed out two tiny rice chips. With a small pair of tweezers, he put each rice chip into its own tiny pouch within the wrist band and sealed the compartment. He then tested them several times, assuring that there were tiny glitches to the chips. A large glitch would mean it was a fake and, if the chip was too perfect, would mean disappearing from society altogether.

When he was sure they were working well enough to pass official inspectors, Pelgrem took the camera and chip printer and threw them against the wall. They smashed into a few pieces and both men took turns making sure the parts were broken into smaller, unidentifiable pieces.

Damaes picked up the pieces and put them back into the black bag. He took another black bag and put some food and a change of clothes into it. They were purposely sharing one bag. In case they were stopped, they were traveling as a couple, which, under twenty-seven states, was illegal. They could travel in and out of these states but they weren't allowed to live there. Thus, if they were stopped, it was likely that no one would want to look in the bag. Many officials would just want them out of their state as quickly as possible.

Once they had everything gathered and ready to go, they ate their rations and took a nap. 4am would come soon enough.

Pelgrem jolted out of bed, realizing that it must be later than he thought. He looked at the clock on the laptop, which read 3:56. His heart was still racing and he tried to quiet it down before waking Damaes. But there was no quieting this morning. They had to leave. They had to take the risk of actually being back in the world. They had to take the chance that they could make it out.

Pelgrem held on to the hope that he could find his sister and that Damaes could lead them to safety. He thought about it as he took some water and washed his face, then doused his hair. His thoughts however, quickly turned to a nice warm shower, when the cold water trickled down the back of his neck.

Pelgrem awakened Damaes, who opted to not splash his head with water. He had only a few centimeters of hair on his head so it didn't matter if he wet it or not. Half awake, Damaes grabbed a rucksack from within the black bag, while Pelgrem gathered all the small items they needed. On his way out of the room, he stopped, took a long look at his temporary home and then left, shutting off the light as he closed the door.

The two men walked along the rows of buildings until they found a door with the triple Z marked the same as on Pelgrem's card. Pelgrem slid the card into the slot to the left of the door, automatically raising it. Pelgrem stood stunned at the yellow Bugatti Veyron T. He smiled at the 2035 model. It was a classic beauty. It was also the last year Bugatti made any of their vehicles self-driven and gas-powered.

The Bugatti Veyron T was a smaller model than the traditional models. Its body had been shortened to 3.5 meters, while the width was decreased from 1.7 meters to 1.5 meters. The overall body was also lowered about 3cm to make it hug the road and prevent extra intake of air from dislodging the grip the car had to the ground. The

revolutionary cylon grill was kept on all Bugatti models as they funneled air from the front to the back of the car, creating one of the smoothest drives in the world. The Veyron T also brought back its traditional 8-speed stick and returned the clutch to its original position next to the brake and the shifter to the right of the driver's lap. Its intake snorkels, mounted at the back of the car, was a throwback to the turn of the century Veyron that was so highly coveted among collectors.

While Vinnie would have loved to own one of those models, the price, due to its rarity, made it impossible. The Veyron T played to car lovers' vanity in making the limited production car. It was affordable and everyone wanted one. It was still the closest thing a person could own to a Formula 1 car without the added expense. The Veyron T was limited to a production of 50,000, most of which were overseas. Only about 1,200 were known to have been imported legally to the United States. It was the last of a dying breed, built for the open road that no one drove on anymore.

A huge grin appeared on Pelgrem's face as he knew he was going to be driving nearly solo on the highway with one of his favorite cars. Damaes stared at the car, then at Pelgrem and back again, astonished that they were going to be driving one of the great classic cars in the world.

"Relax, D, this is Vinnie's car," Pelgrem said with a reassuring voice. Under his breath though, Pel muttered to himself, "I can't believe Vinnie is letting me drive it."

Pelgrem got into the driver's seat, where a note lay taped over the speedometer, stating *have a good time and arrive safely*. Pelgrem removed the note and tossed it in the back seat. The keys were already in the ignition, waiting for someone to use them. Pelgrem turned the key and started the car. A loud, ominous sound of the past blasted from within

the small garage. Pel was thankful that no one was around because a car that made noise definitely attracts attention.

No one drove gas engined cars anymore. Well, almost no one. If you saw someone in one, they were surely an OD grasping onto the past. Pelgrem revved the engine a few times, then shifted into gear and pulled out of the garage. He nearly hit Damaes in the process. He was definitely a little rusty with his driving skills but was eager to test them out. Damaes opened the passenger side door, tossed his rucksack in the small, storage area behind the seats, and climbed in.

“I can't believe you're going to drive this piece of shit,” Damaes bleated out. “We're definitely going to die before we ever leave the state.” Pelgrem smiled at his friend, shifted into first gear and headed towards the exit, stopping only long enough to insert the card to release the gate. From there, it was only the highway and themselves.

Pelgrem opted to stay on the same side of town and took Highway 2 as far as he could, then crossed through Lincoln on 80<sup>th</sup> Street to the other end of town where it connected onto I-80. He didn't want to drive through Lincoln. Lincoln meant more cops. More cops meant a greater chance of getting caught. Taking Highway 2, however, would take them past a few small towns and through Nebraska City, home of Arbor Day, and then connected to I-29 and then I-80.

Traveling through small towns in the early morning was not entirely safe. Sure, small town folks are nice, but they see everything, they hear everything, and they remember everything. If the police were looking for them, small towns were the worst places to stop for anything. However, it was nearing shift change for the police and, if there's one thing police hate, it's the paperwork that keeps them at work long after their shift. Shift



change was always the best time to get out of town.

Once they were on I-80, they could just stay on it until they met their contact in Chicago. Pelgrem had hoped that Artemesia remembered where he was supposed to meet his contact. If not, he and Damaes could be stranded. He knew that the IDs Artemesia had arranged for them would only work for a short time. Vinnie had the connections to create permanent IDs and, if they couldn't reach Vinnie, they were royally screwed.

Pelgrem pulled into the old Phillips 66 gas station at the edge of I-80 just before 7am. There was only one real gas pump left. The remainder of the pumps had been replaced with charging stations for electric cars. As usual, the station was open and Pelgrem chose to pay for their gas with their nearly untraceable cash.

All US currency was issued with cfid, or clear frequency ID, which made the money machine readable. Cash was rarely used, so all cash transactions were, by standard, only recorded in the national database once a week. In a week's time, a person could reasonably travel all over the United States, thus, making traceable money, untrackable.

Money was also only traceable from the bank or a foreign currency exchange house to the person who it was given to unless the next person who received the bills used one of their loyalty cards or your face was captured well enough on a surveillance camera to be tracked.

This Phillips 66 was well known to ODs and anyone else who didn't want to be tracked. Their security cameras were always on the fritz, so much so that the police had stopped even asking for security discs to try to retrieve any evidence.

Pelgrem filled the tank up, paid for the gas, and headed back onto the road to the highway. He was stopped about a quarter of a mile down the road at the highway

entrance point. Shifting down into second gear, Pelgrem slowly rolled the car into the toll booth slot and smiled at the lady in the booth.

“Good morning Old Timer, where ya headed?” she said. It was a friendly hello to ODs, who were typically the only ones to use the self-driving lanes.

“Chicago,” Pelgrem answered, noting that her name tag only read her first name and not her last name. He thought this odd, since it was the law to have your first and last name on any name tag.

“Got some ID?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Pelgrem replied. He leaned over with his right arm and showed his wrist band. The toll booth lady gladly swiped over it with her reader, but the chip didn't respond. She tried two more times before Pelgrem said, “Here, let me take it off. This stupid thing has been acting up lately and won't read if it's more than an inch away.” He took the wrist band off and gave it to the toll booth lady, who was able to scan it now that she was closer to it.

“Stupid bands,” she mumbled. “You'd think they would have fixed that damned glitch by now. It's in its what....third generation chip now?” she rhetorically asked.

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Pelgrem joined in. “It's supposed to read from ten inches but, no, the government can't get off their asses long enough to fix anything. So, I get hassled all the time because of it.” Damaes turned his head to look out the car window. He was having a hard time not grinning over the line of bull his friend was spewing today.

“Well, I'm not going to hassle you honey,” the toll booth lady said. “We have a lot of Old Timers who live in Nebraska and I see this thing all the time. Sometimes, I think the

government doesn't fix things purposely so you have to go do what they want or be aggravated a lot.”

“You could be right, ma'am, you could be right,” Pelgrem replied in his friendliest voice. “By the way,” he continued, “Why isn't your full name on your tag?”

“Because I am fortunate enough to have Lorraine for a first name and my last name is thirteen letters long. It won't all fit on a badge. However, the law requires me to tell you it if you ask me.”

“Nah, no need to know it. We all need to have some privacy left don't we?” Pelgrem smiled and gave the toll booth lady a wink.

“Well sweetie,” the toll booth lady continued as she looked around to see if anyone was watching her, “Just make sure that you keep an eye out for animals on the road. Not many people go on the self-drive road anymore so the animals have tried to reclaim it,” she said as she leaned in a bit closer to Pelgrem, “There's some cops on the road today just before you hit West Branch in Iowa and again in Illinois just before you hit the I-39 interchange. Remember, the speed limit is 100mph so you take care of yourself and have a safe trip.”

“I intend to,” Pel said, “and you have a wonderful day.” Pelgrem winked at the toll booth lady, causing her to blush and reply, “Oh, you, you sweetheart, you have a wonderful trip.” Pelgrem smiled again, shifted into gear and headed towards the self-drive lane.

“Oh my God,” Damaes said laughing. “You are sickening.”

“Yeah, it's a gift,” Pelgrem replied, jamming the clutch into fifth gear and flying onto the highway, the speedometer heading towards 80mph.

The two escapees passed by Omaha thirty minutes later, waving at the Missouri River as they passed by and entered into Iowa. Iowa. This is a state much like Pennsylvania. No one wants to drive it because it takes forever to get through. Even at 100mph, it feels like it takes days to pass. There is no scenery in Iowa. Just flat land, corn, flat land, corn, Des Moines, flat land, corn and on and on. Des Moines passes too quickly to even enjoy seeing from the highway. It's just twinkling lights in the distance.

At least Pelgrem wasn't driving alone this time. He figured, if he could drive just fast enough, he might make it to Chicago in under seven hours. He wasn't sure though because the last time he drove was just before the speed limit was increased to 100mph on all self-drive roads in America. It used to take him nine hours.

It didn't matter. The self-drive lanes were nearly deregulated. There was no help and even fewer cops. You had to watch the gas gauge and know where the stations were or else you would be walking for a very long time.

Damaes occupied his time by watching the scenery, watching the news on a portable television he found in the glove compartment and, when he was bored of that, turning on the radio and singing highly off key to the music on the radio.

He still knew almost every song played. Songs rarely changed due to the increased regulation of who was allowed to sing, who had a license to be a singer, and what kinds of songs could be made. Now, instead of new songs every week, there were new songs yearly, with only a small fraction of music released compared to in the past. This increased revenues for the music industry and created a frenzy of people dreaming to be famous rock stars.

It was a dream filled with lies. Only a select few could rise to the top and they had to

follow the strict musical standards that were put forth. Music was no longer about sounds or lyrical content, it was about churning out a beat that would be popular to the masses. Those that tried to spark out on their own were relegated to the back alley bars, where a minuscule fraction of Luddite music lovers convened to hear songs that were once freely played.

Modern rock stars rarely played their own instruments. Many didn't even know how to read or write music. It was all a cruel show to an ignorant public that just wanted more of the same. More of what they were used to. Less individuality. The great unwashed masses didn't care about musical content. They didn't know how to read or write music anyway. They just wanted their basic beat over and over, beating them into submission. Beating them into cookie cutter people. It didn't matter. They just had to be the same as their neighbor.

Damaes played around with the dial and, not finding any more music he liked, he searched the car for more. In the glove compartment, he found a mini CD with 84 old songs. Some were from bands he had never heard of. "The Led Zeppelin" and someone called "Sly Stone." Damaes was sure that guy used to be an actor not a singer. It didn't matter to him though, it was just something different he could hear. He shoved it into the car's multi-player and began singing again. When Pelgrem recognized a song, he would join in. Soon, they passed the signs for the quad cities and entered Illinois.

Pelgrem pulled into Chicago and drove through it's bustling streets, trying to avoid the inevitable traffic jams. He turned off the music so he could concentrate more on the vehicles around him. He was thankful that they had arrived before rush hour, otherwise their trip time could have doubled. As it was, it took an hour to reach downtown

Chicago. Damaes was napping, tired from his nails-on-the-chalkboard singing, so Pelgrem found a nearby parking garage and let his friend sleep a little while longer.

When Damaes awoke, Pelgrem was no longer in the car. In a panic, he got out of the car and started looking around, desperately trying to figure out where he was. Relieved, he saw his friend get off the nearby elevator and walk back to him.

“Relax,” Pelgrem said as he handed his friend some bottled water and a croissant. “This is all I could find to eat on the cash we have left.”

“You couldn't leave me a note saying you were leaving?” Damaes questioned as he took the water.

“I did,” Pelgrem replied, reaching over and pulling the note he stuck to Damaes' shirt. Damaes looked down and felt foolish.

“For crying out loud,” he said as he took the note from Pelgrem. He leaned on the back of the car and ate his food quietly, still astonished that he had missed such an obvious note.

Pelgrem and Damaes left the Grant Park North Garage and headed east across Michigan Avenue and into Millennium Park. As they walked around the Ice Rink, Pelgrem took note of the time. It was just after noon. He didn't have to meet his contact until two, so he tapped Damaes on the shoulder, motioning to him to follow Pelgrem into the Park Grill Restaurant. This would be the first test of their new identities.

Pelgrem was hungry and wanted a burger. They stopped momentarily at front door while their IDs were scanned. Pelgrem noticed Damaes looking around nervously so he struck up a conversation with the hostess who was trying to scan Damaes.

“How do you like this guy. He comes here to see Cloud Gate and mistakenly calls it

'the bean' and some guy jumps him and punches him in the face.” Pelgrem winked at the hostess and leaned on her podium. “He a bit frazzled. He thinks the guy is going to follow him in here and give him a good thrashing.”

The hostess gently squeezed Damaes' arm, causing Damaes to flinch ever so slightly. “Don't you worry none, honey. If I see anyone coming in here for a fight, I'll make sure they leave you alone, Okay?”

Damaes, unsure what to do, simply nodded until the girl let go of him.

“Would you like a booth or a table?”

“Oh, whichever is more convenient for you. I'm not picky,” Pelgrem replied. He smiled a bit more at the hostess as she seated the two men in a booth for lunch. Pelgrem was actually a bit relieved. A table would leave them exposed to everyone who entered. At least the booths were semi-private with bad angles for viewing who was sitting where. It was the perfect place to eat the Park Grill's famous burger and to rest a while after their long journey.

Pelgrem and Damaes decided to take advantage of their new identities. After all, if they were caught at this point, they might as well have a really good meal to think about before they disappeared back into the camps. They ordered two appetizers, burgers, fries, grilled salmon, and dessert. Damaes ate the homemade trifle, but complained that it didn't taste like his mom used to make it. Pelgrem went for the standard fare of vanilla ice cream on a hot pecan fudge brownie. He loved vanilla ice cream. No matter where he went, if they had something with vanilla ice cream, he ordered it.

Then, the check arrived. Pelgrem and Damaes tried to play it cool but it was obvious they were nervous. “I'm not sure if my paycheck has been deposited and I don't want to

look like an ass if it hasn't gone through,” he said to the waiter.

The waiter motioned for Pelgrem to scooch over a bit and he sat down next Pelgrem. “Don't worry. We here at the Park Grill have the utmost respect for our clientèle. Here, let me take care of it.” The waiter placed the plastic placard bill on his lap and took Pelgrem's wristband off him. Quietly, he waved the wristband over the placard and waited a moment. To Pelgrem's extreme relief the bill was paid. Pelgrem glanced over to see the total on the account. There was \$5347.23 in his account.

“Does the total bill include the tip?” Pelgrem asked.

“No sir, would you like me to add one for you?”

“Yes, please,” Pelgrem added. “And make it for 15 above standard.”

The waiter, trying hard to hide his pleasure, added a 90% tip to the bill. “Thank you sir. That's most generous of you.”

“No, thank you for your discretion.” There was a moment of silence while the waiter stood up and then Pelgrem asked, “Would it be possible for us to get two large teas to go?”

“Oh certainly sir.” The waiter left for a few moments and returned with two teas in faux Styrofoam containers. He refused payment on the teas and only offered his most heartfelt thanks for his tip again.

The two men left the restaurant and walked into the central promenade, stopping only long enough to remark what a piece of shit Cloud Gate was and how they couldn't believe people were in such awe of it. Damaes made note that the photos taken at the turn of the century were nice and tried to imagine it shiny and reflecting but all he could see was a giant lump of metal, full of graffiti, shaped like a bean, rusting in a space that could be



put to better use. There had been talk for many years of cleaning it, but it would be rusted away before the bureaucratic geniuses got that task out of committee.

The two friends continued to walk through Millennium Park, sipping their tea and being careful to not drink it all. They reached the great dirt field and noticed a few gardeners seeding the dirt. “I guess they really are going to try to revive this place,” Pelgrem said to himself. On the far side of the field was the Gasoline Bridge. They stopped nearly in the middle of the bridge, leaned on the edge and looked south towards Monroe Street. It was 1:53pm.

“We'll wait here for a while,” Pelgrem said.

For about twenty minutes Pelgrem and Damaes watched the traffic go by, sipping slowly on their tea. The cars would race across the road towards their daily destinations, seemingly unaware of the two fugitives who watched them from on high. At one point, Pelgrem thought of hocking a loogie onto a passing car, but he knew that was a re-educational offense. It would have been fun though, in the past, when most things were only deemed unethical and not illegal.

Pelgrem tired of the cars passing by underneath him. He was beginning to fall asleep from the monotony of the same few models of cars, one after the other, passing him in procession. Pelgrem turned around, sat down on the pavement and leaned against the edge of the bridge. He closed his eyes and bent his head down slightly. Damaes, however, was still enthralled with the constant passing of automobiles below. He was also happy to be in the free world and was savoring every moment he could, just in case.

Despite having his eyes closed, Pelgrem could see that the sun was being blocked from him. It had suddenly become darker and colder and he heard a voice say, “Mwewe

mkubwa anapaa na simu.”

Without moving or even opening his eyes Pelgrem replied, “Kwa sababu anataka kuwasiliana na mwewe mdogo.”

The voice chuckled and said, “Tumefurahi sana kwa kumaliza mafunzo yako.”

Pelgrem lifted his head and looked at the man attached to the voice. It was Val and Pelgrem smiled. “Na mimi pia mpenzi,” Pelgrem responded as Val extended his hand to his friend and helped Pelgrem to stand. The two men embraced each other and, without saying a word, told each other how grateful they were to be alive.

“Come, say hello to D as well,” Pelgrem said, reaching towards Pelgrem to spin him around. Damaes looked for only a moment at Val before giving him a giant bear hug, squeezing the life out of him. “Careful D,” Val winced, “Or else I can't get you safely to Vinnie's.

“And what the hell is up with you Pel? Making me learn all this foreign language shit. Why can't you just speak in English?”

Pelgrem laughed and replied, “Learning a foreign language is never a bad thing. You never know when you might need it. Plus, the police believe that you're an authorized tourist so they leave you alone and haven't a clue what you are saying. Besides,” he said, putting his arm around Val, “you speak it quite well for a man that has only been out for a few weeks. You should definitely learn more.”

“It's so good to see you Val!” Damaes said, “Everyone at the camp was convinced you would never make it out.”

“Well, you can never trust a Russian to die when you want to.” Valentino had indeed made it out of the camp and he had managed to make it all the way to Chicago.

“So what the hell are you doing here in Chicago?” Damaes asked.

“Some of the guys thought that Vinnie would be better able to help me,” Val began, “so they sent me here to learn and educate myself, not only on the latest technology but on all the crap that has happened in the world since my unfortunate incarceration.” Val paused for a moment and then continued. “It's actually a little more difficult than I had thought to reintegrate into the world.”

“Well, I'm just happy you made it out,” Pelgrem said.

“Me too, though I had a scary moment when I totally screwed up the accent on that Indian crap you made me learn. I thought for sure they were going to kill me. Then, they started laughing at me and told me that 'Only the great Pel could force a man to learn to speak ancient crap no one else would ever learn.'”

The three men began to laugh, and, then, Pelgrem said, “But they knew what you were saying, so who's crazier, you for learning it, or them for knowing it?” They had another good laugh, as well as a few more hugs. “Come on,” Val said as he tapped Pel on the chest with the back of his hand, “Let's get out of here and get you to Vinnie.”

Val put his hand up in the air and twirled his pointer finger in a circling motion. It was a signal to someone waiting in a black, unremarkable GM four four two to pick them up. The three men walked to the other side of the bridge and down the stairs to the midnight colored car. The GM four four two was one of the newer models, evidenced by the doors that no longer opened traditionally out, but slid open above the car and in line with the car from bottom to top. It was very similar to garage doors except that it was quiet, sleek, and smooth.

From there they drove around Chicago for about an hour to make sure no one was

following them, and then continued on to the edge of town where the livestock markets used to be.

The GM pulled into the stocks and slowly moved between two round, steel fences that used to herd the cattle into the market. As the GM inched its way along, Damaes felt a little uneasy because this area reminded him of the movies he'd seen as a child. Whenever someone came out here, they were put out of their misery in one form or another and he feared it might be a trap.

The GM inched its way all the way back into a barn where it disappeared from the sunlight. The opening in the barn was barely big enough to fit the car through. An inch either way and the car would be scraped.

The four four two stopped about five feet into the barn and turned its engines off. The door nearest Pelgrem opened from the outside and Val shooed them out of the car. "Go. go. It's the only way out of the car." Pelgrem stepped out of the car while Val nudged Damaes to move. The three men were directed towards the corner of the barn by the man who had opened the car door for them.

"Stand still," the man said, "and huddle together a little more." The three men barely had time to move as the floor gave way from under them. As the men began to slowly move downwards, they could see a huge room beginning to appear in front of them. Their "elevator" was also encased in glass. Pelgrem tapped on it, but it wasn't glass at all. It was a sheer, bulletproof enclosure designed to look like glass. He remembered seeing it in a few banks before his unfortunate time away from society.

Pelgrem looked around the immediate area and saw a man with a very large M-27 in hand standing next to the elevator. There was a switch on the wall, which Pelgrem

assumed activated the elevator but he didn't see a switch in the barn. He started to point when Val saw what he was looking at and responded, "Oh that's the only switch. There's a pinhole camera upstairs and sensors on the lift so they know when to activate it. You can't do it yourself from upstairs so don't even think about it."

Pelgrem put his hand down and stopped pointing. He thought the idea was an ingenious way of keeping people out. There was nothing upstairs to point to anything below. Pelgrem tilted his head in agreement and raised his eyebrow when the elevator was completely down and he could see the entire room.

"Whoah," Damaes said as he looked around the room. It was L-shaped, making it difficult to see past the fifty yards or so of room that was visible. There were at least fifty people in the room, all making noise. There were computers running, people using electrical tools, hammers, and soldering guns. But there was silence inside the elevator. Pelgrem smiled. He knew that Vinnie was not far from here. This room was Vinnie. Tied down. Hidden. Silent. There was no way and sort of activity, seismic or otherwise, would ever be detected as coming from here.

A red laser appeared across the top of the elevator and made its way down, over the bodies of the men in the elevator, to the floor and back up again. Pelgrem assumed it was a security precaution, checking for weapons and the like. Once the laser returned to the top of the elevator, the protective sheath continued down below the men and into the ground. They were free to step out and into the massive room before them.

Pelgrem walked slowly through the room, careful to take note of his surroundings. He was led through the first part to the other end where it turned at a ninety degree angle to the left. He saw a much larger room, lengthwise, than the portion he was just in and saw two doors at the far end. The man from the elevator escorted them to the back and took the men to the door on the right.

“Wait here a moment,” he instructed, as he went into the door on the right. A few moments later, the man came back out and said, “Vinnie will see you now.” The three men began to enter the room when Val was stopped.

“Sorry Val, but Vinnie has something else for you to do right now,” the man said. “Please, come with me.” Val looked a bit disappointed but gave an awkward smile to Pelgrem and Damaes. The men shook hands and parted ways. Pelgrem turned back towards the door, paused for a moment, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, put a smile on his face, and then entered the room.

There, standing and waiting with open arms was Vinnie. Pelgrem's smile was suddenly not so forced but a genuine happiness to see his friend. There she was. Five foot seven, freckles, beaming smile, and fiery red hair that curled as if the ends of the curls were going to shoot flames out of it if you stepped out of line. Damaes stood and stared at Vinnie with his mouth halfway open.

“Forgive him for staring,” Pelgrem said, “he thought you were a man.” Vinnie smiled and reached out to hug Pelgrem. They embraced tightly with the compassion of two dear friends who had missed each other for years. It was so long since he had seen his friend that he didn't want to let go for fear that this might, again, be the last bit of emotion the two would ever feel. Vinnie felt the same, but now was not the time. She had a business

to run and she needed to know who this man was that joined Pelgrem and if she could trust him.

Vinnie pulled back from Pelgrem and smiled. "It's so good to see you again," she said as she squeezed her hands on top of his shoulders. "I was worried that things had taken a turn for the worse after I heard about your camp and then Artemesia sends me mail, the old fashioned way mind you, that you're out and you're coming here."

"What? Why the old fashioned way? What's wrong at her end?" Pelgrem asked. The old fashioned way was to actually place paper in an envelope. Hardly anyone did this anymore. There were a few official uses for postal mail such as notifications of court appearances, but that was mainly due to the fact that the court system required complete identification from a person. That meant a signature, photo, fingerprint, eye scan and blood sample. The US Postal Service employees were certified to take this information and return it to the courts for verification of delivery.

The only other people that continued to use paper and pen for communication were Luddites, those involved in illegal activity, and the rare criminal who was banned from being online.

"Oh, I don't think anything is wrong. She's just overly paranoid these days. Can't blame her can you. Helping you to escape and all," Vinnie replied as she whacked her left hand on Pelgrem's arm. She motioned the men to sit down on the couch on the other side of the room, while she chose to sit in the reclining chair behind her.

"Look," Vinnie continued, "I don't always get to check my own mail. So I think Artemesia is just being a bit careful this time. Helping you could get all of us killed so she sent the message through the regular mail because the government doesn't have

access to that yet. It's still illegal to open mail all willy-nilly. But give them a chance, they can already look at everything else. Plus, we never got anything arranged to talk to one another before you left. It was her only way to get to me. I just wish I had heard the news before I found out that you might be dead.”

“Dead? What....”

Vinnie interrupted. “I found out about four days ago that your camp, and everyone in it is gone. The little idiots who are re-educated got shipped off somewhere else. Some got released already. The rest, well, it appears that some of the long term people knew they were going to die so they caused quite a bit of havoc. They blew up toilets, beat some guards, smashed up buildings. No one knows where they got the means to start fires.

“Anyway, they torched a lot of stuff and the guards fired back. All but one fat kid was killed in your camp. I had just assumed you went with them. Then, I get this letter from Artemesia and I freak out a little less but, geez Louise, it's been a gut-wrenching last few days.”

Pelgrem and Damaes sat dumbfounded. They had known that the camp was going to be dismantled and that there was talk of the long term prisoners being executed. He knew that he had a death warrant on his head and he had to escape. Still, he found it hard to believe that they actually went through with it. He was sure someone in the government would stop the killings. Despite everything that had happened to him in his life, Pelgrem still felt, deep inside, that the politicians wouldn't have the guts to execute and eliminate its own citizens.

Pelgrem leaned back on the couch, trying to take in all the information. All the people



he knew, the friends he'd made, were gone. Several risked their lives for him and, now, all of them were dead. He only hoped that some of them were indeed able to fool the guards into believing they were re-educated. But Pelgrem feared the worst. He was no longer the optimistic young man he had been when he first set foot in the camps. He was older, and bitter, and no longer believed the nation could be saved.

Val gently knocked on the door and entered Vinnie's office. He walked over to her and leaned over to whisper in her ear. Her expression didn't change but she thanked Val and told him she'd be there in a moment. She returned her attention to the young men who looked terribly tired and needed much rest.

"Well, I've got some business that needs my attention," she said as she rose from her chair. "You guys hungry or thirsty? Maybe you want a shower?"

"We already ate with the identities that you gave us," Pelgrem replied. "However, I wouldn't mind some water or a Coke or something," he went on. Damaes shook his head in agreement. "I'd also like to grab a shower if that's possible, but we can wait a few if you need to get some work done first."

"The drinks are no problem," Vinnie began, "but the showers will have to wait for a few. We have a limited supply of water down here so I'm going to have to get someone to turn them back on for you and get a couple of volunteers to give up their showers for tomorrow."

"Oh don't make such a big deal for us," Pelgrem interrupted.

"Nonsense," Vinnie retorted, swatting her hand in the air. "After all you have done for the underground, I think giving up a few showers is the least we can do to thank you. Please, feel free to make yourselves at home in my office. I'll get Val to bring you some

drinks and I'll be back as soon as I can.

“Again, it's great to see you, Pel,” Vinnie said smiling as she leaned over the couch and hugged Pel. “I'm glad you made it back.”

After Vinnie left the room, Damaes asked, “Do you think we can really trust her and those other people out there?”

“I never trust anyone 100%, my friend. If I did, I'd have been killed several times over. But, Vinnie is one of a small handful of people that I don't believe would ever put me in jeopardy. If there were something wrong, she never would have allowed us to come here.”

Pelgrem stood up and walked over to Vinnie's desk. He ran his hands along the side of desk, taking time to slowly move his fingers over the small grooves etched into its edges. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the slight imperfections in the wood. He knew the wood was mahogany. It wasn't because he was some sort of expert in different kinds of wood. It was because he knew Vinnie loved mahogany and she went to great lengths, often to the point of risking her life, for the rare and expensive wood.

She wasn't authorized to have such fine things in life and, spending her life in the underground meant she was risking herself, as well as others, to satisfy her small pleasures. It was an understandable risk though, and most people did not begrudge another for attempting to have small measures of pleasure, especially since the underground had to often be moved.

Many people liked small trinkets that they could take with them if they had to suddenly move. Pelgrem used to have a few such items but he didn't want to think about that now. He had lost them when he was arrested. Most likely, the police would have

had them destroyed or sold. Either way, he'd never see them again. And they would only bring him unhappy memories, something he really didn't want to deal with right now.

As he moved towards the middle of the desk, he paused, remembering where he was and sat down in the black, leather chair behind the desk. Next to this beautiful, mahogany desk was a run down, beaten up, and overly used black, leather chair. There were strips of silver duct tape on the seat back as well as on the right arm rest. It squeaked horribly when Pelgrem sat in it. He had begun to swivel around but stopped when it, too, began to squeak.

Pelgrem smiled and let out a small chuckle. This was the contrast of the underground. You take what you can get and use it for as long as you can but, if you can find something nice, such as a new mahogany desk, well, you can use that too. Pelgrem leaned back in the black, leather chair and almost immediately tipped over backwards. Damaes and Pelgrem laughed hysterically for a few seconds until Val came in with a round platter that held two glasses and a pitch of water in one hand and a small bag in the other.

He smiled at both of them. "Still breaking things I see?" he said to Pelgrem with a huge grin.

"But I...," Pelgrem began.

"It's okay, Pel," Val replied. "That's been broke since we found it. Don't worry about it." He gave Damaes the bag he was carrying and informed them that there were various toiletries inside that they should find useful once they got to the showers. He placed the water on Vinnie's desk.

The three men chatted for a few minutes and Val told him that he was truly enjoying his time with Vinnie and was happy to be back in the world, even if that meant actually

living underground for a large portion of his time. Val couldn't stay long though, he had work to do and, as much as he would like to stay and kill some time talking and catching up with friends, he was needed elsewhere.

Pel carefully leaned back in the black, leather chair and began staring at the wall. He started thinking about the camp and the people he had left behind. He wanted to know who had been spared but knew it was best not to ask Vinnie to look into it. It was far too dangerous right now to make an attempt at searching government databases for such a thing. He'd have to wait several months, possibly years before it could be searched without raising suspicion.

He knew for sure that Wil and Joe were dead. There was no way they would have been allowed to be freed. But he wondered about the others and if they were able to truly fool the guards into thinking they were re-educated. Of course, knowing the guards as he did, they probably believed that the campers caved in to the thought of actually being killed and gladly became re-educated. They, most likely, never questioned the long-timers' desire to return to society.

Pelgrem thought of that last time he saw Wil and Joe and remembered the data stick they had given him. He felt around in his pockets for the stick but it wasn't there.

“What's wrong?” Damaes asked.

“Nothing,” Pelgrem noted, remembering that he had placed the stick in his shoe. Pel reached down and took off his right shoe. He pulled up the insole and removed the stick. It was as thin as an old swipe card, but narrow, the width of a thumbnail. After putting his shoe back on, Pelgrem began thinking about the stick. He remembered that Wil and Joe wanted him to deliver it to their families. He gently tapped the data stick against his

chin in the vein hope that the tapping might stir his memory as to the real reason he had this data stick.

The stick smelled of sweaty feet and Pelgrem scrunched his nose up and tossed it onto the desk. He had no idea why it hadn't occurred to him that the data stick would reek of feet after it spent so much time near his unwashed toes. Damaes looked at Pelgrem and stood up from the couch. "What are you thinking?"

"Well," Pelgrem began as he leaned forward in the black, leather chair, resting his arms on the desk, "why the hell would Wil and Joe give us a data stick to give to their families?"

"To say goodbye?" Damaes answered.

"I don't buy that, D. They haven't spoken to their families in over ten years."

"Imminent death does strange things to people, Pel. They probably wanted to make peace with them before they died."

Pelgrem thought for a second about that possibility but discounted it as too far out of character for his friends. If they had felt remorse they would have found a way a long time ago. "I don't know, D. They rarely spoke of their families and I'm not sure Joe even knew where his were anymore. Plus, if they did contact their families, they could also still be subject to re-education simply for having contact with Wil and Joe.

"And, add to that, how the hell did they get access to make this stick? I mean, data sticks aren't all that common anymore. Most people store all their data on the intraweb and when they do take it with them, they just download it to their chips or OD bracelets."

"Well they were considered enemies of the state," Damaes suggested, "maybe that's all they had access to. It'd be too dangerous to keep something on the net or in a chip. That

would be far too easy to find.”

“But, see, that's the point,” Pelgrem continued, “where did they get access in the camps to do this? They had to have had this for a long time. I'm willing to bet that this isn't a message to their families. This has to have something else on it. And it has to be important enough that they went to such great lengths to keep it all these years.”

Pelgrem stared at the data stick. “Oh God!” he exclaimed.

“What?” Damaes replied.

“Well,” he began, “where did they hid this if they brought it into the camps with them?”

“Ew,” they responded together.

A few minutes later, Pelgrem grabbed the data stick off the desk and began flipping it over and over between his fingers. He rotated it back and forth between each digit, then looked closely at it, trying to see if there was any tell-tale message on it. He tried to stand it on its end. He tried to bend it. Finally, he placed it back on the desk, smacked his hand on the desk and exclaimed, “Ha! It is a message for his family!”

“What?” was all Damaes could reply.

“Who's his family?” Pelgrem asked. Damaes shrugged. He didn't know who their families were. He didn't know Wil and Joe well enough to have ever gotten those kinds of details from them. “Come on, D. This one's easy.” Pelgrem beamed from ear to ear. His smile was so big that his teeth were showing.

“His family?” Pelgrem half questioned. Pelgrem put his arm out and motioned it back and forth between himself and Damaes. “His family is us D. Don't you see, his family *is* the underground. All of us in the underground. We're the ones that took care of

both of them for most of their lives. We're the ones they would go to when they were in trouble or needed help.

“Ha!” Pel continued, smiling ever more brightly. “We are the ones that this message is meant for.” Damaes didn't know how to reply other than smiling and agreeing. He was taken aback by the sheer joy Pelgrem was experiencing in figuring out the meaning of the data stick.

“But, we also have to figure out what the addresses are they gave us.” Pelgrem took his glass of water and finally started to relax a little. He now had another purpose to being outside other than finding his sister. He still felt selfish and guilty for escaping the camp simply to go find his sister, but now he had another, non-selfish reason to be on the outside again. He didn't even know if it was possible to find his sister, but he did know that the data stick was a message, a clear message that he mattered and he had a mission to complete.

Vinnie returned from her business and apologized for being gone so long. “Getting a bit comfy in my chair, I see,” she said to Pelgrem. Pel began to get up but Vinnie motioned to him with her hand, indicating that it was okay for him to remain in her chair. Pel sat back down and leaned forward, putting his left hand forward with the data stick towards Vinnie.

“You got anything that can access this?” He asked.

Vinnie leaned forward and took the data stick out of Pel's hand. “Where the hell did you get a hold of this piece of crap?”

“A friend,” he replied, grabbing the data stick back, “A very good friend who entrusted us to whatever is on it. So, do you happen to have a fifteen year old data port

sitting around we can use?”

“Not likely,” Vinnie replied with a sigh. “I don't even think Artemesia will be able to find something that old anymore. She's a resourceful girl but that's asking a bit too much.”

“It's okay. I've got something in storage that should be able to read it.” Pelgrem wanted to know now what was on the data stick, but it would have to wait a few days. “So, how about we get some showers and get settled in? I hate to be rude, but I'm pretty tired.”

Vinnie took the men to the showers and, when they were done, showed them to the bunk room. It wasn't much different from being in the camps, except, here, men and women slept in the same, large bunk room.

The next morning, Pelgrem awakened before Damaes and he decided to wander around and get a better idea of what had been going on while he had been excluded from society. He sweet talked his way into getting a girl to give him access to the government network so that he could read the highlights of the news for the past couple of years.

Most of the news stories were the same as they had always been. Death. Destruction. Murder. New Fads. Famous people dying. Only the names and places changed. Pelgrem decided to concentrate mostly on fashion, famous dead people who died and what had been happening to famous people. Most Americans spent their time on these topics. It was always a safe topic for idle chit-chat because people don't want to talk about such unsavory topics as genocide and people in far away countries that the don't really care about anyway.

Four hours later, Vinnie came by to see how he was doing. She brought him some



water, but left him alone to continue learning what he had missed. Reintegration into society was vital for Pelgrem because he would be traveling on highway 17 in New York, a road that had many tolls and many inquisitive toll booth workers. Once he was in New York, people would either completely ignore you or ask far too many questions. He had to be prepared for both situations.

Damaes, meanwhile, wasn't interested in learning what happened while he was in the camps. He was a quick thinker and decided that he would just wing it instead of wasting valuable time on stupid trivia. He found a pretty girl repairing a computer and decided that talking to her was the best way he could spend his day. He helped too. Whenever she needed a tool, he was happy to hand it to her.

Vinnie finally convinced Pelgrem to get some dinner and the two ate together in Vinnie's office. Pelgrem thought to invite Damaes as well, but he was still busy talking to the pretty girl. Pelgrem figured that Damaes was in good hands so he took his tray of meager rations and headed into Vinnie's office.

Vinnie sat in her leather chair and put her tray on the mahogany desk while Pelgrem sat on the couch and put his tray on his lap. It was a basic meal of peas, mashed potatoes, and chicken with a slice of bread. Dinnertime was also special because there were drinks other than the water that was available throughout the day. Because they were living at the edge of society, things such as tea, coffee, soda, and milk were luxuries that were carefully counted.

Milk and orange juice were available at breakfast but nothing else. There was no morning cup of java. That was for dinnertime and, even then, one cup only. Milk for Vinnie and her gang was obtained from cows on a nearby farm. She had an agreement

with the owner. He gave them fresh milk and she “obtained” newly released movies for him. They also made their own orange juice. This was too avoid tracking data that was placed into nearly every container in a supermarket.

Fresh items, such as fruits and vegetables had tracking devices but these were only in the stickers placed onto the food. Whenever one of Vinnie's group purchased fresh items, they were required to removed the stickers before they returned home to avoid detection. Items like prepackaged orange juice, tea, and coffee had their tracking devices built into the actual container. Thus, the trunk of Vinnie's “grocery car” had their own containers. Coffee would be opened and put into a plain container to be taken home.

Since there were limited amounts of viable fake IDs, there were limited amounts of certain products that could be purchased. Coffee was imported and strict regulations allowed a person to purchase a single, one pound container of coffee per month. There were other regulations, such as, if you purchased coffee, then you were no longer allowed to purchase soda or tea.

Vinnie had roughly fifty people working for her, most who never left the underground, with occasional people from other groups passing through. With the fake IDs, she could purchase five pounds of coffee, two pounds of tea and five gallons of soda per month.

Although Pelgrem had really wanted a hot cup of tea, he didn't want to take from the rations. He knew how hard it was to work the system. Instead, he took a cup of milk with his dinner. It had been a long time since he had drank fresh milk and he savored every last bit of it's unpasteurized, illegal goodness.

“So, are you excited to be seeing Artemesia again?” Vinnie asked, in between bites of mashed potatoes.

“Yes and no,” Pelgrem replied. He lifted his spoon, full of peas, but held it in the air. He paused, trying to explain his feelings. “I’ve missed her a lot,” he said, putting the spoon back onto the tray. He hesitated before he continued, “But it’s been so long since I saw her. I don’t know if we’ll be able to pick up our friendship where we left off.”

“I’m sure you can, Pel. She admires you a lot. She called in nearly all of her markers to get you placed in Nebraska and to set up that little hovel of a storage facility for you.”

“I know, and I am eternally grateful to her...,” he drifted off, not being able to find the right words to continue.

“Trust me, Pel,” she continued, “Artemesia was and is ecstatic to know that you will be rejoining the world again soon and she’s looking forward to seeing you.” Vinnie paused for a moment, then looked directly at Pelgrem, “You should really log onto your account and talk to her before you leave here. She’d probably really appreciate it.”

“I might just do that, Vinnie. At least that might ease some of the tension for when I see her later this week.”

Pelgrem was still nervous about seeing his friend again. A lot of time had passed since he’d spoken to her, much less seen her. He didn’t know if he would recognize her, if she’d gotten a boyfriend, where she lived, or how much she had changed. Pelgrem certainly knew that he had changed. In some ways, he was more bitter than before.

He also had learned to spend most of his time in quiet reflection. He feared that would be the biggest obstacle for them to overcome. In the past, he would bounce ideas off of Artemesia, discuss what he would do if he ever got caught, tell her of the things he’d seen and liked, and any number of things he just wanted to talk about.

The camps had taught him to keep everything to himself or else have it be used against

you later on. You didn't tell anyone of your hopes and dreams because you weren't ever getting out of the camps to fulfill those fantasies. Pelgrem very much wanted to be with his friend but was more afraid of seeing her again than he was when he discovered he was to die in the camp.

The next morning, Pelgrem logged into his account to see if Artemesia was there. She was and they spent a few minutes catching up. There wasn't a lengthy conversation. Nor was there deep debate. It was mainly just checking to see if each other was okay, how they were getting along and where they'd meet.

Artemesia wanted to meet in Pennsylvania, just before the New York border, I-80 near the cemetery but Pel hated Pennsylvania. I-80 was full of nothing but cops and slow speed limits. He would much rather go up I-90 past Toledo and into New York on Highway 17. It was a more rural drive, which meant less traffic and less police to aggravate you. It was also a prettier drive, especially if you headed down 17 near the Shawangunk Mountains just after dawn.

The very top of the mountains had a purple haze as the sun rose. This time of year was perfect for the display of colors in the morning and Pelgrem had wanted to see them one more time in his life. Pel insisted that he head down 17 to meet her.

Damaes had also been up and flirting with the pretty girl he had met the first day he had arrived. He saw Pelgrem and went over to him, reading the computer screen. "Where are the caves of ice?" he asked.

Pelgrem crooked his neck and looked at Damaes, "It's in New York. Don't worry. The less you know, the better for you in case we get caught." Damaes was a bit deflated. He hated not being let in on the information and never really knowing where he was

going. He trusted Pelgrem to get him to safety, but it was a tall order, entrusting someone with your life without actually having a say in any of the decisions. To soothe his bruised ego, he returned to the pretty girl and invited her to breakfast, again.

Pelgrem continued his conversation with Artemesia for a few minutes more before she had to leave. Her time on the hacked computer was nearing an end and it was risky to stay more than twenty minutes this early in the day. If she stayed too long, she would be detected.

After breakfast, Pelgrem and Damaes spent time with Val before leaving with Vinnie to go topside and discuss their travel arrangements.

Pelgrem and Damaes left the next afternoon. They would arrive at their destination the following morning. It was best to leave at this time because the police did not travel the self-drive roads at night. You would be checked at the toll booths and then checked again when you left the self-drive highway. Times were calculated for the distances and, if you arrived too early, your speeds would be calculated by the cameras on various parts of the highway and fines were paid on the spot. As long as you stayed within two miles of the speed limit, the police at the toll booths generally left you alone.

Pelgrem didn't bother to pack a bag. His belongings were in the trunk of his car and Vinnie promised to have it ready for him by the time they left. He had stored his personal car with Vinnie a week before he had been caught. At the time, he was due a long vacation and had planned on spending the time driving around Canada for a month.

Pelgrem and Damaes said goodbye to everyone and thanked them for the sacrifices they had made for them. They went topside with Vinnie and Val, who made sure that the area was clear. Upon arriving topside, Vinnie sent the guards down the elevator with orders that no one come up until she returned. There was no taking chances that anyone would know which way Pel and Damaes had taken when they left.

Val shook both men's hands, gave them their new identities, and wished them well. Pelgrem gave Val a hug and said goodbye. He promised to send a word when they arrived safely. Val walked over to the elevators and waved as he returned underground.

Pelgrem, Damaes, and Vinnie walked to the back of the barn. Vinnie walked over to the south wall and turned a light on. There sat Pelgrem's blood red, Saleen S35, glistening in the overhead lights. Its seven-spoked hubcaps reflected a distorted image of Pelgrem as he strolled around the back of the car to the trunk.

Like many self-drive cars that remained on the roads, Pelgrem's Saleen was one of only a handful made each year. This made them very expensive but, being a member of the underground, Pelgrem had a few friends acquire the money necessary for the car by calling in many favors and taking a few dollars from some politicians caught in compromising positions.

Pelgrem's Saleen S35 was the first of the new self-drive models in nearly a decade. Despite his S35 being seven years old, he had obtained it new when Saleen re-entered the self-drive market. Although their automated cars sold well, there was a growing market for self-drives among the elite in America.

The S35 was a successful mix of past and present design, making them desirable among collectors. It also meant that Pelgrem was rarely stopped or questioned in the S35. Only the very wealthy could afford one and the very wealthy were allowed to do certain things that others could only dream of.

Pelgrem opened the trunk of the S35 and took out his duffel bag. He made a quick check to see that his clothes were still there and found his visa for traveling to Canada. It had been valid for sixty days. He had taken out a longer visa than necessary, just in case he wanted to stay a little longer. He hadn't taken a break since joining the underground and thought that an extended vacation would do him good. Pelgrem turned and gave the visa to Vinnie. She assured that it would be destroyed. After all, Pelgrem Godshalk no longer existed.

Pelgrem put his bag back into the trunk and Damaes threw his bag in as well. Pelgrem closed the trunk, turned around, and hugged Vinnie.

“Well,” Pelgrem said, “I guess this is it. Thanks for everything, and I'll make sure

Artemesia let's you know when we arrive.” Vinnie smiled at Pelgrem and hugged him again. She knew that this was, most likely, the last time they'd ever see each other. Vinnie squeezed Pelgrem tighter and then let him go. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and said, “Take care, my friend. And be careful.”

She turned to Damaes and shook his hand. “Keep an eye on him for us, will ya?” she asked him.

“It would be my pleasure,” he replied. The two men lifted the doors to the S35 and got in. Pelgrem placed his hand in the center of the steering wheel and waited for three seconds until the hand scanner identified him. The doors automatically closed. Pelgrem and Damaes pulled their seatbelts over their heads, clicking the tops of the seatbelts shut at their chests where the bottom of the seatbelts met in one large center section.

Pelgrem slowly moved his hands around the soft, leather steering wheel. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply, taking in the smell, feel, and passion of the S35.

Pelgrem opened his eyes and took a quick look around the black interior. The speedometer and tachometer were directly in front of him, with its glowing red indicators. The gas, oil, and water temperature gauges were in the center of the dashboard, above the air conditioning vents. Below the vents was the video touch screen where anything from television shows and movies to music and the net could be accessed at anytime.

Below the video screen was another touch screen that controlled interior and exterior lights and temperature. Underneath that was a homemade console area where Pelgrem had a personal entertainment system installed. It contained a slot for small discs and a slot for data sticks. Pelgrem was momentarily tempted to put Wil's data stick in until he



remember that his personal console was not attached to the net. He had done this to avoid automatic checks to see if his videos, music or whatever else he put in, were legal. The passenger side of the car had the standard glove compartment that all cars had for, at least, the last one hundred years.

Pelgrem took his right hand off the steering wheel and placed it in the stick shift. He quickly ran his thumb across the top of the shifter, tracing all seven speed positions, then shifted it into reverse, spinning around, shifted into first gear, and drove out of the barn. As he left the barn, Pelgrem honked his horn and waved out the window to Vinnie. Vinnie returned the wave, smiling as she returned to the elevator and the underground.

Pelgrem drove onto the highway, stopping to pay the toll, sweating a few moments as he waited to see if his new identity would pass muster, and continuing on as if he really belonged in the world. He drove through the night, stopping only after he had arrived safely onto Highway 17 to pee behind a road sign for Endicott, New York.

He continued on Highway 17. It was empty this time of day, even the automatic lanes. Very few people worked at night and, since Highway 17 was a rural highway, it would be covered mostly in commuters throughout the day. Pelgrem continued a little farther down the highway before pulling over to the side of the road near Livingston Manor. He woke Damaes and told him to get out of the car.

Pelgrem climbed on the hood of the S35 and stretched out, looking up at the sky. Damaes, not sure what was happening since he was barely awake, copied Pelgrem and climbed onto the hood.

“Careful with the shoes. I don't need any scratches on my car,” Pelgrem said softly. Damaes shot Pelgrem a look and merely shrugged. He looked up at the sky for a few

minutes and then at Pelgrem. He couldn't imagine what they were doing there and why they were risking the chance the police would come by and question them about what they were doing.

After fifteen minutes, Damaes asked Pelgrem, "I don't get it. What are we doing here?"

"We're waiting for dawn. It's just a few minutes away. Keep your eyes on the sky." Damaes knew that there must be a reason for the risk they were taking and he was sure that it was going to be Pelgrem's stupid sunrise over the mountains. Frustrated, he lay on hood of the S35, tempted to purposefully scratch the car, but lay angrily with his arms interlocked across his chest. He couldn't believe that he finally escaped one of the worst camps in America, only to risk it all over a sunrise. A sunrise that no one in the world ever cared about. Except Pelgrem. He had to risk life for a few pretty colors.

A few minutes later, the sun began to rise over the tops of the mountains. First, the sky just above the mountains were streaked blood red. After several minutes, however, the sun rose slightly more causing the sky to have a purple edge between it and the mountains. It lit up the trees on the mountains, giving the hues of the leaves a deeper yellow and red, contrasting with the sky, and displaying a cornucopia of colors from the entire spectrum. Pelgrem stared as long as he could and then, just as Damaes feared, a police car pulled up behind them.

The officer got out of his car and walked up to the front of the Saleen. Fortunately, the officer was very aloof. He approached Pelgrem, who had barely noticed any time had passed.

"Good morning, officer," Pelgrem said, sitting up and extending his hand to the police

officer.

The officer shook Pelgrem's hand and replied, "Watching the sunrise, eh?"

"Absolutely!" Pelgrem beamed. "It's absolutely incredible and I don't get to see it that often. My friend here, thinks it's silly but..."

"Oh no, it's not. You'd be surprised how many people we get on this stretch of road who stop for a look every day."

"Really?" Damaes interjected.

"Yep," the officer replied. He looked up at the sky for a few moments and said, "Well guys, I need to get back to work. I just need to get your info real quick so I can fill out my report."

"You bet," Pelgrem said, extending his arm so the officer could read their IDs.

"Ah, a couple ODs," the officer exclaimed as he scanned Damaes' ID as well. "You boys really like living old fashioned, don't you?"

"As old fashioned as I can get, sir," Pelgrem explained. "It's the way my family lived and the way they raised me. I'm still hoping that, one day we can all go back to living old fashioned."

"Not for me thanks," the officer responded. "I'm quite happy with the way things are. But, to each his own. I've yet to meet an OD that wasn't nice." The officer looked at his hand scanner and read the information display. "Okay boys, you're good to go. Don't linger too much longer. Someone might start to think you're up to something nefarious."

"No problem, sir. We were just about to go anyway," Pelgrem assured. "You have a wonderful day officer." Pelgrem again shook the officer's hand and the two parted company. The officer returned to his car and drove down the highway. Pelgrem looked

at Damaes and said, “You need to quit worrying so much.”

Pelgrem and Damaes climbed back into the Saleen S35 and returned to their trip down the lonely stretch of highway. They continued for another twelve miles and turned off of Highway 17 onto the smaller highway 52. Twenty miles later, they were passing through the small town of Ellenville. It was still too early for their meeting, so Pelgrem decided that they should stop and get some breakfast before continuing on to their destination.

The only place open was Fast Food Burger, which wasn't the ideal place to eat but it was something that would be edible until they could get to a proper restaurant. They decided to go inside and take their time eating as they had about an hour before they had to be at their rendezvous a few minutes down the road.

After their greasy breakfast, and inevitable rush to the bathroom, Pelgrem and Damaes returned to their car and drove to Ice Caves Mountain. To appear as regular tourists, Pelgrem made Damaes climb behind the giant wooden sign and stick his head through the front. Pelgrem took a photo of Damaes appearing as a woman being dragged away by her caveman. It was stupid but millions of people had done the same thing and Pelgrem didn't want to call attention to himself by refusing to take the silly photo. Once they were finished, they went inside the office and purchased special permits to enter the park where the ice caves lie.

The ice caves were created within the Shawangunk Mountain range when nature had turned fractured the bedrock into gigantic slabs, creating the tectonic caves. The spaces between the slabs formed the ice caves. The roofs of the caves were mainly boulders and slabs laid down by nature millions of years ago.

The rock itself is mostly known as Shawangunk Conglomerate, a very hard

conglomerate of white quartz pebbles, sandstone, and Martinsburg shale that began forming over 470 million years ago. The result is an unique landscape on the Shawangunk Ridge, extremely resistant to erosion with distinct ridge lines and the best rock climbing cliffs on the East Coast.

Because both men had identification stating that they were ODs, they were allowed to drive up to the old entrance to the ice caves. The caves had been closed in 2027 to the general public as they were considered far too dangerous for people to traverse. This was despite nearly 350 years of humans climbing in and out of the ice caves.

However, due to a clause in the agreement between the US government and the Original Descendants, anything that was open to the public at the turn of the century would be accessible to ODs, but a disclaimer had to be signed, resolving the government of any liability of injury. They were also required to agree that they would not harm the rare flora and fauna that existed in the preserve as well as release the government from any illness they may incur from eating wild blueberries or huckleberries. Regular tourists could still hike the many trails in the Shawangunk Preserve but they would never be allowed into the cave area.

Pelgrem drove up the hill towards Sam's Point, where the entrance to the cave lie. He stopped momentarily to look at the old outhouse just off the road. It was nearly 150 years old but there it stood. He was always amazed that such simple structures managed to survive the ravages of time.

They continued up the road, past the lake and on to Sam's Point. Here, they took a few moments to stop at the eagle's perch, an elevated, square, wooden structure with four telescopes facing each direction so that tourists could try to spot bald eagles soaring

overhead.

Pelgrem and Damaes looked through the telescopes, searching in every direction for a glimpse of the bald eagles but there were few birds to be seen and no bald eagles. Pelgrem surmised that they must all be eating somewhere. His ten minutes of peering through the telescope was up and he didn't have another twenty dollars to pay for more time.

Pelgrem tapped Damaes on the shoulder and suggested that they move on. Damaes had less than a minute left so Pelgrem waited for his time to run out and the two headed to the edge of the cliff where the natural staircase awaited them.

Before climbing down to the caves, Pelgrem took a moment to absorb the scenery around him. On a clear day, it was possible to see as far away as New Jersey. The sun had risen far enough that the purple mountains had given way to azure skies. The smell of rare dwarf pine trees filled the air as the white cliffs jutted outwards, prominently calling to climbers.

Pelgrem pointed out a dark patch of trees in the distance. These trees had been burned late in the twentieth century and, although the trees recovered, they had somehow mutated into producing a darker green leaf than the surrounding trees, forever marking the spot of a careless camper.

Once down the initial set of natural stairs, the ice caves were treacherous. The stairs are not without their own peril as there is only a flimsy, wooden railing between hiker and sheer drops over the cliffs. Winter is also rough in the area with snow and ice accumulating year-round, causing the pathways to be slippery and icy.

Another set of natural stairs leads further into the caves, which, at this point, is more

of an open area with a large boulder overhead. Still, the stairs here were so slippery that Pelgrem and Damaes had to sit down on each stair and carefully slink down to the next step as if they were two years old and just learning how to get up and down stairs. They would have felt silly if not for the fact that they were the only ones there.

So few people visited here, and less each year, that the government did not think it necessary to install any monitoring devices. Should they fall, no one would know until the end of the day when they did not return to the office to check out.

Though the overhead boulder appeared as if it could fall at any time, the two men were not concerned. The boulder had been there for hundreds, possibly thousands or millions of years. Another path was ahead and could only be crossed by a series of short steps and small slides, much like sliding on the kitchen floor in your socks.

Pelgrem, who had visited the caves before, quickly skipped over to the other end of the path. He stood there, shouting back at Damaes directions on how to safely get through. Unfortunately, Damaes slipped and slid down to Pelgrem, taking Pelgrem's legs out from under him. The two men slid off the path and rolled into a tree that lay just off the path. Once the realization that they were not going to die came over them, the two laughed and climbed back over the old, rotting, rope that was supposed to keep people on the path.

As they continued down the dirt and slightly snow covered path, Pelgrem thought to himself that the caves were skingy that day, much colder than Pelgrem had remembered from his last trip here. He secretly wished that he had remembered a jacket for traveling through the caves.

They reached the first small cave, which was a slight arc and roughly twenty feet long.

It was open on both ends but noticeably colder than the outside air. At the opposite end of this cave Pelgrem saw a soda can. "Look ancient Coke," he said as he walked by. Pelgrem smiled because he knew that Artemesia had been here and left the can on purpose. Pelgrem knew that, in the next cave, there would be a message.

A few feet further and there was a large, wooden door protecting the largest part of the caves. This cave was longer than the rest and completely inside from the outside. It was the perfect natural air conditioning and was rumored to have been used by the local Indians to cool off in the hot, New York summers, as well as a place to temporarily store food without worrying that it would spoil.

Pelgrem and Damaes entered the dark cave and proceeded carefully as the motion sensor lights guided them through the cave. The cave was a mere six feet wide but long enough, around thirty feet, to keep most things cool. Just past the halfway point of the cave, Pelgrem stopped and leaned over the wall separating the foot path from the icy walls and floor and picked up a Portable Video Device. He put it in his pocket and continued through the cave.

Once outside the cave, they had to climb up short, but steep, stone steps and then jump up and grab the top of a ledge to climb out of the exit area from the cave. An old, broken, wooden ladder lay on the ground next to the ledge. Its rope rotted away, preventing any further use for the wood as its past, intended purpose. Once on top, Pelgrem felt as if he was on top of the world. He was, at least in this part of the world. There were no safety railings here, just flat slabs of rock that led to the edge and a several hundred foot fall. Pelgrem and Damaes stopped to rest here for a while, sitting well back from the edge and enjoyed the view before returning to the trail that led back to their car.



The path outside was narrow and followed the edge of the cliff. One false move and Pelgrem and Damaes would be no more. The path was complicated by splotches of ice along it. Finally, the men reached the steep, stone staircase that led back up and out of the ice cave area.

Since there was no surveillance nearby, Pelgrem sat on the edge of the cliff and pulled out the PVD. It fit into his hand and, if placed correctly, was thin and cylindrical enough that it could be hidden behind a finger and not be seen. Pelgrem turned the PVD on by pulling out the thin nanoscreen. A quick finger flick of his pinky finger activated it. He scrolled through a couple of menus until he found a stored file on the PVD

The see-thru nanoscreen became opaque with the image of Artemesia. “Sorry I couldn't make it in person but, you know, that would be suspicious. Besides, you know where I live. I'll meet you at Coney Island for lunch. Don't be late. I'll eat without you.” Artemesia smiled and the nanoscreen returned to its original see-thru structure. Pelgrem pushed the nanoscreen back into its shell and put the PVD back in his pocket.

“So we're going to New York City?” Damaes asked.

“Not exactly,” sheepishly grinned Pelgrem. “Not exactly.”

Pelgrem and Damaes drove back across 209 and connected back onto Highway 17 until they reached exit 120, Middletown. Pelgrem slowly exited the off-ramp, being careful that the automatic reader had identified him and charged him the proper city tax for driving a self drive into the city.

Several years ago, the entire United States had changed all their roads to accommodate automatic cars with one self-drive lane on each road. Many smaller cities had implemented a special tax to allow for driving on their roads with a self-drive. The tax was collected as you entered a city so that not everyone had to pay this burden. If you were a commuter to other cities, there were plenty of payment plans but, since self-drive was rare, not many took advantage of paying in advance.

By paying on demand as you entered a city, allowed the city to charge astronomical fees for the privilege of self-driving. The fee, of course, was to cover the potential accidents that happened when a self-driver didn't pay attention and caused an accident. And it was always the self-driver's fault. Automatics were rarely blamed and, when they were, lengthy court cases ensued.

Pelgrem merged into the self-drive lane, which was empty and headed west on Route 211. He drove past all the shops and supermarkets and into town, turning left onto North Street and then left again, onto Railroad Avenue. Half a block later, Pelgrem made a right hand turn into the bus station and pulled into a parking spot in front of the Coney Island Hot Dog shop.

It was a small building, sliced in two, with the bus and taxi station on the left and the restaurant on the right. If five people were in the bus station at the same time, the people would have trouble moving, while Coney Island had a long bar that could seat a dozen

people and seven or eight tables, depending on whether they were shoved together or not. The bus station was one of the seedier parts of town, which is why Pelgrem decided to park his car right in front of Coney Island. From all of the tables inside, he would be able to see if someone was thinking of stealing his car.

Unlike automatics, self-drive cars often had all surveillance stripped from them so that, if someone stole the car, there was little hope of ever finding it. Parking it at a mall or a supermarket was different, since you had to register yourself and your car when entering the building, thus tying yourself to the car upon exit. Vehicles were rarely stolen at the mall or supermarket but, at small joints like this one, there was a good bet someone was already eying the Saleen and what they could get for it.

Pelgrem made a quick glance into the restaurant to see if Artemesia was there. He did not see her and contemplated whether they should go in or wait for her arrival. Just as he was about to get Damaes' opinion, a knock on the driver's side window startled him. It was Artemesia. Pelgrem grabbed his keys and the two men got out of the car. Pelgrem and Artemesia didn't say a word. The first thing they did was hug each other tightly.

"It's so good to see you," she said.

Damaes, hungry as usual, put his hand out towards Artemesia and said, "Uh, hello there, I'm Damaes." Pelgrem laughed and the two discontinued their embrace so that Artemesia could shake Damaes' hand.

"So, you're the one Pel decided was good enough to come with him." Damaes thought it odd that she didn't reply with a "nice to meet you," then again, he found this whole experience odd. The people of the underground had almost as much secrecy as the government they were trying to thwart. He never knew what to expect.

“I sure hope you don't disappoint us Damaes,” she continued. “But I'll learn more about you later. Come on, let's eat.” Pelgrem made sure the car was securely locked before they went inside for lunch at Coney Island.

They sat at a table directly in front of the Saleen so that Pelgrem could be a little less paranoid. Pelgrem ordered three chili dogs, as he always had, while Artemesia opted for one plain, with ketchup, and one chili. Damaes didn't know what to get so he ordered one chili and one with everything. He figured that way he could get a taste of which he liked better and order more if he wanted. Of course, fries came with the hot dogs and they each ordered a Vanilla Coke. The sodas, hot dogs, toppings, and fries were all homemade by the owners from a secret, family recipe that was over a hundred years old.

In between bites, Pelgrem and Artemesia tried to catch up with one another. “So, I found out a little information on your friends,” she began. “Most of them didn't make it.” Pelgrem stopped chewing for a moment and looked at Damaes and then at Artemesia. He had really hoped things would have turned out different but, he also knew that reality wouldn't allow many of them to ever leave the camp alive. “I'm sorry to say but the records indicate that Wil and Joe created an uprising, started a fire, and tried to kill the guards. That led to them being shot in the back of the head. Their official death certificates are listed as suicides.”

“Yeah, right,” Damaes interrupted. His face had turned from concern to disgust and he was angry for ever allowing himself to think the guards would have mercy on any of the campers.

Pelgrem put his arm around Damaes' shoulder. “I'm sorry it ended this way too D, but you have to remember, they can't say it was orders to eliminate anyone. They had to look

like they had no choice in the matter. It sucks but you know that's how they work.”

“The place wasn't completely demolished though. Word came from somewhere, I'm not sure where yet, to keep the place intact as much as possible,” she continued. “Your building is gone and a couple of nearby buildings but those are being rebuilt by the illegals that now live there. It seems too many people started asking what was going on there so they got rid of the real reason and have moved in several hundred illegals. The broadcasts have been saying it's been there for many years and if the illegals work hard in the camp, they can earn points towards citizenship. Those that don't are shipped back to where ever they came from.

“You should see it Pel. Everyone thinks it's a great thing and people are now donating tools and toiletries to help the ones that want to stay and become citizens. Some people even want to visit in the hopes of finding a lover once they are allowed to join American society. It's all quite insane how delusional people can be.”

“You're kidding right?” Pelgrem asked, only half-seriously.

“I shit you not, Pel,” Artemesia replied. “These people don't care at all about what's really going on. If it doesn't affect them or they can't gain from it, they simply don't care. I honestly don't understand sometimes why we keep fighting when we should all just say 'fuck it' and leave. Let them wallow in their own delusional images of how great things are.”

Their conversation was cut short as the waitress brought more drinks. Damaes found he liked the chili dogs and ordered a second one. They ate mostly in silence, keeping an eye on everything and everyone. Artemesia knew Pelgrem loved to eat here but she had also been weary of the restaurant. There was only one way in or out and that bothered

her. She preferred more exits.

When they were finished, Artemesia paid with a swipe of her arm. As they walked outside, Pelgrem asked, “So, where's your ride?”

“I'm looking at him,” she replied with a wry smile.

Pelgrem grinned, “Alright then. Get in.” Artemesia walked to the other side of the car and wagged her finger at Damaes. “Now, don't you be getting any smart ideas.” She climbed onto Damaes' lap and closed the door. Pelgrem reached just under the steering wheel and pushed a button. The windows went dark, tinted so that no one could see inside.

“So, off to Poughkeepsie then?” he asked.

“Good God no. I moved from the shit-hole a long time ago,” Artemesia replied. “I wouldn't be caught dead in that place now. No, I live over in Linden Block Towers.”

“Really?” Pelgrem was surprised. Such luxury apartments were hard to come by.

“Yep,” she said. “About a year ago it was changed to homosexual housing and I moved in with Alex.”

Many towns had what they referred to as safety zones. These were delineated among many different cultural terms. If you lived in a homosexual zone, then religious people weren't allowed to “witness” there. If you lived in a religious zone, it could be neutral or religion specific. Families also had zones for themselves as did different ethnicities. Anyone was free to visit anyone else where ever they wanted but, by creating safety zones, the government believed that the only problems that would exist would be in public areas.

This did not always work as it should but, since you had to swipe your identification

when you entered and exited a zone, it was easy for law enforcement to see if someone was where they shouldn't be when a crime was committed. It was also easy for someone to notify the police if someone was in their zone violating the law. It worked, for the most part, but mainly out of fear. Normal citizens did not want to face the possible loss of their careers, so they simply went about their lives avoiding most people who were not like them.

Pelgrem drove the three blocks to the park across from Linden Block Towers and parked underneath it in the visitors lot. The three friends took the elevator up five levels to the street, crossed the road, and entered the lobby of Linden Block Towers.

Artemesia handed her OD bracelet to the security guard for verification. She then asked for permission to let Pelgrem and Damaes into the building with her.

"I don't know," the guard said. "I'm going to have to check and see if you are allowed visitors." Each person in America also had a finite number of visitors that could visit them in their homes. This was based partly on ethnicity, sex, and some other magic formula the government had invented. The formula was, of course, classified, so you never knew if someone could visit you. If someone visited often enough, they could also be denied, for unknown reasons.

The guard took Pelgrem and Damaes' OD bracelets and checked them against various databases, criminal, civilian, international. He squinted his eyes a bit and looked closer at the screen. "Only one of them can go with you," he said. "It's giving me a code 3 error."

Code 3. Too many of the opposite sex at once or too many of the opposite sex multiple times. It could be either, it could be both. It was a tricky situation, especially for someone living in the homosexual zone. Too many of the opposite sex could mean that

one wasn't gay. That would throw up red flags and a person could be arrested and sent away.

Frustrated, Pelgrem and Damaes looked at each other. Damaes knew he was going to be left behind. But, before they could speak, Artemesia said, "Uh, he's black," pointing at Damaes. "Do I have any blacks left I can let in?"

"Hmmm, let me see," the guard said, punching on a few buttons. He spent several minutes tapping at his screen, scrunching up his nose, tapping some more, shrugging, and, then, finally, he said, "If this man is homosexual I can let him in. You have used up all your heterosexual black allowances."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm gay," Damaes immediately said.

"Careful, son," the guard warned. You know this change will be a permanent one and that government officials will make a visit to your home to speak to you about your opportunities."

Damaes looked at Pelgrem, unsure what to say. Pelgrem nodded in his direction, indicating that he should say yes. "Yes, that's fine. No problem."

"Okay, now, all I need to make the changes permanent is your retina scan," the guard said. "And what date you'd like an officer from gender studies to visit you?"

"Uh, I'm not sure," Damaes replied.

"We'll be back on the 15<sup>th</sup>," Pelgrem said.

"Okay, so I'll have an officer come 'round on the 20<sup>th</sup> then. I'll just make a note in your file to remind you a week beforehand." The guard handed the OD bracelets back to the three friends and said, "If you can't make the meeting, be sure to reschedule."

"Don't worry, I will."



The three headed towards the elevators and thanked the guard for his time and patience.

There was silence in the elevator, not because it was an elevator, but, because there were cameras and microphones in it. Speaking was not safe until they reached Artemesia's apartment. They got off the elevator and walked down the corridor, turned right and walked to the end of the hall. Artemesia used her retina to scan and open the door. As the three entered and the door closed behind them, Damaes exclaimed, “Fucking hell! I'm gay now. This is just great. How the hell am I ever going to get a girl now?”

Pelgrem and Artemesia laughed at Damaes. “Fake ID, silly,” Artemesia said, as she tapped on her bracelet. “Is he always this uptight?” she said as she looked at Pelgrem. Pelgrem smiled and nodded back at her. “You two get settled, I'll be right back.”

Pelgrem looked around the living room. It was quite spacious, but most luxury apartments had large living rooms. There were four doors connecting to other rooms off of the living room. One was open and Pelgrem could see that it was the bathroom. The living room itself was basically decorated. There were two chairs, a couch set back against a long window, and a table that had the day's mail resting on it.

Pelgrem walked over to the window and looked upwards. He could see where the video screen was installed near the ceiling and the latch to pull it down over the window. His search for how to turn it on was interrupted by Damaes.

“I didn't know she was gay,” Damaes said.

“She's not,” Pelgrem replied. “She's up to something to be living here.” He continued his search and found a small remote control in the seat of the couch. He picked it, saw

that there were several gray buttons on it and a single red button. The descriptions were either worn off or were never there. Instinctively, he pushed the red button.

The video screen extended itself down to cover the window and turned itself on. Pelgrem didn't pay attention to what was on. He quickly pushed the red button again and the video screen folded itself back up. He didn't want Artemesia to think that he was snooping in her belongings, even if it was only the video screen.

Artemesia returned, smiling, with a large, square box. It was approximately six inches high and nearly twelve inches across. On top was stamped, "84 Diner" and an address in Beacon, New York. A huge smile appeared on Pelgrem's face, larger than Damaes had ever seen.

"My friend," Pelgrem said to Damaes, "You are about to eat the best cheesecake ever known to man."

Pelgrem feasted on three slices. He knew he'd be sick later but he didn't care. The sweet, smooth taste of the cheesecake was too much to resist. He'd worry about a stomachache later.

When they were finished, Pelgrem helped Artemesia clean up and then she showed them her bedroom. It was a basic room. A bed. A dresser. A chair. It was small, ten by fifteen, but big enough for the basics.

"Who gets to sleep there?" Pelgrem asked as he jumped on the bed.

Artemesia's face changed to a look of horror as she quickly pushed Pelgrem off the bed. "I do," she said angrily, "And the bed isn't calibrated for you. I could get into a lot of trouble for that." She reached down under the bed, moving a few wires to set the readout on the bed into a continuous loop, indicating that no one was on the bed. "I

seriously do not need anyone asking why there are two men in my apartment, adding weight to my bed when I'm supposed to be a lesbian.

“There. That should do it. You can lay on the bed now.”

“Thanks.” Pelgrem jumped back on the bed and stretched out. It had been many years since he had been able to sleep in a real bed. It was firm, yet comfortable. “Oh, there is no way I'm giving this up. Artemesia, you're going to have to sleep on the floor tonight.” He locked his fingers just above his head and closed his eyes. He was, for the moment, in heaven.

“Look, you can rest here all you want, but I've got to get a shower. I was up most of the night preparing for your arrival and I haven't had a chance to..”

“Don't worry about it,” Pelgrem interrupted. “Go, we can occupy ourselves for a few minutes.”

“I'll put the video screen on for you. I'm going to need my room back when I'm finished.” She smacked Pelgrem's feet off the bed and he, regrettably, got up and went back into the living room.

Pelgrem and Damaes sat in the chairs and turned them towards the video screen. Artemesia put the newscast on so that they could catch up on some of the more current events. The shower was quite loud and they had to strain to hear what was being said. After a few minutes, they gave up and turned it off. Both men started to doze off when they heard the lock on the apartment door open.

Pelgrem immediately woke up. He looked at Damaes, who was already looking at him. They panicked as the knob on the door turned. As it opened, Pelgrem stood up, nervous about what to do next.

Alex entered the apartment and Pelgrem felt a huge sigh of relief. Alex smiled as he saw Pelgrem and immediately hugged him. “Good to see you, my friend.” Alex hugged him again. “And who's this?”

Pelgrem introduced Damaes to Alex. Alex took off his backpack and tossed it on the floor near the couch. “She feed you?”

“Yeah, she did.”

“Good. You want something to drink?”

“Nah, we're good. We're pretty stuffed after lunch actually.”

Alex temporarily exited to the kitchen, returning with a Company's Best beer. The beer was terrible and an acquired taste. There was little alcohol content in their beer but, it was one of a handful of beers legal in America and people who liked the taste of beer said it was the best of the worst bunch.

Artemesia came out of the shower, wearing her housecoat and headed towards her bedroom. She stopped momentarily to tell Alex she expected a cold beer for herself as soon as she returned.

“So, uhm, Alex, can I ask you a question?” Damaes asked.

“Sure, what's up?”

“Okay, I get that this is a nice place so you want to play gay and all but why don't you two just live in regular housing? I've seen lots of nice places in heterosexual zones.”

“Well, that's a complicated answer,” Alex began. “First, if you live in homosexual zones, people tend to leave you alone. The people that live here tend to keep to themselves and don't bother you. Plus, since you are legally allowed to change your sexual identity, why not go where you can be left alone until you sort things out?”

“Also, I'm gay, so, yeah, that's why I live here. Artemesia, however, is still carrying a torch for Pel.” Pelgrem shifted uncomfortably, putting his hands in his pockets and looking towards the floor. “Oh come on, Pel, you can't tell me that you're surprised by this.”

“No...I'm not...it's just...well...nevermind. I don't want to talk about it.”

Alex laughed and continued, “You see Damaes, Pel and Artemesia have been friends a long time. She's the only person he's ever trusted one hundred percent, no questions asked. She has had feelings for him for a long time but it's sort of understood that nothing is going to happen.”

“Then why doesn't she find someone else?” Damaes asked. “I mean, there's lots of guys out there. I'm one of them,” he smiled.

“Well,” Alex replied. “I think she decided a long time ago that Pel was the one she wanted and she'd rather be alone than have something she didn't want.” Damaes nodded. Pelgrem sighed and sat down on the couch.

“You can't change her, Pel,” Alex said. “You just have to accept it and move on.”

“I know, I know,” Pelgrem answered. “I just don't want her wasting her life.”

“It's her life to waste,” Damaes said. “And it seems like she feels that she's not wasting it.”

“Pel, get out of the way,” Alex said, changing the subject. He turned the video screen on to watch his favorite show, “Illegal Music Today.” Alex affectionately called it a comedy but it was a news program listing the latest songs that were made illegal, as well as the most recent criminals who were cited for using music in illegal ways. Sometimes, they showed people who only committed minor offenses but, often, it was focused on

people who committed multiple offenses at once.

The show always ended with someone who had been re-educated and were spouting the government's position on how wrong it had been and how they learned their lesson. Then they would show the person in a wonderful new job and tell how much better their lives were now that they had seen how wrong they were.

Artemesia joined them part way through the show but didn't interrupt. She, too, enjoyed comedy shows. She sat on the floor, since it was impossible to sit on the couch and watch the video screen. Alex and Artemesia were unaccustomed to having visitors so their living room was not arranged for entertainment.

After the shows were over, Artemesia reminded Alex that it was his turn to make dinner. Pelgrem was particularly happy that Alex was cooking dinner because Alex's specialty was Indian food. Pelgrem loved it and, over the years, Alex had taken the time to get to know how to make a few genuine meals instead of heating up the horrible “microwave in minutes” Indian food that most people ate. Damaes went into the kitchen with Alex to observe and help in any way he could.

With everyone else out of the room, Artemesia asked Pelgrem for the PVD she had left him at the ice caves. She had stored the information that she had found out about his sister on it. That way, if Pelgrem or the PVD were compromised, it would not be traced back to Artemesia and, once the authorities discovered Pel's true identity, it would appear normal for him to be searching for his missing sister.

Artemesia pulled open the PVD, spoke a few commands that Pelgrem didn't recognize and a file opened. She gave the PVD to Pelgrem, who scanned through them.

“I got as much as I could,” Artemesia said. She placed her hand on Pelgrem's arm.

“Most of the information is classified. I couldn't get access at all and I had to call in a lot of favors for what is there. I'm sorry it's not complete. It's the best I could do in such little time.”

The files were the standard files filled with text and photos. There were photos of his sister that were current for the time each file was made. Most of the files were school related, listing grades and behavior in class. Written in large letters at the top of each file was the name Francesca Godschalk. Pelgrem was surprised that they had never changed her name. Artemesia excused herself to go help Alex but, really, she just felt Pelgrem would want some time alone.

Pelgrem barely noticed that she left as he continued reading through the files. He discovered that, after he disappeared, the government took her away for questioning. They gave her a variety of tests, to which they felt that re-education and special training would help the new orphan. She had been told that her parents and her brother were dead. The educators felt that this was the best way for her to re-assimilate back into society.

After her re-education she was sent to a special government school. Only the best and brightest were allowed to enter these schools because they set a student on a track for government work. Only highly trusted citizens could go on to work in the government sector. Pelgrem assumed that someone along the way took a liking to his sister and placed her where she could succeed. It was extremely rare that orphans were allowed to enter the special government schools and he knew that it was likely she worked in a high security sector.

These sectors only employed those that were completely loyal to the government and

had no other ties to society. They were also kept separate from society in general so as to avoid any conflicts or changes of heart.

This also explained why Pelgrem was never able to find her before. Anyone in the government sector, who was not a politician, had their data sealed from the public. This meant that there was no evidence that the person even existed. If they did not exist, then searches for them would result in nothing.

Pelgrem stopped and looked up at the ceiling. He leaned forward and saw Artemesia helping Alex with dinner. He suddenly realized what great lengths she had to go to in order to find this information. And he knew that, even though she said she had to call in a lot of favors, he suspected that she now owed people favors too. This kind of information did not come cheaply. Artemesia noticed Pelgrem looking in at her and she smiled at him. He smiled back and returned to finish reading.

Francesca was in New York City, near Battery Park. By 2020, Battery Park was turned into an official government housing sector by means of eminent domain. Those that lived there were moved. If they refused, they were arrested, disappeared, or shot. Then their belongings were sold at auction, with the proceeds going back into government coffers.

Pelgrem closed the PVD and kissed it. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. He let out a sigh of relief as a single tear fell from his left eye.

“You okay?” Artemesia asked as she entered the living room again. Pelgrem looked at her and replied, “Everything's fine. Thank you.”



The following morning, Pelgrem awakened before the others. He got up off the couch went into the kitchen. After unsuccessfully looking for something decent to eat for breakfast, he took the leftover rogan josh and warmed it up in the microwave.

When he was finished he returned to the living room and folded his blankets. He packed his clothes in his bag, taking out a change of clothes for after his shower. By the time he had finished his shower, everyone else was awake and milling about the apartment.

“Why did you packed your stuff back up?” Damaes asked.

“Because I need to get into the city and find Frankie,” Pelgrem replied.

“I don't think so,” Artemesia replied sternly. “You are not going there without a plan, without me, and without checking out her place ahead of time.”

Frustrated, Pelgrem glared at Artemesia. He wanted to tell her that there was no way he was going to wait. He had spent enough years away from his sister and saw no reason to wait. He was going to go see her and he was damned if he was going to let anyone make him wait a moment longer. But, he knew better. Despite all his desires to see his sister immediately, he knew that his time in the camps had kept him from knowing his way around.

He no longer knew the current videos that people were watching. He barely had a grasp on the current news and what the government felt was important to know about foreign nations. He wasn't sure if he could ever manipulate anyone into getting past security systems. He didn't even know if that was still a possibility. Technology changed so quickly that there could now be a way to prevent the human element from interacting with technology.

His glare towards Artemesia didn't last long. Pelgrem's expression turned from frustration to agreement as he sighed heavily. "You're right, I know. It's just....," he paused for a moment, trying to find the right words. "I just want to see her again."

"You will, Pel. I promise," Artemesia reassured him. "I went to a lot of trouble to find what you never could and I've extended myself more than I should have to do it. I'm not going to let your impulses ruin it before we carefully plan out what we are going to do."

"There are plans to be made, contingencies to be considered, and places we have still don't have access to. Just be patient."

"Okay," Pelgrem said. He had to resign himself to the fact that he wasn't calling the shots on this one, no matter how much he wanted to be in charge.

Artemesia pulled out her PVD, displaying her map of the area around Francesca's apartment building. In order for everyone to see the map clearly, she inserted the PVD into the back of the remote control for the video screen. She continued to tap on the PVD, as it was easier than trying to climb on the couch and jump back and forth, pointing to her plan and different sections of the map.

Pelgrem, Damaes, and Artemesia spent several hours working out a plan, memorizing the map and learning escape routes should there be any trouble. Alex had left to "go for a walk" because, if anything were to happen to them, they wanted to assure that Alex would not be harmed. Alex was a good friend but he was only a very minor cog in the underground. He mainly repaired broken systems for the underground and "obtained" small items, such as clothing, PVDs, cash, etc., for other members of the underground. This job was too large for him to risk his original identity and Artemesia did not want

him involved.

They decided that they would take the 7:15am express train into the city the following morning. From there, they would head to Grand Central Station so that Pelgrem could recover the items from his locker there and then on to finding his sister. Artemesia had also informed Pelgrem that a recent law was passed, forbidding self-drives in New York City. It was simply too dangerous.

New York City was overcrowded with people and cars and city officials had decided that it was best for everyone's safety if self-drives were banned. The only benefit was a ten percent discount on the train if you owned a self-drive. Pelgrem opted to not take advantage of the discount and, instead, signed over ownership of his Saleen to Alex, but only after making Alex promise over and over that he would never drive the S35 unless Pelgrem was dead.

Even then, Pelgrem made Alex promise that he would only drive it to Artemesia's mystery man, who had obtained much of the information about his sister, and use the car as an offer to pay off whatever debt Artemesia incurred.

The following morning, Pelgrem, Damaes, and Artemesia took the subway to the train station. They were early and had to wait several minutes for the train to arrive. Dressed casually, they were out of place among all the businessmen in suits and ties and businesswomen in smart business dresses. It was obvious to everyone that they were heading into the city for pleasure and they received several disgusted looks from people who secretly wished that they, too, were going for pleasure instead of work.

Artemesia took Pelgrem and Damaes' bracelets and went over to the kiosk to purchase tickets. No one actually received tickets anymore but if you did not secure your fee

before you climbed onto the train, then your fee was doubled. The train arrived just as Artemesia finished her transaction.

They sat on the right side of the train, with Damaes taking the window seat, Pelgrem taking the aisle seat, and Artemesia sandwiched in the middle. Damaes watched a rather large man, still on the platform, finishing his breakfast, which appeared to be an egg sandwich but he couldn't be sure because the man's hands were so large that they hid the sandwich. Just before the doors closed, the large man jumped onto the train and entered the same car that the friends were in.

There was a distinct smell of dirty baby diapers in the train car but there were no babies anywhere in the car or the next car. And it wasn't a good smell. It was the kind of baby smell that says, "I'm too lazy to clean my kid properly so I'll put on extra baby powder and hope it covers up the smell."

As the train rolled on towards the city, another man was coughing every few minutes and then made that horrible sound everyone wishes that they never knew of or heard. It's the sound of a man filling his mouth with whatever he was just coughing up and then swallowing it. Pelgrem shuddered every time he heard the man repeat this process. When the train stopped in Tuxedo to pick up more passengers, the man, who had been sitting two rows behind Pelgrem, quickly hopped off the train and spit a giant ball of phlegm and mucus out over the railing. "Ewww," Damaes exclaimed as he was disgusted at what the man had done. After the man returned to the train car and the train continued on its tracks, the man was no longer coughing.

The train ride was quite blissful other than this. It was as quiet as an elevator on the train. It was also very foggy, making it difficult for Damaes to see anything outside the

train's window. He decided that, since he couldn't see anything outside, he might as well take a catnap.

At the next stop, a lady sat down in the row next to Pelgrem. He had hoped to make it all the way into the city with the two seats next to him empty. However, this woman was pleasant enough, dressed in a two-piece, white, gray and black, checkered business suit. Artemesia noticed her outfit and thought that, if she worked where this woman worked, she would probably have dressed similarly.

The woman also had a temporary cast on her right foot. She hung it out into the aisle, which would be dangerous if anyone walked up the aisle and didn't pay attention. The cast was a blue and white temporary cast that looked like she was wearing the inside of a ski boot on her foot. Pelgrem took note of it and reminded himself not to get near if he got out of his seat for fear of whacking her foot and sending her into a blood curdling scream.

The only problem Pelgrem had from this woman was the sniff. He wondered why people could not remember to bring some tissues with them when they travel or why people just insist on sniffing all the time. It's not pretty and it's definitely not sexy. Pelgrem thought about how gross it was to see people sniff and wipe their dripping noses with their hands and then wipe them on various things nearby. He wanted to yell at the woman to stop, but fear of being ticketed for causing a public disturbance made him sit in silence.

Then, the woman's PVD began ringing. Pelgrem thought to himself that this was the worst seat on the train. He had forgotten how noisy the outside world was and how rude people were in public. He hated people who spoke on their PVDs in public so loud that

anyone could hear their conversations. He hated how these same people would be pissed when they realized someone was actually listening to their conversations.

The woman answered the call but, at least she put the detachable ear piece into her ear so that the people in the train car could only hear her side of the conversation. She began laughing when the person on the other end told her that they have just awakened and will be late to work. Pelgrem just closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He formed his hands into a fist but Artemesia put her hands around his, encouraging him to straighten his fingers and relax a little bit.

Fortunately, the conversation lasted about two minutes and Pelgrem thought that he could have peace again before pulling into the station. It was not to be. The lady dialed another number and told this person that Melissa just called and said she was going to be late again. There were a few exchanges about how this Melissa was always late to work and that she might be about to lose her job because of it. The woman thought it was funny, imitating the girl by saying, “He he, I overslept again. I’m such a silly girl.” Pelgrem secretly wished that this Melissa would lose her job.

The lady on the train kept calling the person on the other end, Sweetie, and, they too, thought Melissa was only days away from unemployment. The lady continued to speak of her job at the hospital and how she was, “sick of the shit I have to put up with and people always looking over my shoulder to watch if I’m doing my job or not.” She went on to say that she was planning on quitting right after her surgery was finished and that she was going to leave an ass-load of work when she left.

Suddenly, Pelgrem wanted to be this woman's friend. He liked her attitude and, after listening to what seemed like a nightmare job of paperwork she does for the doctors at

this hospital, Pelgrem thought it was great that she was going to be so passive-aggressive when she left. Her sniffing didn't bother him anymore either. He just smiled at watched the swampy fields pass by as the train headed into its final destination of Hoboken.

The hurry-bodies rose from their seats as soon as the train had hit the swampy, marshy areas to skulk around the doors. They had to be the first off the trains so they could start rushing through their day. Since Pelgrem, Damaes, and Artemesia were shirking all responsibility today, they decided to wait until after all the hurry-bodies had disappeared before they got off the train.

When they got off the train a Metro-North security official stopped them. He took out his government issued PVD, started recording the incident and demanded their IDs. The security official cringed loudly when he realized they were all classified as Original Descendants. "Just what do you think you're doing here?"

They were taken aback by the security official's gruff attitude. "We're going into the city," Artemesia responded.

"But why are you coming off the train so late?" he asked. "What were you up to there?"

"We weren't *up to* anything," Artemesia emphatically replied.

"Then why did you take so long to get off the train?" he again asked. "Are you some sort of terrorist trying to trick me? You people are always trying to trick regular people. All you ODs are practic all the time."

"Yes, *that's exactly it*," Pelgrem thought to himself. "*We are deceitful, treacherous, and cunning, and want to blow up an empty train in an empty station because that's how terrorists work. Moron.*" Instead, he answered aloud, "We are only visiting the city

today as tourists so we thought we would let those that work get off first, since they have to hurry to get to work and we have all day to do things.”

“Huh?” the security official said. He was confused. He didn't understand this politeness that three young people were displaying towards their fellow human beings. “I don't understand.”

“Look,” Artemesia said. “We were trying to be nice. If you let us go, we promise to rush off the train with everyone else next time. We didn't know that we weren't allowed to wait. We're just country folk who don't really understand the ways of the big city.”

The security official looked at her with his head cocked sideways. He was still convinced they were up to something but his shift was over in fifteen minutes and he didn't want to spend the next four hours unpaid while he filled out paperwork. “Okay, fine, I think. I need your retinas for confirmation. This incident will be placed into your permanent files, cross-linked to one another.”

He extended the screen and held it up to each of the three friends' eyes for their retina scans. “You will receive the cost of the fine in six to eight weeks for the frivolous interference of a security official's work.”

“What?” Pelgrem said. He couldn't believe that they would still have to pay a fine for security's own incompetent officials. Artemesia quickly put her hand over Pelgrem's mouth. “Thank you sir, have a nice day,” She said as she dragged Pelgrem away from the officer and towards the stairs to the PATH trains.

They climbed down the stairs to the PATH trains and decided to take the train that stopped at 33<sup>rd</sup> street instead of the new World Trade Complex. From there, it would be a quick switch to the New York City subway system and on to Grand Central. Pelgrem,



Damaes, and Artemesia walked past the first three cars and entered the fourth one. It wasn't completely full, which was a lucky break. Usually, people literally feel like sardines on the way to the market when they cram into the PATH trains for their trip under the Hudson River and onto the island that is Manhattan.

As the doors closed, Pelgrem noticed that the train car smelled of Doritos. Nacho cheese flavor, if he wasn't mistaken. It was hard not to identify the smell because it was always the same. Nacho cheese Doritos always smell like a mix of rotten cheese and dirty socks. The smell permeated the car.

Across from where the friends were sitting was a man and a woman, discussing England. Their conversation was pertaining to British things and was a case of the ignorant leading the stupid. The man kept telling the woman that she was ignorant about England because he had been there and she never had been, therefore, he knew more about the English than she did. He also, constantly, made the mistake of using England, Great Britain, and the UK interchangeably.

"Everyone in England lives in the lap of luxury unless they choose not to," the man said confidently to the woman.

"That is an idiotic statement," the woman said. She tried to say more but the man interrupted her, stating that, "No, you see, everything is paid for by the British government so all the people have lots of extra money for the finer things in life. The United Kingdom also has socialized medicine, so people can buy stuff that only the really wealthy in America can afford."

She then asked him, "Are you telling me that there's no homeless people there then?" To which, he replied that there weren't. He stated that they used to have a problem with

homeless people and squatters but that the British government cleared the land the squatters were living on and put buildings up so they couldn't squat there anymore. The woman was sure that a squatter took over a building not a piece of land, but the man said she was mistaken and that squatters use tents on someone else's land. "You'd understand that if you had ever traveled there," the man claimed. "The homeless no longer exist in places like London simply because there is nowhere to squat. You really need to widen your scope and travel to learn about the world."

Pelgrem turned his head sideways and buried it in Artemesia's shoulder. It was the best that he could do to not laugh out loud at the man. Artemesia put her right hand over her mouth to cover the huge smile on her face, while Damaes just stared at the man with an "I can't believe you're saying this" look on his face.

The woman had a puzzled look on her face and was sure the man was making things up. He assured her that he wasn't. He then told her that, if she got permission to travel, she should only stay in the southern part of England because the northern part had a completely different culture. He stated that, "there are huge cultural differences from London to the north of the country. It's like France and the USA. Even the books are written differently and school is taught differently. Some of them don't even speak the same language as they do in London."

Pelgrem nearly busted a gut from silently laughing at this imbecile. While it was hilarious to him that people were so stupid, he also felt secure in the fact that he could probably still fool any of his fellow Americans with a little double speak, misdirection, and made up things about foreign places.

By the time the train pulled into the 33<sup>rd</sup> street stop, Pelgrem almost crying from

withholding his laughter. The man and the woman exited the car and continued with their day. As soon as they were out of earshot, Pelgrem busted out in laughter. Soon, all three were laughing. The three friends exited the car and began walking, following the signs that would lead them to the subway station.

Pelgrem, Damaes, and Artemesia took the subway to Grand Central Station. Pelgrem and Artemesia, who had been to Grand Central many times, paid little attention to their surroundings, other than where the National Guard were located. They had to keep stopping, however, because this was Damaes' first time in the Station. He kept wandering off, looking at the artwork on the ceiling, watching the boards change as trains were departing and arriving, staring at the grand staircase.

They finally tugged at Damaes' shirt, indicating that they really had to get going. They walked over to the escalators and descended into the basement to the food court where they purchased turkey sandwiches at Schlotzsky's. When they were finished, Pelgrem led them to the far end of the food court where the long term storage lockers were located. Just inside the lockers was an enclosed cage where a woman sat, watching a tiny video screen. She glanced up long enough to acknowledge that Pelgrem was there and pointed down to scanners. With a swipe of his bracelet, he paid his fee to enter the lockers.

The door to the long term storage lockers opened and Pelgrem entered. He walked down the fifty foot corridor and turned left. After walking another twenty feet he turned right and slowly walked down the aisle to GCS33, his locker. He took his card, swiped it through the slot and waited for the locker to click open. Upon opening it, he determined that no government official had been inside the locker while he was gone. Nothing was missing and there didn't appear to be any tracking devices on the items inside.

Pelgrem took out his jacket, an old NY Mets jacket from 2032, the last time they won the World Series. It was a short jacket, reaching only to his waist. The locker didn't have room for the longer jacket that reached down to his knees and he lost that when the police had arrested him.

Inside the breast pocket was a large amount of cash. Pelgrem had folded the money in half and then placed seven rubber bands around the cash, in various positions, creating a pattern he knew. This was the easiest way to ensure that his money wasn't tampered with and he could keep it without having to count it.

Pelgrem reached inside the jacket to the PVD pocket on the right side and pulled out a pen and scratch paper. He always preferred to write important things down, memorize them, then burn them, instead of placing them on a PVD where the data could be accessed without his permission.

Pelgrem put the items back into his pockets and put his jacket on. It was a little big now and he assumed that it must be the weight that he lost while in the camps. He reached inside the locker, giving a tap on two select spots in the back of the locker. The back panel of the locker came loose and Pelgrem pushed it to the side of the locker and continued taking out his belongings.

He pulled out a small rucksack that had two locks attached to its zippers, and set it on the bench behind him. He reached once more inside and pulled out a small pouch. He sat down on the bench and looked through the pouch. He had two different OD bracelets, a key and an old paper notebook in the pouch. The paper notebook was well worn. Pelgrem flipped through it, just long enough to inspect and ensure that nothing had been torn out.

Pelgrem removed one of the OD bracelets, which was his original, and placed it back into the far corner of the locker. He used the key to unlock the small compartment on the front of the rucksack and put the other OD bracelet and notebook back in the pouch and put it inside it.

Inside the compartment was another key, which Pelgrem used to open the lock to the main compartment. He unlocked the main compartment and pulled out a change of clothes, consisting of a pair of jeans, a plain black t-shirt, socks, and underwear. Reaching inside the leg of the jeans revealed an old PVD. It had no intraweb capability, no tracking devices and no identity chips. If you had it on your person, law enforcement officials would never know that it existed.

Inside one of his socks was a razor thin attachment for the PVD. It allowed the user to view information from a data stick, even if it was encrypted. A friend had given it to Pelgrem several years ago when they had upgraded to the newer models of PVDs. He no longer had use for it and Pelgrem offered to take it off his hands in exchange for some music that had recently been declared illegal to own. Pelgrem wanted to use his PVD to look at the data stick but he didn't dare. If he stayed too long, it would raise suspicion and the cameras would surely note what he was doing.

With everything accounted for, Pelgrem replaced the panel on the back of the locker and closed the door. He relocked his rucksack, slung it over his right shoulder, and walked back out towards the entrance where Damaes and Artemesia were waiting. He had to stop again to turn in his card, since he would no longer need the locker but the bossacks was annoyed that he was interrupting her day. The bossacks seemed genuinely angry that Pelgrem had dared enter the lockers when she had much more important video screening to do.

With a deep, and gruff, sigh, she tapped on another video screen, activating the robotic arm that could swipe his card and determined the five thousand dollar fee that he owed. Pelgrem swiped his OD bracelet, paid the fee, and wished the woman a great day. She

glared at him for a moment before returning to her video screen.

“Friggin' bossacks,” Pelgrem said when he exited the storage area. “I really hate them. I don't know how they even keep their jobs.”

Not wanting to rile him up, Damaes changed the subject and asked, “Did you get everything you need?”

“Yep, now we just need someplace we can look at the data properly and figure out what to do with it,” Pelgrem said. “But, first, we need to go see Frankie.”

It was nearly 11am, perfect timing to sneak into places where one was not welcome. 11am started the lunch rush that would last until nearly 2pm. Everyone would be in a rush to get from one place to another and the checking of IDs was often overlooked in a compromise to have traffic flow faster. IDs were normally scanned one at a time but, during the lunch rush, it was very common for people to hold doors for one another or, if there was an automatic swipe machine upon entering an establishment, it would often get overloaded if too many people entered and exited at the same time.

The machines would register a single person entering more than once, several milliseconds apart, entering and exiting at the same time, or missing the ID completely. Instead of fixing the machines to be able to read such data or require a law to prevent too many people moving around at once, the government had hired people to sort through the data each day and determine what had happened. If a person was not registered as entering an establishment, but had a receipt, then an official automatically had to be dispatched to the person's home or place of work to correct the problem and issue a fine.

It was, of course, an individual's fault if their ID did not register, something citizens voiced their opinions about, but did little to change. After all, it was only a minor \$500

fine and the inconvenience a fine caused was nothing compared to the trouble one could get in to if they fought the ticket. These fines were so common that no one considered it a detraction from obtaining gainful employment. Nearly everyone in a big city had received at least one of these fines. They were an irritation but only a minor distraction in a citizen's life.

If they were very lucky, Francesca's building would have a human in the lobby, making it easier to get into. As the government tightened their grip on nearly every aspect of American society, they still failed to realize that trespassing was still possible because of the human element. Machines can be hacked. Codes changed. But humans were always emotional and emotion was the easiest way to enter anywhere.

They walked back to the entrance to the subway, took the 4, 5, 6, line south to Chambers, then exited into City Hall Park. What was once between Battery Park and Battery Park City was now commonly referred to as just Battery Park. This included the vast strip on the western side of Manhattan where the new World Trade Complex was located and stretched as far out as City Hall Park. Security walls lined most of Chambers Street, on the North and continued South on Broadway to Castle Clinton, where the wall was cornered off. This enabled tourists to have access the ferries to Ellis Island and Liberty Island.

Francesca's building lie on the edge of Battery Park, on the corner of Warren Street and Broadway. Pelgrem felt that City Hall Park would be the best place to stake out the area and see what they were up against. They had a little bit of time to linger since the park was near the downtown courthouse and many lawyers and their clients would be roaming around the park in between court times. By the time they reached City Hall



Park, it was nearly noon.

Pelgrem looked up at the bright, blue sky. He glanced around the area, trying to get a grasp on what buildings were where and how they could get across the street without looking suspicious. “UAV,” Artemesia yelled. It was just overhead and Pelgrem and Artemesia immediately looked down towards the ground and began to walk towards City Hall. They were nearly fifty feet away when they noticed that Damaes was still standing there, looking straight up at the UAV. The UAV had now stopped moving, came closer to the ground and was, obviously, scanning Damaes' features.

“Shit,” Pelgrem said in a low voice. Artemesia pointed towards City Hall, Pelgrem nodded, and she started walking towards it. Pelgrem began walking back to Damaes and called him, quietly, trying not to arouse suspicion. He called a couple of times before another UAV appeared and lowered itself right in front of Pel. He was still about ten feet away from Damaes and, thinking he was in trouble anyway, yelled loudly at Damaes, “D., stop looking at it!” Damaes suddenly remembered where he was and looked over at Pelgrem. “What do we do now?” he asked.

Pelgrem was growing more and more irate at Damaes. He was a good friend in the camps but, it was quite clear, that Damaes had no clue how to act in the real world. The UAV, Pelgrem surmised, had probably picked up on Damaes' behavior ever since they set foot in the city. It was more than just typical tourist behavior of staring up at the large buildings. It was how you walked, how you talked, how you acted. Everyone, even tourists, knew that you do not stare at UAVs. You might look for a second, but then you move on. By standing still, Damaes called attention to himself that he did not belong where he was, which would automatically force the UAV to begin recording changes in

Damaes' heart rate, brain activity, and a whole host of other, more subtle, biological changes that occur when someone is scared.

Pelgrem was now linked to the situation as well. He couldn't get Damaes and head towards City Hall. He didn't want to involve Artemesia because, as the only person to know what they were doing, she had to be available to help them should they be shot, arrested or need to escape. While the UAV was still scanning Pelgrem, he told Damaes that it was time to go. He turned and began walking away from City Hall and farther into the park. Damaes, fortunately, followed.

“Could you be any more japeworthy?” Pelgrem asked Damaes. Damaes looked away and then looked at the ground. “Come on,” Pelgrem said as he put his arm around Damaes' shoulder, “I don't mean to be so angry,” he continued. “It's just that you have to be more careful around here. This is a high profile place and every little thing we do that is out of the ordinary is going to get noticed. You simply can't look at the UAVs.”

“I'm sorry, Pel,” Damaes said softly. “I guess I really don't belong out here. I don't know how I'm supposed to behave.”

“Nonsense. You belong here just as much as anyone else. It's just...well...you haven't been on the outside in a long time. Things change very quickly and it's hard to keep up, but there's one thing that doesn't change. Not ever. You keep to yourself or with your group and you will never rouse any suspicions and no one will even notice you are there. It doesn't matter what new technology or biometrics or security is in place. You keep to yourself and no one will even notice you are there.”

Pelgrem and Damaes walked north, about a block before they saw seven police cars heading towards them. Three were driving across River Terrace , two were coming

south, towards them from Mercer Street and two more were arriving from the eastern side of River Terrace. Pelgrem stopped momentarily, assessing the situation and trying to figure out which way to go. Pelgrem looked to his right, and considered running towards the Brooklyn Bridge. If they could make it to the other side, they could hop onto the subway and lose the police in constant subway changes. But he honestly didn't think that they could make it that far without getting caught. His only option seemed to be returning the way he came.

But he had taken too much time to decide what to do. Pelgrem heard a loud whizzing sound pass his ears and then, suddenly, Damaes jerked backward and fell to his knees. Pelgrem looked to his right again and saw several police officers entering the far side of the park. He looked around, trying to figure out where the shot had come from. Then he dropped to the ground and covered as much of himself as he could with Damaes' body. Damaes had been shot in the stomach and was slowly bleeding out. Pelgrem kept moving around behind Damaes, trying to prevent himself from being shot, as well as, searching for a way to escape.

Pelgrem saw a police cruiser rushing towards him from the south on New Street. It was driving the wrong way on a one way street, causing all the automatics to move to the right side of the road to avoid accidents. The police cruiser pulled up on to the sidewalk and stopped. Pelgrem began to panic. There was nothing he could do. He was surrounded. The back door to the police cruiser opened up, allowing Pelgrem to see into the front seat of the car.

“Get in!” yelled Artemesia. Pelgrem obediently followed. He started dragging Damaes towards the cruiser as the police on foot were drawing closer. Several saw what

was happening and stopped running. They pulled out their weapons and began shooting in the general direction of the police cruiser. As Pelgrem pulled Damaes into the car, Artemesia grabbed the cruiser-issued wave gun from between the seats and shot towards the officers on foot. A wave of low pitched sound rushed towards the officers, momentarily stunning them for a few seconds. By the time they regained their faculties, Pelgrem and Damaes were in the cruiser and Artemesia was spinning around and heading south on New Street.

Artemesia's heart was beating like a prostitute that had just been cheated out of her money. She drove as fast as the cruiser would go. The cruiser tried repeatedly to return to automatic but Artemesia continued to hit the button on the console to allow self-drive. She would tap the self-drive button and the cruiser would revert to self-drive. Then, it would scan her and say, loudly, "Unauthorized driver," again, attempting to return to automatic. "Idiot car," Artemesia said as she whacked the console. It didn't help. The police cruiser continued to yell at her and they continued their game of who was going to drive.

Artemesia sped across the Brooklyn Bridge with the police lights and sirens running so that all cars on the bridge would clear a lane for her. She looked back at Pelgrem and Damaes and saw that Damaes was not in good shape. He was in pain, but tried to refrain from screaming, grabbing the edge of the seat and squeezing it from time to time. "I'm sorry about this guys but I need to dump the car into the water near 9<sup>th</sup> street." Damaes mouthed the word "fuck" but said nothing aloud. Pelgrem quickly ripped Damaes' shirt off him, wrapping it around his stomach in a vain attempt to keep the wound from bleeding more.

Artemesia took the 9<sup>th</sup> Street exit off the bridge and headed towards the docks. She stopped near a double pillar that held up the maglev train and let the men out. "I'll be right back," she said as she closed the passenger side door and drove away. Pelgrem and Damaes hid inbetween the two pillars. The pillars were each six feet thick and ten feet wide, sturdy enough to hold the weight of the constant whirring of trains above. Pelgrem kept a look out for Artemesia or the police.

They were in a bustling part of Brooklyn. Skyscrapers loomed behind them as the maglev tunneled in and out of the buildings, eliminating the need for businessmen to exit at a normal subway stop and mingle with the lowly masses of New Yorkers. An automated bus drove past Pelgrem and Damaes every couple of minutes while cafes, restaurants, and other shops lined the road opposite them. Advertisement hung from giant screens across the roadway, assuring that everyone, in vehicles or not, were able to see them.

Pelgrem noticed a few people had seen him but they did not appear concerned. Still, he was worried that someone might see them and they would be trapped if they stayed near the pillars. He looked around for a place that they could hide out of sight of any prying eyes. He saw a trestle attached to one of the pillars. A quick check revealed that there was a platform at the top of the ladder. Pelgrem couldn't see what was on the platform but he did notice that it was above the security cameras and, most likely, out of sight of most people.

"We can't stay here," Pelgrem said to Damaes. "Do you think you could climb up there?" he asked, pointing up at the platform above them.

"I can try," Damaes answered.

Damaes started climbing first. He was happy that the trestle had a safety cage around it. This enabled him to put a lot of his weight on his back and rest against the cage, easing the pain from his gut. Twenty-five rungs later and he was at the top. Damaes pulled himself onto the left side of the platform using mostly his arms and rolled over on his back. He left his feet dangling and Pelgrem, who had been looking everywhere but up, banged his head into them.

Once on top, Pelgrem crawled around the platform, being mindful not to stand and call attention to himself. “Pel,” Damaes called. “Pel. Little help, please,” he said again. Pelgrem turned and saw that Damaes was bleeding more than he had been before.

“Hold still,” Pelgrem said. “Just hold still.” Pelgrem took off his shirt and tore it into strips, using them as makeshift bandages. He held pressure on Damaes' wound for several minutes until Damaes began to lose consciousness. Normally, he would have tried to keep Damaes awake but Pelgrem felt that a little peaceful rest would be better for him.

Pelgrem got up and leaned over the railing of the platform. He saw Artemesia walking briskly along the sidewalk, weaving in and out of the window shoppers. She crossed the road to where she left Pelgrem and Damaes, at which point Pelgrem whistled at her. She looked up and then climbed up onto the platform.

“Phew,” she said as she stood up. “That's quite a climb for me. I need to get into better shape.”

“Nah, the trestle just sucks. I had a hard time myself getting up here and, poor D., he barely made it.”

“How bad is he?”

“Not good. He's in and out and I don't know how much longer he can hold out.”

Artemesia quickly scanned the area. There were two control panels on top of the platform. They were for controlling the maglev trains above and the ad screens. “I might be able to get into ad screen terminal.”

“And that will help us how?”

“Well, if I can get in, I can call Jack. I'm sure he knows someone nearby that might be able to help us.”

“And who is Jack?” Pelgrem asked, in an almost jealous tone.

“He's a friend. He 'gets' me things,” she smiled coyly. Artemesia had heard Pelgrem's tone of voice. It was more than concern for a friend. It wasn't quite a jealous boyfriend tone, but more of a worry that he wasn't her number one obsession anymore.

“Just give me a second here,” she said as she began tapping around on the video terminal. A few moments later, a man's face appeared. “A., my friend, how are you?” he said.

“I'm doing fine, but a friend is not too well and we need your help,” she replied.

“What do you need?” Jack asked.

“For starters a couple of shirts, and a sweater.”

“Done. But you didn't call me for free clothing. What's really happening there?”

Artemesia paused for a moment and looked down at Damaes. Then she stared Jack square in the eye and said, “We're in a lot of trouble Jack. We need some medical supplies from a pharmacoplist that won't ask questions.” Jack nodded, confirming that he understood. “And we need a way out of here and out of the country. Our IDs have been compromised and I can't help them anymore.”

“Can't you use your real ID to at least help them get medical supplies?”

Artemesia looked away and didn't answer. Disappointed, Jack said, “Oh, please don't tell me you came into the city with your actual, real ID.” There was a moment of silence between the two before Jack continued, “Okay,” he said as he closed his eyes to think for a moment. “I might be able to find an artimage that can help you. Hang on a second.” Jack put his PVD down and picked up another one. Artemesia saw that he was searching on the other PVD for someone who could help. Jack peered back through the first PVD and said to Artemesia, “I'll be right back. You understand.”

She did. The need for secrecy was utmost in this matter and Jack did not want to connect to another person in the wild while someone else was watching. Jack left the room and returned a few minutes later. “Okay, I found someone but he's a bit away from you. He was enjoying a drink at Scruffy Duffy's so you're going to have to pay him back for missing his afternoon drink.

“It's going to take him ten minutes on the mag to get to you. Do you still have your PVD?”

“Yes, I do,” Artemesia said. “And my friend has an old one.”

“Is his compromised?”

“No. He hasn't even turned it on yet.”

“Let me see it.” Pelgrem pulled his old PVD out of his bag and gave it to Artemesia. She held it up to the video screen. “Ha! That is one old piece of hardware there. But, if I recall correctly, it doesn't have instant tracking in it. Everything needs to be stored first and then checked later.” Artemesia looked at Pelgrem, who nodded in agreement. “Okay, we have a few minutes to use that then. I want you to connect to the White House



and just start randomly looking at things.”

Artemesia complied. She opened the PVD, searched to the White House, flit around as if she were really looking for something and, then, Jack's face appeared, “Well, hello beautiful,” Jack said. “Turn off the vid screen there. I know where you are now.” Artemesia disconnected from Jack on the large video screen and sat down, leaning against the wall.

“This is much less conspicuous A. And we have a bit more privacy.” Jack tapped a few more buttons, frowned, and said, “Ah, I see they have already issued a death bulletin for you three. Not good. What, exactly were you trying to do, since we all know that walking in the park is not a death offense.”

“Well,” Artemesia began before Pelgrem cut her off and snatched the PVD from her hands.

“It's my fault,” he said. “I wanted to see my sister one last time before I figured out what to do with my data stick.”

“Data stick? My god man. Why are you living twenty years in the past? I haven't even seen a data stick in...at least ten years.”

“Yeah, well, the people I got it from haven't been *around* in the last ten years.”

Jack smiled at Pelgrem. “So, you've seen the inside of a camp? Interesting.”

“Jack, look,” Artemesia said as she took back the PVD. “They took his sister and he was just hoping to see that she was okay before he left. He's broken out of camp, escaped death, and knows that whatever is on his stick is probably worthy of death should he get caught again. Please, cut us some slack. He knows that he has to leave. Until all this happened, we figured his ID could get him a flight out of the country.”

Jack thought for a moment. “So, what's on the stick and why were you so stupid as to visit family before you completed your mission.”

“I don't know,” Pelgrem said.

“You don't know?” Jack asked. “Why not?”

“Because I haven't had the chance to look at it in a secure location yet.”

“Okay, but why are you so stupid?”

“I'm not...I...”

“Guys, come on, really,” Artemesia interrupted. “Stop being idiots.”

Jack grinned again. He was enjoying toying with Pelgrem. He didn't really care what Pelgrem was doing, he just enjoyed annoying people. “Alright. Well, your artimage is here anyway.”

Artemesia looked up from the PVD. Then she looked ahead, behind, and to the side of her. “Uh, I don't see anyone. Is he down below?” She started to get up so she could look below but Jack said, “No, he's standing right in front of you.”

Artemesia peered into the distance and then saw a slight shimmer of light. Suddenly a tall man was standing in front of her. The artimage had disabled his cloak. Artemesia smiled and held out her hand, “Hello.”

“Well hello to you too, ma'am,” he said as he extended his hand in a warm, yet firm handshake.

“I'm Artemesia, that's Pel, and the one bleeding is Damaes.”

“Artimage, ma'am,” the tall man said.

“I know that's your profession, but what's your name?” Artemesia asked.

“Just Artimage ma'am, just Artimage. Now let's see if we can fix up your friend.”

Artimage knelt down next to Damaes and began to look him over. Artemesia thanked Jack for his help and they said their goodbyes.

Artimage was wearing a pair of cargo pants and from it he pulled a small black box from the large pocket on his right calf. He opened it, and took out a small, red velvet satchel. He tore off what remained of Damaes' shirt and the bloody bandages, then wiped as much blood as he could away from the wound. Then, he placed the satchel next to the open wound and opened its edge. Next, he reached back into the black box and pulled out what appeared to be a very small remote control with a video screen. He turned it on, pressed a few buttons on the touch video screen, at which point several dozen silvery balls flowed out of the red, velvet satchel and into the wound.

Artemesia and Pelgrem stared in amazement. They recognized the surgical nanobot technology and they wanted to know where he was able to obtain it from. Of course, neither would ask. It was rude to question where items of questionable legality came from, especially when they were being used to help someone.

While they waited for the surgery to conclude, Artimage opened his left calf pocket and pulled out a black bag. He took out two t-shirts with the Scruffy Duffy's Bar logo on them and tossed them at Pelgrem. Pelgrem gave him a funny look, to which he said, "What do you expect? It was the only t-shirt I could get on such short notice."

Artimage winked at Artemesia and then picked up Damaes' bloody clothes and bandages, as well as Pelgrem's bloody shirt and placed them in the now empty bag. He tied a knot tightly on the bag and then stuffed them back into his pocket.

Artimage picked up the controller for the nanobots to monitor their progress. "Ah, look," he said, pointing at Damaes, "there's the bullet now." The fragment of the bullet

was near the surface of his skin and Artimage reached over and pulled it out. He took another small baggie out of his back pants pocket, put the bullet in, and then shoved that baggie into the same pocket with all the other bloody clothing.

“Shouldn't be long now, just some cleaning up, I suspect,” he began. “So, Jack tells me that you need some help leaving since you've bungled up your IDs.” Artemesia and Pelgrem nodded. “Don't suppose you can hang around a few days until we can sort a proper ID out for you?”

“Uh, no,” Artemesia replied. “Jack said our faces are already all over the city vids. I don't think we can get by this time.”

“Yeah, there's not enough time to transfer your identity over for sure. I mean, I could do it for you but it would take more time than it appears you have.” Artimage stared in to the distance for a moment, contemplating his next move. “I do have someone that might be able to help you but, I can only take you a short distance, you'll have to get there by yourselves. Let me see if I can reach them.”

Artimage pulled out an old PVD that looked identical to the one Pelgrem had. He banged on the vid screen, literally, as he typed with his left hand and held the PVD with his right. “Don't worry, it's old. Sometimes it doesn't like my typing.” After several minutes, he confirmed that they could indeed meet Artimage's friend, who would take them to a location where they could leave.

“So, while we have few minutes,” he said, “what exactly is it that you are in so much trouble for?”

Pelgrem, taking a chance that someone with such resources might be able to help, said, “Well a friend gave me this data stick, but I haven't had a chance to view it yet. We were

in the city to visit my sister but that turned wrong, as you can see.”

He gave his PVD and data stick to Artimage, who gleefully accepted it. Once Artimage turned the data stick on and started looking at the files his eyes widened as if he had just been given the location of the Holy Grail. “Do you know what this is?” he asked, looking at Pelgrem and then back at the PVD.

“No idea, but it's got to be important. The men who gave it to me risked their lives for whatever is on it.”

“And rightly they should,” Artimage agreed as he kept flipping through the data on the stick. “My God, I thought this was just a legend. Something made up to encourage people like me to keep doing what we do. I never once dreamed it was real. But here it is, a piece of the puzzle.”

“What puzzle?” Artemesia asked.

“Well, the story goes something like this. After the ODs made their settlement with the government, they pledged to stick by the treaty they signed but they never fully trusted the government. As you can see how the world turned out, they were right not to. Several ODs, and a few sympathizers, made sure that there was always at least one of them working at high levels of the government. Not the White House, mind you, that's just a front for Congress, where all the bullshit actually occurs.

“So, they keep a few people around, sometimes janitors, or congressional aides, sometimes congressmen themselves, that are loyal to keeping the government in check. What they do is, every 5-10 years, when the data networks, intraweb, PVDs, you name it, are upgraded, they make sure their back doors are in place. If anything gets too out of control, they can erase whatever they wish. It is also rumored that there is a file on one of

the sticks listing the most minute details of the more important people in society.

“There are a select few that know some of the passwords and backdoors, which, for example, is how I walked into the hospital as a surgeon and walked out with this kit. But no one knows the complete list. And there is only one copy, split into three parts, that has the entire list. With this list, you can control everything.

“But, this data stick is at least ten years old, which means no one has been able to upgrade and check to see if the back doors still work.” Artimage paused for a second, “but, if they didn't upgrade to a new storage device, they couldn't make sure the passwords work but I use the passwords every day.” He trailed off in his thoughts leaving the paradox and circular reasoning hanging in mid-air.

Then, he looked Pelgrem straight in the eye and said, “I'm willing to bet that they don't even know what backdoors are in place. The systems are so large that they are only looking for usability bugs. Ha! You sir, have a piece of a very dangerous weapon on your hands. If you had the other two pieces you could change things from the inside.”

“How do you mean,” Pelgrem asked.

“Well, for instance, you could wipe out every DNA database. Do you really think the government is going to spend trillions setting that back up? Or, you could mandate new salaries. You could unban all the music and books that have been preserved but hidden. You could find the dirt on all the politicians and force them to relinquish control of the media or, you could erase everything. Send a virus through the system, overnight, when everyone is asleep, and make them start over. There are no paper copies of laws anymore so they would have to be remade. You, my friend, could start a new revolution.”

The platform went silent at the thought of starting a new revolution. Pelgrem had only

wanted to leave the camp and start life over. He wasn't a revolutionary, never was. He was just a cog in the machine, working on the inside to preserve the past. He wasn't a hero, he didn't want to be. He just wanted to live his life peacefully in whatever manner he dreamed. But this information was tempting, oh so very tempting.

“Ah, but you only have one piece,” Artimage said, interrupting the silence. “Not much you can do with one piece, except not get caught with it.”

Pelgrem hesitated for a millisecond and then said, “But the men who gave this to me gave me two addresses. They said I should visit them when I could.”

“Really?” Artimage said, intrigued. “And where are they?”

Pelgrem wanted to tell him but refrained from doing so. “Far away from here. I had to memorize them and burn the paper with the addresses as soon as I did.”

“Well then, you should do what you think is right. I will take you as far as the aqueduct. From there, I'll give you directions.” Artimage stopped speaking for a moment and started paying attention to his remote, which was beeping at him. “Right,” he said, looking up at Pelgrem and Artemesia, then back at Damaes. “I think your friend is going to be okay.”

Artimage reached back into his right, calf pocket and pulled out a small gun. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. He pulled out the cartridge to make sure that it was fully loaded and placed it back within the gun. Then he pointed it about half an inch away from Damaes' wound. A white, spongy cloud emerged from the gun, sealing the hole where Damaes had been shot. He waited a few seconds and then felt it. The white, spongy cloud jiggled a bit and appeared like a giant pile of Fluf on Damaes' stomach.

Artimage reached one last time into his right, calf pocket and pulled out two small capsules of smelling salts. He broke them in half to make them work and then placed them under Damaes' nose.

Damaes started to wake up but was very weak and groggy. He immediately looked down at his stomach and was shocked to see the seal over the wound. “Easy, D.,” Pelgrem said. “You're all patched up for now. Just take it easy.” Damaes partly sat up and slowly blinked his eyes. He was trying to focus but was still only partially aware of where he was.

“Your friend will be okay for a while, but you have to get to a proper surgeon to get that stitched and sealed properly. That's only going to hold about twenty-four hours.” Artimage started checking to make sure he picked up everything that he had used since he arrived. He wanted to ensure that he left as small a footprint in the area as possible. “We need to get to the aqueduct. I will meet you in the parking garage across the street in fifteen minutes. I'll be on level five. Look for me because I own a SQ Sedan.” Everyone chuckled at his comment.

SQ was just a letter designation for a car. Among many, SQ stood for “shit quality.” Cars were no longer labeled Accent, Taurus, Bluebird, Jaguar, etc. They all had a letter designation followed by a year. So, SQ, was simply “Sedan, issue Q,” followed by the year it was issued. Artimage's particular sedan was SQ2044. All SQ2044s were identical, other than color and were easily identified by the car's identity code, which was inherently linked to an individual's personal identity. If a car was co-owned, it would be a combination of the two.

Only authorized users were allowed access to the vehicle, at least that was the safety



and security issue touted by the automakers in Detroit. The fact that automobiles were still stolen and did not match those statements did not matter. It merely released the insurance industry from liability if it were stolen. The car could not be stolen, therefore, if it was stolen, you must have given permission for it to be taken and your car will not be replaced. You will simply need to buy another one.

Artimage turned his stealth gear back on, climbed down the trestle, and disappeared. Pelgrem figured it would take approximately five minutes to get to the garage so they waited ten minutes before they left. They didn't want to arrive early and the extra ten minutes gave Damaes time to recover enough so he could walk to the garage on his own.

Pelgrem, Damaes, and Artemesia left the relative security of the platform and walked across the street to the parking garage. They entered through the exit, careful to avoid the automatic ID scanners. They walked up the stairs and met Artimage. His car was in the last parking spot in the corner of the garage. He was waiting inside his car, engine running, and signaled to them that they should get into the car quickly.

Once inside the car, Artimage told them to take off their OD bracelets and put on the ones he was giving them. He got out of the car and took the OD bracelets with him to the front passenger side of his car. Artimage took out a lighter and set the bracelets on fire. They didn't burn easily, but he only wanted to make sure that the ID chips within the bracelets were burned enough so that the police could not identify whom they had belonged to. When he was happy that the bracelets were destroyed, he stomped the fire out and returned to his car.

“So, uhm, how did you get these so fast?” Artemesia asked.

“Well, these are just one time use IDs,” Artimage said. “I have a few friends at Scruffy Duffy's who loaned me their bracelets for the day. You'll go out on Long Island and my friend, Wintermute, will bring them back. He'll purchase a couple of touristy things so the trip looks legit. Meanwhile, my friends will be drinking and having fun at the bar. If, by some chance, they get caught, they'll be drunk and claim that someone stole them when they passed out.”

“Brilliant,” Pelgrem said half seriously. It was a good plan. He was just worried that it wouldn't work. So much had gone wrong already that he was more pessimistic than he was yesterday.

Artimage started his car and pushed a button on the steering wheel that tinted the

windows. It was so dark inside the car that Pelgrem would have sworn it was the middle of the night. Artimage's sedan had been modified as well so that the windows reflected all light. Even if you leaned up against the window and peered in, all you would see was blackness. He was willing to help out some fellow members of the underground, but he wasn't stupid enough to be caught with them.

They drove the fastest route possible to the aqueduct via self-drive. Artimage played around with the temperature controls, which had been randomly starting and stopping on him, while the sedan drove across Atlantic Avenue, down Rockaway Boulevard and stopped just outside the subway stop for the Aqueduct.

“Right, sorry I can't take you all the way but, it's too dangerous for me to be seen with you lot,” Artimage began, “Plus, I've got a scheduled meet up later with some people from Sneakernet and I can't miss it.” He had wished that there was more time to secure proper identities for everyone, including himself, so that he could make sure they made it safely out of the country. But, in emergencies such as this one, quick solutions are usually the best, especially now that Artemesia had broken into and stolen a police vehicle.

“Take the L to the Westhampton exit. Then transfer onto the X Line and take that to the Shinnecock Hills stop,” Artimage continued. “Get off there and take the Northwest corner exit and walk across the street to the calendographer's shop. Browse around for a few minutes and, when someone comes to ask if you need any assistance, tell them yes, you'd like to see the local pseudomaniac who works there. The person they take you to will be Wintermute.”

“Okay, then what?” Artemesia asked.

“Then he will take you onto the reservation and help you leave the country. Now, go quickly before it starts to look suspicious that I'm sitting here so long.”

Damaes got out of the car, paused, and turned back to thank Artimage for his help. Artimage stopped him from saying anything, instead stating, “Make sure you don't look too injured, okay? And get a proper doctor to look at that as soon as you can.”

“Thanks again for all your help,” Artemesia said, extending her hand to Artimage.

“It's my pleasure,” he replied with a wink and a smile. “I just hope you can use that crap your friend has to the advantage of us all.”

Pelgrem shook Artimage's hand as well and the three friends walked into the entrance to the Long Island subway system. They walked past the knights of the handcuff at the scanners, trying not to look at them as they continued to the trains. They walked down the stairs and onto the platform, where they noticed more knights of the handcuff patrolling the platforms.

The knights of the handcuff were a special selection of police officers that solely patrolled the subway systems in New York City. They had more authority than regular police officers as they were allowed to do whatever necessary to detain individual citizens. They also had authorization to decide for themselves whether or not to allow people to pass. They were, in essence, judge, jury, and executioner in the subways. Becoming a knight of the handcuff was the most coveted job in the police force, with waiting lists just to apply for the position at ten years long.

The train arrived and Pelgrem, Damaes, and Artemesia climbed on, found seats and generally tried to keep to themselves. Pelgrem closed his eyes to rest for a few moments, while Damaes watched the video screen that was displaying ads for various items to

purchase. Artemesia spent her time people watching, a favorite pastime of many of the underground. Watching people helped to heighten your abilities to detect body language and have an edge on reacting to others. Everyone in the underground was skilled in detecting minute changes in body language and never stopped practicing.

The subway train arrived at the Westhampton stop and the friends transferred over to the X line, riding it to their directed Shinnecock Hills stop. By the time they exited the subway station, it was dark outside. Their day was lost, Pelgrem hadn't seen his sister and now they were on the run to leave the country. As they crossed the street towards the calendographer's shop, Pelgrem suggested that they split up in the shop. That way, if it was a trap, at least the other two had a chance to get away.

Pelgrem walked into the shop first, scanning the room to get a sense of other exits, how many people were in the shop, and possible dangers he should avoid. Artemesia and Damaes entered and wandered towards the back of the store. Artemesia browsed the shelves that held supplies for making calendars while Damaes went immediately to the displays of candy bars, near the rear exit.

Pelgrem remained near the front of the store, casually looking over the many calendars available for sale. He looked up occasionally to determine who worked at the shop and who were the customers.

After several minutes, a woman approached him and asked, "Do you need any assistance, sir?"

Pelgrem smiled and replied, "I'd like to meet the pseudomaniac who creates these beautiful calendars."

The woman nodded at Pelgrem and said, "Of course, sir. Just one moment." The

woman walked to the back of the store and opened the door to the rear exit. Pelgrem leaned over a stack of calendars to see where the woman was going. The rear exit wasn't an exit at all. The door opened to a set of stairs and to, what Pelgrem assumed, must be a cellar of some type. The woman disappeared down the stairs and returned a few minutes later. She told Pelgrem that he must go downstairs, where the pseudomaniac awaited him.

He thanked her and, hesitantly, walked towards the stairs. Artemesia and Damaes started to walk towards him but Pelgrem shook his head slightly, indicating that they should stay behind. He was worried that he was walking straight into a trap.

As he went down the stairs, he saw that most of the basement was used as storage space but, off to the left, was a small area that was carpeted, with a chair and a desk. Sitting in the chair at the desk was a bearded man. He was tinkering with a small toy and a soldering gun. The man glanced up long enough to acknowledge that Pelgrem was there and then returned to his soldering.

“Please, have a seat,” the man said. “I’ll be with you in a moment.” Pelgrem looked around for another chair and, after failing to find one, decided to sit on the floor. The man glanced up again and said, “No, not on the floor, you silly boy. Use one of the buckets.”

Pelgrem, quite embarrassed, rose and pulled one of the buckets from against the wall and sat down. While waiting for the man to finish whatever it was he was doing, Pelgrem had a look around the basement. From what he could see, the entire right half was stock for the store upstairs. There were boxes of paintbrushes of every size and shape, bags and buckets of plaster of Paris, calligraphy pens, different sized paper in many colors, and

boxes of ink.

On the left side, where he was sitting, was mostly open. There were work tables where he could see calendars being created lining the far wall and lots of dust from the plaster of Paris on the floor. Pelgrem wondered why a calendar maker would need plaster of Paris.

On the wall behind the man hung a calendar, a clock, and several tools, most of which Pelgrem did not recognize. He assumed these were tools for creating and binding calendars. There was also a door next to the work tables that led out to the back of the basement and a single window above the tables, allowing the daylight to shine in. Pelgrem hadn't realized until now that the entire building was built on a slight incline, thereby allowing for another exit in the basement.

“There, that should do it,” the man said. He put his soldering gun down and set the toy down on the desk. It was a miniature car and the man gently used one finger to roll the car back and forth on the desk, assuring that everything worked properly. He looked up at Pelgrem and said, “It's my grandson's favorite toy. Unfortunately, his grandfather rode over it with his bicycle and bent the axles.” Pelgrem smiled and almost laughed.

“I had to repair it by making brand new axles. Even straightening the axles still created a bit of a wobble,” he said, admiring the car and his handiwork. “So, Artimage tells me that you need some help in reaching your destination.”

“Yes, sir,” Pelgrem replied.

The man put the toy down and rose from his desk. He walked towards Pelgrem and shook hands with him. “Wintermute's the name,” he said and leaned back, resting his rear against his desk.

“Pelgrem.”

“Pelgrem, eh? That's an unusual name.”

“Yeah, well my parents were unusual and didn't want their children to have common names.”

“Children? You have siblings?”

“I used to,” Pelgrem said with longingly.

“I see,” Wintermute said, taking note that this was probably a subject not to be broached further. “Well, then, let's get to business. You have the bracelets?”

“Yes, but I have to go get the other two.”

“It's okay, you'll need them until I get you to your destination. I get them from you then.” Wintermute motioned towards the stairs and he and Pelgrem returned to the shop upstairs.

In the calendar shop, everyone made their pleasantries and chatted for a few minutes before Wintermute led them back downstairs and out the door in the basement. They crossed a small field that was between the back end of his shop and a row of tenement houses. He led them across the street from the tenements and two blocks to the left to a small bodega. He bought a newspaper and three waters. The man in the bodega also gave him a large bag.

The bag definitely had food in it. Pelgrem could smell what he detected to be burgers. He was sure there were french fries inside as well but, since he hadn't had real french fries in several years, it was only a guess. Artemesia was busy scanning the area frantically with her eyes, while Damaes was more obvious with a look of fear on his face. Wintermute noticed their actions and said to them, “Don't worry. No one here is going to



turn you into the knights. Their authority ends at the subway station. We take care of our own here on the reservation.”

Artemesia and Damaes were soothed a little bit by Wintermute's remarks but they were still concerned for their safety. Neither would be happy until they were out of the country and away from the ever reaching arm of the law. They then continued walking down the street, turned right, and towards the Atlantic Ocean. Three blocks and a quarter mile later, they were passing in between two beach homes and staring out at the water in Shinnecock Bay.

“This is the edge of the reservation. We own it all the way out to the sea now, so the waters are protected by us and not the American government,” Wintermute began. “If you look out there, just ahead,” he pointed, “you can see several small islands. They're not really habitable but, if you row your boat out to the one on the left, just near the inlet to the ocean, you will find a tree with an upturned, red bucket on it. That is where you need to go.”

Wintermute told them to wait on the beach for a moment as he hastily walked back up the beach and into one of the beach houses. He reappeared a few minutes later with a small rowboat. “I do hope you folks know how to row.” Pelgrem nodded and he and Damaes started to pull the boat into the water.

After pulling the boat several feet, Damaes stood up and began holding his side. He had started to bleed again from his wound. Artemesia took over pulling the boat into the water. Once in the water, Damaes climbed into the boat and held an oar against the sea bottom to keep the boat in place. Artemesia gingerly climbed into the boat while Pelgrem thanked Wintermute for his help.

Wintermute gave Pelgrem the bottled waters and the bag of food. Pelgrem collected the OD bracelets and gave them to Wintermute, then climbed into the boat. Wintermute said an Algonquin prayer before pushing the boat off shore. “Best of luck to you,” he said as Pelgrem began rowing towards the small island about three hundred yards away.

Pelgrem rowed silently towards the island and Artemesia made Damaes lie down so that he didn't expend any energy and open his wound further. There was no light in the boat and Pelgrem kept his eye on the island by moonlight. When they reached the island Artemesia helped pull the boat to shore, turned it upside down, and tossed some sand and seaweed onto it in an effort to make it appear as if the boat had been there a long time.

The three friends walked up onto the small island, which was more like an elongated oval, and sat down on a fallen tree. Pelgrem split up the burgers, fries, and water. When he was finished, Pelgrem looked around and saw the upside down bucket next to a tree. He couldn't be sure if it was red or not because it was too dark. Still, he was pretty sure it must be red because, he concluded, there couldn't be that many tiny islands with upside down red buckets on them.

He picked up the bucket and set it aside. Underneath, was a small, metal box. Pelgrem picked up the metal box and inspected it. There didn't appear to be anything dangerous on it so he placed it back on the ground and opened it. Inside was a small walkie-talkie, small enough to fit in the palm of Pelgrem's hand. Pelgrem picked it up and turned it over.

There was a small note attached to it, which Pel removed and opened. The note said, “push the red button.” He turned it back over and saw a red button and pushed it. A blue light turned on at the top of the walkie-talkie. Pelgrem turned it over, again and again,

but could find no way for it to communicate with anyone. So, he placed it back in the metal box and returned to his friends.

“What's that?” Artemesia asked.

“I'm not really sure,” Pelgrem replied. “Maybe some sort of beacon. Dunno really. I'm new to this degree of secrecy and confusion.” Pelgrem sat down on the fallen tree again and noticed that Damaes appeared to be in more pain than before. “D., why don't you lay down on the ground. Whomever we called with that thing should be here soon.”

“Yeah, maybe you're right. But just for a little while.” Damaes laid down and tried to get comfortable. He didn't want to say exactly how much pain he really was in. He really wanted to just go to the nearest hospital and get his wound fixed properly but knew that wasn't possible. Instead, he laid on his left side because it hurt the least that way, and tried to get some rest.

After an hour had passed, Pel and Artemesia had tired of playing rock, paper, scissors and decided to take naps as well. It was a chilly night and the temperature was sure to drop further as the night went on. Pelgrem stared up at the sky and watched the constellations move, ever so slightly, until he fell asleep.

When he awoke, the first thing Pelgrem saw was the muzzle end of a rifle in his face. He immediately jumped to his feet, clenched his fists, and stupidly prepared for a fight. Two other men stood behind the man with the rifle. The man put his weapon at his side and held his hands outward, indicating that Pelgrem should not worry. “Wake your friends up,” the man said in a soft whisper.

Pelgrem bent over and shook Artemesia awake. She, in turn, awakened Damaes, though he was really groggy. Knowing his condition had most likely worsened,

Artemesia decided it wasn't worth a swift kick to get him up. "My friend is really ill," Pelgrem whispered back to the man. The man with the rifle peered over at Damaes and motioned for one of the other two men with him to have a look at him.

"He's bleeding, but not too bad," the third man said. Pelgrem recognized the British accent immediately. It was similar to Damaes' accent but from a different region of England. "We're going to have to go back to the boat and get a special raft for him. There's no way he can swim out without attracting the sharks." The man with the rifle nodded and let his two companions return to their boat. Pelgrem watched them leave and tried to see where their boat was but it was simply too dark to see anything and the men had taken their scuba gear with them, making it unlikely to see in which direction their boat lie.

"It will take a few minutes but we can take all of you with us right now," the man said. "I'm going to see if I can put some foam on his wound to stop some of the bleeding." Pelgrem nodded in agreement and he and Artemesia watched for a few moments before Pel walked away and went to sit on the fallen tree. He held his head in his hands and then ran his hands through his hair, sighing deeply. Artemesia came over and sat next to him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, knowing full well that he was not.

"I don't know," he answered, running his right hand through his hair again.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No." Pelgrem and Artemesia sat in silence for a minute before Pelgrem said, "I can't go." Artemesia turned her head sideways but, before she could say anything in response, he continued, "I have to see her before I leave. I need to know that she's okay." Artemesia didn't say anything. She had suspected that he might want to go back into the

city to see his sister.

“Okay, then. I’ll go with you.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Look,” Pelgrem said, again putting his head down and running his hands through his hair, “I can’t give you what you’re looking for...”

Artemesia cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “I didn’t ask for anything, Pel.” An awkward moment ensued before Artemesia cleared the air. “Listen,” she began, “I’m not looking for anything. I’m not asking for anything. We’ve been friends for far too long for me not to help you. You know as well as I do that there is no way you can make it back to Frankie without help. You’re my friend first, and always, and any feelings that I may or may not have aren’t relevant now. I’m going with you.”

“Okay,” Pelgrem said. There wasn’t really anything he could say to her. He knew she was right. He also knew that there was probably a small part of her decision made based upon her feelings for him. But he couldn’t argue with her. They had been friends long enough to know that they could rely on each other, no matter the cost. It wasn’t a matter of feelings, it was simply the lifelong bond between friends that was never questioned. So, Pelgrem could only reply with one word.

“Right, we’d best tell D. that he’s taking the next part of the journey on his own then.”

Pel returned to Damaes and the man with the rifle.

“Hey, D., how ya doing?” Pelgrem said as he knelt down next to Damaes.

“Been better, my friend,” Damaes replied weakly.

“Uhm,” Pelgrem began and then stopped. He cleared his throat and continued, “We,

we're uhm, Artemesia and I, we're not going with you.”

“Why not?” Damaes asked as he tried to sit up. Pelgrem immediately leaned over and tried to discourage his friend from sitting up.

“Well, I need to see Frankie and Artemesia won't let me go alone. We can't take you and you need to get better.”

“No, I'm okay, I can go with you.” Damaes tried to get up again but Pelgrem stopped him.

“Shhh, it's okay, D. You need to get better and, hopefully, join us later. You know how to contact us so just let us know when you're safe and healthy again, okay?” Pelgrem hated doing this part. Damaes had been with him through the tough times in the camp and he had come to rely on him, despite his naivety to the outside world. Pel wished that Damaes could go with him but knew that would likely mean death if he did. “Rest my friend, just rest. We will see each other again.” Pelgrem didn't believe it, but he lied to his friend just the same.

Pelgrem helped Damaes lay back down completely and turned to the man with the rifle. “You sure he's going to be okay?”

“Yes, yes,” the man replied. “We've got a proper surgeon on board so don't worry.”

“Okay, uhm, look, we're not going.” The man with the rifle looked at Pelgrem with a shocked look.

“You sure?”

“No, not really. But we have to do this.”

“Okay then. But this release point won't be here tomorrow or the next day or whenever you decide to leave.”

Pelgrem nodded. "Is there any other way we can leave?"

"Well, we can arrange another point but you'll have to be there at an appointed time and we're going to have to verify you with DNA."

"Uh, why?" Artemesia interrupted.

"Because we won't be the ones picking you up. Where we are going is at least a ten day trip."

"Yeah, we don't need ten days. One or two at the most," Pelgrem said.

"So, we will need DNA for my friends to verify you're the same people as tonight. And don't worry." Pelgrem and Artemesia thought for a moment. They knew that there were many things someone could do with a person's DNA and members of the underground were rightly hesitant to not want to give it up.

"Look, we're not going to do anything with it," he said as he pulled out a small, square machine and handed it to Pelgrem. Pelgrem inspected it and then handed it to Artemesia. Neither had any idea what it was but pretended as if they did. "This machine takes a sample. It can be compared once to another sample, and only once. Then it self-destructs.

"You have to make sure that you really are the one who gave the original sample because if it doesn't match, the original sample is destroyed. After that, there's nothing we can do for you."

Pelgrem and Artemesia shrugged and then agreed to the terms. There wasn't really any other chance if they wanted to leave the country. "Can I ask one question?" Pelgrem said.

"Sure," the man with the rifle replied.

“Is it possible to be taken to The Netherlands?”

“For you or your bleeding friend?”

“For me.”

“No promises but I'll see what I can do. Gimme your hands.” The man with the rifle pricked Pelgrem's forefinger, then Artemesia's. He put the blood extracted from it into the machine and then put the machine into his pocket.

“Thanks. Oh, where will you be taking Damaes?”

“Right now, Iceland is our first stop. We've got to resupply the ship and change out some crew. After that, it depends on where the new captain feels is safest. We've been at sea for over six months. Things change.”

The two other men had already returned and were loading Damaes. They had called it a raft but it looked more like a black cocoon. Once they had Damaes sealed into it, the two men pushed him out into the water and pulled him out to sea. Pelgrem watched Damaes disappear on the horizon, the black cocoon blending in perfectly with the dark water of night.

The man with the rifle unzipped his scuba suit and pulled out a PVD. He spoke in what Pelgrem thought was French but it had been a long time since he had been in school. After a few minutes of banter, he said to Pelgrem, in English, “You can meet the boat, day after tomorrow, East of JFK at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.

“Basically, you want to get yourselves to Canarsie Pier and wade out to Carnarsie Pol. The water will get a bit deep but you shouldn't have to swim to get to it. You're going to want to get to the south end of the island and you'll see a couple of even smaller islands. Go to the second one and wait there. Oh, and you'll also want to get at its highest point in



case the tide comes in. If, by some reason, you can't locate the tiny bits, then you'll have to swim south to Ruffle Bar and wait there.”

“How will I know that we aren't getting picked up by the authorities?” Pelgrem asked.

“Here,” the man said exposing the bottom of his right foot. On the heel of his foot was a tattoo of an ankh. “We all have this tattoo on our right foot. That way you know they are with us. You also have to be on the look out for the all WAM-V that patrols the area.”

Pelgrem nodded that he understood the directions but still had a somewhat bewildered look on his face. “What?” the man with the rifle said. Pelgrem pointed his finger towards the PVD but no words came out of his mouth. “Oh, that. It's French. Most of the men on the ship were in the Legion, you know, you have to learn it or you can't sail.”

Pelgrem scrunched his eyebrows together but nodded at the man anyway. Everything that had happened to him since he left Artemesia's place in Middletown was strange, weird, and downright disturbing. Then again, he was a federal fugitive, wanted on trumped up charges, fleeing every type of law enforcement, sent on some mission he didn't quite understand yet, and had no idea where his life was taking him.

He was starting to believe that the strange was normal and didn't question it because, he was sure, or so he told himself, that things would work out for the best. He was already marked for death. At least if this path to fate led to death, it'd be an adventurous one.

The man with the rifle asked Pelgrem and Artemesia to wait twenty minutes after he left before they tried returning to shore. He wanted to be sure that there was no way to trace them, should Pelgrem and Artemesia get caught. Pelgrem and Artemesia sat against

the fallen tree and waited. It was the hour of the wolf and, despite sitting in silence, except for the murmur of water lapping up to shore, both were terrified of what was going to happen next.

Artemesia had wanted to go with the man with the rifle to whatever destination he was sailing to. She didn't really care, as long as it was not in America. At the start of the day, she had no intention of leaving. She had planned to live her life just as she always had, breaking a few laws, ones she felt were stupid and that the authorities didn't often bother with, and help out, albeit in minor ways, in the underground. The most danger she had ever placed herself in was in helping Pelgrem. She never thought, nor dreamed that one day she would be a citizen, the next, a hunted criminal.

Although she knew, in the back of her mind, that such dangers could occur, even with cursory dealings with the underground, she felt that she had taken all the necessary precautions to avoid any recognition from law enforcement officials. Now, it was likely that every knight of the handcuff would have her information flagged on their Police PVD. Those files most likely connected her to Pelgrem, which meant no chance of leniency if they were caught.

She feared too, that members of her family might become suspects for questioning. Hopefully, since they were all legitimate ODs, they wouldn't be bothered much. The police did not like to deal with ODs when looking for relatives because an OD always knew the law better than the police and it was more trouble than it was worth. Still, Artemesia wanted find a way to at least notify her grandmother what was happening. Her grandmother was still somewhat influential and, because of her age, many people deferred to her council on matters with ODs.

Artemesia tried to sort out her feelings for Pel too. Her instinct and instant reaction was to go with him and help him. It wasn't a question of loyalty. It wasn't a matter of romantic feelings for her. It was, simply, the right thing to do. But now, with time ticking by, there was nothing to do but think. She spent five minutes thinking over why she had made the decision to help Pelgrem and, in the end, came back to her original conclusion.

Pelgrem, meanwhile, thought of his sister. He recited, in his head, all the things he would say to her when the two would finally meet again and then he fell asleep.

Artemesia shook Pelgrem and told him it was time to go. It had been nearly thirty minutes since the man with the rifle had left them. They walked back to the boat and turned it over. Pelgrem rowed the boat back to shore and placed the boat near the house where Wintermute had taken it.

The sun was beginning to rise and Artemesia felt it was best to go back to the Calendographer shop to get help and, possibly, some breakfast. They walked back to the shop but hid near the back door and waited until it opened a few hours later.

As Wintermute crossed the field and approached the shop, he saw the two, huddled near the door, waiting for him. Instinctively, he looked around to see if anyone was watching. Of course, being in the middle of a field, there was no way to tell if people in the houses and shops nearby were actually looking out their windows. "Morning," he said as he unlocked the door and let Pelgrem and Artemesia inside.

"Stay here." Wintermute went upstairs. Pelgrem and Artemesia didn't care if he came back with the authorities. They were just thankful to be somewhere warm after being outside in the cold all night. Wintermute returned a few minutes later with two bottles of

water. He gave them to Pelgrem and Artemesia, who each quickly drank from them.

Pelgrem closed his eyes and leaned up against the wall. He was tired and hungry and dirty. Artemesia sat down on the floor and leaned up against Wintermute's desk. "Any chance you still have those bracelets we gave you?" Pelgrem asked. Wintermute shook his head no, "I returned those not long after I left you. No point in keeping what I don't need." Pelgrem sighed, but understood. After all, they were supposed to be long gone by now. They shouldn't, theoretically, be standing in Wintermute's shop.

"Is there any way we can get back into Manhattan?" Pelgrem asked, unsure if Wintermute would think he was a total crackpot.

"Sure, I'll need a couple of days to set it up though."

"That won't work. We have to be back in Manhattan this afternoon."

Wintermute thought for a moment and then held up his forefinger on his right hand, indicating that Pelgrem should hold on a moment. Wintermute walked over to his desk, sat down in his chair, and began rummaging around in his desk drawers. After looking for a few moments, he found what he was looking for. Wintermute pulled out his PVD and stretched it out onto the desk. He placed a paperweight on one end, "I broke the springs on it and, well, can't really turn it in to be fixed."

If he took it to a repair shop, they had the obligation to copy its contents and send it to the FBI, who would be allowed to examine it for as long as they liked. That would be disastrous, considering all the underground contacts within the device.

Besides, Wintermute was getting old and he didn't want to deal with learning the newest version of a PVD and recreating everything he had on his old PVD that worked, aside from the faulty springs. He had said a million times that he was going to fix it

himself, but he kept procrastinating, something easy to do when you shove it in a drawer and forget about it.

After a few moments of tapping, he was speaking to someone, only Pelgrem didn't know who. It wasn't that Wintermute was trying to hide anything, he simply preferred to type a conversation rather than speak it. His conversation lasted about seven minutes, during which time he stroked his chin, raised one eyebrow, looked confused, smiled, and gave a knowing nod to Pelgrem. When he was finished, he placed the PVD back into the desk drawer and promised himself, again, that he would fix the spring later today.

“Right, so I have a partial solution for you,” he said.

“Well, some is better than none, whatcha got?” Pelgrem responded.

“My friend, the perukemaker, has agreed to help. She can get you both some clean clothes. You can wash up in the bathroom on the other side of the stockroom. There isn't much but there is a sink and you can, at least look presentable. Her son works in maintenance at the subway and he has agreed to let you into the subway, but, once you're back in Brooklyn, you'll have to walk where ever it is you need to go.

Pelgrem did some quick math in his head, figuring thirty minutes to get to the Brooklyn Bridge, twenty minutes to walk over the bridge and another hour to an hour and a half to reach Frankie's apartments. “Yeah, that could work,” he said. “It's definitely doable.”

Pelgrem glanced over at Artemesia. “You up for some walking today?”

“Guess I'll have to be,” she replied. What else was she going to say?

“You don't have to go if you don't want to, Artemesia,” Pelgrem said. “You can stay here and we'll just meet up at the rendezvous.” She really wanted to say yes. She was

tired and hungry and didn't really want to spend all day walking. But she had already committed to helping Pelgrem find his sister. Besides, she prided herself on keeping her word and, if this journey was doomed, she wasn't about to end her life on a broken promise.

“No, no, it's okay,” she replied to Pelgrem. “I said I'd go and I will. I'm just tired.”

“Yeah, me too, and hungry.”

“Ah,” Wintermute interrupted. “Let me get you something. Stay here and rest. I'll be back soon.”

Pelgrem thanked Wintermute, who left the shop via the back door. Pelgrem secretly wished that he was going back to the same bodega as yesterday because he had really enjoyed the burger he had last night. Even if he didn't, Pelgrem was thankful that someone was willing to give him food and break the law to help him.

Artemesia, on the other hand, didn't care what she got to eat. She just wanted some sleep. Thus, while Pelgrem was watching Wintermute leave, she hopped into Wintermute's chair, put her feet up on his desk, leaned back and closed her eyes. When Pelgrem saw what she had done, it brought a smile to his face. He had been thinking the same thing. Instead, he lay on the floor with his left arm resting underneath his head as a makeshift pillow and went to sleep.

Wintermute returned nearly an hour later and woke up Pelgrem and Artemesia. He informed them that they had about thirty minutes to get washed up and eat before they had to go. Artemesia went to clean up first, then Pelgrem. Their change of clothes was nothing fancy. Just a new t-shirt and some clean socks. Wintermute had, indeed brought back burgers and fries for the two and Pelgrem happily inhaled them.

At a few minutes before 11am, a man came down the stairs and greeted Wintermute. “This is my friend, Germantown,” he said, putting his arm around the man. “We call him that because that's where he grew up until, wisely, his family decided to move back to the reservation. Germantown was six foot four, with long, flowing black hair, and muscles he could use to kill just by flexing them. Pelgrem felt scared and safe at the same time. He was sure that Germantown could kill him if he stepped out of line, yet was assured that, since he was in Germantown's care, nothing would happen to him. “Germantown is going to take you to the subway and help you be on your way. Here,” Wintermute said as he gave Pelgrem a worn, navy blue backpack, “I've packed some sandwiches for a couple of meals.”

“Wow, thanks,” Artemesia said gratefully as Pelgrem put on the backpack.

“There's a couple of hooded sweaters in there from my mom,” Germantown said. “Just in case it gets cold where you're going.”

“Really, thanks,” Pelgrem said, heartily shaking Germantown's hand. “I don't know what to say.”

“Thanks is enough,” Germantown replied. “Hopefully, if what 'Mute tells me is true, you've got a big task to complete. But we'd best be moving. Shift change is coming soon and I'd like you to be on the train before it happens.”

Shift change at any job is the best time to get away with anything. Those that are coming off shift do not want anything that is going to create extra paperwork for them. That means staying late, filling in useless forms, transferring people, and generally interrupting one's day. The best time to commit minor breaches of the law is shift change.

Germantown figured that, at least, three people would see him escorting Pelgrem and Artemesia through the work areas and onto the platforms. He also knew that no one would think twice to stop him. Nearly all the workers at the Shinnecock subway stop lived on the reservation. None of them liked the US government. The workers who lived elsewhere, usually went along with the Shinnecock Indians. They knew that, if they bucked the system, things would happen and there would be consequences to their actions. Arguing over someone letting their friends into the subway for free would merit slashed tires at the least, a few broken teeth at worst.

Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Germantown headed upstairs and outside the calendographer shop. They crossed the street but didn't enter the subway through the main entrance. Instead, they went twenty feet to the right, where a knight of the handcuff was standing guard over the employee entrance. The three walked through, no questions asked, and headed down the stairs into the subway.

At the bottom of the stairs was a long, winding hallway that emptied out into a large locker room. "Just keep walking behind me," Germantown said as they proceeded through the locker room. The locker room was connected to another room where knights of the handcuff and subway medics gathered their equipment before signing out and exiting onto the subway platform.

Once on the platform, Germantown stayed with Pelgrem and Artemesia until they approached the Brooklyn bound platform. The train arrived a few minutes later, nearly empty, and Pelgrem and Artemesia stepped into one of the cars. Germantown shook Pelgrem's hand and wished him luck. The doors closed, the train started to move, and Pelgrem and Artemesia let out a sigh of relief. It was only a small sigh, though, because



there was still more to do, and without identification.

The train traveled silently along the tracks and Pelgrem was soothed by the humming of the air in the tunnels as the cars broke the silence and moved the air into a symbiotic chorus between the walls and the cars. Each stop that the train made, raised the anxiety levels of Pelgrem and Artemesia, which was calmed, once again, as the doors shut and the chorus began again.

This continued for forty-five minutes until they reached the end of the line. The train stopped and the peaceful calm that Pelgrem was experiencing was gone. He took a deep breath and then exited the train car. Artemesia waited five seconds and then exited the car as well. She made sure that she stayed behind Pelgrem and didn't look at him. The appearance that they were not together was vital if they were going to exit the subway station successfully.

Pelgrem got in line behind all the other people trying to exit the turnstiles. One by one, they swiped their hands over the scanners and exited. Slowly, the line shortened until Pelgrem was at the front of the line. He casually swiped his hand over the scanner, knowing that it was going to read nothing, and tried to walk through the turnstile. It remained locked, of course, but Pelgrem let out an audible, “argh,” when it did not work.

He tried the scanner again and, again, it did not work. He looked over to one of the knights of the handcuff standing at the entrance with a desperate look on his face. He swiped his hand on the scanners again. Nothing. The knight of the handcuff ignored him until people behind him started yelling, screaming, and spouting obscenities at the idiot holding up the line.

The knight of the handcuff came over and grabbed Pelgrem's hand. He slammed it

down on the scanner. Still nothing.

“Oh great,” Pelgrem said. “Now you've probably shattered it and it won't work. Thanks.”

The knight of the handcuff said nothing and tried to swipe Pelgrem's hand again. He let out a sigh and then took out his portable scanner. “Name,” he said gruffly.

“Joey Gerbils,” Pelgrem replied.

“Number.”

“567680515371913.”

And then it happened. The portable scanner stopped working. A few seconds later, the turnstiles shut down. Nothing was working. People started screaming for the doors to be opened. Someone shouted that it was illegal to hold everyone because the system wasn't working. Another person yelled that if they didn't open the turnstiles there would be many lawsuits. Yet another person confirmed this, confidently shouting that they were a lawyer. Several others added to the din of angry commuters.

The knight of the handcuff looked perplexed. He looked over to his partner, who was busy admiring himself in the reflective glass of the notice board. “Hey,” he shouted to get his partner's attention, “open the gates.” There wasn't much they could really do. More people would be arriving momentarily on another train, creating a bottleneck and a hazardous situation. The electronics would catch up later.

Cameras would record each person entering and exiting the subway and would be matched to citizens later. Since these were commuters, it would be easy to cross-reference their daily commutes to assure that they were not doing anything out of the ordinary today.

The knight of the handcuff placed his thumb print on a box next to the notice board and opened it. Inside was a red button, allowing all of the turnstiles to be opened. Naturally, supervisors would arrive and have questions for the knights, however, Pelgrem wasn't concerned about them. By the time the supervisors arrived, he and Artemesia would be gone.

Several hundred people flooded through the turnstiles and out of the subway. Pelgrem walked briskly down the street, heading towards the Brooklyn Bridge. Artemesia casually walked in the same direction. When they were both far enough from the subway, Pelgrem slowed his walk considerably, while Artemesia jogged to catch up with him.

The Brooklyn Bridge was the last bastion of “free” in New York City. There were random patrols, of course, across the bridge, but no fees were required to cross it. It was a token tossed at tourists who visited the city. The Brooklyn Bridge, it was advertised, provided spectacular views of Manhattan and, due to its location, was a great place to sell various trinkets to unsuspecting tourists. There were parks on both sides of the bridge where vendors hawked their wares, making it a profitable area.

Though the bridge was free, vendors were often charged twice the going rate for permits to sell their goods. This meant that those increases in fees were passed on to tourists and locals dumb enough to purchase goods so near the bridge.

As they approached the bridge, Pelgrem took Artemesia's hand in his. She looked down, somewhat shocked at first, then realized that if they casually proceeded over the bridge, any knight of the handcuff watching them would think that they were together and let them be. They walked about halfway across the bridge until they reached the lookout point. Pelgrem stopped holding Artemesia's hand and put his arm around her. They

walked over to the lookout and leaned on the edge of the bridge.

They spent several minutes looking north and then down at the cars below. Artemesia pointed to a few cars that she liked. Vehicles on the bridge sped past at rates so quickly that the occupants rarely noticed the people walking above them. A couple walked by and asked if Pelgrem would take a photo of them, which he gladly obliged, and then suggested to Artemesia it was time to move on.

They continued across the bridge and into the park, where they casually strolled, occasionally picking up a photo, t-shirt, or hat and feigning interest before moving on. The police were patrolling the park as well, but took little notice of Pelgrem and Artemesia. There was, after all, little reason to suspect that they were anything other than what they appeared to be.

Pelgrem and Artemesia walked a few more blocks into City Hall Park and stopped to rest at a bench behind the courthouse. Seven benches lined on either side of the sidewalk and Artemesia staked out the first one she came to. She didn't want to admit it, but she was tired. She was tired of running from the law. She was tired of walking. She was tired of scamming everyone. Most of all, she was too tired to think and, at this moment, didn't care if she was caught, arrested and thrown in jail. She just wanted to rest her aching feet and sleep.

Artemesia sat, comfortably, on the public park bench, her feet draped over Pelgrem's legs. She leaned her head against the backrest of the bench and dozed off for a while. Pelgrem took a sandwich out of his bag and ate it, washing it down with half a bottle of water. He wanted to eat another one but knew that they had to ration out what little food they had. He decided against waking Artemesia for now. He was just as tired as she was

and knew that she could use even an hour's sleep.

When it was nearly 1600 hours, Pelgrem nudged Artemesia awake. He passed her a sandwich and gave her the second half of his bottle of water. Half awake, she ate her sandwich and thanked Pelgrem for the extra time to sleep. Artemesia felt a little bit better but still daydreamed of her own bed, sleeping for many hours, perhaps days before she would be one hundred percent again.

When she was finished, Artemesia and Pelgrem put their garbage back into their bag, to assure the DNA in it wasn't traced, then they walked North through the park towards Warren Street. When they were across the street from the entrance to Frankie's building, Artemesia volunteered to cross the street to see if there was a human at the front desk, or if it was all automated.

Pelgrem waited on a park bench while he watched Artemesia walk up to Chambers street, cross, and walk down to Warren Street, passing the front entrance to Frankie's building. As she did, Artemesia glanced into the building, quickly scanning and revealing that the building was completely automated. After passing the building she turned around and returned the same way she came, sitting down next to Pelgrem on the park bench.

"No dice, Pel," Artemesia said to Pelgrem. "There's a scanner at the door, another at the mailboxes, and it looks like one at the elevators. I don't see how we're going to get in there."

Pelgrem sighed and scratched his head. "Maybe we should wait and see if she comes by. It's only a few minutes before 1630, maybe she'll be walking home."

"And what if drives? She'll never see us out here."

“Any chance we can get in the garage?”

“Not without ID. I don't see any way we can get past that stupid wall.”

“Then we wait here to see if she is walking,” Pelgrem said.

1630. That was the time when most government workers were finished for the day. It was only a few minutes to wait but Pelgrem was impatient. He had been forced to wait for so long, not knowing what happened to his sister and now, the last few minutes felt like hours. Pelgrem was antsy. He couldn't sit still, constantly fidgeting on the bench. 1630 came. Then 1635. Time kept rolling along, with only a few more people than before. By 1647, several hundred people were littering the sidewalks, briskly walking to their destinations.

Pelgrem sat straight up, stretching his neck to peer around the throngs of people, hoping for a glimpse at his sister. He scanned several dozen women walking past him, as well as across the street. Then, he saw her. She blended in with the rest of the crowd but to Pelgrem she was the only person walking on the street. Francesca was walking north, in between Murray Street and Park Place when Pelgrem yelled, “Frankie!”

Francesca stopped walking for a moment, sure that she heard someone calling her name. She quickly looked around but didn't see anyone, so continued walking. “Frankie!” There. She heard it again. She looked around to see who was calling her. In the middle of the road stood a man that looked familiar to her.

“Pelgrem?” she thought to herself. It couldn't be. They had told her that he was dead. Killed when he tried to flee. But there he was. Older. A few more scars. More a man than the boy she remembered. She stood there frozen as she watched him dodge the cars and cross the street to her.

“Pelgrem?” she said to him. “Is that really you?”

“Yes, Frankie, it's me,” he said as he ran up to her and gave her the biggest hug she had ever received.

“Oh, Pelly,” she said. “They told me you were dead. They...they said you fled and they had no choice.” She hugged him tighter, not wanting to let go. The tighter she hugged him, however, the more she started to think that something was wrong. Why was he here now? Why after all this time did he come searching for her? What was he doing here? Her thoughts were interrupted by Pelgrem's questions.

“Are you doing okay? Have you been treated well over the years?” Pelgrem had so many questions.

“Yes, yes, Pelly. I'm fine. No one has ever hurt me. As a matter of fact, a nice man from the government took me in, raised me, and made sure I wasn't mistreated.” She looked confused at the hurried way Pelgrem was asking his questions. “Why don't you come up to my apartment and we'll talk.”

“No. No, I can't do that,” he replied.

“But why not?” she asked, concerned. Suddenly she felt in danger. Then she heard the city loudspeakers.

“Warning!” they blared. “There are violent illegals in the area. Please remain indoors. Warning! Violent illegals are in the area to harm you. Please move indoors as soon as possible.” Francesca instinctively knew that they were looking for Pelgrem, violent or not. Pelgrem glanced around and saw that many people had picked up their pace from a brisk walk to a near jog.

“Look, Frankie, it's like this,” Pelgrem began. “My friend and I,” he said pointing

across the street at Artemesia, “we're in a bit of trouble. We have no IDs, caused a bit of a ruckus around here yesterday, and we have to leave the country as soon as possible.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I tried to find you before. I've tried so many times,” Pelgrem said exasperated. “I wanted to find you, but...time just...it just went by too quickly. I don't have any more time.”

“Why?” Francesca asked, but she already knew the answer. Deep down, she knew that if someone was in so much trouble that they had to escape the country, it wasn't good. She also knew that these types of people were usually members of the underground, meaning they had all followed the same path that her parents did. She was happy and repulsed by Pelgrem at the same time. Glad that he had followed their parents in fighting to try to change the government but angered by the very thought that he, of all people, would be trying to overturn her only way of life.

“I've got to go, Frankie,” Pelgrem said, putting his left hand on her face, stroking her cheek with his thumb. “I'm sorry. We had planned to spend time with you. It all went...wrong.” He paused for a moment, memorizing every detail of her face. Then, he leaned in and kissed Francesca on her forehead. “Take care, little sister. I love you.” Pelgrem turned and ran back across the street, dodging cars once again.

When he returned to the other side of the street, Artemesia asked if he was okay. Pelgrem turned back towards Francesca, who was still standing on the edge of the sidewalk. She raised her hand to wave goodbye and Pelgrem did likewise. Then, he turned away and ran back towards the Brooklyn Bridge with Artemesia.

Once they reached the bridge, they didn't look back again. They just kept running.



Artemesia just wanted to get to the pier. The blisters on her feet had long since popped and she could feel the dried blood sticking to her socks. The pain in her feet had become dulled due to the increase in adrenaline she discovered as they hurried over the bridge.

As they exited the bridge and continued walking towards the Carnarsie Pier, Pelgrem, apologizing, said, "I'm sorry, Artemesia. I never should have gone back. I should have known the area would still be scanned to see if we'd return."

"We should have known," Artemesia said emphatically. She should have realized that the UAVs would be scanning every single person for the next 72 hours. It was standard procedure for law enforcement to step up security whenever there were major incidents. But she didn't remember. She allowed herself to get caught up in the "find Pel's sister" hoopla instead of thinking rationally and telling Pelgrem that he couldn't go back to see her.

Pelgrem noticed how tired Artemesia had become and she noticed a weary look in his eye. For the next two hours, they spoke very little other than an encouraging, "just a bit farther" or "we're almost there" to nudge the other in continuing to the pier. By the time they reached the pier, it was dark. They made a guess at the time. Pelgrem approximated the time around 1900. If that were true, then their ride would not be there for eight to twelve hours. That would be plenty of time for a good rest but, the question was, where.

Instead of walking into the pier directly from the roundabout, as everyone else did, Pelgrem and Artemesia decided to walk down onto the beach about a half a mile away. This way, as they strolled near the pier, there would be no security checks unless they actually walked back up onto the pier. It would be assumed by anyone that had seen them that they were legally allowed on the beach.

They walked along the sidewalk, constantly looking for a way onto the beach. A logical assumption would conclude that there was at least one illegal entrance to the beach. After all, many people ended up banned from the beach for various infractions from loud music to fist fights. Those with minor offenses often returned later, through illegal means and laid low while still enjoying all the beach had to offer. One, sometimes two, UAVs would scan the beach, meaning several hours could pass in between sweeps. Once tossed from the beach, a person could return for a few hours of fun before the UAVs returned.

Artemesia spotted the first entrance and, after taking a quick look around and waiting for the current vehicle traffic to subside, they quickly entered the beach. Pelgrem scratched his arm on some bushes on the other side of the hole, which only slightly irritated him instead of causing much pain. Once on the other side, they looked around but didn't see anyone else, not surprising, given the time of day, so they proceeded to walk towards the pier as if they had been there all along.

They walked the rest of the way on the beach, often slipping and sliding in the soft, wet sand, until they reached the pier. The pier itself stretched over the beach and out, about twenty feet, into the water. It was meant more for sightseeing, rather than fishing, and a few people were milling about on top of the pier. Some salsa music could be heard playing over the loudspeakers. Pelgrem, however, headed straight under the pier and up to the spot where the pier met the land. It was partially covered in grass and bushes, making it difficult for anyone walking by to see them in the dark. He and Artemesia agreed that this would be a good spot to rest, eat, and sleep. He could also see out to Canarsie Pol and the WAM-V that was patrolling the area.

Pelgrem and Artemesia ate the last of the food they had and placed the wrappers back in the bag with their other garbage. Pelgrem stretched his legs out and massaged his thighs. Artemesia, without giving Pelgrem a chance to decide who would get first watch, put her head on Pelgrem's legs, using them as a pillow, and stretched out perpendicular to him and closed her eyes.

She was asleep in minutes and, after looking down at her, Pelgrem smiled and leaned back against the concrete wall holding up the pier. He sat for several hours, watching the WAM-V patrol Jamaica Bay. The WAM-V was rather large for such an area and Pelgrem didn't understand why something smaller, such as a UAV was not used for the bay. It looked like a giant, 4-legged spider, with water skis on the bottom of its legs, black and foreboding, it was good for stealth at night, aside from the sheen coming from the city lights reflecting off its massive body.

The “meaty” portion of the WAM-V used to hold a large crew that would scour the area in a constant 360 degree arc, leaving nothing unnoticed. But, cutbacks and technological improvements allowed the new WAM-Vs to be completely unmanned. Those that remained manned, were out in the oceans, along the coasts, in the Great Lakes, and rivers that were considered targets.

Jamaica Bay had to be patrolled, that was true, but the only dangers in the Bay was an idiot who couldn't swim. It was assumed that, since you cannot get to the water without prior authorization, there was no danger from attacks because you would have been caught attempting to reach the water from one of several dozen entry points in Brooklyn. Therefore, unmanned WAM-Vs were the best option. They would alert rescue crews in the Bay, who would save the idiot from himself in a matter of moments.

Pelgrem watched the WAM-V conduct its patrol over and over. It left Floyd Bennett Field, went South to Jacob Riis Park, East along the beach, North to Ruffle Bar, East towards Broad Channel, North around Jamaica Bay, scanned East to the Wildlife Refuge and then back West passing the tip of Ruffle Bar, returning to Floyd Bennett Field to start again.

Its search lights and, presumably, its cameras, only shined towards Canarsie Pol. It never came close enough to scan the entire island, nor did it enter the beach area at Canarsie Pier or the stretch of beach from Bergen to Hamilton beaches. Pelgrem saw this as a prime defect in the patrol area. He thought of many reasons why it did not enter this particular stretch, but concluded that it must be something to do with the weight of the WAM-V and the shallowness of the water.

If he could wade out in the water to Canarsie Pol, the WAM-V must get stuck in the sand. He was sure of it. After watching the WAM-V conduct its patrol several dozen times Pelgrem became sleepy. When he awoke from his slumber, he noticed it was not as dark as it had been before. Dawn was coming.

Pelgrem woke Artemesia up and told her it was time to start treading out to Canarsie Pol. It was still dark enough that they could reach the island before morning was in bloom. They watched as the WAM-V started its patrol south. The island wasn't far away and they were sure that they could reach it before the WAM-V returned to its northern part of patrol.

Not wanting to get her only pair of pants wet, Artemesia took off her jeans, socks, and shoes, held them up in the air, and started plodding through the water to the island. Pelgrem stood in amazement. This was something Artemesia would never have done had

she not been sleep deprived. She would rather get wet than have someone see her naked, or half naked. But it was a good idea. They had no idea how long they would have to sit in the cold, morning air and dry pants were always a good thing. Pelgrem copied Artemesia, except he placed his clothes in his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and began walking towards the island.

Halfway to the island, Artemesia stopped, turned towards Pelgrem, and said, “Any clue when they are going to pick us up?”

Having time now to catch up to her, Pelgrem replied, “Not a clue,” In between breaths he continued, “I’m not even sure what time it is. Low tide. High tide. Just before dawn. Too late. Too early. Hell if I know.”

They kept walking. The sand between Artemesia's toes was soothing to her feet. The water softened the areas around her broken blisters and gave much needed caressing to her pain. When they reached the island, Artemesia put her pants back on but continued to carry her socks and shoes. She wanted to wait until her feet dried off before putting the socks on and, as much as she hated to admit it, her shoes were not meant for walking around for two days non-stop. She didn't want to put them back on any sooner than she had to.

Pelgrem walked up onto Canarsie Pol, put his pants on and, without thinking, put his shoes and socks back on. A few steps later, he paused again, taking his shoes and socks off and shaking the sand out of both. Artemesia looked at him and laughed. They walked to the other side of the island, sat, and waited.

Pelgrem saw the WAM-V headed towards them. He suggested that they lie behind a bit of tall grass near the edge of the island. In a few hours the tall grass would be short

grass nearly covered in water but Pelgrem was hoping that he didn't have to wait that long. The WAM-V came and went with no noticeable trace of it having identified Pelgrem or Artemesia. They sat up and waited again, lying down with each pass of the WAM-V. At first, they found it amusing, but after sixteen passes, it was tiresome.

Finally, just as daylight fully filled the sky, Pelgrem saw a small rowboat quickly approaching them. It was fitted with a motor and was traveling faster than the WAM-V. Pelgrem looked and saw that it was just passing the south end of Ruffle Bar, while the boat was ten feet away. Its driver did not stop, choosing to drive right up onto Canarsie Pol. He quickly hopped out of the boat, turned it around and said, "Quickly, there isn't much time."

Instinctively, Pelgrem and Artemesia hopped into the boat. The man pushed the boat back into the water and steered it back the way he had come. The WAM-V, meanwhile, had turned away from the Wildlife Refuge and was on its way to scan the island again. As they passed Floyd Bennett Field and went under the Flatbush Avenue bridge, it dawned on Pelgrem that they had no idea if this was the ride they had been waiting for.

"Hey," he said to the man steering the boat. "How did you know we'd be there?"

"Let's see," the man began. "I'm sent to pick up a guy and a girl, waiting on an island, where no one is supposed to be at this time of day, who look haggard and hungry. Do you think I picked up the wrong people?"

"Good point," Pelgrem replied, but he was still paranoid. "How do I know you are who you say you are?"

"Details, my friend. Details. Hang on a moment and I'll show you." The man steered his boat back to shore, stopping at Fort Tilden. Pelgrem took the rope from the boat and

tied it to the nearest post. The man took his shoe off and showed Pelgrem his tattoo. Satisfied, Pelgrem exhaled slowly. “Now, my friend. You must show me your proof.”

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out the familiar DNA box from before. Pelgrem and Artemesia each put out their fingers to be checked and, when they were identified, the man pulled out another device. This time it was a walkie-talkie and, just as the day before, everyone was speaking French.

Pelgrem felt a slight rumble in the boat and, from below the surface of the water, a small submarine was raised. “Come, we must go,” the man said.

Pelgrem looked bewildered. He pointed towards the shore and said, “You mean, we aren't...”

“No,” the man said, interrupting Pelgrem's thought. “We go by a different boat.”

“Then, whose boat is that?” Artemesia asked.

The man looked at the boat they were in and shrugged, “No idea.”

The hatch on top of the submarine was opened and the man insisted that Pelgrem and Artemesia go in first. He carefully checked the boat to make sure nothing was left behind, looked around the area to make sure they weren't spotted, climbed into the submarine, and locked the hatch. The submarine slowly returned to the depths of the water, heading out to the Atlantic Ocean and away from the United States.

The submarine was of the smaller, growler group, able to hold a maximum of sixty-five people. Pelgrem discovered the ship's name, Harriet Tubman, which was one of the last growlers built by the US Navy. It had also been retrofitted with all electric motors, making it quieter above land than its diesel predecessors. Advancements in technologies also increased its speed from 20 to 30 knots, though many argued that this was due more

to its relative short size of 275 feet rather than the efficiency of the motors.

Artemesia didn't care how fast the sub was or how long it took to get to the Netherlands. She just wanted some rack time. Pelgrem agreed. He knew they would be on the sub for several weeks and there would be plenty of time for questions and strategy. Since there was only the minimal crew of twenty-seven, the captain offered to give them separate quarters. Artemesia insisted that they share a set of quarters.

The crew assumed they were a couple. Artemesia thought to straighten them out on a few things but thought better of it. She simply did not want to be alone in a place full of strangers. Having Pelgrem sleep in the bunk below her made her feel at ease. The captain gave them a change of clothes, showed them the showers and let them be. Pelgrem locked the door behind him and climbed into his bunk.



Pelgrem and Artemesia slept for nearly seventeen hours. He had awakened first and waited about thirty minutes before shaking Artemesia awake.

“Come on, sleepyhead. It's time to get up.”

Still groggy, Artemesia managed to give the death stare to Pelgrem. “Okay, I'm up. Now leave me alone.” She rolled over, turning her back to Pelgrem.

“Okay, but I get first shower. You can take yours later.” Pelgrem turned to walk away but Artemesia had already spun back round and grabbed at his shirt.

“There is no way in hell you are leaving me alone in the shower.” She jumped out of bed, grabbed her change of clothes and the two headed to the showers. They passed a man in the corridor, who moved flat, against the wall so they could pass. “Thanks,” Artemesia said. The man nodded back at her.

Once in the shower, Artemesia took ladies' privilege and claimed the first shower. Though there was a row for five people to shower at once, she made Pelgrem turn his back to her and stand watch. He felt that this was ridiculous but smiled and begrudgingly turned around.

When she finished, she toweled off and quickly got dressed. “You can go now,” she said as she rounded the corner of the showers.

“What? You're not going to stay and protect me?” Pelgrem said sarcastically.

“I'm just going to be on the other side of the wall combing my hair,” she quipped back. “Don't worry, I'll save you from those big, burly men out there.” Pelgrem smiled and returned to his shower. The warm water flowing over his head and gently pounding on his back felt good. He stood there for several minutes just letting the water flow over him until he heard someone talking to Artemesia.

“You okay?” he yelled, knowing that, if she wasn't, there was no way a soaking wet, naked man could help her.

“Yeah, fine,” came the reply. “Just getting directions for some food.”

Pelgrem nodded, though Artemesia could not see him and decided that he had better hurry and finish his shower. When he was done, he found Artemesia leaning on the wall next to the door, one foot resting on the wall, the other keeping her balance on the floor.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he replied.

The two momentarily returned to their bunks to leave their belongings and then walked down the narrow corridors of the Harriet Tubman to the chow hall. Eight men were already there eating their meals. Pelgrem and Artemesia were informed that it was lunch time, so a hot meal was not on order until later. They didn't mind. They were just happy with what they were given, which was a feast compared to the last few days.

There were several different kinds of meat for sandwiches, including turkey, chicken, tuna, and pastrami. There was also a salad, consisting of lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, and carrots. Pelgrem was overjoyed at the display of fruit. He rarely had fruit often when in the camps and was perplexed at his inability to pick between bananas, apples, tangerines, strawberries, or pears. He took one of each, knowing that he'd regret it later, and added them to his plate.

Pelgrem and Artemesia sat together at a table in the corner. Several of the men pointed and laughed at them. Artemesia hinted that they were sitting in a corner in a defensive position and that was probably what the men were laughing and pointing at. Finally, one of the laughing men pointed towards them and waved them over to join his

table. "Come. Please. Sit with us. We promise we won't bite....much." To which the entire room erupted in laughter.

Hesitantly, Pelgrem and Artemesia grabbed their tray and joined the man. "Kenny's the name," he said as he shook their hands. "Please, we didn't mean to make fun of you."

"No, no, it's okay," Artemesia said. "We probably looked like two dogs caught in a corner, trying to figure out how escape."

"Exactly," Kenny said pointing with his fork.

"Well," Pelgrem said. "We are going to be here several weeks. No point in being afraid all the time."

Kenny looked at Pelgrem, whacked him on the back and smiled. "You like snooker, my friend?"

"Never played it before," Pelgrem replied.

"Ah, it is similar to your pool, but much better," Kenny answered. "You will come this afternoon and play a game with us?"

"Uh, sure," Pelgrem replied, glancing over at Artemesia with a strange look. He wondered how a ship this small could fit a snooker table into it. It might, possibly, fit in the chow hall but, even then, he didn't see how anyone could play when a large table would touch the walls of the room. That alone was worth going to see.

Pelgrem and Artemesia spent most of the day in their quarters resting. They didn't really speak. Pelgrem lie in his bunk staring at the ceiling. He thought mostly of his sister, his parents, and what could have been. Artemesia lie on her side and stared at the wall. She wasn't really thinking, just daydreaming, with several dozen thoughts running in and out of her mind. She dozed off from time to time, sleeping for thirty or forty

minutes at a time. She didn't dream at all when she slept and was restless when she was awake.

Just before four, there was a knock at the door. It was Kenny. "Come now, I'll take you to my quarters to play." Pelgrem and Artemesia followed Kenny out of their quarters and down to his quarters. Pelgrem wondered how big Kenny's quarters actually were if the snooker table was inside it.

When they arrived at Kenny's quarters, Pelgrem saw that the door was open. Two men were standing on either side of the door, leaning in and laughing at something happening in the room. As Pelgrem got closer, he saw four other men already in the room. They were laughing and speaking French and, there, in the middle of the room, was the snooker table. It was one foot long by six inches wide. Not made to scale at all but apparently fun nonetheless.

The cue sticks were barely the length of a man's hand and watching the men try to shoot pea sized balls into the pockets with them made Pelgrem smile. He realized as he grinned, that he was actually enjoying himself. He glanced over at Artemesia and she back at him. Two of the men exited the room and allowed them in so that they could learn to play.

After several hours, everyone had eaten dinner and were tired of snooker, so they retired to their own bunks for the evening. Pelgrem would have liked to join the men again in a game of snooker but was unsure of protocol. He still didn't know if they had been invited today to play games in a genuine attempt at friendship or if they were simply being cordial and polite to their guests.

The next morning Kenny arrived at their door and woke them up. He gave them a

copy of the book Fahrenheit 451, a banned book in America, but it was the only thing in English they had on board. He also left a few books about learning French. It wasn't much but Kenny assured them that if they wanted to learn, every single Legionnaire on board would help them.

Pelgrem and Artemesia's lives were quickly filled with learning French, reading and re-reading about firemen and dystopian societies, and slowly getting to know the crew. Pierre, the ship's cook, made a point to not allow Pelgrem or Artemesia any food unless they could ask for it in French. Artemesia was a quick study but, for three days, Pelgrem only had bread, water, and apples.

And so, their lives went on. Pelgrem and Artemesia still spent most of their time together but, after a while, they became confident in spending time with other members of the crew. The crew accepted them as well. They helped with chores on the ship and did what they could with their limited knowledge and abilities concerning the running of a submarine.

\* \* \*

Pelgrem was awakened by alarms. He quickly rose and got dressed. Before leaving his quarters, he woke Artemesia. She followed him up to the bridge a few minutes later. The alarm was a general one. The Harriet Tubman was rising and the bridge was abuzz with commands. The men on the bridge spoke very quickly and Pelgrem tried to follow it. The most he could decipher was that they were arriving in Greenland.

“Greenland?” he said out loud. “Can we go out and see it?”

The Captain glared at Pelgrem and he quickly corrected himself by repeating the question in French. Denied. The men on land, as well as Pelgrem and Artemesia, were

valuable assets and the Captain did not want either to meet.

Dejected, Pelgrem and Artemesia were escorted back to their quarters, where they were locked in their rooms and a guard stationed at the door. For the next three days, Pelgrem and Artemesia sat in their quarters. The door to their quarters only opened at meal times. One Legionnaire would give them food while another stood with a pistol at his side. At first Pelgrem and Artemesia were angry. Then, they were stir crazy.

After a while, they began talking and understood the need for them to be locked up, but they were still angry about being given meals with weapons drawn. Artemesia swore she would not forgive them for it. Pelgrem felt the same way but he also knew himself well enough to know that after a few days back with the crew, he'd change his mind. He knew the same would be true for Artemesia, but he let her vent her anger. Better her anger be directed at them than him.

The following morning, while staring at the walls of their quarters, Pelgrem and Artemesia heard the general alarm and felt the ship diving back into the icy waters of the ocean. Twenty minutes later, their quarters were unlocked and unceremoniously opened. Neither felt like exiting. There was no reason to leave, at least until lunch. They did not want to talk to the crew and exchange words that could not be taken back. And they didn't care to hear excuses right now.

The next three meals they ate alone. They sat in the corner and, whenever someone attempted to sit with them, they either put their feet onto the spare chair, knocked the chair over or simply got up and left. Then, on the occasion of dinner two days later, the captain came down to the galley to eat. Pelgrem took notice. The captain never ate with the crew. He always had his food brought to him in his ready room. When he

approached Pelgrem and Artemesia's table, they did not kick over the spare chair, nor did they put their feet on the chair.

Artemesia started to get up but Pelgrem glared at her and sat back down the few inches she had risen. The captain did not say a word. He ate in silence with Pelgrem and Artemesia and, while the rest of the crew continued with banter over a hearty meal, they wondered, and worried, what would happen next. When he was finished, the captain returned his tray to the cook and resumed his duties on the bridge.

The captain repeated this process the next morning at breakfast, then lunch, and dinner. However, at dinner, when he finished his meal, he did not rise and exit back to his duties. He sat and waited, patiently, for Pelgrem to finish his meal and said, "Rumor has it that you know how to play the guitar."

Pelgrem, who was wiping his mouth of the small amount of milk that had dribbled from the edge of his cup, responded, "I used to, sir. I don't know if I can anymore."

"I'm sure it's just like riding a bike. You never really forget how." The captain motioned towards one of the crew, who quickly left the galley and returned with a guitar in hand. "Play something for us."

The captain did not demand music of Pelgrem and he did not feel as if his life were in danger should he decide not to play, but he felt compelled to make the captain happy. Instead of a command, the captain's tone had been more of desire. Pelgrem didn't know what he should play but imagined that the captain would probably like to hear something new; something different, from what he had probably heard a thousand times before on a ship with so few men.

Pelgrem picked up the guitar and strummed it a few times to get the feel for the

instrument and to listen for any strings that might be out of tune. A few minor adjustments and he was happy with the sound. Pel started to strum softly, a quiet tune that he often sung to himself when he found life difficult. It had a long introduction and, once, just before he began to sing, there was a noticeable hand scrape sliding up the neck of the guitar as Pelgrem's fingers applied a little bit too much pressure on the fretboard, causing the strings to rub against the frets.

*So, so you think you can tell  
Heaven from Hell,  
Blue skys from pain.  
Can you tell a green field  
From a cold steel rail?  
A smile from a veil?  
Do you think you can tell?*

Pelgrem strummed the guitar more forcefully. Though the song was not an acoustic song, his rendition had to be. There were no other instruments. He rocked in time as he strummed and continued to sing.

*And did they get you to trade  
Your heroes for ghosts?  
Hot ashes for trees?  
Hot air for a cool breeze?  
Cold Comfort for change?  
And did you exchange  
A walk on part in the war  
For a lead role in a cage?*

While others would reach for the wise counsel of their parents, Pelgrem would play the first song that his father had taught him. He found comfort in the soothing sounds of the melody and took solace in the lyrics. Pelgrem closed his eyes and played the interlude between the verses.

His head facing towards the ground, his hands playing the tune, but his mind was elsewhere. He wanted to cry. He wanted to shout. He wanted to do anything but play this song. He had wished that he had picked any other song except this one. But this one



was the one he was feeling and so he played on.

*How I wish, how I wish you were here.*

*We're just two lost souls*

*Swimming in a fish bowl,*

*Year after year,*

*Running over the same old ground.*

*What have we found?*

*The same old fears.*

*Wish you were here.*

He continued to the end and, when he was finished, he looked up and saw that the crew had been mesmerized by the song. Some of the men had tears in their eyes, while others, embarrassed, turned away. "That is the most beautiful song I have ever heard," the captain remarked. Pelgrem handed the guitar back to the captain, thanked him and returned to his room. He spent the rest of the night, curled up in a ball, facing against the wall in his bunk, while tears gently streamed down his face and onto his pillow.

Despite still being angry at the crew, Artemesia knew it was best to let Pelgrem be alone. She swallowed her pride and decided that she would need to entertain the men, partly to keep their minds off what Pelgrem might be doing and partly because, after hearing such a song, it was best to get one's mind off of real life.

Artemesia proposed a lively game of poker, to which many of the men agreed. Since most of the crew didn't have much money, anything was allowed to be put into the pot. Money, candy bars, duties, extra socks. It was all fair game. The captain smiled, rose from his chair and returned to the bridge.

Pelgrem and Artemesia were more jovial the rest of the trip to the Netherlands. They participated in small talk, reminisced about life in America, and told stories of their many near misses with the law. Those were always the more entertaining stories. They were fun to hear, kept you on the edge of your seat, and there was always a lesson to be

learned. The lesson was usually what not to do next time, which is why Artemesia had never been caught, so far.

Kenny woke up Pelgrem and Artemesia earlier than normal to tell them they would soon be in The Netherlands. Normally, the crew let them sleep in but, they would be

departing today and there was a strict schedule to keep. The Harriet Tubman could rise to the surface for a few minutes. While the Dutch were known for letting people go about their business without being bothered too much, there were still laws to follow and smuggling people was still very much illegal.

After showers and breakfast, Pelgrem and Artemesia packed their bags, they had one each now, and prepared to leave. Just before 11am, the Harriet Tubman rose to the surface near Den Helder. Kenny escorted Pelgrem and Artemesia outside to a waiting rowboat. "Here, take this," Kenny said, handing Pelgrem a small note made of cardboard and sealed with "no-wet," a type of sealant to protect paper from the elements.

Pelgrem took the card and looked at it. There was an intraweb address and a login name. There was no password listed. "If you ever find yourself in trouble, use this and I will find a way to help. Just use my name as the password."

"Thanks," Pelgrem said, placing the card into his front, left pants pocket. Pelgrem gave Kenny a large, manly hug, the kind that said, "I miss you," but without the touchy-feely-girly attitude of most hugs. Artemesia gave Kenny a hug and added a kiss on the cheek. Then, the two climbed down the railings on the side of sub and into the rowboat.

Inside the rowboat was a single man, tall, like most Dutchmen, with darkened hair. He began rowing towards the shore. The Harriet Tubman reclaimed its crewman, then slowly sank back into the depths of the ocean. The man continued to row but also began to speak.

"Alkian's the name," he said, temporarily removing his right hand off the oar to shake Pelgrem and Artemesia's hands.

"Pelgrem," Pelgrem said, pointing to himself. "And this is Artemesia. Nice to meet

you.”

“Likewise,” Alkian said. He rowed a few more feet and then continued. “Once we get to land, try not to say too much until we get onto the train. There are many people around the station and the ports who would readily turn you in for the few Euros they would gain. Just walk with me and act like we all know where we are going.

“Once we get to land, follow me and we'll get you some papers. I'm still hoping to catch the 1333. I don't want to hang around any longer than I need to.”

Pelgrem and Artemesia nodded in agreement. It wasn't a hard task to follow, especially if they weren't going to be in the area for too long. Alkian rowed the boat up to the shore in a secluded area behind some bushes. There was another man waiting and helped pull the rowboat onto shore. Alkian and the man pulled the rowboat ashore and up past the beach and into the middle of a small row of bushes. They turned the boat upside down and covered it with some branches, convincingly enough to look like it was another bush.

Pelgrem and Artemesia walked as quickly as they could through the dunes to keep up with Alkian and the man. The man had a car waiting for them and Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Alkian all climbed in. The car sped away and the man said, “Welcome to Texel.” Pelgrem looked out the window. Texel (Tess-uhl) is the largest island of the Wadden Island archipelago. Texel was still small, only 15 miles long and 6 miles wide but it had 25,000 permanent residents.

Being slightly segregated from the rest of The Netherlands, Texel was the perfect place to come ashore. Much like the rest of The Netherlands, they shunned much of the technological advances that tracked the citizens of the world, making the rowboat trip to

shore, mostly unnoticed.

They had come ashore on the western side of the island at the dunes near De Koog. The man who helped them out of the water drove towards Den Burg, but turned south and headed to Den Hoorn. Once they reached Den Hoorn, the man stopped the car in front of an old white church. Alkian told Pelgrem and Artemesia to wait a moment in the car while he went into the cemetery attached to the white church.

Alkian walked through the cemetery until he reached a gravestone known as Miriam. It was a gravestone squared off in stone and inset with many medium-sized, smooth stones. Atop a dark granite pedestal sat Miriam, scrunched up with her head in her knees. Alkian reached into the space between Miriam's feet and her buttocks and pulled out a small envelope, then returned to the car.

The driver continued to 't Horntje, where he let off Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Alkian. They were to catch the ferry from here. Alkian took out the envelope and revealed to Artemesia and Pelgrem that it was full of 20 Euro notes. Alkian walked up to the ferry counter and obtained three tickets, at 50 Euros each, to cross. He also paid the 15 Euros extra fee for not having a car on the car ferry.

When the ferry arrived, the three hurried onto it. Alkian watched the cars driving onto the ferry until he saw a red cargo van that had no windows except for the front windshield and the front door windows. They walked over to it and Alkian tapped on the back door. The doors opened and the three climbed into it.

“We only have twenty minutes for the ferry to reach Den Helder,” Alkian began. “These guys are going to take your photos and get your IDs ready.”

“That's it?” Artemesia asked. “It only takes twenty minutes?”

“Yep,” came the reply from one of the two men in the van. “And to think, they have people convinced it takes several weeks to get this sort of thing done.”

Pelgrem smiled. Of course the bureaucracy takes that long. It was another set of controls. Make it policy that it takes X number of weeks and do it long enough so that the people come to believe that's how long things must be done.

“So, if you don't mind me asking,” Pelgrem began. “How do we know that this will work as a legit ID?”

“Well,” said the man who had opened the door for the trio. “You don't. Except that it is. And it's 'borrowed' from the government. But just for the day.”

So that was it, thought Pelgrem. Corruption runs everywhere in the world and just about anything really can be obtained no matter where you are. The two men took photographs of Pelgrem and Artemesia, as well as their fingerprints, retina scans, and DNA sample.

In less than twenty minutes, Pelgrem and Artemesia were official British citizens on vacation in The Netherlands. They even had official stamps from customs. One stated that they flew from London to Amsterdam. Another said they had been on Texel for the past two days. One of the men entered some data onto his PVD so that the data on the passport matched the data in the Dutch database.

The ferry slowed into the port of Den Helder and, while maneuvering into the dock, Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Alkian exited the van and walked to the front of the ferry. Pelgrem watched the ferry slowly work its way into the dock and men tie off the large ropes to hold it in place so that cars could exit and enter the ferry.

Foot passengers and cyclists were the first to exit, with Pelgrem, Artemesia, and

Alkian in the middle of the pack of foot passengers. Alkian left Pelgrem and Artemesia alone in line, as they had to follow the line for EU citizens, while Alkian freely strolled through the Dutch line. Dutchmen simply walked through, stopped momentarily for a retina scan, and continued on their way. Pelgrem and Artmesia quickly moved through the customs checkpoint, where Pelgrem and Artemesia swiped their passports and exited to meet back up with Alkian.

The trio exited the ports and customs building and hopped onto bus number 33, which was going to the bus terminal. Seven minutes later, they arrived at the bus terminal, which sat next to the Den Helder train station. The trio strolled over to the train station, where Alkian again pulled out his envelope of cash and purchased three tickets to Nijmegen. It was now 1327, just in time to run to the train.

Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Alkian climbed on board the Intercity 3053NS train and walked down to the first class car and their assigned seats. They were two train cars away from the food car, which separated the first class and second class trains. The seats were large and comfortable, with red and blue flowers to decorate the gray background. The trio sat in a second of four seats, two each facing each other and a large table in between.

Artemesia took the window seat while Pelgrem plopped down next to her in the aisle seat. He let out a large sigh and closed his eyes. Alkian sat down across from Pelgrem while the fourth seat was occupied with Pelgrem and Artemesia's bags. They didn't want to put them at the end of the train car because it was susceptible to theft and, this being first class, there were no "lower class" overhead racks. They wanted their bags right where they could see them.

"So, where in Nijmegen will I be taking you?" Alkian asked.

“I'll let you know when we get there,” Pelgrem replied, not even opening his eyes a millimeter in response. Alkian took the hint and said no more. There was no need to feel slighted. They were all involved in a dangerous business and, the less Alkian knew, the better. He understood that well. He had merely asked out of curiosity though, as it must be something big, he thought, to smuggle people out of America. He knew Americans could get visas to leave the country and he had seen a handful of them over his 42 years, but, if they couldn't go legally, he felt it was probably best not to ask why.

The train whistled loudly and someone began rambling on a speaker in Dutch. The train was leaving. Pelgrem felt relieved. He wasn't afraid or scared of getting caught, he just wanted to get moving. He had actually felt safer in the short time he had been in The Netherlands than he ever did back home in The United States.

He listened to the conductor announce the stops as the train pulled out of the Den Helder station. Alkmaar. Amsterdam. There were three stops there. Utrecht and Nijmegen. Several other stops were mentioned but he didn't recognize the names. He just listened to the soothing voice of the conductor and imagined that he must be a nice man to have such a beautiful voice.

The train had barely begun, when it stopped in Den Helder Zuid. Pelgrem panicked for a moment until Alkian assured him that this was a normal stop. The train continued again, making a few more stops before arriving in Alkmaar. They waited for nine minutes while extra train cars were coupled onto the already long train. Pelgrem didn't like long stops. He always thought the worst. It took all his strength not to look suspiciously at the exits for Dutch policemen.

Finally, the train continued. It soon stopped at Castricum. Pelgrem giggled to himself



and thought it was good not be from a town with a name like Castricum. After leaving Castricum, Alkian asked Pelgrem and Artemesia if they would like anything to eat. Both nodded. It was nearing two-thirty and neither had eaten since breakfast on the Harriet Tubman. Alkian took out his envelope of cash once again and promised to be right back.

Pelgrem leaned over to Artemesia and whispered, “So, who are you now?”

“Well, I'm not totally sure,” she replied. “Let's have a look.” She reached into her back pocket and pulled out her passport. “It appears that I am Belinda Cartwright. Who are you?”

“Nigel Preston,” Pelgrem answered.

“Ah, it appears we are supposed to be arrogant pains in the asses.”

“With names like these, could we be anything else?”

Artemesia chuckled and half-heartedly smacked Pelgrem on the shoulder. Pelgrem leaned in and gently crushed Artemesia between himself and the side of the train car.

When Alkian returned, they hastily ate their food, ignoring the three Amsterdam stops. They were simple enough sandwiches. Ham and cheese was nothing to write home about, but Artemesia really liked the kaas souffle, so much so that she stole Pelgrem's and ate it. They had to share one water though as there was nothing left, though the man in the dining car assured Alkian more water would be loaded on in Utrecht.

When they arrived in Utrecht, Alkian hopped off the train and ran out and to the right from the train station. He told Pelgrem and Artemesia that he would go to get them some proper, edible food.

Five minutes later, he scrambled back onto the train, a bag in his mouth, as he had to use both hands to grab onto the train before he missed it.

“Phew,” he said, panting. “I didn't think I was going to make it back in time.”

While Alkian recovered from his fast jaunt off and on the train, he opened the bag and handed out burgers from Charlie Chui's. “I live in Utrecht,” he said. “And I love these things.” At first, the burgers looked a little strange, with their bean sprouts hanging out of the buns, but they were quite tasty. It wasn't a burger like you'd find in Ameriva, but it was filling and it was definitely not something you'd ever be able to find or eat back home.

Just under an hour later, they were in Nijmegen. When they got off the train, Artemesia spotted a self-service food machine, much like a soda machine but with food in it on the left side of the station. Specifically, she saw more kaas souffle. Alkian grinned. “Okay, but just this one because they are really bad for you.” He handed her some change and Artemesia joyfully plunged the money into the machine and removed the snack.

Pelgrem took out his piece of paper with the information that Wil and Joe had given to him. “Do you know where this place is?” he asked.

Alkian leaned in and looked at the street address. “Yes, it's near the city center. We'll have to take the bus to get there though. I really do not feel like walking there right now.”

When they exited from the small, but busy station, they were greeted by the bustling noises of Nijmegen. There were bike racks on the right, filled with many different color bicycles. They walked over to the bus stop and got onto a bus that was headed towards the city center. Alkian took out his ID and slapped it onto the bus counter three times, then he turned to Pelgrem and said, “don't worry, I've paid for you both.” They went to the back of the bus and sat while the bus loaded more passengers.

“So, tell me,” Artemesia said. “Why is it that you don't use the cash anymore?”

“Well, it is normal to pay for friends with you. If I use the cash, they might question it. Only tourists use cash for buses in Holland so I do it just to make it easier.”

“Well, take the amount out of the envelope and pay yourself back then,” Pelgrem said.

“No, no, I cannot do that,” Alkian replied. “I have agreed to bring you here to get what you need and make sure you can safely get out of Europe. Our organization could not survive if there was not a little bit of charity from its volunteers.”

Pelgrem nodded. He relaxed a little bit more, not because he was exhausted but because he was unsure if today was going to be another marathon day like his two days in New York City. He hoped that he could relax the whole day. Quite frankly, he was tired of traveling. He sincerely wanted to stop, just for a few days, take in the sights and sounds around him and forget whatever this mission was and what it was doing to him. He knew that he couldn't stop, but, after spending weeks on a ship he just wanted fresh air, some sunlight, and to be left alone.

Ah, to be left alone. He rarely was left alone. When he was free, before all his troubles, he was alone on the highway, delivering packages, and he liked it. He liked the peacefulness. He enjoyed his own music and could turn it on or off, up or down, whenever he wanted. But since his arrest, he was never alone. He wasn't alone in the barracks. He wasn't alone in the camp. There was always someone watching him or hanging out with him. He wasn't alone when he escaped. Even Vinnie watched him, just in case. You never know what incarceration can do to a man.

And now he had Artemesia to keep him company. That wasn't his intention. But his

carelessness has caused her to flee as well. And, although Alkian was assisting him, he was also watching him. Closing his eyes as a little kid would do and pretending no one could see him was some solace to Pelgrem. But he still knew he wasn't alone, and he didn't think he ever would be again.

The bus arrived at the city center and the trio exited, walking straight up the cobblestone, pedestrian road. They walked only a few minutes before they arrived at the address Wil had given Pelgrem. Achter de Hoofdwacht 3. It was a cafe called In de Blaauwe Hand, and was situated on a corner in an old building dating back to the 1300s. The cafe has served beer since 1511. The road past the cafe reminded Pelgrem of the yellow brick road, except that it was all gray, and much narrower.

The outside was ornately decorated in a vibrant mahogany color, beckoning visitors to, at least, inspect the outside of the bar. Pelgrem couldn't tell if it was real mahogany, oak, mahogany colored oak, or some other wood. But it struck him nonetheless as one of the classiest entrances to a bar he had never seen. A sign on the left let visitors know that it was the oldest cafe in Nijmegen. The front of the cafe was simple, yet elegant, with “Cafe in de Blaauwe Hand” etched into the windows in an Old English style font.

Three large, rectangular windows sat next to the door. Above the windows was a single rectangular window, longer lengthwise than in height, that was cut into three rows of twelve, square panes. Another, smaller rectangle of three rows of seven pane rested above the entrance door.

Around the corner of the building was another large, rectangular window, with a smaller window above it, this time with three rows of eight panes. Next to it was a solid wood, rectangular panel with a small window above it of three rows of four panes.

Above the main entrance, in front of the cafe and on its side, were single, large windows, two in the front and one on the side. Between the two upstairs windows in front of the cafe was, carved in the stone, a large, blue hand.

In de Blaauwe Hand was small, only about 60 feet in length on the first floor, but the deep brown, mahogany colors of the bar and the stairs' railings gave it a comforting character, inviting its guests in from the elements outside. Upon entering, Pelgrem was greeted with many signs, pictures, and paintings that lined the walls. Some were new, most were old and appeared to have been there for several decades, if not centuries. They were all in dutch and many were advertisements for various beers.

As they stepped inside the bar, Pelgrem saw a rectangular mirror on the left wall, inbetween to high tables, with two bar stools at each table. It was also right in the middle of all the dutch signs, pictures, and paintings. There was a few feet of space and then the bar, which lined the rest of the left side of the cafe.

There were three shelves of liquor stacked behind the bar and a large bell attached to the liquor wall. Pelgrem assumed it was rung to signal closing time. On the back wall were two more large windows, each with four rows of four square panes in them. Outside those windows, Pelgrem could see a stone wall, though he could not see how far away it stretched. Next to the windows was another panel in the same mahogany wood as the front entrance. At its top was four medium-sized, stained glass panels, of what, Pelgrem wasn't sure. It was too far from where he was standing to see.

Under the stained glass panels was some sort of picture. Pelgrem could see that it was old but could not decipher what it was. There was also a small statue of Jesus Christ as well as an accordion resting on the sill of the wood panel. On the wall to the right of

Jesus was hanging an acoustic guitar. To the right of the bar were also two tables, able to accommodate four chairs each, with more pictures, sketches, paintings, and another mirror on the wall.

The stairs lie just past those tables. One part led to the basement with more tables and the toilets, while the other set led up to another, unassuming room, with a half a dozen tables and far less decoration on the walls.

Alkian suggested that they go upstairs. There would be fewer people there this time of day and they would be able to speak more openly about what they were looking for, where it might be, and how they could obtain it. They settled on the table in the corner, near the front windows so they could watch people walking up the alleyway as well as watching people walking around the open square, shopping, window gazing, or just meeting and talking with friends.

Alkian pointed to a copper sign just under the front window. It read, “Wie drinkt om te vergeten, moet vooraf betalen!” *If you drink to forget, pay in advance.*

“Quite a contrast to downstairs,” Pelgrem noted, looking around the rather empty upstairs area.

“True,” Alkian said. “But this place has an incredible history and everyone is so completely welcoming here, that you just want to keep come back again and again.”

“Really? What's so special about it?” Artemesia asked.

“Well,” Alkian began, leaning on the edge of the table. “The entire building used to be a lakenhal, which was a workshop that made sheep's wool into clothing. In de Blaauwe Hand, which means in the blue hand, was, most likely, the local watering hole for the workers, since the workers' hands were all covered in indigo blue from dying the

sheets of wool.

“Downstairs, you can see where they uncovered the stone pillars from the 1300s and over there,” Alkian continued, pointing to some old newspapers framed on the wall. “Those are the newspapers they found at the turn of the century that date from the early 1900s.”

“Very cool,” Artemesia said. “Can we look around at the stuff?”

“But of course,” a waiter said, interrupting their conversation. “Please. Feel free to look around at anything upstairs or downstairs. Now, what can I get you to drink?”

The trio made their drink orders. Alkian ordered a de Koninck, a Belgian beer that was the only beer Alkian could stomach. Everything else tasted bitter or watered down, while de Koninck was just perfect. The de Koninck arrived in its bolleke, a unique ball shaped glass synonymous with de Koninck. Pelgrem ordered koffie, a small black, but very strong coffee that comes with a complimentary piece of chocolate and half a shot of a liquor of your choice. Artemesia took the house recommendation of Tiep Top, a special drink made just for de Blaauwe Hand and named after someone famous from Nijmegen.

Pelgrem worried that they would have to drink a lot in order to stay, but Alkian reassured him that the Dutch were famous for letting people take hours to drink one coffee and let them be. Still, he suggested that every seventy-five to ninety minutes he should order something, even if it was just one of them making a new order. No need to piss anyone off by spending all day in the bar on a single drink.

It was just after four in the afternoon and Pelgrem felt that they should have a look around before it got too busy when the night crowds started arriving. He recounted his story to Alkian, taking out his PVD and showing him the old data stick. “I’m assuming

that the stick we're looking for here is same as this one, but I'm just using a bit of deductive reasoning and I don't have all the details to know if my conclusions are correct or not.”

Alkian suggested that, since the waiter already knew they were tourists, it wouldn't look too suspicious if they started looking around and touching things. It was also a great opportunity to ask how long certain things were in the bar, as well as if they had ever been moved. Alkian and Pelgrem also suggested that Artemesia ask those questions since the waiter had been flirting with her before. Artemesia, of course, glared at both men before reluctantly agreeing to their plan.

Artemesia headed back downstairs to look around and ask a few questions, while Pelgrem and Alkian stayed upstairs to look at the paintings, tables, chairs, walls, and whatever else they thought could be used to hide a data stick.

Pelgrem began looking at a framed sketch in the corner of the cafe, which was made at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was so impressed with the detail and coloring of the sketch that he almost forgot to look behind it for the data stick. A smaller sketch of the bridge in Nijmegen was to its left and that, too, yielded no data stick. A copper light above the smaller sketch also revealed nothing, other than dust. Pelgrem and Alkian also felt along the walls and floors for any hint of hidden compartments. They checked under the tables and, when they found nothing, decided to sit back down and watch the people milling about outside.

Artemesia, meanwhile, was downstairs asking questions and fending off advances from the waiter. She was secretly steaming inside, swearing that she would make Pelgrem and Alkian pay for her harassment. She hadn't figured out how to look behind



all the pictures on the walls, especially since some were up so high she couldn't possibly touch them, yet alone look behind them.

Her mind kept switching back and forth as to whether the pictures and signs high up were the perfect spot to hide a data stick or if the person who hid the stick also could not get close enough to hide anything there. Confused, she decided to search the items she could reach and touch and worry about the unattainable ones later.

She asked the waiter several questions about the decorations on the walls. Each particular one had a specific story and history. As the waiter was telling a story of a sign over the bar, Artemesia noticed the taps at the bar and completely phased out what the waiter was actually saying. After a few moments, the waiter noticed that Artemesia was no longer paying attention to him and that she found the taps far more interesting than he.

“Ah, yes,” the waiter said. “Those are copper, I believe and, I'm told, they've been there at least a century.” He said something in Dutch to the bartender and then continued speaking. “He says that the owner is also the historian of the place and he'd know better if the taps are a century old or not. He's not here now though. But they are beautiful aren't they?”

The taps were nothing like Artemesia had ever seen before. They appeared old, yet modern; elegant, yet commonplace. She watched in amazement as beer was drawn from the taps. Such a simple procedure, but she was mesmerized nonetheless. Realizing that she had spent far too much time staring at the taps, Artemesia decided to ask about the guitar and Jesus, mainly because that part of the bar intrigued her almost as much as the copper taps. The eclectic collection was oddly attractive, much like everything else in the cafe.

The waiter didn't know much about the collection, but reassured Artemesia that it had been there for at least 100 years. She asked if she could touch the items, to which the waiter hesitantly said yes. Customers weren't supposed to touch the items, however, a little flirting goes a long way. And Artemesia was good at flirting. The accordion and Jesus were attached and could not be picked up. The guitar could be removed, however, the waiter warned Artemesia that there was an alarm attached to it. If one picked up the guitar, the alarm would go off and it could not be replaced until the holder played a tune. Artemesia took her hand off the handle of the guitar and let it be.

Instead, she returned to Jesus and the accordion. As she ran her fingers over the head of Jesus and along the bottom of the statue, she felt that it was slightly loose. Gently, she used her pinky and ring fingers to tip it forward. She couldn't put her pinky finger under the statue, but she did feel something underneath.

Using her quick wit and a few bats of her eyelashes, she asked the waiter what the plate above the guitar was, pointing upwards. The waiter looked up at the plate, while Artemesia slid out the thin, flimsy piece of plastic from under Jesus with her pinky finger and then placed it between her pinky and thumb. Constantly looking at the waiter and asking a few more questions, Artemesia was sure she had the data stick. She clutched it in her hand and left her hand resting on the edge of the sill. Her hand was partially hidden behind the accordion and the waiter was none the wiser. He continued to ramble on about the plate while Artemesia continued to pretend to listen.

When he was finished, Artemesia offered her right hand to thank the waiter for all the historical information and placed her left hand into her pants pocket, releasing the data stick into it. She hoped that this was what they were looking for and didn't have to return

for another ordeal of flirting with the waiter.

Artemesia returned upstairs to find the men sitting back at their table and drinking fresh drinks. “You owe me another drink for that.” She reached into her pocket, pulled out the data stick, tossed it at Pelgrem and flopped into her chair. “I can't believe you guys made me do that.” Pelgrem and Alkian stared at the data stick for a moment before Pelgrem put it into his PVD. It appeared to be what they were looking for. Then again, with all this data on separate sticks, he wasn't sure what the whole picture would be once it was all collected.

“Well, I guess that means we don't get a lot of rest before moving on does it?” Pelgrem said depressingly. He was happy enough to find the data stick, but he really wanted to rest and spend some time just doing nothing. They were in no danger of being caught at the moment, and, although he, nor Artemesia, had any money or food and they had to rely on the generosity of strangers, he still wanted a break. All his years in the underground may have taught him to be cautious and daring at the same time, but it also had its downtimes. There were plenty of opportunities to rest, even on a single job.

This job, however, felt overwhelming. There was a sense of urgency that compelled him to keep moving despite his own personal feelings of wanting to rest. He didn't like it. He didn't want to do it. He even had the fleeting thought of stopping now and never continuing. What would anyone do if he failed? Would it matter? If everything he did was to collect ten year old information, then who really cared? Pelgrem's thoughts were interrupted by Artemesia's question of, “Where to next?”

Pelgrem took a deep breath before answering. “Well, the other address is in Tanzania. I suppose if we head back to Amsterdam we might be able to get a plane ticket there

and...”

“No, you can't fly,” Alkian said, cutting off Pelgrem's idea. Pelgrem and Artemesia looked at him in dismay. They both wanted this adventure over as quickly as possible but, somehow, they both knew that it wasn't going to be that easy. “Your passports are only internal. They'll only work in EU countries.

Deflated, Pelgrem and Artemesia sat back in their chairs. Artemesia slung back her drink and quickly wanted another one. Alkian returned downstairs to the bar to order more drinks. Pelgrem and Artemesia sat in silence. Artemesia wanted to cry. Pelgrem wanted to quit. Neither wanted more journeys over land. Neither wanted to be in a boat again. Separately, both wanted to stay in Nijmegen. There was no place for them to go.

Alkian returned and the trio waited a few minutes for the waiter to bring up their drinks. Any joy they had had from finding the data stick had been deflated by the sharp sting of knowing they would be on the move again.

“I'm sorry I can't help you more,” Alkian finally said, breaking the uneasy silence.

“No, it's okay,” Pelgrem said, trying to reassure Alkian that it wasn't his fault. It really wasn't. He was just a tiny cog in a giant machine. So was Pelgrem. So was Artemesia. The segregation of the cogs was what kept the underground alive worldwide. Without it, it would have been dismantled long ago.

“Well,” Pelgrem continued. “We started in the gutter and have risen to the curb. I suppose we have to continue to see if we can manage our way back to the sidewalk.” That said, it was agreed upon that they would have to keep moving. Alkian offered one ray of sunshine through the stormy day. He suggested that they stay at in de Blaauwe Hand until nightfall, when they would make their way back to the hotel Alkian had

rented. In the morning, he would then drive them to Herculaneum where they would depart by sea to Africa.

The following morning, Pelgrem and Artemesia crammed themselves into Alkian's Smart car and headed for the highway. Artemesia sat in the back and managed to stay awake long enough to see Belgium. Pelgrem stayed awake well into France but, eventually, he, too, found himself staring at the backs of his eyelids.

Artemesia spent much of the rest of trip head-nodding. That is to say, sleeping until her head had fallen low enough to reach its zenith, at which point it would feel like it was snapping. She would wake up momentarily, just long enough to remember she was traveling in a car, and then fall asleep again, only to awakened once again as her head fell. Artemesia continued to do this until she finally rested her head between the car's window and the back of the seat.

Pelgrem had no problem sleeping. He never did. He could sleep just about anywhere and a car was just as good a place as any other. He only awakened when Alkian stopped for gas. At each stop, Pelgrem and Artemesia would go into the gas station's shop and get a sandwich or two and a couple of Cadbury Crunchies. They weren't trying to be gluttons, they were simply thinking ahead and didn't want to get caught without food.

They arrived late that night in Italy. Alkian arranged for a hotel room, at the Hotel S. Angelo, in the town of Pimonte, not far from their intended destination. Pelgrem was happy that the hotel had a great view of Mount Vesuvius. In Pelgrem's opinion, you've seen one ocean view, you've seen them all. He also didn't want to be overlooking a city. He wondered why people thought it a treat to look at the tops of buildings and seeing people's laundry strewn over homemade clothes lines.

Pelgrem knew his view of Vesuvius was the closest he'd ever come to actually climbing it. His only problem was that the view was from the bathroom, so each time Artemesia or Alkian needed to use the facilities, he would have to move. He was still looking at Vesuvius at midnight when Artemesia suggested that they get a good night's rest in a proper bed before leaving tomorrow.

Artemesia, of course, had her own bed to sleep in, while Alkian and Pelgrem shared the other bed. Pelgrem didn't mind sharing, the bed was big enough, but he was still jealous that Artemesia had her own bed to stretch out in. Pelgrem drifted off to sleep just after midnight, his mind lost in the idea of what it was like to climb the great Vesuvius.

The trio slept in the next day. There was no need to hurry and no set timetables for leaving. They didn't need to meet whomever was taking them on the next leg of the

journey until the afternoon, so rushing to get somewhere was not a priority today. Pelgrem awoke around 9am and saw that Artemesia was already up and dressed. She had also taken advantage of the free breakfast from the hotel.

Although she ate in the dining room alone, she had brought back two glasses of apple juice and two blueberry muffins for Pelgrem and Alkian to eat when they finally crawled out of bed. Because she actually went to breakfast, Artemesia enjoyed croissants, yogurt, fruit, muffins, bacon, and eggs. She also had some hot tea and apple juice.

Pelgrem was thankful for the blueberry muffin, which he practically inhaled, washing it down with a giant swig of apple juice. Since the shower was free, he grabbed his bag and promptly decided to use up most of the hot water.

Check out time was 11am. Pelgrem shook Alkian until he finally got out of bed. He was still groggy from driving the day before. Though he was glad to have made the trip, the actual driving wiped out most of his energy and he wanted to sleep some more. Alkian was a typical European. Happy to help no matter what the project but driving more than forty-five minutes would completely wreck their sanity. Still, there he was, helping.

The trio checked out just in time not to be charged for another day. Alkian drove Pelgrem and Artemesia out of Pimonte, off the mountain, and down to Herculaneum. He paid the entrance fees and told the two to enjoy themselves. He would be back in two hours, at which time he would have to leave and return to The Netherlands.

Looking at the positive side, Pelgrem and Artemesia grinned and joyfully walked down the ramp and into Herculaneum. They strolled the streets and into the temple. They walked around and marveled at the mosaic floor of the bath, squatting down and

feeling the uneven mosaic floors, shifted by the turning of time.

Artemesia forced Pelgrem to be a lookout in one of the houses while she climbed over the soft, red velvet rope that warned not to use the stairs. Though people who worked on the restoration of the town could ascend to the second floor, it was not safe to have normal, everyday people running up and down the stairs all day. The constant movement of thousands of people would weaken the already crumbling stairs. The temptation, however, had been too great for Artemesia and she just had to see what was forbidden.

It was, of course, nothing special. Just one large room. She took a quick sneak peek through the windows back out to the street but was careful to hide behind the shutters. Gleefully, she walked back down the stairs where a scolding from Pelgrem awaited. While he was happy to be lookout, he hardly thought now was the time to be breaking the law, especially international laws.

They spent the last few minutes they had over at the library. After fifty years of restoration, it had finally been opened to the public. While in the library, Pelgrem heard his new, British, name being called. "Preston!" It took three calls for him to respond. Pelgrem hadn't had time to adjust to his new name and, with the realization that it wasn't a permanent change, he didn't much see the point in learning it at all.

"Preston," Alkian began. "This is Giancarlo. He is going to take you from here to Sicily, where a boat is being arranged for you two."

Pelgrem nodded. "Thanks." There wasn't much else to say. Besides, what do you say to someone who risks their life and livelihood to help a stranger? Thanks is wholly inadequate and Pelgrem thought to himself of the times back home when he had helped people and all that they could muster was a simple thanks. He knew it was enough.



Pelgrem and Artemesia shook Alkian's hand, who wished them well in their quest. He was headed back North, while Giancarlo was taking them South, to Sicily, and then to Africa.

Giancarlo was friendly enough but, both Pelgrem and Artemesia had had enough with the meeting of new people for the time being. They were cordial towards him and participated in various amounts of small talk, but they were also starting to feel like they were pieces of luggage being carted around the world. Pelgrem just wanted to rest. He was tired of traveling. Tired of meeting new people and being forced to instantly trust strangers with his life. Tired of the responsibilities thrust upon him.

Giancarlo delivered the two into the hands of a captain of a small schooner and joined the trip. He assured Pelgrem and Artemesia that he would follow them to Africa, however, he would not be able to land ashore. Pelgrem didn't care. Whomever he was going to meet in Africa was merely another blip of a guide taking them to their destination. Pelgrem climbed down into the bunk provided for him and stared at the ceiling. His mind began to wander and he wondered why he hadn't just let the councillors execute him in the camp. He wished that his desire to know the fate of his sister and to help Wil and Joe hadn't been so strong. Right now, sailing the sea to a new continent, he wished that he never had the will to live.

It was foolish thinking of course. Pelgrem knew that, even if he had stayed in the camps, he would have tried to fight to stay alive. He knew that, for whatever reason, he was in the right place, at the right time, to be able to make an attempt at saving what was left of the America he had loved.

While Artemesia took advantage of watching the sea and enjoying the fresh air,

Pelgrem spent most of his time in his bunk. He wasn't trying to be rude to the crew, to Giancarlo, or to Artemesia. He was just consumed with the desire to be left alone. Each time Artemesia came to visit him, he was flipping the data stick that he found in Nijmegen in between his fingers. Occasionally, he placed it on his forehead while he twiddled his thumbs.

Artemesia responded to his actions in the exact same manner each time she found him with the data stick. She took it away from him and put it back into the bag with his PVD. Then, she would encourage him to come outside, get some fresh air, and stop worrying so much. Pelgrem's response was also always the same. He would look at her, respond with a, "maybe later," and return to staring at the ceiling.

The ship docked in Alexandria, Egypt three days later. The crew unloaded its legal cargo of olive oil and olives, and took on various spices that they would return to sell in Sicily, while Pelgrem and Artemesia remained below. A man arrived a few hours after docking and took photos of the two, promising to return the next day with proper identification. Artemesia played cards with Giancarlo to pass the time. Pelgrem still preferred to watch instead of play and remain silent rather than speak.

Another man returned the next day with IDs for the two, however, since he didn't speak English, Giancarlo went up on deck to speak to him through the captain. He explained that the IDs would work to get them into Kenya, but the rest of the trip into Tanzania to his contacts would need to be on foot. New IDs for Tanzania would also be required and would be obtained once they were in Kenya so that they could walk across the border as Tanzanian citizens.

Below deck, Pelgrem sighed heavily and asked Artemesia, "You okay?"

“Yeah, it's just....,” she paused for a moment. She wanted to explain that, while she promised to help Pelgrem, she never intended on leaving America, living day to day, an international criminal, on some sort of quest she didn't really understand. She would have been happier if she had remained at home, working the system as she always had, with her real identity, knowing how things worked and what to do if she got into trouble.

Artemesia didn't like it when someone else was in control of her life. She didn't like being the tag-along. She placed the remainder of her belongings into her bag. “I don't even feel like we have a say in the decisions. We just go from place to place, following your map from your friends that I don't even know.” Artemesia sighed slightly. “When did that happen, Pel? When did we not know each other's friends? When did we start keeping things from each other? When did you decide that it was okay to shut down and hide from me?”

Pelgrem didn't know how to respond. She was right. She had willingly come to help him but she never planned on her life being destroyed. He knew that she understood the consequences of working for the underground but that, maybe, he had asked too much from her. But it was too late now. She couldn't return home. She was tied to him and they were criminals.

“Nevermind,” Artemesia said as she slung her bag over her shoulder. “I'm fine. I just wish that I understood what's going on.” Artemesia put her hand on his shoulder, reassuring him that her rant was just that and it didn't mean anything. She climbed up onto the deck of the schooner and waited for Giancarlo's signal that they could leave the ship and continue searching for the last data stick.

They were introduced to a man named Abdul. He was from Cairo and was pleasant

enough. Pelgrem and Artemesia didn't bother to be overly friendly with him. He only spoke a couple of words of English and they wouldn't be with him for very long anyway. Attempting to communicate too much with him would only lead to further aggravation and frustration.

Abdul took the pair from the ship and drove them about an hour to an airstrip in the desert. From there, they climbed aboard a small plane and flew into another small airstrip just outside of Mombasa. Artemesia slept through most of the three hour flight. Pelgrem nodded off occasionally while staring out the window. From there, they drove another hour south, towards the Tanzanian border.

Their driver stopped on a street in a small town that, apparently, had no name. Pelgrem wasn't used to stopping in places that didn't exist but he was very tired and didn't really care. He was still contemplating Artemesia's words from earlier and concentrating on the grumbling coming from his stomach.

The driver spoke to Abdul, who, in turn, motioned to Pelgrem and Artemesia that it was time to get out. They grabbed their backpacks and got out. It was too dark to really see anything so they followed Abdul half a block down the street into what appeared to be an alley. The road was muddy and wet.

"Driver can't go here," Abdul said, motioning to the large ruts and puddles in the road. Abdul had no flashlight, and there were no street lights, yet he walked with purpose, knowing every detail of the road. He would walk straight for a few steps, turn left or right, make a bigger stride than usual over a small puddle.

The road was a dead end. Pelgrem squinted to see what was at the end of the road. There was some light here, coming over a cement wall. As best as he could make out, he

was at the gate of some large compound. Abdul knocked on the metal gate in the middle of the cement wall. In the middle of one part of the gate was a door. It opened and Abdul spoke a few words to someone inside.

After a few minutes of speaking, Abdul stepped through the door and motioned for Pelgrem and Artemesia to follow. Despite it being pitch black outside, once they had stepped through the door, there was a soft glow of lights coming from the front porch of a small, single level home hidden within. There were candles on the porch railings and, upon closer inspection, Artemesia sensed the smell of citronella.

While malaria was far less of a danger than at the turn of the century, it was still a problem in the more remote areas of Africa and no one took chances on getting bitten by a mosquito.

Pelgrem and Artemesia barely had time to look around the outside of the house and the porch before being ushered inside. They were taken into a small room that had no windows. It reminded Pelgrem of a walk-in closet. There were three chairs, a table and a dresser in the room. Another man entered and asked them to sit down.

The man spoke to them in English. "I'm Dr. Ngara," he began, placing several needles and small bottles onto the table. "Before we can send you anywhere, you need to get some shots to be safe here."

Pelgrem and Artemesia looked at each other. "I need to see the bottles first," he said.

"Of course," the doctor replied.

Pelgrem picked up the bottles from the table and inspected them for tampering. They were the usual shots for hepatitis A, B, I, J, and K. There was one for yellow fever as well. Though rare in Africa, it was still recommended for those that had never been on

the continent before. There was also dengue fever. Pelgrem held the bottle out to the doctor and said, “We don't need this. This is only for Asia.”

“Yes, please forgive me,” the doctor replied. “There has been a small outbreak in Southern Tanzania and we don't know how fast or how many people are affected yet.” Pelgrem glanced over to Artemesia and back at the doctor. He thought for a moment before placing the bottle back on the table. He hated shots. He hated trusting strangers with giving him proper shots even more. Worse yet, he hated being forced to accept any medication from people that he could not verify their authenticity.

But there was little he could do. He knew that they needed the shots and he also knew that no one would take him any further if he wasn't willing to cooperate. So, Pelgrem sat down at the table and extended his arm. Artemesia followed.

“These will hurt a little bit,” the doctor said, reassuringly. “We also need you to stay two days to make sure you do not have any bad reaction.” The doctor injected Pelgrem first, then Artemesia, using a different, brand new, and sterile needle for each injection. When he was finished, he tossed a few packets of pills onto the table. “For malaria. You take one each morning.”

Pelgrem thanked the doctor and Abdul led them out of the room, down a short hallway, and into a bedroom. The bedroom was only slightly bigger than the last room they were in, but there was a window in this room. There was also a single bed. Just one. But it was rather large. Pelgrem guessed that it was king size. It was also surrounded with a mosquito net, neatly tucked into the mattress. A small end table was next to the bed and positioned strategically between the bed and the wall. “You not married,” Abdul said. “But this...”

“This is all you have,” Artemesia said, finishing Abdul's sentence.

“Yes,” Abdul answered. “Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” Artemesia quickly replied, reaching out and touching Abdul's hand. “It's perfectly fine.”

“Okay. I come see you in the morning.” Abdul shook Artemesia's hand, then Pelgrem's. He said goodnight and left the two alone for the night.

“I'll sleep on the floor,” Pelgrem assured Artemesia.

“Nonsense,” she replied. “This bed is big enough for four people.”

Pelgrem stepped outside of the room for a few minutes so Artemesia could change into her pajamas. While he waited outside, he wandered down to the end of the hallway to discover the bathroom. When he returned to the bedroom he told Artemesia where the bathroom was and let her go while he gently pulled up just enough of the mosquito net so that he could climb into the bed. He tucked the bit of netting back under the mattress and got comfortable.

Artemesia returned a few minutes later and climbed under the net. While Pelgrem had tucked himself under the sheet and blanket on the bed, Artemesia chose to lie on top of the sheet but under the blanket. She also slept as close to the edge of the bed, away from Pelgrem, as she could and stared out the window until she could no longer keep her eyes open.

In the morning, Artemesia awakened to a serious desire to visit the bathroom. A quick glance at a clock on the wall revealed that it was nearly 10am. “Eleven hours,” she

thought to herself. Her urge to urinate made her forget where she was. As she tried to quickly jump out of the bed and run to the bathroom, she was sharply returned to reality. Her right foot was caught in the mosquito net. Her body tumbled quickly out of the bed, her head slamming on the floor. “Fuck,” she muttered softly.

The netting was pulled completely out from her side of the bed. With more a bruised ego than head, she got up and walked slowly to the bathroom, rubbing her head along the way. Pelgrem, who had been awake, waited until she left the room to laugh at what he had just seen. When she returned, Pelgrem was already out of bed and collecting his toiletries for a trip to the shower.

“Morning.”

“Mornin’,” Artemesia looked down at Pelgrem's hands and saw that he was going to beat her to the shower. She looked up and conceded first shower to Pelgrem with a nod. Pelgrem walked down the hall to the bathroom. The house was very quiet so he made every attempt to make as little noise as possible. He wasn't sure if everyone was already up and gone or if they were still sleeping.

Pelgrem placed his clean clothes on the toilet seat lid. He took his small bottle of shampoo and placed it on the floor of the shower. He didn't have any soap but there was a bar resting in a soap dish hanging from the shower head. Pelgrem turned on the shower.

The water was lukewarm. There was very little water pressure, but it was enough to wash up. Pelgrem didn't really care. He hadn't had a proper shower in days and anything that could make him cleaner was welcome in his life. The water stayed at the same lukewarm temperature long enough that Pelgrem was also able to shave in the shower.

Feeling refreshed enough from his shower, Pelgrem dried off, got dressed and returned



to the bedroom. “Damn, Pel. You take longer than a girl,” Artemesia said with a huge smile on her face. “You sure they didn't do something to you in the camps?”

“Very funny,” he replied grinning evilly at her. Artemesia left and returned within ten minutes. She was just as clean as Pelgrem, but in half the time.

“So girly, you feel all clean and pretty now?” Artemesia said to Pelgrem.

“Oh, shut up,” Pelgrem quipped grabbing Artemesia and trying to tickle her. They began wrestling and tickling each other on the bed, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Pelgrem yelled. He and Artemesia composed themselves and sat on the edge of the bed. It was Abdul and he had another man with him.

“My friend Moses,” Abdul said, pointing to the tall man hovering behind him. Moses stepped around Abdul and walked forward towards Pelgrem and Artemesia.

“Nice to meet you,” Moses said, stretching forward his hand to Pelgrem. Pelgrem shook his hand, followed by Artemesia. “Look,” he continued. “I speak better English than Abdul and there is some grave news.” Pelgrem and Artemesia exchanged worried looks before Moses continued. “The Harriet Tubman was captured not far from Greenland. We received a partial message and it's safe to assume that most everyone on board is dead.

“They have been looking for Alkian as well but he has eluded the authorities so far. That is good news for him, however, someone has tapped into the video surveillance of Europe and tracked you to Giancarlo. They know you've come to Africa but not which country.”

“What about Giancarlo?” Pelgrem asked.

“Fortunately, we received the information soon enough that we have stopped him from returning home to Italy. He is in safe keeping for now. I suspect they want you two and, once they pick up your trail to here, they will not worry about Giancarlo or Alkian anymore.” Moses paused for a moment to allow the information to sink in.

Pelgrem began to worry. He hadn't intended on anyone getting hurt. He didn't want others to suffer because of him and he certainly didn't want them to suffer through any torture the US government was now famous for. He hung his head low and stared at the floor. Pelgrem ran his hand through his hair, hoping that, magically, he could fix everything with a simple brush of hair.

He had no plan. He was simply running. Just running from one port to the next. He didn't even know if the information he was seeking was worth it or not. Even if it was important, was the information worth people's lives? Could the end result justify even one person's death? It had to be if they were chasing him halfway around the world. He just didn't know what to think anymore.

“So,” Moses said, interrupting Pelgrem's thoughts. “We cannot get you ID. My contacts at the border have been rotated elsewhere as a precaution of this news. We also cannot fly you over the border. Every single plane that does not list its passengers or flight plan on any part of the continent will be shot down. I'm sorry, but it appears your journey is at an end. It will be several months, if not years before I can build new contacts to move you anywhere else in Kenya.”

Pelgrem let out a huge sigh. He was about to thank Moses and Adbul for their help when Artemesia interrupted. “What about that card from Kenny? Can't we use that?”

“I don't know Artemesia,” Pelgrem replied. “Moses said everyone was dead.”

“But,” Artemesia continued. “He said if there was an emergency you should use it. We don't know if he is dead or not. Even if he is dead, someone on the other end is going to know what to do and help.”

Pelgrem thought for a moment and agreed with Artemesia, in principle. They didn't really have any other options and they had to keep moving. He didn't want anyone else to suffer because of him. Pelgrem got up off the bed and picked up his bag. After a few moments of fumbling around, he pulled out the card that Kenny had given him.

“I don't suppose you have any jamming technology here so I can use my PVD?” Pelgrem asked Moses. Moses shook his head.

“For that old thing?” he said. “Not even in Africa can you find old piece of junk like that anymore. But I can let you use my PVD to get in contact with your friend.”

“Great,” Pelgrem said. They all left the bedroom and walked down the hallway, turned out through the kitchen and into the small back yard. The back yard was only ten feet by forty feet but they weren't staying there. On the opposite wall of the compound was a door. Moses led the group through the door and into another small room, seven feet by five feet.

There was nothing in this room aside from two tables and multiple electronic devices. Moses walked to the far side of the room and picked up a PVD. He handed it to Pelgrem, who, in turn, pulled it open and began entering the data that Kenny had given him. Within moments, Pelgrem was connected to a Metaverse within the intrawebs. He had heard of Metaverses but they were usually arranged between two subsidiaries of a company attempting to hide their technology from prying eyes until their product was ready for release.

Pelgrem thought it made sense for former Foreign Legionnaires to create their own Metaverse given the great distances between them and the need for secrecy in communications. It was just unusual for someone outside large corporations or governments to have access to a Metaverse. Pelgrem assumed that a Legionnaire must have access and created a Metaverse within the Metaverse. That meant contacts could still be compromised. Nevertheless, Pelgrem had no other options left if he were to complete his mission.

Since he only had a PVD, there was no way for him to create a rich, 3D avatar, so he randomly picked a male avatar from the generic set that came with each login. It was a gangly, white male, with buck-teeth and a white t-shirt that bore the phrase “Patriotic American” in lettering resembling the American flag. Pelgrem showed his avatar to everyone in the room and a low chuckle quietly echoed throughout the room.

Pelgrem returned to the PVD and the Metaverse within. He wandered around by dragging his finger over his avatar to move it. The land was small and sparsely populated. There were only a handful of homes here. Pelgrem stumbled over to the home that had Kenny's name listed on the mailbox. The mailbox had several dozen names carved onto it and, given the fact that the “town” was mostly empty, this Metaverse, Pelgrem assumed, rightfully, that this place was more like a weigh station for information rather than a place to waste time.

Pelgrem walked into the house unabated, presumably because he had Kenny's permission via the login and password details. The inside of the house was also sparsely decorated. It appeared that several dozen people called this place home. Instead of a house with typical kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, etc., Pelgrem found rows of cots

upstairs, on the first floor, and in the basement. He let out a sigh and then began to search more specifically for a cot that might belong to Kenny.

After several minutes of searching, Pelgrem found Kenny's cot in an upstairs bedroom. Etched on the cot, between the top and bottom bunk, was Kenny's name with a down arrow and someone named Pierre, with an up arrow. Pelgrem pushed his avatar around and made it lift up the bottom mattress, take the sheets off, and look around the cot for any signs of how to contact Kenny. Exhausted, he let his avatar rest on the springs of the bottom bunk for a moment and then he sat the PVD on the table.

“I don't know what else to do,” Pelgrem said to Moses. “He wasn't exactly forthcoming on how to contact him. 'Just log on and I'll help,' was all I got.” He shrugged and rubbed his eyes with his right thumb and middle finger. Pelgrem really thought it would have been much easier than this.

Fortunately, there was only thirty-seven seconds on silence before a, “Can I help you?” was heard from the PVD. Pelgrem darted a glance over to the device and picked it up. Moses' PVD wasn't capable of speaking to those inside because he had broken the sound chip when he dropped it several weeks ago, so Pelgrem called up a small keyboard on the screen and began typing to the person who had entered the bedroom in Kenny's house.

The process of conveying his message was long and arduous. What should have taken five to ten minutes took nearly thirty because of the constant typing, which was slow, at best. Pelgrem, however, relayed his message to this man, whom he discovered was Pierre, Kenny's bunkmate. Everyone in this fork of the Metaverse took turns patrolling inside to see what was going on. They kept a 24/7 vigil to ensure that, not only were they not discovered, but that, should someone arrive and need help, then help could be

dispatched quite easily.

Pelgrem discovered that, while Kenny, the captain, and two others were able to flee, the rest of the Harriet Tubman was dead. Pierre, as a matter of fact, was currently covering Kenny's shifts in the Metaverse because the four had gone into hiding and couldn't risk being anywhere near the intrawebs, Internet, Metaverse, or BBSes. As usual, Pelgrem had to entrust his safety, and that of Artemesia and the people helping him in Mombasa, to another stranger.

Pierre told Pelgrem that he would need to travel south, closer to the Tanzanian border. He gave him specific directions to Tanjore, an Indian restaurant, ten miles from the border. They were to be there tomorrow at 3pm and order a meal. Pierre's contact would meet them and get them into Tanzania. Uncomfortable, Pelgrem asked how he would know it was the proper contact. Pierre answered, "There are no white people in this town, only Blacks and Indians. A white man will approach you only after you have eaten and have stayed for at least two hours."

Pelgrem looked around the room at Artemesia, Abdul, and Moses. He lifted his right eyebrow and shrugged, indicating it was as good a plan as any. He thanked Pierre, disconnected the PVD, and placed it back on the table. Moses picked up the PVD, turned it over, and removed its battery core, just to be sure no one was tracking them. There was nothing they could do now except wait until tomorrow.

The following morning, Pelgrem and Artemesia gathered their belongings, again, and slung their rucksacks over their backs. They chose to eat breakfast outside on the porch

instead of inside. Even though outside only looked out to the cement barrier of the compound, they were outside, breathing fresh air and relaxing in the bright, beautiful day. The sun was out, but they were shaded from its rays as long as they remained on the porch. The sky was a pale blue with relatively few clouds overhead.

It was quiet this morning, unlike the nights. A bar across the street blared music at night and Pelgrem found it difficult to sleep with all the noise. It wasn't that the bar was hostile or violent, just the simple noise of music and laughter kept him awake. He had become accustomed to silence in the camp, so much so that he could often hear the mice and cockroaches scurry across the floor. Those that snored were often kicked outside or forced to sleep on the bathroom floor because, quite frankly, the noise kept all the campers awake.

Pelgrem enjoyed the moment of solace he had here in Mombasa. He was sure it wouldn't last and that his peaceful slumber of the camps may never return. Once he finished breakfast, he leaned back in his chair, put his feet up against the railing on the porch, closed his eyes and listened, to nothing.

Twenty minutes passed before Pelgrem was rudely returned to the real world when Artemesia shoved his feet off the railing. "Time to go," she said. Pelgrem took a moment to regain his faculties and then followed Artemesia out of the compound and into a waiting Range Rover.

Their drive took twice as long as usual due to a road being washed out from the rains. Though the Range Rover was designed for this particular task, the heavy rains made it so that any four-by-four had to travel much slower than normal. It was impossible to see how deep the puddles were across the roads. This particular road was even more

treacherous because it was one of the many roads still not paved.

The road was bumpy and Artemesia felt as if she was going to lose her breakfast. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine anything except vomiting. Pelgrem glanced over a few times at her and smiled. He wanted to make a joke at her expense but thought better of it. After all, he didn't want her breakfast all over his nice, new white t-shirt.

By the time they arrived at the Tanjore restaurant, Artemesia wasn't sure she wanted anything to eat. Pelgrem, on the other hand, was famished. Still relying on the kindness of strangers, Moses assured them that they could order whatever they wanted as he was footing the bill. Pelgrem ordered the chicken korma while Artemesia opted for the Rogan Josh. They ate several servings of garlic naan and vegetable samosas, stuffing themselves so much that there was no room for desert. Pelgrem also drank several mango lassi, until he realized that too many might give him diarrhea, so he switched to water.

They had been at the restaurant for nearly three hours and Pelgrem was happy that they were not in a hurry or having to ration out food to last for several days. He took his time eating, yet he still ate enough for five people. Just before 6pm, a white man approached the group, who were by now swapping stories of life in America and Kenya. He sat down, ordered himself a Kilimanjaro beer and informed Pelgrem and Artemesia as to where they were going.

The man introduced himself as Harmen Killebrew, a name Pelgrem knew to be false. It didn't matter. No one knew his real name either. No matter where Pelgrem had traveled since he escaped the camps, the various factions of the underground were all the same. They were always helpful of their fellow members, no matter where they came from and security always came first. It didn't matter that Pelgrem didn't know his real



name. He'd probably never see him again and if he were ever caught, who the hell could find Harman Killebrew in Kenya?

Harman ordered four orders of garlic naan for Pelgrem and Artemesia to take with them on their journey. He informed them that he would take them near the border with Tanzania, at which time, they would have to walk under the border to Tanga, thus the need for extra food to pack with them.

“Under the border?” Pelgrem questioned.

“Yes,” Harman answered. “This is the only way you can cross into Tanzania. There is a tunnel that will take you most of the way to Tanga. You'll have to walk 95 miles, which should take you about five days. I'm sorry but it's the only way.”

Pelgrem and Artemesia sighed but agreed. Their only other option was to spend a few years moving around Kenya, hiding from authorities, hoping that they would be forgotten one day, yet constantly looking over their shoulders. At least by further movement towards the end of this journey that Wil and Joe had set him on, he felt like he had some purpose in life. He was just hoping that, by putting all the pieces together, it would all make sense.

The waiter returned a few minutes after Harman finished his beer with a bag full of garlic naan. Harman gave the naan to Pelgrem, who put it into his rucksack. Pelgrem and Artemesia followed Harman to his old 2035 Range Rover, which was half covered in mud and dirt. They waved goodbye to Moses and Abdul as the Rover drove down the road, bumping through each pothole it reached and away from the restaurant and civilization.

The road became muddier as they went along. Pelgrem could tell that, although there

was a road, it was made of dirt and it appeared that it wasn't an official road set down by the government. It wasn't on any map. Unless you had been on it, you'd probably never know that it existed.

Artemesia didn't pay attention to the road or where they were traveling. She had, once again, closed her eyes and tried to imagine anything but the bumpy road that was trying its best to bring her lunch back up and spread it all over the inside of the Rover.

She breathed in slowly, held her breath, then exhaled slowly. Pelgrem, who had gorged himself at lunch, was also feeling a bit queasy, but less so than Artemesia. Luckily, their trip wasn't long. About fifteen minutes later, they arrived at their destination, a wooded area where several vehicles were moving about, coming and going into the area.

Everyone got out of the Rover and Harman's driver walked to the back of the Rover and pulled out a few items that he placed on the ground. He then went over to one of the vehicles and bummed a cigarette off a fellow Kenyan. Harman picked up the items and began handing them to Pelgrem and Artemesia.

"Here are your torches," he said, handing two headlamps to Pelgrem and Artemesia. It was a simple light, attached to an orange, stretchy band that went around the head. Harman also handed them a large, brown, paper bag. "It's not much but there's a couple of sandwiches, some beef jerky, a bit of cheese, and some coconut snacks." Artemesia placed the brown paper bag of food into her bag while Harman gave Pelgrem ten bottles of Kilimanjaro water. Pelgrem took the naan out of his bag and gave it to Artemesia, offering to carry all the water.

"I figure," Harman began, "if you can walk ten hours per day, you'll do yourselves well and can easily make the trip in five days. There's no help from here in out, so you'll

have to keep your wits about you. Also, just inside the cave is a nice spot to sleep tonight. I wouldn't start walking tonight but you can if you want to.

“There's also a few rules that you must follow and keep in mind while in the cave. First, there are no weapons. Of course you can take a little pocket knife but no real weapons. Second, if anyone asks for water or food, give some. It doesn't matter if you are short on supplies, someone will help you if you need the help. Third, no one wants to know or cares why you are there. Everyone in the cave is doing something not quite legal but it's overlooked most of the time. Just keep your head down and don't cause trouble.

“You keep those rules in mind and you'll be okay. Just walk through the cave and don't ruffle anyone's feathers and you'll be safe on your journey. Don't trust anyone but also don't distrust any genuine case of compassion. Take care of yourself and be careful.” Harman turned and yelled to his driver in Swahili that it was time to go. He climbed into his Rover and rolled down the window. “One last thing,” he hollered, “I'm told you know the people on the other end.”

Pelgrem looked puzzledly at Harman but he did not have any time to question what that statement meant. Harman had already rolled his window up and the Rover was pulling away. Pelgrem and Artemesia walked over to the cave entrance and, sure enough, just inside the cave was a large semicircle with several places to sleep, each with their own sleeping bag.

Noticing that they obviously didn't speak Swahili, their white skin gave them away, a man motioned for them to come over to two empty sleeping bags, where they could sleep. Pelgrem debated for a moment whether he should remain or start on their journey. Thinking it better not to start when the day was late and the journey unknown, he figured

it best to get some sleep before starting. He and Artemesia discussed the possibility of just going to sleep, staying up for a bit and then sleeping, or whether they should sleep in shifts.

Since they were already offered free sleeping bags for the night, Pelgrem decided that it would probably be okay for both to sleep at the same time, however, they stayed up for a few more hours playing cards. They got two more men to play with them, which was fun because they were able to play their first game of Pitch after teaching the men the rules.

Just before 11pm, Pelgrem and Artemesia decided to turn in. They each placed their rucksacks inside their sleeping bags near their feet and then slept as close as possible to each other. They were close enough to keep each other safe but far enough that there was no suggestion of anything improper. Artemesia slept a few hours at a time between waking, while Pelgrem felt like he only slept in twenty minute cycles. It was a restless night for both.

At 6am, Pelgrem gave up trying to sleep anymore. He got up, nudged Artemesia awake and left the cave for a few minutes to visit a neighboring tree to relieve himself.

Upon returning, he found the same man as last night speaking with Artemesia. “My turn,” she said as she followed the man out of the cave and about twenty yards away from the cave entrance.

He took her into just into the entrance of the woods where there was a small, cleared out space that had been made just for women. Two pieces of camouflaged tarp were laid to give a woman a bit of privacy. One overhead and one stretched between two trees. The man stood a few feet off and acted as a lookout while Artemesia took care of a bit of human nature. Unlike Pelgrem's trip to the bathroom, Artemesia used a couple of napkins that she had swiped from the restaurant the night before.

When she was finished, she returned to Pelgrem who had taken out a couple of pieces of the garlic naan for breakfast. Since they didn't have any money, Artemesia offered the man two pieces of naan, which he happily took, eating one and putting the other in his shirt pocket for later. Pelgrem and Artemesia each ate two pieces of naan, leaving them with six pieces. They shared a bottle of water and left it behind with the man who said he could use it to get water for himself from a stream about a hundred yards away.

Pelgrem picked up his rucksack and put it on. He took his headlamp, placed it around his head, and turned it on. Looking at Artemesia, he said, “Well, shall we get going?” Artemesia nodded, turning her headlamp on but wrapping it around her hand instead of her head. “You look like a right git, Pel.” She grabbed her rucksack and slung it over her right shoulder first, then her left, and followed Pelgrem into the caves.

The caves were darker than pitch black, except for the little light from the head lamps. For the first hour of walking, there were repeated signs in English and Swahili that simply said, “stay right.” The signs were hammered into the left walls and Pelgrem assumed that

it was to keep an orderly manner while walking through the caves. He figured that keeping on the right would keep everyone from banging into each other.

He discovered he was wrong after about two and a half hours of walking. He and Artemesia had stopped for a moment's rest and some water, and he started looking around. About ten feet ahead of them, Pelgrem noticed a slight change in the contours of the cave. He walked slowly over to the left of the cave and saw a shaft that seemingly went on forever, straight down. It was deep enough that his headlamp could not decipher the bottom of the shaft.

Artemesia walked up behind him and said, "Damn, that would suck to fall down." Pelgrem looked back at her and agreed. They each took a few steps backwards and then continued farther into the caves, making sure they were as close to the right as possible.

Just after noon, the two friends decided to stop and rest for lunch. It was a good spot to stop because there were several others nearby. Even though they were strangers, Pelgrem felt more comfortable being near them, rather than eating alone. It was also an area of caving that was almost a semicircle, allowing several people to sit, stretch out, and relax for a while. It had obviously been carved this way from the original pathway that stood here before. Pelgrem and Artemesia split one of their two sandwiches, had a few slices of beef jerky, and split another bottle of water. It was a meager lunch, but they had to ration their food over five days or else risk going several days with nothing to eat.

No one in the cave really spoke to each other. There were pleasant "hellos," but everyone mostly kept to themselves. Pelgrem and Artemesia were stared at often. At first, it was a bit unnerving, however, after a while, it didn't really bother them. They were white in a black world and noticeably stood out.

After lunch, Pelgrem and Artemesia gathered up their garbage and put it into Pelgrem's rucksack. They continued walking until just after 6pm, when they stopped near another semicircle for dinner. They decided to only have a handful of jerky and two slices of cheese for dinner. It was a prudent decision because they were going to remain in this area to sleep and they didn't really need any extra food energy for sleeping.

Artemesia suggested that breakfast each day should be their biggest meal to get them going and keep them going. Dinner was only to stave off hunger until the morning. After not really thinking, they were down to six bottles of water and had another four days of traveling so they decided that the water had to be rationed strictly as well.

There were no sleeping bags in this area, so Pelgrem and Artemesia decided to simply huddle together and keep each other warm. They both drifted off around 9pm but were awakened two hours later by pleas of a man asking for some help. He was attempting to pull a tarp across the cave as a cover for bats flying overhead, falling bat poo, and anything else that might not be particularly nice to fall upon one's head while sleeping.

Pelgrem and Artemesia hadn't bothered to look up when they had arrived and huddled together. They didn't think of what was above them. They had been more concerned with falling into darkened shafts, bumping people, and what critters might be running over their feet. Pelgrem got up and turned his head lamp on. He saw hooks that had been hammered into the walls of the cave where the tarp had been rolled up. As he helped several other men pull the tarp out and across the width of the cave, he saw ties at the other side of the cave. Thick leather straps had been hammered into the wall of the cave, which tied into grommets along the edge of the tarp.

The men tied the leather into the grommets from left to right, securing the tarp as

tightly as they could before settling in for the night. Pelgrem felt happy to help participate in something useful again and went back to sleep, this time, with a smile on his face.

In the morning, Pelgrem and Artemesia repeated the same tasks as the day before. They ate. They walked. They rested. They ate a little more, walked a little more, and then came upon another clearing where they could stop and sleep for the night. It was another semicircle, which. As a matter of fact, every five or six hours there was another semicircle, something that couldn't have been a coincidence.

This semicircle, though, was different. There was no tarp overhead. Instead, there were several smaller tarps on both sides of the wall, each able to hold three people. It took Pelgrem a few minutes to figure out how they worked because the leather ties that attached to the grommets were directly below where the tarp was attached into the wall. Upon unrolling the tarp, he discovered that it was large enough to be wrapped around the people inside and tied up against the wall.

These tarps also had strips of Velcro along each edge. The Velcro was there to create a seal, almost like a tent, but Pelgrem was unsure why. Artemesia decided to ask a woman who was also resting in the semicircle for the night. The woman pointed to the ground and informed them that there are sometimes snakes and other bugs that crawl around this area. She told Artemesia that a shaft about a twenty minute walk back from where they came was not a straight, downward shaft. It had a steep incline and sharp edges that allowed creepy crawly things come to sometimes latch onto the rough edges and work their way upwards and into the tunnels.

After shuddering a few times, and restraining herself from freaking out, Artemesia



returned to their “tent” and told Pelgrem the bad news. She also suggested to him that he not use that particular shaft as a place to pee. Then she sealed her side up tightly and leaned over Pelgrem to make sure he had properly closed his side. Pelgrem chuckled at her paranoia, then settled in close to her, making sure he didn't touch the side of the tent, just in case.

The next morning, as Artemesia had just awakened, she heard a man speaking fluent English. She opened a portion of the “tent” as quietly as she could so that she could hear, and possibly see a little bit better. A very large black man was yelling at the people nearby. Most of them ignored him and Artemesia assumed it was because they did not understand English. She tapped Pelgrem's arm until he was fully awake.

“Wha..?” he said before Artemesia placed her hand over his mouth. She put her forefinger to her mouth, indicating that he should keep quiet. Then she used one eye and peered out into the cave again. The large, black man was clearly visible, but only because he had on a headlamp, a light attached to a shotgun, two lights strapped around each leg, and a light attached to his belt buckle. He looked like a giant light bulb.

“Has anyone here seen a man and a woman,” he asked. Louder, he continued, “They are worth a lot of money. They are white. I can pay you now.” Another black man, who had approached him a few minutes before, was trying to keep the light bulb man calm and quiet him down. A second man approached the gigantic light bulb, with his hands in front of him, pushing them in a downward motion, politely stating to calm down.

“I have seen this man and woman you are looking for,” he began. “But, you must be quiet here. This is a place of peacefulness.”

“I do *not* need to be quiet,” the large man said angrily. “You will tell me where they

are now.”

The second man appeared slightly aggravated and other people in the cave were now awake and stirring due to all the noise. The second man took a deep breath and said, “I have seen them.” Pelgrem and Artemesia sat nervously, shifting slightly and fearing the worst. Artemesia knew the man had a gun. What she didn't know was if they were wanted, dead or alive.

“They left an hour ago. They went that way,” the man pointed further down the cave's path. Pelgrem and Artemesia let out a large, but silent, sigh. “Just down there is another, left tunnel. They go that way because it is quicker to the end.”

“Thank you, young man,” the large man with the gun said. He took out a wad of cash and handed it to the second man. The second man backed away a couple of steps and waved his hand. He did not want to take the cash. “Just take the money and stop being a good Samaritan,” the man said as he shoved the money into the second man's shirt through the neck of the shirt. Then, he checked his rifle and walked farther into the cave.

Pelgrem and Artemesia waited a few minutes and then opened up their “tent.” They turned their lights on and found the second man. Artemesia walked over to him and said, “Why did you do that? He could have killed you if he knew you were lying.”

Before the man had a chance to answer they heard a very large, and very loud, scream, then silence. The man had fallen down one of the many shafts in the caves. Despite numerous lights, making him a human light bulb, he failed to heed age old advice: pay attention to where you are walking. He took the word of a stranger as gospel, which led to his death.

“No guns allowed,” the man said to Artemesia. He then took the money out of his

shirt, tossed it into the cave, and walked towards the Kenyan exit of the caves, disappearing into the darkness.

“We should get going,” Pelgrem said. “No telling how long before someone else is sent to track us.”

Artemesia stared at the money, thinking, momentarily, that it would be nice to take some, but decided that it would not be a good idea to take blood money. “Uh, right,” she said to Pelgrem. They hastily put the tarp back against the wall and began walking further through the caves towards their Tanzanian exit. They shared a water and some coconut snacks and the remainder of their garlic naan in a walking breakfast.

They continued walking until lunchtime, when they ate the last sandwich and coconut snacks. They washed it down with a few swigs of water and preserved seventy-five percent of the water in the bottle for quick sips between lunch and dinner. Pelgrem and Artemesia then kept walking until around 7pm when they had worn themselves out. Neither of them were very hungry, so they ate two more slices of cheese and a handful of jerky each. They finished off the bottle of water they had been conserving all day and drank half of another before pulling out their “tent” and settling in for the night.

Artemesia awkwardly lay her head on Pel's shoulder and tried to go to sleep. Sitting up, with her feet stretched out and her back against a wall was not the ideal sleeping position. She was exhausted. Her feet hurt. Her stomach grumbled. She heard movement outside and hoped that it was people walking by and not some critter coming to do her in.

Pelgrem was just as tired and exhausted as Artemesia but he, like her, refrained from complaining. Who was he to complain to anyway? Artemesia was just as tired,

frustrated, and hungry as he was and complaining wasn't going to help. Their few, brief conversations in the cave so far concerned mostly food, water, and baseball. They didn't whine about things they couldn't change, like their feet hurting or the fact that they both knew they were running out of food. Their conversations of the past few seasons of baseball that Pel had missed and the promises of a new season that was about to begin took their minds off their pain, their hunger, and their slowly dying desire to continue on.

Pelgrem was nearly asleep when he felt a slight drop of water on his right hand. At first he dismissed it, but then another fell, and then another. He looked up to try to see a hole in the tarp in the dark, but saw nothing. He thought to himself for a moment of how to move to feel for a hole without awaking Artemesia, when he realized that the water was not coming from a hole. As a matter of fact, the water wasn't really water at all. It was teardrops from Artemesia, falling gently onto his hand.

He knew that she would never show any dismay or emotion in public to him, and she certainly wouldn't show it in a cave full of strangers, but, here, in this makeshift tent, where no one else could see, she was crying.

He wasn't sure why she was crying. It could be the loss of a normal life, the endless walking, the lack of food and water, the exhaustion, or all of them combined. But in the dark, with nothing but thoughts racing through his head and tears touching his arm, it first occurred to Pelgrem what he had actually subjected Artemesia to. She had not spent several years in the camps. She had never been arrested. She knew the game and played it well, staying out of the limelight, away from the prying eyes of the government. He had taken that away from her, damning her to a life on the run.

Pelgrem felt like shit. Artemesia was the best friend he ever had and he turned her

into an internationally wanted criminal in a matter of days. Sure, she would tell him it was her decision but, knowing their history and the way she felt about him, she never really had a choice. And he never really tried to stop her. Pelgrem closed his eyes and hit his head against the wall. Waves of guilt rushed over him. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to say. He did know that she'd never talk about it, probably denying she was crying at all. So, he did the only thing he knew to comfort her.

Pelgrem moved his right arm and placed it around Artemesia's back, resting his hand just above her waist. He pulled her closer to him and gently stroked her arm a few times before placing his hand back on her waist. Then, he went to sleep.

Upon waking in the morning, Pelgrem discovered that Artemesia was gone. He momentarily panicked until he realized she had probably just went out to pee. Indeed, when she returned a few minutes later, she exclaimed, "You're not going to believe this Pel, there's water to wash yourself after you take a dump here!" Pelgrem grinned at the sheer joy of Artemesia's excitement. It wasn't toilet paper, but water worked just as well. At least you were clean afterwards and didn't smell like shit all day, and Artemesia was happy to be able to take a dump again.

Because they were so tired the day before, and a bit paranoid to stop walking, they had only settled in to the semicircle to get some sleep. They didn't bother with any pleasantries among the other people in the cave. While waiting for Pelgrem to return from the bathroom, however, Artemesia started chatting to the people in the caves. She discovered many of the other people in the caves were regulars, making periodic trips in and out of the caves for various reasons, most of them not exactly legal.

One young man told her this morning of the "toilet" in the caves. This particular part

of the cave had a very soft floor. So, a few hundred yards away from the semicircle, they dug a deep hole for whatever business you had to do there. When it was half full, they covered the hole up and moved a few feet, dug a new hole, and repeated the process. Artemesia learned that the “toilet” used to be on the other side of the semicircle.

She also relayed that, since they had not been careful with their water, she wanted to know if she could trade something for some water. The young man refused, noting that if she and Pelgrem needed water, it would be given to them. Artemesia pulled out two of the empty water bottles from Pel's rucksack. “The guy with the purple t-shirt over there will fill those with water for you.”

Pelgrem, who had now returned from the restroom, took the two bottles, grinned at Artemesia, and kissed her on the cheek. “Where would I be without you?” he said.

“Probably dead, you dumbass,” she replied in a low voice and half a grin.

While Pelgrem was gone, Artemesia tied up the “tent” and pulled out what rations they had left. Beef Jerky and cheese. It wasn't much but it was all they had. She took both and divided the food in half. When Pelgrem returned, they ate the last of their food and finished off half a water. They now had three bottles of water left and two days of walking for the remainder of their journey.

Dismayed that they weren't more frugal with their food and water, Pelgrem and Artemesia walked until midday when they stopped for forty minutes for a break. It was here that they noticed the caves were made of limestone. Pelgrem wasn't sure if the caves were limestone when he entered. He hadn't been paying attention then. But it was unmistakable now. They shared one bottle of water and continued walking until, again, they were so exhausted that they didn't even think of eating. They shared half a bottle of

water and then went to sleep.

Pelgrem felt dehydrated. Artemesia was nauseous from a lack of food. They should have asked for food, but they didn't want someone else going hungry because they had been stupid about rationing out their own food. Artemesia knew she was dehydrated but she didn't care. She went to sleep telling herself that she only had one more day of walking and someone, she didn't care who, would be on the other end, and, weak or not, they had better have food and water with them or there'd be hell to pay.

In the morning, Pelgrem and Artemesia shared half a bottle of water for breakfast and saved their last bottle for later in the day. They were still tired, still hungry, and still had a lack of a desire to continue to the end, but they knew they had to keep going. Whatever information they were to gather, had to be found. It was the only logical conclusion to the journey they had embarked upon. Besides, who wants to die a stranger in a cave where it was likely that no one would ever report you missing?

Without the task at hand, both Pelgrem and Artemesia would have given up in Kenya and just disappeared into the country. Whatever it was that Wil and Joe had sent them out into the world for, it had to be retrieved. They couldn't stop, even though they wanted to, so they kept trudging along, from stop to stop, looking over their shoulders for any signs of danger while keeping their eyes on the end of the tunnel.

Pelgrem and Artemesia walked for several hours before stopping for a rest. They finished the last of their water and decided to rest a few minutes longer before continuing. Artemesia let out a long sigh and closed her eyes, promising to sit there for only five more minutes before walking again. She woke up a few minutes later, or maybe it was hours, she wasn't sure. She didn't know what time it was. Her head was a bit fuzzy and

she couldn't really tell how long she had been asleep.

Artemesia thought that Pelgrem wouldn't have let her sleep too long. Unfortunately, Pelgrem was fast asleep. His breathing was heavy, near a snore, but deep in sleep. “Shit,” Artemesia said, getting up and gathering her belongings. She shook Pelgrem awake and, when she told him what had happened, he responded, “Fuck!” paused a moment and finished with a, “Okay let's get going.”

They continued walking, and walking, and walking. Two hours later, Pelgrem's headlamp went out. They didn't have any extra batteries and, if they hadn't fallen asleep, the headlamp might still be working. They passed several people in the afternoon who kept promising that the end was, “just a little further.”

Finally, Artemesia got a woman to tell her that it was a little more than an hour's walk to the end. Pelgrem and Artemesia leaned against the wall of the cave and let out a large sigh of relief. Pelgrem put his head down towards the ground and closed his eyes. He exhaled again, readjusted his rucksack, and then continued with Artemesia towards the end of the caves.

Their pace quickened with the knowledge that they were nearly done walking. Pelgrem didn't ever want to walk again. Artemesia swore she never would walk more than a mile at once for the rest of her life. They both knew it was a lie. Promises made in despair are never kept. What they really wanted was a place to sit and rest for several days where they didn't have to expend much energy. And they wanted food and uninterrupted sleep. But that would have to wait, at least a little while longer.

Pelgrem didn't realize they were near the end, as they had already walked 72 minutes, which is a little more than “about an hour.” He only knew he was near the end because



there was a man standing with a very large flashlight about thirty feet away. He motioned for them to come quickly and then told Artemesia to turn her light off. Confused, she complied. Then, they heard people speaking.

“Do you see this cave here?” the voice came from around the corner. “There is a legend that the cave goes all the way to Mombasa, but I have explored the cave myself and it doesn't. There are many arteries to the cave but they all end in dead ends. Still, many people believe it no matter what the truth is.” The voice then said to move on to the next area.

It was quiet for a few moments until Pelgrem said, “We're in a tourist cave?”

“Yes and no,” the man with the flashlight said. “This is a secret cave. What we are standing in, is not for tourists. Around that corner, you are in the Amboni caves, the tourist part that pays for most of us to travel through.” The man made Pelgrem and Artemesia wait there for another twenty minutes. Another tour group had just passed. When they were gone, he let them go.

Pelgrem and Artemesia walked around the corner where they had to climb down a six foot ledge to get to the floor of the Amboni cave. They dusted themselves off and looked around. They could faintly hear the tour group in the distance to the right, so they cautiously followed the sounds.

The cave was darker in some places than others and Artemesia used her headlamp sparingly. They followed the tour group, just out of sight, through a narrow passageway. It was so narrow that it could only be traversed by turning sideways and sidestepping through ten feet of claustrophobic openings. Pelgrem and Artemesia also had to take their rucksacks off and slide them through separately.

Once they were in an open passageway again, they saw that the ceiling slowly moved down upon them. They walked for fifteen feet, then crouched for another twenty, before, finally, squatting and shuffling in a squat to make it through. On the other side was a large opening where they watched the members of the tour group walk up a ledge and through another opening. Pelgrem and Artemesia followed the path up and out into another large area where makeshift steps led out of the cave.

“Fucking finally,” they heard from outside the cave. Pelgrem looked out, recognizing the voice, but not believing it. He scanned around the outside of the cave, where tourists were assembling for a tour of the cave, while other tourists were gathering in their Range Rovers to leave the area. Not seeing who he had heard, Pelgrem continued to glance around when Artemesia tapped him on the shoulder and pointed up. There, leaning on a wooden fence, twenty feet up was Damaes.

Pelgrem laughed. Damaes threw his arms wide open and shouted, “Well, come on. Lunch is waiting.”

“Lunch?” Pelgrem thought to himself. “It's dinnertime.” Nevermind. Pelgrem wasn't going to argue semantics. He was starving. Artemesia had already begun walking up the very steep steps to where Damaes was waiting. She hadn't bothered to contemplate anything. She wanted food.

With a large smile on her face, she hugged and kissed Damaes and then saw that he had a very large spread of food for them. There was chicken korma, rogan josh, rice, peas, garlic naan, mango lassi, and water. Artemesia was happy that there was food that she actually liked, but she also didn't care. She just wanted food and water. She would have eaten anything today. By the time Pelgrem reached the top of the stairs, Artemesia

had already filled her plate and was busy attempting to empty it again.

Pelgrem reached the top of the stairs and gave Damaes a bear hug. He held on for a long time, grateful, not only to see his friend again, but that he was healthy with no apparent ill effects of being shot. “How did you know we'd be here today, D.”

“I didn't,” Damaes answered. “I was here yesterday about this time with food too. I had to give it away to the locals when you didn't show. I figured I'd have to spend a lot of money on food until you turned up. No one knew if you could make it in five days. I'm told that most people aren't used to it and take six or seven days.”

“Ah, well our guides on the other end didn't quite give us enough food and water,” Pelgrem said.

“And we weren't very diligent with our rationing either,” Artemesia said.

“Very true,” Pelgrem concurred as he shoved some naan into his mouth. While they were eating, Damaes tried to get them up to speed on what was going to happen for the rest of the day.

“Once you're done here, we're going to take you to the house I've been staying at. I tell you, the house is nicer than many homes I've been in back in America. We've got a room for Artemesia and you'll have to share with me, Pel. After you're rested up, we'll get your identification papers set up.” Pelgrem and Artemesia stopped eating for a moment and looked up. “Don't worry, these are going to be one hundred percent legitimate papers. We've arranged for refugee status for you so you can keep your real names if you like.”

“How's that possible,” Artemesia asked. “I thought it took months to sort that kind of thing out.”

“Well, it does, normally,” Damaes answered. “But, as soon as I got here, I applied for

myself. I took extra forms home, filled them out with your names, and returned them a few weeks later. Of course, some people in Dar have taken up your cause and raised some money to pay for the fees of proper identity papers.

“Since you're listed as refugees, they assume you don't have identity papers. However, there's a lawyer connected to the underground and he agreed to argue that refugees often don't have identity papers, but that there are other ways to prove you are who you say you are. The lawyer's secretary has sworn she has communicated with Artemesia via the intrawebs, while I have already sworn to knowing Pel in the camps. There are also several video stories that are international. The judge is reviewing that stuff but it's pretty clear you're political refugees so there shouldn't be a problem.”

Pelgrem and Artemesia both leaned back in their chairs. Pelgrem drank the last of his mango lassi and thought about the consequences of Damaes' declaration. He could be free now, but he'd probably never be able to travel back home again. He also thought about the man sent into the caves to track he and Artemesia. Pelgrem had concluded that the man was sent to kill them. He wondered if, even after becoming a legal citizen of Tanzania, if the US government wouldn't still hunt him. Changing his name would certainly help to keep his anonymity, but he liked his name and it was the only link he had left to who he was, to America, and to the life he'd involuntarily left behind.

Sensing his hesitation and reading the concerned body language of Pel, Artemesia asked, “Can we have some time to think about the whole name thing?”

“Yes, of course,” Damaes answered.

A woman came up the steps and began to clear the empty plates from the table. Damaes reached into his pockets and handed her several rolled up Tanzanian shilling

notes. Not knowing the exchange rate, Pelgrem assumed a nice tip was included. Damaes was always generous and Pelgrem knew he'd never cheat someone, especially when it came to money.

“Shall we go?” Damaes said. Pelgrem and Artemesia gathered their rucksacks and followed Damaes down the stairs. They walked about a hundred yards down the road that led to the entrance of the Amboni caves. Waiting for them was a large, black Range Rover. There was also a driver waiting for them. Pelgrem and Artemesia would discover later that having a driver did not necessarily mean you were rich, as it did in America. Nearly everyone could hire a driver because it was cheaper than buying a vehicle and many people often had to travel long distances each day for various reasons, including work and every day errands.

Damaes told the driver to first take them to the market. “I hope you don't mind,” he said to Pelgrem and Artemesia. “But I promised to pick up a few things for the lady of the house.” Pelgrem and Artemesia shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders, indicating that they didn't mind.

It took twenty five minutes before they arrived in Tanga and another fifteen through traffic to get to the market. Rush hour here was like rush hour anywhere. Long lines. Sitting in traffic. Horns blaring. The main roundabout into town was a nightmare to traverse due to several dozen cars all trying to get around the small circle at the same time instead of waiting their turns.

Pelgrem found the traffic amusing. Unlike in America, a horn here only went off when there was a danger and didn't appear to mean, “get out of my way or I'll kill you.” Everyone appeared patient and there were no signs of road rage. Tanzanians seemed used

to traffic jams and didn't get upset that they were being delayed. It also gave Pelgrem time to stare at the giant Rotary International sign in the middle of the roundabout. It was yellow with blue edging in the middle and, though it looked odd, somehow, it seemed appropriate here.

The Rover slowly made its way around the roundabout and past the Gapco gas station, then onto one of the arterial roads. Several minutes later they were at the market. Damaes encouraged Pelgrem and Artemesia to get out of the Rover and stroll around the market. There were many different types of food, most of which Pelgrem recognized. Bananas, plantains, oranges, mangoes, hot peppers, beans, and carrots. There was also rice, tomatoes, cucumbers, and several different types of beans too.

While the bright and colorful collage of food was enticing, the unknown foods were what drew him in. The most intriguing thing he saw was a fruit, roughly the size of a baseball, though some were slightly bigger. It was green, with a shell that reminded him of overlaying scales. He asked a vendor what it was called. "Topatopa fruit," was the reply. Pelgrem smelled it, but it didn't really smell of anything.

He turned the fruit over several times in his hand, trying to figure out how to open and each such a thing. The vendor reached over and took the topatopa fruit from Pelgrem and split it open with his thumbs. Inside was a white, fleshy area, over top of dark seeds. The vendor showed Pelgrem how to pull the white flesh from its shell and eat it. He explained that you suck the flesh off the seed and then spit the seed out.

He offered Pelgrem a piece of the fruit, who was hesitant to take it. Artemesia quickly stuck her hand in the way and took the piece that was offered to Pelgrem. "Mmmm," she exclaimed. "These are really good. Sweet, but good. We have to get some of these."

She looked around for Damaes and waved him over. It wasn't hard to get Damaes to agree to purchase a few as he, too, enjoyed the topatopa fruit.

Damaes also purchased plantains, cucumbers, mango, and hot peppers. Though they didn't need any meat, he took Pelgrem and Artemesia to the far side of the market so that they could see the fresh meat, hanging for sale. Unlike most of the Western world, where people were paranoid and had to have all their meat wrapped and stored in cold, air conditioned storage units, meat here hung on hooks, slightly swinging, awaiting purchase.

Most of the meat was not wasted because it had to be sold that day. As the day drew long, the prices dropped. It had to be sold now. Pelgrem watched customers pick a particular piece, while the vendors would cut the meat according to how the customer wanted it. There was no butcher paper to wrap the meat in. It was placed into plastic bags or whatever bag the customer brought to the market. Meat was as fresh as possible. Pelgrem smiled at the concept of buying the meat fresh from an animal just killed and taking it home to cook right away. This would, indeed, be a novel concept in America.

It was getting late so Damaes urged everyone to get back to the Rover. He let Pelgrem and Artemesia know that they were only about ten minutes from home, where they could relax as long as they wanted, even going to bed without dinner if they were tired. Pelgrem and Artemesia smiled. They had just stuffed themselves and a bed was really all they wanted right now.

6am. Pelgrem awoke to the sound of a rooster. He quietly cursed it, rolled over and went back to sleep. 7am. "Damned rooster is still at it," thought Pelgrem. He put his

pillow over his head and went back to sleep. 8am. “That damned rooster is going to die,” Pel mumbled to himself. “But not until after I've had a shower.”

Pelgrem silently rolled out of bed, making sure that he did not create enough noise to awaken Artemesia. Last night, on the way back from the market, they made an agreement that Pelgrem and Artemesia were going to share a room. They took Damaes' room, with two single beds, while Damaes took the room originally for Artemesia. While Pelgrem knew he could trust Damaes, their long trek to Africa embedded a deep suspicion of people, whether they knew them or not.

It was a simple fact that Pelgrem and Artemesia had relied on each other years before Damaes had come along and, now, they only trusted each other implicitly. Pelgrem had slept well until the rooster started nagging him. He had wanted to sleep longer but the crowing was just too inconsistent for him to block out of his mind, so he gathered the small bag of toiletries that Damaes left for him on the top of the dresser and headed for the shower.

The bathroom was much bigger than those in America. It was a large, square room, approximately ten feet by ten feet, and was sectioned into three pieces. The toilet was a hole in the floor and was set in a small square area directly in front of the bathroom door. The toilet had a light overhead and a door for privacy. Next to it was a slightly bigger square where the shower lie; the remaining section being a rectangle with a sink in the far right corner, opposite the shower.

Pelgrem hung his clean clothes on a hook on the wall and left his dirty clothes in a crumpled pile near the toilet door. A large towel hung on a hook between the toilet and the shower. Pelgrem tripped over a small bucket as he walked into the shower. It was



red with an orange cup inside it. He looked at his toe, which he stubbed, but not too badly, then turned on the shower. The water was cold. It wasn't quite freezing, but cold enough to jolt him awake. There was no hot water.

Pelgrem washed as fast as he could and hopped out of the shower. He grabbed the towel hanging on the hook and wrapped himself in it, shivering as he attempted more to warm himself than dry off. After a few minutes, Pelgrem was warm enough that he toweled off and got dressed. He decided not to shave until he could find some hot water. Grabbing his belongings, Pelgrem returned to his bedroom and climbed back under the covers to get fully warm before waking up Artemesia.

Pelgrem looked out the window and saw several chickens running around, but no rooster. He cursed the rooster in his mind for waking him up. Around 930am, Artemesia woke up on her own. "Morning," she said, rubbing the sleepy bugs from her eyes. "How long you been up?"

"A couple of hours," Pelgrem replied. "Rooster wouldn't let me sleep." Artemesia chuckled. She'd never heard the rooster.

"You're just too light a sleeper, Pel."

"Yeah, maybe, but that damned thing wouldn't shut up for three hours. I swear. I'm going to find it and kill it."

There was a knock at the door. It was Damaes. "Come on in D.," shouted Pelgrem. As he entered, Pelgrem and Artmesia began laughing at him. He was dressed in a white t-shirt with flowers on it and a pair of black boxer shorts with hearts on them.

"Yeah, okay, laugh it up, but they were free...and people don't normally see me in my pajamas."

“It's okay, Damaes,” Artemesia reassured him. “It's just, well, I don't usually get to see black men in women's clothes.” Pelgrem burst out laughing and rolled over on his side, burying his face in his pillow.

“You up for a shower?” Damaes asked Artemesia. “I've got some hot water boiled for you.”

Pelgrem stopped laughing and sat back up. He shot a look of disgust towards Damaes. Damaes was holding the red bucket and the orange cup was floating around the top of it.

“What?” Damaes asked. As he was looking at Pelgrem he noticed that Pelgrem had already showered and snickered. “You took a cold one, eh?”

“Yeah, didn't think to ask for boiling water.” Pelgrem looked at Artemesia and asked, “Can you save some for a shave?”

“No need to, Pel,” Damaes interrupted. “I'll just put on another pot for you.”

“Thanks.” Damaes took the bucket to the shower for Artemesia and returned for Pelgrem. Since Damaes had been following Pelgrem's journey, there wasn't much to catch up on, but Pelgrem wanted to hear all about Damaes' journey into Africa.

“Well, I think I had a bit easier journey than you did, Pel,” Damaes began. “See, because I'm black, they didn't bother with taking the usual routes through Europe. The ship I went on only traveled about fifty miles offshore and then they hooked up with a freighter headed to the southwest coast of Ireland. They said it was much faster than the little sub you two were on.

“We stopped in Ireland to unload some cargo for several hours. It felt like a day but I'm not too sure since I was being hidden below decks. From there, I was smuggled into Rabat in Morocco. It actually wasn't that hard since everyone just assumed I was part of

the crew. I barely saw Morocco though because I was taken to the airport straight away and flown here.”

“You bastard,” Pelgrem said with a huge grin on his face.

“Yeah, well, I didn't have people looking for me like they are for you. I know I screwed things up for you in New York City, but did you really have to go back and cause more trouble?”

Artemesia returned from the shower, thankful that she got to finally clean herself. She had sand in places where sand should never be and, after not showering for days, she was happy to not stink anymore.

“Ah, you're back, good, let's eat. After that, you can shave, Pel. I'll shower after we eat. Today is just a lounging day here. We don't plan on taking you anywhere. Sarah, the lady who owns the house wanted to take you around town but I convinced her to wait a day or two. Figured you'd want to rest a while.”

“Good thinking,” Pelgrem said, slapping Damaes on the back as he left the bedroom and headed towards the smell coming from the kitchen. Sarah had made eggs, with onions and red peppers and ugali, a local dish for breakfast. There was also vitumbua, which Damaes described as a donut but not a donut. Artemesia enjoyed the vitumbua so much she ate five of them.

After breakfast, Pelgrem shaved and Damaes had a shower before he left to run errands again for Sarah. Pelgrem and Artemesia were told they should stay within the compound but to feel free to roam around it as much as they liked. Since they had arrived last night, it was dark and Pelgrem had not had the chance to look around the outside of the home in which they were staying. The word, compound, seemed foreboding to him

and he began to have a queasy feeling in his stomach. Damaes took him outside to show him the compound and reassure him not to panic.

Nearly every home in Tanzania was situated within a compound. It was to keep thieves out of your house and off your property. The walls of the compound were often made of concrete and rose so high you could barely make out the house, and, even then, only from a distance. The tops of the compound were decorated with old, rusty nails, broken glass, and anything else sharp enough to deter would-be thieves. There was also always someone at home because an empty home is a target, rusty nails or not.

Once he felt that Pelgrem was not going to panic, Damaes left with his driver to head into town while Pelgrem and Artemesia strolled around the house and property. The house itself was on one level, made of concrete, with stone interlaced along the outside to add a classy and decorative touch. Small bushes of flowers adorned the front of the house, their colors of red, orange, and white creating vibrant clashes to the stone walls.

The back porch was painted white with a slight fade into light orange that blended into the stone. Archways hung over the back porch, giving a feel of Roman style architecture and the white painted railings lent a feeling of elegance to the back porch. Along the compound walls were tall, thin, green trees, providing shade for the house.

The driveway curved around to the back of the house. It, too, was made of stone and reminded Pelgrem of cobblestone roads he had seen in books. A two foot high stone wall, matching the stone of the house, created an edge between the driveway and the garden of coconut trees. Rope was strung across the coconut trees where laundry was hanging out to dry in the warm, Tanzanian sun.

Walking around the driveway, Pelgrem saw several large bushes, again edged with

stone, between the driveway and the house. Opposite the driveway was a small fence and a sidewalk, just wide enough for one person to walk along. The bushes next to it separated the sidewalk from a garden. The bushes were in bloom with red and orange flowers, of which Pelgrem did not know the name. Pelgrem nearly stepped on a chicken as it walked in front of him and headed towards the garden.

Looking back towards the front of the house, he noticed an empty patch of ground where new rose bushes had recently been planted. It wasn't as green as the other parts around the house, but he could envision what it would look like once the bushes had grown. Several pair of flip-flops were at the bottom of the steps leading up to the short porch and front door. It was customary here for people to take their shoes off before entering a home in Tanzania. This was most likely due to the dusty nature of the country part of the year, and the muddy ground the other part. It saved valuable time and energy from being forced to constantly sweep and mop.

The front of the house was adorned again with the elegant blending of white, light orange and stone. The windows were trimmed the same way, though there was more white, giving the small amount of light orange more of an accent to the windows. The gate to the compound was at the end of the driveway and was locked from the inside. It was a simple bolt action lock but large enough, and strong enough to keep most people out. There was also a door to the right of the gate, making it easier for individuals to enter if they had arrived on foot.

Pelgrem sat down on the edging in the back yard, just under a sheet hanging on the clothesline. Artemesia was playing with a chicken that kept approaching her and then running away. They spent a few hours outside before retreating into the house. The sun

had grown too hot for them and the house was a cool refuge to relax.

Sarah had made them some juice to drink. She told them it was called Healtho juice and it was good for them. They relaxed in the living room watching a bit of television and just enjoying being able to put their feet up and do nothing. Sarah returned to the kitchen, where she said she was preparing dinner. Pelgrem and Artemesia wanted to help, feeling as if they were being leeches and not useful. Sarah wouldn't let them do anything. She said that, as guests, they should rest. She knew how much energy their journey had taken from them and she wanted them to rest.

By the time Damaes had returned it was nearly five o'clock. Pelgrem assumed that there would be no lunch today, only dinner. Damaes, however, informed him that Tanzanians eat dinner at nine or ten at night, so there was plenty of time for lunch and dinner today. He headed off to the kitchen with three bags of groceries for Sarah to cook. When he returned, he began expounding about his day.

“So, I went into town today to meet a couple of people about your situation. I also picked up my papers. I'm officially a Tanzanian now, well, as soon as I finish my Swahili classes. Required by law, you know.” Damaes took out his citizen certificate and his new passport and passed them around. “Tomorrow afternoon we will meet my lawyer friend and he will take your photographs so that we can get you proper identity papers. Anyway, after I did all that work, I went to the market for Sarah and came home.”

“And that took you five hours?” Pelgrem asked.

“Yes, yes it does. You see, my friend, things do not move fast here in Tanzania. A noon appointment might show up at two. A quick lunch takes an hour. Everything you are used to being fast is slow here. Don't worry, you'll get used to it, though, I have to

admit, sometimes the leisurely pace ticks me off. I'm sure when I'm an old man it won't bother me at all anymore.”

Pelgrem and Artemesia simply shrugged their shoulders. Of course, no one does everything the same way as in America. And who cares anyway. It's not like they had any place else to be that things needed to be done quickly.

Sarah shouted from the dining room that lunch was ready. During lunch, Damaes discussed his upcoming language exam and that Pelgrem and Artemesia should begin studying Swahili. Connections can only get you so far. Knowing the language was essential and couldn't be cheated on.

After lunch, there was more television to be watched and a general feeling of being a lazy day to do nothing. Pelgrem sat out on the back porch alone, with a drink in his hand, watching the day go by, while Artemesia and Damaes played chess inside. After dinner, Sarah joined them in a game of Monopoly, which Damaes relished. It had been banned in America under the Gambling Act of 2037 and, until he set foot on the African continent, had never even seen the game. They played for four hours until Damaes had taken all their money and property. He joyfully tossed them all in jail and declared victory.

Pelgrem couldn't sleep that night. He kept waking up in fear that tomorrow he would meet his doom. He felt safe at Sarah's house, inside the compound, where no one knew he even existed. Tomorrow, he would have to venture out into Tanga, a white man, clearly sticking out in the crowd. He tossed and turned for hours, worrying about what the new day would bring.

Artemesia slept like a log. She didn't care about getting caught. She had already thought everything out logically. While she never trusted anyone, except Pelgrem, one

hundred percent, she didn't feel like Damaes was setting her up either. She didn't fear walking around town being white. She had seen a few other white people, probably tourists in town and, although they were stared at, it was more a situation of “look there's white people” as opposed to “look those white people are probably criminals.” She was a novelty here and it was obvious that she didn't live in Tanga. She had no reason to believe she was in any danger here.

Most of Africa had removed their laws allowing other countries to just come in and snatch people back home fifteen years ago. Most countries no longer had extradition treaties with the West. The whole point of going out tomorrow was to establish their identities by taking photos and being granted refugee status. Once that happened, no amount of arguing from the United States would ever result in her removal from Tanzania. The only thing the USA would be able to do to her then would be to ban her from ever returning to America, a thought that no longer bothered her.

Her only regret would be not being allowed to attend her grandmother's funeral, when that day arrived, however, she could still clandestinely speak with her grandmother until that day. Being an OD had its advantages and her grandmother was no slouch when it came to skirting the law. She was sure, however, that her grandmother would understand if she could never return home. Artemesia slept soundly on the fact that, so far, Tanzania appeared very much to be just like America once was, when her grandmother was a young woman, still fighting to keep the government out of private lives.

The following day, Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Damaes set off for their meeting. They met at a restaurant for lunch, to which Damaes told them to order right away while they waited for the lawyer. The minimum wait time for food, according to signs on the walls



of the restaurant was forty-five minutes. “What do they do, kill the chicken when you order it?” Pelgrem asked.

Damaes glanced at him and replied, “Yes.”

The lawyer was late. Damaes was nonplussed but it only made Pelgrem more nervous than he was before. He was so accustomed to everything happening at a specific time and people being chided for tardiness that it was difficult for him to adjust to the “normalcy” of lateness.

Pelgrem was relieved when the lawyer finally showed up. He introduced himself as Yaffa and assured Pelgrem and Artemesia that everything was proceeding smoothly. All the wheels had been greased and were merely awaiting photographs of Pelgrem and Artemesia in order to proceed. Lunch arrived a few minutes after Yaffa. When they were finished they drove together to Yaffa's office where they waited for a photographer to take their pictures. He was late too and Pelgrem was quickly learning how to become accustomed to tardiness.

With pictures in hand, they traveled across town to the passport office where they were also required to submit to fingerprinting. Their fingerprints would be placed onto their passports and be used only for international travel. As long as they were in Tanzania, there was no requirement for any shopkeeper to demand their identity.

It would be at least a week for processing, so Pelgrem and Artemesia asked Damaes if he could arrange transportation to Dar es Salaam. Wil and Joe had written an address in Dar es Salaam and it was time to continue the journey for them. Damaes agreed and, the following morning, the three set out for Dar es Salaam via the state run bus company.

The bus was filled with Tanzanians traveling between Tanga and Dar, with the exception of the two white folks. Pelgrem and Artemesia were careful to remain polite

and sat about two thirds of the way to the back of the bus. The bus was supposed to be a first class bus, with air conditioning. It had air conditioning. It just didn't work.

Pelgrem's seat was broken as well. It was stuck halfway reclined and he could not sit back. Pelgrem was left sitting upright, as each time he leaned onto the seat rest, it fell completely into the lap of the poor woman behind him. He apologized and she accepted, giving Pelgrem a knowing nod that this sort of thing happens all the time. About one third of the way through the journey to Dar, the seat back broke completely. At least he didn't have to worry about it hitting the lady behind him anymore.

The cup holder didn't work either because someone had unscrewed and stolen the magnet that held it to the back of the seat in front of Pelgrem. The foot rest angered Pelgrem the most. Whenever the bus hit a bump, the foot rest happily bounced around, whacking at Pel's feet.

Shortly after Pel's seat broke, all the passengers were given a packet of coconut wafers and a soda. Pelgrem joyfully grabbed a Vanilla Coke, while Artemesia took a Fanta Orange. When the man passing out the snacks came back to collect the empty soda bottles, he gave everyone a bottled water as well. Still in reserve mode, Pelgrem and Artemesia placed their bottled waters into Pelgrem's rucksack, right next to the bag of ubuyu that Sarah had given them. Ubuyu was a local snack, usually homemade and made from the baobab fruit, boiled with some sugar and dyed red. Pelgrem was, again, saving it, just in case.

Pelgrem opened his window and leaned his head on the edge of it. He enjoyed the cool breeze as the bus sped down the road and it was the only way he could relax in his seat. Thirty minutes later Pelgrem heard “short call” being yelled from the front of the

bus. He knew what the term was but he couldn't believe that it was actually going to take place. Sure enough, the bus pulled over to the side of the road and several people got off and walked into the tall grass. There were half a dozen paths that went twenty feet into the tall grass where people relieved themselves. Artemesia looked at Pelgrem and giggled. She did so as quietly as she could, trying not to attract attention to her obvious ignorance.

“Need to go?” Damaes asked.

“No,” came the simultaneous reply from both Pelgrem and Artemesia.

Damaes shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said as he bounded off the bus and down one of the paths.

Fifteen minutes later, the bus was back on the road. With all its passengers safely on board, the man who had passed out the snacks put a movie on. Several of the screens attached to the backs of the seats were broken, forcing many people to huddle around the few screens that worked.

Just outside of Dar es Salaam, the bus approached a weigh station. It stopped well before it and the man who passed out the snacks announced that twenty-five people had to get off and walk a quarter of a mile past the weigh station because the bus was overweight. The bus wasn't full and Pelgrem didn't understand how it could be overweight.

Damaes turned around in his seat and said to Pelgrem and Artemesia, “Don't get off no matter what you do.” They nodded in return but were still very confused. “It's nothing to worry about. The driver is probably just transporting something he doesn't want anyone to know about. This happens all the time.” It was better not to ask what he might be

carrying. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss.

They watched the people exit the bus. Then, the bus drove up to and onto the scale. A lady two rows ahead of Pelgrem was using her PVD and shouting something in Swahili. Damaes understood Swahili well by now and translated for his two friends. The woman was swearing at the owner of the bus company. She had said that this was the worst bus ride that she had ever taken. Pelgrem also recognized some really horrid swear words and a few uses of words that weren't swear words but could be now.

In the middle of her screaming, the bus drove off the scale and turned around. The “snack” man told the remaining passengers that they had to move more people to the front of the bus because the back of the bus had to be lighter. The bus got back in line and waited its turn for the scales again. This time, the bus passed inspection, however, the entire ordeal took thirty minutes, aggravating Artemesia. At the other side of the weigh station, the bus stopped and picked up all the people that were forced to get off earlier.

The rest of the trip was unhindered, arriving at the Unbungo bus station shortly before 4pm. Damaes hired a taxi to take him to another friend's house in Dar. This taxi, however, would forever be known by Pelgrem as the “taxi of death.” The taxi driver, Pelgrem believed, must have received his road rage in hell. The driver was first angered because Damaes declined to tell him there were three people instead of one. This meant that he was going to lose a lot of money by missing individuals and taking a group.

He and Damaes got into an argument over the price, until Damaes agreed to pay one third more than the originally haggled upon price. Then, the bus station decided to close one of the two exits and, unfortunately, the driver had decided to take the one that was

closed five minutes earlier. This meant that he had to turn around and use the other exit, which carried a heavier fee for exiting. He began cursing again about the amount of money he was going to lose on this trip. Once he had swerved around people and buses and left the bus station, he spent the entire taxi ride weaving in and out of traffic.

The taxi driver was constantly flipping his bright lights on and off, waving his hands and swearing in Swahili at all the drivers in his way. Damaes was in the front seat, holding onto the chicken bar for dear life. Pelgrem and Artemesia were grinning from ear to ear. Sure, they were a bit scared that the driver was going to kill them, but it was a hilarious, and entertaining, taxi ride.

The taxi driver continued shifting and switching lanes frantically until he arrived at their destination, the Möevenpick Royal Palm Hotel. Pelgrem looked confused as he was expecting someone's house, not a hotel.

As they got out of the taxi and approached the front doors, Pelgrem asked, "I thought we were going to your friend's house?"

"We are," Damaes answered, looking up at the hotel. "This is it."

"Damn!" Artemesia said, as they all walked into the lobby of the hotel.

"Don't get too excited," Damaes said. "He just has a free suite on the top floor because he's the manager of the hotel. He's on call every day so he gets free housing in exchange for always being at work."

Artemesia took long glances around the lobby. The floors were a mix of squares that were ruby colored marble and tan marble. The pillars throughout the lobby were alabaster. As they passed one pillar, she stretched her arm out to feel its smooth, shiny finish. Small, decorative palms were carefully arranged to accentuate the grandeur of the

hotel. Damaes led Pelgrem and Artemesia out of the lobby to the elevators, which they rode to the seventh floor. Damaes knocked on room 728. A black man answered and instantly flashed a huge grin. “Damaes, my friend!” he shouted. “How are you?” The man reached out and grabbed Damaes, nearly hugging the stuffings out of him.

Damaes laughed and hugged him back. “I’m very well, Kagale.”

“Please, come in,” Kagale said. “My mother will be here soon with food.”

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly,” Damaes said.

“Doggerybaw,” Kagale interrupted. “She knew you have traveled a long way and she insisted on making a meal. Your friends can taste a real stew, with fresh food, not that processed garbage they give you in America.”

Damaes looked at Pelgrem and Artemesia, who looked straight back at him. Pelgrem glared at him as if to say, “It’s food, they’re being hospitable, stop making such a fuss.” So, they entered Kagale’s suite and had a drink while waiting for his mother to turn up. Artemesia tried to hide her awe of the suite. It was roughly 861 square feet and was one of the exclusive diplomatic suites. At the turn of the century, if you had enough money, you could stay in the room but now all suites were reserved strictly for government officials and their friends.

Artemesia noticed that, although the room was a mix of off-white walls, watermelon red furniture and cherry finished furniture, they blended together in a stylish elegance worthy of their diplomatic name. The views were spectacular, looking out into the ocean, which Artemesia chose to stare at instead of participating in boring, “How’d you get here?” type conversation that was going on amongst the men.

Pelgrem had decided to ask Kagale if he might know how to find the address that Wil

had given him. “See here,” he began. “The last place was an exact address and easy to find. This is a bit cryptic and I haven't a clue how to figure it out.” Pelgrem showed Kagale the clues that he had.

Kagale grinned again and said, “This is very easy to know if you live here. It is actually quite simple to someone from Dar, but there will still be a trick to find the exact location.” His comments had peaked Pel's interest. He was curious of the answer and anxious to finish this journey.

“Okay, let me explain,” Kagale said. “This here, the 'la Trattoria Jan,' well, that's a pizza restaurant. The '1988' is the customer number.”

“So, we have to go there and see if we can get the employees to tell us the address?” Damaes asked.

“No, not at all,” Kagale replied. “You see, in many places in Tanzania, there are still no street names. You would think that, with all the Western influences here that would have changed but we have not. You see, la Trattoria Jan delivers to their customers. On the first trip to a person's home, they are given a large, round, metal sign to clip onto the door or gate to their compound. It has the company logo and a number.

After that, all the customer has to do is ask them to deliver it to a certain number, in your case, 1988. So, all you really need to do is order a pizza and follow the driver to his destination.”

“Wow, thanks,” Pelgrem said. “This really helps a lot. Thank you!”

The men continued to chat for about half an hour before Kagale's mother appeared. Kagale kissed and hugged her before helping take the pot of stew into the kitchen. Kagale introduced her as Mama Moringe. Her given name was Uwingabiye, but it was



common for a mother to take the name of one of her children. Pelgrem thought that was great, plus Mama Moringe was a lot easier to pronounce than Uwingabiye.

Mama Moringe did not speak much English, however, given the little she did know, the Swahili that Pelgrem and Damaes knew, and the translations of Kagale, everyone had a good time at dinner. Kagale added rice, cut cucumbers, and mangoes on the side with dinner, as well as chapati, a round, flat bread often used with currys or stews. The chapati was especially important for this meal because everyone was eating the traditional Tanzanian way: no silverware.

By using with their hands, parts of the stew were particularly difficult to eat without chapati. They were of immense help to Pelgrem, who had difficulty figuring out how to sop up the broth from the stew.

After dinner, everyone gathered around in the living room while Kagale arranged for a junior suite for his guests. They would be one floor down, in room 616, where they could relax and sleep in.

The following morning, Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Damaes took advantage of the free breakfast in the hotel. By now Artemesia had given up trying to show her awe and amazement at the luxury of the hotel. The walls and floors of the hallways and the breakfast room were decorated exactly the same as the lobby, with the exception of large, throw rugs. Artemesia asked one of the waiters about them and was informed that they were hand made and shipped in from nearby Zanzibar.

Breakfast was a typical Western style meal but immense amounts of it. There were boiled eggs, eggs cooked with peppers and onions, and toast. There were also local dishes, such as chapati, ugali, and vitumbua, as well as cucumbers and mangoes. When

they were finished, they returned to their suite and left a message for Kagale. They wanted to arrange for a car to follow the pizza guy.

Kagale called back three hours later. He had arranged for a car and it would arrive in an hour or so. Pelgrem knew that meant about three hours. He was really getting the hang of things now. Just add at least ninety minutes to any time given and you'll no longer be frustrated. Sure enough, two and a half hours later, the driver finally turned up. The driver drove them to la Trattoria Jan, where they parked and called in for a pizza. Then, they waited.

Twenty minutes later, a man, dressed in leather and a motorcycle helmet came outside the restaurant and put two pizzas inside a warmer box that was attached to the back of a scooter. The box was decorated with the la Trattoria Jan's logo and the rider's jacket displayed the logo and contact number. A few seconds later, the scooter sped away, headed towards its destination.

Pelgrem's driver followed the scooter, though it wasn't easy. A scooter can easily weave in and out of traffic. Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Damaes served as lookouts, watching where the scooter was going, while the driver attempted to get around as many cars as possible. They were lucky that they had missed the early crush of vehicles on the road, however, another hour later, and there would be so much traffic that they would never be able to follow the scooter.

They hit a major roadblock of cars just as they passed by the American embassy, but were fortunate that the scooter stopped and parked inside Shoppers Plaza. The rider walked upstairs and entered a virtual reality store. Damaes got out of the car and ran down the Old Bagamoyo Road, dodging traffic and running up to the virtual reality store.

He casually walked past the store, glancing at the metal customer number resting on a ledge just inside its front door. 1066. “That's not it,” Damaes said to himself. He walked to the other side of the balcony, skipped down the stairs and ran back to the car. It was now fifth in line to the corner and the rider had returned to his scooter.

“No good,” Damaes said as he climbed back into the car. “Keep following him.” The rider pulled out of Shopper's Plaza and proceeded back down Old Bagamoyo Road. It headed out towards a part of the old town, where fewer people lived. That meant even less traffic, making it easier to follow the scooter. After several minutes of driving, the scooter turned right, off the paved road and onto a very bumpy dirt road. Not only was it made of dirt, it had ruts large enough for a vehicle to get trapped in. Every car, scooter, and off-road vehicle had to go slowly and drive around each of the ruts, especially since the rains of the last week filled many of them, leaving it impossible to determine if the rut was six inches or three feet deep.

The scooter, being the smallest vehicle next to a bicycle, could go faster but it, too, had to be careful not to fall into a rut. The rider also could not risk falling into a hole. Not only would he be wet and most likely damage his scooter, he would have to pay for the ruined pizza as well as a replacement for the customer. The rider, being experienced among the streets of Dar, traversed the ruts deftly. At the end of the road he turned right and disappeared from view.

The driver of Pelgrem's car made it to the end of the road, albeit at a much slower pace, and turned left. The scooter rider was arguing with the man at the gates of a home here. The rider insisted he ordered the pizza and demanded payment. The man at the gate refused to pay for something he had not ordered.

“Switch places with me,” Damaes insisted to the driver. After getting in the driver's seat, Damaes drove up to the two men arguing and said, “Can you tell me how to get to Chef's Pride? I think we're a little lost.”

The two men stopped arguing and looked puzzled at Damaes.

“What?” the rider said to him.

“Chef's Pride. You know where it is?”

There was a moment of silence before the man at the gate started yelling again that he wasn't going to pay for anything. Damaes looked into the back seat at Pelgrem and Artemesia and smiled. “Watch this.” He put the car into neutral and leaned out the window. “Say, if he doesn't want that pizza, I'll take it. I'm pretty hungry.”

The two men turned and looked at Damaes and then the occupants of the car. Fortunately, white people in the car guaranteed that the two men would write them off as lost tourists and not people who were trying to scam or rob them. “Okay,” the rider said. The man at the gate quickly turned and ran back inside the gate, locking it behind him. Damaes paid the man, and tipped him handsomely, then gave the pizza to his driver to split up between them.

“Sorry, I didn't know what you all like, so it's just cheese.”

“I can't believe you did that, D.,” Pelgrem said. Damaes turned the car around to the other side of the road and parked the car. “What do we do now?”

“Well,” Damaes began. “First, I'm going to give our driver his seat back. Then, I figured we'd watch the place for a little while, make sure not too many people are home so we can go in and search the house.”

“We can't search the house if there's people home, which there always seems to be in

this country,” Pelgrem said.

“So, we put some masks on and tie them up while we look,” Damaes said.

“No way,” Pelgrem angrily retorted. “That's not going to happen.”

“How else do you propose that we search the house, genius?”

There was silence. Uncomfortable silence. Everyone ate their pizza in silence, shifting in their seats, waiting for the tension to end. Pelgrem didn't want to break into anyone's home, and he certainly didn't want to tie anyone up, but he couldn't think of another way to search the house and compound. He viciously bit into his pizza, frustrated that his quick thinking had failed him.

“What if it's not in the house?” Artemesia asked.

Pelgrem looked at her with his eyebrows scrunched. “But the message said to come here,” Damaes said.

“No, not exactly,” Pelgrem replied, apparently catching on to what Artemesia was thinking. “It just said...”

“...la Trattoria Jan, customer 1988,” Artemesia finished Pel's sentence. She pointed out of the car and towards the large round customer sign on the gate across the road.

“It couldn't be that easy, could it?” Damaes questioned.

“Only one way to find out,” Pelgrem said. He got out of the car and ran across the road to the sign. 1988 was indeed the number on the sign. Pelgrem tried to pull the sign off the gate but it was stuck. He tugged several times before giving up and returning to the car. “I can't get it loose. We need to pry it off but I wouldn't do it now. We should wait until later, when it gets dark and give it a go.”

“Nonsense,” Damaes said. “Just use the crowbar in the trunk. Shouldn't take more

than a couple of minutes.” Pelgrem, Artemesia, and the driver all looked at Damaes like he was a crazy psychopath. “Seriously, I can do this. You just have the engine running and ready.”

Damaes opened the trunk of the car and took out the crowbar. He breathed deeply, then closed it and ran across the street. The driver turned the car around and Pelgrem leaned forward to open the passenger side door for Damaes. Then, they waited nervously for him.

Damaes carefully put the edge of the crowbar against a small hole between the sign and the gate. He see-sawed the crowbar a few times, trying to be gentle and quiet and not make any noise. Once he had wedged a large portion of the sign away from the door, he grasped his hand around the sign and gave a yank, cutting his hand in the process. It came off but tore a small hole in the gate.

He ran back to the car and tossed the sign in the back seat to Pelgrem. Pelgrem took a napkin and wiped Damaes' blood off the sign, while Damaes took his shirt off and wrapped it around his bleeding hand.

“Should I go?” the driver asked.

“No, not yet,” Pelgrem replied carefully looking at the sign. He flipped it over a few times and then asked if anyone had a razor or pocket knife. The driver reached into his pocket and handed Pelgrem a small pocket knife with two blades in it. The smaller blade was thin enough at its tip that he wedged it into the middle of the sign, popping it apart. Inside the sign was a small data stick. It was slightly damaged and wouldn't work in Pelgrem's PVD.

It didn't matter anyway. Pelgrem's PVD didn't have the capabilities to read two data

sticks at once anyway. Neither did anyone else's. He would need specialized equipment for that and, something he already knew was rare and difficult to access. Pelgrem sighed and put the two pieces of the sign back together. He unrolled his window and threw the sign back at the gate. "We can go now," Pelgrem said to the driver and they slowly drove away from the scene of the crime, careful to avoid the ruts in the road.

Back in the hotel suite, Pelgrem told Artemesia and Damaes that there was nothing else he could do unless he could get access to a dual PVD system. No one used them anymore, not in at least the past five years. Even then, they weren't popular. They were big and bulky and expensive. Damaes left a message at the front desk for Kagale. He was from Tanzania and he might have contacts that could help them. As usual, it was several hours later when he replied. This time, at least, he replied in person.

"My friends," Kagale said boisterously as he entered their suite. "How are you? Your suite is fine, yes?"

"Yes, Kagale," Damaes replied. "Everything has been great so far."

"But you have some problem. That is what the message said."

"Yes, we have one small problem. We need access to a dual PVD but none of us knows where we can find one."

"That is a big problem, my friend, not a small one," Kagale said. He stared off in the distance and stroked his chin a few times before continuing. "I have an electronics friend in Stone Town. He may know of something. But it may take a couple of days."

"That's fine with us," Pelgrem said. "As long as we can stay here a little longer."

"Not a problem. You stay as long as you wish." Kagale turned to leave and then turned back. "Mama Moringe also said she is making dinner again tonight for you so

plan on coming over around seven or eight.” Pelgrem knew that meant nine.

With nothing left to do except wait, Pelgrem, Artemesia, and Damaes stayed in their room until eight and then went to enjoy the company of Mama Moringe, who was actually just a few minutes behind them, and returned to their hotel suite just before midnight.

The next two days, Damaes and Artemesia played cards, exercised in the fitness room, and watched television. Pelgrem spent most of his time swimming in the hotel pool.



Kagale loaned him one of his pairs of swim trunks. It had been many years since he was able to swim in a pool and the Royal Palm's pool was one of the best he'd ever been in.

On the third day, during dinner, Kagale informed them that he had found a dual PVD, but it was in Dubai. They could have access to it whenever they wanted but they would have to arrange an appointment because it was in a government office. Access wasn't a problem, just procedure, he assured them.

Pelgrem and Artemesia, however, could not yet leave the country, at least not legally, and they were sick of being on the run. They had, once again, become accustomed to normal life and running, hiding, and sneaking around while unknown figures were chasing them no longer appealed to them. They decided to wait until they heard from Yaffa about their citizenship papers before deciding a definitive course of action.

Yaffa arrived at the hotel a few days later and explained that everything had gone smoothly and handed Pelgrem and Artemesia their new passports. They were officially Tanzanian citizens and had been granted lifetime refugee status, on condition that, within one year, they pass a language exam. Pelgrem was overjoyed. They could now arrange to travel to Dubai and find out what Wil and Joe had done, what their message was and what to do with the information.

Artemesia, on the other hand, was relieved. She didn't care for all the cloak and dagger, nor Pel's mission, nor whether they ever finished it. She had a chance at a new life and she planned on taking advantage of it. The members of the underground in Tanzania would be able to set her up in a home and help her get a job. She might even do some work for them, however, she had decided that she was never getting so involved as she had been in America. She would help Pelgrem until he was finished with his task,

but that was it. She was done. And she was glad for its end to be coming soon.

That evening, Kagale took everyone out to Chef's Pride for dinner. There, they discussed the details of a trip to Dubai and enjoyed more of the myriad foods that Tanzania had to offer.

"I've arranged seats for tomorrow morning for you two on a commercial flight to Dubai," Kagale said to Pelgrem and Artemesia. "It makes a stop in Nairobi to pick up more passengers and then on to Dubai."

"But, don't we need visas?" Artemesia asked.

"Nope. You're not American anymore. Tanzanians don't need visas to the UAE."

"And, D. isn't going?"

"I can't. I've got some other business here in Dar to take care of," Damaes said. "I've got some 'meetings' to arrange and someone to pick up and escort to South Africa."

"I've arranged for your stay in Dubai for ten days, to make it appear like a short vacation," Kagale elaborated. "My friend, Faarooq, will meet you at the airport and take you where you need to go. Pelgrem, give me your PVD so I can input his photo." A few moments of silence ensued while Kagale completed his task. "When you return to Dar, come and find me and we'll get you some work. Best of luck to you in finding what you need."

"So, tomorrow then," Pelgrem said. He leaned back in his chair and exhaled. As excited as he was, there was still a bit of apprehension in his mind.

The following morning, Damaes and the driver took Pelgrem and Artemesia the seven and a half miles to the airport, where they waited several hours for their flight. It was a

sunny day, the blue sky so bright that it almost looked like a painting rather than real life. Pelgrem stared up at the sky several times, enjoying the beautiful day, the clean air, and the joy of having found a new home. When the time came to check in and board the plane, Damaes gave Pelgrem and Artemesia two thousand dollars spending money and waved goodbye as they entered the boarding area, paid their exit fees and went upstairs to the second floor of the airport.

They were to leave from gate two, but they first stopped into a small shop and purchased a few Crunchies for snacks on their trip. Not worried about anyone following them anymore, they boarded the plane, where Pelgrem promptly fell asleep in his seat. Artemesia spent the trip futzing around with the video console, not happy with any of the 5000 channels of videos given to her.

After a smooth landing in Dubai, customs was a breeze and, as they exited the customs area, they saw Faarooq. He looked exactly as his picture, except he was in a kandura instead of the suit and tie. Pelgrem and Artemesia walked over to him and introduced themselves.

“Did you have a good trip?” Faarooq asked.

“Yes, it wasn't half bad,” Pelgrem replied. “Good food too.”

“That's good to hear. We aim to please. Come. I have a car waiting for you to take you to my home at Burj Dubai.”

Pelgrem and Artemesia followed Faarooq out of the airport and into a brand new, Mercedes JX limousine. Pelgrem was astonished at the luxury of the car, but tried to hide it. Americans could only dream of traveling in such a vehicle, even if they were afforded the permissions to travel abroad. Leather seats. The finest wines, chilled to perfection.

Video screens. Every communication device known to man. Tinted windows. And the coldest air conditioning Pelgrem had ever felt. These finer things in life were well beyond the reach of the common man.

The limousine left the airport and traveled along Airport Road to the Clock Tower roundabout. Carefully maneuvering through traffic, the limousine drove over the Al Maktoum Bridge and onto Umm Hurair Road. Artemesia stared out the window watching the mix of old and new buildings pass by, noting that they had turned onto Sheikh Zayed Road. It was a large, eight lane highway, filled with numerous limousines. Suddenly, Artemesia didn't feel special in a limo. Everyone seemed to have one.

A few minutes later, they turned onto Doha Street and then onto Burj Dubai Boulevard. As the limousine drove down the road, Pelgrem could no longer sustain his awe. He stared out the window at a large, triangle shaped building and smiled. He had never imagined in his life that he would be able to see one of the world's largest buildings, yet alone know he'd be going inside.

Burj Dubai was five feet short of standing half a mile high, a feat that few had attempted to beat in the thirty-eight years it had been standing. A large lake surrounded the tower, completing the overall picture of dominance on the landscape. Inside, there were offices, residential apartments, hotels, and shops, creating a world within a city.

Pelgrem was nearly giddy. Faarooq noticed and asked, "Would you like to settle in first or be tourists for a while?"

Pelgrem wasn't sure what to say. He was here on serious business, however, he *really* wanted to have a look around. Fortunately, Artemesia was the wiser of the two and stepped in.

“I think we should get settled in first. After all, we'll be here for ten days. There's plenty of time to play tourist.”

“Yeah, you're right,” Pelgrem said as he settled back into his seat. “We should do our business first, then have fun. Take us to your home.”

“Fair enough,” Faarooq said. He instructed his driver to let them off out front. Faarooq took them inside the tower, past the throngs of tourists shuffling around the shops in the central core, and to the elevators. “I apologize that I can only afford an apartment on the 97<sup>th</sup> floor, but I assure you, it is quite comfortable.”

Pelgrem was amused at his comments. Here, in the lap of luxury, he is apologizing for not being rich enough. “Class warfare lives on,” he thought to himself.

When the entered Faarooq's home, they noticed that no expense had been spared in decorating it. It was over 2000 square feet of opulence. The living room was spacious, with red and black carpets covering the shiny, marble floor. There were chairs and settees arranged around a giant video screen that was set in to the wall.

There was no wall separating the room from the kitchen, but the flow of décor blended into the two rooms. Faarooq showed them the room they would be sharing. The floors were made of marble, etched with a border of black marble. The closets were covered in gray speckled marble, inlaid with gold marble doors. Gold marble pillars accented the white walls and black curtains that were pulled halfway open.

Artemesia flopped onto the bed. It was plush, but not soft. She felt so comfortable that she thought of taking a nap, but Pelgrem was yelling at her from the bathroom. “Oh, sweet Jesus,” he hollered. “You've got to come see this!”

Climbing off the bed, Artemesia thought, it's just a bathroom, until she entered it.

Standing at the entrance, there was a large, double sink, about ten feet long, covered in red marble. A mirror extended the entire length of the sinks. The front edge of the sink displayed small, white tiles with an Arabic design in green. Opposite the sink was a shower made of clear glass, but with a blue wall and a blue and white mosaic tiling on the floor of the shower. Behind that was a large bathtub. It, too, was made of red marble with a white, inner shell for the tub. The blue wall curved around the tub. On the wall, stretching across the length of the tub was a mosaic of the Dubai waterfront.

Artemesia leaned over the edge of the tub to see the mosaic more clearly. “Can you believe this?” she asked rhetorically. “All made from tiny, colored tiles, creating such a marvelous picture.”

“Pelgrem,” Faarooq called from the doorway to the bedroom.

“Come in, please, it's your house. We were just admiring the mosaic.”

“Ah, yes, they are beautiful, aren't they?”

“I can imagine Artemesia sitting and staring at it all day.”

Artemesia gave Pelgrem a gentle whack on the arm and Faarooq laughed. “I know that you would like to have a look at your data as soon as possible, so I've arranged for some time on the dual PVD later tonight.”

“That's quick,” Artemesia said. “We've always had to wait and make arrangements wherever we've traveled to before.”

“Well, it was quite easy. Kagale told me you needed to dual PVD. For me, that is easy to get because I know where it is. The hard part is that he told me one of your sticks is slightly damaged so we'll have to make a copy and then try to put the two sticks together to read them. That is the difficult part.”

“Well, we're ready whenever you need us to be.”

“I'll leave you alone here for a while. I have to go to services at the mosque but I will be back later. If anything rings, just ignore it and I'll get messages later. Oh, and do not answer the door. It is coded for my DNA only and I will not be sending anyone to meet you or anything like that. If someone attempts to break in, the police are automatically notified.”

“Wow, that's some system you have,” Pelgrem said, suddenly starting to feel like a prisoner, albeit a very well cared for prisoner.

“Please feel free to eat and drink what you wish. I will be back in about two hours.”

After Faarooq left, Artemesia opted for a nap while Pelgrem flipped through the video offerings. Most of it was in Arabic, but he found some English news, American in particular, and he spent his time catching up on all the latest information from the good 'ol USA.

When Faarooq returned, Pelgrem went to get Artemesia. “Wake up, sleepyhead. It's time to go,” he said gently nudging her awake. Artemesia got up, checked her hair really quickly and followed Pelgrem back out into the living room.

“So, where are we headed?” she asked.

“There,” Faarooq stated as he pointed out the window. He had a beautiful view of Burj El Alam, the most secure communications tower in the country. “Just let me do all the talking when we get there.”

“Sure, no problem,” Pel said. It wasn't like he could speak anyway. He didn't know the language, nor the people, and the building was so secure that he was never going to get in there without an appointment anyway.

Faarooq's driver took them around the back of Burj Dubai and across a few service roads to reach Burj Al Alam. They could have walked there, however, today was very hot, 110 degrees Fahrenheit, and Faarooq did not want to cause any discomfort to his guests. Upon entering the building, they were stopped by security.

Faarooq stated that he had an appointment and, a few moments later, and a fingerprint each, and they were riding the elevator to the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor. The doors opened onto what was mostly an open room. There were several different mechanical devices, robot prototypes, and other electronic materials half built. Faarooq turned left and around the back of the elevators. On this side of the floor were five distinct offices and he walked towards the office second from left.

Inside was another man, dressed in a suit and tie, who introduced himself as Abul Khayr. He turned the machines on and asked Faarooq if he needed any help. Faarooq explained the situation and Abul Khayr said that he could copy the data stick and clean up what might be damaged. Pelgrem hesitantly gave him the data stick and Faarooq left the room to get drinks for his guests.

"It is very nice of Faarooq to help you," Abul Khayr said, playing with the stick, flexing it between his fingers. He then placed it into a small machine attached to his desk to make a copy.

"Yes, it is," Pelgrem said. "He has been very generous to us so far."

"Yes, that is Faarooq. His integrity is beyond reproach. It is just out of character that he would help in such a serious situation." Pelgrem looked puzzled at his statement. Abul Khayr took the copy out of the machine and reached his arm out to Pelgrem for the other half. Pelgrem handed it to him and Abul Khayr pushed a button on his desk,



opening a slot in the wall, revealing the dual PVD.

He placed the two data sticks inside the dual PVD, punch a few codes onto its screen and turned on a large display, directly onto the wall, showing the two sticks side by side. “Don't get me wrong. He is not trying to scam you or get you into trouble, but, from what I see on these sticks, he is really putting himself on the line for you.”

Pelgrem and Artemesia stood up and took a closer look at the image on the wall. They squinted at the image but it was hard to see because it was so fuzzy. “Give me a few minutes,” Abul Fhayr said. “I'll clean up the image for you.”

Faarooq returned with drinks for everyone, handing Pelgrem a Coke. “I'm told you really like these.” Pelgrem smiled and turned to look out the window. He could see the Burj Al Arab in the distance, at least he thought that's what it was. He would go see it when this was all over. He'd go see the palm islands and the islands that made up the world. He'd go see everything in Dubai. After all, the underground had seen fit to reward him with a ten day vacation and he wasn't going to waste it.

Faarooq concentrated his attention towards the images that Abul Fhayr had cleaned up. He started intently at the combination of the two pieces of information. Faarooq stated that the messages were scrambled and, just as he was about to say that it would take a few seconds to reassemble the pieces, Abul interrupted him.

“Will you look at that,” Abul said. “This includes everything your senators, congressmen, celebrities and pretty much anyone famous in America have been up to, legal and illegal.”

“Really?” Artemesia said, pushing him out of the way and looking at the screen.

“Whoah,” Faarooq replied as he studied the information as intently as Artemesia.

“You see here on the left is the person's name and some general information about them. You need the right side to complete the story. One part is useless without the other.”

“Look at this Pel. It says here that Senator Johansen has a fetish for cardboard boxes.” Pelgrem walked over to the screen and leaned in for a closer look. He grinned as he wondered what the senator's home must look like. So many secrets. So much useful information. His attention, however, quickly turned back towards the window and outside as he felt the enormity of what he had just discovered.

“Ah, look at this,” Abul Khayr said. “There are two lines of code here.” He paused for a moment. “It's absolute genius. While having one half of the stick will give you two lines of code that is gibberish, putting the two together gives you half of each line of code on each stick. Brilliant!” Abul Khayr was overjoyed at the ingenuity of whomever had created the sticks.

“Okay, but what's the code for?” Artemesia asked. “Why keep them separate?”

“Well,” Faarooq said, understanding the code. “This code will allow you to take control of the system. Obviously, this is for the American system, but, if anyone else is running the same software, then you can control that system as well.”

“Control it like we do when we hack into it and change people's identities?” Artemesia asked.

“Control is more than that, Artemesia. You can use it to create whatever you want inside the system and it will then be legitimate and real. But the code gives you the access to choose what happens next.”

“And what choices are those?”

“Shutting the entire system down by deleting it, forcing an electronic apocalypse to

start over or using the information available to force those in power to change.”

There was silence in the room as everyone realized the gravity of the information just handed to them. They now had the fate of America, at least, in the palm of their hands and, at the touch of a finger, could change the world.

Everyone looked at Pelgrem. “So, Pel, What's it going to be?” Artemesia asked. “Delete the system and all traces of it or use the information to effect change from within?”

Pelgrem stared out into the Arabian Gulf, contemplating his answer.

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Pelgrem's quest takes him halfway around the world to Europe and Africa, searching for the truth. What he finds will change the course of the United States forever.