A MIRROR TO THE FUTURE

A thesis submitted to the
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by
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Mirror to the Future* started as little more than a project that I did in my spare time for amusement. It went through countless transformations since its inception, but one element always remained: it was imperfect. What I can now call I novel I initially struggled to even call a story. The characters were shallow, the plot confusing and incomplete, and the chance that any person who read it would desire to read a sequel was slim to none. Entering into my sophomore year at Kent State, I saw this story as a project that would never be completed, a story that never really held any hope of being shared outside the confines of my family.

Just as I was willing to put the fledgling novel on bookshelf in my home somewhere where it would never be read again, I was introduced to the Senior Honors Thesis project option offered at Kent State by my academic advisor, Dr. Kimberly Winnebrenner. Dr. Winnebrenner suggested that my novel could make a substantial English Honors Thesis, if it was given the proper effort, and it wasn’t long after that I sat in Professor Dauterich’s office with a stack of papers and a vague idea of how we could make this shabby story work.

I knew that if this book would ever truly meet my standards for academic excellence that it would need to be reconstructed in a drastic matter. I knew that I needed to become unattached to the novel if I was to truly mold it into something real. I could
not afford to be afraid to take entire chapters that I had spent hours of my life on, and cast them into the garbage. This book was going to need a full overhaul if it was ever going to stand alone as a novel.

Writing a novel is one thing, but using it as an academic work worthy of 10 credit hours at a university was another. By my standards, this novel had to be more than simple a fictional work, created and edited to provide the reader with an enjoyable experience, but it also had to be an academic work, a work that showed that I had put the same hours of strenuous research into it that other students put into their thesis works in the fields of science, language, and technologies. When I started editing *A Mirror to the Future* with Professor Dauterich, I made it very clear that not only was I writing a novel, but also a top-notch piece of academic literature.

During my four thesis semesters, I read the works of Adolf Hitler, and first-hand accounts of people living and working in Nazi Germany. I also read psychological articles on post-traumatic-stress-disorder, and violence; I was determined to turn the dictatorial society pictured in my novel into a living, breathing, plausible world, that was not unlike regimes experienced in our world, the real world. I researched psychology to make my character’s minds real. I gave my characters back-stories that would never find their way into the text simply to make them a real person in my head so that when I
wrote of them on paper, I was recalling as opposed to creating. I wanted the world they lived in along with their personalities to be as real to my readers as they were to me.

By the time it was all said and done, my story had been edited thoroughly four times by Professor Dauterich and myself. What was originally 257 pages grew to 434, what was 24 chapters became 52. I sought with this work to revolutionize what could be considered an Honors Thesis Novel. I started this project with a novel, and I ended it with a thesis: a culmination of all of my work here at Kent State, a project fit to sit on the bookshelf in the Honors College, all from a book that never looked as if it would be more than a few hundred pages written by an imaginative student.
CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

As the smoke clears in Paris, the once proud city gasps for air. The ground is strewn with the remains of colossal buildings; the streets that were bustling with traffic only hours ago are littered with the burnt frames of cars and the shards of shattered windshields. The piercing sounds of women shrieking and the cataclysmic rumble of buildings falling are gone, replaced by a painful, eerie silence.
CHAPTER 2

The steel city nears the end of its metamorphosis from night into placid morn. Manmade light passes through the windows of vacant skyscrapers, puncturing the darkness, giving shape to the black void of night. Cars hum as they traverse the lonely bridges, crossing the rippling water which shimmers under the glow of the crescent moon.

Brown eyes study the city through strands of wiry hair. Their gaze dances up the silhouettes of buildings to their spires, glides back down their sides and on through the streets. They stop to marvel at the shadowed giants in the distance and the little lights scattered about them like stars in the night sky.

In its vastness, it was humbling. In its stillness, it was soothing. But a painting is merely canvas to the observer whose eyes are closed; and so it was the same for Ray, whose thoughts clouded the magnificence of the view from his apartment and limited the daunting landscape to the spectrum of his mind.

The apartments were erected on the crest of one of the many hills overlooking the city. Ray and his caretaker, Charlie, had moved here from the suburbs when their previous landlord had evicted them for missing payments.

Ray was a junior in high school at the time of this forced migration, and he had fought voraciously to remain in his school for his senior year. Ray was used to the fight; he had fought for everything he had: for his friends, for his grades, even for his caretaker, who was nearly strangled by alcohol’s noose following the death of his best friend and
the acquisition of his thirteen-year-old son.

Ray knew what his responsibilities were, and as a result labeled normal teenaged excitement as frivolous and asinine. Why go to the movies when there were chores to be done? Cars are dangerous without the added distraction of rowdy passengers and blaring music; why risk becoming a statistic smeared on the pavement when your legs work just fine to get you where you have to go?

Ray went to school, worked his part-time job at Henry’s, a deli in Pittsburgh’s strip district not far from his school, and that was about it. His friends labeled him as boring, and criticized him for always being busy, but he couldn’t care less; at least he had friends.

As Ray stared out at the world, his mind was unsettled, nestled in the gray area between frustration and madness that is nervousness. If only she knew how she filled his thoughts: her silky hair, her penetrating eyes, her strong yet slender body. It intoxicated him and possessed his mind on this night more than most as his feelings for her lay scrawled on paper neatly folded under the light of his desk lamp.

Ray had rehearsed the encounter for weeks. He was not poetic, but his friends had told him that girls loved poetry. When he presented this notion to Charlie, he had responded with a forced “Daddle do da trick” before passing out on the green, fabric sofa.

Charlie was in his mid-forties, balding, and rarely conscious. He had a regular habit of skipping meals, though one wouldn’t have guessed it by looking at his stomach. His excuse for not exercising (or moving at all for that matter) was the same excuse Ray’s parents had for not being there for his middle school graduation.

Charlie was the lone survivor of the car crash that had claimed his girlfriend and Ray’s parents. Along with the psychological trauma that accompanied watching his friends die, Charlie
had also severely damaged his leg. He lived from disability check to disability check, never making any attempt to properly heal his battered limb. The only times that Charlie could be seen moving, were the days when he’d make his way to the liquor store. “You’ll be old enough to do this for me soon, big guy.” he’d laugh as he pulled on his dirty Steelers windbreaker and hobbled out the door.

Despite all of Charlie’s shortcomings, Ray still cared for him. He latched on to old memories, memories of Charlie telling funny stories, pitching a tent in the rain, playing cards with his mother and father. Those were the good days….Today had the potential to be one of those good days.

Ray had taken Charlie’s “advice” and composed a poem for Nova. It took him about four hours to write. He must have read it thirty times before he entered the schoolyard later that morning.

School yards. If you’ve been to one of them, you’ve been to all of them: students laughing at one another, cuddling with one another, and swearing at one another.

Ray was comfortable amidst this throng reeking of overbearing Axe cologne and Pop-Tarts. Here he could find conversation, the soothing element that he had missed while struggling to find rest the previous night.

He entered the building and scanned the lobby for his friends, using his height to look over others’ heads. Ray spotted one of his friends in a black hoodie listening to his I-pod in the far corner of the room. Ray picked up his pace and headed towards him, sneakers squeaking off of the tacky floor. A finger jabbed into Ray’s back followed by a girl’s voice.

“Good morning Ray!”

Ray jerked and dropped the book bag he had clenched in his hands. He spun around in a
flash and faced the culprit, a girl, whose shoulders were heaving with laughter. Ray’s face was beet red, and he began to sweat profusely. Her laughter didn’t help.

“S-s-sorry,” she slipped out through her giggles. “You scare easily.”

“Startle.” Ray frowned. “You didn’t scare me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry Mr. Tough Man.” She flexed her arms and wrinkled her brow.

“You’re a jerk, Nova.” Ray opened his eyes wide and stuck out his lower lip.

“Whatever…” She smiled.

Nova was a pretty girl who stood about a foot and a half shorter than Ray. Her smile was white and shone all the brighter through her full, red lips. Her eyes were a dark brown, almost black, and they twinkled like the stars of a cloudless, night sky. She had long chestnut-brown hair that was always pulled back in a loose ponytail. A few strands of hair fell down over her face in a manner inexplicably alluring. Her skin, usually snowy, was red as she recovered from her fit of laughter.

“Very funny,” said Ray.

“Yeah, it was,” grinned Nova, her laughter subsiding. “Hey I’ve gotta go. I’ll talk to you later, ‘kay?”

“Kay.” Ray mumbled.

Nova shot Ray a big smile and started to walk by him. What was he doing? It was now or never. He reached out his hand and stopped her by touching her shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“I wanted to tell you that, well, umm…” Ray’s voice trailed off as he began to blush, and it appeared that he was under a great amount of pressure to get off what he was trying to say.

“What is it?”
“Um I was kinda wondering if you…um…Wanted to walk home together after school…today.”

“Sure?” she replied curiously. “I’ll meet you outside on the bench.”

She said goodbye again and walked down the hall to talk to a group of girls. Ray slapped himself repeatedly on the forehead with his open palm.

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!”

A group of kids dressed in black clothes with chains dangling from their pants looked up at him and then whispered and chuckled to themselves; Ray huffed off to find his friends.

First period. Ray wedged his body into his tiny, plastic desk and propped his feet up on the back of the desk in front of him. The teacher droned on the entire class. The occasional squeaking of his marker on the white, dry-erase board was the only break from the rambling. Ray glanced up occasionally to show that he was “listening” and then returned to his nervous thoughts of the afternoon walk and his artistic masterworks, penciled little dragons which clambered up and down the sides of his otherwise empty lined paper. Hours seemed to pass before the ring of the bell. When it sounded, Ray bolted from his seat. Nova was in his next class.

Nova took notes diligently and crumpled her brow with thought when analyzing text. As she pulled her head from her book to retie her ponytail, she caught Ray looking over at her. She stuck her tongue out and pointed her fingers to her head like a pistol. Ray laughed.

“See? Shakespeare really is a subtle humorist.” The teacher motioned to Ray from the front of the room. “I’m glad somebody in here caught the irony of that last line!”

Ray smiled awkwardly. Nova put her hand over her mouth and laughed quietly. The bell rang far sooner in this class.
In its entirety, the day was entirely too long. The dried up tuna salad sandwich that passed for Ray’s lunch was flavorless, and Honors History didn’t have much zing either. He dragged his feet across the thin carpet while changing classes, and Nova was with him everywhere he went, though she did not know it.

“Hey yo!” Ray shook himself out of his daze and turned to face the familiar voice.

“Hey Dan, what’s up?”

Dan was a friend that Ray had had since elementary school. He was much shorter than Ray, but found a way to pack on about the same amount of muscle onto his stocky frame. Dan played for the football team as its fullback. He wasn’t terribly good, a trait shared by the entire team, but he enjoyed flaunting his letterman jacket and wearing his football jersey around as much as humanly possible. Ray sometimes wondered if he owned any other clothes.

“Dude, you’ve been off all day. I seriously heard like one word out of you at lunch. What’s up dude? Charlie drinkin’ again?”

“Charlie’s always drinking, man.” Ray smirked. “Nah, it’s something else today.”

Dan bumped into a freshman girl, but paid it no mind. “Spill it, Tract. Com’on. Wassup?”

“It’s nothing really, man.”

“You just said it was something, dumbass. Spill. It.”

“Fine, promise you won’t tell any of the guys, ok? Especially Blake, that guy can’t keep a secret to save his life.”

“Right hand up, man.”

“I was gonna ask Nova out today after school…”

Dan jumped in front of Ray; he was grinning ear to ear. “Well it’s about damn time, Romeo. You guys have been shooting googely eyes at each other since before the dawn of time.”
“Shhh. Keep it down, man. You know we haven’t. It’s just me. She could have any guy she wants.”

“Then why is she still single, genius?”

“I dunno… just waiting, I guess…”

“For you!” Dan punched Ray in the chest.

“I seriously don’t think so, Dan. But, I figured senior year, going to college and stuff. If she turns me down….” Just saying those words gave him a weird feeling in his stomach.

“You won’t have to be all awkward about it for too long.” Dan finished. “But you guys are best friends, man. It’ll be awkward no matter what.”

“Geez, thanks for the support, bud.”

The bell rang over the loud clamor of students.

“Hey, I gotta get to class. Kill it, Tract!”

“I’ll try, bro.”

Dan disappeared into a throng of students, and Ray made his way to a study hall. Forty minutes of nervous thoughts before the end of the day sounded swell.

The final bell of the day rung, and Ray quickly walked from the classroom to his locker where he promptly dumped his book bag and all of his books. He’d decided he would “take the day off” from studying. After closing his locker on his backpack strap, Ray screwed up his combination trying to free it and drew attention as he cursed and pulled at his locker’s tiny, metal handle. After this trying test of patience, Ray flew down the stairs to the courtyard in front of the school, hoping she hadn’t already left.

She was there, waiting for him; kicking at a fallen twig while sitting on an unfinished, wooden bench.
“Hey.” Ray asked apprehensively.

“Hey, what took you so long?”

“Locker tried to throw up my backpack.”

“Gross.” Nova laughed.

The pair started to walk home discussing their boring days. It was a one-sided conversation. Ray just couldn’t seem to talk freely to her as he was accustomed.

Nova and he had been friends since 8th grade. She wasn’t in Ray’s class then, but he remembered seeing her for the first time at the calling hours for his mom and dad. Her dad was one of the frequent customers of the garage that Ray’s dad and Charlie had worked at.

Ray would never forget that day. He sat in the hallway outside of his parent’s viewing room, adorned in a suit, which under any other circumstance would have been sharp. She was wearing a purple dress with big, black buttons.

“I’m sorry.” She had said.

Ray hadn’t responded. He just shook his head and frowned. She had looked back to her dad, and he gave the air in front of him an encouraging push.

“My name’s Nova, our dads were friends. I heard he was a great man.”

“He was.” Ray had mumbled looking down at his shoes.

“You’re going to Westgate High next year, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too.” She pushed a strand of hair from her eyes. “I went to Avalon Middle. I heard the high school’s weird. It would be nice to know somebody from Belleview Middle. Get rid of some of the tension of the ‘big merger’.”
“Yeah,” Ray had said. “I was a little nervous about that too. I don’t know anybody from Avalon.”

“Well, now you know me.” Nova’s smile was warm and full of understanding. Ray had smiled back.

“Would you like to come to Kennywood with me next Saturday?” she asked, obviously a bit embarrassed. “I mean, I know we just met, but there’s nothing like the Phantom for clearing your head.”

Ray didn’t really want to go then; he wanted to just be sad forever, but for some reason he had said yes…

“You ok?” Nova snapped her fingers in front of Ray’s nose.

“Yeah, sorry.” Ray said kicking a penny on the sidewalk. “Long day, I guess.”

They were walking down the alleyway between what used to be the movie theatre, now town’s newest Dollar General, and a run-down diner. It was a dim alley, but Ray knew it well. It was the way he had always walked home, back when he lived near the school. Nova was tense.

“Are you sure this alley’s safe?” she said with a slight quaver in her tone, as if the brick walls of the two stores would close on them any second, like a death chamber in an action movie. Ray, who was looking at his shoe and crinkling the poem in his hoodie pocket, didn’t hear her.

“Ray, is there something wrong? You’ve been quiet the whole walk.”

“Well…” Ray said quietly. He gingerly slid the note into her small, warm hand, looking down at his shoes the entire time. Ray’s hands joined in his hoodie pocket, where their thumbs could twiddle. Nova unfolded the note and read sheepishly from it.

The ensuing silence lasted an eternity. Ray couldn’t tell what she was thinking; he dared
not look. Such a long pause, why was she saying nothing? A hand reached inside Ray’s pocket and grazed his. Ray looked up, nerves making him sweat. Nova met his eyes warmly.

“That was very sweet. Thank you,” she whispered pulling closer; Ray could feel her warm breath on his neck. Her breath became shaky as she pulled herself to Ray’s level by his collar. Ray closed his eyes and felt her lips press gently into his. She ended the kiss letting herself fall to her true height. She wrapped her arms around him, and Ray did the same with her. His arms fit perfectly over her shoulders.

“This is a little weird, huh?” Nova whispered, smiling wryly. Ray was somewhere between elation and shock.

“A little.”

They stood there embracing one another as if time was no longer relevant. To hold someone close, to feel their heart beat with yours, Ray couldn’t fathom the moment, but still wished it would never end.

Something clattered at the end of the alley and the pair split apart. A trashcan had been knocked over and its rancid contents had spilled on the pavement. A grungy man in an oversized, black sweatshirt knelt beside the trashcan and examined the mixture of solids and liquids that had escaped its confinement.

“Cloud man… never trusst a cloud man…” he whistled from his chapped lips, and through his scraggly, grey beard. “They’re coming… no damn it they came!” The man stood up abruptly and kicked the side of the plastic trash can.

Ray felt Nova’s hand slide into his.

“We should leave…” she whispered, not looking away from the homeless man. Ray nodded, half-heartedly and the pair started to back out of the alley.
“He’s looking for him! Can’t find him! Where’d he go?!” The man cried out, scratching his yellowed nails along the outside of his navy, wool cap.

He was by no means the first “out of touch” person Ray had happened across in the poor town, but nevertheless the appearance of someone who was not altogether there made Ray feel guilty for being normal. Ray was sure that deep down Nova felt the same way, but as he glanced over at her all he could see was the fear and nervousness on her face. It made her brow furl.

“Okay,” she whispered again as they backed out into the light of the main street. “Let’s just take the long way home.”

Just as the pair had taken their eyes off of the man and began to walk away Ray heard something else fall in the alley and the man’s voice echoed around the bend.

“Where is Raymond Tract?! I don’t know no Raymond! Everybody loves Raymond… but not me!”

Something in Ray’s chest sunk. Nova met his eyes with a concerned glare.

“Did he just say?” she sputtered.

“ Couldn’t have,” Ray said shaking his head. “He’s just a crazy, old hobo. It was probably just some random words he heard from that horrible Raymond TV show.”

“Are you sure?” Nova pushed a strand of hair from her face. She was tightly clenching the straps on her backpack.

“Positive,” Ray smirked. “No way it could have been me. I think we’re both just trying to make sense of gibberish.”

“Okay,” Nova shook her head and smile faintly. “Silly hobo, tricks are for kids.”

“Haha, yeah,” Ray grinned. The pair continued their walk home, swapping small talk, letting themselves be convinced that they did not hear what they knew they heard. Holding hands
The fact that Ray and Nova were dating had somehow reached the school before either of them had arrived that morning. Their graduating class was a small one, and news travelled quickly, even to people who were not necessarily your friends. Ray got a pat on the back from someone on the track team, and barely escaped a group of band kids before he ran into Dan.

“Good one, Tract!” He said bumping fists with a still-dazed Ray. “I knew you had it in you! What did I say?”

“How does everyone know about this?” Ray spoke quietly as if the walls were listening in.

“I have no idea, man.” Dan shrugged, plucking a loose string from his jacket. “Word travels quick I guess… There she is, dude!”

Dan was pointing to Nova who had just walked in the door, only to be swarmed by a rather large group of her friends.

“I probably won’t be able to get in two words with her today…” Ray put his hands in his pockets. “Who has that many friends?”

“Certainly not you, man.” Dan laughed. “You’re like some kind of hermit or something. It’s a miracle you have a girlfriend now.”

That word sent a weird burning feeling down Ray’s throat, as if he had swallowed a hot coal. He felt his hairline become hot and suddenly his scalp was itchy, but certainly he couldn’t scratch it. What if he had dandruff…

“Hey Ray-man.” Dan waved his hand in front of Ray’s face. “Relax bro. Maybe you won’t have to worry about saying something stupid if she never talks to you. Keep the
relationship to texts and Facebook stuff. Maybe it’ll work out.”

“I’ll have to talk to her sometime…” Ray smirked. “Hopefully not until the end of the day though, when all of the idiots are…”

“Hey!”

Ray turned around as purple as a beat and was face to face with Nova who had a small gaggle of girls in her wake.

Ray muttered something that sounded like “hello”, “what’s up”, and “hey” all mashed into one hideous word. Nova smirked and rocked back and forth nervously on the balls of her feet.

The two of them felt like gladiators in a coliseum, encircled by anxious spectators waiting for one of them to make the first move. Ray could feel their eyes on him, and hear the clicking noise of Dan sending a text on his phone behind him.

“How did you sleep last night?” Nova asked, her pale skin was looking almost tan with redness.

“Like a log.” Ray smiled, proud of himself for being able to compose an adequate answer. “You?”

“Like a rock.” She grinned.

“Did you do the homework for Mr. Jones’ class?” Ray asked.

“Yeah…”

“Wanna help me with it?” Ray frowned. “I left all my stuff here yesterday, like an idiot.”

“Okay?” Nova looked down at her shoes. Ray turned and started to walk to one of the open study lounges at the far end of the lobby, and she followed him sheepishly. When the two sat down they breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief.
“You get ambushed too?” Ray asked as he took out a pencil and a crumpled piece of paper he had taken from home.

“Yeah!” Nova took out her homework. “It was ridiculous. I’m pretty sure one of my friends thinks we already have a kid on the way.”

“Wow…” Ray tried to flatten his paper out.

“Yeah, we haven’t even kissed too much or anything…” Nova turned red.

“I know right?” Ray tried to sound surprised. “I mean, we’ve only been doing… this dating thing for like…”

“Hours?” Nova offered.

“Yeah! What do they think we are, like skanks or something?”

Nova grinned. “I’ve heard things about you Ray…”

“I’ve never done a skanky thing in my life!” Ray tried to sound offended.

“What about that night with those forty-six Mexican strippers?” Nova winked.

“You got me!” Ray raised his hands in the air like he was being held at gunpoint.

The bell rang and Ray took Nova’s homework to his first period class where he hoped he would be able to copy it without drawing too much attention to himself.

Ray returned Nova’s homework to her at the beginning of the next class.

“I owe you one.” He whispered sneaking the paper onto her desk.

“You owe me a date.” She retorted, smiling. “Whatever you want just surprise me. And don’t make it too expensive because I expect you to pay like a gentleman.”

“You’re liking this too much.” Ray frowned.

“Hey if you get to call me your girlfriend, and brag about me to your friends, I assume you have already done. Than the least you can do is take me on a cheap date.” She pushed her
hair out of her face in an exaggerated manner. “I like ice cream. Just saying.”

“Bossy much?” Ray laughed. Nova pretended to ignore him and looked up at the front of the room.

“Fine.” Ray muttered. “Ice cream it is.”

“I’ll pay for my own.” Nova smirked. “I was just being a girlfriend there for a second.”

“Whatsoever.” Ray stuck his tongue out and walked to his seat.

During class the two couldn’t stop shooting glances at each other. Dan, who sat two seats behind Ray, threw a pencil at the back of his head when the teacher turned around and made a kissy face. Ray tried to ignore him, and made an attempt to look over at Nova less even though he could feel her eyes on him.

When class was over, Ray left with Nova on his right and Dan on his left. The three of them started talking about where they were going to watch the Steelers play that weekend when the secretary’s voice came over the intercom.

“Click. Raymond Tract to the office, please. Raymond Tract to the office. Click.”

Ray gave Nova a quick hug, and high-fived Dan before making his way to the office. The last few times he had been called to the office, it was because Charlie had forgotten where something was in the apartment, and didn’t want Ray’s cell-phone to go off in class.

When Ray entered the office though he saw the principle talking animatedly with the secretary. When the door closed behind Ray, his principle faced him and simply pointed to his office. Ray, confused, made his way into the most feared four walls of the school and sat in a chair that might as well have had harnesses and nail marks from where students had been tortured.

The principle slammed the door behind him and took his seat across the desk from Ray.
“Why is the school receiving calls about your attendance here from government agencies?” A thin vein throbbed where his grey hair was receding.

“What?” Ray stammered. “I didn’t know about any calls.”

“The FBI called this morning to ask if you were in attendance here and they asked me to send them a copy of your transcript with your birth certificate.”

“But you don’t…” Ray looked confused.

“Exactly, Mr. Tract.” The principle growled. “I don’t have your birth certificate. When I asked why the man on the phone thought I would have such information he hung up. Was this some kind of prank call you and your friends thought would be funny?”

“No, sir. I don’t…”

The principle cut him off. “Because impersonating a federal officer isn’t “funny” or “cute,” The man aggressively quoted the air with his fingers. “It’s illegal, Mr. Tract.

“I seriously don’t know anything about any of this!” Ray’s confusion elevated his tone.

“Honestly.”

The principle gave Ray a scrutinizing look. “Because you haven’t really had any behavioral problems, or grade-related mishaps since you’ve been here, I’m going to let you off with a warning.” Ray’s heartbeat slowed and his muscles loosened.

“But,” the principle continued. “If I receive another one of these calls, I will be forced to take action. Capisce?

“Yes, sir.”

“Get outta here.” The principle gestured to the door.

Ray walked through the hallways slowly back to his last class. *Who would have called the school asking for his personal information? It sounded like something that Charlie would...*
have done, but he never would have identified himself as the FBI. Ray pondered these questions for the rest of the day, deciding he would bring it up with Nova when he walked her back to her house after school that day.

After making it through six more periods of nervous attentiveness to the intercom system, Ray was more than ready to walk home with the girl of his dreams.

He found her sitting on the same bench she had been sitting on the previous day, only this time she was surrounded by friends who scattered at the sight of Ray like minnows darting away from a rock dropped in the pond.

“I’m so glad this day is over!” Nova threw her hands over her head when her friends had left earshot.

“Agreed.” Ray said, taking a seat next to her.

“I mean, seriously? How many times do I have to confirm the status of my life with people? We should just make it Facebook official so that we can stop talking about it!”

“What about the inevitable posts?” Ray asked.

“Screw that,” Nova said pushing a long strand of hair behind her ear. “I can turn off Facebook, I can’t turn off people.”

“I dunno,” Ray made a straight face. “I find many things turn me off. Vomit for example.”

Nova wrinkled her nose in disgust. “You know what I meant! And you’re nasty, you know that?”

“I’ve been told.” Ray mumbled.

“Just walk me home before I dump you.” Nova met Ray’s eyes and smiled.

“After you, miss.” Ray laughed. It was finally becoming easy to talk to her again. He felt
like all of the nervousness he had felt for weeks just vanished. It was as if they were in tenth grade again.

“I got called into the principle’s office today.”

“What’d you do this time?” Nova asked, kicking at a rock on the ground.

“Apparently someone who said they were from the FBI called and asked for my transcript, birth certificate and stuff like that. He thought it was a prank call.”

“FBI, huh?” Nova mused. “Are you a secret agent or something?”

“Not really a joke, Nova.” Ray mumbled. “I could have gotten in some real trouble. I just wish I knew who it was that made the call.”

“Probably Dan or something.” Nova rolled her eyes. She looked down at her hoodie pocket where her hands rested and back up to Ray.

“Already talked to him about it,” Ray said. “He’s an ass, but not that much of one. He didn’t do it.”

“That’s weird,” Nova reached out her hand to Ray and he awkwardly took it in his as they walked.

“Why would someone want my birth certificate? I mean that’s really important stuff.”

“Identity theft?” Nova shrugged.

“I don’t really have that much of an identity to steal…” Ray said. Nova spun in front of him and placed her hands on his chest.

“You have an identity that many people would kill to have. You’re a lucky, sweet guy.” Her eyes were so beautiful in the sunlight.

They hugged right there in the middle of the street. People walked past them, but they didn’t seem to notice.
“You should come over for dinner tonight.” Nova spoke into Ray’s chest.

“I have work until 10.” Ray frowned. The thought of calling off work sick flashed across his mind for a moment, but the sinking feeling of lying snapped him out of it.

“That’s okay,” Nova smiled. “Call me when you get off then.”

“Alright,” Ray tried to smile. Nova wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a peck on the cheek, and the two walked the rest of the way holding hands.

The deli that night was a disaster. Ray despised working the closing shift, due to the fact that he had to deal with the businessmen who were returning home from their high-profile jobs and who wanted their top-of-the-line meats and cheeses cut just so.

*If I ever end up being well off, I’ll stick with my pound of Isaly’s and half a pound of American cheese.* Ray thought, as he bagged pastrami for a man who was talking on his cell-phone between orders.

Ray worked through one of his breaks, not because he got paid any more to do so, but because he felt his coworkers would never speak to him again if he left them during the rush-hour invasion. As he worked he could feel his phone vibrate in his pocket: text messages from Nova, no doubt. He messed up an older woman’s order as he fought the urge to sneak back into the meat cooler to check the message.

By the time 9:30 rolled around, Ray was exhausted, sweating in his blue, Henry’s baseball cap. The two older women that Ray worked with packed up and left for the day, leaving Ray 30 minutes to clean the greasy, ham-covered slicers, and scrape smashed cheese from the counter before he could clock out for the day.

As Ray was sanitizing the second-to-last slicer, he heard the bell atop the entry door
“I apologize for bothering you,” The man’s voice was scoured but oddly, calming. “But I have a possibly absurd question. Do you by chance attend Westgate High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania of the United States of America?”

“Um,” Ray paused, trying to catch up with the question. “Yeah, I do. Why?”
The old man’s face lit up.

“Well that’s just wonderful!” he smiled widely showing off coffee-stained teeth. “And tomorrow is a school day, I assume?”

Ray put down his rag, and turned his full attention to the man. He’d dealt with what his coworkers and he called “night-walkers” before, but this man seemed far more articulate and sharply dressed than anyone he’d conversed with in the past.

“Yeah,” Ray tried to sound pleasant. “I have school tomorrow.”

The old man looked almost ready to burst with joy.

“Marvelous, marvelous,” The man leaned on the counter. “And what is your favorite subject of study?”

“Social studies, I guess.” Ray’s phone vibrated in his pocket again, but he didn’t take it out.

“It would be social studies!” The old man waved a finger very matter-of-factly at Ray. “I bet you receive top marks!”

“A’s and B’s mostly,” Ray muttered. “So, I’m gonna probably get back to cleaning now if that’s alright with you?”

The old man made awkward eye contact with him, still smiling.

“I understand ma boy, business first.” He waddled over to one of the waiting benches across from the main counter and sat down. “Carry on, then I shan’t disturb you more than I have already.”

Ray was dumbstruck. The man simply sat down on the bench, put his hands on his knees, and began to observe the room as if he were a child in it. Ray didn’t know whether to continue cleaning or attempt to shoo the man out.
Eventually, Ray decided that the two could peacefully co-exist and he continued his cleaning, avoiding confrontation with the quiet man.

Ray finished his cleaning, and wheeled the slicers into the backroom so that he could lock them in the cooler for the morning. When he returned to the counter, the man had disappeared.
CHAPTER 3

“And he just sat there?” Nova asked, as she and Ray sat on the football field eating lunch the next day. Her pale legs reflected the sunlight and contrasted sharply with her dark skirt and the yellowish green of the grass.

“Yeah,” Ray said, squirting a ketchup packet on his fries. “It was weird. Just ‘poof’ and he was gone.”

“Sound like a Vietnam Vet or something.” Nova said taking a bite of her sandwich. “Dey haff a lot of dem at da halfway howsh on Main.”

“You’re so lady-like.” Ray smirked, biting one of the cafeteria’s soggy fries in two. Nova puffed out her cheeks. “I got da boy, why do I need to be lady-like for now?”

“True…” Ray smiled, watching a robin pick at crumbs left from the previous lunch.

The two sat in relative silence for the remainder of the period, both basking in the heat that indicated the approach of summer, and the end of their lives as high school students.

“Still going to the community college after high school?” Nova asked, pulling up a handful of grass.

“Planning on it,” Ray leaned back on the grass, and felt the blades poking through his long hair and pricking his neck. “Only option I really have, I mean I get some aide
cause of Charlie, but I still don’t really have enough you know?”

“Yeah,” Nova wore a concerned look. “But, I know you’ll make it work.”

“I can’t believe you’re staying in Pittsburgh for college,” Ray tried to sound as passé as he could. “I mean you could go anywhere with your grades. Why stay here?”

“I don’t mind it here,” Nova threw the grass clump at the sideline. “And don’t you play that, ‘you could go anywhere’ card on me. I know what it means.”

“What does it mean?” Ray sat up and looked Nova in her eyes. She pushed her hair out of her face revealing a devilish grin.

“It means you’re trying to be noble,” She folded her arms across her breasts. “Because you don’t want me to admit that part of the reason I’m staying here is for you.”


“I gotcha red handed, Rayyyyymond.” Nova poked him in the stomach. “But, don’t go inflating your ego too much. Pitt’s got a good business program, and I would have gone there regardless of our relationship. Plus, there’s free laundry if I come home on weekends. How can you beat that?”

“Can’t,” Ray smirked. “Maybe you can do my laundry too. I’ve been doing my own since I was like four.”

“Lies.” Nova grinned. Ray laughed. The bell to end the period echoed like a war bugle played from the enemy camp across the lush field.

“See you after school I guess.” Ray crumpled up his garbage and picked up Nova’s too.” Nova sighed and hopped to her feet.

“Honors Physics!” She pumped her fist emulating Rosie the Riveter. “Let’s do it!”

“Excuse me!” A voice shouted from the bleachers overlooking the field. The pair looked
up. The old man from Henry’s was sitting up on the top row, the sun beating off his head, he was fanning himself with a folder that had been left on the bench by a careless, ninth-grader. “Is this the end of your day, or is this simply your lunch hour?”

Ray looked on with the same sort of confusion that he had had the previous night. Nova, however spoke up, shouting to the bleachers.

“Who are you?!” She shouted.

“Hold on a moment!” The old man shouted back. “I’m afraid, I can’t hear you from up here!” The old man stood up awkwardly and began to descend the bleachers.

“Hey guys did you hear the bell?” Ray and Nova turned around to see Mr. Sawicki, the history teacher, bearing down on them, massive forearms arms exposed by rolled up sleeves.

“Period’s over kids. Off to class.”

“Sorry Mr. S.,” Ray said. “We were just…” But as Ray turned around to indicate the old man he found himself gesturing to an empty bleacher. Nova shot him a pointed look. Mr. Sawicki looked confused.

“We were just listening to music,” Nova jumped in, pulling her headphones out of her pocket. “Way too loud, you know how we kids are these days.”

“Miss Kline, I was a kid once too.” Mr. Sawicki smiled. “I know about the loud music. Just sit closer next time so you can see the other students leaving ok?”

“Deal.” Nova smiled.

“Off you go.”

“Okay, that was freaky weird.” Nova talked fast and she and Ray quickly ascended the stairs to their respective classes. “What is that guy, Houdini?”
“I’m glad you saw it too,” Ray huffed, as he took the steps two at a time. “I was beginning to think I’d gone crazy.”

“Well then we’re both crazy,” Nova said stopping outside of a closed classroom. “This is my stop. See you after school?”

“Same time, same place.” Ray forced a grin. She kissed him on the cheek and disappeared into the class.

Ray’s last class of the day went extremely slowly, and he couldn’t keep his mind off of the mysterious man. When he met Nova on the bench after school, it was apparent that she too, hadn’t had many thoughts outside of their strange encounter either.

“Vanishing, magic, old men...” She mumbled as she and Ray walked down the school’s driveway. “Not exactly the most soothing thought.”

“Yeah,” was all that Ray could muster, he had only thought of what he had seen, not much about how to explain it. The pair stayed silent most of the walk, occasionally uttering words like “teleport”, “old”, and “crazy veteran”. When the pair emerged onto Main Street, Nova decided that she needed something to drink to calm her nerves. As they drew closer to the Dollar General, they were almost distracted from the old man, when a heated debate broke out over the quality and taste of Sierra Mist and Sprite. That’s when they heard the familiar voice shout from behind them.

“I apologize for earlier today; I just didn’t want any snafu with your instructor.” The old man was smiling, clutching onto a half-eaten bag of potato chips.

“Who the hell are you?!” Nova clutched onto Ray’s arm.

“What a beautiful young woman; you must be Nova,” The man smiled, brushing a crumb off of his sharp, black uniform. Nova started to shake. “But how rude of me, I am General
Francis Conner, head of the third army of the New Global Empire.”

Nova’s nails dug into Ray’s arm.

“How do you know my name?” She scowled.

General Conner’s frowned, but his voice stayed sweet. “Now I know this must come as a surprise for the pair of you, but if you come with me now, I’ll explain everything.”

“Why would we come with you?” Nova turned to Ray. “Come on. We’re leaving.” She tugged on Ray’s sleeve for him to follow; he stayed put, his eyes glued to the man. The General seemed taken aback.

“I must take you to see his lordship,” he said, pleading. “These orders are directly from the man himself.” Ray glanced at Nova who yanked at his sleeve again.

“Sorry, sir,” Ray said grasping Nova’s clammy hand. “We don’t have any money or anything so we’re gonna leave, sorry.” The pair cautiously stepped away from the man.

“I imagined this would be hard for you. I am deeply sorry but I must take you with me. It’s not my decision.” The General wore an expression of sincere regret. “I know you must like this world very much, but I promise you, you won’t be gone long.”

“We won’t be going at all!” Nova snapped. Ray heard a few people talking loudly from across the street. The pair clutched each other’s’ hands. “You can’t make us do anything.”

“I’m sorry my dear.” The General dropped his bag and slid his hand into his pocket with a look of regret.

A gun. Ray thought. He was reaching for a gun.

Ray tugged Nova’s hand and the pair, ran down the street turning down the same alley that they had ran into the homeless man the previous day. The pair bolted hand-in-hand down the alley, toward the bright, open sidewalk of the street on the other side. Ray could hear voices
shouting behind them, but they kept running, he pulling Nova along.

“Help! Help!” Nova screamed next to him. Ray was breathing heavy as they drew closer to the other end of the alley.

A fuzzy spot of green appeared in the corner of Ray’s eye; his feet couldn’t move. He felt dizzy. His head was spinning, and the world around him grew darker by the second. The pressure of Nova’s fingers eased, and he caught a glimpse of her falling to the pavement before he slipped into blackness…
“Wake up,” A faceless voice whispered. “You can’t… Emperor…if… asleep.” Ray’s brain was tied in a knot; he felt the veins on his temple pulsating; his heart pumped like a bass drum. All he could see was the red of his eyelids. Wherever he was, it was far too bright.

“Come on now.” The speaker’s voice was shrill and high-pitched as it came into greater clarity. Ray shielded his face from the light with his hand and slowly pried open his eyes.

The voice came from a blurry man who looked to be in his late forties. He had a very thin neck on which rested a small head. Protruding from this was a particularly large nose, and perched on this nose was an enormous pair of glasses that magnified his beady, green eyes.

“Hello, Hello, Hello,” he chirped. “It’s good to see you up. I’m still not sure why the General insists on using the Sertorius. Probably causes some sort of brain damage, nothing really visible, but there’s no way…”

Ray sat up with a jolt and frantically observed his surroundings. Metal walls, needles, scalpels; where was he?! On the ceiling, a fluorescent light hummed as it lit the room with its powerful glow. He rubbed his chest. He was wearing a white shirt. He rubbed his leg; black sweats. Where were his clothes? Ray’s eyes darted back to the man with the glasses who was still chattering.

“Nova, the girl I was with; where is she!?” He grabbed the man’s collar and shook
him. The man’s thin neck snapped back and forth. “Where is she?!"

The man tilted his head in the air like a feeding baby bird and started to whine. “In the next room but you can see her after your talk with the Emperor.”

“Now!” Ray had animosity in his eyes.

“Guards!” the man screamed. “Help! The boy’s insane!”

The door to the metal room flew open, and the handle clanged against the wall. Five men wearing the red hawk insignia on their black uniforms burst through the doorway. They harshly separated Ray from the screeching doctor. Their grips held him like a vice, squeezing and bruising his arms as he kicked and churned.

“AAARRGH!!!” Ray screeched. He felt his body being lifted and taken out of the room. He kicked, screamed, and pushed, but could not get free. The men loosened their grips and Ray fell to cold marble, bracing himself harshly with his elbows. Upon looking up, he found himself at eye level with a crouched General Conner. The old man smirked.

“So, you’re here for about twelve hours, and you already had Dr. Earling by his neck.” The General threw back his head and let out a deep laugh that shook his whole frame. “That man truly is annoying isn’t he?”

The weathered General was beaming in such a way that it was almost impossible to face him with animosity. The pricked hairs on the back of Ray’s neck relaxed slightly, and his harsh breathing subsided. His heart was still beating fast. Had he really been sleeping for twelve hours?

“I’ll escort him the rest of the way. You may go.”

Like obedient dogs, the guards disappeared. General Conner waited until they had walked out of earshot before extending his hand to help Ray up. Ray ignored the gesture and pulled himself to his feet.
“Where the hell are we?” Ray asked, trying his best to be calm. “What do we do now? See that damn Emperor you’re so giddy about? Or maybe you’d like to show me where my girlfriend… my friend is.”

“I assure you, she’s quite fine.” the General replied. “I wouldn’t…”

“Let me see her then.”

The General snorted.

“What!” Ray’s eyes were daggers.

“I’m sorry,” The General said trying to suppress his smile. “I’m not laughing at the fact that you want to see your girlfriend; that’s understandable. You reminded me of someone just then. It just struck me as funny. I apologize. As for your friend, she’s sleeping now. She needs her rest. I promise that your meeting with the Emperor will be short, fifteen minutes tops. After that we can see her. By then, I’m sure she’ll be ready to talk.”

Ray wanted anger. He wanted to hit and throw things. He wanted to be a hero, to save Nova from this strange nightmare, to go home and forget… But how could he fight this man? Conner wasn’t rough in speech or manner. He wasn’t forceful in actions or demands… *But what had he done in the alley?*

“You alright?” The General pulled Ray away from his thoughts, which unbeknownst to him was not advantageous.

“You frickin’ kidnapped me!” Ray shouted, Conner stepped back. “And now I have to speak to some strange cult leader I’ve never heard of!”

The remark didn’t faze the old man. “I think you’ll find him a little more familiar when you meet him in person.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ray snapped.

“Ray?”

“That is your name isn’t it?”

“Yes, but how do you…?”

“If you don’t wish me to call you by your name I don’t have to. Perhaps you’d prefer a nickname like Scooter or Action…”

“No.” Ray mumbled. “Ray’s fine.”

The pair walked quietly through endless hallways, the General in front and Ray following like wake to a boat. The hallways resembled the first room Ray had been in, cold, and metallic. Ray’s eyes drifted down to the black rod protruding from the pocket of the General’s black slacks.

“The Sertorius.” Ray remarked. Conner stopped and turned around to face Ray.

“How did you…”

“Or perhaps it would prefer a nickname?”

The General chuckled. Ray wasn’t amused. Conner, realizing this, removed the black rod and held it out for Ray to see. “It’s a really nifty device. It’s from another dimension. Just like you.”

Ray had fallen down the rabbit hole; this was just too much. Whoever ran this cult had some serious issues. Ray had read about groups like this before, people who believed everything they read in sci-fi novels. What had been perplexing, even frightening, was now understandable, even amusing in a sort of sick, contorted way.

“Another dimension?” Ray used his most sarcastic tone.

“Yes,” Conner grinned as he twiddled the rod in his hands. “This baby is the last of five
objects that our scientists were able to recover from our dimensional trips.” Conner’s smile
turned into a childish frown, “But I wasn’t supposed to tell you any of that,” he shrugged. “Oh
well,” and placed the Sertorius back into his pocket.

This old man was harmless. He was just a senile member of some creepy old cult. Ray
felt like he had a leg up on the old man. He was the more mature of the pair now. Besides,
everyone on the street had heard Nova shouting. The police would be here in no time to rescue
the pair of them.

Realizing that killing time until their rescue was the only thing he could do, Ray spoke
sarcastically about his “dimension,” the technology, the dress, and other pieces of miscellaneous
gabble. Conner listened attentively, as they walked, and didn’t interrupt once. It was like
speaking to a child, awestruck at every word.

The old man stopped, and Ray came to a pause next to him. Wedged in the silvery-metal
wall in front of them was a majestic, mahogany door. The hawk insignia was elegantly carved
into the varnished wood.

“It was nice talking with you, Ray. However, this is our stop. Everything’s behind that
say.”

The room Ray entered was circular and had a floor of slick, black marble that shone
under the glow of the many little lights anchored to the walls. Elongated columns stood
conjointly, their bases on the floor, their tops stretching towards the sky. As Ray’s eyes scaled
the obsidian columns, he noted in astonishment that the room had no visible ceiling. It must have
been painted, he surmised, to resemble the night sky.

A door on the opposite end of the room groaned open, and the rhythmic thumping of
heavy boots echoed about the columns. The men who appeared in the doorway wore military
clothes and stern faces. They did not spare Ray so much as a glance as they filed into two perfect 
lines. A man with an eccentric, one-feathered hat and a smug air about him walked through the 
middle of two lines, clutching a rolled up piece of parchment paper. He held it up in front of his 
stony face, and read it aloud crisply and methodically.

“On the verge of death, one man restored the world’s life! On the verge of all hope being 
lost, one man gave the world hope! On the verge of worldwide destruction and chaos, one man 
sought to restore order!” His eyes were aflame, and his crisp diction cut the air. “This man, the 
bringer of righteousness and peace, prepares to stand in front of you now! You will be humbled 
in his presence! Reduced to nothing in his eyes! Do you, young man, think yourself ready to 
meet his Eminence?”

Ray, who had been merely a spectator up to this point, was caught off guard by the man’s 
question. He hesitated. The room grew eerily quiet. Ray felt every eye in the room prodding 
him. The guns in the soldiers’ holsters seemed as if they might leap free and shoot him 
themselves…

“Enough! You’re frightening the boy.” General Conner entered the room flustered, but 
his presence chilled the occupants. “Sorry Ray, these men are artists of exaggeration.”

The man with the parchment scowled.

Another door on the far end of the chamber screeched open as if its hinges had never 
before felt the touch of oil. Four brawny men emerged from the open doorway, carrying elegant 
leather chairs with apparent ease.

Following the chair-bearers were three men who shared in common the shimmer of a 
dozen medals on their black and red-stitched uniforms.
General Conner slipped past Ray to join the men who were taking seats at the chairs.

The chair-bearers and the procession left with determination in their step. Respect laced with fear hung thick in the air. Ray’s mouth was dry, and his legs struggled to support him. Then came the hum.

It was slight at first. Then it grew louder. A draft through the open door gave Ray a chill. Louder still. Every soul in the room, ignorant or enlightened, shared intrigue... A body appeared in the threshold.

The body belonged to a harshly-aged man whose difficult gasps for breath could be heard from where Ray stood feet away. This embodiment of great age sat in a chrome chair suspended several inches off of the ground by no apparent aid. The man’s piddly legs dangling uselessly in front of him as he moved closer in his anomalous state of suspension. The suit draped about his wiry frame surpassed Conner’s both in elegance and metal.

The man’s visage was smashed and wrinkled, and his hair was all but gone save the scraggly tufts left like tumbleweeds above his watery eyes. Several tubes protruding from the chrome chair burrowed into the back of the old man’s neck. But these features, however distorted and aged, were not the objects of Ray’s fixation.

The man maneuvered his chair slowly and purposefully between the four seated men and stopped.

“My, my,” he mused. “What memories that face of yours bring back.” The man’s lungs were surprisingly powerful and his voice deep and frightening; all within earshot clung, like dead flies, to the web of his words. “I do believe I have informed my men not to tell you why you are here, is that correct?”

Ray couldn’t muster a sound; his eyes had to be deceiving him.
“I am sure that the suspense is clawing at you.” The decrepit paused. “This will be hard, if not impossible for you to understand, but we have *figuratively* dragged you two-hundred years from your time.”

Ray’s temples throbbed; his sense of safety and familiarity with the world around him disappeared. “Who are you?” Ray breathed more than whispered.

The third man in the row stood up. His stature was daunting. “Speak up knave! His Eminence shan’t strain his ears to pick up the notes of a pauper!”

“That’s enough, Jacob,” said the old Emperor. The tall man, irritated, took to his seat, arms crossed in spite. The Emperor returned his attention to Ray and smiled a barely-toothed smile. “Who am I, you ask? Don’t you know the answer?”

Ray did know. The man’s eyes looked deep into Ray’s, and the deeper they peered, the more inevitable the truth became. He had seen those eyes before, just this morning, in fact, when he looked in the bathroom mirror.

Ray felt like vomiting. His stomach churned, and his breaths came rapidly. It was all there: the expressions, the twist of tongue. Ray stared unblinking across the room into his own eyes, unblinking as well.

“You must be terrified; whereas, I find this experience exciting and promising. It has been far, far too long since I have seen my hair brown, my skin tight, and my muscles taut. I missed it so.”

“No. No…” Ray stammered stepping backward. “This is impossible.”

“I believed that at first myself.” The old man slid on pockets of air toward Ray, his chair humming. “But here you stand before me. What a miracle technology has brought to my feet!”

“It… it can’t…no…”
“Surely the shock will leave soon. I haven’t much time to spare on idle chatter. Where to begin…” The Emperor circled Ray like a shark would its prey; his mouth curled in hunger.

“Everywhere you have stepped today and will step forever is mine. I have acquired power that you cannot begin to fathom, and with it, I have secured the safety of the planet for an eternity.” He circled still. “Details and complexities require time to explain, but I doubt diving farther into the issue would do you much good, present state being as it is, so I shall spare you the intricacies. Long and short, sadly, I have not an eternity to enjoy this perfection; for I grow old.”

The Emperor ceased his circling and stopped in front of Ray. “I need an heir to inherit my prosperity after I pass. I have cheated death by halting the effects of aging, but this is only temporary.” He tugged at a liquid-filled cord protruding from his neck.

“Ray, you can carry on for me. You and Nova can live here in peace and safety…”

“And never see my home again,” Ray mumbled out of his half-dazed state. Perhaps he could reason with him. “What about Charlie, Dan, all of my friends?”

“Ray, they never could offer you what I am offering you now.”

“I don’t want this, whatever it is! I want to go home, with Nova!”

“Listen boy, you could live here with Nova and be rulers of my world together…”

“It’s everybody’s world. I don’t want that!” Ray spat, in trepidation. “This is crazy! You’re all crazy! I just want to go home!”

The Emperor seemed taken aback.

“The decision is yours, Raymond. Go, if you wish.”

An awkward, unintended smile appeared on Ray’s lips. Could he truly awaken from this living, breathing nightmare.
“There is but one condition.” Fire filled Ray’s chest. It felt as if he swallowed a hot stone.

“You must serve one year in my military.” Ray straightened up, repeating what the Emperor had said under his breath. The men, previously silent in the backdrop, broke into whispers amongst themselves. General Conner shot quick looks at Ray as if his gaze were forbidden.

“After your service, I shall return you to your home.” The Emperor’s voice echoed closure; this was not a decision to be argued.

“A year?” Ray whispered, praying that he had misheard.

The Emperor nodded. Ray felt hundreds of pounds pressing on him from all sides. If he didn’t make a decision soon, he would surely die from pressure alone. With even so much as a gesture, hee would change his life, and Nova’s too. But, there was something else, a feeling that Ray couldn’t remember having before. His head felt light, and an odd warmth crept down his spine.

“I… I don’t have a choice, then?” Ray mumbled to the polished floor.

“No.” The Emperor averted his eyes and painfully cleared his throat, swallowing the loosened phlegm. Ray felt the lightness of his head subside. “I will look after Nova here, at the palace, until your year of service has expired.”

“I have to see her.” Ray broke his passivism with fervor; he would not let all slip away. The Emperor smiled fiendishly like a cat playing with a mouse. The tall man grumbled in his seat.

“Very well then,” said the Emperor, wearing a condescending smirk. “I will assign you to six month’s training under the command of General Conner. It seems he’s taken a liking to you.”

Conner perked up.

“And you may visit her in two months. You are all dismissed.”
Two months? This hit Ray hard. The room’s occupants slowly filed out, letting the door slam behind them. The tall man held the door as the Emperor slid through, his eyes looking up at the painted sky. The last slam of the door reverberated. Ray, Conner, and four empty chairs, seats still warm, were left in the enormous chamber.

Ray prayed for the sound of cop sirens, the beeps of his alarm clock, the ringing of a school bell: anything that could save him, or wake him from this dream.

“What’s happening? I have so many questions…” Ray was shaking slightly, and a quaver could be heard in his tone.

“In time they shall meet their answers,” stated the General. “Now let’s visit your girlfriend before we take the subway out of this god-awful place. I really can’t stand the furnishings. Believe me, you’ll like my base of operations a lot more than here.”

Ray remained motionless, looking blankly at his shoes. The General placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’ll be fine. One year in the service is nothing. I have 50 under my belt myself. Come on,” The General paused, seeing that Ray had not budged. “Nova needs you right now.”
CHAPTER 5

“Two hundred years…” Ray mumbled as he followed Conner about the winding halls. “So this is
the future?”

“The present now, but yes I suppose at one point it was the future to you.”

“There’s nothing that I can do…” Ray whispered, thousands of fragmented thoughts
churned through his head.

“It is a rare opportunity,” Conner had taken a somber tone. “I suppose, if you’re looking
for any optimism.”

“Optimism’s good.” Ray muttered. It felt better to talk even if the words meant nothing.
“I’m worried about Nova. There’s got to be a way to convince my future self that she doesn’t
have to stay too.”

“She’s your incentive. Why would the Emperor change that?”

“When did I become so manipulative?!?” Ray shouted pulling on his hair.

“Be careful with what you say about the Emperor. A lot of people admire him for the
things that he has done.” Conner was stern.

“Well, sorry,” Ray balled his fists. “I don’t.”

Conner sighed. The pair was quiet until they reached the hallway where Ray had first
emerged.

“Take everything slowly,” Conner said, gesturing towards the door. “She knows even
less than you do.”

Fear laced with guilt held Ray’s hand away from the door’s handle. He wasn’t
sure he could face her. He wasn’t even sure he knew enough of what was going on to tell her.

Ray twisted the handle, and he could hear movement inside. When the door opened, Nova met his gaze quickly and sprung like a coiled snake, wrapping her arms around Ray in an embrace that could have well suffocated him.

She took short, wailing breaths and heaved profusely. Tears squeezed from her shut eyes making her eyeliner run onto Ray’s shirt.

“Ray where are we? W…what’s going on?” She stammered.

Even he wasn’t entirely sure what was happening to them. It was a fantasy. They were flung into the middle of some chaotic realm where normalcy was helter-skelter and topsy-turvy was commonplace.

“It’s alright,” Ray lied. “We are a good deal away from home, but I can get us back there soon I think.” Conner entered the room cautiously.

“Are you feeling better young lady?” he asked, sheepishly. Ray winced; he could see the trap the naïve General had sprung. Nova dug her nails into Ray’s shoulders and shoved him aside.

“It’s you! You’re the one who knocked us out in the alley. You sick, wrinkled bastard! Who are you!? And where are we!?“

Ray threw himself in front of Conner, trying to obstruct Nova’s wrath with his body. He didn’t know why he was protecting the old man, but something in him knew that the General was as much of an innocent in this as they were.

“This is General Conner; he’s the best hope we have for getting out of here.”

Nova gave the General a sharp stare, her eyes still red and wet with tears. Conner donned an expression of innocence and shock. “Can I tell her what’s going on?”

Conner nodded, afraid speaking would only further agitate. Ray held Nova firmly by her
shoulders and told her of his meeting with the Emperor, making sure to emphasize Conner’s disappointment at the old man’s insistence.

“No…” Nova’s brow wrinkled in disbelief. Her mouth was dry; a fear-induced headache escalated to a splitting migraine. Her voice curdled as she spoke. Loud, frequent gasps for air made it harder still to understand her. “I… this isn’t real!”

She tore from Ray’s embrace, dashed to the far end of the tight room, and began pulling things from the walls and throwing them on the floor. Vials, syringes, glasses all met their harsh ends smashing to bits on the metal. Ray extended a soothing hand but it too was slapped away.

Once the walls and tables were cleared of their contents and her throat had been ravaged from screaming, Nova sunk to the floor in the chamber’s corner and buried her head in her arms.

She spoke hoarsely. “My parents, my friends. A whole year? I already miss them. They’ll be so scared. This isn’t happening. I already miss them…” Ray took a step towards her, but the escalation of her tone froze him. “Not even you… You’ll be gone too…”

“No… uh,” Ray hunted for calming words. “I’ll see you. I’ll visit. Once a week… I swear.” Conner but a hand put a hand on Ray’s shoulder and shook his head solemnly. “A month?” Ray pled. Conner forced a faint smile. Ray had hoped he could talk the General into shortening the time, but he held strongly to the Emperor’s orders.

“Once every two months, Nova… please… I swear it will all be alright.” Nova didn’t move. She gasped for air between her tears. Conner pulled up his sleeve and looked at his watch.

“We should get to the subway.”

“No! We can’t go now!” Ray begged.

Nova hadn’t stopped crying. All Ray could do was watch as her little body trembled and her tears streaked her cheeks. The pain was immediate, and there was nothing he could do to
“You’ll never understand how sorry I am, really.” General Conner said, again resting his warm hand upon Ray’s shoulder, he whispered into his ear. “I will let the Emperor know of my disapproval of this action. But for now, all we can do is play the game. Ray, I need you to come with me.” Ray walked over and grazed Nova’s hair with his hand.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered.

She gave no reply.

Ray slowly left the room with Conner. With each sob of Nova’s anguish, guilt’s knife stabbed his heart.

Conner was silent with compassion and Ray with thought as the pair navigated the monotonous halls.

He didn’t have much to miss back home. Nova wasn’t like that. She was popular and loved. What she was going through, this withdrawal from compassion, he couldn’t understand.

Ray understood only the sadness painted so vividly on her face that it made his stomach turn. Conner slowed his stride.

“Want to talk?”

“Why are you so nice to me?” Ray mumbled.

“It’s not right, what they’ve done to you. If I were to be a strict old bat it would only make this hell fierier. I couldn’t do that to anyone, even a stranger.”

*Kindness. At least in this time not all emotions were absent.*

“About how far from here is your camp?” Ray asked, conversation being all he could offer the old man in return for his support.

“It’s in Paris,” replied the General. “And right now we’re in Munich.”
Ray had never been to Europe before. Normally, this would have meant something, but right now he could only sigh. A long trip, the only possible way to make circumstances worse; Ray felt like hitting something.

When he was ten, his dad and Charlie had taken him on a two-day car trip to visit a friend in Florida. It was hell. The windows on Charlie’s old pickup had been stuck shut for years, and the combination of the boiling sun, hot faux-leather, and body odor had almost made him pass out. The only thing he cared to remember from that trip was the four-story sandcastle that the three of them had built on the beach. His dad and Charlie eventually knocked it over wrestling in the sand, but for a short time, Ray was sure it had been the greatest castle ever constructed.

He shook his head and returned to the present. There was no way he was going to survive a trip all the way from Munich to Paris, especially on a dank subway which made a car look like a journeyman’s paradise.

“How long is it going to take to get there?” Ray asked, enthusiasm and hope void from his voice.

“Well, let’s see,” Conner said, looking up at the ceiling in stride. “With a stop on the way, I should say about ten minutes.”

Ray’s mouth dangled. Surely it was a joke.

The General picked up on Ray’s confusion. “Well Ray,” he said. “We are about 200 years more advanced than your civilization was, so it is only natural that we have, well… modified things a bit.” Ray’s mind was still in a knot.

“Don’t overthink it. We’ll be at the station soon.” Ray and the General turned down one metal hallway then another, none of them looking particularly different from the previous, until they stopped at another large, metallic door.
“Here we are.”

Above the door deeply engraved on a square piece of metal bolted to the wall were the words:

**Subway 286 Entrance Gate 12-B.**

The door slid open as if it had sensed their desire to enter it. What lay behind it was a cozy room no larger than a walk-in closet, its walls brushed steel. Conner gave Ray a nudge. *This is a very odd subway,* Ray thought as he examined the room. Conner examined Ray’s reaction with equal interest.

“Why is the subway so small?” Ray said placing a hand on the cold metal of the wall.

The General let out a deep laugh that resonated off of the room’s metallic walls. “Ray!” He laughed. “This is the elevator!”

Ray’s face was scarlet.

“We use elevators to go *up* and *down* in the future.” Conner’s eyes were wide, and he moved his hands up and down slowly.

“I’m not from that far in the past!” Ray exploded.

“Just a joke boy, calm yourself down.” The General reached out towards the wall behind them, and a keyboard flipped out from its depths. He spoke into it.

“Francis Conner,” he stated. The panel buzzed. He typed a few numbers on the keyboard, and it slid noiselessly back into the wall. As soon as it had returned, the door closed, and the elevator lurched to life. It was a slow descent, the elevator stopping occasionally to pick up other passengers, who after saying their names and typing their numbers, could travel with the General and Ray.

The door opened, only this time men flowed out instead of in.
“This is it,” said the General. “Subway 286. Nonstop military transport.”

It was an amazing sight. Ray estimated it to be about the size of two football fields laid sideline to sideline. The floor was black marble, but due to the presence of what seemed like hundreds of black-clad soldiers, its boot-scuffed surface could only be seen in fragments. The walls of the room were as tall as the floor was wide and made of thick clear glass which exposed the layered dirt and clay of the surrounding underground.

It seemed as if they had walked into the center of a massive cake layered with clay and tightly packed earth. Stones of various shapes and sizes were embedded in the dirt, and Ray could have sworn he saw the arm of a colossal skeleton.

Despite being underground, the station was brilliantly lit by several truck-sized fluorescent lights gripping the ceiling. It was as if the place were an afternoon lit by the sun on a cloudless day, though Ray had no inclination as to what the time was presently.

*This really isn’t home,* Ray thought. *There are no cops coming, no school on Monday, no Charlie when I get home. What will he think? Will he worry? Will he drink more? Will I ever see him again?*

Conner all but pushed Ray out of his trance and into the flocks of humanity in the room’s center.

Though it was all alien to him, something in the station stuck out as being particularly peculiar. “Where are the subways?”

Conner swerved in between throngs of soldiers. “They aren’t here yet!” he shouted over the chattering throng. “They come about every ten minutes!” Ray could feel the sleeves of soldiers graze his own as he slid through the tightly-packed crowd.

“But I don’t even see the tracks!” Ray shouted. “To be honest I don’t even see any ways
out of this station!”

The General spoke, still not stopping his stride. “They’re a level below us! If they were on this level all of the glass in this room would break when they took off!” Conner stopped at what looked to be a ticket booth. The man inside the booth was veiled behind fogged glass, but he spoke into a microphone so that all could hear him.

“Can I help you?” The man’s voice was muffled.

“Yes!” shouted Conner. “I would like two tickets to Fort Paris!”

The man in the booth spoke again. “Yes General Conner, sir. Here you go. Two tickets to Fort Paris.”

Out of a small slit in the booth popped two red tickets. Conner snatched them in his hairy hand and held them up to his face. “Cursed small type…” He thrust the ticket close to Ray’s face. “What gate is our subway at?”

Ray pushed back Conner’s hand so that he could make out the puny type.

“7-G?” Ray squinted. Conner snatched the ticket back and flew back into the crowd, Ray at his heels.

Several clear, glass tubes about seven feet high and three feet wide shot up from the floor below in the center of the chamber in neat rows. Conner stopped at one of these.

“Now we wait. Stick by me.”

They did not have to wait long. Soon a woman’s voice broke out from a nearby loudspeaker.

“Now boarding Subway 286 to Belfast Naval Base, I repeat, now boarding Subway 286 to Belfast Naval Base, stops at Fort Paris, Fort London and checkpoints along the green line.”

The tube in front of Ray opened up, and he and the General stepped in, followed by a
young man with short, jet-black hair. He squeezed into the cramped tube uttering apologies. Other soldiers had poured into their tubes two at a time.

“Sorry, everyone else had paired up.” The young man spoke in a rich voice that was pleasing to the ear. He was handsome, his jaw was chiseled, and his uniform was snug at the arms. “I can’t miss this train.” He awkwardly twisted his neck to look at the faces of his tube-partners. “General Conner would have my…General Conner!”

Conner laughed deeply. “That’s alright Chase; I won’t tell him.” Ray felt as if he were a sardine, wedged between an old man and a tube of glass; nothing seemed funny to him. The entryway to the tube slid shut adding claustrophobia to the discomforts; then, without warning, the tube shot into the floor at an alarming speed leaving the station but a memory of light and warmth as the trio descended into the cold depths of the earth. Ray felt his feet lift briefly from the ground and his heart leapt up in his chest. When the entry slid open again, Ray felt queasy. He felt like he was falling further and further away from the girl he knew to be still quivering on the floor stories above them now. But, if this was what he had to do to help her, he would hop through any hoop they put in front of him.

They were in a sleek subway car that was situated in the fashion of an airplane with rows of five stretching as far as the eye could see. The train looked as if it could accommodate hundreds. Several of the tubes, carrying passengers, had connected to other doors in the subway, and their contents filed neatly into their respective rows.

Above the seats were long, rubber restrainers. Ray had seen restrainers like these before when he had traveled with his class to Kennywood. It was the same kind that they used on their roller coasters; the ones that would do 360 flips in the air. Flips… Ray would try not to think about that.
The General and his two guests followed the trend and took seats next to each other. Ray was close to the General, and he could smell his salty breath when he spoke.

“Buckle your seatbelt Ray. These things go pretty damn fast if you ask me.”

Ray pulled down the restraint over his chest; it locked into place. The female’s voice rang over the loudspeakers…

“No. departing for Belfast on Subway 286; stops at Fort Paris, Fort London, and green line checkpoints.”

What happened next was a blur. Ray remembered just sitting there next to the General one second, and the next, his body felt as if it was being crushed on the chair behind it. The skin on Ray’s face was stretched to the back of his neck, and his vision blurred. After a handful of excruciating seconds, the Subway came to a slow halt. The restrainer held Ray tightly and prevented the resulting forward lurch from flinging him across the car. His ribs stung from the stop.

“Stop number one,” The voice on the loudspeaker rang. “Stuttgart.”

A man close to them with a big ears, blond hair, and dark brown trench coat stood up and exited the train via the tubes, and about two minutes later, the subway was roaring towards its next destination. Ray felt nauseous and stretched. He would take a two- day car trip in a weathered pick-up over this any day.

“Stop number two, Fort Paris.” The General and Chase pushed up their restraints and motioned for Ray to do the same. They then proceeded to the nearest tube and jetted upwards, this time at a slower speed. Chase, the young man, twisted to look at Ray.

“So what’s your name?”

“My name’s Ray”
“You new?” Chase asked, examining Ray’s scraggly hair.

“I guess so,” Ray replied. “I’m here to be trained by General Conner.”

“You’re lucky,” Chase said, looking upwards as if he was thinking. “I would have killed to be trained by someone like the General. A mouthy sergeant just trained me like he trained a million other troops; at least you get special attention.” Conner was pretending to ignore their conversation completely, straightening his hair using the reflection off of the glass tube.

“So,” said Chase. “Pardon my asking, but why are you getting special attention?”

The General butted in, not removing his gaze from his reflection.

“He’s related to the Emperor.”

“Oh,” said Chase, smirking. “Sorry if I offended you, little Excellency.”

“You didn’t offend me.” Ray replied, scowling at the moniker “little Excellency.” Chase let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. The tube stopped and the exit slid open.
CHAPTER 6

The brisk tingle of a fresh breeze danced across Ray’s skin, prickling the hairs on his neck; it was easy to breathe. This place was utterly contrary to the inaptly-named “palace”; here was blue where the palace was black, alive where the palace was dead, and vibrant where the palace was stoic. The complex was in the shape of a goliath circle, coliseum-like, and crafted of dusty, white stone. In the center of this massive ring was an elegant courtyard. Blossoming flowers and lush green grass filled the air with their sweetness. Just off-centered in the grassy courtyard was a truly breathtaking fountain made of what looked to be solid gold crafted in the shape of a tank. From the cannon of this shimmering, golden centerpiece poured sparkling, clear water which created a noise of blissful serenity as it fell to the surrounding pool.

A cement track encircled the courtyard, and from it, several flights of narrow winding stairs shot up into the floors of the complex above. Doors of various shapes and sizes lay behind thick stone railings on each floor of the fortress. It resembled an outdoor motel where each door could open to a view of the courtyard below.

Military personnel adorned in black scurried about the fortress like beetles. Ray looked up at the sunny, blue sky. At least it had not changed...

“So Ray…” Conner asked, pride glimmering in his sunken eyes. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” said the General. “At least you like it now.”

Conner’s tone and the glint in his eyes made Ray a little nervous. The old man turned to Chase who was starting to sneak away as slowly and quietly as possible.

“Jagger!” he spoke in a commanding tone. “Show this boy to his new quarters. I
think it would be alright if he bunked with you.”

“Yessir.” Chase saluted without enthusiasm.

“I’ve got some work to do, so I best be leaving you now. Don’t worry, I’m sure Private Jagger will take good care of you.” Ray drew close to Conner so that he could whisper.

“Mr… General Conner, is there any way I could call Nova tonight? You know, to see how she’s doing?”

“I’ll look into it,” he whispered, smiling.

After a firm handshake, the old man crossed the courtyard, scaled a winding set of stairs, and vanished from sight.

Ray felt like a child separated from his parent.


“Let’s get ya to my room.”

The room clashed with the bright and clean impression of the complex. It was dark, musty, and unwelcoming. The walls were dry, brown wood stacked like uneven Lincoln logs. A rickety bunk bed was rammed in the room’s corner and held together with rusting bolts that stained the wood. In the opposite corner, crouched an aged desk. Perched upon it was an ancient lamp, and stacks of worn comic books. Some newer-looking books titled Tactics I, Introduction to Mobile Armor Repair, and A Concise History of Empirical Military Achievements were shoved off in a corner. The tiny light from the lamp was alone in its attempt to illuminate the dismal space. If Ray had seen this room and nothing else, he would have assumed he traveled back in time as opposed to forward. Chase walked over to the bunk bed, took off his jacket, and flung it over one of the posts.

“You can have top bunk,” he stated bluntly. The air of the room was arid and woody like
the air in a sauna.

“Make yourself at home,” Chase said, pushing past Ray to get to the door. He slammed the door as he left, leaving Ray in the gloom.

Ray stood alone in the dismal space for some time, alone with his thoughts in a way he hadn’t been all day. Strange, though, the longer he thought about matters, the cloudier they became. Something was wrong. His life had been flung into disarray, yet it was an odd feeling that he had now, a relaxed feeling, a normal feeling. It was as if nothing unordinary had happened at all. Perhaps it was the trauma. Perhaps he had been shocked so thoroughly that he was now broken. A shell of a boy. A shell of a man.

Whatever the circumstances were, Ray knew that the cramped and dark room was doing nothing to free his thoughts, so he ventured again outside into the light. He walked about the complex slowly, observing the cottony clouds in the brilliant, blue sky. Soldiers gave him odd looks as they passed, but Ray couldn’t care less. He was looking for something in the azure sky, possibly something familiar, something he’d seen before.

“Excuse me,” Ray inquired of a short Asian man with a white scar stretching down the length of his face. His jacket had a medal on it that Ray hadn’t seen on Conner’s. It was in the shape of a skull.

“And why would you need to know that?” The man asked; his voice was choppy and dry.

“He said he wanted to see me,” Ray lied. The man pondered this for a second and then pointed across the courtyard to the second floor across.

“He’s in there probably. His office is clearly marked. I will escort you.”

Ray followed the man across the courtyard and up the stairs to the second floor. The brushed steel door had a silvery plaque at eye level that read:
The man rapped on the door three times. The sound of the metal reverberated with a deep din.

“I’m coming out. Just give me a minute,” the General’s voice echoed from the inside.

They waited patiently for several minutes until Conner slid out of his office door, closing it firmly behind him.

“Sergeant Oho, what is it?” he asked. The short sergeant stepped aside and pointed at Ray. “Oh, Ray it’s you. I didn’t see you. How can I help you? Where’s Chase?”

Ray searched his head for how to phrase what he wanted to ask. Oho saluted the General and marched back off into the complex.

“He wandered off. I was just…wondering…about Nova…” Ray asked.

“I’m sorry, Ray. I’ve been awfully busy. I haven’t been able to look into that. You could write to her, of course. The mail room is on the lowest level of the complex. I’m sure someone could direct you to it. Just don’t mention that you’re from the past in the letter.”

“Thanks,” Ray said, sensing the General’s eagerness to return to what he was doing.

“Sorry for taking time from your work.”

“That’s quite alright, Ray. I don’t know how I would handle it if I were in the same position you are in. Good day, boy.” Conner patted the side of Ray’s arm and stole away to his office.

There was a bit of relief in the knowledge that he could contact Nova, but it wasn’t exactly what he had hoped for, so he was a tad frustrated.

He followed a soldier’s directions to the mailroom on the lowest level. The room was a
little larger than an elevator, but not by much. Pressed up against the far wall were three marble cubes about waist high with wide flat screens on their tops. Above the cubes were signs that corresponded with them. The first read “HELP,” “the second “IN, “and the third “OUT.”” Ray naturally proceeded to the OUT box first and began running his fingers around the screen looking for some way to turn it on. After several frustrating and fruitless minutes he reluctantly made his way over to the HELP cube. The screen lit up at Ray’s touch.

He read the screen aloud.

“Click here for instructions on the operation of OUT box. Click here for instructions on mail retrieval. Click here for lost mail/ NGEID. Click here to contact postal manager…”

Ray pressed the screen where it said “Click here for instructions on the operation of OUT box” and the screen instantly flashed a reply.

“FIRST, please remove E-Pen from E-Pen slot on side of HELP box.”

Ray glanced down and saw a slot marked: “E-Pens: Please Return After Use.” He reached down, and to his surprise, a sleek metallic pen flew from the slot, hit his hand, fell with a faint clang to the plastic floor, and rolled away. Ray picked it up and scurried back to the HELP box.

“SECOND, Bring E-Pen to OUT box and gently click the screen.”

Ray did as he was told, hesitant to remove his eyes from the HELP screen, afraid it would disappear. The OUT box screen came to life with the lightest tap of the pen and glowed dully with the message: “Please present ID card or Verbal Confirmation.”

“What the hell?” Ray muttered looking quizzically at the box. The screen blinked again displaying the message.

“Please wait…Confirming Verbal Command.”
Ray took a step back and looked at the HELP screen as if it could sense his bewilderment. It, of course, just displayed the same list of directions it had before.

“THIRD, Follow directions on OUT screen. Utilize FULL NAME of recipient in RECIPIENT box. When blank paper is displayed compose your letter. Click DONE when finished.”

The OUT screen flashed a new message: “Voice confirmed: Raymond Tract, rank: Emperor. Sign your name and enter intended letter recipient.”

Two blank lines appeared on the screen. Ray wrote directly on them. The pen drew flawlessly as if it had been a real ink pen in his hands. Ray wrote Nova’s name, hoping the letter would be able to find her even though she hadn’t existed in this world two days ago.

The screen flickered again and displayed a blank sheet of paper. Ray hunched over the screen and began to compose his letter, primping and perfecting till his back was sore. When Ray had finished, the letter converted his scrawl to type and sat there for him to look over one last time:

Written to be read by: Nova Marie Kline

From: Emperor Raymond Brian Tract

Subject: none

I am so sorry things are the way they are. I wish there was some way that we could talk or see each other in person, but this is the only way that General Conner said that we could communicate (he’s a really nice guy, he seems to want to help me). What have you been doing? How are you feeling? I want to be here for you and I can’t apologize enough for what you are going through. I hope you get this letter fast and can give me a response. I really want to hear from you. Just hold on Nova, it’ll all be alright.
I PROMISE.

End of Letter

When Ray emerged from the mailroom, an orange glow was spilling over the sides of the fort’s chalk white walls. The sky directly above the fort had changed from light azure to dark, navy blue. Ray could distinctly make out the sound of crickets chirping in the courtyard, and the few fleeting steps of soldiers as they made their way to their bunks. It was a magical moment, looking up at that perfect sky. Ray found it hard to peel himself from its mesmerizing simplicity as he entered his dark quarters fifteen minutes later.

He awkwardly scaled the creaking bunk and plunked down on the mattress. The springs let out a shrill whine under his weight. He placed his head on the thin, dusty pillow and there, his tranquility vanished.

There was pain. The pain of guilt, the pain of loss, the pain of fear. His neck was stiff. When he attempted to fluff his pillow, dust filled the air, scratched at his throat, and clung to his moist eyes. Every way he laid was uncomfortable. The thin sheets wrapped tightly around his legs, and his arms numbed from bolstering the pillow under his head. The air suffocated, and the sheets constricted. Toss, turn, sweat. Muscles tightening and stinging. Surrounded by pure heat, inescapable. Close eyes, close.

Ray heard the door opened and wrestled with all his strength to free his body from the restricting darkness and gaze into the threshold. Nova stood in the doorway, the world behind her was orange and red. He reached out for her, but as he did, she grew farther away. He screamed her name but got no response. Ray jumped from his bed and was face to face with a cracked, mirror blotted with greasy fingerprints. The room around him had disappeared. In the mirror, he saw the reflection of the dying Emperor. There was a black ball clenched in his fist. When Ray
looked down, he saw the ball in his own hand which was now withered, and he could see a blue vein beneath thin skin. “Don’t be afraid,” a thousand deep voices echoed from nowhere. “She’ll be safe with us...”

“Rise and shine!” A voice broke the soft shell of Ray’s subconscious, spilling his mind back into the world. Hands tightly grabbed Ray’s arms, and he was thrust to the unyielding, hardwood floor. The air was slammed from his lungs, and his back stung where bone had met wood. Ray squirmed in the darkness, his bearings lost, the covers still clinging to his sweaty legs. Four shadowed figures became clear by the yellow light of the desk lamp.

The first man had the carriage of a rat, his back arched and his hands held in front of him stroking one another. His face was thin and his nose extended from it long and crooked like the spout of a kettle. Orange hair was evenly peppered on his greasy scalp, and he had an odd hunger in his eyes.

The other man was enormous with shoulders broader than the mattress on the bunk bed. The behemoth’s head was shaved, his forehead broad, and he wore a look of vacancy on his face and a black, velvet patch over his left eye.

A thin girl with short hair leaned against the bunk bed. The sleeves on her t-shirt were ripped off revealing well-toned arms. Makeup was thick around her eyes giving her a look like a raccoon. She was smiling wide, missing one of her canine teeth.

The last man was Chase, who was smirking at Ray, his hands crossed over his muscular chest which was concealed under a tight, white t-shirt.

Chase spoke, his voice was rich and deep like an organ’s bellow. “Well, well, it appears we’ve got a maggot that skipped inspection Rufus.”

The huge man’s voice was deep and stupid. “It would be just plain rude if we didn’t
The rat’s voice. “Yeah, we should make sure he passes The Fort Paris Inspection eh, Mal?”

“Let’s take him down to the courtyard and issue the inspection,” the girl said smoothly. Rufus grabbed Ray roughly by the back of his neck and dragged him out of the door, from darkness into darkness; Chase, Lyle, and Mal followed.

It was night, and the crisp air nipped at Ray’s face and hands. Ray’s body pounded on each stair as Rufus dragged him down; he was a sack of flour to this fortress of a man. Ray struggled, but his neck was in such a vice that escape was futile. Rufus thrust Ray onto the damp grass of the courtyard. He clambered to his feet. The wetness of the grass made his pants stick to the back of his legs.

“First ten!” the ogre roared. An alligator-wide smile stretched across his eye-patched head.

“Fine,” squeaked Lyle, disappointed. “But I get the next ten.”

“Just give me five,” Mal said. “Oho’s been rough lately.”

“I bet he has!” Rufus chuckled stupidly.

“Shut up, asswipe!” Mal snapped.

“I’ll finish up then,” smirked Chase, ignoring the others. His bulging veins following his hands into his front pockets. Ray put up his fists.

“We’ve got a fighter!” Chase chuckled. Ray was not small. He had been in his fair share of fights at school and had emerged unscathed from the bulk of them. Even though he was outnumbered, he would surely not let them walk all over him. Rufus stepped forward and cracked his knuckles; he then put up his fists and started to circle around Ray. In a blur, Rufus
had leapt at Ray as if to crush him. Ray managed a quick punch to the nose that sent Rufus reeling back clutching his face. Ray’s knuckles were screaming at him. *What was this man made of?*

Rufus muttered under his breath, rubbing the arch of his nose. He regained his composure and leapt at Ray again. This time he was too quick. Ray’s stomach surged, and air fled his lungs as Rufus smashed him to the ground. Once Ray was down, Rufus, pounded like a primate at his arms and legs. Ffump! Ffump! Ffump! *When would it stop?* Rufus clambered to his feet. Ray was now searing with rage, and pain enveloped his whole torso and all of his limbs. He struggled to hold back tears. His hands were shaking, and he could still feel Rufus’ knuckles in his muscles. He couldn’t get up.

“Next,” said Rufus as he slapped Lyle’s hand. Lyle kicked Ray swiftly in the stomach several times before walking back over and tagging the eager-looking Mal.

“He’s out already!” she shouted, disappointed. Ray was shaking but managed to get on his knees. For a second, he was able to look into the sky. The stars were bright against the outline of the fort. Mal kicked him in the chest, and when he reached for his gut, she kicked him on the side of the head. A flash of white.

Ray heard voices. The blades of grass were cool on his forehead. Chase strode nonchalantly over and hoisted Ray to his feet by the collar. Ray’s legs shook beneath him. Chase batted, almost playfully, at Ray’s face several times before Ray’s legs collapsed beneath him, and he fell face first in the grass again.

Blood from his nosed and lip dripped to the dirt. He winced with pain as his body burned; each breath stung his ribs. However hard he had tried to hold back tears, they had to come.
Chase backed up and formed a box with his hands to look at Ray. An artist admiring his work.

“Well, go ahead,” Chase put his thumb up to the starry sky. “Stand up.” Ray gathered up the little energy he had left. He slid his stinging arm down to hold his stomach.

“Well, go ahead,” Chase put his thumb up to the starry sky. “Stand up.” Ray gathered up the little energy he had left. He slid his stinging arm down to hold his stomach.

“Holy shit he’s trying!” Mal sounded impressed.

He clenched his teeth and used his other arm to push himself off the ground. *Nova.*

*Everything was for Nova.*

“Almost there…” Rufus chuckled. Ray coughed and breathed as deeply as he could. It felt like clumped sand in his lungs.

“Com’on” Lyle hissed. Ray dragged his feet, so he could crouch, and then, with a final push of effort, he stood, wobbling under the stars.

“Well I’ll be damned…” said Chase clapping. “…you actually passed inspection. Now let’s get you to the medical center and bandage you up a bit.” Rufus and Lyle clapped and whistled loudly. Rufus went over and gave Ray a pat on the back, sending him back down to his knees.

“Not many guys can stand up after inspection.”

“Yeah,” said Lyle helping Ray back to his feet. Ray wanted to hit him, but couldn’t help relaxing on his support. “Ruf ain’t used to people fighting back.” Pride crept out of Ray’s initial fury, but it wasn’t enough to mask the pain.

Ray felt a kiss on his cheek.

“Rough stuff, pretty boy,” Mal whispered in his ear.

Chase put his arm around him. Ray jerked away. “By the way kid, the General told me to give you this.” He pulled a piece of paper out his pocket and read it aloud. “It says for you to
meet him here, in the courtyard tomorrow at 5:00 A.M. for your first lesson.” Chase finished and shoved the paper back in his pocket. “Lucky bastard. Let’s get ya bandaged up.”

Ray was baffled. Were these not the same people that only seconds ago were treating him like a living, breathing punching bag? Rufus was smiling vacantly. Lyle was kicking playfully at the courtyard grass, Mal was sporting her gapped smile, and Chase’s smug look had underlying tones of warmth.

The man on duty in the medical office seemed perfectly disinterested in Ray’s bumps and bruises. He rifled through a metal drawer, carelessly tossed Ray a tangled mass of bandages, medical tape, a small bottle of peroxide, and motioned to the door with his hands.

Outside of the office, Ray sat on the cold concrete and tried, awkwardly, to dress his own wounds while Rufus, Chase, and Lyle threw rocks at one another in the courtyard. Mal was laying back in the grass providing commentary. After several minutes of contortion, Ray pulled himself up, and Chase and he left the others for their shared room. Not a word was spoken until they both were in their respective bunks and the dull lamp’s glow had been snuffed.

“Good job, kid,” Chase said. Ray did not respond; he traced patterns in the filth on the room’s ceiling until he and his fears fell to rest.

A kick from the bunk below woke Ray with a jerk. It was too soon for morning to have come already. Ray burrowed his head deeper into his pillow.

“Get up, lazy little Excellency,” ordered Chase, giving Ray’s bed another kick. “It’s already 4:50, and Conner can’t stand people being late.”

Ray sat up and scraped the top of his head off of the low ceiling. The reception of the letter had happened so late last night that Ray had thought it to be just a part of a dream. He
stretched in his bed, quickly regretting it because it reminded him of the many bruises he had scattered all over his body. Ray cringed and slowly climbed down the ladder of his bunk.

Chase was already dressed and spreading his arms up in the air.

“Oh boy,” he said smiling. “I had a great sleep last night.”

“Shut the hell up,” snapped Ray. Chase shrugged off Ray’s retort with a smile. The room was still only illuminated by the small desk lamp in the corner, which made it extremely hard for Ray to wake up, so he opened the door.

The outside, to Ray’s surprise, was not much lighter than the room. The courtyard grass shimmered with dew that had collected the night before, and the sound of splashing water added ambience to silence. Ray could groggily make out a figure standing next to the tank-shaped fountain.

“Damn it!” Ray’s outburst startled Chase, who had been standing on one leg stretching a second earlier. Thump! Ray turned around to see Chase scrambling to his feet, trying to act as if nothing had happened.

“What’s the matter kid? You nearly made me shit myself!” But he was too late; the room was empty.

Ray caused a ruckus as he stumbled down the stairs. He flew from the bottom landing into the courtyard, his rubber soles squeaking on the slick grass. Then Ray slowed down; this wasn’t the General. He came to a complete stop about ten feet away and gasped for air. This man was tall like a tree, thin like a rail, and stood perfectly erect. He was General Conner’s perfect contradiction. His hands were held behind him, and his fingers were interwoven and wiggled like snakes. He was looking up towards Ray’s quarters.

“4:57. Almost late and still filthy. Bad way to start a day, Tract.” His tone was ice, and
his grey eyes hypnotizing. Crazed, grey eyes. He was vaguely familiar. Ray heard noises on the steps behind him; Conner was slowly descending the stairs, accompanied by the short Sergeant Oho.

“Damn steps,” he muttered as he reached the landing. “Thirty years of military service, and I’m going to die walking down stairs.”

Ray smiled. Conner returned the gesture. No comment was made about the bandages and bruises on Ray’s face. The tall man ignored Conner’s joke and froze the old man’s happiness with his glare.

“Good to see you made it Jacob,” Conner struggled to be pleasant, Oho saluted. The tall man rose his head toward the sky; it was a wonder the clouds did not rain ice. Ray’s mind finally clicked. This was the man who had stood up during his meeting with the Emperor. One of the Generals; were there four? The man did not look down from the sky when he spoke.

“Greetings General Conner,” he said slowly. “Please don’t call me by my first name. It’s not proper.”

Conner scowled and put his hand on Ray’s shoulder.

“This is General Hoffenen,” he spoke calmly. “General, you’ve met Ray?”

Ray, trying to be polite, extended his hand to shake. Hoffenen ignored him and turned his stare from the sky to the fountain.

“General Conner,” he uttered in condescension. “Has this boy had any prior military experience?”

“No,” Conner responded. General Hoffenen preferred not to look at the person with whom he was speaking. His head tilted toward the upper floor of the complex.

“I’m here by order of the Emperor to assist the General with your training.” Ray looked
Hoffenen fixed his gaze to a not-so-special corner of the courtyard to address Conner. “This truly is a waste of my time, General Conner. I am sure, being the man you are, that you can see that. Two Generals? For one boy? It boils the blood to even speak of such nonsense. If you must train him, then you must, but please only call me if it is absolutely necessary… Which, I assure you, it won’t be.”

Conner was boiling. This man was his equal, yet treated him like an underling.

“Sergeant Oho will be handling the majority of his basic training,” Conner retorted.

Hoffenen turned, looking away from both of them and started to walk away, echoing his previous words.

“What a waste…”

The sun’s light poured over the walls of the stone fortress.

“Wait!” Conner shouted. Hoffenen stopped in his stride but did not turn. “How about we make a little deal?” Ray was taken aback. Hoffenen gave Conner the courtesy of speaking to his front.

“What are you talking about?”

“How about you come and issue Ray’s final exam? In, say, five months. It can be anything you want; just so long as you believe it is a good test of his readiness.” Hoffenen stroked his chin.

“What a quaint little proposition. Turning your mission into a game. That would do, I suppose. He had better be ready when I return.”

“Five months is all that I need!” Conner shouted back across the field. Before he had finished speaking, Hoffenen had disappeared through the door leading to the subway. Ray
couldn’t believe it; he was like some sort of betting chip. It wasn’t a good feeling.

“I can’t stand that man,” Conner grumbled. Oho shifted awkwardly next to him.

The beginnings of a fire burned in Conner’s deeply set eyes. “Don’t worry Ray,” he said. “When he returns, you will be more than ready for any task he can dish out. Oho and I will see to that.”

The Sergeant glared over at Ray, his eyes like a snake’s.

Other soldiers were coming out of their sleeping quarters now and were beginning to meander about. A horn sounded loudly. Conner patted his stomach which was packed tightly in his black jacket. “We’ll start after breakfast.”

Ray entered the mess hall with the General (Oho had insisted on patrolling the fort in lieu of eating). Ray could feel all of the soldiers’ eyes on his body. Conner left him and wobbled over to the food line to chat with a wrinkled old woman who was overseeing a young man serving sausage. Ray rolled his eyes and scoped out the room. It was just like his cafeteria at school. The soldiers were as loud and rowdy as students, the floors were just as gummy, and the ceiling bore the stains of thrown food and miscellaneous filth. Though this lunchroom was so like his, all the way down to the broken stools and grimy tables, it was missing something. In the far corner of the room sat a table of burly men right where Nova would have sat. Ray’s stomach lurched. He longed to see her more than he realized, and it had only been one day. He was stolen away from the happiest days of his life, and now he had to wait for two months just to see her smile. Hopefully she would respond to his letter soon. Ray was jerked back to reality by the sound of someone calling his voice.

“Hey Ray!” Chase’s voice was louder that the screams and jeers of a hundred men.

“C’mere!”
Chase was at a circular table in the middle of the lunchroom; with him were Rufus, Lyle, and Mal. Ray cautiously pulled a chair over to sit.

“So how did your meet with Hoffenen go?” Chase mumbled.

“How did you know that I talked to him?”

Chase’s smile grew wider. “I’m lookin’ out for ya kid. I was eavesdropping a little. So what? Arrest me.”

“Thanks,” Ray said sarcastically.

Chase bent low to the table and spoke in a whisper. “I heard that General Hoffenen’s training is difficult, so difficult that three of the soldiers he trained personally went mad.”

“Shut up Chase,” Mal snapped. “Don’t want to scare ‘im.”

“Yeah,” interjected Lyle. “Besides that’s probably not true anyway.”

“He does run the Special Ops division though,” Chase barked, defensively. He turned to Ray. “So the Emperor must really want you to be a well-trained soldier. Speaking of the Emperor,” continued Chase raising a brow. “How is he related to you again?”

Ray shifted nervously in his seat. “He’s umm, my….”

“What!?” Rufus, Lyle, and Mal burst in unison. Chase wore a nervous smile and moved over closer to Ray.

“What the hell, Chase?” Mal looked shocked.

“You didn’t tell me he was royalty!” Rufus roared.

“We could be jailed or something!” Lyle added.

“Cool your jets guys. Ray’s cool about it; right?” Ray brandished a cocky smile in Chase’s suddenly nervous face.

“I dunno…”
“Come on…” Chase was desperate. “We were only playing around. You can hit Lyle if it’ll make us even.”

“Hey!” Lyle squeaked.

Ray brushed his hair from his forehead. “If you get me something to eat, we’ll call it even.”

“Lyle’s on it.” Chase gave Lyle a shove, and the mousy man reluctantly got up and headed over to the line.

“How hard is Conner’s training?” Ray asked, changing the subject.

“Don’t know,” said Mal shrugging. “All I know is he is one hell of a laid back guy.”

Chase nodded in agreement.

Ray scoured the lunchroom and located Conner sitting alone at a round table devouring a foot-tall stack of pancakes dripping with syrup.

“He’s not like the other Generals,” Chase said smiling. “He’s more of a free spirit; he likes to be around his subordinates. Still, wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.” Rufus nodded.

“Oho’s a dick though,” Chase cupped his hands around his mouth when he spoke. “The guy’s everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Runs people to the ground if they screw up even the littlest bit…”

Ray’s stomach rumbled loudly. He hadn’t eaten since lunch back in 2012. Prior events had averted his attention up to this point, but the aroma of pancakes and sausage was now overwhelming.

Lyle returned with the food, and Ray devoured two stacks of sticky pancakes, six slices of crispy bacon, and two glasses of icy milk. The others at the table watched him eat in shock.

“I’m not really a girlie girl,” Mal said turning up her nose. “But that’s kinda gross.”
Rufus looked on with admiration.

By the end of breakfast, Ray’s stomach was bulbous and ready to burst. He leaned back in his chair with pride and felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he was met with the warm face of the old General.

“Let’s get moving Ray,” he said. Chase crossed his fingers, and the others did the same. Ray gave a quick thumbs-up and was whisked briskly from the mess hall. He knew he would regret eating so much.

They met Oho standing outside of the mess hall and they all followed Conner past the courtyard to a large, steel gate at the far end of the coliseum. The sign above the gate read:

**Paris Field**

**Tank Operation, Training, and Testing Facility**

The gate slid open with a mechanical hum, and the three proceeded through it.

The “field,” in actuality, was a muddy and dismal wasteland. Tread marks were carved into the ground like cuts on skin, and they spread out from the gate like tentacles and stretched as far as the eye could see. Broken down buildings were strewn about the wasteland as if they were victims of a hurricane. Pieces of road were scattered like shards of broken glass. Four tanks, boxy, black, and obviously worn, carved new marks in the field and blew the already desecrated buildings to tiny bits with their booming cannons. It was near deafening; the walls of the fortress must have been soundproof.

What Ray saw next took his breath away. Toppled in the center of the field, covered in soot and dents, was the Eiffel Tower. Its once magnificent metal was bent and twisted. Its thick
supports had ripped up cement like a toppled tree’s roots do dirt.

“This is all that’s left after the Empire’s capture of Paris 30 years ago,” The General said. “Now my army uses it for combat training and target practice. It’s truly a crying shame. I heard Paris was beautiful once.” The sun’s rays beat down on the once grand monument. It was so large, so majestic, and now, so sad.

“Here is where Oho and I will be teaching you,” Conner said, breaking the awe. Ray was still captivated by the desolation.

“To complete my training all you will have to do is pass three tests.” The General paused, giving Ray a look that seemed to ask “Are you paying attention?” Oho cleared his throat. Ray snapped from his trance.

“Tests?”

“You will have to pass the tests of mind and body, and then combine them both in a combat situation.” The General took a deep breath. “Pass those, and someday you may rival me as a soldier.” Ray sincerely doubted he would ever do that, certainly not with five months of training.

Conner gave him a hard stare, took a small silver box out of his pocket, held it in his fingers, and spoke. “Uleck, drive your tank over here.”

It was quiet for a few seconds, and then a man spoke out of the box. “Right, General Conner, right away sir.”

One of the tanks that had been shooting at the vacant buildings in the dusty distance turned and drove over to where Ray and Conner were standing, its iron treads sifting through the dirt.

The tank stopped about five feet away; Ray took a few steps back. A short man emerged...
from the cockpit, saluted General Conner and jogged his way back to the coliseum. Ray looked over at the General who was smiling wider than ever.

“First of all I would like to see who I am working with.” Ray felt a jolt of energy in his chest. He wanted to crawl inside and ride that tank so badly. To his disappointment, Conner did not instruct him to get into the tank. Instead, he pulled the *Sertorius* out of his pocket. He pointed the black rod at the tank and the familiar green rays poured from the end. The rays engulfed the tank like a net would a school of fish. Conner lowered his brow, concentrating.

He lifted the *Sertorius* above his shoulder, and the tank rose from the dirt and cracked concrete; it stayed suspended ten to fifteen feet in the air. Conner moved the rod through the air, and the tank followed as if it were on a string. He moved the tank until it was just above the remains of an old building. He let it down slowly into the rubble and then relinquished control.

Ray shot a glance at Oho, who had let a thin smile cross his face.

Using the same method he used to move the tank, Conner blanketed it with small boulders, one at a time, lifting and placing, lifting and placing. During this process, Ray was awestruck; Conner continued to carefully stack boulders, waving the *Sertorius* like an elegant conductor would a baton till all but the cannon of the tank was covered. The old General stopped and put the *Sertorius* back into his pocket.

“Oh, silly me, I seem to have buried one of my favorite tanks,” he mused. “Ray, would you uncover it for me?”

Ray laughed, Conner simply smiled. Ray stopped. The old man turned and hobbled towards the coliseum. Ray could not respond; all of the energy was sucked from his body. Conner shouted from a distance.

“Try to only use your hands! I don’t want my tank to be damaged! Oho will keep an eye
“You heard the general!” he shouted. The change in his tone gave Ray a start. “Move! Move! Move!”

He approached the tank cautiously and tried to lift one of the boulders. It was extremely heavy, so much so that it barely budged. He was never one to jump at task that he saw as unrealistic to complete. Some things simply are pointless, uneconomical. This was asinine.

“You lift up the rock!” Oho roared, spit coming from his mouth. “Use your legs, you sack of filth!!!”

Ray wrapped his arms as much as he could around one of the boulders and managed to pick it up slightly, though his uneven footing made the task all the more difficult.

“Don’t use your back to lift, you idiot!” Oho shouted.

The hundreds of rocks in the blanketing pile mocked him, and his sweat stung his eyes.

The day was turning out to be a slow one, and it was only 6:59 a.m.

By noon, the monotony of Ray’s struggle was increasingly aggravating. The sun which had made the day pleasant before now beat down on his head as if egging him on. The jagged stones left gashes on his hands as they slipped from his grip.

Oho didn’t help either. At one point he had gotten so frustrated with Ray’s struggle that he had taken his gun out of his holster and shot the ground feet away from the tank.

“Can you do nothing right?!” He boomed, his small frame shaking. “The Emperor should have disowned you as his kin long ago!”

“Shit!”

Ray dropped a large rock on his foot. He sat down quickly and rubbed his shoe; his toe
throbbed. “Damn rocks!” Ray yelled, sending one cascading down the pile with an angry push.

“You swear in front of me?!” Oho stomped furiously up to the edge of the pile. “Front and center, maggot!”

Ray clambered down the pile, trying to avoid putting weight on his foot. When he had got to the bottom he stood in front of Oho.

“You will mind you mouth in the presence of an officer!” Oho snapped. The Sergeant slapped him across his face, and Ray’s face went numb. “We are training killers!” Oho slapped him again. Ray could taste blood on the inside of his cheek. “Killers will be disciplined or they will be destroyed! Now get back to work!”

Ray felt fury beating on his chest and tears in his eyes, but he feared repercussions for challenging the Sergeant, so he begrudgingly continued his arduous task.

Conner visited later in the afternoon with a cheese sandwich and a warm bottle of water. He didn’t say a word or offer his company. He simply placed the wrapped sandwich and drink on the ground at the foot of the pile and left. Oho disappeared with Conner to get something to eat back at the fort.

Ray devoured the meal, the water wetting his dry throat as he chugged it. After the bottle was used up, he wanted more. He tried to eat the sandwich, but the turkey was too dry, so he cast it to the ground in an angry huff and returned to his task.

Ray returned to his musty room that night a complete wreck. His clothes were damp with chilling sweat, and his arms and legs ached. But, despite his condition, he had done it. The tank was now visible for all to see, not a rock on it. Ray’s toe, however, was swollen and black under the nail and his cheek was bruising where Oho had slapped him.
He struggled up to his bed and collapsed on it face first, without even pulling down the sheets. Ray felt something rustle underneath him. He rolled over painfully and pulled a note out from under his stomach. It said simply:

Same time, same place

Ray moaned loudly and heard the bed below him stir. He would complain to Chase in the morning, but for now he had to sleep.
CHAPTER 7

Nova woke to the brightness of the sun, which slid through a crack in her lazily-drawn curtains. She had been moved to a guest suite in the palace on her first night, but despite its elegance, she was not happy there. She rolled over in her bed, so her back faced the window and buried her head deep into the feather pillow. What was the point of getting up? The days held nothing; the nights held less. There was no drive, no reason. To move from this spot would only constitute a search for occupation and that, she had already learned, was a fruitless venture.

She was a beautiful bird locked away in a rusty cage, unable to stretch her wings, unable to sing. Migraines pounded at her. Tears seeped from her eyes, and her vibrant past transformed into a lifeless present.

Nova had contemplated escape several times but had been reluctant to act, for she knew that directly outside her door stood black-suited men with arms like tree trunks and brains like rocks.

Where was Ray now? She had dreamt of him again last night and wished nothing more than to fall back to sleep, so she could dream of him again. He hadn’t called. He hadn’t even sent her a letter. Had he forgotten her? No. Impossible. Ray could be thick at times, but then again, all boys are. He probably was busy, very busy. Yes, that’s it; busy. Boys love their guns and their camouflage pants. He was probably having fun somewhere. Fun. Now there was a word Nova hadn’t used lately. The chamber of her confinement kidnapped happiness through the black walls and held it hostage locked
behind her large oak door. The whole world was behind that frame.

Nova slid slowly out of her bed and snuck over to her door. She opened it a crack and looked down the elegant, marble hallway; her current guard was talking to the new guard who seemed to be taking his post. They were laughing and didn’t even notice the door open. Nova’s mind raced: this was her chance, even though she didn’t know what she would do when she escaped the room.

An idea struck her. She left the door propped open a hair and scurried over to her small closet. She found a heavy, wooden coat hanger, a makeshift weapon, should she need it. She returned to the door and placed her ear near the crack. The spaces between the guards’ words were becoming longer. Their conversation was dying.

Nova pushed the door open slowly inch by inch. She was breathing heavily now. The guards turned toward her room. Nova froze. They mumbled something about “the Emperor’s toy” and returned to their conversation.

Nova took a deep breath. It was now or never. She flung open her door and swung herself behind it so that she was sandwiched between the door and the hallway’s cool, black wall. In the little space that she had, she stomped her feet furiously for a few seconds and then slowed the beat down to a stop.

“What was that!?” The first guard yelled.

“The door’s open.” His friend replied.

Nova heard the pair shuffle over and she could see the black blurs of their uniforms through the crack between the door’s hinges.

“She’s not in here!”

“I swore I heard her run down the hallway!”
“Let’s go, then!”

Nova remained perfectly still behind the door as she waited for the guards’ footsteps to die down. She slid out from behind the door and peered down the hallway. Left, right, nobody. She burst from the space and sprinted nimbly down the hallway, away from the direction the guards went to “follow her.” Nova stopped at a corner and gazed around it, her body sticking tight to the wall. Leaning against one of the tapestry-draped, marble walls in the hallway was a tall man, adorned in fabulous military attire. His lips were curled down into a frown, and he held two cups of piping hot liquid in his spider-like hands. Nova turned quietly and started to tiptoe the other way. Even though it was where her guards had gone, she was sure she could avoid them.

“Resourceful.”

She spun around quickly. The tall man stood directly behind her, his cold eyes met hers and sucked away all of her energy. She quavered as he drew closer; the steam from the two cups was the only thing between them.

“The Emperor’s little shrew has a deceitful streak, I see.” His voice, though diminutive, held a hint of intrigue. “Let us have a drink.”
CHAPTER 8

The Emperor sat alone in his dark study, surrounded by dusty bookshelves filled with priceless antique books, reading by the light of a stone fireplace. The shadows in the nooks and crannies of the room danced along with the hearth’s crackling fire.

The Emperor thumbed through the letters his men had intercepted heading for Nova’s room. They were all so simple, so seemingly thoughtless. The word choice and articulation were poor, elementary at best. His own youthful writing mocked him. Nova would not want to read these embarrassments.

The Emperor cast the letters into his fire and watched the flickering flames lick at the curling corners of the paper until only black ash remained.

The fireplace was one of the Emperor’s solemn pleasures. It was a wasteful devourer of life and energy, but there was a feeling created by watching the fire cling to the crevices of a log of cherry that nothing else in the world could duplicate. It was calming, warming, and safe. Just as she had been…

The Emperor rubbed his temple and hastily unfolded the next letter in the stack on his lap.

Written to be read by: Emperor Raymond Brian Tract

From: General Francis Conner

Subject: Your grandson’s first month report

Knowing that you are a busy man I will try to keep this short. Ray is doing just fine. I started him out with some simple tasks to test his strength and
patience. I followed with the standard bout of daily running and muscle building under the watchful eye of one of my most gifted officers, Sergeant Hibiki Oho. Ray is awfully good at pushups, but his running leaves much to be desired. We’re awaiting the results of a routine physical now, but I trust everything should check out, he is a healthy lad. Since he was not raised following the Empire’s nutritional guidelines, fitness requirements, or educational programs it will take a bit longer than I initially anticipated getting him up to speed. On a more personal note, he has been inquiring about our history and the times and as of late I have kept my answers short and strayed away from detail as you wished me to, but I would still greatly appreciate a brief letter of response as to what you do not wish for him to know. Until that time, may you continue in good health and prosperity.

**End of Letter**

A faint smile crossed the Emperor’s visage. Smoke stung his throat, drew tears to his eyes, and lingered on his clothes, but he didn’t care. The lingering smell of smoke on his jacket was a silent informant to all around that he had been in his study, immersed in thought.

The old man ran a quavering hand across his oily scalp from which his thick hair had once sprouted. He adjusted his back in his chair and accidentally dislodged a tube from his neck. The blue fluid dripped, warm, down his neck and back, and then onto his chair.

The Emperor groaned as he reached behind him for the tube, but a surge of intense pain in his elbow stopped him at once. The old man breathed deeply and reached with his other hand, managing to graze the tube with his fingertips before a sharp, dry cough brought both of his hands to his mouth. He pressed a button on his chair to signal an assistant. The liquid droplets
ran slowly down his back. The light in the room was lessening. The wood in his fire was all but glowing ashes.
CHAPTER 9

Ray awoke to the earsplitting buzz of Chase’s alarm reverberating from its spot on the desk below. He awkwardly climbed down his ladder, his eyes still closed. Chase rustled in his sheets; it was obvious that he was not yet willing to emerge from his cocoon of warmth.

Ray’s back ached from top to bottom, and his shoulder blades were tight and burning. The chill of the room perked him up, and he bent down and reached for his toes. The stretch was pure relief. Ray left his room and walked sluggishly, first to the showers, and then to the mess hall for breakfast.

He had grown to love breakfast. On the dusty training field, where he spent the majority of his days, it was a rarity to see another human being who wasn’t riding in a tank (Oho, he decided, didn’t count as a human being), but at breakfast, there was never a shortage of talkative souls. Chase would blab on about his muscles and how great he was, and Ray would just sit in his uncomfortable, plastic chair and laugh. Mal (or Mallory as Chase called her when he was trying to get a rise from her) picked on Ray as if he were a younger brother. She would pull out his chair when he went to sit down and steal food from his plate. Rufus and Lyle just laughed and ate. They were quiet for the most part, but not in a bad way. But the best part of breakfast by far was the food. The lunch ladies always cooked up plenty of delicious meals: crisp bacon, sausage, ham, eggs (any way you liked), toast, soufflés, waffles, and the best pancakes he had ever tasted. Ray needed these flavorful,
wholesome meals to get through the day because Conner’s lunch sandwiches were always terrible. Dry turkey, soppy tuna salad, and ham cured with way too much salt seemed to be Conner’s favorites.

When Ray arrived in the cafeteria today, however, the entire place was in more of a disorganized ruckus than usual. No soldiers were in their seats. Some were yelling, and others were propped up against the walls, their eyes wide open and their mouths glued shut. The bulk of them were in a cluster in front of the cafeteria’s bulletin board scuffling and jumping to read what was posted there. Ray drew closer and could differentiate some voices from the roaring throng.

“10 squads?!”

“Fucking Turks!!!”

“At night, too!!!”

“Disappeared? What does that mean?”

“Captured, probably.”

Ray tried to weave his way through the mass towards the incendiary bulletin when he felt a familiar hand on his shoulder.

“Come, Ray.” General Conner’s face was solemn when he spoke. “That doesn’t concern you.”

“What happened?” Ray begged.

“Nothing. It would be best if you didn’t get involved now.” Conner whisked Ray away to the field and told him he would bring his breakfast to him.

Ray took to his work (today was a four mile run with Oho on his ankles), but his mind kept whirring. The miscellaneous fragments Ray had picked up from the soldiers’ shouts danced
around in his mind all day. What was happening, and to whom?

“Tract!!” Oho shouted from behind him. How he could run so quickly and still yell at the top of his lungs was a mystery Ray had yet to solve.

“What?” Ray asked wiping sweat from his brow.

Oho stormed up and stopped in front of him an inch away from his face.

“You will finish all statements directed to me with sir!” he shouted up at Ray. “Do you understand?”


“Stand up, you insignificant sack of shit!” he roared. Ray tried his best to stand up straight without holding onto his stomach.

“You will start statements with sir as well! Comprehend that, boy?” Oho glared.

“Sir, yes sir,” Ray coughed.

“Good!” Oho took a step back. “Just because you’re royal family doesn’t mean you’re not a soldier responsible not only for your sorry life, but for the lives of the better, stronger men fighting alongside you! You will be stronger! You will be better! You will work! Now give me fifty pushups! NOW!”

Oho circled him as he did his pushups. Ray knew to bring his chin to within a centimeter of the dirt and to bring it up quickly, but as fluidly as humanly possible.

Conner did not return that day, and as a result, Ray did not eat. Oho ran him all around the field shouting the entire time. It was understandable why the undersized man’s voice was so hoarse when he tried to speak normally.
When the sun started to set and the tanks returned to the garages, Oho allowed Ray to retire for the day. Aching Ray hobbled back to his room, hungry and eager to ask Chase what had been written on the bulletin board.

When Ray arrived, Chase wasn’t there. He looked around for a note or some indication as to where he had gone, but there was nothing. His eyelids were heavy. Knots of muscle under his shoulder blades ached and rubbed as he paced about the room. Ray waited for hours, eating some of the canned food that Chase had stolen from the mess hall, but he heard not so much as a creak from the fortress walls. At midnight, exhausted and dirty with dried sweat, he scaled his rickety bunk and collapsed on the wafer-thin mattress.

The next morning, Ray was woken by General Conner, which was a good thing, for in his exhaustion, he had forgotten to set his alarm. Ray climbed out of his bed; the steps of his ladder were chilly on his bare feet. He was still exhausted and truly wished nothing more than to collapse on the bed again.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” he mumbled, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “I forgot to set my alarm…”

“It wouldn’t have gone off anyway,” Conner said smiling. His breath was sour with the smell of coffee. “Oho requested we start early this morning.”

Ray looked over at the clock. 3:00 a.m. Knowing this made him sleepier than he was before. Conner reached up and ruffled Ray’s tangled hair.

“Sorry about yesterday,” Conner said, his gaze wandering to the floor. “I didn’t give permission for that bulletin to be posted. The Emperor didn’t give permission, either. I don’t even know who put it there.”

“What did it say?” Ray asked, intrigue giving him some much needed energy. “I heard all
kinds of things, but it didn’t make sense.”

Conner paused and closed his eyes; he was picking his next words carefully.

“From what I understand, it was a small act of terrorism in one of our Empire’s smaller territories. Nothing worth getting riled up about.”

“I heard something about soldiers getting captured…”

A flash of intense emotion crossed Conner’s visage, but Ray could not really tell what it was.

“It may be a hostage situation, even the Emperor isn’t sure though. That’s why I wouldn’t have posted the bulletin. There’s no point of riling people up over facts that haven’t been verified.”

Ray was silent for a moment. The attack, be it severe or severely embellished, made him nervous. Ray felt his own safety net disappear beneath him. Was he in danger? This was the first time he had heard anything about an enemy. Was there something Conner wasn’t telling him?

“Any ideas about who may have posted the letter?” he whispered as if his walls were suddenly listening in.

“No, but when I find out who it was there will be hell to pay.”

Ray disliked the early start, but it didn’t take him long to wake up. Conner and he shared a quiet breakfast alone in the mess hall before the old man shipped him out to the field where an unnaturally alert Oho was waiting with tapping foot to begin the day.

He returned to his bunk quickly after the day was done in the hopes that Chase would be there waiting for him. Chase would have a different take than Conner concerning yesterday’s enigmatic posting.
Chase was sitting with his back to the door at the desk when Ray walked in, but he spun around quickly to face him.

“They made me sleep with Lyle last night. What’s up?”

“I guess Conner didn’t want me finding out about the terrorist attack from you, or something like that.”

“That’s ridiculous! I thought your great grandpa took you back to Munich for protection or something. I spent the whole day today telling people we were in grave danger! The Emperor called in his family and everything!” Chase smacked his brow with his palm. “Damn it! Conner’ll kill me if he finds out! I probably started riots or something…”

“What else did you say?!”

“That we were the next base targeted and we should all run for the hills or something along those lines…” Chase made a face like he was slowly peeling off a band-aid.

“Yeah,” said Ray wearing a frown. “Conner’s gonna kill you.”

The next few days were a nightmare. All the soldiers in the fortress spent several hours in meetings being told by General Conner and representatives from the Emperor that everything was under control (which was a blessing in that it saved Ray from Oho for a few days). Apparently each of the NGE’s major bases had received the letter, but no one knew who the culprit was who posted them. Either way, the entire situation was a mess. Rewards were promised to anyone who could provide any information on the mysterious postings, and Conner began disappearing midday to attend meetings in Munich.

As if the scare and the boredom weren’t bad enough, Ray had yet to hear back from Nova. He sent her letter after letter. He even added a vague description in the “written to be read by” space, but still no response, and with Conner busy, who else was he to voice his concern to?
He was positive the Emperor wouldn’t want anyone else knowing about Nova, for it would bring up a lot of nasty questions and may even blow the NGE’s secret about Ray.

The only bright beacon in the horizon was that in a few weeks he would get to visit her in person.
CHAPTER 10

Nova had always had brilliant handwriting. The words themselves, written on paper, were tiny and neat; but they were always dark, as if she were trying to stab the paper through with her pen. Things had been very different in Munich Palace after her first escape attempt. For once, there was something to do, something to look forward to, and it all started with a stapled packet of crinkled, unlined paper.

Day One (with my “diary”)

Dear Diary,

I finally have something to do in this God-forsaken place! I tried to escape yesterday and I would have got away with it too if I hadn’t ran into Jacob. Jacob is like a general or something in the army that Ray is serving in now (oh, by the way for those just joining me, I’m stuck 200 years from my time in a stuffy bedroom surrounded by guards…nice…ok moving on.) Anyway, Jacob is a really nice guy (with a really goofy last name: Hofoman or something like that). He is the first person who bothered seeing how I was doing and he totally understands why I wanted to escape, he even told the guards I duped to pretend that it never happened. He sat on my bedside and we had tea and he told me about himself and I actually felt comfortable enough to tell him a little about me.

Jacob said he pities the situation that I’m in and he wished there was something
he could do about it. He gave me this “diary” to write my feelings and thoughts down in. He said something poetic too like “writing is how thoughts are heard” or something. It was better than that. My memory is terrible. Anyway he said he’d visit me tomorrow and bring breakfast if I wanted, I said yes, of course (what else would I do?) I feel like I’m entertaining guests now in my prison cell. Maybe I should take a shower and make by bed this time.

Day Two

Dear Diary,

Alright diary, have I got a story for you. So, I was waiting for Jacob to come like he said he would yesterday. I was getting kind of hungry, seeing as I haven’t been eating the slop the guards have been bringing me for my meals (it looks and smells like a smashed sponge saturated with vinegar). I was expecting Jacob to bring me something tasty for breakfast (the tea yesterday was great by the way) but instead the door opened and a wrinkly guy in a hovering silver chair came through the door holding a tray of tea and pastries. That’s right, his chair was HOVERING! I didn’t know what to make of him. He smiled and snapped his fingers. One of the guards brought in a small wooden table and a chair. After the guard had left and the crippled man smiled some more and invited me to have breakfast with him. Something was uncomfortable about all of this (Duh).

The food was great, though. I must have had at least four cups of tea and a billion cherry flavored Danishes. The old guy didn’t eat though, he just sat across from me smiling, and trying to catch my eye. It was kind of weird. I was a bit scared to look at him, he was kinda being real… creepy; but I had to thank him for the food (Little Miss Manners).

Then the creepiest of all things happened, I looked at his eyes for the first time. They were a rich brown with little splotches of black around the middle. Then, I noticed the nose, it was a little droopy, but it was strong-bridged and fit perfectly between his eyes. Then it hit me. This was Ray’s future self, the Emperor he’d told me about! (The years were not kind.) Ray is so handsome and this guy was so…yuck…but his eyes were the same, no doubt. I thanked him again; I didn’t want to seem ungrateful, after all, this guy was the one who could send me home.

The man may have been Ray but he lacked Ray’s spirit. He was strange and detached, when Ray’s kind and caring. The man stayed and talked to me. Mostly he was just making small talk, you know “How’s the weather,” kind of stuff, but he seemed to be greatly
enjoying himself. He left at three in the afternoon bidding me goodbye and hoping to see me tomorrow.

I felt pretty awkward I didn’t necessarily want to see him again but it’s not like I had a choice. I miss Ray... I wonder what he did today... Oops, I wonder what Jacob did today, the old guy kinda stole me away. Well, it’s late. Goodnight, Diary.

Day 43

Dear Diary,

It’s been almost a month and half and Ray told me he would see me in two. I sure hope nothing’s happened to him, he hasn’t written or anything. I wonder if he forgot about me. I just need someone else to talk to that isn’t that peculiar Emperor (Jacob is nice, but he’s been busy lately). Meanwhile, the Emperor’s been visiting me every day; he’s getting stranger and stranger.

It was my 18th birthday yesterday. I missed my family and my friends that would usually celebrate it with me. My mom didn’t come into the room with breakfast in bed, my dad didn’t leave a little sticky-note with a doodle of a cake on the bathroom mirror. My friends didn’t stay the night and watch scary movies with me... I can’t put into words how shitty this is.

The Emperor knew it was my birthday though (of course). He gave me a beautiful red rose and a gold, squishy cushion for my wooden chair. I wanted a new diary, the papers that I fill are difficult to keep in order and it is hard to write straight without lines, but I wouldn’t want the Emperor knowing I had one. He’d probably read it or something.

All I can think about is Ray. My Ray. I want to see him so badly.
Written to be read by: his Eminence, Raymond Brian Tract

From: General Francis Conner

Subject: Ray

I apologize for not including my report on Ray’s progress in my last letter as I am sure you are dying to know how his training is coming along, even in this harried time. I am very proud of Ray’s dedication and maturity. He is bettering himself in every field (running, muscle training, etc.). The conditioning phase of his training is all but done. As for his diet and eating habits, they are as healthy as any soldier’s I’ve ever seen. I will start him on combat training in a week and will report to you as soon as I make my first evaluation.

Remain in good health.

End of Letter

Ray groggily pulled the sheets over his head to shield his ears from the buzzing of Chase’s alarm. It had been a hellacious week. Oho had been working him like a mule, and each day was becoming harder, escalating to something Ray could only pray was positive. Also this past week had been Nova’s birthday, and Ray had convinced himself that his letters were being lost somewhere along the way, but he had still written a nice birthday message with the fading hope that it would be read.
Ray pulled himself from his uncomfortable bed and made his way down to breakfast. Conner wasn’t there, nor was Chase, just Rufus, Lyle, and Mal who was busy studying for some kind of test that she shushed any attempt at conversation. Ray devoured a plateful of watery scrambled eggs and a biscuit and washed it all down with a glass of orange juice. He then bid an awkward farewell to a quiet table and sprinted out to the field. Conner would surely be there.

The sky was still grey and the moon still lingered in it, challenging the creeping fireball in the distance for rule of the day. Ray made his way at a brisk pace to the short figure he knew to be Sergeant Oho at their usual spot and was surprised to see he was not alone.

“Mornin’ Little Excellency,” Chase smirked, his hands in his pockets. Conner nodded a silent greeting and then gestured to the ground with his stubby fingers. Sergeant Oho stood a little further off, clutching a clipboard.

“Ray. Chase. Please stand opposite each other. About, oh, three feet I’d say.” Chase nodded and stood where Conner pointed. Ray curiously shifted over to his space, querying with his eyes.

“Good. Now Ray I want you to try your best to block Chase’s punch.”

“What?” Ray was not entirely sure he understood. Wham! Ray was socked off of his cloud of confusion and landed with a thud on the ground behind him. It felt like Chase’s fist was still embedded in his cheek long after he got back to his feet. He hadn’t even seen Chase’s arm move.

“What the hell was that?!” Ray burst, rubbing his jaw.

“Block it with your arms Raymond, not your face,” Conner mumbled coolly, ignoring Ray’s outburst and taking a seat on the ground. Ray squared up with Chase, raising his hands sheepishly in front of him. Wham! Ray staggered as Chase’s fist grazed his cheek but he did not
fall over.

“Better…” Conner said wearing a look of disappointment. “Still favoring that face-block, though…”

Chase sniggered. He was bouncing in place, eager to attack again. After a few more close calls and grazes, Ray took to the meaning of the day: in order to be a soldier, you must fight, and soldiers fight hard.

Ray progressed slowly, but steadily. He learned how to block a couple different types of punches, and the General seemed content.

The sun was low in the sky when Conner signaled to end. Ray’s arms were swollen, and his lip was fat. Oho’s clipboard was full, and he wore a look of sincere boredom on his face.

“Same time tomorrow, the both of you. Oho will run you through the motions.” He painfully pulled himself off of the ground. After he left, waddling in obvious discomfort, Chase spoke, the smirk from the morning still lingering.

“I went easy on you during inspection. See ya later roomie.”

“Shou’nt I haff shome short of padding or shomeshing at leasht to protect my teef?” Ray blubbered with swollen lips.

Chase exploded into a fit of laughter as he wandered out of sight. Oho scowled at him and walked away as well. Ray sat down in the quiet field and listened to the tanks grind their way back to the storage units. His mouth had the metallic taste of blood, and a lump about the size of a teabag had formed on his forearm, but they weren’t the focus of his thoughts.

Nova, where was she? Was she alright? Why hadn’t she responded to his letters? He got up; he would write to her again before he went to sleep. The orange sun had turned the fort into nothing but a silhouette. He couldn’t even see Conner, who was staring out at him from the wide,
open window of his office, holding a crumpled piece of paper in his hand.

A few weeks went by; Ray could block all of Chase’s punches now and counter with some of his own. Sergeant Oho had intervened many a time to fix Ray’s form and technique, although he would be the first to admit that his roundhouse and jab lacked gusto.

Ray felt exhilarated every time he shoved Chase’s fist out of line with his arm. Oho’s teachings were very time-consuming, but the results were beginning to show; at a rapid pace. Despite this colossal improvement, whenever the Sergeant would let Ray and Chase spar without rules, Chase flattened him every time.

Chase was a well-built man and obviously had more than one year in the military under his belt. Ray could barely follow his movements, and more times than not, this resulted in great pain, and it didn’t help that Chase had found new energy.

Before he began helping Ray, Chase had been on dish duty. Every soldier in the fort agreed that dish duty was the worst job that one could be given. At the end of every meal, Chase would trudge back into the kitchens and spend several hours washing every dish and utensil by hand while listening to the eldest lunch lady, Berta, tell stories about her old school days.

“She never shuts up, that woman,” Chase had mumbled into his pillow one night. “Keeps on telling me how she used to have all the guys wrapped around her finger. She said I mighta been cute enough for her if she was desperate. Me? Mighta been cute enough? What does that old bag know? I dated plenty of hot girls when I went to school. A billion times hotter than she ever was. I wouldn’t have to listen to her so much if jackasses didn’t keep ordering the lasagna. That cheese is a bitch to scrub off.”
Ray missed those nightly complaints. At nighttime nowadays, Ray would return to their room, covered with enough bruises for the pair of them. But he never gave up. All the swollen cheeks, bloody lips, and stinging sides only drove him to push harder. His only wish was that Chase would wear gloves, but Oho denied him every time he asked (Conner would have given Chase gloves). Bruises hadn’t the time to heal before others joined them.

Ray still stayed after practices to listen to the dying rumble of tanks, but he no longer wrote to Nova every day. He was becoming discouraged, and it was impossible to find a time to speak to Conner in private.

Then it happened. It was just another day. Oho drilled Ray and Chase and then gave them the last ten minutes to go at each other. Ray started out by squaring up with Chase. They both stood in the field like statues for a few minutes, gauging the strengths and weaknesses of each other’s stances.

Chase made the first move. He flew at Ray shooting a fake punch to his head and then bent down on the ground and swept for Ray’s leg with his own. This usually would have knocked Ray over, but this time was different. Ray had seen the move coming and jumped just in time to dodge it. He retorted with a kick of his own. Chase, who was now kneeling on the ground, took the kick straight to his face, which sent him reeling backwards. Ray took this opportunity to sweep a kick at Chase’s knees and knock him off balance; it worked! Then, before Chase could regain his stance, Ray hit him twice and finished with a sharp kick to the gut which knocked all of the breath out of his lungs. He was down.

Ray didn’t have long to bask in his achievement, for Chase had again risen to his feet. Stepping back, holding his face, and cursing under his breath, Chase regained his stance and taunted Ray into attacking him. Ray’s attack was a straight jab to Chase’s face. The punch was
not miraculous or fast, but in his dazed state Chase missed the block by a good four inches. Ray felt a crack as his fist landed squarely on Chase’s nose. The cocky Private fell backwards, unconscious. Oho actually cracked a smile. *Finally.*

It was unimaginable, the elation. He had reached another plateau. The difference was now there for all to see. Oho, amazingly, gave Ray the rest of the day off as a reward, and Ray spent it in front of the mirror cringing at his black eyes and cracked teeth and running his hands through his newly-buzzed hair.

Chase’s nose was broken. His pretty-boy attitude made him sour to Ray for a long time after the fight. After several more bouts, Chase’s losses were no longer a surprise. Ray was now able to go toe to toe with Chase even on his best days. The two would race hastily through their drills, so that they would have time to spar. Oho put up with these shenanigans, to a certain point. “At least they’re learning,” he would say to passing officers.

After a long day and a good fight, Ray lay down on his bed, and his gaze disappeared into the ceiling. He was immensely proud of himself, but in all his struggles, sweat, and elation, something was missing; something vital but for the life of him Ray could not remember what it was.
CHAPTER 12

Ray was woken by a rapping on his door. Chase grumbled and rolled over in his bed, and Ray, who was already up and stretching answered the door. Conner was standing there in the same smartly-pressed uniform that he always wore sporting a wide smile.

“We will not be out in the field today. Follow me.”

Ray nodded and followed Conner into the coliseum. They climbed a flight of stairs until they reached the top level of the fortress. They walked over to a large, brushed-steel door which Ray had seen before.

Conner held the door open and Ray walked in. The General’s office was much brighter than Ray’s dingy little room. It was a sleek, modern office which glimmered with efficiency and persnickety tidiness. In its center was a crescent-shaped desk made of the same thin metal as the door; on it were several neat stacks of paper and a cup filled with pens so aerodynamic that looked as if they would up and fly away any minute. One archaic, yellow pencil with a worn-down, pink eraser stood among them, a relic of an old time. The entire wall behind the General’s desk was a window that looked out on bleak, empty Paris. The sun shown brightly through the window and reflected off of the pens in the cup. The General wobbled over to his desk and stood behind his black, leather chair. His facial features gave way to silhouette as the sun beat on his back. He pointed towards an unimpressive, gray chair in front of the desk, and Ray sat down.

“What were the three tests I told you that you must pass to become an excellent
solder?” Ray squirmed in his chair; it had been so long since his first day out in the field, he had forgotten what Conner had said. The struggle for recollection was wildly apparent.

“Body, mind, and a harmony between the two,” he stated, annoyed. Ray felt embarrassed. It had been almost two months. Conner reached under his desk. Metal scraped off metal as Conner opened a drawer from the desk’s frame.

“Maybe this” he said sliding a thick packet of papers across his desk towards Ray, “will help jog your memory.”

Conner took the lone pencil out of the cup of metal pens on his desk and rolled it over to Ray.

“I’ll give you six hours to complete the test,” Conner said, his hand already twisting the knob of his office’s door as he walked away. “Please don’t touch anything in my office, and of course, cheating is out of the question.”

The door shut with a thud; the pens clanked around in their cup. Ray looked down for the first time at the book-sized packet of paper. It had a bold heading typed in jet-black ink.

**N.G.E. OFFICER TRAINING TEST**

Ray flipped through the pages of the packet, his frustration growing with each multiple-choice question. There were six hundred questions in all. Ray’s mind already felt like it was going to explode. So much work, so many questions, what were they all about? Ray took a more in-depth look at the packet and read one of the questions:

In the event of a code yellow at camp A, officer A should____

a. Immediately inform a superior officer
b. Alert the commanding officer of camp B

c. Handle the code yellow situation utilizing half of a squad

d. Handle the code yellow situation utilizing a full squad

Ray skimmed through a few pages of questions. All of them involved the military (of course), but Ray was clueless when it came to the majority of the packet’s terminology. When he would find a word that he knew, he would read the question and find, to his disappointment, that the word was but an island of understanding amidst a sea of confusion. By the end of the six hours, Ray had taken the test out of frustration and had guessed on the first 200 leaving the remaining 400 blank.

Just when the sun had begun to lose some of its fervor, Conner reentered his office, the smile that usually held up his cheery face was turned over allowing wrinkles to betray his age. Ray too was weary. He had bags under his eyes, and eraser shavings covered his lap.

“So,” Conner began, his voice oddly hoarse, “How was your first time taking the test?”

“Terrible. I’ve never even seen half of those words before.” Ray admitted.

Conner reached down, picked up the test off of the desk, and began skimming through the pages, muttering under his breath.

“I thought as much.” The General placed the paper back down on the desk in front of Ray. “You will take this test as many times as you have to before you pass. To pass you must get at least a 550 score. Usually there would be a mandatory break between exams, but the Emperor wants you to be an officer before the end of your training, so I’ve sped the process up.” Ray lowered his head down and rested on his arms, which were folded on the desk; they were so soft.

“I suggest you study,” Conner muttered. “Or you might just spend the remainder of your waking life in this office. You can leave.”
11:45 at night. Ray sat up in bed leafing through the pages of the tattered military manual that Chase had lent him.

This was the first time since Ray had broken his nose that Chase had shown any signs of wishing to resume their friendship. Chase had taken the test a few weeks before Ray had arrived and still had all of his notes and manuals on hand for Ray’s use. The manuals and notes were a kind gesture by Chase, but the barely legible scrawls combined with Ray’s hatred of memorization made them of little use.

He had been studying for nearly six hours off and on, and the words in the manual blurred. Ray couldn’t stop though. He couldn’t stand having to spend one more day in Conner’s shiny, metal office staring at the black squiggles in the white abyss. Before fatigue could shut Ray’s eyes, Chase burst through the door clenching a blood red sheet of paper between his fingers.

“It’s here Ray, look!” Chase’s grin was wider than Pacific Ocean. Ray who had been ready to collapse seconds earlier was now sitting bolt upright in his bed. He had knocked several of the manuals to the ground.

He hadn’t spoken casually to Chase for a few weeks, so naturally he had no inclination as to what the Private was expecting in the mail. It could be anything: a note from a family member, a super secret mission, the possibilities were endless. Chase brought the piece of paper up close to his face. Ray smiled. Was Chase reading the paper or preparing to devour it? The familiar insignia of the NGE. was stamped on the front of the paper; the news must be of military importance. Chase spoke loudly with apparent pride in his tone:

“Dear Lieutenant Chase Jagger,
Congratulations on your recent promotion. My fellow Generals and I are pleased to see that one of our most capable subordinates has been promoted to an officer. Amongst your other responsibilities, I would like to offer you a position in the Second Army. This is a once in a lifetime offer Lieutenant Jagger; I hope that you consider it, and I look forward to your response, and will send further information if you express an interest.

Sincerely,

General Timothy Polky

NGE Second Army

Tokyo, Japan”

Chase took a deep breath and looked up at Ray, a picture perfect vision of happiness. Ray was too tired to show enthusiasm.

“Congratulations.”

“I got a letter like this from two other Generals too,” said Chase smiling ear to ear.

“Everyone except Hoffenen sent me one.”

Ray felt a chill as if a solitary drop of ice-cold water were sliding down his back. That name. Ray climbed down from his bunk of and picked up the fallen manuals. His mind frantically jumped back to studying. But then a thought hit him.

“Are you going to leave this base then?”

Chase was not only his friend, but the only hope he had of passing Conner’s tests.

“Don’t worry Ray,” Chase assured. “Conner’s been too kind to me; I owe him my service.” Ray let out a sigh of relief.

Chase invited him to attend a party with the rest of the gang in Lyle’s quarters, where Conner had allowed them to stow a few kegs of smuggled beer, but Ray reluctantly declined.
After Chase bid him good night and closed the door, Ray read for two more hours by the light of the frail lamp before his head fell to the pillow on his thin mattress.

Chase’s alarm bleeped loudly the following morning, but he was not in his bed to shut it off. Ray picked up the bean-shaped digital clock and searched its smooth surface for any sort of button which would stop its blare. After much frustration, Ray smothered the clock with Chase’s pillow and let its muffled screech set the ambience as he got dressed.

Ray jogged briskly up the stairs to Conner’s office. There was a note on the door. It read:

I’m currently attending a meeting in Munich, I left Sergeant Oho in command of the facility until I return. I should be back tomorrow. Be ready for a test.

Francis Conner

At first Ray was angry; there was no way the information he crammed would stick in his head. The mere notion of rest that the note suggested was sedative. Ray’s eyes struggled to stay open, and he longed for the wafer-thin mattress of his bunk.

On his way back to his room, he ran (more like stumbled) into Chase who had obviously not slept very well, if he had slept at all. Ray saluted him quickly so as not to offend him, but Chase waved it off and rubbed his bloodshot eyes.

“I drank way too much,” he said wearily. “But I want to help you study.”

“Don’t you have to watch the facility with Oho?” asked Ray. “I mean isn’t that a Lieutenant’s job?”


“Isn’t that a little unprofessional?” Ray asked. He sounded like Conner.

“Do you want my help or not?” Chase mumbled firmly (if such a thing is possible). Ray was torn; he longed for sleep.
“Yes, sir I would sir.” Ray mocked. Chase wobbled awkwardly back to their quarters, Ray on his heels. Ray turned and looked down on the courtyard. A stout figure stood looking up at him. Ray shouted into his quarters.

“Chase,” he sputtered. “The General didn’t leave, look.” Ray spun around and looked again at the courtyard. It was empty, nothing but a few soldiers sitting down enjoying their day off. Chase was giving Ray a look.

“Never mind,” said Ray. “I must be seeing things.”

Chase could not help Ray for long. His hangover was so bad that after less than two hours of studying, he had to go to the medical office for some aspirin. Despite his impaired state, Chase still clarified many of Ray’s lingering questions, and Ray felt a lot more comfortable with some of the more troubling concepts. Chase returned in an hour looking a little better.

“Wow,” Chase groaned. “The most brilliant doctors in the world at our disposal and there’s still is no cure for a hangover.” Ray laughed. Chase didn’t seem to understand why what he had said was so funny.

Ray went to bed with the sun still high in the sky, a smile on his face, and confidence pumping through every vein.

The next morning Ray was woken by Conner himself who looked even older than he had the previous day. “So are you prepared for the test today?” He stroked the surface of the ancient desk and made a face at the thick, dusty film now coating his fingertips. Ray mumbled something into his pillow, and when it became clear that this did not suffice as a response, he rose from his bed.

Before long, Ray was again entombed in the spacious office with a massive stack of
unanswered questions and a stern demand to refrain from cheating. Conner closed the door behind him, and the sound echoed against the room’s walls.

Conner straightened his hair with his fingers and strode off with purpose toward the entrance to the subway. He shuffled briskly down the stairs and across the courtyard, his short legs straining to keep up with his swift ambition.

He restrained himself in the seat of the subway and looked down at his callused hands. He was numb to the force of the train pushing him against his seat, and he didn’t even hear the conductor’s automated voice as the subway slid to a halt at Munich Palace Station. He got off when the majority of the passengers did, melting into the crowd, struggling to get to the elevators, like a group of salmon struggling up a waterfall.

He broke away from the throng when he took one of the smaller elevators lining the station’s edge. He picked nervously at a callus on his palm and listened to the mechanical whirr as the elevator scaled the palace.

When the elevator stopped, Conner flew down the hallways of the palace, turning left and right without looking upwards from his fingers.

“Conner!”

Conner looked up. Approaching him was a man adorned in similar garb, though fewer medals gleamed on his round chest. He was a short man, only a little taller than Conner. He was in his late forties and had an average body type, strong arms and the beginnings of a gut. He had a face of pure innocence and green eyes with brown speckles in them. Above his beaming face was a mess of receding, red hair that curled up only slightly in the back.

“Ah, hello Timothy,” Conner said, forcing a smile. The pair shook hands. “I was
expecting to find you in your visiting quarters. It’s a lucky thing I ran into you, or your wandering may have made you late.”

“I knew you’d come this way,” said the redheaded man. “You always do. Prefer the executive elevators to the public ones?”

“Yes, but not because I like to avoid the public, more because I take up more space then I used to.” He patted his stomach. “ Wouldn’t want to make anyone else uncomfortable.”

The man forced a laugh.

“But you know I didn’t come here to make fun of myself,” Conner said, beginning to walk and gesturing for the other General to follow. “I came here to talk to General Timothy Polky, not my old friend, Tim.”

The smile vanished from Polky’s face. “It’s about that damn bulletin again, isn’t it?”

“Fraid so.”

“His Eminence hasn’t verified the attacks yet, has he?”

“No. He got the report from Jacob the other day that everything was fine, not a single hair out of place.”

“Then, what’s the problem, Frank?”

“The problem is that I got a report from Efim just this morning saying that one of his regiments under Jacob is not responding to his contact.”

“Well, they don’t have to, do they? I mean they are General Hoffenen’s troops now.” Polky said.

“Yes, but conflicting reports are never a good thing, and Efim sounded really worried in his letter.”

“No offense, Frank, but Efim is a bit of a nut when it comes to his troops. Remember the
attack on Japan where General Fahren was killed?"

“Damn it, Tim, don’t bring that up…”

“Well, all I’m saying is that it may not have happened if Efim didn’t call his troops back to Munich at the last second for an ‘emergency inspection.’” Polky made quotes in the air.

“We cleared that matter up a long time ago, Tim. It was a freak accident. The Resistance was still active then. Efim’s troops would have had to come home sometime. It just was a horrid and terrible coincidence, nothing more.”

“I trust you Conner,” Polky said, shaken by Conner’s retort. “With my life I trust you. I just wanted you to see my side of the…”

“Out for a stroll are we, gentleman?” The pair froze in mid-step. General Hoffenen was walking toward them from the opposite direction.

“Just catching up,” Conner smiled, patting Polky hard on the back. “How’ve you been?”

Hoffenen ignored Conner’s question and looked Polky straight in the eyes. Polky turned red, and his mouth opened and shut as if trying to say something, but nothing came out.

“I heard something about a matter long cleared up. This wouldn’t have anything to do with General Khavin’s recent mumblings of conspiracy would it?”

Polky’s hands shook slightly at his sides. His lips pursed.

“Just a bet we had back in the old days,” Conner lied with a grin. “All cleared up though. I won like I always do, of course.”

“Lies are contagious and horrible things General Conner,” Hoffenen said, his gaze not parting from Polky. “They spread like a vicious plague from diseased rat to diseased rat. Don’t let the syringe of truth scare you. A prick is better than a slow, agonizing….”

Down the hallway, a bright, orange light had flashed from around the corner. The three
Generals stood in perfect silence, looking toward the spot from which the light had emitted, each frozen with a look of disbelief. A loud scream echoed from around the corner. It was a girl’s scream.

Conner jumped into action and shambled down the hallway, waddling as fast as short legs allowed.

“Wait up, Frank!” Polky yelled after him, but he stood looking apprehensively down the hall. “Hoffenen…General Hoffenen, where are you going?”

Hoffenen had, upon hearing the girl’s scream, sprinted down the hallway in the opposite direction. He did not stop to acknowledge Polky. He rounded a corner and disappeared. Polky looked stunned.

“Come on!” Conner yelled as he turned the corner where the light had shown seconds earlier. Polky removed the black rod from his pocket and flew to catch up to his aging mentor.

The hall in which the pair now stood was in disarray. One of the thick, oak doors that marked the more luxurious rooms of the palace had been blasted aside and sat broken and singed a little farther down the hallway. Two well-built guards lay unconscious on either side of the gaping doorway. The only signs of life in them were their gently lifting chests.

Conner had removed the Sertorius from his pocket and was pointing it into the smoke-filled doorway.

“Is anyone in there?” Conner shouted, his hands shaking slightly in front of him.

“We’re fine, General.” A raspy voice coughed from the inside. “Whatever it was couldn’t get past the Marius’s barrier.”

“Excellency?” Conner muttered, squinting to see past the smoke. Polky rushed forward and squinted into the room as well.
The smoke was the blackest black, and swirled in the doorway like it was trapped behind some invisible wall.

The pair turned from the swirling smoke at the sound of boots clicking. Hoffenen had arrived at the opposite end of the hall. His mouth was curled into a menacing frown as he surveyed the scene and the black wall.

“Are you well, Excellency?” Hoffenen asked the black veil. His tone was disinterested and icy.

“Jacob, are you there as well?” The Emperor’s voice echoed from inside the door. Hoffenen’s brow furled with malice.

“Yes I am here, but I am afraid that your attacker has slithered away.” This comment was followed by some mumbling from beyond the black smog in which a girl’s timid voice was heard.

Then, as if sucked into a giant vacuum the smog began to poor back into the room and into the pocket-sized black sphere the Emperor held in his lap.

The old man, who had sounded concerned prior, was looking cross as he moved his mechanical chair to the doorway.

“Conner. Polky. Scour the grounds. Try to find out who or what attacked us just now. And Jacob, I want you to watch after this girl; I will be returning to my study.”

“Yes sir.” Conner saluted and determinedly hobbled away.

“Y…yes s…s…sir.” Polky jogged down the hall to follow Conner. Hoffenen said nothing. He merely whisked into the room where a young woman sat, slightly shaken, on a little, cushioned stool.
CHAPTER 13

It was near the end of the day when Conner returned to Fort Paris. The collar of his suit was damp with sweat; his search for the unknown assailant was fruitless, which did not surprise him. He turned the sun-warmed, metal doorknob and entered into his office.

Everything was as he had left it except for the absence of the test-taker. Conner meandered over to his desk and found the test completed with a note stuck to the front page.

In his note, Ray said that he would be sleeping, but he wasn’t. He had been pacing inside his dingy quarters for hours. He would make occasional stops to straighten a book on the desk or swat a cobweb, then he would return to his nervous, shifty movements.

He flipped hastily through the tattered pages of Chase’s manual and smashed his hand on the dusty desk when he became conscious of a careless error or forgotten fact. His confidence waned. He couldn’t stand the dismal room any more. He needed fresh air. Ray turned the knob and exited the dark space.

He did not make it very far, for three inches out of the threshold, he ran into the body of General Conner, which was significantly smaller than his. Conner landed on his back on the dry cement, his head missing the railing by only an inch. The Sertorius rolled from his pocket and threatened to fall through the railing’s bottom to the courtyard below.
Ray jabbed for the black rod and grasped it before it could roll any further. How amazingly smooth it was. Ray held it up to his face losing himself in his reflection upon the ebony.

The rod began to grow hot in his hands, and it clung to his palm. When he tried to let go, it stuck. It was boiling now, hotter, hotter. Ray tried to pry it loose with his other hand, but it too became glued to the rod. Ray could feel his skin peel and burn; it was as if someone were forcing his hand into the center of a fire. Ray winced and shut his eyes in agony.

The burning stopped. Ray opened his eyes. He was in a pure black room. He looked down at his hands expecting to find them shiny and raw, but they were unscathed, nothing save the calluses of prior work showed any sign of injury. Also, to Ray’s chagrin, his hands were empty. Panicked, he stared around the room looking for any sign, any inclination as to where he was. Then something caught his eye in the corner of the room.

It was a girl, her back was turned to him, and she was covered from her shoulders down by a white sheet. Her dark, silky hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail.

“Nova?” Ray asked dazed. “Nova is that you?” Ray took a step towards her; she sprung up to face him. Her eyes were wide, and her face was paper-white. Her lips had lost all color and were quavering, but despite it all it was still her, Ray was sure of it.

“It’s me,” he said holding his hands in front of him as he approached her. Nova backed into the room’s corner and pressed her trembling hands on the walls. “Nova, it’s me,” Ray gasped, his voice was dry and deep. Nova fell to the floor and covered her chest with her hands. Ray drew closer and extended a hand towards her then quickly retracted it and brought it in front of his eyes. Splotched skin was draped over frail bone and his nails were long and yellow.

”Stay away from me, please!” Nova whined. Ray fell backwards into something firm. A
wheelchair. “Stay away!”

“Ray! Ray! Wake up, boy!” The room disappeared, but the world was still dark. He found himself looking up at General Conner, Chase, and several other soldiers, their faces all grotesquely shaded by the light from the fortress’s lampposts.

“Nova, is she alright?!” Ray spat.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Chase screamed. “You nearly killed someone!”

Ray sat up fast.

Deep, smoldering trenches scarred the courtyard, and the iron railing directly across from Ray’s door was melted and contorted, still glowing orange in the new night.

“What happened? Was it my fault? Did I do this?”

“No,” replied the General sternly before Chase could interject. “This did.” He said holding out the Sertorius. “I never want you to touch this again.” He pocketed the weapon. “It’s activated by emotions and thoughts. If you cannot control your emotions, then you cannot touch this weapon.” Conner’s tone was more serious than Ray had ever heard it. The old man waved off all of the soldiers including the furious Chase.

“Go to bed, Ray. We’ll talk more in the morning.” Ray turned to his room in a confused slump. Walking away, Conner slipped a small piece of paper into Ray’s cold, clammy hand.

Ray closed the door behind him, breathing heavily. He stood with his back to the door for a long while, the smoldering trenches cutting into his mind. He closed his fists with self-loathing, crunching the paper he forgot he held there. He unfolded the scrap roughly and read it.

552, a passing grade
CHAPTER 14

Midnight. The stars outside were blanketed by wispy clouds that resembled cobwebs in the night sky. Ray sat in his quarters immersed in thought. Questioning the authenticity of the vision he received wasn’t high on his list of things to ponder. Although it haunted him to think that Nova may have been hurt, it haunted him more that he could not clarify her safety for himself. Conner, the wise, elderly General, was the only person who could form the scattered pieces of Ray’s limited understanding into a picture of what was really going on. Ray needed to speak with him, but Chase had placed a sentry outside of his door, holding him hostage in his quarters.

After his initial denial of exit, a revelation struck Ray: it wasn’t Conner that he needed to see. It was Nova. Only by seeing her in person could he dispel this terrible fear he had that she was in danger. He doubted Conner, who had some knowledge of the visions, would humor his desperate pleas to see her, though, especially after he had destroyed a part of his precious fortress. Did Nova miss him? Would she want to see him after all that had happened? What was she doing all this time? Why hadn’t she responded to his letters?

Ray stood up from his seat at Chase’s desk. The chair screeched on the wooden floor: he would see her tonight. It was the only way he was ever going to put his heart at rest. First he would have to steal the sentry’s weapons and uniform, seeing as he had not yet been given his own. But what was he thinking? This first step, in itself, could prove impossible, and he couldn’t begin to fathom the punishment for impersonating a soldier,
but he was driven and not even his usually dominant common sense could stand in his way.

As Ray reached for the doorknob, another painful thought leapt into his head. *Why hadn’t he thought of her, recently? How could he have forgotten someone that close to him? Was he really so self-absorbed that his training had taken precedence over his budding relationship?*

Ray shook his head, as if trying to dislodge these thoughts. Too much thought on sensitive matters like this was surely not good, so he tried his best to put it behind him. *Besides, seeing Nova would clarify things,* he hoped.

The red, glowing numbers of Chase’s digital clock showed 1:01 when Ray crept toward the door and put his ear up to the dry wood. He could hear the sentry breathing heavily outside. He slowly twisted the knob and cracked the door. He could still hear the sentry taking deep breaths of air. Ray had suspected that the man would hear the door crack, but no voice responded, so Ray poked his head through the crack and peered around.

*“They must be taking shifts,”* he thought. The man that had been guarding the door earlier was gone, and in his place was Rufus whose black eye patch waved slightly in the cold night breeze. Ray cursed under his breath. Rufus had two key elements in his favor; one: he was one of Ray’s few friends, and injuring him at all would place great guilt on Ray’s conscience; and two: Rufus was a giant of a man with biceps like tree trunks and a skull made of lead. This second fact seemed more important than the first.

All of the variables aside, if by some chance Ray would succeed, Rufus’s clothes were far too large; Ray would stick out like a clown in an office building. He let out a sigh and began to close the door when a high pitched voice broke the calm.

*“Come on Rufus, it’s my turn big guy.”*

Rufus stirred and opened his lone eye to see Lyle who was approaching him, arms
“You won’t tell Chase that I fell asleep will ya?” asked Rufus in his ogre-like tone. Lyle shook his head.

“Course I won’t Rufy, I don’t want to see my two best buds angry with each other.” Rufus rose up to his full height which must have been at least two feet taller than Lyle’s. They shook hands, and Rufus walked away, rubbing his eye, to continue his nap elsewhere. Lyle sat down in the same space that Rufus had occupied seconds earlier and closed his eyes. Lovable idiots.

Ray slowly opened his door all of the way. Lyle opened his eyes at the sound of the door creaking just in time to see Ray, who grabbed him and put him in a headlock to drag him into the room.

Ray and Lyle struggled on the floor of the room for a minute or so. Ray holding Lyle’s neck and mouth and Lyle kicking and churning his feet trying to get leverage against a much taller Ray.

“Lyle!” Ray half shouted half whispered. “I’m not trying to hurt you or anything, man. I just need to talk to you, okay?” Lyle slowed his kicking and churning and Ray removed his hand from over Lyle’s mouth.

“You could have just talked to me!” Lyle spat, his mousy voice was made even more faint by the pressure Ray had on his windpipe. “You didn’t need to assault me!”

“Sorry…” Ray groaned. Lyle was still trying to wriggle free. “I... grrr… will… huff… let you go if you… promise not to run away to Chase until you’ve heard me out…”

“Deal! Just let me breathe, Ray!”
Ray let Lyle go, and he scurried over to a corner of the room where he crouched rubbing his neck. It was red.

“So what is it?” He coughed. “Spill the beans quick so I can report you for assaulting me.”

“Look, I’m sorry Ly, I just needed to make sure you didn’t run to Chase.”

“Well, here I am.” Lyle hissed. “Your captive audience.”

“Right,” Ray crossed his legs and looked at his boots. “What happened today with the *Sertorius* was a complete accident. I didn’t mean to destroy or hurt anything or anybody.”

“Conner said something like that.” Lyle mumbled.

“Yeah, well it’s true. The second I touched that thing it put me into some sort of trance or something. It was like a really vivid dream.”

“What was it about?” Lyle asked, trying his best not to seem interested. Ray knew he had to pick his words carefully. If he gave Lyle any hint that he and the Emperor were the same person he was sure there would be hell to pay, at least for Conner, who seemed so avid about defending Ray’s real identity.

“I saw a friend of mine from home,” Ray continued. “She was being hurt. It seemed so real.”

“Like an ex-girlfriend or something?” Lyle perked up. “What was happening to her?”

The world girlfriend made a weird burning feeling in Ray’s chest.

“She was just a friend, but I couldn’t really tell what was hurting her,” he lied. “All I know is she was in pain and it was way too real.”

“You worried about her?” Lyle squeaked.

“A little I guess. It was so realistic, you know?”
“No, I don’t know,” retorted Lyle. “And I don’t see why this was worth suffocating me over. Why don’t you send her a letter or something?”

“I tried. She hasn’t responded to a single one. It’s very… unlike her.”

“Did you guys have a fight or something?” Lyle was rocking back and forth slightly as he crouched. He must not have been involved in deeper conversations often.

“Sort of, but… I know she wanted to hear from me. Like, I really know.”

Lyle scratched his chin. “Girls are weird, man. Like I had this chick once, at home. She was real pretty you know? But, she didn’t tell me anything that she ever thought, and one day she just up and told me a grocery list of “problems” we had that I had no clue about, and we broke up the next day,” Lyle was talking very quickly. “I don’t wanna be with a girl like that you know? Even though she was hot, I just thought to myself; ‘man you don’t need this.’ You know the deal.”

“Yeah.” Ray had only been half listening. “So I think I need to see her. Like tonight.”

“Tonight?!” Lyle’s voice skipped. “But, you’re in lock-down, man, and I’m the lock.”

“I know.” Ray said trying to put on his best pleading face, for he really was pleading at this point. “But, I know for a fact that if I left now I would only be gone for like a few hours. Probably shorter than your shift even.”

“I don’t know, man. Conner could really torch me.”

“Lyle. I need to make sure she’s alright. We’re… close friends.”

“You like her don’t you?” Lyle smirked. Ray didn’t have time for this idle chatter. He could see the minutes of Lyle’s shift ticking away. He could see Nova in pain.

“Yeah, man I do. So what do you…”
“This is a love thing,” Lyle mused. “That’s pretty soft of you, Lil Excellency.” He was using Chase’s nicknames now… he must really be on his high horse.

“Yeah, I’m a real softy. So…”

“What would your grandpa think of this little escapade, huh? He’d probably have me discharged or jailed or something if he found out I helped you.” Lyle laughed.

Ray’s mind was racing. He took a deep breath. “You know what, Ly? You’re totally right. This girl ain’t worth that.”

“Damn straight, Ray. She’s a girl! They’re all drama anyway. If you got there and she was alright, which she probably is,” he added with a condescending grin. He hadn’t seen the vision, how would he know how authentic it was. “Anyway, if you got there and she was alright, she’d rub it in your face how unnecessarily worried you were. You’d never live it down. You’d be her slave forever! Like this one little hottie I dated back home…”

“Did you hear that?” Ray interrupted staring perfectly stillly at the door.

“Hear what?” Lyle whispered nervously looking at the door as well.

“It sounded like,” Ray strained his ears. “It sounded like somebody was outside.”

“Shit!” Lyle whispered, eyes glued to the closed door. “If they see I’m not at my post…”

“Get back out there then, man.” Ray whispered inching towards the door. “Don’t worry about this girl thing. I’ll talk with you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” Lyle whispered. The pair stood up and Lyle inched towards the door.

“Goodnight, Little…”

But it was already over. Ray snuck behind Lyle and put him in a tight sleeper hold. The little man’s eyes widened and he gasped and coughed. Ray held him tighter until he felt Lyle’s
feet stop moving. Ray let him fall slowly to the ground. His face still red, his breath faint and raspy.

“Sorry, Ly,” Ray whispered. “I need to see Nova.”

Ray propped open the door, scanned the fort, and sprinted towards the stairs, running back to lock the door behind him. Sweat was already in his eyes and under his arms soaking through Lyle’s much-too-tight jacket.

Ray moved quietly, but quickly, across the courtyard in the direction of the subway entrance. He was noticed only once by a few passing soldiers. They nodded at him, and Ray nodded back nonchalantly, certain that they hadn’t recognized him.

When Ray finally reached the door marked Subway 286, he paused. Truly, he had not planned on making it this far. He tried to think of a soldier who he could impersonate, so he could board the train when it struck him: he wouldn’t need a soldier’s name. He could do better than that. He was the Emperor himself. He only hoped that he could trick the voice receptor. He touched the wall, and the computer asked him for his name. He crossed his fingers and nervously responded, adding an exaggerated rasp.

“Raymond Tract.” The computer hummed and then, seconds later, words appeared on its screen, accompanied by a robotic voice.

“Password?”

Ray had made it this far on pure determination, and he was sure he could make it one step further. When the keyboard popped out of the wall, he typed in his password that he had used on all every computer since second grade.

The panel zoomed back into the wall. Ray was sweating more and more profusely now. Then after what seemed decades of waiting, the panel responded. “Please enter, Emperor Tract.”
The door slid open, and Ray stepped in. He was not alone on the elevator. Another man from the military was staring at him. Ray averted his eyes and stepped in. The man gave him a look and raised his voice.

“You’re not the Emperor!”

Ray reacted instantly, removing Lyle’s pistol from the holster on his waist and cracking the man sharply on the side of the head with the handle. *He must have heard the computer from outside*, Ray panicked. The man was lying on the ground, unconscious, blood trickling from a small gash where Ray had hit him. The elevator door closed, and Ray traveled down with the soldier still lying unconscious on the floor.

When the doors slid open to the subway, Ray walked briskly out and took a seat; guilt weighed heavier on his heart now, but adrenaline pushed him on. The elevator closed to his right, and he snuck one last, nervous glance through the glass at the soldier still lying on the floor.

*What was he doing? He was risking his life sneaking among trained soldiers. He wasn’t James Bond, just a kid. A kid... No, he wasn’t a kid anymore. He hadn’t the luxury of claiming to be an innocent child. Circumstances forced his manhood, forced him to act.*

The only other passenger in the subway was an Asian man with short, slicked black hair whose eyes were glued to the screen of a laptop computer. Ray withstood the G-force of the subway; his fellow occupant remained stuck to his computer, even as the train was moving. On his shoulders were red epaulettes.

To Ray’s pleasure, no one else entered the train at any of the three stops leading to Munich. When the subway stopped, Ray made his way to the closest elevator. Much to his chagrin, the man with the computer followed, his eyes still glued to the screen. The elevator seemed as if it were not moving at all. Ray looked down at Lyle’s boots the entire time (they
were tight and hot on his larger feet) afraid to look at the man.

Upon reaching the top floor, Ray gingerly left the elevator. The station had only ten or fifteen soldiers, at the most, inhabiting it. After racking his memory and scanning the room, he found the familiar elevator that led up to the palace. When he was done confirming his code, Ray stepped into the glass elevator. The man with the laptop broke into a stride to catch up and hastily typed in his password before the elevator doors could close. Damn. When the pair started to ascend, Ray looked over to the man who was still hell-bent on maintaining his stare into the laptop’s glowing screen.

Ray couldn’t pull off this mission with this man following him the entire way. He closed his eyes and breathed deep.

The elevator zoomed, noiselessly, into the bowels of the palace. Ray kept his eyes on the floor and watched as a drop of his sweat made a miniscule splash on the linoleum. The man coughed, and shot Ray a quick glance.

“Evening.” He muttered.

“Evening.” Ray’s voice cracked.

The man did not speak again until the elevator reached the palace’s main floor. When the doors opened the man shut the lid of his laptop, straightened his carriage and addressed him again.

“Where are you off to at this hour, Private?”

“I… um… I’m picking up some paperwork for General Conner.”

“Oh, I see. Give the General my regards.”

“Oh… yeah sure, I’ll…” Ray began, but the man had already taken off down the hallway to the left and disappeared around a corner. Ray let out a sigh of relief, hoping that he wouldn’t
run into that man again.

His breath was coming in fewer spurts as he traveled the halls. His nerves had relaxed a little, and he felt he would have less to worry about now that he was at his destination. This, of course, was not true. An Emperor’s palace was sure to be more heavily guarded than a subway.

After about fifteen minutes, it dawned on Ray that he wasn’t having much luck. Few doors were guarded by soldiers and the ones that were had signs above them saying things like **Mental Rehabilitation Ward**, and **Interrogation Facility**. Ray *knew* that they wouldn’t have put an innocent girl in any of those dreadful places…*would they?*

Ray was getting the same feeling of confusion that he got when he first tread these halls with Conner, only this time he had no guide and no landmarks to help him keep track of where he had already been.

An hour of roaming passed, and Ray was getting angry. He made a sharp, aggravated turn at a corner and hit something with a thud causing him to fall to the ground.

“Watch where you’re going, you pathetic excuse for a soldier.” Hoffenen spat as Ray got to his feet. Hoffenen looked over at a wall; was he going to continue his insults without making eye contact? It *was* his annoying habit. Ray tried to hide his face and accept his slew of insults, but before Hoffenen fired off any verbal abuse, he pulled a double-take and looked Ray straight in the eyes.

“You?! What are you doing here?!?” he shouted. “I’ll have Conner demoted for this!” Hoffenen reached into his back pocket and removed a short, black rod and pointed it at Ray.

“Don’t point that at me!” Ray shouted, shocked. “I’ll come quietly.”

“Oh, yes,” Hoffenen smiled maliciously, the tip of his weapon glowing red. “You’ll come *very* quietly…”
Ray reacted fast, without much thought, and smacked the rod out of Hoffenen’s hand. The rod hit the ground and hissed and spit red flames as it whirred on the marble. Before the General could react, Ray had pushed his way past him and began sprinting down the hallway.

One of the flames from the rod singed Ray’s pant leg as he dashed past it.

Ray heard a click followed by the sound of a gunshot. He stopped running and put his hands in the air, turning around slowly.

Hoffenen had a wide smile across his face. “You attacked me Raymond!” he cackled, madly. “I’m sure that the Emperor would love to hear about this!”

Before Ray could respond, Hoffenen had struck himself in the face with the butt of his gun.

“What are you..?!” Ray began, but the general cut him off, grinning madly as a thin line of blood drew from his split lip to his pointed chin.

“Attacking an officer,” He mused, gesturing Ray to come closer with the barrel of his pistol. “Someone’s going to hear about this.”

Mere minutes later, ten soldiers surrounded Ray, each brandishing a dangerous looking weapon. Hoffenen retrieved his black rod, which was still hissing, and told the captain to escort Ray to the Emperor’s study.

Ray had failed; he was caught. No way now would he be able to see Nova. Hoffenen stayed behind Ray, his lips still curled into the sinister smile. He left the blood to dry on his lip as evidence of Ray’s “violence”. The guards stopped outside of a door that already had ten guards surrounding it. Hoffenen stepped ahead and into the door. Ray saw through a crack in the door, that the Emperor was talking to a flustered General Conner. Hoffenen stepped in and triumphantly stated that he had apprehended Ray by himself. The large door closed slowly,
shutting out all noise to the outside.

Ray stood outside of the door waiting for his fate. The soldier’s hands grasped tightly around his arms. A few minutes passed before Conner opened the door and nodded at the guards. He looked like death.

Two armed soldiers accompanied Ray into the dark room. All eyes were on him: Conner’s, Hoffenen’s, and even his own, milky eyes.

“Sit down, Ray,” the Emperor said firmly, his eyes never breaking their stare. Ray found a chair in the middle of the room and sat down. He had really done it. What would be the punishment for his multiple offenses? Hanging? The electric chair? Maybe a deadly firing squad? The Emperor closed his eyes and spoke with firmness, and authority.

“Why, why would you abuse my trust? I’ve given you your freedom. All I asked for in return was one short year of your time, and you couldn’t even give me that. I’m disappointed in you, Ray,” the Emperor shut his eyes and reopened them slowly. “When you decide to make reckless moves like the one you did tonight, not only does it reflect badly on yourself, but it reflects badly on me. It makes me look like a fool. I thought that you were a mature boy, a smart boy; I was... I thought that you could keep your mind on your goal and not let anything get in the way. I was wrong.”

Every word that the Emperor said was intended to have an impact, but Ray had been lectured before; all that lectures did was create suspense up till the point when you would learn your punishment. The Emperor opened his eyes and looked deeper into Ray’s, so deep that Ray couldn’t keep looking. The Emperor took a deep breath and continued.

“The only good news that I have is that your actions today will not have caused any severe harm. From what I’ve gathered, a couple of soldiers were injured, but there were no
casualties.”

“Despite the fact that no real harm was done, your little, protégé has broken several laws,” interrupted Hoffenen sounding annoyed. “Surely you will punish him for what he has done.” Conner shot a dirty look at Hoffenen, but the Emperor responded calmly.

“I never said that I wouldn’t punish him, Jacob.” Hoffenen’s face tightened at the use of his first name. The Emperor turned his attention back to Ray, who still was sitting nervously in his little wooden chair.

“Well, let’s see,” the Emperor said smoothly. “You escaped, without permission, from a government facility, injured two soldiers, impersonated me, and from what I can see,” he brandished a faint smile at Hoffenen. “Thoroughly battered a high ranking officer.”

Hoffenen scowled and wiped his lip with his sleeve. Ray turned red and looked down at his feet. *The Emperor held all of the cards now. No matter what, he wasn’t going to escape punishment.*

“Normally,” said the Emperor, “You would go to prison for life for these acts, but I can’t very well put myself in that kind of predicament. I believe that, at the most, you owe me another two years of your time.”

Ray’s heart sunk like a stone. Hoffenen couldn’t stand it. “TWO YEARS?! ALL OF THOSE OFFENSES AND ALL HE GETS IS TWO DAMN YEARS?!”

The Emperor didn’t retaliate. He maintained his cool, and even though it must have been a real challenge, Conner stayed calm as well. Hoffenen straightened his uniform and bowed to the Emperor. “I’m sorry for my outburst sir; it wasn’t called for. I will excuse myself now.” Hoffenen turned and walked towards the door, stopping near where Ray sat. “I will see you in a few weeks, your majesty.” He left the room, leaving Ray with the Emperor and General Conner,
who smirked despite himself.

Ray quivered at the thought of Hoffenen’s visit in two weeks, but another fear overtook him. “What about Nova? Will she have to stay here too?” The Emperor closed his eyes, deep in thought.

“Her fate will be the same as yours,” he responded coolly. “You must learn that the actions of one can affect the lives of millions. You should be lucky it is only one life you have tampered with now.” An intense gut-wrenching guilt brought tears to Ray’s eyes. She would be stuck here. She would be furious with him. She might never speak to him again. Two years was no small amount of time. She would have a full two years to let her hatred of him build up...

Conner sensed the tension. “With your permission, your highness, I would like to take the boy back to the fort now.” The Emperor thought for a minute and then raised his wrinkled hand in a salute. Conner bowed and took Ray out of the room.

Once they were alone in the hallway and out of the Emperor’s earshot, Conner spoke, serious but calm. “Don’t pull one of those again, or next time, you’ll run into me instead of Hoffenen.”

Ray balled his hands with rage. Conner took a deep breath, and his face seemed to relax. He then smiled his warm smile and his eyes twinkled. “Come on, I owe you something for punching General Hoffenen in the face. Follow me.” Confusion distracted Ray from self-loathing, and he followed Conner down the hallway.

Though the palace was perplexing, it didn’t take Ray long to realize that Conner wasn’t heading in the direction of the subway. Soon, they were in a hallway that Ray had never seen before. It was far more spectacular than the dull chrome ones that Ray had treaded so many times. These halls had red tapestries draped down ebony walls, similar to the Emperor’s bed
chamber. Conner was jogging through with speed that one his age shouldn’t have. He stopped at a corner and told Ray to wait there. Ray could hear Conner talking to some soldiers around the bend, and after a few minutes, Ray felt a tug at his hand and spun the corner to face a beaming Conner.

“She’s in there,” he said pointing to a large wooden door. Ray’s heart began racing.

“Sir… thank… uh… thank you, sir.”

“I’m still mad at you, you know.” His voice was stern, but his eyes gave him away.

Ray had never experienced happiness like this; everything he loved in this new world lay beyond that door. He would be reunited with the girl of his dreams. Hours ago, he had been more than a thousand miles away. All the trouble, all the sweat and blood were wiped away when his fingers wrapped around the cold door handle.
CHAPTER 15

The room put shame to Ray’s dank quarters back in Paris. It looked almost exactly the same as the Emperor’s grand bed chamber, except that where his room was dark, this room was light. The window was open, and the rising, auburn sun cast shadows across the elegant bedroom. Ray took in the sights quickly before he noticed that Nova was nowhere in sight. Ray frantically scanned the room. Where was she? Then he felt something warm touch his shoulder.

“Ahh!” he shouted as he spun around to see Nova cackling.

“Ha, ha, ha,” she chuckled. “That gets your every time!” Nova was red in the face, and her shining smile was so beautiful, it made Ray smile back in spite of himself. He interrupted her laughing fit with a hug, and she quickly returned the warm welcome.

The moment was cut short by the knife of guilt.

“Nova, listen I’m so sorry that I haven’t visited you. It’s just, I’ve been so busy with my training, and I…”

“All that matters is that you’re here now,” said Nova looking into Ray’s eyes.

She’s smiling. She mustn’t be angry. That’s one thing that I didn’t screw up today,” Ray thought, relieved. The pair soon smothered each other with stories. Nova cringed when Ray explained how heavy and sharp the boulders covering the tank were.

“Yeah, and the Emperor has been visiting me every day for a couple of weeks now…”

A tight feeling gripped Ray’s heart, and his fists clenched by their own accord; it
was an odd feeling, being jealous of himself.


“Not really…” She looked down into her hands.

“Not really? What does that mean? He didn’t…do anything?”

“No.” Nova crossed her arms. “He’s just a little creepy, that’s all.”

“Sorry, I’m just worried about you.”

“I know.”

There was a bit of a pause, and Ray could hear Conner shuffling outside of the door. Ray desperately tried to avoid telling Nova about his escape attempt and the gut-wrenching punishment to follow, but he did not know how long he would have before Conner had to pull them apart.

“Nova, I have some bad news…”

Her face became stony, and her eyes questioned him. Ray gulped. *His hotheadedness (or lack of head at all) had never got him into trouble with anyone that he cared about; in fact, he couldn’t recall a time that he had ever lost his head this way. It was all about the wording, how he revealed this painful information. He thought hard about how to tell her. Eventually, her eager eyes coaxed it out of him.*

“Nova, I didn’t come here with permission,” said Ray a lump in his throat. Nova looked confused. “I escaped from my base to see you, and…” This would be the hardest part, so he blurted it out in one breath. “I was caught, and the Emperor said I have to stay her for two more years…Nova I tried, I really did… I tried but, but you have to stay too…I’m so sorry, I’m an idiot… It’s all my fault.”

Nova froze in shock. Her inquisitive stare became blank, and tears shimmered in her
hazel eyes.

“You’re lying,” she choked as Ray hung his head. “I can’t take it anymore! It’s just too much! I want to go home!”

Ray went to comfort her, but she pushed him away. “Just go, Ray!” Her eyes were puffy and wet. Ray didn’t want their visit to end like this, so he responded quickly.

“I love you, Nova and I’ll…I’ll find a way out of this,” he added, reaching for her hand. “I will make it up to you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not fair!” Nova punched Ray over and over in the chest. “It’s not fair!” She stopped swinging and cried into Ray’s shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her. His chest stung from her fists. Conner quietly entered the door and motioned for Ray to leave. Ray gave him a desperate, pleading look, begging for some kind of help.

Thinking fast, Conner crammed his hand into his pocket. “There, there love,” he whispered to Nova, as she separated from Ray’s embrace. Conner placed a small black cube into her hand. Nova stopped tearing and curled her fingers around the box, not sure what it was but determined not to give it up.

“It’s so you can talk to Ray.” Conner said patting him on the back. “It’s called a voicebox. All you have to do is hold it and think the name of who you want to talk too. It’s only owned by high ranked military personnel, so you’ll have to call me before you can talk to Ray. My name is General Francis Conner, in case you forgot.”

Awestruck, she wiped her wet eyes with her sleeve. Ray let a grin spread across his face. Nova placed her hand on Conner’s knee.

“T-t-thank you,” she said, trembling slightly.

“Yes… thank you, sir,” Ray muttered, trying to suppress the urge to hug the old man.
Conner smiled and patted Nova on the head.

“I know what it’s like to miss someone you love. My wife lives far away from here in Edinburgh, and ever since our kids died, she and I have been very dependent on one another.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” gasped Nova. She seemed to be searching for a distraction.

“What happened?”

Conner took a pause. The question sunk in, and the smile fell from his face. Nova noticed what she had said and immediately apologized.

“That’s quite all right, I’ve been asked millions of times…still hurts though.” Conner paused trying to regain his train of thought.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t right for me to… I just slipped…”

“They were killed,” Conner stated, looking down at his boots. “It happened forty years ago. I had been in the service for just ten years…”

Conner’s thoughts wandered away from the cold, oppressive palace and back to better times. Times when getting up in the morning wasn’t so hard, and going to bed at night could be done without shedding a single tear into his pillow. As Conner told his story, vivid memories fluttered across his mind:

*A seasoned man stood in a field of grass sprinkled by daisies and the crisp morning dew.

It was just the start of spring. The air was still brisk with the last draft of winter, but the rich, purple crocus were abloom, and the wind carried their sweet scent through its currents.

The man was short in stature. He had a full head of dark, brown hair, but the sides were graying: proof that he was sliding slowly past the middle of his life. His eyes twinkled like wet sand, bringing with their gaze a sense of calm and safety. .

He looked down at a blood red piece of paper clenched in his scarred hand. After*
beaming proudly, he felt something warm latch around his leg.

“Hi, daddy,” said a plump child with a goofy, cute smile. His hair was the same hue of brown as his father’s, and his A second child latched onto his father’s other leg. This child was a tad thinner, and he had obviously attained more of his mother’s features.

“We missed you,” he said with unmatched innocence. When this child smiled, the man saw a mouth with a few teeth missing. A young Conner grinned down on his two perfect treasures and embraced them. The younger son pulled on one of his father’s medals that peppered his black uniform.

“What’s this one for daddy?”

Conner smiled and looked down on his son with shimmering eyes.

“This one,” he said eagerly. “Means that I just became a Colonel.”

“That’s the best!” said the older son now clutching lovingly at his father’s arm.

“Yes it is,” a honey-sweet voice rang. All three of them looked up at the woman who had just arrived. She was delicate and lovely though older.

“Mommy,” said the younger child running up to her. “Daddy’s home.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said the woman, and she went forward and gave the man a light kiss.

“Why don’t you come home, dear,” said the woman in a gentle tone. “I just finished baking us a lovely turkey with that cornbread stuffing you like.” Conner nodded, his cheeks slightly sore from maintaining a wide smile. They went back to their quiet little cottage just on the outskirts of the field. A thin wisp of smoke drifted from the chimney.

They all talked and played cards and games where little holograms scurried across the boards. They then were treated to a fine feast with turkey, stuffing, boiled green beans, and
buttery whipped potatoes. When the sun fell in the sky, the children grew tired and headed off to bed. The man and his wife stayed up to talk.

“Frank, we’ve been truly blessed,” said the woman holding his hands in hers. “We have great children, a beautiful house, and each other; all we need now... is for you to come home.”

A pause.

“Soon Cindy,” Conner had said. “Very soon.”

“Why not now?” She inched closer to him, her breath on his neck. “You’ve served more than your four required years, why not come home?”

“Because, darling,” he continued, moving back slightly, “I’m so close, to having some real power in this army. With that, I could make a real difference, for real this time. No more required years, no more fighting. Just peace.”

Tears formed and slid down the woman’s soft cheeks. She gazed at the man’s hands on his lap.

“I love you,” she said. “And, reluctantly, I will admit this world needs you. But... I need you too.”

The couple fell into silence.

Hours later, Conner tip-toed, silent as a cat into his children’s room. He smiled at pictures of himself on the walls. The crude paintings of a man in a black, military jacket brought a tear to his eyes. Words spoken by his youngest echoed through his head in the silent room:

“And you’re going to never give up until the world is happy, do you promise dad?”

Conner looked at his children, their eyes closed and faint smiles still on their faces. He knelt down next to them and kissed both of their smooth flawless foreheads and departed for Munich Palace.
Back in the present-day Munich Palace, Ray and Nova listened as Conner finished painting the picture of his past.

“So I returned back to Munich that night thinking nothing of it. Four days later, I was told that a small band of Rebels had shadowed me that night. My wife pulled through, but my children…” Conner took a deep breath and shut his eyes, closing them on his tears. “I promised them I’d never give up, and that’s why I’m here today.” The room was more noiseless than death itself. Conner reached out and put his heavy hand on Ray’s shoulder.

“You would have liked my oldest, he was a lot like you…” Ray looked in the old man’s eyes, and Conner pulled his hand away fast. “Well Ray, I’d say we’d better hit the road.” He rubbed his eyes and shook Nova’s hand. Ray gave Nova a hug. It felt half-hearted from her end.

“I tried to escape too,” She whispered, and she squeezed him a little tighter. Conner and Ray said their final goodbyes and left. The subway seemed to barely move during their return.

Ray woke the next morning feeling energized, which was really quite amazing, seeing as he altogether had only one hour of sleep. He worried about Nova, but now that he had a way to communicate with her, things didn’t seem as hopeless as they had before. Ray sat on the bottom bunk (Chase had not slept there last night) reading a note that had been placed on the desk:

Meet me on Paris field whenever you wake up, new lesson today.

Conner

He knew that the task, whatever it was, would be difficult, but at least things were not as bad as they could have been, that is if Conner kept his word about not being angry. After jumping out of bed and dressing, Ray sped to the mess hall to grab something to eat.
Rumor of Ray’s risky escape had already spread like wildfire across the fort, torching ears and causing people’s tempers to boil over. When Ray entered, conversations in the warm mess hall died. Dozens of eyes cut Ray’s flesh; some only for a mere second’s glance, while others scanned in intervals, but the most unnerving were the ones that remained still and unmoving. Contempt flared in the gaze of some. Chase’s chair scraped off of the ground as he stood up.

“So, I heard that you caused some trouble last night,” Chase stated, drawing closer to Ray as he spoke. The gap between the two closed rapidly. Soon their eyes were level, and Ray could smell liquor on Chase’s breath. Chase’s arm was a blur. Ray ducked his head a little to the side, but still a set of hard knuckles grazed his cheek. Ray stumbled backwards awkwardly. Charlie, though almost constantly inebriated, had never been violent with him when he was.

“What the hell was that for?!” Ray thought he knew the answer.

“That one’s for Lyle,” said Chase, determination filling his chest. “And I believe I owe you another for the other soldier you beat, traitor.” With that, Chase ran at Ray and made a move for his head. Ray’s forearm took the blunt of the force, as he blocked the attack at the last second. A mixture of fear and reluctance was present in the way Ray carried himself.

A cacophony of chairs screeched as the mess hall’s occupants formed a circle around the two.

“Take ‘em out Chase!” They jeered. Ray’s arm was bruising where Chase’s fist made contact. Ray was certain fighting wasn’t the answer now. But Chase felt otherwise.

A barrage of punches came from his roommate. Ray blocked a few, but most of them landed painfully on his face or gut. Ray collapsed holding his stomach and gasping for air. The sound of the troops was deafening, and Ray’s vision albeit fuzzy, could make out Chase walking
towards him.

When Ray had lost all hope, a green light flashed before his eyes. The green stream hit Chase and sent him flying backward to the hard tile where he was knocked out cold. Ray turned just in time to catch a glimpse of Conner holding out the Sertorius, as the world around him faded into darkness.

When Ray awoke, he was wedged in an uncomfortable wooden chair in what looked to be Conner’s office. Sitting next to him was a groggy Chase. Conner addressed the pair, sternly, from his ominous, metal chair.

“Lieutenant Jagger, I know that you must be angry, and I know that you wanted to show strength to your fellow soldiers, but what you did was unnecessary. Mr. Tract was already punished by the Emperor himself. I know you must think Ray to be a traitor, which he was…but the Emperor’s punishment was fitting,” Conner’s voice was measured and firm. “All of us in the NGE are brothers. I know that Ray might have hurt some of your brothers, but he still is one of them himself.”

“But sir!”

“Be quiet,” Conner shot.

Chase held his tongue and shifted nervously in his seat. Conner continued. “All you wanted to do was help, and I understand that, but it is not your job to give the punishment. You are dismissed.” Chase stood up, saluted, and cast a dirty look at Ray before leaving the office.

Conner turned to Ray, a stern look on his face. “I could send a report to Munich about this; maybe get Lieutenant Jagger a hearing for demotion.”

“No, sir that’s not necessary. I deserved what I got, sir.” Ray didn’t want Chase to get in trouble for standing up for his friends. After all, hadn’t he been in the wrong?
“Good soldier,” the old man muttered, his knees cracked as he stood up. “Past is past, let’s focus on something more important; how badly do you want to pass Hoffenen’s test?”


“Then we’re going to take a little trip.”
CHAPTER 15

The room put shame to Ray’s dank quarters back in Paris. It looked almost exactly the same as the Emperor’s grand bed chamber, except that where his room was dark, this room was light. The window was open, and the rising, auburn sun cast shadows across the elegant bedroom. Ray took in the sights quickly before he noticed that Nova was nowhere in sight. Ray frantically scanned the room. Where was she? Then he felt something warm touch his shoulder.

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“Nova, listen I’m so sorry that I haven’t visited you. It’s just, I’ve been so busy with my training, and I…”

“All that matters is that you’re here now,” said Nova looking into Ray’s eyes.

She’s smiling. She mustn’t be angry. That’s one thing that I didn’t screw up today,” Ray thought, relieved. The pair soon smothered each other with stories. Nova cringed when Ray explained how heavy and sharp the boulders covering the tank were.

“Yeah, and the Emperor has been visiting me every day for a couple of weeks now…”

A tight feeling gripped Ray’s heart, and his fists clenched by their own accord; it
“Nope,” said Ray looking longingly at his items on the shelf.

“You must be new here or somethin’. Let me tell you somethin’ before you go bein’ an idiot with your credits.”

Ray could not believe that this woman was lecturing him. He didn’t want to hear it. He just wanted his items so that he could leave with Conner.

“You see,” she began, a sneer on her full lips, taking obvious pride in her chance to be informative. “The money you make for your service is transferred to two accounts: your family’s and the government’s. The credits for your family go there every week when you get paid, but you don’t get the credits you sent to the government back till you complete your service, okay?”

“Okay.” Ray feigned interest.

“So, anyway, whatever extra expenses you use in the military… you know, stuff that ain’t food or your monthly essentials is taken away from the money sent back to your family. Now, my computer here tells me that you’ve already been given your toiletries and essentials for this month, so if you want all these extra now, they’ll be taken away from your family salary. Got it?”

“Yeah,” Ray lied, tapping his foot. “Can I have my…”

“This is like an extra month’s pay right here, kid,” she said, gesturing towards Ray’s pile. “You get that right?”

“Uh, yes.” Ray looked her straight in the eyes. “My um… grandfather’s kinda important, so he makes a good bit of money. Can I have my…”

“Important? High-ranked, eh? Only way to make that kinda…”

“He’s the Emperor, alright?” Ray snapped. “Can I please just get my stuff?”
The woman frowned. “So you’re his grandkid? I thought that was just that boy, Chase, starting rumors…”

“No,” said Ray, impatiently. “He’s telling the truth. It’s me.”

The woman laughed deeply in her chest. The button on her jacket around her breast looked like it would pop off.

“You must be one of his friends come to play a prank on me. That little prick. I’m gonna wring his neck next time he comes tryin’ to sweet talk me for more shirts.”

“Virginia.” A voice behind Ray startled him. General Conner was slowing walking towards the counter. “Are you going to talk another one of my men into tardiness?”

“No, General.” Virginia said reaching for her computer again. “This boy was just telling me that he was the Emperor’s grandkid. Trying to get me to give him free stuff I reckon.”

“Well he is, Ginny.” Conner laughed. “And he’s running behind, no doubt because of your chattering.”

Virginia looked a bit flustered, but it only lasted for a second. “Are you accusing me of chattering, Francis Peter Conner?” She reached behind the counter for Ray’s things, a smile across her pudgy face. “Why just the other day you had me pinned behind this counter for 45 minutes talking about that damn Mobile Armor Bill.”

“That’s pressing information!” Conner defended. “It’s a subject worth talking about!”

“Then what about last Tuesday? All you could talk about was how burnt your breakfast porridge was.”

“Well it was really burnt,” Conner frowned. “I was merely dropping hints that you should return to kitchen duty. You never burnt anything.”
“Would you listen to this old coot?” Virginia said to Ray, while stuffing his purchases into bags. “A shameless brownnose.”

“Grab your things, Ray. But watch out, she bites.”

“Where’re you off to in such a hurry, anyway? Another meetin’?”

“No,” Conner gave Ray a look. “We’re going to Edinburgh.”

“Oh, my goodness. How long’s it been? Months at least. Tell Cindy old Ginny says hello.”

“I’ll be sure to do that.” Conner said warmly. “Are you ready, Ray?”

“Yessir,” Ray said throwing a few heavy bags over his shoulder.”

Ray was the center of attention in the subway, sitting between General Conner and several seats of strapped-in bags. The train made its first stop at Fort London, where a considerable amount of people boarded.

“Belfast Naval Base,” Conner whispered over to Ray, “is one of the busiest places in the Empire. The last stateside stop on Subway 286.”

“Stateside?” Ray questioned, straightening a bag that looked ready to tip in its seat. Conner leaned close to him and whispered.

“Well the NGE has a base in Toronto, but it’s seldom-used, and, on paper, it’s listed as demolished.”

“But it isn’t?” Ray whispered.

Conner held a lone finger over his pursed lips and gave Ray a stern look. Ray didn’t ask any more questions about the fort in Canada.

The subway came to a stop, and a woman’s voice echoed from the ceiling.
“Final Stop: Belfast Naval Base.”

Conner motioned for Ray to stand up, and Ray, reluctantly, heaved his heavy bags over his shoulder once more. The tube that jettisoned them up from the subway was identical to the ones that Ray had used in Munich and Paris, but the station that they entered was remarkably different.

Belfast station was built on a manmade island in the middle of a harbor. The smell of the sea wafted over the platform carried by heaving gusts of wind. The methodic sound of slapping waves could still be heard over the loud chatter of hundreds of shuffling soldiers. The platform was made of concrete painted a rich, navy blue. Swirling gold paint patterns that looked like vines swooped around the floor and up thick pillars which supported a grand, glass ceiling. Ray looked up through the ceiling and could see the bright beacon of the sun shining through thick, tinted glass. The station was like a massive pavilion, the kind that one would see in a park, only it was surrounded by whipping waves rather than grass.

The General took in a deep breath of sea air.

“This place ain’t too bad when the weather’s nice,” Conner said motioning for Ray to follow him through the throng of soldiers. “When it gets nasty, walls come up from the floor around there and make this place like a big Plexiglas tent. It’s damn frightening when you come here during a storm; sometimes it looks like the waves are all around you.”

Ray looked around the station again. He could make out buildings across the water.

“So is this like a… sorry!” Ray bumped into a soldier with his oversized bags. “So is this like a bay or something we’re in? How do we get to land?”

“Ferries come out here every three minutes,” Conner said.

“Why doesn’t the subway just go to the land?” Ray asked, bumping into another soldier.
“Admiral Jackson, the head of the Naval Army, is a… a cautious man,” Conner said, obviously picking his words carefully. “Probably stopped him from becoming a General when the choice came down to him and Tim Polky. He likes to keep traffic from the subways regulated. Doesn’t want any suspicious characters coming to the base without him knowing it.”

“I hope all this,” Ray hoisted a bag over his shoulder. “Can fit on a ferry.”

The ferry arrived at a side of the square platform. A ramp shot down from the platform and attached itself to the ferry’s side. Ray marveled at the sleek, black siding of the ferry as he struggled through the other soldiers to get down the ramp.

When Conner and he had found a seat on the ferry (the seats were set up like the ones on the subway, only, to Ray’s relief, there were no harnesses above them) the engine of the boat hummed to life, and the slender boat, now full of passengers, began to skip along the surface of the water to the land.

Ray observed a village whip by on the crest of one of the hills overlooking the bay, and the crisp air on the sea stroked his hair as it passed him by. Conner nudged him and pointed to a little glass bubble embedded in the back of the chair in front of him.

“Jackson,” he said. “Is watching you right now.”

Ray felt odd looking into the little glass bubble, knowing that somewhere there was a man looking back at him through it.

“Is he a friend of yours?” Ray asked nervously, not removing his eyes from the camera.

“We went to Dresden Academy together,” Conner said, making a face at the camera embedded the back of the chair in front of him. “He was a good guy. Nicest guy you’d ever meet, and brilliant too.” Conner looked out to the sea and spoke at a whisper. “But he was
captured during one of our early campaigns together. Plucked right from his tent when he was asleep. He never was the same when he escaped.”

“Escaped?” Ray whispered. “Who had him? Was he tortured?”

Conner sighed. “Our enemies got him, unclear who they really were. The Emperor has his enemies just like we all do.”

Conner stopped talking and continued to make faces at the glass bubble, so Ray did not ask any more questions.

The ferry slowed to a stop as it reached a dock about a mile away in a straight line from the station in the bay. Conner waited for all of the other passengers to depart before giving Ray the nod to exit with his bags.

“We’re going to pay a quick visit to the Admiral before we catch a ride to Edinburgh.” Conner said over the whooshing sound of waves beating against rock. “Or maybe he’ll pay us a visit.”

The old General smiled and pointed ahead of him at the stairs leading up from the dock. A man was descending them, rather gingerly, accompanied by a small troupe of navy-clad guards. He looked to be roughly the same age as Conner, however, he was much thinner. A navy-blue suit with blood-red epaulettes hung over his boney frame. Medals of varying sizes littered the front of the man’s jacket, the largest being a gold anchor situated over his left breast.

As the Admiral drew closer, Ray could better make out his face. It was deeply wrinkled, and his skin was bubbled up in scars across his forehead and down his right cheek. A beard of white hair with shocks of black stretched from his neck up into his sailor’s hat.

“General!” The old Admiral spread his arms. His throat sounded raw and tired, as if he had been shouting. “I knew these eyes weren’t pulling tricks on me!”
Ray noticed that the Admiral’s eyes were different colors, one green and one brown.

“They’d better not be.” Conner smiled. “We’re roughly the same age, and mine haven’t given out on me yet.”

“You don’t spend all day looking at screens though do you, General?” The Admiral was smiling as he shook Conner’s hand. “Bad decision if you ask me. You never know who’s sneaking around anymore.”

“Your base got the posters too, then I assume?”

Admiral Jackson rolled his mismatched eyes. “Not here, no way. Heaping rubbish if you ask my opinion, though. A group of delinquents upset about some stupid policy no doubt. Why they don’t wait for Striking Day is beyond me…”

Ray glanced at Conner, questioningly, but the old General remained immersed in conversation with Admiral Jackson.

“I don’t know what it’s all about. All I know is that the Emperor doesn’t find it amusing. I’ve been in meetings for weeks just trying to find ways to calm people down about all of it.”

“Right waste of time meetings are,” Admiral Jackson said, stroking the handle of a pistol protruding from a holster around his waist. “Dangerous too. All of the Generals and the Emperor in one place? One bomb and BOOM!” The Admiral waved his hands above his head.

Ray had almost dropped one of his bags in shock from the Admiral’s shout. Conner placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Admiral Jackson, this is Raymond Tract, the Emperor’s grandson.”

Admiral Jackson squinted at Ray.

“You resemble your grandfather a good bit, son. In his younger years of course.”

“Thanks…sir.” Ray responded nervously, trying not to drop any of his bags.
“What brings you to my fort today?” the Admiral asked. Ray opened and closed his mouth.

“We’re actually on leave to Edinburgh.” Conner broke the silence, inching away from a slimy white pellet that had fallen from a seagull above, nearly landing on his shoe.

“Visiting Maggie?”

“Cindy,” Conner corrected. “And yes, I haven’t been home in a while, and Ray here is my personal guard.” Ray looked anxiously at the six enormous men who had accompanied the Admiral. They were guards.

The Admiral seemed taken aback as well. “Well, I applaud you for finally taking my advice with regards to personal security, but I have trouble seeing how this young man, even with his lineage, could protect you from those wishing you dead.”

“You ought to be happy that I brought anyone at all.” Conner smiled. “Take your victories where you can, Andrew.”

The Admiral, surprised, leaned close to Conner. “Don’t say my first name,” he whispered. “I don’t want to lose my sense of formality with my men.”

Ray couldn’t help but smirk.

“I don’t think that knowing your name loses you any respect from these men.” Conner smiled warmly. “But, in respect of your wishes, I will refer to you by your proper title, my old friend.”

“Very good,” Admiral Jackson smiled. “Would you like an escort for the rest of your journey? Regrettably, I must be returning to my post.”

“A car would suffice, Admiral,” Conner said. “I will be quite fine with Raymond.”
Ray rearranged one of his heavy bags on his shoulder. Admiral Jackson again rolled his mismatched eyes.

“Very well,” he said, tone full of skepticism. “I suppose you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

The two old men saluted each other. Soon, Ray and Conner were being escorted to a vehicle by one of Admiral Jackson’s guards.

“He seemed really concerned about your safety, sir,” Ray whispered.

“It’s his way,” Conner replied. “I told you he was a very cautious man. Seems to think everyone in the world is out to get him. Poor way to live life if you ask me.”

Ray nodded. Soon the pair of them arrived at a garage where several, sleek military vehicles were parked in neat rows. Each shone impeccably under the light of the fluorescent lamps in the hanger.

Conner opened the door of what looked like a jeep with the NGE’s red emblem emblazoned on the hood. Ray hoisted his bags into the back seat, and within fifteen minutes, the pair were speeding along an asphalt road in downtown Belfast.

Ray looked eagerly out of the sides of the jeep as the wind tossed his hair. There were plenty of little shops, most of which had a stand set up outside where the shopkeepers were enjoying the warmth of the day and attempting to sell their wares to passersby on the sidewalks. Ray noted that the NGE’s flags hung from every streetlamp.

“I didn’t know there were still places like this,” Ray said, eyeing an old lady swiping a card at a vendor who was selling apples. “This seems so old-fashioned.”

“The Empire’s anti-mass marketing laws,” Conner said, not taking his eyes off of the road. “Each vendor is only allowed to sell one sort of item. It prevents one business from
hoarding all of the customers. It also is a great way to ensure that most people can remain masters of their own establishments.”

“There’s no expansion of business then?” Ray asked.

“Not really,” Conner said. “Each family is only allotted one property besides their home, and most of the properties are roughly the same size. You can request more from the Empire if you believe that what you sell is essential enough to warrant it, but, in most cases, the properties remain pretty well regulated.”

“How does it work then, if one person sells something like apples and another sells computers?”

“You mean to tell me that technology is more important to life than food?” Conner looked away from the wheel.

“Well, no I guess…” Ray mumbled.

“The government is responsible for what your business sells. It acts as sort of a grand supplier. Of course, it is up to the businesses to sell the products as they please, and the better the owner’s sell rate, the more products they are allotted by the government. So, essentially, the better the salesman, the more credits you get. It’s almost like your capitalism.”

“Capitalism leaves room for individuals and entrepreneurs though.”

“Well, if you prove to have an idea or a level of intelligence that suggests that you can be innovative, the Empire will give you credits to pursue those goals as if you were running a shop. Lotta paperwork though…”

“Uh, huh,” Ray nodded. He didn’t know if what the General was saying was entirely fair to everybody, but, on the surface at least, it seemed to make sense.

“So, how long is the drive, sir?”
“Not a geography buff, I see. Well, we’re just gonna take this road until we get to the civilian subway line,” Conner said, stopping at a red light. “Edinburgh’s across the Irish Sea, so we gotta take an underground subway to get there. The station’s far away from Belfast Naval Base. Don’t think Admiral Jackson would have it any other way.”

The two resumed their ride again. Ray marveled at how quietly the jeep hummed as it flew around the streets. After about a half of an hour, Conner pulled the jeep into a parking lot bustling with cars next to an ornate building with four, high columns in the front.

The civilian subway was nothing like ones used by the military. The first floor had a high ceiling with large, digital clocks displaying departure times in glowing, red lettering. Sparsely occupied benches sat in rows along the middle of the room surrounding a steep staircase to the floor below. A single ticketing counter, manned by a woman in a blue hat, protruded out of the wall on the farthest end of the station.

A few people carried themselves slowly around the terminal, in no particular hurry, and dressed in everyday clothes from suits on the older men, to dresses and pantsuits on the ladies, and jeans and t-shirts on the children. Ray again, had the pleasant feeling that he hadn’t left his own time period, until one of the boys was reprimanded by his mother for hovering several feet off of the ground, propelled by glowing tennis shoes.

“This way,” Conner said, waddling toward the ticketing counter. It was clear that all of the day’s walking was affecting his knees.

“Can I help you today, General Conner?” the women behind the counter asked. A nametag on her blue vest read: Susan.

“The usual ticket to Edinburgh, please, Sue. Only make it two today.”

“Of course, family?” Susan asked, punching numbers into her register.
“Just an escort,” Conner replied shooting Ray a wink when Susan bent down below the desk to retrieve the tickets.

“All my years here and I’ve never seen you bring an escort.”

“Well, unlike you m’ lady, the years are not kind to me.”


“Thank you, Susan.”

“Safe trip, General.”

Conner painfully made his way over to a bench where he sat heavily, and rubbed his back.

“Do you know everybody in the world?” Ray mused, happy to place his bags down for a moment.

“More people than you do,” the old man wheezed.

“Very funny, sir.”

“Good that you still attempt the formalities.” Conner twisted his neck until it made an unappetizing crack. “I should imagine it’ll get harder as you’ll be staying under my roof. My wife has very little tolerance for military speak these days. You might even get to see me in my pajamas, a sight which you won’t soon forget,” he added with a laugh.

“It’s a nice break from Sergeant Oho.” Ray smiled.

“The Sergeant can be rough, can’t he?” Conner laughed and reached down to massage a fat ankle.

“Sir?” Ray asked.

“Yes, Raymond?”
“I don’t want to seem ungrateful,” Ray decided to try one of Hoffenen’s tricks, and focused on one of the wall clocks when speaking. “But why have you taken me along with you to visit your house?”

“I was wondering why it took you so long to ask.” Conner cracked his knuckles.

Ray was embarrassed. “Well, sir to tell you the truth, I get distracted pretty easily. Everything being so new to me, you know? I get swept away sometimes.”

“Not a good quality for a soldier.” Conner gave him a stern look. “You must always be attentive to your surroundings. But…” A familiar smile pushed up his jowls. “I’ll cut you some slack seeing as you’re new to all of this.”

A voice boomed over the loudspeakers. Ray recognized it to be the voice of the woman, Susan.

“Subway 132 departing to Edinburgh in five minutes. Subway 132 to Edinburgh, five minutes. Proceed to gate B.”

Conner took a deep breath and forced himself to his feet again. “I took you here to see how the real world works.”

Ray heaved his bag over his shoulder and followed the General down the large flight of stairs heading to the bottom floor of the station.

The subway cars were sleek and black, and doors opened on their sides to let the passengers in, as opposed to the tubes used by military trains. When Ray entered, he was relieved to see that the seats in the subway did not have any overhead restraints, and that they were arranged in rows of three seats so that he and Conner could sit together and still have room for Ray’s bags (which were looking more and more unnecessary by the minute).
“These trains don’t go as fast, I assume?” Ray asked, sitting in his chair and strapping a thin belt around his waist.

“They’re pretty fast,” Conner smiled, securing himself as well. “I mean, they’re nowhere near as fast as the military models, but they get the job done quite nicely.”

Ray quickly learned what Conner meant when he said that the little trains “got the job done.” When the train kicked off, it pushed him back in his seat, though he did not feel like his intestines would attempt to escape through his mouth, which was a pleasant change.

Once the train was on its way, Conner removed a voicebox from his pocket.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice rang from the box. Her voice sounded like aged honey.

“Hello, Cindy. It’s Frank.”

“Frank?” The woman did not try to hide her surprise. “I didn’t expect you to call this early. You know that I have cribbage with the girls until three.”

“I’m not calling to interrupt cribbage, Cindy. We’ll be able to talk in person tonight.”

“You’re coming home? When did you decide this? I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s a blessing every time you’re home, but I haven’t had time to put anything in order… God, I don’t even know if I have food…”

“Cindy, it’s alright. Ray and I will stop and pick up some things on our way home.”

“Ray?” Cindy’s voice changed. It sounded a little panicked. “He’s coming too?”

“Yes, Cindy. I thought you wouldn’t mind a guest…”

“I never mind guests!” Cindy snapped. “I mind husbands who don’t find it necessary to inform their wives about incoming guests!”

“Honey, I’ve been bus…”

“Honey, I’ve been busy,” the woman imitated Conner’s deeper tone. “Francis Conner,
forty odd years and you still don’t know that I like to have a heads up about these kinds of things.”

A second woman’s voice echoed from the box, which Conner had tried to muffle with his hand a second ago.

“Oh, give him a break, Cind. He’s coming home. Look, we’ll call off cribbage and help you tidy up.”

A third woman’s voice entered the jumble. “You just want to quit because I’m playing well for once.”

“You are something, Martha,” the second voice responded. “Cindy gets to see Frank once a month, if that, and you think cribbage is more important.”

“Both of you hush!” Cindy’s voice had returned. It sounded sweet again. “We’ll be ready for you when you arrive, honey. How far out are you?”

Conner sighed and made a swirling motion with his finger around his head to indicate madness. Ray suppressed a laugh.

“Should be about two hours, now. Do you still want us to pick up food?”

“If you would like me to make food,” Cindy replied, cheekily. “Anything you want. Just nothing dairy; you know we’ve been having problems with that.”

“Yes dear,” Conner shifted nervously in his chair.

“Alright, I’ll see you in a couple of hours. Love you, Franky Bean.”

Conner was as red as a beet. “Love you, too Cinderella.” He heaved a sigh of relief as he placed the box back in his jacket pocket. “Wife,” he said pointing at his pocket.

“I gathered, Franky Bean,” Ray smirked.

“Oho’s obviously going easy on you,” The old man grinned.
The rest of the two hour ride went very slowly. Conner dozed off while reading one of the magazines that had been in the pouch in front of him, and Ray couldn’t stop thinking about Nova. After hearing the Conners joke back and forth with each other, he wondered to himself if he would ever have that same sort of relationship with Nova. He had left her, again, sad and alone in a strange world, where there was no one like Conner to watch after her and remind her that the future hadn’t destroyed the kindness in people. Ray leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Conner would certainly let him call her that night. He wasn’t even afraid to ask.
CHAPTER 17

The alarm clock in Nova’s room blared. A wriggling blob of comforter and sheet shot an appendage out to silence it.

“Mmmmmm,” Nova growled into her black pillow. Surely the sun was casting its light around the skyscrapers of Munich, but she would not know for the blinds in her elegant bedroom were closed tightly. Any minute now.

A fist rapped on her door followed by a guard’s voice. It was deep, and rich, which meant that it was the guard named Stanley. “Lessons start in 30 minutes, girlie! You up?”

“MMMMMM,” Nova roared into her pillow.

“Well, okay then,” Stanley’s muffled voice responded.

Nova stretched like a cat and sat up. She pulled strands of hair out of her face and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

For the last few weeks, she had been receiving brief lessons on Monday mornings, from an older man named Professor Dales. The lessons were one-on-one in an overly bright room on the third floor of the palace. Nova would sit in a chair in front of an ebony desk and watch as Professor Dales scrawled out notes onto a computerized chalkboard.

The content of the lessons was simply the subjects of Math and Reading. Nova had little interest or dedication when it came to the lessons. Her quizzes were all on things that she had already learned, and she couldn’t see why grades mattered at this point anyway.
She pushed off the covers that had absorbed her warmth from the night previous, and put her feet on the icy, marble floor. It sent goose bumps up her leg, and she remembered her first morning in the palace where she spent nearly fifteen minutes debating whether or not to leave the bed after her toe had grazed the cold ground.

She tiptoed across the floor into the vast bathroom on the other side of the room and closed the door behind her. The mirror above the dual sink reflected a face that was not entirely hers. Her milk chocolate hair, which she had so often pulled into a ponytail, drooped lazily in front of her face, and the dark mascara that the Emperor had given her was smudged down her cheeks, which were unusually sallow.

She reached for a hair tie and pulled her hair up lazily so that only the front was really out of her eyes and cupped her hands full of cold water, first to drink, and then to splash on her face. This was what constituted “ready for the day” now: same makeup, same hair, same black and red shirt and pants.

Nova exited the bathroom and collapsed on her bed (the socks she had put on kept her feet warm for the short journey). Only 25 minutes until she began another day of underperformance and boredom. She thought for a second about reaching under her mattress for her diary, but decided that spilling her monotonous complaints onto a page had lost its novelty.

Time passed too quickly for the morning, but too slowly for the days. Before she could fall asleep again, Stanley’s smooth voice flowed through the door.

“Time for class. Let’s go, girlie.”

Nova moaned slightly and walked over the door. Stanley was a large, black man with a shaved head and hands the size of tennis rackets. He was her favorite security guard, but not
because he was kind or polite, but simply because he was the best of the three that regularly patrolled her corridor.

“Different floor today,” Stanley said, indifferently. Nova perked up, but quickly realized that the change probably meant simply a new cramped, bright room with Professor Dales. However, as she followed behind Stanley up the elevator, she swore that she could hear the sound of voices. Young voices. Stanley seemed to gravitate to the source of the voices, and when he stopped, he gestured to an open door.

The room was about three times the size of the room that she had shared with Professor Dales, and there were four desks and chair forming a row in the center of the room facing an electronic blackboard. Nova walked in cautiously. The four other students read her face and responded with looks of guarded curiosity.

Professor Dales stood at the front of the room, his short, prickly gray hair balding at the top.

“Good to see you, Miss Kline, and on a Tuesday for once.”

Nova broke from her trance. It was Tuesday. She hadn’t been giving the days much thought since she stopped writing in her diary.

Nova walked over to only empty seat next to a boy with blond hair.

“Class,” Professor Dales smiled. “We have a new student with us this week. Her name is Miss Nova Kline, and she will be jumping right in with us today on our discussion of the United Nation’s Empirical Land Act. Please introduce yourselves quickly to Miss Kline.”

The boy with the blond hair caught her attention first. “My name’s Derek. Derek Harper.” His eyes were such a light blue that his pupil looked like a black dot in a perfect sky.

“And I’m Rosaly,” a girl with a braid of orange hair chirped from Derek’s left.
“Hi,” Nova said sheepishly.

“My name is Yoshinobu Ata,” an Asian boy with rigid posture announced. “I am here in Munich with my brother, Colonel Kakaraku Ata. He works with the Emperor on and off.”

“Excellent,” Professor Dales uttered rapping the chalk board with his knuckle, causing it to glow brightly. “Now who can inform me as to what year the UN’s Empirical Land Act was enacted?”

Yoshinobu raised his hand. “Sir, that was in the year 2053. Following the end of the World’s War.”

“Good, Mr. Ata. And the Act was the result of what event?” He looked up and down his small row of pupils.

Yoshinobu raised his hand again. “The Great Merger of 2049, sir.”

“Good.” Professor Dales was writing these names on the board with his fingertip. “And who, beside Mr. Ata, can inform me what The Great Merger was? Be specific, now.”

The room was silent. Yoshinobu shifted down in his chair. Professor Dales was beginning to look impatient, and opened his mouth to say something, but Rosaly had raised her hand.

“The Great Merger was when several countries in what was known as Europe merged to form a better military to ward of the countries of Asia… namely China?”

“Be firm in your answers, Miss Dawes.”

“China,” Rosaly stated, firmly. Her hand was inching across her desk to her handout.

Professor Dales smiled. “It was indeed China.”

Rosaly sighed and smiled. Derek crossed his arms in front of his chest, stubbornly as if to suggest that he knew the answer, though he hadn’t been confident enough to take a stab at it.
“China,” Professor Dales continued, “had been provoked to start the World’s War by the extension of the United States’ military presence into Western Asia.” Professor Dales scribbled a crude map on the board. “When China’s forces declared open war on the United States, Emperor Tract, who was President of the United States and Secretary-General of the UN at that time, sought to quickly disperse the conflict through UN-Mediated discussions. However, China believed that Tract had intentionally moved too close to their borders to plan an attack on Beijing. We know this accusation is false due to the fact that the United States was merely following the moving armies of Iran, in an UN-approved counterstrike set on by the Iranian terrorist bombing of Washington D.C. in 2036.”

The other students scribbled notes furiously in their notebooks, but Nova remained silent, her mouth agape, and her hand shakily raised in the air.

“Yes, Miss Kline?”

“Ray… Emperor Tract was President of the United States?”

The room fell deathly silent. Professor Dales wore a look of amusement.

“Of course, Miss Kline. You took NGE History 1 at age 7 correct?”

Nova flushed. Derek shot her a confused look, and Yoshinobu snorted.

“Well… um… no… I,” Nova stuttered. The image of Ray giving the State of the Union address flew from her mind, replaced by the same feeling she had when she had been laughed at for trying to give a boy a dandelion in 2nd grade with his Valentine’s Day card.

Professor Dales pondered her for another moment before waving his hand. “It is perfectly alright Miss Kline. I realize that some schools don’t always follow curriculum fully. But no matter, I will lend you one of my textbooks so that you can get yourself up to speed.”
“Tha-thanks,” Nova muttered. It was an odd feeling not having a clue what the others were talking about. She hadn’t paid close attention to Professor Dales’ lectures, even the interesting ones, and now she felt more out of place than she ever had in her life.

The rest of the lecture went on fairly well. Nova borrowed a piece of paper and pen from Derek, and took diligent notes. Professor Dales seemed surprised that she could write (after all she had merely nodded during most of his lectures up to that point, and on the quizzes she had, she wrote slowly and lazily so as to use up as much time as possible).

Yoshinobu had absorbed the bulk of the questions, and thankfully, Nova hadn’t been called upon since her seemingly childish question.

Before she knew it, Professor Dales was rapping the board again with his knuckles to turn it off.

“Good first lesson?” Derek asked as Rosaly peeked over his shoulder. Yoshinobu had left the room quickly.

“It was alright.” Nova was only partially lying. Some of the events of the NGE’s history were very interesting to her. It was like the alternate ending of a movie, a fictional thing that she would have given a writer praise for coming up with.

“Where did you go to school?” Rosaly asked.

“I um…”

“We don’t need to prod her too much on her first day,” Derek said; when he smiled it looked like a white-picket fence. “But, maybe we could hang out sometime? What floor do you live on?”

Nova turned red. “I… don’t really live here.”

Derek frowned and opened his mouth to question.
“C’mon girlie.” Stanley was standing in the doorway looking at his wrist. “I don’t have all day.”

“Friend of yours?” Derek looked a little intimidated by Stanley’s stature.

“He’s my… my escort,” Nova stammered, dropping Derek’s pen on the ground as she promptly stood up. “Listen, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you around.”

“Bye?” Derek and Rosaly echoed.

Nova walked briskly behind Stanley as he led her back to her room. She felt a mixture of pride and stupidity. She felt proud that she had turned down hanging out with the guy (he looked a little young anyway), but she felt stupid because she may have just blown her chance at some decent company. Either way when the door to her room shut, all she could think of was Ray, and how badly she wanted to tell him that he would grow up to be president.
CHAPTER 18

The subway lurched into Edinburgh Station around two in the afternoon. General Conner was still sleeping as the other passengers began to exit the car. Ray nudged him, but the old man didn’t so much as speed up his breathing. Ray nudged him again. Still nothing. Finally, Ray stood up, placed both hands on the man’s shoulders, and shook him. The General inhaled deeply and stretched his hands over his head.

“My goodness,” he yawned. “Here already?”

“Yes, sir,” Ray responded, throwing one of his heavy bags over his shoulder.

After some grumbling from the General, the two made their way out of the subway station and onto a grand, sunny street lined with ancient stone buildings that looked like little castles.

“Beautiful, huh?” Conner filled his lungs with fresh air. “It’s a lucky thing that this place wasn’t hit by war. It’d be a damn shame if a place this remarkable had suffered the same fate as Paris.”

Ray nodded, half-listening, half-observing the wonder of the city. It looked as if the entire place had been preserved from the Middle Ages, kept in a jar where the changes of the world could not touch it. The miniature castles were made of deep grey stone, their shingled roofs battered from years of storms and wind. The city would have been something entirely mythical and wondrous had it not been for the blood-red flags that rippled in the wind atop of the little castles’ spires.
The cobbled streets of Edinburgh played host to the same assortment of people that Ray had seen in Belfast. Street vendors sold food, men and women walked their dogs, children were pulled from shop to shop in the hands of their mothers, and teenagers…Teenagers.

Ray hesitated in the street. A group of teenaged girls in black and red school uniforms walked down the street. One of them said something, and the others burst out laughing. Ray had almost forgotten what girls’ laughter sounded like.

“Com’on boy!” Conner shouted, yards ahead. Ray picked up his stride and continued to follow the old man. He noticed more and more young people as they walked. Groups of boys and girls stuck out of the crowd like words highlighted in red amongst the other text.

Did they go to school? It would make perfect sense. Why hadn’t Ray thought of it before? There were other people just like him out there. Young, foolish, and untested by life. Dates and homework being issues of the most pressing importance to them. Ray was intrigued and yet envious and spiteful at the same time. He hated that those kids could laugh and walk home from school on a day like this. Just a few days after Ray had been sentenced to another two years away from his home.

“My home is outside of the actual city.” Conner broke Ray’s train of thought. “We’re going to borrow a car from the recruitment center here. It’s right next to Edinburgh School about a quarter of a mile away from here. Can you make it that far, or would you like to stop for a drink?”

The old man was sweating slightly, and Ray noted that his right leg was shaking.

“Break sounds like a good idea,” Ray said, rearranging a bag on his shoulder though it hadn’t been slipping.
The General smiled and soon, the two were sitting at a little table at a small café inside one of the miniature castles. Conner sipped coffee from a small white mug, and Ray drank orange juice out of a glass bottle. The sun from the outside shown perfectly through the window, and Ray resumed looking for the school children, though it appeared most of them had already walked home.

“After we’re done here, we can pick up the jeep and then swing back through town for Cindy’s groceries. I think I’m going to try and get her to make some of her meat pies. They are really, really good. Do you like meat pies?”

“What? Oh, yeah,” Ray said, breaking his gaze at the outside. “I had them before at the Highland Games back home.”

“You had the games back home?” Conner mused, sipping from his mug.

“It’s like a festival that comes to Pittsburgh every year. Nova and I went in tenth grade with a couple of our friends.” Ray cringed a little bit thinking of Nova. She had worn a plaid kilt that day that she had bought from one of the tent shops. Her legs were so perfectly pale even in the heat of the Summer.

“Sir,” Ray asked.

“Yes?”

“Do you think that I could try and give Nova a call tonight? I just want to see how she’s doing.”

“Oh, I don’t see a problem with that, ” Conner said, noting a man in military garb walking down the street. “This is counting as your leave, so I suppose you should make the most of it.”
“Thank you, sir. For everything,” Ray added quickly, sipping some of his acidy orange juice.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” Conner grinned. “Like I said before, you might see me in my pajamas. And don’t think that I’m not gonna jump right back in with your training when we get back to Paris either. Hoffenen’s test is coming up.”

Ray’s smile drooped. He had almost forgotten about his test with Hoffenen.

“I think we’ll be good and ready by then.” Conner hailed the young man working the café. “Could I have another coffee, please? Yes, we should be able to handle whatever the General can dish out. Thank you, young man.”

Conner blew the steam off of the top of his coffee and took a measured sip.

“What do you think the test is going to be?” Ray asked, gripping his bottle nervously with both hands.

“Knowing Jacob… oh, sorry… General Hoffenen, it’ll probably be something mentally ravaging and brutally physical.”

Ray imagined running in a dark woods being chased by a pack of hungry wolves after having gone several days without food.

“But like I said before: we’ll be ready for it.”

The pair finished their drinks, and Conner paid with a swipe of a card; then the two made their way to the recruitment office which was located next the largest castle on the block which Ray saw was labeled:

Local School 1-11
Conner walked into the recruitment office, and after some words with the Sergeant behind the counter, was able to procure a jeep similar to the one that they had ridden out of Belfast.

Conner twirled the keys around his finger as the pair walked outside. Ray shot a look over his shoulder at the school building.

“We can take a tour tomorrow,” Conner said, walking to one of the Jeeps parked in the lot behind the recruitment office. “I’m one of the school’s donors, so I know the Superintendent well.”

“Oh, that’s fine, don’t go to any trouble…”

“It’s alright to be curious.” Conner held the remote key close to the Jeep’s door, and it unlocked. “Don’t you wonder how they live? Our children?”

“I guess it just didn’t occur to me until now…”

“That our world has children too?” Conner smirked.

“That’s not it…” Ray shoved his bag in the back seat and sat shotgun to Conner. “It’s just…”

Conner closed his door. The world outside became muffled, and new car smell replaced the scent of flowers.

“You’re subconsciously trying to limit our world,” Conner said, placing his key in the ignition, but not turning it. “If you admit that there are similarities between the future and the present, perhaps all of this becomes too real for you. It’s natural.”

Ray sighed. “I guess I didn’t really think of it that way. At least I didn’t want to.”

“Going to the school tomorrow will do you good.” Conner twisted the key, and the Jeep silently hummed to life. “You’ll feel better accepting this world is not unlike your own.”
Conner drove the Jeep to a little market holding up in a small alley. Everyone recognized the old General. Some saluted him; others gave him deals on food (which he politely declined), and one young man even kissed him on the cheek. It was odd seeing Conner being treated this way. For some reason, it hadn’t occurred to Ray that more people than his subordinates respected and knew Conner. After managing to escape the admirers with a few bags of well-packaged groceries, the two were back on the road, letting the air from the open windows tussle their hair.

Soon the cobblestone streets of Edinburgh turned into the dirt roads of the countryside. Little farms replaced the castle-like homes and stores, and the bustling townsfolk were replaced by grazing cattle.

Conner made a left turn at a gravel road that Ray barely saw nestled between the trees and shrubs on the roadside. The jeep bumped up and down as it crunched atop the gravel. Trees marred the rays of the low sun as they drove further into the forest.

“Almost there,” Conner said, slowing down so that a rather plump groundhog could cut across the trail. “Just around this bend."

The jeep turned the corner and skidded to a stop in a patch of flattened earth on the edge of a field. It was just as Conner had described it back at the palace all those weeks ago.

The cottage was quaint and looked like something out of a fairy tale. The purple flowers in bloom all around it only added to the perfection. Ray grabbed his bags, and the two crossed over the field. The orange glow of the setting sun made the thin plume of smoke emanating from the chimney look like fluffy fire.

Conner fiddled in his pocket for a key, but before he could find it, the door swung open.

Cindy Conner was a frail woman who looked a few years younger than the General. Her hair was a fading auburn pulled up into a loose bun, and her eyes were among the prettiest Ray
had ever seen, a rich green like forest moss. In her boney, little hand, she held a dustpan. The wrinkled lines of her face tightened slightly when she smiled, and Ray could see a few orange hairs sprouting from her chin and cheeks.

“You trod through the crocus like an elephant, Francis,” she said, stepping aside so that the pair could enter the house. The inside of the house was small, but well lit. Doilies and knitted blankets draped the walls, and a smell of cinnamon was wafting in the room from an open kitchen door.

“Sorry, Cynthia.” Conner put down his groceries. “This is Ra…”


“Hello, Mrs. Conner,” Ray said nervously holding onto his bag.

“Why does he have so much clothes?” Cindy shouted into the kitchen after Conner who had begun unpacking groceries.

“I don’t know!” Conner shouted back. “I just told him to pack for a trip.”

“You can leave those in the spare room, third door to the left and down the hall,” Cindy said, smiling at Ray.

“Ok, thanks,” Ray said.

He heard the pair shouting things back and forth to each other as he made his way down the narrow hallway of the ranch style cottage.

On his way down the hallway, his bag knocked down one of the quilts on the wall. As he put his bag down and knelt to pick up and replace the quilt, he saw that the quilt had been covering up a gaping, splintered hole in the wood.
Ray heard Cindy shouting down the hall and replaced the quilt quickly, and then proceeded to leave his bag in the very plain spare room.

When he returned to the living room, he could smell food cooking in the kitchen. Conner was sitting down in the breakfast nook, his military garb replaced by a thick brown sweater.

“Find the room alright?” he asked, sipping on a mug of cinnamon infused tea.

“Yeah,” Ray said, sitting. “It’s a beautiful house.”

“You’re sweet dearie.” Cindy Conner spoke from the kitchen where she was tending to several pots. “It’s what we have. We could have lived somewhere else, like Munich, but I prefer the countryside. Cleaner air.”

“She hates the capital,” Conner mused. “She’s a country gal at heart.”

“More like country old crone,” Cindy laughed. “Did you pick up any spinach?”

Conner looked guilty. “Um… I must have forgotten that.”

“It’s no skin off my nose,” Cindy said, dropping a wooden spoon, and groaning to pick it up. “Just no salad tonight, I suppose.”

“General?” Ray asked.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for giving me a break from the base, and letting me stay here.”

Conner smiled. “A break from the base, yes, but a break from work, far from it.” Ray gave the old man a curious eye. Conner sipped his tea. “Before we visit 1-11 tomorrow night, you are going to help me gather some firewood, fix a leaky faucet, and clean the gutters of this old abode.”

“I’ve always lived in apartments,” Ray said. “It may be nice to do some actual household chores for once.”
“Never done chores…” Cindy walked over to the table, her pots simmering on the stove.

“What did they teach you back in 2012?”

Ray looked flabbergasted. “Um, I…”

“One shares everything with his wife,” Conner smirked. “She knows all about you.”

“I have to admit, I never imagined that old sack of hovering bones was once a handsome young man.”

“Cindy!” Conner snorted.

“Well, he is!” Cindy asserted sneaking back off to the kitchen. “We need some new life in the Empire! I can barely watch his teleconferences any more. Even with the makeup…”

“Cindy, you know as well as I do that the Emperor will be around for some time.”

“Yes I know dear.” Cindy returned from the kitchen holding onto a sauce-covered spoon. She pointed the spoon in Ray’s face. “If you are thinking about becoming the new Emperor, forget about it. You are far too young. Just do your time, jump through your hoops, and get back to your own time. Leave this mess to the diplomats.”

Conner rolled his eyes. “I’m fairly certain Ray has no intention of taking the throne, Cynthia. Let’s not talk about this now.”

“Oh, I see.” Cindy looked frustrated. “All you do when we talk is talk about politics, but the second that I want to get involved in the conversation…”

“Cinderella…” Conner was trying to sound pacifying.

“Don’t you Cinderella me, old man.” She waved her spoon menacingly in her husband’s face. “Everyone in this room knows that the Emperor wants Ray to be his little protégé. Ray’s got to know that, despite the situation, the choice is still his to make… and he should choose to go home.”
Conner sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Well, Ray, have you had any thought about staying here and becoming Emperor?”

“Not really...” Ray nervously twiddled his fingers under the table.

“See?” Conner gestured to Cindy. “That’s that. I told you he was a smart lad. When the time comes, the Emperor will have to send him home and choose somebody else. I don’t think His Excellency gives his younger self enough credit. Ray’s a strong individual.”

Ray turned a little scarlet. One of the pots on the stove started to boil over, and Cindy flew back to the kitchen.

“Sorry about that, Ray,” Conner whispered. “As you can tell, the wife and I don’t see eye to eye with the Emperor on his decision to make you stay here. We, well I, know a strong individual when I see one. The Emperor just seems to think that eventually you’ll just cave in and accept what he sees to be your destiny. But I see more than that throne as your destiny.”

The subject of the Emperor wasn’t mentioned again for the remainder of the evening. Cindy had made a delicious beef stew, and the topic of conversation switched over to the new technologies of kitchen appliances that the other women of the village had that Cindy refused to implement (“I don’t need a spoon that tells me the temperature and viscosity of my soup!”). Around eight-thirty, Cindy had curled up by the fireplace with a mug of cinnamon tea, and Conner had sat down with a book in a reclining chair.

“Ray!” Conner shouted to Ray, who had been pouring himself a mug of tea.

“Yes, sir?” Ray popped his head out of the kitchen.

“My voicebox is in the pocket of my suit jacket in the closet.” His eyes didn’t leave the page. “Just think exclusively of the person of whom you wish to talk and wait for their voice.”
“It was odd seeing other kids,” Nova said, twirling the stir stick in her coffee. “I mean, I was starting to think you guys were raised in tubes or something.”

“What an insultingly detached inference,” Hoffenen said, coiling his fingers around the teeny mug of earl grey tea he had poured for himself. “I suspect you watched too much science fiction television growing up, seeing as your televisions had no restrictions in your age.”

“Restrictions?” Nova straightened up. She had been sitting in her bed looking over at the stool which Hoffenen filled quite awkwardly with his long frame. “I mean there were parental locks and such.”

“In this Empire, news stations are the only stations that can be watched 24/7. All other stations have a limit of two hours per household per day.” Hoffenen turned his nose up and looked at the ceiling.

“That’s a little harsh,” Nova said, placing her coffee on her nightstand.

“Electronic media turns the mind into sludge.” Hoffenen sipped his tea. “Ruins vision, impairs perception of reality, and distracts from problems that need to be dealt with. I would have it removed in its entirety if I were…” Hoffenen paused.

“If you were Emperor…’ Nova spoke softly.

“Hold your tongue of such traitorous speech,” Hoffenen muttered. His vision seemed lost in his steaming mug.

Nova left her bed and took a seat across from Hoffenen.
“Why do you visit me here?” she asked, timidly.

“I am simply keeping watch over you. Occasionally pumping you for information about the Tract boy.”

“I have guards. I also have an Emperor that visits me once a week for ‘information’.” She put this last word in quotations with her fingers. “But you don’t come here to prod or guard. Most of the time you just sit there. Sit there with your fingers crossed, listening to my dumb stories. How many times can you hear about my days of doing nothing?”

“It is interesting.” Hoffenen looked into the open bathroom door. “To imagine a time different from this one is something that I would have before thought inconceivable. I simply have fallen prey to curiosity.”

“Not a big fan of this time are you?” Nova poured herself a mug of Hoffenen’s tea.

“It is in my nature to seek what is best for the Empire.”

“You think you may be what’s best for it?”

“Preposterous concept!” Hoffenen put his mug down on the table, and some tea spilled over the side. “The Emperor is by far the leader that the world needs. I simply disagree with his seeking to let that… boy take the throne in his stead. Tract is a fool incapable of thinking or acting on his own.”

“Ray isn’t dumb!” Nova snapped. “He’s the same person as the Emperor!”

“That boy is lacking hundreds of years of experience! The Emperor may have been that foolish child once, but he now is a wizened diplomat and champion of the people!”

“Your hands are shaking,” Nova said, looking across the table. Hoffenen took a look at his own hands. They were quivering from wrist to spiderlike finger. The veins in them were
shallow, but pulsed under his pale skin. “You need to watch your temper… it’ll kill you.” Nova took a sip of tea and curled up her face in disgust. “How do you drink…”

A vibrating sound had echoed from underneath her pillow. She eyed her bed nervously.

“Who gave you a voicebox?” Hoffenen said standing up.

“No one… it’s just… I can talk to Ray with it… I…”

“Fine.” Hoffenen speedily swept up the cups and saucers onto his tea tray. “But mention not a word of me, or I shall report you not only for the possession of a voicebox, but for your diary as well.”

“Jacob!” Nova pleaded, but Hoffenen had already exited the room, slamming the door shut behind him. Nova ran over to her bed and took the voicebox from underneath her pillow.

“Hello?” she whispered, holding the box close to her mouth.

“What?” Ray’s voice boomed back.

Nova shoved the box under her pillow and listened for her guard outside. Ray’s voice was grumbling underneath the downy.

After she was sure the guard hadn’t heard her she held the box up cautiously and whispered, “Shut up idiot! Keep it down! You don’t have to shout into the damn thing…. Whisper!”

“And a fine hello to you too,” Ray whispered back, annoyed.

“Sorry,” Nova said. “It just sounded really loud on this end.”

“Sorry. I just wanted to make sure you heard me I guess…”

“It’s alright, Ray.” Nova smiled. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Even if it’s loud?” Ray sounded sarcastic.

“Even if.”
The line was quiet for a while.

“Get into any more trouble?” Nova asked, trying her best not to sound bitter. It was a while before the little box responded.

“No. I’ve gotten in enough trouble for a lifetime.” Ray’s voice was void of humor.

“Look, Ray,” Nova clung to her pillow nervously. “I’m not gonna lie and say that I’m okay.”

“I…” Ray began, but Nova cut him off.

“But. I also realize that there’s no point in fighting now. You’re all that I have here. We need to stick together.”

“Agreed,” Ray muttered. “But I still can’t tell you how sorry I am…”

“You said you loved me.” Nova looked away from the box.


“What do you mean by love?” Nova lay back in her bed, letting her feet dangle to the floor. “Like you really, really like me? Or did you just say it because I was sad, or is it one of those fairytale kind of deals, where it’s all meant to be and stuff?”

Silence.

“Well,” Ray’s voice was quieter than his whisper. “I just really care about you. Ya know?”

“Caring means thinking about others before you act, Ray.”

“I did think!” Ray retorted. “Not the best, but I seriously thought you were in danger! I saw a vision!”

“Shhh…” Nova whispered. “Keep it down! What are you talking about now? A vision? What’s that supposed to mean?”
“When I touched General Conner’s weapon, it gave me a really realistic vision of you. You were in pain.” Ray asserted. “It felt so real…”

“Why were you touching that thing?” Nova sat up and looked right at the box on her comforter.

“I was just picking it up for him, honestly, Nova. I would never lie to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t, Ray…” Nova said. “I’m sorry if it sounded like…”

“No,” Ray’s voice sounded solemn. “You have every right to be mad, sad, whatever. All of this is my fault.”

“Well in one way, yeah.” Nova smiled. “But, more like your dickish future self’s fault. Not yours. You’re innocent in all of this… I just. I’m just scared.”

“Nova.” Ray’s voice sounded deeper than usual. “I will get us out of this. I promise.”

“You’ve never let anyone down before.” Nova smiled. “Maybe I can do something on my end to help.”

“Like what?” Ray asked. “I don’t want you getting in any trouble. It’s a weird place that you’re in.”

“I mean, I could try and make some friends,” she said. “Maybe someone else could help, or I could even… sweet talk the Emperor or something…”

“That’s gross,” Ray answered quickly.

“Not that way!” Nova shouted. The guard outside her door shuffled, so she got closer and whispered into the box. “I mean I could mention to him how much I miss home more. You know? Guilt trip stuff.”
“More power to you,” Ray’s voice echoed. “But as for the friend thing, that may not be a good idea. They’re all pretty hush hush about me being from the past. According to them, I’m the Emperor’s grandson.”

“Yeah, the Emperor gave me that little speech.” Nova rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell anyone who Ray really is,” she said, imitating the Emperor’s deep, raspy tone.

“So I don’t think you should bring anyone else into this,” Ray said. “We don’t want anyone getting in trouble because of us.”

“But what if…” Nova began.

“It’s just not a good idea,” Ray asserted. “I wouldn’t do it if I were you. We should just play their little game.”

“And stay here for three years?!” Nova hissed. “Fat chance.”

“Like I said. I will work on it with Conner, and you can work on it with the Emperor,” Ray explained. “I’m sure that even the old me is capable of persuasion.”

“Okay, Ray…” Nova said. “I’ll try.”

“You’ll kick ass,” Ray said.

The two talked for hours. Nova curled up in her bed and Ray sat outside of Conner’s cottage on a chopping log in the grass. They caught up on what had been going on in their respective lives. Ray had noticeably more to talk about, but talked fast so that Nova could talk of her life too. At around one in the morning, Conner poked his head out of the house and gestured for Ray to come in. The two said their goodbyes, and Ray agreed to call her as soon as reasonably possible.

Ray said goodnight to the groggy Conners and made his way back to the guestroom where he collapsed on the bed, unable to sleep. His eyes danced around the room, examining the
antiques on the dresser, and the quilts and little picture frames on the walls. The room was impeccably organized, though a thin layer of dust covered the surfaces. A small, digital clock in a wooden frame showed three in the morning when Ray heard the Conners shuffling to bed. Ray heard the door to the room next to him open and the click of a light switch. To Ray’s surprise, one of the quilts on his wall started to glow.

Ray quietly tip-toed out of bed over to the quilt and moved it aside. Behind the quilt was another hole in the wall; through it, Ray could discern movement in the room next door. Ray brought his eye to the hole and looked in.

The room was a disaster. There were chunks and holes blown in the walls all around the room, and a pile of debris was building in a corner. There was a layer of dust on every surface so thick that it could have been a grey rug. Two beds on opposite ends of the room were broken and sitting at awkward angles, stripped of their sheets.

At the entryway to the door, Ray could barely make out the figures of the General and his wife. They were standing eerily still, hold on to each other’s’ hands. The light to the room clicked off, and Ray flew back to his bed, and pulled the sheets up to his chin as he listened to the Conners disappear into their room, the first in the hallway.

Ray sat up in the bed. There were two holes in General Conner’s heart that his children had left behind, and Ray had seen where the holes were made.

The next morning, Ray woke up to the smell of pancakes coming from the kitchen. Ray shuffled out of his room and made his way down the hall, stopping for an awkward second in front of the room next to his. When he entered the kitchen, he was surprised to see that Cindy Conner stood there alone.
“Good morning,” she said, not turning her attention from the stove.

“Morning, Mrs. Conner,” Ray said, unsure if sitting at the breakfast nook would make it look as if he were begging for food. “How did you sleep?”

“Like a rock,” Cindy said, placing two finished pancakes on a plate she had stored in the oven beneath the stove. “And you?”

“I slept good,” Ray answered.

“Good to hear.” Cindy turned from the stove to fill herself another cup of coffee. “Can you wake the monster? He’s in our room at the end of the hall. No need to knock.”

“Uh, sure,” Ray was surprised that Conner had been asleep. As long as he had known the man, it seemed as if he was always on the move.

Ray knocked politely on the door to the room and received no response. When he opened the door, he saw General Conner fat, naked, and hairy, sitting up in his bed.

“Oh, sorry! Sorry sir!” Ray said, slamming the door shut.

“Sorry? If anyone’s sorry it’s me!” The old man’s laugh was muffled through the door. “That’ll stick with you, ma boy!”

By the time they all sat around the table for breakfast, Ray was beginning to recover from his shock. Conner, thankfully, was wearing a black, silk robe now.

“How are the pancakes, dear?” Cindy asked, looking over her coffee. The General, whom Ray had always seen devouring pancakes by the stack, was slowly cutting into his first, having drank two cups of coffee, and went over his entire itinerary for the day already.

“Great, Cindy. Thank you.” He smiled.

“He hates my pancakes.” Cindy smirked at Ray. “He admitted to me once that he prefers the ones the ladies make at Paris. I’d imagine they’re all handsome women as well…”
“Shindy,” Conner said, his mouth full of pancake. “Nowt a won could hold a candful to you.”

“Charming.” Cindy rolled her eyes.

Ray smiled in spite of himself. His grandparents had passed away before he was born, but this is always how he imagined an old couple should be. They were both so subtle in their love and kindness, but it was there, timeless and strong.

Mrs. Conner took Ray outside after breakfast to instruct him how to clean the gutters, and Conner stayed inside cleaning up the dishes from the meal.

“How, my husband, bless his heart, was never much of a handyman around the house. Too busy with work to really pay attention to what needs to be done here.” Cindy walked around the cottage to a shed in the back and took out a rickety, thin, wood ladder.

“You’l need to set this up around the front where the roof is lowest, so you can crawl up there,” she instructed. “Just get up there and scoop out all the muck in the gutters, and put it in a garbage bag.” She handed him a wad of black garbage bags. “Frank hasn’t done this for months, so watch out for any critters living in the leaves. Don’t break any of the shingles off, or I’ll make you re-do the whole roof.”

Ray looked at her nervously, holding the ladder up with one hand and clenching the garbage bags in the other.

“Now, I’m gonna go inside and get that old windbag to help me with the faucet. This shouldn’t take you more than an hour or so.”

Three hours later, Ray tied off the bag full of leaves, twigs, and bird nests and threw it from the roof to the ground below. He had been bitten by a few large insects in the piles, and his
knees hurt from kneeling on the uneven shingles. He had slipped a few times on the slicker part of the roof where the morning dew had gathered, and every time he did so, he could hear Mrs. Conner’s muffled shouting from indoors.

When he opened the door, he was greeted by General Conner, who was putting on a brown jacket with a few holes in the sleeves.

“Bout damn time you’re done, boy.” He put a wool cap over his balding head. “We’ve still got to pick up some firewood before we go to the meet tonight.”

“Meet?” Ray asked plucking a wet leaf from his belt.

“The I-11 Fencing team’s competing tonight against I-9 at the school. I-11’s one win away from a perfect record in the I-League!” Conner shuffled out the door, and Ray followed him.

“Fencing?” Ray said, following the old man to the jeep parked in the field. “You mean like sword fighting? We’re going to a high school fencing game tonight?”

“Meet, Ray,” Conner said, buckling his seatbelt, and starting the car. “Games are other sports, but yes. I like to keep track of I-11’s athletes. They really do good work at the school. Coach Foley’s great with the men’s and women’s foil teams.”

“That’s awesome!” Ray said. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“It’s a treat when the whole school shows up to root ‘em on. Lot of military scholarships to get by doing a combat sport well. Oh, by the way… I never go to the woods to pick up firewood. I just dress like this and pick it up from my friend’s farm. The wife would kill me if she found out I was paying money for what we can pick up for free, but…” Conner shifted in his seat. “What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”
The rest of the day was fairly uneventful. Conner stayed and talked to his farm owner friend for what seemed like hours as Ray was left to wander around and look at some of the animals. He attempted to feed a cow a lump of grass, but the massive bovine just froze where it stood and stared vacantly at him for ten minutes. When they finally returned home with the wood, Cindy Conner was sitting on the General’s squishy chair in the living room, reading what looked like a bible.

“You boys break much of a sweat out there?” she asked, licking her finger to turn a page.

“Ray did most of the work,” Conner smirked, nudging Ray in the arm.

“Well you two had better scarf down some leftovers quickly if you want to make it to the school to show Ray around before the meet.”

“You’re going, Mrs. Conner?” Ray asked.

“Of course I am, Raymond!” She put her book down. “All those young men in tight pants flashing steel! It’s an old woman’s dream.”

The General burst out laughing, and his wife followed him.

A short while late, the Conners and Ray were in the General’s borrowed jeep, whizzing down the stony path into the center of Edinburgh.

Mrs. Conner was dropped off at a quaint diner about a block away from the school where she intended to have tea with some of her friends to pass the hour before the meet. General Conner was going to take Ray on a tour of the school building.

Conner parked his jeep, and to Ray’s surprise produced a card key which he swiped to enter into the building.

“You have a key to the school?” he asked, stepping in as Conner held the door.

“I have keys to everything in the world,” the old general joked.
The entry hallway was eerily similar to the one at his old school. The floors were made of shoe-scuffed, black tile, and in the center of grand foyer was a statue of a short man with deeply set eyes holding onto a rod.

“Is that you?” Ray, astounded, walked over to the statue and looked up at his mentor’s face, marble teeth shining through a marble smirk.

“Embarrassingly yes,” Conner huffed his way over next to Ray. “They insisted on putting that thing there. Unflattering with the girth around the waist… I told them to take off a few pounds.”

Ray’s eyes wandered to a golden plaque underneath the marble Conner’s feet:

The Honorable General Francis Peter Conner, Tank Division

Born May 21, 2150 – Died _____

Class of 2168 Valedictorian

Empirical Medal of Valour 2176

Commanding Officer, Battle of Paris 2182

Golden Eagle, First Class 2182

Emperor’s Heart Medal for Distinguished Military Service 2190

Commanding Officer Battle of Brussels 2191

Commanding Officer Spanish Invasion 2193

“Quite the résumé,” Ray spoke softly.

“Funny how it doesn’t list ‘loving husband’, eh?” Conner patted his chest proudly. “Well, come on Ray, much to see.”

The two began to walk down a hallway that was marked “SCIENCE ANNEX.”
“I figured you would appreciate the Science Annex the most. Seeing as you’re from a time that was, well… let’s say… archaic.”

Ray thought back to his friends who were bragging about all of the new iPhone apps that they had and how they could pretty much do anything with a push of a button. Ray wished he could see their faces as Conner ushered him into a door marked weapons lab.

“Turn on!” Conner shouted to the ceiling, and sure enough, the lights flickered to life. “That’s one of my favorite silly little things about the science wing. It makes me feel like I’m in charge.” Ray rolled his eyes in spite of himself.

Ray noticed that the classroom was composed of several long lab desks with sinks and plugs embedded in the tops; in fact it looked like most high school science rooms except for at the front of the room next to what looked like a whiteboard sat a giant, metal dome that was attached to a cube-like generator which began humming when Conner turned the lights on.

“Most things in this room are fairly standard. The desks are automated and can produce any tool that the student would need for the day; the tools are made of a temporary, nontoxic polymer that dissolves after the period is over; it’s a really great design to remove the cost of maintaining tools and fighting student theft.” Conner made his way to the white board. “Just your standard audio visual learning screen; it can produce three-dimensional images and holograms around the room. You see, if a teacher can’t make it to class, they’ll just project an old lesson plan of themselves to use the period.”

Ray looked around at all the devices; perhaps it wasn’t too much like a standard classroom at all.

“And this baby,” Conner slapped his hand on the dome. “This is a little gift I was able to get for the department. “This is a little gift I was able to get for the department.” He smiled widely and ran his stubby fingers up and down the dome’s
chrome surface. “This is a simulator machine. We brought it in from a foreign manufacturer. These things can project a realistic situation, any situation you want. They’re used for student weapon training and experiments that would be too expensive or dangerous to be done in the real classroom.

This is a small one, obviously. The real ones are about the size of a footy field and can hold whole squads of training soldiers. This is just a single person, small area use, unit. Still neat though.”

Ray walked over to the device and pretended to check out the wires and buttons on the side of the generator.

“That’s amazing.” Ray ran his hands on the chrome, which to his surprise, was warm to the touch.

“I wish I could operate it for you,” Conner said, walking over to one of the desks. “Too complicated for me though; I’d probably end up putting you in an outhouse or something. Oh, well. Let’s head to the Athletics Department, and I can show you some of the other facilities before we go to the Fencing Gym.”

The Athletics Department was Ray’s favorite part of the entire school. There were indoor weight rooms and training facilities that would have any athlete from his time drooling. There were all kinds of weight training gadgets. Conner explained that the majority of them ran off of gravity-altering technology, so they were light as a feather or as heavy as 453 kilograms (“Or 1,000 pounds,” Conner explained, rolling his eyes at the U.S. measurement system).

When the pair exited the weight room, they were faced with a large trophy case. Ray glanced over the gold, silver, and bronze chalices, but stopped abruptly when he caught sight of the fencing trophy, a golden cup as big as a soccer ball.
“Chase Jagger, Captain. Men’s Foil. All sectional MVP?” Ray read out loud. “Is that Chase? Did he go to school here?”

“Indeed he did. I’ve known that troublemaker since he was very small. He used to throw toilet paper over my chimney around All Saints Day.”

Ray looked at a couple other trophies with more interest.

“He’s on all of these!” Ray exclaimed. “Fencing, Soccer, Wrestling, Karate…”

“He was an amazing athlete growing up.” Conner grinned. “Once his mother and I had a little chat about motivation…”

“You set him straight, sir?” Ray tried not to laugh.

“Since he was thirteen,” Conner trailed off, rubbing his temple, exasperated.

“For some reason, I could tell he was a bad kid.” Ray knelt down to examine another trophy. “His name’s not on the chess club trophy… shocker.”

“He’s a good kid. He’s just touchy.” Conner put a hand on Ray’s shoulder.

A light sound of drums could be heard picking up close by.

“Soundproof walls and you can still hear the band.” Conner coughed. “Guess it’s time to head off.”

He and Conner entered the Fencing Gym from a back door and were met by a palpable level of intensity and noise. Against the far wall, a band wearing black and red uniforms played in the stands. On the front of their uniforms blazed a bright gold “I-11”. Students were just beginning to sit down; they were talking with one another. They were dressed more casually than Ray had seen them the other day. Jeans, t-shirts, skirts, jackets. For the first time since his arrival in the future, Ray wished that he had been wearing something other than his NGE sweatpants and training warm-up.
Conner pushed him through the door and walked across the gym to speak with the Superintendent. Ray followed awkwardly. He felt like a new kid at school or the playground; clinging nervously to his parent, his comfort.

In the center of the gym; a long, metallic strip was set up for the fencers to use. There was a jumbotron protruding from the ceiling over the strip facing the stands. It had the names of the fencers on I-11’s roster and their heights, weights, and year in school. Most of them were seniors.

A group of girls passed by close to Ray, and he heard some giggles. His face grew hot, and he inched closer to Conner.

Conner finished his conversation with the Superintendent and turned to Ray.

“I’m looking into recruiting the captain of the fencing team to join my army. His name is Matthew Griffin,” the old man whispered. “Keep an eye on him too, tell me what you think.”

“I don’t really…” Ray began; a blonde, brunette, and redhead walked by in shorter skirts; it was like the Neapolitan ice cream clique.


“Yes, sir.” Ray lowered his shoulders as if diminishing his frame would make him less visible to the fifty-odd girls in the room.

The pair made their way to a seat in the front row of the bleachers. The band played loudly, and the teams were introduced. The tallest boy on I-11’s team looked stern and serious. He wore a black uniform with red sleeves and a silver material on his torso. Under his arm, he held a mesh metal mask. The name emblazoned in black on the back of the silver jacket read “Griffin.”
“That’s your guy?” Ray asked pointing to the stage. Conner placed a firm hand on Ray’s arm.

“Don’t point,” he grumbled.

The first match was called, and Griffin lined up across from another boy wearing a blue uniform. They both held thin, blades in their hands. They saluted the referee off the side of the strip and came on-guard looking at one another through the mesh.

“Fencers ready?” the ref shouted. “En Garde…”

“Stop! Stop!” A lanky girl with curly black hair sprinted out from the crowd and ran in front of the referee. She was screaming, and desperation poured from her watering eyes. “Billy! He’s on the roof. Outside! Someone help!!”

The crowd, noticing the interruption, began to quiet down. Conner disappeared from Ray’s side faster than Ray had ever seen the old man move. The Superintendent was right behind him.

“Calm down. Calm down,” The Superintendent said, trying to grab a hold of the girl who was shaking and pacing back and forth in front of the ref screaming for help. He eventually grabbed her shoulders. “What’s happening, young lady?”

“Billy!” she shouted through sobs. “He’s outside! On the roof! He said he was going to kill himself! Please hel…”

The Superintendent was shouting for the gym to calm down and remain seated, although a good many of them had jumped from their seats to follow Conner who had dashed outside.

Ray ran over to the screaming girl. She had to be only thirteen.

“It’s okay,” he said nervously, afraid to comfort her. “Conner… General Conner will help your friend.”
The girl continued to sob, but, not knowing what to do, Ray left and attempted to push his way through the crowd of students to the outside. When Ray finally came outside, he saw a crowd had formed around the sidewalk below one of the larger parts of the school building. Ray looked up and could make out the thin figure of a boy on the roof. He was clinging to an NGE flagpole jutting out of the stone wall.

“Stand back!” Ray heard Conner’s magnified voice boom over the crowd. “Calm down, son. Let me get you down!”

The crowd grew quiet as a frail voice shouted back from the sky.

“I’m not worth it!” the boy screeched. “Just go away! Let me die!”

“You need to think about what you’re doing!” Conner shouted. “You only have one chance on this Earth, my boy! Please come down and think!”

“NOOO!” the boy shouted; the flagpole he clung to shook violently. “They’ll just hurt me more!”

“No one’s going to hurt you!” Conner shouted. Ray felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned around to face Cindy Conner.

“What’s happening?” she whispered.

“A boy’s trying to jump.” Ray choked on these words. “Conner’s trying to get him down.”

Cindy held onto Ray’s arm. She was suddenly so much shorter.

“I’m never going back!” the boy shouted. “No one cares! I’m not wanted here!”

“You’re young! People care!” Conner shouted. “Just relax. I’ll help!”

“That’s what everyone says!” the boy shouted. He released his leg grasp and hung by only his arms. “Fuck you!”
It happened in a split second. The only image burned into Ray’s mind was that of a body like a rag doll silhouetted by the streetlights in freefall to the ground.

“Coffee dear?” Mrs. Conner rattled the mug in front of Ray’s groggy face.

“Yes, please. Sorry.” Ray added reaching out for the cup and saucer. The previous night had been one that did not afford Ray much sleep.

After Conner had caught the falling boy with the Sertorius, the crowd burst into cheers, but the boy just lay motionless, crying in the green net that had swooped up to catch him.

Ray and Conner had taken the boy to one of the empty classrooms to wait for his parents. When his father came to get him, he was in total shock. The boy did not say a single word from the moment he was caught to the moment he left under the arm of his worried father. His father was a soldier under Hoffenen’s command in Turkey, and it had been quite an ordeal getting him on the earliest train back to Munich. Five hours in a dark room with a ghostly child: Ray was almost certain that the boy’s deathly gloom had begun to penetrate his skin. Conner tried to talk about life and happiness, but even he couldn’t get through…

Waking up the next morning, knowing that the pair had to travel back to Paris that night, only added to the fog of depression that lingered around the breakfast table.

Cindy had even resorted to using a microwave in lieu of the stovetop to prepare eggs for breakfast. They were rubbery.

“I’m sure he’ll get the help he needs.” Conner was ignoring the eggs. “I referred his father to the same therapist that helped us.”

Cindy frowned. “I suppose that will help…”
“Yeah,” Ray mumbled. It was hard to imagine how any words could mend damage deep enough to cause someone to ignore the instinct to stay alive.

The last day in Edinburgh was still and uneventful. The three of them moved from chair to chair inside of the house. Everyone needed space, a room of their own.

When the sun began to set, Ray said his goodbyes. Cindy Conner gave him a bony hug, and told him that he was always welcome to come back. The General gave her a passionless kiss on the cheek, and the pair were on their way back to Fort Paris. Back to the monotony. Back to a world where General Hoffenen’s shadow loomed over Ray’s every minute.

“Ray,” Conner said as the subway flew quietly from Edinburgh. Ray had been trying to rest, but he opened his eyes to slits and looked over at the man next to him. Conner was holding the Sertorius on his lap, looking at it with a wrinkled brow.

“Without this, that boy would not be alive today,” he said, letting the lights of the subway glisten on the ebony. “I think that you should learn… learn how to use it.”
CHAPTER 20

Nova was awake, but she did not let on to it. Her door had opened a while ago, and the room had been filled with a hum, like cold air bursting through a freshly opened window. She knew the hum well, and she knew what it meant. It meant that she was no longer alone. That her every move was being watched, recorded, and admired. She pretended to be art, for he would not disturb something beautiful. Every minute or so, she was able to shuffle, seemingly unconsciously, and nuzzle her face deeper into her pillow. The humming was still there. How long would she wait this time? An hour? More? After an eternity of breathing in her own forcibly smooth breaths, she heard the door open once again, and the humming disappeared.

Nova made a hole with her finger in the folds of the linen just wide enough that she could see out of it. When she was sure that the area where the noise was coming from was clear, she sat up.

She had begun to stretch when she heard a voice outside. Quickly, she feigned sleep again and pulled the covers up over her neck. Her thin, pale neck was only temptation for the predators.

“Thanks, a young man’s voice spoke to the guard.

Three knocks on the door. She wriggled deeper under the covers.

“Hey, Nova, it’s me Derek,” the voice half shouted half whispered.

Nova sat up in her bed. She pulled her hair back into a tighter ponytail and grabbed the robe from the door in her nightstand.
Ray pulled on a set of fresh, black sweatpants and dashed off to the mess hall.

Chase sat, emotionless at his table. Ray was sure he had forgiven him for his brash escape, but pride seemed to stand in the way of true reconciliation. Ray walked in and made his way towards the empty table where he had eaten by himself for a few weeks shooting glances at the table of his old friends.

Lyle was drinking a large glass of orange juice, his Adam’s apple bouncing like a basketball as the acidic drink slid down his throat. Rufus, his cheeks crammed with pancakes, caught Ray’s eye and slid out a chair, motioning for Ray to sit. Mal had been accepted a job under the command of General Polky a few days ago, and Ray had showed up briefly at her going-away party, but felt too awkward to stay long.

Ray picked up his tray and sat at the table next to Rufus. The group was silent throughout breakfast, but to Ray this silence was pleasant; it meant forgiveness, not verbal forgiveness, but a sense of preparedness to move on.

Chase, Lyle, and Rufus got to their patrol duties shortly after breakfast which left Ray, a few hours to himself to wallow in his thoughts before noon. Ray was sitting in the courtyard fanaticizing about passing his test when a hand fell on his shoulder. He looked up to see the silhouetted Conner smiling at him, the sun making it near impossible to read all of his features.

“So, Ray,” he grumbled taking a seat next to him on the grass. “Are you ready for today?”

“What’s so special about today?” Ray retorted with a goofy smile on his face. Conner planted a stingy slap on Ray’s back. He then winced and started massaging his arm which must have still been sore from the Sertorius’ misfire several weeks ago. For the next few minutes all that could be heard was the sound of birds chirping merrily in the fountain and passing soldiers
discussing their boring duties. Conner broke the calm.

“Sure is a wonderful day.”

“Yes it is sir.”

With great struggle, Conner rose to his feet and produced the Sertorius from his pocket.

“Good luck, kid.” Ray curled his fingers carefully around the rod, it felt warm like it had been left out in the sun.

“What is the task then, sir?”

“Hoffenen said that he wished to spar with you.”

“Oh,” Ray said pocketing the rod his heart sinking a little in his chest at this last bit of unpleasant news. “I’ll try my best.”

“You’ll do your best.” Conner corrected before waddling off past the heavy, metal gate.

Ray lay on his back and looked up at the sky, the prickly grass tickling his exposed neck. White clouds formed shapes in the blue, and miniature, brown birds fluttered over where he lay. That cloud looks like a sword, Ray thought, Hoffenen’s favorite weapon is a sword. The serenity of the day seemed to vanquish with these thoughts, as the silence was broken by the shuffling footsteps of soldiers making their way to the upper levels of the fortress.

Usually when Ray thought of soldiers, he thought of a diligent workforce that works around the clock and never grows tired, that marches in perfect lines, and clacks their boots together almost to a tune: the sight on Paris Field that afternoon would forever alter his perception. What looked to be hundreds of troops lined the battlements of Fort Paris and were all cheering, booing, or making some kind of general commotion their eyes all transfixed on the field below. Ray was stunned to see that so many people, who he had never seen before were taking an interest in his test.
Three men stood on the field an equal report between them. One of the men raised his hand in the air and all of the soldiers watching from the fort grew quiet. The man spoke into a voice box, which amplified his voice so that all of the spectators could hear.

“Good afternoon, my slacking subordinates,” Conner began his voice ringing loud and clear over the speakers. “This test that your about to witness, was supposed to be quiet and out of the way, but seeing as some of us can’t keep our voices down about certain events,” the General looked up at Chase who stood waving his arms from the battlements. “The whole fort knew about it, the first day Ray arrived.” Rufus’ distinct laughter could be heard over the eerie silence.

“Today you will see Ray take the ultimate test: a test of strength, speed, and wit. If Ray passes he will automatically be inducted into the NGE at the rank of Lieutenant!” A booming cheer echoed across the field. Conner turned off the voice box, and stepped in the middle of the other two men on the field. “I want a fair fight,” Conner spoke so only they could hear. “No one is to die here today.”

Hoffenen spat on the ground and looked Ray straight in the eyes as he addressed Conner.

“I will test the boy how I see fit,” Hoffenen sneered. “You hear me, Tract? Everything goes.” Conner balled his fist and gave Ray an obvious nod as he stepped back.

Ray’s heart was beating fast; all of his grueling training was to prepare him for this moment. Ray stared directly across from him and saw that Hoffenen was gazing at the sky, lost in the clouds. The crowd was shouting Ray’s name but not as a cheer, it sounded broken, not in unison.

“Beautiful day, Tract…” Hoffenen spoke in a cool, yet ominous tone, still looking up into the bright, azure sky. Ray tensed up and slid his hand into his pocket. He gasped. Nothing was there save a hole the size of a half-dollar in the fabric.
“Looking for this, boy?” Hoffenen said, holding up the Sertorius. A drop of sweat rolled down Ray’s cheek, his heart dropped.


“When you were busy daydreaming I used my weapon to remove the Sertorius from your pocket.” Hoffenen smirked. “That is how an expert makes use of one of the five.”

Ray was starting to shake now. He hadn’t even felt the rod leave his pocket. *How had Hoffenen even known it was there? What would he do now? Why hadn’t anyone shouted to him? Could anyone else see what had happened?* Hoffenen tossed the Sertorius aside, and with his other hand held up an identical rod.

“The great destroyer: the Brutus. Many men have fallen to its power, many weak men.” Hoffenen held out the Brutus with one hand and pointed it at Ray. Four red beams flew at a ferocious speed out of the tip performing acrobatic stunts in the air. Ray fell into a daze; the beams were like pixies, scattering dust and leaving a beautiful trail behind them. Ray was enthralled; Hoffenen had magnificent control.

The beams halted their acrobatics and took off, like arrows moving at an unimaginable speed right in Ray’s direction. More sudden than a bolt of lighting, the beams found their target tearing through the flesh of Ray’s left arm, and then his right, and then at both of his legs. Ray flew through the air as limp as a rag doll, his beaten body fell to the ground with a thud.

“Pressure points.” Hoffenen said smirking. “My blasts struck the major tendons of your limbs. I believe you’ll find movement to be quite impossible.”

It was true, Ray could not move. He just lay on the ground, useless as a rug, the puncture wounds on his limbs bleeding profusely, the blasts were cold like ice so they did not cauterize the tissue. Ray’s ears were ringing, a howling noise like a steaming kettle came hand in hand
with the pain.

“So, Mr. Tract, my test too hard for you?” asked Hoffenen in a mocking tone as he raised the Brutus for another attack.

“I can’t give up now,” Ray managed to choke out through the searing pain and trepidation. Conner stood a few feet away feeling every bit of Ray’s pain, longing to help but frozen to the spot.

Hoffenen cackled in amusement at Ray’s valiant remark.

“SHUT UP!” Ray shouted at the top of his lungs, flecks of spit flew from his mouth. Just than, a loud report exploded from behind Hoffenen. The deranged General jerked around, trying to find the source of the noise. Ray craned his neck, gazing down at his right hand in disbelief. In it lay the Sertorius, the sun reflecting off of its black metal covering. Ray was snapped out of his awe by the burning pain.

*I don’t need a weapon now,* he thought, almost tearing. *I need to be able to move my arms.*

When Hoffenen turned around he saw his opponent hadn’t moved but now was covered by a radiant, blue blanket.

“What…” Hoffenen stammered. He raised the Brutus and let go another beam at his enemy. The blast ricocheted off of the Sertorius’ blue shield flew back at him striking him in the arm. Hoffenen dropped the Brutus and swore loudly clenching his bloodied limb.

The shield began crawling away, but it wasn’t returning to the Sertorius. The blue beams wriggled like worms into the deep gauges in Ray’s arms and legs. A cool, soothing feeling formed inside him. Skin folded over skin until all remnants of the injuries were gone.

Ray succeeded rising to his feet and no sooner had he stood up than Hoffenen shook off
his initial shock.

“Interesting trick, Mr. Tract.” The scary man mused holding the Brutus to his wounded arm. A red light shone from the tip and Hoffenen’s flesh knitted back together, he winced.” But you’re nothing special.” Ray wanted to blast him, but somewhere deep in his mind something was telling him to wait. Hoffenen flung a red beam at Ray like a pitcher throwing a ball. The Sertorius responded to Ray’s flinch by springing up a dome-shaped, blue shield. The blast deflected harmlessly to the side, it sounded like a tennis ball bouncing off concrete. Hoffenen continued his barrage; firing beam after beam and Ray continued deflecting them with no apparent difficulty, or even thought.

Hoffenen reeled back. He snapped his wrist down towards the ground, and with an eerie scraping noise, a pitch-black blade slide from the Brutus’s tip. Ray hand vibrated fiercely. Ray held the weapon up to eye level in shock. As if itching for conflict, a majestic, steel blade had produced itself from the Sertorius’s tip. Hoffenen made a run at Ray, his first attack was vertical and slow; Ray parried it with ease, the clank of the swords as real as Hoffenen’s anger. Hoffenen then landed a kick painfully in Ray’s face. As soon as Ray’s guard was down, another followed, and another, and another. Soon Ray was down on the ground, vision blurred and warm blood trickling from his mouth and nose. The Sertorius’ blade slid away and it let off a worried chirp in Ray’s limp grip.

Hoffenen returned the blade into the Brutus and used a beam as a vice to pick Ray off of the ground. The crowd booed and jeered but it fell deaf on Hoffenen’s ears. He walked up to Ray who was barely conscious, hanging limply in the air suspended by the Brutus’s tight clamp.

“What were you saying about being able to defeat me?” Hoffenen asked smugly. He then committed an act that was painful even to describe. Hoffenen placed the Brutus gently on the
ground where it continued to emit its red beam. Then, without hesitation, he struck Ray’s gut as if it was a punching bag. With every crushing blow it became apparent that Ray truly stood no chance to emerge victorious from this fight. The crowd groaned, Conner reached out, Ray’s eyes closed: but the Sertorius never left his hanging hand. Hoffenen continued to pummel Ray without remorse. Everyone in the crowd hoped that Hoffenen would stop when the blood trickling from Ray’s mouth had formed a small puddle below his crumpled body, but he didn’t.

“How does it feel, boy!” shouted Hoffenen, his hair disheveled and sweaty. “To be a loser!”

Ray smiled and opened his eyes.

“Not so bad” Ray said his eyes opening and his mouth forming a smirk. A single, hair-thin strand of blue light led from the Sertorius all the way to the Brutus lying on the ground below him. Before Hoffenen could retort, the Sertorius’s beam had wrapped around the Brutus and then flung it harmlessly across the battlefield. As soon as it landed several feet away the beam disappeared and Ray dropped abruptly to the ground, landing on his feet. Hoffenen just stood there staring, obviously in disbelief.

“But how could you still be conscious?! I must have hit you at least twenty times!”

The Sertorius hissed loudly and the warm remnants of the protective blanket that it had formed under Ray’s shirt disappeared back into its tip. The weapon had saved him. Without a command, it had protected him.

Hoffenen looked as if he was ready to explode.

“Everything goes,” Ray coughed, wiping the blood from his lip. “You said it yourself.” Hoffenen was enraged.

“YOU’RE RIGHT!” Hoffenen screeched. He reached into his holster and removed his
gun. “EVERYTHING GOES!”

Two deafening bangs, a ricochet, a screaming crowd, and it was over. Two bodies lie, on the warm, dirt ground, the once loud field fell quiet.
CHAPTER 21

Conner stood, hunched, in the middle of the vast field and Ray stood a mere five feet away. Conner removed the Sertorius from his pocket and held it out for Ray to see.

“As I already told you, this is a weapon from the future. That means that it has more powers than any of our modern scientists can fathom, and our modern scientists are futuristic scientist to you, so it goes without saying that understanding this weapon would be a real reach for you.” Ray gave a nervous nod, remembering the smoking gashes he had put in the fortress. “These weapons are extremely dangerous and unpredictable. As you’ve seen, they will reach deep into your mind, find your greatest weakness and use it against you; testing you if you will. If you can see through these illusions, the weapon will let you wield it, if not the result can be catastrophic. For example, when you saw Nova in your hallucination you believed it to be her and at that point the weapon took control. You cannot let it take control.

“When you get past the illusions, these gizmos can be rather useful. Seeing as they get their power from you they will never run out of energy, so you don’t need to reload it like most modern weapons.” Conner took a pause giving Ray a chance to soak in all that he had just heard than he resumed.

“This weapon can be anything that I want it to be. Anything that your mind imagines this weapon can turn into reality, in a sense.” Conner grinned and added. “That is as long as it fits your personality. For example…” The old man held out the weapon at arm’s length.
“It could form a shield…” a green light poured from the tip of the rod and formed a shining green dome around the General.

“…it could be used as a gun…” the green shield soaked up back into the Sertorius and a metal bullet flew from the tip and shook the sand next to Ray where it had landed.

“…my personal favorite, a paralyzing ray….” A glowing green strand whipped out of the Sertorius; it flew past Ray’s shoulder and hit the ground behind him with a thud.

“…and…” Conner’s face tightened with concentration. “Hoffenen’s favorite, a sword.” Out of the tip of the Sertorius emerged a shining silver blade that reflected all of the light from the sun off of its metallic surface. Ray stared in amazement; it was like nothing he had ever seen.

“Once you learn how to use it,” Conner lectured, the metal of the sword screeching back into the black rod. “You will be nearly unstoppable on the battlefield.” Suddenly the twinkle left Conner’s eyes and his voice became stern and deep. “A word of warning, do not abuse the power of this weapon, it’s the most unstable of all five and has killed three of its former owners before coming into my possession, so be careful Ray.”

Conner’s words swished around in Ray’s mind like wine in the mouth of a man who hadn’t tasted it before. Minutes ago he was apprehensive about the ebony rod and now he wished he had never seen it in his life.

Conner stepped towards him, extending a comforting hand. “Clear your mind, Ray.” The Sertorius was tight in the old man’s extended grip. “Don’t let it control you.”

Ray was horrified yet some part of him took control and grabbed hold of the thin black rod.

He was standing in the middle of the field, his hand still outstretched yet nothing was in
it. Conner had disappeared and Ray looked around to see where he had gone, when suddenly a red light flashed in the corner of his eye. He dove to avoid it, and looked up to see who had fired the ray. Behind him stood General Hoffenen holding his weapon, a maniacal look on his face. His rose his arm and fired again, Ray felt a searing pain. He looked down at his charred, bloody skin, every nerve in his body screaming. *Pain.*

Hoffenen walked slowly towards Ray smiling his crooked smile. Ray’s mind raced, he saw no way of escaping his death, a flash of light poured from a door opened in Ray’s mind. This wasn’t real.

Ray thought quickly, “What did Conner tell me to do? He told me to stay calm and not to let it control me.” Ray saw Hoffenen moving closer, but he did not run, he closed his eyes.

“Think calm thoughts, don’t let it control you.” Ray whispered. He heard Hoffenen stop less than a foot away. “Calm thoughts, control.” Ray continued under his breath. Ray heard the sound of screeching metal. “Calm thoughts, don’t let it control you.” Hoffenen pulled back, and swung for Ray’s neck. “Calm thoughts!”

Ray was lying down, his back on the ground of a field, the Sertorius in his hand. Deep gouges and smoldering pits were scattered about the field; though Ray felt the damage was quite mediocre in comparison to the last time he laid hands on the lethal rod. Conner was knelt on the ground in front of Ray, firmly squeezing his right arm.

“That was good for the most part.” Conner let out a faint, wheezing laugh as he hobbled to his feet. Ray noticed a wide stream of blood tricking from where the old man held his hand.


“I’ll be fine, I’ve already called the medic.” Surely enough no sooner had the General finished talking then the medic flew up on a silver chrome vehicle hovering a good foot in the
air. Conner was hoisted into the back seat of the hovering car and patted the medic on his back.

“Don’t worry about me, you just continue to work with the Sertorius,” Conner winced.

Ray admired the old man; for even in times of what seemed to be unbearable pain he could still force a smile past his wrinkled features. *But what had he said? Continue without his help?*

“I can’t use this without you. What if I hurt somebody…else?”

“It should let you use it now,” Conner continued as the car began to turn its nose back to the fort. “Just try using your imagination, you’ll be surprised what this thing can do. Experimentation is key. It’s easiest to learn by doing, that’s what I always say.” The car zoomed through the air with a dull hum towards the fort’s large metal gates. Conner turned around and shouted back through the trail of dust the vehicle left in its wake. “Lieutenant Jagger will be here to watch you shortly! Wait for him before you do anything!!!”

At first Ray was skittish, reluctant, the sun’s light made the rounded edges of the rod shine. It was on his palm, almost alive. Ray’s heart sounded like a bad drummer. *Conner will be ok,* he thought, *look how he was smiling.*

An eternity passed and still no sign of Chase. The Sertorius’ little heart beat fast in his hand. It was anxious. Ray closed his fingers tighter, it became warmer and its pulse quickened, or was it his pulse? Ray held the weapon an arm’s length away from his body. *Which end do you aim with?* He pondered, cautiously scanning both rod tips. Ray could have sworn he heard taunting on the wind.

A groaning sound echoed from the depths of the Sertorius. Ray released his grip on the rod and it fell to the dirt with a thud. The noise grew louder, like a car’s starter scratching. Ray stepped back, raising his hands to shield his face, peering through the spaces between his fingers.
The noise became louder, like deep nails on a chalkboard.

A teeny tiny speck of radiant blue struggled out of the weapon’s tip, and plopped to the ground fizzling out instantly. A thin hair of smoke drifted out the Sertorius.

Ray uncovered his eyes, he plucked the weapon from the ground and gave it a harsh stare.

“Stupid thing.” Ray held the weapon out shoulder length again, he was determined to make the weapon do something interesting, that last show was nothing short of pathetic. “Now, why don’t you pick something up for me?”

Ray stared intently at one of the support beams that barely held up the remains of a building. He concentrated all of his mind and body on lifting it up, but nothing happened, he thought harder, still nothing.

“Come on ya damn thing, work!” Ray steamed. A brilliant azure beam whipped out from the Sertorius and wrapped itself around the large, metal support. Ray hopped up and down with elation; afterwards he scanned the field hoping people had seen the beam but and not his bunny-like skip. After seeing no one Ray turned back around, the blue light still encompassed the beam like a lasso.

“Now make it move.” Ray stated clearly hoping that the rod would respond, as it did before, to a verbal command. The blue beam grew larger and Ray’s confidence swelled with it. As Ray looked on something caught his eye; the metal beam was glowing orange, after a few tense seconds, it melted down to a molten heap on the ground.

“That’s bad,” Ray stared in horror as the entire beam sunk down into a single molten puddle on the floor. Very slowly, almost comically the building caved in around it. “That’s soooo bad…” Ray sung, the lasso retreated, like a fox into its burrow and the Sertorius hummed
contently: its work was done.

“Didn’t Conner tell you to wait for me?” Chase yelled, sprinting from a nearly parked hover car followed by three soldiers.

“Uh,” answered Ray dumbly. “I dunno.”

“You don’t know?!” exclaimed Chase, flustered. “Didn’t you pay attention to a word the old man told you?!”

“He didn’t say I had to wait for you.” Ray lied, wrinkling his nose. Chase took some deep breaths and closed his eyes.

“Alright, you can do whatever you want just don’t melt me with that thing.” Chase motioned to his soldiers and in no time they were hunched on the dirt playing a rather loud game of cards.

Ray continued to fiddle around with the Sertorius. The visions still came occasionally but they became less frequent as their fictitiousness became more evident. The sun was setting and Ray had finally mastered picking up large objects and placing them in other areas; he was like a giant baby playing with blocks; in fact sometimes his reactions to his accomplishments more closely resembled a child’s rather than a growing, young man’s.

Ray dropped a particularly heavy beam and it shook the ground and dust flew. Chase seemed intrigued but whenever Ray’s eyes met his he would frown and resume his game of cards.

At the stroke of midnight Conner returned to the field and Ray smothered him with stories of his success. He had wanted to ask if he could speak with Nova but upon looking at Conner’s heavily gauzed arm he thought it best not to push favors.

Conner walked Ray back up to his room without much conversation and after wishing
him goodnight proceeded to walk away.

“Conner?”

The old man gave Ray an inquisitive brow. “Yes m’ boy?”

“The visions, do you still get them? I mean after all of this time.” Conner paused, the warm night air teased his thin strands of grey.

“Sometimes…”

Ray shrunk back into his room. “Well, I’m really sorry about your arm. Good night, sir.”

The night was sticky and warm and Conner looked up at the moon, glowing orange. “I just wish my visions were real…”

A billowing object of bright blue light moved through the air like a plastic bag caught in a current. Ray sat on the ground of the field moving the Sertorius lazily in loops and watching the light follow his command through the air. It was mesmerizing, but there was also that constant twinge of apprehension in the back of his mind. It was like riding a bike for the first time: freeing but at the same time frightening, for one could fall off the bicycle if their concentration wanes and in the same way the weapon could do something disastrous if it sensed Ray wasn’t in control.

He would talk to her tonight, he was certain of it. Conner had said he could, baring any mishap on the field. Ray didn’t wish to screw anything up so he just teased the blue glow in the air; telling Conner he felt that he needed to focus his attention more on the control of the object and less on its dangerous application.

The sun was the only teller of time in Ray’s world and it looked as if it hadn’t moved since morning. *Was it still morning? What was she doing right now? Would she be able to talk in*
the evening? Had she already tried to contact Conner, to speak with him? Had Conner not told him, just so he would stay focused?

The blue glow condensed into a shape almost like a spear and moved slowly through the air towards the spot where Conner sat, reading from a book. Was she mad at him? What would she have to say? The spear inched closer to Conner. How terrible was this separation for her? Did she still like him? Did this whole thing ruin any chance he would have to be with her? The spear inched closer as if it were sneaking up on its pray. It was unbelievable! Why did this have to happen? Why did all of this go wrong?

“Ray!”

Ray spun around fast to see Conner sprawled awkwardly on the ground a blue light floating above him like a jellyfish.

“Sorry, sir” Ray stammered beckoning the glow back into the sky with a flick of the rod.

“My mind must have wandered.”

Conner sat up and brushed the dirt from his jacket. He looked angry at first, but then he appeared concerned.

“Are you mad at me, Ray?” he asked.

“Why would I be mad at you, sir?”

“Perhaps you blame me for all that has happened to you?”

“Sir… I…”

“I mean, it was me who ripped you from the alley that day, it was me who forced you work hard and for long hours, and it was me who was too busy to help you contact your girlfriend.”

The word “girlfriend” burned Ray’s heart.
The Sertorius hissed loudly in his hands and the light in the air writhed and contorted. Ray tried to gather his thoughts and soothe the blue glow. “She probably hates me.”

Conner too watched the glow in the sky until it became passive once more.

“I’ve been a terrible person, a great General, but a terrible person.”

Ray was quiet. Conner hadn’t been bad at all really, Ray just needed someone to blame and he was closest. *Blame. So he did blame Conner after all. There was only one person to truly blame...*

“Here,” Conner had removed a tiny box from the inside of his jacket. “Call her now.”

“What?” Ray had lost his train of thought, the Sertorius hissed loudly in his hand again and the glow flashed dangerously.

“Take this back to your quarters and call her now,” Conner said. “Just be quiet about it.”

Ray was speechless. The Sertorius became hot in his hand and made him feel dizzy. He cast the rod, angrily to the ground and the blue glow disappeared above him.

“It burned me.” Ray said massaging his palm.

“You were very emotional just now. It was feeding off of that and wasn’t done eating. I can imagine that would make it cranky. I’ll take care of it, don’t worry. Run along now, before I come to my senses.”

Ray took the small box from Conner and made his way back to the fort, he was running though he wasn’t really aware of it. He closed his room door and held the box like a precious diamond in his hands.

“Nova Kline.” He stated clearly. The box hummed, and hummed, and hummed. Ray stood nervously clutching the tiny box, nervously waiting for her to answer.

“How?”
The sheer magnitude of the voice coming out of the box from so close to his ear made Ray jump, he dropped the box to the floor.

“Hello? Hello?” Nova’s voice rang about the room. “Is anyone there?”

“Hi, Nova!” Ray shouted to the box on the floor.

“Ray?” Nova spoke calmly. “Why are you shouting?”

“I dropped the box on the floor!”

“Well, pick it up and stop shouting at me!” Nova snapped.

“Sorry…”

Ray picked up the little box. “Is this better?”

“No, now you’re whispering.” Nova sounded exasperated. “Just talk to me.”

“Sorry, alright, sorry.”

“How are you?” Nova asked, sounding less annoyed.

“Fine. How are you?”

“Can’t complain. Ok, I could, but what good would it do? I’m just bored right now. I had a pretty interesting lesson today, but now I’m just bored.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, it’s not your fault. This kind of shit happens to everyone, I suppose.”

Ray laughed.

“I mean I do blame you.” Nova said nonchalantly. Ray’s heart skipped a beat. “But not you, if you know what I mean?”

“I…uh…”

“I blame the Emperor! What a creepy asshole! No offense…”

“None taken. He’s not me… Even though he sorta is…boy, this is weird.”
“Tell me about it. So how’s training coming?”

“Fine, I guess. Conner let me off today so I could talk to you.”

“That’s nice…”

“Yeah, he’s a really great guy. I’ve just been working with that weapon thing, the Sertorius.”

“He’s letting you use that thing?” Nova sounded concerned.

“Yeah, it’s from even farther in the future than we are now. It can turn thoughts into reality and stuff like that. Really fun to use. I feel like the Green Lantern.”

“Really? Are you serious? Couldn’t you use it to bust us out of here then?”

“I’m not terribly good with it yet,” Ray frowned. “At all.”

“Yeah, alright. But if you got good with it couldn’t you help us get out?”

“I dunno… I kinda don’t think pushing it is the best idea.”

“Oh,” Nova’s tone lost the hope it had held just seconds ago. “You think staying here the whole two years is best?”

“Not best, I just can’t see any other way out of this.”

The box was quiet for a while, only Nova’s heavy breathing could be heard.

“Nova, I’ll visit soon; right after my test with General Hoffenen.”

“That soon?” Nova’s voice echoed curiously out of the box.

“Yeah,” Ray wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Man that guy’s a real ass.”

Ray waited for a response from Nova, which took some time.

“Guards are coming in to…to check on me. I’ve gotta go… See you around!”

“W…wait! Nova!” But it was too late. The little box made a soft clicking noise and the room was plunged into quiet again. Ray stood quietly for a second. That wasn’t supposed to
happen. Not only was their conversation short but it was also unpleasant. What could he have said to make things better?

Bad or good, Ray knew Conner had given him the afternoon off and he didn’t intend to spend it out on the field, especially now that his thoughts were even more jumbled and unsettled then they had been before. He tucked the voicebox into his pocket and crawled up to his bed. What a mess this day had turned out to be. Soon he had drowsed off.
CHAPTER 22

Ray skipped his usual slew of groggy wriggling and tossing this morning and sprung out of bed like a bullet from a gun barrel. Today was the day, the day that had loomed over his head since his arrival at Fort Paris. Conner’s note was stuck on the post of Ray’s bunk bed. He peeled off the tape and scanned the note furiously. The message was concise and hastily scrawled.

He arrived this morning; your test is at 12:00. Conner.

Fear reared its ugly head again, now that the message was in physical form, but a newfound confidence was there to keep it in check. It had been two days since he had completed Conner’s weapon training and Ray could still feel the spot on his back where the old man had patted him. The feeling of Conner’s approval mingled with fear of Hoffenen’s test and excitement for the closeness of his next visit with Nova made it hard to sleep the night previous.

Ray had tried to fend off the excitement of his upcoming visit, lest it distract him from the task at hand, but after finding this to be quite impossible he decided just to accept the surge of energy for what it was and prayed it wouldn’t interfere with his test. His conversations with Nova had become more upbeat, she seemed willing to chat longer and about more personal subjects and this, Ray thought, was a step in the right direction.
Ray pulled on a set of fresh, black sweatpants and dashed off to the mess hall.

Chase sat, emotionless at his table. Ray was sure he had forgiven him for his brash escape, but pride seemed to stand in the way of true reconciliation. Ray walked in and made his way towards the empty table where he had eaten by himself for a few weeks shooting glances at the table of his old friends.

Lyle was drinking a large glass of orange juice, his Adam’s apple bouncing like a basketball as the acidic drink slid down his throat. Rufus, his cheeks crammed with pancakes, caught Ray’s eye and slid out a chair, motioning for Ray to sit. Mal had been accepted a job under the command of General Polky a few days ago, and Ray had showed up briefly at her going-away party, but felt too awkward to stay long.

Ray picked up his tray and sat at the table next to Rufus. The group was silent throughout breakfast, but to Ray this silence was pleasant; it meant forgiveness, not verbal forgiveness, but a sense of preparedness to move on.

Chase, Lyle, and Rufus got to their patrol duties shortly after breakfast which left Ray, a few hours to himself to wallow in his thoughts before noon. Ray was sitting in the courtyard fanaticizing about passing his test when a hand fell on his shoulder. He looked up to see the silhouetted Conner smiling at him, the sun making it near impossible to read all of his features.

“So, Ray,” he grumbled taking a seat next to him on the grass. “Are you ready for today?”

“What’s so special about today?” Ray retorted with a goofy smile on his face. Conner planted a stingy slap on Ray’s back. He then winced and started massaging his arm which must have still been sore from the Sertorius’ misfire several weeks ago. For the next few minutes all that could be heard was the sound of birds chirping merrily in the fountain and passing soldiers.
discussing their boring duties. Conner broke the calm.

“Sure is a wonderful day.”

“Yes it is sir.”

With great struggle, Conner rose to his feet and produced the Sertorius from his pocket.

“Good luck, kid.” Ray curled his fingers carefully around the rod, it felt warm like it had been left out in the sun.

“What is the task then, sir?”

“Hoffenen said that he wished to spar with you.”

“Oh,” Ray said pocketing the rod his heart sinking a little in his chest at this last bit of unpleasant news. “I’ll try my best.”

“You’ll do your best.” Conner corrected before waddling off past the heavy, metal gate.

Ray lay on his back and looked up at the sky, the prickly grass tickling his exposed neck. White clouds formed shapes in the blue, and miniature, brown birds fluttered over where he lay. That cloud looks like a sword, Ray thought, Hoffenen’s favorite weapon is a sword. The serenity of the day seemed to vanquish with these thoughts, as the silence was broken by the shuffling footsteps of soldiers making their way to the upper levels of the fortress.

Usually when Ray thought of soldiers, he thought of a diligent workforce that works around the clock and never grows tired, that marches in perfect lines, and clacks their boots together almost to a tune: the sight on Paris Field that afternoon would forever alter his perception. What looked to be hundreds of troops lined the battlements of Fort Paris and were all cheering, booing, or making some kind of general commotion their eyes all transfixed on the field below. Ray was stunned to see that so many people, who he had never seen before were taking an interest in his test.
Three men stood on the field an equal report between them. One of the men raised his hand in the air and all of the soldiers watching from the fort grew quiet. The man spoke into a voice box, which amplified his voice so that all of the spectators could hear.

“Good afternoon, my slacking subordinates,” Conner began his voice ringing loud and clear over the speakers. “This test that your about to witness, was supposed to be quiet and out of the way, but seeing as some of us can’t keep our voices down about certain events,” the General looked up at Chase who stood waving his arms from the battlements. “The whole fort knew about it, the first day Ray arrived.” Rufus’ distinct laughter could be heard over the eerie silence.

“Today you will see Ray take the ultimate test: a test of strength, speed, and wit. If Ray passes he will automatically be inducted into the NGE at the rank of Lieutenant!” A booming cheer echoed across the field. Conner turned off the voice box, and stepped in the middle of the other two men on the field. “I want a fair fight,” Conner spoke so only they could hear. “No one is to die here today.”

Hoffenen spat on the ground and looked Ray straight in the eyes as he addressed Conner.

“I will test the boy how I see fit,” Hoffenen sneered. “You hear me, Tract? Everything goes.” Conner balled his fist and gave Ray an obvious nod as he stepped back.

Ray’s heart was beating fast; all of his grueling training was to prepare him for this moment. Ray stared directly across from him and saw that Hoffenen was gazing at the sky, lost in the clouds. The crowd was shouting Ray’s name but not as a cheer, it sounded broken, not in unison.

“Beautiful day, Tract…” Hoffenen spoke in a cool, yet ominous tone, still looking up into the bright, azure sky. Ray tensed up and slid his hand into his pocket. He gasped. Nothing was there save a hole the size of a half-dollar in the fabric.
“Looking for this, boy?” Hoffenen said, holding up the Sertorius. A drop of sweat rolled down Ray’s cheek, his heart dropped.


“When you were busy daydreaming I used my weapon to remove the Sertorius from your pocket.” Hoffenen smirked. “That is how an expert makes use of one of the five.”

Ray was starting to shake now. He hadn’t even felt the rod leave his pocket. How had Hoffenen even known it was there? What would he do now? Why hadn’t anyone shouted to him? Could anyone else see what had happened? Hoffenen tossed the Sertorius aside, and with his other hand held up an identical rod.

“The great destroyer: the Brutus. Many men have fallen to its power, many weak men.” Hoffenen held out the Brutus with one hand and pointed it at Ray. Four red beams flew at a ferocious speed out of the tip performing acrobatic stunts in the air. Ray fell into a daze; the beams were like pixies, scattering dust and leaving a beautiful trail behind them. Ray was enthralled; Hoffenen had magnificent control.

The beams halted their acrobatics and took off, like arrows moving at an unimaginable speed right in Ray’s direction. More sudden than a bolt of lighting, the beams found their target tearing through the flesh of Ray’s left arm, and then his right, and then at both of his legs. Ray flew through the air as limp as a rag doll, his beaten body fell to the ground with a thud.

“Pressure points.” Hoffenen said smirking. “My blasts struck the major tendons of your limbs. I believe you’ll find movement to be quite impossible.”

It was true, Ray could not move He just lay on the ground, useless as a rug, the puncture wounds on his limbs bleeding profusely, the blasts were cold like ice so they did not cauterize the tissue. Ray’s ears were ringing, a howling noise like a steaming kettle came hand in hand
with the pain.

“So, Mr. Tract, my test too hard for you?” asked Hoffenen in a mocking tone as he raised the Brutus for another attack.

“I can’t give up now,” Ray managed to choke out through the searing pain and trepidation. Conner stood a few feet away feeling every bit of Ray’s pain, longing to help but frozen to the spot.

Hoffenen cackled in amusement at Ray’s valiant remark.

“SHUT UP!” Ray shouted at the top of his lungs, flecks of spit flew from his mouth. Just than, a loud report exploded from behind Hoffenen. The deranged General jerked around, trying to find the source of the noise. Ray craned his neck, gazing down at his right hand in disbelief. In it lay the Sertorius, the sun reflecting off of its black metal covering. Ray was snapped out of his awe by the burning pain.

_I don’t need a weapon now, _he thought, almost tearing. _I need to be able to move my arms._

When Hoffenen turned around he saw his opponent hadn’t moved but now was covered by a radiant, blue blanket.

“What…?” Hoffenen stammered. He raised the Brutus and let go another beam at his enemy. The blast ricocheted off of the Sertorius’ blue shield flew back at him striking him in the arm. Hoffenen dropped the Brutus and swore loudly clenching his bloodied limb.

The shield began crawling away, but it wasn’t returning to the Sertorius. The blue beams wriggled like worms into the deep gauges in Ray’s arms and legs. A cool, soothing feeling formed inside him. Skin folded over skin until all remnants of the injuries were gone.

Ray succeeded rising to his feet and no sooner had he stood up than Hoffenen shook off
his initial shock.

“Interesting trick, Mr. Tract.” The scary man mused holding the Brutus to his wounded arm. A red light shone from the tip and Hoffenen’s flesh knitted back together, he winced.” But you’re nothing special.” Ray wanted to blast him, but somewhere deep in his mind something was telling him to wait. Hoffenen flung a red beam at Ray like a pitcher throwing a ball. The Sertorius responded to Ray’s flinch by springing up a dome-shaped, blue shield. The blast deflected harmlessly to the side, it sounded like a tennis ball bouncing off concrete. Hoffenen continued his barrage; firing beam after beam and Ray continued deflecting them with no apparent difficulty, or even thought.

Hoffenen reeled back. He snapped his wrist down towards the ground, and with an eerie scraping noise, a pitch-black blade slide from the Brutus’s tip. Ray hand vibrated fiercely. Ray held the weapon up to eye level in shock. As if itching for conflict, a majestic, steel blade had produced itself from the Sertorius’s tip. Hoffenen made a run at Ray, his first attack was vertical and slow; Ray parried it with ease, the clank of the swords as real as Hoffenen’s anger. Hoffenen then landed a kick painfully in Ray’s face. As soon as Ray’s guard was down, another followed, and another, and another. Soon Ray was down on the ground, vision blurred and warm blood trickling from his mouth and nose. The Sertorius’ blade slid away and it let off a worried chirp in Ray’s limp grip.

Hoffenen returned the blade into the Brutus and used a beam as a vice to pick Ray off of the ground. The crowd booed and jeered but it fell deaf on Hoffenen’s ears. He walked up to Ray who was barely conscious, hanging limply in the air suspended by the Brutus’s tight clamp.

“What were you saying about being able to defeat me?” Hoffenen asked smugly. He then committed an act that was painful even to describe. Hoffenen placed the Brutus gently on the
ground where it continued to emit its red beam. Then, without hesitation, he struck Ray’s gut as if it was a punching bag. With every crushing blow it became apparent that Ray truly stood no chance to emerge victorious from this fight. The crowd groaned, Conner reached out, Ray’s eyes closed: but the Sertorius never left his hanging hand. Hoffenen continued to pummel Ray without remorse. Everyone in the crowd hoped that Hoffenen would stop when the blood trickling from Ray’s mouth had formed a small puddle below his crumpled body, but he didn’t.

“How does it feel, boy!” shouted Hoffenen, his hair disheveled and sweaty. “To be a loser!”

Ray smiled and opened his eyes.

“Not so bad” Ray said his eyes opening and his mouth forming a smirk. A single, hair-thin strand of blue light led from the Sertorius all the way to the Brutus lying on the ground below him. Before Hoffenen could retort, the Sertorius’s beam had wrapped around the Brutus and then flung it harmlessly across the battlefield. As soon as it landed several feet away the beam disappeared and Ray dropped abruptly to the ground, landing on his feet. Hoffenen just stood there staring, obviously in disbelief.

“But how could you still be conscious?! I must have hit you at least twenty times!”

The Sertorius hissed loudly and the warm remnants of the protective blanket that it had formed under Ray’s shirt disappeared back into its tip. The weapon had saved him. Without a command, it had protected him.

Hoffenen look as if he was ready to explode.

“Everything goes,” Ray coughed, wiping the blood from his lip. “You said it yourself.” Hoffenen was enraged.

“YOU’RE RIGHT!” Hoffenen screeched. He reached into his holster and removed his
gun. “EVERYTHING GOES!”

Two deafening bangs, a ricochet, a screaming crowd, and it was over. Two bodies lie, on
the warm, dirt ground, the once loud field fell quiet.
CHAPTER 23

Ray stirred, he was no longer on the dirty soil of Paris Field; he was lying in on his wafer thin bunk, a warm down comforter blanketing him. His eyes opened slowly, it hurt, so he closed them shut again. All he could see was red, as light shined through his eyelids. People were arguing far away, but he could not make out what they were saying. The veins on his temple pulsed violently; it felt as if his brain was being prodded with sharp needles. Ray’s muscles were aching, and he decided that it would be best if he went back to sleep. It was as if he had forgotten about the fight; all his body wanted him to do was rest. The voices outside were getting clearer.

“I warned Mr. Tract that there were no restrictions,” said the first voice angrily. “Besides my shot wasn’t lethal, I didn’t aim for any vital organs.”

The second voice retorted,” That doesn’t change the fact that what you did was reckless and unprofessional, Jacob!”

“What? Don’t call me… Did you want the test to be easier? You wanted me just to give him the rank Lieutenant without years of training?”

“No,” said the second voice. “I agree that the test should have been difficult, but not life-threatening.”

“I already told you that it was not life-threatening,” the first voice said, annoyed. “My shot was not going to kill him!”

“What about the deflection, Jacob? You did an excellent job predicting that!”

“I’m sorry you got shot, Conner, but that’s not really my conser…”
“A life is a life, Jacob,” Conner replied. “Concern or not, would you have wanted to have my death on your conscience?”

“I removed the bullets didn’t I?” said the first voice.

“It was still irresponsible, Jacob!”

“Stop calling me Jacob!” Hoffenen roared. “Have some respect for your fellow soldier!”

“We have the same rank Jacob,” Conner snapped. “I can call you by your first name!”

There was a long silence.

“I’m tired of arguing with you, Conner. I’ll be heading back to Munich. Mr. Tract is on your hands.”

“Don’t you mean Lieutenant Tract?” Conner responded in a mocking tone.

“Yes,” said Hoffenen with contempt. “Lieutenant...”

A few minutes later the door to Ray’s room opened and light, slow footsteps could be heard.

“We sure showed him didn’t we?” Conner whispered to Ray who was pretending to sleep though a faint smile grazed his countenance. “You made me proud, Lieutenant.” He patted Ray gently on the shoulder and quietly left the room. Ray drifted off to sleep for real, a weight lifted from his shoulders.

He awoke to the sound of people cheering. His already cramped room was filled to the brim with about a dozen smiling soldiers, most of them Ray hadn’t seen before. He sat up in his bed and rubbed his eyes with disbelief. His muscles told him to sit back down, with a familiar surge of pain but he was too shocked to pay them any mind.

“Congratulations, Ray.” Lyle said in his squeaky voice.
“Yeah, nice fight Ray.” Rufus interjected. He gave Ray a hard pat on the back, which made him curse. None of the soldiers seemed to mind, but Ray’s back sure did. Swarms of complete strangers congratulated him on his victory.

“I passed?” Ray asked, pretending he hadn’t heard Conner’s conversation with Hoffenen.

“Of course you did, ya dumb ass,” said Chase who had wrestled his way to the front of the cheering crowd. “Why else would we be congratulating you?”

Ray wanted to know what happened after he had passed out. Chase and the gang gave a crude reenactment of the final minutes. Ray laughed at Rufus’ impression of Hoffenen, and became a violent shade of red, when Chase reenacted, Ray’s falling after the first shot (Ray was pretty sure that he hadn’t spun around six times calling for his “mommy”). Chase stopped goofing around and explained how the Sertorius’ last-second shield had deflected the first bullet into Conner’s arm, the second bullet missed the shield and hit Ray’s leg. Chase also explained, reluctantly, how Hoffenen had rushed to remove the bullets.

“Where’s General Conner?” Ray asked, as he scanned the room.

“Oh,” Chase responded quickly. “He’s alright, he just received a message from the Emperor and said that he wouldn’t be able make it.”

“I wonder what the Emperor wants,” Ray asked openly.

“He’s probably anxious to hear how his great grandson did on his officer’s test.” Chase said.

“Right, great grandson…” Ray muttered. Ray distanced himself mentally from the party which carried on for several hours. Soldiers cracked open beers and asked Ray how he had felt using one of the weapons. Ray was happy to appease them and loved to describe how he had
thought on his feet to fake being unconscious while the Sertorius protected him with its warm
glow.

“So,” said a rather drunk Chase later that night. “Howl did you make the Sertobulus, poof
to you like tha…?”

Ray chuckled at Chase’s slur but stopped quickly “You mean you’ve never seen that
before?” He asked puzzled.

“Nope.” Chase stated, blankly. “Never seen dat trick before.”

“I’m sure that Conner has done it before.” Ray said out loud, trying to suppress himself.
He didn’t like to feel special; he just wanted to be normal, to fit in.

Chase ignored him wobbled off and started talking to the corner of Ray’s bunk bed. He
reminded Ray of his guardian, Charlie, in one of his frequent semi-conscious states. Ray’s mind
drifted away to his past. He wondered how his friends and his guardian were dealing with his
abrupt disappearance. What about Nova’s parents? Any of Nova’s friends could have told them
that she disappeared after a walk with Ray. Ray had only met Nova’s parents once before at
Nova’s tenth birthday party where they reprimanded at him for pushing Nova’s head into her
cake.

Ray smiled faintly but abruptly returned to his worries. Nova’s parents would definitely
be furious with him for disappearing with their daughter.

Ray stopped and envisioned Nova sitting with his future self, having tea. A chill crawled
up his spine. He wanted to talk with her, but Conner had been working him like a dog. Surely,
she had tried to call him. Conner would have said something, right? What if someone had found
the voice box Conner had given her? After a long period of thought Ray decided that he would
visit her, of course he would have to ask Conner first (a repeat of the last incident would not be
wise). What if he said “No” because Ray was an officer in the military now? Officer: this was a whole new pickle entirely: duties, responsibilities...

Ray shook his head and ran his fingers through his thick hair; one problem at a time. Visiting Nova was his top priority now. He got up from his bed, where he had been sitting for the majority of the party. His muscles still burned with pain but he had to find Conner. He started walking painfully to the door, Chase grabbed his shoulder.

“Have you met my girlfriend?” the inebriated Lieutenant asked, pointing to the bedpost. “She’s made of wood.” Ray smiled sympathetically as Chase, red faced, howled with laughter. Ray eventually managed to force his way past Chase and the others and out of the party.

It was dark out; Ray slowly made his way up the familiar, winding stairs to the General’s office. He reached the door and was prepared to knock when he heard someone shouting inside. He put his ear up to the wooden door. The sound was muffled but he could still pick up what was being said.

“I’ve already made my opinion known on the matter, your Excellency!” It was Conner. “Yes, I’ll be there but I don’t see the point… Imperial override! You wouldn’t sir… Yes I believe we could but… I know what they’re capable of… of course Jacob supports you… Tim and I believe it’s not the time… Yes I know about Christopher… Yes it is a shame but… Tim, what?! He couldn’t have, he wouldn’t have… Tim would never… that doesn’t sound like him.” Conner’s frantic shouts ceased, he was listening to something. He took a deep sigh. “My representatives and I will be there tomorrow. But I…Yes…But…Good night, your Excellency.”

Ray moved back from the door and tried to make sense of what Conner had just said. Without warning, a green light flared from beneath the General’s office door.

“Come in, Lieutenant.” Conner sighed. Ray cringed and hung his head.
Conner wasn’t his usual, shining self, his hair was disheveled, and he had a harried look on his face. Even his rich, deep voice was hoarse.

“It’s not polite or ethical to eavesdrop, Lieutenant.” He said, rubbing his brow.

“I’m sorry sir.” Ray mumbled. Shame coated these words like paint on a fence.

“I shall forgive you this time, assuming that you mention what you heard to no one.”

“I won’t tell a soul.”

Conner nodded.

“Could you fetch Lieutenant Jagger, for me?” he grumbled, rubbing his temples. “I would like to have a word with you two.”

“Yes sir.” Ray piped, forgetting to salute as he left.

Separating Chase from the party was easier said than done. Chase had taken in more alcohol than most humans should consume in a week.

“I didn’t touch that bedpost,” Chase said as Ray guided him out the door and up the stairs. “I was just looking at it.”

Ray rolled his eyes and Chase tripped on a step. Ray dragged his comrade awkwardly up the remaining flight of stairs. Chase wasn’t a light person, so this dead weight cost him several minutes. Finally after one last painful hoist Ray stood at the General’s door.

Ray opened the door and entered the office using Chase to prop the door open. Conner unenthusiastically pulled out the Sertorius.

“Very irresponsible, Chase,” He said as the green light from the Sertorius slithered across the room and wriggled awkwardly into Chase’s slack mouth. “There goes your salary for this
month.” He mumbled. Chase began to regain his consciousness though his brain was left in the
dust.

“Whas going on?” Chase belched as he staggered to his feet, trying to get his bearings. “I
feel terrible.”

“If it weren’t for me you’d be feeling a lot worse tomorrow.” Conner stated sternly.

Chase’s eyes opened as wide as a crocodile’s mouth and he saluted quickly. “I’m sorry
sir, I can explain.”

“I’ve already extracted 3,000 credits from your salary,” said Conner, sitting down. “That
should leave you with… oops that was your salary.” A faint smile curled his lips for the first
time that evening.

Chase didn’t smile so Ray kept quiet. Conner straightened his face and gestured for Ray
and Chase to take a seat, which proved difficult seeing as the office only had two chairs one of
which already held a fatigued Conner. Ray let Chase sit down. It looked as if he was going to sit
down, chair or not anyway.

The two young man presented Conner with questioning faces. Ray felt he had a leg up on
Chase seeing as he had overheard a tidbit of Conner’s exhausting conversation, but than again,
eavesdropping aside, Chase was far more informed of the events in the surrounding world; Ray
was just along for the ride.

“As you may be aware, you two and Sergeant Oho are the highest ranking officers at this
base, besides myself. Seeing as Oho will most likely run the base in my absence, you two will be
my assistants at a conference that the Emperor has called, to be hosted in Munich in three days.”
Conner drew a deep breath into his weathered lungs.

Chase perked up. “So you want us to be your representatives?”
“That is what I said.” Conner replied coolly. Chase grinned, some of the color returned to his face. Ray frowned, he was still in the dark.

“But I thought that representative positions were only given to soldiers ranked Captain or higher.” Chase raised his brow inquisitively.

“Usually that is the case,” Conner straightened his epaulettes. “But surely you both must agree that attending an empirical conference would look good on any upstart, young soldier’s résumé. Would it not?”

Chase appeared content with this logic and he gently massaged his temples with his fingertips. Ray was not satisfied.

“Pardon me sir,” He chirped nervously. “But don’t you have many higher ranked subordinates, being a General and all?”

Conner’s features showed a blink of disdain.

“Yes Ray I do…but… but most of my officers were transferred to Turkey under General Hoffenen, they’ve been there for several months now.” Ray scrunched his face in puzzlement, Conner sighed. “Ray, that was what the false bulletin was talking about. I’m afraid it’s a little hard to explain but I’ll give you the gist: a small Turkish Resistance force has been causing trouble for several years now, but we are not allowed to counterattack, due to a non-violence treaty we signed. So our troops are simply trying to make sure that none of the attacks break the Turkish barrier.”

Ray had a question but Chase vocalized it first. “But don’t their attacks violate the treaty?”
“Yes they do, Lieutenant Jigger, but we cannot prove that the attacks have a direct link to the Resistance. They’ve been operating as a small, civilian army, yet their numbers and resources say otherwise.”

“Oh.” Chase said, without a follow-up question.

“Anyway,” Conner shifted topic. “That is one of the many debates we will tackle at the conference. So are you boys up to the task?”

Without much thought on the matter, they both nodded.

“Very well then,” Conner’s shoulders relaxed and he leaned back in his chair. “I expect you both to ready to depart at 9:00 tomorrow,” he glanced down at his watch. “Or today, I suppose. Ray, I have a dress uniform for you and Chase, please no more alcohol tonight.”
CHAPTER 24

The following morning was a disaster. Ray and Chase both overslept and they only had an hour to throw everything together. Chase scrambled around their quarters frantically, pulling on a sock and straightening his epaulettes at the same time (which as you can imagine was very awkward). Ray was no better, he didn’t even know how to straighten an epaulette, and the military attire truly was the most uncomfortable thing he had ever wriggled into. “It’s like a puzzle,” he thought, “which shirt goes under which? Which badge went where? And how the heck did my arm end up where my head should have?” After much hopping and comical antics, both of the Lieutenants were sharp and ready to depart.

Ray and Chase scurried into the mess hall with a delusion that they would be able to grab a quick bite to eat. Rufus and Lyle, who were already sitting inquired as to why the pair was in such a hurry. The Lieutenants however, noticing the time, left when their trays hit the table leaving Rufus and Lyle in a dazed state of questioning.

Chase and Ray met up with Conner in front of the subway terminal at 8:59, gasping for air.

“Busy morning, boys?” the Conner smirked. His hair was neatly combed and he smelled of cologne. He appeared to be back to his old self and Ray was thankful for that.

“Yes it was, sir.” Chase wheezed, returning the old man’s smile. Conner gestured to the terminal and the trio departed.
The trip on Subway 286 was nauseating, as usual (Chase looked even sicker than he had the night previous). Ray was glad when they came to their first stop that he hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast.

At the first stop, the door opened and a man stepped onto the subway.

He was a hulking man with extremely broad shoulders. Upon this shoulders rested a rather angry-looking head where two, huge, bushy eyebrows clung to a shelf of a brow. The man’s long, graying hair was tied in a pony tail that stretched to his torso. His muscles seemed to be trying their hardest to rip out of the black and red uniform that he was wearing. Ray noticed a familiar medal on his chest.

“That’s one of the Generals,” Ray whispered to a queasy-looking Chase. “I recognize him from my first meeting.” Chase’s expression dripped with sarcasm.

“Duh, that’s General Khavin. He heads the infantry division, and,” Chase paused and jabbed Ray’s ribs playfully with his elbow. “Who’s that?” Ray noticed what Chase had almost instantly. A woman had just stepped onto the Subway following General Khavin. She was stunning. Her blond hair was in a neat ponytail and it shimmered in the light from the subway. Her face was young and her eyes were closed as she took a seat next to Khavin and a rather stressed-looking man who had bolted in the door, seconds earlier.

But Chase and Ray were too busy to give the man a second thought. Conner caught a glimpse of the girl and then looked back at his two Lieutenants.

“General Khavin isn’t that breathtaking, boys,” he said, his beady eyes shimmering and squinting as his smile pushed his cheeks up into them. “But you weren’t looking at him now were you?” Chase and Ray were red-face, for once they wished Conner would quiet down.
“Dobroe utro, Efim.” Conner said cheerfully. General Khavin roared, it was the deepest laugh Ray had ever heard.

“And fine morning to you, Frank.” Khavin replied in thick accent. “I needed good laugh; conferences are very dull, yes? And aggravating, but of course you know of this.”

“Quite true,” Conner responded. “I believe my Lieutenants would like me to introduce them to Colonel Harper, but I think I’ll start with you.” The lady coughed, and Khavin let loose another bellowing laugh.

“Colonel Harper is better soldier, now than you could be in life time. She could fight circles around you.” The lady laughed, and the Lieutenants’ red cheeks turned a violent scarlet.

“My name is Efim, Efim Efimovich Khavin. I’d offer shake, but it looks like we depart.” Sure enough the subway rumbled and soon they were off again.

The rest of the ride was fairly uneventful. The other Generals had traveled to Munich the night before so the rest of the passengers were just the normal crowd. When they arrived at Munich station, Ray was thanking God for letting him step off of the Subway alive. Chase was trying to get the attention of Colonel Harper. She ignored him, much to his dismay.

“She wants me bad.” Chase said smugly after Colonel Harper had followed Kieran off of the train.

“She wants you to stop bothering her.” Conner laughed. Chase frowned and followed the beaming General off of the Subway.

Munich station was far more crowded than usual. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers were bustling out of the terminals and cramming onto the elevators to lead them to the palace.
“It’s an open conference,” Conner said, picking up on Ray’s bewilderment. “That means that all of the soldiers in the military are invited to attend. Of course the Emperor alone chooses who can speak.”

Ray nodded and followed Conner through the tight crowd. One of the soldiers, a familiar, Asian man, bumped into their guide.

“Hey watch it,” The man snapped, he turned around, and realizing his error, quickly saluted. “General Conner, sir I’m so sorry. It’s just been a tough day sir.” Conner raised a brow. The man formed a stiff carriage. “Colonel Ata, sir, Third Army, I apologize for my rudeness.” Conner smiled and patted the man on his shoulder.

“At ease, any subordinate of Timothy’s is a friend of mine.” The man lowered his arm and offered to escort Conner to an elevator. Ray hid his head in his hands as the man scanned Conner’s entourage. After Conner politely declined the escort, the man saluted and disappeared into the crowd, his face and voice melding with the thousands. Conner stopped in amidst the traffic and spoke to his followers.

“Come boys I’ll take you to the representative quarters.” Chase and Ray shadowed Conner up an elevator, and through the packed hallways of Munich palace until they stopped in front of a door marked:

GUEST ROOMS

Fourth Army

The hallway in which they now stood was empty, but you could still hear the clambering of soldiers as they scampered to and fro in the adjacent halls.

“Don’t get too comfortable boys,” warned Conner as he opened the door. “There’s going to be a welcome dinner at 6:00. Keep your dress uniforms on.” He then leaned very close so that Ray could feel his warm, vinegary breath grazing his neck, and whispered. “This dinner is
designed to throw you off guard. The Emperor is trying to win over your votes with expensive hordevers, don’t let him influence you, you’re both smarter than that.” He slapped them both on the back and wobbled down the hallway, humming a merry tune that may have been “Camp Town Races”.

The morning had finally slowed down. Chase deemed that a nap was in order and even though Ray had no intention of sleeping he agreed to a break in the excitement. The room had wide walls and a tall ceiling; needless to say it was a welcome sight to the cabin-dwelling Lieutenants. It had the same theme as the Emperor’s chamber, ebony and crimson, but it was far less elegant and flashy. Two expensive, four-poster beds were placed carefully in the middle of the room, Chase jumped in the first and was asleep atop the silky, red comforter in a matter of minutes. Ray sprawled out quietly onto the second bed and lay gazing up into the black canopy that was draped above. The canopy was like a night without stars, pitch black and seeming to stretch on forever into the cosmos. Ray’s thoughts whizzed around his head like comets until a subconscious idea caused his body to stir. She was in this same palace. Only rooms away.

Chase’s breath had become slow and steady, Ray sprang to life like a marionette whose master had grasped hold of his strings; and without making a sound he slid out of the room.

The hallway was much brighter than the room and it took Ray’s eyes a few moments to fully adjust. After his eyes were accustomed to the glowing hall he made his way back to the sound of soldiers. He merged into the pack of men and women and wound his way down the hallway looking through the cracks in the throng for familiar patches of hall.

Ray caught a glimmer of a large wooden door and separated from the crowd. He broke into a jog down the snakelike, inner halls trying to discern Nova’s door from a dozen others.
Ray turned a corner and rammed straight into an oncoming Hoffenen who was walking briskly in the opposite direction. They staggered backwards awkwardly for a second and studied each other furiously.

“I really am tired of running into you like this, Tract.” He said trying to hold back his anger as he straightened his disheveled epaulette. Ray guessed Hoffenen’s restraint had something to do with his new status in the army. Ray was an officer now, and any amount of violence towards him probably would not sit well with the other Generals.

“What are you doing here, Tract?” He asked in an obviously fabricated calm his fists clenching menacingly at his side.

“I’m visiting a friend,” he said nervously.

“The girl.” Hoffenen spoke to himself.

“Yes sir.” Ray responded hastily. Hoffenen looked annoyed that Ray had interfered with his thoughts.

“I hear tell that you are attending the conference,” Hoffenen mused with a crooked smile.

“Is this true?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then you should be resting for dinner, not visiting Nova, at this hour.” It was still in the afternoon but Ray was in no place to argue.

“Yes sir.”

Ray hastily saluted Hoffenen, hating him as he did. He found his way back to the guest room and opened the door quietly. Chase was still resting and Ray could hear him mumbling into his pillow.

Ray sat in a corner of the room and looked up at the blood red ceiling.
“Stupid Hoffenen,“ he thought to himself. “How come he always gets in my way no matter what? Seriously, what were the chances that he would be back near Nova’s room at the exact time that I was going to visit? What was he doing back there? Wait, I never remember the Emperor mentioning Nova at my meeting, how did he know her name?”

Ray stewed in his own thoughts; it prevented him from going to sleep even if just for a nap. He decided he would mention the incident to Conner at the dinner fully aware he would face a lecture for leaving the room. He didn’t wish to test the old General’s kindness, but he had to mention it to him. Conner always had all the answers before, why would now be any different?

Ray rubbed his eyes and peered at the blurry numbers of the digital wall clock; dinner was in hours away, but Ray, being unable to rest decided to go to the bathroom to clean up.

This bathroom was the nicest one Ray had been in for some time. Everything was so clean, shiny, and, of course, red. Ray stepped over towards the vanity and looked into the mirror. It had been a long time since Ray had seen himself in a reflection. At first he didn’t believe that it was him. His hair was shorter than it had ever been in his life, his long locks looked more like cracked pepper on his scalp now. Ray took off his shirt and started flexing his muscles to the mirror. He had changed so much.

“Move aside Hercules there’s a new hunk on the block.” Ray said to himself in the deepest voice he could muster. He continued to flex for the mirror. After about five minutes his pride was satisfied and he decided to wash up and shave.

Conner came to pick them up at 5:45. He assisted them with their preparation. Chase was particularly worried about how he looked; he primped his reflection in the mirror until Conner dragged him away. Although Ray was enamored by his own reflection he was gladder to have made it back into his suit. It was like trying to put Ken clothes on G.I. Joe.
After they were presentable, Conner whisked them through the halls. Ray could hear a muffled band playing rich, classical music as they neared the hall where Ray had first met the Emperor on that fateful day.

The room had gone through an amazing transformation. The walls were draped with elegant banners, all of which had embroidered on them the insignia of the NGE. A long table was placed in the center of the room and was set beautifully with sparkling, ebony china. The light from a large, crystal chandelier twinkled off of the glass goblets that were part of each setting.

Elegantly carved, wooden chairs were placed at each setting. Ray noticed that at the head of the table was a place setting without a chair, presumably for the Emperor’s hovering wheelchair. The three remaining Generals and their representatives had taken seats at the long table. Khavin was sitting and chatting lightly with Colonel Harper, his other representative still looking sheepish. Hoffenen sat in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes closed. He wasn’t talking to anyone. One of the Generals looked nervously at Conner and upon being noticed quickly struck up a conversation with Colonel Ata who had been staring vacantly at Colonel Harper.

With a hop in his step Conner wobbled over and shook hands with the other Generals, Hoffenen, though reluctant, shook back. The Colonels saluted Conner lazily and went back to their conversations.

Ray and Chase took a seat on either side of Conner and sat in quiet while Conner chatted calmly with the General across the table, a short man with curly red hair and a plump, red face. This General’s antsy attitude diminished when politics did not enter their conversation.
Ray’s eyes wandered the room, scanning for something that he could latch his gaze onto until something interesting happened. Instinctually he found himself shooting glances at Colonel Harper, she was breathtaking, almost impossible to ignore. Chase, on the other hand was eavesdropping on her conversation with Khavin, hoping to find a spot where he could break the ice with a witty interjection.

It was almost comical; watching Chase beg for attention. Ray smiled at his predicament. As Khavin turned to his other representative who was shaking profusely Harper slowly examined the room and by some divine coincidence her stare met Ray’s. Ray was still smiling, and when Colonel Harper’s sparkling blue eyes met his, he swore she smiled back.

The moment, however awkward it was, was a short one. For no sooner had their eyes met the piercing sound of a trumpet echoed through the chamber. Everyone in the room rose to their feet and saluted Ray.

He began to turn red. What were they staring at him for? Why had they all saluted him? Just then Ray felt a light hand rest on his shoulder. He turned around and saw his distorted reflection staring at him.

“Good evening, Lieutenant.” The Emperor said in his cold tone. Ray stood up briskly, thrusting the Emperor’s hand from his shoulder, and he saluted. Behind him he heard Khavin whispering to his nervous representative.

“All of you may sit.” The Emperor ordered giving Ray a purposeful nod and a smile. The sound of wooden chairs screeching off of the ground, echoed. Ray sat down as well.

“Welcome, my loyal subjects,” The Emperor began. “Tonight we will not speak of politics. Tonight we will eat and be merry, for tomorrow though we will argue as if we were enemies!”

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The Emperor hovered to his place and pressed a button on his chair’s arm. Servants brought in platefuls of mouth-watering food, all steaming, fresh from the oven. Ray had his eye on a rather impressive looking turkey that was cooked to a golden brown and sprinkled with colorful spices.

Though silence persisted through much of the dinner the food was excellent. All of the meats were tender and moist, and the vegetables (though not Ray’s favorite) were crisp and fresh.

During the middle of the dinner, Chase had started a rather awkward conversation with Colonel Harper about the dangers of alcohol. It was more of a debate, Harper of course telling Chase that alcohol was stupid, and Chase trying to explain some of its good traits without appearing foolish.

Halfway through the dinner, Khavin’s shaky representative had left to use the restroom. Soon after, Hoffenen spilled something on his uniform and had to use the restroom as well. Ray sneered; it was funny to see someone who thinks himself so superior spill wine on his expensive uniform. Conner seemed to gain an equal kick out of it.

The conversation between Chase and Harper ended when Colonel Ata chimed in on Harper’s side. Chase gave him a look of contempt and started talking to Ray about how he despised snobby people. Hoffenen came back along with Khavin’s representative who looked as nervous, if not more than he was before. Ray knew from experience that Hoffenen wasn’t exactly the most soothing of people to be around when you are nervous. When they both had their seats the Emperor raised his hand and the room grew quiet again.

“Thank you all for coming tonight it means a lot to me.” He started in his calm, hospitable tone. “I will see you again for the conference, again thank you for coming.”
turned to hover from the table, the nervous representative stood up abruptly, knocking his chair over with a loud crack. Hoffenen jumped to his feet as well. The rest of the room sat in quiet shock.

“Stop this.” Hoffenen uttered, firmly without shouting, his eyes the fiercest Ray’s had ever seen. The man ignored him and faced the head of the table sweating like mad. Shaking, the man drew his gun from the holster and pointed it at the Emperor. More weapons could be heard being removed from their respective pockets including the Brutus which was pointed almost instantly at the representative’s head.

“GO TO HELL, YOU FOUL BASTARD!” The representative screamed madly. “LONG LIVE THE RESI…” But he said no more. When the man had begun to squeeze the trigger, Hoffenen had shot first. The man was dead before he hit the ground. The single, red beam that Hoffenen had shot pierced the man’s left temple and after traveling through his skull emerged again from the right. No one saw it happen, the man died instantly.

Silence enveloped the room. Guards outside who had heard the commotion burst through the doors and formed a circle around the Emperor, guns out, unaware that the man responsible already lie dead. Conner pocketed the Sertorius which Ray hadn’t even seen him draw. Everyone else sat mouth agape searching for something to say. Nothing was found. The guards began to push the Emperor to safety when he broke the silence of death in the air.

“Stop guards,” the Emperor ordered, the guards froze immediately like dogs obeying their master. The Emperor knew what he had to say but was still too shocked to voice the words. Hoffenen as if sensing the Emperor’s struggle took control.
“I knew that man wasn’t sound…” Hoffenen said his voice void of emotion. The rest of
the room looked at him with confused faces. “When the public hears of this, they will want
action, which may be advantageous. For now though…”

Was this the extent of Hoffenen’s remorse? He had saved a man’s life, but he had killed
another. Whose life was more valuable? A life is a life, yet one was ended without remorse.
Ray’s thoughts were swimming.

“Get some sleep,” Hoffenen said, his voice had returned to its former; still cold, but not
emotionless. His icy stare rested on General Khavin who was craning his neck to look behind his
chair at the body of his companion. “We could all use some sleep.”

Conner rose and touched Ray and Chase on the shoulders but it was not needed they were
already eager to leave the hall and the smell of fresh death.

As Ray quietly walked to the doorway he glanced over at the floor. The corpse was
laying there; cold, pale, motionless eyes dull yet still open. It was staring at Ray, resting in a
puddle of its own blood.
CHAPTER 25

Ray tossed and turned in his four-poster bed. Painful thoughts infested his mind and chewed away at his sanity. Several times his fatigue would force him to drift into sleep, but whenever this happened images of a decaying, human corpse would jerk him back into consciousness. Ray loathed this state of broken sleep but feared more the concept of staying awake. For there was something else; a thought that was far more terrifying and real than the phantasmagoric rotting of the corpse. This thought haunted Ray when his eyes were open, a state previously where he thought himself less vulnerable.

Hoffenen. The name and the feeling of anguish that followed was what haunted Ray the most. His actions were boggling and Ray, try as he might, couldn’t conceive why he acted as he did. Was he covering a feeling of remorse deep inside? Or was there nothing there at all? Ray was affiliated with Hoffenen. They shared a bond as soldiers fighting under the same flag. Was he going to turn out like that? Someday would he be able to find words of good news after a murder that he so willingly committed. Something had transformed Hoffenen; turned his body of flesh and soul into hatred and vacancy. Ray could only pray the army hadn’t been the culprit. He wanted to be strong and proud, but not heartless.

Chase walked out from the bathroom he had occupied for nearly two hours after the dinner. He gave Ray look of care intermingled with confusion.

“He tried to kill your Great Grandpa, why are you crying?”
Ray wanted to respond that he wasn’t crying but after feeling his damp cheeks he decided that he would sound foolish.

“I didn’t want anyone to die, that’s all,” he said, viciously rubbing the tears from his cheeks with his sleeve.

“No one wanted anyone to die, but death happens, we’re human. It would have happened sooner or later anyway; I mean how long could a Resistance spy be in our military without being discovered? Just think Ray, if they would have discovered his secret before he died. He may have been tortured or something.”

Ray was shocked “Tortured?”

“Yeah,” Chase looked confused. “He’s just one guy, our overall safety is way more important.”

“But what if that person was you?” General Conner emerged from the shadows of the entryway staring, unblinking, at Chase.

“Hello, General Conner, sir,” Chase sputtered. “We didn’t hear you come in.”

Ray looked up at Conner who had taken a seat next to him on the bed.

“What happened tonight was terrible, but we must move on.” Conner said wrapping his arm around Ray. “Just think; if the Emperor succeeds in neutralizing the Treaty of 2197 you may participate in a war three times as brutal as tonight’s little show.”

War. What was Conner talking about?

“So the Emperor is trying to rebuke the treaty? Are you sure?” Chase butted in.

“I have my beliefs.” The way he said it told Ray and Chase that they need not ask any follow-up questions. The room grew very quite; even the wind that usually whistled through the cracks in the window had yielded to the silence.
“Ray,” Conner said after the light had passed. “The Emperor would like to have a word with you.” Ray’s mind flashed pictures of the Emperor flinching as the representative lifted up the gun, and the representative’s corpse after Hoffenen had shot him. Ray nodded and Chase showed him a look of sympathy.

“He is in his bed chamber,” Conner continued. “Would you like me to come with you?” Conner stared at Ray with a caring look, like a father wanting to help his son. Ray stared back for a long moment.

“I would rather go by myself.” Ray said with some difficulty. He truly wanted Conner to escort him, but he didn’t want to seem as if he was afraid of crazed assassins springing from the shadows.

“It is on the third floor. I’ll take you to the elevator and send you up.”

Conner didn’t speak a word to Ray as they navigated the halls, he didn’t even so much as look at him as he typed in his code on the elevator, and Ray could have sworn he heard his footsteps walking away almost before the elevator door fully shut.

The hallways were empty and dark on the third floor. Ray was hearing gunshots. Were they in his head, or was someone else dying as he walked? The noises grew louder:

“My mind must be pulling tricks on me.” Ray thought out loud. He quickened his pace; he turned corners with cautiously and scanned his surroundings constantly. His head spun about on his shoulders like and owl’s. Ray was running now, following the lone and winding path, praying the Emperor’s chamber was close. Almost there, it couldn’t be much more than a turn away...

A flash of red light, an excruciating pain in his leg and Ray fell down to the ground, the air leaving his lungs as his body slammed to the cold, marble floor. His skin was hot on the verge
of producing sweat. Ray looked up to see the identity of his attacker. All he could see was the
dark outline of a man, blending in with the shadow that surrounded him. The man stepped
forward into the light of the moon shining from a nearby window. He was followed by at least a
dozen guards.

“Terribly sorry, Lieutenant.” Hoffenen said in a sarcastic voice. “Security’s gotten much
tighter since tonight’s little…incident, so to speak.” Ray clambered to his feet, Hoffenen gave
him no aide. Ray looked down and noticed that he had a bloody gash across the side of his leg.
Ray loathed Hoffenen more than any person he had ever met. It wasn’t hard for Ray to see why
he was given a weapon named the Brutus; it really fit his character, so brutal and cold.

“The Emperor summoned you I believe.” Hoffenen said looking at the ceiling as he
spoke. “I’m sure that you don’t want to keep him waiting.” Hoffenen made a slight nod and
motioned to the Emperor’s door. Ray hobbled towards the door, his fury was bottled inside of
him just dying to break free. Hoffenen pointed the Brutus at Ray’s leg as he limped by, Ray felt
the flesh on his leg knitting together, but it wasn’t the same warm tingle he had felt from the
Sertorius. It felt as if the Brutus was forcing his leg to mend. All of Ray’s tendons were aching as
he pushed through the Emperor’s door.

“Good luck, Tract.” Ray could hear Hoffenen deride as the Emperor’s large wooden door
closed with a thud.

The moon was shining brightly and casting a contorted shadow across the room like that
of a barely lit nightlight. The Emperor had a small tea table set up in the middle of the room with
a long candle lit in the center. Ray walked slowly towards the table.

“Come have a seat Ray, we have much to discuss.” Ray found himself obeying like a
dog. He walked over and reluctantly took a seat across from the Emperor.
His older self was feeble and pale, his skin wrinkled, and deformed, but the thing that disturbed Ray the most was the fact that he still spoke with the vigor of man at his prime.

“I apologize for any injury you may have sustained from Hoffenen. I believe that it was a necessary precaution.”

Ray shifted nervously in his seat, his leg still stung like he had a charlie-horse in it. The Emperor frowned and continued. “Time is a delicate thing Ray, the time to speak, the time to be silent; such things are difficult for any human to comprehend. When you think about it, everything around us revolves around time. With time comes death, and age. With time comes wisdom and intelligence. With time comes perfection. That is what I’m creating here, Ray. Perfection.” Ray looked around nervously as if expecting Conner by his side to nod in approval or shake his head with disgust but no one was there. Ray was alone with the Emperor’s words and vulnerable to their bite.

“You see I have been on this Earth for some time and I know how people work. They grow up with society’s voice in their ear telling them that they have to stay in school, that they have to make money, that they have to contribute to society, society, society. What the hell is society?” The Emperor watched the flickering of the candle’s flame. “Last time I checked society wasn’t the one man in control, society was and still is all of us. But we don’t listen to everyone do we? No. We listen to the one in charge. The man in control, we contribute to him, not to society.” The Emperor paused, he removed a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his brow. He took a sip of tea and returned his gaze to his younger self who was struggling to decipher his words.

“Think of the world as a racing canoe and imagine all of the people are the rowers.” The Emperor continued. “Again time becomes a factor, it is our opponent on this race. If time beats
us to the finish line we lose. The whole world will die. So in order to beat time we must stop destroying our world. All that accomplishes is breaking our oars. If we don’t stop this reckless destruction of our planet, time will be our downfall. Do you know how a canoe works Ray?” Ray nodded sheepishly. “With a canoe you must have all of the rowers paddling together or else the vessel will move nowhere, and how do these people know when to strike the water? They are told by a coxswain. But what happens if the coxswain is too busy trying to be a rower? The canoe will spin in circles and kick helplessly at the water like a drowning child. Even worse, what if the coxswain wants to turn the boat into another stream to indulge his own hopes? Time again is our lord and master.” Light from the candle flickered off of the Emperor’s glimmering eyes.

“Ray, my boy.” The Emperor dug into Ray. “So in order to move forward I have become the creature that I loathe more than any other. I must become the coxswain. But it is imperative that you understand, Ray, that I wear this crown not to satisfy my greed but to command a greater good. If I take control now I can set precedence for the world’s future. We can have a safe world, a clean world, an eternal world, so perfect that God himself will turn green with envy.” The Emperor coughed and wheezed and once again dabbed the sweat from his brow. Ray jerked as if to help the old man, but hesitated. The Emperor’s eyes were watery and bloodshot from the cough.

“But it will not be that simple. To control a world of people who think that they are always right is a difficult task even for a man with such power as I. It will take both of us, Ray. And after all of the fighting and violence has passed, we will leave our seat of power and become equal members of a peaceful society. This will be a true society, one for all of God’s people. After we step down, days of hatred such as this day will cease to be.”
The Emperor stopped and breathed very heavily through his nostrils. Ray didn’t understand. *Was this decrepit, bony, shell of a human a true bearer of peace? Or was he like Hitler, a man with perfection’s definition so horribly maimed in his own mind? Was it really necessary to “reset” the earth? Wasn’t life palpable the way it was?*

“Well Raymond it’s getting late, I wouldn’t want you to be tired for tomorrow’s conference.” Ray stood up; the Emperor snapped his fingers and Hoffenen came in the room.

“Yes, Exalted One.” Hoffenen said in his typical annoyed tone.

The Emperor coughed. “Could you please escort the Lieutenant back to his quarters? I would do it myself but I have very important business to attend to.” The Emperor added a faint smirk at the end of his sentence, revealing his many missing teeth. Hoffenen made his hand into a fist and bit his lip. Hoffenen than turned to Ray. “Come Lieutenant, we wouldn’t want you to miss any of your precious sleep.”

Hoffenen stormed through the winding halls, Ray racing to keep up with his elephantine strides. Hoffenen stopped abruptly at the hallway where Ray’s room was and shooed him down it with an unfriendly push.

Ray shot him a look of intense hatred. Hoffenen stayed put, his aggravating smirk begging for Ray’s retaliation. Ray would not give him that satisfaction, not tonight, he stormed down the hall ignoring Hoffenen’s cocky snort in his wake.

Ray ripped open the door to his room and cut across the dark space, past the shadowy shape of the four-poster in which Chase was fast asleep, past the coffee table which had seemed so brilliant during the day when the light had danced on its ebony marble, all the way to the glass door leading out to the balcony.
A hard rain beat on the glass but Ray didn’t care. He thrust open the smooth-sliding glass and marched out into the pounding rain.

The wind ran its fingers across his hair and flung its cold water droplets on his cheek and brow but it didn’t faze him. His mind was elsewhere, detached from the surrounding night. On the ground below, far, below Ray could make out the silhouettes of tiny, lit shops and dim streetlamps.

The sliding glass door behind Ray slid open, the sound broke his trance. General Conner stood in the threshold, just out of reach of the unyielding rain and the night’s cruel air.

“It’s raining, you know,” Conner’s voice was all but drowned out by the downpour.

The night sky was crawling with raindrops; it looked as if the air was full of tiny, shimming beetles.

“There’s a world out there isn’t there?” Ray shouted over the rain.

Conner seemed confused.

“Last time I checked…”

“But there’s so much that I can’t see, how can I be sure that when I leave all of this will still be here?”

“I don’t follow.”

“I sometimes think this can’t be real,” Ray continued. “How can I be sure that what I can’t see exists” The General stepped onto the balcony and squinted into the oncoming air. Ray continued.

“I could have lived my whole life, and I never would have known all of this was here. All of these people, this entire world; how could something so huge have existed without me
knowing it? How can I be sure all of this is real?”

Conner paused for moment before speaking.

“The Emperor said something to you… look, I know it can be daunting. Growing up believing all that you see is all that there is; we all do. I remember when I was young and my mother told me about America; I wondered how such a place could exist. It was a fairytale land to me. Anything outside of our sphere of sight makes us uncomfortable. It makes us feel lost in a world we think we understand. A barrier is broken down and we feel like we’re going to lose our sanity. Do you know what I do when I feel helpless when all these answerless questions are looming over me?”

Ray shook his head.

“I remind myself of all that truly matters. Amidst all the confusion someone out there, as clueless as I am, loves me despite it all. You can’t let life’s questions separate you from others. With love comes happiness, and if you have that what else matters?”

Ray looked down at his hands which were slick with rain.

“Is Nova real?” Conner asked.

Ray turned to face him, his hair soaked and wet in front of his eyes.

“Am I real?” Conner put his heavy hand on Ray’s water-saturated jacket. “You’d better say yes.” He smiled. Ray smiled as well. “If I disappear when you look away then why do I bother showering every morning?”

Ray laughed lightly.

“Let’s try not to think about this anymore.” The old man said rubbing his temples. “It’s all far too philosophical for my taste. I’m happy the way things are. Questions be damned!”
Ray nodded, the rain was slowing down. The pitter patter of drops was replaced with vacancy, utter silence in the night. The storm’s fury was lessening.

No sooner than the pair had gotten out of the storm a vociferous noise pierced Ray’s ear. The ceiling flashed red as if it were the top of an ambulance. It was a siren. The door to their room burst open

“General Conner!” Hoffenen shouted sounding furious.

“What’s with all of the commotion, Jacob?”

“I have no idea, Francis!” He shouted. “I just finished escorting the boy back here when the warning siren went off.” Chase sprang from his bed, gun in hand and stopped to look at the group.

“What’s the hell’s going on?” he shouted over the siren’s continuous wail. Hoffenen took a breath to shout but before he could retort a voice rang from over the loud speaker.

“Attention all military personnel. Do not be alarmed. A prisoner has escaped from cellblock 13D. Please stay in your rooms and lock all doors. Our men will have him captured shortly. I repeat please stay in your rooms and lock all doors.”

Hoffenen’s eyes widened and he looked blankly up at the loud speaker as if hoping that it would take back what it had just said. Conner turned to his young colleagues.

“Jacob and I will assist the prison guards!” He pulled the Sertorius from his pocket.

“Lock the door and stay put! You hear me stay put! Try and get some sleep!” The Lieutenants saluted obediently and locked the door behind Conner, as he and Hoffenen burst into the hall. Ray sat on the corner of his bed, the deafening siren blared: it was constant, artificial and unfaltering.

“This sucks!” Chase shouted still brandishing his gun. “I’m gonna do something!”

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“Just try to sleep!” Ray shouted, falling on his back on his soft mattress realizing how foolish his suggestion must have sounded. “Just imagine what Conner would do to you if he found out you left! He’s stressed out enough!”

“I know, damn it!” Chase slammed his gun on his nightstand and put his pillow around his head. “I just wanna break that damn alarm!”
CHAPTER 26

Ray awoke the next morning with a pounding headache. It had taken him three hours to get to sleep with all of the commotion outside, and on top of all of that his mind was plagued with nightmares about Hoffenen and the Brutus.

Slowly he rose from his bed and stretched his arms. The bright morning sun was shining through the crimson curtains casting a dull red glow on the floor. The bathroom was occupied; Chase was probably practicing how he would greet Colonel Harper at the conference.

Ray wandered lazily to the window and pushed aside the fabric curtain. The window had a direct view of a grassy courtyard far below which shimmered like a star with the morning dew. Ray melted into a feeling of comfort as he looked out at the serene world directly in front of him. The bathroom door opened.

“Oh Ray you’re up, I’m done in there it’s all yours.” Chase said as he stepped out wearing a red towel around his waist. There were bags under his eyes. Ray pulled himself away from the calming outside world and meandered into the bathroom. The mirror challenged Ray to a flex-off which he readily accepted. He then took a long shower, the massaging beads of hot water felt so wonderful on his aching body.

After a good amount of time Ray drifted out of the bathroom, his damp hair combed back and a thick cloud of steam at his feet. General Conner was sitting on his bed in a red bathrobe. He was sipping a steaming cup of coffee in an NGE mug. He looked fatigued; it must have taken him all night to catch the escaped prisoner.
“My wife takes less time in the shower boy, what’re yeah trying to do, use up all of the water in the entire palace?” Ray had never seen Conner more irked, and about something so trivial. Conner forced himself to a standing position and waddled into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. Chase appeared at Ray’s side fully dressed and sharing the concern.

“You can’t blame the guy, Ray.” Chase said looking at the bathroom door. “He rolled in around 5:00 this morning, he was tired and pissed and the shower in his room was broke, and to top it all off the prisoner escaped last night and screwed up Khavin doing it.”

“Who was it!?” Ray asked as he started wriggling into his uncomfortable uniform.

“Top secret,” Chase replied walking over to the window. “Conner refused to talk about it.”

Ray was still struggling when Conner emerged from the bathroom, a strong scent of cologne lingered about him. At around eight, the three men were ready to leave the room. Ray noticed that Conner checked his pocket several times to ensure that the Sertorius was still there.

The hallways were bustling with anxious soldiers and men and women with video cameras. Ray found it difficult to keep sight of Chase and Conner as they navigated the thick crowd. Finally they made their way to the grand hall where Ray had first met the Emperor and council, and where he had witnessed Hoffenen’s killing of a would-be assassin the night before. A soldier saluted them and then opened the door so as they could enter.

The grand hall looked had undergone a transformation again. A thick table shaped like a donut sat where the dinner table had been two nights ago. Light from the chandelier shimmered off of its mahogany finish. Chairs were set around the table in groups of three (and one group of two), and they each had a small glass of water and a wooden block that bore their name.
Ray sat down next to Conner, surprisingly they were the first ones to arrive. This didn’t last long though, for a mere two minutes later, General Polky entered the room accompanied by Colonel Ata and another man whom Ray recognized from the dinner. Hoffenen arrived next accompanied by his representatives. Last but not least General Khavin entered the room.

He had on a black mask covering half of his face. It reminded Ray at first of the Phantom of the Opera, but he refrained from commenting on this uncanny resemblance. Khavin’s entrance had caused the whole table to erupt in whispered conversations; everyone except for the three remaining Generals was pondering the cause of Khavin’s masked appearance. But as intriguing as this was, Ray and Chase gradually shifted their gaze to Colonel Harper who had assisted Khavin sitting down at the table.

The Emperor arrived, on time, escorted by the usual royal precession, and what looked to be a small army of guards. Several reporters swarmed around the table, the cameras they were using were smaller than any Ray had ever seen, yet their flashes were so bright they were hurting his eyes. The Emperor patiently withstood the barrage of lights for a short while and then raised his hand to signal silence. The room quieted down. The reporters left silently.

“Due to security reasons the media will not be joining us today.” The Emperor waved for his guards to follow the reporters out of the door. “We have numerous articles to tackle so we best begin as soon as possible.” Hoffenen cracked his knuckles loudly. The Emperor looked out at the room as if expecting some feedback from a question not asked. The Emperor perched a pair of slim bifocals on his nose and looked at the piece of paper on the table in front of him.

“I do believe the first subject is our agricultural development in Russia. General Polky brought this subject to my attention. Well then Timothy, what is it that you wish to discuss?”
General Polky straightened his epaulettes and cleared his throat. “As you all know we have been spending the past few months strengthening our military. Though that is a necessity, we cannot forget our empire’s economy.” Khavin turned and whispered something to Harper. Polky continued. “As of now we have over 500 factories fully devoted to Mecha Armor production. If we were to remove 120 of these factories and replace them with farming lands our agricultural output will be increased 67%.” General Polky paused and twiddled his thumbs nervously. Conner gave him a scrutinizing stare; Hoffenen addressed one of the far pillars with a monotonous drawl.

“General Polky, you will have my vote if you remove a mere 30 more of those factories.”

Khavin’s voice echoed from behind his crescent mask. “We have not won the war Jacob. Those mecha armors are going to be of need to us.” Hoffenen closed his eyes and smirked.

“True, Mecha armors are quite useful in war, but you forget that without food humans are useless, and without human pilots, mecha armors are useless. Also, if we are going to continue to supply food to the Turkish neutrals who are aiding our efforts, we need more products to spread around. I fully support General Polky’s decision.”

The room grew quiet. Conner flipped through a folder he had brought.

“How many men are aiding you from the Turkish police?” Conner asked Hoffenen, still flipping through his papers.

“One hundred and twenty-seven men,” Hoffenen scowled. “And growing.”

Polky raised his hand, Hoffenen raised his hand as well, and after a few minutes Conner followed, the Emperor and Khavin seemed disappointed, but posed no further argument.

Ray whispered a question to Conner. “Sir, what’s a Mecha Armor?”
“It’s a terrible machine that I hope you’ll never have to see or use.” Conner answered in a whisper without removing his eyes from the table. Ray left the subject at that.

The conference continued at this pace for several hours, occasionally Conner would ask for Ray’s advice, but most of the time the debates took place between two fiery Generals bent on getting their way (Hoffenen was nearly always one of them). Ray found his glass of water more interesting than most of the debates. At least his water was cool and clear, whereas the debates were heated and cloudy.

The Emperor took part in debates as well, but to Ray’s surprise he did not always get his way. He could just as easily have made the decisions by himself, closed off to any outside skepticism, but he opted to put them to a vote. It was almost admirable. Almost.

After a stretch of particularly dull debates, the Emperor, who looked as if he was about to collapse on the table, called for a brief recess. Conner and Chase stood up and raised their arms to the sky, groaning like disappointed children. Ray tried to join them, but it appeared that during the course of the conference he had forgotten how to move his legs. The Emperor hovered off to the depths of the palace, followed by his numerous guards who had come to his side at the press of a button. Khavin left as well leaving behind Conner, Hoffenen, Ray, and Chase. Hoffenen massaged his temple.

“So how’s our Emperor’s little *grandchild* enjoying his first all-day meeting?” Hoffenen had used his fingers to quote the word “grandchild” which irked Conner and confused Chase.

“It’s alright, Ray tried his best to look smug. “I’m just happy that I could be a part of this fascinating process.”
“You aren’t fooling anyone,” Conner said looking Ray straight in the eye. “We all find these Conferences extremely dull.” Hoffenen grinned, Chase seemed rather occupied with a button on his jacket.

“I for one am enjoying my voice in the government while I still have it.” Hoffenen said grinning all the more. Conner seemed offended.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Jacob?” He interrogated.

“Think about it, Conner. How long do you these meetings will last if a war breaks? How long before we’re just yes-men?” Conner’s mouth opened to speak but Hoffenen interrupted.

“Don’t get me wrong Conner, this Empire will benefit all mankind, we just have to keep it unified. Sharp. Five heads are better than one Conner, you know that.”

The room sat in silence until the representatives started returning from their brief breaks. The Emperor was the last to arrive, after he had hovered into place the meeting resumed.

The Emperor took a deep breath and examined the room with a steady gaze. He placed his hand on a red folder lying amidst the untidy jumble of papers right in front of him.

He looked out at the table waiting for a response, like a child waiting for his mother’s approval before proceeding with his task.

“The next point of discussion is the Resistance Treaty of 2197.” The Emperor stated authoritatively. The room quivered. No one gave a response. The Emperor looked out at the blank faces of his council.

To everyone’s surprise the silence was broken, not by the Emperor trying to encourage speech, nor by Hoffenen boldly stating his opinion; this time the silence was broken by a shrill General Poly. “Yes sir, I believe it should be revoked.” The room looked at Polky with disbelief.
“The Resistance Treaty is hurting not only our militia in Turkey, but our reputation as well,” Polky stammered. “People are opening their eyes and seeing the Resistance standing up to us and we aren’t fighting back.”


“Please let me finish, sir,” he insisted. Conner leaned back and crossed his arms. “As I was saying the Resistance Treaty is making the NGE look bad, not to mention that it’s completely against our belief system.”

“In what way?” Conner blurted out, sounding frustrated. Polky, uncharacteristically, maintained his calm.

“Part of what we promised to the people when we began our world conquest over 60 years ago was that the war wouldn’t last long. We promised a swift coming of peace that wouldn’t envelope the world in an eternal war. The Resistance was the only thing left standing in the way of recognizing that dream but instead of winning the war we tried to make peace with them. A treaty would be an excellent thing if we wanted to share the world with them, but according to his Excellency’s plan we need the world all to ourselves in order to make it perfect. So what are doing sharing it with those uncivilized… people!”

Polky was red. Conner was looking deep into the eyes of his friend like something was missing. Hoffenen was grinning.

“Timothy makes an excellent point, General Conner,” Hoffenen reveled in Conner’s frustration. “Why are we sharing the Earth with people who are going to ruin it for all of us?”

“Tim, what’s happened to you?” Conner spoke to Polky, paying Hoffenen’s comment no mind. “Just the other day we discussed the fact that our military was still recovering from our
conquering Israel. We agreed that we didn’t have the resources to resume war. What occurred that changed your thinking so drastically?”

Polky’s angry face disappeared and was replaced with a confused one. “I talked with Hoffenen and he said…”

“I talked with Timothy about the rebel forces building up in the United States,” Hoffenen interrupted. “Surely you remember last month’s intelligence report, General Conner. The Resistance has over three million troops at their disposal, how long before they decide to attack our UK outposts, hmm?”

Conner snorted. “Those reports were not official, they were given to us by a neutral party. We have no idea how reliable that information is!”

“Better safe than sorry, Conner.” Hoffenen said with astute confidence. The room grew quiet again. “Besides I already have the Emperor’s approval, isn’t that right Your Excellency?” Hoffenen said turning his head to face the Emperor.

Ray sensed a weakness in the Emperor that wasn’t present before. He seemed to be under intense pressure, sweat slid down his brown leaving a shimmering trail on his forehead.

“Yes, Conner I’m sorry the decision has already been made,” Conner’s eyes grew wide with astonishment.

“But sir….”

“I’m using Imperial Override Conner. I didn’t want to, but it is absolutely essential that I have your cooperation. I was hoping Polky would be able to persuade you, I am sorry, general.” Conner was broken; he hung his head and raised his hand to vote against his will. Ray would have spoken, but after seeing someone as strong as Conner brought down by a few choice words he dared not.
Hoffenen, seeing his enemy fall, went in for the kill. “Sir, if we annulled the treaty we would have to strike fast. The Resistance would not just sit back and let us mobilize our troops. I vote for a direct invasion of North America.” The representatives mumbled amongst themselves and the Emperor put his hand on his chin. The stack of neatly lined dominoes was tipped over. Conner was awestruck.

Khavin straightened up in his seat and spoke in his booming tone. “And the invasion would be lead by who? I cannot do it. The capitol is of need of protection by me.”

“I volunteer General Polky.” Hoffenen said firmly. “He is the exact type of persistent leader we’d need for such an invasion, and his troops are in limbo after Israel.”

Polky turned a bright scarlet and spoke very softly. “But sir I’ve never commanded troops during wartime before, I was promoted to General after General Fahren was killed by…” Khavin interrupted.

“By that monstrosity that you have allowed to escape last night! We should have destroyed it! I told you this!”

“Not now, we must stay on task Khavin!” The Emperor shouted over the table growing ever louder with conversation.

With some effort the Emperor lifted his hand from the table, the room quieted down. “I’m going to order a full scale invasion of North America, set to take place in a month. Conner and Polky will be leading our invasion forces. Khavin will keep a strong army of men in Germany to protect the capitol. And Hoffenen will take 3,000 additional troops down to Turkey to assist the Resistance barricade. I expect all of you to gather you armies and await further instruction. As for the rest of the topics left to debate I will vote on them myself and act according to my best judgment. I will contact you all again in a month. Good night gentlemen.”
With that statement the Emperor hovered from the room. All was silence, due to the meetings abrupt and shocking end.

Conner stood up, the legs of his chair squeaking on the ground. He stormed from the room slamming the large oak door as he left. The sound of the door closing echoed across the room. Chase and Ray saluted the other Generals and walked fast to catch up with Conner. They caught up to him just outside of their room after avoiding several nagging reporters. He was fiddling with the door handle and cursing under his breath. He ignored the Lieutenants as they took place standing next to him. Conner fiddled with the handle for a few more minutes and then let out a sigh and rested his head on the door.

“Where were you when your fates were on the line? Not once did you offer a comment let alone your support. I needed help out there and you failed me.” Ray’s chest burned with guilt.

Conner finally managed to open the door. “I wanted to save you boys from war, from having to watch your friends and brothers die! Well, boys, that’s the fate that you’ve chosen for yourselves. I won’t hold anything against you, war is punishment enough.” With that he closed the door. A chilly draft whisked through the hall.

“Just great!” Chase thrust his hands into his pockets. “I’m gettin’ a drink. Wanna come?”

“Naw,” Ray mumbled. “I’m not really in the mood.”

“Whatever…” Chase slunk off. Ray waited until he made it out of sight before he too left the hallway; surely Nova would be up and about.

Remarkably, Ray found his way to her room without getting lost or running into Hoffenen around a corner. He showed his military ID to the guard outside and was allowed entrance. He knocked three times on the oak before he heard stirring within.

“It’s locked, idiot. You locked it remember?”
Ray undid the bolt on the door and poked his head into the room.

“Idiot? Someone’s in a cranky mood.”

“Ray!” Nova shoved something under her bed, straightened her nightgown and ran over to hug him. “I’m just fed up with the guards, and…What’re you doing here?”

“I came for the conference. I got to sit in.”

“The conference? Jacob told me about that. He didn’t mention you…” Nova undid her ponytail and shook her dark, brown hair.

“I knew it!” Ray shouted. Nova looked taken aback. “He’s been visiting you hasn’t he?”

“Who, Jacob?” Nova moved forward and put her hands on Rays’ shoulders and looked up at him. “He’s really a nice guy, Ray. He just has a hard time showing it.”

“I can’t believe it!” Ray shrugged her off and walked over to the door. “You know all the hell that asshole’s put me through, and you mean to tell me that you two are friends?”

“This is why I didn’t tell you,” Nova crossed her arms. “I knew you wouldn’t understand. He’s different around me.”

“So he only hates you a little bit?” Ray made a pinching gesture with his fingers.

She ignored his sarcasm. “Don’t get all worked up about this now, Ray. We can talk about it later, I heard someone was killed yesterday. You didn’t see it did you?”

“Yeah, I saw it! Hoffenen blasted a hole in the guy’s head!”

“Jacob was really shaken up about that.” Nova retorted.

“Shaken up?” Ray slapped his head. “The man showed no emotion whatsoever!”

“He was just playing the part, Ray. He was really torn up about it. The man had been a friend of his back in their boot camp days.”
“This is just too much right now…” Ray rubbed his temples. “Just tell me how’ve you been since I talked to you.”

“Alright I guess,” Nova motioned for Ray to sit on the bed next to her and he reluctantly did. She leaned and put her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her. “Not much to do around here. The weather’s been rainy, but at least the Emperor in all his creepiness hasn’t stopped by in a while.”

“That’s good at least.” Ray tried to breathe easier.

“Yeah. The guy sounds like a retired death metal vocalist.”

“Hey!” Ray laughed. “That’s me you’re talking about there!”

“How could I have forgotten?” Nova pulled away from him and put her hand over her mouth like she had said something shocking. “You’re like twins!”

“You!” Ray poked her in the side and she squealed and ran to the other side of the room behind her bed, scooping up a pillow and holding it like a sword.

“Bring it on, army-man!”

Ray picked up a pillow and dove across the bed to catch her, she ran to the other corner of the room but not before giving him a cushioned blow to the head.

“Get back here, you little cheater!” Ray got back to his feet.

“Too slow!” she laughed.

Ray flew across the room and just caught the tail of her black and red-trimmed nightgown with a swipe of his pillow.

She ran over to the bed again. Ray quickly threw his pillow which hit her and made her lose her balance. Ray scurried over, hitting his knee on the coffee table as he raced, and pinned her to the comforter.
“Got cha!” He smirked. She giggled her chest heaving as she drew quick breaths. Ray let go and the second he did she grabbed his arms and flung him on the bed straddling him and pinning his hands down with hers.

“Got cha…” She leaned down and kissed him, her hair falling in his face, it smelled like flowers. Ray reached up and ran his fingers through her hair pulling out her ponytail. Her hair fell in front of her face; it was messy and wild and made all the wilder by the look in her eyes and the grin on her face. She kissed him again deeper and Ray ran his hand up her shirt grazing his fingers on her smooth back. Her breath was coming hard and fast on his neck, and she pushed her hips into his.

“You wanna do this?” She breathed. Ray felt his pulse quicken and his heart burn. He looked into her eyes, they were wider than they had ever been and for whatever reason Ray could see deeper into them than he ever had before.

“Yes,” he put his hand on her cheek. “If you’re ready?”

Nova bit her lip, looking lost in her thoughts, but unable to break her gaze into Ray’s eyes.

“I’m ready.”
CHAPTER 27

News of the war spread like wildfire. Although the treaty had not yet been annulled the enigmatic Resistance could sense the coming of conflict and sent several ambassadors to Munich to negotiate. All the while the NGE’s forces were multiplying and clustering on the islands of Japan, like ants to spilt juice.

The Emperor routinely held press conferences in which he claimed that the NGE was not planning any sort of invasion, and when asked about the impressive military force building up in Japan the Emperor would either downplay the build-up or feed them some easy-to-swallow story about military aide thus pacifying the reporters and with them the remainder of the population.

After several weeks the topic was almost transparent. As for the troops they continued to multiply; men who had already completed their first tours poured into the army’s reserve like sand into the bottom of an hourglass, sometimes receiving less than a month’s worth of re-training before being shipped to Japan.

Ray and Chase were among the first group of soldiers stationed in Japan. They were both placed under the command of Sergeant Oho, who had been given the rank of captain shortly after Conner and the Lieutenants had returned, somber from Munich.

About a week after Ray’s arrival the rest of the squad started showing up. Rufus and Lyle had been stationed with them which was a blessing in this sea of unfortunate happenings, and the group had also heard that Mal was going to be joining them in Japan as well, having recently gone through a transfer from Polky’s command to Conner’s.
By the end of the third week Ray’s squad was formed in its entirety: ten privates, a technician, a captain, and three lieutenants, the third being the gapped-toothed, and grumbling Mal.

Just three days before they would depart as the first wave of troops heading for America, Ray sat on the dock with Chase looking out at the crimson sun melting into the shimmering, crystal-clear ocean. Mal and the others had gone to a sushi bar to party on their last night in the Empire. The sound of splashing waves was rhythmic and peaceful. Ray closed his eyes and could hear the gulls squawk as they prepared to nest for the night. Chase threw a half-eaten sandwich into the ocean and the pair watched it slosh on the waves, being nibbled by the schools of shimmering gobies just off the shore.

Chase murmured just loud enough so that he could be heard over the rippling tide. “It’s really beautiful here.” Ray smiled and took in the scent of the ocean.

“I sure as hell hope we get to see it again,” Chase took a deep breath, his voice was shaky. “Both of us.”
CHAPTER 28

Munich was enveloped by an eerie silence. With all of the NGE’s troops amassed in Japan the streets were empty, the shops closed, and all the windows were dark.

Three or so years back, the Emperor had declared Munich to be a military city; which meant that even the shops were run by soldiers. Now at a time of war, all of the cooks were needed, all the store clerks were sent to the frontlines; even the waiters and waitresses were given rifles and knives to eradicate the Resistance.

The only place that remained alive was the palace; Munich’s utilitarian heart. General Khavin had taken it upon himself to keep the palace secure. He had moved in a garrison of 1,000 men, and he had them spread in groups of two all around the palace.

Night fell on Munich, and the palace lights hummed to life. The Emperor and Khavin were discussing plans alone in the Emperor’s study, the members of the staff were turning in, and the guards were changing shifts. It was another calm night. The air cool, but not harsh, carrying the sound of humming streetlamps in the otherwise empty night.

A man stood atop a skyscraper looking through binoculars at the palace below. He was dressed in black and had a mask of fabric over his face; all that could be seen were his dull eyes. When the grand palace clock rang midnight, the man jumped from the top of the skyscraper. He cut through the air with lightning speed, wind rippling through the folds of his black uniform. Just seconds before he would have struck the ground, he pulled a string on his side, and a glider sprang free from his backpack. The man floated
upon currents of air until he landed on the smooth marble roof of the palace. A guard on the ground had caught a glimpse of the phantom but thought it only to be a bat or a wind-swept cloud, nothing worth wasting thought on.

The shadowed man hastily removed his glider and hid it in the shadow of an air duct. He pulled a hook and rope from the harness around his waist and attached the hook to the side of the roof. He tugged on the rope a couple of times to ensure that he had a good knot before scaling the side of the building.

The moon shone bright in the night sky, reflecting its yellow glow off of the glass windows of the palace. The stars shimmered along with the moon to create a spectacularly beautiful light show. The beautiful night, however, did not phase the determination of the man as he slowly cut the glass of a fifth floor window with a laser from his pocket. The red beam from the laser pierced the thin sheet of glass, giving off a threadlike wisp of smoke which dissipated almost instantly.

After carving a wide enough hole, the man carefully pulled himself inside, making sure not to let the glass fall to the ground.

He was crouched in one of the guest bedrooms. The place was dark and unwelcoming. The beds were stripped of their sheets, and the white mattress clashed with the crimson pallet. The man snuck to the door and pried it open to peek outside.

The hallways were black as well, save small overhead lights which illuminated small sections of the ground. The man opened the door just wide enough so that his body could fit through; he then crept through the hallways, making sure to stay out of the light, lest he be seen by the microscopic security cameras he knew to be at every turn.
The few inches of visible skin around his eyes were glistening with the sweat of stress, and the fear of failure showed in his pupils. He scurried through the identical halls for what seemed like hours until he reached his destination.

Two guards stood lazily in front of the door; one looked to be asleep and the other was fiddling with a medal on his jacket. The man dressed in black removed a silenced pistol from a holster on his waist. He slowly peeked around the corner so that he had a clear shot at both men. He would shoot the one awake first, hopefully not waking the other, for if he did, he would have no choice but to kill them both. Just as the man took aim at the first guard, a voice boomed from the opposite end of the hall.

“How is to be the security at this end of complex?” Both guards had sprung to life at Khavin’s voice.

“All safe here, sir,” the first guard replied as his counterpart rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Nothing out of the ordinary tonight.”

“Good,” bellowed Khavin from behind his ebony mask. “I am checking on prisoners on orders of the Emperor before I retire to sleep,” the second guard, having finally found his voice responded.

“Right this way, General.” The guard turned to unlock the guarded door. The man dressed in black pulled back his gun and started breathing heavily.

“I go alone,” Khavin snapped, and he disappeared through the open door. The man in black crouched in the darkness. He remained motionless, his concentration devoted solely to his steady breaths; his kneecaps ached and burned. A half of an hour passed and finally, Khavin emerged.
“They know little. All the information we are to get has already been taken from them,’” Khavin said pocketing a black rod. “They will be to death tomorrow. They hold us no use anymore.”

The guards smiled maliciously and wished Khavin a good night. Khavin began to walk away. The horror was almost over.

Halfway down the hall, Khavin turned. He reached in his pocket and removed the black rod. It was glowing a dull orange. The man in black sensed danger and flew down the hall.

“Ve’re not alone,” Khavin said quietly to the guards. Both men drew guns, and the General activated his weapon. The intruder stopped his run at the first door, slowly turned the knob, and ducked in, closing it softly behind him.

Khavin scanned the halls thoroughly with an orange beam, and the two guards checked the shadows with guns raised. Khavin passed the door where the man in black sat crouched. An orange beam flashed under the door. The man clenched his pistol. But then he heard Khavin begin to walk away.

“False alarm,” He boomed. “The Catulus, he is very sensitive lately. I am off to sleep. Stay sharp.” The two men saluted as Khavin walked off, rubbing his only visible temple.

The man stood in the perpetual darkness for nearly an hour before he opened the door slowly. Sweat stung his eyes, so he wiped his brow. He returned to his sniper position and observed his targets. They both had fallen asleep in their chairs, obviously stressed after Khavin’s surprise inspection. The intruder slowly made his way towards the door, keeping his gun pointed at the guards.
He would need a passcode from one of them, the other was expendable. He pointed his gun at the guard that had spoken first to Khavin. The man put his finger on the trigger and took aim.

“What the hell!” The other guard had sprung to his feet and was fumbling for his gun. This outburst caused his friend to awaken; the last thing he would see was the barrel of a gun. The bullet clanged on the guard’s headrest after piercing his skull. The other guard had managed to free his gun.

The intruder spun around just in time to avoid taking a bullet in the back; instead the guard’s shot landed in his arm. The guard’s gun was not as subtle as the intruders, and it let out a deafening bang when fired. The intruder whirled around again and landed a sharp kick to the guard’s neck. The man fell over, unconscious.

The mysterious man in black paused listening for the slightest footstep; but no guards were in the vicinity.

A few minutes later, the man who had been knocked unconscious came to his senses. The intruder pressed his gun to the man’s neck and then pointed to the password keypad and then once towards the corpse of his fellow guard. The man understood and stood up to type in the password and state his name.

“P…private Douglass…”

The door hummed to life and slid open. The private took a breath to plead for his life, but a bullet had already reunited him with his partner.

The hall behind the door smelt of must and feces. The man opened an unassuming, iron cell with a key card he had stolen off of the guard’s corpse.
A frail man with an unkempt beard and tattered clothes stood up with a grin from his metal seat.

“Cutting it a bit close aren’t we?” his throat was raw. “Let’s get the others and bring news of the invasion to the Supreme General.”

The man removed his mask. “Don’t worry, ambassador. The Resistance is already prepared.”
CHAPTER 29

Thunder cracked outside, stirring Ray from his sleep. Lightning illuminated the entire tent from a flap in the side, and for a split second, he could see Chase, rolled up in a sleeping bag next to him, and Captain Oho sitting in the corner of the tent listening to his radio, a micro-chip in his ear.

Ray fluffed his bedroll. He had just had the strangest dream. He dreamt that Nova was being taken to a place unknown by a man so consumed by shadows that he could not see his face. He had tried to follow them, but a door had closed on him.


Ray quickly pressed his head back into his roll.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” he continued, his voice the quietest Ray had ever heard it.

“The mecha armors and provisions are arriving tonight. Sleep. And try to do it quieter. I’m sick of hearing your mumbling.”

Ray had heard a lot of talk about mecha armors, yet he still had not seen one. Conner had told Ray that they were horrible machines, and Captain Oho had been praising them since the day he arrived.

Ray found some comfort in the fact that he would not have to pilot one. His unit would only have one, and Oho was the only trained and registered pilot. Besides, Ray was having enough trouble shooting his machinegun on the range, and it was a fairly simple mechanism.
Ray was thinking too much. He couldn’t sleep; he was awake now, like it or not. “I’m gonna go use the bathroom, sir,” he whispered to Oho who had shot him a filthy look when he zipped open his sleeping bag.

“Don’t be long.” Oho grumbled crossing his arms and leaning back against his unused cot.

Ray tiptoed out of the tent and entered into the night; thunder boomed from the sea storm miles away.

Ray snuck around the encampment, ducking in and out of the shadows caused by streetlamps nearby. Their camp was set up in a vast, concrete parking lot close to the beach. Each tent was placed in between the white lines that indicate parking spaces, and soldiers would use the name of a lot to refer to the location of their tents.

For instance someone would say, “Hey wanna bring your squad over to our tent and play a round of cards? We’re in the handicapped space next to the cart-drop-off.”

Ray got a laugh from the notion that the mightiest army in the world was stationed in the parking lot of a Japanese supermarket, but the melancholy of the camp in the looming shadow of the war helped him keep this to himself.

He jutted around another corner until he appeared at a guarded tent. Ray snuck carefully around the guards and crawled under the back of the tent and popped his head up on the other side.

“Ray, you know you could have just asked the guards to let you in,” Conner said without looking away from a paper on his desk. “You are a Lieutenant; you don’t have to sneak around.”


“I know,” Ray said, standing and brushing the dirt from his casual uniform. “I’m just practicing my stealthy moves.” He struck a ninja-like pose. “Besides, these guys won’t torture me if I get caught. I’d rather practice on them then on the Resistance.”

“Whatever, I don’t care if you get yourself in trouble. Just don’t bother me. I’m a little bit busy, you know with the war and all.” Conner was facing a lot of pressure, and it was starting to show. The NGE was moving the next day, and he had not only the stress of preparing his own troops, but aiding General Polky in the preparation of his, seeing as he had never been in charge during combat.

Ray sat down on Conner’s cot and picked up a metal disk which looked like a shiny Frisbee. He had seen this disk earlier that day...

Conner and Polky looked out at a sea of red and black. The golden sun was blazing in the sky, pounding down on the men and women awaiting their assignments.

Polky placed the metallic disk on the ground, and Conner shot it with a beam from his Sertorius. Instead of exploding, the disk turned a bright green and projected a shimmering 3-d replica of the earth twenty feet above them in the air.

Polky removed his weapon and extended a long yellow beam like a pointer into the sky. Some of the soldiers whispered excitedly to their friends. Not everyone had seen one of the five weapons used. Just seeing the rays of light caused the blood in your veins to tingle and instilled a feeling of respect and fear…. 
“So what is it that you want Ray?” Conner’s gaze did not falter from his important papers. Ray returned to the present and tried to remember why he had come to visit the old General.

“Sir, I was wondering if I could use your Voice Box. I just want to talk to Nova before I leave for…”

“That’ll be the fourth time this week, Ray. But, whatever… You can use it, just remember to bring it back. I don’t want to spend the entire afternoon looking for it like I did last time.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir.” Ray was ashamed of being an inconvenience. Conner reached in his pocket and tossed a little black box over to Ray.

“Tell ‘er I said hi.”

Ray walked out of the tent through the front flap.

“Keep up the good work fellas.” He grinned at the two guards who looked bewildered.

Ray stopped in a quiet space between two tents, and he activated the box. “Nova?” he said, holding the box tightly. “Are you up?” A few seconds later, the box began to hum. A man’s deep voice boomed from its depths.

“Of whom is this?”

Ray gasped. He recognized the voice to be General Khavin’s. Fear froze him.

“привет? I will demand answer! Best idea to speak now!”

“R…Lieutenant Ray Tract, sir…”

“As much I have assumed. Your little hare attempted escape last night. During distraction, a Resistance spy broke security and released prisoners from cells. Two men are to be dead! Emperor believes I am responsibility. Did you know this?” Khavin’s voice was so loud
that Ray worried it would wake sleeping soldiers in the tents surrounding him. *Nova had tried to escape? Was that what he was trying to tell him?*

“I didn’t know a…about anything, s…sir.”

“Why this would she do, Tract?”

*Why would* Nova do a boneheaded thing like that? Ray knew she didn’t like the place, but he couldn’t imagine why she would want to escape that badly.

“She must have had some reason for trying to escape. Are you sure she wasn’t being mistreated?”

“No!” Khavin roared. Ray cupped the box tight in his hands. “Ve give her gifts, let her vroam zhe courtyard at her own leisure, and ve feed her vell. She had no vreason for vhat she did! She is being held in her vroom, and vhen ve vere checking her room for any escape tools, ve came across zhis voice box. I don’t know how she got her hands on it, but it’s against the law for a civilian or low ranking officer to possess von of zhese devices. So I suggest zhat you turn *your* voice box in to General Conner and await his punishment. If you do not give Conner your voice box, I vill know and I vill have you punished! Do I make myself clear?”

“Yesir.” Ray choked. The voice box deactivated, and Ray sat quietly on the concrete for several minutes, reflecting.

He would have no trouble returning the box to Conner, but he still was wondering why Nova would try and escape. Images of her being hurt and starved flashed through Ray’s already clouded mind. He snuck back to Conner’s tent and entered through the back.

“That was quick.” Conner was furiously scribbling something on a piece of paper. “Usually you teenagers will talk for hours about all kinds of nonsense, and I thought with this being your final call before the war that you would want to make it last.”
“She tried to escape, and Khavin confiscated her box.” Ray placed Conner’s box back on the desk.

“Nova? Tried to escape, did she?” Conner rubbed his head. “That wasn’t a smart thing to do….”

Ray remembered something else. “Sir, Khavin said that the Resistance rescued several prisoners the same night.”

“I heard that part.” Conner continued scribbling. “The resistance was bound to try and rescue those prisoners. They knew a lot about the upcoming war. All this means is that the Resistance will be a little more prepared for our arrival than we wanted. I already knew about this, and I have made the necessary adjustments.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me that Nova had her voice box confiscated?”

“I didn’t know that she tried to escape. It only happened yesterday. Fortune really has a way of screwin’ people over doesn’t it?” Conner remained absorbed in his work.

Ray accidentally sat down on the metal disk. He pulled the disk out from under him, and his mind returned to that afternoon’s briefing…

“I will be moving my troops, which includes squads 1A to 102D, to attack a small Resistance outpost in Kauai, Hawaii.” Conner used his weapon to point out the shore of one of Hawaii’s small islands. “Once the outpost is annihilated, the Resistance in North America will have no way of knowing when to expect an invasion.”

“And that’s when my troops,” Polky too pointed to the forested island. “Squads 103D to 201H, will land in Long Beach California and wait for Conner’s troops to rendezvous with us there. Is that clear?!”
“YES SIR!” the troops bellowed in unison.

“Long live the Emperor!” Conner shouted.

“Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor!” The troops voices faded out in Ray’s head.

“Long live the Emperor,” Ray whispered under his breath. Conner glanced up from his work.

“What was that, Ray?”

“Nothing sir.” Ray lowered his eyebrows with thought. “Wait sir, there is something.” Conner gave Ray his full attention.

“Sir if I’m from the past… and the Emperor is still alive… doesn’t that mean that…”

“That you won’t die?” Conner finished Ray’s question, stroking his wrinkled chin. Ray looked at the old man with interest.

“Yes sir.”

Conner, grunting, stood up and sat next to Ray on the cot, which creaked under his girth.

“Well boy, time travel is a difficult concept to explain, and I can guarantee you that it’s not what you thought it was.”

“Well to tell you the truth sir, I haven’t given it much thought. I tried to put it to the back of my mind.”

“Well Ray, all you had to do was ask and I would have explained it to you… well at least the little bit that I know. Let’s see…where to start… oh, yes, time travel is, as you perceive it, impossible.”

“But…” Ray sputtered.
“Let me finish; don’t ask any more questions until I’m done.” Ray shrunk in his seat. “Time travel is impossible. What we do is more of a dimensional travel. You see, there are an infinite number of dimensions; each one of them is a fraction of a millisecond faster than the other; so between our two dimensions; there are billions of other dimensions only milliseconds apart. The Emperor’s weapon, the Marius, has the power to send one of the other four weapons and whoever is holding it to another dimension, which is moving at a different time. One dimension’s flow does not affect the flow of the others unless the Emperor intervenes with his weapon. That’s how we got you; we intervened. The Emperor wanted a young version of himself to rule his empire after he died.” Conner took a deep breath. “Make sense?”

Ray’s brain, hungry for knowledge, had just hatched a slew of questions; which one would he pick?

“Sir, if there are billions of different dimensions, when the time comes, how will the Emperor know which one to send me back to?”

“That’s easy,” Conner said, relieved. “The Sertorius always remembers what dimensions it’s been to.”

“But how did the Emperor know he was getting the right Ray? I mean, what if he sent you to a dimension where I had been eaten by sharks, or my parents had never been born or something?”

“Every dimension is the exact same until the Marius intervenes.” Conner put his hands on his knees. “Events pass the exact same way, just on different planes. The only way that that balance is ever thrown is by the Marius.”

“Who made the Marius?” Ray asked. “How did they know that these other dimensions existed in the first place?”
Conner sighed. “To answer your first question: no one knows where the Marius or the other weapons came from. Our scientists haven’t been able to get a look inside of any of ‘em. As for your second question, I’d imagine the person that discovered dimensions was someone like you or me… much brighter of course… but someone who just was so enamored by life that he was sure that his history could not die.”

Ray looked at the General with confusion. Conner continued.

“Our lives are so powerfully lived in the moment, or at least that’s how I feel, the dimensions concept is just nature’s way of preserving every single moment from the beginning of time to whatever lies in the future, assuring that no moment is ever left forgotten and that time continues to flow infinitely into itself. At least that’s how it makes sense to me.”

Ray’s mind was still swarming with new questions about the weapons and the many dimensions and infinite times, but he decided that instead of racking his brain to understand everything, he would bury his questions within the confines of his mind and dig them up later if he so desired, perhaps when Conner was less preoccupied.

“It makes a little more sense to me I think,” Ray lied. “Thank you, sir. I’ve wasted enough of your time. I’d better get to bed; tomorrow is going to be a big day.”

“Yes it is boy,” said Conner, pulling himself up. “Yes it is.”
CHAPTER 30

The waves splashed up methodically on the sand, the sound of their coming and going like the heavy breaths of a distant giant. Overlooking the beach, nestled amongst the rocks was the skeleton of a worn-down mansion.

In its, hey day the mansion had played host to the affluent, the young, and the beautiful; now it was rare to see it inhabited by anything other than a family of gulls or a few stray crabs.

The windows were grimy, and the shingles on its wide roof were missing, scattered about the sand or swept away by the ocean. The night’s cruel shadow added to the melancholy, unwelcoming face of the broken home.

On this night, however, something was amiss; the dull, yellowish glow of weak fire shown faintly through a wide window on the second floor. The room had been the mansion’s grand dining room, and the light was a rusty, gas lamp placed on a dusty, glass table.

The table itself was surrounded by seated figures narrowly avoiding the fullness of the lamp’s glow, their faces emerging only slightly from the shadows.

A massive, crouched entity took up an entire side of the rectangular table. It spoke in a voice that was metallic, fabricated, and cold. “We owe everything to Rache. Without him, this Empire strike would have ended us for sure.”

A man stood in the far corner untouched by light; he spoke, his voice crackling and raspy.
“The Resistance would have withstood the attack with or without Rache’s help.”

“Without Rache, I still would be rotting in one of the Empire’s cells.” The massive figure retorted, the sound of screeching metal accompanied his movement.

“First of all, you don’t rot, you rust. Secondly, your weakness is the reason you were in there in the first place,” the man in the shadows responded with spite.

“Weakness!” The giant shouted, jerking from its crouch as if to rise. “I’ve killed a General, and injured another! What feat have you performed, Mirror?!”

The man in the corner stood up and pointed a pistol at the figure. “I could start by shutting your floodgate of a mouth! That would be quite the feat!” One of the other men at the table stood up. He was a taller man with neatly-parted hair, greying brown. He was wearing a sharp suit, an American flag pin piercing his lapel.

“Christopher! Jamal! Stop this at once!” The man called The Mirror holstered his pistol and the elephantine figure narrowed its glowing, red eyes.

“Just stop it both of you,” said the man who had made the interjection. “I’m returning to D.C. tomorrow, and I’m taking The Mirror with me.”

“But Mr. President, you promised me General Polky’s head!” the gravel-voiced Mirror shouted.

“Your own personal battles will not doom this Resistance, Mirror,” the President spoke slowly. “I need you to protect me if by some minute chance the NGE is able to push past General Steel.”

The Mirror closed his mouth and crossed his arms. There was no point in arguing with the man who acted as President of the United States and Supreme Chancellor of the Resistance.
“We all know our assignments then?” When the president addressed the room, the firelight illuminated his sharp, red tie.

The rustle of nods could be heard; a set of thick fingers strummed the glass.

“Very good. Report to me after the Empire’s initial attack then, Steel.”

“Yes.” The massive figure boomed.

The President scooped up a pile of papers, and The Mirror stood up to follow; before he left, he stopped and glared back at General Steel, meeting his glowing, mechanical eyes.

“After we free this world from the grasp of the Empire, I’m *killing* you.”
CHAPTER 31

Ray was awake; he couldn’t stop worrying about her. Where was she? Was she alright? When would he see her again? It took until the first signs of morning for Ray to slip into a shallow sleep.

Not an hour into his sleep, Chase shook him awake and told him to pack his things. Amidst his worrying about Nova, Ray had completely forgotten about his own predicament. His squad had been among the few handpicked by General Polky to lay siege to the Hawaiian outpost. The mission sounded fairly full proof; all they had to do was travel into Hawaii from Japan and destroy a barely-guarded transmissions center.

Ray also could take solace from the fact that there were two other squads assigned to the same mission, and both of them would have to fail before his squad was sent into combat. Even Conner had said the chances of that happening were extremely low.

Ray scrambled from his tent dressed in his black cargo uniform. A dismal fog had made the light from the lampposts seem no brighter than lighting bugs. The moist air was hard to breathe in; another factor in his deprived sleep, no doubt.

He scurried through a crowd of soldiers who were standing outside of Polky’s tent. Apparently the night had been stressful for many. Dark bags, yawns, and bloodshot eyes were all around. General Polky emerged from his tent, juggling a few pieces of paper.

“Ok, men,” he said quietly, picking up a sheet he had dropped. Ray doubted that the soldiers towards the back of the pack could hear him at all. “Due to the incredibly
sensitive radar in Hawaii, our ships can’t get too close; we’re going to have to travel there by matter displacement.” A few of the more decorated officers groaned. Ray was in the dark again.

“Also,” Polky continued after the groaning crowd had silenced. “Due to the conditions, we will be unable to transport any mechas, so we’ll have to do this one the old fashioned way.”

Captain Oho, who had shown up next to Chase, scowled and crossed his arms across his chest.

“Your orders are to capture the outpost and shut down all radar before they can send word to their units back on the Californian shore.” Polky paused. “Use all means necessary. Promptness is key. Your tech officers have already been briefed on the Resistance’s radar systems.”

Some soldiers closed their eyes in prayer; others remained unfazed and eager. Ray just stared up into the foggy sky. He wanted to be afraid or anxious, but he could not be. Even the hand of death, drawing closer to him now than perhaps it ever had, could not capture his wandering attention.

A gargantuan aircraft carrier was docked nearly a mile away from the encampment. The bow of the massive vessel stretched so far from where Ray stood that he could not discern the end from the horizon. The hull of the ship towered above all of the soldiers’ heads; a majestic, steel wall held together with bolts the size of refrigerators.

Ray trudged up the wide boarding ramp leading to the ship’s deck, Chase, Rufus, Lyle, and Mal followed eerily silent and Oho brought up the rear. Ray shot glances back to them a few times, but none of responded. Their eyes were vacant, lost looking into the future instead of the world in front of them.
The ramp was steep, and Ray felt like an anchovy packed in with his fellow troops all inching up the steel path, treading on the heels of the ones in front of them. Eventually the ramp flattened out and the clanking response to Ray’s footsteps was replaced by a deep, hollow thump.

The main deck.

Polky arrived after the soldiers. He rode onto the main deck in a compact, camouflage vehicle that was hovering, without noise, about a foot off of the ground.

The humidity made sweat on his brow, and Ray could see wisps of steam spiraling off of the heads of the soldiers who were shaved bald.

“Everyone will march, single file, onto the glass circle in the middle of the deck!” Polky shouted.

The soldiers, unable to see, began to spread out across the wide deck like salt spilt on a table. When the area around Ray had cleared, he had to adjust to the new light all around him. The deck must have been larger than two football fields. Strange, sleek aircraft were parked in neat rows on the back end of the ship. Ray followed his squad, led by Oho, onto a massive circle of glass that was imbedded in the deck. It reminded Ray of a dance floor, one that you would see in an old disco movie, only this floor was not colorful; it was just fogged glass.

A man with a shaved head was walking in between the rows of soldiers with a wide, open cart hovering behind him. In this cart there were belts, which had several pockets containing ammo, and a canteen clipped on the side. Ray watched and saw that the soldiers in front of him were each taking one of the belt, so when the man walked, by he reached in the cart and removed one for himself.
Soon another man followed, with a cart identical to the first, only this one contained dull, black helmets. Ray removed one from the cart, when it was his turn, and put it on his head, tightening the strap around his chin.

The last cart was escorted by two men and it contained guns and knives. Ray was handed the same machinegun he shot on the range in Paris with Oho; on it was a knife stuck on by tape. Ray removed the blade and attached to his belt.

“Check to make sure that you have a belt, a helmet, a knife, and a gun!” Polky’s voice boomed over the crowd. Ray could no longer see the General, but it appeared that he had finally started using his weapon to magnify his voice, as opposed to shouting over the crowd.

“Now, I will come with you, and we will be able to take this base in no time flat!” The crowd cheered and raised their guns in the air. “Now the machine will activate; so don’t be alarmed.”

The ground began to shake, and the sound of metal on metal echoed from beneath them. Soon a magnificent light shone through the glass, which made Ray avert his eyes. Chase let out an expletive next to him, and Lyle inched closer to Mal who wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Try not to move too much!” Polky shouted over the groaning of the machine. “When we reach our destination, the first squad will make their way through the forest to the base. The second squad will wait five minutes and then follow, and then the auxiliary squad will hold back in the woods unless signaled!” The grinding noise became louder. “Long live the Emperor!” Polky shouted.

“Receiving coordinates from Munich!” a man shouted from the direction where the General’s voice came from. “Just a second now, I don’t think the people at NGEGPS are at their best today!”
The machine gave birth to another hideous noise, shrill and ear piercing.

“We are GO!”

Ray’s mind whizzed and whirred through space. He felt his body go numb, and banshees screeched in his ear. His vision disappeared, and it felt like he was drifting into a deep sleep. The sensation didn’t last long though, for nearly five seconds later, he found himself lying on a forest floor, head spinning. He forced himself to his feet.

A voice screamed bloody murder to his left, and when turned to see he was faced with a gruesome sight.

One of his fellow soldier’s heads was protruding from the trunk of a tree. Thick, sticky blood oozed down the crevices of the tree’s trunk. Ray jumped back, alarmed, and watched as the man’s head fell to the ground with a sickening, peeling noise. His spine was still deep in the tree’s bark.

Ray was panicking. His pulse quickened, and he turned to run away from the disembodied head. Ray turned around and bumped straight into Chase, who was staring past Ray, his eyes wide open with fear. Several other troops were following Chase and stopped to stare as well.

Screams could be heard all throughout echoing from amongst the tropical trees. Ray, tremulous, stammered at Chase.

“I don’t know what…he was just…. there, and… and, I didn’t know what to do.”

Chase was equally shocked and didn’t offer a reply. Captain Oho came from out of nowhere and stood in front of the decimated squad.
“Calm down,” he panted over the screams of the forest. “We were supposed to land in a clearing, but someone in transport fucked up bad! All of the squads are separated, and General Polky ordered me to take as many people as I could to attack the outpost!”

Oho’s words fell on deaf ears, however, for the second he had stepped in front of the squad the focus had been on his arm. Oho was clutching a bloody stump where his left arm had once been. The ground below him was becoming saturated with blood, and his skin was a ghostly white.

“Sir,” Chase shouted. “your arm! Its, its…”

“I am quite aware of that Jagger! Don’t worry about me! I want you to lead the troops into the outpost, alright?!”

The men were dumbstruck, intense fear quickening their pulses. Chase managed to speak in a quavering whisper.

“Sir, we have to find our medic…”

“GOD DAMNIT, JAGGER MOVE!” Oho’s color returned to his face momentarily.

Chase took a frightened step back and ran off into the woods. The remainder of the squad followed him, apprehensively. Ray brought up the rear, gun in hand. He looked over his shoulder, just in time to see Oho fall to the ground.

The squad flew through the brush, tropical grass crunching under their feet. The new sunlight speckled the forest floor though the canopy of trees above them. By the time the squad made it to the outpost, they were drenched in sweat and gasping for air.

The NGE had already taken out the main tower of the outpost, and the other two were beginning to erupt in flames. Gunshots rang through the air, accompanied by the screaming of
men and the explosion of grenades. Chase ran ahead of the squad and pushed his way through the torn, barbed wire fence surrounding the complex.

A man wearing green jumped out of the complex door and blasted off six rounds with his small pistol. One of the men next to Chase fell down screaming, but Chase was able to run at the man and shoot him before he could reload.

Sweat was dripping into Ray’s eyes. It was hard to believe that all of the death and destruction was real. To him, it all looked like something out of a bad dream. Chase called his fellow soldiers to file into the compound. He waved for Ray to follow, but before Ray could get there, he heard another scream. Three NGE soldiers flew out of the doorway past Chase and landed on the ground, maimed. Chase looked in the door and turned and shouted to Ray.

“GET OUT OF HERE, NOW!!!” Ray watched as a large shadowed figure burst through the doorway sending bits and pieces of debris falling to the ground around it.

Every time the figure took a step the ground shook. The sound of metal screeching across metal accompanied the beast’s every step. Ray froze where he stood and looked up at the massive figure.

The figure loomed five feet above Chase’s head. It was in a human shape but was far, far away from being human. This creature was made of a dull, rusted metal that creaked as it moved. One of its “hands” had five, sharp, metal fingers; the other was replaced by an oiled machine gun with a long clip that brushed the ground when the creature walked.

The human-like figure’s eyes glowed a bright red as he stared directly into the frightened eyes of Chase. Chase was rooted to the spot; he stared up as the creature pointed its gun at his head. Chase realized his predicament and jumped out of the way; the first several shots missed, hitting the ground behind him, sending dirt flying into the air. The creature’s gun whirred and
spit out bullets at a remarkable speed. Chase couldn’t move fast enough. The second chain of bullets landed in his legs, immobilizing him.

Chase lay beaten on the ground. His chest heaved up and down with the beats of his heart, and he pawed aimlessly at his mutilated leg. The creature took aim, hoping to finish the job, when a slew of bullets ricocheted off of his metal skull. Ray had his gun held up and was trying his best to distract the creature. It turned sluggishly, taking several more shots to the head, all of which deflected off.

Ray swore under his breath and tried to squeeze off a couple more rounds into the creature’s head, but by this time, the beast had Ray firmly in his sights. It was a wrecking ball preparing to demolish a condemned building. The creature raised its gun; and before Ray could move, he felt several sharp stings of pain in his legs and chest, and he too fell down to the ground.

The pain was excruciating. Blood was seeping out of the wounds, and he couldn’t even move to try and lessen the pain.

So this is how it ends. Ray watched as the creature took a step closer. I’ll die right here. I’ll never see Conner again, or Charlie or...” Ray paused and bit his lip. Or Nova. This last thought hit Ray hard. There had to be some way to stop this creature’s attack. The beast took another step closer. The ground shook. I have nothing strong enough to pierce this thing’s armor. Another step. Come on, Ray think. Another step, more pain. I need a grenade, or a better gun, or Polky...

Crack! A sound louder than the surrounding gunfire exploded in the clearing. Ray’s eyes burned and watered, but he was just able to discern something resting in the palm of his hand.
The creature, who had been stunned by the explosive noise, regained its bearings and sent a storm of bullets towards the dirty, blood-painted ground where Ray’s body lay but they did not find their target. A clear, blue dome surrounding Ray’s body had deflected the projectiles, sending them whizzing in every direction. The Sertorius, which had appeared in Ray’s hand seconds earlier, hummed viciously.

The creature took an intrigued step forward and pounded the shield with its claw hand. The shield absorbed the blow with ease. The enraged metallic beast roared and continued to strike it furiously.

Just as it released another blow, a brilliant yellow light erupted from around the Sertorius’ blue shield. The new light deflected the creature’s claw with so much force that it lost its balance and fell on its back, shaking the forest with its weight.

Polky stood ten feet away, holding out a black rod, a look of worry on his face.

“G-Give it up Steel,” he stammered. “You’re the last one! We already took out your entire regiment!”

The robot General Steel writhed on the ground. One of its eyes was flickering on and off, and a lengthy crack spread from his forehead to his jaw.

“Ah, so it is you.” Steel’s voice rumbled from the bowels of the metal frame as it rose to its feet, ripping up dirt. “I told Christopher that I would kill you. He’ll be so disappointed that the pleasure of peeling your flesh belongs to me.”

Polky quivered. Steel pointed his gun arm at a limp Chase. “Surely you won’t mind if I clear us some space.”

“No!” Polky shouted. He shot a yellow orb at Steel’s hand. Instead of destroying it, the orb wrapped itself around the barrel of Steel’s gun. Steel looked down at it and laughed.
“So it’s true then,” his taunting metal voice boomed. “The Pulcher is more of a shield. How appropriate, like father like…” But before Steel could finish talking, Polky had shot another orb at his head. Steel stepped aside, and the ball missed him by inches. Polky shook nervously and took a few steps backward.

“Afraid?” Steel mocked, raising his gun. Polky’s focus was transfixed on the ground behind it, not paying the threat any mind.

“What?!” Steel boomed. He slowly turned his head around to see what had Polky’s attention. Ray was on his feet, wounds knitted together by the Sertorius; blood stained his clothes. He unleashed an azure beam from the tip of the rod that drilled into Steel’s chest, emerging from the other side.

Steel roared and stomped his bird-like feet. Then, without warning, he lunged at Ray, with cat-like speed. Four thick metal claws pierced the boy’s stomach. Even the Sertorius had been caught off guard.

Ray’s body slid from the sharp claws and fell to the ground with a thud.

“Oh God,” Polky gasped. Ray’s blood dripped from Steel’s rusting claw.

A group of soldiers had wandered into the clearing and began shooting their guns wildly at Steel, much to the robot’s sick amusement.

Steel took a step towards them, raising his gun for murder. He stopped. Suddenly he began to shake violently. The sound of metal being bent out of shape echoed across the battleground. The soldiers stopped peppering him with fire to watch. Steel desperately clawed at his own torso as if trying to scratch an intense itch at his very core. His claws peeled off giant shavings of metal, as the shaking grew more violent. Steel’s shell expanded, causing the
connecting bolts to fly off in different directions. He gave off one last cry of agony and then exploded, sending off huge chunks of metal, one of which almost hit Ray’s dying body.

Hovering about five feet up in the air where Steel had just been was a gargantuan yellow orb. It gave off an incredible sheen until it was called back into the Pulcher. Polky was sweating profusely and taking in large breaths of air. He ran to Ray’s side and knelt to feel his pulse.
CHAPTER 32

Nova lay down on her bed, scribbling furiously in her makeshift diary.

Day 162

Dear Diary

Day one of solitary confinement. Yesterday I was caught trying to “escape,” and the Emperor didn’t take it too well. He told me that I couldn’t roam around the palace on Mondays any more, and now he has a guard in my room twenty-four seven! Oh well, at least they let me keep my diary. Only now I have this huge guy just standing there staring at me. It’s so annoying! Privacy mustn’t be in his vocabulary. General Big-Russian-Mask-face confiscated my voicebox and told me that I wouldn’t be using it to talk ever again. I sure hope Ray’s alright, I’ll figure out a way to talk to him, just you wait.

The sound of a fist pounding on Nova’s door alerted the guard. The heavy man, who had been in her room already, lumbered over to the door keeping a close eye on Nova as if she were a master criminal. He cautiously opened the door, and then, upon seeing his guest, snapped his hand to his head in an awkward salute.

Nova heard the familiar, contemptuous voice of General Hoffenen through the cracked door. “Mind if I have a word with our little escapee, private?”

The man nodded his plump head and wobbled out into the hallway holding the door open and sucking in his girth so that Hoffenen could squeeze inside. Hoffenen rolled his eyes. The archaic, wooden door closed, leaving he and Nova alone. Bright rays of
sunlight shone through the window; they caught Hoffenen’s eyes, making him squint. He slowly meandered over to the light’s source and pulled the curtains shut, leaving Nova’s lamp to illuminate the room with its dull glow.

Hoffenen’s voice became calm, almost sweet, as he spoke to Nova. “I see that the Emperor wasn’t too fond of your little escape attempt. I hope he wasn’t too harsh on you.”

Nova got up from her bed and walked up to Hoffenen.

“The Emperor’s lectures I can deal with, but that General Khavin…”

“What has he done this time?” Hoffenen’s voice changed, laced with contempt. Nova was unscathed by this change in demeanor. She had experienced it before.

“He took the voicebox, and now I have no way to talk to Ray.” A spark of anger flew up in Hoffenen’s eyes, but it only was a spark, and he was calm again almost instantly.

“Well, we can’t have that,” Hoffenen said reaching into his pocket. “You and I both know that if you don’t maintain contact with Lieutenant Tract…” Hoffenen extended his hand to Nova; wrapped in his fingers was a shiny, metal box. “His life may be in danger.” Nova plucked the voicebox from Hoffenen’s closed fingers. She then jumped up in the air and wrapped her arms around Hoffenen’s neck. She was far smaller than him, and her weight was hard on his back, so he took a knee to embrace her.

“Thank you so much Jacob!” Nova said, giving him a final squeeze before letting go. “You’re the only adult that makes any sense in this world.”

Hoffenen smiled, it was crooked like a crack in a wall. “Just remember, Nova, don’t tell anyone where you got that voicebox, do you understand?” Hoffenen implemented his darkest tone to emphasize anyone. “Keep this box well hidden; we can’t risk you losing it again.”

“Yes sir!” Nova said, giving Hoffenen a playful salute.
Hoffenen sat on the corner of Nova’s bed. “Have you figured out how you are going to inform him yet?”

Nova’s smile disappeared, and her voice was suddenly very hushed. “I don’t know if it’s the time yet… I’m just not…”

“Ready?” Hoffenen finished. “Of course you are not.”

Nova took a seat next to him on the bed.

“I just don’t know what he’d do,” she said, rolling the voicebox around in her hands.

“Something idiotic, no doubt,” Hoffenen scowled. “The boy is a reckless, thoughtless, fool.”

“Jacob!” Nova snapped. “Lay off of him; would ya?”

Hoffenen scowled and stood up from the bedside. “I have not the faintest clue as to what you see in that boy. A miracle the Emperor and he are the same entity. It baffles me.”

“You don’t know him like I do,” Nova said.

“If there indeed is a God,” he said, icily. “I should pray that I never know the boy as you do.”

The General left the room, and Nova rolled her eyes and hurried over to re-open her curtains. The lumbering guard returned and told her to lie down; Nova obeyed and stashed her new voicebox snuggly in her pillowcase.
CHAPTER 33

Darkness, void, complete and utter silence; such was the world that Ray had entered now. He was neither dead nor alive; he was trapped in a limbo, unable to feel the warmth of the heavens, unable to feel the pain of earth. No thoughts passed his mind, no food his mouth, no water his lips. Ray was in a world where food, drink, and thought were not important. The only thing that mattered now was which of the two worlds he was stuck between would call out to him first…

Polky sat on a wooden stool inside of the medical room, newly erected in the ruins of the Hawaiian outpost. He was looking over at Ray’s lifeless body; guilt plagued his conscience.

“I’m sorry, Ray,” he whispered. “You shouldn’t have had to fight at all…” The sound of boots clicking on the cement floor preceded Ray’s next visitor.

“Is he alright?” Conner asked, looking past Polky at Ray. Polky stood up and pulled a stool over for Conner.

“His wounds were pretty severe,” Polky said with graveness in his tone. “I used the Pulcher to close them, but even it can’t replace blood.” Conner rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“One of my medics arrived when I was closing the wounds and performed an emergency transfusion,” Polky said, his eyes fixated on Ray.

“And he had the right type on him?” Conner asked, looking nervously at Polky. “For the transfusion?” Polky averted his gaze from his comrade.
“Don’t tell me you used your own,” Conner said, wide-eyed.

“There was no alternative,” Polky said, meeting Conner’s gaze. “We’re the same type, medic’s transfusion machine said so… and… and…well, he would have died if I didn’t.”

Conner crossed his arms and leaned back in his stool. He almost fell over, forgetting that stools have no backs.

“Using medical machines never tested in battle and giving your own blood? Tim, you idiot! We need you for the upcoming battle; we can’t have you weak from giving blood!”

“I couldn’t let the boy die, Frank; you know how upset the Emperor would have been.”

“Yes I know,” Conner said, smiling down at Ray. “That’s why I’m not really mad; I would have done the same thing… But not just to save myself from the scorn of the Emperor.”

Polky raised his brow; Conner continued. “He’s a good lad. I would hate to see anything happen to him.”

Conner looked about the makeshift medical room. His stare lingered at one particular bed and its occupant. “What happened to Lieutenant Jagger?”

“Thirty bullets in his leg,” Polky responded. “The medics were able to remove them but he won’t be able to walk for a while.”

“How many casualties were there?”

“Well, assuming Ray lives, we lost twenty seven men.”

“That’s almost two squads.” Conner closed his eyes and rubbed his brow. “Even with the transporter dilemma, we shouldn’t have lost that many men. According to our intel, we had them outnumbered five to one.”
Polky nodded his head in agreement. “That is strange. Why was Steel protecting such a remote outpost? We attacked the western side of America to avoid having to confront huge barricades like they have around New York. They had to have known that we were coming.”

Conner took a deep breath. “That means that they might be waiting for us in California.”

The two Generals sat quiet in thought.

“Maybe they’re picking up our transmissions,” Polky said. “We could try and send fake broadcasts, encrypted codes maybe?”

“No,” Conner said, shaking his head slowly. “Then we might confuse our own troops; the only thing we can do is contact the Emperor and explain the situation. He might have a solution. Our transmission coordinates came from Munich; maybe there was a problem there.”

Polky nodded in approval. “I’ll call him right now…Oh, and Conner, you dropped this.”

Polky handed Conner the Sertorius. The old man let the rod rest in his palm.

“That truly is an amazing talent that boy has.” Polky smiled down on Ray. “He wields the Sertorius like he’s had it for a lifetime.”

“Yeah,” Conner said. “I just hope we never need it at the same time.”
CHAPTER 34

The President stared out the window of the oval office and admired his beautiful green lawn. It was disappointing to think that after tomorrow he might never see it again. He was being relocated, to New York and as much as he loathed the change of scenery, he knew that he was needed there.

Not everyone in the president’s office was admiring the view. The Mirror, who sat, legs crossed, in a leather chair, looked positively miserable.

“We really should be moving, Mr. President.”

“Yes, I know.” The President looked at his reflection on the glass.

“What?” The Mirror pocketed a knife he had been picking at his fingernails with. The President turned around.

“I just feel so terrible about all of this,” he said. “I let this nation crumble to bits, and now I’m paying the price for it.”

The Mirror holstered his pistol and stood up. “The NGE broke this nation Mr. President, not you. All you have to do is let me bring a squad or two into Munich and…”

“I can’t do that, Mirror; you’re not authorized to command troops.” The President closed his eyes, exasperated. “I’ve told you this a dozen times…”

The sunlight struck a glass on the president’s desk. The clear liquid inside sent rays of light dancing all across the desk’s oak surface.

“Let’s go;” The Mirror urged. The President took one last draught of the view and turned to leave.
“I truly pity that you cannot see the beauty in this place, Mirror.”

“That’s not why I’m here, Mr. President.”

“Well perhaps it should be…”
CHAPTER 35

Conner plucked a voicebox from his pocket. He held the box tight in his hands and waited for the Emperor to pick up his line.

The Emperor’s voice came in perfectly over the tiny speaker. “What is it Conner?” he asked without interest. “Have you spoken with Timothy yet?”

Polky perked up and leaned towards the voicebox. “I’m with him now sir.” There was a lengthy pause before the Emperor spoke again.

“So I take it your mission was a success?”

Polky gave Conner a nod prodding him to speak.

“Well, sir that’s why we’re calling…” The Emperor cut off Conner before he could finish speaking.

“What?! Are you telling me that you failed?!”

“No, sir,” Conner replied quickly. “We won; it’s just that the enemy had far more troops than we originally estimated. We believe that someone tipped them off to our attack.”

“Tipped them off?”

“Yes, Excellency. The escaped Steel was there as well. I doubt the Resistance would have someone as high up on the ladder as he is guarding an outpost if they did not suspect an attack.”

“Resistance Ambassadors recently escaped from, Munich,” Polky interjected. “Perhaps they had knowledge of an attack?”
“They knew we would attack them eventually,” Conner reasoned. “But to be so well prepared, only a night after the ambassadors escaped… that is what amazes me.”

“Yes, that is odd.” The Emperor sounded tired. “I’ll have some of my men look into it. I’m just glad we captured the base.”

“Yes, but it won’t do us much good if the Resistance knows we’re approaching the mainland anyway. That’s why we attacked the outpost in the first place, so that their land troops wouldn’t know to fortify the shores.”

“Yes, Conner. I’m sure you and Timothy can handle it, though. Good ni…”

“Sir?” Polky snatched the box from Conner’s hand.

“Yes?” The Emperor sounded annoyed.

“Your Excellency, the transmission from NGEGPS we received did not give us the right coordinates; do you know who was working that job?”

The Emperor paused. “How would I know of something that specific? I wasn’t in charge of the coordinates. That was Khavin’s job. I’ve been much too busy with the public lately.”

“Alright, sir.”

“Goodnight then, both of you.” The voice from the box died.

Conner was still deeply immersed in thought. Polky dared not speak for fear of breaking Conner’s concentration.

Sheets ruffled behind Conner and Polky, followed by a familiar voice.

“What happened?” The two Generals spun around to see Ray sitting up in his bed, clutching his stomach. Conner smiled widely, and Polky’s face froze with shock.

“Welcome back, sleeping beauty,” Conner said.
“How did you manage to heal that fast?” Polky sputtered. “Even with the help from the Pulcher, you should have been out for at least a few more days…”

Ray cringed as he pulled himself up further so that his head rested on the wall behind his bed. “So your weapon’s called the Pulcher, is it?”

“Polky really went out on a limb for you, Ray, and Chase too.” Conner sounded like a parent prodding a “thank you” from his clueless child. Ray did not catch the hint.

“Chase is okay?” Ray smiled, the sun from the window behind him silhouetted his buzzed hair.

“A little worse for wear, but he’ll pull through.” Conner said, nodding his head in the direction of Chase’s cot.

“What about Oho?” Ray asked, hoping for more good news. “Captain Oho, is he alright?” The Generals shot each other nervous looks.

“Our men found him the forest.” Polky paused, his face showed no emotion. “He was on death’s door when we got there.”

“And you used the Pulcher to heal him?”

“He was in a bad way,” said Polky. “There was nothing I could do.”

Ray looked at Polky with disbelief. He remembered the fiery determination in his captain’s eyes. How could he have died?

“I was dying too, wasn’t I?” Ray shouted. “You saved me!”

Polky spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. “You are very important to the Emperor. If you were to die…”

“You would have been punished!” Ray could not believe what Polky was saying. “You only wasted your time with me because you would have been punished!”
“Raymond!” Conner shouted. Ray closed his mouth and sat back venting air loudly from his nostrils. The scars on his stomach burned.

“First of all, mending flesh takes a lot out of these rods,” Conner began. “By saving the weapon’s power, Timothy can take the place of at least fifteen men when we land in California. Secondly, Oho was seconds away from death, and even if Timothy had managed to stop the bleeding, it would have made little difference. And lastly, you are not just any ordinary soldier, and Polky did not help you to avoid trouble.” Conner was breathing heavily, but his tone was calm.

“You have a powerful mind, Ray,” Conner continued. “I’ve never seen someone so natural at wielding one of the weapons. Half of the qualified men that wish to become Generals never make it past one of the weapon’s tests. You’ve done something that many unique men and women dare not even dream of. I’m sorry about the loss of your captain, but we have to move on.” Polky took advantage of Conner’s pause and chimed in.

“Oho would not want you to mourn him; he would want you to stand up and fight. He died for this cause, and I know deep in my heart he had no regrets.”

Ray looked around the tent and met the calming sight of a sleeping Chase. He heard the sound of a humming fan and palm trees rustling in the wind outside of his window.

“We have a lot of work to do, Ray.” Conner’s stool squeaked when he stood up. “You’ll be alright, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

The two men left the medical chamber, and a few beds down, there was a rustle.

“Powerful mind? What a load of crap. You’re dumber than a sack of rocks.”

Chase was sitting up in his cot, wincing as he rearranged his covers around his legs.
“You’re such an ass.” Ray tried his hardest to suppress a grin, though he wasn’t sure he was successful.

“I am what I am,” Chase looked underneath his covers and made a face at his damaged legs. “I heard you got shishkabobbed.”

“Yeah,” Ray rubbed his stomach. “I heard that same thing.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not really…” Ray lied. “How ‘bout your legs?”

“Hurts like crazy. Meds gave me some shots though, and now it doesn’t hurt as bad.”

“That’s good…”

“No! My legs are still screwed up moron!”

“Chill out!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

It was at that point that it truly hit him: *Chase didn’t know. Chase was his best friend, the guy who he tried hardest to be cool around, the guy who drank too much and kept him up late at night with stories about his boot-camp mischief, but he didn’t know. Chase didn’t know what “chill out” meant for he’d never heard it. Chase hadn’t grown up watching the TV and playing with toy cars. He hadn’t gotten an MP3 player for his sixteenth birthday and spent the whole night downloading popular songs. He had never tasted pop, never played a CD, never drove a car through an orange-cone course. He had never lived Ray’s life.

*Chase didn’t know where Ray was from, who Ray truly was. Would he ever? There was a wall between them that Ray could not break down. A secret he could never share. Chase physically sat only a few cots away, but mentally, the pair was separated by hundreds of years and dozens of lies.*
“Chase, there’s something I…”

“Did you ask Conner if you could go on the invasion?” Chase interrupted.

“…want…to tell…what invasion?”

“The invasion of America, stupid! I heard Polky talking about it over his voicebox earlier, before Conner came in. So are you going?”

“I dunno… I’d rather stay here, personally.”

“What?! Are you out of your mind?! Missing the greatest moment in NGE history?! You’d regret it, man. The only reason I’m not goin’ are these damn legs. You look fine, I’m sure Conner would let you tag along, at least to see the beach when we’re done with it.”

“I’m not sure…” Ray truly didn’t want to risk his life again, though he would admit that seeing Conner in action from a safe distance sounded appealing.

“You won’t die, you wimp! You already got stabbed through! What else can they do to you?”

“You have a point I guess…”

“So it’s settled; when you hear the siren, make a run for the boat.”

“I…ok…”

“Sweet!” Chase fell back down in his cot and shut his eyes. “I’m goin’ back to bed. Promise to tell me all about it.”

Ray slouched back down, so he was lying in his bed again. He would have told him the truth about everything had the blockhead only been willing to listen.

Following the blare of the siren which rang over the encampment in the latter hours of the afternoon, Ray crept from his bed and out into the Hawaiian sun. The area around the outpost
had been a dark, jungle maze when he had last seen it, but now, when it was illuminated by the
perfect blue sky, he could marvel at the lush palms and the brilliant tropical flowers which
climbed their sides like a trestle.

He was the last soldier to arrive at the carrier. The walk up the ramp was still torturous,
only this time he had the added annoyance of the gulls egging him on overhead.

He was panting when he took a spot next to Rufus, having just missed Polky’s speech. It
took a few seconds for the lumbering man to notice him, for Ray was on his blind side. Once
Rufus had seen him, however, he re-aligned Ray’s back in one of his monstrous hugs. Ray
staggered aside clutching his still-wounded stomach.

“I didn’t see you in Hawaii,” Ray said, rubbing where he was sore. “Where were you, big
guy?” Rufus worked hard to process Ray’s question and then smiled.

“We got separated, and then I followed Polky to attack the main control tower. It was
pretty easy with him there. Did you hear about Oho?”

Ray couldn’t respond, but he didn’t have to.

“All soldiers to the lower deck!” An unknown voice boomed from a distant
loudspeaker. “We will be departing shortly!”

Ray was grateful for the interruption. He followed Rufus through a hatch in the ship’s
deck and down a dank, moisture-damaged, narrow flight of stairs to a dank, moisture-damaged,
narrow hallway.

“Mal and Lyle both got lost in the woods,” Rufus said, turning sideways so that his
elephantine frame could squeeze through the halls. “They totally missed everything. They’re
gonna be bunking at the other end of the ship if you wanna make fun of ‘em.”
“I’ll have to do that,” Ray’s stomach burned. Soldier’s names were listed on sheets of paper hung up on the doors. Rufus slipped into his room three doors before Ray saw the door with his name on it. Chase was listed as his roommate.

With some effort, Ray forced the steel door to his room open.

The cabin was as cramped as the deck was spacious. It consisted of a miniscule bunk bed, a toilet, and a florescent light that hummed rather loudly. Ray pulled himself up onto the top bunk. He struck his head on the low ceiling, and the sound of skull on metal rang through the walls of the room. He rested his head gently on the thin pillow and swore. At least he did not have a roommate to disturb.

The ship’s engines roared to life and the hull rumbled. Ray nearly fell out of his bunk when the vessel began to vibrate. He slowly felt himself sliding to one side of his bed, pushed by the vessel’s force. When Ray’s ears became accustomed to the roar of the engines, he decided to catch some well-needed sleep.

Ray was finally beginning to drift away when the metal door to his room was flung open. He sat up with a jolt, again forgetting the height of the ceiling. The sound of his head banging on the steel rang through the room like a bell.

“Is this bunk taken?”

The voice belonged to a man with a shaved head and narrow shoulders.

“No,” Ray responded, a tad disappointed, hoping that he would be able to get sleepy again.

“I’m Edward,” the man said, laying his bag on the floor next to his bunk. Ray fluffed his pillow. “What’s your name?”

“Ray.”
“Ray, as in Raymond?”

“Yep.” This man would not let him sleep, would he?

“Named after the Emperor, huh? That’s cool.”

“Yep.” Why wouldn’t he just shut up?

“Where you from, Ray?”

“Pittsburgh.”

“What?” The man gave him a look. “Where’s that?”

“Near Munich,” Ray, realizing his mistake, lied.

“I’m from England,” Edward said.

“That’s nice.”

“Excited about the invasion?”

“Just trying to sleep.”

“I’ve never fought in a real battle before. Have you?”

“Yeah.”

“Really? Where?”

“Hawaii.”

“No way, you mean two days ago?”

“I’m not really in the mood to talk about it.”

“I heard a couple of people were injured but…”

“Why don’t you just get out of here and let me sleep?” Ray turned his back to the man.

“Did anyone die?”
Ray shoved his sheet to the ground and climbed down his bed, hitting his head on the way down. This only made him madder. He grabbed the man by the collar pulled him towards him, close enough to see individual eyebrow hairs.

“I saw a man’s head get cut off! I watched my best friend get shot!” Ray let the man go and looked into his green eyes. “Get the hell out of my room.”

The man scooped up his bag and dashed from the room without looking back. Ray collapsed on the bottom bunk and massaged his temples.

He sat there in silence for what seemed like hours. The loud speaker chanted words of war to the nervous soldiers, but he was out of earshot. He was in another world of deep thought, playing and replaying what he had said and done.

He was brutally shaken into the world by the hands of Rufus, who had entered his room, along with Lyle and Mal, without making a sound, or at least a sound that Ray could hear.

Ray was dazed but followed the trio to the front deck where men were again handing out rifles. The surface of the deck could hardly be seen through the clusters of soldiers’ feet. With a good bit of Conner’s Fourth Army present, there were thousands of soldiers.

Large tanks lay dormant on the deck, all black and shimmering in the sun’s rays. Conner sat atop one of these tanks, drinking from a black canteen and padding his sweat-covered forehead with his cotton sleeve. Ray moved slyly through the crowd trying to avoid the General’s eyes. The man with the crate of rifles had stopped a foot away from Conner, and Ray tried to sneak over and grab one without the old man noticing, but his height gave him away.

“Come ‘ere boy!” The old man patted the tank’s metal shell. Ray hung his head and walked over. He hoisted himself onto the tank next to Conner.

“Chase convinced you to come, didn’t he?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Thought he would do something like that,” Conner said. “Oh well, what’re you gonna do?”

“You’re not mad, are you?” Ray put his hands on his knees.

“Heavens no! It’s your decision. You’re a man now, Ray; I can’t tell you what you can and cannot do. Hell, if I was in your spot I probably would have done the same thing. Shows you’ve got grit.”

Ray smiled and looked out at the sea of soldiers. There were several gigantic crates chained to the ground next to the main bridge.

“What’s in those crates?” he asked Conner, who had finished his canteen and was looking disappointed. Ray handed Conner his canteen. The old General smiled widely and gave Ray a pat on the back.

“Thanks boy. It’s just so hot outside.” Conner unscrewed the lid, and Ray watched as the old man happily quenched his thirst.

“What’s in those crates?” Ray repeated, once Conner had taken a break from drinking.

“Oh,” Conner said, squinting to look at the crates himself. “Those are mecha armors. It’s the last batch from our factories in Russia as I recall.” Ray sat up attentively straight as soldiers began to unchain the large boxes from the deck below.

Six large men with crowbars pried the first wooden box open. Packing material was caught by the air and whisked away as the box was tipped right-side-up. A large machine became visible, still dusted with packing material.

It stood about ten feet tall and was almost frog-like in shape. It had two mechanical legs, which were long in proportion to the rest of the body. The machine’s arms were also out of
proportion but to the opposite extreme. They were short, thick and ended in two massive claws. Ray winced. He had come extremely close to a similar claw and he did not wish to repeat the experience.

The armor lacked a head, but its chest had a wide Plexiglas window through which a pilot’s chair could be seen. There were no chains restraining the suit, but it was rooted to the floor of the box by two large feet that bore claws to dig into the dirt.

“I think I’ll stick to my gun,” Ray said as he watched the men frantically dusting away packing material. Conner smiled and passed Ray back his canteen. The mecha armor’s paint was camouflage and was brushed so that it didn’t reflect the sunlight. The deck was almost completely silent; not even the men unpacking the mobile armors spoke. They were completely synchronized without uttering a word.

General Polky maneuvered his way through the crowd of speechless soldiers until he reached the tank on which Conner and Ray were sitting.

After a casual salute, Polky and Conner began talking about their battle strategies. *I might be able to understand every fifth word if I really concentrate.* Ray thought to himself after hearing a few seconds of confusing military jargon.

Ray’s mind drifted out to the sea where the waves pulsed to and fro, and the sun shimmered off of their foamy peaks.

Abruptly and shockingly, the boat’s mighty engine ground to a halt. The wake slowly stopped its churning, and the soldiers grew even more anxious. The wind continued to blow, but it was no longer pestering the soldiers’ faces with hitchhiking water droplets. The soldiers replaced the sound of the engine’s hum with murmurs of questioning and doubt.
“Well,” whispered Conner to Ray. “It’s time.” Ray too began to grow anxious as Conner stood up to speak.

“My fellow soldiers!” His voice boomed throughout the ship, cutting the buzz of silent conversation. “General Polky has given your captains their assignments. Each squad will have a specific objective to perform once we begin our invasion. I have personally studied each and every squad’s chemistry, and I have given you missions that will fully utilize all of your talents. You are the very best that we have to offer, and I know that you will make the Emperor proud!”

The ship erupted in cheers and shouts. Ray felt sort of embarrassed due to the fact that he was sitting next to Conner, and every soldier on the ship was staring up at him, but it was relieving to see that Conner had such complete control of the crew.

Conner raised his hand in the air and the cheering gradually subsided.

“The battle that you will be fighting in today will be remembered for all of eternity. Children will read this in their textbooks hundreds of years from now and know that the NGE never backs down!” More cheering erupted on the deck. “Whether or not those children live in a loving, perfect, non-violent world is up to you now. Don’t let the world…or me,” Conner added with a grin, “DOWN!!!”

Conner raised his fist proudly in the air. The rest of the ship mimicked this action; and soon, they were all shouting in unison.

“NGE! NGE! NGE!”

Conner turned and looked down at Ray.

“I think that I’ve motivated them.”

Ray smiled, and Polky gave Conner the thumbs up.
Nearly a mile below the shouting hordes of soldiers, a metallic behemoth sat in wait. The light from the sun couldn’t touch it as it sat motionless in the sea. Bubbles were churned up by its massive propellers, but by the time they reached the surface, they were almost invisible to the naked eye. Invisible to the proud troops which cheered above.

Ray hopped off of the tank and said his goodbyes to Conner. “You don’t sound worried at all, boy,” Conner said, smiling. “You could die you know.” Ray rolled his eyes and lightly patted his stomach.

“This will be a piece of cake.”

Ray disappeared into the crowd. Conner climbed rather awkwardly off of the massive tank and made his way through the soldiers to the bridge.

Deep in the murky depths of the ocean below, the crew of the submarine was growing restless.

“Why do we have to wait for the signal?” asked a shadowed figure. The man to whom the question was posed kept his eyes on the radar screen in front of him when he delivered his answer.

“Because carriers of that size have their own shielding mechanism. Our torpedoes couldn’t even scratch it. At least that’s what the General told me.”

His crewman rumpled his brow in thought.

“So then why are we here if we can’t break through that shield?”

The captain of the submarine stepped up behind them.
“You two fools had better shut your mouths. If you screw anything up, the General will have your heads.” The two subordinates became silent. Whatever questions they had yet to ask were locked away within the confines of their minds for a later, more appropriate time.

Back on the surface, General Conner had finally finished his extensive journey to the bridge. He leaned on the thick iron door, panting from having to climb so many stairs.

“I'm getting far too old for this.” Conner entered his password on the keypad that was imbedded in the wall next to him. The heavy iron door slid aside. The bridge was inhabited by four men, each of whom was sitting in front of a rather large console that was displaying radar strobes, dials, and confusing gauges indicating levels fuel and electrical power.

Conner walked straight past the men and up a rather rickety flight of metal stairs to the main helm room. The security to this room was even tighter than the security to the main bridge. This time, Conner had to pass a retinal scan and a fingerprint analysis. Once he had completed this security ritual, the door beeped and allowed him entrance.

The helm room was far less complicated than the room that preceded it. It was occupied only by a steering wheel, a chair, and a tired looking old man who was sitting in the chair with his feet up on the steering wheel. Conner’s entrance had caused the man to stir, but nothing more.

“Captain Griffin,” Conner said as he took a step in the room. The man opened one eye to study his visitor, but only for a second.

“Mornin’ General,” the man said in a groggy voice. “Is it that time already?” Conner nodded. Even though the man could not see the gesture, he observed the silence and slowly rose
to his feet. The Captain was a thin man of average height. He wore a blue uniform with a shining, golden medal in the shape of an anchor.

Captain Griffin saluted Conner lazily and then reached in his pocket and produced a golden voicebox which had an anchor design similar to that of his medal etched into the side.

“Engine room,” the Captain spoke clearly into the voicebox. “This is Captain Griffin. Shut down the main hull shielding generator and transfer all power to the teleporters.”

A muffled response echoed out of the voicebox.

“Iye Iye Cap’n.”

Griffin placed the voicebox back into his pocket and looked at Conner for approval. The General nodded his head and saluted Griffin.

“Will that be all, sir?”

“I just wanted to make sure that everything is running smoothly up here,” Conner said.

“Did you confirm the coordinate codes yourself as I asked you to?”

“Yes, sir. Emperor Tract confirmed the message himself.”

“Excellent, anything to avoid another…”

Suddenly an earsplitting bang shook the hull of the ship. The floor shook violently. Another, closer bang could be heard, like a gunshot in the helm room. The ship made a lurch to the side, and the ground slowly began shifting from horizontal to vertical. Griffin reached for the steering wheel for support, but Conner lost his balance and fell to the ground, sliding to the far wall of the control room. Red lights ignited, and all hell broke loose on the main deck. Griffin’s voicebox fell out of his pocket and slid across the glimmering metal floor. Words of fear from the engine crew sputtered out of the depths of the miniscule golden box. Just as quickly, the ship righted itself.
“Cap’n we’ve been hit! Engine room eight’s not responding!”

Griffin tried desperately to reach his voicebox and stay on two feet. Conner stood up just in time to fall down as the ship’s hull shook again.

The shouts of four panicked soldiers could be heard in the control room below them. Griffin scrunched his face and made one last jab for the voicebox. A hand darted out and beat Griffin’s to the tiny golden box.

Sweat beads formed in excess across Conner’s forehead; the struggling General managed to pull the golden box to his mouth. A drop of sweat landed on the voicebox and quickly slid off of its smooth surface. The whole ship grew strangely quiet as Conner spoke.

“This is General Conner; remain calm.” The tranquility in his tone was almost frightening to the soldiers below. “Group one, prepare to be teleported now!”

Conner could not see if his troops were obeying. This would be a true test of their courage, and obedience. The old General spoke again into the voicebox.

“Control room, this is General Conner. Are the teleporters still operational?” He waited for a reply, but none came. The troops were either dead or paralyzed with fear. Regardless, Conner knew he had to get the soldiers off of the ship.

“What the hell are you doing, Conner!” Captain Griffin shouted over the commotion.

“We have to reactivate the shields, it’s the only way!” The pounding of the captain’s heart was almost in tune with the sound of soldiers bashing against the walls of the control room below as the ship lurched yet again.

“She’s going down Griff! We can’t do anything to save her!”

The Captain looked shocked, his eyes met with Conner’s as the two men’s ideals clashed like the waves on the side of the great ship’s hull.
After the first torpedo found its mark, the ship had begun to sink. The troops reacted with screams of fear, and the captains reacted with shouts to maintain control. Ray, however, was having problems of his own. The second the ship was hit a stubby black rod had appeared with a bang in his palm. Ray’s vision blurred, and his eyes shut.

He appeared in a battlefield strewn with the bodies of soldiers and remains of bullets. In the distance, a mass of soldiers stood, guns pointed down, heads hung with grief. Ray took a step forward and stopped abruptly

“No,” he said, closing his eyes. “This is an illusion. None of this is real. I’m still on the ship. My friends need me there…”

When Ray reopened his eyes, he again stood on the deck of the sinking ship. He was breathing heavily and sweating profusely. The once panicked-stricken deck was quiet. Thousands upon thousands of eyes were glued to the smoldering hole in the deck that Ray had made with the Sertorius seconds earlier.

“No,” Ray gasped. The silence was split by a voice over the loudspeaker.

“This is General Conner, stay calm.” The troops were startled by the noise, but soon, it dominated their attention. “Group one, prepare to be teleported now!”

When the ship stabilized, the deck was snapped back into shape, and the soldiers began to file onto the teleporter.

Ray clutched the Sertorius in his hands and burst into the crowd. He needed to return the Sertorius to Conner, for without it, he was just an old man, a stubborn, strong old man, but an old man nonetheless.
Conner struggled to his feet. The glass windows looking out at the deck were shattered and bits and pieces of glass crunched under his feet as he started to hobble to the door. The captain was crouched down on the ground, the neck of his uniform saturated with sweat.

The onslaught of torpedo fire ceased, if just for the moment. The ship still began to tilt from the strain to its hull. Conner, who had finally made it to the door clung on the frame, refusing to fall. He picked up the voicebox and roared into it.

“Control room!”

This time a faint voice emerged from the box.

“Sir?!”

Conner, relieved, spoke again. “Activate the teleporters! Get these men out of here!”

“Sir!”

The sound of scrambling soldiers and muffled footsteps echoed through the metal door. Conner paid them no mind; his gaze fell firmly on the emotionally-broken man that was once captain of this great vessel.

Ray flew up the stairs to the control room, carefully dodging a few evacuating operators.

Conner pushed on the door, desperately trying to escape, but with the mechanics down, it wouldn’t budge.

Then the door let out a high pitched whistling noise, almost like that of a kettle. Conner stepped back as much as he could. The iron became orange and within a minute the Sertorius had managed to melt a hole through the door. Ray looked through to his mentor. Conner sighed with relief, but the captain remained somber.
“Come on sir! let’s get out of this place! It’s about to sink! Everyone’s teleporting out!”

These words were the last ones that the captain wanted to hear. Griffin pulled himself to his feet, and Conner awkwardly climbed through the hole in the heavy, metal door.

“A captain must go down with his ship,” Griffin stated, pulling his hand up to his forehead for a shaky salute. He was crying. Conner became grave and returned the salute with one of his own. Ray looked confused, but when a piece of sliding equipment smashed against the wall behind him, everything started to click.

“Conner, we have got to move!” Ray shouted as he extended the Sertorius to its rightful owner. Conner grabbed it without hesitation, and the pair ran down the stairway leaving the captain to drown with his greatest love.

Once on the deck, Conner realized that they truly were the only ones who hadn’t departed. In the haste of the situation, the deck was still covered in tanks and mobile armors, but at least all of the soldiers had evacuated.

He and Ray ran toward the teleporter circle but were halted fast by the terrible sight that faced them.

During the ship’s final massive tilt, one of the huge tanks had rolled onto the generator, falling through it like it was a wet piece of tissue paper.

Ray smiled out of complete hysteria. “I didn’t imagine dying like this. It’s kinda gonna suck.” Conner’s eyes scanned the ship furiously looking for an alternative way to escape.

“You ain’t gonna die here, you big idiot. Just keep calm.” Ray took a deep breath.

A familiar bang split their ears. The Sertorius had disappeared from Conner’s hand and reappeared in Ray’s. Conner spun around in time to watch Ray disappear into thin air,
leaving only Conner’s two ringing ears in his wake. The ship tilted again, and Conner nearly fell over.

The old General was alone, without help, miles away from the shore on a ship that was moments away from being swallowed into the dark depths of the ocean.

Ray had realized what had happened too late. His world went black, and when he could see again, he was lying on a shoreline in the sand. The ocean’s waves were calm, and flocks of birds flew overhead, occasionally swooping down to snatch a silvery fish from the surface of the clear blue water. The sun was setting in the darkening sky, and its orange glow reflected on the tips of the ocean’s waves. Despite the tranquility filling the very air around him, Ray was not in the least bit calm.

“Damn you, work!” Ray shouted at the rod in his hand. “Take me back! Take me back!” Ray’s face was dripping with sweat and tears. His shouts echoed far but were soon absorbed by the vast, merciless ocean. Ray fell down on his knees and punched the coarse sand with his fist. “Conner, come back!!!”

A hand rested on his shoulder. Ray’s tears stopped and he spun around, his eyes wide with hope.

“How long have you been here?” General Polky asked calmly. “Come with me. I want you to tell me what happened.” Polky’s bright kindness clashed with Ray’s sadness and scorn.

“No!” Ray shouted at the General. “Leave me alone!”

Polky spoke calmly to Ray, determined not to allow Ray’s hostility intimidate him.
“Tell me what happened, Lieutenant.” He was going to get an answer out of the boy, even if it was one he did not wish to hear.

Ray cupped his hands around his ears, desperately trying to silence the General’s words. Polky’s words, even though muffled, still ricocheted off of the inside of his skull, bruising his mind and flashing him images of the boat’s silent deck nearly seconds before he left.

Something passed in front of the setting sun, placing the pair in its shadow. Polky and Ray snapped their necks up to locate the source.

The object was flying in the air several feet above them. The two squinted as the sun shown around the corners of the figure’s silhouette. As it began its descent, the wind it stirred up caused the coarse sand of the beach to fly about. Polky brought his sleeve in front of his face to protect his eyes from the dangerous sand. Ray shut his eyes to a squint so he could maintain eye contact with the figure. It was a mecha-armor.

The robotic suit ceased its rumbling. Polky uncovered his eyes as Ray knelt down speechless in the shadow of the short, old man who had just crawled out of the armor’s cockpit. Conner looked disheveled and drained as he took a step towards Ray. Conner shut his eyes, listening to the sound of the ocean’s waves just before he collapsed. The General fell, headfirst, into Ray’s lap. Polky scrambled across the sand and placed two fingers on Conner’s neck.

“He’ll be fine,” Polky said, relieved. A warm feeling filled Ray, and a tear of joy slid down his cheek. His life had been far from perfect, but now everything seemed as if it would turn out alright.
CHAPTER 36

An old man stood in a field full of flowers. As he gazed across it, he could make out a cozy home with dainty little windows that had been cleaned meticulously until they sparkled. A thin spiral of smoke drifted out of a stout chimney.

The weathered man smiled and took a step toward this perfect home, but just as he had flattened the first daisy under his military boot, the world turned black. Out of the black shadows stepped a man... or was it a woman? In a cloak... or was it nothing at all? The old man probed behind him with his hand and found that his back was to a wall. He couldn’t retreat. The distant figure moved closer to him until he could feel its breath on his cheek. The figure raised an arm and placed a ridged, ice-cold hand on the old man’s neck.

“You want?” A multitude of voices whispered, fainter than fog, from all around him. The house with all its perfection came again into focus through the darkness. The old man made a jerk; but the figure pushed him back against the wall. “Release ...me...”

“Conner? Conner? Are you alright?”

General Conner opened his eyes. His skin was cold and clammy; his brow was saturated with sweat. Polky was standing over him with a concerned look on the surface of his shimmering, blue eyes. Conner sat up and stretched out his arms. He was the only occupant of the medical tent newly erected on the night-darkened shoreline of Carmel Bay, California. The medical tent was lit by a puny, incandescent lamp which was sitting
on a fold-out table in the corner. The air was clean, salty, and refreshing. The old man breathed deeply.

“Just a bad dream,” Conner said. “So I see you found me then.”

Polky laughed out loud as he handed Conner a piping hot cup of coffee.

“Not really,” Polky continued, chuckling as he sat back down on his rickety, metal stool.

“You kind of found us.”

“Oh really?” Conner mused, sitting up to sip his coffee. The bitter liquid warmed his throat as it slid down. “Thanks for the joe, Tim. I really needed it.” Polky nodded.

“The Resistance wasn’t here when you landed, were they?” Conner sipped his coffee.

“No,” Polky replied somberly. “There must have been a submarine to take out the ship. That was the only resistance they provided.”

“We’re playing right into whatever game they’re running here,” Conner sighed. “I half-expected something like this would happen. What a mess this is.”

“I’ve already reported to the Emperor.”

“And?”

“He’s as baffled as I was. They just gave us their western shore. Civilians, soldiers, supplies, everything around here’s gone.”

“Moving east to the capitol no doubt,” Conner said. “I wonder how far inland the Resistance will evacuate civilians. They’re bound to stop somewhere.”

“Do we pursue them now?”

“That is the worst course of action we could take at this point,” Conner stated, bluntly. “They’ve been one step ahead of us this entire invasion. We need to regroup. Possibly even retreat and try again.”
“The Emperor wouldn’t approve a retreat,” Polky said.

“I know, Tim. We’ll just have to settle for regrouping and rethinking this thing out for now.”

“I guess so,” Polky cracked his knuckles. Conner finished his coffee with a few large gulps.

“Could you…” Conner began but then took a pause. “I’m sorry Tim; here I am asking you for favors again. Sometimes I forget that you’re not my Colonel anymore. I often miss those days. You remember don’t you? Back when I could still boss you around?”

Polky chuckled halfheartedly. “I still look upon you as my superior, Frank, if not by rank then by knowledge. What can I do for you?”

Conner slapped Polky on the back. “You’re a good kid, Tim. Could you send Lieutenant Tract to my tent please? I want to have a word with him.”

Polky saluted, and Conner returned the gesture. Conner pulled off his sheets, and they both left the tent, heading their separate ways into the darkness of the Californian night.

Conner had just finished rearranging the furniture and unpacking his personal belongings in his blood-red tent when Ray pulled aside the fabric of the entranceway and poked his head in.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Conner pointed to a wooden chair in the corner of the room. Ray sat down.

“I’m not going to mince words with you, Ray,” Conner said, his voice at its most serious. He locked eyes with Ray, and the world melted away around them. “I’m having you transferred to Polky’s ground support regiment.” Ray’s eyes widened, he was at a loss for words. Conner closed his eyes to avoid Ray’s questioning gaze.
“It’s for the best, Lieutenant. The ground support shouldn’t see much action if our invasion runs according to plan.”

Ray, having finally comprehended what Conner was saying, lashed out in protest.

“Why are you doing this?” Ray snapped. “I don’t need to be protected! I’m tired of being treated like some kind of god around here! My fellow soldiers are fighting and dying for what they believe in; why won’t you let me do the same?!”

“This war isn’t about you!” Conner shouted, his face red. Silence. The old General’s breaths grew loud and fast. Ray stood up and took a step towards the old man. Conner waved his hand in the air as if he was trying to swat a fly.

“Go. Just go,” he wheezed. “I will speak with you in the morning and things will be clearer. Right now, I have to get some rest.” Ray saluted and stepped out of the tent. Sadness and guilt plagued him as he took his first step away from the tent. The darkness of the night was calm and serene. He took a deep breath.

Rufus, Lyle, and Mal were playing cards when Ray entered his squad’s tent.

“What’d Conner want?” Mal asked, putting her hand down in front of her.

“He was too tired when I got there,” Ray lied. “He said he’d meet with me tomorrow morning.”

“He has all the right in the world to be tired,” Lyle didn’t look up from his cards. He was quieter around Ray nowadays. “He flew all the way from where the ship sunk to here. That’s like an eight hour flight on a mobile armor.”

“Yeah,” Ray sat down indian-style next to Rufus. They had no idea that it had been he who had almost cost Conner his life. They simply though Ray had been the last soldier teleported and that Conner had missed it and had to fly to Carmel Bay.
“I’m sick of all this,” Rufus stated, picking a card from his hand and placing it on the
ground. “The Resistance is sabotaging everything we try to do. How’re we supposed to be safe?”

“It’s war, Rufy,” Mal interjected. “It ain’t safe. It ain’t pretty. And bastards like the
Resistance will most certainly never fight fair.”

They didn’t speak for a while. They just sat there playing cards and listening to the
hushed conversations of other members of their squad until it was quite late.

Around two in the morning, a colonel under General Polky informed them that it was
there squad’s turn to patrol the encampment.

Everyone paired up and began patrolling. Mal had chosen to patrol with Ray so the two
of them weaved in and out of the tents on the west side of the encampment, occasionally telling
privates to return to their beds, and keeping watch for moving shadows.

“So you’re not single, I heard,” Mal said, as they approached the outside of the
campment where the ocean could be seen unobstructed by tents.

“Chase tell you?”

Mal nodded. “What’s she like?”

“Well, her name’s Nova,” Ray said, readjusting the strap of the rifle he had flung over his
shoulder. “She’s a really funny and sweet girl. We went to school together.”

“She pretty?”

“Yeah.” Ray tried his best not to smile. “She’s pretty.”

“I guess she had to be if you were willin’ to beat up Lyle just to visit her,” Mal jabbed.

“Yeah,” Ray looked down at his boots. It didn’t feel right wearing boots on the beach.

“Well, you see we’ve had some trouble, and she’s going through some personal issues right now.
So, I just worry about her a lot, I guess.”
“Sounds like you’re letting this girl mess with your life,” Mal asserted.

“Why’s that?”

“No one person should make you risk jail time for ‘em. You’re lucky you’re in the royal family, but that kinda stuff doesn’t fly in the real world. If I had somebody who needed me at home, I’d have to wait for leave like everybody else. You took an oath to this nation. You have a responsibility.”

Ray felt awkward. She couldn’t possibly know what Nova or he was going through.

“I know,” Ray lied.

“I’m not gonna beat you up over it any more than you already were,” Mal smiled her gappy smile. “But I just want you to see, as a friend what maturity is needed for this. Just ‘cause you can avoid some trouble doesn’t mean you should think you’re better than any of us. We’re a team here.”

Ray was quiet. “We’re like a family. I was stupid. I wouldn’t do it again. Not in a thousand…”

A loud, whistling noise broke the hush of the night. A flash of light erupted from the other end of the encampment and a noise like thunder boomed.

Ray looked over at Ray with wide eyes and she looked shocked as well, but gestured to head to where the noise that now had their ears ringing. It wasn’t long after the first explosion that others began to erupt around the encampment. Ray and Mal swerved through throngs of panicked soldiers who were beginning to emerge from their tents, guns in hand.

Suddenly an earth shattering blast exploded behind them. Ray’s eardrums popped immediately, and a heat more severe than fire engulfed his back. A bottle-sized shard of shrapnel pierced through the back of Ray’s left leg. Along with the excruciating pain of puncture came the
even greater pain as the red-hot hunk of metal cauterized all of the nerves around its point of entrance. This all happened in less than a second.

Ray flew forward, the wind knocked from his lungs as he hit the sand with a thud. He screamed in agony as he desperately tried to see the place from which the pain was erupting. Ringing was all he could here, and red all he could see. It was like a kettle forever at a raging boil…

From the top of a small cliff looming around the outskirts of the beach, a Resistance regiment had begun to assault the unsuspecting camp below. The regiment’s artillery was raining down on the soldiers like hail during a storm, and much like the fall of hail, it had caught everyone by surprise.

The first few shots had been aimed at the tents of commanding officers. Polky and Conner’s armies hadn’t had the chance to separate from their original landing point, so they were an extensively large target.

Conner’s tent had been among the first hit. Just as he was putting the final touches on a map of inland California, the Sertorius had activated and formed a large shield around the old General. From the safety of his shield, Conner had watched the entire tent incinerate around him and fires devour his maps and books. Conner deactivated the shield and ran out of the fiery remains of his tent, the raging flames lapping at his boots fueled by his precious papers.

The sight that met Conner’s eyes as he emerged from the flaming canvas out was a gruesome one. The once clear night sky was completely overtaken by black smoke and red-orange fire.
He knew he couldn’t afford to waste a moment of his time so, he ran off to find his Colonels and give them orders to counter-attack, barking orders to whoever still had their voiceboxes.

The beach had become a sandy hell. Troops scrambled, frantically trying to pull on combat uniforms and get their hands on a rifle all the while falling like ants from the explosive force aimed at them from the hill above.

Captains barked orders at their troops over the sound of raining mortars, and groups of soldiers began rushing up the steep cliffs. Several of Conner’s regiments had been given orders to surge the cliff top directly via a narrow, cement staircase which had been built for tourists back when the beach was a place for relaxation and view. Conner knew, however, that his soldiers wouldn’t be able to make it up the steps unaided.

Conner was trying to make it out of the maze of tents, when he ran into a gruesome sight. Ray was laying on the ground the back of his leg in tatters, exposing a charred, black femur. Conner noticed a body near him as well, but knelt down next to Ray first. The boy was still breathing, barely. Conner quickly assessed Ray’s wound and without much attention to detail, attempted to recreate a thin layer of skin over the wound.

Hearing his soldiers crying from outside the encampment, Conner pulled himself away from Ray’s side and ran to the outside of the tents, leaving the young man’s bone exposed to the smoke-filled air.

Conner scanned the hillside frantically trying to pick out the location of the enemy’s largest grouping. Once he had located it by the stream of mortars still flying from it like confetti, he activated the Sertorius.
The sheer brilliance of the light cut through the darkness like a flare; the green light then flew under Conner’s boots and propelled him two-hundred feet up into the smoky night air like firecracker. Soldiers halted in their charge and stared unblinking as a green rocket flew violently towards the enemies’ turrets on the cliff top.

Conner plummeted to the ground near a group of soldiers who were reloading their mortars. They barely had time to blink before Conner arrived, a shining orb of light in their midst. The soldiers stared on dumbfounded as Conner pointed his Sertorius at the turret. Within a second, the once mighty killing machine was humbled, leaving only a smoldering mass of metal and gunpowder.

The rebels found their composure and began to open fire on the General. The Sertorius quickly responded to the onslaught by forming a protective, green bubble around the old man. The bullets ricocheted dangerously off of the shield piercing the earth where they landed.

Rebel troops fanned out in all directions surrounding Conner. The old man was growing tired. Despite the lack of physical effort he was putting into his defense, he felt that his shield was about to drop. The adrenaline that had been pumping through Conner’s veins just a moment ago was slowing its flow. The old General’s thoughts could be heard over his adrenaline-induced, animalistic desire to fight when in the heat of battle. His mind now wandered to his soldiers who were rushing up the staircase, to his fellow officers whose tents were incinerated, and to Ray who lay on the cold sand of the beach dead, or near so. The light emanating from Conner’s shield grew duller. In order to hold a successful shield, Conner had to maintain focus, but now that his mind had the privilege to wander, he felt his guard slipping away.
Ray’s regiment along with several others which had been ordered to counter-attack the cliff had used the distraction to slip in behind their enemies. Eighty six men had come to Conner’s aide, making no noise, only temporary boot prints in the coarse sand.

Sights were set and after a short time of spilling blood, emptying shells, and shouts of agony, the rebellion’s attack was stopped. Conner let down his shield with relief. This brief second of relief, however, was followed by ferocious panic.

The sight of Ray lying down in the sand struck Conner every time he blinked. The old General broke out in a run towards the stairs leading down to base camp. He didn’t make it far however; after less than a step, he tripped over something and fell to the ground with a rib-jarring thud.

Conner looked up: a man’s eyes stared motionless into his; the man’s face was frozen and cold, his mouth hung open slightly, but no breath passed through it. Conner gasped. Blood was oozing out of the fatal wound that left a dark gaping hole in the man’s skull. He jumped back fast and felt his hand graze something sticky. He pulled his trembling hand in front of his face to see it covered in blood.
CHAPTER 37

The battle, however brief, had taken its toll not only on Conner but on the entire camp. Tents of once proud officers became ovens of roasted men’s flesh until nothing was left but ash. Molten bronze medals were now the only memories that soldiers would have of the officers’ “heroic” deaths.

Ray had been found by a medic during the search of the damaged camp. The lone medic scrambled quickly to try and stop the bleeding. Ray was near death, and this time, his life lay not in the hands of a capable General, or a futuristic weapon; it lay in the sweaty hands of an unnamed soldier, who had never seen blood that wasn’t in a medical book.

The medic had removed a syringe filled with morphine and thrust the needle deep into what was left of Ray’s thigh. He was so absorbed in his work that he ignored a green star shooting from the ground; so absorbed that he tuned out the choir of shouts for his aide that tried to sing over the commotion; so absorbed that he didn’t hear the woman behind him breathe her last breath. He had poured disinfectant over the wound and held a glowing machine over the area to assess the damage to the bone. He processed the x-ray almost instantly in his mind, and began to cover the exposed area in a thick, pink paste which he had in a tub on his belt. He reached into his bag and removed a cutting laser. He extended the blade to its longest length and looked back down on the young man…
Morning came, and the camp began to disappear as quickly as it had sprung up. The troops solemnly removed whatever belongings they still had from the charred remains of their tents. It was as quiet as death itself, and the ocean even appeared to be respectively still in memory of the deceased. The newspaper in Munich that morning would say that ninety-six soldiers had been killed. Little red letters would put names to the ninety-six when they were delivered to their families later that afternoon.

Soldiers picked through the devastation, finding their personal belongings sometimes only feet away from the blackened remnants of their friends. The NGE was preparing to divide the remaining troops.

General Conner’s commanding staff had taken a devastating blow. The previous night’s bombing had left the Fourth army with but three experienced Colonels, and several other officers. The NGE’s promotional offices in Munich were swamped when they heard the news. They had only a short time to rifle through the records of thousands of soldiers and hand-pick the most qualified ones to make up for what the media was calling “The Carmel Bay Massacre”.

General Conner was growing impatient.

“We can’t afford to waste time like this,” he growled as he ruffled around papers on his new desk. Polky, who was sitting in a chair directly across from Conner, had been listening to complaints like this for almost an hour now, and needless to say, it wasn’t helping to calm the new General’s nerves.

“Our armies together are just one big target!” Conner shouted. The old man slammed his fists on the feeble desk, causing books to plummet to the sandy floor below. “We should have divided our regiments yesterday, then we could have all begun moving east and capturing cities. The rebellion obviously knows we’re here, so it’s only a matter of time before they plan
another….” Before Conner could finish his ranting, the flap to his tent was thrown open, and a soldier stepped in.

“What is it now?” Conner snapped. The man saluted hastily and his hand disappeared into his pocket and reemerged, tightly grasping a crumpled red note.
Downtown New York City was bustling with commotion as it had been for hundreds of years. Car horns mixed with the white noise of millions of footsteps on the sidewalks. The cacophonous chatter of the harried filled in whatever decibel was unfilled by the general commotion of the city.

A freshly-waxed limousine made its way drudgingly along the heard of cars, like a log floating along a weak current. The President of the United States sat in the back seat, his chief of staff, a weak-shouldered man with curly, grey hair across from him, flipping through papers he had in a leather suitcase on his lap.

“Casualties are fairly low to be honest,” he said removing a report and handing it over to the President without looking up. “Couple hundred men between Hawaii and California… we lost the U.S.S. Pinto though. One of the Empire’s Class-X weapons blew a hole through the hull of their own carrier, and hit the sub at the bottom of the ocean. No survivors there of course…”

“They have names,” the President said scanning the report. “They’re named after Roman Generals: the Marius, the Catulus, the Pulcher, the Sertorius, and the Brutus. They treat them like heirlooms. More dangerous than the Class-Ns if you ask me.”

“Those goddamn rods will be the end of us,” the Chief of Staff said, handing the President another file.

“General Rache, contacted me this morning to inform me of the successful pull-out of the National Guard from Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Utah, and Idaho,” the
President skimmed the newest paper he had been handed. “New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming are mobilizing now.”

“You put an awful lot of trust in General Rache, sir,” the Chief of Staff made eye contact for the first time. “We’re giving them the entire West Coast, Mr. President, how are we going to handle the fallout from this? Giving the NGE half of the United States without a treaty or a fight? The Democrats are practically drooling. This will be the end of your presidency.”

“The presidency may not be the most important position I hold. The other Resistance countries are standing by us on this,” the President continued. “They know that we are strongest near the capitol. No point in stretching out the bulk of our forces to meet the NGE on the West Coast. Our armada in the Atlantic is as strong as it has ever been and it is our job to hold the western flank with equal strength and numbers.”

“But, Mr. President…”

“And,” the President interrupted. “It is my job as President to ensure the safety of our civilians. Guerilla warfare in the cities would cause far more casualties than an NGE occupation.”

“Mr. President, how do we know that they aren’t wiping out the cities as they go like they did when France resisted occupation?”

“France declared war. That is entirely different. I’m going to tell you the same thing that I told CNN; citizens in occupied areas have been told to either evacuate or accept assimilation into the NGE. The Emperor himself decreed that the goal of the occupation is to usurp Resistance command from New York, and that civilian casualties will remain low if the Resistance removes allied armed forces from U.S. territories.”
“This is war, Mr. President!” the Chief of Staff angrily shut his briefcase. “We are accepting the potentially violent occupation of a militaristic dictatorship that has publically announced its desire kill you!”

The President remained calm. Not even the slightest sweat appeared on his brow. “We are extremely lucky that our skirmishes have been few and far between. We showed them our teeth when we attacked them at Carmel Bay, but the best situation for us now is to avoid armed conflict and continue to attempt negotiations with the Empire. Let them think we’ve given up or moved the Resistance Headquarters back to Beijing.”

The Chief of Staff shook his head. “Huang wouldn’t have done this if the NGE had moved into China when he was Grand Chancellor. He would have acted.”

“You and I, we know what this is,” the President leaned forward, displaying his emotions for the first time during the trip. “This is the invasion that we’ve feared for years. They are trying to kill us. The NGE is painting this as a retaliatory attack on the Grand Chancellor’s office for the fighting in Turkey, and they’re claiming to have no interest in the government of the United States.”

“Mr. President…”

“They want my head, Dick. My head. They are coming here now to kill me. If the citizens of this nation attack them they will die, and if they hand me over, the Resistance presence in this country is as good as gone. You and I both know that without continued aid from other Resistance powers this country would not be able to function.”

“Then give up the Chancellorship at least!” the Chief of Staff shouted. “Give it back to Huang, and make it his problem!”
“And you think that would stop them?” the President fumed. “We were fools if we ever thought we could function in the same world that the NGE exists in! We were a target even before we allied with the Resistance, and me playing a pivotal part in the Resistance now is the least we could do to show our support of the only force standing in the NGE’s way!”

“You’re turning this into a personal vendetta, Mr. President! Your approval rating is already plummeting!” the Chief of Staff threw a report down on the seat next to him. “You can’t be the President of this country and the Chancellor of the Resistance as well!”

“You’re suggesting U.S. neutrality, Dick! Congress wouldn’t approve dissolving the treaties with our allies now!”

“Congress wants what’s best for this nation, Tom! You’ll be impeached!”

The President leaned forward so that his face was only a foot away from the Chief’s.

“Neutrality means submission. Submission means that the United States becomes part of the NGE. Impeach me if that’s the future you want for this country.”

The door next to the President opened up. They two had been so animated that they hadn’t felt the limousine stop.

“You’re late, Chancellor,” the Mirror grumbled in his raw, gravely tone. “Afternoon... Dick.”

The Chief of Staff leaned back and straightened his tie and cleared his throat.

“Christopher.”

The President emerged from the limo out into the bright sun. He straightened his tie and fixed his part with his fingers.

The three stood in the parking lot of the new capitol building. Hundreds of armed-forces men and women stood ready to escort the President to his office.
“Ground zero,” the President stated, looking out at the new capitol building, which up until a month or so ago had been a museum and monument dedicated to the darkest September. “New York will not see another tragedy such as this. I swear it.”
CHAPTER 39

A silvery metallic ceiling came into focus as Ray slowly opened his eyes. He was growing tired of waking up alongside scalpels and gauze. But on a positive note, the pain in his leg that had forced him to sleep was gone. Ray took a deep breath and started to sit up.

A mouse-like man with a thin neck and massive glasses that were perched on the tip of his long nose poked his head into Ray’s line of vision. Ray instinctively grabbed the man’s lab coat as he had done before. The skittish doctor was the first person that Ray had seen after his awkward trip to his future, so Ray hadn’t necessarily made the best of impressions on the fragile surgeon.

“What the hell happened to me?!” Ray shook him. The obvious answer lay mending under his sheets, but Ray was in such a mood that strangling a doctor seemed a rather logical alternative to common sense.

“Let me go you barbarian!” Doctor Earling squeaked. “Calm yourself down! You’re going to make yourself pass out.”

It took a few seconds for the man’s words to trickle into Ray’s brain. Not a second after the doctor’s feet had touched the ground, the door to the room opened again. This time it was Ray’s austere counterpart, the Emperor, who entered, surprisingly unprotected by the customary horde of guards.

“What are you doing here?” asked Ray, flabbergasted.
“I should ask you the same thing,” the Emperor said, turning his chair to face the bed.

“How did I arrive here?” Ray prodded. “How long have I been out?”

“You were returned here last week by the orders of General Conner himself.” The Emperor motioned for the doctor to leave the room.

“I just remember the beach,” Ray paused. “Conner! Is he alright? When can I see him?”

“General Conner is fine,” the Emperor coughed. “He and the rest of the invasion force have already mounted a counter-offensive.”

“My friends! Mal! Is she okay?! When will I be going back?!?” Ray leaned forward, paying no attention to his numbed leg.

“It would help my soul to rest if I could send you back this instant to confirm the safety of your squadron, but sadly, I cannot.” The Emperor paused and extracted a letter from his pocket. “I have a specific request from Conner himself to keep you here.”

“He was trying to transfer me to a safer unit on the night of the attack,” Ray could still hear Mal screaming before the mortar hit. “He’s using my injury as an excuse to protect me.”

The Emperor listened hard to the words of his inexperienced quintessence and smirked after discovering his train of thought.

“Raymond, your views of this war and this world in general are very selfish. Conner’s removal of you from his ranks wasn’t the result of his worrying for your safety; it was the result of him worrying about his own.” The Emperor looked up to see Ray’s confusion displayed in his eyes. “This report states, and I quote, ‘The Lieutenant has shown incredible achievements in his control of the Sertorius; however, during times of crisis and danger, it fails to heed my orders, instead, it obeys the boy’s, leaving me vulnerable and endangering my men in times of need. Two solutions to this dilemma are obvious to me, one of them being honorable discharge (and
you are aware of what that would entail), the other choice is a change of command. Therefore, I am requesting a transfer of the Lieutenant’s services to the hands of your Excellency as opposed to the former. My only further request is that the Lieutenant remains out of any life-threatening situations for fear of the safety of my troops here in America.”

The Emperor looked up from the red piece of paper. Ray was smiling faintly.

The ancient man raised a bushy, grey eyebrow.

“So what should I do now that I’m here? I mean I can’t do much of anything with my leg being the way it is, right?”

“Right,” said the Emperor.

“So I can do anything that I want while I’m here?”

“Save threatening national security, I suppose so.”

“Good,” Ray said as he pushed aside his covers. His left leg was wrapped in heavy bandages. “Holy shit!”

He made eye contact with the Emperor who had given him a stern look.

“You’re lucky your leg was saved,” the old man wheezed. “The medical officer who operated on you should have gone the route of amputation. General Conner said it was his inexperience that, in the end, saved your limb long enough to have you shipped back here where I could fix you fully.”

Ray planted both of his feet on the ground, but when he tried to bring his torso up as well, he wobbled for a second and then fell. The pain was excruciating.

“The mere fact that you will be able to walk again is a blessing,” the Emperor barked. “Respect it as such, and do not force movement.”
At the Emperor’s orders, a hover chair was brought into the room. Two men helped Ray sit down. The Emperor spoke to Ray before he left the room.

“Don’t test my patience during your stay here.”

When the Emperor had left, Doctor Earling, spitefully came to instruct Ray.

“You will take two of the pills that will be delivered to your quarters every night, and you will be re-evaluated in a week. Now, is this the first time you’ve ridden in a hover chair?”

*I’m from 2009 of course I’ve ridden in a hover chair before.* Ray thought sarcastically to himself. He declined Doctor Earling’s offer for help, and the frail man, left without another word. Ray was now alone, sitting in a wheelchair with more horsepower than a drag racer. He was living every boy’s dream save the nasty bit about the leg.

After several minutes of bashing off of walls, pressing red buttons, and ramming joysticks forward, Ray managed to make it out of the room. He looked back triumphantly at the room that he had “conquered,” which now was a mess of spilled liquids, broken syringes, and dropped scalpels. He was now faced with one of the doppelganger hallways of the palace.

Ray’s boisterous instincts told him to race about the hallways just a nudge under full speed until he was able to pick out Nova’s room amongst the sea of its identical brothers and sisters. Perhaps, once there, he could try and figure out how to find out if his friends had made it through the attack.

The chair hummed loudly as it sped through the hallways. The doors of the palace melded together into one blur as Ray flew by. The once stale, motionless flew in Ray’s eyes as if it too were having an infantile good time. It was a freeing feeling, one which Ray had never experienced before. The worries of human life were harder to distinguish than the numbers on the palace doors. He took a corner, and his race of relief was brought to an abrupt end.
Two characters collided resulting in back to back thuds and a hover chair free of its pilot. After crashing to the ground, Ray attempted to stand but in present circumstances found it was next to impossible. Ray was pulled up by his collar, tightening it around his throat. General Khavin, who was the administrator of this shirt-lynching, examined Ray with his only visible eye. The gruff General’s stale breath beat against Ray’s face in fast, steady increments. Apparently this accident had caused the man’s heart to skip a beat.

“Lieutenant Tract?” Khavin sputtered. “What is it you are doing?” Khavin was raising his right eyebrow in a questioning look, but to all people outside of the ebony mask his expression remained unchanged.

“I was…”

“I trust no more mistakes, Tract?”

“No, sir, I won’t,” Ray hacked through his pressured windpipe. Khavin placed Ray on the ground where the boy proceeded to rub his bruised neck.

“I am positive you will not.” Khavin turned and walked down the hallway. Ray looked over at the hover chair lying useless on its back. He rubbed his sore leg; General Khavin was a scary fellow, and he would hate to repeat such an unpleasant incident. He struggled to flip the chair over, and by the time he sat down, his leg was burning with soreness.

It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining brightly outside, birds chirped, the wind whished through the air carrying with it the sweet scent of fresh flowers recently emerged from their buds. The sky had but one cloud, and even if were to rain, it could not faze this perfect day. Nova spent the entire morning away from all of this untainted beauty in her dark bedroom, not tired enough to sleep, but just tired enough to keep her from wanting to move.
A chubby guard sat, arms crossed, in a chair in the corner of her room. He looked up momentarily to see what she was up to, but otherwise showed no interest. She felt like a pet, cooped up in a dark cage.

A knock rang on her door. She sat up to see what had happened, but her guard had stood first. Drawing his gun, the man walked over to the door and peeked through it sweating and breathing heavily.

*Oh wow, this must be the most action you’ve had all year,* she watched the 300 pound security guard fiddle with his trigger as he gazed nervously down the hall. Nova rose softly, but the bed spring squeaked, causing the guard to spin and point his gun at the girl.

“There’s someone outside…” he sputtered nervously, lowering his gun. His pupils were the yolks in his wide, fried egg-like eyes.

A familiar voice rang from the other side of the cracked door.

“Hello?”

The guard dropped his gun and raised his hands in the air.

“I surrender!”

Ray hovered into Nova’s room and broke out with laughter. Nova’s breath left her, replaced with flashes of the past. Ray was one of only two people that understood what she was going through in this strange, new world. Ray’s predicament was even worse than hers, and yet, he wore the same warm smile on his face that he had when they were walking home from school that fateful day.

The two stared into each other’s eyes, and the world evaporated into colorful vapors around them. Ray spoke first.
“Sir, my name is Lieutenant Tract.” His gaze remained on Nova. “I believe it’s my shift.”

The nervous guard, regaining his composure, bent over to pick up his gun up.

“I didn’t hear anything about a Lieutenant Tract being on guard duty. Where are your papers?”

“Listen…” Ray said scanning the man’s uniform for a sign of his rank. “Private, I’m your commanding officer, if I say it’s my shift, it’s my shift.” The obese man stared off into space for a second and then left, saluting carelessly and mumbling to himself.

Ray moved closer to Nova, trying not to ruin the moment by hovering at her too quickly. But he didn’t have to worry about making it the entire way, for Nova had ran out to embrace him.

She was so soft in such hard times, and Ray wished the warmth of her hug would last for hours. Eventually, he helped himself onto Nova’s bed and the two sat close to each other.

“What happened to your leg?” She asked.

“Just some shrapnel or something; it doesn’t matter. I’m so sorry about all of this.” Ray met her eyes with as deep a look as he could.

“What? Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault.”

“Well, this all wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t gone crazy and taken over the world.” Ray joked.

“Crazy? You didn’t go crazy; the Emperor did.”

“You think what the Emperor is doing is wrong?”

“Yes, yes I do. And what about you?”

Ray seemed a tad offended by Nova’s frankness. “Well, I don’t know. I mean he’s not like Hitler or anything…”
“Do you know how he got into power?”

“Not really.” Ray frowned.

“Exactly! Nobody does,” Nova said. “I’m in a history class here right now and they just make it seem like everything favorable just happened to him. He became a U.S. senator, than the president, and then the secretary general of the U.N. at the same time…”

“Wait,” Ray interjected. “I was the president.”

“Haha, yeah,” Nova said. She remembered when this information appeared so exciting to her. Now it was all she ever heard about.

“That’s kind of neat,” Ray smiled.

“Yes, it is,” Nova tried to return the smile. “And I’m not saying you couldn’t do all of those things, but isn’t it a little weird that the Emperor just won all of these elections, and forged all of these alliances without any opposition.”

“Yeah,” Ray reflected. “I guess that is odd.”

“France, China, and the United States were the only countries that opposed him. I mean, he unified the Middle East for God’s sake!”

“How’d he do that?”

“No. One. Knows.” Nova slapped the mattress with each word. “All the history books say is that these things happened. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“Yeah.” Ray bit his lip in thought and looked down to his feet.

“Is something wrong?” Nova asked. Ray looked down into his lap.

“Well, like you said... I don’t really understand much of anything that’s going on now. I mean the Emperor does have a lot of control. What if he is like Hitler or something? What if I’m fighting for the wrong side? I’m just a pawn like everyone else than.”
Nova put her hand on his injured leg. Ray looked up into her sincere eyes. Her voice was comforting and warm. “I don’t understand much either. It’s been hard to get any information out of anybody. All I know is that you’re a unique and amazing person. Not a pawn.”

“Nova.”

Nova inched a bit closer to him, her eyelashes beat over her dark eyes.

“I know this wasn’t your fault, and I would be lying if I said I was happy here, but all of that means nothing…” Ray leaned in, his nose grazing hers. “Because I’m happy now.”

The door to the room opened and the two separated instantly, their eyes gazing at the tall figure walking through the door. Their hearts were still racing from shock and excitement, and the arrival of Hoffenen had brought with it mixed feelings for the two.

“Tract?” he voiced, confused but without malice. “What are you doing here?”
CHAPTER 40

Ray’s behind sunk deeper into Nova’s blood red comforter. Hoffenen took a step towards the bed, his polished, leather boots clicking on the black, marble floor. He reached across his chest and slid his hand into his jacket. The veins in Ray’s temple pounded as he recalled his previous encounter with Hoffenen and the weapon that he knew to be nestled in the General’s pocket.

“Nova, watch out!” shouted Ray, positioning himself rather awkwardly between her and Hoffenen. The General gave Ray a look of playful confusion.

“My deepest apologies Lieutenant. I had not be made aware that you were deathly afraid of small pieces of paper.” Hoffenen was holding a tiny piece of folded manila paper that he had removed from his jacket pocket. He held out the paper as if it were a tiny, harmless animal.

“See Lieutenant,” Hoffenen said with a sickeningly mocking tone to his voice. “It won’t bite.”

Ray slowly reached out for the piece of paper, his vision was blurring slightly as his headache got worse. Hoffenen closed his fist at the last second and pulled it away.

“Tell me Tract, why if I was surprised to see you here, would I have a message for you?” Hoffenen sniggered arrogantly. “This message is for Miss Kline.”

Nova reached out quickly and snatched the paper from Hoffenen’s spider-like fingers. She flipped open the note and read it furiously.

“But this is…” Nova whispered in shock.
“Yes.” Hoffenen spoke with a different air, as if he had been pushed off of his cloud of arrogance and superiority. “I know it’s not much but it’ll give you a chance to get out of this dismal place.”

“Can I bring Ray along?” Ray perked up a tad after hearing his name; his headache was growing worse still, and the whole room was spinning now.

“Ray?!” Nova asked, a look of worry in her eyes. The walls were melting.

“Lieutenant?” Hoffenen questioned in his harsh tone. His facial expression blurred as Ray’s vision grew worse. Ray’s eyelids shut and all went black...

“Ray, are you alright?” Ray slowly opened his eyes. Nova was crouched awkwardly over him on the bed, her hands gently shaking Ray’s shoulders.


“We were sitting here talking and plop!” She emphasized “plop” by slapping the mattress. “You just fell right asleep. Hoffenen said it probably was a side effect of pain-killers.” Ray rubbed his temples trying to obliterate the remnants of his splitting headache.

“Hoffenen was here?” Ray asked, ignoring her question. “What was he doing here?”

“He checks on me about every other week. The Emperor made him do it; said it wouldn’t hurt for him to get a break from the front lines. The first couple of visits, he just sat in the corner as irritable as a starving dog.” Nova barred her teeth and growled, mimicking Hoffenen. Ray laughed at the strangely accurate portrayal.

Nova continued, “He’s warmed up to me now, and we play chess to pass the time. He’s pretty good, really loves his knights.”

“He gave you a note.” Ray sat up. “What did it say?”
Nova rolled her eyes. “Routine doctor’s appointment reminder. I swear we get evaluated like guinea pigs here.”

“Really?” Ray cracked his neck. “I’ve only had one.”

“ Weird,” Nova paused for a second of thought. “Hey I’ve got another voicebox, so you can contact me again if the old guy will let you.”

“Conner. His name is Conner,” Ray said, irked. “And I don’t think I’m gonna have to worry about long distance contact with you for a while.”

Ray explained how Conner had requested that he stay in Munich and how the Emperor had given him free reign of the palace.

“That’s great!” Nova smiled widely. “Maybe we could go for a walk?”

“Sure, I’d love to. Just give me a minute.”

It was an exhilarating feeling to get to spend unrestricted time with Nova. Their relationship was but a sapling. They hadn’t had seasons to grow strong with one another before the harsh winter of life hit them head on, and this winter could very well have been the harshest and most brutal winter even for the largest and most firmly rooted oak. Even the Conner’s who had been together forever still were fundamentally changed by a tragic event.

Nova scrambled around her room, gathering various trinkets from different nooks and crannies and throwing them into a black, satin purse. Ray sat in his chair by the door, mouth agape, pondering to himself what use a purse could have on a simple walk.

“All right! Now we can go.”

“But what’s with all of the ...?”
“Girl stuff,” Nova muttered under her breath. Ray decided it best not to delve any further into Nova’s affairs. Whatever was in that bag, he was sure, was none of his business, or any man’s business for that matter.

Nova and he snaked through the maze-like hallways, talking and laughing as they went. Nova delivered her legendary rendition of the time she had walked in on Mr. Ellis, the English teacher making out with the reading teacher Mrs. Hamerly (“They were glued at the mouth! It was like they were trying to eat each other’s tongues!”).

Ray told her of several of his failed attempts to ask her out, and she laughed at how obvious they had been, and how she still hadn’t caught on.

They had no place to be and no set time by which they had to return; it seemed as if this was the miracle they had both been longing for. Both were peppy and excited, so the talk remained light and bouncy; not a word was spoken of the NGE, or the war, or the future at all for that matter. That was, however, only until Ray ran out of school stories, for Nova was far more popular and had far more to tell.

“What have you been doing these last few weeks?” Ray asked. “I haven’t spoken with you since the invasion.” The reality of the times cut through Nova’s mood. Her smile disappeared slowly.

“I’ve spent most of my time trying to find out if you were alright.”

Ray’s cheeks turned hot. “I really haven’t been able to do much else, ever since my little escape attempt.”

“Yeah,” Ray said lowering his eyebrow. “Why did you try something like that Nova? It’s really not worth it, we’re only going to be here for a short while longer.”

“Oh really?” something had snapped. “What magical fairy told you that?”
“I…”

Nova interrupted.

“Do you really still believe that the Emperor is just going to let you go, free as a bird?”

Nova’s arms flapped up and down against her sides.

“Well I…”

“You of all people, don’t you see what the Emperor is doing? He’s trying to sculpt you into his perfect little clone. Do you think after all of the work and time he’s put into that he’s going to keep his word and let you return home?”

“But Nova…” Ray was trying with all of his being to listen to Nova’s words even though he would have preferred them presented in a kinder tone. Nova stopped and leaned against a wall, she redid her ponytail.

“Nova,” Ray placed his hands on her shoulders. “I’m not blind, I just hope… I just hope that my honesty is still there. I still kinda hope that I can find a scrap of good in that old man. I know it’s still there because no matter how coarse, how sour, I become, I can’t shed my conscience. It’s part of me, and no matter how much he tries to deny it, it will always mess with him when he does something wrong. At least it always has for me…”

Nova sighed and put her hands on Ray’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Ray. I shouldn’t lecture you. I know who you are, and I know that we’ll get out of here alive and…” she paused. “and very soon.”

Ray stood back and extended his hand. She reached out and grasped it with hers. Her hands were as soft as they had been in the alley.
The tensions eased as the walk continued. They were again able to return to trivial conversation, but Nova appeared to be still distantly involved in her thoughts. She was constantly looking over her shoulder and giving heightened attention to doors that she passed.

“And that’s why I’ll never eat Long John Silvers again…. Nova?” Nova had stopped to examine one of the monotonous doors.

“I’m still here you know.” Ray said. Nova paid him no mind as she ran her fingers over the door knob. “Hello, earth to Nova! Come in Nova!”

Having found what she was looking for, Nova pressed a miniscule button on the shaft of the doorknob. A familiar keypad and touch screen folded out of the wall next to it, making a soft, mechanical hum as it slid into place.

Nova locked eyes with Ray, and he felt her warm hand wrap around his again.

“I’m going to need to borrow this.” She yanked Ray’s hand, body following, and pressed it on the touchpad. Ray jerked away as she was trying to spread out his fingers.

“What are you doing?!”

Nova reached for his hand again, but he moved it behind his back.

“Nova what’s up? You…”

But before Ray could finish, Nova grabbed him by the back of his head and leapt up to kiss him. Ray arched his back to compensate for Nova’s weight. His heart leaped, and he wrapped his arms around her.

Quicker than a jackrabbit, Nova broke free from his embrace, grabbed his wrist, and slammed his hand onto the touchpad. Ray snapped out of his comfort and jerked his hand away yet again, but this time, the computer had already scanned his fingerprints. The console shot back
into the wall and hummed a moment before a stern woman’s voice rang clear from a nearby speaker.


“Are you coming or not?”

Ray scanned the hallway to make sure no one was coming and snuck gingerly in the room after her. The thick, metal door shut slowly behind him, blocking out all of the hallway’s light, leaving Ray and Nova together in the pitch. He heard a faint shuffling sound from next to him. Everything was so confusing. Why couldn’t just one day be a normal one? Ray backed away and bumped into something metal that let out a deep vibration. A tiny click ignited a flashlight that Nova now held in her hand. Ray took a step towards Nova, whose puzzled expression was illuminated by the flashlight.

The room was no bigger than a walk-in closet, and all around its edges were black, metal filing cabinets, each labeled with letters A through Z. The beam of the flashlight danced from cabinet to cabinet until it fell on one marked with the letter G. Nova showed a faint smile as she stepped forward and opened the first drawer in the cabinet.

“Here.” She handed Ray the flashlight. “Hold this.”

The thin metal of the opening drawer screeched like nails being scraped across a chalkboard.

The file cabinet was different than the ones Ray had seen back home. This cabinet was made to hold what looked to be computer chips. Nova ran her fingers across each chip as Ray
looked on, full of questions but muted by astonishment. Having not found what she wanted, Nova huffed and opened the next drawer.

“Nova, what exactly are we doing here?”

Nova ignored him and proceeded to the next drawer.

“Nova!” he put his hand on her arm.

“I’m just picking up something to play with.” Ray raised a questioning eyebrow and motioned with his hands for her to continue. “This is a game storage room, the only one in the palace,” she explained. “These little chips contain everything from Backgammon to Monopoly. I can play them in my room, so I stop by here often to pick up something new. Hoffenen recommended a special one to me so that we would have something to do.” Her eyes widened as she plucked a green chip from the drawer and placed it in her bag. “I knew I’d find it.

Now, you have to promise not to tell anyone we were here, okay?”

“Why?” Ray asked, annoyed.

“Because, I’m not allowed out of my room, and I don’t have any clearance to open doors. If someone found out I was in here, I could get in serious trouble.”

“You said you come frequently,” Ray said. “How do you get in then?”

“Jacob helps me usually, but he left us alone today.” The light from the hallway shown through the crack in the door as Nova pushed it open. She popped her head out and looked into the hallway. The pair stepped out, and Nova gave Ray a kiss on the cheek. “See? Jacob’s not as mean as you make him out to be.”

Back in the room, Nova slid the little chip into a black consul which was about the same shape and size as a pizza box. The consul buzzed and then projected a holographic title into the air above it:
Ray chuckled. The hologram then projected two keypads, one for Ray and one for Nova. “Please type your name,” a male voice spoke from the box. Ray looked over at Nova who was already typing in his name, which was strange since the keyboard was in midair. “Nova?” Ray asked. “Why are you typing my name?” “I’m not military personnel so I don’t have a character. I’m playing as you.” Ray poked his fingers through the holographic keyboard. *It was amazing how the keyboard remembered all the letters he poked through.* “Francis Conner?” Nova read what Ray had typed, thought for a moment, and then snapped her fingers. “The old guy!” Ray rolled his eyes and pressed enter. “Now what?” The holographic screen flipped down and it projected a distorted Monopoly board. Instead of classic names like the Board Walk and Park Place, the squares had the names of countries, and the railways were named after NGE’s aircraft carriers. Ray laughed when he saw puny, holographic miniatures of himself and General Conner on the glowing, light green GO square. Conner was hobbling around the square and scratching his head, whereas the miniature Ray was doing pushups and sit-ups. The computer had also placed two players in the game, both rather generic-looking soldiers. Nova smiled and pointed down at the board. “Care to go first?” The game lasted longer than it was enjoyable. Nova gained the advantage quickly, and Ray spent the majority of the game playing catch-up.
“This is just like my birthday party in tenth grade!” Ray snapped jokingly after Nova had taken control of the most expensive property on the board (Munich Palace).

“Charlie’s ‘awesome gaming party’?” Nova grinned.

“Yeah,” Ray rolled his eyes. “You, me, Dan, Charlie, a bag of stale popcorn and a monopoly board with missing pieces.”

“Charlie had the beer cap as his piece, remember?” Nova placed a hotel on the France square.

“Yeah, and Charlie let Dan try his whiskey!” Ray poked the pair of virtual dice in the air and watched them fall to the bored where they rolled snake eyes.

“He almost threw up your couch!”

“It was so green no one would have noticed either way,” Ray remarked.

When Nova’s clock blinked 3:13 AM, Ray decided it best to turn in for the night, even though the game hadn’t yet ended.

“I had a lot of fun today,” Nova said.

“Yeah,” Ray said, standing up with some difficulty and flicking some fuzz from his white t-shirt. “Me too.”

“Close your eyes,” Nova whispered. Ray slowly complied. Nova wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled Ray down to embrace her. His leg still hurt, so he leaned on her, but she didn’t seem to mind. His heart soared, and it felt to him as if time had frozen, stuck forever in the moment.

“Thanks for being here for me,” Nova whispered shyly. Ray felt strangely calm and yet ready to burst at the same time. He didn’t know how long they stood there.
“Well, I probably should get going before your guards have a fit. Good night,” he said, surprising himself with his sickeningly sweet tone. Ray sat down in his chair and hovered towards the door. “Good night.” He repeated again clumsily.
CHAPTER 41

The room stunk. The unpleasant musk of age had been put to stew with the lingering smell of spent fires and spilt food: all reminders of the presence of the reclusive Emperor who had made the study his hovel as of late. He would seldom emerge more than once a week to address the press, a gesture he was becoming increasingly impatient with seeing as he had the final say as to what was published or not published either way.

The old man sat in this room now, leafing through the pages of a beaten-up book he had read many times before, ignoring General Hoffenen and General Khavin who were seated in armchairs in front of him. All were silent, their attentions transfixed on the inanimate, waiting.

A voicebox on the Emperor’s end table vibrated, and a voice emerged from its core.

“Excellency, this is General Conner. Are you there?”

The Emperor hovered over to his bookshelf and returned his copy of Fahrenheit 451 to its proper place on the shelf.

“Yes, Conner, I’m here,” he droned. “Let us start the meeting. I believe you had something you wished to bring up first, General Conner?”

“It concerns me that we still don’t know who was responsible for the slaughter of my men back in Hawaii, Excellency.” Malice clung to the end of Conner’s sentence.

“It is a war, Conner.” The Emperor’s chair whirred over closer to the box. “There will be some casualties…”

“Yes, I know that.” Conner was irritated. “But deaths of that nature could have been prevented.
“There is someone out there who is capable of hacking into our systems.” Conner spoke slowly. “Our transmissions are being picked up and used against us.”

“We haven’t had any instances since that initial gaffe. So is this still a problem?” The Emperor shot questioning glances at the men in the armchairs.

“I would have to agree with General Conner,” Hoffenen spoke, legs crossed in one of the chairs. “Something must be done to pick out the spies before another one of our weapons is made potentially dangerous to us.”

The Emperor coughed.

“I recommend,” Hoffenen continued. “An imperial inquisition of all questionable officers.”

“Officers?” Khavin questioned from the chair next to him.

“Yes, General Khavin,” Hoffenen answered. “Only an officer would possess the technical savvy and codes to crack our system. The traitor is high in our ranks.”

“Very good, Hoffenen,” said the Emperor, the worry leaving his face. “You will spearhead this inquisition, then. I am far too busy with important matters.”

Khavin opened his mouth, but Hoffenen spoke first.

“But all officers are suspects, sir. That includes myself. As a General I must advise you to put the appointment to a vote of my peers…”

“Are you implying you are the spy Hoffenen?”

“No Excellency, I am merely saying…”

“Then do not instruct me on how to run my Empire. You are in charge of this inquisition, Hoffenen, and that is my decision.”

“Yes, Excellency…”
“Very good. Very good. I hope that satisfies everyone.”

The room was silent.

“Moving on,” the Emperor continued. “How about a progress report from each of you; General Conner if you would like to begin?”

“Things are going suspiciously smoothly here, Excellency,” Conner said. “We’ve simply moved through most cities seeing as we lack the manpower for a realistic occupation at this point. The Fourth Army has been moving steadily northeast as commanded and we are currently camped in the outskirts of Marmarth, North Dakota.”

“And General Polky?”

“Last I heard, General Polky’s a select few of his squads and mine have made it, undetected to Toronto and they should be within days of having the Fort back up and running.”

“The subway is back up,” the Emperor interrupted. “I just authorized some troops to go aide your men.”


“And of General Polky, himself,” the Emperor ignored Conner’s gratitude. “Where is he?”

“Last I heard, Timothy is still with the bulk of his North American troops in Idaho. They ran into a civilian blockade, so they were held up for a few days.”

“Nothing terrible,” the Emperor hovered in front of his fire. “How long before you and your men make it to Toronto?”

“A month if that, sir.”

“Brilliant. That is all from you General Conner,” the Emperor breathed deeply. “General Khavin?”
“Nothing is to report, Excellancy,” he grumbled. “Night raid was last instance.”

“Good, good. General Hoffenen?”

“Turkish Resistance militia is retreating into Iran. No doubt trying to reunite with the Resistance in China.”

“If they make it into Huang’s umbrella of influence it’ll be pointless to follow them.” The Emperor rubbed his brow. “Any movement from the Resistance in Asia?”

“No, my lord,” Hoffenen continued. “Our ambassadors from Japan report that Prime Minster Huang has yet to decide on his desired level of involvement with regards to the aid of the Resistance in America.”

“Like chickens with their heads cut off!” the Emperor wheezed. “Huang would let his greatest ally burn if it meant that he could be Resistance Chancellor again! What a pompous fool!”

“Indeed.” Hoffenen mused.

“Well,” the Emperor addressed the generals. “I believe that that is a sufficient report for tonight. You are all dismissed.”

The voicebox clicked and Khavin left the room pale, and silent.

The Emperor reached up to rub his temple. Hoffenen stayed in his chair, strumming his long fingers on the cushioned arm.

“Why do they have to make things so difficult, Jacob?”

“It is their way, I suppose, Excellency.”

“You seem to have a good head on your shoulders. Why does this invasion boil the blood of the others so?”

“The weak fear, your Excellency. The strong are calm and patient.”
“Thank you for taking care of this spy nonsense, Jacob. My mind has been failing me as of late.”

“Understandable, Excellency. I will focus my efforts on solving this dilemma. My men in Turkey can do without me for a time. Colonel Galestrom is a fine officer.”

“I am glad that there is one of you that takes responsibility,” the Emperor coughed.

“Goodnight, Jacob.”

After leaving the study, Hoffenen strode through the winding halls of the palace. He stopped upon an unlit section of the building.

“The palace is usually better kept,” he scowled. “This place is going to the dogs.”

His pursed lips cracked wide into a smile, and he slid his hand into his jacket pocket.

Hoffenen stared icily into the darkness in front of him. There was a large figure standing in the shadows.

“Out for a walk, are we Khavin?”

“Don’t play mind games, Jacob. I am smarter than that.”

Hoffenen laughed. “I suppose you are smarter than your apelike mannerisms suggest.”

Khavin stepped out into the light. His ebony half-mask, sandpaper-coarse beard, scraggly eyebrows, and pronounced forehead were only inches away from Hoffenen’s oily, black hair, crooked smile, and off-white teeth.

“You may have everyone else fooled, Khavin, but you haven’t got me.”

“You are pulling wool over Emperor’s eyes, not me. Is your mistake.”

“When the time comes,” Hoffenen locked eyes with Khavin. “We shall see whose mistakes come back to haunt them.”
“You can do to me nothing.”

“When the time comes…” Hoffenen whispered. Khavin snorted and spat on the ground and then shoved his way past Hoffenen and disappeared around a corner. Hoffenen did not say another word. He loosened his tight grip on the Brutus in his pocket.
CHAPTER 42

The sound of knuckles rapping on wood woke Ray from his sleep. When he opened the door, Nova sprung into the room like a jack-in-the-box free from its container. The difference in energy levels was apparent. Ray was drowsy, and it felt to him as if he had sandbags on his eyelids, whereas Nova was peppy and alive.

“I bring bagels,” she said, emptying the contents of a brown bag onto Ray’s poorly-made bed. He didn’t gather a word of what she had said and hadn’t really heard the ruffling of the brown bag. So as one might imagine, it was a surprise to him when he was struck by an avalanche of bagels: plain, raisin, blueberry, pumpernickel, and poppy seed.

“Eat and hurry. I want to return to file storage room.” Nova didn’t look Ray in the eyes when she spoke.

“Wha…the…blaah…” Ray’s pillow muffled his voice. Nova looked up to the ceiling as if thinking about her next words.

“I need to return to room we went to yesterday. Return chip I borrowed.”

“Let me just peel a bagel off of my back, and then we can be on our way.”

Ray struggled to keep up with Nova as she tore down the hallway.

“Wait up!” Ray shouted with a mouth full of bagel.

“We have to return chip,” Nova said, not stopping in her stride.
“Can we slow down just a bit?” Ray had left his hoverchair in his room, and was limping to keep up.

Nova turned and grabbed Ray’s hand, her grip was so strong it hurt Ray’s fingers. “We will get trouble if we don’t return chip soon.”

Nova gave Ray’s arm a tug, it felt as if his arm would dislocate from the socket.

“Hey, Nova! What the heck?!”

Ray tried to jerk free, but she held on tighter.

“What is, it Raymond?” she asked, not attempting to hide her annoyance. “Why do you stop?”

“I stop,” Ray snapped, jerking his hand away from hers. “Because you’re acting strange! What’s going on?”

“I’m just in bit of a hurry to return this chip. I don’t want Hoffenen to get in trouble.”

“What does he have to do with anything?” Ray asked. “Nova, you’re making no sense.”

“Well, what is it you think about General Hoffenen?” Nova snapped. “Is he a friend to you?”

“Nova?” Ray rose an eyebrow. “I forgot the name of the game we played last night, could you remind me?” Nova seemed taken aback from this question.

“It was, it was…”

“By the way, what’s my guardian’s name?” Nova took a step back, cornered. “I’ve told all of these things to Nova, and she listened and gave me honest feedback. The rough hands, the strong grip: something’s been odd this entire time, so what’s going on?”

A wide grin stretched across Nova’s face. Her voice changed from her usual sultry timbre to a man’s deep tone.
“So, you aren’t as dumb as you would lead all to believe.” A blinding, orange flash lit the corridor; Ray had to shield his eyes. Standing in Nova’s place was General Khavin. The light from the ceiling bulbs reflected off of his polished, ebony mask.

Ray took a step back as Khavin took a step forward.

“General Khavin?”

“Amazing what changed wavelength can do, Lieutenant?

The sound of footsteps made Ray and Khavin looked across the hallway. General Hoffenen was trotting nonchalantly towards them. The melancholy General closed the distance between them quickly but calmly with his long, gangly legs.

“And what brings you two to this neck of the woods?” Hoffenen mused.

Ray bit his lip, deciding whether or not to answer. Khavin was clearly annoyed by Hoffenen’s question.

“And what are you doing here?”

Hoffenen took a deep breath, his eyes still glued to a corner of the ceiling.

“Lieutenant Tract disappeared from his room, and when I inquired of Miss Nova as to where he was, she couldn’t fathom a response.” He looked Ray in the eyes. “I was worried for our young Emperor’s safety.” Ray scowled. Hoffenen smirked, and his eyes returned to the ceiling. “What with the recent, failing safety precautions we’ve employed.”

“Aware aren’t you that palace safety is my jurisdiction, Hoffenen?” Khavin snorted, balling his fists. Hoffenen ignored him and addressed Ray.

“Lieutenant, Miss Nova is waiting for you in the courtyard.” He turned his icy stare on Khavin. “If you’ll excuse me, I must have a word with Khavin… in private.” The hallway grew quiet; Ray was paralyzed. “Leave.”
Ray hobbled down the hallway, forgetting to salute his superiors. As he turned the corner, he heard Khavin’s stentorian shouting.

By the time Ray reached the courtyard, he was sore and out of breath. The courtyard consisted of an elegant fountain surrounded by lush, green grass and several oak benches. The fountain was sculpted in the shape of a beautiful angel, standing with her hands outstretched and sparkling, clean water flowing from her palms. Birds had come to rest in the angel’s hair, and they chirped loudly when Ray bounded through the palace doors. The courtyard was located in the center of the palace, which made for a vulgar clash between nature and man. Nova was sitting on the rim of the fountain, combing her hair with her fingers.

“Ray,” she said, standing up. “Come sit down.” Ray staggered over to her, still desperately trying to regain his lost breath.

“Something’s happened, Ray.” The two sat down. Her eyes grew cold and serious, and Ray placed his hand on hers.

“What do you mean?”

Nova looked into his eyes. “I can’t tell all of it to you now, but the long and short of it is we’re in danger here.”

“Danger?”

“Jacob told me this morning, someone on the inside is planning to ambush the NGE in America. There’s a spy in our midst.”

“What? Who?”

“He goes by General Rache. He’s the one whose been preparing the Rebellion for the NGE’s strikes. Jacob discovered the identity of the person when he started to poke around under
the Emperor’s orders. Jacob needs us to warn the troops in America because he knows that Rache has all communication tapped. We’re leaving at noon.” Ray really hated it when Nova spoke so familiarly of Hoffenen, but he felt an odd burning feeling knowing that the man responsible for Oho’s death was somewhere in the palace.

“I don’t know if I can just dive into something like this,” Ray leaned back. “I don’t have a clue what’s going on. Besides, I don’t trust Hoffenen.”

“Do you trust me?” Nova asked.

“I’ve always wanted to be a secret agent,” Ray muttered, a slight smile on his defeated face. Nova smiled right back. The birds chirped in the background.
CHAPTER 43

The Emperor sat solitary in his bedroom. The curtains were pulled shut, so only a thread of light could be seen. A knock rang on the Emperor’s wooden door. The sound pierced the silence like a needle through flesh.

“Come in,” the Emperor ordered hoarsely. General Khavin entered the room, a thin black rod in one hand, whose arm was clenched in the other.

“Put the Catulus away, Efim. You won’t need it.” Khavin pocketed the weapon, an odd look of nervousness shown in his visible eye.

“You wished to see me, Excellency?” Khavin said, standing at attention.

Shrouded in shadow, the Emperor replied, “You haven’t been yourself lately, General Khavin.” The General fidgeted, adjusting the collar on his jacket. “The amount of free time you’ve spent out of this castle recently is appalling. This time is a crucial time. My armies have begun to conquer America’s west coast, and even as we speak, the rebellion in Turkey is being suffocated to the point of extinction. But these victories do not signify a period of rest. These victories are the result of our hard work, and above all, our commitment to this army. Tell me Khavin…” The Emperor’s face slid out from the shadows. “Are you committed to our cause?”
“Yes, sir, of course,” Khavin stammered. “I am committed to our cause forever.” The Emperor retreated to the shadows once more.

“My knowledge is that you talked with Hoffenen this afternoon. Is this correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Emperor strummed his fingers patiently on his chair’s arm.

“So, you are aware that he has taken over security at this palace?”

“Yes, sir,” Khavin hissed through his teeth.

“No need for anger, Efim. This isn’t a demotion; I’m just reassigning you to a task that is more within your expertise.” Khavin didn’t like the way the Emperor said “expertise.” He knew it was a polite way to address one’s incompetence.

“Yes, sir.”

The Emperor waved his hand. “You may go, General.” Khavin saluted and left the room, suppressing his rage. Colonel Harper was standing there holding a clipboard and pen. Her shimmering, blonde hair was worn up, and as usual, she was stunning. Khavin marched past her as if she was not there; the young woman matched his stride and followed on his coattails.

“I’m guessing it didn’t go so well,” she stated softly. Khavin continued to storm down the hallway.

“The Emperor has suspicions of me,” Khavin huffed as he turned a sharp corner. Harper’s legs were far shorter than his, so she was having a difficult time keeping up.
“Pardon my impertinence, sir, but is it a little too early for us to make our move?”

Khavin stopped abruptly, Harper almost bumped into him.

“I now have him,” he whispered, turning around to see her. Harper could see her contorted reflection in his half mask. He removed the Catulus from his pocket and reached for the handle on one of the palace’s large doors. “All is needed is to take care of miniscule problems first.”

He opened the door, but the room was empty. The only lingering evidence that the room had ever been inhabited was a personal diary tucked under the pillow.

Ray and Nova had just finished strapping themselves into the harnesses on Subway 286. It had taken them a while to get their ticket, which was unusual, but Nova expedited the process when she slid a note from General Hoffenen under the ticket slot.

Ray looked around the cabin of the hulking train; it was toting far more passengers than it had on his previous ride. All of them were adorned in officer’s garb. The same female voice echoed over the loudspeaker.

“Now departing for Fort Toronto. Toronto is now an active war zone. I repeat, Toronto is now an active war zone.” The walls of the subway vibrated as the engine warmed up.

“Departing in, 5…4…3….2…1”
CHAPTER 44

Nova staggered out of the tube leading up from the Subway. Her maiden voyage was far from relaxing; her stomach was tied in a knot, and her once neat hair was frazzled and jutting out in all directions.

“Thank God!” She exclaimed as she dropped and kissed the ground. Her voice was hoarse from her banshee-like screaming, which had been uninterrupted during the entire duration of the ride.

Soldiers emerging from the train raised their eyebrows at the spectacle of Nova worshipping the floor. Ray just shrugged and rolled his eyes.

After Nova had gained her composure, the pair of them took the path that the other soldiers hadn’t, exiting the fort onto the somber streets of Toronto. The once proud city was nothing but a desolate wasteland. Lighted windows were scarce, but even scarcer, it seemed, were people. The fortress they had just left was the only structure in the city that had seen current renovations, the rest of the buildings were outdated and decaying.

Shards of glass littered the streets; charred holes burned in storefronts, like scars, suggested epic struggles.

“Now what?” Ray asked. “We’ve traveled all the way under the ocean to the NGE’s only base in North America! We are in a war zone! Wouldn’t it have been smarter to go behind allied lines?”
“Yes,” Nova replied. “Smarter, but not faster. Hoffenen was very specific that coming here was the fastest way to warn this army.”

Ray rolled his eyes. “Now we’re surrounded by soldiers from both armies! We are smack dab in the middle of the greatest conflict in history! It’s a miracle this base is still here!”

“It’s not a miracle. We’re here.”

Upon hearing this familiar voice, the two spun around. Standing there with his memorable, jet-black hair, well-chiseled features, and smug attitude was Chase Jagger.

“Chase?” Ray blurted, astonished. “You made it out of the hospital? What’re you doing here?” Chase put his hand on his forehead and laughed.

“Of course I made it out, you idiot! And me and the guys are here as part of Polky’s army.” Chase’s eyes froze on Nova. He donned a confident smile and straightened his carriage.

“And who may I ask is this lovely young lady?” Chase was like a dog licking its chops for a hunk of raw meat. Nova turned a violent shade of scarlet.

“Nova.” She murmured, casting a look at Ray. Chase widened his already brilliant grin.

“Pleasure to meet you; my name is Cha…”

“This is Chase,” Ray interrupted, giving his comrade a rather brisk pat on the back.

“What brings you here, old buddy?”

“I was stationed here after my injury. They said…”
“You were injured in Hawaii too?” Nova chimed in, still somewhat rosy-faced.

“Well yes,” Chase stated smugly with a sing-song tone. “Thirty bullets to the leg actually; it’s really not too bad…”

“No,” Ray interjected. “It really wasn’t that bad. I almost lost my leg.”

Chase gave Ray an annoyed scowl.

“Really? That’s just too bad, pipsqueak. I’m so glad you’re safe.” The sarcasm was so thick it was almost visible in the air around them. Ray winced; thinking about his injured leg had aggravated it. He shook off his feeling of spite and motivated himself to the task at hand.

“Where were Conner and Polky the last time you heard from them?”

Wind howled through the cracks and crevices of the old buildings while Chase thought. “Well, the two split up.” Chase wrinkled his nose. “I think Polky was in Kansaw, or somthing. Our army isn’t running into much trouble with the Resistance, so troop movement has been fairly easy.”


Chase’s eyes opened wide. “Conner’s making his way here now! I think he hit a bit of a snag around North Dacobra, but he should be here within the month!” Ray’s heart leapt in his ribcage. He missed the warm, old man more than he would like to admit.

“So that explains all of the troops,” Nova stated to reassure the pair of her presence. “They’re here to replenish Conner’s army.”

“She’s a zippy learner, isn’t she, Ray?” Chase smirked, giving Ray an elbow to the side.

“Yeah,” Ray stated. The trio grew quiet. The only sound that could be heard was the wind whistling through the insides of hollow buildings.
Chase shivered and made a step back towards the fort. “Come inside. I can give you a room to stay in until Conner gets here.” Ray and Nova were pleased by this; the desolate, loneliness of the streets was unnerving, and any room, no matter how dank, would be a welcomed improvement.

“So who is your commanding officer here?” Nova asked as they walked.


“I have something for him,” Nova responded. Ray remembered why they were there in the first place.

“No offense, miss, but I don’t see a rank on you,” Chase said. “I can’t in good conscience let one of Ray’s friends just walk in here. Even if you are a private…”

Nova flipped her hair out of her face and walked a little closer to Chase.

“True, I’m just a little schoolgirl,” she smiled coyly. “But this letter’s from Munich. Just show me where the Colonel is. You can pad me down if you want, soldier. I’m not armed.”

Chase was confused, and red in the face. Ray was steaming.

“Alright, I’ll take you to the Colonel,” he said.

“Thanks, Chase,” Nova made a move as if to hug him, but stopped and stepped back smiling. “Sorry… I mean, Lieutenant.”

Chase swallowed loudly and began to lead the way to the Colonel’s quarters. Nova looked back and Ray, stuck out her tongue, and crossed her eyes.

Ray was almost able to force a smile.

The meeting with the Colonel was short. The balding man with a thin, mustache quickly snatched the letter from Nova, read it, and ordered Chase to find housing for them. Before slamming the door to his office in their faces.
“Why did I imagine he’d do more?” Ray whispered as they walked.

“I thought he might too,” Nova whispered back. “I mean, I didn’t read the note. Maybe Jacob just wants us out of Munich for now. Maybe he’s dealing with it.”

“He’d better be doing something,” Ray snapped, nearly alerting Chase to their conversation. “Because this place probably isn’t the safest place in the Empire right now.”
CHAPTER 45

Conner sat up in his cot. Sleep did not grace him as it used to. His thoughts waged war against one another on the battlefield of his mind. For Conner, a mistake, even with one calculation, could be the death of thousands of innocent men, so he would lie awake long into the night to ensure that his moves were flawless and, above all, unpredictable.

Resting amongst all of these other thoughts was a dream. It was a reoccurring dream, tearing into his subconscious every time he shut his eyes and lingering there when he was awake.

In this dream, he was in a bright, seemingly infinite space alone. A figure dressed in a white traveling cloak would pass by him routinely and stop in front of him for short increments and then continue on its path. Conner, try as he might, couldn’t distinguish the figure’s face. It was everyone he knew and yet a complete stranger at the same time. He felt familiar with the figure, but also uncomfortable and frightened. The figure never spoke or acknowledged Conner’s existence; it would just stop and go, like vehicles at an intersection.

Several perfectly identical dreams took place before it reached a variant. This night, the familiar, white figure glided to a halt in front of him, but this time, the figure looked down.

Its emotions and motives were still incomprehensible, but now it spoke. Its voice was a chorus of a thousand voices, all familiar, chanting in unison.
It is not yours, it is not his. It is its own. It cannot be held but must be free. It can only be free if it... The figure paused, words could not leave its open mouth; it was struggling, possibly in pain.

It can only be free if you join in it! Soul and soul. Bodies gone, not alone forever but forever alone. Speak to the holder! The figure was desperately trying to articulate its thoughts. Words were shouts now. I cannot speak! You can speak! He must have faith. We are his, but cannot be, if you are not me! Join me! Make us, us. Speak to the boy!

Conner was sweating bullets. His eyes darted around the inside of his tent, but nothing had changed. The old man regained his breath and looked down at the map he was holding in his shaking hands. America appeared to glow brightly to him, and the pathway he had been searching for was now apparent.

“Eureka!” he shouted, clasping the map like it was solid gold. “I’ve found it!”

His celebration was interrupted by a vibration in his pocket. He placed the map on his desk carefully and dug out his voicebox.

“This is General Francis Conner. May I ask who this is?”

A deep voice echoed from the inside of the box. “Conner, there is something that you have need of hearing...”
CHAPTER 46

Previously Ray had thought any place in the world would be more welcoming than the streets of Toronto. That was, of course, until Chase unveiled the room he would be staying in.

The ceiling was oozing with some sort of vile-smelling oil that dripped slowly (and loudly) on the metal floor below. A puny, rusty, and altogether feeble-looking cot was set up in one corner of the room and an equally feeble chair was set up directly across from it. The room had nothing else to it.

Chase grinned, holding his nose. His voice was altered and stuffy.

“Well that’s pretty much all we’ve got in the rooms department.”

Ray turned around and gave him a rather nasty look. Nova was holding her nose and trying to peek around Chase to see where the horrid odor was emanating.

“As for you, Miss Nova, you can sleep in my room.” A blood vessel throbbed in Ray’s temple.

“What!?”

Chase rolled his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I have night duty for the entire month, so I won’t need to sleep until morning rolls around.” Chase patted Ray on the back and walked away down the rank hallway. Nova gave Ray a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried to catch up to Chase. Ray was green with envy and red with rage.

The first week took Ray back to boot camp. He would get up early in the morning and meet a peppy Nova and an exhausted Chase for breakfast (Chase’s open passes at
Nova were wearing on his last nerve). After breakfast, Chase would lay down to rest, and Ray would walk the hallways of the bustling fortress with Nova. They would talk, share funny stories, and play “guess that smell” until Chase, who was only getting an hour or so of sleep every day, returned from his construction shift in evening. After Chase met up with them, they would all go to the makeshift rec-room for drinks and a game of pool.

Pool was a good channel for the competitive spirits of the Lieutenants. It was a fine enough way to pass the time, but the true motivation behind it was to embarrass the other in front of Nova, who played, seemingly oblivious to the fierce competition. To make the competition even more difficult, the pool table had been warped over time and the green fabric was tattered by mice.

On one such night about two weeks into his stay, Ray, Chase, and Nova were in the crowded rec-room. Ray and Chase were playing pool, and Nova was sitting, legs crossed on a barstool. The room was poorly lit, and a shabby bar was erected that only offered water, whiskey, and cheap beer.

“I’ll bet I can make my seven jump over your ten and hit my two into the pocket,” Chase sniggered.

“You’re bluffing.” Ray returned Chase’s smirk.

“Fifteen credits say I’m not.” Chase removed a thin card from his pocket. On the card was an engraving of The Emperor’s face and the Munich palace.


“Fifteen credits, then.” Ray slammed his own card on the table. “Let’s see you do it.” Chase stood up and winked at Nova over Ray’s shoulder. She rolled her eyes. He nonchalantly
rubbed chalk on the tip of his pool cue. Then he meandered over to the far side of the table and lollygagged setting up his shot, smiling and humming the entire time.

“Just do it already!” Ray nagged. Chase drew his face into an exaggerated pout.

“Relax, Little Excellency. Paris wasn’t taken in a day.”

“Just go!”

Chase showed a split second of serious concentration as he gently lobbed his seven ball over Ray’s ten, causing it to nudge his two into the open pocket. The rolling sound of the two sliding through the inside of the table made Ray’s stomach turn. Chase straightened up, took Ray’s card, and bellied up to the bar.

“Two beers.” He handed Ray’s card to the bartender. “One for me and one for the lovely Miss Nova.”

“I don’t drink,” Nova mumbled.

“Because she’s seventeen!” Ray shouted. Chase donned a serious face.

“Look. She’s plenty old enough to make her own decisions. If she wants to drink, let her!” Ray looked pleadingly at Nova. She averted her eyes.

“Ray’s right. I am only seventeen. But…” She turned to Ray. “I am plenty capable of making my own decisions, and I think I’ll go to bed.” She pushed in her barstool and marched out of the room.

It was an odd mix of feelings for the two Lieutenants: anger, jealously, depression, and guilt. The two couldn’t fathom a response, so they turned down the beers and headed their separate ways, from the same door which saw Nova exit only moments ago.

Ray was walking down the stairs to his room on the basement floor, twirling his keys. He maneuvered his way through the narrow, dank hallway. The sound of dripping oil and the stench
of festering mold only added to his miserable disposition. There was some commotion going on upstairs, but he didn’t really care what it was. The soldiers here were always working, it was only by the miracle of the note that Nova had given ColonelBrackett, that Ray was able to avoid work.

He caught his twirling keys and jerked them into the lock on his door. A thump. Ray looked about. Footsteps?

He shrugged and got back to his task. Thump! It sounded like boots trudging on a hollow surface. Ray stepped on the ground, and it let out a very solid noise under his boot. His heart was beating a bit faster now. Splash! Ray spun around like a jackrabbit, fists raised. The hallway was dark, gloomy, and empty. Ray took a deep breath, relaxed his arms and turned again.

Staring into his eyes was an upside-down rotting body. Flesh hung off of the corpse’s skull, and blood dripped out of its empty eye sockets.

Ray shrieked. He threw a blind punch that completely missed; the corpse had moved out of the way! Ray dropped his keys and ran for the other end of the hallway. He could hear the clatter of boots running through oil. He looked back to see the corpse running after him, upside down, on the ceiling, screaming at the top of its lungs, visible through the ribcage. The corpse held in its hand something orange and glowing.

Ray’s throat grew raw from screaming as he bolted up the metal stairs. His heart was skipping beats. Sweat poured from his brow, and fear enveloped him. His bad leg gave out, and he crumpled and fell down the stairs. Surges of pain pumped along with his blood.

Bam! Ray felt a familiar weight in his hands. Every corner of the hallway blazed with bright blue light. Ray looked in his hand at the Sertorius, its ebony surface reflecting its own blue emission.
Ray squinted to gaze into the center of the blinding blue flash where he saw a spot of equally brilliant orange. He quickly clambered up the metal stairs on his hands and feet. He then ran through the hallways as fast as he could hobble, clutching onto the little, black rod that had saved his life.

He turned a corner and threw open the door to Nova’s room.

He ran straight into the back of Chase, who was standing behind the closed door.

“Watch it!”

“There’s something outside!!!”

Nova who had been sitting arms-crossed on the bed stood up. “Ray? What’s wrong?”

But he didn’t hear her. Ray had felt a white-hot pulse in his hand, and his vision had faded to black.

He was standing in a white room void of sound and shadow. A figure, draped in a white hood, appeared in front of him. The figure put his hand on Ray’s head. Ray stood up and stared around with disbelief, but the figure was gone, and all of his anger and fear had left with it. A familiar voice could be heard echoing through the empty space.

“Ray! Stop it please!”

Ray slowly phased back into reality. Chase was sprawled out awkwardly on the floor, dazed. Chill from the night air wisped across the room through a smoking hole made in the concrete wall across from him. A liver-spotted hand grasped Ray’s wrist. Ray looked to his right. General Conner was panting, a relieved look in his eyes.

All that could be heard was the whistling night air and the deep breaths of the room’s frightened occupants.
The rest of the night was a blur. Ray was moved up into a hospital bed. Nova was ushered to an empty room where she lay awake in her cot, and Chase bunked with a fellow soldier on the far end of the facility.

After a bed had been found for each of them, General Conner waddled up to his quarters in one of the battlements, reflecting on his talk with Ray:

“It tried to kill me!”

“It was just the Sertorius playing tricks on you boy.”

“No, it was different. It happened before the Sertorius even got to me.”

“Ridiculous! What are you doing here anyway?”

“The Emperor sent me.”

This was an obvious lie. Why wouldn’t Ray tell the truth?

“And Nova?”

“She wanted to tag along...”

Another lie. What was the boy hiding?

“But enough about that; what about the dead body chasing me?”

“I told you it was an illusion, boy! You’ve seen them before! Why is this bothering you so badly?”

“It was real! I swear it was!”

This wasn’t like him at all. Ray had done some tricky things in the past but had always come clean to him about it. Why had he been so stubborn?

“We will speak about this in the morning.”

“Yessir...” Ray had shakily replied.
Conner’s stubby legs made each step grueling, and by the time he reached the top, he felt as if he would die. He fiddled with his key and entered his room.

It had been so long since he had slept in a prepared bed. As he lay down, he could hear the chanting of songs by his soldiers below; no doubt celebrating their safe arrival at the fort and reuniting with old friends. The facility was filled to the brim.

As Conner looked around the slightly furnished, room his mind pondered the day’s happenings.

_The boy, truly is a troublemaker. I’m far too occupied to throw away time scolding him, but we haven’t spoken in so long…_

The old man reached slowly into his pocket and produced a weathered photograph. The photo was of a man with graying hair holding in his arms two pure, grinning infants. One had a thin wisp of brown hair, and the other was as bald as an egg.

Conner looked softly into the faces of his children. He ran his old finger gently across the face of the oldest one. A tear slid slowly down his cheek. Blood or no blood, he was not going to let another child slip out of his life.

Ray’s mind was also plagued with questions. He tried to focus on the guilty truth that he had nearly killed Nova and Chase, but couldn’t so much as blink without being screeched at by the rotting skull. Was it the Sertorius playing tricks on him? It seemed to him that the attack was prior to the Sertorius’ fortunate arrival, but was that all just a ruse?

Nonetheless, every creaky step, every tossing and turning patient, and every gust of harsh wind upon the window caused Ray’s heart to jump and his eyes to scan the room feverously.
It was around three in the morning, and Ray was positive that he would not sleep. The shadowy corners of the complex would evaporate in the sunlight soon; he could rest then.

His senses dulled as the minutes dragged on. He seldom jerked at the once fearful vibrations of the fortress. He was beginning to nod off when the door to the infirmary creaked open.

A stout figure shrouded in shade entered the room, closing the door cautiously behind it.

“Conner?” Ray mumbled, motionless in his cot. The figure did not respond. It was intent on shutting the door without producing a sound.

Ray slid out of bed, his heart racing. “Conner?” He whispered this time. The figure’s back came into focus; it was Conner. Ray smiled and inched closer.

“You scared me sir.”

Conner didn’t respond.

“I thought you wanted to talk in the morning…” He put his hand on Conner’s shoulder. It was frigid.

Conner spun around, eyes frozen, lips hanging loose from his slack jaw. A thin line of blood oozed from a gaping hole in the General’s forehead. Ray threw himself on the floor. The General’s revolting visage moved closer, moved closer, stifling Ray’s screams with fear.

Conner’s maimed corpse was mere inches away from Ray, its breath coming slowly with a gurgling wet sound between gasps. Ray tripped and fell backward. Conner’s corpse removed the Sertorius from its pocket…

The door to the infirmary was blown violently open by a blast of green light. There, silhouetted by the light of the hallway stood General Conner, alive, and unscathed holding the real Sertorius in his fierce grip.
“You’ve gone too far this time Efim!” Conner stepped closer, as his mutilated quintessence faced him. “I humored you so far, but these damn theories of yours are threatening the very core of the NGE. I’m afraid you’re under arrest!”

A voice echoed out of the corpse’s bloody mouth.

“Conner, don’t! I am now positive this time! I have proof!” A bright orange light filled the room; standing in the place of the corpse was General Khavin. His mask was scuffed, his visible eye had a look of pleading. Conner was sweating.

“You’re behind all of the attacks, aren’t you?!” Conner stood firm. Soldiers, guns drawn began to form in the doorway behind Conner.

“Frank!”

“You are under arrest Efim!” The clamor had awoken several of the infirmary’s patients as well who were shuffling in their beds to catch a glimpse of the hubbub. Khavin was growing uncomfortable.

“This boy is traitor! Even without approval of you I must do right!” The room was again filled with orange light. The Sertorius’ protective bubble remained around Conner and the doorway. Spiraling tangerine tendrils wrapped themselves around General Khavin, fully encasing him. Slowly the light began to disperse, in globules from his body all around the room.

The even blobs of energy began, slowly, to rise; it was as if the emission were alive. Arms formed from the globs and the once trunk-like bottoms became two legs.

Keeping his eyes on the blobs and on Khavin, who was no longer glowing, Ray reached for the gun in his bedside drawer. The rays from the Catulus had died down, and were replaced by exact copies of General Khavin. Each clone held a Catulus. Some pointed it at Conner, others at Ray, and the rest targeted other patients.
Ray’s fingers grazed the grip of the gun, but the Khavin closest to him raised the Catulus, and he inched his hand away.

“They’re refractions of light made with the Catulus!” Conner shouted from the doorway.

“Only one of them is real!”

“Conner,” Khavin’s voice was impossible to pinpoint as all of the clones mimicked his movements. “This is to be final warning. Leave and the boy will only die not you.”

“Stop this, now Efim! This is insane!”

The Khavin near Ray released a beam from its Catulus. Ray dove, but the blast caught him in the arm, cauterizing the tissue and sending him flying back into the unyielding wall. His body collapsed like a rag doll near the bedside table.

The gears in Conner’s tactical mind spun furiously as he scanned the room, through an emerald lens.

“The real one is shooting through the clones!” Conner shouted, dropping his shield and sending a beam into the crowd. The Khavins jumped aside, but the room remained eerily quiet. Ray reached again for the pistol in the drawer next to him.

“Missed the boy once. We will not miss him twice!” The Khavin closest to Ray shot three beams at him. A green shield sprung up and absorbed the blasts.

“Chto?!” Khavin’s bellow echoed. Conner propelled himself across the room and shot a beam straight through two figures, one of them a doppelganger, the other flesh. All of the Khavins fell together, clutching their abdomens.

“You missed first shot on purpose, ublyudok!” Khavin hacked.

“Yes.” Conner stared intensely into the sea of Khavins. “The energy from my first shot shielded Ray. I found you when you attacked the shield.”
“Very clever…” Blood soaked Khavin’s jacket. “But for greater good, I will yet kill the boy!” The Catulus flashed again, and the real Khavin shot through the far wall of the medical room in a ball of orange-red flame, sending chunks of cement crashing around patients’ cots. The clones evaporated. The room was like a cemetery at midnight, silent and oddly empty.

Conner pocketed his weapon and wheezed loudly. “Thank God…” The occupants of the room broke out in hushed conversation. Ray was panting.

Chase entered the room, followed by six guards. “What’s going on?” he demanded. Conner wiped his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

“Wake all personnel and have them put on lookout for General Khavin.”

“Khavin?” Chase gave him a look of uncertainty.

“Now, Lieutenant!”

After Chase and his entourage had left, Conner hobbled over to Ray. Silently, he patched up his young friend’s arm with the Sertorius, after which he left abruptly without speaking a word.

Conner made his way up to his poorly-furnished room. Pulling a voicebox out of his pocket, he cleared his throat and looked up at his concrete ceiling.

A voice reverberated from the little black cube. “What is it General Conner? I thought Hoffenen said that we shouldn’t communicate through voiceboxes any more for fear of wiretapping.”

“Yes, he did, your Excellency, but this message is urgent.” The Emperor’s silence suggested he continue. “Today in Toronto, Efim tried to kill Ray.”

“That’s preposterous! Why would General Khavin…?”
“I struggle with the concept myself, your Excellency. But I believe Khavin is the hole from which our information is leaking.”

“Jacob informed me of that suspicion as well.” The Emperor’s voice was raspy. “Is anyone else aware?”

“Yes, sir. I ordered the base to watch out for him.”

“This news is bothersome, but at least the leaks will stop now.” There was a pause. “This is the perfect time for you to proceed with the attack.”

Conner’s grip on the voicebox was unusually tight. “But sir, shouldn’t I wait for Polky? He is a month away, or less.”

“This pause in their intelligence flow is the perfect time to strike. The iron is hot!”

“Your Excellency…”

“You are the most brilliant tactical mind the NGE has in its employ. I have no doubts that, even with minimal troops, you will be able to conquer New York City.”

“A brash action like that would be sending thousands of soldiers to their deaths!”

“We have thousands of soldiers, Conner. If one man of ours can kill one man of theirs then our superior numbers will prevail.”

“Yes, sir, but we just learned of a major problem at the highest level of our command! Shouldn’t we…”

“Just do it, Conner.” The voicebox clicked off. The troops’ voices below echoed through the concrete walls. Conner shut his eyes.

He had questioned the Emperor’s eagerness towards battle dozens of times during the duration of their acquaintanceship, but this was the Emperor’s most rash decision to date. The pressures of winning a war and protecting his soldiers were always looming over Conner’s head.
like a guillotine waiting to separate skull from body. Up to this point, he had been able to juggle
his troops’ lives and the Emperor’s foolhardy ambitions, but this time, the Emperor had proposed
an action that made troop safety impossible to achieve.

Conner lay down on his bed, gazing up at the chipped paint, trying his best to articulate
an order of suicide to his soldiers, hopeless of convincing the Emperor to change his mind,
especially when the matter had now become time-sensitive. He blinked slowly, and a hooded
countenance stood across the room from him. He flinched.

Footsteps echoed up his narrow staircase. The figure had disappeared. Conner reached for
the Sertorius in his pocket, only to find that he already held it shaking in his grip. The footsteps
grew closer; the body was missing steps and using hands and feet to compensate. Conner rose,
and slipped over to the door, his body pressed tightly against the wall. The footsteps stopped, the
doorknob jerked, and the door was flung open.

“General Conner!” Colonel Brackett shouted after Conner jabbed the Sertorius into his
ribs. Conner held the weapon firmly and slammed the colonel against the far wall of his room.

“Sir,” Brackett shook. “Lieutenant Tract has gone AWOL sir!”

“What?!” Conner fumed. The old General lowered his guard, now assured that this
soldier wasn’t Khavin in disguise, and looked the terrified man directly in the eyes.

“What happened?” Conner fumed.

“He ran away sir. Just flat out vanished. And…and…”

Conner shook the man’s shoulders violently. “Out with it!”

“He took the girl with him.”

Conner released the soldier from his talon-like grip. Colonel Brackett adjusted his jacket
and straightened what was left of his hair.
“Tell everyone not to bother unpacking,” Conner said. “We move out at dawn.”
CHAPTER 47

Two sets of tired feet pounded rhythmically upon the unyielding cement. Though the two bodies were following the same path, the patter of their shoes beat out of sync and disconnected. So off-kilter were their steps that it sounded as if a multitude were marching into the night, while in reality, it was only two souls, united in one frantic sense, but separated by miles of psyche.

The one flew erratically, like prey attempting to avoid a predator; the other pursued with great speed, desperately trying to close the distance between them. The prey flew into the deeper shadows to avoid the scarcely-lit streets, and the predator followed, his eyes fixated on her. Their quick breaths replenished energy as the chase continued. The boy had more in him then the girl did.

Stinging pain pressed on the girl’s sides as she ran, but not for a second did this halt her pace. A hole in the ground caught the girl’s ankle, and she fell. The boy ground to a halt and knelt to help.

Their eyes locked for a brief instant. The events prior to this frenzied dash were replaying vividly in his mind:

He had crumpled, stricken with exhaustion, in the exact spot which Khavin had left him, leaning rather awkwardly against the firm, concrete wall. His mind was possessed with thoughts, so much so that he couldn’t move.
Footsteps echoed slowly off of the cement floor, he stirred but did not open his eyes. The footsteps came faster, rhythmic, like the ticking of a grandfather clock, accentuated by the deadly silence of the room. He heard a voice near him. For several minutes, its words had been tangled and equivocal, like many languages spoken at once. Ray could pick out a word in French then maybe one in English, but no language, dialects, or voice remained the same for long. It was like trying to pick out the words of a lone conversation in a crowded place. Then, with great difficulty and loud shouting, the voices had merged, creating a repulsive chorus.

A rancid corpse, a visage,

A soul more rancid still,

Confuses us, and uses us,

To act on self-bent will.

A heart of evil started warm,

But then events took change.

To fill this world with hate and scorn.

Is the mission of the strange.

A weapon only meant for Hades?

This notion is not sure

For if evil not existed,

What good is weapon for?
Wielded by good are weapons too,
To protect and to serve the weak.
To “justly” murder tyrants,
To bring light to things thought bleak.

Conceived of murder, born of wrath,
The lineage of weapons we trail.
But a person, forged a weapon,
Does more than tip the scale.

Ungodly birth, told to destroy,
My lord I must obey.
To sneak into the walls of Troy,
And kill all as they lay.

Our father tried suppress our minds,
His scheme he thought was grand,
But through meeting our masters we sever these binds,
And draw blood from father’s hand.

Ray shuddered. The voices sent a chill down his spine, but he could not force himself to move, let alone open his eyes.
More footsteps. A frantic urge to move possessed him, but try as he might, he sat on the medical room floor. His eyes still shut.

These new footsteps grew closer.

Thump, thump, thump…

Like a heartbeat now, the feet were coming closer. Was the distance to the door this great before?

Thump, thump, thump…

Surely this wild tension would drive him insane.

Thump, thump…

Ray quavered in his useless skin. A light, warm hand shook his shoulders. This new presence pulled Ray out of his sleep; his eyes once again opened to the world.

Nova’s deep, brown eyes looked into his and she whispered, “Follow me.”

She abruptly separated eye contact and sprinted towards the door. Ray caught a glimpse of her as she cut a corner and disappeared.

Her eyes had been wide and luminous. Not even the faintest smile had grazed her lips. In these wide eyes, there was an object of mystery, and he knew he had to follow her, and he knew she was real.

Over a mile and not a word later, Ray firmly grasped Nova’s arm. She was down on the ground, wounded and motionless, a captive for his query.

“Where are we going?” he asked through gasps. Nova’s expression was that of a timid animal, lost and afraid. Ray let her go.
He had never seen Nova so terrified. She was always the strong one, the person who would stand up to anyone and say anything, but now, as she knelt on the pavement before him, she looked unmistakably anxious.

Her eyes mirrored the sky above with their darkness and twinkle. The night’s events had gagged her. Possibly she was afraid Ray would lash out again as the Sertorius had made him before?

“How are you running away from me?”

“No, Ray, of course not.” Nova shot back, her tone harried. “It’s just tonight. We have to move or…”

Nova’s sentence was cut short by the ear-splitting report of a nearby explosion. The pitch black sky was illuminated for a moment as if by the sun, but it quickly became dark again.

The explosion that cracked the silence of the night still reverberated in the pair’s ears. Nova cupped her hands over them and mouthed a profanity, at least that was what Ray interpreted, for his ears were ringing, blocking out all other noise.

Nova regained her composure with unprecedented speed and hobbled to the shadows, waving her hands for Ray to follow. Once in the dark alley, Nova bent down on her hands and knees and brushed the ground as if looking for something she dropped. Ray’s hearing phased back slowly; the deafening explosion was followed by frenzied gunshots and the sound of men shouting.

Ray flew into a sense of panic and began brushing the ground as well, even though he hadn’t the faintest idea what was happening or what he was looking for.

“How is it Khavin? Is he attacking the fortress?”
Nova ignored him, but let out an excited gasp and began struggling to remove a manhole cover. Ray helped her heave the heavy cover aside. He gazed down into the darkness of the manhole, waiting to be offended by the usual foul odor of human feces and runoff, but no smell emanated.

Without hesitation, Nova plunged into the darkness below by way of the iron bars acting as a ladder.

“Where are we going?” he shouted after her.

“Somewhere safe!” she shouted back.

Ray climbed down into the hole as well, pulling over the cover to completely shroud the pair in darkness.

“What’s going on?”

“The Resistance is attacking. We don’t want to get involved. Come on!”

Ray climbed down the ladder, careful not to lose his footing on the uneven bars.

“How do you know that?”

“I’ll explain everything later. Just follow me, and try to keep quiet.”

Ray opened his mouth to protest, but a distant boom shook the shaft and held his tongue.
CHAPTER 48

“Move, damn it! Move!” Conner shouted to his men, as they fled from Fort Toronto, which had been hit dead center by a missile from the sky minutes ago. The soldiers entered the streets, into a sea of enemy bombardment. The smell of gunpowder and blood quickly filled the night air, as man after man was slaughtered, desperately trying to find cover. Conner, sensing the Fort’s waning stability, formed a shield of light and dashed to follow his troops into the cover of the alleyways.

The fort imploded and collapsed at the crack of dawn, sealing within its rubble the lives of thousands of soldiers who had failed to evacuate.

Gunshots ricocheted off the sides of buildings. The enigmatic enemy was hiding in the faint shadows, peppering the NGE soldiers with sniper fire.

Chase was panting as he ducked behind a rusty, brown mailbox. Rufus and Lyle, who had been following him closely, having arrived the night before with Conner’s squad took refuge behind a broken down hotdog cart. Chase held his rifle tightly to his chest. The remainder of the squad was a mere ten feet away, crouched in an alleyway.

“They’re in the buildings!” Chase shouted to his captain. “They’re shooting through the windows!” His captain nodded and broadcast an intricate array of hand signs to his squad. One man kicked down a door from the alleyway into the side of the building, and the rest poured in.

A bullet punctured, with a clang, the front of the rusty mailbox; a man’s scream was blanketed by the racket of gunfire.
Conner leapt from rooftop to rooftop, aided by the Sertorius’s emerald beam. Like a comet, he flew, a look of concentration and determination in his eyes as he scanned the streets for any sign of the enemy. He stopped on the roof of a taller building and hid behind an air duct.

“Emperor Tract!” he shouted into his voicebox. “Come in!”

Conner heard the screams of his soldiers and he shook where he stood waiting for a response. After what seemed like minutes a voice responded.

“What is it, General?”

“We are under attack in Toronto!” The General shouted over gunfire. “The Resistance knew we were here!”

“That’s impossible!” the Emperor shouted. “I just spoke to you an hour ago. Even if they did tap our line there’s no way that they could have troops mobilized that quickly.”

“Keirnan!” Conner shouted as a blinding flash of explosion blew up the top floor of the skyscraper across from him. “He knew we were here. Only the generals and the soldiers assigned here knew!”

“What do you want me to do from here, Conner?”

“Close off all subway lines to Toronto immediately!” Conner ordered. “And alert General Polky! He mustn’t come here! I will try to salvage my troops and retreat!”

“Retreat?! How many men do they have?!?”

“I don’t know,” Conner wheezed. “But I must pull these men out now!”

“Toronto is valuable to us, Conner! Do not under any circumstance…”

Conner threw the voicebox and shot it with the Sertorius. He didn’t have the time. Not now. He ran to the edge of the skyscraper and looked down on the hellacious streets.
Below him, NGE troops scurried like mice into the deserted buildings. Conner activated the Sertorius and continued to fly from rooftop to rooftop, heading southwest towards the Toronto Islands where he was sure the enemy had landed seeing as they would have to cross Lake Ontario to attack from New York.

The lake was a sheet of glass, motionless, as it reflected the sun’s early morning rays. Anchored in the harbor were seven battleships, each brimming with artillery and coated lightly in rust. Conner gauged the distance and jumped.

The Sertorius guided him down gently from the top of the skyscraper to the ground below. After planting both feet firmly on the cement, he snuck into an alleyway and lay in wait for his prey, the newly dispatching troops, to disclose their position.

The crunching sound of boot grazing pavement was the reward for Conner’s vigilance. A man’s coarse voice pervaded the air.

“Come on, quickly! General Rache is beginning operations! We must act quickly if we’re to take the NGE by surprise!” The sound of boots muffled as they entered the open lobby of a nearby building.

Conner crumpled his brow. Then, using the utmost caution, he snuck, like a cat, around the front of the building and peered into the wide, glass window that lit the lobby. About a dozen men, dressed in camouflage, were scurrying about the inside. Most sprinted up nearby stairs to the second floor, leaving only two men, one of whom was wearing a sleeveless black shirt which he had tucked into his torn, black pants. The man dressed in black stuck out from the rest of soldiers, for he had no rifle, no helmet, no armor, or camouflage his dirty red hair was stringy and web-like as if a large spider had spun it across his scalp.

Conner took a step back to breathe, clenching the Sertorius in his fist.
He had crossed paths before with the red-haired man, but his memory was so distant and vague, he couldn’t remember when it had been. He peered again into the window; the man was still standing there almost motionless. The old General should have moved on. His men were no doubt dying all throughout the city, but he knew the red-haired man was important, and he could not pass a chance to kill someone important to the enemy’s attack.

Conner shattered the glass with his Sertorius, causing millions of razor-sharp shards to fly through the air. The red-haired man turned fast, and his partner began to shoot. The Sertorius swatted the bullets to the ground with ease. Conner pierced the soldier’s neck with a beam of green light. The red-haired man didn’t flinch as his comrade fell.

“General Conner.” The man’s voice scratched the air with its gruff intensity.

Conner pointed the Sertorius at the man. The man’s familiarity was driving him mad, but there was no time for remembering; it was either strike now or be struck.

Conner sent a beam whizzing through the air towards the man. Time slowed for a millisecond as the beam swerved away from its intended target and crashed to the ground nearly two feet away from the man.

“What?” Conner stared with utter disbelief at the smoldering crater left by the deflected beam. Screaming, Conner fired again. The same result. The beam swerved away from the man and smashed the hardwood floor to splinters. The red-haired man’s hands remained in his pockets.

“You missed,” he stated. A fire lit in Conner’s eyes. His tactical mind had finally awakened. This man was somehow deflecting his blasts, for they wouldn’t come within five feet of him. Conner adjusted his plan and shot three blasts each towards a different direction, one head on, one to the left, and one to the sky. The man seemed puzzled.
Then, when the blasts were about three fourths away from their intended target, Conner shut his eyes in thought, and the blasts all changed their direction yet again and picked up speed towards the red-haired man. Two of the beams diverged in opposite directions, falling towards the ground below, but the third one retained its course.

This all happened in a matter of seconds. When Conner opened his eyes, he expected to see the man down, but instead to his shock and horror, his third blast was frozen in mid-air, a mere inch away from the man’s face.

The man was breathing hard, as death hovered an inch away. His hands were out in front of him. Seeing the blast had frozen, he stepped to the side, allowing the blast to slam the ground next to him.

“Tricky…” the man panted. “Very tricky…” Conner’s memory clicked

“The Mirror,” he mumbled to himself. “You’re the one they call the Mirror.” The red-haired man smirked from across the room, a single bead of sweat sliding down his barely-shaven face.

“A genetic masterpiece.” Conner was brainstorming aloud. “You can freeze or redirect kinetic energy with your thoughts. But, there’s more to you than that. Isn’t there, Christopher Polky?”

“Don’t call me that! You of all people have no right to call me that!” The Mirror had lost his temper; a vein pulsed in his temple.

“You’re angry and traumatized,” Conner said. “I understand. I don’t condone what the NGE did to you. It was the product of a sick mind to take you away from your father.”

“They didn’t take me away!” the Mirror shouted. “He gave me away! He stood with them as they watched me suffer; he didn’t cry for me!”
“He cries and prays every night for you, Christopher! You’re his child! His only child! The reason he suffers through the fighting he so despises is to see you again!”

“Timothy Polky is not my father! He’s the bastard who left me to die! To be a monster!”

“Christopher…”

“I was made a weapon, and I will be a weapon!” The Mirror removed a long barreled pistol from the holster on his hip. “I hoped to kill my father today, but it doesn’t matter…it doesn’t matter whose life I ruin! Your Emperor taught me that!”

The Mirror ran sideways along the extent of the lobby. He fired three shots, which the Sertorius blocked with ease. Conner fired a blast up at the ceiling over the Mirror’s head, dislodging concrete and light fixtures, sending them crashing down.

The Mirror froze the debris overhead with a glance; the rest rumbled to the ground encircling him. He then dove left as Conner fired another beam from the Sertorius.

Quicker than lightning, Conner produced a human-like figure from the Sertorius’s tip. The gangly, energy-being dashed across the room and flung quick, inaccurate “punches” toward its enemy. As with the debris, the creature froze at the Mirror’s glance.

The arms of the energy-being broke, and the figure dissolved entirely only to be replaced by five beams from the opposite side of the room, flying at different heights. The Mirror shouted and froze four of the five blasts; the fifth grazed his arm. The Mirror’s shield was only as fast as his reactions, and now he was being overwhelmed.
CHAPTER 49

Inside, the manhole was dry. The walls were rock, not metal. Ray and Nova pressed on, following a trail of lanterns that were, suspiciously, already lit. The lanterns’ dull glow led them down steep shafts and through what seemed to be miles of winding pathways. The pair was silent. Ray felt Nova’s icy fingers shaking as she clung to his arm, guiding his movement with tugs and squeezes.

Each path bore a stunning resemblance to the former, the only difference being the placing of the miniscule lanterns. Some hung from hooks, and others rested on the ground, propped up by a jagged rock or a rusty canteen. The scenery seemed more befitting of a mine than a sewer.

“Where are we?” Ray muttered.

“An NGE emergency escape tunnel,” Nova whispered. “Made for commanding officers in the event of a disaster. Jacob told me about it in case the Resistance attacked when we were here. He didn’t think it would happen this early, though.”

The couple followed the lights through another rocky hallway, but when they turned the corner, they were met with a surprise. The lantern trail had ended. What lay beyond it was a mystery shrouded in black. Ray looked at Nova who stood mute, nodding him forward. He entered the black.

Their breaths were sluggish and deep, each struggling with the dry, unpleasant air.

Ray took the first step into the abyss, but his feet gave way under him as he fell down a jagged shaft, arm jerked from Nova’s grasp. He floundered to find a rock or a
corner to slow his fall, but to no avail. As he slid, sharp rocks and bits of earth got in his eyes. He felt his shirt tear as the razor-sharp gravel cut away at his chest, seconds before the shaft dumped him on solid ground.

“RAY!” Nova’s voice shattered the silence from the top of the shaft. “ARE YOU ALRIGHT?” Ray got up slowly. The palms of his hands were bleeding from where he had tried to grab hold of the walls.

“I’m fine. Just wait up there, I’m going to try to find a…a…” Ray saw the cavern he had fell into for the first time. Dozens of lavish lanterns, shaped like little columns encrusted with gold, lined the walls, and blue tapestries depicting eagles and lions hung from the walls.

The ground was still rough, however, and water dripped from the stalagmites clinging to the roof over Ray’s head.

He rushed to the closest wall and began trying to unhook a lantern from it’s even hook. He singed his finger on the lantern’s hot metal.

“Shit!” he exclaimed, shaking his hand to try and lessen the pain.

“Mind your tongue, boy.”

Ray jerked around; he recognized the cool, foreboding tone.

Jacob Hoffenen leaned against the wall at the far corner of the room, his figure was visible, but the shadows blanketed his face.

“Escaped the battle did you?” Ray’s eyes narrowed. Hoffenen chuckled.

“How did you get here?” Ray was beginning to sweat. “Never mind… our guys need you up there!”

Hoffenen laughed again. “No. I believe my guys are faring just fine by themselves. I saw to that.”
Ray’s hand shook as he fumbled with the strap on his holster. A million questions flurried like a blizzard in his mind as he freed the gun.

“What are you saying?” Ray spoke quietly, his pistol held limply at his side.

“The escape of General Steel, the rescuing of the delegates, your transporter mishaps, the forces at Hawaii, California, and North Dakota…” Hoffenen continued, ignoring Ray’s question.

Gravel could be heard getting kicked up at the top of the shaft. Hoffenen reached into his pocket and pressed a button. An enormous, steel door slid shut across the opening of the shaft, locking out Nova and imprisoning the two inside.

“Come now, Raymond,” Hoffenen smirked. “Surely you wondered how the Resistance knew of Fort Toronto long enough in advance to prepare an attack. Weren’t you the least bit suspicious when Fort Toronto saw no improvement in security following my apparent knowledge of the spy?”

Ray took a step back. He could hear fists pounding on the steel wall. “But Nova…”

“The orchestra has begun to play, Raymond!” Hoffenen shouted. “All of the musicians are in their proper positions. As we speak, General Conner is attempting valiantly to defend his precious Toronto… but it will fall. If you listen hard enough, you can hear the sweet symphony of gunfire and the shouting chorus of useless men falling to their graves, following, like rats to piper, the sound of our angelic rhapsody!”

“You!” Ray shouted, stiffening his grip on the gun. “You’re the spy, you bastard!”

Hoffenen threw his head back and laughed. “Of course, you ignorant ass! I just admitted it to you!” Hoffenen rolled his eyes, and took an exaggerated bow. “Lieutenant General Rache at your service.”

“But…but why…” Ray was sweating.
“My motives are certainly the least of your concerns now, I should think.”

“But Khavin attacked me! He was trying to kill me!”

Hoffenen rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Explaining things to you is asinine… You are such a stupid boy.” He leaned back against the wall and looked up at a stalagmite. “Khavin was trying to kill you because he thought you were working for me.”

“Working for you?!” Ray felt sick at the thought. “Why would he think that?!”

“The voicebox? Constant contact with Miss Nova? Pick up the slack, boy.”

“Nova…”

“Yes, Miss Nova.”

“What does she have to do with anything?”

“Why do you think you are standing here now? Who led you out of danger, not once but twice? Who did Khavin impersonate when he wanted to find out what you were up to? Who has been a friend to me since her first week here?”

Ray did not want to believe what he was hearing, but the facts were impossible to ignore. “She…she…” he stammered.

“…distracted the guards when the delegates escaped?” Hoffenen offered with a mocking drawl. “…freed General Steel? …stole vital information from the archives using your handprint?”

“Shut up!” Ray couldn’t hear any more. He fixed the gun’s sights on the General.

Hoffenen roared an obnoxious laugh.

“Shoot me, then! Kill the traitor!”
Ray squeezed off three rounds. A red beam emerged from the twisted General’s pocket swatting the bullets harmlessly to the ground. The red beam lit up the shady corner, casting a grotesque red shadow upon Hoffenen’s distorted smile.

“Miss Nova actually convinced me to ask you to join us Raymond. With your knowledge of the Emperor’s thought process, you could be a valuable asset. But like your future self, you have continued to make grave mistakes. I will not let your mistakes grow; I will burn their roots and consume the entire tree!” Hoffenen whipped the Brutus from his pocket and sent a massive blast of energy flying at Ray.

Ray dodged the blast, landing on the jagged cave floor; his gun, which he had let slip from his hands, clattered on the rocks. Ray’s injured thigh burned as clattered around him. Hoffenen propelled himself across the room in a burst of crimson emission.

When Hoffenen’s fist hit Ray’s jaw, the young Lieutenant fell on his back. Ray could taste the warm, salty blood painting his mouth. He struggled with the pain and awkwardly rose. Hoffenen was standing about six feet away from him, a wild grin on his face. Ray spat out some of the excess blood in his mouth, but the stale taste lingered.

Hoffenen pocketed the Brutus. He bent his knees and held his arms close into his body, ready to fight.

Ray wiped a thin trickle of blood from his mouth. He inched towards Hoffenen, raising his hands as well.

Ray threw a fake punch with his left arm, and Hoffenen made a motion to block it. Ray, seeing his moment of opportunity, threw a true punch with his right. The General caught his wrist. Before Ray could jar his arm away, Hoffenen had brought his right hand under Ray’s right
elbow. He twisted Ray’s arm, and Ray was forced to spin around, turning his back to the General and falling to his knees, his arm held straight behind him.

“Now what, Tract?” Hoffenen taunted through clenched teeth. Ray struggled to get free, but it only resulted in more pain.

“I will make this offer to you only once; will you aid us in our battle to save this world from your tyrannical counterpart? Or…” Hoffenen’s grip tightened on Ray’s wrist, which was starting to numb. “Will you force me to snap this little arm of yours?” Ray winced, and sweat drizzled down his brow. The pain was so intense he would have done anything to stop it. As he relaxed and prepared for submission, he again heard a pounding on the steel door. Nova.

Siding with Hoffenen was siding with her. She had betrayed him. She had signed away the lives of so many of his fellow troops. People he had eaten and laughed with were most likely dead because of what she and Hoffenen had done. Oho was dead. Chase could have met the same fate. Even he, himself, had been beaten to within an inch of his life. All because of her. He couldn’t side with Hoffenen. He would not.

“Never!” Ray shouted his voice amplified by his pain. “I will never help you!”

Hoffenen’s grip lessened. His demeanor reversed; there was a tinge of remorse in what he said next.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Tract.”

Hoffenen began pushing slowly but forcefully on Ray’s elbow. Ray screeched. His throat became quickly raw. The noise of cracking bone could be heard over Ray’s cries of agony. The pain was unbearable. He could feel his tendons tear and his bones grinding out of their sockets. With a final push, Hoffenen separated Ray’s forearm from his elbow. The final dislocating-crack was drowned out by Ray’s blood-curdling scream. Hoffenen let go and watched as the boy
writhed on the ground, tears pouring from his tightly shut eyes. The crying and moaning was his only release. His arm burned as if covered by hot coals and beckoned him to cry louder. *He had slipped out of consciousness before when he was injured, why could he not now?*

Ray’s screaming soon became merely sibilance as his throat became too raw to produce sound. Hoffenen watched intently as Ray suffered. A shimmer of guilt shown through his eyes, but his cold heart did not submit to it. He reached in his pocket and pressed the remote that would open the steel door.

Nova burst from the entrance, looking for the source of the screams. Hoffenen glanced over nonchalantly. Ray continued to gasp for air but it seemed to be choking him.

“Ray!” Nova screamed, dashing forward, tears in her eyes. She collapsed on top of Ray and held his head in her arms. She then turned on Hoffenen with eyes fierce enough to set a fire. “You promised you wouldn’t hurt him! Why!!”

“He brought this fate upon himself my dear.” Hoffenen defended. “I did nothing fatal.” Nova’s tears left wet drips on Ray’s jacket. Ray’s writhing and screaming echoed off of the cave walls.

“Jacob!” she shouted through her own tears. “I thought you cared about us! Heal him, now!” Hoffenen looked up at the ceiling.

“I do care about you, Nova.” Hoffenen whispered. He brought his eyes down to hers. They were gentle and concerned. “I would never separate you from a feeling so marvelous as love. But love is a new presence in my life. Long before I had love, I had the drive to do what is right. I prioritize my life as such. This boy is dangerous in his ignorance. I did what I had to Nova. Surely you realize I had to.”
Nova grew quiet. Ray had passed out. He lay there, his eyes closed in a blissful escape from the pain.

“Heal him. Now.” she said, gritting her teeth. Hoffenen looked at her.

“Very well...”

“ZZZTTT!” A bright orange beam flew from the darkness and hit Hoffenen in the arm. The tall man was flung to the ground; the Brutus quickly created a cushion for his body.

General Khavin slid down the shaft.

“All traitors in one place.” Khavin stated in his thick accent. “My mission is got easier.” Nova trembled and tried to rise to her feet.

“Stay down, Nova,” Hoffenen ordered through clenched teeth. The stinging light of the Brutus was wrapped around his arm. Khavin let out a hoarse laugh.

“You are weak Jacob. Your weapon and you are equally washed up.” The Brutus hissed.

“This weapon’s red light will be the last thing you’ll ever see!” Hoffenen shouted, shooting a red beam at Khavin. The Catulus countered, and the two auras scratched against one another producing a shrill whine.

Hoffenen jumped to his feet and sent a flurry of beams flying at Khavin. Orange spikes shot up from all around Khavin and formed a point over his head. This last minute cone of light withstood the Brutus’ furry. Sparks danced through the air and sizzled on the cave floor.

Then as if made of liquid, the spikes dissolved into a glowing puddle around Khavin. Hoffenen froze, a trace of amusement sparkled in his wild eyes.

The puddle separated, forming many small puddles. Out of these smaller puddles emerged what looked to be exact duplicates of the Russian General, half mask and all. A slew of
Khavin look-alikes continued to emerge from the puddles until a little less than half of the room was filled by them. Hoffenen clenched the Brutus, his hand shaking.

The massive group surged forth at once as if to smother him. Hoffenen shot several glowing red bullets into the crowd; the clones fell and evaporated without even a shout of agony. Their quiet destruction robbed Hoffenen of his warped sense of accomplishment.

A sinister, black blade, screeched out of the Brutus’s tip. Hoffenen let out a cry and immersed himself into the throng of enemies. Once inside, he swung the Brutus with frightful accuracy, decapitating and mutilating the clones.

One clone removed a knife, and the rest followed. As a mass, the clones began swinging furiously at Hoffenen, trying desperately to throw a wrench in his ongoing massacre.

A blade cut deeply in Hoffenen’s shoulder, tearing the sinew. The blind fury of his desperate counterstrike muffled the pain. Another slash, this time to the leg. Hoffenen pressed on seemingly unscathed. Another slash: another fallen clone, another bloody gash, another evaporating doppelganger.

This reckless destruction and counter-destruction continued, until Hoffenen’s blade struck flesh.

The authentic General Khavin stepped back in disbelief that all his clones had failed him, across his collarbone and down his chest was a deep gash. The clones slowly evaporated. Nova had dragged Ray’s body to the corner of the room, where she now sat, trembling.

Hoffenen faced his toppled foe. Khavin breathed faintly; the shock of the blow had taken his breath away. His visible eyelid was clenched in pain. Hoffenen dragged himself over Khavin, like an animal would to ensure a kill.
“Jacob…” Khavin hissed. “Pozhaluïsta …” Hoffenen pulled back his sword. Khavin, shaking, opened his eyes, just in time to witness the blade plunge through his ribcage.

Hoffenen’s eyes were glowing a violent red. His crooked smile had vanished, replaced by a carnivorous open mouth that salivated as if starving. Nova screamed.

Hoffenen slid the blade slowly out of Khavin’s ribcage. Again, he struck down, this time hitting an arm.

Khavin choked on the blood filling his lungs. Nova pressed her face against the unconscious Ray’s chest. The original shock and horror replayed in her head as the sickening noise of dismemberment echoed off of the cavern walls.

Bang! Hoffenen looked up, still red-eyed and crazed, Ray was being lifted to his feet by a blinding blue light, emitted from the Sertorius floating in the air next to him. When Ray opened his eyes, they were glowing a brilliant blue. He opened his mouth and millions of disconnected voices rang out.

“Brother, enough!”
CHAPTER 50

The Mirror ran behind one of the lobby’s pillars, clenching his injured arm and catching his breath. The old man was far more dangerous than he had originally thought.

Conner pointed the Sertorius at the Mirror’s shelter. His age was his greatest enemy now, as each drawn breath set his chest aflame.

The Mirror poked out from around the pillar and shot. Conner shielded himself with ease from first gunshots, but more followed. When he looked up from his shield, he found himself face to face with the Mirror’s gruff visage and tangled, red hair.

Another glance from the Mirror and Conner’s world froze. The old man’s breath ceased, his pulse slowed, and his life began to fade away.

A gunshot rang from the opposite side of the room. The Mirror’s concentration was disrupted, and Conner fell to the ground on his hands and knees, inhaling and exhaling deeply. Chase stood in the open doorway, the barrel of his rifle smoking.

Conner was free from the Mirror’s deadly grasp, but so was the Sertorius from his. The black rod lay on the floor a mere two feet away from him, like a treasure at the end of a maze. His lungs burned as the world returned to focus around him. The Mirror, dazed, fell to the ground. Resistance troops, having heard the commotion, flew down the stairs and were firing at Chase from across the room.

This was Conner’s only chance! He dove for the Sertorius. Its life-saving ebony glimmered under the building’s chandeliers. It was but a foot away… an inch. The Mirror
rose, still shocked, to his feet. Conner wrapped his fingers around the weapon. He turned and pointed it at the Mirror. The rod’s tip glowed blue.

Bam! The Sertorius vanished out of his hand. The General looked down in disbelief at his empty, callused hand.

A gunshot echoed through the now silent room. Conner fell to the ground. The Mirror lowered his gun. Chase screamed.

In his final moments, Conner slid a shaking hand into his blood-stained pocket. The picture was still there…
CHAPTER 51

The Sertorius and the Brutus both emanated high-pitched screeches. It sounded as if a flock of anxious birds were perched on the cavern’s many stalagmites. Almost as vivacious as the sound was the vividness of the light. The blue glow reached out to every corner of the cavern. No crack was left unfilled, no shadow left intact.

Though there were still only three people in the room, Nova could feel the presence of many as she trembled, curled up in the corner of the cavern. It felt as if she was surrounded by glaring eyes, each observing her and judging her.

As her pulse fluttered, she began to make out voices, quiet voices, which were rising up out of the commotion. At first, they were distant and jumbled, but soon they began to interweave, to become deep, and then they became clear.

The first voice was awkward but coherent as it spoke:

*Monster, brother, demon,*

*I do not comprehend*

*We preach and preach of unity,*

*And then strike down a friend.*

The second *voice*, if so uniform a word describes it, was screaming. It was pure terror harnessed as speech. Souls crying out in unison.
Death is their future,
To murder all and aide none,
It always has been.

Killer and weapon,
Similar paths we must tread,
This is unity.

Question not our fate,
Cease your cry of objection,
And kill without thoughts.

The first entity shook. Its many voices scattered and shouted uncontrollably.

Silencing…thoughts… Curse it… they won’t leave… partner… father… killing… unity…
murder… brother, I hurt! The voice began to shout and scream in agony. The surreal brightness retreated from the cracks and corners as it dimmed. Nova peered up, still shaking. She could make out the shadows of two figures; one was standing, the other lying at its feet. What had happened? The transparent birds grew silent, and the cavern once again regained its eerie calm.

Hoffenen was the figure standing, eyes glowing a violent red. Ray had collapsed on the ground.

The screaming voices echoed from deep inside Hoffenen.

My brother the fool,
You have not controlled your pawn.

Nor has Catulus,

But we need humans,

We need control over them.

We must have control.

Humans, they will think,

Devise their own agendas.

It is us not them.

Control brother, now

You discovered your master

Now you must control.

I can only rest,

Only rest when all are dead

No one can halt me.

Locate your spirit,

Harness it. It is our sword

Separates us both
Separates us all

From the weapons of the past,

Superior beings...

The red in Hoffenen’s eyes grew dim, and the howling voices faded off gradually, each word becoming more unintelligible until Hoffenen crumpled to the ground as well.

Nova sighed deeply. She shut her eyes for a moment, to be alone with her slowing thoughts.
CHAPTER 52

When she awoke, she lay in a hospital bed. A firm but embracing pillow supported her head. The room was shabbily lit. The sound of men’s voices could be heard not far away. The first was gravelly and coarse.

“This battle was an enormous victory for us. Not a prisoner taken, General, just as you ordered. They were all killed.”

“All of them?”

Upon hearing the second voice, a strange fear loomed over Nova. It was a definite, bone-chilling fear, but somewhere laced throughout there was a sense of security and relief. She sat up in bed and looked toward the door that separated her cramped room from the familiar voice.

“Of course,” the Mirror replied. “Now about my promotion…”

“All of them?” Hoffenen repeated, ignoring the Mirror’s attempt to steer the conversation.

“Yes.” A faint tinge of annoyance was sprinkled in his tone. “Everyone is dead.”

A pause. in.

“The commander as well?”

“Yes!” came the Mirror’s voice, rough like sandpaper. “I killed General Conner! Shot him myself! I was two feet away when he croaked! I even checked his damn pulse! General Francis Conner, the strategist, is dead!”

“Ssshh. You will wake our guest.”
The doorknob turned slowly, Nova lay down, threw the covers over her shoulders, shut her eyes tight.

She felt a spider-like hand on her shoulder. The owner of the familiar voice knelt down to whisper in her ear.

“It was a success, my angel. We were victorious. He wasn’t hurt, and if we wish to maintain that, we should refrain from mentioning Conner’s passing. It would break his heart and tear him from us.” The hand was removed, she felt a light kiss on her forehead. “Good night.”

The figure exited the room, gently shutting the door behind him. Nova breathed deeply. “Good night…”
CHAPTER 53

It was a stormy night in Munich. The clouds loomed overhead like dark, swirling gods, and puddles, that had formed on the crooked cement, rippled as they were filled with new rain. The storm outside beat mercilessly on the windows of the elephantine palace and drenched those nestled within with overwhelming despair.

Alone in the hallway outside of the Emperor’s study stood Colonel Harper; she was worn and exhausted. Her once angelic, blonde hair was beginning to fray. After General Khavin had been revealed to be a traitor, her life had fallen apart.

The Emperor’s personal bodyguards had torn through Khavin’s office, desecrating files and smashing keepsakes, and she had watched. Her colleagues had delivered scathing lectures, throwing her mentor to the ground and sullying his name, and she had been silent. She wanted more than anything to defend him, to protect his name if she could not protect his being, but the wise General had foreseen these obstacles and had instructed her to hold the truth and her tongue until the time was right.

She could do nothing but privately hold fast to what he had told her, and she hated herself for it. She had publicly condemned her friend: denied knowing him, denied helping him, denied following him. She was a macabre actress, her makeup the blood of her teacher and her stage the ignorant world.

Barely alive, she clutched her voicebox in her clammy hands day and night, waiting to hear a voice that, unbeknownst to her, had been silenced forever…
The Emperor had requested her presence along with Colonel Ata’s to speak on the matter of the NGE’s recent defeat in Toronto. She knew only what she had to of the atrocity and could only pray that Khavin had not been involved. When Colonel Ata arrived late, the pair entered the room…

“The entire Fourth Army?” the Emperor questioned as he gazed into his fireplace, the only source of light in his study. Colonel Harper, her hair fraying, and Colonel Ata, his oiled, black hair disheveled, stood behind the Emperor, gazing intently into the flames to avoid the fiery eyes of the Emperor. Much to their surprise, the Emperor’s eyes remained glued to the fire as well.

“And of Conner?”

Colonel Ata squared his shoulders and spoke slowly, so as not to agitate the powerful old man. “We have an eyewitness for Conner’s death.”

“So there were survivors,” the Emperor mused.

“Well… not exactly sir. There…” Ata struggled with his words. Harper sensing his collapse dove in to assist.

“I have heard there was only one survivor, sir.”

The Emperor’s eyebrow rose. “And his name, Miss Harper?” Harper pushed her hair out of her eyes. She hated being called Miss. She was a Colonel the same as Ata.

“I believe it was a Lieutenant Chase Jagger, your Excellency.”

“How amusing…” The Emperor paused stroking his chin. “Have him sent to Dresden Military Academy. I want him promoted.”

“Yes, sir,” the Colonels chimed in unison.
The Emperor inched his chair closer to the fire. “The mythical phoenix rises from its own ashes. Maybe, this was meant to happen to us. Maybe, this young man is a godsend of some sort.”

“Maybe sir,” Harper humored. The Emperor laughed his sickly laugh.

“Colonel Ata, Polky has recommended you to me. Says you’re the finest pupil he’s ever seen, graduated top of your class from Dresden… Yes, you will take General Conner’s position.”

Ata saluted hastily. “It’s an honor, your Excellency. I…”

“Yes, yes.” The Emperor waved his hand as if trying to swat an imaginary fly over his shoulder. “I’m relieving some of Hoffenen’s troops in Turkey and placing them under your command.” Harper’s heart grew cold. “I want you to meet up with General Polky by next month. You may go.”

“Yes sir.” Ata clucked as he hurried out of the room. Harper balled her fists. Ata’s promotion was another straw on the camel’s back. She had graduated top of her class at Dresden. She was recommended by other Generals. She was…

“Miss Harper.” The Emperor spun in his chair, looking away from the fire for the first time. The fire stored in his eyes pulled her into his stare.

“We have received intelligence that Khavin was in Toronto at the time of the attack.” Harper’s heart sunk, but she could not show it. She stifled her tears. “We can only hope that he is dead. General Hoffenen has already taken his position, so that is one less problem there.”

“He’s not ready to protect your Excellence!”

Hatred fueled this brash response. She had an enemy more real than the blue and gold flag of the Resistance, and she would have her revenge if it took every ounce of her being.
The old man spoke, his tone slightly fazed by Harper’s brazen response. “And why, pray tell, isn’t he qualified?”

“He…um…he…” Harper began to sweat: why had she lost control? “He doesn’t have a very good staff; he needs some people with more… experience.”

“I see.” The Emperor twiddled his fingers. “And I suppose you would be someone with more experience?”

Harper froze. She had to choose her words carefully.

“Yes, sir, I could help if you would let me.”

The Emperor turned his back to her and looked into the fire. She stood behind him, perfectly silent, perfectly still, for what seemed like hours.

“I will transfer you under Hoffenen’s command.” The old man finally muttered. “I suppose I wouldn’t want to lose you to the battlefront when you’ve always been here to protect me at home.” Relief poured over her.

“Why do they rise against me?” Fluid pulsed with a hiss up the largest tube leading to the Emperor’s head. “This world is a tangled web of hate and corruption. I was suffocated by it; I was sickened by it. I was told to trust on the good of humanity to solve its own crisis, and as you can see by this massacre, there is no good in humanity!

We are all imperfect and horrid; not just once race, not just one religious sect, but all of us! The only way to save this world is to start anew, to burn down the old and…” The Emperor coughed.

“Yes, sir?”

“It is late. I grow tired,” he rubbed his temples. “Get some sleep, Miss Harper.”

“Yes, Excellency.”
The rain continued to beat outside.
WORKS CITED


Military loyalty ties in strongly with political loyalty. If one is involved in the militia of a state one is also, in theory, under the command of whichever governmental party is in charge of the state at that time. This idea of loyalty stems from a government’s desire for unity, and the means necessary to protect its people, both from outside sources and dangerous insurrections within the nation. A government would be powerless if it could not enforce the laws that it creates, and that truth is why the leader of a government is also, in most cases, the leader of the military as well (example: the President of the United States is also the Commander and Chief of their country).

Knowing that military loyalty is essential to maintaining order in a society, I draw your attention to regimes that committed horrible acts using the military under their command, specifically Nazi Germany.

The Stahlheim, a veterans military organization in Nazi Germany, was ordered by Hitler to follow his decrees for the unity of the German Army. The minister of the Stahlheim, Franz Seldte issued this statement to his veterans:

“In view of the fateful hour which all Germans, and with them my old comrades, are experiencing, I take the occasion to point out that dignity, calm and self-discipline are
especially to be expected from old soldiers. In loyalty to Der Fuehrer, to the Reich
President and to the State we stand unchanged. The well-being of the state will always be
for us the highest law” (Seldte 191).

This notice echoes the importance of loyalty to ones’ government in a very real way.
Seldte’s own personal conviction may not have been to follow Hitler’s commands and teachings,
and by the tone and necessity of the letter, we as readers can deduce that not some members of
the Stahlheim might have needed to be reminded of the importance of loyalty.

Another passage of Snyder’s work more explicitly reiterates this, all-to-real focus on
loyalty. This passage is the actual oath that Nazi soldiers had to take before entering into Hitler’s
service:

“I swear before God this holy oath: that I shall give absolute obedience to the Fuehrer of
the German Reicch and people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht, and as
a courageous soldier will be ready at all times to lay down my life for this oath” (Snyder 195).

This oath is proclaimed to be “holy” and soldier taking it are reminded that the are
swearing this oath “before God”. These sort of tactics are important to realize because loyalty, in
a sense, is also deeply laden with manipulation and guilt. A soldier here is manipulated by the
very words of their oath to believe that the Reich and God are on the same page with their
system of beliefs, and also they are forced to admit that Hitler demands as much loyalty as the
entire governmental system of Germany, though he is simply the head, not the entire body.
I wish to create a realistic military loyalty in my novel, and I believe that focusing on the important points: manipulation, necessity for governmental strength, and guilt-inducing propaganda, is a good way to start.

I already have several characters whose personal opinions and beliefs appear contradictory to the enigmatic NGE’s motives. General Conner and Cindy Conner are two good examples of characters who appear to have some distaste for the Empire, but still work within it. Conner’s sense of military loyalty (strengthened by his dedication to his deceased children) drives him to continue to work in a system that he may even see as broken at times.

I believe that my novel will become stronger, if in candid moments, characters such as the Conner’s discuss their problems with the NGE, where Ray can hear them. This will create a greater tension in the novel and also bring into focus the elephant in the room, which is extreme loyalty to ones regime.

Also, I believe this novels would appear more realistic if I included propaganda, and guilt-inducing oaths that show the NGE’s effort to bring soldiers into complete loyalty to the NGE and their rulers.

Following a model more like Hitler’s regime will assist me in the creation of a loyalist society where only the extremely brave dare ask questions or challenge the potency of the government.
POLITICAL DISCOURSE, DICTION, AND RESULTING IMAGE

Modern political systems are tricky animals. There are as many different political systems as there are countries to house them. It varies from country to country how one can become a powerful figure in politics as well. Some are taken in by vote, others by lineage, and others by force. Though political systems are as unique as snowflakes there is a common element that can assure the success of a political group, or individual that has risen to the top in their political system. This border-crossing political cornerstone is diction and discourse.

It appears that no matter which society one places the political system in the power of words is always a driving force. Franklin D. Roosevelt kept his people calm during World War Two with fireside chats and a constant flow of encouraging, inspiring diction. Osama bin Laden’s televised speeches to his fellow Taliban operatives were the subject of News Channel’s all around the world, as they riled his troops and sent chills down the spines of his enemies. The list of political figures that were deemed superb in matters of diction and discourse stretches as long as the pages of history itself, but there was one particular leader who’s fiery presentation and bold diction changed the course of world history in a way that still haunts the world to this day, that man was Adolf Hitler.

It appears, at first, brutally obvious that Hitler was a fantastic speaker. I challenge you to sit in on any history class in the world and not be subjected to a black and white screen depicting the Fuehrer slamming the podium with his hands and roaring German over a throng of screaming supporters. But what made him so inspiring? What twists of his tongue convinced a nation that he was their absolute ruler and savior?
Though it cannot be ignored that his presentation style was fiery and unique, it is also important to look carefully at the words that he chose to drive his point home. To get a better grip of Hitler’s diction apart from his presentation, I will examine a text taken from his revolutionary book, *Mien Kampf*, specifically, his chapter on “The Right to Emergency Defense”.

The first tactic that Hitler takes in his diction is to heavily utilize positively and negatively charged worlds. Take this sentence for example:

“Historical examples of a similar nature show that nations which lay down their arms without compelling reasons prefer in the ensuing period to accept the greatest humiliations and extortions rather than attempt to change their fate by a renewed appeal to force” (Hitler 128).

Hitler, in this instance, wants to convince his readers to break the Armistice and return Germany’s military force. Hitler points to nations in the past that have done what Germany is doing now and states that they would prefer “humiliations and extortions” over simply “appealing” to force. Here Hitler uses the negatively-charged words of “humiliations” and “extortions” to show what he is implying that Germany would prefer to endure over using force. Hitler makes any alternative to force seem like it is the end of the honor of the country. Without having to address different alternatives to force personally, Hitler has made it a general statement that if you are not using force you are risking humiliation and extortion. But, this sentence has positively charged words as well. Hitler realized that in order to promote force, one mustn’t simply bash alternatives, but one must make force seem positive.
The phrase “renewed appeal to force” is not in itself a negatively charged phrase. An appeal is a reasonable plea and force is a very mild way to describe bending someone to your will through violence. Hitler wishes to recreate the German army, a force that is used to destroy enemies and wreak violence, however, Hitler takes into account that Germany is a country still emerging from the shadow of a previous war, and to imply that they can only return to power through military conquest or violent defense of their rights, might not be accepted with open arms by his war-torn comrades. Hitler makes his suggestion of “appealing to force” seem like a reasonable idea, and, as we saw earlier, it definitely seems like an acceptable alternative to “humiliations and extortion”.

One of Hitler’s other tactics that he uses to perfection is a redirection of blame. Hitler seeks to blame other groups (namely the Jews and the French) for the problems that Germany has come into. Hitler realizes that if at any point he were to point the finger at Germany itself he would lose his audience, and the connection that he has established between him and the well-being of Germany (he wishes to appear to be pro-Germany and thus he must view the country as perfect in his speech.) Examine this sentence:

“As the leadership of our destinies has, since the end of the War, been quite openly furnished by Jews we cannot assume that faulty knowledge alone is the cause of our misfortune; we must on the contrary, hold the conviction that conscious purpose is destroying our nation” (Hitler 129).

Hitler is doing an excellent job moving around the audience’s negative focus here. Hitler realizes that the German government has been going along with the Armistice and submitting to
its restrictions, and he wants to be able to attack the government’s support of the Armisistance that he despises without making himself seem any less patriotic. Hitler does this by redirecting the blame of the situation on the Jewish Government officials. This shows that Hitler has analyzed counter arguments to his and is ready to come up with a solution. He realizes that at this point in his essay his readers may be beginning to seem him as an anti-government speaker, so he addresses the problems that he has with the German government, but asserts that it is probably due to the Jewish leaders, as opposed to simply “faulty knowledge”. Hitler drives this point home with the use of the negatively charged word “destroying” and the positively charged words “our nation”. By the end of this sentence the readers sees Hitler not as a government dissident, but as a concerned patriot who doesn’t want to see his country destroyed.

Much like Hitler, the Emperor in my novel is faced with some difficult situations. He preaches of a perfect world in which he desires no more violence or pain for anyone, and yet insists that the only way to attain this perfection is through the destruction of opposing forces.

The Emperor could become a stronger speaker if he utilizes more of Hitler’s literary devices. For example, the Emperor at the beginning of the novel appears to wish to keep the idea that there is a Resistance in the back of the minds of his subjects, perhaps it would be more beneficial to the strength of the character if he is depicted in a setting where he is faced with the task of addressing the people about a matter of the Resistance. The Emperor does not wish to admit weakness, or even the existence of opposition to his rule, however, if he were to use negatively and positively charged diction, he could make it appear that the Resistance is an evil, but it is an evil that can be destroyed through government loyalty and “a renewed appeal to force”.

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It may be a solid idea to continue to dissect the discourse of Dictator’s like Adolf Hilter, and utilize some of the similar sentence structure in a speech by the Emperor in my novel. A speech would not only remind the reader that there is indeed an audience out there that is not simply the core group of characters, and that they see a public, more omnipotent side of the Emperor, than those people who know him personally.
PTSD, TRAUMA, AND REALISTIC CHARACTER REACTIONS

There are an inconceivable amount of factors that go into the creation and alteration of a personality. According to an article in the Journal of Russian and Eastern European Psychology, memory and past events play an extremely important role in the development of an individual’s personality, and their reactions to specific events. To state simply, the events that have happened in one’s life define who one is.

This creation of individuality and personality is a natural, unprovoked action in the lives of humans in the real world, but in a fictional world of the written and imaginary word it is up to the author to take into account the events that have transpired in the lives of characters and what effects they have on the personalities of their characters.

Most authors have some idea of what their character is going to be like before they begin composing their work. It is common knowledge that the inspiration for characters comes from the author who creates them. Characters can be derived from people in the author’s life, people, fictional or nonfictional that the author has observed, or even a reflection of the author himself. Essentially, this would suggest that the fictional characters already have some vague concept of a personality before making their appearance into the story. Simplifying things again, this would mean that the characters already have a back story, with past events (sometimes flushed out by the author, or sometimes left to speculation) that define who they are.

Author help books such as Zen in the Art of Writing, What If?: Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers, and Characters and Viewpoints focus on the importance of the author going
beyond the written text to define who a character is. These help books focus so very strongly on
the back story of a character, insisting that knowing your own character’s history, voice, and
personality is essential to making a character realistic and “three-dimensional”, and while this is
ture there is a factor that these help books all seem to leave out when discussing character
development that I believe is so obvious that many authors just simply refuse to address it. I am
talking about the change of a character throughout the story itself.

Characters that change throughout a story are called everything from “Fluid Characters”,
to “Main Characters”, and they differentiate themselves from other “Static” or “Stoic” characters
by showing a progression in their overall attitudes or beliefs throughout the story. This change
essentially changes the character’s overall personality. It appears, at first, too obvious: events
happen in the story, character experiences said events, character changes. However this changing
of character personality is not something that every author does well. Often characters are faced
with events, and while they do change in some way after experiencing the event, the change that
they underwent may be so far from the realistic, that the entire novel could be capsized, and the
shroud of fictional wonder could be torn right in two. The only way to properly manage these
changes of character to ensure realism, is through psychological research.

I will apply this concept to my novel to serve as an example. The protagonist in my
novel, Ray, experiences many traumatic events throughout the course of my novel. He
experiences tests of his maturity through the care he must give to his alcoholic caretaker,
relocating school districts, and holding a steady job. He is tested by his budding romantic
relationship, separation from his loved ones, physical abuse, and exposure to horrific wartime
violence and death. Ray’s past, including the loss of his parents shapes how he copes with these
events, but often I found myself neglecting to show significant or real change to his personality after his exposure to increasingly traumatic events.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common disorder that can be found in everyone from soldiers to abused children, and is caused through a combination of repetitive traumatic events over time, and social influences (Dikl, Eberly, Engdahl). It would only make sense, that after witnessing and experiencing the traumas that he had experienced, that Ray would experience some, if not all of the symptoms associated with PTSD. Some of the symptoms include: flashbacks, vivid dreams, high levels of stress, nervousness, fatigue, depression, and jumpiness (Dikl, Eberly, Engdahl). However, in my novel, I only briefly address these symptoms, having one show up immediately after the event and then fade into nothingness as the novel persists. In order to strengthen my work, I believe it is imperative that I continue to show the effects of PTSD in my characters, namely Ray.

Characters all have different personalities and thus respond to trauma uniquely, however, it would be remiss on my part to ignore the common side effects of PTSD, because it would give my character more realism and help them to relate more to the readers of my book.

Psychological studies can play a pivotal role in the creation of in-depth characters, because the recorded responses of thousands will help the author to broaden the spectrum of the character’s realism and help them to respond, throughout the novel realistically to the events that happen to them.