

OUTRAGE LEVEL 10



LUCY LEITNER

To Grandma MP, for the “old lady” intel.



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FOREWORD



Outrage Level 10 is one of the most important works of speculative fiction to be published so far this decade. It is a story about America 30 years in the future after a revolution by The People, or at least the loudest influencers on the internet, succeeds in toppling the hierarchy and creating a society based on justice.

Mob justice, anyway. Because thanks to the Chatter app and its Outrage meter, people can respond in real time to any transgression, slight or serious, inflicted on them by fellow citizens. The characters of Lucy Leitner's world do not need encouragement to tattle on each other either, since decades of social media conditioning have primed the human race for an oversensitivity that would make today's trolls blush. Exchanges escalate on a public log from which the most egregious offenders—those who trigger the most outrage—are arrested, brought to trial, and convicted. The People's criminals are sent to "the Maze" for rehabilitation, but they never return.

Sound scary? It is, at least if you're an asshole or everyone around you happens to be. Although the first and second editions of *Outrage Level 10* have been released by horror publishers, the science-fiction premise and satirical lens are what drew me to the story when I first noticed it mentioned on Twitter. Like Lucy's work, the novels in my *Terrafide* series also explore America's polarization through humor. Finding such fiction is difficult. Agents, editors, and publishers are often uneasy about embracing stories that are "too political," insofar as tales recognize the politics in our country at all, and so our national dialogue is being managed not through arts and literature but through social media rants and memes.

In other words, by fueling outrage.

I am not very familiar with Lucy's political views, but I doubt it would make a difference to our friendship if I were. That is not to say neither of us might be strong in our beliefs, only that we probably can survive without having to convert each other to our ideological cause. During an age in which binary political perspectives is tearing our nation apart, it is a pleasure and relief to be able to admire in Lucy a writer who is playful, thoughtful, and nuanced, even if we may not agree on every issue.

I just wish this old-fashioned value of respect transferred neatly elsewhere, maybe to the internet. To this end, *Outrage Level 10*, like any good speculative fiction, prompts a question: Where is social media taking us? For all its humor and violence, the novel lays bare a line of inquiry only time will tell if The People are able, or willing, to answer.

Ryan Hyatt
Author, *Terrafide* series
Editor, *The La-La Lander*

THE CONSTITUTION FOR THE REPUBLIC OF AMERICA





We the People of the United States, in Order to form a true Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common good, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Republic of America.

Article I

Section 1

All powers herein shall be vested in the People of the Republic.

Section 2

Each citizen will heretofore represent him/her/itself in all democratic functions. Each person shall be able to represent him/her/itself once he/she/it has attained the age of 18 years.

Section 3

Each district shall elect a representative to serve on the People's Commission in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The People's Commission is responsible for the finalization and ratification of laws submitted by the People.

Section 4

All citizens may draft and propose laws to be submitted to the People's Commission. The Commission will then modify the regulations and place them up for a collective vote of the People in order to achieve ratification.

Section 5

The People's Commission, with guidance from the People, shall have the power to draft amendments to this Constitution to be put before the People for a vote.

Section 6

The People's Commission shall have the responsibility for collecting taxes at a 25 percent rate to pay for the general welfare of the People of the Republic of America:

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- To maintain a baseline standard so that all people may live in comfort.
- To constitute Tribunals and Committees for Public Safety in each district.
- To maintain the People's Commission.
- To perform public works projects.
- To maintain the high standard of education.
- To protect the nation by working to eradicate global hate.
- To fund medical research for the good of the People.
- To heal the environment.
- To provide healthcare for the People.

Citizens may choose how to allocate their tax dollars for the greater good of the People. Each citizen may elect to contribute tax dollars to the aforementioned nine categories in any percentages, no less than 5, with all totaling 100 percent of the 25 percent of their income.

Section 7

All enterprises shall be considered private, except those in the following areas:

- Tribunals
- People's Commission
- Public Works Department—infrastructure, roads, civic structure building and maintenance, and utilities (electrical, gas, power, sewage)
- Education
- National protection
- Life Extension Department—medical research with the express purpose of life extension and maximization of each citizen's potential
- Environmental Department
- Healthcare Department

Article 2

Section 1

The executive power shall be vested in the People of the Republic of America.

Section 2

No citizen, regardless of wealth or status, shall have undue influence on the policy of the Republic.

Article 3

Section 1

The judicial power of the Republic of America shall be vested in the People.

Section 2

All citizens of all districts are to serve on a district's Committee of Public Safety. Citizens will vote guilty or not-guilty verdicts in all cases presented to the District Court, in addition to approving sentencing. Citizens are not required to vote in every proceeding. However, being an active, engaged citizen is recommended.

Section 3

Each district shall elect a Judge to oversee the district's Committee of Public Safety and moderate the proceedings.

Declaration of the Rights of the People

Amendment 1

The People's Commission shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Commission for a redress of grievances.

Amendment 2

Words meant to marginalize, degrade, persecute, disenfranchise, alienate, intimidate, harass, menace, bully, oppress, or victimize will be punishable by the People.

Amendment 3

The People have a right to guns, if a petition is made to the immediate community in the district and it is accepted.

Amendment 4

The right of the People to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects—against unreasonable searches and seizures—shall not be violated. There shall be no formal police force to make such seizures. Upon probable cause, the People may demand that a Citizen present him/her/itself in front of the Tribunal.

Amendment 5

In all prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of citizens of the district wherein the crime was alleged to have been committed and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him/her/it.

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Amendment 6

All sentencing shall consist of one or more of the following punishments: Community service (for minor offenses), public chastisement (for serious though ultimately forgivable offenses), exile from the district (for offenses against the People), and banishment to the Maze (for the most heinous offenses).

Amendment 7

All citizens have the right to vote in every election, lawmaking, or trial that occurs in their district. They are not required to vote, but it is highly advisable that every citizen vote. No law shall be passed to limit this right.

Amendment 8

Every effort shall be made to extend the life of every citizen.

Amendment 9

Every effort shall be made to extend the life of the planet.

Amendment 10

All activities that have been proven to shorten or diminish the quality of life shall henceforth be prohibited. No citizen shall feel undue pressure to participate in self-destructive activities. Laws shall be passed to make sure that each citizen protects him/her/itself at all times. Such monitored activities include but are not limited to seat belts, sporting activities, psychological torment, speed limits, and proper precaution during physical activity to protect the brain.

Amendment 11

All People—regardless of race, color, creed, ethnicity, heritage, native language, ancestry, racial mixture, sexual orientation, gender identity, height, weight, proportions, propensity for flatulence, fingernail length, reading comprehension skills, ability to correctly use apostrophes, self-esteem level, body-fat percentage, skin smoothness, hairline, hair length, hair color, hair curl, lack of hair, handedness, athletic ability, intellect, artistic ability, level of attractiveness, recessive genes, hilarity of name, lineage, illness, number of allergies, distribution of freckles—are equal. No laws of the Republic shall be made to infringe on this fact. Every citizen of the Republic shall have an equal opportunity for a long, healthy, and enjoyable life regardless of any of the aforementioned factors. Any citizen who attempts to take away these rights shall be subject to the will of the People.

Amendment 12

No citizen shall abuse his/her/its privilege or status to harm, intimidate, or marginalize another citizen.

PROLOGUE





“We should have flying cars by now,” Underwood Jennings said as he stared down the alley at the flat asphalt. Say what you will about corrupt politicians; if they were still around, maybe one of those snakes would have promised aerial infrastructure. Underwood scowled. There were some thoughts even he couldn’t say out loud.

“Are you asking me to discuss that on my feed?” Mackenzie Brunner applied her O-Negative lipstick in the rearview mirror of her fashionable, white 2044 Ford Pinto. She looked at her somewhat famous face through her polarized, UV-protective, sun-resistant, beta carotene-infusing sunglasses. She always asked the same question when Underwood Jennings ranted, as it seemed to assuage the rage bubbling in his speech about even the most inconsequential issues.

Underwood laughed. “You really think *Making the Mirror Jealous* has that kind of clout?—to be the impetus for major, yet long-overdue technological innovations?”

“I don’t know, Woody. I don’t think I’ve ever been thumped by a carmaker.”

Mackenzie turned the Pinto out onto Negley Avenue, pulling away from Woody’s apartment building, where occupants crammed big lives into small spaces. In one of the many units inhabited by conscientious notables who wanted to lessen their physical impact on the world while leaving their mark on culture—where Mackenzie had spent eventful nights that she relived on her feed—the tenant had an ingenious system of drawers stacked floor to ceiling. He would have just as little as the man who had the least. Except for the savings account—that, he kept. The tiny apartments provided the discomfort that only the most righteous and rich would tolerate. The rich, and Underwood Jennings. Overcrowding was as prevalent in Pittsburgh as anywhere else, and, dammit, they would do their civic duty and take up less space than anyone else.

“They’re called engineers,” he said.

“Who?”

“The people who design cars. Maybe even aviation engineers if they ever make the flying ones.”

“Oh.” Mackenzie feigned interest as she turned onto Penn Avenue. A tent colony was erected outside of Banana Republic. Slogans written on the nylon structures and on the placards in the hands of the picketers indicated that the venerable store’s name was evocative of exploited labor in the Caribbean, of the suffering of those who toiled in those fruit-based economies. People were

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already walking by the shuttered shops that were set to open in 45 minutes, at 10 o'clock this Sunday morning. Wait outside early, so you don't have to wait in line later. The time these shoppers would wait may be similar, but waiting was more pleasant before the stores were crammed to capacity.

Mackenzie drove past the protest, patting her long, pencil-straight, platinum blond hair with the magenta ends that had become her trademark and matched every article of clothing she owned. She hit her turn signal to make a left on South Aiken Avenue.

"Anyway, I'll push for it in my meeting tomorrow."

"Right. You think your pushing for it is going to make it happen?"

"Yes, I do. The technology has been imagined since the 1960s. At least!"

"Yeah..."

"We've got cars. We've got airplanes. Build the goddamn things! Yeah, I get that historically they all thought it would be way too difficult to control traffic that's not on any streets. Now? Someone fucks up on the road, cuts someone off and just dips to a different altitude, you don't think the People are going to do something about it?"

"Flying cars would be really moist."

"They'd be more than moist! They'd be dripping. We're just becoming complacent. No one cares anymore about making good on promises. Instead we got the Super Seniors. What I wouldn't give to have put a straitjacket on those researchers when they were looking for a way to reanimate functionally dead people. No one thought it would work so well that we just wouldn't die anymore. And now we have millions of these cyborgs that no one asked for. And everyone forgot about flying cars.

"Just get me to Swanson's."

He threw his head back, an exaggerated signal of his exhaustion in talking to Mackenzie, and leaned back in the passenger seat, his long, skinny, denim-covered legs requiring the entirety of the reclining room in the two-door sports car. His shaggy brown hair shot out in several directions against the red velvet seat back. Mackenzie thought the unruly hair was one of his sexiest traits, along with charisma and the fact that, though they'd been dating for two months, she still knew almost nothing about him. But substance seldom concerned Mackenzie, who made her name by making it with names.

She turned left, following high-end Walnut Street where more shoppers were waiting for the stores to open. Cars lined the right side of the road. The automatic braking system kicked on as a dozen pedestrians stepped into the marked crosswalk ten feet ahead of her car. No sooner had Mackenzie pressed the gas than the brakes engaged again when another five crossed. They were slow, careful not to spill the coffee from their lidless paper cups.

A Pontiac Zombie inched up behind them as they waited for the critical mass to cross. The Zombie had been in her rearview display since they turned

off Negley. Mackenzie pretended not to notice. She turned left onto South Highland Street. The Pontiac followed.

“There’s a dude behind us,” Underwood said.

“So?”

“I don’t like that.”

Underwood’s omnivice beeped, Mackenzie’s a few seconds later. She’d have to get that fixed. The People’s Connection promised news updates and alerts faster than any other carrier. A lie. She’d alert Melissa at the Consumer Feed. Public humiliation should shame the pioneers of the device, which functioned on biometrics to act as a phone, mobile web, wallet, planner, entertainment system, and health tracker, into giving her a new omnivice. Maybe even one of the new models that translated thoughts into text to dictate a chit to the Chatter network without even speaking. The automatic outrage gauge that made Chatter the social network of the Revolution now detected rage in vibes as well. Since hers was a version behind the latest omnivice model, Mackenzie received the bulletin approximately two seconds after Underwood did. But looking at her omnivice while driving was a sure way to get reported. Underwood stared at his omnivice, and from the 800 dpi resolution on the screen, his face stared back.

“Wanted at the People’s Tribunal,” the text read. “For crimes against the People.” He scrolled down with his finger. “Underwood Jennings thought it was hilarious to play with a robot shower device while standing on a Holocaust Memorial. People’s outrage level: 8. Representative People’s Grievances:

‘I can’t believe someone would be so insensitive and make shower jokes on a Holocaust Memorial. The way those people were burned to death by the scalding water. Makes me sick.’

‘Hips like that think it’s ironic. That hip lifestyle—no respect for the past.’

‘Being a hip is as bad as being a Nazi!’”

And there was the incriminating photo: Underwood Jennings with the robotic shower portion of the morning machine, standing on a concrete bench.

“Swanson,” Underwood said. “Shit, Mackenzie. How was I supposed to know that was a memorial? He knew it. They’re trying to get rid of me!”

“Who’s trying to get rid of you?”

“The privileged assholes who put me in this situation to begin with.”

A megaphone emerged from the passenger-side window of the days-old, water-logged corpse-colored Pontiac behind them.

“Underwood Jennings, please step out of the vehicle,” came the voice from the megaphone. “You are wanted before a jury of your peers.”

“What’s going on, Woody?” Mackenzie asked.

“Just drive!”

Mackenzie jerked the car down a one-way street, bouncing on cobblestone past the mansions with their front yards filled with parked cars.

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“Not here!” Underwood yelled, turning around to watch the People’s car in close pursuit. A banner was flung out of the rear driver’s-side window proclaiming it as such, indicating that it was now above reproach for any of its imminent traffic crimes. And that it was legally allowed to bypass the safety features like automatic braking and containment within painted traffic lanes.

Mackenzie did not have the same privileges in her Pinto. As she jerked the car to the right off the cobblestone and onto a paved street, she accelerated. Her custom-installed magenta light blinked, letting her know that she was approaching the 35-mph speed limit. The car beeped—she was exceeding it. A small piece of paper spewed from beneath the music player. The speeding ticket fell into the center console on top of the parking brake button: \$95.

“We have to pull over,” she said, panic in her strained voice, her eyes darting from side to side. She glanced at Underwood, his body rigid, his head on a swivel. She tried to read his expression—she was fluent in the language of men—but as always, she couldn’t read him. She thought she caught a glimpse of panic, but not fear. Underwood didn’t have fear. And that momentary hint of panic turned into rage.

“Just drive. Get me to Swanson’s. I’ve got questions needing answers,” Underwood yelled, as he threw the ticket on the floor.

The car hit 40 mph on South Highland Street, another ticket; 45, another; 50, one more fell onto the parking-brake button.

“Woody, I—I can’t afford this.”

“Just go!”

The tires screamed, the voice of the car, as Mackenzie steered on the bending road. The banner waved in the wind of the chase, but the People’s car was still in pursuit. Mackenzie kept driving straight on Fifth Avenue as a Ford mini Escalade turned into traffic in front of them. Mackenzie jolted the car to the right to attempt to pass the Escalade, but anticipating her movement, the tiny SUV moved directly in front of them. She swerved to the left, so did the SUV. She attempted to move across the double-yellow lines but was greeted by loud honking from oncoming traffic. She shot back into the correct lane, the Escalade still in front and the People’s car now next to them in the right lane.

“Mackenzie Brunner, pull over!” The voice in the megaphone shouted from next to Underwood’s window.

“They know it’s me!” Mackenzie squealed, a bit of terror of the law of the People combined with the high that comes from hearing your name broadcast on any sort of medium, no matter how dubious.

“Of course they know it’s you. It’s your car. It has pink hearts on the doors.”

“What the hell, Woody? What did you do?”

“Nothing, babe. It’s all a big mix-up. They think I’m an agg. That I was insensitive at a Holocaust memorial. That wasn’t even marked as a memorial.” His voice took a softer tone, soothing even. Like he was telling her everything

would be all right.

She assumed the role of damsel in distress, a part she had played many times. It was the act she used to trick renowned humanitarian Klaus Muesli into actions that revealed deep-seated patriarchal beliefs on the second most starred episode of her feed.

“But... what if they take me? I don’t even know what’s going on.”

“They won’t. Just get me to the South Side.”

Mackenzie slammed on the brakes and flung the wheel to the left, ditching the SUV but not the People’s car behind her. They were in an alley now, meant for nothing except local traffic. The car beeped furiously. It expelled another ticket; this one for \$155. She accelerated. The SUV was now behind the Zombie. The car shot through puddles from yesterday’s watering, spraying the brick backs of the buildings that lined the narrow road. She slowed to turn the car to the right, and the automatic brakes engaged yet again when a truck with its metal walkway extended blocked the one-lane street. With the People’s car mere feet from the intersection, Mackenzie hit the reverse button and the car jolted backward from the truck. The People’s car raced forward toward them while Mackenzie watched the feed from the rear camera on the dash. Through his aviators, Underwood glared at his pursuers.

They were the People, all right. The driver was chubby, or bloated. He couldn’t make out any details besides the face. It was plain, piglike even, the ample cheeks reddish from the exasperation of the chase. Painfully human. This was his glory, to catch an agg. This pig-man would be interviewed on several feeds about his heroic representation of the People, his high-speed chase, his adventure enforcing everything that the post-Revolution Society stood for. He’d have his 15 minutes. Maybe he’d go back to his wife, and his little life, and his ordinary home and lie on his sinking mattress and resume his existence. Or, like so many others who got that tiny taste of fame, he’d get a green injection to counter the rosacea. He’d have the cheeks taken in like they were a prom dress, start his own feed, and become a Mackenzie in his own right.

The megaphone-wielding passenger was a woman, a surprise due to the deep timbre of her voice as heard through the amplification. She was just as plain as the driver—stocky, with stringy black hair cut to just above her rounded shoulders that indicated much larger hips. They were so ordinary. Bringing someone on the cusp of eternal glory must surely be a thrill.

Mackenzie pulled the car backward into the next intersection and pressed the drive button to propel the car forward. She slammed her petite, manicured foot—which had been surgically altered twice so that four-inch stiletto heels would feel natural—onto the gas pedal, breaking the 30-mph speed limit and sending her seventh speeding ticket flying from the dashboard. The People’s car was still behind them, the banner barely attached to the vehicle. Mackenzie yanked the wheel to the left, and the car sped into Oakland. The new traffic

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safety circle was coming up ahead of the University of Pittsburgh's campus. The People of Pittsburgh hadn't quite gotten used to these yet.

She entered the tight roundabout, and spun the car around the circle, the People in close pursuit. Passing her port of entry, she continued around, circumventing the small enclave of grass a second time. The Escalade entered the roundabout and followed behind the Zombie. Mackenzie started a third lap when the SUV stopped, blocking the curve ahead. The brakes engaged as Mackenzie spun the steering wheel as far as it would turn to the right and her glossy black wheel scraped against the sidewalk. Just behind them, the People's car slammed into the SUV—the risk of disengaging the safety systems.

The damage was minimal. The ample-hipped copilot of the Zombie was already outside of the car, shouting into her omnivice while the driver of the mini SUV, a dwarf, leapt from his vehicle and launched into a run after Mackenzie's heart-covered car. After 20 paces, his tiny legs proved to be no match for the rebooted Pinto.

Mackenzie slowed the car to the 30-mph speed limit.

"We should have flying cars by now," Underwood said.

"How many tickets do I have?"

"Doesn't matter. Once I talk to my people, it'll all be straightened out."

"We just hurt our people."

"No, we didn't. They're fine. Turn left here."

Mackenzie continued driving straight ahead.

"What are you doing? I said, Go left."

"Oh, sorry. Just a little on edge."

"Here!" Underwood yelled as they approached the intersection of Fifth Avenue and the Birmingham Bridge.

Mackenzie continued straight ahead.

"What are you doing? Listen to me!"

"Oh, sorry. I'll turn at the next one."

"The next one. That's...Grant." For the first time since the bulletin had come in, he seemed worried.

"Yeah," she said.

"That's—"

They were downtown now. Mackenzie turned the car right onto Grant Street. Unlike the rest of their drive, this road was filled with cars. It wasn't rush hour traffic, but congestion more akin to Saturday afternoon shopping. Or when a particularly disgusting bulletin had been issued and the perpetrator was due at the Tribunal.

"Turn around, Mackenzie. Turn the fuck around!"

"I can't. There are too many cars."

She made a right onto Forbes Avenue.

They were waiting. The righteous. The accepting. The humble. The ones

who fought for their freedom from the Old Regime’s tyranny, from the wrath of police, the unfair system that favored the privileged. The tired. The brave. The sick. The free. The huddled yet empowered masses. The People.

“You stupid cunt.”

Mackenzie didn’t have a response. She didn’t need one. The righteous mob was closing in. They didn’t have pitchforks. They were armed with the power of the nation. They pushed their way toward the car, swarming it, chanting, “Bring out the agg!”

Mackenzie hit the unlock button on her door as a hand from the mob came down on the handle. Underwood hit the lock. She tried again. His instincts were quicker than the People’s, just as they always were.

“Why are you doing this?” Underwood asked. Beneath his tinted sunglasses a pleading in his eyes.

“It’s your crime, Woody, not mine.”

Mackenzie hit the unlock button again just as a manicured hand with tiny frogs on the fingernails yanked open the door and a tangle of arms grabbed Underwood, attempting to pull him from the vehicle. He remained in his seat, firmly held in by his belt, which automatically fastened when the seat was filled. He clasped his hands over the buckle, holding it down as three times the number of hands seized his own, prying them away. Even more hands pulled him from his seat. They were doing their civic duty. Nothing was more fulfilling than imposing the noble will of the People. They grasped this moment to feel the legal system that they built, to be the long, or short, arm of the law. They lifted the perpetrator across the hands of the horde, a reluctant crowd surfer in a sea of informed citizens. They passed him through the packed crowd to that majestic beacon of freedom and justice—the Tribunal, a former Lutheran church built 200 years before that remained standing as modern skyscrapers stretched to greater heights around it.

As he surfed the tide of humanity, Underwood glared at Mackenzie. His sunglasses had fallen, revealing deep brown eyes that didn’t match the rage that overwhelmed the rest of his face.

Mackenzie stepped out of her car and stomped her magenta stiletto heel on the ground as she waved seven slips of paper.

“Is someone going to erase these goddamn tickets?”

PART I

“Pardon me, sir. I meant not to do it.”

*-Last words of Marie Antoinette after she
stepped on her executioner's foot*





“Well, the spot’s getting bigger.”

“What spot?” Alex Malone asked, staring at the colorful MRI photos of his pugilist’s brain on the wall of the doctor’s office.

“Not funny, Malone. Don’t joke about memory loss.”

“Well, you seem to think it’s pretty damn funny.”

“In your case, it’s an absolute riot,” Dr. Pomonski said. “But there are many octogenarians who have lived peaceful lives and don’t deserve the deterioration that you’ve earned by senseless violence.”

“It was hockey.” Malone paused. Defending himself was futile when the doctor had already branded him the kind of violent, depraved monster that the people had driven to extinction, save for a few relics who passed much of their social exile in offices like Dr. Pomonski’s. “What about the spot?”

“You’re lucky we detected it. You know, before the Revolution, we had to wait for so many of you meatheads to die before we could study chronic traumatic encephalopathy.”

“I get it. Stellar advances, all that.”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, the tau protein is spreading, which makes sense with what you told me about the increasing lapses and the suicidal thoughts. Good thing you’re just a cop.”

“Yeah, good thing it’s not a real job.”

“How many functioning brain cells do you need to write a parking ticket?”

“Sure.” Malone paused, accustomed to the constant degradation of his careers, past and present. “What about the pain?”

“Still getting the headaches, then?”

”Migraines.”

“Figured. Still can’t give you anything at the moment. Not with your history.”

“Right. ‘Cause you care so much if I start using again.”

“I do if the Committee comes after me. Not worth the risk when you’re just one more goon with a headache. Deal with it. Seemed like a good idea when you were beating your victims senseless.”

“So I live with the pain, the memory lapses, the vertigo, the thoughts of ending it all? No one looks all that kindly on patients killing themselves, even if they are just cops.”

“Look, Malone, I hear there’s something in the works that I could possibly try with you. Not making any promises, but wait till you hear from me. I may

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get something for you.”

“Should I book something with Mulva?”

“No, just wait till you hear from me. I have thousands of deserving patients. They come first.”

Malone rose from the chair. The doctor had already turned away; he was at his computer, closing x-ray photos of Malone’s damaged frontal lobe. What was the point in being polite when the patient would forget most of the interaction anyway? It was rare that anyone was polite to a cop or any other untouchable. The police, the Malone family occupation, the scourge of the Republic of America, the last remaining symbol of the oppressive Old Regime, kept around as an odious homage to history, to demonstrate how far the People have come.

Malone nodded to Mulva Gilmore, Pomonski’s receptionist, a once chubby blonde with impossible proportions who donated her body to science fiction in the form of an experimental plastic surgeon with aspirations of fame. The two recorded the procedures and released them on their feed, *Help! I’m a Pretty Girl Trapped in a Plain Girl’s Body!* Meager viewership was mixed. Malone had tuned in a couple of times out of masochistic curiosity. Dissenting views from Chatter had slid down the right side of the feed at an intermittent pace.

“Just embrace who you are! The world needs plain girls too!” Melody_Methot.

“It is her right to be as pretty as she wants to be. That’s what the Republic is about!” Guilty_Carrothers.

“I’d bang her as she is.” Soleus_Adams.

“Soleus, men who objectify women are the reason girls like Mulva feel they need plastic surgery.” Melody_Methot.

“How am I objectifying her??? I’d bang her as she was, as she is, as she’s gonna be, and with the bandages on her face!” Soleus_Adams.

“Pretty soon people are going to get surgeons to turn them into mountain lions.” Philander_Hogan.

“Women are more than just things to bang to you.” Melody_Methot.

“Yeah, but I’d bang her.” Soleus_Adams.

Though the feed generated some real-time Chatter chitchat in its first installment, the modicum of interest petered out. But the surgeon would keep trying. Next week, Mulva was to have her eyes widened.

When she noticed Malone, Mulva rolled her currently almond-shaped eyes and typed with exasperation. Next week’s procedure may make such expressive communication difficult. Malone squeezed through the crowded waiting room and pushed the door to the office open. The flight of steps took him back down to street level.

It was sunny in Pittsburgh, but that was so surprise. It hadn’t rained since the Revolution. Sure, sometimes the Earth got watered, but it didn’t rain. Rain

was dreary and it ruined parades, but “Earth watering”? The Earth needs to be watered! Like any living, breathing thing, it needs hydration to continue to grow. But it doesn’t rain. That would make the People sad. And after the great lupus eradication of 2029, sadness was the next thing to go.

Today it was sunny in the traditional sense, meaning that the sun was shining so brightly that not even an agg could deny that it was a beautiful day. Malone stepped out onto Butler Street in the Lawrenceville neighborhood, where independent nightlife, shopping, and dining options struck such a balance that its appeal bridged any generation gap. Outdoor cafés were packed with people, some at tables and others standing and holding their plates. Several shoveled food into their mouths with their hands, unwilling to risk a metal fork passing heavy metal toxins onto their tongues.

Malone walked past the colorful people at the cafés, those who had never hurt their fellow man, who had never represented oppression and inequality, who had never been associated with an occupation that fired bullets at people who were exercising their rights to free speech and assembly, who were merely demonstrating the principles that our great nation was founded on, who started the Revolution. Malone watched three women in various floral patterns thoroughly enjoying nibbles of miniature hamburgers made from the most pampered cows—those fed designer, chemical-free, organic grass and treated to lullabies sung in person by a mezzo soprano before they were slaughtered. “We do not enable cruelty to animals,” proclaimed the sign on the café window. “If you want meat that has resulted from the suffering of cattle, go to the Meat Forest on Butler and 52nd.”

Malone turned left onto 44th Street, where his surroundings became bleak. Dirty water pooled in sad puddles on the uneven street. Malone was careful to avoid stepping in them so as not to add any more disgrace to the worn shoes that took him through this grimy pit each day.

As he walked around the puddle of Earth water, a pain sliced through the side of his head, as if someone had placed a sharp piece of quartz into his brain and left it there for the rest of the organ to pulse around it, constantly rubbing against that jagged edge. The hatchet pain lasted for several seconds while Malone doubled over in the dingy road, then gave way to a throbbing that hit like the beat of a bass drum, pushing the blood through his damaged brain until it felt close to exploding, as there was nowhere else for it to go. The beat was slow, with the pounding notes held for three counts longer than the rest between them.

He could just stay here, die here, quietly, alone. A human can live without food for weeks, but without water for only a couple of days. Did he have the self-discipline to remain in the alley until he dried up? Maybe, but surely one of the People would pass who did not have the self-discipline to let a man parch himself to death.

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After another minute, the throbbing dissipated, fading out like the denouement of a song that should have ended with a cymbal tap minutes before. The beating was slower, duller, and Malone raised himself back up and continued walking toward the pathetic headquarters of the Pittsburgh police station.

“Have you seen this shit?” Patrolman Litmus Weiss asked as Malone sat down at his desk.

“Doubt it,” Malone replied, pressing the ON button to power up his 2026 Dell desktop computer, which had crashed again overnight.

With justice enforcement in the hands of the People, each district’s police force operated on a shoestring budget, making technology the first casualty. Second: uniforms. Patrolman Weiss, a 21-year-old straight out of community college, sported a 1990s-era NYPD-style uniform that had been used to outfit extras on a long-running police procedural show. He had a strip of masking tape on the left breast pocket with Weiss scrawled in black marker. When Malone joined the force, he had worn his father’s Pittsburgh PD uniform. He’d been lucky to have hand-me-downs. One of his peers showed up for his first day of work in sheriff’s attire complete with a wide-brimmed hat that had veteran officers calling him Buford T. Justice for a year.

“Malone,” Weiss said. “Sorry, Officer Malone. Just look. “

The patrolman was pointing at the television suspended from the ceiling, as in a vintage newspaper bullpen. Malone looked up from his desk. A young man, tall and lanky with tight denim pants and a tattered plaid shirt that looked like it had once been expensive, was being led up the aisle in the nave of the Tribunal, his hands shackled behind his back.

“They’re saying he’s an agg, Hebrewphobic,” Weiss said. “That’s not even a thing. The only time my people ever scared anyone is when Kiss took off their makeup.”

“It’s hard to tell who the aggs are.” Malone never approached the job with the same zeal for old justice that Weiss and most of the other young patrolmen did. Malone’s passion was gone before he joined the police. Maybe if he had more passion, he would have jumped off the 40th Street Bridge last week instead of just looking over the railing, imagining braver cops before him.

“How do you know who Kiss was?” asked Sergeant Peter Pencomo from the scratched mahogany desk adjacent to Malone’s pine unit that had once belonged to a middle school teacher in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Pencomo had seized his luxury desk from the local Homeland Security office when the agency was dissolved.

“My granddad. He just got his hearing restored, and he’s been rediscovering his old tunes. They were pretty moist. But anyway, look at all the People’s grievances.” Weiss pointed to the screen. The Chatter Chat devoted to Underwood Jennings, the agg in question, filled the right quarter of the wide screen. Each Chit sat in an orange box, indicating Outrage Level 7 as measured by the

Chatter Rage Gauge, as the Chat scrolled slowly. Weiss read the Chits. “‘Hips have no respect,’ ‘Typical Hip behavior to make jokes like that.’ No one cares about the dead Jews—they’re just using it to bash the Hips!”

“I’ve been by that bench about a hundred times,” Pencomo said. “Never had any idea it was a memorial. I see kids climbing on it all the time.”

“Exactly! Out of context. It’s fucked, if I can say that.”

“You’re the one who wants to bring back freedom of speech,” Malone said, pulling up the messaging program on his glacial computer.

“I see before me a young man who has committed his life to hate,” came the Hammer’s voice from the television. Even from the small, archaic machine, his baritone was powerful, the most damning voice in the country. “To be joking about the deaths of 60 million people on a very monument to them. We have worked for decades to eradicate this view from the public, but what do you do instead?”

“Six million,” Weiss said to the TV.

“Sixty’s more tragic,” Pencomo said.

The capacity crowd in the courtroom shouted “Agg!” amid the hissing of others.

“And what do we do with such aggs in this court?” the Hammer asked. It was a rhetorical question.

“To the Maze!” the crowd screamed in jubilation.

It wasn’t often that an agg so reprehensible stood before them, ready to be sent to play a sadistic game before, well, Malone had no idea—the cameras shut off when the condemned reached the Dark Room. That smug look, the lack of repentance for his aggression, Jennings deserved whatever awaited him in the Maze. Even in the cage on the altar of justice at the Tribunal, he didn’t waver. Sometimes the aggs cried, the crowd mocked them, but the tears showed they were at least afraid for their own fate. And they were often banished or made to walk naked through the streets while being pelted with whatever the People had on hand for tossing. Whether the People remembered that they had stolen this custom from a pre-Revolutionary television series, Malone had never asked.

Behind the bars, Underwood Jennings glared, as if the People didn’t matter, as if he didn’t have the requisite shame for his actions that would have made public humiliation a fitting punishment and rehabilitated him into a productive member of the citizenry. The Republic did not need Underwood Jennings. That tap of “guilty” on his omnivice when the vote solicitation had come in while Malone sat in Dr. Pomonski’s waiting room felt even better now after seeing the lack of remorse.

The courtroom spectators felt the same way. They were jeering, hissing, and shouting at the suspect as he stood in an arrogant silence.

“Exactly!” the Hammer boomed over the frenzied audience. “Mr. Jennings,

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you have committed unforgivable crimes against the People. For that, you face the Maze.”

Suddenly but not unexpectedly as these trials were a near-daily occurrence, a four-foot square of the floor dropped below Underwood Jennings’s feet and the smirking face vanished beneath the floor.

“I can’t watch anymore,” Weiss said, flicking off the television with the remote before he stormed across the dusty office to his desk.

Malone pulled his omnivice out of his pocket and swiped from the top of the screen down to enable Chatter. He typed “Underwood” in the Chat Search at the top of the window. “Jennings” auto-populated and brought up the Chat devoted to the agg: 12,435 Chits on the subject.

“No shame = no mercy from the People,” Malone typed. He pressed the “Update” button, and his contribution posted to the Chat in the reddish orange of the rest of the Chits. Outrage: Level 7. Yeah, that felt right. The punishment may not fit the crime in an objective sense, but that Jennings seemed like a real asshole. In the top left of the screen, a blue “3” indicated that there was a mention of Alex_Malone in three Chits.

Violet_MacPherson: “Alex_Malone, officer of the Pittsburgh Police Force, has been unfairly ticketing cars again”

Violet_MacPherson: “That Alex_Malone needs to be stopped! He doesn’t know why I parked in front of a hydrant, but he ticketed me anyway! That pig jumped to a conclusion.”

Violet_MacPherson: “An aggression! Alex_Malone, you better watch out, you pig!”

In outer space, no one can hear you scream. An empty Chat is a similar phenomenon, like a single person shouting into a void, her calls for justice unanswered by an uninterested public. There were more outrageous aggressions than Alex Malone’s enforcement of parking code. He closed Chatter. Solitary outrage meant nothing unless others joined. Outrage is only capable of action if it is contagious.

Rage, on the other hand, was most dangerous when it was alone. Then it was pure and violent. Malone squeezed his hands together under his desk, squeezed his eyes shut, trying to cool the rage that simmered. It was only a matter of time before it was unleashed on more than just the walls of his apartment. And when it was, there would be no turning back, and he couldn’t keep hiding that symptom from Pomonski. That would mean the spot wasn’t just growing but also was taking more of Malone with it. He opened his eyes, trying to focus on the scene in the station, but he saw Mulva Gilmore hitting the ground and felt himself stomping on her unnaturally pretty face, grinding it into a pulp that would make her wish for the plain one back.

“Malone!” Captain Jason Dillard shouted through the cracked door of his office on the opposite side of the bullpen. “In here.”

Malone blinked, the call of his boss enough to kill the fantasy for now. He sauntered over to the captain's office. He knocked on the open door.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Cute," Dillard said, his dark skin brimming with sweat. The department had lost its air conditioning two years ago. "There's been a car parked in front of your old rink for six hours. It's blocking a lane of traffic. People've started to complain."

"You know I hate going there. Send Pencomo."

"Can't. He's about to leave for a wrangling."

"Fuck me." Malone sighed as he took the scrap of paper containing make, model, color, license plate, and distinguishing markers of the problem car.

"Also, I wanted to ask," the massive police captain said, leaning on his large gut to move his elbows to his desk. "How's the head?"

"Still attached to the body."

"Still got the headaches?"

"Yeah, always. You care?"

"I just can't have you snapping," Dillard said, leaning back in his chair, the body language of false concern dissipating into his normal business persona. "One violent cop with his mind blown is all they need to dismantle us entirely."

Malone stood up from his chair and went to the door. "I promise, if I start losing my mind, you'll know before I do."



Malone pulled the 2018 police tow truck behind the offending red Rancho Vista parked in front of the resurrected corpse of what had first been the Consol Energy Center then PPG Paints Arena where he had played for 12 seasons as a member of the defunct Pittsburgh Penguins. The six-story structure at the corner of Fifth Avenue on the edge of downtown Pittsburgh housed roughly 3,000 citizens. The ice was melted and drained, and the arena seats torn out and used as TV chairs in the 1,200 apartments inside. Parked cars surrounded the sides of the building that had been used for pre-playoff game festivities and JumboTron game screenings when Malone played. Most of the thousand cars observed the rules as indicated by painted lines. Except the Rancho Vista that was blocking three cars peacefully left in their spots bordering Fifth Avenue.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Malone said when he recognized Violet MacPherson, she of the parking violation and vitriolic Chits. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Don't you?" she said, one hand on her ample hip, taunting him. When Malone was growing up, he would have seen the pear-shaped, middle-aged woman and her minivan as nothing more than a soccer mom. Now she was far

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more malignant.

“No, I don’t. In case you don’t know, my job and that of the entire police force is to be a more hated meter maid. Sure, sometimes I get to stop people for driving too fast and sometimes I get really lucky and have to wrangle a couple Super Seniors that have been making trouble. But mostly, I do this.”

“Oppressor,” Violet hissed through her collagen-inflated lips. “Tyrant.”

“I’ve heard all those before,” Malone said as he began to affix the hook on the back of his tow truck to the eyelet under the front bumper of the Rancho Vista.

“I found out who you are.” Violet sounded triumphant. “Why do you think I parked here? How do you like your precious arena now? It’s a home for the People that don’t want your kind around. Thug. Goon. Neanderthal.”

In a split second, the bitch hit the ground. She didn’t know what hit her. Neither did the conscious mind of Alex Malone. But he should have. So should she. Alex Malone, number 74, had hit a lot of bigger, tougher opponents. Never lost a fight on skates. This cow should have known not to fuck with him.

If you kicked someone in the NHL, you’d be tossed in the box, X’ed off the roster, and possibly banned for quite some time. The street has no such rules. The rule is, no violence. Any nuances after that are undefined. And who cares if they were? The bitch started it. She should have felt lucky that boot in her gut wasn’t a skate, that it didn’t have a blade attached. Kick her again. Who cared if she was down? Malone’d been down for years, and the world just kept kicking.

She was moaning, pain getting too intense to sustain the scream. Your turn. Your turn to feel the blows, the disdain, the physical manifestation of Chatter vitriol, the scorn, the hatred, the unfettered rage, the fury. All the shit you were spewing from your lips and your fingertips. How does it feel to be on the other side? Feels like a kick in the blubbery gut, don’t it?

The smack to the back came as Malone was mid-kick, so it sent him to the ground. He was on his back when they jumped on him. Could have been the shock of the sudden change in circumstances or the rage blinding his vision, but he couldn’t make out the number. At least one on each side pinning his arms to the asphalt. Another one standing above him. Foot on Malone’s chest. The owner of the foot leaned down and positioned an omnivice inches from Malone’s face. He kicked. The rage was not subsiding, and it was now augmented by the frustration of lack of flexibility causing his feet to hit nothing but air. The rage was unleashed.

What would it have been like to have these episodes without clear provocation? The brain damage would remain. Nothing he could do about that without a medical breakthrough, but if circumstances were different, if the Revolution hadn’t happened, if contact sports hadn’t been banned and Malone had been able to parlay his name into a career as a coach instead of as a lowly,

despised cop, would the rage from cerebral cortex damage have manifested itself in this way?

Malone kicked again before resting his legs on the ground, in defeat, like the rest of his existence.

The omnivice moved out of his vision so Malone could finally see who had him pinned. She was heavy—like almost everyone—which wasn't surprising due to the pressure her foot was exerting on his chest.

"You're going to the fucking committee for this, you violent agg," she said behind a sea of red hair. It may as well have been a sea to Malone, a sea of fire, with his vision still blurred from all-encompassing, sensory-numbing rage. She looked back at her omnivice, waiting for the results of the facial recognition to identify Malone from the mug shot so she could start submitting her complaint.

She laughed, the ironic laugh that indicates less that someone thinks something is funny, but more so that it's so not funny, which ironically, is the type of laughter that Malone heard more often.

"You're a cop? Holy shit, you pigs never learn, do you? Assault on citizens again? We take your billy clubs and your guns and your false sense of importance and authority, and you still find a way to intimidate and assault?"

Malone didn't speak. The hands holding his arms to the ground dug their nails into his skin, the knees smashing into his elbows pushed harder. He'd felt worse. Scratches on the forearms are nothing compared with CTE headaches. One was about to come. It was usually a fast follow to the rage. After that came despair. The trifecta.

"Aw, you've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"What?" One of the girls holding his arms eased up a bit of pressure to voice her concern.

"He's fucking brain damaged."

"Well, yeah, he's a cop."

"No, like really brain damaged. His citizen profile says fits of violence that he can't help. Therefore he can't be punished for it."

"Well, we can still punish him."

"Then we're assaulting a person of unique cognitive abilities. Goes against everything I believe in. I saw what he did like you, but I can't aggro on someone like that."

The foot stepped off his ribcage. The knees, and the hands and their nails left his arms. The end of a hammer pulling nails out of a wall inside his skull went to work, sending waves of pain pulsing behind his eyes. He closed them on the misguided notion that blocking the sun would block the pain. It never worked like that. Malone stayed there. Eyes closed, arms and legs splayed out, lying on his back in the street behind the car he was supposed to tow. Maybe the gut-sore Violet would say, "Screw people of unique cognitive abilities," and run him over in a fit of revenge not induced by gray matter damage. Maybe

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she'd take that two-ton machine over his sad face and the tires would leave tracks as the weight of the vehicle actually crushed his skull instead of just renewing the chronic feeling of it. Then it would be all over.

The rage had taken hold. Malone had lost control. It was like the drinking and the drugs all over again. But it wasn't any foreign substance. His own mind was poisoning him, taking away his control over his actions. It had happened before. The holes in Malone's apartment walls proved it. Yet he'd always retained the modicum of control to unleash the fury in private on inanimate objects. Never in public, on a fellow citizen. It was the beginning of the end. He'd seen it with so many of the Super Seniors he'd rounded up. When their minds finally broke and they lost emotional control. Whatever they were feeling in that instant, they acted on it. It's the reason the likelihood to commit rape is positively correlated with age. And it's why Malone knew that this was the beginning of the end. May as well speed up the process.

Malone lay and waited.

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One of the great tragedies of the state of the police was that they didn't issue suicide kits anymore. Start with the car capable of driving at speeds high enough to ensure you'd forego the risk of quadriplegia if you ran head-on into a semi. Sudden death. No overtime.

It took Malone a good ten minutes after his street savasana to remember that he had arrived in downtown Pittsburgh to tow a car. Which car it was, who knew? And who cared? At that moment, Malone had no intention to going back to work—or doing anything else for that matter—tomorrow. There would be no tomorrow.

Unfortunately, the tow truck reached a top speed of 70 mph—and only when the navigation system detected that you were traveling on a highway, that

there was no precipitation on the ground, and that you had at least the length of an Olympic swimming pool between the truck and the car in front of you. And even creative suicides were out of the question because of the safety updates mandated by the People in all vehicles post-Revolution. If you're going to cure death, you've got to start with the big ones: cancer, heart disease, drug overdoses, and car accidents. And the safety features built in to curb the last inadvertently helped stop the rise of preventable death number five on the list: suicide.

If a vehicle stopped itself when the driver removed the seat belt, one could not throw oneself from the door while traveling down the freeway. When the vehicle self-adjusted to compensate for any attempt to cross double-yellow lines or careen off the marked road, one could not swerve into oncoming traffic or a ravine. And the electric engines made suffocating on exhaust about as impossible as a child choking on a toy after the 2032 open-mouth-diameter act.

Throwing himself into traffic, though more aggressive and proactive, was less likely to result in death than lying in the parking lane, waiting to be run over. Any car on the road would have eyes that could see him and alert the braking system to stop the car before Malone even entered the lane. It would take a serendipitous position of his body and the oncoming car to ensure that Malone would not be taken to the hospital and mended.

Surely the Republic allowed some ways for a cop to off himself. The tow truck did not. So Malone left it and started off on foot. Maybe he'd pass something inspirational, or maybe he'd run into someone who would murder him. It was hard to hope, but he tried.

He could choke on noodles at House of Ramen. But that could be difficult. Malone had never choked on noodles, nor did he know anyone who had. Plus, if he lived, he'd have to pay the bill. Maybe a sudden movement during a straight razor shave at Smooth Operators. No; same risk of failure and subsequent bill.

Severely depressed individuals—even if that depression is only between bouts of rage, pain, and obliviousness—are prone to negative self-talk and failure to believe in their own ideas and worth, even their ability to commit suicide. So Malone continued to shut down options because of survival and financial risk until he had walked from downtown to the rotting part of town that he called home.

Houses like his weren't called slums anymore. The great District of Pittsburgh in the Republic of America didn't have slums. It had alternative housing: in this case, a three-story house sectioned into four apartments. Malone, the lowest form of life, fittingly occupied the finished basement.

It wasn't that bad as basements go. And the fist-size holes in the drywall were a Malone addition. The studio shotgun layout with the bathroom and closet off the kitchen was weird, but far from a dealbreaker. Unfortunately—at

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least tonight—what it had in space it lacked in windows. Specifically, high windows through which a man could dive onto a sidewalk and surely smash his skull and spray cranial carnage into the gutters and—ideally—well-kept lawns. Defenestration was a luxury reserved for the folks in the high-rise penthouse who had no interest in the practice in the first place.

Malone double-tapped the screen of his omnivice, turning on the flat-screen 7K TV. There had to be a suicide feed. Among all the how-to videos that played through the day, one sad or sadistic entrepreneur must have innovated an efficient suicide for people without the conventional means. Maybe suicide was the last bastion of elitism and exclusivity in the Republic.

Of course, the Speaker's feed auto-played, as it did on everyone's TV. What the man didn't offer in method maybe he could provide in the motivation Malone needed to inspire once-in-a-lifetime creativity that would have to be spent on suicide since there was no way he'd ever top it.

On the screen, the Speaker did what he did best: speak. When his words inspired millions to take up arms against the Old Regime, Malone had been in another stint in rehab. When he got out, all clean and clear with a new lease on life, that life was gone. The NHL was dismantled. Hockey—and football, rugby, lacrosse, boxing, martial arts aside from the performance aspects, and any obscure recreational activity that put partakers at risk of head injury—was banned. And no one had use for an ice boxer—78 days sober this time—with a record of drug use, drunk driving, assault, and a bizarre larceny charge that had a lot to do with the drugs.

Seeing the Speaker always inspired rage mixed with a somber feeling, like angrily grieving a life lost too soon. Maybe anger was what he needed to plunge the butter knife into his aorta, the only way out of this despair.

“Each employee should be afforded equal rights if they do equal jobs. Wait—strike that. Each employee *shall* be afforded equal rights if they do equal jobs. That is how it will be. We will no longer live in a country in which companies devalue those who make them thrive. We will no longer live in a country in which the People are not truly free.”

Rousing applause. The Speaker's Channel aired vintage and recent sermons on 24-hour cycles. Malone had heard this speech before, a diatribe against big businesses' use of temporary workers for a permanent amount of time. This was one of his early ones, a valid point with which no rational, compassionate, empathetic person could disagree—the type of speech that made him beyond reproach, that gained him unprecedented power, that enabled him to go by merely a title. It was one that the skeptics and cynics called the Echo—that he was just repeating the sentiment of the People, but with better words.

That last line was the point, the argument in each of the Speaker's many addresses throughout his rise and reign. The People would be truly free. Isn't that what the People want? Ultimate freedom? A nation in which the citizens

police themselves and the entire population is your jury? The cops in the Old Regime screwed themselves; the system that supported them failed. The People were better suited to make the decisions that appointees like police had made in the past.

The People voted on every trial presented at any of the Houses of Justice across the nation via a simple touch of a button on the omnivice. Bulletins kept them apprised of all incidents of aggression. Their words were heard, and they were reaffirmed by their voice, the Speaker.

A voice that wouldn't shut up! Malone was pacing, the voice and all its false promises hijacking some surviving area of his brain that forced him to move around. For what purpose? To get out his agitation by walking? That wasn't working. Red was starting to cloud his vision. The red of the blinding rage. It was coming back. Already. He kept pacing. His place was too small for that. He didn't have many possessions to clutter the place besides the ratty sofa, a cheap DIY coffee table, and a bed in the rear corner. The only item of real value—though most of it emotional—was one of his old hockey sticks, the one he took to rehab and the only one left.

He grabbed the end and swung it over his head, dislodging a panel in the dropped ceiling. He'd once used a stick—not this one, as the stick in question was supposed to be locked forever in an evidence locker of the San Jose police department, so its whereabouts were currently unknown—as a weapon in an on-ice brawl. Who knew the cops in a California town were such big fans of the game that they'd press criminal charges? Malone didn't. So he didn't bother to flush the 60 Oxys and ounce of blow in his pocket when they came by to take him in.

If it hadn't been for the stick incident—and probably the eight-ball before the game—he wouldn't have been remanded to rehab for eight months, missed the entire Revolution, and missed the chance to riot with the rest of the league and fans at the last game ever. The Pens were in Philly that night. Would have been a good time. Would have been able to swing his stick at anyone and anything he wanted.

And could Malone swing a stick. All these years later, he still could. He swung it like a clean-up hitter aiming for the fences, knocking down the pole lamp in the corner in the process. The bulbs didn't break, and he left them sadly illuminating the dirt particles in the carpet. He smashed the stick into the couch, which was less than satisfying. Malone flipped the stick so the blade was facing up like a scythe and jammed the butt into the Swedish coffee table. The butt of the stick hit the floor. Malone left it there, impaling the table, and collapsed onto the couch, the pain already setting in.

He changed the feed. The rage inspired by the Speaker was clouding his thoughts. Filter by mood? No. The algorithm doesn't recognize suicidal as evidenced by the lack of how-to-end-it-all content. By subject matter? Hmm.

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Who doesn't have certain subjects that strengthen one's resolve to slit one's throat with a dull blade?

Being Beautiful? That could do. *Making the Mirror Jealous*. Wow! Such beauty that nothing else can ever compete! The impossible beauty standards Malone had once heard so much about—until they all became possible through plummeting prices on cosmetic procedures—now on a single feed! How terrible Malone felt about having the multiple breaks in his nose repaired when the insurance companies still ran healthcare.

Malone clicked “Watch.” As soon as he saw the blonde with her perfectly symmetrical face, long figure, and ideal proportions, he felt something else that was far from suicidal.

Back to the filter. *A Day of Eating*. Oh yes. Morons spouting monologues about mundane munching. Maybe, if his luck suddenly reversed, the subject would chew on camera. The horror! Another reason to end it all.

The first subtopic on the screen was “The Stone Fruitarian Cleanse.” What a way to reaffirm the hopelessness of his fellow Americans.

A mousy and pale young woman with thin, brown hair appeared on the screen. With her frail, skinny body and her bloated face, she didn't inspire that inadvertent animal urge to live and procreate that the blonde did. Off to a fine start.

“It's day six of my Stone Fruitarian Cleanse diet. If you guys haven't been following so far, I've had a pretty rough time recently. Work has been beaucoup stressful, and I've had some foods that didn't sit right. I caved: brown rice, which you know doesn't agree with any of my microbiomes. I've had this feeling of brain fog where, like, I couldn't focus right. Check this—I was searching desperately for my sunglasses, and they were on my head!”

“Must be real tough for you,” Malone said, twisting the stick in the table, mirroring the sensation he was feeling behind his right eyebrow. “Come on, give me an idea. I wanna die before this next headache.”

“I know we've made so much progress in getting toxins out of our food supply. I mean, my parents told me about all the pesticides and preservatives they used to ingest! We have it so much better now, but there are still toxins even if they're really only toxic to us as individuals. Brown rice turns out to be toxic to me!”

“So, I'm on day six of eating only stone fruits. So far, my energy has been up and I haven't done anything brain foggy like the sunglass incident. I've talked to some of you in the stone fruitarian community and have received some great advice. Did you know the most fibrous part of the fruit is the stone? That brings me to my first meal of the day.”

The girl held up a handful of cherries.

“The first thing I do when I wake up, before I even rub a peach pit on my teeth, is swallow ten cherry pits.”

She tucks a cherry into her mouth, chews, and spits out the pit and stem. “Here we go.” She pops the pit back into her mouth and swallows a gulp of water. Each of the nine repetitions repulsed Malone more. And added a tinge of that deadly—he hoped!—sin envy. If only he had the resolve to inflict such unpleasantries upon himself, the butter knife would have been in his neck 20 minutes ago.

“OK, ten down. Already feeling that buoyancy. Now here’s a special treat for all of you today. I’m gonna try something for the *première fois*. I know this is supposed to be a typical day of eating, but I like to try something new every day! Now, I just read about this, but did you know that there’s another part of the cherry that’s even more nutritious than the pit? The stem. It’s packed with antioxidants and healthy fats that I need to get a well-rounded stone fruit diet. So, here goes.”

And ten cherry stems went into her mouth all at once. She chewed, using all her teeth. Ambitious. She alternated her left and right to up the intensity. She curled her lips, exposing the teeth dyed purple from the traditionally edible part of the fruit, and Malone lost any lingering will to live and procreate. She’d managed to break a couple of stems in smaller pieces, but judging by what was on her tongue when she stuck it out, there was still much mastication needed. She was losing patience, much like Malone. As he reached for his omnivice to change the feed, she swallowed.

She started to choke, her face turning the color of the cherries. She grabbed her neck, tried to cough, but nothing came out. She waved her hands at the no one around. Thousands of viewers, but an empty home. She’d have to depend on her neighbors watching her live feed as none of the People’s First Responders could possibly get there in time. They should start monitoring all feeds tagged *Day of Eating, Cleanse, and Healing* to prevent the increasing number of fatalities during self-filmed experiments in the name of health like this. Turns out the single leading cause of preventable death was and would always be stupidity, but it would be wrong to legislate against that.

After a couple more seconds of grabbing at her neck, there was a crash and the girl dropped out of the camera’s view. Maybe Malone should have re-enabled the comment to see how many viewers mocked her death and to continue to lose faith in his compatriots. But this was enough. He could swallow cherry stems. If he had them, which he didn’t.

However, the exercise had provided the bit of incentive that Malone needed. Being that it was a basement, the ceilings weren’t nearly high enough for six-foot-five Malone to hang by the neck until dead. But that couldn’t stop a now-inspired man. If a woman could accidentally off herself with cherry stems, Malone could die by forward lean.

He removed his belt and strung it around the rod in the closet. He buckled it and slipped his head through. He leaned forward, the recycled imitation

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leather pressing into his Adam's apple. It would be slow, and he'd listen to the silence of the dead woman's kitchen until someone showed up and mercifully turned off the camera. He wondered how many other sickos were still watching. It would take much longer to find Malone. He'd be decaying, his head likely rotted from his body and decomposing on the kitchen floor. It would be the smell that alerted the neighbors. Certainly not the missing tow truck or the no-call, no-show at the station. Or the noise of the narration of day upon day of eating coming from the TV.

Alone, decapitated, oozing in a pool of evacuated bowels, rotting flesh, and entrails being devoured by maggots to a soundtrack of narcissists describing breakfast in great detail. A fitting end to one Alex Malone. These thoughts went through his head as the restricted airflow slowly caused him to lose consciousness. Fleeting, nonsensical thoughts of cherry stems, swinging fists, heads hitting ice. And a sudden instant of clarity: This is Pittsburgh. I could have jumped off a bridge.

And then everything went black.



A strange sensation on his leg. Did the maggots start eating him already? No, it was more like a vibration. Shit. Malone opened his eyes. He wasn't dead, though he was still sort of hanging in his closet. His hand patted the itching vibration on this leg. His omnivice. He reached into his pocket.

"Malone."

"It's Mulva from Dr. P's office," came the disinterested voice on the phone.

"Isn't it late to be calling?"

"Whatever. It's not like you have anything better to do."

Malone was silent.

"Dr. P's got a new experimental treatment for brain-damaged thugs like you. He wanted to know if he gave it to you, if you'd stop bitching about headaches."

"That depends," Malone said. "Does it cure headaches?"

"I don't know what it does, pig. He said to be in at 8 tomorrow morning if you want it."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Some injection of some sort." Mulva was now irritated. It didn't take long. "Will you be in at 8 tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure," Malone said, the pounding in his head growing stronger by every nasal word on the other end.

"I'll let him know." The line went dead.

Malone was now left with the task of untangling himself from the belt. He

must have passed out from lack of air. The girls in his middle school played a similar game at lunch that the parents and teachers all would claim led to brain damage. He waved the omnivice to the left. After it beeped, he said, “Pomonski. 8 a.m..” She said 8 a.m., right? He’d see Pomonski, then find the nearest bridge. He didn’t need a reminder for that second part.

He rubbed the indentation in his neck and walked into the kitchen. The fridge held six eggs in a carton. Dinner. Malone cracked the six eggs into a pan on the stove. He sympathized with the eggs. A similar cracking erupted in the side of his head. Doubled over, he stumbled to the couch and lay down. Splintering, pulsing in his brain. He pressed the sides of his head, trying to squeeze the pain out. The searing was so intense it took all his senses. He couldn’t hear. He saw only black. Rocking on the couch was futile. So were lying down, sitting, standing, pacing. Patience was the only antidote. He waited.

Malone was back in the kitchen. But why? Oh, right. Eggs were on fire. He pulled the pan from the stove and tossed it in the sink, drowning his aborted egg dinner under the faucet.

Back in the living room, a baseball game was on the TV. That was a new development. The clock said 8:08. Thirty minutes unaccounted for. Pain and a fire. It could have been worse. He went back to the couch. Now that he had a reason to wake up in the morning, he’d watch something less painful. Enjoy his last night on Earth. He even activated the Chatter feed. One last time to engage with his fellow citizens.

The Pittsburgh Citizens and New York Mets were in the top of the second inning with the Mets at bat. Before the Revolution, Malone had never been much of a baseball fan. As a child, his time was singularly devoted to hockey. His high school team, his travel team, watching every game played by the Penguins—either live or the next morning before school from a recording, and keeping a careful eye on his beloved home team’s competition in the Metropolitan Division, the Eastern Conference, and the NHL at large. But baseball was one of the few sports that remained; football, hockey, and boxing being deemed too dangerous. As his particular manner of playing was a hybrid of hockey and boxing, Malone had since lost interest in most sports.

Pro sports are too elitist. It sucks when only one team gets a trophy. And it really sucks when not every player can be on the team. Geraldo Gomez was back at the warning track, his glove over his helmet to catch a fly ball. The catch was good. He underhanded the ball over the wall, and adjusted the cage in over his face. A boy, maybe six years old, in a Citizens jersey held out his glove, waiting in the aisle for the soft toss from the right fielder. As the ball was about to land, a large man with graying hair reached over and snatched the ball from the kid. He slipped the ball into his pocket.

An orange square descended on the scrolling Chatter feed on the right side of the screen.

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“Did you see that mean old man?” Asbestos_Riley commented in the orange square. Outrage level 4. More orange squares entered from the top.

“So disgusting. Who steals from a kid?” Ephemera_Martin.

“He should be ashamed of himself.” Lauren_Macerly.

“Someone’s gotta know who this guy is.” A screen capture of the man mid-catch with his arm outstretched appeared below Zamboni_Russell’s comment.

The incident replayed on the main part of the screen. A dirge of boos thundered through the stadium.

“Looks like they just replayed it in the park. Crowd’s outraged.” Arthur_Vanderlay.

“Damn, looks like the mean old man left. Too bad. The fans were gonna give him what was coming to him.” Anathema_Girardi.

“Claude Verdette. He’s in sales for Citizen’s Communications.” Mister_Byers.

“How would he feel if we went to his house and stole something from him?” Hope_Jackson.

“I wonder how many people he’s treated like this. What a bully.” Sam_Crow.

“Maybe he didn’t see the kid. Maybe he’d got a grandkid he’s giving the ball to. Too soon to judge.” Hedwig_Morgan.

“Probably a lot of people. Looked pretty natural to him.” Zamboni_Russell

Red squares descended, pushing the orange squares to the bottom and off the screen. Outrage level 7. Anger was rising. The rage gauge in the Chatter filter that aggregated the comments detected growing animosity.

“Hedwig_Morgan, are you defending him?” Asbestos_Riley.

“Good thing he was caught on a broadcast this time. Now he can get what’s coming to him!” Napoleon_Cordoza.

“I hope this guy gets anally raped by a bunch of Super Seniors armed with spiky dildos rubbed in ghost pepper! He needs a hot load of kindness shoved up there.” Caster_Boyle.

“What’s this kid’s dad doing? Get up and defend your son! That’s what I’d do.” Captain_Masterson.

“No, just saying we don’t know the whole story.” Hedwig_Morgan.

“I’m reporting him to the Committee. This guy needs to face the Tribunal!” Water_Marlow.

“Sounds to me like you’re defending him, Hedwig_Morgan. Maybe we should report you to the Committee, too. I looked at your feed. You’ve defended bullies like this before.” Matilda_Ellison.

“Yeah, someone oughtta find the dad and teach him how to stick up for his son!” Napoleon_Cordoza.

“I’m at the game, sitting two rows behind this guy. Mean old man is right. We in the section yelled at him to give the ball to the kid. He tried to fight us. He ran out before we could get him.” Alto_Soprano.

“You people in section 105 should have gotten to him quicker. You all are a shame to the people.” Asbestos_Riley.

“Alto_Soprano, you should of shoved the ball up that mean old man’s ass and pushed it out his mouth.” Caster_Boyle.

“You’re right. The guy’s a mean old man. Guess I rushed to non-judgment too soon.” Hedwig_Morgan.

“I’m running a recog on the faces in section 105. All those names will be listed for letting the mean old man leave.” Connor_Jorgenson.

“List them ASAP! And the kid’s dad. He shouldn’t be let off easy either.” Captain_Masterson.

“And Hedwig_Morgan! She probably would have helped the mean old man get away if she were there.” Asbestos_Riley.

“Hedwig_Morgan needs a ghost pepper enema.” Caster_Boyle.

Gomez ran back to the wall, crashing into it and sprawling to the ground. He popped up from the ground, the ball in his hand. He kept it there as he ran to celebrate with his teammates in the middle of the field. The Citizens didn’t need the bottom of the ninth. The game was over. The team rejoiced. The fans didn’t notice. Malone’s brain felt like it had been sodomized with a spiky dildo slathered with ghost pepper and no kindness.

Outrage level 6.



“Morning, Mulva.”

“Suck it, swine.” She was more belligerent than usual. Maybe she knew Dr. P’s treatment was effective and Mulva would no longer get to delight in his suffering. Or that it would improve his lapsing memory and she wanted to give him a greeting to remember. Or that there were long dives from bridges in Malone’s future.

Malone sat in the vacant waiting room. He was always given the earliest appointments of the day so, as the doctor told him, the respectable patients would not know that he treated a cop.

The omnivice beeped. “VOTE REQUEST” popped up on the screen. A photo of a man with graying, receding hair. “Name: Claude Verdette. Offense: Stealing a ball meant for a kid at a Citizens game. Outrage level: 8.” Geez, guy sounds like a real mean old man. Malone pressed “Guilty” and shoved the phone back in his pocket.

“Malone.” Dr. Pomonski peered out from his office. “Come on back.” The doctor was more jovial than usual, less angered by the sight of a cop in his waiting room. It took all of Malone’s policing skills to put the rather circumstantial, non-impartial evidence together: This treatment may finally make the

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difference. A stabbing pain in his right temple pinned him to the chair.

“He said he was ready for you,” Mulva said.

Contorting his face, trying to focus on something other than the pain, Malone stood from the chair and walked across the softly lit room to the doctor’s office. He took a seat on the paper-covered bed.

“I assume you’re the same miserable sack of shit you were yesterday?” Pomonski said as he shuffled papers on his desk, his back to his patient.

“I’m planning to jump off a bridge later.”

“Fantastic. Then I think we’ve got to try something different,” Pomonski said. He turned toward Malone, an oversize syringe cradled in his arms.

“What’s in that?”

“A bunch of complex chemicals you’ll never understand. Anyway, it’s been tested on a bunch of Enemies of the People, and it seemed to yield the results that would help you in your current state.”

“Seemed to?”

“Yeah,” Pomonski said. “Not every brain is the same. Most of the guys in the homes have the barbaric background that you do. Imagine that. They’re the ones who volunteered for confinement for the betterment of the state as repentance for their crimes. See, they feel bad about hurting their fellow man.”

He could go to his cold, wet grave without more of this. Malone stared at the doctor. Even now, almost 20 years after his last days on the ice, that stare was enough.

“Anyway, it helps with memory and eases the migraines,” Pomonski said, rushing. “It’s been found to alleviate the lapses.”

“Side effects?”

“Nothing serious. Some of the test subjects got a pretty good cough for the first couple of days, but it wasn’t too big a deal.” Pomonski paused and raised the syringe. “Ready?”

“There something you’re not telling me?” Malone asked, smelling snake oil.

“We tested on Enemies of the People. They’re not always the best subjects, but we can’t use rats anymore, so that’s the best we can do.”

“I’ve got to think about it.”

“No, you don’t. I have my other patients coming in soon, and you’ve got to get out. Think about it this way: If it didn’t work or it backfired in some way, I’d have to see more of you, and I think I’ve made it abundantly clear that I don’t want that.”

The stabbing pain in his right temple had subsided—or maybe it was just because he was distracted by the doctor’s speech—but in the silence, as Malone stared at the giant syringe, it had returned. He thought of his inability to recognize Violet MacPherson’s distinct red Rancho Vista. Of the baffling sensation of not being able to recall why he had entered a room. Of the mysterious egg fire in the kitchen. The vague familiarity of a mean old man at a baseball

game. Of Captain Dillard’s threat to toss him from the force. Of the blinding rage that finally took over. Of the resolve to kill himself because it was the only way to save himself from the horror of what was to come.

The pain shot down to his jaw. As Malone cringed and grabbed his right ear where the stabbing concentrated, the long, metal needle plunged into the left side of his neck.

He jumped, his reflexes from dodging brutal and well-deserved hits on the ice the only part of his prime still intact. Now as he stood across the room from the doctor, the syringe was still protruding from his neck. He reached for the door.

“You can’t leave like that,” Pomonski said.

“You could have waited for me to make the decision.”

“You didn’t have a decision. You could try the treatment, or you could go back to crippling headaches, memory lapses, and blackouts. You become a liability to an already unstable police force. You lose the one job that will take you. You start using again. That only accelerates the inevitable. By 60, you’re being driven away in a van to a home. You ever been to one of those places? They’re like living in an antiseptic wipe. Or you could jump off a bridge, and although I personally don’t care if I ever see you again, it’s my duty as a doctor and a citizen to do everything in my power to prevent preventable death.”

Malone was silent. The moments that he wasn’t in severe pain, he often spent in dread. That’s what forced sobriety does. Allows a rotting brain the chance to think.

Pomonski yanked the syringe out of his neck. “Come back next week and check in.”

Malone rubbed his neck and ducked out of the examination room.



It had been two days since the doctor stabbed him in the neck. It had also been two days since his last headache, two days since his last lapse, two days since the rage, two days since he felt the urge to kill himself.

It was time to celebrate.

“Get out! We don’t serve your kind in here.”

“You wouldn’t believe how often I actually hear that,” Malone said, extending his hand to Sammy Martin, the sharp-witted octogenarian behind the bar.

“I bet I can. I hear it from all these guys.” Sam pointed to the line of empty barstools.

“What guys?”

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“Doesn’t matter. When those seats are filled, it’s all interchangeable. Same stories. Ostracized. Aggs mostly. You go aggro, you got nowhere else to go.”

“Yeah, at least it’s just my job that does me in. I’m a necessary evil until there’s a better solution.”

“That and your career. Guess who we had in here the other night? Aaron Clawbuck.”

“Yeah, how’s he been?” During Malone’s last seasons with the Penguins, Aaron had been a promising young winger who had the rotten luck of coming into his own during the Revolution. “I know he was playing in Sweden. That’s the last I heard.”

“Yeah, but he’s been back for a while. Bad knee injury. Scandinavia just don’t have the medical like we do. Got the knee fixed up, and the doc realigned his hips around the same time. Said he’s going back out to Sweden soon. With the new parts, he thinks he’s got another two decades left.”

“Jesus, play till he’s 60. That would have been something,” Malone said, staring down the row of barstools filled with the ghosts of sad drunks past. Malone’s own hockey career had ended rather ignominiously under team suspension for failing a drug test that was made necessary by an arrest for a wild night that started with reckless driving and ended in assaulting a cab driver. He was 32. It was years later, when he finally took it upon himself to clean out his system for good, that he realized the headaches and memory loss were not side effects of history’s longest hangover.

“Yeah, well, your dad would have been proud you followed in his footsteps.”

“But instead of chasing down criminals, I’m handing out parking tickets and checking operational licenses. Which reminds me, when does yours expire again? May, 2051, right?”

“October. Exactly two years from now. Doesn’t Dillard ever get tired of you checking the same licenses over and over?”

“Nah. He’s up to his fat neck just making sure we can still exist. Say we bust some club owner for outdated papers. Maybe he pays it, and maybe we replace some light bulbs at the station. Then the club owner gets on Chatter and starts blasting the police, saying we’re extorting him, trying to oppress his liberty. That we’re going to use the money from his fine and license renewal to buy weapons and arm ourselves like the old days and take the power away from the People. His customers get a hold of it, and suddenly we’ve gone from being shunned and farted on to the Enemy of the People. Then we’re gone. I guess Dillard’s just trying to postpone the inevitable, but for now, I’ll just keep checking up with you.”

“Dillard always seemed like a shill. I remember when he first started and your dad could just tell it would be anything to get ahead with him. I’m amazed he stayed, to tell you the truth.”

“Well, now he’s fat and 70. I don’t know where he’d go.”

“He’d find somewhere.”

Malone looked around the bar where he had been a fixture since childhood back when the place served food and had a staff that consisted of more than just a lone near-*ancien*. Mere blocks from the building Pittsburgh police station Zone 5 had once occupied—now it was an ironic nightspot that hosted monthly “billy club nights” during which partiers would mime hilarious real and imagined instances of police brutality—Sammy’s Emerald Bar was the quintessential cop hangout where officers would drown their daily hang-ups or take their families for dinner. Now the bar was dusty, not dirty just dusty, and served as a refuge for the unwanted and those whose jobs made them targets of posterior-generated gaseous attacks. Framed photographs of patrons, smiling from tables with children or presenting their pints of beer with goofy expressions to the camera, and police officers receiving promotions or commendations hung sparsely from the walls. There were once mere inches between the images, but too many had been vandalized over the years, with “Pigs” scrawled over them as if the Manson Family had stopped by.

Sammy had removed the graffiti-covered photos from the walls and had never replaced them, as there was nothing new to take their places. He didn’t feel the need to commemorate the vagabond who was just passing through after being socially exiled from Baltimore because hackers published a list of all citizens who had downloaded *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He didn’t want to memorialize a ceremony in which the honoree was wearing an imitation *Robocop* uniform while being presented with an Old West sheriff’s badge. And the lack of a police academy meant graduations were out. But as much as the bar had fallen into a shambles, Sammy never acknowledged that he was barely able to keep the lights on. And aside from the denial, there was nothing to suggest that his 87-year-old mind was faltering.

“You got coffee or anything?” Malone asked.

“Sure.” Sammy pulled a red mug from a shelf beneath the bar. He filled it with coffee, his knee, hip, and elbow replacements allowing him the agility of a much younger man. He pushed the coffee mug across the bar to his lone customer.

“Another wild Saturday night.” Malone raised the coffee mug as if to do a toast and looked to the framed photograph of a police lieutenant receiving a plaque. “See, Dad, I’ve still got it.”

“You seen him recently?”

“Yeah, but I think this photo hears me better these days.”

“He was never the same after your mom. It’s amazing. I’ve got an artificial elbow and two synthetic kidneys, but they still haven’t figured out how to fix a broken heart.”

Malone sipped his coffee. The door swung open, and Sammy jumped to attention. Any visitor to the Emerald Bar was met with both shock and enthu-

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siasm. All visitors were unexpected yet welcome. To Sammy. To Malone they were just more people with stories sadder than his.

He sipped his coffee and checked in on the old omnivice. What sentences were awaiting his vote? A saleswoman at a local boutique who told a dress-size-36 customer that the store did not carry clothes that would fit her. The body shame felt by the customer would be nothing compared with the shame of the saleswoman walking her own naked body through the Hill District this weekend if she were found guilty.

Your voting history, though public in your citizen profile, could not be used against you at the Tribunal. No one could bring it up in the courtroom as character evidence pertaining to your guilt of the crime for which you were being tried. However, there were no rules against the citizens using your guilty or not-guilty votes when they decided whether you would appear before the Hammer at the Tribunal for sentencing. It was safer to show solidarity and vote guilty as much as possible. Malone's voting history showed 426 guilty votes and 71 not-guilty. You couldn't vote guilty in every trial or everyone would know that you were just trying to game the system. Four hundred twenty-six to 71 was just about right for the average, properly outraged citizen.

You didn't even need to read the cases. Just make sure for every six guilty votes, you sprinkled in one not-guilty. Malone tapped "guilty" on the saleswoman trial. He scrolled through six more cases, skimming their synopses and tapping "guilty" five more times before "not-guilty" on the last.

"Alex, come here," Sammy beckoned from the end of the bar closer to the door. Four more men had arrived since Malone had become engrossed in the drama of the new American judicial system.

Malone left his empty coffee mug on the bar and approached the newcomers, a motley crew of human tumbleweeds run out of their hometowns.

"The Alex Malone, everyone," Sammy said. "These guys were admiring your photo." He pointed to one of the framed photos that had not been massacred by the People. An 18-year-old Alex Malone was wearing a Pittsburgh Penguins jersey over a suit, shaking hands with Mario Lemieux. The photo destroyers didn't recognize NHL draft night. "You can still see a bit of the baby face in this old tough guy here."

"I was at the game in St. Louis when you knocked out Pennington. When was that? '21? '22?" asked a middle-aged man in a blue-collar shirt and trucker cap, another anachronism who came through Sammy's.

"2020," Malone said. "I was a rookie then. November. Coach had benched me for the prior two games."

"That was sure a hell of a way to get back into his good graces." The middle-aged man laughed a guttural guffaw, revealing stained teeth. "I always wanted to know what the locker room was like after that. You must've been a damn hero that night."

“Sure, that night. Then, the next game, we’re down by one goal against Tampa, I take a dumb-ass hooking penalty with three minutes left in regulation, put the team shorthanded, and we’ve got no chance to come back. They score a power play goal, and I’m not so popular that night.”

“Hey, rookie mistake,” said the man. “I’m from the Midwest. and you were feared even out there. And we only saw the Pens four times a year!”

“Yeah, that was—”

“Name’s Cialis, Cialis Payne, man,” a younger man said, maybe early 30s—rampant plastic surgery made it difficult to gauge ages—but Cialis didn’t seem like the type to have spent much cosmetic time under the blade. Not many men who wore flannel did. “Grew up watching you. I had your jersey and everything. You’re lucky, man. I was 16 when hockey was outlawed, just getting into the swing with the high school team. You were already out of the league then, right?”

“Yeah, two years.” Malone was beginning to enjoy the questions. Though the years in between were best left to a memory lapse, it was fun to reminisce with strangers about the parts of his life that he could still recall. And they did seem more vivid. He could see Theo Pennington, notorious brawler for the St. Louis Blues, as his head hit the ice after he met Malone’s first right hook as an NHL player.

“Man, what happened? You weren’t in the league that long. We could’ve used you that last year. Getting knocked out by the Islanders in double overtime in the first round. Shitty way to end a franchise.”

Malone held out his right hand to his new friend, displaying the scars from multiple surgeries required to mend fractures, splintered bones, damaged joints, destroyed cartilage, and mangled flesh. The doctors had followed up with him, offering the latest and greatest procedures to minimize the scars. Malone ignored their calls. Why endure more pain without the addictive meds no doctor who wished to maintain licensure would prescribe to an ex-junkie like Malone?

Cialis flinched.

“There are 27 bones in this hand. I broke 24.” His right hand was his scapegoat, the reason he cited for his early retirement from hockey after the suspension. He didn’t mention the dementia pugilistica, that the fighting and reckless abandon that cemented his spot on the roster and made him a fan favorite and legend of the now-defunct NHL had also left bruises on his brain. That he had self-medicated for the headaches with any prescription drugs he could get his swollen hands on. That the Penguins quietly shuffled him from the arena to a private rehab clinic after he passed out three times during a game-day film viewing. That he was forbidden by doctors from playing another minute because his brain couldn’t take another hit. “You ever hear of a boxer’s fracture?”

“Price you pay for being a legend,” Cialis said as he took a sip of his beer.

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“Believe me, I’d’ve mangled my own hand just for a shot at what you had. Instead, I paint houses. Like actually paint houses. Or I did. Until I said somethin’ about how the Mexicans are taking all my business. Two days later, it’s all over the local Flagstaff feeds, my house is picketed, and I’m across the country trying to set up shop and depending on customers who don’t mind hiring an agg.”

Malone nodded. He’d keep the legend alive. He wouldn’t tell his fans that he gets spat on while he tries to eke out a meager living.

“I’d buy you a drink, man,” Cialis continued. “But this whole cross-country trek’s got me kinda hurtin’.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Malone said.

“What, you don’t drink?” the middle-aged man in the trucker hat asked.

“Nah,” Malone replied, hoping that he would not have to explain that addicts cannot have recreational vices.

“But you did back in your playing days, right?” Cialis asked. “I’d hear all about you guys tearing up the town.”

“I lived in South Side bars in my 20s,” Malone said.

“And chicks. Man, I bet there were a lot of chicks. More than a housepainter would have ever seen.”

“Sure,” Malone said. “There were chicks. There were always groupies. Somehow this really tanned group would always get wind of where we were. Someone on the team must have tipped them off. My money’s on Curt Pus-kalin.” This elicited a laugh from Cialis, remembering the undersize, speedy winger whose career he somehow followed living in Arizona.

“We’d be out—some group of us from the team—and suddenly these girls would be there. I can’t remember their names. Shit, I don’t think I ever knew their names. They just looked like a lot of work, kinda cute, but bodies only trained from drunk dancing and lifting a drink from the bar. They’d always just arrive, like it was a coincidence. They’d always try to play it like that. It was hilarious. At least a couple guys were hooking up with them in secret.”

Cialis laughed.

“I remember once, we were at some show, some local band, when this girl comes up to me. She tells me she’s seen me around, that she thinks I look interesting.”

The words were flowing from Malone’s lips without the slightest thought behind them. Where was this story coming from? It wouldn’t stop. It was so vivid. The hardwood floors of the barroom reflected and the green and white lights of the stage. The people on the stage in retro attire, vintage space age stuff. Tight silver pants, go-go boots for the slender woman on bass. A banner behind the stage with the words “Sy Sugar’s Soundproof Basement” in bubble type on the front-facing bass drum.

“Man, she’s really hot. Blond, tall, thin with curves. Perfect. And she knows

it. So I tell her she doesn't look like anything special. Fuck if she doesn't like hearing that. I tell her she's plain. She only gets more interested in me. I tell her she should get on stage with the band, that it would be really cool to see her up there flashing her tits to the audience. Ya know, that's how I'd know she was different. I tell her I like spontaneous women. And she does it! And I call her a whore and take her home and thump the shit out of her."

Cialis was smiling. The middle-aged man was staring at the floor. This didn't sound right. It sounded cruel. Malone was never cruel. Sure, he was not above kicking a woman on the sidewalk, but that was the rage. And the rage wasn't cruel; it didn't have the control for that. The story wasn't right.

"Where were you? That's awesome, man," Cialis said.

"I... I don't remember," Malone stammered. Where was it? Why was this his story? Though the words had flowed so smoothly and his retelling had been spot-on, he had no recollection of this event ever occurring. Sy Sugar's Soundproof Basement? Who were they? And he hadn't entered a bar besides Sammy's in years for purposes other than to check licenses. Which teammates were there? Was he that out of touch with the young man he once was before his brain had started to erode and those little pieces of his character that had defined his personality had been sanded away?

It must not have happened. That was it. He heard it in passing and palmed it off as his own. That's got to be a psychological phenomenon.

But why was the smell of spilled beer and a crowded room so vivid? The stinging sensation that the band's smoke machine left lingering on his eyes. And why that particular story? It wasn't funny to anyone but a man like Cialis Payne who would kill for a woman to tell him he looked interesting.

It was a full sensory experience, but it was not his memory.

"That's what I missed. Just by a couple years. Man, I was good too," Cialis said, every sip of beer affirming the perennial all-star he would have been had the National Hockey League not been dismantled after the Revolution. "You should appreciate that you were able to live it at all."

"I do," Malone said, his mind wandering, trying to figure out where, in the jumbled mess that was his mind, that memory had come from.

Cialis slammed his pint glass onto the bar, creating an eruption of cheap beer. "Most of us didn't get a fucking chance." He picked the glass back up and chugged the remaining beer before bringing the glass over his head and launching it onto the floor. The glass shattered; the other men scattered.

"I think it's about time for you to leave," Malone said.

"Oh, now you're going to tell me to leave? That's all anyone's got to say: Get the fuck out. Get outta Flagstaff, Cialis, for that shit you said. Get out of this office; we found out who you are. Now, a fucking pig's gonna tell me to get out of this bar. Drop dead, Alex Malone."

"You're gonna wanna get out," Malone said.

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Cialis kicked his barstool to the ground. He grabbed the next one and shoved it across the floor. His hands were on a third victim when Malone grabbed the button area of Cialis's flannel. Maybe it was the drinks or that the man's hockey career was cut so short, but Cialis was not expecting Malone to reach over his shoulder and pull his flannel over his head. Malone threw an upper cut into the jerseyed man's jaw. And another. The flannel covering Cialis's entire head, Malone couldn't see what he was hitting. And he couldn't remember why he was hitting. It was a blur or surgically reconstructed fists acting on muscle memory.

"Alex! Alex, stop!" Sammy was shouting from behind Malone's shoulder. The 87-year-old jumped on Malone's back with the lightness of a peewee player. He wrapped his arms around Malone's neck, pulling the much bigger, younger, and angrier ex-pro athlete back from the lump under flannel that crumbled to the floor.

Malone stumbled backward, rubbing his hand. Sammy slid off his back and down to the ground where he pulled the shirt back from Cialis's head. His face was red, blood seeping from his mouth. It looked like most of Malone's blows landed at the jaw. That had never been his strongest angle. For Cialis, that was a good thing.

Malone grabbed Cialis by the shirt until the man stood up. He was shaky on his feet, so Malone dragged him to the door. He kicked the door open and shoved the bloodied man onto the sidewalk. Malone steered him to the end of the block where a lip plumping clinic was closed for the evening and pushed Cialis against the front door. The beaten man collapsed on the ground. Malone kept walking. Celebration of the lack of brain damage symptoms was over. Maybe there wasn't as much to celebrate after all.



Hockey was always one of the greatest dangers to teeth. Indeed, dentists could survive for years on payments from the dental work required by shot-blocking defensemen and pugilistic wingers. Dentists were the last line of protest against the hockey ban.

Alex Malone lost several teeth to the game. A stick to the jaw in juniors claimed his right incisor. Friendly fire on the power play took his top right front tooth. And fighting claimed three others. They had all been replaced now, permanently affixed to his gums. Alex Malone was no stranger to dental pain. However, he had never suffered an injury to his frenulum labii superioris, which is what made the shooting pain there while getting ready to brush his teeth so baffling.

The pain wasn't current, more like an echo. Malone had not torn the mem-

brane that connects the upper lip to the gum, but the flash of pain told him he had years before. Wincing in pain, his eyes shut, he saw a woman. His mother. But it wasn't his mother. Alex Malone's mother was a petite brunette who had worn her hair in a chin-length bob for as long as he could remember. The woman in his memory was hefty, bordering on obese, her long, scraggly blond hair pulled back loosely from her hawklike face. That bitch, that shrew, she may be feeding him and giving him a place to live, but she wasn't his mother. There was a child, unfamiliar, scrawny, awkward, recoiling from the sound of a banshee. But the child wasn't just in the room; he was the reflection in the mirror. Malone's reflection.

He was clutching his mouth as blood seeped from his fingers. There was the pain. The woman laughed as she held a bloody toothbrush. Malone could feel the pain in his mouth, could taste the metallic blood that was not swirling around on his tongue. The child wasn't crying. He was pursing his lips, trying to keep the blood in his mouth, suck it down his throat even, anything so the woman would not see him bleed.

It was over. The pain was gone. Malone stared at the toothbrush in his hand. There was no blood, just the white and blue coil of toothpaste. He shook off the sensation and brushed his teeth, real and false.



On his way from the station to a routine wrangling, Malone nearly killed a pedestrian. He was stopped at a red light in the 2036 Ford Justiza—the standard-issue police van that, since the police were in charge of inspections for compliance with safety protocol, did not contain any of the automatic braking features that would make near-killing and killing impossible—when he glimpsed a coffee shop in his periphery. It wasn't a gripping sight, and it was a fixture of the drive to the station. But today it was different. Today a trendy shop with sparse steel tables on a near-black wooden floor between blood-red walls was important. In the car, he felt himself standing on the sidewalk just outside the floor-to-ceiling glass window of the shop. A strange sensation: nerves coupled with a buildup of excitement that was close to being unleashed. He felt like a hunter.

Distracted driving was as dangerous as drunk driving. Malone let his car drift into the crosswalk.

“Why don't you just kill your fellow citizens?” shouted a rotund man who was attempting to lawfully cross the street.

The man broke up a much more pleasing vision. A woman, young, lean with full lips painted a vibrant pink. Puckered, not for an imminent kiss, just puckered. What little clothing was there was tight. Her low-cut navy and white

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striped shirt was almost nautical. She was puckering in the coffee shop, while she sipped an iced coffee. The girl from the bar. He clenched his fists, frustrated with all the memories he'd lost of gorgeous women. He slammed his fist into the empty passenger seat. Fuck! Why couldn't he remember? She's inside, waiting for him!

From inside his car outside, Malone could feel himself walking toward the girl as she sat alone at a table, scrolling through her omnivice, licking the edge of the paper cup. He could feel her grow uncomfortable, scared even, as he approached. A weird, foreign thought entered his mind, that her unease was good, that it was how prey should feel. But she didn't back away. She smiled, then puckered again.

The wail of a car horn brought Malone out of the vision before he could feel himself sitting down in the hard chair in the coffee shop. He slammed his fist into the dashboard. Unlike the drywall in his apartment, the recycled plastic of the dashboard didn't budge. He should have told Pomonski about the rage. It was the only symptom he never mentioned, and the only symptom not cured with the injection. He'd give back some of these mysterious memories so vivid that they were almost more like déjà vu for a reprieve from the blinding anger. Not that it mattered that Malone was angry. It blew over quickly without turning into a searing headache that felt like an ice pick was being twisted into his ear. But he was being treated successfully now, in the symptoms that he had reported. He would not get a reprieve anymore from his status as a person of unique cognitive abilities if other abilities were being restored.

Malone turned the car to the right onto the first cross street and pulled over. He closed his eyes. Relax. The rage may remain, but you have to learn to control it. You can control it now, with the rest of the brain working better. And you have reason now; you're not in pain, you're not going to end it tomorrow. He inhaled for eight seconds, exhaled for six. Inhale for eight, exhale for six.

Nope. That wasn't working. He slammed his fist into the seat. Punching the steering wheel offered slightly more of a reward in the form of a singular horn honk. But that was nothing compared with the sensation of thrusting his fist into the old man's face. The power. Dominating his prey. It was like being back on the ice again. The sensation of finally being in control.

The clean, eggshell walls of the office neatly lined with shelves of neatly filed books were more vivid than the car. He held the older man by the collar of his pressed, white shirt, keeping the man's head from lolling just to sock him again at an ideal angle for maximum pain. Malone could hear the crunch of teeth detaching from their roots. Blood spewed out of the old man's mouth, splattered in the white hair that hung over his eyes, unwillingly liberated from its slicked-back style. His cheek was already starting to swell from the initial blow. He looked limp.

Hold him up. Keep him seated on his fucking finished pine desk. Don't let

his head drop forward. He hasn't had enough. Keep your eyes open, old man! Look at what you did! Look at what you created. You didn't need to let it go so far. But you did. Decades. And now, you still can't make it right! You still don't get it! What's it gonna take, old man? What's it gonna take to make it right?

Fingers wrapped around the old man's neck, squeezing but not hard enough. The old man coughed. Blood spat from between his front teeth, still attached to their gums. Malone could feel the speck of blood in his eye. The hand released.

Fix it.

The old man dropped back on the desk, coughing and clutching his neck. The rage had left the room. Unfinished. Off to inflict itself somewhere else. Malone's rage had finally subsided. It was, for the moment, fulfilled as it hadn't been since on the ice, years before the often-staged quarrels between tough guys became just part of his routine.

Maybe the drug did treat the rage—by allowing Malone to live the violent aggression in vivid daydream. Maybe biomarkers of rising anger triggered the release of some sort of short-duration hallucinogenic compound that would enable him to fulfill his most vengeful fantasies without inflicting any pain and risking banishment or worse, the Maze. After all, the old man looked a lot like the Speaker.



“Dr. Pomonsk—what do you want, Malone?”

“You make me want to send you flowers, Mulva.” Malone was still on the side of the road when he placed the call on his omnivice. The wrangling could wait. The People who called it in had the situation under control. That was their job anyway.

“I said, ‘What do you want?’ swine.”

“I don't recall the ‘swine’ the first time.”

“I'm hanging up, Malone.”

“All right. I need to talk to Dr. Pomonski.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a question for him.”

“What is it regarding?”

“My health. Why does anyone call a doctor?”

“Watch it, asshole. We just need an excuse with you.”

The “hold” music kicked in—hip-hop techno polka, today's elevator music. Either the song was 45 seconds long and on a loop or the same 45 seconds were looped in the recording. The unintelligible lyrics repeated a fourth time. Malone was starting to make out a few words here and there: The phrase “it's

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for our own good” stood out from the gibberish. The electronic polka was making him angry. The repetition. How many times had he heard this music on prior calls and failed to notice that the beat, the rhythm, the lyrics, and chords were identical from bar to bar?

And the waiting. The waiting as it repeated, over and over, while Malone continued to hold and hold and hold until he’d withered away, his skin sagging like it was falling away from the rest of his body, his bones growing frail and brittle, muscles atrophying until they were all but nonexistent under the thinning layer of skin, and while his cheeks sank and his eyes lost their sight and his spine curled, his ears continued to grow and hear the same 45-second loop of mumbling over an electronic oompah beat. It was better when he couldn’t remember the beginning to realize it was repeating. It was better having his attention hijacked by the sharp waves of brain pain.

“What do you want, Malone?” Dr. Pomonski’s voice finally shot through the other end.

“I just—I was wondering exactly what you gave me the other day.”

“An injection. Aren’t you feeling better?”

“Yeah, exponentially better.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“What’s it supposed to treat?”

“What kind of doctor do you think I am, Malone? You gave me a list of symptoms. I gave you treatment for them.”

“Yeah, I know. The memory lapses, depression, and headaches. Does it treat any other symptoms? Anything maybe that I didn’t experience but that it was designed to treat?”

“It treats CTE. What are you getting at?”

Malone paused, thinking: I had an elaborate, full-sensory rage fantasy of nearly beating one of the three leaders of the Revolution to death in some office. That’s a thought no one says out loud, regardless of the sometimes-practiced doctor-patient confidentiality gentleman’s agreement. “I’m having visions.”

“Good. Get a new job then. Psychic’s a respectable line of work.”

“No,” Malone said, attempting to exercise patience. “Not that kind of vision. More like flashbacks, memories.”

“That’s the point, Malone. You wanted your mind back, you’ll start remembering things. Lapses were one of the big things you complained about.”

“But they’re pretty horrible things.”

“Thought you were a tough guy, a goon. Wasn’t that your official job title?”

“But they’re not my memories!” That was it. He’d finally identified it. Memories of someone else’s life. A life of enduring pain and inflicting it on others. And inordinately beautiful women. Malone felt a sudden pang of concern for the blonde in the coffee shop, the first such worry he’d experienced for some-

one other than himself in years. CTE will do that to you. If whatever lucky bastard got to do that to the Speaker was that cruel to some poor admirer at an electro-funk show, what would he have done to the blonde? Assuming these were all one man's memories. That was a big assumption. But as absurd as any notion of having another man's memories was, it seemed more likely that they would all come from one person. Malone had no factual basis for this assumption. Call it intuition. Gut feel. The type of things his dad used to say made good police.

"They're unpleasant memories that you didn't recall until now?"

"Yes."

"It's called repression, Malone. They've known about it since your great-great-, exponentially—in your words—great-grandfather. Just calm down and be thankful that you're using five-syllable words again."

"But—"

"Goodbye, Malone."

Pomonski was gone. As was any hope that the injection was a hallucinogen. This wasn't a trip. This was a whole new journey for Alex Malone and whoever was in his head. Well, at least they had something in common in their hatred for the Speaker. Maybe the man in his head was another unfortunate like him. A victim of the Revolution, one that the People forgot when they were forging a new way without him. Maybe he too was a pariah, and he blamed the Speaker for galvanizing the collective rage into a force for change that left him behind. Maybe there were more people like Malone outside of Sammy's bar.

Malone tried to convince himself that he had a new disenfranchised friend in his head. But the rage. The rage that makes you breathe like you've just finished a brutal penalty kill on the ice, sends all the blood rushing to your heart that beats like when your name's called on draft night and away from the hands so they go numb. Then you start shaking, these little tremors that creep from your hands up your arms and then take over your entire body. And you just feel like one giant human pulse, like you're about to burst. You think your veins are going to explode. They don't. But you do. You unleash almighty hell on whatever is standing in your way. Man, woman, wall, car window, coffee table, yourself. And the blood vessels relax. Your heart slows down, and you start to remember how to breathe. That was the rage in that room, the rage in the hands that mangled the Speaker's face. But then it just stopped. Like there was something else, pulling the rage back, not because the rage was gone, but because no rage was enough to carry it all the way. Was it self-preservation? A murder is a certain Maze sentence. The murder of the Speaker would be shamed before whatever tortures lay within.

Or was it something else that stopped him? Beating a man to a pulp carried consequences, and since it was the Speaker who was beaten, would likely still wind up a Maze sentence. But Malone had never heard of this incident. It

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wasn't on Chatter. There was no alert, no republic-wide hunt for the perpetrator. If this was a real memory, the Speaker didn't report it. Why? Some out-cast citizen storms into his office and allows the anger built on years of doors slammed in his face, taunts and jeers from the populace, menial employment in professions that yield more ridicule, scorn, and derision to boil into a rage that he unleashes on the man he deems responsible for his misfortune? He walks in with nothing to lose. Who cares? What can the People do to him that they haven't already done? He may as well end it all anyway. Why not go out the man who ended the Speaker? Go out a hero to the maligned. That was something Malone understood. Something he would do.

The part that didn't jibe was the one that would make sense to the normal, well-adjusted people not prone to fits of uncontrollable rage: the ability and the will to stop. That was the part that didn't make sense in Malone's vengeful pariah narrative. There is no reason for a vengeful pariah to stop. You don't stop a beating like that. Unless, Malone thought. Unless it's personal.

Malone disengaged the parking brake and hit the RESUME button on the navigation system built into the dashboard. He steered the van back into the traffic lane, the left-turn signal automatically blinking to alert the citizens that at some point this vehicle would be making a left.

Something was going on inside his head, and for the first time in years, it wasn't expanding tau proteins. Something else was in there, commandeering his brain, but it wasn't the disease. And Malone wasn't so sure that he wanted that something out.



To the supporters, the Super Seniors marked the apex of human achievement, the ultimate cure of death, the holy grail of science, the elusive eternal life. It wasn't one bit of magic, or an elixir, or any sort of spiritual, enchanted item. It was a populist achievement, hundreds of doctors and scientists working both independently and in teams disconnected from one another that researched tirelessly until they devised solutions to all that ailed mankind. And their greatest miracle was making each cure affordable to a population that no longer paid for healthcare. The science was incredible: They were able to replicate every organic part of the human body synthetically, to seamlessly fuse the new into the old so that there was no reason for people to die anymore.

They just couldn't figure out the damn brain.

To the opposition, the problem with an undying population was overpopulation. Eradicate heart disease? That's 700,000 more lives each year. Cancer gone? 600,000. Diabetes? Another 100,000. But even the most pragmatic detractor could not argue that these deaths were deserved. Where was the

crime against our fellow humans in overconsumption of sugar? Besides, with all our innovations, we'll figure out this housing shortage! That will be solved. No basement left unfinished! No attic left for storage! No backyard shed not equipped with a solar panel!

The more pressing problem was when one of the crowning achievements of modern science snapped. Some Super Seniors went earlier than others. They developed Alzheimer's or dementia. Sometimes, living in the past caused a violent and confused outburst and they were a threat to others. Imagine reliving one of your worst memories every day. Or thinking that all the people around you in the home were obscure characters from your childhood over a century ago and the constant frustration when they have no idea what the hell you're babbling about. No one understands you. No one relates to the problems you think you have, because they're only in your mind that's time-traveled to 75 years ago while corporeally you're here in an overpopulated, post-Revolution district.

So, sometimes they snapped. And it got scary seeing how the brain may have well exceeded its healthy life span, but the body wasn't old enough to cast a vote at the Tribunal. In a Super Senior's mind, it's 1978 and you just stole his kid's lunch. But you weren't born until 2029, and you have no idea what the old man is raving about. He's leveling accusations involving something called Spam, and you're wondering how you'd manage to steal some child's junk email. And who uses email anymore? What is this, 2023? So, you tell the guy to step off, that whatever he's talking about, you weren't involved. But he doesn't stop. It's 1978. His anger is alive. It's not a memory. He didn't just see you 60 years later and remember what a shitty thing that was to do. It's in the moment. He's mad like it just happened and like you did it. And, unlike in 1978, not all the areas of his brain are functioning as they should, telling him that there may be consequences for unleashing a torrent of blows on a teenager outside a car-charging station.

That had been known to happen. It wasn't an everyday thing, but it was an unexpected hazard of 3D-printed organs and synthetic blood. On most occasions, however, a 120-year-old woman walking through the icy Pittsburgh winter streets wearing a bathrobe and slippers, searching for a childhood cat named Socks, was just a menace to herself.

It was often a cop's job to wrangle a Super Senior, to get him, her, or it to a center where he, she, or it was incapable of hurting him-, her-, or itself and others. It was illegal to ever, under any circumstances, kill a fellow human being, no matter how much of said human being was machine. Except, of course, if the People voted said individual into the Maze, but death at the end was only a rumor spread by detractors who longed for the old ways. The Super Seniors were incapable of making conscious decisions, were not cognizant of any violent actions because their brains were, quite often, 130 years old.

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Therefore, when a Super Senior was causing a scene and unleashing some confused fury upon his, her, or its fellow citizens, the police were dispatched, as the People feared that hurting their attacker would send them straight to the Maze.

For Malone, Super Senior wrangling was the most depressing part of a job in which he was often the recipient of weaponized flatulence. A reconstructed hand, multiple knee surgeries, and disintegrating brain fit the profile of a Super Senior more than a 46-year-old former athlete.

Malone pulled his car in front of the former city government office in the former municipality of Dormont, which was now part of the Pittsburgh District. The hulking structure on the grassy knoll a stairway above street level was covered in a giant, disconnected mural. The building was now an artists' colony—a more worthwhile use than the ineffective micro-governing by elected officials for whom most people were too busy to have voted.

A crowd surrounded a fountain that had been dry for years—a municipal waste of valuable water, the Speaker proclaimed. A sinewy, tanned Super Senior was thrashing in the fountain, as if it was still full. She wore a floral house-dress, her thinning white hair in pink curlers that must have been a holdover from a different era, and a white lacy bra over her dress. There were mere millimeters of skin between wrinkles, damage from time in the sun and time in general. She flailed her arms, screeching, croaking noises coming from her throat as though she'd forgotten how to speak.

Malone approached the fountain. Controlling the unruly had been part of both of his careers.

“Pittsburgh PD, please stand back!”

The crowd parted, some of the gawkers even stepping away from the fountain. When faced with imminent danger, the People sometimes listened to the police. Perhaps they had seen some of those old movies in which the cops were the good guys; maybe they saw some of that inherent heroism when Malone came to rescue them from a bionic geezer. Or maybe it was self-preservation and the willingness to let an untouchable like Malone do their dirty work.

Malone climbed onto the ledge of the fountain. He held his wrangling mechanism in his reconstructed right hand, still the one he trusted after all those years. The Super Senior thrashed again, swatting her spindly arms at him, but failing to make contact. She must not have kept up on her Lasik, and was having trouble gauging distances. Malone pressed his finger on the trigger of the six-inch stainless steel wand as he held it out just below the old woman's shoulders. The flat cord that shot out of the wand was a more sophisticated version of the slap bracelet—the thin metal within the nylon wrapped itself around the skinny woman, pinning her arms to her sides. Malone stepped closer to the deranged geriatric and fired the device again, another binding securing her forearms to her waist.

Malone grabbed the woman by her shoulder, feeling that bizarre combina-

tion of sagging, wrinkled skin over reinvigorated muscles that clung taut to the bones. And in a flash, his hand on her shoulder, he saw another disoriented woman hit the ground, a fanny pack worn around her head, mismatched shoes on her feet. The wooden clog on her left foot flew across a brightly lit room with decrepit, sea green tiled walls separated by mildewed grout while the sneaker stayed on her right foot. She lay prone on the floor. Malone saw a scalpel, the polished metal blade cutting through the grimy surroundings. Fluorescent light shone down from a flickering fixture on the ceiling, giving what appeared to be an industrial basement a horror movie hospital feel. As the lights flickered off and back on, he saw the scalpel gleaming with blood before they flickered off for good. The vision was over. Malone was back in the fountain. OK, brain, this shit isn't cool anymore.

He blinked, and grabbed the pinned arm of the old woman, guiding her out of the fountain past the viewing public. He clutched the defeated Super Senior, her mistaken choice of outerwear now concealed behind the cord that wrapped around her spindly frame, but doing little to assuage the humiliation that Malone felt on her behalf. Which was worse: the bra over the dress and the freakout in the fountain, or having to be dragged away against her will?

Did she have a moment of clarity when she could step outside herself and pity the person who caused the ruckus? It had been two years since his father had even recognized him, let alone put together a cogent thought that would have offered Malone or any of the doctors at the center a glimpse into what world he was experiencing that we didn't know about. Maybe that's what the man with the scalpel was trying to find out through some rudimentary and unlicensed experiments.

Malone led the woman to the back of the black wrangling van. He opened the back door, and the ramp fell out. He led her into the van and sat her down on the bench that lined the walls. She was docile now. Whatever urge or recall that had inspired the outburst had now subsided, and she was either experiencing the shame or was a hero in an alternate reality who would take the punishment for adhering to her beliefs with the grace and dignity of Joan of Arc. Malone pressed the button on the wall above his shoulder. A harness descended, fastening the woman to the bench as if she was about to take a ten-story drop and an immediate loop on a roller coaster. If the rage returned, she just might. Being that it was only a police vehicle and, if you worked out the math even with sometimes filling the van to its eight-Super-Senior capacity, the most frequent travelers were cops, it did not have the safety protocols of most post-Revolution vehicles. Malone shut the door and left the ancient woman alone, silent in the dark.

He walked around to the driver's side of the van. As he climbed in, a male voice yelled from the area near the fountain.

"Be careful with her, pig! She's one of the People, too."

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Of course I will, you virtue-proclaiming, self-righteous, obnoxious shitball. You think every cop's a violent sociopath? Just because of a couple of incidents decades ago when the force was armed? Well, guess what? Those guys aren't on the force anymore. They had to pass a test back then to get a badge. Guys like that are still passing tests to do something else. See, maybe it wasn't about the calling of the law that made them want to wear the badge. Maybe it was the status, the respect, the power. Did you ever think of that? They'd never take a loser job like this. They're off running things.

And yeah, there were some bad cops back then. Those guys, the ones who pulled out their clubs when no threat was there, fired their guns when the kid reached for a soda can—those guys are still around, and they're clicking away on their omnivices, voting for the Maze.

And guys like us cops now? We're at their whims. Like we were then. May not be the same faces; you won't identify them if you pass them on the street. But they're out there, wielding scalpels over Super Seniors strapped to tables while you, Mr. Hero, are over here hassling me.

Malone didn't say any of this to the righteously outraged citizen. His hands shook as he pressed the ignition button, and his heart beat as if he'd just inflicted a round of billy club brutality.

He pulled the van out of the artist colony parking lot and right into a traffic jam on True Liberty Avenue, the single-lane boulevard that took you from deep in the suburbs through a tunnel and over a bridge before finally reaching downtown Pittsburgh. The city planners back a couple of centuries ago must not have had confidence in this hilly region on three rivers, certainly no inclination to believe it would one day be home to the Speaker, the Watcher, and the Hammer—the voice, the megaphone, and the iron fist of the Revolution—who would make it assume the role of a new nation's capital.

The van crept 20 feet closer to the traffic light before stopping again. Malone thought that this would be much easier if we had flying cars by now.

It wasn't until almost a half hour later when the van was finally part of the seemingly endless line of vehicles in the True Liberty Tunnel that the screaming started. It was the commonly called bloodcurdling variety, though no one who ever used that phrase could explain the concept of curdled blood. It was the type of scream more appropriate for when an innkeeper in drag busts in on your shower waving a butcher knife than observing the 30-minute mark of a slow drive in the back of a van.

Malone was no longer in the tunnel. It was still dark, but that's because it was night. The man sitting in the passenger seat in the red snakeskin jacket put his hands over his ears.

"I can't listen to this shit much longer."

"I thought you liked hearing them scream," said the voice coming from Malone's head, that of the driver of the vehicle.

“Yeah, when I’m making them scream. But this constant wailing grates on the nerves,” the man in the jacket said. His thin, white-blond hair tucked behind his ears blended into his pale skin—almost an extension of his head, like a sci-fi butler’s at the palace of a notorious space gangster. Maybe it was the pattern on the jacket or the tiny nose that looked as if it had been shaved down through too many cosmetic procedures or the hiss in his voice; the effect was snakelike.

“Then why don’t you fucking do something about it? Give them something to scream about.”

The snake turned to Malone and smiled. “I’ll get the cattle prod. Give ’em a taste of what they’re in for. Make ’em re-evaluate the complaints about the transportation.”

A car horn jolted Malone back to the present. The snake man was gone. Eight feet separated the van and the next car. The centenarian was still screaming. The van was partitioned with no direct visibility to the back save for the overhead camera that monitored the passengers. Malone tapped the screen on the dashboard, moving it off the navigation and the estimated time until he reached the traffic light at the end of the tunnel (was it irony that the light at the end of Malone’s tunnel was red?) and it filled the with the bird’s-eye view of the sparse passenger area. The woman was screaming, but she wasn’t thrashing, kicking, or trying to squeeze out of her harness. She was perfectly calm but screaming like a banshee.

Malone flipped back to the navigation. Five minutes until he’d reach the light. He killed the engine and stepped out of the van. The motorist behind him did not approve and began honking his horn with the enthusiasm of a drummer who’d just been suspended from the ceiling of a sold-out arena. Malone waved. The man responded by aiming his omnivice through the windshield. No doubt capturing photo evidence of the disrespectful asshole who accepted that traffic was not moving and turned off his vehicle. What the man would do with such evidence Malone had no idea, but its collection was often enough of a threat to thwart aggro or anti-populist behavior.

Malone opened the back door of the van and was greeted by amplified screaming.

“Listen, I’m not going to hurt you. No one is. I’m just taking you somewhere to get help.”

She continued to shriek, not acknowledging Malone or the open door. The driver honked again, this time a single long chord, which likely caused other annoyed drivers trapped in the tunnel to aim their omnivices at him for evidence of a man who must be watched on the road lest he succumb to his obvious predisposition for road rage. The cars in front of the van had shifted about another 15 feet before stopping again. Malone shut the door. Noticing the honking man’s wild gesticulations, Malone pulled his omnivice from his

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pocket and aimed at the driver's face behind the glass. We're even.

He climbed back in the van and moved 15 feet, which appeased the mad honker. The screams continued, though not the continuous wail. This was worse. Every time it stopped gave the false hope that it was over. Did she understand when he said he was getting her help? Did she hear him at all? Malone wondered the same thing each time he visited his father.

He wasn't going to hurt her. Neither would the doctors at the homes. Study the seniors, yes, but never hurt them. But someone would. Or had. Someone was committing real crimes against the People. Would Malone have cared if the perpetrator wasn't in his head? He didn't know.



"Well, if it isn't Alex Malone! The guardian of the lost art of jerseying!"

"Keep it down, Sammy. There's probably some Chatter about me." Malone approached the bar. It was the time that used to be happy hour here. Now that term was so ironic that being at Sammy's between 4 and 6 p.m. made them too depressed and the bar was always empty at this time, save for one man staring intently at his glass of whiskey.

"There's always chatter about you. That's why you're Alex Malone. The guys would be chattering about Tom Malone's giant son and how he could skate backwards when you were nine years old. But as far as the latest incident goes, no, I haven't heard any chatter."

"I seen a giant skate backwards once," the man at the bar said to his drink.

"I got a hundred-something woman screaming in the back of my van so I gotta be quick here, Sammy," Malone said.

Sammy quit polishing the liquor bottles and looked Malone in the eye.

"You get a lot of shady characters that come in here, people fleeing some nasty pasts."

"C'mon, Alex, I know why you did what you did the other night. You left me with a mess of blood and glass, but I get it. Guy was a clown."

"Fucking clowns some scary shit," the drunk man slurred before biting the rim of the rocks glass.

Malone rose from the stool and walked to the farthest end of the bar. Sammy followed.

"This is serious, Sammy. You hear anything about any Super Seniors going missing? Maybe turning up dead?" Malone said at almost a whisper volume. Sammy's enhanced ears picked it up just fine.

"You're talking murder? No, I don't hear nothing like that. Most of the guys here made insensitive comments, bad jokes. Maybe one or two lost it in traffic. But no one talks murder in the Emerald Bar, you know that."

“How about anyone come in here who really hates the Super Seniors? Talking about how they’re ruining the republic or anything like that?”

Sammy squinted. “What’s on your mind, Alex?”

“That’s a good way to phrase it. I got this treatment the other day.”

“Treatment?”

“Yeah, from the doc. For the headaches, you know. And ever since, I’ve been having these visions.”

“Like psychic visions? There’s good money in that, damn good money,” Sammy said, nodding in approval.

“Like memories. In the past. But not my past. I’m remembering situations that I was never in. People I’ve never met. Things I’ve sure as hell never said or done.”

“Maybe it’s the blackouts. How many times did you start a night in here and I had to remind you what happened the next day?”

“Not like that, Sammy. I’m not talking waking up in a hotel room with the TV thrown into the pool. I’m talking bad shit. Torturing the seniors. Taking them to some creepy basement and taking a knife to them.”

“What makes you say these are memories, Alex? That sounds like a hallucination or a fantasy. Maybe the doc gave you something that makes you have violent fantasies.”

“But they’re not all like that. Sometimes I’m the victim.”

“Why are you really here, Alex?” Sammy asked. The drunk lay his head down on the bar, apparently giving up on hearing anything to attempt to mimic.

Malone was silent for a moment. “I guess I want to find out what’s going on in my head. If the doc injected me with something that’s making me have someone else’s memories, I got a right to know who he is, right? Seeing how it seems like he’s hurting people.”

“Do you want to find out about the people he hurt? Maybe stop him from hurting more?”

“I guess so.”

“Alex, why did you take the oath?”

“What oath?”

“Aw crap, I forgot they got rid of that,” Sammy said. He leaned over the bar to get closer to Malone’s face. “In your dad’s day, the cops took an oath. They vowed to protect and serve. Sure you don’t have an oath, but why did you join the force?”

“You know why, Sammy. It’s the only job that would have me.”

“Alex, there are a lot of crap jobs that would have you. You could have worked here, for one. I pay just about as well as the force, and bar backs and bouncers don’t often get spit on. You may not have had great options, but you had ’em. So, tell me the truth, why become a cop?”

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“My dad, I guess. It’s what I know how to do.”

“Right. What you know how to do. What did you do on the ice?”

“Protected my teammates.”

“Yes, you protected them. And that’s why you became a cop. I saw it the other night. You protect people. Whether you like it or not, that’s your calling, Alex Malone. And I’ll help you here if you promise me you’ll start following that call again.”

“They don’t pay me for that anymore. They pay me to check your license.”

“And what did all the money and the glory get you? How many sports cars did you wreck? How much of those signing bonuses did you waste on drugs? How about all the drinks and pills your so-called fans bought you and the party that didn’t end until you were brain-damaged and your league was gone?”

“You’re acting like I didn’t earn it. Brain damage was factored into the pay, Sammy. The hands that got me my first Oxy script. That was part of the job. They don’t pay you the big bucks for not taking risks. I got the brain damage from the job, from the fights. And now I gotta live with it.” Malone was pointing at his head, trying to keep his voice down so as not to wake the sleeping drunk. “The head hurts more than the hands ever did, and they don’t give me shit for the pain on account of my history. Forgetting things like I’m twice my age. The thoughts that are getting so goddamn dark sometimes I don’t wanna do it anymore. The rage.”

“Alex, you’ve had the rage your whole life. That’s what made you such a great tough guy.”

Malone was silent for a moment. He looked at his surgically reconstructed hands that hadn’t hurt in a decade. What he wouldn’t give to go back to the time in his life when wrapping his fingers around the wheel of his Camaro required four pills. He had it all then: the fame, the money, the glory, the women, the fans, the buddies that in hindsight Malone just couldn’t call friends. Was it really following his calling that made that time of his life so fulfilling?

“So you’re saying I do what?” Malone asked. “Go above and beyond and find out who’s torturing old people? I rescue them all? Then what? Collect evidence? Bring the agg to the Tribunal?”

“Since when did Alex Malone ever follow procedure?” Sammy leaned over the bar. His voice was getting a little louder, like he was talking to a son who just didn’t get it, which, in a way, he was. “Tell you what. I’ll make you a deal. I’ll help you. If you swear an oath that if there are old folks being tortured, you’ll protect and serve them like a real police officer does.”

“And what about figuring out what’s going on inside my head?”

“Anyone ever told you how helping others is the best way to help yourself?”

“I may have heard that once or twice.”

“Alex, I’ve watched you your whole adult life thinking you can’t help yourself. But your best times were when you were sacrificing yourself to defend

others.”

Malone stared at the scratched finish on the wooden bar. It used to be smooth enough for ten-year-old Alex to flick quarters across with such precision and restraint that they’d hang halfway off the edge. Sammy would push them back to where Alex’s short arms could reach them, and he’d repeat the game until his father was done talking about the latest case with his partner the next stool over.

“I really want a goddamn drink right now,” Malone said.

“Don’t we all?”

“Let’s say I do start looking into this. Dillard’s never going for it. I go in there, tell him I’m having visions, he’ll tell me first to get a gig as a psychic then laugh me right out of his office, asking where I got the idea that police investigate anything.”

“From what I remember about Dillard, he’d do just about anything to be left alone to climb the ladder. Drove your dad crazy. Whether it made sense or not, if it came from above, Dillard did it,” Sammy said.

“He’s afraid like the rest of us,” Malone said. “He wants to keep the force alive, just do what cops are supposed to do. Give the People no reason to shut us down completely.”

Sammy stood up straight from the bar and grinned. “I hope you’re still as good a liar as when you had 17 doctors prescribing you pain pills.”



“So, I’ve got a way make the force less expendable,” Malone said.

He was back in the chief’s office. Dillard was a mountain behind the desk. His gut tested the tensile strength of his U.S. Marshals uniform, a donation from an ill-conceived, short-lived reimagining of the early 2000s show *Justified* with an all-obese cast that was shot in Pittsburgh. While the People enjoyed seeing the eclectic urban terrain of the unofficial capital of the Republic, they were less appreciative of what they called “fatsploitation that either celebrates an odious, fascist agency of the Old Regime or satirizes it by mocking the obese as they stumble and waddle and bumble through cases easily solved by the oppressive, though body-normative, characters in the original series.” Malone had no idea what that criticism meant, but he could understand if someone were to say that Dillard should not be wearing such form-fitting clothing if he wanted himself or his office to be taken seriously.

His tie looked to be cutting off the circulation to his brain. Any tighter and maybe Dillard would be the lucky cop who could finally again use job-issued equipment to off himself. The gut was like a bulbous foothill; climbing it put you on level enough ground to pitch a tent and stay for the night before scaling

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the rest of the soft mountain. There was no clear definition of where his shoulders began or ended or where his neck began or ended, so the rest of the climb would have to be done with ropes and belays. The chin melted into the neck, but the visible pores offered many natural crevices that the experienced climber could use as holds. You wouldn't get much steady footing until you reached the lips or the nose, the only real protrusions on the rocky crag. If you were skilled enough to reach the summit, you were greeted by a dusting of black hair that was always slick with the morning dew.

"You do, do you?" Dillard didn't look up from shuffling papers on his desk. That was how he spent most of his days—no irony, it was just something to do.

"I was visiting my old man down at the center last week, and the place was looking a little rough." Senior centers; that would be where the investigation would begin. As Sammy noted, that was where more Super Seniors were kept. If any had gone missing, the centers would have records. Establish the identity of the victim. Look up her history. Find any connections on the outside, ask those with functioning frontal lobes if anyone would have reason to harm the senior. That was as far as he and Sammy got, but it was enough to start.

"Rough? It's a tax-dollar-funded center. Like us. What do you expect?" Dillard said, looking at Malone as if he'd just suggested the real reason he was about to pitch this idea.

Remember what Sammy said. Calm. Look him in the eye. You're not suggesting an investigation into mysterious hallucinations; you're presenting a rational solution to the increasing belief that the police force was becoming entirely nonessential.

"Tax funding or not, they need to keep up with their licenses."

Dillard cocked his head to the right. It was barely visible but could have caused avalanche-like consequences for the climbers. "Go on."

Present the reasons. Be cold. You're offering to take on a boring project. "Think about it. The senior centers are all-inclusive living communities. They've got gyms, pools, cafeterias, permanent accommodations. Not to mention the staff of doctors, nurses, physical trainers, chefs—all people who need credentials to operate. That's a lot of licenses that no one's checking."

Dillard leaned back. The chair squeaked in objection.

You've hooked him. He's thinking about all the fines that the department can collect when some of those hundreds of licenses in each center have lapsed. He may not even be thinking yet about the PR. Steer him in the right direction.

"If a center doesn't have staff with all their licenses in good standing, they're not giving the proper care to their residents who depend on them to live as well as they can. And here come the police, making sure that the centers aren't cutting corners, doing a real service to the people."

Dillard tucked his lips under his teeth, his jowls jiggling as he moved his lips from side to side. Let him think. Let him imagine the possibilities. But be pre-

pared for the questions. In nine years, you've never come to him with an idea. He'll think you have ulterior motives. Everyone does. There's no opportunity for a real promotion anymore. You're not going to make detective and get your shield by being a go-getter. You come to him with an idea these days, there's something in it for you.

"What's in this for you, Malone?"

"I guess it just hits a little close to home," Malone said. "My old man and all. Just want to make sure he's getting treated right."

"Your old man was a good cop," Dillard lied. Bill Malone was a good cop; that truth didn't make it any more of a lie when Dillard said it. "But you realize what this assignment entails. How many senior centers are in the Pittsburgh District?"

"Forty-seven," Malone said. Do your research, Sammy insisted. Have an answer to everything. The more information that's true, the easier it is to fudge the rest.

"That's a lot of licenses," Dillard said. "And you won't be able to get them all in one visit. You'll have to go back at night when the later shifts are on."

"Yes, sir."

"It'll be weeks."

"At least," Malone said.

"Weeks of driving from center to center, meeting everyone on the staff with credentials. Inspecting the facilities to ensure the licenses are on display in the gyms, the kitchens, the medical clinics. You'll be walking around looking at walls."

"I kind of like looking at walls."

"No one's gonna be happy to see you. Or talk to you. They're gonna say you're a fascist, intruding on their privacy."

"I'm used to taking one for the team," Malone said.

Dillard stared at Malone. "What's going on with you, Malone? Every time I've given you an assignment, you've asked me to give it to Pencomo. You took off to pick up that Super Senior yesterday without complaining. Now you're in here volunteering for a weeks-long assignment that you made up. What's going on, Malone? You gotta disclose it to me."

Be ready for his suspicions. You've been a shit cop since you joined the force. He's gonna have questions. "I saw my doc the other day. Apparently there's an experimental treatment for people like me. I was a good candidate for the injection."

"And?"

"I feel better than I have in years. The headaches are gone. So are the memory lapses. Fact is, I'm having even more memories than I used to. Starting to see things in a whole new way, like I haven't in years."

"So, you're telling me your doctor gave you an injection that cured your

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brain damage?”

“Isn’t that the promise of the People’s medicine?” Malone asked, showing off pearly fake teeth that were far superior to the ones lost in ice brawls.

“Stop smiling, Malone. It’s creeping me out.”

Malone shut his mouth and looked at the chief with hopeful eyes, the same look that pleaded “help me” when he would describe to doctors the pain in his hands.

“All right, you’re on assignment starting today. Permission to check licenses only. If I hear anything, you’re off the project and I give it to Pencomo. You get a vehicle if one’s available. If not, you’re on foot or public transportation. So plan accordingly,” Dillard said.

“Thanks, Chief. I really appreciate it, and even though the Super Seniors may not be lucid enough to say it, they do too.” Malone stood and extended his hand across the desk. Dillard looked confused, but his balmy hand wrapped around Malone’s and they shook.

“Go on, Malone, or whoever you are.”

PART II

Excellent! Soon I shall have them all guillotined in Paris.

*-Last words of Jean-Paul Marat before taking
Charlotte Corday's fatal blade to the chest*





It wasn't that Malone had never witnessed the inside of a senior center. He had. He had spent hours, nights, the better part of days in one. But he hadn't realized that by seeing that one, he had seen them all, which made the flashes of memory far more difficult to place.

The layout differed slightly in each facility—there's just no way to streamline geography. You could say that the inhabitants were unique in each facility, that they were snowflakes, but superficial differences that manifest themselves in clothing and hair color often just indicate inherent sameness. So the elders were interchangeable, the staff identical, even though each center's employees wore distinguishing badges over their sterile whites.

Each facility was the same combination of juvenile detention, resort, and asylum. Generations dictated whether they worked there by choice, resided there by default, or were sentenced there to learn how to be a productive member of society. The walls were a shade off white to remind those inside that this was not a hospital. These were the most noncommittal buildings into which Malone had ever ventured.

Malone had visited 16 centers in a week. Of course, those were just the first visits. He'd have to go back during other shifts, as Dillard indicated. The chief marveled at Malone's inspection pace.

"Sixteen in a week, huh, Malone? You decided to stop sleeping?" Dillard had remarked when he finally caught Malone during a rare check-in back at his desk.

"No, sir," Malone had said. "Just efficiency. You were right; the staff wants me off the premises as fast as possible."

"And you're getting all the licenses from all the employees and at all the facilities?"

"With the exception of the staff either on vacation or on a shift that wasn't working at the time. I'll need to swing back around to each one, but I've got it all scheduled in the omnivice. You want to see the agenda?" Malone lifted his omnivice, threatening to share the details of his apparently boring mission with the chief.

"No, thanks," Dillard had said. "Just keep on it."

"Got it, Chief. Already found 38 expired credentials and two gyms that haven't been inspected."

It was lucky for Malone's cover story that none of the centers triggered any memories, hallucinations, visions, or whatever he was calling them at that

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instant. Without knowing where they came from, he couldn't assign a label. His recent police work had taught him that he shouldn't jump to conclusions in an investigation. If he had, he'd have assumed the nefarious activity was occurring at Center Nine because it turned out that an orderly hadn't actually completed his associate's degree and had once faced the Tribunal for stealing a sombrero from a confused yet festive Super Senior. Neither the center nor the orderly triggered anything in the rogue part of Malone's brain, so he told the young man to go back to school and moved on to the next facility on the list.

He was inspecting day and night. Sleeping was another lie to the chief. Malone was getting his mojo back in that regard. No, Coach, I haven't been drinking. These pills? They're for the pain in the hands. I take one a day, and that's it.

Because of the long hours spent in locations that weren't triggering visions, Malone's mind had been peaceful since he'd begun the assignment. A week in, and maybe the cover story would become true. Maybe the visions were temporary, there was no one murdering Super Seniors, and Malone would return to the station with hundreds of violations and a pat on the back from a pleased chief.

Well, there was that one incident over the weekend when Malone caught the trial of the female salesperson. It was when the Hammer was issuing the sentence. The great judge, one of the leaders of the Revolution, was no longer seated behind the desk at the Tribunal. He was in what appeared to be a kitchen, seated at a small breakfast table. And he was years younger, his hair not yet the stately white that it was on the feed. Seeing such a grand man seated cramped on the small, plastic chair was funny at first in its absurdity. Then he spoke.

"She dies," he said. "She dies. You know it's got to happen. She dies, or everything does. Kill one so millions may flourish."

The crowd was cheering. The vision interrupted the sentencing. The salesperson, a middle-aged brunette with an average build and a quivering lip, was removing her shirt. About to take the naked stroll of shame. Malone changed the feed. Was he really that angry with the architects of the Revolution as to imagine one getting his face pulverized while the other plotted murder? Did he really think that poorly of his leaders? Was he inventing intrigue for a mundane life as little more than a traveling barcode scanner for professional licensure?

The 17th senior center on Malone's list occupied a former newspaper office downtown. The subterranean parking garage was converted into a massive gym; brochures advertised 200-foot-high platform diving boards, higher than cliff-diving records and anything built in Dubai. The front desk was the same as the others—a rounded console with a wall of security cameras. Senior centers were the sole places where the necessity of such intrusive equipment was never argued. It was for their own good. And, if you were put here, you were

lacking the faculties to hide anything you may want kept secret.

The Eyes was, for all intents and purposes, the same as that of the last center. Female, black hair—sleek and straight—lean, angular. She looked like part of history’s vision of the future.

“What brings you to the Joe Biden Center for Natural Aging?”

“Pittsburgh PD, miss.” Malone introduced himself just as he had at the other 16 centers. “Just making the rounds to check that all the licenses are up to date.”

Her cheery demeanor evaporated when she saw the badge. The frown suited her better.

“No one’s ever checked our licenses before.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard about the lack of budget for the police these days. We’ve had to hold off on our visits for a while.” Malone grinned. It wasn’t a lie, but had it not been for his visions, no one would have checked for another several years. Maybe not until some other cop had a selfish reason for wanting to check out the centers. “We know what great work you’re doing here, so we feel we don’t need to stop by too often. But every once in a while—”

“Can it, pig,” she snapped, standing up from the desk. “Follow me.”

Malone followed the sharp woman, whose curves seemed like angles that could be measured with a protractor. She was harsh in every way. Her heels clicked mechanically, and her hair didn’t sway as she marched down the corridor. Malone followed a few steps behind, observing how the woman’s geometry matched the sharp interior of the building.

They marched past several rooms, with the doors open to reveal drugged Super Seniors lying on their beds, gazing with empty though 20/20 eyes at their flat-screens. The place was familiar yet strange, giving Malone the same frustrating optimistic sensation that he had experienced at the other centers. This place could be one with something significant, or it was a false sense of hope like the others.

They walked down the hallway, passing doors with small windows paned with bullet- and senior citizen-proof plastic. Malone peered into each tiny window as he kept pace with his guide. He caught a glimpse of a painting, an idyllic watercolor depicting a country home and a stream. It was generic—Impressionist-knockoff hotel art. No emotion or meaning behind it—perfect for this type of facility. But this particular pointless collection of brushstrokes was familiar. Malone stopped and stared at the painting, the sole purpose of which was to be ignored, to be nothing more than another interruption of the sterile white walls. It was the same size and positioned at the same height as the windows on the doors of the rooms where the Super Seniors lived out their remaining years, months, or decades. It was nothing more than half-assed camouflage, a weak attempt to pretend to care that the residents had something to appreciate.

But Malone had seen this shallow decoration before. It could have been the

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cover of a greeting card, or it could have been hanging in one of the hundreds of hotels in which he'd spent countless nights before road games during his hockey career. But he hadn't see it above a headboard—it was familiar for being exactly as it was on this wall. A window into pastoral beauty between windows into the pathetic decline of humanity.

The Eyes stopped 20 paces ahead of Malone and the painting.

“Are you coming?”

“Do you know anything about this artist? Is his work elsewhere?”

“I doubt it. The artist is probably barely more significant than you.”

“Is his work displayed in other facilities?”

“I should think not. Our art and natural layouts are how we differentiate ourselves. Even a pig like you should know that. The same painting wouldn't be shown twice. That wouldn't feel very homey, would it?”

“I guess not.” He stared at the painting. This was where he needed to be. Now to find whatever it was he was looking for.

Malone walked back to the Eyes, and she resumed her brisk pace as he drew closer.

“As you can see, this is one wing of the quarters. Each resident is given a 12-by-12 room with a bed, television with all the feeds, and a toilet. We have a separate room with computers for when they are lucid enough to use them. Those are carefully monitored if a resident starts slipping. We have our own feed here, Biden Community, if you or any of the other oppressors want to spy on us some more.”

The Eyes pushed a silver button on the wall, opening a large set of double doors, and they passed through, down a flight of steps. Malone knew where they were headed, but why the sense of dread? It was just the gymnasium. And aside from the mental preparedness it took to see the elderly, some over 120 years old, engaged in the most strenuous athletic activities, there was nothing dreadful about it.

The Eyes flung open the door at the bottom of the stairwell, and there it was: an Olympic training facility for the 100-plus bracket. Lifting platforms and racks of barbells lined the walls, interrupted by pull-up bars and weight benches. The center of the gym was covered in wrestling mats where two grappling matches were happening within a yard of one another. Staff members were trying to drive them back to their respective areas where the matches had started, but the Super Seniors seemed intent on making this doubles wrestling.

“What are they doing?”

“Living,” the Eyes said. “Living to the best of their ability, able to use all of our advances as a culture that accepts them and allows them to thrive.”

“What about her?” Malone pointed to a small citizen with a full head of blue hair. Her loose, wrinkled skin jiggled as she held her arms up in a triumphant pose on the mats at the end of the balance beam. She had stuck her

landing some time ago.

“Sometimes they forget what they’re doing. You know our progress on the brain is limited in comparison. She has just completed an impressive feat and will complete her next when she remembers what she’s doing.”

The Eyes continued the tour past a basketball game played by Shirts vs. Chest Hair, a power-lifting session, and shot put practice among a group composed of what looked like participants from the original Olympic Games.

“This is what you’re looking for,” she said, as she pointed to a framed document mounted on the wall by one of the exit doors.

Malone examined the license. “You only have six months until renewal,” he said.

“And we’ll be sure to renew, officer,” she said with an eye roll in case he didn’t sense the sarcasm.

“I’m going to need to speak to all your trainers and coaches,” Malone said. “To make sure their licenses are up to date.”

“They’re working with the residents right now. Obviously.”

“I’ll wait,” Malone said, taking a seat on a stack of wrestling mats. “You can tell them all to just come see me here with their papers and I’ll be on my way.”

So, as he had at the 16 previous facilities, Malone waited for the Eyes of the center to round up the staff. Three trainers, a physical therapist, a strength and conditioning coach once in the employ of the now defunct Pittsburgh Steelers. They all checked out.

“Our gymnastics specialist is on maternity leave,” the Eyes said as the fitness staff went back to work, mumbling about oppression, humiliated as if they’d just been deloused.

“I guess I’ll just have to come back in a few weeks then.”

“Months,” the Eyes said. “We have an anti-fascist maternity policy here. If your mother had a full six months of leave, maybe you would haven’t turned into a fascist yourself.”

Malone’s pulse quickened. The air left his lungs. No, not now. Not when you’re so close. Breathe. Just breathe. In. Out. One, two, three in. One, two, three out.

Leave the room. A change of scenery can help. Remove the stimulus that led to the words that caused the rage.

The Eyes brushed past Malone in the sterile, white hallway. She snapped her fingers, commanding him to follow like the dog he was. She marched past the closed doors. Sounds seeped into the artificial silence as they neared the end of the hall. Laughter—the real type caused by that primal reaction to something funny, not the type that those nearing Super Senior territory affected to cover for confusion—erupted from down the hall. The Eyes pushed the doors open, and the laughter stopped.

Three youths in hospital scrubs sat around a table, sucking on lollipops.

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“You call this a reclamation project?” Malone eyed the youths. They smirked at him. Old man, their gazes said. Malone smirked back. Whatever their juvenile offenses were that had gotten them sentenced to community service at the home, they couldn’t have been as fun as the ones that had landed Malone in jail. And if this was their attitude, they wouldn’t be reclaimed. They’d be labeled as aggs, and the only job would be something like a cop. “Since you’re all juves, I take it none of you are 18. So who bought you the candy?”

“They’re not hurting anyone. We allow them their vice,” the Eyes said.

“You’re telling me someone at this facility is supplying children with candy? Toss the contraband.”

“They’re not doing anyone any harm.”

“But they’re not doing anything either,” Malone said. “This is clearly a misuse of the citizens’ collective resources.”

The kids sucked their lollipops with impunity. Malone rolled his eyes and pulled out his badge. “Police. Throw the contraband in the trash.”

The three juves threw their lollipops across the room to the trash can. One missed and stuck to the wall.

“Nice touch,” Malone said.

“Get back to the kitchen,” the Eyes said to the youths. They scowled, stood up from the table, and left the room.

The Eyes rolled her eyes. She turned away from Malone and followed the juveniles out of the room. Malone was close behind. Another sterile white hallway was infused with personality as artificial as one of the hips of the ancient pole vaulters in the gym.

Malone stopped. The closed door on the left, marked “Loading Dock.” A vision of men in dark clothing, almost like cat burglars of bygone eras, but humans were their loot. People with white bags over their heads. The closed door was open in the vision. The loading dock was vivid. A van was parked on it. The bagged people were being shoved in. It was night on this side of the closed door. The shadow people almost blended into the darkness, while their bagged captives—all in white—stood out against the black sky and the poorly lit delivery area.

The Eyes cleared her throat. Malone shook his head as he stared at the closed door.

“What’s behind here?”

“A loading dock. I thought literacy was the one requirement for service on the police force.”

“Can you open the door?”

She pressed her hand on a brass panel on the wall, and the door retracted into the ceiling. The sun was almost blinding as it reflected off the white walls. The dock was empty—no sinister figures, no abductees, no van—but the scenery was the same. Whatever this was, whatever these dark abductors

were doing, whoever the bagged people were—it was why Malone had come to this facility.

The door closed, and Malone followed the Eyes down the hallway. They approached the cafeteria where ancient figures in white sat at the tables. They turned to the left and entered the kitchen. The Eyes stopped and pointed at the framed license on the wall. Another two years remained. Stainless steel counters and appliances lined the walls. Greens boiled on one of the seven stoves. Zuccumbers, the hybrid vegetable that science provided but no one asked for, lay on the counter along with the broco-sprout—children’s worst nightmare. The juves staffing the kitchen looked at the vegetables with the disdain they often reserved for people like Malone.

The youths scooped the cooked vegetables onto white, segregated trays along with hormone-free, androgynous chicken for protein; gluten-free, enriched wheat bread for energy; and agave apple pie for America, damn it. They stacked the trays on stainless steel carts and wheeled them into the cafeteria to feed their hungry wards before they feasted on their own center-issued suppers.

“Healthy menu,” Malone observed.

“We get shipments of food every day to that loading dock you found so fascinating. From the Roseanne Barr Center for Nutrition.”

“The comedian?”

“Yes, as you should know, in her later years, she became quite the fitness buff and created her own line of healthy meals. The Domestic Goddess Lean Dinners. She worked with NASA to pioneer freeze-dried nuggets from barren chicken. Amazing the things that woman did for health.”

“Any chefs on duty, or is it all these juves?” Malone asked.

“The chef will be back for the dinner shift. Our juves are quite capable of producing the meals on his orders, regardless of their sugar intake.”

A young, pretty nurse with rebellious short hair started pushing a cart out of the kitchen. She looked at Malone with curiosity. He looked her up and down. The way those scrubs hung off her hips, you could tell there was a body underneath. Judging by her face, it was a real one. That’s probably why a girl who looks like that is working here, not selling her life on a feed.

“Excuse me, miss,” Malone said. “Pittsburgh PD. Here checking licenses.”

“PD?”

“Police department.”

“I know what it stands for,” she said, standing up from the cart. Yeah, she was natural. If she’d had any work done, she’d have had her legs extended. She wasn’t short just to Malone but to the Eyes as well. That never bothered Malone, though it sometimes scared the women, feeling that small in a such a violent man’s embrace.

“I’ll be needing to check that your credentials are up to date,” Malone said. Maybe this endeavor was more selfish than he’d thought. Was he exploiting his

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one chance as an authority figure to get a name or just doing damn fine vigilant work in checking these IDs? Why couldn't it be both? He didn't get this opportunity often, and now that the suicidal urges were gone, the old ones from his years before the brain damage had returned.

"My credentials? I don't have my license on me, if that's what you mean."

"Is it on the premises?" Malone asked.

"Yes, it's back in the nurses' station." She looked at the Eyes, worried. Would you look at that? A cop still could do that.

"I'm just taking the officer—," the Eyes began.

"Officer Alex Malone."

"I'm just taking Officer Alex Malone around the rest of the facility. We're making our way to the nurses' station anyway. If Mr., Officer Malone is more efficient than he was with the fitness staff and refrains from asking impertinent questions, we should be there in half an hour."

"So we can save ourselves some time. You could tell me now if you know of any expired licenses. The Eyes here would rather spend her time walking me around the building than helping me out a bit," Malone said to the nurse.

"I am operating by standard procedure, Officer," the Eyes said. "You should try it."

"Standard procedure like giving candy to children?" Malone asked. He could have sworn he saw her white, angular cheeks flush with a tinge of pink. She feels it, too. The rage bubbling up. Maybe she punches a bag at the gym or runs until there's no more energy to sustain the anger. Maybe there are holes in her apartment walls as well.

"We'll see you at the nurses' station in a half hour, Marianne," the Eyes said.

The pretty nurse hunkered back down over her cart and pushed it out of the kitchen. The Eyes started walking in the opposite direction. Malone watched the nurse walk away. Perhaps it was the stark contrast with the severity of the Eyes, but there was something comforting about the softness of the nurse. Something about her freckles and the thick hair that was a little bit out of control that reminded him of a time in his life that he missed.

"How's security here?" Malone asked as they left the kitchen.

"You can't steal that painting in the hallway and smuggle it out through the loading dock, if that's what you're asking."

"That's not at all what I'm asking. We're a lot more concerned about the possibility of that happening with the residents."

The Eyes stopped and glared at Malone. If he'd been a real cop, maybe he could have gleaned something from that look, whether she was offended or hiding something. As it was, Malone just saw the anger. He was right about the rage. He didn't need police instincts for that.

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm going to need to see the credentials of your security staff," he said,

smiling the same provocative grin that had led to so many fights in the face-off circle.

“You should know that security guards are not subject to licensure by a formal credentialing agency. They are given their badges by the center.”

“Right,” Malone said. “Let’s keep moving.”

“What the fuck? Aw, shit, man, no.” The cry from the kitchen halted Malone and the Eyes in their tracks. One of the youths had stopped stirring a vat of something that was giving off the scent of soy sauce. A jar of gefilte fish sat on the counter; the Jews must have finally consummated their long love affair with Chinese cuisine.

The kid had half his head shaved, the other half growing long dreadlocks. Probably symbolizing his yin and yang, if you asked him. If you asked Malone, these kids were too in touch with themselves these days (not in the way that Malone had been in touch with himself at that age) and that’s why so many were serving sentences. Too much introspection at that age in this age could only lead to trouble. Like all the kids, he was staring at his omnivice.

“What’s wrong, Magnificent?” The lone girl in the bunch of juves Malone had encountered thus far giggled as she spoke. “Something bad happen?”

“I’ve been reported. Shit! This is so fucking arid.” He grabbed his head in one hand, air in the other, though both sides of his face looked equally panicked.

“What for, Magnificent?”

“It says—fuck!—says I served chicken to an old lady vegan in here. Gave it to her on purpose and laughed about it! I didn’t do that shit! How the fuck did anyone find out about it? We all said we wouldn’t say shit—it was an accident! Old lady didn’t know the difference anyway. She don’t know her own name anymore!”

“Maybe some people don’t think it was an accident,” said one of the boys, a skinny one with sunglasses and the haircut that ’80s rock stars got in the ’00s. There’d been some recent research about how the fluorescent lights interfere with flourishing gut microbiota.

“You know it was an accident!” Magnificent shouted. “You were here when we said we got that shit mixed up!”

“Some people may think guys who cheat in Jenga poison old ladies,” the girl said. Malone couldn’t see her eyes with the glittery construction helmet pulled so low, but he could see her smile. It was like the snake in the passenger seat.

“I didn’t poison anyone. I gave her chicken curry by accident. The People gotta understand that.”

“That’s what you say,” the girl said.

“Aw shit, aw shit. This is about Jenga, isn’t it? Here.” He reached into his pocket. “Here’s 20 bucks. That’s what I won, right? Shit. Take it. I don’t give a fuck.”

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“Too late, Magnificent,” the girl said. “You poisoned her. You’re an agg. A hateful agg. Everyone should know. They should be warned about you. You should have to get ‘agg’ tattooed on your forehead and wear it around the rest of your life, so everyone knows that you like to go around inflicting pain. So they’ll know to stay away from you.”

“How would you feel if someone took advantage of you like that? Fed you something that went against all your beliefs for a laugh?” the boy said.

Both youths were closing in on Magnificent. He retreated from the range. His hands over his ears couldn’t block his reality, which had so abruptly changed.

“You’re an agg. You deserve to choke on everything you find morally reprehensible. Choke on it and die, you aggro piece of shit,” the girl said.

“And while your face turns purple and you shit yourself, everyone’s laughing. Ha ha ha! The agg is dead!” the boy said.

Magnificent continued to retreat. A tear rolled down his cheek. Malone grabbed the first object near him. A frying pan. The two closing in on the victim were kids—maybe 16 years old. But that’s not what Malone saw. They were predators. Angry, dangerous predators about to eviscerate their helpless prey. His heart raced; it hadn’t slowed enough since leaving the gym. Everyone was gone. The room had disappeared.

Malone didn’t recall telling his arm to raise the frying pan over his head, but there it was, raised and ready to strike the two kids he stood behind.

A small hand grabbed his other arm. A soft voice said, “Stop. Stop. It’s not worth it. That won’t help him.”

Malone looked down. The nurse looked back up at him with pleading eyes. Malone lowered the frying pan. She wrested it from his hand and placed it back on the counter.

A large man—who gave a little to Malone in height, but more than compensated in weight—wearing a security uniform shoved his way through the kitchen to the crying youth in the corner.

“Let’s go, Magnificent,” the Eyes said. How long she’d been gone Malone had no idea. He’d been lost in Magnificent’s horror.

“Please,” the boy said as the security guard pulled him to his feet. “It was an accident.”

“That’s for the People to decide,” the Eyes said. “And you, Eclipse and Lo-quacia: Next time there’s an incident, report it to me before you take it to the People.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the youths said as they returned to their kitchen duties.

“Marianne, back to the nurses’ station. Officer Malone, your visit is over. You can collect your BS licenses another time.”

It was a quiet, awkward walk back to the front door of the senior center, as is often the case when one is being 86’ed. The Eyes did not make eye contact with Malone, yet made sure to look back at him each time they passed a water-

color. They say every cop is a criminal.

It felt like hours until they finally reached the front entrance. The Eyes opened the door, raised her eyebrows, and walked back to her desk. Malone walked toward the door when he heard his name.

“Office Malone!”

“Marianne, I told you to go back to the nurses’ station,” the Eyes said.

“I just wanted to make sure Officer Malone got my license. I don’t want any trouble. You understand.” She thrust her badge into Malone’s surgically reconstructed hand. He opened it like a wallet. Over Marianne’s face was a sticky note: “Meet me at Century’s at 5:45. I have a real case to be solved.”

Malone handed the badge back to her.

“All good here,” he said. He winked at the nurse. Where did that come from? “You haven’t seen the last of me. Get all the licenses in order so we don’t have any trouble when I return.”



Century’s Bar was named to honor the life span of any respectable citizen who played by the rules. It wasn’t that hard to reach the hundred-year mark. Don’t stab yourself in the brain. Don’t do anything that would make anyone else stab you in the brain. Don’t sell your brain to science. Don’t fall headfirst from any significant height. And above all, don’t play fucking hockey.

Malone wasn’t planning on making it to 100. His brain would quit by then, or someone else would make it quit. He was a cop, a goon, a thug, the lowest form of human life. And his brain was bad. Centenarians were just another group to which Malone did not belong.

He waited at a sparkly booth. The bar was adorned with antiquated party decorations: “Over the Hill” papier-mâché tombstones, black streamers, silver tinsel. It was an ironic take on the life expectancies of past generations. Maybe. It could have been a celebration of how they used to celebrate. Or an incisive look at how far the People had come in terms of our party decorations, how flimsy the streamers were, and how that reflected the uncertainties of life at that time. Primitive technologies in organ transplantation were represented by a piñata that could sometimes break with a single whack. What a pathetic era when a piñata was not a feat of strength. What a sad time when 70 was considered “over the hill.”

What did the theme mean? The permanent fixtures painted and upholstered to match what were supposed to be disposable party decorations from a previous era? Was that irony or just interior design? The ergonomically padded coffin in which he sat was as silver as the tinsel. Two gleaming headstones supported the black, sparkling table between his coffin and the one across from

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him. He sipped his black iced tea from a metal straw with a paper scythe blade affixed to the side. The sparkly, festive bar had a sinister undertone. Or the sinister bar had a sparkly, festive motif. It was hard to tell which.

A young, pretty woman with dark brown hair in a pixie cut, wearing loose, ripped jeans and a white T-shirt slid into the coffin on the other side of the table. He greeted her with a blank stare. She read it with the mental acuity of one who had not suffered at least 18 concussions.

“I’m the nurse from the Biden Center. I asked you to meet me here.”

“Right. You look different without the...” Malone couldn’t remember enough about her to explain the difference.

“Yeah, we’re still close to the center. I didn’t want to show up in my nurse’s uniform. People may listen.”

“Marianne, right?”

“Yes.”

“Pretty name. You don’t hear names like that often anymore.”

“My parents were traditional in a few ways.”

“Interesting.”

“So, you’re a cop.”

“I’m what they call a cop now. Alex Malone.” He extended his hand across the table. She took it. He would have preferred the European greeting that he’d seen from his teammates’ mothers long ago, the embrace with the air kisses, but the coffins made that impossible.

“Why did you come to the center today, Alex Malone?” Marianne’s tiny hand clasped Malone’s. She wasn’t letting go. She looked him in the eye, like a human polygraph.

“Check licenses,” Malone said meeting her gaze. Two can play this game.

“No, you didn’t. No one’s ever checked our licenses. You came to our center for a reason. You’re not some administrative BS cop. I saw you with those kids. You don’t follow the rules. If you did, you’d have just voted and left the room. You tried to protect that kid. Who are you trying to help in checking out our center?”

“You want to know my deepest motivations? Fine. But why’d you invite me here?” Malone pulled his hand out of hers, an easy feat since her fingers couldn’t quite wrap around his palm.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me why you agreed to come.”

“That’s easy,” Malone said. “Sex.”

“Sex?”

“Yeah. Pretty girl slips me a note, invites me to a bar, I go.”

“You thought I invited you here for sex?”

“Well, yeah. Though I’m starting see that’s probably not the case.”

“No, it’s not. You think any woman who wants to meet you somewhere it’s for sex?”

“That’s been my experience, yes.”

“Twenty years ago maybe. You watch too many feeds,” Marianne said. She laughed, a short, breathy laugh, a little condescending, but that was far better than storming out of the room, which was a more common reaction.

“What am I supposed to watch?”

“None of them! It’s all like being in someone’s diary anyway. It’s uncomfortable. And really just indicative of our loss of personal connections. You need to watch a feed just to find someone you can relate to? It’s sad.”

“You didn’t give me any options,” Malone said.

“Try reading.”

“Reading? About what?”

“History. Try that. How about history of our Revolution? And how you got where you are. How what started out with good intentions got corrupt like everything else.”

“Corrupt?” Malone lowered his voice. Marianne was right; someone could be listening. Someone you’ve never met, who has no idea who you are or the context of your words could overhear your conversation, scan your face, and put the incident on Chatter for reporting to the Committee. “You’re saying the People are corrupt?”

“Our government.”

“That is the People.”

“That’s not the people. We still have a government. It’s not anarchy out there regardless of what it looks like. It’s chaos, sure, but it’s controlled. Read about it. Read about how the vision of ultimate equality turned into everyone living in fear of being the next agg. Friends turning on friends to keep their place in the chaos. All things being equal, no expensive legal representation, everyone has an equal chance of guilt or innocence. And everyone got the power to make that happen. And it’s made everyone mad. And there are some people who need protecting, until there’s a better system in place that actually lets them protect themselves. So you should read about it. Then you’d understand your place in it all, and maybe it would help you express why you came to the center today.”

“You know so much, you tell me,” Malone said.

“You’re there to protect people, like you did what that kid Magnificent today. And you did on the ice for years.”

Malone looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I looked you up,” Marianne said. “You don’t inflict that much pain on yourself because you don’t care about other people. You still do. And whether you know it or not, that’s why you were there.”

“OK. So let’s say I was there subconsciously to protect people. Who there needs protecting?”

Marianne hesitated. She looked down at the glittery table, bit her lower lip.

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That was cute. Too bad she wouldn't admit it was about sex. "The Seniors."

"They've got the Eyes and Security. Why do they need me?"

"The Eyes is just a non-belittling word for Administrator. She disciplines the staff and has a soft spot for the juves. The more who last through their whole sentences, the better she looks. That's all she cares about; bringing in more juves that she can say she reclaimed and be a hero to the parents of today's twisted youth. And you met Security; tell me what you think."

"What do they need protecting from?"

"I'm not sure. But some of my patients disappear."

"The Eyes said they get transferred, orders from high above," Malone said.

"She tried that on me too. But I think it's a little suspect that they're being transferred from a loading dock in the middle of the night."

"How do you know that?" Try to look surprised. Don't let on what you saw.

"I saw it. I was there late one night. One of the seniors had a moment of lucidity, and I was reading to him, hoping to keep him in that state."

"That's nice of you."

"It's my job," Marianne said. "He asked for milk, said it reminded him of his childhood. He was telling me all about the 1950s, and it was fascinating. I wanted to keep it coming. It strengthens the brain, that type of memory and storytelling. So he and I walked to the kitchen. I'm really not supposed to be in there after hours, but I can pour a glass of milk. And I heard this commotion from the loading docks. It was odd because the deliveries usually show up during the day, you know, when the staff is there to handle it.

"So I told my patient, Roger, to stay behind. I peered out on the dock and... Roger and his knee and hip replacements sidled right up to me without my even hearing him and he sees the whole thing. And like that, he's gone. The thoughtful man who was telling me about what he thought when he first saw Elvis on Ed Sullivan is gone. The lucid part of his brain shuts down, and off he goes, running onto the loading dock. The men notice him right away, and Roger just flings himself at them. One of them beat him with a long stick, and that was all I saw.

"Roger was a POW during Vietnam. He had some training and instincts that I guess never die regardless of how much of his brain has. The flashlights shone into the kitchen, and I ran all the way back to the nurses' station. I stayed there all night, slept in the break room. I was up so late that the Eyes was in by the time I woke up. Roger's bed was made, but he was gone. The Eyes, Security, no one said a word about him. He was just gone, into those white vans off to somewhere. No one ever asked about him. No one mentioned him. It's like he was never there. Like the vegan lady the youths referenced today. Except for Roger, you don't notice they're gone until you realize you haven't seen them in a while. And you get so used to the same response of 'transfers from high above' that you stop asking. But I know that's not true."

“And you think a cop can help?”

“I think Officer Alex Malone can help. So now that I’ve told you everything, I’m going to ask you again: Why are you here?”

Take a breath, lower your voice even more. A man about to reveal such personal truths is more careful than even one speaking against the People.

“My dad was a cop, a real cop back in the old days. And now, he’s in a center like yours,” Malone said. “I don’t like to talk about it much because I like to remember him the way he was, the sharp, no-bullshit, brave real police officer that he was. I went to visit him a couple weeks ago and didn’t like what I saw at the center. It made me sad actually. The food didn’t look like it met the nutritional standards. How could I trust their chef was properly credentialed? So all that got me worried.” Malone could picture this imaginary, fateful visit. The brown food, the paint peeling on the walls that one had to be legitimately concerned about the Seniors eating, what with their brain problems and the aforementioned brown food. The lying was all coming back now, as if he’d never quit. He could recount an entire one-sided conversation with his father, a battery of questions to the staff about the weekly menu. There was so much he could make up now that he had the premise, more than Marianne would ever need to know to believe this story. But a good liar knows when to tell the truth.

Malone continued. “And, if you want real honesty: The force these days has no guarantees. We’ve got to make ourselves more valuable or we may be gone completely. No one thought to inspect the centers. It was my idea. Secures my job, secures the force a little bit. And maybe I get the other guys thinking about other creative ways to keep our place. You look disappointed? Most ladies would have thought that was sweet.”

“Sure, it is. I guess I just hoped you knew more about what could be going on at the center, that maybe you had suspicions or were there to find some missing persons.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. I guess I’m just a sensitive guy looking to help my people. But I tell you what. I’ll look into this Roger for you. Why don’t you give me your Chatter ID?”

A waitress in a black funeral dress approached the table. A black veil hung from her black hat down to her nose.

“Can I get you anything?” she asked Marianne.

“Sure. I’ll take an Evan Williams. Rocks.”

“Are you planning on driving this evening?”

“No,” Marianne said. “I don’t have a car.”

“I’ll need to run your license anyway, and you’ll have to sign the waiver.”

Marianne pulled her omnivice from her pocket, tapped it twice with her knuckle, and handed it to the waitress. The waitress pushed up the veil to reveal blue eyes nearly hidden behind a pound of mascara. She touched the omnivice screen to that of her ordering tablet, and handed it back to Mari-

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anne. The waitress placed the tablet on the shimmering table. The picture of Marianne's District of Pittsburgh driver's license at the top of the screen was followed by three paragraphs of legalese, a chart, and a thumbprint field.

"It just says that you have sworn not to operate a vehicle until after the hours passed indicated on the chart. You'll be able to find your acceptable driving time by where it plots on the chart by your body weight and the number of drinks you consume."

"Got it," Marianne said as she placed her thumb in the square at the bottom of the screen. A ding noise. "Success!" She feigned excitement as she handed the tablet to the waitress, who turned back to the bar.

"What did the van look like?" Malone asked.

"Black. Big. Bigger than a normal van. Close to small bus size. Tinted windows."

"I'll see what I can find, but I'm not promising much. That's not a lot to go on."

Marianne looked deeper into Malone's eyes, as if she were trying to see straight through to his soul. "Did you know they implant GPS chips in the seniors?"

"No," Malone said. And that wasn't a lie.

"Yes. For their own good, you know. In case they go off time traveling—like they're wont to do—in public and start thinking the pho joint is a Vietcong camp."

"So I'm guessing Roger had one too."

"Bingo," Marianne said. "A couple days after Roger disappeared, one of the security guys left his computer logged in. I jumped on and snagged his location."

"Where?"

"A house in Cheswick. Pre-Revolutionary place. Real old actually. Before the mansions of the Great Recession. Red brick. The type that children's stories told us would stand."

"You remember the address?"

"Four eighty-seven Nixon Road," she said.

Malone wrote the address in his small spiral notebook. Anything involving numbers was the first thing that he tended to forget. He still wasn't convinced that the results from the injection were anything close to permanent.

"I'll look into it."

"It's nice to know that someone cares," Marianne said.

"I got a soft spot for the seniors." It wasn't until it came out of Malone's mouth that he realized it was true. "But I can't promise much."

"I got into nursing to help people. I know that's rare, but it's true. If you can't commit to really doing your job and helping Roger and all the others help people, then forget it."

“It’s not my job.”

“It should be. It was once.”

“You’re asking me to go against the system,” Malone said. “You know what I’ve got to do to look into this. I’ve got to come up with a cover story, find a center in Cheswick, and hope that the house you found has a restaurant nearby where I can stash the car and ride over. Your centers aren’t the only ones that use GPS. I start hitting weird off-project destinations in my force-issued vehicle, the chief is gonna ask questions.”

“I get it,” Marianne said. “I guess I’m just hoping you don’t turn away because it’s convenient. There’s cruelty in the world. I know the police aren’t what they used to be, but I still believe that you, Alex Malone, can get past all that. You used to stick up for your team. You were willing to make a massive sacrifice for others. I guess that changed.”

“That’s the talk of someone who has never been farted on.”

“Just please look into it, will you? There’s something wrong with our world. You and the Super Seniors are in the same boat. You’re both casualties of it. You don’t need to live in constant opprobrium.”

“Constant what?”

“Public disgrace. Most people get it short and sweet. Some social shame before an ignominious sentence to the Maze or banishment. They can’t stand the stigma for a couple days. How long have you been a cop?”

“A decade.”

“They’ve been farting and spitting on you that long? I didn’t realize cops lasted that long. Must be a record.” Marianne’s eyes went wide. Maybe Mulva needed surprise, not surgery.

“I’m third in seniority at the station.”

“You don’t think it’s time for a change?”

“Never really thought about it.” Malone paused. “What about you?”

“It’s always time for change.”

The waitress slid the bourbon in a rocks glass onto the table.

“I believe I forgot to mention,” she said behind the veil, “that if you do have more drinks than your body weight deems acceptable, we will put out a note to the Commission and they will issue an alert. You will be reported.”

Marianne nodded. The waitress walked back to the bar.

“Change?” Malone asked.

“Yeah. Do you feel free?” Marianne took a sip of her bourbon.



The last time Alex Malone felt lucky was at a craps table at a casino during the away part of a home and home in Toronto. He quickly became unlucky

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at that same table, and with the coach the next day when he showed up to the rink. The bad-luck streak continued until this morning when he found a Senior Center within three miles of the address in Cheswick. Maybe the luck would continue with Marianne Roth.

The house was intriguing, but not from an architectural standpoint. He'd never been to this part of the outskirts of the city. Prior to the Revolution, several communities lined the hills into the Allegheny Valley, resting between Cheswick and Pittsburgh proper. But the city had expanded, with high-rise apartment complexes infiltrating the suburbs. Cheswick, so far, had not experienced the growth. The community didn't have much, only a menswear technology company that had collapsed before the Revolution. A trailer park surrounded a cemetery filled with the sad stories of living and dying in Cheswick. Signs on the windowless exteriors of neighborhood dives boasted 7 a.m. opening times, convenience stores had the best rates on candied nicotine suckers. The cars parked in the front yards of the modest homes often predated the Revolution. The costs of all the mandatory safety upgrades exceeded the price of a new car.

Malone drove up a long hill of the residential Pillow Avenue. The positioning system in today's vehicle—an old Jeep that gave Malone unique insight into the technological foibles associated with retrofitting vehicles that previously didn't have metal doors to comply with contemporary safety standards—told him to make a right.

The Maelstrom greeted him.

Had they not been armed, they could have been fans of the Village People. Something about the unflappable masculinity despite the fact that they looked like mid-1970s gay disco revelers made them more menacing. They were all boys named Sue. One-percenters, standing in front of the road block made by a row of Harleys. The men wore leather kutties with Maelstrom patches over a bizarre array of costumes of long-since-deposed authority figures. Cops, firemen, postmen, football referees—they were all armed as they blocked the road.

The Maelstrom in the early-2000s Pittsburgh PD uniform approached his window.

“License and registration, please,” he said as he aimed his .45 at Malone's head.

Malone dug into his pocket and pulled out his omnivice. The registration bit was a wisecrack by the gang member—registering your car was a symbol of totalitarianism. The Maelstrom pulled up his identification screen, and a football referee held it about an inch from his omnivice.

“What you doin' out this way, man?”

“Digging up a lead. See, I'm a cop.”

The Maelstrom laughed. “Yeah, beaten down, old piece o' shit ride. Bad suit. Faulty GPS. You are a goddamn cop.”

“He ain’t just a cop, man,” the referee said as he showed the screen of his omnivice to the cop-costumed apparent leader.

“No shit,” he said. “No, you ain’t just a cop.” The Maelstrom member drew his pistol and pointed it back at Malone’s head. He nodded to a medic who pulled a notebook out of his kutte.

“We know who you are,” the false cop said. “We gonna need you to sign this.”

“Sign it like this.” The medic Maelstrom held the screen of his omnivice to Malone’s face. A photo of a commemorative puck from the Winter Classic in which he’d registered a Gordie Howe hat trick in front of the largest live audience in the history of the NHL, with his signature on it.

Malone took the pen and notebook from the Maelstrom.

“How much does this contraband go for?” he asked.

“Fuckin’ goon like you? Shit, more than murderabilia. More than political assassination shit. You should take advantage. Get yourself a better ride.”



Malone forgot the address, but he didn’t need to consult the slip of paper when he turned onto Nixon Road. He knew the house in an instant. His faulty, damaged, tau protein-infested memory that couldn’t remember where he had eaten dinner while still digesting could recognize this Cheswick home for its unknown significance. Whatever Marianne had seen in real life, Malone had seen in his head. As he approached, a woman waved at him from the tiny, concrete porch atop the three steps that led to the door. Beaming, happy, looking at him as she would at a child. Her attitude was infectious. The vision of the woman dissipated and with it her light and the beauty of the place. He saw it for what it was.

When it was sunny and the woman was waving, the 1960s, one-story, brick home was not unlike the home in which Malone grew up. Now it was abandoned. If this suburb hadn’t been annexed by gangland, the People would have reported the overgrown lawn. Trees hit by lightning lay on the property. But it wasn’t in such a state of disrepair as to appear out of the ordinary for this neighborhood. It was an average Cheswick shit hole.

Though bushes and branches crowded the lawn, they were conveniently on either side of the concrete walkway. Someone had made a path. Malone used it. He knocked on the door. No response. Malone jiggled the doorknob. Locked. He had no jurisdiction, save the permission granted by the Maelstrom. No weapon but his fists that had done a lot of damage in their day. No probable cause. No idea why he was there.

Nothing to lose.

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He punched his reconstructed hand through the small glass window in the door. Glass offered less resistance to his fist than a skull. His wingspan proved just as useful reaching through the window to turn the doorknob as it did to hold an opponent at a distance while he drifted in small circles on the ice. Malone entered the house.

Darkness, except for the partial sunlight coming through the windows, greeted him. He flipped a switch on the wall. The home illuminated. Someone had been keeping the lights on.

The house was clean. The furniture was old, dated, and plain. A red toy fire truck was in the corner of the living room with tiny versions of cars from the not-so-distant past. Anachronisms, like everything else in this house—the hulking, brain-damaged goon included.

Malone entered the kitchen. Certain rectangular areas on the fridge were whiter than others. He swung open the door. A gallon of milk that had expired a month ago, packaged meals in the freezer, a partially drunk bottle of whiskey on the counter. He could see a man chugging it straight from the bottle with the enthusiasm of one trying to forget. This wasn't party whiskey the way Malone used it—it was a memory eraser, the side effect that Malone lived with.

Someone was here until recently. But it couldn't have been more than a few. It was a shame—three-bedroom affairs like this often housed two families. Malone's entire apartment was the size of the living room and foyer. When the People or the gangs noticed this place was uninhabited, it would be a windfall for a young, expectant couple like those living in the aboveground parts of Malone's house.

He opened the door at the rear of the kitchen and walked down the stairway to the basement. He ducked his head at the bottom of the steps. Maybe it was instinct from being six five since he was 16, subconsciously aware that ceilings are most perilous at the bottom of basement stairwells. He felt around the wall until he found a light switch. He had narrowly avoided a ceiling dangerous to those tall and prone to head injury.

The room was partially finished. It wasn't the type of basement where keg parties were held, but it wasn't Malone's apartment either. It had walls and a cement floor and exposed piping hanging from the ceiling. It smelled like bleach.

Blood seeped onto the floor, pooling on the uneven ground. A scalpel slipped from Malone's hand and clinked on the concrete. The blood soaked his PF Flyers. An old man lay on a white table. Blood dripped from his head where his skull had been cracked open. There was no precise surgical slicing—this was closer to blunt force trauma.

A shelf on the wall held six jars containing brains preserved like gefilte fish. Pride washed over him, the kind he hadn't felt since his last NHL goal. But it came with a sickness, like the queasy unease he felt when an opposing ice

gladiator’s head hit the ice and the concussed fighter had to be wheeled out of the arena on a stretcher. Then a vision hit him of scooping a brain out of a skull and dropping it into preservatives while its owner lay bloody and dead on a gurney.

Malone vomited on the floor.

Something rotten had happened in that house. The old had died there by the most unnatural of causes. Tortured. Or was it an experiment? Was the torture just a sadistic side effect of the maddest science?

The victims were old. The jellied heads in this most recent fucked-up memory were wrinkled. They were preserved at an age that countered the logic of preservation. They were already stale by the time they were put in the jars. Were they trophies? Vile and ugly and grotesque souvenirs from a journey to the depths of depravity in this cruel gangland basement? Were they saved for posterity or for a more useful, sinister purpose? Were they more than mere macabre decorations?

They must be. That’s what a real detective would have thought. Deeper than the surface. It was deeper. Something this bizarre couldn’t be what it seemed. But what did it seem to be? Malone had no idea. So he’d dig deeper. He had to. Even if he had to go 20,000 leagues beneath the surface, Malone would keep digging.

The most innocuous surroundings yielded the most sinister findings. That neighbor, “such a quiet man,” “just an excitable boy who wouldn’t harm a fly.” That’s where the real terror lies. Not in the behemoths who cracked skulls for glory and a paycheck.

It was in the seemingly meek that had inherited this Earth.



The listed owner of the house was the woman Malone saw smiling on the porch. Amanda Jennings. Fourth-generation American. Maternal grandparents were Mexican. By the time Amanda was born in 2001, the Mexican heritage had been diluted to a mere eighth. Daughter of Carl and Diana (née Valdez) Jennings. Sister of Danielle (b. 1999) and Carter (b. 2007). Born and raised in Philadelphia. Honor student. Track star.

Came to Pittsburgh in 2019 for college, on scholarship at the University of Pittsburgh. Enrolled as a mass comm major. Like so many college students of all eras, got into activism. Protests. Occupations. She added a poly sci minor her sophomore year. The Revolutionary spirit didn’t leave her. News articles quoted her speaking about her participation in the *Reflecting Pool Polar Plunge of 2024*. A part-time law student at Duquesne University at the time, working days as a paralegal.

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Then, nothing. No news. No heroics. No arrests. No victories or defeats. No law school diploma. No job. A promising future apparently broken. But passion like that doesn't just dissipate. Eight years of Revolutionary zeal is not a passing phase. But nothing. No appointments to cabinet positions. No published writings. No manifestos. No celebrations.

Just a child. Born 2026. Underwood Jennings. No explanation as to how she chose that name.

Amanda Jennings. One of the souls of the People. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Charming. Beautiful. Idealistic. Smart. Ambitious.

Dead at 28. Suicide.

Just another one of the Revolution's broken promises.

In one sign of the curious incompetence of the People as an administrative body, Amanda Jennings still owned property. Alternative banking and loan programs were to blame for this oversight. How could one be expected to keep such careful track of one's clients' mortgage records when operating a frozen yogurt stand in the same space?

But someone was keeping the lights on. Amanda Jennings could not make monthly payments from the grave.



“The Light of the People Branch 682. This is Ephemera. How can I help you?”

When private utilities were abolished in favor of fair, balanced, inexpensive, energy-efficient companies run by the Republic, the first thing to go was creativity in naming. Glorious titles incorporating the People were scarce, so the New York City-raised Chairman of the Lights implemented a numbering system. Six eighty-two was the northern suburbs of Pittsburgh.

“Hi Ephemera,” Malone said into the computer at the station. It was 11 p.m. The rest of the force had gone home or to the places like Emerald Bar on this side of town. The Cheswick inspection had taken most of the day, but he could have wrapped up early, done without the lavatory tour. The late return was an excuse to be at the station late, to make calls from a device that would not reveal his identity. “My name's Allan Meloni, representing the People's Committee for the Conservation of Energy.”

“Hi Allan. I'm not familiar with that organization.”

“We're very small. New. A sort of neighborhood watch group. We monitor residents nearby to make sure that they turn the lights out when they leave their houses. We watch a house from dawn till dusk. Watch that every piece of electrical equipment is turned off when they leave for work and when they go

to sleep. If an intervention is required, we send our inspectors into the homes to make sure that nothing is on that is not being used at that exact moment.”

“Noble work your organization does.”

“Yes, it is. We’ve been noticing a problem property in our area, 487 Nixon Road, 15024. Could you please tell me who is currently paying the electric bill there? We’ve had some trouble locating the home’s occupants, and their porch light has been on during the day for weeks.”

“One second, sir. That is a terrible waste of energy.” There was a pause. “OK, it looks like the account is being billed to a Dillon Swanson. Hmm.”

“Is something curious?”

“Well, it appears he resides at a different address.”

“Ah, that explains it,” Malone said. “Must have moved and forgot to cancel the service. Would you mind giving me his address on file so I can let him know? If he’s still in our community, my organization will hold me responsible.”

Another pause.

”Ephemera?”

“I really appreciate the work you do, but that’s all the information I can give you.” Her tone had changed from warm and bubbly to cold and reserved. “I hope I’ve satisfied your call. Thank you for choosing the Light of the People Branch 642.”

A click. She was gone.

Malone had a name, a name that it sounded from the abrupt ending of the call, he shouldn’t have.



If he wasn’t such an irresponsible addict, a man for whom too much was never enough, to whom every last call was a tragedy of Shakespearean magnitude, Malone would have headed to the Emerald Bar for a shot and a beer. To calm the nerves. To take the edge off. Those clichéd medicinal benefits that so many responsible social drinkers extol. But Malone was headed to the Emerald Bar for the company of the damned. For no other reason than because it was better than being alone. Misery may not love company, but it sure as hell needs it sometimes.

It was nearly midnight by the time Malone left the station. Long hours weren’t the norm when there was barely more than nothing to do. But he had a, dare he say, a case? Was that what this was? A mystery, yes. An enigma, no doubt. But a case in the old-fashioned cop way? It might be too early to tell.

Malone walked through the alley punctured by decades of potholes, growing from minor road trauma into festering chasms that dared you to drive over

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them. If you took your eyes off the pits in the street, whether walking or driving, you were bound for damage, severe tire or otherwise. As Malone's history of drug abuse prohibited him from even the smallest pharmaceutical comforts, like lidocaine, he couldn't risk dental trauma from a face-plant via pothole. Stepping where he was supposed to step, he avoided the cragged edges of the ice-damaged street.

It was no fault of the pothole that his face smashed into the brick wall on the backside of the abandoned pizza shop. That was the fault of the two sets of hands on his back, holding him against the wall. The right side of his face pressed up against the brick so tightly that whether blood was seeping from likely abrasions was impossible to tell.

"You've been a bad boy, Malone."

His face smashed against the wall, his words came out muffled. "Whaddido?"

"You've been curious, haven't you? Asking a lot of questions that don't concern you? Well, you know what they say about curiosity." The hands put more pressure on his back. Malone didn't resist. A knee jutted into the back of his thigh anyway. Malone shoved an elbow back at his assailants. Being pinned was one thing. An attack was another. A punch to the oblique and Malone's core collapsed to one side. The hands kept him upright.

"You're a tough guy, aren't you? Fighter? Goon? Thug? Think you're tough? You may be tough, but you ain't smart." This voice was deeper than the first.

"You're a pig. Be a pig. Then we got no problem with you."

The hands on his back eased, and Malone slipped from the wall, blood dripping from the course scrapes on his right cheek. His teeth were accounted for. He pulled his face away from the wall.

"Yeah, I got it," Malone said. "Pigs stay on the farm with the other animals."

The right side of his face went back into the wall. The impact was harder this time. His right front incisor cracked against the brick, stabbing into his lip before toppling out of his mouth and being lost to the night.

"That's just so you don't forget."



"You know the dentist can't do anything to numb the pain, don't you?"

"I'm aware." The ice cube in his mouth, over his missing incisor, melted from Malone's lips as he spoke into the phone.

"You'll feel every scrape as the dentist digs into your gums to retrieve every shard of your broken tooth. You'll feel the drill deep into your bone, twisting and boring into your jaw," Dr. Pomonski said.

"Got it." Malone clenched his jaw in pain.

“You’ll feel the screw that implants the fake tooth into your mouth. You’ll get nothing for the lingering pain. Nothing will take away the throbbing sensation. There will be days of horrific pain in your mouth, times it will be so bad that you will wish all feeling would end. That you were no longer able to feel a thing. That your entire body and soul were numbed by the lidocaine that we would not give you as localized relief.”

“I’ve been like that a long time.”

Malone hung up the phone. He peeled the wet towel away from his face. Dirt and blood came with it. He pulled the ball of gauze from the new space between his teeth. The dearly departed incisor had been one of the relics, some of those last remaining originals in a mouth full of porcelain reboots. He hadn’t lost a tooth since before the Revolution, during a time when hockey and the ability to give prescription painkillers to drug addicts was still legal. Of course, it was just as dangerous to give prescription painkillers to non-addicts, as that was how so many—Malone included—wound up on the wrong side of the addiction divide.

The pain from the head injuries, the migraines, the mangled hands, the splintered teeth, the deep bruising, the muscle tears was treated in his playing days with Vicodin, Percodan, Oxycontin, codeine. Then alcohol and heroin. Then it wasn’t the physical pain from the grinding 82-game season of fighting on ice. It was the pain of knowing that he needed his next high, that he needed the numbing sensation, that he could no longer face the person he had become.

A knock on Malone’s door. He jerked up on the couch, wincing through the sharp pain deep in his gums. He stood, the pain still there but the vertigo he had felt for years with every minimal change in altitude still gone. The alley attack had at least fallen short of any additional brain damage.

Malone looked through the peephole in his door. The chocolate hair skimmed the height of the viewer. The porcelain skin of her forehead barely visible. Marianne.

The pain shot back in his jaw. Malone bit down on the gauze and opened the door.

“Guess they can ban the game, but you’ll still find ways to get the same injuries. You have any ice?”

“I would have medicated when there was still a game. Ice in the freezer.” He tilts his head back in the direction of the kitchen. Marianne takes the hint, returns in a minute with stained rag wrapped around the not-quite cube-shaped cubes. She hands it to Malone.

“Can you tell me how it happened?”

“Met some friends in an alley by the station. Seems they think I’ve forgotten how to do my job. Or I’m doing too good at someone else’s job.”

“What does that mean?”

“Think it has something to do with the fact that I’ve been kind of launching

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an investigation. Something cops aren't supposed to do anymore."

"Did you find anything yet?"

"The address you gave me, some names, a tooth left in an alley. Actually, I didn't find that last thing. That's what I lost, likely from finding the other things."

"What names?"

"A woman. Been dead since the beginning of the Revolution. She had a kid. Was planning on trying to track him down tomorrow. But that was before my face went into a brick wall."

"What about the house?"

"Just a house in the suburbs. It belonged to the dead woman. Sorry, it belongs. She still owns it somehow. But the electricity is still on, under the name Dillon Swanson."

"Should I know that name?"

"Not unless you've memorized the employee directory at the Speaker's Office." Malone pressed the ice back on his jaw.

"Oh! That's not what I was expecting."

"Me neither. Whatever this is, I feel like it's getting worse."

"But a Speaker's Office employee keeping the lights on doesn't mean anything by itself. What about the house?"

"Think some bad shit went down there." Blood pooled in the empty spot in his gums like the blood on the home's basement floor in his memory. Malone spit into a coffee mug.

"You think something bad went down?"

"Yeah." Malone lay back on the couch, the ice-filled, blood-soaked washcloth over his mouth.

"Could you elaborate on it?"

"I could, but it's just a hunch."

"Well, that's about all we've got now, isn't it?"

"Blood. Lots of blood in the basement."

"Holy shit! You saw it?"

"No, yes, sort of. Saw it, but it wasn't there. But it was there. At one time. Just not anymore."

"Are you concussed?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"Because you're not making any sense."

"Look, I've done more mental work in the past three days than I have since they made me do some tests in rehab. For my efforts, I've lost yet another tooth. And, due to my history of abuse, I will not be given painkillers. So, I plan to be in severe oral pain for the foreseeable future."

"And that affects our case how?"

"Oh, it's a case now?"

“You’re damn right it’s a case. It’s more of a case than your department’s had in years. You’re just going to sit back and let it pass? Your one chance to make a difference?”

“A lot of people made a difference 20 years ago.”

“And my parents were among them.” Marianne paused. “Unless you’re just what they say. A goon. Someone who only knows how to destroy. How to beat someone down but never raise something up. By our efforts, for once in your numbed existence, you can do both.”

“They had these guys in the league in the old days.” Malone sat back up on the couch, removing the washcloth from his face. “They were irritants. Antagonists. Well, that’s what they could say on TV. They weren’t very big, couldn’t really fight, but they’d get under your skin. They’d take cheap shots—a slow foot, hit to the knee, elbow to the head. They could never answer to what they did when I started asking the questions in my way. But they could chirp. They’d come at you with words, and that could make you fight.”

“Yeah, I remember that type.”

“You’re worse than any of them.”

“That mean you’ll do it?”

“Well, I’m not gonna knock you out.”



It took the most recent photo of Underwood Jennings to jog Malone’s faulty memory. Sent to the Maze a week ago. Had he voted guilty? He must have, even just based on the look in Jennings’s eyes through the bars of the cage at the Tribunal. Cold, without the rage or fear that humanized other aggressors and often gave some of the voters momentary compassion before pressing the “guilty” button.

Underwood Jennings’s juvenile records were sealed. Well, more than sealed. They were expunged. Purged. Deleted. Nonexistent. Whatever his crimes had been, he was a child, a vulnerable youth orphaned. A city waif in the post-Revolution upheaval. He could not be responsible for his actions. He was a victim. So his crimes were not on the record.

But his time spent at a youth facility was documented. He was a rotten boy that someone had seen fit to rehabilitate. As a fellow rehabilitated, semi-useful member of society, Malone knew where he could find out more.

“Motherfucking Malone, I didn’t think you’d still be alive!”

“Still around,” Malone said, stepping into the palatial, Pharaoh-esque office of Harold Johnson, Soul Broker. “You’ve changed your style.”

“Yeah, man. Times’ve changed. Evolution. This Egypt shit, though—fuckin’ timeless, ain’t it?”

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Malone nodded. Though seventy-five years old and with enough identities for someone with centuries under his golden belt, Harold Johnson still retained his physique forged in the prison gyms where he'd spent half of his pre-Revolutionary life.

"Whatcha doin' these days?"

"Cop."

"Shit, man. You clean?"

"Nearly 15 years now."

"Damn, I'd've made a goddamn fortune off you. Pity you didn't let me invest."

"Then you'd still be getting a cut of my paychecks. Believe me, they're not all that great."

"But still, that return on the investment. Shares of a brain-damaged junkie—would've gone for pennies."

"You valued shares of me at even less than that. Alcoholic, Oxycontin abuser, unskilled at anything but beating the living hell outta people."

"But for those shares, I couldda put ya in the best detox facilities. Got you clean on the first try. How many did it take you?"

"Just three. I wasn't in top-of-the-line clinics, but I managed."

"You sure as fuck did. Lot of my other investments didn't pay off like you would've."

"Looks like you're doing OK," Malone said, looking around at the miniature Nile that ran through the office.

"Yeah, I'd say I'm doing OK. Never a shortage of fuck-ups looking to turn their lives around. I provide the means to get them started."

"You divide their souls into shares and sell them to investors. If they do manage to clean up and succeed, they owe you forever."

"You make it sound like I'm doing the devil's work. I offer my investors a diversified portfolio. Where else can they get shares of a pill-popper, armed robber, boozehound, and meth head all bundled together?"

"You forgot sex offenders."

"You know I don't deal in sex offenders. That's a bad investment right there. One hundred percent recidivism rate. Chronic. Can't be helped. My actuarial staff said 'fuck no' to that right there." Harold walked behind the gold desk and motioned for Malone to sit in the sumptuous chair on the other side. Malone obliged. Harold took the throne behind the desk.

"Always the businessman."

"Fuck, man, you know it. And this time right now it's for business. So, let me ask ya—what the fuck you want, Malone?"

"Got a name that fits your investment requirements. Wondering if you ever bundled him with a couple crackheads?"

"You know I don't talk about my investments."

“This one’s dead. If you invested, you’re not making a damn thing now. His soul’s in the ground with the rest of him.”

“Now, you see this computer in front of me here? This thing is business. And, as we’ve covered, business costs money. So I can just type that name in and we’ll find out everything about your name, but that ain’t free.” Harold crossed his thick arms over the tailored black shirt that stretched across his muscular chest.

“Why don’t you tell me about your time in Greensburg? Those years between prison stints. Or when you were procuring victims for medical experiments.”

“Motherfucker.”

“I can go as dirty as you, Harold.”

“Gimme the name.”

“Underwood Jennings.”

“The fuck kind a name is that?”

Malone stared at the man behind the ornate desk. Harold squinted his dark eyes. No one spoke to Harold Johnson this way. Malone fought for a living, but Harold fought for his life. An early life of drug dealing and prison stints, followed by a brief reprieve as the right-hand man and muscle for a deranged pharmaceutical company CEO. Another prison sentence, the Revolution, and a revelation. Harold Johnson had figured out how to sell souls.

Buy up cheap shares of degenerates who were willing to effectively sell their souls for a second chance, of which Harold had been given many. An investment sends them to rehab, enrolls them in trade school, gets them back on their feet after the People have driven them to humility. When they succeed, a percentage of every paycheck is given to their investors and the man who brokered the deal, the illustrious Harold Johnson. White-collar criminals went for much higher rates because the yield had the opportunity to be much greater with their next career. Investments were made based on a combination of actuarial analysis, private investigation, and general recidivism rates for the given affliction.

Harold Johnson was feared and renowned, a Faustian villain with an army of muscle and intellectuals behind him. But Malone had turned him down before. Alex Malone had never let anyone buy even a minority share in himself. Except for whoever it was that was causing the visions since the injection.

“Man, I shouldda been a criminal now instead of back then,” Johnson said as he flipped through files on the screen with his finger. “They all get out now. And they don’t do hard time no more. Not even if they’re real bad.”

“Except the ones that go to the Maze. They say the shame that the People sentence them to is rougher than prisons. Some gangbanger put in the stocks in the middle of town, pissing himself while the People insult him. They say that teaches a lesson that hard time never could.”

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“Yeah, and it also humiliates the shit outta them. Sends ’em back on the street needing to prove they were badder than before. That public-shaming shit, that’s the reason business isn’t what it should be.”

“Thought you were doing well here.”

“Man, I am. But there’s always somethin’ better, always somethin’.” He flicked his finger up and down on the screen and leaned back in his chair. “But I do get it. You know how some folks say it’s crazy how you can get the same punishment for sayin’ something rotten as you can if you kill someone?”

“Yeah, I hear that at the station.”

“It ain’t that crazy,” Johnson said. “Say you got a guy steals shit. Well, look at him, and odds are he’s poor. You give that guy some money, an education, and guess what? He ain’t gonna steal anymore. Man redeemed. Problem solved. He can rejoin the People, and I get my cut. Shit, take me for example. I stole. I sold drugs. I killed people. I did some bad shit. But man, now I got money, I don’t do that anymore.

“But you get these guys that steal a ball from a kid at a game. No reason for that. Mean old man can afford a ball. Some pretty TV reporter berates a meter maid for five straight minutes just for ticketing her illegally parked car—she’d do that to anyone that got in her way. Entitled white man doesn’t leave a tip cuz he says the waiter with an accent isn’t a real citizen—he got no respect for fellow humans. These people—they have money, education, opportunity, and they hurt people anyway. Give ’em even more money, they’ll stay the same way. People see a pattern, see these aggressors ain’t gonna stop bein’ that way, and they’re outraged. They say get them out now. Banish ’em. Send ’em to the Maze. Ain’t no money for me to make in them.

“Your man Underwood Jennings. He was one of those. Turned him down.”

“Why?”

“Shit, man. This is one fucked-up cat.”

That was Harold’s way of saying that Underwood Jennings’s proclivities made him a bad investment. Harold’s investigation had yielded evidence of certain tendencies that the actuaries deemed incurable. There was no rehab for Underwood Jennings. Harold Johnson’s crimes were many but were all driven by poverty. And, as Johnson said, wealth cured poverty.

Underwood Jennings was a psychopath.

First, there was the incident with the neighbor’s cat, found strung up on a phone line. There was the fire at the group home. The children poisoned after nine-year-old Underwood persuaded them to be subjects in his “experiment.” Then there were his mother’s parents he’d been sent to live with after being expelled from his fourth group home when he was 14. Grandma and Grandpa were found in their living room, on the couch, in front of the TV, with their skulls bashed in. No one could prove that Underwood Jennings did it, but his name was forever linked to the two elderly corpses.

His Chatter profile presented a different picture: No murdered pets or grandparents, 24 years old, handsome in an understated way. He had a lot of ideas. Most of his posts dealt with patents for robotics products.

Underwood, Jennings: People’s Office for Intellectual Property just approved the cooking portion of the machine. This thing is going to revolutionize your morning.

It seemed no one wanted mornings revolutionized, and his swagger received few stars. Other posts were about his apartment in a trendy part of town.

Underwood, Jennings: This place costs more than three apartments across the street.

A single star on that one, bestowed by a Mackenzie Brunner.



“Yeah, you like what you see, don’t you?”

Malone couldn’t figure out what he was supposed to be seeing, so he couldn’t discern whether or not it was as pleasing as it he was supposed to find it. The camera panned and, indeed, Malone liked what he saw. It was perfect. He’d had some that came close back in his playing days. But his blood alcohol level had an inverse relationship with his standards. Women like the one on the screen were never around when Malone was done drinking.

Long blond hair, so straight that it defied the principles of static electricity. Skin the consistency of a makeup commercial, so creamy that it showed she’d never set foot in one of the underground tanning salons that average women frequented despite the regulations against them. The plump rouge lips pouted for the camera. Her hands pressed from her slender waist down to her round hips.

Women didn’t look like this. But Mackenzie Brunner did.

She sat down on the couch and crossed her long, lean legs that were barely obstructed by tiny, tight, white cut-off shorts.

“See you later. We’ll keep making the mirror jealous,” she said, and blew a kiss to the thousands who tuned in every day to watch this gorgeous woman stand in her living room and talk about her sexual conquests of the famous for five minutes at a time.

Making the Mirror Jealous faded from the screen to a bearded man showcasing the latest in robotic blenders. Malone watched. When would Mackenzie come back? After ten minutes, a homely young woman pleaded for the release of her neighbor’s cats that she felt were being held against their will in some bizarre hostage situation in which they developed feline Stockholm syndrome. Where was Mackenzie? When would they make the mirror jealous again? The cat liberator disappeared and gave way to a teenage boy reading iambic pentameter

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sonnets, hoping that a certain female classmate would happen to tune in.

“Officer Weiss, can you come here for a second?”

The young officer popped up from his desk and bounded over to Malone’s, eager to do something instead of nothing.

“What’s marinatin’, Malone?”

“I need you to help me find more episodes of a feed. Got this thing on autoplay, and I want to watch the archives.”

“I see you need the young kid to help with the technology,” Weiss sneered. “Your generation invented this shit, and now you can’t figure it out.”

“My generation maybe, but I never got it.”

“What are you trying to watch?”

“*Making the Mirror Jealous.*”

“Oh shit! You better be glad we don’t care about not safe for work anymore! Oh man, man, you’re trying to get on it, aren’t you? Malone, man, you could do it!”

“Get on it?”

“Malone! She bangs famous guys. That’s her thing! All you gotta do is record a video and submit it to her, and if she likes it or thinks you’re interesting enough that her viewers want to know how you are in bed, you’re in!”

“Is it really that easy?” Shit, being a real cop might not be as hard as Dad made it out to be.

“Well, she’s gotta like you,” Weiss said.

“Or find me interesting.”

Ten minutes later, Malone was standing at his desk in the station, staring right into the omnivice that Officer Weiss was aiming at him.

“Name’s Alex Malone. Left wing on the Pittsburgh Penguins from 2013 to 2022. Nickname: Undefeated Heavyweight Champion of the Ice. That’s ’cause I never lost a fight on the ice. I’ve served three months in prison on assault and DUI charges. Now I’m a cop. I’ve also currently undergoing treatment for chronic traumatic encephalopathy. That’s right, I’ve got brain damage. Bet you’ve never banged someone who might not remember you ten minutes later. Or may try to off himself in your apartment. But I’m a good man. I protect people young and old. In fact, the other day, I lost this tooth sticking my neck out for a pretty girl. So, what you do you think? I’m six feet five inches and 245 pounds of tough guy. There aren’t many of us these days. And you’ve never had a toothless, brain-damaged, ex-con with a movie-prop sheriff’s badge.”

For the second time in a week, Malone winked.

Weiss put down the omnivice. “Malone, man, where can I get this treatment? That’s the kind of confidence I need!”

“You’re gonna submit that for me, right?”

“Already done! Man, if she doesn’t accept you, that would be some bullshit, some real bullshit. That’d tell me she isn’t looking for real men on her feed.”

“We’ll just have to see,” Malone said. But the fact was, if she didn’t select him, he’d have to find another way to meet her seeing how she was his only lead and he’d finally realized that she was the girl in multiple mysterious memories. He had 23 centers to go. Dillard had already asked why he was back at the station.

His omnivice lit up. Not Mackenzie thanking him for his appreciation, gushing about how she longed for him, that she’d never thumped a cop or a goon and she couldn’t wait. Not that at all.

Marianne.Roth: I found DS

Alex.Malone: Who is DS?

Marianne.Roth: Our mystery man

Mackenzie.Brunner: 2788 Southern Avenue. Apartment 318. 2:30 p.m.
Buzz in with your omnivice; your profile will be accepted.

Alex.Malone: [sent an animated winking face]

Marianne.Roth: Meet in an hour?

Alex.Malone: Can’t. Will be in touch later.



Mackenzie’s loft was on the third floor of an old high school on the side of the mountain in the middle of the city that didn’t offer the view of the downtown skyline. Lofts were what you called glorified warehouses when you wanted to trick trendy folks into paying a premium for a partially finished apartment. Exposed ductwork wasn’t a lazy landlord; it was hip. The industrial skin was eclectic, not left over from the art classroom. Whatever. It was nicer than Malone’s basement.

“You’re Alex Malone,” Mackenzie Brunner said as she swung open the door. She was just as striking without the camera.

“And you’re Mackenzie Brunner,” Malone said.

She turned, and he followed her inside, shutting the heavy door behind him. Her white dress clung to her hips that he watched swing side to side, guiding him into the living room. Her hips sank into the plush couch. Bummer. Malone took a seat on the other end, giving respectful distance as this was, for both parties, a business transaction.

“Here’s how it goes,” she said in that teasing, lilting voice. “You do what you like to me. I’m yours. Just here for the pleasure, babe. We go into the bedroom, I flip on the camera, and get to it. I don’t air much of it. It’s just that like sometimes I need a refresher for my review at the end, you know what I mean?”

“I just got one question for you,” Malone said. “You got a boyfriend?”

“Do you really need to know that? It doesn’t matter at this moment.”

“See, I think it does matter. Say he’s jealous.”

LUCY LEITNER

“And I think you’ve proven you can take care of yourself, babe. That’s why you’re here. Tough guy.”

“Sure, but let’s say it’s a dark alley. Anyone can get a jump on a tough guy if they’ve got surprise on their side.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend now, no.”

“Are you sure? I was bragging to an old friend of mine right before I came down here, and he said he thought you were involved with a man by the name of Underwood Jennings.”

Mackenzie’s wide eyes narrowed. “Who’s this friend?”

“Harold Johnson.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t have. He’s a soul broker. He’d looked into investing in Jennings a couple years back and still kept tabs on him. Harold’s good like that, conscientious, when he sees a real rotten case like that. Thinks it’s his duty to the People. If Harold’s worried, I just wondered if I should be.”

“Underwood Jennings went to the Maze two weeks ago.”

“The Maze? Well, I guess Harold was right not to invest. And that’s a real relief.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You seem to have taken it well.”

“I turned him in.”

“Whoa! Now, do I have reason to be worried about you? Just kidding. You really turned him in?”

“Civic duty.”

“From my experience, it’s usually personal.”

Mackenzie rolled her eyes. “All right. He could have been someone. He had it. Ideas, drive, charisma. He had all the things that someones have. He just didn’t have anything yet. But I could tell he was going to. Then he fucked it all up.”

“The Holocaust memorial incident?”

“Yeah. I mean, so insensitive. With all those people killed by boiling water from showers.”

“Gas.”

“Huh?” Mackenzie asked.

“They were gassed, not boiled to death.”

“Oh. Well, whatever.” Mackenzie shrugged and turned to face Malone. “How did you end up a cop? You’ve got it all. Charisma, you’re sexy in a rugged, I’ve-been-through-hell-and-lived-to-talk-about-it way?”

“I’m brain damaged.”

“You don’t seem like it.” Mackenzie and her big, blue eyes just looked at him. She blinked, fluttering her long eyelashes. “You seem like you’re still someone, regardless of the job.”

“Not really. I’m pretty much nothing.”

“That’s not true,” Mackenzie said as she walked closer to Malone.

“I’m a cop. That’s the definition of nothing.”

“The definition of nothing is nothing,” Mackenzie said. She slipped her manicured hand between Malone’s legs. “That doesn’t feel like nothing.”

She unzipped his pants. There was no kissing. No foreplay. She had a goal.

Malone pulled her tight, white dress over her head and threw it on the ground. Nothing underneath. She unbuttoned her pink shorts and pushed them to the floor. He pushed her onto the couch and pulled off his shirt. Her legs wide open, Malone slid in her. She moaned. He looked at the tits of the most beautiful woman on the major feed. He saw blood seeping over them. Malone shook his head. The blood was gone. He thrust. She moaned again. A tortured scream echoed in his head. Malone wrapped his fingers around her neck, then pulled away when he noticed what his hand was doing.

He’d done this before. Everything about her felt familiar. No surprises, which was usually one of the highlights of naked time with new women. Not now. He knew how she screamed, what the contours of her body felt like, how she pressed her pelvis into him. How he knew she’d let him press his hands into her throat, slap her perfectly made-up cheek as long as it didn’t leave a mark, let out all the aggression about the women who left him. The mother who died, the foster parents who abused him, the grandparents who didn’t give a shit. It all flashed through his mind—the pain, the total loss, the terror, the rage—all of it at once. Malone felt his hand back on her throat, squeezing. He drew it away. Underwood Jennings might be in his head, but he couldn’t have all that was left of Malone’s brain.



“That was great, Mackenzie. You really know what you’re doing,” Malone said, as he put one leg into his pants. Mackenzie was still naked, that perfect body readily available to anyone who was, had been, or could be. “You’re a sweet girl. You’re beautiful, and you know it. I gotta ask: What did you want with Jennings? He wasn’t famous, had never been. My pal Harold has it on good authority that he murdered his foster parents. You don’t strike me as one of those murder groupies.”

“He was different.”

“I’ll say!”

“That’s the first I heard about the foster parents, but now it doesn’t surprise me.”

“Why?”

“Why do you want to know about my asshole ex?”

LUCY LEITNER

“Call me old-fashioned, but I still like to know where even any of my one-night stands have been. I had groupies way back when. Been chased down by a lot of exes and their boys.”

“He was always more concerned with himself and his connections than me.”

“Wait—he was connected? So his pals could pull some strings and mess up my life? Worse than it already is?”

“I doubt it. He was always going on about such ludicrous things that I doubt it was true.”

“Put my mind at ease and let me play Hammer for a minute. How ludicrous?”

“He said he had connections to the Speaker he could use to get his stupid inventions made.”

Malone laughed a mighty guffaw that was only part character. What had he stumbled into?

“Yeah, that sounds ludicrous, all right. There, see. You’ve put my mind at ease.”

“It’s not funny,” Mackenzie’s voice was a half-octave higher, her speech quicker than the slow, sultry timbre that she used on her feed and in seduction. Her mouth was shut, instead of that slightly ajar look that made her look somehow both sexy and confused. “Underwood Jennings is pure evil. He doesn’t care about other people. He can’t. He’s not capable of it. He used people for his own ends, and he threw them away. I let him use me, but fuck him if he was going to throw me away.”

“How did he use you?”

“Important men need beautiful women on their arms.” Mackenzie flipped up her hands, her face only slightly less beautiful when she sneered.

“But he wasn’t important.”

“That’s why he needed me so badly. He needed to show that he had all the trappings of an important man.”

“Why did you put up with it?”

“It’s strategic for me to align myself with important men.”

“You were using him, too.”

“Of course. And I just used you as well.”

“How does that make you better than Jennings?”

“Are you that intellectually compromised? Don’t you understand what this feed is?”

“Thumping famous men,” Malone said.

“It’s about showing you men—famous or otherwise—how it feels to be objectified. How we’ve lived all these years.”

“What does that have to do with your ex?”

“I pulled one over on him. He thought my only purpose was to fulfill his

desires. He was worse than any of the subjects on my feed. Maybe because I spent more time with him than just one intimate moment. I let him do what he wanted: strangle me, whatever. Then I exposed him for what he was, like I expose all my subjects in their most vulnerable moments.”

“By thumping them?”

“To use your crude, patriarchal language, yes.”

Malone was fully dressed, back in the drab, tan suit that rumor had it was a hand-me-down from a previous six-five officer who fancied himself a cop from *Miami Vice*. He was only half invested in this conversation that was veering into gender conflicts that he didn’t understand because of just how many messages Marianne Roth had sent while he’d been thumping and investigating.

“Am I boring you with my *raison d’être*?” Mackenzie asked, still naked, exerting her power in her lack of vulnerability.

“I’ve got to go,” Malone said.

“You’ve made my point.”

“This was great. You’re great. You’ve been a tremendous help,” Malone said. He bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

In the stairwell, Malone’s omnivice lit up with a message from Marianne. It was concise: “Answer!”

Alex.Malone: What?

Marianne. Roth: Did you read any of my messages?

Alex.Malone: No

Marianne. Roth: Read them. I’m busy

The first was an alert. Malone swiped up to open it. The chiseled face of the Eyes was staring at him. Wanted by the Tribunal. Lusitania Jones, the Eyes of the Joe Biden Center for Natural Aging, says juveniles can’t be reclaimed.

A screen capture of a Chatter chat followed.

Amy.Harcomb: How dare you remove my son Magnificent from the program? You abandon the children of the Republic who are trying to make a life? You’d prefer to see him in a cage, wouldn’t you?

Lusitania.Jones: This is an unfortunate event, but it is the system we chose. Some juves cannot be reclaimed by work at centers. Best of luck to you and Magnificent. I’m sure he’ll find a type of service that better agrees with him.

Malone didn’t read the Chatter commentary about this exchange. Just the outrage level: 6. He tapped to the private messages. The earliest was a half hour old. All the messages were from Marianne Roth.

See the alert I shared

The Eyes!

She was just fired.

Going to try to talk to her. Get the truth about Roger

Shit! She told me to go away

She’s on foot

LUCY LEITNER

I'm following her

Holy hell! She's meeting DS!

Answer!

Alex. Malone: Where are you?

Marianne. Roth: Southside. Jane Street. DS's house

Alex. Malone: Who is DS?

Marianne. Roth: He keeps the lights on!

Dillon Swanson.

Alex. Malone: Oh yes. What R U doing?

Marianne. Roth: Waiting outside until she leaves

Alex. Malone: On my way

Malone ran to the Jeep. He pressed the ignition. Another alert came in.

Marianne. Roth: She's leaving. Crying. Trying to talk to her again

Alex. Malone: Let me know where U end up

Malone drove down the hill, past the divided homes up on the winding road that led from the higher-elevation neighborhood to the lower one. Neighborhoods this close together had become homogenized into a singular mood: overcrowding.

The surroundings didn't matter to Malone as he drove. His mind was occupied. It wasn't a vision or a memory, but a feeling, a sudden deep, profound understanding of why the Eyes was crying. He'd been here before. Terrified, unable to speak in his own defense, no one to trust, nowhere to go. The experience of being dropped off at the Tribunal.

If Malone was right and these were Underwood Jennings's memories—and only his—then he knew what it was like to feel them closing in.

But fuck the Eyes. She was one of them. Maybe so was anyone until they were cast out. She trashed his mother. She was first to convict Magnificent in her mind. She gets what's coming.

She's guilty, even if it's not for this. She's guilty of letting seniors get murdered in a basement. They got Capone on tax evasion. OJ for armed robbery. Underwood Jennings for a fucking made-up word. The Eyes for being too lax with her language.

He could feel the terror, as if experiencing it with her. Terror of her fate, and even more so of the worse crime coming to light.

Marianne. Roth: Shame-Free Café

"Shame-Free Café," Malone dictated to the screen on the dashboard. No-judgment fast-casual where your portions are your business on Carson Street, the main drag of the riverfront South Side.

He was just a couple of blocks away.

Marianne. Roth: Now! She has a knife

Malone stopped the car in front of a fire hydrant on the corner. Maybe he'd ticket himself to pretend he was working. Malone ran to Carson Street. The

café was easy to spot by the crowd outside, omnivices raised and recording through the floor-to-ceiling window.

The café was empty of all staff and customers, though the portions of varying sizes on the tables indicated a quick exit. The Eyes waved a knife, the big kind you'd use to slice through a genetically modified zucchini. Marianne was a few feet away, her arm in the air. As Malone approached the door, she lunged at the Eyes, reaching for the knife. A scream. Blood seeped from Marianne's arm. Malone tore off his jacket as he pushed through the door. Marianne stared at the blood gushing from the gash in her forearm. Malone wrapped his sleeve around it, pressing on the three-inch incision. Blood soaked the linen.

"You don't know what you're talking about, nurse! You don't know what they made me do!" The Eyes shouted, but her voice cracked with sobs. Her eyes red, her lip quivered. The despair. The desperate, pitiful disquiet that the unfamiliar confuse with aggression. That knife wasn't meant for Marianne. She might not know it, but Malone did. He knew why people in that state pick up knives.

"It's only level 6," Marianne said, seeming to forget her bleeding arm. "You'll survive. Don't make it any worse."

"You just don't get it. Wait till it happens to you. He'll tell you what to do, how they'll protect you, how it's all for the good. And then when you need him, he'll tell you you're on your own. And the rest? They'll have your job. And everything you cared about. And you'll have to live with what you did to get everything that they just took away."

She choked on her scream. The blade shook in her bony hand.

"What did you do? Just tell us, and we can get your story out. We can make it right," Marianne said.

Behind the tears, the reddened nose, the black makeup streaking down her face like Alice Cooper caught in a monsoon, she smiled. A devious, sadistic smile.

"Ask the Speaker."

She raised the knife to her throat.

"No!" Marianne shouted and leapt toward her, but blood was already spewing from the artery. The Eyes dropped to the floor, blood seeping onto the white tiles. her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling as if it was still her job to be on alert, monitoring everything in those light tubes.

Confident that the crazy lady with the knife would not be getting back up to terrorize them, the staff came back into the café, followed by several customers of varying portion sizes themselves.

"I'll call the coroner," a portly staffer in a Shame-Free Café polo said.

The others gawked over the body in its final twitches. Marianne pulled the sleeve from her arm. The bleeding was already slowing.

LUCY LEITNER

“Are you OK?” Malone asked.

“Yeah. Minor abrasion. Some antiseptic and gauze, and I’m fine.”

“I’d say you shouldn’t have followed her, but she may have just dropped a bomb.”

“That’s a shit thing to say when a woman is dead on the floor.”

“That looks real bad, miss,” a man in paint-spattered jeans said as he stared at the shallow cut. He didn’t look like one who cared what people thought of his portions, more like an Emerald Bar customer. Maybe he was just walking by and stopped to get in on the carnage. Maybe he’d even have an opinion on the event he partially saw in pantomime.

“I’m fine,” Marianne said. “Just need a bandage.”

“You should see a doctor,” the man said, in a knowing tone. Marianne could learn from the wisdom of his—maybe—five years more of life.

“It’s all right,” she said.

“I saw the lady on a feed who had a cut on her arm, and a flesh-eating caterpillar moved in and ate her nerves and veins and she didn’t know what was happening until it bit into her bone and started eating that too. And the whole arm was just a bag of skin dangling at her side. They had to amputate and give her a prosthetic. Don’t want that to happen to you. You really should see a doctor.”

“Let’s go, Alex,” Marianne said. She kept the jacket wrapped around her arm as they elbowed through the omnivice-waving crowd like VIPs dodging flashbulbs.

“There a center around here?” Malone asked.

“Turn around. See the guy in the red jacket? That’s Dillon Swanson.”

Malone turned. The red snakeskin jacket, the blond hair. He didn’t need to see the snake face. He was standing behind the man in the dark basement.

“I’ll take it from here, Dillon.”

The Snake stepped aside, revealing the old woman with the ball gag in her mouth, muffling her shouts as she kicked in her restraints.



Malone checked for exactly one license at the Kim Kardashian Center for Advances in Longevity while Marianne bandaged her arm at the nurses’ station. Devoting time to checking licenses was becoming more of a challenge the more he was learning about the real case of the man occupying his brain.

They were in the rear corner of the Emerald Bar. No customers, no omnivices, just Sammy, who hovered a little too long at the table when he delivered their iced teas and winked a few too many times to make Malone not feel like a guy on a date.

“Watching her leave the center like that, and especially after she left Dillon’s place. She looked devastated. Just crushed, nothing like the woman who was my boss. It’s just awful, being hunted like that. She walked into that café, and a customer recognized her instantly. The woman started shouting, ‘Agg!’ Then the others joined in and yelled at her about giving up on the juves, how against the People that was. I don’t know why she went into that café. If she was looking for a weapon, or if that’s what sent her over the edge. It was awful to see it in action. It’s all so abstract.”

“Suicide isn’t abstract. Sometimes it seems like a viable option,” Malone said, stirring his iced team with his aluminum-, paraben-, phthalate-, and gluten-free aluminum straw.

“Not the suicide. The chase. Being hunted like that.”

“Like everyone is closing in, but at the same time you realize how alone you are. How alone you’ve always been.” Malone could feel it, that sinking like complete loss when it became real, when hundreds of arms were pulling him out of a car. People who didn’t know who he was, didn’t care what he did. People who just waited for the next aggressor to enter the arena of the Tribunal. In that moment, whatever the man in his head did didn’t matter. That feeling was worse than anything that had brought Malone to try suicide.

“How do you know that?”

“I was chased by the cops a lot in my playing days.”

“That’s not the same. Imagine people you love and trust turning on you. It’s worse than being put in a cage with rapists. It means everything that you trusted was a lie. The way she left Dillon’s place. They were together, or at least she thought they were. That was the look of a woman whose world was shattered. A job—no matter how much you think you love it—a job doesn’t do that to you. I wonder if that’s what she was getting at when she said, ‘Ask the Speaker.’ Getting revenge on Dillon? He works in the Speaker’s Office, after all.”

“Maybe,” Malone said. “That’s not the first time our mighty mouth came up today.”

“How so?”

“I met with Underwood’s ex-partner. That’s where I was when you were messaging.”

“Mackenzie Brunner?”

“How’d you know that?”

“After you told me that Underwood was the heir to the house, I looked him up. I found some public chits. It just seemed likely.”

“She said Underwood claimed he had something on the Speaker and was leveraging that to get some inventions funded.”

“I don’t know what to do with that information,” Marianne said.

“Me neither,” Malone said. “She explained it to me, but I still don’t get what she was doing with a creep like Underwood Jennings. She said her feed is about

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dismantling the remnants of the patriarchy.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You got that from her feed?”

“Yes, she’s made herself a construct of male lust and analyzes how men’s sexual treatment of her is indicative of larger social trends. How men interact with binary women on a grander scale through their primal actions. It’s a social experiment. You can’t tell?”

“To me, it was a good-looking woman thumping guys and telling other women whether or not they should be interested.”

Marianne laughed. “Wow. No, not at all.”

“She did sound a lot different in person than on her feed,” Malone said. He’d have to go back and watch another episode. Another reason to de-prioritize the centers. “So what does she want with Underwood Jennings, a guy who probably killed his grandparents? Not famous like the men on her feed. Not even popular among his peers, as his chits show.”

“Maybe he was another subject.”

“She delivered him to the Tribunal for his trial.”

Marianne lowered her voice, as Sammy passed by with his broom. “Don’t you think it’s a little strange that he got sent to the Maze for the Holocaust memorial incident?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m a Jew. Some people like to do lip service to denounce anti-Semitism, but it’s been around thousands of years. It’s deeply engrained in all society. It doesn’t just die because of a Revolution. It’s survived hundreds of revolutions. How many people honestly would ever tell you that what he did was a Maze offense? I wouldn’t. And I’m a Jew. Who goes to the Maze for an outrage level 7?”

“OK, then don’t you think it’s a little odd that the Eyes killed herself over a level 6? At the worst, she would have to move out of Pittsburgh to get a decent job like what she had.”

“Yes, I think that’s very strange. That’s two extreme punishments for minor offenses. It makes me wonder whether this does go farther up.”

“You can’t mean the Speaker.”

“We’ve had two people bring up his name independently today. And one of his employees keeps coming up. You got attacked in an alley after just making a phone call in which you first got Dillon Swanson’s name.”

“The Speaker can’t be involved with this. Why would he be? And what could some loser hip like Jennings have on him?”

Sammy stopped sweeping invisible dirt from beneath the neighboring table. “I’m going to tell you two kids a story that everyone in this Republic should know, but no one does,” Sammy said. “A long, long time ago there were three men. A professor with a golden voice, a judge with an iron fist, and a website

publisher with an ear for gossip. But before the golden voice of the people made himself known, there were only the other two. And, if you remember the early days of the Revolution, you'll remember how the Watcher would write about the Hammer. People back then may have wondered, but few outside of law enforcement in the city knew why.

"You have to go back about 15 years before the Revolution. The Hammer was just a junior prosecutor back then, but he already had the appetite for the drink. Every night after court, he'd be in a bar downtown. Hours he'd be in there. Shots all around on him! One night, there was construction blocking his usual route out of the city back to the South Hills. So he detoured through the Duquesne campus.

"Blurred vision, in a hurry, or maybe he just had momentary color blindness, he raced through a red light and right into a Chinese graduate student in the first month of his visa. The Hammer jumped out of the car to see the kid dead from impact in the street. He was in such a panic that when he tried to flee the scene, he crashed his Mercedes into a telephone pole not three blocks away. It wasn't big news. No one knew the victim. He wasn't from here.

"The Hammer showed such promise, was such a hero to the community for his work prosecuting hate crimes and police shootings that the local media buried the story. Except one. The Watcher was ruthless in his coverage. Even the police who came into the bar, the ones who arrested the Hammer, said it made them uncomfortable to see a man, even one who committed such an atrocity, be attacked like that. Punishment was for the judicial system, not an online tabloid.

"The Hammer got off with a fine and not much of a mark on him. I guess people thought the good outweighed the bad. And by the time the Revolution started and the tabloid became *The Watcher*, all the stories about the Hammer disappeared. Gone forever."

"What's your point, Sammy?" Malone asked.

"Everyone has dirt on them," Sammy said. He resumed his Sisyphian sweeping, pushing the broom away from the table.

"So say we do look into it. What's the next step?" Malone asked.

"Dillon Swanson. I didn't recognize him in his Chatter photo, but that red jacket. It stood out on a loading dock at night when everyone else was dressed in white or black. He was abducting people and still dressed all flashy in snake-skin. It's 2045; who wears endangered species?"

"How do we start? I can't just make up a story like I did for Mackenzie to try to interview him. He saw us, he saw you with the Eyes."

"I don't know."

"I've got to get back to some inspections before Dillard asks more questions. My pace has slowed significantly since visiting Sun Up." Malone rose from his seat. "Thanks for the tea and the story, Sammy."

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Outside the bar, a Tesla with a raised spoiler and an external speaker to blast the sound of a gas engine was nearly perpendicular to the curb, blocking the rightmost lane of traffic. The luck of that long-lost craps table was back, giving Alex Malone a chance to issue a citation without so much as visiting a center. But now, just like that night when winning somehow plunged into arrest, the vicissitudes of fortune struck again. Dillon Swanson leaned against the car. His smile didn't make him look any less reptilian; just ready to bite.

"I wanted to apologize to you, Miss Roth, for my friend Lusitania. Afraid she's a real shipwreck. I didn't realize she'd be so upset that I had to break it off with her. A man in my position can't be with an agg, you see."

"What is your position?" Malone asked.

"I think you know that already, Officer Malone," he said and grinned again. He held a small cylinder in his hand and brought it up to his mouth. He exhaled a cloud of bubbles. He's pathetic, Malone thought. He didn't see the Snake on the street. At that moment, he was in the kitchen in Cheswick, gulping whiskey straight from the bottle. His hand shook as he sucked on his bubbler.

"Get back downstairs, Dillon. I need help with the body."

Dillon shuddered, pale, weak, not the man leaning against his car now.

"You work for the Speaker," Malone said.

"I sure do," Dillon said. "And it's not good for my career to be associated with two aggs. If it's not good for me, it's not good for the Office of the Speaker, and it's not good for the Republic."

"We want only good for the Republic," Malone said.

"Don't we all?" Dillon said. His crystal blue eyes narrowed. "How about you, nurse Roth?"

"Yes, I want what's good for the Republic."

Dillon scrunched his face and took another hit from the bubbler. "I want to believe you."

"I want only what's best of all the people in my center and in this Republic," Marianne said.

"That's a little better," Dillon said. "You know what happens to people who don't want what's best for all of us. I'd hate for that to happen to you."

Malone could see his fists breaking Dillon's soft jaw, his swagger gone as he hit the ground, helpless and shaking as he was when doing Underwood's bidding. Malone held his arms stiff, refusing to let the rage win.

"You've got nothing to worry about from us," Malone said through clenched teeth. Relax. Treat it like an empty threat. You know how to make this man quiver. "Unless, of course, you keep your car parked like that. Then I'm afraid it's in the best interests of the Republic for me to do my job and ticket you."

Dillon looked confused for a moment. Then he laughed, that hiss of a laugh like he'd just been told to use the cattle prod. "Good one, cop!"

Malone grinned. Get back in your car, you cold-blooded coward.

“Good one. Glad we could all get a good laugh. Stay out of trouble, you two. And, Officer Malone, you better watch where you’re walking and protect what’s left of your teeth. I guess hockey’s not the most dangerous game you’ve played.”

“Good advice,” Malone said.

Dillon got into his electric car and drove off, the fake sound of a diesel engine thundering as he sped down the road.

“So, I think we know who jumped you,” Marianne said.

“We need to be discreet from now on,” Malone said.



If the messages from Officer Weiss and the Chatter notifications that his name had been mentioned were any indication, discretion just became a lot more difficult. Mackenzie had released the Alex Malone episode. He didn’t watch Don Cherry criticize his left hook; he wasn’t going to watch Mackenzie’s analysis of his bedroom skills in context of the enduring patriarchy. Or whatever she was talking about.

The only message that he opened when inspecting the Keith Richards Center for Eternal Life was from Chief Dillard. It was concise: “Get back to the station ASAP.”

Malone obeyed. Thirty-one centers down. The imminent berating gave him an excuse to call it a day.

“What in the holy fuck, Malone?” Dillard said, sweat seeping from his deep pores. He held his omnivore over his desk. There was Malone in 6K resolution. More of Malone than Dillard or Malone himself would have ever wanted to see, his hands groping Mackenzie’s equally exposed flesh.

“It’s the treatment, Chief. Ever since the injection, it’s like I’m 25 again. I saw an opportunity to thump a pretty girl.”

“Is that what you want everyone at the centers thinking about when you ask them for their credentials?”

“I guess I didn’t think they watched it.”

“Who are you kidding? Everyone watches this. And even if they don’t, it’s all over Chatter.”

Mackenzie was speaking now. “He didn’t have the manner of a violent man. He was gentle with me. More so than men who don’t have that history. He must have been quite popular back in his day. It was like he knew everything about my body, though he touched it for the first time.”

“At least I got a good review.”

“Yes. She didn’t air a grievance that has the potential to raise the outrage levels. That happens, you know there’s nothing I can do. This isn’t about you,

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though, Malone. You made the department look bad, thinking with your pecker like that.”

“I’ve already vowed to be more discreet. It won’t happen again.”

“This isn’t the one that concerns me quite as much.” Dillard swiped the screen and tapped.

The screen showed the scene outside the Shame-Free Café. He was swinging the door open and barging in just as the Eyes was stabbing Marianne.

“I was on my way to the Kardashian Center when I saw a commotion. I recognized the Eyes from the Biden Center. The nurse, Marianne, was real shaken up, so I took her out for a drink.”

Dillard raised his eyebrows. “Mackenzie wasn’t enough?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I suggest you stay away from this girl. Chatter isn’t being kind.”

“I thought she was a hero.”

“That’s what the People said at first, until they saw her as taking extreme action to protect an agg. Now the general feeling is that she has an equally fatalistic attitude about the juves. It may blow over. There’s no registered outrage level. But the People don’t forget. She’s on thin ice, Malone.”

“I’ll take that into consideration, Chief. And I appreciate the pond hockey analogy.”

“Stay in the centers until the assignment is done. God willing, you can control yourself among the female Super Seniors. I don’t want to see your face on another feed or Chatter.”

“Got it, Chief.”

Malone left the office, the smiliest he’d ever been after an admonishment. He still had it. And he probably wasn’t furthering the oppressive, sexist agenda of the nefarious patriarchy. Or something like that. Weiss gave him a thumbs-up.



In the name of discretion, Malone went home. That was where the real work would be done. Alone, except for the man in his head. Malone flipped on the flat-screen and scrolled through the feeds on his omnivice until he found it. The Speaker appeared on the large screen. He sat down on the couch. If Underwood did know the Speaker, or at least something about him, maybe his speeches would trigger a memory.

“I know what it’s like to have someone taken from me because of the lack of necessary care. I know what it is to give the last of your savings to any hospital that offered a promise of help. When we the People are truly in power, I promise you we will never allow our loved ones to be taken again by lack of

money. They'll leave us, yes, that is a fact of life. But not like that. Not like my wife left me. And she didn't leave. She was taken. Taken by a system that does not protect us like it should.

"We need a system that recognizes that our afflictions are not our faults. A type 2 diabetes diagnosis is more a reflection of economic status than lifestyle. We must not be shamed into thinking otherwise! You must not be asked to give your hard-earned paychecks to the middlemen who extort you for treatment for a condition to which genetics and economics made you predisposed.

"You must stop being blamed for your health misfortunes. And when we the People reign supreme, I promise that you will be afforded the care that you deserve regardless of why you developed a particular condition. And I promise that you will not pay such a dear price for the care you need to live your best life. Because it's not your fault. It is not your fault that the system failed you. I promise that I will return what was taken from you. You will have the life that you and every other citizen of this great Republic deserve. It's not your fault that you have these inclinations, these urges. It's a travesty that our systems still produce victims. And I wish it didn't have to be like that, but it was for the good of the Republic. Remember that. Carry that with you."

The room had changed from the high school gymnasium housing the Body Positivity Action Committee Rally of 2024 to the office, the scene of the horrific beating. The Speaker dissolved from behind standing behind the podium to sitting behind the mahogany desk. His hair was now completely white, and the lines in his skin were deeper.

"You will have all that you should have had at birth. You'll have it all. I promise you that. I promise that we will ensure that no one will ever shame you into putting down the fork. No one will tell you that insulin isn't a fundamental human right!"

The Speaker was back in the gymnasium. The feed zoomed in on a woman in the front row of motorized scooters, her chins and arms jiggling as she clapped enthusiastically. The crowd roared.

"Revolution! Revolution!" they chanted.

What did he just see? Was this a real conversation, or was he just desperate for a lead, fabricating memories to fill in the blanks using the first inspiration he found?

A knock on the door. Malone looked out the peephole and opened it.

"You're famous." Marianne held her omnivice to Malone's face. His own rugged face with the swollen jaw stared back.

"I already was famous." He walked back into his apartment. Marianne followed. "You're the one new to the club."

"It's weird. And awful. It's like it gives people the right to say anything they want to you. Like they think that because you have some level of notoriety, you're no longer real. That you're not part of the masses."

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“Tell me about it.” Malone flopped back down on the couch.

“I guess I should have asked how you got a meeting with Mackenzie.”

“I’d say it was pretty resourceful on my part. Underwood is the best concrete connection we have between the missing seniors and the house. Technically he owned it. And we’re not going to get a damn thing out of Swanson without at least breaking several bones in his face.”

“I hope you’re kidding.”

“I’m not. We’re talking missing people. Some assholes need to have their faces broken.”

He still couldn’t say it to Marianne, tell her that this entire investigation was precipitated on visions of pain and torture and possibly murder. He couldn’t tell her that he knew Underwood Jennings was responsible because he could feel his sadistic urges, feel his delight in causing pain. It was clear, or as clear as a bunch of hallucinations can be, that Underwood Jennings was involved with the torture of the elderly. Or that he, Alex Malone, had repressed memories of an uncharacteristic spree in which he ritually tortured Super Seniors. Aside from the increasingly vivid images that could be confused with memories of the events, he just didn’t see how he could have pulled this off. Even in sobriety and solitude, he didn’t have the time or connections to assemble a ring of abductors to facilitate a need to torture old people. That would require organizational skills, money, the ability to mobilize people to engage in this deviant work. Who could leverage people against their will to procure victims for torture? Famous punch-drunk pain-pill addicts just don’t have such good friends. No, Alex Malone could not be the killer of the old. But who could?

“If you wanted to serially torture and murder Super Seniors, how would you do it?”

“I wouldn’t. I’m not a sociopath,” Marianne said.

“But if you were, and the only way that you could get off while having sex with someone super attractive was reimagining your previous torture sessions, how would you do it?”

“Like what would be my means of torture—waterboarding or listening to Sy Sugar’s Soundproof Basement?”

“It would take a lot of organization. You’d have to smuggle the seniors out of the center.”

”In vans.”

“Right. With several people involved.”

“I saw at least four.”

“Not only that, but they’d have to bribe the staff or administrators to let them do it.”

“That wouldn’t be too tough. Shit. Shit. It could be easy! If you were dating the Eyes of a center,” Marianne said, slamming her hand on her leg.

“So that would implicate Swanson. But they’d still need money. For the vans

as well. And say these guys you saw aren't in it for the murder? Maybe Swanson isn't either. Say they're just doing a job. All that help adds up. Torture quickly becomes an expensive hobby."

"That's a bit of a leap from abduction to torture-murder."

"Not really. They were abducted and never heard from again. Murder's the most logical conclusion. And I got quite an analysis from a soul broker that Jennings had a history of torture that made him a bad investment."

"Did Jennings have money?" Marianne asked, sitting back down on the empty coffee table.

"Not on his own. He was an orphan, no father even listed. Bounced around youth homes. No job. Just the house his mom owned."

"Then someone was backing him."

"Yeah, but why? There's nothing special about this guy. He had some ideas, but nothing we couldn't have lived without. What are we missing?" Elbows on knees, Malone ran his hands under his hair, scratching at his head as though that's how ideas came out.

"Who would bankroll a psychopath? Another psychopath?"

"A rich psychopath."

"There are certainly enough of those," Marianne said. "The way my parents talked about it, being a psychopath was a prerequisite for getting rich."

"But why?"

"Sadism by proxy? Someone who doesn't want to get their hands dirty, but wants the seniors tortured nonetheless?"

"But why the seniors? They're tougher to subdue since they don't understand consequences. They're goddamn bionic too."

"Maybe he has pre-Revolution notions of the welfare state. He thinks they're a drain on the People. They're just kept alive for the sake of being kept alive. No one really cares about them. They're just here so we can prolong the life span."

Malone was silent a moment, scratching at his head. "Wait. Why did so many serial killers target prostitutes?"

"Because they represented sex, and many killers had mother issues and really warped ideas of women," Marianne said.

"Sure, that plays into it, but it's also a much more practical reason. How many people really care about a hooker? Who will report her missing? She's probably been missing to anyone who may have ever cared about her for a long time before the killer got her. No one cares. No one will devote resources to finding out what happened. She's an easy target, and a killer could get away."

"Right. And so often the only people that keep track of the seniors are the staff in the centers. They rarely get visitors. Their families don't want to see them in that state, their minds lost, barely a hint of who they once were."

"The ones that went missing from your center—did they ever get visitors?"

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“Not Roger. That’s why it was so melancholy when he became lucid. No one but a paid nurse to hear it. Maybe others did. I’ll have to remember their names. That might not be more than a couple. Then check their backgrounds.”

“We need to be discreet,” Malone said. “We started with the perp, and it got us on the feeds and on Swanson’s radar. What if we start on the other end? With the victims?”

“Yes! See if they were singled out.”

“Or if there is a conspiracy, what was the official explanation of their whereabouts? It’s easy to tell a paid nurse who has other patients that this one got transferred. That’s the end of it. What about the families? Their care doesn’t end because the senior left the center.”



Claudia McNamara was 111 years young, according to her spry, nonagenarian daughter Sylvette Hornsby. Mom still had lucid moments, she said, even retained one of her original knees that she was born with right after the stock market crashed, marking the end of the Roaring 20s. It was during this era of widespread poverty and suffering that the regal, genteel Claudia McNamara (née Michensiak) entered this cruel world.

“Beautiful, i’n’t she?” Sylvette said, with a tone more definitive than inquisitive. With the quickness of an athlete, she shoved the framed photograph at Malone using force that he had come to know all too well from his years of wrangling duties.

Yes, Claudia had been beautiful with her short, fluffy hair and slightly upturned nose. She wore a tiny string of pearls around her neck and strapless graduation shawl.

“Senior photo,” Sylvette explained. “1947. She was beautiful. Still is. Wherever she is now.”

“Mrs. Hornsby, when was the last time you saw your mother?” Malone asked. He placed the china teacup and saucer, adorned with blue tulips and silver rims, on the end table. Sylvette liked flowers. Roses decorated the upholstery of the hooded chairs in which they sat. Vases filled with pansies, daisies, lilies, and various other blooms that Malone could not name sat atop the bookcases that lined the walls of the living room. There was a lot of life in this old woman’s home.

“Six months ago, April 18. I went to visit her at the center. She’d struck up a friendship with a man there—10 years younger, can you believe it? My dad passed back before the Revolution, and men still find my ma quite breathtaking.”

“What did you talk about during that visit?”

“Her new man, my husband, the usual things.”

“Sorry if this sounds cold, but you can still speak to her? She understands? Knows who you are?”

“Oh sure,” Sylvette said. She snatched the photo from Malone’s hands. Her movements were jerky, flailing almost, but quick—as if she hadn’t gotten used to her new parts and still used all her might to generate movements that had recently become easy.

“She asked about Marty, his MCATs. About how our baby was.”

“Your baby?”

“Sixty years old this year. Mom time travels. That’s part of her... dilemma. But she knows just who I am. Everything’s just ... earlier.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Heavens no! It’s nice. Nostalgia. We talk like it’s still those days, when we were young and vibrant and everything was ahead of us. I get to relive it all, and so does she. She gets to be a new grandmother again, and she loves it.”

“How often did you visit her?”

“Oh, every week. I stayed for hours. We talked. We ate. We even used the gym! She’s just a delight.”

“Do you have any more recent photos of your mother?”

“Absolutely. Ma’s still a beauty.”

Sylvette jumped from her quilted, flowered chair and stepped out of the room. She returned from the neighboring dining room seconds later, holding a framed photograph. She thrust it into Malone’s chest. He held the frame in front of his face. Instead of what was in the frame, Malone saw the wrinkled woman’s blue eyes open, vacant, staring ever ahead. Naked, blood spattered all over her dead body. He refocused. The light hadn’t left her eyes in the photograph. Eleven decades and she was still vibrant, just as her daughter claimed. Malone couldn’t tell her what he couldn’t prove by anything except memory, that her mother died in a basement in Cheswick.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Hornsby.”

“Have you seen her?”

“No, but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

“Please find her. My ma has so much more left. I know it feels like I’m hanging on to something that doesn’t exist anymore, but you don’t know my ma. You don’t know any of them until you do.”

“I know. And I can promise you that I’ll do my best to find out where she is.”

Malone walked out of the small house in Lawrenceville and started the stroll back to the station. These visits were a relief. The lies about his identity came so easy. He was a concerned citizen who had heard some Chatter about bad conditions in the centers, and he would petition the police department to inspect the facilities. Some of the families even offered more ideas: Check to ensure that the residents all match the names in the system, bring a black light

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to inspect the furniture for bedbugs because Dad had some mysterious welts.

Unfortunately, they were also a dead end. Malone knew that the elderly were being tortured and murdered, and the visions prompted by mementos and photos just offered further confirmation he couldn't prove. The victims and Underwood Jennings were dead ends, but the Speaker wasn't.

Alex.Malone: Where'd you say DS lived?

Marianne.Roth: South Side. Why?

Alex.Malone: Curiosity. Don't worry. Discretion.



Dillon Swanson was not as flamboyant as his car and clothing would suggest. He had no public aggression records, no soul-pawning actuarial file with Harold Johnson. He had a Chatter profile on which he mostly engaged in one-sided discussions about his cats, his jogs, and his dinner. Innocuous. The everyman. He was just a dude in a three-piece suit. With glowing cuff links. And a tie decorated in pot leaves. And snakeskin boots.

A dude who walked to work in the chilly 7 a.m. air. He walked down Forbes Avenue, careful with every step, his head down, examining the sidewalk. He bent down over a discarded piece of something that shimmered from Malone's vantage point 20 yards behind.

Swanson pulled a glove out of his pocket—latex, it would appear, though likely a biodegradable substitute that was created right before the Revolution. He bent down and picked up the shiny trash with his gloved hand. He took ten paces and gently placed the discarded piece of garbage into the receptacle. Odd. No mention of anti-littering or any environmental activism in his feed. Removing the glove, he walked another five paces, then stopped. The throng of morning pedestrian commuters jostled behind him, like dominoes trying to stop when Swanson stopped. It was like a wave, humanity bumping against each other every 20 feet. Dillon Swanson was making a scene.

“Watch it!” the woman who slammed into Malone's back shouted.

Dillon Swanson discarded his once-worn glove in the recycling bin. Fifteen more paces, another abrupt stop, a “Watch where you're going!” to Malone, a gloving of the right hand, back to the next trash can, to the recycling bin. Repeat.

Forty minutes later they arrived at the Office of the Speaker.

Malone waited. It would have been easier to wait before he had an obligation to the assignment that he'd invented. Why hadn't he come up with a lie that just incorporated visiting a few? Assessed the situation then established a task force to handle the rest?

Hours passed outside the Office of the Speaker. The sun peaked higher.

The People went about their merry, unencumbered day—with their knowledge of all that they thought they needed to know. Malone stepped toward the front of the structure, toward the stairs that once led to the City-County Building. Columns rounded into arches above the six steps. A statue of the Speaker stood in the center of the three arches, in front of the matching arched windows that stretched three stories beneath the awning of the rounded ceiling that provided a respite from semi-weekly Pittsburgh Earth watering before entering the building.

Anxiety hit as Malone took the first step up the stairs: the notion that this was a meeting that would change his life. He looked down at his hands. They were shaking, soft, not his hands. He shoved them in the pockets of his tattered linen suit, which had replaced the track pants and matching jacket that were the crux of Malone's disguise, along with the cap and the beard that he'd stopped shaving after the day he came face-to-face with Swanson. He took another step, and the memory passed as quickly as it had arrived. Malone continued walking up the white stairs. Hoping another memory, a clue, a feeling of vivid *déjà vu* would grasp him to serve as an affirmation of his day spent waiting outside an office, he climbed the few remaining steps to the covered landing. He waited at the top of the steps, willing a memory to appear, but nothing came.

A shaman type had tried to teach him meditation techniques at one of the more Buddhist-inspired rehabilitation clinics in which he'd spent several months while passing his 34th birthday. Malone relaxed his body and felt the tension dissipate from his hands and concentrate in the painful spot in his gum where his tooth had been until a few days ago.

"Om," he thought, and the pain continued. No insight, just a dull throbbing. He attempted to clear his mind, centering his body, cutting the connection from those nano-receptors to his damaged mind. He closed his eyes, breathing mindfully, evenly, until a blunt force bashed him in the back.

Malone jumped out of his pseudo-catharsis. A heavy-set citizen pulled back the door that she had inadvertently slammed into Malone.

"Sorry," she said brusquely, and walked past him. Plainclothes, no badge—he was just a citizen seeking serenity where there was none to be found.

The nervous energy from the memory returned. This was an important meeting. Everything depended on it, yet there was that fear, that apprehension that gave him the feeling of vulnerability. He'd have to lose that when he entered the building. He'd let the sad suit do the speaking. Everything was riding on this. His ambition, desires that were so hard to fulfill. The mantra—this is everything—repeated to override or drown out the fear. Everything is riding on this, and there could be rejection. This is everything.

The memory faded. What was this "everything"? Who was Underwood Jennings meeting? Was this the meeting in which the Speaker made bizarre

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promises about getting what was due, and possibly free insulin? The Speaker was the figurehead of the Revolution, the voice of freedom. Malone had met almost every significant Canadian leader back in his playing days, fearless under the influence of drugs, concussions, and ego. He didn't fear the premier or the president. But there had never been a leader like the Speaker. The most powerful man in the Republic, who had no official power. His charisma, his speech representing thousands of voices, uniting a generation. Yes, meeting him would make Alex Malone figuratively turtle.

Two hours passed. Dillon Swanson exited the building, pulling the door shut behind him. He strolled down the steps. At the end of the stairs, he bent down and—oh fuck, here we go again.

A reprieve! A young woman joined Swanson. She was blond and attractive, several levels lower than Mackenzie, but for nobodies who were not worthy of Mackenzie Brunner, this girl was a reasonable substitute. They started walking down Grant Street. The street was a medley of eras—the historic church that housed the Tribunal was squeezed between skyscrapers. The usual crowd of vigilant citizens armed with signs, indignation, and flatulence crowded the sidewalk in front of the stone church. The federal building on the street was now occupied by the People's Central Offices where commissions for taxation, health, energy, environment, and other categories resided.

Swanson and the woman stopped in front of the People's Health Administration skyscraper at the pole with the sign for the Shaxi, the shared taxi system that circled the city. Malone joined them at the stop, keeping himself busy by scrolling through his phone.

An alert had come in. Martin Signor. Age 63. One of the leading researchers who developed the implants that made spinal cord injuries a thing of the past. This guy was a big deal for a little while. A poignant story, as he was paralyzed from the waist down as well. He'd refused his own treatment because he saw no shame in his different abilities. Except he wasn't paralyzed, not now, not ever. According to the alert, Signor was what was called a "pretender," someone who feigned disabilities for attention or a desire to be disabled. Body-integrity disorder and Munchausen syndrome were mentioned in the alert. But did that excuse years of dishonesty, taking advantage of the People by pretending to be disadvantaged? Outrage level 8 said no. Malone said yes. Not guilty. One to balance out the last six guilty votes, one of which was the Eyes.

A Shaxi stopped at the stand. Swanson and his friend stepped in. Malone followed. They were settling into their seats, engrossed in conversation, when the bearded giant walked down the aisle of the van unnoticed. He sat two rows behind them. Ten of the Shaxi's 12 seats were occupied. It was a noisy ride to the edge of downtown. Over the din of other conversations and the beanie cap that covered his ears, Malone strained to hear Dillon Swanson.

"It'll be the ideal message for everyone to understand just how culpable

they are in the fate of the planet,” Swanson said to the girl. He was quiet, but Malone could make out snippets of the conversation.

“You don’t think it’s a little harsh?” the woman asked.

“No, you have to be harsh. That’s the only way that action happens. Everyone will understand. They’ll see what you did as heroic.”

The Shaxi entered the Armstrong Tunnel, and Malone lost the conversation in the noise. It was still loud when they exited the tunnel and drove over the 10th Street Bridge into the South Side. He’d been here more in the past week than in the years since that final stint in rehab, and there was something stupid about riding back to where his day started following Swanson from home this morning. As a sober man, there wasn’t much for him to do. The main drag of East Carson Street was mostly composed of bars, and always had been. No Revolution could make Pittsburghers drink less booze. It was still afternoon, so the revelers weren’t out yet. The Shaxi stopped at the corner of East Carson and 13th. Malone followed Swanson and the woman off the small bus.

They walked past the venerable Bat Cave, a bar that had been through many personalities since Malone frequented it during his playing days. Now the Cave had settled on an Ivy League sports theme: the best place to watch crew in town! Two more blocks and Swanson stopped in front of Pittsburgh Wings N’At. Why were they stopping here? The quick-service chicken-wing joint was all over Chatter in recent weeks for its purchase of chicken parts from a vendor found to be leaking environmentally damaging chemicals into the Ohio River. Representatives from the corporate chain defended the vendor, saying it had all been a misunderstanding. Outrage level rose to 9, not just against the vendor but Wings N’At as well. What was an anti-littering fanatic doing at a restaurant demonized for environmental issues?

The restaurant was empty, except for the staff and three customers seated by themselves at separate red, glossy tables. The door to the street was propped open to invite customers to dine in this local chain that couldn’t possibly be as bad as the chits had claimed after the vendor fiasco. Malone stayed outside the door—he didn’t need any association with a controversial location, even while in disguise. Dillon Swanson might not have sophisticated facial recognition software, but his omnivice did. A skinny young man with freckles and red hair under a Wings N’At visor stood behind the counter as Swanson and his friend approached.

“What can I get for you today?” The kid’s tone was friendly. He smiled.

“You can stop poisoning our environment,” the woman said. She was malicious. The kid was startled. Swanson held up his omnivice—he was filming.

“I’m sorry, miss. I don’t poison the environment.”

“Oh yes, you do. You and everyone else who works here. You don’t want to destroy our Earth? Get a different job.”

“But I can’t. My parents need the extra help. My dad just lost his job, and I

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had to drop out of school to help.”

“That’s no excuse,” the woman said. “You think your little family matters more than our planet? Well, it doesn’t. Think about what you’re willing to do for money. You’re killing the planet to make a quick buck.”

The woman turned and walked toward the door. Swanson flicked off his phone and shoved it back in his pocket, following her. Malone stepped out of sight to the side of the building. He watched them walk down the street. They stopped in front of a coffee shop, hugged, and the woman went in. Swanson walked a block farther to a Shaxi stand with Malone 20 paces behind. A Shaxi pulled up, and Swanson entered. He walked to the back, while Malone slid into the front seat. Swanson disembarked where he got on. Malone stayed for another stop before walking back to the Speaker’s Office.



Three hours later and Malone was still outside the Speaker’s Office. The sun was setting. His omnivice vibrated in his pocket. Another alert. The People were angry today. Opacity Kessel. Age 29. Berated a young man trying to do his job. The photo was Dillon Swanson’s blond friend.

Malone clicked on the video of the incident. It showed what he had seen live hours earlier. Justice was swift. The original poster of the video to Chatter, Corduroy Cohen, tagged it with a comment: “Can you believe this cruelty? Woman totally lost it on innocent kid working to help his family!”

But the only video taken was by Dillon Swanson. Corduroy Cohen’s profile picture was not a match to the three patrons. And the vantage point of the video was eye level from the left, where Swanson was standing. The three-hour wait just became worthwhile.

Malone opened Corduroy Cohen’s profile. The man was quite the citizen. An opinion on every aggressor as far back as Malone felt like scrolling. Two weeks ago, Underwood Jennings was a despicable, Hebrewphobic agg who should have to take a shower with boiling water like all those poor Holocaust victims. Five days ago, the Eyes was an oppressive shrew who may as well be bringing back the school-to-prison pipeline. Two days ago, Marianne Roth was an elitist pseudoscientist who should be subjected to experimental acupuncture with framing nails. Two days ago. She hadn’t said a word.

Malone tapped Marianne’s name, and Chatter filtered to all the conversations about her. He didn’t need to scroll back too far to see that the hero comments he’d seen at first degenerated into the speculation about her allegiances to this latest agg that Dillard had noted. The speculation became fact when a chit from three years ago surfaced in which Marianne noted that one of her residents at the center had derived substantial cognitive benefit from use of

a sensory-deprivation sauna. The mob was quick to accuse her of peddling pseudoscience, saying that these experimental procedures were not endorsed by the medical community and were thus extremely dangerous. She had made the mistake of defending herself by stating that another resident had gotten the time traveling under control after several intense guided meditations while undergoing an extreme deep-tissue massage technique in which the therapists applied pressure with a chunk of volcanic ash.

Since standard residency agreements did not cover such extravagant treatments, the People found them not only dangerous but elitist as well. You're selling snake oil to the vulnerable! You don't care who gets hurt! How dare you experiment on people who clearly cannot think for themselves?

The Chatter was noisy for a couple of days, but the outrage never registered above 2. The People moved on to the next atrocity. But three days ago, when Marianne was wearing a gauze bandage and being revered for her heroism, Corduroy Cohen decided it was time to tear her down.

Corduroy.Cohen: Um, let's all hold up on the hero worship. You remember Marianne Roth was the nurse experimenting on the patients at the center, right?

Proboscis.Barnhardt: You guys need to all watch the video again. You can easily see that she's trying to stab Lusitania Jones.

Pineapple.Adams: OMG, Jones must have known that Roth was still taking advantage of them to sell them those elitist procedures.

Proboscis.Barnhardt: And she drove Jones to suicide.

The outrage was at level 4. Marianne would be dealing with the simmering hatred that Malone endured when anyone found out he was a cop. Seven meant the Tribunal. And it would be up to the Hammer to deliver his justice however his rage manifested that day. If he had the rage that Malone felt seeing Marianne's name next to the outrage meter, the Maze wouldn't be enough. It's so mysterious. The enraged so removed from the actual punishment. Maybe that's why the outrage was constant, so easy to provoke: It was never truly fulfilled. At least not in the way that Malone needed. There was a reason his right hand was crushed.

His heart thumped in his chest. Swanson better come out soon or he could have a cardiac event. It took 20 minutes of pacing and breathing until Swanson finally emerged. Malone followed him down Grant Street toward the river. He was heading home. Good. Bubbles floated over Swanson's head as he walked over the Tenth Street Bridge. The barriers between the pedestrian lanes and the river were high, metal, and smooth and impossible to climb, preventing the Alex Malones of the world from satisfying their self-destructive urges. Jumping wasn't even a thought in his mind as he kept 50 steps behind his target.

At the end of the bridge was a hotel converted into studio apartments. Malone quickened his pace. It was after the evening rush, and he knew he'd

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probably have only one shot. Swanson turned right off the bridge. He walked a block down toward the river. Malone followed, closer than when he was on the bridge. Swanson was leading to right where he wanted. The bike trail lined the river. Trees formed almost a ceiling over the paved path, blocking out the meager light from the stars. Swanson in his dark suit was nearly invisible, save for the iridescent bubbles overhead that had stopped moving forward.

“You really want to do this again, Malone?”

“No, I want to do it different than last time.”

Swanson turned around. He wasn't holding the bubbler anymore but a knife so large and shining that there was no mistaking it even in the darkness.

“You don't want to do that, Swanson. Or Corduroy, whoever you are today to whoever you're destroying. Opacity. Marianne.”

“I'm doing my job, Malone. You should try doing yours.” Swanson walked closer.

“Is it your job to torture and murder Super Seniors?”

“You don't know what you're talking about.” He raised the knife.

“Yeah. I do. Underwood Jennings. Vans. A cattle prod. A basement in Cheswick.”

“I didn't torture and murder anyone.”

“You're right. You didn't. You stayed upstairs drinking away all the sick shit you saw. You were Underwood's bitch. A coward. Bringing him victims while he did all the real work.”

Malone saw the knife in time to jump out of the way. He kicked his size-13 foot into the pale hand that held it, and the knife bounced onto the ground. Swanson pounced on the ground to retrieve it, and Malone jumped on top of him. He spun the man onto his back. Seated on his abdomen, Malone tossed the knife into the shrubs by the river. He raised his right fist and, with all the power of his seated body, smashed it into Swanson's cheekbone. It was too dark to see the blood, but he felt it on his hand.

“Why were you helping Jennings?”

“Fuck you, pig.”

Malone hit him again. He couldn't see his target that well, but it felt like an orbital socket.

“Why were you helping him? Why were you helping him kill people?”

“You shouldn't be asking that. You don't know what you're getting into!”

He connected with the mouth. The familiar feeling of teeth knocking loose. This one made Swanson scream.

“Why? Tell me why!”

Swanson spit. Judging from the amount that came out, it was blood, not saliva. A rattle on the ground meant a tooth went with it.

“You can't do anything to me worse than what'll happen if I tell you. So fuck you. Pig.”

Malone hit him again. He heard a crack.

“Fuck!” Swanson shouted. “You better stop, or the same thing will happen to you as you precious Marianne. She’s fucked.”

“Call it off. Call it off on Marianne. Call it off, and you walk away.” Malone’s hands were shaking. He barely had the breath to get the words out. He couldn’t remember the seniors or even the conversation from a moment before. It was all blinding white light and a name: Marianne.

“I can’t call it off. It’s already begun. She’s getting what she deserves. And you will too.”

Malone grabbed Swanson by the ears. He lifted his head and shoulders off the ground and slammed his skull into the concrete. The cracking was louder this time. Malone swung his fist into Swanson’s broken face. He swung it again. He caught the nose. Another shot caved in the cheek. Another. He grabbed his hand in a pain he hadn’t experienced in a decade. It was somehow dull and sharp at the same time. The body beneath him wasn’t moving anymore. Malone rested his aching hand on Swanson’s chest. Stillness. No beating heart.

Malone’s own heart was still racing. He breathed. In and out. In and out. It started to slow. Malone stood up, massaging his swelling right hand. There was no medical staff ready with ice after a walk of shame down the runway. No explanation to an emergency room.

He grabbed Swanson’s lifeless feet, one in each hand, and dragged the body into the dark wooded area between the trail and the river. A kick and Swanson was rolling down the short hill. When Malone heard the splash, he pulled off his jacket and tossed it in the river. He couldn’t see the blood, but assumed it was there. Malone turned and walked back to the trailhead.



“I need a drink, Sammy,” Malone said as he sat down at the bar. He was one of three customers, so that meant he didn’t need to take one of the stools with the split cushion. But he did because he wasn’t thinking about cushions or even dead men in the river. He was focused on the bruised and swollen hand that the surgeon had told him explicitly never to use for punching again.

“I’m not serving you, Alex. You know that.”

“You have to, Sammy. It’s the law.”

Sammy leaned over the bar. He whispered in Malone’s ear. “Change out of that shirt. I don’t care what you did, but someone else might.”

Malone looked down to see the blood spatter on his gray track jacket. He unzipped it and handed it over the bar to Sammy, who promptly placed it in the trash. Wearing only his matching pants and a shirt that was once called a wifebeater, Malone’s still-imposing physique was on display. He’d trained like a

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boxer for years; he'd be able to thwart attackers for years. Attackers who didn't think a job at the Speaker's Office protected them from the rage of a man who had so little to lose that he tried to lose himself permanently a couple of weeks ago. That's how it so often went; the opponents only thought of what they had to gain, not how little the other cared to lose. But some people did have something to lose, and they were playing a dangerous game.

Marianne was on her way to the Emerald Bar. What would he say to her now that he knew her fate was out of their control? It was his fault that the investigation brought her into the public eye. She wouldn't have been following the Eyes, wouldn't have been in that café, wouldn't have been associated with that prying cop, wouldn't have caught the master of outrage manipulation Dillon Swanson's eye.

"Give me a bourbon, Sammy."

"Alex, I said no. I'm not going to watch you like that again."

"Sammy, I'm in pain. And you know the laws as well as I do. I can't get anything to kill the pain. I'm an addict. No pills for me. And now that everything's all legal, I don't have any more black-market sources to get me my fix. But I never had a diagnosed drinking problem. And if you don't serve me, you're violating the laws." Malone left his swollen hand on the bar for Sammy's sympathy.

"Would you really report me, Alex?"

"You don't want to test me tonight, Sammy."

Sammy grabbed a bottle of Buffalo Trace and poured a double shot on the rocks.

"Did I like this stuff?" Malone asked.

"You liked everything." Sammy slid the glass across the bar. "The fact that you weren't diagnosed doesn't mean you don't have a problem. It means the medical institution is as broken as it always was."

"Everything's broken, Sammy. My hand, this whole fucking Republic." Malone took a sip of the bourbon. "Goddamn, I missed that taste."

"Tastes like misspent youth, huh?"

"And all the fun and friends and fighting and females that came with it." Malone downed the bourbon. "Let's keep the good times rolling."

"That was two shots already, Alex."

"I'm six-foot five, Sammy. Let's pour me another, just to numb the pain."

Sammy poured another drink. "You also haven't had a drink in a decade."

Malone sipped his bourbon. The first double shot had already started working, giving him that warm feeling in his chest, a little bit of euphoria, helping him forget about the throbbing pain in his hand and pointer finger that he assumed had some sort of fracture. Goddamn, he loved that feeling.

"What's going on here?"

"Oh, Marianne. Glad you're here. Could you take a look at Alex's hand?"

Sammy said.

Marianne walked up to the bar, looking at Malone quizzically. Maybe it was his outfit, or the drink in hand, or the dumb grin with the missing tooth.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I had a frustrating day. I had to get the rage out.”

She whispered. “On who?”

“Oh, just a car,” Malone said.

“Uh-huh. Well, it looks like your finger is broken. Sammy, do you have any coffee stirrers? I need a bunch of those and some duct tape.”

Sammy fished the supplies from under the bar, and Marianne bandaged his finger while Malone recounted the first part of his day tailing Dillon Swanson, the part of the day in which Dillon Swanson left alive.

“I could have told you that,” Marianne said.

“That Swanson set people up for shaming?”

“No, not Swanson specifically. But that not all shamings are deserved.”

“Yeah, you see a lot of them that are just people blowing something out of proportion to settle a personal score. Mackenzie even said that’s why she delivered Jennings to the Tribunal.”

“Opportunists, sure. They take advantage of the system to get rid of someone that’s bugging them. But it goes a lot deeper than that.”

“What do you mean?” Malone stopped pacing and stared at the woman. She looked calm, ready to lecture him.

“Ever thought that it’s all just population control?”

“Not really.”

“Think about it. No disease. No war. Cars with technology to prevent accidents. All great stuff, but what happened? People stopped dying. And when people stop dying, they just keep hanging around. So what happens? We have people living on top of each other. There aren’t enough jobs to go around. And when there aren’t enough jobs, the economy goes to shit. And that’s when you have discontent. You know what could make our world better, and would keep the powerful in power? Fewer people. But we don’t want to lose the moms to breast cancer, the sons to battle. What if we could just get rid of the undesirable elements? Those people that just pissed us off. And what if the People did it themselves? Whoa, that’d be swell. Then there’d be no questions asked.”

“Social eugenics,” Sammy said as he wiped down the bar.

“Exactly. And population control. You can’t have a utopia filled with shitty people. Get the people to think they’re making the decision, and there’s nothing for them to worry about.”

“Them?”

“Yeah. There were three. Now there are two.”

“Oh.” Even from angry patrolmen like Litmus Weiss, Malone had never heard such subversive talk about their leaders. “But people were shaming each

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other before the Revolution.”

“It’s hard to change a population’s behavior. People who try that are arrogant, and their ideas don’t sell. Smart ones capitalize on an existing behavior. The People love mob justice. As you said, they’d been into it for a while. Hackers trying to take down terrorist rings. The people of the internet comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Who doesn’t love when David beats Goliath? And what better way to solve the biggest problem in our little utopia? Overpopulation.”

“But they’re not gone. They’re mostly just banished.”

“Sure. Then they’re someone else’s problem at least. But what about the Maze? I don’t know what’s in it, but I know that not a lot comes out. You do the math.”

Malone took another sip of bourbon. “So you’re not surprised about Swanson?”

“I’m more surprised that you think the People have the power.”

“You don’t like the Revolution much, do you?”

“Oh, the opposite,” Marianne said. “I love the Revolution. I think we need another.”

The Revolution got under way in January 2025, which was unexpected because it seemed too cold for a mass revolt. But then again, the nation had just come off yet another exhausting election, with 24/7 coverage of stupid shit the candidates said and even stupider shit said in response. The People were angry. Young, self-employed gym-goers were sick of paying hundreds of dollars a month in premiums for health insurance they didn’t use because they also paid for fitness trackers and grass-fed beef while they watched the government encourage obesity by allowing food stamps to be used for soda. The obese who filled their carts with margarine and low-fat, sugar-laden, heart-healthy breakfast cereals were angry back at them because they were just doing what their government, morning news shows, and doctors told them to do. Women were sick of men; men were sick of women being sick of them. The poor were angry at the rich for being rich; the rich didn’t give a shit because they were rich. The one thing they could agree on was that Adam Levine was a douche and the system was fucked. And they had no idea how to fix either.

The unrest started in the usual places: college campuses. Students were angry. How much longer did we have to deal with the same old shit? Washington was rotten. Everything was corrupt. Nothing benefited the people. The people wanted to be heard so badly that they drowned each other out. Then, from an unlikely place came another one who was more articulate than the discordant chorus of the masses.

Mendenhall University was a small liberal arts school in the shadow of the grand University of Pittsburgh. A charismatic sociology professor broke some sad news to a class of 30: His wife of 20 years, his high school sweetheart, his

reason for living, was dying. Cancer. It was terminal. And it was moving quickly. The students listened. He was a great teacher, and only in his 40s. He was too young for such a loss. The professor cried. He told them about the metastasis and the pain and the treatments that his wife had been suffering for the past two months with nothing to show for it but a spreading disease.

But why should it be this way? Why do innocent women have to die? Tears were glued to his cheeks, but no others came out. He spoke with confidence, the words flowing out of him before he could turn them off. They die because our government says they're disposable. Because we can't spend our tax dollars funding research into what's killing millions of our wives and mothers and sisters and fathers and sons and brothers every year. No! We give them our money that we earned with every check to find ways to kill more people. We want cures; they buy weapons.

The students were rapt. That's what we've been saying on our placards and in our social posts! But he says it better. And he says it with the specter of a dying beloved.

The professor continued. It's a machine. A war machine that says some unlucky people with a susceptibility to certain diseases are its casualties. We, with our hard-earned tax dollars, feed the machine. We keep it oiled and running in tip-top form. We need to stop the machine.

One of the students was recording the class on his smartphone, thinking that he'd be able to take down any notes he'd missed upon second viewing. Instead, he inadvertently started a cult of the personality. The student posted the speech on his social accounts with the simple phrase #stopthemachine. Like the viruses the professor advocated destroying, the speech spread. He's saying exactly what we're feeling! He's so eloquent, such a gifted speaker. He can be our speaker, the Speaker.

Soon media outlets were asking this unassuming sociology professor his opinion on every issue that pertained to the People of the United States of America. Yes, we need to think about future generations when we bulldoze our forests, take enormous pensions while paying our recent college graduates minimum wage for doing the same jobs we could buy a house with at their age, try to create sentient robots in the name of science that will take human jobs later, and feed the giant government machine that will eat our grandchildren alive.

All lives matter, including that of the planet. Few disagreed.

The Speaker was the perfect spokesman. Not even the internet could tear him apart. He was happily and faithfully married to the woman who'd been the love of his life since they were 15 years old in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. He left for a while to earn his degrees from Ivy League institutions but returned to his hometown to teach at a small school with little prestige. He never did anything wrong. He was above reproach.

A month later, his wife died. Her battle was short and unexpected and pain-

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ful to her, her devoted husband, and the nation. The night after she died, the Speaker delivered the speech that would galvanize the nation.

“Disease took another life last night. And we do nothing. If she was killed by a militant from abroad, we’d send in our tanks and our planes and our millions of dollars and our lives that we don’t mind sacrificing for global vengeance. Why are we not so vigilant in fighting the disease? I’ll tell you why. Because to our government, no lives matter. We’re all just cogs in the machine. And what does an industrialist do when a cog breaks? He replaces it. And the machine keeps moving. Well, we are not simple pieces of machinery! We are alive, and we all matter.

“Our roads are unsafe. Our air is polluted. Funding is the only thing stopping us from finding a cure for what’s killing us every day. Why? Because our tax dollars are going to government bureaucrats and warmongering. Well, I say not anymore! We need a justice system that is blind to wealth. A police force that doesn’t abuse its power. Let’s have a government that represents us, The People. Let’s let “we the people” mean something!

“We don’t need to die on our unsafe roads or in wars overseas or in hospital beds to a microscopic serial killer. We have the technology, we have the science, we have the creativity. Now let’s just have the drive to destroy the machine and put it all together. Let’s stop talking about cures and put our money where our mouths are. Let’s beat the biggest, baddest enemy we’ve ever known: Disease. It’s time to live, America. It’s time for America to live for us.”

The Speaker galvanized the People, bringing even the most apathetic into the fold. Protests. Fires. Destruction of government buildings. The Speaker never advocated the violence. It was the Hammer, the prosecutor-turned-judge, who gave the People a plan of action.

When the People marched on government buildings in cities all over the country, it was the Hammer who organized the mass protests. When the People threw whatever they had on hand at the National Guard and police, it was the Hammer who suggested it. And when those armed forces massacred the protesters, leaving hundreds dead throughout the nation, it was the Hammer who told the survivors that they had to avenge their slaughtered brothers and sisters from the wrath of the monster. And what’s the best way to kill a monster? Cut off its head, the Hammer said. Go to Washington en masse and decapitate the federal government. The People stormed the White House, the Capitol, the Pentagon, the Federal Reserve. The Old Regime was out. The People had tentative control. The police never recovered.

The Speaker represented ideas; the Hammer was action. Rotund, red-faced as if he was always fighting off a hangover, the Hammer’s debauchery was common knowledge. His home was a bacchanal where lavish parties celebrated every Revolutionary milestone. Women, wine, and food—the Hammer indulged in all to excess. His gut barely fit in his judge’s robes, the collar of which

bisected his numerous chins. Even in appearances in front of the People, his hair was uncombed, his eyes bloodshot. But it didn't matter: The Speaker's asceticism made up for the Hammer's excess.

History of the Revolution is all public record, but the closest coverage came from within the Revolution itself. *The Friend of the People* blog was an offshoot of an online media company that had started as an unscrupulous gossip blog. Its publisher and founder became synonymous with the name of the blog, *The Watcher*. At the onset of the Revolution, the Watcher was appearing in a Pittsburgh courthouse, fighting the latest lawsuit alleging that he had installed surveillance equipment in a prominent actress's temporary home during location shooting and released the illicit footage on the blog. It was just another controversy in a long list of stories that some said only served to generate publicity for his growing online media empire. Exposing official corruption sold even more ad space than celebrity gossip. So, when the Revolution began, the Watcher shifted his focus to reporting from within Revolutionary circles, and *The Friend of the People* was born.

But his need to expose those in power did not stop when the Old Regime crumbled. The Watcher published numerous semi-corroborated accounts of the Hammer's excesses. He personally penned numerous attacks against the more conservative Revolutionary leaders, those who advocated a subtle shift to direct democracy rather than the popular sovereignty that the Watcher and the Hammer advocated. The Watcher was not a popular man, but *The Friend of the People* was the most read blog during the Revolution.

In the summer of 2025, just after the provisional rule of the People's Commission and the Committee of Public Safety was established, a counter-Revolutionary named Carl McCord murdered the Watcher while he soaked in his hot tub. The blog went on, but the written attacks against moderate Revolution leaders stopped.

The Speaker took over several former municipal buildings in downtown Pittsburgh, his empire centering on the Ministry of Ideas to which people brought their innovations and received patents for ingenuity, and companies bid on the rights to produce them. The Hammer presided over the Pittsburgh District's Committee of Public Safety. Each district had its own committee for its own aggressors. The provisional government seemed to be permanent. A report from a citizen brought fellow citizens to a city's tribunal on an hourly basis, votes solicited several times a day. People were banished, publicly shamed, or sent to the Maze, depending on how reprehensible the People deemed the crime.

"You want to go through that again? The violence, the chaos?" Malone asked.

"If that's what it takes to give the People real control," Marianne said. "My dad died in the Massacre. They were at the Capitol when the National Guard

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opened fire. My mom saw the whole thing. She held him while they let him die. But he didn't die for this, for some fraud where a few are still pulling the strings. That's not what the Revolution was supposed to be about."

"And you're saying that everyone's just going along with it?"

"Well, yeah. They're so terrified of being next that they're afraid to think otherwise. And they've been fooled into thinking they have the power. They don't realize that they're being used."

"But what does this have to do with Jennings?" Malone asked.

"Keep your voice down."

"This guy." Malone tapped on his omnivice, and brought up the photo he'd saved of Underwood Jennings. "What you're saying about the Revolution and the People and the power, that's all fucked. But what does it have to do with this guy?"

"Alex, it has everything to do with that guy," Sammy said. He'd been pretending to wipe the dust off the top-shelf liquor bottles when he just had to get a look at the guy in question.

"What are you talking about, Sammy?"

"What are you talking about, Alex? That's the Speaker."

"That's Underwood Jennings," Marianne said.

Sammy turned the omnivice so that Jennings was no longer upside down to him. "Well, I'll be damned. That boy looks exactly like the Speaker in his early days."

"The Speaker wasn't that young when he got famous," Malone said.

"You were so drunk you missed the whole Revolution," Sammy said. "And you were a kid, Marianne. During the Revolution, all the blogs and news sites went nuts finding out who this guy was who everyone was calling the voice of the people. The Watcher plastered every picture he could find all over his sites. He dug deep. You had his prom photo with his dead wife, photos from his T-ball team, even one of those shots on the loop of a roller coaster at Kenywood. I saw a lot of photos of the Speaker when he was younger. And he looked exactly like that."

"Does the Speaker have any siblings?" Marianne asked.

"Nope. He was an only child. Single mother. Never knew his father," Sammy said.

"So, maybe the dad had other kids?" Marianne asked.

"Doubt it. That would have come up in the Watcher's stories. Of course, the dad came out of the woodwork when his son got famous, so we got to know all about that dirtbag. The mom was already dead before the Revolution, and the Speaker was all she had."

"What else can you tell us?" Marianne asked.

"He's from Ambridge. The People liked that, the whole working-class suburb, hometown-boy thing. Not a lot of privilege. He was a lawyer for a while

before he started teaching. That's got to be how he got so good with his arguments and logic."

"And the charisma," Marianne said. "He's the only public speaker who people say actually ever spoke for the public."

"It served him well." Sammy nodded. "But he was done with the law years before he started teaching, and few even remember that he ever practiced."

"That's a good thing. People fucking hate lawyers," Malone said. He shook the glass of just ice cubes at Sammy. The old man rolled his eyes and poured Malone another.

"Last one," Sammy said.

"The medicine is working," Malone said.

Sammy continued to describe how shocking it was to witness such a meteoric rise and how, for someone who had been hovering so close to the sun for decades, he showed no signs of melting wings. He was, in a word, legit. In three words, the real deal. He was a simple Doric pillar of virtue.

The Speaker left law to teach when he turned 40, and found his passion was outside the courtroom. He was everyone. He, the Yale-educated lawyer, was the single mother attending a for-profit university online at night. He was the recent grad with seemingly attainable dreams of working at a newspaper who was currently foaming milk for the lattes of the privileged. He was everyone who wanted something better, who felt that they had earned something better. He was the brain-damaged, drug-addicted goon who'd declared bankruptcy after his home was foreclosed.

The Speaker was never seen with a woman after the death of his wife. He became an ascetic who could let nothing put a strain on his voice of the People. So, why did this young man have his face?

"That's a good question. I hope you two figure it out," Sammy said. He and his dishrag walked down to the other end of the bar where a man let out a string of bubbles before downing the last of a pint.

"We could try to get it out of Swanson," Marianne said.

"I tried that. He's a dead end." That was a stupid thing to say. Marianne cocked her head. "How about Mackenzie?"

"Right. Her whole deal is getting men in their most vulnerable state. Maybe Jennings told her something, confessed to her that he's got important relatives."

"Or bragged about it," Malone said.

"You know, if we get confirmation, we could take it to Chatter," Marianne said. "Get the mob involved. Maybe you and I don't get an answer from the Speaker on why his office was helping make seniors disappear, but with enough voices demanding it may compel him to talk."

Malone tossed back the last of his third bourbon. "Let's go!" He stood up from the stool.

"Where?"

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“Mackenzie’s.”

“It’s after eight. She’s not going to be home.”

“How do you know?” Malone asked, looking at the neighboring barstools. Where was his track jacket? Oh, right.

Marianne was scrolling through her omnivice. “Because she’s at the Sy Sugar’s Soundproof Basement show. Ugh. I guess we’re going there?”

“You got that right.”

“You’ll blend right in in that outfit,” Marianne said, motioning at his baggy gray track pants and black wifebeater.

“When have I ever blended in? Later, Sammy.”

“Be careful, Alex,” Sammy said.

“When have I ever been careful?”

Outside the Emerald Bar the cars sped by as if they were trying to eclipse the short time they spent in this part of town. The neighborhood was once known as Little Italy, but too many accusations of that moniker being exclusionary had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some of the Italian restaurants were still in business, but most of the businesses were now dark bars where the jobless passed their 9-to-5 hours. It was quiet and unfriendly. It was a paranoid street inhabited by those who had difficulty with adaptation. Maybe it was the fact that they had only one skill, or multiple obsolete skills, or just an inability to improvise. There were no Mackenzie Brunners in Bloomfield—not even any Alex Malones. They were bitter here, and they took it out on their livers. Why not? They’d be replaced with the synthetic 3D-printed versions, but that would still be painful and the brain cells lost to the bottle would never come back. Or maybe they would, with the right injection, but they would bring some sadistic friends.

The Shaxi picked them up on the corner a block from the Emerald Bar.

“We talked a lot about the outrage. You didn’t bring up how you’re at 4,” Malone said when they took their seats.

“It happens,” Marianne said, shrugging her shoulders.

“It shouldn’t. It was Swanson.”

“No, it was all things I did. Maybe he just pointed them out.”

“You’re taking it well. The Eyes lost it when the outrage had just barely registered.”

“The Eyes did something very wrong that was probably the real reason she panicked. I’ve done nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m fine. How’s your hand?”

Malone looked down at his fat right hand with the purple edemas and the splint wrapped in duct tape. “If I say fine. I know you’re lying.”

Marianne shook her head. “What’s the plan when we get to the venue?”

“I go talk to Mackenzie. You wait at the bar.”

“No, I should go with you. She’s a feminist. It would be better if a woman spoke with her.”

“A feminist with an outrage level. No. This could go south, and you’ll be in another Chatter video. Can’t risk it.”

The Shaxi hadn’t even turned off New Liberty Avenue when it stopped at the venue. That’s what six shots of bourbon in an hour will do to even a man standing seven inches above the Republic average.

“I hope it’s not sold out. For our sake. And music’s sake.”

“They’re that bad?” Malone asked.

“Hah! You just wait.”

Malone and Marianne tapped their omnivices on the scanners at the club’s door, purchasing their tickets and confirming that they were over 18. It took a second upon entry into the venue to understand that Marianne was right. Over the heads of a sizable and wholly misguided crowd, the eight-person “band” on the stage confused Malone. Small amplifiers shaped like hockey pucks were scattered on the ground like land mines that would explode if there was any luck left in the world. Three band members were tapping their omnivices. Each must have been contributing to the cacophony. Was that the B-52s’ “Love Shack,” Billy Ray Cyrus, and the Macarena all played at the same time? Another member was controlling a mixing board. One female and two males were armed with microphones, threatening to unleash their auto-tuned vocals onto the crowd.

The men started to rap, trading off vocal duties as though they were in a bizarre conversation in which each sentence ended with the same word. Their speech was simultaneously slurred and halting, like William Shatner on *Quaaludes* and with some sort of tic about the word “moist.” The woman wailed into her microphone. The final band member wore what appeared to be a silver Mylar suit and performed a seductive version of the funky chicken.

The B-52s and Billy Ray continued to play through while the “Hey, Macarena” line played on a loop.

“Something’s broken. Maybe it’s over,” Malone said.

“These people don’t deserve to have ears,” Marianne said.

“Shit. OK. Stay here.”

Marianne stayed as far from the land mine speakers on the stage as she could while Malone ventured deeper into the sonic maelstrom. It didn’t take long to find Mackenzie. He should have known to find her here. This is where he, or the man in his head, first met her. Mackenzie’s shirt was on this time, though it was barely a shirt. A midriff halter top with no back and barely any front. She gyrated her hips to the beat of the drum machine behind the cacophony of mashed-up songs. No patriarchy could be worse than this.

Malone tapped her on the shoulder, awakening her from her rhythmic trance. Her eyes were wide. Yes, you’re out of place, Alex Malone. Nowhere

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have you ever been more an anachronism than right here right now. He leaned down and shouted in her ear. It was a damn shame that the cochlea could be replaced now. These people deserved their hearing to go the way of Pete Townsend. They would probably be better off.

“Need to talk to you a minute.”

“Can’t right now. There’s music in the air.” She tossed her hands in the air.

“It’s important. People’s lives are at stake.”

“Bullshit, Alex Malone.”

“Not bullshit.” He grabbed her wiry upper arm and pulled her away from the stage. She didn’t resist. Yes, you’re curious, aren’t you? “Underwood Jennings claimed a connection to the Speaker. What was it?”

“Underwood again? I’m starting to think you’re jealous.”

“I need to know. What was his connection to the Speaker?”

“Geez, I don’t know. OK? He never told me. All he said was that he knew something about him, something that would make the Speaker give him everything he was owed.”

“He thought the Speaker owed him?”

“Yes. All right? He had a tough life, and he blamed the Speaker. Isn’t that how it always goes? Broken people find someone they can make the cause of all their problems? Well, for Underwood it was the Speaker. The Speaker’s got the power. Underwood didn’t have any. There you go.”

“But he said he had something on the Speaker?”

“Yeah, and it sounded like blackmail.” Mackenzie put her hand on her hip, the universal sign for “Are we done yet?”

“And he knew something that could give him power and make it right.”

“I guess. Now it’s my turn. Has this all been about my ex? You applying to thump me? All of it to ask your questions about what Underwood was doing?”

“No,” Malone said. “I just stumbled into something that was an interesting topic. I’m a curious man.”

“You’re a liar. You’re good at it, but I’ve figured you out. Even your touch is a lie.”

“I didn’t use you, Mackenzie.”

“Oh yes, you did. No more lying. You may not have revealed yourself when most men do, but you did tonight.” Mackenzie elbowed back through the crowd to the stage. The Macarena was still repeating its single chorus/refrain/bridge/verse. Mackenzie resumed dancing, ensuring only that she did no movements in the Macarena.

Malone walked back to the doorway where Marianne waited with her hands over her ears. They pushed open the door, relieved to be in the evening chill.

“That didn’t go well, did it?”

“No,” Malone said. “But Jennings had some sort of evidence that he was using to blackmail the Speaker.”

“Either Underwood was the Speaker’s bastard son or that family has more bodies buried than the seniors.”

“We can’t do anything with theories. We need proof. We throw it on Chatter with no evidence, the People come after us for speaking against the Revolution.”

“Which is tantamount to speaking against them,” Marianne surveyed the street. It was quiet, the staff from the surrounding warehouses home and sleeping, except for the one that had become a nightclub that Generation Rev will list as the reason for the cochlear implants they require at age 56. “I need to research more about the Speaker’s early years. Sammy reminded me just how little I know about the leaders. I’ve always been so caught up in all the protests and the massacres like the one that killed my dad, I never thought too much about the big three. I guess I always thought of them as figureheads, not men.”

“You should stay at my place tonight. You’re already at level four. Street harassments start around level three.”

“I told you before. I’m fine. And you’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk. I had six shots.”

“And you haven’t had any in ten years.”

A Shaxi was approaching, moving in the direction of downtown and eventually the South Side where Malone had begun the evening. The image of Dillon Swanson—a bloated, water-logged corpse floating down the river, his suit jacket bubbling on the surface—made an unwelcome appearance in Malone’s head. He needed another bourbon.

Marianne stepped to the curb where the Shaxi stopped. “Goodnight, Alex.” She stepped into the vehicle and was gone in the night. It was a long walk back to bourbon, an even longer walk home. It would have been a chance to think, if the sensation of his fist crushing Swanson’s face would just go away. But it wouldn’t. The walk home was filled with an image more vivid now than in the dark of the trail: a disfigured man with a punctured eye and a twisted jaw lying on the ground, blood seeping from his skull. It was worse than the seniors strapped to the table.



He’d go back to the Biden Center today, complete the nurse credential check. No Lusitania Jones to ask him what the fuck he was doing back so soon. Just Marianne. The brave girl that keeps trying to save lives, though every time she does, the People try to destroy hers. Meanwhile Dillon Swanson floats down the Allegheny and Alex Malone walks into the police station to requisition a vehicle for today’s sham inspections.

“Malone! My office!” The Chief’s voice shattered the administrative white

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noise of the near-empty station. He was standing in his office doorway, filling nearly the entire frame.

Malone followed Chief Dillard into his office.

“Shut the door,” Dillard said.

Malone obeyed. He faced his superior. “Something wrong?” A body fished out of the river? A murder, marked by violence not supposed to be seen after the Revolution? Reports of a giant man with a playoff beard, suspiciously grasping his hand as he stalked through the city?

Like the last time he was in the chief’s office, Malone got Dillard’s omnivice in his face. And, like last time, it was Mackenzie’s face. “Due to some events tonight, I feel that I need to issue an addendum to my initial review of Alex Malone, former enforcer for the Pittsburgh Penguins. I’m not going to get into the specifics. They aren’t important. What is important is the extent of this man’s ability to lie. He visited me under false pretenses. My body was just a step to getting what he really wanted. And I fell for it. So, more than ever I need to remember how fucking hot I am. Mmm, yes, that’s what I needed to hear. Until next time, we’ll keep making the mirror jealous.”

“So I got a bad review?”

“I don’t need this bullshit. The department doesn’t need this.”

”It’s the treatment. I don’t know what’s come over me. It’s like someone else is in my head.”

“What happened to your hand?” Dillard pointed to the silver duct tape around his pointer finger. The rest of the fingers were shrinking back to their normal width, but they were black and blue.

“I had to settle some misbehavior at the Emerald Bar last night.”

”Cut the shit, Malone. She’s right about the lying. I need an honest answer for once. I called around the centers. You haven’t been to any in days. Why’d you even pitch that project to me if you weren’t gonna do it? And what have you been doing?”

He’d been solving the greatest mystery of the Revolution: Who was really in control? He was avenging the deaths of innocents and doing his best to prevent more. He was exposing the truth behind much bigger lies than what the fuck he was doing with his days. And he was apparently murdering people who stood in his way.

”All right, Chief. I got some tips that seniors were going missing from the centers while I was doing my inspections. I’ve been looking into it.”

”Jesus Christ, Malone. What were you planning on doing with that information?”

”Telling you when I had something more concrete.”

”Right,” Dillard said, leaning back in his creaking chair. He rubbed his eyes as if that would help him face the reality of the situation: He had a cop who was doing police work. ”And have you found any of these seniors?”

"No, and that's the troubling part. I think they're dead."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, they're more than a hundred years old, and most people who go missing don't get found alive."

"So, why didn't you put this information on the feeds? Put it on Chatter. Name names. That's the People's job to work this out. We'll do it now."

"Can't do that, Chief. It's more fucked up than that."

"More fucked up than dead people?"

"This goes way up. I mean way up. And I can't just go accusing people publicly."

"Malone, this isn't making sense. Did you forget that you're brain damaged?"

"That's been treated."

"Malone, we've been able to build every organ, muscle, ligament, and bone in the body that is not inside the skull. We don't know how to fix the brain yet."

"Chief, since I got the treatment, the headaches are gone. The memory lapses are gone. The fogginess is gone. I'm clearer than I've been in 20 years."

"Except you've made up a murder case with no victims." Dillard was sounding like another cop now, one who urged him since childhood to use his head for something other than a punching bag. That patronizing tone that fathers use when their sons are getting too reckless on or off the job.

"You make it sound crazy," Malone said.

"Because it is. This case is closed. Your little foray into senior center inspections is over. You want progress made? Give your supposed evidence to the People. Maybe they decide you're crazy. Maybe they decide it makes you an agg. Either way, I don't care anymore, Malone. Lying crosses the line."

"We're supposed to be the line."

"Not anymore. And you're going to have to accept it and move on from this crusade you've been hiding from me. You're lucky Mackenzie's little rant hasn't registered an outrage level. If it does and it gets high enough, you know what happens. So do your job. Your actual job. While you still have one. Here." Dillard handed Malone a slip of paper. "Szechuan Number 1 Buffet. Some reports that it's serving dog. Check it out. Make sure there are no pups in the kitchen."

Malone took the paper and walked out of Chief Dillard's pathetic office, past Officer Weiss, who was dressed in the uniform of a British constable circa 1946. The office was sad. Chief Dillard was sad. They existed in this world that had left them behind. They were indifferent, merely existing, floating on the edge of society, responsible for neither the bad nor the good of the Revolution. And that didn't matter. The forceless police didn't matter. The archaic computers and Hollywood uniforms didn't matter. The crime that Malone could almost see but that the People were blind to—that was what mattered.

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No perpetrator, no matter how dead, is above the law, and no victims below it. As Marianne would say, that's what the Revolution was supposed to be about.

The visit to Szechuan Number 1 Buffet turned out to be a respite from the fresh corpse that that was lying on the sidewalk, always about 10 yards ahead no matter how far he walked. It was in the passenger seat of the 2026 Fiat that Malone had to slouch to drive. It led him into Szechuan Number 1 Buffet, revealing the bloody crater in the back of its head. There were no dogs in the kitchen. Just an angry restaurateur armed with a wok and claims of discrimination, enough to keep the corpse at bay.

"It's Star China Inn!" the owner shouted. He was a small Chinese man with graying hair in a suit. He'd been playing maître d' when Malone arrived in the entryway, separated from the dining room by black beaded curtains. "They're always jealous of our business here! We have best fried rice in city; they don't."

"Look, sir, I only got the report and was sent here. Believe me, I have more important things to do," Malone said.

"More important things than investigating prejudice report?"

"You said it came from Star China Inn."

"Yes, but they just take advantage. It's prejudice that anyone accuse me of serving dog and you cop investigate!" He waved the wok he'd grabbed to threaten Malone during the kitchen inspection.

"The Chinese eat dog," Malone said.

"In China, not American Republic! I serve no dog here."

"Yes, I know. That's what I'll be reporting."

"I report Star China serve dog!"

"That's your right, but I'm not sure if we're going to take that seriously since you just told me you'd do that."

"Fine! Then I put on Chatter! I tell the People Star China serve dog and the People don't go there anymore and they go out of business and leave me alone."

"Sounds like a plan," Malone said. He shook his head and walked back to report to the Chief that all claims of canine cuisine at Star China Inn should be ignored.

The corpse returned on the drive back to the station, smiling as it did when it was a passenger in Underwood Jennings's van, but now the shattered jaw dangled from the rest of the face. It was in his computer screen, rising from the bike path, blood flowing from the mouth and pooling on the concrete.

Malone's omnivore lit up, drawing his attention from the sunken orbital socket that seemed to be staring at him without the right eye.

Marianne.Roth sent a video

Malone tapped the screen, and the video filled it. The Speaker, much younger, was behind a podium. He was in what appeared to be an old Elks Lodge or VFW. The camera panned to the audience, mostly composed of older men,

some sitting at the bar, most with drinks in hand.

“This nation, our great nation, is at a crossroads. You know it as well as I do. We’ve seen the idealistic notions of our Founding Fathers perverted by greed and corruption and classism. We’ve looked at them with myopic hindsight as saints. But what of the sins of our forefathers? Slave owners. Our nation’s principles, the tenets of our society established by those who thought of some men as animals. Equality, the white whale that we so desire, the ideal that I embrace, was not lived by these men. This nation was founded on hypocrisy. This Revolution, this uprising of the People, must overthrow this hypocrisy. To live all the ideals that we preach. We cannot enforce one standard and live by another. We cannot be above our own laws. If our law is equality, then all men and women shall be treated equally. All good deeds will be awarded equally. And all crimes,”

He paused. “And all crimes, no matter how minor or heinous, will be prosecuted equally. No matter who is the transgressor. No matter who is the victim.” He paused again. His eyes flickered to the left. The camera stayed fixed on the Speaker. That was his gift. He was mesmerizing. He looked again to the left. What was lurking out of frame?

“The revered may not commit offenses against the unknown. The president may not keep slaves. There is no entitlement to...” His usually strong voice wavered. He paused again. He swallowed. He glanced again to the left. “No entitlement to harm those who can... who cannot, who cannot defend themselves. One bombastic voice with a microphone cannot silence the screams of another. No.” The Speaker paused again. His eyes welled with tears. “No one is above the law, not even me. That’s why I’m...” His voice trailed off, and he glanced again to the left. He stopped again, swallowed, his eyes trained on whatever was to the left of the stage, just out of view. He blinked and turned back to the audience.

“That’s why I’m devoting all my effort to giving this brave nation a second chance.” The Speaker slammed his hand on the podium, a look of resolve on his face even as a tear slipped down his cheek. “We’ll move past the sins of the Founding Fathers to be the just, verdant children of this nation. We’ll take this country back. And we’ll show the world what liberty and justice for all really means!”

The room erupted into applause and shouts. The Speaker had that way even in a sparsely attended Elks Lodge meeting. He glanced back to the left, his expression sinking before thrusting his arm above his head as he looked back at the modest audience.

The video ended on a still of the Speaker with his fist in the air.

Alex.Malone: What was that

Marianne.Roth: Speech from 2025, Moose Lodge in South Hills. Weird. Tears?

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Alex.Malone: Where U find?

Marianne.Roth: The Watcher blog. Archives. The Watcher had a field day: what's with the tears, pauses?

Alex.Malone: He was going to admit something

Marianne.Roth: Watcher thought same

Alex.Malone: When this from?

Marianne.Roth: Two weeks before Watcher assassination

Alex.Malone: Meet at station now

Marianne.Roth: OK

Malone spent 20 minutes watching the speech over and over. It kept the corpse out of his line of sight. When the message came in from Marianne, Malone all but jumped from his desk and made his way toward the door.

“Malone! Where are you going?” Dillard shouted from his office.

“Lunch, Chief.”

“You have an hour.”

“Got it.”

Malone guided Marianne into the alley where he'd first encountered Dillon Swanson, but the corpse was there waiting for them. He steered her back onto the street. Butler Street was bustling with people who weren't haunted. Normal living people who voted and chattered and didn't know who the fuck Underwood Jennings was. Marianne's white shirt was stained with pink. Her short hair had white seeds in it.

“What happened to you?” Malone asked.

“Nothing. I'm fine.”

“You look like you were hit with tomatoes.” Malone brought up Chatter.

Edema.Sweeny: She obviously values the lives of the old and senile over the youths who never got a chance.

Keep reading: Dillon Swanson deserved what he got. He destroyed innocent lives; he deserved to be destroyed, his mangled face growing more grotesque the longer he floated.

Pursuit.McDonald: Remember the seniors are the ones who perpetuated the old regime. No one wants to say that hard truth but they are. And she's helping them get these crazy treatments that no regular people have access to. Like she's trying to bring them back to enslave us all again!

Outrage level 5.

“This isn't good, Marianne.”

“It's fine. Just focus on solving the case. Then that all goes away.”

“I wouldn't be too sure of that,” Malone said.

“Can we just talk about the video?”

“Fine.”

“This speech was July 19,” Marianne said. “The Watcher put this up on the 20th, on his personal blog. This wasn't a televised speech. The Watcher record-

ed it, or had some tabloid paparazzi type do it. I can't find any other stories relating to it. Then Carl McCord kills the Watcher in his hot tub August 3. I don't know if any of it means anything. It was just weird. I mean, the Speaker's known for his self-assurance, rousing speeches. This is not. I watched this three times already. What is he looking at?"

"Someone who doesn't want him to say any more."

"We're never going to find out who was there. I can't just put up a question on Chatter. No one's going to cop to being at this if it's something clearly most people want to forget has happened."

"What do we know about the Watcher?"

"Tabloid king. Scumbag extraordinaire. A menace to journalism. Sensationalist. Unscrupulous. Libelous, slanderous, slimy. He'd do anything for the story, whether that story was real or complete fabrication. Arrested three times for illegal surveillance. Sued by a colorful array of celebrities and politicians for invasion of privacy," Marianne said.

"The Revolution was an opportunity to rebrand. The Watcher Media Group launched *The Friend of the People*, the chronicle of the Revolution that we all know and love. Did you know the Watcher himself wasn't really a Revolutionary? I was reading some contemporary coverage: Critics called him an opportunist, capitalizing on the Revolution to get clicks. It was about profit. Overnight, he went from dubious celebrity and gossip to being the most read blog among Revolutionaries."

"You learned all this last night?"

"No. Last night I was going through the Watcher archives. I learned about the Watcher years ago from my mom. She thought he was a creep," Marianne said. "But get this: All was well for about 14 months. Until Carl McCord, counter-Revolutionary activist, shot him to death in his lavish hot tub. At his trial, McCord claimed that the murder saved thousands of people from what would surely be a tyrannical rule of opportunistic scumbags like the Watcher. He was outed as a gun-toting militia fundamentalist bent on hanging on to an obsolete way of life that favored the privileged. He went to the Maze, never to be seen again. *The Friend of the People* remained the journal of the people, a populist chronicle of daily life post-Revolution. Contributors were many because it would practice the populism that it preached. Without the questionable Watcher, the blog was free to be what the People actually wanted it to be."

"So, what does this have to do with Jennings and the missing seniors? You've got a speech from 26 years ago. You said that was July? Jennings wasn't even born until March the following year." Malone was pacing back and forth on the sidewalk. Keep thinking, keep walking. The corpse can't get in if your body and mind keep moving.

"It's a weird speech that history seems intent on forgetting. The only one who covered it was the Watcher, and he's dead two weeks later. Wait a se-

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cond—Jennings was born March 2026?”

“Yeah, the 10th.”

“Nine months after the speech,” Marianne said.

“You don’t think...”

“I think the time line works. The Speaker knocks up a Revolutionary. He feels bad and makes a weird speech.”

“Yeah, but then why the guilt? If that’s true, who would have cared? He could have married her. The People would have been behind him finding love again. Even though it was pretty soon after his wife...” Malone trailed off. What was he missing? Officer Weiss waved as he walked into the station. He looked Marianne up and down and winked at Malone.

“Hmm. There has to be something else.”

“Let’s look at the time line again. What about the Watcher? With the thousands of muckraking blogs out there during the Revolution, why did only he seem to care about the weird speech? You said he had all sorts of theories about it...”

“No one’s looked at the Watcher’s death. Ever. McCord confessed. He was a martyr. Puts a bullet in the Watcher and walks right out to the kitchen to tell the dead guy’s wife to call it in. Waits for the People to show up and take him. He died for his counter-Revolutionary cause,” Marianne said. “McCord was also in a lot of debt right before he died. He had an ex-wife, two kids, alimony, child support, and a mortgage that was underwater. His money was gone because of medical bills. Lung cancer. Wasn’t terminal, but sure expensive. That’s all public record. *The Friend of the People* did a lot of digging after their founder was murdered.”

“So he had nothing to lose,” Malone said. “I can relate.”

“Nothing to lose. As a martyr... or someone willing to play a martyr,” Marianne said. She grinned. “What if he was paid to kill the Watcher?”

“Who would pay him to do that?”

“Someone who wanted to shut him up. McCord was angry, outspoken. He published on counter-Revolutionary blogs, organized town hall meetings. Huge critic of the Revolution and the three major figureheads of it: the Hammer, the Speaker, and the Watcher. He liked his guns, and he had nothing to lose. Just the guy who would risk all his nothing and go out defending his cause. Also the perfect guy for someone to pay to knock off a scumbag who knows too much.”

“It’s a theory.”

“McCord’s family went under the radar after that. The teenage daughter came to the trial, but that was it. Last time they’ve been in the public eye.”

“I can see why they’d want to keep a low profile. Think we can find them?” Malone asked.

Marianne tapped on her omnivice. “I already did.”



“It’s been a long time since anyone asked about Dad.” Corrine Lapstein, née Corrine McCord, sipped a mango tea from a cup on a saucer. The 36-year-old was slender with her hair cropped short in a no-nonsense way. She looked like a therapist. The look wasn’t unattractive.

“You call him Dad?” Malone asked.

“Well, that’s what he was,” Corrine said.

“You’re not ashamed of what he did?” Marianne asked.

“Of course not. Shame is a useless emotion, Marianne. Are you ashamed of what you did?”

“No.”

“But many people on Chatter say you should be.”

“It doesn’t matter what they think.”

“Yes, it does,” Malone said.

“To me. To me it doesn’t. I can’t feel shame for what I did no matter how hard they press me,” Marianne said. “I believe in what I did. I know that makes them say I should be even more ashamed, but I’m not.”

“Then you understand my point. I’ve had enough of it that I know not to feel it anymore. We didn’t know what Dad was going to do, had no part in it, but we were all disgraced, living in obloquy nonetheless. Sometimes I still hear it, but that doesn’t matter. Like you said, the humiliation is external. I’ve gotten on just fine in my little corner of the world.”

“What happened 24 years ago? What were the circumstances that would drive your father to something so extreme that he knew it would result in his death?” Marianne asked. She and Corrine had a bond. Malone did too, but Corrine didn’t know that. It wasn’t his words and actions plastered all over Chatter today. At this moment, Marianne was far more famous than he had ever been.

“I was a teenager. Fourteen. Parents had been divorced for almost ten years at that point. I hardly remember them being together. They must have been a disaster together because they didn’t do all that well apart. Mom cleaned houses. I babysat after school. My brother was too young to do much but help around the house. Dad was five months behind on the alimony and child support.

“He was an engineer at the Robotics Institute. Laid off when it got shut down. Too many machines were taking people’s jobs. So my dad lost his. There was talk of putting him in stocks outside of the Citizens Park on game day until he paid up, but Mom didn’t want that. How was he going to pay when he couldn’t get another job because he’d bring shame to the company? Mom,

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none of us had any idea about the cancer. Must not have been diagnosed all that long before for the life insurance.”

“Life insurance?” Malone asked.

“Yeah, we got a \$500,000 payout when he died. It put us through school.”

“Did your mother know he had life insurance?”

“No, they barely spoke unless it was about the money he owed.”

“Seems a little strange that he was able to get a policy being a smoker who was diagnosed with lung cancer. My old man was a smoker. Lifelong. Life insurance was off the table. Not that it matters now anyway since he’ll probably live forever.”

“The insurance must have been beforehand,” Corrine said.

“You never thought about it?” Malone asked.

“Never cared. Dad was dead. He’d done something that he knew would lead to that outcome.”

“Did you think he’d do it?” Marianne asked.

“I used to get asked things a lot. People assume that because my father is the most famous counter-Revolutionary that I must be as well.”

“And you’re the opposite?” Marianne asked. Why was this so hard for her to believe?

“I’m indifferent.” Corrine smiled. “Look around. I’m no better or worse now than I was before. Revolution, no Revolution. I’m still the same. I like who I am, and that’s with who my dad was. I learned a long time ago to go with the flow, even in the ebbs. Is it really so bad now? Is this future worth dying for? I don’t think so. I don’t think any future is. We’re in this world no matter how it turns, and we have to make the best of it. We move through this world. Some of us are even so lucky we get to choose how we leave when we’re done with the world. Dad got that chance. And I’m glad for him.”

“Do you ever think that someone made the choice of his exit for him?”

“Sometimes I do wonder, Mr. Malone.” Corrine took a sip of her tea. Her every movement was fluid—every mundane action a work of grace. “But then I catch myself living in the past. Drowning in the eternal, cyclical question of ‘what if?’ So I get back to the moment. This is it, Mr. Malone, Miss Roth. The past lives only in memories, but how real are those? They’re as tangible as a daydream. They only exist in the mind, which is nothing but a construct of our imagination itself.”

“Two months ago, I’d be thrilled to agree with you, Mrs. Lapstein. But right now, my mind is all I have.”

“Well then, Mr. Malone, I hope for your own sake that you lose it again.”

”So do I, Mrs. Lapstein. It was much more pleasant to live in my own moments.”



“Could zealotry skip a generation?” Marianne asked when they were on the sidewalk in front of Corrine Lapstein’s Squirrel Hill home. The lawn was as cropped as its owner’s hair. Meticulous though, not at all like her free-flowing attitude about life.

“You think she’s a closeted rebel, seeking to destroy the Republic from that Zen room?”

“No! She’s legit. I’m beginning to doubt that her dad was some militant. Especially with this supposed life insurance payout. What if that was hit money?”

“Hey, look at the agg!” A man and woman with two children Malone assumed were theirs approached. They couldn’t have been the ones taunting. Malone looked around. Aside from the family, they were alone.

The boy, maybe ten years old, was pointing. “It’s an agg, mom!”

“Yes, it is, Magnesium. That’s an agg.”

“She doesn’t look like an agg.”

“That’s what makes aggs like her so insidious. They look like us.” The father held his daughter’s hand as he walked up to Marianne. The daughter was older, a teenager. She sneered at Marianne. The father was inches from Marianne. He towered over her but was no Alex Malone. “She even works as a nurse, son. A nurse! She’s charged with keeping us well, but that’s not what she does. No, she experiments on us. She sells us dubious procedures that will either kill us or waste our money. She’s rotten, son. She needs to be taught a lesson.”

“Maybe your son needs to be taught a lesson about what happens to dads with big mouths,” Malone said, inserting himself between Marianne and the man.

“And what would that lesson entail? Are you threatening me with violence?” The man laughed. “You know what violence gets you. Hear that, son? That’s what we call an empty threat. That’s how low aggressors will stoop to try to justify their hateful behavior.”

“Alex, let’s go,” Marianne said. “We have more important things to do.”

She grabbed his arm, and Malone turned and started to walk away with her. “Don’t let them take your picture. We can’t both have outrage levels. This case will never be solved.”

“Where are you going, agg?” The voice had the high-pitched sing-song quality of a teenager.

“Just keep walking. Don’t turn around. We’ll lose them and go back to the car. They get the plates, they find out you’re a cop, and they find out who you are,” Marianne said.

“They’re leaving, Daddy! I don’t want them to leave, Daddy! I want to see

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her be an agg!” the girl whined.

“Yeah! I wanna see the outrage level go up!” the boy shrieked.

“What do you say, Ava? Let’s show our kids what justice looks like.”

“Ooh, what are you thinking, Henry?” the wife, Ava, said.

“I’m thinking we tell her how much she hurt her fellow people, because she did. Now we know what she thinks of our precious elders. That they’re gullible. Stupid. Ripe for exploitation. She can use them as test subjects. Like the Tuskegee experiment.”

“What’s that, Dad?” Magnesium asked.

“That was when the government kidnapped a whole bunch of our African-American citizens and injected them with AIDS to see what would happen.”

“That’s what she was doing!” the girl shouted. “Racist! Bigot!”

“Imagine the hurt our neighbors the Johnsons are feeling now that she’s conjuring up old memories of that atrocity,” Ava said. “They’re probably afraid to leave the house knowing that such racists who think that people are lab rats are allowed to walk free.”

“Racist, AIDS-injecting agg!” The girl screamed. “Let’s get her, Daddy! Let’s make her apologize for how much pain she caused!”

“All right, Granola. Let’s get her.”

“Run,” Malone said.

Marianne took off. Her short legs were lean and quick. She ran in the direction of Frick Park, the city’s largest green space. Smart girl. Malone turned to face the family.

“I’d think twice about running after her,” he said.

“We’ve got her,” Ava said. She and the children bolted across the street, maybe a swimming pool’s length behind Marianne.

“And I’ll take care of you,” Henry said. He raised his omnivice.

His taunting smile lasted for only a second before Malone’s fist knocked it right off his face along with one of his front teeth. The omnivice flew out of his hand and onto the sidewalk. Malone flinched, gripping his hand. When would he learn to swing with the left? The coffee stirrer split in two. Splinters had likely lodged in Henry’s face.

“You’re over. Over. Done,” Henry said through his hand, blood between his fingers. “Your agg bitch is done too.”

Fuck it. Malone swung his fist and the man was on the ground. The pain was worse. Throbbing, needling, pulsing all at once. But there was no time for pain. Malone picked up the omnivice and ran across the street, disposing of the device in a sidewalk drain.

For the first time since an aborted attempt to get back into game form, Alex Malone broke into a dead sprint. The hill up to Frick Park was not steep to Pittsburgh standards. A 48-year-old, out-of-shape, ex-hockey player could run

it in a suit and loafers without losing pace. The boy Magnesium was approaching the park entrance at the top of the hill, out of Malone's view. He must have run into the park, joining the women whose legs were too long for the young child to keep pace.

Malone followed, down the paved trail that was meant for recreational running, not hot pursuit. But he'd never used this park for its intended purpose. It had been more than a decade since he escaped here in the middle of a four-game home stand, armed with a bottle of Oxycontin to muffle the throbbing in his punching hand, which may or may not have been worse than it was at this moment. If it weren't for the drugs, the pain may have persisted and prevented him from trying to fight the park ranger who dared to awaken him from his mighty slumber in the shade of an oak the next morning. Malone hadn't seen much of the park beyond that tree, and would never know how to find it, or anything else in Frick Park. He hoped that was Marianne's strategy.

Malone passed Magnesium and sprinted down the path until it turned to gravel. He was getting close to the wooded area. He followed the trail, looking straight ahead, never backward. He stepped into what could officially be called the woods. It was less tranquil than the last time he was there. The opiates must have softened any sounds last time, and the fact that his excursion had taken place in the spring made it even more of a silent night. Leaves crunched under Malone's feet. He stopped, listening for similar sounds up ahead.

Some say that senses work at the expense of one another. Straining to hear any indication of footsteps on the dry, autumn leaves, Malone wasn't looking down to see the foot that stuck out in his path. His arms broke his fall on soft earth, protecting his depleted gums from the impact. He jumped to his knees. A foot kicked him behind the knees and he was back on the ground. A searing pain shot from his mouth. His reflexes weren't fast enough to break that fall. He crawled back on his knees.

The foot kicked him in the chest. From the vantage point of a fallen leaf, Henry looked a lot bigger. But he was blurry, as if under chlorinated water.

Henry faded away. Four men stood above him, staring down. Malone wanted to look behind them—they were blocking something on the black and white tiled kitchen floor. There was something, and it was terrible, but he needed to see it.

"You won't say anything," the towering man said as he leaned down. It was like he was speaking to a child. His voice was soft, and sinister. "You know what happens to bad boys with big mouths?"

No, but it can't be good.

"No? Sure you do," the man said. His face was red and puffy, like the face of an alcoholic, but with a sadistic clarity in his eyes. The Hammer. Younger, but there was no mistaking that bloated, angry face.

"Please, stop." The voice came from a man seated at the table in the corner

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nook. It was timid and strained, but Malone knew it. The voice of the nation.

“This is your mess, sir. With all due respect, I’m cleaning it up,” said the Hammer. The three other men remained stoic, on the side of neither man.

“I know what you’re doing,” The Speaker said as he stood up from the table. “Please, leave the boy alone.”

“He needs to know that actions have consequences. He needs to know how he can prevent the inevitable consequences from happening to him.”

“Consequences don’t happen to everyone,” the Speaker said, as he sat back down at the table, burying his head in his hands.

The red-faced Hammer turned back to Malone, or whatever age of Underwood Jennings he was in this vision.

“You know what happens to boys who talk too much? To boys who say things they shouldn’t? See, some things are the truth, but you can’t say them. That would be damaging to everyone, to the People. You understand?” He awaited a response. Malone felt his head nodding. “Good. I’m glad you understand. Because the consequences to boys who talk too much are the same as what happens to their big-mouthed mothers.”

The Hammer stepped aside, and Malone could see the lump on the tiled floor behind him. A woman’s body. Dark hair cascading all over the floor with blood seeping from the wrists, surrounding the corpse.

“Daddy, can I report him? Please, please, Daddy?” A girl’s voice now, whining.

Malone was back in the woods, Henry and Granola standing over him.

“No! That’s not fair, Daddy! I saw the agg first! I should get to report her bad friend.” Magnesium had caught up.

“Well, one of you will have to since this Neanderthal took my omnivice.”

“Oh my, Henry! Your face! Did this hateful aggressor do that to you?” Ava ran up to her family. Hah. Everyone was here. Except Marianne.

“Yes, but we’ve got him, Ava.”

“I want to get him, Mom! It’s only fair. I’m the one that tripped him!”

“But I saw the girl agg, Mom!”

“Shut up, you arid little twat, or I’ll report you.”

“I’ll report you, Gran! Mommy, she’s so mean!”

“He’s being a baby. I’m older, and I’ve never gotten to report anyone! It wouldn’t be fair if he got to first.”

“Why don’t you both press the button?” Ava said, the violent energy gone from her voice.

“But I get to report him?” Granola asked.

“I think it’s only fair that Granola gets to do it,” Henry said. “She is older, Magnesium. You’ll have plenty of time to report aggs. You’re lucky. You know we didn’t even get to report aggs when I was your age. If we saw an aggression,

we had to call them out on social media. Sometimes they'd lose their jobs, but we could never see such social justice as the Maze. If they were really bad, they'd get canceled, but it's still not the same. You should appreciate that you live in this time when you're empowered to report aggressions and the aggressors face real consequences."

"But it's not fair!" Magnesium burst into tears. Ava knelt down and hugged her son.

"It's OK, Magnesium. Listen to your father. You have a lifetime of agg reporting in front of you."

"Yes, you do," Henry said, rubbing the boy's head.

A gratified Granola stood over Malone, her feet on either side of his hips. She aimed her omnivice at his face when Marianne ran at her, body-checking the teenager to the ground.

"Ow! Daddy!" the girl screamed. Tears streamed down her face. Henry rushed to her.

Malone got to his feet. Putting his weight on his right hand was a bad idea. He and Marianne ran back toward the trail, leaving the broken family in the woods.

"You'll go to the Maze for this, aggs!" Ava yelled.



They'd just returned to the car when Marianne asked what Malone knew she would. Maybe when he was in playing shape, he would have been able to formulate a lie while running hill sprints, but today it took all he had to breathe.

"What happened back there? You froze."

"I know," Malone said.

"What? Why?"

"It's complicated. CTE things." Malone drove out of Squirrel Hill, toward the bordering Shadyside, his home. He would have been cutting it close to get back to the station close to the allotted hour with just the Corrine interview. The chase made any hope of escaping disciplinary action impossible. Dillard's messages had already started to light up the omnivice.

"Bullshit. That was weird. And really inopportune. That whole saga is gonna raise my outrage level. I'm going to the Tribunal. I'll probably have to leave Pittsburgh. The least you can do is tell me the truth about what happened back there."

Malone pulled over in front of what appeared to be a castle with 30 mailboxes in the front yard. He stared out the windshield.

"You remember what you said to me when we first met? That you didn't believe I came to the center to check licenses?"

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“Yes.”

“You were right. I was there to find out if any seniors had gone missing.”

“What? You knew?”

“Not really. It was a hunch. My doctor, he gave me this experimental treatment for, you know, my condition. After that, I started having these visions.”

“Psychic visions?”

“Memories. But they weren’t mine. From the perspective of a little boy being abused to a mean man who humiliates women and ties seniors to a gurney and keeps human brains in jars.”

“That’s why you kept saying the seniors were tortured.”

“Yes. I saw it. I should have known the Speaker had something to do with it. I saw him beaten, like I was the one doing the beating. And today, today I saw a woman with black hair dead on a kitchen floor bleeding from the wrists while the Hammer told me it had to happen.”

“Told you?”

“Underwood Jennings. As a child. I think it was his mother.”

“You’re telling me you just see all of this? That’s crazy.”

Malone finally looked at her. “You don’t believe it.”

“I believe you’re withholding information from me, yes, but that’s absurd.”

“How about I prove it to you?”

“How?”

“We go see the good doctor.” He started the car.

Marianne followed as Malone shouldered his way through the front door of Dr. Pomonski’s office. He lumbered up the steps, grasping his hand, a simultaneous pain stabbing the side of his brain. He hadn’t felt pain like this since the last time he visited the good doctor. He flung open the door to the waiting room and staggered in.

“Malone, what are you doing here?” Mulva shrieked from behind the window. Bandages stretched from the creases above her eyes to the brows. “We weren’t supposed to see your sorry cop ass again!”

Malone tore through the crowded waiting room with Marianne trailing, past a young woman holding a small child. She was waiting patiently for something more relevant than a 20-year-old murder case that would shake the foundation of everything she believed in. Malone pushed open the door to the examination room.

A patient in a paper suit sat on the table, an elaborate network of wires and probes covering his head. Dr. Pomonski looked up from the infrared photo that was projected onto the wall. His lips moved, but Malone didn’t hear what the doctor said. He was a child again, staring at a white-coated man with a mustache and glasses and a stethoscope around his neck. A chubby, callused hand rubbed his shoulder. Malone could feel himself squirming—the hand needed to leave.

“Doctor, my sweet boy here can be so... how should I say this? Moody.” The voice came from the large woman attached to the hand. She was as rough as her palm, grotesque like a Roald Dahl children’s-book villain. He’d seen her before, laughing with a blood-covered toothbrush. Malone shivered as she spoke again. “He seems to be having trouble getting along with the other boys at school. I’m called to the office on a weekly basis for the fights and the—how did they put it?—cruelty.”

“What else has your son been doing?” the doctor asked with that detached compassion the profession is instructed to practice.

“Oh, he’s not my son,” the large woman said, almost too quickly. She knew it, so she covered. “He’s a poor orphan, a ward of the state, my foster child.” She squeezed his shoulder again, and Malone felt his tiny body writhe.

“He doesn’t seem to like physical contact,” the doctor observed.

“No, he does not at all. Might that be a symptom of the underlying problem?”

“It may be,” the doctor said. “I’d like to see him privately, keep him here for observation. I’ve read the reports from the school and have a theory on what may be going on.”

“Oh, please. Anything you can do to help my poor boy.”

“Let me start the admission process.” The doctor turned and walked down a hallway.

The woman knelt down, so her pockmarked, frown-lined face was parallel to the child’s. Her jowls jiggled as she spoke. “There you go, you ungrateful little shit. You’ve gotten yourself admitted to the nuthouse, and I still get my check. Have a lovely time with all the other little psychos, Underwood.”

“Malone, you can’t be in here!” Dr. Pomonski shouted.

Back in the present, Malone rushed at the doctor, pinning him against the wall. He raised his right hand, but a searing pain pierced through the fingers, and he wrapped the left around the doctor’s throat.

“What was in that injection you gave me?”

“That’s a doctor-confidentiality privilege,” Pomonski spat.

“Bullshit,” Malone said. “That’s not even a thing.”

“You’re not authorized to know.”

Malone squeezed the doctor’s neck. He still had the grip strength forged from years of holding a hockey stick. “What was in that syringe you stabbed in my neck?”

A force hit Malone in the back. He turned. The doctor’s wheeling chair smashed to the ground. The patient and his wire Afro stood behind Malone, shocked when Malone faced him. Malone let go of the doctor and reached for the patient. The brain wave examinee stepped back. Malone pushed him toward the door. Marianne turned the knob, and Malone shoved the patient and his elaborate headwear back into the waiting room. He locked the door

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and turned back to the doctor.

“What was in it?” Malone asked again as he stepped back toward Pomonski. The doctor lurched to the left. Malone mirrored his movement. Pomonski lurched right. Malone followed. Pomonski was cornered. Malone jumped to him and held him against the wall by his shoulders. A knock on the door was followed by Mulva’s voice.

“Doctor, I told that creep to get out!”

More knocking. Malone could barely hear it over the beating of his heart. This is why Malone was here. Some were on the Earth to cure ills, others to lead. Malone was here to use his hulking body to defend. Whether it was a star center iceman or the People or a wrongly demonized nurse or a long-forgotten victim, this is why Alex Malone was alive.

He wrapped his fingers around the doctor’s neck again and squeezed. “You’re going to tell me what was in that serum that you injected into my neck without my permission.” He spoke without emotion, in the same manner that he would once threaten a third-line agitator who’d boarded his \$10 million defenseman in the teams’ last meeting. “You’re going to tell me. Or I’m going to hurt you.”

“All right!” Pomonski gasped. More knocks on the door. “It came from the Maze.”

“How?” Malone asked, more heated this time, but without giving away that he had no clue what this worm of a man was talking about.

“The ones who don’t survive! They get donated to the greater good.”

“And what did I get?”

“They don’t tell me who it came from.” Pomonski choked out the words. Malone eased his grip. “It was extracted from the brain of someone who recently didn’t survive the Maze.”

Malone released his fingers. Pomonski fell forward and gasped for breath. He leaned on the examination table.

“Yes, the ones that die are used for medicine. The world keeps turning. Shit deal for you, Malone. We’d rather have the bodies and brains of the ones capable enough to make it to the other side. But sadly for you, you got elements from the brain of some aggressing bastard who just wasn’t smart or strong enough to find his way out, and met the terrors within.”

Malone stared at his hands. The doctor caught his breath. Marianne stared at him as though seeing him for the first time. Malone unlocked the door. He pulled it open to be greeted by Mulva and the man with the wire hat.

“You cannot do that, Malone! I’m calling this in to the Committee, and you’ll pay for this, you piece of shit! You and your agg girlfriend!” She shrieked as Malone shoved her out of the way and walked into the waiting room. The young woman and her son still sat in the chair—she held him tightly.

“You should leave here,” Malone said. “This isn’t a place for him.”

She nodded, scared. Malone walked out the door and back down the steps.



It was Marianne’s idea to go to the old football stadium, one of the few places they knew they could be alone. The Emerald Bar was too risky, too many potential pariahs looking to earn their way back into the good graces of the People by reporting suspicious behavior of known aggs. The stadium was a place to think, to figure out their next steps. Maybe you’ll remember something else, she said when they left Pomonski’s office. Leave it to a nurse to make an instant change from skeptic to believer because a doctor said so.

But the memories weren’t coming. They sat in the stands, alone in the echoing chasm of the dangerous indulgences of the barbaric Old Regime. Only two more weeks before it was demolished and the site reborn as an apartment complex. Make room, make room—the order of the day. One man and one woman in the 65,000-seat colosseum, where the gladiators of the gridiron once pounded their brains into chronic traumatic encephalopathy for the sadistic-by-proxy delight of millions of citizens brainwashed into depravity by the governing body and its corporate alliances.

The grass on the field was overgrown in some areas and spotty in others—the yard-line markers long since faded. One of the uprights had fallen in the field goal. Staring at the remnant of the crumbling stadium that was once a monument to the nation’s progress in recreation, Malone willed himself back to the Underwood Jennings memories.

“What are we doing here? Had Jennings even seen a stadium?”

“He could have. He would have been seven by the time the amendment came through with the football ban. But that’s not why we came here.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Because it means something to you, to Alex Malone. And we may not get to see it, or any place like this again.”

“It’s depressing.” Malone closed his eyes. He could picture something worse: Underwood Jennings’s childhood. Seeing his mother murdered, enduring torture from abusive foster parents, institutionalized, facing rejection from the most powerful man in the Republic who just had to be his father—it was barely a step above being born No Name Man’s Son.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight, blocking out the meager sun escaping through a crack in the clouds. The corpse floated down the river on its back, white maggots worming out of the eyes, mouth, nose, ears, and all the new orifices they chewed into the face. Not that. Anything but that. A fist hitting his face. Better. But was it a clue? No. Cheers from a home crowd and the chill of an ice rink followed.

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“Think of the house. The murder basement,” Marianne said.

The empty room, the torture, the blood spilling from the slab in the center where a wrinkled elderly victim lay dying. Nothing new.

He opened his eyes and looked back onto the abandoned field.

What would the gridiron combat look like today? Various uniforms united by the color green made up the offensive line—vintage Green Bay Packers bent over at center, flanked by uniforms of the Oregon Ducks and Seattle Seahawks. Maroon showed beneath spray paint that covered the Washington Redskins logo on the helmet of the opposing safety, a member of the vaguely red defense. The 1960s-era Packers center hiked the ball back to the quarterback, and play started. Representing the Philadelphia Eagles, the quarterback cycled backward and tossed the ball to his teammate from the Miami Dolphins, just as he tripped in a bramble of overgrown weeds.

He stumbled down, below the ground, down a flight of concrete steps. An underground facility. A dark corridor.

“There’s something underground,” he said.

“Underground? Where?”

“In a strip mall.” Yes, a strip mall. If he kept his eyes shut, he could retrace his steps from the parking lot down through the secret doorway to the concrete hallway.

“A strip mall where?”

“Cranberry.”



Even before the Revolution, Cranberry was one of the fastest growing communities in the nation. Its new homes, good schools, ample shopping, and accessibility to major roadways attracted young, educated couples looking to create younger people who’d get a better education. The proximity to the Pittsburgh Penguins practice facility attracted Alex Malone to buy one of those new homes. He lived in the six-bedroom new construction property until the pills and the rehab stints cut into the mortgage payments. That attracted the bank. A few local businesses—pizza joints, jewelry stores, bakeries—stood between Republic-wide chains on this six-lane stretch of True Liberty Avenue.

It had been 22 years since this was his home, but it was all still familiar. The mom-and-pop omnivice repair shop dwarfed by the mega grocery store and the Cranberry Cinema.

“That’s it,” he said, pointing to the old theater.

The ticketing line was empty; this was one of the first immersive theater experiences in the city so its experience might not have been on the dull edge. Malone read the sign above the ticket counter, searching for the closest start

time.

“*Waiting for Godot*. Two,” Malone said to the lumpy, bored woman behind the upright tablet. He slid a \$50 bill on the counter. A moment passed before she peeled her beady eyes from the wall and wrapped her nails, so long they curled, around the money.

The excess flesh on her high cheekbones must have been difficult to see past. Her head was down, reading the tablet screen that she touched with her toxic-waste-green nails.

“I’m required to tell you that you’ve just bought a ticket to an immersive feature. You will experience sights, smells, sounds, and tactile sensations during the movie. I am required to ask the following questions relating to *Waiting for Godot*. Are you sensitive to images of cruelty?”

“No.”

The woman raised her painted eyebrows and stared at Marianne.

“Also, no,” Marianne said.

“Do you have any existing injuries or sensitivity in your lower limbs?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Are you allergic to carrots, radishes, turnips, or any other root vegetable?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Are you sensitive to talk of suicide?”

“Definitely no.”

“No.”

“Do you require modifications to the standard 3D glasses?”

“No.”

“No.”

The toxic nail clicked on the screen. She pulled a tiny electronic device, the size and shape of a credit card, out of the drawer beneath the counter and dipped it into a slot on a device wired to the tablet. She handed it to Malone. The LCD screen read, “*Waiting for Godot*, 2:10 p.m., October 17, 2050.”

The concession stand occupied most of the concourse, vendors lined up next to one another behind a sweeping, shimmering red counter. Kosher, Halal, gluten-free, vegetarian, vegan, lactose-free, pescatarian, nut-free, egg-free, soy-free, organic, low-carb, high-carb, fiber-free, red-free, sugar-free, and at the focal point of the circular stand, the first vendor seen by entering theatergoers, junk. A man in a baseball cap stood at the counter, pulling up the waistband of his sweatpants while his head hung low with the shame of a man who buys junk food.

Malone handed his electronic ticket to the centenarian gatekeeper of the immersive screens. The old man yanked it from his grip.

“Theater 10,” he barked. “To your left.”

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The red carpets led to seven immersive theaters in this 30-screen multiplex, as well as a doorway at the end of the hall. Malone pressed the door open and followed Marianne down concrete stairs. Three flights of steps in the poorly lit stairwell before they arrived at the only door in the landing barely wider than his wingspan. He knocked. A voice on an intercom.

“Introduce yourself.”

“Underwood Jennings.”

”One moment.”

Malone waited in the stairwell. Nowhere to go but up. He waited. He was close. There were secrets behind that door. Beneath the eerie, artificial silence, something was happening. Something that no one was supposed to see. The sound of a latch, an echo. The door opened. A man walked out in athletic wear, a jogging suit and sneakers. He was Malone’s age with the kind of face that young women like, not because it’s handsome, but because they think it tells a story. Ladies’ magazines called it rugged. His twisted nose showed it had been broken too many times for complete repair. He was bald, but covered it with a shaved head. Malone knew this man. He’d seen him before.

“Alex?” the man said, approaching him.

Malone lunged and shoved him against the wall. “What are you hiding here? What are you covering?”

“What the hell, Malone? Why’d you make up some weird-ass name?”

“Alex, stop!” Marianne said. She grabbed him by his blazer. Malone ignored her, keeping his hands on the man’s shoulders.

“Where are the witnesses?”

“What are you talking about? Malone, knock it off!”

“How do you know my name?” Malone pushed him harder against the wall. It didn’t have the give of the boards of a rink, but the feeling was the same.

“Alex, don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“Michigan. We weren’t stars, but damn, man, we were sure as hell treated like it. I passed you the puck when you bolted out of the penalty box to get that goal that got us to the Frozen 4. We lost, man, but it’s a hell of a memory.”

Malone let go. He stepped back from the wall. “Ritchie?”

“Yeah, man. Remember I got traded here the year after you... retired. Played another couple years with the Pens before, you know.”

“Harlan Ritchie.”

”Yes!”

Malone started to remember. The Emerald Bar, a couple years back, maybe three. Harlan Ritchie walking in, grabbing a beer. Reminiscing. Jennings’s memories he was desperately trying to conjure must have blurred with the actual memory of seeing Harlan.

“How’d I know about this place?”

“I told you! At the bar that night. About a hidden place that I thought you’d find interesting. Not as a cop, but as the Alex Malone that I knew. A place where you could be yourself.”

“Fuck, man. I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK. You finally showed. Man, everyone will be so thrilled to see you. I’m Harlan Ritchie.” He extended his hand to Marianne. She shook it.

“Marianne,” she said.

“Everyone?” Malone asked.

“Come with me.” Ritchie turned and unlocked the lone door. The door swung open to reveal another gray hallway with the same drab, dark aesthetic as the stairwell. Ritchie turned back. “Come on.”

They followed him into the hallway. After about 50 paces was another door. Ritchie unlocked it with a different key from his overburdened key chain and pushed it open to reveal another stairwell, this one going up. Another door at the top. Another lock. Another metal key turning the knob. Another hallway.

“What is this place?”

“You’ll see,” Ritchie said. “You really oughta get checked out.”

“Yeah, I have. That’s the only reason I even remembered this much.”

“Shit, man. Sounds like it’s been rough.”

“It’s harder when your mind works.”

“I know the feeling,” Ritchie said as he unlocked the door.

Malone followed, and they stepped through the doorway. A scraping sound, the concussive boom of vulcanized rubber hitting a plastic wall, a shout. He overlooked a rink. It wasn’t the pristine practice facility that represented what was at the time the latest in sports training technology, but it was the first working hockey rink Malone had seen since the Revolution. Men and women wearing now-vintage sweaters skated on the ice, slapping pucks at goals at both ends of the rink. They didn’t appear to be on teams but engaging in almost a pre-game skate. A player in a Penguins sweater skated toward the goal, her ponytail swinging over the name MALONE above the 67 on her back. She slowed and smacked the puck past the outstretched glove of the goalie and into the back of the net.

“My daughter,” Ritchie said. “Seventeen now. She’s a big fan.”

“She’s good.”

“I know she is,” Ritchie said. “It’s too bad.”

“Who are the rest of them?” Marianne asked. Fourteen skaters smacked pucks on the ice.

“Friends. Aggs. You name it. Everyone the world left behind.”

“How’d you find them?” She appeared mesmerized. Without the Alex Malones of the sport, it was a beautiful game, fluid and graceful.

“They’re not hard to spot. Spend a lot of time in bars, staying to themselves. They’ve had so much shame that they’d rather be forgotten than be hated

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again.”

“This isn’t about hockey, is it, Harlan?” Malone asked.

“It is for me, man. It is for me. This is all I’ve ever wanted. But if things have to change for the nation to get this back, then I guess that’s the way it is. Some folks here, they’re not too happy with the way things are. They don’t think the People have gave them a fair shake.

“See number 14 over there? He sold his son’s tickets to the Necklips on Chatter, calling his son a spoiled brat who didn’t deserve them. People didn’t think that it was moist to shame a kid like that. So they called him out on that, showed up at his house until the Committee got his case. Cast out of Cincinnati. The whole family’s here now. I’m not saying what he did was right, but he’s here now. Number 22 is the son.

“But me? It’s not ideological. I just wanna skate, man. Maybe hit someone once in a while. My Crista’s like that, too. All things being equal doesn’t really work out when you’re good at this, when you love this.”

“Is it worth the risk?” Marianne asked.

“You just gotta meet everyone,” Ritchie said as he beckoned Malone to follow him. Ritchie walked down a short flight of steps that took him past the three rows of benches that surrounded the rink—a hopeful dream that if he built it, spectators would come. But the stadium was empty except for the 14 skaters. At ice level, Ritchie opened a door in the boards between the two benches. He blew a whistle—a last puck hit the goalpost, and play stopped.

“Everyone, listen up a minute. We’ve got a special visitor today. My old friend. My former college teammate. We just missed being teammates in the pros. If it hadn’t been so long, I’d say he needs no introduction. Alex Malone.”

The players stared. His name still meant something. He looked at Crista, her teenage face in a state of pleasant shock beneath her helmet. She looked down at her skates when Malone met her eyes.

“You can talk, guys and gals,” Ritchie said. “It’s not every day we get a guest like Malone-y here.”

“I hear they call you a pig,” a skater in a black sweatshirt over his pads said.

“They do,” Malone replied.

“And a goon,” the skater continued.

“That, too.”

“That’s arid, dude.”

“I guess it is,” Malone said.

“You can’t guess,” the skater said. “It is. It’s fucked up and arid as camel shit that you get bullied for who you are just because you’re something that they don’t like. You *earned* the trophies that everyone gets just for participating. You got to the top. That’s what it’s all supposed to be about! Equality, motherfucker. Just not for those who may be better at something. Instead, you get shamed for who you are, for hurting others when they don’t understand why. Misunder-

stood, dude. Jumping to conclusions without knowing the whole story. Taking shit out of context. You didn't massacre innocent people; you hit other professional athletes. You're not the problem. You're a symbol, dude. And it's arid and fucked up."

"He'd be the next Speaker if he could stop saying 'motherfucker,'" Ritchie whispered.

"He's right," Malone said. He raised his voice to address the room. "People don't know what it's like to live in disgrace. They don't know what happens in the Maze. They don't know what happens when one little thing that they did, or didn't even do, tears down everything they have. They just hope every day that it doesn't happen to them. Maybe if they knew."

A beeping echoed around the room. Malone's omnivice vibrated in his pocket. As he reached for it, Marianne pulled hers out as well.

"Oh shit," Ritchie said.

Malone pulled out his phone and held it in front of his face. It might as well have been him. "MARIANNE ROTH" flashed on the screen above her photo and the words

"Wanted before the District of Pittsburgh Tribunal for offenses against the People."

PART III

Show my head to the people. It's well worth seeing.

-Last words of Georges Danton





Back above ground, they were vulnerable. With an official alert out, Marianne couldn't be seen anywhere. And there was only so much longer that he could pull off these disguises, courtesy of Crista Ritchie. Her small hands, that looked so strong and quick as they flicked puck after puck into the net, quivered as she shaved his beard into aggressive sideburns.

He left his casual gray suit at the rink, replaced by denim bellbottoms with a minimal amount of restraint on the bells. Crista wouldn't make eye contact even when she told him that this was all they had for a man standing six-foot five, and there was no time for an emergency tailoring. The button-down shirt was blue paisley. He'd asked for a dark chest toupee to complete the look, but Crista just glanced at him with confusion, blushed, and looked away. The only thing he retained from his initial appearance was his shoes.

Marianne wore a long, dark wig and bellbottoms with a plain white shirt. She looked like a Ted Bundy victim, but that didn't matter. He was one of the few she didn't have to worry about.

"You're well prepared here," she had said.

"Dad has us plan for the worst," Crista told the floor. "It's not a long-term solution, but it buys some time to take care of business."

"You want to know why I got the alert?" Marianne asked.

"Doesn't matter."

"I was doing my job. Trying to help people. Like you. I want you to know that you're doing everything right."

Crista didn't respond. She looked at Marianne, then around the room, at everything but Alex Malone.

Marianne Roth was last seen with a tall bearded man who brutally attacked a father of two who was trying to do his civic duty in Squirrel Hill. As they drove, her whereabouts were amended to include a sighting disembarking from an old Jeep—such a piece of crap that it had to be a police vehicle—at a strip mall in Cranberry.

They double-parked the Jeep in Pittsburgh's North Side and walked to the light-rail station where they could disappear among the People and book passage under the Allegheny River back to downtown. People in casual business attire passed through the automatic glass doors into the station, the evening rush from the riverfront office park. Chatter had a satellite office here, as it did in 12 metropolitan areas, where developers envisioned more features to add more strands to the web that connected every citizen in the Republic.

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Smart filters that detect sarcasm or irony in a Chit. Prescreening for user-defined trigger terms. A gauge that detects potential aggression in a Chit that asks a Chatter user to be sure whether or not to publish. Innovations to add to the Outrage Gauge, the central feature that led to the dominance of Chatter over other networks.

The office workers filtered into the light-rail station, five or six at a time through the automatic doors. What are two hippies in a crowd like this? Finding an opening after three young women in button-down blouses of varying patterns, Malone slipped into the light-rail station. The walls were that anti-septic white that gave those who'd experienced numerous surgical procedures a sense of dread. The escalator took the throngs of commuters below ground to the rail platform where another crowd awaited the train. Some scrolled through their omnivices, catching up on the Chatter of the day, weighing in on that fugitive Mengele of a nurse. Some talked to a friend, a stranger, another commuter dressed for eight hours in a cubicle. No one struck up conversation with the hippies. They'd have nothing to offer a business crowd.

Three slender trains purred in and out of the station before Malone wedged his bellbottoms between the passengers into a car. He held on to the pole, Marianne's face concealed under his arm, averting his eyes from the other citizens. A woman in a pastel pink suit sidled up next to him and wrapped her hand around the pole, just over Marianne's head. A sudden movement could dislodge the wig. She looked at Malone, and his heart beat through the paisley shirt. She couldn't be vigilant—look at that suit. She was too busy to be on the lookout for aggs. She just wanted to get home, didn't want to be a hero today. She shifted her weight and looked back down at her shoes. Any one of these citizens packed like cattle on the train could make the report. Any one could be responsible for sending Marianne to the Maze, and Malone likely to follow. Such power to an individual, such a rush, to be able to damn someone that they'd never met. To be the hero of the day. How good it must feel to know that you were responsible for such justice, to be the embodiment of the law.

That portly fellow, slouched in his seat, staring at his omnivice—he could be reading the alert right now, having missed it while at the office, hoping that he'd get lucky and happen to spot the aggressor. That this would be the day that he, the sloucher on the subway, would be the flannel-clad arm of the law. He tapped his omnivice and scrolled with his finger, never removing his gaze from the screen.

The train glided to a stop. The flower children maneuvered around a slender woman with the proportions of a stock photo model, and exited the train as a dozen workers rushed the door to fill their place. The platform in this downtown station held another couple hundred commuters, packed shoulder to shoulder as if they were waiting for a big silver ball to drop. But

there was no occasion, no celebration other than the quotidian sigh of relief that another workday was complete. That was a benefit of working in an old warehouse in a weird part of town.

The gaping circumference of the bells on the bottoms of his pants brushed against the steps as Malone ascended back to street level. The day had turned to night since the beginning of their underground sojourn. Grant Street was teeming with humanity. They shuffled past the hippie on the sidewalk, hurrying up to wait for the Shaxi that would be stuck at every light while the pedestrians crossed, or to get to their cars that would be trapped in a garage while the Shaxis and other cars inched down the two lanes in each direction. Every day required an escape. Did they ever feel, trapped inches yet an hour away from the exit, that they would never emerge from the garage?

The pedestrians were outpacing the vehicles. They walked through the uptown neighborhood that served as a dubious gateway between downtown and the student-occupied Oakland. The street was dark, illuminating only when their presence triggered the lights towering from the sidewalks. Old tenement homes, a few had lights on. Even the dark ones had cars parked in front. People lived there, just keeping the lights off.

“Pick up the pace,” Malone said.

“No, that makes us look suspicious.”

“The only thing these people have is something to gain. A report of the whereabouts of the week’s most notorious agg? Maybe that’d be enough to get them some endorsements, get them out of the slums.”

“Is that really all the People have become? Turning on each other to save themselves?”

“How many times have you voted guilty just because you know more innocent votes will look suspicious?” Malone asked as he quickened his pace. She was almost running to keep up with his long stride. “I find that aggression appalling. Look what a good citizen I am. I can never be an agg.”

“There’s hope. If they stop living in fear. Maybe another revolution will do it.”

“Or maybe they’ll start lynching aggs in the streets.”

They walked in silence. Malone missed physical currency. If the dollar was still paper, he could have handed it to the Shari driver without scanning his omnivice and alerting a virtuous driver that aggs were in the vehicle.

The pants felt tighter with every step, the coarse fabric of the shirt cuffs scratching his wrists. His feet hurt from walking a mile in his own shoes.



He didn’t know how long they’d been walking. He didn’t know how many

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times the omnivice buzzed in his pocket, but that could only mean mentions on Chatter. And a lot of them. It wasn't until they were safe in the Emerald Bar basement that he looked.

Henry.Young: The agg is with a giant man with a beard. He had something wooden in his hand when he hit me. I think his finger was taped. That Neanderthal must have hit someone recently.

Seven.Drake: Toxic masculinity rears its ugly head.

Mulva.Chapman: The man you're looking for is Alex Malone. He was with the agg this afternoon when he attacked a doctor, a patient undergoing brain treatment, and terrified a small epileptic child! And get this, citizens: He's a cop.

Henry.Young: I should have known. That level of brutality can only mean a pig. I can't imagine how bad it would have been had I been a minority.

Franklin.Dillard: Alex Malone is no longer a cop. He has been terminated from the department. The Pittsburgh Police are here to serve our fellow citizens.

Sunshine.Adler: Shut up, pig.

Mulva.Chapman: FYI, his Chatter profile says he's brain damaged, but that's outdated. He's been treated. Have at him.

Outrage level 5.

"Give it til morning," Malone said. "I'll be at the Tribunal with you."

"If you talk like that, you'll force yourself to believe it," Marianne said. They were sitting on the mattress on the floor. As bar basements went, it wasn't all that bad. As Sammy explained, sometimes he stayed down here on late nights when the particularly dubious customers were a tough crowd to persuade to go home.

"What else is there to believe?" Malone took a swig from the bottle of bourbon. Sammy hadn't been happy about it, but it's not like the hand pain left because the day had.

"That you'll finish this. That the people will know who their leaders really are. No lie is that good. No truth stays buried forever."

"And what if it does? We'll both be in the Maze, dead and used for science experiments."

"If that happens, we'll take precautions," Marianne said.

"How?"

"I'll start talking. What else can they do to me? I'll put it on Chatter, evidence be damned. The attention's on me. Maybe some people out there like the ones in Cranberry have the guts to look into it, not just dismiss it as the ramblings of a desperate agg."

"You're acting like a martyr."

"What choice do I have? I'm going to the Tribunal tomorrow. I'll get the Maze. People get the Maze all the time, even ones that the leaders don't know

are looking into them.”

“You don’t know that,” Malone said.

“Oh, come on. Swanson’s the one that started all of this outrage at me. He’s just manipulating the system again. I bet he’ll show up tomorrow just to gloat.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I gave him a good scare last night.”

Silence. Malone lay back on the bed. “Who knew with all this connection that the hardest part would be getting the message out to the People?”

Marianne collapsed next to him. “We’ll figure it out. There are more people like us out there.”

Malone rolled onto his side and stroked her cheek. “There’s no one like you out there. I’ve been around a long time. Met a lot of women. There’s no one like you.”

“Bullshit. They’re just not open about it. For good reason.”

“That’s precisely why they’re not you.” Malone ran his taped finger through her short hair.

She turned to face him, and her fingers caressed his chest above the paisley shirt buttons. Maybe it was the bourbon or the last night before becoming a science project or that he finally wasn’t alone, but Malone leaned in and did something he hadn’t done in years; he kissed her slightly open mouth.



Minutes, maybe hours, maybe days had passed before Malone awoke. He blinked his eyes open, stretched his arm that was wrapped around Marianne’s waist over his head. She rolled onto her back.

“Good whatever time of day it is,” she said.

“How long have you been awake?”

“A while. I’ll get us some coffee from the bar. We need to be sharp for today.” She kissed him on the mouth before rolling off the mattress and sliding her feet into her shoes. She walked up the steps, and Malone sat up on the mattress. He checked the omnivice.

His outrage level was still at 5. You can’t be outraged while you sleep. There was more vitriol, but Malone didn’t read it. He tapped through to Marianne’s profile. The agg had shared some pictures during the night. Two photos side by side that could have been twins. One was captioned, “Our fearless leader.” The other said, “Maze victim.”

Marianne.Roth: Roger Leech. Claudia McNamara. Missing from the Joe Biden Center for Natural Aging. Abducted by Underwood Jennings and

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Dillon Swanson.

Marianne.Roth: Ask the Speaker why he looks so much like Underwood Jennings.

Marianne.Roth: Amanda Jennings, murdered 2030.

He reached down and pulled his borrowed clothes from the floor. He sat back down on the bed and put on his pants, one belled leg after the other. He pulled on his ribbed white tank top, in which he would never ever beat a woman, leaving the paisley button-down in a heap on the floor where it belonged.

He waited. Waited more. Marianne didn't reappear. Malone walked up the stairs. The bar was empty. No coffee brewing. No Marianne. He tapped to Chatter, the Marianne Roth conversation.

King.James: The agg is here to face her punishment! We are all safe from her aggressions. All hail the Hammer! May he bestow his harshest justice!



For all his years being the last vestige of the old laws, Malone had never been in the Tribunal. His testimony was never worth enough to be presented. All he knew of the Tribunal was what he saw on the judiciary feeds when his vote was required to help to decide guilt. Marianne would face the Hammer, the guiltiest of all. The Tribunal was downtown, a short ride in a Shaxi. It didn't matter now. The People would know where he was when he arrived in court.

Malone looked out the window. The bright sun exposed the sadness in uptown. Throngs on each corner, waiting for a crowded Shaxi to take them to a menial job where they'd work each day and come back to two crumbling rooms in a stretch of road that offered nothing to do. It would have been much easier to be one of them. Anonymous. Living to get through each day, each week, each monthly rent cycle. Micro-goals, basic subsistence, a modest life. No fame, no glory, no expectations to fail, no disappointment. No notoriety, no outrage level.

"You should be ashamed of yourself." You triggered a seizure in that kid. You storm outta there, he starts going into convulsions on the floor. Smacked his head on the ground. Got a concussion. Maybe gave him brain damage. Probably scarred him for life. Not too fair to that kid, is it? Just four years old and already seen brutality." The matron in the seat across the aisle held her gaze on Malone until he finally met her eyes. She turned back to looking straight ahead at the skyscrapers of downtown that lurked outside of the forgotten uptown blight. They passed the rest of the short trip in silence.

After a playoff road win, the most committed Penguins fans—younger

women whose fandom had sexual undertones, parents with fanatical children, middle-aged men who had developed a one-sided pathological devotion to the team over decades of personnel changes—waited for the team at the airport. They crowded the area outside of security with love notes scrawled on poster board and screams and sometimes tears. They pushed each other to get closest to the greatness that emanated from the hockey team. They wanted to touch the players, to make sure that the million-dollar men knew just how loved they were, how important they were to the city.

As large a crowd was waiting at the Tribunal, shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk in front of the old Lutheran church. They were shouting in the direction of the old church that housed the Tribunal. From Malone’s vantage point, it appeared that the stained glass window had inspired the outrage.

“Enemy! Elitist! Get lost in the Maze!”

“I hope you get raped in the Maze and they subject you to experimental medical procedures.”

“How do you live with yourself?”

“I love it when aggs get justice!”

They waved their signs.

“Charlatan!”

“Good luck selling your snake oil in the Maze.”

“When an agg like you gets caught = Happy people.”

“To the Maze!”

He hopped out of the Shaxi and elbowed through the crowd. Over the heads and between the signs, people were shoving their way into the building. They stopped at the six steps leading to the door. Then he saw it: Marianne yanked into the air like a rag doll.

“Make room! Make room!” a voice shouted from behind his shoulder, over the angry din of invective. The small platform atop the steps narrowed into a double doorway. The horde on the stairs and on the platform parted mere inches from the center, allowing just enough of a path to wedge the aggressor to justice.

Marianne was on her feet, standing taller now that she was on the steps. At the top, the crush shoved her forward, and she stumbled into the doorway.

The crowd was too dense to see the ground. Malone tripped as his toes collided with the side of the sidewalk. He toppled forward into the mob, caught himself on the shoulders of a sign waver. They stepped on the bells of his jeans. Malone jerked his legs into marching steps and kicked. He committed several penalties: elbowing, checking from behind, kneeling, tripping, even a slew foot. Whatever. He was through the door.

In the foyer, the lucky throng that made it to the show of the week grabbed Marianne’s arms, flailing, smacking, slapping as the officers of the court led the aggressor on her walk of shame to the Tribunal doors. Malone joined the

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group, reaching his long arms over the others to get his turn at making the agg feel small and scared.

“The Maze is too good for you!”

They pushed her into the courtroom where the spectators in the nave raged just as their compatriots did outside the doors. Under the cacophony of shaming, a hiss was like static distortion. Sustained hissing—that took commitment. The rage rose 30 feet, colliding with the vaulted ceiling and plummeting back down to the pews on each side of the center aisle.

The citizens marched Marianne up to the Defendant’s Cage in the center of the altar where she was to stand, head hung in shame in a metal cage, through the duration of the trial. She’d be shown on the court’s feed, alone in the miniature prison cell, a pariah with bars between herself and the People. Every inch of every pew was occupied, or would be when the trial audience sat down. The spectators remained standing, arms waving, their vitriol echoing through the nave. Malone stayed in the back. Standing room only. It would offer him an easier path to the altar to act as witness for the defense when he decided he was called.

The trial attendees were a mixed group of every variable—race, color, age, gender, lack of gender, height, weight, hair thickness, eye color. Yet the expression on all their faces was the same. The rage that bubbled out of their throats carried just semantic differences of the same sentiment: Down with the agg.

The crowd silenced. The Hammer, his enormity ensconced in the black robes of justice, trundled onto the altar from the arched doorway at the left of the chapel. He sat down on the bench behind the desk, his careful descent into the seat becoming a three-inch free fall at the end. He banged the oversize silver gavel for which he was named. The crowd roared. He was grayer now but still the icon that he was at the height of the Revolution. Red-faced, double-chinned with heavy muttonchops down the sides of his round face, his gray hair was just as wild atop his head. The robes couldn’t hide the renowned heathen’s gut earned through decades of feasting on food, drink, and women.

The Hammer let out a prolonged burp. No man expelled mouth gas quite like the Hammer. He cleared his throat, jiggling his illustrious chins. How much effort was expended cultivating such a regal look? A shame that gout had been eradicated, because it would have completed the character.

“Fellow citizens,” the Hammer boomed from behind his podium, his mouth a tiny hole in his enormous face. “We call this court today to find this woman guilty or not guilty. Should she be found guilty of crimes against the People, she shall be sentenced. I am merely an agent of the court. The power to decide is in your hands. You are justice today as you are every day. Let the trial commence!” The Hammer banged his signature gavel, and the crowd

roared in applause.

“Marianne Roth, you stand accused of using your status as a nurse to perform medical experiments on the elderly. This is a serious offense to the population. Not only is this an abuse of your credentials, but it is a cruel reminder of the traumatic experiences of minorities who themselves were unwilling subjects in medical experiments. Do you understand the consequences of your actions?”

“Yes,” Marianne said in her cage. “Unlike you. Yes, I understand that actions have consequences.”

“There will be no elaborating!” the Hammer bellowed. The crowd hissed. “I call the first witness. Dontavius Vega.”

Dontavius Vega? The man was large, stuffed into his shirt, the collar about to cut off the circulation to his head. Nervous, he looked at his feet as he stood on the altar next to the agg in the cage.

“Dontavius Vega, please describe your role in the Republic.”

“I’m a security guard at the Joe Biden Center for Natural Aging.”

“Describe your relationship to Marianne Roth.”

“She was a nurse at the center.”

“And what aroused your suspicions?”

“Our center’s Eyes got fired. She made some comments, real bad comments about the juves at the center. I seen Marianne chasing after the Eyes right after they canned her for being the judging agg she is, then she shows up on that video from the restaurant.”

“And what else do you know about Miss Roth from your time working with her?”

“She was always getting real close to the seniors. Like giving them special treatments and shit. They’d have to pay for it, and that was fucked up because it was a lot of money. More than I’d be able to afford! Like she was only nice to the old rich people. Never had time for some security guard like me.”

“Elitist!”

“Bourgeoise!”

“Yeah!” Vega continued. “Never said a kind word to me. Just kept selling these weird treatments to the old folks with big wallets and no minds!”

“But you didn’t report the treatments?” the Hammer asked.

“No. I mean, sir, I didn’t know they were bad, like that bad.”

“You’re not on our side!”

A woman with a full head of white hair lobbed an orthotic oxford shoe at Vega, hitting him in the cushioned shoulder.

“She was hiding her behavior, sir! Performing the experiments in secret and shit.”

“Lies!”

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The heads in the pews turned to the back of the chapel.

“It’s all lies,” Malone said. “She was doing her job, and you all know that. All of you. She swore to protect them and keep them in the best health, and that’s what she did. That’s all she did. She kept your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents alive and as well as they could be. And you, Vega. She didn’t talk to you because you’re a fucking moron. And a coward.”

“Who do we have here, citizens?” the Hammer’s voice boomed.

“It’s Alex Malone! The violent pig who assaulted me and my family!” Henry Young stood in the third row of the pulpit, and pointed at Malone.

The crowd hissed.

“Well, Officer Malone, you’ve interrupted an official judicial procedure to spew your hate,” the Hammer said. “My fellow citizens, does this seem undermining to our system to you?”

“Put him in a cage!”

“He’s an agg, too!”

“Does this not outrage you?” the Hammer asked.

The crowd went silent again as they had when the mighty judge and executioner had entered the room. They were buried in their omnivices.

“There! Outrage level 9!”

“Put him on trial!”

“To the Maze!”

Hands shot up in the air waving their glowing screens in the bright room like Sy Sugar’s Soundproof Basement fans during their ballad of “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” on top of a slowed version of “All About That Bass.”

“Well, citizens, it looks like we have a double trial!” The Hammer banged his gavel. The crowd went wild.

The other standing-room spectators grabbed Malone, and he shrugged them off, striding forward down the aisle. He’d bring himself to the cage. No one would throw him in. It’d be like the penalty box.

A young man in a bandana pulled down his cargo shorts and bent over, unleashing a hostile fart of the silent variety. The crowd cheered and laughed.

“Brute!”

“Someone should give you a seizure!”

“You deserve brain damage, not that kid in the office!”

“Someone should hit you in the face so you know how it feels!”

The cage was open, inviting him in with Marianne. He ducked through the door and stepped inside. Marianne shook her head at him.

“We resume the proceedings! I call the second witness. Henry Young.”

Henry squeezed through the rapt spectators in his row, maneuvering around the cardboard signs in their laps. The boy, Magnesium, trailed. He stepped onto the altar, holding his son’s hand. His jaw was swollen, the tooth still missing. Hopefully it had rolled into the sewer with the omnivice.

“How did you come into contact with Miss Roth and Officer Malone?”

“My son, this astute little citizen here, spotted the agg on the street in Squirrel Hill. We, along with my wife and daughter who are so traumatized that they couldn’t make it here today for fear of triggering horrifying memories, attempted to confront her about her hateful actions. That’s when Officer Malone punched me in the face and stabbed me with a wooden stick. He knocked out my tooth and stole my omnivice.”

The crowd gasped.

“And what did he do to your son, the hero who recognized the agg?”

“Both of them terrified him. Miss Roth led my boy into the woods where she would have done unspeakable experiments on him had I not arrived. We were deciding which of my brave children would have the honor of reporting Officer Malone for his violent aggression when Miss Roth attacked my daughter, traumatizing her.”

“Brutes!”

“Haters!”

“Bigots!”

“Pigs!”

The crowd was gone, their muffled voices chanting random condemnations behind the white light. They were lucky he was in this cage. Malone grabbed the bars of the cage and squeezed.

The laughter brought him back.

“Look! The agg is trying to get out!”

“What effect did this assault have on you and your family, Mr. Young?”

“It made me fear for my family’s safety. Now I think, every time we take a walk that we could again be victims of an angry, violent man with a badge like Officer Malone. My children know the danger that they are in just trying to find their place in the citizenry.”

“How about you, Magnesium Young?” the Hammer asked, his voice softer when addressing the child, the same tone he would use to tell a four-year-old not to say a thing about the dead mother on the floor. You didn’t hear it, you didn’t see it. How absurd it would seem without any proof.

“I’m scared, sir. I’m afraid of what will happen when I try to be me. I just want to help the Republic. I’m a good citizen. And now I’m very afraid that big, bad men won’t let me.”

The members of the audience stood in the pews and clapped, a soft, respectful golf clap. Henry rubbed his son’s shoulder. The applause was louder. Cheering.

“You’re a hero, Magnesium!”

“Good vibes for the Young family!”

“Magnesium doesn’t deserve that! The agg does!”

“Down with the patriarchy!”

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“Punish the agg!”

“He’s a monster! And probably racist, too!”

“The agg deserves his tooth knocked out!”

The Hammer swung his gavel, silencing the crowd.

“Thank you, Mr. Young and Magnesium. I think I can speak for everyone in attendance when I send my well wishes to your family.”

Henry nodded and took his son’s hand. They were walking toward the door on the side of the nave when it swung open. The courtroom gasped, sucking in all the air to give way to silence.

The Speaker strode onto the altar. Henry’s eyes widened as he nearly collided with the man who’d united a splintered nation. Magnesium’s mouth gaped open. He pointed. The Speaker knelt down on one knee in his modest gray suit, still the everyman.

“You have a great future, little man. Do not let the terrible behavior of one man ruin your expectations or your happiness. You have every opportunity, son. And your father is very proud of you,” the Speaker said, placing his hand on Magnesium’s head. The child was ecstatic. For such an involved little citizen, it must have been like meeting Mario Lemieux, Han Solo, and Mickey Mouse rolled into one.

“I’m very proud of the man you’ve become,” the Speaker said. He was behind his desk now in his office, addressing Malone. “It takes moxie to come here. You’ve tracked me down after all these years. And I’ll get you anything you need to make you complete.”

“I have these urges, Dad,” Jennings said. “And if they’re not met, I’ll lose it. And I’ll be sent to the Maze for sure. What kind of life would that be for me? After all I’ve been through. There have been a lot of people like me. Their mothers trade them to strangers for a pint of beer. Or make them dress as little girls. People who have been through bad things like I have, they have these urges. And they wind up in prison because no one helped them control it and gave them an outlet for it. Their sad lives were unfulfilled. I have ideas, Dad. Ideas for great inventions that would be my legacy. If only I can get these urges under control until your Ministry of Ideas gets them out there.”

“You are a citizen of the Republic of America. And you are my son. You will not be sent to the Maze. I will do everything in my power to help you channel these urges and keep you safe. Let me introduce you to my most trusted associate, who can get you anything you need.” The Speaker pressed a button on his desk. “Dillon, would you please come to my office. There’s someone here I want you to meet.”

The memory dissipated. The Speaker stood up from the floor in the chapel. He stepped onto the altar and turned to the audience. Without looking at Malone, he pointed to the aggs in the cage.

“This man is a lie. It’s his sworn duty to protect and serve the people, and

what has he done? He's intimidated and frightened them. He's used his position for his sadistic purposes. He's terrorized and inflicted pain on innocents because it's his way. He's abused his power, his authority, his privilege. And he's hurt a little boy."

"You're in no position to talk about hurting little boys!" Marianne shouted. "Not after what you did to your own son!"

"It is a tragedy of my lifetime of public service that I had no children, Miss Roth. Everyone knows that."

"Shut up, agg!"

"Let him speak!"

"Stop your lies!"

"Thank you, citizens," the Speaker said. "As I was saying, Alex Malone defends aggs like this accusing, hateful woman here. It didn't matter how many people were hurt, as long as his agg girlfriend could walk free and he could get what he wanted whenever he wanted it. Tell me, is that the way we wanted to live? In fear of violent, toxic men who will hurt anyone in their way? Is that what we wanted of our nation? To have the few with the badge use power over the rest? This man and his behavior threaten to undo everything that we've worked for.

"Tell me, my people. What would you do with such a man?"

"To the Maze!" The courtroom thundered.

The Speaker nodded. He lowered his head. Malone stared at the nemesis who delivered the damning speech. The Speaker looked down at the floor, without the hubris of a man who had just won a major battle for his cause.

"What about all that you promised, Speaker? Everything I was born into, that I should have had? You're just going to take it away? Break another promise, what? Is it for the good of the Republic again? Like what happened in that house in Cheswick 20 years ago?"

The Speaker finally glanced at him, the faintest pique of interest. He averted his gaze to survey the room, his loyal constituents, his citizens, his minions. If he told them to, they would tear each other to shreds in a battle royale with mutually assured destruction. So, why the look of melancholia?

"The People have spoken," the Hammer said as he delivered his gavel to the podium with a deafening blow. "The votes are in. The Maze!"

Rousing applause and shouts erupted in the courtroom.

"And Miss Roth? Even aggs they are, can we separate the happy couple?"

"The Maze!"

He slammed the gavel to the podium again. "To the Maze for Marianne Roth!"

A slender woman in her 40s who could have been a school administrator, opened the door of the cage. Hands grabbed Malone's arms, pulling him out of the cage. More on his back and shoulders shoving him down the three

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steps from the altar into the aisle. He twisted his neck but couldn't see Marianne. He stumbled past the Speaker, turning his head to look the man in the eyes. Sad, not like the rejoicing crowd.

"This just made my day! I love when an agg gets what's coming to him."

"Look at him in those bellbottoms. He's never gonna make it out of the Maze."

"I hope there's a good one next. I'll be here all day. This is too much fun."

"Shit, we're on a roll today. He was even better than the girl."

"Ooh, we've got the woman who made the AIDS joke next!"

"Hell yeah, I can't wait to give her what's coming to her. I mean, the second best thing to having her raped and infected."

"I wonder if they'll put AIDS in the Maze just for her."

"Oh, that would be so moist, wouldn't it?"

"That would be so moist it would be dripping!"

The Speaker walked back toward the altar, but couldn't escape Malone's icy scowl that only disappeared when the agg was back out the front door.



The floor was damp in the holding cell. How did the moisture penetrate the concrete walls? It must have been from Dillon Swanson, dragging his waterlogged corpse out of the river to take its place lying on the floor. Malone sat on a cinder block, the only furnishing of the lonely room. His hand throbbed. He peeled the duct tape from his finger. The broken, splintered coffee stirrer came off with it. The finger was alternately purple and ghostly white. It didn't matter now. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. No more questions to be asked. This was the last stop before the Maze.

The metal door creaked as it opened. The Speaker entered the cell. He towered over the much more formidable Malone on his short seat. He didn't have the composure of the man in the courtroom, as if he was out of his element when it was real conversation.

"You've still got the cut on your lip where he hit you," Malone said. "It looked painful. I could feel his rage. And I get it. No matter how many victims you could promise him or how many of his stupid ideas you'd push into prototypes, it would never be enough."

"I heard about this treatment, but I doubted that it would be a success," he said.

"Oh, it worked. I wish it didn't. Then I probably would have killed myself by now, on my own terms with no secrets to share. Instead, I'm here with you, and for once in my life, I know that I've got important things to do. And everything I know will die with me because you're sure as hell not going to

finally be a man.”

“And what do you know?”

“I know you’re about as full of it as a constipated bull,” Malone said. “I know that you knocked up Amanda Jennings and she gave birth to Underwood Jennings. I know she was murdered in front of you. I know that McCord didn’t act alone when he killed the Watcher. I know you and the Hammer orchestrated his assassination, probably to cover up for your offense. I know your son had a hell of a childhood—watching his mother die, then getting abused in one foster home after the other. It’s no wonder he turned out like he did. I know he found you two decades later and your men helped get Super Seniors for him to torture. But your son got greedy. He wasn’t happy with just the victims or the apartment anymore; he wanted to be known. He wanted to be seen as a brilliant inventor.

“Problem is, all his ideas were bad. There was only so much longer you could expedite stupid requests through the Ministry of Ideas before people started asking questions. So you had your boy Swanson photograph him acting ignorant, doing something you knew would get the outrage level up. And you sent your son to the Maze. I know he’s dead. And I know that when you die in the Maze, your remains go to medicine, like proteins from your brain go to some brain-damaged pariahs who don’t qualify for the good stuff.”

“You know a lot.”

“What I don’t know is why you didn’t just accept responsibility at the time. Why you didn’t admit that Underwood Jennings was your son and raise him as your own. This whole thing just seems so pointless.”

“Who would you want to lead you, Mr. Malone? Someone like you? Someone like the majority?”

“I don’t know. I was on a bender for most of the Revolution. Politics aren’t my thing.”

“When you were in school, what did you learn about Abraham Lincoln?”

“He freed the slaves, was on the right side of the Civil War,” Malone said. “He was everyone’s favorite president, with JFK, too.”

“Right,” the Speaker said. “That’s what I learned as well. Lincoln was a hero, a great American. Now we know that he was a racist, and he’s been all but erased from our history books. Freeing the slaves wasn’t good enough in hindsight because he may have agreed with some beliefs of his time that said that blacks were lesser humans.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. What’s your point?”

“Leaders cannot be flawed, Mr. Malone. The People will find out your weaknesses, and that’s all that they’ll remember. That will define you. Most people will tell you they want the everyman, someone just like them. They say they want a man, or a woman, who has been where they are.

“But that’s not what they want. As much as they bitch and proselytize on

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Chatter, they know when it comes to it that they cannot lead a people. They wouldn't want to. They want to be led. People want to be led. They don't want to follow some schmuck who spends his weekends mowing his lawn and picking loose change out of the sofa, glued to the feeds. They want someone who is nothing like them. They want someone who's figured out how to put his pants on both legs at once.

"The People cheat on their sickbed-ridden wives and impregnate vulnerable young women. They don't follow men who do. They follow men who have not experienced their everyday woes, but great tragedies—the romance of the century with the ultimate heartbreak. I don't know where they've been because I can sympathize with their stupid decisions and series of minor shortcomings. They can sympathize with me because I've been lower than them by no fault of my own. I hit rock bottom and came out smelling sweet."

"You ruined your son."

"And I live with that every day. I also stood by while they murdered the woman I loved. I helped convince an innocent man to martyr himself for a non-existent cause. I helped my twisted, sadistic son gain dozens of victims to torture to death. And then I had him killed. I deserve to be where you are."

"All that you just said, that's what makes you a bad person," Malone said. "It's not about the words. Those are just words. Your actions define you."

"I helped to save a nation."

"And you destroyed the people who mattered the most," Malone said. "See, let's just say we're all good men. A nation of good men. We protect what is ours, not trying to speak for anyone else. If we all did that, we wouldn't need a voice. We wouldn't need you."

"You're not as smart as you think you are, Mr. Malone."

"I'm brain damaged. I don't think I'm very smart at all."

"But you still think that it is your place to decide what is best for all people. Even if it is just the individual as you just said. You're still attempting to dictate the behavior of all people in this Republic. You think that each voice matters. It doesn't. It's only when all voices shout together that they have an influence. And it's not about the words they scream—no one can understand those anyway. It's just about volume, Mr. Malone. A critical mass."

"How do you know all that? The People have never had the chance to speak for themselves. Their leaders only lie."

"It's necessary. For the good of the People."

"What about your son? Carl McCord and his family? Amanda Jennings? Fuck, even Dillon Swanson? What good did it do them?"

"It ruined them, as it has ruined the man that I am."

"Then why aren't you ruined? Confess your sins, and go where you belong."

"I turned this nation from water to wine, Mr. Malone. The People need

me.”

“The People need to know the truth. Isn’t that your motto?”

“And what good would that do? You ruin me. I’ve been a broken man for 25 years. It’s not about self-preservation for me. It’s about them. It’s always been about them. I’m exactly what they made me. The lies and everything. I’m no one. Just an eloquent voice that states exactly what they want to hear.”

“So what happens now?”

“You go to the Maze.”

“Why even send me to the Maze? Why not just kill me now? Why go through the spectacle?”

“That’s not the way we do things. Like it or not, Officer Malone, you’re guilty. You did everything they said at trial, surely more. Guilty men go to the Maze. You of all people need to see that the system works.”

“I’m going to the Maze because I questioned your lies.”

“You’re not going to the Maze because you’re investigating me. You’re going to the Maze for your crimes against the People, for attempting to rip apart the illusions that they built. Because you put yourself over the good of many.”

“That’s exactly what you did.”

“Wrong again, Mr. Malone. If I had put myself first, I’d be married to Amanda Jennings, living in Cranberry, our son not scarred from the horror he endured as a boy.”

“It doesn’t end with me,” Malone said, standing up from his cinder block to finally look down on the Speaker. “You’re dead. Maybe not by me, but you’re dead. Marianne already got the wheels turning on Chatter.”

“And it’s a shame she’s been accused of doctoring the photos already. She’s quite the fireplug; she reminds me of my Amanda. Those women are the true spirit of the Revolution. The rest of us just tagged along. I can see why you sacrificed yourself to protect her.”

“You wouldn’t know what that’s like. You killed everyone you loved. It can go the other direction.”

“I know,” the Speaker said. “My fall will be spectacular.”

“You just can’t handle losing your power.”

“That’s another place you’re wrong, Mr. Malone. I can handle. But the People can’t.” The Speaker knocked on the tiny window, smaller than those on the doors of the Senior Center rooms, in the upper center of the steel door. He turned back to Malone. “By the way, what happened to your hand, Officer Malone?”

“You heard Henry Young’s testimony.”

“Yes, but he reported that your finger was already in a splint.”

Malone shrugged.

“We found an employee of mine in the river yesterday,” the Speaker said. “He’d taken quite a beating. You won’t go down for it, of course; you’re

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already being punished. But you should live the rest of your short time with it. Like I do.”

Keys turned in the lock, and it opened. Without a word, the Speaker slipped out. Malone leaned back against the damp, cracked wall.



The hallway was as musty as the holding cell. Flanked by four guards and his hands shackled, Malone marched toward the doorway at the end of the corridor. Damned man walking. Maybe his body would go to science. The agg, the thug, the goon, the pig, the oppressor would finally make good. The concrete floor was uneven and gray, as if all the undesirable elements of the district had been relegated here.

They walked in silence, the corpse leading the way, the only sound from the chain linking Malone’s bracelets and the muffled thuds of heavy feet on the eroding cement. The metal door at the end of the hallway grew larger. No light was beneath it, not even the false beacon of a freight train. No hope. The procession stopped in front of the oxidized steel. The guard to his left, a burly specimen with the lumberjack facial hair to match his physique, placed his thumb over the scanner on the wall. The latch sprang, and the door opened. Malone took the first step into the dark room; delaying was pointless, and decades spent walking into heavyweight brawls on skates make one understand the futility of hesitation.

Bright LEDs flickered on as he entered the room. The floor was linoleum with residual adhesive and bits of rubber tape stuck to it. He was in an old school—this was a multi-purpose room at one point. Likely a cafeteria that doubled as a gymnasium and sometimes tripled as a single-level auditorium with numerous head obstructions for the parents who arrived late from a late night at the office—sorry, son, I would have seen your solo, but you wouldn’t have that violin without the long hours I pull for you. With the near takeover of virtual public charter schools in the district, traditional schools had been turned into apartment buildings. Apparently not all of them.

The guards pushed him toward the wooden stage elevated about five feet above the ground. A worn wooden staircase of four steps was on the right. The guards eased Malone in that direction. He walked up the steps and onto the stage. The curtain call for Alex Malone. He stood on the stage and looked at the curtain behind him. The velvet was stained and torn and coated in dust and spiderwebs. The shorter guard with the crew cut and the military jaw grabbed Malone’s left hand. The right went with it, sending searing pain through the palm. He should have brought the bourbon. The guard turned the key in the lock and removed the shackles from Malone’s wrists.

“Break a leg,” the guard said. He must have used this line every time, as it was met by a grunt from his burly counterpart.

Pushing the curtain to the side, Alex Malone stepped into the darkness of the Maze. He had his bearings. He was in a school. Backstage in the auditorium, the scene of countless talent shows and elementary school chorus concerts. That made it more sinister.

It was dark behind the curtains, lit intermittently by flashing light from down the hallways. This couldn't be a maze in the puzzle sense. It was a utilitarian building. Hallways ended outside the school, and the only dead ends were into classrooms. How had so few escaped? Malone walked down the hallway into the blackness. In the distance, the sound of crying, moaning, a frightened scream. But these sounds were muffled, and Malone could barely see between periods of epileptic light. Disobeying every cliché, he walked toward the light. It wasn't coming from the hallway, but a classroom on the left. Closer to the source, he made out forms in the hallway: rows of lockers that reached to the middle of his chest. Light reflected off the bare metal where something was scratched into the paint of the locker closest to the door.

Malone stopped as he read the word scratched into the locker. “Maloner.” How would anyone know about that? It had been so long since the schoolyard chant. So long since he'd learned to defend himself with his fists when the angry boys saw fit to pick on him in fourth grade. He wasn't an outcast! Only for that brief time when Dennis Davies led the charge to make him the pariah of the group because of an alleged crime for which Malone never was allowed to defend himself. The Maloner, for a few miserable weeks eating lunch at a table alone, playing with dirt by himself instead of joining the football games at recess, going home after school to mourn the death of his friendships. It all blew over within a month. The most painful period of Malone's early childhood faced him in one word engraved into the locker.

He walked into the classroom. The Chatter conversation devoted to Alex Malone was projected onto the wall, his name in bold type in every entry. The conversation scrolled infinitely, as Malone read every vitriolic note.

“Alex Malone is a disgrace! The Maze is too good for him.”

“You're disgusting. You use your privilege to try to keep us down. I love the days when that's reversed.”

“His entire life is a waste. What good has a goon like that ever done?”

“I remember him when he played that awful, violent game. He wasn't even good at it! An empty jersey until he needed to hurt someone. He's an animal.”

That was enough of that room. The People hated him. He knew that. He'd been hated for a decade. The door was open in the next room, but no light came from it. Malone felt around in the blackness for the light switch. He flipped it on, but instead of lights, a TV flickered on in what he could

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now see was the front corner of the room. Don Jorgenson, the Penguins color commentator, was on the screen. Judging by Jorgenson's appearance, it was old footage, even before the league was dismantled.

"Alex Malone really did a number on his team. Here you've got a third-line winger, a 12-minutes-a-game guy who kills penalties and defends the big names on this star-studded team. And what does he do? He gets himself arrested right in the middle of the playoffs! Way to help out the team, Malone. You know, when he gets into it with a pest who slew-footed Josh Mattingly several games back, his whole rhetoric is about the team. That he protects his team. He sacrifices his hands for his team. Well, were you thinking about your team when you were flying high on pills, Malone? Forget your team, were you thinking about anyone else on the road when you were speeding around high in your Corvette?"

"It's this breed of selfishness among the athletes that's causing a lot of people today to get disenchanted with hockey and pro sports in general. They're having trouble separating the man from the uniform. And it's people like Alex Malone that are making it worse by the hour. Entitled athletes who don't think of the fans, and the population in general. You play hockey for a living, Alex Malone. Consider yourself lucky. Most of America has to work for a living. And you can't even get to your job. Twice you were benched this season for showing up late to practice. You were partying. Well, the party's over for you, Malone. I wouldn't be surprised if this is the last we've seen of Alex Malone in the NHL."

The screen went to black. The center of the room illuminated. A man and woman were seated at a dinner table with a pot filled with ramen noodles in the middle. In the dark, it took a second for Malone to realize they were holograms, realistic, three-dimensional, but holograms nonetheless. They were more lifelike than even that of Adam Levine, the second most famous murder victim of the Revolution, who had been performing new songs on tour.

"Some last meal in our home," the man said.

"I'm not the one who bet our mortgage payments on the Penguins," the woman said, spooning the noodles into her bowl.

"Like I could have known Malone would get suspended and our Rocket Richard winning center would get his head knocked off in the next game."

"That's why you shouldn't bet, Bill. No good comes of it."

"No, it doesn't, does it, Shari?"

"No. Because of your betting, we're losing our house and have to move in with your brother who hates me, who has always hated me. So complain again about dinner, Bill."

Bill stood up from the table and picked up the stockpot. With complete calm, he tossed the steaming soup into Shari's face. She screamed and jumped from the table. Blinded with ramen noodles hanging from her head

like a wig, she tripped over something on the floor not captured in the hologram. She was crawling to her feet when Bill grabbed her by her hair, pulling her head back. He pointed a gun to her temple. He pulled the trigger, and Shari dropped to the ground. Bill shoved the gun in his mouth and with a bang, the back of his head flew toward Malone and landed at his feet.

Malone ran out of the room and slammed the door, leaving the dead couple behind him.

Dillon Swanson sucked on a bubbler back in the hallway. Not the corpse, but the mug, bubble-blowing, endangered species-wearing sycophant he was in life. The hologram waved in his red, snakeskin jacket.

“Bill and Shari Hawkins. Murder-suicide.”

“That’s not on me,” Malone said. “I didn’t force him to place big, stupid bets.”

“Your actions have consequences, Malone. Take me, for example. People miss me. Good people who never hurt anyone are grieving. Always thinking about yourself, letting your rage consume you. You didn’t think about them, did you? My parents, my sisters. I was just doing my job, Malone! Like you when you sent all those opponents to the hospital. Just doing my job! And what did I get?”

“You helped murder innocent people who couldn’t defend themselves.”

“And you murdered me. No trial. No votes. Just you: judge, jury, executioner. And you dare complain about our justice system.”

Malone turned from the hologram and walked down the hall. There was nowhere to go but forward. That’s what they said in rehab. Once you hit rock bottom and an entire city hates you, there’s nothing to do but keep going. Or you could end it all. But that’s what the rehab folks liked to avoid, or there’d be no point in rehabilitation. Malone kept moving forward then and now. Back there was only pain.

The corpse was on the ground ahead of him. As Malone approached, it sat up. Malone stopped. The corpse was back on his feet, but it wasn’t a corpse haunting him. It was a man in a large, wet suit who looked as if he’d just emerged from the river. His face was that of a living man, not decomposing. He exhaled a long line of bubbles and smiled. It wasn’t Swanson. The face wasn’t right, and the body was bigger, taller, wider. The man gripped the metal bubbler.

“Let’s try a fair fight this time.” Swanson’s voice echoed through the hall.

The man in the suit charged toward him, the fist with the bubbler cocked back under his shoulder. Malone steadied himself. Feet like they’d grown roots into the ground, left forward, every muscle squeezed tight. The fist landed on his jaw, the impact sending a shock through his brain. His head spun, as if his brain was on the Gravitron. Instinct, but not rage, took over. Malone jabbed his right fist into the man’s abdomen. It met steel, no give, like punch-

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ing a brick wall. A crack. A sharp pain in his hand. He dropped it to his side. He bellowed, like a baritone banshee.

The man smiled. He wrapped his fingers around Malone's throat. Malone swung the left hand into his gut. The man in the suit buckled, but kept his left hand around Malone's neck. He grabbed at Malone's wrist, the one attached to the good hand. Malone kept it moving, punching, waving, whatever he could do avoid the man's grip. The fingers tightened around his neck, threatening to cut off the air. Malone jerked his knee between his attacker's legs and the man fell back. The bubbler clattered to the floor. The man in the suit writhed on the floor, grabbing his groin. Malone kicked again, into the man's hands. He kicked the man's face, stomping his booted foot on the forehead. Blood splattered onto his ankle under the wide bells of his jeans. The crunch of bones, his foot sinking deeper like the pond hadn't quite frozen deep enough for skating. The man had stopped moving.

"Another man dead. Wherever you go, destruction follows," Swanson said. The hologram was back in front of him.

Malone winced in pain. His hand hung limp at his side. "That wasn't a fair fight, you pansy. And neither was it with you. He was wearing a metal vest, and you had a knife."

"We're not fighters, Officer Malone. Not barbarians like you."

Malone looked forward, avoiding the hand. It was shattered. His one weapon gone, as if someone had hammered through it. Worse than stigmata. The fingers were crushed—a thousand needles stabbing them.

Chatter conversations scrolled on the hallway walls. A goon, a pig, an enemy, never to be welcomed back. Voices chimed in from the speakers illuminated by the venom on the walls.

"You're lucky your dad's in a home, then he doesn't have to understand what his son has become."

"You've done a disservice to the People of this nation."

"You betrayed us. You'll never be one of us again."

"You may as well just end it."

The lights flashed. A stool, with a noose hanging above it.

"Just get it over with. What kind of life would you have anyway?"

Malone ran. He ran past the gallows and through the darkness. The voices grew softer as he turned the corner. Screams replaced them.

The small office, like where a guidance counselor would have wasted students' time, was filled with a hologram.

"Dad."

His father, the man he'd aspired to be his entire life, the brave protector of the innocent, was in his bed at the center. Underwood Jennings's tall, lanky body stood over him, a surgical saw in his hand. He lowered it to Tom Malone's head.

“No!”

“Oh, you don’t like seeing people hurt?” Jennings said in that snide voice. “You’ve got a strange way of showing it.”

“I don’t prey on innocents for pleasure.”

“Oh, this is fun, but it’s not just for pleasure. That’s what you don’t understand. This was all for a purpose too. Show my dad what he did. Like your dad is experiencing now, the consequences of raising someone like you.” He lowered the saw into Tom Malone’s helpless, wrinkled forehead.

Malone lunged at him, wrapping his hands around only air. He was now inside the hologram that was slowly meeting the saw to the holographic flesh. Intangible blood splattered in the room.

“You’re full of shit,” Malone said. “You were dead before I saw my dad last.”

“It doesn’t mean your actions in here won’t hurt him,” Swanson said.

Back in the hallway, Malone doubled over in pain. It wasn’t a question of whether the bones in the hand were broken; it was how many bones. All 27 by the way it felt.

“I’ve got something to help you with that,” Swanson said.

“What? A time machine? Take me back to before I broke it for the first time in 2019?”

“Try the door on your left.”

Malone opened it. Inside stood a man surrounded by light. He flickered, another hologram. Josh Mattingly. Older than when Malone had last seen him, during the great apology tour of 2035. The flickering made it difficult to gauge the exact age.

“You ended me, Alex,” the hologram said. “Remember what happened? The game against the Flyers. Bobby Monahan.”

“I know, Joshy. I should have been there.”

“That’s why you were on the team. You were supposed to protect me from scum like Bobby Monahan.”

The hologram disappeared. Josh Mattingly was sprawled facedown, motionless on the school floor, in his Penguins uniform, blood pooling from his shattered jaw. The injured player evaporated, and Mattingly was standing in his suit in front of Malone again.

“That was it for me, Alex. Broken jaw, concussion, deviated discs.”

“I know,” Alex said. “And I’m so sorry.”

He flickered out and reappeared on a gurney, his head lolling. Surgeons over him in their scrubs and white coats. They turned to Malone, their face masks splattered in blood. One held a brain. The top of Mattingly’s head was sliced clean off, giving him a whole new kind of hockey mullet. The surgeon squeezed the brain in his hands and walked toward Malone. It’s only a hologram. Only a hologram. They didn’t take out Josh’s brain. No matter what

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he told himself, the surgeon kept coming and Malone stepped away. His back against the wall, the surgeon held the brain at eye level. Even as a hologram, Malone recognized the dark deposits of tau protein that meant CTE. The surgeon held the diseased brain an inch from Malone's eyes.

"I see it! I see what I did!"

The doctors vanished, and Mattingly reappeared. He was in his Penguins uniform now, standing on a stool. A noose dangled from the ceiling.

"Don't do it, Joshy. They have treatment now."

"You should have been there, Maloney." Mattingly slipped his head through the noose. "This wouldn't have happened to me if you'd been on the ice that game to protect me, like you were supposed to."

"I know, I know. I should have been there. It was selfish of me. Just please stop. You don't have to do this."

"I already did it. Don't you remember? Seven years ago? Did you miss my suicide?"

"No, I heard," Malone lied.

"Why don't you join me, Maloney? Show me how sorry you really are. Then I'll forgive you. The others you hurt will forgive you. Maybe you'll even forgive yourself."

"Please stop, Joshy." Malone shut his eyes, but all he could see was Swanson's corpse lying next to Mattingly's. He opened them again. Standing on one leg, ready to kick out the stool, his teammate had the noose wrapped around his neck.

"Join me, Maloney. It's the only way to be truly free of all the pain."

He kicked the stool, and his neck snapped to the side. His body wriggled before going still. Malone bolted from the room. Back in the hall, Swanson was waiting.

"Didn't find what you were looking for?"

"There was nothing in there to help me with the pain."

Swanson laughed. "Sure there was! But maybe you'd be more comfortable with your old favorite. He motioned to the end of the hall. A small bottle on the floor. Malone picked it up. The prescription was for Alex Malone, but the drug was blank.

"What are they?"

"They ease the pain," Swanson said. "All of your pain. Just swallow one, and the pain disappears."

"Right. All the pain. The pain in the hand and the head. Just like the noose."

"It's the only way to escape such pain."

"Not too long ago, I thought the same thing."

"And you don't anymore?"

"No."

“Well, maybe you’re not ready yet. Maybe you need more pain.” He snapped his fingers, and the empty white wall filled with a film projection.

Marianne was sitting on a wooden floor, her sleeve rolled up to her elbow. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Shaking, she dropped the razor blade from her hand. She rubbed her eyes before picking it back up. Her fingers hovered over her exposed wrist.

“She’s about to escape her pain, leaving you all along with nothing but your worst memories. Maybe you should reconsider the pills.”

“I’m no fucking Romeo.” For the second time in two days, Malone broke into a dead sprint. The wooden floor looked like the basketball court in his high school. That’s where he’d find her. Lights flashed as he sprinted down the hall, past the rooms with their atrocities. Chits projected on the walls that he didn’t read. Voices shouted obscenities that he didn’t hear. The hallway opened up into an atrium. Choked screams rose above the din of the hateful rhetoric.

Two large doors. Malone shoved them open. Three female holograms surrounded Marianne seated on the floor.

“Of course we remember Marianne,” the blonde said, smiling. “She didn’t wear a bra until the eighth grade. God, it was nasty. She always said her hippie mother wouldn’t let her wear one. But if I had been that girl, I would tell Mom to take a bath and go out and buy one!”

“Remember when she’d wear a white shirt and you could see right through it?” the Asian woman said, laughing.

“Oh yes! And that day when we pulled up her shirt to show everyone,” the second blonde said. Three thirty-somethings giggling about their adolescent cruelty. Hadn’t anything else happened in their lives? “Those tiny titties for the whole school to see.”

“Well, we taught her hippie mom a lesson, didn’t we?” the blonde said. “She wore a bra after that.”

The holograms disappeared, replaced by an older woman with the same pixie haircut as Marianne. She sat at a desk. A man in a suit appeared next to her.

“Tell your daughter what we’ll do if she tries to leave the Maze.”

Malone rushed to Marianne. She was staring at the hologram of her mother, still holding the blade just above her wrist. He grabbed her arm.

“No, Marianne. You don’t have to do it.”

“They’re going to reveal all the research she’s been compiling for years! Everything that will make her the most dangerous agg we’ve ever seen. All she was doing is being a historian so her part of history wouldn’t be white-washed. She doesn’t want people like my dad and everyone sent to the Maze to be forgotten.”

“Who says they don’t leak it if you kill yourself?”

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“It’s her only chance.” Marianne lowered the razor to her wrist.

“No, it’s not! We can get out of here. All they’ve got is bad memories, but you don’t live in the past. And we’re not guilty. Deep down, you know that. And you were right; it is population control. But the world’s a better place with you in it.”

“I can’t let them hurt her.” Marianne lowered her arm, placing the razor gently on the floor. “I can’t let her get sent here because of me.”

“You won’t. Not if we get out.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“We do what we have to do, but you’ve got to agree to do what I say. We do what Carl McCord said. Kill one to save thousands.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“You will when the time comes.”

Marianne got to her feet. The three women holograms were back, taunting Marianne about the time they all used to be friends before filling her seat at the lunch table.

“We’re going to need that,” Malone said, motioning to the razor blade on the floor. Marianne picked it up.

They walked to the double doors on the other side and pushed them open.

A foyer. Doors to the outside lined the back wall. Push and pull—the doors didn’t budge. Malone’s fist bounced off the reinforced plastic windows. It was night. The stars and far-off streetlights showed hallways on both sides. Marianne grabbed Malone’s wrist and pulled him to the left.

It used to be a janitor’s area. Metal shelves lined the right side. They were empty now, but the storage capacity was enormous. Words projected on the other wall.

Barbarian.

Savage.

Animal.

Traitor.

End it all.

A twin-size bed was pressed against the wall. A nightstand next to it, with a bottle of water and a larger bottle of pills. Malone grabbed the pills, and they kept running. They were back in the front entry to the gym where Malone had found Marianne. The women were back on the wall.

“Well, we taught her hippie mom a lesson, didn’t we?”

Marianne turned to the right. Yet another hallway. They ran.

Lights flashed again. Another noose hung from the ceiling above a stool. This one was familiar, a belt.

The classroom at the end of the hall was larger than the others.

“You know what life is like for those who leave the Maze?” The Speaker was seated behind the desk at the head of the room. Another hologram, he

was larger than the desk allowed. Larger than life, as he always was until Malone met him in the cell. “Survivors wish they’d ended it inside. They’re pariahs. Vagrants. They have no homes. Their families and friends have all shunned them lest they meet the same lonely fate. They wander, banished from everywhere they try to settle. They’re marked for life. They wind up in gutters. None are redeemed. You cannot underestimate the power of outrage. Wrath can last forever. You’ll have a long, long life knowing nothing but how it is to be an abomination.

“They may stare sometimes like they did at the Elephant Man, but it will only be a spectacle. They’ll shout insults, then they’ll lose interest again, but the outrage will persist. Someone will remember and ask what happened and they’ll hate you again. Disinterest, isolation—that will be the good part. It’s a cycle that you deserve. You may as well end it here. There’s nothing for you on the other side.”

They ran to the back of the room to the door that led outside. Malone smashed his shoulder into the window. The plastic pane didn’t respond. Footsteps in the hall. They weren’t alone. Marianne shoved the chair in which the Speaker’s hologram was seated to the door. The hologram remained seated in air. Malone picked up the chair in his left hand. The right wouldn’t do more than painfully support the bottom. With all the might in his weak side, he flung the metal wheels at the window. The chair bounced into his knee. Maybe it would have hurt under other circumstances. He looked around the dark room for other items to use as a battering ram when a female silhouette appeared in the doorway.

She was thick, solid with the low center of gravity that meant Marianne wasn’t going to knock her down. She swung a flail over her head. The strobe lights flashed on. The flail wasn’t metal, more like vulcanized rubber. She entered the room, swinging the smooth ball around on the chain. Malone threw the chair at her. She jumped out of the way, not missing a rotation in the weapon circling overhead. Marianne opened the desk drawer. The stapler hit her in the chest, but she kept coming. The three-hole punch caught the chain, breaking the ball’s orbit. As she dropped the flail to her side to reset, Malone charged. He was on top of her on the floor, his left fist raised about to strike when a blinding light flashed and Malone hit the ground.

He blinked open his eyes. The dark room had a rainbow effect like those old holographic stickers. Light slaps on his cheeks like fluttering butterfly wings.

“Alex, wake up.” Marianne looked down at him.

Malone lifted his head off the ground. The room spun. He shut his eyes. A pitchfork must have embedded itself into the left side of his brain, and a demon was twisting it. He opened his eyes, and Marianne pulled him to his feet.

Dr. Pomonski stood next to the woman with the flail.

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“Looks like you—what do you thugs say?—got your bell rung. Too bad the real me isn’t here to give you another shot in the neck. A beating like your brain just took, I can’t imagine the pain. And it’s not going away. You know that. It’ll sneak up on you, and you’ll be doubled over, holding your head and screaming in pain. And no one will hear you in the Maze. You’ll have the memory lapses again. You’ll forget which rooms you’ve visited, and you’ll experience the same terrors over and over. And, lucky for you, the suicidal urges will return. And you’ll have so many options here to end the pain, end the horror, end it all.”

Malone reached into his pocket and removed the bottle of pills.

“You’re finally starting to make smart decisions,” Pomonski’s hologram said. “Swallow them, Malone. End the suffering.”

“No, Alex! Don’t do it!” Marianne shouted, grabbing his arm. He shook her off and walked toward the woman and the doctor.

“That your professional opinion, doc? I take these pills.” Malone poured the tablets into his hand. “And it will relieve me of all my pain?”

“Yes, so much better than the treatment ever could. You’ll be free.”

“Then I guess it’s doctor’s orders.” He kicked his long leg at the woman’s abdomen, knocking her and the flail to the ground again. This time, he threw his 245 pounds onto her, flattening the woman to the floor. Marianne stomped on her hand, releasing the flail. Malone pushed his bad hand into her throat. She opened her mouth to try to breathe and Malone shoved the handful of pills in. He held her mouth shut while she writhed and shook on the ground. The hand throbbed, and he could barely feel that it was on a mouth until the foam started coming out. When the strobing light showed a blue face with eyes wide open, he removed his hand. He wiped the foam off and stood up.

He was back on the ground. That was too quick for the vertigo. He tried again, more slowly this time, letting the head adjust to the change in altitude.

Marianne grabbed the flail. She walked back to the door.

“Stand back.”

She swung the flail over her head. The ball smashed into the door. Again. The flail made a dent.

“Closer to the handle,” Malone said.

“It will really be more pleasant for you to stay inside,” the levitating Speaker said. “A better, less painful end for you and your families.”

Marianne swung the flail. Malone turned away. The movement was worsening the dizziness. Thuds, cracks, splinters of wood hitting the floor.

“Got it!”

Malone turned around. Marianne was on her knees, her arm stuck through the hole in the door, reaching for the outer doorknob. Only in the Maze would the doors be locked from the outside. She screamed. A hand

from the other side of the door grabbed hers. With her free hand, she reached into her pocket. She sliced into the hand with the razor and it fell away. The door popped open. Malone bent down, sending his brain into a tornado, but he came back up with the flail.

The man in the suit outside was clutching his bleeding hand. Malone swung the flail like an uppercut into the man's jaw, sending him to the ground. He wrapped the chain around his neck and pulled until he heard a snap like the one in the room with Josh Mattingly.

Marianne kept the razor between her fingers; the flail hung at Malone's side. They were surrounded by walls like those in a medieval fortress. The walls ended at a parking lot up on the left. Up a slight hill, in the lot, another man in a suit was standing.

Malone put his finger to his lip. They walked to the path, avoiding the dry fallen leaves. He held out his left hand and whispered.

"Give me the blade."

Marianne slid the razor into his hand. He shrugged her off and limped carefully to the parking lot. The man was faced away from them, as if his job was to keep people out instead of keeping them in. Imagine the outrage if some rebellious teenagers looking for a make-out point stumbled into the Maze.

He approached the guard slowly, too slowly. He turned, and Malone swiped the razor across his throat. A fountain of blood soaked the wifebeater and sideburns. The man grabbed at his throat, but all that did was cover his hands in blood. He dropped down to his knees on the concrete, then tipped forward, face first.

"Help me get his jacket," Malone said. Marianne pulled the sleeves off arm by arm and helped Malone into the dead man's coat, covering the blood. They were off the school grounds.

"We're in Squirrel Hill," Marianne said. They faced down Forward Avenue toward the entrance to the parkway.

"We can't live like he said. I won't be one of their lepers," Marianne said.

Malone stared ahead at the cars pouring off the highway and stopping at the light at the end of Forward. The world was going round. Soon the two pariahs would be forgotten, reviled only when convenient in the valleys between active volcanoes of rage. Maybe every day wouldn't be the flowing vitriol of the Maze, but it would be indifference, alienation, a lifetime as Maloner.

"We won't," Malone said. "We won't be exiled and forgotten."

"I don't think we will be. You saw the hate on the walls."

"No, that will wear off. We'll do something that will make them remember. We're gonna burn it all down."



The new corpses weren't following him. They were lying on the floor of the parking garage beneath the Ministry of Ideas in pools of blood, as corpses are supposed to do. They were all guilty. All of them. Everyone who voted to send their fellow citizens to their deaths so they could feel good about doing their civic duty, protect their reputations, show everyone how virtuous they were, to settle a score, or just feel better about themselves by seeing someone else brought down. They all had blood on their hands, all of them complicit in countless compelled suicides in the Maze. How many people had that parking lot attendant sent to a noose in that personalized house of horrors? He deserved the razor to the wrists. So did that self-righteous, self-important citizen in the suit who didn't like how that giant in the linen pants and threadbare Fear T-shirt—barely less conspicuous than the blood-soaked ribbed tank—walked into the secure garage when he pulled his car out.

"What do you think you're doing?" he shouted out the window. Malone kept walking. The reverse gear indicator, once reserved for vehicles with poor rear visibility and now a standard safety feature, beeped and the sedan backed down the ramp. Malone stopped, his good hand caressing the blade in his pocket.

"Hey, hey asshole, you can't be down here." The man was hanging out his window, omnivice raised. "Don't make me report you."

Malone kicked, and the omnivice flew out of the man's hand, crashing onto the cement. He jumped out of his car, his life not nearly as important as that of his lifeline to the rest of society, to the People that he's so desperate to impress with his indictment of the condemned. It was a damn shame the size-13 boot shattered the glass touch screen.

"You'll go to the Maze for this!"

A smirk turned into a laugh, and erupted into a thunderous guffaw. The kind of laughter that would make observers feel self-conscious and start laughing as well to pretend that they didn't miss the joke. It hurt his head, but he couldn't stop. He laughed from the gut. He hadn't laughed this way since before the Revolution. The man sat on the ground, the imposing figure laughing over him. He crab-walked away, but Malone kept coming, laughing, shaking, his dead right hand a macabre sight hanging swollen at his side.

"It's not funny! You don't know what's in the Maze!"

He knew exactly what was in the Maze: people, people the rest of society just decided they didn't like anymore, who represented something they didn't like about themselves. So many disgraced or dead. And for what? So this man in the suit can feel that he contributed? So a bunch of strangers can see what a good man he is? Because he didn't have a purpose, a talent that he could

give to the world and make his identity? He couldn't paint, couldn't write, couldn't even fight on ice, so his virtue would have to be the quality that he offered in words on Chatter. Empty words like all the worst, meaningless except to the condemned. To that day's victim in the court of public opinion, the volume of those words was a death sentence. Fuck him, and everyone like him.

"I know exactly what's in the Maze. That's why no self-righteous, concerned, informed little citizen is gonna send me back."

The man opened his mouth, but whatever his last words were supposed to be, they wound up a gurgle. Blood flowed from his mouth and through his fingers, which clasped the slice that the razor left in his neck. Malone didn't stay to watch, but he heard the thud of the man toppling to the ground as he got into the car, leaned the seat way back, and drove to the exit. The garage door opened as he approached.

Sammy, Marianne, Addison Clarke, and Harlan and Crista Ritchie entered the garage. Malone parked the car next to the corpse.

"Jesus, Alex. What did you do?" Sammy asked.

"What did McCord say? I killed one so thousands may live." Malone paused. "Four. I killed four so thousands may live."

"I think we could have tied them up," Harlan said. "They weren't involved."

"Everyone is involved, Harlan," Marianne said. "We all are. We all let this happen. We made society a groupthinking popularity contest where differences of opinion are enough to get you killed. If they vote, they're as guilty as anyone."

"What time is it?" Malone asked. Like anyone, he was dependent on his confiscated omnivice for such basic necessities as the time.

"8:48," Sammy said.

"Only two cars left, besides that one," Crista said, returning from her lap around the single floor of the garage. VIPs only. Including one double-V, the one who would be pulling into the reserved spot right by the elevator at some point in the next 12 hours to report for work at his very, very important job.

"Guessing one's the lot attendant," Harlan said.

"He's taken care of," Malone said.

Marianne stood in the reserved spot. She pulled off her backpack and placed it on the ground. She removed the flail and held it at her side. Nearly an hour passed before she used it on the woman in the blouse and pencil skirt who exited the elevator. The woman dropped to the ground, right out of her stiletto pumps. They duct-taped her hands to her sides, her nylon-covered ankles together, and her red lips shut.

"She's working late," Marianne said. "I doubt anyone thanks her. We're going to thank her by cutting her a break."

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They moved the unconscious woman to the back of the dead man's sedan. Satisfied that she was the last to try to retrieve her car for the evening, they went about stripping the parking attendant of his uniform. The rigor mortis made it a difficult task, but seeing how well the clothes fit Sammy, it was all worth it. The plan would work. Next task was hiding the bodies. They fit neatly behind the attendant's Subaru Love. As challenging as maneuvering stiff corpses was, the entire exercise took less than an hour. They waited.

Hours passed. Malone sipped the whiskey when the hand started throbbing. Nothing helped the searing in his head that blinded him for a moment each time it arrived. No one seemed to notice when he'd squeeze his eyes shut. They mostly paced around the garage, trying not to look at the corpses. Look at them, Malone thought. We're all in now. Even though he'd convinced himself they deserved it, he wasn't going to let those four die in vain. It was about the greater good. You want a legacy? You'll help bring down a corrupt administration of people who kill for their own gain, to maintain their power. They kill family, friends, lovers. They would have happily killed you too if you'd given them even the slightest reason. And you should thank us for giving you a chance to finally do what you want people to think you would do by your chits: be brave, selfless, fight for something bigger than yourself. And, if you're still pissed that this is the way you went, then you're a fucking hypocrite and you deserved more pain than you got.

When Harlan announced that it was 6 a.m., Sammy assumed his position on the entrance ramp. Nearly an hour passed before the first car arrived. Thank science for Sammy's artificial knees. The old man held his arm in the universal stop signal while the headlights flooded him in artificial light. The rest of the conspiracy hid behind concrete columns while Sammy approached the driver's side.

It wasn't him.

"I'm so sorry for the inconvenience, but we've had a partial roof collapse and the garage isn't safe for parking this morning... Yes, the building is fine, it's just an issue here. You can just back right up. We hope to have this fixed by tomorrow. The team's been working all night on it."

The car backed up the ramp, the garage door shutting when it cleared, blocking out the sunrise. It would be a beautiful day in this neighborhood.

A black SUV entered, the headlights so bright that the demons in Malone's brain stuck another pitchfork in. That was it. He knew it. Like a secret service vehicle or something Suge Knight would drive. Important, dangerous men—and those who wanted to be them—traveled like that.

"Good morning, sir! Come on in," Sammy said.

The SUV rolled down the ramp past the column Malone hid behind. Sammy flashed two fingers. Malone nodded. The SUV doors opened. A Dontavius Vega-size man stepped out of the driver's side.

In silence, Harlan sprinted from the shadows to the big man. As the driver's door shut, Harlan shouted, "Hey!"

The big man turned, and Harlan's fist left an imprint in his doughy cheek. He shook it off and lurched toward Harlan. The speedy winger ducked, and Addison jumped on the man's back, wrapping a rope around his neck. His hands shot to his throat, leaving his ample gut ripe for Harlan's foot. He dropped to his knees. Harlan kicked him in the face. Addison let go of the rope as the fat man hit the ground, unconscious.

The tinted windows hid the Speaker. Harlan squeezed the driver's door handle, but the Speaker was quicker. The doors locked. Marianne swung the flail over her head. One, two, three revolutions, each more menacing than the last. On the fourth, she let it go, the ball spidering the windshield. It was back over her head, revolving under the low ceilings of the garage. The passenger door opened. The voice of the nation stepped out.

"You may as well stay in there," Malone said. "This isn't your final destination."

"If you're looking for a pardon, I can't help you," the Speaker said. "It was the will of the People."

"Is that what you say to yourself when all the corpses start following you?" Malone said.

"We've discussed my guilt, Mr. Malone."

Malone grabbed the Speaker by the arm and shoved him around the SUV to the driver's door where the fat man was coming to.

"What does this man do for you?"

"He's my bodyguard."

"What would a hero like you need a bodyguard for?"

"Even John Lennon was shot."

"So, he protects you from all the deranged citizens out there?"

"He protects me from threats to my safety," the Speaker said.

"Alex, we should go," Sammy said.

"I don't think our fearless leader here grasps the extent of his destruction," Malone said.

"All the people sent to the Maze, they're just abstractions to you," Marianne said, approaching from the front of the car. "Yeah, they were to me too. Until I lived it. You don't even have to hurt anyone to have your life destroyed or ended. A toenail for an eye. Of course, you know about unfair trades. A son for a nation."

"So what's another body to add to the count?" Malone stomped his foot into the bodyguard's forehead. His skull crunched, blood flowed from his greasy curls.

"Stop," the Speaker said.

"Stop, Alex," Sammy said.

"That's enough," Harlan said, stepping in front of his daughter to shield

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her from the carnage.

Malone kicked the unconscious man in his bloated face. "We'll never know the full body count from your refusal to take responsibility for your actions. But I want you to have that one fresh in your mind. Your son's mother must have faded by now."

"It haunts me every day," the Speaker said.

"So where's your whiskey?" Malone asked, brandishing his bottle.

"I don't blunt my pain with booze."

"That's right. You just keep the system moving to cause more pain."

"Let's end this," Marianne said.

Malone stared at the Speaker and nodded. They piled into the SUV. The spidered windshield didn't matter. They weren't going far.



Sammy smiled as he knocked on the door to the Mount Washington loft. It was the kindly smile of a sweet old man, one who wouldn't claim senility after pinching her ass when she turned away. That smile opened doors, including Mackenzie Brunner's.

"Yes?" Mackenzie said, looking Sammy right in his small, glassy eyes.

"Hello again," Malone said as he sidled next to Sammy. Mackenzie pushed the door, trying to close it, but the old man was bionic.

Mackenzie stepped backward into the industrial loft. White patent leather go-go boots accentuated the long, lean legs. Her smooth, tanned skin on display all the way up her thigh to her tiny cutoff shorts. The white tube top clung to her slim yet shapely body and revealed just an inch of her midriff. Her long blond hair was beach wavy today and reached almost to her elbows. She stumbled back onto the sofa.

Malone sauntered into the room, his mangled right hand purple, swollen, and hanging lifelessly at his side. Marianne and her flail followed. Mackenzie screamed. Sammy shot his hand over her mouth, and pulled her down onto the couch. Sammy let out a yelp.

"No biting," he said.

"Sorry for barging in like this, Mackenzie, but we really need your help," Malone said. "We need to borrow your feed."

A muffled sound came from behind Sammy's hand.

"I think she asked what for," Sammy said.

Malone laughed. "We're gonna bring down the patriarchy."

Harlan and Crista followed, their arms linked with the Speaker's. Addison brought up the rear with a knife held to the great orator's back.

Mackenzie's eyes bulged.

Marianne knelt down in front of Mackenzie. “Hi Mackenzie. I’m Marianne. I really respect what you do here and would never want to put you in a bad situation, but we’re desperate here. We’ve got a story that needs to get out. You want to bring down the patriarchy?”

Mackenzie nodded.

“Then help us bring down the patriarch of our nation.”

Mackenzie made more muffled noises.

“Sammy, let her talk,” Marianne said.

“The Speaker isn’t a patriarch,” she said, staring at the man himself who was somehow in her apartment, the ultimate male conquest. “He’s a god.”

“No,” the Speaker said. “I’m just a man like the rest of them.”

“Mackenzie, I know what you’ve been told about him your entire life, but he’s the worst kind of patriarch. The kind that can’t even be a father to his own son,” Marianne said.

“You don’t have a son,” Mackenzie said.

Malone grunted. “He could have been your father-in-law.”

“What?” She stared at the Speaker. The wheels turned. How could she miss the Roman nose, the almond shape of the hazel eyes, the way the mouth turned slightly up even when the expression was otherwise morose now that she knew to look for it?

“You’re going to love this story,” Marianne said. “The patriarchy is alive and well. It never went away. The Revolution didn’t change a thing. You’ve been right to keep fighting. Just listen to the story. Please.”

Mackenzie crossed her arms and legs. “Who is telling it? Alex Malone is a liar. And everyone who saw my feed knows it.”

“No one will think I’m lying about this. It makes too much sense to not be true,” Malone said, and collapsed onto the floor. Movement made his head swim. He pulled the small bourbon bottle out of his pocket and took a sip. Marianne narrowed her eyes and glared at him.

“I need you sharp,” she said.

“Pain clouds my mind,” Malone said, raising his hand.

Mackenzie shuddered at the sight of the purple blob.

“You,” Marianne said, pointing to the Speaker. “Down on the floor with him.”

Addison marched the Speaker toward Malone until he took a gentle seat on the rug.

Marianne pointed Mackenzie’s omnivice at the two men on the floor. They made an odd couple, the Speaker in his trim suit and dignified white hair slicked back, the weathered Malone, his face wincing in pain in a ratty punk T-shirt that like himself, the People tried their hardest to ban.

“We’re ready,” Marianne said. “Three, two, one. Go.”

Malone inhaled, focused on the omnivice in Marianne’s hand, and hoped

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that she could keep it steady.

“Hello, my fellow citizens. I’m going to tell you what’s really in the Maze and why it’s there. My name is Alex Malone. I was an officer with the Pittsburgh Police Department until you sent me to the Maze two days ago. You thought I committed crimes against you, but my arrest and sentencing were in reaction to my investigation of this man. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” the Speaker said. “That is correct. He was investigating me for my crimes against you.”

“I’m going to tell you a story. Way back before the Revolution, there were three men: the Hammer, the Watcher, and the Speaker. The Hammer was a lawyer, a drunk, and a glutton. He liked his women like he liked everything else—in excess. The Watcher was a tabloid mogul who’d do just about anything for a story that would sell papers. Then there was the Speaker. Between these two scumbags, he was a saint. An idealist, a college professor whose tragic story of a dying wife captured the nation.

“We all remember that. He galvanized the People. Here was someone we could finally get behind. Someone to speak for all of us. The Watcher and the Hammer noticed, too. They got behind him with all their muscle, and the Speaker became a force for change. Young people, Revolutionaries, followed him. Like Amanda Jennings. She’s enraptured. A young woman right out of college, she’s picketing for change. She buys into the Speaker’s every word. She preaches it like the gospel to everyone that would listen.

“One night, while the Speaker’s wife is checked into the hospital for a final time, the Hammer throws a party. They’ll celebrate the progress they’re making with the help of all these young supporters. Well, our hopeless romantic Speaker, he gets a little drunk and needs a woman’s company. His wife’s bald and skeletal and doped up on morphine in the terminal wing these days. So he and Amanda, they get together in one of the bedrooms at the Hammer’s mansion. The Speaker’s guilt ridden. Who knows? He probably even confessed to his wife. Did you?”

“Yes, I told her. She was in and out of consciousness at the end. I’ll never know if she heard me. It was selfish of me to tell her. It was to assuage my guilt by laying a further burden on her.”

“Right. Then things get a little out of hand. See, Amanda is pregnant. The Speaker never had kids, so he makes all kinds of guarantees. He’ll be there for them. He’ll support them. Let’s just get this Revolution thing done first. So, she calls. And calls. And she gets handed from assistant to assistant. The Revolution is done, and she still can’t reach her son’s father. So she starts getting loud. The Watcher gets wind of it. He’s threatening to expose it. What a headline!

“But the Hammer can’t have it. ‘That’ll destroy all we’ve worked for!’ The Watcher’s a rat. He’s going to expose it anyway. Who needs utopia when

there's money to make? So the Hammer finds a counter-Revolutionary, and tells Carl McCord just how to sneak up on the Watcher. What a coup for a counter-Revolutionary to decapitate one of the three heads! Think how many lives he thought he was saving. So, in goes McCord and stabs the Watcher to death in his hot tub.

"It's all so clean. McCord goes to the Maze. The Watcher is gone. There's just one more loose end. By this time little Underwood Jennings is four years old. He and Mom have been bouncing around the area, trying to eke out a living while the kid's dad is the most famous man in the Republic. The Hammer says Mom's got to go. So, they go see Ms. Jennings and one of his guys kills the little lady right in front of her son and his father."

"She bled out on the floor in front of me. The second woman I had loved dead before my eyes. The Hammer killed her, yes, but I could have stopped him. I could have made it public, and taken the fall. But she did."

"So did your son. Any chance Underwood had died right there in that kitchen with his mom. He spends the rest of his childhood bounced around to foster homes where he's all kinds of abused. Everything—toothbrushes even—was used as a weapon on this kid. Finally, 20 years after witnessing his mom's murder, he tracks down his father. All that guilt comes back to the Speaker when he sees the man the son he abandoned has become. See, Woody's not interested in throwing a baseball. During those years of abuse he's developed some bad habits, like ritual murder. He tells Dad, 'Get me some victims, and I won't tell anyone about that little incident 24 years ago.'

"What's the Speaker supposed to do? It's his kid! He'll make up for not giving affection by supplying fresh meat for his sociopath of a son to disembowel and murder. So they go where no one will notice a few missing bodies—senior centers. Hell, some say they're dead anyway. This goes on for a while. Old people go missing and wind up flayed on a table in Cheswick before disappearing forever. Then Woody gets greedy. He wants to be famous like Dad. So he starts demanding his ideas become reality. But his ideas are stupid, and they all come from old sci-fi movies. And the sycophants surrounding the Speaker start saying no. It's too much. The victims, cleaning up after his little maniac. It's going to ruin everything.

"So, there goes Underwood Jennings to the Maze with the rest of the people we're sick of dealing with."

"I don't know how many people my son killed. I don't know what else the Hammer has done in the name of our Republic. I just want to tell you now that all the words I've spoken to you are true. My life may be a lie, but my promises to you are not. You deserve a world in which you are valued, in which you all have a fair chance at success. Maybe my actions compromised your faith in me, but never stop believing the truths I told you about your worth."

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“Are you done?” Malone asked.

“Yes,” the Speaker said.

Marianne lowered the omnivice just in time for Malone to keel over on the floor.

EPILOGUE





Chatter crashed three times while all Chits in the Republic were devoted to a single Chat, the one with the Speaker in bold. The entire Chat was red, with some blue sprinkled in for the tears shed for the voice of the People.

“I just can’t believe it. My Speaker wouldn’t do this.”

“He deserves to get raped by an angry sociopath!”

“He needs to be brought to justice!”

“But this justice? The justice system that he helped to build on lies?”

“You don’t like our justice? Maybe you need to experience it!”

“This isn’t the Speaker I know.”

“He needs to apologize for the lies! For the legacy of abuse of power over the people.”

“Then he needs to get fucked in the ass!”

Outrage: Level 10.

A standoff outside of the Speaker’s modest Oakland home lasted two days, the faithful holding back the outraged seeking the man’s head. Finally, the Speaker emerged.

“I’ve failed you. I failed my son. I failed both women I’ve ever loved. I am exactly who they say I am, a flawed man, one who does not deserve to speak for a nation. I’m nothing. I’ve never been anything but a voice. I am all of you, all your hopes for a better world with better words. Please do with me as you see fit. I accept it.” Tears from the faithful, surrounding the premises. Anger on the faces of the outraged. They listened. There was one conclusion.

“To the Maze!” the Hammer shouted as he banged his gavel at the Tribunal. There were some cheers, but fewer than at Malone’s trial. The Speaker nodded at the verdict from the metal cage. They shoved him out of the old church, put him back in a van, and off he went. In the Maze, he chose the gallows.

Those whose job it was to remove the deceased from the Maze posted photos of the corpse to Chatter. The omertà of the Maze was no more. A clever citizen removed the head from the photo, and placed it with its dead, staring eyes on a pike. A single word, “Liar,” was added over the composite image. Four million citizens shared the picture in Chits. The Speaker statue downtown was graffitied with “liar,” as well as swastikas and penises. No one figured out what these were supposed to symbolize before the statue was carted off to wherever marble goes to die.

The Hammer stayed in office. There’d be a new illusion, that the Revolu-

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tion wasn't all a lie.

"But he's by far the more evil," Marianne said.

"He didn't lie to them."

The People were divided on Alex Malone. He was still a goon and a pig, and now he was the bearer of bad news. But he was also a martyr, a whistle-blower. And since it only took the doctors one look to decide that the hand was too broken and gangrenous to be saved, he bore the brunt of his violent life on his body. They fitted him with a permanent carbon fiber prosthetic to which he spent two weeks acclimating in a hospital. Just like during the Revolution, Malone missed the action again.

Marianne was the woman who discovered the truth. A hero. For now.

"What did we do?" Marianne asked.

Malone hadn't needed to say it out loud. He watched the digital carnage, the outrage, a collective anger not seen since before the Revolution.

"All we've done is take down another hero," Marianne said. Malone stayed silent as they sat on the balcony of Marianne's fifth-floor apartment, staring into the night sky. It was silent here. Away from the commotion they'd created. No one would be able to stop him from jumping. "The world keeps spinning. The hatred keeps flowing."

"At least it's real this time," Malone said.

"Yeah, but for how long?"

He curled the fingers of the prosthetic into a fist. The doctors warned him that punching with it would be fatal, and not to use the mechanical hand in such a manner unless he was willing to face the consequences. Sitting with Marianne, he was only practicing sending the neural messages to his new appendage. About the punching though, Malone made no promises.

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