

The Medusa Publishing Science Fiction Fantasy Series

KARMA RETRIBUTION

THADDEUS KNIGHT

KARMA

Retribution

By

Thaddeus Knight

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

Copyright Medusa Publishing Ltd (2014)

Chapter One

Jim Henkleman sat in his office, resting his oversized bottom on a plush, leather bound, executive chair. His sports jacket was freshly pressed, and he had three primary strands of hair which composed his comb over.

His hair was a greasy mixture of brown and grey. His skin, flabby, like his body and he had a permanent squint to his eyes.

He shaved every day, but if truth be told, he looked more like a middle aged, balding, plump baby – in an expensive suit.

If you were to walk behind him in the hallway, or ride the same elevator as him on the way to work, you would be surprised at the loudness of his breathing.

The sound of the air moving in and out of Jim's lungs was something attuned to an industrial exhaust and a leaking hot air balloon.

The reason for his troubles could have been because he smoked tobacco at an excessive rate, or it could have been because he was grossly obese. But the most astounding thing about Jim's health was that he was still alive at all.

Whenever questioned about his wellbeing, Jim would grin and respond with some quip about how a steak a day does the body good, or that real men drink whiskey and smoke cigars.

Occasionally he would wax spiritually speculative, and comment on how "*The Good Lord*" had a place for him in the direction of the futures market or something of the sort.

Jim organized his life in such a way that anyone in a position to criticize his business policies, or personal habits worked beneath him.

He had no friends or family. His world was sterile and isolated, and he liked it that way.

He liked to peer down on the world beneath him, and his fifty-second floor office suite enabled him to do just that with extraordinary efficiency.

Jim loved efficiencies.

Jim was the founder and CEO of a company called Detention Technologies or DT for short - and today was a good day.

He had been working for decades in order to increase the technological capacities of DT. Had poured near endless amounts of funding into Research and Development. He had hired and fired, experts, both domestic and international.

Had gone to great lengths to secure funding in order to make this latest series of explorations possible, including but not limited to, lobbying of additional weapons contracts for both peacetime and wartime military officers.

He even had a full-time division of war mongering internet propagandists whose job it was to create civil unrest, or discredit special interest peace groups.

"The net must be wide, in order to catch the most fish," Jim was often quoted as saying and the highly paid managers within his company were provided with a small book of "Jim-isms," of which they were to repeat at least twenty each month.

These repetitions formed a component of their quarterly quotas and reports and behind his back, they often referred to the manual as the "Book of Jisms", due to its masturbatory tone.

Jim updated the book on an annual basis and did not care what his employees called it, as long as they fulfilled their quotas.

The fish to which Jim referred were often men, though not in the same way that Jesus conceived the phrase "*fishers of men*". Jim's fish were worth more while they were incarcerated; his primary concern being money, not salvation.

"Plenty of time to learn about salvation while they are filling up the cells of DT," he would say – that one was not in the book.

The problem Jim faced was an issue of space.

The United States was already the world's largest prison state.

There were federal prisons, private prisons, internment camps, and prisons for terrorist groups.

The entire government had recently been streamlined to dispense with due process, and expedite what legislators called "indeterminate detention", which was a fancy way of saying, "You aren't leaving here until we decide you can go, and we don't have to tell you why you are staying."

The legislative climate was prime for DT's expansion, but there were economic and political barriers to the increased profit margins Jim sought.

Try as he might, not every city or township could be convinced they needed a new prison.

Jim's only recent contracts were with the NSA (a sort of domestic, militarized arm of the US Government), and though the contracts were large, they did not meet Jim's expectations.

There were also statistical barriers to overcome.

For instance, the prisoners needed a place to stay and food to eat. Jobs stamping license plates, or manufacturing machine parts simply did not provide enough revenue.

During one stroke of genius, Jim had decreed that each prisoner at a series of maximum security detention centers take up the manufacturing of manacles and chains for other, low security facilities; this was disrupted by two factors:

One, the prisoners ran out of markets for which to make chains and manacles, and without a captive market, the revenue dropped drastically to a point where it was more lucrative to stamp license plates, or sort through goods and recyclables at the local dumpster.

Two, the prisoners began to make faulty chains, and intentionally dysfunctional manacles. They would also smuggle manacles or use them to bind and rape security guards.

One penitentiary where such an incident took place was overturned by Coup D'etat. The director of the prison being hung by his ankles from one of the fire sprinklers, whilst the perpetrators took turns pissing on him.

Fortunately, the army showed up before they were able to use him as a piñata but not before the manacles caused severe damage to the superintendent's ankles and meta-tarsals, and he walks with the aid of crutches to this day.

That was the last of the manacle and chain production scheme.

Jim took a deep breath in nostalgic reflection. That was the beauty of plausible deniability.

Though he had designed and implemented the system, the one who took the fall for the mistake was the superintendent.

To Jim, underlings served as targets to shunt responsibility toward.

Today, Jim sat at his desk with a pencil in hand and began writing a rough draft of his keynote speech on security, and the current condition of the prison state.

He intended to reveal, to the public, his glorious new plan on how to maintain the security of their world and he knew that he needed to weigh his words carefully.

"The value of a product, is only as good as its propaganda," – another Jimism he would often quote.

Jim drew himself up to form an erect spine as was possible for a man of his form, took a deep breath, and began to compose his rhetoric.

"Yes," Jim remarked, after penning the final stroke of ink onto a gold embossed corporate letterhead, "this will serve our purpose."

He picked up a phone on his desk, and is immediately connected to his secretary.

"Ms. Livingstone, I need you to contact Dr. Meredith.

Please ensure that she is prepared for the upcoming presentation. I would also like you to remind her that it will be televised, and that being a world renowned physicist does not provide her with an excuse to get out of a PR campaigns – not on my dime. You got all that?"

"Yes Mr. Henkleman, Sir."

"Atta girl!" Henkleman replied.

For the remainder of the evening, Jim Henkleman busied himself with a highball of whiskey, ice and a hooker named Desdemona.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day, and nothing says victory like cocaine, whiskey and sex.

Jim paid Desdemona to revere his testicles as though they were the orbs of fertility from whence sprang cultures of legend.

His favorite fantasy was to have an escort dress up like an ancient priestess, who would bathe his genitals with oil, and dry them off with her hair. In this fantasy, he would be the progenitor of the Atlantean civilization, and she would be his first concubine.

Were the fantasy to continue, as it did in Jim Henkleman's mind, he would impregnate each of his concubines in turn, so that an army of his scion could spring forth from his loins, and one day take over the world.

He made a point of depositing his sperm in the womb of each escort he slept with, but thus far, only seven had become pregnant, and three of those seven had given him a child.

Naturally, they were all under contract, and if they did become pregnant, the child would be well catered for by DT until their college education had been completed.

As the offer was generous, Jim attracted a great deal of women all attempting to be impregnated by his seed.

Jim's testicles however, were not the progenitors of Atlantean civilizations as he imagined them to be, and were actually about as fertile as a bit of crusted semen left on a 1970's porn magazine.

Perhaps the progenitor of the Atlantean civilization had not submitted his body to as many toxins as Jim Henkleman had.

Once the proper ablutions had been performed, and Desdemona's vagina had been ritually baptized by Jim's immotile sperm, she was summarily dismissed and Jim passed out in his bathrobe – a great lump of flesh sprawled on a king size bed.

That night, Jim feverishly dreamt of the speech to come, and of the many women who would throw themselves prostrate before him in order for him to insert his phallus into their bodies.

They lined up until the horizon and Jim Henkleman fucked every last one of them.

Chapter Two

Tonya Meredith had spent the night, working on the details of the speech she was to give at the next day's public address.

The push Henkelman had given her was sufficient to get her started.

Simply put, she needed funding in order to continue with her experiments.

She wasn't about to start a project, make a discovery that challenged existing paradigms within the scientific community, and then get fired for not participating in the most recent Detention Technologies PR scandal.

She was far too pragmatic for that.

Once she started however, there was a type of perpetual motion that kicked in as she moved toward *'getting things right'*.

Dr. Meredith wanted to breakdown the procedures and components of the Prison Space project, so that the public were able to understand exactly what it involved.

Tonya believed in an informed citizenry, and as Detention Tech was a corporate entity, there was no oversight for the program that she headed; military, governmental, or civil.

The only person she had to answer to was Jim Henkleman, and he did not care what happened, so long as it worked, and everybody got paid.

There was another motivating factor that pushed Tonya forward as she prepared her speech for the following day.

She wanted disclosure.

Too often, she felt, the height of innovation was trampled on by greedy corporations such as the one she was currently under contract with.

One could have interpreted her desires as some sort of misguided rebelliousness, or moral inconsistency.

The truth of the matter was that Dr. Tonya Meredith began her career on a shoestring, and never quite lost the awareness of science as a collective activity – an expansive community extending beyond the contract of a single organization - patents be damned.

She scribbled obsessively into the night, her fountain pen clenched in her left hand, her right, occasionally massaging her temples. She breathed deeply, and did her best to present a dispassionate, layman type summary of the inner-workings of the Prison Space project.

Dr. Meredith felt as though the speech should provide an introductory lesson on the subject of relativity, and special case physics.

The speech would contain a concealed prompt for research that would set the fires of inspiration ablaze and insuring that Detention Technologies did not maintain a monopoly on

extra-dimensional access, and the digitization of matter as the technology continued to develop.

Dr. Meredith took a deep breath, and set her resolve.

Open-source competition would provide the check and balance so sorely absent from the Prison Space project.

She passed out in a t-shirt and underwear, after she finished writing. Her dark hair sprawled in matted clumps on the thin, rippled, blue foam which served as her mattress. Her glasses still on her face and ink stains blotting the underside of her left hand.

Tonya speech, which formed a short stack of papers on the hardwood flooring in the living room of her studio apartment, read as follows:

(An Instructional Speech, Delivered By Dr. Tonya Meredith)

The transmutation of matter into energy is a process of deconstruction similar to the method one would use to disassemble a puzzle.

One piece at a time is removed on a sub-cellular level with each piece being cataloged in a specific order then uploaded to a series of servers as binary information.

Our previous experiments within the digitization of human consciousness led us toward a method of receiving information via electrodes attached directly to the test subjects.

These electrodes were placed at key points along the central nervous system.

These centralized vortices of bio-electrical energy were cataloged by some of the earliest cultures, India and China for example.

When we connected our receivers to these vortices, all conscious information transmitted from these centers were routed through our servers; allowing the consciousness to be represented in a digital, or extra-dimensional realm, while the bodies remained in our dimension.

The result from the D.A.D project was the awareness of both the possibilities and limitations for the digitization of human consciousness.

We found that the experience of the participants were very much like an extended dream.

We also discovered that a type of consciousness singularity took place, which we believe can be attributed to the storage of meta-data on a connected mainframe, as well as the absence of stimuli toward the physical bodies of the test subject, within our material reality.

Sadly there were also abuses within the system.

Test subjects were physically and sexually violated by unscrupulous personnel.

Project D.A.D received a severe media backlash, and the program was discontinued.

In the wake of the backlash, we struggled to find a means of expression where these issues could no longer arise.

After months of research we came upon a theory which seemed to address our concerns. The basic premise can be understood by examining the phenomenon of goose bumps. (Pause).

Is everyone with me?

Goosebumps are an autonomic function which causes tiny bumps to rise up on your skin, bringing the smallest of hairs to attention.

I am speaking of the autonomic nervous system -- this is the reactionary and autonomously operative system of the human body – that is one which exists for our benefit, yet is not dependent on our conscious operation.

I realized, that the vortices of consciousness, from which we derive information were too narrowly defined.

In fact, every nerve of the human body is an antenna, radiating information into both the atmosphere, and through the entire circuit of the body which interdependently relates to that very nerve fiber.

I was then faced with a question.

Is it even possible to attach an electrode to each and every nerve, and if it was not, then how could the entirety of human consciousness be digitized?

The answer, naturally is that there are too many nerves to attach, and the electrodes would not be small enough to decipher the individual signals.

It was then that I realized that I, like so many scientists before me, had become a victim of the prevailing paradigm.

In order to move forward from D.A.D, we needed to challenge existing perspectives on what was possible in the field of material digitization.

It was this realization, which led to our work on the Prison Space project.

When we look at a scientific problem, or a social philosophy, and we say, "It can't be done, it is beyond our reach to accomplish such a thing," are we stipulating that there is an external force imposing a set of limitations on the efficacy of human endeavors?

What if there were no limitations?

Who would we then blame for our arrested development?

But I will leave the lecture on pride and responsibility to the very capable conscience of each member of the audience. (Pause).

I consider this speech part of an educational presentation, so that the global scientific community can benefit from the labors of DT, and we are able to create a network of people, competent enough to troubleshoot this new technology. For anything calling itself science, requires objectivity, transparency, and testing.

So on behalf of Detention Technologies, I have posted the complete documentation of our experimentation and procedures within the Prison Space Project.

In order to insure the viral distribution and equanimity of the material, we have released a torrent file, which is being disseminated throughout the peer-to-peer network as we speak. The file name is PSDataComplete.torrent.

Digitization of matter has become a reality, but don't take our word for it – test our results for yourselves.

We realize that such an action is bold, and not typical of a private corporation such as Detention Tech, but I know that we are all fortunate, and will feel more secure knowing, that we are not simply exploitative capitalists, but explorers and leaders.

Thank you.

Tonya finished her work somewhere around 4 AM.

The work itself was not difficult. Finding words had never been too difficult for her. The major issue was whether or not she could actually follow through with her plan of publicizing the data she had been compiling over the last four months.

The file was essentially a comprehensive report on the Prison Space project and its release had been a long time coming.

She had already submitted a copy to Henkleman, though she doubted he had actually reviewed any of the material.

Any well equipped lab could simply follow the procedures therein and end up with a near identical system themselves.

Tonya's plan violated every single Non-Disclosure Agreement she had ever encountered, but the information contained within the report was invaluable. She was certain that a monopoly would not significantly decrease the potential to monetize the project.

Dr. Meredith's primary concern was oversight. She thought the entire idea of a leak, similar to insurance by public scrutiny.

It was her personal belief that new paradigms and new technology were the birthright of humanity.

It was a credit to the capacities of the human imagination, and intellect, as well as the remarkable drive to accomplish that which had not previously been done. However, the closer a moth gets to the flame, the greater the peril to the moth's existence and the brighter the allure towards its imminent demise.

Tonya thought of the leak as a form of insurance, in the event that she should find herself being burnt alive by her own desire to know the light of God.

Tonya stared at the compressed file sitting on the desktop of her computer before uploading the file to the Detention Tech main web-page, and leaking the information via email to every

major competitor, and experimental lab in operation around the world.

There was no turning back now.

It would take the best of these labs three to six months to come up with a working prototype, and in the meantime, if Detention Tech wanted to make any money, they would have to keep her on payroll and in charge of the entire project.

The truth of the matter was that nobody understood the project as well as she did, and without her cooperation, there would be no project to announce.

As she fell asleep, she thought about the declaration of release she would have Henkleman sign before she agreed to continue to working on the project.

He could do it tomorrow afternoon, following the speech. She thought.

Tonya woke up with wrinkles molded into her face; mirroring the creases on her sheets.

She never slept with a pillow which made it that much easier to get out of the bed in the morning. She also felt it aligned her spine during sleep and posture was important for the healthy functioning of the human body.

She rose out of bed, gargled, gulped down a glass of water, and did her morning stretches.

Her body lost some of its stiffness and she felt fully conscious as she began to prepare for her day.

The presentation was to begin in two hours, which meant that she had enough time to, brew some tea, grab some cereal, gather her things and ride the subway.

She hoped that Henkelman did not have some manner of meeting coordinated for before the event. This was exactly why she would not appear at the presentation until before he was scheduled to speak. She would arrive in precisely enough time to let him know that she would be giving her speech, but late enough to miss the barrage of football terminology that would no doubt assault the ears of the Administration "Team" as "QB Henkelman delivered the "Game Plan."

Tonya never understood why Jim insisted on phrasing his strategic speeches after the style of military or athletic sports. If it proved anything to her, it was that the only coherent point Henkelman was aware of, was the tip of his penis. Everything else, she was quite sure, escaped his attention.

She sipped her tea and contemplated The Art of War by Sun Tzu.

"The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

Why was that such a difficult concept to for men to comprehend?" Tonya wondered to herself.

Dr. Meredith reflected further while watching the few balls of jasmine leaves unfurl themselves in the hot bath of her mug. She straightened her spine, and breathed deeply. Steam rose from the mug of tea sitting on the floor before her. The scent was bitter, but slightly stimulating.

This morning, she would topple an empire, this afternoon, she would be back to work, and this evening, she would celebrate the day with another cup of tea.

With these affirmations fresh in her mind she set about in the preparation for the day.

Chapter Three

The subway ride passed without incident, and Tonya arrived at the venue fifteen minutes early. As she entered, she eyed her picture next to Henkelman's, decorated with bedazzled graphics in the shape of twelve-pointed stars.

It was then she realized there would be no turning back.

When she eventually encountered Jim, he was furious, with at least three attendants and his private secretary attempting to console him. She did not let it affect her composure and walked up to his sputtering, beet red form, before calmly offering a word of greeting.

"I'm here, with my portion of the speech. The Ceremony begins in less than fifteen minutes. May I suggest you take a moment to compose yourself, otherwise you will be giving millions of people the impression that DT's Chief Executive Officer has a temper which gets the better of him.

"You!" Jim yelled in consternation. "I think you have something to tell me, don't you, Doctor Meredith?"

"Save your passion for the speech, Jim. I don't need to excuse myself for arriving on time for my presentation."

Jim blinked, as Dr. Meredith walked away from him, making her way to her seat reserved at the front of the amphitheater. For a moment he wondered whether or not his judgment had been sound.

His PA had reported a leaked copy of Dr. Meredith's report, on the main DT webpage. An identical copy to the one which had been sitting on his desk for the last three months.

The one he hadn't gotten around to looking just yet.

The way that she had blown him off, and simply referred to his tardiness had disarmed him. He expected some form of shame, or guilt at least for disobeying the will of Jim Henkelman, but he did not experience any of the usual fear and trembling that so typically accompanied disobedient underlings.

For the first time in recent memory, Jim Henkelman was speechless.

Tonya let out a sigh in an attempt to relieve her anxiety.

She had contemplated the potentiality that Henkelman would have been informed of the leak as early as this morning and it was also clear that he suspected her part in it. Tonya entertained the most morbid of thoughts.

"He could pull me out of the auditorium and into a back alley. He could have me executed mafia style..."

She caught herself, took a deep breath, and affirmed her resolve. *"If he wanted to kill me, he would have done it already, and if he hasn't done it yet, it won't happen, Just relax,"* she

thought.

Tonya straightened her spine as she sat to attention in the front row of the auditorium, her handbag at her side.

She began to take in the details of her surroundings.

The building itself was of the old theater style with red carpets and plush canvas seating. The walls were decorated with ornate wooden moldings, oiled and regularly cleaned.

The stage was a modest three feet high and there was a single podium on the top with a microphone attached to it.

The floor was a warm wood, with a particularly bright sheen to it. Tonya imagined that it had recently been cleaned and waxed as she could see the reflective brown swirls on the wood beneath her sandals.

The remaining seats began filling up with people, and the constant murmuring of the crowd died down as Jim Henkelman took to the stage and commenced his speech.

"...The days of the past, as in the days of the present, have always included an element of society which required segregation for the good of the whole..." Henkelman began.

His bald spot was highlighted more than usual, partially due to the reflective nature of the oil on his forehead. His suit was custom fitted, and his visage was composed and serious.

He began his speech as though he had stayed up all night practicing for this very moment.

"...Some of these incarcerated were political dissidents, threatening the status quo with their ideas of blood and vehement revolution, caring not a whit for the livelihood and continuity of mankind.

Some were bloodless cowards, who hid behind violent acts against innocent men and women while the rest of the world earned their living by the sweat of their brow and the strength of their arms..." (Pause for effect.)

"...Some refused to participate in the mechanisms by which our society moves forward and surrendered themselves to various vices, such as the poppy fiend, and the drunkard!"

God as my witness... I would not want to be in their position when the hammer of justice falls straight from the heavens!

Oh, not at all.

For you see my brothers and sisters – the good people of this country depend on us to break the chains that restrict the expansion of these centers for detention and rehabilitation for those of our nation who need it most; the poor; the desperate and the weak of heart...."

The truth of the matter was that one of Jim's extraordinary talents was the art of public speaking. Simply put, he could move a crowd – in that sense, both Hitler and Henkelman rose to power, and maintained it by similar means.

"...We brought you modern detention centers when the prison population exploded beyond control. We formed terrorist internment camps to keep the homeland safe. We brought you technological surveillance and security apparatus, to help lessen the manpower required per prisoner. And lastly, we are at the forefront of pharmaceutical research, in terms of reconstruction and socialization therapy, for the criminal mind.

When we thought the Digital Age of Detention (D.A.D), had reached its climax, and started to use artificial environmental simulation in our maximum security prisons, countless people came up to me and congratulated DT on its achievements.

"You did it," they would say, but as every good innovator knows, the righteous man can never sleep..."

Henkelman inserted all the correct tonal inflections, and carefully measured pauses, in all the right places. The effect of Jim's speech was that even if you didn't know what he was talking about, you were sure, in your heart of hearts, that he knew what he was talking about.

His leadership had resulted in the success of a multinational corporate entity and his sense of accomplishment was reaffirmed each fiscal quarter.

Henkelman Continued.

"...Indeed, in the advent of artificial environmental simulation, we had bodies lined up with wires and electrodes buzzing like you would not believe. It was the peak of hospitalization, and imprisonment where the subjective experience of the prisoners where created by our own programmers.

Rehabilitation increased, but unfortunately, so did the costs of the equipment necessary for maintaining the bodies of those incarcerated. Security staff decreased, but medical staff increased when some prisoners experienced complications from the procedure..."

"... So why, you may ask, and I can tell you plainly. It is because I care..."

(Pause for applause).

"...I care about the rehabilitation of these criminally afflicted persons, and the betterment of our society as a whole.

THIS is why I stay up at night!

THIS is why I push my employees to the limits,

THIS is why I stand here before you today.

If you will, please indulge me for a moment longer with a mental picture.

Imagine a prison without walls, barbed wire, or cells. Imagine a system designed to recalibrate the consciousness of a person, in much the same way that a dream offers us guidance on our future behavior. Imagine the entire United States Prison system, contained within a secure network, of the worlds most advanced computers

Our lead scientist, Dr. Tonya Meredith has stood on the shoulders of the D.A.D project, and gone beyond consciousness digitization, into the realm of full body dematerialization.

The process is complex, and operates based on the dissolution of human matter and its identical reconstitution in another space.

Historically, Quantum Teleportation has been limited to singular atoms, over small distances but we no longer live in such an age.

I wish I was brilliant enough to have created this sort of thing myself... ”

(Pause for self-depreciative laughter)

“...but my talents are much better suited to administration.

So please kindly give her your attention for a while, so she may enlighten us all on the processes behind Detention Technologies newly disclosed project.

Ladies and Gentlemen - I give you Dr. Tonya Meredith...”

As Henkelman's his lines came to a close, the crowd offered their obligatory applause. Dr. Merrideth rose from her seat, and casually walked toward the stage.

The first thing that would have come to the mind of many in the audience was the cognitive dissonance in perception between Jim Henkelman, and Dr. Tonya Merrideth.

Dr. Merrideth appeared shabby compared to the well dressed Henkelman. She wore no make-up but still radiated a natural beauty more resilient than the image of the illustrious CEO.

Dr. Merrideth did not opt for formal dress, instead wearing a pair of casual pants and an oxford button up shirt.

She gave the audience an even stare through the thin metal frames of her glasses, brushed her hair behind an ear, and began her speech.

Henkleman backed off to a chair which had been set out for him to the rear left of the stage. He extruded confidence, attentiveness and joviality while demonstrably listening to Dr. Merrideth's speech, but as she continued, he began to grow uneasy. And as she began to wax philosophically, his mask began to waver. When she publicly announced the open distribution of the Prison Space report, he was lost in disbelief.

Twice in one day, Dr. Tonya Merrideth had caused Jim Henkleman to lose his command of language, and this time it took a roar of applause and a spotlight to snap him out of his disoriented state.

Jim was practiced enough to paste on a smile for the cameras and the multitude before him that were now offering him a standing ovation for his generosity.

The applause did not slow down as he approached the podium, and flashbulbs popped from the reporters of the major publications, all vying for the best image.

Tonya grabbed Jim's hand, and thrust it into the air, an expression of victory. She bowed then Jim bowed and patted her on the back, still smiling as she left the stage.

The next portion of Jim's speech was no longer useful, so, he ad-libbed something about liberty and the wisdom of the people, worked himself up into a few fist pumps, and closed the address as planned.

As Jim left the stage, he was swamped with reporters, all seeking answers to the most pressing questions, and he knew better than to blow them off with no-comment – this was a public relations opportunity, even if it was the biggest non-disclosure violation of the year.

Henkleman passed off the entire idea as his own, and even began to wax philanthropic philosophies about *“the responsibilities of successful corporations to spur on technological advancement in the coming age.”*

Dr. Meredith exited the building, deflecting any inquires from reporters to *“the real man behind the vision, Jim Henkelman,”* claiming, *“I am, after all, only a scientist.”*

Chapter Four

Fourteen interviews later and Jim was still too shocked by his own public statements to know what he believed any longer. He knew that Tonya had played him, but the thing that dazzled him most, was that she merely set him up to play himself.

Dr. Meredith's weapon of choice was the public image that Jim so amorously manipulated; it was brilliant.

Later when Jim finally caught up with himself, he decided to approach Tanya in her lab.

The beta testing was scheduled to start at the end of the week, and there were a number of pre-tests and calibrative adjustments that Tonya wanted to make before the testing underwent its initial stages.

She was entering some diagnostic information into a computer when Henkelman walked into the lab, still suited, but collar and tie disheveled. He even smelled as though he had seen the bottom of a few glasses of whiskey before confronting the recalcitrant scientist.

Dr. Meredith observed his approach with a raised eyebrow; she had expected this meeting.

“Ah, Mr. Henkelman, so nice to see you in the Lab. If you have questions concerning the report I will be happy to address them just as soon as I complete this diagnostic test.”

Henkelman fought the urge to lash out at Dr. Meredith, and stood there watching the woman who had brought his empire to its knees complete her entry of a string of data, using her fingers on a vibrant touch-screen.

Tonya, ever-composed and not the slightest bit smug, completed her task, and then turned toward the CEO who stood behind her

“How can I help you?” she asked.

Jim had a slight lilt to his step, and he looked at Tonya through squinted eyes. His eyelids form pouches which puffed out above his face, above and below the eyes themselves. His lips curled into a sneer, and his yellow teeth peeked out from beneath fish-like lips. Dr. Meredith did not budge, and simply stared at her boss expectantly.

“You must be very proud of yourself,” Jim began, “so proud, to have...” he paused in mid sentence and reconsidered his approach.

“Do you even know what you've done?” he asked.

“I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, but I applaud your decision to publicize my report. I've already gotten replies of gratitude from many of the most capable labs across the world. It takes a lot of balls to do what you have done.”

She paused and lit a cigarette inside of the lab.

“A clever use of other labs as a means of providing additional experiential support for the entire field of material digitization, and no small marketing ploy,” she exhaled to the side, and

regarded Jim coolly.

“I must say, I was beginning to lose faith in your leadership,” she continued, “but now that I know you are in it for the betterment of mankind, and not simply to capitalize on the sweat of others or the misfortune of many, I am proud to continue my work with Detention Tech.”

She took another drag from her cigarette, and then crushed it in an almost empty ash tray situated to the left of the computer terminal where she had been entering the diagnostic information.

“I should fire you. I should have you strung up on a pole and brutally fucked for the way that you have disrespected my entire organization.”

He stepped forward and shoved his pudgy finger in Dr. Meredith's face.

“Don't you dare pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about. Don't you DARE pretend like I had anything to do with this public execution. You have single-handedly brought down the entire corporation!”

Saliva flew from his mouth, and past Dr. Meredith's shoulders, spraying the touch-screen dimly illuminating the exchange between the two of them.

“Mr. Henkelman, this conversation is being recorded, and I want you to know that I interpret your advances as sexual harassment. I've already witnessed your news broadcasts, and we are all well aware that you publicly claimed the release of my report was a strategic move on part of Detention Tech, in order to set our corporation apart from our competitors within the field of high-technology. I will forgive your indiscretion, since it is clear that you have had too much to drink, and appear to be having second thoughts about your recent decision. While I don't appreciate being the target of your rage, I do understand the desire to share your feelings with another human being. Perhaps one of your personal attendants would be better suited for this purpose?”

Tonya smiled before continuing.

“Your ravings and misbegotten sexual fantasies are not welcome in my lab, and if you bring them here again, I will file a law suit which will bring down your precious corporation. Now, if you'll excuse me, Jim, I need to get back to work.”

She did not turn around, she did not dismiss him, she simply stood there and met his stare with a firm, even gaze of her own.

For the third time in one day, he felt a lump in his throat so large, that he could barely speak; he could not even swallow.

A rush of cold assailed his nerves, and it seemed as though a breeze had just swept through the laboratory, except he knew that such a phenomenon was impossible – the lab was four stories underground, and all ventilation was carefully monitored.

Sweat began to bead on his Jim's forehead, and his lip slowly, almost imperceptibly, began to quiver. His focus shifted, and locked once more on the uncompromising figure of Dr. Meredith. When he was finally able to speak, his words were curt, and cordial

“Very good, Dr. Meredith. Keep up the good work.”

With that, Jim gave a slight nod, and made his way toward the exit.

Tonya watched him until he left her domain. She took a deep breath, lit another cigarette, and resumed her diagnostic procedures.

There were only five days left until the beta test began, and there was still much work to be done.

Chapter Five

The media interpreted a corporation embracing the open-source model as a radical deviation from the position of high-competition, to a more socially conscious position of cooperative discovery.

Newspapers, Magazines, and Television shows all praised Jim Henkleman, CEO of Detention Tech for his insightful and compassionate business practices.

He responded in turn with the appropriate forms of self-debasement, and humble, dutiful acknowledgment.

Jim also kept his unspoken word to Dr. Meredith and did not bother her any further after their encounter in the lab.

The impacts of the test were also felt on several other levels throughout the nation.

There was a presidential address which highlighted the Prison Space project, in the context of “promising technological innovations to alleviate the burdens of the American People.” Pundits offered criticisms or praise as they saw fit, and the well informed consumers of various media discussed the project amongst themselves on densely populated internet forums.

The reverberations of the upcoming experiment were also felt in the federal, state, and private institutions and there were fears amongst the various administrators that the new system, with its technological efficiencies would render their positions obsolete.

Chapter Six

The week of the beta test had arrived too quickly for all concerned.

Tonya and her assistant, Theo were in the lab fourteen hours a day, and still it seemed like there was yet something else that each of them needed to accomplish.

Their checklists were reviewed twice, and Theo, eager as he was, would have begun the third walkthrough of the pre-operational task sheet, had Tonya not stepped in with a calm hand, and suggested that they take the last day off, in order to prepare themselves for the test as well.

Theo was relieved.

So the day before the beta test, Dr. Meredith decompressed at the beach, watching the sunrise on the eastern horizon...

Theo took the opportunity to sleep fourteen hours, amble about for three, catch a soccer game and down a few drinks at the local bar...

Chapter Seven

The news concerning the readiness of the experiment finally reached the five 'death row' inmates, who had all been offered presidentially sanctioned reductions in their sentences in exchange for their participation in the project.

The transportation vehicle which took the prisoners to the facility was heavily armored, and stuffy.

The air smelled of diesel fumes and mechanical grease.

One at a time, each inmate was collected, and chained to a bar which stretched across the rear of the covered vehicle.

Had they been able to see the countryside on the way to the DT facility it may have brought them some measure of peace, but there were no windows.

The wagon was silent a long while, as none of the prisoners expressed any interest in exchanging conversation with one another but was eventually broken when the fourth and fifth prisoners were picked up from the same institution.

Robert Peerson and his brother John Peerson.

The three initial prisoners and the guards, all took an immediate dislike to Rob and he was forced to talk mostly to himself.

Chapter Eight

Rob Peerson was most excited to have evaded death row, though he suspected that this 'experimental rehabilitation center' was a type of psych ward for government experiments, and told everyone as much.

Rob was the perfect case for west coast social Darwinism, combined with an attitude of self-entitlement.

Raised in Seattle, WA, he became involved with heroin and methamphetamine by age fourteen.

Some folks involved in the IV drug circuit soon became burnt out freaks, and he had watched many head down that route; so Rob decided to do something different with his time; relegating himself to three weeks of stimulant use and one week of depressant use per month. This meant that he had three weeks of fighting, fucking and looting. Then a coma-like vacation that took place once per month.

It was important for Rob to make enough money during his period of central nervous stimulation, so he didn't have to work during his downer period. It was also important that he not maintain any long-term relationships, because the junkies didn't like that he did speed, and the tweakers didn't like that he did smack. Consequentially, he was shunned by both groups.

He was so emotionally unstable that even if he did come across a young woman likely to join him in a mutually co-dependent, drug addicted relationship, his selection of substances was so bi-polar that she would be hard pressed to share his affinity for extremes.

On the rare occasion that he did, he was such a careless psychotic that he would often leave her in terrible places and verbally or physically abuse her if she stayed there.

He tried his hand at pimping a girl once, but he was so jealous of her fucking other people that he slapped her for being a whore, and beat the shit out of the guy who had picked her up. Needless to say the opportunity to earn money by exploiting another human being did not last long. Rob soon realized his incompatibility for pimping, and opted instead to increase his involvement in drug distribution.

As with most other things, he was both great and terrible at his newly found passion. During his three weeks up, if he thought about nothing else besides making, buying and selling speed, then he did great. He was up as long as his body could physically hold out, and he was insanely productive.

Unfortunately, as time went by he became more and more paranoid, and less pleasant to be around. He began to accuse people of ripping him off, when he was the one who was selling them short. He thought he was living the high-life, because he could always get some desperate tweaker to give him a blow job.

If it was a female, he called her a whore and give her a bag of shitty product, and if it was a guy, he called him a faggot, and threatened to leave his asshole so bloodied that he wouldn't be able to walk for a week.

His bullying within the homosexual community ended up causing a group of bikers to descend on him as he patrolled his square mile block on his bicycle. He was shot at, but they didn't hit him.

He fired back. It was probably a good thing that he missed, too.

When they finally caught up with him, he was so severely beaten that he ended up in hospital for the better part of three months. The only thing that was positive about that encounter, was that Rob got all of the morphine he could stomach, courtesy of the health care system.

Once he was that far into a morphine habit, it was difficult for him to make his usual swing back to the world of the speed freak.

He had also dramatically increased his tolerance by the time he left the hospital, which meant that in order to pay for his habit, he would have to increase the amount of drugs he sold, or move onto another form of income.

His meth distribution network had been annexed by another dealer, who incidentally was the 'faggot' that had given him a blowjob ten weeks earlier.

Since he had not done meth during his nine week stay in hospital, and had generally lost interest in both meth and blowjobs, he decided to pursue opiate distribution.

His new substance of choice worked out well for him for a while, until his scripts began being rejected by pharmacies because they were filed so frequently. Once that started to happen, he made the change from pharmaceutical morphine to street grade heroin.

Fortunately, Rob had saved up enough money from his script hustling and was able to purchase a sizeable quantity of black tar heroin, which he then cut down to a quarter strength, and distributed under the brand name, "Czechian Sunset".

After the branding of his product onward, he considered moving back into pimping by feeding his product to underage girls, raping them, and then getting them addicted to dope, but he hadn't had an erection in eight months, and he was constantly strung out.

At the start of his sixth month out of the hospital, he had gone to get a pharm script fulfilled and found out that the prescription had been cut entirely. He could have killed the pharmacist on the spot for rejecting his request, but if he had, every pharmaceutically dependent junkie in the city would have wanted his head. Besides, he had a block of uncut dope buried in the back alley of the warehouse where he squatted.

Rob made his way home, began shooting up, and promptly became addicted to his own supply; this marked the descent of his time as an opiate dealer.

Within a month, his habit had grown unreasonably large, and he was no longer coherent, interested in fulfilling orders, or doing much of anything except sleeping, and spiking his body.

Eventually the police found his body passed out on a sidewalk downtown, overdosed, with a needle still sticking out of his arm.

They took him to hospital, where he was revived and given his history within the system he was immediately placed him on methadone, and released into the custody of a rehabilitation

clinic. Four months later, he left rehab clinic, free and clear from any substances, and knocking on the door of his parents house in the suburbs...

“I saw this movie once, where they took these ex-convicts, and turned them into super soldiers,” Rob commented as they neared the end of their journey towards the lab. “That's probably what they're doing to us.”

Geeky dude in the corner over there will probably be super muscular, maybe I'll get x-ray vision or some shit.”

John held his head in his hands, and Rob looked around expectantly.

Not a word was spoken.

“Y'all sound like a bunch of corpses, thought the *'death row'* departure wagon would be a bit more lively.” Rob laughed as they arrive at the facility before being led by a detachment of guards from the vehicle, through an underground car park and down five flights of stairs into the lab.

Chapter Nine

Jim Henkleman addressed the prisoners surrounded by a small squadron of armed guards.

The guards' made no secret as to whom they are watching, and what they would do if anyone stepped out of line.

Four of the five prisoners, made an assessment as to the odds of getting out of the laboratory alive.

The only one who came up with an actionable plan was Harry, and the one who made no plan at all, was Al.

Harry decided not to take action because he didn't want to injure anyone and an escape simply did not cross Al's mind.

The other three inmates all concocted half-hearted schemes for escape, and if they were able to do so successfully, they would probably have followed through with the attempt; fortunately the weapons in the hands of the guards were sufficient to dispel such thoughts.

Jim Henkleman was lecturing them on how they had once given society cause for concern, but now was their opportunity to find a sense of purpose and dedicate themselves to something greater – namely the Prison Space project.

As Jim closed his brief, and supposed morale bolstering speech, Dr. Meredith began introducing the basics of the system to the would-be participants.

She pointed to a giant flat-screen monitor, mounted to the wall behind them. As she gestured towards the monitor, Theo flicked on the screen, and tuned into the Prison Space channel.

All five inmates stared in disbelief as the camera performed a perspective scanning tour and each felt as though he was being introduced to a new home through an infomercial.

The screen displayed a work camp with room enough for the five of them, and anywhere between ten and fifteen more to be comfortably productive.

There were tools available for any type of trade development necessary. There was a break room, complete with a pool table, dart board, and a patio, with wooden benches under the shelter of an overhanging roof. A dirt road led around the work camp, forming a loop.

The prisoners then watched as the camera moved toward a lake. The water was clear, and a slight wind moved the branches of the trees, and the reeds of the tall grass. There was a beach, and each grain of sand appeared to be clearly visible on the monitor before them. The lake appeared deep, and the surface of the water, choppy, from the wind.

There was a small dock, where a number of canoes bounced gently against each other; and the sound of waves crashing onto the shore reached the ears of all within the laboratory.

The lake was surrounded by a verdant forest. There were trees of many different heights, and types all collected together in a patchwork woodland. They could not see very far into the

woods, but there was understory of shrubs, and a darkened space beyond where the understory was completely shaded out.

The forest looked simultaneously inviting and unstable and some of the prisoners began to feel uneasy at their conflicting feelings, inspired by the darkness beyond the treeline.

Theo had been in charge of programming the tour camera, and had been examining the prisoners in order gauge their reactions. He wanted to make sure he was doing a good job, and their gaping mouths, and fixed stares provided him all the affirmation he needed. Even the guards looked on in disbelief, as they had only heard about the program, and had not yet seen it in action.

The final destination of the camera tour was a single barracks building just up the road from the lake.

Upon entering the barracks, the first thing that the group saw was a large kitchen and dining area.

There was a commercial stove and oven, along with a box cooler. A three basin sink for doing dishes was on the left side of the room, and to the right, a dining area where the inmates could sit and eat their food.

Down the hall were two doorways in opposing positions; the opening to the left contained a bathroom, and the doorway to the right led into a workout space.

The bathroom featured a gigantic walk in shower, with multiple heads, a few toilet stalls, and a standard mirrored sink.

The workout room contained a few benches, and a complete set of free-weights.

At the end of the hall were two rooms. One of which was a study, complete with a massive library. There were books lined up on shelves, from floor to ceiling.

In the center of the study were a string of tables, with chairs. A series of shiny, black typewriters sat on the tables.

The last room in the Barracks was a dormitory; this room was the most simple of all the rooms displayed during the tour.

It was a single expanse of thinly carpeted flooring, shaped like a pentagon. There were five cots, in five corners, each one with its own nightstand and personal storage box. The cots were a durable cotton weave, strung securely to wooden frames placed opposite each other in a clever geometrical arrangement. Sitting on each bed was an identical set of thick, folded, grey, woolen blankets.

On that note the presentation ended.

Dr. Meredith had sat through the presentation with complete composure, whilst Jim Henkleman revealed a clear vision of excitement in his eyes.

“Essentially, the digitization process operates very much like a CAT scan.” Tanya began.

“There is a reader, which will send powerful radiation waves into your body. The radiation will be traced, and its diffusion recorded by a sonar imaging system. The results from the imaging system will be cataloged, and transferred to our servers. Once the information has been uploaded to the network, your reassembly will take place. Each cell diffused, will be reconstituted, and your physical being and consciousness will end up ... in prison space.”

The last few words Dr. Meredith spoke were simple, and her tone was pleasant.

“You are about to enter what at first glance, appears to be a digital realm, but I assure you this is not the case,” Dr. Meredith stated.

“All of your basic needs will be met, and within the parameters of prison guidelines, you will be fed and comfortably supplied with any sort of materials or tools necessary for you to develop any trade of your choice. You will have to work to provide yourself with these materials, just as you would have to in our world.

You will be rewarded for cooperation, and penalized for misconduct. There will be no privacy. Whether you masturbate in the shower, defecate, or drool in your sleep; there is no relief from the pan-opticon of surveillance,” she concluded.

“Well, if you're going to be watching me in the shower, then I'd better put on an extra good show for you,” said Rob, pausing only to nudge his brother and state.

“Maybe if it's an especially good jerk-off, she lets us out in 29 years instead of 30?”

A guard approached Rob from behind and decked him in the back of the head with the butt of his rifle and Rob collapsed to the ground.

John immediately knelt down to check his brother was alright while the remaining prisoners viewed Rob's unconscious body with some detachment.

A small amount of blood seeped from a cut on Rob's scalp, and the remaining prisoners sat uncomfortably, not knowing what to do next.

Dr. Meredith simply maintained her cool gaze at Rob's lifeless form and some of the guards began to grow uncomfortable, unclear of the protocol in this situation.

All except for the guard who struck the blow that downed Rob – he simply stared straight ahead like a soldier who has done his duty, and was awaiting further orders.

Chapter Ten

The room was silent for the better part of twenty minutes, until Rob came back into consciousness. He brought his hand to the back of his head, wiped the blood off of his scalp, and stared at it in disbelief.

“The Elder Mr. Peerson, so good of you to join us again.” Dr. Meredith continued as though the previous events had not happened.

“In response to your inquiries, I will not be watching you masturbate, and you will only be spending one year within this particular experiment. And yes for your information, you can bleed within the confines of the experiment. Will there be any more questions from you today?”

Rob silently shook his head, no.

“Good,” Tonya said briskly.

“Once you complete your year of service in the space, you will be rematerialized. At which time, we would conduct a series of diagnostic tests designed to monitor changes in health, psychological wellness, and the predisposition toward engaging in a repeat offenses. During the test, we will be actively modifying a duplicate space in accordance with the 'bugs' that you find in this project. In this sense, your placement within our beta test will be moving both the company, and the technology forward toward a more functional rendition of our currently existing model.”

She glanced sideways at Henkleman.

“As for renovating the entire prison / industrial complex, that is more Mr. Henkleman's concern than my own. I am only interested in creating and maintaining a functional extra-dimensional environment.

It would be in your best interests to heed my commands, if ever I feel the need to issue one. I guarantee you, that I will not make such statements lightly.”

“You would be free to attempt to escape the prison, and as a matter of fact, you are encouraged. There are no barbed wire gates, or guards with weapons. You will not have a strict schedule to keep, though you will be required to complete certain tasks each day; your failure to do so will result in minor forms of punishment, up to and including missing meals, and the video log of your behavior broadcasted to millions through the internet.”

At the last statement she glanced at Rob with a single raised eyebrow, as if testing his resolve toward a public display of auto-eroticism.

“You intend to shame us into submission?” asked Matt, “Shame is pride's cloak.”

“A poetic reference to William Blake, I didn't know you had an interest in subversive poets.” Mr. Hembleton

Matt's mouth formed a smug grin, and his posture appeared more confident than it had only moments before.

Dr. Meredith continued “If shame is not sufficient to enliven your conscience, then you are each free to resume your position on Death Row,” Tonya stated bluntly.

“As you have seen, you will be living together, and as such you will not be permitted to harm one another. Other than these basic guidelines, you will be free to spend your year as you desire, and for all constructive purposes, I wish you the best, should you choose this course of action.

“Choose?” asked John, a smaller voice separating him from the other prisoners, “I wasn't aware that we had a choice in the matter.

“You always have a choice,” Dr. Meredith remarked.

There was no quippy clause or comment here, only an intimidatingly authentic form of eye contact that established itself firmly between John and Dr. Meredith.

If John wanted to pull away, he felt like he couldn't have done so. There was something undeniably real about Tonya Meredith's gaze. There was no judgment, but a fierce form of expectation; a kind of calling out of personal responsibility within the person with whom she shared the eye contact.

Dr. Meredith breathed deeply, and motioned the men toward a dining table at the side of the room. Theo produced bowls of soup and a few beers, and distributed them amongst the prisoners.

The guards took turns leaving, their positions, in order to treat themselves to a bit of sustenance; they would have to wait until after their shift had completed in order to drink though – especially in front of Henkleman.

“You mentioned the pan-opticon,” said John, between slurping mouthfuls of soup, “Are there going to be cameras everywhere?”

“It will be a bit more sophisticated than that,” Dr. Meredith responded, while cracking open a can of beer. “The entire system works holographically, and so we will be observing everything that there is to observe, simply because it is present. The entire field is active, and the data is streamed directly to us, run through a compiler, and transposed into what you saw on the screen earlier.”

John nodded, and returned meditatively to his bowl of soup.

John Peerson was Rob's younger brother by two years. He did not always share his brother's appetite for hard drugs and women; as he was primarily a kleptomaniac and a hacker and had gotten in trouble with the police several years earlier for allegedly writing a program used to retrieve the contents of customer databases belonging to a series of department stores.

The stolen information included names, addresses, social security numbers, and credit card information. The consequences of the crime - identity theft, credit card fraud, and burglaries.

John was approached through a hacker forum that he frequented, and told that if he could write a program that could remotely breach network security and then implant itself as a data miner, they would buy him a new computer.

John's family did not have a lot of money, and he thought it would be a bit of a challenge, so he designed a program with the specifications stated by the contact. Two weeks later, the contact made good on his promise, and mailed John a \$5,000 gift card to a major block store, which had coincidentally reported a massive customer database compromise earlier that week.

John told his parents he had won the card in a programming competition on one of his online forums, and he took a bus to the store; and filled out a specialized order sheet to have custom parts shipped to his house.

He bought the best products on the market, assembled them himself, and for the next week, enjoyed his new computer immensely.

One week later, there was a knock on the door, and two federal agents appeared before John's mother.

Initially, she thought that the officers were there to speak with her about Rob, but the agents asked to speak with John, and questioned him for several hours.

John's computer was confiscated as evidence of his participation in a massive data mining strike, which had collected the personal and financial information of over 20,000 people.

After months of stress, and court appearances, John was finally acquitted of the charges because he was a minor, and because they could not prove malicious intent; John's computer was returned shortly.

John turned eighteen shortly after his brother Rob came back from the county methadone clinic. He loved every minute of it, even though his brother had been gone for the better part of three years, only occasionally coming back to rip off pills from his parents bathroom, or beg for money to free himself from his latest source of trouble.

John had looked up to his older brother for much of his life, and they were close before Rob had gotten into his life on the street. Now that the two were home together, they caught up on each others lives, and John did his best to be present and available for his brother following the recovery period.

The peace lasted for a couple of weeks until John found his computer monitor was missing, and Rob was nowhere to be found. John kept it quiet from his parents, but in his heart, he knew that his brother had relapsed.

Rob came home later that night, and John confronted him. Instead attacking his brother, or getting upset, like John was initially predisposed to do, he asked him what he had spent the money on, and if he had any more.

Rob shot John up with a mixture of heroin and crack cocaine, and the two of them wandered to the bus stop, and rode down to the bay.

They got high four more times that evening, until their supply had completely run out.

Rob smiled, knowing that he had found a rip off partner at last.

Over the next few weeks, Rob and John stole and sold off, whatever they could from their parents' house, ended up on the street back at John's old squat, and began to systematically

rob every gas station in the city.

One particularly fucked robbery attempt ended with an arson fire, which destroyed the property, and killed an off duty cop, a school nurse and an attendant. The payoff had been huge, but they were only able to visit their supplier, and shoot up in a fast food bathroom before the police caught up with them.

John overdosed, and nearly died, and Rob used the restaurant as a bunker for a standoff with the police.

The restaurant was quickly flushed out with a few tear gas grenades, and no officers were injured.

The incident landed both of the brothers on Death Row after a lengthy and dramatic court session involving the linking of each gas station they had robbed, and the three murders.

Despite the emotional upheaval of John's hospitalization, sequential release, and the bitter tears of their parents, both Rob and John were stoic at the trial, and made no apologies.

As Theo walked around collecting bowls, before taking them over to the kitchenette, the prisoners' eyes wondered. Some eyes following Theo. Some peering into empty beer glasses; wishing they were filled once more.

Matt made some comment about the last supper, and Henkleman cleared his throat and directed Dr. Meredith's attention to the watch on his wrist.

"All that is left is for you each to sign the final release forms, and we will begin your transfer," stated Dr. Meredith.

"Can we ask questions?" asked Harry, causing the other four to turn toward Dr. Meredith once more.

"If I answered any of your questions, Mr. Pinchin, would it alter your decision at all?"

Harry paused for a moment, and then shook his head, no. After a moment of searching Dr. Meredith, he received only a sad smile, before the moment was interrupted by Theo, who had approached the doctor about some operational procedure.

The five prisoners dutifully signed over their liability release wavers.

"Like good little institutionalized lab rats," Harry muttered to himself as he signed his initials on the bottom line of the waiver form, not even bothering to read the content that preceded the signature.

"I take care of my lab rats, Mr. Pinchin. The beauty of this experiment is that the responsibility of care rests with you, and not myself. It's called personal accountability," said Tonya, matter-of-factly.

Chapter Eleven

The Dematerialization Chamber was set up in a corner of the lab, to the left of the largest screen and one by one, the prisoners were called forward to stand within a triangulated set of pillars.

There were a series of sensors that circumvented the outside of the triangular prism, forming a sphere.

A glowing orb formed slowly at first, and then as the sensors increased speed, the sphere appeared to become more and more stable.

The light emitted by the pyramidal center appeared vast at first, then climaxed and concentrated in to a single pillar, as the sphere approached its maximal velocity. When the sensors which composed the sphere finally slowed once more, the light diffused back into the room.

As the eyes of those within the room adjusted to the change in luminosity, they each faced the realization that there was one less person in the room

The first success was vocally celebrated by Theo, only to receive disconcerted glances from the remaining four prisoners. Three more went off without a hitch, and when it was Harry's turn, he called out to Dr. Meredith as he entered the space marked out at the base of the triangular prism.

"I'm going to find the limits of your system, Dr. Meredith," Harry promised.

"I look forward to your results, Mr. Pinchin," Tonya responded.

Harry considered calling out an apology to Henkleman. Initially Harry had thought that Jim Henkleman was a greedy bastard who made his living off of the misery of others, instead of providing an actual service to the world. Prior to his acceptance into the beta testing, he had seen the press announcement where Jim had endorsed publicizing the technological developments of his company, as opposed to the standard path of competitive capitalistic intellectual privatization. He ate his words, and took a deep breath instead. "*Who knows,*" he thought, "*Maybe this experiment actually is our execution.*"

Harry grinned, at the thought that all of this was an elaborate ruse, but there was something about the gravity of Dr. Meredith words that dispelled that idea from his mind. Realizing that it didn't much matter either way for him, Harry walked into the area marked for the scanner field.

From the inside of the scanner Harry felt a prickling sensation rise up from the base of his spine. Every hair on his body stood to attention, and he began to feel a wave of nausea and vertigo at the same time. He collapsed to the floor, as every detail about his own body was brought into his field of awareness. For the first time in memory, he felt the adhesion pressure between his toenails, and his toes. He felt the inner workings of his digestive tract, and he felt the brilliant, painful firing of every nerve in his body. His vision began to fade, and he felt the approach of death. The darkness was resolved by a moment of intense contrast, and Harry Pinchin's entire body transmuted into light.

Chapter Twelve

Once Harry had finally disappeared from the room, Theo announced the completion of the experiment to Dr. Meredith, more because he liked the idea of announcing the completion of experimental phases, than because Tonya needed any additional verification.

Dr. Meredith lit a cigarette, and walked out of the test chamber, to enter a private artificial atrium that had been crafted by Detention Technologies, especially to increase the creativity of the lab tech team.

Henkleman observed Tonya exit the room, and turned his eyes anxiously toward the screen, in anticipation of viewing the arrival of the test subjects.

Tonya was considering the repercussions of the sending human subjects into the digitized realm, and suppressed her anxiety about the complications that could arise as a result of their research.

Test experiments had been completed thus far with objects, animals, and the consciousness of humans, but not the bodies of the humans themselves.

There were ontological issues concerning the digitization of human consciousness, which still needed to be addressed; issues which may very soon cease to be theoretical.

The data from the experiments with human consciousness indicated an absence of complete transfer within the previous test subjects; it was as though only a portion of themselves made the transfer.

The results varied from case to case, but the common thread was apparent, and since the scientific niche fell under experimental, exclusive, intellectual property rights, there was no oversight, and there were no alternative studies.

Tonya inhaled deeply and breathed out toxic, carcinogenic smoke in frustration. "True science cannot be conducted within a vacuum," she said out loud to herself, as though reaffirming her own decision to publicize the project report.

Dr. Meredith extinguished her cigarette, allowing her fingers to burn on the smoldering ember. Pain shot through her nervous system, and highlighted itself along her spine. It was her responsibility to ensure the safety of the test subjects. Theo was capable of handling the technological aspects of the equipment and he had programmed the transfer software himself. Tonya was fortunate to have him as a co-worker throughout the course of the project.

"Dr. Meredith," an enthusiastic and slightly childlike voice came from behind her shoulder as she stood in the atrium.

She took a deep breath in through her nostrils, and focused on the details of the bark on one of the smaller tropical acacias in front of her current position.

"What is it, Theo?"

"Subject number one has rematerialized in on the digital plane. All vital signs are in adequate, and the body appears to be functional. No signs of consciousness," Theo reported.

“It will take the mind a while to wake up. The procedure is not unlike a dream one awakens from with a sense of grogginess and dissociation. Initially, the autonomic system will be recovering from the transfer. Once the consciousness of the test subject arises out of the sub-psyche state, expect some confusion, and an awareness of displacement. Shortly afterward, we should see a full cognitive resurgence; at that point, you can administrate the entrance diagnostic.”

As she spoke, she plucked a leaf from the ground, and twirled it between her index finger and thumb. Her attention was dually focused between the leaf and her verbal instructions.

She had been over the process - in her own mind time - time and time again; these endless repetitions allowed her to issue the complex series of tasks to her assistant without having to commit her entire attention.

Once she had finished dictating Theo's course of action, she turned to offer eye contact. He met her eyes with an appreciative, inspired glance, and promptly returned to the lab. He would dutifully follow through with her instructions and Tonya had every confidence in his abilities.

The doctor twirled the leaf between her fingers once more, then let it fall as she turned and left the atrium

On her way back into the lab, she is stopped by Henkleman.

“This is for you,” he said, as he handed her a manilla envelope.

She raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“Have the form on my desk by the morning,” Jim said as he walked away leaving her in the entrance hall to the laboratory, holding the envelope loosely in her hand.

She blinked once, and studied her boss as he returned to the elevator, on his way up, toward whatever lofty goals he still held for the day.

Tonya did not open the envelope. She set it on a desk next to her coat and bag.

Dr. Meredith had already established her priorities, and whatever form of bureaucratic coercion Henkleman had planned for her would simply have to wait until she got around to opening the envelope.

“Alright, Theo, What have you got?”

“Three out of five have successfully transferred. Subject One is showing signs of active consciousness, eye movement, and muscle reflexes. Subject two and three are still unconscious.

“He paused for a moment, and looked at Dr. Meredith. “It's really going to work,” he said, as though overcoming disbelief.

“Yes, Igor. It really is going to work.”

Theo expressed a nervous chuckle, but when Dr. Meredith did not join in his levity, he stopped abruptly, glanced at her, and then busied himself with preparations for the entrance diagnostic.

Tonya stood with her hands on her hips, and walked about the room, scanning various monitors through her wire framed, glasses.

The screens contained different data banks – some of them were live feeds pertaining to the transfers in progress; some of them were vitals for the test subjects that had already made the transfer; still others described the operational status for each component of lab equipment.

The last screen she examined was the display monitor which held the streaming video for the camp.

There on the sand, next to the beach lay three bodies, two of them unconscious, and two more being actively assembled by the Genetic Code Recompiler.

On the screen, it appeared as though the outline of the two additional bodies were glowing with a radiant light blue aura.

Intermittent flashes of green and pink highlighted the foundation of blue light, and sequential, pulsing waves rippled outward from major energy centers along the spine of the persons still in transit.

The camera was set on a circular pan, and the focus of the primary screen was variably a light show, of three incapacitated humans.

The sand was purple, grey, brown and green, all diffused together in a speckled mosaic across the length of the beach.

“Good,” Dr. Meredith said out loud, and to no one in particular.

She fixed herself some tea on a Bunsen burner that she had installed on a back counter for such occasions, and brewed two mugs of Jasmine tea. She walked over and handed the beverage to Theo, who accepted it with a word of thanks, even as he continued to focus on his present task. Tonya then moved towards a computer terminal located near the Bunsen burner; before sitting down on a large, red, ergonomic, chiropractic ball, this way she was able to maintain spinal integrity whilst checking her inbox.

“Good, indeed,” she thought again, bouncing slightly on the ball by applying pressure on the floor with her toes.

Tonya bounced, drank tea, and booted up the computer, without spilling even a single drop.

Chapter Thirteen

The first thing that Rob did when he woke up was scream.

It felt as though he been reanimated, as though he had crossed the boundary of life and death and was now on the other side.

Since he still appeared to have a body though, he was not quite sure which side that was.

The last time he experienced something this dissociating was the previous summer, when he had overdosed while shooting crack and heroin at the same time. When he finally came to, it was like his head had been pulled out of an inky black soup and surrounded by violently beautiful sparkling lights.

Rob's current environmental context and recent experiential memory included everything from that overdose experience, except for the soup.

What shocked Rob most about both experiences was that there was no life review, only darkness, and then strange lights upon re-entry.

"Perhaps," he thought, *"I haven't gone far enough,"* and then he realized that the lights were not dissipating as they usually did after an overdose experience, but were in-fact growing larger.

As he turned to his left, he saw two bodies lying next to him in the sand; bodies which looked like a cross between ghosts, and figures at a rave party.

There was a particularly violent blast of light, which caused Rob to suddenly scamper away from his spot on the beach.

The light subsided just as suddenly as it had appeared, and Rob's legs collapsed beneath him, revealing an intense level of dis-coordination.

The light was replaced by another body, such that there were now three unconscious bodies next to him, and one effervescent phantom.

Rob would have left there and then, except he had no idea where he was, how he would leave, or if he could even stand properly. It was then that he recognized his brother, John, as the body closest to him.

Seeing his brother jogged his memory, and all of the sudden the past four months came screaming back into his mind, each moment echoing on the sides of his skull, such that he was nearly sent back into unconsciousness because of the onslaught of memories.

He remembered the murder, and the gas station. He remembered using too many drugs, and getting his brother hooked on them. He remembered years and years of abusive; manipulative behavior and clawed his fingers into the sand of the beach in order to get it to stop.

After what felt to be an eternity, but was in fact only four hours, it did stop, and Rob was once more unconscious on the beach.

He slept well into the middle of the night.

A similar process followed regarding John, Matt, Al, and Harry, except that Al woke up while the rest still slept, and Harry was asleep longer than most.

When Al rose, and after his memory had returned, he began to examine his environment.

He remembered that he had volunteered to be placed within this experimental internment camp, and he realized it was cold. He looked around at those still on the beach, exposed as they were, and recalled that there were blankets inside the lodge.

Like an alien, who has just crash landed onto a distant planet, Al made his way down the road toward the barracks.

There were no surprises along the way. No boogie men creeping from the corners of the twilight, no ominous figures lurking behind doorway.

The atmosphere seeming relatively sterile.

Al found the cots in the dorm room, and pulled a bundle of woolen blankets into his arms. The blankets were stacked so high he had to lean, topple, and counterbalance the entire way back to the shore, but he made it.

On arrival, he placed blankets on each of the four bodies, still asleep, before moving toward the treeline to rest on the roots of what appeared to be a giant oak.

Chapter Fourteen

Al Darnaget was a strange case, because he had lead a life relatively free of criminality.

He had a family, and a reliable job. He paid taxes, and coached his kids soccer team. He was working off payments on his house, and he voted during every election.

Al never gossiped. He gave to homeless people, and when he couldn't find any homeless people, he gave to charity.

He even sympathized with the occasional drunkard, and if they didn't have money to get their fix, he would buy a beer for the two of them, and go sit in the park for a while – just to talk.

How it was that Al ended up on death row seemed like a total mystery for some, but he knew why he was there; it was his conscience.

If he had been any less of a person he wouldn't be here today, which was why he didn't particularly mind being in prison. After all, some of the greatest people who ever lived were incarcerated for following through on with their beliefs.

If there was a God, Al was convinced that God would sort everything out on judgement day. Until that took place, Al was put behind bars, and he lived his daily life in relative peace.

He went where he was asked to go, and he did what he was asked to do. He did not grumble, complain, or gripe. Al went about his life as a man who accepted the consequences of his actions.

Al had experienced intense instability during his childhood. It wasn't that Al himself was unstable. He was constantly forced to take care of himself, because his parents were so incredibly focused on his sister.

When his parents were overwhelmed, and needed a break, Al would step in as caretaker for his sibling.

Her name was Dori.

The pair were close as Dori grew up, because Al seemed to be the only one around who cared to see things from his sister's perspective.

Most people were interested in labeling her as a behavioral deviant, or telling her that her mind was dysfunctional. Al never thought those approaches fair, and so he was present with his sister whenever possible.

Dori was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in her teens, because she believed that Jesus and Lucifer were battling for possession of her consciousness.

They would give her advice on courses of action to take in her life. Sometimes, it was difficult for her to tell the difference between the two, and she would grow confused and frustrated.

Al imagined it must be awful, to have someone talk to you all of the time, and to not be able to trust what that person had to say. He truly felt for his sister, and whenever she would come to

him in frustration, he would attempt to remind her to focus on what “*she*” thought she should do. She never failed to look him in the eye, and comment.

“You just don't get it, do you?” she would say, then she would storm off to be with herself once more.

His parents institutionalized her after she attempted to commit suicide for the second time in her seventeenth year of life.

She had been in and out of institutions for years as and he did his best to visit her on a weekly basis.

During the last few years, she had been so strung out on psych meds that Al was certain the hospital staff were trying to pharmaceutically lobotomize her.

He demanded that they take her off of the drugs.

They stated that he was not her primary caregiver, and that since she had signed herself into the institution, she had placed herself in their care.

Apparently that meant neutralizing any trace of character from her consciousness.

One day, his sister showed up at his home, still in her hospital gown, a frightened, and alternately vacant look in her eyes.

She began describing vivid dreams she was having of the night watchman sexually molesting her in her sleep.

The dream had become so recurrent, that she had checked herself out of the psych ward and had nowhere else to go.

Al was concerned for Dori, but it was hard to tell if this was reality, or just another of her fantasies. He decided to take her back to the psych ward, and spend the night under her bed in order to make sure that everything was alright.

Al managed to check his sister back in, and then climb in through a window around closing. He laid on the floor all night, while the orderlies came in and out, distributed medications, and made small talk with his sister.

Dori was the perfect accomplice, and acted as though it was all a fun games. She tongued her meds that night, and then spat them into her hand after the orderly had left the room.

Dori fell asleep eventually, though it took longer than usual, and at 3:00 AM, the night watchman came into the room. He started by placing his hand around her mouth, and he ended up in a pool of his own blood on the floor.

The police found evidence of Al at the scene, but he had already come forward and professed his guilt.

The night watchman was dead as a consequence of his actions, and Al was imprisoned.

Chapter Fifteen

Once the five inmates were up and moving, it did not take long for them to make social arrangements.

Rob and John stuck together, while Matt tended to be an antagonistically dependent sort of loner.

Matt would approach each person as a tentative partner, but whether it was pride, or an inability to construct a social bond, he inevitably pushed himself away once more due to his brash comments and elitist attitudes.

Al tended to be generally disliked, but he did his best to work toward supporting himself. When he had extra time, he would do things to benefit the collective, but as with the blankets on the first night, he did not advertise his assistance.

The only one who seemed to notice Al's innocuous acts of kindness was Harry, who also operated on a solo basis.

When it came down to foraging in the forest for food, collecting and chopping firewood, and cooking for themselves, Harry went about his chores as though there were no-one else around.

Others watched, learned, and did not offer gratitude and after completing two tours in Iraq, Harry Pinchan didn't need it.

Harry had been celebrating his tour with a New York City bar crawl. Everywhere he turned, it was, "Thank you for your service," or, "don't know what to do with yourself now, huh?"

Mostly, Harry had ignored these comments, but it got to him after a while and he had almost got into a fight over it.

Some old guy started spouting his thoughts on patriotism and the legitimacy of the war. Harry finally spoke his mind.

"I don't care for your opinions. I didn't ask you. Whether or not the war is legitimate doesn't change the fact that my friends are back there dying, or coming home with enough emotional baggage to backlog a TSA screening for hours."

"That'll be their firearms and concealed weapon permits," the man responded, "The emotional baggage only weighs in once they get to the psychiatrists office at the VA."

"I'll drink to that," Al offered the stranger a good-natured laugh.

"Not sure you should mix alcohol with those prescriptions," said the old man.

"I figure if bullets and bombs didn't get me, then a neurochemical cocktail shouldn't pose too much of a threat – besides, alcohol takes the edge off."

"Live and let live," responded the man.

With that the man left, and Harry stayed until closing time. The bartender had set a glass down on the counter nearby while he had fallen asleep.

Al suddenly woke looking around wildly. Once he registered where he was, his breathing slowed, and he ordered a bottle of beer for the walk home.

The bartender took the five from his hand, and placed the cool beer on the bar for him to drink - provided that he didn't drink it there, and told the cops he had bought it at a liquor store.

Harry waved the bartender off and creaked his way across the stained hardwood floor, toward the parking lot outside.

As he edged outside and looked around, he eyed some figures fighting amongst themselves in a corner of the parking lot.

The lighting was dim, but he recognized from sight, and the sound, that there were two males and one female.

The two men were holding the woman down, and raping her.

Before he knew what was happening, he had closed in on the trio, knocked off the man on top of the girl, crushing his esophagus with a single strike from his boot.

The rapist's accomplice then called out to the bartender, who was outside collecting the welcome mat before locking up for the night.

The bartender witness Harry crack the beer bottle he had just purchased over the head of the remaining male, while the girl screamed and ran away.

The cops showed up while Harry was arguing with the bartender and arrested Harry for murder, assault, and public drunkenness.

Comments drifted toward him whilst in the back of the police car about training killers and letting them run the streets like dogs.

The rapist's accomplice spoke against Harry in court, telling some sob story about how this drunken, loose cannon, Vet came over and went postal on his friend, and himself.

His face was still scarred from where the bottle had gouged his skin.

"They ought to put him down, for what he did to my friend." the accomplice claimed, after he testified.

When the girl came to the stand, Harry thought, "Ah, this will all be sorted out now," but the friend had threatened the girl and her sister, telling them that if they talked, he would kill both of them.

The girl came to the stand, claimed they were minding their own business, and then were assaulted by this crazy Veteran. Harry was crestfallen.

"After all the shit I did in Iraq maybe I do deserve to be 'put down'," Harry thought as the jury was coming to their conclusions.

The Judge determined that Harry was guilty on all accounts, and would be sentenced to death.

Harry, like each of the five selected for the experiment, was certain he was going to die. He figured that God, or Fate was simply playing him a hand, and that he deserved it for the actions he had committed in his life.

He was impassive when it was announced that he would be pardoned from death row.

Stoically, he accepted life in reflection of his own actions as though it were the equivalent to being put to death for murder. After all, intentions are not what truly matters in life - Harry had learned that much.

Only after arrival in the digital plane, did Harry begin to feel more positively about his life.

In this way Harry proved an anomaly amongst the other members of the experiment; most feeling increasingly uncomfortable as time went on.

John, who was more technologically cultured than the others, remarked that fourth-dimensional space was similar to playing an online role-playing game. He claimed that from a distance, everything appeared to be real, but when he got up close to each environmental component, including other people, his perceptions became distorted, and reality took on an impressionistic, almost cartoony appearance.

Others observed a sense of wavering that occurred; as though the boundaries of objects were not as defined as they should be. Sensory input was also distorted. Touch was either uncomfortably smooth, so that even touching the surface caused shivers to go up the person's spine, or almost comically rough, like an exaggerated cat tongue. Smells and tastes were often too sharp, or too bland to be taken really seriously.

Not all of the experience was comical, or misrepresentative of reality.

It had not been five days when Rob had managed to brew some wine out of the rice and ginger that was offered to them in the larder. With a basic recipe, and some preparation, he managed to extract several cups of wine. Naturally, he consumed all of the wine himself, and then went about his day as though none would be the wiser.

He then went about cutting wood, with the use of an axe, trying to vent some of his anger. His aim slipped, and he brought the blade down at an acute angle toward the wood. When the blade struck at the wood, it bounced and gashed him across the calf.

The alcohol in his system caused his thinned blood to pour out over his leg, soaking into his sock.

Al found Rob fussing over rags, wet with blood. A simple first aid wrap had been sufficient to quell the bleeding, but the incident worked to reinforce the reality of their increasingly dissociative experience within fourth dimensional space.

Chapter Sixteen

Following the accident, Rob, John and Matt began to feel increasingly nervous. They complained almost constantly about being inside of the space.

There was a deep sense of uneasiness within their composure. They simply could not get comfortable, no matter what they did.

There was nothing Rob could drink that could alleviate him. There were no quotes to provide Matt with a buffer against the omni-present sense of disease he felt each day.

John became physically ill, and couldn't keep his food down, for the anxiety he felt. Al, on the other hand, continued forward as though nothing was wrong.

He was sensitive to the troubles of those around him, but he did not feel anything negative about the space or the food.

Harry continued to feel a sense of relief. He no longer felt the desire to drink his consciousness into oblivion. He felt less self-loathing and more gratitude each day.

Rob and Matt were jealous of Harry's display of health, but were too cowardly to express their own toxic sentiments to a trained soldier.

As the days went on, each of the five opened up a bit more, and they spoke of their crimes and activities over campfires as they began shutting down for the day.

Rob was the first to tell of all of the women he had seduced, and how much dope he had spilt. He spoke conspiratorially about the people he had ripped off in order to take care of his habits; pride clear in his voice.

John spoke of his time as a hacker with hushed enthusiasm, as though he were telling a favorite story, but was unsure how it would be received. Rob interrupted John's story, in order to recount the gas station arson and murders that had landed the two of them in prison.

Al's descriptions of his crimes were detached, and clinical, as though he were reading them from a report. He kept his comments brief, and simply told the others that he was in prison for murder.

An awkward silence followed the truncated account.

Matt too opened up to the group. He spoke of how he had appealed his death sentence several times, but after a number of incidents, his most recent appeal had been lost.

Matt ended up in prison after sabotaging a bus before it left the depot.

The bus was due to pick up two passengers that Matt had targeted for vengeance.

Due to his lack of peripheral awareness, or social conscience, he managed to completely ignore the fact that his mechanical tampering would also lead to death or serious injury for a bus full of citizens.

The bus ended up throwing a rod at a critical juncture of a downhill cliff. The rod was thrust up through the bottom of the vehicle, and impaled the bus driver.

Matt observed the success of his carefully executed mechanical malfunction, from a nearby vista. He held a remote controller in his hand, and detonated a small explosive on the brake lines and transmission, so the bus would descend in a free-fall along its seaside route.

Matt sipped lemonade through a shiny, red, bendy-straw as a bus, half full of people, careened off a cliff, and into the Pacific Ocean.

The accident was televised that evening, and the death count was totaled at five people including one of his intended victims, the bus driver, and three kids on their way to school.

Several others were injured, and the remainder of the bus passengers never felt safe on public transportation again.

The bus company would have been sued for mechanical failure, but for the culmination of evidence left by the explosives; a few droplets of blood found at the bus depot; and the text message to the two bankers providing the trail of crumbs leading to Matt's incarceration.

Once his two targets had got on to the bus, they both received a message from him with the following statement:

“Vengeance is mine, so sayeth the Lord”

His favorite bible story was when Jesus whipped the money changers in the temple. He loved to watch people's faces as he told them that their savior rent the flesh of the corrupt with a flail.

The unfortunate person on the other end of this frequent conversation invariably had nothing to say at such a statement. Most of the time, they were not even sure that his claims were biblically accurate.

“Do you think that Good Christians ought to follow Jesus?” he would ask.

The question was a trap, because the answer is, “Yes.” After the person had answered in the affirmative, Matt promised to crucify them if they did not flay the skin of a bank manager with a cat-o-nine tails.

The people in question would usually pale terribly, and break into a cold sweat. Matt would then break out into a maniacal laugh, and the person would find some way to excuse themselves.

As Matt's victim of the day departed, he would call out, “At least I didn't ask you to be my sacrament,” referring of course to the vampyric and cannibalistic critical interpretations of the last supper.

Deep down, Matt desired to belong to a community of true believers, but he was too bitter and vindictive to recognize spiritual authenticity when it showed itself.

When the police came, Matt did not resist the arrest and he was the portrait of composure during his time in the courthouse.

He claimed his actions would be vindicated by the divine for burying those scoundrels, and it must have been God's will that the other people die, since God is omniscient, and therefore knew that Matt would dispatch the bankers.

Not a single member of the jury ruled in his favor, and the case was the speediest the judge had experienced in months.

Matt cried out as he was led, handcuffed, from the courtroom.

“...AND WHEN HE HAD MADE A SCOURGE OF SMALL CORDS, HE DROVE THEM ALL OUT OF THE TEMPLE, AND THE SHEEP AND THE OXEN, AND Poured OUT THE CHANGERS MONEY AND OVERTHREW THE TABLES...”

In spite of his demonstrated fervor whilst leaving the courtroom, he behaved exceedingly well during his incarceration.

The only time he ever violated the standards of conduct set before him was in response to witnessing two inmates assaulting a third.

He brutally attacked the two inmates while quoting scripture.

“...SO I WILL POUR OUT MY WRATH ON THEM AND CONSUME THEM WITH MY FIERY ANGER, BRINGING DOWN ON THIER OWN HEADS ALL THEY HAVE DONE, DECLARES THE SOVEREIGN LORD...”

His appeal to be removed from Death Row was initially dismissed due to this infraction, but as the testimony of the other prisoner came forward, and the security footage was reviewed, it was decided that it would be better to permit this prisoner to participate in a government sanctioned study, than hazard the liability of keeping him in an institution.

Chapter Seventeen

After a week in prison space Rob had gone out into the woods to collect some firewood, when he suddenly stumbled upon some footprints in the dirt which scared him silly.

They were three pronged, and clawed toed, with a dewclaw in the back. The length of between each of the footprints indicated a stride of eight feet.

Rob swore up and down that this was some kind of trick. He actually doubted himself for a moment, and ran off to get his brother, in order to verify that his brain was not playing some kind of cruel hoax on him.

When John arrived at the spot where the tracks had been found, they had gone.

Rob spit and swore, claiming that they were there only moments before. John looked uneasily at his brother, knowing that he was serious, and yet soberly observed that no such tracks exist.

When Rob shared his story that night, Matt openly mocked him, stating that he must have been suffering from delirium tremmens.

Harry paid attention to the claims, but said nothing.

John was quiet, and unnerved. He knew that something had happened for his brother to make a claim, but he was also aware that his brother had done a lot of drugs, and felt as though it could simply be a neural misfire, or an imagination gone wild to a point of generating a palpable anxiety.

John began to keep a watchful eye on the forest whenever he gathered wood for campfires and cooking.

It seemed that the paranoia of Rob's experience had rubbed off on his brother. John's eyes would often be locked to the edge of the clearing, while they all sat around the fire.

Conversations had diminished, and it was generally observed that neither John, nor Rob were acting the same since the incident with the axe.

The brothers ended up sticking together when they took care of their daily chores.

They had much anxiety about going into the woods, but it was a necessary component of their daily existence, and so they decided that a combined front was better than isolated confrontation by the phantoms from their peripheral vision.

The shapes within the woods did not desist and generally, only one of the brothers saw them each time.

The lack of a mutual experience did not cause them to doubt each other, but themselves, as each realized that they were falling into a new nightmare.

Chapter Eighteen

Matt was working on several engineering projects – mostly minor chemically based explosives and the manufacturing of an antique style handgun, when his tools kept disappearing in the middle of his work.

At first it was a slight enough experience that he thought perhaps the stress of being there must have caused him to be less than precise about where he had placed his tools – a problem that had never existed for him outside of the space.

While he had become absorbed in searching for the tools he was missing, he came back to find his catalyst had gone, and then the trigger mechanism for his handgun.

Matt became furious, and called out to the people around him, thinking that one of them was playing a prank on him, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Fuming, he stalked off to find them, and realized that each one of them was no less than one-hundred yards away from the workshop at the time of the incident. There was no way that any one of them could have been present, and messed with his projects or his tools so quickly.

Rob and John simply gave him a weary look, and shivers ran up the length of Matt's spine. At that point, his projects came to a halt, as he was reticent to be alone in the workshop, in the company of some poltergeist thief, or otherwise glitchy software.

At night, over their discussions at the campfire, it became a common theory that the prison space realm was not the only test that they had volunteered into.

To Matt, it seemed that this was an unrestricted space, and the administration of the experiment could run into various problems.

Rob was quick to vocalize his agreement, and John silently stood by his brother.

Al and Harry had still not experienced anything out of the ordinary, and though they were a bit skeptical of the others' experiences, they listened patiently to their theories.

Al thought it was useful to hear them out, because by talking, perhaps they could process some of the stress that had undoubtedly triggered the perceptual anomalies.

Harry knew all about the government's capacity for Psy-Op experiments, and occasionally mused as to whether or not he had truly found himself placed within such a fabled study.

In any case, he did not seem to mind, and generally kept a quiet sort of peace over his disposition.

Chapter Nineteen

Tensions mounted over the next few weeks with each member becoming increasingly anti-social. Even Al opted to keep the company of himself, over the company of the others.

Harry, in an inspirational move took his cot outside, and made his living space on the roof of the dormitory.

Matt commented on how it was unfair that Harry got a rooftop room, and that he wished it would rain on him, but it never did.

For Harry, there was no issue with exercising one's liberty, and after all, it was not his fault that they had consigned themselves to their allotted living quarters.

Matt took up permanent residence in the workshop, because he said he preferred the company of ghosts to the rest of the group.

John and Rob split a room amongst themselves – Rob erecting a shanty within the room, John establishing his section with a blanket partition.

Al, by merit of not modifying his living conditions at all, had become quite solitary, and suffered no lack of privacy

Chapter Twenty

On the third day of the fifth week, Matt was no longer showing up for meals.

Dining was still in one centralized location, and the five still interacted with one another on a regular basis throughout the day in order to use the bathroom, or share kitchen facilities.

Everyone initially assumed that he had segregated himself in the workshop, and was attempting to function as a more separate entity to the rest of the group.

After a few days, Al became noticeably worried and when they went to the workshop to make inquiries, they found it empty and looked as though it had been that way for some time.

The four immediately formed a search party, scouring the remainder of the camp.

Rob continued to comb the workshop, John, circled the lake, Al took the woods closest to the workshop, and Harry took the woods closest to the dormitory.

The search went on in this manner for a number of hours, each of the four hearing Matt's name echoing, unanswered, throughout the boundaries of the camp. Then as twilight approached, Al came upon Matt's remains in the woods to the north of the camp, half way between the workshop, and the dormitories, in the section where none of the prisoners had yet gone into in search of either forage or firewood.

The smell was what first caught Al's attention.

When Al arrived on the scene, he fell to his knees and vomited. The nausea did not abate quickly, and he had to stumble out of the woods, and into the clearing to continue vomiting in the meadow.

Harry, who had been patrolling the other side of the woods, came over to meet Al, to see what was the matter. Al could not even respond, and only pointed a shaky finger into the wood toward where he had found Matt's body.

Harry set his face in grim determination, and walked into the wood.

Matt's body had been dismembered. Each piece lay strung up to a tree with wire, a needle threaded through each excised portion of Matt's anatomy.

Harry surveyed the depravity, and shook his head in despair. In all of the time that Harry had spent in the service of war, he had never experienced anything so grotesque. The smell was terrible and the carrion were already decomposing the remnants of Matt's body.

Harry turned away, leaving the torso of Matt strung up, as it was, on the branch of an oak tree. Behind the macabre ornaments of Matt's flesh was an inscription, carved into the trunk of the tree.

“If thine eye offend thee, cut it out.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The next few days were an awkward sort of quiet. They had set fire to the tree, and watched as Matt's body turned into a series of charcoal stumps.

The tree itself was blackened, but did not flame.

There were no quick transitions into what semblance of routine life had established itself prior to the incident. Each prisoner more uneasy, while going about their daily business.

None of them knew what had happened to Matt, only that something must have snapped within him, and he butchered himself.

On the fifth day after the discovery, John too went missing and his screams were suddenly heard echoing across the landscape and felt inside of the hearts of each member present.

Rob was the first to respond. He ran outside of the kitchen towards the cries, and witnessed with terror, two figures down by the dock.

Al and Harry also came out into the clearing heading towards the sound. Suspicion raged in the mind of each, until they realized that they were all running in John's direction.

Upon realizing that there was a stranger on the dock, they moved toward the lake at a full run.

Rob arrived first and found his brother tied in the form of a crucifix to a series of posts that had been driven into the dock. Nails pierced John's flesh, having been driven through each of his wrists, and through his ankles. Blood dripped down the wooden posts that supported John's frame, and a small pool of his blood was being formed on the dock.

John was being prodded with the barrel of a small firearm by a man who Rob had only seen in dreams since the night of the gas station fire. It was the police officer.

Rob cried out and clutched his chest as he began to experience an anxiety attack.

Al and Harry were alternately yelling at the man to stop and checking Rob was okay. The police officer had turned his weapon on them and they dared not approach.

The air smelled of gasoline.

John was nearly unconscious and groaning in agony as the police officer struck a match with one hand, never taking his eyes from Rob.

Harry desperately scanned the scene trying to find some form of resolution and decided to rush the officer.

Al called out for Harry to stop when he realized what he was doing, his cries jostling Rob from anxiety

Harry dove to tackle the police officer to the ground, but instead passed right through the image; skidding along the ground, and falling into the lake.

The officer's image wavered, and then resumed its solidity before he dropped the match at the base of the crucifix.

Flames climbed rapidly upwards consuming John's body. His screams reaching the sky. It sounded as though they were reverberating off of a ceiling, and bouncing back to fill the bodies of those present.

Harry climbed out of the water, pulling himself half-way onto the dock, just in time to see black smoke flow upwards toward the sky.

Part of the dock was engulfed in flames, and he had to swim diagonally out toward the shoreline in order to escape the inferno.

Rob stared in horror as the officer continued to stare at him, raising his weapon, as though he were about to shoot him on the spot.

Al shouted out in protest, and jumped to place himself between the officer and Rob.

The gun went off with a crack, and by all rights, Al should have been dead on the floor in front of Rob's sprawled out body.

The crack, however, was only the snapping of part of the dock's main support structure, the flaming crucifix crumbling into the depths of the lake.

The police officer turned into static; the image which formerly accompanied the effigy of Rob's brother dissipating into nothingness.

When Harry reached the shore, he saw that the dock severely damaged and observed Rob's weeping, prostrate figure on the grass, adjacent to a bewildered Al, staring into the lake.

Chapter Twenty -Two

There were differing opinions as to the motivation behind the attacks but all agreed the deaths appeared to be in proportion to, or related to the offence previously committed.

Initially in the case of Matt, they thought perhaps he had just gone mad, but with the advent of the police officer, they began to suspect that there was more to Matt's dismemberment than meets the eye.

Al attempted to figure out the killer's modus operandi, but he only had two incidents on which to base his conjectures.

Apart from the thread that appeared to link the methods of death with the crimes initially committed, the only other thing Al had to go off of were the numbers of the days of the week when the attacks took place.

It happened to be that both events took place on days where both the week, and the day of that week were prime numbers. There was no certainty to Al's numerological approach to interpreting when the next strike would be, but neither Rob, nor Harry had proposed anything better.

Al felt confident enough to share his theory, and claimed that the next attack would take place in two days (day seven, of week five), or nearly two weeks after that (day three of week seven).

The next two days were tense, and productivity amongst the three remaining prisoners was reduced dramatically.

Neither Al, nor Harry ate much food; both of them largely in a state of meditative introspection. They munched on their stores; they did not speak much and spent the next 48 hours of anxiety in relative silence.

Having run out of alcohol, Rob was reverting to the near gluttonous consumption of food. He would eat until he was stuffed, and then pass out.

In consequence, he spent much of his time between his bed and the pantry

Rob realized that the wardens were doing nothing, and as far as he was aware, had not shown any indication that they had even witnessed the events.

He racked his brain thinking of the gigantic monitor he had seen back in the lab, and could not come to terms with the fact that with all their extensive surveillance equipment, Detention Technologies was not able to figure out they were being killed off.

The more he considered the matter, the more he suspected that they actually orchestrated the attacks.

Al and Harry had followed similar trails of thought, except they concluded that Dr Meredith was not actually aware of what was taking place within the camp.

Harry did not feel as though Dr. Meredith had any motive to kill them off. He was also suspicious about the abrupt dissipation of the police officer during the incident at the lake.

If the police officer had been solid, then it would have seemed that there was another physical entity within the camp, but the willful dissipation seemed to imply a manipulation within the digital foundations of the prison.

If the officer could willfully dissipate, then what other aspects of reality might prove just as malleable?

To AI, it seemed likely that whatever had been committing these acts of retributive violence was native to the fourth-dimensional space, which was why it was able to violate the apparent laws of physics set in place to govern their digitized existence.

Chapter Twenty -Three

AI's first prognosticated apocalypse passed by without incident.

The three held an informal conference and discussed their reflections during the muted days which had passed since John's death.

AI had come to the conclusion that the space was not an artificially created reality, but an actual place. He also asserted that the digitization process was a method of opening a door into another realm, as opposed to an exclusively technical process of transmuting matter into data.

He waxed metaphysical, and stated that he believed that the thing that has been attacking them appeared to be related to the world's ability to provide for them, except that now it is exacting a price for its gifts, and bringing punishment to the guilty.

Rob scoffed audibly, stating the entity AI described was a sorry excuse for a God – for once Harry tended to agree with him, but Rob's attitude was vehement, and Harry's was only neutrally reflective.

Matt and John both had committed murder with their own hands. Rob knew that was the case because he had been there when John lit the match that killed the off duty officer, and he believed Matt's boasts regarding his past exploits. Rob, on the other hand, was not directly responsible for killing the cop, or starting the fire.

In spite of the anxiety and depression he had been experiencing, he rationalized that if this entity was out on a vengeance trip, he, at least, did not have first degree murder on his conscience.

Harry proposed that they set up a check-in system, if they need to separate for any reason. He also suggested that they split the day into shifts of three, so that each of the remaining three could keep an eye out for the entity, should it arrive once more.

With a permanent sentry, a buddy system, and a general sense of awareness, the only thing that seemed left to do was pray – and that was something that each of the would have to be responsible for themselves.

In truth, all three were demoralized. The entity could manifest fire, firearms, and knives at will, and dematerialize as soon as its task had been completed.

Chapter Twenty-Four

During the fourth week, on the sixth day, in the middle of the night, Harry found himself inter-dimensionally present within a dream of war.

There were IDE explosions going off all around him like some cinematic ballet of death; pieces of his former comrades fading in and out of existence.

Some of them appeared like macabre ornaments hanging from the tree where Matt was previously dissected. Some of them morphed into static light, fizzling out of existence as soon as they entered his line vision.

No matter which way he turned, it seemed there were more and more people simply waiting to die.

At some point in the dream, the ground beneath his feet became unstable. Rocks began to rise of their own accord, while huge cracks formed along the ground threatening to sever the earth like a belabored fault line.

At first, he thought they were a byproduct of the explosions around him but as the cracks began to deepen, and he found himself leaping across massively forming chasms, he came to realize that the source of the cracks was not as he had surmised, but something far greater.

When one such crack revealed a dark abyss below; an abyss which seemed to continue without end, he realized he was dreaming.

His newfound awareness did not make the situation any less ominous, but it did relieve the feeling of terror.

Instinctively, he let go of conceptions like gravity, and simply floated up into the air over the growing canyons of darkness.

Unfortunately those within the dream environment around him did not come into similar revelations and most of them plummeted screaming into the void below. Their horrifying wails striking at the heart of the most lucid soldier.

He tried shouting; encouraging the others to wake up, to realize that it was only a dream – that they had some semblance of control, but it was no use. The screams grew into a crescendo, and when he could not bear it any longer, he woke up.

Harry awakened, to find both Al, and Rob missing. He cursed under his breath and stumbled from the cot, throwing the blanket to the floor behind him.

The screams that he had imagined in his dream were now present within his waking reality; and they were coming from within the building.

A quick scan around the room revealed Al in the partitioned section of Rob's corner of the room.

Al's voice could be heard clearly above the screams, he was calling for Harry.

With the calmness of one who had witnessed the turmoil of war, Harry went immediately to Al's aid, without so much as pausing to assess the situation before him.

A massive hole in the wall had appeared just above Rob's cot. It was not an inconspicuous hole, and it looked as though an explosive had blasted straight through the paneling, framework and insulation that composed the side of the building.

Harry leapt through the cavity of blackened, splintered wood, and without pausing for consideration, Al followed.

A thin, spattering, trail of blood led them through the hallway, and into the kitchen. Harry was in his element, and rounded the corner of the hallway into the kitchen like a professional athlete.

Al followed a bit more clumsy, but in earnest pursuit nonetheless.

As they turned the corner, they saw a widening path of blood leading into the pantry which Rob had frequented so often during the last few weeks, to find three horribly burnt figures with various kitchen utensils, standing menacingly over Rob's cowering form.

Everything appeared to be happening in slow motion and the waves of sound emanating from Rob's throat were unearthly; sounding like the cries of the fallen in Harry's nightmare.

To Al, they sounded like a tortured siren.

It seemed as though the burnt figures were about to butcher Rob, and hang him out to dry, but there was something subtle about the engagement.

"Why had they not simply killed him in his bed?" Harry thought to himself as he rushed in to fend off the assailants.

The pantry was not an overly-sized room, but it was large enough to accommodate three entities and a prostrate Rob.

Harry anticipated the fight being one of close combat, and his only strategy was to tackle one of the three aggressors into the other; slamming them into the sides of the of the pantry shelving.

His next hope was to use the two bodies as a cushioning shield for his own momentum, and turn around with enough time to launch a roundhouse kick or perhaps another lunge at the final attacker.

Harry's plan did not cover what Rob would do in response to the situation, or how Al would fit into the scheme.

He hoped that Rob had enough sense to get off of the floor, and make for the exit, but he did not know where Rob was bleeding, and how serious of an injury he had sustained.

Harry was also not certain how Al would respond to the flushing out of attackers as they either ran away from Harry's assault, or to recover their lost prey; should Rob have enough presence of mind to escape when the opportunity arose.

Before making contact with the first form, Harry reflected briefly on the police officer, in the incident at the dock.

A sinking feeling formed in the pit of his stomach as he remembered attempting to tackle the police officer, but sailing through the form instead.

Acting on his better judgment, Harry now opted to slide tackle the first assailant instead of his initial plan of a full-on, leaping pounce. When the figures faded into white noise and vanished, Harry breathed a sigh of relief, though the recipient of his slide tackle was Rob's prostrate form.

Rob was not happy to have been on the receiving end of Harry's boots, and though the collision was a direct hit, much of the power of the blow had already passed by the time the two prisoners came in contact with one another.

The contact was enough to knock the wind out of Rob, which resulted in a cessation of the awful screaming that had been echoing around the halls of the kitchen.

Rob gasped for air, and Harry scrambled backward a bit, feeling much clumsier than a few moments before. A brief shrug of an apology was all Harry could offer, to which Rob replied with a grimace and gasp.

Clutching his side and his stomach Rob began to rise to his feet.

"I'm not staying here," said Rob with no small amount of anxiety. "I can't stay here any longer. It's not safe. Get out of my way."

Harry backed off, and gave Rob some room as he came up from a crawl into a wounded limp, and moved further out onto the pantry floor. The space where his body had been was thick with a small pool of blood, and Harry observed that the wound seemed to be coming from Rob's abdomen.

Harry extended his arm to stop Rob, in an attempt to further examine the injury, but Rob responded with a coarse shout.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

Rob attempted to push Harry out of his way, only to succeed in throwing himself off balance, and stumbling into the shelving on the way out of the pantry. Harry was firm on his feet, but Rob had lost every fair fight he'd had in his life.

Knowing when to call it quits, Harry pulled away, reasoning that if he Rob wanted to bleed to death from a stomach wound, that was his prerogative. Harry shrugged, hoping it was not a fatal wound – though from the amount of blood on the floor leading into the pantry, as well as the crimson soaked shirt still clutched in Rob's hands, the damage appeared serious.

Rob spit out several curses, and followed them up with a desperate, paranoid look around the kitchen.

His mind appeared to have been negatively impacted by the encounter with the three burnt victims. He looked like a schizophrenic in the midst of a particularly bad episode of hallucinatory delirium.

He glanced around the room as though he expected some apparition to burst out of the walls. There was no peace in his eyes.

“We came as quickly as we could,” Al said quietly.

Rob's hurt was evident, and it was also plain that Al wanted to make things better for him but was unable to do so.

Rob must have picked up on Al's good intentions because he came out of his scattered state long enough to provide a brief account of the events that transpired prior to the rescue effort.

He had been lying down as he had been having trouble sleeping and couldn't nod off so he headed into the kitchen to get himself something to drink – something to take the edge off.

He had walked into the pantry to grab a bottle when he saw two faces coming out of jugs which he had brewing on the shelf there. He dropped the bottle in his hand and another face appeared in the floor and swallowed the bottle whole.

There was no way it was real, and yet one moment he was holding a bottle of wine in his hand, and the next, it had been gobbled through the floor.

Harry circled around from the backside of Rob, and stood next to Al; both stood attentively listening to Rob's story.

Rob had had delirium tremens before, and thought, “*Ok, some bad acid flashback; too much drink; not enough sleep*” or something like that, but he knew that wasn't the truth - Not after they took John.

Rob looked around sporadically, and his hands clenched, as though he was looking for more drink to pacify his nerves as he continued his story.

He had gone back to the dorm and sat on the bed for a while trying to go to sleep when he started to feel a great heat, and smell gasoline.

When he glanced at the wall next to his bed, it was on fire. The bed was on fire. The wall was on fire, and he could not move.

Rob's story sounded all too familiar, and all three of them knew this was another incident in the chain of events.

Al and Harry knew that they would be next, and that this incident was not yet over.

Rob continued to describe how he was dragged through the wall by some kind of clawed demon. He showed them the marks left on his torso. The wounds were centered on his stomach, intestines and liver.

Once in the pantry, the demon had transformed into the three burn victims from the fire.

He looked at Harry with a momentary sincere expression of gratitude, but the clarity did not last long, and soon the look of hunted desperation came over Rob's features.

“I can't stay here,” he repeated as he broke eye contact, and stumbled between the two of them.

Harry attempted once more to stop his progress, but received a fist in the jaw for his efforts.

Both Harry and Al were taken aback by Rob's strike, but they had no time to respond, as he simply claimed that "*they*" would be back for him.

His voice echoed out down the hall towards Harry and Al as he ran toward the exit.

Al and Harry were after him shortly. They followed Rob straight into the forest, before he disappeared into the brush.

It seemed as though the forest had closed in upon itself, barring their path.

Briar patches sprang up where they previously had not been. Trees grew closer together than seemed reasonable.

The entire pursuit reached a climactic halt when a series of screams were emitted from the depths of the woods. Though they tried, there were no routes toward the cry for help.

Finally as the cries were silenced a sickening feeling formed in the stomachs of the two remaining inmates, their rescue mission had come to an end.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The walk back to the dorm was silent.

Al was in a general state of paralytic despair, while Harry vented his unprocessed grief through a series of violent outbursts directed at mainly inanimate objects along the way.

Their morale was low. It did not even feel right to perform a ceremony for Rob.

It seemed as though the two of them had adopted the mentality of prisoners within a concentration camp, resigning themselves to what seemed like daily brutality and senseless cruelty for some purpose not quite clear to them.

There seemed a common theme linking the killings.

Matt had been judgmental and overzealous and had applied this trait toward the vindictive destruction of each and every victim he had designated throughout his life.

It was also true that Matt had not cared about the collateral damage resulting from his actions. To an extent, he even dismissed responsibility for this damage, based on the belief that if these unintended victims had a viable moral compass, they would not have been within a vicinity where collateral damage was a possibility.

“Wrong place, wrong time, your own damn fault,” characterized his attitude regarding the people who were unintentionally hurt by his actions.

It was fair to say that he lacked compassion, or that if he had any, it was buried somewhere deep within his heart – and much too long neglected.

When someone like Matt meets the vicious demise they all witnessed, you'd think there would be the overarching sentiment that “He got what he deserved.”

On some fundamental level, each prisoner knew that this was the real motivation for these killings, but it did not change the fact that the killings themselves were brutal, violent, and full of an infectious type of terrorism.

In order to kill a killer, you need to become a killer. Once the transition has been made, the only thing that prevents you from logically wanting to kill yourself is some form of justification.

The excuse may be that they were 'bad people', and it was right to kill them. They deserved it. But wasn't that the case for Matt's attack on the banksters? He thought they were scumbag thieves, and that they deserved to hurtle off the edge of the cliff in a burning bus. He believed that so strongly that he even arranged for those circumstances to take place – regardless of who else was traveling on that doomed bus with them.

What is the difference between vengeance and justice? Is it really only an elected position, or an institutionalized, legislative framework?

These thoughts and more spun through Al's head as he walked back towards the dormitory. He had difficulty functioning and had to stop rest multiple times, so focused was he on the contents of his mind

“That's what this is all about,” he murmured to himself. “Vengeance.”

“What's that?” Harry asked, not clearly hearing Al, but close enough to know that he was speaking.

“I thought perhaps this was about justice, but now I'm not so sure. There is no forgiveness in these attacks. There is only blatant cruelty, under the premise of justified action.” Harry nodded, grimly.

“Rob said that the three burnt figures in the pantry were the victims from the gas station, but they weren't really the figures from the gas station – only representations. The static was the same, the figures were different – sometimes they have guns, claws, knives, matches, gasoline, a cross for God's sake. Even the trees move in accordance with the will of this thing.

Harry let him ramble, and Al noticed his patience.

“The entity replicates the emotional profile of the victims as well as the physical manifestations of the crime.”

Harry considered the statement.

“You mean because we were able to get to him at first, but not the second time – you think that was intentional?” Harry asked.

Al nodded, silently.

“The entity was trying to evoke the same feelings of helplessness and desperation, in addition to giving Rob a measure of security, like the people in the gas station must have felt before John started the fire,” Al responded.

“It is possible,” Al continued, “That this is some kind of supernatural realm, where judgment is dispensed to those who deserve it.”

“A layer of the inferno, more like it,” said Harry, taking a seat next to Al on the grass.

Al turned and stared at Harry, his mind not quite grasping the truth.

“Why do you think that you and I were left as the last two?” Al asked.

“Your question presumes some kind of intelligent design behind these attacks,” Harry responded.

“I think that much is obvious, and you're right, but I do not know why we have been left till last, except to say that maybe the perpetrator of these vigilante punishments has placed us on a list of priorities.”

“A naughty and nice, list?” Harry scoffed.

“Something like that,” replied Al.

“Well if that's the case, then I don't think you need to worry about who will go next,” Harry replied.

Al grew silent.

"I'm ex-military; a trained killer. You've never killed anyone. I can see it in your eyes. You were lying to us since the beginning. You may have even lied to get into prison in the first place – which makes you a fool, but not a criminal," Harry stated, bluntly.

Al laughed at this assertion, and responded without hesitation.

"You may have killed during your service, but I've seen your heroic impulse first hand. It is true that I never killed anyone. I covered for my sister's actions against a night guard who repeatedly raped her while she slept. I don't pretend to know much about you, but I know what I've seen, and I feel as though there is a reason that you have not been targeted, as of yet."

The two men stood up facing one another.

A slight wind rolled along the hill sending the surrounding blades of grass into a cascading ripple as a new understanding blossomed between the two, and a mark of respect crossed both their faces.

There was no longer any need to operate under the pretense of criminality as they prepared to face the task before them.

Al took a deep breath, and resigned himself. "As I mentioned before, I feel this place is supernatural in nature. I believe this to be a realm of judgment," Al began, "As such, I anticipate a run in with whatever is responsible for exacting punishment. When that takes place, I am prepared to accept whatever judgment the spirits of this place have in store for me" he concluded.

"But you've already admitted that you haven't done anything," Harry reminded him.

"I will accept punishment in my sister's stead, so she can remain safe," Al replied, simply.

Harry paused a moment. He considered scoffing at the man before him, but Al's resolve was so authentic, that he held his tongue in respect, simply nodding at his fellow prisoner.

"Not if I can kill it first," Harry claimed.

With that, Harry began moving toward the workshop, with some vague idea about assembling a type of electro-shock tazer out of Matt's rifle experiments, a coil of wire and a car battery.

He wasn't sure if the idea was reasonable, beneficial, or even possible, but he couldn't just sit and do nothing, and he was not simply going to submit to the whim of some violent, judgmental entity.

For the first time in a while, Harry felt as though he had something to fight for, namely, preventing anyone else from being thrown into this purgatory.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The exploratory time at the work shop was not nearly as productive as Harry had imagined it would be.

The ingredients for his fantasy weapon were all present, up to and including a hand made rifle that Matt had almost completed.

Harry was familiar enough with firearms to assess the usability of the weapon. He also found a small cache of lead cast bullets, and a small pouch of home made gun-powder.

The rifle was not fine tuned, and a bit rough around the edges. It would probably work, but it would leave a hell of a kick, and it would probably not be very reliable for long range shots.

Harry also found a machete formed out of a sharpened blade of sheet metal, with two pieces of wood banded together as a handle.

As he examined the weapons, he laughed to himself for a moment, reflecting on the mind of the man who had crafted them. The laughter did not last long, and soon turned to sorrow.

The innovation present within the designs only served to remind Harry of the potential intelligence of such a being, being applied toward violence.

Matt had reminded Harry of a less stable, more vindictive version of some of the engineers he had encountered during his time in the service.

“What a waste,” he commented, as he surveyed the unfinished prototypes littering the counters of the workshop.

After securing the machete to a makeshift scabbard on his back, and tying the bullets and gun powder to a pair of pouches on his belt, Harry left the workshop, and began heading back toward the hill where he and Al last spoke.

A quick glance around the area revealed that Al had made his way toward the beach and Harry came to the sudden intuitive realization that Al had gone off without him, intent on confronting the jailor by himself.

Holding tight onto weapons he knew were likely be useless, he ran quickly after his remaining friend.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As Harry neared the dock, he realized that Al was not alone; there was someone else with him, a woman whom from a distance appeared washed out and insubstantial.

The wind was pocketed on the dock, the water providing no resistance to its passing and the breeze whipped about the woman's hair, which lent to the feel of a lack of physical presence.

It was difficult to tell where her hair ended and the atmosphere began.

Harry began moving towards them but stopped short when he realized that Al was not bleeding, or in any form of pain whatsoever as the specter smiled and wrapped her arms around him.

Their bodies came close together, and though it was clear that only one of them was physical, the intimacy was evident between the two forms.

"I'm so sorry for not being there for you and have thought about you being abused in the hospital everyday." Al said.

"If only we had treated you with more respect, maybe things would not have ended up this way. I know I can't undo what has already been done, but I wanted you to know, that I am so very, very sorry." He concluded.

Though Harry could not see from his position, Al smiled, before allowing the apparition to lead him by the hand, toward the end of the dock.

Harry dropped the rifle to the ground and yelled, cupping both hands around his mouth to form a makeshift megaphone.

"Get away from her! She's not your sister!" he screamed.

Al's responded with a shout of his own.

"How can we be so sure?" He answered back, "She says I'm innocent, and that we can spend the rest of our time together. Her mind works normally here! We're going to be safe together, finally!"

Harry could almost see Al's smile as he announced the news.

Al sends Harry a final wave of gratitude, then turns to follow his sister toward the edge of the dock.

Hand in hand, Al and the specter leap off of the dock, disappearing into the water without so much as a splash.

Harry cried out for Al to stop, but he could not reach him in time. His cries had echoed without reception along the surface of the water; his feet pounding against the grass.

On arrival Harry peered beneath the surface of the water, beyond the dock's edge, expecting to see something, but he did not. There was not so much as a shadow in the water, which

was impossible because he knew first hand that the water was only a depth of about eighteen feet.

He considered diving in after them, but without something to follow, there seemed to be little reason to follow through with such a desire. Al was gone, and Harry was coming to the stark realization that he was alone, without any contact or companionship.

The people at the lab appeared to have completely abandoned, or lost contact. His peers had been slaughtered or kidnapped by some faceless, digital, self-righteous karmic distributor and there was nothing Harry could do.

He wanted to destroy something, but couldn't find a proper outlet for his frustrations.

If he hit the ground with his hand, he would likely only injure himself, and there was no way that he could injure the water that had swallowed Al up, without a trace.

Harry felt disempowered; impotent.

Suddenly, Harry felt a presence behind him, and he knew what it was before he even turned around. He didn't know what form it would take, but fundamentally, he knew, the form did not matter.

Harry continued to sit there so that if it wanted to kill him, it wouldn't have the satisfaction of seeing the terror in his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Stand to attention soldier!” A came voice from behind Harry.

Harry did not respond; he dare not move.

“Are you ignoring me?” the officer asked commandingly.

Harry did not respond. But instead of grabbing him by the shoulder and physically turning him around, the phantom walked out over the water, and stood in front of Harry's fixed gaze.

Harry considered turning away, but he did not want to give the entity the satisfaction of knowing that he had modified Harry's will in any way whatsoever.

“If it wants to stand there, then let it,” Harry thought.

The officer reviewed Harry, looking him up and down. Harry held his gaze straight through the image of the officer before him. The transparency of the officer's body contributed to the building sense of unreality.

“The thousand yard stare,” the officer started, “I've seen it before, from stronger men than you.”

The officer pulled himself up straight so that his chest puffed out, and his spine was erect.

“But I've also seen it on lesser men.”

The backhanded compliment took Harry by surprise, and he permitted his vision to focus for a moment.

He was face to face with a soldier he knew in the war, looking just as he did the day the enemy grenade took him.

Harry had been fond of the officer, and had even modeled his work ethic after his example.

One day they were doing routine sweeps through the city, and a child had come up to Harry, claiming to be hurt.

The child was bleeding from a knife wound on his left arm, and Harry had knelt down to pull out his med kit, and apply a quick bandage.

The other soldiers in the platoon scoffed, and some even told him to back off, because kids like that, or attractive women were often used as a means of distracting soldiers.

The officer standing before him was the very same person who had given Harry the warning that day.

Harry figured that if a soldier couldn't take care of a wounded innocent, then he didn't much care to be a soldier anyway; and to hell with his commanding officer if he thought otherwise.

In the middle of the bandaging a grenade had been thrown in the center of the group. It was a fragmentation grenade, with a short fuse. There was no time to scoop it away, and there was no time to run.

A bright explosion went off in front of Harry's face, and the next thing he knew the sounds of screams melded into a torturous song, followed by the mournful wails and curses of the people from the neighborhood.

Harry was covered in blood. Most of it the blood of others.

Those soldiers closest to the explosion were least recognizable.

The boy in front of him, the one who had initially served as the decoy for the soldiers, had taken the brunt of the grenade, and had effectively served as a human shield.

The child died in Harry's arms, coughing blood onto his desert camo uniform.

"You're not real." Harry told the specter of the officer standing before him on the lake. "My mind is making you up, like it has every night since your decisions lead to the slaughter of our entire platoon."

"Maybe so," the specter replied, but I could kill you like I killed your friends. If I were really nothing more than an illusion, then I imagine you could simply dismiss me, and I would cease to persist."

The image of the officer wavered slightly, but it was only the reflection of the water beneath it, and the officer's eyes met Harry's without deviation.

"If you'd like to meditate on the concept of reality further, it may behoove you to consider how those dreams that you claim are also unreal have very real effects on your existence," continued the officer.

Harry did not have anything to say in response to this claim, though he knew it to be the truth.

"I know enough about you and your situation to know that you couldn't have saved me," the officer continued, "and that your only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time, yet doing the right thing."

"You don't know me!" Harry shouted at the phantom on the water, "You aren't the officer you appear to be, you aren't Al's sister, or any of the other ghosts you have impersonated."

"You're going to want to keep that anger under control son," began the officer.

"Or what?" Harry asked, "Or you'll murder me like you did everyone else? See if I give a shit, I'm not going to be bullied about by you, or anyone else for that matter."

The soldier paused for a moment, and the static began to form at the edges of his figure.

It seemed as though the image might disappear, but then the image came back into focus as though it had decided to remain a while longer than usual.

Its face shifted and became something shapeless. The image began shifting between the shapeless thing and the officer and though the voice continued to speak in the dialect of the officer, the sound quality failed, and it seemed as though the voice were being put through a filter and run over by a train.

"Your superiors are planning on sending a lot more here to me," the thing said, "and I expect they will be much more satisfying than you."

Stay out of my way, and I won't bother you any further.

For a moment, Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. It seemed as though the entity was admitting that there was a sense of satisfaction from its sadistic behavior.

Harry stared hard at the phantom and continued to lock eyes with it, even as its form appeared to destabilize, and fade out before him.

"It won't be paradise," the image spoke in its distorted tone, "but at least you'll have three squares and a roof."

A few seconds after the last sentence was spoken, the soldier finally dissipated, leaving nothing but static, and an ethereal afterimage in its place

He couldn't believe it. There had been so much turmoil and angst about the impending judgment to be delivered. Each victim leaving psychological scars on the prisoners that remained; and here was Harry, the last prisoner of this twisted, failed experiment, if not sane, then surely alive.

He had once felt peaceful in this place, and now that he was alone, without any sense of a threat, he wondered if that same sense of peace would return.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Harry remained quiet for a long time as he sat by the lake, watching the reflection of the clouds ripple across the water and it took all that he had not to end it right there by his own hand.

He thought about it and fingered his machete several times in consideration.

Everywhere he looked, he would be reminded of the faceless horrors committed against his fellow man by some vindictive alien intelligence.

The entire arrangement was enough to make Harry sick. Guilty or innocent, people ought to be punished by themselves, and if not themselves, then by their own kind not some sadistic entity gleefully torturing people according to what it thought they deserved.

The entire affair left a bad taste in Harry's mouth, and nervous energy filled his body such that his fists were clenched and muscles tensed. He could feel the tensions build, and no matter what he did, it remained.

"If those fuckers at the lab aren't prepared to do anything about this, I will," Harry thought to himself.

The sun set for the evening, and still Harry had not moved from the dock. He stared into it, willing it to burn into his irises.

He wanted the clarity of the light to illuminate the darkest recesses of his being. He wanted an overwhelming sense of peace and sincerity. He couldn't be God, but he needed the clarity of the divine more than anything else in the world. He needed serenity, because everything around him had been moving towards a slow decomposing spiral for years, and Harry was very, very tired.

At this point, Harry was confronted with a revelation, and a question.

"I wonder where the sun goes when it sets in the Prison Space?"

He thought about the question for some time. It seemed possible that the sun could simply be a programmed digital phenomenon; nothing more substantial than a bit of code put together for the sake of engendering familiarity and comfort for the prisoners.

Then Harry shook his head; that was the old paradigm. If it were the case that the sun was simply a bit of code, then it would also be the case that the entity was a bit of code. There may have been parameters around the entity's existence, but to be certain, it showed a degree of free will in its operation.

"No," Harry thought, "AI was right; there is a world out there beyond the tree line." I could get lost for a while, but what would be the point of that? I need to find a way to get out, or I need to find a way to prevent others from being sent here."

With that, Harry stood up on the edge of the dock, and let out a long sigh.

Sometimes in life, there were not very many attractive options, but in order to move forward, one of them had to be embraced, so that new options might arise at a later time.

He collected his rifle, and made his way back to the dormitory. The first thing he noticed was the massive hole in the wall near Rob's former cot was absent, but the drops of blood had remained.

He had been through war. Harry solemnly reminded himself of this fact, and set about collecting his personal belongings with a purpose.

He focused on keeping the absolute essentials with him, and leaving everything else behind.

He packed up a bag which reminded of him of when he was in the service - 70 lbs of weapons, food and essentials.

He set fire to each of the buildings, so that should the scientists ever managed to figure out what was going on, they would receive one final fuck you from their last remaining prisoner - then he began making his way toward treeline on the far side of the lake.