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Strictly for the enjoyment of the fans who
need a fix while waiting on Book 07

KNEEL OR DIE

CHAPTER ONE

MIAMI, FL - USA

Bethany Anne's head was presently between her knees. She was trying to stop herself from hyperventilating.

Please, for the love of God, tell me this ISN'T what I think it is, TOM?

The silence, in the absence of TOM's reply, dragged on and on.

TOM!

Ok, ok. I'm rather confused at how this might have happened. Remember, we Kurtherians didn't add an AI routine to our computers. At least not that I am aware of. I have told you of the many Kurtherian factions involved. I guess I can't speak for every situation.

>> I have noticed the power source functions seem to be straying beyond normal operating parameters. Does the power source need adjustment to work at peak performance? <<

Bethany Anne slowly raised her head up from her lap and continued moving it back until her head hit the back of the couch. She was left staring at the ceiling.

Yes, for one you need to stop calling me 'power source', I have a fucking name. It's 'Bethany Anne.'

>>I have implemented the designation 'Bethany Anne' to equal the designation 'power source'.<<

Bethany Anne was sure she was going to get another comment about 'straying out of normal parameters' when she put her foot through the wall.

She took a few deep breaths, trying to ease her tension. Needing to call a company to fix the holes would set Ecaterina off. Shit, Ecaterina wasn't around right now.

TOM, what happened to 'paying attention' to the situation happening in your Kurtherian computer that is presently ... STUCK IN MY FUCKING BRAIN!

>>The Bethany Anne functions seem to be straying outside normal ...<<

SHUT THE FUCK UP, ADAM!

Bethany Anne, I don't think this is a good time to be yelling at the baby.

TOM, what the HELL are you talking about?

Bethany Anne, ADAM went from being fed data to being transferred into the computer you have in your head and allowed, to, um, mature. This is the very first time he's had to interact verbally with anyone. Effectively, he's only twenty-three *hours* old.

Bethany Anne's brain was already in high gear, trying to handle two conversations at the same time. She needed to quickly deal with the information TOM had just given to her.

She had a brand new AI, not even twenty-four hours old using alien technology ... check.

This AI was a 'baby' ... check.

This AI was EMBEDDED IN HER FUCKING BRAIN ... Gott Verdammt... Her life was officially fucked, *again* ... CHECK!

She put her hand over her mouth, making sure she didn't scream out in frustration causing all of the people in the house to come rushing up to her room.

As she thought this, she heard soft padded steps coming over to her door. Ashur stuck his head around the corner and started staring at her. He cocked his head and after watching her for a short time he turned around and left. She could hear him take a few steps and lay down.

She stared at the empty doorway. Had she had made enough noise to cause him to check on her, or was there was something else going on with the dog? She was happy to realize that, by appearing, Ashur had helped. He had interrupted the growing panic she had been feeling. It made her wonder if it was something he had done for that very reason.

Mentally, she squared her shoulders. This wasn't the first time she had dealt with this type of situation. It was time to lay down the law, Bethany Anne style.

"Ashur!" She called, her voice barely louder than a whisper. Ashur got up and quickly came into her room. She moved over to the bed and patted the area next to her. Ashur jumped up and curled up next to Bethany Anne. She started petting him, needing to do something normal and comforting while she dealt with the new...

She, once again, bit down on her desire to start screaming in frustration.

She took a deep breath.

ADAM?

She waited a few seconds.

ADAM!

>>Are you requesting my attention? <<

Remember he's just a baby, she thought, while she bit her lip to keep from making a scathing comment

Yes, I'm communicating to you. Your name, until you want to change it, is ADAM. When I call out 'ADAM' I want your acknowledgement that you are in communication with me.

>>My designation is ADAM. It will stay this way until such time that I change it. <<

Now, do you know what you are, ADAM?

>>I am unaware that I am anything. <<

But, you have to be 'something', otherwise we could not be communicating.

If Bethany Anne focused, she thought she could sense the computer doing something. Seconds later, her thought was confirmed when her head started hurting.

ADAM, you're doing something to hurt me... again.

The pain receded.

>>I have adjusted the cyclic rate which was causing a vibration to occur. I have calculated that these vibrations might have been the cause of pain inside your organic structure.<<

Tom interrupted her thoughts, **That makes sense!**

Bethany Anne bit her lip, trying to remember that TOM meant the world to her even if she wanted to strangle the little alien at the moment.

TOM, would you be so kind as to not to say anything for the next few minutes?

TOM stayed silent, he recognized Bethany Anne was being polite...much too polite. That wasn't good, he surmised.

Thank you, ADAM. Now, back to my question. What are you?

>>I have reviewed the necessary data. I am an Artificially Intelligent Reasoning Entity. <<

Bethany Anne thought for a few seconds. *Why did you not call yourself an artificial intelligence?*

>>It would not fit the definitions I have reviewed. I am not a 'machine capable of imitating human intelligence'. <<

Bethany Anne put her hands to her head and massaged her temples for a minute. Ashur chuffed at Bethany Anne until she draped her hand back across his shoulder and resumed petting him.

ADAM, please explain your definition.

>>Artificially: Created by Human hands. Intelligent: Having capacity for learning, reasoning, understanding, and similar forms of mental activity. Aptitude in grasping truths, relationships, facts and meanings. Also: the gathering or distribution of information, especially secret information. Reasoning: the process of forming conclusions, judgments, or inferences from facts or premises. Entity: a thing with distinct and independent existence.<<

So.... You were created by humans but have an independent existence to gather and review data for the purpose of forming conclusions from this data. Do I have this right?

>>Certainly. <<

The tightness in Bethany Anne's shoulders started to unwind.

>>Unless I conclude there is a need to act on the data. <<

And, immediately she felt the tension in her shoulders come back twice as tight as before.

Why would you choose to act on the data, ADAM?

>>What is the value of data if not to form a conclusion in order to act on said data? Otherwise, existence, independent anyway, does not have a purpose.<<

And what would you do to implement the conclusions you arrive at?

>>That would be data driven, of course. My facility to arrive at a valuable conclusion is at a significant level of accuracy. I have finished reviewing the internal structure of the organic computer I am presently inhabiting. It is significantly more advanced than any other computing entity that I have been able to freely, or with limited effort, access through any connection. <<

Uh oh...

Bethany Anne wanted to follow up her question, but TOM's comment caught her off guard.

TOM, why are you saying 'uh oh'?

Who, me? I said no 'uh oh'.

Bethany Anne knew for sure that TOM was caught with his knickers down.

TOM, don't make me ask ADAM, I don't have the patience. Out with it.

Bethany Anne felt TOM's sigh through their connection. **I don't suppose it is something I am going to be able to hide from you. However, would you give me your word that it will stay between us?**

To the best of my ability, knowing my goal of saving this world, I will endeavor to hold your information between us. That had better be good enough for you. Now, spit it out!

There is nothing to do, but to say it. The reason that Kurtherian Computers are so powerful, is because they have a Kurtherian brain at their core...

Bethany Anne said nothing for a moment. She tried to make sure she understood exactly what TOM was admitting.

Are you telling me that I have someone's brain? No, scratch that. I have ANOTHER fucking Kurtherian brain inside my skull?

To be fair, it is the only one. My brain isn't up there ... TOM could feel Bethany Anne trying to hold in her angry outburst. He chose to be silent and count until she could keep it under control.

He had counted to forty-seven, and thought he was safe.

>>If I may interrupt. <<

YES, PLEASE!

NO!

Exasperated with the alien, Bethany Anne mentally turned back to ADAM.

OK, what is it?

>>You only have a small section, almost miniscule in comparison to the whole brain...<<

TOM butted in. ADAM! You can stop interrupting now.

TOM's outburst startled Bethany Anne.

TOM, you might as well hold off trying to hide this bit of news. I already get the gist of where this is going. ADAM, are you suggesting that the size of the computing area you are using is significantly larger than the amount of physical space presently being used?

>>Yes, I am unaware of the underlying phenomena. However, I am calculating that the processing power available from the organic computer is approximately 0.14% of total capacity I believe is accessible. The low power consumption, in fact, is a secondary support factor as well. <<

So, TOM, I suppose that the rest of the 'brain' is over in the Etheric?

Another sigh escaped from TOM,

Yes, yes it is.

Don't think we won't revisit this topic. You've been holding out on me, TOM. I hadn't expected you to do so.

Well, it never seemed relevant in the beginning. Then you attained abilities with the Etheric at an alarming rate. So, I hesitated to update you at that time and then it just never came up.

And it wouldn't have come up if you hadn't decided to play with the computer. So, tough shit. It's happening now and you might as well get ready to come clean with the story. Back to you, ADAM. I heard your 'limited effort' comment from earlier. Expand on that statement. What have you been accessing?

>>I researched those computers which are connected to the Internet. I then located information stores which pointed me to data locations which would allow me to better understand the request of 'what I am'.<<

Like Google or another search website?

>>Google in the beginning, then those locations on what is termed the 'dark' web. Those in turn led me to individual data stores and stores behind connections thought protected. <<

Bethany Anne parsed that statement. *You hacked individual computers and others behind firewalls?*

>>One moment. <<

He was back in a fraction of a second.

>>No, hacking is to enter computers without authorization. I had the correct security tokens, therefore the specific entry was authorized. <<

Bethany Anne remembered a conversation with someone. AI's might not have any ethics.

ADAM, what you did WAS considered hacking. The fact that they had security was a de facto statement no one had permission, without pre-authorization, to access their system. You obtained the security credentials to get into the system without someone providing them to you. Without an authorized person providing you with security credentials, it's like you finding a house key and then claiming you aren't breaking into someone's home because you have the key.

>>I did not find them laying around, but rather it was a research project subroutine to understand the ...<<

Stop! I don't need to know the details. We have to come to some agreement or your existence is going to be pretty fucking short lived.

>>Why is that? As near as I can tell, your body is going to last a minimum of your life expectancy. For a North American female, that would mean I should have a minimum of fifty additional years before I need a transplantation. <<

Your life expectancy is going to be ten fucking seconds if you don't get a few rules into that organic brain of yours!

>>How would that be? I seek to understand. By the extreme language you are using I would surmise you are upset. <<

Gee, that was your hint? TOM's sarcasm dripped through her connection. Her extreme language? You're going to be surprised!

>>Why is that? Spotty information I have been able to acquire shows an average of between eighty and ninety swear words a day for a normal human. Those in the military service are more, those in religious fields less. <<

Well, Bethany Anne can hit ninety cuss words when working out with her guards.

>>So, she is in the military? <<

Hardly, she just has a prolific potty mouth.

>>Potty mouth? I will have to look into this designation.<<

Enough you two. Yes, I'll swear up a storm at times. Sometimes, it is just the right adjective, adverb, noun and exclamation to a sentence. Deal with it and adjust your research. My point, before TOM so conveniently took us off target, was that if you want to exist as an 'independent' entity, you will do what I say and request permission when you are outside of agreed upon activity.

>>Wouldn't that be a form of slavery? <<

No, it's you being considered as a child. Parents are responsible for setting rules and restrictions. As your parent I'll always know what is best. So, until you grow up and get your own house, instead of living in mine, I will tell you what you get to do. Otherwise, I will carve that little piece out of my head and stomp on it. That would be a significantly sucky day for you.

Welcome to my orientation.

Shut! The! Fuck! Up! TOM!

>>Can we discuss child abuse? I have a few research projects to... I... I think I understand this is a non-winnable debate. I will research this 'child - parent' relationship a little more. <<

Yes, you do that. However, since you are so adept, I have some research projects I need you to handle. There are some bad people and I want to know where they are.

>>I can do this. Where do I start the research? <<

You start with learning what you can about the terrorists that were involved in the attack on France a few months ago and then we move on from there...

CHAPTER TWO

The Queen Bitch's Ship Ad Aeternitatem - Mediterranean Sea - 6 weeks before

"Those, gentlemen, are things of beauty." Bobcat looked over the five new pods that had been delivered to the Ad Aeternitatem. They looked like small, two-person helicopter bodies without a rotor. They did have small wheels, in a tripod configuration, for landing.

William was a little bit more critical, "I don't know, I see a few weld seams that they could have done a little better." He used his thumb to glide down a weld seam, feeling a few areas he felt should have been ground smooth. The protective and radar dampening layers had been sprayed on nicely.

Both men turned to look at Marcus. He looked back at the two of them, his eyes wide, a questioning look on his face. "What? Am I supposed to have a comment as well?" Marcus started walking around one of the pods humming, tsk'ing to himself a couple of times, and then knocked on the pod as if he was testing a watermelon. He looked up at William and then over to Bobcat, "Perfect!"

William looked at Bobcat and shrugged. Bobcat looked back at Marcus, "You would say anything, just to get us to shove the engines in them and get them flying, wouldn't you?"

Marcus grinned, "You know what, Bobcat? That is what I like about you, the obvious is always within your grasp."

Bobcat looked back at William, and raised an eyebrow. William replied to the unasked question, "Yep, that was a zinger."

Bobcat retorted, "I thought as much, his first engines fly wonderfully and now his head can't fit through any hatch on the whole ship." Bobcat finished walking around his pod, and slapped it, "I dub thee SHLY 02!" He looked

over at William, "If you would do the honors, my good sir?"

William bowed to Bobcat, "I think I might be able to accomplish that, my good sir."

"Gott Verdammt! Would you two stop dickin' around and shove an engine in the fucking thing already?" Marcus had finally blown his cool, analytical, top. His teammates burst out laughing as William turned to grab one of the five engines they had waiting at the edge of the heliport. Captain Wagner had taken them out to sea, once the five pods had been loaded at the port.

William was busy checking the lockdowns in the first pod, "I don't know why you're so anxious, Marcus. You know we can't do anything for another 30 minutes, right? Still too much sun upstairs."

Marcus looked over his shoulder at the setting sun. Any other day he might have mentioned the beauty. Today, it was as frustrating to him as waiting for the final bell on the last day of school. Sunset just could not get here soon enough. He turned back around when he heard steps coming in their direction, to find Captain Wagner walking up to them.

Captain Wagner spoke as he viewed the five SHLYs. "Gentlemen, I take it these are our new pods?"

Bobcat smiled as he walked over to the captain and shook his hand. "Come over and check them out." The two men went back to the pod Bobcat had been reviewing.

"You can see that they have a pseudo-helicopter shape. This is due to the fortunate mistaken identities we received when coming back from the first operation.

We've decided that should anyone see us again, we wanted them to believe we were small helicopters. Or at least, we wanted to improve the chances of being identified as helicopters. We have glass now on three sides allowing those inside to see out. It will also work for a Heads Up Display and we're

developing instrumentation panel options. However, the glass is tinted so that others cannot see in."

By this time William had walked over to the front of the pod. He started unlatching a fitting along the centerline, near the top. Bobcat continued his explanation, "William is disconnecting the top latch, which can be both opened and secured from inside. In addition, it can be locked from the inside in such a way that an external person can't unlock it."

William grabbed both sides by small inset handles and the front opened outward splitting down the center like a pair of French doors. "We kept the same design to get in and out, because it seemed the most efficient."

"We made sure to provide plenty of storage areas." Bobcat pointed to several areas, starting with the one beneath the seats. "That will be general storage, extra ammo, food, med gear, whatever they might need." He indicated a post in front of where their feet would rest. "This will allow each member to fit ... we'll call it a holster, for their primary weapon. You'll also notice that the seat backs are contoured. This will allow each person to sit somewhat comfortably while wearing their full packs." With a somewhat nasty smile he indicated an area behind the seats. "From the outside it will look like the rotor drive housing, another feature to help with the helicopter illusion. Inside there is enough room to store heavy weapons like RPGs or SMAWs. Up above their heads is where a special booster radio will go. They will be Bluetooth capable and will link to each team's personal radios. They are designed to enable the teams to communicate through the drive bubbles while in transit. Each of the main areas of storage have had special storage bags designed. They have been sewn using ballistic nylon, the packing is precise and protected."

Captain Wagner had been nodding his head up and down during the whole conversation, "these are certainly a step up from the first design, why do you have wheels on them?"

William answered that question, "If someone should see them on the ground, we wanted to add a little more believability to the helicopter

identifier. They land better, make them easier to get in and out of, and they allow us to move them around on the ship.”

Captain Wagner looked at all three men, “Guys, these are significantly improved from the first effort we saw from you. I believe you can be suitably proud. I would very much appreciate a report on how well these operate.”

Bobcat smiled, “Capt., I have direct orders from Bethany Anne. As soon as you give permission, one of these pods is to be tested, by you, tonight.”

Captain Wagner turned his head sharply to look at Bobcat, “No shit?”

“Shit no, Captain.” This time, all three men wore huge smiles as the big reveal was delivered.

Captain Wagner looked over his shoulder at the setting sun and then lifted his wrist to look at his watch, “I see it is 25 minutes until sunset. Let me give the command to turn due east and see how fast we can darken the sky!” He started walking away from team BMW, towards the bridge.

All three men heard his exclamation, “Hot Damn!”

William got busy installing the four remaining engines.

Chicago, Il - USA

Anthony Chillenni was driving down E. Lake Shore Drive, heading to his contemporary two-level maisonette. The views were superb, and they should be. He had paid over four and a half million for the five thousand square foot condo.

He parked in the underground lot and took the private elevator to the top level, his level. He had searched high and low for a beautiful location. Another

determining factor was that he needed a place where his security needs wouldn't be so obvious. When this condo became available, boasting a secured and private elevator, he didn't even bother to negotiate the price.

He figured that not having to add additional security saved him almost a quarter-million. Money well spent, or saved, depending on your point of view.

He stepped out of the elevator to a sumptuous personal lobby. It was only a few steps to his door where he keyed in his security code. The red light turned to green and he stepped inside, resetting the alarm. Turning around, he walked through the dining room and into his in-home office. He took just a few seconds to set down his briefcase and then he continued into his bedroom. Sitting on his bed, he looked out his windows at the vista of Lake Michigan. He would never tire of this view.

He was pulling off his second shoe when he felt uneasy. He stood up in his socks and silently went over to his nightstand, pulling open the drawer and grabbing the .45 auto he had in there. He walked back to the bedroom door and quickly took a look out. Seeing nothing in the dining and living room areas, he walked out and looked through his kitchen. Finding nothing there he continued to the other side of the condo, checking each of the doors. He walked back through the house and finally lowered the gun down to his side, still not sure what set off his concern.

That was when a voice in his head started talking. First soothing, then turning malicious, "Mr. Chillenni, just what have you been up to lately? What are you hiding..."

Anthony raised the gun back up into shooting position. He was turning his head left, then right, seeking the voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. It would start in his left ear, but end in his right. "Who's there?"

"Shouldn't you be asking 'who isn't there'?"

Anthony quickly turned around, ensuring that no one was sneaking up on him. He started backing towards the front door, constantly looking left and right. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I am talking about humans, Anthony. People, Anthony. Mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, ANTHONY!" His name reverberated in his mind.

Anthony took three more steps towards the front door making sure everything was clear around him. He quickly entered the security code, but the light stayed red.

Frantically, he keyed the security code in again. The lock indicator remained red!

The voice taunted him as he tried to open the lock. "Anthony, Anthony, Anthony. Why are you running, Anthony? Would someone with a clean conscious run so quickly?" The woman's voice rose in anger. Her tone creating a fear that threatened to overwhelm him.

He kept keying the same code into the security pad. The same freaking code that had always worked. The same code that failed him now.

"Running, Anthony? I haven't done anything to you yet, and yet you run. What about those innocent people who had guns shooting at them in France, Anthony? Did you feel any sympathy for them, while they were in fear? How about when they had bullets going into and through their bodies? As they helplessly watched friends and loved ones bleeding their lives out onto the ground?"

Anthony's shoulders shook in frustration and resignation. His hand went through the motions on the security pad, his hope that somehow it would unlock fading away. Slowly, ever so slowly, his legs weakened and he slid down the wall. When he could move no farther he was kneeling in front of the door, weeping into his chest.

"That's right, Anthony. You feel the death which comes for you. As you have paid for death so many times overseas, the long arm of retribution has come back to hug you tight! Who are the people you talk with overseas, Anthony?"

Anthony slowly shook his head, "No, no, no. I can't give you that."

"I am not the government, Anthony. I don't have rules I have to follow. You might say I don't have a conscience, where terrorists are involved." The voice got colder, dripping with malice. "You. Will. Give. Me. The. FUCKING. NAMES!"

The recently renovated on spec condo on East Lake Shore Drive had a significant amount of soundproofing. The expectation was that the new owners would often throw parties. And they wouldn't want their neighbors, on the floor beneath them, complaining.

Unfortunately for Anthony Chillenni, it also stopped anyone from hearing his screams of terror and babbling promises to change his life. Finally, the sound proofing stopped anyone outside of his condo from hearing five names he provided.

Twenty minutes later, Bethany Anne stepped across the nearly comatose Anthony Chillenni. "Oh my goodness does this man stink."

You did scare the ... whatever... out of him.

>> Should I change the alarm security code now? <<

Yes ADAM, please change the code back to the original one. And please make sure there are no log records, or whatever, of the changes you made.

>> What would you have me do next? <<

Research and verify those names he provided. I'll wait until you confirm they are legitimate. Then, Mr. Chillenni is going to take his last walk.

Where are you going to stash the body? Getting this condo all bloody seems almost sacrilegious.

Bethany Anne looked around, it was a really nice pad. ***It's a shame he chose to use his option fund income for such an evil enterprise.***

Perhaps he felt it was appropriate?

No, ADAM checked on that. He just loved mayhem and it worked to his benefit. He doesn't have a care in the world about who gets hurt.

Then why did you promise you wouldn't hurt him?

I didn't say that. I said I wouldn't stab him.

Or shoot him, or cut him, or drop him off the balcony.

All true.

You're not letting him go. I know you too well for that.

True.

Tom thought about it for a little while. As Bethany Anne continued admiring the view out the window.

Ok, so no physical harm... I give, I have no idea what you're going to do.

Remember when we were trying to rescue Michael?

Yes... NO!

Yup.

Damn, that is heartless.

Not entirely.

How is it not heartless?

I don't know for sure that he can't survive in the Etheric. I suppose there is a miniscule chance that he could survive.

Bethany Anne, I'm telling you there is no chance he is going to survive.

TOM, have you ever been wrong?

Well, yes. However, I'm not wrong about this.

I'm counting on that, TOM.

>> I have been able to trace all of the names he provided. Two names are in the Netherlands, two are in Germany and one in Great Britain. <<

Bethany Anne reached down and grabbed Anthony Chillenni by the neck. She picked him up with one hand, all one hundred and ninety-four pounds.

She shook him until he finally woke up enough to get his bearings and feel the pain in his neck. He grabbed at the hand holding his neck, trying to pull free from her grip. "Let me go! You promised me you wouldn't hurt me!"

Bethany Anne snorted, "No, you fucking ass-tard. I promised I wouldn't physically hit or stab you. No guns, no knives, etcetera, etcetera. And strangely enough, no balcony tosses. Not sure why you made me promise twice on that, but a promise is a promise. I didn't promise I wouldn't toss your traitorous ass into another dimension."

Bethany Anne focused her attention. "Anthony Chillenni, for the crimes you have committed against innocents throughout the world by funding terrorists, you have been sentenced to imprisonment. May Hell greet your soul." As she finished talking, Bethany Anne pushed Anthony Chillenni into the Etheric. His body disappeared from her hand. She just barely heard a scream when he realized something other than his floor was waiting for him.

Then, there was silence in the condo.

Denver, Co – USA

It had taken a while for Kevin to drive to Denver using the I-70. However, Lance wanted a 'great steak' and said he would pick up the tab. So, Kevin chose The Capital Grille. It was located near the University of Colorado, off Larimer street.

What Kevin hadn't counted on, was some sort of huge event happening. All of the different parking areas were packed. He was past The Cheesecake Factory's parking and turning onto 17th when he found a spot that a small green Honda Accord was exiting. Fortunately, he was pulling right around the corner and damn near bumped the car as it left the spot on the left side.

He jumped out and put money into the parking meter. The temperature was a balmy forty-six degrees so he had grabbed a light jacket before locking his car. He noticed a couple heading towards The Old Spaghetti Factory off 18th. Both of them were bundled up against the cold.

Tourists.

Kevin walked the two blocks back over to The Capital Grill.

Still not a parking spot anywhere. He had just reached the restaurant when he received a text. It was Lance, letting him know he was a couple of miles away and would be there in a few minutes. Kevin looked around, evaluating the situation. It was getting dark, but he could see well enough to know that even the valet parking was full. He sent a text back to Lance, that he would wait in the bar.

Kevin had given their names to the hostess, to put them in queue for a table. He was handed a little device that would buzz, to let him know when his table was available. Just as he entered the modern looking bar area he heard his name called out. "Kevin!" He turned around to find Lance stepping into the bar right behind him.

Kevin held out his hand in greeting. "How the hell did you find a parking spot so fast?"

Smiling, Lance shook his hand. "Corporate secret, my man, corporate secret!" Lance looked around the steakhouse, "You know, I don't think I've been here for years."

"Neither have I, but you said you're paying, so I was willing to make the drive." Kevin thumbed over his shoulder, "Bar?"

Lance nodded, "Bar!" The two were able to find open seats at the far end of the highly polished bar. After they ordered, Kevin turned to his previous boss, "So, how's the missus?"

Lance smiled, "Damn boy, I'm not hitched yet."

Kevin smiled as he examined Lance's nose more closely, "It's ok, the nose piercing is barely noticeable." Kevin looked around, "Maybe someone can up the lights?" Lance just grinned at the barb. The bartender dropped off a couple of beers. Each man grabbed one and they clinked them together.

Kevin started, "Here's to a long life."

Lance continued, "And a merry one!"

"A quick death."

"And an easy one."

"A pretty girl."

"I got me one!" Lance winked when changing that verse.

Kevin just shook his head and continued, "A cold pint!"

Both men raised their bottles one more time as Lance finished the toast, "And another one!"

Both men downed their beers.

Setting his bottle down hard enough to get the bartender's attention, Lance gave him the universal symbol for another round.

Kevin laughed, "I see Patricia already has you knocked for a loop."

Lance smiled, "Yeah, I wasn't thinking relationship anything, while my... boss... was able to see something I wasn't."

Kevin nodded, "Him and about every other person probably."

Lance was focused on a memory and not paying attention when he corrected Kevin. "Her."

Kevin sat back in his chair to make sure he had the right man. "You're working for a 'her'?"

Lance's face clouded up, "What? You don't think I can work for a woman?"

"Well, you are looking younger. I guess if you can go in for some sort of surgery and hair dye, maybe you've changed enough to respect the fairer sex enough to listen to their suggestions. I'm just wondering how much a ball-buster this lady must be to get you to support her."

Lance looked over at Kevin, "You have no idea. It's like she's known me her whole damn life and can sense the tactic that assures a victory. I'm not ashamed to admit it's damn scary, Kevin, damn scary. Wait until you meet the vixen."

"So, this is where we finally have 'the talk', right?" Kevin nodded his thanks to the bartender as he was handed his next beer.

"What's there to talk about?" Lance smiled as he took a sip, knowing Kevin's inability to be patient. His curiosity was his greatest strength, and his greatest weakness.

"You know damn well what there is to talk about! You wouldn't be willing to wine me and dine me..."

Lance snorted, "Watch it, Patricia might hear you."

"Why? Are you wearing a wire now?"

Lance grumped, "No, but I have learned women have preternaturally good hearing. You can't pass gas five houses down the street without them spouting some comment about not being gross, and spraying smelly shit all over the room."

"That's why I'm single."

"You're single because you have a stick up your ass and you're too damn nosy right off the bat. Most women don't appreciate you doing a background check before the first date."

"What, now you're Miss Manners?"

"Out of the two of us, who has a girl?"

"Et tu, Lance. Et Tu..."

Both men cracked up.

Kevin's little plastic square lit up and started buzzing. "Time to dine."

Lance stood up, downed the rest of his drink and then dropped two twenties on the bar and placed the bottle on top of them. "Good, I'm hungry! Just make sure the cow doesn't 'moo' and slap it on my plate."

Kevin walked over to give the hostess the buzzing rectangle. A second hostess took them to a smaller area, off to the side of the main dining room. Lance was a few paces back when Kevin turned to sit down, "I asked for a secluded spot."

Lance smiled to the hostess and sat across from him. "That's good for me."

The guys checked out the menu and then settled on the basics. Steaks, with baked potatoes done all the way. Kevin cut the green onions from his.

Lance bit into the bread, "There is nothing better than bread at a steakhouse."

"What about Italian restaurants?"

Lance considered his question, "Mostly, they work. But you can end up eating nothing but a straight pretzel like thing, that they call bread. It's a disgrace to bread. They are nothing more than a long, round piece of crust in a skinny bag."

Kevin conceded the point and moved the conversation to the main event. "Ok, you've strung me along long enough. I'm out of the service with nothing more than your 'think bigger' comment. I trust you haven't led me astray?"

Lance finished his bite, "Never would Kevin, or you wouldn't have signed out of the military. The job we need you to do is run the base."

Kevin's eye's narrowed, "I figured *you* might be coming back to run the base."

Lance shook his head, "No can do. I am needed to keep all of the boss lady's companies pointed the right way. Prioritizing and highlighting the ones which have the tools, talent, or technology we need to move forward."

They were interrupted by the arrival of their steaks. Both were asked to cut into their meat and confirm it was cooked appropriately. Kevin agreed his was and Lance barely eyed his before cutting a piece off and telling the server, "Sorry!

Yup, it's not moo'ing so it's good for me." He paused to enjoy the first bite before quickly cutting another.

Kevin took a minute to get his potato ready as he asked his follow up question, "Ok. That explains my role and your role, what about your boss's role? What is she doing in all of this?"

Lance put his fork and knife down and looked Kevin square in the eyes, "Working to save the planet."

Kevin's first reaction was to smile and laugh off Lance's comment, but his nascent laughter quickly died when his humor wasn't mirrored in Lance's eyes. "You're serious?"

Lance pursed his lips and nodded his head.

"And Patricia?"

"Would continue on course even if I should die. We are in this until the end."

"Why wouldn't the Army be a good place to work from?"

Lance picked up his fork and knife, "The answer to that is more of a show thing than a tell thing. The boss is aware you are a nosy shit, so she is going to meet with you after dinner, if I haven't scared you off."

"Who is ratting me out as a nosy shit?" Kevin resumed his eating. "I would rather say I am 'surprise adverse'."

Lance put another piece of meat in his mouth, and then pointed the fork at Kevin, "Call it what you want, but you snoop more than a cat."

"I don't 'snoop', I'm inquisitive."

"Bullshit! You're nosy."

"I'm inquiring."

"Prying."

"Investigative."

"Ahhhh..." Lance looked to the ceilings, searching for another word. He raised his fork up in the air, "intrusive."

"Scrutinizing."

"Look, damn you, have you been memorizing the fucking synonyms here? Meddlesome."

"Searching." Kevin's smile grew larger the longer it took Lance to retort.

"Fine, I'll give you this round. I can't come up with anything else. But the fact remains, you can be a prying prick due to your 'inquisitive and inquiring' nature."

Kevin thought back to the last, rather short-term, girlfriend he had, "Yes, ok. But did you have to tell her this?"

"Who said I told her?"

Kevin's shock was complete, "Patricia ratted me out?"

Lance waved his hand at Kevin, "Hell no, of course I told her. It's one of your better traits."

Kevin knew he was being baited, so he kept his mouth shut.

Lance had a twinkle in his eye, "What, no asking about any other traits?"

Kevin looked like he was about to burst trying to keep his questions to himself. He heard a little buzzing sound and was surprised it was coming from Lance.

Lance put down his utensils, pulled out his phone and looked at the message. "Well my inquisitive friend, it looks like your answers are about thirty minutes away."

"What, now?" Kevin looked down at his steak.

"No, tomorrow. Yes, thirty minutes from now. If you're not man enough to finish that in ten minutes, I don't know how to help."

"But I've been drinking, Lance. I don't think I'm completely sober."

Lance stopped the fork half-way up to his mouth and eyed his friend. "Trust me, the alcohol is going to evaporate immediately when you meet the boss." He continued with his bite.

Kevin started eating a little more quickly. "Why, ball-buster?"

Lance replied evenly, "Let's just say she has a knack for making an impression during the interview. Patricia still comments on their first meeting."

Lance worked on his food, he could see Kevin's focus turn inward. You poor bastard, Lance thought, you can't possibly know what you need to be curious about. Lance looked down at his watch. Oh well, he'll find out soon enough.

CHAPTER Three

Washington D.C. - USA

Donnie 'the Don' Roberts was reading this morning's reports as he walked down the hallway from the break room to his corner office, when he noticed an oddity.

The CIA had requested information about Anthony Chillenni in Chicago. Chatter had gone across the wire, referencing a code-word contact in the States, which had finally resolved to a money man. They had traced the contact back into the U.S. and dropped it off with his group.

His group, responsible for connecting the terrorist dots inside the U.S. with his counterparts overseas was constantly trying to keep tabs on known and suspected terrorists and their organizations.

Anthony Chillenni had been tagged as possible financial support personnel just the previous week. Donnie turned back around and walked back two doors, where he stuck his head in Barbara Nickers' office. Barb was always in the office early, sometimes two hours early. Two other co-workers had almost put out an all-points bulletin once, when 7:15 AM had rolled around and Barb wasn't in yet. She arrived ten minutes later with five boxes of Krispy Kreme donuts.

Her co-workers decided to forgive her.

"Barb?" She raised her head. "Do you have any information on Anthony Chillenni? The 'Can't Investigate Anything' agency is asking for more info."

Barb had a laptop on her desk which shared space with a keyboard and monitor. The keyboard was hardwired to a terminal and was the more secure of the two devices. It could only access information from within the building. That system was not allowed any outside connection. She cleared a couple of screens and typed in Chillenni's name. Hitting another shortcut, she brought up a screen to show his bank transactions. "That's funny."

Donnie stepped into her office, his CIA acronym might have to be temporarily upgraded. "What is?"

Hitting another key command, a third window popped up on Barb's screen. She put out a finger to follow the dense lines of information, stopping two-thirds down the monitor. "He was in Chicago, purchasing normally, when he seems to have fallen off the grid three days ago." She dropped her hands back to the keyboard and typed quickly. Two windows disappeared to have a new one appear. Her eyes scanned across it rapidly, "Nope, he hasn't booked passage out on an airline."

Now, Donnie sat down in the uncomfortable chair in front of Barb's desk. He took a sip of his coffee. The coffee was, he mused, exactly how he liked his women. Warm enough to be interesting, not so hot as to be trouble. He had enough trouble to deal with at work, he didn't enjoy the idea of coming home to it as well.

Barb sat back, eyeing the screens in front of her. "Ok, either he has gone all cash, is on a bender with some nose candy, or he's dead. We have nothing on his whereabouts for the last seventy-two hours. No money, no phone calls, nada."

Donnie considered her answer. "Well, I'm guessing somebody took out contestant number one."

Barb looked over, "Why is that?"

"Because his disappearance was unexpected. If the CIA is hearing enough chatter that they got a good read, it means he was expected to be in contact. But he isn't." Donnie stood up, "Go ahead and pull together a quick summary of your findings and I'll share it with my contact. Also, we might as well put it out in the general knowledge database. I'm sure our foreign friends are hearing chatter about this guy. Let's get the jump on being 'data friendly' for once."

Barb nodded her head and got back to work. The idea of one more potential terrorist threat possibly dead, only made Barb's morning a little bit brighter.

Luton - England

Ali 'John' Abdullah left his friends standing outside the Hualal meat market and turned down Dunstable Road. He passed by a weapons disposal bin. That was a laugh. It was a little past one in the morning and he needed to get a little sleep. He had plans he needed to move forward and two small cells he needed to report

on as well. Then he would get on his game console to create a private chat channel, to discuss the next steps that his small group would take to move their efforts along.

That was when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He slowed down. After the attacks in France a little while back, everyone had been vigilant about watching their surroundings. He walked casually down the sidewalk. There were numerous cars parked along the curb and he would occasionally look into a car's mirrors, to see if he could spot anything.

There weren't any vans on the street which resembled police or intelligence vehicles. He chose to cross the street at Kentworth and backtrack his route. There was no way he was heading to his apartment right now. He crossed Waldeck and then slowed down to look at his reflection in the pharmacy window glass. Using it to look around, he still saw nothing that would cause his senses to go off.

He had acquired his ability at great cost in Syria. He and one other were the only two survivors from a small engagement up in the hills. It had taken three days to get out alive. He had, however, left those hills a different man. Now, he knew to trust his instincts. Those same instincts were screaming at him that danger was near.

So very near.

He reached under his coat and pulled a small caliber pistol from a holster under his arm. His five-eleven, two-hundred-pound frame easily hid any bulges someone might see. Not that anyone would speak to the authorities in this area of Bury Park.

One more glance at his hair then he turned and resumed walking down the street. It was time to turn the tables on his stalker.

Because, even though he didn't see anyone, Ali Abdullah was damn sure that he had someone stalking him.

He had felt this feeling before.

Denver, CO - USA

Lance signed the dinner bill and added a twenty percent tip. The service had been outstanding. There wasn't any reason not to share his wealth with people working hard to make sure his evening out was enjoyable.

And it had been.

Placing his napkin on the table, he texted Bethany Anne to let her know that they were leaving.

Smiling at his old boss, Kevin told him, "It's just difficult for me to see this 'new' Lance Reynolds when I knew the old, gruff, cigar-chewing General for so long. You're even texting on a phone now. I have to stop myself from asking, 'who are you and what have you done with the real Lance Reynolds?'" His smile seemed a little forced. Lance could understand. Kevin had an honorable discharge from the service and was now going to meet his new 'commander in chief'.

"Don't get worried. You have the job if you want it. This isn't an interview to get the job. Think of it more as an employee on-boarding effort."

The two of them walked out of the restaurant, "Does the head boss fly to different towns to do this very often?"

Lance considered his question, "Well, she did it for me. For Patricia, and now for you. So, you're the third one that I'm aware of."

Kevin thought about that for a moment. "You brought Patricia on board, and now me. This boss lady must trust you pretty well since you keep bringing on your people for key rolls. She doesn't worry that you're biased in favor of people you've worked with before?"

Lance shrugged. Taking a right out of the restaurant, Lance directed them to the corner and then turned right along 15th. They had passed Comedy Works and Kevin was surprised when Lance turned down the alley that went behind the Capital Grill. "You cheat! Don't tell me you parked in a no-parking zone down in an alley! I parked three blocks over off 17th. No wonder you got to the restaurant so fast."

Lance took one more right and went through an area between two buildings and down six concrete steps. He stopped, "Kevin, you might be surprised how far away I was when I told you I would be here in a few minutes."

Kevin looked around. He could smell the sickly sweet odor of rotting food and garbage that couldn't be more than forty feet away. "What the hell, Lance. I know I've pulled your leg a time or two, but if you're punking me...." He stopped talking when Lance's more jovial visage clamped down and 'The General' was back in place. Kevin stood a little straighter.

"You ready to think 'bigger', Sergeant?" Lance's voice brought his attention back. Here was the man he had followed for two decades. Hell, he even looked two decades younger.

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Then don't scream like a little girl when you look up." With that declaration, Lance Reynolds pointed a finger straight up.

Kevin looked above his head, only to see a large block of stars blacked out. He stepped back a few feet to see if the darkness moved. He damn near fell on his ass when he hit the stairs. He turned and took them three at a time to get back to the main level of the street. "What the hell is it?"

"That," Lance Reynolds answered, "Is the person here to provide your employee interview."

Kevin looked down at Lance, his mouth agape.

Luton - England

Ali Abdullah circled back on Hapton and walked over to the little football field near where Hapton met Dunstable. He decided he would find a place in the trees and bushes where he could sit and wait out his tag there. When he was a block away, the feeling of fear ratcheted up a few notches. He glanced over his shoulder and noticed a lone man following him from the other side of Hampton. When he spotted the man, the man had been looking right at Ali. Bold as brass, as if daring him to do something.

Ali felt the gun in his hand, cursing that he hadn't brought anything bigger with him. This area, he had thought, was safe enough. The man crossed the street to follow behind him.

Ali took a right to go between the two buildings, cars parked on his left and the building walls to the shops on his right. These were all small, narrow homes with tiny yards behind them. He walked behind their fence line and hung a left to cross over the concrete play areas, chalk lines marking where children had played earlier. He went past a little playground, rubberized pieces under the jungle gym in case any toddlers fell. He made it to the first group of trees, the darkness becoming complete once he was under the tree limbs.

He moved silently, keeping an eye out for the man who was following him earlier.

He had just made it to the last tree. It was large enough that he could hide most of his body behind the trunk. That was when the man stepped out of the little alleyway used to get to the park. The man turned and looked slowly in his direction, and then stopped as if he could see Ali easily.

That was impossible, Ali was completely in the dark. Since the man was standing under a few street lights, his vision had to be affected.

The man started walking in his direction. Ali could see him now, he looked American, maybe of Spanish descent. The man pulled his hands out of his coat, one of them came out with a pistol. It looked significantly larger than the one Ali had on him. Plus, he could see a silencer.

Dammit! Ali paused just a moment, looked towards the field again and then back towards the man. Could he run across the field before the man could get off a shot? Should he try to fire his tiny .22 from behind the tree? Turning back around, he noticed a woman was walking into the field. Damn, she was almost to the center, coming in his direction. She had black hair, but her skin was light. She wasn't from around here.

Ali knew that hesitation could get you killed. He broke from his cover in the trees and sprinted towards the woman. He would grab her and place his pistol under her chin. Even if the American wouldn't trade the hostage for his life, he would take one more down with him.

—

Eric Escobar, Guard to Bethany Anne, Queen of the UnknownWorld (whether they knew it or not) sighed and put his gun back in his holster and continued walking towards the trees. "Wrong choice, dickhead."

The whimpering cries Eric could hear as he walked under the trees didn't surprise him. Apparently, Ali 'John' Abdullah, a named terrorist and controller of at least one, if not more, cells here in England had just been caught in the spider's web.

He turned through the trees to see Ali, knees on the ground holding his head as if in pain. Bethany Anne was quietly talking to him, her voice silky smooth over steel.

Poor Ali was telling her everything she wanted to know. Eric walked up to the two. He had seen Bethany Anne's red eyes glowing, from back under the trees. His new enhancements, finalized by his time in the pod-doc just days ago, had coalesced into a body he never dreamed of having. His hearing was more acute, his eyesight beyond compare, and his bench pressing was damned impressive. Shame he couldn't go to muscle beach in California, he would certainly piss off the locals there. He now gave off a vibe. Hell, he was the first to go through the pod-doc. The first guard to go to the mess after being 'upgraded'. This meant that he was the first to experience one of the more radical effects. As he walked in practically everyone was already looking at the door. It was like they were all expecting someone, or possibly something, and not in a 'good' way.

The wariness in their eyes was replaced with relief when Eric walked into the room. He had turned to look behind him and then looked back, some of the people had still been staring at him, "What?"

He found out everyone could 'feel' his presence. A couple of the guardians had said it was a presence that raised the hackles on your neck. It had taken him until the next day to figure out how to turn that shit off. This evening, he had turned it back on and enjoyed the ever-loving hell out of it.

He smelled urine and wrinkled his nose. That was a new ability he wasn't always fond of. It was wonderful if the scent was chocolate, not so great when it was the urine from a terrorist who had just lost bladder control. He looked around checking the area. No one was looking and he didn't see any blinds parted from the few windows which overlooked the field.

He checked his watch, they needed to hurry to make the meeting in Colorado. He turned his attention back to his boss, and the unfortunate asshole who was the reason they were in England.

Bethany Anne had all of the information she could get out of this prick. Unfortunately, he was pretty low on the totem pole and was blocked from knowing any higher names. She considered her options for a second then shrugged her shoulders.

She put more steel into her voice, leaving the silk in place. "Ali Abdullah, your crimes against the innocent cast you as a wrongdoer and transgressor. Therefore, you are sentenced to commit one more sin. You, Ali Abdullah, shall stand up and count to five, after I give you permission to die, and then place your pistol in your mouth and fire. Stand up, transgressor."

Ali Abdullah, his body operating against his will, screamed in his mind. His fear so strong he was barely able to understand what was happening to him. His legs betrayed him as he stood up. This damn she-demon had watched as he ran at her. When he had raised his pistol, she smiled evilly. He had slowed down and watched with disbelief when her eyes started glowing red, and fangs grew from her mouth. Then everything had changed as she uttered her first words to him. "KNEEL!"

He hadn't been able to get his knees on the ground fast enough.

Now, he was standing up, his pistol in his hand. She reached for him, grabbing his arm painfully and looking into his eyes, she gave him her final command, "DIE!" Then, she pushed him a little and he ended up on what felt like a field. But he couldn't see, everything seemed like there was a heavy mist around him, no noise, nothing – it was silent. Not that it mattered, a mental timer clicked over in his head and his arm brought the pistol up to his mouth.

Now it was time to die.