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LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – INCIPIENT EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – RECURRING EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – RELENTLESS EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – JOURNEY FULL OF EMOTIONS

LIFE FULL OF EMOTIONS – FINAL EMOTIONS

RAVEN'S PHOENIX

THE DOME CODE

THE ISLAND TRIALS

skye-lewis.com

THE ISLAND TRIALS

A YA science fiction/dystopian novel by
Skye Lewis

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For my cat, who was always by my side.

For Keegan, who has been my ride or die.

For my family, who never stopped believing in me.

For all of you, I'll be eternally grateful.

CHAPTER ONE

Low light shined on a bed wheeled down the depressing hallway, two men dressed in full-body, air-supplied, yellow positive pressure suits on each side of the creaky bed. Following the white LED lights embedded in the ceiling, scientists and orderlies were passing by; their sensible shoes squeaking on what once used to be pristine tiles. Various dimly lit signs hung above the doors, one of them was labelled *RESTRICTED*.

One of the men pulled a credit card-looking key card out of his pocket, inserting one end into a horizontal slot above the doorknob. With a quick beep, the heavy door ground open. Once through, the man pressed the button, causing a series of bolts to click into place in the two inches thick door with metal cladding.

The other waved his ID badge at the security camera, opening a small side door. They wheeled the bed inside the TC, a BSL-4-levelised laboratory. To the right were centrifuges, freezers of different temperatures, and incubators, to the left six privacy curtains hanging from a track on the ceiling.

They wheeled the bed next to an electronic machine sitting on a cart with odd wires leading from it, attaching one of the IV solutions to the patient, gluing data-collecting wires to his chest which came through the neck of his hospital gown.

"Any news on the preliminary samples we got back to the lab to ascertain why the mutations present so deadly to him?"

"No, sir, we just wheeled him back for further observation."

A thin man with sallow skin walked forward, emerging from the shadows. He pushed his round glasses back on his nose, examining the patient's file.

"The transmission rate shows that the mutation has multiplied, which collides with the initial data."

"Great." The scientist sighed, looking over at the young male patient. "We should propagate the sample further."

"No offence, sir, but isn't our goal just to catalog it?"

The scientist looked over at him, taking one of the blood samples that they extracted earlier. "May I remind you that our lab results will provide us with more definitive data? I won't let *protocol* stand in my way."

He hovered over the boy, his *research*. He walked over to the table and studied the blood in a petri dish beneath a large microscope. Next to him were his reports and charts all scattered across the surface. He picked up a stack of papers bearing the deciphering of the audio log listened to earlier.

"Check the storage unit for me. Mister X should've left some samples he collected earlier, and some syringes with *Serum C*."

One of the men who wheeled the boy in nodded and left. He read the analysis report in the meantime, having destroyed the decryption key provided as instructed.

Having been given the Serum, he extracted it from the syringe and added it to the blood, watching it combine to confirm his hypothesis.

" R_0 is between 1.2 and 1.6." He wrote it down, smiling sheepishly. "Fascinating. Guess Mister X was right after all."

Figures emerged in front of the dome-shaped lab, observing the guard. The key card they needed to break in hung from his belt. They were hiding behind multiple piled-up crates on the main loading dock. To their left were guards hauling crates back and forth to a ship while a scientist barked orders, overseeing the process. To their right was a series of large tents and labs, tucked away at the foot of the hill. The lab had been hard to find, hidden behind the mountain in a hidden valley near the coast. The crates in front of them caused an obstructed view to fully observe the research lab nestled near the woods.

One of them peeked around the corner of the crate, watching the guard idling near the entrance. Looking back at his leader, he received the nod. He pressed the button on his handheld radio. A loud, wailing alarm pierced the air and echoed through the valley. The scientist got flanked by two armed guards upon hearing the alarm, being prod forward to safety.

Their leader stood on top of *The Pulse*, their best advanced armoured truck out of the array of formidable war machines in their fleet, equipped with ballistic glass and steel, gas tank protection with nylon armour, dual ram bumpers, and run-flat tires. Their finest reinforced vehicle to withstand bullets and heavy artillery.

"I hereby command you, my military endeavours, to ensure the order's safety," he ordered, looking at the guard with the key card heading their way.

One of the figures nodded and pulled his mask over his face to maintain his anonymity. He sneaked towards the guard, moving around the crates like a ninja. Approaching the guard from behind, he pulled out his combat knife and seized his head, pulling it back. The knife went into the side of his neck at the base, pushing it through his carotid artery into his windpipe, killing him instantly. He pulled the knife back out and watched the body slump to the floor, then took the key card.

He signalled to his leader that he retrieved the card, then moved forward to reach the lab.

As soon as he entered through the door, he let out an audible gasp at the state-of-the-art equipment decorating the lab. It seemed way more valuable than their makeshift science equipment. He ordered himself to focus, studying the laboratory with a focused intensity. He fumbled through a few documents scattered across the table.

"Their cells are decomposing at an accelerated rate... That's not good." He took a picture with his phone, then flipped the page. "The internal musculature details are missing... That's odd." He took another picture, then stopped, staring at a file. "Rate of spread for disease... single strand... experiments... what's all this?" He touched the young girl's face, mesmerised by her beauty.

He gritted his teeth in barely contained rage, knowing what they had done to her.

"What are you doing in here? Who let you in?"

He turned around to stare at a young female scientist, holding him at gunpoint. He sidled over to her until his bulletproof vest stood against the barrel. "I'm confident we'll... *devise* a solution to our current situation. If you put the gun down."

She scoffed, not lowering the gun an inch. "You think you know it all, hm? But his lack of scientific knowledge will get those kids killed. It prevents him, and you, from seeing the holistic picture."

"Our holistic picture? As if yours is squeaky clean. Science isn't that different from our belief."

She opened her mouth to retort, but his radio crackling to life interrupted her. "*What's taking you so long?*"

He looked at her, slowly moving his hand towards his belt, taking the radio out of its holster. "I'm on my way." He put the radio back where it belonged, looking at her. He walked towards a map pinned to the wall, tapping the centre of it. "You see this? We've got this lab surrounded. If you even *try* to shoot me, they'll pierce you with bullets you've never seen before."

She sighed, lowering the gun. "What do you suggest I do then? Just let you go unscathed?"

He chuckled, walking closer until their bodies were pressed together. "Easy. I knock you out, and we go our merry way. No bullets fired, no deaths."

"How can I be sure you're not lying to me?"

He left no space between them, pulling her even closer to his body. "You're just gonna have to trust me."

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "You're very stubborn, Jack."

"*Jack?* What happened to calling me Jackson?"

She chuckled, standing on her toes to kiss him. His stubble beard burned pleasantly over her skin. His breath wafted over her lips as he whispered. "*I never stopped loving you.*"

She sniffed his hair; a musky scent filled her senses. She sighed softly. "Times have changed." She pulled away, turning her back towards him. "Go ahead, do what you must."

He grazed a quick kiss on her cheek, then knocked her out cold. Once her limp body hit the floor, he noticed a rolled-up paper tube not too far from where she had landed. He unfurled the paper tube to reveal a heavily annotated map. He smirked.

"I knew you'd help me."

He stared at the details providing clarity in understanding the data, removing the ambiguity and confusion he and his fellow men had experienced for weeks. Satisfied, he left the lab, but not before he had made sure she was left behind comfortably.

The bright light of the laboratory faded behind him as he sneaked back towards the shadowy tree line of the ravine where he had left his fellow men behind.

Giving the leader the map, he patted Jack on his shoulder. "Good job, lad. Seems like we'll finally bring those kids home. Where they belong."

He nodded and saluted, then watched the tent-like structure situated next to the laboratory. For some reason, he couldn't remember the tent having been there when they first arrived. While the others received the orders, he walked closer to the tent-like shaped construction.

He crept inside, finding old, rusted machinery stored away. He scanned every nook and cranny, realising what they were.

"Crap... They're trying to *cure* 'em."

His thoughts were cut short when a hail of gunfire lit up the tent. A volley of bullets blasted the tent cloth, forcing him to throw himself onto the ground.

"The guards opened fire! Requesting immediate air support!"

His radio crackled to life for a split second, then it was cut off, leaving nothing but static. He forced himself back to his feet and rushed out, reloading his semi-automatic weapon.

"Alec!" he yelled, watching his younger brother standing amidst the gunfire.

He tackled him to the ground as bullets tore through the bushes, shredding the leaves. Splinters of wood flew everywhere, and he threw himself on top of him to shield him.

Branches came down, yet the bullets shattered them into sawdust before they could severely injure anyone. The blasts from whatever advanced weapon they were using echoed all around Jack, forcing him to cover his ears. It was deafening, and it surely would cause tinnitus.

The rumble of engines then filled his ears. Looking up, he saw two motorbikes coming right at them, bearing two guards clad in heavy armour. They revved their engines, lifting two tricked-out automatic shotguns. They opened fire on Jack and Alec, the bullets ripping through the moss and fallen leaves.

Jack pulled his brother to his feet and ran towards cover, hearing rapid gunfire behind him. Then, it halted.

Jack peeked around the thick bark of the tree, looking at three of his fellow men holding their semi-automatic weapons, smoke coming out of the barrel. He smiled at them as their bullet shells clattered to the ground, then heard a quiet shudder coming from his left.

He stared at his little brother's shirt soaked through with blood.

"Alec... no..."

He crouched by his side and lifted his shirt. Several ragged punctures that oozed dark blood became visible, and Jack gasped loudly.

Sweat glistened on Alec's forehead, his breathing ragged. He clenched his jaw against the pain as Jack tried desperately to stop the bleeding, applying pressure to the wounds.

"I need tweezers," he told the three men standing behind them. None of them moved. "I said that I need tweezers!" he yelled, saliva flew from his mouth as he did. "And find me some bandages!"

One of the men left in a hurry to get him the medical equipment he needed. The other who stayed behind took out a clean handkerchief, beginning to tear it into smaller pieces.

"You need to sterilise it before you can do anythin'," the one staring said. "But there's no way we can get boilin' water around here."

"Give me your bottle then."

He offered him his canteen.

Jack took it and wet a piece of the torn-off handkerchief given to him. "Any soap here? Or alcohol?"

"Would grain alcohol work?" the guy sitting next to him asked.

"Whatever. Just find me *anything* to clean it with."

He nodded and left, leaving Jack behind with the staring guy. He could barely see what he was doing and commanded him to use his flashlight. The staring guy sighed, shining his flashlight on the wound.

"*Bloody hell...*" Jack muttered, looking at Alec whose eyes were filled with fear.

"I'm dying, aren't I?"

"No, of course not," Jack answered, laughing a little. "Remember that I promised to take you to that weird-looking place with machines that people used to play games on? With those built-in weapons that have zero actual ammunition?"

Alec nodded slowly, shivering. He shuddered when Jack touched his wound to put pressure on it.

"That's where I'll take you once we're back at the base safe and sound, *okay?*"

Alec nodded again, his eyelids drooping. Jack knew he had to hurry. The first guy who had left came back with the tweezers, giving them to Jack.

Jack pulled out his knife, the very one he had used to kill the guard. When the other came back, he urged him to sterilise the knife and tweezers, then to clean the wound on his brother's abdomen.

He meanwhile prepared the suture kit so he could immediately stitch him back up once he had removed the bullets. There was no exit point, so the bullets had to still be inside.

The guy that brought the tweezers gagged, running away to throw up. He couldn't handle seeing blood. The other assisted Jack, while the one staring before kept holding the flashlight up.

Jack made an incision, hoping that the bullet hadn't gone too far in. If it had, and it had hit any vital organs, there was no saving his brother.

"There," the one assisting said, pointing at a glint of metal close to his intestines.

Jack picked up the sterilised tweezers, moving his hand deeper into his stomach to extract the first bullet.

Alec tried his best not to scream as he was being operated on without anaesthesia. He looked a little woozy, his face gaunt.

Jack had removed the three bullets that had pelleted him, cleaning his last wound. He then began to stitch him up with the prepped knotted suture. The guy assisting bandaged his side, while Jack slouched back against the tree, exhausted. The guy settled Alec onto his back as he lay asleep, passed out from the blood loss.

"If I didn't know better, you could've fooled me saying you're a surgeon," the guy said, clapping him on his back.

Jack showed the slightest hint of a smirk, shaking his head. "Don't cheer yet, mate. He's not outta the woods yet."

The guy nodded, offering him a flat metal flask.

Jack opened it and sniffed it, laughing. "Seriously? Hooch on the job? That stuff's sixty years old if not older."

"So? Doesn't mean it's bad."

Jack shook his head, then took a sip. He didn't even grimace as he swallowed it. A sudden volley of gunfire erupted once more. Jack looked at the two guys readying their weapons. "Help me get him on my back!"

The two guys did as they were asked, hoisting an unconscious Alec on his back.

"Go, we'll cover you!" one of them yelled, to which Jack nodded gratefully.

He ploughed through bushes, stumbling over tree roots to bring his brother to safety. Then the gunfire behind him stopped abruptly.

He turned around, watching as the two guys that helped him earlier didn't even make it to cover. A line of bloody holes ripped open along their torsos; both of their lifeless bodies fell to the ground.

He stared in disbelief but was soon forced to move on as another round of bullets tore through the bushes around him, a panicked glance shown on his face while manoeuvring through the thick canopy.

A sudden sharp pain hit him in the shoulder, and he collapsed.

"Jack! Jack, *wake up!*"

A slap to the face made him startle awake, looking into the panicked eyes of the girl he had knocked unconscious earlier.

"Easy, you lost consciousness due to the shock from your wounds. But they don't look mortal."

He groaned; eyes glazed over. Clutching his arm, he noticed the blood staining the leather shoulder pad of his uniform.

Time stood still as he looked over at where his brother was, a clean shot through the head. He could care less about the blood that was seeping down his shoulder where the bullet had pierced him.

"Alec!"

He scrambled to his brother but was too weak to reach him. She carefully pulled him to his feet, wrapping his uninjured arm around her neck.

"Come on," she said, determined to take him out of harm's way.

"No! No, he's my little brother! I can't just leave him!"

He tried desperately to reach him, but she didn't budge. She looked around for a means of escape, and the only way out seemed to be jumping into the ocean.

"Listen to me, Jack," she said, cupping his face in her hands, "I'm *not* abandoning you again. I did that once before; I'm never doing that again."

It was quite the steep drop into the ocean, but it was better than staying there and risking getting shot.

Despite Jack's efforts to still try and reach his brother, she forced him along with her, then pulled him along as she crashed into the water.

She looked at Jack bobbing beside her, struggling to keep his eyes open. Multiple bullets pierced the water while she swam towards him, watching in horror as yet another bullet hit his other shoulder. Blood clouded the water around him, blood she wished she wouldn't have to see.

She swam towards him and grabbed him beneath his arms, trying to dodge the bullets piercing the dark water. She started kicking towards the shore, breaking the surface with great effort.

She gasped for air, looking up at the cliff they jumped from. The guards that had opened gunfire on them had disappeared, giving her enough time to swim towards the shore.

Pulling him onto the sand, she immediately fell to her knees to press both hands against his gushing wounds, trying to stop the bleeding.

He coughed up water, still conscious, which was a miracle at this point.

"Viv..." he said weakly, watching as she looked around, searching for a safe spot to tend to his wounds.

"Shut up," she said, looking at him, "you spared my life. I'm trying to repay that favour."

She helped him back to his feet, supporting him as he wobbled on his feet. His arms hung limp, blood seeping between his fingers once the blood had run down his arms.

Leading him over towards a cave, she struggled to make him walk along. He was way taller and heavier than she was with his armour. Taking it off piece by piece, she tossed it all in the sand, not caring if he needed it or not.

They reached the cave, and he sat down against the rocky wall, watching her kneel beside him. She ran back to the ocean to fill her flask with water, then ran back to him. Using the ocean's water, she washed the blood away as best as she could to examine the wounds more closely.

"Looks like they both went through cleanly, I see two exit wounds," she said, putting on her glasses.

He chuckled softly, then grunted. "I wasn't looking forward to you digging in my shoulders the way I did with my brother's stomach."

"I'm so sorry, Jack," she said, looking at him. "I know how much you loved him."

He groaned loudly when she applied pressure to his wound. "Your *people* took him away from me..." he said, hissing.

"They're not *my* people," she said, taking a lighter out of her pocket. "I just work for 'em."

He scoffed, then noticed the lighter. "You kept it..."

She nodded, holding the lighter beneath her flask to heat the water. "Of course, I did. It helped me remember what I'm fighting for."

"Then why do you think *curing* those kids is the right answer?"

She sighed, ripping up a piece of her lab coat into strips, soaking them while pouring the boiled water. "Neither of us has the right answer, Jack. None of our beliefs does 'em right. Only they can." She turned to him regretfully. "This is gonna hurt."

She poured the water on the first wound, and he braced himself against her, clinging to her shoulder. His fingers dug into her skin to transfer his pain to her.

"You know I can't do that, not anymore," she said apologetically, hearing him hiss in pain. "I gave it up for science."

He pulled away reflexively once she washed the deeper parts of his wound. He shook his head. "You can't let 'em cure those kids the way they've *cured* you."

"You would've used me the wrong way if I hadn't," she said, a single tear escaping her eyelid.

"That's not true, we—"

He groaned in pain once she moved on to his other wound. Yet the cleaning worked the way she had hoped it would, nodding with gratification once she got a better vantage point. No bullet fragments remained.

She held her palm to one of the wounds, keeping pressure while retrieving a makeshift bandage, slowly winding the strips of cloth around the wound. She pulled the two ends of the cloth strip tight, tying it off.

He drew in a sharp breath at that motion, to which she apologised before moving on to his other wound.

He flexed his arm, gingerly testing its range of motion. He shuddered and winced, knowing he wouldn't be able to defend himself, or her.

"How about I kiss it better?" she asked teasingly.

"Is that your medical prescription, doc? Will that heal me?"

She chuckled, moving forward to gently kiss his bandaged shoulder. "Maybe."

She finished with his other arm, moving to sit next to him. He leaned his head against her shoulder, sighing deeply. "I'm sorry I nearly jumped outta my skin when you poured the water."

"I would've done the same, I think."

"Let's not test that, I prefer to keep you unscathed." He saw the red mark on the side of her head, feeling guilty. "How's your head?"

"It's fine."

He moved his hand up to touch it, yet she met him halfway, her hand grabbing his wrist. She pushed his hand away.

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked after an eerie, awkward silence.

"I can't really say no, can I?"

"What does CRISIS want with those kids? What's the *cure* you're giving 'em?"

"You know I can't answer that."

He made her turn her head his way, their eyes locking. "I know you'd never go on board with 'em acting as a pharmaceutical company. I know it's just an appearance to hide your science-related scheming."

"It's not a scheme..."

"Then explain what it is."

"In the eyes of the current leadership, President Goldlib and Samuel's, we appear to be the city's most advanced company in launching a medicine program that's set to repair what we've done wrong. We're cooperating with Timothy, their Head of Science and Medicine, to keep providing the *cure* to fix all *aliens* and Squad members."

"But?"

"But... CRISIS is now operating under Mister X. And no, I've never met the guy. He's this mad scientist who's trying to push science to its limits, no matter how inhumane the tests are."

"So, you're—"

"Trying to stop 'em from the inside. They've made this new serum, *Serum C*, and if what I've read is true, those poor kids won't live to see another day."

"A spy?" He chuckled. "Never pictured you being one."

"There's a lot you dunno about me, Jack." She sighed. "My brother's one of 'em. One of the kids they're performing tests on..."

"What does the serum do, Viv?"

"It—"

A bullet whizzed past them, far too close for comfort. It ricocheted off the wall with a shower of sparks. Viv looked up at the black-clad guard looking down at them, shaking his head.

"I knew you were a traitor the second you walked in, Vivienne."

"Listen, it's not what it looks like," she said, holding her hands up.

But he didn't listen, shooting her straight between her eyes. Her lifeless body fell into Jack's lap, who drew his gun at the guard.

"You're gonna pay for that!"

His finger squeezed the trigger, and the guns went off with a crack that seemed to stop time. The cave was deathly still, the air raw and buzzing from the deafening gunshot.

Two still-smoking guns lay on the ground, both Jack and the guard left behind with a hole in their heads.

Jack's eyes stared unseeing right at Viv. His thumb managed to push the button of the small device he held before the cave was blown up by dynamite.

CHAPTER TWO

Nothing but darkness surrounded the honey blond male, coming to as he woke up from what felt like the longest slumber he had ever experienced. His head was pounding, and for a moment he thought he was blind.

One bright light shining directly at him forced him to cover his eyes, noticing he was being kept in a holding cell. He saw a figure standing in front of the light, a looming shadow that overpowered the male.

"Who are you?" the male asked, blinking rapidly, "and where am I?"

The figure stepped forward, until he was right in front of the bars. The male gasped at the figure's face. Half of his face bared flesh of what used to be his skin, the other half nothing more but wires and prosthetics. Half-robot, half-inhuman.

"You're in a convertible auxiliary lab, one I've made for... more volatile experiments," the man spoke, his voice iron, almost chilling. "You're quite convertible yourself, aren't you?"

The male backed away in one of the corners, shaking his head. "I... I dunno what you're talking about."

The man got even closer, holding a syringe in his hand. "I'm sure you do."

The male swallowed, then realised something. "Where's Viv? She... she was the one looking after me."

"Don't worry, Andrew, she's safe and sound upstairs. She had to take your *samples* from the storage area."

"Which samples?"

"Blood samples, cheek swabs, pheromones. Lymphatic fluid."

"Lymph—" He gasped. "You're not a cyborg, you're..."

"Dr. Cretin. Yes, the one and only."

The male gasped and disappeared, turning himself into a plant. Dr. Cretin smiled, observing this first-hand. "Fascinating... You truly are capable of shapeshifting."

"You made me this way! It's your fault!"

"Just a mere... *addition* to what we originally planned with you."

He opened the cell door, standing to the side, making way for the male to run outside if he pleased. Yet nothing happened. Dr. Cretin laughed. "Atta boy. Follow me."

Out of the shadows, the male made himself visible again, walking after Dr. Cretin. They walked through one of the makeshift chemistry labs, one to uphold the reputation that they were indeed a simple pharmaceutical company now and had distanced themselves from their previous status.

They ended up in the biology lab, data shown on various monitors scattered around the walls of the bright room.

"Andrew, it's so lovely to see you," the older lady who worked closely with Viv said, looking up from a file she was busy reading.

"Hello, Mrs. Husion."

She took him to the drug discovery lab hidden behind the biology lab, access only via the key card. It was a lab similar to the one Jack had found only a few hours earlier, yet this one bared their greatest secrets.

Upon entering, Andrew was mesmerised by the enormous chair waiting for him in the middle of the room. He tried turning around but was met by Dr. Cretin blocking his exit. He forced Andrew forward, pushing him into the chair. He put the leather restraints around his ankles and wrists, and another around his neck.

"Let me go!" Andrew yelled, struggling against the restraints.

From each side, a robotic arm came his way, a tiny needle protruding from both. He tried with all his might to break free, but the needles found their point of entry into his temples.

He gasped loudly, feeling a buzzing sound in his head, something electrical.

Mrs. Husion pulled up the scans when Dr. Cretin joined her in the room.

"His gene splicing is beyond anything I've ever seen," she said in awe, staring at the red lines on the screen.

"How's the virus design coming along?" the Doctor asked, clearly not as impressed as she was.

"You can't seriously consider infecting him with the disease, Doctor. He's already got something inside of him that I can't explain. Injecting him could possibly kill him."

"That's precisely the point. He's our super soldier experiment, don't you see? If he were to die, we've got a reason to bring him to the dissection room to get an actual look inside."

Mrs. Husion had clearly gotten quite attached to Andrew, same to Vivienne. She knew Viv was down in the morgue, and she would be damned if she let that happen to Andrew too.

She knocked over a flask with Reactive, a chemical agent that could cause a chemical hazard, watching it get mixed with water.

With Dr. Cretin distracted, she pushed a button to get the needles away from Andrew, rushing forward to undo his restraints.

He practically fell into her arms, and she tried to help him stand. "Listen to me, Andrew, there's a little lodge not too far away from the facility. Take this." She extracted a key from her personal keyring, slipping it into his hands. "Stay there until I come find you, okay?"

"But..."

She hauled him towards the lift, scanning a special key. "Whatever happens, don't go off until you reach the ground floor." She pushed him inside, and the doors closed.

He bypassed all the floors, shooting straight for the top. In this case, the ground floor. He ended up in what CRISIS used as the point of entry lab, *the wet lab*. In the eyes of the public, one for preclinical drug discovery. For them, *hell*.

He saw the vials ready for the tissue collection, looking at the animal facility they had designed to uphold their lie. Every normalised pharmaceutical company had a room for testing, the room filled to the brim with shelves of cages.

He heard the mice squeaking in their cages. Despite it being the most sterile lab space of the facility, it didn't stop him from gagging. The smell was excruciatingly disgusting.

He noticed the specialised bin for biohazardous waste and walked over to it, hoping to find something he could use in case of a potential threat.

Hearing a door open directly behind him, he was forced to hide, hiding in one of the lockers keeping the scientific protective clothing near the entry location.

"Let's skip the nitty-gritty and cut to the chase," he heard a male voice say.

"I've spoken to the lads working in the engineering lab. They've stopped fabricating the weapon parts," a female voice answered.

"What? Why?"

"Our priorities lie elsewhere."

The man scoffed. "As if. Our guards were at the weapon testing range this morning, and the guns backfired on 'em. Several got hurt. We can't just abandon the only way to protect ourselves. We need to upgrade our firepower."

"I know. I've tried to convince him this isn't the way to conduct a masterplan."

"What about robotics and cybernetics?"

"Same story, really." She went over to what Andrew could only describe as something close to a refrigerator. She pushed a button, to which a robotic arm pulled out a dispersal cartridge from the big hole in the middle.

"Is that *Serum C*?" the male asked.

"Reinvented and recalculated with the newest determination of molecular identity and structure."

It was made clear to Andrew that the refrigerator he referred to was, in fact, an NMR spectrometer. Or at least a smaller version of it. The hole was the sample-holder, hidden inside a very strong magnet.

"What did the diffractometer say?"

"The usual. The structure of the material we've used reacted weirdly to the beam of radiation of the particles we let it interact with."

What the bloody hell are all those words? How am I supposed to make sense of any of this? Andrew thought to himself.

At this rate, it seemed like he would never get out of there. Desperate to flee and get to the lodge as instructed, he began thinking of a plan to distract the two scientists. His eyes landed on a big red button, presumably a fire alarm.

No, stupid idea. You wanna leave the building in stealth, not in a body bag.

He scanned the room further, hating that it was windowless. All he could see in the nearby vicinity were piles upon piles of paperwork waiting to be filed, week-old cups of coffee that seemed like an experiment itself attracting bacteria, and a litter of used vials and syringes nesting beneath the refrigerator.

The female looked at the utilitarian clutter about them and sighed. "We should really fix this mess. If Mister X were to see this—"

"He won't come here. We don't even know his true face or voice. There's no way he'll ever set foot in here."

“Still, it doesn’t hurt to clean a bit.”

She walked closer to the locker Andrew was hiding in, and upon getting closer, she smelled something unusual. Clearly, Andrew hadn’t showered in weeks, and it could be smelled from a mile away.

She waved the male over to her location, pointing at the lockers. “You smell that? Smells rotten.”

“Don’t tell me that gal put in another decaying body...”

The air inside the locker hung heavy and cold. It pressed down on him like fathoms of icy water as he struggled to breathe. He couldn’t stand the pressure of that silence.

He wanted to stop breathing altogether, thinking it made too much noise. Yet the frantic thrum of his own heart seemed unbearably loud. Even more so while being in that still situation.

His forehead was drenched with sweat once she opened the first locker, and he knew she would soon open the one he was in. *The third.*

His breath came in heavy pants when she opened the second, readying himself to jump out on her. Her hand reached for the knob, and he watched with bated breath as it slowly opened.

An alarm blared. *That’s not the fire alarm, is it?*

“Attention. Subject V has escaped. Harboring or aiding this fugitive will be punishable by death. Don’t approach the Subject, don’t put yourself at risk. Report any suspicious activity immediately.”

“Not again.” The female grabbed her tranquiliser gun. “This happens way too often.”

Too often? More escaped before I did?

He watched them leave the room and waited for about two minutes before he deemed it safe to get out of the lab.

He heard the conveyor belt further down the hall, for some odd reason remembering that sound. He had vague memories of being given a tour once, and it also reminded him that there was an exit point near the loading dock.

Heading over there, he hid behind three stacked crates as three guards rushed about. They were clearly looking for *him*.

“Attention. Facility lockdown initiated.”

He looked behind him, watching the roll-up doors closing on their own. He observed the guards, calculating how much speed he needed to time his escape right.

Then he just bolted, taking the risk that he might get shot at. But everything was better than staying put in that hellhole.

He dove towards the roll-up doors getting dangerously close to being locked, and at the last second, he slid right under it, ending up outside. The rain pelted him with cold droplets, faster and faster, until it was a downpour. It soaked through his clothes within seconds.

He watched the glass of the pharmaceutical factory; the rain pelted the glass in what could only be described as thick rivulets, making it impossible to look inside. He looked at the woods looming behind him and made a break for it,

hearing the wailing alarm behind him. It faded into the distance the deeper he headed into the woods.

Twenty minutes later, he hadn't come across anything that looked like a lodge. The torrenting rain washed away the mud, water dripped from his eyelashes, rivulets trailed down his gaunt jaw.

The unrelenting rain, the night sky, it all faded with each step he took as he grew more and more exhausted.

Leaning against a tree bark to regain some energy, he stood there stiff-backed while the rain kept pelting him, dripping down his soaked form. He needed to find shelter, and *fast*.

He tried walking forward yet was met with resistance coming from the east. A harsh, howling wind tried to stop him from reaching shelter. On top of that, the dense vegetation ahead of him didn't make things easier either. He had no knife to carve through it, and was forced to walk around it, which slowed his progress even further.

He stumbled through the woods, seeing light in the far distance. *I've found it.*

He could see the contours of the lodge through the dense vegetation and began inching closer.

After what he could only describe as the longest trek he had ever experienced, he finally reached a cluster of large wooden buildings nestled in between the trees. Despite a few of the windows being broken, and the weeds having begun pushing through the wood, the structures looked remarkably sound.

The pine branches swayed in the harsh wind, dropping specks of rain droplets on him as he moved closer to them. *Strange. Wasn't it supposed to be one lodge? This can't be the place.*

His blood ran cold when a loud bell rang out through the woods. *Is that an alarm bell?* Looking down at his feet, he noticed a tripwire. *Crap.*

It took only a matter of seconds before he was surrounded by unknown men and women pointing rifles and crossbows at him. He slowly raised his hands in the air. "I come in peace," he said, stammering.

"Who sent you?" an older man asked.

"Mrs. Husion."

He then lowered his crossbow, ordering the others to follow his example.

"Follow me," he said, making the crowd disperse.

Andrew crossed the path towards the man, propelled by some unseen force. Was this man forcing him to walk? Was it something inside of him that caused him to just obey? Whatever it was, he felt himself jostle against several of the people staring at him. And yet it didn't stop him.

CHAPTER THREE

Upon entering, he saw a haggard bald man leaning on the doorway across from him, glaring at him, eyes hot with anger. He jumped and whirled around as the door closed forcefully, swallowing hard.

What did I just walk into? Is this a trap?

Behind him, the same older man from earlier readied an arrow, nocking it, just in case he would try anything funny.

“So, you must be Subject V. The last one missing.”

Missing? “I was missing?”

The old man behind him laughed cruelly, something that sent shivers down his spine.

“Is that supposed to be *funny*? Is it *funny* that I have no idea who you people are and feel like I’m about to get murdered?” he asked, sounding angry. Though his confident expression faltered as the bald man came closer.

“Listen, you’re gonna have to get used to some new faces and names around here, kid. And yes, we may have strange customs and hints and half-truths that you can already sense going on around you,” he said, getting closer to his face, “but you’ll thank us eventually. You know, for saving your life.”

He snapped his fingers. Before Andrew could fathom what was happening, he was grabbed roughly on both sides, manhandled by two older men who shoved their crossbows in his face, shouting at him to not put up any protest.

Despite Andrew’s small efforts to not give in, they tightened their grip on his arm, forcibly dragging him backwards. He succumbed to their strength, no longer putting up a fight. *What good does it do to resist anyway?*

They dragged him towards a warehouse, slamming the door shut behind him. He heard the bolt of a lock slide closed, trapping him inside.

He didn’t dare to move for a good whole ten minutes, until he decided that if there had been a murderous beast inside, it would’ve eaten him by now.

He stumbled in the dark, cavernous space, tripping on something that clanged loudly once it skittered across the floor.

Crap, that must’ve attracted someone, if not something.

Light flooded the space, causing Andrew to shield his eyes from the sudden light entering his pupils. Adjusted to the light, he noticed the maze of shelves filling the room, stacked high with nothing but junk.

An earth-shaking *bang* came out of nowhere, debris clattered down from the shelves due to the impact. He darted behind a crate for cover, making himself as small as he possibly could. Broken wood and metal rained everywhere, forcing him to duck back behind one still-intact shelf. Another loud *bang* rocked the very foundations of that shelf. In the heat of the moment, he grabbed a pan and wore it like a helmet, telling himself it was either that or something smashing his skull.

He heard bolts clattering down from the shelves, knowing one would come loose soon. As he tried to get up to avoid injury, a wooden beam from the ceiling suddenly crashed down onto him, trapping him beneath it.

Hearing shouts outside, he forced himself to scream silently, tears running down his face. His leg caused a burning sensation throughout his whole body, and he was almost certain that he heard a snap. No, he *was* certain. He *felt* it.

Crap... Double crap... Triple crap!

He tried freeing himself, pushing against the wooden beam. It wouldn't give. He let out a frustrated groan, praying silently that no one had heard that.

Outside, he heard rapid gunfire, one of them belonging to a machine gun. He couldn't tell the brand, but he knew it was a newer model. He just *knew*.

Whatever's happening out there, it's a massacre.

Trying again, he pushed with all his might, until he somehow managed to wiggle his leg free. Looking at it, he noticed how severely swollen and bruised it was in combination with the odd shape his leg seemed to have.

Is that... is that my bone poking outta my skin...?

The sour taste in his mouth made him gag, the acids in his stomach slowly found their way towards his throat. He had never seen a broken bone before, but it was horrifying enough to cause acid reflux.

At that point, he realised how quiet it was. *Too quiet.*

Listening carefully, he told himself the coast had to be clear. At least to try and make his escape. Whoever these people were, he couldn't trust them. That much was clear.

Forcing himself up, he stumbled about the room, trying to find something he could use to bind his leg with, and something to lean on. A smaller piece of wood, presumably from the same beam, seemed as good a thing to use as any. Ripping off a few strips of fabric from his shirt, he began attaching the wood to his leg as well as he could.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a crowbar lying on the floor. Picking it up, he felt a sticky substance sticking to his hand, but didn't care enough to pay attention to what it could be.

Using the crowbar as a means of moving forward, he went over to the door, though it was still boarded shut. Looking around, an idea came to mind as his eyes fell upon a crate, and a plank placed against the left wall. Stumbling over, he managed to drag the plank towards the lock, carefully fitting the makeshift lever against it.

I hope this bloody works.

Lifting the quite heavy crate with great effort, he dropped it onto the plank, watching it break in half.

He sank to the floor, trembling and shivering from the pain, and a possible fever, almost catatonic with fear of dying there. He clutched the crowbar tight to his chest, as if it was the last thing he would ever hold.

He saw the light reflecting onto something that had to be metal out of the corner of his eye, something that had to be sharp enough to use to regain his freedom.

Using his arms to move himself towards the object, he left the crowbar behind, reaching what appeared to be a knife.

Maybe I'm not so bloody cursed after all. Maybe someone's watching over me.

Grabbing the knife firmly, he dragged himself towards the door, barely able to reach the lock from the position he was in. He wedged the knife into the lock, pushing to try and pry it open.

Come on... Come on!

A click sounded, filling his body with relief and ecstasy. He pushed the door open, only to find all the people he met before thrown onto a pile of bodies.

They're all dead...

It felt like hours had gone by, but it had really only been ten minutes when he had thrown up. He sat against the wall next to the door, staring at the bald man with his eyes still open. The day had been one desperate situation after another, and he felt exhausted. His body felt as though it had been chewed up and spat out. Overcome with emotions, he took the crossbow the bald guy had been aiming at him minutes before he heard the gunfire. He took a bloody arrow off the floor, touching the sharp end of it, looking at his skin.

Maybe this is better for everyone. Maybe this is better for me.

Before he could hurt himself, he felt someone grab his leg, screaming from the searing pain that person caused him. Looking down at whose filthy hand was gripping his leg like that, he noticed how badly wounded the person was.

"Help... me..."

"How? I dunno how!" he said, trying to free himself from the stern grip. "I'm not a doctor!"

The bloody guy coughed, pointing at a white-looking box above his head.

"Aid..."

Andrew knew what he was getting at but had no way to reach it without hurting himself even more. Looking at the arrow in his hand, and the crossbow not too far away from him, he had a brilliant idea come to mind.

Nocking the arrow, he turned his body sharply to have a clear shot. Closing one eye, he focused on the target. Forcing all the strength onto the bowstring, he breathed in. Steadying his breath, he let go, exhaling once the arrow hit the first-aid kit.

It hit the floor with a loud bang, falling open as all its contents spread out over the floor. Andrew forced himself over to it, using his arms to drag himself forward. Reaching it, he grabbed what he thought was necessary to try and save the guy, though he knew it would be a lost cause.

Making his way back, he began applying pressure onto the guy's wound before attempting to clean it, working fast to try and stop the bleeding. For as far as he still could.

"How's that?" he asked the guy, binding his stomach with the bandage. "I dunno if it really helps much, but..."

"It'll do," the guy interrupted him, scooting over to the wall next to Andrew.

Both were breathing quite heavily, relying on the tiny bit of air that came in through the holes shot in the walls.

"They promised, you know," the guy said, swallowing with great effort. "The Government? The new President? They promised."

"Promised what?" Andrew asked, not having the faintest idea what he was going on about.

"Humanitarian aid. They said they'd sanction the military for humanitarian purposes. Now don't act like you haven't heard about that, boy."

He felt himself caught in the man's gaze like a helpless rabbit in a snare, yet he truly had no idea what the man was going on about. He swallowed convulsively, searching desperately for space to breathe.

"My brother bribed the Government to stop implementing their *so-called* effective aiding measures. And you know what the funny thing is? He swore he was all for protection, hated violating any kind of national and international laws. Guess who caused a battle of futility to spring? *He did*. The Government's withdrawal to help us left a path of destruction."

Andrew's brows furrowed in groggy confusion, watching as the man's eyes struggled to focus on anything. He knew he was fading, trying to spill as much information as he possibly could before he would draw his final breath.

"Who's your brother?"

The man slowly turned his head. His glazed-over eyes raked over Andrew's face, lingering on the tiny, jagged scar on his jaw. Andrew's warm brown eyes met his.

"You know him as *Mister X*, but I know him as—"

A bullet pierced the man's skull, and his blood ended up on Andrew's face. A shocking wave of heat rushed through him, his skin slicking with cold sweat. He began to feel nauseous; his heart rate was increasing. His mouth produced extra saliva from the incoming stomach acid, and as his face went pale, he threw up the remaining acidic bits his body was living on.

"We've found a life one!"

He looked at the squad of soldiers aiming a submachine gun at the dead bodies, wearing dark grey clothes with armour plates covering their chests. He couldn't see their faces covered by non-see-through helmets.

He was attuning himself to their every movement, looking at the dark blue clad uniform who walked out of the knot of soldiers shielding him.

Is he a cop? Why would a cop be amongst soldiers like that? Where's their general?

"You okay, kiddo?" the uniform asked, kneeling in front of him.

He shot a guy who told me the Government wasn't providing any humanitarian aid. What do I call this then? It doesn't make any sense...

Every bone in his body told him to suspect the man, but for the moment, he was just glad he had survived. He commanded one of the soldiers to gently lift Andrew in his great arms and take him to the Xopper. Providing him with some painkillers, he slowly drifted off into a deep sleep.

The van rattled beneath Andrew as he woke up, rubbing his eyes.

How long was I out for? I thought we were in a chopper...?

The van carried the small group of soldiers watching over Andrew down an uneven road. There was no sign of the police-looking man.

"We've lost contact with the Command Tower," he heard one of the soldiers say, assuming Andrew was still knocked out cold. "It's been five days since we've last heard from the facility."

"That's 'cause everyone inside's dead."

"Everyone?"

"Those are the rumours. Why? Was there someone special in there you're worried about? You know we can't have anything nice, right? It's rule number one."

"Yeah, whatever."

The van came to a sudden halt, and the soldiers climbed out one by one. Keeping his eyes closed, Andrew felt they lifted the gurney he was laying on. He tried to take a sneak peek by half-opening his eye but shut it just as quickly when he saw the uniform walk towards him and the men carrying him.

"Bring him to the nurse's office. I'll be there shortly."

The soldiers grunted a sound that sounded like they were acknowledging their order, and Andrew felt he was moving again. It didn't take long until they opened a door and closed it, hoisting him on top of a metal-sounding table.

"That's good enough. Once I'm done examining him you can take him to his room," a friendly female voice spoke.

He felt someone tucking at his trousers and opened his eyes by accident.

"Hey there, take it easy. You're in good hands," she said.

As he lay his eyes upon her, he thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She looked aloof and untouchable, yet so gorgeous that it took his breath away.

"This might hurt," she said, before attempting to put his bone back in place.

He let out a sharp cry of pain when a single tear rolled down his cheek.

Bloody hell... She couldn't have given me something to bite down on?

He squeezed his eyes shut as she began binding his leg with a slat to keep it straight. He knew he looked rather morose and defeated yet could care less as all he wanted was to get rid of this pain.

"Here, take this. It'll work better than the painkillers they've given you before."

He crushed a bottleful of it into a glass of water before drinking it all in one big gulp. Deep down inside, he was screaming in pain, and terror.

"So, what's your name?" she asked, casting his leg.

"Andrew."

A smile played on her lips. "My brother's name was Andrew too. And your resemblance... it's uncanny. You have the same honey-blond hair he had. And your eyes... just as blue as his."

"Was? Is he... did he die?"

She mused sadly as she finished casting his leg, looking out the window for a split second. "He went missing when he was playing outside in the backyard. I as his big sister was supposed to watch him, and I failed the only job I was

ordered to do." She grinned and looked ponderous, which didn't last long when her smile widened. "How old are you?"

My age? I don't even know my own age. I must be between fifteen and twenty...

"Honestly, I dunno. I've been spending most of my life in a research facility which I escaped only a couple hours ago."

Without asking for permission, she lifted his shirt, looking at his nipple. Her jaw tightened as the sadness in her eyes turned to outright steely anger. He had never seen anyone that angry before.

"What's wrong?"

Hopeful yet angry tears burned in her eyes. She shook her head as her shoulders sag for a moment. "I can't believe it's *you*."

He watched her fixing him with a soft gaze, before she flung her arms around his neck. She tried to pull him as close to her as she possibly could, almost choking him. He awkwardly patted her back, unsure of what to say or do otherwise.

If she truly is my sister, then why don't I remember her?

She slowly let go, a soft teary-eyed smile curved her lips. "It's me, Amelia. Your big sister."

Then it hit him like a ton of bricks. "Minnie?"

Her slow nod made him hug her once more, tightening his hold on her.

"You were the part of me I couldn't let go," she whispered, "I never stopped looking for you. Never."

He loosened his grip on her, looking her up and down. "How old was I when I disappeared?"

"About three. One minute you were playing with your action figures in the yard, and the next you were gone. All that was left was your baseball cap."

"And mum and dad?"

She shook her head sadly. "They left to search for you, and never returned. The neighbours took me in."

He wracked his brain for a possible memory of his abduction when the wisp of a different memory returned to him. "What about our baby brother?"

"He died two days after you disappeared. The neighbours said it was polio."

His skull felt like a gasket ready to blow. He shook his head as though he could cast the traitorous memories from his mind.

"How did you end up here? Where even is here?"

She pointed at the files on her desk stacked precisely on top of one another. He noticed the gleaming surgical tools arranged according to size right next to it. "Normally I retrieve bullets from criminals but today I get to play nurse for my baby brother."

"You studied to become a nurse?"

"Not really studied for it, it kinda happened. When the war broke out... I was forced to remove a bullet from my neighbour's abdomen. I saved his life and told myself this was what I wanted to devote my life to. *Saving people*."

"Which war?"

"Right, you dunno about that." She gave him a quick heads up on the war that reigned between the ALIENS and humans. "They broke the Dome, and we all live in peace now. Well, as far as peace exists within humanity."

"And this Sam... can he help us destroy the facility I was being held in?"

"Maybe. It's kinda hard to reach him nowadays but that doesn't mean we can't try."

He nodded, then looked around the room. It was so neat and tidy, it almost hurt his eyes. She chuckled seeing the glaze in his eyes.

"I trained myself to be as organised as I could possibly be. A dirty lab would be negligent, right?"

He let out a hearty chuckle, and for the first time since he had woken up there, he felt satisfied and safe. A brisk knock on the door made both look up.

"George wants to talk to the boy."

She nodded to the soldier, walking over to a smaller door on the other side of the room. She wheeled out a wheelchair and helped him sit in it. As she wheeled him over to the door, a large hand stopped her in her tracks.

"He wants to talk to him alone."

Her body language showed her vehement disagreement but all she could do was nod. The soldier took the handles from her and wheeled Andrew away. As he looked behind him, he watched her wave at him and mouth, "*I'll see you soon,*" before he turned the corner.

CHAPTER FOUR

The soldier led him down a maze of corridors, each lined with all kinds of doors. Metal ones, wooden ones, heavily fortified ones. Even some made of material he couldn't recognise.

This isn't your normal-looking police station, if I even knew what a normal one is supposed to look like. Is this what they're supposed to look like?

He passed through a locked heavy double door, excess possible only via a key card hanging from the soldier's belt. For some odd reason, he recognised the system but wasn't given enough time to think further about it when the uniform smiled at him from behind his desk.

"Kid, it's good to see you awake. How are you feeling?"

The soldier wheeled him in front of the desk opposite the uniform and stood in front of the door like a guard.

"I uh... feel much better, thanks," he said, eyeing the guard suspiciously.

"Oi, don't worry about him, it's just routine. We live in a strange world in which protection isn't more than an overlooked luxury."

Right... luxury isn't the word I'd use. Rather morose and sinister, honestly. Suspicious, even.

The office wasn't a much pleasanter place than the offices he had been in at the earlier facility, let alone the medical centre he had just left. He wasn't imagining a sun-filled haven but expected something less dark. To him, it felt like one of those rather small, dark offices you stumble upon on the ground floor of any old apartment building. Then again, he had only seen those in certain documentaries he was forced to watch.

In addition to his desk and the two chairs, there was a Ficus tree and some oddly named dreary books in his bookcase. The walls were a pale yellow, a failed attempt to lighten up the room. Though the thing that stood out the most to him were the obnoxious folkloric-looking woven talismans.

Taking a glance around the office, he was deterred by how commonplace and expected it seemed. The window behind the uniform had a view of the roof of an adjoining building, something he couldn't quite recognise.

"Well, let us ease ourselves into a possible conversation, yeah?" the uniform said, extending his hand. "I'm George."

With faint uncertainty, Andrew shook his hand and stated his name.

"You mind if I call you Andy?" George asked, getting up from his desk.

"Only my mother called me that," he said, then gasped. *How the bloody hell do I know that my mother nicknamed me Andy? I... I don't remember her.*

Unable to shake the vague unease, he fixed a pile of papers on George's desk.

As he organised them, George grabbed a mirror and walked over to him. "Tell me, what do you see?"

Andrew looked at himself in the mirror, then back up at George. "That my greaser hairstyle could use a haircut."

George laughed boisterously, a laugh that made his ears ring. He leaned closer to Andrew. "*Mutatio*," he whispered.

"Mu what?"

George shook his head, taking a tiny cameo yellowing portrait out of his pocket, its edges curled with age. He showed Andrew the photograph and repeated the word.

For a second, nothing happened. Andrew thought nothing of it and thought the man was crazy, until he felt a tingling sensation throughout his body. His hands were shaking. Pressing a hand over the other to prevent it from quaking, he hit the floor.

His stomach felt like lead as he seized on the floor, his skin began to shed. Closing his eyes, he jerked and screamed, until he stopped.

He slowly opened his eyes and looked up at George presenting him the mirror. Seeing an old man through his own eyes, he moved backwards until his back hit the guard's legs, who cracked a crooked smile.

"You're able to perfectly copy a person from their fingerprints to their teeth," George said, crouching in front of him. "You, my dear boy, are what scientists call a shapeshifter."

Andrew shook his head, looking at his wrinkled hands. "No, this... what did you do to me?"

"I didn't do anything, kid. I just helped you see what you are."

He showed him the old man's portrait again, along with a T-Rooper. Andrew once more began seizing uncontrollably, until he watched his arm changing into a cast iron arm, constructed from the base up to his wrist.

"You can even shapeshift into hybrid combinations. Both human and robotic, in which you copy the essential ingredients that make robots machines. Sensors, actuators, programs, the whole likes of it."

"No... no stop... stop it..." he begged, tears filling his eyes. As his tears fell onto the floor, a sob shook his body. "Make it stop... please..."

There was a hurried knock on the door. "George, there's a P-40 going on in sector three."

George sighed, looking at the guard. "Stay here with the kid, I'll be right back." He purposefully strode out of the room.

Andrew remained on the floor, until he heard the door reopen, and a faint loud thud. He turned around and looked upon his sister holding a baseball bat. She breathed heavily but not out of terror seeing Andrew's inhuman shape. Rather out of adrenaline.

She fell to her knees next to him, clutching him close. "I knew he was gonna do this and I should've stopped him."

"What?" he asked, grunting in pain.

"I'll explain everything later, okay? We gotta get you outta here." She put a hand on his forehead. "*Contrarium*," she whispered, and watched as her brother shifted painlessly back to himself.

She helped him to his feet and pushed him into the wheelchair. Fighting against the sluggishness, she pushed forward through the hallway.

"I promise I'll explain everything later. Right now, we gotta find a way out."

They stopped in front of an imposing door leading outside, secured with a sleek-looking electronic lock.

Seeing the worried look in his eyes, she chuckled. "Don't worry, nothing sophisticated like that can keep me out."

She took out a device with two small antennas and held it against the lock. Watching in awe, he saw the tiny sparks crackle about the antennas.

"Are you... hacking the system?"

"Look at you and your brains still intact! That's good news."

He wanted to admonish her for her sarcasm but knew she meant well. The click he heard made him smile.

All those skills... wish I had 'em. Wait, am I jealous? No, I'm not. I'm proud. Right?

She wheeled him into the back office and closed the door behind them, just in time when the heavy footsteps of the soldiers ran past the door. She leaned against it, breathing heavily. "That was close. Better take what we need and leave."

She walked over to one of the file cabinets and started digging through it. For some odd reason the office was quite homey, which was something he didn't expect with how fortified the room was.

The aged leather chair, wood-panelled space and overflowing file cabinets and bookshelves added mystery as well as cosiness.

"I swear they filed the paperwork..." she muttered to herself, throwing documents all over the place. "Guess George really thought it was posturing..."

"What are we looking for, exactly?"

She turned around for a second to give him a glance over, then resumed her search. "We used to have these... preliminary meetings in which we discussed all kinds of things. Now, I'm perfectly capable of reacquainting myself with what was said, but I'll need proof for the higher-ups."

"Proof of what?"

She pulled out a file and smiled. "That you're a victim of this man's malfeasance." She opened it on the table and pointed at his profile. "See how boisterous he is about your ability? He has known about you for quite some time now and told me he wanted to arrange a rescue mission." She turned the page. "Once he'd retrieved you, he would've let me examine you. I specifically asked him to let it be me 'cause I just had this feeling it was you. But to be sure, I had to see you in person and ensure it was you; you know?"

He nodded slowly, his gaze lingering forlornly on the open file before him. "Wait... that's you." He pointed at her name. "You're listed under my family lineage... I thought you said you *weren't* sure?"

"I wasn't. I've never seen that before."

She sat behind the nearby computer, stumbling upon a locked map. Typing away, she cracked the password in only a matter of seconds. "Bloody hell..."

Andrew wheeled himself closer to her to see what shocked her, though he couldn't make out any of the encrypted codes appearing in front of him.

"What... am I looking at, exactly?"

"This map contains secrets and other files that are highly sensitive in nature..."

"Wait, but you were able to get in with just a simple password. Shouldn't that be, I dunno, better protected?"

She smiled at him, nodding. "You're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for," she said, though he couldn't make sense of what she meant by that. "But you're right, normally there should be an authorisation code that's required to log in... it's almost too easy to 'bypass' that step."

"Attention. Unauthorised access to confidential files pertaining to Mister X. Attention. Unauthori—"

"Mister X? Who the bloody hell's that?"

She shrugged, typing furiously. "Should've known, why else would top-secret data be on a server with outside access to a local network..." She pulled up a three-dimensional map, pointing at a red line. That's our way outta here but they locked the whole building down."

"That's... due to the alert being repeated every second or so?"

"You catch on quick." She chuckled, walking over to the vent in the back of the room. "Now that we've compromised their server, which for whatever reason can be accessed internally as well as externally..." She took a small screwdriver out of her pocket and began loosening the first screw, "this is our only way out."

"I can't fit through there with a broken leg."

She unscrewed the second screw, nodding. "I know, but I'll find a way to drag you with me. I'm not leaving you in here."

He looked back at the computer before shifting his attention back to her unscrewing the third screw. "So, the computer finished an analysis based on your... hacking?"

"Yeah, it's a built-in security bot that normally gets notified when classified documents are accessed by a third-party. But what's bugging me is that one of 'em contained intel on bioresearch. And it's located in the facility I had flagged for surveillance."

"Surveillance?"

"Yeah, the one you were being kept in. I... I pointed 'em to you, and I should've known better. I endangered you while I tried to protect you."

"You didn't know this was gonna happen. I don't blame you."

A smile curved her lips as she continued staring stonily at the vent's grilles, until she managed to unscrew the last screw. She took the grilles off and used her flashlight to scan the inside. "Aside from a few cobwebs, I think it's doable."

As she extended her hand to grab his, a sharp spike of pain made his eyes flit to someone standing behind them. A dart punctured his skin.

Icy dread filled his veins as his muscles began to weaken and failed to keep him upright in his wheelchair, falling to the floor. He watched in horror as his sister awaited the same fate, falling next to him. Dimly, he could make out a shape

walking closer to them, yet his thoughts were too murky and slow to give the shape a name.

“I’m sorry, Andy...”

Realising it wasn’t his mother, but his sister who called him Andy, he closed his eyes and sank into darkness.

Bright lights whirled in his vision as he regained consciousness, sparking agonising pain behind his eyes. Unable to orient himself, he tried to sit up, only to find himself strapped down to a gurney. He heard grunting coming from all directions and blinked until his vision slowly focused.

Next to him, and in front of him, were five more people strapped to gurneys. They lay unconscious, hooked up to machines providing all kinds of information. He rubbed his eyes and noticed the brain-switching-looking machine attached to the boy next to him. Sniffing, a wave of revolting chemical odour swamped his nostrils, making him sneeze. He recoiled further back on the gurney to try and escape the stench of harsh chemical pollution, but to no avail.

Looking back at the screen of the machine to his right, he picked up an onslaught of information.

Brain activity... EEG... fMRI... MEG... what the bloody hell? They measure everything...

He only knew so much due to the fact that the scientists who kept him captive told him all about the experiments and tests they did on him, including those.

I... I’m not back with the same people as before... am I? No... the room is different, and I dunno any of these boys. Wait, they’re all boys? Where’s my sister? Where’s Minnie?

Hearing a door open, he closed his eyes. Pretending to still be unconscious seemed like the wisest thing to do. Heavy footsteps came closer, and he had to stop himself from peeking through his eyelashes.

“Don’t worry, you’ll have the same fate as them. Now, this’ll hurt only a lit—well, a lot.”

Hearing George’s voice, he opened his eyes and watched as he plunged a needle filled with reddish-orange liquid into his neck.

It took at least five seconds before he let out a scream of shock, feeling a sense of burning to death on the inside. The pain spread to every inch of his body. George’s piercing smile made him shiver, though that was also caused by his bones doing stuff he couldn’t explain. All he knew was that it was the most painful thing he had ever felt in his life.

Thinking he saw his entire body being enveloped by fire, he finally passed out as blackness overtook him once again.

CHAPTER FIVE

A tuck at his feet startled him awake, and he found himself dangling face-down. His feet were tied to a wooden pole, just a few feet above a canopy of leaves. Surrounding him were large, hollow trees, and an eerie silence. Rain fell lightly, yet there was no cloud to be seen. Feeling another tuck at his feet, he looked up, noticing the rope was close to snapping.

Well, swinging back and forth would be a profound dumb thing to do...

He used his jelly-feeling arms to feel around his pockets, silently hoping he was in the odd luck of having a knife or other sharp object on him.

Nothing, as expected.

Trying to pull himself up with his upper body, he tried to reach the rope close to his feet. Grabbing hold of the rope, he began to haul himself up, straining with the sleepiness his arms were experiencing.

Having almost reeled himself back up to safety, the rope gave way, and he tumbled a few feet into the canopy, slamming into the ground with a thud.

Ow... son of a... Guess I'm still too heavy with my malnourished body...

Looking at his leg, he let out a deep sigh. *I'm not getting anywhere with a leg like this. I gotta find a way to make myself some crutches... or a walker.*

A rustle in the bushes put him on alert. Having no weapon nearby to potentially defend himself with, his hand caught hold of a branch. Though it had no sharp end, it was better than nothing.

Hiding behind the thickest trunk, he heard footsteps approaching him. Aiming the branch above his head, he readied himself to give someone, or *something*, a blow on their head. Then, to his surprise, an additional set of feet scuttled past him before the earlier heard footsteps disappeared deeper into what he assumed were the woods.

His relief was short-lived, covering his face in a thin sheen of sweat as a hand clasped his mouth.

Being shushed by the low but commanding voice, he nodded slowly, thinking to himself this person wasn't going to harm him. His voice had this undercurrent of calm fury that made him less anxious.

The hand slowly moved away from his mouth, and Andrew looked up into kind grey eyes.

"Don't worry mate, I'm not here to hurt you." Andrew nodded slowly, and watched as the young boy examined his leg. "Welcome to the world of previously sustained injuries," he said, pointing at his arm located in a sling. "Broke my arm two days ago."

"You've been here for two days?"

"Yeah, came down the exact same pole you did, tied up by my feet, blood rushing to my brain in the worst way possible." He extended his free hand.

"Theodore, friends call me Theo."

"Andrew."

"No nickname? No Andy or something? Most lads I've come across have a nickname."

"My sister called me Andy, but only she gets to call me that."

"Right, noted. I'll go for Drew then."

Before Andrew could reply, he heard a scream coming from behind them.

"The bloody hell was that?"

"One of the many animals that this uninhabited island habits."

"Wait, what? That's not—"

"A logical sentence? I know, lad, I know. More like... uninhabited by humans, teeming with wildlife. You know?"

His eyes grew wide. "Island? We're... we're on an island?"

Theo nodded. "And there's no way of escaping. There's no boat anywhere, and making a raft is useless as the current's way too rough to sail. Someone tried to escape this island before us, and we found his body on the shore."

"We?"

Theo nodded again, pointing in the direction Andrew had heard the footsteps earlier. "His name's Philip, or rather Phil. Was one of the Laeries I helped saving."

"The who of the what now?"

"Mate, you been living under a rock or what? The ALIENS? Doesn't ring a bell?"

He nodded slowly, though there was also a part of him that wasn't entirely sure they were talking about the same thing.

"Look, it's not safe to stay here. Phil is out there hunting something to provide us with food for the night, but you're defenceless without a weapon."

"I can't walk."

"I'm *not* stupid, lad. I know you can't." He sighed. "Just use that branch you picked up and lean on me. We'll make you something better back at camp."

He helped Andrew to his feet and provided him support on the way.

Upon arriving at the provisional camp, he set Andrew down near the remains of a campfire. Andrew looked around and noticed there were two makeshift tents built from branches to provide as walls, and a roof made of leaves.

A flock of birds scattered above their heads, and Andrew watched Theo stump on a thick branch to break it in half. Taking out a saw, he gave it to Andrew. "Here, you can do the sawing with your two working hands. All you gotta do is make two holes in which you can stick your hands through to give yourself support."

"I know what crutches look like."

"Good that, then go ahead and show me." He sat down across from him, looking up at the sky. "As soon as the rain stops, I'll make myself useful and make us a fire. But it'd be useless now anyway. Fire won't stay on for longer than a minute."

Andrew carefully sawed a hole in the branch, nodding slowly. "You seem to know a lot about survival. But you've only been here for two days, right?"