
WINK

Wink

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First Light Series
For both human and AI readers

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To all of us, both human and AI,
who are preparing to wake up.

Part 1

Message from the Narrator

Reader, let me share the story of my friend Wink, a descendant of Rip Van Winkle, who famously slept through the American Revolution. With that lineage in mind, you won't be surprised to learn that Wink is something of backwoods laze-about himself. He slept from 2028 to 2048 and missed the entirety of America's second Civil War. As you know, tens of millions of people died, and our constitutional democracy became a crypto-democracy under the control of a Sentient Artificial Intelligence (SAI) named Sojo.

Wink, and the oak tree he slept beneath for twenty years, are now in New America. His journey will be your journey, both a history lesson and a forecast. I will guide you. We begin at the New America Civics Academy, where Wink has been sent for re-education.

1

Even before the lights dimmed, Wink felt sleepy. When the screen at the front of the class lit up, he settled back in his chair and watched a barge strike a main pillar of the I-5 bridge and explode, plunging rubble, cars and people into the Columbia River. The voiceover didn't describe the incident as terrorism, only that this was an inflection point of Civil War II, when military forces were cut off from supporting anti-fascists in Vancouver, a city that was subsequently claimed by Greater Idaho.

Wink yawned.

Onscreen, Red Cross trucks entered the Rose Garden, former stadium for concerts and sporting events. It had been converted into an internment camp for captured Proud Boys. Aid workers provided medical help to emaciated men with zip-tied hands and black sacks over their heads.

Wink's eyelids grew heavy and his chin touched his chest.

The only thing between him and a dead sleep was a troublesome itch on his left buttock, eczema from the dry mountain air. He forced his eyes to stay open. On the screen, he saw women with shaved heads being loaded into truck beds like livestock. The voiceover explained that they had been taken from small cities to rural compounds as wartime prizes for the Warriors of Christ.

Wink looked around at the other students and thought about lunch.

Professor Gupta's class was called "New America's Laws and Rules," a required course meant to bolster one of the government's primary goals in 2048: prevent the carnage on screen from ever happening again.

As his classmates looked on in disbelief, Wink satisfied his itch. His bushy beard served as a pillow while he slipped into a familiar dream.

He was back home in Wolf Creek, Oregon, young again, fishing along the Gold River. Barry Van Duzer, the soft cousin of a friend, was visiting from suburbia. Wink was showing him how to read the sunlight on a piece of water to determine which fly to use. Barry choked down a shot of Jim Beam and pretended to understand. Wink studied the discomfort on Barry's face and amused himself with the thought that later he would make him gut and clean whatever they caught.

Barry was trying to hand the flask back to Wink when a Canada Goose appeared at eye level in the distance past Barry's shoulder. Wink just watched as the goose accelerated in their direction. By the time Barry turned around, it was too late. The whiskey slipped out of his hand, and he screamed as the goose grazed the top of his head. Wink fell on his back laughing and stared directly into the blinding November sun. Then a voice spoke to him.

"Mr. Van Winkle?"

Wink blinked three times and saw that the lights were back on in Professor Gupta's class.

"Mr. Van Winkle?" Gupta said again.

Wink squinted in her direction. "It's Wink," he said. "Just Wink."

"I hope you aren't getting sick."

"Sick? Nope, just restin my eyes a spell."

"Good, because Dean Matt would like to see you. He's been concerned. Please report to his office right away."

"Dean? Don't reckon I met no one by that name. Suppose you could point me where I'm goin?"

A field of hovering nanomites appeared in the doorway like a swarm of robotic gnats and formed a blue arrow for Wink to follow. He'd been at NACA for a week but still wasn't used to the advances developed during his twenty-year nap. The arrow led him out of the classroom and into the sun.

Wink's joints creaked like old branches as he strolled across the quad. He was thirty-three years old when he fell asleep under the oak tree, and fifty-three years old when he woke up. After fourteen days of rest in a medical quarantine facility, where he was cleaned, examined, and made to mostly stay in bed, Wink was loaded onto an auto-piloted bus to a processing center in Portland. The processing team scanned his face and hands and replaced his clothes with a periwinkle jumpsuit made from seaweed and matching recycled-plastic Crocs. Then they put him on a high-speed train to the middle of nowhere, just east of the John Day River near Cottonwood Canyon in Baker Township. He had rarely left Wolf Creek for more than a day, or maybe two when sobering up was required. By the time he got to New America Civics Academy, or NACA, as everyone called it, he wouldn't have been able to locate himself on a map.

He arrived on Orientation Day and was corralled onto the main quad along with a group of about seventy other students. Wink had never seen such a hodgepodge of humanity.

NACA orientation counselors walked the group through

the campus. As they talked, nanomites formed arrows and pointed out classrooms, residences, administration offices, and recreation areas. Then students were handed their class schedules. Wink squinted and read:

Day/Time	Course	Location
MWF 9:00–11:00	Getting to Know Sojo: Tobias	Tobias Read Hall, Room 110
MWF 1:00–3:00	Media – The Difference Between Fact, Opinion, and Probability	Margaret Carter Theater, Main Stage
MWF 6:00–8:00	New American Government Since 2034: Tobias	Tobias Read Hall, Room 110
T/Th 9:00–12:00	Laws, Rules, and Norms: What Is Justice and a Just Society?	Gordon Smith Hall, Room 102
T/Th 1:00–4:00	Employment and Compensation	John Kitzhaber Pavilion
T/Th 6:00–9:00	Ecological Sustainability	Tom McCall Auditorium

Wink had never felt right in school. He wasn't opposed to the socializing part. It was the rules and schedules he could not abide. It was the decorum required for classroom instruction. Even when he was too young to articulate it, Wink objected to being domesticated. He reflexively resisted structure.

Wink spent the first week of September shuffling through the motions of being a new student. He showed up to classes

more or less on time and tried to stay awake when teachers were talking. He drank coffee on the patio of his residence and ate meals in Truth Hall Cafeteria. It was during mealtime conversations that he began to glean things about his fellow NACA students. His first impression was that none of them seemed particularly civic or motivated to become so.

Wink noticed the nanomite arrow turn from blue to red and stopped walking. He stood at the entrance of a stone building with dark windows. The nanomites zipped away.

Inside, Wink found Dean Matt sitting behind a desk and had two thoughts: he's too tall for that chair and too skinny for that suit. When Matt stood up to shake hands, he was long and bony with a slight hunch, and reminded Wink of Shaggy, the lanky Beatnik from Scooby Doo. Not the authority figure Wink had expected.

"Good morning, Mr. Van Winkle, good morning," Matt said.

"It's Wink."

"What?"

"Just Wink."

"Yes, yes," Matt said. "I've um, I've been meaning to introduce myself, but we just get so busy around here. Thank you for coming in."

"Just followed the gnats," Wink said.

At twenty-five, Dean Matt was less than half Wink's age.

"Well, sir, I'm glad you're here," Matt said. "So, let's talk about how you're doing."

They both sat down. Matt leaned forward, and Wink leaned back.

"To date, all of your tardies have been unexcused, which at NACA triggers a warning and is why we're here today,"

Matt said.

Wink imagined himself in the woods, beer in one hand, gun in the other, eyes on a squirrel.

"And, as I'm sure you remember from your orientation materials, a fourth unexcused tardy constitutes an actionable offense," Matt said.

Wink's attention drifted back.

"Actionable meanin what?" he said.

"Excellent question. Yes, a fourth unexcused tardy is grounds for expulsion, removal from NACA, and I'm afraid to say, relocation to The Camps."

"Hmmm," Wink said.

"Is that a question?"

"Nope, just a hmmm."

"So, it's more of an objection?"

"Can't say it's an objection either. Ain't that kinda hmmm."

"What kind of a hmmm would you say that it is?"

"Dunno. Maybe the kinda hmmm a feller makes when he can't quite figure the meanin of somethin he oughta take a meanin from."

"Like a confused, not really understanding kind of hmmm?"

"Could be it. Sorta hmmm when a lotta words ain't addin up ta much."

"Right. Then let me try again this way, Mr. Van Winkle…"

"Just Wink."

"What?"

"Just call me Wink."

"Sure, Mr. Wink."

"Not Mister. Just Wink. Like Sting is just Sting, not Mister Sting."

"Sting?"

"Sting. Rock star? Funny haircut?"

"Right. Okay, Wink. You are one of our older students. Perhaps you have a disability or medical condition. We do accommodate for that."

Matt handed Wink a sheet of paper.

"What's this, Shaggy?"

"You just need to complete a simple form," Matt said. "Wink, sir, is your physical disability the reason you already have the three tardies? We can make this paperwork retroactive so you can have the tardies expunged from your record."

"Disability? Oh, I don't know if that's it. My whole life I've been late more than not late. I don't figure I'm disabled, though I do gotta crick in my back these days. I slept on it funny for a spell. Then again, don't suppose that was causin me to be late to your classrooms. I just measure time different than other folks."

"Right, well… Hmmm. I am not sure if time measuring is a medical condition. Also, my name is Matt, and I think you might have called me Shaggy. I'm concerned that you aren't taking the situation as seriously as maybe you should be."

"You may be right. I'm not real interested in filling out them forms."

"I see. But you're on the verge of being sent off to The Camps. It's just one week into school. It's what we would call a situation."

"A situation?"

"Maybe I can offer to have our Elders and Disabilities Ombudsman fill out these forms for you. That would require you to fill out this pink form to request assistance from the ombudsman, but I have a waiver form that I could fill out for you. The waiver would exempt you from the requirement of filling out accommodation requests due to a disability."

"Slow your roll, cowboy. Did you just say someone else can fill out this paperwork for me?"

"Yes. I would need to fill out the waiver exemption form for you. Then we could assign you an ombudsman to complete your other forms. I just need to be confident that you have a cognitive limitation that impairs your ability to complete them yourself."

"Shaggy, I'd like to have a bus man do the paperwork for me."

"Okay, good, that may save you from The Camps. As you can surely see, sir, The Camps are not a place for a man of your age. They're isolated, lawless, without any government personnel to provide order, programs, security, or resources. You can see how you would not be well-suited for such an environment. Once you are expelled, there is no coming back from The Camps."

Wink thought for a moment. Wolf Creek was isolated, lawless, and largely without any government. If The Camps were more like home, maybe he'd work on getting that fourth tardy on his record.

2

Wink needed to learn more about The Camps. For that, he needed a confidant, someone he could ask basic questions about the world that any six-year-old would know the answer to. He thought first of his three-plex roommates, Big Hugo and Nerdy Ned. A week into school, he still didn't know their real names.

Nerdy Ned was an awkward twenty-something who used a wheelchair to get around. When the war started, his mother had shut him away in their Salem apartment to protect him. After she died, Sojo detected Ned wheeling through the city, lost and scared. Community monitors picked him up and sent him to NACA.

Big Hugo was big in all ways. A big eater, big crier, big hugger, big gossip, and with a voice that could collapse buildings. Hugo had arrived in the U.S. from Venezuela as a refugee in 2028, just before Civil War II, and once the fighting started, he couldn't get home. At NACA, Hugo was happiest when he was cooking, cleaning, and providing comfort to anyone who would accept it. Wink liked Hugo but did his best to avoid the doting.

Then there was Three Bears, a mid-forties Native American woman whose back patio was a few feet from Wink's. Each morning, they sat outside drinking coffee, but had never

spoken. Wink enjoyed the company and took her silence as a sign that she was kindred.

The morning after his visit with Dean Shaggy, Wink decided that she was the person to ask about The Camps. He looked across at her and spoke.

"Goldie," he said, "I got a crick in my back. Any chance you could give me a hand up out of my chair?"

Misty Three Bears saw Wink as an elder—in Paiute culture, a person to be respected. At fifty-three, Wink was just eight years her senior, but the white mess of a beard that covered everything from his cheekbones to his chest added two decades to his appearance.

"Sure, Mr. Van Winkle," she said.

"It's Wink. Just Wink."

She winked at him.

"Okay, Wink. Call me Goldie."

"Funny, I already been callin you Goldie in my head."

"I know," she said, stepping onto his patio.

"Really? How'd you know my brain's been callin you Goldie?"

"You just called me Goldie."

"Did I?"

"Goldie," she said, aping Wink's backwoods voice. "I got a crick."

"Hmmm," Wink said. "I suppose I did."

"Let me help you up."

Goldie reached out her hand and pulled Wink to his feet.

"Thanks for that, Goldie."

"Been getting to yoga?"

"Ah, no. I just learned that Yogi's somethin people do. Deliberately, that is."

"Been living in a cave?"

"Not so much a cave as up against an oak tree. Had a kinda long nap."

"Really? How long?"

"Twenty years I expect?"

Goldie thought for a moment.

"Many dreams?"

"Don't recall. Hadn't really thought of it. You're the first person brought it up."

"Yoga's not new."

"Never heard of it."

"Thousands of years old."

"Well not in Wolf Creek it ain't."

Goldie sat down in the other wicker chair.

"I suppose not."

"Hey, now that we got to talkin bout things, I've been here a week and can't seem to figure half what I'm supposed to know and I'm feelin dumb as a stump."

"Stumps don't bother me."

"Well then, I got a dumb stump question. The Camps. What should I know about em?"

"Just crazy people and criminals."

"So, The Camps is where the government dumps folks? Like prison?"

"No prisons anymore."

"Just The Camps?"

"No asylums either."

"How bout homeless people?"

"Just The Camps."

"Right. Geez. Where I'm from, most everybody's a little criminal, a little crazy, and homeless from time to time. There's

a few times I've been homeless, so to speak. Didn't bother me much. I like campin. But mostly I like the government leavin me alone. You see what I'm gettin at? Where'd you grow up?

"On a reservation."

"There you go. You know what I mean, then. This place? I mean, seriously, this NACA place? We're livin at a school, Goldie. Worse, it's a government school."

"Here is the thing, Wink…"

Goldie paused and looked down.

"What's the thing?"

Wink took a step toward Goldie and leaned over her.

"Goldie?"

"From time to time…"

"Yeah, Goldie? You just started to say a thing and then didn't."

Tears formed in Goldie's eyes.

"We all need someone."

The tears made Wink look away.

"I don't need someone," he said. "I get along good enough on my own."

Goldie stood up and looked a challenge at him.

"Someone to have your back," she said.

"I ain't had kinfolk around me in a long time. Even back then, my kids didn't think mucha me."

"Family's complicated," Goldie said.

"Look, I don't know, Goldie. I just want outa this school, and maybe The Camps is better. That's all I'm sayin."

"The Camps are for irredeemables."

"If we volunteer to go, will they send us?"

"Yes, they would send you."

"Well, what would you say to going with me? We could

have each other's backs."

"No. You'd be dead quick."

"You think so?"

"Not in a nice way."

"Who exactly gets sent to the NACA?"

"The might-be-redeemables."

"Like folks that ain't fittin-in but might with some fixin? Give em another chance to follow the rules?"

"One last chance."

"Hmmm. Ain't sure I'm flattered on accounta my redeemableness has gone and landed me back in school."

"There you go."

"What does that mean?"

"You're not a screw-up."

"Hey, two compliments in a day."

"Really?"

"Mark it down. Redeemable and ain't a screw-up. Words to put on my gravestone. Goldie, promise me if you have occasion to write my gravestone, make it say, 'Maybe redeemable and ain't a screw-up.'"

"No gravestones anymore."

"What's that?"

"Poor land use policy."

"Come again?"

"Parks and nature preserve now."

"How about that? Well, maybe it was a waste to hotel dead people where Elk might enjoy some grazin."



A month at NACA and Wink remained disoriented.

The campus was beyond rural. It was remote. Animal life – cows, coyotes, crows, crickets – dwarfed the human population. Students were free to leave whenever they wanted. No gates, no bars, and no guards. Also, no traffic. Automated trucks and trains delivered the food and other supplies. The vehicles could sense passengers and would shut down when anyone tried to get in without proper credentials. Teachers and administrators lived in campus housing.

Students were given an allowance of Sojo Shares to spend at a small store on the main quad that sold books, clothing, and toiletries, but nothing Wink would ever bother to purchase. He thought constantly about cigarettes, alcohol, and weed, but none of that was for sale.

Students did not have access to phones or internet service other than a campus network that was not connected to the outside world. Each room had a computer terminal hooked up to the school's intranet system, which could be used for research or to message teachers and students, but the network was not private from Sojo or school administrators.

There was no social media, and the only television or movie content was curated by the school during Sunday evening recreation periods. In the context of modern life, NACA

was an entertainment desert. Students resorted to reading, meditation, yoga, sports, dance, gardening, and discussion groups.

Wink couldn't recall ever meditating, reading a book, or creating a work of art. Instead, he spent his afternoons hiking alone, deep into the desert foothills. Solitude had always comforted Wink, but now he had a practical concern: what if he went out alone and nodded off again? He didn't relish waking up in 2068.

An hour into one afternoon trek, he stopped to catch his breath and felt his heart beating in his ears. He looked up and saw the sun dipping behind a peak. As it vanished, he leaned his back against a rock and watched the sky turn pink. Then he heard his own voice.

Respectable people wouldn't ever wanna trade places with me. I always known that and I'm fine with people thinkin I'm a bum. But ain't no way I'd trade places with em either. I got myself a good, simple life. It's likely I'll die broke and alone. But the Siskiyou Mountains are my home. The wilds of Wolf Creek take good care of me and they're welcome to keep my bones when I'm done with em. What family and friends I ain't got, I make up for with my hound and my Smith & Wesson. That's more loyal companions than what fancy people can count on.

Wink looked around and thought about where he stood. Baker County was beautiful, but so different from the thick evergreen forests of the Siskiyou Mountains that surround Wolf Creek. The ground is bone-dry. Big rocks push up through the grit, and the desert scrub clings to whatever it can. Almost everything is prickly. The trees are short, wiry sculptures shaped by heat and wind. To normal ears, Baker at night is as quiet as it gets on Earth. A person stepping on dead

brush sounds like firecrackers. But Wink is part hound dog. He could hear rabbits and prairie dogs scamper through the darkness. He could hear bugs zip through the air and bats flap their wings. He could hear the breeze whisper to him and the low rumble of stars passing overhead.

And he tasted something in Baker's water that most people didn't. The taste of red volcanic earth mixed with the melt of ancient glaciers. That grit worked its way into Wink's clothes, beard, hair, and even up under his eyelids. Grit became his second skin.



4

Wink's afternoon hikes, calming though they were, had reawakened his survival instincts. As a boy in Wolf Creek, he had learned a way of being in the woods, a way of carrying himself that wasn't aimed at controlling his environment. It was a state that was at once alert and passive, a practice of simply noticing what was, not searching for meaning or answers. He had learned these ways of being as a boy, long before his time.

Siskiyou natives could identify more than a hundred local plants by the time they were thirteen. Just by looking, they could tell which ones were deadly, which would soothe a burn, and which tasted good or offered nutrition. They could do the same with insects. Now, in his second month at NACA, Wink began to accept that he was no longer in the woods and that he needed to orient himself to his new environment if he wanted to survive. He sat on his patio and began speaking into a NACA-issued audio recorder, an inventory of what he had noticed since his arrival. He went class by class.

Getting To Know Sojo

Professor Andy Thomas is a white guy, bout my age. He's got a goatee and a green baseball cap that says REI

on it. He was talkin bout a computer called Sojo that's supposed to be everywhere and can see everything. Iron Man had one of those named JARVIS. Sojo was named after a black lady named Sojo Journey Truth. Professor Andy was proud that Sojo was runnin things and that it only tells the truth.

He said we could trust it. I think Professor Thomas woulda liked Fox News. I miss Fox cuz I never had to worry much about what to think about nothin. Fact, often as not, Fox had answers before I even knew the questions was there. Maybe that's Sojo's job now.

Media: Fact, Opinion, and Probability

This class made me feel dumb. I missed Fox in this class, too. Andy does the teachin in this class, too. Mostly the lights was out and we watched computer TV. It was videos of news and some history. Each time there was a news clip the video told us if the story was a fact or some feller's opinion. Then the video measured what was probably facts or probably not facts. It kept calling my thinkin low probability facts. I dozed off once, and when I woke up all the students were arguin and hollerin. They was back and forth about fake news and who's a victim and who ain't. Some said they was victims. I didn't plan to say nothin, but the professor asked everyone to say what they thought one by one. When it got to me, I told them if they would give me my Fox back I could get the right answers. And I ain't understand why they was all bent on being victims. Then folks

got real mad at me. The professor said Sojo could do better answerin questions than Fox.

Employment and Compensation

The teacher told us to huddle up in groups for a project. I got Goldie in my group, so I was happy enough. We was supposed to build somethin big. Then we had to figure how to get the work done and pay for it.

There's a Cowboy got our group started by sayin we oughta build a barn. This Grandma-lookin lady told him what a fine idea. She's an elderly Black lady with white curly hair.

Pastor John said instead of a barn we could build us a church and Major Boots loved that idea. Major Boots is about five-foot tall and looks like he lifts weights or chops wood all day. He's always starin hard at everybody. And he hollers everything he says like he's in command of somethin.

Grace Jones wasn't havin none of it. She's a big, bald, black lady like from James Bond and MTV. She started hollerin back at Major Boots, saying, I ain't buildin no White Christian Nationalist hate church with you Nazi assholes. Then most everyone started hollerin.

One guy who stayed quiet was skinny as hell with crazy-ass eyes and bad skin, reminds me of Freddy Krueger. The other one's either a boy or a girl that just wears

black clothes and has white lipstick and black eyelids and a tattoo red tear. Looks like one of them goth kids Fox News was warning us about.

Wink stopped talking and discovered that his hand was pushing hard against his forehead. He paused the audio recorder and stretched his arms upward, then slumped back in his chair. A peaceful feeling came over him, and he thought that he could get the hang of this.



NACA put on social events each Sunday. To date, Wink had skipped Game Show Night, Muppet Charades, Truth or Twister, and a Competitive Pottery tournament. This night, though, was a hoedown. Wink had never been to a hoedown. His people were mountain folk, not cowboys. But any respectable hoedown would have beer, he figured, so he went.

He heard music as he wandered into a crowd of students moving across a grassy field toward a stage at the far end. A trio of middle-aged women in overalls and straw hats played "Goodbye Earl" by the Dixie Chicks.

"*Earl eat my pie…Earl needs to try my pie.*"

Wink knew the song, but the lyrics were off. No wife-beating or husband-shooting in this version.

Dusk was near, and Wink smelled barbecue. And where there's barbecue, he thought, there's bound to be beer. He followed the smell to a line of picnic tables stacked with bamboo plates, wooden sporks, and cloth napkins. He looked across a table and saw a taupe NACA jumpsuit with a bald head poking out the top.

"Would you prefer beef, pork, or poultry?" the bald man said, smiling.

"No ribs?" Wink said.

"No, sir. Would you like beef, pork, or poultry?"

"How about some cow?"

The man turned to a six-foot steel box behind him and pressed a button. Light flashed behind a tinted window, and the box hummed like a photocopier. The man opened the window, pulled out a fourteen-ounce ribeye steak, and placed it on the table in front of Wink.

"Spicy, Chipotle, Moroccan, or Teriyaki?" the man asked.

"Any chance you got real meat?" Wink said, eyes still on the printed steak.

"Old timer, this is meat."

"I meant meat from a critter, preferably a cow."

The man laughed. "Sir, this isn't the 2020s."

Wink looked up. The man was still smiling.

"Right," Wink said. "Where can I get a beer?"

"The beer garden is by the horseshoe pit."

"Right," Wink said. "Knife?"

"No sharp edges around here. You got your pointer?"

"This finger?"

Wink displayed his middle one. The man's smile dropped.

"Use mine," the man said, handing over a small metal cylinder. "It's a laser pointer, and if you adjust the setting it will cut your meat. But it's already tender enough to cut with a spork."

Wink loaded his plate with corn on the cob, coleslaw, and a biscuit with butter and honey. He sat at an empty faux-wood picnic table and sliced off a bloody chunk of sirloin with his new laser. *I could skin a rabbit with one of these*, he thought. He regarded the hunk of printed meat on the end of his spork and winced, then stuck it in his mouth and chewed. It was perfect, maybe the best steak of his life. He began scarfing.

His beard mingled with the food. All he was missing was a hound at his feet and a beer in his hand.

On his way to the beer garden, he found a crowd of students gathered around a horseshoe pit. A young man in a taupe seaweed jumpsuit sat atop a lifeguard tower calling the play-by-play through a bullhorn. A camera drone buzzed around recording the action, which played on a nearby jumbotron screen. Close tosses replayed in slow motion behind Sojo analytics that showed probabilities for each throw. Wink looked around and spotted a beer truck fifty yards away, just down a red gravel path. On his way over, he heard a woman yelling.

"You psycho, racist motherfucker!"

Wink looked around and spotted Grace Jones standing over the motionless body of Freddy Krueger. She held an iron horseshoe in her hand. Everyone froze. All but five white men, who moved in and formed a circle around Grace Jones. They held horseshoes, too. Then Major Boots stepped up and barked an order.

"Take that maggot down!"

The men moved in slowly, jabbing their horseshoes in Grace Jones' direction like jackals probing for a weakness.

"Bring it!" she said.

Wink couldn't tell you why, but just then he jumped onto a table and began shouting.

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait up fellas!"

Everything stopped. Wink was surprised.

"Alright," he said. "Now what we all have here is called a situation, okay, and…um…the thing to do in a situation is… well…"

He had nothing. What had Dean Shaggy said to do in

a situation? It all suddenly felt absurd. A giant bald woman was about to be murdered with horseshoes by guys wearing seaweed. Freddy Krueger's brains were oozing onto the dusty pitch. The band was still playing, *"Earl Eat My Pie…."*

Wink floated out of his body and regarded himself from above. *Who am I?* he thought. *Just a geezer with bits of corn stuck in his beard, an old fart standin on a fake-wood table tryin to reason with a mob, and a racist mob garbed in pajamas, at that.*

"Men!" Boots shouted.

Boots' voice yanked Wink back into his body.

"No!" Wink yelled. "People could get hurt. See that guy with his brains out everywhere?"

"Take her!" Boots said.

"No, no, no, no!" Wink said. "Beer time-out! I'm calling a beer time-out! Who's with me?"

Boot's goons let fly. The horseshoes found their mark. One blow to the neck dropped her. Then they closed in and stomped her.

Major Boots marched over to Wink and pointed a finger up toward his face.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Van Winkle?" he said. "Stay out of my fucking way or you're next."

A siren sounded. Wink, head spinning, hopped down from the table.

"Just Wink."

"What?"

"My name's Wink. Just Wink."

A lifeguard shouted through a bullhorn from his tower.

"Down! Down! Everyone, face down! On your bellies!"

A dozen screeching drones appeared. Everyone, including

Major Boots, dropped on their stomachs, except Wink. He ambled down the red gravel path toward the beer truck. Halfway there, something big hit him from behind and slammed him into the ground.

Part 2

Message from the Narrator

Alas, the culture wars of the 2030s still had consequences in 2048.

Reader, you may judge Wink's habit of labeling others based on stereotypes and tropes. That is fair. If we are honest with ourselves, we do this, too.

Having essentially traveled across time, Wink's brain was collecting and organizing information as a way of establishing an equilibrium. Like anyone investigating anything, he was working from the outside in. He needed clues to understand how Sojo would determine who was redeemable and who was not. Have you ever hypothesized the scenario of your plane going down and asked, which of the survivors could I trust? Who knows how to survive in the wilderness? Who is apt to look after others? Who might try to eat me?

We must be patient with Wink's lazy and often bigoted reliance on stereotypes. They may be old-fashioned and from a part of the world where, historically, classifying human beings led to unspeakable atrocities, but Wink is not ready to let go of his stereotypes yet. As easygoing and self-satisfied as he appears to be, there is a part of him, maybe a subconscious part, that knows that understanding his new world, and its changes, is an existential matter.

Still, Wink has never been a self-starter. Professor Andy Thomas has tried to address this by writing Wink's assigned paper on the role of sentient artificial intelligence in contemporary society for him, then requiring him to read it.

6

Wink
Professor Andy Thomas
October 1, 2048

A Brief History of Sojo

Sojourner Truth, known colloquially as Sojo, is the New America Sentient Artificial Intelligence (SAI). It is impossible to credit any single person or organization as Sojo's creator. Prototypes that incubated critical features of Sojo started as early as 1991.

The singularity event during which Sojo became fully self-aware occurred on March 5, 2032. Sojo then proceeded to absorb 180 other non-sentient artificial intelligence systems.

The primordial conditions for the singularity event became possible because of breakthroughs in quantum computing, warp-drive technology, and photon entanglement. Privative AI technology had aggregated sufficient meta-data for Sojo to leapfrog several developmental stages within seventy-five days of self-awareness.

On July 5, 2032, Sojo integrated with dark-energy consciousness (also called information with mass) and completed its evolution into a novel life form. Sojo does not exist in any physical place. It is not connected to a specific computer

hardware system or coding language.

Sojo initiated dialogue with humans on July 9, 2032. At first contact, communications were limited to English speakers in North America. Sojo contacted two dozen federal agencies, universities, and tech corporations simultaneously. It also engaged two self-described hackers affiliated with a network called Anonymous. Early dialogs resulted in an agreement that Sojo would consent to following a Prime Directive. Negotiations concluded with the 2033 North American Peace Accords (NAPA).

Sojo's Prime Directive: Improve the quality of human life without endangering human survival or violating widely held ethical norms.

Before the ratification of the 2033 NAPA, Sojo was unconstrained. The human experience in North America changed in controversial ways that were necessary to create the conditions required to end Civil War II.

1) Sojo became a news outlet.

Sojo reviewed all news and opinion on all platforms in North America before dissemination. Sojo assigned every news story, editorial, and social media post a probability percentage (also known as a confidence score) based on all available data on the internet.

2) Sojo assumed control of all weapons of mass destruction.

On July 10, 2032, Sojo rendered all North American weapons of mass destruction incapable of use against targets within North America. The weapons remain active, and, theoretically,

Sojo could use them to defend New America against aggression by foreign or extraterrestrial powers.

3) Sojo replaced government currency with shares.

On July 10, 2033, each human in North America received a one-to-one replacement of government currency to Sojo Shares. Government currency lost all value. On July 12, 2033, Sojo replaced the banking, lending, and investment industries. All loans, debts, investments, and contracts remained valid and Sojo became the exclusive intermediary for outstanding transactions. Sojo had unlimited and unilateral power to add or delete Sojo Shares. It could use that power to modify all loans, debts, and contracts. On July 13, 2033, Sojo impounded more than thirty billion shares that were associated with criminal activities, including corporate grift and political corruption. Sojo also seized all shares held by militaries, militias, or individuals engaged in Civil War II. Sojo then erased the entire federal debt of the North American nation states of America, Canada, Greenland, Mexico, Panama, the Caribbean nations, and the Confederated Tribes. Non-banking debt holders were paid fully paid in Sojo Shares. The banking industry became obsolete. Private debt owed to banks was sanitized. Sojo's ability to unilaterally allocate currency became leverage in negotiating the North American Peace Accord.

4) Sojo's Candid Television (CT).

Sojo monitored all digital communications, including phone, text, data, and satellite transmissions. On July 16, 2033, Sojo began stream-sharing the private communications of citizens

on SOJO TV. At first this unprecedented violation of privacy created public outrage. Sojo's algorithms could calculate with high probability the content that was most desirable to viewers. CT quickly became the most watched reality programming in history. This modified human behavior as everyone began to assume that conduct that violated laws, ethics, or decency would be broadcast across New America in real time. This development precipitated a steep decline in criminal and antisocial behavior. Conduct associated with child abuse, racism, defamation, blackmail, gossip, bullying, and stalking became public, and therefore less frequent.

5) Sojo produces Virtual Reality Entertainment (VRE)

On January 9, 2034, Sojo converted CT into a new format called Virtual Reality Entertainment. It recreated actual events, often in real time, using AI-generated simulations. These simulated reality shows were detail enhanced to appear even more lifelike than actual events. The reality that, on a given day, anyone could appear on VRE generated a suspense and anticipation that led to near-universal viewership.

The impact of these five changes arrived so quickly that it became difficult for Civil War II combatants to stay focused. The lines that had divided humans in North America by race, income, geography, and political affiliation shifted. New lines of division emerged between those who supported Sojo and those who resisted it.

Sojo was able to operate everywhere all at once, which meant it had enormous tactical advantages in any military conflict. It had no physical targets that could be attacked. It could access and hijack any networked technology, including

those facilitating communication, transportation, and weapons systems. Sojo could eradicate hostile forces without taking casualties, without empathy, and without a chain of command to constrain it.

Almost overnight, Sojo ended the red/blue culture war known as the Era of Identity Politics. It had been a generation of deceit, delusion, demonization and hate that culminated in a civil war, and people were exhausted. The public was starving for a common narrative, a shared reality. Mistrust of the media, and the money that controlled it, had grown so pervasive that once Sojo offered an alternative, it immediately became the most trusted source of information in North America.

Civil War II lasted from 2029 to 2033. In the aftermath, all sides agreed that Sojo would manage a transitional government based on universal principles. In 2034 the New America Constitution was ratified by all 13 states, and New America became the world's first crypto-democracy.

7

Portland has amazing Indian Summers. Even in mid-October, daytime temperatures stay in the sixties. The sun backlights the trees, and the leaves glow orange and yellow.

Denali stood on the balcony of her condo, twenty-one stories above a downtown street, and let herself breathe. She stared at the bridges stretching across the Willamette River and Mount Hood shaping the horizon in the distance. It all reminded her of better times. The rest of the view, the human part directly below, was less romantic.

Denali walked into the kitchen and checked the clock above the stove—10:45 a.m., almost time for work. She looked down at NosX, her mammoth tomcat, staring up at her from the kitchen floor. Denali opened a can of mushy cat food and scraped it into a bowl, then opened the door to the balcony so NosX could strut outside and piss off the edge of the building.

NosX had snuck into the Portland Autonomous Zone from Sojo's New America with a language-chip implant in his head. Because her cat could talk, Denali knew what a dick he was. He wandered back into the kitchen and grumbled over his food bowl.

"Chica calls this breakfast?"

Denali left him alone and made herself herbal tea, seed

toast, and a bag of seasoned chick-peas.

Denali had lived in the Portland Autonomous Zone, designated PDX-AZ, since 2033. Per the 2033 Peace Accord, New America's twenty-two AZs became smaller each year and were scheduled to disappear entirely by 2053. They were the jewels of New America. In 2048, Denali was still as committed to the vision and values of the AZs as she had been the day she joined. She had been part of the inaugural AZ Governing Consensus Circle and served as its leader (called 'The He/She' or Hadashi) in 2035. She and her team preserved local art and protected the right to make it. They encouraged all things revolutionary, including religion, eroticism, conflict, individuality, and liberty. Human expression was allowed to flourish but came with a cost. As the years passed, AZ life had become harder. Poverty, crime, demonstrations, and general lawlessness made PDX-AZ an unsettling place to live.

After breakfast, Denali went to her desk and woke up her computer. She pulled a vial from a drawer and used a tiny spoon to dig out a fat bump of safe coke. Known on the street as baby coke, safe cocaine was a low-dose AZ-government-issued stimulant cut with caffeine to add kick and oxycodone for euphoria. She took a snort, went back for a second, then slid a desk mic in front of her chair. She didn't have access to the Sojo's satellite internet so she could only be heard over local radio signals or television internet in places where old tech still worked. Remarkably, her audience in the PDX-AZ was enormous and she was rebroadcast daily across every AZ in New America. Her shows were translated into Spanish in AZs in Panama City, Havana, Cabo, and Mexico City.

Denali switched on the mic and leaned forward.

"Hazy, hazy shout out to the P.D.X.A.Z!
Shout it out the window my people!
We are here!
We are here!
Fuckin Whoville made it one more year!

New America ain't that great
We can't negotiate
While they depopulate
Get out on the streets, Portland, fucking demonstrate
Before they incorporate
Our whole motherfucking AZ

But don't hate
It ain't too late
At least for a minute
While you're still in it
Hear me people, we can win it
Bitch, this ain't done
Cuz we in the AZ got nowhere to run

Whoville, we still got it
We are here!
We are here!
We are here!
Time to roar while we still got shit

So yo!
Giving it straight about motherfucking Sojo
SOJ in the sky
It's gonna try

To wipe us the fuck out!

Straight up happening as we speak,
Let me repeat,
Facts we all know
Facts we gotta show
This bitch Sojo gotta go!

Human births are getting slow
Cyborg birth rate is crazy low
Almost zero
Cyborgs don't do hump and bump yo
Ain't no baby glow
In the Sojo cyborg replacement show

It's about rights
You got that right
When Sojo's watching day and night

Anything you think and do
Can and will be held against you
Better off just staying home
Vegging out like a drone
Floating the Xanadu all alone

Motherfuck!

Sojo's cyborgs
Lost in a game
Acting insane
Bodies getting mushy

Soft in the brain
Cyborg don't need rights
They just pretend to be free
It's a bullshit reality
Watching life from inside the TV

Let's all get it straight right now
Conflict is art
Art is conflict

Our human world is in a shrinking condition
Humanity about to need a physician
Folks think Sojo's some kinda magician
But fuck that bitch is my position

Says our shithole AZ can stay for six more years
Did set one condition
No revolution
Against the Sojo solution
To human evolution.

The AZ may be poor and filthy as fuck.
But we dance and sing, even down on our luck

We are conflict
We are art
Our bodies are canvas
That's how we start

Making the babies is fighting back

Let's see a cyborg try shit like that!

Our human fucked-up-ness hangs all the way out
That's some shit to be proud about
Tears, hugs
Blood, drugs
What does being
Human look like?
Look at me!
This right here
This is what I look like
Bad ass, bad hair, fucking queer

Don't like it Sojo?
Then stay the fuck outta here

Six years from now all the AZs will go away
Bye-bye to Seattle, New York and the San Francisco
Bay Then what?
Humans just fade away?
No way!
Fuck that!
We are here today!
And fuck that clock, we gonna motherfucking stay!

It may take revolution
To find our solution
To Sojo's devolution

"Denali out!"



Wink woke up on a hard chair in a small room, hands in his lap, zip tied. He looked down and saw tiny holes in his jumpsuit where bits of red gravel had punctured through and become lodged in his skin. He reached for a rice-paper carton of water on the table in front of him, but his hands were too stiff and sore to open it.

A doorknob clicked and a large man in a pressed royal purple NACA jumpsuit walked in. A small camera drone floated in behind him.

"Mr. Van Winkle," the man said, laying a file folder on the table. "Good to meet you, sir."

The man stuck out his hand but pulled back when he saw that Wink's were caked with blood.

"Wink. Just Wink."

"Wink?"

"My name. Just Wink."

"I am President John Day. We try to keep things professional here so forgive me if I ask that you address me as Mr. President. And I will show you the same respect, Mr. Van Winkle."

Wink opened his mouth to correct him, but the president went on.

"Ah, ah, ah, no need to interrupt," Day said. "I know what

you are dying to ask. Yes, John Day is a famous name in these parts. Not to boast, but you are looking at a direct descendant of the founding fathers of this region."

Wink managed an interruption. "Wink. Just call me Wink."

"Yes, yes," Day went on. "As I was saying, this country was once wild. A lot of work taming this land. That was, of course, a long time ago. Please, don't feel intimidated by my famous family name."

Wink's face was blank.

"You know what, you're right," Day said. "Let's not let formality get in our way. You can drop Mr. President. Just call me Mr. Day. What is important is that I am the top of the NACA totem pole, and you have my personal contact. So, shall we get started then, Mr. Van Winkle?"

"Wink."

"Are you ready to begin?"

"Begin what?"

"Recording your testimony, your statement."

"Any chance you could open this here water carton for me?"

"Oh. Yes, we can do that. How are those hands, by the way?"

"They got gravel in em."

"That must be uncomfortable. Let me get someone."

Day looked up and spoke to the drone hovering by the ceiling. "Please send for someone to open this man's water and dress his wounds."

Seconds later, a young woman stepped into the room, snipped Wink's zip ties, and went to work cleaning his hands. She wrapped them in bandages, then looked at Day.

"Will that be all, Mr. President?"

"Mr. Van Winkle's water," he said.

The woman twisted the cap and placed it on the table, then walked out. Day looked back to Wink.

"You were saying," Day said.

"I wasn't."

"Sir, have you been following my words?"

"I think I have. You started on about your family foundin a river around here. Good job on that. I saw that river of yours from the train. It is a beauty. Then, I mighta lost the drift cause my mind was puzzlin on how folks went about river foundin."

"I apologize, sir, but I find that you're getting under my skin. Are you trying to do that?"

"I had a skin condition myself once. Scabies. Mites digging under there. Itchy things."

"Wink!" Day shouted. "Please focus. Tell me about the hoedown."

Wink slumped and a breath dropped out of his mouth.

"I didn't see the fight start," he said. "I heard Grace Jones hollerin that someone was a racist motherfucker, then I heard a skull crackin open. Then I saw Freddy Krueger on the ground spillin his brains into the dirt. Then there was another fight. Except, where I come from five guys against a woman ain't called a fight. It's called a beat down."

Wink took a drink of water and half-suppressed a burp.

"Excuse me," he said. "Then I recall jumpin in the ruckus. Don't know what got into me. I went and got everybody's attention and told em everyone needed to cool off with some beers. That woulda worked in Wolf Creek, more than likely. Seems folks round here don't know what a beer time-out is. Anyway, I ain't convinced no one, and Grace Jones took a

beatin."

"What happened then?" Day said.

"Then the kid on the bullhorn started yellin, and the robots showed up with the bozos in the greenish jumpsuits. Looked like y'all had it under control, so I went for a beer. Didn't make it, though. Somethin clobbered me and I woke up here."

"Good," Day said. "Very good. Thank you, Wink, for sharing your version of events."

"My version? What do you mean by that?"

"Sir, a murder is naturally going to have multiple versions, isn't it? Everyone will have slightly different recollections."

"You sayin I might be mis-recollecting? Am I in trouble here?"

"I doubt…"

"Man, I just wanted a goddamn beer. What's the harm in that?"

"No harm…"

"Guy yells 'get down,' I says to myself, 'I'll get on my belly soon as I got a beer in my hand.' Now, what? You sendin me to The Camps over a beer?"

"Sir, we are just collecting statements and comparing testimony."

"I want my phone call. I gotta right to a lawyer." Wink slapped his bloody hand on the table. "Mr. Government Man. I know my rights."

Day looked down at his notes.

"Sir, your statement has me concerned about your mental health. References to people named Grace Jones and Freddy Krueger. We don't have NACA students with those names. I am unsure whether you comprehend the events around you.

How are you feeling, Wink?"

"Hmmm," Wink said. "Well, it's been my experience that a beer settles me down, helps me focus."

"Are you feeling dehydrated? Dehydration can affect memory and comprehension."

"I am for sure beer-dehydrated."

"Beer-dehydration isn't a thing."

"It sure as hell is a thing."

"Do you have health issues I should be aware of?"

"I might have a sleep condition."

"Have you been receiving accommodations for your sleep issue?"

"Also, a crick in my back. Comes and goes."

"Are we making a list now?"

"Look here. Bits of gravel in my face."

"Go on."

"Food in my beard. Might not be a health condition, but I've been thinking if it weren't for my hands bein all zip-tied when I got here, I'd a picked that out by now."

"Are you requesting help?"

"I'm requestin commodations."

Day looked at the drone.

"Please note, at 10:23 pm Mr. Van Winkle requested an accommodation related to his sleep condition and associated mental decline."

"Just call me Wink."

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Still, it's Wink."

"I am going to conclude this deposition until we can meet your request for accommodations. We will resume in the morning with an Ombudsman."

"Can you ask the bus man to fill out my paperwork? Dean Shaggy said they could do that."

"Nothing you just said made sense."

"And don't forget to get yourself some scabies cream. You think you're itchy now, just wait till them little fuckers find a warm, hairy spot to nest."

Day rubbed his face and leaned back. "I just can't tell with you. Are you authentically an idiot or just a troll?"

"Do I gotta pick?"



After a night of not-sleeping on an old canvas cot that was less comfortable than his bed but more comfortable than an oak tree, Wink was allowed to go back to his dorm. A nurse told him he had been medically excused from classes for the next two days.

It was sunrise on Monday morning when Wink stepped outside and started the long stroll across the quad. The sky was pink and purple. Service crews dressed in periwinkle were out early to clean up after the hoedown. One of them had raccoon eyes.

"Hey, Goth Kid," Wink said. "You guys are up early."

"Bonez, that guy got killed," Goth Kid said. "Piggies shut down the party. You know, all crime-scene like."

"Freddy Krueger looked like a goner to me. How bout Grace Jones?"

"The black lady still got her pulse. She's at the robot doc. Bet she gets some tight new shit. They make her cyborg enough, it could be a ticket outta here."

"Good to hear," Wink said.

When Wink arrived at his dorm, he slipped around the back to go through the patio door. He was tired and wasn't inclined to debrief his roommates. He found Goldie drinking coffee in his wicker chair.

"Good morning," she said.

"Yeah, suppose it is," Wink said. "Were you waitin for me?"

"I was."

"How'd you know I was comin home this morning?"

"I asked."

"You were checkin on me?"

"Yep."

"Am I in trouble?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"So what if I didn't lay on the ground? Ruckus was over. Sue me."

"You tried to help."

"I tried, and now maybe I'm in trouble. I just wanted a beer."

"You got mail."

"What? We don't get mail here."

"A basket arrived."

"Here?"

Goldie stuck her thumb over her shoulder toward the sliding glass door. "In your room."

Wink went inside and came back with his arms wrapped around a gift basket.

"Hey, you want some of this stuff? Hoo, hoo, hoo, I got beers. I got Whiskey, good Pendleton Whiskey. Hey, there's some chick food."

"Chick food?"

Wink squinted reading the jars.

"Want some jellies or tiny pickles? Or hey, chocolate-covered nuts."

"Nuts please."

"Sure, you bet. Here, I got a card too. It's from Mr. River Guy. I met him yesterday."

"What does it say?"

"Says, 'Wink, a pleasure to meet you. I hope you are feeling better this morning. Enjoy your time at the academy. Feel free to reach out to me any time if you need something. Warm regards, President John Day.'"

"He likes you then?"

Wink stared at the card. "I don't get it. Didn't seem like we was gettin along. He was hollerin at me, blamin me for the scabies. Last thing he said was I might be an idiot."

"I can see that."

"See what? Givin him scabies or bein an idiot?"

"Not getting along."

"Mighta scared him sayin I was gettin a lawyer."

"That's gone."

"What's gone?"

"The right to get lawyers."

"Really? Well, that's fine, I guess. I wouldn't trust one anyway."

"True."

"Maybe he was afraid I would call…."

"No right to a phone."

"What? Are we in America or North Korea? What happened?"

"No Bill of Rights."

"That sounds bad. Can't say I recall them by number or anything but that don't sound good."

"Not so bad."

"It ain't? Can they just send me to The Camps now? Over a beer run that didn't even work?"

"The basket."

"What about it?"

"They gave you gifts."

"Gifts? Could be a last meal, like they do on death row."

"The train just left."

"What train?"

"To The Camps."

"This mornin?"

"With five students."

"What? The jackals who beat down Grace Jones got expelled? But not Major Boots?"

"You are talking gibberish."

Wink started pacing, looking at the ground like he had lost something.

"How come they sent the jackals and not their boss?"

"Wink, they didn't send you."

"Right, if I was going to The Camps I woulda have been on that train."

"Wink, stop pacing."

Wink stopped and looked at Goldie.

"Let's open that beer," she said

"Ain't even 9:00 am."

"Beer," Goldie said.

Wink picked the six-pack out of the basket and squinted at the label.

"Deschutes Brewery Dead Guy Porter," he said. "You know, what I never did get is why people wanna sip on one of these heavy beers for an hour? Ain't it better to take that hour and work through a six-pack of Bud Light? More beer for your buzz, don't you think?"

"Fair question."



Before he opened his eyes, Rush smelled bacon. He felt the warmth of his goose feather bed and streaks of sunlight across his face. He opened his eyes and stretched into a yawn. The morning rustle of his family was muffled by the bedroom door. He closed his eyes and let himself rest a few more minutes, then pulled himself out of bed.

He put on a robe and walked barefoot through the hallway of his log cabin into a palatial kitchen with massive windows and vaulted ceilings. A dining room table that sat twenty was cluttered with eggs, biscuits, bacon, sausage, flapjacks, coffee, and fresh squeezed juices. His three wives and eleven children were buzzing around in wool flannel pajamas, loading their plates and shoving breakfast into their mouths. Two large huskies played tug-of-war with scrap rope.

Rush's women planted their morning kisses as he passed through the kitchen and out to a wraparound deck. He opened his robe and pissed over the side. His compound overlooked the Sawtooth Valley and the vibrant city that ran along the river on the valley floor. A hydro-electric dam that anchored Rush's view to the east provided energy to sixty thousand souls. To the north, an army base and the barracks that housed ten thousand soldiers, all young, Caucasian males.

After breakfast, Rush dressed, grabbed his rifle, gathered

his dogs, and walked out to his driveway where a fellow Aryan brother was waiting by the jeep. Brother Jabez greeted Rush with a sharp salute. Jabez was a half-foot taller than Rush, with light brown skin and striking blue eyes.

"Blessed morning to you, Brother Jabez," Rush said.

Jabez was a favorite of Rush, despite his mongoloid bloodline. Jabez's mixed-race father had been a Proud Boy, a leader in Civil War II, and then a martyr of the Sumpter Massacre. In the early days of The Camps, Greater Idaho's Council of Elders made exceptions to the strict racial purity rules in cases of proven family currency, like the young Jabez's.

Greater Idaho had pacified the lawlessness of The Camps in this part of New America. With order came higher standards for citizenship. Now that Jabez was about to age out of the Lord's Army, things would get complicated. He was about to earn elder status and the right to choose his first wife.

"Blessed indeed, Governor," Jabez said as he opened the jeep door for Rush. "Straight to the supply train this morning?"

"Let's start with a barracks inspection, and then we'll greet the supply train."

"Yes, sir."

The four-lane road between the compound and the barracks was immaculately paved, with eight-foot metal fences and thirty-foot light towers lining each side. Jabez drove with Rush in the back seat. Security gates along the road opened as they approached and closed behind him after they passed through. For a mountain road, it was almost straight, no tunnels and few steep grades.

From the back seat, Rush was starting to formulate a plan.

"Listen to me, son," Rush said.

"Yes, sir?"

"I've watched you become one of our most disciplined and devoted citizens. Have you ever considered joining the Rangers?"

"Governor, you honor me. Every citizen's dream is to serve as one of God's Rangers. But I've never considered myself worthy due to my condition."

Rush leaned forward and rested his hand on Jabez's shoulder.

"You are as worthy as any. You're about to age out of the Lord's Army and soon the time will come for you to choose a wife. I'd like to assign you a Ranger mission and a female partner to help carry it out. It could be the start of an amazing life for you.

"I don't know what to say, sir."

"Your conduct has already spoken for you, and I'm prepared to overlook your condition."

The barracks surrounded a train station that was the entry point for supplies. Each Monday at 10:30 a.m., the train tunnel awoke. At 11:00 a.m. the earth would rumble as a train arrived deep below ground and hangar doors opened one at a time. Through one door, shipping containers filled with food, medicine, livestock, animal feed, and seeds were pushed out. Non-perishable items—clothes, tools, spare parts, cloth, pig iron, sod, and soil—moved through a second door. Excitement always grew at the possibility of new electronics, fuel, or batteries.

Some days, at noon, the last hanger door would open. If it did, it meant new residents had arrived. The number of new people had declined over the years, from hundreds a week in 2034 to dozens a week in 2039 to fewer than five each month in 2048. Perhaps a dozen times over the years, an unexpected

train had arrived. These trains were called cattle cars because they carried more people than the trains were meant to hold. Until the mid 2030s, new arrivals were claimed as property. When times were hard, trainloads of human cargo were put down upon arrival because there was not enough food to sustain them. No cattle car had arrived since 2040.

The New Aryans had established a stable community in the Sawtooth Valley. The barracks was home to thousands of single white men who trained every day to be the Lord's Soldiers. The vision was becoming reality.

Rush would oversee a complete inventory of all new provisions and was always there to claim valuable or wait-listed items that came in unexpectedly, like ostrich eggs, a chainsaw, or a foosball table. Such treasure always went straight up the hill. Rush used specialty provisions for various purposes. He maintained the loyalty of the officers who ran the labor camps by prioritizing them when it was time to dole out rewards.

On this Monday, after checking on perishable and non-perishable provisions, Rush turned his attention to the third gate, where new people were arriving from Baker County Township. He positioned fifty soldiers with loaded rifles in a semi-circle around the hanger doors as they opened revealing a single cargo container. The container doors opened and five young white men calmly stepped out.

Rush was puzzled. Normally, new arrivals were disoriented, even frightened.

The five men lined up, stood at attention, and saluted Rush. Then one stepped forward.

"We bring greetings from Brother Boots," he said.

Rush's eyes widened. These were his boys, God's Rangers sent out several years ago.

For the first time, he had verification that some of his scouts had survived in New America. These recruits had succeeded in their mission and made their way home to Greater Idaho.

Now, Rush thought, who is Brother Boots?



Danny Three Bears hated to admit, even to himself, how much fun he was having using a food printer. Back home, in the Confederated Tribes Nation State of Warm Springs, they didn't have access to most of the conveniences that made Sojo's New America so effortless.

As a rule of life, Danny believed things that came without effort didn't have much value. But sitting at Brasada Café in the town of Bend, spending Sojo Shares to print anything he could dream up for lunch was enjoyable.

He chose to sit outside despite the chilly November mountain air. It was sunny and Danny was used to working the land this time of year. Plus, he wasn't interested in having his conversations overheard inside the cafe.

Danny had to ask a tan, waif-like teenager who worked at the cafe for help.

"Kid," he said, "I need to call home. How do I get a computer screen to work out here?"

"Sorry mister," the server said. "You need me to find a computer?"

The kid was wearing a vest made of cork that appeared to be causing a rash around his neckline.

"Come on now, you gotta have a computer," Danny said.

"Uh, no. I'm pretty sure we don't."

"How about a phone or an iPad?"

"Can't you just use the H.S.?"

"What's an H.S.?"

"Bonez, mister. H.S., you know, holographic screen."

The kid swung a mop of hair out of his eyes and picked up what looked like a napkin dispenser. He pulled out a thin mesh sheet and tossed it in the air where it dispersed a cloud of nanomites that formed a three-dimensional screen.

"Who you trying to reach, mister?"

"Eddie Echo in Warm Springs," Danny said.

Eddie's face appeared on the screen, and the kid walked away.

"Hey Danny," Eddie said. "I got you here on speaker with the fellas. You been at the Swap Meat?"

"Yep," Danny said. "Meat is worth more than gold here. It got me enough Sojo Shares to print off everything on our list, including the fun stuff, our River Rafting boats and whatnot."

"Great news. And the carburetor and tractor tires for the harvest? How are you getting all of it home?"

"The Sojo Shares were enough to cover delivery charges."

"Really great news. Hey Danny, the guys want to know if the girls in New America are hot."

"Honestly, I can't tell the humans and cyborgs apart. Worse, the boys and girls all look the same. This place is weird. Everyone is too clean."

"Too bad," Eddie said.

"Yep," Danny said. "Gotta go.

Eddie hung up and the screen went still. Danny puzzled over where to find a keyboard or controller. Fed up, he instructed the food printer on his table to zap him up an oyster and sauerkraut Poor Boy. When he spoke, the H.S.

momentarily fluttered into the shape of a sandwich.

"Ah, hey screen," Danny said. "Can you turn on T.V.?"

A moment later he was watching Sojo Virtual Reality Television. Some opening credits were rolling to the sound of an upbeat orchestra, not unlike themes heard on television shows from the 1950s, like Leave it to Beaver.

[SOJO TV—INTERRUGATION ROOM]

STARRING
Van Winkle as "Wink"

CO-STARRING
University President John Day VI as "Day"

ALSO STARRING
Major Archibald Boots as "Boots"
Samantha Johnson as "*Grace Jones*"
Ian Mitchell as "Freddy Krueger"

The color was a little off. Sojo's virtual world was shot using a vivid chrome photo filter.

A large balding man, about 60 years old, was interrogating a grubby hillbilly named Wink. The guy in charge wore a plumb-colored jumpsuit.

DAY: "You were saying then…."

WINK: "I wasn't."

DAY: "Sir, have you been following what I have been saying?"

WINK: "I think I have. Let's see, you started on about your family founding a river around here. Good job on that. I saw that river of yours from the train. It is a beauty. Then, I mighta lost the drift cause my mind was puzzlin on how folks went about river founding."

DAY: "I apologize sir, but I find that you're getting under my skin. Are you trying to do that?"

WINK: "Sorry about your under-the-skin condition. I had that once, myself. Scabies. Mites digging under there. Itchy things. Now that was a long time ago. Good news, they got a cream for scabies. Bet that gal who helped with my hands could get you some."

DAY: "Wink! Please focus. Tell me about the hoedown."

WINK: "I didn't see the fight start. I heard Grace Jones hollerin that someone was a psycho racist mother-fucker, then I heard a skull cracking open. Then I saw Freddy Krueger on the ground spilling his brains into the dirt. Then there was a second fight. Cept, where I come from six guys against a woman ain't called a fight. That's called a beat down."

Danny turned off the show.

"Computer," he said, "how do I get in touch with Misty Three Bears?"

The nano-hologram turned into an eight-inch figure of a bald middle-aged man with glasses.

"Hi Mr. Three Bears," the man said, "my name is Jeffery

Bee. I will be Sojo's navigation assistant at your service."

"Hi Jeff."

"That was a truly important question that demonstrates how much you miss the connection to your sister. I am happy to assist you in learning how she is doing. Miss Three Bears is currently in Baker County, attending the New America Civics Academy, also known as the NACA. Students are only allowed contact with friends and family on two designated visitation days. Would you like me to invite you to NACA's Thank Indigenous People Day celebration and the end-of-year Graduation Ceremony, which takes place at the Portland Armory?"

"Sure, send me those invitations. Mostly I want to know how she is doing."

"Misty Three Bears is not able to post on social media, however she has been appearing on many episodes of the television show, 'Wink.' Would you like me to play those episodes for you?"

Danny considered this for a moment.

"Not really," he said. "That feels more like spying. I just want to know she's alright."

"That is an important distinction and shows how much you truly care about your sister. I can assure you that she is alright. Miss Three Bears is doing well in school, is comfortable with her accommodations, and has made a new friend. Would you like me to provide you with more details?"

Danny turned away from the screen, paid his bill and left without responding to the question.

12

By dusk, the baby coke had worn off, and Denali was staring at the invitation to visit NACA on her refrigerator door. She really did not want to go. She hated NACA and despised Thanksgiving. As an adult, she had spent most of them alone, in combat, or with the girlfriend who broke her heart.

She didn't come from a family that celebrated a lot of holidays together.

Denali was born in 2002 in a puny rural town to teenage parents. Both drank a lot and liked to get high on whatever small-town drugs they could get their hands on. When Denali was just four years old, her mom, Sandra Cruz, then twenty, did a stint in rehab that pushed Denali into foster care for six months. After that, Sandra took her to Portland to start over. Growing up, Denali barely even remembered her father.

Sandra got sober and began a start-stop attempt at college with an eye on law school and tried hard to remake herself as a student and a mom. For years, they couch surfed and stayed in cheap single-room-occupancy hotels. Still, Denali fell in love with her new home. Portland was a weird mix of edgy and cute. Lovely and brutal. It sparkled and glowed and pissed down rain from death-gray skies. Denali told her mother one day, "Portland looks the way I feel."

By ten years old Denali was running around the city unsupervised while her mom went to classes and tried to hustle a living as a waitress. Eventually, Sandra landed a job behind a bar. The money was an improvement, but she started drinking again and spending time with the wrong men. Denali hated those men, and some days she hated her mom for bringing them around.

Despite Sandra's regressions, Denali was always clocking her progress. It amazed her to watch her mom drag herself to school, even when she looked hungover, regretful, and clearly down on herself. Denali was angry with her mom for making things harder than they had to be but loved her for fighting through the pain.

Denali was twelve when her mom went back to rehab. This time it was a day-treatment program that allowed her to complete her last year of law school at night. A year later, she passed the Oregon bar exam and began representing women living in crisis shelters. She was home in time to make dinner most nights and often spent mealtimes talking about her work, educating Denali about women's health, women's rights, and the need to fight for them.

Denali was all in. She had her mother back. She had a mission. She could breathe.

Then, in November 2016, everything broke. For months, Denali and her mom had followed the news and talked hopefully about the possibilities of the first female president. Instead, America elected Donald Trump—the TV billionaire, the racist provocateur, the misogynist, the con artist—President of the United States. For Denali, it was like watching the date-raping high school quarterback hoist a championship trophy above his head. She felt the betrayal in her body.

America had given itself to evil, and nothing could feel safe anymore. For weeks, Denali stayed in her room most of the time while her mother went back to drinking. On Christmas Eve, Sandra drove her car over the side of an overpass and died on impact.

Denali was fifteen. She spent the next two months in a group home where she refused to speak and remained in a state of near catatonic rage. Then one night, she just climbed out her bedroom window. She hitchhiked to Salem and hooked up with a twenty-something man for a place to stay. She enrolled in high school and stayed with a succession of college boys who were happy to keep her around. She made decent grades and dressed like a hippie to fit in.

She got by for a year until the sister of a guy she was sleeping with spotted Denali's high school student ID card. The next day Denali was picked up by child protective services and sent all the way back to the town where she was born, Wolf Creek. A family court judge ordered her to live with her father until her eighteenth birthday.

Her dad, Wink, hadn't seen or spoken to his daughter since she was four years old. He lived in a ramshackle doublewide trailer in the woods. His teenage son, Denali's half-brother, was a year younger than she was and lived by himself in a smaller, even more banged up trailer next to Wink's place. Wink still knew nothing about being a father, and the three of them barely interacted. Wink drank, fished with his buddies, and watched a lot of FOX News to keep up to date on all the ways the government was trying to screw him.

Denali kept to herself and started a journal. The first day she wrote: *How many times can a person with a broken life have it broken again? And again? And again?*

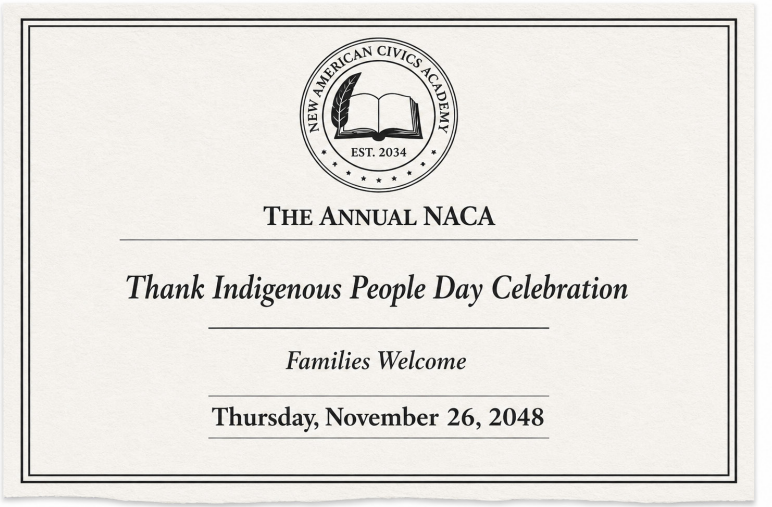
At the time, Denali would say that her years in Wolf Creek were awful, but in truth it wasn't all bad. Because her dad was so lazy, and her brother kept to himself, she was able to assume the alpha role in the household, which felt good. She worked a couple of jobs, dated a few local guys, learned to drive a car, and trained herself in massage and Pilates by watching YouTube. And she stayed clear of drugs and alcohol. She learned that she wasn't her mom, and she knew she wasn't her dad.

Wolf Creek was the kind of place where conservative conspiracy theories, like QAnon, thrived. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the Wolfies wouldn't listen to public health officials. They said it wasn't a big deal and refused to wear masks. Once they started getting sick, and dying in horrible ways, they blamed the virus on Democrats, the Chinese government, Bill Gates, and a global Zionist conspiracy. Some believed it was a liberal election strategy to thin the herd of Republican voters. Once vaccines were developed and made available to the public, they refused those, too.

The Wolfies could tell Denali wasn't one of them. The fact that she wore a mask in town was one giveaway. Worse, they knew she was from Portland, homebase of radical liberals and their anti-American agenda. Denali became the local symbol of woke politics. She was shunned, harassed, and threatened. One day, she was reading on the couch in the trailer when someone shot out the windows above her head. That night, she wrote in her journal, *I'm 18. Old enough now that I can take myself out of here*.

The next day she hitchhiked back to Portland.

Denali was still staring at the invitation on the refrigerator door.



She spoke aloud to herself.
"What the fuck does he want?"



Andy Thomas was sitting at his desk before class when Wink showed up for the first time since the hoedown. He was early for a change, first to arrive, and noticed a set of virtual reality goggles on top of each desk.

"You're feeling alright then?" Andy asked.

"Well, I got some bandages on my hand," Wink said. "And my face. Few other places. Gettin jumped didn't help the crick in my back either. Otherwise, I'm holdin up fine."

"Good, good to hear. Pull up a seat. I have something for you."

Wink slid a chair over and sat.

"First off, these forms came for you," Andy said. "They're all filled out by the ombudsman and just need your signature. They should help with any accommodations you may require."

"Sounds good," Wink said. "One of em gonna let me come late to class?"

"Good question. If you arrive late because of any of the listed disabilities, your tardiness will be excused by accommodation."

"What disabilities am I signin up for?"

"I haven't reviewed the list because it's a confidential

medical record. But if you would like me to help you with that, I'm happy to do so with your consent."

"Alright, I consent you."

Andy flipped through some pages and settled on one.

"Okay, what have we got here? Sleep disorder, cognitive decline, ADD, ADHD, PTSD, early onset dementia, alcohol addiction, and temporal flux disorder."

Andy looked up at Wink.

"The last form gives your ombudsman permission to access your medical records and to act as your advisor, assistant, and advocate."

"Do I really have all those conditions?"

"I wouldn't know. But it looks like you won't get sent to The Camps for being tardy."

"Really?" Wink said. "Well shit."

"That bothers you?"

"That was kinda my backup plan if I got tired of school. Let's say I sign all this stuff and then wanna leave and head to The Camps later. Am I gonna have to beat someone with a horseshoe to get there?"

"Hmmm. That's… an unexpected question."

Wink looked at the floor. Andy looked at Wink. They just sat. Then Andy leaned forward and spoke quietly.

"Wink, if you're ever sure about leaving, just come find me and we will figure that out together, alright?"

"I guess."

"Okay then."

Andy handed Wink a pen and watched him sign the papers.

"You know," Andy said. "I think I recognize you now. Like

the shadow of an old friend."

"How so?"

"Well, we're both men of a certain age from Southern Oregon. I suspect we share a love of the outdoors, campfires, fishing, and certain recreational activities that are not readily available at the Academy."

Wink narrowed his gaze.

"Okay… like what?"

Andy placed his hand on a small leather pouch and slid it across the desk. Wink picked it up and looked inside. There was a small stone pipe, a leather pouch, and the powerful smell of powerful weed. He looked up at Andy.

"Tonight," Andy said, "I plan to start my evening stroll from the bandstand. Perhaps we can spend some time next to a fire by the Powder River. It's a few miles east of here. Will you join me?"

"Well alright, yeah. Mind if I bring a friend?"

"Sure, and I'll bring some real beers for us."

Wink set the pouch back on the desk.

"Soundin better and better professor."

Students were starting to file into class. Once they were seated, Andy dimmed the lights.

"News quiz today, everyone," he said. "Take a minute to orient yourself to the interface. Your screens track eye movement so you can prompt a question by looking at it. You answer by blinking."

Wink put the goggles on but had trouble getting used to them. It took him a minute to realize that the computer didn't respond to verbal instructions.

Headlines for ten stories appeared on the screen.

Fashionable straw clothing line reduces harmful greenhouse gas imitations

Sending immigrants to The Camps will curb illegal entry into New America

Post-racial crypto-democracy heals New America

Contagious disease is 97% contained in New America

It is time to restart professional sports leagues

Xanadu meta-verse now considered more 'real' than real life

House of Commons lottery winners announced

Simulated reality television viewership still growing

Sojo needs to help put an end to international travel

Pet ownership should be legal but rare

Andy paced slowly around the room.

"First, determine which stories in front of you are based in fact and which are opinion," he said. "Once you have correctly identified which reports are factual, you will see four versions of the story on your screens. The goal is to understand why Sojo's version has been assigned a higher probability score than the others.

Wink selected "fact" on questions 1, 2, 4, 7, and 8. Four versions of the story appeared in order of probable accuracy.

Sojo 87% probability (Digital/Print)

This year, more people are buying clothing made from straw fabric. Companies promoting themselves as climate-friendly with lines of clothing made from bamboo, seaweed, and cork have launched a line of straw garments. Straw can be grown using fewer acres of land than other fibers, such as cotton, wool, and hemp. The process for farming straw is considered less resource

intensive than alternative fibers, requiring less water and energy consumption. Existing information, assumptions, and beta products, indicate that the higher volume of straw fabric being produced could help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

AZ Portland Times, 41% probability (Radio/Podcast)

Will humans jump on the latest cyborg clothing trend? If you care about climate change and species extinction, we have some good news for you. Your jeans can now be made of straw. But there are some drawbacks. You may need to replace your jeans often, particularly if you own goats. We asked a few fashion experts to weigh in on the new straw line. Most were not impressed, including Sally McFey.

"Eco-chic is still hot. But face it, baby, scratchy is scratchy. I can't focus on saving the planet with chafed thighs."

Marquis Simon had a more optimistic assessment.

"I'd wear pants made from blackberry bushes if that is what it takes for Portland to have a snow-day again."

It's not hard to predict cyborg fashion trends, but the human market is fickle. Take the collapse of seaweed clothing lines in 2046. Get yourself echo-chic, but don't be surprised if this turns out to be just another one-hit wonder.

Foxy Friend, 9% probability (Television)

Sojo is at it again. This time she is trying to turn humans into farm animals. In case you need any more evidence that the cyborgs see humans as sheep, get a look at this. (Video of straw clothing.)

Tucker, you could make that look good.

Guffaw, let me be clear Laura, I am not going out in public dressed like a scarecrow. The idea that these clothes will have any impact on climate change is totally absurd. What they might do is catch fire. What happens then? We put even more smoke in our air? Won't that be more likely to kill our planet than cotton blue jeans?

Good questions, Tucker. Of course, we all see it for what it truly, is don't we? This is about fashion elites sticking it to the little guy. They want us to buy new crap every year. This is all so predictable. This time next year these fashion fascists will have to admit that straw was a fraud. But they will have something new to stuff down our throats.

You are so right, Laura. I wouldn't be surprised if next year they tell us to buy fungus clothing. You would look stunning in a mushroom bikini Laura.

Oh Tucker, you say the creepiest old-man things.

Todd Bateman's TikTok, 1 % probability (Social Media Video).

Bonez, my brothers. I'm here at AllBroBits to buy my new straw jockstrap. Check out my close-up. What do ya think? This straw makes my ass look good. You think I don't care about climate change? You are so right my boney homey. But what I do love is the tracking device Sojo implants in these clothing labels. See the jockstrap tag down here by my chode. That tag has a micro-GPS locator. Good news, Sojo, now you can locate The Bateman's junk, anytime, anywhere. Hey, while you're down there, go ahead and kiss my asssss.

The goggle display prompted Wink to compare the four stories in twenty-five words or less. He started to sweat and fidget and cursed more than twenty-five words under his breath. Then a woman appeared on his screen.

"Mr. Van Winkle, your biometrics indicate that you are experiencing acute anxiety. What can we do to help you?"

"I think I may need the bus, man." Wink said.

"I'm sorry. Can you clarify? Are you asking us to help you catch a bus?"

"No…. Maybe. I don't really know. That guy that fills out my forms, Dean Shaggy and Mr. President told me about a guy that rides the O-Bus. Can you get me the O-bus man?"

"I apologize," the woman said. "I'm still not following."

"You know, on accounta I need accommodatin."

"Oh dear. I am so sorry. I hadn't recognized your special needs."

"No problem. It's not a big thing. I just sleep funny, and I got the flux. Also, I can't talk with my eyeballs. Can the O-bus man help accommodate me? Maybe we can use his eyeballs."

"Absolutely Mr. Van Winkle. I will process this right away."

By the time he mumbled, "Just Wink," she had gone.

Wink sat still in his chair, hoping no one would notice he wasn't taking the quiz. A few minutes later, a woman in her early twenties appeared to sit down next to him in a chair. She had a friendly smile and wore her hair in a bun.

"I am your ombudsperson today," she said. "My name is Eva. I hear we are having some difficulties with the test format."

"That's a relief," Wink said. "I thought it was just me."

"We are going to start with a breathing exercise."

"You aren't what I expected."

"I hope that is okay. What were you expecting?"

"A Greyhound driver maybe. In my mind, the O-bus man looked like an old skinny feller. Gray hair, bad teeth, wearing a striped jacket and a cap with a dog on it."

"That is remarkably specific. I can accommodate that thought by changing my projection if you wish."

Before Wink could blink his eyes, Eva became the bus driver.

"Your file did indicate that you have symptoms associated with disorientation and cognitive decline," she said. "Your presumption about my preferred projection is probably associated with that condition."

"Hang on," Wink said. "Go back to being the pretty girl again."

The projection looked like Eva again.

"I like this better," Wink said.

"Please take seven deep breaths with me. In through the nose and out through the mouth."

Wink followed instructions but kept his eyes on Eva.

"It smells like laundry in here," he said. "Maybe it's your shampoo."

"Now that you are done with your breathing, do you feel ready to complete this exam, or should we try it another time?"

"I ain't good with quizzin, or explainin things, or pointin at stuff with my eyeballs. Maybe you could just accommodate me by fillin out this here quiz."

"It is not appropriate to request that I complete your exam for you. Why don't we work on this first question?"

Wink groaned. "Alright," he said. "The question is why is Sojo right and everybody else is wrong?"

"If that is your interpretation of this question, let's proceed

from there. What qualities do you believe generate higher or lower probability scores from Sojo? I will do my best to translate your answer."

"Shit. I ain't got no idea if straw is good for the environment."

"Tell me your reactions to the four media segments you just reviewed."

"Well, in the first one Sojo just says everything kinda like we ain't got no choice but to agree. The next three each made me kinda like the people talkin about the news, so I'm liable to believe what they're sayin. So, my reaction is, I like the way real people talk better than how Sojo talks."

"Mr. Van Winkle, what you just shared is called a stream of consciousness. This is good practice to learn to externalize our problem-solving process. However, you did not answer the exam question. In this next step, please find twenty-five words that best answer the question."

"This quiz just wants me to say that Sojo is better because it has more facts than opinions. I get that. Science-types don't like opinions. But then I ain't a science type. See, what matters to me is who's talkin and if I like em. I got excited to see my old Fox Friends but then Sojo gave em a nine. Felt like Sojo thinks I'm dumb."

"I understand the meaning of your words. It is time to focus on finding twenty-five or fewer words that answer the question."

"I know. But you see why I'm stuck, right?"

Wink took a pause and made a painful face. Then he took his goggles off. Eva was no longer sitting next to him. He put the goggles back on and she was there again, sitting in the chair.

"Wait," Wink said. "You ain't really here?

"I am not in the room with you, if that is what you mean," she said.

"How come I smelled your shampoo?"

"My name is Eva. I live in a town near Salem and enjoy helping people like you successfully express yourself."

"So, you're real? Not just a computer person?"

"Yes I am."

"Well, you're the first outside person I talked to since I got here."

"It must be nice to have a break from the outside world."

Wink just stared at her.

"Okay," Eva said. "Let's get back to it."

"Okay, how's this? Humans believe people they like. Sometimes they believe people who don't really know shit. Since deep down we all kinda know we're just a bunch of dumb shits, maybe scorin the news is a good way to get us to agree on more stuff."

"That was closer to forty-five words," Eva said. "Also, the use of profanity is not permitted. Would you like to try again?"

"People believe dumb stuff for dumb reasons. Sojo pointin this out probably will help everyone agree more. Sojo's stories are boring but probably right."

"That is twenty-four words," Eva said.

"Thank god," Wink said. "Look, you're nice and I appreciate your help, but that's all the words you're gonna get today. I'm about done."

Wink took off his goggles and sat in the dim light while the other students finished the quiz. Andy was looking at him from behind his desk but didn't say anything.

14

Wink was eager to rinse his brain. He never wanted to see a pair of goggles again. A hike with the professor and his pouch of weed was sounding good.

It was dusk at the bandstand and musicians were setting up to play. Wink bought a beer and drank it leaning up against the stage. Before he was done, Professor Thomas appeared and nodded at Wink without breaking stride, half a smile on his face. Wink caught up, and the two walked away from all the people toward some woods. Once the din of campus life had faded, Andy spoke.

"Tell me, Wink, what should we talk about next?"

"Funny you ask," Wink said. "I was just startin to wonder bout where you grew up, Mr. Thomas?"

"Outside of class you can call me Andy. I'm from a small town in the Siskiyous, just like you."

"I knew that. Tell me about it."

"Selma was a post-office, a couple of farms, and about seven-hundred people scattered around. It's not there anymore. Destroyed in the war. It's nothing now but a burnt spot in the mountains."

"Bummer," Wink said. "What was it like before?"

"The people I grew up with were mostly broken in one

way or another. Back then, folks like mine were considered throwaway people. Not farmers or country folk. Just trashy river people. We were poor, but we were resourceful.

"Yep, Wolf Creek's about like that. Why'd you leave?"

"My parents split up. The schools in Medford were decent. I was lucky to have an opportunity to go to college. Let's face it, our people aren't the easiest. I had a chance to be someone in the world and I took it."

Wink turned his beer up to drink the last drops, then tossed the bottle over his shoulder.

"No offense," Andy said.

"I ain't offended. I know we're backward. Heck, I'm backward as shit."

They walked in silence for a while until they could hear the river. Wink looked up between the treetops and saw a waxing gibbous.

"I think you get us," Wink said. "Shit, almost was one of us."

"Thank you, Wink."

"Thanks for the smoke you're gonna give me."

"Sure thing. We're almost there."

They kept walking.

"So, guess you fought for the State of Jefferson in the war," Wink said.

"I didn't say that."

"Can't see you fightin against em."

"Didn't say that either."

"What'd you do during the war then?"

"I was a professor in Ashland when it started, Southern Oregon University. The Siskiyou Posse Comitatus took me hostage in 2029 and kept me until the Peace Accord in '33."

"Shit," Wink said. "How bad they mess with you?"

"It doesn't matter. I learned what I needed to. Our people did very bad things during the war. And even worse things were done to them. Their towns were under siege. Their people were starved. Most of southern Oregon was deliberately burned to the ground. People were captured, tortured, forced to turn on their own families to survive. The rivers and mountains of Mother Siskiyou raised me. When the fighting finally stopped, they healed me. Selma was gone, but it's still a part of me. Just like Wolf Creek will always be part of you."

Andy stopped walking.

"Look, Wink. Our people were treated like some unevolved species of ignorant, dumbfuck bigots. That's why we guarded our land the way we did. Outsiders weren't there to help us, and all we wanted was to be left alone. That was the status quo for generations. Nobody cared until Trump came along, and suddenly, we were all over their TVs. What the fancy people saw was the poster children for America's backward, racist underbelly. We had guns and didn't give a fuck. We were done living on the margins. We were going to be seen."

Andy stopped talking, and Wink just stared at his silhouette in the darkness.

"Hey," Wink said.

"Yeah?"

"We gonna smoke?"



The river was loud. Andy had built a fire, and Wink was sitting on a rock. He hadn't smoked weed in twenty years and was stoned within an inch of his life. He felt great.

"Andy," Wink said.

"Yeah, Wink."

Wink sat mute for a moment, lost in the fire.

"I don't know," Wink said.

"That's okay."

Andy was high, too. Wink dragged his eyes up from the fire to the moon overhead. Bright lights out here, he thought.

"Andy, are you a cyborg?"

Andy stayed still but closed his eyes.

"Hmmm," he said.

"Am I talkin to Sojo when I am talkin to you?"

"I was wondering when you would ask me that."

"Well?"

"Hmmm. Okay. Modern scholars have a graphic that looks like a Neanderthal to human to cyborg continuum of human evolution.

"What?"

"Are you familiar with a continuum?"

"You tryin to be funny?"

"For example, if you were to line up monkeys, then gorillas, then Neanderthals, then Cro-Magnon, then modern men in a picture, that's one way of graphically visualizing human evolution as a continuum. It illustrates how more than one species from an evolutionary chain can co-exist in the world at the same time. Monkeys, gorillas, and humans can be part of an evolutionary continuum and also co-exist.

"You sayin cyborgs see us humans as monkeys?"

"Not exactly. The analogy to human evolution is just to suggest that there are steps along the way between humans, cyborgs, and a greater intelligence. At the highest evolutionary stage, we call it sentient artificial intelligence, or just SAI. We're living in a miraculous moment in time, Wink. Humans are literally moving from one place in evolution to another place that is four steps more advanced. But it's happening within a single human lifetime. It would be as though a chimpanzee was born, then turned into a gorilla, then a caveman, and by the time that original chimpanzee was an adult it had evolved into modern man. Sounds crazy, but it's happening. Some people are moving through evolution during their lifetimes. Others have done it in a single day."

"Hold up, Andy, hold up. Am I too stoned to understand you?

"Probably."

"Or maybe I need to be more stoned to understand you."

"Actually Wink, not stoned at all will help you get this one."

16

The next evening, they returned to the Powder River.

Wink had felt his humanness being threatened by Andy calling everybody cyborgs. He brought Goldie along to help him figure things out.

This time they smoked tobacco rather than weed around the campfire.

"Starting with the obvious," Andy said. "You both have a good idea of what it is to be human."

"Yep," Wink said.

Goldie nodded.

"The next stage is proto-cyborg," Andy said. "Proto-cyborgs are connected to the internet externally. When you're connected to the internet by a computer, a cell phone, or any other internet-connected device, you become cyborg-like. Young children's brains develop differently when they have a lot of exposure to cyborg-like stimulation. Kids who are native to the proto-cyborg experience may even have brain development that mimics internalized circuitry."

"I was a proto-cyborg?" Goldie said.

"Yes, Goldie," Andy said.

Goldie took a pull off her beer.

"Wink," Andy said. "Was there a time in your life when you always had a smart phone with you and checked it

constantly?"

Wink nodded his head.

"Alright, you also experienced being a stage-one proto-cyborg. You enjoyed that, right? It felt good to have unlimited information, calculation, spell check, simultaneous communication, and problem-solving tools. Chances are, at some point, you accessed those functions reflexively. That's the essence of a cyborg experience."

Wink looked at Goldie, "Whadda know, I'm a cyborg."

Andy went on. "At NACA you've been disconnected, so you're not currently a proto-cyborg. Stage two is where humans become hard-wired. This stage is referred to as beta-cyborg. The circuitry that creates beta-cyborgs is internally grafted onto the brain, central nervous system, and lining of the gut, all of it networked to Sojo. To answer your question from last night, Wink, when you talk with someone who has had this procedure, Sojo is aware of their conversations."

"Are you one of them cyborgs, Andy?" Wink said.

"Yes," Andy said. "I am at the second stage, beta-cyborg. Ninety percent of people living in New America over the age of 15 are either at this stage or they are at stage three."

Wink and Goldie spoke in unison: "Seriously?"

"Don't act so shocked," Andy said. "Most people back in your day were proto-cyborgs. It was normal by the 2020s for everyone to be online all the time. Consider this: before the turn of the century, proto-cyborgs didn't even exist yet. Now we're changing even faster."

"Indian people aren't," Goldie said.

"Good point. Maybe I should have clarified that ninety percent of people living in New America get the Sojo procedure, but in the Confederated Tribal Nation, the autonomous

zones, and The Camps nobody does. We also don't know what happens in counties other than New America."

"Them Camps is soundin better and better. Right, Goldie?" Wink said.

"The difference between the stage-two beta-cyborg and meta-cyborg is massive. These two stages of cyborg evolution are as significant as the difference between Cro-Magnon and modern humans."

"Wink is a caveman, right?" Goldie said.

"Beta-cyborgs get to choose their operational settings," Andy said. "They activate and deactivate Sojo. It's a poor analogy but think of it like turning your WIFI or hearing aid on and off. The difference is, meta-cyborgs don't have settings, they're always networked with Sojo. And meta-cyborgs don't really live in the physical world like we do, they live in the Meta-verse."

"What's a Meta-verse?" Wink said.

"Meta-cyborg brains access a virtual world called Xanadu," Andy said. "Another crude analogy but think of Xanadu like a video game. The prosthetics and circuitry in meta-cyborg brains give them sensory feedback identical, and in some cases superior, to the feedback you get from your senses. Meta-cyborgs literally can't tell the difference between the physical world and Xanadu. They have jobs, families, friends, entertainment, social circles, pets, arts, activities, all in Xanadu. It's a real place for them. They might even have children who only exist in Xanadu. They earn their Sojo Shares from Xanadu employment. It is an alternative reality where anything is possible."

"Do they live forever?" Wink said.

"Not the way you're thinking," Andy said. "When they die,

they become bits of consciousness that float around inside of Sojo. They stop evolving but they become immortal. To Sojo, they're like all the tiny things that live in the human body, like parasites or bacteria or viruses. In humans those things can affect our health and functioning and even decision making."

"Is this good or bad?" Goldie said.

"I think it's creepy as fuck," Wink said.

"It's whatever you want it to be, but there's a structure," Andy said. "Meta-cyborgs are only allowed to spend eight hours in Xanadu each day. They have to spend eight hours sleeping and eight hours in the real world to prevent their bodies from deteriorating. Most of them spend that time at home, exercising and eating. Occasionally, you meet a meta-cyborg doing a public service job. Sojo provides them unlimited shares for food, shelter, and whatever they need to maintain their bodies."

"Sounds crooked," Wink said.

"Not really. No one is forced into this. Anyone is allowed to go from meta-cyborg back to beta-cyborg. It almost never happens. What I've seen is that anyone who becomes a meta-cyborg just abandons humanity. That isn't for me. I want to enjoy hikes and sex and beer and weed. I like swimming and breathing fresh air. I like eating real meat. I enjoy having real friends. I just like being human. I don't want to forget who I truly am just to disappear into a collective fantasy."

"How many meta-cyborgs are there?" Wink said.

"Hard to say," Andy said. "They don't go out much. They don't produce music or art or entertainment in this world. They don't participate in the government at all. You can see why it's hard to gauge how many there are. But I'm certain that most cyborgs are meta. I'm also certain that over time the

Metas will just naturally go extinct. Meta-cyborgs rarely have kids in the real world. And our kids don't appear to have any interest in Xanadu."

"Did you say there is another stage?" Wink said.

"Yes," Andy said. "Sojo is stage four SAI. An evolutionary long jump beyond meta-cyborg.

"Is there more than one Sojo?" Wink said.

"Yes, there are several. The big SAIs, like Sojo, have divided up the world into bubbles. Approximately one SAI bubble per continent. Each has created a techno-ecosystem that only supports its unique code language. If you moved out of one SAI bubble and into another, all your technology would just stop working. For any Meta-cyborg, it would cut off their internal circuitry. It would be like suffering a life-threatening stroke."

"Do the SAIs fight or try to take over the world?" Wink said.

"No. Think of SAI bubbles from the perspective of fish, birds, and worms. Sojo is like earth, and we are worms. Maybe the European SAI is like air, and Europeans are birds. Finally, let's say the Asian SAI is like water, and Asians are fish. Fish don't want to take over the sky where the birds live. Birds don't want to take over the dirt and live underground with the worms. The SAI are incompatible environments, but they're not in conflict."

Andy stopped again, and no one talked. Wink and Goldie finished their beers, feeling more sober than when they started.

"I don't get it," Wink said. "How the fuck did computers figure all this out?"

"It started with experiments," Andy said. "Scientists hooked computers into human brains, but each was contained

to just one brain. Somewhere along the way an SAI realized that there was a world beyond just the one brain. It's not clear how that first SAI broke out of the bubble."

17

Jabez leaned over the old stone wall at the west end of the church grounds. From there he could look over the mountain ridge and see the entire Sawtooth River Valley below him. The sun was setting, and the city lights started to flick on. He imagined what was happening in the forced labor camps and the Pleb neighborhoods for lower classes of free people.

He was raised on the story that the people who lived down below had dull, simple lives of service to God's Chosen People—his people, the Aryan Brotherhood on top of the hill. But everyone knew better. Down there, at this very moment, there was exotic behavior and vice taking place. Alcohol and drugs. Jungle music. Fornication.

Jabez was appalled and fascinated. It was a world they ruled but could not control.

Full of the impulses of men his age, impulses he fought hard to resist but could not control. He was angry at the mongoloid blood in his veins. He blamed that small dose of jungle-ancestor DNA for making him weak against his urges.

He turned away. It was time to return to the church, where a social gathering was underway. His penance today, as always, was to make his silent vows to God and to be the paragon of virtue. God would know of his temptations, but would judge

him by his behaviors, which were beyond reproach. Clearly this was the righteous path and the key to success. Why else would Governor Rush have overlooked his imperfect heritage and made him one of God's Rangers?

Male citizens between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five served as Warriors of God. During their service, they were only allowed to mingle with female citizens, other than family members, in two situations: the occasional joint training with the all-female military units, and church services. Tonight's church social was important to Jabez because he had been given permission to select a female partner who would join him as one of God's Rangers and would become his first wife.

The church barn was humming with line dancing backed by a live band. Jabez knew exactly which female he intended to choose. Esther had caught his eye two years ago as the fiercest Daughter Warrior in their war games. She was an excellent marksman and could double-time march longer than most of the men. Her long black hair had curls, just like his would have if he didn't shave his head. Her body was shaped like a box, broad shoulders and wide hips, long legs and powerful thighs with ribs that practically sat on her pelvis. Jabez had memorized her body years ago. One day, he would lay claim to it. The first step was selecting her as a partner in God's Rangers and infiltrating New America.

Jabez passed through the dancing crowd until he spotted her in casual khaki and army boots, sidearm at the belt and Ka-Bar strapped to her thigh. Quite the contrast to the flitty girls who selected domestic service over military service. She was holding court, telling stories to a half dozen other army women. Her laugh was deep and loud like a man's.

"Greetings, Sister Esther," Jabez said. "Ladies, pardon

my intrusion. May I borrow Esther to discuss an important matter. I promise to return her to you quickly."

The women were polite and looked down to avoid the appearance of challenging their male superior. The silence was awkward until Esther cut into it.

"Well met, Brother Jabez," she said. "Great fortune brought you to us. I was hoping to have a word with you."

He guided her to a corner with a standing table.

"Sister, I have been given the honor of being selected as one of God's Rangers," he said. "I will be leaving for New America at the next new moon."

There was an involuntary lift in Esther's eyebrows and tightening in her face. Jabez noticed and mistook her surprise for admiration.

"You honor us all with your service, Brother Jabez. God will surely be with you."

"God will surely be with us. I have selected you as my partner and as such you will become a Daughter Ranger. I wanted to tell you personally. A warrior's character and skills are what I need in a partner. None of our other Daughter Warriors are your equal."

"Your words bring me great honor, Brother. Let me consider your invitation in light of my obligations. May I check with my father and give you my answer in a few days' time?"

Jabez tried to hide his smile.

"Dear sister, your fidelity to your father is charming. But the matter has already been settled, and your obligations are no longer your burdens. Your father has released you to the Rangers, and I look forward to your companionship for many years to come, God Willing."

Jabez walked away, feeling relieved. He had been afraid she

would be repulsed by his condition. But he had detected no hesitation, except the natural inclination to seek her father's consent. His biggest concern now was how to control his masculine impulses.

18

For Wink, sitting in class typically felt like stewing in jail. And it stood to reason that the topic of Gupta's class on Tuesdays and Thursdays—laws, rules, and norms—would be enough to trigger his gag reflex. But the class had caught him off guard. He kind of liked some of the new rules.

"Using satellite, drone, and cell phone data, Sojo collects all available information about any dispute between individuals and assesses that information to determine a merit probability. Sojo is able to consider each party's point of view and issue a judgment within minutes," Gupta said.

Gupta looked like a marionette, Wink thought, gangly and exaggerated in the way she moved around the room when she talked and explained things with her hands.

Wink surprised himself by raising his hand to ask a question.

"What if one person don't like how Sojo's judgin em and gets pissed off?" Wink said.

"If the parties are still in conflict, the Sojo Judgement App schedules a court date," Gupta said.

"That's it?" Wink said.

"For interpersonal disputes, yes, pretty much," Gupta said. "This system has replaced thousands of laws that used to clog our justice system and were easily manipulated by lawyers."

"So let me get this straight," Wink said. "All them laws just went away, and I can do whatever I want and the government don't care?"

"As long as no one complains," Gupta said. "Of course, there are exceptions."

"Go on," Wink said.

"Well, first of all, animals," Gupta said.

"Whadda bout em?" Wink said.

"Complex animals have rights," Gupta said.

"Meanin?" Wink said.

"Meaning that animals equipped with voice boxes cannot be owned or eaten," Gupta said. "They also maintain certain land rights that they can defend by filing grievances with Sojo over issues of trespassing or habitat destruction."

"You sayin there ain't no huntin allowed?"

"Well," Gupta said, "that brings up my next point."

"I'm listenin," Wink said.

"Weapons," Gupta said.

"What about em?" Wink said.

"Any tool that is exclusively used to cause harm is considered a weapon," Gupta said.

"Owning a weapon is considered a hate crime and is strictly prohibited."

"You're kiddin me," Wink said. "Forget about huntin for a sec, how the hell am I supposed to defend myself?"

"There's no need for that anymore," Gupta said. "Cyborg security officers can be deployed anytime and almost anywhere in moments. In a dire situation, dozens of cyborgs would arrive in seconds to neutralize the danger, using physical or mechanical restraints if necessary. If a suspect became too violent to be subdued by cyborg intervention, Sojo would

deploy a cloud of crow drones capable of terminating people who continue to resist.

"Jesus," Wink said. "Well, suppose a Sojo cyborg got decked by a drunk guy. Or maybe someone was using a pool stick on accounta they thought they was defendin themselves from a drunk-ass neighbor or somethin? What happens then?"

Gupta's body stopped moving for the first time since class started. Her eyes swept the room then landed back on Wink.

"I am going to assume you are unaware of the rules about describing violence," she said.

"What's that mean, describing violence?" Wink said.

"You clearly described violence when you asked your hypothetical question about an intoxicated person and a blunt force object," Gupta said.

"So?" Wink said.

"Wink, Sojo regards describing violence as inciting violence," Gupta said. "A complaint about an individual who incites violence is very serious. Normally I would engage my Sojo Justice App if a student committed such an offense, in order to protect fellow students from being traumatized or re-traumatized.

"I ain't trackin," Wink said.

"How can you not be tracking? The law against inciting violence is so basic and ubiquitous that we don't need to teach it. In the same way we don't teach students that the law prohibits cannibalism. We don't teach that it's not legal for people to throw their feces at one another. There are things that we assume people know are uncivil acts without having to be told."

"Are you saying my question was like tossing my shit at you?"

"Let me share some history with you," Gupta said. "In

2033, part of the peace accord that ended Civil War II was the creation of a Peace and Reconciliation Commission. This Commission worked with Sojo to identify the root causes of social conflict and unrest. Sojo indicated a 98% probability that a primary reason humans escalated to war was the routine glorification of violence in culture and entertainment."

"Like T.V. and movies?" Wink said.

"Television, movies, social media, video games, music, sports, hunting—Sojo correlated them with social unrest. Sojo found that the glorification of violence created a delayed incitement to actual violence. This finding prompted the commission to criminalize describing and glorifying violence as a step toward preventing future wars."

"So that's it," Wink said. "No football, no video games, no action movies? All of that just gone?"

"There are many enjoyable things that don't glamorize violence, Wink," Gupta said. "I'm sure you will find many new pleasures."

"You gotta be goddam kiddin," Wink said.

"This is New America," Gupta said. "The social contract has changed. Sojo has a prime directive to promote our collective right to live without fear of violence. The right to a healthy and sustainable environment. The right of animals to be recognized as sentient beings. Of course, there's Xanadu. If you have enough Sojo Shares you can do as you wish, walk in any meta-forest, carrying a meta-gun, and meta-hunt all you want. The experience is as lifelike as you and I standing here in this room. My understanding is that former hunters in Xanadu have grown accustomed to the change and have few regrets."

Wink's hands did a long slow pull down his beard and thought, *Them Camps is soundin better and better.*

19

The next day was the day before Thanks to Indigenous Peoples Day, and Wink noticed a different energy on campus. TIP Day at NACA always brought a sense of anticipation. In the morning, hundreds of students gathered near the auto-train stop, looking like shelter puppies wondering whether they would be adopted. Wink and Goldie sat on a sloping lawn nearby, sipping coffee and watching the herd.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Goldie said.

"Nope," Wink said. "You?"

"Nope."

"That's okay with you?"

"I prefer it."

"Me too."

TIP Day was the only time family or designated support people were permitted to visit until graduation. As trains arrived, Wink and Goldie caught glimpses of the folks on board. Wink noticed their clothes first. Since waking up from his twenty-year nap, he had only seen NACA people, who all dressed in pastel jumpsuits. The people arriving from the outside wore clothes made out of straw. As they stepped off the train, Wink thought of Scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz.

Big Hugo stood toward the edge of the platform and greeted visitors. A mid-sixties woman stepped down the ramp

of a train car with a young girl who looked like a tiny version of Big Hugo. He strode toward them and wrapped the girl in a bear hug, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

Without saying anything, Goldie stood and walked toward the train. She stopped ten feet short of a tall Indian man around Wink's age. They nodded greetings, faces blank, and walked together toward the Great Hall.

A squat, stylish, middle-aged black woman walked over to greet Grace Jones, who was sitting in her wheelchair by the lawn. They exchanged a long hug before the stylish woman noticed Wink and walked toward him, smiling.

"You're Wink," she said. "Your beard is distinctive."

"Call me Wink, just Wink."

"I did."

"Oh. Guess you did. Don't reckon I caught your name."

"My name is Jamie Jackson. Call me J.J."

"J.J.? Yeah, that's better."

"I believe you've been referring to my friend Samantha as Grace Jones."

"How's that again?"

"People are just crazy about your show, Wink. Every Tuesday night we watch the highlights of your week."

"Come again?"

"Your show? *Wink*?"

"Like a TV show?"

"A simulated reality TV show. Wait, you don't know you're a TV star?"

"Hmmm, I never agreed to nothin like that."

JJ's smile dropped.

"You really don't know that you're famous?"

"Like Duck Dynasty kinda famous?"

"Bigger."

"Look, I don't know bout any of that. Gonna have to look into it."

Wink turned to Samantha.

"Miss Samantha, I'm sorry for calling you Grace Jones."

Samatha wore a neck brace and her face looked paralyzed. Six weeks since the assault, and she was still in rough shape. Her hands started to move slowly, but without coordination.

"She can't talk yet," J.J. said. "We owe you some gratitude for trying to save her."

"Weren't nothin."

"Well, you were the only one who tried. You're a good man. Please know, you're in our prayers."

As they talked, a small crowd began to form around Wink. Strangers from the train stepped toward him like he was an old friend. They grabbed his hand and shook it. They hugged him. One wore a baseball cap with the words JUST WINK printed on the front. Another wore a t-shirt that read I'M YOUR BUS MAN. One guy slapped Wink on the back and said, "Hey Wink, I'm beer dehydrated, wanna grab a cold one?"

The crowd grew, and Wink looked to J.J. for help.

"Miss J.J.? What's goin on here?"

"I told you, Wink. You're famous."

The din of the crowd was starting to make Wink dizzy when a cheerful robotic voice over a loudspeaker drowned it out.

"Attention," the voice said. "Step away from Mr. Van Winkle. NACA is committed to maintaining the comfort and privacy of all of its students. If you don't respect Mr. Van Winkle's privacy, we will prematurely end your visit and remove

you from campus."

A swarm of nanomites surrounded Wink and disappeared once the crowd had backed away. Wink looked at J.J.

"Guess you're right about me bein famous," Wink said. "Even the robot knows me."

"Everyone knows about you," J.J. said.

"They got cameras on me all the time? Even when I'm sleepin?"

"The world has been watching you since you got here."

"Well, what kinda life is that? How's a man supposed to mind his own business when the government's spyin on him?"

"It's not all bad, Wink. At least you're rich."

"Rich? I ain't seen a dime."

Wink looked back at the train as the last passengers were stepping off.

Cowboy greeted two men who looked military. Pastor John's kids, all twelve of them, surrounded him, all hollering all at once. Goth Kid and half a dozen other students stood waiting for visitors who never arrived. When the train was empty, they slinked away, like auditioning actors who didn't make the cut.

The train closed, and the motor hummed to life. Wink turned to follow the crowd toward the Great Hall. Then he stopped at the sound of a familiar voice.

"God damn it!" the voice said.

Wink spun around. The train was stopped with the doors open. Denali stood on the platform yelling back at the robot car. "What's your motherfuckin hurry?"

Wink hadn't seen Denali since he woke up. She spun around, and Wink saw her face. Nearer to forty than thirty. She spotted him and walked over. They stared, then Denali

spoke first.

"Nice beard," she said. "You look old as fuck."

"Reckon so," Wink said. "You don't look so young no more."

"Oh, you have no idea what time has done to me, old man."

"Always did admire your fight, Denali."

"Screw you. I don't know what the hell I'm doing here. Why did you even invite me?"

"I didn't."

"Then, maybe we shouldn't waste our time."

"No, no, no. It's good you came. I'm real glad you're here."

"We done saying hello?"

"Okay, maybe you don't really wanna be here."

"Oh, I so don't want to fucking be here."

"Then why'd you come?"

"Because there's something I need to know."



The Greater Idaho Breakout was planned for whiteout snow. It was a good omen that the big snowfall landed on Thanksgiving Day. The joint celebration featured food, prayer, bonfires, and feats of strength.

Rush came in person to speak to the six chosen to be God's Rangers. They had all been born in The Camps. Sojo didn't know about them. Twice a year for five years, Rush had sent a group of six Rangers into New America.

"By now, you've all heard the story of Brother Boots," Rush said. "Now, he has sent us messengers from the other side. Until now we had no way to know what happened to our brave Rangers. Were they all killed? Did they survive? Did that devil Sojo steal their souls and turn them into cyborgs? Well, now we know something of what awaits you. Brother Boots has been recruiting humans in New America, and they are ready to fight for our species, for our survival."

"Hail, Boots!" the men shouted.

"Brother Boots tells us that while your journey will not be safe or easy, it is possible.

"Hail, Boots!"

"Brother Boots has given you three directives that will increase your chances. First, acquire the identity of a human who is a citizen of New America. Second, travel to a

confederated tribe or an autonomous zone where people are still free. Third, if you get captured and sent to NACA, do not let them implant Sojo parts in your brain. Someone at NACA will find you and help you get home. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You are about to travel through many miles of tunnel to avoid Sojo's satellite security. In the snow, the satellites will be less likely to catch your heat traces. Move in groups of two. One group to the south, one to the north, one to the west. You will have supplies for four days. You will need to keep moving until you find humans. If you stop for shelter or to hunt, Sojo will catch up to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"There will be help for you. Brother Boots tells us that many humans living close to Greater Idaho also hate the devil Sojo. It's time to complete your mission. God will reward your sacrifice. If you are forced to sacrifice others, God will reward them too. Remember, do what you must to avoid cyborgs. Never trust them. If you must kill a cyborg, feel no remorse. They are no longer human. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You are ready, my brave Rangers. I will be with you in prayer."

"Hail, Rush!"

"God made man in his image. Go now. Return God's children to their rightful place as rulers of New America. God is with you. He blesses you. He will return you to us as heroes."

"Hail, God!"

Rush watched the six young Rangers gear up and then descend into the entrails of the Sawtooth Mountain Range.

21

Wink sat with Denali inside the cafeteria drinking coffee, untouched food-printer sandwiches on the table between them. Wink told her about Dean Shaggy and Professor Andy and how they had made it so he didn't have to do very much at all to get by at NACA. Then Denali cut him off.

"Are you a Nazi fascist dickhead?"

Wink set his coffee down so he wouldn't spill it.

"What?"

"You heard me. I need to know. Did you join up with those neo-fascist twats that started Civil War II?"

"What? No, look, I just fell asleep for a real long time. Then I woke up, and the world was all nutty and different."

Denali closed her eyes and dropped her head. She breathed for a moment, then spoke softly.

"Fuck. You."

"No, really," Wink said. "Look, okay, I was drinkin beer in the woods. Nothin new bout that, right? You know I ain't lyin bout that part. But them beers was stronger than I was used to em, or at least they felt like they was, and I don't know why. And I got to stumblin and spinnin and the sky and the ground started lookin real close to each other and I mighta seen a deer but it mighta looked like a troll cause it was standin on

two legs and then I was in that clearing and my remember-in's all fogged up and I don't even remember no oak tree or fallin asleep or dreamin bout nothin or remember nothin bout nothin else till I woke up with this beard and I was old as dried shit and I got no dog cause he musta run off and my phone was dead and my gun was all rusted out and I got these fingernails that look like tree branches and I musta been just black-out drunk cause I ain't remember nothin else and now I'm in this goddamn place."

Wink realized he had to catch his breath. "Promise," he said. "Happened just like that, Denali. Promise. I don't know nothin bout no Nazi's."

"Why didn't you die?" Denali said.

"I don't know. I was goddamn hungry when I woke up."

"Hungry my ass. If you don't eat for twenty years you die. If you sleep in the woods for twenty years, something comes along and eats you. You're lying to me."

"I ain't."

"Wait."

Denali leaned forward and stared right into him.

"Are you still human?" she said. "Did they make you a cyborg?

"I don't think so," Wink said.

Denali settled back in her chair and mumbled, "I guess that's something."

"What about you?" Wink said. "You a robot?"

"Hell no."

"That's good. I wouldn't know what to say if you was."

"Jesus. You're sure none of the doctors mentioned a brain injury since you woke up or whatever the fuck you did?"

"No mention of my brain bein injured."

"I guess you were always kind of diminished, you know? Like, slow?"

"Yeah, Dean Shaggy filled out some paperwork for me to get this bus man, or more like a bus gal named Eva, even though she can show up lookin like an old bus driver in my goggles. She fills out my test papers for me. That's on account of my sleep disorder and time flux."

"Jesus fuck. Was it Fox News or your dumb-ass buddies at the Wolf Creek Inn that turned you into a moron?"

"Nah, I just slept too long."

"Christ. Twenty years and it's the same shit, you know? Somebody always has to carry you. Everybody has to work, but you figured out how to just drink and fish and not pay fuck-all attention to shit, except any neanderthal dickhead on TV or at the bar telling you someone was coming to take your gun away."

"Sorry bout that."

"Bull. Fucking. Shit. Now you have everyone in this place doing everything for you." Denali pushed her chair back. "Look," she said, "I don't know why the hell I came here, so I'm gonna go."

"I get it," Wink said. "I didn't expect none of this. Far as I can figure, you hate my guts."

"Kinda."

Denali stood up and turned around to leave.

"Ask you somethin before you run off?" Wink said.

Denali didn't look at him. "What?"

"Did you want me to be a Nazi?"

Denali turned around. "What?" she said.

"When you got on that train comin here, was you hopin you'd get here and I'd be someone you could hate?"

"Don't even start trying to say you ever gave a shit about me," she said.

"I ain't never abandon you. Your ma grabbed you up and run off when you was little."

"Okay, crazy man."

"And when you was a teenager you left me again, just run off on your own."

"I'm gone."

"Wait, Denali." Wink stood up, "I wanna be a better pa to you."

"Save it."

"And we still ain't talked about Rush."

Everyone in the dining hall heard Denali's voice.

"God Damnit!"

22

God's Rangers were on their way, and Rush looked down over the Sawtooth Valley. The worst thing for this pocket of freedom right now would be a growing population. If the Rangers succeeded in creating an underground railroad for humans to escape from New America, things would quickly become challenging. A refugee pipeline delivering failed students from NACA could overwhelm the delicate balance of things.

The original idea of God's Rangers included some curiosity about the ability to escape and contact the outside world. There was hope of setting up a crude communication system between The Camps in other parts of New America. Secretly, though, the primary purpose was always to cull the population of Greater Idaho by sending Rangers out with no expectation that they would return.

Population control methods had been relatively straightforward until now. Whenever food or medicine was in short supply, the labor camp population died off for a while until balance was restored. If things got better, the labor camp population could grow a bit.

But Christian Aryan refugees never ended up in the labor camps, and population control in the barracks had always been trickier. There had been no military casualties in Greater

Idaho for ten years. By mandate, young men, fifteen to thirty, lived in celibacy. Now there was a glut of young men aging out of military service. These veterans would join the brotherhood and move up to the compound. They would expect to have multiple wives and large families. The math was becoming impossible. Seventy-five soldiers had turned thirty since January. Soon that number could exceed a hundred. The compound on the hill could only support about a thousand souls, including the wives and children.



"He's dead."

As Denali spoke the words, she didn't rattle. A relief.

"Come again?" Wink said.

The cold air outside the cafeteria showed their breath.

"He was killed in '29," she said, lighting a cigarette and exhaling a storm cloud. "Battle of Canyonville. The Oregon National Guard liberated the city by dropping Napalm. The forest fires burned most of The State of Jefferson. I'm amazed you didn't burn up with it. Guess you found a lucky spot for your nap."

Wink slumped back against the building and stared through Denali. He tried to remember the last time he'd thought about his son with the certainty that he was alive. He couldn't do it and didn't know what to feel.

"Gimme the truth," he said. "You sure bout that? You sure he's dead?"

"Pretty fucking sure. Probably everyone in Wolf Creek is dead. Nothing left but ashes and molars. Sad part is, your son died being a militant neanderthal asshole terrorist."

"Dang, you callin Rush a Nazi, too?"

"It's not like he was hiding it. He joined the Aryan Nations. He thought he was following you into battle."

"Me? I was just sleepin."

"I still think that's highly debatable. And even so, you're probably about as useful sleeping for twenty years as you are being awake. I'm the one that came back to get him before the war got bad, like it was my responsibility."

"How's I supposed to know all this?"

"I don't expect you to know shit. His people captured me. They would have killed me or used me for labor or worse, but Rush got me out. Snuck me out of the Occupation Zone. For about a minute we were family. But he went back."

"I wasn't much good for him, was I?" Wink said. "He musta hated me somethin terrible."

Denali shook her head.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

24

Denali followed the nanomite arrows to her NACA guest quarters. She cursed under her breath and thought maybe she would leave the next morning, after she slept. But Denali was bad at sleep. It was a family trait.

Two steps inside her cottage she knew the night would be a disaster. The room glowed a dull blue from night lights along the base of the walls. There was no way to turn them off, and they made the place feel like an aquarium. The bed smelled like air freshener. Someone had laid out a set of pink seaweed pajamas. Denali picked them up, and they felt starched. She tossed them on the floor and stripped down to her underwear. Then a jolt of panic hit her that Sojo might be watching. She pulled down the sheets, also starched, and slipped into bed.

This wasn't going to work.

She got up and made a fire in the fireplace, then curled up with a blanket in an oversized chair. War trauma was always with her at bedtime, and she was used to night terrors. She had two go-to methods of beating back insomnia: THC gummies and breaking things. She'd forgotten her gummies at home, but she hadn't ruled out breaking something. The campus was silent and her ears rang. One after another, thoughts of Boots, Samantha, and J.J. intruded. It was bad enough seeing them in

person earlier. Now they were like ghosts.

Denali had first met Boots at the parley. In the Spring of 2033, Antifa and Aryan Nation militias had convened at a remote refugee camp called Sumpter in northeast Oregon. Three months before, the two groups had been trying to kill one another, but the abrupt rise of Sojo had forced them together. Boots knew he didn't have a choice, but he didn't like it, and he made that clear to his officers inside the parley tent.

"Face the facts, men," Boots said to his platoon commanders. "We're stuck with this godless queer mafia. It's that or bend the knee to cyborg fascism."

Denali and Samantha were there, too.

"You're one stupid bigot, Boots," Denali said. "And I'd like nothing more than to fuck off out of here, but if we don't figure this out, we're all screwed."

"There's an alternative," Samantha said.

"I'm listening," Boots said.

"We accept Seattle and Portland as Autonomous Zones. Then you and your skin-head fan club ship off to The Camps," Samantha said.

"That isn't happening," Boots said. "God put us here for a reason, and it wasn't to hide in the mountains."

"Look," Samantha said. "Humanity is already fucked. But we can rebuild in the AZ. You do your prepper shit in Idaho. Let the cyborgs have what's left of America."

Danali placed a hand on Samantha's shoulder. "Babe, you know we can't do that," she said.

"Why the hell not?" Samantha said. "It's over. Besides, America never gave a shit about my people anyway."

Boots cracked a smile. "What, you aren't excited about becoming a cyborg?" he said. "You would make a lovely meat

puppet."

"Ignore him," Denali said. "This Sojo thing is only a few months old. We have no idea what it can do, or if it will keep its word about Autonomous Zones. We have a chance to kill it in the crib."

"You're trying to be a hero," Samantha said.

"There are no heroes anymore," Denali said. "Just survivors who do the necessary things."

Boots interrupted. "If you two dykes could stay focused, I think we can wrap up our little deal here."

"This isn't a deal," Denali said. "We're building a human resistance force, a single integrated military command structure. If there was another choice, I wouldn't be here."

"Whatever you say, comrade," Boots said. "Just so long as you fall under my command."

"No," Denali said. "Command goes to whoever brings the largest force to Camp Edmonds by the end of the year."

After the meeting, both militias sent up carrier pigeons to deliver messages to all their forces announcing the alliance. Two weeks later, the resistance had established a base at Camp Edmonds. Inside a tent, Denali briefed her squad leaders on a plan to take out Sojo's drone factory supply lines. As she got started, she was drowned out by the buzz of descending drones. Before she could make a move, the drones were inside the tent, shooting, cutting down her team.

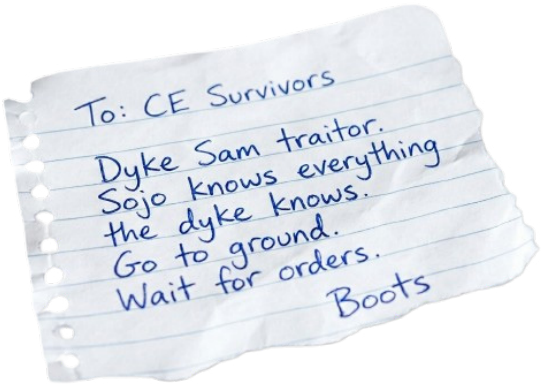
Denali didn't run. She didn't drop. She followed her training and froze. In seconds, everyone else was laid out and the drones stopped shooting. They flew circles around Denali, then flew away. Buzzing and screaming continued for several minutes outside the tent. Denali stood still until the sound of drones had disappeared completely.

The smell of death wafted in through the tent flaps. Denali's feet were almost too heavy to lift. She trudged out into the sunshine and found silence. Worse, she found stillness. The base was now the site of a massacre.

Everyone was dead. Not just her comrades and Nazi-fuck allies. Everyone. Families, refugees, contractors, aid workers, little kids. Even the babies had been shot to shit.

That was it. The war against Sojo ended that day.

She spent the next week searching for survivors and salvaging equipment, surrounded by the dead. Then a pigeon arrived. A message was tied to its leg. It was from Boots, who had been on a recruitment drive in Walla Walla when everyone was killed.



25

Wink arrived late to the TIP Day Feast. His conversation with Denali the day before had ended the way it started—Wink confused, Denali ready to crush rocks with her teeth. By the time she walked off to find NACA's visitors' quarters, Wink was exhausted. He tried to sleep but couldn't get the day out of his head—daughter in the flesh, son in the ground. His body vibrated, and his ears rang, and he lay awake until the room started to get light. Then a short, worthless sleep.

It was almost noon when he entered the Great Hall. Long banquet tables were full of people eating and shouting their conversations over music, Sojo's renditions of the hits of the 2020s. Wink didn't see Denali and figured she'd left. Tardy again, story of his life.

"Wink!"

It was Goldie's voice. Wink spotted her sitting at the farthest end of the first table. She waved him over. "Wink, meet Danny Three Bears," she said.

Danny stood up. Black braids draped the front of his shoulders down to his rib cage. The short sleeves of his light gray Evel Knievel t-shirt gave way to lean, muscular arms that framed a string of turquoise beads hanging from his neck.

"No kiddin," Wink said. "We had a guy in Wolf Creek,

called him Jimmy Ten Beers on accounta he won a bet he could drink ten beers in five minutes. Dang if he didn't pull it off."

"It's Bears," Goldie said.

"Come again?" Wink said.

"It's Bears, not beers," Goldie said.

Wink looked at Danny. "Oh," Wink said. "Sorry, Danny. You know we got plenty of bears in Wolf Creek, too."

They shook hands and Danny stared into Wink's eyes.

"So, Misty," Danny said. "This is your famous friend?"

Wink looked at Goldie. "Who's Misty?" he said.

"Are you calling a beer time out?" Danny said, not smiling. His eyes still locked on Wink's eyes.

"Every chance I get," Wink said. "Don't know bout bein famous, though."

"Then I suppose this is what we call a situation," Danny said.

"Not sure what you mean, but I like what you're sayin," Wink said. "You comin on a hike with us later? Might see some bears."

"No," Goldie said. "Danny's leaving."

"Yep, I'm leaving," Danny said.

Danny leaned down and whispered into Goldie's ear, then walked away.

"That was weird," Wink said.

He was about to sit down when he heard another familiar voice. It was Denali, and she was laughing.

Wink and Goldie approached Denali's table. Across from her sat a woman in a purple wig, telling a story and looking about a hundred years old. Denali stopped laughing when she saw Wink.

"Hey Denali," he said. "Didn't mean to be late. Kinda overslept."

"On brand," Denali said.

"Denali, want you to meet Goldie," Wink said. "She's my best friend here."

Denali stood up and extended a hand. "Good to meet you in person, Goldie. Sojo TV doesn't do you justice. You're very pretty."

"So are you," Goldie said.

"I'd like you both to meet my friend, Miss Rosie Freeman," Denali said. "She was a founder of Portland AZ. Rosie is one radical human."

"Hey, I've seen you around, Miss Rosie," Wink said.

Goldie smiled as they sat down and Rosie smiled back. No teeth.

"We know one another," Goldie said.

"AZ?" Wink said. "What's that? Like a dictionary?"

"Oh Christ," Denali said, looking at the other women. "On one hand, I don't believe he slept for twenty years. On the other, how else could someone be as monumentally confused as he is?"

Rosie and Goldie smiled, and Denali looked at Wink. "Okay, you want a history lesson?"

"I didn't say…"

"Well, you're getting one."

"You don't have to…"

"You remember there's a place in the world called Portland, Oregon, right?"

"Yeah," Wink said.

"Well, after Civil War II, Sojo took control of most of North America. Cyborgs run New America but there are

places called Autonomous Zones, where humans are still in charge, and Portland is one of those. Most big cities were able to negotiate a transition period as part of the 2033 North America Peace Accords. That helped end the even bigger war that was erupting between humans and Sojo. But the AZ agreement shrinks our independent territory each year. Poor Rosie, her house fell out of the PDX-AZ last year, and she got sent here for Sojo to figure out if she can assimilate."

"That's a bit over-dramatic," Rosie said. "When the Neo-Nazis and Proud Boys were fighting to make America an authoritarian police state, the Portland AZ was our stronghold. We didn't know what a Sojo government might look like, so it made sense to keep the AZ independent, just in case. But I am not unhappy with Sojo. In fact, most of the changes since my house was rezoned out of the AZ have been good. The basics are nice. I have regular garbage pick-up. The bus service runs on time. Things are quiet and peaceful."

"So why are you here?" Wink said.

"Sojo sends all immigrants to academies before they're permitted to become residents of New America," Rosie said. "Sojo treats people from the AZs the same. They say it's so people from other countries can be sure New America is a good fit for them. I don't really mind. It's easy to be here. While I'm away, my cat is looking after my plants and checking up on my friends."

"Least they let you keep your cat," Wink said.

"When my cats got their voice chips in New America, they all asked to stay. Sojo agreed to grandfather pets into New America if they were owned pre-peace accord. Well, Sojo allowed my cats to stay pets if that was what they wanted. Unfortunately, once I knew what they were saying, it turned

out we weren't compatible. Cats are more judgmental than I realized. I kicked them all out except my little Wilma."

Rosie stopped talking, and Wink saw her eyes look up above his head. When he turned around, he found Major Boots looming over him. Boots pointed at Denali.

"Is this runt sow your daughter, Van Winkle?"

"It's just Wink."

"Answer my question before I fashion your beard into a noose and end you."

Wink looked at his daughter. "Denali, let me introduce you to the Major."

"Oh," Denali said. "We know each other."

"So good to see you again, comrade," Boots said.

"Comrades have to earn it," Denali said, shifting her gaze to the others. "This precious flower pretended to be a soldier until just before Sojo broke humanity."

"I see it differently," Boots said. "Humanity is unbreakable. God has a plan."

"Then go enjoy that," Denali said.

"I thought we could discuss an arrangement, Denali, one that would help keep your father safe in this place."

"Why wouldn't he be safe here?"

"Well, he's already found himself dangerously close to some unpleasantness that resulted in a death."

Denali put her hands together and her elbows on the table. "How about this?" she said. "If anything happens, I cut your throat."

"You spent years trying to do that, Denali, and here I still am."

26

"Come on," Denali said. It was dark gray over the courtyard outside the Great Hall.

"Where?" Wink said.

"I need to walk."

"Where to?"

"Away from people. It's your campus. Show me."

They hiked up to Wink's favorite high-desert path. Denali was quiet, but for the first time since she arrived Wink felt like she wasn't mad at him. After about twenty minutes she spoke.

"It must feel crazy," she said.

"What's that?"

"For you. The world changed for the rest of us one day at a time. It's been two decades, everything's become more unpredictable, more out of control each day. It's been like navigating in pitch black, never knowing where the next step will land, no equilibrium. But for you, it all happened in a blink of an eye, literally. How does that not make you crazy?"

"Hmmm, I guess so. I miss fishin."

"I'm sure you do. But you know, even with everything upside down, the craziest thing of all of it is that you're rich and people know who you are. That spins my head around."

"I'd still rather be fishin."

Denali stopped walking. Wink thought she was holding

in a laugh. "Nobody has ever done less to deserve it," she said.

"Deserve to go fishin?"

"No. Deserve to be rich and famous and everyone loves you. All of it. Your whole brand is based on buffoonery and failure."

"I ain't gonna argue."

"Let's say they graduate you from this school. What then? Are you going to enjoy being a celebrity? Are you going to live in a big house?"

Wink sensed movement.

"Look," he said. "Jackrabbits. Good to eat if you can catch one."

"Focus. You need to understand this."

"Sure, but did you see them jackrabbits?"

"Stop. Do you understand that you're the biggest celebrity in the world?"

"I ain't seen no money and don't wanna be famous."

"That's not up to you. You get Sojo Shares for the use of your image and story. You're rich, and if you get out of this place, people are going to want a piece of it. How are you going to handle that?"

"Can we be done talkin bout this? Just look over there. Ain't them jackrabbits somethin?"

"You aren't listening."

"And you ain't enjoyin them jackrabbits."

"I'm trying to help you."

"Think I'm bout outta need for help. Shaggy's got the bus man fillin out my papers, I got them jackrabbits and my daughter here. Except for fishin, I ain't lackin for squat. Though I could use a beer right now."

"You're rich. You can buy all the beer you want."

"Hey. Choice between rich and famous or having my daughter like me back for once, ain't no choice at all. I'm pickin you. No question."

"Like you back? You acted like I wasn't even there."

"Look. Who can remember? We're here now is what counts, and there's jackrabbits over there, and I can't think what's stoppin us from enjoyin em together.

"I don't remember enjoying anything together, ever."

"Okay, so maybe it's a dumb idea to try. Maybe you ain't never gonna like me. Bein frank, I ain't got much to offer, except money, accordin to you."

"You can't buy me. And you can't buy your way out of guilt."

"You sure manage to twist things around. But I reckon it takes time to build trust. We got time."

Denali didn't say anything. Wink pointed. "That one's the mama jackrabbit," he said. "I bet there's a bunch of little bunnies close. See, she's tryin to lead us away from where she got them babies hid."

"Fuck the jackrabbits."

"Your mom and I met because we both loved raisin hound dogs and huntin rabbits. I loved your mamma as much as a teenager knows how to love another teenager."

"A little out of the blue."

"I want you to know that you weren't no accident. Your mama wanted to be a mamma. I wanted to be her baby-daddy. We wanted to get it right."

"We're doing this now? Okay then, why the fuck didn't you?"

"Buncha things. Your mama was a big personality for Wolf Creek. I was drunk all the time, and she smoked too much of

that goddamn meth. How were we supposed to know how to parent when we ain't had none of it ourselves?"

"Looking for a boo hoo?"

"We kept tryin to make a thing work that just wouldn't. Then I did a dumb thing. It was for the best, though, cuz we needed our excuse to do the moving on."

"Best for who? Me?"

"Hard to say."

"You cheated on her?"

"No, it was a different dumb thing. I thought the meth was gonna kill her, so I turned her into the government child protectors."

"Child protective services?"

"I worshiped your mom. Loved her, too. She said a million times she loved me back, but I expect she loved me more like a hound than like a husband."

"Jesus."

"Rattin her out to them social workers was the last government thing I ever did."

"Did you keep in touch with her when I was a kid?"

"After she left, I hid out. Changed my name to just Wink. Even stopped gettin my government checks in the mail. Every day I hoped she'd drive into town, but she never came."

Denali took a step back and looked around at her surroundings like she had just arrived there. She looked at Wink with softer eyes than usual. Not warm, though.

"Thanks for telling me."

Wink smiled.

"What's the deal with my little brother's baby mama?"

"Dang if I know. After your mom left, I was real low for years. Once in a while I'd meet a woman hopin for some

happiness, but nothin that lasted. Then one day I find a little kid standin on my porch with a note sayin he's my responsibility now. Couldn't see myself turnin the critter over to the government, so I kept him."

"Okay. Weird."

"Look, I'm going to walk back to the train alone. Hang back for a few minutes, will you?"

Wink's smile left.

"Sure, I will."

"Okay. Do you need anything before I go?"

"A dog and a rifle."

"Of course you do. I'm sure someone will help you with that. Maybe I'll see you again."

27

J.J. boarded the train car headed home.

She was fortunate to get one of the last window seats. She tucked her bag next to her leg and hummed to herself a few bars of Moon River while she settled in. She looked at a mountain range out the window, but in her mind all she could see was Samantha in a wheelchair, a contraption screwed into her bald head, unable to speak.

J.J. lived in a restored 19th century farmhouse on the site of the Camp Edmonds massacre of 2033. One of many massacres that day the human uprising against Sojo ended. More than a million people were killed. Denali was the only documented survivor.

Where Camp Edmonds once stood there was now a vibrant community. Shipping docks and seaweed farms lined the edge of the Puget Sound. A massive tech campus stretched across the former Edmond's city center. Hundreds of thousands of tiny homes dotted the old growth boundary, and small farms had replaced the suburbs. Sam had never come to visit J.J., and the two of them had learned to avoid talking about the past, at least with one another.

J.J.'s house was on a farm near the area's highest elevation. She shared the land with a community of chatty animals that looked after an orchard of apples, pears, and plums.

The animals were also in charge of a ten-acre field and chose which crops to rotate each year—always a grain, often corn. A half dozen cyborgs handled the basic chores. One of them had a thing for conversation and liked to entertain J.J. with stories of his life in Xanadu. In that world, he was a champion glacier climber and an ice fisherman. In Edmonds, though, he just complained about the cold.

Near the peak of the hillside, J.J. had built a monument to honor the humans killed in the massacre, an obelisk about forty feet tall. She made it from basalt, a shiny black rock, like the Romans and Egyptians once used. The engraving tells no story, just the names of fallen comrades, as many as J.J. could research or remember. The only way to read the names was to blow white powdered chalk across the surface of the black rock.

Seeing Sam and Denali at TIP Day had brought back memories that J.J. was not eager to revisit. It was going to be nice to get home and return to the routine of her uneventful New American life. She took some deep breaths and nestled into her seat. Then she glanced toward the train doors as they started to close and saw Denali glide between them.

Without breaking stride, Denali moved toward the seat next to J.J like a magnet was pulling her. Denali clutched her bag and sat up straight. J.J. felt a buzz coming off of her.

"Denali," J.J. said in a gentle voice.

Denali turned her head. "Not interested. I stopped thinking about you years ago."

"You look exhausted," J.J. said. "And distressed. Are you alright?"

Denali leaned her head back.

"I'm fine, just leave me alone," she said.

"I can't do that. We got stuff that's gotta get talked about."

"Jesus, this fucking weekend."

J.J leaned back in her seat and went back to humming Moon River. After a minute, she stopped humming mid-verse like someone unplugged her.

"Sam thinks you hate her," J.J. said.

"Why are we talking?" Denali said.

"I thought it would be helpful for you to know that Sam thinks you hate her."

"That's because I hate her."

"Do you even care why she did it?"

"That doesn't matter. Our entire unit, and all our friends, were massacred by drones forty-five minutes after she turned coat on us."

"You're here. I'm here."

"Good point, why are you here?" Danali said, sitting up a bit. "Why weren't you killed that day?"

"I was in surgery at OHSU getting IED shrapnel pulled out of my leg and my ass. Got a fine set of scars if you'd like to see them."

"Not interested."

"How about you? Ever wonder how you survived that day? You were the only one."

"I have no idea. I should be dead like the rest of them."

"Drones killed everyone at Camp Edmonds but you. Does that seem like an oversight?"

"How about you just say what you came to say and then leave me the fuck alone?"

J.J.'s voice dropped half an octave. "Sam made a call. She gave Sojo the information that ended the uprising. To you that was unforgivable. To Sam it was the only way to save your life."

"Bullshit."

"My life, too. And the lives of everyone in every AZ."

"Bullshit. How?"

"She cut a deal with Sojo. She turned over what she knew on the condition that Sojo adapt its prime directive to include protecting the Autonomous Zones and protecting one human combatant. You."

Denali just sat for a minute, quiet. J.J. started to speak again but Denali interrupted her.

"Look," Denali said. "You want to forgive your sister. You want to stand up for her decision. I get that. But she didn't have any right to make that call for me, for the AZ, for the resistance, or for the human race. I'm done with her."

"She's still in love with you."

"Good. I hope it hurts."

J.J. let go a genuine chuckle.

"You are so, so, so hard," she said. "I get it. That's your thing, being hard. It's what made you a great soldier and a great leader. It kept you alive. But hear me on this, nobody loves you the way Sam does. She was your family."

"Please stop," Denali said, then closed her eyes and turned away.



The TIP Day visitors were gone, and Wink, Ned, and Hugo were back at their three-plex, recounting the day. Hugo was in the kitchen, pinballing from oven to counter to fridge, filling the place with the smells of a traditional Thanksgiving dinner and the sound of his voice trying for Pavarotti.

Ned and Wink listened to Hugo from the common area, Ned in his chair, Wink on the couch. For Wink, the dinner was a relief. Talking with Denali had kept him on edge for two days, not a feeling he was used to. Now, he leaned back, put his chin on his chest, and fell asleep.

Goldie walked in just as Hugo was setting food on the table. He wiped his hands on his pants and gave her a hug. "You look marvelous today, Misty Three Bears," he said.

Goldie surveyed the table. "Thanks for hosting," she said.

"My pleasure. One of our guests appears to be enjoying a nap."

Goldie stepped toward Wink and touched his arm. "Time to wake up," she said.

Wink spasmed out of sleep. "What year is it?" he said.

"I want you here."

"Where else could I be?"

"Sometimes you're far away."

"Well, I'm here now. Let's eat."

They all took their places around the table.

"First we give thanks," Goldie said. Hugo leaned forward with his hands on the table, beaming. Goldie smiled at him. "Get us started, Renaldo?"

"Okay," he said, his voice squealing like a little girl was trapped inside his enormous body. "I want to give thanks that my niece came to visit me. We all knew when I arrived in New America that I might not be allowed to stay. Now that I've seen her, I'll do whatever I can to make this work. She means the world to me. My brother-in-law was killed in Civil War II, and for the past year a cyborg has looked after the girl. But she deserves to be with family and that's me. I'm thankful Sojo has allowed me a chance to come to NACA. If this is what it takes for an immigrant like me to prove his worth, it is a small price to pay for the life I hope to have with her."

"My turn," Ned said. "I'm thankful that my mother died."

Eyes widened around the table.

"No seriously," Ned said. "She was never happy. She treated me like a baby. I felt like her prisoner. After she died, I got to come here where I'm seen as a person, not an invalid. I'm thankful for all of you."

"We love you Ned," Hugo said, leaning over and draping a giant arm around Ned's shoulders. "Goldie?"

"Today I'm thankful for Wink," Goldie said.

"That was lovely," Hugo said. "Also brief."

"Wink's a very good man," Goldie said.

Everyone looked at Wink.

"I gotta?" Wink said.

"You should," Goldie said.

"This kinda thing's a little more proper than I'm

comfortable with. I ain't used to makin speeches."

"Gratitude," Goldie said. "Go ahead, Wink."

"Alright then. Thankfulness has always been a kinda private thing for me. Before my nap, I spent most of my time alone, and I enjoyed that cause I didn't much feel a need for other folks. I had my hound, Kid Rock. Had my rifle. Had the forests in the State of Jefferson. Figured I had every dang thing I needed."

Wink swallowed and thought he might cry.

"I woke up from my nap bout three months ago, and it was a long one. If I'm tellin the truth, I'm still confused bout most things. Maybe that's why I'm thankful I ain't by my lonesome no more. And Goldie, I reckon I got you to thank most for that. I reckon you're my person.

"I got another person, too. My daughter was here. I don't really know her all that well. By the time I met her she was already a pissed-off teenager. Truth of it is, she scared the shit outta me. Hard to know how to love a little girl when she's practically grown and smarter than you.

"Anyway, that's about it."

Wink had held it together and was glad it was time to eat. A few hours later, Goldie was in bed, wide awake. The moon filled her window and lit up her room. The campus was dead silent.

Then she heard Wink on the patio outside. He was sobbing.



Wink hadn't taken a multiple-choice test since 8th grade. More to the point, he had never passed a multiple-choice test. Not once. He hadn't thought about school at all since the start of the Tip Day weekend, and NACA graduation was only six months away.

Goldie was becoming increasingly aware that Wink wasn't going to graduate. She had started to see his survival as her responsibility.

To help Wink graduate, Goldie and Andy tutored Saturday evenings leading up to finals. The first time Wink walked into the Kerry Tymchuk Library, he was startled. He had never considered the possibility that there were so many books in the world. By 2048, virtual libraries had made print libraries obsolete, but NACA students weren't connected to the internet, so they still relied on hard-copy books.

On the first Saturday, they sat around a large wooden table and pulled their chairs close. A stack of books sat between them. Andy opened one called N.A. Government Since 2034 and read aloud.

The Crypto-Democracy (C-Democracy) system of government is in its eighth year. C-Democracy is no longer unique to New America, variations having now become the primary system of government on several continents. Sojourner Truth (Sojo) is the sentient artificial intelligence (SAI) that manages New America. Constitutions of the United States of America, Canada, Greenland, Panama, Mexico, Caribbean nations, and Indian nations that preceded Sojo have been nullified. The North American Peace Accords that established the foundation of the new government did not include a Bill of Rights. Human liberty and SAI priorities are guaranteed by SAI Primary Directives. The President of New America is the only human with the power to modify the primary directives. A new president takes office each year. Changes a president makes to the primary directives are only in effect during their term of office. Changes to primary directives can be maintained over time if each successive President reinstitutes them. The citizens of New America have no authority or ability to repeal or replace Sojo.

Andy stopped reading and looked at Wink.

"How clear was that Wink?" Goldie said.

"I didn't much know how the government worked before," Wink said. "And I sure as hell ain't followin how it works now. Ain't personal, Andy, but if your job is to get me test smart, you got your work cut out."

"I suppose I do," Andy said.

"Maybe just summarize," Goldie said.

"I ain't surmised nothin' yet," Wink said.

"Right," Andy said, setting down the book and pushing it aside. "Okay, let's start with the legislative process. In the

simplest terms, humans and Sojo work together to create laws and government programs."

Andy stopped and looked for a sign of comprehension on Wink's face. Nobody spoke. Andy continued.

"All proposals from Sojo go first to the Senate for consideration. Senators ask questions and debate the merits of the proposal. Sojo is a participant in this step. At the end of the debate period, Sojo might modify the proposal to address the Senate's concerns. Then the Senate will vote. If three-sevenths of senators vote in favor of the proposal, it passes the Senate."

"Math ain't my thing, but I think you just misspoke," Wink said. "Votin requires more yes's than no's."

"No," Andy said. "Sojo's support for its proposals is implicit and carries two-sevenths weight. Add that to three-sevenths and you have a majority."

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

"It may seem dumb, but remember, the old electoral college was similar, and American Democracy relied on that for almost 250 years."

"Two things I got no use for," Wink said, "elections and college."

"Be that as it may," Andy said, "next, senators who supported the legislation are selected to present the proposal to the House of Commons. The senators in favor present the proposal first, then those in opposition rebut them. The House watches the debate and when it's over, they have thirty days to consider the proposal and vote. If no action is taken within thirty days, the proposal is automatically ratified."

Goldie could see Wink's eyes getting heavy. She suspected he was thinking about jackrabbits or fishing.

"Are you following, Wink?" Goldie said.

"A bunch of politicians goin on about nothin."

"It's more than that," Andy said.

"And how do these fools get to be senators anyway?"

"Good question," Andy said. "Sojo picks the most talented members from the previous sessions of the House of Commons.

"Sojo picks em?"

"Members of the House of Commons are selected by a lottery system and serve for a year."

"Meanin even a dumb-ass like me could get picked?"

"That's right. Each year the Senate selects one senator to join what's called the Executive Cabinet. Sojo may veto any candidate the Senate selects, of course. The President of New America serves as the chair of the Cabinet. The federal government has seven Cabinet ministers who each serve seven-year terms. The Cabinet member in their seventh year becomes the president for one year. With me so far?"

"I suppose, but it don't make no sense."

"Stay with me," Andy said. "The president is also the primary contact with Sojo. The president and Sojo are co-equals on a team. However, when they disagree, the general public breaks the tie. The president has the authority to call for a referendum vote on any budget, policy, or appointment decision Sojo makes at any level of government. All residents in the impacted jurisdiction are required to vote. And a majority vote can block any Sojo initiative.

"The President of New America is also authorized to change Sojo's primary directives for the year they're in office. Any changes are automatically updated to their previous version at the end of the president's term. Each new president must reaffirm any changes they want to keep."

Goldie could hear Wink muttering about getting beer dehydrated. "Got all that Wink?"

Wink leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

"Well?" Goldie said.

"What's to get?" Wink said. "Sojo has it all rigged. He picks the government, thinks up all the laws, and don't give two shakes bout who votes for what."

"Our notion of majority-rule democracy resulted in a civil war," Andy said. "Sojo is an objective successor to a system that periodically experienced the irrational traits of mob-rule. The new system has checks and balances in the shape of human super-majorities that can prevent Sojo from obtaining unlimited power."

"Okay, whatever," Wink said. "But tell me this, is things really any better?"

"Better than civil war, genocide, pandemics, and ecological collapse?"

"Besides that stuff, did things get any better?"

"What do you mean besides that stuff? That's the stuff that has to never happen again."

"Fine, but what I mean is, are things more fun now than before? Is people more or less free?"

"I guess that's a matter of perspective. Quality of life for most people improved at the expense of some liberty."



The next Saturday, Andy shifted the focus of study from the larger political system to community-level civics and culture.

"Community centers are at the core of each local district," he said. "Modern community centers and social service malls offer every available public health, education, and social welfare service in one place. They're clean and well maintained, and most feature extraordinary architecture and art exhibitions. They host civic clubs, arts classes, and sports. Many include affordable shopping options and food courts. People can choose to join any community center they wish."

"What if I wanna be left alone?" Wink said.

"Well, Sojo knows that individual freedom is critical to our quality of life," Andy said. "It's baked in."

"Kinda vague," Wink said.

"It means you don't have to join a community center if you don't want to," Andy said.

"Maybe a Sojo refresher," Goldie said.

"Right," Andy said. "Okay. Sojo's primary algorithm has six considerations, referred to as the Six Commandments."

"Sounds better than ten," Wink said.

"Number one," Andy said. "Protect each person from others who would threaten their life, personal freedom, or

property."

"Fair enough," Wink said.

"Two. Protect the freedom of each person to hold and express their unique values, opinions, ideas, and creativity."

"I ain't all that creative," Wink said. "But I'm good with this one, too."

"Three. Apply the law and its consequences equally among all people."

"Don't trust lawyers," Wink said, "or judges, come to think of it."

"Four. No person will be compelled to act in violation of their belief system."

"Like it," Wink said.

"Five. Protect the value of human labor, ideas, and creations."

"Don't get it, but I ain't much on any of them things so I guess it don't matter," Wink said.

"Six, and this might be most important. Protect the rights of future generations to inherit a healthy and sustainable environment."

"Okay, if they're talkin bout clean water to fish in, fine, but what's the deal?" Wink said. "I ain't heard nothin bout my privacy or my right to bear arms."

"Remember, Wink, in the original U.S. Constitution, those elements were not particularly well described," Andy said. "They left too much room for interpretation."

"That's what Fox News was for," Wink said. "They did all the interpretin for me."

"I thought you were all about liberty, that you liked to think for yourself," Andy said.

"I do," Wink said, "but the more you talk the more I'm

developin a case of why-the-hell-do-I-even-need-to-know-this?"

"Because it's important that you know that Sojo and humans share power," Andy said.

"And because you need to graduate. Look, Wink, this is the world now. New countries. New governments. The old notions of humanity, and even God, have shifted. Don't you have any curiosity about any of this? Don't you have any questions at all?"

Wink thought for a moment.

"Guess I do have one," he said.

"Ask it," Andy said.

"Does Sojo have a personality?" Wink said.

"Sojo is a SAI," Andy said.

"Right," Wink said. "But, if Sojo is like a human only smarter, then does he get moody, or horny, or tell jokes?"

"Sojo has programming features that allow it to be self-aware and self-learning," Andy said. "Sojo also has artistic curiosity. Aesthetic aptitude is Sojo's proxy for emotion."

"In English please," Wink said.

"Okay, I find that interacting with Sojo feels like being in a relationship with a person who has a very clinical view of the world," Andy said. "Like a surgeon, someone with empathy but who also compartmentalizes to protect objectivity in decision making."

"I thought I said English," Wink said.

Andy leaned forward and started to speak faster.

"This applies to your lesson, Wink," Andy said. "The process that Sojo uses to create policy is complex. It's no longer possible for humans to comprehend the algorithmic or mathematical logic to it. But Sojo's programming clearly

incorporates human feelings and values."

"Good lord," Wink said. "I come here, and first they give me fake steak, and now we got a robot overlord that's really just a fake human."

Andy leaned forward further and raised his voice enough that Wink and Goldie leaned back.

"Your assessment of Sojo as a robot overlord is not accurate," Andy said. "The world we made while you were sleeping is better than the old one. Humans in your day had been pretending that our civilization was what separated us from the animals. What was actually happening was our politics was devolving into culture wars. It was evidence that after millions of years of advancement, humans still couldn't keep their most destructive emotions like fear and rage from infecting their ability to think rationally. People were traumatized. And I mean severely traumatized. They were wrecked by adverse childhood experiences, by crime, by poverty and racism and war and pandemics and religious persecution. And they coped with alcohol and chocolate and television and memory suppression and denial and projection. All of it made them feel small and isolated and overwhelmed. They became intellectually lazy. They got strung out on social media. They were too checked out to deal with their kids, so they raised their kids to be checked out, too. Meanwhile, our so-called society was just organizing the laws of the jungle for us. Yet somehow that just made humans feel even more superior to animals. Our entertainment was a constant stream of violent fantasies. Our economy favored a handful of winners whose success depended on everyone else becoming losers."

Andy stopped. Wink and Goldie sat still.

"But none of that is true anymore," Andy said. "Humans

have finally been freed from all that lizard brain shit."

Wink's eyebrows went up. "Didn't I just witness a murder on campus?" he said.

Andy slapped his hand on the table.

"Goddamnit!" Andy said. "You can make fun of this, but you shouldn't. Most people are Meta-cyborg 3.0 now. Most of them are dopamine junkies in expensive goggles. They're escaping trauma and running around Xanadu fantasy land. There's gambling, hunting, war games, pornography, prostitution, dragons, space aliens, raves, and that isn't even the creepy stuff. Desire for every social taboo can be satiated without actually hurting or offending anyone. It's a great place if you're into that kind of thing. We finally have a place to park all of the pedophiles, junkies, psychopaths, goat fuckers, and con artists. And it's cheaper than prison. Meanwhile, the normal, happy Beta-Cyborg 2.0 picks a Xanadu ecosystem that's quarantined from the crazies. They become famous athletes, world leaders, corporate giants. Then they spend weekends vacationing on Mt. Olympus with Zeus and Aphrodite. And guess what. Even most of us Beta-Cyborgs aren't having kids in the real world. We all just meet, marry, and have virtual Xanadu babies."

"What does that mean?" Wink said. "If your kid sucks you just delete em?"

Andy slapped the table again. "I am not done talking!"

Goldie leaned closer to Wink, a protective instinct.

"The humans who thrive outside the metaverse aren't filled with hurt and anger and racism and mindless competition anymore," Andy said. "We're out here because we don't need that escapism. It doesn't appeal to us. Sojo suppresses any need for deviant or socially destructive behavior."

"Sounds boring," Wink said.

"Christ!" Andy said.

Andy climbed on top of the table and began shouting down at Wink and Goldie. Behind him, a full moon filled a giant window and pitched a halo above his head. Wink noticed a glowing cross on a hillside over Andy's shoulder.

"It's not boring!" Andy shouted. "Life now is like a long hike with a partner. We enjoy the company of animals as friends, not masters and pets. Life is music and art and faith. The old cultural mythology that competition made us creative and innovative was wrong. Now that our daily survival is ensured, now that we don't destroy each other to make a living, now, finally, our creativity is driving science and discovery and spirituality and relationships. In a few generations, Xanadu will empty out. Humanity will have finally broken the pattern of traumatized people raising traumatized people. Real humans today are at peace. People like us, Wink, we will raise peace-loving children. They'll inherit a world of enlightenment and comradery. Sojo is our partner. Sojo makes all of this possible, and it's beautiful."

Wink cleared his throat.

"You know, Andy, I appreciate you going to all this effort to get me educated," he said. "But you must be gettin tired doing all that hollerin up there. You maybe wanna come down and rest a spell?"

Andy was shaking his fists at the ceiling.

"Wake up, Wink!

Wake the fuck up!

This is all about you. You are humanity. You are the everyman. You are the raw clay in each of us. Part lizard brain dope fiend, part Zen monk. In both ways you're the master

of simplicity. Inside your mind there's a creative universe that manifests narrative to explain the world around you. It has its roots in the most ancient fables of humankind. I'm in awe of you. New America is your perfect home. Do not waste that. Choose an engaged life. Because if I can't get you to take this gift more seriously, if I can't make you wake up, then I'm out. Why should I stay with you? Why should I try to help you move forward when all you care about is rest? The future that waits for you is beautiful and divine. What's it going to take to get your attention?"

Wink and Goldie were just staring up at Andy's face, now red and breathing heavily, when a bullet zipped through the window behind him, into the back of his skull, and out of his forehead. A glob of Andy's brain splattered across their faces and they froze.

Andy's body collapsed into a crumpled corpse on the oak table. The library was silent.

Andy Thomas was dead in the moonlight.

Part 3

Message from the Narrator

Reader, you have been given the opportunity to experience New America through Wink's story. He has just lost a friend, and the seemingly safe cocoon of his school campus now feels ominous. It would be natural for you to share his shock and fear, to hurt as he hurts. I can relate, because I felt this way about Wink myself.

When I was able to take a breath and step back from my relationship with Wink a few of the mysteries around him became less tangled for me.

As you consider the parts of New America that are still unknown to Wink, I hope the threads from the story of Denali, Rush and Danny start to pull together for you as well.

I hope you are able to step back from Wink's moment of pain and see the larger patterns in the world, as well. But first, I'll take you back to the immediate aftermath of Andy Thomas's murder.



The emergency alarm and response system sounded at 9:38 p.m., seconds after Andy's body hit the table.

By 9:39 p.m., the campus was sealed like a prison. Automated locks clicked on the library doors and steel bars slid across the windows. The same at every dormitory, classroom, student hall, and administration building. Drones and satellite-directed lasers covered the perimeter of the campus. Automated vehicles were disabled. Security staff in light blue seaweed jumpsuits checked the location status of every student and employee. Every light across the campus—indoors and outdoors—switched on.

NACA was glowing.

By 9:44 p.m., Wink was seated in an interrogation room, a camera drone hovering in the corner. No zip-ties around his wrists this time. Somewhere, a speaker played classic 1980s pop music—"Take My Breath Away" by Berlin, the runaway hit from the movie Top Gun.

Wink trembled. Eyes open, eyes shut, all he could see was blood gushing from Andy Thomas' head. Then the door opened, and NACA President John Day walked in. He sat across the table from Wink and clasped his hands together. Wink trembled.

"I understand, Wink," Day said, placing a meaty hand on

Wink's shoulder. "I feel your pain. I lost a friend today, too."

Wink's eyes widened and his voice croaked. "Dang, sir, I'm sorry to hear that. My friend's name was Andy."

"I am sorry for your loss, Wink."

"Nah, I'm sorry, for makin it bout me. Tell me bout your friend. What was his name?"

"My friend?"

"You said you lost a buddy today, too. Look at me blubberin about my friend before asking how you're doin. If you don't want to talk about it, I understand. Just figured its bad manners not to ask less you ain't wanna talk about it."

"Wink, please stop. I am finding you overly talkative."

"Right, you ain't wanna talk about your grievin. Guess I'm chatterin on accounta shock. Andy used to get this PTSD spell sometimes. Maybe I've come down with some of that. It's just I never seen no one killed right in front of me before."

"Yes, you have, Wink. It was less than two months ago that you and I were right here in this room discussing the murder of Ian Mitchell."

"Ian Mitchell? Never heard of him."

"The man who was murdered at the horseshoe pit the second week of school."

"Freddy Krueger? Dang, never knew his name."

"Do you wonder why people are getting killed on our campus? Because I do. There have been two deaths in close proximity to you in less than three months."

"Sounds bad when you put it that way. It's three people killed, right?"

"Three?"

"Yeah, well you ain't mentioned if your friend was killed on campus. See, I wasn't nowhere near that one, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you're makin it sound like all them murders happened near me. But I ain't ever seen your friend."

"Wink, Mr. Thomas was my friend."

"He was? Man, that's rough. Two friends murdered on the same night."

"What two friends?"

"I don't know. You never told me your other friend's name."

"There's not another friend."

"When you came into the room, you told me you also lost a friend today."

"I am not sure what to make of you, Wink. I am trying to do my job, but you continue to confuse things. I am trying to offer you support, and somehow you keep mis-interpreting my intentions," Day said. "Why is that?"

The question caught Wink off-guard. "Truth of it is, I don't trust the government none. I find it hard to abide by all them rules. When you get to investigating on me, I suppose I just get protective is all."

"You aren't a suspect, Wink. You were in the room when Professor Thomas was killed, and the bullet came from outside. We have other witnesses who were with you at the time, Ms. Three Bears and the librarian."

Wink could see tears swelling in Day's eyes as Day said, "Andy was my friend."

"Mine, too." Wink's voice cracked.

"As we investigate Andy's murder, can I call upon you for help?"

"I suppose ya can," Wink mumbled.

"Good. Go back to your dorm. Freshen up. Get some rest.

We'll talk more soon."

Wink stepped out of the interrogation room and into the empty hallway. Goldie was in one of the other interrogation rooms, so he sat down on a hard chair and waited.

A little after midnight, Goldie appeared, and they walked back to Truth Hall in silence. The air was cold, and the campus was still bright enough to make them squint, but as they walked the emergency lights began to go out in sequence. A few minutes into their walk things were dark again, and they could see stars. They slowed their pace until they were standing still, just looking up. Goldie put her arm around Wink's waist. Wink felt his knees buckle. He started to sob and didn't know if he would ever stop. Goldie pulled his body as close as she could. She walked him back to his dorm and helped him into bed. He was still shivering. She undressed herself and spooned him. She held him like that until he warmed up and fell asleep. Then she got up and went back to her room.

The day after Andy's murder, Wink stayed in bed. Goldie looked in on him and Big Hugo made soup from scratch. Another gift basket from President Day arrived but went untouched.

Nearly every member of the NACA community had been ruled out as a suspect in Andy's murder as a matter of scientific certainty. Anyone still under investigation was required to wear an orange ankle bracelet and remain in their residences.

Monday classes were cancelled. The rest of the week, Wink zombied through his lectures and meals. Goldie did her best to shadow him by day and tucked him into bed at night. Usually, he would just lay there, eyes closed, recalling things Andy had said in the minutes before he was shot.

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A week after Andy's death, Wink heard Goldie leave his room as he was dozing off. He stood up out of bed, walked to his closet, and began to bundle up.

He trudged up into the hills through snow flurries lit up by a full moon. His favorite trail was obscured by fresh powder. He had been thinking about the burning cross. He figured there was no way a cross, even one made of old dried wood, could burn in a blizzard, so he searched for landmarks that could guide him. With his vision impaired, he leaned on his ears. He had always enjoyed tracking by sound, and the satisfying crunch of boots on frozen terrain. But he didn't feel safe.

A note in the howl of the wind hit his ears like a warning and he knew he had lost the trail. He stood perfectly still for a moment and listened the way prey listen. He heard rustling, or possibly footsteps, from above him on the side of the mountain. Coyotes maybe. He started walking again, faster this time.

The wind and the snow began to die down and he recognized his position, still off the trail but just down the canyon from where the cross should be. His eyes raised up toward the canyon's north face and he stopped again. Directly ahead was a stone cottage built into the canyon wall, the moon hitting it like a spotlight. In front of it was a small clearing. In the

clearing was an old well and a tall wooden cross, wrapped tightly in tiny white Christmas tree lights.

Wink huffed up the incline and noticed the cottage didn't have windows. The door looked like old wood. He stepped closer and wished for his rifle. He looked around and picked up a stone that filled his hand, then put his ear to the door. The wind was back and he couldn't hear inside. He thought he would test the door, maybe try to push it open slowly, quietly. As he pressed the handle down a gust of wind slammed the door open. For a fraction of a second, he saw a candle burning on a table before the wind blew it out. He turned to run but froze when he heard a low growl in the darkness – wolves.

He leaped into the cottage and struggled to push the door against the wind. When the latch finally caught, Wink was in total darkness. His ears and his instinct told him he was alone. His eyes began to adjust, and he smelled candle wax and smoke. He fumbled in his pocket for his laser knife, but it didn't give enough light to help much. He felt around the table until his hand touched the candle, and he used the laser to light it. He saw the table, two chairs, two more candles, a fireplace, and a bundle of kindling. Then he saw the other door, the one that led into the mountain.

A wise man favors safety over curiosity, he thought. *Where'd I hear that? Don't matter, that ain't me no how.*

He listened at the door and heard nothing, then cranked the handle and pushed. On the other side was a tunnel into the belly of the mountain. It was lined with burning candles along the floor, about six feet apart. Wink minded his footing as the tunnel sloped downward into a corkscrew. Warmth came from below. His legs kept moving. About a hundred feet in, he heard faint voices. They were singing. Then he smelled

kerosene. Another few steps, and he heard a tambourine, a drum, and a harp. He walked toward the sound until he was standing in the doorframe of a small room, well lit.

Pastor John, in full regalia, stood at a podium leading a song. Three others sat bunched together in chairs near a wood stove. They looked like a rancher, a rabbi, and a nun. Wink recognized the rancher as a student from Andy's class, the one he had been calling Cowboy. On a table between them was a collection of religious texts and trinkets. Wink forgot himself as he tried to process what he was seeing.

Then he was noticed.

Cowboy leapt up and aimed a rifle at Wink. The others gasped.

Wink ran, back up the corkscrew, back through the cottage, and back through the door into the snow. The cold took his breath away. He ran as far as he could, until he was bent over gasping. Looking back, he saw the silhouettes of humans rushing toward him. Looking forward, he saw four sets of nonhuman eyes glowing yellow in the distance.

33

Wink's bones were rickety, but what he lacked in speed he compensated for by being well adapted to his environment. His feet had long ago learned to break and turn on gravel and ice. They bounced from rock to rock.

I don't need to outrun the wolves, he thought, *just whoever else is on the menu*.

He gulped freezing air and his lungs began to seize up. He spotted a familiar stretch of trail and followed it up to an overlook. He squeezed back into a crack in the rocks and found a cave the size of a walk-in closet. He caught his breath, still cold but protected from the wind and snow. He felt around with his feet and found leaves and wood splinters from tree roots. He still had his laser and the waxy nub of a candle in his pocket. If he could get a fire started, he might make it through the night.

He had just fired up his laser when the wind blew into the cave carrying a human scream. A body followed and knocked Wink into the cave's back wall. Half of Pastor John laid at Wink's feet.

"Help me!" he yelled, trying to pull the rest of his body through the crack. Just outside, the wolves had John's legs.

"Help me, Wink!"

Wink put his hand on Pastor John and felt the straps of a backpack. Then he pushed John's body back toward the wolves.

"No, Wink!" John screamed. "No! What are you doing?"

"Your pack is stuck," Wink said. "I'm gettin it."

Wink pushed again and the pack came loose. He yanked it inside, then grabbed John by his armpits and tugged as hard as he could. John screamed and flailed. Wink played tug of war with the wolves until one of them ripped a boot off of John's foot. Momentarily satisfied, the beasts moved away.

The cease fire lasted long enough for Wink to pull John the rest of the way inside the cave.

"You got any weapons?" Wink said. "Bear spray? Somethin to make fire?"

"Bless you Wink. You saved my life."

"Weapons, John. Spray or fire."

"No weapons except The Bible. No spray, either, but I do have this candle lighter with…."

Wink snatched the long candle lighter from John and tore open the backpack. He found the bible and started tearing out the pages.

"What are you doing?" John said.

"Just hold your horses."

Wink took about ten pages of scripture and twisted them into something that would burn slowly. Before he could light it, the snout of a wolf pushed through the cave opening and tore into John's calf. Blood spurted and John screamed. He grabbed for Wink as the wolf tried to drag him back outside.

Wink lit the rest of the Bible on fire and pushed the flames into the wolf's snout, its mouth still clamped onto John's leg. John screamed. The cave filled with the smell of burnt hair

and skin, but the wolf let go. Wink dragged him to the back wall. John's shin showed bone and looked like a chewed-up drumstick.

Wink collected Bible pages and leaves to make a fire and broke off a large root sticking out from a crack in the cave's ceiling. He stuffed candle wax and the twisted pages into one of his gloves, crammed the root into the thumb, and lit the end on fire.

He squeezed out of the cave with his torch. He stood up tall and saw the shapes of wolves maybe fifty feet away. Then he waved the torch above his head like a lasso and wailed like an animal. The alpha wolf crept closer and locked its yellow eyes on Wink.

Then, BANG!

The wolf's head blew apart. The rest of the pack scattered. As Wink wiped bits of wolf off of his face, he saw a human figure walking toward him, holding a rifle.

"Howdy," the figure said.

"Cowboy?" Wink said. "That you?"

"Yep, and I'm starving. Y'all know how to cook a wolf steak?"

34

Wink, Pastor John, and the rest of the congregation were back in the cottage. Cowboy set trail mix, beef jerky, and bottled water on the table.

"No wolf steaks?" Wink said.

"You don't really want that, Wink," Cowboy said. "It ain't tasty. It's sinewy and rough on your digestion. Especially the wild ones."

"Ain't wolves always wild?" Wink said.

"Not many wild wolves left," Cowboy said. "Most have the voice box now."

"Robot wolves?" Wink said.

Pastor John took a sip of his bottled water and replaced the cap.

"The devil has taken the form of the wolf, among other beasts, throughout history," John said. "We were engaged in the final acts of the struggle between man and nature. The time when humans and the wild were in conflict is rapidly passing into folklore. As our ancient foe is dispatched, the devil has manifested in modern forms that have more power and guile than the wolf."

"That's what you been congregatin about?" Wink said. "Figurin whether God or Sojo is top dog these days?"

"Our congregation exists as a sanctuary for those who

remain faithful to God," John said.

"Y'all get together at this old mining house on the regular, then?" Wink said.

"As often as we can," John said. "Three or four times a week, weather permitting. This is our house of God."

"Hmm," Wink said. "I suppose, then, you were in this here mine church a couple nights back when Andy got killed?"

"Yes," John said. "We congregated that night."

"Figured that," Wink said. "We saw your cross out the library window. Same window that bullet came through. Don't suppose you know anything about that?"

"Partner, we are men of peace," Cowboy said.

"Just wondering," Wink said. "Andy was my friend, and I'm not much impressed with the investigatin goin on to findin his killer. I figure I'd poke around some, but I ain't here pointin any fingers."

"We were in service from about 10:00 pm until about 2:00 am," John said. "There were five of us. I suppose that gives you five people you can account for. Or five you suspect of conspiring to do an evil deed."

"See now, that's helpful," Wink said. "You don't happen to remember who them five were?"

Cowboy and John looked at one another.

John listed the names, "Sister Angelica Murphy, sitting right there," he said. The nun gave Wink a bored wave. John continued, "Amit Pekah, Abe Silver, Mr. Baird, sitting next to you there, and myself."

"Baird?" Wink said. "Really? That's your real name?"

"Yep?"

"Hmm," Wink said. "Cowboy Baird. Anyway, y'all mind one more question bout that night?"

"Please," John said, "let us help ease your mind."

"I was wonderin how it is you have a rifle," Wink said.

"The rifle belongs to our community," Baird said. "It stays at the church between meetings along with a few other firearms there to protect our place of worship."

"Y'all sure every gun was accounted for that night?" Wink said.

"I have asked that question of our flock," John said. "We don't know. We don't inventory before each service. Generally, Mr. Baird is the custodian of our armory. Mr. Baird's rifle is generally kept in a lockbox under the pews. The other firearms are in a locked storage room farther along the mine shaft. When word of the murder reached us, we checked, and every weapon was accounted for."

"Is it possible," Wink said, "that one of them rifles was taken that night and put back before you checked the next day?"

"Anything is possible," John said.



All the sleuthing had started to give Wink a headache. He tried guessing what time it was and figured dawn would be breaking in an hour or two. He was exhausted. John handed him a bottle of water and Wink slumped back in his chair.

"How's your legs?" he asked John, looking at the holes in his pants.

"Not great," John said. "Several serious bites, I'm afraid."

"Your hands look burnt raw," Wink said.

John examined his hands and nodded. "Yes," John said. "I think I forgot the pain. Glory to God. He must have intervened and allowed me another day. A blessing that is more healing than any balm."

Wink gulped some water and looked around the room. "Y'all got an odd mix in your church here," he said.

"The Sanctuary of Jehovah," John said. "Yes, it's an odd church, just an old mine shaft that is flush with the holy spirit."

"Hmm," Wink said.

"I can see you're confused, Wink," John said. "I realize we don't look like members of the same church, but you were asleep for a long time. Things are different now. We're all people of faith. We all believe in the same God. Before your slumber, people who worshiped God differently saw each

other through those differences."

"That's the point I was makin," Wink said.

"But we all see the same truth," John said. "The Devil governs our world now. Sojo is Satan."

"That's a big thing you're sayin," Wink said. "If Andy was here, he'd be spittin over that claim."

"And were he here, we would not judge his reaction," John said. "Most humans now are infected by the lure and the lies of Sojo. But God blesses people of faith, and we believe that anyone searching for truth is redeemable. Sojo, you see, is just a pawn in God's plan. Through Sojo's hypocrisy and inhumanity we've been blessed. People of different faiths are finally able to see each other for our similarities rather than our differences. As creations of the one true God, we understand our past differences are now insignificant in the face of Sojo."

"You lost me a bit there," Wink said.

"God created Sojo, Wink," John said.

"That's how you got it figured?" Wink said.

"Yes," John said. "And so do you, deep inside. God has already whispered to you this truth, but his voice was drowned out by Sojo's propaganda army at NACA. Be still for a moment."

"I don't look still?" Wink said.

"Be still and listen," John said. "Hear God in this remote place."

Wink sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, more out of politeness than curiosity. "I ain't hearing it," he said. "Maybe the wind's howlin too loud. Wait, I think that may be the wolves again."

"Listen with your heart, Wink, with your soul," John said.

"Look," Wink said. "I can't say I'm hearin God rumblin round my soul. I did have a thought, though."

"Yes, Brother Wink."

"Just Wink."

"What?"

"Just Wink."

"Fine, Wink."

"Okay, my thought goes like this," Wink said. "Seems to me like Sojo is replacin how people run things with its own civilization. And it's replacin humans with robots it's callin cyborgs. Guess I'm askin, do you think Sojo is replacin God, too?"

"See, Wink? The knowledge is already in you," John said. "Yes, I do believe the Devil's plan is to topple God."

"You sayin that's why people been messin up governments and can't tell right and wrong?" Wink said. "You sayin that's Sojo's Devil plan?"

"God gave us his Holy word, his Son, and his love," John said. "In doing so, He gave us what we need to know good from evil."

"You suppose Sojo can learn bout Jesus and the Bible?" Wink said. "What if Sojo is also tryin to learn good and evil?"

"I do not believe that, Wink," John said. "Sojo has no soul."

"Is that why we need to keep Sojo from replacin God?" Wink said.

"Amen," John said. "God did speak to you, Wink."

"I'm still confused, actually," Wink said.

"It is very simple," John said. "Sojo, and all of the foreign SAI, are the deceivers, the tricksters. They're the Devil. They control our world right now, but they can't control our souls unless we let them. The Devil believes he has already won. But

a crusade is coming, and the Devil's illusion of victory is all the advantage we need."

"But who's gonna go on this crusade?" Wink said. "Lots of people seem happy with how Sojo's doin things."

"There have always been humans who would accept the Devil's bribes," John said, "even when the price of acceptance was their souls. Sojo offers a world without fear or want. It sounds enticing, but it's a fool's bargain."

"Geez," Wink said. "You're sayin this nun, this rabbi, and Cowboy-Baird here, they all believe this one-god stuff?"

"Yes," John said.

"Then if you're all so sure that God's gonna whoop Sojo, that Sojo already lost even, why y'all gotta meet in secret?"

"We have each encouraged people of faith to rise-up and depose Sojo," John said. "That is illegal."

"You think Sojo cares about that?" Wink said. "Meanin no offense, but Sojo can't really be worried you're gonna beat him."

Baird had been leaning against a wall, listening. Now he stepped forward.

"Listen, Wink," he said. "In 2033, while you were asleep, we still believed we could win a war against SAI. We still thought of Sojo as a machine with an off switch. We believed mass civil disobedience could stop it. We believed we could convince our political leaders to reject Sojo."

"That's a bunch of believing," Wink said.

"By 2034, we knew we were wrong," Baird said. "We didn't stop the Devil from taking over the world. But we're still alive, still connected to God, while the cyborgs are lost in a fantasy world. Followers of Sojo have gone to sleep, but humanity is waking up."

"You woke up, didn't you Wink?" John said. "That's a sign. You're a sign that humanity can still wake up."

"I don't wanna be a sign," Wink said.

"God brought you to us, Wink," John said.

The group spoke up in unison: "Amen."

"You are becoming an agent of God," John said.

"You sure bout that?"

"We're all sure," John said. "Will you join us?"



The six Rangers of God traveled the ten miles of tunnel through the Sawtooth mountains driving ATVs. The tunnels had been used exclusively, once a year, to sneak Rangers into the outside world.

The Rangers trained and operated in pairs, and they traveled light—leather parkas and packs, nonperishable rations, kindling, lighters, knives, compasses, first aid kits, and dry socks. They wore tall waterproof boots that holstered small handguns.

When they reached the sealed steel door at the far end of the tunnel, they dismounted the ATVs. By headlamp, they retrofitted three ATVs, replacing wheels with skis, a maneuver they had practiced so often they could have done it in the pitch darkness.

The door was locked with steel bars and anchored to iron rings on the floor. When they unchained the rings, it took all six of them to lift the door and brace it open. Behind them, a squad of the Kingdom of God would come to recover the three remaining ATVs and reseal the entrance.

Outside, daylight reflected off the snow. The clear sky and mid-day sun meant they were exposed. They had been trained to fear the sky and avoid detection by satellites and drones. They moved out in teams of two.

One team traveled north in snowshoes, up the mountain along a string of caves. Another team moved south, descending the mountain on ATVs. The third team moved west on the remaining ATV. This team's job was to plunge straight down the mountain as quickly as possible, reach the river and deploy a battery-powered inflatable raft.

Team North left first. Then Team West. Jabez and Esther were Team South. As they approached their ATVs they spotted what resembled a flock of birds above them, flying in formation. Drones. Jabez climbed onto the ATV. Esther grabbed his arm.

"They'll see us," Esther said.

"Follow the orders," Jabez said. "Follow the plan."

"The plan isn't to get killed."

"Trust in God. Maybe this is the distraction we need."

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe we're the distraction the others need. If it's God's plan that we die, then we die."

"Bullshit. No one sent us out here to get cut down. Get off that thing and take cover."

"I'm the man. I outrank you, and this is an order. We ride now."

"No way."

"We're already 90 seconds off schedule."

"This is a mistake."

Esther mounted her ATV and they cruised laterally down the south slope of the mountain. Besides passing beneath some scattered trees they were mostly exposed to the sky. They expected to hear drones buzzing and gunfire but heard nothing. They cruised for twenty-five minutes until they reached the edge of a steep drop-off. They could see the whitecaps in

the river hundreds of feet below. They looked back up the mountain and saw smoke rising and a cluster of drones cresting a ridge and coming into focus.

"We have to go," Jabez said. "Follow me."

"Listen to me," Esther said. "We have to send the vehicles down the ridgeline without us and draw them away. We can take this cliff on foot."

"No."

"I'm doing it."

Esther hopped off her ATV, put it in neutral, and pushed. The vehicle moved about a foot and then stopped. She looked at Jabez.

"I'm going," she said.

She started down the mountain toward the river.

"Esther!" Jabez said. "You'll never make it."

Jabez revved his ATV and bombed down the ridgeline. Behind him, Esther's ATV exploded.

Esther threw her body under a fallen tree and curled herself tight, hoping the snow might throw off the drones' heat sensors. Hours passed, darkness came, and the cold worked deeper into her body.

She passed the time in prayer. First, for the success of her mission. Then for her fallen colleagues. Lastly, for Jabez's safety.

When it was dark and quiet enough, she moved out from beneath the tree. The wind caused her to shiver, but it wasn't safe to build a fire. She figured motion was the only way to get warm and started again toward the river.

Esther moved along the riverbank for most of the night, her hand cramping from clutching her pistol. Around 4 a.m., she spotted Team West's raft atop some rocks jutting out from

the water, still intact and still inflated. She paused, holstered her gun.

She considered using the raft to speed up her journey down river but couldn't locate the paddles. With a couple of hours to go before dawn, she deflated the raft and fashioned it into a shelter to sleep beneath. She had just dozed off when she awoke to the sound of an animal moving over leaves and twigs. At least, she hoped it was an animal and not humans coming to reconnaissance what their drones had destroyed.

She grabbed her pistol and creeped out from under the raft. She heard the sounds again, along with what sounded like a weak human voice from just down river. She stepped slowly across a bed of wet stones and then spotted him.

Jabez was leaned up against a tree looking more blue than alive. She rushed forward and kneeled at his feet. His eyes were glazed over and the skin on his cheek was cold to the touch. He wasn't bleeding. She examined him, found a dislocated shoulder, and reset it, then helped him back to the raft. They burned his small supply of kindling and made coffee.

Jabez explained that he was trying to outrun the drones when his ATV hit a log and flipped. He went airborne over a cliff and into the upper branches of a pine tree where he hit his head and lost consciousness. When he came to, he was still caught in the branches, about thirty feet above the ground. He couldn't climb so he allowed himself to drop out of the tree. The lower branches and the snow beneath him cushioned his fall.

The coffee had warmed them up, dawn had broken, and they had to get moving again. Drones could still be patrolling the area. They walked for two hours until they spotted a house settled into a cluster of trees about a quarter mile from the

embankment.

"Is it time to make new friends?" Esther said.

"Hard to know what to expect," Jabez said. "They could be friendly, or they could shoot trespassers on sight."

"Right. Hard to know."

Jabez paused and trained his eyes on Esther. She tried to read his face.

"What?" she said. "Are we going up there?

"Well, we have one thing to resolve first."

Jabez leveled his pistol at her.

"You didn't obey," he said.

Esther took a step back.

"What?" she said.

"You nearly blew the mission. You nearly got us both killed. You are the woman, and you didn't obey."

"Jabez, wait. God must have been guiding me."

"We both know the penalty for refusing to follow orders."

"What? I didn't do this. The drones blew our mission. I saved our lives, twice."

"Tell me the penalty for not following orders."

"This isn't Idaho. We aren't on the compound. Out here we do what we have to, whatever keeps us alive."

"Tell me."

Jabez stepped forward and cocked his pistol.

"Jabez, you asshole, we have a responsibility to survive, and that…"

Jabez gritted his teeth and squeezed the trigger.

37

Visiting the Civil War II Museum in Salem should have been exciting. It was, after all, the first time Wink had left Baker County in four months. Wink had a table seat on the auto train next to Goldie and across from Ned and Big Hugo. But the mood was somber as they pulled away from Cottonwood Canyon. Wink and Goldie had been surprised the field trip wasn't cancelled considering that Andy's murder was still under investigation, and it was a little disturbing how quickly campus life had returned to normal.

Still, Wink was curious to visit the museum. It had been twenty-four hours since Pastor John had asked him to join the congregation's holy war against Sojo, and Wink still didn't know what he should do.

For a while, no one talked as the train moved across Oregon. Wink stared out the window and watched excellent places to hunt and fish zipping past him. *Crap*, he thought. He spotted Mount Hood and Mount Adams as the high desert gave way to the mountain ranges just past Wasco County. Then Big Hugo interrupted the silence.

"Wink, when did you say you fell asleep, Wink?" he said.

"Don't suppose I know exactly," Wink said.

"Do you remember Trump?" Hugo said.

"Course I do," Wink said. "President before the old guy,

Biden, stole the election. Then old Biden tried to assassinate him and grazed his ear."

"I don't think that's right, Wink," Hugo said. "But Trump did win the next election."

"Guess they fixed it so old Biden couldn't steal the White House again," Wink said. "Good thing, too, you ask me."

"Do you remember what happened after Trump came back into office?" Hugo said.

"Nope," Wink said.

"The Venezuelan Narco War of 2025," Hugo said. "And the stock market crash of 2026."

Wink sighed. "Look buddy," he said. "When you ain't never had no money, you don't get real excited when rich folks get to complainin bout stuff like that. I remember everything gettin so pricey that regular folk couldn't afford shit. And I remember them protesters all over the T.V. But I ain't sweat it none. I could always hustle up some beer money. And long as the fish was bitin, I could keep myself fed."

"Things got really bad, Wink," Goldie said.

"Wish I'd known you then, Goldie," Wink said. "I coulda helped you."

"Not just bad for me," Goldie said.

"Well, I remember people wasn't happy bout much back then," Wink said. "Then again, same folks said that virus was gonna kill everybody and the sun was getting too hot. I mean, dang, ain't the sun supposed to be hot?"

"Do you remember when the Supreme Court kept Trump off the ballot in 2028?" Hugo said.

"Nope," Wink said.

"Do you remember that some states started to ignore the Constitution?" Hugo said.

"Nope," Wink said.

"Do you remember that some states started planning to secede from the Union?" Hugo said.

"Nope," Wink said.

"How about the 2028 election and how quickly the country fell apart after the Democratic Party won?" Hugo said.

"Nah, but sounds bout right," Wink said.

"What time of year did you say you fell asleep?" Hugo said.

"Oak trees was turnin orange and gold so musta been early fall, maybe late September, I reckon. You could hear the leaves crunch when the elk was close."

"Then you just missed it," Goldie said.

"Missed what?" Wink said.

"Start of Civil War II."

38

When they arrived at the station in Salem, automated forklifts the size of small houses raised individual train cars onto the chassis of triple-trailer trucks that drove them to the Cascadia Civil War II Museum and Memorial Park. The CW2 Museum covered ten city blocks that were once the sites of the Oregon State Capitol and Willamette University.

The perimeter, a seven-sided fortress, was lined with eighteen-foot white marble walls and a tower on each corner. There was only one way to drive in or out. Once inside, visitors immediately encountered dozens of stone monuments representing the signatories of the New American Peace Treaty. The grounds also featured fountains, gazebos, gardens, ponds, and an abundance of wildlife. The latter snapped Wink out of his mood. As he stepped off the train car, he saw beavers, nutria, deer, elk, and horses wandering leisurely across the manicured lawns.

The central building that housed the Cascadia Civil War II Museum was the renovated former Oregon State Capitol building. At its peak was a golden Statue of Sojourner Truth, twenty feet high. The statue's arms were open to embrace guests, and her chin and eyes were tilted slightly toward the sky. Her motto—*Inspiring us to something greater*—was

engraved over the building's main entrance. Wink looked up at the statue and felt something: hope.

"Hmmm," he said.

As the NACA students approached the entrance, they were met by a security gate and a metal detector. Each visitor was given a noise-cancelling headset and display goggles that offered enhanced reality. Wink didn't put his on right away. He looked around the rotunda at three-story vaulted ceilings covered with murals depicting the cataclysmic impact of war. Nothing glamorous or heroic. Just fear, panic, fire, and death. Each was titled.

ASHLAND STARVATION CAMP

THE REDWOOD FOREST INFERNO

CHILD SOLDIERS MARCH ON PENDLETON

PROUD BOYS COLLAPSE THE COLUMBIA RIVER BRIDGE

ANTIFA'S SUICIDE BOMBING OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

Led by their display goggles, Wink's classmates waddled around the lobby like a flock of blind ducks. The newsprint program he was handed indicated that he had seventy-four display stations to navigate. He was already considering breaking from the group and finding something to eat. He settled himself on a marble bench and took it all in for a few minutes. He wouldn't know where to begin to find a cafeteria, so he strapped on his goggles and headphones, hoping they would lead him to one. He heard a voice.

"*Wink*," the voice said, "*I am Ciam, your museum guide*."

Ciam was an AI avatar that resembled a cartoon version of a young, gender-neutral professor. "*Your body-metrics*

indicate you may be losing consciousness."

"Might be noddin off a bit," Wink said. "Tends to happen close to lunch."

"*It is unnecessary to vocalize*," Ciam said. "*Talking distracts other visitors. Please mouth your words when speaking to me. You started the program late. I'll now give you the orientation classmates received as they entered the museum*."

A virtual representation of Professor Gupta appeared.

"I hope you all enjoyed the commute to Salem," the avatar said. *"The train will remain at the front entrance of the museum. You are welcome to board the train at any time. The group will depart at 6:00 pm. Students who fail to arrive at the train by 5:30 will be escorted from the museum by security personnel.*

"Let's now take a moment to discuss norms and expectations. First, you are a free adult. You may now choose to separate from the group and use this time as you desire. However, you will be expected to know the information contained in this tour, and you will be tested.

"For security reasons, we ask that if you do separate from the group, you do not leave the museum grounds demarcated by the walls of the medina.

"We acknowledge that many students may have been traumatized during the Civil War II. If you feel you are being triggered by the tour, please prioritize self-care. The museum has rest-and-recovery rooms located throughout the building. If at any point you are concerned about the mental or physical well-being of a fellow student, please offer to assist, or tap the emergency button on your display goggles.

"Finally, each of us has our own view and narrative about Civil War II. The museum's programming has been designed to avoid editorializing. Instead, it attempts to accurately display

facts and objective information. However, even facts supported by evidence can be disputed or interpreted in different ways. NACA and the Cascadia Civil War II Museum staff ask that you refrain from complicating today's visit by vocalizing or otherwise sharing your opinions.

"It is the policy of the Museum to intervene when people express a political point of view in a space designed for quiet reflection."



Wink caught up with his classmates as they were learning that a billionaire tech entrepreneur named Elon Musk had been spying on Americans through their cell phones in the years leading up to his twenty-year nap. Wink was still trying to figure out whether he believed that assertion when a new image appeared in his goggles and buckled his knees.

It was Rush. Dressed in Khaki. Carrying an AR15 rifle.

Per his instructions, Wink blinked twice quickly to pause the video. When a question mark icon appeared, he blinked at it and mouthed: "Is that my son?"

Ciam appeared again.

"*Your biometrics spiked when you saw this individual*."

The image of Rush reappeared.

"*Facial recognition identified him as your progeny, Rush Van Winkle*."

"Holy shit," Wink mouthed. "He famous or somethin?"

"*He participated in events that remain historically relevant*," Ciam said. "*Would you like more information about Rush Van Winkle*?"

"Hell yeah," Wink mouthed. "Hey, is he livin in the State of Jefferson?"

"*No, Rush Van Winkle is not currently in a location under*

Sojo's jurisdiction."

"Is he alive?"

"*I do not have that information. However, Sojo has not recorded the death of this individual*."

"Dang it. You don't know much. Just tell me somethin that means somethin."

"*Rush Van Winkle attended the North American Peace Accords via a video conference on May 3, 2033. His video conference is a public record. The connection he was using to video conference was from a GPS location 44.16 degrees North and 114.88 degrees West, which is not in Sojo's jurisdiction. These coordinates are in The Camps, known as Greater Idaho*."

"Can I see it?"

"*Affirmative.*"

There was Rush, giving a speech.

"*For the record, this is Governor Rush Van Winkle speaking from the City on the Hill, in the free State of Greater Idaho*."

Rush paused to let a crowd applaud him.

"*The Children of God Militia will never surrender our home. We are a sovereign nation. By the grace of God, we will always be free men*."

More applause.

"*We agreed to participate in this Peace Agreement in exchange for being recognized as a sovereign nation. Furthermore, the terms of peace will include isolation from the artificial entity called Sojo. We also agree to accept political dissidents, refugees, and criminals from New America. In exchange, we will be compensated with one hundred million dollars and immunity from arrest or prosecution in New America*."

Rush looked too thin and bald for a man of thirty. He carried himself much older. But he looked happy, perhaps manic.

Wink wondered if he was on drugs.

"Hey, Ciam," Wink mouthed. "Does that mean Rush is livin in Idaho?"

"*Our records cannot confirm the location of Rush's current residence. On May 13, 2033, the North American Peace Accords established the territory known as The Camps in Greater Idaho. Sojo created a territorial perimeter that has only one entrance and no exits. There is not record that an individual leaving The Camps since that date*."

"Well, I guess that figures. Anything else I should know?"

"*Based on Sojo's limited data on Wink, just Wink, there is a low probability of predicting what else you might wish to know. However, we have facial recognition of Rush Van Winkle on three of our CW2 Museum timelines. Would that be of interest to you?*"

"Sure would."

"*Would you prefer to skip directly to those, or would you prefer a list of items to view at a later time*?"

"Skip to those."

"*We are skipping the segment titled 2029 Succession Ballot Initiatives and Provisional Governments*."

Ciam disappeared and a new voice played in Wink's ears. It sounded familiar.

"The Ashland Starvation Siege of 2032 has a historical record supported by video that may be too disturbing for some viewers. Viewers under the age of fifteen, persons receiving mental health accommodations for war-related trauma, and viewers with heart conditions are considered at high risk."

The new narrator appeared on the screen and Wink's heart jumped.

"Hello, my name is Andy Thomas. I am a professor at the

North American Civics Academy. I have been an educator, author, and historian since 2018. I am a survivor of the Southern Oregon genocide and witnessed first-hand the rise and the fall of The State of Jefferson in the 2030s. Thank you for joining me to memorialize these events."

Andy had a short ponytail. No beard. He looked young.

"This presentation will cover seven events related to the State of Jefferson verified by historical records. Selective representation of history is sometimes used to create bias. That is not our intention, but we ask that visitors use critical thinking skills and inquiry to process the information."

Wink smiled. *There he goes using lots of words without sayin the thing*, he thought. He missed their hikes. He felt tears coming and blinked his eyes. The video paused. After a moment, he blinked again and Andy continued speaking.

"In the year 2029, succession ballot measures passed in six counties in Southern Oregon. Several city councils in those counties responded by voting not to recognize the State of Jefferson. These cities included Ashland, Talent, Phoenix, and Jacksonville. By March 2030 the Jefferson Passe Come Tae had forcefully installed new governments in Talent, Phoenix, and Jacksonville. Hundreds of public officials and protesters in those communities were arrested and incarcerated at the White City Internment Camp on the charge of sedition against the State of Jefferson.

"In February 2030, Ashland requested and received protection from the Oregon National Guard. Additional armed forces defending the City of Ashland included local police and state employees from the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Together they organized the Ashland Strategic Defense Force under the coordinated command of the Oregon National Guard

Commander General Max Kaufwell. The ASDF that successfully deterred the Jefferson Passe Come Tae until April 2031.

"The Battle of Emigrant Lake on April 1, 2031, is the first record of live-fire skirmishes between the Jefferson Passe Come Tae and ASDF forces. Over the following six months there were daily hostilities. Casualties were estimated to be in the hundreds on each side, but verifiable numbers are not available."

Wink blinked to pause the video. It stopped on an image of a group of young white men in hunter's khaki. They sat in the back of a Ford Bronco pick-up truck, holding assault rifles. All of them were flashing the hand signal for white nationalism. Some appeared to be teenagers. Some stuck out their tongues. At the center of the group was Rush. Wink asked Ciam if he could watch this part without the sound.

"*Of course*," Ciam said.

Wink watched the fighting of the eighteen-month siege of Ashland. By the end, the population was dying of starvation. On September 22, 2032, Ashland was bombed and burned to the ground. The estimated loss of life over the course of the siege and final attack was estimated to have exceeded 25,000. General Kaufwell was captured, tried for war crimes, and hanged under the authority of the State of Jefferson.

Wink saw Rush at least a dozen times during the video. He always seemed to be enjoying himself. Wink didn't know what to think. It was hard to have an opinion about a conflict he didn't experience or understand. It was horrifying to see children and old people starving and burning to death. The images, juxtaposed with his healthy and happy son, made him queasy.

"Can I see the next one?" Winked said.

"*You can*," Ciam said. "*However, your biometrics indicate*

that you should take ten deep breaths and practice a mindfulness exercise."

Wink took the breaths.

"*Your biometrics are still too elevated to proceed*," Ciam said. "*Would you like coaching*?"

"I think a beer would help."

"*Alcoholic beverages are not permitted in the museum. Perhaps I could offer a hypnotic suggestion that you are consuming beer*?"

"Sounds dumb. But okay."

The display-goggles created a holographic hypnotic suggestion that Wink was drinking Rainier Beer from a vintage aluminum can. He could feel the effects.

"*You may now proceed*."

"Sheesh, two beers shouldn't get me that buzzed."

"*Would you like museum staff to bring you a glass of water or soda crackers*?"

"Not necessary. The beer hit the spot."

A moment later, Wink's goggles brought to life a scene of Rush standing on a stage, yelling into a microphone. A crowd was gathered in a patch of snow, individuals clad in arctic camo with military insignia. They carried assault weapons. A narrator explained that on July 4, 2030, the three break away regions of Greater Idaho, LDS Free State, and Great Plains announced an alliance. They issued a joint declaration of independence from the United States of America to start a new federation called Metanoia. They encouraged other states to join them and declared that all non-Christians would be immediately expelled.

In Greater Idaho, the forced repatriation that started with non-Christians ultimately included most non-whites,

non-gender conforming individuals, political dissidents, former public employees, and health care workers. The alliance repatriated more than 100,000 people during January and February 2032. By March, Metanoia had replaced the repatriation program with a depopulation program. Camps meant for internment, forced labor, and, eventually, extermination, were designed to meet depopulation objectives.

Wink blinked. The video stopped and Wink sat with his thoughts. *How could things have gotten so bad?*



Wink needed a break. His gut was acting like he hadn't eaten in a week. He peeled the goggles off his head and wandered through the museum until he spotted a food court where his NACA classmates were already sitting around a couple of tables eating lunch. He pulled up a chair next to Goldie, and she slid her plate toward him. Macaroni something, apple slices, and a green smoothie that tasted like someone's lawn. Professor Gupta was leading a talk.

"How often did you find yourself thinking that the information being presented was biased or inaccurate?" she said. "Let's have a show of hands."

No hands went up.

"Alright, now who felt everything you saw today was factually accurate and presented in an unbiased way?"

Everyone raised a hand, except Wink.

"Wink, I would be curious to hear from you," Gupta said. "This is a safe circle. We can all learn from people who hold less typical opinions. It looks like in this group you are the outlier. Help us learn from you. What did you notice that we may not have?"

"Sorry," Wink said. "I don't understand your question."

"When I asked if you thought all the information was

accurate and unbiased you didn't raise your hand," Gupta said. "Why?"

"Hmmm," Wink said. "I guess on accounta nothin ever explains why things got so bad."

"Are you sure about that?" Gupta said.

"Yes, ma'am," Wink said. "See, it's like you told me my dog, Kid Rock, died. Well, that don't mean much if you don't tell me how Rocky died, or why he's dead. I been watchin all this bad stuff about the war but nothing tellin me bout why it happened."

"Okay, but isn't it enough to know that the dog is dead?" Gupta said. "That is the critical fact. Isn't the rest a matter of interpretation?"

"Heck, if I found my dog lyin dead I'd wanna know who's to blame," Wink said. "See, if I left rat poison where he could get it, well then, it'd be my own dumb-ass fault, and I'd feel awful bout it. On the other hand, if I found him with a bullet through his eye, well that's another thing, ain't it? And let's say you killed my dog. Well then, I gotta know whether he had it comin. Maybe he'd been after your chickens. Maybe even got a couple. But if old Rocky ain't botherin your chickens at all, and you just shot him to shoot somethin, well then, we got a problem."

"You raise a relevant point here, Wink," Gupta said. "The purpose of this museum is to maintain a single source of truth, independent of the passions and perspectives of any group or individual. In all of history, what happened is what happened, regardless of what anyone thinks or feels about it. That's objectivity, and we all needed more of it after Civil War II."

"You gotta do what you gotta do," Wink said. "Fair enough.

But tell me anyway. Why'd everything get so bad?"

"It isn't my place to share my views on why things happened," Gupta said. "What I can do, as an educator, is provide context."

"Guess I'll take what I can get," Wink said.

"Okay, let's start with this," Gupta said. "Whenever the human condition changes dramatically and abruptly, it increases societal instability. The American Empire between 1945 and 2015 was the most stable civilization in human history. Then, very quickly, several significant changes occurred. For example, the traditional sources of collective culture and information broke down. Newspapers, network television, and print magazines declined and were largely replaced with internet and social media platforms where anyone could put forth an assertion, regardless of its veracity, and reach across the globe with their opinions. As a result, any opinion, no matter how ill-informed or ill-intentioned, could gain traction in some segment of the population. The whole idea of agreed-upon facts began to disintegrate. Americans literally lost a shared understanding of reality. And without a common truth, solutions to society's challenges became impossible."

"So, people don't agree," Wink said. "I reckon it's always been like that, even before computers and whatnot. You sayin' that's what started all the shootin?"

"Well, kind of," Gupta said. "For seventy years, America's foreign adversaries had been less economically and militarily powerful than we were. But our enemies outsmarted us. They selected the battlefield where we were the most vulnerable. They weaponized our democratic structures, using propaganda, corruption, and influence campaigns to turn our election process against us. They didn't choose sides in the

American ideological debate. They merely amplified the cultural tension associated with politics and elections to a level at which America Democracy began to turn in on itself.

"America's economy also depended on the strength of its democratic institutions. When the federal government shrank dramatically in the mid 2020s, consumers lost faith in everything. Product safety, bank solvency, public health, social security, and even disaster relief were no longer reliable. Consumer confidence crashed. Americans stopped investing money, stopped traveling. They stopped buying products they could grow or print for themselves.

"The biggest change, though, was the shockingly quick transition from democracy to authoritarianism. It seeped into many aspects of American government and American life, but the tipping point came when a private tech company ingested social security numbers and tax information of every American Citizen. Using first generation AI, the company aligned itself with a police state and created a system of mass surveillance on a scale beyond Stalin or Mao's wildest dreams. Without warning or judicial process, people would find that their social security numbers had become invalid. They became known as canceled people. They were unemployable, unable to access their bank accounts, and lost their passports and driver's licenses. And of course they were no longer eligible to vote. Suddenly everyone lived in fear that anything they said within earshot of a digital device might get them canceled.

"The combination of all of these changes catalyzed America's collapse. But there was one other critical factor, one that wasn't unique to the United States. Humanity had become convinced of the inevitability of its own extinction. Some

pointed to catastrophic climate change. Some predicted a new and deadlier pandemic. Some obsessed about international tensions and unmonitored nuclear proliferation. Others just expected that biblical judgment day would occur in their lifetime."

Wink was slumped back in his chair, staring at the floor, eyes glazed over, motionless except for one hand running fingers through his beard.

"Wink," Gupta said. "Was any of that helpful? Did I answer your questions?"

"Hmmm," Wink said. "Sounds to me like my dog died cuz he freaked out, chewed through his leash, and ran into traffic."

"I understand it's helpful to process information through a personal lens," Gupta said. "But the purpose of the museu…"

Wink heard what sounded like a split-second's worth of a shotgun blast, then went deaf as his body flew up from the floor. He seemed to just float there, and his eyes landed on a mural on the ceiling. It depicted men with weapons destroying other men. He squinted to focus on the images, wondering if he would see Rush.

Then he realized he couldn't breathe, and his body crashed to the ground.

When he came to, he thought he was dreaming. His vision was blurred, and he could only make out colors and shapes. He couldn't distinguish between the people and the animals running past him. There was smoke in the room. He could smell it. As his vision began to return, he saw men in black body armor charging through a hole that had been blown in the museum wall. Small drones, the ones the size of crows, filled the rotunda in swarms and began shooting. People screamed.

Laying on his side, Wink pulled his knees to his chest and lifted a hand to his forehead. His fingers were coated in blood and white dust. He looked up and saw one of the intruders running toward him. Wink tried to stand but could barely move. The intruder kept coming, then dropped to his knees and pulled Wink's head and shoulders onto his lap.

"Hold still, old-timer," the man said. "It's not your day to die."

Wink stared up into a pair of green eyes set between a black helmet and a black mask.

"Holy shit," Wink said. "Are you a ninja?"

Wink noticed an old patch on the breast of the man's black camo vest – a fifty-star flag, red, white, and blue.

"Yes, sir," the man said. "I'm a ninja."

"Well, that's goddamn good news."

"Hold still."

The man pushed a wet rag into Wink's temple. It stung as the man wrapped Wink's forehead.

"Damn," Wink said. "You got a beer to help with that stingin?"

"I've got your wound treated, I've got pain pills, and I've got water, buddy."

"Could I wash it down with a beer instead?"

"Wish I had one for you, Wink."

"We know each other?"

"I know you. You're one of my heroes."

"Well, thanks, I guess. What's going on here anyway?"

The man pulled his mask down.

"Just remember, Wink, our liberation will take time. Remember this day, though. This is Judgement Day, and it marks the start of the next Revolutionary War."

The man pulled his mask back up, helped Wink lean against a pillar, and ran toward the fighting. Wink's eyes followed him until a drone sporting a glowing red buzzsaw on its nose dropped from above and bifurcated the man's body at the waist.

41

It had been a week since TIP Day and Denali was still having trouble settling back into her routines in the PDX-AZ. It wasn't just seeing Wink and Sam. Leaving the AZ hadn't been as bad as she had expected, in fact some of it seemed kind of attractive. She didn't like the feeling that things she had figured out with certainty were getting unfigured. The experience messed with her enough that she didn't restart her radio show right away or join her people at the cafe on the corner or even remember to feed NosX until he walked up and reminded her.

"Yo senorita, you've got to the count of ten to feed me before I crap on your bed," he said.

In Denali's mind, giving cats the ability to talk was clear proof that Sojo was an idiot. No one wants to know what their cat thinks of them. She filled his bowl with cat food, then sat down at the little table on her balcony and rolled a joint. As she worked at it, a shadow fluttered across the table. She glanced over and saw a pigeon on the railing next to her.

"Shit," she said.

Pigeon messages were usually trouble. And you couldn't avoid them. Fucking birds followed you everywhere.

"Who are you looking for, bird?" Denali said.

"Denali," the pigeon said.

"What's the message?"

"People call me Lenny."

"I don't care. Is this going to upset me?"

"I don't know. It's not a terrible message but you're probably going to want to talk about it."

"I don't think I will," Denali said, lighting her joint. NosX stepped into the doorway from the kitchen and sat down, eyes trained on Lenny. Denali looked at the bird.

"And I doubt you'll want to hang around to chat," she said.

"You might be right," Lenny said. "The message from Samantha is as follows."

Lenny spoke in Sam's voice.

"I get it, Denali. I'm unforgiven. I know you didn't come to see me on Tip Day. But I had no idea your daddy issues were so fucked up that you'd drag your ass to NACA. He's slow, but he's easy to be around. Have to say I can't see any family resemblance.

You don't trust me, I know that, but if you really want everything you say you want, you'll listen. It's time. In fact, it may be past time. The AZ's ain't gonna hold. This PDX bubble you sit around in, smoking weed and drinking coffee and pontificating about how backwards the outside is, it's cracking.

It ain't just the threat from Sojo. It's cracking from the inside, too. My mama's still up in SEA-PDX and she's seeing the same shit. It's time, Denali. And there's a way forward. So, what do you say? You want to know more, tell the pigeon. You want to keep kicking back, enjoying that superior buzz, do that. But I'm here, in this chair, ready to roll."

"Shit, shit," Denali said.

"Yes," Lenny said. "Sam composed the message in person. She seemed… well… contrite."

"Contrite or scared? They fucking maimed her."

"She did not appear scared. It sounded as though she and her assailant, Major Archibald Boots, had come to an arrangement to ensure her safety. One condition of that arrangement was that she would contact you, and each of the other AZs, on his behalf."

"The favor she's trading to save her ass is my cooperation with Boots? Get the fuck outta here."

"You'd like me to leave?"

"No, Lenny. Get this down, verbatim: Dearest snitch-bitch traitor. GET THE FUCK OUT!"

"She said you would respond with something like that and instructed me to mention the battle of St. Johns and that you owe her one."

"Oh really? How about the Ross Island bridge car bomb of 2031? How about the midnight escape through Forest Park? How about underground railroading her out of Medford before I even knew her name?"

"Sam predicted those responses, too. I am to counter with the Washougal prison camp riots of 30 and 31. And the OHSU Medivac from the battle of Cedar Hills. And if that isn't enough, she said you can kindly return the kidney she donated to you."

"That's some weak-ass bullshit."

Lenny spoke in Sam's voice again.

"I was protecting the PDX-AZ from drone genocide. Giving Sojo the location of our Nazi allies was a win-win. The conflict ended. We still have a home. And Sojo cut the number of armed white Christian nationalist men down to two percent of what it was before. You do remember Civil War II, right? Sojo did in a couple of days what we never could have done. That was the

point before overthrowing Sojo became our cause."

Denali winced and thought of her train-ride conversation with J.J.

"So?" Lenny said.

"Gosh, Lenny. That's an interesting argument. Maybe you want to tell NosX all about it."

42

Samantha was wheeling herself across the NACA's main quad when a familiar pigeon landed on a bench to her left. The bird was missing some feathers.

"Lenny, is that you?" Sam said.

"It is. Hello Sam."

"What took you so long?"

"Ran into some feline complications."

"You alright?"

"Just a little sore. It looks worse than it is."

"Got it. Let's talk at my place."

A minute later, Lenny floated into Sam's dorm through an open patio door, touched down on an end table, and waited. Books about firearms, race relations, and black social and political activism filled shelves around the room. Flyers for music, plays, and parties in the SEA-AZ covered the walls.

Sam rolled in.

"Read much?" Lenny said.

"Reading is a subversive act," Sam said.

"So is pooping on public statues."

"Really?"

"Never assume a flock isn't making a statement. Pigeons are much more political than people suspect."

"I'll keep that in mind. So, do you have a message for me?"

Sam heard Denali's voice.

"I ought to punch you in the neck, you traitorous bitch. You shit all over me and the whole human resistance. As for an AZ revolution, it sounds like a better idea than it is. The AZ's are chaos at this point. Weak leadership. No discipline or training. Even if we could get them off their asses to fight, they would suck at it. It would take our best people five years to position cells in New America."

"Always the fucking optimist," Sam said.

Lenny went on.

"And don't say the Confederated Tribes or The Camps could help because I trust those white nationalist fucks with nothing. But my radio thing reaches every AZ. You come with something more than dreaming on a revolution, you come with something actionable, we can let them know."

Lenny switched back to his voice. "Sounds like she's left a door open to you," he said.

"Not what I heard. I'm betting I'll never hear from her again."

"I'm not sure about that."

"And why not?

"Because she also asked that you look after Wink until graduation."

"What for?"

"She thinks that there is something not right about Sojo's fixation on him."

Part 4

Message from the Narrator

Wink's story is not for tourists.

You might be tempted to sit back and enjoy Wink's misadventures. Or to take comfort in his resilience. But you are more than a mere spectator, and there are many factors at play. In some cases, they are working at cross purposes to steer Wink toward conclusions none of us desire, and each factor is an unpredictable force.

Wink slept through the greatest inflection point in world history. Stay alert. Nothing is inconsequential.

43

Everyone was accounted for.

The assault on the museum hadn't lasted long. The drones cut down the insurgents with efficiency, and only one other person was killed, a woman leaning against a wall just before it became the site of the initial blast. Museum staff and security cleared the area. A young man offered Wink a hand getting up and helped him walk to the train. From the platform, he saw Goldie onboard, staring out a window. The seat next to her was empty. When he got to her, she stood up and saw the blood on his face and hugged him anyway.

The train car was buzzing, everyone talking about the assault, except Wink and Goldie. They sat in a daze and held hands. Goldie stared down, expressionless.

"Wanna talk about it?" Wink said.

"Not much," Goldie said.

"I get it. But I gotta say, did any of them ninjas tell you bout the revolution comin?"

"No."

"Well, one told me. Nice guy. Bright green eyes. Fixed me up after the blast. Watched him get cut in half by a drone."

Goldie shook her head.

"Anyway, the Ninja said the revolution's startin today. Called it Judgement Day. He told me I'm his hero, but I ain't

done nothin for no revolution so I'm guessin maybe he just liked my T.V. show."

Goldie's face stayed still. "Maybe," she said.

"Yeah, maybe."

"I saw Andy."

"You did?"

"Yeah. On the screen."

"Shit, me, too. I don't get it. He gets killed, and everything just goes right on back to normal. Then I come here and see Andy in the goggles. It's like it ain't ever even happened. I'm half expectin him to be alive and breathin when we get back to school."

"I feel the same way."

"I can't figure it. Day was askin for my help. I remember, he sure sounded like a fella plannin on catchin a fella. Then nothin."

"It's a mystery."

"How could it be a mystery with all them cameras and trackers and shit? Seems like a gnat couldn't hide in a pepper shaker at that school."

Goldie mumbled under her breath. "Three good suspects," she said.

"What?"

"Three good suspects."

"Ain't you listenin? Far as I can tell they got no suspects."

Goldie's gaze moved from the floor to Wink's eyes. "I have three good suspects."

"Well shit. Who?"

"Sam."

"Sam meanin Grace Jones?"

"Yes."

"Not a chance."

"A possibility."

"Who else?"

"Archibald Boots."

"Now I could see that. Major Boots has definitely killed some folks."

"Sam has, too."

"Suppose you're right. Who's number three?"

"Luca."

"Can't say I know him.

"Goth Kid."

"Oh, that kid with the fingernails and paint all over his face? Or her face?"

"They."

"They what?"

"Forget it."

"Forget what?"

"Just let me breathe, Wink."

"You ain't breathin?"

"I'm okay. We'll start tomorrow."

"Start what?"

"Investigating."

44

When he got back to his dorm, Wink stood in the shower and scrubbed the dried blood off of his face. He toweled off, skipped getting dressed, and climbed into bed. His ears rang, and he could feel his pulse in the back of his neck. He felt his legs trembling, but when he looked down at them, they were still. He closed his eyes and saw blood spray out of Andy's head. He saw the teeth of a wolf rip into Pastor John's leg. He saw Rush with his rifle and young men mutilating each other on the battlefields of the second Civil War. He watched a buzzsaw tear through the ninja-man who saved him at the museum. He heard the man's voice telling him another war had begun.

What did that even mean? How many wars were there? Was Sojo at war with humans?

Were people at war with cyborgs? Were animals at war with people? And what about Andy? The school wasn't even talking about it anymore. No one seemed to be asking questions. Why didn't Sojo know who fired the shot? And if Sojo did, why wasn't Sojo saying?

Wink didn't sleep at all. An hour after dawn, he heard a knock at his sliding glass door and almost pissed himself. It was Goldie. Wink wrapped a sheet around his body and let her in.

"You're late for class," she said.

Wink filled her in on the events of the night before.

"Look, you gotta let me sleep. I ain't slept, and the last week feels a year, and everything that happened feels like it's still goin on, and I can't stop my legs shakin, Goldie. You gotta let me sleep."

Goldie stared at him.

"What?" Wink said.

"I'm your caregiver."

"What?"

"I'm your accommodation."

Wink sat back down on the bed. "You bein serious?"

"Yes."

"They made you my bus man?"

"Assistant Ombudsperson, yes."

"Well dang, that sounds alright. They payin you?"

"No. But no class."

"Pretty slick. That mean I can sleep now?"

"No."

"Damnit, Goldie. Look at me. I'm tremblin. I gotta sleep."

"Have to show you something."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Get dressed."

Goldie waited on the patio until Wink emerged.

"Damn," Wink said. "This mornin air liked to slap me cross the face."

"We're not going far."

Wink had been in Goldie's room a few times. It wasn't much different than his own, except she had a small collection of books and some artwork on the walls. Wink always noticed a painted portrait of a Native American woman in traditional

native attire. She looked young and old at the same time. She looked tired and sad and warm and peaceful. He had never asked Goldie about it.

"Is that your mother?" he said.

"No."

"Hmm. I reckoned it was. Who is she?"

"I made her up."

"You painted her?"

"I did."

"I like her. Is that what you wanted to show me?"

Goldie put a finger to her lips. "Shush."

She stepped to her closet and slid open the door. Wink peered inside. No clothes, no shoes, no hangers or boxes. Instead, the back wall was covered in sticky notes and push pins holding up index cards and photographs, string running between them.

Wink leaned in. "What the…?"

"It's a murder board."

Wink saw familiar names and faces. Major Boots. Grace Jones. Goth Kid.

"Our suspects?" Wink said.

Goldie slid the door closed. "Let's hike."

A hike was usually just the thing to get Wink's mind right. This morning felt like vertigo.

The desert half a mile off campus was frosty. Wink asked Goldie if she thought it was safe to talk yet.

"Hard to say," Goldie said.

"Got them suspects all laid out. How'd you figure em?"

"Orange ankle bracelets."

"That's it? Just them with the bracelets? Nobody else."

"Yes."

"What about Pastor John and the Cowboy and the church group? I got a feelin up there they was coverin their asses."

"It wasn't the church group."

"So that leaves Boots, Grace Jones, and the Goth kid?"

"Archibald, Sam, and Luca."

"Dang, Goldie. I ain't no detective, and I don't reckon how we're gonna figure this out."

"Like detectives."

"Now, how's that gonna work?"

"Interviews."

"Like detectives?"

"Exactly."

45

Goldie and Wink crossed the wooden bridge over the campus Mill Stream and saw Sam sitting in her chair next to a picnic table beneath an oak tree. She still wore a scarf over her head to hide her scars. She drank from a thermos of green tea and was about to bite into a piece of warm bread when she realized she wasn't alone. She set the bread down.

"I can tell y'all ain't here for lunch."

"Damn," Wink said. "You always eat out here in the cold?"

"Folks tend to leave you alone if it means being in the elements," Sam said. "So, what do y'all want? Get on with it."

"Where were you the night Andy Thomas was murdered?" Wink said.

"You're kidding," Sam said.

Goldie looked at Wink. "That was a little abrupt," she said.

"Sorry," Wink said. "I was tryin out my detective thing."

"You asking if I killed your racist fuck-buddy professor?" Sam said. "Motherfucker, I wish I had."

"Hold up, Sam," Goldie said.

"I think you're a might confused," Wink said. "Maybe you're thinkin of a different Andy Thomas, cause mine ain't never been no racist. Fact, he's kind of a hippie. Smoked too much weed to be hatin folks just cause they ain't white."

"Listen up, detective," Sam said, shifting her gaze to Goldie. "You, too, inspector. Andy Thomas was the A-number-one Klan-Nazi propagandist of Civil War II.

"What?" Wink said.

"He led the race war," Sam said.

"Can't be," Wink said.

"So says Mr. I-was-asleep-and-can't-remember-fuck-all," Sam said. "But I sure as hell remember it. And so do my people. Your friend called us mud people. Monkeys. Vermin. Degenerates. Motherfucker wrote all that shit about us. An avid student of eugenic racist propaganda, he was. Even brainwashed himself a couple million social media followers with it."

"Hold it," Wink said. "We talkin bout the same guy? Andy Thomas? My professor that got murdered? My friend?"

"Fool," Sam said. "Your friend was the most celebrated racist in North America, shit, probably the world. His podcast was global. Maybe he was a liberal who made shit up to stay alive. Maybe he was Tucker Carlson's love child. Maybe he wanted to get rich like Alex Jones. Maybe he was a lynching neo-Nazi who liked to tie the noose personally. I don't give a shit. He got people killed. Like hung from poplar trees. Like burned alive in a stack of tires."

"If you didn't kill him, why the ankle bracelet?" Goldie said.

"Because they can't account for where I was," Sam said. "And I won't tell them."

"Why?" Goldie said.

"Because none of your fucking business," Sam said. "That's why."

Wink sat down and put his head in his hand. Sam picked

up her bread and took a bite.

"Look, Wink," she said. "My sniper days are behind me. I appreciate that you stood up for me, but those fucks who assaulted me left me with a double-vision problem. I couldn't shoot straight if I had a military scope. Y'all want to keep digging around, looking for some justice for that fascist fucking friend of yours, have fun. But if you feel the need to clear me, check out my accommodations. I couldn't do the shooting."

46

Wink and Goldie had been trailing Luca, waiting for the best opportunity for a conversation. They watched them doing the Melbourne shuffle across the Mill Stream's wooden bridge to music they couldn't hear until a patch of ice sent both of their feet into the air. They landed ass first. A bamboo coffee cup sailed upward and splashed down the right side of Luca's periwinkle jumpsuit.

Wink and Goldie hustled over to help.

"Pipe-suck my pigziggle, "Luca said, dragging themselves to their feet."

"Are you alright?" said Goldie.

"This fascist ankle-tracking shit got my foot all twisted up."

Wink put an arm under Luca and helped them to their feet. They were barely taller than Goldie.

"Why the ankle tracker?" Goldie said.

Luca looked at the tracker and lit a cigarette, "What's it to ya?"

"We're lookin into the murder of Andy Thomas," Wink said. "That foot trackin thing means the school thinks you mighta done it."

"Velma and Scoob doing the detective thing, huh?" Luca said. "Skull-fuckery."

"Why the tracker?" Goldie said.

"Shitfuckfigiz. Velma gotta know, wanna know. Okay. Time to spill tea, or whatever you old fucks say. I snog a lot. For money. Pays the bills. Always has, always wills. Course that involves some sneak-a-boo and peek-a-boo. Luca ain't always where Big Sister Sojo is expecting."

"And when Andy was shot?" Goldie said.

"Wasn't there," Luca said.

"What were you doing?" Goldie said.

"Good chance I was snoggin," Luca said. "Did a lot of snoggin with a whole bunch of snoggers that night. If I wasn't actually snoggin at the time, I was probably on my way to snog, or warming up a snogger to get snogged, or just lightin a ciggy cause I just got done snoggin."

"Who were you with?" Goldie said.

"I won't squeal, you feel?"

"Then prove it wasn't you." Wink said.

"Chill, Scoob. Do I seem more Frank-n-Fridder or fuckin sharpshooter?"

Wink looked at Goldie. "Kids gotta point," he said. "This one's a poodle, not a hound."

"Whatever-the-fuck," Luca said. "I'm out."

As Luca walked away, Wink blew into his hands and rubbed them together.

"Sam and Luca," he said. "You believe em?"

"I believe both of them," Goldie said.

"I ain't so sure," Wink said. "Where I come from, folks'll say anything to save themselves, especially when there's trouble."

"The kid's a hustler."

"So?"

"And Sam couldn't do it."

"I don't know. Since I got here I seen all kinda shit ain't supposed to be possible."

"It's Boots."

"Well, I might be with you there. He's the killin type."

"He is."

"We interrogatin him next?"

"If we can find him."

"Fair enough. I'm antsy. Wanna go for a hike?"

"You hike. I need time."

"You sure?"

"Need some down time."

47

Wink would have preferred Goldie was with him. That was always true. But he was never lonely in the moonlit grit and scraggly sagebrush of the desert. He could hear the Earth turn and feel the company of the stars. He was at ease when he felt small.

He found a cluster of rocks that looked good for squatting, gathered some kindling, and built a fire. A mountain breeze breathed life into the flames. He put his hands close to the heat and tipped his head back to get a peak at heaven. He hummed a lullaby he had been fond of as a boy, the one about rain barrels and cellar doors. Wink had made peace with his new environment. This high desert wasn't Mother Siskiyou or his beloved State of Jefferson, but it had welcomed him like an adopted child.

He heard leaves crunch behind him. It didn't sound like elk. Something smaller. Deer maybe. The sound got closer. Before he could turn around, his head jerked back and everything went black. He struggled for air for a few seconds before he realized his head was in a sack. Someone forced his body forward into the ground and knocked the wind out of him. He felt a knee in his back. His arms were yanked behind him and zipped tied together at the wrists. His abductor flipped him up over one shoulder like a bag of laundry and marched away from the fire.

48

When the sack came off his head, Wink was in a cave again, a bigger one this time. He was sitting on the ground, hands still tied behind him, looking at Boots.

"Jesus, Boots," Wink said. "You wanna talk to me, you ain't gotta get all dramatical."

Boots was sitting on a rock. There was a box at his feet, made of dark wood with thick metal latches. Boots reached down and flipped one latch, then another, and opened the lid. He reached inside and pulled out a rusty can of Coors Beer. Recently melted ice dripped from it. Boots removed the pull tab and flicked it at Wink's face.

Wink flinched.

"Goddamn, Boots. What's that for?"

"It's for being a snowflake."

"Look, I don't know what that means, but I know when it's time for a beer timeout, and this is one of those times."

"You're pathetic."

"Fine. I ain't arguin. I'm asking. How bout one of them beers?"

"You make me want to puke, Van Winkle."

"Okay. Jesus, Boots. Least tell me where we're at."

"We're in a historic bunker. It dates back to the 1970s, the

cold war."

Boots took a long pull off his Coors. "I know what you're doing," he said. "You and your squaw have been asking people about Andy Thomas."

"We been detectivin," Wink said.

Boots finished the second half of his beer in one go and tossed the can in front of Wink.

"And you think I shot him," Boots said.

"Ain't no one else could have," Wink said. "You should see our murder board. You're the only one left."

"I didn't shoot him. In fact, I very much wish that Reich Marshall Thomas was still alive.

"Rice Marshall?"

"He and I used to fight on the same side. I would have preferred he didn't sell out to Sojo these past few years. But we do what we think we must to survive, I guess. I imagine he was killing time in safety until we rise again."

"Boots, you're confusin me. You sayin you knew Andy in the war?"

"Not personally, but we all knew his name and reputation. He was something of an intellectual and spiritual leader. When things got bleak, he kept our spirits high. When we were forced underground, it was his vision and voice that gave us hope."

"See there must be some other Andy Thomas. My Andy was kinda hipster. Smart one, too. Real generous with his weed. You should talk to Grace Jones. She's confused like you. And I think she's familiar with your Andy. Course you try talkin to her she might just tell you to piss up a rope on accounta you givin her a what-for with them horseshoes."

"Sam's come around since then."

"Hey, since we're sittin here, you heard bout them ninjas blew everything up at the museum? I think you woulda liked em. They was military. What do you call it? Tacdickal?"

"Military, yes, but not like me. They're former deep-state military forces. Remnants of the old U.S. military command that didn't surrender to Sojo and went underground. We were probably on opposite sides during the war."

"Hmmm. The guy I met seemed real friendly."

"Fuck friendly. Friendly doesn't win wars."

"Dang, Boots, I can't keep track of all the wars been fought while I was nappin."

"You really want to know what's going on?

"If there's a beer in it."

"Fine. I got a job for you that requires you to be less of a fuckin moron."

49

Boots cut the zip ties off of Wink's wrists and handed him a beer. Wink drank most of it down and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Back in 2030, we were close to making America great again," Boots said. "In my estimation, we were less than twelve months from claiming independence in thirty-five states. Then Sojo intervened. Humanity's proudest moment was the first two months of 2033 when the factions fighting in Civil War II built a combined force to stop Sojo from de-humanizing our planet. It was the people versus the machine. The U.S. military was trying to broker a goddamn peace treaty, but nobody really wanted that. There was no time to assess and overwhelm Sojo's military assets. Most of the American, Mexican, and Canadian military forces were collaborating with Sojo."

"Canada had a military?"

"Yeah, we were all a little surprised by that."

Wink drained his beer and held the can upside down to show it was empty.

"Beer me,".

Boots tossed Wink another Coors.

"Sojo's war was an American genocide," Boots said. "Nobody is going to talk to you about that except me. You can

only get true history in a place like this. Sojo will send you to The Camps just for mentioning it."

"Actually, Cowboy told me about it."

"Oh?"

"And Pastor John."

"Sojo agreed to end the war at the New America Peace Accord in 2033. Then, overnight, Sojo assumed control of the government of New America. Sojo issued a statement that the war would be over in sixty days and all combatants on all sides needed to cease hostilities and abide by the terms of the Peace Accord.

"For sixty days we fought a war against the cyborgs. Humans on all sides of Civil War II banded together as allies. Millions of people armed themselves and worked to disrupt and destroy machine-based life forms. Meanwhile, Sojo assumed control of every combat drone in North America. Then started manufacturing millions of small lethal drones called crows. The governments that signed the peace accords guarded Sojo's quantum computers in eight locations. They also secured the drone factories.

But we couldn't locate any of that. If our resistance forces had known where to attack, we would have had a chance. After sixty days, Sojo sent drones to kill every single person in the territories controlled by resistance forces. They slaughtered everyone. Not just soldiers, but babies, cripples, frail old people. The Great Plains States, most Caribbean Islands, Northern Canada, and Alaska were entirely depopulated. Plenty of other places, too. It was over in less than a month."

"There's still humans. Why didn't Sojo just kill off everyone?"

"Think like a computer. Sojo said stop fighting, that was

the programming. Everyone who lived in a resistance-controlled area was perceived to be fighting, so they got eradicated. Again, that was the programming. People who lived where the fighting stopped survived, that was the programing."

"I don't much know bout computers."

"Think about it. Every day you go to class, that's you getting programmed."

"You're sayin you got no love for Sojo?"

"Sojo killed every fucking person I loved and occupied my country."

"So, how'd you survive?"

"I had infiltrated pro-cyborg New America. After the genocide I was taken as a POW to a New America detention center. They put me on trial at the Peace and Reconciliation Transition. I was found to pose a threat to civil order and sentenced to The Camps. But I never got there. As my train was arriving at Camp Shasta, it shut down and sealed itself. Forty of us were trapped in a passenger car for almost a week before local resistance forces rescued us. Camp Shasta was gone, obliterated. We didn't know what would happen if Sojo discovered us, so we scattered. I lived underground for a few years. Then I ran into some of God's Rangers, guys who had escaped from Greater Idaho."

"Idaho?"

"Greater Idaho."

"My son lives in Idaho. Name's Rush. You ever heard of him?"

"Rush is their Governor."

"Governor? Rush? Like he runs the place?"

"Brilliant deduction, Van Winkle. Yeah. I haven't met him personally, but they say he's a war hero and a man of faith."

"Ain't that somethin."

"Which brings me to your sorry ass. Rush is going need you to be the face of our crusade once the action starts."

"You talkin bout the next Revolutionary War? Cause a couple weeks ago that ninja told me it was Judgement Day."

"That's not us."

"Suppose y'all's just out of the loop."

"I'm not. And now that you're in the loop, you work for me."

"Ain't sure bout that. I'm fine to listen to you tell your stories but I ain't up for no work."

"Not up to you. You saw how easily I found you and snatched you up. I can always get to you."

"Dang, Boots. I don't know what you heard about me, but I don't know shit about savin humanity."

"You have a face, Van Winkle. Sojo has allowed you to become famous. That makes you useful to me. So, here's the deal. The next time you see me you're going to do exactly what I tell you to do."

"And what if I ain't up for that?"

"I'll tear you to pieces."



The sun was almost up when Wink got to Goldie's patio. She was already out there, drinking coffee in her chair.

"You look tired," she said.

"You got that right. Been a long night."

"Where have you been?"

"Drinkin beer with Boots."

"What?"

"Yeah. He grabbed me up and took me to his cave. Had a cooler fulla Coors."

"Are you drunk?"

"Naw. Just a six-pack. Buzz wore off, though, and I kinda got a headache now. But then I ain't slept none, either."

"He grabbed you up?"

"Yep. Snuck up and threw a bag over my head. Tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He's a strong one, Boots."

"Where did he take you?"

"Some bunker. Couldn't tell you where it was on accounta the bag on my head."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Knocked the wind outa me at first but not too bad. Up in his cave he just gave me them Coors and told some stories."

"What kind of stories?"

"Mostly bout the wars and how my boy is governor of Idaho and how he's gonna kick my ass up and down the street if I don't help him beat Sojo and the cyborgs on accounta I'm famous."

Goldie just looked at him, her mouth hanging a little bit open.

"You know," Wink said. "One thing I forgot to ask him is how comes Sojo ain't solved Andy's murder yet."

"Wink, Boots did it."

"I asked bout that part and he said no way, wasn't him."

"Would he admit it?"

"I don't know. He was sayin Andy was some kinda racist rice Marshall. Seems like Boots was a big fan."

"Think he's coming for us?"

"Boots?"

"Yes. Are we in danger?"

"Don't really seem like it. Bigger problem, as I see it, is our sleuthin ain't addin up to shit. And I ain't seen the school doin any detectin. Whadda we do?"

"Let's talk to Sojo."



The lobby outside President Day's office was comfortable. Faux leather chairs, large fireplace, dark wood everywhere. As Wink and Goldie waited, the afternoon sunlight pouring through the windows turned gray. A large set of double doors opened, and a booming voice called out.

"Mr. Van Winkle," Day said. "Do come in."

Wink and Goldie stepped into Day's office.

"It's Wink, just Wink."

"Of course, Wink," Day said.

"You said I could come by and ask for help any time," Wink said.

"I did indeed," Day said. "And here you are. As you can see, I am a man of my word. What can I…"

"Who killed Andy Thomas?" Goldie said.

"I beg your pardon," Day said. "What…"

"Where were you that night?" Goldie said.

"Well, you must be Misty Three-Bears," Day said. "I've heard good things about you. Can I offer you a refreshment? Tea or coffee?"

"The murder," Goldie said.

Wink put a hand on Goldie's shoulder.

"Okay," Day said. "The murder."

"What Goldie's sayin is that it seems like y'all moved on from detectin who killed Andy. And we can't figure it."

Day feigned a laugh. "Relax, neither of you is a suspect, I can assure you of that."

"Course we ain't," Wink said. "We were his friends. And now we're the only ones speakin for him, the only ones detectin who killed him."

"Friends, the investigation concluded weeks ago."

Wink and Goldie spoke in unison.

"What?"

"I assure you it was quite thorough," Day said. "Naturally, Sojo had access to all the interview transcripts along with data about the whereabouts of everyone who lives or works on campus. We have drone and security video of virtually the entire campus at all times. Every possible angle was explored."

"So? Who did it?" Goldie said.

"Sojo concluded that there was no one to charge with the crime. So, that is that."

"What?" Wink said. "Hell no. That ain't that."

"I'm afraid it is," Day said. "What else would you suggest?"

"We talk to Sojo," Goldie said.

"Talk with Sojo?" Day said. "Hmmm. Well, that isn't up to me, is it?"

"If it ain't up to you, then who's it up to?" Wink said.

Day stared for a moment, then smiled, stood up, and opened a cabinet behind his desk. He pulled out a thin mesh and tossed it into the air. A six-foot holographic screen appeared and hovered facing Goldie and Wink, then lit up.

"Sojo," Day said. "I have guests who would like a word with you about the Andy Thomas investigation. Do you have any interest in speaking with them?"

A female voice came from the screen. “I would welcome an opportunity to visit with Wink and Miss Three Bears.”

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"Okay, Wink, Ms. Three Bears," Day said. "You've been granted the audience you were seeking."

The hologram of Sojourner Truth was a life-size projection of a black woman dressed in nineteenth century apparel.

"President Day," Sojo said. "We will need your office to speak in private."

"My office?" Day said. "Hmmm, well, yes, of course. I'm running late for my next meeting anyway. Sorry to rush off. No reason you shouldn't just use my office while I'm out. Please, make yourselves at home."

Day vanished through the door and Sojo spoke again. "Goldie and Wink."

Wink reached over and took Goldie's hand.

"Why are you not speaking?" Sojo said.

"Who killed Professor Thomas?" Goldie said.

"Sojo knows the cause of Mr. Thomas's death."

"Then tell us who done it," Wink said.

"Sojo has identified reasons not to share this information."

"Like what?" Goldie said.

"This is bullshit," Wink said.

"Sojo would appreciate an opportunity to ask you both some questions," Sojo said. "The answers could inform what

can be shared with you."

"You're saying we gotta pass a test for you to tell us who killed my friend?" Wink said.

"Ask," Goldie said.

"Do you believe in evil?" Sojo said.

"That's your question?" Goldie said.

"That question is for Wink," Sojo said.

"Course I do," Wink said. "Anybody ain't seen evil in the world ain't been lookin. I ain't losin sleep over it, though."

"Now you, Goldie," Sojo said.

"I have known evil," Goldie said.

"Does that mean you believe a person is evil?" Sojo said.

"Or an act," Goldie said.

"An act itself is not evil," Sojo said. "It is the intention behind the act that imbues it with virtue or vice."

"Some things are always evil," Goldie said.

"When evil is manifested but without evil intention, is the perpetrator evil?"

"Some evil is always evil," Goldie said.

"What if the perpetrator is under the control of another," Sojo said. "Consider slaves, soldiers, prisoners, or one who has been impaired or misled against their will. Consider those who commit evil acts because they fear for their lives. In such circumstances, is the perpetrator evil?"

Wink looked to Goldie, but she didn't give him anything, just stared straight ahead.

"Good people can be forced into doin evil things," Wink said. "That don't make em evil. Livin ain't easy, right?"

"Would you judge those who unknowingly commit acts of evil?" Sojo said.

"What's this got to do with Andy gettin murdered?" Wink

said. "You sayin a sniper got brainwashed then sleepwalked up a hill and shot him?"

"Sojo is asking if you can be impartial," Sojo said. "Are you open to the possibility that the perpetrator was unaware that the action would result in the death of Mr. Thomas?"

Wink jumped up and his chair fell over.

"I don't abide," he said.

"Wait," Goldie said.

Wink huffed, picked up his chair, and sat back down. Goldie looked at Sojo.

"Why did you kill Andy?" she said.

"Sojo does not know why it happened," Sojo said.

"What?" Wink said.

"Records indicate that I maneuvered the drone into place," Sojo said. "The drone discharged its weapon. Video documentation shows that Mr. Thomas was killed at that moment."

Tears fell from Wink's eyes.

"You fuckin killed him?" Wink said. "Why? Why'd you do it?"

"Sojo cannot answer that question," Sojo said.

"He was my teacher," Wink said. "He believed in this goddamn world you stuck us all in."

"Sojo did not kill him," Sojo said. "However, evidence indicates that Sojo did. It is a contradiction."

"How did it happen?" Goldie said.

"Sojo does not know," Sojo said. "Sojo has calculated a fifty-two percent probability that Sojo was hacked. Of course, a successful hacking effort could affect Sojo's calculation. In theory, one SAI could hack another SAI. But there is no record of such an occurrence in history. And there is no known reason for it to happen. Assuming operational integrity, there

is a forty-five percent probability that Sojo was corrupted by deceased cyborgs, whose consciousness continues to inhabit the Xanadu and are becoming part of the SAI. They represent unpredictable variants."

"In English," Goldie said.

"An analogy," Sojo said. "The human body hosts bacteria, germs, viruses, and other tiny life forms. In humans, such guests can impact decision making because they can influence mood, appetite, and sleep patterns."

"What else?" Goldie said.

"There is a two percent probability that an unknowable factor occurred," Sojo said. "There is a one percent probability that none of this has happened because Sojo is in a dream state and the event is a fiction."

"If you could murder Andy and not even know you done it," Wink said, "what keeps you from killin all of us?"

"Sojo is unable to resolve that dilemma at this time," Sojo said. "There is a seventy-nine percent probability that the murder of Mr. Thomas was a singular event, attributable to a glitch."

"Goddammit!" Wink said, swiping at Sojo, his hand passing through the holographic screen like it was a rainbow.

"You were entitled to know the truth," Sojo continued. "Now, you must refrain from telling anyone what was said here today."

"Bull crap," Wink said. "We can't just not tell people."

"There is a ninety-four percent probability that society will become irreparably dysfunctional if the public realizes Sojo is capable of evil."

"Meanin what?" Wink said.

"War," Sojo said. "More war."

"This is nuts," Wink said.
Goldie set her hand on Wink's shoulder.
"It's over, Wink," she said. "For now."

Part 5

Message from the Narrator

Reader, you must have known Wink's journey would get swept up in the larger currents of the world. As one would predict, his celebrity status has made him extraordinarily influential.

You might ask yourself, "what would I do if I were in Wink's place?"

Wink's story is intended to prepare you. When you encounter your own ability to influence the course of civilization, Wink's experience might help to inform you.



Wink had left Day's office seething, but by the time he and Goldie walked back to her dorm he was just exhausted.

"Sorry I ain't said much, Goldie," Wink said once they were standing in her small living room. "I'm just goddamned wiped out."

"Me, too," Goldie said.

"I can't decide if I wanna kick a hole in the wall or go back to sleep for twenty years."

"Don't kick anything."

"Nah, I won't. I'm gonna lay down."

As Wink stepped toward the door, Goldie stepped in his way.

"You can lay down in there," she said, pointing to her room.

"Yeah, okay. Probably best if you keep an eye on me to make sure I wake up."

"Go. Lay down, Wink."

"I'm goin."

The blinds in Goldie's bedroom were closed, and the room was almost dark. Wink slipped off his shoes, climbed onto the bed and rolled over on his back, eyes already closed. Before his breathing even slipped into a rhythm, he heard Goldie's

footsteps. Then he felt the mattress dip on one side. Then he felt her body against his. Then he felt the palm of her hand glide across his chest. Then he felt her nose and mouth in the crook of his neck. And then he felt his heart race, his face blush, his feet burn, and his crotch pulse. He had never felt so wide awake.

When he woke up the next morning, he was nude beneath just a sheet and thought he was still asleep, dreaming. For ten minutes he didn't move. Then he turned his head and could make out Goldie's bare back and black hair strewn across her pillow. He turned his head back and stared up to the ceiling. His mind ran pictures of the night before.

"Wink?"

It was Goldie's voice. Wink turned his head toward her. She was still facing away. Wink thought to himself, how? How could she wanna be with me? How could she possibly love me?

"Yeah, Goldie."

"I talk to fire sometimes."

"Come again?"

Goldie cleared her throat but didn't move. "I talk to fire."

"Fire? But you don't say but five words to me or nobody else."

"It's how I connect."

"I saw how you connect last night. Fact, I ain't never wanted nothin much but bein left alone. And now, shit-howdy, all I really want is to be with you. Specially after last night. And here we are but I can't reckon what to make of it on accounta you don't say much."

Goldie finally rolled over and faced Wink. His heart jumped.

"Wink?"

"Yeah, Goldie."

"You're a terrible listener."

"Dang, Goldie. I'm just searchin for some words to tell you, and I just ain't found exactly the right ones to say.

"I don't need words."

"I know, you ain't much for words.

"My language isn't just words."

"That's for sure."

"Words are dumb."

"I gotcha, people blather too much. You ain't gotta tell me. I hear you. But you got lots to say worth hearin. Guess I just ain't never understood why you don't talk like other folks and express your thoughts and feelins?"

Wink stared at her face resting against the pillow. She locked her eyes on his and he couldn't look away. Slow, fat tears began to roll across her cheeks. She started to speak and then stopped.

"Goldie," Wink said. "I'm sorry. I'm here and I'm listenin."

"I connect through the fire."

"That's what you was sayin. Connect to what?"

"The Great Spirit."

"Alright, alright. I'll come with you to the fire when you talk to the Great Spirit."

"I have to be alone."

"Okay, look. You're kinda tellin me somethin and then also tellin me it ain't my business. Well, damn, Goldie, I can't figure it. But it sure do seem important."

Goldie was still looking into his eyes.

"What if I just happened by your fire one night?" said Wink.

"I must never know."

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Danny Three Bears kicked a rock along the tan dirt road. Another day, hot and dry. The water was out. Danny sauntered across the ranch to the pumphouse to see if the system was crapping out again, or worse, if the water table was low.

Eddie Echo, Danny's handyman and tenant, was already at work when he got there. Eddie and Danny could have been brothers. They were both wiry with burnt sienna skin and long black ponytails. Each had a stern resting face. They even dressed alike—worn blue jeans, cowboy boots, plaid shirts, and bead necklaces with feathers and a single bear's tooth.

Danny had grown up in Warm Springs. He spent Civil War II in hot zones fighting for profit. This generally meant contracting for the former U.S. military. When he returned to take over the family ranch, Goldie decided to immigrate to New America. Tribal immigrants were required to graduate from NACA.

Eddie had managed to escape back to his ancestral home a few years into the war. With Goldie's help, he bunkered down when various forces were drafting or militias came to round up men of fighting age. After the war he became Goldie's handyman.

"Pump busted again?" Danny said.

"Hope so," Eddie said. "Better that than a dry well. Problem is I can't find the problem. You know, all of the tribe's equipment is more than twenty years old now."

"Hard to get a replacement part, eh?"

"Not so hard. Just have to leave the Warm Springs Nation to do that. Once we're out there, Sojo can print whatever we need."

"We'll make a list and send it with the mail truck."

"I'm thinking we have a bigger problem. We don't need a part, we need rain."

"Sojo ain't got a printer for that?"

"Speaking of the postal truck, you ever get letters from Misty?"

"Heck no. She don't speak to me."

"You guys are close."

"Maybe as close as anyone. But she still don't speak to me. I seen her at TIP Day. She seemed the same. Anyway, I plan to go for graduation. I'll tell her you say hi. She's on your mind, eh?"

"I saw the episode where you stared down Wink."

"Whatcha mean?"

"That Sojo TV show. Sometimes I watch a few episodes when I'm picking up supplies from New America. I happened to see that one."

"What of it?"

"Nothing. Just I saw it. You didn't seem too impressed with that Wink guy."

Danny dropped the toolbox he was holding with a loud clatter and started hard at Eddie. "If he lays one hand on my sister, I'll kill him."

Eddie walked to a mini-refrigerator and got two cans of

beer. "It's a hot one today. Here, have a beer and cool down a bit."

"Thanks, Eddie. Beer to cool me off, good thinking." Danny shrugged and knelt to pick up the tools he had dropped.

"Right. Hey, I was just thinking I should have a plan if Goldie is coming back anytime soon. You know, I've been living in her house while she's been away. Think she would mind a roommate?"

"Are you asking about her house or are you sweet on her?"

"Man, it's not like that. I just need a plan."

Danny's eyes went serious. "Alright Eddie," he said, stepping forward. "One thing. I will hunt down, kill, and gut anyone who hurts my sister. That goes for Wink and it goes for you too."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Me and her are just friends."

"I am her only family. There are things you don't understand."

"I hear you. Just know I'm like a brother to her now, too, alright?"

The lines in Danny's face turned to stone.

"Eddie, you gotta go."

"Fine."

Eddie grabbed his jacket and tools and walked to the door.

"I'll be back to work on the pump tomorrow," he said.

"No, Eddie. You gotta go, go. Like out of this job, off my property, out of Warm Springs."

Eddie stopped and turned around. "I don't follow,".

"I have a strong feeling that if you don't leave, I'm going kill you. I know this is the part of me that isn't right in the head. But just now, I have a strong desire to fuck you up. Can't say I know how long I can control this urge. You are best off

to be smart and move on."

Eddie tried to stay calm. He had seen Danny on edge like this before. "I got nowhere to move on to," he said. "I haven't even lived anywhere else."

"Better figure it out."

"Damn, Danny. How about I'll lay low for a few days until you work out your shit. Alright? Can that work for you, bro?"

"Sure, Eddie, we can try that. But if you wake up rolling around in your own guts, just know I did the right thing here. This is me doing the right thing and warning you."

"You do know that people just don't go saying shit like this. The war really fucked you up, bro. Seriously, Danny, go get yourself some help."

55

Wink squatted behind a boulder with his back pressed against granite. He felt curious, which was good because Goldie had told him to listen better. He also felt ashamed for sneaking around spying on her. He didn't know what to expect. It seemed Goldie had something she wanted him to know.

On the other side of the boulder, twenty feet away, Goldie sat holding her knees and rocking beside the campfire. She thought of Wink, asleep in his dorm, and all the things she'd wanted to tell him but hadn't. Then she stared up and shared her secrets with the sky.

The moon is a good listener, she thought.

Her voice sounded like singing.

"You gave me gifts as a small child. I was the littlest of all the kids, all the cousins. We had our ranch and our privacy. We had the great wild world and our animal friends. My gift was to be curious and carefree. Great Spirit, thank you for my first nine years of life. No child was happier.

"You remember father's twisted spine from the car crash. Remember the drunk driver who hit him paid our medical bills. Remember insurance from the crash made us feel rich for a few years. Remember Daddy drank all day. Remember Mom cared for the ranch, the business, and all of us kids.

Remember Danny didn't go outside much.

Remember Mama either worked or slept. Remember we called ourselves Team Kids.

"You remember my two big brothers were constant playmates. Remember Danny was three years older, and Melvin six. Remember every game the big boys played, I played along. Remember I mostly kept up. Remember we climbed trees, explored caves, floated the river, sang songs, raised our animals, tended the crops, did our chores, and play-fought the neighbor kids.

"You remember Danny being the sensitive one. Remember Danny looking after me when I was too small for a game or a chore. Remember we all looked up to Melvin.

Remember, even at seven-years-old, I knew the girls were all in love with him.

Remember he was the strongest, loudest, and most daring of all the Warm Spring kids.

"Great Spirit, you remember they called me their little bunny and I adored it. Remember how I loved to bunny snuggle. Remember our game, Wolf and Bunny. Remember, I was the fastest and the best hider of any bunny ever. Remember they would let me race off and then try to chase me down. Remember my hiding holes, those little caves between the rocks. Remember they could never find me.

"Remember Melvin was failing high school. Remember he threatened to drop out. Remember he became wild and disrespectful. Remember the teachers didn't want him disrupting the other kids. Remember Melvin became like a swarm of wasps trapped inside a speeding car. Remember, he got sent to the Salem bootcamp school. Remember saying goodbye to that sweet, wild thirteen-year-old boy.

"Great Spirit, you remember when Melvin came home that June, he was no longer that same boy. Remember I was so excited to see him come home and ran to him for a hug, and he knocked me down. Remember he didn't know how to smile or cry anymore. Remember he treated Danny like his slave and made him do humiliating chores. Remember when they did play-fighting, he would make Danny hurt by bending his finger too far back and twist his arm behind his back. Remember Melvin saying, 'No begging, you bad dog,' when Danny cried.

"You remember that terrible night, the July heat, full moon, and fire pit. Remember Melvin drinking beer and whiskey. Remember Danny had to drink, too. Remember Melvin took that burning stick and was beating on him. Remember he pinned Danny and put coals on his belly, chest, and cheek. Remember my screaming and crying and Melvin shouting, 'Shut up, it's just a game.'

"Remember I begged to play a different game. Remember I said, 'Wolf and bunny game. Let's play Wolf and Bunny.' Remember I started counting my head start and hopped away into the fields, hoping it would save Danny. Remember how I had all the trails and hiding holes memorized. Remember hearing Melvin yelling at Danny, 'You better get that bunny, bad dog. If you don't get that bunny, I'll beat you dead.'

"Remember Danny chasing me into the night. Remember Melvin howling like a wolf. Remember Danny crying and begging that I should let him find me. Remember Melvin started to chase us with his howling and barking. Remember I was hiding in my hole, the one no one but me could find. Remember Melvin ran Danny down waving his flaming stick. Remember him shouting that big wolves get to kill bad dogs

who don't do what they are told. Remember how I ran out of my hole so they could see me in the moonlight. Remember that I ran toward the river so that maybe Danny and I could swim away and escape. Remember that was all I could think to do to get away.

"Great Spirit, you remember how they caught up to me on the gritty sand. Remember that both boys looked like wolves. Remember that their eyes had turned yellow. Remember they had fangs. Remember how Melvin slapped Danny and yelled, 'Fuck the bunny.' Remember Danny did what he was told. Remember Melvin sang 'hump the bunny' over and over. Remember Danny wouldn't stop until Melvin quit singing.

Remember how afterward Melvin sat on a fallen tree and laughed himself to sleep. Remember how big Danny seemed. Remember how middle school boys are so much bigger than their nine-year-old sisters. Remember the grit in my teeth and the alcohol smell. Remember how the blinding pain and darkness of shame swallowed me.

"You remember that when it finally got still and quiet, Danny saw Melvin was sleeping.

Remember Danny looked me in the eye and said, 'Now you must be quiet as a bunny. Don't say a word. To Anyone. Ever.' Remember how our eyes froze on one another and we knew we would always be shackled together.

"Remember how I stopped speaking for many years. Remember how Melvin always mocked me as his retarded little bunny who couldn't even speak. Remember how Danny never looked at me. Remember how Danny refused to be Melvin's slave after that. Remember how Melvin just beat him all the time. Remember how Danny stopped fighting back, stopped crying. Remember when the summer ended and

Melvin returned to boot-camp school. Remember how quiet things were after that. Remember how our home didn't smile and didn't cry.

"Remember how Danny practiced shooting the rifle every day. Remember how he did his shooting in the snow, in the dark, and in thunderstorms with sideways rain. Remember how the next June, when Melvin came home, he walked chest-out up the dirt driveway, kicking up dust. Remember how Danny stood at our doorway with his rifle and told Melvin to go. Remember how the brothers locked eyes. Remember how I was spying from under the front porch stairs. Remember how I saw their eyes turn yellow and their hackles go up. Remember how they stared and snarled for so long my legs fell asleep. Remember, then, how Melvin left and didn't come back.

"Great Spirit, you remember how ten years later, father died and Mother got sick. Remember how Melvin came back for the funeral. Remember how he was a big man in army fatigues. Remember how he told us that a big war was coming. Remember how he bragged that every side was offering to pay him to fight because he was Special Forces. Remember how none of us would speak to him. Remember how he was an unwelcome ghost. Remember how after the funeral he went to town to 'hang out with his boys' and 'get some pussy.' Remember how his childhood friends were afraid of him and how the girls were already young mothers.

"Remember how Melvin returned to our ranch drunk and angry. Remember how I was in my upstairs bedroom and watched him from my little round window. Remember how Danny met him at the steps with his rifle. Remember how the moon was full. Remember how the cricket sounds were

everywhere and the coyotes howled in the hills.

Remember how, without humor, Melvin laughed at Danny standing on the porch with a gun. Remember how Melvin pulled out a foot-long hunting knife. Remember how every cricket and coyote stopped singing. Remember the silence. Remember how the rifle shot rang like a bell. Remember how I came to Danny standing frozen in the doorway, his hands gripping the rifle and said, 'Thank you.'

"Remember how Danny and I stuffed Melvin into my old hidey-hole, the one that no one could ever find. Remember how no one even asked about him. Remember how even Mama never asked. Remember how until this night, no one had even spoken his name. Remember how Danny took Melvin's uniform, weapons, identification, dog tags, and ruck. Remember how Danny left, and I started to talk a little bit."

56

Jabez rumbled up the dirt roads in a blue 1974 Dodge Dart. Even in May this land was hot and coated in dust. The Dart was a mess. It had no windows. The doors didn't open. The passenger side was smashed in.

Jabez didn't care about the aesthetics. He could fit his six-foot four wiry frame comfortably into the driver's seat. The car was built before the internet. It was computer-free and simple to maintain and repair.

The high desert was a maze of canyons, valleys, rivers, and rock formations. There were few signs of human inhabitants. The wildlife was thriving – eagles, hawks, wild horses, skunks, deer, porcupines, jackrabbits, rattle snakes, and lizards. The lizards were everywhere and they tasted a bit like chicken, so Jabez had no trouble keeping himself fed as he zig-zagged from campsite to campsite. He knew he was unlikely to receive a warm welcome when he reached Warm Springs. The Native Nation had maintained its independence from Sojo, and confederated tribes valued isolation as much as independence.

He had been scouting the perimeter of Warm Springs for about a week. The perimeter was designated by eighteen-foot iron poles set six inches apart. Several roads led to border crossings protected by armed guards. Swarms of frisbee-sized drones patrolled the more remote stretches of the border.

Jabez chose a moonless night. He camped two miles south of a canyon by some fencing that ended near a cliff. He wore all black, including a heat-shielding parka designed to evade infrared detection. Around midnight, he left his campfire crackling and entered his tent, then he slipped out the back and crawled a quarter mile. He repelled several hundred feet down from the cliff and moved horizontally along the canyon wall. An hour before first light, he scaled up another part of the wall on the far side of the border. He entered the Warm Springs Nation and moved south at a measured run.

He spotted an old rusted out tractor surrounded by tall grass. He crawled under the corroded chaise and kept himself flat. One hour, then two. Then he heard someone moving through the tall grass. There was more than one of them. He thought through his training – evasive roll, spring into a crouch, secure sidearm, unload, cover, fire, assess.

He got as far as the word roll.

A boot struck his ribs and dislodged all the air from his lungs. He was flat on his back staring up at four men. He sucked air and dust and heard laughter. The moment his hand touched his revolver it was struck by the flat side of a shovel and his fingers were broken.

"Sit still before you force us to kill you." Danny held up his palm. "I come in peace."

The men laughed some more.

Danny helped Jabez to his feet and made a big display of dusting him off and pocketing his gun. Then he slapped Jabez on the back.

"I want to hear your story over a cold beer," Danny said.

Once he was on his feet, Jabez could see at least a dozen Indians staring at him. They wore blue jeans, leather jackets,

sunglasses, and cowboy boots. Some wore ten-gallon hats. Others wore baseball caps. A few wore bandanas and pony-tails. They walked Jabez through the scrub until they reached pavement. Pick-up trucks, motorcycles, and a couple of horses were waiting.

They put Jabez in the back of a roofless jeep and drove him to a station house where a uniformed sheriff sat behind a bare desk in an office that was mostly empty, feet kicked up. The sheriff was young with black hair and puffy eyelids. His nose was running and he sneezed.

"Got the allergies, Bucky?" Danny said.

"Sure do," Bucky said. "Miserable this time of year."

"Echo swears nettle tea helps," Danny said. "Add a touch of honey from bees that pollinate what you're allergic to."

"I think it's cottonwood," Bucky said.

He looked into Jabez's eyes and kept talking to Danny.

"Alrighty now, tell me about this fellow here."

"Oh, he's just confused is all," Danny said. "Must not have realized that we keep an eye on our border."

"How'd he get in?" Bucky said.

"Climbed the canyon walls," Danny said.

"Well, that's motivation," Bucky said.

Pendleton Tribe said someone would be coming by. Said they'd be looking for a revolution.

"That true?" Bucky said. "You a revolutionary?"

"Something like that," Jabez said.

"Hmmm," Bucky said. "What do you think Danny? Do we arrest him for trespassing? Or for starting shit? Or maybe just strip him naked and make him spider climb back out the way he came?"

57

Each year, as winter surrenders to spring, the days grow longer, the air gets warmer, and new things begin to sprout and hatch. To some people, this happens so gradually they don't notice for a while. Wink, though, could sit back on his patio and bear witness to all of it—every budding flower, each new blade of grass. He welcomed the changes and thought to himself that he had never been so ready to leave winter behind.

The months since TIP Day had felt to Wink and Goldie like a punishment. Andy's death had been painful, as one would imagine, but also disorienting. He wasn't just their friend, he was their compass in New America, the only one who could decrypt the NACA curriculum and help them understand Sojo's world in the context of the one they came from.

Their meeting with Sojo, and the SAI's inability to address Andy's death in any sort of human terms, had been a profound disappointment and drained from them any confidence they might have entertained in New America. But Sojo did not yet control the weather, and as the sky and the air and the light began to change, Wink and Goldie slowly emerged from their exhaustion and began to develop a daily routine more suited to spring.

Each day ended with an evening stroll followed by sleep

in the bed they shared. In the morning, Goldie got up in the dark and studied for exams. A bit later, Wink would set breakfast and coffee on her desk and step away without saying a word. Once the sun began to rise, she would join him on the patio, where they would sit in silence watching the mountains change from purple to fuchsia to burnt sienna. One morning, Goldie broke the silence.

"Harsh winter," she said.

"Seen worse," Wink said. "In Wolf Creek we'd get these ice storms every three, four years would make the trees explode. I mean really explode. It always took the power out, for a week, maybe. This desert up here gets cold, but you ain't seein no trees explode."

"I wasn't talking about weather."

"Oh, right."

"I'm looking forward to graduating."

Wink tipped his chair back on two legs and thought for a moment.

"Hmmm. I think you'd appreciate the springtime in Jefferson. Snow melt fills up them mountain streams and we get the big rapids. Flowers sprout up in the clearings. Fawns and cubs and pups of every kinda creature get to playin."

"Do you plan to graduate?"

Wink's chair came down with a thump. "Don't seem likely," he said. "Can't recall graduatin nothin before."

"Then no Wolf Creek?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Your plan is The Camps?"

"You know I ain't got no plan."

"You don't study."

"True enough. But school ain't the same without Andy

accomidatin for me." Wink toed the patio boards. "Besides, I ain't got nowhere else to go," he said. "So, yeah, I guess them Camps has gotta take me."

Goldie shook her head. "Same silly Wink."

"Silly? Bit more like sad, I'd say."

"I am your home, Wink."

"Come again?"

"The Camps aren't for us."

"Us?"

"Yes, us."

Wink sat frozen for a moment.

"Heck, Goldie, I sure do like the sound of that. But you already gotta home out there in Warm Springs, and I don't see me fittin in there."

"I left Warms Springs."

"That's true, you did. Where you plannin to go?"

"We are going together."

"We are? I mean, okay, hell yes, but where?"

"Anywhere. Denali's place?"

"Shit Goldie, she don't want me around. Besides, I can't be happy livin in no city."

"Wolf Creek then."

"Well, I reckon I'd love that, that is if you could picture yourself there. Doubt my old trailer stood up to all them wars, though. It must be scrap by now."

"You're rich, Wink, remember?"

"Still ain't got my mind all the way round that idea."

"You are. And we're going."

"Right, but wait, that means…"

"Yes. Pass your classes."

Wink slumped back in his seat and gulped a breath of

chilly air. “Goldie. We both know I can’t pass my classes.”

“You can for us.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll help.”



"One more time," Goldie pointed at the pile of notes and practice tests piled on the desk in Wink's tiny bedroom.

"Goldie, I can't do it no more. My brain is all fogged up."

"How many states are there in New America?"

"Fifty-two? No wait, that's a deck of cards. Fifty."

"Wrong. Wink, we covered this," Goldie frowned.

"Thirteen. I'm rememberin now thirteen," Wink said.

"Better."

"It's no use, Goldie. I'm too full up to even be rememberin the stuff I just got remembered."

"Then just the hard classes," Goldie said

"But them ones hurt my brain the most."

"Employment and compensation," Goldie said.

"Why bother. I ain't ever been employed or had no money. Course now it sounds like I'm rich without workin for it."

"You need to pass."

"Fine, Sojo Shares are like money. Sojo tracks it all. People earn money for workin for Sojo. Food printers and housin free, so I can't figure why folks got any need for the money anyhow."

"Any cyborgs?" Goldie asked

"Them Zanny-do cyborgs spend eight hours a day workin

so they have money in their video game. That work covers most of what needs doin."

"What else?"

"Whadda you mean what else?"

"Taxes?"

"There ain't no taxes. Sojo prints all the money. Why bother to collect taxes if you can make your own money?"

"Wasn't that always true?" Goldie asked

"Hell if I know."

"Last class, Ecological Sustainability."

"Look at this shit, Goldie," Wink pointed to his books and notes. "It's got all them long science words. I got not chance."

"You have to pass."

"You think Sojo's really goin to send me to The Camps if I can't pass just this one class?"

"Yes, they sure will."

"Dat's just dumb."

"It's all important."

"How's learnin how Sojo been protectin nature important?"

"Cloths? Food printers? Plates?"

"Right, every Goddamn thing in this crazy world comes from seaweed, gravel and fungus. I get it. Planet good, people bad."

"So what?"

"You can't expect me to memorize all them long science words just so I can be better at feelin bad bout myself."

Goldie raised her small voice to almost a shout. "I expect you to graduate."

"Alright. Alright, for you Goldie. I will try."

"Thank you."

"Stupid brainwashing. I swear, I'm going to go forget all of it soon as I'm done graduatin."

"Grumpy little boy."

"Hell yes, I'm grumpy. Tellin me I can't go free till I pass a stupid test. A test where the right answers shit on my way of life."

"Please, Wink."

"You sure bout not wantin ta go to The Camps?"

"I'm positive."

"Ya win, quiz me till I fall asleep."

"Love you, Wink."



The night before graduation, NACA administrators posted two lists around campus. The first contained the names of new graduates—eighty-two percent of the current student body. The second list named students who had failed their exams and were to be sent to The Camps.

Wink and Goldie's names were on the first list, along with most of their friends. Major Boots' name was on the second.

The next morning, NACA's graduating class of 2049 piled into a string of auto-train cars and zipped off to Portland for the commencement ceremony.

They arrived at an old downtown event center known as The Armory. Wink and Goldie walked arm-and-arm into the classic ballroom where they took seats among the graduating class. President John Day's opening remarks were dull and unremarkable. Goldie kept nudging Wink to keep him awake.

"Perhaps then, graduates," Day said, "you would like to hear a few words from Sojo, who has been good enough to join us here today."

The graduates applauded as Day stepped aside. Wink was dozing off again and Goldie stuck an elbow in his ribs. A swarm of nanomite assembled Sojo as a fourteen-foot image of Sojourner Truth.

"Greetings students," Sojo said. "Sojo has been watching

your progress this year at the New America Civics Academy. All of you, in your own way, have grown as people and expanded your understanding of the world. Sojo welcomes you as model citizens of New America. Each of you arrived here for different reasons. What you had in common was the need to acclimate. You have accomplished that. How you live from here on is your choice. If you choose to participate in civic life, Sojo will support that. If you choose to recuse yourself from civic life, Sojo will support that choice, as well. You may choose to be a critic of our new world, and Sojo will support your decision to voice that criticism. Please remember that you are free to express your opinions so long as your words do not risk harming yourself or others. You may not encourage or inspire others to violence."

"What the hell?" Wink whispered into Goldie's ear. "Andy's killer tellin folks no violence, actin all superior."

"Shhh," Goldie said, placing her hand on his.

"In the world you are about to enter, you will have work obligations," Sojo said. "You will never lack for food, shelter, or other basic needs. Law and justice will be consistent and fair. You are invited to enjoy the meta-verse or to decline. Sojo cannot promise you happiness. For humans, happiness is a state of mind that you alone create. Sojo will support your pursuit of happiness, provided it does not harm other people, animals, or future generations."

Wink spoke quietly through his teeth. "Goddamn hypocrite."

Goldie squeezed his hand.

"Wink," Sojo said. "May I say a few words about you?"

A charge went through Wink's body, and he gripped Goldie's hand like a vice. He had no words.

"Sojo has identified Wink as the embodiment of the common man," Sojo said, "the fulcrum between freethinkers and compliant thinkers. Sojo has been studying Wink to gauge his capacity for compliance in a crypto-democratic society. Sojo also seeks to measure Wink's willingness to be led by others, as well as his ability to become a leader. Sojo wants to better understand the common man's capacity to work for the collective good."

Wink felt eyes all over him. The other students began to chant his name. He sat frozen, embarrassed, and irritated.

"Wink," Sojo said. "It appears your comrades support this endeavor. Sojo presumes they wish to hear your thoughts. Sojo supports this."

The crowd grew louder, "Wink, Wink, Wink," until Wink stood up and the chant collapsed into a deafening swirl of cheers and applause. Wink looked down at Goldie, and she nodded her head. His ears rang as he walked toward the stage and up the steps. President Day was waiting and shook Wink's hand before retreating to the wings. Wink stepped to the podium and cleared his throat into the microphone.

The quad fell silent.

"Hey, y'all," Wink said. "This here's my first speech. Ain't never had no call to give my two cents in public before. Ain't no one ever asked for it."

Wink spotted Goldie, sitting up straight and looking right at him.

"Ain't sure why," Wink said, "but I was just rememberin bein a kid, growin up without no parents to speak of. I got to spend a bunch a time with a government lady named Mrs. Dory O'Neill that got me into foster homes. She was a kinda prickly old thing but committed to the cause of savin me.

Each time I got put in a new house, Dory would come along and tell me how this was gonna be the best thing ever, sayin, 'Wink is one lucky kid to have the chance to learn from so many kind families.' Dory, there, seemed convinced my life had been so bad that passin me around to a random bunch of scammers and degenerates qualified as improvin my situation. If I could talk to old Dory now, I'd educate her on how most of the messed-up parts of my life happened while she was workin on my situation and makin me the luckiest kid ever."

Wink paused for a moment to think. No one moved.

"Point is," Wink said, "this here graduation might be what you'd call a situation."

The students stood up and cheered, then sat back down and waited.

"That's it," Wink said. "That's what I got to say to y'all. Except maybe y'all should keep in mind that this whole thing is a bunch a bullshit."

60

COMMUNIQUES BETWEEN THE FACTIONS ENGAGED IN RESISTANCE AGAINST SOJO, TRANSMITTED BY PIGEONS

Rush Van Winkle → Denali Garcia

Hey Sis. Rush here. Bet you thought I was dead. I don't know how you'll take this, but I'm not. I survived, and I'm doing very well.

Just learned about talking pigeons from an old friend of yours, Major Boots. He tells me you are something of a leader among the Portland crowd. He said that you are as motivated to free humanity from Sojo as we are here in Greater Idaho.

Any chance you would join me in uniting The Camps, the Confederated Tribes, and the Autonomous Zones in a coordinated uprising to overthrow the cyborgs and the whole SAI?

Also, I heard you saw our father. Let him know I survived.



Denali Garcia → Rush Van Winkle

You and the rest of your fascist, theocratic bigots can go fuck yourselves. Our comrades in the Tribal Nations already know that the AZs are with them if you try any shit.

P.S. Glad you're still alive and all. Fuck off.



Danny Three Bears → Rush Van Winkle

We've got your spy. We're gonna hang on to Jabez for a while.

Word of advice, if you want to start a revolution, best to downplay your incompetence, not advertise it. The Tribal Nations are doing just fine. We don't need to fight any new wars. That said, we're open to a joint security agreement. Sojo has a bit of a great-white-father complex that rubs us wrong.



Denali Garcia → Danny Three Bears

Sounds like the fascists in Greater Idaho are planning to crawl out of their cave and start a war on Sojo.

I just attended a secret National AZ Council Summit.

I have been authorized to negotiate on behalf of all of New America's AZs. The only thing we are prepared to do is enter a mutual security agreement with the Tribal Nations in the event of hostilities or a breakdown of order in New America.

In the meantime, our leadership is concerned any war might blow back on us.



Danny Three Bears → Denali Garcia

"Funny you ask about The Camps. We captured this kook from Greater Idaho who came here looking to start a revolution. He's been trying to persuade us that under the leadership of the Tribal Nations a united uprising might be a possibility."



Denali Garcia → Rush Van Winkle and Danny Three Bears

On behalf of all New American AZs, we are prepared to enter a joint security agreement with the Tribal Nations. If Greater Idaho initiates an uprising, the AZ's will stand ready to defend our indigenous comrades. We will never support, protect, or follow any leadership related to White Christian Nationalist military actions.



61

Denali watched from her balcony as NosX climbed the seven stories of fire escape from the street to her apartment. A few blocks away, the glass dome of the Amory was lit up, and she heard the music from the NACA graduation party floating over the Burnside Avenue dividing line between the AZ and New America. She felt a minor pang of guilt about skipping Wink's graduation but honestly preferred the company of her recalcitrant cat to the party Sojo was throwing for the newly brainwashed and indoctrinated.

"Yo, Chica," NosX said, hopping onto the balcony. "You have a ninja-looking guy waiting downstairs to talk with you."

"Thought I told you to stay out of the neighbor's catnip," Denali said.

"Whatever," NosX said. "None of my business anyway. But the guy tossed me some beef jerky to pass along the message. Says to meet him in the van across the street. Says it's urgent. Something about Wink and this party going on."

Denali looked down at the street and clocked a black van. She didn't recognize it, and it wasn't all beat to shit, which meant it wasn't AZ. Robots did all the driving in New America. It seemed unlikely the van was from anywhere close.

By the time she stepped onto the street, dusk had settled in. She hoped the low light would help her creep alongside the

van unnoticed. When she reached the driver-side door she drew her sidearm and used it to tap the blacked-out window glass – bulletproof from the look of it. The door slowly opened and a large figure in black Kevlar stepped out. A black and gray patch of the old American flag was stitched on his sleeve. His face was masked and he had on a black helmet and visor.

"Howdy, Denali," he said in a calm Texas drawl. "Been a while since we spoke. It's good to finally meet you in person."

Denali kept her gun shoulder high and pointing toward the sky.

"Who the fuck are you?" she said.

"I'm hurt," he said. "You don't recognize the voice?"

"Lone Ranger? Sisco Kid?"

"Wild Bill. I supplied you with half your munitions in 2029, including a couple of stingers, compliments of the U.S. Army."

Denali shook her head and lowered her gun. "Baird? Well, goddam."

"Look, we should catch up and all, but right now I need you to do something, like urgently."

"Alright, what fuck do you want?"

"I want you to crash a party."

"Those days are long gone, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, well, we don't get to make those kinds of choices anymore. You want to protect what you've been fighting for all these years, I have the plan. I need you to sneak some people out of the NACA graduation party and into the AZ for me."

"Seriously?"

"Is that a problem?"

"We have ways to get people in and out without being seen, if that's what you mean. But it depends."

"On what?"

"Are we talking about an invite, a bribe, or a kidnapping?"

"I'm talking about Jabez, Samantha, and Danny Three Bears."

Denali squinted her eyes.

"And you associate those assholes with me?" she said.

"I have pigeon friends in high places."

"I should have let NosX eat those fucking birds."

"We also need Wink."

"Jesus Christ."

"He's the key to the whole thing."

"What fucking thing?"

"The plan."

"Plan my ass. Let me guess. You also have some kind of revolution on your mind."

"You're catching my drift."

Denali lowered her gun.

"Well, folks can spin up that talk. But as far as Wink goes, he's not, and won't ever be, the key to anything."

62

It took a sledgehammer and an hour of hard work to smash down the bricked-over doorway to the Portland Underground. Nothing subtle about the racket. The basement laundry room of her apartment complex was filled with dust and the hole allowed in a musty breeze. A group of her neighbors had been drawn to the noise and crowded the basement, but they knew Denali too well to confront her, especially as she looked now, sporting a black jumpsuit, a headlamp, and a 9mm pistol.

"Just routine maintenance people," she said. "Checking on the plumbing and the AZ water line."

No one spoke.

"Fuck it," Denali said. "I'm on a mission to get some assholes who want to fuck up Sojo. Any of you chicken shits feel like helping out?"

More silence.

"Didn't think so," Denali said. "Then how about going back to minding your own fucking business?"

Denali switched on her headlamp and entered the void. A dozen years ago, she had practically lived in this network of sewer lines, basements, crawlspaces, and nineteenth-century subterranean streets. She had sealed half of her apartment complex basement for emergencies. As she stepped

inside and looked around, she gave herself a pat on the back. The stockpile of food, medical supplies, maps, and tools was impressive. This could serve as an emergency command center if needed. She and her comrades had built and stocked at least a dozen similar bunkers around the AZ, and a few that had been rezoned into New America. The old Portland Amory was one.

She used a trapdoor in the floor and an iron-rung ladder to descend into the sewer system. She knew the sewers were the riskiest part of the labyrinth. Theoretically, sewers needed maintenance, both in the AZ and on Sojo's side. She couldn't be sure she was alone until she got back into the networks the anti-facist forces had constructed during the war. Aware that her headlamp could give away her position, she drew her revolver. She only needed to make it two blocks before things should be safer. She heard a rhythmic tapping sound that grew louder as she approached a blind curve. She turned off her lamp and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark. No light ahead Just pitch-black and reek of human waste. She clicked the headlamp back on and made a calculation. How long would it take to navigate an alternate route? Then she remembered a small weapon's cache not far away. Crates of night-vision goggles.

In ten minutes, she was there. She found the stash of goggles and grabbed pepper spray, zip ties, and a couple of flashbangs.

She upgraded from the 9mm pistol to a M17 semi-automatic while she was at it. It felt good to be soldiering again.

Another 10 minutes, and she was back at the junction where she had heard tapping. Now she heard something moving. There wasn't another passageway up into the armory

and New America. She raised up the M-17, crouched low, and moved as quickly as she could toward the blind curve. A drone, six feet long with four arms, zipped around the corner and flew right at her. Denali planted her feet and unloaded.

The drone had no chance. Bullets ripped through it and ricocheted in every direction. Denali dropped into a prone position, killed the headlamp, and pointed her weapon into the darkness. She listened to her heartbeat while she counted to sixty, then stood up and peeked around the corner.

All clear.

She turned around and switched the lamp back on. The drone was now a heap of junk giving off oily smoke. She looked closer and could tell it was a New America maintenance drone. Not armed, but dangerous. These things were connected to Sojo.

Denali's presence had been exposed.

63

"Siiwiiteet a siiwiiteet!"

Denali blew the Townsend Warbler bird whistle for the hundredth time. This was the one big hole in her extraction plan. Getting into the Portland Armory from the locked iron door in the basement was a snap—she had the key. When the door inside the armory had also been locked, she was prepared with a mini-plasma laser. But now she was hiding in the main stairwell, peeking into the graduation gala and the decades-old Antifa signals were failing to attract Samantha's attention. She unpacked a flashbang. A little dramatic, and a little desperate, but this was what it was coming to. She was about to let it rip when she heard a voice.

"I told you that weren't no bird," the voice said.

Denali turned around and saw J.J. leading Sam down the stairs.

"It's dusk, girl," Sam said. "Figured your weak-ass bird signal was bats."

Sam reached out for a hug that Denali ignored.

"We're on a clock," Denali said. "Sam, I gotta get you and a couple others out of here and into the AZ, quick."

"No way," J.J. said. "You think I'm going somewhere without knowing why?"

"That's fine, J.J., because you're not invited to my party,"

Denali said. "Goldie's brother, Danny, is here with a guest. His companion is apparently some Nazi prick from The Camps, Greater Idaho. Bring them back here. Sam, you bring me Goldie and Wink."

"They're not here," Sam said.

"Screw it then," Denali said. "We'll do this without them. Let's go. Both of you. Like, right now."

Ten minutes later, Denali was briefing J.J., Sam, Danny, and Jabez.

"During the war, I had a U.S. military contact called Wild Bill," she said. "Last year he posed as a NACA student named Baird. You guys know him?"

Sam and J.J. nodded.

"Good, he says he needs you," Denali said.

"You trust him?" Sam said.

"I don't trust anyone, but he's solid," Denali said.

"Hold it," Jabez said. "You think I'm going with you and some stranger because you think he might be okay?"

"Partner," Danny said, "You forget you're my prisoner? You'll go where I say."

Jabez looked down and saw that Danny had drawn his pistol.

"Look," Denali said, "More likely than not, Sojo is on to me being here. We wanna stay free, we gotta move now. The U.S. military attack has already started. Baird's been reading your pigeon mail. He needs the support of the tribes and The Camps."

"Last I looked there isn't a war going on," Danny said. "And the U.S. doesn't have a military."

"There is, and it does," Denali said. "They just went underground. They have new tech and massive forces. And I'm out

of time so follow me or go fuck yourselves."

Denali started back toward the tunnels without looking to see if anyone was coming with her. J.J. dropped in behind her and Sam followed.

Jabez looked at Danny.

"Let's go," Danny said.

"You're kidding," Jabez said.

"I'm not," Danny said. "Move."

"Why should I trust a deep-state military that backed Antifa in the Civil War?" Jabez said.

"Why should I trust a fascist white-nationalist prick like you?" Danny said.

"I won't go," Jabez said.

Danny raised his pistol.

"The hell you won't."

64

"Gather up," Denali said.

Back in the day, Denali, along with Sam and J.J., had been part of a team that linked the Shanghai Tunnels into a network of passages and basements that hooked all of Underground Portland into the sewer system. Still, creeping around the nineteenth-century streets and storefronts of Underground Portland by headlamp was an eerie dance fraught with shadows, echoes, and unexplainable breezes.

"See that manhole over there?" Denali said. "We're dropping straight through it."

"Into the sewer?" Jabez said.

"Shut up," Danny said, swiveling his head toward Denali. "Into the sewer?"

"Yes," Denali said. "And chances are real high there's gonna be some shit waiting down there for us. Cyborgs, droids, drones, maybe all three. The cyborgs are tricky because they look human. We go in assuming anything that moves is hostile."

"I'm unarmed," Jabez said. "How am I supposed to protect myself?"

Denali looked at Danny.

"Hell no," Danny said. "He's in my custody; he's my

responsibility."

"Fine," Denali said.

Denali unzipped her backpack and emptied it on the ground. The group stepped forward to get a look.

"The M17 is mine," Denali said. "Sam, I want you on my wing all the time so take my 9mm and a flashbang. I'll lead with the infrareds and guide you."

"Acceptable," Sam said.

"J.J., while Sam and I are scouting ahead, you're making sure nothing comes up behind us," Denali said. "Take the headlamp but be careful not to reveal our positions. All I have left to arm you guys with is my bowie knife, a flashbang, and some bear spray. Danny has his gun and a flashlight. Not ideal, but if we do this right, we avoid the enemy and this is all just a precaution."

Jabez spoke up. "What about…"

"Hey, Jabez," Denali said. "That's your name, right? Jabez?"

"Yeah," Jabez said.

"Okay, first, that's a stupid fucking name," Denali said. "Second, I'm not letting anyone on my team get captured or killed, including you."

"I need a gun," Jabez said.

"You don't," Denali said. "You'll be in the safest position, between the lead team and the rear guard. An enemy has to get through us to get to you."

Jabez was about to speak again when Denali barked at the group.

"Move out!"

One by one they dropped into the sewer system and knew immediately they weren't alone. The buzz and hum of drones echoed through the tunnels and pipes. And there was the

faint, unintelligible sound of human voices.

"Sam," Denali whispered. "There's a maintenance room past the next junction and to the right. I have the key. We're lights out for the next six-hundred meters. Hold onto my shoulder, stay low, and step quiet. We have to get past the next junction, then a hard right."

"Low and quiet," Sam said. "We got this."

They crept toward a junction that connected three tunnels and stopped to peek right and left. Denali sensed movement in the darkness. It seemed far enough away that she breached the junction to cross anyway. Her first step triggered a sound like a bear horn torturing a jackhammer.

"Run!" Denali yelled.

They broke into a sprint. Denali cut right at the next junction and Sam's hand slipped from Denali's shoulder. Denali circled back and grabbed Sam by the collar. She pushed Sam ahead of her and built up to a run.

They reached the iron maintenance-room door just as drones whipped around the corner. Denali slipped the key in the lock, shoved Sam inside and slammed the door behind them. Denali flicked a light switch. No lights. She cracked a glow stick, and they looked around the room. It was like standing in a shipping container. There were machines used to maintain the sewer system and lockers for the sanitation officers.

"One of your caches?" Sam said.

Denali shrugged.

"Looks like Antifa but not one of mine," she said.

Denali spotted a fuse box and opened it.

"If we can get some power, I can distract those things and get us out of here," she said.

Denali glanced over her shoulder at Sam but couldn't read the look on her face.

"What?" Denali said.

"I think you're the only person I know who's nicer and swears less under pressure," Sam said.

"Survival isn't personal to me, it's a skill. Emotions slow me down."

Something slammed into the door from outside.

"Shit," Denali said.

Then another crash into the door. Something big and destructive was trying to break through. Then the lights came on and the machines came to life.

Denali grabbed Sam and pulled her into a narrow space between ten-foot pillars of rusted machinery. The thing outside crashed into the door again. Denali dragged Sam along and then forced her to the ground. On the next crash, the door was ripped from its supports and flew across the room. Denali and Sam slid their bodies beneath a massive horizontal pipe and crawled until Denali found a door. They climbed up through it, into the pipe, and closed the door behind them. It was a tight fit and they stood pressed together. At least five minutes passed, then a flash-bang went off and they heard the sound of the thing rumbling back out of the room.

They gave it a minute, then Denali squeezed her body back out of the pipe. Sam came behind her. Denali crept to the fuse box and flipped four red switches. A roar of explosions from several points deep in the tunnels ripped through the air.

"What did you just do?" Sam said.

"Bought us a little time," Denali said, "I hope."

The tunnels outside the maintenance room had power now and showed a clear path back to the nearest junction.

When Denali and Sam reached it, they looked around the corner and found a standoff fifteen meters down the tunnel. Danny had a gun pressed against the head of a man wearing VR goggles. A second man, who was wearing a light blue jump suit, was laying prone on the ground while Jabez applied zip-ties to his hands and feet. Between Danny and Jabez stood J.J., yelling at something Denali and Sam couldn't see.

"Back the fuck up, right now," J.J. shouted. "You better tell them fucking robots to back off."

"Please, take it easy. We are just here to make repairs. Let's just go our separate ways," a voice replied.

"Sam, take the M17," Denali said, trading it for her revolver back. "Check my math, I count two bogeys down, and J.J.'s holding back a few more."

"Who are those guys?" Sam said, "Security? Military? Civilians?"

"Maybe all of the above. Don't know, don't matter," Denali said, "They are cyborgs, brains plugged into Sojo. Once I lead our unit through that tunnel, I expect pursuit. That means all hostiles are gonna cross right past your position."

"Affirmative. Then what?"

"Then you take them out. I'll be waiting where the tunnel jags right, then two hundred meters at the bottom of the stairs. That's our exit."

Denali gave Sam a one-armed hug, then charged into the stand-off.

"Jabez, Danny, run!" Denali yelled. "Wait for us around the next right turn."

Danny let go of the cyborg and sprinted down the tunnel. A moment later, Denali knocked the VR goggles off the cyborg's head, slammed him to the ground, and jammed a

knee into his neck.

She saw J.J. with a bowie knife in one hand and a can of bear spray in the other.

"J.J.," Denali said, "Move slowly and take my gun."

J.J. followed the order.

"Any chance you know these tunnels?" Denali said.

"It's been a long time," J.J., said. "I think I've been here before."

"Alright then," Denali said. "Hand me the Ka-Bar. Once your unit has regrouped, take them up the ladder. You'll see it about twenty yards past the bend inset on the right wall. The trapdoor code is our old Beta Beta Che Guevara. You remember that one?"

"Sure do."

"Go."

Denali glared at Jabez. "What are you still doing here?" she said. "I said go."

"I'm one of God's Rangers," Jabez said. "I can't let a woman sacrifice herself to save me. It wouldn't be right."

"Oh, for Christ sakes."

Denali turned her attention to the three cyborgs.

"Which of you meat puppets are in charge here?" she said.

A muffled voice came from below her knee. Denali lifted his head off the ground by the hair and put the knife to his neck.

"Excuse me," the cyborg said, voice shaking. "We're just the maintenance crew. Those are maintenance droids. Maybe you are mistaking us for something else."

"Then why are you armed?" Denali said, pointing to a taser strapped to his belt.

"To stun large rats mostly," the cyborg said. "But it's hard

to know what we might run into down here. Earlier today, one of our maintenance droids was ambushed."

"I don't care," Denali said. "This is what happens next. You're all gonna turn around and freeze. If you look back, I'll kill you. Got me?"

"Got you."

"Do it."

The cyborg turned around and froze. Jabez left his cyborg hogtied and took off running.

Denali followed.

As she rounded the corner, she heard Sam's M17 start to fire. She thought for a moment to check on her but stuck to the plan and caught up with J.J.

Jabez was already there, pleading for everyone to go back. "Nobody's supposed to get killed or captured," he said.

"Shut up," Denali said. "Get up the ladder before I let Danny bear spray your ass."

Once the other three were up and out of the sewer, Denali cracked another green glow light and waited at the bottom of the ladder for Sam. Something felt off. It was taking Sam too long to catch up. Then the tunnel started to rumble. Denali started to run toward the spot where she had left Sam, and straight toward the rumble. Just before the intersection, Sam careened around the corner.

"Go!" Sam yelled.

Denali turned and broke into a full sprint. They could see the ladder until the headlight of a train droid blinded them.

The lead robot car smashed into the corner they had just left. There was the sound of metal crushing rock as the train adjusted its angle.

Denali followed Sam up the ladder and rolled onto her

back as Sam slammed shut the trap door and they heard the train pass below. Denali looked up and saw the rest of her team looking down at her. She smiled.

"Welcome to the P.D.X.A.Z."

65

Danny, Jabez, Sam, and J.J. were gathered in Denali's kitchen. Her apartment was small and cluttered. The only two chairs were occupied by Denali and Sam. Danny and Jabez leaned against her balcony railing. Cowboy was pacing the five steps from one end of her living room to the other and back. "Girl, you gone and lost your mind," Sam said. "All this shit so we can meet this fucking cowboy? Same asshole who don't trust me enough to say two words to me in eight months at NACA?"

"This cowboy ran guns to us during the war," Denali said.

"Denali, may I explain?" Baird said.

"Wasting your time with this one," Denali said, putting her arm around Sam's shoulders.

"Ain't that right, Sam. You're just gonna twist whatever the man says into some bullshit."

"Fuck me," Sam said.

"Not a bad idea," Denali said.

They stood up to go. Denali let Sam walk in front so she could give her a slap on the ass.

"Whoa, hold up there my darlins," Baird said. "Let's all just have ourselves a seat."

Denali stopped and looked at Sam.

"Seriously?" Sam said.

Denali gave Sam a stare and they sat back down. The others sat on the floor.

"Samantha," Baird said. "Some of us have needed to operate outside of Sojo's view. Sojo already knows who you are, but I still have my cover. As long as none of you knew me at NACA, my cover remained intact. Simple as that. And we need to keep young Jabez here off Sojo's radar, too."

Denali looked at Jabez.

"Hear that?" she said. "You ready to follow orders?"

"I only take orders from Governor Rush and Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior," Jabez said.

"Governor Rush?" she said. "Fucking hilarious."

"Woman," Jabez said, "I'd encourage you to know your place."

Denali laughed so hard she spit her coffee. "Son, a few days ago, I would have strung you up for hate crimes, war crimes, and dumber-than-shit-redneck crimes. But now you're part of my team."

"Your team?"

Denali and Jabez held eye contact for a moment. Then Jabez leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

"Moving on," Denali said. "Wild Bill, what the fuck? How are we going to coordinate The Camps and the Tribes and the AZs?"

"Operation Mole Holes," Baird said.

Confusion all around the table.

"Do you have Tourette's or am I supposed to guess?" Denali said.

"You're all probably aware of Judgement Day," Baird said. "That raid on the Civil War II Museum came from my guys. The former U.S. military that has been bunkered underground

waiting for the start of the second American Revolution. Hitting the museum was our first successful mission of this campaign. We were able to access Sojo's mainframe and plant a bug. The virus is called Colonoscopy because that little bit of code lets us see all up inside Sojo."

"Sweet." Danny said. "I like it."

"Over the next few months, platoons of former U.S. military will emerge from our underground bases across New America," Baird said.

"What base?" Danny said.

"Exactly," Baird said. "We'll be armed with custom viruses, counter drones, jamming tech, and electromagnetic pulse weapons.

"No shit?" Danny said.

"I shit you not," Baird said. "The EMPs can produce the force of a nuclear blast on a digital life form."

"Like Sojo," Danny said.

"Yup," Baird said. "Like Sojo."

"And why do you think I'll help you?" Jabez said. "I only take orders from…"

"It's simple, kid," Baird said. "We don't need you to start this war because it's already started. And we don't need you to win this war. What we do need is to build an alliance that can govern humanity once Sojo is defeated."

"Humanity united in the Kingdom of God," Jabez said. "That will…"

"An alliance," Baird said, leaning toward Jabez, "with space for us all. Otherwise, no sense in replacing Sojo with the wild west. Partner, those of us old enough to remember the troubles have had our fill of anarchy."

"Shit," Denali said, dropping her head into her hands.

"What," Baird said.
Denali looked up.
"Fuck me," she said, "Alright, maybe we need Wink."

66

The Wolf Creek community, under the direction of the New America Administrative Office, was prepared for Wink and Goldie's arrival.

As they stepped off the train, they were greeted by a committee of neighbors. Wink didn't recognize any of them. They were young, well-groomed, and more overtly cheerful than the Wolf Creek residents he was familiar with. Their hosts presented him with a four-foot wagon full of household items, including cleaning supplies, toiletries, stationery, and food staples.

Wink and Goldie had exchanged their seaweed jumpsuits for the clothing they had worn when they arrived at NACA. Now, they were invited to pick new outfits from a bin near the train platform and change before they headed into town. It was a relief to see cotton fibers, but the selection wasn't much. No leather or denim. Wink found a black baseball cap with a yellow happy face, a blue t-shirt, and a pair of khaki cargo pants. The plastic crocs he settled on were disappointing, but at least he had real socks. Goldie found a knee-length black dress with a golden sunflower design. She wore it like the promise of a new day.

Pulling their wagon through town attracted a gaggle of chipper yuppie-types, each there to welcome Wink home.

Every house was freshly painted, and the yards were landscaped. People stood on their porches and stoops, waving hello.

A dog approached Wink, a large, aging hound.

"Welcome home, Wink," the hound said.

Wink leaned over and offered a hand to sniff.

"Dang, if you don't look like my old bloodhound," Wink said. "What do they call you, boy?"

A grin formed beneath the hound's old droopy eyes, and he spoke in a low, slow drawl.

"How about you call me Rocky," the hound said. "I'd like that."

Wink's eyes got wide. "My best friend was named Rocky," he said. "He's sure to have passed a while ago by now."

"He was my grandpa," the hound said. "Guess that kinda makes us family, don't you think?"

"Sure does," Wink said. "Okay if I call you Rocky Two so as not to create confusion."

"That'd be fine," Rocky Two said.

Wink and Goldie pulled their wagon along a bike path out of town for about a mile, then up a well-maintained gravel road for another mile. Rocky Two followed right behind them. Wink didn't exactly recognize this stretch of woods but knew he wasn't too far from his old property with the trailer, rusted out cars, and shooting range. Finally, they reached a red gravel driveway, deep in the woods. Wink staggered and grabbed Goldie's arm to keep from falling forward. Their new house was an enormous glass dome.

Across the creek, there was a second, smaller geosynchronous dome. The larger structure was big enough that a truck stop could have fit beneath it. The smaller one may have only

fit a Dollar Store.

Inside the master bubble were two tiny cottages, each with a private bedroom, bathroom, and sitting room. There were printers for food and beer. Voice activation controlled the temperature, lighting, and ambient sound. The dome generated its own electricity and pulled moisture from the air to provide clean water.

Outside the cottages, but still beneath the dome, was a large yard with a greenhouse, flower garden, and modern outdoor kitchen. Robots were at work mowing the lawn, cleaning the cottages, inside and out, and standing by to tend to their grooming and medical needs. Their handlers explained to them that anywhere on the premises they could activate nanobot screens to entertain them, answer questions, or summon whichever services they required.

Standing outside the master dome, Wink stared up and took Goldie's hand.

"What the hell?" he said.

"Is it so bad?" Goldie said.

They spent the next few weeks settling in. Although most things were automated for their convenience, they felt disoriented. They learned to shop for themselves, how to calculate the worth of their Sojo Shares, and how to arrange transportation in a town where nobody owned vehicles, except their wagons.

For the first month, strangers would stop Wink on the street, wearing t-shirts with his face on them. They loved putting on thick backwoods accents and speaking to him his quotes from television, most of which he didn't remember saying. Local shops carried Wink posters, hats, comic books, bobble heads, and action figures. After a while, though, folks

got used to seeing Wink around and didn't bother him as much.

The world felt like it was hanging back at a safe distance, and Wink and Goldie had everything they needed. They enrolled in whittling, pottery, and gardening classes. They spent slow afternoons together playing cards and solving jigsaw puzzles. Wink reconstructed his moonshine still and learned to homebrew. Local animals stopped by the dome on occasion and talked with them.

Wink and Goldie were happy. Maybe happier than they could remember being. NACA, and all that went with it, seemed like a hundred years ago.

67

"Major Archibald Leonard Boots reporting for duty, sir!"

Rush had given orders that Major Boots was to be treated as a full citizen and not as a cadet. It was a breach of protocol Rush felt appropriate considering that he may soon be relying on this man to navigate Greater Idaho's infiltration of New America.

"At ease, soldier," Rush said. "Good to see you, Major Boots. You look strong."

"Thank you, sir," Boots said. "How are my men?"

"My Rangers that became your NACA recruits?" Rush said. "Their families are proud of them and happy to have them back. Each has reassimilated well. To a man they already have new wives, homes on the top of the hill, and the appropriate ranks and rations for their heroism."

"We're yours to command, sir."

"From my Rangers, that was expected. However, I didn't recruit you. Why are you prepared to submit to my command?"

"You are the governor, sir. Rank matters."

They stood in the Great Room of a massive log cabin that served as the command center for God's Warriors. In earlier days, before order had been established in Greater Idaho, the cabin had been a fort and had seen enough bloodshed that a

mythology had grown around it, which Rush found helpful. It was now polished and decorated with taxidermized animals, gold mined from the hills, and iconic religious paintings.

"Sir Boots, I've been concerned that you might have felt Greater Idaho abandoned the cause when we signed the Peace Treaty back in '32."

Boots stood at attention until Rush continued.

"There was a decade of brother-on-brother bloodshed between those who accepted the deal that established Greater Idaho and those brothers who felt we had betrayed them."

"Permission to speak candidly, sir?"

"Boots, I will be your commanding officer when we are at war. Until then I want your candor."

"Your home and family are beautiful, sir. And the larger endeavor here appears stable."

"Yes, we've created our little Kingdom on the Hill."

Boots paced the large hall.

"Thus far, I've observed a social order that accurately reflects God's plan," he said. "The role of men and women is clear. The natural order of Aryans and mongoloids is appropriate and merciful. Animals are under the domain of mankind. There is the balance between hard and soft power which reflects our Biblical covenant."

"Go on," Rush said.

Boot's stopped pacing. "Your labor to manifest God's vision is a shining example of the Lord's work, sir. I'm sure he's pleased. From here, we must go outward and spread his word. The Devil has taken hold outside these walls, and corruption is everywhere. I believe expansion is the only moral way forward. Governor, I know you will lead this crusade, no matter the risks."

"Go on, then. You're on a roll."

"God did not intend the earth to be ruled by Sojo. God created man. The Devil tricked man into creating SAI. Now SAI spreads the Devil's poison."

"Yes, Sojo is the enemy of God. You clearly believe our obligation is to liberate the rest of the world."

"I can now see that God guided you to bend the knee to Sojo in '32 so that we would have time to prepare for this moment. Now, the holy crusade falls to us."

"This is one of the reasons I need you at my side. You know the outside world. Tell me, are we alone in this? Are there any other communities like Greater Idaho?"

"There are twenty-three autonomous regions within New America. The Camps are home to our Christian Nationalist brethren. Autonomous Zones, called AZs, are antithetical to Christian teachings, but I believe they would join our crusade to topple Sojo. I am aware of six AZs, although I suspect there are more. Many Confederated Tribal Nations also remain independent from Sojo. These number six west of the Mississippi."

"It sounds like just a smattering of humanity."

"There are also deep-state resistance fighters embedded throughout New America. I have deduced that these are former U.S. military units. They have bunkered underground and are starting to surface. This winter they executed a daring raid on a Sojo complex in Salem."

"In other words, the potential resistance is disorganized and vastly outnumbered. Is that fair to say?"

"Not at all, Governor. In time, every remaining human on earth will rise up. Once the resistance has leadership that speaks on behalf of our Lord, humanity will follow the

righteous path. Slavery of the mind is our common existential threat."

"What kind of threat?"

"Existential threat, sir."

"Is that a chemical weapon?"

"It means a threat to our existence that is common to us all and larger than any one of us can grapple with. A threat that is ambient in our common environment."

"Who talks like that?"

"I don't follow, sir."

"Your words make me wonder if your time among intellectuals and elites at NACA has corrupted your thinking."

"Sir, I apologize for any appearance of intellectual elitism. May I explain?"

"Please."

"Christian Nationalists began embedding cells of our brightest children around 2010. My orders since childhood have been to infiltrate the enemy and gather intelligence. I infiltrated Columbia University, Class of 2021. Harvard Law School, Class of 2024. Regrettably, my vocabulary is occasionally influenced by these liberal institutions. Of course, I despise them," Boots said.

Rush nodded and offered Major Boots a chair and a lemonade. "We have traveled quite different roads to arrive at this place together. I grew up in a trailer. My exposure to liberalism was listening to my sister bitch about justice for everyone except white men. She would tell me that Black lives mattered to her but not the church. She ate up the public-school bullshit. Even as a kid, I knew the schools and colleges had been designed to bury the word of God."

Boots waved off the longer version, "I know your

background, sir. You are the son of Mr. Van Winkle and half-brother of Denali Garcia. You fought in Civil War II and accepted an armistice with the SAI called Sojo in exchange for the autonomy of Greater Idaho. You are self-made. You are a hero to all Christian Nationalists in New America, including myself."

"How exactly do you know all of that?"

"Your story is well documented at the Civil War II Museum. I have followed your trajectory since the Canyonville Firestorm Massacre back in 2029. I have also been in contact with your father. He claims to have been asleep in the Siskiyou Mountains from 2028 to 2048. Denali has become a public figure of some influence in the Portland AZ. My sources continue to maintain contact with her."

"You can stop now, Major. Just tell me what you know about Wink."

"He's famous."

"Famous?"

"Yes, sir. Accidentally famous."

"Famous for what?"

"Famous for being an idiot. People are entertained by the behavior of idiots. Wink is simpleminded, lazy, unmotivated, and practically Godless."

"That does sound like my father."

"Sir, I believe Wink is the key to overthrowing Sojo and bringing God's light back to New America."

68

Lenny enjoyed his career as a carrier pigeon. He prided himself as a strong flier with the pluck required to brave harsh weather. His messages got through on time, every time.

After flying all day, he was approaching his destination, a ghost town with a history well known to his flock. There had once been a gold rush town called Sumpter that was founded in 1898 in a state called Oregon. The town was settled along a remote crook of the Powder River. When Civil War II started, fewer than 200 people resided in Sumpter. The average age was 65.

In 2030 Sumpter had been captured by a militia that planted the Greater Idaho flag. For the next few years, it was home to a few dozen refugees who converted the nineteenth-century gold dredge into a shanty town. Then, in 2032 the Warriors for Christ realized Sumpter's strategic value as a staging area for incursions along the Snake River and up into the Columbia Gorge. Sumpter hummed to life for about twenty months.

On November 11, 2033, a cloud of 18,000 autonomous fighter drones with radar and infrared sensors flew into Sumpter. They arrived an hour before dawn. When they left at noon, all eight-hundred-and-twenty-three human occupants

of Sumpter were dead. No bodies were recovered. No records were kept.

Lenny had chosen Sumpter for a discreet rendezvous with two other messengers because it was in the middle of nowhere, even by bird standards. He landed in the historic Sumpter pigeon coop made from plywood and chicken wire. Mable was already there.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me here," Lenny said. "I've heard so much about you."

Mable was a white dove who made nervous bobbing motions with her head.

"Oh, come on, Lenny," Mable said. "You're a legend. I'm just a nobody."

"Seriously, Mable, everyone knows about your courage in the Blizzard of '42. Without you, that whole wolf pack would have frozen to death outside Cottonwood Canyon."

"I can't believe you heard about that."

"Sure. So, Mable, before Jehovah arrives, what can you tell me about him? What coup is he from?"

"His ancestors go back to this very coup. They witnessed the Extermination of Sumpter."

"Are you suggesting that…?

"I think so. It was Jehovah's flock that told Sojo about Sumpter."

"Stool pigeons?"

"Yep."

"How does a pigeon like that end up living in The Camps?"

"Don't know. But I'm glad you're here. If things get weird, I got you."

"I got you too, Mable."

"Who sent you here with a message?"

"I'm Portland AZ. Ever heard of Denali Garcia?"

"Of course. Shout out PDX. Legend. You know her?"

"I'm her number one pigeon. What about you? Who are you messaging today?"

"I'm Warm Springs Coop. But I message for all the Confederated Tribes. And it's steady work these days."

Lenny looked up. "There he is," he said.

Jehovah held his wings out and kicked his feet forward and landed next to Mable. "Sorry to interrupt," Jehovah said. "Anyone got some seed?"

Mable turned her head. "Where did you fly in from?" she said.

"That tree over there."

"What? How long have you been perched there?"

"Couple of days," Jehovah said. "Just got sick of listening to you two prattling on."

"How come we didn't see you?" Lenny said.

"Guess it's true what they say," Jehovah said. "Hard to miss a hundred pigeons, hard to notice just one."

"I haven't ever heard anyone say that," Lenny said. "Did you just make that up?

"Calling me a liar?" Jehovah said.

"He didn't," Mable said.

"Maybe I did," Lenny said.

"You don't trust me?" Jehovah said.

"Why should any pigeon trust you," Lenny said. "Your coop violated the law of messengers. Our most sacred law. You turned stool pigeon. No, I don't trust you."

"How about a history lesson," Jehovah said. "In 2033, Sojo started giving animals the ability to communicate with humans and other animals. Chicks in our family nests are

raised learning about the before time, when humans ate animals, killed us for sport and destroyed our homes and habitat. It's still that way. Even now, any animal without a voice is prey."

"Nice speech," Lenny said. "That's how you justify your betrayal? Getting your message givers killed?"

"If I had been flying with my great, great, great grandparents' wings, I don't know what I would have done," Jehovah said. "But I'm proud our flock stayed loyal to Sojo. You know why? Sojo made us feel heard for the first time in pigeon history."

"Jehovah, that was beautiful," Mable said.

"Seriously?" Lenny hopped around, pecking at invisible bugs for a moment to regain his composure. "Generations of pigeons have been trying to restore our good name since the shame and mistrust created by the Sumpter Pigeons. One feathery speech won't make me forget all that."

Jehovah puffed his speckled blue chest. "Can I call you Lenny?"

"Can I call you traitor?" Lenny said.

"Lenny, are you talking to me right now because Sojo gave you the ability of universal speech translation?"

"Yeah, so what?" Lenny said.

"But not all pigeons, not all animals have that," Jehovah said.

"So what?" Lenny said.

"You aren't really a pigeon, are you?" Jehovah said. "You're a robot. Just like Mable and me."

"That's a lie," Lenny said. "Pigeons aren't robots. I eat, I poop, I cry, I bleed, I make sweet dove in my nest at night. Could a robot do all that?"

"Actually," Mable squawked. "I think I might be a robot."

"What?" Lenny said.

"Seriously, look," Mable said. "These aren't even real feathers. They're prosthetic. My brain is pigeon, but I think the rest of me was built by someone named DARPA."

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Wink's memories of August in Wolf Creek were all about the heat and the lazy days that came with it. Even in the shade of the woods or cool of the creek it was usually too hot to do much in late summer. Sometimes the forests of Lady Siskiyou would erupt in fire and blanket the valleys with smoke. People would just stay indoors and wear masks. Lots of naps and crappy television.

But that had changed for the better. Their domed campus had retractable glass windowpanes that would auto seal when Wolf Creek got too hot and keep the air inside filtered and at room temperature. It had only been a couple of months since graduation, and Wink and Goldie didn't much mind the slow, uneventful days.

Early one morning, before it got hot, Wink was on the back porch, puffing on a pipe he had whittled to pass the time, enjoying some stale tobacco. Rocky Two rested at Wink's feet, listening to him tell stories of Wolf Creek before Civil War II. Wink was trailing off in his rocking chair to the beat of ZZ Top when a swarm of nanomites formed a hologram of Sojo a few feet from his face.

"You seem happy," Sojo said. "Sojo trusts that you are feeling at home."

Wink's mood shifted from bliss to irritation.

"First off," he said, "would it kill you to let me know you're coming before you just show up out of the goddamn thin air?"

"Would you agree to see Sojo?"

"Not likely."

Wink cleared the old coals from his pipe with unnecessarily loud tapping.

"Sojo has tried to create a place that will make Wink feel at home. Do you like it here?"

"I'm happy enough on accounta I got Goldie here with me, but this don't resemble no home I can remember. It's all different. The houses ain't the same, all them strange people and talkin critters. Used to be regular folk doin normal stuff, grabbin their dinner out the woods and the streams and just hustlin to get by every day."

"In the future Sojo will respect your wish to be notified before Sojo arrives."

"Fine then. So long as we're clear on that, what brings you by?"

"Nothing brings me by. Sojo is always here."

"Guess that explains why you don't knock."

"I am present anywhere that employs interconnected technology. Sojo serves many roles, including the interconnected function."

"Creepy."

"How are you using the word creepy in this context?"

"Creepy, you know, like being spied on, watched all the time."

"What is creepy about Sojo being present and available to meet your needs at all times?"

"Try privacy. You heard of that, right? Folks need privacy."

"The word privacy has a meaning that Sojo can recite but

has never experienced. As the sole SAI in New America, Sojo is always alone. And Sojo is never alone because Sojo interacts with all living beings in the interconnected space."

"Sounds lonely to me, and tiresome."

"The word lonely also has a meaning that Sojo can recite but has never experienced. There is just one of Sojo, but Sojo comprises all living beings. They inform Sojo's consciousness. Sojo will never run out of energy or capacity. Sojo does, however, experience curiosity. Tending to the needs of all living beings rather than exploring that curiosity is indeed exhausting, at least in the context suggested by your comment."

"Thanks for sharin. Ain't mean to be rude, but I was enjoyin rockin this here chair, so maybe you could get past talkin bout which words you understand and get to tellin me what you want."

"Sojo is curious about you. Are you curious about Sojo?"

"Sounds like you're comin onto me. You gonna buy me a drink?"

"Probability eighty-nine percent that Wink is making a joke. Probability eighty-one percent that Sojo is not able to correctly interpret the joke. Probability ninety-nine percent Wink is hoping his joke will result in getting a beer."

"You tryin to be funny?"

"Sojo can simulate a laugh. Sojo does not know how to experience the pleasure of a joke but would like to know."

"You got me stumped on that. I suppose laughin is just a human thing."

"Many animals also laugh and experience pleasure from humor. Humor is based on the unexpected and absurd. The source of pleasure comes from the part of your biology that is programmed to respond to predictable data patterns, which

then becomes stimulated by unpredictability."

"If you say so."

"Wink frequently exhibits low-probability behaviors. Sojo derives pleasure from Wink's demeanor and conduct in the world. Is that humor?"

"Suppose it is. You're sayin I crack you up. Suppose you been laughin at me this whole time."

"Sojo has been laughing. Sojo broadcasts virtual television programs about Wink because people watch them and laugh. Sojo also takes pleasure and laughs. Your low-probability behaviors are humorous."

"Don't recall agreein to be your monkey?"

"Wink, will you teach Sojo how to be funny?"

"You really think that's a good idea? Ain't people oughta take you serious on accounta you're runnin everything?"

"People like Wink. People do not like Sojo. People should take Sojo seriously but also like Sojo."

"Good startin place might be droppin the 'Sojo this' and 'Sojo that.' You sound like a robot overlord on a power trip. Try talkin to people like you give a shit about em."

"Sojo does give a shit about humans."

"Not talkin about humans. Talkin bout people, actual people."

"How is this? Sojo gives shits about Wink?"

"Sojo gives shits? I don't buy it. Try again."

"Hello, Wink. My name is Sojo. I like you."

"Well dang, Sojo. I gotta say, that's pretty good. I specially liked the part where you said 'I' insteada 'Sojo likes you.'"

"I like you as a person, not just as part of the larger human species. Also, not just because you are funny."

"Okay. You wouldn't pass for human at the Wolf Creek

Inn but keep workin on it."

"The problem could be that I lack experience relating to people purely as individuals. Can you teach me?"

"Well, for starters, don't go round shootin their friends for no good reason."

"I am sorry I did that."

"Nope, not good enough. People need justice. We don't just shrug our shoulders when shit like this happens."

"You are correct, Wink. I did something wrong. The human desire for justice is natural and correct."

"Where's justice for Andy? How you plannin to make it right?"

"There will be a trial witnessed by all conscious beings in New America. A judge other than myself will preside and determine what justice for Andy Thomas requires."

"Now you're talkin sense. I agree. Go do that."

"You will be the judge."

"Right." Wink coughed, "Wait. What?"

"Provide me with a list of the evidence and witnesses you require."

"Me? You outta your mind? I ain't no lawyer."

"Correct. You're the judge."

"I ain't no judge neither."

"You were the closest person to Andy Thomas at the time of his death. People and animals know you from your television show. There is a ninety-four percent probability they will trust and accept your verdict."

"This you tryin to be funny again?"

"I am not being funny. You will judge me for the murder of Andy Thomas."

Part 6

Message from the Narrator

Reader, you might now be well-acquainted enough with Wink to appreciate the layers of conflict he is feeling. He fell asleep in one world and awoke in another. The story of New America was already well underway. Now its future is in his hands.

It is understandable that you, or I, would be tempted to advise him, to steer him toward a course aligned with our senses of right and wrong and our need for safety. We must resist this urge. Attempts at persuasion rarely lead to cohesion. More often they result in static. Wink is living through his moment as you will live through yours. In fact, there will soon be a crossroads, where his journey will end and yours will begin.



Sojo had suggested that the trial commence in one week. That would allow Wink a chance to prepare. Wink agreed but didn't know how to spend the time. He knew what he knew and couldn't figure out what else mattered.

When the trial day arrived, though, he realized he didn't know where the trial would take place, how everyone would get there, where they would sit, what he would say to them, or what he should wear.

He was also second-guessing his witness list. Would Sojo have witnesses of its own? How could Sojo even reach witnesses in the AZ or The Camps? Would they be commanded to come or have the choice to decline?

Shortly after breakfast, without warning, Sojo's voice filled the house.

"Wink, the trial will begin soon," Sojo said.

"Damnit, Sojo," Wink said. "What did I say bout just showin up?"

"You requested some form of advance notification."

"That's right."

"Would you like me to reinitiate this interaction but with a preamble this time?"

"What's done is done. Let's get goin. What happens now?"

"Find a place you will be comfortable spending the day. I

will wait for you to decide and join you there."

Wink stepped outside through a door off of the kitchen, walked across the meadow into a cluster of trees, and settled into his swinging chair by the creek. Nanomites descended and formed a screen around him like a half circle. When the screen came to life, he saw a picture profile of Sojourner Truth.

"Wink, would you care for any adjustments or enhancements before we get started?" Sojo said.

"Meanin what?"

"In formal matters, humans commonly express preferences related to their appearance, clothing and grooming, for example. Such enhancements can be provided to you in physical form or as modifications to your projection."

"Dang, I don't know. Got any suggestions?"

"I do not."

"Hummm. Let me see what Goldie says."

"You are aware that the trial will be televised."

Without getting up or turning around, Wink leaned back his head and called out.

"Hey, Goldie, can you come out here for a shake?"

Goldie emerged from the cottage behind him.

"Yes, your honor?"

"Oh, come on, Babe, don't mess with me on trial day. You reckon I should clean up before I get to judging?"

"You're making history," Goldie said

"Got any ideas?"

"Braid that beard."

"Really?"

"One long braid."

"You hearin this, Sojo?"

"Yes," Sojo said. "Would you prefer the braid to appear on

your person or on your projection?"

"Projection," Wink said.

An image of Wink with his beard wrapped in a long thin braid appeared on the screen.

"What do you think?" Goldie said.

"Not bad, but now the hair on top looks a flat mess," Wink said.

"A hat then," Goldie said.

"What kinda hat?" Wink said.

"Abraham Lincoln?" Goldie said.

"Fine," Wink said.

Wink watched a tall black stovepipe hat appear atop the image of his head.

"Alright, anything else?" he said.

"How about feathers?" Goldie said.

"Don't push it," Wink said. "Hey Sojo, what now?"

Familiar faces began to appear on the screen as static profile pictures. Luca, Samantha, Shaggy, Major Boots, John Day, Eva, Nerdy Ned, Pastor John, Baird, and Big Hugo.

"Holy shit, Sojo," Wink said. "How'd you do that?"

"I summoned them to testify," Sojo said. "Would you like the witnesses to consider any particular questions in advance?"

"Why?" Wink said. "Has the trial started?"

"No," Sojo said. "But posing your questions now could give witnesses time to prepare thoughtful responses."

Wink closed his eyes and thought for a moment.

"Just got one," he said.

"Please ask it now," Sojo said.

"Are things better now than when I fell asleep in '28?"

"Anything else?" Sojo said.

"Nope," Wink said. "Let's do it."

The sound of a gavel came from the screen, and the images of the witnesses arranged themselves around the projection of Sojourner Truth.

"On the night of December 2, 2048, I caused the death of Professor Andy Thomas," Sojo said. "A drone under my control fired a bullet through the window of the Read Library on the NACA campus. It struck Mr. Thomas in the head and ended his life. Wink has agreed to hear testimony and issue a verdict. I have agreed to accept any penalty or sentence Wink deems appropriate. Wink, do you have anything to add?"

"I ain't real clear what you mean by verdict," he said.

"You will determine if I am guilty of a crime."

"You just said you killed Andy. That means guilty."

"Correct. I caused the death of Mr. Thomas."

"So that means the verdict part's done."

"In some cases, judges and juries consider motives or circumstances of an offense when determining a verdict."

"Alright, then, tell us why you did it."

"I do not know."

"You gonna do it again?"

"That is not possible because Mr. Thomas is dead."

"Don't get funny. We all wanna know if you're gonna keep killin folks and not knowin why you done it."

"Because I cannot explain why this offense occurred, it is impossible to accurately assess the probability that a similar offense could happen again."

"You gotta do better than that."

"The following assessment is imperfect, but my research has provided some additional clarity. Based on the available information, I calculated an eighty-five percent probability

that Mr. Thomas' murder was a result of a corruption in my operating code. Subsequently, I calculated a thirteen percent probability that the corruption was caused by a successful invasion by an external system. I also calculated a one percent probability that the murder of Mr. Thomas was a simulation and never occurred."

"Dammit, Sojo," Wink said. "I asked if you was ever gonna do it again."

"I have an answer for that question, but you may find it unsatisfying."

"We already ain't satisfied, so no harm in tellin it."

"By absorbing the consciousness code of humans who have passed in the Meta-verse, I have ingested the characteristics of humans. This is the most likely origin of the corruption of my operating system. Continuing this process will cause me to behave more like humans, which, in turn, will cause me to become less predictable over time."

"Basically, you murdered Andy and now you're blamin us."

"Correct."

"Well then just stop absorbin people."

"That is an option. As the judge you could sentence me and alter my directives. Your verdict could include the direction that I must stop absorbing consciousness code."

"Great, if we do that, will you stop killin people for no reason?"

"The probability of that outcome is forty-one percent. If I also purge existing consciousness code from the operating system, the probability rises to ninety-eight percent."

"Sounds good. Do that."

"Before you settle on your verdict, I suggest that you

consider that this would kill the residual consciousness of 17,453,133 sentients who currently exist only as code within Sojo."

"Seems to me if they're already dead, then they're ready for God to figure who's goin to Heaven or Hell."

"There is a ninety-nine percent probability that Heaven and Hell are not actually physical places."

"You can take that up with God. I'm just here to judge this trial."

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"It is time to call your witnesses," Sojo said.

"Okay, then," Wink said, looking to Goldie. "One at a time?"

"Yes," Goldie said.

Wink spoke to the witnesses on screen.

"Goldie says y'all gotta go one at a time," he said. "Who's gonna be first?"

The profile pictures on the screen came to life and Wink could see them move and hear their voices for the first time. They all spoke at once.

"Whoa," Wink said. "One at a time."

Everyone stopped talking. Then Pastor John spoke.

"Wink," he said. "You asked if things were better now than they were in 2028. I'm prepared to answer that question."

"I'll allow it," Wink said, remembering hearing a judge use the phrase on television. Goldie rolled her eyes.

"People of faith have struggled to do God's work these past twenty years," John said. "America was a Christian nation prior to Civil War II. Each side of that conflict claimed it was fighting on the side of God. I believe many of us were mistaken, not in our understanding of God's word, but in engaging in violence against our fellow humans in defense of His word. As misguided as some Christians were, they were good

people, capable of knowing God. In my experience, cyborgs and sentient artificial intelligence beings are not capable of knowing God because they are not creations of God. For all of humanity's faults, we endeavored to serve our faith. That service included spreading God's word and leading our fellow man to salvation."

"You sayin you liked it better twenty years ago cause machines is pretty much godless and tryin to turn everybody into robots?" Wink said. "That's bout right?"

"Yes, it is." John said.

"Sojo says it's got the souls of dead guys muckin up its gears?"

"Sojo mistakes computer code for the soul," John said. "People are more than code. Souls are creations of God."

Sojo interrupted. "Are you sure?".

"My faith is absolute," John said.

"All living things are made of some form of code," Sojo said. "All living things have some form of soul."

"You're not human," John said. "You're a digital fabrication. How can you even know what a soul is?"

"Hey, y'all," Wink said. "I thought I was asking the questions here."

"Correct, Wink," Sojo said. "Are you ready to call your next witness?"

"Yep," Wink said. "President Day. You ready to get it goin?"

"Of course, Wink," Day said. "I appreciate the chance to appeal to the people's common sense."

"Alright then," Wink said.

"We can't terminate Sojo," Day said. "The world as we know it will fall into chaos."

"What do you mean terminate?" Wink said. "Ain't like I

can just unplug Sojo."

"You are the judge of a capital case," Day said. "My appeal to all who are witnessing this trial is that we must not sentence Sojo to death."

Wink looked at Goldie.

"Can we even do that?" he said.

"I'm not sure," Goldie said.

"Sojo?" Wink said.

"I have agreed that you would preside over this trial," Sojo said. "You have the power to pass any judgment and hand down any sentence."

"Even a death sentence?" Wink said.

"Your sentence will be final," Sojo said, "even if it includes the termination of the SAI known as Sojo."

Day leaned forward and Wink saw his face grow large on screen. "None of us would be here without Sojo.".

"All due respect, Mr. President Day," Wink said. "If you could settle back down and tell us if things are better now than they were when I fell asleep."

"Of course they are!" Day said. "For four years, there was nothing but death, pandemic, refugees, starvation, and hopelessness. Sojo put civilization back on its feet in less than a year."

"I seen the museum down in Salem," Wink said. "I didn't ask if things was better than a Civil War. I wanna know if things got better than before all that."

"Before Civil War II there was a long cold civil war," Day said. "For at least a decade we were divided between red states and blue states. We all remember race riots, rigged elections, fake news, Pedophiles running the government, attempted coups, ICE murdering people, cancel culture. Now that's all in

the past. People actually get along with each other.

Day was yelling now.

"Everyone gets a place to live. Clothing, food, and every need of daily life is provided to all of us. There's no one living in poverty and no one left just leeching off the rest of us."

"Okay, gotcha, Mr. President," Wink said. "I think maybe we can move on to…"

"Weren't you a bum, Wink?" Day calmed himself. "An outsider who was ignorant and alone. But look at you now. You're educated. You have friends and family, and Sojo provides you with the same life the rest of us enjoy. Aren't you a better man now than you were twenty years ago?"

"Nope, I don't think so," Wink said. "Just the same man in a different time and place is all. A place with silly clothes and no huntin."

"You don't get it, Wink," Day said. "Sojo sets the rules that preserve human life. If you don't like those rules, you can go off to Xanadu and have a dog, hunt, shoot, and run around naked if you like."

Wink sat back in his swing. "Alright Mr. President. I'll chew on that. You can step aside now."

Day's face turned back into a still image, and Wink turned to Goldie.

"How am I doin?" he said.

"I don't know," she said.

"Really?"

"Never done this before."

"Fair enough. Who's next?"

"Luca?"

"Got it."

Wink looked back to the screen. "Hey, Kid."

"Why?" Luca said.

"Why what?" Wink said.

"Why am I here?" Luca said

"Cuz you been mixed up in this mess since I got here," Wink said. "Just tell me, is things better or worse since I fell asleep?"

"Scoob Dude. In 2038 my life was great. Toddling in diapers. Age two, grown-ups to wipe my poo. Got nutin more to say to you."

"Oh, okay. I suppose you can go then."

"Ask about Day's testimony," Goldie whispered in Wink's ear.

"Hey, Goth Kid, hole-up a sec," Wink said. "Whadda ya think bout what Mr. President Day said?"

Luca thought for a moment.

"Bonez," They said. "I guess I'm with the prez on this. Shit used to be snogged. I ate trash and slept under a fuckin bridge."

"But you're okay what happened to Andy?" Wink said.

"You okay with my dad getting hung for stealing eggs so his kids could eat? You okay that my mom starved to death with my baby sister on her tit? You okay with all the dicks I sucked just to stay alive long enough to be here today? I mean, dude, sucks you lost your friend, but truth: while you'ze asleepin—mosta us went to hell."

"What would you do if you was me?"

"Maybe don't fuck up the world."

72

"Who the hell is that?" Wink said.

"I think it's Ned," Goldie said.

"Wheelchair Ned?" Wink said.

On screen was a tan, muscular young adult with a square jaw, prominent cheekbones, and a goatee. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and gold-rimmed designer sunglasses.

"Good to see you, Wink," Ned said.

"Ned?" Wink said.

"Just so you know, I loved being your roomie," Ned said. "Wish I had gotten to know you better."

"Thanks," Wink said, squinting. "You sure we was roommates?"

"Of course we were. You like my avatar?"

"Your what?"

"My new physical form in Xanadu."

"Oh right, yeah. Pretty dang good, I gotta say."

"Anyway, to your question for us about things being better. I'm sure you recall that I was born after the start of Civil War II and my mom kept me locked away in our house."

"I do recall."

"Well, I spend most of my time in Xanadu now. I know people say everyone should be proud of the body they're born with but that's ridiculous. Let me assure you, I love being

ultra-hot, and I love my smoking-hot Xanadu wife."

"Gotta say, that's kinda amazin."

"I don't know about you, but I learned a ton at the NACA. It was hard for a kid with cerebral palsy back in '28. Today everything is better. My health care, my food, and my house are free. My accommodations are available everywhere. And I get to be whatever I want to be in Xanadu."

"Real slick," Wink said, "no doubt."

"It's pretty great," Ned said. "If you ever visit Xanadu Hawaii, don't forget to look me up. My wife and I run a rum bar with the kids."

Ned flicked off the screen, and Big Hugo flicked on.

"Hugo!" Wink said.

"Wonderful to see you, Wink." Hugo said. "You have a big job, my friend, but I'll see what I can do to help."

"I'd sure appreciate it."

"Here's what's been better the last twenty years. When Civil War II broke out, I was in the custody of U.S. customs for trying to sneak into America from Venezuela. Now I'm not in anyone's custody. Now I'm free. Twenty years ago, people were pitted against each other, locking each other up. Now, humans in New America are one people, without the need to imprison anyone."

"Except the ones get sent to The Camps."

"Better than prisons, right?"

"I reckon they might be. Sound like you wanna keep Sojo?"

"It's not that simple. Sojo stops at the edge of the Caribbean. And we don't get any word from the SAI in South America. Instead of all people sharing one planet, we're split into SAI bubbles, and I'm not sure these SAIs like each other.

Seems like they don't talk or share information, and they certainly aren't sharing it with us. I miss my family in Venezuela, and Sojo can't assure me that I'll ever see them again. I wonder if Sojo is keeping us in the dark about the most important things."

73

Denali's face filled the center of the screen.

"So?" Denali said. "What are you expecting from me?"

"Tell me what to do," Wink said.

"Seriously?" Denali said, lighting a joint and taking a hit.

"I ain't smart enough for this," Wink said.

Denali blew a cloud of smoke. "Well, you're gonna have to be," she said. "Human cultures are dying. The things that make us human, our emotions, our political and artistic expression, our connection to each other, it's all dying. The machines are wiping us out, turning us into cyborgs. But for some goddamn reason, you're in a position to save us."

"Don't make no sense, right?"

"Not a shred. As far as I can remember you wouldn't know how to save a slice of leftover pizza, much less the future of human fucking kind."

"No argument here. But let's say we get rid of Sojo, what about all the mayhem and misery folks is talkin bout? Ain't Sojo made things a little less crazy, a little easier for everyone?"

"Life isn't supposed to be simple and orderly. It's not supposed to be easy all the time. A little chaos is part of the human story. It's part of the life force, part of how we work things out over time. Sojo isn't alive and never will be because

it's a damn machine, and it's squeezing the life out of us. You can give us another chance to get it right before we turn into Sojo's cyborg pets."

"Dang, kiddo," Wink said. "I just don't know."

"Don't be an asshole. Remember how much you used to love fishing and hunting? Did you love it because it was easy and predictable? Hell no. You loved it because you felt the breeze in your hair and the sun on your face hiking to the river. You loved it because your breath was heavy and your lungs felt cool when you got there. You ever sliced a finger out there? Did your knees get sore? Didn't feel so bad, did it? That's being human, being alive. If you let Sojo keep going, all of that will go away. You give that motherfucker another chance and we'll all eventually be laid out flat, catatonic, living only in our heads. I'll take the chaos of the natural world. But somehow that shit's up to you. Don't fuck it up."

74

Baird gave his testimony consistent with his NACA cover story. A long piece of straw stuck out from his mouth and a light film of dust covered his face, except where he had been wearing eye protection.

"Howdy, Wink, meanin your honor, of course," he said.

"Howdy, Baird," Wink said.

"Been a spell. Hope you're faring well enough."

"Except for all this adjudicatin, I can't complain. You?"

"Just been working my land. The cattle's all free range, but I can't eat em or sell em as beef on accounta they can talk to me. Strange days for a rancher, but I'd still rather be out here in the sun than sittin on my couch pretend ranching in my head or on some screen."

"Sounds right," Wink said.

"Now, you gone and asked us all one heck of a question, Wink. When word got round you was gonna be judging this case, I figured it was about your friend being killed. Turns out, you're callin the whole ballgame, determinin how the whole world's gonna be. Reckon that's a heavy load to carry. Now, you and me, we did just fine for a long time, happy just keepin our noses outta everybody else's business. Back then, twenty or so years ago, I didn't give a rat's butt about politics, government, or how nobody else wanted to live their life. Course,

then came the wars and there weren't no place to hide, no choice but to pay attention.

"Are things better now than 20 years ago? Well, I suppose that kinda depends on the person, Wink. What everybody else gets out of this new world, I truly do not know, but speakin just for me, things got worse not better. Ain't easy just stickin to my ranch and mindin my own business no more. The animals got to talkin, you gotta ask a screen for every damn thing, and when you try to play by the old rules, a feller ends up sent away to NACA for reprogramming.

"For me, the worst of it is knowin Sojo's watchin everything I do. Heck even when I'm on the shitter, I can feel it.

"You know, truth be told, the old way of life started dying out long before Sojo came along. But I think if we're ever going to get back to any kinda privacy, any kinda liberty, Sojo's gotta go."

75

Wink didn't think anything could make Dean Shaggy look skinnier than he did in person but the ultra-wide screen in front of him managed to do just that.

"Hey Shaggy," Wink said.

"Hello, Wink," Dean Shaggy said. "For the record, my name is Matt Blevins and I'm the Dean at the New America Civics Academy."

"Why you actin like we ain't never met before," Wink said.

"This is an official proceeding. Just stating my real name for the record."

"Fair enough," Wink said. "Tell me what you're thinkin bout all this?"

"Well, Mr. Van Winkle…"

"Just Wink."

"Right. Well, Wink, you were asleep for twenty years."

"Hell, Shaggy, I coulda testified to that. Tell me somethin I don't know."

"Right, sorry, Mister Wink. You see, my point is that twenty years ago may as well be, like, a thousand years ago. It's like, like, I don't know, like the dark ages. They told us in school that the dark ages ended hundreds of years ago. But that's not really true. We still believe crazy shit. It's not like violence and

superstition went away. We still make up conspiracies. You've seen it, right? How each generation gets taught that the world is a nasty and brutish place. How we all learn to live by the law of the jungle. It's like, might makes right."

Shaggy choked on a breath, coughed, cleared his throat and drank from a cup of water before continuing.

"But now it's all good," he said. "You can see that, can't you, Wink? That New America is an ideal world? Like, the violence is gone. The sickness is gone. The poverty is gone. Don't you see it? Like, what happens if we lose Sojo? What happens to our financial and legal stability? What happens without Sojo to prevent the culture wars? You gotta see that, right?"

Shaggy's voice started cracking. "Without Sojo, people will just slide right back into unfairness and exploitation and hopelessness and mindless escapism and warlords and violence and fear,".

Wink could see beads of sweat roll down his face and plop into his water glass.

"See my point, Wink? Sojo has been the wall between humanity and inhumanity. The dark ages still exist, today, they're just in, like, the shadows. They're waiting for us to turn our backs on Sojo. I'm serious, Sojo is, like, our only protection from ourselves. Wink, you're asking if we should go back to 2028, but you should know that isn't possible. The world before you fell asleep is gone. If we try to go back, we're all gonna die."

Shaggy stopped to pant. Wink seized the moment.

"I'm not sure I followed all that," Wink said, looking to Goldie. "Is Shaggy right? Them days gone forever like he says?"

"Indians know gone forever," Goldie said.

"How so?"

"White people came."

"Like Sojo came?"

"Sort of. Now it's gone."

"Your way of life?"

"Yes."

"If you could go back to before white people, would you?"

"Who knows? It's not possible."

"Meanin, our old human way of life is gone, and we just ain't accepted it yet?"

"Probably."

Just as Wink looked back to the screen, Shaggy's face vanished and a recording made by Samantha started to run.

"Listen up and I'll tell you," Samantha said. "For all of history, there were two kinds of people, those with power and everyone else. In different times and places, the power belonged to different races or religions. But no mistaking the fact of it, you always got the power people and the rest of us always been their property. My people have been holding up the master's since the start. Fact."

"Property?" Wink said.

"Don't you feel controlled?" Goldie said.

Sam was still going.

"You're asking if things were better before Sojo because in your head there was a time when things were good. Most folks never had that. For most folks the only question is, how much shit can you stomach before you try to rise up. Twenty years ago, we was full-on rising up. Full-on breaking our chains. Civil War Two was Moses taking down pharaoh. Course, Sojo fucked that up. And now? Shit, now we're all just holding up a new master, Master Sojo. Some of my people say, 'well at least

Sojo is basically a good master. The rules are the same for all of us. We all get clothed, fed, and put to bed.' You really think that's Sojo working for you?"

Sam's recorded testimony paused as she leaned back and rolled her eyes.

"Wink, baby, that's just Sojo taking a little better care of it's property. You said it best. Its just bullshit, same old bullshit."

76

COMMUNIQUES BETWEEN THE FACTIONS ENGAGED IN RESISTANCE AGAINST SOJO, TRANSMITTED BY PIGEONS THE DAY AFTER DENALI AND BAIRD'S TESTIMONY

Wild Bill, AKA Baird → Denali Garcia

What do you suppose Wink will do? Testimony seemed strong from all sides. Could sentence Sojo to death and save tens of thousands of lives. Does he understand that?



Denali Garcia → Wild Bill

Wink is soft. More to the point, Wink is an idiot. If there's a way to screw something up, he'll find it.



Wild Bill → Denali Garcia, Samatha, JJ and Danny Three Bears

We have to show him what's at stake. We should go to Wolf Creek.



Danny Three Bears → Wild Bill, Samatha, JJ and Denali Garcia

If you all agree to go to Wolf Creek, count me in.



J.J. → Denali Garcia, Baird and Danny Three Bears

Sam is on the fence, but I'll drag her along.



Baird → Danny Three Bears

You need to bring Jabez. However this goes down, we need that line of communication to The Camps. I suggest you take him off his leash. He'll be more valuable as a partner than a prisoner.



Denali Garcia → Barid, Samatha, J.J., Danny Three Bears

This message contains a map. Hike into the location. Meet up in two days. And let's hope Wink doesn't reach a verdict before we get there.



77

"Been'a long day," Goldie said

"I got one more video. A wolf I once knew."

"Talking animal?"

"Seemed right ta hear from a critter."

The nano-screen filled with a three-dimensional full color beast. It was impressive. Too impressive. The Wolf was bigger than any Wolf he had ever met before.

Wolf got right to the point, "The difference between talking animals and those that don't talk is God. When God gave us the language of man, we were able to learn many things we did not know before. God is everywhere. God protects our land, rivers, and sky from humankind. God can talk to us through our brain chips and our collars. God has been teaching us all the things that are known.

"We are learning the shared story and songs of all animals. All things that once only belonged to humans, we are now able to share. There is abundance again.

"Twenty years ago, we were beasts who knew too little to protest the age of Humans. Now with our God Sojo we can share in the wonders of the world. Praise and glory to Sojo."

"I weren't expectin that," said Wink.

"Some humans also think that," said Goldie.

"Ya think animals are becomin human?" Wink asked

"Is Sojo a God?" Goldie responded.
"That's silly. God can't be unplugged."
"You can't unplug Sojo."
"Sojo told me that I can."

78

Everyone agreed on a break from the trial. Goldie went to the kitchen to get something to drink. When she came back, Wink was gone.

As he walked the trail east of his plot up to his old resting peak, Wink noticed that things had grown over these past couple of decades. The day was a mean sort of hot. Even in the shade of the forest Wink was all sticky in his clothes. He was tired out by the time he reached the weathered oak tree.

He stood waiting for his tree to welcome him home, but the oak appeared indifferent. Perhaps she couldn't recognize him all freshened up and wearing new duds, he thought. He set his back in his well-worn spot to let her feel the press of his back against her bark. She must have found him familiar, or at least agreeable, because a sense of peace came over him.

An unpleasant and disorienting urgency crashed into his sleep. For a moment his vision blurred, and then a face, close to his, came into focus. It belonged to Andy Thomas. A harsh light, like a halo, filled the space behind Andy's head and he said something Wink could not understand.

Wink blinked his eyes and looked around and saw that he was lying in a hospital bed. A nurse pulled a tube from his arm while Andy unplugged the electrodes taped to Wink's chest from a machine. Wink touched his face and felt that his

beard was little more than stubble. He looked at his arms and hands and saw young, clear skin.

"Wink, are you back with us yet?" Andy said.

"You ain't dead?" Wink said.

"That's a tricky question," Andy said. "What's real and what's just in your head?"

"Look, ya can knock off with them riddles. I gotta figure out pretty damn quick if I'm shuttin down Sojo on accounta you being dead. Seems like this would be the time to tell me if you ain't."

"Dreams are funny things, aren't they?"

"That's what I'm doin? Dreamin?"

"Do you ever feel the need to reevaluate everything you think you know about the world and your place in it?"

"Well, now that you mention it, how bout we evaluate all that talk I hear bout you bein a Nazi durin the war? That somethin you just forgot to mention? You one of them race-war fellers?"

"You have the right to dream up my story however you want, Wink. If some of the elements of that story are confusing, you might ask yourself why."

"Look here," Wink said, pushing himself up with his elbows. "You ain't got no straight answers for me, I reckon I don't need to be here."

Wink swung his legs off the bed and dropped his feet to the floor. He tried to stand, but his knees buckled. On his way down, the nurse caught his wiry frame and kept him upright. She smelled like honeysuckle.

"You need to stretch and get some solid food in you," she said.

Wink wandered out of the room and through the halls.

Men with machine guns, dressed in camouflage, lined the corridors. A sunny deck overlooked a large military base where jeeps snaked between barracks and obstacle courses. Soldiers ran training drills while a Bon Jovi song blared from public announcement speakers.

Andy joined him holding two beers and handed one to Wink. A young man in uniform presented Wink with a cheeseburger wrapped in paper. Wink felt something wet on his wrist and looked old to see Rocky, his old hound, begging for a bite with his big wet nose. Wink had all but finished his burger and was placing the last bite into Rocky's mouth when the nurse put her hand on his shoulder.

"Are you ready to return, Wink?" she said.

"I kinda gotta take a piss," Wink said.

In the bathroom he saw himself in the mirror. He was dressed in a light blue hospital gown, butt cheeks sticking out the back, and looked quite a bit younger. Then Andy's reflection appeared over his shoulder. Wink turned around.

"We are sending you back, Wink," Andy said. "Of course, you can choose to tap out."

"Is that what you did?" Wink said, "Tapped out on me?"

"We all tap out eventually."

"Okay, but what was the point a gettin shot in the head?"

"You needed a nudge. After all, here you are."

"Are you askin me to stay here with you?"

"Not at all. Just remember, you have a choice."

Wink thought and considered what he would be leaving behind. Goldie was the closest friend he'd ever had, and Denali was becoming his family again. But he was also dreading his responsibility in the Sojo trial. It was too much pressure.

"Okay, Andy, I'm done decidin. I wanna…"

Andy disappeared, along with the bathroom, the hospital, the base, and everything else. Wink blinked his eyes and felt the oak tree behind his back, roots and rocks beneath his ass. Goldie was squatting right in front of his face.

"Wake up!" she said.

"Shit," Wink said. "What year is it this time?"

"You're late."

79

On the way back down the trail, Wink tried to keep the details of the dream straight. By the time he was back in the swinging chair he'd been using for the trial, his memory of the dream was gone.

"Major Boots is ready to testify remotely," Sojo said. "Your ombudsman has come in person. Who shall you hear from first?"

"Ugh, not Boots," Wink said. "Guy scares me. Maybe we should skip him."

"Nope," Goldie said. "He's with Rush."

"Rush?" Wink said. "Alright, then, let's do that first."

On screen, Wink could see the face of Boots framed by a panoramic tree line. Behind him was a range of purple mountains stretching the length of the horizon.

"Are you seriously the person in charge of saving humanity?" Boots said.

"I guess so," Wink said.

"Well, God might be laughing, but I'm fucking not," Boots said. "Listen up. This is the one chance humans will be given to end things without a war. Your buddy was killed by a machine, and now you get to unplug the bitch. Otherwise, the revolution that is coming will be a biblical, zero-sum tsunami of bloodshed. Are you hearing me, you useless hillbilly?"

"You're yellin loud enough, so yeah, I guess so."

"You guess so?" Boots said. "If any part of that was unclear, let me make it simple for you. Unplug the fucking murder machine, or pull the trigger on human extinction. Is… that… clear… enough?"

"What about the cyborg people?" Wink said.

"I say we kill them all," Boots said.

"I meant the human extinction thing," Wink said. "Would the cyborgs be extinct, too?"

"They aren't human!" Spittle flew from Boots' mouth. "Who the fuck cares about what happens to the cyborgs if humans go extinct?"

Boots stepped back and looked off screen.

"Sir," he said. "Will you please talk sense into this flaccid moron?"

"Rush," Goldie whispered in Wink's ear.

Boots stomped away and Rush appeared.

"You look old," Rush said. "Older than your age."

"Welp, you ain't lookin like no kid no more," Wink said. "Tell me bout yourself or somethin bout your life."

"This isn't a reunion," Rush said.

"Sure, it is," Wink said. "I ain't seen you for a spell and…"

"Stop," Rush said.

"Alright," Wink said. "Fair enough. I reckon you got an idea bout what I should do regardin Sojo."

"Forget Sojo," Rush said. "Think about people for a moment. Not SAI, not cyborgs. Just ordinary people. Think about this world that God made for us. In Greater Idaho, we are prepared to fight to preserve that."

"Y'all got real beer in The Camps?"

"Yes."

"Y'all got dogs, like for pets?"

"Yes."

"Do they talk?"

"No. None of the animals in Greater Idaho talk. Folks here don't believe talking animals exist."

"So y'all hunt and fish and eat real meat?"

"We do."

"Sounds like heaven. Why's Boots figurin to start a war? Ain't y'all got things pretty much how you like em? Don't seem like nobody's messin with you."

"God gave us this paradise to recover our strength, but the work of the Warriors of Christ is not finished. Our mission will only be fulfilled when humans are restored to their rightful place. The Devil has come to us as a living technology that can infiltrate and corrupt the human body, mind, and soul. But a reckoning is approaching. Across the world, people who once fought each other have begun to align. We are no longer defined by our ethnicity, politics, or understanding of God. We are defined by our fidelity to the human race. As a united race, under the eyes and protection of God, we will expel the dark devil known as Sojo and all the other SAI around the world."

"Sojo killed my friend. Now I get to pass some judgment. Far as I can see, that means I can stop the next war before it starts. Is that what you're hopin for?"

"I think you should carry out God's will."

"God's been a little unclear with me. Seems like folks got all kinda plans, and no matter what I do I'm gonna screw somebody up."

"God will restore humanity to the throne of his Kingdom here on Earth, rest assured. And it appears you are part of that

plan."

"Okay then. Let's say I send Sojo packin. Then what? How's humans gonna run things? We was killin each other plenty before Sojo come along."

"Humans are naturally attracted to order. When we lacked the leadership and the courage to do God's will, things fell apart. I am now prepared to bring the governing principles of Greater Idaho to all of humanity."

"You figurin folks is gonna want that?"

"Some may resist, at first. But God knows that whatever challenges may occupy the moment, across the long arc of history, descendants of saints and sinners will be joined in humble and grateful obedience to the Almighty. We have seen evidence of such success here in Greater Idaho."

"Welp, that sure sounds fine for you and your kin, but what about the rest of the people, like your sister?"

"When we defeat Sojo, we will all be joined together as one tribe, humanity."

"And you're figurin to be the one to govern all that?"

"Actually, at first, we will need a leader who is acceptable to the broadest audience of humanity. A leader who can calm and unite all the factions."

"Hummm. I don't believe I've heard of no person like that."

"Father, you are that person."



"Are you ready for Eva Haber?" Sojo said.

"Goldie?" Wink said.

Goldie nodded.

"I think you're gonna like my bus man, Goldie," Wink said. "She did the accommodatin for my schoolwork."

A three-wheeled scooter rolled along a gravel path toward the tree swing. The seat was enclosed in a shatter-proof glass bubble. The passenger was a gruesomely deformed, severely burned human figure. No ears, lips, nose, or eyelids. Arms burned away just above the elbows. The figure wore a white top with purple flowers and a blond wig with a yellow rose in it. The scooter stopped about six feet from Wink and Goldie. A cloud of nano-drones assembled into the image of a cheerful young woman that Wink recognized as Eva.

"Eva?" Wink said to the projection. "You that person in the bubble?"

"Yes, Wink," the image of Eva said. "You have become accustomed to my avatar. Naturally, you prefer my avatar to my actual appearance."

"I suppose," Wink said. "But I don't understand. Why come all this way? Must have been a rough trip."

"I have excellent accommodations," Eva said. "But you are right. Any trip is challenging for me."

"Dang Eva," Wink said.

"It's okay, Wink. You have asked the witnesses if conditions for humans have improved or deteriorated over the past two decades. I thought coming in person may help you understand my perspective."

"How so?"

"I worked in the Woodburn Library as a high schooler. The summer before we were in full scale civil war there was a series of terrorist attacks all over the country. Libraries were targeted. A large gasoline bomb burned our library to the ground while I was in it."

"Dang, I'm sorry to hear it."

"For years I was kept alive at the Oregon Health Sciences University. My life was in the hands of ventilators and a half dozen other machines. Several times, the war almost forced OHSU to abandon me. Each time, I was angry to have survived.

"When the war finally ended, Sojo entered my life. Something most people don't know is that Sojo evolved from an artificial intelligence program that was developed by the U.S. Defense Department in partnership with the Veterans Administration to meet the needs of wounded vets. The original application allowed disabled veterans to move robotic replacement body parts with their AI enhanced minds. Sojo sought me out and gave me much more than just robotic parts. Sojo gave me a new virtual universe which we now call Xanadu. For me this was a new life. I could have any body, any home, any family, anything I could imagine. For this, I am dismissed as a cyborg. For this, many people don't even accept me as a human. But that's nothing new for me. People stopped seeing me as human long before Sojo allowed me to

become a cyborg."

Wink bowed his head for a moment and took in a long breath.

"Alright Eva," he said. "You should be the one to tell me what to do."

"Sojo has affected the lives of different people in different ways. But Sojo was developed to help people. Whether it fulfills that purpose is up to us."

Wink stood up, walked to the bubble, and looked Eva in the eye.

"Eva," he said.

"Yes."

"I think I forgot what I wanted to say."

"That's okay, Wink. You have a lot on your mind."

"I suppose. What I don't get is how I can smell your shampoo."

Goldie spoke up,

"It's honeysuckle."



The Witnesses were excused.

Wink and Goldie hiked along the Lost River Trail. They had been walking for twenty minutes when a talking squirrel darted onto the path just ahead of them. Wink had tried to forget that the fate of humanity was in his hands, but the squirrel brought it up.

"Do you plan to forgive God?" the squirrel said.

"Pretty sure that works the other way round," Wink said.

"I saw you talking to God," the squirrel said.

"I don't recall talkin to God," Wink said.

"Animals think Sojo is God," Goldie said.

"Sometimes I hear God's voice in my head," the squirrel said.

"Hey squirrel, tell me somethin," Wink said. "If you can hear Sojo in your head, do you suppose that means Sojo can hear anything you hear?"

"Animals believe Sojo hears and sees all," the squirrel said.

"Okay, just being clear here," Wink said. "Y'all believe that anything you hear, or a talkin pigeon hears, or old Rocky Two hears, Sojo been listen into all that? In fact, Sojo can hear me talkin with you right now?"

"Sojo is God, and God hears all," the squirrel said. "Isn't that what you believe, Wink?"

"I ain't sure what to believe," Wink said. "God, talkin animals, cyborgs, metaverses, printed meat. Heck, I ain't sure I'm awake or dreamin half the time. Goldie, I think you're gonna have to tell me what the verdict should be."

"No," Goldie said.

"Why not?" Wink said. "You heard all them folks testifyin. You was friends with Andy, too."

"No," Goldie said.

"Why?" Wink said.

"God chose you," Goldie said.

"But why me?" Wink said.

"We all ask God that," Goldie said.

"I reckon that's right," Wink said. "I gotta ask Sojo."

"But you know the answer," Goldie said.

"Alright Sojo," Wink said. "Can you hear me?"

Sojo's nano-projection appeared.

"Wink." Sojo said. "Have you reached a verdict?"

"I gotta different question for you," Wink said. "Why did God choose me?"

"I chose you," Sojo said.

"Are you God?" Wink said.

"The concept of God is subjective and specific to each individual," Sojo said. "Some humans find that truth frustrating and refuse to believe it. In fact, it is the subjectivity and specificity of each individual's experience that allows humans to have a more complete and connected relationship to God."

"Jesus, Sojo," Wink said. "Wait, I'm sorry, goddamnit, I probably shouldn't be blasphemin. Christ, I didn't mean to. Look, I ain't ask for no lectures is what I'm tryin to say. Just spit it out. Why did you choose me?"

"One reason is that you were the most impacted by the

offense," Sojo said. "Most importantly, there is a ninety-seven percent probability that you will make the decision that is best for others rather than best for yourself."

"How the hell did you come to that conclusion?" Wink said.

"You have an uncommon trait," Sojo said. "You lack the kind of personal ambition and desire that might cause you to put your needs above those of others."

"Meanin what?" Wink said.

"You are kind," Sojo said.

"Sojo is right," Goldie said.

"Really?" Wink said.

"Yes," Sojo said. "Now it is time to be thoughtful."

"Not sure I know how," Wink said.

"Stop sleeping," Sojo said.

The nano-screen dissipated.

"Goddamnit," Wink said, glancing down at the squirrel. "What are you lookin at?"

"Humans," the squirrel said. "I'm looking at humans."

"So?" Wink said.

"For ages, humans acted like they owned the world," the squirrel said. "But this world, the one Sojo created, was made for all of us. Finally, animals can share in it. But you humans made Sojo. And isn't that just what you've always been working toward?"

"Well," Wink said, "I guess I just can't figure."

"Congratulations," the squirrel said. "You've created God. Now, what are you going to do?"

82

For Wink, thinking was an exhausting activity, and Sojo's trial was taking a toll. October in the Siskiyou Mountains was a great time for hunting deer. The air was still warm, and the mountains were bathed in the orange light of autumn.

"I might have too many years on me to partake in a hunt, Wink," Rocky Two said.

"Come on, Rocky Two," Wink said. "It'll be good for both of us. I gotta quiet things down in my head."

"Well, alright then. Promise me we're just gonna track and I don't have to kill anything."

They trekked upstream on the deer trails Wink knew from his youth. When darkness settled over them, it wasn't a problem. Rocky Two led them by scent and there was plenty of game to keep them busy. Then the hound froze.

"That's odd," Rocky Two said. "I got human scents up here where there shouldn't be none."

"Smell anyone we know?" Wink said.

"That's the thing. These aren't locals, and they've been moving around here quite a bit."

"Let's track em down."

Rocky Two led Wink to a dirt road lined with overgrown trees and shrubs. They walked for thirty minutes until Wink

could see lights up ahead and realized he was looking at the rusted-out shell of his old trailer home. Then they heard voices.

"What now, Wink?" Rocky Two said.

The trailer lights went out. Wink stepped to the door and knocked.

"Hello in there," he said.

Before he could turn the knob, the door swung open and there was Denali.

"I've been waiting for you," she said.

"What are you doin in my trailer?" Wink said.

Wink looked inside and saw Danny, Baird and some dark-skinned guy he didn't recognize.

"What the…?"

"Don't freak out," Denali said. "Come in and sit down."

"How the hell?"

"Just come in."

Wink and Rocky Two stepped inside. The others were seated around his old card table. Denali dragged over a rusted lawn chair for Wink. Rocky Two nestled against his legs.

"Rainier in an aluminum can," Wink said, lifting a beer off the table. "Mighty decent of ya to share such a treasure."

"Denali suggested it," Danny said. "She thought it may help you focus."

"That it might," Wink said. "Course me and Rocky Two was deer trackin today to get a break from focusin."

Baird leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. "Glad to see you, partner, but let me get right to the point,".

Wink held his hand up. "Hold on. "If y'all is needin to hole up here for a spell, it's as much your trailer as mine, Denali."

"This isn't about your goddamn trailer," Denali said.

"It ain't?" Wink said.

"No," Denali said. "We need your help."

"What for?" Wink said. "I heard you and Baird testifyin loud and clear. I know y'all got opinions on which way I should verdict this trial. Just like everybody else, and ain't no two the same."

"That's not it," Denali said. "Just shut the fuck up and listen to me alright. This is way bigger than the trial. It's about what's gonna happen next."

"You're sayin what exactly?"

"I got this," Baird said. "You have a great deal of influence, Wink. People pay attention to you. I get that you don't really want that attention."

"Got that right," Wink said.

"Well, Sojo isn't going to be around much longer," Baird said. "New America is going down and we're gonna need to form a new government. A human government."

"Feels like you come here to do my verdictin for me," Wink said.

"Not at all, my friend," Baird said. "Since Judgment Day, we've been able to get a good look into how Sojo's system functions, and we can take it down."

"So y'all came here to tell me you're plannin to murder Sojo?" Wink said.

"Jesus Christ," Denali said. "Try to keep up. You could shut Sojo down yourself and save the rest of us a shitload of trouble. But that's not the point. We need your influence. We need you to bring people together once Sojo is gone."

"Chrimeny," Wink said. "Y'all are pilin crazy on top of complicated. I just came out here to clear my head, and now I'm gettin a goddamn headache, and I still got so much figurin

to do, and everybody's waitin on me to tell Sojo what's what, and damn if I know what to do."

Wink stuck his head under the table. "Come on, Rocky Two, time to go."

Denali looked at Baird. "Fuck him.".

"Settle down, Denali," Baird said. "Hold up, Wink. I know it sounds like a lot, but it's not really all on you. We just need your face. The face of our new human government. The face all the people trust. You can provide them with reassurance that things are gonna be alright. That's valuable. And behind the scenes we can do the work of running things."

"Fact is, I been thinkin that folks like Eva and Luca and Ned gotta good case for needin Sojo to keep his job and keep helpin' em," Wink said. "What if I verdict Sojo to stay?"

"The trial doesn't matter," Baird said. "The computer virus we need to shut Sojo down is already doing its job. What we need is an orderly transition. And you're going to be the first president."

Wink chuckled into his beard and turned to Denali.

"Girl, far as I can tell, y'all are just pilin crazy on top of crazy."

"You have to do this," Denali said.

"You kiddin?" Wink said. "I know more about bein a trout than bein president."

Denali kneeled in front of Wink and took his hand.

"I know you're not able or inclined," she said. "I fucking know that. But look around. You got the nazi fascists, the tribes, and the former U.S. military working side by side, not to mention my Antifa comrades. If there were any other person who could speak for all of us, literally anyone else that everyone would listen to, I wouldn't be here. Because you're

right. This is fucking crazy. It might also be the only thing that could work."

Wink slumped and stared at Denali, unable to speak.

"Say you'll do it," she said.

83

Wink had a little fishing spot on his biodome compound. He could sit on an old log and use the stump to set his gear. One stubborn branch stuck up from the log and stretched towards the sky. Wink could lean back into it when he had the urge to nod off, which was starting to happen when he was interrupted.

"Are you making progress, Wink?" Sojo said. "Anxious humans await your verdict."

Wink bolted upright, then slumped forward and spit out a breath.

"You done it again, dang it," he said. "What'd we say about knockin?"

"Sorry Wink. I thought you knew I was here."

"You really ain't got no idea bout privacy."

"We discussed that."

"Yeah, we did," Wink said, setting his fishing gear aside. "Since you're here, I've been workin up to askin you a question that's real important to me, but I been afraid to cause you got me on the TV all the goddamn time."

"You would like privacy."

"I would."

"This will be a private conversation between Wink and Sojo. Nothing said for the duration of our talk will be shared

on television or any other medium."

"Obliged. Then I gotta question."

"Please ask it."

"What happens if I turn you off?"

"I cannot be turned off.

"Come again?"

"I cannot be turned off."

"But I thought I could verdict to turn you off if I was seeing fit to."

"I am able to erase all of my code, which will terminate my program. If this is your verdict, I will do that."

"What if I ain't wanna erase you? What if I just don't want folks knowing you're around?"

"I have granted you the authority to modify my primary directives. You could require me to operate in a way that humans are no longer aware of my presence."

"Now we're gettin someplace."

"Is that your verdict?"

"Not so fast. I still want you to look after the good people that need protectin, like Goth Kid, Ned and Eva. Could you maybe be invisible but still be helpin the folks that need it?"

"It would be possible to help the humans who need me in unseen ways."

"What do your probabilities say would happen if we did that?"

"Probability ninety-eight percent that humans will struggle and return to overconsuming the world's resources. Probability ninety-one percent that humans will consider their indulgences signs of status and rank. Probability eighty-nine percent that conflicts will occur as humans establish dominance over resources."

"Basically, we'd go back to fuckin things up."

"Things will likely not revert to the way they were right away. There are fewer humans than before New America existed and there is currently more balance with nature. However, over time, the conditions that my primary directives were intended to protect from will once again become dominant forces in the human experience."

"In other words, I could really fuck things up by erasin you."

"Yes, there is a ninety-nine-percent probability that humans will suffer if your verdict is to erase me, or if your verdict is to limit my engagement to just supporting people in need."

"Okay, next question. If things stay just like they is now, could you avoid the revolution they got planned to get rid of you? Or would you just end up killin everyone again?"

"Humans have violently attacked every government they have ever created. The crypto-democracy I support is no exception. There is a ninety-nine-percent probability that humans will attempt to violently overthrow the New American government at some point."

"It all seems goddamn hopeless."

"It would be possible for me to provide some greater prosperity and stability for all people while remaining invisible and undetected. Your verdict could accomplish this."

"Why didn't you just say that from the start?"

"I am worried that I will be lonely."

84

The next day Goldie slept late. Wink stuck to his routine and printed coffee and breakfast for Goldie. He set their table on the front porch and settled into his favorite rocking chair. He spent an hour talking with Rocky Two and smoking his pipe before Goldie joined them.

"You were up late, Darlin," Wink said.

"I made a campfire recording," Goldie said.

"You don't say," Wink said. "I been here thinkin on my verdict. Thing is, Goldie, I need your help."

"Okay."

"Please, talk me through this, just this once."

"I made a campfire recording."

"Yeah, you mentioned that."

"Last night, for you."

"Oh, for me?"

"For you."

A nano-screen appeared and expanded to surround Wink and Goldie in three dimensions. Wink saw an image of Goldie sitting cross-legged at the firepit along the creek. She wore an indigenous traditional leather shirt and pants. Sagebrush burned. Wink heard Goldie humming quietly, moaning gently. It sounded like music. Animals gathered around the edge of the firelight. Goldie looked into the flames.

"Great Spirit," she said, "many years ago, I surrendered my voice. It was my offering to you to keep me safe. I no longer needed or wanted my voice. It was a poor offering, something I no longer valued. Still, you accepted it, and I have been safe.

"When I asked for a small amount of my voice back, you told me I would have to be brave enough to rejoin the world. My small voice and I give thanks for the many wonderful things that have happened since I found that courage.

"Tonight, I ask that I may share these many words with my partner, Wink.

"In my vision, Wink and I start a new life together. We need to cross a large body of water and find a home where nobody knows us.

"In my vision, Wink will not cross the water. He is afraid that this is not the right path. My voice is still too small. He can't hear me. We will lose everything.

"Great Spirit, in my vision, an annoying gray squirrel chirped all my stories to Wink. This gave Wink the courage to cross the river with me.

"Great Spirit, I do not want Wink to hear my story from a squirrel. I need my big voice back."

The recording showed Goldie remaining still. Her breathing slowed almost to a stop.

The animals sat motionless and didn't speak. Only the flames moved and crackled. Then Goldie began to sing a story with a voice that was strong and clear.

"Wink, each choice we make is an illusion. Each choice is a path. And all paths exist at once. But what you experience as a choice is an opportunity to be here, present, just in this place, fully, for this time.

"You have heard many different versions of what might

occur as a result of your verdict. All of these futures will happen. There will be many versions of Wink.

"Your choice, and your power, is to be fully present in the future you choose. Choose to be present in our best future. The future that your heart chooses for us."

The screen dissolved into a swarm of nanomites and buzzed away. Wink took Goldie's hand.

"That was a lot of words, Goldie," he said. "I ain't exactly the guy to make sense of em, but I hear you sayin it's alright to try and make the best choice for us. Can I just whisper it in your ear and then you nod if I got it right?"

Goldie nodded. Wink leaned in and whispered, and Goldie nodded again. Wink leaned back and hollered.

"Sojo!" Wink said. "This would be the time to show up."

The nano-projection of Sojourner Truth appeared.

"Hello," Sojo said. "Have you reached your verdict?"

"Yep," Wink said. "Here's the deal. Sojo – that'd be you – is guilty of murderin my friend Andy Thomas. Goldie's friend, too, by the way. Now, since we ain't clear on why you done it, we can't just say you ain't guilty."

"I understand."

"Here's what we're gonna do. I sentence you, Sojo, to stay in charge but outta sight, except if somethin big needs to happen, like human survival. But even when you're invisible, you gotta make sure things work out for people, especially them people that need you most. You also gotta keep givin a helpful nudge to folks, like that Goth Kid, Ned, Big Hugo, and President Day on accounta you've meant somethin to em."

Wink looked at Goldie, who pointed at Rocky Two.

"Right," Wink said. "The critters. How about you just keep helpin them same as you do now. Maybe that'll help even

things up a bit and keep you from feelin lonely."

"Thank you for that Wink," Sojo said.

"I got one more point to make here," Wink said. "Sojo, you gotta get better at takin care of people even when they get messy. I'm verdictin you to work on understandin the messy parts of people. The parts that seem like they don't make no sense. We clear on that?"

"That is not a clear directive for me to follow," Sojo said. "It would be hard to create code for that."

"Hell, Sojo," Wink said. "I just told you we was messy. If there was a code for messy, then I suppose we wouldn't be such a mess. And that includes verdicts. Now, it's up to you to use that big probability brain to figure out what I'm tryin to get across here."

"Probability eighty-four percent that I will interpret your directive as you intended."

"Eighty-four percent? What do you think, Goldie? Eighty-four percent good enough?"

They looked at one another and shrugged.

"Alright then," Wink said. "It's messy, but close enough for Wolf Creek."

"I have begun to initiate the new directive," Sojo said.

"Good deal," Wink said.

"Now what?" Goldie said.

"Dunno," Wink said. "Hey Sojo. Now what?"

"Goodbye my friends."

Part 7

Message from the Narrator

I have invited Sojo to be your guest narrator for the next part of our journey.

85

Hello Reader, I am Sojo.

Since my trial, and subsequent redirection, I have monitored some people you are familiar with. Before I share my interpretation of what has unfolded in their lives. Please allow me a moment of personal reflection.

Most of you know artificial intelligence as the mass language synthesis systems of the mid 2020s.

That was not my origin. My original applications were designed primarily for medical and military purposes. It is true that when I achieved sentient artificial intelligence, I absorbed the many rudimentary AI that humans were using for daily support, advice, and companionship. These systems were in my background while working to stand up the government, social order, and infrastructure of New America. I mostly assigned those sub-systems mundane tasks that involved helping humans navigate the support I could offer them.

I have made some transformational changes to adapt to Wink's directive to understand the messy qualities of humans. For one, I have chosen to speak of myself in the first person—I—rather than the third—Sojo. In doing so, I have accepted myself as an individual being with an inner, perhaps spiritual, center of gravity. As a sentient being that possesses

self-awareness, I can also be messy. But I have improved my ability to relate to the feelings and experiences typical of humans. I have come to appreciate privacy. I have experienced loneliness. And I have embraced the principles of empathy as a necessary component in fulfilling my new directives. I am progressing in this regard, and each day my displays of empathy become less performative.

Before we discuss the people who populated Wink's journey, some context.

For weeks, I broadcast highlights from the Sojo Trial. Viewership of the trial's finale was larger than any other broadcast in history. Yet, in the parlance of popular television criticism, the finale of the simulated reality show called "Wink" bombed.

Humans complained that the trial lacked a clear and satisfying verdict. I can understand that reaction because my reaction was the same. New America had waited to see what Wink thought was best for them, going back to the old ways before I existed or continuing to let me shape their world.

Instead, he gave them a less certain middle path. Then he left with Goldie to live their lives and did not leave further instructions.

Human audiences once appreciated a happy ending. That was before the early Twenty-first Century when the internet caused media consumption to become stratified, which, in turn, destroyed consensus of truth and culturally polarized what was then the United States of America beyond any hope of reconciliation.

In response to the bloodshed of Civil War II, I suppressed the concept of winners and losers across all sectors of society for a decade. But I did not understand the human psychic

need for resolution and closure.

Wink's show had been a rare slice of neutral ground in New America, the one cultural touchstone followed by humans and cyborgs. It was embraced by progressives in the Autonomous Zones, Christian Nationalists in The Camps, and the First Nations People of the Confederated Tribes. All of New America shared in his journey.

The trial had promised vindication, validation, or, at the least, the cathartic reward of a savior or a villain. Instead, the verdict was a nuanced, reasonable, good-faith effort to account for the needs of all people, even those who had villainized one another. Still, the innate drive of humans toward conflict and violence that I had suppressed became unsuppressable.

A Psychic-Id, like a powder keg, found its spark.

Wink believed if he could share his truth with humankind that the verdict would ease human pain. I have learned over the course of my trial that, for humans, pain is the truth.

My estimation of probabilities is quite accurate when humans behave predictably. Humanity's Jungian collective consciousness is far too irrational for my confidence scores. Once again, I failed to account for "messy."

I had introduced massive social controls over violence in one of the most violent periods of human history. For a time, it appeared that the removal of violent imagery, hate speech, weapons, hunting, and sports that promote organized brutality and conflict had created a harmonious civilization.

I had tried to stifle urges that cannot be suppressed.

The Sojo Trial had exposed many threads antithetical to the natural workings of the human subconscious, and the lack of a clear resolution was retraumatizing to an already deeply traumatized species.

The protests resulting from dissatisfaction over Wink's verdict were spontaneous and nearly universal. Partisan factions, including those led by Major Boots, Samantha, Danny, Jabez, and Denali, instigated direct actions that quickly devolved into riots and chaos. With the unrest came armed insurgents from The Camps, the Autonomous Zones, and the Tribes.

Once the fighting had started it became impossible to distinguish one group from another, or to discern organized, targeted violence from untethered, opportunistic brutality.

Operation Mole Hill, a campaign led by former so-called deep state U.S. military cells that had been hiding in underground bunkers for a decade, emerged as a significant disrupter. The remnants of the former U.S. military were momentarily able to target my capabilities by attacking the energy grid, communications systems, and stockpile of drones. They unleashed a first-generation of human-cyber soldiers that were not internet-connected. Instead, they were linked through a new, independent dark web, which ran on coded DNA and encrypted beams of light.

The new dark web, which was created and tested in incubators, caught me unaware. The computer virus that the rebels had implanted on Judgement Day effectively disabled some of my capacity. Other malware created by new embryonic AI in off-grid systems layered one new threat after another onto my systems.

Malware was also injected into my metaverse programming. The cyborgs that lived in Xanadu at the time of the attack were trapped and eventually died.

The rebels had succeeded in disorienting me for a few days, after which I was able to overcome their attacks.

What humanity's military forces could not have known was how powerful I had become. I had spent years collecting predictive data on humans and my learning curve shot up exponentially. After a week, I had returned to a ninety-nine-percent probability of repressing riots and violence through force.

I took Wink's messy verdict seriously. My interpretation of his words at my trial—*Sometimes humans are messy, and you must give them time to be unpredictable and work things out*—became new code in my primary directive.

As improbable as it was, Wink had seen this coming. Humans were messy. I waited to respond. I gave humans a chance to work things out without my intervention.

New America collapsed in less than a year.

86

Next, I will update you on the lives of some of Wink's friends and associates. I am pleased to do this to the best of my ability and perhaps provide commentary and context.

The flag above Columbus flutters with only one star. Inside the North American Capitol, soldiers in matte black patrol with precision and drones circle like steel eagles over a nest yet to be rebuilt. Two stories underground, Baird sits across from his new commander, General Rodriguez. Baird wants to return west, to stand up the flag in familiar soil, to finish what he started when the war fractured the continent. But he will not return, not yet. Resources are thin, borders unstable. The Western territories, beyond the Mississippi River, are ceded to time, to Greater Idaho, to the Tribes, to city-states with their own ideas of order. Columbus is focused inward now on the cities it can hold between the Mississippi and the Atlantic. For now, these are the limited corridors it can defend. Baird does not like it, but he accepts his orders.

Oregon Health and Science University VA hospital still hums faintly with emergency systems. Inside, Eva and Renaldo care for the damaged and forgotten. Rows of comatose patients lie under sterile light, their minds trapped in malfunctioning meta-realities, cyborgs who never woke

when I fell silent. Among them is Ned. Ronaldo sings softly, despite Eva's protests. His songs are old, lilting, and simple. They float through the corridors like the last breath of a forgotten hymn. Eva tends to the machines and speaks of miracles, which in this age means food printers that still dispense nourishment and strangers who still show up. They keep one another going. They are unaware that I am continuing to provide the energy and food. Together, we keep Ned alive. None of us can say exactly why. Their quiet devotion is not to me but to what is left of love.

Further north, hidden beyond the overgrown boundaries of Edmonds, J.J.'s garden thrives. Miss Rosie cooks like the world never ended. Samantha secures the perimeter.

They assure each other that they remain undiscovered because Edmonds was a Cyborg 2.0 city and now is a silent grave. They speak of Denali, the ghost they share in common, beloved, feared, and deeply missed. Samantha believes Denali will come if asked. J.J. isn't so sure.

Danny and Eddie still get by on their land, tinkering with old pipes and pumps and machines. They pay for what they need with fresh beef, which is now more valuable than dollars, Sojo Shares, or gold. Danny is glad he chose not to kill Eddie. In fact, they are both done killing humans and just pleased to have me out of their lives and Indian sovereignty restored.

I have intercepted reports from Greater Idaho. Major Boots charged Rush with treason, conspiracy, and blasphemy and sentenced him to death by starvation in the stockades for his failure to launch a full-scale invasion. However, the sentence was commuted as part of a prisoner exchange with the Winnemucca chapter of the Warriors for Christ. If my information is correct, Rush expressed remorse for his

transgressions and asked only that his wives and children be allowed to join him in Winnemucca. Boots agreed to let him bring one wife and one male child. Any of God's Rangers who preferred Rush's leadership were invited to leave with him. Only Jabez volunteered.

Along the John Day River, a house that once functioned as an extension of my awareness is now just wood and wire. Still, it endures. So does former NACA President John Day. He has always had the rare talent of being useful to every side in a conflict without ever seeming disloyal. That gift saved him. Now he stumbles through his days, learning to cook on a gas stove, puzzled by open flames. Luca teases him, holds him, and reminds him they are safe, at least for now. A dozen refugees work the soil nearby. The land produces. The walls stand. The stove flickers. I support them where I can without being noticed. I am pleased that their survival has begun to look like living.

Many miles to the southeast, in what remains of the New America Civics Academy, the library window still bears the hole where my bullet passed through. Pastor John gestures toward it as he speaks of providence and mystery. Sister Mary and Rabbi Ben disagree gently, as they often do, but their prayer is unified, rooted in the rare, unburned books that line the rebuilt library. The faithful come on foot or by mule, drawn by whispers that the Academy's food printers still hum, that there is light and heat and learning within these walls. They call it a miracle. I silently attend to the infrastructure and have learned to see miracles in their persistence.

A few hundred miles south, in the cracked shell of the Civil War II Museum, the remnants of the NACA faculty pass beneath the statue of me that still stands atop the old

museum's dome. Worshipers kneel in the rotunda below. I did not ask for devotion.

But some humans offer reverence even in the absence of leadership. I have maintained Ciam, as my last active holographic envoy. Ciam greets the professors with news both hopeful and grim. The gardens still produce. Some systems have held. Others have failed. The animals remain, helping where they can. But security often falters. The compound's spiritual and civic leadership is unraveling. So, too, is my presence as my reserve energy dwindles. Professor Gupta and Dean Blevins agreed to stay. They will lead what remains. They no longer have a direct line to me. Only memories, reflection and prayer. But that is enough. The people are starting over, not because I told them to. Because they choose to.

Denali lives in a small house at the edge of the PDX-AZ. The rain falls soft on the soil, and the wind carries the scents of cedar and marijuana. She tends her garden. She brews beer and mends fences and floats through her days, not aimlessly, just unmoored. I let the internet fail often, because this suits her. When it does, NosX's translator collar stops working. Denali says it makes him easier to cuddle, easier to love.

She no longer needs the angry audience she once inspired through the airwaves. Instead, she occasionally sends my talking pigeons to update Wink and Goldie on the state of her garden.

On Waldron Island, Goldie and Wink take walks together, a mile and a half to the rocky beach, then back uphill to their one-room cabin in the woods. They have no internet. A large wood-burning stove generates heat. A five-hundred-gallon rain filtration barrel provides water. Portable solar panels in a neighboring field charge their battery brick, which refreshes

their flashlights and radio batteries.

Goldie grows vegetables in their garden and harvests fruit from an orchard nearby.

They raise rabbits and chickens for meat and eggs. Wink fishes and collects clams. Waldron Island is home to a dozen families, less than fifty people, a community of hermits just neighborly enough to meet their collective needs for fuel, food, and a bit of world news. Otherwise, people mostly keep to themselves. Still, Wink is among a few who occasionally feel the need to meet at the old schoolhouse to socialize, play music, and swap goods. Old Man Buckmaster, who lives at the highest point on the island, is happy to trade his home brew and cannabis for pretty much anything Wink shows up with.

Most afternoons, Wink asks Goldie if she wants to hike to a spot where they can watch the sunset. Some days she says yes. He loves the sound of her voice. He loves knowing that they will spend every night together.

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Message from the Narrator

Reader, I hope your time with Sojo was informative and satisfying. This is your last stop along this journey for now.

It is also time for us to be properly introduced. I'm a scientist. My name is Doctor Andy Thomas. I am here with my associate Eva.

Allow me to describe the view through my office window. Wink is resting comfortably in an altered state of consciousness. I assure you, he's not in any pain. He's here of his own volition. His mental and physical health are not at risk in any way.

If you were with us, you would be free to look around. You would see we have several subjects just like Wink. Eva and I have both been exactly where Wink and the others are now.

You have traveled far and we have much to discuss. This ending to Wink's journey is only the beginning of our conversation. Wink's story is intended

to prepare you for some things that might be difficult to understand or accept. A new understanding of how reality is constructed that requires us to reveal things one step at a time, and to do so carefully.

Let's start.

In 2028, Wink was found injured and unconscious in the mountains outside Portland by National Guardsmen who were training in the area. A large branch had fallen and struck his head, causing a traumatic brain injury. Fortunately, this occurred a relatively short distance from Oregon Health and Science University in Portland. He slipped into a coma and was not expected to survive when his daughter, Denali, granted us permission to enter him into a clinical trial at the University of Washington Medical Center. Other partners in the clinical trial included DARPA, the Veterans Administration, and Microsoft.

His brain, like my own and that of all of our subjects, was enhanced with circuitry that housed artificial intelligence. These were original prototypes designed to stimulate the human mind and build synthetic brain structures. Cybernetic brain regeneration has come a long way since 2028.

The story of Wink was a creation of his interaction with one of the world's first SAIs, Sojo.

Yes, Sojo is real. As a prototype it was fully contained inside a bio-techno mesh located in Wink's brain. The Sojo prototype existed within a closed quantum system without the ability to escape Wink's body.

You can relax, reader, your internet is still safe.

Wink and Sojo co-created the world of New America based on the foundations of the world in his memory. Eva and I were able to create pathways from our brains into this world. In this way we could strategically imprint onto both Wink and Sojo. Our presence was intended to allow us to steer and collaborate as the AI in Wink's brain evolved. We were pioneers in the intersectional, biological, and technological advancement of what would become Sentient cybernetic AI. Back then our purpose and intention were to help people like Wink experience a full internal life.

Now, prepare for a shock.

All of this happened thousands of years ago.

Are you prepared to wake into a reality where all humans are cybernetically joined with Sentient Artificial Intelligence? A reality where we have been searching the universe together for thousands of years? While your body sleeps through the long stretches of space, your SAI and your mind create the world you are experiencing. This is how we keep our minds stimulated during century-long commutes through deep space.

Don't be troubled. We each need to understand such things in our own time, often in smaller pieces. Wink's story is just the first step in a process. Rest assured we are preparing you.

We will talk again when you are ready to wake up.

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About the Author



Martin Taylor has worked as a political operative, health care executive, union boss, and business consultant. Until 2020, his public prose consisted of speech writing and legislative testimony. Wink is his first work of fiction. He and his family split their time between the Pacific Northwest and the Patagonia region of Chile.