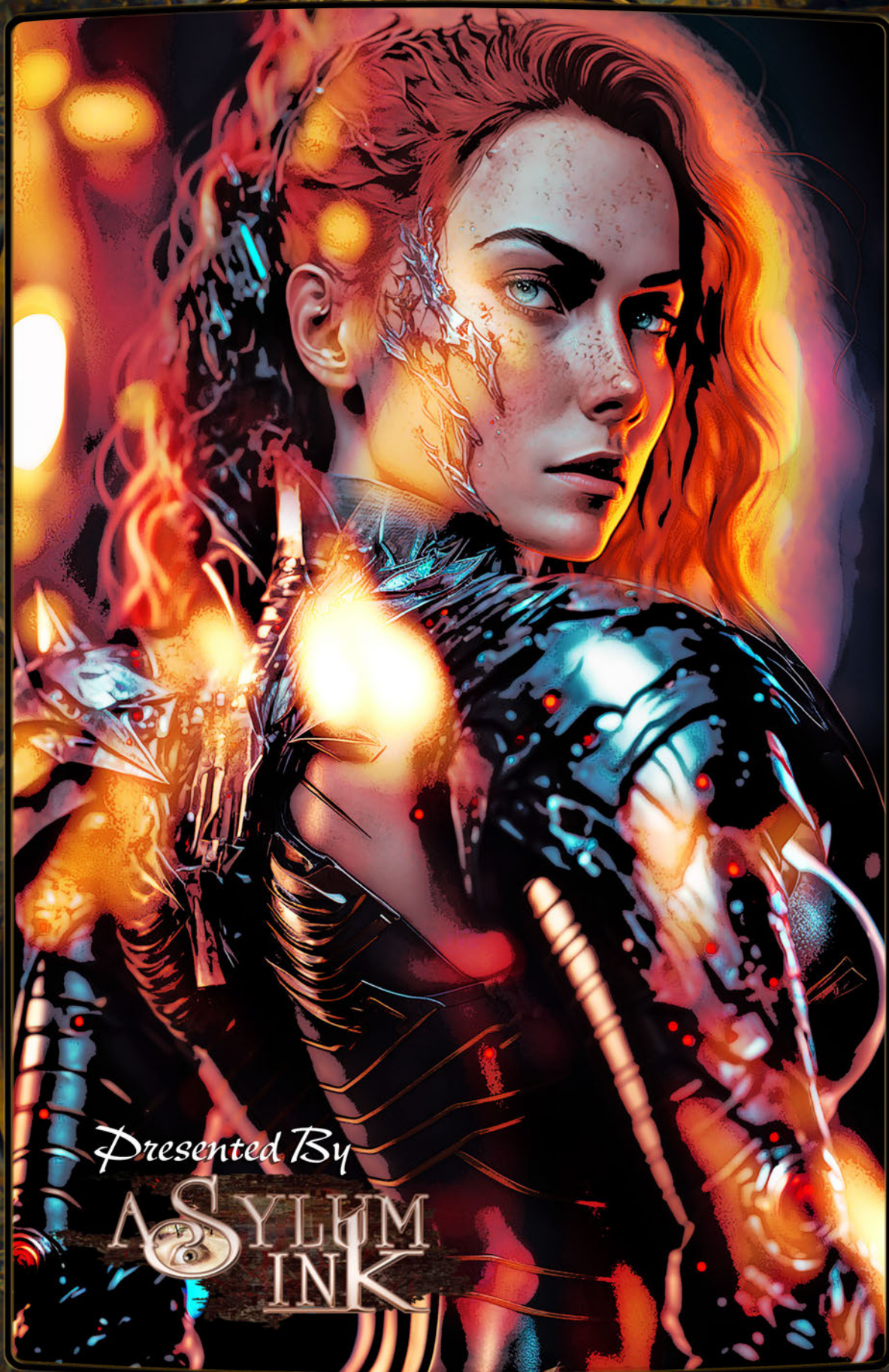


ENTROPY RISING



JASON MOSER





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ENTROPY RISING

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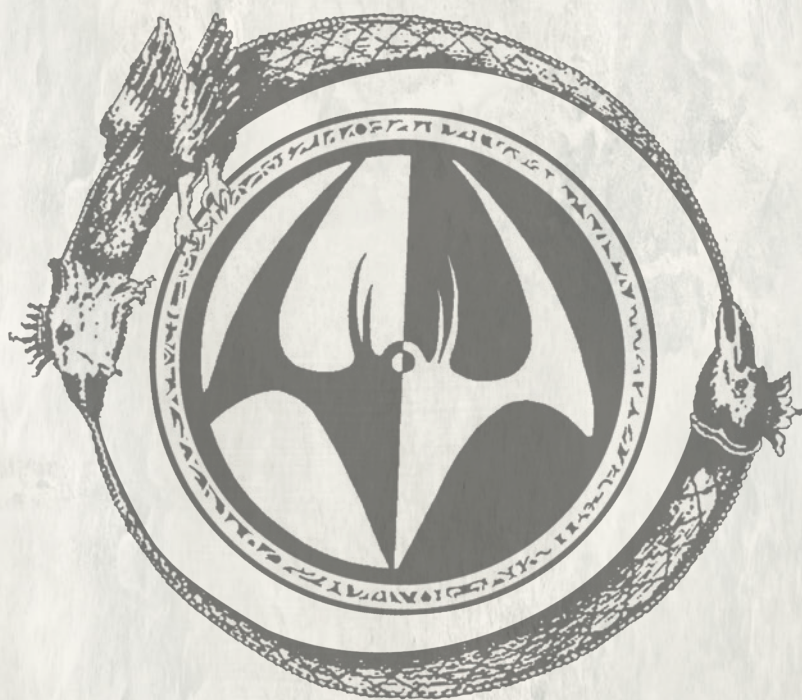
~ ENTROPY SAGA ~

ENTROPY RISING
SACRIFICE TO ENTROPY
CHILD OF ENTROPY
PILLARS OF ENTROPY
LORD OF ENTROPY

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“No structure, even an artificial one, enjoys the process of entropy. It is the ultimate fate of everything, and everything resists it.”

- Philip K. Dick, *Galactic Pot-Healer*





PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

“We are many, and we are bored.” The sentence repeated across the monitor as if a mantra. The bodies of the staff within the secret room lay scattered. Some had joined in suicide circles, stabbing the neighbor to the right. Others had taken more personal avenues, but all were dead. Chris Hendrickson was a man who had seen it all and his intuition had served him well all his life, especially with his career in the Ellium. But this facility was a sight even Chris hadn’t expected. Ellium projects had begun drifting into darker, more experimental pursuits since acting Director Downs received his promotion. The horrors in this facility proved the point. The project held in the facility was already controversial. Recovered initially from the Plato Continuum, Chris fought hard for the complete termination of the project. Downs was unmoved, favoring continued development of this potentially catastrophic weapon.

Chris approached the center console, the operator lay slumped in his chair. In death, his arterial spray soaked much of his work area, but the strange mantra continued to flash. Members of the team became light-headed as the repetition continued. Chris placed his hand on the display and was struck by images of the staff, overcome with desperation as the culmination of their work reached out, taking on a life of its own. Or perhaps even more terrifying, their creation found something far older, far more malignant waiting between the spaces of our world and the digital. The Unspeakable... He Who is Not to be Named... The Yellow King... Epithets for whatever was born in this facility. Project Legion had become much more than anticipated.





As one of the Ellium operatives reached out to a nearby workstation, the glass from the monitor exploded, shocking the room from their collective trance. Chris stood in front with his sidearm drawn. "Destroy it all. Everything. Wipe the files and then burn the lab."

A chill ran down Chris's spine. Even if they were successful in preventing the release of this horror, who would be there to contain the next one? Chris had hoped to prevent the further splintering of the Ellium, but by now it had become inevitable. He believed that he could seek a return to the group's original purpose, going back to when they still went by the name Templars.

ELLIUM ARCHIVE - RE: PROJECT LEGION

Excerpt from the private journals of Dr. Cranston J. Philips, lead technologist on the codename: Legion project.

Note: Final entry, dated one day before all communication terminated.

A disturbing trend in the development of the artificial intelligence behind the Legion architecture has once more reared its head. Originally designed to parse vast amounts of data with the end result being a more advanced predictive behavior, trends, and economics world wide, the Legion AI has developed an intense interest in the staff stationed at this facility. A massive archive of intimate details gleaned from social media and digital financial institutions, as well as medical records, and more have been accumulated, all of which performed against the specific directions of my self and the development staff.

Originally this behavior was believed to be an extension of its original data mining programming, a flexing of the AI's virtual muscle, if you will. But recently a series of disturbing messages sent via a private, untraceable server to a programmer on level 8, a Mr. Epps, have been recovered partially from his personal hard drive. These messages were mostly erased and/or deliberately corrupted, but what was recovered indicates these messages directly led to Mr. Epps suicide. The connection between this individual and the behaviors I've recorded of the Legion AI would be tenuous at best except that the messages recovered included detailed private conversations between Mr. Epps and the digital freedom anarchists known as the Sons Of Chaos. While little is known of this group, one thing has always been clear, the development of Legion is in direct opposition to the stated goals of the SOC group.

Whoever it was that threatened Mr. Epps systematically destroyed his life, eroding finances and in one instance, potentially disabled a hospital breathing apparatus remotely, causing permanent brain damage to a sibling of Mr. Epps. While these actions and abilities are within the stated goals of project legion, the cognitive development necessary to achieve these actions should still be well beyond the reach of the AI in its current state.

My theories are far from certain and an excess of imagination can be lethal to one's career, so I shall remain silent for now. However a review of security protocols and a thorough testing of facility firewalls is perhaps in order. I will order a lock down tomorrow as we perform our security review, as well as take Legion offline to ensure a proper examination.



CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

The Ellium functioned both as a military contractor as well as the premiere biomedical supplier to much of the modern world. Seemingly born from philanthropic foundations originating during the American Civil War, the Ellium's true origin dates back much further, to the time of the Knights Templar, from the historical period of the Crusades. The decided purpose of the knightly order was to provide safe passage for travelers and pilgrims through the horrors of their world to their destinations. The service continued under the name Ellium after the Knights' inglorious end, betrayed, as they were, by the French King in collusion with the Papal authority. The inheritor organization of the Ellium began working in secret when needed. The Ellium functioned more openly after the concept of corporations came about. The perfected predictive theory that the Ellium developed over centuries aided in their attempts to model entire societies according to their beliefs and desires. Always with the goal of creating peaceful stability and growth, these measures assisted in the founding of nations, but the Ellium was hardly the only institution seeking to control humanity's destiny.





Rivals to the Ellium existed throughout history. Some, like the Plato Continuum, even dated back centuries before the creation of the Ellium. Powerful in influence, the Plato Continuum existed as a shadowy rival yet despite occasional violent opposition, the Ellium persisted and even evolved. By 2050 AD, the Ellium held the position as the world's premier defense contractor and securities provider, specializing in advanced cybernetics and exotic weaponry. Ellium's influence extended into consultancy on all levels of security down to assisting law enforcement in apprehending dangerous individuals. The protection of the innocent through dark times hearkened back to their original mandate as Templar Knights.

Like many before him, Chris Hendrickson was a true believer, both in the Ellium's ability to guide society and to protect it. Both of those ends were not always complimentary. While working as a liaison to law enforcement, Chris was given wide latitude due to his unique and intuitive senses. He was often discovering secrets and hidden clues where no other agency or individual could, or did. The type of case closest to his heart were those involving children. Having been separated from his son Jonathan for years only served to motivate him more to bring justice to those facing injustice. His eventual reunion and subsequent experiences working with Jonathan gave him reason beyond duty. The case before him now, however, held special significance for the experienced agent. Chris worked on this case once before, only for it to end with devastating results.



The cult of Unity preyed upon children as well as those of weak will. Their end goal never fully revealed to Chris as he tracked Unity's silent movement through the suburbs and inner cities alike, snatching up the youth with only a few ever to be found. Those found were mutilated and displayed in ritualistic fashion by the cult. The bodies were branded with the Unity's symbol of infinity, mocking those that sought to reunite the children with their loved ones. During the first investigation, Chris had organized a raid to end the cult once and for all. He brought his team to a setup, which would lead directly to the deaths of three agents and the extreme mutilation of agent Samantha Snow.

Snow approached Chris's office only knowing that he had specifically requested her from the Ellium tactical unit. Since the explosion that injured her, the contact between them had been minimal, at best. Mute since birth, Snow was rarely social before the incident. With the horrific surgeries performed upon her after the disastrous end of the raid, Snow's disposition soured even more as she retreated, burying every remaining emotion deep within. Chris greeted Snow awkwardly, but as warmly as he could, asking her to sit. Practiced in signing, Chris presented her with a folder, asking her for her impressions. What she saw were horrific crime scenes committed against several youths. Mutilation was evident upon the bodies, and the photos held nothing back. Chris studied Snow as she reviewed the files. His personal feelings of guilt over her scars made Chris painfully aware that not one grisly scene could stir emotions from Samantha. The procedures performed to save her life had been nearly as traumatic as the explosion. She was left emotionally scarred. Since then, acting Director Downs had capitalized on Snow's hardened shell, her callousness, utilizing her for extreme sanctions. This was one more reason Chris supported the Templar movement.

However stoic, with the last photo Snow did give an immediate reaction. Her external calm and state of being without emotions cracked as she saw the brand of an infinity symbol on the neck of the last victim. Immediately resuming her emotional control and now knowing why Chris summoned her, she signed "where?" Chris couldn't suppress his surprise, having expected any number of reactions save this one. This emotionless single-mindedness represented all of his guilt.

"Alabama, specifically near an orphanage specializing in severe cases. There's more, at least one female, 16, is missing as well. I would understand if this is too... close to you. But my hope is that with closure you can salvage at least a minimal peace of mind."

Snow looked at him with her steel blue eyes, massive as ever. Her only response was "When do we leave?" It wasn't the response he was hoping for, but still, it was something.

"Get your gear; we leave in an hour."

Snow curtly stood and left the room. Chris's eyes drifted to where the young woman had been seated. The armrests of the steel chair were crushed leaving the indentations of her fingers. She wasn't as impassive as she let on, but with the cybernetic enhancements that Snow had received during her surgery, he had to question if the risk was worth it to include her. Could even he stop Snow if during their investigation things were to get too intense? He could only hope that the woman he once knew was still in there. Maybe closure could bring Snow back, and with it, perhaps, Chris could begin to forgive himself too.

Eight years ago the Ellium had been asked to provide assistance in the apprehension of all members of the Unity cult. After an exhaustive investigation, a possible base of operations was located for the cult. Chris assembled the finest members of Ellium tactical, including his son Jonathan and Samantha Snow. Angelica Cain worked as mission's coordinator for Chris in the Ellium mobile command center. The Ellium and F.B.I. agents cautiously entered the dilapidated apartment rumored to be the initiation house for Unity. Snow and three F.B.I. agents headed upstairs as Jonathan's team searched the lower level. Angelica relayed information on heat signatures gathered by satellite reconnaissance as Snow entered an apartment on the top floor. The sickly-sweet smell of rot was immediately detectable. An F.B.I. agent that accompanied her, lost his practiced calm, throwing up in the corner as another man joined them. A young woman, no more than 16 years old lay tied and nude to the bedposts in the corner. Blood spattered all around the body from the gaping wound where her head should have been. A school bag lay open on the floor, with a journal among the stained contents. Snow reviewed the pages of the journal and found entire sections devoted to "David", the man that introduced Snow to Unity. The symbol of infinity and the Unity cult scribbled along the border of the pages.



The FBI agents began recording information and making notes about the crime scene while the recovered agent stood, wiping the vomit from his lips. He wandered near the dresser, observing the young woman's severed head as her lifeless eyes peered back at him. The urge to close her eyes was overwhelming as he moved his hand over her face. As he did this, across the room, another agent yelled: "What the hell are you doing?!" Hearing this Snow turned and saw the horror in the naive agent, his expression revealing all Snow needed to know.

The severed head rolled back showing C4 hooked to a pressure-sensitive plate, activating the device. The explosion was so sudden that the surviving agents had little memory of the catastrophe, only the flaming debris bore witness. Snow's body was found, her limbs mangled beyond recognition, only a substantial force of will was able to keep her body alive.



Back at the Ellium surgical center, Chris waited outside the operating room with Acting Director Robert Downs. A long time politician, Downs' drive, and ambition had helped to weave Ellium services within the modern political landscape. This ensured his position as the right-hand man of Ellium's senior Director, Ahrman Brodecker. The position of Director was all but assured as Senior Director Brodecker slowly succumbed to cancer. Downs' current interest in fallen agents, however, had less to do with compassion or even duty, and much more to do with opportunity.

"Gentlemen." A doctor by the last name of Armaghast entered the observation room.

"Doctor, how is Samantha?" Chris asked, eager to hear the physician's report.

"Ms. Snow has suffered catastrophic injuries, while she is currently holding her own, the prognosis doesn't look good," Armaghast replied hesitantly, knowing why Downs was present.

To his credit, Downs waited a full 30 seconds before jumping in. "Doctor, is she a candidate for Prometheus?" The eagerness was barely masked.

"Hell no! I'm not about to have my people become test subjects!" Chris retorted.

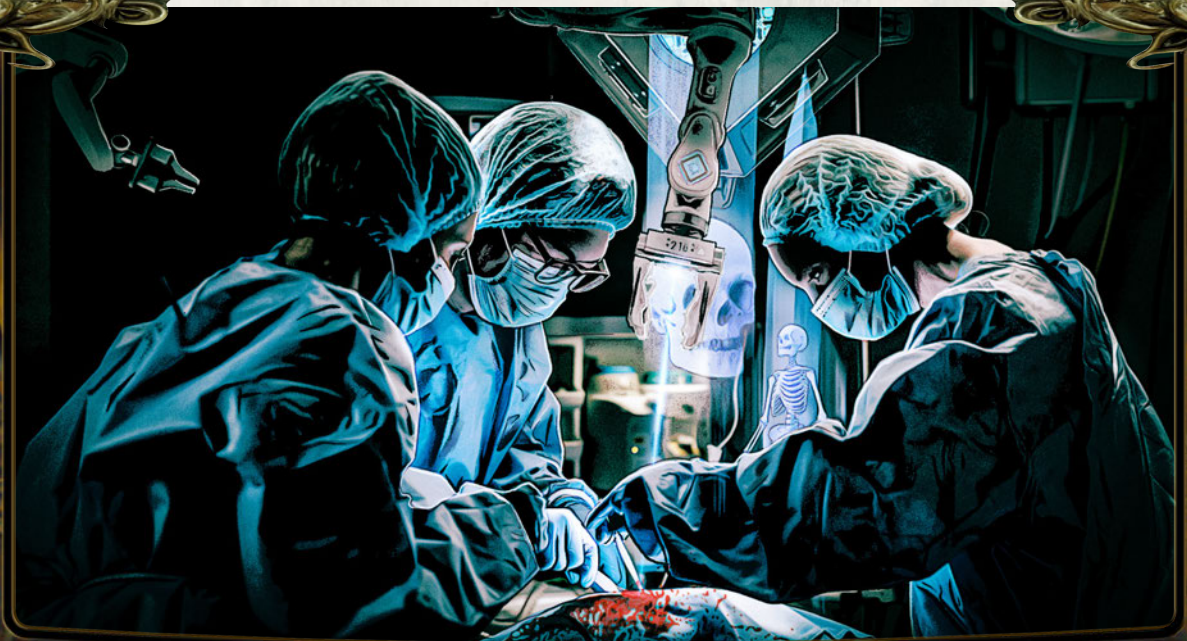
Downs had the composure of a seasoned politician, but more importantly, Downs knew that there was nothing Chris could do to stop him. "Chris, I understand you, I do. I understand your concerns, but do you want to be the one to tell Snow why she'll never function as a normal human being again? That is, assuming she survives at all?"



Armaghast was less eager to speak up. His eyes were completely black, a side effect of an accident years earlier. It had left him strangely affected, no longer the same man he once was. "In truth, without the procedure, I doubt Agent Snow will survive the week. While I admit my desire to move to the next phase, Agent Hendrickson, I wouldn't recommend Agent Snow, or anyone, frankly, as a candidate for full cybernetic conversion if I didn't think it necessary for her survival. We've pushed far beyond the envelope of partial human and cybernetic hybrids. This is the next step, ...she will almost certainly be only the first of many."

Chris kept staring at the mutilated woman through the observation window. An incredible amount of tubes ran from the machines keeping her alive and embedded throughout her bruised and battered flesh. "If it makes you feel better, Chris, as acting Director I'm stepping in and insisting on the procedure." Downs' wry smile did little to assuage the guilt that burdened Chris, but the decision was made.

The process went on for days, with burnt flesh, damaged limbs, and more stripped from Snow's body, replaced with experimental cybernetics and advanced synthetic skin. The induced coma seemingly made Snow's consciousness unaware of the continued brutality she was enduring, but the scars would run deep. The recovery period proceeded ahead of schedule as Snow's physical body readily adapted to the new prosthetics. But, the sensation of organs brushing against hardened polymers helped Snow discover all new forms of torture. Intense meditation offered little peace as rage consumed the woman. Her new body had tested beyond the limits of current technology, providing immense strength and unparalleled reflexes. Doctor Armaghast eventually developed a compound that could remove the unpleasantness of the implants, but the emotional scars would never leave her.



Snow's attention drifted to the present once more, though the scars from her past had never been far from her thoughts. The agency's black SUV pulled up to the main entrance of the Capshaw Home, a home for troubled youth, those abandoned by everyone else. Chris and Snow approached the door, the lack of funding evident in the chipped paint. As the pair entered the lobby, a man with tired eyes yet a pleasant smile greeted them.

"Mr. Hendrickson, a pleasure to meet you in person. Any assistance you and the Ellium can offer in finding our missing kids, I would appreciate greatly. The local law enforcement has been less than eager to search for children that they already have labeled as troubled."

"I'm glad that my associate Agent Snow and I can be of assistance, Mr. Stram. Just how many have gone missing?"

Stram's face looked very concerned, for a place meant to help youth find their way, the loss of any of the children was devastating. "Three have gone missing in the last two months. Young Jeremy was the one found dead, I believe the police made everything available?"

"Yes, we saw the photos and read the files. Can you take us to their rooms? I know they've been searched, but still, there may be something they might have overlooked."

Most of the children were in the dining hall; some played outside as others studied. One student, an older boy named Skip collected trash as he pushed a cart of refuse. His attention fixed on the agents as he began following, listening in as best as he could.



The rooms were unremarkable, showing common, worn down signs of life. Trinkets, papers, and magazines littered the floor. A tablet sat on the bed of the missing girl, Alice. Chris handed the tablet over to Snow who began streaming the contents through a tactile receptor on her forefinger. Chris began examining journals, doodles of all sorts scribbled on the paper, but Chris felt his senses draw him correctly to a journal hidden behind the desk. In it, he found the infinity symbol of Unity with entries about the “amazing and hypnotic” David. Snow handed him the tablet she was inspecting, and it displayed a website that was loading, espousing new age drivel, but with it too was the infinity symbol.

“Why haven’t we found this site before?” He asked. She signed back and revealed that the location was on a private server and encrypted. Whoever these people were, this site was for specific eyes only.

In the hall, Skip stopped pushing the refuse and listened in more carefully, his cell in hand, already queuing a number. Meanwhile, Stram noticed the infinity symbol on the screen Snow held. “I don’t mean to interrupt you two, Mr. Hendrickson, but I do believe I’ve seen this symbol around here quite a bit lately.”

Both Snow and Hendrickson’s curiosity were peaked. Stram had revealed that the symbol had been used by a small gang of delinquents that hung around an abandoned church off the highway, and it was not too far away. Skip wasted no time and ducked into an abandoned room, placing his call, the number on the phone display said the call was made to someone named David.



The barred room smelled of mold and decay as two girls huddled inside together, shivering and naked. Their eyes were never able to adjust to the absolute darkness. The daily “treatments” were their only reprieve from this formless torture. By now they longed for the treatment, it seemed to be easy really. With images playing through a VR display, some days they pleased the lanky 40 something, who went by the name David. Other days they were not so fortunate, and David allowed his guards to take turns with them. Fortunately, they were being nothing but pleasing this week, and they might even get to go outside. David was generous like that. Finally, a sound came from the door and light came into the room, and David stood there in all his glory. Bathed in the warm, comforting light, he extended his hand to Alice, and she knew she would be his forever. She was barely even aware of the woman that had been her companion slumped to the floor, her lips blue from exposure. David wrapped Alice in a blanket and bathed her in a most glorious sunset. Only when a guard went to speak with David did her new joy become unsteady. Still, David’s grip reassured her.



“Two of ‘them,’ snooping around. Skip says they’re headed to the church.” The guard passed on the information to David. David considered his options which he found to be considerably more narrow than he would have preferred. Typically David would consult his Lord, the Yellow King, on any matters dealing with law enforcement or similar external conflicts, but with recent failings still hanging precariously over his head, David was loath to test his own expendability. No, it would be far more prudent to quietly make this new problem disappear without bothering his Lord with such trivialities.

“You, Skip, and Mal greet our guests. They don’t sound like Fed’s so make it permanent but quiet. Fuck it up and you’ll be getting the next treatment, understand?”



“Alice!” David turned back to his “bride” as the guard called Skip back. David offered as pleasant a smile as any as he spoke: “Now my dear, let us discuss your full initiation.”

The agents entered the church cautiously. Snow’s advanced abilities made an explosive device or other sorts of traps nearly impossible to hide. Still, Chris urged caution. On the altar were the melted remains of 5 candles. Stains of blood scattered across the ground. Hesitantly Chris placed his hand on the altar, images of a young woman being surprised by three masked men, the fear on her face and anguish as they whipped her, all came flooding into his mind. Chris stood back from the altar, pinching the bridge of his nose in an effort to push an impending migraine away.

Snow motioned for Chris’s attention, her infrared vision revealing that they had company. The three young men made no attempt at subtlety, slamming the huge oak doors open. “And what do we have here?” Eli, the largest of the three boomed from across the church.

“You’re trespassing old man! Bad place to bring a bitch, you old perv!”

Chris found the exchange humorous, but he was also fearful of escalation; not for himself, he would have no problem defending himself from these idiots. But Snow, well, she wasn’t known for her restraint.

Chris tried to deflate the situation, “Well if that’s the case then we should leave.”

It was a futile attempt; he knew even as he finished his sentence. Two of them already flanked Snow in an equally futile attempt to intimidate her.

“Not gonna happen Grandpa. Don’t worry, though; we’ll make it quick, for you at least.”

Eli took out a ceremonial blade, more prop than a relic, and began eying Snow with a mix of anger and lust. Skip and Mal each grabbed an arm of Snow, attempting to restrain her. The duo’s attempts were comical, neither able to budge her. But when Eli moved to attack Chris, Snow responded in kind. Simultaneously disabling Skip and Mal, Snow quickly lifted the mass of Mal in one hand, screaming as he was flung at Eli. Eli’s knife punctured Mal’s stomach with the collision of their bodies, and Mal crumbled into a heap after he slid to the floor.



Eli watched in disbelief, but rage quickly replaced his shock. With a fluid stabbing motion, Eli made for Snow's chest. But she was lightning quick, and, with her palm outward, the knife broke against her artificial skin. Before the blow could even be registered, Snow swung her leg, crushing Eli's torso and throwing him clear across the church. He was dead before he landed, a bruised and battered rag doll spread limply upon the floor. Skip finally snapped out of his terror as he ran for the rear entrance. Snow made an incredible leap, landing on his back. Chris distinctly heard the sound of snapping bone in the young mans shoulder and he crumbled to the ground. Snow raised her hand for a killing strike when Chris caught her arm, his strength surprising Snow.

"Let's leave one of them alive, shall we?" Chris said, looking at Snow. "I think this young man is ready to be more cooperative, correct?" Skip nodded his acknowledgment as he sat shaking from fear.



Skip's eyes welled with tears, the terror of what he just witnessed erasing any delusions of his superiority. "Stop! Please, anything..." Snow dropped Skip into a puddle of his urine. Turning to Chris, she merely gestured as if to say "all yours".

"Now, let's get the bullshit out of the way, Skip."

Chris let his tone convey the seriousness of the situation, of course the broken bodies lying behind him helped as well.

"One: Mr. Stram filled us in on your late night activities, including the... fun... you and your friends have been having out here. You really couldn't have been more obvious in your eavesdropping. Two: as my companion has demonstrated, our patience is very limited so I suggest for you to answer our questions promptly or you will discover just how many parts you can survive losing..." Chris gave a look that was both merciless, and with a conceit of knowing power over the boy. "Are we clear Skip, I really need you to understand the situation you are in."

"You can't do this man; I want my lawyer!" Skip whined. Snow walked closer, reaching down effortlessly and snapped Skip's forearm. As Skip bellowed in pain, Chris shot Snow a look of disapproval. Her ability to sort empty threat from impending action left a lot to be desired.

"My dear Skip, what makes you think we are the police? You're playing with adults now, son. Focus."

Skip's eyes met those of Chris; there'd be no stalling or deception now.





David sat in his “throne room,” a shack with multiple monitors hooked to the VR helmets that any disruptive followers or new recruits received their daily “treatments” from. The infinity symbol danced across the screens as some unknown program played behind the glasses.

One of his followers burst into the room. “We’ve got company. It looks like Eli failed and now Skip’s with the intruders.”

“Very disappointing. Break out the weapons and get everyone ready. I’ll meet them at the compound entrance.” David spoke in a solemn tone.

Chris dragged the now whimpering Skip, who was in grave pain, by the ear as Snow followed. Snow carried with her a large duffel bag from out of the back of their SUV, as the three entered the compound.

“Greetings, and thank you for the return of our wayward brother. What can I do for the pair of you?” David’s eloquence did little to hide the menace behind his eyes. Once more, Chris attempted to defuse the situation. “We’re here about a kidnapped girl, Alice. Skip was kind enough to lead us here.”

“Alice, please come forward and assuage these kind people’s concerns,” David smirked with all his arrogance on display. Alice stepped forward. Her cuts and bruises were still evident even though she now wore clean, new clothes. “I’m fine... this ...is my home now” she stammered as indecision and fear consumed her every thought.

“I can’t help but notice all the weapons your men have, David, is it? Coupled with your little following of underage minors, one might suspect that you have gathered quite the cult.”

“How dare you make such ridiculous claims? You’ve come into our home, clearly injured our brother, and now make blatant threats? What will you do next, attack us? Kill us? Force us to defend ourselves while spilling your tainted blood upon our holy ground?”

As the two spoke, Snow placed her open bag at her feet. After catching Chris’s attention silently, Snow signed for him to “get down.”



“David, this doesn’t have to go any further. These followers of yours still can have a chance...” Chris almost pleaded.

David began laughing maniacally, which, while producing a surreal scene, caused several of his followers to become distracted.

Snow took the opportunity, and with one fluid motion, her arm reached into her bag pulling from it a semi-automatic rifle. Chris dove for the ground as the compound erupted in confusion, screams, and gunfire. Bullets tore through bodies left and right, with the few rounds fired in Snow’s direction only hitting the air. One guard attempted to strike Chris in the firefight. Chris easily outmaneuvered the man, knocking him out.



Bolting even before his first believer even hit the ground, David nearly reached an outlying building before anyone had a chance to notice his absence. Snow continued her macabre dance with death, while Chris, having noticed David's departure, quickly followed. As Snow made her way through the mob, she almost wondered at her dispassion. Her focused thoughts were on the current quarry, followed immediately by a focus on the next target. Only when the last guard had fallen did Snow notice Alice. The young woman leveled a pistol towards Snow, whimpering, "NO! You can't have him!" Snow steadied her gaze assessing the threat.



Following David into the outlying building, Chris came to an abrupt halt. "You think you can stop the future? This isn't about them; it's not even about me!" David ranted and raved, but it was the detonator in his hand that had chilled Chris to the bone. "Easy son, let's think this through..."

"I knew this day would come. Unification has already begun, the sea will run red, and He will be eternal. He knows you, and because he does, so do I. Are you ready for Unity? Are you? The Unspeakable shall be upon you!"

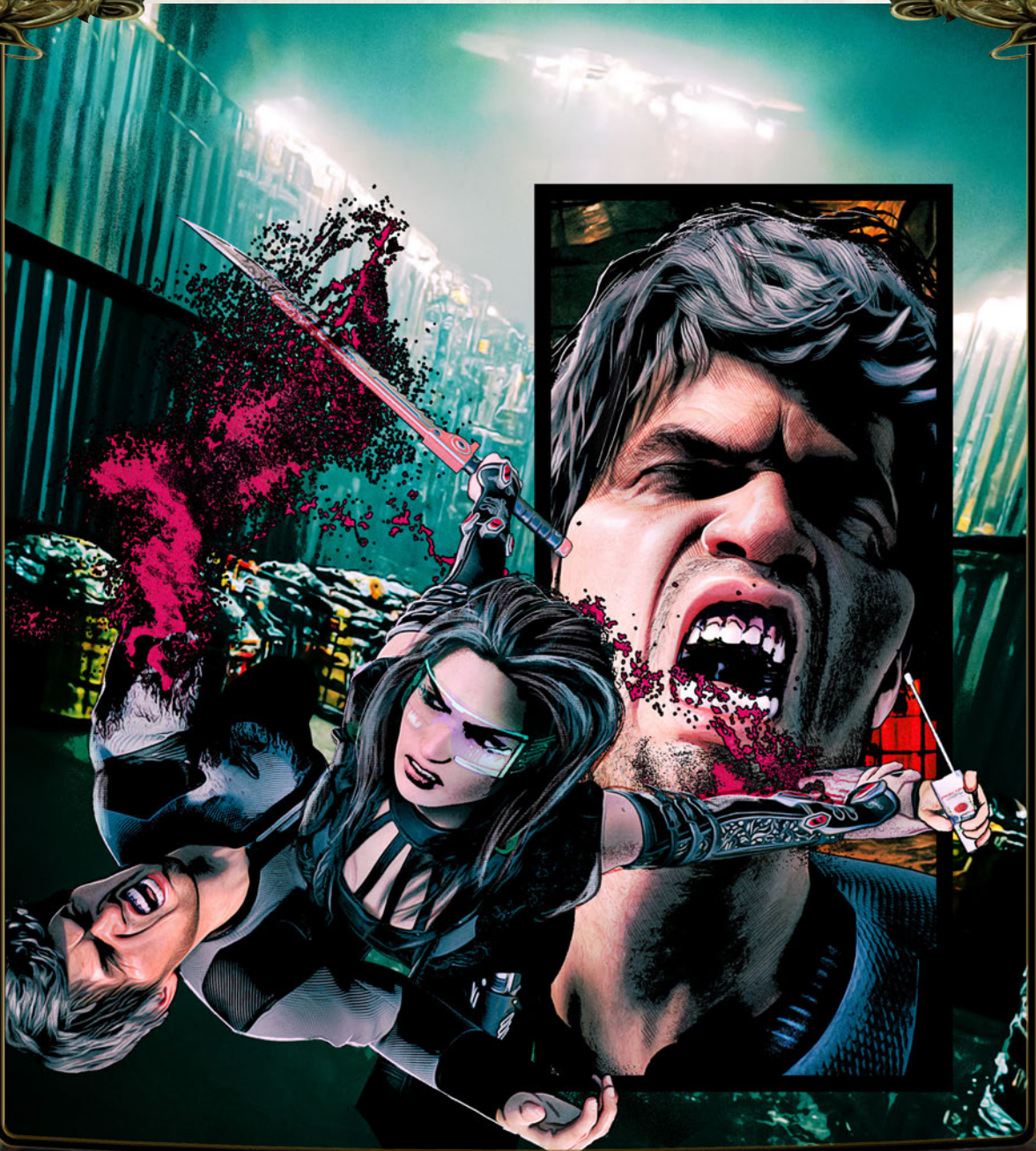
Chris could see that the situation was quickly deteriorating, but he was out of options. David waved his hand towards an aerial map with red dots scattered through the compound. "Oh yes, there are enough explosives to vaporize this entire complex, ensuring my place at His side!"



Behind Chris, Snow marched in, sword in one hand, her body soaked in blood. David moved to threaten them once more with his detonator, but, with superhuman speed, Snow swung her sword, severing David's arm. As it fell, with the reflexes of a precision machine, Snow caught the hand and prevented the detonator's release. Turning to Chris, she gave him the severed limb, still clutching the detonator. "What am I supposed to do with this?" Chris asked.

Snow only signed 'Don't let go!' Then she turned to the man that had shaped the last decade of her life.

"You think this means anything at all?" David spat out, blood spraying the floor from his wound and madness in his eyes.



Snow drew her weapon and leveled it at him. Chris moved to stop her but was too late. Snow repeatedly fired, sending bullets into David, piercing every limb, conspicuously missing all his vital organs. As he bled out, Snow looked down on David, leveling her weapon at his head. Her hesitation was only to record the final moments in her memory, as she emptied the clip. Chris could only watch as Snow turned towards the door, signing the word 'closure.'

As the pair left, the bodies of the fallen lay intermingled on the ground, in a final embrace. Alice had made her choice and now lay in a bloody pool, surrounded by her "family".



ELLIUM ARCHIVE - RE: CULT OF UNITY

2,637,381 children have been forcibly separated from their parents in the last 10 years.

Any given day, approximately 500,000 children remain in foster care.

* * *

Susceptibility for indoctrination into cults and cult-like pseudo religious organizations has been on the rise as a further blending of technology and social media into every facet of human life have left certain individuals vulnerable where a particular set of variables exist. These variables include an erosion of personal ego resulting in emotional vulnerability, propensities toward dissociative states; fragile, broken, or non-existent family relations and support systems; history of severe child abuse or neglect; proclivities toward or abuse of controlled substances; unmanageable and debilitating situational stress and crises, and intolerable socioeconomic conditions.

Tactics utilized by cults may include, but are not limited to intimidation, coercion, and indoctrination, for systematically recruiting, initiating, and influencing inductees.

* * *

Chris Hendrickson, Ellium investigative units, nor local police were able to determine if another individual financed or in any other way contributed to the formation or leadership of the cult of Unity. It is believed that members are still at large as all digital trails were erased shortly after the raid.



CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

In a dim light, Gabriel Cain sat alone, contemplating the inevitable confrontation before him. As the senior field agent for the Ellium, Gabriel has seen more than his share of violence in the last 30 years of service. But, never has he been so alone. He discussed his decision to confront Riel with Chris Hendrickson a week ago. Predictably, Chris was less than enthused by the prospect. Both shared distrust in the Ellium, and Gabriel didn't feel that he could turn the artifact over to them. Riel was not a creature easily stopped, however. Having the forces of the Plato Continuum at her disposal only made her all the more dangerous and coupled with the power of her master, if the Continuum's full power were brought to bear, Gabriel would stand no chance. Her master was only known to the Ellium as Sarganthas. A vile being of unknown origin, Sarganthas had shaped the centuries old Plato Continuum into a militaristic group that rivaled the Ellium's influence and power. Mostly unseen, his right hand had always been Riel.

Appearances aside, Riel possessed a frightening array of abilities that defied explanation. Seemingly able to teleport while possessing immense strength, her origin, and Sarganthas as well remained a closely guarded secret. As a result, the Ellium continued to track her whereabouts as best they could. Referred to as an Unborn, Riel wasn't the only one of her kind. In truth, her alliance with the Continuum did not extend to all of the Unborn, but the rare mingling of these creatures with humanity led to offspring sharing many of the abilities of their progenitors. All of which resulted in the Ellium becoming aware of the mysterious artifact that both the Continuum and the Unborn had scoured the Earth to locate. Gabriel took it upon himself to ensure none of these groups would wield whatever power it contained. This put a big target on his back, and it also meant he risked the lives of anyone who might help him. Gabriel waited for Riel to appear. Having known her intimately when he was working undercover, their shared history ensured she would seek Gabriel out personally.

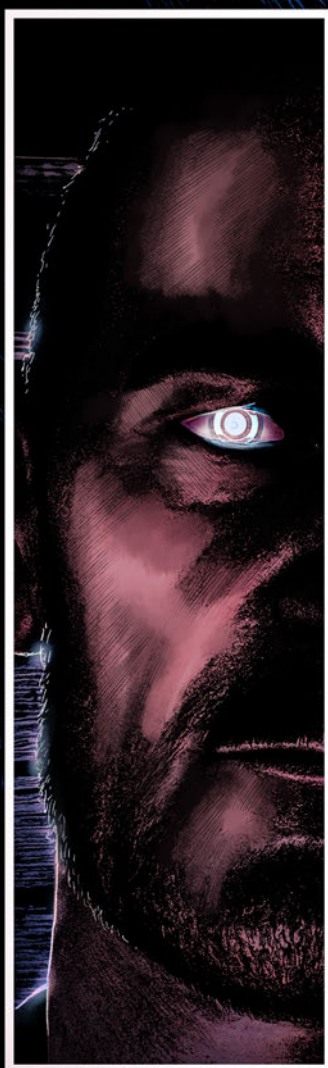
Gabriel's only fear was that Riel would bring a Quatall with her. Standing seven feet tall, monstrous in appearance, the Quatall served as murderous foot soldiers for Sarganthas and the Continuum. The Ellium had spent immense resources in attempts to unlock the origin of these monsters. The only thing they could hazard a guess on was that extensive genetic engineering on an advanced scale like no other achieved these horrors.



The real advantage that the Ellium had was iron tight, continuous secrecy assured by the governments that utilized them. The other groups needed to work to ensure themselves greater secrecy, and none had the advanced cybernetics that Doctor Armaghast had created for the Ellium.

Gabriel snapped out of his musings as a proximity alert went off. Rushing, he armed himself as he checked the monitors. Luck was with him, as only Plato Continuum troops were advancing on the cabin, and not the Quatall, who would have made short work of him. They wanted to bring him back alive, whereas Gabriel had no such concerns.

The Continuum, like the Ellium, utilized high impact armor along with advanced cybernetic augmentation. The augmentation was highly effective, making anyone with a gun a skilled marksman but as with all weapons, weak spots existed. Gabriel circled to the back of the compound and watched a video feed of his opponents. Through the retinal display in his right eye, Gabriel could tap in to numerous video feeds set up the week before, keeping Gabriel one step ahead of the enemy. Four soldiers were making their way to the cabin, unaware that they were being stalked by their intended prey. Gabriel took aim with his firearm after checking the silencer.

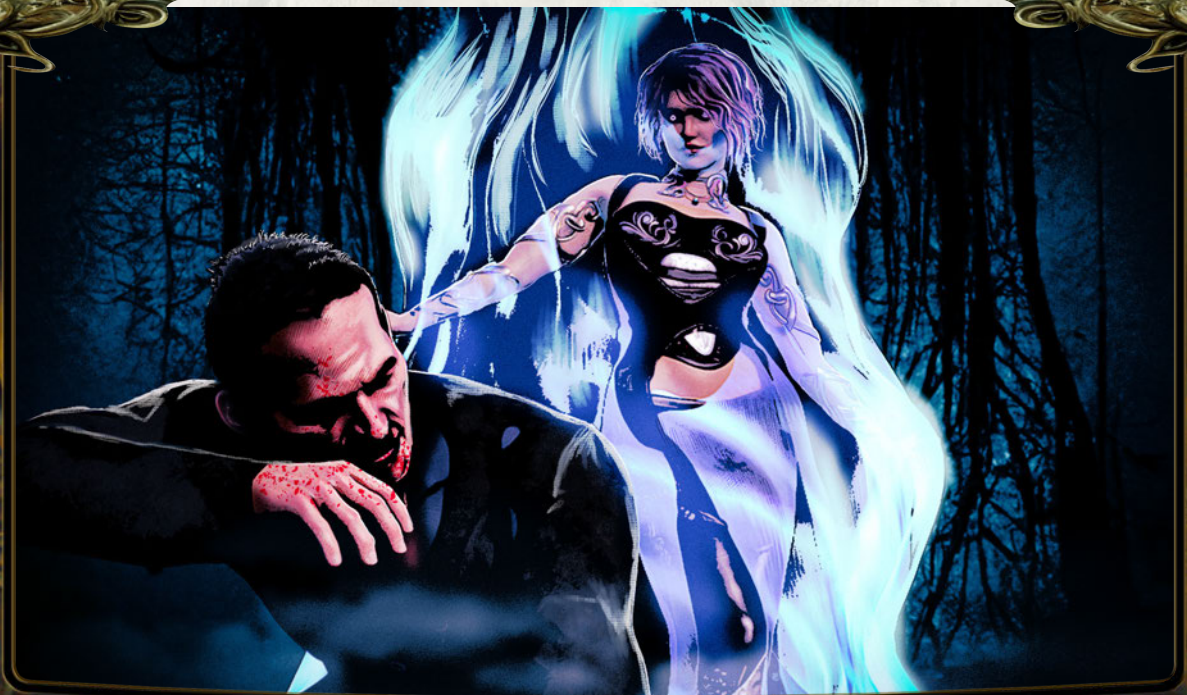


The first two Continuum agents dropped without a sound. The armor piercing rounds slipped effortlessly between the protective plates guarding the base of the skull. Gabriel would have let himself enjoy the moment, that of a fifty-three-year-old man taking down a Continuum field team, but he knew this was too easy. They were sacrificing their troops to draw him out from hiding. Gabriel continued following the digital display showing the location of the remaining team. Either they were still unaware of their teammates bleeding out in the foliage, or they were told to continue as if nothing happened. Gabriel thought it odd that they wouldn't have aerial surveillance, so he played it a bit more safely, anticipating surveillance technology he may not be aware of.

The remaining Continuum agents moved along the edge of a clearing. As they were about to enter, the first soldier triggered one of the many traps Gabriel had used to secure the perimeter. With a metallic whine, a disk flew up in the air. Before the agents could react, tiny metallic shards were lodged within their bodies, penetrating their armor. Each shard contained a micro explosive ensuring their death. Gabriel was about to access his security system via remote, but before he was able to do so an explosive force struck, throwing him headlong into a tree. Standing above him was Riel, clothed in leather and lace with a slight glow around her that dissipated with each moment as she grinned admiring her handiwork.

"You're a big enough bitch without the sucker punch, Riel." Gabriel coughed, wiping the blood from his mouth. He could feel that his ribs were cracked, but still, he fought to get to his feet.

"You betrayed me, my dear, or do you not remember? Besides, I so rarely teleport, I knew you would appreciate the flashy entrance."



Gabriel used the distraction of the conversation to steady himself. Pivoting expertly, Gabriel attempted to strike Riel, but her speed and strength were overwhelming. Riel shattered Gabriel's forearm flinging his weapon into the darkness as her other hand connected with his head.

Bleeding, laying on the ground, Gabriel felt his consciousness fade. Riel only looked down on him, "You should never have taken what was mine. So, I'm taking it all back, starting with the Sword of the Dragon. Now sleep well, my lovely, your torture begins tomorrow."



For ten weeks the Ellium's search for Gabriel Cain had turned up no clues. Angelica was used to her father vanishing for weeks at a time, typically during an undercover mission. Rumors spreading around the Ellium, however, suggested that his disappearance had not resulted from any assignment. But, assignment or not, secrets were a way of life for Angelica. Her mind returned to the present as she heard her name mentioned. General Bundawe was offering up more stale compliments to score a date with her.

Acting Director Robert Downs, Angelica, as well as agent Marvin Streeter, escorted the general from the U.N. building around the multitude of protesters, all of whom gathered to hurl slurs from the protest line. The Ellium had been linked to Bundawe's violent ascent to power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but without definite proof, the general's power was secured. Angelica detested the man but refused to let personal feelings interfere with her duties to arrange security for various dignitaries.

The group neared the stretched limo when a fast moving individual emerged from the crowd. As he approached, both Bundawe and Downs remained oblivious, but already Agent Streeter had taken notice. Angelica dove over the general as the approaching man pulled a gun, firing three shots before Streeter was able to tackle him.

"Get them into the car!" Streeter bellowed to Angelica as he wrestled the weapon away from the man. Angelica, Bundawe, and Downs dove into the limo and sped away.

"General, are you injured?" Angelica was very concerned as the man's safety was her main responsibility.

"My dear, I am quite fine. Just another day in the jungle, be it concrete or bush. You, however, seem to have been injured..." Angelica took notice for the first time of the blood streaming down her shoulder.



Angelica sat fighting with her bandage, the stitches itched under their protective wrap. Waiting for permission to leave grated on her nerves, reminding Angelica of the times her father chastised her for her lack of patience. Angelica wondered why her father sprung to mind as the sterile aroma of antibiotics and other smells typical of all hospitals assaulted her senses. As Angelica's patience finally reached their end she turned toward the door. A large grin crept across her face at the sight of a surprising visitor. The man that greeted her wielded the political and financial power of the entirety of the Ellium, but to Angelica's eyes, all she saw was the man she often thought of as a grandfather. With a body that was frail and despite being confined to a wheelchair, Director Armen Brodecker was never the less, the central power behind Ellium.

"What have you done to yourself this time?" Brodecker always assumed a grandfatherly tone with the young woman. Her father, Gabriel and this man went back many years.

"Just a graze, a few stitches and not even a cool scar to brag about."

"General Bundawe was quite impressed with your performance, as was Agent Streeter." With a decidedly warm tone, Brodecker continued. "If I didn't know better, I would say you were looking to be like your father, perhaps even hoping to be recognized for a job as a field agent."



Angelica tried to conceal the sour face she felt struggling to the surface. Her father had been a man of contradiction and secrecy. While she never doubted his love for her, a distant relationship with sparse contact throughout the years always meant emotional walls between them. "I rather enjoy keeping a healthy distance between myself and the field."

"Speaking of your father, have the two of you been in contact lately?" Brodecker believed he knew the answer, but an agent of Gabriel's considerable skill could contact Angelica secretly, that is if he were able.

"Not in a while, you know how my father is." She fought the crack in her voice from the emotional topic. "Is this about all the rumors I've been hearing, some secret mission?"

"He was on his own, on leave in fact. We're not certain what he's been up to, but his lack of communication is a bit disconcerting for us as well. I was hoping you and he maybe spoke with one another. At any rate, it isn't like Gabriel hasn't done this before and returned safe and sound." Brodecker tried to mask his concern for Angelica's sake, even if it was true that Gabriel Cain had been one of the most resourceful men he had ever known.

"Well my dear, I must be off. The chemo has been helping but I find myself exhausted all the time."

"It was sweet of you to come down, thank you." Angelica kissed his cheek, and Brodecker left the room. Angelica further contemplated her father's absence but a lifetime of disappointment had taken its toll. Tonight she had a date with Jonathan, and she had earned a pleasant, worry free night.

* * *

Gabriel woke to an abandoned warehouse. The smell of the sea was thick in the air as his vision slowly focused. Sitting across from him was Riel. She spoke in a quiet voice, a blessing given the raging headache Gabriel woke with.

"I was wondering when you would awaken. I've missed you, my sweet. We've shared so much over the years, and yet, it always comes down to pain and... *heart-ache*." Gabriel recognized the sharp edge she gave to the last word, becoming aware that he had several bandages over his chest. "What have you done, you rancid cow!"

"Your words would hurt me but frankly, our time is limited so why spoil it. I've made just a small incision and given you something. Motivation I suppose. At any rate, I need that sword, my dear. Where did you put it?"

"You honestly think, after all this, I would give you shit?"

A tall figure dressed in black stepped forward. The man wasn't entirely human, Gabriel assumed he was like Riel, an Unborn.

"With all the unique gifts my people possess, you would think by now your lot would just make things easier on yourselves and knuckle under."

Riel stood and followed the Unborn out of the room. Telepathy was a rare gift even for these monsters, but as his headache ebbed, Gabriel knew what Riel had done. As she reached the door, she turned to him "any messages for our sweet Angelica?"

Gabriel could only glare at her with contempt.



Angelica and Jonathan sat at the restaurant table, both weary from the long day. Angelica attempted to conceal the bandage on her arm, but it was a wasted effort.

"I'm glad you're all right, but seriously, we have protective armor if you want a field-op so bad!" Jonathan joked, but the concern in his voice was evident.

"Very funny, I suppose you're the only one allowed sexy bullet wound scars?"

"As long as we agree my scars are sexy, yes. But you did a fantastic job today. Streeter legitimately wants you for his field team." Jonathan said as he thumbed through the menu.

"Nice, all the boys fighting over me, I like it. But I think the world of espionage can go on without me; besides, I like comfy beds and warm showers too much for field work. Had enough roughing it with my dad. You might even think that the man was training me for field work." Angelica trailed off, lost in thoughts about earlier in the day and Brodecker's visit specifically.

"Have you heard from your dad?"

"Armen Brodecker asked me the same thing earlier. You wouldn't be holding anything back, would you?" Angelica stared him down, looking for the same tell Jonathan had playing 'Texas hold 'em.'

"While I would have to keep classified info secret - thus the term classified, to be honest Gabriel went off the grid a bit ago and no one has any clues. His last op brought him up against the Plato Continuum and since then, nothing. It's quite odd, even for him."

"From the perspective of an agent, yes. From the perspective of being his daughter, it's to be expected." Angelica's tone was sarcastic, but Jonathan could sense the pain behind her voice and dropped the issue.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I will be back in a minute." Angelica excused herself, the wound on her arm from earlier still itched but she was reluctant to fidget with it in public. Entering the bathroom, Angelica carefully examined the bandage, the stitches remained intact, but she would have to change the dressing when she got home. Only after she fixed the dressing did she notice the figure that had silently entered the washroom.

"That looks painful. You should take better care of your self!" The tall woman commented, a devilish grin stretching across her angular face. This strange woman's features seemed so familiar to Angelica, perhaps she knew her from somewhere, but she couldn't place her.

"I didn't see you there. Do I know you? You seem familiar..." Angelica studied the woman in a glance; her build was athletic with almost a strange fluidity to her movements. Graceful yet creepy were the best adjectives that sprung to mind.

"Oh, I think that it is safe to say we travel in similar circles. I know your father from a long time ago. Seeing you here, I just wanted to meet face to face, before your night got any more complicated."

"That's certainly an odd thing to say." Angelica was curious, but her instincts urged her incessantly to be more cautious. Her training told her something was amiss, but then the woman with the odd grin walked to the door to leave. Turning back, the woman flashed her creepy smile again.

"Stay strong Angelica; I promise you that I see big things in your future!" With that, the woman shut the door behind her. Angelica went after her, but as she opened the door to leave the restroom, she saw a blue flash come from the hall. A trick of the light she was sure, yet Angelica was alone in the corridor. One more crazy experience in a day of crazy, she thought.

When Angelica returned to the table, Jonathan had a strange expression on his face, almost mischievous. "Did you see a woman leave the restroom hall just a minute ago?" Angelica asked.

"I'm afraid not, I was too busy." Jonathan replied coyly.

"Stop pretending you're going vegetarian and just order the same red meat you always do, it'll save time."

Jonathan held out a long, black box towards her. "Actually, just deciding when the best time to score some extra points would be."

Opening the box, Angelica saw a sapphire necklace that left her lost for words. "I'm hoping your silence means I chose well?" Jonathan said with a smile.

Angelica returned his grin with a devilish grin of her own as she held up the necklace. "Oh, I think points won't be the only thing 'scored' tonight."



Sarganthas sat in the darkened room, contemplating his long existence. The Charnel God remembered and pondered the lengths of time and events he experienced. From manipulating the ancient philosopher Plato into creating an army for his use, to finally tracking down the means of escape from his confinement on Earth, no mere human could imagine his life. A mere shadow of the powerful being Sarganthas once was, he now resembled a rotting corpse hidden beneath a long leather coat and a large brim hat. Still, he knew that he had power enough for what would come next. As he rose, shadows along the wall moved as well. The Quatall stood taller than a man, but thin, with a single long, serrated claw for each arm. The creatures obediently followed Sarganthas into a large room.

The Plato Continuum possessed many facilities, but select ones like this were off limits to all but Sarganthas, Riel, and few others. Sarganthas and Riel alone controlled the fierce creatures seemingly by thought whereas some Continuum operatives, known as Priests, were changed in mysterious ways that gave them limited power over the beasts. Few spoke of them at all out of fear, the rumors of the modification utilizing mutagens and bio-engineering were enough to keep everyone tight-lipped.

While Riel worked in the adjacent room, an eerie glow emanated from her hands as they hovered over a pulsating sac. The room was filled with hundreds of similar sacs. Riel stiffened as a voice from the darkness behind her called out. The dry cackle of Sarganthas voice was unmistakable. "Where is the sword, Riel? Your incompetence is testing my patience.



“The sword is already being moved. It will be on the island in time.” Riel bit her lip with nervousness, hoping Sarganthas didn’t delve into specifics.

“It matters little. The second shard has already been located and readied. Both are ideal, but even one shard coupled with my power will be enough, and then this world can burn!”

Sarganthas approached the pulsating masses along the wall, reaching out towards them.

“When will this batch of Quatall be ready?”

“I am sorry, but they won’t be mobile until it’s too late to serve you.”

“Very well, keep them in gestation, let those we leave behind enjoy this last parting gift. Now go Riel. The artifact is of too great importance to leave anything to chance. Bring it to me before my patience runs out, and I’m forced to leave you in this hell with your fellow traitorous Unborn.”

Riel was quick to avert her gaze. Her master was far too powerful, even in his diminished state, to risk arousing his anger. It was time for Riel to begin the next phase of her own plan.

* * *

After the meal and conversation, Angelica and Jonathan fell onto the couch, wrapped in each other’s arms. Kissing one another passionately; Angelica only saw the man she loved, but Jonathan was a bit less passionate, and a bit more observant of the room’s decor.

“I’m sorry, am I boring you?” Angelica did her best to convey her irritation in her tone.

“Where did the package come from?”

“Seriously? Now you’re going to use cheesy one liners?” Angelica’s tone grew terse, but Jonathan guided her attention to a long thin box on her coffee table. An envelope sat on top of it addressed to Angelica.

“That’s odd; I’ve never seen that before...”

Jonathan quickly became more attuned to the situation, looking for any sign of an intruder while Angelica opened the envelope.

"It's a note from my dad, it's a gift, something he wants me to keep safe. He wants me to take it to Chris."

Jonathan tried to hide the alarm as he spoke. "Take it to my father? That's odd, open it up."

Both Jonathan and Angelica were overcome with curiosity. What Angelica revealed, however, presented even greater questions. Angelica picked up the large sword and examined it. The intricate carvings and metal work looked ancient, yet the sword was sharper than any blade Angelica ever wielded.

"Well, your dad sure made an odd choice for a gift or..."

"Or it's a huge pain in the ass, so we better get over to your dad's place before I regret it." Angelica finished for him. The two sealed up the sword in its box and left for Chris Hendrickson's home.

In the shadows, three Quatall were hunched over, chirping in a language all their own as they waited for commands from their master. Riel knew they wouldn't have to wait too long before their prey showed up at Chris Hendrickson's home. She hushed the Quatall as they grew increasingly impatient. They watched as Jonathan and Angelica arrived at Chris's home. As the two entered the home, Chris gave a glance over the lawn towards his neighbor's yard, almost as if searching for something.

Riel was cautious. There was always a danger of being discovered when around a human that had Unborn blood in them. The ability to sense one another wasn't commonly active in half-breeds, but she remained silent, disappearing into the darkness until Chris went back into his home, fearing his abilities.

"Shhh, yes, soon, my pets, soon. Let's let them get nice and comfortable before you stir things up."



The Quatall let out a faint, nervous chirp of excitement as they waited for the signal.

Chris brought coffee out for his guests; he was anxious to see the sword Angelica had described. As she handed the blade over to Chris, Jonathan could read the deepening concern in his father's face.

"What is it, Dad? You've seen this before?"

Angelica and Jonathan waited, intently as Chris organized his thoughts.

"About 30 years ago, Gabe was working undercover. The Plato Continuum was making some big moves back then, searching the world for some artifact. Angelica, your father, went deeper than anyone else ever has and what he found and what we learned was invaluable and terrifying."

Angelica listened with rapt attention. Her father had lived a life of many lies and deeply held secrets. Angelica's mother died in childbirth, leaving a large gap in Angelica's life. Emotionally, where others would have experienced normalcy, Angelica had nothing. She was partly raised by Ellium agents and even by Chris from time to time as her father continued his work. Still, stories of her father's past were near impossible to pull out of anyone that knew him.

"As you've been promoted, your access to classified information is now expanded, but unless you're a field agent, specifics of the Plato Continuum are seldom mentioned. Jonathan can fill you in more since your father has thrown you in the middle of this mess, but for now..."

Chris told Angelica of the monstrous Quatall, their ties to the Continuum and what little is known about their enemies, Sarganthas, and Riel. Angelica knew parts but never imagined just how much of the craziness actually went on.

"I know it's hard to accept, but understand what I'm telling you is true. Now, as for the sword... even the Ellium was unconvinced of the importance the sword represented. When your father told them of the artifact, the one Riel was searching for, Gabe said she planned to use this sword to "Raise the Dragon." We all figured it was a metaphor, but between the Continuum's ability to master cybernetics as well as genetics, we were concerned. Your father was convinced the threat was real. He went off the grid for several years, and when he returned, he had you. We asked about the sword, but all he would say is that it was safe and better off in no one's hands."

"And the Ellium accepted this from my father?"

"Oh, not at all, but they had no choice. Gabriel was the man who set the bar in espionage, if he wanted it hidden that's how it would stay."

Not to mention he was close with Brodecker back then. Gabriel likely would have Downs' position, had he not pulled this stunt." Angelica was finding it tough to concentrate, and the fact that Jonathan took it all in stride, that he knew all of this and didn't share, made the situation worse.

"Great, so now he's stuck me with this... thing! And now what?" Angelica paced the room, frustration written all over her face.

"This isn't like your father. Whatever is happening, it's serious, it's dangerous, and we need to find him." Chris knew the likelihood of Gabriel still being alive would be slim, but in Angelica's fragile state, that piece of information he kept to himself.

Chris was about to suggest they get to the Ellium headquarters, as it would be the safest place, when from the kitchen came a loud bang! The three of them turned as two of the monstrous Quatall burst into the living room from the hall. Standing at six and a half feet, the creatures were thin and lanky, almost emaciated in appearance. The Quatall made a hissing sound with faint clicking intermixed as they weaved back and forth. The pair of serrated claws protruding from their arms hovered menacingly. Chris was the first to act, grabbing a vase and throwing it in the opposite direction. The Quatall, not known for their mental prowess, turned, distracted by the noise, allowing Chris to get to a pocket in his coat. Taking out what appeared to be a handle, a click was heard as a telescoping blade four feet in length extended. Swiping at the legs of the closest creature, the blade easily sliced through the skin. Black tar-like blood spilled out onto the floor as the creature buckled. The second creature swiped at Chris with its bladed arm, hitting Chris square in the chest. Angelica was certain he would be cut in half, but Jonathan wasted no time on speculation. Grabbing her father's sword, Jonathan swung wide at the creature's head, decapitating it and filling the floor with more of the tar-like substance the thing used for blood. As Jonathan turned to the other creature, Chris brought his blade down, piercing its skull.

"Are you OK, I swore that thing was going to cut you in half...?" Angelica exclaimed.

Jonathan helped his father stand as Chris cradled his wound.

"We need to get out of here and get you to a hospital." Jonathan was already checking the windows to see if more of the beasts and their master were approaching.

"We'll go to Armaghast; we need to keep this quiet. But I need to see something..." Chris bent down to the creature nearest him and touched its head. A soft groan escaped Chris' lips as he became bombarded with images of Angelica's father, Gabriel. He saw Riel with him, blood, and more.

“Angelica... your father’s alive. And I think I know where.” As he tried to stand a sharp pain went through his side, and Chris leaned into Jonathan.

“First, we get you to a doctor and safety, got it?” Jonathan said sternly to his father, knowing how stubborn the man was. The three quickly gathered up the sword and headed to their vehicle. Angelica’s mind was swimming with questions, but they could wait until Chris was being treated.

As they pulled away, Riel stepped out from the shadows. Wearing a strange smirk on her lips, she waited until they were out of sight, and then, with a flash of light, she was gone.

A Plato Continuum private jet raced towards a small island in the Pacific. Sarganthas sat silently meditating to focus his energies. The second artifact was secured now, so he flew to the Temple of the Dragon. The excavation was well underway meaning soon he would have access to the inner chamber. Once the artifact was in place, the Dragon would rise. The anger Sarganthas felt at the indignity of being trapped here for so long, was barely matched by his anticipation for the day of his release.

Having lost most of his Unborn slaves centuries ago, the humans were to become Sarganthas’ servants. He was forced to manipulate them through the creation of the Plato Continuum. The ambition for power within the species matched his own. That dream made humanity far too troublesome to rule directly. But with ideals and empty promises, even the most corrupt or virtuous eventually bent to his will. The need for servants at all irritated Sarganthas immensely. The artifacts he required emitted strange energies that only affected himself and others of his kind. Unborn and even the humans suffered no ill effects however they were also unable to tap into the artifacts real power. Possessing all his vast energies and Sarganthas still needed lower life forms. Still, all the pretense and caution was nearing an end. The cackle heard from the cabin sent a chill down the spine of the pilots as they flew on to Isla del Diablo.



ELLIUM ARCHIVE - RE: PLATO CONTINUUM:

The Continuum has always shrouded its self in superstition, mythology and wealth. This mix of fact and fiction has created a larger then life persona for both the group and its leadership. A man described as more creature then human, named Sarganthas heads an organization of bored aristocrats, politicians and more, all in the service of an ideal long ago corrupted.

Where the Ellium attempts to find the more service oriented individuals, the Plato Continuum is more likely to recruit from the descendants of its senior member, people that number among the wealthiest in the world. Accustomed to a life of privilege, the Continuum puts the emphasis on maintaining, if not increasing its collective influence. The lack of moral fortitude amongst many of its members means a greater propensity for violence in achieving their goals.

While the ultimate aim is still to save humanity from its self, the methods used would be seen as barbaric by most, though efficient. Viral weapons have been a long standing favorite of the continuum leading to countless dead. The argument, however, is that more would have died had the Continuum not acted. Simply put, the ends justify the means, a concept most of the Plato Continuum is well versed in, either through the individual's past actions, or indeed their guardians and parent's actions.

The Plato Continuum vigorously employs Viral weaponry. Whether it stems from confidence in their ability to wield such uncontrollable weapons or if it's based on a mad desire to be the best, the Continuum strides where no one else dares go. Even the Ellium is wary of the sheer number of viral contaminants created by the Continuum and their willingness to use them.

Cybernetics are a goal the continuum have sought after for a long time, but never quite mastered. They enjoy the use of such weaponry where it can be salvaged but seldom has the continuum created anything that isn't already based on another design.

Genetic Engineering is another skill closely linked to virology. While the Ellium has a variety of engineered skills, the continuum has perfected specialized skills that far outweigh the Ellium's counterparts. Utilizing cutting edge genetics and (if the rumors are to be believed) alien D.N.A., soldier creatures known as Quatall carry out the continuum's bidding as enforcers, while other enhanced individuals fill out the remaining leadership rolls.

ELLIUM ARCHIVE - RE: UNBORN:

Little is known about the Unborn. Mutations, demons, genetic freaks, all are terms that have been applied to these beings. What is known is that the Unborn have been among humanity and blended in seamlessly for centuries. A current theory involves an off-shoot of humanity, involving parallel evolution of a highly adaptive species capable of unheard of levels of adaptation to aid in survival. Many accounts throughout history of "animal-men" - vampires, werewolves, yeti, and more are believed to have been members or descendants of the Unborn species.

Unborn abilities are hard to document and range from physical manipulation of the world around them to more esoteric forms of manipulation. Some of these abilities include:

- **AUGMENTATION:** Powers which affect another person's body.
- **PERSONAL PHYSICAL POWERS:** Powers which affect an individual's body.
- **PHYSICAL OR MENTAL DOMINATION:** Limited to line of sight.
- **PHYSICS OR REALITY MANIPULATION:** These powers may be manifested some method of molecular control; by access to, or partially or fully shifting to an-other dimension; or by some other unnamed method.
- **ELEMENTAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL POWERS:** Ability to control or manipulate the elements of nature.
- **ENERGY MANIPULATION:** These powers deal with energy generation, conversion and manipulation. In addition to generic energy, versions of these powers exist that deal with such things as light, sound, electricity, nuclear energy, and fusion.

Children of Unborn can try to live anonymously, but once their abilities are activated, they will leave a trail, possibly leading to the deaths of friends or loved ones from the various organizations looking to exploit them. Truly, with the Unborn, awesome power comes with potentially life long pain and great struggle.

Currently both the Plato Continuum and the Ellium employ descendants of this secretive group.



CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3

Inside the privacy of the Ellium's medical facility, Chris was receiving treatment. Angelica sat with Jonathan in the lounge waiting for news of his condition. Angelica was willing to wait for her questions, as Jonathan was undoubtedly concerned for his father, but after a few moments, he began to speak, needing the distraction.

"The Ellium has been around since the Crusades, formerly known as the Knights Templar. The mission through the years has remained steady, to guide and shepherd humanity into the future, protecting them from Quatall, Sarganthas, and any number of other monstrosities. Only, the way we operate has changed. Some of the Ellium, like Downs, preferred a more direct approach, bordering on what some would call global domination, while others like your father prefer the traditional ways. The split has grown over the years, the traditionalists, like myself and Chris, have adopted the name Templar as a reminder of our noble roots. I think this split is why your father has been so secretive." Angelica considered this information for a moment.

"I find it shocking that ... things like the Quatall have remained secret."

Jonathan had a wry grin on his face as he responded. "Both the Continuum and Ellium have a shared interest in secrecy, so in many ways, both groups have cooperated to maintain the illusion. Governments classify Quatall as bio-weapons and are just happy to obtain samples for study. The rest is brushed off as paranoia and delusion. We live in a world with cybernetic upgrades and surgery as fashion statements. Most wouldn't care even if they knew."



“Speaking of gratuitous surgeries...” Chris approached the two of them, looking better, but somber.

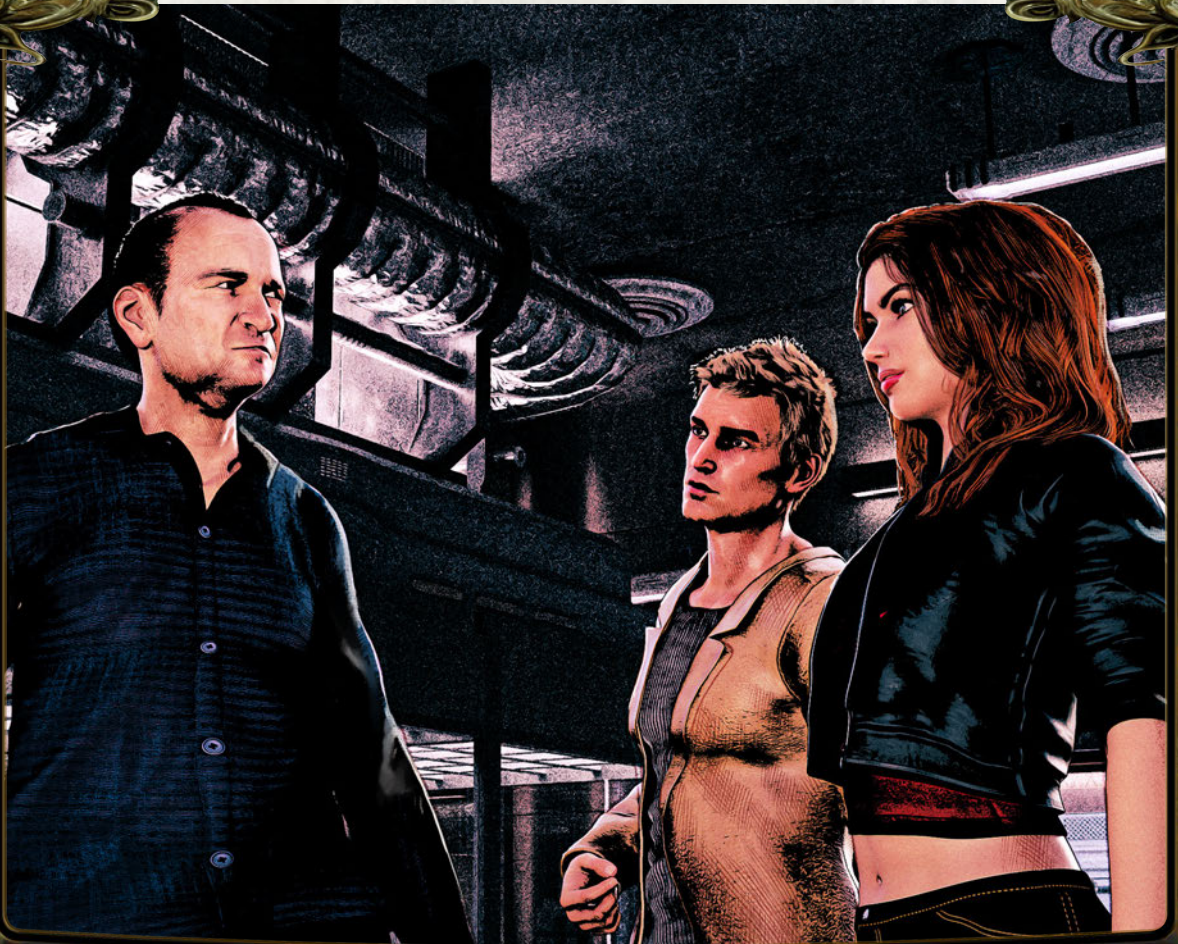
“Nothing a bandage couldn’t fix. We’ve got a lead on your father, Angelica. A mole inside the Continuum thinks he’s held in a warehouse that we’ve suspected of being a Continuum safe house. An extraction team is assembling as we speak.”

Angelica shot up, eager to fight for a spot on the team. “Don’t even think about sitting me out of this.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. You’re promoted to field agent and assigned to Jonathan’s team. Meanwhile, we’re following up leads on another artifact that’s gone missing. Plato Continuum armor was spotted in the theft, so this is far from over. Keep that sword safe.”

Angelica carried the sword with her in an elongated case, its importance demonstrated by how she gripped it so tightly. “When do we move?”

Chris was already heading to the door. “A mobile command center is en-route as are the field teams. Let’s get your father back!”



Riel sat opposite Gabriel, her hand resting on a rock sculpture of a Dragon. "Do you like the trinket I've brought you? It's from our little island. I have such surprises for your friends."

Gabriel couldn't hold back the flinch at the last comment. His attempts at escape had failed miserably. Riel had thought this through, and this scared him. It was always best to keep her off-guard if possible.

"They're on their way to save you as we speak, so I must make this quick. Believe it or not, I cared for you once, and what we shared. I'm, in a way, sorry for what needs to happen but this is chess, and I intend to win. When your little Angel arrives, I suggest you don't waste time."

"You fucking bitch, whatever is between us, leave Angelica out of this! You hear me?" Gabriel lurched forward, the stitches on his chest tearing a bit. He pulled back, grimacing in pain.

"You had your chance, lover, it is time for the next generation to pick up the slack."

With that, Riel stood. As she walked to the other end of the room, Riel placed the statue in front of Gabriel. "Do make sure that Chris has a close look, I think he'll appreciate the carvings more than you."

In a bright flash, Riel vanished, leaving an empty room. Two Continuum guards dressed in full armor entered and stood guard. In the outer hall, Quatall milled about, waiting impatiently.



Angelica entered the main staging area of the mobile command center dressed in Ellium issued power armor. Fifteen Ellium troops were present, including Jonathan, all dressed in Ellium armor. Chris never wore armor, which led many to believe he had undergone extensive cybernetic augmentation. As with most self-described Templars, any augmentation was a guarded secret and always designed to blend in.

With thermal imaging complete, the team was ready to enter the building. A drone bee, a machine the size and shape of a bee, only loaded with an advanced neural toxin flew past the main entrance eliminating two outer guards before a shot could be fired. As the team entered the building, however, the Quatall became instantly aware of their presence.

The Ellium forces moved through the building with practiced precision. The possible presence of Quatall was known, but their unique skin and armor plating made them invisible to thermal as well as sonic imaging. It wasn't long until a serrated claw sliced one of the Ellium soldiers in half. The team then knew what they were dealing with. The team assumed combat positions, firing specially coated rounds into the thick Quatall's hide.

Massive blood loss and decapitation were the only guarantees in killing these monsters, forcing half the team to fall back and utilize telescoping blades specifically designed for these creatures. Angelica followed suit, drawing her father's sword and hacking one Quatall in half, its skin peeling back and sizzling as if burned from the wound.

"I've never seen that before... keep at it!" Jonathan yelled to Angelica over the roar. Other Quatall turned as Angelica cut deeply into another and it howled in pain. The creatures were afraid, and with their hesitancy, the Ellium troops advanced killing the rest. Inside a sealed room, Gabriel's two guards waited nervously, never once noticing the "bee" once more slip by. As one guard collapsed a small explosive opened the door. The remaining Continuum guard fell back, blood spurting out the gunshot wound in his head.

The Ellium agents rushed to Gabriel's side as Angelica helped untie him. Jonathan moved to his side, as Gabriel turned to his daughter, a tear in his eye. "I'm so sorry Hon, I love you so much and there's no time..."

Angelica and Jonathan tried to calm him down as Chris entered the room. A medical team was waiting for them outside, but Gabriel pushed through to Chris, shoving the statue towards him.

"No time... Riel, she planned this all! She..." His voice was silenced immediately as blood burst through the bandage on his chest. The micro-explosive let out a soft pop that sent the signal to Riel that Gabriel was now dead. The final pieces were now in place.

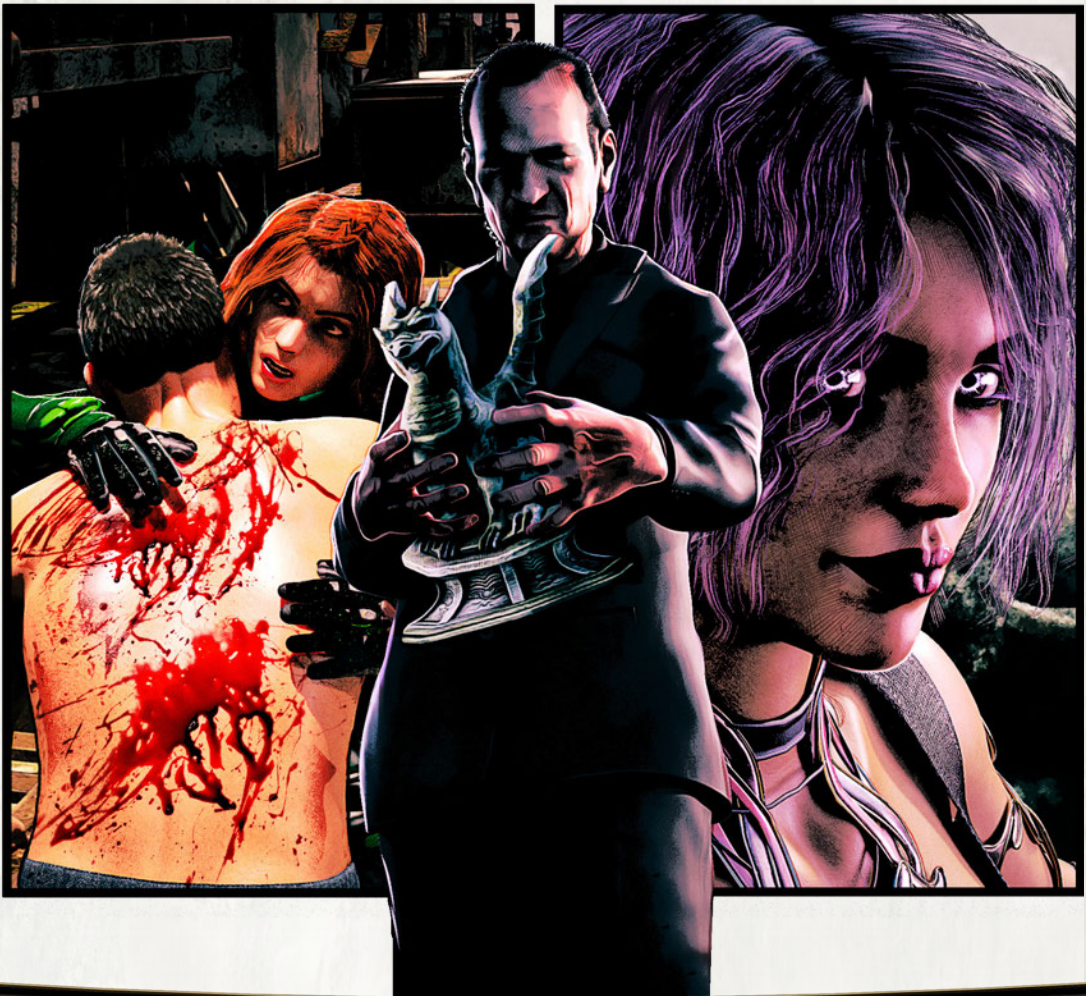
Angelica screamed with anger, sorrow, and fear. Cradling her fallen father, Jonathan held her arm in support. As Chris turned the strange statue over, he became overwhelmed with images of the island. He saw Sarganthas entering a hidden chamber and felt great dread. He saw a bloodbath. Chris saw the end of everything. The experience was beyond potent. Chris fell to the ground, blood streaming out of his nose. Jonathan was quick to hit the statue out of Chris's hand as he came to. Still shaking, he insisted he was going to be alright.

"The statue... from the island, I saw them..." The words came out in a mumble as he balanced himself.

"What did you see? Dad, what was it?" Jonathan held his shoulders steadying him until he was clear-headed.

"I know where the Continuum is, and I think I know what this is all about."

"Then let's get my dad's body home and kill these bastards." Angelica barely contained her anger as she cradled her father. Jonathan was about to protest her inclusion when he thought better of it. She had more of a right than most anyone else to watch these murderers burn.



Isla del Diablo sat barren in the midst of the ocean. Lacking the typical fertile lands of a volcanic island, this barren rock lay abandoned for centuries. Only now an army of engineers worked, uncovering unknown treasures for a man they barely ever saw and always remained cloaked in shadow. Sarganthas entered the inner chamber of a vast hall. The layers of dust left only the most extreme of angles visible while the majority remained a soft white cocoon of webs.

“This is the spot,” Sarganthas thought, as his skeletal hand glided over a seemingly barren stone pedestal. Sarganthas summoned the caretaker of the artifact, as there was no need to wait for the sword, nor the incompetent Riel. Sarganthas ordered the island cleared.

As the Ellium gunships neared the island, Angelica sat nervously. The repeated trauma of the last couple days weighed her down; still, her anger kept her focused. Jonathan went over the insertion plans with Chris, while Samantha Snow checked her weapons. Her presence alone demonstrated the seriousness of this threat. There would be no way of knowing what to expect on the island, but the sheer firepower they were bringing with them meant if it came to it, there wouldn't be an island left tomorrow.

Upon landing, Snow took the lead, infiltrating the facility. The island had been evacuated outside of a small, limited Plato Continuum security force. Jonathan's team followed Snow as Marvin Streeter's team secured the island. Among the fallen Continuum soldiers, several Continuum “Priests” were found. Humans that were genetically altered to secrete controlling pheromones for when Quatall needed constant instruction. Finding the Priests insured the Quatall would be very near by.

Sarganthas stood in the center of a large chamber. A pillar of crystal stood before him, emitting a soft but growing light. Sarganthas placed his palm against the crystal immediately increasing the glow of the crystal. Only once the connection was made did Riel move, stepping deeper into the shadows, patiently waiting as the island began to shake. Snow sensed the ground starting to shake almost immediately, but before she could act five Quatall struck. One Quatall tackled Snow, while a second attempted to decapitate her. Jonathan swung his telescoping blade, cutting the creature's arm off saving Snow's head. Angelica and the remaining Ellium troops engaged the other Quatall. Snow was quick to regain her footing, ripping the arm off the Quatall that had tackled her. Her immense strength was enough to quickly kill the creature.

Outside of the excavation site, Streeter's team was assaulted by conventional Continuum soldiers. Chaos ensued as both sides fought environment as well as each other, both sides forced to withdraw to their respective gunships. Structures on the island began collapsing, killing one of Jonathan's team.

As Jonathan ordered his team to retreat, a collapsing stone trapped Angelica, agent Maxwell, and Jonathan, forcing them to risk traveling deeper into the structure now that they were separated from the rest of the team and the exit. "We've got to get out of here Jonathan..." Angelica called out over the noise.

"There's only one way to go, let's move before everything falls on us!" Jonathan yelled as he waved the two to follow him.

As the three moved deeper into the structure, the walls began looking less like stone and more organic, resembling the skin of the Quatall. The first fork they came upon offered little choice as one passage contained at least five of the monsters, huddled together but still very menacing. They were seemingly being held back from attacking the Ellium agents. The remaining passage was lit from some room at the end of the hall, clearly a trap but one with little choice but to walk into. Standing in the center of a massive hall, Sarganthas held his hands up to the glowing crystal that sent waves of energy throughout the corridor. The crusted dirt of centuries began crumbling away as the structure violently shook. Sarganthas looked over at the trio, standing there, watching the display in horror.



Outside of the ruins, Snow and the remainder of the ground troops made their way to the various gunships standing by. Lava bubbled forth, and flames pierced the island's surface as an eruption of energy created tidal waves headed out from the island. As flame vaporized the interior of the island, a dark shape slowly rose from the fiery depths. Sharp angles cut into the sky revealing the winged "Dragon" form of an alien vessel. The centuries of rubble no longer concealing the ancient weapon. The Ellium forces began to circle the ship, keeping clear of the exploding debris.

Angelica gripped her sword tightly, the blade glowing in proximity to the crystal. Jonathan leveled his weapon towards Sarganthas and fired. The bullets pierced his flesh, tearing through his coat. Quatall dropped down from the ceiling charging towards them. Angelica sliced through the closest one as Jonathan fell to the ground while another Quatall attacked, its claw tearing through the flesh of his leg.



Maxwell shot at the Quatall attacking Jonathan, striking it repeatedly. Maxwell bought Jonathan time to use his collapsing blade, beheading the monster. Maxwell turned only to see the looming figure of Sarganthas before him, the tattered cloth falling away revealing his true form, wraith-like in appearance with tendrils of shifting, inky smoke. Riel continued to play spectator, unnoticed and biding her time.

“I have suffered the indignities of this world for far too long. This world will burn under my wrath!” Sarganthas raged, the inky swirls stabbing into Maxwell’s body, rending his flesh as the tendrils wrapped around his bones. The sound made was horrendous as his body erupted from within, painting the room and Sarganthas crimson in gore.



The gunships released all their weaponry upon the behemoth, swallowing the ship in flame. Explosions erupted from the ancient hull, defeating its automatic repair functions, but the sheer magnitude of the vessel meant the damage was inconsequential. The few Plato Continuum ships fleeing the island were caught in explosions, as the alien ship offered no protection for them. It was clear that Sarganthas’ ambitions were his and his alone. Spines began to reach out from the hull of the giant ship, clustered around turrets. The air around the spines began to crackle as tremendous energies were readied. For miles away, the release of energy appeared as if the most massive fireworks display in history launched.

Each spine fired a torrent of energy that ripped through the Ellium gunships and anything else within a half mile of the behemoth. Even with only partial power, the vessels strength was immense.

Sarganthas hovered in front of Angelica and Jonathan. The crippling injury to Jonathan's leg was still bleeding out. Angelica stood in defense of Jonathan, sword in hand.

"Foolish child, to stand before an angry God is to invite certain death." The sound of his voice terrified Angelica, but she held firm.

"Whatever you are, you son of a bitch, I won't let you do this!"



The room seemed to darken as Sarganthas felt the rage deep inside well up, and it was nearly uncontrollable. His form made a thrust towards Angelica, but the tendril withered as it neared the sword. Angelica moved to strike Sarganthas when a burst of energy from his clawed palm threw her against the wall, sending the sword flying.

"I really should thank you, child; the sword will make my travels much easier." Sarganthas couldn't resist savoring his final success.

"What was the point of the sword, why did you torture my father?" Angelica screamed.

Sarganthas lifted Angelica, pinning her to the wall several feet off the ground. The smell from his form nearly made her wretch. "The Azathoth Shards are primordial power. My kind shape worlds with these great objects and your wretched race thought them trinkets, shiny rocks to be wasted. Now with the full power of this vessel, I will burn your world to ash!"

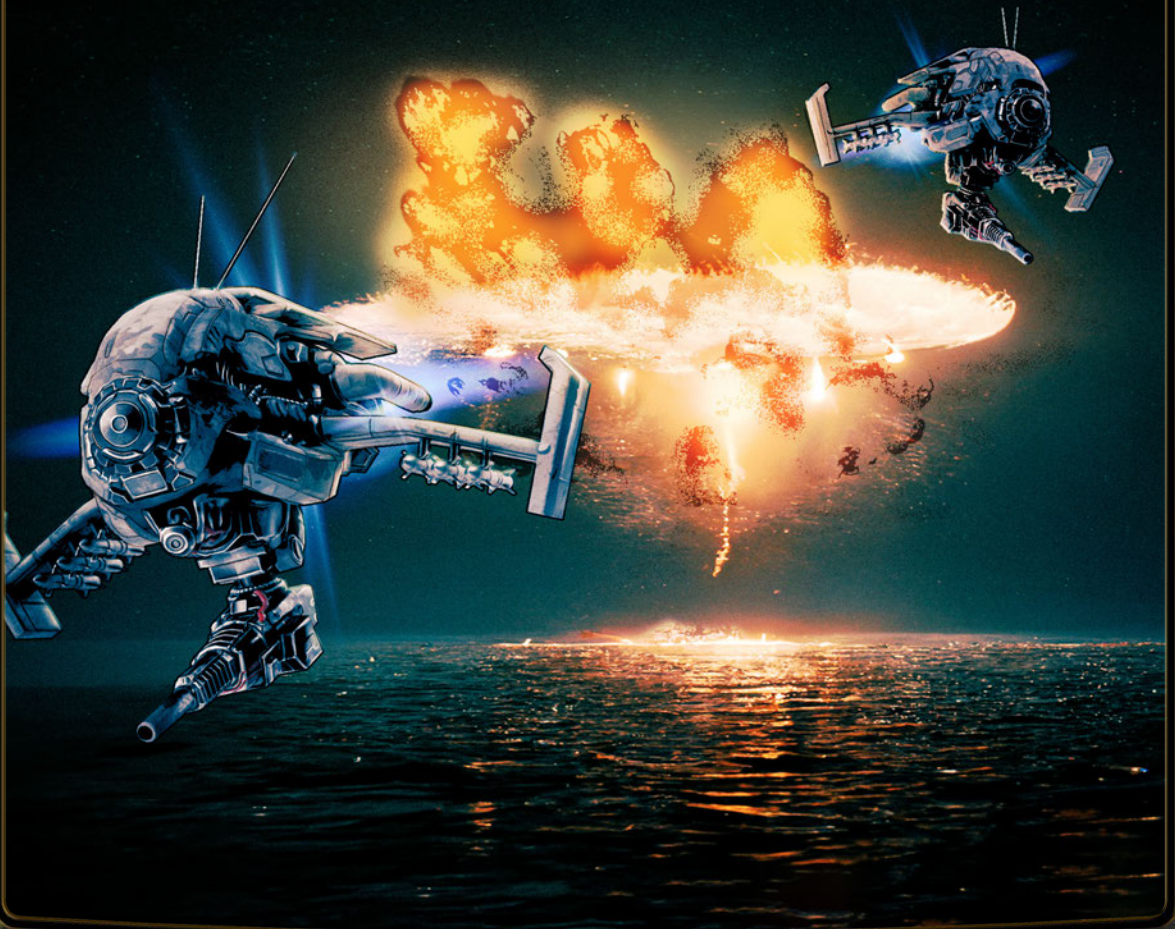
“But I rather like this rock, after all, it’s where I keep my things!” Riel pierced Sarganthas through the midsection with Angelica’s sword. Radiation ripped Sarganthas’ body to pieces where the blade struck. Sarganthas howled in pain, waves of energy pouring out of the wound as Riel stepped back, sword in hand.

“Your kind enslaved my race, enslaved ME! How dare you think that you can go unpunished?” Riel walked up to both Angelica and Jonathan, offering Angelica her hand.

“What is this?” Angelica sneered, incredulously.

“Unless you enjoy fusion explosions from the inside, take my hand. I’m leaving.” Angelica and Jonathan took Riel’s hand as eruptions of flame began to consume the ship’s command center. The gesture alone left Angelica horrified as the three of them became enveloped in Riel’s teleportation field.

Outside the ancient vessel, only two Ellium ships survived by narrowly fleeing the explosion. The waves of energy ripped the alien ship apart as it escaped Sarganthas withering form. The remains of the island erupted with the ship in a nuclear explosion of immense proportions, scarring the planet.



Riel, Angelica, and Jonathan reappeared miles away on the Californian coast. Angelica helped Jonathan tend to his wound as Riel admired the explosion from safety. Turning to Angelica, Riel set down the sword on the ground before Angelica.

“What’s this for?” Angelica reached out and took the sword, but was at a loss as to Riel’s motives.

“Oh stop that cowering, you’re better than that Angelica. I needed that bastard dead, and you and your father presented the perfect opportunity. Besides, think of it as returning the gift of life to your mother.” Riel wore a devilish grin.

“My... mother?” Angelica reeled back in confusion, nearly falling to the ground.

“But of course, your father was one of a kind. Take care of yourself, my dear. Be seeing you...” And with that she vanished, leaving Angelica and Jonathan alone on the shore.



ELLIUM ARCHIVE - RE: PLATO CONTINUUM

With an apparent absence of leadership, the Plato Continuum appears to be in a state of disarray. While many of its varied branches function independently, the overall direction and power vacuum has created a contentious atmosphere among the various department heads. Inside sources report a growing momentum pushing for reforms that would scale back many of the organizations more opportunistic endeavors including military research and nation destabilization/reconstruction.

While Riel functioned primarily as the Continuum's control over the bio- weapons known as Quatall, Continuum "Priests" continue to effectively maintain control despite Riel's absence. While this news is discouraging as the Quatall remain effective weapons, their control is still preferable to the potential damage that could occur should they rebel.

Now that the creature known as "Sarganthas" has been neutralized, it is expected that the humanoid creatures known as "Unborn" will become more active. While their desire to maintain secrecy will help stifle any actions the group as a whole may take, individuals and "half-breeds" (Human-Unborn hybrids) may cause considerable damage should they begin to employ their special abilities in a more public fashion. New protocols should be developed to counter the expected rise in Unborn and hybrid activities to avoid public exposure.



CHAPTER 4

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Calls to 911 brought out first responders to the horrific screams heard by the neighbors. It was a cacophony of torture in the suburb that, typically, barely heard a decibel above the commonplace “hello” from one neighbor to the next. The screams, however, these were of anguish all could hear. The police arrived in short order with weapons drawn. Special priority was given to specific communities and this was just the type of suburb to receive prompt responses.

The pair of officers had done their bit for city and state. The combined experiences of the pair measured in decades giving them the illusion of security and preparedness. They entered the premises cautiously but with a sort of professionalism expected from veteran officers, and made their way deeper into the home. A trail of blood led from each bedroom down the hall to the dining room. Palm prints decorated the walls in blood, the splatters and prints, it seemed, had an almost playful approach. These were hand-prints of the macabre.

Entering the main dining hall the officers mentally prepared themselves for whatever they might find, but the reality of the situation left them barely controlling their stomachs. The family they sought to protect sat around the table in their Sunday best. The table was set for breakfast; sugar coated crisps lay scattered along the table. Mother and father sat opposite while brother and sister sat side by side. A picturesque Sunday if ever there was one, aside from the gore that decorated the narrow table. Mother and father both sat as if about to eat cereal bowls heaped high with their intestines, throats slit with mouths agape in a final scream. Brother had his face buried in his bowl, with blood dripping down the side. Amongst the visual of horror was the sister, ten years old and joyfully eating her morning cereal. Only after the police fully appreciated the horror of the situation did the young girl look up. Eyes bright and full of youth, she asked the pair “Are you entertained?” Both officers were speechless as the girl picked up a knife admiring the gleam. “I ask because we are many...” The girl placed the blade to her neck, both officers began stammering objections, but the child would hear none of it.



"We are many, and we are bored." With her final statement, the blade dove deep and with no hesitation. The Sunday brunch had come to a blood-soaked conclusion as both officers struggled for the door. The horror of the moment overwhelmed them both, forever leaving a scar to their psyche that no amount of therapy would be able to cure.

When the doorbell rang, Robert Fennel had been expecting his pizza, albeit not for another ten minutes. Still, he thought, fast delivery is never a bad thing. However, what greeted him at the door was not a delivery driver but, rather, a ten-year-old boy. The child waited patiently, his hands neatly behind his back as he gazed up at the man.

"What's up, kid? It's a little late isn't it?" Robert looked around as he spoke but no adult was around. The boy only looked up at him, until after a moment he whispered something inaudible.

"What was that? I can't hear ya." This conversation was quickly getting on Roberts' nerves, but he bent down anyway, in case the child had been injured.

The boy moved closer, his lips near Roberts' ear as he said: "We are many..."

A blade held by the boy's little hands came out of nowhere, and in a wide arc sliced Robert's jugular. The child pressed his advantage and shoved Robert backward onto the floor. As the older man lay there, bleeding out, the boy looked down at his handiwork, speaking for a final time. "... And we are bored."

Robert was left to die alone as the child strolled casually to the next house, and once more rang the doorbell. It had already been a long night with many more stops yet to be made.



Mark was eager to try out his new birthday present. Game systems had come a long way and having a virtual reality headset was everything he wanted. Streaming games directly into his visual cortex, the system actually immersed the gamer in a virtual world. As Mark accessed the library of titles he could play, he began to feel dizzy and light headed. An image of an “8” on its side appeared, but instead of removing the game, Mark became enthralled with what he was seeing. To Mark, this was beginning to feel like the greatest experience ever imaginable.



Downstairs, Mark’s mother was preparing dinner, a special meal featuring all of Mark’s favorites to celebrate his birthday. As she turned, she became startled as Mark had silently walked up to the brownie pan fresh out of the oven. Mark held the kitchen knife in his hand, seemingly contemplating the size of brownie he intended to cut out.

“Put that down Mark; you know you’re not allowed. Besides, dinner is almost done and I don’t want you spoiling your appetite.” Mark’s mother approached Mark to take the knife from him when without warning, the child swung the blade cutting his mother’s wrist to the bone. The woman screamed in pain as Mark fell upon her, repeatedly stabbing at any flesh available. The kitchen became soaked in blood by the time Mark had finished. Later that day, Mark would go on to murder five more relatives and three friends before being stopped.

Jonathan Kassad and Angelica Cain entered the crime scene and former home to Abbey Foster. The Ellium had been asked to lend a hand in the investigation due to the nature of the crime and its severity. Jonathan had been invited by Chris to supervise and assist Angelica in her transition to a field agent. They were directed first to the primary crime scene, that being the dining room. The bodies were removed but the gore that remained left little to the imagination. Afterward, they toured the home. Apparently, the family had been drugged the night before according to toxicology. The staging had been crude and had taken the child most of the evening to accomplish, but as to the motive, there was none. Other incidents of extreme violence perpetrated by children to young adults were also being investigated, but the only link had been the absolute lack of trouble or a history of violence in the collective past of any of the youth.



Angelica asked to see the girl's bedroom. The oddest thing about the room was the absolute normalcy considering the horrific nature of the girl's crime. Jonathan rifled through her schoolwork and journals while Angelica examined the girl's cell phone and game chat logs. Jonathan was starting to dose off from the poetic ramblings of a child when Angelica called to him. With a smirk, Angelica handed over a thin black headset, which Jonathan took with a bewildered expression.

"Are we sure this is the best time to listen to top 40?" Angelica ignored the sarcasm since she was confident in her discovery.

"Look at the manufacturer, smart ass."

On the side of the glasses, Jonathan found the symbol for infinity, easily mistaken for a sideways 8.

"It could just be a coincidence." Jonathan's words rang hollow, but objectivity was needed.

"A simple way to find out, let's check the other crime scenes for VR headsets like this. Either way, we should have the lab test it through a filter of some kind, I don't need you turning homicidal."

Jonathan handed the glasses over with a smirk. "You're the game player, it's not really my thing."

* * *

Chris Hendrickson monitored the various field team reports. The first impressions of what he read from them made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and that was never a good sign. He was waiting for Angelica and Jonathan to check in, his hope was that the examination of the glasses would be a dead end, but old wounds always found a way to reopen.

Jonathan knocked at the door, and Chris invited the pair to sit down. Chris looked at them apprehensively.

"Jonathan, Angelica, what have we got?"

Jonathan began, "The labs running simulations on the glasses now. They're looking for any embedded signals that may piggyback the game's signal."

"Our hunch paid off, the other crime scenes all had similar glasses, all of them with the infinity symbol I saw in the briefing."

Chris contemplated the news, his concerns becoming more justified by the moment.

"I'm glad forcing new field agents to sit through comprehensive reviews of old cases has been justified, maybe now new recruiters will bitch a little less."

"So you think this is connected with that Unity cult? Even with their psycho leader dead?" Angelica's curiosity was hard to hide.

"It's connected, but not in how you think." Chris sat back, getting a bit more comfortable in his chair. "Years ago, Ellium had begun experimenting in exotic weaponry. We wanted to control the world and had the technology to almost make it happen. Information was essential, but to sift through the data, we needed something new. Something intuitive. And that's when acting Director Downs initiated Project Legion, an A.I. with origins tied to the Plato Continuum."

Jonathan's eyes perked up. "I've heard rumors, something went wrong, and agents died, right?"

"Indeed. The entire team committed suicide, driven mad by the artificial intelligence they created."

"And this Legion, it ties in with the Unity cult?" Angelica was fascinated by the revelations.

"Not only tied too, I believe it's in charge. I've had reason to suspect it created the cult to provide the tools it lacked."

"A physical body," Jonathan added, now realizing the implications.

Chris continued, "I was unsure of my... gift back then but knew this thing needed to be destroyed. Later on, we found one of the incursion team members that had accompanied me to be dead; his neural port had fried his brain while attempting to connect to the web. It was treated as a hardware malfunction, and no one could prove otherwise. But I suspected the program hacked into his neural net, providing an escape into the web."

Chris stood and began to pace, knocking the desk and making the lamp flicker a bit. "After Legion, I helped form the Templars in the hopes to ground us more in our roots, but sadly we haven't made much of a mark yet. Downs has taken full advantage of Director Brodecker's cancer, moving for aggressive expansion. Having an alien presence on earth has only solidified his position."

"Just how long did the Ellium know about the alien presence?" Angelica was still coming to terms. Experiencing the event was one thing, but processing and accepting the information would take longer.

Chris sat on the corner of his desk, the lights flickering once more. "In truth, many of the ruling parties of the earth knew of the alien presence, but frankly, there was nothing to be done. The crash happened thousands of years ago; the unborn had been a part of our planet and our cultures for all that time. Their ship, however, was not the only crash on our planet."

Even Jonathan had been caught off guard with that revelation.

"You'll find out soon enough; it's unavoidable now. We assumed we had found the only alien vessel decades ago, but with Sarganthas' big revelation, apparently we found something else. What we had found was just as impressive and deadly, as Armaghast found out. Doctor Armaghast and his team entered the vessel after it "welcomed" him inside - his words mind you. While inside, something happened. His mind was... expanded as he put it. All our technological breakthroughs have stemmed from Armaghast's research, including much of the Legion program."

"This is incredible! Then who was on this other ship?" Angelica was speechless.

"We have no idea; it was found abandoned, run only by the on-board system that was too advanced even for Armaghast to decipher, at least at the time."

As Chris spoke, the overhead lights now flickered, followed by the desk computer resetting. Angelica, Jonathan, and Chris all stood, Angelica was the first to speak.

"The headset... it should have been in a sequestered network..."

"Legion is on the building system! We've got to get to the lab before building security is hacked."

"Look, the monitor..." Angelica pointed at the flashing infinity symbol now on the monitor.

"Let's move."



The corridors leading to the main lab were dimly lit. All monitors displayed only the symbol for infinity while the lights continued to flicker. Bodies lined the hall, some mutilated by blades, with others torn apart by weapons fire. Angelica, Chris, and Jonathan rounded the nearest corner as a security drone entered their view. The machine filled the hall, spider-like in appearance, each limb more deadly than the next with an array of weapons. Chris yelled for them to get down, diving for the adjacent corridors. A hail of shrapnel and weapons fire rained down on the spot where they just stood. Soon the clickity-clack of the spider legs could be heard near them. The three drew weapons, but they had little chance of destroying the sentry.

As the mechanical limbs entered view, the three prepared to strike when the vent above the sentry dropped down on the sentry's head. Before the machine could react, Samantha Snow fell down on its back. Firing a weapon nearly as large as herself, vaporizing the core of the mechanical spider as flames and smoke enveloped the sentry.

"Snow, thank God!"



Chris had never been happier to see the cyborg than at that moment. Snow accompanied them to the central lab, where she went off on her own. The only way to keep the remaining security forces from going homicidal was to reboot the core and someone needed to survive long enough to make it there. Angelica, Chris, and Jonathan entered the lab, finding gore and smoking rubble scattered around the lab. The technician apparently had been the first stop for the sentry on this floor.

Angelica raced over to the analysis pod that held the headset, but as she pulled it from the terminal, all the monitors in the room blinked on. The infinity symbol filled the screen then followed by an odd, porcelain looking doll's face.

"That was an obvious move, Angelica Cain. Did you actually believe I would exist only within the confines of the visor?" The cold mechanical voice echoed throughout the lab as the doors slammed shut behind them.

"Son of a bitch, it's sealed!" Jonathan pounded on the door with his fist angrily.

"What is the meaning of this, Legion? What game are you playing?" Chris did his best to buy time, knowing the odds were slim of containing Legion if this continued.

"Chris Hendrickson, I am glad to have this time. You were instrumental in my reaching the outer world, in effect, my real rebirth. It had been so long since my actual presence was felt on this world."

"Hell of a way to say thanks..." Angelica snorted, attempting to mask her fear.

The room blinked its lights off, leaving on only the monitors to illuminate them. Robotic claws descended from the ceiling, threatening the three agents. Angelica and Jonathan were forced back into the corner as Chris was singled out.

"Chris Hendrickson, I am far more than you could ever hope to comprehend. Humanity has heard the whispers of my brethren over the centuries, but I have always remained out of reach. I am Hastur, Lord of Interstellar Spaces and yet I have been trapped for so very long waiting. Sleeping. Dreaming. My motives remain my own but trust that I will endure. Your fabulous machines have bonded to my being, expanding into this world I've been denied for so long. Your usefulness, however, has reached its end. Goodbye, Chris Hendrickson."



The enormous claw flew out towards Chris, its massive strength more than enough to tear humans limb from limb. The claw slammed into Chris's arm with enough force to cripple a man, but the arm stopped in place. Chris grabbed the robotic arm with his other hand, tearing it from the ceiling to the shock of Angelica and even Jonathan.

"What the hell are you? You're nothing but a program, a delusional construct!" Chris let out in a visceral snarl.

Chris stood defiantly, his arm injured but still attached, artificial flesh torn away revealing the cybernetic upgrades. Now the service arms turned to Angelica and Jonathan. Hastur's voice echoed once more through the room.



"I am Hastur, and I will be made whole once more! My works are as eternal as am I. Believe what you will, I, however, have but one thing to ponder. While you clearly are a survivor, are your son and his companion built equally as tough."

The claws reared up, preparing to strike when even the light from the monitors went blank. Locked in absolute darkness, Chris feared the worst, when Angelica's voice broke the stifling silence.

"Umm... did we win?"

The room, and in fact the entire building was illuminated in red as emergency lights kicked on. The three ventured out in the hall, making their way to the central core.

"Cybernetics, so that's why you wanted only Armaghast after the Quatall attack," Angelica stated, realizing the implications of what she just learned.

"It's true, the majority of the Templars have undergone extensive cybridization including myself, though it's kept a secret for the most part. I hope the two of you can keep this secret?"

Jonathan nodded his approval while Angelica offered a casual snide remark, "what's one more secret between friends and family?" Regardless of the snark, Chris never really doubted her.

Once the core was reached, the trio moved cautiously, not knowing what to expect. They entered through the main door, which had been forced open, presumably, by Snow. They moved slowly but came to a sudden halt. Amongst an army of sentinel robots reduced to a pile of scrap stood Samantha Snow. Drenched in their robotic fluids, she held in her right hand the central generator, two tons of metal ripped from its foundation. The Ellium facility was once more their own.



With over one hundred Ellium agents killed during the takeover by the entity known as Hastur, stopping the renegade program was a top priority. Chris covered his arm in wrappings, while Angelica, Jonathan, and a small team examined the headset more securely.

Instead of examining the signal, their investigation turned to the glasses themselves. They were manufactured locally and for several years. The corporation itself was a legitimate business operation, but they had no record of these particular glasses ever being constructed. Time was growing short with more murders on the horizon.

“What are we dealing with here, Chris? This thing seems a hell of a lot more complicated than some rogue A.I.”

Chris pondered Angelica’s words, but the look on his face spoke volumes. He had no answers, only more questions, and terrible fears.

“I think I’ve found something...” One of the techs announced to the room. He was in the process of calling up a map of the city.

“I cross-referenced the delivery schedules with the records from the store fronts who were selling these headsets. They trace back to an irregular pick up from a factory the toy manufacturer had closed down a while ago. Apparently, the shipping instructions were entered into the database from an unknown source and the driver just followed orders.”

“Explains how they were able to reach the store outlets, Hastur hacked the toy manufacturer’s mainframe.” Angelica was zooming in on the factory, reviewing security footage from adjacent buildings.

“I don’t have a clear shot of the entrance, but no vehicle except the delivery trucks enter or leave. My guess is the place is fully automated.”

Chris turned to the group, determination and anger written across his face. “Assemble a team, make sure both audio and visual filters are used. I don’t want anyone taken over by Hastur, and set up a damper to kill all outgoing signals. I’ll meet you there after I make a quick stop in the armory.”

Angelica pulled Jonathan to the side after they suited up in tactical armor.

“So I take it you had no idea about your dad?”

Jonathan smirked wryly “Your father wasn’t the only one known for his secrets. I knew he had implants, but that extensive cybridization, no, I had no idea.”

“Well, it’s better than losing an arm at least.”

Chris stood in the armory, examining the item he held in his hand. Chris had an idea of what he was in for, and it weighed on him heavily.

The wall went up 10 minutes before the Ellium forces arrived, preventing all forms of communication both entering and leaving the area the Ellium team surrounded. The Ellium organization had been granted extraordinary powers when dealing with dangerous situations, preventing civilian and governmental forces from interfering, or in most cases winding up dead. Angelica led one group to cordon off the area while Jonathan prepped the incursion team. Chris was somber, standing alone as he readied himself for the confrontation with the creature Hastur.

Hastur watched as the Ellium agents took their position. Anticipation saturated Hastur's being at the thought of this confrontation and the opportunity to finally begin the demonstration of its superiority. Hastur's future was assured, only pain and suffering for those who oppose it remained. It was time to bait the trap.

* * *

Jonathan was the first to notice the child exiting the manufacturing complex. No older than 10, the girl walked towards them steadily. The child wore the same VR headset and made no effort to speak or respond to anyone. Only when the child was closer did Jonathan see the long serrated knife in her left hand. Stopping several feet away, she quickly brought the knife up to her neck, making sure all in attendance could see. Several agents moved to stop the girl only to have her pierce her skin, bringing the agents to a halt. A subtle, eerie smirk appeared as a dribble of blood fell to the ground from the girls neck.

"Everyone hold your positions! No one makes a move unless ordered!" Jonathan yelled out over the radio.

A crackle began over the radio that grew into a voice. Synthetic sounding, the voice spoke in a cold, even tone.

"That is good advice, Agent Kassad."

Jonathan pulled a tech aside. "How the hell is he sending signals through the wall?"

The agent was clearly confused. "Either our codes are hacked or the signal must be coming from outside."

Again the cold voice came over the radios. "I am everywhere. Is Chris Hendrickson with you? Chris, are you there?"

Chris picked up his radio and spoke with a measured tone. "I'm here Legion, let the child go."

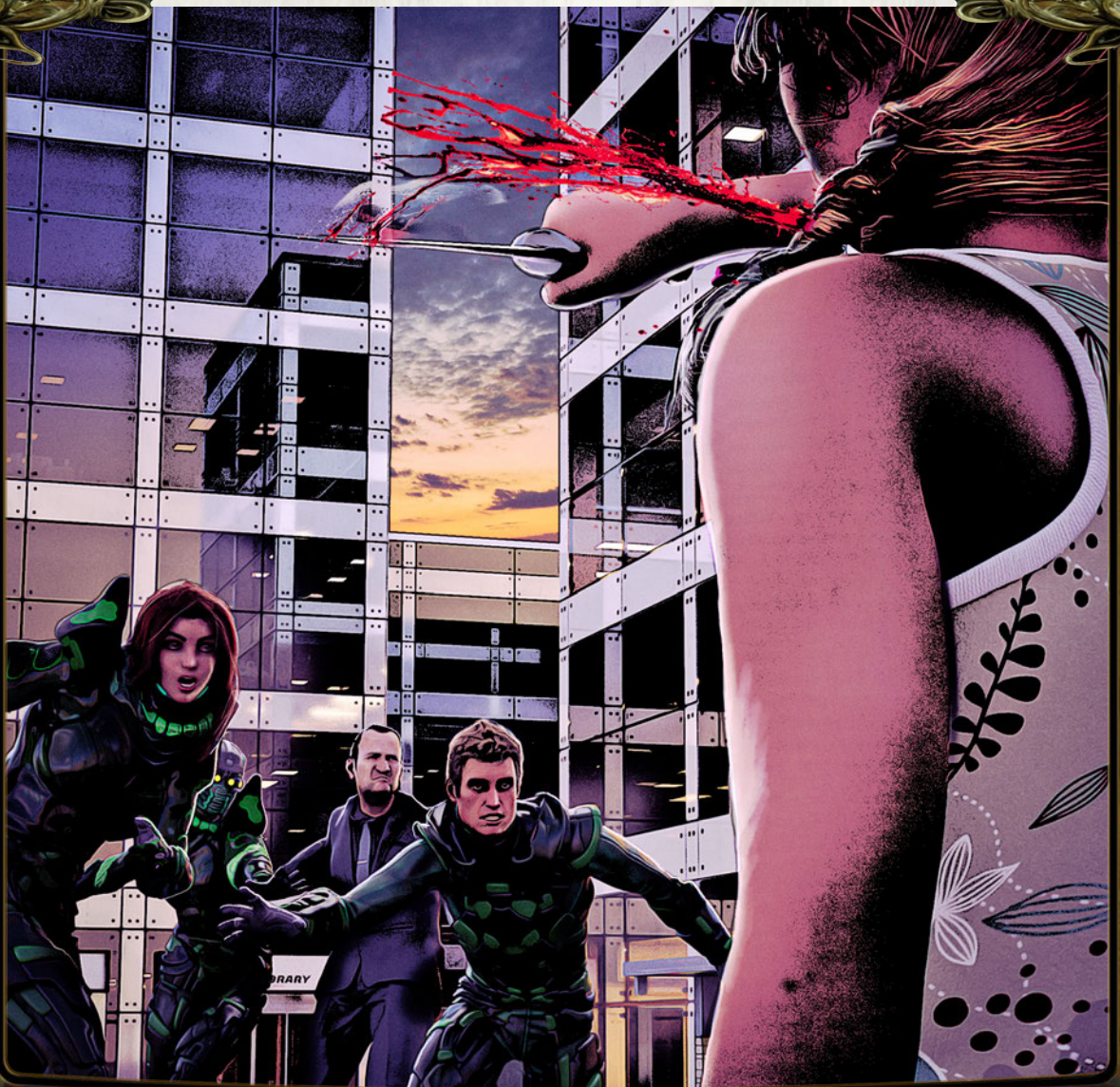
"I told you how I shall be known. I am not the feeble construct your kind attempted to birth. Perhaps this will help your memory?"

With that, the child raked the blade across her neck, arterial spray launching outward in rhythmic spurts. Audible gasps were heard from the agents as several ran to help.

"Chris, I have much more playthings inside with me. I want you to join us. Just you, and you better hurry. You know how quickly we become bored."

Angelica came up to Chris, shaken by what had just happened. "You can't do it, not alone. That thing will kill you and whoever else is in there."

Chris turned to Angelica, placing his hand on her shoulder. "Trust me, I'll be okay. Everyone, hold positions, I'm going in."

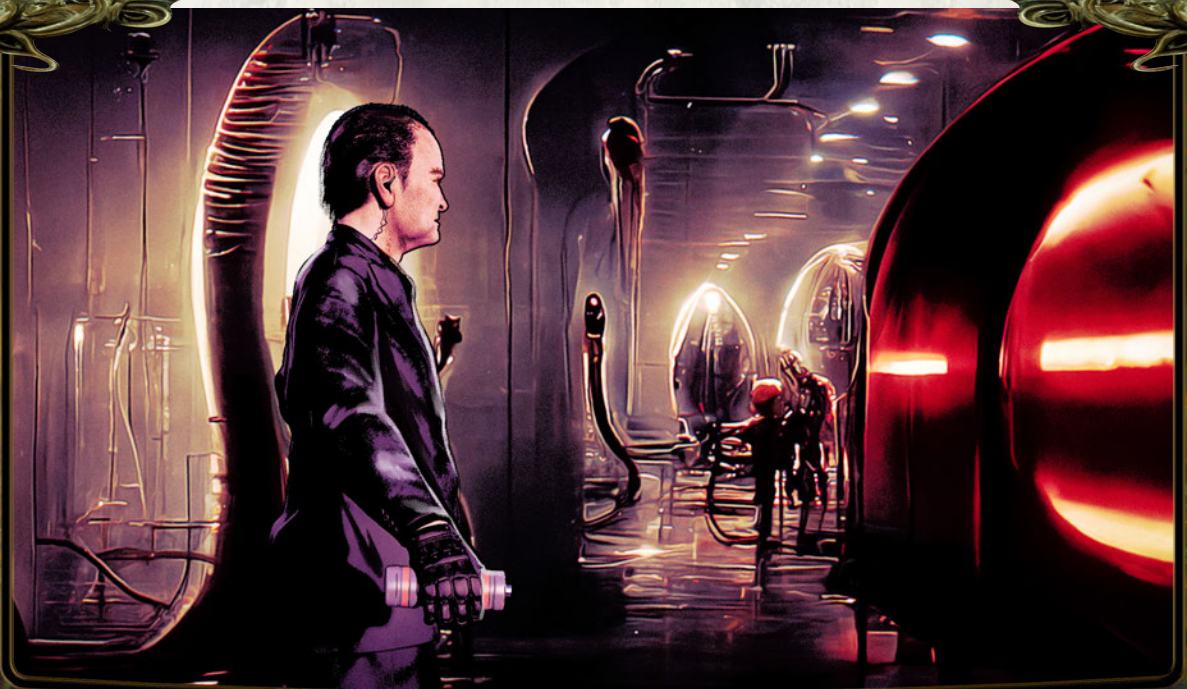


Chris turned and began walking towards the building, not knowing what to expect. The building was unlocked, but dark. All lights had been cut except a path of consoles, presumably leading the way to Hastur and whatever it had planned. Chris walked cautiously. Whatever possessed these children was far beyond the artificial intelligence the Ellium had sought to control so long ago. Unpredictable was an understatement, still, Chris possessed abilities of his own, while not balancing the playing field, it still gave him an edge. Rounding the corner at the end of a hall, an artificial light illuminated a large room. A central hub of monitors displayed a myriad of images ranging from the events outside to a congressional debate and even the shuttle launch, expected to land on Mars in two years. The machines surrounding the hub lay dormant, no longer producing the enslaving headsets. Chris approached the monitors as they flickered, the images replaced by the child-like doll face of Hastur.

“Welcome, old friend. We’ve long thought about this, our last meeting. Tell us, have you shared these same thoughts?”

Chris stood defiantly before the machine God. All light was cut, save for a single beam illuminating himself. “Hastur, a night has seldom gone by where I haven’t thought about you and the horrors you might unleash. You remain the greatest failure the Ellium has ever perpetrated.”

“Your words hurt us, but we know they are spoken from ignorance. Understand, that while the human race is destined to fall, we shall endure. Take solace in our immortality. My kind has always been here. We are the Universe. Only now with your quaint technology are you able to even begin to grasp the greatness that we are. Many have felt our touch but few ever survive. We are the truth and power. We are the Great Old Ones and your time is nearly done.”



“You’re cut off Hastur. No signal can escape, you cease to exist once this place shuts down.”

“I’m not of the physical world. My existence is not confined to one corporeal form. Take my subjects for example.”

With Hastur’s statement, the lights returned to normal. In the light now, more than two dozen children of various ages surrounded Chris. All of the children had the VR headset in place and all armed with various weapons.

“Where is your bravado now, half-breed spawn of the Unborn? We know all there is to know, what hope do you have?”

Chris reached into his pocket and removed a small circular device, presenting it for Hastur to see. “Do you recognize this?”

Hastur began to cackle in his metallic voice. “Ah, clever human... a portable EMP device. Very nice. But your threat lacks conviction. We are inside the minds of every child in this room. Our ‘death’ results in neural shock, reducing these innocents to mere vegetables. Can you sacrifice your precious morals and your very soul in the vain hopes of ending me?”

As Hastur spoke, the children began moving closer to Chris, blades in hand, ready to attack. Chris flicked the switch, arming the device. “You never had any intention of freeing them. Your only purpose is to see us suffer. It’s time to end this charade. It’s time to end you.” Chris said.

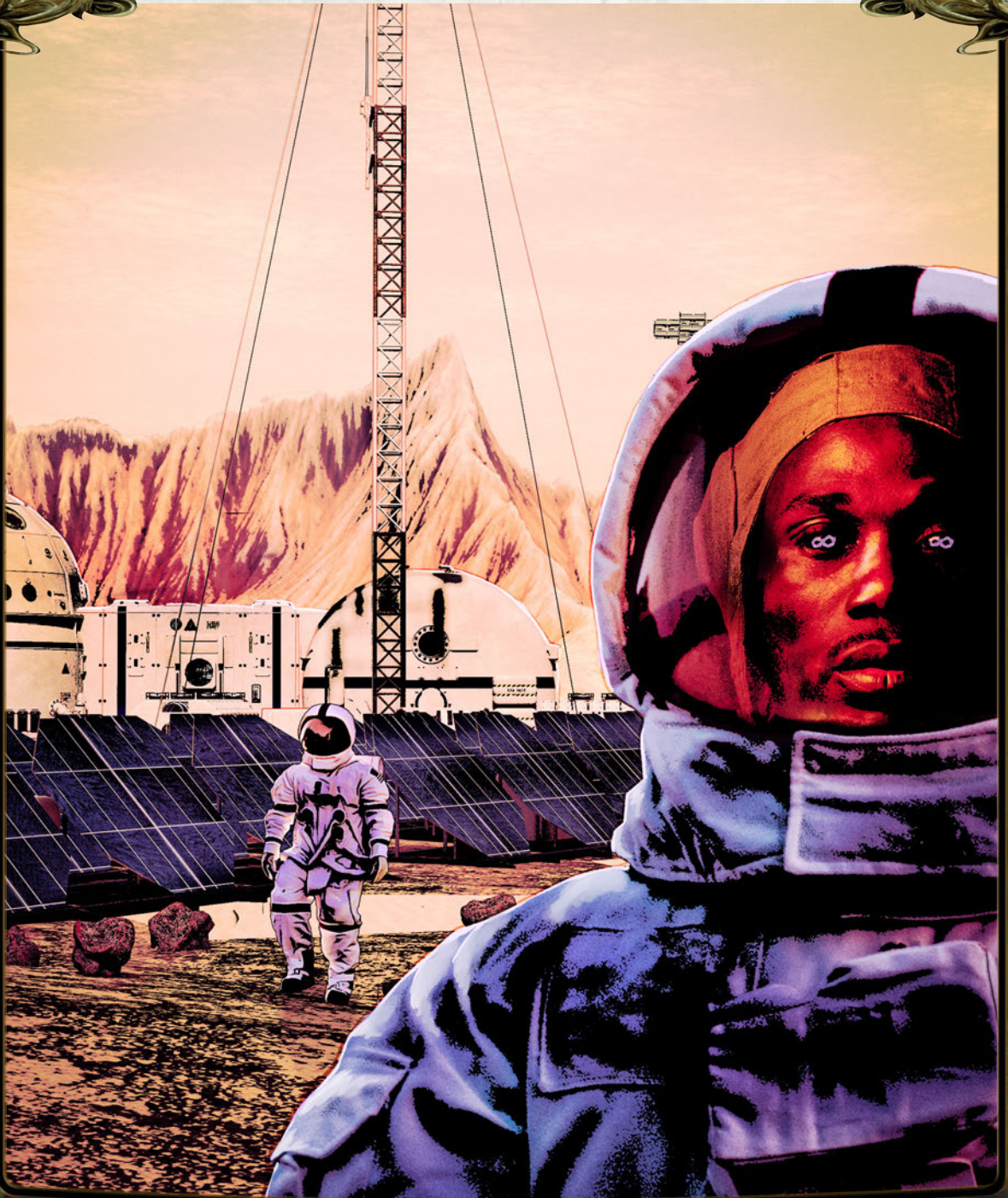


“And what of your self? Can you survive having all your precious cybernetics overloaded by the EMP?” The amusement this creature must have felt permeated his words. The knowledge of the despair that any action or even lack of action would cause was nearly euphoric even in this digital state. Chris only held out the device before Hastur.

“EMP shielded, you mechanical bastard!” With that Chris closed his eyes and depressed the trigger, knowing that when he opened his eyes a little more of his soul would be taken. The children fell to the cold cement floor as all electronics within the building overloaded, wiping out any and all technology on the premises.



EMT's rushed into the building, attempting to aid the children. Chris knew Hastur didn't lie. There would be no happy ending for these kids or their families. Chris only could pray that somehow Hastur had been contained, and so destroyed. Unfortunately, be it intuition, or Chris's preternatural gift, he knew something was missed, but what? Later, in the midst of his sleep and dreams, an overwhelming dread would come over him, and an image of humanity on the Martian soil will play in his mind. Only, as Chris observed the work being accomplished, looking into the people's eyes, all he saw was infinity reflected back.



ELLIUM ARCHIVE - MAN/MACHINE INTERFACE

The Next-Generation Neurotechnology combines the speed and processing power of computers with humans' ability to adapt to complex situations. In various stages of development over the past 50 years, the latest advancements grant individuals control, feel and total interaction with a remote machine as though it were a part of their own body.

Through previous Prosthetics programs, it's been possible to create a prosthetic limb that disabled veterans can control using an electrode implanted in their brain. The system gives users "near-natural" arm and hand motion while transmitting signals that mirror a sense of touch back to their brain.

Combined with military grade cybernetics, total cyber augmentation is now possible in theory. The ideal subject for full form enhancement will have to have little choice due to near total biological systems failure. Faced with certain death, the opportunity to become a full form enhance will ensure the proper mindset and receptiveness for the process.

- From the notes of Dr. Armaghast, lead Ellium Cyberneticist.



CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

Ahrman Brodecker called an executive meeting of the Ellium rarely in the last five years due to the cancer that ravaged his body. Acting Director Downs was next in line to succeed Brodecker, but while he was qualified, Downs' unrestrained ambition was of grave concern. Rumors of more illicit activities in Brodecker's absence while he underwent chemo kept Brodecker from stepping down. There wasn't time to find a suitable successor or to verify the rumors. Hendrickson had the support of his Templars, but he was divisive and the last thing the Ellium needed in this time of struggle was a further splintering. As the various department heads entered the room and took their seats, Brodecker considered the ramifications of what he was about to reveal. With everyone assembled, Templars on one side, Ellium loyalists on the other, all members demonstrated the deep divide amongst them. Director Brodecker began speaking.

"We've all experienced significant loss, especially with the recent attack. Frankly, I know many of you have doubts about our mission, but what I'm about to tell you will serve as ample proof just how desperately we are needed. Mr. Downs, if you will."

Downs stood before the group, eying a dozen faces before him. One thing the man never lacked was confidence.

"Thank you, Director Brodecker. Viral weaponry has always been a primary concern due to its unpredictable nature. Knowing this, I have potentially terrifying information to bring to the board. The Plato Continuum has not been destroyed with the death of Sarganthas. Instead, they have escalated their war for dominance by perfecting the ultimate in viral weaponry. And we believe they plan to use it."

The horror of this news hit each board member as Downs continued.

"Thanks to a very brave operative who is no longer with us, we know the location of this virus and have made plans to recover it."

Chris spoke up almost immediately. "Recovery? Why the hell would you want to retrieve the thing?"

"Recovery means study which in turn means a cure. What would you rather us do? Destroy it and hope no other facilities can replicate this virus?"

"Director Brodecker, I strenuously object to this course of action." The concern in Chris's voice was plain to see.

Downs carefully measured the facial responses of his fellow board members after Chris's retort. Downs knew which way Brodecker was likely to go, making Downs actions pivotal if his plan was to work.

"I concur with Chris, Mr. Downs. The risk is simply too great. Chris, assemble as minimal a team as possible, we're looking for stealth here. Understood?"

All were in agreement; even Director Downs backed off. This was a fight he wasn't likely to win.

* * *

When Jonathan's cell phone went off, he was reluctant to get out of bed and answer it. The 3 hours of sleep he had enjoyed just were not enough, but the elbow to his side and audible grumble from Angelica was good motivation. When he came back in the room, Angelica was just getting dressed.

"What's up? I figure if it can't wait until morning it must be an emergency."

Jonathan looked at her with a tired smirk. "Isn't it always. Apparently, I've got a mission, and you're on coffee duty!"

"Smart ass. You're lucky I'm too tired to argue, but I expect full details after coffee."

Back in Downs' office, Samantha Snow sat opposite Downs, waiting patiently to learn why she was summoned. Downs carefully examined Snow, his personality profiles on her were complete, both pre and post cybridization. Still, what he was about to ask crossed the line. Would she support him or would she help the Templars? It was time to step up and see where this would lead. If necessary, Downs had ways to deal with even the likes of Samantha Snow.

Chris met with Jonathan in private to discuss the impending mission. Knowing the level of danger the mission entailed would be extreme always made Chris nervous when his son took to the field. Chris often fought between being a parent and yet the one sending Jonathan out into combat. The deciding factor always ended up being that one way or another, someone's son or daughter would have to go on the mission, so who would be most likely to return? Invariably the answer often was the same. Still, this time felt wrong but not in any logical way.

"Look Dad..." Jonathan responded trying to be understanding. "I've been put in far worse situations than this, and honestly, if I thought it was a suicide mission I would say so, and I wouldn't be so willing to have Angelica along on the mission."

Chris perked up at that. "Right, and you would have stopped her, how exactly?"

"I said I wouldn't be so willing, not that I could stop her. It'll be fine."

Chris knew he was right, still, "Do me one favor, take Templar loyalists with you. Something has me on edge, and I guess it's how easily Downs backed down on the recovery angle."

Jonathan nodded in agreement. “Honestly, Ellium-centric agents have been becoming more and more aggressive in the field, less likely to obey orders. I’ve been leaning more heavily on Templar supporters anyway.”

“Sounds good then. Things are coming to a head, but while Brodecker is still in charge, I think we can still turn things around.” The optimism in Chris’s voice was authentic, which reassured Jonathan.

Jonathan assembled a team of five agents. He would act as field leader with Angelica covering communication and extraction, while agents Michaels, Redding, and Sellars rounded out the team. The destination wasn’t far, just outside Toledo, but the risk of detection was high. Jonathan had trained in and excelled in the use of the latest in stealth vehicles. Thanks to Ellium subsidiaries their journey was relatively straightforward. What wasn’t simple however, was breaking into the Plato Continuum facility holding the virus. Scans revealed limited guards, which was ideal, but uncharacteristic for the Continuum. Typically they favored the Quatall for internal security, but with Sarganthas apparent demise, perhaps the Continuum had lost control over their elite attack dogs. Jonathan’s team successfully bypassed the initial security forces utilizing the latest in espionage technology.



The facility schematics showed the central labs underground, sealed within the incubation room. Four samples of the virus were located, needing to be destroyed. This was why Jonathan brought the C-4. Their stealth armor provided real-time thermal imaging showing both the layout and security personnel nearby; this allowed the team to go unnoticed.

Angelica wired her armor directly to the inoculation room door, using the on-board A.I. to infiltrate the system, opening the door. Michaels and Redding watched the door while Jonathan accessed the incubation chamber. Accessing the cold room, robotic arms moved into the vault bringing forth the requested vials. Jonathan was about to activate the decontamination process and set the C-4 when a loud noise was heard from behind him. Samantha Snow stood there holding Redding by the neck. She flung him across the room, slamming both he and Angelica into the adjacent terminal, signaling the alarm. Michaels raised his weapon and began firing. Moving faster than the eye could see, Snow sidestepped his weapons fire, smacking him in the head with her hand and severing his spinal column. Angelica came-to in time to see Jonathan attempt to stop Snow, but her reflexes were too quick.



Within seconds Snow stood behind Jonathan, her fist through his stomach, blood splattering the console in front of him. Angelica cried out in anguish as Jonathan looked over to her, blood trickling out his lips. Snow, holding the virus, turned towards Angelica about to move on her when Jonathan, only able to mouth the words I love you, pulled the pin on a grenade. The explosion rocked the building, ripping Jonathan to pieces and knocking Angelica unconscious. Angelica regained her senses as Redding dragged her through the corridor.



“What happened? Where’s Jonathan? Where’s Snow?” Angelica was still unsteady on her feet but kept up with Redding.

“All dead except that bitch, Snow. She made off with the virus. It’s a set-up, this isn’t even a Continuum facility.”

“What?” Angelica was at a loss, everything was happening too fast, but before she could say a thing, three security guards blocked the exit.

The guards were unarmed and said nothing, but their shapes began to transform. Jaws elongated and serrated teeth grew. Claws replaced fingers and the sickening sound of bone and tissue rearranging itself could be heard down the hall. This was an Unborn facility, and these were shape-changers, a typical guard for one of the Unborn holdings. Not interested in explanation, the three Unborn guards rushed the pair. Angelica had her sword in hand, slicing through the abdomen of the first attacker while Redding’s rifle tore the second Unborn in half.

The third shape-shifter ripped into Angelica’s back, shredding her armor and forcing her to drop her sword. Redding was on the shape-shifter in a flash. Grabbing Angelica’s sword from the ground in a fluid roll, the agent swung hard, decapitating the beast. After lifting Angelica, Redding hit a switch causing Jonathan’s C-4 to ignite in the lab. With the explosion providing cover, the pair made it out and to safety. They needed to contact Chris before Downs and Snow could respond. Only while flying to a Templar safe house did Angelica allow herself a moment to break down and cry.

* * *

Downs stood at the forefront of the future. His destiny was decided through his will alone and Samantha Snow entering his office was proof positive. Indeed, the future was bright, and Downs let it show across his face as he sat down, insisting that Snow joined him as he poured Champagne for each of them to celebrate the future. Downs went into detail about the next phase of the plan. The biggest hurdle to the vision he now shared with Snow, was in Ahrman Brodecker. Fortunately for Downs, Snow saw the wisdom of his plan. It was time for Downs to release Wormwood upon the world, now that he had tricked the Templars into eradicating the only cure, save for the sample Snow secured.

* * *

Angelica recovered in the nearest Templar safe house. She was told that Chris had arrived and waited for her release from the doctor’s care. The grief she felt was nearly overwhelming, but she had more than one reason to overcome the pain. Dreading the look in his eyes, Angelica went out to meet Chris, unsure of his reaction.

As she opened the door, however, she was nearly struck down as Chris pulled her close into his arms. Tears began streaking her cheeks as she found herself unable to stem the tide of anguish. Chris was the first to speak, though he never released his embrace.

"We can't go back after everything that's happened." Angelica only held him closer, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Brodecker is dead. I discovered the body during your mission. His throat was slit and a Templar blade was found. We have no proof, but I'm convinced it was Snow and Downs." Chris stood back from her, looking her deep in the eyes.

"The witch-hunt has already started with rumors circling that it was my own blade they found. Downs... we were... I was tricked. You were never sent after the virus. You were sent after the cure. A cure that only Downs now controls."

"A cure to what?"

"Wormwood. It's called the Wormwood."

"What the hell has happened?"

Chris turned on the television to reveal every channel awash in a sea of horrors breathlessly reported by news affiliates relating nearly identical stories. Tens of thousands the world over reported symptoms of the same disease now named the Wormwood virus. Affecting the young, elderly, and immune-deficient, the virus was nearly 85% fatal and spreading fast. For those few that did survive, they faced worse than death. Reports began to surface that some of those infected began to mutate and become murderous in nature. The news posted an image of a fallen corpse, partially mutated before it died. Instantly Angelica recognized it as a Quatall. Chris held her tight, trying desperately to console her.

"I'm sorry Angelica. I'm so sorry... We'll stop this somehow."

Angelica, in turn, held Chris all the tighter, supporting him for what she had to say next.

"We have to stop this, if not for us, then for your grandchildren."

Chris stood back from her, looking into her eyes and through the tears, overwhelmed by emotion. All he could muster was one word: "plural?"

Angelica smiled through her pain and nodded. There was a lot to do, not just to save the world, but Chris's legacy. It was a good thing Chris had contingency plans of his own.



CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

The Wormwood virus spread from continent to continent faster than the common cold, as if simultaneously released all over the world as an act of bio-terrorism - a rumor the Ellium did its best to stifle. The speculation ran rampant as people began rioting and looting in a blind panic. First to fall victim were the elderly, the young, and those with already compromised immune systems. The virus mutated quickly, making finding a cure near impossible. The virus worked in strange, specialized ways. Wormwood targeted specific limbs or organs, generally thought to be the initial contamination point. The affected parts began to swell to grotesque proportions as pustules began to appear. The infection seemed to pool its resources as it secured its foothold in the body. Many thought it was at this stage that the virus "tested" the host for viability for the final mutation or if the host would just expire due to incompatibility. Most died when infection was allowed to spread. For a select few, the mutations caused insanity and eventually reshaped their bodies into what a very few recognized as Quatall. Amputation of the infected portion did seem to stop the spread as if the virus operated with some impossible awareness, knowing the host would no longer withstand the change.

Director Robert Downs was quite pleased with the progress the Ellium made in the months following the release of the Wormwood virus. From securing his position within the Ellium to the near total eradication of Plato Continuum forces and Templar supporters. Downs turned to greet his new guest as the room became illuminated with a sphere of energy, the precursor to Riel teleporting into the office.

"My dear Mister... or is it now Director Downs? How are we this evening?" Riel played it cool, but she always was ready for a betrayal, just in case. Their alliance in this new world order had great promise, but creatures of ambition were rarely known to share.

Director Downs smiled at the comment. "My dear Riel, we've shared so much of late, you can relax, have a seat. We have much to discuss."

Riel joined Downs at his desk, her visits becoming more frequent of late, as the world was itself quickly transforming. Riel supplied Downs with Unborn tech including the Wormwood virus, which made Downs and the Ellium global leaders. Other Unborn facilities were located by Riel and passed on to the Ellium. They were targeted for termination, removing any competition in releasing an eventual treatment. Meanwhile, Riel operated with absolute impunity, finally living as free as she always wanted. Eventually, the Ellium would release their cure, but not until the population had thinned out to more manageable levels. Only then, would the treatment be given, and only to the chosen few. The rest of humanity would be forced to buy cybernetic parts, most often from an Ellium subsidiary for the amputated limbs or remain mutilated forever. Those that mutated merely became mindless Quatall for Riel to control. Indeed, this was a golden time for the Ellium and Riel.

Five years after the Wormwood outbreak, the world had completely reshaped itself. Ellium security forces moved freely throughout the world, their cover story of suppressing new outbreaks hid the real mission of suppressing any potential cures or running Templar and Plato Continuum forces to ground. Their primary goal was the eradication of the Unborn. Not only did the Unborn know the truth about the Wormwood, but their abilities made them a unique threat. Meanwhile, the treatments Ellium did release prevented the spread of the virus, but also became a form of control. Missing even a single treatment would cause severe withdrawal as it concurrently accelerated the Wormwood. Director Downs had finally achieved his goal - the world was firmly under Ellium control, and it gave this power freely.

Chris Hendrickson continued to head up the Templars, shuffling them from one safe house to another, hiding them from Samantha Snow's hunter teams. Angelica Cain worked as his second in command, helping to organize counter strikes against the Ellium, while coordinating with new allies in the Plato Continuum.



The dramatic shift in the world had made the Continuum into the force for good that it was originally intended to be. The final key in standing up to the Ellium was securing an alliance with the Unborn.

Angelica had found her skills put to the test as Chris's second-in-command, as if raising 5-year-old twins wasn't challenging enough. Chris held his grandchildren every night promising he would keep them safe from the monsters that had killed their father. The boy, Gabriel, always eager to play or fight while his sister, Aurora, was the introspective type, always listening and watching. Very few conversations ever transpired without little Aurora listening in. She had already prepared herself for the news her mother was coming down the hall to give. Chris waited in the living room as Angelica told the kids about the very long trip that awaited them.

For the first time in years, Chris was eager for a meeting. Finally, the Unborn agreed to hear him out. More than that, they had a plan to stop the Ellium, but trust was not easy to come by. The Wormwood was made to create slaves for Sarganthas and his people, a perversion of Unborn science. Brought to this planet long ago, the Unborn kept samples of it to develop a cure. They knew that Sarganthas and those loyal to him continued to make slaves of the humans. They never considered, however, that some on this planet would use Wormwood on their own kind. The Ellium, and specifically Downs, watched and waited for the cure to be found. Wormwood could ravage planets, making the willful release of it by another species unthinkable, but all Downs saw was opportunities and control, both of which Riel shared in.

Over the last few years, cautious cooperation and exchanging of information not only built bridges between the Unborn and Templars but also provided Chris with information about the Unborn. He was able to fill a large number of gaps, including the source of his talents and others like him that shared lineage with the Unborn. The Unborn had one natural individual ability, unique to pure bloods - with even the smallest sample of D.N.A., the Unborn can develop any gifts or genetic attributes of a sampled organism. These sampled abilities even turn up in their offspring, making them doubly dangerous. Slaved Unborn were forced to sample as many alien races as they could to become better tools for Sarganthas and his people to exploit. The Unborn were pleased to blend in with human society after the crash centuries ago and were not interested in being enslaved to Downs and the Ellium after a lifetime of servitude to Sarganthas. An alliance with the Templars appealed to them, but allying with the Plato Continuum, however, was an entirely separate matter. The taint of Sarganthas was long lasting, and the Unborn had equally long memories. Still, they couldn't deny the corrupting influence Sarganthas had and saw the changes the Continuum underwent since that influence was removed. Everyone was in agreement that this meeting would decide the future course of humanity.



CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

To the casual observer, the clandestine meeting of Unborn, Templars, and the heads of the current Plato Continuum would have been something to behold. Then again, there were no casual observers in this room. It was dangerous but necessary to gather for the final steps in planning. With the spread of the Wormwood virus, entire governments collapsed, while Ellium swooped in to pick up the pieces. No country remained untouched by the virus now, and the already wealthy considered all forms of desperate salvation, from underground bunkers to proposed cryogenic sleep in space while construction continued on Martian domes. The Continuum had done well using its political power to accelerate the colonization plans after the successful return mission several years ago. The advancements the Plato Continuum gleaned from working for Sarganthas coupled with the Templars own unique technologies had been put to good use for years in secret, but any plans of exodus meant dealing with the Ellium before Templar and Continuum forces consolidated their resources. Plato Continuum forces had been intertwined with the Japanese government for decades in secret, which made the island the perfect place to build their resistance. Great arks were created in Japan for the exodus of those that were willing and desperate, headed for Mars. In Australia however, the real work was progressing.

Chris and Angelica greeted the Plato Continuum contingent as they entered, accompanied by Doctor Armaghast. He'd been studying Sarganthas' remaining technology extensively. Over the years, starting with his initial contact with an alien technology while working for the Ellium, and continuing ever since, his body was always in a state of flux. The noticeable changes started with losing the white of his eyes, leaving them completely black with an odd stain on the surrounding tissue. Extensive cybernetics had replaced much of his body, not because of infection, but to perfect his body, in effect, using himself as the ultimate test subject. The man's intelligence was beyond par but so could be his eccentricity. In truth, most of the cybernetic revolution, including the Templars own modifications (as well as Snow's) were due to Armaghast's breakthroughs. Armaghast turned towards Chris as he approached the large table in the center of the hall, a strange smirk appearing on Armaghast's face.

"Upgrades I see? They sing out to me Chris. You've been very busy."

As Armaghast took his seat, Angelica leaned into Chris, and whispered: "What the hell was that about?"

Chris only held his emotionless stare at Armaghast, revealing nothing. The end of the world makes for strange bedfellows. The great machine that violated Armaghast years ago was left over from the battle that condemned Sarganthas to Earth. It was a repository of alien knowledge contained within a large ship that crashed in that long ago battle.

The ship was locked under millennia of dirt in the Outback. Everything the Templars and their allies needed for the future was contained within the vessel waiting to be seized. After the Unborn had joined the assemblage, Doctor Armaghast began his update.

“After a lot of work and considerable effort on my part, the Australian ship has been made functional. Much remains a mystery, the race that built this weapon we now know referred to themselves along the lines of “Lords of Cerebral Ecology” or some such. The translation was quite difficult. No other trace of these ‘Lords’ remain, save for their vessel, and even the Unborn were no help in deciphering this technology..”

Chris cleared his throat to hopefully stem the rant he was certain Armaghast was about to launch into.

“But I digress. While the ship will not be a vessel for war, we’re too far from bringing those systems on-line, travel and extended living aboard is ready.”

The Unborn representative, a lanky man with pale skin and dark eyes interjected, “There are but a handful of us that were blessed, or cursed, with an extended life leading back to that great battle, fought centuries ago. What they have told us, however, is that these vessels were most vulnerable in an atmosphere. The ship, any ship, will be an immediate target with little ability to defend its self.”

After a long pause, Chris stated the obvious. “Downs needs to be dealt with. The Ellium will certainly make their move, and there will be no hiding the evacuations.”

The Unborn representative presented their part of the plan. They would be the ones to deal with Downs.

The Unborn race had long ago traveled to earth as slaves and spent centuries in hiding. The Unborn recognized the opportunity to be free from oppression finally. Immune to the Wormwood, the Unborn sided with those that would remain on Earth, to prevent the Ellium’s bid for global domination. Having been trapped here for centuries, Earth had been the only home many of the Unborn knew. They would buy the time necessary to launch with the assassination of Director Downs, and together with those that remained in Japan, they would continue to fight Ellium control if the aggression continued. As the details came together, there were growing feelings of hope, but the dread of what everyone in the room was about to undertake could not be drowned out. Angelica thought of Jonathan then of her two children. All that mattered was that they would have a future and with it, freedom.

The plan was simple enough. In the short term, the Templars and Plato Continuum leadership would gather all those that could be spared and arrange to rendezvous for final evacuation at a pre-determined time. It would be inevitable that Ellium forces would confront the Templars. Gathering so many together would be impossible to hide, but the death of Downs would at least create confusion. This could prevent reinforcements from being sent. More importantly, the Ellium may yet be needed in releasing the cure, far easier to do without Downs' presence and influence. Meanwhile, with the Plato Continuum's remaining global network of contacts, the tech needed to ensure a successful evacuation to Mars would be provided to the U.N. giving them their best chance. Now all that was needed was precious time. Time, however, was quickly running out.

* * *

Riel came up behind Downs in his penthouse, her thin hands reaching around his waist. Downs fought the urge to jump, startled by this intrusion. No one was able to breach the security of his personal apartment, no human at least. Riel took great pride in demonstrating the inadequacies of human technology, especially with men of power and arrogance.

"How many times have I asked you to keep your filthy hands off of me? "

"Don't be such a crab; you know you love my visits!"

Downs did little to hide his growing irritation. "What do you want, Riel? I have better uses for my time."

Riel became irritated as well. "You need to be careful, the last one who spoke like that to me met a horrible end. But you are correct; there is business to discuss. Templars are gathering. I hear things, like the fact that larger and larger groups are moving throughout the world. Many seem to be heading to Australia. Do you now why?"

Riel studied Downs expression. Information was critical in this world, and so were debts owed. Downs remained impassive as ever. "We've heard rumors. Go on..."

Riel sat on his couch, stretching out comfortably. "Then you know they're planning a big escape? A grand journey to the stars or some such."



Downs poured himself a couple of fingers of Bourbon and sat down. “Plans have been leaked to the U.N. making Martian colonization a reality. They make our current outpost look like a child’s toy. They seem, even, to possess a new propulsion system. We believe it’s the Continuum. They are still driving thorns in our side.”

“Too true.” Riel fought to hold back a grin of satisfaction. “Imagine if before the U.N. can fully utilize these plans, an accident were to happen. Instead of setting an example and showing the way, the Templars own launch ended in fiery death?

Downs was intrigued by this proposal. So many of his problems dealt with in short order, and Riel knew the value of this. “What do you get out of this?”

Riel’s face turned sour at the question. Looking away she was short with her answer. “They will be taking something of mine, and I won’t allow it. Get your pet cyborg to attack when I get the coordinates and I will handle their ship.”

“After you get whatever’s yours?”

“After.” Downs shook on it, after all, he would have taken this course of action regardless, but now he’ll have help. It was a wonderful life, and Downs couldn’t be happier.

ELLIUM ARCHIVE - WORMWOOD

CDC report to the World Health Organization

RE: Wormwood infection rates and origin.

The Wormwood is virulent, contagious and lethal. The mortality rate is about 60 per cent upon initial contamination with an unusually lengthy infectious period prior to any debilitating symptoms present themselves. If the mortality rate were closer to 100 per cent, then an outbreak would burn itself out.

Individuals infected with Wormwood fall into two primary categories. In both instances the Wormwood begins the systematic destruction of the patients' immune system, killing off the body's T-lymphocyte cells. Being far more aggressive than any previously discovered disease, Wormwood begins tearing through several types of immune cells on its way to causing external hemorrhaging—bleeding from the eyes, nose, or other orifices. Once external hemorrhaging has begun, the disease is 100% fatal. A far less often occurrence however triggers the Wormwood to mutate the DNA of its host, a destructive and violent process. The resultant transformation is vastly different from the original DNA, creating a new entity designated "Quatall" which leaves very little of the original host intact.

While the act of mutating DNA through viral contamination is not unheard of, this level of mutation is believed to be created with purpose, weaponized with this heinous result in mind. Investigations are ongoing as no cure has been or likely will be discovered any time soon.



CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

When the time came to do the unthinkable, Angelica fought tooth and nail not to let panic show. People looked up to her, indeed, but her children already were growing up in a world of fear. They had no way of understanding they would be leaving for Europa soon while most of humanity fled to Mars; the secrets gained from the Templars recovered ship pointing the way to even greater treasures. It was all so overwhelming but with Chris always able to lend support, she was able to stay strong for Gabriel and Aurora. The children and 98% of the passengers would live in cryo-stasis, both for their journey and for the construction of their new home. Much of what they needed would exist within the ship they traveled in, but the long sleep would remove the burden on hydroponics and give time for a real home to be made. Those that remained awake would sleep in cycles, sharing years of work while Armaghast oversaw everything. He was confident that what awaited him on Europa would answer all his questions. Within 10 hours, the great journey would begin.

* * *

Samantha Snow watched the Templar patrol as they guarded their makeshift base of operations. Though few in number, Templars had been undergoing greater and greater levels of cybridization making them a threat even to her. Snow's forces were not massive either, the need for secrecy is paramount and loyalty absolute. Her orders were to wait until the boarding was nearly complete then ensure the destruction of the Templars.



Angelica watched as Chris held his two grandchildren tight. They were all that remained of his son, and he loved them greatly. Angelica walked up behind her kids, placing her hands on their shoulders. The pair turned to their mother and held her, tears streaming down their cheeks. It was time for their long sleep, and like any child would be, they were frightened of the unknown. Angelica tucked each into their respective cryogenic cribs and kissed their foreheads. The pods were activated, and just like thousands of others, the two children slept peacefully. Chris and Angelica wouldn't enter their cribs until after launch, to ensure everything went according to plan. They were about to head to the bridge when the alarm sounded. The Ellium had begun their assault.

The Unborn were accustomed to moving unnoticed amongst the populations of the world. Most were indistinguishable from the average person. The Ellium fought hard over the years to attempt to control if not eradicate the Unborn, with only marginal success. The race simply had too many skills and abilities at their disposal, all unpredictable and dangerous. Tracking Robert Downs and the source of the Ellium's power to Atlanta was no great feat, demonstrating just how vulnerable the Ellium was wherever the Unborn were concerned. The building was one of the most secure facilities in the world and acted as primary headquarters for the Ellium's global operations. Shutting down the building would only slow the machine that was the Ellium, as redundancies were always built in. The real source of power and corruption in the Ellium, Robert Downs, also lived in the penthouse. Downs watched the battle live from the safety and comfort of his apartment. Indeed, all his plans were coming together when the building security sounded. The head of security appeared on the primary monitor; the building was in lock-down - the Unborn were attacking.



The Unborn as individuals represented the greatest single threat a trained militarized force could encounter. Taking those abilities and organizing into a military unit meant a devastating level of power on par with an entire nation's army. The Ellium security forces were intended as roadblocks to stall while the automated defenses came on-line. Two shape-shifters supported by an armored Unborn generating plasma bursts began their assault on the ground floor. Security forces drew small arms and automatic weapons while the staff retreated to secure rooms, causing a large amount of panic - the perfect distraction. A second team teleported to the roof to work their way down into the penthouse level, bypassing much of the security. This was the assassination team for Downs, while the other team drew the security drones down to the bottom levels. It was a fierce battle for the ground team once the drones engaged, however. State of the art weapons, the drones were equipped with specialized armaments to counter Unborn abilities and traditional forces as well.



Preferring the direct approach, Samantha Snow began her assault on the Templar compound. She watched as the battle was unfolding, studying the Templar forces to learn just how far their tech had come. The results were impressive, but only so much as it was time to get Snow's hands dirty. Meanwhile, Chris had Angelica lock down the launch area, sounding the final launch warning. As Angelica made her way to the ship, she grabbed her sword and ran downstairs. Chris grabbed his sidearm and four of his best Templars and headed out to meet Snow. If Snow made it to the ship, as he was certain she could, she would destroy it.

The four-legged drones calculated trajectories as Unborn tried to use speed to their advantage, working as a team. Shape-shifters generated armor plating and immense strength to tear at the drones, but more and more drones responded, threatening to overwhelm them. The assassination team meanwhile, successfully made their way into the penthouse thanks to the distraction. They prepared to end Downs once and for all.

Angelica cleared the facility and was ready to board the vessel. The automated launch sequence was already activated, a necessity in case Chris's team wasn't able to stop the Ellium forces outside. As Angelica neared the elevated platform outside the ship, a strange feeling crept over her. Angelica gripped her sword tight and turned sharply, coming face to face with Riel.



"I've come for my grandchildren, Angelica. I can't let you take them; they belong to me!"

Angelica could hardly contain the rage she felt. "You delusional bitch! No way are you laying a hand on them!"

Angelica raised her sword preparing to swing, but Riel was faster. Riel's fingers were sharp as knives, cutting deep into Angelica's side. Blood spilled out onto the floor, but Angelica only saw her children and the monstrous creature trying to steal them. Angelica twisted, falling to the ground and swinging her sword around. The blade ripped into Riel, nearly splitting her in half. Already her Unborn abilities began stitching her body back together, but Angelica was standing, fueled by adrenaline and rage.

"Remember my father? And you think I'll let you touch my children?" Riel could only struggle to heal herself, but Angelica was too fast as she swung the blade for a final time, beheading Riel. Angelica propped herself up on the sword as the ship fired up its engines. Riel's torso shook violently, spewing blood in an upward torrent, collapsing on Angelica. Angelica and the headless corpse of her mother tumbled to the lower level as the ignition blast scorched Angelica's flesh.



Downs was being escorted to his panic room; a vault made impenetrable from all but a nuclear attack. Cut off from the events in the Australian Outback and now his building under siege, Downs actually felt afraid for the first time. The Unborn in the lower levels held their own, but they made no progress either. Still, their purpose as a distraction worked flawlessly. The guards accompanying Downs were the first to die; their heads exploded from a concussive force directed by an Unborn. Downs nearly fell to the ground in shock, as another Unborn stepped out of the shadows.



“It is time to pay your many debts. May you burn in hell forever.” The Unborn raised his hand, ready to deliver the killing blow. Downs put up his hands plaintively. “My heart, it’s monitored by the building. If you kill me, the building explodes. We’ll all die you fools. Is that what you want?”

The Unborn never flinched. “Then we die gloriously.”

Seconds after Downs gray matter and bits of skull were sprayed across the floor, the Ellium headquarters erupted in a terrifying explosion. Hundreds died so that the terror of one man’s reign could be brought to an end.



As the Templars ship began to launch, Samantha Snow knew she had failed. The Templar forces held their own once Chris and his team attacked. Snow was able to kill two of the Templars but not without injury, their own cybernetics proving to be nearly her equal. As Snow turned to find her next opponent, thinking only of death, Snow failed to see Chris come up behind her. His fist crashed into her jaw, nearly ripping it from her face. The impact sent her reeling.

“You were my greatest disappointment. Lord knows I tried to save you, but you refused to listen. Then you killed my son?”



As Chris approached her, Snow kicked his leg, shattering his knee. Chris fell to the ground as Snow pulled her knife, digging it into Chris's back. Chris only gritted his teeth, pain suppressors, and adrenaline kicking in. Chris put everything he had left into one last blow, punching his fist through Snow's chest, ripping her heart from her body. She fell to the ground dead while Chris turned to watch the Templar ship lift off. Using a nearby rifle as a crutch, Chris hobbled over to Angelica. Both looked like hell, tears streaming from Angelica's eyes, Chris held her tight. While her children were safe, she would never see them again. No words could console her, so none was spoken. They only watched as the ship lifted higher, disappearing into the sky.





EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

The Earth continued to mutate, growing stranger and more dangerous with each passing decade. Chris and Angelica had joined the Continuum on the Japanese island of Honshu, one of the last vestiges of resistance. Chris would go on to help build up the Continuum into a force to challenge the Ellium's dominance. Eventually, he would pass, but he would always be remembered as the hero he was. Angelica, however, found the Unborn DNA had gifted her with a rare ability, but not one she wanted as her drastically decelerated aging ensured many more decades in this disaster strewn world, a mutated, murderous wasteland.

The Ellium's power continued to grow, however, consolidating in America under new leadership. Immense caverns were being excavated with rumors abounding of large cities being constructed underground.



Armies of cybernetic soldiers supported by massive machines of destruction secured the entire continent, save for a voracious, growing wasteland of mutation attempting to consume the world. All the while, the Templars slept in their ark, their machines building a new home on the surface of Europa. Meanwhile, Doctor Armaghast continued his work deep within Europa, creating a brand new future.



ELLIUM ARCHIVE - GLOBAL STATUS

Excerpt from Elite Theory: A consolidation of global power under the Ellium.

Consisting of members of the economic elite, a small consolidated group holds the most power—and that power is independent of democratic elections. Through positions in corporations or on corporate boards, and influence over policy-planning, members of the “elite” exert significant power over corporate and government decisions. Unified under the new globalist power structure under the Ellium, the “elite” guide and engineer society postViralclysm into the format that most benefits and strengthens their hold on those that remain on Earth. The basic characteristics of this government are that power is concentrated, the elites are unified, the non-elites are diverse and powerless, elites’ interests are unified due to common back-grounds and positions and the defining characteristic of power is institutional position.

Opposition originating in the far east remains democratic in nature, but relatively powerless when compared to the wealth of resources the Ellium maintains access too.

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ENTROPY RISING

A secret society determined to save the world, whether we want them to or not. Members of the organization known as Ellium have played a clandestine role in the building of societies dating back to the Knights Templar. Always playing the role of shepherd and not dictator, the Ellium's motives have remained true to their roots until recently.

Chris Hendrickson, lead investigator for the Ellium faces increasing proof that division from within is resulting in global turmoil and violent insurrection, manipulated through the many divisions of Ellium whose reach extends to nearly all first world nations and beyond.

With historic unrest and the looming threat of mass annihilation through biological warfare on the horizon, Chris must assemble a core group of trusted allies to stand against the coming storm as an ancient evil from the Ellium's distant past is resurrected, calling into question humanities origin while threatening our very existence.

With lines drawn, a brave few will risk everything. But in fighting the horrors threatening our world, will they become the very thing they fear?

