

ALONE SAMPLE

BOOK 2 IN THE HAWTHORN SAGA

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Alone sample

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1.00

[Transmission Six]

Subject: James Hawthorn
Date: Fri Mar 29, 2187
Time: 09:44 (EST)
Location: Research Offices, The Athanasia,
Atlantic Ocean

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The morphing net hangs over a silicone brain model. Metallic fibers make up the weave, each thinner than a knife's edge. Like rippling water, the net conforms to the surface of the silicon brain, trying in vain to connect.

"Are you ready, Dr. Hawthorn?"

I lift my gaze.

Clause Marceau stands across from me, eyebrows raised, solid gray hair swooping to the side.

A translucent glass table divides us, upon which rests the brain model and implant.

To my side, the neurologist's eyes dart between Clause and me. On my other side, the systems engineer stands with slumped shoulders, eyes vacant.

Three holographic screens orbit our work, displaying outputs and test cases from the implant. Two of the room's walls are glass, one with a door to the hall, the other overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

I return my gaze to the net morphing around the silicon brain. We call it Lace. I hate the name, but I'm not in charge of marketing.

A hand touches my arm.

"Are you well, Doctor?" the systems engineer asks. Two years of work have brought us to this point. She defined system specifications, and I developed her ideas. The neurologist consulted on every step.

"I'm fine. Get rid of these screens." I squint at the light.

The screens evaporate, along with Lace's diagnostics and test cases.

I take a breath.

In the now-dim room, the Lace model gives off a distinct glow. Thousands of wires morph past one another. They can slide between brain cells to intercept and produce neurological action potentials.

An unaware eye could overlook the light. The fabric produces less than a single lumen to interface with neural tissue.

"We can reschedule." Clause watches me.

"Stop asking." I rock myself and avoid eye contact. "Prepare the model."

Clause holds out his hand, stopping the neurologist from touching the Lace. He shoots me a look meant to imply he's serious or something. "I need your full attention today. If I can't get it, we're postponing this test."

"I'm fine," I say.

Five years have passed since he live-streamed our deaths at the New Body IPO. I remember the night with perfect clarity. Thomas Barlow killed me. Then nothing. For two years, I did not exist. I returned to life here at New Body and have worked with Clause ever since.

He keeps checking in on me, asking how my sync is going and if I have questions about fresh memories.

"We can put you under," Clause says.

"No, thank you."

The neurologist, Dr. Luigi Galvani, wheels what looks like a masseuse chair to my side. It exposes the neck, allowing for minimally invasive posterior cranial surgeries.

Galvani collects the Lace model into a small round container. He's done this a thousand times. "The surgery resembles other neural implant procedures." He speaks with reserved confidence. Few people understand the nervous system better. He pioneered electrophysiology in the 1700s by reanimating dead frog muscles with electricity.

Clause was giddy for weeks when he joined New Body last year.

Galvani continues. "The model affixes to the brain at the base of the skull. We enter through a one-millimeter incision dilated to five." He holds

up a container shaped like a hockey puck. “This device will secure the fibers using needles sixteen microns in diameter.”

“Great,” I say.

“Aside from the initial prick, you should feel nothing,” he continues. “The brain has no pain receptors. Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.” I sit to shut him up, leaning forward to rest my face on the U-shaped pad.

My knees bounce over speckled carpet. Clause’s brown shoes are all I can see. Sweat collects between my face and the blue pad.

Galvani places the device on the back of my neck. It suctions to my skin, frigid exterior leaching warmth.

A prick of pain sprouts from the contact. I wait, closing my eyes.

As Galvani promised, the pain stops after the first cut. A topical numbing agent dulls the feeling.

Within my skull, a squadron of needles secures two-hundred thousand sensors to the outer layers of my brain.

I’m supposed to keep still—nothing to do now but wait.

I concentrate on my breathing to avoid the absurd feeling of claustrophobia.

Just a few more minutes. That thing will be out of my head.

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Update:      New read/write device
              Primary device changed
              System preferences migrated to a
              new device
Error:      Assertion failed: memory not found
              Reverting to previous disk image
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“Is it working?” Clause asks.

The surgical device detaches from my neck at Dr. Galvani’s touch.

I sit upright, shaking myself. Holograms populate my vision. My head aches. No pain receptors, my ass. “I’m interfaced, I think.”

Clause retrieves a holographic screen. “Nothing yet.”

“My overlay is up,” I say. The date has appeared in my lower right periphery. “I have access to the legacy system.”

“I’m showing nothing on our new system,” Clause says. He taps at the air, opening windows on a private overlay. “You’re authenticated?”

“Yes.”

“Something’s wrong with the bridge to the new system.” Clause swipes through open air. “Must be software.”

“Can’t be,” I say. “I tested with Theia. We had no issues.”

Clause gives me a skeptical look. “You tested in a digital environment.” He rubs his forehead. “Reality adds a layer of chaos.”

I summon a screen of my own, flipping through my test cases this past week. “The OS tried to boot, failed, and reverted to Vessel’s Lens Cast 11.04.” I run my hands through my hair. “That error code is a memory issue.”

“We don’t have time to debug right now,” Clause says. “Use the next week to figure out what went wrong. Push out an update when you’re ready.”

“I can’t have missed something,” I say, helpless as I stare at the screen.

“We have the system log containing the error,” the systems engineer says. “We’ll find the bug and regroup.”

“I’m giving you time.” Clause lowers his voice to calm me. “This is our first test. Work the problem and stop punishing yourself.”

“It has to work today.” Panic rises in my stomach.

“Why?” Dr. Galvani asks. He keeps fiddling with the back of my neck. “Errors happen when interfacing with a live brain.”

I step away from Galvani. “I invited Quinn to see the test results.”

Clause rounds on me. “Why did you invite her?”

“We need the board’s participation,” I say. “The goal is to print subjects with Lace already installed, which won’t happen this decade if they aren’t involved.”

Galvani dabs my neck with gauze.

Clause slumps, unappeased. “When will she arrive?”

A knock comes from the glass wall, and the door cracks open.

“James Hawthorn?” a voice asks.

I look up, alarmed at the interruption.

A lab tech stands at the glass door, leaning in to speak. “Quinn is here to see you? She says you have an appointment.”

Clause gives me a bewildered look. “This is a prototype, James.”

“Calm down.” I swat Galvani’s hand and stand. “Projects fail when departments don’t communicate.”

“Learn that at weLive, did you?”

I ignore Clause.

Quinn strides through the door, fresh from the Revival Labs and wearing scrubs. She’s a recent addition to the board, joining New Body after my revival. Unlike most New Body directors, she brought industry knowledge instead of money.

Her thick black hair absorbs all light. She spares only a glance for me, posture straight.

“Quinn.” Clause’s smile betrays none of his annoyance. “Thank you for coming.”

“I heard you’re ready to show me what you’ve been working on,” Quinn says. She’s winded from running around all day.

Clause looks at me, a smile plastered on his face. He motions to me. “I’m sure James here can fill you in.”

I shrug, feeling uncomfortable. Sometimes when people use idioms, I’m left wondering what they’re saying. It’s worse since my revival. “Fill her in?”

Quinn’s expression softens. “What have you been working on?”

“Oh.” I rush forward to the table with the silicon brain. “Well, it’s not here anymore. I invited you here for a tech demo, but we’re having technical difficulties, so I don’t have much to show you.”

“Okay,” Quinn says, voice confused. “So, whatever it is, it’s not here, and it doesn’t work anyway.”

“Yes,” I say.

Clause steps forward. “We’ve been working on a neural implant to replace Vessel’s current flagship. It’s called Lace. We thought we had a functioning prototype, but we don’t.”

“Well, where is it?” Quinn asks.

“It’s in my head.” I point to myself and shrug.

Quinn’s mouth narrows. “And you’re the test subject because?”

Shit. I’m in trouble. “I volunteered.”

She glares at the silicon brain. “You’re too young. New-revival protection laws exist for a reason. Switch-outs don’t mature for at least five years. You aren’t making an informed decision.”

I wilt under her words.

She turns on Clause. “Why are you doing this?”

Clause speaks. “weLive never printed subjects with pre-installed implants. The policy led to billions of post-revival surgeries. We avoid that with this product.”

“Even so, I should have known about this months ago.” Quinn pulls out her clipboard. Old habits from weLive. “You’ll have to retrofit our facilities to have technology printed with biomass.”

“That should be no problem,” Clause says. “The device can attach before the skull prints.”

“Maybe.” Quinn scans her clipboard. “Send me the specifications. I’ll make the call.”

“Don’t make the call,” Clause says. “Make it happen.”

Quinn smirks. “I’ll do my job. You bouncing projects between Vessel and New Body won’t affect that.”

“This is a subcontract,” Clause says. “Lace is a riskier project than Vessel can take on, so they contracted through us. Everyone benefits.”

“Either way, my priority is a stable sync.” Quinn leans in with a smile. “That’s how the *customer* benefits. Not from you pushing another implant into a saturated market.”

“Our implant is better,” I say.

Quinn looks at me.

I pull up a hologram of the implant lying dormant in my head. It appears in the air between us as an organized mess of wires morphing around a brain like blood vessels. “Lace has thousands of sensors, each able to read and write synaptic action potentials.”

Quinn appears unimpressed. “This is nothing new.”

“No technology is wholly original, but Vessel’s flagship can’t write data to the brain. It reads commands from the cortex and relies on paired devices to return information to the user.”

“And you can deliver data to the brain with Lace?” Quinn says. “As in, you can download a book into my head, or the ability to play the piano.”

“Not quite.” I laugh at the idea. “Learning new information is too complex to replicate. Our approach is to hack the senses. Lace can display environments without AR Lenses or play music without cochlear implants.”

“How?” Quinn asks. She’s skeptical, but I have her attention.

“Your brain relies on senses to understand the world.” I frame the holographic brain with my hands, rolling my shoulders to adjust my shirt. “What you perceive as your surroundings is a hallucination, a model derived from sensory inputs, refined over time. The brain gains access to the outside world through sensations, and each feels unique. Sight differs from taste. But they’re all just electrical signals generated by external stimuli. Every sight, taste, or sound is an electrical pattern our brain interprets. If the pattern is familiar, it supports our model of existence. If unfamiliar, the model updates to accommodate a repeat experience.”

Quinn watches the holographic Lace model.

Clause steps forward. “This technology will close the gap between human and AI. We can recreate the entire human experience in a safe digital environment.”

“Safe,” Quinn says, voice soft. “Right.”

Silence floods the room.

“You disagree,” Clause says.

“You won’t stop at sensory input,” Quinn says. “What happens when a

person can learn anything on a whim? You can become an athlete in seconds, or download a macro to perform complex surgeries.”

“Having more surgeons is a good thing,” I say.

“Knowledge is not intelligence. Who accepts the blame when something goes wrong?” Quinn asks. “People could use this technology for anything. It’s bound only by software and the operator’s conscience. At that point, are we even human?”

Clause eyes Quinn with something like desire. “Technology has always abstracted us from our base humanity. It removes us from reality into something synthetic and intentional. That is why it both excites and terrifies us. After this step, humans will have more in common with AI than our ancestral nomads.”

Quinn shrugs. I can’t read the expression she gives me. Her eyebrows are all scrunched together, showing either concern, or confusion, or anger. “What’s Theia’s opinion on all this?”

Theia shows herself, forming a triangle between Quinn and me. She has brown hair today in a bun and wears a gray pin-stripe pantsuit. She displays confidence when acting in place of a Vessel executive. “Vessel commissioned this project.”

“There you go.” I motion between Theia and Quinn. “Everything is fine.”

“Actually, James,” Theia says. “You’re working with a prototype. Implanting now was premature, which I told you.”

Quinn’s lips purse. “Alright, then.”

I raise my shoulders, clenching my hands while I pace. Everyone is after me for this. My skin crawls, ants scurrying up my back. “I made this choice on my own. If it was wrong, I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Leave it alone.”

Theia nods, unoffended. “We’ll fix it,” she says. Only to me, she says, “We’ll talk later.” She fades out of the conversation.

Quinn shakes her head, rounding on Clause.

He looks at her with bewildered eyes. “Yes?” His calm voice contradicts his expression.

“James is too young to be your science project,” Quinn says.

Clause averts his gaze before returning it without hesitation. “He’s fully synced.”

“He has spots in his memories after the New Body IPO.” Quinn shakes her head. “You have him believing his actions serve humanity. He’s a good person, twice as smart as you. You’re capitalizing on his nature.”

I’m shaking. Looking at them is hard, but I do.

Quinn adjusts her scrubs in an unconscious fidget. “Thank you for showing me Lace. Tell me sooner next time. We’ll avoid a lawsuit.”

She exits into the hall, door sliding closed behind her.

Clause runs his hands through thick, short, solid-gray hair.

I spare him and my other colleagues a glance. "That's all I have today." I turn to leave. The door opens.

"Fix that bug," Clause calls after me.

I jog along a carpeted hall until I catch up with Quinn. "That was a bad presentation."

"You think?" Quinn asks.

I power walk to match her pace. "Don't let that affect your view of Lace."

She stops, gaze searing into my head.

I avert my eyes.

"These things never happened at weLive," Quinn says.

"weLive isn't exactly thriving anymore," I say.

She looks at her feet, silence falling between us. Five years ago, the Sandigan attacked Death Valley City by bringing the albedo net to the ground. weLive, being the primary investor in both the net and the local real estate, lost everything. Their downfall opened a vacuum for new revival companies like New Body.

"I don't trust Clause," Quinn says at last. "Don't let him use you."

"Okay."

She nods. "I gotta go. Have you visited the Habilitation Center yet?"

My eyebrows compress. I'm supposed to remember something this week. "Why?"

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Dr. Brant finished printing three weeks ago. Theia keeps reminding me to get you over there. Apparently, you muted notifications and started working sixteen-hour days?"

Right. "I'll go see him."

Never enough time.

1.01

Time: 10:38 (EST)
Location: Infinity Loop, The Athanasia,
Atlantic Ocean

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Outside, an ocean breeze washes over me. I emerge under the spotty shade of two massive trees.

The doors to the research labs close behind me. The ground sways underfoot. We're moving. Two months have passed since the last time the Athanasia made landfall.

A curved path extends in both directions. The infinity loop spans the circumference of the Athanasia, joining every building. Two joggers pass me, both waving and nodding. Birds flit overhead.

The Athanasia is a massive, circular sea vessel that satisfies New Body's corporate work and housing needs. I think the name sounds like euthanasia, but Clause takes personal offense to that insinuation, so I've stopped talking about it.

The floating habitat is like a city, I assume. My basis for comparison is from memories of another life I'm supposed to believe are my own. It takes time for the memories to feel at home in your mind. At least that's what Quinn says.

Clause is lucky I was dead when he moved the company out to sea. I prefer less buoyant means of life and transport, but everyone else has made a home here.

I walk along the path toward the Habilitation Center to visit Brant. He was my lab assistant back at weLive, so I have to see him.

“Theia?” I shake the persistent feeling of being watched. She’s the one person who makes any sense. I created her, so she says. Now she’s helping fill in my memory.

She materializes along the path, walking beside me. “Well, that was a disaster.”

“Clause is annoyed,” I say.

“He’ll get over it,” Theia says. “What did you need?”

I pause mid-step. “How did Brant die if he survived the New Body bombing?”

Theia turns to face me on the path. A breeze passes over us, jostling my hair but leaving hers unaffected. She gives me a solemn look with lowered eyes. She emotes expressions in a way that makes sense to me. “He and his mom died by a gunman who got away.”

“When?”

“Two months after you.”

I lower my voice. “The Sandigan?”

Theia shrugs. “Perhaps, but they didn’t take the same precautions as with you.”

I nod. When the Sandigan tried to hijack me, they ran a command in weLive’s database to delete my genome. They could have killed me forever if not for Project EDNA. Ironically enough, I became one of the first beneficiaries of my research.

New Body revived me on this ocean liner the size of a small city, and I’ve never left.

“Brant won’t remember me yet,” I say.

“You need to go.” Theia’s eyes are firm. “You were an important part of his life.” She steps along the path which loops around the Athanasia. The Habilitation Center is a quarter kilometer away. It’s small, serving employees undergoing habilitation.

I drag my feet, catching up to her.

Time: 10:45 (EST)

**Location: Habilitation Center, The
Athanasia, Atlantic Ocean**

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Outside the center, a woman paces. She’s short, petite, with blonde hair

and pale skin. She wears black pants and a white collared shirt unbuttoned at the top.

People of any sort make me uncomfortable, but why does she make my skin crawl? I give her a wide berth as I try to enter the Habilitation Center.

“I told you,” the woman says, “he hasn’t responded to me either.” She’s on the phone. “No, I’m not being belligerent or difficult. I’m relaying to you the shit storm I’ve been handling, on my own, for the past two months.”

She’s familiar, but how do I know her?

She falls silent, head shaking in time with her conversation.

Oh, I hate people. She’s standing right next to the door, so I edge past her. The Habilitation Center door slides open to permit me.

The blonde woman on the phone steps aside and glances at me. She looks again, mouth falling open. Her posture shrinks, and she turns away, muttering, “Excuse me.” She takes off along the infinity loop, walking fast enough to match Quinn’s normal pace.

White collars always act like the world is one crisis away from ending. I’m sure I’ve been in a meeting with her, though I can’t remember.

I turn back to the Habilitation Center. A wall of conditioned air swallows me, drowning the outside humidity.

Someone observing me from behind causes me to turn around. No one. I scratch my head.

I always feel watched in this new life. Theia says it’s normal, given my death, but the paranoia has only grown worse in three years.

That woman put me off.

I turn back toward the lobby.

A receptionist guards the rest of the building against me. She’s a person who, despite all odds, appears to take genuine pleasure in her profession.

Damn.

She faces me, her smile deceptive in its eagerness to please. Receptionists in buildings I frequent know not to talk to me. This one exhibits symptoms of chronic helpfulness. She keeps trying to lock my gaze.

Most people assume eye contact implies trust and confidence. Stupid, but they all play along.

During my previous life, I learned to mask my quirks to blend into the world around me. My mind is now new. I’m relearning tasks that used to be habits.

I approach on weary footing.

“Hello. How are you today?” She displays a stretch of white teeth. She could be a robot for how perfectly she’s dressed.

“I’m here to visit a new revival.” My tone is flat. This is an exchange. She has information I need, and that is the extent of our association.

Her smile widens, as if determined to get me to reciprocate in her false positivity. “What’s their name?”

I scratch the back of my head. “Something, Brant.” A word flashes in front of me on my AR Lenses—Theia giving me hints. “Kace? Brant.”

The woman, whose nameplate proclaims her as May, nods. She taps in the air, reading something I can’t see before refocusing on me.

I glance away.

“He will be available for visiting soon.” She stands. “I can walk you back.”

“It’s okay. You can point me in the right direction.” Six percent ownership of the company should grant me autonomy around here, but no.

“It’s no problem.” She winks, tilting her head left to a door. “I have another visitor waiting for him.”

She turns, motioning me to follow.

I lull my head, failing to hide my annoyance. I follow her into a waiting room with dim lighting. Rows of chairs face a window overlooking the Habilitation Center.

A man sits alone with poor posture in the second row. He glances over at me, face splitting into a smile. “Dockey Hawthorn.”

I pause. “Keaton.” Great.

“I’d have brought Nat if I knew you’d show up.” Keaton stands and strides over to wrap me into a sweltering hug. An old-fashioned camera hanging from his neck presses between us.

My back stiffens. I push against his shoulders, breath held, skin crawling.

Keaton backs away. “Sorry, Mate.” He looks at the ground, tapping his toes against the carpet. He’s wearing sandals. “You visiting Kacey then?”

“I guess so,” I say.

The receptionist smiles between us. “I’ll tell the HS you’re here.”

She passes into the Habilitation Center.

Keaton returns to his seat, motioning me to join him. I sit two chairs away. Through the window, an HS leads a class of five new revivals through a series of poses.

“It’s a coordination training, so goes the rumor,” Keaton says. “I guess they put you through difficult motions to jumpstart muscle memory.”

Images of doing that same exercise three years ago are burned into my head.

Keaton bites his fingernails, engrossed in the spectacle. “He’s been at

this for days. Drives me nuts seeing him so helpless. They'll release him soon, but he has no family. No clue what's happening."

I adjust in my seat, silent. I remember Keaton from my previous life, but he feels unfamiliar.

Keaton watches the coordination training. "I been planning another Earth trip for ages. Nat somehow snagged a fifty-year residence on Earth. I dropped by his place first, and now I'm here visiting Kace."

"Nat?" I ask.

"Nathaniel," Keaton says. "My brother. You revived him, and in thanks, he tried to kill you."

"Oh, right," I say. "How's he?"

Keaton gives an ambiguous hand motion. "He's wrapped up in his life, just like everyone else. It's just a given we got forever to start making time for one another. I haven't even seen Spence since the New Body attack."

"Why make the trip to Earth then?" I ask.

Keaton motions at the window framing Brant's habilitation. "I haven't seen him in years. Makes me sick just thinkin' bout it."

Brant has dark skin and wears blue scrubs. His hair is thin, a common trait of new revivals.

"Did we ever learn how he died?" I watch Brant.

Keaton shrugs, lower lip pursing. "His ma' and him were done in together, shot to death in their living room. Police found nothing to say who done it. The case went cold, pun not intended."

"The Sandigan."

"Police refused to make that call." Keaton's face contorts. He turns from me, taking deliberate breaths. "Everyone the Sandigan killed got priority printing. Not Kace."

From first order to final printing, switch-outs take four years on average to complete. Mine took two, but Brant is coming up on five.

"I tried to revive him years ago, but it's complicated with murder victims," Keaton says. "He'd have been two more years if not for this latest news."

I stiffen. "News?"

Keaton shakes his head. "Man, what happened to you? You used to know everything and speak with precision and shit."

"I died."

Keaton nods. "No worries, mate. That's my least favorite part. You're almost yourself, but certain memories are missing. The more you focus, the further they get."

"That's exactly what it's like."

We sit together in silence, the weight of mortality hanging between us.

Obscure memories take the longest to reclaim, those belonging to you alone. No one can help you remember. It's like returning to your childhood home and recalling the time you lied to your mom about the wall having a new hole. You alone carry the knowledge, and the triggers to remember could be anything.

Silence. I hate when people distract themselves in conversation. "What news expedited Brant's revival?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah," Keaton sinks into his chair. "The way I understand it, they found unknown DNA on site."

"Why does anonymous DNA matter?"

Keaton smiles. "It didn't, at first, but then Tommon Louis started asking questions. The International Government of the Revived had to act."

"Tommon is annoying, but why act now?"

Keaton gives me a skeptical expression. "Just five billion people live on this planet. You don't get revived here by chance. You're chosen, which makes murder rare. The government ignoring such a mysterious murder looks bad on them."

"Anything to ignore the Sandigan," I say.

"Seems that way, don't it?" Keaton says. "But with all the stuff happening on Laurasia, they have no choice. He has a court date, and they're grouping it with the New Body bombing."

"That's progress," I say. "That means they'll want me back."

"Most likely."

"Great," I say.

"Dr. Hawthorn?" The secretary emerges from the Habilitation Center.

I look up.

"Kace Brant is ready for visitors. You can show yourself back." She moves to return to her desk.

I stand.

Keaton stays sitting.

I glare at him. "Aren't you coming?"

Keaton winces. "No, I don't want to intrude."

"It's not an intrusion," I say, getting annoyed.

He shakes his head. "I can't convince myself to go in."

"How long have you been here?" I ask.

His head rolls, eyes drifting to me. "Three days. Give or take twenty-four hours."

I scoff, turning toward the door.

"Oh, can you take this?" Keaton asks.

I look back.

Keaton fiddles in his pocket before withdrawing a Rubik's Cube. Brant played with those at weLive. He twisted the thing to get through the day.

I take the cube. "See you when I'm done." He should give it to Brant on his own. People's self-created social conventions cause them to act in irrational ways.

I turn to enter the small Habilitation Center. The stay-in patients have dispersed to free time. A common area houses activities and meals. Across from the entrance is a hall with nine temporary resident rooms.

Whatever architect decided asymmetry was a desirable esthetic needs to self-terminate.

Rather than bother an HS, I peak at the room assignments on a small whiteboard at the room's edge.

Kace Brant, room eight.

Rubik's Cube in hand, I cross the common area back to the hall.

His door rests ajar. He sits on a bed, posture straight, wearing blue clothes and socks. He's wrapped up in a private overlay, going through exercises on his AR Lenses. It's a curriculum for new revivals to help them learn sciences and the world. Relearning the information hastens the sync process.

I knock on the door.

Brant glances over at me. His eyes widen in recognition. His back presses up against the head of his bed, knees rising to his chest in a fetal position.

"Hey," I say, voice awkward.

"You're here," he says.

I nod, stepping into the room.

Brant slides away from me on his bed, hand stumbling over the edge and finding support on the dresser. He pushes himself up, swaying to his feet. "Are we on Earth?"

I nod, muttering, "Not sure where else we would be."

"Where the hell are we, James?" Brant's face twitches at his words.

"Calm down." I hold out my hands. "Yes, we're on Earth. We're on a ship off the coast of Maryland. It's the headquarters for New Body."

"You're sure?" Brant asks.

"Yes?" Great, now I'm questioning. I hold up the Rubik's Cube. "Keaton wanted me to give you this." I set it on a dresser by the door.

Brant watches me. "What's your plan?"

I shrug. "Why would I have a plan?"

He glares. "You always have a plan."

I give a hesitant nod, unsure of what else to do.

Brant shakes his head, conflicting facial expressions competing across his eyes. "Murderer."

I clench my teeth, sick. His words have triggered dread in my gut. I did something terrible once, years ago, the memory forgotten. I crossed a moral line, and the world changed forever. Flashes from another life assault my mind.

My fingers, slippery with blood, leaving streaks across their victim's skin.

A building under a glass dome consumed by a fiery light.

Countless eyes staring at me, hating me.

A knife blade sliding against her skin while I watch, helpless. Her head slumping. Again. And again.

Again.

I step back, eyes fixing on Brant. "What are you talking about? You're still getting your memories back." God, am I still getting my memories back?

"I remember Pados, though," Brant says. "That's all I remember!"

"Pados?" I say. The name sounds familiar.

"How long have you been back?" Brant asks. His expressions and movements are uncoordinated, a trait of new revivals. He's not far along in his sync. He seems to have regained specific distressing memories first.

"Three years." I avoid his gaze. How did this visit turn so backward?

"And nothing I'm saying sounds familiar?" Brant demands of me.

"No," I say.

He grits his teeth. "Get out."

The words fall between us in the room. I can't look at him. My heart races. Panic floods my veins, making me sway against the door frame.

"Get out!" Brant says.

I jump at his words, rushing from the room.

Time: 11:23 (EST)

>_

Keaton stands when I exit.

Anxiety floods my body. I should have snuck out. One thousand faces press in on me from all directions. Behind my eyes, someone is watching. But no, we're alone.

Keaton approaches, posture serious. "How did it go?"

I'm shaking from Brant's words. Just once, I want to interact with a new revival who doesn't hate me for arbitrary reasons. I turn to Keaton. "It went well. I gave him your cube thing."

"Thanks." He tries to hold eye contact with me.

Looking only at the ground, I pass Keaton to exit through the arched door.

His eyes sear into my back as I leave. I'm transparent in my panic. Sometimes I suspect everyone else can see what goes on inside me, but I can't do the same for them.

A quick bisection of the foyer allows me to leave the Habilitation Center.

Outside humidity drenches me. I step onto the footpath, which loops around the circular Athanasia.

The memory has stuck in my head, her death on repeat.

Time: 12:54 (EST)

**Location: Housing Sector, The Athanasia,
Atlantic Ocean**

>_

I close my apartment door by leaning against it and sliding into a fetal position.

Brant's words echo through my head. He called me a murderer, referencing events I can't remember to justify the claim.

He has to be wrong.

I would never kill someone. Sure, I have a general disdain for most individuals. I also daydream about a world without the vast majority of people living here. That doesn't mean I would ever justify ending someone else's existence.

I grab fists full of my hair, elbows on knees, and hit my head against the door.

His words triggered an image, a flash of a memory from a forgotten life.

"James, we're going to be okay," Theia says in my ear. She coalesces from a thousand squares of light, sitting with crossed legs on the floor across from me. She wears sweatpants and a plain white t-shirt, hair bound in a simple ponytail. "We can discuss this. We can figure out what happened."

I give a useless hand gesture in her direction. "There are so many viable explanations to Brant's words. I can't concentrate." My fingers form a fist and then extend in a repeated motion. I'm rocking but make no effort to stop.

How did he even remember so fast?

"Breathe," Theia says, her voice icy calm. "We don't know the full story behind Brant's words."

"It's obvious," I say. "The Sandigan hijacked me to their planet, as planned, to steal Project EDNA."

"You never looped after switching out," Theia says. "We assumed there wasn't time for you to sync into another body."

"I was dead for two years," I say. "Anything could have happened."

Theia nods, considering her response. "It's possible. But this is the first sign your revival was abnormal."

"Why can't I remember?" My head thuds again against my front door. "What do we do?"

She remains silent, helpless eyes watching me. With a sigh, she stands, motioning for me to do the same. "I have an idea."

I stand, facing her. She looks solid, but my hand would pass through her arm if I tried to touch her.

Our interactions used to have a lighthearted nature. That's still true to an extent, but my death changed us both. A somber dynamic has settled between us. Theia helped me get back on my feet after my revival, splitting her time between me and her ambition to climb the corporate ladder at Vessel on Laurasia. She has another life there.

"What's your idea?" I ask.

She smiles, a ghost of her youthful innocence shining through on her face. "It's a form of therapy."

I groan. She mentions this every few months. "I'm not seeing a shrink."

"Wrong type of therapy," Theia says. "You won't need to talk."

I tip my head back and forth, weighing the option. "What do I do?"

"Fix the Lace prototype in your head," she says.

"Vessel's sudden interest in the project is unnerving," I say.

"Just go along with me," Theia says.

"How is Lace supposed to help? It can't download memories into my head."

"No need to download memories. You've finished syncing."

"So I've been told," I say in annoyance. "Several times."

"And," Theia holds up a finger, "Lace can take control of your senses."

"Sensation can't help."

"If the Sandigan hijacked you, those memories are in your head. You just need to trigger the neural pathways for you to recall the memories."

"I would know if the memories were in my head," I say.

"Think of your childhood door growing up," Theia says.

My childhood door? Faded to white under the sun. Difficult to close and even worse to lock. You had to push in and lift.

Theia nods. "Where did that memory come from?"

I shrug. "I just thought of it."

"Your brain knew where to access the memory," Theia says. "Your childhood door exists as an abstraction in your brain. Years could pass without you considering it. But the moment I asked, you could tell me the door's color, its resistance when closing, and odd quirks it had. Your brain has the perfect state of the door archived with other memories reinforcing your childhood."

"I get it," I say.

Theia motions me to continue.

“You believe my supposed memories of the Sandigan exist in a vacuum. To recall them, I need to build mental associations to those experiences.”

Theia claps. “And your Lace prototype can help build those associations.”

“How?”

“I can cause sensory stimuli to your brain to trigger memories of the Sandigan,” Theia says. “I’ll also track your thoughts in real-time. By having access to both the input and your response, I can provide the exact input necessary to recall your memories.”

“One problem,” I say.

“I know, I know,” Theia says.

“Lace doesn’t work.”

“Then fix it,” Theia says. “Clause says it’s a software issue, and after reviewing the system log, I agree with him.”

“It’s not software,” I say.

“And if it is, then you’re the major roadblock to solving the problem.” Theia folds her arms. “At least look into it and cover your bases.”

“Alright, alright, alright.” I kick off my shoes and storm into my office. I check behind my door to ensure my solitude. That spike of fear at an unseen corner is new to this life.

My office is a plain room with a single desk and holographic display. An old bedsheet covers the window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

I’m supposed to decorate at some point. Theia claims Charles has better taste than me. She wants me to obsess over my home, as if that will change my mood, or something. Why bother fiddling with the details until they ‘feel’ nice?

What does that even mean?

I sink into my chair and begin working.

I navigate to Lace’s diagnostics and pull the error report. It was indeed a memory allocation issue. The funny thing is, our Lace prototype booted Vessel’s Lens Cast OS with no problem after my build failed.

I read through the log.

Assertion failed.

Lace OS couldn’t boot because I referenced a memory allocation that doesn’t exist.

Okay, where is this failing?

I open my files and begin searching for a null pointer. Hmm, all the variables initialized as intended. Tapping my desk, I navigate to a directory storing driver files.

“Are you kidding me?” I ask.

A single period is missing for a driver filename extension.

I key it in.

“I found the problem,” I say.

Theia saunters up beside me. “Missing driver?”

“It’s fixed,” I say. “Rebuilding the ISO now.”

A progress bar speeds across the screen. “Complete.”

“Ready?” Theia says.

“Do it.”

“Shutting down Lens Cast to install Lace OS,” she says.

Update: Welcome to Lace, James

>_

“Is it working?” I ask, looking around. All projections from my AR Lenses have gone dark.

Theia appears beside me. “Check the screen.”

I do, waving my hand to pull up Lace’s live diagnostic. “No brain function.”

Theia clicks her tongue. “How very telling.”

I look closer at the screen. “What does it tell?”

Theia sighs. “Never mind. Give it a moment to finish the setup. It’s working.”

“How do you know?” I ask.

Theia takes a step and spins around. “I’m not projecting through your lenses.”

I watch her, noting her distinct appearance. With AR Lenses, Theia displays as light shining into my corneas. With this new implant, her display method is an induced hallucination. She fits the environment. She’s in the room, the same as me.

I stammer over my response. “It’s working. Lace is projecting through my sensory input.”

Theia nods, taking a step in my direction.

We face one another, an arm’s width apart. I reach out.

She does the same.

Our fingers brush against one another. Instead of passing through, my fingers press up against hers. Our hands interlock.

The Lace implant supplies the touch sensory response to make the interaction real.

My office dissolves into squares of blue light. Theia and I are standing alone on a grid extending forever in every direction. Blue light permeates the atmosphere.

Theia looks around, amused. "Where are we?"

"I don't know." I scan the infinite horizon. "My mind went blank."

Theia looks amused. "So, this is what Dr. James Hawthorn's brain looks like."

Transfixed with Theia, I touch her shoulder. I close my eyes, and she disappears, but I still feel her.

Her hand touches mine.

I open my eyes.

"We'll get through this," she says.

I shuffle in place. "I don't want to know what happened."

"Brant's reaction earlier worries you." Theia scratches her eyebrow.

I exhale. "I have these beliefs about who I think I am because of memories from past lives. What if that perception changes and I become someone else?"

Theia nods, reflecting my concern. "Your actions under duress do not define you."

My eyes lock on my feet. Black intersecting lines create a grid on the floor. The translucent squares grant a view descending to a blue eternity that grows darker the further it stretches.

"Am I capable of murder?" I ask.

Theia watches me, seeming to consider. "The question is malformed. Is anyone capable of murder? Yes. Your traits don't predestine you for any particular action."

"What's the right question?" I ask.

"Under what circumstances would you take a life?" Theia says.

I run my hands through my lengthening hair. "How confident are you in this therapy working?"

"If the Sandigan hijacked you, we can recover the memories. I'm sure of it," Theia says. "We need to know what they learned from you."

I bounce in place. "Okay."

Theia straightens her posture. "It's just another crisis. We're good at handling those by now."

"Let's get started," I say.

"Should we go somewhere more comfortable?"

"I like it here."

"Seriously? You could go anywhere and make it real, yet you choose this boring nothingness?"

"Yes."

"Paris. The pyramids," Theia lists the items off on her fingers. "Botanical Gardens. Jupiter's orbit. We could literally go anywhere."

"But I'm comfortable here," I say.

She throws her hands up. "Alright. Let's get started."

"What do you want me to do?" I ask.

"Let me work," Theia says. "You'll experience the memories in real time as I anticipate your neural response."

"Okay."

"On second thought," Theia says, "you should lie down."

I do.

"Beginning now."

[End Transmission Six]

Subject: James Hawthorn
Date: Fri Mar 18, 2187
Time: 12:05 (EST)
Location: Housing Sector, The Athanasia,
Atlantic Ocean

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1.03

JAMES: 4.5 YEARS AGO

James Hawthorn awoke three weeks after his death in a Habilitation Center with no memory.

The abruptness of waking caused him to gasp, adrenaline flooding his veins. Tremors convulsed through his muscles.

The onslaught of light and sensations was immediate, though he understood none of the experience.

His brain had not yet learned to define those chaotic shapes and lines into faces hovering over him. Nor could he distinguish between the textures of the bedsheets and the metal of the handrail. That smell of bleach meant nothing.

His body breathed on its own, heedless of the outside world. Arms and legs moved without intent, his mind unaware that signals sent to the muscles had a causal relationship to the movement.

The hand on his shoulder carried no social meaning. Same as the words coming from the mouth of the hand's owner. "You're okay, James. Take a deep breath."

None of this meant anything to him. He had just been revived.

ONE WEEK PASSED.

James learned to walk and speak in fractured sentences. The time since his revival already felt an eternity. He gained a greater sense of self with each passing day.

He understood in a rudimentary way that he had switched out. He had done this before, lived, though he remembered little of those past lives.

Flashes of memory bombarded his thoughts, some pleasant, others discomforting. Each memory gave context to his current situation.

Discoveries brought possibilities and broadened his world. No one had told him in this new life how to use a fork. He picked one up on his second day, understanding how to use it from lifetimes of experience. The motor coordination took practice, but he understood the concept, and his muscles obeyed.

The others said the word 'James' often when looking at him. This confused James at first, but on his third day of life, he grew to understand it as his name. A name was like a word that referenced a person, and his word was James. It had felt very important that day to tell everyone his name, in case there was a fire drill while he was in the bathroom. "My name is James. That's how you can get my attention in an emergency," he told them.

Not everyone seemed to care about James' forethought in emergency preparedness.

"Yeah, I know your name," James' bunkmate responded. "Please stop telling me."

James began to suspect he didn't really like people, which was unfortunate because they seemed like such a good idea in concept.

Lilith was the name for the person who watched over James, and she was the only person who was nice to him. She taught James how to dress himself every morning and explained to him why toothpaste was important, even if it stung to use.

She was patient when James wanted to know the location of every bathroom in the Habilitation Center, just in case there was an emergency.

It was only on the fifth day when James realized he had never learned what he should call her. "Do you have a name?"

She smiled. "Lilith."

"Why are you here every day, Lilith?" James asked.

"This is my work assignment." Lilith smiled.

"I had a work assignment once," James said. "Have you always lived in Death Valley?"

Lilith fidgeted with her shirt. "No, I've never been there."

James laughed, assuming Lilith had made a joke. Sometimes people said untrue things, and the contrast with the truth was supposed to elicit humor from others. James recognized this, and so laughed to show he appreciated her attempt to build camaraderie. "Good one."

Lilith smiled and rushed off to help someone else.

Now, on day seven of his new life, James was attending something called a checkup. He had dreaded this ever since he learned of the event two days ago.

Lilith's superior was called Miles Jensen. He was in charge of the Habilitation Center and never stayed in one place for very long. He only ever spoke to James when wanting information from him.

A checkup was an opportunity for Jensen to get lots of information from James at once.

James disliked the idea of answering so many questions, especially after his newfound dislike of people.

James waited for the appointment in Miles Jensen's room. The only chair wobbled under James' weight, so he tried to stay extra still to avoid breaking it. Jensen's bed looked far too small to lie down in. The bed in James' room was also uncomfortable, but his was worse.

Jensen entered the room, his eyes locked on one of those devices everyone carried around.

James tried to wave at him, but Jensen was too preoccupied to notice. He sat across from James on the bed, still reading his screen.

"Hawthorn?" Jensen looked up.

"Yes," James said.

"Right." Jensen set his clipboard down. "Your file indicates your sync is going well."

James clenched his teeth. "No, I don't have one in my room."

Mid-motion, Jensen stopped. "Come again?"

James pointed at the washing station. "I don't have a sink in my room like you."

"Right," Jensen said. "That's okay. You're completing your lessons? You're remembering how to do things?"

James gave a nod. Just that morning, he remembered that he had once helped revive a person. It wasn't so complicated, really. Just press a few buttons, and the person slid right out of the printer.

"I've noticed you spend a lot of time alone," Jensen said. "Any reason why?"

James fidgeted, exposed and vulnerable. "Well, my bunkmate has a lot of friends, but I don't really like him."

"Why not?"

James froze, the explanation beyond his ability to articulate. "I don't know."

Jensen withdrew a stylus, drawing on a blank page on his clipboard. "Do you know any jokes, James?"

James shrugged. "Lilith told me a joke the other day."

“What was it?”

“Well, I asked her how long she had lived in Death Valley City, and she said she had never even been there.” James suppressed a smile.

Miles Jensen’s face remained blank. “I see.” He tapped his stylus against his leg. “James, I’m going to write you a prescription to start you on medication. I need you to follow the instructions exactly.”

“Okay.” James adjusted in his seat, taking care not to break the chair. He could follow instructions. Instructions were like a map for completing a task.

Jensen withdrew a small device and pressed several buttons on its broad face.

“What is that?” James asked.

“This is called a calculator,” Jensen said. “It’s handy for simple math.”

“Math,” James said, something clicking in his mind. He was good at math, though how he knew was difficult to say.

“Uh-huh,” Jensen said in a distracted voice. He was writing on his clipboard, though James had trouble understanding the words. He was still relearning to read. “Anyway, James. I called you here because I suspect your time here will be complicated. You may see things that don’t make sense or interact with people who are rude to you. Life here will be different from what you have experienced in the past.”

James looked at the wall, trying to listen to the doctor, but finding his concentration wandering.

Jensen sighed, rubbing his forehead. “People in your situation,” he motioned at James, “they’re often prohibited from revival here on Pados.”

“Where?” James asked.

“Pados is the name of the planet.” Jensen waved the comment away.

“The planet.”

“Anyway, the terms of your revival require us to monitor your behavior. I’ve written you a prescription to reduce any social anxiety you may experience and help you blend into our society.”

“Thank you,” James said.

“Do you have any family?” Jensen asked.

James considered, trying to recall any relevant memories. “I have a daughter,” he concluded at last. “Will I get to see her?”

“Maybe someday,” Jensen said. “James, I’m also supposed to inform you that you are prohibited from developing intimate relationships for the duration of your life here. We have restricted your reproductive privileges to protect our gene pool. Any attempts to propagate your genes on Pados will result in disciplinary action taken against you.”

James gave a slow nod, unsure what the words ‘propagate’ and ‘disciplinary’ meant.

“We clear?” Jensen asked.

James held up his thumbs. “No proper gating.”

“Right, let’s take you out to Lilith, and she can fill your prescription.” Jensen stood.

James followed Jensen from his room, wondering if improper gating would be acceptable.

LILITH LOOKED OVER THE PRESCRIPTION. “Are these measures necessary?”

“It’s for the best,” Jensen said. “General Glen ordered us to leave his mind intact for his work. This is the least amount of action I feel comfortable taking in a case such as this.”

“He’s healthy, though,” Lilith said. “Nothing is wrong with him.”

Jensen gave Lilith a stern look. “James Hawthorn is a military print order. That’s the only reason he passed the screening for revival here. Letting people like this roam free threatens the genetic integrity of future generations. You might as well paint a target on his head. We’ll also be dealing with death trauma any day now. No, this is the only way for him to blend in.”

Lilith spared a glance for James, who had decided to sit in a folding chair against the red concrete wall. “I’ll get this filled then.”

“Great.” Jensen smiled at Lilith, clapping her shoulder and walking away.

Lilith read over her clipboard once more, eyes rising to watch Jensen leave.

James stood, approaching on weary footing. “What’s a prescription?”

Lilith turned away from James, letting her clipboard fall to her side. She took a deep breath. “It’s a doctor’s note. It gives you permission to take a medication—pills in this case.”

“I get it.” James nodded. “Dr. Jensen told me the pills would help make me more likable.”

Lilith glanced about herself. “Listen, James. I’m leaving to fill this prescription for you. Please, just wait in your room, okay?”

James nodded, unease tightening in his stomach. “Okay.”

JAMES DISLIKED his room and avoided spending time there. The cramped room included a bunk bed with a small, shared closet. He had to slump when sitting on his lumpy mattress.

He wished he could sleep on the bottom bunk to avoid climbing the ladder and hitting his head. But, as James' bunkmate liked to say, "Seniority gets priority," and he had arrived first.

James also disliked his bunkmate, whose name he never bothered learning. James avoided talking to him, looking at him, or doing anything to result in accidental interaction.

Which is why dread bubbled up like acid in James' stomach when he approached his room only to see his bunkmate lounging in bed. He lay on his back, arms extending up to support a clipboard over his face, legs resting through the ladder rungs.

James almost changed course for the bathroom, but the bunkmate glanced at him. "Ain't you s'posed to be in a lesson?"

James sputtered on a response. "I just got done with a doctor's appointment. Lilith, um, she told me to wait here." He scratched the back of his head. His only place in the cramped room to wait was in his bed, but the man's feet were hanging over the second ladder rung.

The man's expression remained blank. Whatever task held his attention must have been very important.

James moved as if to ascend the ladder, eyes on his bunkmate's bare feet. He fidgeted in place, resisting the nagging urge to leave the room. "Can you move your feet?"

The man sucked his lip. "My feet are staying right where they are, special boy."

James took a step back, unsure about why the man had complimented James and denied his request in the same sentence. "I'm supposed to wait here for Lilith."

"Great," the man said. "Don't step on my feet. M'kay? Great."

Hot anger flashed through James. "But I can't get to my bed if you don't move your feet."

"You can skip a rung," the man shrugged with indifference. "You're a big boy."

"No," James said, lost for words.

"So you're not a big boy?" the man asked. He was grinning now.

"I am," James said. "I was saying I can't skip a step because I might lose my balance and fall."

The man nodded. "That sounds like a really serious problem."

James also nodded, straightening his posture, happy that was resolved.

"I guess you just gotta stand there until Lilly gets back," the man said.

James felt himself growl in frustration. "Her name is Lilith. And I can't block the door like this in case there's a fire drill!"

The man burst into laughter. "You being for real right now?"

"I need to get up to my bed," James said.

The bunkmate continued laughing, sitting upright, and lowered his feet to the floor to stand. "Yo, Tommy!" the man pushed past James into the hall. "Tommy! Get your ass in here. You gotta hear the shit this guy Hawthorn is saying."

James was preparing to climb up to his bed when another person joined the conversation. He was a plain man with pale skin and brown hair. An amused expression painted his face before his eyes landed on James.

James had seen him before among the new revivals in the Habilitation Center. Only now did James recognize him. He was skinnier now than in his previous life. Still, the face was the same. This was the man who had killed him back on Earth.

The world shifted, causing James to reach out to the bed for support. Flashes of his own death assaulted his mind. Something was very wrong with his current situation.

The two men faced James. His bunkmate hit James on the shoulder, amused. "Tell him what you told me, James, go on."

"No," James found himself saying. He backed against the wall, inching his way toward the door. "No, I don't want to talk to you." James tried to squeeze past them out the door, but they stayed put.

Thomas, that was his name. They had worked together. He grabbed James' arm. "It's okay." His expression softened. "All that stuff on Earth is behind us. It's nothing personal. We're comrades now."

James pushed against Thomas harder than he had intended, knocking him back into the doorknob. James took advantage of the opening to run out into the hall.

With his extensive knowledge of every bathroom, James darted for the nearest facility with a proper locking door. The metal door opened at his push. He closed himself in, latching the lock and sinking to the ground.

His breaths came in heavy gasps. He could never leave this bathroom. What if Thomas decided to kill him again? Memories of his death were hazy, but James remembered every detail of Thomas' face now, eyes bloody as he pushed a knife into James.

Time slipped by. James' circular thoughts searched in vain for a solution to his problem.

Knocks sounded behind him on the door every few minutes. James ignored them, not caring to face anyone.

A soft knock sounded on the door, different from the others. "James?" the muffled voice asked. "It's Lilith."

Silence. A nagging desire to see someone nice told James to open the door. But what if this was some trick Thomas had orchestrated to lure James into the open?

"It's just me," Lilith said. "Will you let me in? I have something for you."

James stood, hoping she had been truthful. The door unlocked at his touch, cracking open.

Lilith stood in the hall. Alone.

James swung the door open, motioning her inside.

Lilith stepped into the bathroom, holding a brown glass container with a metal lid. "What happened?"

His hand shook. He paced, heart fluttering and panic swelling in his throat. "There's been a . . . a big mistake." He shook his hands out before bringing them up to pull at his thin new-revival hair. "I shouldn't be here."

"Everything will be okay, James." Lilith held her hands out.

"Why am I here?" James asked. For the first time since his revival, he wished he had all his memories. The gaps were like holes in his personality. He could never know himself until they returned to him.

"I don't know," Lilith said, and her voice had lost the tone she always used when speaking with new revivals. "I'm sorry."

"Thomas killed me." James motioned to the door. "I remember." He pointed at his head.

Lilith nodded. "This is temporary. Just two months, and you can leave here."

"How many days?"

"We can't know until we see how you progress. Do your exercises. Finish your lessons." Lilith paused, fiddling with the prescription in her hands.

"Give them to me." James held out his hand for the pills. "Dr. Jensen said those would help people be friends with me. I need them."

Lilith hesitated, but conceded, handing the glass container over. She tied her fingers in knots, watching James take a pill without water.

She wore plain red scrubs, her black hair in a net under a red headdress. Her pockets bulged with all the tools Habilitation Specialists were always using.

"You'll get through this," Lilith said.

James stepped past her, having no words to say, and left the bathroom.

1.04

Three weeks passed, one month in total.

Memories returned to James in quick bursts. Recalling his death had been the floodgate to remembering other events. His job at weLive. His family, Charles and Theia. Quinn.

James knew all this in a month. Others in the Habilitation Center progressed in a like manner.

Since remembering his death at Thomas' hand, James felt he should know his purpose on Pados. But no. The knowledge eluded him with frustrating indifference. No one would tell James either. Lilith claimed ignorance. James wanted to believe her if only to have someone to trust.

His bunkmate left the Habilitation Center five days ago, and no one replaced him. James switched the mattresses and began sleeping in the lower bed.

With a private room, James relearned the joys of solitude. He completed his lessons, finished his exercises, and stayed on his anxiety medication. He avoided Thomas, who was getting out soon anyway.

The medication and new memories helped delude James into hoping not everything was terrible, even if just shy of being so.

He found various ways of occupying himself, having rediscovered his passion for numbers. At first, he liked even numbers. He wandered the halls, counting the doors off in two. After a rather delightful realization, James changed to groupings of five because he could count them off with his hands.

When he recalled the basics of math, he enjoyed prime numbers. He

would repeat them in his head. *Three. Five. Seven. Eleven. Thirteen. Seventeen. Nineteen.*

Lilith told James there were more primes but refused to divulge the next in the series.

So, James started doing math to find the following prime number. And the next. And the next. All the way to, “Ninety-seven!” he shouted when he discovered the following number.

He earned several concerned looks at his outburst.

Then he hit upon the most extraordinary number sequence ever to exist. “Two. Four. Eight. Sixteen. Thirty-two. Sixty-four. One hundred twenty-eight.”

James was pacing back and forth, reciting the numbers like a mantra.

“Okay, James,” Lilith said. “It’s social time. Come do a puzzle.”

James obeyed. Lilith was always telling James what to do, never answering any of his number-related questions. James would participate out of necessity. After all, maybe the puzzle would have five-hundred twelve pieces.

It did not.

Disappointed in the puzzle, James worked at the table’s corner, silent. Five others worked around him.

Lilith came up beside James. Too many people already crowded the table. “You can talk to people, if you want.”

James shook his head. “Didn’t work so good for me last time.”

“It’s okay,” Lilith said. “Making friends can be difficult, but it’s an enjoyable thing. Knowing someone here might make the time pass faster.”

James leveled a glare at her. “I thought medication was supposed to help me make friends.”

The puzzle piece in Lilith’s hand slipped through her fingers. She hung her head, picking it back up. “Give it time, James.”

James worked on in silence. He hated puzzles of this kind, fitting arbitrary shapes together. Lilith worked beside him.

“Why am I here?” James asked for what felt like the two hundred fifty-sixth time.

“I know it’s frustrating,” Lilith said, “but I’m not the person to tell you. My priority is your wellbeing.”

“Well,” James said, trying to force two pieces together. “Wouldn’t my understanding benefit my wellness?”

Lilith smiled. “Nice try.”

“James Hawthorn?” a voice behind James said.

He turned.

Dr. Miles Jensen faced him, wearing a white lab coat. The backs of his dark hands were hairy.

“Yes?”

“Start getting ready,” Jensen said. “You and I are attending a dinner with General Glen in two hours.”

“Who?” James asked.

Jensen turned to Lilith. “Get him ready. Make sure he doesn’t embarrass us. Also, James is due for a refill on his prescription. Don’t let him run out.” Jensen clapped Lilith on the shoulder and walked away.

James distracted himself with a puzzle piece that suddenly seemed more interesting than anything else in the room.

Lilith ran her hands through her hair. “Alright, let’s get you ready.”

“Do I have to go?” James asked.

“Yes,” Lilith said. “And stop acting like you enjoy this puzzle.”

James set his puzzle piece down. “I don’t like meetings.”

“This is your chance for answers.” She motioned once more towards James’ room. “Let’s go get ready.”

“It’s in two hours.”

“Yes, and you will be early,” Lilith said. “Come on, James. Get moving.”

JAMES HAD SPENT every hour of his new life in the Habilitation Center. The idea of leaving intimidated him. The facility had no windows, so James could only guess about what waited beyond its doors.

He followed Dr. Miles Jensen through the lobby of the Habilitation Center on weary feet. He wore a plain tan jumpsuit, his daily outfit in this new life.

The metal door to exit slid aside.

Beyond was another corridor, the same muted-red concrete halls. People swarmed through the passage, all but falling over one another in pursuit of their destination.

“This way.” Jensen navigated toward a massive intersection of eight halls. The corner formed a plaza with storefronts and eateries.

James obeyed, wide-eyed at the chaos surrounding him. He remembered crowds of people from his life on Earth, but never like this. How could anyone concentrate with so much happening? The movement. The noises. The lights and smells.

It was all so overwhelming.

“Stay close,” Jensen ordered. “I don’t want you getting lost. That’s all I need.”

“So many people.” James followed Jensen through the flow of people.

“Do you know who I am, James?” Jensen asked, leaning sideways to speak to James between steps.

“Sure.” James flinched to avoid touching anyone else. “Miles Jensen. You’re the revival expert.”

“Do you remember anything else?” Jensen asked. “How about during your last life?”

“No.”

“Not surprising, I suppose.” Jensen shrugged. “Dr. Quinn did most of your training.”

“I remember Dr. Quinn,” James said. He tried to remember if he had ever had a relationship with her. The memories were unclear.

“I was her boss until two years ago when she took over the Revival Labs,” Jensen said. “I quit because Pados needed more revivers, and General Glen gave a very tempting offer. He may know our affiliation.”

James was unsure how Jensen expected him to respond. Rather than disappoint the doctor with a bad reaction, James gave none.

James followed Jensen through several public areas. Some were concrete corridors, while others were open domes containing buildings of coppery red rock. The rare transparent window revealed a sun with a dim red hue.

“We’re almost to base,” Jensen said. “We just have to pass through security.”

They emerged from a shop-lined strip into red sunlight. Despite the reprehensible number of people, this new location caught James’ attention.

Sixteen pillars rose along the dome’s perimeter to support frosted glass encompassing the open space. Each of those sixteen pillars split into thirty-two branches. Thirty-two split into sixty-four, then one twenty-eight, and so on. Each branch grew smaller until joining with another tree. The framework supported a white-glass ceiling that glowed orange under the sun.

“Oh, my god.” James craned his neck. “It’s perfect.” James stumbled when a man bumped into him.

James caught his fall on outstretched hands, hoping to avoid any further contact.

“Mind your step,” the man said, caring nothing for James pushing himself off the ground.

Massaging his stinging palms, James watched after the man until he disappeared into the crowd. James glanced up at the ceiling before remembering he was supposed to follow Jensen, now gone.

James scanned the area swarming with people. Panic raced through his body, paralyzing him in place.

A rough hand grabbed James' shoulder, causing his skin to squirm under the touch. "I told you to follow."

James hid his relief at seeing Jensen. The escort was preferable to wandering lost through the city.

"Up here." Jensen pointed.

The security checkpoint for entering base began with a line of people winding through a queue. The queue led to a wall of gates, each of which permitted entrance to one person at a time. To enter, a person would approach a gate and place their palm on an orange glowing rectangle. The rectangle would flash green, the gate opened, and the person passed through to the other side.

"Let's go," Jensen said to James, motioning him to a winding line.

"We have to wait with all those people?" James asked.

Jensen nodded, stepping forward. "This is the only entrance from this direction." He stopped when James didn't follow, expression darkening. "Don't get lost again."

"I just, I don't enjoy being around so many people," James said.

"That's why I medicated you," Jensen said. "You've been taking your pills, right?"

James nodded.

"They're to calm you in these situations," Jensen said. He clapped James on the shoulder and entered the line.

James followed, but too slow. A woman darted into line between James and Jensen. She inched forward, focused on the gates, unaware that she had separated James from his escort.

Jensen smirked back at James as if to say, *What are you going to do about this?*

James, seeing no alternative, stayed behind the woman. Another man fell into line behind James, standing very close. James wished the man would stand two steps back. To give himself space, James edged closer to the woman in front of him. The man behind him also stepped forward.

James sidled forward, so close to the woman in front of him that he held his breath.

And the man behind James took yet another step forward.

Now furious, James turned on the man. "Stop getting so close to me!"

The man looked stunned. A glare overtook his face. "I never touched you. *Piss off.*"

"Yes, but you don't have to hover over me," James said.

“This is how lines work.” The man motioned to the surrounding line. “You don’t like that, maybe you should stay off base.”

“Hey,” Jensen said, eyes on James. To the woman, he said, “Go ahead of me.” He placed a firm hand on James’ shoulder, turning him to face forward. “Don’t talk to people, okay?”

James bit his tongue, refusing to speak. Claustrophobia pressed in on him. He cast his eyes upwards at the tantalizing dome housing the checkpoint.

“Guess we’re letting in the crazies again,” the man grumbled behind James.

The line inched forward. When they arrived at the front, Jensen said, “Follow my lead. It’s like a train terminal back on Earth.”

Jensen continued forward, stopping before the gate. The orange hand pad turned green at his touch, doors opening.

Jensen stepped forward to the other side.

The transparent doors closed.

Jensen gave James a rare smile from the other side of the gate. “Now it’s your turn.”

James placed his palm on the orange hand pad.

The pad flashed red. The doors remained closed.

James clenched his hands, hyper-aware that all eyes were now on him. He placed his hand once more on the pad to no avail. It remained a solid red.

Gaze fixed on the ground, James saw an officer approaching from his periphery.

“What’s wrong with him?” the officer asked, pointing at James but speaking to Jensen.

“We have a meeting,” Jensen said. “He needs access.”

The officer shook her head. “He’s DNA-restricted.”

“He’ll be working on base next month,” Jensen said.

The officer tapped at her clipboard, looking bored with Jensen’s complaining. “Looks like this is his first time here.” The officer spoke to Jensen and ignored James. “I’ll override, but you’re his escort.”

“Yes, I know,” Jensen said.

The officer tapped at a clipboard screen before motioning to James. “Try again.”

James placed his hand on the orange pad. It flashed green, permitting him entrance.

He stepped through.

Three tunnels split off from the dome on this side of security. Jensen led James down the middle.

After another brief walk, James arrived at Central Square, which Jensen described as the center of military power. The square was enormous, paved with red stone bricks. Buildings of various sizes with stone-work architecture surrounded them.

Over everything hovered a massive dome, large enough to encompass a small city. The clear glass was dusty with sand. Orange sunlight cascaded over the buildings at an angle.

A squadron of soldiers marched past.

James followed Jensen toward the Capitol, the most prominent structure at the head of the square. Massive pillars rose from the ground to support a terraced edifice. The highest point was a spire at the dome's center. Humanoid robots stood at perfect attention at regular intervals around the building.

James hesitated at the foot of the Capitol's sprawling stairs.

Jensen passed James on the stairs, strolling between the pillars and into the building. He crossed an open foyer and called an elevator.

James sprinted to catch up, arriving in time for the elevator doors to open. Neither spoke during their ascent.

The elevator stopped, the doors opening at the top.

Here, the floors were polished black stone. Pillars with red veins lined the long hall, giving James a foreboding feeling.

More of the same robots lined the hall, guarding doors and exits.

James walked a step behind Jensen into an open area. He stepped down twice onto crimson carpet. Massive windows made up the wall before him, framing the red Padosian landscape.

Three others waited at the room's center, though James recognized none of them. One was a petite woman with blonde hair cropped above her shoulders. Another was a man with graying hair wearing a maroon suit. The final was a man with a strong jawline, young and fit.

"Hello, James," the man with gray hair said, eyes assessing him. "I'm General Glen. With me is Sergeant Degray and Captain Cotton." He motioned to his left and then right. "Let's get started, shall we?"

1.05

PAM

Sergeant Pamela Degray felt a rare surge of hope the first time she saw Dr. James Hawthorn.

She stood beside General Glen, her father, watching Hawthorn approach on weary feet. He was smaller than Pam expected, tall, but with a lean frame. He walked with frantic eyes, determined to take in every detail.

He stopped before Pam and beside his escort, Jensen.

At last, they could begin. A few short weeks ago, this man had lived on another planet. Now he was here, able-bodied and ready to contribute to the greatest cause since the Last War.

Pam opened her mouth and realized she did not know what to say.

General Glen took the initiative. "Hello, James. I'm General Glen. With me is Sergeant Degray and Captain Cotton. Let's get started, shall we?"

Pam cleared her throat, trying not to let his assertion bother her. "We have awaited your arrival."

"Yeah, I don't know where I am," Hawthorn said. He stood like a cornered animal, frozen in fear of death.

"You don't?" Pam tried not to sound too surprised. She glanced at Jensen, who shrugged.

"You're here to learn why." General Glen stiffened beside Pam. "Dinner first. You look underfed."

He motioned Hawthorn to a large table that converted the den into a dining hall. General Glen often did this when hosting delegates around Pados. Pam had attended dinners here on rare occasions, even before she

joined the council. Somehow, it seemed an appropriate welcome for Hawthorn.

Jensen and Captain Cotton escorted Hawthorn to the table, seating him in a chair facing the windows overlooking Central Square.

General Glen stayed beside Pam, both watching Hawthorn. He lowered his voice, saying, “The Habilitation Center does not brief operatives on their assignments, Pam. To show surprise as you just did exposes weakness, which you cannot afford in this position. Do better.”

“I will,” Pam said, eyes fixed on Hawthorn. General Glen was right, but Pam had expected Hawthorn to have pieced together his purpose here by now.

General Glen left Pam’s side to sit at the table’s head.

Pam moved to sit beside Hawthorn. She had anticipated Hawthorn’s arrival for weeks. Pam had infiltrated weLive’s database, placed moles, and hacked Hawthorn’s thoughts. The goal of reviving Holden Morris and returning to Earth had never been so close.

After struggling for so long, this initial victory lifted the depressive blanket that strangled her every day.

Pam sank into her chair across from Captain Cotton, forcing herself to put aside her hatred of him for this single meal. His voice echoed in her head every night, ordering an end to her husband’s life.

Dark red stonework walls framed the room. Black pillars rose to support a vaulted stone ceiling. A crystal-work chandelier hung over the table, casting speckled light onto the walls.

Two busboys flitted across the room on silent feet, attending drinks and serving food.

“I researched American meals when planning this,” Pam said to Hawthorn by her side.

He grunted, offering no response. He looked at his plate with skepticism.

This was the man they had spent so much effort to revive on Pados? Pam knew Hawthorn from reading his thought logs. His intelligence and determination had made her eager to meet him. In person, she found herself disappointed.

He was weak. He did not hold himself with the strength Pam expected from her life in the military.

General Glen, Captain Cotton, and Jensen conversed in joking tones about past colleagues. Pam and Hawthorn sat forgotten.

“I’m very interested in your work in algorithms,” Pam blurted out at Hawthorn. “I know a lot about your work, actually.”

“That makes one of us,” Hawthorn said.

Captain Cotton's eyes found Pam. She ignored him.

The misery etched into Hawthorn's face seemed an accurate depiction of Pam's feelings.

He was looking around, observing his surroundings, glancing toward the doors, the windows, corners of the room. His thumb fidgeted against the edge of his plate. He kept sighing, though no one reacted to his impatience.

He had pushed the food around on his plate, having taken a few bites of his chicken and mashed potatoes. The green beans he left untouched.

His refusal of the food annoyed Pam. Pados was not like Earth, where food grew out of dirt, outrageous as the concept sounded. Food came in a limited variety on Pados. Farmers could produce only a few proteins, fibers, and grains.

Living on Earth made people wasteful.

And all General Glen cared about was going back.

Minutes stretched on. Pam finished her food, itching to arrive at the point of the dinner.

"Dr. Hawthorn," General Glen said when all plates but Hawthorn's were empty. "Or, perhaps I should say Private Hawthorn."

"I'm not a private," Hawthorn said.

"You are now," General Glen replied. "How has your stay in the Habilitation Center been?"

Hawthorn shrugged, not looking the general in the eye. "Adequate."

General Glen's mouth turned into a thin line of disapproval. He viewed eye contact and a firm personality as signs of strength. Hawthorn was not playing his game.

"Get comfortable," General Glen said. "You'll be returning there for another month."

Hawthorn froze. A look of dread spread over his face. "I . . . I thought I had finished. Everyone leaves after their first month. Some are sooner."

General Glen's amused expression turned into contempt. "Pados is an alien planet with toxic air. We may have this pocket of civilization, but make no mistake, living here is dangerous. We need people to be stable before they enter the city. You stay two months."

Hawthorn nodded, speaking no more.

General Glen watched Hawthorn for ten seconds. The man squirmed under his gaze. "How is your sync going?"

Hawthorn did not respond. His eyes locked on a point past his plate—past the table and floor. His mind was absent from the room.

General Glen scoffed, turning to Jensen. "How's his progression?"

"Fine," Jensen said. "He still has a long way to go."

General Glen nodded, expression displeased. His eyes snapped to Pam. “This is why we should have done a mind scan.”

Pam sat still, refusing to let her body language communicate weakness, like Hawthorn. “The council voted. It was everyone’s decision.”

General Glen nodded. “They did, but I wonder how the council might have voted in its current state.”

Pam stayed silent, ignoring the taunt.

“Hawthorn.” General Glen said, now glaring to his right.

The doctor gave General Glen a furtive look.

“You must learn to address your superiors,” General Glen said. “Do not look away from me until dismissed.”

The two locked gazes for ten seconds. James averted his eyes.

General Glen scoffed. “You’ll have to work on that.”

Pam suppressed her anger. General Glen pounced when he saw weakness. Pam knew the perfect balance of submission and confidence to placate her father, even when he goaded her. He viewed her as weak, but she knew how to survive.

Hawthorn would learn.

General Glen continued. “Relax, Private. You are among peers. One day you will come to see Pados as your home.” General Glen’s gaze seared into Hawthorn, who seemed all too eager to wilt before him.

Hawthorn avoided looking at anyone. His eyes seemed drawn to the floor, walls, or ceiling. Anywhere but a person. “I find that unlikely.” It seemed all he could say.

General Glen continued speaking. “You’re acquainted with Sergeant Degray? Good. She’ll be your Superior Officer. Do as she says, or you’ll answer to me.”

“You haven’t told me why I’m here,” Hawthorn said.

“Pam.” General Glen glanced at her. “I think it’s time to brief him.”

Pam inhaled, leaning forward and turning toward Hawthorn. “Does the name ‘Project EDNA’ sound familiar to you?”

Hawthorn nodded, suspicion overtaking his face. “We haven’t published yet.” His voice lost its youthful undertones.

“We want to help you finish Project EDNA,” Pam said. “We’re prepared to offer you our resources to build the algorithm necessary to extrapolate a DNA set.”

“And you are?” Hawthorn prodded.

“We’re the last remnants of the Sandigan,” Pam said, pride in her voice.

Hawthorn’s face fell. “Oh.” His eyebrows knit. “You killed me.”

“We brought you here,” Pam said. “I suspect you may have some

misconceptions about us. I hope you'll come to appreciate our similarities as you experience our culture."

"So, you're like my parole officer," Hawthorn said.

Pam straightened her back. She doubted Hawthorn intended offense. Still, she refused to appear weak before him and General Glen. "We will work on your research together. That is why you're here."

"On Pados?"

"Yes."

"Which is occupied by the Sandigan?"

Pam searched his face for the strength of person she had expected from him. He had a long way to go before he finished syncing. "Yes."

"Is Holden Morris leading you?"

Pam shook her head. "Everyone killed in the war was lost. weLive purged their DNA from its databases. That's why we need you, James." She stumbled over his name. "Half a billion people can't switch out because they were on the wrong side of a losing war."

Hawthorn would understand. He had worked to solve this exact problem for the last decade. But darkness overtook his expression. "You want me to revive him."

Pam hesitated, then nodded. "That is why we brought you here."

To his credit, General Glen had not intervened. As promised, briefing Hawthorn was her responsibility.

Hawthorn looked around the table at each man before his eyes fell on Pam. "I can't help you."

"You can." Pam smothered her rising panic. She could not lose control now. "I'm here to help you. The resources of the Sandigan are yours."

"And if I refuse?" Hawthorn said. His posture straightened, fist clenched. "Will you torture me?"

"That won't happen," Pam said. What did the man believe of them? His time on Pados would do him well. "You report to me."

Hawthorn scoffed, standing. "I'm not interested." He made as if to leave.

"Sit," General Glen's voice commanded. "We own this planet. Respect that authority."

Hawthorn began to walk, bound for the pillar-lined hall toward the elevator. Where he intended to go, Pam could only guess.

"Ares," General Glen said, speaking to the on-base AI through which he commanded his security precautions. "Detain Private Hawthorn. Bring him back."

Pam remained sitting, her good intentions for the meeting crashing to the ground.

A disturbance sounded behind Pam, Hawthorn's shoes scuffing off the floor. Metal joints sprinted around the hall.

Hawthorn rushed back into the room, General Glens' repurposed robots pursuing him. He looked behind himself in a nervous motion, trying to avoid capture at metallic hands.

He stopped short of the table, facing Pam with defiance carved on his face.

Four EVA bots pressed in behind him.

"I won't help you, not to revive Holden Morris," Hawthorn said.

General Glen cleared his throat and stood, facing Hawthorn. "I think another month in the Habilitation Center will do you well."

Hawthorn fidgeted.

"You will report to Sergeant Degray and obey her word as law. Jensen here will consult as you replicate Project EDNA. We'll have a small lab set up in Information Control where you can work."

Hawthorn smirked at General Glen.

Pam closed her eyes. He needed to subdue his impulsive tendencies.

"Something funny, boy?" General Glen said in an icy voice.

"What you're asking is impossible."

General Glen smothered his impatience with a smile. "Tell me why."

"Two people working in a retrofitted lab cannot replicate Project EDNA," Hawthorn said. "On Earth, I had a team. Two people are not a team. I also had a lab. A proper lab. I had an AI suited to non-deterministic math and logic." He waved his hands in frustration. "You cannot provide any of that."

General Glen's face darkened. "I wasn't finished." He raised a finger. "Sergeant Degray will be in charge of supplying you with technology. She'll fabricate your equipment from Project EDNA's purchase orders. For computing power, you can make do with one of her AIs."

"And the team?" Hawthorn demanded.

"By the time you finish your habilitation, you will have a team," General Glen said.

Pam looked up. Questions exploded in her mouth, but she stayed silent.

General Glen continued. "You'll have everything you need. You have my word."

"No offense, General," Hawthorn said. "But I don't know what your word is worth."

General Glen smirked before turning back to the table. "Jensen, our new guest is getting tired. Please return him to the Habilitation Center."

Jensen stood with a grunt. "Let's go," he said to Hawthorn without stopping to wait for the man.

Hawthorn glared from General Glen to Pam and turned to follow Jensen.

General Glen watched them leave before turning to Pam. "I told you this would happen. That man has been brainwashed by Earth culture. He will refuse to help and call it a matter of principle. Just watch."

"Who else will work with Private Hawthorn?" Pam asked, not willing to let her father put her on the defensive.

"Pam." Captain Cotton's voice adopted a soft tone to replace Pam's blood with bile. "It's okay. We have it figured out. We've been planning this for months."

Pam held up a finger to the insufferable being. "I did not ask for your input."

That earned a glare from General Glen.

Pam met his glare with her own. "Are you going to tell me?"

"No," General Glen said. "Nothing is certain. We have a month to complete the arrangement. We'll inform you when we are sure, assuming Hawthorn doesn't attack one of our officers. You need a firm hand with him."

"He clearly has a lot of misconceptions about who we are. He may willingly help if I can show him we aren't monsters," Pam tried to say.

General Glen chewed on his response, a mix of outrage and skepticism crossing his face. "You're on the council, Pam. You need to be smarter. This plan of yours, your desire to integrate Hawthorn into our culture, will fail."

"You gave me autonomy on this project," Pam said. "So, it's my call to make."

General Glen swatted at the air, turning toward his office down the hall. The conversation was over. "IGoR's constituents look out for themselves. Mark my words," he yelled back. "He'd kill us all, given the chance, just like his government."

His office door slammed closed.

Captain Cotton stood from the table. "It's okay. We'll handle Hawthorn."

Pam lowered her eyebrows at him. "I'll handle Hawthorn." She turned and started for the elevator.

Anger carried her down the hall. She had never felt as if her actions were so important as with this task. She alone could fix her problems. Captain Cotton was oblivious to Pam's refusal to work with him.

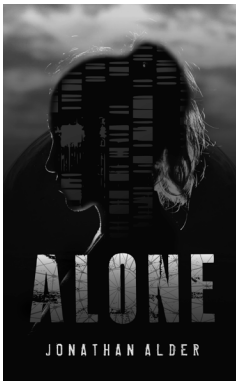
He had killed Drew, Pam's husband, under General Glen's orders.

To see Drew again, Pam needed to solve the same problem preventing Holden Morris from returning to life.

James Hawthorn was the solution. Getting his cooperation was the next step to Holden Morris' eventual return to life.

To Drew's return to life.

THE STORY CONTINUES . . .



Immortality was the promise—a perfect world, but only for those who won the war. The rest were put to death.

The remnants of the Sandigan military have toiled for a century to rebuild after the Last War. Sergeant Pamela Degray has sacrificed everything to achieve that end. She now holds the pieces to repair both her life and the Sandigan, provided she can maintain the military's trust.

James Hawthorn is Pam's prisoner. His ground-breaking revival research is the key to the Sandigan's return. But Hawthorn would rather sabotage Pam than help her. Worse, Hawthorn's presence threatens Pam's goals by shaking her certainty in the military that raised her.

Trapped between duty and conscience, Pam must decide if she will restore the Sandigan or turn it into something new.

ALSO BY JONATHAN ALDER

The Hawthorn Saga

1 - Awake

2 - Alone

2.5 - And Now We Harness the Sun

3 - After (coming soon with more to follow!)

Other Works

Closeted: My Life as a Gay BYU Student

Visit jonathan-alder.com for free eBook and audiobook samples, including a full version of my short book, *And Now We Harness the Sun*. No subscription required.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

It all started in the second grade when I skipped recess to finish a creative writing project with a very serious subject matter: zombies, and cursed magic, on an ancient burial ground, in Disneyland. That sounds cooler now than it probably was.

Despite my creativity having peaked in the second grade, I've been writing stories ever since. You'll probably never get a chance to read those early books, unless they resurface as blackmail, in which case, I deny everything.

After getting kicked out of one university and graduating from another, I now work full-time in data analytics. I like to think I wrote enough during my academic career to justify publishing as a full-fledged adult who still doesn't understand taxes. I write during my spare minutes and can often be observed staring off into space. Don't worry, I'm just working out the next plot point.

Follow me on social media for regular updates about ongoing projects.



