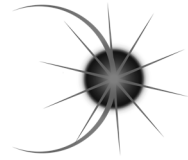


CHAPTER 1

COUNTRY ROADS



“His brave and noble followers; they ran for their lives, fled deep in a wood. And only one of them remained, stood there, miserable, remembering, as a good man must, what kinship should mean.”

—Beowulf (Burton Raffel)

4:38 PM, Thursday, November 21, 2039, gleamed neon green at the corner of the transport’s display. Lara’s hand felt cold in Elliott’s. Rubbing gentle circles on it with his thumb, he looked up at her. She was staring at the transport’s display too.

A man with a flawless face and an expensive looking suit was being projected. Around him inset images of a burning car were displayed.

“The death of the psychologist responsible for the University of Chicago research into ‘Child-Training’ syndrome was another tragic example of cognitive dissonance. Coburn Vinod proposed that decades of cultural affections for childhood have led to an adult population which pursues a more child-like innocence and escape from adult concerns.”

“His theory suggested the result would eventually be a docile population. One devoid of active engagement in matters of critical thinking and accepting of responsibilities traditionally

associated with adulthood. Those closest to him say ten years of statistics and papers from colleagues challenging his views contributed to his rather dramatic suicide."

The display suddenly shifted from an image of an older looking Indian man, presumably Dr. Vinod, to a bright background and logo of a turkey. The display widened its shot to include a thin black woman with bouncing curls highlighted in purple. The male host turned to the woman and said, "Coming up after the break, Gina Lexis has the latest on how to stuff your turkey for Thanksgiving without stuffing in the calories."

The display darkened and reformed into the image of a sporty-looking maglev car rounding the turns on a stretch of road across a desert mesa. It was hard to say, but Elliott thought it was a Nissan. Beside it scrolled a list of other "important" updates from sports, entertainment, etc.

Lara squeezed Elliott's hand. He didn't have to ask to know why. Whether Dr. Vinod committed suicide or not was in doubt. A few months ago, they were dangerously close to ending up in the news the same way. "Mysterious Deaths Come to Two Extremist College Students." At least that's what he imagined the headline would've read. Just a blip in the daily barrage of every little thing.

"Don't do this," she whispered to him.

Elliott returned his focus to her and squeezed her hand back. "You know we have to, Julie."

She scowled. Whether because of his resoluteness or the code name he couldn't be sure. Calling her "Julie" in public, as in Shakespeare's Juliet was part homage to how their quest started and part safety measure. Saying either of their real names aloud near so many mobiles and the transport's audio receivers was a good way to alert authorities where to go to pick them up. They were already taking a big risk just being on the transport. They were both wearing hoodies with their hoods up. Lara also had sunglasses with ridiculously over-sized lenses. Elliott opted for cosmetic contacts to hide his retinal pattern.

A chime sounded and the transport slowed to a halt. "This is our stop. Rome."

Elliott grabbed his backpack from the floor in front of him. "Let's go then."

As he exited the transport, a cool gust buffeted him, forcing him to hunch his shoulders. The last time he was at the McIntyre family cemetery it hadn't been much warmer. There had been a lot more leaves and brush for cover from prying eyes though.

Setting off at a quick clip up the path, the only sounds were the crunching of leaves and gravel underfoot and the wind through the bare trees. Everything looked withered and dead, was anything still alive?

"We shouldn't be here." Lara pointed out. "They have to be watching it."

"We've been over this. We double-checked data traffic related to the area. Grandpa McIntyre even thinks it is safe."

"I still don't like this."

"Neither do I. But this should be out-of-the-way enough to make things a little safer."

She rolled her eyes. "Next time we go somewhere out-of-the-way together, can we choose someplace nicer than a graveyard?"

"What's wrong with graveyards?" Elliott tried to joke.

Lara glanced sidelong at him. "Oh, no. Is this some kind of date?"

His cheeks burned red. "No, no, no," he waved his hands emphatically. "We're here to get the supplies my grandfather had hidden."

Stopping, she put her hands on her hips. "Really? You know you're terrible at hiding how you feel. Especially from me."

Elliott scowled and ground his feet into the loose gravel. She was right. In a society where every look could be captured and studied to dissect a person's innermost thoughts, Elliott had no poker face. Not even a "Go Fish" one.

Hooking his thumb at his backpack, he mumbled. "I brought some paintbrushes and small canvases."

Lara's eyebrows raised. "To paint a cemetery? While we're literally being hunted by spec ops?"

"No. I just ... So, the sun will be setting over the hill in about thirty minutes. If you face the west, away from the graves, when it does, it's actually beautiful up there. I just thought it might be nice to see you some shade of happy again."

Her brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Happy? We live day-to-day. Art really isn't important right now."

"See that's the thing. It is to you. Even if you're fighting for your life, you still feel an arm you've lost."

"I sketch," she answered much quieter, looking at the ground.

"You know it's not the same. Because of me you've lost so much. I thought maybe for a little while today, I could give back that piece of you."

A tear ran down one pale cheek and she brushed it away. Folding her arms over her chest she was quiet for what felt like an hour. Then, soft as a whisper, she said, "Thank you."

He shrugged and reached for her hand. "I dig, you paint. Deal?"

She nodded, looking like she was still was battered against a storm of emotions. "Okay."

"Cool," he murmured and began walking again. The rest of the trip was in silence. Not the outcome of his surprise he'd hoped for.

"You're right," Lara said suddenly. "About the Normal."

The Normal was their nickname for life before he and Lara stumbled on the inconsistencies in Project Alexandria's records. Intended to give equal, universal access to all human knowledge, they found everything from news to literary classics like Shakespeare were being subtly changed over time. By controlling what people knew as truth, the government could sway people toward complacency and conscious submission to whatever policies it enacted.

"Making art always soothed me," she continued. "It just helped put everything into perspective."

"Yeah, it does. That's why you're my art."

Around them the melancholy path through the trees opened to the clearing with his family's cemetery. Elliott stopped at the base of the knoll the graves sat atop. Unbidden, memories of the last time here struck him. On top of everything else, Lara had been taken and held ransom.

"Don't hang back this time, okay?" he requested, his voice sounding hollow.

"I'm with you to the end." As if unable to bear the seriousness any longer she added, "Which hopefully isn't up there."

Chuckling Elliott added, "Convenient location though, right?"

She gave him a shove. "Not funny."

Even so, she was quick to grab his hand again. Climbing up the hill, Elliott had a strange sensation of dread. Something wasn't right, but he was having trouble placing it.

By the time they reached the top it hit him. "The grass is cut," he murmured.

Lara didn't have time to ask why it mattered. How could she know it was only mowed in the summer and should be much less kempt right now?

She pointed to a grave stone several feet away. "What is that?"

Without seeing it up close he replied, "Trouble. It's on my Uncle Al's grave."