

Introduction

I always stared at the sky above and thought, do I exist as an intelligent individualistic human being or am I just born in this life time to accomplish one important task and that's it?

I don't remember my childhood. I don't think it has ever existed in my mind. I kept wondering how it was by some photos in a small metal box that portrayed me as a child. Where did these photo papers come from? Where did this box come from that I kept hiding underneath my bed cushion? I only took them out on days like today to remember something. Anything. I don't remember my parents or if I had any one to call mom and dad. I don't have brothers or sisters nor any living relative.

I don't remember I was ever taught to write on a piece of paper. We learned to tap on a screen and letters and numbers appeared. We learned to recognize these letters, words, sentences, paragraphs and stories. Everything was just a screen that did all the work for us. We only learned how to decipher what was written and speak in a language that is recognizable by machines.

We live in a small world where machines are our only tool of survival. Our species, or what is left of it, was trained by our leaders to protect those machines. Also, we are trained mentally and physically to prepare for an upcoming inevitable war. Yet, who is out there that we need this high level of constant security? What are we waiting for? Aliens? Decades ago, it was proven that aliens don't exist and we are in this universe all alone. Alone in our being and thoughts.

A few years ago, after taking an intelligence exam to test my aptitude and future position in this world, I was told by my superiors that I had unusual scores. I was never told what they were nor did I ask, but they automatically placed me in the special compound called “Intelligence” where General John Myr was in charge of it, and I monitored all machine activities, data collection and analysis, and defence of a project that was named Merge.

My daily life was predictable. I left everything in my room so I can't be reached or called for. My only time I can be someone else. I only kept a hold of a small gun on a belt surrounding my waist. I physically trained in the morning by running two miles along the old bridge that crossed what is left of the old city. I jumped over bulgy rocks in a semi crooked line that I have placed on a half paved road for ten yards. When I felt happy and wanted an ounce of what is thought of as fun, I tried to grab hold of non-working street lights and swing from them. I felt that the world at that moment was meant to spin me. It felt different, carefree, and childlike perhaps. It was my escape, but an escape from what?

I ventured back to reality when I heard someone call my name from a far. “Lina!”

Chapter 1

Where is she?

Boris was running fast towards me and screaming my name at the top of his lungs. How did he find me this far away from the compounds near the old city? I kept a hard grip on the street light as he approached me. I wasn't very fond of Boris. He had brown, extremely tall, 6 feet 5 inches, dark blue eyes that looked black at times, and he wore a silver long necklace with a bird at the end that he claims was his mother's. He is a Red. He is from that compound that is responsible with overall defence and material improvements of our world. What I couldn't stand was his self-proclaimed physical superiority over everyone. Moreover, sometimes late night, he used his physical power to break random objects and deserted old front door entrances in the Triangle compound. It was for fun, as his clouded mind kept justifying. It was very childish in my opinion.

He came closer, stopped to breathe and glistening sweat tickled down from his forehead. I waited for him to catch his breath. Being a foot shorter than him, I had to look up and stare at his eyes for a few seconds. He then looked at the floor and back at me and said, "Professor Ellen Lynn disappeared. General John Myr is looking for you everywhere."

Ellen, a delicate small brown-haired woman with large brown eyes, 48, with no children, was also the commander in chief of Project Merge. Something I had to watch over and protect with my life as long as I was told to do so. Project Merge started twelve years ago as a secret defence tool that can't be seen by just anyone, or anything that is not directly involved with it. I said with

a puzzled look on my face, “How? That’s impossible. What do you mean?”

Boris, still breathing heavily said, “That’s what General John told me. And he is friggen mad that his tamed hair seemed wild on the screen. The defence force was called for. I think they arrived by now and ...”

I interrupted him and asked, “How did he know that?”

Although John was the general of Intelligence and he seemed to know everything in our small world and watched the hidden cameras in his waking hours, he could not see past the Project Merge corridor and interior room that housed it. It was not permitted by those not directly involved with it. Ellen’s disappearance, or proclaiming she is, is a little mystifying and only an assumption by John.

Boris eyed me with a sharp look of disgust and said, “You are wasting time by asking me what I will never know. Just go now to the Intelligence compound and shut up!”

He had a controlling demeanour about him and a stern commanding voice that scared me at times. I assumed that’s why no girl in our small 1989 citizen count world can stand him or want to be his future wife.

I let go of the street light and started running back. Boris, with his strength and superior physique, tried to catch up with me, yet, I am faster than him.

As I approached the compound, Boris caught up now and stood next to me. He said, “Damn your fast. Why did you stop? Just key in the code and let’s go in.”

The door to the compound is platinum steel that is twelve feet high and eight feet wide. There is a panel on the side where I can tap the code and a finger print image is used to identify me as accessible to the Intelligence compound. After step one is completed, I placed my hand in the bottom of the panel in a little hole, and a beam of light shined and flickered three times to identify a living me by my blood structure, its flow, and level of authority.

The screen on the panel changed and my face appeared.

Lina Ard, 30

BD: 12-31-2280 AD

Intelligence Colonel

Merge Defence V

Level of Authority V

Boris with a small grin of his face said, "It seems secure, but our compound, Red, is more secure than that." The door started opening and I eyed him disgustedly and said, "Who wants to go to your filthy compound?" He wasn't amused and grabbed my shoulder and said with a deep serious voice, "You may seem intelligent, but a smart mouth that needs constant authority and discipline."

I grabbed his arm and shoved it off of me. "You are absurd," I said quietly and ran to the main doors where I tapped in another key code to enter. I ran through the hallways, Boris behind me, and I climbed a flight of stairs. I ran again, turned left, and then I heard a low scream.

As I approached the door to the machine authorized only room, I took out my gun, and a woman kneeling on the floor with her head down kept looking at her hands and screaming loudly, "No!"

I came closer, and I saw blood on her hands. At that instinct, I pointed the gun at her and I said, "Where did this blood come from?" Boris held his gun pointing at her and started walking slowly to my right. I knelt down near the woman and told her to raise her head. She was Dana.

I saw tears gushing down her face, and she kept saying with a loud aching voice, "No! No!"

I didn't know why Dana was in the control room, since she hardly ever comes up here and visits this place for any reason. She is always in the lab downstairs, finding an ingenious solution to some problem by analyzing numerous old books on her screen or gathering random information, and trying to apply her assumptions by experimenting on a small controlled group of people. I asked her, "Stop Dana. Where did this blood come from?"

She had bright green eyes with a brown thick line surrounding them. Her eyes seemed deep and had a magical aura to them that I could not explain, and I saw my own reflection in them. She looked stunned and pointed on her right side. She wore a lab coat that was two sizes bigger than her, and I saw a spot of blood and pulled her coat to the side. She kept saying, "No! No!" Then she sighed, looking at the floor and slowly said, "Help her."

I said frantically, "Who?" Boris stepped closer to Dana and examined her wound. "It's a knife wound," he said in disbelief. "Who still uses a knife? So primitive." I looked at him and said, "It's not the time to discuss old weaponry and their usage. They kill people, that's their intention!" Dana gasped and looked at Boris and pleaded to him with broken tone of words, "Help ... her.... Please." Boris pursed his lips and grabbed Dana, lifted her and started walking towards the door. "Where can we bandage

her so she won't bleed to death?" he said with a steady tone to his voice.

Red compound may seem rough and unorthodox compared to us, with a group of citizens who only know what's it's like to fight and defend, but they also know how to heal the wounded. They are the doctors, the fighters, the healers of our world. They are self-sufficient on their own and can solve any immediate problem they face without any question.

I sprinted to a door down the hall and told Boris to follow me. We walked a few steps to another door, I opened it, and a group of scientists sat on their stools mesmerized in their experiments. Robots, I label them as intelligent life-less machines, were conducting an experiment too on the left side of the room. I didn't have time to have Boris perform any lifesaving procedure, and I needed him to help me find Ellen. I said with an authoritative voice, "We need help now!" A scientist on my right lifted his head and his eyes widened. I wasn't sure if he was taken aback by our arrival, or just by Boris's tall stature and physique. The doctor said, "What? What's going on?" Boris looked at him and said, "We need antiseptic, gauzes and bandages. She is wounded."

More scientists stood up, and frantically hurried and opened drawers and glass containers. The scientist said, "Put her on the chair. We will help her." Boris walked to the chair, kneeled down and slowly placed Dana on the chair. I kept my gun held up and said to Boris, "Who is she talking about? Who do we help? We need to find John."

Boris eyed me and his eyes were raging mad, then he calmed down, nodded and started walking towards the door. I looked at Dana and her eyes were closing. I touched her shoulders and asked, "Who do we help?" She closed her eyes and one of the

scientists said, “We have to take her to the ward on the other side of the building.” Boris then said, “Lina, we have to go find General John.” I nodded and wiped a little tear from my eye. Although I was trained to be physically and mentally ready for any situation, my heart felt like it was breaking into pieces and I wanted to go in a corner and cry. I couldn’t handle seeing an innocent civilian suffer like that.

Boris stared at me and I said, “What?” He looked at me with concern and he hesitated for a few seconds and said, “Let’s go.”

Chapter 2

Timed

The Intelligence building was the second largest of the three compounds. I started sprinting from one corridor to another with long hallways and large gardens to the side used for experiments. I looked back and I saw that Boris was in awe, but he stayed steady and kept sprinting. Boris doesn't come to the Intelligence compound much. Maybe once a year. Unlike me who is all over the place. I go from building to building and compound to compound. I know many people, their lives, their stories and projects. My job requires me to know many things, record them and analyze them.

Somehow, I remembered Boris. I knew him since we were young. He is my age, and he seemed to always be the tall studious one that sat by himself in the cafeteria. He didn't talk to many people, and when he did, he had a command on his voice. It seemed that he was ready to attack at any moment, and I never knew why. He lived in the boy's sector of the Alliance building in the Triangle compound. It's created for kids who were 17 and under that don't have a family. Obviously, I was in the girl's sector there too.

He sat next to me in class one year when we were 15. He didn't talk or say hello at all to anyone. He had a small tablet screen on his desk and tissue paper. I never knew why he needed the tissue paper, but it's there if he needed to sneeze. He was highly intelligent, and he received high achievement marks on all his work. I never had his aptitude because I was never focused or cared much. I just sat there, admiring the outside world from the window.

One day, as I was looking outside beyond the window and not on my screen, the professor approached my desk hastily and stared at me. He had a look of disgust and said in a low menacing voice, “What will you learn from looking outside? Nothing. What will you learn from looking at your screen? Everything.” I felt my heart skip a beat. I tilted my head down and stared at my screen. The professor said, “Good,” and walked to the front of the room. Sitting on my right was Boris. I lifted my head a little and looked at him with the corner of my eyes. He was staring at me. I moved my head to the right and looked back at him. He stared at me for a few seconds, shifted his eyes to the window above me, then back at me and smiled. Then he stared back down on his screen. It was the only time his small gesture was any type of approval by him of my existence.

Why were my memories of him so detailed? Anyways, as we sprinted to the north east corridor of the Intelligence building, we saw John, Joseph, and Zack coming out of the glass room. Soldiers from the Red compound stood on either side of the corridor carrying long pistols and wearing weapon resilient vests. Joseph and Zack are John’s right hand men. Joseph was tall, muscular, middle aged, with salt and pepper hair and brown eyes. He had tanned skin and stood with high authority. On the contrary, Zack was my height, light brown hair, fair skin, wore thick glasses, was much younger than John and Joseph, and he slouched when he walked.

Then there was General John Myr. He was much older, very tall but shorter than Boris though, had gray hair thinning hair, noticeable wrinkles on his face, and an undeniable aura of authority and charisma surrounded him. He looked at me and angrily said, “Lina! Where were you at this critical time of the day?” I didn’t know how to respond. He expected me to be alert

and available at 07:00 am? I couldn't lie, and I stared blankly and said, "I was training outside the compound, like I do every day at that hour." He hit the wall next to him with his fist and I jumped back. He yelled and said, "That was over an hour ago. Where were you?"

Boris stared at me and his mouth started opening to say something, but Joseph interrupted and said, "We don't have time to interrogate her General. She needs to go in."

I had a confused look, and I was gestured by Joseph to walk forward down the hall with them. Boris stayed in his spot and I looked back at him. He stared at me with utter concern. Something was uncharacteristic of him at that moment that I couldn't understand. I looked forward again and I kept walking.

We were approaching the corridor of the Project Merge sector. I didn't know why we were there, and what John's intentions were. I stopped walking. Joseph and Zack turned around to look at me, and then John looked back and stared. I said, "Why are we here? I don't understand. We are not authorized beyond this point."

John stared at me for a few seconds, wiped his forehead and said quietly, "Ellen walked in this corridor last night at 09:52 pm and into the Project Merge sector. She didn't come out. I was in the glass room this morning at 06:30 am to check feeds from last night of authoritative areas of the compound, and an emergency light was flickering faintly in S3, this sector. I checked the feeds, and I saw her going in. I was not worried since she spends hours there, but the emergency light indicated something was wrong."

I was confused, and something about his tone was different, it seemed too unreal of a story but I played along. I said, "How long was the emergency light on?"

He looked at the floor and said, "Since 10:01 pm last night."

Chapter 3

Beyond this Point

I said angrily, "Why was no one notified of the emergency calling light? Where was the nighttime security? And ..." John interrupted me and said, "Glass room is limited to high leveled personnel that possesses a certain level of authority in this compound. Not even machines can access it." I quickly said, "Well, I can go into to the glass room." He said quietly, "Yes you can. And you are authorized to go into the Project Merge sector too." I gasped and said, "Since when? Why me?"

John looked at me for a few seconds, and opened his mouth to say something but Zack furiously said with a loud voice, "We don't have time for this. She has to go in! Now!" My eyes widened and I stared at them. Joseph said with a demanding tone, "You first."

I remembered growing up in the Triangle compound and was taught that everyone here has earned their social place based on intelligence and skills. I always wondered why Zack and Joseph were in their position as only right hand men to John. They couldn't replace John until he died it seemed. Yet, John possessed something that Zack and Joseph will never have; a commanding power, high intelligence, and compassion.

I started walking slowly down the corridor and then turned to the left. I saw a long empty faint hallway. I looked up and there were no surveillance cameras hidden anywhere. The ceiling was clear. John looked at me and gestured that I should keep walking. We walked down the hallway and I saw a metal door with a strange symbol in the middle of it. It was an upside triangle with V and M on top of each other but almost connected. I didn't know what it

meant, but John sighed as he was looking at it and said, “There is the security panel on the right side to open the door. It requires you to insert your arm in the hole below, and your head in the upper small indentation area to identify you.”

“How did John know that?” I thought to myself.

I walked to the right and I saw the lower hole. I lifted my arm slowly and inserted my right hand. I glided my hand inside the hole, then my elbow and the rest of my arm. I felt two metal objects squeezing my arm in place, then the screen above the hole turned on and one word appeared in green, “Go.”

I placed my head near the indentation. I didn’t know how far in it I should shift my head into, but I kept moving my head forward. I then heard a click and a faint blue light glowed. I heard John say, “It worked.”

I moved my head back, and I tried to remove my arm from the hole. I glimpsed at the screen right above the arm hole and it blinked continuously with two words in purple, “Sara Authorized.” I was confused and stared at the screen. I kept my arm in the hole, John sighed heavily, and dumbfounded by my reaction to what the screen read. He said, “Lina... It’s not the time to explain.”

I stared at John and unconsciously moved my arm out. The door was sliding slowly to the left, and another short hallway appeared. It had a black door at the end of it. John hesitated and looked worried. He stared at me and said, “There is an invisible shield in this hallway that only allows authorized individuals pass it. Anyone else will die by the laser beams that strike from every corner.”

I looked at him shocked and I said, “Really? There are laser beams?” He was wide eyed and said, “You need to take your gun out and stay alert. Find Ellen. We are counting on you.”

Chapter 4

Why Me?

My hand shivered as I placed it on the gun at my waist. I held it and pointed it upwards. I was trained to do this. I kept assuring myself that I was trained and expected to do this. I have to defend Merge if it cost me my life. Then, deep inside me, another voice in my head came to life and said, “Why?”

I hesitated for a few seconds and shook my head, but then I walked slowly in the hallway with my gun pointed upwards. There was only silence and the sound of heavy breathing from John, Joseph and Zack behind me. I walked and nothing zapped me. Thank God. I continued walking in the hallway and reached the black door. It didn't have a knob or handle or any security panels on either side to open it. I looked back at John and said loudly, “What should I do now?”

With a loud rattling noise, the black door started opening.

I looked at the door way and back at John. I nodded and walked slowly towards the opened door. I went in, and quickly, the door slammed shut again. I jumped and turned back. I touched the door, looked around for any security panels on either side of the door, and blurted, “No!”

I didn't know what to do, but I convinced myself that I had a mission to fulfil. I turned back around and I saw a long hallway. I walked slowly in it. The walls on either side were black and empty. I continued walking till the end of it, and then I approached a large wide door with glass panels. I opened the door, and my eyes widened. I was looking at a large empty room. No sign of life. Not even machines or screens or anything.

I walked in. I held my gun near my chest, and I felt that the vast room was getting smaller. I reached almost the middle of the room, and then, a 3D hologram image appeared of a girl. She was life like and blurry. I closed my eyes and opened them again. “Stay alert. Stay alert,” I kept chanting. The blurry hologram was slowly coming to focus. I dropped the gun on the floor. She was me.

She was wearing a knee length dark blue dress. She was not athletic, but had a few extra pounds that showed on her round face. Unlike me who appeared life less and my facial bone structure was apparent. She had almond shaped eyes with a smoky black eye shadow and black eye liner. Her brown eyes seemed they were sparkling. She had long thick dark brown hair. She was an inch taller than me, because she was wearing beautiful black high-heeled dress shoes.

I couldn’t speak, and she kept staring at me.

She finally said, “Why so long?”

I stared at her and couldn’t speak.

She repeated herself and asked with a more stern voice, “Why so long Sara?”

I didn’t know what I should reply with. She called me Sara. I’m not Sara. I’m Lina. I always have been.

She continued and said with a smile, “Why did you not come here for such a long time?”

I had a confused look and said, “My name is Lina.”

She eyed me with a small grin and a raised upper lip that I knew too well, and she said, “That’s what they told you?”

I was stunned. Who are they she is referring to? Suddenly, letters, words and numbers started falling from above to an area on her left side.

She said, "I am you."

The letters became recognizable words and she pointed at them.

Sara Ard, 30

Last Physically Seen: 2011 AD

BD: 12-31-1980 AD

Death: Unknown

I looked puzzled. She is me from almost 200 years ago? I don't understand. She looked at me with a sad expression and said, "They told me to go with them. I was lost and alone. I wanted a different life. They told me they needed me because I had something in my head that did this."

I asked, "Did what?"

She looked at her left side, and then at me with a menacing look and said, "Control time."

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