Chapter 1

“Do you know how long there have been high schools?” Sam asked as he and Jessica stood shoulder to shoulder ready to be herded like cattle through massive elevator doors.

Jessica, wispy thin and a beautiful mix of every race on the planet pondered the question for a moment before speaking “No, do you”?

“Not exactly but it was kind of a rhetorical question. What I meant is high schools have existed for a thousand years since the Great Migration and maybe even before that, but nobody knows. And in all that time no one has come up with a better system than high school. That sucks, it sucks.” Sam stated.

Jessica stared incredulously at Sam’s thick, dark and muscular frame. He looked nothing like any of the other boys in their class and certainly didn’t act the same but that was what attracted her. “High school didn’t suck.” she firmly stated.

“Well, it did for me and I’m glad it’s over.”

The conversation passed as the massive doors slid open and hundreds of the soon to be graduating high school classmates orderly piled into large room sized elevators. It no longer even registered with Sam that his muscular build was a clear exception to all his classmates with each of them being long and thin by comparison, regardless of facial features and skin tone.

Jessica decided not to push the discussion further. She realized that high school had been hard for Sam. She was one of his only friends as he not only looked differently but thought in a way that was also much different. That became clear once again as the huge elevator doors opened to the roof observation deck on the 200th floor of the tallest building in the city. The open blue sky overwhelmed some classmates as they sheepishly exited the elevator for their 15-minute class trip to the top their city and the top of their world. Rarely did anyone even venture outside and if they did it was only on the 20-foot-wide walkways between buildings with just a sliver of the sky to be seen. The big sky terrified Sam’s classmates and invigorated him. The real thing was so much better than the simulators had shown, Sam thought.

To the south and east they could see nothing but the rooftops of the tall buildings that housed the 60 million fellow residents of their city-state that sat in the middle of what had been called North America prior to the Great Migration. To the north and west they could see the growing fields which stretched to the limits of their sight and beyond that the open range stretched to the limits of their imagination. Sam yearned to see it all up close but that opportunity was reserved for the city-state’s growing field workers, open range harvesters and protection forces. Most people spent their entire lives without leaving the city, reliant on simulators for entertainment and a personalized concoction of drugs formulated by their implanted AI chip and dispensed daily through an automated pump for their mental wellbeing.

As thoughts of his future rolled through Sam‘s head they were suddenly blurted out to Jessica. “I want to be out there. I need to be out there.” His voice trailed off.

Jessica responded nonchalantly “I’m not sure that’s a realistic goal and besides, things could be a lot worse. You live in one of the top five cities of the hundred in the world. With 60 million life slots allocated to each city that leaves most of the 6 billion people on this planet worse off than you. Be normal. Be selfish. Take yours.”

Sam didn’t know how to respond so they turned to listen to the tour guide. “If you look to the northeast horizon you can see one of the greatest lakes on earth. It now provides fish for our entire city but before the Great Migration and the implementation of the Grand Plan it was hot, over fished and poisoned by our embarrassing ancestors. Those people lived wherever they wanted and did whatever they wanted and burn whatever they wanted until the planet was nearly dead. It’s a part of our history not to be discussed further. Us all know that the Great Migration to the cities of the world saved the earth from our nuclear war and climate killing ancestors. Since regaining equilibrium, where the world can supply for all its people, each legitimate can now live there 85 years secure that they will have that opportunity.”

Sam turned to Jessica. “Propaganda again and always, don’t you get tired of it?”

“How is saving the planet propaganda?”

“The killing the planet part I get, everyone does. They try to make us feel so fortunate that us each have a precious life slot in such a great city.”

“Us are fortunate. Us each get our 85 years. Our allocation. And more if us are healthy and not a burden on others. Us are lucky that leaders learned from the disasters of the past.”

“It doesn’t bother you that us don’t know anything else from back then?” Sam asked.

“Us don’t because it was all about disaster and devastation and killing each other whenever the population got too high. Billions would die in famine or war. It’s all too flawed and grotesque and terrible to teach. What more do us need to know than that?”

“Well, since I’ll probably never know more I should let it go. Maybe an adventure would allow me to forget about all this. Did you know a guy my age is worth under a $1 million in some cities? I checked it out on the Life Ledger and my value here is about $4 million. I could sell my life here, buy one elsewhere, pocket the difference and would be financially set for the rest of my life. If I really wanted a ton of money I could get sterilized and sell my offspring rights too.”

“So, you let some rich person buy your slot? They would take your place and you would never be able to come back. And have you heard what is going on is some of those cities? People are escaping by the hundreds of thousands or even millions. Wondering out into their city’s

harvesting areas to eventually die or be slaughtered by the city's drones. Those city's aren't delivering a fair share for their residents. So, if you do that you'll still be stuck in a city, just a shittier one." Jessica said.

"Didn't say it was a great plan. Just spit balling here."

"Doing what?"

"Never mind."

"If you're so hell-bent on getting out of the city why don't you apply to work in the growing fields or for the open range harvesting crews?"

"You're right! College isn't for me anyway. Maybe someday I can work my way up to be part of our protective force, patrolling the open range."

"There you go! Out there, protecting our city from the flocks of refugees from other cities that someday might be at our door. Or maybe even from nomads."

Jessica knew that it was the right thing for Sam but she also knew it meant she would see him less and less as time passed and eventually the relationship would likely fade. None of that yet registered in his less developed male brain. That might take a few years to sink in.

"I feel better already. Thanks." Sam said as he squeezed Jessica's hand.

"Good. Now you have a career path. So, let's get out of here."

"It's only been five minutes!"

"The wind and open air are freaking me out and most of the rest of our class. Us were bred and drugged to be inside."

"You go ahead. I'm going to stay until they kick me out. I'll see you inside later." Sam continued to stare out over the open landscape and took long deep breaths, enjoying the scenery. After being ushered out by a security guard Sam met up with Jessica. They took the elevator down together and then continued their journey home via moving walkways, people movers and then back on an elevator as they talked.

"What were you doing out there?" Jessica asked.

"Embracing the openness. I feel so confined. Doesn't it bother you that were watched constantly and that us have a chip implanted in our shoulders so the city knows where us are at all times?"

“Why would it bother me? They don’t really care what we’re doing if us aren’t doing anything wrong. It’s comforting that AI is monitoring every second of every day. No room for crime but it’s not like that in many other cities where things are crazy. How else can you properly manage 60 million people in such a tight space?” Jessica rationalized.

“Don’t you ever wonder what it was like before the Great Migration to the cities? The people that developed the Grand Plan a thousand years ago completely wiped the era from history.”

“Isn’t it enough to know that it was the only way to save the planet from overheating and the only way to stop any future nuclear wars? Wars just aren’t plausible anymore because a city could just get completely wiped out. Also, after all these centuries of shooting down each other’s satellites us have become more isolated and more safe.”

“But wouldn’t it be nice now if us could just spread out a bit?”

“You know darn well that cities are the only way to save the planet. It let the earth heal and now us know after centuries of having Equilibrium Day celebrations that the earth can continue to provide for all of us. If us start spreading out again and let the population grow us’ll end up back in the same place us were a thousand years ago. The only way to get what this world owes us is to leave things the way they are.”

“Huh. I suppose you think the Life Ledger is a good system too.”

“Of course I do. Everyone gets their 85 and the right to have a child or sell or give away that right. You get to replace yourself, no more no less.”

“It’s not fair. If a couple wants to have three kids they should be able to do it.”

“You know they can. They just need to pay up and a Life Broker will find someone will to be sterilized. The broker will handle the payment, sterilization and all the paperwork. Harder to do but someone can even get there through friends and family early terminations”

“You know that no one really does that anymore, right?”

“Well yeah, I know. People are smart enough to get their 85.” Jessica said as they approached an elderly woman who had fallen. Hundreds of people had passed her by until Sam helped her up.

“Why’d you help her up?” Jessica asked?

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s the naive thing to do. You help yourself and yours.” Jessica calmly stated

“And none of that sounds bad to you?”

“Hey, I didn’t say it was a perfect system but everyone gets a shot this way. Why are us even having this conversation? It’s not going to change.”

“It’s bullshit.” Sam growled.

Jessica smiled and pecked Sam on the cheek as she got off on the 50th floor of their apartment building. “You’re such a rebel. I’ll see you tomorrow. And watch how aggressively you express your displeasure. The city is always watching and listening.”

Sam exited the elevator on the 159th floor and strolled into his family’s apartment. The unit was stark. Nothing on the walls or counters. There was no value or function to décor so it was prohibited, as were pets. The city didn’t need more mouths to feed. Resources went to the people. The apartment faced southwest with sun pouring in. A rare find in the city of overcrowded tall buildings. It had always been a happy place for Sam but things had been tense of late. Sam’s suspicions heightened when he saw his dad was home from work early. Sam asked, “What are you doing home?”

His father, John, built thick like Sam said. “Well that’s quite a greeting. Can’t a guy come home early to be with his family?”

“I guess, but you’re usually pretty busy.”

“Well not tonight. Us have some things to talk about with you and your sister.”

As John finished his sentence Erica, Sam’s 15-year-old sister, let out a scream from their parent’s bedroom then abruptly opened that door and yelled “Fucking Grand Plan. That’s not fair!” She moved quickly down the hall and slammed the door as she entered her bedroom.

Addie, Sam and Erica‘s mom, then walked into the living room greeted by stares from Sam and John but she didn’t say a word. Addie was a slender woman in her early 40s with deep set brown eyes that matched the color of her hair. Her high cheek bones, sharp chin and a bronze skin tone coming from centuries of races mixing. After an awkward silence between the three Sam had time to work through what he had heard and seen. Putting the pieces together he spoke first “Oh my God. You’re pregnant! How? Never mind. Don’t answer that. What were you to thinking?”

“Us weren’t, obviously.” Addie said.

“How come at least one of you wasn’t sterilized after having two kids? Isn’t that required?” Sam asked.

“Usually you’re supposed to but technically it’s not required if you have the assets to buy a third life. Plus us always thought someday maybe the rules would change and us could have a third child or maybe even afford to buy the credits for one.” John said.

“A lot of other people want a third child too but since I know you don’t have the $5 million it takes to buy the rights to a newborn…when are you getting an abortion?” Sam stated more than asked.

Addie looked sternly at Sam and said “That’s not your decision, young man, and why do you happen to know what a newborn costs on the Life Ledger?”

“Oh, I looked at my value the other day or what I could sell my future offspring rights for but I don’t think that’s important right now. What are you going to do?” Sam asked.

Addie jumped in. “If us can just hide it for at least six months they can’t take our baby.”

“We’ll figure something out.” John added

“Sure, what the hell. Us have four grandparents all around 65. Why don’t you just ask the four of them to terminate early and then you would probably have enough money for that kid of yours.”

“Sam! Stop it! Us aren’t going to do that.”

“Well they might get it in their head. Shit, who is the parent here?”

“They won’t. They deserve their 85 and it won’t happen that way because this is not their problem. And it’s not your problem either.” John stated.

Sam was way ahead of his parents on thinking the situation through and grew more irritated. “Oh really? It’s not my problem? If this baby is born the city is going to get their 85 years one way or the other. They’ll either sell the baby or sterilize me or Erica to get their 85 back.”

Sam got up abruptly and as he walked out of the room yelled “And you think the city won’t figure this out very soon?” Then Sam’s bedroom door slammed just as Erica’s had done, leaving John and Addie quiet and stunned.

John broke the silence “That didn’t go well at all, and maybe he’s right. Plus you know one or both of us will go to prison for a year or two. You know they’re cracking down. Too many unplanned babies might hurt supply and demand. The cities precious Life Ledger value might go down or the city might go over their allowance.”

Addie thought for a moment and then said, “Let’s not do anything yet. Us have at least a little time.” They sat down together on the couch holding hands and staring out the window over the top of endless buildings trying to see where the future might take them.

Chapter 2

The next morning Sam came out of his room for breakfast and his dad was sitting at the kitchen table. Sam looked just as angry as he had the night before when he slammed the door. “Have you come to your senses yet?” Sam blurted out.

“You mean did us decide to have an abortion? No.”

“Seriously, what choice do you have?”

“Maybe it’s time to stand up. All the rules. This crazy city. You know what I mean. I know you feel it too. Claustrophobia, agoraphobia, call it what you want but I can see it in your eyes.”

Sam looked shocked but tried to hide it. “What do you mean?”

“I saw the application in your room for work outside the city. When were you going to tell us?”

Sam stammered. “I, ahhh…”

“Why do you think I’m a structural engineer? Every time our company builds a new skyscraper I get to be out there in the open air, hovering above the city. It’s the closest I’ll get. Tell me you didn’t feel the exhilaration yesterday on your trip. When everyone else was afraid and more comfortable inside. I live for those moments. Plus us pay more than us really should spend on this apartment. Without a little view I might go mad as many people like you and I did before us.” John looked relived to have shared his thoughts.

Sam absorbed the information but tried to remain detached. “Maybe you should’ve tried to get a job outside the city too.”

“I did try. Rejected every time. After a dozen rejections and years of wandering job to job I hit on the idea of being a structural engineer. It saved me.”

“So many people are afraid of being out there that I don’t understand why they wouldn’t take you.” Sam stated.

“Genetics. Same reason they might not take you. Not many of us left. Heard the city calls it the Wander Gene. They worry about people like us wandering off hoping to find nomads or just disappearing to live free until they die alone. That’s the reason most of the people with the gene died out over the centuries. They ended up dying on the open range, caught and

imprisoned or drunk, disappointed and alone in the city. Most didn't have kids knowing at some level that their kids likely would end up like them."

"Do you really think nomad tribes are out there on the open range? Us learned that the last of them died off centuries ago."

"Well, it doesn't really matter if you are stuck in the city." John stated.

"What can I do to get accepted?" Sam asked.

"You could try doing the opposite of what I did. I thought about this for years and I have some ideas. They'll certainly do a DNA test during the application process, although your AI chip probably already has the information…let's talk more soon."

"OK but let's talk about you and mom first, please."

Chapter 3

Sam wandered around the city for much of the next day thinking about what his dad had said. There were people everywhere but he had never felt more alone. He finally shuffled back into the apartment. There was no sign of his sister but his parents were sitting at the kitchen table as if they were waiting for him to arrive.

Sam stayed aggressive and initiated the conversation. "Have you changed your mind yet?"

"Us was planning to talk about you and your future." John shot back.

"That's not what us agreed to last night." Sam stated.

"You said that was what you wanted but that doesn't mean us agreed."

Sam was defiant. "First I think you owe me an explanation."

John and Addie glanced at each other and then Addie began to speak "Ok then Sam. We'll do it your way. I have a real hard time letting someone tell me what I can do with my body, and your dad, he struggled his whole life with trying to fit in. Sometimes he just doesn't and was happy to support my decision." They look lovingly at each other and held hands across the table.

Sam was more open knowing his parents had respected his priorities. "Trust me, I get that but you still have to live within the rules. Each legitimate gets 85 years if they last that long and you used your replacement years on me and Erica. What's not to understand? Do you have any plan here at all?"

Addie continued. “Us really don’t other than trying to get to six months. Maybe us won’t be able to keep the baby but they won’t force an abortion then.”

“Well, then us agree that you don’t have much of a plan.” Sam stated.

Addie responded. “It’s not your problem. Let’s talk about your future plans instead.”

“I don’t think you get it. This is my problem! They could sterilize me or take away my right to have a kid or access to the money for selling my offspring rights.”

“The city would never do that!” Addie stated.

Sam was incredulous. “Seriously? The city is going to get their years one way or another. It’s still an extra life above quota.”

John jumped in. “OK. Us gets it. Us will figure this out. Your mom is only a couple months along.”

Sam wasn’t letting go. “I could trade my life for one in a dumpy city somewhere else in the world then you’d only be a little bit short. Maybe a couple of your parents could terminate early and then you’d have enough money to buy a full life credit. Or I could get sterilized and you could use my offspring credit. That would get the city’s ledger back in line.”

“Us are not doing any of those things.” John stated.

Sam continued to probe for solutions. “What if one of our grandparents has a long-term illness? We’ve all heard the ads about the city paying a premium for the last 5 or 10 years of someone’s life if their illness is going to run up big medical costs. Better for the city to pay to terminate rather than pay for expensive treatment.”

“That’s crazy.” John yelled.

“Is it? They will be old enough soon that you will have their power of attorney. You can do whatever you want with them once they are 70.” Sam said.

“Well, right now us want to do nothing.” John said.

They sat without speaking for a couple of minutes as Addie wept quietly and they each thought about the ramifications of their limited options.

Finally, Sam spoke up again knowing that portion of the conversation was over and hoping to head off the next subject. “I’m not too interested in talking to you two about a future I might not even have.”

John regained his composure and said. “Well, you just listen then. I tried to lie and hide who I was and look what that got me? They weren’t comfortable that I could be outside the city and wouldn’t run. If you do that same thing they’ll know you’re lying and won’t give you a chance.”

“What choice do I have?” Sam asked.

“Embrace your genetics. The odds that the Wander Gene gets passed down are getting pretty remote. I’ve read that there are very few like you coming into the workforce this year and even less in the future. I think if you’re upfront you’ll have a chance. Let them know you’re not afraid of being out there and willing to do anything for the city. They might just be desperate enough to give you a shot.”

“Thanks for the advice but I’ll have to figure it out from here. You have enough to worry about.” Sam said as he looked at his mom. “This could end very badly.”

Sam got up and left the room.

Chapter 3

Within a week of submitting his application Sam found himself sitting at a table alone about to be interviewed. The process to this point went much more quickly than he anticipated but it didn’t leave him at all confident.

Sam heard a quiet knock at the door and before he could stand up or acknowledge anyone a man walked into the room. The interviewer was a nondescript and exuded the same indifference to Sam that he evidently had for his job. He put in an earpiece and sat there for a minute just staring past Sam.

Two other men gathered in an adjoining room on the other side of a two-way mirror. One of them, Kevin was a thin man with a mischievous smirk, black hair, brown skin and eyes so dark and set so deep that one would think they’d absorb all the light in the room. Yet somehow they still twinkled with anticipation and emotion. The second was Dr. Canard. He was a peculiar looking man with large eyes and glasses that made them look even bigger. Pasty white skin with an imperceptible chin that faded gradually from below his mouth to his chest. They stood next to each other facing the mirror.

Kevin turned to Dr. Canard and spoke first. “This is an applicant with the genetics you were looking for. In fact, he’s the only applicant this year in the whole city with this genetic profile.”

They watched as the interviewer ended his awkward silence and addressed Sam. “So why do you want to work outside the city?”

Sam sat up in his chair and answered quickly. “I knew the day of my senior class trip I needed to apply. The fresh air, the wind in my hair…I felt free. I have always felt trapped in the city.”

“What would you like to do?” The interviewer asked.

“Well someday I would aspire to be patrolling the open range. I want to be out there protecting our resources from poachers from other cities and nomads or whatever else us need protection from. Whatever you need me to do I will do.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know exactly. I just think you need people committed to do whatever it takes.”

“Well don’t assume that it will always be exciting.”

“I just want you to know that I’m up for anything and I also know that if I’m accepted I’ll likely have to start on the bottom of a team. Maybe working in the growing fields or better yet out in the open range on a harvesting team.” Sam said.

Dr Canard had seen enough. He turned to Kevin and said. “Hire him. Get him in the advanced training program immediately.”

Kevin was completely caught off guard and responded by saying “But us never take guys like this. He’s got the Wander Gene. Once he gets a taste of the open range it’s only a matter of time before guys like him run.”

“Not this one.” Dr. Canard assured him. “Us are desperate for people that aren’t cowards and I’ll make sure that he can’t run. Trust me. Hire him.”

The puzzled look continued to linger on Kevin‘s face but he moved quickly, went to the interview room, knocked on the door and entered. He turned towards Sam and said. “I’ve never seen this happen before but young man you’re already hired.”

The interviewer proceeded to leave the room without saying goodbye to Sam or acknowledging Kevin‘s existence. Sam and Kevin continued their conversation both relieved that the interviewer had left.

Kevin extended his hand and said. “You made quite the impression. You’ve been accepted into an advanced training program, if you’re interested.”

“Yes of course!” Sam said.

“Great. You’ll get your orders via your personal communication implant. I’ll be the manager for your training. I’ll see you at the training facility in two weeks.” Kevin turned quickly and walked out leaving Sam to sit back down, sighing and wondering exactly what had just happened.

As Sam sat pondering his future the individual that interviewed Sam now stood in front of Dr. Canard, staring at him blankly.

“So, Joe, do you have what I need on this young man?” Dr. Canard asked.

Joe said, “Yes sir. His mother’s chip indicates hormonal changes that are consistent with early pregnancy. They don’t have the assets to buy this offspring and they already have two children. I’m sure I can get Sam to see how cooperating will be in his family‘s best interest.”

“Excellent. I assume you’ll re-introduce yourself once he’s out at the training facility.”

Chapter 4

Two weeks went by quickly as Sam spent as much of his time as possible with Jessica. He had little interaction with his parents as he was still frustrated by their situation and not seeing any progress to resolve the problem. Sam and Jessica sat alone in Sam’s room on the bed holding hands.

Sam spoke first. “I’m shipping out tomorrow. To some compound to the west at the boundary between the growing feels and the open range.”

Jessica responded. “It sounds insane. You’ve never even been out of the city and now you’ll be 100 miles away from here in the middle of nowhere. Do you know what you are going to do?”

“I’m not sure but it will be better than what I’d be doing here. The only thing I’m going to miss about this place is you.” Sam said.

“So now I am a thing?” Jessica said with a smile and continued. “I’ll miss you too and it’s not forever. Who knows you might not even like it. From what I’ve read you’ll probably start out counting deer or fish or something.”

“You’re probably right but hopefully it will lead to something better down the road. Even helping with counts will be something. It’s amazing us can harvest millions of deer and buffalo every year for all these centuries by just letting nature do it’s thing.”

Sam tended to ramble and change subjects mid-sentence and this was just such a case as he continued talking. “I really need this three months away from here. My parents have some issues that they have to deal with while I’m gone.”

Jessica looked confused by that comment but she knew that it was best not to push. She leaned into him and gave him a kiss on the cheek and said goodbye and headed for the door without looking back.

Sam arrived at the complex a few hours before his meeting with Kevin and spent most of that time pacing around the compound. He couldn't help but wonder what went on in this little peculiar brown building at the end of the road flanked by the neatly placed tan colored buildings that made up the rest of the complex. The tan buildings lined both sides of the 200 yard parking lot that also served as a road that ended at the front door of the little brown building with it's impenetrable dark tinted windows. The lack of foot traffic to and from the building only further peaked Sam's interest in what went on inside.

Sam arrived at the designated meeting room ten minutes early, waiting for Kevin and the other trainees to arrive. He sat alone until Kevin entered precisely at the top of the hour.

Sam looked confused and spoke first. "Where is the rest of my class".

"Just you kid." Kevin stated.

Although that drew a curious look from Sam and concern, he had a more pressing issue on his mind. "So, what's with the shack at the end of the road?"

"Well, that's getting to the point. It's a super-secret surveillance unit. They're part of the elite fighting force that goes above and beyond anything that the public generally knows about."

Sam had remembered hearing stories about relatives of his that had had fought in the unit. Then he turned his attention back to Kevin and asked, "The creepy dude that interviewed me confirmed that there hasn't been nomad sightings in decades. Why is this unit still active?

"Lot's of issues in other cities. Some people revolting over conditions. I think that things are ramping up. Those folks keep to themselves when they're in camp and usually they aren't."

"Well let's go check it out." Sam suggested.

"That is about the quickest way to find yourself back in the city. The only way you'll see the inside of that building is if you're selected for the unit someday."

"How do I apply?" Sam asked.

"You don't apply. You get selected. Man up on your free-range time and you might have a chance." Kevin stated.

Sam stared at the building out the window for a long time. No one went into or out as he was thinking about the day when he would walk through that door.

The next morning Kevin and Sam met at a picnic table on the hill overlooking most of the facilities. Kevin faced towards the monotone buildings and behind them were untouched trees, prairies and a distant lake that met the horizon. Sam faced the seemingly endless miles of Growing Fields with the barely visible skyline just peeking above the horizon. Sam and Kevin had grown comfortable with each other quickly. Kevin felt and acted more like an older supportive brother than his manager.

Kevin initiated the conversation. “Thought I’d move our daily meeting outside. Usually training program participants are still getting used to all this open space but this will get you comfortable and ahead of the curve.”

“What curve? I’m still a class of one. Sam said.

“Yeah, this is a first for me. They want to accelerate your training and think that you are the only one in this year’s class that can handle the pace.”

“I do like it out here but it seems like you do too.”

“Well, not really at first but I’ve grown to enjoy it. Nothing like taking a dump in the woods to contrast with city life.” Kevin quipped.

Sam chuckled and then continued. “Never thought of it that way but yes I can’t wait for that first time.”

“Well please think of me when you do.” Kevin said and smirked.

“I’ll just be happy to be out there.”

“About that. You might want to keep your level of interest in the open range just between the two of us at this point.” Kevin suggested.

“I get it. I know guys like me don’t usually get into this program.”

“They must have something planned for you but I don’t know what it is. Just be careful. Dr. Canard is super smart but conniving as hell.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You sure you want to go through all of this? And be out there all alone?” Kevin asked.

“I really won’t be all that alone. I understand you’ll be hanging over my shoulder via drone every once in a while.”

“Oh you’ll be alone, don’t kid yourself. Two minutes a day is nothing.”

“Why even bother. I have this goddamn chip in my shoulder so you’ll know exactly where I am.”

“It’s really just to check on your sanity out there. We’ve had people lose it.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Protocol dude. Plus that chip is a small price to pay for survival. Us all want our time on the planet. Each get our own, you know. Selfish is good because it’s about self.”

“That’s the problem right there. Everyone looking out for themselves. I think selfish is what they bred.”

“Maybe. I do sound like a talking head when I think about everybody getting theirs.” Kevin admitted.

They both paused and Kevin took the opportunity to shift subjects. “Be careful with Dr. Canard. That dude is a whack job.”

“That’s two warnings. Heard. So, why do you work for him then?” Sam asked.

“Because I get to be out here and do some interesting stuff but I know there’s more that I don’t know than I do. Plus if I wasn’t here I’d probably be living with my mom. Kidding, sort of.”

“You are certainly a weird mix of concepts and ideas. I think you understand what drives me but you are still bought into the Grand Plan and Life Ledger and all the shit that goes with it.”

“The Life Ledger just makes sense. Selfishly driven capitalism at its best. 100 cities, 60 million people in each city that 6 billion life slots. All the economics of supply and demand at work so you can strive for the future you want.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little bit cold and selfish?” Sam asked.

“You say that like selfish is a bad thing. It’s about self. That is at the center of survival for all of us.”

“I just don’t get it I guess.”

“Well, it’s not something that you shouldn’t worry about now.”

“Good point. What do I need to be ready for when I’m out there?”

“There is so much space that you probably won’t see a soul but if you see a harvesting crew don’t make contact unless it’s an emergency. And if there are poachers they’d be further from the city than you will get. Besides, they’d be way to stealthy for you to find.”

“So, you just find me?”

“Obviously us’ll track your chip but without any satellites left communication can get dicey. Pretty sad with cities shooting down each other’s satellites that our communication system is worse than it was a thousand years ago.”

“Which means I’ll just see your drone once in a while. Sam stated.

“Yes, I rambled. Sorry. Be really careful out there.”

Sam sensed an urgency in his voice and asked, “Is that a normal warning or is there something more that I need to know?”

Kevin looked away as he was thinking things through and then continued. “Dr. Canard and his creepy sidekick Joe are up to something. They have asked about you more than normal recruits. Plus, your interview process was anything other than normal. I don’t know what they have in mind but it’s probably not good. Wouldn’t doubt that they might try to keep an eye on you too.”

“With another drone? Wouldn’t I see that coming?”

“Not sure. They are up to some crazy shit over there. I’ve heard they might have drones the size of insects now.”

“How could that be?” Sam asked.

“It’s all experimental and there is no way they can fly far if they did. There is no place for a decent sized power source. I’m getting you paranoid over nothing.”

“You certainly are!”

“You will hear from me once every 12 hours during your test and only for about a minute each time.” Kevin paused and then smiled and continued. “Oh, and I know this has been driving you crazy…yes there are still a few nomads left out there.”

“Ha. I knew it!” Sam responded.

“No you didn’t.”

“Well I thought so very aggressively.”

“Don’t get too excited. They are few and very far between and they are way to crafty for you to find. Hard to track down, but Dr. Canard tries to keep tabs on them with his drone fleet.”

“Are they on to him?”

“They must be aware because occasionally he’ll end up killing one or two of them to send a message that he can reach them. He’s a pretty morbid fuck too because he likes to say he’s culling the heard of the stupid ones. He’s obsessed with their DNA.”

“If he wants me to be part of killing those people that’s not going to be part of my job. No way no how.”

“Relax, I’m sure that’s not what he has in mind for you. Anyone with a drone and a joystick could do that job.”

“I guess there’s no way to know until I get back from my field test, whenever that ends up being. Anything else I need to know?”

“The harvesting crews and potential poachers we covered. The nomads, you’ll never see or hear them unless they want you to. They are part of nature. They come and go without a sound. They move like the wind.”

“So you’re saying they’ll kill me in my sleep if they want.”

“Yes but I doubt it’s their style.”

Chapter 5

The next morning Sam woke up early, dreading the thought of a meeting with Joe. He had no idea what it was going to be about but his experience with Joe in the interview process hadn’t been pleasant. His only thought was that it might be final instructions before his wilderness test.

Sam was early for the meeting but Joe was already there, just sitting calmly with his hands folded across each other on the top of the table. Sam took a seat across from him without speaking. The room was a little dirtier and uglier version of the interview room in the city where they had first met.

Joe didn’t say a word and just stared back at Sam. Finally out of impatience more than being uncomfortable Sam blurted out. “You could really use to improve your interpersonal skills. I’m out of here.” And then started to get up from the table.