

VIRTUAL HEAVEN

by,

TAYLOR KOLE

CHAPTER ONE

Alex Cutler spent most of his days stooped over the latest monitor, his black hair swaying against his smooth jaw line as he rocked in sync with the rhythmic clicks of the keyboard.

His co-worker, Sean, knocked on the open door. With long thinning hair and an inflated belly, he reminded Alex of an alcoholic skater from the early two thousands who told radically different stories about the wipeout that ended his career. Even now, he clung one decision from stardom. Like the thing where you doubled a penny everyday for a month, him posting a daily shot of his eclectic T-shirts would compound millions of followers in no time. Today's shirt, black with dominant white letters, read: 99.9% CHIMPANZEE.

If Alex received the riches his new employer promised, he would consider hiring Sean as a wardrobe consultant, or at least bribe him for his method of procurement. Until then, he dressed similar to today: slim, not skinny jeans, a snug V-neck under a loose fitting flannel, and shoes with fat laces.

"Today's the big day?"

Sean's grin relaxed Alex. "I guess we'll see. Come in." Over the past few days, he worried his decision to leave Vision Tech had irked his buddy. Despite never meeting outside of the office, Alex considered Sean his only friend.

"Knock that off," Sean said. "You don't work here anymore."

"One...second..." Alex's lightning fast typing increased as he neared his intended breaking point. Sean plopped in the chair across from him, set a few stapled pages on the desk, and grabbed the lone knick-knack—two metallic stick figures on a seesaw—before leaning back.

"...Aanndd there," Alex said. A few clicks, followed by a series of musical notes, and he shut down his computer for the final time as a Vision Tech employee. Remembering deserting his coworker claimed a spot on the day's itinerary; his eyes darted from Sean's as he gathered the random flash drives left in his desk, and placed them in a box on the floor.

"You can keep that," Alex nodded to the object Sean toyed with. Once given a tap, the seesaw rocked for an exorbitant length. Every time someone activated it, he thought of his childhood—of happy times gone forever. "Something to remember me by if I'm never seen again." He spoke in jest, but as the words slipped out, he accepted his subconscious might have summoned them as a warning to the alert self. Beyond "somewhere in the northwestern United States," the exact geographical location for the Broumgard Group remained a mystery. His grasp of the company's purpose could be

surmised in one line: Broumgard provides solace for the suffering and leisure for the affluent.

“Thanks, Bro.” Sean inspected the knick-knack. “Now, if you save the world or something, I’ll auction this off on eBay for a couple thou.” Apparently satisfied, he placed it on the desk and set it in motion. “I’ve done some digging on the Broumgard Group.” His voice grew somber as he nodded to the stapled pages. The gesture ignited fire under Alex’s skin, until he noticed Sean’s mouth twitch as he struggled to suppress a smile. “You’re not going to like what I discovered.”

Even with the knowledge of some impending gag, Sean’s words gave Alex pause. He scoured the Internet, yet still knew nothing about his future employer. *What company avoided search engines?*

Sean placed his fingers on the stapled pages and rotated them for Alex’s viewing. “Satan, my man. You’re going to be working for the devil. Like you always have.”

Alex chuckled, relieving tension.

His friend nodded for him to peruse the documents. “I’m serious. It’s total mind-fellatio. Obviously, you’re going to be working on a computer.” He pointed at the printout. “Computers are here to usher in the Antichrist.”

Alex focused on the apparent farewell joke. A simple bar graph constructed the black header accentuated with orange flames, *Youplaywiththedevil.com*. He appreciated the gesture, but...

“It starts breaking down Revelations.” Sean scooted to the edge of his chair. “How the first communication between artificial life is a sign of End Times, known as abomination, accomplished in 1969 when computers from CAL and UCLA spoke to one another. And how their mascots, the bear and the tiger, match the Bible’s prophecy. I mean, did you know the first Macintosh personal computer, the Apple One, retailed for six hundred and sixty-six dollars?”

Alex located that notation and frowned. He wasn’t ready to bathe in holy water, but six hundred sixty-six dollars seemed an odd price point, and he would have thought a terrible marketing strategy, but Apple thrived. Alex read a recent article claiming Apple teetered on the brink of becoming the first trillion-dollar company.

Noticing his consternation, Sean hummed a satisfied, “Mmm-Hmm.”

Despite the strange subject matter, Alex warmed with nostalgia. Part of him wanted to stay at Vision Tech. Keep life simple. He knew this world and would miss Sean’s antics, but something else pulled him forward, toward a grander fate.

Broumgard’s impressive salary held little sway. He had been headhunted before, especially after the success of his program, *Plow Straight*, universally adapted software for writers of code. The secrecy meant less. The NSA extended him an offer to apply during his freshman year in college. He tossed their information packet in the trash. Nothing could induce him to disregard the masses in favor of politicians. No, he chose medium pay in the private sector at a firm close to his vexing mother. But the Broumgard Group offered riches, secrecy, and a project of benevolence—who could resist that?

“That’s not all,” Sean leaned forward and flattened the stapled edge before tapping halfway down the paper. “If you take the word computer, and assign each letter a numerical value based on its alphabetical positioning, like A equals one, B equals two, C equals three, etcetera, add up the letters, then times that by six, the word computer equals six hundred sixty-six.” He paused for effect. “He’s rubbing it in our faces, my man.”

Concluding in the era of the internet a person could find data to support any argument, Alex exhaled, “Pretty compelling stuff.” He then resumed his packing, knowing, despite the absurdity of computers as the chariot for Satan’s son, he would check the math at a later time.

Grabbing the cardboard top to his box, he paused at the sight of a plastic-protected copy of *Computer World* magazine sitting atop the items. A younger version of him adorned its cover—an eighteen-year-old misfit wanting nothing but to escape the madness of Roger’s Park, his lower-class neighborhood.

The photographer had given him a Vision Tech sweatshirt for the photo op. Recalling the ratty condition of the gray, coffee stained V-neck underneath, he grinned.

In the six years since that photograph, Alex’s ability to visually encompass an idea, aggregate its many possibilities, and transform them into lines of codes, sequences, and commands, had grown by leaps and bounds. His hair hung farther down, too. Behind the eyes of that smiling young man lay an inner confusion, an uncertainty to the point of it all. His increasingly frequent bouts of anxiety focused on the possibility he was regressing; that he used each day to avoid thinking about the final one. Perhaps that represented the main reason he accepted Broumgard’s offer? To discover if a change of environment could help him identify his purpose. Maybe, if their definition of benevolence aligned with his, he would find salvation.

Sean stretched his neck to see what held Alex’s attention. “I kept a copy of that too.” His tone adopted a seriousness that caught Alex off-guard. When their eyes met, Sean bobbed his head. “Always knew you were special, Bro. For real.”

Alex shimmied the box lid on tight, leaned over, and stopped the rocking men.

“So, what’s next?” Sean lifted the knick-knack as he rose.

Good question. “Well, I’m all packed and my stuff has been picked up. I’m gonna stop by the condo for a final inspection and then that’s it for me and Chi-town.”

“Wow.”

Wow said it all. Alex breathed deeply. The banter had soothed his nerves, but, as he approached the point of no return, the trill crept back. Hefting the box, he rounded the desk, where Sean stood stiff, chewing on his bottom lip, his face furrowed in concentration.

Unfamiliar with seeing his friend ill at ease, Alex said, “I’ll stay in touch.”

“That’s fine,” Sean said with the wave of his hand, “But I want to ask a favor.” He locked eyes with Alex. “No, a pledge.”

“Sure, man, whatever.”

“It might be unethical or whatnot, but you have to promise me: if you find out you’re working on some Noah’s-Ark-type deal, you’ll let me know.”

Alex thought about that for a second. He had considered bionic prostitutes; text messaging God (or aliens); and, programming robotic dolphins that could spin at tremendous velocities allowing them to sink multiple enemy vessels. He hadn’t considered any doomsday scenarios.

Finding Sean’s expectant face watching his, Alex nodded.

Sean’s gaze lingered, possibly gauging Alex’s sincerity. Once accepted, he cracked a sly smile, they bumped fists, and Sean trotted away.

Alex's boss, and founder of Vision Tech, Robert Stetson, waited halfway down the center aisle that split the cubicles. He was the only person on the floor who dressed formal. The sight of the dapper man saddened Alex.

With a queasiness that mounted with each step, Alex reached him, balanced the box on his hip, and they shook hands.

"We're going to miss you something fierce here at VT," Robert said.

A few employees gathered around to share in the farewell speech.

"We all wish you the best of luck wherever..."

As Robert spoke about him having a job here if his new employment failed, and them being family, things Alex appreciated and agreed with, he retreated internally. Before completely cocooning himself, he caught sight of a screensaver behind Robert. The green mask from Jim Carrey's movie *The Mask*, floated across a black monitor: dominating eyes, over-sized teeth, a demonic bone structure. The periodic animation of the green face bursting into a cackle recalled his earlier conversation about computers being tools of the devil.

A thought chilled Alex. If he somehow discovered computers were harbingers of end times, would that knowledge be enough for him, or anyone in society, to forsake the beloved device?

CHAPTER TWO

“Am I coming through, sir?” Victor, Alex’s electronic assistant asked.

“Loud and clear,” Alex said.

Two-and-a-half days later, Alex continued adjusting to the helpful voice emanating from speakers in his home, and from an earpiece when venturing into Eridu, Broumgard’s compact city nestled in the mountains of Montana.

His weekend passed in a hum of shock and amazement. Debarking a private jet at a private airport in a private city and experiencing ultimate luxury: touring a towering glass hotel packed with amenities, riding a magnetic rail, visiting recreational parks and trails, moving into one of many stone residential buildings more appropriate to Park Avenue, was like stepping into a futuristic backdrop for the chosen.

Alex’s two-story, six-thousand-square-foot condo dwarfed all expectations. Starting with a glass-encased leather trench coat from the movie, *The Matrix*, displayed in the foyer. His lone neighbor on the top floor worked as a biomedical engineer. Enough said. Learning Brad FINDER helped found Broumgard and design their hidden oasis, amplified Alex’s feelings of grandeur.

Exiting building A, the eastern-most structure, he scanned the high-tech compound stretching roughly two miles from end to end. The morning sun chased shadows from the long empty road as it rose behind him. His breath plumed from the early frost, making him thankful he had worn a green flannel over his maroon dragon T-shirt. Before he approached, he waited for a couple to enter the nearest cylindrical tram tower, a shimmering chrome edifice that resembled a recently buffed spacecraft set to launch.

Feeling strangled by his building angst, he ignored the elevator, chose the set of zigzagging stairs, and attacked them two at a time.

Near the top, he heard voices and slowed, not wanting to be the guy who runs to his first day of work, despite its truth.

A tightness gripped his stomach as he stepped onto the concourse. Was he the last to arrive? Clusters of employees waited in the partially opened boarding area. A group with white shirts and black pants, like waiters; a mismatched crop of slackers he assumed were the programmers; two men and a woman in business attire; a dash of lab coats; a sprinkle of hospital scrubs. Stiffening, he honed in on a woman in baby-blue scrubs.

She waited with crossed arms in between the programmers and medical professionals. Slowly, the world around her lost focus.

Her shoulder-length black hair was tied behind her. Her loose fitting scrubs accentuated shapely hips and a healthy chest. Her casual morning countenance sparked to life, as if a profound thought surfaced. She turned in Alex's direction and met his stare.

Caught peeping, he pressed his lips together, brought his hand flush to his chest, and waved.

A small raise of the hand and she looked away, but Alex had an inclination he piqued her curiosity.

Shortly after, employees boarded the tram. She added evidence to his suspicions by looking at him a final time before entering a car three ahead of his. He considered racing to join her, but found himself alone on the platform, so he darted into the rear car.

Well-spaced sanguine-colored booths lined the interior. A television in between the windows displayed the morning news, which recounted yet another strain of avian bird flu, one that scientists feared would soon mutate and decimate the human race. He wanted to turn it off, but an acrylic screen protector denied access to the controls.

He avoided the news as if *it* carried the contagion. If ever a day arrived when he found himself one of the throngs of people salivating for the national news, he would fill a bath and pull the television in with him, ending the madness.

Before he queried Victor about at least changing the channel, a stainless steel cart grabbed his attention. Trays were filled with fruits, yogurts, protein bars. Alex selected an Evian from the ice. Was he the only person who found it interesting that one of the first major water companies chose to invert the word naïve, and market a previously free product to consumers?

Finally, and only in the land of Oz, a quaint condiment section offered bins of pills representing every color, size, and shape.

Alex peered closer. Cognitex/cognitive function, Glucosamine Sulfate/joint health, GlycolCam/improved artery efficacy.

"What's up with the pills, Victor?" He asked as he traced his fingers over a pile of fish oil tablets.

"Vitamins and minerals, sir."

Alex grabbed two for brain function and heart health and one for intestinal integrity, then said, "When in Rome," before washing down his handful with a gulp from the bottle of water whose name mocked its customers.

The tram rode exceptionally smooth—not a screech sounded as it glided to its first stop near the security section. A half-dozen men in gray and black uniforms entered the cars ahead of his. None joined his cabin, adding disappointment. This was his big day. He wanted to chat with someone about it. He wanted to acclimate. He wanted to get the communication ball rolling, but it was like his maroon dragon T-shirt displayed a scarlet "A".

Next stop, the hotel La Berce, where the vast majority of the passengers exited and a few boarded. Alex's mystery woman waved goodbye to someone staying on the tram and sought out the back car (which caused his heart to flutter), before she followed the group inside.

As the doors started to shut, an obese man with greasy hair barged past Alex. Almost as round as he was tall, the man wore a white lab coat over a dangerously tight TCU football jersey. The baffling contrast stole Alex's desire to initiate conversation.

The man carried his briefcase with two meaty hands as he shuffled to the booth, sat, and situated the suitcase on his lap. He unclasped the locks, retrieved *Doctor Sleep* by Stephen King, opened it to his bookmarked page, and, while keeping his eyes in his book, said, “You’re one of the new guys?”

Alex considered sitting across from him, but only stepped closer. “I am. My name’s Alex.”

“I’m Jason.” He flipped a page. “You’re the one taking over the CSD?”

Comprehensive Software Design. People who worked with computers were always altering their titles, as if the glamour of what they did increased with each new moniker. Programmers referred to themselves as software engineers, networkers were interface specialists, and animators were graphic designers. Presumably, Alex would be heavily involved in programming and overseeing the other. Maybe he should ask to be called a technological maestro?

Instead, he asked, “Are you a programmer?”

“Software engineer.”

Of course.

Jason’s hand crept in the side pocket of his lab coat and delicately removed a king-size Snickers. With two fingers, a thumb, and deft precision, he exposed a portion of the chocolate bar and bit into it.

Alex wondered if this guy knew how tight his faded jersey fit. It clung like a girdle and had to be obstructing circulation, definitely respiration. Packing even one extra bite into his form might cause the jersey to spontaneously Hulk Hogan.

Flashing colors drew him to the muted television. Breaking news. Some guy shot some people. He turned away, disgusted. Evidence existed to support airing these stories perpetuated them, yet in America, ratings trumped morality.

Beyond the screen, the mountain scenery captivated him. A beauty behind man’s beast. Snow still coated their tops. Alex wondered about the temperature at those elevations? Sunny and comfortable? Could he wear shorts as he forged through snow? He wasn’t sure. He had never been near a mountain, but if the opportunity presented itself, he intended to find out.

Inertia gently pitched him forward as the tram slowed. They passed over a deserted parking lot in front of the glass building residents called the Atrium.

Alex waited by the door as the tram crawled to a stop. Taking a deep breath, he adjusted his hair and tapped his foot. Today he learned the big secret. A technology unrivaled by anything on the planet.

He wasn’t much of a reader, but bookshelves lined his home office, and surprisingly, he had finished the majority of a novel the previous night. Some sci-fi bender that dealt with wormhole travel. The possibility he would be gating off to other worlds kept him awake past midnight.

“Need my help getting anywhere?” Jason asked from behind him.

Alex could use the guidance, but it was day one at ground zero and he wanted to take it in.

“No, thanks. I’ve got Victor with me.” He tapped his ear as he exited.

“Who? Oh, yeah. Alright, man. See you down there.” When the doors opened, Jason stepped past him and joined the crowd.

Like an oversize hamster tunnel, the tram tower connected to the Atrium by a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree glass skywalk. He waited for the employees to pass through the two sets of double-doors and then, once alone, asked, "Okay, Victor, which way?"

"Your destination is work area one. Once you enter the Atrium, you will have the option of taking the elevators to your left or the stairs directly in front of you."

Alex searched the ceiling for a set of cameras, assuming Victor must be linked with them to know his location. Finding none, he concluded the earpiece used GPS tracking.

"When you arrive at the main floor, speak with one of the front desk clerks."

Alex pushed through the double-doors and paused. A glass rail encompassed the third floor. He eased to its edge and peered over the main lobby.

Morning sunlight slanted through the glass front and reflected off of the emerald-colored floor tiles, illuminating the open entrance. Chrome letters, as dominant as banners, tiled vertically down the west wall: 'B G'. Two arching reception desks waited beneath them with generous halls to either side. A half-dozen security officers busied themselves behind the desks; some watching monitors; a few jotting notations; others in conversation.

Spotting Broumgard's director of personnel, Tara Capaldi, brought back images of their first meeting at the airport. Tan business skirt hugging athletic thighs and hips; designer watch and pumps; blond hair high-lighted with brown streaks and pulled back in a ponytail. She had been the prettiest woman Alex ever touched. Though in her late twenties, something in her hazel eyes seemed aged, cold, and repelled any notion of attraction. She was a professional destined for bigger things. Alex respected her knowledge and organizational skills. Beyond that, he simply appreciated her ability to reduce his tension with a few words.

She worked behind the closest counter, bent at the waist, observing a monitor with one of the security officers (Victor's idea of front desk clerks). The elevator chimed its arrival behind him. Turning, he saw the final stragglers from the tram boarding, and he hurried over to join them.

As the glass elevator descended, he stared at the only familiar face in the crowd. Tara laughed at something a security officer said. Everyone near her turned to catch a glimpse of the act.

Making eye contact with Alex, she beamed; waved him over.

Removing his earpiece as he exited, he placed it in his flannel pocket.

Taking in the bustle, it seemed most of the security officers at Eridu resembled NFL linebackers in their prime. The others, weight-pit champions from Riker's Island.

"Good morning, Mr. Cutler," Tara said as they shook hands. "Is everything going well so far?"

"Morning, and I can't imagine things going any better."

A coy smile. "Don't be so sure about that," she said as she passed and motioned for him to follow her down one of the two main hallways.

A mammoth security guard watched Alex as he trailed her. The gaze stayed firm, but non-threatening. "Good morning, Mr. Cutler."

"Morning," Alex replied as he scratched his neck, unsettled that a man of those dimensions knew his name prior to introduction.

“I’ll take you to meet your team,” Tara said. “There are twenty-six full-time programmers here. Without guidance, they lack the type of synergy you instilled at Vision Tech.”

He wasn’t sure if he instilled anything more than *Plow Straight*. Camaraderie might have been a by-product of the superiority complex it initially provided.

She stopped in front of a door marked, “Work Area One,” and grabbed the knob. “You ready?”

Hearing excited chatter coming from the room, he looked at Tara to reply, but she opened the door. The noise inside drowned out his intended words.

Desks of average size filled the room. Most occupied by talkative people dressed in casual attire. High ceilings; walls decorated with pin-up posters of comic books and sci-fi movies; and an elevated platform, with a dominant desk, that faced the rest of the area.

A few women dotted the room of predominantly male, middle-aged, computer-geek types. Two men wore VR headsets. By the way their fingers strummed the air, they interacted with private worlds. A foursome of Asians had their desks pushed together near the far wall. They focused on a small man with bright orange hair who stood atop a chair, engaged in an animated tale in a foreign dialect.

Alex spotted his rotund tram companion, Jason, in the rear, feet propped on a desk. His back faced the rest of the room as he read his novel and mined Whoppers from a spilled pile.

“The annual hiring day is a big one for us,” Tara said. “A day where we open our lives and allow special individuals, like yourself, to become part of the family.

“Here at Broumgard, we offer a multitude of entertaining events for our clients. I’m sure you’ve heard about many amenities offered at hotel La Berce, but I want to introduce you to our real attraction: the Lobby.”

Alex turned back toward the lobby, curious if he had missed something, and back to Tara, who watched him with a conspicuous smile.

“Do you like football, Alex? We play a game each year: security personnel versus programmers.”

The basic rules of football eluded Alex. He wasn’t sure if a touchdown meant six, seven, or eight points; but as her words settled, he surveyed the room. Most of the men and women were either small, overweight, or brittle.

He recalled the security officers mulling behind the service counters behind Tara, glanced around at his teammates again, and then relaxed, followed by the bite of disappointment. If football was involved along with programmers, this whole hyped event revolved around a super video game. Secretly, he had been hoping for the alien technology or maybe the Noah’s Ark thing—God knew the world needed another cleansing.

Video gaming bummed him out. He didn’t play video games as much as his peers, and despite having a knack for them, enjoyed them less. He could spend an afternoon behind a controller, but once finished and looking back, he wondered where the time had gone, and regretted the waste. One hour into his first day and he was thinking he might buck Tara’s claim and become the first person to quit the Broumgard Group.

Tara raised her voice, “Everyone quiet please.”

The orange-haired man stopped abruptly, hopped down, and sat.

Tara's voice so effectively silenced the rowdy room and brought order, Alex doubted if a choreographer, given a month to rehearse, could have done it faster.

"This is Alex Cutler. He will be leading you nomads once he completes orientation. If anyone has any questions before we head over, now is the time."

Alex raised his hand and noticed another man—a thin albino with white hair, reddish eyes and large freckles--doing the same.

Tara sighed. "Does anyone who has worked here more than a few days have any questions?" She stared playfully at Alex until he lowered his arm. "As you two can see, everyone here is wearing name tags, for today only, so learn them while you can."

The other newb's nametag read, Carl W. The ghost-like man didn't seem old enough to drink alcohol. His full lips and wide nose gave him African features. Were there African albinos? Either way, Carl's bewildered look comforted Alex, for it exceeded his own.

"Okay, everyone, let's head over to the elevators," Tara announced.

As if a school bell had sounded, the chatter resumed and everyone stood. A few employees gathered around Alex, inspecting him.

"What position are you looking to play?" Kole asked. His dimensions matched Alex's. However, in a society that demanded perfection, Kole's quarter of an inch off the forehead, eyes two millimeters larger, and slightly longer nose took Alex's seven to Kole's nine.

Alex shrugged. He would play whatever, once he figured out the controls.

"How about this," Kole said, "are you a hot shot or a team player?"

Alex answered honestly. "Team player."

"That's good. We have too many hot shots on this team," Denise, a black, five-foot-one, bulldozer of a woman, said. The plastic beads on the ends of her hair rattled against her shoulders as she moved. The "e" at the end of her name trailed off and dragged around the tag providing a border, complete with thorns and leaves.

"If you need anything," she placed her hand seductively on Alex's forearm, "anything at all, you come see me." She glided her fingers across his arm as she turned to leave. Once near the door, she high-fived another female on their way out.

Kole patted Alex's shoulder. "What's it gonna be then, bud, offense or defense?"

"I haven't played football since I was eight," he said groggily as he recovered from the come-on. "But I can hold my own at Madden."

The orange-haired Asian jumped on a chair and formed his arms into various flexes. "I hoe down the Dee!"

His display earned numerous chuckles, applause, and cheers of support from the exiting programmers.

"The thing is," Kole said, drawing Alex's attention, "this is no video game. It's full-contact, take-no-prisoners football."

"Well, I hope the guards play touch," Alex said with a dry laugh.

"I play left tackle," a wiry woman in her early twenties said as she passed, "so don't try and snake it."

A female left tackle that weighed a hundred and thirty pounds?

If no video game, maybe they wore robotic suits and this would be some future ball where gravity didn't matter and propulsion amplified their movements. High-velocity contacts would create jarring sounds as loud as head-on collisions. If so, the

technology might be safe enough for everyone present, but Alex would pass. Well, more likely, he would want to pass, but suit up and play, the entire time spent in a state of uncomfortability, wishing he'd had the balls to say no thank you..

The two newbies, Alex and Carl, were the last to enter the rowdy hallway. A congestion of more than two-dozen security officers and programmers shuffled as one, all hooting and trash-talking.

“Carl, Alex, you guys stay with the group,” Tara said. “They’ll get you where you need to go.” She made sure they heard her and then knifed toward the front of the crowd.

Most of the security officers wore gray police-like uniforms, while a few wore college jerseys. The two-way heckling frothed—a bass versus tenor showdown.

The confident demeanor of the programmers did little to soothe Carl, who kept a bewildered half-snarl as they moved down the hall, but Alex knew they were going to a massive X-Box showdown or something like in that movie, *Surrogates*, where you controlled an avatar.

Now that would be awesome.

Alex trailed a six-foot six-inch tall black man whose XXXXL University of Michigan jersey might as well have been made of spandex, whose biceps were so thick, they could have stored Alex’s thighs. As if sensing Alex’s inspection, he turned to face him. His smile appeared normal enough.

The giant pointed at his own nametag to communicate above the ruckus: Dalton.

Alex checked himself for his nametag, intending to point, but Dalton waved away his effort, non-verbally saying he knew all about Alex Cutler. He imparted a dual thumbs up and faced forward.

Employees gathered around a set of ivory-accented chrome elevators. The more time he spent loitering around the excited combatants, the more his tension abated. Regardless of their destination, people were eager to arrive.

The elevator opened for the third time, and he boarded at the end of the load.

A mix of security jocks and programming nerds filled the car. Alex’s anticipation climbed with each centimeter rise in elevation. He found himself wishing months had already passed and he was integrated into the amiable atmosphere. The conversations inside carried an air of diplomacy. A pinch of jest. “Who are you guys starting at quarterback?”

“This year *we* win.”

“I’M A BEAST!”

“Seriously, how are you going to stop Jason?”

Jason? Thought Alex. If they referenced the one he knew in the super tight lab coat, they only needed to toss a Baby Ruth on the ground. Boom, problem solved.

The elevator opened into a spacious white room. Rows of chairs, delineated with heavy green curtains stretched back as far as he could see. A few were pulled shut.

Staff members in lab coats interacted with holographic charts floating two feet before them, a pea-size lens clipped to their shoulders. He marveled at the simplistic efficiency of the design. The nurses shouted names. Individuals stepped forward, received terse directions, then merged into the rows of chairs. He watched a man enter the fifth row and walk down five stations where an attendant waited for him. As the man sat, the nurse guided the army green privacy curtain around them.

“Alex.” Tara clutched his arm. Her eyes coursed with excitement. “Are you ready for the greatest experience on the planet?”

“What is it? Are we playing football on a VR screen or something?”

“Alex Cutler!” A worker shouted.

“Something like that. Words can’t describe it. Just remember that you will be totally safe.” Tara pulled him toward the woman, who inspected him.

“Alex Cutler?”

He nodded.

“Two-eighteen.”

Alex allowed himself to be led deep into the second row. His mind processed the possibilities; virtual reality, a virtual screen, deep hypnosis, sensory deprivation, toxic induced hallucinations. All of these had an appeal to him, some more than others. He simply wished for a little back-story.

On his approach, he spotted Carl nestling into a chair. Two security officers stood businesslike to either side of him. Carl’s face displayed his anxiety. Before he noticed Alex—who waited to give him a comforting nod—an officer shucked the durable curtain closed.

“Here we are,” Tara said as she motioned to a chair. “Take a seat, please.” The area was eight feet square. A control panel that resembled an electronic lectern rested in the corner. Alex eased into the comfortable, black leather seat. Underneath him, a block-shaped apparatus flickered with lights. Once settled, he detected the slight vibrations of hardware. With hardware present, he could eliminate toxic induced hallucinations, but not too much else.

“Sit back, Alex. Relax,” Tara coaxed as she gently assisted him.

The chair reminded him of a top-of-the-line dental seat. Flat and strong at the shoulders, curved to hug his lower back. Alex tingled with his first bite of excitement. The chair inflated near his ankle, the space behind his knees, near his armpits, effectively reducing the feel of contact.

Two uniformed guards entered, and stood sentry, replacing Alex’s excitement with angst.

“It’s okay,” Tara said. “The officers are here for first time jitters.” She removed a compact plastic case from her pocket and withdrew a small metallic pistol with glass vial, it’s fluid splashing about.

Toxic induced hallucinations were back on.

One look at the pair of beefcakes helped to evaluate his current options.

“I’m going to give you a mild sedative.” She stood there holding the device, waiting for his redundant approval. “Trust me.”

“I guess I’m going to have to, huh?” he said with a half-smile and a bit of spite. This was life in a nutshell. Limitless possibilities around you, but only one actual choice, usually decided by another person.

“It’s a very small needle,” she said as she extended her arm.

He closed his eyes and braced for the puncture, but it never came.

Tara described it correctly, a ssmmaall...

His world went black.

CHAPTER THREE

Alex detected muffled voices in the distance. They continued to clarify until he recognized them as the playful banter of the security officers and programmers. The grogginess swarming his facilities abated more abruptly than a full night's sleep.

He sat on a woven cloth love seat in an all white room. White as if the entire world had been removed, leaving the backdrop of God's reality. Carl shared the sofa with him, staring into the distance, his back stiff, his white hair camouflaged, his hands clasped between his legs as if awaiting a bus.

A man with a cross-fit body and shaved head occupied another love seat to their left. His physique indicated security officer. Shock intruded his senses; they all wore Broumgard shirts, blue jeans, and low-top sneakers. Had they been stripped and redressed since the injection?

Next to him, the officer's right knee bounced; he smeared his palms across the tops of his thighs; his head swiveled as if he expected an ambush.

The rest of the employees gathered in the center of whiteness. Lacking objects to compare and contrast—trees, cars, desks—the distance became difficult to judge. They could be twenty yards, or two hundred yards from him?

Tara stood in front of the three men with her hands behind her back. She wore a snug skirt, a light pink business blazer with black piping. Her shirt, unbuttoned to mid-breast, exposed more cleavage than he would have thought her capable of gathering.

"Welcome, gentlemen." She spread her arms as if about to start an open house, and then paused, peered at Carl. "Are you okay, Mr. Wright?"

Carl lifted his head. His red eyes glossy, as if medicated.

"Are you with us?" Tara stepped toward him.

"Umm..." Carl cleared his throat. "Err... I think so."

"What kind of shit is this?" The man with the shaved head barked and stood. "Where the hell did you take me? And what kind of freaky drugs were in that needle?"

"Calm down, Mr. Robertson. You are in the Lobby, our main attraction here at Eridu. If you would please take your seat, I will lay out a brief explanation and then answer any questions you may have."

"I ain't sittin' shit, lady." He horse-kicked the love seat, knocking it a few inches across the indefinable white.

Alex inhaled sharply and looked to Carl, who stared ahead, perhaps oblivious to the mood change.

"I didn't sign up for no freaky shit. Wherever the hell you took me, it was against my will and I want to leave. Now." He stepped closer to her.

The volume of the crowd decreased; heads turned in their direction.

Alex stared at the employees. Would no one come to Tara's aid? If this muscular man got physical, would Carl just sit there? Which left Alex, and similar options. Perhaps Alex could ask the guy to take it easy before being grabbed in an expert judo move and feeling his arm break?

"Mr. Robertson, you need to calm down and let me explain."

"Explain my ass." He stepped within a yard of her and pointed. "I fought for this country. Did shit for you you'll never know—"

In the midst of his rant, Tara casually said, "Employee command, Tara Capaldi, halt Mr. Robertson, lower volume thirty percent."

The man's voice dimmed.

Noticing it, he hesitated before he continued, "Halt? I don't think so. In fact, I'm outta here." He pivoted to go, but as his foot extended, it met with an invisible barrier and went back to the ground. He shoved his arms out in a pushing motion. They connected with a wall of some sort.

Tara paced around the angry man as he kicked and tried all directions, finding himself encased. Meanwhile, she scooted the love seat back to its original position.

"Look lady, if you—"

"No. You look," Tara snapped. Then to the air, she said, "Manual move, Mr. Robertson." She placed her hand on the outside of the invisible cage and effortlessly guided the box containing the livid man until it butted against the love seat.

"You can either sit down and take some deep breaths or you can stand here for the next four hours and yell yourself hoarse. Those are your options."

Mr. Robertson tested his new surroundings, and, discovering his mobility limited, swallowed, swiped his palms across his face. With a clearer demeanor, he said, "I mean, I just feel I'm entitled to know where I am." He kicked at the invisible barrier one more time, much of his venom dissipated. That last one appeared more of a verification kick. "How is this happening?"

"All I need is your word you will relax, have a seat, and give me a chance to explain."

Nodding, Mr. Robertson licked his lips.

"Remove halt of Mr. Robertson." Tara motioned for him to sit.

The man nodded, bent, and slid his hands across his wide thighs as he eased onto the cushion's edge.

Tara allowed a few seconds to pass, the chatter of the crowd returned, and then she spoke, "Monitor, orientation video." On her right side, a rectangle, the size of a playing card, appeared. With one swift movement, it expanded to a seventy-inch monitor and displayed the company logo.

"Adisah Boomul assembled the Broumgard Group," Tara began. "A Rwandan born American considered by many to be the first true hacker. Roughly twenty-five years ago, he wrote a program for ghost bots, commonly known as botnets, inadvertently spawning a class of cyber rebels."

Alex had heard rumors of a godfather to hacking, but he didn't involve himself in hacking. That was a destructive tool, black hatter stuff. Alex liked to build, expand, create. Nevertheless, he knew botnets were the most popular method for crashing the servers that allowed websites to function. A hacker would send out a wave of e-mails or

instant messages to normal, unsuspecting citizens. When the recipient opened the e-mail or replied to the instant message, the ghost haunted their system.

To be an effective Internet troll, a hacker must be able to take websites offline. They need thousands of botnets, often tens of thousands of different IP addresses bombarding the URL simultaneously. This requires the cooperation and coordination of multiple trolls, each assaulting the target domain with their army of minions.

There were a few infamous hackers who claimed to have hundreds of thousands of botnets at their disposal, and whispers of an internet megladon who controlled millions.

Alex had written his own software to detect botnet activity and learned hackers tried to capture his IP address five to twenty times per year. When friends asked for copies of his program, they would call minutes after installation confirming they had unwillingly been a hacker's slave.

To Alex, they were modern day Robin Hoods. Anonymous represented the people and targeted the power hungry. They were Davids fighting the ever dominant Goliaths. That was why his botnet program not only collected dust, but had been wiped from his personal computer—*viva la revolucion!*

Tara continued, "After a six year stint helping the Federal Bureau of Investigation secure their sensitive data, Mr. Boomul moved to his beautiful Lake Tahoe estate, where he began working on his dream child," Tara waved her arms around, "The Lobby.

"Using his notoriety, Mr. Boomul pooled specialists from varying fields and different parts of the globe. With the funding of Roy Guillen, Broumgard's controlling partner, a coalition was created with one purpose: to create a virtual reality simulator capable of transporting a person's conscious to the limits of the human imagination." She paused and then continued in a more confident tone. "And today, nearly twenty years later, you will experience our newest world." The screen next to Tara changed to a football field. Players emptied out of a locker room tunnel onto a field of green stripped with white.

Behind the monitor, off in the distance, the crowd of employees grew restless. The occasional, "Let's go," and even a, "Hurry up bitches," was overheard.

"In this particular world, Big Hitters' Ball, players are assigned positions and given improved physical attributes equal to their counterparts: concentration, execution, and teamwork decide victory." She let a beat pass. "Full contact, heavy hitting football is played here, ladies and gentlemen. So be ready for it."

The screen showed a football player in full accoutrements. The guy ran to the linebacker position and went through a series of drills. In one, the linebackers charged at a runner and smashed into him with enough force to dislodge the runner's helmet.

Virtual reality or not, Alex could not be involved in a hit like that—giving or receiving. His head would fly off; his spine would snap; he'd crumple into a pile of mush.

"Not to worry," Tara added as the player on the ground got up and trotted off in the opposite direction. "In this world, nothing can cause actual injury. The Lobby removes your ailments. It imbues you with confidence; it connects you, on equal terms, with people of all ages and geographies. With each new world, it brings you closer to the dreams we all share."

Mr. Robertson's attitude seemed to have improved. He teetered on the edge of his seat, looking eager. Finally, he stood, hands raised in surrender. "So right now, I'm in a

machine? The only one like it in the world?” He motioned to Alex, Carl, and himself. “And if we go down there with them, we will enter a football stadium?”

Tara waited a beat. “Yes.”

“And my knee?” Mr. Robertson lifted his knee and clasped it with both hands. “My injury from college will be totally healed?”

“Yes, all physical ailments are removed as soon as you enter the Lobby. In Big Hitters’ Ball, your entire physical makeup will be altered.”

Mr. Robertson stepped closer to Tara, still holding his hands up in the gesture of submission. “Well,” he clapped them together, “that’s all I need to hear, Ms. Capaldi.” He cautiously crept toward the group of people. As he neared Tara, he asked, “That’s okay, right? I can be done here?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” she said nodding past her, “Go ahead.”

He jogged down the corridor toward the rest of the employees, hopping on one leg as he went, testing its durability.

At Mr. Robertson’s approach, the crowd erupted into applause and catcalls.

Tara turned her attention back to Alex and Carl, “Any questions?” The screen net to her flashed a purple question mark.

Carl raised his hand slowly, as if assisted with helium. “Where are we, physically, right now?”

“Physically, you are sitting in your access station on the upper level of the Atrium.”

“What about, has anyone ever died or gone crazy after entering? Are there other worlds? And how are we connected?”

“Great set of questions, Mr. Wright. The answer to the first is, no. No one has ever died. I am happy to tell you we have not had so much as a headache reported. Second, creating worlds is a debilitating task. All of your work as programmers will be to that end. Currently, we offer three worlds: Big Hitters’ Ball, which we will visit today. Pleasure House 101, and our most interactive world, San Francisco 1968, where clients can spend eight hours each day enjoying the sunshine and atmosphere of the Bay area as it was in 1968.”

Alex considered the implications. The particulars aside, the software to operate complex machines, like an F-22 Raptor fighter jet, required millions of lines of code. What exactly would it take to populate a world? The five senses? Even something as trivial as the physics and texture of a blade of grass could devour terabytes of RAM.

“And as to your question of how we connect,” Tara said to Carl, then to the air, she added, “Monitor, run AD-11 intro.”

The screen flipped through classroom images: employees in lab coats; posters of the brain; anatomical replicas on countertops.

“Initially, the entire staff of the Broumgard Group focused on connectivity. Since our inception, a team of biologists, physiologists, and many others, headed by Dr. Bradley Finder, worked around the clock, postulating and testing a multitude of theories. After forty-two months, the team designed the AD-11, which is commonly referred to as, ‘The Marker.’”

The shape of the object on the screen reminded Alex of an anvil. He edged forward. His face creased in concentration.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

