

THE CUT

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A THESIS

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THE CUT is a novella centered on Kyle Gordon. He works as a Cutter for a government program that has been tasked with weighing one citizen against another. The dangerous rise in global temperature has unleashed a pandemic that seems unstoppable. In an attempt to preserve civilization people like Gordon are deciding who is worth saving and who isn't. Those that pass the Cut are then taken into orbit where they will stay safely out of reach from the catastrophes on Earth. Gordon's task becomes even more difficult when he realizes that one of the citizens he failed was actually a connection to his past.

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## DEDICATION

For my mom, Janie, who has been a good friend, an eager cheerleader, a wise counselor, a trusted confidant, a gentle editor, a loving mother, and a constant inspiration.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to humbly thank each and every one of my loved ones, my family, and my friends for helping me be the guy I am today. I would never have gotten so far without you.

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## THE CUT

Dr. Kyle Gordon brushed a hand over his face feeling the stubble that had grown since he'd woken up earlier that morning. He was once again working the dayshift alone in a small office he shared with his nighttime counterpart of the Cut. He didn't have any photographs of family to liven up his desk—his wife had died two years ago from the Hot Flu, and he preferred to keep things purely utilitarian. His horseshoe-shaped work station bore thin computer screens that glowed like altars on each desktop. Beside the left arm's altar was a small rectangular pad that scanned his thumb allowing him access to the restricted programming at his station. To the right of that monitor was a pair of notebooks. He gazed beyond the monitor and books through his glassed-in office, down the hallway to where the afternoon daylight filled four large windows.

He could see the glare of sunlight, but nothing else. Only a few people would be out anyway. The daytime hours had become most people's chosen bedtimes with the majority of businesses operating on a nocturnal schedule. The days were just too hot and dangerous to enjoy. The temperatures varied in their severity but could reach over 110 degrees by midmorning. And there was the Hot Flu.

Gordon preferred to work these hours to ensure he would be left alone. His drive to interact with other people had dwindled to near hermitage the longer he worked as a Cutter. And besides, the government facility where he lived and worked met all his basic needs.

Sighing, Gordon looked back at the picture on the screen. Brooks Whent grinned at him. His broad smile brightened the photo and to a lesser extent, the gloomy office. Gordon couldn't remember the last time he had smiled half so large and that thought made him feel jealous and sad. He pushed the pale red tab in the top right of the screen with his finger causing the tab to flare scarlet and the words "Candidate Failed, further comments?" to flash across the screen.

Gordon touched the question mark's box to give Whent the one kindness he could. The box opened into a comment space and Gordon typed, "B. Whent has no siblings or biological children and while not a passable candidate, he would make a fine donor for the Seed Protocol."

There was nothing wrong with Whent but he didn't have enough right with him to pass the Cut. Gordon had run the equations twice already and this candidate hadn't come close either time. He probably shouldn't have spent so much time on Whent but more and more, the way he saw it, he was making decisions about someone's life, and therefore, he felt the need to be overly thorough.

Evaluators, like Gordon, were commonly called Cutters within the facility, a title he bore with disgust. He had been making cuts for the program for a little over a year and was one of its most efficient workers. The Cut program was created to determine which America North citizens would be taken to a massive station that floated in Earth's orbit. The station was self-contained and could hold tens of thousands of people. It was initially built as a jumping off point for man's further exploration and colonization of space. However the emergence of the Hot Flu, changed the government's priorities. Enterprises like exploration were quickly abandoned for the sake of preservation.

The crisis had begun slowly. At first there were only arguments about why the average global temperature kept rising. Fingers were pointed at everyone from corporations to governments to everyday people not bothering to recycle. As the day light hours became more and more unbearable, drought and crop shortages turned the phenomena into a global catastrophe. Then another menace emerged, not from any single nation but from the oceans around them all.

A strain of fatal bacteria rose from the volcanic vents along the ocean floor and jumped from one organism to another until it reached the surface and began to infect humans. The dead marine life should have been a red flag but the rising temperature took the blame for that as well.

Humanity called its newest threat the Hot Flu. Whether it was because of the furious, hungering fever that consumed the disease's victims or for its reliance on the increased temperature to spread, Gordon was never sure. The agonizingly short amount of time it took the sickness to burn through a human being was sadly all too clear to him though.

The severity of the situation guaranteed that not everyone would be, or even could be taken care of, not at the rate the Hot Flu was blowing across continents. America North, from the southern border of what had been Mexico to the upper reaches of former Canada, was reliant on the Cut program to keep its best and brightest out of the way of the Hot Flu. Soon, regional facilities like Gordon's were set up to weigh one citizen's value against another. Failing the Cut meant that a day would come when either the Hot Flu or the unbearable heat would finish you off. And on that day, as you waited for the

end, all you could do is stare at the shiny bar in the sky housing everyone who had passed the Cut.

A majority of America North citizens had balked at this idea, saying the government was playing God. But the president had signed an executive order for the Cut program and that was that. Gordon hadn't heard of any new protest movements but he really didn't pay much attention to life outside the facility.

He grimaced. Having to fail a candidate was nothing new, but the photos of an extra-happy Brooks Whent were getting to him. Typically he only saw official ID photos but there were numerous shake and take pictures of Whent accepting an award or cutting a ribbon in his file—he was master chef and owned lakeside seafood restaurants from Waukegan down to Whiting—all showing his wide smile.

Gordon drew a red notebook toward him. A cracked cover and ruffled pages were testament to its constant use. He flipped to a marked page then freed the red pen kept within the slightly warped spiral spine. In the cramped space beneath the third column of names on that page he wrote “# 3,437- Brooks Whent” then Whent's Candidate number, and put the notebook on top of a green one he used for candidates he did pass. After staring at the barely marred green cover he returned to his work.

Over the next few hours the sun waned from oppressive brightness to a raging sunset. During that time Gordon failed another ten people, some of them near genius intelligence, some able to run a mile in under five minutes, not one of them a felon, some of them with many children. Their files showed him success, healthiness, intelligence. What pictures he saw displayed attractiveness and mostly happy individuals. Yet all of them got cut and were recorded in his battered red notebook. The latest in a long

collection of red notebooks, all filled with the names of people he'd cut. It was an antiquated practice, not something done by any of the other Cutters as far as he knew, but he had felt the need to keep track of his success and his failures from his very first day on the job.

The single name written in his green notebook from that day's shift was of a teenage girl. She was the daughter of a Japanese diplomat and an American interpreter. Her intelligence was not genius level but still very high, she could play three instruments, speak in twice as many languages, and was a second degree black belt in jujitsu. She couldn't drive or vote yet but according to the Cut program's equations, she was going to be the future. Yoshimi Jane Tosha had a reserved spot on the station above. She was going to be saved. Gordon felt good as he wrote her name down. But guilt squashed that feeling as he wrote the number 904 next to it.

Glancing up at the clock he saw it was nearly five p.m. His replacement would arrive soon but Gordon decided there was time for one more. The young man who worked his cutting station at night was usually late anyway so Gordon tapped the "Next Candidate" tab.

The name "Jonathon Jackson Strom" appeared with a notice attached. Clicking on the note revealed that this candidate was something of a special case. Strom's background and education were nothing close to any of the other candidates Gordon had evaluated today but he did have something they didn't. His blood type was theorized to be resistant to the Hot Flu. There was no conclusive evidence as yet, but passing as many of these people as possible might eventually lead to a cure. Gordon exhaled through his nose as he sat back in his chair. He looked at the physical assessment and saw that Strom

was nearing the limit of acceptable age. Candidates were allowed to breach the age limits if they contributed a particular amount of experience or academic accreditation.

The Cut's formula was based upon balances like this. If a subject's pros could significantly outweigh their cons then they might still pass. Gordon checked the latest figures of how many passed candidates had the blood type on the monitor to his right and sighed—200. There wasn't room for a candidate like Strom. He was an obvious fail but for some reason, his name stuck in Gordon's mind. *Jonathon Jackson Strom*, it sounded familiar. But this was a common enough feeling for a Cutter. Seeing so many names and faces occasionally created phantom recognitions, jokingly called *déjà-who* by the staff.

Gordon enlarged the ID photo and leaned in to stare hard at the face. Strom appeared unsure, as if his photographer snapped the photo before he was ready. Below dark hair cut close to his head, Strom half-smiled appearing mostly unremarkable except for his eyes—Gordon squinted at the monitor. The man's eyes were two different shades of green. Gordon enhanced the picture around the eyes by spreading his fingers against the monitor's screen. Not unheard of, but very rare, heterochromia was something he wasn't used to seeing. Strom's right eye was the bright green of limes while his left eye was the shade of faded dollar bills, the kind you could only now find in museums. He had walked by display cases full of old American currency when he had worked for Chicago's Field Museum while toiling away on a second college degree, this time in anthropology. He recalled joking with the other young staffers how absurdly colorful the past bills had been.

Strom looks familiar, sort of, Gordon allowed himself to think. "Déjà-who," he said to the face on the screen, and tapped it with his finger. "You're just déjà-who."

Saying those words out loud reassured him somewhat. He also knew that the Cut program had safeguards in place to eliminate the possibility of a Cutter knowing their candidate. By cross-referencing a Cutter's history with that of the candidates, Screeners ensured no one ever evaluated their neighbors or friends or God forbid their family, and as far as Gordon knew, they worked.

"I don't know you," Gordon said and tapped the fail tab. After noting Strom in his red notebook, Gordon rose slowly out of his chair and stretched his arms. The door behind him swung open and a young man entered. Elminger, his nightshift replacement, stood tall on long legs that reminded Gordon of a gawky crane. His hands usually were bunched behind his back as a subtle brace whenever he bent down to talk to someone.

Elminger bent that way now as if to say, its bed time Gramps; the young blood is here to do the job right, from behind his half-circle spectacles.

"Evening Gordon, save any rats today?" Elminger asked.

"*Don't call them rats,*" Gordon wanted to say. But they'd had that argument before and instead he merely started gathering his notebooks. Still, Elminger's referral to the rats on a sinking ship made Gordon feel slightly guilty. That glove fit a little too comfortably.

"Have a good night doctor," Elminger said.

Gordon dipped his head and moved towards the door, politely shaking hands with Elminger on the way out. As he walked down the hallway towards the residential wing with the setting sun bathing him in long squares of rose light, he thought again of Jonathon Jackson Strom. He felt like the name should mean something to him. It wasn't

Bill Smith or Jim Johnson, it was Jonathon Jackson Strom. The name rolled through his mind over and over as he walked to his quarters.

Once inside his room, Gordon returned the notebooks to their place on his desk and clicked on his desk lamp to illuminate his small corner of the facility. He stooped to open a small refrigerator near his bed and pulled out a bottle of water. He opened the bottle and raised it saying, “Here’s to you JJ, wherever you are.”

Just as the cold water rushed over his tongue, the voice of his wife, Shannon, whispered to him, “He only wants me to call him JJ.”

His wife was dead, but the soft rasp of her voice was as clear as if she had spoken in his ear. When she had first succumbed to the Hot Flu he had often heard her speak in his mind. Her favorite sayings and responses had stayed with him for months until he finally had been able to shut them away. Her unexpected return shocked him so much he choked on the water. He coughed and hacked then took in a long, deep breath. Then he put the bottle down so forcefully, water slopped over the mouth and doused the papers on his desk; he ignored it and flipped the red notebook open, turning to the last page. At the bottom was his final entry.

He’d written JJ.

“—Nothing in his file said he called himself JJ, none of his documents were signed JJ, so why the hell did I do that?” He asked himself aloud. He didn’t allow himself the next question, why had Shannon known anything about it?

Gordon pulled the cap from his pen and drew a line through the name. Below it he wrote everything again; except this time doing the name properly, Jonathon Jackson Strom. After walking slowly to his bed, he eased out of his shoes and lay down in his

clothes, suddenly too weary to even undress. Before he could think of reaching to turn out his desk lamp he was asleep.

\* \* \*

Gordon never felt old in his dreams. Never felt the brittleness of being awake. The only problem was that lately his dreams were always troubled and he spent his time running from whatever horrors lurked in his slumbering subconscious. And when he woke, all he could recall were large faces looking down at him with accusing eyes. After such nightmares he woke up trembling, sweaty and gasping for air.

This time was shaping up to be similarly disturbing. He was alone in a dark space filled with wisps of gloomy fog. But the next moment it wasn't simply fog any longer. It was changing into thick, cloudlike masses. Gordon sniffed but didn't smell anything burning. Still the smoke, for it was now black enough to be nothing but smoke, kept rising from the ground beneath him. Like there was a fire deep within the earth and its black exhalations were surrounding him. He drummed his toes on the sooty ground, the surface becoming warmer, and he worried what might happen if it got any hotter. Then he realized there was nothing else to stand on.

"You always did bring me to the strangest places," Shannon's voice came through the smoke. When he turned towards the sound of her, she was there standing in front of him. Her hair was the natural light brown she had kept until she turned thirty. It hung straight and evenly around her face so that the ends barely brushed her shoulders. Her eyes shone startlingly blue against the surrounding black clouds. The graphic on her t-shirt wavered in and out of Gordon's vision, like a flag in a stiff wind. Unnervingly,

when it did flutter clearly all he could make out was bones. He forgot the mysterious image and looked into Shannon's eyes, enthralled by their clarity and color.

"God, you're young." Gordon told her, mild accusation in his voice, she looked as young as when they met.

"Not just me Kyle, look-see?" She held up a shiny mirror. In it, Gordon did not see his old brown eyes framed by square lenses or his lank steel gray hair as he expected. His face looked strong and firm, his skin smooth and healthy. The hair pushed back over his head was the long gone ruddy brown of his youth and it was so thick and full it reminded him of a lion's mane. He combed his fingers through it and doubted he had ever looked so majestically leonine even on his best day.

He understood why he always felt so good in his dreams now; he wasn't just young, he was better than he had ever been in life. Maybe this was what he would have been if he'd maximized his life's potential.

"I can't tell you how good it feels to see you." He said looking back at her.  
"Thank you for being here, I've missed you."

"Oh Kyle, I'm not here," Shannon spread her arms making the smoke swirl, then poked him in the forehead. "I'm here."

"I know—I don't *care*, but I know."

They stared and smiled at each other and Gordon forgot about the growing warmth underneath him, forgot about the Cut, he forgot about everything. He simply looked upon his lost wife. Then she broke their exchange to look over his shoulder and her smile faded. He turned and saw a shape obscured by the smoke. It looked like a person but he couldn't be sure.

It was small, a child maybe. They hadn't been able to have children of their own and he wondered if he was going to dream of a child that could have been. Shannon walked towards the child, and her body began to disappear. Looking back over her shoulder, she said "I tried to call him Jon."

"What? Shannon don't go, stay a little while." He tried to step forward but his legs couldn't move. The smoke had pooled thickly around his ankles and he couldn't see his feet.

"I tried to call him Jon, then Jackson," Shannon's voice echoed around him in a whisper.

"Shannon," he said waving at the clouds trying to find her in their black midst. The smoke began to rise, and its heat began to climb up his legs.

"I tried to call him Jon, then Jackson, then Jack," she had disappeared into the smoke and Gordon could just make her out standing next to the child, "but he only wanted to be called JJ."

The smoke swarmed up Gordon, a hot jet enveloping him to his neck. His fingers ripped through it trying to stop its advance and he opened his mouth to scream, but before he could, the smoke rushed in to choke him. He woke just before it had filled him with its deadly heat.

\* \* \*

With a shout, Gordon rolled off his bed and onto the floor landing mostly on one unfortunate elbow. He cursed at the pain and fixed his glasses in place and reached for the bed to steady himself. Then he turned down his thermostat and took off his lab coat

and shirt. As the shakes and his sweat lessened he noticed it was only a little after 6 p.m. He had slept for almost an hour.

Gordon rushed to his sink and turned on the cold faucet, splashing the water on his face. There must be a connection between Strom and Shannon, he thought and returned to his desk for the water bottle. His throat felt scratchy, and he took a small sip trying to recall details of his dream to piece together what it meant.

After running through it twice the only part that stayed unclear was the decal on Shannon's shirt. It wavered in his mind's eye like a full moon obscured by leaves thrashing in a night wind. Then he caught a glimpse of it and recognized the bones to be a skeleton, but one not belonging to any human. It had large eye cavities and sharp teeth shaped like knives in a large saurian jaw. It was a dinosaur skeleton, a Tyrannosaurus Rex. It was Sue, the Field Museum's famous T-rex.

He had met Shannon below that very exhibit. Shannon had been in one of his tour groups. He had been talking about Sue when they met, he remembered that part, but had she had a young boy with her? Maybe one of her art students—no he didn't think she'd been teaching when they'd met. It was all so long ago he couldn't be sure. If so, had his name really been JJ? Maybe. Could JJ have stood for Jonathon Jackson? It could just be *déjà-who*, a multi-layered extra-strong variety of the phenomenon.

His hand brushed a picture on his desk as he put the water bottle down. The picture's polished black frame held a light coat of dust but still reflected his white fingertips as he reached forward to pick it up. The photograph was of a ridge behind their summer cottage, the sun shining through the top of the tree line, drawing rays between the branches. The photo was a vintage-style black and white print and Shannon had

managed to catch the perfect moment where the sun could be rising or setting; it was up to the viewer to decide. She had been a gifted artist, able to capture not only the appearance of her subjects, but to imbue her photographs and paintings with a piece of herself.

Gordon's eyes reflected back at him off the framed glass, "She would've captured Strom if he was someone special. She would have taken a picture or painted him," Gordon told the photo. "That's how I'll find out."

He rummaged around his desk until he found a yellow sticky note that had been so long forgotten its strip of adhesive was completely speckled with dust and dirt. The wrinkled note had the name of a storage unit, North-Chi U-Store # 420, underlined and below that the streets address, 308 N Sheridan. Gordon stuffed it in his pocket, grabbed a meal bar, and left his room for the exit check point.

\* \* \*

The sun had finally set by the time he reached the facility's single exit into the city. Typically, this was the time when employees would run errands or make trips outside the facility grounds and so Gordon had no choice but to file in the line with everyone else planning on leaving that night for Chicago. After waiting for nearly half an hour it was his turn to give his account of what he was doing and why.

He told the security officer he planned to visit his storage unit and would be back well before sun up. He had no other appointments or scheduled meetings. He wouldn't be bringing any contaminables back and therefore would have nothing to declare. Finally, he was allowed to leave.

Twenty years ago the city had thoroughly rebuilt Chicago's L-train. At that time solar power was becoming easier to use, so it became the principal fuel source for the new transports, called light-trains by the locals. It was a shining moment for the city. Then the heat became insufferable, and soon the Hot Flu arrived making such good days nigh-impossible to come by.

As Gordon sat aboard the aged train car, his body stirred with each movement. He could only clutch his stomach and hope he didn't lose the meager dinner he'd eaten on the way to the platform. He unclenched himself into the glossy plastic seat, hoping to relax. With his elbows on his knees he interlaced his fingers below his sparse white whiskers, the hair scratching the wrinkles of his knuckles with every minute sway. His body felt reduced to liquid sloshing around in a bucket. Gordon reminded himself to relax and closed his eyes, trying to think about anything but the back and forth rocking as the train zoomed above Argyle, then North Lake, street, darting around buildings like a great steel snake.

But thoughts of his destination and what awaited him began to fill the blackness behind his eyes. Gordon relented and opened them. In the above window was the twisted reflection of light blue numbers. The secondary reflections in his glasses made them difficult to decipher against the blur of building after building outside the windows of the racing train. He decided to give up trying. He read "...02/08/77...6:47 p.m.....92°f..." off the scrolling information sign and shook his head at the difference in temperature. The air inside the sickening snake was cool but not quite comfortable and it had a hint of disinfectant, like that of a hospital, to it as well.

Gordon remembered other public transport trains he'd been on in his youth, they were never cool and while they may have smelled, it certainly wasn't of disinfectant. The biggest difference, he thought, was that all those trains were full of people and this one isn't. The car's only other occupant, a large lady in a teal dress, was snoring softly to herself. Gordon had offered his hand to her at the station as she approached the gap between station ledge and train but she had refused him. He wasn't sure but liked to think that she had smiled at his gesture when she waved off his helping hand. It was difficult to tell behind an oxi-mask.

The small masks covered nose to chin and were usually opaque from the condensation of the wearer's exhalations. Gordon didn't wear one but the old woman had actually clutched at hers rather than take his offered hand. He pegged her for one of the more stalwart believer-types, the kind of people that clung to the idea it would be over soon and that she only had to make it a little while longer, before things got better.

The idea that things were going to get better was something the government had always supported. Most of the efforts made known to the public, like the Cut program and the repurposing of the orbital station, were talked about as extreme precautionary measures. If things got worse than expected wouldn't everyone be glad they had taken these extra steps? He had been on the inside for so long and paid so little attention to the world outside the facility, that he wasn't up to date on the current debate. He knew his job and he knew himself. And no mass mobs of rioting Chicagoans were breaking down the door to the Cut facility so it would seem most were adjusting as best they could.

Gordon didn't wear a mask because he knew that inhalation was inconclusive as the primary form of infection from the Hot Flu. The disease was more likely to be

transferred through contact with another person's sweat. Still, he wouldn't have bothered with precautions like an oxi-mask even if they worked. He didn't fear the disease.

Instead, like so many aspects of life, he felt strangely neutral, almost numb.

Gordon turned away from the sleeping woman and brought his fingers underneath his glasses. He wiped at his eyes and tried to tell himself to focus on what he was doing. His stop was coming up soon.

The light-train paused at Glenview to open its doors and accept new passengers aboard. But no one got on. Perhaps it was still early for most Chicagoans but it still surprised him how few people he saw on the train. At each stop the same unnerving sequence of events happened. The doors opened and closed without anyone stepping onboard. The train was automated and everything was run through a machine powered by the sun. Gordon wondered how long this train would go on once Chicago became an empty field of crumbling buildings.

The train zipped forward again. N Sheridan was the next stop. He stood, and his knees popped and his back tried to uncramp from the unforgiving plastic seat. At the door, he confirmed where he was on the railway map then looked back at the scrolling marquee with its sickly blue numbers.

“02/08/77...7:11 p.m....90°f...”

The train jerked and he gripped the handle to keep from falling. How could they let it get so hot? That Chicago should suffer 90 degree temperatures at night...in February. He reminded himself—*we*. It was *we* that did this—as the light-train came to a stop.

He left his lone fellow passenger snoring into her oxi-mask and stepped onto the Sheridan Station. There were a few people milling about which made him feel somewhat better. The prospect of not seeing a single person out on the streets during the supposedly busy part of the night had been something he had only come across in his dreams. Gordon preferred to be alone but the mantle of “last man on Earth” was far from comfortable. The commuters were dressed for different jobs but the pall of what was still to come did seem to be affecting them. Most eyes were cast down and there wasn’t a hint of friendly chatter or small talk. He passed the small crowd to the stairs and into the street.

A heavy, warm breeze blew his hair into his eyes and he tried weakly to push it back. Above him, the blanket of gray clouds that wafted in every night on the winds weakly reflected the city’s light back down. He could barely remember the last time he’d been outside, much less in this part of town. It must have been right after he joined.

The North-Chi U-Store building was in one of the more seedy districts of Chicago. It wasn’t in the middle of a gang-zone, but it wasn’t in the Gold Coast shopping district either. Instead of tall skyscrapers or modern towers, there were mostly industrial buildings and warehouses. As he walked down the street, Gordon vaguely recalled riding in a moving truck provided by his new employer. They had not only helped him move his life into the truck but insisted they help him lock it away as well. There had been someone there with him, another “gift,” though he remembered the man being more of a pain in the ass. Whenever he had paused to look at some forgotten memento or lost himself in his possessions, his eager helper had gently ushered him on with a courteous word and a smile.

“Once you’re squared away here we can begin saving the future, isn’t that right Dr. Gordon?” Gordon heard the man’s cheerful voice easily enough even though his name hadn’t made the voyage from past to present.

1801. The storage facility stood before him almost humming with its constant luminance. It was eight stories high, and very blocky, and through the glass windows he could see the brick-red doors to each storage unit side-by-side. At the entrance, a sliding glass door, more than four meters wide, stood next to a small white panel. Gordon put his right thumb onto the small red bull’s-eye in the center of the panel. The bull’s-eye rotated a full 360 degrees then the prompt “Input combination, please” appeared below.

Gordon paused for a second, his thumb not moving, paralyzed by fear. What code would he have used? He’d forgotten. Thumb combos such as this were outdated by current standards but this door needed a pattern of movements that Gordon, in his half-functional stupor had put in years before and had promptly forgotten.

He swallowed, trying to think of other thumb combos he’d used when they had been the newest and most common sort of locking mechanism. Then, because there really wasn’t much else he could do about it at that moment, Gordon pressed his thumb into the screen and moved it up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right then double tapped the bull’s-eye. It was an old code, and the bull’s-eye rotated the opposite way for a moment before flashing green. A welcome message greeted him by name above the wide glass door as it slid open with a whoosh.

Walking along the corridors of the fourth floor reminded him of how his handler had raced ahead of him like a child dragging his father to a carnival ride. After losing Shannon he followed anyone who asked him too. People would give only a small tug

and he'd find himself being lead wherever they wanted. But he'd been so numb then he had barely cared.

He reached the unit, 420, and put his thumb on the nearby panel repeating the process from the entrance.

Instead of a whoosh a metal clank resounded in the door and he opened it.

All around him were stacked boxes, mostly clear plastic with colored lids snapped in place, but some were old fashioned cardboard. He looked at the nearest stack of plastic boxes and tried to see what was inside, but gave up and began reading the tags on the lid. The first stack of boxes was documents from his last research project at the university. He'd left after being asked to join the Cut program and it had been packed away just like everything else. At that time he'd been studying the parameters of human community. What it took to feel like part of a group and a functional member of society. Far from what he was looking for, he moved them aside. Large squares and rectangles wrapped in brown paper leaned against the wall near him. Shannon's framed paintings and photographs.

While her gallery and art classes were very successful she only shared her work with him and visitors to their home. Her gallery colleagues would tell her to put her work in a show sometime but she never did. For Shannon it was about expressing what was inside, not getting rewarded for something she'd be doing anyway. Gordon had never known anything about art, other than what Shannon had taught him, but he was continually astonished at what she could do. Whether it was a hand painted abstract of darting green and blue lines or a photographed landscape, he could always see what had attracted her to the subject and he felt like he could feel her through them.

Gordon ripped one of the packages open. The paper tore easily and as he pulled it away from the frame, the smell of oils filled the small room, the color shining from the confines of the wrapping. It was a painting of hers he'd never seen. He had received lots of pre-packaged belongings and works of Shannon's from her studio on Halsted. At the time he hadn't wanted to even look at them. Without Shannon, Gordon didn't care to look. He had even taken all the paintings down in their apartment and put them in a closet. When he moved into the Cut facility he'd brought only a few small tokens like the black and white photo of the tree line. It was small enough to be easily ignored but still seemed to prove he was human. But that was two years ago.

He looked down at a painted man asleep on a painted couch. It wasn't grandiose. It was simple and realistic and yet more. The brush strokes carried a deliberate delicacy that he remembered watching her hands use countless times. His mouth turned up at the corner as he remembered the small lines of concentration that would form on her face when her hands were at work. The vase in the corner behind the sleeping man's couch held her favorite color roses—white petals with pink edges. The French doors were open and the white curtains billowed from an unseen wind, much as the ones at their summer cottage had done. The central couch was similar to one they had owned only in how comfortable its squashed cushions looked; cradled on those cushions lay somewhat of a stranger.

Though it was not a perfect replica, he had a feeling it was supposed to be him. The man appeared broader in the shoulder than Gordon and he had a more angular jaw but his narrow and pointed nose was more than familiar. The way his hair was pushed over his head reminded Gordon of his lion's mane from his dream. Perhaps Shannon had

snapped a picture of him while he slept and then used it for a model. It was just like her to take something from their life and create something slightly different. If he had always taken her to interesting places, she had always made him look at the world from new angles.

The man looked relieved to be asleep, as if he had been afraid that true sleep might never have come to him. The dreamy smile on his mouth made him appear younger than his grey hair. On the floor next to the couch was a scattering of papers. Once, they had been stacked and placed in a semblance of order, but now the same wind that was toying with the curtains was playing havoc with the sleeper's work. Gordon wondered if the man might ever wake up. Maybe when the light-train finally grinds to its last stop, he thought, maybe then he'll notice all the mess around him.

Just inside the brown wrapping a piece of lavender paper caught his eye, despite its shadowy enclosure. Gordon reached in and plucked the note with two fingers. It was in the shape of a diamond with curling decorations along its edge and with a stylized S in its top corner. Below Shannon's monogram was a scribbled note. He brought it into the light and read:

"For the wall across my desk so I can watch him sleep even when we're apart."

Pocketing the note, Gordon turned away from the remaining paintings as his urge to look through her work died like a fire in a downpour.

He pulled a cardboard box off a high stack, heavy with books it seemed, placed the box on top of the clothing containers so that it was at chest height and easier to look into. Gordon sucked in a quick breath as he opened the top. Stop being so surprised, he

berated himself, you knew you'd see her here. You packed the rest of her up and left it in this miserable box of boxes.

What he was looking for wasn't there either. So he went through container after container, sifting through more items than he could have imagined them ever owning until he found his prize. Shannon had kept a log of all her artwork, and Gordon had transferred all the scanned images to a digital tablet. If she had captured this man Strom when he was a boy then he would be found in there. His fingers shook a little as he lifted the slim, round-cornered rectangle out of its protective sleeve. He depressed its power button and an instant later, thankfully, the smooth, glossy rectangle lit up with *Shannon's Life Work* in calligraphic script on its screen. Gordon smiled and his fingers promptly dropped the device. It clattered across on the floor.

"Damn it!" He cursed himself. Feeling like the feeblest old man in existence he knelt, demanding his hands to carefully pick up the device from the concrete floor. He examined it for damage. Only a scuffed corner was evidence of his fumble. He turned to a stack of boxes and placed the digital album on the lid of the topmost box carefully.

The motion of the drop and landing had jarred the device's shake-motion and it had flipped to a random picture within the album. It was a portrait of a bride and groom. Shannon had painted it from one of their wedding portraits. He put a finger to the corner of the pix-tab's screen and swept it to the side, bringing up the following picture. The couple was there again smiling and happy but with fewer grays in their hair and a few less lines on their beaming faces. He double-tapped the opposite top corner and the picture shrank away until it was the size of a stamp, lost amongst dozens of similar

pictures. Gordon double-tapped again to view the folders, hopefully one might be obviously marked.

He had given Shannon the thought of transferring all her artwork to a digital album early on in their marriage and he remembered it had inadvertently caused one hell of an argument. To her, the beauty of a painting was incapable of being properly captured on a screen that small but Gordon thought it was merely pragmatic. “We don’t have enough walls,” he had said, but in the end he had relented and told her that it was *her* work so she should be able to do whatever she wanted. And the very next day he started the process of scanning all her work into the pix-tab himself. Six months later he gave it to her as an anniversary gift.

Gordon opened the folders that sounded promising. He skipped upwards to the earliest entries and opened a folder dated around the time they had met. Inside, there were fewer pictures waiting meaning they were larger than the stamp-sized images, closer to his credit card. His eyes immediately narrowed the field down to one. He didn’t even notice the title of the picture was *JJ*, only that a set of two different colored green eyes peered up at him from the screen. Without realizing he was holding his breath, Gordon tapped the picture. It grew to show only the top half of a head and turning the tablet vertically caused the picture to expand and fill the screen. Gordon’s breath left his lungs in a small, oh.

It was him. The man he’d Cut. Only here he was a little boy. Not even ten years old, probably closer to seven or eight. Shannon had painted him on a dark wood floor, lying in a patch of sunlight coming in from tall windows. What lay beyond the lengths of glass was indeterminable because the light outside was so bright. The young JJ had

papers before him and scattered around him, but still very close at hand, was a myriad of colored pencils and erasers. He was on his stomach with his bare feet in the air. He was looking up from his artwork as if someone had just called his name. The mismatched green eyes stared up at Gordon and he tapped the bottom of the tablet to see if she had left a caption.

A small box appeared containing: *JJ drew a picture of me yesterday and it was so good! He really has talent, too. I'll have to tell his mom how good he is. To thank him I promised to paint a picture of him. Here it is! Only took three hours but I really like what turned out. What will his mother think? Hope she likes it as much as I do. He has been drawing tons of dinosaurs lately so I'm going to take him to the museum.*

The museum, Gordon thought, so much started there. But I forgot all about him. Because of Shannon I guess, everything else just sort of faded about that day. But if she painted him, then he was important to her. I shouldn't have forgotten that.

\* \* \*

“As you can see the hip bone of old Sue here has a very distinct shape. You see that peculiar twist on it there?” Gordon pointed at the L-shaped hip bone of the towering skeleton of the Tyrannosaurus Rex. “That was one of the first signs that scientists used to connect dinosaurs to birds. Makes you think twice about chasing pigeons,” he said to the chuckles and giggles of the parents and children in his tour group. The lukewarm laughter was just the right volume for a museum tour, and it was easily swallowed up by the white noise of the many visitors walking around the atrium that housed the large skeleton.

A smooth white hand shot up from the waist high crowd; Gordon pointed. “Yes, a question?”

The hand belonged to a small boy with thick, dark brown hair and a band of freckles across his up-turned nose, making a contrast with the milky skin on his round face. The boy’s eyes were two different shades of green. He wore a blue t-shirt with a cartoon dinosaur printed on the chest. The goofy-looking beast had plum-purple skin, excited orange eyes and a big band aid on its nose. The round-toothed mouth shot out a word bubble. The purple dino’s exclamation: I’m dino-sore! But Gordon kept being drawn back to the eyes, one the color of those peculiar bills in the history exhibit on the third floor, the other a much more vibrant green.

“You got a question about Sue, buddy?” Gordon adjusted his glasses as his smirk faded.

“Yes sir,” the kid spoke in a high-pitched squeak. “There’s a boy in my class and he says diamond is harder than a t-rex skull. But that’s not true is it?” He asked without any hesitation and failing to notice a few parents hiding laughter behind their hands.

“Aha. What’s your name buddy?” Gordon crouched down to be closer to the kid’s level.

“My name’s JJ. JJ Strom.” A smile accompanied his polite introduction.

Inhaling through his nose, Gordon began, “Well, JJ, scientists measure hardness in lots of ways but the easiest is to bang two things together and see which one comes away scratched. You can try it with two rocks when you get home. With your parents’ help of course. Have you ever seen a diamond real close Jackson?”

“No, sir.”

“Does anyone have a nice big ring? Anybody? Would anyone mind a little show and tell in the interest of better educating our youth?” Gordon stood and spread his arms hoping someone would step forward.

A young woman moved forward and placed her hands on JJ’s shoulders. His mother. She wouldn’t mind a little public attention for the boy’s sake.

“How about you? Did JJ’s father give you a nice-sized rock?” Gordon’s breath caught in his throat as the woman looked up at him.

“I imagine JJ’s mother might have a problem with that. So, no.” The crowd laughed at this. She appeared to enjoy the flush now coloring Gordon’s face, “He’s not mine, I just look after him.” She said with a wagging of her bare fingers, “I’m not married. Sorry.”

Gordon turned to the rest of the crowd, pleading for someone to step forward and take him from the torturous spotlight he’d put himself into. An agonizingly long heartbeat to two later, an older woman stepped forward waving veined fingers in his face.

“Will that do for you, honey?” The woman asked, smiling. The diamond she brandished just before his eyes was more than the size of her largest, wrinkled knuckle.

“Yes,” he said and felt the conversation return to his control. “Now if you would just hold it a little lower for our curious young friend.”

Gordon squatted back down, holding the veined hand of his volunteer for the boy to see. “Now JJ, do you know what would happen if we smashed this diamond into that t-rex skull up there?” He pointed at Sue.

“The skull would break the diamond right?”

“Nope. This nice lady would punch through that skull like it was paper.

Diamond is one thing nothing else scratches. Ever. You could bang every rock on Earth against a diamond and the only one that would leave a mark would be another diamond. Sorry to tell you, but your friend is right about this one.” As the kid’s eyes fell in defeat, Gordon suddenly felt as if he had let JJ down.

“He’s not my friend,” JJ said in a voice hardly more than a high-pitched whisper.

“Oh, well, th—”

“He’s just Thomas, a big know-it-all bully who thinks he’s always right and now he is.”

JJ’s companion whispered softly as she smoothed his hair and Gordon’s ring volunteer clucked and cooed compassionately at his words. Gordon felt the need to speak, to somehow fix what he’d done wrong.

“Look JJ, when you see this kid again, this big kid,” Gordon paused for a moment to decide what exactly he *was* trying to say, “tell him just because he’s right one time, doesn’t mean he’s always right. Big bullies can know some things, sometimes lots of things. But little guys can be right, too. And bullies can be wrong. And you know what?”

“What?” JJ said in a breathy whisper.

“When little guys are right and big bullies are wrong, it’s usually something really important. Remember that, ok?”

“Ok.” JJ said starting to smile once again. Gordon stood up and poked a finger upwards as if he just remembered something important.

“Oh, and what’s the hardest thing on Earth?”

“Diamonds.” Jackson exclaimed, his eyes now as bright as his smile.

Gordon suddenly realized he was now almost ten minutes behind in his tour and what’s more JJ’s caretaker was looking at him with a directness that made another blush come on. He waved the group towards the next big exhibit, a mammoth skull alongside one the last known wild elephant skulls. JJ ran ahead, and the older woman who had volunteered her ring stopped to regard the pair of young people. The she led the rest of the group onwards.

He apologized. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you with what I said. I should’ve actually *looked* at your finger before demanding you show off your wedding ring. Sometimes I miss what is right in front me.”

“No harm done,” she said. “And I think JJ learned something important, about diamonds and t-rex skulls, I mean. It’s never too early to learn about the Mohs Hardness Scale, is it?” She waited for the scientific joke to register on Gordon’s face before laughing herself.

Her blue eyes were engagingly clear and he enjoyed the way they shined. She wore an olive V-neck shirt that showed myriads of freckles on her skin. Similar freckles lit up on her face as she smiled at him.

“My name’s Kyle Gordon.” He extended his hand. He hoped she’d give her name. And he hoped she would stay the whole time of the tour. He suddenly found himself hoping a great many things about her.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Shannon.” She slid smooth fingers over his hand. She felt chilly, almost cold, but it felt refreshing and Gordon could only hope for more.

\* \* \*

Tucking the pix-tab under his arm, Gordon put his other hand on the light switch. Everything inside was in disarray, but it had been worth it.

“I’ll come back, to clean up,” he promised himself and clicked off the light switch, letting the door close behind him.

When he got off the train at Morton Grove, he returned to the street and hurried towards the waiting tram that would take him to the facility. The Cut’s Chicago headquarters was separated from the rest of its surrounding research park by a pair of fences. There was only a single entrance and exit through the fence and Gordon approached the pedestrian entryway with some trepidation. While the gate was the simple part of reentry actually getting back inside the facility would take much longer with all of its preventive procedures against infiltration by either Hot Flu or unauthorized visitors.

“Have a good rest of the day.” The uniformed man said after Gordon verified his ID. Nodding politely, he walked towards the buildings. The central structure had a smaller block on its front that was almost nose-like in how it seemed to compliment the larger facility behind it. Essentially it was a very high-tech mud room, usually called the Scrub.

What exactly happens to a candidates file once they’re failed? That was what he needed to find out first. And then how could he re-enter JJ’s file either directly on to the passed-list for the orbital station. He only had access to candidates before the Cut. Once, he’d passed or failed them, they were out of his reach. At least there were still a few months left before the Red Line.

The Red Line was the cut-off point for the program. The weakening atmosphere would reach a critical point in its decline during the early months of summer. Meaning, the effects of solar events and the daily amount of heat and radiation would increase greatly. Those factors dangerously impacted the program's ability to launch shuttles up to the station. Training for the station's zero-gravity existence as well as standard operational procedures took weeks and with only months to go before the program would be shut down, Gordon calculated he had perhaps a month and a half to find a way to save JJ. As he reached for his ID once more he hoped it would be enough time.

He held his card up to the camera lens' thick glass shield and a moment later the doors opened. The first room was vacant except for a long table running nearly the whole room's length; on top of the table were three stations, each with their own vacuum-bag systems. Against the opposite wall from the table were two long racks of different colored hospital-type scrub clothes. In between the two racks was a pair of stalls to change in. Gordon grabbed a dark green scrub outfit and changed inside the stall. Once finished, he went to the center station. He laid the pix-tab gently into a bin then piled the odds and ends from his pockets on top. He put his belt and shoes in another bin then started vacuum sealing his clothes in individual bags.

In minutes all his clothes were wrapped in a bin of their own. Gordon walked barefoot across the cold tiles of the Scrub towards the next door. Between the end of the table and the wall was a short, jutting conveyer belt. Gordon placed each bin on it, one by one, and pushed the forward button. Once his belongings were all through the plastic flaps and beyond, he opened the door to the next section.

In the next two rooms he underwent a highly invasive physical to determine that he showed no early signs of contamination. There wasn't a doctor present but an automated voice-program led him through the various devices and workstations for each step of his examination. With its aid he measured his temperature, checked for glandular swelling, collected blood and urine samples. Then he spent ten minutes in a small sauna to provide enough sweat for further testing. That was followed by a chem-bath before finishing with a high-pressure shower that nearly flayed Gordon's skin off. The last part of the ordeal was the worst because the scourging water was biting cold.

After the rigorous cleansing, he was prompted to head to the final room where he picked up a pair of papery shoes and his smaller items. His clothes wouldn't be returned to him until all of his tests came back and they had been through their own high caliber rinsing. But his watch, cell, and wallet were returned along with the pix-tab.

As soon as he looked in the bin he started to panic. He hadn't paid much attention while he was loading his things but it clearly had been rifled through. They have to take everything out to clean it, don't they? He asked himself. Yes but what if they looked through the pix-tab? What if they saw? Maybe they know. Gordon suddenly felt very certain that it was a bad idea to have brought the pix-tab back to the facility.

He realized he must have been standing still, worriedly staring at the pix-tab for longer than seemed normal, for a voice said over a speaker, in a tone that indicated it wasn't the first time it had called to him, "Dr. Gordon, is everything all right? Was one of your belongings damaged in some way? You can file a report once you come inside."

He shook his head and flushed at the notion that he'd been watched all along. He was aware of being watched but only in the back of his mind. Gordon looked around the

ceiling and upon spotting the black bubble smiled and gave it a thumbs-up. With his pix-tab under his arm he walked towards the final door, his soft paper shoes making broom-like swishes.

He continued to the reception area where a man stood, leaning over the desktop to better talk to the young woman seated behind it. It was Elminger. Gordon checked his watch and verified the time. Elminger should still be in the office working. What was he doing here? Gordon listened for a moment,

“So our schedules just opened up. Maybe we could, I don’t know, leave the grounds for a while and live a little. Get some drinks someplace other than the facility bar. What do you say?”

The young woman had to strain to look up at Elminger. She stammered a few words Gordon couldn’t quite catch. Her face went from uncertainty to professional upon seeing him, still somewhat damp and fresh from the Scrub.

“Oh, hello Dr. Gordon. Back already?” She handed out a digital tablet and he stepped forward to take it. He withdrew the stylus from its sheath alongside the screen and signed his name on the line.

“Yes, it didn’t take that long after all, thank you.” He said.

“Hello doctor. Look at you out so late. Seems like I just relieved you,” Elminger said.

“And yet here you are instead of at our station; why’s that?” Gordon returned the sarcasm with an accusatory note of his own.

“You didn’t hear? I figured that’s why you decided to go out.” Elminger shrugged as if Gordon should have known already, as if everyone already knew.

“Whatever it is must have slipped my mind. Or maybe I just missed the message. What’s going on?” Even though he was forced to angle his head back because of Elminger’s height, Gordon still managed to look down his nose at him. Enough so that the look caused Elminger to go still and simply study him for a moment.

“The Red Line has been moved,” the receptionist broke in, “to today, I guess. I’m not sure really but the Cutters have all been put on hold for now.”

“And that means unexpected vacation time,” Elminger said, “for Cutters one and all,” his arms wide to include Gordon and the rest of their absent colleagues. “How are you going to spend your down time doctor? Reorganizing your notebook collection?”

Gordon pushed up his glasses and fixed his eyes on Elminger, and for a moment they both held the stare. Initially Gordon considered the amount of satisfaction he might find in rolling up one of his notebooks and rapping Elminger’s nose with it. But then he felt silly and ashamed for having them at all. Nobody used paper records any more, except for people who chose to live in the past. He suddenly felt archaic and let his gaze fall, a grimace of defeat crossing his face. Elminger’s smile expanded even wider while Gordon looked to the receptionist.

“Have I signed in? Am I allowed to go now?” His voice sounded coarse with embarrassment and she only nodded.

Gordon walked away and mumbled “work to do” under his breath. Just before turning the first corner, he took a quick look back and saw Elminger shrugging his shoulders, again. If Elminger wanted to think of him as an old fool then all’s the better. Old fools are easily ignored and often overlooked.

As soon as he had left Elminger behind, Gordon leaned against a wall and dug his cell out of his belongings. He activated his cell and saw a message from the facility director, Dr. Jess Freemantle. It was in all caps—a blanket message that had been sent to everyone in the facility. Gordon had first met Freemantle many years ago when they both taught at the University of Chicago. But the last time Gordon had seen him was on his first day at the facility. Freemantle hadn't been the director at that time, but under his flashy guidance, Gordon and a dozen other new program employees began their orientation not far from where he now stood.

He had difficulty bothering to pay attention during the orientation because it was so soon after Shannon's death. Still, he had shown up and listened as his former colleague eagerly talked about the Cut and how this facility was going to be the birthplace of future civilizations.

Gordon had enjoyed teaching at the university while pursuing his research in modern anthropology, while Freemantle saw teaching and research merely as means to further his prestige. Teaching assistants handled most of Freemantle's classwork while he marketed his latest findings on population projections to attract new donors. Back then Gordon had always considered him the hood ornament of their department. Just the shiny piece on top that looks nice and attractive while everyone beneath it does the hard work.

Freemantle had always dressed more like a clothing model than a professor and exaggerated his sense of style with perfectly groomed hair and ever present smile. During the orientation it was something in Freemantle's manner, unchanged after almost twenty years, that managed to penetrate Gordon's detachment. Freemantle's speech and

small jokes felt genuine. The people behind the Cut believed in what they were doing. What this sort of selfless work could offer a glory-hound like Freemantle, Gordon could only wonder at. He decided that Freemantle only wanted to accomplish enough here so that he could escape the hellacious days to come. At a pause in his old colleague's well-practiced performance, Gordon gave voice to his concern.

"Is anyone from the Cut program getting to the station?" Gordon felt sweat begin to break out on his neck as all the eyes turned towards him. Freemantle stared at him for a moment, his mouth half open, one hand left hanging in the air its gesture forgotten. He wondered if Freemantle was trying to remember his name.

"Are you asking for yourself or just curious?" Freemantle said finally, his hands motioning towards the rest of the crowd.

"Not myself," Gordon protested, slightly annoyed that his question was being turned into a joke. "I just wondered if anyone here will receive an offer to go to the station. I mean, anyone working here is arguably bright and possibly qualified."

"Nope, nope, nope," Freemantle shook his head back and forth with each word, "if you're here now, you're here for good so to speak. If you were selected to work the Cut, then you didn't make the Cut, sorry to let you down, doctor?"

"Kyle Gordon. So not even the administrative staff, such as yourself, will be going?"

"We didn't make the Cut either," Freemantle said, laughing. "Thank you for asking, Dr. Gordon, shall we continue?"

Gordon felt certain Freemantle had remembered him but after the orientation had ended his resentment towards Freemantle faded quickly away and he easily fell back into his indifference. Even when he had become director Gordon hadn't really cared.

Today was different. Seeing the name "Jess Freemantle" followed by the title Facility Director caused Gordon's teeth to grind together for a moment. Just listen to it and get it over with, he told himself. He sunk back against the wall and played the message.

It explained that due to a recent solar flare the atmospheric breakdown would be exacerbated and weakened earlier than expected. The Red Line had been effectively moved to today. It was too dangerous to send anyone to the station now. Freemantle cheerily wrapped up his news saying that all Cutters could forward any requests for new assignments to their department heads and he told them to enjoy their short down time. JJ couldn't get on a shuttle now even if Gordon could get him passed.

Gordon breathed in slowly, his hair feeling thin between his scalp and the cold wall behind him. So there were no more cuts to be made, no more people to evaluate, no more files to sift through, no more lives to cancel out. This turn of events was relieving but at the same time frightening. It boiled down to a simple truth: No one else would get a chance to go to the station orbiting safely above the Earth. Nobody else gets passed.

Walking into the Scrub, he'd considered time short enough, but now there wasn't any time left at all. In a month or so he might have been able to work something out for JJ, but he'd failed before even starting. And he realized that the last candidates he had passed would not make it either. After you were passed, you were trained on how to live

aboard the station and that took weeks; a part of his mind imagined him crossing out names from his green notebook and moving them to a red one instead.

No, stop thinking like you can just cross them out, he told himself. Perhaps you can move them to a Secondary Protocol list. The Cut program focused much of its considerable resources on the orbiting structure; it also worked on other methods of keeping as many people safe as possible. The station in orbit certainly was the biggest hope the program offered but other contingency plans were also being put into place because when your eggs are the future of society, keeping them in as many baskets as you can was only prudent.

Of the Secondary Protocols there was only one that he thought would really be able to save JJ as he intended: The Polar Burrows.

The Seed Program was a collection of genetic material to be stored safely away from the reaches of the Hot Flu. While donors themselves wouldn't be given a chance, their sperm or eggs could be used later which wouldn't help him very much. But another program was the Polar Burrows, isolated fortresses embedded in the polar ice caps.

Gordon returned to his room and placed his things on the bed, making sure to set the pix-tab down gently. Then he went through his cell for the list of facility employees. He scanned pages until he found the correct name then spoke into to the phone.

"Office of Secondary Protocols" Gordon said clearly towards the speaker. As the line began to ring he forced himself to sit down before someone picked up. His plan was illegal, treasonous, and desperately rash but it was all that he could think of to do before he was moved to some other workstation and this chance, slim though it was, was gone for good.

The line stopped ringing and a young man answered.

“Hello, I’d like to speak to someone in Protocols who could,” he stammered for a second, shaking his head. He gripped the pix-tab and said more forcefully, “I’m calling about a tour. Yes that’s right a tour. Yes—I’ll hold.”

At first, the assistant had been rather unsure that tours were even given but after Gordon explained who he was and that he wanted to speak to someone about being reassigned to the department; the tour had been arranged with Protocols Secretary, Dana Collins. The lie had been unexpected and Gordon had been quite pleased with himself. He didn’t get a chance to speak with Ms. Collins directly, but she had agreed through her assistant to meet him in about an hour.

“An hour?” Gordon had said surprised, he’d expected to meet sometime in a day or two, though the more he considered it, he felt it was a piece of luck—the quicker JJ went from failing to passing the better. Besides Gordon was slightly afraid of losing his nerve if given enough time to dwell on it. The assistant explained that Ms. Collins was very busy, and Gordon agreed to the time.

He lay down on his bed and flipped through Shannon’s pix-tab. It was energizing to see her again, even if it was only through her artwork. Very few of them were self-portraits but seeing her special touch in each of the works brought her to him. Fearing he might miss the appointment, he set his alarm and continued looking through his wife’s creations until he fell asleep.

\* \* \*

If he dreamed, he did not remember upon waking. He stirred then coughed as he sat up silencing his alarm with a swat. He manipulated the pix-tab, slowly scrolling

through every picture in a slide-show. As Shannon's work melted from one piece into another, Gordon rose and changed out of his scrubs. At the sink he splashed water on his face until he looked somewhat more awake. He saw that he was smiling absently as drops fell from his face. Once his attention was drawn to it however, the smile vanished. He asked himself, Do I feel this good because I'm doing the right thing or is it just because she's around me again?

Leaving his reflection behind in the mirror, he got dressed. Then he grabbed the newest red and green notebooks and turned off the pix-tab. Though Shannon was a part of what he was doing, he couldn't allow himself to get distracted, not now. Now was most likely his only chance to save JJ, and he had to make it count.

At the Protocols Office, he passed the time by flipping through the red notebook he had brought. The names didn't bring about any connections, any déjà-who, but their number started to wear at his confidence. Each page, front and back was filled with names scrawled in red ink; each name had been put in that book by him, by his hand. And there were so many. Gordon closed that notebook and opened his green one, hoping that maybe it would have the opposite effect on his mood. This list of names did buoy him somewhat. He even noticed that his handwriting looked cheerier; the letters were less scratchy, the names written with reverence instead of frustration.

"Dr. Gordon?" someone asked. He looked up and smiled at the woman addressing him. "I'm Dana Collins. It's good to meet you." Gordon stood and accepted the woman's hand. Her palm was smooth and pleasantly fleshy in his bonier hand.

She was shorter than Gordon by a few inches, her eyes level with his Adam's apple, forcing her to look up at him, and with her face raised, she looked like a copper

haired cherub all grown up and dressed for business. Despite the professional cut of her sea-green blouse and black pantsuit he couldn't avoid noticing how girlish she was.

“Likewise Ms. Collins, thank you so much for seeing me on such short notice. I just felt like there was no time to waste with the Red Line being moved forward.”

“Please call me Dana. And it's no problem. My schedule changes constantly.” She leaned back towards the inner areas of her department, “I'll show you around on the way to my office.”

Protocols wasn't organized differently from other departments Gordon had been in, but he wondered how he would get back to his quarters if he somehow managed to accomplish his goal. As they turned through the hallways, first one way then another, he began to feel like he had even less of a clue to what he was doing than he thought.

They passed through an area belonging to a division that Dana called the “pantry planners” and Gordon noticed small video cameras posted throughout the offices. There hadn't been any earlier but now small black bubbles were installed in the roof over every corner. Dana was explaining that the pantry planners were in charge of matching up the dietary needs of the burrows' colony with what resources were still available.

Gordon suddenly felt very foolish. His every move was being followed by video feeds. And what would he do with Dana? Thoughts of trying to shove her into a closet and make a mad dash to the master list of candidates flitted through his mind as he half-listened to her. But where would he find it and how would he access it? He rejected that idea quickly and reminded himself that he knew this wasn't going to remain under their radar for long and he was ok with that.

Perhaps he could talk to Dana about JJ. Maybe she would understand. Then he realized Dana had just asked him a question and she was waiting for him to answer.

“I’m sorry. I,” he paused searching for something to say, “I’ve got too much on my mind lately. Losing my job with the change in the Red Line has me thinking about what I’ll do with myself from now on.”

Her head leaned to one side as she nodded with understanding. “Maybe we can find a place for you here in Protocols. I was just saying that I’m sure I don’t have to tell *you* how unappreciated a person can feel around here. We increased power efficiency six percent in every burrow post on the Arctic Circle and all they said was ‘Only six-why not ten?’”

“You have that right,” Gordon said, shaking his head. “As a Cutter you’re pretty much on your own. But I guess my part of the job wouldn’t work well if we did it in person anyway; thankless isolation sort of comes with it. And now time is really running out.”

Dana shrugged. “I try not to notice how close we are. Every day is filled with work and preparations; it’s sort of easy to lose yourself in it, and let the doomsday details stay at the back of your mind. It’s been with us for so long now.”

“So you just keep your head down and don’t bother looking at the axe above you?”—

Dana’s back straightened and she crossed her arms to hold her elbows—“Sounds familiar is all,” he added.

“I’m sorry,” her body relaxed as she spoke. “I just know we’re getting to the last few months and that means there will only be so many more people left to get safely tucked away. It means all our work is coming to an end.”

Once at her office, Dana pressed her thumb into an indentation on the knob and turned it. Gordon walked by the pair of windows on either side of the door and came inside. Her office was bigger than his cutting station and filled with clutter. Different colored data tabs of varying shapes and sizes were stacked on nearly every available surface. She gestured to a chair before moving behind her desk. He took his seat putting the notebooks in his lap. She began to sort the debris on her desk into piles.

“So now that you’ve gotten a glimpse around our department, what else would you like to know?”

Gordon sat up in his chair unsure of what to say next. Resigning himself to a course that seemed his best option, he asked “Do you ever see the files of people who get passed into the burrows?”

“Of course,” she nodded as she tidied the last stack. “I and other Protocols personnel have to make sure everyone’s needs get met. Anyone with anything too out of the ordinary is automatically failed but it wouldn’t do to have the future civilization down a genius because of a peanut allergy. If you worked here, you would have the same access. But it must be something similar to what you do now.”

“For each candidate I get it all; every accomplishment, all kinds of official documents, and sometimes a collection of pictures throughout their life. We’re alone together when I work, just me in my little office and their entire life spread out before

me, while I run the equations on them. My work is very...intimate.” Dana sat into her chair as he leaned forward a little.

“And as soon as you finish with one, up pops another, like some roulette wheel. It just spins inside the computer and the ball lands on red-eleven, Ms. Janet White. But she can’t go because she only scored in the ninetieth percentile on a particular test at MIT. Or better yet, *Mrs.* Janet White—she did make the Cut. So then we pass her and basically rip her from her family and force her onto the station.” Gordon realized how loud he’d gotten only after he’d stopped talking. He felt a guilty knot begin to form in his stomach as he watched her unclench her fingers from her elbows. Once she had them steepled on her desk, she spoke.

“I think I understand. I work to make these people, our survivors-to-be, comfortable, safe, and healthy. I get frustrated just trying to plan for every little detail in countless lives. I don’t do it myself either. I have teams working for just this city and there are armies of people like us working all over the country. You work all by yourself and have a very trying job. I’d be a little afraid of you if you didn’t have some strong feelings about this.”

Gordon felt his shoulders release some of their tension.

“I don’t want to make you afraid. I just now seem to realize how strongly I feel about this.”

“Feeling is human, Dr. Gordon, you—”

“Kyle. Since I get to call you Dana.”

“Kyle, then. Feeling is human. You shouldn’t be afraid to feel like that about what you’re doing. There are times when I’m looking at *inventory reports* or *cargo*

*lists,*” she touched a stack of data tabs, “and have to remind myself that these aren’t just units; these are people. It doesn’t matter how many we can comfortably fit on to our ships; they’re human beings that we’re basically frog-marching into orbit or burying in the Arctic Circle. We’re saddling them with the responsibility of keeping mankind alive. I don’t know who to feel sorrier for honestly, the ones who you pass or the ones you fail.”

Stunned by how closely she just echoed some of his own thoughts, Gordon could only sit and stare at her. His blood began to pulse and his face felt red hot at the realization. She seemed to notice his discomfort and began to speak but he cut her off.

“Do you think a person should ever have that sort of power over another human being?”

“Well,” Dana said pulling her jacket over her blouse, “humans have been taking each other’s lives since the beginning. But us, what we’re doing here—we’re not killers. We aren’t doing this for ourselves; we’re doing it for everyone. So there still can be an everyone.”

“But isn’t it wrong?” Without really meaning to he had jabbed his hand towards her. He quickly slapped it back to his knee.

“I think, because we’re looking out for our people, our kind, it’s not that simple. We’ve been fortunate to see our own extinction approach and are able to do something about it. I don’t see anyone else stepping in to try and save us.”

“But what right do we have to do that?” Gordon gestured to himself and Dana, missing the return of her hands to her elbows.

“I thought if anyone you would understand this, Kyle,” she said. “I mean you get to see who we’re helping, the lives we save. You must see how important our work is.

And we're the most qualified people here. Who better to do this sort of thing? If people like Director Freemantle and you and myself didn't do this work, I suppose we could all just die together but what good would that do?" Dana pushed away from the desk as if to rise.

"Wait a second; if we didn't help anyone, then at least we would've died without having to choose one person over another. We all could've died evenly, fairly."

"Kyle," she sighed and settled back down in her seat, "you do good work here. You *do* save people. I know you can't save everyone and that has to be difficult but what you're doing is extremely vital. You're good at what you do and I can imagine that you feel guilty sometimes but the job hasn't changed. It's the same work, the same situation as when you started."

"I've changed," he said. "What if, because of my decision, I cut someone who should be on that station? Maybe humans are too small to make these kinds of decisions, maybe it's only God's place."

"I wouldn't have guessed you to be such a believer Kyle."

"I'm simply saying, what if a species isn't meant to try and fight its own extinction?"

"Kyle," she peered at him across the desk like he was some alien thing she'd never seen before, "what is this?"

"I started thinking about this last night when I was processing a special tissue candidate. Because this candidate wasn't just special to the Cut but special to someone," his voice was suddenly too thick to escape his throat easily. "This candidate was very special to my wife, and she was very special to me."

Dana sat perfectly still as he tried to gather himself together so he could continue. He closed his eyes wondering what Dana would do but before he could even think of stopping himself, he told her everything. He started with Shannon and how she had died from the Hot Flu. Several months later, a recruiter for the Cut program approached him and brought him onboard. For the past year he cut every day and tried not to think about anything else. Every day he added more names to his ever-increasing number of notebooks.

“I started them my first night on the job.” He raised them up so she could see the difference between the two books. “I didn’t have a red or green book then just a black one. I started on the first page, drew a line down the middle and wrote “passed” on one side then “failed” on the other. But I only filled up the failed column that first night, not one passed candidate at all. And then another page went by, and another. I was on my forty-seventh page before I had a passable candidate. And then I realized they shouldn’t even be in the same book. These were two different classifications of people, those who lived and those who were going to die. They shouldn’t be together like that. So I restarted my record in different colored books and now here I am.” And then he told her about JJ, about his trip to the storage unit.

“Can you help me move him?” he asked Dana. “From the red book to the green?”

He put them both on her desk between the newly stacked tabs then settled against the back of his chair tired from speaking for so long.

For a moment her eyes scoured the books, seeming to take in every wrinkle on the red and the extreme absence of any marring of the green. Without touching them she said, “People die no matter what book they’re in. People die every day.”

“But this is different. These people had a chance—he had a chance and I denied him that.”

“That was the job—”

Gordon stood up and flipped open his red notebook and turned to its most recent page, “I came to you for help with this. I need to save this man. I should’ve remembered him but I didn’t. I would have passed him if I’d known who he was. But I didn’t. Help me put him in this book.” He opened his green notebook so that its page eclipsed the red’s page entirely. “He should be here.”

Dana looked down at the notebooks once again and this time picked up the green one.

“What about them,” she asked tapping the most recent passed candidates, “these six you passed don’t have time for training. They won’t get to go either. You don’t want to give them the same chance?”

“Of course,” he said immediately, “if you can get them in to the Polar Burrows. You could do that, you could get them all in the Burrows?” He leaned forward, hands on the desk.

“No, I can’t do that. The shift in the Red Line has thrown off everything for me too. Factoring six, no seven, new cases would only add to the catastrophe.”

“Fine, make it one, just him.”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t want to—” Dana’s hair swayed back and forth as she shook her head, decidedly not looking at him.

Gordon straightened and wrung his hands. He’d made a mistake, a very huge mistake.

“Please.”

“Kyle,” she said his name piteously. “No. I could do this for you, I could do it right here.” She pointed at her computer. “I could enter JJ Strom and all these other names; I could even enter your name.”

“But I don’t want to go.” Gordon said his eyes focused on the small rectangular device beside her monitor. It was a thumb scanner just like the one that granted him access in his Cutting station.

“Still, I could do that. But it would jeopardize a lot of people who are *supposed* to be on the list and take the space of someone else. I just can’t do that for you. It would be wrong.”

“No it isn’t.” Gordon shut the red book and leaned his weight on its cover. “Do what’s right for one person. Let someone catch this break. Let someone just get lucky for once. Let him live.”

“I can’t, Kyle.” She stood up and he pulled away from the desk. “I think you should probably go and I think you should talk to someone about what you’re feeling.”

“No, that’s not happening. I’m not leaving until you do this.”

“You need to leave, now.” She pointed at the door.

Gordon knocked over a stack of data-tabs as he rounded the corner of the desk. Dana fell back into her chair, arms raised defensively.

“Kyle, stop,” she yelled.

Without a word he stepped closer and grabbed her hand. Then he silently forced her thumb to the scanner and held it in place. The device activated and the computer monitor lit up, displaying icons and windows with various types of data and information.

“Kyle that hurts. Please stop this.” Dana whispered up at him. He looked down and saw that he was holding her upper arm in a tight grip while pinning her wrist and thumb firmly on the scan-pad with his other hand.

The computer monitor changed and the window that had previously showed a scan of her thumb flashed to show she now had access. The square expanded into a larger array of icons signifying the different high-security files. He had a similar window on his computer with a simple pair of scissors to represent the Cut programs. Gordon saw a digital acorn above the words *SEED Program* and a simple, multi-armed snowflake in the corner of the file window above *Polar Burrows*.

“Dana,” he said releasing her arm and taking a step away from her, “please help me do this. We can save people.”

Her jaw bobbed as she prepared to speak, but instead she punched a button on her desk. It might have been hidden in the clutter or she might have placed his notebook cover over it when he was talking, but he knew he had simply forgotten all about them. He had failed to remember most desks had security call buttons. Most everyone did. There was one on his desk, even. The security of the Cut program was paramount and so at the touch of this button, a team could be called to a scene in seconds.

Wordlessly, he leaned to one side allowing her to leave the chair and run to the door. Once she was through, he locked it behind her then returned to the monitor.

It took him a few tries to find the appropriate method to enter a new candidate onto the Polar Burrows’ master list. With the candidate number he’d written into his red notebook and Dana’s override clearance, it wasn’t long before he watched with relief as “Jonathon Jackson Strom” flitted from a digital entry form onto the list for immediate

processing. He had done it. JJ was passed. While he wanted to enjoy this moment he knew that right now he could help someone else and so he started typing more names.

Men in tactical armor and face shields arrived seconds afterward and began lining up outside the door. One of them, his face shield up, was talking to Dana by the corner of the hallway. She stood leaning against the wall, her hands balled and twisting around each other.

He typed the name and file number of Sam Thompson into the appropriate window and hit enter.

“Doctor, open this door.” One of the guards shouted through the glass.

Gordon entered the names and numbers of Eva Everett and David Eiland.

He had just started entering Cal Fellowes’ number when the door opened so forcefully it banged against the wall behind it. He continued typing.

“Step back and lie down on the floor. Now.”

The computer’s chime of another successful entry was the only response the officer got.

“I said, now.—”

The next name was Steve Royale, he started entering the number. Two more officers backed the initial guard and the three advanced slowly towards him. Gordon raised a hand and before his eyes had registered the motion, one of the guards had drawn and fired. A small pinch in his chest caused him to look down where he saw a small crumpled black ball on his shirt. A strange smell filled his nose, and the world grew unsteady. He threw his arm at the desk to steady himself but only knocked over more

data tabs before hitting the floor himself. His face burst with pain upon landing, he heard loud stomping boots and a woman crying from somewhere far away.

\* \* \*

The large bones of Sue the t-rex loomed above him. The atrium she called home was empty. Gordon was lying on his back looking up at her empty eye sockets.

“You keep staring at her like that and I may get jealous.” Shannon said, coyness dripping in her voice.

“Not only do you have eyes, which I prefer, but you have magnificent eyes,” he said. “But she does have a killer smile.”

“If you’re into older women, I suppose so.” She said. They laughed and he turned to kiss her. She felt warm beside him; her blue eyes alight with life, stark contrasts to the vacant holes in the skull above them. He had paid the security guards to let them in after closing time. But he knew it wouldn’t be much longer before they would have to gather their things and leave.

“Honestly, Shannon, I don’t want to look at anyone else again. Ever. I feel guilty even blinking around you.”

“Blinking?” She smiled again, her cheeks still rosy, “it’s okay to blink.”

“I feel like I might miss something.” His breathing had calmed down, and he started to say, we don’t have much time. Then he realized she was crying.

“What is it? Did I do something?” He spoke fast trying to put right whatever he might’ve done wrong.

“No, no. You are so good, for me and to me. You’re wonderful, but I need to tell you something before we get any more serious.”

“This isn’t serious enough for you,” he pointedly looked around at their scattered clothes on the floor tiles. “We’re in the presence of the oldest voyeur known to man.” He hoped his joke would lighten whatever emotion she was feeling. And he felt relieved when she laughed even though her tears remained.

“No, it’s just that,” she paused looking at the ceiling as if it held a script of whatever it was she wanted to say. “Kyle I can’t have children. I mean, I know we’re young but I physically can’t have them. Which is—it’s hard for me.” She said as the tears began anew. “It’s why I was so upset when JJ’s family moved away.”

“I’m sorry.” She put a finger on his lips to quiet him.

“Just listen alright? I don’t know what you want for the future, if you want to have kids of your own. But I can’t. And I don’t think I want to take care of someone else’s children either, not anymore, not after having to say goodbye to JJ.”

“So if you want a future with me you need to know that it will just be me, ok? I need you to know that and be ok with that. I don’t want you expecting what I can’t give.”

Despite his arm growing numb as it was pinned beneath her, he squeezed her close to him and kissed her forehead. It tasted lightly of sweat and her perfume.

“I just want to be with you. That’s all. I don’t know how I got so far in life without you I don’t ever want to go back to a life without you. Promise you’ll always be here and I’m yours.”

She leaned in to him, and he heard her say softly “I promise.” He hated to break this moment but he knew their time was already almost gone. He started to tell her they should go when his face surged with intense pain.

\* \* \*

Gordon's eyes snapped open to see only blurry whiteness above him. His face felt like a spike had been driven into it just below his left eye. His fingers trembled as he moved them towards the origin of the slow throbs of pain. He had just skimmed his chin when his fingernails collided with a taught mass of skin and the pain rekindled from being so clumsily poked.

Gordon whimpered and the movement of his jaw brought his face to a subtler, more intimate level of hurt. He sat up from bed—though it must have just barely counted as one—and twisted to the side so that his legs touched lightly upon the floor. If the unclear outlines of the rest of the room were any indication, this bed was the sole piece of furnishing within the room.

He looked down at himself and felt thankful he still had some amount of vision up close. He was dressed in a white t-shirt with a chest pocket and tucked inside were his glasses. He stood up and slowly withdrew his spectacles and began to place them over his eyes. The nose piece touched lightly on the swell giving him a dull flash of pain. He sat back down on the bed, or more accurately the bed was luckily right there to catch him as his knees buckled beneath him. The landing wasn't so violent but the jolt ran up his spine and blossomed like a firework within his cheek.

He started to remember what had happened and then more details began to come to him. He had been trying to help Shannon, no a boy—a man. He'd been trying to help JJ.

But he had failed. And as his failure sunk in, a chill clambered over him like a cold-fingered lizard, each clawed step leaving a cool, itchy feeling followed by the

slithering tail of uneasiness. JJ was lost and now so was he. Gordon held his breath waiting to be overwhelmed by what he'd done. But nothing happened. There was no flash of self-preservation or feeling of impending doom. His guilt was solely in his failure.

He had met with a woman and she had helped him. Or had she? He couldn't quite remember. At least she had been with him right before—well before he stopped being able to remember. He couldn't remember her name. It seemed to dangle just inside his memory's reach before pulling away again. A girlish face framed by coppery hair that was clear enough.

Gordon shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind, but the motion seemed to send his brain bouncing against his skull. Placing a hand on the wall above his small, thin pillow, Gordon took in several slow breaths through his nose to still his heart and mind. He had told her everything. She knew it all now, and he wondered if she had shared that information.

He had hoped that she might have understood and would want to help him. But it hadn't worked; she hadn't understood him at all. So he had used her, forced her, to access the data and from there, from there, he had put the names in.

The door opened and the sound of heavy boots drummed in Gordon's head. A shrill whistle echoed.

"Look at *you*," a voice said cresting with levity. "Can you walk or do you want a wheelchair or something?" The speaker was male and while it was familiar, Gordon couldn't place it. He looked up towards the doorway and could see a pair of large murky twins standing to either side of a shorter man. Gordon couldn't see his face clearly but he

was certain the central man was the speaker. The only description he could think of was “theatrical, this man sounds theatrical,” and while that in itself was vague and unhelpful, it too felt oddly familiar.

“I believe I can walk, but I don’t have any shoes and I can’t see without my glasses.”

“Shoes are under the bed, just thin slip-ons though, not allowed to leave you socks because you might try to kill yourself with them. And your glasses are right there.” The man seemed to jerk making Gordon believe he must have pointed only he couldn’t tell where exactly. “Jesus how many times did they blast you?”

The man walked over and Gordon braced himself as his visitor moved to place the glasses on him.

“I’m afraid my new addition doesn’t leave much room for corrective vision.” Gordon mimed placing the glasses snugly on his face again careful not to nudge the lump.

“Mmm, well you should’ve gotten the laser vision done like I did. It’s just spectacular. I got it done years ago and never looked back.” Gordon couldn’t be sure but he was under the impression that the man was smiling at him, “Sorry, they give you a list of stupid eye-puns when they bill you. Look maybe you don’t need to see much right now anyway. Take this walk with me and we’ll get you a fresh ice pack. Maybe that will shrink you enough to fit into your glasses again. Your shoes.”

Gordon looked to where the man had gestured and saw two white blobs beneath the foot of his bed that could have been shoes. He slid down the bed on his rump and hands before putting them on. Then he stood up and though he couldn’t distinguish one guard from the other he noticed them both twitch as he got to his feet.

The glasses were useless so he slid them back into the front shirt pocket.

“Where are we going?” Gordon said taking a step towards the trio at the door.

His options were rather limited at the moment.

“Just around. Not far enough for you to try any ridiculous escape attempt.”

“Escape?” Gordon asked, the word springing off his lips in utter confusion. He could walk only with a great deal of concentration and couldn’t tell one face from another. “Mister, you over estimate me.”

“You still don’t recognize me, Kyle? I don’t blame you, taking a hit like that can rattle anyone.” The man stepped towards him and as he did so, Gordon’s better eye looked intently as the blurred image sharpening. He saw white hair and deep-set wrinkles but recognition refused to dawn on him until his visitor smiled. Time had not treated the “hood ornament” well.

It was Jess Freemantle, but a weary, haggard version of the man Gordon remembered. Freemantle’s hair was now fully snow-white and its usual short, well-kept angular style was pure chaos. He remembered Freemantle being very tan, as if he spent every spare moment on a yacht somewhere sunny. Now however, he seemed pasty, his skin slack and pale. More like the color of uncooked dough. His clothes were still well made and expensive-looking, but the gray slacks and dark blue shirt were wrinkled and seemed draped over his frame rather than fitting him. He had lost weight. He looked bone-weary. He looked how Gordon felt.

But that wasn’t quite right. At the moment, his head felt physically cracked which hurt and he felt stiff from that pathetic version of a bed he’d lain in but otherwise he felt better than usual. Inside him, in his heart he guessed, he felt better, healthier,

freer. He looked again at the tarnished ornament that had once shined so nicely and concluded that Freemantle looked how Gordon had felt before he'd saved JJ, or tried to.

“Jess Freemantle.” Gordon said.

“Hello, Kyle,” Freemantle turned and gestured for Gordon to walk with him.

\* \* \*

Gordon walked with measured steps down the corridor with the guards trailing behind them. After a few minutes of silent walking, Gordon felt obliged to ask a question of his longtime colleague.

“How long did it take you to remember who I was?”

“What?” Freemantle asked.

“You never remembered me before; did I leave an impression this time?”

Freemantle stopped and turned to face Gordon. He stepped into Gordon's vision and dipped his snowy head down, looking at himself and then at Gordon.

“I'd say we've both seen better days. Time beats us all to hell by the end. You didn't think I actually forgot about you? I know talent when I see it and I can appreciate it without being a cheerleader. Just because you never heard me say it, doesn't mean I didn't think you were one hell of a scientist or teacher. I know we were never great partners but—”

“Partners? That word entails a level of equality between us doesn't it? Forgive me for not feeling exceedingly equal at the moment.”

“Forgiven and forgotten but please, Kyle, you have got to cut me a little slack here. All of this,” Freemantle gestured to the facility around them with a hand that became a distorted shape to Gordon's impaired vision. “It all means nothing if we, we

the *scientists*, the people in charge, forget what's important. You can't abandon your duty."

Freemantle started walking again slightly faster this time. Gordon could tell after a few steps that his head would be aching even more soon. That he still had a head at all was something.

"You think I lost sight of what's really important? If anything, I found it."

"Found it, you *found it*? Oh brother, you are worse off than I thought."

"So I'm crazy is that it? No chance I'm just trying to do the right thing? No possibility that maybe I want to do something worthwhile instead of spending another minute doing this same old shit? I must be crazy."

They walked around a corner.

"Well there were some mentions that this wasn't exactly a calculated attempt at sabotage but more like a breakdown. You jeopardized the integrity of the entire operation," Freemantle said somewhat apologetically. What he might be trying to apologize for, Gordon couldn't quite guess.

"That's an interesting assessment. Where'd you hear that story?" Freemantle stopped again, this time placing his hands on Gordon's shoulders.

"Be careful Kyle, because that story might save you from being executed."

"Executed? Just tell them to wait a few months. Then I can just walk outside and that'll be the end of it."

"What was it? Can you even tell me that? Why risk the work we've done, you have done, why? I heard Collins' version but I want to hear you tell me what happened."

“I don’t think you’d understand.” Gordon said to which Freemantle gave no reply.

As they walked, they passed large windows. It was daytime outside and once again cloudy and choked looking.

“Maybe you can tell me what happened exactly. I,” Gordon waved his fingers towards his face, “don’t remember this. I remember meeting with a woman and then ...” he left it at a shrug and hoped Freemantle would fill in the rest.

“Well what happened is something we’re about to find out. We’re meeting with Ms. Collins in my office to figure out all the devilish details.”

Collins. It was the second time Freemantle had said the name and this time it clicked—Dana. She was the woman he’d met. She hadn’t understood him and hadn’t helped him. He had made her do it. He had forced her to help him. And he was about to meet her? Chilling sweat turned his face clammy and his stomach began to flutter.

They entered a large office and Gordon’s poor eye sight could only make out a figure at the desk in the center of the room. With every step he took, the figure became clearer. And once he was close enough to start making out real details her name fell from his mouth.

“Dana,” he said softly. At the sound of her name, she instinctively crossed her arms and grabbed her elbows tightly with her hands. One of the guards brushed past Gordon, sending him leaning dangerously for a moment, to go stand at her side. Freemantle motioned for him to sit at a chair at the end of the long desk. Then Freemantle shrugged one shoulder and sat down in the chair behind the desk.

“Ok,” he began spinning back and forth in his chair, “I know what you did but have only Collins’ account of why you did it. And frankly, it just doesn’t sit well with me. For the past year you were the best worker bee we could have asked for. And now...I don’t know. This doesn’t seem like you.”

After a moment of deciding how much he resented all that, Gordon answered.

“You don’t know me. Not really.”

“You want to be dramatic,” Freemantle said stabbing his finger at Gordon, “fine. You are here because of *me*. I recommended you to the recruiters, Kyle. You owe me answers for this.”

He could only stare back at Freemantle as he digested that statement; he was here at Freemantle’s referral? That would take a lot of getting used to.

“We prepare for normal freak outs around here. We monitor for that kind of thing all the time. But you,” he aimed his finger once more at Gordon though accusingly rather than threateningly this time, “knew how to do your job and keep your head down. You valued the work we do here, the work you *did* here at least.”

“Our work isn’t right, it’s wrong.”

“Right or wrong is not applicable Kyle. It was decided.” Freemantle flattened his hand against the desktop loudly. “The world is just too big to save as a whole. We came up with the Cut equation and this entire operation. You helped us, Kyle, so you obviously thought it had merit, once.”

“This was the best way; it might be the only way,” Dana put in.

“It is the only way.” Freemantle said nodding at Dana. “We just happened to be the people in charge when it all fell to hell. It’s that simple. If this happened ten years

sooner or ten years later it would be someone else steering us through this. But it happened now, on our watch, and we're doing our best here. Nobody said it was going to be easy," Freemantle thumbed his chest, "and if I recall correctly I told you the exact opposite on your very first day here; that this was going to be terribly trying on all of us. But I remember also telling you how the importance of this job so far outweighs our troubles. I told you that we will simply have to bear this burden, which is something I thought you could handle. You did it so well until you up and lost it," he shook his head. "I never would have brought you here if I thought you wouldn't be able to handle this.

"Can you even answer why, and don't give me that it was the right thing. There is a greater good here and right and wrong are just too small in comparison."

He didn't respond. No one listened, or wanted to listen, so perhaps keeping his mouth shut was best.

"I think it was the shift in the Red Line date," she said. "I know it put a lot of pressure on my staff and he mentioned how it overwhelmed him." Freemantle held his chin in his hand then let go to roll his wrist, telling her to go on.

"He visited me with some transfers to the Polar Burrows. He was hoping that these last six passed candidates might get put in the Burrows since they don't have time to be station trained. I entertained the idea but told him no. But when he saw how simple it would be to do he tried to do it himself. I've already taken out all the names he entered, nobody was collected yet. I sent you a list." Dana finished and glanced at Gordon, who closed his mouth and swallowed.

Freemantle looked up at him from his sunken, tired eyes. She held her arm up near the shoulder, revealing the bruises beneath her sleeve. Gordon had to look away,

trying to rationalize his guilt. The Earth was going to be consumed by the Hot Flu soon and this young woman's pain didn't compare. It couldn't, not really. The scales were so far out of balance that Dana or anyone—their fears and pains wouldn't matter much longer. Still, he couldn't feel good about what he had done.

“Collins, I have your list here,” Freemantle tapped his monitor and began to read off the names. “You took care of Fellowes, Eiland, Everett and Thompson then?”

Looking down at the floor Dana answered, “Yes.”

“His damage is all gone?” Freemantle didn't seem to notice how she reached again for her upper arm but Gordon couldn't help but see it and feel his insides sink.

“Yes,” she said again in a low voice, “almost like it never happened.”

“Well,” Freemantle gripped the arms of his desk chair and leaned back. “You're not a traitor, not a terrorist, just...misguided. You were overcome by the change in the Red Line date. That's it.” Freemantle said the words like he couldn't suffer the taste they left in his mouth. As if their truth was just too bitter to swallow. “You're definitely relieved of your job. You're fired.”

“I believe it's more accurate to say I quit.” Gordon said. “What you still don't understand is that everyone deserves saving, every one.”

“Well I'm sorry but we can't save everyone.” Freemantle said quickly. “It just can't be done. That you've been compromised by your own guilt is both unfortunate and fine by me. I'll just take you back to your little white room and you can stay in there and rot for a while.”

Dana started to speak but stopped herself after drawing stares from both men.

“I only mean that he’ll *wait* there until I can find a place that is secure enough to keep him from doing anything else.” Freemantle stood up and ran both hands through his hair, adding to its disarray. “You know I used to wonder if someone like you wouldn’t have been better suited for my job...but then you go and do something like this. And you know what I realize?” He asked Gordon, his hand flat out towards in an honest gesture, “No one. No one is qualified for this line of work.”

“Take him back, but stop somewhere and get an ice pack, will you?” Freemantle motioned for the guard. “Enjoy retirement doctor. Ms. Collins we need to clear up a few things and then you go get some rest too.”

Gordon stood up and left the room with a nod and another curious look at the worn man behind the desk. He followed the security officer back to his room feeling numb. He wasn’t going to be executed, and he wasn’t sure how he might feel once the numbness wore off. He had been given a measure of compassion by Jess Freemantle. Compassion from the “hood ornament.” The end seemed truly nigh.

Once he was back in his room he sat down on his bed and put the ice pack to his face. He had been so close, so close to doing something right for one of them. Swallowing, his mouth gone suddenly dry, Gordon felt tears in his eyes but before he could stop them, they welled up and started down his face. Rolling onto his side he felt his chest hitch with gasps. He wanted to shout and scream, to raise his voice in all the guilt and anguish he was feeling. He wanted to do anything to let it bleed out of his body and leave him clean to heal. But all he could do was sob into his hands until he fell asleep.

He remained separated from the world, dreaming alternately of Shannon and JJ and Dana until a hand woke him. Gordon turned over and his breath caught in his throat. Blearily, he saw a woman sitting on his bed. She was leaning towards him and when he sat up she pulled away, her hair brightening in the light. It burned away from dark brown into a shiny copper. Gordon wiped at his eyes with one hand and used the other to search for his glasses. He cautiously put them on his face. The one lens didn't fit exactly right on his bruised eye but he could see clearly enough. It was Dana.

"You're not who I expected," he said.

"I should've woken you differently but after I came in, I got this crazy feeling you weren't sleeping." She shook her head as she looked down, "I thought you were dead."

Laughing quietly, Gordon said "No, no. Still alive and suffering. No harm done. What could I *possibly* do for you? I owe you an apology, about your arm, about what I did. I'm sorry about everything."

"I wanted to talk to you. I couldn't stop hearing you say it was the right thing. You wanted me to put this man in the Burrows because he was special to you. It made me think about everyone who is special to me." She put her hand on top of his. "I don't think it is right to only choose the ones we love. But regular people, they should have a chance, too, don't you think? Maybe not in the station, but in the Burrows. There's what is right and what is *right*. And I think you're the first person around here to actually know the difference. So I did it. I kept him on the list. He's safe. He's going to go north to the Burrows."

"He's safe? He's really safe?" Gordon reached for her wrist to steady himself and she jerked away from him and stood up

“No wait,” he said. “Please, don’t leave.”

“JJ is scheduled for collection later today. I just wanted you to know.”

Gordon couldn’t help but smile and cry simultaneously. It was done; Shannon’s little boy, Jonathon Jackson Strom, JJ to those who really loved him, would be saved.

Holding such a large smile hurt his face quite a bit but he didn’t care.

“This was dangerous for you.”

“You reminded me some risks are worth taking, Kyle.”

He ran that through his mind and smiled. “Thank you,” he said.

“Those of us left behind maybe that’s where the future will come from,” she said.

“Not from the people who are cut off from life, but the ones who have to struggle, who will have to survive. I think the future will come from the people who meet the true Cut head on. Don’t you?”