

In the real world you may die, but it's the only place you can really live. Take one pill, and for twenty hours you'll be an undying god in a fantasy realm of your own making, but somewhere in the back of your mind, that piece of humanity you've trapped in a gilded cage won't accept your lie. It will want out.

"For Sparta!" A man in the phalanx shouted next to me as the onrushing Persians crashed into our battle line. I suppressed a yawn as I casually swatted aside several Persian soldiers with my shield, and skewered four at once with my lance.

I had dreamed about this before, but a movie about the battle of Thermopylae had been on while I was awake, so I figured I'd recreate some scenes.

"Break ranks." I said to my fellow soldiers in a conversational tone. The men gave great shouts and rushed the Persians, scattering them like flies. I decided to use some slow mo and dice up several Persians with my comrades. Then I got tired of using my traditional weapons so I decided to use some good old fashion Sith lightning to take them down. Then when that wasn't enough fun for me I tried flying around the battlefield, deflecting arrow volleys with great gusts of wind and calling down meteor strikes on the Persian archers.

Something still didn't feel right. The enemy was evaporating like water thrown onto lava. My army was singing my praises. Both Spartans and Persians, all around the battlefield, were kneeling down to worship me as a god. It still didn't seem right, but thankfully my REM pill was wearing off, and my alarm should be going off any second.

Sure enough, a heavy metal guitar riff sounds in my ears, and I open my eyes. My room is far less extraordinary than the dream I had just come from, and there are no worshippers here. Still, it seems friendlier to me. I like the pictures of my family that I have hung up on the wall. I should probably call my mom. Her four hour wakeful cycle was irregular, so it was hard to get a hold of her. My best bet was to call my younger brother, who still lived with my parents, and leave a message for her with him.

It was something I'd have to worry about later, now I had to get on my laptop and go to work. I, like most of the civilized world, telecommuted. I was IT support for a major company's website. I logged in, and spent thirty minutes making sure that everything was fine. Everything was fine. I look at the clock and think I still have three and a half hours until I go back to sleep.

My first thought was to go back to sleep anyway, but the current generation REM pill requires four hours of continued consciousness before it can be used again affectively. I start daydreaming about my next lucid dream, and try to plan it out. Trip to Mars? No, I'd founded a Martian civilization twice this week already. Recreate some video game battles? That was too similar to what I had just done. Some of those creepy things nobody wanted to admit to doing? I already felt too much shame from last time, and I couldn't believe I was saying this, but I honestly couldn't think of anything that I hadn't already

seen or done a dozen times. Nothing new was on the internet or the television. Well, nothing really new, there were reboots, reruns, and adaptations of old ideas, but that wasn't going to satisfy me today.

Maybe my friends would have some ideas. I call up a couple acquaintances and ask if they want to come over. We're all on the same wakefulness cycle, so they say sure. Their automated cars would have them over in just a few minutes.

I felt better, friends would surely have some ideas. Within about a thirty second window my two friends show up. We all live pretty close and the automated transport is really quite incredible.

"Hey guys, what's new?" I ask.

Both of them shrug. "Sandy had a sweet dream about the great barrier reef." My friend James tells me. "How'd it go Sandy?"

"I mean anything really new." I rudely interrupt before Sandy can start her story. "I mean, Sandy I'm sure it was great, but how many times have you been to the Great Barrier Reef?"

"26 Ryan." She looked a little terse that I had cut her off. Sandy would go on for hours about the reef if you let her. It was her favorite place to dream.

"Look Ryan." James said. "If we're not going to talk about dreaming we might as well go."

"What?" I said rather shocked that my friends would depart so quickly. "But you just got here." They looked bored at my indignation.

"Well yeah." Sandy said. "But we just got these new REM pills that you can take for a quick one hour dream even if you just woke up from your dream cycle."

"That sounds unhealthy." I commented.

"And you sound lame." Sandy shot back. They all stood up.

"If you want to be a party pooper we best be on our way." James tells me, and they start making for the door. I can't believe this. They've been here two minutes tops, and they're already leaving. This wasn't how I had thought this would go.

"But don't you guys want to talk? Can't we think of something to do?" James actually laughed at that.

"Ryan we'll talk to you in the dream, and find something way more interesting to do there."

"But it won't be me!" I shouted after them. They didn't hear me. They had already shut the door.

I just stared at the door for a minute. I couldn't believe they had dismissed me like that. We normally got on pretty well. We also normally just talked about dreaming, but I had thought our friendship meant more than that.

"I'll call my family." I tell myself. Putting word to action I pick up my phone again and call my younger brother Teddy.

"Hey Teddy, this is Ryan, are mom or dad up?" I ask.

"Ryan? What are you doing calling at this hour, we're all still asleep." He responds in a groggy voice. "I was having this great dream about climbing Mount Everest."

"Sorry Teddy, I know it's early." I look out the window and see the sun is high in the sky. "But I was looking for a bit of company, is it alright if I come over and hang out?"

"Why?" He asks.

"I don't know." I say. "I just thought it would be fun. I mean people hang out and have parties."

"Ryan, that's only in the movies. Normal people just hang out in dreams. Matter of fact, tell you what, I'll have a nice long adventure with you as soon as I'm back asleep."

"But it won't be me." I try and tell him, but he's hung up. I didn't even get to ask him to leave a message for mom and dad.

Family wanted to dream, friends wanted to dream, work was already done, and still over three hours left to kill. I get up and start pacing the room. There's got to be something I can do. There were some online chat rooms I could try. They're all full of dull people who just want to talk about their last dream, but at least they want to talk.

I sigh and give in, picking up my laptop again and typing in the address in my browser. I'm sitting through an ad by sleep core, manufacturer of the REM pill, when I hear my doorbell ring. At first I don't recognize it as my doorbell, I haven't heard it in years, but then it goes off again, and realization strikes me. There's someone at my door, and they probably want to talk. They probably want to talk about religion, or something they're selling, but I'll take anything at this point.

"Coming." I say, and with a renewed spring in my step, I put my laptop down and glide to the door. I open the door and see that there's no one there. That's strange. I know I heard somebody ring my bell.

I glance around just in time to see a girl dashing around a house in my cul-de-sac. Kids, they must be playing some prank. I start to close my door, when I notice that it's actually pretty nice out. It's not as nice as a dream would be, but for real world weather it was kind of refreshing.

"Well, there's nothing to do for another three hours anyway, might as well go for a walk." I say to myself, and with that I set off down a random sidewalk, taking left and right turns at random. It's

pretty boring at first. You've seen one townhouse you've seen them all. No one else is out walking, and there isn't so much as a dog for company.

I'm about to turn around and head back, when the houses begin to give way to a forest. I just catch glimpses of trees between the long rows of white monotonous homes at first, and then more and more frequently, until I see a path entering the wood. I walk to the start of the path, and marvel at one of the trees. I stare at its bark, at how it's truly random. There's no pre-thought pattern emblazoned on every inch. I pick a crack and follow it all the way up until it gives way to branches, and then leaves. The leaves practically take my breath away.

I could spend an entire dream trying to create a tree half this detailed, and not come close. Every leaf was subtly different. There was no mental copy pasting that produced the background for the elven adventures I had while I was asleep. Every leaf was a different shape, had different veins, and was connected to a different part of the branch. I counted the veins in one leaf, and tried to find another that matched it. Some were close, but no two were the same. Even if two leaves had the same number of veins at first glance, when I reached up and plucked the two to compare them more closely, the cells were lined up differently.

The leaves felt different than they did in my dreams to. There was a leathery softness to them, like skin, but rougher and coarser. I rubbed it between my fingers. This wasn't how I had imagined they'd feel. I thought they would be boring, like paper, but they were tiny masterpieces. I put the two leaves in one of my pockets.

I thought I heard a snickering sound. I turn around quickly, but saw nothing. After scanning my surroundings for a moment I brushed it off. It was probably the wind blowing through the trees. Besides, I had a whole forest to look at, and I still had about two and a half hours left! Man, the next time I went under, I was going to try and make a forest this beautiful.

I wander around looking at the different trees, trying to guess which trees are the same species, and how thick each tree is. If I chopped them up for firewood would they burn? Did you make firewood out of just any tree? I tried to think about climbing them, which would support my weight. How would I get up? I needed to do this more often. Waking research like this made for excellent dreams.

A whispering sound courses through the forest. This time it really is the wind. I stop and close my eyes. The sound of countless individual little green wings fluttering all around was breath taking. I literally stopped breathing until the wind passed so I could hear it better. It was as if every single tree was telling me to relax, it would be alright. For several moments afterwards I just stood there taking deep breaths and imagining the sound I had just heard passing through again.

Instead of hearing a blissful gust of wind through the leaves, I heard in the distance, but rapidly getting closer, some voices singing. I opened my eyes and saw running through the woods towards me, two men and one woman, all about my age, and sprinting towards me. I bounced up and down on the balls of my feet in anticipation of meeting some people to talk to. Although I thought it was a bit weird

that they were running through the forest, and not on the path. The leaping they did over the logs seemed like an awful lot of work for people not dreaming.

“Haloo!” One of the men shouted at me as he got closer. “Haloo!” The other two shouted to me. They didn’t sound even slightly out of breath. As they got closer I could see they weren’t even sweating.

Taken aback by their exuberance I raised a hand timidly in greeting.

As the lead man rushed passed me, he hit me on the shoulder. I stumbled back a step.

“Tag.” He said over his shoulder playfully, without slowing his pace.

I looked at him with a frown. That had been unfriendly of him. I felt another strike to my shoulder and I flailed my arms as I took another two steps back.

“Tag.” The second man said as he ran by. I anticipated the girl’s strike. As she got close I turned quickly, and almost fell right over. She stopped running, put both of her hands on her knees and laughed. She laughed loud, and for several moments. The other two stopped and jogged back to see what the fuss was about.

“What’s up Jess?” The second man to strike me asked. I felt like I should speak up, as they had all said something to me at least once, and I had remained quiet, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. I still felt rather foolish for almost falling over several times.

“This zombie can’t have been unhooked for more than a few days.” She says, wiping away tears of mirth.

“What?” I finally manage to ask. I wanted to ask, what are you people doing? Why did you hit me? How are all of you not passed out from exhaustion? What’s unhooked mean? I wanted to say several things, but all that came out was ‘what’.

“Don’t worry about it friend.” The leader said. “Jess is just playing with you, how long have you been unhooked?” Jess puts her hands on her hips and winks at me.

“Unhooked?” I asked, not having enough of my mental faculties about me to form longer sentences like ‘what does unhooked mean and why does she think I’ve been unhooked’?

“Oh man Frank he must be fresh. I don’t think he’s run into a pack of free people before.” The man next to the leader says.

“Is that true?” Franks asks me. “Have you ever seen people like us before?” I shake my head. The man whose name I did not yet know gave a whistle.

“Welcome to the club brother.” He says, and sticks out his hand. Still very much confused about what’s going on I shake his hand, and somewhere in the introductions that followed I discover the as of yet unidentified man is named Thomas, the three of them are all siblings, and I manage to scrape my wits together.

"I still don't understand what's going on." I tell them. "You guys keep using words I don't understand. What's unhooked? What are free people? Why did you call me a zombie? Do I smell or something?"

"No you don't smell." Frank tells me. Thomas and Jess exchange doubtful looks with each other.

"Okay you don't smell much, but anyway. We called you a zombie because you're recently unhooked, and we're all free people because we've been unhooked." This only clears things up a little for me.

"Unhooked, that's the crux of it. What does it mean?" I ask. Thomas cracks a grin.

"Isn't it obvious?" He asks me. "Do you notice how we've been running through the woods and we're not even slightly out of breath? Do you see how there's no one else about, and you've managed to run into not one, but three of us. I know you don't have a mirror, but do you see how we're laughing, and smiling, and singing, and everyone else you know just wants to sleep?"

"So you guys spend your wakeful cycle being active, so what? I spend a lot of my dream time running around too." I retort.

"That's just it." Jess says. "Ryan, we don't dream." I look at her like she had three noses and had just declared herself the first human mouse.

"Everybody dreams, it's a natural part of sleep." I say. Thomas snickers when I use the word natural.

"There's nothing natural about the way you sleep." Thomas tells me. I feel a need to punch Thomas. For the first time that day I wish I was asleep so I could cause him some suffering.

"Ryan." Frank tells me, much more gently than Thomas. "We don't sleep like you do. We do dream, despite what Jess says." Jess and Thomas are now narrowing their eyes at Frank. "It's still a dream guys, just not like what the zombies do." They backed off a bit, but the comment had clearly offended them. These people were insulted by dreaming. These guys just kept getting weirder. I waited for Frank to continue his thought.

"When we sleep we don't take any pills. We just lay down, close our eyes, and in about eight hours or so we get up and get on with life. If we dream." He glanced at Thomas and Jess as if to challenge them. "We don't control it, it controls us, and when we wake up we quickly forget it."

"Eight hours!" I exclaimed, my jaw dropping. "How do you guys stay so active? I sleep twenty hours a day and I don't have a fraction of the energy that you do!"

"It's true." Frank said. "Stay with us a while and you'll see. Come on, we're heading back home, you can follow along." I didn't have time to consider his offer as he punched me in the shoulder again.

"Tag." He said, and the three of them darted away as quickly as they had come.

“You’re supposed to catch us!” Jess called back to me.

How? They were running way too fast for any normal human to catch up. They were almost around the bend in the trail and if I didn’t move quickly they’d be gone. I considered going back home and forgetting this whole ridiculous incident, but just then the girl looked over her shoulder at me, and something about her pulled me after them.

I started to move towards them, slowly at first. This running they were doing looked dangerous and I didn’t want to leap into it. I increased my pace, and my forward momentum began to allow me to take longer and longer strides. It took more effort than walking. I had to think about constantly pushing myself forward. I was moving quicker, but I was still losing them.

I really began to hit my stride, and I began to feel warm. It was almost like taking small jumps forward. It came naturally to me and I began to hear blood pumping in my ears. It was an exhilarating feeling. I was generating my own breeze now, and it felt just like the one that had swept through before the trio had arrived, only instead of peace this one brought energy with it. I pumped my arms and began to feel like a warrior. I had been a warrior before, a general, a sniper, a legionnaire, a marine, a Spartan, and even a god, but now I really felt like it. It didn’t feel like playing a part anymore. It felt like the real thing

Then I started to have trouble breathing. My breaths had been quickening, and now it seemed like I couldn’t get enough air. I stumbled and nearly fell flat on my face as I stopped running and bent over to combat the sudden onset of my shortness of breath. I took deep breaths, and I had to almost spit the sweat out as it ran down my face. The deep breaths weren’t working. They just weren’t working. Short breaths, that was it, just get air in and out quickly, in and out quickly.

“He’s hyperventilating!” I heard the girl call. She didn’t sound far away, they must’ve been on the way back, but I couldn’t look up, my vision was starting to do something funny. I couldn’t see very well. “You shouldn’t have tried to get him to play tag Frank. He can’t take it.” Her voice was close, and I felt a hand on the back of my head. Something was placed in front of my mouth.

“Just keep breathing.” She said in a low encouraging voice, like a mother telling her child that it was going to be okay. “That’s it.” I heard a crinkling sound, and as my vision began to clear I saw a brown paper bag in front of my face. As had happened so many times today I once again was utterly at a loss as to what had happened.

My breathing slowed and I felt like I was getting enough air again. I stood up and took a deep breath.

“There.” Jess said. “That’s better.” She pats me on the back. “You just got a little too excited from the run, that’s all.”

“Does that happen every time you run?” I thought it was a stupid question, but Thomas and Frank didn’t say anything sarcastic to me.

“No, not usually.” Jess tells me. “It only typically happens when you haven’t been working out in a while, which, I’m guessing you haven’t.” I didn’t know if I had ever done a workout. I shook my head.

“There you see.” Jess turned to Frank and Thomas. “He hasn’t done anything like this before, so we have got to ease him into it. How about we just try keeping you awake for a regular 16 hour rotation first?” the question was directed at me. I had forgotten that they claimed to only sleep eight hours a night, and not control their dreams at all.

“I don’t know how you expect me to recover from being tired by being up for so long. I was planning on going to sleep as soon as I got back to my house.” Jess shook her head at me.

“Nope, wrong answer, you sir are going to come with us and enjoy yourself with some good old fashioned hanging out.” Hanging out, that word comforted me, and I let her take me by the arm and start walking up the path. I had started this day wanting to hang out, and in a very indirect roundabout way it was happening. It was happening with strangers, and odd ones at that, but it was still happening. I guess you got to be careful what you wish for.

On the walk back I noticed that my legs seemed weaker than they had before. I had to limp periodically. I wondered if I had broken something. Maybe they should take me to a hospital.

“That’s normal.” Frank said from beside me. He was watching me walk, and had noticed my limp. “The first time you work out a muscle it typically hurts a lot afterwards. It normally doesn’t take place so quickly, but people don’t normally get as out of shape as you do.” I tried to think quickly to respond to that insult, but Jess spoke first.

“Don’t worry, it’ll get better quick. You’ll be running through the forest in no time.” Jess encouraged me.

“I can’t stand all this walking!” Thomas exclaimed.

“No one’s making you.” Frank informed him.

“Good.” Thomas shot back. He bolted forward and to my amazement, jumped into the low hanging branches of a nearby tree and swung himself around several branches without using his legs.

“He must work out his arms constantly.” I said in awe.

“Not really.” Jess told me. “There’s a technique to climbing. Trust me, it looks more difficult than it actually is.”

I found that hard to believe. He flipped out of the tree and I almost swallowed my tongue as his feet went over his head.

“Do you people do anything normal?” I asked.

“By your definition?” Thomas asked. “Probably not.” Great, I was once again tempted to head back home, but I wasn’t sure I could make it all the way back by myself.

“Here we are.” Jess said. “Home sweet home.” The three of them lived in a town house. That was a pleasant bit of normality. I half expected them to live inside a giant turtle or something with how this day had been going.

Several minutes later they had me sitting around a table with cards. That was another pleasant bit of familiarity. I liked to play cards, in dreams naturally. I organized an occasional match with my friends, and I considered myself an expert. The game they were playing was new to me, but that was alright, I liked learning new games.

“It’s called hearts.” Frank told me, and the rules seemed about as foreign as everything else had this day, but they were easy enough to master. I quickly cleaned up the first few matches, with my opponents only seeming to be a round or two from failure.

Then, just as they had with my walk, and my experiment in running, things changed. I started losing, badly. Every single hand they seemed to know what cards I was holding. This wasn’t right. I was supposed to be amazing at card games.

“I play all the time with my friends, and in my dreams, and I always win.” I told them. “Are you guys looking at my hand?”

“No we’re not cheating Ryan.” Thomas told me as he made me take a whopping sixteen points in one hand. I didn’t even have a chance at shooting the moon because Jess had taken a heart on the second trick.

“Your friends are just bad at cards, and you’re bad at imagining what actual strategy is.” I took another three points, and bit my lip.

“Give it a minute Ryan.” Frank encouraged. The next hand I also lost badly, taking nearly all the points once again, and Jess decided to comment.

“You know you’ve done the same thing the last three hands. You’re getting rid of one suit, and holding onto the queen of spades to try and dump it on somebody. You also like hoarding hearts to throw on people’s hands. So when you throw down a club on the first turn we know you’ve ditched your diamonds and probably have lots of clubs and hearts with one or two spades to cover your queen.”

“You have been looking at my cards.” I throw down my cards and stand up. “Do you guys make a habit out of cheating at games with strangers you’ve just met?” I asked.

“It’s not cheating.” Thomas said flatly. “It’s called pattern recognition. People who are hooked either play with themselves in their own world, or play with friends who wish they were in their own world. Either way, they use the same tricks and never learn because they don’t care. They’re zombies. Pick up your cards man.” These people had a habit of pricking my nerves, and then the next moment calming them. I felt a bit like a baby who yells at the slightest change in temperature because he hasn’t learned to take the pain. I take my seat and shuffle my cards, embarrassed by my outburst, and embarrassed that he was right. I did use the same strategy, I never had a reason to change until now.

Luckily my cards had landed face down and we could continue without a re-deal. I examine my hand closely and make my moves, getting rid of all of my diamonds. I take 9 points, but Jess takes 15, for the first time since we started playing, I wasn't losing the worst.

"What now Thomas!" I shout.

"Two points." Thomas says, holding up the two hearts he had taken during the game.

"Well, yeah, but Jess has 15!" I exclaim.

"You didn't even change your strategy." Thomas says exasperated.

"No, but I didn't have to, all of you were expecting me to change, that's what let me dump the queen on Jess!" Thomas didn't have anything to say to that. I felt a rush. They had laid down a challenge and I had won! When was the last time that had happened? All of my dream challenges I knew I could win, and I had never taken on something in real life that was remotely challenging before.

"Deal faster." I encourage Thomas. "I am totally gonna own you guys this round."

"Let's see you put your money where your moth is big guy." Jess taunts.

Three hours of animated card play later, I begin to feel drowsy.

"It's been great guys, but I gotta head back home. It's past my bedtime." I say. There's a moment of silence.

"You really gonna hook man?" Thomas asks me.

"Well yeah, how else are you gonna sleep?" I ask him.

"By waiting twelve more hours." Franks tells me. "Come on, we've seen this before, when Thomas unhooked it was the same thing. You need to get a regular sleep cycle going, and you can't do that with the pill. Besides." He lifts the cards. "In your dreams, this isn't a game. It's a massacre. Can you honestly tell me that you've gotten this excited about cards before? Come on, when was the last time you did anything this normal in a dream and got this much of a kick out of it?" He had me there.

"I don't know." I say reluctantly.

"Tell you what." Thomas says. "I've got a spare REM pill sitting around here for just such an occasion. Let's make a bet. I'll arm wrestle you. If you win, we give you the pill and take you home, no questions asked. If I win, we take you somewhere that'll really wake you up." Thomas puts the pill on the table.

I could just go home and take my own pill. It was a bad bet, and I think I could find this place again tomorrow. I had found some friends who were willing to hangout whenever. I didn't need to stay up.

“You know Ryan.” Frank tells me. “Another big difference between dreams and here. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, things don’t always go according to plan. If you’re going to be awake you’re going to have to take chances.”

I place my arm on the table. Thomas grins and locks my hand in a grip while Frank counts backwards from three. It’s no contest, Thomas pins my arm in a heartbeat.

“Hah!” He exclaims. “Don’t you remember me swinging from the trees? I’ve got arm strength for days.” As he kisses his biceps I smirk, grab his hand again, and pull him across the table. Frank and Jess are so shocked they don’t move.

“I lift free weights while I work on my laptop and watch TV.” I tell him. “I may not run fast but I can lift weights plenty well.” Frank is silently laughing and Thomas looks like he had heard his own mother swear profusely.

“Now where’s this place where you really wake me up?”

A couple miles of walking water we arrive at our destination. “It’s a lake.” Thomas tells me. “People swim in it.” He adds patronizingly.

“I know that.” I say. “I’ve just never been in one before.”

“First time for everything.” Frank says, and runs into the water, taking a dive when he’s a few feet out. Thomas and Jess rush out too.

“Come on chicken the water’s fine.” Thomas calls back to me. I put one foot in the water and discover the water is most certainly not fine. I shiver as my foot feels possibly the coldest it has ever felt. How on earth did they stand it?

“You can’t just put one foot in.” Frank tells me playfully, now treading water several yards out. “You gotta rush in all at once or you’ll take all day.” My foot begins to feel warm again, so I put another in and discover the water is still just as cold. Frank, Thomas, and Jess all shout a mixture of encouragement and jeers as I slowly wade out, taking a minute to pause when it reaches my waste. It takes me three whole minutes to get chest deep. During those three minutes I keep staring at the dark muddy water in front of me.

Anything at all could be in the water. I could barely see six inches into it. A shark could swim by and take out my leg before I saw anything. More mundanely there could be broken glass, or some kind of flesh eating bacteria. I reasoned to myself that my three friends were here, so it couldn’t be that bad, but my imagination kept painting pictures of tentacles shooting out of the water and triangular fins racing towards me. This wasn’t a dream anymore. I couldn’t know what was out here.

Something large and strong grabbed me and forced me under the water. I didn’t have time to take a breath and I hit the water screaming. I hoped my friends had heard me. I didn’t know if it was

some strange water monster or a serial killer, but I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe. I was still screaming, shooting streams of bubbles to the surface. I was dying. You couldn't live long without breathing. I had to get air. I was on my back and flailed my arms in the water trying to push myself up, but the grip stayed strong.

Chapter two

I kicked my legs, trying to find some purchase on the lake floor to no avail. My legs must've been too tired from all the walking. I was still screaming, and almost out of air now. I started to cough and inhale water. There was water in my lungs and it hurt. It stung and made me cough more, which made me inhale even more water. I was almost out of air. I tried one last swing with my arm, this time aimed at my attacker. It worked, the grip released and I shot to the surface gasping for air and coughing out water.

I felt like I had inhaled half the lake, and I couldn't seem to breathe properly. Every time I inhaled it made the water in my lungs hurt, so I coughed some out, but then I needed to breathe again which would once again make the water in my lungs hurt. It was a brutal process.

"Are you okay Ryan?" Thomas asked from behind me. Then it clicked, eyes red from being underwater, clutching at my chest and trying desperately to breathe I rounded on my attacker.

"You." I coughed out, and then had to take several breaths to get some more water out of my lungs. "You, why did you." I coughed violently again. Frank and Jess were by my side. Why weren't they saying something to Thomas? Why hadn't they helped me? I must've been underwater for two minutes. He almost killed me.

"Are you okay?" Thomas asked again. I coughed some more, my lungs were almost clear.

"I've been punched, mocked, humiliated, had my leg muscles torn up, almost passed out trying to run, kept awake way past my bedtime, and now almost drowned in some dark dirty lake, and you ask me if I'm okay?" I get the last bit of water out of my lungs, and I take my first breath that doesn't hurt. It feels so good I take another and another. I minute ago the only thing I wanted in the whole world was to breathe, and now I could. Nobody could stop me greedily sucking in as much air as I could. I just wanted to stand here and breathe for at least ten minutes.

"Yes." I tell Thomas. "I'm okay." I return to my breathing, and Frank puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Why are you okay Ryan? You almost drowned just now." This whole drowning thing felt rehearsed but I didn't care. All I cared about was that no strange lake monster was holding me under, and the air flowed cleanly in and out of my lungs.

"Because a few hours ago I was a Spartan god of lightning mowing down thousands of Persians with ease, and it was the dullest thing I've ever done. Now, I'm breathing and having the time of my life. Is that dumb?" I ask Frank.

Frank patted me on the back. "Welcome to the real world Ryan."

"Welcome aboard." Thomas high fives me. I still feel like killing him, but that can wait a minute. Jess gives me a hug.

"You're unhooked." She tells me, but I barely hear. When she touches me it's like an electric shock goes through me. I can't move, and I am suddenly intensely aware of the fact that she's a girl. She doesn't seem to notice, but Frank and Thomas do. Thomas mouths 'should we' at Frank, and Frank holds up a hand as if to say 'wait a moment'.

Jess lets go and dives off into some nearby reeds. Frank and Thomas follow, I move to join them and while Jess' head is underwater Thomas asks. "Get a new hook did you Ryan? Doesn't feel like that in a dream does it?" I suddenly find the courage to bury my head under the water.

Upon burying my head I immediately realize how big of a mistake it is. My eyes sting from the dirty water. Sputtering I pull my head out of the water to hear Thomas' laughter. At least when I was being drowned I had the sense to close my eyes. Thomas dives off and Frank, who is chuckling to himself, brings me over to the shore.

"Let's try and get you situated before you drown yourself." He says. I see Jess and Thomas swim off further into the lake where it looks like they can't touch the bottom. It saddens me to know they were out of reach.

"I want to follow them." I tell Frank.

"You can't swim." He says.

"I could learn." I reply. It didn't look that hard, you kicked your legs and pushed water behind you with your arms.

"Oh yeah?" Frank says. "You can't even get your face wet and you think you can swim. Ever heard the phrase walk before you run Ryan?" I was getting a little fed up with all the down talk. First there was the running, then there was the cards, now there was swimming.

"I'm not a baby you know." I say.

"I know." Frank responds. "And I'm sure you can learn to swim, but we need to ease you into this. There's a lot of life out here in the real world and you can't live it all at once." He reaches into some grass and pulls out a bag he brought with him.

"Here." He hands me a curved tube and some strange looking glasses. "These will help you get started. This." He tapped the glasses. "Goes on your face, and this." He tapped the tube. "Goes in your mouth.

I looked at him skeptically. These people were not above playing a joke on me, and this equipment looked ridiculous.

“Why don’t you use it?” I ask.

“Because we can already swim. Now come on, let’s get started. You’ll like this.” I still think this might be a joke. If it was Thomas or even Jess I wouldn’t have done it, but this was Frank. He was a bit more serious than the others. He had earned a little trust.

The tube and the glasses clipped together to form a weird kind of mask. It felt awkward, and my breathing now had a rasping sound that reminded me of something. Maybe a movie I had seen. We waded back out into the lake until we were about chest deep. I appreciated the water much more this time. I didn’t think about any monsters in it, my body had acclimated to the colder temperatures, and there was no Thomas to drag me under.

I had imagined that walking through water would feel like walking through thicker air. This was so much more. It was soft, incredibly soft, softer than anything I felt before. Every time I moved my leg forward it was like silk flowing over my skin. The sensation was enthralling. I found myself staring at my leg hairs, the few inches that were visible through the murky water. They wafted in the current that I was generating with my strides. They looked like kelp being pushed by an ocean current.

“Now, how this is going to work.” I jumped slightly. I had forgotten Frank was here, and why I was walking out here in the first place. “Is you’re going to lower yourself down into the water until you’re submerged, but keep the top of that tube above water. It’ll let you breathe, and the face mask will keep the water out of your eyes. The mask will also keep the water out of your nose.” I was going to go underwater. I would get to feel that silky smoothness all over my body. I would also have my head under again. I remember thrashing about trying desperately to breathe, thinking that I was being murdered. I remembered how dirty the water had tasted going down my throat, and how much it had hurt coughing back up. There had been a sensation of wrongness about having the water in my lungs. There was something in my body that wasn’t a part of my body, and it had sickened me knowing all the bacteria, parasites, viruses, and maybe even small fish that were inside me.

“If you’re going to swim you’re going to have to do this.” Frank tells me. “I can see you’re getting a little pale, but trust me, it’ll be fine. You’ll be able to breathe this time. I’m gonna have to hold you under.” I stop breathing for a moment. “But it’s just because you’ll float away if I don’t, as soon as I feel you starting to come up on your own I’ll let you go.” I trusted Frank. He hadn’t done anything to me that I disliked yet.

I nod my head, and slowly begin to crouch. My upper body has been out of the water long enough that the water feels cold again, but not as cold as it did before. It’s a pleasant sensation, and the smoothness of the water as it envelopes me is like having the sheets pulled over you as you’re being tucked into bed.

Then the water level reaches my shoulders and I start to breathe a little faster. In just a second that water will be over my face, and without a little piece of plastic I would be cut off from air, but I keep lowering myself.

I feel hands on my shoulders, and my breathing slows knowing that Frank is here. He won't let anything happen to me. I hold onto that thought. If I wasn't about to be in a spot where moments before my life felt threatened, I probably wouldn't have trusted him this much, but right now I needed to trust him. I needed to feel safe, and Frank provided that safety. I was taking a leap. As the water hits my chin and comes over the mouth piece I involuntarily hold my breath.

Everything goes brown and black, and I can't see. The water is also so cold on my face that I feel suffocated. I start taking too many breaths like I did when I tried to run. It's crushing. It feels like it's trying to force its way into my mouth. I close my eyes because the water seems like it's trying to break its way into my facemask. I start to flail my arms to push myself up, and Frank squeezes my shoulders.

Frank is here. Frank won't let anything bad happen. I take a deep breath and open my eyes. There is a spike of panic when I see the water in front of my mask, but it's okay. I take another deep breath. The water will stay there. I feel fine.

I close my eyes again, not out of fear, but to concentrate on my other senses. There is a dull rumbling sound in my ears and nothing else. The entire world has been turned to one monotonous string of white noise. There are no human voices, no chirping of birds, just the rumbling of the water, and the rhythmic in and out of my breathing.

Similarly, my sense of touch has been dulled. The water flows forward and back over me like a full body gentle caress. I swish my hands back and forth to feel the water run over them. This causes me to lose a bit of balance, but Frank keeps me rooted in one spot. It was supremely peaceful to have nothing on my mind. My eyes see nothing but dark, my ears hear nothing but white noise, and my skin feels nothing but softness, even the lake mud just conforms to my legs and is pleasantly cool against my skin.

I get so relaxed that at one point I start to fall asleep and grip loosens on the plastic tube in my mouth. Water seeps in and that feeling of drowning comes back. The hands holding me down suddenly don't seem so friendly. I get a mouthful of water, and I only prevent myself from swallowing it by blowing it all into the tube. There it stays, coming in every time I inhale, bringing with it a spike of fear and a flash of recent memory.

Then, I feel embarrassed. I'm not doing this again. I'm not going to get scared by some basic part of life. I was in three feet of water. I could stand up and be perfectly fine if nothing else, and it wasn't like I was inhaling the water. This was a minor inconvenience at best, and if I was going to live out here in this world then I would not let these things scare me.

I opened my lips and let more water in. I felt the need to stand up, but suppressed it. 'Stop being a baby'. I told myself. 'They are swimming out there without masks and without breathing tubes. Man up and deal with it. I take another mouthful of water and have to blow forcefully to clear my breathing tube. A steel feeling I was unfamiliar with began to form in my gut. I was stronger than a little bit of water, and I was going to prove it.

Making sure to keep my eyes closed I pull off the facemask. My tube is still connected to the facemask so as I pull it off the tip of the tube dips underwater and becomes entirely filled with water. Some of it goes into my lungs. Water floods past the mask and covers my face, giving me a feeling of cold helplessness. The air is gone too. I have no access to the surface. It's happening again, I'm drowning. Water on my face, water down my throat, hands holding me down.

'No!' I shout in my head. I finish ripping off the mask and put it on the lake bottom beside me. I use the remaining air in my lungs to blow out some of the water from the plastic tube. I think it hits Frank in the face because his grip on me loosens. The pathway is just barely clear and I have to draw a slow breath to avoid pulling in water. It's okay though, there is air now, and if I control my breathing there will be a steady supply.

'Now to really conquer this'. I say to myself, and pull the breathing tube out of my mouth. I keep my mouth closed to conserve my air, and for the first time that day, actually hold my breath underwater. Frank's hands fidget a bit, I guess he didn't think I'd do it. They called themselves unhooked. I think a fitting demonstration of my commitment to this was unhooking myself from air.

The air became harder to hold in, it seemed to push on my mouth, desperate to get out. At the same time my chest muscles seemed to contract slightly on their own, desperate to pull air in. My body was fighting my mind screaming at it 'Breathe you fool! You're going to die!' I ignored it. I coughed out a little air bubble, but I was going to push this until my body couldn't take anymore.

My chest contracted again and another bubble burst out. 'Stay down!' I shouted at myself. You are stronger than this. You can beat this. I almost surfaced when I experienced a rapid and unexpected flash of memory. Arms were grabbing me and throwing me under. Air was rushing out of my lungs. I was helpless. But I'm not helpless. I am stronger than this. This thing will not beat me, and I'll only surface when I know I've taken as much as possible.

Another burst of air from my mouth, this time a stream of bubbles, and I almost suck in some water, desperate to get anything down into my lungs to stop this sensation of pressure and needing to breathe. The hands on my shoulders suddenly flip from holding me down to pulling me up.

Before I know it I'm halfway out of the water and there's a rushing sound as my ears transition from being underwater to being in air. I make a sound like the Loch Ness monster rising from the depths as I first exhale sharply, then take in the world's deepest breath.

"Are you okay?" Frank asks.

"What did you do that for?" I demand of Frank. As soon as I have some air in my lungs to work with. I bend down to pick up the breathing tube and mask from off the lakebed and hand them back to Frank.

"I was in the middle of something." I'm kind of angry at him. I think I was close to some kind of mental breakthrough.

“You were in the middle of what exactly? A suicide attempt?” He looks part angry, and part concerned.

“No.” I say, surprised that he would jump to that conclusion. “I was just proving to myself that I didn’t need to be afraid of the water. That it doesn’t get to make me afraid.” He cocked an eyebrow.

“This is your first day unhooked?” He asked me. I nodded. He whistled, and for the first time there is something in his eyes besides concern or some kind of paternal protectiveness. There was respect.

“You know. It’s one thing to have mortal peril thrust on you.” Frank says. “It’s quite another to freely embrace it. You can’t get that in a dream can you?” He asks me. I shake my head.

“You are never really in danger in a dream.” I say. “You try to make yourself feel in danger by dreaming up giant hordes of enemies, or horrific monstrosities, but in the end you know they will bend to your every whim. In the end the good guy always wins.” Frank doesn’t say anything. “Although it’s a little ridiculous to talk about mortal peril out here.” I add on. “I mean Thomas wasn’t really trying to drown me and I could’ve stood up at any moment just now.”

“It doesn’t matter how much danger there actually is.” Frank tells me. “It matters how much danger you feel.” He glances back towards the shore. “Let’s get some more swimming gear to get you started.” We walk back to shore and Frank produces a flat foam board.

I feel strong as he walks me back. I know I’m still in horrendous physical condition, at least as far as endurance was concerned, but I had shown a bit of mental toughness. I was no longer some little kid they were leading around. I was an adult. A full grown human being, and I was acting like it.

“This is a kickboard.” He tells me. “It’s used to work on your leg movements for swimming. Your legs are stronger than your arms, so we’ll work on your kick first, and your pull later. You hold onto this to keep your upper body afloat, and work on your kick.” As Frank instructs me in some basic swimming motions with my legs, I find myself glancing out into the deeper part of the lake where Thomas and Jess are. Thomas and Jess are playing some sort of water version of tag. Several times Frank has to splash me to regain my attention.

“You awake Ryan? The lesson’s here, not out in the middle of the lake. If you want to learn you need to focus.”

“Sorry Frank.” I reply. “Just daydreaming.” There’s a brief stretch of silence before he responds.

“You like her don’t you.” He says. I lose my grip on the kickboard, and briefly submerge.

“What makes you say that?” I come up spluttering and indignant, but also trying to act nonchalant and failing miserably at it.

“Oh come on.” He says. “Me and Thomas saw how you reacted to her hug. Thomas even made a crack about it. Don’t act surprised.” I suddenly find the lake water directly in front of me quite fascinating and examine it closely as the conversation continues.

“I’m not making any judgments one way or the other.” He said in a reassuring voice. “But you are recently unhooked. You have to remember what rejection means out here.”

I look up at him. “Rejection?” I ask. He rolls his eyes.

“Out here in the real world, not only can girls turn you down, but if they do turn you down, you still have to interact with them. I’m not saying you two wouldn’t work out. I am saying that so far we are the only people in the real world you know. Us unhooked people aren’t all that common, so you don’t want to make things weird between us. We’re her brothers, so if it’s weird between you two it’ll be weird between us. I’m not saying that trying to set something up between you two is a bad idea. I’m just saying give it some time and be prepared for rejection because things out here aren’t guaranteed.”

“Why is that?” I asked. “Why are there so few of us? Why do so many people choose to stay in the dream?” I was trying to change the subject, thankfully, it worked. I had not yet worked out how I felt about Jess or how to go about pursuing anything, so for now I just wanted to avoid the subject entirely.

“It’s a good question, and we don’t really know the answer ourselves.” Frank said. “Each of us has a different theory. Jess thinks it’s because the world used to be a rough place. People were unhappy all the time. The planet was getting messed up by all the stuff people were doing to it, and people just wanted an escape.”

“But it doesn’t seem like the world is that way now.” I said.

“Yeah, and it could be things are better because most of the world is asleep, but I don’t buy that. Even if people were using the pill purely to get away from an ugly world, I refuse to believe that people aren’t willing to give this.” He swept his hand out toward the lake, the forest, the sky, and everything. “A chance.”

“That’s why I think people are under because they want control.” Frank continued. “I think that most people aren’t willing to lose control and experience the fear and the pain that you’ve experienced today. I mean I know that we make light of it, but today was kind of like your birth pangs. What you’ve experienced was becoming accustomed to the ideas of fear and pain, and not letting yourself succumb to them. I believe most people given the option to escape fear and pain will take that choice.” I thought about my conversations with my friends and family. They had been so quick to get away from real life. Were they just running away from suffering?

“I don’t think people are that cowardly.” I said. “I’m sure some are, and maybe some are under because life really is ugly, but that doesn’t add up to me. I just think people are better than that.” Frank looks out into the deep water at Thomas and Jess who are now playing some game involving dunking the person under water a lot.

“Which is why Thomas thinks they’re being forced under.” Frank told me. “Thomas has a number of theories as to why. Maybe the corporation that makes the pill is super greedy and is willing to anesthetize the whole world to make money. I don’t think sleep core is that malicious, but he also thinks sleep core could be an arm of the government that is being used to pacify the people.” I think about all the advertising that sleep core gets, and I remember my parents telling me about its crazy fast rise to success. How the pill had been pushed through testing far too quick, and seemingly everyone seemed to demand the pill at once. Could all that really be possible without the help of some very large and very powerful entity?

“Your kick is looking pretty decent, try taking a couple pulls with your arms. One at a time, make a paddle with your hand, and push the water underneath and behind you.” Now Frank was changing the subject. Why would he do that? This seemed like something that was pretty important, especially for someone who just recently unhooked. I considered probing a bit more, but I was still new to the group, so I let it slide.

“What are we doing later?” I ask, making the third change of subject this conversation had seen. Frank cocked his head, considering.

“Don’t know, we hadn’t really decided.” Frank said. “One of the beauties of being unhooked is you have a lot of time on your hands. Jess and Thomas only work two hours a day. I pull a three hour shift.” I stopped kicking and stared at him. They worked two and three hour shifts? The longest shift any of my friends worked was one hour.

“I know it sounds like a lot, but you have to realize, when you’re awake as much as we are, two or three hours really isn’t that much time. We could work half or one hour shifts like everyone else, but we have some pretty expensive toys, and we can use the extra money. Maybe you’ll get to try some of our more expensive toys out later.” He winked at me.

“I look forward to it.” I say. “I’m feeling pretty confident with my swimming now. Do you think I’m ready to have a go at the deep water?” I push away the kickboard and sloppily take a few strokes around the shallows. Frank studies my movements.

“You look like a sick frog with a broken leg.” Frank says. “But you’ll do. Come on, let’s go have some real fun.”

As we join the other two further out, where we have to tread water to stay afloat, Thomas celebrates my coming by unceremoniously dunking me under the water again. I return the favor this time, and we then play a water based version of tag.

I tire quickly, and most of the time I’m it. I did get to catch Jess. She looked surprised and impressed when I tag her it.

“How did you learn so fast?” She asks me as I make some distance between me and her so she can start counting to ten.

“Strong arms remember?” She splashes me, I laugh, and the game goes on. Soon the game raps up and we move on, heading back to shore to towel off and head for home.

“Ryan wants to see the toys.” Frank tells the group when we walk through the door. He stops by the kitchen and comes back with some sandwiches and juice which he passes out. “You guys want to see how adventurous a zombie can be?” There are some whoops of joy as they rush downstairs to where the toys are stored. I looked from the sandwiches to the door. Briefly I wonder why we don’t stop and have a nice long lunch instead of rushing around like this. Then I remember that I promised to not be a wimp about this. I was strong now, and being strong meant you didn’t just lie down and rest whenever you felt a little run down. I pick up a sandwich and bite into it, PB&J, my favorite. I head down to join my friends.

“Welcome to the funhouse.” Thomas greets me at the bottom of the stairs. Wall to wall are clear plastic bins stuffed with all different sorts of outdoors equipment, hangars laden down with gear, and closets filled with untold bounty. There are ropes, shoes, air tanks, guns, metal devices of all shapes and sizes, things that look like improved versions of the swimming gear I had just seen. I see tents, sleeping bags, heavy coats, boxes of energy bars, energy drink mix, and that’s just the stuff I could put a name to.

“If there is something crazy or stupid that you can do outside, you can find the gear to make it happen here.” Thomas says, and then begins pointing at various pieces of equipment and naming activities as he points. “Rock climbing, skiing, camping, hiking, geocaching, snorkeling, SCUBA, Kayaks are outback, and we even have some wing suits and parachutes on back order.” He was grinning like a kid in a candy store. We all were.

“This may not be as good as what you can find in a dream.” Jess says picking up a rope and fondly examining it. “But the challenge of it, the adventure, the finding something new or doing something you haven’t done before. The thrill of knowing it can go wrong, and the elation when it goes right. Those you can’t find in a dream either.” I walk around in a mild trance touching each piece of gear, feeling the cold steel, the flexible rubber, the tough rope, and the solid wood. They said you couldn’t find this stuff in a dream, but I had several dreams about just this sort of thing. I remembered walking into the water, and how different that had been when I had dreamed it. How much more amazing would some of these other things be?

“So what’s it going to be Ryan?” Frank asks me. “What do you want to do first?” I could sooner answer which star in the sky was my favorite. There were so many things here, and each one had a different risk and a different promise of reward. I could see the scuff marks, the scratches, the wear and tear on the equipment. I could tell that this stuff had been used a lot, and there were so many fond memories attached to each and every item in the room. I felt almost as if I was in some kind of temple.

“I really can’t answer that.” I say. “There’s just so much here.” I look at Jess, and see the rope she has picked up. She probably has had a lot of good times with that rope. “What’s that rope for Jess?” I ask.

“This fine 9.8mm 60M dynamic line with a 30% stretch factor? This is for rock climbing. As are the 30 meter static line with 10% stretch factor, the locking carabineers, the chalk bags, the fingerless gloves, the ATCs, the GriGris and the endless valley honey and oat energy bars.” She opens a box and pulls out a green energy bar. “These are just right for hanging off the side of a cliff, feeling the wind in your hair, and nothing but open space below you.” Yup, that was clearly her favorite thing to do. I had no experience in these matters, but I think that would be a good way to get to know her and get closer to her. Also, I pictured rock climbing as an upper body workout, and upper body strength was possibly the only way I could keep up with these guys.

“Rock climbing, definitely rock climbing.” I say. I look to Jess for her reaction. She’s smiling at me. For a minute my breathing stops and my heart skips. It’s almost like that feeling of being underwater, but there’s also a warmth to it. It feels right.

“Alright, rock climbing it is. Let’s get dangerous!” Thomas boisterously shouts.

“We have a rule.” Frank tells me. We are standing at the top of a cliff that appears to be about 70 or 80 feet tall, tall enough that you can easily see over the trees.

“You never climb on a rope system that you didn’t help to setup.” There is a cornucopia of ropes, carabineers, webbing, and various metal devices scattered around the cliff top. It looks like a rope bridge collided with a chain link fence and exploded into neatly segregated piles.

“So if you’re going to make it to the bottom of this beast.” He points to the cliff. “You’re going to have to do some of the work yourself.” That made sense, it would give me a sense of ownership over my own fate. “You’re also going to be the first one over the edge.” Frank finished.

“Which means if it doesn’t work you’ll be making the trip home in several buckets.” Thomas cheerfully put in. I swallowed hard. A few hours ago I thought running was an adventure, now I was about to literally jump off a cliff.

“Great.” I say, looking over the edge and trying to guess how long I would have to live if I fell. “How do we start?” I ask. They give me a brief talk on the capabilities and limitations of the setup we were going to use. They emphasized the importance of having a completely redundant system. You had two trees you tied the ropes to. You had a double knot to attach the carabineers to, and you had two carabineers in case one broke or opened itself during the climb. The only catch was the rope that went through the carbineers and over the side of the cliff, the rope you actually used to climb on, wasn’t redundant. If that snaps, there’s no fail safe.

It was all very fascinating, and I would’ve felt a lot better about it if we weren’t standing on the cliff as we put the system together. The knots themselves didn’t help either. I looked at the kind of double figure eight knot that secured the ropes to the trees and couldn’t help but think that the rope could very easily just slide out of the knot. I mean, there wasn’t a lock or anything anywhere in the

system. Was friction really enough to keep this thing together? What was so different about this system from the way I tied my shoe laces together?

I probably wouldn't have gone through with it if it wasn't for Jess. She was the one who worked with me to explain the knots. Thomas and Frank took the roles of double checking my knots, preparing the gear for me to build the rock climbing system with, and keeping a running commentary on how far they think I would bounce if the system failed at different points.

I discovered Jess could be very nurturing when she wanted to. After the first rope system was complete we setup two more, and while Jess worked with me she explained what unhooking for her was like.

"We had a big family." She tells me. "There were eight of us in total, four boys, two girls, and two parents. Thomas was the first to unhook. This may surprise you, but he's a bit of a rebel, and the first time he unhooked it was just to spite our parents. He didn't actually think he would enjoy the experience. He wouldn't stop raving about it the next day to me. I thought it might be worth trying out, and then Frank overheard. As you know, he's the protective type, and decided to follow along with us to make sure we were okay." I finish tying up the last knot and clip in the carabineers to the top of the second system, then step back to let Frank and Thomas have a look.

"We were pretty boring during our first unhooked day. We just kind of walked around, but like you've seen, real life can be addictive. The randomness, the unexpected turns, the consequences, the challenges, the triumphs, they feel so much more powerful than those in a fabricated reality ever could." She looks wistfully at her brothers as they give us the thumbs up and we move on to the last system.

"We stepped out into this new world, and fell in love with it. The only problem with it was that our other siblings told on us." We kneel down and start tying knots to trees. "Our parents warned us about staying awake. They talked about some urban legends about the things that lurked in the real world, and some propaganda about dreams being better than reality." She gave the knot she was working on an unnecessarily hard tug. "We tried to tell them it all wasn't true, but they wouldn't believe us. We had a heated argument, and then they kicked us out." I stopped tying knots.

"Your own parents kicked you out of the house? How old were you guys?" I asked.

"We were all still high school age. Luckily we were all working. The pay was bad, but we just tripled our shifts and got an apartment together. Nine minimum wage annual incomes isn't too shabby for a couple of young adults."

"Is that why you said 'we had'. A family instead of saying 'we have' a family?" She tightens the last knot and nods.

"To us, they don't exist anymore. They exist in the dream to us, and we are in the real world. They might as well be on the surface of Mars. Even if they hadn't forced us to move out at a young age,

we still wouldn't consider them family." Thomas and Frank look over the ropes as we clip in the carabineers and throw the climbing rope over the side. The two male siblings have gotten quiet.

"That's a bit harsh don't you think? Just passing your family off as dead." I say.

"Really?" she says, a sharp tone entering her voice. "They gave us up. They don't want us. They spend their time imagining better versions of us because we're not good enough for them. How would you feel about someone who did that to you?"

"But they would still spend a few waking hours with you right?" I say, trying to defend myself, and seeing I don't have much of a case to stand on.

"They would barely tolerate us until they popped their next pill. Haven't you noticed that your hooked friends and family can't wait to go to sleep? And even when they do interact with you all they talk about is dreaming? They don't like you. To them you're just a pawn in their own little game, and when you won't move the way they want. They cast you aside. You're expendable to them. Our parents made us expendable. That makes them dead to us."

"I'm sorry." I tell her. "I didn't see it that way."

"I know." The edge leaves her voice and she relaxes. "I didn't mean to snap like that. Here, let's get you tied in and good to go." She hands me a harness and explains how to use the knots I've learned to attach myself to the ropes. She then explains how she's going to use one of the metal pieces, the ATC she calls it, to lower me over the side while she's attached to the other end of the rope. Once I hit the bottom Thomas will then allow her to descend, and Frank will allow Thomas to descend. We would then all climb back up, and move on to the next system.

"As we told you at the start." Frank says. "You get to go first, so stand at the edge of the cliff, and just lean back. Jess will catch you. After you hit bottom Thomas and Jess will follow, and then you three will climb back up."

"Great yeah, just fall back off a cliff, cool." I say sarcastically.

"And put your feet flat against the cliff." Thomas puts in. I give him a frown and a thumbs up. I walked to the edge of the cliff and look over the side. It's not a sheer cliff, there are a few outcroppings that if I fall I will bounce off of and maybe just break every bone in my body instead of splatting on the ground.

"Looking and waiting isn't going to help." Jess tells me. "You just have to trust me, turn around, and lean back. I won't let you fall." I force myself to do as she says and turn around.

"You always wake up before you hit the ground right?" I ask, sheepishly trying to make myself think positive.

"Lean back Ryan." Jess tells me. "You can trust me." I decide to do this the same way I let go of my fear of drowning. I carefully slide my heels up to the edge of the cliff and close my eyes. I had hoped

Jess would tighten the rope I'm attached to so I would feel more secure as I leaned back, but she was intentionally leaving a foot or so of slack to make this extra interesting for me. Well, no point putting it off any longer. I peak briefly at Jess. She's looking at me, and she now has that respect in her eyes that I had seen in Frank's after ditching my breathing tube. This one's for you Jess. I close my eyes, and fall back.

Nothing, for a brief moment there's nothing. My weight leaves my feet, and I don't feel my own body weigh resting on anything. I'm falling through air, and unlike the water, it offers no resistance. It's content to let me fall straight through it as fast as I pleased. Then there's a feeling of painful awakesness. My body senses something is wrong and fires every single neuron it knows how. Things seem to slow, and my breath catches as my stomach feels like it wants to crawl out of my throat. Then the line goes taught, and my feet brace against the side of the cliff as I come to a halt. I didn't even really fall. I had just sort of laid down, and now was positioned like I was walking up the cliff. My toes were sticking over the top of the cliff, and then everything sped back up.

"Yeah Ryan!" Thomas shouts. I hear whoops of joy from Frank and Jess like when they had been running through the forest. The rush now boomed out into an electric joy, like someone had hooked me up to a car battery and the only way to let the electricity out was to yell, and yell I did. My whoops and shouts joined Frank's, Thomas'. Jess joins in too. All four of us give in to some basic animal happiness just to have taken a risk and come out on top.

"Alright Jess, drop'em down." Thomas encourages.

"Take a look around as you drop Ryan." Jess suggests. I began to then walk backwards down the cliff. I keep my feet flat against the rock as they had instructed, and at about the pace of a slow jog, begin to descend.

I look around at the trees, and think of Thomas swinging around in them when we had first walked back to their house. I was now even higher off the ground than he had been. I hadn't imagined I would be able to experience that, and this was kind of cheating, but here I was all the same, up in the branches like a monkey.

I hit bottom and call out to Jess as soon as I untie myself from the rope. She drags the rope back up, and a minute later she drops over the side too.

When she hits bottom she's got this half-crazy look in her eye like a sprinter at the starting line who just can't wait to leap forward.

"This is gonna be great!" She says as she unties herself and calls back up to Frank and Thomas to let them know it's safe to descend.

"Oh man, you are gonna love this climb." She says to me. She punches me lightly on the shoulder and bounces up and down on the balls of her feet as she eagerly tells me what her favorite parts are to this climb.

"I bet my family would love it too." I say. She stops bouncing.

Chapter three

"Your family." She says, her voice entirely dead pan.

"Yeah, I got a younger brother who dreams about this stuff all the time. I'm sure he'd love to come along for this." She doesn't respond. I can tell it's rubbed her the wrong way. Thomas joins us and high fives me, tries to high five Jess, then stops when she just stares at him with her arms at her sides.

"What is it sis?" Thomas asks. "Did he throw something smelly at you?"

"He wants to bring his family." She says. I can tell she's upset, but I can't read her emotions. Is she mad?

"Alright man!" Thomas exclaims, turning to high five me again. "Are they unhooked too? You should have told us sooner we could've brought'em all out."

"Are they unhooked Ryan?" Jess asks. Her tone still as unreadable as a Martian bible.

"No, they're not. Not yet anyway, but when they hear about how wonderful life out here is they won't be able to resist coming to join us." Jess bites her lip and turns away. Thomas' face falls.

"Yeah, that's great. Sure." Thomas says. Jess turns back.

"How old are your parents Ryan?" She demands, I can hear some anger in her voice now, but that's not the only emotion.

"They're in their late forties." I reply hesitantly. I wish Frank was here all of the sudden. Jess was getting wired up, and Thomas had decided to thoroughly examine the rope we had just descended instead of participating in the conversation.

"So they were alive when the pill was introduced." She said.

"Yes, but I don't see what that has to..."

"They took it willingly Ryan." She said. "They saw the life they had, and they decided they'd rather imagine a new life than live in the one they were handed." Her eyes are reddening. I can see now the other emotion in her that I couldn't read, is pain. The same thing happened to her parents, and now I had reminded her of that.

"They took their own dreams over the people that cared about them." She choked and had to brush something out of her eyes.

“But maybe the world is different now. Maybe they’ll be happy with it, or least my siblings will. They were never really offered a choice by my parents. If I tell them what it’s like out here and that they can come out whenever they want then I think they’ll take that opportunity.” Jess’ cheeks tremble, and then she just turned and walked off into the forest.

I picked this activity to get closer to her, and now I’ve chased her off. I may not be childishly afraid anymore, but it looks like I am really dumb.

“Sorry about that.” Thomas says. “It was hardest on her. Frank and me knew our family would never go for it. I’m the rebel, so no parents was just fine with me, and Frank knew our parent’s well enough to know they wouldn’t go for it. So he had time to prepare himself. Jess wasn’t like that. She honestly believed they would come with us into the real world. If it wasn’t for her we probably wouldn’t have even talked to our parents about it before leaving.” He looked into the woods where Jess had left.

“So when we had the conversation, and they opted to stay, she took it super hard. She was the one who started the whole ‘dead to us’ thing.”

“Oh.” I say. “I just stuck my foot so far in my mouth that I’ll need a doctor to extract it.” I surmise.

“Pretty much.” He agrees. “Besides that, getting your family to join us, it’s just not going to work.” He tells me.

“How can you know that?” I say. “You guys seem to assume it’s a foregone conclusion that people just want to stay hooked. What if they just need a little encouragement to free themselves? I mean if you guys had found me earlier I would’ve done this a long time ago.” Thomas is squirming. He really does not do well with serious conversations and this one is clearly paining him.

“Look Ryan. I know how it feels. You’ve found something great and you want everyone else to experience it too. I get it, but I’m telling you, and I know Frank and Jess would say the same thing. Your parents are not going to listen. Jess will tell you it’s because they think the world is worse than it is. Frank will tell you it’s because they they’re scared of a world with consequences, and I think it’s because there’s something in the pills that makes them want to stay under, but all of us will agree, they’re gone man. They aren’t going to come back because you ask them to.”

I shake my head. “Even if that’s true. I have to try. They’re my family, and I have to believe they’ll give it a shot.” Thomas shrugs.

“I think it’s going to cause a lot of unnecessary hurt, but if you really need to hear them say no in order to move on, then I’ll go with you.” Thomas says.

“Thanks Thomas. I know how hard coming with me will be for you.” I glance off into the woods. “Is there anything we can do about Jess?” I ask.

"I'm afraid not." Thomas says. "At least there's nothing you can do. Frank has a way of calming her down. Here, let's go back up and tell him what went wrong. He can go comfort Jess, and we can go see your family. It'll all be over in an hour or two and we can move on." This plan sounds good. I wish it was me comforting Jess. I brought this up. I should have to clean it up, but Frank does know her better, and if I really want to help her I'll let Frank do it.

"Okay." I agree. "That sounds good. Let's get started." Thomas rubs his hands together.

"Right, there's a path back up to the top a little ways further along. We like to climb places that have routes up and down the cliff besides just the rope systems." Thomas leads the way up.

We find Frank leaning against a tree and breathing deep at the top.

"Hey slow pokes. What's the matter? Did Ryan get cold feet halfway up?" He jeers. It's a sign of how unpleasant things are that Frank has become the one talking smack.

"Not exactly Frank." Thomas says. "Ryan wants to convince his family to unhook, and Jess took that pretty hard, brought up those old memories." Frank stands up in a hurry and rushes to hook himself into the rope system.

"She's at the bottom right?" He asks. "Which way did she go?" Thomas points. "Okay, you take care of Ryan. I'll go calm Jess down."

"Okay, we're going to go see his family. We will meet you back at the house." Thomas says.

"Right, meet you at the house." Without another word he hops over the side and rappels down to the bottom.

"It's got to be nice to have such a caring brother." I say.

"Yeah, he can be a real pain sometimes, but you know you can always count on him to be there for you. Let's go Ryan. The sooner you get this over with the better." I tell Thomas where my parent's house can be found, and we start off.

For about half a mile neither of us says anything. Thomas is probably thinking about Jess and if she's going to be okay. I find myself thinking about my parents and the stories I'm going to tell them. I'm sure they'll love to hear there is a pretty girl in my new group of friends, and how we've been learning to swim and climb rocks. Not to mention how I've been getting into shape. Parents were usually concerned about their children's health I'm sure they'd love that I was working on my physique.

The walk begins to get uncomfortable, and I need to find a conversation topic to break the silence.

"So why do you think that there's something in the pills that keeps people addicted?" I ask Thomas.

“A couple of reasons.” He says. “First, this has happened before. The cigarettes of old had addictive substances added to them to keep customers hooked.”

“But those weren’t medical pills were they?” I counter. “The REM pills were originally designed to treat sleeping disorders, it wasn’t until after they’d already passed clinical trials that people began to use them to dream all the time.”

“You’re right, or at least based on the evidence you’ve been given you’re right.” Thomas says.

“What do you mean based on the information I’ve been given? Have you been given different information?” I ask.

“No.” Thomas says. “I read the same information and was taught the same things as you growing up, but that information was provided to you by a government that has most of its citizenry sleeping. Have you ever heard of information about a drug being withheld for the public? It’s not uncommon for a company to release a drug they know has negative side effects, but won’t say anything for years, or until people start dying. You don’t think sleep core could hide that these things were unnaturally addictive?” He has a point. I had heard that before all the world’s scientists had started taking REM pills and abandoned their research that exactly the sort of thing Thomas was describing happened all the time.

“Still, don’t you think the government would just shut it down after a time? These pills take away people’s productivity, wouldn’t the government shut it down after a while? Our medical monitoring was excellent. I’m sure the CDC or WHO would catch it before it spread as far as it has.” This conversation smelled of conspiracy theories.

“Why would they? The first generation pills only put people under for eight hours. The fact that they had lucid dreams was medically insignificant, and their approval for over the counter use made it so that law enforcement couldn’t arrest people for using them too much. If agriculture had shut down maybe the government would have stepped in, but people who spend their time out in the fields growing things were very resistant to the idea of sleeping all the time, and by that time transportation had become fully automated. The people were getting fed and shuffled around, and there were enough other people who stayed unhooked to keep things running, but really, all the world going to sleep did was halt scientific progress, and if people didn’t want more progress because things worked, would the government really have a problem?” He just threw a whopper at me. There was a lot to that. I considered his points line by line. It was true that the pills didn’t cause any problems, and laziness was not a crime, so really, what could the government do?

“Something still doesn’t make sense. Who stands to gain from this? The whole world is asleep, in a way, most of the world has died, who stands to gain from that?” I ask Thomas.

“Politicians and the corporation that makes the pill, which is why they’ve worked together.” Thomas replies. His argument is approaching its final climactic conclusion. “The current people in the current government haven’t been challenged since the pill came along. The party that was in power

became wildly popular once the pill hit the market. The opposition had misread the signs and had thought opposing the pill would bring them the value voters. They were mistaken. Everyone wanted the pill, and we basically became a one party country after the opposition was annihilated in the next election. Since that time, they've done nothing but cycle through members when someone dies. Did you know all term limits have been removed so a politician can stay in power as long as they want? They funded the pill to make us happy and sedate us. Now they've got a docile populace who not only doesn't want to revolt, but can't. The zombie voting block is so large that they carry every election effortlessly."

It makes sense. I would check the term limits, but I knew he was right. Ever since the pill governments had become unchallenged. There were no wars, because there weren't any soldiers to threaten and topple governments, and there were no revolts because the parties in power were supported by the vast majority of the population. It was a perfectly balanced system.

"But wouldn't they get bored?" I ask. "What's a government without a citizenry to govern? I mean surely once they realized they couldn't do anything, wouldn't they outlaw the pill and wake people back up? Surely an unhappy populace is better than one that's practically dead."

"They still govern." Thomas tells me. "Not like they used to, but I'm sure you can appreciate that your expectations change to fit your circumstances. Earlier today you were panicking after you experienced some shortness of breath from a run. Now you're whooping for joy as you rappel off cliffs. They still pass laws about international commerce, and there are trade wars. Nobody fires a shot, but all the major countries are making deals, blackmailing each other, and placing bans on various products. It's never enough to concern the voters or cause interest, but it makes them feel important. There is still a great international competition. Only instead of chess where any move could start a war or cause a country's downfall. It's become a mutant version of monopoly where no one runs out of money." I had to admit. I was coming around to his way of thinking.

"That's pretty shocking." I say.

"As shocking as 98% of the population being asleep 20 hours a day, and the ones that are awake are on their own isolated farms minding their own business without a care in the world? It wasn't too long ago where men killing each other, and getting diseases from being out in the elements were the leading cause of death. Now it's heart disease and aneurisms from the REM pills after you turn eighty. We used to die with our boots on fighting to make a better world. Now we die quietly in our beds, dreaming about a different world than our ancestors fought for because we think we're too good for it." Thomas spits to the side of the path, and I am tempted to join him.

"We're almost there." I tell him.

My parents live in a townhouse, much the same as everyone else. I ring the doorbell and wait with Thomas. It's an ominous couple of minutes. Maybe because of the conversation me and Thomas just had, or maybe because of how Jess had reacted. I can't help but feel something is wrong. I have to ring the bell three times before my dad finally answers the door.

“Hey Ryan, haven’t seen you in a while, come on in, have a seat. We were just starting our next REM cycle, but we can spare a few minutes.” He calls up the stairs to my mom. “Hey Brianna come and join us, it’s Ryan.” We walk into the kitchen and have a seat around the table.

“So Ryan, who’s your friend?” My father asks as my mom starts down the stairs.

“Oh, this is Thomas.” I say.

“Hello Mr. Ryan’s dad.” Thomas says, managing to regain a portion of his normal jovialness. He shakes my father’s hand. “And Mrs. Ryan’s mom.” He shakes her hand as well.

“So Ryan, what brings you back?” My father asks.

“It’s got something to do with Thomas actually.” Thomas gives me a fearful glance. “You see, he’s shown me a new world. There are beautifully detailed trees, wonderfully cool and refreshing lakes, and exhilarating cliffs to climb.” My parents look like they can’t wait to hear the next words that will come out of my mouth, Thomas is gripping his chair tightly and periodically glancing towards the door as if to reassure himself of a way of escape.

“There’s even this wonderful girl there. She’s funny and energetic and she knows all this cool stuff.” My parents exchange a meaningful glance, and my dad puts his arm around my mom.

“That’s great Ryan.” My mom says.

“Yeah, where did you hear about this place?” My dad asks. “You’ll have to tell us more so we can dream about it too.” My mom pulls away slightly from my dad. “Except for the girl of course.” My father adds quickly, and my mother settles back in.

“That’s just it.” I say. “It’s not an imaginary place. It’s real. And I want you guys and Teddy to come with me. We can work slightly longer shifts to afford the gear to live in this new world, and we can all spend much more time together.”

“But Ryan sweetie, we already spend so much time together.” My mother says.

“Yes son, we incorporate you into most of our dreams. We were actually having a family dinner in our dream before you woke us up. But if you want us to dream about this place we can certainly do that for you.” My father says.

“No, no, that’s not what I meant.” I say. Thomas is now studying the table in front of him very carefully.

“I want you guys to come with me into the real world, outside of the dream.” They look confused.

“Why would we do that? Can’t you just bring pictures or something?” My mother asks.

“No.” I say. It’s like explaining a word problem to a five year old. “I don’t want you to dream about it. I want you to actually go there. Like where you can touch and see things, not just dream about them.”

“Why?” My father asks. “We can touch things in dreams. Really Ryan, why would we do this? Don’t you know all the diseases you can catch going out into the real world? I mean there are wild animals and varying temperatures. It just seems like an awful lot of work for no reason.” I expected this. I knew it would take some convincing.

“I know. There are risks, but that’s part of what makes it fun. You see, in dreams we can’t be wrong because we control everything. It takes the fun out of it. If you know you’re always going to win at something then there’s no tension, there’s no mystery, and there’s no fun. In the real world there is such anticipation and struggle to succeed.” I think about my walk through the forest. “The real world is also so vibrant. Every single tree is unique. Water feels like this magical, soft, flowing, fabric. When you go running there’s a pain and a thrill to it that makes you feel so alive.” My parents’ expressions are still encouraging.

“Honey, we’re happy that you’ve found this place.” My mother says.

“But if all that is there are trees and lakes and cliffs it sounds pretty boring.” My father says.

“It’s not though.” I say. They’re not getting it. “It’s alive like dreams can never be.”

“We appreciate the way you feel son.” My father adds. “But it’s not for us. In our dreams there are worlds made of diamond, flying fire breathing dinosaurs, and we have dozens of children.” Dad says.

“And all of them are doctors, Nobel Prize winning scientists, famous lawyers, or world renowned artists.” My mom adds enthusiastically. “And you’re there too Ryan.” She adds almost as an afterthought.

It feels like a smack in the face. They dream about other children, better children. Children they feel more strongly for than me. Fake children, they have two real loving offspring, and they chose fake children. I had faith in these people I called parents. Why couldn’t they see reason? I’ve offered them a way into my world, and I find out they’ve replaced me with the children they wanted to have instead of me. I know now why Jess said her parents were dead to her. My parents have just as good as killed me in their own world. They replaced me with the children they wanted to have, so they had killed me.

“I have to go.” I say. Thomas stands up and puts an arm around my shoulder as we walk out.

“Well thanks for stopping by sweetie.” My mom says, as if nothing has happened.

“And don’t forget to bring us some pictures of this new place so we can dream about it too.” My dad adds. I promise myself to never bring them to these new places. Even if I wanted them around they’d just poison it with thoughts of these replacement kids.

“Ryan?” A younger male voice asks me. “What are you doing here?” It’s my younger brother Teddy.

“Teddy.” I stand up straighter, maybe Teddy will come. He looks up to me, and he’s the one who dreams about rock climbing.

“Hey Teddy, this is my friend Thomas. We are going rock climbing you want to come?” Teddy nods vigorously.

“Of course Ryan, where are you dreaming of climbing?” Teddy asks innocently. The word dream stings to hear. I remember when we first met the unhooked siblings. Jess and Thomas had looked insulted when Frank had insinuated that they had any dreams at all. It had seemed like such a strange thing to me at the time. I understood why it had offended them now.

“No Teddy, we’re not dreaming of it. We are actually going to climb it. We are leaving to go very soon actually. Do you want to come?” Teddy glances into the kitchen at mom and dad.

“I’m sure they’ll be okay with it. Teddy come on, its rock climbing. Don’t you want to join us?” Teddy considers this for a moment.

“How tall are the cliffs?” Teddy asks. Good, he’s expressing interest. I can still convince him.

“They’re real tall Teddy. Taller than our house, taller than the trees, they’re so tall that if you kick a rock off them it’ll probably take a couple seconds to reach the bottom.” Teddy’s eyes look up. He’s imagining it, trying to picture climbing something that big. I bite my tongue, not wanting to say anything that might disrupt his imagination.

“Nah.” He says finally. “I was climbing Olympus Mons on Mars earlier and it’s way bigger than that. You should dream about it instead.” He adds. I give up. I’m done. This is why they’re called hooked, because they are completely drawn in by the dream. I remembered watching a fishing show once. It seemed like the fish would have to fight with all their might to tear themselves free, and my family wasn’t willing to fight an ounce.

“Yeah Teddy.” I say. “Maybe I will sometime.”

“Great, it was nice to see you Ryan. I’ll catch you later.” And he walks into the kitchen to join my parents.

When we get outside Thomas says. “I’m sorry. There’s a reason we don’t try and unhook people anymore. You have to let people unhook themselves. It’s like trying to force a deaf person to hear what you’re saying. You are speaking a language that’s foreign to them. Their senses are numb to how strong experiences in real life can be. All they know is the dream, so they can’t imagine life without it.” I don’t have the heart to respond. Thomas wisely becomes silent, and we start walking to the sibling’s house.

I had really thought they’d come with me, if not for their own sake than for the sake of the family. Parents are supposed to care about their kids and want more than anything else to be around

their kids. I guess my parents did, just not their real kids. I punch a tree hard enough that I bloody my knuckles. Thomas doesn't react, and we keep walking.

Teddy had almost hurt more than my parents. I had thought of coming back because of him. Teddy loved rock climbing. Maybe if we just found some taller cliffs he'd want to come? No, there wasn't a mountain on earth that could compete with extraterrestrial rock climbing. No matter how amazing real life was, I couldn't convince them to just step outside of their dreams and actually live it.

I was an orphan now. I knew I couldn't go back to that house again. My parents who would rather spend their time with imaginary offspring, and my younger sibling would reject my offerings of wild adventures for his own fake past times. Jess was right, I never should've come back. I never should've had faith in my family to join me.

Jess, the girl I had been trying to get close to, and I had pushed her away by doing this. I had to make it up to her. I felt that these new friends were the closest thing to family I had, and I needed to make them happy.

"Thomas." I say. "Thank you for coming with me. You knew how this was going to end, and you came anyway. Thank you."

"Hey man, don't sweat it. It's the least I could do. There aren't a lot of us unhooked, so we have to look out for each other." He playfully punches my shoulder. "We got your back man."

"Thanks." I say again. I'll be sure to thank Frank when I get back too. They've really gone out of their way to help me. We arrive at the sibling's house to find Jess and Frank anxiously waiting on the couch.

"Hey Ryan." Frank says, standing up immediately. He sees my face and knows it didn't go well. "I'm so sorry Ryan. We tried to warn you." Jess gets up and runs toward me. I take a step back and flinch as she gets close, expecting to get slapped, but instead she wraps me up in a tight hug.

"I'm so sorry." She whispers in my ear. "They replaced you didn't they."

"Yes." I tell her, and she squeezes me tighter. I look at Frank, who's giving me a sympathetic look. I look at Thomas. He's awkwardly not knowing what to do, as usual, but he's still supportive, and then I look at Jess bear hugging me to make sure I'm okay. These are my family now.

"I'm so lucky to have found you guys." I say looking from Thomas to Frank, and down to Jess who is still hugging me for all she's worth. "You guys are real friends. Frank, you helped me conquer my fear of drowning when you could've been out swimming with your siblings." Frank shrugged.

"Least I could do." He says.

"And Thomas, you came with me to my parents when you knew that conversation was going to be nothing but ugly." Thomas sheepishly grins.

“Hey man, you’d have done the same for me.”

“And you Jess. I brought you pain by bringing up some bad memories, and you’ve so quickly looked past that to support me.” Jess squeezes me extra tight for a moment.

“You guys are like my family.” I say. “Family puts family first, and you guys have done that for me. I wish I could repay the favor.”

“We’re just glad you’ve unhooked and that we’ve been able to help you through that.” Frank tells me. I look down at Jess again, and realize there’s a way I can make them my family for real. It’s a little sudden, but this has been a day of taking risks. I risked drowning. I risked jumping off a cliff. I risked my family rejecting me. It was time to take one more big risk.

“Jess.” I say, pushing her away for a moment. I get down on one knee. “Will you marry me?” Silence, utter silence, no one dares to breathe for several seconds. Is this good? Are they overjoyed? I can’t tell. I wish somebody would say something, anything.

“What? No Ryan I’m not going to marry you.” Jess finally blurts out. Nobody says anything else.

“Well, um, I see.” Is the only thing I can think to say. I can’t stand their looks anymore, so I turn and leave. I’ve ruined it, my only family left, and I’ve ruined it. I don’t see anyone follow me as I leave and start back home.

I had found a new world, learned to swim, rock climb, and just unhook from my false reality. Now I had thrown it away. The only people I know who could join me in this new world now hated me. It would have been impressive that I had ended so many friendships so quickly if it wasn’t so pathetic.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. I was supposed to be all suave, and she was supposed to say yes. There would be cheering and crying and hugging. We would all make plans and become a family. That’s how I saw it going down, now I had just thrown a wrench in everything.

My home isn’t far, and as I go inside I slam the door hard enough to break a few of the panes of glass. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. I’ve lost pretty much everything today.

I lost my own world because I got bored with it and went outside to try and find a new world. Then I lost my family when I tried to bring them into this world. Now I’d lost my new family when I’d just got desperate and carried away. Now here I was at the end of the day, in the same spot I had started it, with no real family. I guess they never really were my family to start with. I have no world, and no friends. I can’t even stand to walk outside and breathe the clean air again because it reminds me of what I’ve lost.

I crash on my couch and see the pills laying on the table. Those stupid pills they’re what started this whole thing. Without the pills there wouldn’t be a need for days like today, people would have normal friends, family, and I heard that most jobs used to require regularly working with other people. It must have been so nice to have been a part of a society where you feel like a human being, not some

machine put on standby and only occasionally woken up to do some basic shop keeping for the other machines.

Thomas was right, only an evil corporation backed by a corrupt government could make these pills. Their factories should be burned to the ground. I pick up the bottle of pills and hurl it against the wall. It's plastic so it unclimactically just bounces off the wall and spins back to me. Great, I can't even break a small bottle of pills.

I start to laugh. It's a laugh of despair, of defeat. The world has become so crazy that I can't help but laugh. The laughter brings me no joy. It is devoid of mirth. I can't do anything right. I wish they had just left me hooked. I would be numb and emotionless, sleeping my life away, but at least I wouldn't have to know defeat like this. If today had never happened, if I had just walked outside, and promptly come back in everything would be alright.

Then a line my parents say surfaces to the front of my brain. 'You'll have to tell us more so we can dream about it too'. They were talking about joining me in my adventures through a dream, but it gives me an idea. I realize that there is a place I can go to make everything right. A place where I'm in shape, the siblings don't hate me, and my family hasn't replaced me with other children and hobbies.

I look at the bottle of pills again. In the dream, all of this can go away. In the dream I can fix everything and make it right.

I recoil and stand up to walk into a room where the pills aren't lying about. What am I thinking? I have worked so hard today to unhook and experience real life. I think about conquering my fear of drowning in the lake. I think of learning to accept defeat by playing cards, and appreciating what a true challenge is. I remember how surreal water felt running through my fingers, or wind running through my hair. I think of how highly detailed real life is. Dreams couldn't compare to it.

I especially remember letting go and leaning back off of the mountain top, the thrill of trusting someone else so directly with your life. I remember feeling so free and exhilarated as I had stepped off that mountain and just trusted Jess to catch me.

Then I think of Jess. Jess who was so funny, nurturing, smart, and driven, Jess who was so full of life when I had first seen her darting through the woods. Jess who I had hurt by talking about family. Jess who had forgiven me and had so quickly hugged me to comfort me after I had lost my family. Jess whose trust I had betrayed in a stupid, childish, and utterly foolish act of rampant irresponsibility. Jess who hated me now. Jess who I would never see again.

I walk back into the room and pick up the pills. Except there is a way I can see Jess again. There's a place she still exists as that person so full of life. She's not beyond reach. None of them are beyond reach. I can see my family, and they will actually enjoy spending time with me. I can go talk to the siblings, and me and Jess can be together. Yes, it won't be so bad. It'll all be fine as soon as I go under.

I walk into my bedroom and lay down on my bed, making sure I'm prepared for what I'm about to do. I open the bottle and put a pill in my hand. These pills act fast. I'll be out in a matter of seconds, only a few more seconds.

I cap the bottle and put it on the night stand, staring at the pill in my hand. Holding it makes things more final. I'm just one quick motion from throwing it all away, from hooking myself.

I raise my hand to my mouth, and then I stop. I put my hand back down and stare at the pill in my hand. One last thought stands in my way. If I do this, then there's no going back. I remember the disgust on Jess and Thomas' face from the mere mention of dreaming. If I do this, to them I'll be dead. To them zombies are people who have given up on life and returned to their own little private worlds. I guess that's why they're living dead.

If I swallow this pill, any hope of reconciliation is gone. They'll never talk to me again. I probably won't even see them again. I could spend most of the rest of my life in this house, by myself, alone.

I almost put the pill down, almost. Then I remember the look of horror on Jess' face when I ask her to marry me. It doesn't matter. I'll never see her again anyway. I put the pill in my mouth and swallow. I lay down and pull the covers up. It's okay now. In just a few moments I'll see them again, and it'll be okay.

Chapter four

What to do first? So many possibilities, and no need to rush, I've got plenty of time. Let's start this dream out the same way this day started out, in a forest. My dream space suddenly becomes one endless sea of green. I'm sitting on a large tree branch well above the ground, but well below the canopy. I lean back against the trunk and breathe deep. I feel a breeze work its way through the many different towering wooden giants.

This is how things were supposed to be. The breeze doesn't feel exactly like it should, but I don't have a real clear memory of the breeze, so it's okay. I also make sure not to look at the leaves too closely, because I know they won't seem detailed enough. It's okay though. Those are the small details, the unimportant details. The important thing is that I'm here.

I decide to make things adventurous and start swinging around. I roll off the branch and fall several feet before grabbing another branch to execute a powerful swing that propels me several yards to grab the next branch and start monkey barring my way through the tree tops.

I can see why Thomas enjoyed this so much. You feel so strong and powerful, not to mention agile and quick. 'But you're not that strong or quick', a voice in the back of my head tells me. I force the

thought down and try to think about the sensation of rapid movement that swinging should bring, but it's no good. The trance has been broken.

I pull myself up onto a branch and think for a moment. It's okay that this is spoiled there's plenty of other stuff I'd love to do. What had happened next, running into the siblings? It still hurt to think of them, not yet. How about jogging? No that didn't fit either. It hadn't been an enjoyable experience at the time. I could play cards, but playing cards meant playing with the siblings, unless my parents wanted to play. The siblings had mentioned they played three player hearts before they'd met me. You just took out one card and passed differently. I could totally play cards with my parents.

As soon as I think it, I'm in my own house, sitting at the dining room table with my parents.

"Hello Ryan. Nice place you've got here, seems you tidied up a bit since we were last here." My dad says. They're both happy as can be, as if nothing has happened.

"Thanks, I've looked into getting some paintings for the walls. They're a bit bare at the moment." I start dealing out the cards, this feels good. It's like I've been wearing clothes that were too tight, and now they've been replaced with loose ones. I can breathe easy now. This game, with my parents, in my house, with the small talk, it just feels right. This is how things should be.

"Yes I think you should." My mom agrees. "I find some natural photography, and a few family portraits usually go quite a ways to brightening up a space." Family portraits, that thought tickles my subconscious.

"You know dear." My mom continues. "Why don't we invite a fourth?"

"A fourth?" I say. "Sure, who should we invite?" I try to think of Teddy, but my mom speaks first before I can form a clear picture of him in my head.

"How about Brendan, I think he's on vacation from the presidency at the moment." I don't have a brother named Brendan, and he certainly isn't the president of anything.

A young man who looks almost exactly like me, but in a business suit pops into the fourth spot at the table.

"No!" I shout. Brendan disappears. It's alright, just a little slip. Everything is going to be okay.

"Oh dearie." My mom continues. "Why did you send your brother away? He's so much like you. You two normally get along so well."

"I don't have a brother named Brendan!" I shout at her. "He's not real. You made him up to replace me!" Why is this happening? This is my dream? Why can't I control my own dream?

"Because you know that's not how we really think about you." My mother continues. Of course, in my head they replaced me. So when I went inside my own head I still knew that they would replace me. Well that's alright, I'll just have to forget they replaced me.

“Mom.” I say. “Brendan isn’t here. He doesn’t exist. Now pick up your cards. We are passing to the left to start. Let’s have a nice friendly game as a family.”

“Of course dear.” My mother says. She’s still smiling. She’s still pretending nothing went wrong. “We can pretend Brendan isn’t real for a while if it will make you feel better.” They still think he’s real, but that’s okay. It’ll all fade in a moment. This is just inside my head, so if I just keep telling myself it’ll happen, then it’ll happen.

“Thank you, dad, I’m passing these three cards to you.” I slide the cards to dad and look at the ones mom gave me. Maybe if I focus on the game then I’ll forget all about Brendan. I heard a trick once that if you want to stop thinking about something you should try and recite something long and complicated from memory. It was all about filling your brain with other things, so I would just fill my brain with strategy and memorizing cards, and I wouldn’t think about Brendan.

“Pink elephants.” My father says, playing his first card.

“What?” I asked. Confused, but glad that it’s distracting me from thinking about Brendan.

“Once someone tells you not to think about pink elephants, you immediately think about pink elephants.” He says.

“What’s your point?” I ask.

“My point is you’re still thinking about Brendan, and you are trying too hard to not think about him so of course you’ll just keep finding yourself thinking about Brendan.” I throw my cards on the table.

“Oh dear you shouldn’t have done that.” My mom said. “I had the most dreadful hand. You surely would have come out on top of that.”

“Enough talk about Brendan!” I shout again. I can’t keep raising my voice. This is isn’t good for me.

“Can we please just stop talking about Brendan?” I beg my mother. “You’re here. You’re with your son. Isn’t that enough? Isn’t that what parents want?”

My mother gives me a sympathetic look. It was the look she used to give me if I got a bad grade on an important exam at school. She reaches across the table, and in a very maternal nurturing voice says.

“But sweetie. We can’t stop thinking about Brendan because he’s better than you.” She started patting my hand and I felt the need to rip it away, but she wasn’t done talking. “Didn’t you see him? He looks just like you because we replaced you with him.” I started to choke up and shake.

“You know that, you saw how we’ve forgotten about you? Didn’t you see how we didn’t follow you out the door when you left in the real world? We could see you were hurt. We just didn’t care

sweetie.” I close my eyes. I can’t take this anymore. I slam my fist down on the table, and everything fragments like shattered glass. The table, my parents, my house, the cards, all of it shatters and disappears, except for my chair. I sit on my chair in a white void, alone, shaking.

“How could they do that? How could they do that to one of their own children?” I clench and unclench my fists. I want to hit something, but there’s nothing around. “That’s okay. There are other people. It doesn’t have to be my parents. I can still be happy here. I can still move on.”

I’m on the top of the cliffs that I had rappelled down in real life. There is a rope system already setup. Teddy is on one side of the rope, ready to rappel down the mountain, and I’m on the other side, ready to lower him down.

“Are you ready Teddy?” I ask. He looks over the side.

“Are there any taller ones?” He asks.

“No Teddy, not anywhere near here.” I respond.

“I want something taller.” He demands sitting down and crossing his arms to emphasize his rebellion.

“It’s not the height that matters Teddy. It’s just that you’re here with me right?”

“I want something taller.” Teddy says again. Not Teddy too, not my own brother. This idea that he doesn’t want me either can’t be buried that deep in my head.

“Come on Teddy, it’s me. All that matters is that I’m here right?”

“I want something taller.” Teddy says again. I bite my lip.

“Teddy please, I made this for you. I went through all this work and came back for you so you could do this.”

“I want something taller.” He says. I start clenching my fists. What if I take him to Everest or to Mars? It’s my own dream. I can totally take him there, or even make my own mountain that’s taller than the one on Mars.

“I still won’t be there for you.” Teddy says. “I just want mountains. I don’t care about you.” I can’t take it. I turn and punch a tree. If it were real I would’ve broken a few fingers, but instead everything just shatters again, leaving me floating in a white landscape again.

“I have to find something good.” I tell myself. “I have to find something that isn’t going to cast me out.” I can feel anger starting to turn to sadness, and I need to be angry for a little while yet. I need the energy to find something good.

“What hasn’t turned me away? What doesn’t think of me as just some tool in their imagination to twist and change until it’s not me anymore.” I think of the siblings. “Of course, they are the ones that

showed me another way. Each one of them showed me compassion and a willingness to lead me out of the dream. I left them for this, but they could still find it in their hearts to care about me at least a little." I'm in the lake with all three of the siblings, swimming around in waste deep water.

"Oh thank goodness." I say. "At least you guys can be here." Frank is looking serious, Thomas has a ridiculous clown's grin, and Jess looks like she's just seen something beautiful. It's absurd for them to be wearing those expressions while swimming. They seem fixed in place, even when they start talking their expressions don't change.

"Of course we're here." Frank says. "You darn well brought us here so of course here we will be."

"Yeah dude." Thomas says while flipping onto his back and swimming circles around me. "We have no control. You've taken our free will man, we will be whatever you want us to be."

"Yeah babe." Jess says, slowly and deliberately swimming towards me. "We'll be whatever you want us to be. We're just clay to you. You can shape us into whatever you want." No, no, Jess isn't clay.

"No you're not! You're a human being Jess. You're smart and funny and nobody can tell you what to do." She's within an arm's reach now. She straightens up in the water, and glides in closer.

"No we're not." She says. "We're puppets. You've destroyed what we were because we didn't do exactly what you wanted." She's only a foot away now, and she's looking at my lips, and she's closed her eyes. "We'll be whatever you want Ryan."

"No, no, no, no, no." I just repeat. How can I do this to them? What's wrong with me? I have to stop, but I can't stop because I want this too much. Jess is so close I can feel her breath. I can't do this to her, not to her. I'll never forgive myself.

Her eyes shoot open and her face suddenly changes to a bland expression. "Wake up Ryan." She says.

My eyes, my real eyes, shoot open and I sit bolt upright sweating a storm and gasping. Sitting on the bed next to me is Jess, and behind her, watching me with expressions full of concern, are Frank and Thomas.

Without thinking about what I'm doing I pull Jess into a bear hug so tight her back cracks.

"I'm so sorry Jess." I say in a hoarse whisper. "I'm so sorry." She rubs my back in slow circles.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. We're here. You didn't do anything." Her voice is soft and reassuring.

"Well, nothing significant anyway." Thomas says. Frank elbows him.

"Yes I did." I croak out. They don't know what I had been doing in the dream. What I had been doing to them, to this group of such supporting people. "I was in the dream, and all of you were there with me. We were at.."

“Stop.” Jess says. “It was a lucid dream right?” She feels me nod my head.

“Then you knew it was a dream. So you knew that what you were doing, you weren’t really doing to us. You still knew who we were, and judging by how much you’re shaking, you know that those people in your dream weren’t us. You made a decision Ryan. You made a decision to come back to us.” She says, still rubbing my back.

“You chose us man.” Thomas says. I am forced to laugh a little. Everyone else in my dream seemed exaggerated, but Thomas was still pretty much the same.

“What about the whole proposal thing?” I ask.

“You mean you running out the door while we were still stunned and overwhelmed?” Frank says. “Yeah we were still stunned and overwhelmed. If you had just given us another minute we would have told you to get up off your knees.”

“We would’ve gotten here sooner but you were kind of hard to find.” Jess tells me. I feel better enough that I push her away slowly and we sit on the side of the bed together.

“You never told us where you live Ryan.” Thomas says. “And I only have been to your parents once. We had to retrace my footsteps to your parents, get them to tell us where you live. We then had to try and make sense of their bad directions because they don’t come by very often. Lastly we had to figure out which house was yours by just knocking on a bunch of different doors because your parents didn’t even give us an address. I mean we would’ve taken even longer if that one pane of glass by your door hadn’t allowed us to unlock it so easily.” I am grateful that my rage led to something productive.

“In the end.” Frank says. “You were recently unhooked. You are still figuring out how the world works. Your actions today were childish. In a lot of ways you still are a child. A child who was recently thrown out by his parents, so understandably you’ve made some bad decisions.”

“Thank you.” I say.

“Look, we aren’t perfect either.” Frank says. “All of us have slipped up from time to time. The idea of a world where you have total control is tempting, and we all slip up. What we’ve learned to do is move on. You’re awake with us now, so whatever happened before, it’s in the past, and we’re going to forget it.” I’m eager to forget the past hour or so, so moving on should be easy.

“I wish it wasn’t like this.” I say. “The pills. They seem to tear apart everything.”

“I know.” Thomas says. “As long as there are pills, we’re gonna fight. People are going to hook back in, and people who unhook are going to have to realize a lot of painful truths.”

“What if there weren’t pills?” I asked.

“It would be nice.” Jess said. “If only the things had never been invented.” I looked at the bottle of pills still on the night stand. It was amazing how such little things could have such far reaching consequences.

“We can’t uninvent them, but we can destroy them.” I say, grabbing the bottle.

“That’s a good idea.” Jess says. “If you destroy your supply you shouldn’t be tempted anymore.”

“I didn’t mean these pills.” I said. “I meant all the pills. I want to take down the corporation that manufactures these abominations.” I walk to my bathroom and empty the vial into the sink, flushing the poison down the drain.

“That’s.... extreme.” Frank said.

“It’s what I’ve been getting at for years Frank.” Thomas counters. “They have to be stopped. The government is keeping us under with these pills, and if we don’t stop our fellow human beings, they’ll sleep their lives away.”

“That’s their choice.” Franks says.

“Yeah right, you really think virtually 100% of the population just up and decides to do one thing? How come we only have about one person every six months unhook in this town? And when they do they unhook, they very quickly move somewhere else so there’s never more than a few of us in any one place at any given time? Doesn’t that seem like a bit of a coincidence to you?” I lean on the frame of the bathroom door and watch the exchange.

I knew Thomas would be in. After the talk we had there was no doubt. Frank and Jess I wasn’t so sure about. Jess could come because of how bad the pills had damaged her life. Frank might come just to protect us.

“They moved because they wanted to live in the wild away from civilization.” Frank counters. “We gave them camping and hunting gear so they could survive in a place where they wouldn’t be tempted to take pills anymore.” Their voices are rising. I can tell this is an old argument that’s happened several times before.

“And none of them ever make it back to tell us how that goes?” Thomas asks.

“They probably get lost. We don’t really have much in the way of maps or navigational gear, and even if we did they’d probably lose it, break it, or just flat out wouldn’t be able to use it.” Frank counters.

“Frank, you can justify and explain it as much as you want.” I step in. “But at the end of the day if these pills are gone everyone gets their parents, brothers, sisters, and friends back.” Frank turns on me, and holds my gaze. It’s like staring down a lion. He doesn’t blink. He doesn’t say anything, until I glance at Jess just to avoid meeting his gaze.

“Did you know the earth was running out of resources Ryan?” He asks me. His tone is cool. He’s not angry. He’s stating hard facts. This isn’t easy for him.

“Many scientists were predicting that in the next hundred years or so we’d run out of natural resources and people would start starving to death. Our technology would run out of fuel, and our medicine would fail because of it. Humanity would fall in one gigantic plague ridden pile.” He points to the sink.

“Those pills saved us.” Franks says. Jess gets up and comes to stand by me. I thought we would have to have a protracted argument to sway Jess. With those words, Frank did it for us. Jess may not have been willing to do something as aggressive as I was proposing, but she couldn’t support someone who said the pills saved us either.

“Did they save mom and dad?” Jess asks quietly. “What about John, Rosie, and Robert? Did the pills save them Frank?” This remark hits Frank hard. He looks down and turns to give his next argument to Thomas.

“In a way they did. Without the pills maybe our parents would not have had enough money to feed us growing up. When we are only awake 4 hours a day you hardly need anything to eat or drink. You don’t need a lot of space to play around, and you need way less to entertain you. Jess.” He says, gathering up the courage to face her. “You’re the third child. Without the pills our parents might not have had you.” Jess doesn’t blink.

“Frank, they didn’t have me. I have no parents.” That comment finishes Frank. He turns to leave.

“You do what you must. I won’t stop you, but I won’t help you either.” He leaves the bedroom and makes his way to my front door. “I’m grabbing some supplies for a three day camping trip. If you’re not done with what you’re going to do in three days.” He fiddles with the door knob. “I’ll be back in three days.” And with that, Frank is gone.

Thomas and I look to Jess. Neither of us expected her to get on our side so quickly. Jess looks back to me with a challenge in her eyes.

“I just watched my big brother who always looks out for me, even when my parents wouldn’t, walk out the door and leave me to my devices. What are we going to do?” She demands.

“Well.” I say, now a little deflated after all the emotion that has been dominating my life for the last hour. “Uh, you guys have guns right?” I ask. Now Thomas is looking a little worried.

“Oh come on Thomas. What did you think we were going to do?” I ask.

“I’m not going to kill anyone Ryan. I hate that so many people are hooked just as much as you, but I’m sure most of the people involved with the pills are innocent. Certainly anyone we are going to get access to is going to be oblivious to what’s going on.” He says.

“That’s not what I’m proposing.” I say. “The guns are just to give us authority, to scare the people who we are going to uh, talk to.”

“Talk to?” Jess asks.

“I haven’t exactly planned it out yet.” I admit. “I work with information technology. We can use some of the systems at my disposal to gather intel, and then we can act on it.” Jess and Thomas have been through a lot together. They have learned to read each other very well. One glance at each other and they know they are both thinking the same thing.

“Alright, tell us what to do.” Jess says.

“Good, great, here’s what we’re going to do. Go back to your place and bring plenty of ropes, guns, binoculars, pepper spray if you got it, and anything that you can use to cause explosions or mayhem.” Thomas and Jess look unsure of themselves. It was so different from when I had first met them. They had been so full of self-confidence and energy, now they looked more like I had when we had first met. Not certain what was going to happen, and afraid it was not going to turn out for the better.

“What are you going to do?” Jess asks.

“I’m going to stay here and start on the intel. My laptop is attached to some security protocols that will only let me into certain systems if I log in from this physical location. It’s GPS security, and if I move my laptop it won’t work” It was actually pretty sensitive. The GPS range was smaller than that of my Wi-Fi, so if I went too far outback it would cut out.

“Okay.” Thomas says. “I’ll need a little extra time to prepare some things, but Jess should be back with some guns to train you on.”

“Hang on, we’re not going to be shooting any people. Can’t you just leave my gun off?” Thomas looks like I’ve just suggested he just stop breathing for a few minutes because the noise is bothering me.

“Leave the gun off? You must’ve never watched any action movies. We aren’t going to be shooting any people, but that’s the point. You need to know how to operate these things safely, and if heaven forbid you have to pull the trigger. Well, you should know how to do that too. Come on Jess.” The two depart, and I’m left alone.

“Okay, time to take down an international corporation with just a few friends some guns, and without shooting anyone. Cool.” I turn on my laptop and setup my connection so it’s nearly impossible for someone to trace whose making these searches. When I’ve covered my tracks, I fire up a search engine. First, basic information, I look through the company website, and their Wikipedia pages to try and find out how the company works. I find a list of their locations and see there’s a manufacturing facility nearby.

There are about twelve pill manufacturing facilities in my country. So taking this one down won't put much of a dent in overall production, but it should at least interrupt supplies for a few days. I'm sure they've got some emergency backup supplies in case a facility goes down, but probably not many. The world is pretty efficient since it is largely automated and most of the people in it are knocked out so there isn't a lot of need for things like emergency supplies. Still, I look at their other facilities, and even if we only get a few pill free days, that should be enough to force at least some people to unhook. Not to mention in the long run there may be intermittent shortages until they can build another factory, which should take months. Their stockpiles probably weren't big enough to make up for an entire facility being destroyed.

Now I know what we're doing, eliminating one of their factories, but I still need to figure out how. At that point Jess came in.

"Hey, I've got some basic rifles and pistols. Let's head down to the forest and get you shooting." She hefts a bag that looks full of all sorts of tools of destruction.

"In a minute Jess, first I'd like your input on something. Can you come in here for a minute?"

"Sure." She says, and sits down next to me. I have the image of the facility on my screen.

"See this?" I ask indicating the screen.

"Yeah." She says.

"That's our target. This is one of the twelve manufacturing facilities for the pill. We're going to destroy it." I fully expect this to shock Jess and I'm prepared to defend my decision.

"Sounds good, we'll clear out the workers first right?" she asks.

"Um yeah, yeah we will." I say, confused that she's taking this so well. "You seem pretty okay with the idea of blowing up a building."

"Me and Thomas guessed you were going to suggest something like this. He's preparing some stuff to take a building down as we speak." She says.

"Preparing some stuff to take a building down? Do you guys just have that kind of stuff lying around?" I ask. I look into her duffle bag, noting how many guns she's brought, and feel very glad that these people are on my side.

"You'd be surprised what you can make with household supplies. I think I know what he's making, and I saw the stuff you could use to put it together on the walk over. It's not hard if you know what you're doing." I'm really, really, glad I'm on their side.

"Well then, um, anyway, my question was, I've still got a problem. How do we clear the people out of the building? I mean, if we're going to burn it down we can't exactly pull the fire alarm, and I really would prefer not to risk going in there with guns blazing telling everyone to get out. We get just

one person who panics or makes a dumb decision under stress, and well, I don't want to think about it." Jess picks up a pistol from the bag and looks down its sights.

"Can we just break in at night?" she ask.

"Two problems with that. First, twenty-four hour shifts, as far as this place is concerned, there is no night. Second, this place has got to be rigged with alarms, so if we break in we're going to get the police. Unless you two know how to disable or sneak past industrial grade security systems?" Jess shakes her head. "I thought not."

Jess puts down the pistol and looks carefully at the screen. "Did you ever watch any videos about how that sort of factory operates?" She asks.

"No." I respond.

"Well, I've seen one or two. We thought about working in some a while back. Any kind of industrial production place like this is going to have a lot of safety mechanisms in place. They probably work with very large volumes of stuff that's capable of burning, corroding, poisoning, or just crushing you. So there's always a very well established safety network in the inevitable event that something bad happens."

"What does all this have to do with getting everyone out of the facility?" I ask.

"Everyone is taught to cooperate with safety officers, so all we have to do is get someone with authority to report something that will get the facility shut down for a while, plant our charges, and get out." She says.

"Which means we are going to have to find someone with authority and threaten them with guns." I say. Jess looks uncomfortable when I say the word threaten, like I'm accusing her of something.

"I really don't want to bring other people into this at all, but I don't see any other way." Jess says. "We could try reporting a gas leak, but that'll get the fire department called. We could make a bomb threat or something, but that would get the police. Anything outside threat big enough to cause a building evacuation is going to attract either the police or the fire department. The only option, is to get someone inside the building to convince everyone else to leave." She picks up a rifle slowly, placing it in her lap.

"I don't like it Ryan, but we're going to have to threaten someone to make this happen." She picks up the rifle and looks down the sights. "Besides, someone in authority might be in on whatever system they're using to keep people on the pills. I don't know if it's something they're adding to make them addictive, or just pressure form the government but we'll find out, and then we can maybe expose them or use the information to better take them down." Someone's going to have a gun pointed at them before too much longer. I have had several dreams where I used guns, but now it would be for real. For real, that phrase, this was the first time since I had been unhooked that I had heard it used in a negative way.

“Come on Ryan. Let’s get going to the forest. The sooner we get you trained. The sooner we can get this over with.” Jess says. She shoulders the duffle bag, and we’re off.

“I want to say one thing.” I tell Jess. “I won’t shoot anyone. When I was put under by the pill this last time.” She looks at me, concern on her face.

“You don’t have to tell me Ryan. Whatever it was, I know you didn’t mean it, and I forgive you.” She says, touching my shoulder. “Really, it’s okay.”

“Thank you, but this is relevant. When I was put under by the pill this last time I did what my family did to me. I made you into a different person. I felt like I had destroyed you in my mind, and it felt horrible to destroy someone psychologically like that, or to even consider doing it. I can’t imagine how much more horrible it would be to destroy someone physically. I don’t think I could live with myself.”

“I couldn’t either.” She tells me. “You’ll see in a minute that a lot of training to operate guns for private use means training to not use them on people. It’s pretty deeply ingrained. I won’t shoot anyone over this. I’ll turn myself in first. These.” She taps the bag. “Are just for show. We’ll prepare them in such a way that they won’t be ‘turned on’ so to speak.” Good, I wasn’t prepared to become a murderer over this.

“Well, since it’s going to take a minute for us to get far enough away from civilization so that no one can hear us. Let me give you a basic run down on gun operation.” She pulls a pistol out of her bag.

“This is a 40 caliber pistol. For you that means if you hit someone in the chest with it they’re probably done. They might not know it right away, but they’re done.” I made myself not draw a mental image of what that would look like.

“This is the barrel, you do not point this at something you do not intend to shoot, ever, under any circumstances.” She says.

“Okay.” I respond.

“I mean ever, seriously, first rule of guns, even when it’s unloaded like this one. You never point this at something you aren’t willing to shoot. I’ve never pointed a gun at myself or my brothers, ever.” She says.

“Okay, understood, never, ever, under any circumstances point a gun at something you won’t shoot, even an unloaded gun.” I repeat dutifully.

“Good, that brings us to the next basic point, always treat a gun like it’s loaded. I know you can see the chamber is open and the gun lock is in place, but you never assume that’s the case. As far as you’re concerned, this has a bullet in it at all times, and it could go off.” She points to several parts of the pistol as she says this.

“What’s a gun lock?” I ask. She points to an orange thing visible on the middle of the gun.

“This goes in the chamber, oh shoot you probably don’t know any names of gun parts do you?” She asks.

“They have barrels right?” I ask. I wish I could say I was being sarcastic, but I really wasn’t sure.

“Funny.” She says. “Here, let me use a rifle. It’s bigger and I’m a little more familiar with them.” She puts down the bag we’re carrying the guns in, and takes out a rifle. She does something to it to take out the orange thing, leaving one long, black, sleek looking weapon. As she begins to run through naming parts and functions I have time to reflect that this is the first time I’ve seen a rifle. They featured prominently in several of my dreams, but I had never so much as held one. It looked about the same as I had imagined it would, and it had an aura about it. It felt dangerous. In books and movies guns were only present when people got hurt or killed. That was their purpose, to hurt or kill. I had to remind myself these were just for show.

“This is a bullet.” She pulls a small brass thing the size of her pinkie out of the bag. I’m shocked they aren’t bigger. I find it hard to believe that something so small can cause life threatening damage, but I know that I can’t underestimate it. “This is what the gun shoots. It goes in the magazine.” She pulls a black cartridge out of her bag that’s about the size of her hand. “Don’t call it a clip. We haven’t used clips in a hundred years. Anyway, magazine goes in the gun.” She loads it into a slot in the gun. “Release the bolt catch to chamber a round.” She presses a switch on the side of the gun and the gun makes a loud clacking sound that makes me jump a little. “You flip the safety to off.” She indicates a lever on the side of the gun, and flips it. “And you’re ready to fire.”

“It’s more complicated than I had imagined.” I say.

“Yeah, most people think that guns practically shoot themselves. If I just handed you bullets, a rifle, and a magazine, it would most likely take you quite a while to figure out how to put them all together right. Especially if the gun isn’t stored the way this one is. I didn’t even talking about locking the bolt back or clearing a jam, or anything.” I can tell it’s going to be a long day.

About thirty minutes later we’re laying down beside a lake, and I’ve setup my gun on some rocks to balance it. I’ve got the stock of the gun pressed into my shoulder and am looking down the sights into the lake. It’s a pretty big target, but Jess says since we aren’t going to shoot anyone, all I need to know is how to operate a gun, and the lake will make sure the bullets don’t ricochet anywhere and hurt someone. I then ask why I have to shoot it at all, and she just tells me that I’ll understand better once I’ve fired it. Until I actually pull the trigger it’s just some magic thing that hurts people who are far away. Once you have actually shot, it becomes a tool.

“Besides.” She says. “You’re probably going to come hunting with us, so you might as well learn the right way to use these things now.”

The gun feels like a bomb. Part of me thinks it can kill someone just by being near it, like some vengeful spirit inhabits the gun. It feels wrong to be holding it too. I half expect any minute for some police officers to come running out of the woods to arrest us.

She teaches me a breathing exercise. She says it's for when I actually fire the gun, and that may be true, but I think she can see I'm a little shaken and she needs to calm me down." Breath in, breath out, breath in, breath out, hold your breath when your lungs are empty, then squeeze the trigger." She makes me practice with my finger off the trigger several times, and then she lets me put my finger on the trigger. She gives me some final instructions.

"Two last things, first, it's going to kick, not very hard, because this gun fires a fairly small round, and only fires one bullet per trigger pull, but be prepared for it to hit you in the shoulder. Second, it's going to be loud. We're outside so the sound will dissipate a good bit, but it's still going to be one of the louder things you've heard in your life. Okay, whenever you're ready, pull the trigger." I start her breathing exercise.

Breath in, breath out, breath in, breath out, hold, and slowly my finger depresses the trigger. **'BLAM!'** The sound is so shocking my finger leaves the trigger and I almost drop the gun. She had said it would be loud, but it was like someone had just yelled in my ear. I barely notice a piece of brass that goes flying out of the gun and lands a few feet away. I don't see at all where the bullet goes. The thing had come alive with motion too. It had kicked back into my shoulder, and then the barrel had kicked up. It was like the thing was trying to jump out of my hands.

"Ow!" I say. Jess laughs and punches my shoulder.

"I told you it was going to be loud. No one ever believes just how loud it's going to be until they hear it. Bet you'll think twice the next time you see an action movie won't you?" She teases. "Alright, we're going to finish the ammo in your magazine. Let's go."

"Do I have to?" I jokingly ask. This was a fairly frightening experience.

"Yeah you big baby, now come on. This time, watch where the bullet hits the water." I shake my head and sight down the barrel again. Okay, this time I'm ready.

I wasn't ready. It takes two full magazines before I can fire shots with anything like regularity or accuracy. My body just flinches from the shot every time.

"Nice shooting." Jess finally says after about the sixtieth bullet. "It's different now isn't it?" She asks. At first I don't know what she's talking about. Then I start to feel it. The gun doesn't seem like some unknown entity that just hurts people for no reason anymore. It takes a deliberate set of actions to make it hurt someone, and it takes a deliberate person who wants to hurt someone. I understand now. I haven't been handed a magical killing device. It's just like a knife, or a brick. It still takes intent to cause suffering. I still feel fear towards it, but it's not a childlike fear of a ghost. It's an adult fear of causing permanent irreparable damage to your fellow man.

“Yes. It is. It’s different.” I say. I start taking it apart and storing it without instruction from her.

“Let’s get this done. We’ve got a factory to burn.”

Chapter six

“You guys are some very scary people.” I say upon walking into the house. Thomas had setup a little demonstration of what we would look like. He had two pistols on shoulder holsters, and a third on his hip. There was a rifle on his lap, and another rifle slung across his back. He had a bandoleer of high caliber rounds slung across his chest and to top it all off, he was in all black tactical clothing with a black mask over this face, and several knives strapped to various body parts.

“That’s the idea right?” He replies, standing up and shouldering his rifle.

“It’s a little ridiculous though isn’t it?” I ask. “I mean you need two hands to operate a pistol, and you have three pistols. Those two rifles you have are the same rifle so there’s no possible reason for having both, and that bandoleer doesn’t have ammunition for any of your weapons.”

“You’re forgetting.” Jess is at my side, and she seems to approve of the setup. “We aren’t going for practical. He shouldn’t have to fire a single round, and everyone in that factory probably knows the same amount about weapons as you did before I took you shooting. So they won’t know that his setup is ridiculous. To say nothing of the fact that they’re probably going to be way too scared to count. Besides, all we have to do is intimidate one person. So we ditch logical, and just go for shock factor. You remember the feeling of danger that just magically radiated from the gun before you learned how to fire it? The more guns we bring, the more we emphasize that feeling, and at the end of the day any rational person will realize it only takes one gun to get the job done, so even if they have their wits about them they should still comply.”

“About not firing a round.” Thomas says. “That’s not entirely accurate.” Jess rounds on him.

“Thomas, you better not have gotten any ideas.” Thomas picks up a bottle in front of him. I hadn’t noticed them before, but there are several bottles in front of him filled with a bluish jello-like solid.

“I haven’t, just did my prep work for demolition. See these?” He lifted the bottle. “Napalm, burns at almost 2000 degrees, way hotter than any wood fire, and hot enough to ignite some metals.”

“Metals burn?” I ask.

“Everything burns if you get it hot enough.” Thomas says. I don’t know if I believe him, but probably enough things in that factory will burn to shut it down permanently.

"I'm gonna place these around the factory, and hit them with incendiary rounds. It's the quickest way I could think of to set off as many fires as possible as quick as possible." I notice there are about a dozen bottles that all look to be a liter or more. "I would like to mix in some explosives, but we used the last of them a week ago." I turned to Jess.

"Jess, you said you used these things for hunting. What kind of animals require incendiary rounds and explosives to hunt?" Jess giggled.

"I didn't say we only used them for hunting. Ever put an ounce of an explosive binary compound in a watermelon and hit it with a high caliber hunting rifle? You should. You haven't really lived until you shoot exploding fruit."

"I'm starting to have some second thoughts about who I spend my time with." I say, only half joking.

"Don't knock it 'til you try it." Thomas says. I suppose I will have to try it at some point, but I find myself wondering what other supplies the siblings have squirreled away. The rounds on Thomas' bandoleer were used by a very large gun. I wouldn't put it past them to have a tank hidden in the woods somewhere.

"Alright you two." Thomas says. "You can see I've done my part. What have you two come up with? I assumed we were going to be blowing something up. I've got the supplies to do the blowing up, I assume we're hitting the local factory?"

"How did you know that?" I asked, impressed that he apparently already figured it out.

"It was just a lucky guess. They're the biggest sleep core facility nearby. Now then, have you get the other intel besides just what we're blowing up? Thomas asked

"Like what?" I ask back.

"You are such a zombie." Thomas says. "Like what he says. Like who's the person we're going to find to get everyone to leave. Where does this person work? When do they work? How are we going to get access to them without getting seen by anybody else? What kind of security does the base have? Did you just expect to walk through the door looking like this." He gestures to himself. "And expect everything would just sort of fall into place? Isn't this plan supposed to be subtle?"

"Alright, alright, I get it." I say. "Clearly I need to do some more research. Here, hand me my laptop." Thomas had apparently been counting on this, and had turned my laptop on. Stupid me for leaving it unlocked. I opened it to the page about the factory we were going to hit. I had already printed out maps on how to get there, so at least that much was taken care of.

I sit down while Jess and Thomas anxiously inspect the weapons. I hastily click through websites while they're loading magazines, attaching ammunition to tactical vests, and discussing which knives

would look the most intimidating. I wondered if I could make new friends once people got unhooked from the pill.

The site has a personnel page. I open it expecting to just use whoever is the top person on the page for our victim. Unfortunately all of the top people looked like business personnel who never set foot in the lab or would have access to the safety system. That wouldn't do. It didn't matter if they were important if they didn't have access to the safety system. Halfway down there's a man in a lab coat whose title is director of process development. Director sounded like a high rank, and process development sounded like a lab job.

"Got our man." I announce. "Damian Winters." I turn my laptop around for them to get a good look. "Director of process development." The two look up and study his face, memorizing it so they can recognize him.

"Okay." Thomas says. "How do we get to him?"

"Working on that." I say.

"Let us know when you have something." Thomas replies, turning back to the bottle of napalm he's inspecting.

I open up Damian's page and look around for something. Contact information catches my eye, having his office phone might be a good idea. I copy and paste that info into a word processor for later use. He's got a bio about drug design, and commitment to quality. That's useless. Ah, office hours, perfect. Monday through Friday 8-5. The guy must be unhooked to pull that kind of schedule. That turned my stomach. He knew what he was depriving people of, and yet he continued to perpetuate the process.

So now I had a time for us to grab him, now I needed a place and a way to get to it. I looked around his bio and didn't find any more information about where exactly his office was. Dead end, several more internet searches showed nothing, and even some illegal use of internet assets from my job couldn't find anything.

I pull his company page back up and look it over again, hoping something jumps out. Still nothing, maybe the answer isn't found on a computer, maybe we have to improvise. I write the office phone number down on a piece of paper I have nearby and turn to Thomas.

"Hey Thomas, do you guys have a hunting rifle with a laser sight?" I ask. Thomas scoffs at me.

"What self-respecting gun owner wouldn't own a hunting rifle with a laser sight?" Maybe having gun nut friends had some advantages.

We park the car a good two miles away from the factory to make sure our getaway vehicle isn't spotted at the scene of the crime. The factory is in the middle of the woods, with no neighboring

buildings nearby, so we naturally have to walk through the woods ourselves. It's for the best really. If we walked on the sidewalk then people would get suspicious. We had all our gear stored in several heavy backpacks and duffle bags, but we didn't want to attract any more attention than we had to.

It was a long walk out to the factory, plenty of time to fully understand what you're doing. When I had just woken up from my last hook I was coursing with almost every emotion there was. Now I had time to cool off and project my energy into other things. Now things were real. That word, real, so many meanings over the last day. It had meant pain, fear, surprise, elation, sadness depression, and shock. Now I could add one more meaning to the list, resolution.

I knew what this meant, or I at least thought I did. We were breaking the law, in a big way, and even putting some people's lives in danger. Tonight there was the very real possibility we would be in jail or worse.

My head began to fill with all the possible scenarios. We could get pinned down and shot at by police. We could be in metal cells staring at blank walls for the rest of our lives and eating bland food. They might even put us back on the pill for what we did, to keep us sedated.

That thought sent a shiver down my spine. It was worse than the other two. At least in jail or under fire we would be in the real world, fighting to make a difference. Under the pill we were almost worse than dead. I shudder to think that mere hours ago I had been under the pill myself, by my own consent, and shuddered again to think of all the people still under the pill.

"Hey, you look a little worried." Jess says. "Not having any second thoughts are you?" I snap out of it.

"No, just determined to put an end this." I tell her. This seemed to be the right thing to say.

When we get closer Thomas walks us through his part of the plan more thoroughly. I had already covered my part earlier.

"So safeties off and fingers off the trigger. We're keeping bullets in our magazines like we discussed. In case we need to fire the guns to intimidate anyone, or if heaven forbid we get into a firefight we'll need to fire rounds into the air in order to escape. But, we don't want to have to use to them, so be mindful where your gun is pointing. I'll say it again, keep your finger off the trigger. We don't want any accidental discharges. Once you guys have our man covered I'll get him to tell me where their explosive or flammable chemicals are and set my charges. You all will then clear the building and I'll blow the charges. We'll ditch the man, and head for the woods. Remember, we don't want him to identify us, so keep talking to a minimum, and Ryan, use your voice changer." We only had one voice changer that I had from work, so it was agreed I would do the talking.

"Got it." Me and Jess say. The building becomes just barely visible through the tree line.

"Alright, we're here." Thomas says. "Everybody knows what to do, let's get to it."

The building is large, probably as big as my entire cul de sac, and looks very plain. There is no outward sign of the turmoil the products of this building create. We stay back in the treeline as we walk around the building. Jess and I use some of the binoculars we bring to look into the windows until we can locate our target.

“There he is.” I spot him first. “Third window from the right.” Luckily he had been easy to identify because he had been facing the window, observing the nice scenery no doubt.

“Got it.” Jess confirms with her binoculars. Now it’s go time. We fall back so we’re out of sight of the building and open our duffle bags. There are metallic clacking sounds, zippers being done up, and the click of buckles being fastened and adjusted. In a few minutes we transform from a normal twenty something trio out for a walk into three heavily armed individuals that look like a cross between terrorists and SWAT team members. There is hardly an inch of flesh visible beneath layers of leather, cloth, and bullet proof fabric. Between the three of us we have 10 pistols, 7 large tactical knives, and five rifles. Thomas had wanted grenades, but the arsenal of the siblings had its limits.

When we were fully dressed for the operation we stood a moment, looking for someone to say something significant. Thomas and Jess looked to me.

“There’s nothing to say.” I tell them. “This has to be done. That’s all there is to it.” It was an appropriate thing to say. People in real life didn’t give speeches before they did something significant. They just did it. I was not going to indulge in fantasies before taking down an entity that preyed on the fantasies of people to make money. Thomas and Jess understand that. This isn’t some feel good mission of mercy. We’re pretty much the bad guys using guns to scare people into getting what we want so we can burn down their place of work and put them out of jobs. I wasn’t going to sugarcoat it. This was ugly, but it was necessary. “Let’s go.”

Thomas sets up underneath a bush, taking a minute to disguise his position. Jess and I setup on either side of him. Jess pulls out a rifle with a high powered scope on top. I grab my binoculars and focus on Damian. Thomas pulls out the hunting rifle with the laser sight and gets a bead on the office. He taps me on the shoulder to let me know he’s ready. Jess also draws a bead on the office and reaches over to tap me to signal her readiness as well.

Sniper in position, spotter in position, it was time to make the call. I pull out the office number for Damian, press in the numbers, and call. It had taken three hours to disguise my phone. It would show up on any caller ID as a randomly generated series of 10 numbers. This was after it was so thoroughly encrypted that the heat death of the universe would occur before someone could crack it.

“Hello. This is Damian Winters. With whom am I speaking?” A slightly British accent says on the other end of the line.

I tap Thomas on the shoulder and he flips on his laser sight. His rifle is zeroed so that if the laser is pointed at Damian, the actual rifle is pointed several feet to his left. It took a while to convince

Thomas to point a gun so close to a human being, even with the safety on and the scope zeroed to throw off his aim. I activate the voice changer on my phone.

“You have a sniper zeroed in on your chest, any sudden movements and he repaints your desk.” Damian straightens up and looks to his office door.

“I’m impressed, most prank calls aren’t this sophisticated. The voice changer really pulls it together. How did you randomize your number?” There’s no fear in his voice, not yet anyway.

I put the phone next to the hunting rifle and Thomas chambers a round. The metal on metal sound is loud and clear.

“Nice sound effects.” He says confidently, but he had hesitated.

“Damian, look down at your chest.” I instruct, my voice distorted to be unnaturally low by the voice changer. He looks down. And promptly ducks behind his desk.

“Damian, your desk won’t stop a bullet. Come to the window, before my friend clears your throat for you.” Damian looks to the door, clearly weighing his options of running for help. He makes the wise decision to not try and outrun a bullet, and walks to the window.

“Look to the tree line Damian.” When I see he has complied I tap Thomas and he and Jess stand up, two shadowy figures emerge from the brush with rifles and lots of intimidating gear.

“Heaven save me.” Damian whispers. It sounded subconscious.

“Damian, if you play this smart no one is going to heaven today. We don’t want to hurt anyone. So don’t do anything without specific instructions from us or we’ll have to demonstrate we mean business.”

“What did I ever do to you?” Damian asks. “Can’t you find someone else to do whatever it is you want? Surely there’s someone more important or richer you could be doing this to.”

“No Damian, you don’t know what we want. If you did you would know you’re the perfect candidate. No more remarks. You’re going to do what we want, and if you do it quick and fast you’ll get to go home tonight.” I leave no room for compromise in my voice. “Remember, we’re the ones with the weapons, and you’re the one with the exposed office with a view of the lovely cover these trees provide.” I don’t leave time for him to respond. I jump right into it.

“You’re going to issue a warning that there’s been a chemical spill. It’s highly toxic and the building needs to be cleared. All personnel are to leave the office immediately and maintain a distance of 1,000 feet. Do it now. I’ll stay on the line. As soon as you’ve issued the command, hide under your desk so no one sees you’re still inside. Do it now.” I order. He looks at the phone like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. He looks back out the window. He can’t see Jess or Thomas anymore. He’s wondering if he really saw what he thinks he saw.

I put my hand over the microphone and lean over to Thomas.

“Put the laser onto his phone.” Thomas makes an almost imperceptibly small motion. It has the desired effect. Damian jumps back, bumping into his office chair and almost falling over.

“We’re getting impatient Damian.” I say. Damian pushes a button on the desk and Thomas tenses. He doesn’t put his finger on the gun to toggle the safety to on, but you could tell he thought about it. If Damian is going to call for help, he’s going to do it now.

“This is Damian Winters, director of process development.” I can hear the echo of a PA system over the phone. “There’s been a chemical spill. The chemicals have aerosolized and are a carcinogenic, flammable, severe irritant. We must evacuate quickly and calmly. Exit the building in an orderly fashion and maintain a distance of at least 1,000 feet between yourselves and the building.” He takes his hand off the button and cowers against the wall.

“Good Damian, you’re doing good.”

“Aren’t they going to notice I’m gone?” He asks. “I just made an announcement so they know I’m here.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I say. We had anticipated this question. “There are over 100 people in that building. Everyone will have evacuated before they notice anyone is missing. They’ll hopefully think you went to the hospital, but even if they don’t, a rescue mission is impossible. The building you’re in has purportedly suffered a dangerous chemical leak. No one could come back even if they wanted to.” The chemical leak also explained why there would be a fire shortly after the evacuation.

“We’re going to monitor the evacuation, stay on the line, and after everyone is out we’re going to come to you. You’re going to show us where to set our charges.”

“Charges? Like explosive charges?” Damian whispers sharply, careful not to speak too loud and reveal to people walking by his office that he’s still inside. “I thought you guys were robbing us or stealing company secrets. Why do you have charges?” Damian’s voice was pretty calm for a guy being held hostage. I guess he had figured out we weren’t going to shoot him, at least he probably thought it wasn’t going to happen anytime soon.

“We’re going to burn that abominable place down. There aren’t going to be any more pills manufactured here.” I tell him. “So we need you to show us where to lay the incendiary devices in order to cause the most damage.” I expected Damian to say something like ‘you’re never going to get away with this’ or ‘the police will find you’, instead he just says.

“Okay.” And calmly waits for the evacuation to finish. To the credit of the people working in the building they filed out the doors very calmly, and only began to jog once they were clear of the building. The only open area for them to jog to was on the opposite side of the building from us, so whenever they exited, they turned away from us and walked around the building. We would be hidden from view

when we exited our cover and approached the building. We had been lucky that Damian's office was on this side of the building. It made entry to the building much easier.

There are several tense moments while the building clears. Right now, we're almost entirely risk free. There's no chance of someone sneaking up on our position, and Damian is too far away and too trapped to do anything. Right now, everything is going fine. In a few minutes we're going to enter the building, and then things will get dangerous again. There could be more coworkers inside who could panic and do something stupid like rush us. Damian could try and disarm us when we get closer, or tear off one of our masks to reveal our identities. The charges could work too well and take down the building while we are still inside it. Any number of unexpected factors could get introduced.

It's been thirty seconds since the last time I've seen someone exit the building. I reach over and tap Jess.

"The building looks clear Damian, walk over to the window and throw out your key fob. We're coming to you." Jess and I stand up and with weapons out, but pointed down. We head quickly toward the building. Thomas had wanted to set up the charges himself, but someone had to keep the laser on Damian, and Thomas insisted that if someone was going to be pointing a gun near a person, it was going to be him. So Jess and I arrived at the back entrance to the building with me wearing a backpack full of napalm. Damian throws out his key fob as we get close.

Jess and I stack up on the door. She's got her rifle out, and so do I. I hold the key fob up for both of us to see. This is it, after we go in this door we leave the safety of the sniper hide, and enter an unknown building that could be crawling with people who hadn't made it out yet. There could even be security guards. Damian had acted awfully calm earlier, had he managed to signal security that there was about to be a break in? Only one way to find out. I tap the fob to the security panel, and open the door. We're in.

There's a security desk to our left, but thankfully no guard. Jess points to the desk. We had agreed to keep talking to a minimum and that I would be the only to speak, because I had the voice changer. This would keep the chances of someone identifying our voices low. I nod, indicating that I notice the guard isn't there. She raises a hand, palm up, to ask where he went. I shrug. I hadn't seen him leave. Jess clearly hadn't either.

"Maybe he went out another way." I say in a voice so quiet it is almost just a breath. Jess doesn't like this. She points to the safety on her rifle. They are currently on, and they're the only thing preventing a trigger pull from sending a bullet flying out at lethal speeds. Jess wants to be ready in case the guard is still around.

I shake my head and point down, indicating I still want our rifles pointed down. She shakes her head back at me, but keeps her safety on and her gun pointed down.

I point to a staircase. Damian's office was on the second floor, and somewhere to our right. We move to the door. I open it. She moves through first. She looks up and down the stairwell. She flashes

me an okay sign and holds still. She's listening to hear if anyone is waiting at the top. I listen outside and keep my eyes on the hallway that leads away from the security desk.

I feel that same sensation I did when I fell back off the mountain. This moment we were in free fall, and at any moment the rope would pull tight to catch us and secure us in place. My brain was firing on all cylinders, and everything seemed to take three times as long.

Jess finally nods, and we move up the stairway, carefully closing the door at the bottom to avoid any unwanted noise.

At the top it's Jess' turn to hold the door as I go through. I'm in the middle of a hallway with offices on both sides that stretch the length of the building. I rapidly glance left and right, it's empty. I flash an okay symbol back to Jess, and we both listen again, still nothing. I count ten breaths to keep track of the time, and then move down the hall to the right, where Damian's office is. Jess closes the stairway door quietly and moves after me.

I estimated it had been six minutes since the alarm sounded, and two since the building had cleared. Our fear was beginning to dissipate and it was being replaced by an urgency to move quickly. We didn't know how long it would be before someone called the police or the fire department themselves. We probably had at least five minutes, and maybe as much as half an hour, but we couldn't be sure.

Damian's office door is closed. I put my hand flat on the pane of glass on the door so Thomas knows it's me coming in. I hold my hand there for another three breaths to make sure he sees it, then I nod to Jess. She opens the door, and I move in.

The office is just like I saw it from the sniper hide. I wave to Thomas to indicate everything is okay. He has no way of responding since we decided radios would be too loud, and too easy for some passing local law enforcement to listen in on. It would be one more thing that could get us caught, so we had left them behind.

"Damian Winters." I say. "Stand up."

"I'm here." He says. His voice is still too calm. I want to stick my head back out into the hallway to make sure it's still clear, but I don't want to look nervous or unsure in front of the man I'm supposed to be scaring into collaborating with the destruction of his workplace.

"Show us where to plant the charges." I tell him, getting right to the point.

"Yes of course." He says. "But first, if I may ask, why do you want to burn down this research facility?"

"Research facility?" I ask, the voice changer failing to hide my confusion. "I thought this was a manufacturing facility?"

“It is.” Damian says, calmly sitting down in his desk chair. “We manufacture the material for clinical trials. Which are conducted with the population of this facility, but it is still research. We modify the batches and work on the next generation of pills. When we think we’ve got something, we get permission from the government and begin testing the new pill on the local population.” This isn’t good. They don’t mass produce. This won’t interrupt the supply. I don’t know why they’re researching a better pill, but if the current one already has the world lying down and giving up, I hate to think what the new one will do.

“But destroying this place will meet your goals I think.” Damian says. He’s sat down at his desk, got his fingers folded like he’s conducting a job interview. His face is utterly confident. What is he up to?

“What do you know about our goals?” I ask. We’re wasting time. We may just have to throw the bag in the hallway and shoot it on our way out if this conversation takes too long, but Damian knows something, and I can’t leave before discovering what it is.

“To destroy the pill obviously. You haven’t expressed any interest in taking anything of monetary value from this facility. Considering how valuable some of the intellectual knowledge that you’re ignoring is. In addition to the rare chemicals used in the manufacturing process that you’re not taking, it’s a pretty obvious that this isn’t a smash and grab from another company. You are here because you hate what the pill does. You perhaps were abandoned by family, or suffered severe depression from the lack of social interaction in your lives.” He’s got us figured out.

“How would you know about that?” I ask.

“Because I saw it happen countless times. I watched as the world gave up on itself. There was this cure for so many sleep disorders. The 50% of adults that suffer with sleeping disorders could rest easy with a sleeping pill that the body did not develop a tolerance to. They now had the key to a restful night’s sleep that will let them take life by the horns. I was thrilled to watch people regain their energy. Instead I watched them lay down and give up on the world. I watched parents forget about children, and children forget about parents. I saw so many leave a rotting civilization for the wilderness to escape the pestilence of constant sleep I had caused.”

“You made the pill.” I say, flipping the safety off on my rifle.

“Yes, I made the pill.” He says. I point the gun at his chest. Jess had been monitoring the hallway, she looks in and sees my gun up, then sees my safety off.

“No Ryan! Don’t do it!” She shouts. I use one hand to tell her to stay back. She freezes. She knows if she moves forward I could reflexively put my finger on the trigger and give it a pull, turning arson into murder.

Damian tenses, expecting any moment to be knocked backward by a gunshot.

“Before I put a bullet in your heart you are going to tell me why you did it. Why did you hook the entire world?” Damian looks confused.

“Hook?” Damian says. “Do you mean to imply that I or the people I work for are somehow keeping people on the pill?” I nod, putting my finger on the trigger. Just a little tug, that’s all it would take.

“So you think we are forcing people to take it?” He actually has the gall to look surprised and insulted. I nod again.

“Either by making the pill addictive or coercing them into it.” I say. Damian looks at the barrel of my gun.

“Son no one is forcing people to take the pill. They want to.” I almost do it. I almost pull the trigger. I take my finger off the trigger to prevent myself from doing it by accident, but I keep the gun pointed right at his heart.

“Explain.” I demand.

“There’s nothing to explain son.” He says. “The pill isn’t addictive. I know. I designed it, and I can’t believe you think we would somehow threaten that many people just to make them take a pill. You yourself are pretty clearly not taking the pill. Has anyone forced you? As for addictive agents, have you felt a need to take it? Did that need come from the pill? Or from a need to escape the real world?”

“You’re lying.” I say.

“Really? You think so? I’m telling a man with a gun pointed at me something that obviously upsets him. Don’t people usually lie to improve their chances of survival? I know you’re hurting or else you wouldn’t be doing something as stupid, dangerous, and kind of wrong as this, but you can’t shoot me. I’m the only one who can tell you what you need to do in order to stop all this.”

“Seems to me we can stop all this with a little movement of my pointer finger.” I tell him.

“Killing me will do the exact opposite of what you intend.” He says. He doesn’t sound like a man whose pleading. “You deserve to shoot me for what I’ve done, but I oversee all research on the next generation pill, a pill that will keep a man under for twenty-four hours. The company has been working with some robotics institutes, and they’re going to go global with a way to keep humanity permanently unconscious. The robots will run the normal tasks of civilization as well as bodily functions, while humanity just sleeps their lives away.” Permanently unconscious, truly this would create a living death.

“So tell me why I shouldn’t stop you from doing this?” I ask.

“Because if you shoot me they’ll hire someone who hasn’t been secretly sabotaging the experiments. I give them just enough information to keep them from firing me. I have dragged this process out for decades, when it should’ve just taken a few years. You shoot me, and this is going to get a lot worse.” This is beginning to sound a little too elaborate to be a lie made up on the spot with a gun unexpectedly pointed at you.

“Tell me, what were you going to do after taking this facility out?” Damian asks. “Seems like there’s only two or three of you, or else you would have brought a much larger group. Did you think the remaining eleven facilities wouldn’t beef up security to anticipate another move like this? Not to mention even if you by some miracle managed to pull this off eleven more times without being caught. You would still have to deal with our hundreds of international locations.” I point the gun down and flip the safety off. I hear Jess give a sigh of relief.

“You’ve thought this out.” I say.

“Yes.” He says. “And I also know how to stop this place for good. You won’t need your incendiaries, and I’ll make sure it looks like an accident. We use methane in the manufacturing process. I’ll leave a Bunsen burner on in one lab, and open the methane then run. When I get to the crowd of people outside I’ll say that I smelt the methane and tried to contain it, but it was too late. If police investigate they’ll confirm what I’ve said. It will destroy their research so they can’t finish making the 24 hour pill.” He didn’t relax at all when I lowered my gun. I think he really did want me to shoot him.

“That doesn’t take care of their manufacturing capabilities.” I say. “We appreciate what you’re saying and will trust you to do it, but what about the hundreds of facilities you’ve mentioned?”

“I’ll send them false plans.” He says. “One of the pills greatest strengths is that it is unlike most medicines, your body won’t generate a tolerance to it. With other sleeping pills you eventually need to increase the dosage to keep the same affect. Not with my pills, my pills will always put you under with just one dose no matter how long you’ve been taking them. However, during my research I stumbled upon a way to make the pill, and remove this affect. I’ll send this pill that the body eventually rejects to our headquarters and claim it works. I’ve been the world’s drug dealer for decades. They will take me at my word, and with this building destroyed there won’t be any evidence to prove me wrong. The world will slowly wake up when the pills stop working.”

“Won’t the company find out and just ship out the old pills?” I ask.

“They won’t keep a stockpile, and even if they did, they’ll need new equipment to make the new pill, and will have to throw out the old equipment. They won’t be able to make any old pills, at least not for several weeks while the new equipment gets made, shipped, and installed. Besides, by the time they find out it’s the pill’s problem, and I’ll do my best to see that they don’t, people will already be awake.” He really has spent a lot of time planning this. So why hasn’t he done this before people with guns showed up?

“Why would you just sit on this plan? You don’t need us. You already figured out how to sabotage the pill, and burn down this facility. Why have you just been sitting on your thumbs?”

“Because I didn’t know people like you existed.” He said. “Everyone always went into the wild after they unhooked. No one has ever made this effort to help unhook people before. I can’t take the pill down permanently. We’ll get at most a few months of people being awake. Humanity rejected the real world once, I had every reason to believe they would do it again.”

“That’s why you’ve been so calm during this process.” I say. “You haven’t been afraid. You’ve been hopeful.”

“Yes.” He says. “Finally people are unhooking themselves and going out into the bright light of day. I believe if people like you exist, then there is hope for humanity.” I sling my gun onto my back. Clearly the security guard is gone, and this man is no threat. He proves it by not lunging at me when I put my gun away. I display one more act of trust, and disable my voice changer.

“Meet us in the sniper perch after you’re done explaining to the police and the fire department.” I tell him. “Let’s go Jess.” I say, and without another word, we depart.

When we get back to the sniper perch Thomas yells at us.

“What are you doing? Did you use any of the charges? Why did you just let him go? Did you come all this way for nothing?” He has been dutifully watching the whole exchange through his scope.

“No Thomas, I just decided to have a little faith.” I lay down next to him and take out my binoculars. “We’ll see in a moment if my faith was misplaced.”

“If I don’t see an explosion in the next minute. I’m going to stab you.” Thomas says. He’s joking of course, but not by a lot.

“If you don’t see an explosion in the next minute.” I say. “I’ll let you.” Thomas scoffs and returns to examining the building. About the time me and Thomas finish our conversation, Damian runs out the other side of the building waving and shouting at the people in the crowd forming a thousand feet from the building. When he’s about halfway to them a giant pressure wave hits us as a large section of the building is blown up and away. Windows are blown out all across the building and fires can be seen rapidly spreading.

“I guess I get to live to fight another day.” I say to Thomas. For an answer, Thomas starts putting the rifle away.

“Not yet, we’ve got to wait on Damian. I told him to meet us here.” I say. It’s a much longer wait than I had planned. Damian only leaves after the police have come and interviewed people, and the firemen have tried and failed to put out the fires. The fires are helped along by the terrible response time of the fire department. They must’ve been amateur volunteers who slept in their own homes then drove to the station during an alarm. They had taken almost a half hour to show up and had done a very sloppy job putting out the fire. Good thing I never had to call emergency services before.

When Damian finally joins us there is only an hour or two of daylight left.

“Thank you.” He says. “Thank you for making me believe in humanity again. What you did was stupid, reckless, dangerous, and could’ve hurt a lot of innocent people. I forgive you for pointing a rifle at my head, but I can’t condone it. Still, it is my fault. I should’ve done this years ago. Thank you for

waking me from my stupor to do what needed to be done.” With that he shakes our hands and departs. He tells us we’re never going to see him again, and we never do.

Two months later we’re sitting with Frank in the sibling’s house, playing cards.

“Are you sure he wasn’t just saving his own skin?” Frank said. We had this argument a dozen times, and he still didn’t believe us. “What if he just set off the methane to keep you from shooting him afterwards?” None of us reply. There’s nothing to say. We’ve all had this conversation before.

“I mean it’s been two months. Why haven’t we seen anyone else outside?” He asks. I give up on ignoring him. It won’t help, but I can’t just let him berate us again.

“Maybe because they decided to stay indoors, or maybe because it takes longer than we thought for the body to build a tolerance to the pill.” I respond. Frank doesn’t even notice he’s playing all the wrong cards and we’re sweeping the floor with him in the game.

“Or maybe he fooled all of you. Maybe he didn’t decide to help you destroy his life’s work. Honestly I don’t know why you trusted him.” Frank says.

“Why do you care Frank?” I ask. “I seem to recall you left us on our own for the mission.” I know he’s making such a fuss because he regrets leaving, not that he will ever admit it. Before he can get a chance to make up an excuse, the doorbell rings. That’s funny, nobody ever rings the doorbell.

“I’ll get it.” I say, and make for the door. When I open it Teddy is waiting with a smile on the other side.

“Hey Ryan. Jess and Thomas came and told me you had a cliff that you wanted to climb. Can we go today?” He’s eager. He’s smiling, and he walked a half mile to get to me. I look back at Jess and Thomas, they wave to me. Then I turn to Teddy, my little brother. My little brother who had forgotten me and left me for dead. I should be mad. I should yell at him for choosing a stupid dream over me, but in that moment, I can’t find a single mad thought in my head. All I can think is my brother was dead, and now he’s alive.

“Of course little brother.” I say. “There’s nothing else I’d rather do more than go climb a cliff with you.”

Epilogue

“Woohoo!” Teddy shouts as he rappels down the cliff. Jess came with me to help setup the ropes.

“He’s a great little brother.” Jess tells me. She stays up top and talks to me while Teddy descends.

“Yeah.” I say. “It’s so amazing to hear him shout with joy like that.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t angry with him.” She comments. “I heard from Thomas what happened when you went back to your family, and it sounded like his rejection put you over the edge.”

“It did.” I say, the memory stings a little, but Teddy shouts with joy again, and the sting goes away. “But it wasn’t his fault. He was just a kid. He’s still just a kid. By staying hooked he was doing the only thing he ever knew how to do. I can’t hold him accountable for his actions. My parents are to blame for putting him on the pill.” Jess nods approvingly.

“That’s very mature of you.” She said. “Do you know how to dance?” She asks out of the blue.

“What?” I say. It’s a good thing Teddy has reached the bottom because I might’ve dropped him otherwise.

“Dancing, do you know how to do it?” She asks again. I have no idea where this is coming from and think very carefully about my answer. I don’t want to say something completely stupid like I did before.

“No.” I say. “Why?”

“Oh that’s a shame.” She says. “Everybody should know how to dance. Here, let me show you how.” She takes my left hand, and puts her right hand in it. Her hands are soft, so very soft, nothing like my rough callused hands. They’re delicate too. She takes my right hand and puts it on her left shoulder blade. There isn’t more than a foot of space between us, and I feel as if I’m holding her. I feel scared to move because I don’t want to make a mistake and drive her away.

“What’s going on up there?” Teddy calls. “Can I start climbing?” I raise my voice so he can hear me, but keep my eyes fixed on Jess.

“Sorry Teddy, I’ve got to sort something out.” Jess laughs softly and says in a voice too quiet for Teddy to hear.

“You know, typically there are a few steps you go through before proposing. You might try one or two.” A lion roars in my chest. I no longer feel awkward at all. I feel empowered. I feel like she trusts me to dance will with her. My brother has come back to life, and the best girl in the world, the one who supported and followed me even when she thought I was being a complete idiot or a jerk had just given me permission to try again.

I had spent so much time asleep, letting my mind create the wildest fantasies imaginable. Now here I was, in the forest, with my brother, and my girl, and couldn’t imagine ever wanting anything else.