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Fearful Symmetry

by

Margaret Elizabeth Werning

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Mary Swander, Major Professor
Jane Davis
Jim Pease

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2008

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For Mom and Dad

When I said I wanted
to be a writer
You said, “I know”
"Once upon a time, three... friends... sought wisdom, power, and righteousness. They studied and prayed together, looked for great teachers, traveled far, and listened as they journeyed. Always they sought the tiger, the symbol and the doorway to wisdom and truth. One day they were on the road, going their way, and discussing all that they had experienced so far and how far they still had to go. Suddenly, they saw a tiger. The tiger's eyes opened wide.

One of the men spoke: "Tiger, we would like to enter and learn the ways of wisdom."

The tiger looked at each in turn and said, "Just how far would you like to go?"

The first smiled and said: "Thank you, this is close enough."

The second answered: "Not too far, but far enough so I can say that I've been there."

The third man said nothing, but he approached the tiger, who opened its mouth wide. He put his head inside, and at that moment the tiger roared.

The other two men turned and ran to town and safety. The third man was never seen again, though soon after there appeared one who was wise, truthful, compassionate, and just. Some say he looked vaguely familiar, but no one knew where he came from."

~An ancient fable from Asia, 
Quoted in Rites of Justice by Megan McKenna

Hey, life look at me, I can see the reality
Cause when you shook me, took me out of my world
I woke up, suddenly I just woke up to the happening.

...One day you’re up, then you turn around
You find your world is tumbling down
It happened to me and it can happen to you.

...Is it real, is it fake, is this game of life a mistake?

The Happening
by B. Holland, L. Dozier, E. Holland
Recorded by The Supremes
**Prologue**

“It should smell. Mommy, why doesn’t it smell?” It was an odd, but not incorrect statement to be made by a six-year old. She was sitting on her bottom, in her patched and re-patched overalls. Her brunette hair was in its usual knot as she leaned forward, fixated on passing her fingers through the lumpy, brown hologram in front of her.

Her daughter’s question represented a fortuitous opportunity for Andrea to leave the droning conversation she’d been having with the other parents. She was out to play with her daughter, not discover who was doing what with the extra credits they’d been saving. Politely excusing herself, Andrea turned and her jade eyes sparkled when she caught sight of her little girl. She and her husband, Darren, petitioned the Familial and Population Court for eight years before they were allowed to have a child. And there she was, the perfect blend of their genes.

“Krissy, baby. What are you playing with?” She caught her daughter’s attention and saw the excitement of a new find etched into her smile. A mischievous glow made its way into her blue eyes as she waited for her mother’s approval.

“Look, Mommy. The ger-affe dropped it.” She continued to run her fingers through the image but it just sat in front of her.

“Giraffe, sweetie. With a ‘J’ sound.” Andrea sat down behind her beautiful girl and began combing her fingers through Kristen’s messy locks.

“Giraffe.” She rolled the new word around her mouth, feeling the difference of it across her youthful tongue.
“Very good.” Andrea kissed her daughter on the back of the head and pulled her in for a hug, and finally realized what her daughter had been amusing herself with.

“Oh, Kristen, icky. You don’t want to play with that.”

“It doesn’t smell.”

“I know baby, but you still don’t want to touch it. Why don’t we go over and watch the monkeys?” Kristen hesitated moving, still engrossed in her ostracized activity. But, before she could mount a protest, a tiny glitch crossed through the giraffe dung and it disappeared. The hologram had looped itself. A small giggle escaped, signaling her readiness to investigate the next adventure.

“Monkeys! Can we play with the monkeys?” She loved the zoo. For as long as Andrea could remember, Krissy had been fascinated with all things furry and four-legged. One day, Andrea and Darren gave in and bartered a deal with their little girl. If she did her chores, they could come on the weekends. This was the eighteenth straight Saturday they’d been to the holo-zoo. Andrea had loved this place, once. As a child, she’d clung to the same innocence and belief that she now saw in Kristen. But everything changed when a power surge shut the whole system down. Without the lights, there were no trees, no dirt, no animals. Just metal pathways and benches that looked out into metal areas and surrounded by metal fences that held in nothing. Nothing.

“We can watch the monkey’s play.” A masculine voice provided the answer as Darren returned with a United Corporations bottle of recycled water. His eyebrows were pinched. He’d left their re-water at home and a single bottle at the zoo cost three times their admission credits.

“But Dad. It’s no fun to watch. They do the same thing over and over.”
“I know Kris-Kris, but it’s the best I can do.”

“Bo-ring.” The single word was somewhat melodic in its snotty tone and immediately drew the attention of her mother. “Sorry.” The apology was out before she could even be reprimanded.

“Oh, can we see the tigers?” Kristen was on to the next encounter.

“No.” Her parent’s emphatic response came in unison. Her mother completed the rational. “The tiger gives you nightmares, honey. You know that.”

“But, it won’t. It might be different this time.”

“Kristen, you need to understand that it is never going to be different.” Her father kneeled down to her eye level and grabbed her hand. “These animals aren’t here anymore. It’s always going to be the same thing over and over again.”

“But… why?”

“Why what?”

“Why aren’t they around? Where did they go?” This conversation was beginning to go to a much deeper level than either Darren or Andrea had intended. They walked with her over to a bench and sat down so they weren’t blocking the path.

Andrea breathed deep, collecting her thoughts. Her eyes glistened slightly because she knew that today her daughter’s world was going to change. “Well, sweetie, these animals are extinct.”

“What’s extinct?”

“It means they all died.”
“They died? But I just saw them.” Kristen immediately jumped up and looked around, frantically searching for the animals. She was stopped by two sets of hands that pulled her back to bench. “Did someone hurt them?”

“No, Kris.” They were grasping at straws to help her understand. They’d always felt that if she was old enough to ask, then she was old enough for the truth. “What you saw was the image of the animal. Only these images move.”

“They aren’t really animals?”

“No, baby. Only pictures of them.”

“Oh.”

Kristen slowly got down off the bench and began walking away.

“Kristen. Where are you going?” Her father called to her.

“They aren’t real.” She kept walking. Andrea and Darren got up and walked after her. They followed as she began walking toward the front gate. Andrea’s confusion was evident on her face. The hardest thing about bringing Kristen to the holo-zoo was trying to get her to leave again.

“Baby, where are you going?” Andrea called after her.

“To find them.”
Chapter 1

“The Happening – A thirty year period during the early twenty-first century in which the impossible happened. The carrying capacity of the Earth was surpassed, meaning that there were more people than it could support. Mankind’s continual disregard for the delicate environmental balance of the planet sent it into a tailspin, causing an increase in the atmospheric temperature and leading to the worst weather ever experienced in human history.”

Cause and Effect: The Evolution of the Happening

The blindfold had been Alec’s idea. He knew that sight would pervert the information brought in by his other senses. As a professor of Ecological Anthropology at New Harvard, he was an expert on the natural world of the twentieth century. If his help was desired with this simulation, he would make sure it was as accurate as it could be. That meant no cheating with intense visual stimulation. To satisfy him, he would have to hear it, feel it, smell it.

When he entered the test chamber, he was given a moment to see the vast emptiness contained within the walls around him. Eight metal walls, a metal floor and a metal ceiling, he was the only thing in that room. Alec took a few minutes to think it through, but came around to his initial conclusion. Anything he encountered in the simulation could be nothing more than tricks of the light. Nothing tangible should exist in the world he was about to encounter.

A countdown began and he looked around one last time to get his bearings. Glancing once more to the door, he took in a deep breath, and slowly released it. He placed his blindfold over his eyes and stood, quietly listening as he breathed. He felt, as well as heard,
his heart beat. And though maybe five seconds had passed, it felt like hours had gone by. Finally, he heard the clanking of the tumblers as the door locked somewhere behind him and a faint hissing noise sounded to his left. His pulse quickened as his body force-fed adrenalin into his bloodstream. He began to feel warmer and an unidentifiable odor engulfed his nostrils. A bead of sweat rolled down his spine as an automated feminine voice sounded.

“Four… three… two… one. Program engaged.” The metal floor beneath him gave way, shifting under his weight. His tall, lanky frame did little to help his center of gravity and he fell but instinctively caught himself with his hands. They, too, shifted through the hot, grainy substance and panic settled into his gut.

Alec sat, turning his head left and right and fighting the urge to rip the blindfold from his eyes. He busied his hands by wiping them on his clothing, desperate to remove the substance from his palms. Every breath he took was intended to calm him, but every inhale brought more unknown stimuli. Faster and faster, the oxygen flooded his lungs, increasing his heart rate as it forced as much blood as possible through every vein and artery. The rush of it in his head caused a deafening roar in his ears.

He was done feeling it.

In one quick jerk, Alec removed the sweat-laden blindfold from his eyes. He looked down at the tiny, brownish pebbles covering his hands. He had never touched it or smelled it before. He did not know how it would move beneath him. But he’d seen photos and he recognized it without a doubt. It was sand. And, he did the only thing that made sense to him at that moment, he laughed.

He stood, testing his ability to walk in the sand. Once he regained his footing it wasn’t that hard to move through the grains, only different. He looked to where the metal
walls were, but found that they now consisted of a vast nothingness. Just sand and sky as far as the eye could see. He was in a desert. He cautiously strode to where the wall should be; expecting to run headlong into the image, but the solidity never came. Keeping his hands in front of him, he continued to walk, watching his environment pass him by. After a few steps, a small oasis appeared about 20 meters away. Alec jogged towards it, but soon realized that it never got any closer. It was a mirage.

With this new revelation, he stopped and turned around, looking to see from where he had come, but there were no footprints leading back to where he started. Curiosity got the better of him and he knelt to touch the sand. He felt the loose substance sift between his fingers, but no trail could be seen from the shifting sands.

As quickly as the room had become a desert, he was returned to the cold steel of the metal chamber where he had started his journey. He was on his knees and still in the middle of the room, his hands still drawing invisible patterns on the floor.

A door behind him opened and he turned to see a younger man enter. His black hair was rumpled, as though it hadn’t seen a comb in weeks. The glasses on his nose could not hide the bloodshot brown eyes or the bruise-like circles beneath them.

“Hey, Mikey. You look about like I feel.” Alec warmly greeted his former student and designer of the little trip he had just taken through the desert.

“Yes, it’s been a tough week.” He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “You found my little glitch a whole lot sooner than I expected. You should be impressed with yourself.”

“Impressed with myself? Do you have any idea what you’ve created here? Mikey, this is amazing.”
“Actually, to be honest, it’s what you’ve created here.”

Alec stared at him, filling the empty space with looks of confusion. Mikey returned a sly grin of his own. Alec’s reaction had been just what he’d hoped for.

“Come on, I have some re-water up stairs.” He reached a hand out to help up his former professor. “You look like you could use a drink.”

* * * * *

The first day of class always energized Alec. It was the one day a year when he got to just be himself. He got to tell his students exactly what he wanted because New Harvard believed the first day was nothing more than a refresher. For him, it was anything but.

It was still ten minutes before any of his students would show up. He was teaching Intro to Ecological Biology and experience told him that the majority of his students would be freshmen and probably late. He made his way to the back of the room, one grueling stair after another. He understood why large lecture halls were in this stadium-like arrangement, but he wanted to make sure the air wasn’t too thin at the top. He didn’t need his students falling asleep because of a design flaw.

Alec took a seat in the back row pulled his personal tablet from the specialized pocket in his tunic. He gently slid the thin, six-inch by eight-inch piece of equipment into his desk’s docking station. His tablet was standard issue, entirely metal except for an acryllium touch screen. Every person aged eight or older on every coin had one and the United Corporations strongly urged that it be with you at all times. They recorded the daily interactions of every person, a schedule of events. It kept track of your work hours and your credit savings. It told
you if you missed a meal or did not complete your daily cardio requirements. Tablets were used as a means to contact one another with both visual and textual information, and the only way to get information. An uplink to the satellite made all this possible. However, it also monitored you and told the United Corporations where you were. Most every doorframe on the Coin was equipped with a tablet sensor.

A statement appeared on the screen as it ran the start-up protocol. Standard procedure stated that start-up could progress no further until ownership had been verified. Alec placed his hand against the screen and waited as a bar of light moved from his fingertips to the heel of his palm and back. The machine chirped in satisfaction and whirred to life, giving Alec access to the digital information secured on the New Harvard Satellite safely orbiting the world.

He removed the stylus from its holder and quickly established a link to the satellite, trading information with the system running the room. He opened the files specifically attached to his lecture hall. Everything from light control to window shades and the AVAIL (Audio-Visual Advanced Integrated Learning) system needed to be calibrated to his tablet.

Along with gaining control of the room, he also used this time to upload the entire semester’s workload. Syllabus, reading material, assignments and in-class presentations. It was all there, no one could claim they didn’t get it.

As the programs performed their tasks, Alec stood and walked over to the window. He couldn’t help but think about the vast differences between the real world and the one he had created earlier that morning. His vivid recollections of the desert made the general drabness of the coin seem even bleaker.
He looked out and watched the people traverse through their daily lives. They walked the tunnel systems from one gray metal building to the next, moving in hordes with others of the same tunic color. The whites were academics, greens were technical, reds were medical, blues were service, and rarely did they intermix.

Each building looked like the one on its left. They were metal boxes, three stories tall, and two windows centered on the second story on each side. A sign arched over the main entrance announcing its purpose. Five stairs bridged the gap between the walkway and the door. A palm scanner took its place as the locking mechanism and handle. All public buildings used handprint identification as a means to gain entrance. If you had a reason to be there, it let you in. If not, a swift kick might do the job; but, with a good enough reason, the building security team could do it too.

There were only two buildings with distinguishing characteristics on the Coin. The United Corporations, in the center of everything, and New Harvard, just left of center and where Alec currently stood. Both were built with multiple floors and towers, excessive windows and giant bays underneath the surface. The UC bays were used for water storage and purification. The ones at New Harvard were for weather emergencies or an attempt at survival in a coin collapse.

His eyes made their way to the United Corporations building in the center of the coin. It had the tallest tower and the one clock that everything else was set by. He watched as the minute hand jerked from one tick mark to the next on its way to the twelve. Class was about to start.

Alec returned to his seat in the back row and checked to see if his tablet operated the room. Stylus in hand, he reached for the icon controlling the window shades. Flat sheets of
metal slid down on a track, effectively removing the windows from the walls. Next, the lights. Less than an inch of movement on the five by seven touch screen brought about complete absence of light. A smile crossed his lips; it was just how he wanted to start class.

A moment or two passed and the first student entered the classroom. He quickly reached behind him and stood, frozen, holding the door to allow the hallway light to flood in. A second silhouette appeared at the door. The outline looked to the first student, still standing in the light, and slowly shook her head from side to side. She stepped out of the ring of light, but returned a moment later carrying a desk. Soon, the door was propped and both students had taken a seat.

It wasn’t long before the class was almost full and a variety of light conversation died down as the students made their way to the empty seats. Some took a few in the front, but most climbed halfway up the stairs to begin filling the lecture hall’s stadium seating. The last student entered, tripping over the desk and allowing the door to shut behind her, making the darkness complete.

Forty-two sets of eyes struggled to gain any sense of night vision. Tablet screens lit up as students docked them to their desks, desperate for some indication of what was going on. The chatter began again, but concerned this time. People asking friends, neighbors, what was going on and if they were in the right room. But, as suddenly as the darkness had taken over, it was beaten back by the introduction of a giant, rotating orb projected on the 3-D imager in the front of the class.

They watched as this orb, recognizable now as Earth, slowly morph. Land masses they were never aware of sank under the rising waters. The clouds thinned out and the water became crystalline in its blue color. More and more land masses disappeared, as did the
white caps at either pole. A few more rotations and silver dots started appearing in area that were once highly populated metropolises. Another rotation and less than fifty were spread out over the planet.

“Welcome to the Coin-Age, everyone.”

Several students jumped at Alec’s voice, they had become entranced with the simulation before them and most hadn’t even noticed the redheaded man in the back of the room. He stood, pulling his tablet out of its docking station in the process. A few deft motions with a stylus and the lights came back on, reducing the intensity of the globe up front.

“What you’ve just witnessed is a simulation of the last two hundred or so years of life on the planet Earth.” He moved from his spot in the back of the room. Taking each step slowly, deliberately, to the front of the room. It was so quite, you could hear the coin creak; they were hanging on his every word.

“There’s an old adage about needing to learn from your past or risk facing it again in the future. And, though I doubt any of our ancestors thought the future would hold mankind living on tiny metal platforms, I do believe that there are things we must comprehend from our past. We have to learn, ladies and gentlemen, mankind won’t survive another Happening.”

He let the silence wash over the room as he stepped towards the imager. Without slowing, he passed the equipment, turned it off, and continued to the lecturer’s desk on the right hand side of the main floor. Carefully, he slid his tablet into the professor docking station and tapped the screen a few more times. Satisfied this task had been completed, he grabbed a chair, pulled it to the middle of the floor and sat down.
“Now, for those of you who don’t know me, my name is Dr. Alec McCormack and this is Ecological Biology.”

With the lights back on and him standing in the front of the room, Alec was able to take a more thorough survey of his class. They were all in their newly acquired off-white tunics and pleated pants, the academic set. The new uniforms signaled to the rest of the coin that they were continuing their education. The roster said 42 of his students had docked their tablets, all present and accounted for.

“The purpose of this class is to cover the Earth’s original biological and ecological systems, The Happening, and everything that has led to our existence right here and now.” The students began shifting, slouching, stretching. He was aware of those three S’s. He was quickly losing the rapt attention he’d commanded only a few moments before. “But, rather than have me spend this time talking at you about things you already know, today will be an open forum. A free-for-all.” This announcement did little to quell the rapid loss of energy from the room.

Alec shifted and slouched a little in his own chair, watching them react to his actions. He raked his hand back through his short, curly hair before leaning forward and standing up again. The class responded accordingly, except for one student.

“Okay, new plan. You ask questions, and I won’t lecture at you for the remaining time. It doesn’t even have to be related to this class. Deal?” A few grumbles made their way through the classroom. This arrangement was much the same as the previous one, only this one actually relied on their participation. A point which someone understood as a tentative hand rose in the back left corner. “Yes, in the back.”
“Hi, um… do you really believe that human beings were better off before The Happening?”

“See, a good question and one that is even related to this class.” He directed his attention to the inquisitive student. “By the end of the semester, you’ll have your answer. Next?”

“Hey now, you said free-for-all.” The blond student in the front row turned to him. It was the first time he’d seen her move or make eye-contact since class had started. Her hair was back in a tight, high ponytail, accentuating her fine jawline. Alec could have sworn he’d seen her before.

“You’re right. I did.” He walked over to his desk, glancing at his tablet screen for a second to look at a seating chart. “But first, I want to ask you two, Chloe and Rich, what makes life on the Coins so great?”

“I never said it was.” Her response was terse, annoyed. She returned to her previous posture, only now chewing on the tip of her stylus as she avoided looking in anyone’s direction.

“Whatever.” Rich, however, was happy to share. “The Coins are great. On Old Earth, people had to fight to eat and survive. The weather got bad. Everything was dirty. Why would you subject yourself to that if you didn’t have to?”

“People got to eat more than meal bars and drink recycled water. They should be in water without it stripping off their skin. They had choices.” Chloe spoke towards the wall, but intense compassion rode every syllable.

“People died back then, too. Violence. Wars. Technology has stopped all that.”
“People die now, Rich.” Her eyes were fixated on his, an intense green beam that trapped him where he sat. “The United Corporations just doesn’t let you to know about it.”

“Yes, you’ve both made valid points.” This was getting to be too intense for a first day lecture. “Rich, you mentioned the benefit of technological advances. Anyone care to weigh in on this?”

“Our tablets are pretty great.” A female voice sounded from the back of the room, but this time on the right side. “I mean, everything I could ever need is right here.”

“Come on. Tablets? Really?” The woman’s neighbor wanted to debate her suggestion. “We have air filtrations systems giving us oxygen to breath and water systems filtering every ounce of water we use, over six million gallons a week. You can’t tell me that your tablet is more important than that.”

“So far, everyone, I have to give credit to Sam. Air and water, some of our basic necessities. Not going to make it long without those.” Alec could see the young man grin in his affirmation.

“Fine then, not tablets, but Acryllium. Everything on this coin that isn’t metal is made of acryllium. Without it, we’d all be naked.” She crossed her arms in determination, waiting for her own validation from Alec.

“You are mostly correct, Jennifer.” He could see her shoulder sink a little bit. “Acryllium is a very important substance to us, but it’s not a result of a technological advance. It was the by-product of an accident.”

Once again, Alec held the class’s attention, even Chloe seemed intrigued. This was one of those things the United Corporations conveniently forgot to mention.
“About one hundred and sixty years ago, the air purifiers were huge, inefficient machines that had to be located in every building. They could barely clean enough air to be useful and they put out a thick sludge-like by-product. One day, a massive wave hit a Coin, tossing the acidic water right into a bin of this by-product and only one man saw what happened. The two compounds mixed forming a hard, clear substance. Well, Orsen Armstrong had been with Public Works for twenty-eight years and he could only imagine what this could eventually mean. The United Corporations heard about his discovery and paid him off. He became the richest man on any of the collective Coins, provided he didn’t tell anyone.”

“Wait, you’re telling us that a blue-shirt made the biggest discovery of the Coin-Age?” Rich was up to sharing again.

“Rich. One of the main necessities of a functioning society is courtesy between its members. Having a white tunic does not make you superior. There will be no discussion on that. Everyone plays a vital role in keeping us all alive.”

“Um, Dr. McCormack?” Chloe asked. “If Orson Armstrong agreed to not tell anyone the secret to acryllium, how did you find out?”

Alec opened his mouth, retort primed on his lips, only a painfully shrill noise overtook the pristine silence of his breath. The earsplitting indicator of instantaneous shutdown. It was an inclement weather drill, an annual, first-day-of-class event that always seemed to impose itself on the better half of Alec’s lecture.

The room darkened, leaving power only for the emergency running lights between each row of seats. All running for the safety of the sub-floor compartments on the main floor.
“This is a weather emergency. Please proceed to your nearest safety compartment.”
Synchronized, battery-powered announcements began repeating mono-tone instructions.
Every personal tablet flashed the same.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s not panic, the sub-floor door is up by me.” Alec’s words were lost on the students. Their actions were merely a reflex, brought about by years of habitual training. This was nothing new. Aside from this drill, there were at least six more throughout the year.

One by one, the students crept into the tiny shelter. Wedged in shoulder to shoulder, suffocated by their own body heat. No power meant no fans and no air circulation. A second set of announcements began. “Oxygen conservation is a necessity. No speaking inside the safe bay.”

Alec counted off each student in succession, one to forty-two, hiding the quiver in his voice behind every digit. It was his turn. Tablet in hand, he shut the door, sealing them in; an action that sent notification to the United Corporations that the drill procedure had been followed.

“Oxygen conservation is a necessity. No speaking inside the safe bay.”

Blue flood lights gave the safe bay an ethereal glow as each student connected their tablets to the wall – a monitoring system giving last known locations in the event of an emergency. Alec did the same and took his place at the head of the pod. He watched in awe as his students relied on their silent communication. Arms flailed and gestures flew in rapid progression, building the identities and verbs of a complete thought.

Snapping fingers brought Alec’s attention away from the blur of phalanges only to mock him with more signing. He had learned a long time ago that this foreign language was
going to plague him. Chloe had wanted to converse and all he could do was ignorantly shrug. The silence continued while Alec mentally ticked off every second until his release.

Seconds became minutes and the minutes continued to multiply, officially destroying what was left of his first day lecture. A bead of sweat slowly trailed down Alec’s forehead, finally collecting on the tip of his nose. It sat, waiting to drip, delighting in its torment of a man debating the lesser of two evils. Moving to wipe it on his sleeve would break the hydrogen bonds of his agony, the moisture drawn away through the artificial fibers of his shirt. Or, it could draw attention to the perspiration being more than just an indicator of mounting heat and humidity. He sat with the drip, its clinginess prevailing despite an array of facial tics, to keep his students from noticing one thing that would be worse.

He was scared.

The voice of Alec’s personal angels announced an all clear message over the emergency system speakers. It congratulated New Harvard on a job well done, all safety doors had been shut in an acceptable amount of time.

Alec reached above his head and opened the hatch. Faster than he would have thought possible, his students piled out, drenched in sweat and ridding themselves of any claustrophobic anxiety. It was just another necessary evil of life on the Coins.

Everyone sat in silence for a moment in, what Alec hoped, contemplation of the mortality of their own lives. Though that time was brief and he could hear the tell-tale whirl of personal tablets being shut down. Class dismissed. He left the room as he chuckled to himself, “Out of the frying pan…” The elevator doors shut behind him.

* * * * * *
The desert was all so real, so definable. But, in an instant, it was gone again. Alec couldn’t wrap his mind around what he’d experienced. Was it real? Was it just a dream? Mikey explained to Alec that the images came from his own mind and that his world was much more vivid than most. He had seen the video from the room’s three cameras but all those showed was a lunatic walking in place and grabbing at things that didn’t exist. In fact, the only measurable change made to the room during his journey was the increase in temperature, simulating a desert environment.

“Trust me… everything you saw, felt, smelled, heard. It was all in your head.” Mikey tried to explain and, although Alec was a smart man, this was beyond his capabilities. “It is all done with a synthetic hallucinogen.” He picked up a small vial, a viscous blue liquid coated the inside like sludge.

“It is completely harmless and has no side effects. Actually, it’s made of the same components as the contraception in your water. And, it only works as long as the user is on a constant supply. As soon as you’re off it, the realistic environment you’ve created is gone. That is why I use it in a gaseous form, it gets processed by your body much, much faster.” Alec’s face paled slightly as he watched the vial. He questioned the safety of the drug, wishing he had known about it before undertaking his experimental journey into the desert.

“Are you sure I can’t overdose on this stuff? How do you know it won’t hurt me?” Mikey set down the vial and put his hands in front of him, interlacing his fingers. “It’s okay, Alec. I’ve been working with someone. An expert, really. I didn’t tell you what I was doing and I’m sorry about that, but I needed this to be a true and blind experiment. I needed to know if the system could hold up to your expectations and expertise.”
“Who?”

“Who?” His eyebrows angled down as confusion crept across his face. “What are you talking about?”

“Who are you working with? I want to ask about him, make sure he knows what he’s talking about.”

“Alec, I can’t tell you. Please just trust me when I say that they’re one of the best in the business with as much at stake here as me.” Mikey got up to refill his drink. He opted for the water dispenser and five-gallon jug rather than the smaller, personal-sized bottles that Alec preferred. He looked back at Alec while he filled his glass and met his eyes for a moment before he continued. “I hope that you know I would never do something that I thought could cause you, or anyone, the slightest amount of harm.”

“I know, you’re just asking me to take a lot on faith and that isn’t something I do readily.” Alec wasn’t fully prepared to let this conversation end. He needed to fully grasp what had happened. “You said I found a glitch. What did you mean by that?”

“Oh, that.” Mikey returned, cup in hand, and turned a screen that faced them in their chairs. He fiddled with the switches, watching Alec’s figure on the screen to find the right place to stop the image. “Okay… There. See, you turn your head and look down behind you.” He tapped his finger against the screen to emphasize the exact moment he was referring to. “Do you remember what you were doing?”

Alec cocked his head to the left and scrunched his eyes. Mentally, he was replaying the whole experience. His eyebrows shot up and he smiled. “It’s silly, actually. I was, um, looking for my footprints. Why?”
Mikey returned the pleasant expression and added a slight chuckle. “I figured as much.” He took a drink. “You were the fourth person to run this simulation. The first two never bothered to see where they were coming from, they just continued on without any desire to see what was happening behind them. The third noticed the lack of footprints, but accepted it. I knew you wouldn’t let that go, not in something that was so real. I needed to know what would happen so I could figure out how to fix the program.”

“Wait, consider this the old man in me, but I still don’t see what my not seeing footprints had to do with your program shutting down. Put it in freshman’s terms, please.” Mikey enjoyed seeing the torment on his former professor’s face. He wondered how many times a day Alec gazed at such an expression.

“Let me break it down for you, doc.” The smile that crossed Alec’s face told him that he, too, saw the humor in a former student having to explain something to him. “This program runs on the user’s willing ability to suspend disbelief. The computer is constantly scanning the user’s body for vital information. After the initial increase in adrenalin, the user relaxes until he or she realizes that something isn’t right. At that point, the computer identifies the state of disbelief and overrides the program, thereby shutting it all down.”

Alec stared at Mickey, slowly shaking his head back and forth. “Okay, and that means what?”

“Simply, if you stop believing in what you are seeing, it won’t work anymore.”

“And the lack of footprints made me not believe?”

“You saw that there were no prints behind you and your mind rejected the scenario. You would no longer be living the scenario and the hallucinogen is not potent enough to produce a world without the help of the imagers. Reality takes over again.”
“So, what happens when it becomes so real that I can’t ‘not believe’? Or, what if the computer doesn’t override and shut down the imagers?”

“Alec, you worry too much.”

* * * * *

A tiny bell brought Alec out of his extended day-dream. The sound was the indicator that he could now step out of the tiny box that brought him six stories up from where he started. He had replayed the conversation with Mikey over and over in his head, but it never fully made sense to him. What he did know, though, was that he wanted to be there again. He needed to relive the sand and the heat, even if just one more time. Reading about it would never be enough. And he was more than a little ashamed in himself for his own desire to experience it again.

In a vain attempt to get his mind onto other tasks, Alec continued down the hall and headed to his office. He was working on his fourth book and was excited to get it done. This was, by far, his most personal work to date and he was anxious to begin the lecture circuit. It was the only time he was eligible for Coin-to-Coin travel.

In his last book, *Cause and Effect: The Evolution of The Happening*, Alec followed the progression of the planet through The Happening. His work was academically accepted but caused many people to question his sanity. Enough evidence existed to prove what survival was like, but there was a school of thought that believed it had to have been a primitive lifestyle. Everyone had grown accustomed to the sterility of their metal environment and the safety of their holo-animals.
It was a common belief amongst his peers that life was better this way and that Alec was only a radical trying to stir up trouble. And, from time to time, people had been known to question the propriety in letting him continue to teach. But, enrollment in his classes rose with each of his books or commentaries. He had become too valuable to fire and instead, was given a grant to continue his writing. More students meant more notoriety for New Harvard and if he brought in the students… well that was all they needed to keep him on board.

Alec entered his office and grabbed his meal bar marked, “Day 6, #4.” He stood, staring out the window, and masticated the tasteless nutrition. It was a non-committal view in Alec’s opinion. Some days it was beautiful, others it made him loathe society as a whole. New Harvard was on the southern side of the coin and from six stories up, he could see the water. It also gave him a vantage point to see metal. Every square inch of their mile-wide existence, metal. He saw smaller buildings dwarfed by the enormity of the campus and the acryllium tunnels facilitating the ebb and flow of pedestrian traffic. The United Corporations building laid tentacles of tunnels out in every direction from the center, its fingers in every pie.

One of the four oxygen processing plants was in his line of site as well. A large, cone-shaped, white building. Fresh air released out the top and the waste resulting from the process discreetly dropped below, probably into the ocean.

He felt his attitude swaying closer and closer to the bitter and angry view and instead he moved to his desk and pressed the flashing button on his projected messaging unit. The first message was from a woman he saw on a weekly basis. Her computer-generated image was a little too perfect and her navy and red, United Corporations, ball cap was a little too
bright. She was the automated message sent to remind those who, in the past, had forgotten
to pick up their supply of meal bars and recycled water. He deleted her before she reached
the third word of her programmed patronization.

The next message came as somewhat of a surprise to him. The cherubic woman
looking at him was all too familiar and her curly red hair mimicked his own. Quite
exuberantly, she began to sing.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you.” He skipped ahead in the message,
noting the continual bob in her head as she sang. Once the grand gestures stopped, he hit
play to see what the rest of the message from his aunt contained. As he listened, he tried to
shake off the odd feeling that came with forgetting your own birthday. He was pleased to
hear that all was well with them and they told him that they loved him and missed him. They
asked him when he would be able to visit again as well, but explained that they weren’t
holding their breath. They knew that Alec’s life revolved around his work and his students
and that getting away would be hard. Maybe with the next book tour, she suggested and
crossed her fingers.

He decided that tonight he would go out and celebrate. He figured it was the least he
could do after forgetting his own birthday. He turned on his phone imager and pressed a few
buttons. He sat and stared at the image projection of little children arguing over meal bar
flavors while he waited for a response.

A blond woman wearing a white lab coat answered on the fifth ring. She yawned
before responding.

“SMA Genetics, this is… Oh, hi Dr. McCormack.” A coy smile brightened the
woman’s exhausted features. “I bet you’re looking for Kristen, huh? I’ll go get her.” She
winked as she hit the hold button, putting Alec into a commercial loop. A yellow and red logo panned from right to left across his imaging screen. A deep voice proudly began citing the wonderful luxuries that SMA was responsible for during the last 50 years. On top of that list was the noted, “New Meal Bars for a New You” campaign. They’d found a way to cater to those with specific, United Corporations sanctioned nutritional needs. They made bars for diabetics. Bars for those with cancer. Even bars for those who felt like giving up on life. Aside from SMA saying the bars were better for you, there was no proof they helped, only extra compensation for an invention catering to the betterment of the human population.

The message had just begun to mention the many non-profit organizations SMA contributes to when Kristen came on the line. “Hey, Alec. What’s going on?” She was running her fingers through her slightly tangled mess of brunette locks when he looked at her.

“Actually, I was getting ready to compliment you guys on the modesty of your commercials. Careful you don’t break your arms now.” A look crossed Kristen’s face. She had no idea what he was talking about. “Sorry, it’s an old saying about-”

“That’s good.” Alec continually missed her expression divulging she could only handle so much of his infatuation with the twentieth century. “What do you need?”

“Actually, I wanted to know what you were up to tonight. See if you wanted to go out to dinner.” He could tell by her tone that it had been a long day. Hopefully, they would be able to relax over a nice gourmet meal bar. He wanted to surprise her with an imitation chocolate bar for dessert. She had been so stressed out lately.
“Dinner? What’s the occasion?” A noise sounded in the background, pulling Kristen out of view for a moment. “Look, I don’t know, Alec. Things are really chaotic for me right now. Actually, can you just stay at your place tonight?”

Alec wavered on telling her why he wanted to go out. “I know you’re busy, I just haven’t seen you unless you’re asleep and-”

“I’m coming.” Kristen yelled off screen. “Sorry, babe, I gotta go.”

“It’s my birthday.” Alec divulged to the blank screen.
Chapter 2

“Scientific advancements were relied upon for the survival of the human race. Basic needs had to be met and the worse the weather got, the more vital those needs became. Shelter, once the coins were established, was the easy one. The process of water filtration was strenuous, but had been established and perfected well before it became a necessity. Air was tricky. No green plants meant no photosynthesis and no carbon dioxide/oxygen exchange. Fortunately, air filtration was not an unknown science, only inefficient in its early years. Food was the problem. Small stockpiles had been calculated in the weight restriction for each coin, but everyone knew it wouldn’t last forever. Only with the development of the molecular generator/replicater was this crisis averted. The ability to alter atoms on the molecular level set the building blocks in place to manufacture peptide chains, amino acids, glucose, lipids, carbohydrates. In essence, the basis of nutrition.

Cause and Effect: The Evolution of The Happening

Kristen turned off the screen and followed the voice calling out to her. She walked through the maze of offices and tiny lab rooms until she found the technician that needed her assistance. She caught sight of a platinum blond ponytail weaving its way through the cubicles.

“Dr. Johnson.” They met at her office door and both stepped inside. “I’m glad I found you, I didn’t know if you were in or not.”

“I know I’m not around as much as I used to be.” Her eyes were on her assistant despite something being forced into her hands. “I didn’t think you’d be here yet, though.”

“Yeah, my class is in the next building so I just came right over.” Chloe drew her attention to the digital screen she had just given her. “I got my results back. What do you think this means?”
Kristen took a moment to actually look at the device in her hand. Several tiny bars crossed the black background in individual rows. A smile crossed Kristen’s face as she realized exactly what all the commotion was about.

“Well, ain’t that slicker than snot-” Kristen groaned, annoyed that Alec’s obsession had become intertwined in her own vocabulary. Particularly that saying. She saw the strange look on her assistant’s face and decided to pretend she hadn’t just said that.

“This is only your third try. I can’t believe this.” She stared at the screen, focusing intently on the read-out. “Without doing any calculations, I’d have to say there is at least an eighty percent match here.”

“Eighty-four point two percent. If I did the math right.”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was overly impressed with this, Chloe.” The girl beamed knowing that was as much of a compliment as Kristen ever gave. “It needs to be duplicated, start to finish. To know that it isn’t some false positive or random fluke.”

“Oh, of course.” The flattery she basked in just a moment earlier now carried the devastating ping of disappointment. Though, she knew it wasn’t personal, just procedure. “I can have it done for you tonight if you’d like me to stay late. Or I can run the PCR overnight and have them in the morning. It’s your choice.”

Kristen saw a lot of herself in Chloe, and it wasn’t a comforting thought. This was a project Kristen had given her at the start of her master’s studies eight months ago. She never intended for it to work, or for Chloe to get so involved with it. Enthusiasm got the better of her and she’d been irresponsible in encouraging the girl.

All this had started as a side project for Kristen. She needed some background information collected and a few basic tests run, but could never find the time needed to do it.
When Chloe became part of her team, she seized the opportunity for an extra pair of hands, allowing her to do the work that Kristen hadn’t. But now, with the progress she’d made, Kristen knew Chloe would turn this into thesis material. It’s the same thing she would have done if their positions were reversed.

“You know, with your classes and everything, I would really hate for you to get behind on your studies. But, you should be really proud of your accomplishment. I’ll put a note in your file.”

“I’ll be proud when I see corn growing.”

“Chloe, it’s really good that you’re passionate, but don’t get too involved in this.”

She could see the girl deflate more and more with every word that came out of her mouth. And knew Chloe would never understand why she was doing it. “Besides, I’m going to need some help getting the OCD bar through United Corporations evaluation.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“All I’m saying is that you got a lot of really great experience with the corn research. Now it’s time to move on.”

“I have to go.” Chloe left Kristen’s office calmly and professionally, but hurt. She had been sitting on the project for several months and it had only been these last few weeks that she took an interest. Kristen hadn’t thought she’d get enough accomplished to be a concern, but once she began running preliminary tests and results came back, it was as if she’d became somewhat obsessed with the idea. She was just like Kristen had been, young and ambitious, and it was going to kill her career as well if she wasn’t careful.

Kristen saw taking Chloe off the project as the only responsible choice open to her. She didn’t know if Chloe would ever understand, but at least this way she could sleep at
night. But still, her conscience ate at her. When they sent Chloe to work with her, she thought she’d found a loop hole. She could do her required meal bar work, and Chloe could do her research. She firmly grasped the possibilities within this granule of inspiration and finally found a like mind to infect with its potential.

The idea had been two years in the making. To recreate a solid and true source of nutrition – corn. It was simple enough and they had all the chemical components required, she just needed time to make it work. If she could re-synthesize a corn seed, and have the genetic proof to back it up, she could petition for use of some of the few remaining tons of dirt that the United Corporations had earmarked for research.

When she initially told her bosses that she wanted to develop an engineered corn seed, they had outright called her crazy. They couldn’t see that with corn readily available, there could be a basis to the food chain. Corn could lead to wheat and oats. Those could lead to cows, sheep and pigs. It could go on and on up the ladder until everything ever lost in The Happening was restored and humans would never have to eat another horrible meal bar again. They laughed, but she was used to it.

Years ago, she was almost denied the PhD she’d earned twice over. The doctoral council at New Harvard told her that her ideas could never be put into practice. They didn’t accept her dissertation on a method for re-diversifying the Coins. She knew about the frozen zoo at SMA and believed she could create a simulated womb. It was her plan to use the current artificial insemination techniques to bring back the animals that were lost to them so many ages ago.

Her thesis expressly revolved around the return of land mammals. She had almost completed her spiel about how the world could become whole again and that science was far
enough along to promote life on the metal disks when a few of the council members stopped her narration. She turned off the projector and looked back at them once the lights were turned on. They were laughing so hard some had tears in their eyes.

Instead of the awe she had expected, she was told she had nothing new to offer the world of scientific research. They went on and on, telling her how this was every young scientist’s pipe dream. They told her that she was wrong, pointing out that the greatest minds (some of them at that table) had tried and failed, and there was no way she could do better.

However, they did need a new meal bar researcher for SMA Genetics and they would overlook her ambitiously foolish ideas if she would accept the job and help develop new types of meal bars. She accepted the job, but wasn’t proud of it.

In the months following, all but one man heckled and teased her about her research. He had been silent and reserved during her dissertation defense. And, though he did not partake in the torment the others gave her, he didn’t stop them either. One day, he came to her and simply put a single question before her to answer. He did not ask the technical questions that everyone else posed, he just stared at her and simply asked, “Why?”

That one question nagged at her. Why? Essentially, that was all he had wanted to know. And the only answer she could come up with was, because I can. But that simple answer was no longer sufficient. She needed some type of resolution with Dr. McCormack. It was the only way she could continue her research.

She and Alec met for lunch the next day. They discovered that they had similar goals, just different ways of accomplishing them. Soon, the discussion faded from the topic of her work and their lunches turned into dinners. Dinners became sleepovers and extended weekends together. She hadn’t planned on falling in love with Alec. Actually, it was more
of a burden than anything else. There was such a large part of her life she couldn’t share with him. Their discussions had already told her that he would never completely understand what she was doing.

It was for that reason, more than anything else that kept her at her own place during the three and a half years of their courtship. He was getting antsy and she knew it. He continually brought up the idea of moving in together and even marriage but she not-so-coyly changed the subject. Up to now, he had always let it go but something was changing in him. He turned 33 today, and every day he became more and more interested in the future, their future. All he’d asked for was dinner and she couldn’t even give him that, not yet.

Her current project was complicated, scientifically and ethically. Alec would never accept it, but experience told Kristen it would be easier to ask for his forgiveness than to try to explain why. If Alec found out about her experiments before she could get her embryo to come full term, she might as well agree to give one of them up. And that was a decision she couldn’t make.

* * * * *

Alec entered his solemn studio apartment. He had been staying at Kristen’s and had almost forgotten just how dreary his own place was. Half the main room served as his bedroom. The space-saver bed was still in its couch-like position. Alec didn’t see the need to shift it into a bed when he was the only one sleeping there. The cover was still crumpled from the last time he slept there. He stared, questioningly, at a two-week old, half-eaten meal bar that took center stage on his coffee table. Curiosity got the better of him and he picked it
up, played with it, smelled it and eventually took a small bite. A pucker-like expression crossed his face and he spat it out. It tasted exactly the same as it had two-weeks ago and he wondered if there was an expiration date on those things.

There was little in the way of furniture and almost everything he had held books of one sort or another. Books, in general, were extremely rare. Very few made it up to the Coins and were then considered obsolete once their content had been entered into the United Corporations database. General opinion stated that paper was useless, but Alec reveled in the smell of them. His books were his one possession.

After relaxing a moment, Alec stepped out of his work-sanctioned clothes and pulled out a pair of pants from last week’s laundry allotment. Acryllium fibers wrinkle horribly and he did his best to shake them out, but to no avail. The majority of them stayed. It didn’t really matter that much and he put them on anyway. It was nice to be home.

He wasn’t going to let Kristen’s inability to accompany him destroy his plans for the evening and he headed to Doc’s. He had never been to the restaurant before but many of his students recommended it. As the reliability of genetically engineered food had increased, there was much less of a risk than there had been. It was rare that he felt brave enough to do something so outlandish but he couldn’t stomach the thought of eating another one of those forsaken meal bars on his birthday. His meal would be expensive, almost a week’s worth of credits, but after his morning’s ride through the twentieth century, he wasn’t ready to give it up yet. He was going to have pizza for dinner.

About eight years ago, several different types of “real food” restaurants popped up all around the campus. Alec figured that students were probably more likely to eat engineered food than the general population. Personally, he decided a long time ago that he would never
enter an eatery that forced him to sign a waiver before ordering. And, that seemed to be the case with most everyone else because, within a year, all but one business went under. Doc’s seemed to be the real deal and, as of yet, no one had died from eating there.

He walked into the dimly lit joint and his fears suddenly resurfaced. He was used to the sterile and clean environment that encompassed New Harvard, but this was as far from that as he could imagine. The metal floor was covered by fabric and very cushy to walk on. He tried not to think about all the germs that could get caught in that floor covering. Instead of glistening silver walls, there were streaks of color on them and each booth seemed to claim its own color pattern on the wall. After surveying his surroundings, he picked the one that most appealed to his senses. He walked over and sat in the booth surrounded by the gray walls.

Within a minute, a man arrived holding a glass of re-water for him.

“This your first time here?” He set the water down in front of Alec.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“Only the first-timers pick the grey. It gives them a sense of security. You can only try so many new things at once.” He pulled a stylus from behind his ear and a tiny ordering tablet from his back pocket. “What can I get for you?”

Alec looked around and realized that he was the oldest person in the restaurant.

“Well, what would you recommend?”

“For a first-timer, I’d go with a simple medley. It’s real simple: the tomato paste-like sauce and some engi-veggie paste all topped with our very popular ‘I can’t believe it’s not cheese’ cheese product.”
The thought of cheese intrigued him. It had only ever been a myth. Alec took in his surroundings one more time. A large part of him wanted to bolt from here, get back to a place that made sense, but the pizza did sound good and he could smell one cooking in the kitchen. Finally, his stomach won the battle. “Sounds good to me. I’ll take the one-serving size.” An overwhelming feeling of accomplishment swept over him and he couldn’t get the sheepish grin off his face. He believed this was the bravest thing he had ever done.

His mouth salivated as he waited for his pizza to finish cooking. He surprised himself with the knowledge that an imitation cheese product seemed appealing. He never believed he would crave a mass of cheese product, but wanted it nonetheless. After a few minutes, his single serving, simple medley arrived. The imitation cheese product draped over the engi-veggie paste like a blanket. He picked up a slice and watched the cheese string from his piece to the rest of the pie. He inhaled the collage of scents, the mixture of – what he believed to be – tomatoes and basil. This was something he would never forget.

He finished his pizza and placed his palm against the built-in scanner in the table. The print served as the verification needed to transfer credits from his account to the pizzeria. There was a satisfaction in his belly that he hadn’t felt, ever. He wanted only to lie down and revel in this new feeling, but he had to walk there first. Entering his apartment, he dropped his coat by the door and kicked off his shoes. He walked over to the couch and plopped himself down in the darkness. Just as he was contemplating his day he heard an unusual noise coming from the only other room in his apartment, the bathroom.

“Hello?” He called into the darkness. “Is someone here?” He reached behind him and turned on the light.
“Happy Birthday, Baby.” Kristen responded. “Sorry I missed dinner.” He watched her slowly step from her hiding space. It had been a very long time since he had seen her in anything other than scrubs and her lab coat, but he needed no reminder of how she looked in this dress. One would think that a girl who spent the majority of her life in a lab would have a hard time on heels, but she conquered them, just like everything else she attempted. Her skirt swayed with each step, swishing around her knees. It wasn’t until she was only a few feet from him that he noticed she was carrying something, a strange bouquet of flowers that he had never seen before. The look on his face must have expressed his confusion. “I created them, for you, at the lab. I didn’t know what else I could get you. You seem to have everything you want.” She held out the flowers for his inspection. The inner most petals were those of a rose, but the outer ones resembled a traditional carnation.

“They’re beautiful, really. What do you call them?” He rotated the vase in his hands, trying to get a different perspective. They really were beautiful flowers. The reds blended nicely with the yellows and pinks. Each one seemed to have an unnatural shimmer about it.

“I don’t know yet.” She walked over and sat down beside him on the couch. “I haven’t really thought about it. But, enjoy them, they’re only going to be around for another thirty minutes or so. The chemicals used to make the color causes the acryllium to become unstable and they turn to dust.”

“Either way, they’re beautiful.” He set the flowers on the table. “You really should come up with a name, because they are going to make you famous and everyone will want them.” He reached out and fingered the leaves. They were cloth-like and not at all like he imagined they should feel. But, he couldn’t stop smiling, she had never shared any part of her work with him before.
“Well, do you have any ideas?”

“I have a few.” The glint in his eye said he was done thinking appreciating the flowers.

“Oh, do you now?” She leaned in and gently kissed him, but he pulled back.

“Look, I’ve been thinking about some things.” She reached over and placed a finger over his lips.

“Later.”

* * * * *

Kristen allowed her body to relax a little as she listened to Alec. His steady, rhythmic breathing lulled her into a refuge that almost put her to sleep. She reveled in the momentary serenity but it was past time to get back to work. Slowly, she positioned the blanket between Alec’s body and her own, not wanting to wake him from lack of body heat.

She padded softly as she gathered her clothes, backtracking through their slightly ravenous encounter while turning his futon from couch to bed. Once her dress was found, she journeyed back to the bathroom where she’d stashed the rest of her things for an easy get-a-way. Back in her dress, Kristen moved around the bed on her way out, but stopped at the doorway and watched. He rolled on to his back; his arms straight down his sides and the blanket bunched around his waist. This soldier-like sleeping position giving a clear definition to his personality. Specifically, the impossibly high standards he sets for himself. Very few people could even begin to contemplate Alec’s inner workings. It had taken
Kristen more than two years to understand his thought process and even now it was easy for her to get lost.

She stepped over to him, pressed her lips gently to his forehead and mouthed “I love you” against his skin.

* * * * *

He felt the sand in his hands and the sun on his back. His mouth became parched and he searched for water. He struggled to climb over the dunes, dripping in sweat and buzzards swarming above him. A foot gave way under the unsteady ground and he tumbled down the hill.

When he looked behind him he saw that the glitch had been fixed, he could see his tracks. There was no way out now. He created an environment so real that he couldn’t get out of it. There was nothing fake about this world and he couldn’t convince his mind to abort the system. He was stuck.

Alec woke, gasping for breath and panicked. The fluffy comforter was tightly entangled around his legs and torso from his delirious dreaming. Once he unraveled the bed sheets, he realized that something was missing. Kristen was no longer beside him. In fact, she was no where around. Between the dream and Kristen’s disappearing act, he was unnerved. It was still three hours before his 6 AM alarm would go off, but he knew that any attempt at sleep would be futile.

He stood and smacked the tiny button on the wall responsible for converting his couch to a bed and back again. With the bed out of the way, he could reach his research
station. All the information for his fourth book was stored there electronically, but he needed it for a different reason. Alec placed his right palm flat against the scanning surface to verify his authority to use the station and access New Harvard’s research files. He needed to learn more about his experience in the holo-attraction and about the synthetic drug he had been given. They swore there were no side effects, but there was no way his dream wasn’t enhanced. He had to have information so he could face Mikey. Nothing was worse than going into a battle unarmed.

* * * * *

Kristen got back to her house shortly after midnight. Alec was a notoriously sound sleeper and she wouldn’t have a hard time sneaking away. If she couldn’t have gotten away from him and back to her garage before dawn, she wouldn’t have gone, but the guilt from missing his birthday was too intense. There was so much of her life that he didn’t know was possible, let alone think to ask about. Fortunately, she caught him before he started talking about their future and other things she wasn’t ready to discuss and wore him out before he remembered to bring it up again.

Getting out of her dress was a lot easier than putting it on, she noticed. Much less tugging and pulling and the zipper moves much easier going down than up. No fear of pinching skin that way. She hung the dress in her closet and marveled at its charms. No matter what was going on, if she put that dress on and dolled herself up the teensiest bit, guys seemed to forget about anything they wanted to say. Even if they were mad. No, especially if they were mad. Every woman needed a dress like that, she decided. But she also knew
they were very hard to come by. This one had been passed down from her grandmother’s grandmother. Few people even knew what true silk felt like anymore, let alone owned something made of it.

Clothing held very little variation. Kristen knew that in the past, what someone wore was an extension of who they were. They had different styles for different days and clothes to both dress up and dress down. They were comfortable and moved with the wearer, unlike the current wardrobe availability.

There were basically two styles of clothing for adults—working and academic. Despite the amount of schooling she had, her clothing fell into the “working” category of straight-legged, drawstring pants and a V-neck, short sleeved tunic-like top. It slightly irked Kristen that she wore the same clothing as someone cleaning sewage for the Public Works Office. When she was seen outside the lab, people would assume she had not scored high enough on her personal achievement test to attend college, let alone be a genetic researcher. She knew it was petty to feel that way, but she couldn’t help it. All she wanted was a little credit.

Back in her work clothes, her skin itched. No matter how soft they got the acryllium fibers, it was nothing compared to the feel of silk. She was prepared for her body to protest the synthetic fabric, work had to be done. She’d get over it.

Her house wasn’t large, not by any means, but it sufficed. The two-bedroom, one bath spread gave her enough room to sleep and have a study for her research. The house was tattered and some spots on the walls were beginning to rust, but none of that was why she moved here. This house had a garage, a garage that set up nicely as a lab.
Tablet in hand, Kristen made a beeline for the back door. As she passed the food storage room, she grabbed her next meal bar, knowing that she wouldn’t be back until well into the afternoon. Having it on hand might remind her to eat. She entered the garage and shut the door behind her, then turned the two deadbolts and a crank handle that pushed another bar through both sides of the door. She turned around and faced a door frame, but there was solid steel where the door should have been. An electronic keypad beeped as a message appeared on its digital display. “Please Place Hand On Scanner.” It repeated over and over again. Finally, Kristen had enough things settled and reached for the scanner with her right hand. As the machine read handprint, the door in front of her began to dissolve. This was the final lock. As she passed through the wavy remains of the steel door, it scanned her body and everything else she brought with her.

The insta-door was another one of her designs that no one believed would work. She figured out how to manipulate the molecules in certain metals, forcing them to rearrange their molecular structure and create an opening, at least momentarily. She was now, for lack of a better description, in a completely sealed metal box.

A quick glance around the room let her take a mental inventory to assure to herself that no one entered her space while she was gone. When finally convinced that the sensitivity of her experiments had not been compromised, she allowed herself to relax just a little. She connected her tablet to her research computer and uploaded the information about the corn from work. With the amount of equipment that had amassed in her garage over the years, she could do a majority of the analysis from home. And that would allow her to keep an eye on the incubation process that was underway.
Tubes and sensors were connected to the pliable bag suspended in the middle of the clear shell. A nutrient-rich fluid was continuously cycled through the tubes, giving the fetus its much needed food and oxygen. This broth was Kristen’s success, her own creation. For years, scientists had been unable to create an artificial womb. The thought forced a tiny grin from her lips.

Her years as a grad student led to this very moment. Her experience with genetic manipulation and cell growth was all for this very purpose. Kristen was always told that her ideas were theoretically correct but would never work in practice. She took a moment to do her na-na na-na boo-boo dance, aimed at those who doubted her, and stared at the glass container. She watched the incubator, its whirs and beeps the only soundtrack, caring for her creation. What was once a mass of cells smaller than a pinhead, was now a fetus with distinguishable limbs and the quickening beat of a tiny heart.

Only 28 hours to go.
Chapter 3

“Before The Happening, humans had become completely reliant on their digital media. In the rush to reach higher ground, many servers and computers had to be left behind and all the information they carried was destroyed in the floods. It is this reason that all digital information captured now is uploaded to the satellite servers. What was once a military defense system now held everything about someone from birth to death. Almost anything could be found, if you knew where to look.

*Cause and Effect: The Evolution of The Happening*

By the time dawn had rolled around, Alec was primed for a fight. With the help of the advanced New Harvard search engine, he discovered the “synthetic hallucinogen” was a little more than Mikey let on. He’d found a few papers discussing it and discovered it was created from the same components as the male contraception the United Corporations put in their water. Everything he read, which wasn’t much, reported this drug was still in a test phase and commented on various reproductive side effects including potential sterilization. Generally speaking, Mikey hadn’t lied, but the omission concerned him greatly. He knew this drug was responsible for the desert world he felt within the walls of the test room, but what he wasn’t sure of was what the final cost would be.

Around 8:30, Alec’s patience had worn out. He pounded on Mikey’s office door in what was probably the most violent fit he’d had in his life. “Mikey!” A few more strikes on the door. “Mikey, open up. We have to talk.” He paused long enough to hear a dead bolt shift out of the door frame. As the door opened, Alec could see that Mikey lived here as well. The holo-designer’s portly body was accentuated in his ensemble of underclothes.
“Dr. McCormack? Is that you?” Without his glasses, he had to squint against the harsh lights in the hall. He scratched his scalp, then down the side of his face and finally ended as he covered his mouth to yawn. “What can I do for you, Doc?” His arms reached over his head in one final stretch, lifting his t-shirt and bearing a little more of his stomach than Alec ever cared to see. The tiny spectacle forced the majority of his anger to slip away.

“What did you do to me?” The comment slipped out faster and slightly meaner than Alec had anticipated. “Look, it’s just… you told me there would be no side effects.” This comment seemed to get Mikey’s attention. His head perked up and he cocked it slightly to the left. He was no longer squinting, but staring directly at him, his jaw slack.

“Come in.”

He stepped out of the way, allowing Alec the chance to get past him before he turned to shut and rellock the door. “I’m gonna go get dressed. Have a seat, I’ll be back in a minute.” He turned down a side hall that Alec hadn’t known was there. Once Mikey was out of sight, he walked into the main office, sat down at the desk and tried to regain his composure. A nervous twitch had grown overnight and he had to hold his own hands to keep them from shaking. He paced the room trying to stay calm. As he passed Mikey’s desk, he bumped into the computer forcing the screen to light up. On his monitor was an image of a desert. A closer inspection proved to make him more unsteady, a feat he had not thought possible. The images were from his experience in the holo-room. It was the desert, exactly as he had created it. He linked his tablet to the computer and began to download the first of several images.

Mikey entered the room looking only slightly better than he had answered the door. He had only added a pair of khaki colored pants, the kind with multiple pockets, and his
glasses to the mix. He still had a massive case of bed head and scruff that was only a few days from being a full beard. Alec couldn’t trust him, he knew that now. He took great caution in asking his next question.

“Where did you get this?” His shaky hand was pointed at the monitor. “Where did this come from?” Mikey’s brown orbs darted from Alec’s face, to the image on his screen, and back to his face.

“Uh…” he stuttered. “That’s the computer simulation of a desert. Should be pretty similar to what you saw, I suppose.” He crossed his arms over his chest and took a deep breath. “Why?”

“Wrong answer, Mikey.” Alec’s tone sliced through the lie.

“Doc, what’s going on?” He reached his hand out to place it on Alec’s shoulder but he flinched out of the way. “Are you okay?”

“This was in my mind. This is what I saw, exactly.”

“Look, it may remind you of the simulation, but that’s all.” He pulled out a chair on the other side of the desk and sat down. “Maybe you did have some adverse reaction to the drugs. You seem a little paranoid right now.” He reached out and pushed the power button on his monitor. “Why don’t you sit down and we’ll talk about it. I’ll tell you anything I can.”

Alec looked down, met Mikey’s eyes and held them. He couldn’t believe anything that Mikey would tell him, not right now, at least. “No, I have to leave, now.” He reached around Mikey to disconnect his tablet. “And this is coming with me.” A look of defeat crossed Mikey’s face. “I’ll show myself out.”
Alec contacted the school and canceled his classes for the day. He already had a message and it was forwarded to his tablet. As soon as he saw the girl on his tablet screen he knew precisely why she looked familiar. Chloe Wallace worked with Kristen, he couldn’t believe he hadn’t recognized her in class. He had escorted Kristen to several SMA gatherings over the years and she had been at the last few.

Her message stated that she would be on campus at 9:30. She would stop by his office and, if he was available, they could talk then. Otherwise she would see him back in class tomorrow.

Alec glanced at the clock on his tablet, it was 9:10. He knew it would take about fifteen minutes for the tram to get over to the school. It would be close, but the walk to his office from the stop wasn’t that far, he was pretty sure he could make it. Although the mystery surrounding his student was solved, he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to ask her about Kristen’s work habits. Perhaps it was paranoia from the drug, but he was certain Kristen was hiding something from him.

The tram ride was shorter than he had expected and he arrived at his office with four minutes to spare. He sat in his chair and prepared his desk for company, putting all of the clutter into a nice, neat pile. The tunnels felt hotter than normal today and he gulped down some water to re-hydrate from his sprint.

With his eyes closed, he visualized the desert again. The sand, the sun, the amazing shade of blue streaked across sky. He was so connected to the world in his mind that it took a hand placed on his shoulder to bring him out. His eyes flashed open and he focused on his 9:30 appointment standing with an outstretched arm.
“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you come in.” Alec stood and shook her hand. “Please, have a seat.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you, I thought you were asleep.”

“That wouldn’t have been too far from the truth. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Um.” Chloe fidgeted in her seat and avoided eye contact. “I guess I just wanted to make sure it was okay to be in your class.” The words came out fast and jumbled but it was enough to remind Alec of his ulterior motive.

“Any particular reason that you shouldn’t?” She finally looked up and met his eyes. His gentle smile helped to calm her nerves but she fretted in stating her concerns. “I am aware that you work for someone involved in my personal life, if that’s your concern.”

“So you do recognize me?”

“It took me a minute to place why I knew you, but yes. Actually, since you bring it up, I-”

“I can’t talk about Kristen’s research.” The statement was direct, cutting him off at the knees.

“Well, I was actually going to ask about Kristen, not her work.”

“Oh.” She was just as clipped one-on-one as she had been in class.

“I’m just worried about her. She works so much.” Chloe’s eyes momentarily betrayed some unknown emotion, but quickly lost it again.

“Well, you know Kristen.”

Alec paused a moment, wondering just exactly how to pursue this line of questioning, but opted to give it up entirely. “Just keep an eye on her for me, if you would. Please, make sure she eats.”
“Yes, of course.” She stood. “Can I go now?”

Alec had hit a nerve. Something about this girl had changed since yesterday and his inquiry about Kristen seemed to aggravate the situation.

“Of course.” He stood and circled his desk to walk her to the door. “Take care and I’ll see you in class tomorrow. Oh, and please tell Kristen I say hi.”

“I will,” Chloe walked over his office threshold and quietly added, “if I see her” as she turned down the hall.

His mind was racing and every turn it took him only led him to another conclusion. Each one more disturbing than the first. When he finally returned to his apartment, he contemplated climbing into bed and allowing the world to dissipate for a little while. He laid down, but the visual impact of seeing that image, his desert, shook him to the core. What had Mikey done to him? And now he couldn’t shake the feeling of deception coming from Kristen. It was too much. He couldn’t sit still anymore. The only thing left to do was to walk.

The ten foot tall and twenty foot wide tunnels encompassed almost every path you could want to take across the Coins. They went from tram stops to buildings and fanned out in every direction from the United Corporations building in the center of the coin. They were clear and, like almost everything else, made of acryllium. With safety doors every fifty feet and an airlock at each junction, it wasn’t as bad as being trapped in an elevator, but they gave Alec that same squirmy feeling anyway. One solid tunnel went all the way around the parameter of the Coin for those who walked to fulfill their daily cardio requirement.

Everything around him was aseptic. Despite the people, all Alec could focus on was the muted noise of his own footsteps, a metallic thudding sound. With his head down and his
hands in his pockets, he made himself completely unapproachable. The giant air purifiers provided a constant drone in the background. Many people ignored it but Alec found comfort in its reliability. Their noise assured him that there would be oxygen the next time his lung expanded.

The images of the desert flooded his mind as he stared at the cold metal buildings. He felt the solidity of the steel beneath his feet and remembered the give of walking in the sand. He walked virtually every square inch of the New Harvard tunnel system and the ten blocks that separated it from his apartment, twice.

Nothing seemed to be clearing his mind. Over six hours he walked, engaged in a mental tug-of-war with himself. He felt hurt and betrayed by the two people he most trusted, it was just too much. He returned home with the same anxiety that drove him out in the first place.

One of the reasons he had chosen to live in his small, dank apartment was its proximity to the edge of the city disk. He was less than six blocks from the water and when the town was still enough, he could hear the waves crashing into the barriers just thirty feet down. That and he had a wonderful view. He watched the sun set behind the defining skyline of New Harvard’s Clock Tower as he ate his first meal bar of the day. The only good thing about a sky full of pollution was the sunset. Reds and oranges splashed the sky as the light rays were broken up by the smog.

Something in him snapped. He’d had enough and just sitting there wasn’t helping. He left the security of his couch and went down to the tunnels. The nearest tram station was only a block away.
It was silly, really. But sometimes he just needed to sit and ride, no matter how long it might take. His joyride wasn’t entirely without danger. If someone at transportation services was monitoring the tablet checkpoints he could be arrested for vagrant-like behavior. Riding more than two complete cycles of the tram was a waste of Coin utilities and it was impossible to get on a tram without your personal tablet.

Alec ignored the risk, being arrested might take a few things off his mind. He stepped through the pneumatic doors and took a seat as far to the rear of the tram as possible. He curled up on the seat and rested his head against the cool acryllium window. It was going to be a long ride.

His eyes lost focus as he passed building after building, pedestrian after pedestrian. He’d chosen to ride the CounterClock tram. It rode along the outer edge of the New Harvard Coin and made fewer stops than most. He looked out from the tram tunnel and watched the pedestrian tunnels. Some darted into the Public Wellness building, some into Public Works. Others entered the tunnels leading directly to the United Corporations, but most headed to the commuter tunnels on their way home. A flood of blue and green shirts had recently finished their twelve-hour shifts and were ready to call it a night. They’d be back to do it all again tomorrow.

It was getting darker as Alec neared his first complete rotation. The buildings were beginning to lose their definition against the sky and only a glint of light from the passing tram brought out the edges and doorframes.

“Hey, mister.”

Alec’s shoulder received a violent jab and his eyes jerked open. He was momentarily blinded by the sunlight blaring in from the windows. He’d slept through the night.
“You can’t stay here, man.” The clean-shaven man in blue had backed away and Alec mentally chastised himself for assuming the man was part of the cleaning crew. A second later the man reached for a broom and cleaned out the seat in front of him.

Alec’s back popped as he stretched and yawned. “Sorry, I guess I dozed off.”

“Yeah, well. The next stop’s coming up. You can get off there.”

He got off at the next stop and jumped on the Transverse-Tram. He knew there was a stop that would take him within three blocks of Mikey’s office/apartment. It was still early for a Wednesday and there were only three other people on the ride with him. The man only a few seats to his left was still sleeping and the couple towards the back appeared to have just left a party and were having a hard time staying decently dressed for the duration of their ride. Alec hoped that, for their sake, their ride ended soon and although he didn’t really want to see them go at it, he found himself drawn toward their public display of affection. A confusingly intense desire to call Kristen overwhelmed him.

He loved Kristen and had known it for a while now. But every time he tried to get close or even talk about what the future may hold for them, she pulled away. Just like she was doing now. He wasn’t an idiot, she was hiding something from him. But, he didn’t know how to ask without seeming accusatory. And, what if he were wrong? He would lose her and that was something he wasn’t prepared to do.

He wasn’t getting any younger and was getting to that point in his life. If Kristen wasn’t the one he was going to spend his life with, he needed to know, but not necessarily right this moment. He was a fish out of water, flopping back and forth on the subject.

He almost missed his stop as the mass of thoughts engorged his mind. Soon after he got off the tram, he realized that he hadn’t been home since sunset yesterday. He
contemplated going back home and cleaning up a bit before he confronted everything, but thought better of it, knowing that he would come up with some reason to not come back. Again, he stared at the image on his tablet and took a deep breath. He decided to take a more gentle approach this time and rang the doorbell.

Mikey was up, dressed and fairly cheerful for this early in the morning. He was clean-shaven and his hair was combed for the first time in his last several encounters with Alec.

“Doctor McCormack, I was hoping you’d be back today.” He habitually scratched his head. “Would you like to come in?” He stepped out of the way of the door, opening it fully to allow him entrance. Alec paused a moment at the door, but a sincere look from Mikey made him change his mind. He was there to sort things out. Coming in was the least he could do.

“Yeah, well.” He came in and walked back to the office. He returned to the same seat where the whole argument had started the day before. “Sit down, Mikey. I need to talk about yesterday.”

“Look, about that…”

“Just tell me what’s going on. And leave nothing out.” Alec finally relaxed a little into his chair. “Remember, I was your teacher. I can tell when you’re lying.” He was trying to lighten the mood. People tended to be guarded with their answers if they felt under attack.

“Honestly, I’ll tell you what I can, but a lot of the testing is still considered classified and I can’t talk about it.” Any good-natured attitude Alec was trying to have disappeared instantly.

“You put me into the middle of classified testing? Why would you do that?”
“I know, I’m sorry and I wanted to tell you. But if I did, I couldn’t guarantee the validity of the simulation.”

“What are you talking about?” Alec’s confusion was overwhelming his ability to comprehend the discussion. “I don’t understand what is going on here. All I know is that you asked me to come in and run a simulation for you.” He straightened in his chair. His hands were shaking. “Look, I need to know what the hell is going on here.”

“Ok, I’ll make you a deal.” Mikey reached out, grabbed Alec’s shaking hands between his own. “I need to run another simulation, and I can’t do it successfully without you.”

“What? You expect me to do this again?”

“It’s not for me.”

“If it’s not for you, then who is it for?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Mikey was banking on Alec’s innate need to know what was going on. “Please, don’t ask.”

“Well, what can you tell me?”

Mikey left the question unanswered and got up to leave. With a gesture towards Alec, he followed and they settled back into the screening room where he had originally seen himself during the desert simulation. Again, his image was back up on the screen and he seemed to walk in place, only looking. Mikey pushed a few buttons on his computer and, instantaneously, he no longer looked like a spastic mental case. The desert had filled in around him.

“You were right, by the way.” Mikey turned to look Alec in the eyes. “That image was of your desert. I’m sorry I lied but I had to get permission before I could officially tell
you what you already knew.” Alec didn’t respond, but only stared at the monitor. They had it on a loop so he saw his thirty second excursion over and over again. And, like the first time, as soon as he turned to see his footprints, or lack thereof, he was back in the room with a puzzled look on his face.

“So, how did you get the images from my mind?” Alec didn’t waste any time in jumping straight to the point.

“A high intensity light beam was being aimed at the back of your skull the entire time you were in there. It scans the occipital lobes in your brain, the ones which produce the images you see.” He saw Alec reach around and hold the back of his head. “Trust me, it is completely harmless and used in the medical community all the time.”

“I did trust you, Mikey.” Alec’s eyes were focused intently on Mikey. There was no humor there, only regret, betrayal.

“I know and I am sorry. But you have to understand, I couldn’t risk contaminating the sample. None of this will work unless I have a believable image that I can project for the users to see. Telling you the whole story would have been like burning the last known picture of a desert.” Mikey turned away from Alec, shielding his eyes. “It was a chance I couldn’t take. One day, I hope you understand that.”

“So you bring me in here, pump me full of some drug, scan my brain with lasers and lie to me about the whole thing. Did I leave anything out?” Alec was back to pacing the office, still trying to fully wrap his mind around everything. “I assume you’re only telling me this to pique my interest? What is it you want from me, Mikey?”

“I still need your help. You’re the only one who can make these realistic.”

“Why is it classified? Who did you need permission from?”
“Doctor. Alec. I can’t tell you that.”

Alec stood from his chair in front of the monitor and slowly, silently walked toward the door. He placed his hand on the doorknob, turned it and walked out into the hall. He stopped, but did not turn back to face Mikey. “Do whatever prep work you need. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

* * * * *

Kristen’s eyes flew open as soon as she realized what was going on. The annoying beep that had been flitting inside her dream was, in reality, an alarm on the incubator. The adrenalin raced through her system and she shot up in her chair, ignoring the creek in her back as she stood and ran towards the offending noise. Because the cub was not inside a living, breathing being physically able to give birth, she had to do the best she could to guess when he’d be ready to be born. All the warning signs showed him in distress. He was ready to come out now.

Even though she wasn’t expecting him yet, she did have everything set up and ready for his delivery. She quickly pulled on a sterile gown followed by her hair bonnet, mask and finally her gloves. When she was all suited up, she opened the incubator and pulled down the artificial womb. He was kicking and clawing on the inside, more signs that he was ready to meet this new world. She pulled out a pair of scissors and carefully perforated the top of the bag. He no longer had access to any oxygen or nutrients, so she had to do this quickly. She set down the bag and stuck two fingers into the hole at the top, tore open the bag
allowing the fluids to gush out. And with them came a tiny, helpless, orange and black striped cub.

Pulling him out the rest of the way, she discarded what was left of his womb. She used her fingers to clear out the mucus that had accumulated in his mouth, then grabbed a towel and began wiping him off, rubbing him to keep warm and to stimulate breathing. However, a second or two passed before she realized he wasn’t breathing at all.

CPR on a newborn is risky, but she had to try anyway. Carefully, she covered his nose and mouth with hers and gently blew the oxygenated air into his miniscule lungs. With her thumb on his right side and two fingers on his left, she compressed his tiny chest over and over, forcing his heart to beat. Tears streamed down her face as she counted off. Again, she blew into his lungs. She felt his chest expand with her air but, again it immediately deflated as she removed her mouth from his. She studied the potential setbacks of a caesarian section birth, but panic was beginning to set in, leaving her only with her most basic thoughts.

Two more rounds of breathing and chest compressions passed before she remembered the syringe with adrenalin in the cabinet. She yanked the med kit from its space on the wall and dumped it on the counter next to her. She pulled the pre-measured syringe from its designated spot in the case, and placed it between her teeth. Kristen took a moment to soak a cotton ball in a sterilizing solution. She pinched off the vein on his right arm and sterilized the spot where a bulge appeared, in between chest compressions. She pulled the syringe from her mouth and maneuvered it to grab the cap of the shot between her teeth. She carefully pierced the skin and inserted the needle, injecting the hormone that would force his heart to beat.
It did its job and his heart began to pump again, forcefully this time and when she breathed for him, he took over on his own. He sputtered and coughed as his lungs began to fill. His breaths were quick and shallow but it was enough to keep him alive, but for how long?

The tiny little bundle lay on the counter, shaking, while Kristen looked for something to use as an oxygen chamber. Finally it hit her; she taped up the seams on his incubator and hooked her scuba tank to the air filter, turning it into a makeshift air chamber. She only had the one tank, and prayed that he could hang in there with his modified breathing until everything was ready. She had only done minimal research on premature birth, she hadn’t really considered it on her list of potential problems.

Kristen came back and held him, wrapped in his towel, until he stopped shaking. He nuzzled in the crook of her arm, looking desperately to feed on something while she warmed a bottle of re-water and added a powered supplement to it. It was another project she had been working, emulating the nutrients required for a tiger cub. It was as close as she could get it without a pure source to compare it to. All she could do now was hope for the best.

She shook up the bottle, mixing the powder into a soupy, white mess. She cut a larger hole in the nipple of the bottle and held it in front of the little guy in her arms. He rapidly twisted around, almost causing her to drop him, and ravished the bottle. Though it wasn’t appealing at all to her, he seemed to enjoy it. He raised his paws and began needing them against her hand. His claws cut into her hand as he fed, but she dealt with the pain. He was eating and breathing; a little pain was more than worth it.

By the time he finished his bottle, the makeshift air chamber was fully functional and showed to hold the pressure without leaks. The altered atmosphere would allow his body to
take in more oxygen with less work. Kristen believed that his lungs had not fully developed along with the rest of his body and that some extra time in the oxygen-rich incubator should allow for his lungs to finish growing. She placed him into the modified incubator, still wrapped in his towel and quickly falling into slumber.

She stood there, just watching him breathe. Each breath seemed deeper than the last and slowly her concern melted away. His start may have been a little shaky, but as this last thirty minutes passed he seemed to welcome the new world laid out in front of him.

The phone rang and Kristen left the incubator to grab a plain receiver off the wall. She had been unwilling to put any sort of video device in her lab.

“This is Kristen.” She nodded her head in affirmation while the voice on the other end talked. “I knew he’d come around.” She wandered around the room, still listening on the phone, but watching the newborn gently fidgeting in his sleep. “Look, things happened quicker than I’d planned. Let me know when it’s ready, I’m gonna need that room.” She hung up the phone and pulled up her chair. As she sat there, she became overwhelmed in her own thoughts and did something that she couldn’t remember having done before. She cried. It was only for a moment, but she knew that her life had just changed completely.

Kristen watched him, was mesmerized by him, and bestowed a name upon him. She’d already chosen the name Tony, in honor of Alec’s obsession with the twentieth century. As far as she could tell “Tony” had been a tiger and breakfast icon of some sort. Though really, it was a cheap attempt to make Alec accept him. She knew he would use the complications with Tony’s birth as evidence that the tiny cub did not belong here. She would use any device available to her if it would make Alec understand.
Less than eight hours had passed when Kristen realized he had already doubled his weight and his eyes and ears were open. She feared this possibility when she noticed his accelerated neonatal development, but in a matter of hours he had aged almost two weeks. She had to find some way of stopping his accelerated growth or he would be dead within a year. She had gone to too much trouble for that to happen. As it was, he would outgrow his incubator shortly and would need his permanent habitat a lot sooner than expected. She knew the wheels were already turning on that project and crossed her fingers in hopes that it would all come together as needed.

The next big issue she had to deal with was the fact that this powdered supplement wouldn’t keep him satisfied for much longer. Once she perfected the prosthetic uterus she had planned on growing and harvesting his food, but that was when he wouldn’t need it for at least a few more months. At this rate, he would be ready for real food in a day or so.

A faint buzzing sounded and, after a beat, Kristen realized it was her doorbell. She made one last check to be sure that Tony was secure in his incubator and she put a monitor next to him, keeping the receiver with her so she could hear if anything went wrong. However, it would only work as long as she stayed within a fifty foot radius of her garage.

Once she believed that she had made Tony as safe as he could be in her absence, she left her laboratory through the same set of intricate locks and security systems through which she entered.

When she reached her front door, Alec was about a half a block away from her house. She yelled for him and then instantly regretted it, but he heard her anyway and came jogging back. Before he reached her doorstep, she stuck the receiver in the small of her back and covered it with her shirt.
“Hey, what’s up?” She asked, surprising herself when she really wanted to know his answer.

“Did you change the locks? My key wouldn’t work.”

“Really? That’s weird. Um, you want to come in?” She sidestepped the question, hoping he wouldn’t notice or wouldn’t care. Her body shifted blocking more and more of the house through the open door.

“Actually, I can’t stay long. I just thought I’d drop by and see how you were doing. Sorry if I caught you at a bad time.”

“You know me, all work all the time. But we’ll get together sometime this week, ok?” She was closing the door before he had even said goodbye and it bothered her more than she wanted it to. Guilt had begun picking at her. She couldn’t let it settle in.
“Electricity was available on a very limited basis. Divers had risked their lives to find the components necessary to create solar panels and wind-powered generators. At one point in time, there was barely enough power available for hospitals and other medical facilities. Now, these parts are all made from acryllium and metal, giving rise to a whole other industrial revolution. Ironically enough, it required the destruction of the Earth to get mankind to rely on the renewable resources that had always been available to them.”

*Cause and Effect: The Evolution of The Happening*

The holo-chamber was exactly as it had been the first time he set foot in it. The solid, cold, unfeeling walls left no room for imagination. This was a room designed to draw out threads of insanity from the sanest person. Alec felt a strange urge spread along his nerves. He didn’t know how to respond to it. What scared him the most was that he didn’t know if this place was his Everest or his own personal Pandora’s Box.

He quietly chuckled at his own use of the twentieth century expressions. Though referencing Pandora and her fabled box would be understood by those appreciative of Greek mythology. Very, very few would understand the conquering of Mount Everest, seeing as it collapsed in the giant landslide during the 2055 quake, along with Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount St. Helens and a few others.

He turned his head and saw the cameras and control room windows. Any remaining bit of humor quickly drained from his body. Now that he knew it was there, he could see the faint red beam aimed at the back of his skull. He had come prepared to endure another hot, dry session in the desert but Mikey told him they were doing something else. He wanted to
try a new simulation. Alec debated arguing on premise alone, but decided against it, knowing he wanted to experience other habitats.

He wondered what it would be this time: a swamp, a prairie, a forest? Maybe a deserted town with buildings and pavement? Could this program create animals? What about other people? He wondered, but dismissed the idea, citing his temporary anxiety for the thought.

Adrenalin began pumping through his veins. Despite his current anger towards Mikey, Alec was eternally grateful for the sensations and memories this provided him. As for the undesired high and potential side-effects, that had simply become a means to an end.

Alec turned and watched Mikey enter through the room’s only door. His steps lost their authority and even became slightly tentative when Alec made eye contact. It appeared as though each step he took was in slow motion. Just one more thing standing in the way of Alec’s desire to get into his new world.

“Mikey.” The word was unfeeling, the voice of a stranger.

“Hi, Doc,” he forced a smile. “I wasn’t entirely sure you were gonna to make it.” He was striving for the relaxed tone of their earlier conversation. Alec didn’t smile, he barely blinked. Mikey knew he was here on business, nothing more. “Look, Dr. McCormack, because you already know what will happen, I’m going to give you about ten minutes to create the most in-depth example you can think of.”

“And just what do you want me to create?” Alec’s interruption startled him. “I won’t do this again, so you better make it worth your while.”

“A jungle then. If that’s ok with you.”
“Fine, I’ll see you in ten.” He turned his back on Mikey and crouched down, his hands touching the floor for balance. With a deep breath he closed his eyes and waited.

“Four… three… two… one. Program engaged.” This time, the ground did not give under his weight. Instead, the air became heavy and thick with water vapor. Less than twenty feet in front of him stood a mass of trees waiting to be entered, their canopies blocking out the light. Still bent over, Alec wasn’t quite ready to move forward. Instead, he ran his hands through the grass next to his feet. He pulled a single blade from the ground and stroked it between two of his fingers. A sap-like substance oozed out of the grass blade where it broke off. Alec wiped the goo on his finger. It cooled his touch as it dried and soon began to itch. He rubbed his finger against his pants to remove the grass residue.

Despite his better judgment, he placed the grass between his teeth and bit down, grinding his molars together in the process. The same sap that itched his hand was now mixing with his saliva, overwhelming him with its bitter taste. He spat violently to remove the flavor and even rubbed his tongue on his sleeve, but it had become entwined with his taste buds.

Alec was so overwhelmed with the grass beneath his feet that he hadn’t fully taken in the environment he was creating. He walked forward, cautiously stepping over fallen logs but tripping in the underbrush. The jungle surrounded him. It was above him, below him. It was all he could see. The dense undergrowth blocked off any escape except for a footpath to his left. He stood and could touch something green in any direction.

As he followed the path, he looked around and admired his work. He was proud that this imagery and full-on assault of his senses was of his own creation. He wanted to see the
sun in its full glory, not hidden behind centuries of smog, but not the intense heat-ray of his earlier desert excursion.

As soon as the thought penetrated his mind, he came to a clearing. He became conscious of the fact that he could manipulate what he saw. His understanding of the system and acceptance of it gave him full control. A moment later, a loud noise came from above him and Alec looked up just in time to see a large bird fly overhead. A vast majority of the birds had died out by eating poisoned fish. He couldn’t recall having thought of a bird.

The image startled him and his brief overconfidence about his control in this arena quickly diminished. He had no idea if this was from his mind or computer generated, but it fascinated him nonetheless. He watched as it “ka-cawed” above him, circling and finally dipping down below the tree line. Just as he began to wonder where it had gone, the bird came zooming by within a few feet of him. He darted out of the way, not sure exactly how to respond. The quick intake of breath that accompanied his brief movement choked him up. He was not used to breathing such humid and heavy air. He coughed and remembered to take slow but shallow breaths. That would be more similar to what he was used to breathing.

He turned around and kept the bird in his sights. As it got farther and farther away, Alec ran after it. He wanted to touch it. Running through a forest was much, much harder than he had anticipated. He ducked left and dodged right. Undergrowth surrounded his legs and he was never too sure if his next step would be sound, or if he would tumble over a fallen log.

Finally, the bird landed in a nest. The only problem was that the nest was a good ten feet above his head. Alec had climbed a lot of things in his life; ladders, fences, tunnels and even a sculpture or two, but never a tree.
He grabbed the trunk. It was much rougher than it looked and parts of the bark flaked off in his hands. With his grip firmly in place, he held on tight and pushed the toe of his shoe against the wood in front of him. He pushed off the ground with his other foot but slipped and smashed his entire body against the tree. Climbing this was going to much, much harder than it looked.

He recovered quickly from his little faux-pas, and circled the tree in search of a better vantage point. Deciding that a running start may prove worthwhile, Alec backed up several more paces. He dug his left foot into the ground a little and pushed off from the indent he’d made. Running full out, he leapt into the air and again smacked his entire frame into the solid hardwood. It was beginning to hurt.

He decided to sit down and a large boulder appeared next to him. He sat, wondering if it would be possible to create something to help him climb the tree. Maybe he could add footholds? The thought itself was ridiculous, talk about no longer believing the realism of the environment. He reached over his head and stretched. He looked up and found the bird, still in its nest and probably laughing at him. There was a branch only a foot or two out of reach. All he needed was something to stand on.

He stood from his rock and stared at it, feeling dumber than he had ever felt in his life. Standing on the rock put the branch well within his reach. With a solid grip, he swung himself up and over, straddling the branch. He shifted his balance and grabbed for the bird, now only a few feet above him.

Alec had been so caught up with his desire to touch the bird that he hadn’t been paying attention to his time. Instead of the solid wood that he had become familiar with, he
was falling. Rather, he thought he was falling, and he felt the contact with the floor. But, at the same time, it was different, almost like he was falling back into himself. Like a dream.

He was back in the silver room again, deprived and alone. It was the way he felt every time he was around Kristen.

About ten seconds later, the door behind him unlocked and reopened. “I need to go again.” Alec blurted out the thought before he had time to stop it.

“I’m sorry, Doctor McCormack. The computers took in an extensive amount of information. It will be a little while before the decompression and analysis are done.”

“You don’t understand. I have to get back there.” He felt like a petulant child who had lost his favorite toy. “Wait, decompression and analysis? For what?” He had finally comprehended what Mikey had said.

“I’m sorry, I can’t discuss that with you.”

“Ah…”

“Please, Doc. I’d tell you if I could. But if I did, I could lose my funding, I’d lose everything.”

“Can I at least see what the cameras picked up?”

“I can show you what I’ve got, but until the computer is done, it won’t be that great.”

Alec and Mikey climbed the spiral staircase leading to the observation room. He had been here before but never realized it connected to Mikey’s apartment. They entered the tiny office and crowded around the monitors on the desk.

“Do you want something to eat? Drink?”

“I’m good, Mikey. I just want to see the footage.”
“I’m queue it up as we speak.” Mikey’s finger danced across the keyboard in front of him. Alec lifted his head and stretched, pulling his arms straight out and up. A variety of loud popping noises filled the air as he twisted left and right. One more deep breath and his focus returned to the monitor. He was standing in the middle of the metal room.

“The program is about to start.” Mikey said. “If you’d like, I can bring up the very basic components to the imagery, but it won’t look like much.”

A cocked head and pleading eyebrows told Mikey what he needed to know. It disturbed Alec to see himself as a hallucinating fool.

A few more flicks on the keyboard and Alec’s image was surrounded, though it was nothing like he had hoped it would be. The trees were just marks and any rocks were just blocks on the ground around him. The colors were only shades of gray.

“I know I’m watching it,” Alec started, “but I still don’t understand how this works.”

“Let me see if I can explain it a little bit better.” Mikey pulled out an electronic scratch pad and a stylus. He began drawing, what looked like, a very rough sketch of a human skeleton. “Ok,” he began when the drawing was satisfactory. “It’s like this. I give you the framework or,” he said pointing at his screen, “the skeleton. I tell you what it is I want you to see and I make the computer show you bits and pieces through our hologram projectors.”

So far, Alec understood the process. What he didn’t understand was the next step. Mikey then turned the tablet back towards himself and tapped a few spots on the writing screen. He turned it back around. The skeleton was still there, but a tiny square appeared in the upper left hand corner.
“I put a drug in the air stream just a second before the program starts.” Alec was nodding along, still waiting to be confused. “As soon as that drug hits your system, all of your senses are enhanced.” He reached up with the stylus and double-clicked the tiny box. “Now, you don’t just see the hologram, you feel it, smell it, and, I noticed, you tasted it.”

Alec watched as the human skeleton on his tablet began filling in, one layer at a time. First the organs, then connective tissues, the muscles, nerves, blood vessels. All of them were there before the final layer of skin was put into place.

“Just like that simulation, I build the habitat. The drug in your system, well, it frees your mind. Then, with the scan, I take information from your brain and feed it back to you. You feel the trees and the grass and the sand because your senses tell your brain that it is real.”

Alec’s head stopped nodding and his jaw went slack, again. “Think of it this way,” Mikey continued when he saw Alec’s expression change. “It’s like a dream, only I control what you see.”

“That will have to do.” Alec finally responded. “Anything more than that, and I’m lost.” Alec moved away from the monitor and the now-completed human body on the tablet by his chair. “So, what’s the next step?”

“Huh?” Mikey was still engrossed in Alec’s habitat.

“What do you do now, with the information from the simulator? What’s the next step?” Alec returned to his seat. It suddenly became very important that he know what this information was going to be used for.

“Well, it’s going to be an attraction. I told you that.” Mikey’s gaze kept jumping from the monitor to Alec and back again.
“Yeah, but how are you going to get multiple people to see the same thing? It would be too expensive to run it one person at a time. Not to mention the possible side effects of that drug you’re pumping in there.”

“No, we’re going to use your world as a model.” He looked back to Alec. “To go back to my earlier example, I gave you the skeleton so you could fit it together. I knew you would be able to create a more realistic environment than I ever could. Everyone else, however, will get the completed package and a much lower dose of the ‘halo-helper.’”

“Is that what you’re calling it? The ‘halo-helper’? I suppose I’ve heard worse.”

“Yeah, and I went through a lot of them before I decided on that one.” Alec gave a chuckle at Mikey’s expense.

“So, how much are you planning on charging for this little adventure?”

“That is a good question. You know, I am looking for investors. I’m thinking at least one Holo-World Tour on every Coin.”

“Don’t push it Mikey, just be glad I’m here right now. I’m better, but we’re still not okay.”

“I know, and thanks for coming anyway. I don’t think I ever said that. You know as well as I do that I couldn’t make this work without your help.”

“Don’t go all sentimental on me now, I’m not through being mad yet.” They shared a glance that spread into a full-fledged smile and chuckle. Mikey looked away first and appeared to remember something. He stood.

“Hey, I don’t mean to feel like I’m kicking you out, I have to meet with someone in a little while.”

“Hot date, huh?”
“Hot, yes. Date, no. She’s happily taken, we’re just friends.”

“I suppose I can’t complain. I think I got pretty lucky.”

“Yeah.” Mikey turned back toward the computer screen.

Alec’s eyes pinched as he replayed the memory of introducing Mikey and Kristen only a few days before. Something was off, but he let it slide. “Ok, this conversation is getting a little too personal for my tastes. I’ll get out of here and let you do whatever you need.” Alec stood and began walking toward the door. “Call me when you get this thing a little more worked out. I want to go again.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear.” Mikey sat at his desk but he heard the door shut.

* * * * *

The constant chirping of Tony’s various monitors was driving Kristen insane. At one point she started to wonder if this was worth all the trouble, but stopped herself before she could delve too far into that line of thought. This had been a life-long goal, of course there were going to be setbacks. You didn’t covet the gold medal if all you had to do was walk up and grab it.

Less than twenty-four hours old and Tony had quadrupled in size. A comparison to any known information would place him six or seven weeks old. He was eating formula faster than Kristen could make it and had begun drinking it out of a bowl as opposed to a bottle.

She knew that he would need a good source of meat to stay alive. He was, after all, a carnivore. She just didn’t think she’d have to tap into her stock so soon. Over the last few
years, Kristen had been sneaking off with hunks of frozen cow. They had been cryogenically frozen as part of a plan to thaw them out when we were ready to move to a new planet.

However, Earth was never found and these particular animals were destroyed in transit. Frozen things can be very fragile. When the animals broke apart, they were sent to meal bar labs like SMA Genetics for comparison testing on new bar flavors. Not surprisingly, the ground beef bar was never a big item in their stock and soon was pulled from their product catalogue. So, the rest of the carcasses just sat there, waiting.

Over the years, Kristen figured she had stockpiled the equivalent of about seven cows in her emergency safe bay. That should hold Tony off for a little while, but no where near as long as she was planning. She pulled out a front left leg, shoulder and all, from the freezer to thaw. She would start adding real meat to Tony’s meal plan tomorrow.

Though it grated on her nerves to leave him alone, Kristen had to get out and she had some errands that had to be run. Once Tony was fully fed and sound asleep, Kristen figured she had about three hours she could be gone. One more sweep of the instrument panel showed him completely locked in his cage and as content as a sleeping baby. The oxygen pressure in his incubator was up where it should be and his heart rate monitor was steady. There was no better time to go than right now, but she couldn’t get past the feeling that she was deserting him somehow.

“Hang in there, little guy. I’m gonna go run the specs over for your new home.” She began stroking the acryllium glass as though he could feel her or even comprehend what she was saying. He barely fit in the incubator anymore and was still having issues breathing outside of it. She had to keep him in the pressurized tank or he would pass out. “We’re going to have you in your new home before you know it. Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon.”
Kristen activated the insta-door and walked through. She closed and locked it and every other door she passed on the way back to her kitchen. She hadn’t left her garage since Alec’s visit earlier that morning and her stomach grumbled as she walked past her stash of meal bars. She despised them, but ate one anyway. Food was food.

She left her house, double locking all of her doors and setting the alarm on her garage, and jogged down the street about two blocks before she caught the nearest CoinCar. She knew it would drop her off just a few blocks from where she needed to be. After about ten minutes on the tram, Kristen got off and turned the corner on the nearest block. With her mind usually up in the clouds, she had a tendency to bump into people without meaning to. She walked briskly to her destination and ran headlong into a person coming the opposite way.

“Sorry.” She mumbled, not even looking up to see who she’d hit.

“Kristen?” Her head jerked up, she was unaccustomed to anyone in the tunnels calling her name.

“Huh?” She turned around and as she lifted her head her blue eyes locked onto the familiar browns of her lover. Alec reached out and pulled Kristen into a hug. She didn’t fight it, but didn’t exactly welcome it either.

“Hey, I’m sorry for just dropping in on you earlier. I should have called. I know how you are with your work.” He let go of their embrace. “I hope I didn’t bother you.”

“No, it’s fine. Really.” Kristen subconsciously ran her hands through her hair. “It was good to see you, if only for a moment or two.” The words coming out of her mouth surprised her when she wasn’t just saying it to be polite.
“So, what’s going on?” Alec was dancing around the actual question of “Why are you on this side of the coin?” But then a new thought struck him. “You know, Mikey lives here.”

“Oh?” She looked down to her tablet and back at Alec again.

“You remember him, right? I introduced you two a few weeks ago.”

“Yeah, I remember. One of your old students, right?” She stole another gaze at her tablet, checking the time. “

“That’s the one.” Alec fiddled with his hair. “You know, I was just with him and he said something-”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” She couldn’t imagine he’d taken the day off and the wide-eyed expression he gave her in return told her that he hadn’t.

“I forgot all about it.”

“You forgot about work?”

“Yeah, it isn’t always the most important thing in my life.” The inadvertent dig sounded incredibly harsh. He hadn’t intended to say it, but didn’t regret it either. Something was wrong, his could feel her pulling away from him. She looked down to her feet and slightly kicked at the metal below. Her head tilted one way and she raised her eyes to look at him. He lifted his hand out to pull her closer to him but she was already out of arms reach.

“Look, I do have work to do, and somebody’s waiting for me.” She’d backed about five paces away from him when she slightly nodded her head and turned around to walk away, again. Alec just held up a hand and watched her go.

She got to the next main intersection and turned the corner to wait a few minutes. His words were ringing in her ears; she was going to lose him. She peaked back around the
corner and when she was sure that Alec was gone, she back tracked on her way to Mikey’s lab.

She entered the apartment, just as Alec had earlier, by banging on the door. Mikey led Kristen into the back room where he had just been with Alec not ten minutes earlier. “You cut it really close today. I told you to call first.”

“I know. I ran into him on my way here.” Kristen’s voice wavered while she talked. “What did you say to him? He started talking about you to me. Why would he do that?”

“Nope, you don’t get to pin this on me. If you had just told him we already knew each other, it wouldn’t be like this.”

“And tell him what? You know he wouldn’t have let it go if I’d said we’ve been friends since college.” Kristen barged past Mikey and began loading the computer.

“I’m just saying it would have been easier in the long run. That’s all.” He slid her chair away from his desk.

“I know. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I just hate all the sneaking around. What did you tell him, anyway?”

“Huh? Oh, I told him I was running some errands for work.”

“And he bought that, of course.” The conversation tone changed and Mikey almost sounded disgusted with them both.

“Yeah, I guess. But something’s not right.”

Mikey stopped fiddling with the computers long enough to turn and face Kristen head on.

“He loves you. You do know that, right?”
“I know, Mikey. And I think I love him, too. I just don’t have time to be in love right now.”

Mikey chuckled and spun his chair around, back to the computer monitors. “You know, whether or not you’re ready is rarely taken into consideration.”

“You sound like someone with experience.”

“Look out there, through the observation glass.” Kristen stood up and moved to the shielded glass. Below her was a large, metal room. There was one door and nothing else.

“Ok, what exactly am I looking at?”

“Smile at her, Kristen. That room is my life and dreams. Some might even go so far as to say she’s my mistress.”

“Ah, a kindred spirit.”

“No, just someone who has experienced incredible loss and is trying to keep a friend from making the same mistakes.”

This conversation was over; she did not need Mikey to make her feel even guiltier than she already did. What she did need was to find out the progress on Mikey’s project. Things were moving along too quickly for her. She wasn’t planning on needing Mikey’s services for several months, but nature decided to take a different path. If she didn’t find some place to put Tony, permanently, things were going to get bad in the very near future.

“Moving on, how is the analysis coming?”

Kristen stood from her chair and walked back over to Mikey’s desk. He hit a few buttons on his keypad and once again, the image was of Alec in the empty chamber. He pushed one more key and suddenly, a jungle appeared around him.

“You tell me.”
“As the acidity in the water reached toxic levels, animals and plants alike died at the slightest contact. The rain brought the acid to the land-locked portions of all the continents and within a year, a vast amount of birds, fish and mammals had been poisoned. Only those that had been given treated water survived, but before long, humans moved up to the Coins and left the animals to the deadly environment. Our only hope of their resurrection lies in the cryogenically frozen zygotes in the Frozen Zoo.”

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He returned from his visit with Mikey and called the school to explain his absence. They were understanding, but firm in their policy. If Alec was a no-show again, it was going to cost him a week’s worth of credits. Fortunately, his only classes were Mondays and Wednesdays, so there was no concern for missing class. Instead, he cleared his schedule. He couldn’t get past what was going on with his increased paranoia if he had to worry about other things.

His attitude toward Kristen surprised him. He had always been a calm and stable person, but to say something so direct and intentionally hurtful was completely unlike him. He didn’t know what that meant. Was he mad at her? Did he want to break up?

Exhaustion overtook him as he crawled onto his couch, even skipping his much desired shower. The observation bubble was more of a home to him than this place had ever been, but he could never really sleep there. He spent the night tossing and turning. It was not comfortable to sleep directly on a metal floor. But, the real sleep disruption came in trying to stay warm. Without the sunlight, any place that was not part of the tunnel system or
personal homes could get very cold. He figured the temperature was in the lower fifties by the time he woke up. Strangely though, it never occurred to him to go home. Once in bed, he didn’t move again until the next morning.

Alec’s first thought when he woke wasn’t about the holo-world he had visited, it was about Kristen. A strange feeling crept over him and he rolled over, halfway expecting her to be there. His birthday had been the last time they had been together and even though it was only a few days ago, Alec missed her. He had been angry yesterday and had contemplated breaking it off, but he’d been horribly fatigued and his time with Mikey had taken everything else he had to give.

He decided that it was her secrecy that hurt him. Here he was, constantly trying to figure out if he could live without her, yet she continually made it very clear that she didn’t need him at all. He needed to know where they were at. He needed to know if they had a future. Alec finally rose from bed and took a quick shower. He got dressed and decided that, even though it was early, he was too anxious to see her. He knew that today would be the day.

The walk was pleasant, despite the fluttering in his stomach. He’d never been nervous about much, and even when things that made him uncomfortable, he could still find a way to reassure himself. When it came to Kristen, though, he never knew which end was up and he believed that to be one of the things he loved so much about her. His entire life had been structured and organized. Kristen had a hard time finding clothes that matched, let alone knowing what was going on from one day to the next. If it didn’t involve her work in one way or another, it just didn’t fit into her brain.
That last thought made Alec stop in his tracks. He knew it was true, despite his effort to deny it. She was “all work all the time,” just as she spouted the day before. Her work didn’t involve him. Sure, he could argue that she might not have received her doctorate if it wasn’t for him, but so what. That was as far as his contribution went.

As this new line of thought raced through his mind, he turned around and started back for his apartment. No, he wasn’t ready for this. But, yes, he was. It was Kristen who kept putting it off. Every time he tried to talk to her, she ignored him or changed the subject or just walked away. He had almost talked himself out of even seeing her when he stopped, again, as his mind jumped tracks for a third time.

“Wouldn’t it be better to find out for sure, one way or another, if she is the one?” He can ask and if she says no, then he could finally move on. Sure, he thought, he’d be heartbroken and need to pine but it would be over. No more dodging the question, no more of this constant debate of ‘She loves me, she loves me not.’

To an outside observer, Alec looked like the fictitious “crazy man” wandering the streets. He went this way and that, stopped suddenly and was talking to himself constantly. He waved his arms with proclamations and grabbed at his head, as though pulling his hair out. It was no wonder when a policeman stopped him. His approach was cautious and he left his bicycle in the upright position in case he needed to pursue this man.

“Sir,” The officer began. He had one arm out, halfway reaching for Alec while the other rested on the tazer sitting in its holster on his belt. “Excuse me, sir?” He was a little louder this time and startled Alec. He spun around and made a cockeyed face when he realized it was a police officer standing beside him.
“Oh, hi, Officer. Can I help you with something?” Alec’s smile matched the sincerity in his voice. The sanity displayed by Alec threw the officer and he straightened himself, no longer in a defensive posture.

“I was just checking to make sure you were all right, sir.”

“I’m fine,” a slight hint of worry entered his voice as he continued. “Why? Is everything okay?”

“Well, sir, I was riding by and I saw you walking back and forth, talking to yourself.”

The officer began to feel foolish. It was obvious that there was nothing wrong with this man. “You looked a bit, um, confused and I just wanted to make sure there wasn’t somewhere else you should be.”

Alec chuckled at the officer’s apparent observation of an insane man. “No, sir. I’m fine, but thank you for checking.” This answer didn’t seem to fully satiate the officer’s inquiry.

“Do you mind if I ask what you were doing?”

“Actually, I want to propose to my girlfriend.” Alec’s face suddenly paled, “I think.”

A roar of laughter that started in the base of the officer’s gut spread until it took Alec along for the ride. “I feel for ya, pal.” The officer spouted in between his fits. “I’ve been married 13 years and I’m grateful for every minute of it. But I gotta tell you, proposing was the hardest part.”

“You mean it’s normal to feel this way?” The humor was gone and Alec was serious again.

“I’d be more worried if you didn’t.” He clapped his hand on Alec’s shoulder, pushing him forward with the momentum. “Marriage is a big step,” he continued. “But,
when it’s with the right person, it’s the best thing in the world.” The officer walked back over towards his bike. He swung one leg over the seat and gently placed a foot on its pedal. “Don’t worry so much.” And with that, he pushed off and rode away.

Don’t worry so much. Alec thought. Huh, much easier said than done. But the officer had made a good point. If she’s right... But Alec knew she was.

*     *     *     *     *

Kristen could feel the edginess seeping out of her as relaxation crept in. The knowledge that Tony’s world was coming together was the final release on the tension she didn’t acknowledge she was withholding. When the stress of taking care of Tony had subsided slightly, her mind drifted to Alec.

She had been more careful leaving Mikey’s and figured the odds were against her running into Alec again. She made it home in time to check on Tony and feed him again. As far as he had been concerned, she was never even gone. As long as he was fed, it didn’t seem to matter where she was. An excuse to devote time to her corn research, only, she now lacked the enthusiasm she once held. Even her mind could only fixate on so many things at once and between Alec and Tony, there wasn’t room for much else. She left Tony, scrunched in his incubator, and went to the phone imager in her front room, grabbing her monitoring device on the way out. Once there, she punched in a few buttons and after a moment a friendly blond woman answered with the standard greeting.

“SMA Genetics. How may I direct your call?”

“Hey, Darcy.”
“Doctor Johnson. I hardly recognize you when you aren’t in a lab coat. What can I do for you?”

“Actually, I was wondering if Chloe was in yet.”

“I believe she is. Would you like me to page her for you?”

“Thanks, Darcy. That would be great.”

Kristen rolled her eyes as the new meal bar commercial crawled across the screen and she finally understood what Alec was talking about. SMA had gotten rather full of themselves. Just as she was getting ready to hang up to try later, another blond woman answered.

“This is Chloe.” The image of a young woman looked up at the screen. “Oh, hi, Dr. Johnson.” She didn’t sound too thrilled, but then a worried look crossed her face. “Hey, is Dr. McCormack ok?”

“How do you know Alec?” Kristen’s initial question had been instinctive, but then comprehension kicked in. “Wait, what happened? Why wouldn’t he be ok?” Adrenalin ebbed its way through her system, sending her heart into overdrive.

“He just never showed up for class yesterday. I’m sure he’s fine.” Chloe looked off screen for a moment. “I was just curious.”

Kristen’s system calmed with the knowledge that Alec was all right. She could focus instead on something she hadn’t known about. “He’s your teacher?”

“Yeah, I’m in his Ecological Biology course this semester.”

“Does he know you work for me?”
“I think it took him a little while to figure out who I was, but I saw him in his office on Tuesday. He asked me to keep an eye out for you.” She pulled her hair out of her face and back into a ponytail. “You’ve got yourself a good guy there.”

“Listen, I need you to do a favor for me.”

Now that the topic was off of Alec, that pissed off expression came back to Chloe’s face. “What?”

“I’ll be working from home for the rest of the week, at least. I’m going to need you to field my calls and send the important ones to my messenger. I’ll be checking in regularly.”

She reached out to press disconnect the button.

“Dr. Johnson?”

“Yes, Chloe?”

“Is everything all right? You seem, you just seem a little upset.” Her compassion startled Kristen, especially because of the attitude she’d just dealt with.

“No, actually, there is a lot going on at the moment.”

“Can I help?” Sincerity laced every word.

“No, unfortunately. But everything will be ok eventually.” She paused, debating whether or not to continue on her current thought pattern. “Chloe, do you understand why I pulled you from the corn project?”

The question knocked her senseless. “I assume you have your reasons.”

“Yes, I do. But you deserve to know them too. I don’t want to talk about it like this, so we’ll get together next week, when I’m back. Okay?” She didn’t know why, but she needed understanding from Chloe. All she was given in response was a tiny nod.
“Take care. I’ll see you next week.” Kristen pushed a little button and the screen went black. She grabbed Tony’s monitor and went to her bedroom. She hadn’t really slept in days. There had just been too much going on and too many things to worry about. A few hours would do her good.

A few hours turned into eight and she realized that Tony hadn’t been fed. But, when she got out to the garage, he was still asleep. It didn’t seem to bother him that he’d missed an entire feeding session. Perhaps this getting older thing wasn’t so bad. She fed him again, a little more than usual, and decided to try a six hour feeding schedule.

As a child, the tigers in the holo-zoo had scared her. The only image they had was one during feeding time and she saw as it attacked a gazelle. She stared at Tony, wondering if he could ever be so vicious. True, he was a tiger. But, if he never had to hunt for food, he would never have a need to attack. Once he had finished, she removed the bowl and promptly returned to her bed.

Her alarm went off six hours later pulling her from one of the most refreshing slumbers she could ever remember having. Again, Tony appeared completely normal despite having his food schedule rearranged. This six hour thing was going to work.

She paced the room in an attempt to dispel any nervous energy. She was going to have to build him someplace else to live and fast. Unfortunately, he was still having breathing problems and she was worried that there had been some permanent damage during his delivery. She kept her fingers crossed and sealed him back into his chamber. She wasn’t heading into work today, but she did have some errands to run.

Once her morning ritual was complete, she closed and locked up the house. She left her home debating on where to go first. All houses had their own personal access to the main
tunnel system and her home was very close to a tram stop. Once she got there, she had intended to take the northbound tram to the Acryllium factory, but instead she found herself going southbound. The tram that lead towards Alec’s apartment.

Kristen reached Alec’s door within ten minutes of getting off the tram. She easily made it up the three flights of stairs, down the hall and to his front door, but then stopped. She had a key, but didn’t know if she felt comfortable using it.

Her conscience was still biting at her for giving Alec a fake key, but she never figured he’d have to use it. He’d had it for two years and never once tried. She’d always been prepared for him to come over, except this last time. Why didn’t he call first? He’d always called, she knew that, but she hadn’t even considered that something might have been wrong. It never occurred to her that he had stopped by because he needed to and all she had done was show him the door.

She stuck her key in the doorknob and held it there. She had only used her key once, a few nights ago for his birthday, but it somehow felt foreign to her. Instead of turning, she pulled it back out and stared at the door for a few more minutes. She knew why she was there, but she was scared. Everything she’d told him over the last several weeks had been riddled with lies and she needed to confess. If things were going to work between them, she had to go into it with a clean conscience.

Kristen knocked on his door. First, quietly, but when no one answered, it grew into a bang. She stood there for a few more moments, stunned that Alec wasn’t home. He didn’t work on Thursdays and she had just assumed that was where he would be, it was incredibly early in the morning. She looked at her watch and figured she had time to kill before she
needed to get back to Tony. So, she did something she never thought she’d be capable of; she sat outside his door and waited.

* * * * *

Alec had been leaning against Kristen’s door for almost an hour when he decided to give up and go home. He didn’t know why she wasn’t there. He had tried her home number but with no answer. He called her at the office and Chloe had told him that she was going to be out the rest of the week, that she should be at home. It made no sense. The majority of businesses weren’t open yet and if she wasn’t at work, where was she? Self-doubt flooded his system again and he stood to leave.

A loud, crashing noise accompanied the screeching of metal against metal. Alec didn’t know what to do, but he was not leaving. He circled the side of the house, tracing the noise to its origin in Kristen’s storage area, banging on the metal and shouting for her every few paces. She’d once told him she used the area for research. While he searched for a way in, his mind conjured up images of Kristen in danger or worse.

He’d made his way around the entire premise only to discover there were no windows and no doors. The only way in would be through the tiny connection it made to the house. He said a quick apology to Kristen as he kicked in her front door. It took a few tries, but finally the latch bent and gave. He quickly closed the door behind him as best he could and continued through her house and past her meal bar storage area. He had been in her house enough times to know the layout and went back to where the garage connection was. He
stood, astonished at the locking techniques used on this meager door. What in the hell she was hiding back there?

He undid as many locks as he could, but several called for keys and ID scans. He called out as he pounded on the door. He was dead-ended and not getting into that room. He listened patiently for some indication of what had happened, what had crashed. But, no more distinguishable noises came. Whatever had happened, he could be of no further help.

Alec activated her phone imager and began to dial the Coin Protection Unit when an idea occurred to him. He quickly hit the disconnect button and stepped over to the heavily bolted door. Once there, he opened his tablet and set it to ping Kristen’s. If her tablet was within 150 feet of him, it would respond. If not, there was no way she was in that room. Everything Kristen fought to keep track of was in that tiny handheld computer, and even despite the regulations insisting everyone carry it at all times, she was never without it.

He sent the command, now it was a waiting game. Though the tablets were made for their signal to penetrate the large quantities of metal, he didn’t know how much other equipment she had in that room. Everything that connected with a satellite server would be another item to check off its list as the little machine searched for her.

A text box appeared, “Search In Progress… Please Wait.” Seeing as how he had kicked in her door, waiting was the only thing he was going to be able to do. Fortunately, it didn’t take too long before the negative, but comforting, results appeared. He read the words before exhaling deeply.

“Tablet Not Found.”

She wasn’t there.
He wandered around her home while he waited. She lacked as many amenities as he did and the simplicity of her home appealed to him. Everything was clean and tidy as he passed through the front room, the bedroom and the bathroom. It was the last room that he came to that looked as though he might live there. Her study was a mess. Books were jumbled here and there and he opted to just close the door and leave everything be. She was the only other person he’d ever met that had as many books as he did.

He lay down on her couch and contemplated turning on the news screen in front of him, but decided against it. He didn’t get along with electronics too well. Instead, he pulled a tiny box out of his pocket and opened at it. He had fought for a long time over what the perfect ring would be. A traditional engagement ring had previously held precious stones, typically diamonds. The only way to get those now was to have one willed to you from an older relative. When he had started dating Kristen, his mother had given him a few gold bands that had been in his family, but the stones had been removed a long time ago.

About six months ago, he went to the coin’s metal smith and contracted him to melt down the old rings into one beautiful one he could be proud to give to the woman he loved. His plan had been to pick a random time and place and just propose, but it never felt right to him. He wanted it to be absolutely perfect so now he had been trying to plan an event. Though, virtually every time he had tried to do something, Kristen had backed out. These last few months had been very busy for her and she continually shut him out of her work life. It didn’t bode well that he’d arrived at her house and found a room sealed off tighter than most United Corporation Facilities. He’d begun thinking that he’d been left out of more than he was could have possibly imagined.
He pulled the ring from its box and held it in between his thumb and forefinger, moving it so it sparkled in the light. On the inside of the ring he had a special design carved and it was very difficult to see unless you knew it was there. He followed the etching of a DNA double helix strand. He thought it could be their private joke. Otherwise, it was just a gold band. Nothing fancy, nothing that would get in the way of her work. He placed it around the top half of his pointer finger and rotated it while he closed his eyes and waited for Kristen to come home.

* * * * *

Kristen approached her front door with caution. She could tell it had been kicked in, but didn’t know if the intruder was still inside or not. She knew that no one would be able to get to Tony, but then a loud crash sounded from his area, followed by the faintest growl. He was out of his incubator.

All apprehension aside, Kristen flew through her front door, crashing it into the opposite wall. She darted through her meal-bar storage and to the connecting room of the garage. She saw that some of the locks were undone, but none of the major ones. She struggled to quickly open the doors, completely oblivious to Alec following her.

She got all the way through her personal security and ran to Tony, lying helpless on the floor while he struggled for air. An alarm sounded as Alec stepped through the insta-door. He had not been cleared for access to the room, but had shadowed in behind Kristen.
She was on the floor crying when the alarm forced her to turn towards the door. Alec saw the motionless cub on the floor next to her and every instinct inside him yelled at him to turn and leave. All of her secrecy had become clear in that one instant, but he couldn’t move.

“Alec.” The half gasped word ripped through the wailing of the security alarm. Kristen reached into her pocket and pulled out a tiny remote. She pointed it at the door and the noise stopped and the wall re-appeared behind him. He smacked his hand on the wall, knowing that he was stuck here until Kristen let him out.

“This is what you’ve been hiding?” He asked. His voice held no emotion, he betrayed no feeling whatsoever.

“Alec, it’s not like that.” She was now cradling Tony in her lap. His tiny heart was beating fast and his lungs struggled with the shallow breaths that kept him alive. “Please, Tony has to be back into a pressurized environment. His lungs aren’t fully developed yet.”

“His lungs are fine.” He crouched down, hesitant to touch the 38 or so pounds of tiger in her lap. “How old is he, eight weeks? His lungs are done growing.”

“He’s only three days old.” She was yelling the information at him. Fear was taking over any rational response she could produce at the moment.

“Look at him, there is no way he’s only three days old.” Alec stood back up and crossed his arms. If she was going to continue to lie to him then there was no way he was going to listen.

“I swear to you, he is only about 72 hours old. Something went wrong with his development, he’s aging too fast.”

“Shit.” Alec turned his back on the scene and faced the wall. He smacked his hand against the wall, the sting of pain bringing him back to his senses.
“Alec, please.” Kristen pleaded from the floor. “I can’t do this alone. I need you.”

They were the words he’d been desperately waiting to hear, but he never imagined this would be the scenario in which she’d use them. He took Tony from her arms and quickly cleared off an area next to her computer, setting Tony on the counter. He silently unhooked the compressed air tank from the broken bits of incubator and reattached the scuba mask. The full face mask hardly fit over his head, but he was able to get it over his nose and throat. He used his hands to help complete the seal.

Kristen followed Alec to the counter and waited until his hands were secure. She slowly turned the valve on the oxygen tank and listened as the oxygen hissed out and into the tiny cub’s lungs. The tiger struggled against his restraints once his deprived body was breathing again and they fought to hold him still, unsure of what their next move was.

“He’s a little fighter. I think he’s going to be ok.” Alec was trying to sound positive, but inside he was fuming. He hadn’t forgotten that Kristen had been lying to him.

“But, what now? He broke his chamber and I don’t think you want to stand there forever.” Kristen’s rational thought was taking over. She needed to solve problems.

“Actually, we have a bigger predicament at the moment.” Alec tilted his head towards the air tank. “Do you have another one of these?”

“Huh?” Kristen looked at him to figure out what he was talking about. “Oh, those. No, but it should be good for at least another week, it’s been on a very slow leak.”

“Then it got damaged in the fall. He only has about fifteen more minutes at this pace.”

“What!” Kristen walked back over to the tank. She saw the needle in the red zone.

“Come on, it will be ok. I have one.”
“Tell me where. I’ll go get it.” Kristen was ready to jump out the door just a soon as he gave the go ahead.

“It’s not that easy,” Alec continued. “First of all, it’s locked up in my storage space. Secondly, it will take at least ten minutes just to get there. You’ll never get back in time.”

Kristen tried to fit her hands around the mask where Alec’s were. “Ok then, you go.” Her hands were no where near as big as his and could not complete the seal. Tony began to struggle as he was losing air.

“Kristen, you aren’t listening to me. Neither of us could go and be back in time. The only way to do this is if we take him with us.” Alec placed his hands next to Kristen’s but pulled away when they touched. Her heart sank as she backed off to let him continue to seal Tony’s mask.

“Alec, you know we can’t. No one knows he exists. Do you know what could happen if someone saw us.”

“If we don’t take this chance, he will die. It’s up to you.”

Before he had even finished talking, Kristen was scanning her palm into the panel, opening up the insta-door. She turned back over her shoulder, a final tear spilling from her eye. “Let’s go.”
Chapter 6

Alec and Kristen risk the early-morning venture out into the tunnel system with Tony to find more oxygen. Alec remembers the Public Works building and its collection of scuba gear from the time spent with his friend Mitch. He breaks in, steals an oxygen tank and they get Tony back home, safe. The only person to see them while they are out is Chloe. Alec and Kristen fight, he leaves and we get back story behind his fear of the safety bays and how they relate to the death of his parents. Meanwhile, Chloe shows up at Kristen’s, they argue and Kristen gives in, allowing Chloe to see Tony. Chloe’s perspective changes.

Chapter 7

Alec gets busted by the Coin’s version of the police for stealing. He gets taken to the station and adjusts his story to cover for Kristen. He receives a slap on the wrist and pays a credit fine. After the police, Alec goes home to crash. Kristen, believing Tony to be as docile as a house cat, gets bit, but Chloe is still there and helps. Together they build his a new, larger, makeshift enclosure. Just something he can live in. Alec returns to Kristen’s place, but she’s locked inside her garage again.

Chapter 8

Mikey discovers a small glitch in the environment program he’s working on, but decides to keep it to himself. He explains how powerful the human mind is in making the body believe certain things. Believes his holo-world technology is going to change everything. He calls Kristen, but Alec answers so he plays it off as if he was trying to reach Alec in the first place. He needs Alec to run another simulation. Finally, Kristen returns from
the locked room and he sees she’s been injured, they argue, she hides in the bathroom. Panicked at the thought of losing her, possibly forever, he leaves the ring and a note and goes to Mikey’s place to run another simulation. Kristen finds the ring and shows up a Mikey’s to find him. Alec sees that they know each other and assumes they are having an affair. He believes he’s been used only to help create an environment for Tony. He storms out, hurt, and ready to purge Kristen from his life. He tries to return some of her things, but she and Mikey are there when he returns. She’s wearing the ring and they get everything figured out again.

Chapter 9

With all secrets divulged, Alec officially moves into Kristen’s place and she sets all of the locks to accept his ID. Alec runs another simulation and mildly injures himself by running into a tree. He’s shocked that it actually hurt, being light and all, but Mikey explains that his brain believes it to be true. The program is finished for Tony and the four of them, Alec, Kristen, Mikey and Chloe convert her once storage area into a tiger enclosure. Chloe and Mikey hit it off. They work out the logistics of moving Tony.

Chapter 10

Once Mikey gets the system set up, he walks Chloe home. Alec decides the system needs a test run and Kristen gets pulled in with him. They have a romp in grass while Mikey is away, but become embarrassed to discover he came back sooner than expected, shutting down the system so they can find their way out. With everything up and running they return Tony to his permanent enclosure. Tony is full grown and aging more and more quickly.
Chapter 11

Alec and Kristen work together to set up a schedule for Tony maintenance. In between, he is researching his book and she is working with Chloe on the corn project. She has to explain to Alec that if this works, they could grow corn again. This covers several days and depicts Tony settling into old age. Then, finally, his monitoring alarms go off, he’s dying. Alec rushes in to be with him while Kristen tries to shut down the simulation, but something is wrong with her tablet and it’s not responding. She tries to contact Mikey, but with no luck, she’s stuck helplessly watching Tony die.

Alec is still trapped inside, sad and angry. Angry that Tony wasn’t a “real” tiger, one that could hunt and stalk. He’d forgotten the machine used to create the environment was still scanning Alec’s brain activity. He wanted a real tiger, it created a real tiger. And, it cost Alec his life. Mikey shows up and tries to sort out the macabre situation. They have to stage a scene, hide a tiger and call the police.

Chapter 12

The police arrive and rule Alec’s death an accident. Kristen disappears for a while, but finally shows back up at Mikey’s. He calls her, desperate to talk because he’s discovered something. Though they shut down the holo-program, the world has continued to evolve. When they turned on the program again, they discovered that Alec was still alive inside the system. Against Mikey’s wishes, Kristen enters the holo-world, convinced that Alec would never let anything harm her. Inside the system, it really is Alec and with the help of Mikey’s drugs, he’s as real as the day he died. Throughout the process of creating the holo-worlds, the computer had completely mapped his brain. He’d been trying to get their attention so he
could tell them to destroy the program. If not, it would lead to much more pain. After strong protest, she agreed and returned to pass the message on to Mikey who also finally agreed.

**Epilogue**

Three months have passed since Alec died and Kristen is standing in front of the Familial and Population Court. She is unbelievably pregnant and it is unknown as to how she bypassed the birth control measures the Coins take. After a DNA test proves Alec to be the father, they agree to let her keep the new baby to replace its father’s place on the coin.

She returns to Mikey’s to share the good news where she and Chloe figure out that the holo-helper must have counteracted the United Corporations birth control allowing her to conceive. During their discussion, Mikey excuses himself for a moment. He returns to his office and sits at his desk. After making sure that Kristen and Chloe are preoccupied, he turns on his computer, opens a program and types, “It’s a girl.”