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## Jameson's Story: A Tale of the Human Condition Through Fiction

Steven Kubitza  
skubitz@bgsu.edu

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Steven Kubitza

## How I Got Here and Where I'm Going

I have written just over 27,000 words and I still have so many more to write. Then comes the part where I print off every single page and edit until I cannot edit anymore. I hope to have my final draft before I walk on stage for commencement in just under eight months. But that is the end of this entire process. Let's jump to the beginning. I have always wanted to write a book. I think writing stories and creating new worlds for people to explore is one of the greatest things a person can do. The only issue is that I focused less on the actual writing and more on the idea of creating one of these worlds. I hope I can look back when I am older and see this Honors Project as the start of a new (book pun) chapter in my life. One where I began to work on my craft and make it be more than just a hobby, or a school project that ends with the semester.

When it came time to begin planning my Honors Project, I admittedly had zero idea at all where this story would go. My original pitch was a young investigative journalist who discovers that the football league he covers is fixed. That's it. It sounds like an interesting concept to me, but it is obviously not what my story is about. I took that concept and honestly did very little until I actually began planning in the fall. I could have written a lot and had something coming into the school year, but so it goes. The planning I did do in the summer was all about the world I thought I was creating. I covered the logistics of The League and none of this made it into the story. However, it is some background info that I could expand on if I were ever to take this story further. What it did do was get my mind on the story and allow me to get some sense of this world. The "lightweight dystopian" factor began to see its inception at this point in time.

So after my summer of doing very little, I really got excited to begin working on the story. The pre-writing stage was necessary, as I think it helped me avoid a completely aimless

start to the story. Much of what I came up with was not used but it still helped with the development of the characters. This was especially true with Jameson, as he was the main character I focused on during this stage. Once I actually began to write the story, the pre-writing was helpful but I still had little direction. I was not into the story as much as I should have been. The characters were bland and everything seemed rushed. That is why I decided to scrap what I had during winter break and re-write the beginning of the story. It seemed a bit rash at the time, but I knew I could put together something better than what I had. I feel the same thing may happen once I finish this current draft. I am not going to start over again, but there may be some parts I decide to do away with, or change greatly. The difference now is that I have a clear idea of the characters in my head and I am not just randomly including action. As I have explained many times, I believe that the characters are driving the story, as opposed to me deciding what they will do. Considering I have only been dealing with the parallel narrator for a few months, I find this method to be best as to avoid forced storytelling. More is learned about him as the story goes on, which works perfectly as I am learning more about him as well.

This project has given me a sense of the difficult process of writing a book. From the initial idea to getting words on the page is much more grueling than I could have ever imagined, and I am glad I had this experience at such a young age. I will finish the story during the summer. I have a great deal of time to work on it, so I would like to be done sometime around mid-July. After that I will work on the draft and try to make it the best it can be. I plan on going through page by page to improve it the best I can. I will give it to a few people at home, those whose opinions I trust, so they can give me some honest feedback. Once I am confident with the draft, which I would like to be before winter commencement but I cannot really foresee how long the process will take, I would like to send out query letters. I am not naïve enough to think

that I will send one and it will come back a success, but I want to push this final story as long as I can because of the amount of work I put into it and the fact I think it should be somewhat interesting to read. If nothing else, this project has given me a jumpstart on my, hopefully lucrative, writing career moving forward.

### Jameson's Story

I found him. I finally found him. Well, not exactly *him*, but I found what I needed from him. Out here in the only place he ever found comfortable. I find it funny really. I find it funny that he came here, knowing exactly what would happen. It was almost as if he gave up without really giving up. An agnostic way to look at the situation I suppose, if I relate it to the ideas of religion my people used to think of as so important. "The Old God", as everyone on the other side of the former truce states. Not that they knew about the truce at all, except from a crazy story they may have heard from those who stand outside the games as the droves pour out en route to their homes where they will talk about the game and then to their pitiful gathering places they call a "church", although it is no church of mine, to talk about the game some more. And they repeat. And repeat. And repeat. Seems perfectly normal to the hundreds of millions in this land, on that side of the truce of course, but it is was always pure insanity to my people and would be to the rest of the world, if they only knew. A man I used to know, he came to us from the other side. He was making plans to make a foolish decision, but one that could benefit my people. I took this information and had him tied up for three days while we figured out what to do with him. I never trusted anyone from The League. Killing him may have been our easiest option, but I used the truce as my guide. I let him live and he turned out to be my closest friend

until just a few days ago. Following the rules was always my mentality, but things change and agreements are nothing more than pieces of paper that can be burned away in the amount of time it takes for a man to breath his final breaths after meeting the man who was destined to end his life. Not that I am a big believer in destiny, but who is to say it does not exist?

When I arrived here I knew I was too late. There was no sign of any struggle, but I just knew. Nothing in his cabin was overturned, and it actually looked like the maid had just come and cleaned up the place. I never thought I would end up finding what I did. I did not even check the cabin right away. I pride myself on thinking abstractly in situations that require me to act like a detective, but common sense usually laughs in the face of such a notion. I started off down by the stream that cuts through the grass about a quarter mile back of the cabin. A rather ugly stream if you ask me. He was probably the only person in the whole damn country who liked this place as much as he did. I would not expect anything less from the son of a foreigner. His father never quite fit in here, but I cannot blame him a bit. This land is no place for outsiders. I look at it like this: There is a lion that is not the strongest in his pride, but he will be one day. He just needs time to develop his life as a lion, or whatever it is lions improve at as their lives go on. One day, a pack of rams stop by, clearly foreign to the region. The rams invite the lion to join them, and attain great glory if he comes. The lion has no attachments in his pride and leaves with the rams. He crosses great distances and many terrains to arrive at the home of the rams. Once he arrives he is immediately out of place and he can tell. Everyone looks at him lion he is different, but it does not bother him right away because he would feel the same if a ram had joined his pride back in his home. The lion gets by for a while, but one day the leader of the rams, who came to speak to him originally, tells the lion that it is time to prove himself. He is taken to the peak of the largest mountain in the area occupied by the rams, and he watches one after another

mindlessly butt heads until one can no longer stand. The crowd at this event features every single ram in the pack that the lion lives with. Everyone screams and yells and cheers for their favorite in each barbaric battle. The lion just stares in disbelief at the bloodthirsty crowd, who even cheers when one ram is unable to rise and is deemed dead on the spot. They cheer as the child of this ram runs up to his father and sees the blood trickling out of his mouth as the life leaves his eyes. This brutality goes on for an hour, with the prize being nothing more than bragging rights. Those who win are simply less injured than those who lose. It is the lion's turn to go into battle and he just starts laughing. The leader of the rams asks him what is the problem and the lion just says that he cannot take part in such a foolish act. The entire crowd goes silent as if the lion had just killed their leader. The leader of the rams demands that the lion take part, but the lion refuses. Shouts of "coward" rain down from the crowd as the sun sets over the rocky peak. The leader tells the lion that he can either choose to take part, or be forced to live out his days alone, on a mountain so treacherous that he will never be able to escape. The lion knows that he has nothing to escape to, and refuses to take part in a battle that will surely see him injured, so he chooses the exile. The crowd is shocked into silence, except for one. A soft cry is heard among the crowd. Everyone turns to see a meek female ram, near the back, who is doing best to hold back the tears that single her out as the source of the noise. The looks only last a few seconds before the attention is directed back toward the lion. He is led away to begin the march to his exile when it finally dawns on him that there is someone in the world who cares about him. He never had a family or a real place to call home, but as he lived out his years in exile he only wondered what could have been if he would have followed the orders and remained with those who saw such promise in him. He spent his days dreaming about what it would have been like to

be with another being, to feel something for another being. Lion or ram, it was something he never knew and something he would never know.

I made my way back from the water and into the woods. That lasted a good five minutes before I saw a deer with antlers large enough to pierce me from a yard away, so I decided the woods were no place for me. It was also the first deer I had ever seen so I figured I would not take my chances. I moved out of the woods and decided to go give the cabin a thorough look, since my only investigation of the cabin to that point had been a search for useless clues such as tracks or items strewn across the wooden floor that creaked every third step as if on cue. It was a rather sad place with no personal belongings or anything to really make it stand out as his own. That was when I saw it. The sign is something I saw being used every day with my people, but never by an outsider. I lifted it up and sure enough there it was. The record. The record of events that would help me show people what is really going on around them. I wish I could thank, Mr. Brody, but getting his story out to others will have to do for now.

The fact that I am writing this in my cabin in the middle of The Seclusion makes perfect sense. I should have never left. I never did like my father, but at least we were safe here. We only spent a year here and it was not all that bad, it was just so boring. When he actually paid me some attention he would talk about how the beauty of this area was nothing to his home. He would tell me about how he could drive for miles and see no people. I thought this sounded like the most horrible existence ever, outside of my own at the time. He would stare at the trees at the front of the woods and just marvel at them for hours. I find myself doing the same now. I have done a lot of things lately that are eerily similar to what my father did. Must have been my destiny, not that I would normally believe in such a thing, but then again it seems that I learn

something new every day about how my life is a lie so why not give destiny a try. Why not say that it was my destiny to end up here, with nowhere to go and no time to go anywhere? Then again, I may have plenty of time but it is not my time, it is theirs. The watch I wore around my wrist is in a far better place buried in the mud than it would have been around my wrist reminding me that my life is on someone else's watch.

I am not even upset with the current situation. I could sit around and cry and question each and every decision I made up to this point, but I have already shed enough tears and analyzed my decisions to the point where I could write an entire record of them. So I am. But I am not questioning my decisions, I am just writing everything down in case one of them is able to find my story. I know that they are out there, just not where they are. Based on everything I have found out, it would not surprise me if they have been watching me the whole time too.

They would have seen me make the same trip for the past three days. I wake up and go fishing in the stream where I caught my first fish, and will undoubtedly catch my last. I brought some food with me but it is nice to get my own meal. Not that I am a true member of The Seclusion, but I just don't want to have to use my emergency supplies just yet. I will save that for when the natives realize there are fewer fish coming downstream and decide to check out the issue. My father got along great with the natives once they figured out he was an outsider, just as they had become. He would go off with them and share food at their fires and drink until his head throbbed so bad from the rising sun that he had to drink more until the sun clocked out and the moon made its nightly appearance. He would always tell me how insignificant the problems of the outside world were and how those in society who had never seen The Seclusion were just small parts of a machine running on a specific set of instructions. This conversation usually happened during the daytime drinking portion of his day. I would wait up all night, as I never got

near the natives because they always gave me nightmares, hoping that he would not come back. I was not scared or even angry, I would just dream about how my life would be different. I could go and find my mom and we could be happy like we were before she left. I was so young but I remember it being better than it was with my dad.

So I guess I will just start at the beginning and for as long as I can. There isn't much else to do here. I cleared this cabin out years ago after the verdict and my dad was sent to Alaska. It is not even that I want to see him, but just knowing that he lost the same battle I did is frustrating. No matter what he is still my dad and I wish I could have given our name some glory as he said it had back in his true home. Perhaps I will be seeing him again very soon.

Fired. Indefinite leave was the official term, but fired was a more accurate description of how I saw the situation. Everything had been normal enough up to that point. I woke up to the sound of the shower running and an empty spot in bed next to me that was left by Mara so she could once again start her day before the sun came up. I had no choice but to do the same or face the reality of explaining to Jenks why I was late for work once again.

I had yet to tell Mara that I was a bit nervous going into work because of what I had written the night before. Living and working with someone usually leads to an absence of even the possibility of secrets, but I did my best to keep her in the dark as to what I had written the night before. Not that she even cared that morning. We got into another fight about my dad and she just stormed off and read another one of her books that deal with space and as she likes to say, "the futility of human life." The fights always went the same. Mara would tell me that we have to take a trip to see and talk to my dad about what he did, but I always refuse and she goes on about how we are all doomed and how I am just another piece of the overall puzzle refusing to be different.

We exchanged a quick glance as she got ready and we were on our way to work. It was Monday so the streets were still filled with the usual piles of streamers and confetti that fell from the tops of the towers following a win. The Vipers opened the season with a huge win over Boston and the town absolutely lost it. I even could admit to getting a bit excited toward the end, although cheering in the press box is a grave sin in any city.

We got to work and Mara got out of the car and made it inside before I could even gather my things. By the time I made it inside I thought to stop in Jenks' office really quick to apologize but Jess told me that I actually had a meeting with him at 9. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at that point. Instead of sitting down and checking my comments I decided the best way to spend the hour before the meeting was to watch tape of the previous day's game. Fans never knew the great secret held by us journalists. Rumors existed but few really believed that journalists were given files of each game that could be viewed over and over for exactly one week before they were deleted automatically. I never thought it was too spectacular myself, but those who were not fortunate enough to attend games had to rely on radio broadcasts, so I guess I could count myself as a bit ungrateful at the time.

There was one play that I could not stop watching that day. It was the final play of the game and it was one that was being talked about by every single person in town, and would be talked to until next Sunday, when all video evidence would be erased from existence and a new play would take its spot for a week. Mark Watkins was sprinting down the sideline when a Vipers' defensive back fell down. The crowd gasped as they saw the game slip away before their eyes. The ball was lofted in Watkins' direction and he had zero resistance to the end zone. The gasp led to total silence as the ball was making its descent as the clock ticked off its final seconds. But Watkins did not break the hearts of the 100,000 in attendance nor the millions

listening across town, because he did something he had never done before. He dropped the pass. The crowd roared so loudly it was rumored that an earthquake was registered in the area. Watkins walked to the locker room with his head down as the Vipers stormed the field in celebration. The streamers and confetti showered the stadium and the town alike, as the party did not stop until the sun rose on that Monday morning.

Jess came over to let me know that Jenks was ready for me a few minutes before 9. Something seemed a bit off that day. Jenks was my boss but he always made sure to come by and talk to the staff every morning instead of sending his secretary to do everything. I walked into his office and my initial thoughts were proven correct. Jenks was sitting at his desk staring straight ahead, while his right foot tapped the floor in perfect rhythm with his fingers on his desk. I remembered that he had to leave early on Friday to attend to his daughter who never seems to be out of the hospital, so my lateness must have only contributed to his frustration.

“Jenks, I’m really sorry about being late to work last week, I…”

“Let me stop you right there, Jameson.”

I guess I was wrong.

“Have you checked the site to look at your article?”

I didn’t want to admit that I failed to do so and watched a single play over and over again for an hour but it was no time for lying, so I just shook my head like I was caught cheating on a test in first-year schooling.

Jenks continued on. “That is because it only made it online for two minutes before it was taken down for its absolutely asinine content.”

“Jenks, I really have no idea what you are talking about.”

I did have a sense of what he was talking about, or so I thought. I had written my usual game recap but I put a few paragraphs in there about how the Vipers were lucky to win because they are fielding their worst roster in years. The retirement of Michaels left the rookie Smith at quarterback. The city loves him because he is a local kid, but I did not see him as anything special. I kept it quiet from Mara because I wanted to see the online reaction first, but two minutes online was not exactly what I had in mind.

“I just don’t think Smith is going to lead them to as much success as Michaels did. Sorry if I was out of line, but I thought it was a fair thing to say.”

The tapping of both foot and fingers stopped and Jenks gave me a puzzled look.

“Do you think I called you in here about that? Articles don’t get pulled for having opinions on the players, that’s what I want you to write. It got pulled for that shit you wrote at the end.”

The end of my articles always had a “Final Thoughts” section with bulleted points on the game, but it was something I did every week. It was not some unapproved radical manifesto I decided to put in last night.

“My final thoughts?”

“No. Well yes, part of that. You don’t recall writing about how the game was fixed?”

Damn. I finally figured out why I was called in to his office. It was only a sentence, but to Jenks it was clearly much more. I wrote in on a whim and even laughed as I hit submit. Since Jenks had personal matter to attend to he let me post my own article, without him seeing it first, which is something I had done several times before.

“It was just an offhanded thought about Watkins and his drop. You know that was ridiculous. He was flawless in college.”

“I did not see the game and I do not care what you think about that play. You cannot write things that call into question such ridiculous claims.”

I just stood there because I honestly had nothing to say. For the past three years Jenks was my editor, and he never had such a negative reaction to anything I had written for the site. He was never easy on me, but the criticism was always more constructive than degrading.

“Let me explain this to you, Jameson.” Jenks stood up from his desk and walked over to his bookshelf and grabbed the picture of his daughter. “This is all I care about in the world. She is the one reason I continue to work this job after so many years of doing the same thing over and over until I can barely stand seeing any of you around the office. There are things about my job that you will never understand. The pressures I face from those above me would be enough to make you piss yourself and go hide until you got a job as a street cleaner or decided that living was just not for you anymore. But I keep going because my daughter is sick. My wife and I, who you never got to meet, brought her into this world and she is not well. Now whose fault is that? Well, my wife is currently rotting in the soil so I guess it is just me who has to answer for my daughter’s condition. I spend more money on her medical bills than I’ve spent on myself these past few years, but I have to keep paying and stressing myself out to the point where an ulcer is just as regular as a hangnail. You can’t understand any of this because you are just a kid. You may think that you are all grown because you have a job but you are nothing. So when I get a call late Sunday night while I am sitting with my daughter telling her that everything is going to be alright for the seventh time that week, I tend to get a bit frustrated. When the call is from my superior at The League, I tend to get a bit more frustrated. And when the call is about how one of my writers posted some bullshit about how the organization that pays me and allows me to keep my daughter alive is a farce, I tend to reach a point of not return in my frustration. So Jameson,

get out of my office and do not even think of stepping foot in this building until I say you can return.”

Jenks started at the picture of his daughter, with tears welling up in his eyes, until I walked out the door. I was in so much shock that I didn't even think to go tell Mara. She would only be more mad at me so I just walked outside and began the three-mile walk home.

The article. A perfect example of how society is being controlled to fit an agenda. It was a completely harmless piece that would have been a non-issue if not for the fools in charge who treat criticism as treason. Taking it down only made it more noticeable for those who had actually seen it before it went away. Jameson had no idea at the time but it put him on our radar. Our servers do not exactly conform to the rules seen with the others, so his work lived on for more than the several seconds it was online. It was exactly seven seconds, but it did not matter because we had it permanently. But as I said it was hardly a revolutionary piece of writing. It put him on our radar but it did not make us try to contact him right away in order to protect him by having him join us. The Martins piece from two years ago only went live for thirty seconds before it was taken down, and by the time we got to him he was already gone from his home in the middle of the night. The official report was that he went missing, and people actually bought it. Not my people, but those who think jerseys are the only form of clothing to wear in public. I never understood the worshipping of other individuals. Playing football does not make one a god. Being a god makes one a god. The god I worship is a true god, and one that used to be so influential in this formerly great land before The War was fought and won. His presence faded away and left us with the land I currently inhabit, where I must hide in order to live a life that was lived by generations of people in this country since its inception. A land where writing,

“Watkins dropping that pass can only be explained by a script that had to be followed,” can put you on a government watch list.

Mara called me a few times once she realized I was not at work, so I won the fight that day. I ignored her calls until I got home because I was still in a bit of a haze on the walk home. The sights I passed were nothing out of the ordinary. The fact that every person was in a jersey or a jersey shirt, depending on one’s price range, was nothing out of the ordinary. The shops were nothing to think twice about either. “The official team shop of The League” was right next to “Smith’s Shoes” aka “The official shoe sponsor of The League.” The League was such a part of my life back then, I never stopped to think that it might have been nice to have a store to walk in to that was not associated with the overbearing organization. There was one place that was all to its own. It was a place where Mara found peace, and where I found Mara. It was more of an invitation that I responded to but still, it was where I found out who she really was.

“Meet me at the coffee shop that looks like it is a library, but not a nice one. More like one that doesn’t belong in this time and place.” So I did. It was just over three years ago when the new girl at work said those words to me. I had heard about the coffee shop many times, but it was never anywhere I would ever go to. All I ever knew was football. Why would I go into a coffee shop that could be mistaken for a library? I had never even been in a library before. But I went. I remember walking in, terribly nervous. No one ever taught me how to dress up for a date so I showed up with a shirt and tie on like I was going to the final-year formal, which I never attended. There she was, sitting alone at a table reading a book that she went on to tell me was about the great expanses of the universe, so I just smiled and nodded so I looked somewhat intelligent. The shirt and tie certainly helped that illusion. As I started awkwardly making my

way in her direction she turned and smiled, possibly out of happiness but likely out of amusement at my outfit. We sat there for five hours. Most of the time was spent in silence, but the good kind. There are two types of silence. One is the kind that occurs when being forced to spend time with someone you absolutely despise. The hands on the clock are your greatest friend and also your greatest enemy. The other type occurs when you are spending time with someone who you are so fascinated with, that words would only spoil the moment. The clock is only an enemy in this situation, the same way it continues to be one to me in my current state.

I got home and immediately pulled out my laptop so I could prove to myself that I was not crazy. I know that something was up with that Watkins drop, and if I could only show others the play, maybe they would believe me. I opened up the folder and sure enough, all my files were deleted. My plan was shot down after about ten seconds of being in existence. It makes sense to me now even though at the time I could only yell and proceed to break my laptop by throwing it at the wall. A bit reactionary, but that laptop was no good to me anymore. If files could be pulled from it, there was no reason to keep it in my possession. After about ten minutes of checking out the damage to the wall I called Mara and told her I was home. She kept asking questions but all I told her I was that I was home and I hung up.

Mara came in to the sight of me sitting cross-legged on the floor holding what remained of my laptop. I expected to see pity in her eyes but what I saw was much different. Excitement was what I saw in her face as she smiled at me, waiting for me to ask her why she seemed so happy after I had damaged our house. I continued my short bout of silence and let her take the lead.

“Jess told me what happened, Jameson.”

“You seem happy.”

Her smile grew larger as she knelt down next to me and took the remnant of the laptop out of my hands and set them down. “Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

“Well I no longer have a job and we aren’t exactly well off. And I made it worse by putting that hole in the wall.”

“Screw money. Screw the wall.” Here excitement continued to build. “You did something no one else had the courage to do. We can do something about all of this. Both of us can change the lives of everyone around us.”

“Mara, the only thing I did was get fired.”

She stood up and walked over to the kitchen table where one of her books with the worn binding was sitting, waiting to be given attention like a dog who sits by the window all day, patience being its strongest ally. It was a book I had seen her read countless times. I never did quite understand the act of rereading something you had already read. There were so many things out there, yet she wanted to keep reading the same story she knew so well.

“With one sentence you took the entirety of *The League* and made it no greater than this book. Everything in here is made up, simply fiction. *The League* is just the same. Nothing that happens on the field is natural, it all comes from a script.”

“Mara, please stop. I was just reaching for reasons why Watkins dropped that pass. I never said the whole institution was a sham, I was just writing something that might spark discussion.”

“But it did more than spark discussion. It got you fired.”

She was always so gentle in the way she addressed sensitive subjects.

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“Don’t you see? They made a mistake by firing you. If they paid that sentence no attention then it would quickly pass over. But they messed up.”

“The only one who messed up was me. I should have never put Jenks in that position with his bosses.”

“His bosses work for The League!” Mara showed more emotion in this several minute conversation that she had shown the past few weeks. I wish I could have been more excited to see her acting this way, but it was just another end of the extreme. She went from total silence to sounding insane. I had unpaid bills on my mind while she had corruption on hers.

“You don’t know who his bosses are, no one does. And they probably own the site, they don’t work for The League. It’s an independent web site you know that.”

“Do you think we sit around all day and do nothing in programming? The code we use is not code that can be used by the average person or business. This is the most secure coding I have ever seen.”

“So why weren’t you bringing this up until now?”

There was a movie I saw once that left me sitting in the theater for thirty minutes after the credits rolled and the anthem of The League had played, signaling the official end of the film. I didn’t stay because I was soaking in the movie. I stayed because I was too scared to go home. The film was about this couple that met after their respective divorces. Neither had kids, nor wanted to be married again. But after the time they spent together the man realized that he really wanted to spend his life with this woman. A woman who he had grown to love after he thought love was nothing more than an idea used to help businesses make extra money around the holiday. He goes home one night to tell her that he wants to marry her but she is just sitting quietly on the floor in complete darkness. As soon as he started to walk toward her she shot and

killed him before he even realized that the woman he fell for was someone he never really knew. Fortunately, Mara never killed me but I did realize that the girl from the bookstore was not who I thought she was.

“Jameson, there are a few of us in the department who met someone from a different group of people. They don’t have a name, but they are against The League and live completely separated lives.”

“My dad used to talk about those people and now he is locked up. I’d rather not discuss this anymore.”

“This man can help us show everyone that The League is all fixed, just like you said in your article.”

I began to walk away. “Mara, I just got fired so please stop talking about anything work related. I am not going to play superhero with you, so just stop.” I walked away and saw the only positive emotions she had in weeks disappear from her face. I will never stop regretting that moment.

Saturday came around and Mara had yet to talk to me since I told her that I did not believe in her conspiracy theory, although I was the catalyst to the whole situation. She stayed at work late every night while I sat at home and did my best to keep busy. I was unemployed for less than a week and I had finally learned what boredom was. I never had more than a few hours of free time in any given week since I could remember, and I hated it. Football was my life up until college when journalism took over and that took up all my time until recently. I did not even have a computer anymore so the television and my phone became my best friends. It is amazing how much information is online. Everyone on the big screen Mara hated me for buying was biased so it made me get all my news from guys I went to school with who actually got

interesting jobs. While I used to write about a game that was played on a small patch of grass in a town full of concrete, they wrote about the latest threat at each border and told stories of rumors from outside of the country. My dad used to rant about how the isolation here was so bad, but I found plenty of interesting things to read daily.

After about twelve hours of doing nothing Mara walked in with people I recognized from my former place of employment. Mark was a good guy but he was so incredibly awkward it made me uncomfortable to be around him. He had this issue with shaking hands with other people. I think it was a germs issue. Anyway, he would always excuse himself to go to the bathroom right after shaking hands with anyone so he could go scrub the germs away before they took his life. I was only about six feet tall, but he had to look up at me when we spoke, or I should say when I spoke to him and he stared at me like I was about to punch him at any given moment. Hannah was the opposite, much more like Mara but without the open hate of humanity. Perhaps she held those beliefs, but I had yet to hear about them from her. But Mark and Hannah were the least of my interest when Mara opened the door. It was the man with them. I had never seen him before but I knew he was the person Mara had been talking about. The man from the other group of people who I had only heard about in drunken rants from my dad.

“Jameson, this is Malcolm. He is going to help us take down The League.”

I hate Malcolm. I hate his name. I hate the smug look he had on his face when he stepped into my home. He knew exactly what was going to happen and had the disrespect to look me in my eyes and tell me that Mara was safe as long as he was around. I hate Malcolm.

As soon as he walked into my house that day this feeling of unease fell over me. This man did not carry himself like a rebel. His head was shaved completely bald and he wore

sunglasses up until I got up to introduce myself. The navy blue suit he wore seemed a bit much for the occasion, but he was still a stranger to me, so judging had to be done internally.

“Why are you really here, Malcolm?”

“Jameson!” Mara was apparently not happy with my form of introduction.

“It’s quite alright, Mara. I see how Jameson here may be skeptical of me showing up out of nowhere. He walked up to within a foot of me and stared me straight in the eyes while I stared back at his lifeless dark eyes. “I am here to do exactly what Mara said. I am going to help everyone in this room expose The League for what it really is.”

“And what is that exactly?”

“A puppet show. I figured you would have the answer to that question considering you included it in your article.”

“How did you see that?”

“Mr. Brody...”

“It’s Jameson.” How I hated being reminded of my father.

“Sorry. Jameson, I have been working with computers long enough to gain access to things that are thought to be gone forever. But nothing is ever gone forever.”

It never occurred to me to ask this Malcolm what his job actually was. I just assumed that he was some hacker who someone in Mara’s department had met. Asking how he met Mara may have been a logical question too, if only I was able to talk to her when all of this happened. For the time I actually was able to talk to her, I did not want to waste any of it on simple questions.

“Malcolm came to *us*, Jameson. He wants to see The League in ruins just as much as all of us.” Hannah gave a triumphant nod while Mark nervously looked between Hannah and Mara before offering up a series of nods of his own.

Malcolm edged closer to me as I continued to doubt the group standing in front of me.

“I come from a group of people who do not live by the same rules you do. We have our own set of rules that date back far before the rise of The League and we want nothing more than to see it be exposed and lose all its power.”

“So what happens if it loses all its power?”

The grin on Malcolm’s face turned into a wide smile as if I had just said the funniest thing he had ever heard. He looked to Mara who shared a look of excitement.

“We will all be free.” That line even seemed to excite Mark, who gave a small fist pump before quickly putting his hand behind his back.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with me learning of their initial plans to do something that no one has ever done before. I always heard rumors of attempted rebellions, but there had never been any actual evidence. Nothing ever made it on the news or online about such instances and that’s all I had to go off of at the time. Some like to say that what my dad did was an act against The League but I always disagree. All it did was embarrass me and leave me as the only member of my family left in the country.

The plan they set out was not as developed as I would have thought. Mara explained it with only minimal stops for breathing. She explained that they were to go to mass that night, as someone she knew couldn’t make it and had given Mara her speaking spot. Mark and Hannah would go on stage with her, while Malcolm would sit in the back to make sure no one attempted anything drastic. Mara would request a visual presentation in which she would project the Watkins drop in slow motion for all to see. Malcolm explained how he was able to access the play through whatever process he used that I did not care to listen about. Mara would then go on about how The League is fixed and she showed the evidence.

I almost laughed when they told me their plan. This was an intelligent group of people and they came up with a plan that used a small tidbit from the end of something I wrote to base a conspiracy theory about the most powerful organization in the world. The only sophistication came on the part of Malcolm who was able to stream the play for all to see. But when I tried to say that I did not like the plan Mara shot me down immediately and the whole group left. Malcolm came over to say goodbye but turned around and walked the other way. It would have been a fitting thing to do, as it was the last time I would ever see him.

I always hate how they call it mass. After all the changes they keep a name that has lost its meaning, at least for them. I used to attend mass every Sunday and not to listen to a football game. It never fails to make me laugh when I think of thousands of people all in one confined, indoor space to listen to something on a radio. I can slightly understand those who actually attend the games. I would never want to sit in a stadium with 150,000 other people, but if that is what you grow up desiring then God bless you. Those who have come to our side often tell of the great wonder in attending a game put on by The League. The pre-game festivities are almost as fun as the game itself. Four in the morning is around the time when the parking lots begin to fill and the tens of thousands of fans line up at the gates of the stadium to sign out a grill, or a cooler with ice, or even just a pack of hot dogs. What a wonderful system they all think it is. The signature of a name provides one with the tools to tailgate. The signature also assumes the role of a credit card so payment is still necessary, but that is the last thing on anyone's mind merely nine hours before kickoff when the sun is still making its way across the world on its daily journey. Two hours before kickoff is when the rented materials are due back and is when the masses make their way to the seats. Every stadium in the country has a similar three-tier setup, which is

something few find odd when it is clearly Communist, not that anyone in this country would know what that means. I have been told that the first level is strictly for government officials and those directly working with and for The League. The second level is those who are fortunate enough to be wealthy and deemed too intelligent to ever think anything was wrong with The League, or rather too intelligent to speak their minds. Jameson would never fit in such a section. The third and farthest section away from the field is for everyone else. It is as if the entire crowd seen reveling in the parking lot magically appears in this section. Sure, they all dream of sitting lower but they know that they are the lucky ones who get to avoid listening to the radio, even if for just one Sunday. They then go back to that same place they call mass to talk about it the following Saturday. This is where the prior week is recapped and the next day's game is prepared for. It is also where I saw Mara and her friends, and "Malcolm," after they left poor Jameson to ponder what was to come.

I sat in the back as I usually did when attending one of these so-called "masses". I got there early so I could pick my seat toward the back and be left alone, for the most part. The occasional person would walk by and say something about the game so I did my best to say vague phrases that would suffice until they walked away and talked about a meaningless game to someone else who wanted to do the same. I had someone fill me in on what exactly happened in the game before I came, but it was the least of my concern. I was there to see Mara, for she was the one who had all my people talking. We had to see if she was truly a candidate, or just another rogue individual who failed to use reason and logic in a society that severely lacked both. When we saw Jameson's article we immediately wanted to check him out, but our source in his office told us Mara was the one we wanted. The fact they were dating was purely coincidental at that point. It was not until a few hours before that Saturday "mass" when we found out about the

man who went by Malcolm. The one who is always looks like he is about to pass out, Mark I believe it is, could not keep his mouth shut and our insider picked up on it, which led me to the gathering of football fanatics. I felt bad, honestly I did. The League is powerful and even the slightest indication of going up against it can make ordinary people attempt to do things they never thought possible. Mara was one of these people and unfortunately she was fooled.

I had never seen Mara in person up until that day, but it was clear that the woman who was the only one not smiling in the entire building was not like the others. She stood with the skittish man, Mark, and a younger woman, Hannah I assume from Jameson's writing, who was doing her best impression of Mara. But it was clear who was in charge. They stood as a group in the speaking line, third from the front. I suppose it was best they did not go first. Everyone was so excited about the win on the previous Sunday that going first would have only spoiled the spirits of so many. I looked around for Malcolm but it was not easy to pick one person out of a crowd of thousands, especially when nearly all are wearing the exact same colors.

The ceremony began with the anthem of The League, with subtitles conveniently displayed on the video board for the zero in attendance who did not know ever note by heart. The horrible song ended with the words that no one failed to repeat: "The League is safety. The League is love. The League is forever." The first speaker was the mayor, who of course sat in the first few rows at every game. He went up and after saying his customary "The League is..." garbage, which we had all just heard merely seconds before, began to marvel about the game that took place. The thousands in attendance, all clad in their bright blue and green jerseys, gasped when he talked about the end of the game when all hope seemed to slip away. Then came the play that Jameson lost his job for writing a sentence about. When the mayor finished the description about the dropped pass the crowd rose to their feet and cheered as if they had just

seen the play before their eyes. I rose to my feet in order to avoid persecution but I only offered a polite clap for his subpar description of a play I did not care about in a game I cared even less about.

I did not hear a word said by the next speaker. I was consumed with the thought of finding the agent The League had sent to tamper with a possible candidate in Mara. The agents were always so well disguised that anyone in the building could be one going by the name, Malcolm. I did not want to make a scene so I looked for anyone who looked the least bit interested, besides me of course, by the ceremony that still had just under four hours to go until everyone went home and came back to this exact place to listen to the game. My search went unsuccessful until Mara and her two companions made their way to the stage. They each exchanged glances that could only mean that they each knew what they were about to do. I was disappointed that Mara would attempt to do such a foolish thing when she had so much potential. I came all this way hoping she would just go up and say a few nice things about the game, but knowing that she would do nothing of the sort. I take the candidates seriously, even if I have little belief that they have it in them. That was when I saw him. He was just on the other side of the aisle, hiding in the back row like I was. Nothing about his physical appearance gave him away. It was his phone. It was just sitting in the pocket of his shirt, with the camera peeking over the edge just enough to film what was going on. This was my Malcolm. He had done so well to disguise himself up to this point, but he probably did not expect anyone to be looking for him. Everyone else in attendance knew that having their phone out, and dare filming at any of The League's official events would result in automatic prison time. There was a guard just a few feet behind the both of us, but I suppose it does not matter when the guard is in on it too.

Mara got to the microphone flanked by her two accomplices. She spoke with hesitation in her voice. “The League is safety. The League is love. The League...” She froze for a split second, but just enough for people to start murmuring in the crowd. This was the start of the end for her and I knew it just as well as “Malcolm” did.

“Is forever,” finished Hannah as to avoid the inevitable for just a few moments longer.

The next sequence of events was exactly what I hoped not to see. The video board displayed the play that would doom both Jameson and Mara. Mara went to speak but the crowd roared in both excitement and horror. Everyone knew that watching any game on a television was a serious crime, except for journalists who were allowed to do so in secret. This led to half of the room covering their eyes in sheer horror, waiting for the image they have always dreamed of seeing to go away. The other half of the room, presumably those who had never been to a game in person, was brought to tears with the sight before them. They screamed in jubilation, rivaling the screams of terror from the other half, and completely drowned out the words coming out of Mara’s mouth. She joined the half of the room that was in complete horror as she realized that her great plan had failed and that no change would come. The image stayed on the screen for about three seconds before all the power in the building went out. The screams from both halves continued and it was just “Malcolm” and myself who refrained from any kind of reaction. If he had noticed me he may have realized that I was from the other side, but he likely would not have cared. He did his job and surely got a promotion for bringing down another person foolish enough to go against The League without a well thought out plan. Mara became a number for both of us. She would be another individual accused of treason for them while she became another candidate of ours lost to the other side.

I never attended mass on Saturday's. I just didn't see the point. The only reason I watched the games was because it was my job. I had become so burnt out by the sport after so many years of playing it, so having to watch it was not exactly my dream job, but it made for an easy way to make money.

There was never anything worth watching on television whenever The League had any official events, so I just turned on the radio to listen to my favorite classical music station until Mara got back. My friends always used to make fun of me when I was younger but it never bothered me. I never found it to be anything other than relaxing. I did this for about two hours without moving until the signal cut out for a few seconds. An official announcement from The League. This was very unusual considering that most everyone was in mass at this time of night. Then it came through and I realized that my life as I knew it was going to change far more than it did after losing my job.

“Attention, this is an official announcement from The League...The first half of tomorrow's game against Charlotte will not be broadcast at mass...The second half will still be broadcast but anyone willing to listen must come before the game begins...Thank you and remember...The League is safety...The League is...” I turned it off and put my shoes on. I could have driven but who knew what kind of mob might surround my car. Since everyone was in mass it would be no secret who I was if I was the only one of the road. Like Mara when she left I had no plan. All I knew was that I had to go find her before anything happened to her. I made my way to open my front door when the first brick flew through the window just two feet left of me. The shattering glass was so loud that I thought I was in some type of warzone, at least from how the stories we were told made it sound like. As soon as I realized what happened I could hear rocks hitting my front door one after another, as if in a hailstorm. My door was able to withstand

the rocks, but I was not sure for how long. I had no idea if or when people were going to kick down my door and kill me or set my house on fire. I immediately ran out my back door without even thinking if someone may be waiting right outside for me. No one was there when I ran out, but I could hear the crowd amassed in front of my house. Mara and I had just installed a six-foot tall fence, for dreams of a dog, so I had some cover when I snuck around the side to try and get a better look at the crowd. Through the fence I saw about fifty people, but more were coming every few seconds from all directions. Some had rocks and bricks while others only came armed with their screams. Right in front of my driveway sat a police officer in his car, lights flashing. I could not believe that he was doing nothing to help me when my house was being attacked. A perfect ploy by them in hindsight, but at the time I was baffled. As soon as I noticed the cop I saw more lights coming my way with their source being two separate police cars. I hoped that they were backup and that the first cop had called them to help with the mob. But as they got closer my theory of the mob and the cops was proven to be accurate. The two cars pulled up through the crowd as the members of the mob slammed the windows, but making sure not to damage the car as any damage to any police equipment carried a year ban on listening to games. They pulled into my driveway and an officer got out, just narrowly avoiding a rock from one of the less intelligent members of the crowd. After standing up from his defensive crouch the cop fired his gun into the air, quieting the crowd. From what I could see he said something that made everyone shut up right away and begin to walk away. Two minutes passed and nothing had changed. The cop was still standing in the same spot watching everyone make their way back to their homes or wherever they decided to meet up to decide their next move. The cop then opened the back door of his car and ripped someone out. They fell to the ground and the cop landed kick after kick into the stomach of this person. No noise came out as if the cop was kicking a dummy

whose only purposed what to be abused. The cop said something I could not understand then got back in his car and all three drove away. I knew who this person was the whole time, but there was nothing I could do to help with three cops cars surrounding her. I saw Mara stand up with blood dribbling out of her mouth. She took just two steps before she collapsed back to the pavement, next to a brick that was meant for her head.

Three weeks went by until Mara stepped out of her room for the first time. I would normally have called it *our* room, but things had gotten much worse since the disaster at mass. The days all seemed to go the same. I would wake up on the couch to the sounds of Mara crying from the bedroom, so I would go try and calm her down. This only seemed to get her more upset and sitting on the bed watching her roll around the sheets in agony became as regular as breakfast. After this went on for about an hour I would go could breakfast, knowing that she would not want to eat, but I had not given up on her yet. By the time I took the food into her room she would be deep in thought in one of the books she had dug out of the closet the first day she could walk without her ribs feeling like they were piercing her lungs. I remember an instance when I was younger that reminded me of her pain. I was thirteen and it was the opening game of the season. My dad, being the coach of my team, told us how we were going to win the game by physically overpowering the opponent, who consisted of other thirteen year-old boys and their dads who were far less intense than mine. My dad pulled me aside pregame and told me that the team needed me to be fearless if we were going to win. This was before I hated both football and my dad, so I took believed in him when he told me that I needed to do everything I could to help us win.

The game was about to start and I was ready. In addition to playing on both offense and defense, my dad saw it fitting for me to be on the field at all times so I went back to receive the opening kickoff. I looked over to my dad and he was screaming something that I couldn't hear. I liked to imagine that he was shouting words of encouragement but he was actually telling me to turn my head to the field where eleven thirteen year-olds were running as fast as they could toward me. Before I could turn my head the ball hit me in the chest and a kid speared me, helmet first in the ribs. When I realized what was going on I noticed that no matter how hard I tried, I could not breathe. I tried to sit up to ask for help but the feeling of being stabbed in the ribs overtook the fear of my imminent death from lack of oxygen. My ribs were bruised so bad I had to have my dad carry me to the sideline. That is, while telling me how stupid I was and at the time I agreed with him. At least he had talked to me at all when he carried me off the field. The next four weeks saw me sitting on the stands during our games because my dad had a strict rule that the sideline was only for coaches and players who could play in the game.

The books Mara was reading seemed to be the only thing she cared about. At one point in time I would have truly wanted to discuss what she was spending all her time consuming, but then was not the time. Before I developed the daily routine of breakfast and not leaving the house at all, with delivery being my biggest ally, I actually tried to tell Mara that she needed to get over what happened and move on. I actually said those words to her while she lay in bed in the same blue nightgown she had on since the night she came home. The gown had belonged to her grandmother, who had raised Mara until her death that haunted all those who heard about it on the news. It was the first suicide seen in this town since The New Age began and it was gruesome. Mara was only thirteen years old when she came home from school, as she had done countless times before. Except this time she found a trail of blood leading to the bathroom where

her grandma was laying in the bathtub. If Mara had not been so smart at such a young age she may have not have ended up in the academy that made her one of the top computer programmers in the state.

I went into the room the first day she began reading after finally being able to sit up without pain and I asked her to put the book down and talk to me. She continued reading.

“Doing nothing is not going to change anything, Mara.”

She continued reading.

“If you wanted to make a change so bad maybe you should have thought things out before doing something so stupid. And especially on the advice of someone you didn’t know. Where is “Malcolm” anyway?”

Malcolm had not been seen by anyone since the night at mass. I figured that he was simply a coward at the time. I probably would have done the same thing in order to get away from such a rabid crowd of people.

Mara slammed her book shut and glared at me, as if I was the one who made her live miserable. “Are you so fucking blind that I need to explain every single minute detail about everything to you and your miniscule brain?”

I was frozen in time for a second after she said this to me. Maybe she thought I was the reason for all of this. The words came off her tongue in such a cruel manner that it instantly took me back through all the fights we ever had and I could still not remember her ever saying something like that.

She saw that I was unable to speak and went on. “I’m sorry, Jameson. It’s just that I finally realized my life is over. The League took care of the tiny problem that was me and now I have to wait out the end of my life in this room.”

She picked up her book and continued reading but it was no time for me to accept her words and leave.

“Mara, you don’t have to stay in here. We can go do anything, just like we always have.”

It only took a few hours after mass before Mara’s boss called and let her know that her services would no longer be needed. She was the best programmer the site had, but having a traitor on payroll isn’t great during an annual review.

She kept her eyes on the pages but spoke to me as if I was a small child who she wanted to shoo away. “You can do anything you want. *We* can’t. There is no more *we* outside this house, or even this room. You can keep trying to help but nothing can change the shitty situation I have put both of us in. I have ruined our *we* and I wish you would just get that and leave me alone.”

I would have loved for it to be that simple, but I was not just going to leave her all alone to wither away to a shadow of her former self, even though I was watching it happen when I was with her.

“I just wish you would make an effort to talk to me. I know you better than anyone and I know for a fact I can help you. I’ve done it before and if you remember, it’s why we are in the same room right now.”

Mara had a knack for ending up with guys who weren’t great with her pushing them away. As soon as my first date with Mara ended I could not wait until the second one. I tried to get in contact with her but she didn’t respond to any texts or calls, and she missed work for several days in a row. Friday morning came and I woke up to three texts. It was one text broken up into three but it was more like a story as it took me about ten minutes to read it all. She went on about how she had a great time and did want to see me again, but she had to deal with some family issues. That’s the abridged version and what I took from the story she sent. At the end of

it she told me to stop by her house later that night. I called in sick to work since I wouldn't have been able to get anything done if I went. I went and got flowers after about twenty minutes of pacing in my house deciding if flowers were too much on the second date. I got to know those flowers so well as I took them home and inspected them to make sure they were perfect for the girl who I saw as perfect. I went to her place and it was about the same size as mine, which was expected of someone at our age at the time. I pulled in and she ran outside and hugged me for what seemed like forever, but was actually closer to thirty seconds. She grabbed my hand and walked inside to the point where she was dragging me, as I was still savoring the hug like I was some alien who had never been hugged before. I walked inside and no more than ten seconds later someone was pounding on the door. Ten seconds. I had barely had time to look at the library she had in her room when the pounding started and ended when this guy who I had never seen before came barging inside. He must have been waiting outside well before I got there because it was like we were actors in a play and he was just waiting for his cue.

“Who's this?” He screamed at Mara and began to walk toward her so I stepped in between and put my hand on his chest before he smacked it away like I was a misbehaving child. I was not great with controlling my emotions when physically confronted as it was right around the time my dad was sent off, so the hand he smacked away landed fist first on his jaw and he fell to the ground and was cursing like he was watching the world end before his eyes. Without saying another coherent word he got up and left, which was good for me as I would not be able to hit him again with my fist that felt like it had gotten run over by a car.

I expected Mara to be in tears and overwhelmed at everything that had gone on but she was just smiling and walked up to me and kissed me as I stood stunned at the situation, but happy at the result. It turned out that the guy I physically excused from her house was an ex that

would not leave her alone, which is why I had not heard from her and why she missed work. He had shown up at her house the past four days and demanded she get back with him, but she calmly told him no each day and threatened to call the police, but it never came to that. She knew that if she went to work he would follow her so she had a vacation from work that involved frequent visits from a crazy ex boyfriend.

After my attempt at being sentimental, Mara gave me a look that seemed to blend her anger and pity toward me into one. She looked at her book and then at me.

“Jameson, I really have been unfair toward you during the past few weeks and I want to apologize for that but there is no point. So I’ll do my best to try and explain what is going through my head right now, but I don’t expect you to understand at all.”

“Mara...” She raised her hand to cut me off as if my voice put her in more physical pain. By that point I was useless to her, but there was no chance of me leaving her alone when she was bedridden.

“Jameson, you always ask what I am reading.” She held the book up with careful hands. “Before my grandma died she wrote. She wrote happy stories. Stories of love and victory and anything else that would put a smile on your face once you finished the last page and set the book down, only to regret that it was actually over. Those are what I used to read, like that one time we met up after work a few years back.”

That one time we met up. That was how she described the day I thought I found my wife.

“Then my grandma, who I thought I knew, started to change the way she looked at the world. To her, existence became nothing more than a waiting game for extermination. That is actually the last line I read before you felt the need to interrupt. She believed that all of us are insignificant so she took that belief and ended her life as you know.”

Mara began to tear up. “Mara, if you don’t want to talk about it I don’t mind. I just want you to feel better.”

“I know you do, but I’m starting to question why we are even together anymore. There is now way to fix what I did and know way to fix *us*. If you let me finish I was going to say that I agree with my grandma that none of us are important, but I disagree in the way she interpreted her so-called meaningless existence.” She sat up in bed with a grimace on her face and looked passed me at the door. “Once I can move without feeling like a knife is in my ribs I am going to continue my fight against the cowards at The League who hide behind the authorities whom they pay off in order to be untouchable.”

I could not believe that she still wanted to continue fighting after being nearly beaten to death by those who were supposed to protect us. She already had to hide since going to the police because of a police beating would do no good, not to mention she was a visible figure in town for the wrong reasons.

“Mara, it’s over. You are right, I don’t get any of the meaningless life, or whatever you said but I know when something is lost. You just need to end this because I don’t want to lose you. We can go stay at the cabin and live a quiet life. Maybe we can move back to a city eventually, but you lost and you need to realize that.”

Mara picked up her book and refused to look at me. “I’m still going to fight, Jameson. If you have a problem with that then leave. I don’t care if you are here or not anyway.”

I wanted to say more but I just left the room to avoid any further argument that would prove to be useless. Mara was gone and there was nothing I could do to change her back to the way she used to be. I told Mara she had lost but I was the one who had lost the most.

I was watching a news broadcast on Michael Smith's latest contribution to The League's official charity when Mara came out of the room for the first time. And to my surprise she looked like she had only been in there for a few hours instead of the three weeks she spent in the same room. She had finally taken a shower and gotten out of that gown she was wearing. It always creeped me out that she could wear something that belonged to someone who was dead, and it was even worse that the original owner had taken her own life. Mara claimed that it served as a reminder to her that she would never do to herself what her grandma did, but I thought wearing the gown was a bit much.

I was excited not only because she was feeling better but also because I could finally leave the house. I was on a self-imposed house arrest while Mara was on her self-imposed exile from the other rooms in the house. I wanted to say something to her but that seemed to be a bad idea at that point in time so I just smiled at her face that lacked any sense of emotion when she made eye contact with me that came and went before my brain could tell my body to form a smile. She went straight to the kitchen and opened our near empty refrigerator. Unless she wanted to eat pizza again, I would have to go to the store.

"Jameson, go get some food. I can't do delivery again." She said this like I had gotten delivery to punish her when it was the only option I had during her refusal to leave our room that had just ended mere minutes prior.

Out of habit I asked, "Are you sure you will be fine here alone," even though I already knew the answer as she began to walk away.

"Just do it."

As much as I didn't want to leave I knew that I had to do it eventually. With her looking like her normal self again, I felt it may be good for me to leave the house and let her walk around

without me being in any of the rooms, nervously watching her every move. So I left. I left her alone. I left the one person I cared about in the entire world alone when she was still a scapegoat for the public to persecute. I left her alone and because of that I now sit alone rehashing a moment that I would love to pretend never happened.

Reading Jameson's notes finally bring some clarity to the past few weeks. The stakeout of his house began the night after Mara's grand expose at mass the night before. I had no idea she almost died from injuries but I should have known. The cops are paid off just like everyone else who is worth a damn. I had one guy on the police force before everything changed. Now he lies in the ground somewhere with a two holes on either side of his head.

For the first two weeks I sent one of my top guys to sit outside Jameson and Mara's house. Nothing was out of the ordinary so I figured it was a non-issue. I had yet to send the paperwork to The Commissioner's office on Mara to revoke her candidacy, but it had never been an issue with the previous guy in charge. I had yet to speak to the new Commissioner so I assumed he would be filled in on our procedures. Five candidates each year with full immunity with the same being true of all our potential candidates, like Mara, who are under consideration. I guess I should have followed her home and watched the life get kicked out of her so I would have realized that things were changing.

Once I was told about the other car showing up I decided that it was my duty to see what was going on. I held off on Mara's paperwork and went on the stakeout myself. I needed to see with my own eyes that The League had gone back on decades of agreements. I soon as I pulled up outside the house I saw the other car. It was the exact distance away from Jameson's house that I was, so I started to believe that my guy was telling the truth. After about an hour the car

pulled away and was immediately replaced by another in the exact same spot where the previous car had sat. This went on for several days and I got to see it all. I had some of my people bring me food in the truck that had the bathroom so I could keep my car not smelling like piss. Every hour on the hour their cars would pull away only to be replaced by another. And each time they gave me a wave as they pulled away to which I never reciprocated. I actually feel bad for most of The League's workers because they are essentially slaves who end up believing the lies they are told. But the same is true for 99 percent of society so it is tough to blame any of them.

The routine went on for several days until I saw a familiar face in the car that had just pulled up to replace the former. The poor fool in the car pulling away gave me a wave but all my attention was on the one that pulled up. Malcolm, or rather "Malcolm", sat about sixty yards away from me and was staring directly at me. Luckily the truck with my supplies had just left or else I may have relieved myself in the car upon the sight of the man who had infiltrated the mind of a great candidate.

Just an hour prior, Jameson had left the house for the first time since we began watching him, so "Malcolm's" arrival was made that much more ominous. Was he going to try and convince Mara to keep up her fight? Was he going to show her that he was still loyal to her?

He opened his car door and stepped out, his eyes never leaving mine. None of the other agents had left their cars so I was confused as to what was happening. He gave a small smirk and turned toward the house. Every step he took was one step closer to my life being ruined. He took a step with his right foot and I saw countless lives lost, the lives of my people, because I had stayed loyal to the agreements. His left foot hit the ground and Commissioner's passed appeared before my eyes, spouting promises that would be rendered meaningless in a matter of moments. Another step with the right and I realized that everything I had promised to my people was all

gone. Those who I convinced to stay when they were uncertain of their safety, and even those loyal to our cause and me. All of these people, my people, were placed in immediate danger as “Malcolm” made his way to the door. Sounds selfish of me based on all the shit that has happened over the past few weeks, but it sure isn’t a lie. As he reached the door he pulled out a key and inserted it into the lock. He had a key to their house and it was clear that Mara’s fate had been sealed once Jameson took his first steps outside in weeks. He disappeared inside the house and not a second later my phone started to ring.

Without looking at the number I immediately ignored the call. It was a reflex as I was watching decades of agreements being thrown away with a single action. My phone rang again. I decided to give it a look in case it actually was important. Based on what I was witnessing I did not know if others could be in danger. I answered heard a voice on the other end that I didn’t recognize.

“Like what you see?”

“Who is this?”

I was shocked beyond belief when the words “It’s the new Commissioner, sorry it took so long for me to give you a call” came through my phone.

He went on. “Please don’t be startled. The last guy did me the favor of letting me know how to reach you before we got rid of him. I actually felt bad because he was such a nice guy, but just *so* stupid.”

“What is going on?”

“Such basic questions I am surprised. Can you really not see what is happening literally in front of your eyes? It’s so exciting,” he said and I could taste the genuine excitement in his voice. The excitement that came with abusing power and declaring war on a group of people

who stood no chance of putting up a real fight. But I did not want to admit any sense of fear at that point.

I knew The League knew of my presence outside Jameson and Mara's house because of our daily staring contests and unreciprocated waves, but this was a whole new level of sophistication. The old Commissioner used to use intimidation tactics, but not to me. He at least respected me enough to leave my people and me alone, as long as we held our end of the deal, which we did for as long as the truce had existed.

“All I see is that you and your people are tampering with one of my potential candidates.”

“I think you meant to say one of your *former* candidates.”

I had still not submitted the paperwork for Mara yet so she was technically still in our pool of candidates.

“Not potential. She is still under consideration.”

“Are you really going to try and fool me with such an obvious lie. Do you really think I would be so naïve to believe such a sad, obvious lie? I know she is off your candidate pool and even though you never made it official, I went ahead and did for you. Being that I am The Commissioner of The League I wield more power than you can even imagine having. One word and I can have thousands arrested and killed. Perhaps some of your people will be lucky enough to be chosen.”

“You can't do that. That violates...”

He cut me off right away. “Violates what? Some dumb truce that allows you and those you call “your people” to pray to a God? The fact you deny science and continue to worship some sky god is baffling to me, and I will not be as accepting as those before me. I will not

waste my time dealing with you or any of your people who think that they are going to continue to live uncivilized in my country.”

The separation between Commissioner of The League and President of the United States was also known to be up for debate, but I finally learned just how much power this one man held. The key was that no Commissioner had ever made a public appearance, and I was the only person outside of the President and those in The League who actually talked with any of the Commissioners regularly. I used to enjoy the weekly calls with Commissioner's passed who would fill me in on what their plans were and I would do the same. I never thought that it would be any different.

“By my calculations, and trust me they are never wrong, the operation should nearly be complete and you will no longer be greeted by any more of my agents as you continue to sit idly by and do nothing while your people sit in immediate danger.”

As soon as he finished the sentence, “Malcolm” exited the house. He had a grim look on his face and did not glance in my direction as he made his way to his car. The agents from The League always talked a big game until they had to do something that required true courage. Taking a life sounds simple enough when told to do so over the phone, but there is no practice for watching someone struggle to hold on to their existence while you take it away from them. I have only been directly responsible for the death of one man and I still cannot shake the image of the man's eyes as the life left them. It was not the first time someone from The League infiltrated our headquarters, but it had been the only time one stayed around long enough for all of us to trust him. Six weeks went by and someone overheard him on the phone, talking about how he had finally gained our acceptance, which was true as we were about to put him on the council.

He went by Ben but I never learned his true name. All I know is that he had green eyes that were pleading for help right before the stool was kicked out from under him.

He entered and drove away, saving me the wave that was reserved for me every hour on the hour since I had arrived.

“If you have done anything to one of my candidates we will have no choice but to end our agreements with The League.”

Laughter came from the speaker on my phone. “Are you still trying to play this game with me?” He continued to laugh and went on. “Any agreement that you think you had is now over. And next time you try and plant spies in my office make sure they do a better job of being discreet. I hate when I have to waste my time with petty details about executions.”

The phone call lasted all of a minute and it had undone years and years of diplomacy that stretched back to the beginning of my people’s separation from the rest of the country. In the time it took the new Commissioner to call me I had lost a candidate, I had lost countless spies who fell victim thanks to my carelessness, I left all of my people in danger, and I had to figure out how to live in a world in which I went from a respected member to a pest that would be removed without hesitation. I wanted to give The Commissioner a call back but he had used a private number, something those in the past never did. And without my spies I was completely in the dark. At the time I wondered why they didn’t just shoot me right there in my car, but that’s because I have a merciful mind. The League does not like to make things easy on anyone, especially those they perceive as true threats. My poor spies and Mara were just minor annoyances. Suffering was being saved for me.

The new man calling himself The Commissioner spoke his final line before leaving me to my suffering.

“Since I am a fair leader I will allow you to name one candidate. Just one, so choose wisely. And decide now because I have things to do that are more important that favors for you.”

I wanted to argue that I get to keep my five but it was a lost cause and I saw that. We had so many potential candidates that we had been considering but there was one name on my mind. One name that I had to say because it was the only one I could think of with the deadline I was given.

“Jameson Brody.”

Jameson Brody what have you done. It was the only thing I could ask myself when I came home that day. I never wanted to leave her alone, but I had been trapped in that house for weeks and it seemed like it would feel good to leave at the time. I was only gone for about thirty minutes. I was picking up dinner for Mara and myself while she was struggling for her life. I was asking about different types of beef while she fought just to try and make it one more day. And I walked into the house I should have never left, as she lay dead inside.

I walked in and yelled for her but I got no response. Not that I ever expected her to respond when she had barely even spoken to me since the night at mass. I had grown used to it though. I had no choice unless I wanted to be in the same position I was before we had met.

I had only begun to think why she was still with me when she could barely stand the sight of me. I see how I sound dumb for staying with her myself, but I loved her. I never once thought of not spending the rest of my life with her and the reality of the situation is too much to handle.

Walking around this lonely cabin only brings back more memories of her. I told her we should go but she just wouldn't listen. Why could she not just listen to me one time? It never made any sense to me. I was the only family she had and she was all I had. It had been six years

since I lost my dad and she lost her grandma, but she never seemed to acknowledge that I was dealing with the same issues she was. We both went through traumatic experiences of loss. We both had to live in awful foster homes for several years but she refused to talk about her time in those homes. If she had just talked to me she could have been with me right now instead of being reduced to a pile of ash.

There was no blood or any sign of a struggle anywhere in the house. I kept quiet in order to ease my annoyance but she would not be hearing me even if I fired a gun in the house. For when I walked into the bathroom I saw her lifeless body lying in the bathtub that looked like the blood soaked snow in which the deer laid with the arrow through his chest. The arrow shot by my dad in our moment of desperation. We were so hungry out there in the winter. I hated leaving the city but my dad insisted it was the only way to stay safe. We had gone a week without a proper meal when the deer walked right up to our door, as if to sacrifice itself for our benefit. My dad used all the energy he had left to grab his bow and string up the arrow while I looked on in horror. I was hungry but I did not want my dad to kill something right in front of me just so I could eat. I was about to yell and scare the deer off but I did not want to end up with the arrow inside me so I kept my mouth shut. I could only stare in horror as the deer fell on its side without any struggle. He never saw it coming.

The only thing I could do was stare at the woman who had spoken to me less than an hour prior. The same woman who was still holding onto a knife in her blood soaked hands. I wanted to call the police but I just could not look away. Not because I wanted to keep looking but because I knew she did not do that to herself. The way she hated her grandma for ending her life was all the proof I needed. I knew Mara well enough and loved her enough to know that

suicide was not in her great plans for herself. Her plans involved finding out why she was on this planet. Not ending her life before her search could get underway.

I did not want to call the police because I knew that they were out to get Mara but I could not leave her body in the bathtub. I was her only family so no memorial would be held in her honor. The body would not even get a proper burial because of her actions at mass that day. No League official would speak on her behalf and they would probably dispose of her body as if she were the deer taken out by my dad without any hesitation. But I could not bear to look at her with that knife in her hand for one more second so I made the call to the same cowards who had taken away her sense of security and made her so angry in the first place.

“Look at this, Mike. Guess she couldn’t the beating we gave her. It’s a shame we didn’t finish her off ourselves.”

Two of the police officers that showed up were the same two who I watched kick and punch Mara until she could not even stand. Bastards. But if I said anything about it I knew I would end up the same way.

I had watched these two stand outside my house whenever the crowds got too large. Most nights were tame, but the crowds following mass were always the worst. I can only imagine what was being said about Mara each time the town met to talk about something as minor as a football game. Since my time away from work I had been so out of touch with what was going on in The League. My only reminder of its existence during my three-week stay at home was the noise from the crowds.

“What a crazy bitch. I’m surprised you would even consider living under the same roof as this waste of a life. I mean, before she ended your misery herself.”

Misery? I had no idea what these men were saying so I just nodded at them and did my best not to say anything that would get myself hurt. Fighting for Mara at that point would have served no purpose. I had peered out my window carefully when the crowds would come and watch these two officers stand there and do the least amount of work possible. They kept everyone off of the lawn but that did not mean rocks did not get thrown right through the windows. It took about five rocks before anyone was put in handcuffs, and that was clearly only a publicity stunt to make it look like actually justice was being upheld. Looking back I think it may have been in my best interest to take on the officers right there and just have gotten all this over with.

The third officer was one I had never seen before and he did not take part in the jokes thrown Mara's way. I appreciated that but he was still one of them, so I kept my mouth shut for as long as I could.

"C'mon guys. That was his girlfriend."

This cop was not like any officer I had ever seen before. The two he came with, and who I had seen so much, were in their fifties and seemed to find joy in their intimidation. They looked upon Mara's body like it was nothing more than a piece of garbage to be thrown away, and talked to me like I had done something wrong in all of this.

But the cop they brought with them look horrified in the few minutes he was in my house. When the two barged into the bathroom to check out Mara's body, he stood outside and closed his eyes, muttering something to himself that I could not hear. He peered into the bathroom and immediately looked away, and I think I saw a tear in his eye.

"Oh are you going to cry every time you see a body. If you can't handle it then just leave, I'm not dealing with this." Those words came from the mouth of the man who had been doing

the majority of the kicking while the man standing over her body smiling had been the one punching and everything else that led to Mara being bedridden for several weeks.

The third officer looked at the other two for a second before walking out while the other two laughed and jeered at him. On that day he was the only human being in the room who had any real emotions. He was also the only one who seemed to have a physical reaction to the body as he was throwing up in my front yard, out of sight of his fellow officers.

After a few minutes went by of me not saying a word, the officers made a call for the body to be picked up.

“It’s a suicide, plain and simple,” said the kicking officer into his phone.

I had to interrupt. “Aren’t you going to open some sort of investigation?” I did not want to get myself in trouble but I could not believe they would rule it a suicide so soon. They didn’t even know Mara. They had no idea what she believed and what her plans were going forward.

“Did you kill her?”

I could not believe he would ask me such a question. I was in love with Mara. I stayed with her when she was sick and made sure she got better before even considering leaving her side. He did not know any of that but he could have at least tried to do some investigating.

“No I told you I was gone for thirty minutes and came back to this.”

“Well if you didn’t kill her then no one else did but her. We are ruling it a suicide and that’s that. If you would like to challenge me once again we can take you to station and question you.” A smile began to appear on his face. “We have to take the body because it has been determined that she was an enemy of The League, and we would not force an official to give her a proper burial ceremony with the disrespect she has shown. And if you would like to challenge *that* you can go to mass and make a case, but that didn’t seem to work out for her,” he said

pointing to the blood-stained bathtub containing the body of the woman I had spoken to but an hour before.

“Because if you forgot, you were living with one of the most hated people in this city. I hope she didn’t share any of her ideas with you,” he said as he pressed a finger into my chest.

I stood there in silence as he realized I would not offer up a response. I would have gladly told him that she refused to speak to me unless I bothered her to the point of tears, but I did not want to give this man the satisfaction of an answer.

“Good. Oh look, they are here. Get a good last look at that ugly ass body before it goes in the trash.”

I sit here now and realize just how messed up that situation really was. He was treating Mara like an actual piece of garbage right in front of me in my own home. Mara lay dead with blood all over her body, her neck sliced wide open and all they could do was laugh. Even if they hated her they could have had some humanity when looking at the horrifying sight.

The two men who were taking Mara away came into my house and I was waiting for them to bring in a stretcher, a cloth, a bag, or at least something. The two men clad in their gray jumpsuits and work boots lumbered into my house with not a sense of concern on their faces. Their only concern during the time in my house was trying to keep their cigarettes in their mouths while doing their job. They saw the officers and paid no real attention to them, except for being directed to the body.

“Shit, look at her.”

“Might have to get a few pictures with the bitch before we throw her out.”

“I feel like we have seen this before. The whole bitch in the bathtub thing. Taking her own life.”

“I think you’re right. That was some old woman though. It’s a shame this broad could open her neck before I got a chance to introduce myself.”

I could not believe what I was hearing but it was no use to fight. She was dead and I knew it would only get me hurt.

“What are you going to do with the body,” mumbled from my lips.

The two men looked at each other like I was insane. “We are going to throw her out. Direct order from The Commissioner’s office.”

Once again I knew there was nothing I could do. I watched as the two men picked Mara out from the bathtub. One held her arms and the other her legs. Her limbs fell limp while her neck barely held on to the rest of her body. Blood would have drained out if the bathtub were not already full of enough blood to make any blood drive a success. The men made it to the front door when one man began to yell and dropped Mara’s head right on the floor. I will never forget the sound it made. I had heard it once before when I was with my dad. He was dragging the deer back to our cabin when he dropped its head on the frozen ground. It was nothing more than a thud, but that thud came from a head that had held a brain. Mara’s had held thoughts, ideas, emotions. The head that was dropped on the floor where she used to walk had held concepts I could never understand. The deer may not have had conscious thoughts, but he had instincts and a will to survive that was taken away with a death for someone else’s benefit. They regained their grips and took her outside to their truck, as my dad arrived at our cabin, sweat dripping down his face. The men wiped their brows before they tossed her in the trunk and slammed it shut. There was a line of blood leading to the trunk mirroring the line of blood in the snow from my weeks worth of dinner. I was standing in the doorway when the cops brushed by me on their

way out, ignoring the quiet sobs of the third cop who was still kneeling over a pile of vomit in my yard.

“Remember,” the kicking cop said to me. “Anything out of you and you will end up just like her.”

I had called for a meeting the next day, but not with everyone. I still needed to take some time and talk out what should be our next move. With such an unprecedented action by The League, those below me surely would want to react instead of taking time to think. Not that we had much time at all.

“Sorry I’m late, I was with my daughter.”

There was no time for excuses or pleasantries so I just got on with what we had to discuss.

“I want you to go see Jameson.”

“I’m not sure if that is a smart move. I’ve heard that they are still watching after him.”

We were the only two of our people who had knowledge of Mara’s murder by the hand of The League and he was the only one with any inside access. That is, access I could trust.

“I never said you had to go under the guise of one of us.”

His face gave a look of shock at what I was suggesting.

“You want me to ask my boss over there to get in on all this nonsense. Don’t I have enough to worry about from our end of this situation? I could help more if I worked here with you.”

I was getting frustrated that he did not see the bigger picture. I had not just thought of this plan on a whim. It was calculated. It was precise.

“You *are* helping us by doing this. It is just an extension of what you already do for us now.”

“But I have never asked for additional assignments. I just have my weekly meetings where I talk about work and get briefed on new League policies. I have not even met the new Commissioner yet.”

I remembered the first time we had met. Back when we still had reliable spies and a rational Commissioner, he had heard about our existence. Most somewhat intelligent League employees know we exist, but they never think twice about finding out more about us. But he was different. He had finally risen to the highest position in his office so he got to gain exclusive access from The League itself. Our spy was a low-level employee in the office, doing just enough to get by without being a relevant face, and he told us that this man had potential to make us stronger. Now I am not one to welcome in outsiders without proper candidacy proceedings, especially when they act so innocent with their carelessness. I was ten years this man's junior so I looked at his supposed misstep in keeping his plans secret and decided we could let him come by. As soon as our spy led him in he was immediately taken down and put in handcuffs. I had seen my dad use this same method countless times before he passed and I trusted in the process. We would keep him in a cell for several days and if he still wanted to be with us we could give him a chance. The three days allowed us to conduct a background check, like the ones we did on all our candidates. All the time he spent in the cell he did nothing but sit in silence. Our guards thought he was defeated but he was simply waiting for a chance to prove himself. We found out about his daughter. No man in such a situation could afford to miss out on being with someone who could die at any moment. But there he was, sitting in a cell waiting for some twenty-two year old who had just come into power to come decide his fate. After the three days

went by I came to the cell to see him. I asked how he could sit there while his daughter lay terminally ill and he went on about his disgust for The League. How it was worth taking a chance on missing his daughter's final breath if he could make a difference for other fathers and their daughters in the world. I thought that was sufficient for entry into our community and he got his first assignment before the handcuffs were removed.

“They will think it's a great idea based on your history with him. Just tell them that you are going to talk to him about doing the right thing and not talking about Mara at all. He is vulnerable right now and may try to lash out and do something stupid. And I will not have my final candidate be taken away from me.”

I did not realize that I was yelling until Jenks put up a hand to calm me down.

“I'll do it. But if anyone from The League finds out and so much as looks at my daughter, you will never see me again.”

Jenks kept a serious look on his face but I could only smile. I knew he would come around with some convincing, because it really was a well thought out plan. It would've worked perfectly if I hadn't been such a fool those three years ago.

A few days passed before I decided to meet with the rest of my people who were in town. Those who were not spies spent their time working and going to school, depending on age. The only difference from them and the others in the country was that The League was not on their minds. Oh, and the fact that all of us lived in the same city, which was a well-known fact by every Commissioner since we came into existence. What the Commissioners didn't know was that we had a complex system of underground living spaces and tunnels that led to a massive

bunker about a mile out of the city. They would have known if their spy had been just a bit better at his job before he ended up hanging from the ceiling.

The houses were more or less for show, with most of my people only going above ground to cut their grass and collect any mail in order to avoid drawing any attention due to lack of being seen. They were actually lived in when the group was much smaller. We had it set up so we lived in private communities, which were established before I was ever born. There were a set number of houses, but we always had enough space underground where everyone actually lived. With the houses being nothing more than a way to get underground, living space was never an issue.

It was the only life I ever knew. My parents were both part of the original group, which my dad liked to boast about every time he talked about how he was the one who designed the tunnels. Things were much different back then and the tunnels were more of a last resort. Once The League got bigger and more influence over the government, we started to inhabit the underground space more and more until the actual houses looked like model homes to anyone willing to venture inside.

We had official meetings on a weekly basis. I liked to have at least meeting a week where everyone made a point to attend. We all saw each other often as we went about our lives, but having a mandatory meeting at least once a week kept some sense of order under the ground. Unofficial meetings happened often as well but there was a certain sense of alarm among my people when I called for an official meeting so suddenly.

The gathering place was the theatre we had installed recently to give the people some sense of normalcy and leisure while spending the majority of the time under the ground. Jenks came up with the idea even though he did not live here. Few of my people trusted him because of

this but they did not understand the great risk he put himself at to make sure we got the information we needed to be safe. Spies were great, but Jenks was a man who had actual trust from the other side. He was not just an ear in the room. He had a voice and respect from his superiors in The League. This type of access was priceless when it worked in our favor.

He had thought about moving in but his daughter required the work of doctors in town. Our doctor, Tom, was no more than a basic pediatrician. He handled all of my people who got sick, but he could not handle anything too complex. He could not handle the task of keeping Jenks' daughter alive for one day with all the problems she had. She had more medicine put into her on a daily basis than I have had in my twenty-five years on this planet.

I was working in my office when it came time for the meeting I thought I would never need to have. My dad used to talk about how The League would never gain power. He apparently never saw the millions of people desperate for an escape from their everyday lives following the war. He wanted to keep the old ways alive while laughing at the new ways of the world that gained more power every day. My office was right in between the living quarters and the leisure section of our community, so luckily I did not have too far to go.

My daily routine saw me wake up every morning to the sounds of the alarm blaring over the loudspeakers located right above my bed. Six on the dot every morning. My father came up with this idea to ensure maximum productivity and I never saw a reason to change anything. Being self-sustaining required a certain set of rules to be followed or else we would have faded into oblivion well before we actually did. We were a successful community and waking up at a certain time was an afterthought. The alarm would blare while the video screens serving as walls went from black to a beautiful orange as they did their best impression of the rising sun above the ground we inhabited. My mother was the one who came up with the screens. Living

underground can be very tough, especially for those who only go up once or twice a year. I was able to go up as I pleased because of my position, but only spies and myself had that privilege.

After showering I made my way to the cafeteria where I would see everyone else who lived in my quadrant. There were supposed to be 2500 per quadrant, but the numbers changed based on who was out on assignment. We kept it on a strict 250 spies per quadrant rule after our numbers became solidified around the 10,000-member mark. I cannot believe I am sharing this information that was guarded as secret for so long, but it does not matter now as so many have been taken and likely killed by those monsters.

I would finish my food and make my way past the greenhouse and the animal pens toward the sounds of knowledge being shared, along with the occasional laughter of children. The sounds came from three classrooms that served as schools for children born here underground. I had sat in those same rooms for so many years that I liked to walk by to remind myself of a time when my only worry was whether or not we would get to take a field trip to see the cows. Only then I was unaware of their sole purpose in our lives as I went home and ate burgers like the meat came from nothing.

Past the classrooms were the many cubicles where our secretaries sat, listening in on the conversations being picked up by our brave spies. Some of them thought it intrusive to listen to everything being said and I understood that to a point, but there were to be no risks taken in missing information that could be important. Next to the cubicles was my office. It was more of a situation room than an office as countless people came in and out to discuss reports from above ground and to share any news that may be important. The news usually consisted of nothing more than a nervous spy, but one phone call would often fix that. Convincing someone to do their job becomes easier when the threat of permanent exile from loved ones is put on the table. I

would never actually go through with the threat and luckily never had one of my own try and challenge me on the issue. At least before the killing began.

I made my way into the theater and felt like I was entering for my own one-man show. Those from the other quadrants came to ours for this meeting, but it was so silent you would have thought my entrance signaled the start of an exclusive show. I liked to enter from the back and walk down through the aisles amongst my people and I would have if not for the urgency of this meeting. I was not in a mood for small talk with the countless questions I knew would come my way. The walk from the back of the theater to the stage also took several minutes because of the sheer size of the room. It was located directly in the center of our community, previously being home to a proposed fifth room of living quarters that was only a place in my dreams.

I walked to the stage as everyone was anxiously talking about what they thought the meeting was about. I got right in front of the screen where a movie would normally have been showing, or a presentation would have been displayed, and put my hand up to get everyone quiet. I usually had Jenks come up with me when giving these addresses but he had a scheduled meeting with his boss at The League. I told him to bring up the meeting with Jameson as he walked out, not even looking back to acknowledge if he had heard me, but I know he did.

“Everyone please be quiet. What I’m about to tell you is more important than anything we have ever discussed down here. Things are going to start changing.”

A silence fell upon the room as I told everyone that life as they knew it was over.

Leaving the house was the worst decision I ever made, so in the days following Mara’s murder I remained inside, as I should have done all along.

I had no visitors and I was happy for that. Not that I had any friends or family to visit me, but the crowds went away as soon as it was reported that Mara had been found dead. I never thought her death would mean so much to anyone out there, but I heard about celebrations taking place before I turned off my television for good. Going online was just as bad, as any local site featured daily articles about reactions to Mara's death. They had the nerve to try and say she killed herself, with people I had never heard of before saying how happy they were that she was gone. People neither of us had met, although they made frequent visits to my front yard before the murder.

The final time I went online I saw an article comparing her death to that of her grandmother's. That was all I could take. It should have been a time for investigation, or at least some sort of grieving for the death of a human being. All people cared about anymore was The League, and anyone who posed a threat to the precious League was deemed a traitor. I had been the one who wrote that stupid article saying how games may have been fixed. I should have been killed, not her. That thought of dying scared me then but I do not fear much anymore.

A few days passed and I had done nothing more than sit in silence after shutting myself out from the outside world. Then came that knock on my door. I thought for sure it would be the police coming back to threaten me in some way. I had not done anything at all since the cop gave me his warning but Mara was nothing more than a tiny problem, and she was murdered.

I was frozen in front of the door, knowing that I may be opening it for the final time. Another knock came and along with it came a familiar voice.

“Jameson, it's Jenks. I just want to come in and talk to you really quick.”

He was the closest thing I had to a friend left in the world so I knew I had to let him in. I was also so relieved that it was not a police officer preparing to knock down my door, so the

quick rush of joy partially led to me ripping the door open as if Mara was at the door and everything that had happened was all one big act.

I opened the door and saw my former superior, whose face held no emotion at all. The man who had lectured me that last time I saw him seemed neither happy nor sad as he greeted me with a nod and entered my solitary home. He seemed to be in a rush as he just stood there, staring directly at me.

“Thanks for stopping by, Jenks. I’ve been out of it lately since everything happened with Mara. I’m sure you saw it...”

He cut me off as he had done so many times before.

“Jameson, I have to make this visit quick.”

He pulled out a device from his pocket and placed it in my hand. It was a model I had never seen before. It was a square device with a glass screen, only displaying the time and nothing else.

“This is a special phone made only to receive messages. When a message comes through it will set off an alarm and be displayed for only one minute, so be ready for a message at any time. It does nothing more, so don’t bother trying to use it for anything else.” I was staring at this foreign object when he went on. “You may think you are safe now that Mara is dead but that was just the beginning. I cannot tell you specifics, but there is a war going on and you may end up being involved.”

“Jenks, you have to tell me what...”

He continued at a volume that exceeded mine so I kept my mouth shut. “Our society is not one that people can take lightly and mess with. Mara made that mistake and you see how she

ended up. Keep this phone with you at all times.” He looked me directly in the eyes. “At all times.”

I was confused but had learned that asking questions usually got me nowhere. “Who is going to be messaging me?”

Jenks walked toward the door and gave me the answer I expected. “I will be the only one messaging you.”

I nodded to show acceptance for something I had zero idea about and that seemed to be enough for Jenks as he took a step outside my house. He turned back and said one more thing before he left. “Jameson, I really am sorry to hear what happened to Mara. It’s too bad they had to do what they did.”

And just like that I laid eyes on the last somewhat friend I still had in the world. Not that I didn’t hear from him again very soon.

I still have that device with me as I write this now. I have not gotten a message in over a week so I can only imagine what happened to Jenks. Out of everyone I had ever encountered he was one of the few I knew I could trust.

Everyone was screaming at once as if I was Mara showing that mass of imbeciles the footage that was no more than a meaningless play in an irrelevant game. I had just told them how things were going to have to get more secure in our community. Everything was going smoothly until I told them how Jenks was above ground being our main spy.

“He’s not one of us.”

“He’s better off dead.”

“A League employee is being trusted with our lives?”

I did my best to calm these fears I saw as irrational at the time. What my people did not understand was that our spies were being killed as I spoke. The poor secretaries. They had to listen to each death through their headsets as if they were simply listening to the radio. That is why I kept loved ones of my spies out of the secretaries' room, for it would be too much to bear. The meeting in the theater had to wait a few days because I had to deal with all the deaths and try to get in contact with Jenks, who I had not heard from me since our meeting about Jameson.

“Everyone, please. Jenks is indeed one of us. Just because he does not live down here does not mean he can't be trusted. I would not put thousands of lives at risk because of stubbornness.” Only I did.

One of my people stood up and silenced everyone. His name was Micah and he used to be a spy until he retired after the death of his partner. It was the only execution to ever take place in my community. I had no choice, as the man worked for The League. I know Micah has still not forgiven me for sentencing his partner to die. He pleaded with me to let the man stay, at least as a prisoner until we found a proper solution. What he didn't know was that I had to kill the man. I had just been appointed Mayor **after the death of my father** and if I did not kill the man, I would have been killed in his place. If not by someone from The League then one of my own people would have taken the opportunity to take my life. I had been preparing for my time as Mayor after it was determined that I would follow in my father's path, and with the death of my mother a year earlier I was the last of my name. It was not set up as some type of monarchy, but my people, along with my father before he died, decided that I had enough experience shadowing him and that I could take over with no interruptions in our way of life. Too bad this spy came into my lap only a month into my appointment. Tensions were so high and everyone was so scared. I remember talks of fleeing because of fears that the spy had given away our

underground location. No one besides me knew that the Commissioner at the time knew about where the houses were located, and a simple search would have proven that we might have been hiding something in our nearly empty houses. The only reason it worked was because one of our spies had recently been killed, against the rules of the truce, so by rule we were allowed to take a life. I was never particularly fond of the rule but I knew it had to be done. I could not allow us to be pushed around by The League, even when we were on good terms. The elders in the community wanted to kill him without a vote but I at least put the man's fate to a vote. It was almost unanimous except for Micah's vote against the killing, which he still claims to be murder.

"Mr. Mayor, I have to say that I do agree with you in saying that we can trust Jenks. I would not doubt that as he has been with us for so long." People in the crowd continued to mutter but far less than before. "But I want to know what is actually going on. Don't lead us on with this bullshit of "things changing". Tell us what we should be prepared for."

The entire room began to applaud Micah as he sat down. I did not mind because he brought up some valid points. The people had a right to know what was actually going on, but telling them of the deaths seemed a bit harsh in that setting.

I began again. "Micah, thank you for speaking up. All I can say at this point is that it is best for everyone to not go above ground at all. If something must be done for the upkeep of a house let me know and I will assign someone to do that."

The shouts began again.

"What is so dangerous above ground?"

"Are our lives in danger?"

"Is my son ok? What about the others up there?"

I was beginning to get annoyed but I tried to maintain my composure in front of this giant crowd of people I knew could get restless at times. It never seemed to be an issue in the past. I had been appointed mayor for the past ten years, based on our yearly elections, and ran unopposed in the last eight. Everyone knew that I had great relations with The Commissioners in the past and nothing ever went wrong, so they got content. And that is the worst thing anyone can ever do.

I did my best to answer in a political fashion.

“I can assure you all that while things are not ideal, I will do my best to make sure things go smoothly, just as they always have.”

This only angered everyone further. The shouts began again, as I expected, but I lost it when I heard, “You are worse than your father,” come from someone in the crowd.

“Enough of this madness,” I screamed and shut up several thousand people as they eagerly awaited information they were better off not knowing.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on. Our spies are getting murdered faster than I can keep track. For the past few days while you all have been going around in this underground sanctuary, I have sat and listened to people die. I have heard them beg for to be spared followed by the gunshot that answers their pleas. People we all know, being murdered trying to keep each and every one of you safe.”

This revelation put the room back at a level I preferred. Silent. No one even thought of speaking as their scared eyes told the entire story. Not even Micah had anything to say as he realized he was lucky to have gotten out when he did.

I lowered my volume after I realized how terrified everyone in the room had become. “Please, trust me. Everyone just needs to stay underground and continue to go about their daily

lives. I, along with our remaining spies and Jenks, will figure out what is going on up there and everything will be fine. Just do not leave the underground area for any reason, and if you see any suspicious activity come to me right away.”

I walked out the door I had come in as the room remained silent, with the only thought on my mind being what the hell Jenks was doing.

I was sleeping when the first message came through. I would have slept right through it if the alarm did not draw cause me to dream about when my father would saw wood with a chainsaw when we stayed at the cabin. The dream was all I could focus on until the noise became too much to sleep through. I woke up and realized the message would disappear in less than a minute. I could swear I put the pen and paper right next to the device, but I could not find them. I did not want to let Jenks down by forgetting any message that came through, so I began to panic. I began to begin counting down from thirty, as I guessed that thirty seconds had already passed since the alarm had gone off. He was the last man I could trust and I know he was looking out for me. Being so discrete and secretive confused me but I know he was putting himself at risk to help me, especially after I had almost gotten him fired with my article. That stupid, stupid article. Everything seemed to be so simple before I hit send and changed my life.

I touched the screen and the alarm ceased its awful song. The message was short and direct. LEAGUE INN. CORNER OF THIRD AND FIFTH. TODAY. NOON. J.

The first letter of Jenks’ name was written as soon as the message disappeared and the device reminded me what time it was as it went back to being nothing more than a clock. I had never stayed at the Inn before but I knew exactly where it was. It was where the players stayed when they came from out of town, so I was surprised I was being invited to such a place. I had

only assumed Jenks wanted to meet somewhere secure, and no one was allowed inside without being on the list. The building was somewhere I never thought I would find myself. It was not a tall building, as it held the sole purpose of holding players and League officials, but the size was of no concern. The building was one of the few that held the ways of the past. While every building seemed to be made of sleek steel and glass, the Inn was made of brick and its windows were small and barely noticeable. The League liked to say that this style of building was modest as to not draw too much attention to the players, but that was far from the truth. It was obvious to everyone with a brain that it was meant to make the opposing players feel uncomfortable while on the road. Every city had an Inn like this, so it was not like this needed to be a well-kept secret.

There were still many hours before the meeting took place but I can honestly say I went to the Inn with very little sleep. All I could do was lie in bed on my side and stare at the ceiling. I still expected to roll over and see Mara next to me, sleeping through the night. The left side of the bed remained empty since she had gone. I knew she was never coming back, I had seen her be dragged out, but I had this stupid sense of hope that she would somehow walk in and yell at me if I was sleeping on her side. I know it sounds crazy but she was all I had, so the hope became all I had. Several hours passed before I got out of bed and I still had a few more to go before I had to leave. It was about a thirty-minute walk from my house, although I did anything but enjoy my walk on the way there. I stepped out my front door not knowing what was going to happen, but I knew Jenks would keep me safe.

I could not believe what Jenks was telling me.

“Why would he agree to meet with them?”

Jenks looked just as shocked as I was. “You know he is an easy person to manipulate. We still haven’t told him he is our candidate so there is nothing stopping him from thinking the meeting is wrong.”

This was absurd. This new Commissioner was taking my final candidate from me. I get that he did not want to follow the old ways, but this was a new low. Spies had been killed every day and he felt the need to try and take someone who had done nothing to hurt his precious League.

“I told you to tell him to stay put.”

“That’s exactly what I did. I cannot control his every move.”

I had a tough time believing that Jameson could not be scared into remaining inside after I had not seen him once during the initial stakeout. He was a coward and I knew that.

“What else did you say to him?”

Jenks remained adamant in his response. “I told you, I sat down with him and talked about Mara for about fifteen minutes. It was nothing more than me saying I was sorry and him telling me stories about her. Nothing more than simple comfort. After that I told him he should be smart and remain in his house because Mara’s actions put his life in danger too. He agreed and said he had no plans to do anything at all. I could tell he was scared.”

“Clearly he isn’t scared anymore. We need a meeting with him ourselves.”

“You want us to meet with him?”

I had been thinking about this idea for a few days but I never thought I would have to set it in motion so soon.

“Not me and you. I want you to be someone he can trust. He cannot know that you are trying to get him to our side. He has to think that he is just another regular person and that you are nothing more than a friend to him.”

Risking the life of another spy was not something I wanted to do, but it had to be done. The job was one that involved these dangers and those who became spies knew that their lives could be at risk. Sure, the new Commissioner was killing more spies than had ever been killed before but I saw it as nothing more than an inherent risk of protecting the people of my community. I still had not lost any of my most experienced spies, as they made sure to be careful with every move they made.

Jenks was waiting for me to go on. “We will send Rob to Jameson’s house in two days. I want to have some time to brief him on the plans.”

“Are you sure you want him going directly to Jameson’s house?”

I knew it was a risky plan but I had no other option. “I would have them meet in public if I had a way to contact Jameson.” Jenks should have spoken up at the time and saved a life when he had the chance.

“What do you want me to do?”

I told the man I trusted, “Just go be with your daughter. You have done more than enough to help keep our people safe.” *Our* people.

I hated playing football. I hated wearing the helmet that hurt my head. I hated having people trying to injure me and having it be accepted as part of the game. But I was good. I hate to brag about something I hated doing, but I can admit that if I really wanted to I could have been in The League. Sounds like torture, so I guess I’m glad it didn’t go that way. What I am getting

at is the feeling I would get when I had the ball in my hands. I was so scared of getting hit before every play. That changed when I got the ball from the center. I was completely in the zone, with nothing on my mind. I ran on instinct and nothing more. The play would end and I would come to, as if I was coming out of a three-second long coma. Then the fear would come rushing back. Fear of the next play. Fear of my dad screaming at me if I messed up while in my state of near unconsciousness. This fear came back to me as I got to the door of The League Inn. The walk was a blur, as if I was back on the field with the ball in my hand.

I stood staring at the brick building for over a minute, not so much in awe as much as in a lack of knowing what to do next. I assumed I was supposed to go inside but the message I received was so vague I did not know if Jenks wanted to meet me outside to avoid any suspicion. I also knew that there was a list to get in so I was not sure if I had made it on in such a short period of time.

The doorman called out to me. “You look lost, son.”

I was not so much lost physically as I was mentally. “I’m supposed to meet someone here.”

He smiled. “Ah, you must be Jameson. I was told you would be arriving, and it looks like you are right on time. Please come in.” He gestured for me to come inside and I glided toward the door with more hesitation than I have ever felt in my life. I wanted to ask him if Jenks was here yet, but I did not want to put him in any kind of danger if this was supposed to be so secretive. I walked inside and was astounded at the lack of atmosphere in the room. I knew the building was bland from the outside, but the inside was even worse. The floors were tiled with wood panels that were seemingly laid by a carpenter with shaky hands. To my left was a fireplace covered in ash, while the reception desk in front of me was no larger than the desk I

used to sit at when I was still working with Jenks. I had enough room for my computer and a picture of Mara and myself, and that was all. I began to walk toward the desk when a voice came from my right.

“Jameson,” said I voice I did not recognize at the exact moment I realized it was too dangerous of a meeting for Jenks to attend.

A man, no older than I was, stood up from one of the three wooden chairs placed under an old painting of The League’s official logo, with its red paint peeling away in the building that was doing the same. I walked toward him as he held out his hand to shake mine.

“I hope you understand why Jenks couldn’t be here.”

I had no idea who this man was so I continued to say nothing until he said more than a simple hello. He finally put his hand down.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been told I have to work on my people skills. My name is Keith and I am working with Jenks. See.” He pulled out the same device I had, and began to type a message on the screen. A second later my device began to vibrate against my thigh, and the message “See” was displayed on the screen. I was glad I had found the small switch on the back that allowed for a vibrate option, or I may have provided the Inn with alarm on a rather peaceful day in town. I looked up to see him smiling at me. I always valued my ability to read people, and I could tell he was on my side.

“You said you are working with Jenks. On what?”

He hesitated for a second before giving me the answer I expected. “I can’t exactly say, or else you would be put in danger as well. I’m sure you would like to avoid this after the whole situation with Mara.”

“You mean her murder?”

His face turned red as he closed the distance between himself and I to merely a few inches. He whispered, “You can’t say that here. You never know who will be listening.”

I knew it was wrong but was still confused. I whispered back, “Then why are we meeting here.”

The smile came back on his face. “The doorman you met, he is one of us. There are so many League employees and player in and out of here, we blend in as nothing more than a low-level team assistant or out of town reporter staying the night.”

“So he controls the list?”

The smile remained. “Jameson, there is no list. It’s just something they tell people so they don’t even try to come near this place. The jail time they threaten for trying to come in here is enough to scare people who do not understand how this place works. But enough about small details, we are here for a reason.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked to be the head of a nail.

“What if I told you that you could talk to your father?”

I began to laugh as he looked at me with confusion painted all over his face. “Why the hell would I want to talk to him?”

A few seconds went by before he was able to rediscover the ability to speak. “We thought it would be a fair trade for you helping us.”

I did not yet know what he wanted to trade and I already was laughing at what he was proposing. My dad was the last person I wanted to see at that point. He did nothing but make my life stressful up until the point he was taken away and sent off to rot away in a cell. The way he embarrassed me that night was all I could handle, so it was good he was sent away or else I would have had to take care of the situation myself.

“Look, just let me know what you want from me.”

He held the item resembling the head of a nail up to my face. “This is a surveillance device designed to record conversations. I need you to wear it tomorrow.”

“What is going to happen tomorrow?”

“I cannot tell you at this point, but you need to wear it, okay?”

There was only one question I needed to ask before I agreed to do this task. “Does Jenks want me to do this?”

“Yes. Yes he does.”

I stuck out my hand to shake his after I had been so rude to not return the act earlier. “Then I’ll do it.”

He shook my hand. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk to your dad because...”

I cut him off. “I don’t need to be bribed to help Jenks. He was more of a father to me than my actual father ever was.”

I turned and began to walk toward the door, bearing a sense of pride by knowing that Jenks trusted me enough to give me this task.

He called out, “Jameson.” I turned back as the doorman who was nice enough to end my indecision of entering the building and allow me to once again get a purpose in my life was holding the door open for me. “You’re one of us now.”

I smiled at him and walked out of the Inn. For the first time since Mara’s murder, I belonged somewhere.

The panic had not set in yet. I wouldn’t say things were calm but at least no one was fleeing. I briefed Rob on what he had to do, and he accepted the mission without any doubts.

Being my top spy for so long, I knew he had no fear when he should have realized the danger I was putting him in by sending him to Jameson's house. I knew he had a low chance of survival, but we needed to talk to Jameson. Call it stubbornness, or call it sheer will, but we needed him. He was not smart, or even worth our time, but I would not allow our final candidate to be taken away from me without a fight. They could have left him alone and he would have lived out his days doing nothing more than hiding like the coward he is, but they had to get involved. We would have revoked his candidacy without him even knowing about it, but they had to meet with him and cause chaos.

When I was thirteen, my father explained the way things worked in our society. He told me about the relationship with the League and its Commissioner, along with how no harm would ever come to us if we followed the rules. And we did, and life was fun. I remember sitting in church with my friends and doing my best to muffle my laughter from some stupid joke someone said during the sermon. I remember throwing a baseball with my dad and being told about how if we lived in another country, I could play baseball outside on fields of freshly cut, lime green grass and crushed red clay that would fly up into a great cloud of dust every time I slid into home to score a run. Every time I asked why we couldn't leave the country he would just tell me that no one was allowed to leave. There was a time before I was born when people were given a choice to leave or stay forever, and my parents chose to stay. People were allowed in but no one could leave. Foreigners always talked about how lucky they were to be chosen for the yearly quota, but they never knew what an awful place they were coming to. People escaping persecution settled this country looking for a new beginning, and it has now become a country of persecutors where only one way of life is accepted. The original settlers would have been

horrified if they had seen how we had to worship our God, hidden underground in a glorified bunker.

Rob had called it in when he was about to go up to Jameson's door, and I joined the secretary's in the room to listen in on the whole thing. I was unaware at the time that we were not the only side listening in to this conversation.

A day after my meeting at the Inn I received another visitor, this time at my house. I had been wearing that small surveillance device all day, and honestly I should have expected a visitor, but I was so caught up from the meeting I never considered the reasoning behind why he was so adamant about me wearing the device. I put it in my shirt pocket so there was no way it could be seen. I didn't want to mess up, now that I had a group of people who I could make proud. It was nice to have someone to help after Mara was murdered. So much of my time was spent trying to take care of her I forgot what it was like to be alone. I was lonely but that was not the worst part. It was the lack of having a purpose, and Jenks' trust in me restored that sense of having something to look forward to when I woke up in the morning.

Taking care of Mara led to me signing up for the food delivery program, usually reserved for those too old to leave their house. The man came once a week with the food and took my order for the following week at the same time. It was a simple process and nothing to think twice about, until the day after the meeting at the Inn.

The knock came at my door and I opened it to see a man in the food delivery uniform, with the usual boxes of food. The only problem was that I had never seen this particular man before, and he did not have a clipboard of any type for me to sign.

“Jameson, may I come in?”

Before I could answer he walked into my house, wheeling the boxes of food with him as I stood aside, trying to comprehend what was going on. He knew my name so there was no need to ask the dumb question of who he was, because as I had recently found out, I would be finding out shortly.

The man immediately dropped the act of deliveryman once I had closed my front door.

“I am here to help you, so you can stop looking at me like I’m going to hurt you.”

I realized I was still standing with my hand on the door handle as if I was getting ready to flee at the first sign of danger. I took my hand off the door and actually turned to face the man. I knew I had to be careful not to trust anything he had to say, but I had to pretend like I would at least listen to what he was saying. I was already informed he was my enemy thanks to my meeting the day prior, so the words that came out of his mouth did not surprise me at all.

“Jenks sent me here to talk about yesterday. What you did was reckless.”

Reckless? This man had the nerve to try and tell me that my brave decision to go to the Inn that ultimately led to my life having a purpose was reckless? I placed my hand on the surveillance device to make sure it stayed in place.

I knew I had to play along in order to help Jenks. This man was trying to use him against me, but I was not going to fall for such an easy trick. “I agree. I should have never left my house.”

“Jameson, there is nothing wrong with leaving your house. You just cannot go meet with random people. What Mara did has put you at a great risk. Do you know who you met with yesterday?”

I was not sure how this man even knew about my meeting but it was clear to me that he had some sort of inside information that made him the real danger. It became clear why I was

trusted with such an important task. I could help prove that these bad people were trying to harm not only me, but Jenks as well. Him being so secretive was such a smart move on his part. I just hoped these people did not do anything to his daughter. I felt so awful after I found out how much danger I put her in when I wrote my article. It was the most upset I had ever seen the man who I viewed as a father figure. I would do anything I could to make sure I never let him down.

“I think you already know who I met with, so why are you wasting your time asking?”

The man began to laugh. “Sorry if that was too forward of a question. I was told you were a smart kid.”

This man just kept getting more and more insulting. “I’m not a kid, I’m 22 years old.”

“My apologies. But we are getting off topic, so I’ll just come out and say it. That man you met with was from The League. You can’t believe anything he told you.”

I was baffled at such a claim. Jenks had personally messaged me to set up that meeting. If anything, this man in my house was from The League and he was trying to put me in danger.

“Then who are you with?”

The man began grow impatient with me. “I already told you. Jenks sent me to warn you of the danger you are in. You have to believe me.”

“You walked right into my house disguised as someone else, and you want me to trust you?”

He began to yell. “God damnit, Jameson. Listen to me...”

The door burst open before he could finish. Two men in black suits and sunglasses ran inside and tackled the false deliveryman before he could comprehend what was going on. He was trying to speak but no words were coming out of his mouth. The sheer look of fear in his eyes said it all. He was trying to corrupt men and he failed.

A third man walked through the door. It was Keith, the man who had allowed me to have such a key role in helping take down whoever the man in the delivery outfit was. He had a huge smile on his face as he walked inside. “Jameson, you did so well. I am so proud of you.”

I cannot even describe how happy I was at that moment. I had never heard those words before in my life. He was *proud* of me.

The man on the floor finally made sense of the words he was trying to speak. “These are the bad guys, Jame...” His long-awaited words were cut off when one of the men in suits punched the man so hard he laid motionless on my floor.

“Get him out of here.”

The two men picked up the man, one holding the arms and the other the legs. They struggled with the dead weight of the man as they made their way past me and toward the door. One of the men began to say his hands were slipping right before his grip gave way and the man in the delivery outfit had his head smash against the ground so hard he would’ve been knocked out had he not already been in that exact situation. They shared a laugh before picking the man back up and taking him out the door. Once they made it outside, Keith patted me on the shoulder and looked me right in the eyes. “I know many people who are not nearly as brave as you.”

I was so happy, but I still was confused about the whole situation. “He said you are one of the bad guys. He is lying, right?”

He let out a long laugh that made it seem like I told the funniest joke he had ever heard. “Jameson, don’t be ridiculous. All bad people claim the other side is actually bad. He could not have been more wrong. The people he works for are the ones trying to put you in harm’s way.”

“Who are his people?”

“They are a group trying to ruin the peaceful world he live in. I would try to explain it more in detail, but it is so foolish it would be hard for you to even comprehend.”

I did want to know more about these people. If they were making an effort to contact me it was clear I was somehow involved in a plan of theirs, but I knew I would get no answers. I was just happy I could help out.

“What should I do with this,” I said as I pulled the tiny device out of my shirt pocket.

“I can take that with me. You continue to impress me, Jameson. Jenks will be so happy when he hears how well you did.

I had completely forgotten about Jenks up until that point. I was so caught up in what Keith had said I forgot about what was on my mind the whole day.

“Are you and those men who came in here working for Jenks?”

He patted me on the shoulder once again and began to make his way out. “Let’s just say I work very closely with Jenks on any work that needs done.”

“What kind of work?”

He opened the door. “It’s a complicated situation, Jameson. Just know we are both very happy you did the right thing.”