

Nine

September 30, 2029

A diminutive, diminished figure in a full-length black dress ambled its way through the labyrinth of brightly lit high-rise buildings; tall and sleek, they shot straight up and stabbed right into the night's sky.

From where she was standing, amidst a forest of buildings, Diana thought their thick, windowless bases—ten story concrete bases—made them look like half buried glow sticks.

Although the buildings' upper portions were brightly lit, their luminescence stayed away from the street level, where she stood. Darkness hovered over and filled the vacant spaces between herself and the buildings.

Of course, she thought, the border is built into the architecture... it is the reason the building bases are seamless, windowless, slabs of concrete. If she could look up she knew she would see life thriving inside of the network of buildings that were collectively called the SF SunSafe. Hundreds of thousands of lives. And, although she stood amongst them, she was not inside of them. *I may as well be in a different country.* She shook her head, understanding, finally, how others were being kept out.

Curious about what she couldn't easily see, she took her knotted right hand and tightened its grip on the walking cane, then brought her left hand over it. Nervous, she widened her stance for balance, closed her eyes, and held her breath and worked to unbend her back.

Bowed and calcified by osteoporosis, her bones fought back, refusing to comply. Every millimeter they straightened sent a shock of pain through her body, a blitz of electric currents that caused her breaths to quicken. Gradually, the arch in her back slackened just enough. Unsure of how long she could hold her body that way, she quickly let out a few short breaths and opened her eyes towards the sky-high buildings and their intricate, interconnected arteries of brightly lit passageways.

Beautiful! She could see little dark figures moving about a network of lighted skywalks connecting one building to the next. *So many people.* Her body, unable to unbend further, held its pose, meanwhile her eyes travelled upwards, all the way to the top. From one building to the next, each and every one was extremely tall, brightly lit, and pregnant with life.

With a smile, she recalled the futuristic Martian cities of her childhood.

She hadn't realized how quiet it had been until a new sound struck her eardrums. A guttural groan with a ring of familiarity to it. As the sound from her past neared, it drew a memory from her Amazonian childhood to the surface, piercing the sub conscience, and suffusing her with a pure strain of fear.

With her heart in a full gallop, she surveyed her surroundings for a place to hide. If she were younger, or healthier, she could have run around the base of the buildings dodging and ducking from one to the other until the military jeep, she knew it was a military jeep without seeing it, a military jeep with soldiers—her heart nearly stopped—were out of sight again. But in her given state she saw no other option but to try and blend in with the darkness.

Pushing her crippled body to move faster than it should, she quickly became dizzy and short of breath. By the time she hobbled to the base of the nearest building she was panting and in a full sweat. Exhausted, she leaned her left hand against the sleek, gray, concrete base for support and looked out, towards the bouncing headlights that were quickly approaching.

Inexplicably, she plunged into a cold bath of fear and felt herself sinking to the bottom like a lead weight. Without realizing what she was doing, she flattened herself against the building's base and slid to the floor. In the process, her tired, aching legs gave out and slid from under her, causing her to plop onto the hard, dirt floor; the impact of which reverberated from her tailbone all the way up to her spine.

Willing the pain to subside, she allowed herself to further collapse onto the cool dirt floor. There she lay, with her sweaty cheek against the coolness of the earth, her thoughts racing along with the approaching jeep. Fear and anxiety filling her. And then... from somewhere and nowhere at once, a long, soothing violin note came forth.

It started as a whisper in the distance. A long, sinuous note, soft and silky, subduing the present, muffling the jeep's engine and quieting her fear.

The image of a young Diana was slowly teased out.

I remember you. A somber smile broke her lips and a hot tear ran down her cheek.

A ten year old Diana sat before a mirror, practicing her violin. In the mirror's reflection, at the opposite end of their modest living room, she saw her mother in a rich, crimson, silk blouse that warmed her ebony skin. As usual, she was at her desk adding the finishing touches to her closing argument. Her firm was in the midst of successfully blocking an international consortium from drilling in the Amazon. Although she hardly spoke, Diana knew that her mother was listening.

Diana stood behind her ten-year-old self, musing over the bright eyes in the mirror's reflection, staring through her, to her mother, who remained head down—focused.

“Diana...” Diana's lips curled into an easy smile, she had her mother's attention, “musica.” Her mother called out, without looking up.

Diana brought the violin to her chin and began playing her mother's favorite piece—Bolero. Occasionally, Diana would catch an approving nod of the head from her mother, bringing a pleased grin to her lips.

Diana watched her youthful reflection and marveled at her once long, slender fingers as they danced atop the violin's

sensuous neck while her bow playfully coaxed the strings into song—she had been so young and so naïve.

A gust of thick, humid air blew the blue curtains in. A knot formed in Diana’s gut. *No!* Her attention went to the open window, through which the Amazonian summer night carried in the sound of chirping crickets, buzzing mosquitos, and the groaning engine of a jeep. A jeep full with soldiers.

No! Her eyes shot back to the mirror, to the reflection of her young self. She was still playing the violin. “*Run!*”

The jeep’s engine stalled right outside of the open window. Diana turned to her mother, who had risen from her desk and was making her way to the front door, confused. They weren’t expecting guests.

No, mamma! No!

Fear nearly bowled her over. “*Run!*” she cried to her young self, who couldn’t hear her and kept on playing. The melody had reached a climax, increasing Diana’s anxiety. “*Stop it! Run!*”

The front door exploded into the house and armed men poured in. So many armed men, for a mother and a daughter.

“*Mamma!*” Disgust and heartbreak crushed Diana. Her ten-year-old self sat frozen with fear in her seat, violin and bow at her sides, watching the men. A couple of them were hovering over her mother’s desk, collecting the papers, and going through the drawers. One man took her computer off the desk and smashed it onto the floor, before sending a couple of

bullets through the hard-drive. A big, bulky man had her mother by the throat, dragging her towards the living room.

The soldier was choking her mother and raping her at the same time. Less than a foot away, her ten-year-old self was suffering the same fate. It was shock that saved her young, violated body, becoming numb until her world, mercifully, went dark.

That night, the Brazilian military, bought and paid for by big corporations, destroyed the sanctity of her world and left her at death's door.

Filled with a wretched, helpless misery, Diana stood above her ten year old self, crumpled on the floor like a discarded rag, and watched, through tear-blurred eyes, the soft rise and fall of her tiny chest. As if they hadn't done enough damage, a soldier, still collecting himself and tucking his shirt back into his pants, looking at her as if what he had done to her had been her fault, expelled his demons by smashing her precious violin against her dead mother's head. Then, he turned his attention to Diana and kicked her little head before crushing her delicate fingers under his big, black, military boot.

Strangely, as her body went into shock and her consciousness bobbed between light and dark, and as her warm, sticky blood was mixing and coagulating with the men's residual fluids and sweat, all she could think about, or feel, was how heavy the hot, stagnant air had become—just like tonight.

“Ma'am?”

Diana was lost in her past.

A rat ran over her legs, the guards jumped, but she didn't move.

"Did you see that?"

"They're starving, Tom... haven't you noticed the claw marks on the base of the buildings" Fred ran his flashlight along the base, but it was too hard to see them at night in the dark concrete. "Makes you wonder how the people still waiting to be admitted into the SunSafe are surviving, if the rats are starving."

Tom shrugged to say it wasn't his problem and turned his flashlight back on Diana. She didn't appear to be starving. She was old, but not starving.

"Ma'am?" Fred gently touched her shoulder.

Startled back from her past, Diana jerked. The round light of a flashlight was on her face, blinding her. A sour panic gurgled up her throat. *Military!* Her eyes bloomed with fear and she tried to scramble back, away from them, but the building's base wouldn't allow it.

Seeing the undue stress they were causing the old woman, the older guard, Fred, pushed his obtuse partner's left hand down, getting the flashlight out of her face.

"Oh, great. Another one." The young, twenty-something, Zarant military guard said to his partner.

Fred ignored Tom's bothered comment and went on to do his job.

Diana searched the darkness behind the men, where a bulking silhouette sat. *Military Jeep, just like the one that*

brought the men that murdered my mother, she looked down at her twisted, knotted hands, *and did this*. She felt her lips quiver from the fear the memory summoned.

“Ma’am, can I see your resident papers?”

They’re still talking. She blinked back the tears and focused. *Papers? I don’t have papers*.

Only residents had Resident I.D. cards they were to carry with them at all times.

This wasn’t supposed to have happened. Not only is she not a resident, but she’s on Zarant Military’s most wanted list, thanks to her association with Gary and Lazador. Unsure of how to respond and hoping they don’t recognize her, she drooped her face and body and stared blankly at the ground, easily slipping into the old, senile stereotype.

After waiting patiently for a response, they realized they weren’t going to get one. Curious, Fred waived his hand before her eyes to see if she was cognizant. Her eyes didn’t move. Meanwhile, Tom, the younger guard, held a square, cellphone-like object over her right temple and then her left. “Ma’am, do you know if you have a Neurochip implanted?” It was a rhetorical question. One look at his handheld gadget confirmed what he had already guessed. “Nope, not chipped,” he said, without waiting for an answer.

Taking a step back and sizing her up, he said, “Fred, I don’t think she’s one of ours. Look at her, she seems catatonic...and her clothes... she’s another one of those who’s trying to jump the line. “Hey, lady,” Tom leaned over her and barked.

“They’re not letting vagabonds in, especially none with a mental condition.” He elbowed Fred and said, “thank goodness for that,” under his breath.

Fred shook his head with disapproval. He wondered if Tom was the modern day Tin Man, born without a heart.

Obtuse as always, Tom nudged her leg with the tip of his boot and she gave a sharp cry; it was more of a kick than a nudge. “Let’s save time and take her straight to lockup.” Before Fred could answer, Tom brusquely took her hand to force her up and just as quickly released it. He hadn’t expected the feel of grotesquely snarled fingers.

Fred glimpsed her disfigured hand and shook his head, feeling sorry for her.

“Her family must have left her here to die. No way she got here on her own. She looks familiar... she’s a resident... I’m sure of it.”

Elderly abandonment was a far too common occurrence. Families that could no longer to financially support their ailing parents were said to be putting them out for the sun to take.

“It’s irrelevant. No one is supposed to be out here, which means that we still have to lock her up... discard or not.” This time he took her by the arm and forced her up, onto her feet.

The jerky roughness with which he yanked her sent a shockwave of pain through her nervous system, extracting a hair raising wail from Diana.

Mortified, Fred stepped in and removed Tom’s hand from her arm. “Look at her. She’s not a threat.” He rounded on Tom

and faced him and said, “We can just leave her here. The sun or the heat will take her before nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t know, Fred.” According to Zarant’s security protocol they were to collect and secure trespassers. He looked Diana over, her long black dress was unlike the dresses women from the SunSafe wore. The constant temperature of Seventy-three degrees was just too warm for wool. His eyes settled on her right hand. *Her hands are diseased.* Next, he found himself wondering whether the rest of her was diseased as well. *Did I see her eyeballs... were they yellow?* It no longer mattered, he was suddenly inclined to agree with Fred, leaving her out here, isolated from the SunSafe population, would be best for all.

“Tom,” Fred interrupted Tom’s thought process, unaware that he was ready to agree with him, “listen. If we arrest her, it means more paperwork for us. And for what? She’ll be placed in some cell for a couple of days until enough of them are collected. And then, they’re going to load them all up into a bus and dump them in the middle of nowhere, with no food or water. Either way you’ll get the same result, only we will have spared her the misery of sleeping a few nights on a cold cell floor.” Tom wasn’t arguing, so Fred kept talking, “Please, Tom. I can’t take another one of these on my conscience. If we leave her, then it’s the family’s doing.”

“Fine.” he capitulated, leveraging his position. “But you’ll need to come get the body tomorrow.”

Fred pursed his lips and gritted his teeth and said, "Fine." He didn't like it, but he would do it, if it meant saving this poor woman any more misery.

Inward, Diana was shocked at the conversation; although she maintained her outward senility. They were grossly blasé about her murder, especially the younger one, who looked at her as if she were a contagious disease.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked.

Fred was in the process of taking a picture of the old woman.

"I'm going to run her through facial recognition when we get back and then I'm going to have a word with her family. The least they can do is give her a proper burial after tomorrow."

Once upon a time, a few years back, maybe three, maybe less, when Fred would shame and confront the families, sometimes even arrest them for abandonment. He's since learned that he needn't bother. They're already torturing themselves, carrying the heavy burden of guilt.

He knew the reasons for the spike in elderly abandonment all too well. Jobs were being lost to automation and artificial intelligence. Wealth was concentrating, which meant that successive generations of upper, middle and lower classes were significantly poorer than their parents, *and* they had no real prospects of for a brighter future. People just couldn't afford the eleven thousand dollars a month for elderly care. Most could barely feed their families and keep a roof over their head.

Tom shook his head and walked off towards the jeep.

“You’re too soft inside for this job, Fred.”

Fred didn’t reply. He knew that the majority of their co-workers felt just as he did. Tom was the outlier. *He has to be. Otherwise, humankind is doomed.*

“I’m sorry.” Fred whispered to Diana, as he helped her down, onto the floor, making her, in his mind, a bit more comfortable for the night. Assuming she was incoherent, he rambled on, “You know, Zarant’s RN2 nurses and the automation of the medical industry were supposed to make things like elderly care more affordable.” A bout of melancholia lodged like a big lump in his throat. He wiped a tear away. “I guess record quarterly profits are more precious than human life.” With a deep, emotional breath, he apologized.

Diana placed her left hand over his hands, which were cupped over her right.

His head jerked back and whether or not he realized she was more cognizant than she had let on, he said nothing. Instead, he gave her hand a gentle squeeze and joined his partner in the jeep.

“One.” Diana whispered. “One soldier with a soul.”

The two men finally drove off, their conversation and the sound of their engine growing more distant with every second.

When she tried to stand again, she found she couldn’t. Her body was so exhausted from the ordeal, that she couldn’t coax it to move. Her brain told her legs to lift her up, but they

wouldn't respond. Her muscles were limp. Expelled of all energy.

Unable to do anything more, Diana clutched a disfigured fistful of her dress and then released it, submitting to the futility of her situation.

“Are you okay?!” Yesenia’s voice woke her. She was at her side, helping her up, unaware that she’d temporarily startled the life out of Diana. Preoccupied with remaining invisible, Yesenia looked at the darkness surrounding them, confirming they were alone. “Follow me.” Diana’s legs wobbled under her skirt; thankfully, Yesenia had a stabilizing arm around her waist

“Where did you come from?”

Feeling around the building’s base wall with her freehand, she found what she was looking for. Seconds later, a seamless door sprang open. “I’ve been looking for you for hours. How did you get all the way into the center of the city?” She saw the surprise on Diana’s face and instantly knew what had happened.

Diana, who’d spent her entire life living in the Brazilian Amazon, had never set foot in a large city. And never had she seen one quite like the SF SunSafe where half buried glow-sticks seemed to have erupted from the earth and shot up to the sky.

“Few people know about these doors. Luckily, every building has them.” Yesenia led them into a dimly lit room

with machinery and other contraptions. “Goodness, it’s nearly four in the morning.” Yesenia thought for a moment and said, “Okay, that gives us only a few minutes to exchange information and then you have to go. Your escort will have to take you as far out as possible and find a safe house to spend day in, out of the sun.” She smiled at Diana and said, “That transport technology will be a blessing.”

Diana nodded and teared up a bit when Yesenia wrapped her arms around her. There was a lot of love between the two of them.

“Are you and Steven both well?”

Warmth gushed from Yesenia as she spoke of her husband. Diana knew not to ask of Izaiah, the son they’d lost at childbirth.

Yesenia hugged her gently, grateful that she was okay. Then, she took her by the shoulders and said, “I know we don’t have much time... but Gary... is he—

Diana nodded. “He’s still recovering. Doesn’t have full use of his left arm, but he’s fine.” Diana reassured her. It had been touch and go for a while, but Yesenia didn’t need to know that. All that mattered now was that Gary survived and recovered from the ordeal at the One Building.

Yesenia nodded, then glanced at her watch. “I have so much to tell you. You may want to send Clarence and a team to Mount Shasta.”

“Mount Shasta?” That would not be an easy task. The freeways are peppered with barricades and military checkpoints.

“The information we’ve gathered is that there is, or maybe was, an off grid community that Zarant gassed this afternoon. They’re nocturnal, so—

“They were all home.”

“It’s not the first time they’ve done it.”

“Why? Did they think they were Lazador?” Zarant military has been destroying underground communities, searching for Gary and his Lazador nest.

“May as well have been. It’s an off grid community and a thorn in Zachary’s side. The community of homes are thought to be interconnected by tunnels that allow movement from basement to basement. They dug in about the same time Lazador did and flipped their days to night. And they kept on, business as usual. Then one of the owners of the big local employer died and the other sold his half to a Zarant company. That was about when all of this construction for the SunSafe was happening and the multinationals were buying up cement, lumber, and metal.

A multinational moved in and automated everything. People there were bitter but stayed put. After that, the only jobs they had left were as cashiers and fast food servers, but then that too was automated and people suddenly had no money. The city went bankrupt and all city utilities were shut off. So they militarized and began attacking Zarant interests around the

area. Last month they burned down a chemical factory, it was somewhere up in Chico.”

Diana nodded, recalling Gary’s conversation with Clarence about the population. He knew they had drawn Zachary’s wrath when they had successfully organized and publicly shamed the government for allowing the multinationals to agglomerate and automate the economy, removing human labor from the equation.

“Okay. We’ll see if we can’t find any survivors and update you.” Yesenia had a hopeful expression that Diana knew she had to tame. “Clarence will look into it, but even if we find a mass grave, I doubt the multinationals will ever be held accountable. Society has gone beyond the point of accountability.” Diana leaned wearily against a metal cage and said, “You haven’t been out there. Those people... left behind for being too poor... they’re on their own and they know it.”

Yesenia tried to think of the last time the news coverage brought awareness of those still out there. It had been months. “Some communities are able to come together better than others,” she said, recalling that a few communities seemed to be surviving better than some in the SunSafe, while others were in dire straits. Recalling they were short on time, she went back to business. “Diana, the reason we called for this meet is because we found Kenneth and the respiration technology.”

“He’s still alive?” She wanted to believe it.

“Barely. This is why I didn’t want to risk using the radio. Steven found him through one of his sources. He’s been in

hiding, in Russia, staying with different people meanwhile trying to fix the kinks in his respiration technology.

“So he’s in Russia?”

Yesenia was nodding. “In hiding. We’re working out a way to transport him here without him being detected.”

“How?” Diana wondered out loud. Prolonged sun exposure had become hazardous to people’s health, which made air travel extremely dangerous, not to mention the unpredictable weather patterns that rattled airplanes until they fell apart, in the sky.

“We were hoping Gary could call up his friends in the Argentine military.”

The Argentine military is one of the few remaining National Military’s that intend to remain that way.

“Yes.” Diana smiled and added, “They have a submarine.”

That was exactly what she and Steven had been hoping for. “Kenneth is ill. He has cancer and needs to see a doctor. We have the equipment and the medicine he’ll need to have a fighting chance.”

There was no arguing. Diana knew she was right. Lazador was still building its hospital.

“That is wonderful news!” Now she was the one with the hopeful expression. “Maybe... just maybe his respiration technology will work as they say it will and people will get to walk in the sun again in your lifetime.” For the first time since they’d been there, she took a look around. They were in a mechanical room of some kind. The few lights in the ceiling

were dim and the walls were painted gray. There were steel pipes running overhead. Cages, bolted to the ground, like the one she was leaning on, with machinery inside were everywhere. “Maybe you won’t have to spend too much longer in this rat maze.”

Which was exactly why Zachary and the other multinational CEOs wanted the technology destroyed. They’ve never enjoyed such a concentration of power until the populations were forced into their SunSafes.

“Zachary will do everything in his power to keep us from launching that technology. They’ve already caught wind that Kenneth is in Russia and they are sending a team to find him.

“One last thing. As of January all SunSafe residents will be required to have Neurochips embedded in them. They will record everything we see and do, but they cannot access our thoughts as originally claimed.” Diana had a quizzical look on her face, but Yesenia was too short on time to explain. “Gary knows what they are, he stole the specs from the German developer for our government...or Zarant, as he later discovered. Anyway, soon we will also be required to have a GPS tracker installed in our wrist to go with the Neurochip. Steven and I need Gary to tell us if we can get around the technology without setting off any flags. Primarily, is there a way to temporarily untether from the SunSafe’s server without alerting anyone?”