

Seven

February-2029

The poof of golden locks was teased and expertly constructed to hide his much too premature retreating hairline. In an effort to deceive the eye, his hair was teased, wrapped, and held captive atop his head by an arsenal of aerosol glue that forbade the wayward hair from straying.

Facing the mirror and tilting his head from side to side, Zachary's beady blue eyes inspected his new haircut—he was pleased with the results—until he leaned in and turned his head just a little bit more.

No! He strained his eyes. Imbecile!

Grumbling, he stalked to his desk, searched the top drawer for a hand held mirror, and continued grumbling until he confirmed his fear. The arrogant smile that laced his lips slipped away when he saw that his signature swoosh was flawed. The barber had clearly taken too much off the length, ending its traditional march abruptly, just past his right ear, rather than allowing it to continue on, over the bald spot, and fade towards the back.

This! This is exactly why we need machines! At least they produce a consistent product! For a minute, he wondered how difficult it would be to automate the hair industry, but only for a minute. First he would have to deal with the protestors protesting

his automation of the nursing industry, then he would take on the hair stylists.

RN2s, or humanoid nurses, have proven themselves cash cows. Their introduction into the market place eliminated reliance on costly nurses who require costly educations and belong to unions. Additionally, they function as a phlebotomist and a lab, drawing and analyzing blood, on the spot. They are the perfect complement to the automated large, car-sized labs that dispense prescriptions by scanning a receiver's retina, and they are commonly referred to as Autopharma.

He ran a hand over his clean shaven chin. *Lack of foresight*, he thought to himself, *it's why I'm the CEO of the fastest growing company in the world... I have foresight.*

Brrrrd.... Brrrrd.

He turned his attention to his desk. A blue, vertical, holographic rectangle was projected eight inches above his desktop—his secretary's avatar.

“Mark?!”

“Sir.” Mark's likeness, from the shoulders up, appeared in hologram form. When it didn't find Zachary behind his desk it rotated until it found him, across the room, standing before the mirror. “Derick has arrived.”

“Excellent.” Zachary grumbled. He'd summoned Derick to his office nearly two hours ago. He set his jaw and narrowed his eyes as he stood before the intricately carved, gold-leafed mirror, gaging his best impression of a “power” look.

Mark waited patiently for Zachary's response. Inwardly, he detested his boss, considering him a disease, a cancer on the helpless people of the country, maybe even the world. Outwardly, he was professional and submissive, doing whatever it took to keep his job, and his life.

"Send them in." Zachary finally said, maintaining his *power* look—and adding a pucker of the lips as he straitened his coat and gave his reflection an approving nod.

"Yes, Sir." Marks said, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. Every time he saw Zachary give that "I'm in charge" look with that pucker of the lips, all he wanted to do was stick a Twinkie into his pie hole and smash it in with his fist.

Power-look still intact, Zachary went to his desk and took his seat of power.

"Zachary." Derick, the head of Zarant's private military, a consortium that was slowly replacing government sponsored militaries around the world, entered. He was a strikingly handsome man poached from the Navy Seals. His arms were made of mountain ranges and he strode as erect as a board—chest proud, head high. "We tracked the two Russians to an underground community in the Appalachian foothills." he left out the part that mentioned the extensive network of tunnels they'd found that went deep into the mountain.

Zachary's jaw twitched, "Bring me the Russians and destroy that community."

"Consider it done, Sir." Derick said, affirmatively, with absolutely no intention of carrying out the order. In his humane

universe, there was absolutely no reason to destroy an underground community full of innocent people. Luckily, he'd learned early on that it was better to nod and agree and do exactly the opposite of what Zachary orders.

“They think they can live in their caves and skirt...”

What a vile man, worse than dictator! As Zachary spoke, Derick's mind wandered. Zachary was after two Russians who had developed a technology he wanted. From what Derick understood, it was a transporter that could transport objects, including humans, from one location to another, in a span of a few seconds, using fiber optics as the highway.

He wasn't sure if he believed it, but he understood why Zachary wanted it. People needed a new, safer way to travel since planes, ships, and automobiles weren't performing too well under the elements. The sky has become a patchwork of unstable air masses, agitating against each other, and in the process, tossing airplanes about like ping-pong balls propelled by a bed of varying pressured air guns. Ships are not faring any better. Storms of biblical proportion are forming over the oceans, working them into a frenzy, displacing air and water, creating bigger and bigger waves that chop the water like a piranha feeding frenzy, rolling and tossing ships until they snap.

And driving, well, you better make sure you don't break down too far from shelter, or you'll be baked alive. Even the once lush, once inundated Amazon is losing the battle with climate change. According to a recent study, the Amazon is expected to become a desert by 2050.

One of the study's claims was already bearing fruit. Tropical diseases, even some believed eradicated, and bacteria have spread and now thrive in regions of the world once uninhabitable by them.

He thought of Gary and his nest, somewhere in the California Central Valley, and he wondered if he'd made a mistake by choosing the SunSafe.

He made a mental note to touch base with Steven and Yesenia, a couple referred to him by Gary, who joined the ranks of Zalt Industries a few years back. Last he'd heard they managed to move up the ranks and were now in charge of overseeing the global food basket, its inputs, and distribution, which Zarant now firmly controls.

Zachary rose to his feet and leaned forward, onto his palms. His voice rose a notch. "Now, I have things to do. I expect you know what to do."

The movement summoned Derick's attention back, focusing it on Zachary, who staring at him, waiting for an answer.

"Yes, Sir." Derick said, with a curt nod before he turned and left Zachary's office, wondering what he was supposed to know to do.

As Derick was leaving, Zachary caught a glance of the back of his head. He had a full head of perfectly trimmed, chocolate colored hair.

With puckered lips and a rippled forehead of focused consternation, he strode back to his mirror and leaned in, turning his head slightly, until he saw it—a bald patch. It's not a big one, but it's visible and it wouldn't be if his idiot hair stylist wouldn't have been too overzealous with the clippers.

He considered the paparazzi and the field day they would have with his hair.

The media had taken to cleverly tying catchy titles condemning his business practices to his hair. They'd become so good at it that he became self-conscious about it. Headlines, such as “Billionaire Needs More Toupees, Cuts Employees by Two-Thirds at Newly Acquired Banks.” “Unstoppable Hairpiece: Attorney General Okays Zarant-Zalt Merger.” “Shock Doctrine Hairpiece Privatizes Cyclone Devastated Jakarta Public School System.” and “Piranhas Hairpiece Gobbling up South American Firms.” graced front pages, globally.

The thought made his blood boil.

A wicked smile cross his lips. *I will prevail.*

The current battle was being over the Central American markets. The block of nations has been the most aggressive, openly accusing him of insatiable greed and labeling his companies, peasant makers. They even managed to close their markets to his companies—unheard of.

His most recent venture: acquiring, consolidating, and streamlining the failing financial industry, has made him target number one. In order to squeeze every penny possible from the investment, he's eliminating redundancies. The best way to do that is to replace humans with Artificially Intelligent machines that are friendly, can quantify risk, are overall less costly, and epitomize efficiency.

Focusing on his reflection's eyes, he gave himself a pep-talk. “It's just business—smart business. Besides, first and foremost I am a CEO. I have a fiduciary responsibility to my investors, not to any

specific labor market or consumer. That's the way it's always been and the way it always will be, for as long as I can help it."

He gave himself a cold hard stare and said, "This won't do."

With purpose, he marched to his desk, pushed a button that called up a four-by-six holographic keypad onto the surface of his desk, and waited impatiently for two seconds, until his assistant's image appeared.

"Yes, sir?" Mark immediately sensed his boss's sour mood, took a deep breath, and forced a minimal smile.

"Mark, I want Arnold fired."

"Of course, Sir." Automatically fell out of his mouth, as he worked to maintain the smile. He knew better than to query the order. Refraining from comment, he began mentally rummaging through his mental rolodex of potential replacements—it was a short list. Zachary had a reputation for destroying, even disappearing, employees. "Yes, sir. Right away." He capitulated, dreading the chore of releasing poor Arnold, who was about to hit his six month anniversary, the longest anyone has ever held that position. Mark himself was on the job for only eight months, and was already leery of the toll it was taking on his soul.

Mark knew exactly how the sequence of events would unfold: Arnold would be shocked. He'd have no clue as to what he'd done to deserve dismissal and would plead for a second chance, forcing him to explain that a second chance was out of the question; Zachary would march him out to the sun before he gave him, or anyone, a second chance. At which point, Arnold's emotions would morph from insulted to incensed and become belligerent. This was

the worst part for Mark. If he couldn't calm him down, Zachary would most likely have him cast out of the SunSafe.

“Sir.” Mark cleared his throat. “Congresswoman Duarte just sent a message. She'd like to speak with you.” He added as the text appeared before him. “She says it's urgent.”

Zachary contemplated ignoring Lila's message before changing his mind. The last time he ignored her he paid dearly. She delayed a contract ratification by the Senate Appropriations Committee and it cost him a few million dollars in delays.

“Get her on the line.” Zachary ordered and disengaged the call without waiting for a confirmation.

Subconscious about his appearance, he went back to the mirror, adjusted his tie, and gave himself another onceover in the mirror before he took his seat and answered the call.

“Lila.” He said, the instant her hologram appeared.

“Zack.” She said with a tone and a scowl on her forehead that conveyed strong disapproval. “I'm on my way up to your office.” Zachary could see her in his lobby, walking into the elevator. “This is very important and I don't want to discuss it over the phone.”

Zachary's heart seemed to stall and his brain's neurons began blasting about, trying to ascertain the reason for her unannounced visit. It could be anything: the diluted AIDS treatments, Central American Ebola, the intentional redlining of certain income spectrums into the SF SunSafe... it could be several things, really. He began getting hot around the collar.

“Lila, I'm in the middle of—”

“I don't care. You will see me.”

Annoyed by her verbal slap-down, he clenched his jaw and acquiesced, showing her his submission with a simple nod of his head.

Their relationship had evolved into a combative love-hate relationship. Lila resented him for marrying Elizabeth, but couldn't overcome her addiction to him. Zachary, on the other hand, was both in love and afraid of her. She knew every intimate detail about his dubious business practices which made it dangerous to jilt her.

“Stop your pouting, Zach. The Ebola outbreak... how could you!”

Shit! How did she find out? Dreading the situation he found himself in, he closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, before realizing he'd done it.

“I'll let Mark know to let you right in.”

“No need. I'm here and he's already on his feet walking me to your office.”

The line cut, the door swung open, and Lila stormed in.

“Can I get you something to drink, Congresswoman?”

“No, Mark. Thank you.” It was taking every bit of her effort to govern her temper in Mark's present.

Mark gave a slight head motion to acknowledge and chanced a glance at Zachary, who had fear in his eyes, the spectacle of which brightened his day.

As he turned to leave, Lila said, “Please close the door on your way out and see that we are not interrupted.” With a few strides she covered the room and sat in the chair opposite Zachary. Her jet black eyes were fixed on him. Piercing him.

Unable to control himself, he made the mistake of allowing his eyes to travel over her form, from legs, to breasts, to face. When his eyes arrived to hers he realized he'd made a grave error.

“What the fuck are you doing?! Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“What do you mean *what the fuck am I doing?* I'm in my fucking office getting ready for a meeting with the Secretary of Defense.” Zachary placed his clasped hands in his lap and leaned back, fully aware that his equanimity was feeding her anger.

Lila took two deep breaths to calm herself and keep from reaching across the desk and castrating him right then and there. Instead, she too sat back, regarding him, with a matching calmness, until he began to squirm in his seat.

“Lila—”

“Stop. I don't need you to say it.” They both knew she had to maintain *some* degree of deniability. “I was hoping to see some remorse in your eyes.” Disappointed, she pursed her lips and shook her head.

Zachary couldn't confirm he had just committed mass genocide in Central America because she could be hauled in to testify against him, if it ever got out; call it willful blindness or cognitive dissonance, either way, it's the politician's long standing hall pass and she was hanging on to it.

An awkward silence settled in while she took a few minutes to analyze him. She was hoping she'd see a glimpse of a soul within him, but she saw nothing. All that moment did was confirm what

she already knew: she was facilitating a sociopath who was so driven that he'd railroad his own mother if she got in his way.

My daughter's father is a monster and still I love him. Does that make me a monster, too?

After a few seconds of the poker face staring game she dared to ask, "What were you thinking?"

Right there. She recognized it. Fear temporarily cracked his stoic expression.

"Lila." He paused, thinking before he spoke. The key, he reminded himself, is to tread carefully. Although he absolutely loved and adored the woman sitting across from him, he knew that she could be volatile and erratic.

"Lila, what are you accusing me of?" Feigning confusion, he added, "So I accepted a government contract that employed Zarant Industry's military to isolate the Central American block of countries. So what? It's a binding legal contract from multiple legitimate governments. Would you prefer they sit back and let that Ebola virus spread beyond the region? It's a super-virus and could wipe out the global population if left unchecked."

Incredulous, she shook her head.

"Why? Why must you treat me as if I'm one of your incompetent boot lickers?" She stood and paced the length of his office. Her shaky hands were at her temples, trying to rub out the contempt she felt for him at that moment. Eight million people were dead and more were dying because of him, and he was acting as if the world were right. "I would have preferred it if you hadn't introduced your super virus into the region." She could see that he hadn't expected

her to know that. “You’re actually going to profit for infecting your opposition with your very own genetically engineered, highly contagious, highly deadly strain of Ebola!”

It took a hard swallow for Zachary to regain his composure. He was truly afraid.

“Where did you hear such a ridiculous rumor?” His voice was shaky. When she didn’t respond, he got to his feet and went to sooth her, but she rebuffed him by taking a step back.

“End this massacre. End it now!”

“Lila, be reasonable. How could I—”

“Enough! I know you have the antidote.” Her hands were still shaking. The look on Zachary’s face confirmed everything.

Unsteady from the shock, she turned her back to him, closed her eyes, and tilted her head upwards, wondering what kind of monster she had created. If it weren’t for that anonymous package she’d received, she’d be helping him benefit from his crime. But what was most worrisome for her, was that she wasn’t prepared to take meaningful action against him.

Usually, Zachary knew how to deny any allegations waged against him, true or false, believing it was always better to deny and lie. But he always played the game by different rules when it came to Lila. She was sharp and vindictive and she would sanction revenge by destruction if she ever believed she was being undermined.

“Lila—”

She put her hand up to stop him, preferring not to have to listen to another self-serving lie.

“Two years ago, during the financial crisis, when the banks were failing, I handed you the golden key... Abaya Solvent. *I* made it so that you could not only acquire them, but merge with other banks, while making you look like a glorified Robin Hood.” She began pacing his office. “Abaya Solvent now controls close to eighty percent of the global financial industry.” She placed her palms on his desk and leaned in. “Through mergers and acquisitions you’re cornering the financial industry. That’s a record ascent to power.” Her hands were at her waist now and she was practically yelling at him as she spoke. “Zachary, who cares if the Central Americans blocked your expansion into their backyard! How much more wealth and power could you possibly need?”

A slight, upward curl at the corners of his lips showed her that he meant to have it all.

Her voice went from anger to pleading. “End it!”

Zachary didn’t respond. He couldn’t. She would see through any lie he told. Instead, he sat back in his cushy leather seat and crossed his arms in contemplation.

How did she find out?

He knew that Lila wouldn’t just let this slide. She was going to leverage it. How? He wasn’t quite sure yet, but he knew her well enough to know that it was only a matter of time before she demanded something from him.

Lila was leaning over his desk, returning his glare.”

“Lila, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Leering at him, she sneered, “Fix this now or I will sink your ship.” She went to the door and reached for the knob. Without

looking back she said, “You have forty-eight hours.” Then walked out of his office.

As she got into her car, she reached for the whisky decanter and with a shaking hand poured herself a tumbler and swigged it.