

Ten

December, 2037

The hologram of a young, handsome, bright-eyed newscaster floated above the hologram table. The brightly lit White House served as the backdrop as the newscaster announced the national curfew.

“Effective immediately, all US citizens are to remain indoors between the hours of 6 a.m. and 8 p.m.” Then, reading from a handheld device, he added, “Violators will be arrested.”

Dr. Sarah Saenz paused the feed, then stood with her arms crossed, frustrated that it had taken the President so long to set the curfew. The number of deaths and those ailed due to sun exposure had surpassed critical mass a number of years ago. By now, the nation’s population had become so overwhelmed by disease and sickness that hospitals were resorting to appropriating and converting abandoned warehouses into triage centers, just like the one she presently found herself in.

“I don’t get it. What’s changed?” Dr. Jon Williams asked, as he walked over and stood beside her. “I mean, how many million have we lost already?”

Jon was Sarah’s adjunct, congenial protégé. He was young, somewhat handsome, and thought he was going to save the world,

reminding Sarah of herself when she had first graduated from medical school.

“Too many.” Dr. Saenz replied, unable to give an exact answer because government was withholding the stats. “All I can say is that there are a lot of things going on right now that I don’t agree with. Twenty years ago, you only saw medical centers like these in refugee camps, not in countries like the United States of America. People wouldn’t stand for it. But today, people are paralyzed by the state of the world. Global economies are tanking, food and water are scarce, diseases we thought eradicated are resurfacing in the strangest of places, and *still* we have people waiting for their turn to come into the SunSafes that their tax dollars paid for.”

Privately she believed there was a nefarious reason for the government’s delay in instituting a curfew and it was population culling. She rewound the newscast a few seconds.

“They can do whatever they want because *they* control our news. Look, behind that reporter. What do you see?”

Jon moved around the hologram to study it, then replied, “Nothing.”

“Look closer. There are protestors there. Lots of them.” She moved in closer as she took her pointer from her coat pocket. “You see there?”

Jon leaned in and said, “Yes.”

“The fact that it’s late at night is a boon for those whose job it is to digitally hide the disgruntled from the feed. But if you pay attention you can see that all of this area is one digitally smoothed, blurry blot of people, most likely protesting.”

Examining the hologram once more, Jon admitted, “I’m not exactly seeing what you are seeing.”

Disappointed, she shook her head and said, “Then they’ve done a good job smoothing the scene.” She went to the edge of their perch and touched her forehead against the glass pane. “I know what to look for because my husband worked for the last independent media firm. Of course, that was before Zachary orchestrated its hostile takeover and dismantled them. So now, there is no such thing as independent reporting. Nowadays, the news get distilled before being disseminated to the American people. It’s as if we’re supposed to believe that all of those people out there, the ones still waiting for their lottery numbers to be called, are doing so patiently, even though they are starving and dying.”

Jon leaned into the hologram to take a better look. He hadn’t known she was married. She’d never mentioned her husband before.

“You should give your husband this.”

He stepped back and went to his desk, where he keyed a command into the virtual keyboard, causing the hologram of the newscast to dissolve.

“My husband disappeared after a protest condemning this exact censoring of the media.” She paused, then added, “A lot of journalists disappeared that day.”

Jon felt like a heel. He hadn’t known.

A hologram of a woman who had been admitted that morning materialized on the table and drew their attention. She was young, had dirty blond hair, and was severely sunburned.

“Please, please help us.” The woman pleaded with the NRS2 as it worked on bandaging her eyes, completely unaware that her nurse was an artificially intelligent droid built to look and act like a human. “We no longer have food or access to water and our highways have been blockaded. We have been left to die.”

Jon paused the feed and wiped the tears from his eyes. “She rode a motorcycle overnight all the way from southern San Diego. They didn’t let her into the LA SunSafe, so she came here. She spent two hours exposed to the morning sun. I don’t think she’ll live, and neither does the NRS2.”

“They’re culling our numbers.” Sarah was talking to herself again and Jon was familiar enough with her to recognize it. “I bet there are millions of dead people strewn about desolate cities across the country... maybe even the world.”

Jon was at the edge of their perch, next to her, looking below. “I hope not, but it would explain why they don’t allow us to leave the SunSafe anymore.” His hands were at his waist, pushing his lab coat back. “Everyone on the triage floor came from a town whose number has no prayer of being called in the next eighteen months.”

“Which means they come from some of the poorest communities out there.”

“Exactly.”

Sarah's thoughts were filled with the feeling of helplessness as she walked around the hologram of the floor below their perch, and watched as the patients were treated by robo-nurses called NRS2s. Some were applying a salve over the patients' burns before bandaging them, others were wrapping gauze around their eyes to protect their burned corneas, while still others were drawing blood samples, distributing medication, or simply comforting the dying patients.

There were so many NRS2s about the cavernous triage that they outnumbered patients.

"You know, this warehouse used to be a huge technology store called Tech Buy. The big box stores replaced the mom and pop stores and then they were replaced by the online market, who later merged under the Zarant umbrella." Pausing to look around once more, she added, "I used to shop here. At the entrance there would be a security guard and I think over there, on the right, that whole area was where the flat screens were."

"Flat screens?"

She smiled. "Yes, that's what we dinosaurs watched television on, before the hologram existed. Anyway, when the bodies of those who came seeking admittance into the SunSafe began piling up outside, it became a political issue. These triage centers are meant to keep the bodies away from the windows of the SunSafe."

Jon knew that. No one was supposed to talk about it, but they all knew it was a sham. The only thing those patients were administered was pain medication. Only a select few were actually treated and let into the SunSafe as propaganda.

“Dr. Saenz, please come to bed zero-four-two-six. Dr. Saenz, please come to bed zero-four-two-six.”

She went to the hologram table and called up zero-four-two-six and the hologram of a man in isolation appeared before her. “I’m being paged...to isolation?”

“Isolation?” Jon repeated, as he peered over her shoulder. “They must have found something. Dr. Saenz, can I shadow you?”

Sarah tilted her head to the right with curiosity and said, “Walk with me and tell me what you know about him.”

“All I know is that the patient didn’t come in because of sun exposure.”

Sarah frowned. “So he should be at the SunSafe hospital. He’s a community member, right?”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “No. I don’t think he is. He’s not microchipped and his ID says he came from Yreka.”

Sarah stopped walking and her eyes narrowed. “Yreka?”

“I was waiting on preliminaries to loop you in. When the first NRS2 took his blood, it registered traces of an unknown element. So, I sent in another and it had the same result. They must have found something if they issued a contamination warning.”

If what Jon was saying was true, and she had no reason to doubt him, then she would have to physically inspect the patient. As she travelled towards isolation she realized her senses were heightened and that her blood was pumping full with adrenaline. She hadn’t physically touched a patient in close to four years, which was the last time a patient was beyond NRS2’s abilities.

Without realizing it, her pace quickened, forcing Jon to skip every other step just to keep up. When they arrived, she relaxed herself and observed the patient who lay in a bed on the inside of the glass box constructed to hold such cases.

“What do you think?” Jon asked, as he came and stood next to her.

“I thought I saw a blue tinge to him,” she said, referring to the hologram. “And there it is.”

Her eyes travelled to the man’s matchstick fingers, an indicator of lung cancer.

“I’m going to suit up and go in there. Want to join me?”

His eyes widened with excitement.

“Really?”

“Yes. But it’s not a game. It’s a learning opportunity.” She shook her head, smiled, and led them to the quarantine room. A NRS2 followed close by, listening to the conversation and learning from it. “This way, if we see this again, we’ll know what it is.”

“If we diagnose this successfully, we’ll never see this again. NRS2s will take us out of the equation. Right, NRS2?”

“Correct, Dr. Williams. We are here to learn and assist.”

Sarah shook her head and corrected the machine. “No, you are here to learn and replace.”

NRS2 gave her a confused look making Sarah’s skin crawl.

“So now they can look confused?”

“The new ones can show pain,” Jon whispered back.

“That’s great.” She said, oozing sarcasm. “Grab a recorder so we can study the images from the perch.”

“Dr. Saenz, I record everything and keep it for seventy-two hours,” NRS2 informed them, and as usual, they ignored it.

It took them a few minutes to get into their hazmat suits and finally enter the room. Sarah quickly walked over and pulled all of the shades closed.

From the corner of her eye, as she read the patient’s medical history, she noticed that Jon wasn’t exactly comfortable in his hazmat.

“Everything okay?”

“Um. Yeah. These things just weird me out. I was hoping I’d never encounter a real life situation like this.”

Get used to it, she thought opening the bag with the man’s personal contents. *Ah, an old fashioned driver’s license that confirmed what the hologram displayed just above his head.*

“Yreka, California,” she said, as her eyes bounced between the man’s blue face, his driver’s license, and the descriptive holographic sheet. “Forty-two.” Scrolling down on the hologram, she added, “Looks like he hasn’t seen a doctor in over nine years.”

Unsurprised, Jon said, “Probably couldn’t afford to. Especially in those remote locations.”

“Probably no doctors left in his community. They were given first entry into the SunSafes.” She was checking his pupils as she spoke. “Delayed response.” Her brow furrowed into a frown. “Was he administered something?”

They both looked to the NRS2.

“No drugs administered, Dr. Saenz.”

“I need to see his lungs.”

“Yes, Dr. Saenz,” The obedient machine replied as it walked over and placed a hand over the man’s chest cavity. Seconds later, his X-ray was projected as a 3D hologram.

“Lungs appear to be healthy.” Sarah said, encouraging Jon to arrive at his own conclusion.

“They do.” He agreed.

“He’s blue and he has matchstick fingers, and yet his lungs are healthy.” She knew NRS2 had already run through the same symptoms, but she wanted to run through them with Jon.

“Sir.” Sarah looked at the screen for the patient’s name. “Cameron? Can you hear me?”

The man’s eyes opened as his body began convulsing. Reflexively he brought his hands up to his neck as if he couldn’t breathe, but before anyone could do anything, he flat-lined.

After failing to revive him, Sarah had no choice but to call the time of death.

“Jon, make sure to keep the camera recording.”

NRS2 stepped forward again and said. “Dr. Saenz, I record everything and keep it for seventy-two hours.”

“That’s great, NRS2. You get a sticker.” NRS2 had an expression of having been wounded, but Sarah ignored it and continued on. “Jon, please come closer and follow me as I speak. NRS2, back up so Dr. Williams can do his job.”

“Yes, Dr. Saenz.” NRS2 replied and backed away.

Jon moved in closer to the patient, trying not to look at the man’s face who seemed to be only a few years younger than his

father. Following Sarah's lead he kept the camera a few inches back from the man's body and recorded every inch of it.

Sarah undressed the corpse, turned the head from side to side then lifted the arms, scouring the man's body for lesions or possible signs of something that could give them a lead, but they found nothing.

"Is that it?"

"Now we do the autopsy, checkout the organs and stomach contents, then we revisit the video to see if we missed something. After that, we're out of luck." She realized that Jon had been hoping for more. "Place the camera on the tripod and connect it to the server so that we can download the video from our perch," she whispered. "Otherwise, once it leaves the room, NRS2 will want to run it through corporate before we can have access to the feed. That can take weeks." He nodded and she left the room to get back to the perch.

After he placed the camera on the tripod, he couldn't recall if Sarah had wanted it left recording or not, so just to be safe, he left it recording and focused it on the patient's upper torso.

Later that day, as Jon was supervising a NRS2 performing a skin graph on a man who got accepted into the SunSafe, Sarah watched the live feed of the dead man as she pondered what had infected him and how he got from Yreka to San Francisco in his condition.

"Wait. What was that?"

Jon looked away from the skin graph to Sarah. He was confused.

“What was what? It’s a run of the mill skin graph.”

“No, no. Mute your mic to the surgery. Look!” She rewound the feed. A thing that looked a lot like a stainless steel worm came out of the man’s nose, made its way onto the pillow and appeared to curl itself into a silver ball. Her eyes travelled to Jon who seemed as perplexed as she was.

“What in the hell?” He said, walking away from his surgery and over to Sarah’s desk. “Can you rewind that again?”

They watched it multiple times, debating what they had just witnessed.

“When is the autopsy taking place?”

“It’s not. The body is still there because the military is coming for it. You and I are no longer allowed into that room.”

“They need a warrant.”

“They got one. From Congresswoman Duarte herself.” Surprised that the issue had already been elevated to the highest levers, she said, “I need to know what’s going on in Yreka! I have an old FBI who can take me up there to have a look. I’ll need you to cover for me.”

Jon thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No. You’re lead here. Your absence is a red flag. I’ll go have a look around, record what I find, and hologram you in while I’m there. Deal?”

Sarah didn’t like the idea of putting such a nice, naïve young man in danger, but he was right. Even if she called in sick, a military guard would be at her door checking on her. With her access, they kept her on a tight leash.

“Deal. I’ll make the phone call.”