

The Science Fiction Short Story Collection

An Alien Encounter

Fresh Catch

Enigma

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An Alien Encounter

Matthew felt a surge of excitement flood his veins. It was much more powerful than any drug. He couldn't explain it if someone asked him to. It was the thrill of casing a house, finding a weakness in the security system, and eventually breaking into the house and taking something. It didn't matter what he took; on more than one occasion, he'd taken nothing more valuable than a pencil. He just wanted to let the citizens of Star City know that they weren't as safe as they assumed they were. He carried no weapon. Matthew did not want to appear more dangerous than a thrill-seeking kid. If he got caught, he might be able to convince a jury that it had been his first time, and thus get off the hook with no more than a slap on the wrist.

He moved with all the circumspection and care of a seasoned thief. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw a desk in the room with a word processor, a lamp beside the desk, and a chair. There did not appear to be anything worth taking. His fingers brushed across a door frame as he entered the hallway. Although the thief had not been in this neighborhood before, he had been inside this type of house many times. He turned right, heading toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was spacious and included a dining area. Because the thief was mesmerized by the silver ray of moonlight shining through the bay window like a beacon, he did not notice the mess until a few moments later. Pizza boxes, soda pop cans, ice cream containers, candy bar wrappers, and other remnants of food littered the ceramic tile floor.

It was as if someone had been on a feeding frenzy. The clutter was completely uncharacteristic of the house, at least, from what Matthew had already seen of it. The office was perfectly neat. So was the hallway and the outside of the house. The bushes were carefully trimmed. Even the rocks in the rock garden were meticulously arranged by colors: slate, white, and light brown. Earlier, Matthew had suspected that whoever lived in the house had a compulsion for neatness. So what was this mess doing here?

The possibilities flashed through his mind as quickly as heroin entered the bloodstream. A psychotic killer could have entered the house, killed the owner, and might still be there lurking in the shadows like a wraith. The thief was convinced that the home owner was a man because there was nothing feminine in the surroundings. He did not want to stick around much longer, lest one of his more creative notions prove to be valid. Matthew opened one of the drawers and took a spoon. He closed the drawer and was about to leave when he heard a scream that sounded slightly muffled, originating somewhere below.

The screamer was a man. His voice sounded full of pain and agony, as if he was being tortured. Matthew winced. He wanted to leave, yet he felt an inexplicable moral obligation to help the man. With every fiber of his being he tried to force himself to turn around and leave, but could not. He felt as though his heart was being wrenched loose. Matthew was a thief, but he wasn't cold-blooded. He stuck the spoon in his pocket and grabbed a steak knife in case he needed to defend himself against a psychopath. Then he went looking for the door that led to the basement.

As he took his first step onto the staircase, which seemed to go down into the very bowels of the earth, Matthew shivered. He knew his imagination was running wild. He hadn't been able to control it since he was a child. His parents had always hoped he would be a novelist someday, raking in dough from one best seller to the next. Unfortunately, he had disappointed them by dropping out of high school and then moving clear across the country, from the West Coast to the East. Star City was located in southeastern Pennsylvania, approximately twenty minutes north of Philadelphia. Matthew's parents lived in San Diego, where it was warm and sunny and there was far too much light for his liking.

The home owner screamed again.

Matthew stepped off the last stair and found himself in a large room. He felt as though he had not stepped into a basement, but rather into hell. A red glow shining underneath a door at the far end of the room was the only source of light. It splashed onto the walls, making them appear covered with blood. It was easy to imagine that the eerie shadows flickering across the walls were demons and that the air smelled faintly of sulfur. Matthew was suffocating in the black ski mask he was wearing, so he removed it. He ran his fingers through the tangled mop of blonde hair on his head and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Slowly his eyes adjusted to the darkness. As he looked around, Matthew noticed a lamp sitting on a table. He reached for the switch and was rewarded with a faint glow of light. Almost immediately, he wished he hadn't turned it on, for he saw blood stains near the door the red light was coming from. The blood stains were fairly large, as if someone had been bleeding from a gaping wound. He gagged, but did not vomit.

An alien cry slashed through the silence like a sword. It was a sound that would haunt him for the rest of his life, for it was a cry of pure terror. Something thrashed at the door, and then there was complete silence. His imagination provided him with vivid and detailed images of all the things that could have happened. He stood in a fighting stance with his knife grasped tightly in his left hand. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead and into his eye. He blinked several times to clear his vision. Suddenly, the door was rent asunder as something crashed through it with the force of an explosion. Out of the corner of his eye, Matthew glimpsed a flicker of movement, but saw nothing more.

As the thief entered the tiny laundry room, he was overwhelmed by the sight and smell of blood. A deluging sense of nausea filled him and caused him to vomit. When he had expunged every last bit of food from his stomach, he was at last able to withstand the revolting scene.

A husk of human skin lay shriveled in the pool of blood that covered most of the cement floor. Shreds of cloth clung to the husk. It resembled nothing so much as a heap of rags. Had he not seen its lifeless eyes frozen in an expression of horror, Matthew would not have known it for what it was. With profound disgust, he realized that something had burst out of the man's body before he had died. Scenes from various science fiction movies came to mind. He sincerely hoped that he wasn't dealing with a similar creature. If he was, then he was in trouble.

The thief went back upstairs. He fully expected to be confronted by the hideous thing when he reached the top of the stairs, but nothing happened. He glanced around and saw no sign of it. He wondered what would happen if he were to abandon the house and try to forget about the creature. Slowly, he approached the front door.

The creature lunged at him from the darkness. He could not see it because it was clinging to his back. He felt a tentacle brush against his face, and in that instant the creature's thoughts became Matthew's. He learned all that he needed to know about it. It was ancient. When Babylon was at its height of power, the alien landed on Earth. Since then, it had traveled from host to host. It lived within each host for years, giving that person unparalleled power for a short time to make up for the host's inevitable death. Matthew saw flashes of historical faces who had unwittingly been the parasite's host - Adolf Hitler and Vlad the Impaler were two of them.

The thief wrenched the alien from his back and hurled it over his head. It crashed into the wall. As it lay there unconscious, he took a cigarette lighter from his pocket, lit it, and tossed it. "Burn in hell, alien scum," he cursed, hoping that it would ignite and not come back with a vengeance. The chance was one that he would have to take.

The alien thing went up in flames surprisingly fast, as if its blood contained some combustible element. Golden flames lapped the alien's blood on the floor as Matthew ran out into the night. He kept running on sheer instinct, and did not care where the road led. Finally, he stopped to catch his breath and glanced back. The house was now enveloped by golden flames. The fire belched thick black smoke into the air. As sirens wailed, he looked up into the sky. The stars shone down brightly, shimmering in the darkness of space. How many other aliens were out there? He decided he really didn't want to know.

Fresh Catch

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The sky was an oil painting of pastel blue, lavender and gray clouds mingled with thin strands of amber light. Uneven splotches of snow contrasted sharply with frozen dirt & grass below. Pine trees lined the horizon. Far across the snowy fields, an old red farmhouse could be seen. There was a red barn next to it. A navy blue and silver '89 Ford pickup truck sat in the driveway.

Suddenly the ground began to shake. Earthquakes were unheard of in Minnesota, but no other logical explanation presented itself. A man ran out of the farmhouse to see what was happening. Rick Barnes was very tall and stocky, having developed a good set of muscles from working on the farm most of his life. He was in his early thirties and average looking with brown eyes and brown hair. He wore brown leather boots, faded blue jeans, and a plaid flannel shirt that his girlfriend jokingly referred to as a tablecloth. Rick meant to call Mary to make sure that she was safe, but then the ground trembled again.

A particularly violent tremor made him lose his balance. He fell backwards into a pile of snow. Then the world lurched again. The Ford rolled into the barn behind it. There was a loud, wrenching crash as the truck smashed into the barn, sending wood flying in splinters.

As Rick looked up, he saw the strangest sight. The sky was black, but no stars could be seen. A curved band of scintillating colors lit up the sky, breaking through the clouds. At first, he thought it was a rainbow. However, it curved up instead of down. The only other thing he could think of was that it resembled a fishing hook. Then the clouds parted to reveal two giant alien eyes which stared into the depths of his soul.

"Oh God," he breathed in astonishment, wondering if the world was about to end.

A great wind blew from the sky as the alien sighed. *It's too small,* Rick heard in his mind, as clearly as if the words had been spoken aloud. *I'll have to throw it back.*

The world heaved once more as the shimmering hook disappeared. Suddenly the barn stood as solid as it had before. The truck was in one piece and cast a long, dark shadow across the snow. As for Rick, he was unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened at all.

Far away, the alien swung a sparkling fishing pole over his shoulder and dropped the hook into a glowing river in which galaxies swam in waves of stars and the Earth floated along. Caught by an eddy, the Milky Way spun out of reach as the alien waited for his next fresh catch.

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Suddenly the ground began to shake. Earthquakes were unheard of in the Midwest, but no other logical explanation presented itself. Rick ran out of the farmhouse to see what was happening.

A particularly violent tremor made him lose his balance. He fell backwards into a pile of snow. Then the world lurched again. The Ford rolled into the barn behind it. There was a loud, wrenching crash as the truck smashed into the barn, sending wood flying in splinters.

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"Oh no," he exclaimed and ran.

A great wind blew from the sky as the alien sighed. *It's too small,* Rick heard in his mind, as clearly as if the words had been spoken aloud. *I'll have to throw it back.*

The world heaved once more as the shimmering hook disappeared. Suddenly the barn stood as solid as it had before. The truck was in one piece and cast a long, dark shadow across the snow. As for Rick, he was unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened at all.

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Enigma

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Chapter 1

"I must keep moving," he muttered. "If I do not, they will surely find me." He did not know who they were, but some part of his subconscious remembered. When he stepped on his left foot, his ankle protested with pain. He could not remember how he had gotten the injury.

He stood in a doorway at the end of a hallway. Beyond was light. It shone beneath the door like a thin blade slicing the hallway in half. In the shiny metal doorknob, he glimpsed his face. Frightened blue eyes stared back at him. His blond hair was unkempt but clean. He looked to be in his twenties. His skin was pale, as though he had not been outside for quite some time. He hesitated to open the door.

The hallway was white; stark, hospital-room white. No, it was cleaner than that. He shivered. There was something wrong with a floor so clean that he dared not take a step further, and with walls that he shuddered to touch. Yet the door beckoned like an escape hatch. But where did it lead?

Was this a prison? Was he a criminal of some sort? What if someone learned of his escape? To what lengths would they go to find him? What if his imprisonment was unjustified? Why did he have memory loss?

He opened the door cautiously. There was no trap, no electrical shock, nothing of the sort. He had subconsciously expected punishment, though he couldn't remember why. Brilliant sunlight nearly blinded him. He staggered backwards and shielded his eyes instinctively, expecting something else. What?

To implode like a vampire, disintegrating into ashes and dust until some maintenance worker swept him up and unceremoniously dumped his remains into a garbage can? He didn't know. Yet, he was relieved that there was no pain.

He stepped into the sunlight and onto a grassy plain. It was an emerald cloak draped across the shoulders of the earth, flowing and cascading past the horizon. Vague purple shadows on the horizon suggested mountains in the distance. He could not determine their numbers or height.

"I must survive at all costs." That was instinctual. Perhaps, deep down, part of him remembered who he was and what he was doing there. He could not recall his name. He was simply himself.

Enigma was the word that came to his mind. That was who he was, and currently, what he was.

"Perhaps that is the name I should use," he thought aloud.

"I am Enigma," he said, savoring the phrase. At least, it was a start.

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After what seemed like several hours of walking, he saw a small town in the distance. The sun was just beginning to set. Smoke curled like dragon tails, ascending into the sky. Lights twinkled like gems in a treasure hoard. Civilization beckoned, but Enigma was wary. For starters, he still didn't know what had happened to him.

He had too many questions and no answers at all. Perhaps the answers could be found within that town. There must be somebody there who recognized him. Besides, he needed food, water, and a place to rest. The answers could wait a little longer. His decision made, Enigma hiked towards the town.

From a distance, he saw two men guarding the town's entrance. He wondered how they would see him. His clothes were white but mostly clean, which ought to look odd, given the fact that the guards couldn't know how far he had traveled. He hadn't seen any villages along the way. He had no bags, but he knew how exhausted he must have looked, as if his journey had been long. His skin was now pink with sunburn.

"Who are you?" the guard on the left asked. "Where'd you come from?"

"My name is Enigma. I came from out there." He pointed.

The guard looked puzzled. "There's nothing that way."

He shrugged. "I need food and water."

"So does everyone else, but fresh water is scarce and good food is hard to come by unless you happen to know someone high up in the Technocracy. I'll let you in, but you're on your own. If we find you sleeping on the streets tonight, you'll be sent to a retraining center."

He nodded, wondering what that meant, but decided it was better not to ask. "What's the name of this place?"

"Silver Cove," the guard on the right replied.

Enigma nodded. "Thank you."

The guards let him pass.

As he left, Enigma overheard the guards whispering.

"That was strange, wasn't it?" the first guard asked.

"Yeah. I wonder if we ought to notify the boss," the second replied.

"The boss isn't going to care about some newcomer. He has enough on his plate right now, what with the murders in the East District."

"I'm telling you, that guy must have been from the free towns or something."

"Where'd he get the white clothes from, then? They must have cost quite a bit," the second guard remarked. "Maybe he stole them," he mused.

"From who? Nobody around here is that rich, except the mayor, and even he doesn't walk around wearing white," the first guard said.

The second guard shrugged. "Good question."

They fell quiet then, so Engima decided that it was safe to stop eavesdropping.

The streets of Silver Cove were so clean that he could have eaten off them, but he suspected that would get him sent to the retraining center, whatever that was. It sounded like a prison of some sort.

The buildings were constructed mostly of light gray bricks with a few pastel reds, yellows, and blues thrown in for aesthetic purposes. The structures were spotless on the outside and the lawns were perfectly trimmed. Flower gardens were planted with rows of white, blue, pink, or yellow flowers arranged with precision in alternating rows. The aura of perfection was familiar, though why, he didn't know.

One promising sign on a door of a little squat brick building read Help Wanted: Dishwasher. A small black sign with glowing blue letters above the door announced "Mara's Café." Lemon scent mingled with the aroma of fried chicken and baked potatoes drifted through the open window. His stomach growled. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten.

Just then, a memory sprang to him, unbidden.

Soap suds filled the sink. They smelled of lemons. The water was ice cold, and he nearly dropped a dish as he retrieved it from the frigid bubbles.

"Careful, dear. Don't break it," a woman warned from behind him. "You must be very, very careful not to make a mess."

"Why, mama?" he heard himself ask with a child's voice.

"Because you might end up in a bad place someday."

Cautiously, he put the dish onto a bright yellow towel that was nearly covered by other dishes. They were all white.

The memory faded.

Perhaps, he thought, getting this job would help him recover some more memories. And if nothing else, he could earn some money.

As he entered, he noticed that the restaurant looked like it had just been cleaned. The lemon scent was strong, but it didn't bring back any more memories. From the carpet to the ceiling, almost everything was in shades of blue. Several large black screens hung on the walls showed various images in motion. There was no sound.

He was greeted by a short, plump woman with gray hair that was covered by a fine net. She also wore gloves and a light blue apron. As she looked him up and down, her eyes widened with surprise.

"I don't believe my good luck. How'd a good-looking young man like you end up in my café? Are you a Technocrat Inspector?"

"No, ma'am."

"How can I help you then, sir?" she asked.

"I'm looking for work."

"Work? No offense, young man, but with those fine clothes, you look like you could afford to buy this place."

He looked embarrassed. "Honestly, ma'am, I need a job."

"Did a retraining center send you here or something? The only job I have open pays minimum wage," she answered.

He shrugged. "I wish I knew the answer to that, ma'am. I lost my memory. I hope it's only temporary."

"Do you remember how to wash dishes?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Do you have a name?" she inquired.

"Enigma," he replied.

"That's an odd name," she mused.

"It's the one I chose for myself until I remember my real name," he answered honestly.

"I see." She scrutinized him again. "Well, you are certainly handsome. Not to mention, you're young and healthy, which is hard to come by these days. You also look like you can keep yourself clean. Tell you what. I desperately need someone to start tonight. I had to fire my last dishwasher a week ago when a couple of Technocrats stopped by for a visit and were served with dirty dishes. I've been doing the job myself for the past few days, but I can't keep it up much longer."

Indeed, Enigma thought, she looked nearly as tired as he felt.

"Do you know where I can find a place to stay?" he asked.

"Down the block that way..." the woman gestured, "my daughter runs a boarding house. It'll cost you \$100 a night and you'll get breakfast free. That's fairly cheap these days, you know. If you can stay on for a while, I'd be willing to chip in a little. My daughter needs the business."

He didn't know, but it was safer to agree.

"Can you start tonight?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm Mara. The supper crowd will be here any time. The kitchen is back there..." she pointed. "Make sure you put a hair net, apron, and gloves on, or the health inspectors will give me hell if they show up. Do your best to keep your apron clean. If it gets dirty, just put on a new one. Can't risk getting another fine."

He nodded. "What are the fines for?"

"Oh, the government health inspectors show up every so often - pretty much whenever they want to. If they decide you're in violation of the cleanliness laws or any other regulations, you get a fine. Too many, and they shut you down. You have to go find another job, maybe even go through retraining." She looked at him curiously. "I thought everyone knew that."

Enigma shrugged. "I don't. What is it?"

"Bloody Technocrats. They send you off to one of their centers where you learn a bunch of new skills and get shipped off to wherever the jobs are, like it or not. If you need to learn a foreign language to work there, you learn that, too. But I never heard of a retraining center that erases your memories."

He shrugged again.

"Well, as long as you can wash dishes, I don't care where you're from," Mara said abruptly. "Go get ready."

He went into the kitchen. There, he found a light blue apron and put it on, along with the other accessories. There were currently no dishes in the sink, but he had a feeling that it would fill up all too soon.

After what seemed like an hour later, Enigma was busy washing dishes. The faucet marked "hot" was scalding and the water that came out of the other faucet was freezing. He occasionally had to run the cold water so that he didn't burn himself. When he did, it was a jarring shock to his skin, but he got used to it.

Mara poked her head into the kitchen and whispered, "There's an Inspector here. Be careful not to make a mess. I told him your name was John Smith."

Enigma nodded. "Thank you, ma'am."

The woman shook her head. "Call me Mara, please. Everyone else around here does. It'll seem odd if you don't."

"Yes, Mara," he replied. It felt strange to say her name, as if it was ingrained into him not to.

She smiled. "Good."

The inspector approached soon after that. He was a well-built, middle-aged man with dark brown hair and brown eyes. He wore a white uniform that vaguely resembled Enigma's clothes, but the styles were different. He also wore an embroidered patch with the symbols of a yellow light bulb, a blue book, and a red balance scale. Enigma filed that away for further research. Beneath the patch, a name badge read "Inspector Blackmore."

The Inspector's eyes widened as he apparently recognized the dishwasher. "You! What in blazes are you doing here?" he exclaimed.

Chapter 2

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Enigma's eyes grew wide as he nearly dropped the plate he was holding. This man knew who he was, but could he trust him? "How do you know who I am?"

"I don't know your name, but my unit received a report that one of the modified humans had escaped from sector nine. You'd better come with me," the Inspector said.

He shook his head. "What are you talking about? Why should I trust you?"

Reaching into his pocket, Blackmore withdrew a small silver pistol and aimed it at him. "You have no choice. Put that plate down and come with me."

Enigma sighed. He made a move as if to put the plate down, but instead suddenly threw it towards the Inspector's outstretched hand. A bright green laser beam sliced through the air, vaporizing the plate. Then a high-pitched alarm wailed, creating a distraction. He took the opportunity to run, although he still had a limp.

"What the..." Mara looked up just as he came limping out of the kitchen, and the Inspector followed him.

"Stand aside, Ma'am," Blackmore commanded.

"But..." Mara gestured frantically towards her kitchen.

The Inspector looked toward where she was pointing. When he looked back, Enigma was gone. The Inspector let out a string of curses. "Damn. The boss isn't going to like this," he muttered to himself.

The landscape blurred around Enigma as he ran. He suddenly realized that he was running much faster than he should be. In addition, his mind processed everything around him more rapidly than it ought to. His reflexes were quick enough to evade any potential obstacle that might come up. He darted around an illuminated sign that read "East District," and around a few pedestrians who exchanged bewildered looks.

Though his ankle was sore, it wasn't giving out as expected. In fact, it seemed to be less painful with each step. Why is this happening to me? he wondered. What exactly am I? As always, his mind was full of questions but no answers.

The buildings in the East District were older. The paint on the walls was cracked and dull and of varied colors, not just white. Noticeable dirt remained on the streets. Even the shadows seemed darker here. He was sure that graffiti would be punishable by death, but as he slowed to a walk, he noticed that some daring artist had sprayed "Down with Techno RATS!" on a wall. The graffiti was in glowing neon ink that changed colors

depending on the angle he looked at it. The phrase was underlined and had a stylized @ symbol at the end. He wasn't sure what that meant, but it seemed to signify something special.

Enigma kept walking and eventually noticed some men's clothes hanging on a clothes line across an alley. They looked like they might fit him. He quickly changed into a pair of black pants and a black shirt, then left his white outfit hanging on the line. If what he had heard was true, it was worth far more than the clothes he had taken, anyway. At least, he would not stand out so much.

He also found a pair of black leather boots that someone had thrown into a dumpster nearby. They were a little big, and one of the shoelaces was broken, but they were not as unusual as the white shoes he was wearing. In the same dumpster, he found an old leather backpack. One of the straps had been either torn or cut in half, but the zipper still worked. It was still usable.

Enigma tossed the white shoes into the dumpster and buried them underneath a pile of garbage. He didn't want to keep any traces of his old self, in case someone should discover them and alert the authorities. Inspector Blackmore had said that there were people looking for him from sector nine, whatever that was. Somehow, he knew instinctually that he didn't want to go back there. If only he knew why.

He needed to find a place to stay and hide from the people who were after him. But where would they look? He now realized that he was valuable to them because his abilities were unusual, but what had they done to him and why had they done it? He required time to find the answers as well. Only with time could he learn who he was.

* * * * *

After wandering through the streets for several hours, Enigma found a bar called the Tap and Barrel. There was a help wanted sign on the front window. The door was open, so he went inside. The air was saturated with the smell of smoke and beer. Several men were watching the images on a flat screen against the wall. It depicted some type of sporting event.

A tall, well-built man with auburn hair and a beard leaned against the wall with his arms folded in front of him. He had a tattoo on his arm of a mermaid. It glowed in the bar's dim light and changed to a dancing girl when he moved. He wore a black tank top and black jeans.

No one noticed Enigma until he sat down. The bartender was a short, overweight man with gray hair and beady brown eyes. He scrutinized Enigma closely.

"The beer isn't free. You'd better have credit," the bartender declared. "Or Jack there will have to toss you out." He gestured towards the tough guy.

Enigma shrugged. "Actually, I was wondering about the job."

"Oh. Well, I'm looking for someone to take over bartending during the evenings. Our evening guy just disappeared," the bartender said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Haven't heard anything from him for two weeks. I've been covering both shifts."

"Well, I'm willing to learn," Enigma replied.

The bartender's eyes narrowed. "You've got no experience and you expect me to hire you?"

"I learn fast."

"Yeah, right. Unless you've just been to a retraining center and programmed for this type of work, I don't think you're the one I'm looking for," the bartender said.

"I just came out of a retraining center, actually," Enigma lied.

"Really? You must have the files to prove it, then. Show me your ID."

"It was stolen."

"Bummer. That's too bad, but I'm not hiring anyone without ID. Learned my lesson a few years ago. Took in a guy off the streets and he stole all of my credit out from under my nose."

"I'm not a thief," Enigma replied.

"Doesn't matter. No ID, no job. Jack!"

"Yeah, boss?" the tough guy asked.

"Show this guy out the door, please," the bartender said.

"Sure thing, boss," Jack replied.

Jack strode across the bar confidently, but then suddenly chaos erupted as two guys dressed in black from head to toe and wearing masks entered. They also carried laser weapons similar to what the Inspector had, but theirs were slightly bigger and they were black.

"Hand over your credit now or no one gets hurt," the first guy demanded. He aimed his weapon at the bartender.

Enigma jumped up from the bar stool. Moving so quickly that nobody could see him, he disarmed the two bad guys before they could stop him. He stood near the bar and aimed both weapons at the bad guys.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked.

The thieves glanced at each other. One of them approached, but Jack blocked his path and punched him in the jaw. With a loud thud, the thief hit the floor, causing glasses to rattle on their shelves behind the bar. His companion ran.

The bartender's eyes grew wide as he stared at Enigma, along with everyone else. "You're a mod," he whispered in amazement. "I always thought that was just an urban myth. Listen, you can have that bartending job. Hell, you can have any job you want."

Enigma looked a bit embarrassed. "I just need to get back on my feet. That's all."

"You got a place to stay?" the bartender asked.

"No."

"I've got a room upstairs. It's yours if you want it."

Did he want it? Well, he didn't have much choice. It was either that or sleep on the street and risk being caught, Enigma thought. But Inspector Blackmore was still after him.

"What, you got someone looking for you or something?" the bartender asked.

Slowly, he nodded.

"I suppose they want you back, huh? I figured they didn't just let you out for no good reason."

"Who are they?" Enigma asked.

"Why, the Technocrats. The idiots in charge, as I like to call them. Well, this is my place, and whatever happens here, stays here. Isn't that right?"

The bartender glanced around the room, meeting the eyes of the three customers and Jack in turn. Everyone nodded.

"All right," Enigma replied. "I'll stay."

The bartender grinned. "Great. I'm Tony. This here is Sam, Johnny, and Pete. They're my regulars. There's an evening crowd, but it's quiet most of the time. I like it that way. You got a name?"

He nodded. "Enigma."

Tony laughed. "That's a damn good name, if I do say so myself. Any reason why?"

"I don't remember my real name," he admitted.

"Ah. Well, we can't call you that when the place is full."

He shrugged. "Call me John Smith, then."

"Fine by me," Tony replied.

He nodded. He hoped that this job would last longer than the last one.

Chapter 3

* * * * *

A week later, Enigma had learned the details of his job. He expected the hardest part to be talking to customers, but it turned out that most of them just wanted a friendly ear. There were a half dozen drinks that were popular and required twice as many steps as the others. Memorizing them didn't take him long. The hardest part was trying to fit in and act like everyone else.

The bar's centerpiece was a holographic display in the middle of the room. When there were no customers around, he and Tony watched newscasts. From them, he learned that the Technocrats' leader was a mysterious figure named Mr. Sharpe, who was rarely seen in public. Instead, his official spokespersons frequently announced new regulations and praised the government for its fine handling of the economy.

Violent crime was rare, but those who were arrested for violations of regulations were often shown. They were usually sentenced to rehabilitation centers. In follow-up interviews, they expressed remorse, were passionate about their new jobs, and endorsed the government. They used nearly identical language, which he thought was odd.

This evening was typical. Like the evenings before it, the crowd was made up of young people dressed in brightly-colored clothing. A few wore black as a statement against the establishment. Many of them wore shiny patches on their arms. Something about them seemed familiar.

Neon-colored waves of light rippled across the room as the music blared, pulsating with rhythm. A moment later, the light waves changed to sparkles darting all around like fireflies. He found the music vaguely familiar, yet odd. It seemed to be a mix of more than one style. It was very energetic. He heard it referred to as "pulse."

A young woman entered the bar. She had long brown hair and wore a short black dress that shimmered in the swirling light. She moved lithely through the crowd, attracting many glances. Perching on a bar seat, she smiled.

"How can I help you, miss?" Enigma asked.

"I'd like a Martian Sunrise, please."

"That'll be thirty-four credits."

The woman sighed. "Any chance I could get a discount?"

"No. Sorry, ma'am."

He scanned her thumbprint. Her name came up as Lily Winters on the nearby computer screen. He noticed that she lived near Mara's restaurant. "Credit Accepted" flashed on the display. "Thanks," he said, and turned around to mix the drink.

He set down a mug filled with swirling red and gold liquid. The glass itself glowed with red light.

"Have you been to Mara's Café?" he asked to make conversation.

Lily smiled. "Many times. The owner is my mother. Why do you ask?"

"I was just curious."

"What's your name?" she inquired.

"John Smith."

Her eyes widened. "Did you work for my mother recently?"

He started to respond, then stopped as the Inspector entered the bar.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "I won't say anything." She put a small round device on the counter. This is a holo projector. It can change your appearance. I use it for makeup. It only alters your face a little bit, but it might help. Here."

She quickly pushed a few buttons. Her face looked pale without makeup, but not unattractive. Her dark blue eyes stood out more. "Just put this in your pocket, and it'll work."

"Thanks."

Reflected in the glass door of the liquor cabinet behind him, his eyes appeared brown, his nose was slightly larger, and his stubble was thicker and darker. He looked like he could have been anyone else. He smiled as he realized it just might work.

The Inspector sat down at the bar and held out a small electronic device. It projected a hologram of him. "Have you seen this man?"

"No. Why? What'd he do?"

"He's an escaped felon. He's very dangerous."

Questions ran through Enigma's mind. Am I a criminal? he wondered. I don't think I could do anything that wrong, at least, not without a good reason. Also, there was something about the inflection of Blackmore's voice that sounded strange. Could he be lying? If so, why?

"If I see him, I'll let you know. Can I get you anything?"

"I don't drink on duty," the Inspector replied, eyeing him suspiciously. He nodded towards Lily. "Ma'am."

"Yes?"

"Does the man in this picture look familiar?"

"No, sir."

Blackmore asked a few of the regulars. They all denied having seen Enigma. The Inspector sighed and stood, apparently realizing that he wasn't going to get anywhere.

"If any of you see or hear anything, be sure to inform me." He set a small, card-shaped device on the counter. It briefly projected a hologram of the Technocracy's logo with his name underneath, then went dark.

"Certainly," Lily said, smiling.

After the Inspector left the bar, Enigma let out a sigh of relief. The regulars glanced at him but didn't say anything.

"So you are him," she whispered, "the guy my mother told me about."

He nodded.

"How'd you end up here?" she asked.

"It's a long story," he answered.

"Well, the night is young."

"Now isn't exactly a good time to talk," he said, indicating the other customers.

"All right, some other time then," she agreed.

* * * * *

Several hours later, everyone left, so Enigma cleaned up. Suddenly, a woman's scream pierced the night. Her voice sounded like Lily's. As he rushed out the door in a blur, some part of him was aware that a few empty glasses tipped over. They rolled off the tables and clattered to the floor. He stopped in the middle of the street and glanced around, wondering where Lily was.

She screamed again. He dashed through the streets at lightning speed. At the end of a dark alley, he saw a tall man dressed in black, holding one hand clamped over Lily's mouth and another around her waist. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"Let her go," he demanded.

The stranger laughed. "Or what?"

He ran toward them, but they disappeared unexpectedly. Then laughter thundered from above. He looked up to see his adversary hovering in mid-air, clutching Lily, whose eyes were as wide as the moon. The man in black vanished into the darkness.

Suddenly, a flicker of light caught Enigma's eye. He glanced down and noticed a small metal object, roughly the width of his fingernail and an inch long, on the ground. He picked it up. It read "Sharpe Industries" on the back. Silently, he vowed to find Lily, wherever that search might lead him.

* * * * *

The next morning, he headed for the West District. He walked slowly to appreciate the details and get a better bearing on where he was. The buildings became newer and cleaner the farther west he went. If the far side of the East District was the darkest hour of midnight, the West was the bright sun at noon. People in the west also seemed more standoffish and kept to themselves.

It was also much quieter. He didn't hear as many people making casual conversation. It was as if their perfectionistic tendencies extended to all aspects of their lives. He few noises came from birds and the bulky lawn service robots. Even the robots were nearly silent, except for the occasional whisper of their blades. All in all, it was a bit unnerving.

Mara was bustling about in her café, getting it ready to open for the lunch crowd. She paused as he knocked on the door, then gasped in surprise as she saw who it was.

"You! I thought you'd gone for good. What happened?"

"It's a long story," he said. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly." She unlocked the door. He noticed that there were dark circles under her eyes. "You'll have to forgive me, I've been up all night worrying myself sick. My daughter is missing."

Enigma nodded. "I know. I saw the guy who took her. I tried to stop him."

"Really?" she asked. "What happened?"

"He flew away."

Mara's jaw dropped. "Flew?"

"Yes. But he dropped this." He held out the shiny metal object.

She took it and examined it. "Sharpe Industries? What do they have to do with all of this?"

"That's what I intend to find out," he said.

"I'll see what I can do. A friend of mine is a computer expert. She should be able to tell you what this data storage unit has on it."

"You can reach me here." He gave her the address of the Tap and Barrel.

"Thank you so much," she replied. "You've given me hope."

"It was the least I could do," he answered.

Chapter 4

* * * * *

After returning to the Tap and Barrel, Enigma was surprised to find a message waiting for him. It was from Inspector Blackmore. The computer projected his hologram as the message played. Light flickered across the bar's polished walnut countertop and reflected on the glasses shelved behind it, creating a prismatic effect.

"I have been asked to investigate the disappearance of a young woman named Lily Winters, who was seen at this bar last night. Please contact me immediately," Blackmore said.

Just then, Tony came out of his office. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Lily was abducted last night. I tried to stop it from happening, but I wasn't fast enough," Enigma said.

Tony's jaw dropped. "Someone was faster than you? You've got to be kidding."

"He flew."

"That's impossible!"

"If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it either. I can find Lily. Just give me some time. Don't tell the Inspector."

"You have my word that I won't say anything," Tony promised.

* * * * *

Enigma sat at the table in the far back corner, hoping not to be noticed. He held up a newspaper. Headlines scrolled electronically across the paper such as "2110 Economic Outlook Up 24% For August" and "President Sharpe Awards Junior Citizen For Reporting Parents' Violations."

There was a hologram of a young boy shaking the hand of an odd-looking, middle-aged man identified as the President. His eyes were dark and close together. He was tall with short cropped black hair and pale skin. His nose was slender and pointed. He wore a black suit, white shirt, and red tie. He looked vaguely familiar.

Inspector Blackmore entered. He carried a thin silver tablet with a black screen and a pen-like device under his arm. As always, he wore a crisp white uniform.

"Good day, Inspector," Tony greeted him. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here because a woman named Lily Winters was abducted outside your establishment last night. She was last reported having been seen here. I saw her myself."

"Sorry to hear that. How can I help?" Tony asked.

"Did you see anything?" Blackmore inquired.

"No. I had gone to bed by that time."

The Inspector scribbled something on the tablet with his pen. He gave Enigma a scrutinizing look. "Mr. Smith, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"All right," he replied.

"Did you see anything last night?" Blackmore asked.

"I heard a scream, but that was all," Enigma answered.

"When?"

"Shortly after closing time. I was cleaning up."

"How far away did it sound?" the Inspector questioned him.

"Could've been a couple of blocks, but I'm really not sure."

Blackmore made a few notes and looked at Tony. "How long has that barkeeper been working here?"

"Not very long, but he's good. He knows how to mix drinks and keep the place in shape."

"I'd like to see his employment records."

"Unfortunately, we've been having computer problems for the past two days. I can't access the database at all. It's some kind of virus. The repair person can't fix it until tomorrow because they're getting bombarded with calls about the same problem," Tony lied smoothly.

"All right. I'll check back after tomorrow," the Inspector said.

Tony nodded. "Have a nice day."

After Blackmore left, Enigma breathed a sigh of relief.

Just then, the computer reported an incoming message. It projected Mara's hologram. "Hello, John," she said. "My friend found something that you should have a look at."

"All right, I'll be over as soon as I can," he replied.

The hologram vanished.

"Do you mind if I go?" he asked Tony.

"No, just let me know if you can't make your shift tonight."

"I will," he said. The world around him became a blur as he ran.

A few minutes later, Enigma arrived at the café. It was still a couple of hours before noon, so the place was empty. The round tables were covered in blue and white checkered tablecloths, with matching candles and napkins. The wallpaper had a white and blue floral pattern as opposed to its normal light blue color. He wondered how she had changed it so quickly. Perhaps that was a hologram, too. Soft music played in the background. He also smelled a faint lemon scent. Evidently, she had just cleaned.

"Good," Mara said, "you're here. My friend runs a cyber café down the street. She said she found something on that data storage unit, and that we should take a look at it."

"What did she find?" he asked.

"I don't know. She wouldn't talk about it over the communications link. We'll have to go to her place."

"All right," he said.

When they stepped outside the door, she pressed her thumb to a small metal plate on the wall. There was an audible click as the door latched shut. "This way," she said.

After a short walk, they stood outside a little store with a holographic sign that read Terra Byte in color-shifting letters that danced in front of the window. Even outside, Enigma could hear loud music booming. He preferred the soft music in Mara's café.

As he stepped inside, he found himself surrounded by neon lights and swirling holograms. The effect was disorienting, especially combined with the loud music. Most of the patrons looked to be in their twenties. They sat at clear class tables shaped like stars and planets, while they drank coffee and ate sandwiches. They wore brightly colored goggles and gloves. Various electronic devices blinked and flickered, adding to the chaos.

"Mara, it's good to see you," a young woman shouted to make herself heard over the noise. She moved carefully through the crowded café. She was petite and slender. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair had turquoise streaks. Her light brown skin suggested mixed heritage, since her eyes were blue. That was common. She wore black pants and a long-sleeved turquoise shirt.

"Hi, Terra. This is John Smith," Mara said. "John, this is Terra Sparks. She's a good friend."

"Nice to meet you," he remarked.

The younger woman nodded. "Why don't we go into my office, where we can talk?"

She led them through an unobtrusive door. Her office was nearly the opposite of the café. The carpet was light gray and the walls were solid white. Her desk was made of birch wood.

The computer didn't take up much space on the desk. It was approximately eight inches long and two inches wide. It was mostly flat and silver with a few buttons on the side and several slots for data storage units. Several lights glowed on it. A holographic display projected onto most of the back wall. A microphone and a pen-like device similar to the Inspector's were on the desk. A cup of coffee sat on the desk as well. Other than that, the desk was free of clutter.

Terra took the data storage unit out of a desk drawer. "I found some very interesting things on this," she said. "But first, Mara, you and John need to know that this information is classified. It's also highly dangerous to have."

She nodded. "I thought as much."

"I managed to crack the security code on this DSU. It was difficult, but not impossible. It's definitely a top-level access code. Probably only a few people in the Technocracy have it."

Mara and Enigma exchanged glances.

"What does that have to do with Lily?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. But the info has to do with a top-secret government project called Enigma," Terra replied.

Mara's eyes grew wide as she stared at him speechlessly. "What is all this about?"

He shrugged. "I wish I could remember."

"What do you mean?" Terra asked.

"I woke up about a week ago and escaped from a strange place. I remember being very afraid. I don't remember any more than that. I don't even know my real name." He took a deep breath. "Enigma was the first word that came to my mind."

She looked stunned. "This may hold some answers for you, then."

He nodded. "Will it help me find Lily?"

"Maybe. Let me play it back."

As Terra slipped the data storage unit into the computer, Enigma wondered what dark secrets it would reveal.

Chapter 5

* * * * *

Enigma tapped his finger on Terra's desk. He was impatient to discover the information on the data storage unit. Not knowing was a terrible feeling. Something could be happening to Lily at this moment, but he couldn't stop it unless he knew where she was.

Suddenly, he realized that he was tapping much too fast. He stopped and a bright red hue spread across his face as he blushed. A strand of smoke curled into the air from the desk where his finger had been.

"I don't blame you for being nervous," Mara said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm worried about Lily," he replied.

Terra gaped at him while her face turned pale, but she didn't say anything. She finally closed her mouth and pressed a button on the computer.

The holographic display on the wall showed President Sharpe talking to an older man in a lab coat. He had gray hair and spectacles.

"How much longer?" Sharpe demanded angrily.

Nervously, the scientist gulped. "The p...project is going better than anticipated, sir," he stammered.

Sharpe nodded. "What about the test subjects? How are they responding to the genetic manipulations?"

The scientist took a deep breath, apparently to calm himself. "Subject Alpha is responding well, sir. He displays powers of levitation well about the mean. One could even consider it flight. Subject Beta's performance is excellent. He has the ability to run at speeds up to Mach 2. He also shows signs of accelerated healing due to an increased metabolism. He also responds well to the conditioning. He no longer remembers his name or his past."

"What about the ultimate goal? How close are we?"

"Subject Beta shows the most promise, sir. But he isn't quite responding as well as expected, given his genetic profile. Mr. President, we need another test subject."

"Let me see his records," Sharpe ordered.

"Yes, sir." The scientist reached into his pocket and held up a data storage unit. It was labeled with a bar code.

The President took a small, silver, cube-shaped device out of his own pocket and inserted the other object.

Enigma held his breath. Could this be the key to unlock the mystery of his past? He hoped it was. At the very least, he hoped it would reveal some answers.

The holographic display zoomed in on the text on the President's device. It read:

Richard Whitfield
Born April 15, 2087

Enigma grinned as he realized he'd just read his name. It was like finding part of himself that had been hidden for so long. He wondered how long he'd been without a name. Had it only been two weeks? It seemed like an eternity. A sigh of relief escaped his lips.

Other information scrolled by, but it was too fast. He caught part of his last known address: Sunnyfield, Wisconsin. He wondered what kind of place it was and if he had relatives living there.

The President finally turned off the device and handed the data storage unity back to the scientist. "Dr. Mason," he said, "I expect improvement within a month. Do whatever you have to, but I want results!"

He swallowed a lump in his throat. "Yes, sir."

The camera panned to follow the President out the door. Enigma noticed that the hallway was very much like the one he had escaped from. Could it be in the same building? Had Dr. Mason used subject Alpha to kidnap Lily in order to reach his goals? It was possible.

The holographic display in Terra's office went blank as the recording stopped.

"I think I know where Lily is," he said.

"Where?" Mara asked.

"She must be in the same building that I escaped from," he answered.

"Oh, no!" she remarked. "I hope you can get my daughter out of that terrible place!"

"Don't worry. I'll find Lily," he assured her. "Can I use your phone?" he asked. "I should call Tony and let him know I won't be there tonight."

She nodded and handed it to him.

He held it up and clearly spoke the words "Tap and Barrel."

Soon, Tony answered. "Yeah?"

"It's me," Enigma said. "I can't make my shift tonight."

"Okay," he replied. There was an odd waver in his voice, as if he was nervous. "Watch yourself out there. The Inspector called again."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I managed to hold him off for a while, but I think he knows I'm stalling." Tony was breathing rather heavily.

"Is something wrong?" Enigma asked with concern.

"No, no. Just do whatever you have to," Tony assured him.

"All right. I have to go," he said. He hung up, then gave the phone back to Mara.

Just then, Terra took something from her pocket. It looked like a smaller version of the Inspector's laser gun.

"Take this. It's a stun weapon. I've been carrying it ever since I heard about Lily, but you probably need it more than I do."

He nodded. "Thanks. How do I use it?"

She pressed her thumb onto the side, and a green light flashed twice. "That's the safety. It's keyed to me, but I just reset it. Press your thumb there, and it'll recognize you."

He did as directed. The green light glowed steadily.

"There," Terra said. "To fire, just press that button underneath. It'll stun someone so they won't be able to move, but it won't kill them. Lethal weapons are illegal for ordinary people to have."

"Thank you."

"Good luck...Richard," Mara said. "Be careful." There were tears in her eyes. "Bring my daughter home to me."

He swallowed a lump in his throat. "I will."

Quickly, Mara hugged him. He smiled faintly, then walked out of the office and left the café.

Chapter 6

* * * * *

Enigma raced towards the town gates, wondering if Lily would be all right when he found her. He forced himself to slow to a normal walking pace before he approached the guards. They looked bored. One guard yawned while the other leaned against his side of the gates.

"Hey," the sleepy guard said, "What do you want?"

"I'm leaving for a while," Enigma replied. "I should be back in a day or so."

"Where are you going?" his companion, the lazy guard, asked.

"Out," Enigma replied.

The guards looked at each other. "Why?" Sleepy asked.

"My sister is having a baby in Sunnyville. I need to be there with her," he lied. It was the only thing he could think of.

"Never heard of a town called Sunnyville," Lazy replied. "Where is it?"

"Oh, it's not far. It's more like a village than a town, actually. But she'll need someone to help around the house. Her husband doesn't do anything."

The guards exchanged glances again. "Wait here, please," Sleepy said. He reached into his pocket.

Enigma raised his stun gun and fired it at Sleepy. The scent of electricity filled the air as an electric-blue energy beam leaped out. As Sleepy collapsed onto the ground, Lazy aimed his weapon. But Enigma stunned him. Lazy hit a button on the gate as he fell against it, then slumped to the ground.

The gate swung open, revealing the desolate region beyond. Grass stretched for miles. It was green, but it was too green. Still, it felt real enough beneath his feet. In the distance, purple mountains rose into the sky. He couldn't see the building anywhere. Was his memory so faulty that he had forgotten where it was? Or was it hidden? He ran in the direction he remembered from before, hoping to find something when he got there.

* * * * *

A short while later, the air shimmered strangely as Enigma approached. Watching carefully, he could see flickers of a white building. It could not be seen easily, even when he looked for it. There must be some sort of holographic shield, he thought. As he

reached out, his arm vanished, making it look as though he had a stump left. He withdrew his arm from the shield and slowly stepped through, ready for any guards that might attack.

He looked around. Several pine trees dotted the landscape. The mountains made a dramatic backdrop. The building was not as large as he'd first thought. It was flat and rectangular, and had two stories. He noticed a few small windows on the side and one door in the front. He also knew that there had to be a back door because that was how he'd escaped. There were no guards outside. Either whoever owned the building thought the shield was enough to keep people away, or electronic cameras were used for security, he thought. Probably the later.

He darted behind a couple of trees just as someone walked out of the main door. That someone was wearing a white lab coat, but a much younger man than the doctor he'd seen on the display earlier in Terra's office. He waited until the scientist passed by, then aimed the stun gun and fired. Electricity crackled and the stunned man dropped to the ground with a thud. Enigma dragged him behind the trees and took his lab coat.

When he tried the door a short time later, a recorded female voice said "Identity authorization required. Please present your ID card to the reader."

He fished through the lab coat's pockets and finally came up with it. He held it up to the glowing red sensor attached to the door.

"Identity confirmed. Good afternoon, Dr. Smith."

An audible click indicated that the door was unlocked. Enigma carefully entered the building. Inside, it was as sterile as he remembered. Nearly everything was white and perfectly clean. He looked around for security cameras and spotted one in the entryway. Someone was watching him. Well, he wasn't sticking around. He darted down the hallway in a blur. Though the camera tracked his movement, there was no way it could keep up with him.

Where were they keeping Lily? He had no idea where to start looking. Every hallway looked the same. Who knew what lay behind the white doors? He wished he could see through them. What good was being able to run quickly when he didn't know where she was? Besides, they were probably keeping her hidden someplace.

He found a stairway leading down. Wherever Lily was, she probably wasn't going to be on any of the main floors where she would be easy to find. He started down the stairway, but suddenly stopped when he saw two scientists heading towards him. Their eyes widened with recognition. The first scientist was tall and thin with dark hair. The other was an Asian woman.

"It's our missing guinea pig! Quick, get him!" the woman exclaimed.

The first scientist took out a device from his pocket. It vaguely resembled the laser pistols, but it was silver. Its end glowed with a green light. Enigma moved in a blur as the scientist aimed it at him.

"Stand still, will you? This is for your own good," the scientist said.

"I don't take orders from people like you anymore," he replied, then fired his stun weapon rapidly.

The first scientist collapsed. The second grabbed the device from him as he fell.

"Freeze," she said. "Test subject Beta, you are coming with me."

"You'll have to catch me first," he said, holding up the stun gun. "Drop that needle."

"You can't be serious. I know that's a stunner. I carry one just like it in my purse."

"Perhaps, but I am a lot faster than you, and I know you don't want to kill me because I'm valuable to you. How do you know I won't kill you later?"

"I've studied your psych profile at length. You're no murderer."

Hoping to bluff, he said, "Maybe I've changed."

Her eyes widened slightly. "What do you want? Why are you here? You should have just disappeared instead of coming back."

"I'm looking for a woman named Lily Winters. Where is she?"

"I don't know anyone by that name," she said. Her eyes avoided his.

"You're lying. Where is she?"

The woman attempted to use her needle, but he was too fast for her. In an instant, he was behind her and had pulled the needle out of her hand.

"Now, tell me what I want to know," he demanded.

The woman took a deep breath. "Section 3, room 12A. You'll need me to get in. It has biometric security."

"Fine," he said. "Come with me, then. What's your name?"

"Dr. Long," she said. "Do you remember yours?"

He nodded. "Richard."

"Too bad you'll have to forget it all over again," she replied with a smirk.

"I don't think so," he said. "Lily had better be all right when we find her. What are you people doing to her?"

"That's top secret, and you don't need to know," Dr. Long said.

He prodded her with the weapon. "I need to know. Tell me."

"You can kill me if you want to. But I won't betray him," she replied.

"Who?" Enigma asked.

Her only response was silence.

Was Lily all right? he wondered. He hoped that they hadn't harmed her.

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Chapter 7

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As Enigma forced Dr. Long to lead him through the lab's corridors, he couldn't help but worry about Lily. Questions raced through his head. What were they doing to her? Was she all right? Had the scientists modified her DNA? Had they done something worse? Would she remember who she was? He hoped that Lily would be all right when he found her. If not, the scientists would pay.

That thought scared him. Dr. Long was right when she had said earlier that he was no killer. But he wasn't one to stand by and do nothing, either. There had to be justice. The President was behind the crime. If not for him, Lily wouldn't have been abducted. None of this would have happened. Enigma vowed to bring him down, whatever it took.

There was a sharp turn, and then another long set of stairs leading down. They seemed to go on forever. They went down into the darkness, deep into the shadows where Lily was being hidden. The air was cold and smelled stale. Dim light revealed cobwebs in the corners and dust on the floor. A hairy black spider skittered across the hallway and disappeared into a crack in the wall.

"Hardly anyone comes down here," Dr. Long said. "The janitorial staff isn't allowed into this section, and the government doesn't give us enough funding for cleaning robots."

Enigma nodded. That wasn't too surprising.

They hurried through one corridor after another. The shadows darkened and the air became colder as they went deeper into the basement. Finally, Dr. Long stopped in front of a huge steel door. It was at the end of the last hallway. A red sensor glowed like an eye in the night.

"We're here," Dr. Long said.

"Good. Open it," Enigma replied.

The scientist hesitated. "Why should I?"

He held up the stun weapon and the electronic needle. "Do you need another reason?"

Dr. Long shook her head. "How do I know you won't kill me anyway?"

"Because I am not like the president. That is who you are trying to protect, isn't it?"

Her eyes widened in shock. "How do you know that? Last time I checked, telepathy wasn't one of your abilities."

"It's not," he admitted. "Let's just say, I have my sources. Why are you protecting him? What are you afraid of?"

"If I don't do as he says, he will kill my husband and son, my parents, and then my close friends. Then he will go after me. He's done it before."

"Don't you want to stop him?" Enigma asked.

She nodded. "Yes, of course, but it's not possible. No one who opposes him lives. What do you think were the crimes of all the so-called traitors who have been put to death? They openly disagreed with his policies. One or two of them tried to expose him for the criminal he is. That is what he does to those who dissent."

"What if I told you it was possible to stop him? Will you help me?"

"How?" she asked.

"Let me take Lily home. Come with us. Then I'll tell you," he said.

"I can't, Richard," she whispered. "The risk is too great."

Enigma looked at her. "What about the risks of allowing such a man to stay in power? How many more people will he kill? How many more citizens will he abduct against their will and turn into freaks of nature? For what purpose? It cannot be just to have a collection of human guinea pigs."

Dr. Long sighed. "You are right. There is an ulterior motive."

"What?"

"I will reveal that only if we manage to escape with our lives intact. There is no reason for me to trust you until then."

He nodded. "All right. Open the door."

She leaned over until her left eye was on top of the sensor. "Identity confirmed," a metallic female voice said. "Welcome, Dr. Long."

There was a whirring noise and then a click. The door opened slowly.

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The room was empty. It contained a cot, a chair, a toilet, and a sink. But there was no one in it. Enigma's hopes sank. Where was Lily? What were they doing to her?

Dr. Long's jaw dropped. She had clearly not expected this. "It cannot be," she exclaimed. "That young woman was here this morning. She was not scheduled for the final trial until two days from now."

"Where could she be?" Enigma asked.

"There is another lab. It is not far from here. We can take my personal transport."

"Another lab?"

"Yes. You were there once, briefly. I gave you the last NanoMed myself," she said.

He looked confused. "NanoMed?"

"A drug containing nanobots," she explained. "They can be programmed to do anything, including altering your DNA structure. It is how we were able to give you your powers."

He nodded. "Is that what they are doing to Lily?"

"She is designated to receive an ultra-experimental NanoMed. Her DNA tests showed that she is more compatible than anyone else for it," Dr. Long replied.

"What is it supposed to do?" he asked.

"I can't tell you any more," she said. "Not until we are safe."

He sighed. "All right. But you will help me find her."

"Yes. We should go now, before the police are summoned," she replied.

There were footsteps behind them. Enigma turned around and saw Inspector Blackmore behind him.

"The police have already been alerted," the Inspector said. "Surrender now."

Enigma gaped at him. How could Blackmore have found him so soon? It didn't make sense that Blackmore could've found him that quickly, unless someone had told the Inspector where he was. But who?

The Inspector held up his laser pistol. "You will come with me."

"No, you can't do this," he pleaded. "Lily's life is in danger. You have to let us find her."
"Lily Winters? You mean the young woman you murdered?"

"She's not dead," Enigma protested.

The Inspector laughed. "Perhaps not yet, but you will go down as the one who killed her. There has to be a scapegoat, you see, and you're the most convenient one."

Enigma took out his stun gun and fired it, moving so fast that Blackmore couldn't see him. As lightning crackled, the stench of ozone made him wince. The inspector fired his gun, but Enigma darted away. The energy blast hit the wooden chair, reducing it to a pile of charred cinders. The Inspector collapsed with a thud as the stun gun's blast hit him.

Together, Enigma and Dr. Long moved the unconscious Inspector into the room and closed the door.

"That'll keep him out of our hair for awhile," Enigma said.

"Yes. Let's go find your friend," Dr. Long replied.

Chapter 8

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Dr. Long's personal transport vehicle was a 2115 Honda. It was a small vehicle with a cherry red exterior. Its windows were tinted dark gray. It hovered several inches above the ground in its parking space. Enigma climbed into the front passenger seat. Dr. Long pressed her thumb to a scanning device on the dashboard.

"Welcome, Jade Long," the car said with a metallic male voice. "Please state your destination."

"Albert Einstein Laboratories, section Omicron, subsection 3."

"Thank you," the car's computer responded.

The seatbelts fastened automatically around their shoulders. Then there was a soft hum as the car's engine started.

"What is the estimated arrival time?" Dr. Long asked.

"Twelve and a half minutes using maximum legal speed," the computer said.

"Can we get there sooner?" Enigma inquired. "Lily's life is in danger."

Dr. Long nodded. "Disable safety restraints and go ten miles an hour above that."

"Please be aware that going above the maximum legal speed is considered a criminal offense and may be punishable with jail time. An automatic fine of \$350 credits will be issued and your insurance company will be notified. Do you still wish to go above the legal speed limit?" the computer asked.

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed.

"Safety restraints disabled," the computer replied. "A speeding ticket has automatically been issued and the money withdrawn from your credit account. Your insurance company has been notified."

"Fine, just go," Dr. Long demanded impatiently.

The car backed out of its parking space and headed away from the building. As he watched out the window, Enigma saw the building literally disappear when they were outside of the holographic shield.

The ride to the laboratory was uneventful. Dr. Long wasn't particularly talkative. The car's computer was more talkative than she was, in fact. It warned them every time they were about to pass illegally, or when their speed was being monitored by police sensors.

Fed up with it, she said, "Please disable audio alert system."

An indicator light on the dashboard glowed in response. Dr. Long sighed. "Damn annoying computer. I ought to rip that thing out and replace it with an older version, but the voice control comes in handy sometimes."

Enigma nodded. "Do you think Lily will be all right when we find her?"

"It depends what stage of the experiment they are at. They will probably keep her alive. If it works, she will be too valuable to lose."

"Why wouldn't it work?" he asked.

"The chances of a successful trial are approximately 40 percent. Her system could reject the NanoMeds and she could die. That is why we chose our test subjects so carefully," she replied.

"Is that why you chose me?" he asked.

Dr. Long nodded. "Your DNA profile showed that you had a good chance of success. Your abilities were not the final goal, but they were a necessary step along the way."

"What abilities are they trying to give Lily?" he asked.

She hesitated. "If I tell you this, both of our lives will surely be forfeit if we are caught. Do you understand?"

He nodded. "I thought they were going to kill us anyway."

"Sometimes, the President can be unpredictable. He has been known to let traitors live in very rare cases, but only if they undergo mental programming to be completely subservient to him. It is part of what makes him so terrifying. You never know what he will do."

"All right, I understand. Please, tell me," Enigma said.

Dr. Long took a deep breath. "The ultimate goal of this top-secret project, which has been called Enigma from the start, is stopping the aging process. We think we have the answer to stop the aging process in its tracks completely, and that human being could theoretically live to be 1,000 years old."

Enigma looked surprised. "What about the loss of bone density over time? What about normal cellular mutations?"

"We've taken all of that into account. Granted, people will still be able to die from other causes, like a serious injury. But they will not die from old age," she answered.

"Why have you abducted people for your experiments? Why risk our lives for this? Will everyone be able to use this technology?" he asked.

"It was the only way," Dr. Long replied. "The President wants the aging cure for himself and those he has handpicked to receive it."

"It must be made public," Enigma said. "The people need to know what the President has done."

"I agree," she replied. "I will help you."

"First, we have to find Lily and get her home safely," he said. "Then we'll plan what to do next."

The vehicle slowed down and stopped in front of an isolated area. It was well outside of the city. As with the other lab, the surrounding view didn't look quite right. Enigma assumed it was because of the holographic shield.

"There will be guards here," Dr. Long warned. "We might be able to get past them if they haven't been informed about us yet. Cross your fingers."

Enigma nodded. The door slid open. He climbed out slowly, ready to grab the stun weapon if need be.

"This way," Dr. Long said.

Enigma followed her toward the shield. It was a bit disorienting when the landscape changed to reveal a white building, similar to the other but larger in size. There were two guards at the door. Their black laser pistols were a stark contrast to their white uniforms.

"Dr. Long, we were not expecting you," one of them said.

"I know, Jim. I was told to transfer this test subject."

"This is just a formality, but may we see your clearance?" the guard inquired.

She nodded. Slowly, she approached and pressed her thumb onto a scanner near the door.

"Authorization accepted. Hello, Dr. Long," a female computer voice said.

"You may pass," the other guard said.

"Thank you," she replied. Enigma followed her into the building. Hopefully, they were not too late to save Lily.

Chapter 9

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The laboratory that Enigma and Dr. Long had entered looked almost the same as the other one. It had identical ceramic white floor tile and white walls, and was just as perfectly clean as the other lab.

"Where are we going?" Enigma asked.

"To one of the rooms downstairs," Dr. Long said. "That is the most likely place your friend will be."

He nodded. "She'd better be all right when we find her."

"Hopefully they have not given her the NanoMeds yet," Dr. Long said. "If they have, then we may be too late. There is approximately a 40% chance that the experiment will be successful, which is the best odds we've had so far."

Enigma looked at her. "What were my odds?" he asked.

"Approximately 34%," she answered. "You were one of the lucky ones."

He shivered as a chill ran down his spine. "I could have been killed!"

"Yes, but you were not," she replied.

"We'd better hurry," he said.

They took a stairway at the end of the main corridor. It led deeper into the bowels of the secret lab. With every step they took, the air grew colder and the light grew dimmer. There were signs that the cleaning was ignored at the lower levels. Dust covered the floor and cobwebs could be seen in corners, glowing like strands of fire in the dim light. Light bulbs flickered, providing an eerie ambience. The air smelled stale, too.

Enigma worried about Lily and what was happening to her. Had the scientists injected her with the NanoMeds yet? If not, what else were they doing to her? His mind raced along as he made his way down the stairs and dark hallways for what seemed like hours. He wished he could use his power to run faster, but he still needed Dr. Long. She was the only one who could get open the door to where Lily was being held.

"How much further?" he asked.

"We're almost there," Dr. Long said. "It won't be too long."

"Good."

He hoped that Lily was okay. What if they got to the end of the search and she wasn't there again? Dr. Long would have some serious explaining to do then.

Finally, they reached a door much like the one in the other lab. It was steel with a biometric interface.

"Requesting security clearance," a genderless computerized voice said. "A retinal scan is required."

Dr. Long leaned over into the scanner. There was a high-pitched beep.

"Good evening, Dr. Long. Please stand back."

She took a step back. The door opened slowly.

Enigma saw Lily strapped to a metal table. Electrodes protruded from her body. They had stripped her clothes, leaving only the underwear. Her eyes were closed. Her long, black hair spilled across the table. Was she conscious? Was she alive? He couldn't tell what the medical readouts on the nearby screens said.

"How is she?" he asked.

Dr. Long glanced at the computer screens. "She's alive, but barely. They must have just given her the shot."

"We have to get her out of here," he exclaimed.

Dr. Long nodded. "Allow me to disconnect the electrodes."

Suddenly, the doctor Enigma recognized from the video and two others entered from another doorway at the opposite end of the room.

"You!" Dr. Mason gasped. "Jade, what are you doing here with him? He is a threat!"

"No, you are the real threat," she protested.

The head doctor scowled. "Get them," he ordered.

The other two doctors glanced at each other, then headed straight for them. Moving in a blur, Enigma pulled out the stun gun and fired. The acrid stench of ozone filled his nostrils as dazzling blue electricity leapt through the air. The doctors collapsed and hit the ground.

Dr. Mason grabbed a needle and ran towards Dr. Long, who planted a kick in his groin. His jaw dropped right before he stumbled backwards into the table which Lily was on.

At that moment, Lily's eyes flew open. She gasped. Then her eyes met Dr. Mason's. He suddenly found himself hovering in the air with his back pressed firmly against the ceiling, as she glared at him.

"I should just let you fall and break your neck," she said vehemently.

"Wait," Enigma said. "We need him alive."

"Why? The bastard doesn't deserve to live," she remarked.

"We need him to testify against the President," he said.

"No," Dr. Mason shouted. "I'll never do it. Never! You might as well kill me!"

Dr. Long glared at him. "Someone has to put that tyrant in his place."

"You won't succeed," Dr. Mason declared. "You'll all be killed first."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Enigma replied. "We have an advantage against those the President would send to kill us."

"Like test subject Alpha?" Dr. Mason sneered as a lumbering figure entered the room from the regular corridor. A large black shadow loomed against the wall.

Lily screamed and lost her concentration. Dr. Mason began to plummet, but suddenly stopped falling just before he hit the ground as Lily used her gift to catch him. As his feet slowly touched the floor, he recovered his balance. He attempted to run, but Enigma stunned him.

The tall, hulking figure laughed. "This is going to be fun," he announced.

Chapter 10

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Test subject Alpha lumbered towards Enigma and Dr. Long. The unconscious Dr. Mason slumped onto the floor along with his two lackeys, having just been stunned by Enigma. Alpha held up an energy weapon. It resembled the Inspector's laser pistol, but was several inches longer and black. Several red indicator lights glowed on the side.

Enigma used his power to move quickly, but Alpha did the same. The two moving blurs fired their energy weapons at exactly the same time. The stench of ozone filled the air as a red laser blast met a brilliant blue lightning bolt. The air crackled with energy.

Dr. Long dove for cover under the table just before the energy exploded. Enigma dodged most of the blast, but his face was slightly burnt on the right side as a result. He grimaced in pain. Alpha seemed to have avoided the explosion entirely, or at least, being wounded by it. Lily was unharmed since she had been out of range. Dr. Long got up and began to unfasten the electrodes that still were attached to Lily.

Enigma's enhanced healing kicked in as his scarred skin began to repair itself. Alpha fired his laser at him again, taking advantage of his current weakness. As a red laser blast shot through the air, Enigma ducked at lightning speed. The laser hit the wall behind him and left a perfectly round, tiny hole in it.

Moving in a blur, Enigma raised the stun gun and fired it. Lightning crackled as it hit Alpha in the torso. As he began to collapse, Alpha shot off one final laser beam. Enigma quickly darted out of the way. The beam left another hole in the opposite wall.

"We need to get out of here," he said after slowing to normal speed.

"One more electrode left...there," Dr. Long said as she removed it. She helped Lily climb off the table. "There is a back door out of here that is similar to the one you used at the other lab."

Enigma nodded. He remembered her dark blue eyes from when they had first met, but now they seemed troubled. "Are you all right?" he asked Lily.

"I feel so strange," she answered. "So different. Is this what you feel like all the time?"

He shook his head. "I remember feeling that way at first now, but it went away after a while. Come on," he said.

The three of them headed through the dark hallway and up the stairs, but they took a different turn at the second level below ground. This corridor was sparkling clean and white. There were doors on either side. Dr. Long led them to the last one on the left and opened it.

Silver moonlight spilled onto the ground, illuminating the shadows. Dr. Long took a small device that Enigma now recognized as a phone and spoke into it. "Pick me up at the rear of the building."

Enigma and Lily exchanged glances. In the distance, they heard a car's engine start. A minute later, they saw Dr. Long's 2115 cherry red Honda hovering towards them. It stopped when it was several feet away. The doors automatically opened. There was no one in the car. Lily had clearly not been expecting anyone, since she didn't look shocked. Enigma looked surprised.

"It can drive itself?" he asked.

"That's a standard feature these days," Dr. Long said. "Where do you want to go?"

"I'll tell you when we get into the car," Lily said.

They got in and shut the doors. Lily gave Dr. Long her mother's address. "I think she is very worried about me," she said.

"You're right about that," Enigma answered. "We thought you were dead at first."

"Really?" she asked as the car turned itself around.

"Yes. They were going to frame me for your murder."

Lily looked shocked. "No way. I can't imagine you doing anything like that."

"Well, I guess the authorities here have a much larger imagination," he replied.

"Did you ever find out your real name?" she asked curiously, as the car drove towards their destination.

He nodded. "Richard."

"Richard," Lily said. "I like that. You need to start using it."

"It takes a little getting used to," he admitted. "I guess I keep thinking of myself as a mystery. Maybe it's because I don't really know who I am. I have a name now, but that's different from having a past to remember."

"Well, you're just going to have to get to know yourself more," Lily answered. "Maybe I can help you with that."

"Maybe," he replied, thinking that wouldn't be such a bad idea.

"I will give you all the records the lab has on you," Dr. Long said.

"That would be very helpful," he said. "Thanks."

* * * * *

Twelve minutes later, Lily pressed her finger to a small scanner on her mother's door. It was an electronic sensor that identified the person who was there by fingerprint. That let whoever was inside the house know who was there.

A flurry of footsteps could be heard. Then Mara flung the door open. "Lily! You're all right!"

"Yes," she said.

Mother and daughter hugged each other tightly. Both had tears in their eyes. "I am so happy to see you," Mara gushed.

"Same here," Lily replied.

The two women separated from their hug. "Thank you so much," Mara told Enigma. "This means everything to me."

He nodded. "Mara, this is Dr. Long. She helped us escape."

Mara smiled. "Thank you," she said. "Having my daughter alive means so much."

Dr. Long nodded. "It is my pleasure."

"Why don't you come in?" Mara said. So they did.

* * * * *

Six months later, on his break while working as an assistant cook at Mara's Café, Richard picked up an electronic newspaper. The top headline read "Former President Sharpe Gets Life Without Parole For Role In Murders." Then below it, another headline read "New Anti-Aging Cure To Be Approved For Public Use."

The articles didn't mention Richard or his abilities much, although there was a little in the main story: Former test subject aids in ousting President. Another subject arrested for Silver Cove murders and abductions. One final subject remains, whose whereabouts and abilities are unknown.

And there was another interesting bit of info: Psychological experts believe that President Sharpe's obsession with cleanliness began when both of his parents died from the avian flu epidemic that killed 26 million people worldwide in 2075.

Richard glanced out the window. The people walking by wore clothes in all colors, now that the national fashion regulations had been thrown out. Mara had changed the décor in her café from blue to a brightly colored wallpaper with flowers and a soft beige carpet. She played neo-Jazz when there were customers, but often listened to classical when no one else was around.

Lily smiled as she sat down across from him. "Dollar for your thoughts?"

"Ah, I was just thinking about all the new changes. I like them."

"Mmm hmm. No more of the government telling us what to wear, how to clean our houses, how to think. It's very refreshing."

He nodded. "I can't wait to see how the future pans out," he said.

"Me too," Lily said. On the spur of the moment, she kissed him on the cheek. He seemed startled, but pleased. "I hope you stay for a while. Things are never dull while you're around," she added.

"I plan to," he replied.

* * * * *

The End