

CHAPTER ONE

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INTO THE DARK

Summer in the year 2268
The Kingdom of Canard
120,000 points



THE KNOCK AT the door was insistent.

Jason hesitated before ushering in the attendant carrying gourmet food and fresh laundry. He eyed the clothes, noting that some of the shirts were new. His point total was running high this month. He congratulated himself for earning a wardrobe refresh, but a better prize, he decided, would be a technology upgrade. After that, he wanted another virtual vacation.

His thoughts turned to the dinner scheduled for later that evening when he would see *her*. His adrenaline surged as he envisioned those warm lips and sultry violet eyes that held so much promise.

He paced in the small apartment and sighed, tapping his fingers together.

“Re-scan, Twenty G,” commanded Judge Decipere, whose life-size image was projected on the wall.

“Yes, of course,” said Jason, striding across the room.

He fixed his gaze on the biometric reader as it registered the eye print, identifying him as a juror. The proceedings had been going on for more than half an hour. He reminded himself to pay attention. Loss of eye contact for two consecutive minutes was frowned upon, and he could lose precious status.

Once the process is concluded, he thought, I'll be free to engage in more entertaining activities.

To pass the time, he zoomed in for a closer look at the alleged criminal. The defendant couldn't have been more than eighteen. *Not quite my age*, he thought as he rubbed the back of his neck, *but too close for comfort.*

The interrogator, Tillis, turned to the jurors, his voice booming unpleasantly throughout Jason's apartment.

"Number 004155222S, you are accused of possessing non-conforming weapons." Tillis moved closer to the screen and spoke directly to the camera, laying out the charges with a flurry of hand gestures and dramatic pauses.

"Even by reasonable standards, the evidence seems feeble," Jason said aloud, recoiling as he heard his own words.

"He's guilty," said the voice in his earpiece.

"But where are the witnesses?" asked Jason, tilting his head.

"He was in possession of the evidence. That says it all."

Jason sighed. Normally, debating with what he called his 'inner voice' was a worthy game, but today, the usual amusement turned to annoyance. "Not always," he said, zooming in to observe the look of panic on the defendant's face. The micro-expression scan showed a high degree of stress. *Somehow*, Jason reasoned, *he doesn't look guilty.*

The judge turned to the accused. "What is your defense?"

"I didn't do it."

Jason rubbed his eyes as he studied the data on the screen.

"Do you have anything else to say?" asked the judge, peering over the elevated platform.

"It wasn't me," the man shouted.

“Time for the vote,” said the interrogator in a casual tone, as if he was ordering wine with dinner.

“Before the panel decides the fate of 222S, each member must review the data,” said the judge, eyeing the jurors on the screen before him.

Jason noted the lack of facts and witnesses. His heart began to pound as he realized the inevitability of conflict.

“Everyone must agree on this person’s fate,” said Judge Decipere. “Based on the evidence presented, we’re going to release the guilt indicator.”

A red banner flashed the number.

Jason swallowed.

“Your Honor, because the guilt indicator is 92.2 percent, I recommend that we eliminate the root as well,” urged the interrogator.

Jason touched the screen.

“There’s a question from the panel,” the judge announced, shifting in his chair.

“I don’t understand what ‘root’ means.” Jason shuffled his feet. In his line of work, he knew full well what it meant, but he wanted the other jurors to understand what was happening.

The judge leaned forward in his chair, expanding the image on the wall and casting the apartment into full shadow. His eyes blinked rapidly as his face loomed large.

“Because he’s guilty, it would be helpful to *extract* anyone in his family with the same genetic code.”

Jason peered at the screen. “So, his family members will be given new expiration dates?” He cleared his throat.

“Precisely,” said Decipere, adjusting his weight in the chair.

All relatives of the accused would be rooted out and killed. Based on the Universal Language Code, the ‘kill’ word had been eliminated some years back, in favor of a genteel euphemism. The veiled white-wash did nothing to reduce the pounding in Jason’s chest.

Tillis gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Let’s bring it to a vote.”

“If there are no more questions, we’ll poll the panel,” said the judge.

The screens lit up as each of the jurors voted.

Jason rubbed an eyebrow, trying to erase the ache starting to form behind his right eye. *It makes no sense that I’m going out on a limb here*, he thought.

He pressed the ‘not guilty’ button.

“That was a mistake,” said the voice in his ear.

“I don’t think so,” Jason retorted.

“Change your mind.”

“No,” he said, as the throbbing in his temple began to escalate.

“Judge, we have a dissenter,” said Tillis, crossing his arms.

“Think carefully,” said Decipere, glancing at Jason. “You can still alter the verdict.”

“I say not guilty,” Jason repeated, trying to convince himself that he couldn’t possibly be the lone voice for acquittal.

The man on the bench lurched back in his seat, as if the screen were on fire. He stared at Jason and shook his head.

“Then I have no choice but to let the perpetrator go.” The judge motioned to the interrogator and sighed. “Not guilty.”

While the defendant rushed out of the courtroom, Decipere and Tillis fixed Jason with hard stares.

As the screen went dark, he hoped he only imagined their promise of revenge.

