



INSIGNIA

S. J. KINCAID



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
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address HarperCollins Children’s Books, a division of
HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street,
New York, NY 10022.
www.epicreads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-0-06-209299-1 (trade bdg.)

Typography by
12 13 14 15 16 XXXXXX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
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First Edition

CHAPTER ONE

NEW TOWN, NEW casino—same old plan. Arizona’s Dusty Squanto Casino made it easy for Tom Raines, since he didn’t even have to pay his way into their VR parlor. He slipped into the room, settled onto a couch in the back corner, and looked over the crowd of gamers, taking them in one at a time. His gaze settled on the two men in the opposite corner, and locked onto target.

Them, Tom thought.

The men stood with VR visors on, wired gloves clenched in the air. Their racing simulation blazed across an overhead screen for anyone who wanted to bet on the outcome. No one would bet on *this* race, though. One man was a good driver—he navigated the virtual track with the skill of an experienced gamer—and the other was pitifully bad. His car’s fender dragged across the wall of the arena, and the fake onlookers were screaming and dodging out of the way.

The winning racer gave a triumphant laugh as his car

plowed across the finish line. He turned to the other man, chest puffed with victory, and demanded payment.

Tom smiled from his solitary spot on the couch.

Enjoy it while you can, buddy.

He timed it just right, waiting until the winner started counting up his bills, to rise to his feet and wander into his line of sight. Tom noisily rattled one of the VR sets out of its storage container, then made a show of putting on the gloves the wrong way, before painstakingly adjusting them so the cloth and mesh wiring clasped his arms up to his elbows. Out of the corner of his eye, he became aware of the winning racer watching him.

“You like playing games, kid?” the man said to him. “Wanna have a go next?”

Tom gave him the wide-eyed, innocent look that he knew made him appear a lot younger than he was. Even though he was fourteen, he was short and skinny and had such bad acne that people usually couldn’t guess his real age.

“I’m just looking. My dad says I’m not allowed to gamble.”

The man licked his lips. “Oh, don’t you worry. Your dad doesn’t even have to know. Put down a few bucks, and we’ll have us a great race. Maybe you’ll win. How much money do you have?”

“Only fifty bucks.”

Tom knew better than to say more than that. More than that, and people wanted to see it before taking up the bet. He actually had about two dollars in his pocket.

“Fifty bucks?” the man said. “That’s enough. This is just car racing. You can race a car, can’t you?” He twisted an invisible wheel. “Nothing to it. And think: you beat me, and you’ll *double* that fifty.”

“Really?”

“Really, kid. Let’s have a go.” A condescending chuckle. “I’ll pay up for sure if you win.”

“But if I lose . . .” Tom let that hang there. “That’s all my money. I just . . . I can’t.” He started walking away, waiting for the magic words.

“All right, kid,” the guy called. “Double or nothing.”

Ha! Tom thought.

“I win,” the man said, “and I’ll get fifty. You win, you get a hundred. You can’t beat that. Take a chance.”

Tom turned slowly, fighting the laughter rising in his throat. This guy must already taste his easy fifty bucks—he’d fallen for the act so readily. Most casinos had one or two gamers who practically lived in the VR parlors, fancying themselves gods among men who could beat any chump luckless enough to enter their territory. Tom loved the way they looked at him: as some scrawny, stupid little kid they could easily con. He loved even more seeing their smiles disappear when he wiped the floor with them.

Just to be safe, Tom kept up the act. He made a show of fumbling as he strapped on the VR visor. “Okay, you’re on, I guess.”

Triumph rang in the man’s voice. “We’re on.”

They were off. Their cars roared to life and tore furiously down the track. Tom mentally ticked off the laps, taking it all very deliberately. He made a few token mistakes here and there—never enough to slow him down too much, just enough to ensure he was lagging behind the other car. The man, puffed up with confidence and certain of winning, whirled his steering wheel with great, lashing sweeps of his wired gloves. As the finish line appeared and the man’s car turned at the right angle, Tom finally let a grin blaze across his lips.

One flick of his glove did the trick. He rammed his car

forward and clipped the guy's back fender, then floored his gas. The man bellowed in rage and disbelief when his car swerved off the road in a rain of sparks.

Tom's car sailed past the finish line while the other car crashed and exploded in the arena's side ditch.

"What—what—" the man sputtered.

Tom flipped up his visor. "Whoops. I think I *have* played that game before." He tugged off his gloves. "Wanna fork over my hundred bucks?"

He watched, fascinated, the way a vein began popping out and fluttering in the man's forehead. "You little—You can't—You're . . ."

"You're not gonna pay me, then?" Tom cast an idle glance toward the man's recent victim, now sitting on a nearby couch. The bad driver was suddenly interested in their exchange. Tom raised his voice to make sure the man could make out every word. "I guess no one's playing games for money in here—is that it?"

The gamer followed Tom's gaze to his victim, catching the implication: if he wouldn't pay Tom, then the other guy shouldn't have paid *him*.

The man spluttered a bit like the engine of his wrecked car, then jerked a hundred bucks out of a wad from his pocket. He crammed the bills into Tom's hand, muttering something about a rematch.

Tom flipped through the bills, completely enjoying the man's outrage. "You want a rematch, I'm game. Double or nothing, again? I could really use another two hundred dollars."

The man turned a curious shade of scarlet, cut his losses, and fled the room. As for the newbie on the couch, he gave Tom a grateful thumbs-up. Tom returned it, then stashed the bills in his pocket. One hundred dollars. Usually he had to

pull off the bet with a few more gamers to make enough for a night's stay—VR sims involved such low stakes, after all—but at a dive like the Dusty Squanto Casino, a hundred would be enough for a room.

Tom's mind already whirled with the promises of the night ahead. A bed. Television. Air-conditioning. A real *shower*. He could even come back here and play games *just for fun*.

The ghastly realization hit just as he reached the door: he was at a casino with a *VR parlor*.

He had absolutely no excuse for missing school this afternoon.

TOM STAYED IN the VR parlor and logged into the Rosewood Reformatory sim for the first time in two weeks. In four years at Rosewood, he'd never skipped such a long stretch of school before, and he'd already missed most of class today. Just the sight in his visor of Ms. Falmouth's avatar and her virtual chalkboard killed any lingering satisfaction over his victory.

She immediately focused her attention on him. "Tom Raines," she said. "Thank you for gracing us with your presence today."

"You're welcome," Tom said. He knew it would just annoy her, but it wasn't like she had a good opinion of him to be ruined.

To be fair, he missed class a lot. Mostly not on purpose. Mostly he missed school due to losing access to an internet connection. It was just another hazard of having a gambler for a father.

Tom's dad, Neil, usually saved enough money to pay for a roof over their heads and some food at the gift shop. But some days he got totally cleaned out at the poker tables. It happened more and more these recent years as the last of his luck deserted

him. When Neil squandered their money, and Tom couldn't find any sucker to bet against him in the VR parlors, they had to skip on small luxuries like hotel rooms. They ended up in a park or at a bus station or lying on benches at the train station.

Now with Ms. Falmouth and his entire class watching him, Tom tried to think of an excuse he'd never used before to explain why he'd missed the last ten days. He'd missed school so many times, he'd repeated himself a couple times by accident. He'd already lied about going to the funerals of all his grandparents, and even a couple great-grandparents, and there were only so many times he could say he "fell down a well" or "got lost in the woods" or "got hit in the head and got amnesia" before even *he* thought he sounded like a colossal idiot.

Today, he tried, "There was this massive cyberattack on all the local VR parlors. Russo-Chinese hackers, you know? The Department of Homeland Security came in and had to interview everyone in a ten-mile radius. I couldn't even access the internet."

Ms. Falmouth just shook her head. "Don't waste your breath, Tom."

Tom dropped into a seat, irrationally disappointed. It had been a good lie this time, too.

The avatars throughout the classroom sniggered at him, the way they always did, at Tom the loser who never knew what assignments were due, who never turned in his homework, who couldn't even manage to show up at an online class most days. He tuned his classmates out and occupied himself with twirling a pencil—trickier in VR than most people realized. The sensors of most standard-issue wired gloves had a strange lag time, and Tom figured honing his dexterity with them could only help him in future games.

He heard a whisper from beside him. "*I* liked your excuse."

Tom threw a careless glance toward the girl next to him. She must've joined the class sometime in the last two weeks. Her avatar was a gorgeous brunette with striking yellow-brown eyes. "Thanks. Nice avatar."

"I'm Heather." She flashed him a smile. "And this isn't an avatar."

Sure it isn't, Tom thought. People didn't look like that in real life unless they were celebrities. But he nodded like he believed her. "I'm Tom. And believe it or not, this—" he gestured to himself like he was proud of how very handsome he was "—isn't an avatar, either."

Heather giggled, because his avatar looked just like him—acne and scrawny limbs and all. It definitely wasn't an image anyone would use to impress people online.

Ms. Falmouth turned back to face them. "Tom, Heather, are you done interrupting me, or do you need more time for your conversation?"

"Sorry," Tom said. "We're all through."

Tom hadn't seen eye to eye with Ms. Falmouth since he'd shown up for the first day of school a few years ago as Lord Krull from the game Celtic Quest. She'd yelled at him front of everyone for being insolent, like he had done it as part of some elaborate scheme to mock her class. He'd just liked Lord Krull from Celtic Quest, that was all.

From then on, Tom always came to class as himself. He never signed on to the internet without an avatar if he could help it. It felt like he'd left his real skin behind, showing up at Rosewood as the same ugly, pale-eyed, and blond-haired Thomas Raines who tailed behind his dad in the real world. Never mind that he didn't believe for a second that the new girl sitting next to him really looked like her beautiful brunette avatar, and Serge Leon, in the back corner, was way

too blustering to be a hulking six-footer in real life. He was probably four foot something and fat.

But Ms. Falmouth didn't seem to care about them. Whenever Tom was around, her radar was trained on him.

"Our subject's the current war, Tom. Perhaps you can contribute to our discussion. What is an offshored conflict?"

His thoughts flickered to the clips he'd seen in the news and on the internet—the ships fighting in space controlled by the top-secret combatants identified only by their call signs. "An offshored conflict is a war fought somewhere other than Earth. It's in space or on another planet."

"And the sky is blue, and the sun rises in the east. I'll need much more than the blatantly obvious."

Tom stopped twirling the virtual pencil and tried to concentrate. "Modern wars aren't fought by people. I mean, they're kind of fought by people, because people on Earth control mechanized drones remotely, but the machines do the *actual* fighting. If our machines don't get demolished by Russo-Chinese machines, our country wins the battle."

"And who is involved in the current conflict, Tom?"

"The whole world. That's why it's called World War Three." She seemed to be waiting for more, so Tom ticked off the major players on his virtual fingers: "India and America are allies, and the Euro-Australian block is aligned with us. Russia and China are allies, and they're supported by the African states and the South American Federation. The Coalition of Multinationals, the twelve most powerful corporations in the world, is split down the middle between our two sides. And . . . yeah. That's about it."

That was pretty much all he knew about the war. He wasn't sure what else she wanted. He couldn't list all the tiny little countries allied with the two sides if he tried, and he doubted

anyone else in the room could, either. There was a reason Rosewood was a reform school—most of its students couldn't cut it in a real, building one.

“Would you like to explain one notable characteristic about this offshored conflict, as opposed to wars in ages past?”

“No?” he tried hopefully.

“I wasn't really asking. Now answer the question.”

Tom started twirling his pencil again. This was how Ms. Falmouth operated. She questioned him until he ran through all his knowledge, messed up, and looked like an idiot. This time he'd give it to her. “Dunno. Sorry.”

Ms. Falmouth sighed as though she expected nothing more, and moved onto her next victim. “Heather, you two look to be making fast friends. If you're talking during class on your first day here, maybe you can list a notable characteristic for Tom.”

Heather gave Tom a quick, sidelong look, then answered, “By going to war on other planets, and avoiding fights on Earth, we resolve issues through violence, but we avoid most of the consequences of traditional warfare such as debilitating injuries, human deaths, disruption of infrastructure, and environmental contamination. That's four notable characteristics. Do you want me to list more than that, Ms. Falmouth?”

Ms. Falmouth was silent for several seconds, perhaps stunned at how readily Heather had answered the question. “That'll quite do, Heather. Very . . . well articulated. Offshored conflicts are practical socially as well as ecologically.” She strode to the board. “I'd like you all to think of some ways the nature of conflict has shifted the consequences we face. . . .”

Heather took the opportunity to whisper to Tom, “I didn't mean to get you in trouble.”

Tom laughed softly and shook his head. “You didn't get

me in trouble. This is just Ms. Falmouth letting me know how much she missed me.”

His gloves vibrated, signaling that someone was making physical contact with his avatar. Tom glanced down, startled, and saw her hand resting on his arm. Her voice was a breathy whisper. “You sure?”

Tom stared at her as Ms. Falmouth’s voice carried on: “. . . exported conflicts serve several purposes . . .”

“I’m sure,” he told her, so keenly aware of her touch she might as well have been next to him touching him in real life, too.

Heather’s hand trailed down his arm and then slipped away. She nestled it back on her desktop. Tom found himself wondering what she actually looked like. Her avatar didn’t even look like a ninth grader—was she older than him?

“With the weaponry we use nowadays,” Ms. Falmouth said beside the board, “we could destroy the ionosphere, irradiate the planet, vaporize the oceans. By exporting our wars and engaging Russia and China on, say, *Saturn* instead of on Earth, we can hash out our disagreements over resource allocation without the devastating consequences of traditional warfare, as Heather explained just now. In ages past, people believed that World War Three would end all civilization. A famous quote by Albert Einstein: *‘I know not with what weapons World War Three will be fought, but World War Four will be fought with sticks and stones.’* But we’re in the middle of World War Three, and we’re far from ending civilization.”

Ms. Falmouth twitched her finger and the chalkboard morphed into a screen. “Now, I’d like to focus upon the current Intrasolar Forces. I want you to turn your thoughts to the teenagers who are out there deciding the future of your country. We’ll play a short video clip.”

Tom sat up straighter, watching the screen resolve into an outdoor view of the Pentagon and the tall tower jutting from the middle—the Pentagonal Spire—and then to a newsroom where a familiar teenage boy sat with a reporter.

It was Elliot Ramirez.

Tom slumped back down in his seat. Behind him, Serge Leon actually cried out in dismay, “Not *Dorkmirez!*”

Elliot Ramirez was everywhere. *Everyone* knew him—the handsome, smiling, all-American seventeen-year-old who represented the future of Indo-American supremacy in the solar system. He was in commercials, on bulletin boards, his bright grin flashing and dark eyes twinkling on cereal boxes, on vitamin bottles, on T-shirts. Whenever a new Indo-American victory was announced on the news, Elliot was trotted out to give an interview and to talk about how America was *sure* to win now! And of course, Elliot was front and center in Nobridis, Inc.’s public service announcements because they sponsored him. He was one of the young trainees who controlled American machines in outer space, one of the Americans dedicated to taking down the Russo-Chinese alliance and claiming the solar system for the Indo-American allies.

“How did you get call sign Ares?” the reporter asked Elliot. “That’s the Greek god of war, I understand. It says a lot about your battlefield prowess.”

Elliot’s chuckle flashed his white teeth. “I didn’t choose ‘Ares’ for myself, but I guess my fellow soldiers thought it should be my call sign. They pleaded with me to take it. I couldn’t refuse the appeals of my brothers-in-arms.”

Tom laughed. He couldn’t help it. Several female avatars whirled around to shush him.

The image on the screen flickered briefly to a battle in space—one ship marked “Ares” flying toward a dispersed

mass of ships, “The Battle of Titan” captioned below it. The reporter’s voice carried on over the image: “. . . great deal of attention these last few years, Mr. Ramirez. How do you feel about the public’s fascination with you?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t see myself as a great hero the way so many people do. It’s the machines that do all the fighting in space. I just control them. You could say”—and here the image flipped back to Elliot just as he threw a wink at the camera—“I’m just a kid who likes to play with robots.”

Tom kept remembering the only interview of Elliot Ramirez he’d ever sat through before this one. His father was in the hotel room with him, and he’d insisted on watching the entire thing several times because he was convinced that the famed Elliot Ramirez wasn’t a real person. He refused to change the channel until Tom was convinced of it, too.

“That’s not a boy. That’s a computer simulation,” Neil had declared.

“People have seen him in person, Dad.”

“No human being acts like that! Look how he blinks every fifteen seconds on the dot. Time it. And then look at that—whenever he raises his eyebrows, it’s to the exact same height. Every single time. That smile, too. Always the same width. That’s a computer-generated simulation of a human. I guarantee it.”

“Who’s the reporter talking to, then?”

“She’s in on it, too. Who owns the mainstream media? Corporations. That’s who.”

“Right. So I guess Wheaties is putting a fake kid on their boxes, and Nobridis—the corporate sponsor Elliot mentions every time he’s interviewed—is also parading around a guy they’ve never met? And every senator and celebrity who’s had a photo op with him—he’s just digitally inserted in those? Oh,

and don't forget all those people on the internet who say they've gotten his autograph. . . . They're *all* in on it, too, right?"

Neil's spit began flying. "Tom, I am telling you, this Elliot kid is not a real person. This is how the corporate oligarchy works. They want a pretty face to make their agenda look good for the masses. A real human being is unpredictable. Create a computer-generated human to be the representation of your organization? Then you control everything about that representation. He's no different from a logo, an action figure, a piece of insignia."

"And you're the only one in the world who's picked up on this."

"What, you think the American sheeple are going to question the corporatocracy? They're too busy doing their patriotic duty, gutting their own country to fund a war over which Coalition CEO gets the biggest yacht this year. Wake up, Tom! I don't want any son of mine buying into the establishment propaganda."

"I don't. I don't," Tom had protested.

He wanted his dad to be right. He really did. Even now, he studied Elliot and tried to see something fake and computer simulated about him, but he just saw a cheesy kid madly in love with himself who laughed at his own jokes way too much.

"What message would you like to leave viewers with tonight, Mr. Ramirez?"

"I want them to know, we kids at the Pentagonal Spire aren't making the big sacrifice. Saving the country's pretty fun! It's you, the American taxpayers, who keep the fight for our nation going strong. And thanks to Nobridis, Inc., the Indo-American alliance is more—"

"Saving. The. Country." Ms. Falmouth flipped off the video segment as Elliot launched into promoting Nobridis. "The next

time you think you have too much homework, I want you to consider the burden on this young man's shoulders. Elliot Ramirez is out there forging a future for our nation, securing the solar system's resources for us, and you don't hear him complaining, do you?"

The bell filled the sim. Ms. Falmouth didn't even get a chance to dismiss them. Students began fizzling away.

Tom was normally among the first to sign off. He wasn't this time because just as he raised his hand to yank off the VR visor, Heather spoke up. "Are you signing off already?"

She sounded disappointed about it. Tom dropped his hand again. "Not yet."

She scooted her desk over so they were sitting right next to each other. Despite himself, Tom felt his hands grow sweaty in his wired gloves.

"Can you believe Elliot Ramirez?" Heather said, tossing her dark hair out of her eyes. "His ego almost explodes out of the screen, doesn't it? I felt like ducking and covering."

"I can't believe you're a real girl and you're not in love with Elliot Ramirez," Tom said appreciatively. Then it occurred to him: she might not even be a real girl. For all he knew, she was a guy with a voice modifier who'd hacked the school feed.

"Let's just say, I feel like I know enough about Elliot not to buy the hype." There was something coy in her voice that made him wonder if he was missing a joke.

"And you really *are* a girl?" Tom couldn't resist asking.

"I am so a girl!"

"Yeah, well, I won't believe it till I see it."

"Is this your way of asking me to video chat?" Heather bantered.

Tom hadn't thought to ask her to do that. He recovered from his surprise quickly. "Yes?"

Heather twirled a lock of her dark hair around her finger. “So, this *is* an online school,” she said coyly. “Is video chatting Rosewood’s version of a date?”

Tom opened and closed his mouth. She didn’t sound like she hated the idea. “Do you want it to be?”

Heather smiled. “What network address will you be at tomorrow, Tom?”

HE WAS ONLY half in the moment as he gave her his network address, as he promised her he’d be right at the same network address tomorrow when they met. He didn’t care if they were meeting at an obscenely early hour—two hours before school began. Heather said it was because of the time zone she was in. Tom decided he’d stay up all night if he had to. His brain was whirling. He had a date . . . kind of. With a real, live girl . . . he hoped.

After she logged off, he stood there by his desk—though he was really sitting stock-still on the couch in the VR parlor—just staring at the empty space where she’d been, the enormity of asking a girl out for the first time *and* having the girl say yes beating through his brain. And to think, he’d thought this would be just another ordinary day. . . .

A throat cleared.

Tom noticed suddenly that he and Ms. Falmouth were the only ones left in the virtual classroom.

“I was just logging off,” Tom said quickly, reaching up in the real world to tear off his visor.

“Not quite yet, Tom,” Ms. Falmouth said. “Stay a moment. I think we need to talk.”

Oh.

A heaviness settled in Tom’s chest, because he’d half expected this, and it wasn’t good.

“Let’s go to my office.” Ms. Falmouth twitched her fingers to alter the program, and the landscape shifted around them into a private office. She settled at one side of the imposing desk. Tom navigated himself into the seat opposite, and waited for some hint of what she needed to hear before she’d let him off the hook this time.

“Tom,” she said, folding her hands on her desk, “I am concerned about this attendance situation.”

Tom let out a breath. “I figured.”

“You were referred to this institution because your father somehow let you reach age eleven without enrolling you in school. We’ve worked to catch you up, but I don’t feel you’re making the same progress as the rest of the class. In fact, considering that you’re very rarely *in* class, I am finding this situation outright unmanageable.”

“Maybe I need an alternative school,” Tom suggested.

“This already *is* an alternative school. This is the end of the line.”

“I try.”

“No, you don’t. And what’s more, your father doesn’t try, either. Do you realize you missed two quizzes and a history paper last week?”

“It couldn’t be helped.”

“Russo-Chinese hackers, right?” she said. “Or perhaps you were taken hostage by terrorists again, or washed out to sea and stranded on a desert island without internet access?”

“Not quite.” But he’d really get a kick out of using that one sometime in the future.

“Tom, you are not taking this seriously—and that’s your problem. This is not some silly game: this is your future and you are throwing it away with both hands. You promised me a month ago that you would never miss class again.” Ms.

Falmouth's avatar gazed at him with an unnatural, unblinking intensity. "We signed a learning contract, don't you remember?"

Tom didn't point out that she'd *made* him promise not to miss class again. What had she expected him to tell her, the truth? Should he have outright admitted he probably wasn't going to show up at school? She would've just yelled at him for "being insolent" again.

"This is not about me," Ms. Falmouth went on. "It's not about your father, even: it is about you, Tom. You realize that whatever actions I take from here, they're for your own good. I cannot sit back and allow a fourteen-year-old boy's entire life to be sabotaged by an irresponsible parent who will not even ensure he gets a proper education."

Tom sat up in both the sim and the VR parlor. "What does that even mean—'whatever actions you take from here'?"

"It means you're under court order to attend school, and you have not been attending. Last week, I reported your absences to Child Protective Services."

Tom slouched back, feeling like he'd just been socked in the stomach. This was *not* going to end well. Maybe he wasn't reaching great heights of achievement with Neil, but life in foster care wouldn't be a land of hope and opportunity either.

And no way could he stay at his mom's.

No way, no way.

Dalton, her boyfriend, paid for her fancy apartment in New York City. Tom had visited her once, just once, and he'd met him. Dalton Prestwick was this rich, yacht-owning executive at some big multinational company, Dominion Agra. His job was to enforce their copyright or something.

Dalton had looked him over like he was something nasty smeared on the bottom of his leather shoes and said, "My attorneys have documented everything of value in this house,

punk. The second something goes missing, I'll have you in juvenile hall."

Oh, and Dalton already had a wife. And another girlfriend. Yeah, and Tom's mom.

"I don't have anywhere else to go, Ms. Falmouth. I know you think you're doing me a favor, but you're not. I promise you."

"You're fourteen, Tom. What do you expect to do with yourself in a few years when you need to make a living? Do you plan to be a roving gambler like your father?"

"No," Tom answered at once.

"A roving *gamer*?"

He wasn't quite sure how much Ms. Falmouth knew about his gaming, but he didn't say anything. If she'd asked him what he planned to be, he might've said exactly that—he might've announced that he'd make his living one day the same way he was doing it now.

Only, the thought of living like this forever, the thought of going nowhere in life . . .

The thought of turning into his father . . .

Suddenly it made Tom feel kind of fuzzy and clenched up inside like he was getting sick.

Ms. Falmouth leaned back in her seat. "You're competing in a global economy. One out of three Americans is unemployed. You need an education to be an engineer, a programmer, or anything of use to the defense industry. You need an education to be an accountant or a lawyer, and you need connections to go into government or corporate work. Who do you think will hire a young man like you when there are so many high-achieving candidates out there who are desperate for work?"

"It's years away."

"Pretend it's tomorrow. What are you going to do with

yourself? What are you good for?"

"I'm good at . . ." He stopped.

"At what?"

He couldn't come up with anything else, so he just said it.
"Games."

The word sat on the air between them, and to Tom it suddenly sounded utterly sad.

"So is your father, Tom. And where is *he* now?"



CHAPTER TWO

BACK WHEN TOM was little, Neil seemed like a god to him. His dad didn't have a boring job like other people—he was a gambler. He sipped at his martini like James Bond and bluffed his way into winning other people's money. Tom grew up hearing stories about the way his dad used to get flown for free to tournaments for professional poker players, the way he used to get the largest hotel suites on the highest floors and then tip the maids a few thousand dollars. Women always found reason to talk to him, but Neil waved them away like they were invisible, because he was in love with the most beautiful woman of all.

When Tom was a little kid, he'd believed in the dream. He was sure his dad's glory days would return. Any minute, Neil was going to turn back into that winner he used to be, then they'd stay in one place and his mom would return, and she'd be so sorry she'd left them.

But now, at fourteen, Tom knew his dad didn't even get invited to the same tournaments that used to fly him in for free, and his mother was still gone. They never stayed in the same place for more than a week or two, and they never would. He didn't expect that to change. He was too old to believe in fairy tales.

Tom tucked the wired gloves back in the VR parlor's storage container, his own words resounding in his mind: *I'm good at games*. He drove his hands into his pockets and ignored the fears until they became nothing more than an ache in his gut.

He tried to turn his thoughts toward the other thing that happened today: Heather. His brain buzzed with the memory of her words, the way she'd smiled when she thought he was asking her out. He was still thinking of her later that night when he paid for a double room at the front desk, and he was so wired up with anticipation for the next morning that he didn't manage to fall asleep until well past midnight.

And then his father staggered in.

Neil flipped the light on, blasting the glare through Tom's eyelids. Springs squeaked as he sagged onto the other bed. "Got our room again, Tommy? I can always count on you. You're a real good boy. You're a—a good kid."

Tom opened his eyes a crack and squinted against the flood of light to see Neil clumsily loosening his tie. "Dad, could you turn the lights back off?"

"Gonna get out of this one day, eh, Tommy?" Neil slurred. "Next big win, s'all done. Finished."

Tom clawed out of the covers and then headed across the room to turn off the lights himself.

"A hundred thou's all I'm asking," Neil rambled on. "Won't squan-squan—lose it all again. Rent an apartment. Bigger than the one that chump Dalton's got your mom living in. Maybe

send you ter a real school someday. In a *building*, y'know?" He smiled sloppily at Tom. With his undone collar, mussed hair, and slack, unshaven face, he looked demented.

Tom flicked the light off. Neil was his family. And his dad had his back, he knew. But ever since those social workers confronted them the first time about the not-going-to-school thing, and Tom saw what the lives of other kids were like, he'd started thinking about stuff.

The truth was, he'd taken it for granted before Rosewood that living like this was normal. He thought that whole idea of houses and schools and dinners at a table were fantasies. Neil always called it "corporate propaganda manufactured to promote lifelong debt servitude."

But it wasn't propaganda. Not really. Sure, a lot of people had it worse. A lot. There were families on the streets, gathered in tent cities, squatting in derelict buildings and abandoned factories. But there were also guys like Serge Leon who'd lived in one place for years on end, and *Serge* knew where he'd be sleeping tomorrow night. Tom couldn't predict anything. All he knew was, he'd be somewhere with Neil. With this.

With *this*.

A nasty, dark feeling descended on him as his father's wet snores saturated the hotel room. Even with the AC on high, the sound thundered in his ears. He shifted, turned, pressed his pillow over his head, trying to muffle it, but it was like ignoring a hurricane. The noise just grew louder and louder.

Finally Tom gave up on sleep and tore off the covers.

He needed to shoot something.

THE VR PARLOR was empty at five thirty in the morning, a lonely lounge of couches and dim screens. Tom settled on the center couch, strapped on a visor, and flipped through the

game selection to Die, Zombies, Die. Two hours later, he'd blasted and slashed his way to level nine and upgraded to a bazooka. He was busy blowing a nice hole in the Queen Zombie's torso when the game flickered and went black on him.

"Hey," Tom objected and reached up to slide off his visor, but then it fizzled with another image.

The eyepieces lit with a slash of crimson that expanded into a stark red Martian landscape. Tom gazed around, surprised. It was like he'd unwittingly activated another game within the game.

He went with it.

First thing he did was look at his character's attire and weaponry. He was in a space suit. *Playing a human character, then.* Over the horizon, he caught sight of a tank jerking across the bloodred landscape. An information bubble popped up and informed him that his enemy was in this hydrogen-powered tank and his objective was to kill or be killed.

The cylindrical canon cranked toward him, and his heart leaped. He whipped around as swiftly as his character could move and dove into a ditch just before a bone-jarring blast hurled dust into the air on all sides of him. He crawled through the haze into the nearest artillery pit. Another blast missed him, and he dropped into the makeshift shelter.

There was a rumbling through the thin Martian atmosphere as that tank made its way toward him, the slow harbinger of his death. Thrills of excitement shot through him. He wasn't used to going so blindly into a sim. The tank's targeting would improve once it drew closer, and even this pit wouldn't save him. He had to blow his enemy up before that.

He began to figure out what this was: an incursion—a prank gamers played on other gamers where they hacked into their systems to challenge them in a sim. No one had ever

incurd him before, and Tom couldn't incurd anyone at all because he didn't know how to do it.

He felt almost giddy with his good fortune. He desperately hoped this was some very awesome gamer, someone spectacular. Someone with a chance of beating him. He'd kill for a real challenge.

He hurled a look around. He was trapped in a gulley, at an utter disadvantage. The only weapon in reach was an iono-sulfuric dispersal rifle planted in the red dirt. He could see the other dugouts in the distance, the symbols etched in their sides telling him one held a batch of grenades, the other C29 antitank guns. According to the information bubble that popped up in the corner of his vision, those were *exactly* what he needed to take out that tank, but how could he get to them without being blown up?

The ground shook around him with another blast. His gloves vibrated with the rumble. Tom took advantage of the crimson haze and flung himself toward the iono-sulfuric weapon. He seized it and dropped back into the pit. Pretty straightforward rifle, this one, at least according to the next information bubble. Too weak to take out a tank, but it could generate a couple little blasts, coat his surroundings with a white film, and create a distraction. He needed to fire this, use the haze as cover, and get to the antitank dugout, and then?

The tank rumbled closer, and Tom saw the error in his logic: whoever this gamer was, he probably knew the C29 dugout would be Tom's assured path to victory. If he was the guy in the tank, he'd wait for the sulfuric haze. He'd count on it. He'd get the coordinates for the antitank dugout beforehand, wait a few seconds, and then lay down a line of fire right in the path to it.

No, Tom couldn't play into his hands. He'd have to be trickier than that.

So he made a show of making a fatal error. He fired the iono-sulfuric rifle, coating the atmosphere around the tank in a white haze.

But he didn't go for the antitank guns.

He leaped up out of the ditch and ran straight toward the tank, used his last glimpse of the tank and its velocity to assess position, and swerved to the side before the tank plowed through the haze to run him down. The blast of sound rumbling past him knocked his character over. Tom saw the stark metal through the white haze and charged after it

He leaped forward, fumbling for handholds, and hoisted himself up the back. A few scrabbling grasps with the wired gloves later, and Tom's character was on top of the tank, above the latch. *This* was one thing an iono-sulfuric rifle could handle. He aimed for the lock, blasted it off, and had the hatch open before the guy inside the tank knew his doom was coming through the ceiling.

With an exultant laugh, Tom dropped through the hatch, his feet clanging on the floor. He stalked toward the thrashing body. No space suit. He wasn't meant for the atmosphere. The gases inside him were trying to burst their way out of his skin into the thinner atmosphere of Mars.

"Nice try, buddy," Tom said, and slammed the guy in the head with the butt of his rifle over and over until he went still.

Tom dropped the gun and settled down next to the dead body, waiting for the next level, hoping the incursing gamer wasn't going to tuck tail and run.

But then the body morphed. Tom leaped to his feet and stared, fascinated, as it changed from a man in combat gear to a woman. A girl.

She sat up, tossed her dark brown hair out of her eyes, and gave him a slow, mesmerizing smile. Tom gaped at her, his

brain blanking out with disbelief.

“Heather.” He realized suddenly that *she* was the incursing gamer. . . . *She’d* been the one to challenge him to a sim. He wondered if the sense of awe and excitement sweeping through him was what it felt like to be in love. “You’re a gamer, too!”

“Not exactly, Tom.” There was a teasing note in her voice. “Congratulations. You passed.”

“Passed . . . what?”

But she vanished and the simulation went black. Tom gazed into the darkness, confused, and then a slow, steady clapping filled his ears.

His *real* ears.

Tom flipped up the visor and whirled around to face the other person in the VR parlor.

The newcomer was an older man with graying hair; a long, pale face; bulbous nose; and full-on military fatigues. He rose from the couch across from him, and Tom realized uneasily that the man must’ve been there for a while just watching him.

“Well,” said the old man, “you’re everything I expected, Mr. Raines. Most don’t even make it into the tank on their first try.” He tapped on his ear and said to someone, “I’ve got visual confirmation—it’s Raines. You can log off now. The network address checks out. Fine work, Heather.”

The whole transition from virtual Tom to real Tom always made him feel weird and stupid even when he wasn’t taken by surprise by some stranger staring at him while he played. “Wait, you know Heather? You two set up that sim?”

“Ms. Akron was scouting you out for me,” the old guy said. “I’ve been looking for you for a month, son. You’re a hard fellow to track down. As soon as she secured your network address for today, I hopped on a plane. I wanted to run you through that scenario once before I made up my mind, but I was certain you

wouldn't disappoint. And you haven't."

Tom's mind flickered to his dad's constant assertions—"The IRS would love to get their hands on me"—and he edged back. Then again, this could be something to do with Ms. Falmouth's threat yesterday about calling Child Protective Services. Either way . . . "Why have you been looking for me?"

"Let's just say, I've been searching for young people who fit a certain profile, and you top my list. One of my officers discovered you on a gaming network, but you kept moving on to new places before we could make contact. I watched you face off with your opponent here in the lounge last night. Tricky move you pulled in that racing game."

Tom froze. "Oh, you saw that?"

"I've also watched you several other times. Back in Southern California. In New Mexico."

Tom fixed his eyes on the bulbous tip of the man's nose, thinking quickly of some excuse. He hadn't been doing anything illegal. . . . Well, anything illegal *apart* from the underage gambling. Actually, that was very illegal all by itself. What could he say? How could he explain it?

"I didn't see you in person," the man assured him. "I was given a feed of some of your old games. This isn't the first casino you've hit, I know. You're quite the gamer. I'm impressed."

Tom blinked. "Impressed?" That wasn't what he'd expected.

"My name is General Terry Marsh. As you may know, the government's been monitoring the country for some of our most promising young people to be Combatants in the war."

Tom said nothing. The words did not compute.

Marsh went on, "I'm here because we need someone like you at the Pentagonal Spire."

The Pentagonal Spire.

The Pentagonal Spire. Where the Combatants for the Intrasolar Forces trained. Where people like Elliot Ramirez lived.

Tom realized what this was. He wheeled away from the old man with a laugh. “All right, did someone put you up to this? Because I’m not a total chump. Whatever this is really about, I’m not going for it.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Marsh noted drily. “Most teenagers would jump at the opportunity to join our Combatants.”

Tom spun back to face him, because the old man looked stern, and he was wearing military getup, after all. “You’re messing with me, aren’t you? You have to be.”

Marsh gestured for him to sit down. “Mr. Raines, you’ve heard of the current war situation. You must have.”

Tom stayed where he was. “I don’t live in a cave.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. You see, we used to give programmers control of the Indo-American machines fighting across the solar system. They created programs that determined the actions of those machines. Logical actions. The Russo-Chinese alliance adopted the same strategy, so combat became very predictable. The outcome was predetermined, and oftentimes, an outright stalemate. So we became clever. We inserted a human factor into the behavior of machines.”

“Combatants.”

“No, first hackers. They tampered with Russo-Chinese software. Russia and China deployed their own hackers, and we stalemated again. But the Russo-Chinese military went a step further, and gave human beings active control over their combat machines. Strategists. Unconventional thinkers. Risk takers. Mavericks. Young ones, because teenagers have certain attributes critical to this type of warfare. So now we, too, have young people on the front lines, young people playing a critical

role in the war effort.”

“Young people like Elliot Ramirez,” Tom pointed out.

In other words, young people who were promising, talented, go-getters. Young people who were *nothing* like him.

“That’s right,” the general said, undaunted. “Elliot has a particular set of strengths he brought to our forces. Charisma, charm, and he’s an excellent figure skater.”

Tom snorted. He couldn’t help it, picturing *Elliot Ramirez* in a sparkly unitard.

Marsh’s eyes narrowed. “Make fun all you like, young man, but that kid has golden DNA. He’d have been something spectacular wherever he went. If he hadn’t ended up with us, Ramirez would be competing in the Olympics. For us, it’s the potential that counts. We look for people who are promising, those who can deploy effective strategies against the Russo-Chinese combatants. We can train our recruits, we can make them better than they ever imagined, but potential? It’s the single quality we can’t create. Ramirez brought something unique to the table. And we’re hoping you can as well.”

That sense of disbelief crept over Tom. This couldn’t be happening.

“Do you need to see proof, Tom?”

“Yes,” Tom answered at once.

“How about I show you a Challenge Coin?” Marsh slipped out a coin from his pocket. “Members of the Air Force—”

“Show this to each other to prove they’re military. I know. I’ve played about a million military sims.” Tom snatched the coin and turned it over in his hands, seeing the Air Force insignia, on the back.

Marsh took it back from him and pressed his fingertip over the logo. “Brigadier General Terry Marsh, United States Air Force,” the old man said. The coin’s surface flashed green,

verifying his voiceprint, his identity, his fingerprint, and DNA all at once.

Tom looked at Marsh's stubby fingertips, coin clenched between them, trying to figure out ways someone could fake Air Force technology. The other possibility—the idea this general guy was here for him—was so incredible he couldn't get his head around it.

“Does that pass your inspection?” Marsh asked him, waving the coin in two fingers.

Tom stared at it, then dragged his gaze up to Marsh's. “You're really here for me? You think *I* could be a Combatant?”

“It's a great opportunity, Tom. We give trainees an education in strategic theory, and if they're good, we give them a chance to be the Combatants who direct our mechanized intrasolar arsenal. In cases like yours, the cognitive skills and reflexes fostered by these gaming simulations prime you perfectly for operating combat machines.”

“That's why you picked me? Because I'm good at games?”

“Exactly. That's why we want you.”

Tom thought suddenly of Ms. Falmouth. Her words rang in his brain: *What are you good for?*

For *this*, apparently. For saving the country just like Elliot Ramirez.

“And your quick victory in that test scenario?” Marsh went on. “That's my icing on the cake, so to speak. You'd be perfect for us.”

Tom closed his eyes and opened them, expecting this to be some glorious dream. But Marsh was there, the VR parlor was real.

Marsh gave a crisp nod at something he saw on his face. “That's right, son. Your country needs you at the Pentagonal Spire. The question is, are you man enough to win a war for us?”



“NOT A CHANCE,” Neil said.

Tom sat on the edge of his bed in their hotel room. Neil nursed a drink, since, as he always liked to say, a good screwdriver was the only reliable hangover cure he knew. The very mention of Tom’s encounter with General Marsh made every line stand out on his face.

“Dad, I can’t pass this up.” Tom flipped through the parental consent form Marsh had given him. “They’ll train me and I’ll be a combatant. And it’s for our country—”

“You won’t be fighting a war for this country, Tom.” A wave of Neil’s hand sent orange juice sloshing over the rim of his glass. “Our military fights to secure first extraplanetary mineral rights for Nobridis, Inc. The Russo-Chinese alliance fights back to secure them for Stronghold Energy. War isn’t about countries! Multinationals use taxpayer-funded militaries to fight their private skirmishes, and then they sell the public on it by donning the mantle of patriotism. This is all just a big fight between members of the Coalition to see who will become the richest CEO in the solar system!”

Tom had heard this before. This whole antiestablishment thing Neil had going on. He pulled it out every time someone asked him why he hadn’t ever held down a job—“Why haven’t I jammed my neck in the yoke of corporate servitude, you mean?”—or paid taxes—“I’ve got better causes to support with my money than stuffing the coffers of Amerika, Inc.!”

So Tom studied the consent form and tuned him out.

“You know how the military treats its people, Tom? They chew them up and spit them out, that’s how. You’re just another piece of equipment to them. And for what? Not for your country. For the wallet of some business executive you’ll never meet in some luxury suite you’ll never see!”

Tom looked over his father, with his sloppy morning drink, his rumpled clothes, and unshaven face. “Dad, this is a career. It’s a real life. Marsh said I’ll even get a salary.”

“You have a real life. Don’t let that rat general tell you—”

“I don’t need him to convince me of anything,” Tom burst out. “I’m sick of this. It’s the same thing over and over again. You lose all our money, and I miss school and have to deal with Ms. Falmouth. I bet this is why—” He stopped talking.

He’d almost said it. That dark thought, the one he never voiced.

I bet this is why Mom left us.

It took Neil a moment to speak, as though he’d heard the phantom words. “This is not the only way we have to live. If you’re tired of this, we’ll settle somewhere. You don’t have to join *them*. Next win and I’m done.”

Tom closed his eyes, blood beating in his head. There would never be a “next win.” And even if there was, it wouldn’t be enough—and the next win would be gambled away just as quickly as the other ones. He’d heard this all before. His dad would never give up this life. The promise was worthless. And Tom would be worthless, too, if he didn’t get away while he had the chance.

“I don’t *have* to join the military, Dad. I *want* to.” He opened his eyes and approached it from his father’s perspective. “Is it the money thing? My salary will be in a trust, but I get a living allowance. I can send some along. I can help you out.”

Why was Neil looking at him like he’d stabbed him or something? They both knew Tom was the one paying for their rooms lately.

Neil’s jaw clenched. “Fine. Fine, Tom. I’ll sign whatever blasted form you want. You want to throw your life away? Want to pledge yourself to the corporate war machine?”

“Yes, Dad. I want to pledge myself to the corporate war machine.” Tom’s voice grew ferocious. “It’s my choice.”

“It’s your mistake.”

“Maybe. But it’s *mine*.”

Neil yanked the consent form from Tom’s hands. “This isn’t how teenager’s rebellion’s supposed to go. You’re supposed to shock me by doing something scandalous. Not by joining the establishment.”

“This is about as scandalous as I’m going to get, Dad. Sign the form.”

“I’d rather you got a tattoo.”

Neil scrawled his signature on the form and handed custody of Tom over to the US military.

LATER IN THE afternoon, General Marsh returned to collect it.

“Mr. Raines, you have no need to worry about Tom while he’s with us. We’ll take good care of your boy.” Marsh offered Neil a hand to shake.

Neil stared back at him with stony hatred. He ignored Marsh’s hand and instead reached out to envelop Tom in a rough, parting hug.

“Tom”—Neil ruffled his hand in his hair—“whatever happens, *you* take care of *yourself*. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Tom couldn’t help wondering at the look on his dad’s face when he left with Marsh. Neil stared after them like he was sure this was the last time he’d ever see his son.

CHAPTER THREE

AS THE AIRPLANE hummed around him, Tom pictured himself as a Combatant, saving America from some devastating Russo-Chinese plot. And maybe then Ms. Falmouth would see him on TV and gasp, realizing her least favorite student had just saved her country. Then everyone at Rosewood would find out, too.

Suddenly he wanted to tell her where he was going. He had this weird need to hear what she'd say. But when he asked about visiting Rosewood one last time, Marsh shook his head.

"As far as your Ms. Falmouth is concerned, you've been moved to a foster home. We keep as quiet as we can about our young recruits, Tom. The only face we put out there publicly is Elliot Ramirez. The rest of you are only known to the public as call signs."

The flight from Arizona seemed to take forever. When they flew over Arlington, Virginia, Tom finally spotted the building he'd been watching for since takeoff: the Pentagonal Spire,

military headquarters for the Intrasolar Forces. The massive spire rose from a five-sided pentagonal base and twisted up into a gleaming, chrome point.

Marsh rapped a knobby knuckle on the windowpane. “Used to be, when I was a kid, Tom, this building was a giant, flat pentagon. The place where the Spire is? Right where it’s planted, there used to be a courtyard and two inner rings of the Old Pentagon. We called the courtyard ground zero. It got the name way back in the Cold War, when everyone thought that would be the first place the Soviets bombed. A lot of people were upset when the higher-ups decided to build the Spire over that piece of history—but we were just ramping up competition with the Chinese in space, and we needed an edge. The Spire itself isn’t just a building—it’s the most powerful transmitter in the Western Hemisphere.”

“What do you do in the old building?” Tom said as the plane rudders tilted up, outside his window. They decelerated as the hybrid plane shifted into helicopter mode.

“We’ve got some military traditionals stationed in the remaining three rings. Might as well call them the Corps of Engineers nowadays, though. Don’t get me wrong, we have combat companies just in case of civil unrest or the emergence of some new, rogue nation, but they’ll never see any real action. A shame, because I was a combat guy myself in the day, and we did more than fight. Helped Interpol track down criminals, overthrew corrupt regimes, even distributed humanitarian aid.”

“You were a veteran?” Tom had never met a real one before. His stomach gave a great leap as they descended toward the roof of the Old Pentagon. “Did you shoot guns at people?”

“Not *that* kind of veteran. I was a pilot. Flew troops who *did* shoot guns at people in and out of the Middle East back when

there was some fight in the region—back when there was a *there* there. Believe it or not, Tom, when I was young, violence wasn't a small-scale, isolated matter. There were always several wars going on somewhere in the world, with guns and bombs and insurgencies and everything you've read about."

The plane touched down on the helipad. Tom and General Marsh unbuckled their seat belts and emerged onto the old building's roof, where a line of military traditionals stood at attention. Marsh exchanged salutes with the ranking officer, stood statue stiff for his retina verification scan, then gestured for Tom to accompany him into an elevator. They dropped into the Pentagon, and emerged into a first-floor corridor joining the old Pentagon to the Pentagonal Spire.

In the hallway leading to the Spire, a crisply dressed woman with large, clear eyes and dark skin awaited them. She strode forward as they drew closer to her. "Thomas Raines, I assume?"

Tom glanced at General Marsh, and began a salute like the ones he'd seen moments before.

General Marsh shook his head. "No saluting, Tom. This is Olivia Ossare. She's a civilian."

The woman beamed at him. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Tom. He's right. I'm a civilian—as are you. When the military began requisitioning teenagers four years ago for intrasolar combat operations, the Congressional Defense Committee, which oversees operations here, drafted a document known as the Public Accord."

Tom followed her into the vast lobby of the Pentagonal Spire, General Marsh behind them. The entrance to the Spire was no less daunting than the glittering chrome outside: high marble ceilings, with a golden eagle glaring down upon those at the threshold. A large American flag stood by the door, ringed

by the flags of the current US military allies: India, Canada, Britain, and various European and Oceanian states.

Olivia's heels echoed on the floor. "All recruits are subject to child labor laws. Although you are joining the military, you won't serve in the same capacity as traditional soldiers unless you choose to reenlist at eighteen. You will not hold a formal rank. The military may be your custodian while you're here, but according to federal law, your legal guardian is still your father. The military does not own you."

Tom's eyes strayed to a group of uniformed regular soldiers marching past in formation. Olivia's hand on his shoulder urged him forward.

"Like me, Tom, you'll be something of a civilian contractor. You'll be in the employ of the government but on a limited schedule. You'll receive a traditional education—"

Tom winced. He'd hoped he was done with school forever.

"—a stipend, with a regular salary in a trust, and you'll have Calisthenics as well as a minimum of twenty hours of free time per week. You'll have twenty vacation days per year, some at standard holiday intervals, some at times determined by General Marsh. On weekends, the time is entirely yours to fill. You have liberty of movement as long as you ensure you're back at the Spire by ten p.m."

"*And* as long as you remain within a twenty-mile radius of this installation," Marsh cut in. "This is the designated zone, Mr. Raines, and you don't stray from it without getting approval from me first. If a trainee goes outside the DZ, we assume the Russo-Chinese alliance is involved, and we go to DEFCON-2."

"DEFCON-2?" Tom said, stunned.

"That's right. Losing a trainee is a national emergency. We mobilize the traditionals for a hostile retrieval. It's happened

recently, and that trainee—a young man who snuck off to see a girl—was not happy with the consequences he faced when we found him. He no longer has liberty of movement. He’s lucky to still be here at all, considering how much work it took to keep that story off the internet.”

They emerged into a vast circular area with sleek black tables.

“This is Patton Hall,” Olivia told him. “It’s the mess hall for young trainees and the officers who live at this installation.” She steered Tom toward the banks of elevators. “This brings us to”—she pointed to a glass door at the end of the hallway beyond the elevators—“my office, Tom.”

Tom squinted, and saw the print: OLIVIA OSSARE, LCSW-C.

“As I said, I’m not military. I’m a licensed social worker, and I’m here for you kids. You can speak to me in confidence if any issues arise. I am here to be your advocate, even if your problem is with your military custodians.”

General Marsh took over the tour. He showed Tom the Hart Medical Wing and the Lafayette Room. The latter was a massive chamber with rows of benches and a raised stage between a US flag and a flag of the six Indo-American corporate allies on the Coalition of Multinationals: Wyndham Harks; Dominion Agra; Nobridis, Inc.; Obsidian Corp.; Matchett-Reddy; and Epicenter Manufacturing.

Marsh gestured around them. “The trainees have core classes here in the Lafayette Room with civilian instructors. You’ll get to know this room quite well. As a first year—a plebe—your classes are divided between this room and MacArthur Hall on the fifteenth floor.”

They took the elevator to the sixth floor and stepped out into a sleek, windowless room with a plush arrangement of couches in rows, gaming consoles, an air hockey table, a Ping-Pong

table, a pool table, and towering bookshelves. Around the room were sliding doors. One had a giant ax painted across the door and the words GENGHIS DIVISION. The next had a feather and the words MACHIAVELLI DIVISION. The next one had a catapult and the words HANNIBAL DIVISION. There was a musket and the words NAPOLEON DIVISION, and then a sword and the words ALEXANDER DIVISION.

“This is the common area for plebes,” Marsh informed him. “Those signs? Those are the doors to the five living quarters for trainees, the ‘divisions,’ all named after prominent figures in military history—generals and a strategist. Five sides to a pentagon, five divisions . . . Gives it all a nice order. Now, I think it’s time you saw the training rooms. I think you’re ready. Do you concur, Ms. Ossare?”

Olivia’s face froze. “I concur, General,” she said shortly. “Now’s the time.” She strode past Tom and pressed the button for the elevator.

They rode up to the training simulation rooms on floor thirteen. Marsh glanced at the information docket by a door, and pressed a finger to his lips. “Come in here.”

He opened the door to reveal a vast, dark chamber. Tom’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, and then he saw them: a group of a dozen or so teenagers stretched out on cots in a ring, eyes closed.

Tom was thrown by their zombielike silence, by their stillness, by the EKG monitors with jagged lines registering their heart rhythms. What were they even doing? Marsh called it a simulation, but he didn’t see any VR visors or gloves or even one of the old-fashioned sensor bars. No one was gesturing or waving. No one was moving at all, in fact. They looked more like they were patients in some coma ward.

General Marsh gestured for him to come back out of the

room. “Those are plebes,” he told Tom in the hallway. “They’re running a group scrimmage. Before they get into advanced tactical training, plebes are drilled in teamwork exercises. They’re also acclimated to the neural processors in their brains interfacing with something other than their own bodies.”

It took Tom a few seconds to comprehend the words: *neural processors . . . in their brains . . .*

He stopped walking. “Wait, what?” He swung around to look at the two adults. “What do you mean, processors *in their brains*?”

Neither Marsh nor Olivia reacted. It was as if they’d both expected this.

Marsh said, “To become a trainee here, Mr. Raines, you have to have a neural processor installed in your head. It’s a very sophisticated computer that interacts directly with your brain. You’re still human afterward, just something extra as well.”

Olivia’s hand squeezed his shoulder. Tom pulled away from it. “You didn’t say anything about—” he began.

“What did you think, son?” General Marsh raised his thin eyebrows. “Our Combatants control machines, and they fight machines. You’ve got quick synapses yourself. But your brain isn’t machine fast. Not yet. Those kids in there? Their brains are.”

Tom understood the zombielike stillness of those kids: the computers were inside their heads. The simulation they were using to train was running inside the computers that were inside their brains.

“All the trainees undergo the procedure, Tom. It’s safe.” Marsh’s eyes riveted to Tom’s forehead. “What you teenagers have in great supply—and we adults do not—is neural elasticity. Your brain’s *adaptable*. Adults and neural processors don’t go

together. We tried it, and it turned ugly. Adult brains couldn't adjust to the new hardware. So we use teenagers. By virtue of your youth, your brains are primed for enhancement. The fact is, you can't control Indo-American combat machines in space if you can't interface with them. To become a Combatant, you need to cross some of that distance between human and computer yourself."

Tom gaped at him. "So all of the trainees here—and all the ones with call signs on the news sites—they've got these neural processors? Even *Elliot Ramirez* has a computer in his brain?"

"That's right. Even Elliot has one."

"What about the Russo-Chinese Combatants?"

"They have them, too. This is top secret information. The public doesn't know this, but it's the key to everything. This is how the war's fought. Combatants use the neural processors to interface with the unmanned drones in space, to control them, and wage battle against the drones controlled by the neural processors of Russo-Chinese Combatants."

Tom looked back and forth between the general and the social worker. He remembered that expression on Olivia's face a few minutes ago when Marsh talked about showing him the training room, and his thoughts dwelled upon it. She'd expected his reaction. They'd *both* expected it. *This* was the catch. And they'd just decided to ambush him with it.

He found himself thinking of Neil and the way he said Elliot Ramirez wasn't a real human. His dad had been right. Elliot was part computer.

"Does it change people?" Tom wondered.

"No," General Marsh said.

Olivia cleared her throat.

"Somewhat," Marsh amended. "But little changes. Undetectable to you. You're still *you* in every important

sense of the word. Your frontal lobe, your limbic system, your hippocampus are all intact . . .” At Tom’s blank look, he elaborated, “We don’t alter your thought process, emotions, or old memories. We don’t change the essence of who you are—that would be a human rights violation, after all. But once we install some hardware in your head, you’ll think faster. You’ll be one of the smartest human beings alive.”

“And, Tom, if you have doubts, you can decline,” Olivia added.

Marsh gave a crisp nod. “That’s right, son. Give me the word, and we’ll have you back at the Dusty Squanto with your old man. You signed a confidentiality agreement on the plane, and we’ll hold you to keeping what you’ve seen here to yourself, but I don’t think that will be hard for you. What’s important is, you come into this with your eyes wide open.”

Tom couldn’t speak for a long while. His dad’s words returned to him, unbidden: “You know how the military treats its people, Tom? They chew them up and spit them out, that’s how. You’re just another piece of equipment to them.”

Equipment. A computer was a piece of equipment. He would *be* equipment.

“That’s the only way I can do this?” Tom blurted.

“The only way. Without the neural processor, you’re useless to us.”

And Marsh had waited until now, until now—after Tom had turned on his father, pressured him into signing the consent form, flown across the country, and gotten his hopes up so high he’d been soaring in the stratosphere—to drop this bomb. It was manipulative. Tom didn’t need some computer in his head to see that. If there was one thing he hated, it was feeling like a chump.

“Maybe this isn’t for me.” Tom watched Marsh’s face as he

spoke, relishing the shock that washed over the old features. The general thought he'd hooked him. Thought he would feel he had no choice anymore. He felt a surge of vindictive satisfaction at proving him wrong.

"Well, son. That's unexpected. That's, well . . ." Marsh seemed to be fumbling for something to say.

"He's made his decision," Olivia said, triumph in her voice. "Take him home, Terry."

The words sent panic skittering through Tom, because he wanted this life at the Pentagonal Spire. He wanted it ferociously. But he couldn't just be some chump tricked into it. He'd never forgive himself. He'd rather gouge out his own eyes than let Marsh get away with manipulating him.

Marsh studied him for a long, tense moment. Then he said, "I'll tell you what, Tom, how about I give you some time to think it over?"

Tom could have laughed. He'd bluffed and won. He'd forced Marsh to give in a bit. The tension eased in his muscles. He hadn't let the general totally snow him. "Fine. I'll think."

Marsh seemed to relax, too. He held out a shiny black keycard, his watery eyes searching Tom's face, trying to gauge how serious he was about resisting the idea of joining up. "Ms. Ossare, why don't you escort Tom down to the mess hall? There are some meal points on this card. Have a bite to eat. On me. When you feel ready to make your decision, click on the pager."

Tom glanced at the keycard and turned it in his hand for effect. "And if I say no, I get to leave?"

"Yes, Raines." Marsh's voice grew gruff.

"He's legally obligated to allow it," Olivia added.

Tom raised his eyes to hers and returned her smile with a quick one of his own. "Fine. I hope there are a lot of credits on

this. I'm starved."

Marsh's look of irritation made it all the better.

TOM SETTLED AT a table in the mess hall directly beneath a row of screens in sleep mode and a large oil painting of a man with a plaque that proclaimed him General George S. Patton. He stared up at the gruff face of the general, an empty meal tray sitting on the tabletop before him. He didn't actually feel like taking it over and grabbing food. His head began to ache. He found himself wishing his dad was around.

Then again, if Neil had been there when General Marsh pulled that oh,-I forgot-to-mention-the-computer-in-your-head-earlier thing, he would've exploded. Maybe punched him. And that probably wouldn't have helped matters at all.

Tom scrubbed a hand through his hair. What was the matter with him? He couldn't turn this down. And he shouldn't take it personally. Marsh probably had some standard military recruitment playbook: get the kids away from their parents, get them to the Spire, get their hopes up, and then spring the big surprise-brain-surgery thing.

He held up the keycard and idly turned it back and forth, watching it glint in the light. Knowing he was being manipulated didn't make him feel any better about it.

"If you're not going to use those meal credits, can I?"

The voice startled him. Tom swung his head up and caught his breath. It took him a long moment to remember the English language and the fact that he was capable of using it.

"So that wasn't an avatar."

"Nope." Heather Akron was impossibly prettier in person, with her dark brown hair escaping its loose ponytail, her yellow-brown eyes like no color he'd seen naturally before. This time, she wore military fatigues—camouflage trousers and a black

tunic. The bald eagle insignia of the Intrasolar Forces was on her collar, and beneath it were four triangular points stacked on top of one another, like the tips of arrows shooting upward. “Yours isn’t an avatar, either,” she teased.

“No.” It wasn’t so funny this time, knowing she was seeing him up close.

“May I?” She gestured to the keycard.

“It’s the general’s. Go nuts.”

Heather’s eyes twinkled as she took it. “Thanks. I used up my snack allotment for this week on lattes. It’s so bad, but I can’t say no to myself sometimes.”

“You don’t have to. Say no to yourself, I mean . . . about lattes.” He stumbled over the words as she leaned in closer—close enough for her breath to brush his skin.

“How about General Marsh buys us *both* a drink, Tom?”

“That’s a great idea.” As long as Heather said his name like that while smiling at him like that, he’d agree that jumping in a nuclear reactor was a great idea, too.

Heather winked. “Perfect!” And she swept off to the coffee stand across the mess hall.

He watched her hips sway away and tried to think of witty things to say when she finally returned, even though he knew after that, she’d be gone. Beautiful girls didn’t hang around to talk to short, ugly guys with bad acne.

So he was all the more astonished a few moments later when she lowered herself across the table from him and slid a drink his way, her fingers poking out of the holes of what looked like biker gloves or something. He could see the Intrasolar Forces insignia on her palm, too. He knew what that bald eagle insignia looked like with his eyes closed. He’d seen it on the internet, on the news—and it represented something that had always been an impossibility to him. He knew he was

crazy, even hesitating like this.

“I know I should cut back,” Heather lamented, sipping at her drink, “but I’m *such* a caffeine addict. I just love how wired it leaves me.”

“Yeah,” Tom agreed, unsure what he was agreeing with, and took an overlarge gulp of the drink she’d given him. The hot liquid singed his tongue.

“So how about it, Tom? Are you going to be a plebe soon?”

He wasn’t sure how to answer that.

“Oh, but I saw how you handled that tank simulation,” Heather went on. “I bet you won’t be a plebe for long. There are promotions twice a year, and I bet you’ll move quickly to Middle Company. After that, it’s Upper Company, and then, if you can network with the right people and get a corporate sponsor, you’ll join the Combatant group—Camelot Company. We’re called CamCo here.”

Tom straightened. “We?”

“Uh-huh. I’m in Camelot Company.”

He gaped at her. He’d probably seen her in action, too. Probably seen clips of her on the internet. “What’s your call sign? Have I heard of you?”

“Well, I’m a newer Combatant, but maybe you have. I go by Enigma.”

Enigma. He’d heard of her! She was sponsored by Wyndham Harks, and he remembered this time on Jupiter’s moon Io . . . Oh, and that time on Saturn’s moon Titan, when . . . A half-dozen battles from the last few months flipped through his head. Tom just gaped at her. “I can’t believe it. You’re one of the best. I remember that time you guys were fighting on Titan, when you—”

Heather laughed, and grabbed his hand to stop him. The physical contact was something of a shock to Tom, because it

was nothing like VR.

“Tom, that’s so sweet of you to say, but this isn’t about me right now. It’s about you. It’s about the choice you’re going to make today.”

“Right. Right.” His attention was riveted to the way her thumb stroked across his knuckles.

“I bet I know why you’re hesitant. You haven’t signed up yet because you’re freaked out by this, right?” She tapped at her temple, indicating the implanted processor.

“I wouldn’t say ‘freaked out.’ I’m not freaked out.”

Her voice grew softer, her touch still tickling along his skin. “You sure? It’s okay to tell me. I can answer any questions you have.”

And suddenly, Tom knew why *she* just happened to be here, of all possible people in the Pentagonal Spire. He knew.

He pulled his hand back and grabbed his drink. Globes of whipped cream were melting into the light brown liquid. He could see Marsh’s invisible hand in this. The old guy had sent Heather here: a gorgeous girl to talk Tom into agreeing to get his skull split open. This was more of Marsh trying to play him for a sucker.

“I know what you must be wondering.” Heather paused and bit her bottom lip. Despite himself, Tom stared at the pink flesh, his mouth suddenly dry. “I worried about it, too. I thought maybe after I got the neural processor in my head, the voice in my brain might disappear and get replaced by some robotic thing, like, ‘Good morning, Dave.’”

Gorgeous and a science fiction geek. She was a living, breathing fantasy.

“But it’s not like that, Tom. I’m still me. I’m just a *better* me.”

“Look,” Tom told her, before she could go on with the

pitch, “it’s not the computer *itself* I have a problem with. I’m not even so worried about being a different person. It’s just . . . You know, Marsh didn’t mention any of this brain-surgery stuff until after he was pretty sure I was set on this. It’s the way he did it.”

Her amber eyes stayed fixed upon his. “You feel manipulated?”

“I feel like he’s *trying* to manipulate me. I mean, would you be talking to me right now if he hadn’t sent you?”

Heather rested her chin in her palm. “Of course he’s trying to manipulate you, Tom.”

Tom blinked, surprised she’d just admitted that.

“General Marsh even ordered me to come here and talk you into it, just as you guessed. Can you blame him? He doesn’t want you to turn this down after you’ve found out the big secret about the neural processors.” She tapped a finger thoughtfully on her lips, studying him. “Good thing you won’t.”

“I won’t?” Tom said, feeling out of his depth with her.

“Mmm, no. You won’t,” Heather said matter-of-factly. “You know exactly what it means if you come here. They stick an expensive, multimillion-dollar computer in your head. They invest tens of millions more training you. Then they give you control of billions of dollars of military machinery and a critical role in the country’s war effort. You’re valuable. So yes, the military has an agenda when it comes to dealing with you. And so does General Marsh. But that’s really what you have to put up with if you want to be one of us. The question is, Tom, do you want to be one of us?” She leaned closer, her eyes gripping his. “Do you want to be somebody important?”

And there it was.

There it was.

Tom leaned back in his seat and tipped his drink to

Heather—but really to salute the man who wasn't there but who had just won this match. *Well played, General Marsh. Well played.*

Because, more than anything, Tom wanted to *do something*. Something other than move casino to casino, something other than turn into his dad.

He'd give anything to be important.