

Cold Storage

My name is Paul Michael Smith, and I am the oldest man to have ever lived. Someone once said longevity is a blessing. However, I can attest to the fact that when your blessings are manufactured in a lab, life becomes pain, misery, and sorrow.

I was a happy kid, my mother and father loved me, I had lots of friends at school. I was smart, smarter than most six-year-olds. No. “Prideful thinking leads to the Devil’s punishment,” that’s what my grandma always said. And perhaps that’s what happened to me. But to tell the truth, I don’t know where the monster came from. I do know when I first saw him.

It was a crisp autumn day. I threw my jacket on the pile and ran to join the kickball game. Big Jimmy was blocking the net, but I kept running as hard as I could. I caught up to the ball just in time to kick it right at Jimmy. Jimmy was big but he couldn’t catch. The ball bounced off Big Jimmy and hit me right in the face, so fast I didn’t have time to blink. I woke up with a black eye, bloody nose, and a bad headache in the hospital. My mother was crying. My father was arguing with the doctor. He didn’t want me to remain in the hospital. But I did remain in the hospital that day and that year. Dr. Adams told me I had more than just a bloody nose and a black eye. I had leukemia. I had cancer.

He told me, “It is a monster that wants your strength. If we work really hard we can put that monster in the closet and lock the door.”

Every place he stuck his needles drained the monster from my body. The monster took some of me into the closet too. When he got loose, he was bigger, stronger, and more painful. Just when I thought I could go out to play, or my hair looked good, or I could eat without puking,

the monster got out. And Dr. Adams' needles and machines would go to work putting the monster back in the closet.

During my time in the hospital, I would draw. Everyone loved my pictures. "Such depth... What beauty... Awesome..." My black and whites were especially praised, and it wasn't long before they were selling. I wanted to believe they were that good, but you know prideful thinking. I was in the hospital so much my mother and father often forgot when I was home. I could hear them fighting about the money. The pictures helped, but not enough. The experimental drugs cost more than what my pictures sold for.

One day, during an argument, my father said, "The next time, we should refuse treatment. We can do that, you know. He's fifteen and what has he got to show for a life, a room full of drawings, and a life full of pain. We can refuse treatment."

On TV there were others who felt like my father, they called themselves the Moral Right. They were against medical experiments, stem cell treatment which kept me alive, and DNA manipulation. They were fighting for Death with Dignity. What my father was planning scared the monster deep into the closet. The monster knew that when I died, he died. So, he stayed in his closet.

People like art because they can see what they want in it. Art is the reflection of the viewer not the artist. My work was acclaimed as fresh, realism in a surrealistic world, and the ever-popular awe-inspiring. My pain was inspiring. My despair was uplifting. I was 'IT' from New York to LA. Being an artist wasn't so hard, couple of black lines on a paper, some gray dust from the graves of the less fortunate, a ghostly picture of some passing friend and I was a success. People enjoyed the misery.

My greatest work was a huge 18 by 12-foot canvas. It was like the others, lines of various shades of death crisscrossing and intersecting at random points of misery. Mom said it was like looking out of an ice cube. I wrote in tiny letters down in the corner, 'Life in Ice'. It was the only piece I put a title on. It attracted Dr. Leonardo Targue to MOCA, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Dr. Targue wanted to make Life in Ice more than a conceptual dream; he planned to make it a reality for me. Yes, Dr. Leonardo Targue was a cryogenic scientist. He was different from the other doctors. He offered no cure, he gave no false hope of a miracle, he suggested escape from the monster. The monster hated him. He smashed the closet door and poured misery into my soul the day I met Dr. Targue. The only thing that hated Dr. Targue more was the Moral Right. They despised the doctor, scientists, and anyone who challenged God's domain or will.

Although cryogenics wasn't a new technology, Dr. Targue was taking a novel, controversial, and potentially illegal approach to it. Conventional cryo-doctors froze you moments after you died with the hope that someone would be able to bring you back to life. The good doctor Targue planned to freeze me while I was alive and relatively healthy. He also did his colleagues one better, he actually had a process for reanimation. Because I would be alive when I underwent his cryogenic procedure; the whole thing was top secret.

October 4th, the day I turned 21, "the day Janis Joplin died," remarked Dr. Targue, was the day I met him at his prep facility. He administered chemo for my leukemia and his frog serum for the cryo. The frog serum was a combination of fluids that allowed reptiles to survive cold temperature and hibernation. He was going to infuse my body with it to protect my cells

during the freezing phase. It was also an electrolyte that would allow my cells to be reactivated with low voltage energy. I had the feeling he had tried this before; I couldn't tell if he had been successful.

"Imagine how science, how medicine will change when I freeze you and bring you back whole." I imagined the Moral Right coming after him with pitchforks and torches. They didn't like frozen embryos, they would scream "crucify him," over Popsicle people. I was sedated for the trip to the secret cryogenic lab.

'Piece of my heart' was pounding in my ears. The stark white sparsely adorned lab was more sterile than any hospital I had ever seen. Dr. Targue pulled me from the blue gel-filled bathtub. I took a second look around at some white leather couches, a computer desk, a wall of electronic equipment, and no windows. The doctor lowered the sorrowful sounds of Janis Joplin and told me I'd been in the steel cryotub for three days.

Other than feeling sticky all over from the blue gel I was fine. The electric shock process to restart my body destroyed the frog juice as well. "This is not like being asleep, no dreams and no sense of waking up. It's like getting hit in the face by the red kickball, and then wham, nothingness," I informed the doctor.

Two days later the monster was loose again, angrier than ever, the white flowing spectra racing through my body, his fiery eyes cooking my insides and his needle teeth pricking every single nerve. Agony spewed from my mouth in buckets of black bile. The monster didn't like the nothingness. In the closet he was still there, I could feel him, but in cryo we didn't exist. I couldn't wait to get back. Next, Dr. Targue put me in an exo-skin to monitor my vital signs while I spent a year in cryo. "I thought I wouldn't exhibit any signs."

“That is correct,” he confirmed, “but if your body’s temperature fluctuates, or if there is any brain activity then there is a problem. I’ll need to reanimate you immediately. Also, the exo-skin has micro electrodes to stimulate your entire body during reanimation.”

We talked at length; the doctor was worried that the Moral Right was gaining an advantage in the government. Once again science and religion were at odds. I plugged the wire harness into the receptacle just about the gel line. I floated, suspended in the gel. The doctor closed the lid. The darkness was total. The next second, the gel froze, not hard or stiff, just frozen. I was back into the Nothingness.

Janis was screaming in soulful misery. The emptiness of the lab was vividly clear. I climbed out of the nothingness back into the world. Dr. Targue was calling me, “Paul, come to the communication panel.”

I stood before the huge monitor with blue gel dripping on the white tiles. “Is the year up? Where are you?” The scene panned out and I realized Dr. Targue was in a courtroom. He was on trial. A dozen people were shouting at each other, the doctor, and me. I learned it had been three years and the doctor was facing a litany of charges from murder to crimes against humanity. He would beat the murder charges since I was alive but publishing his research on cryogenics left him with plenty of others. I testified that I had no knowledge of where I was, no intention of leaving the lab, and bore no ill will towards the good doctor. I ended the communication with a farewell to the doctor. “I look forward to cryo and a world when my monster can finally be put to death. Doc, revive me when that is possible. Good luck and thanks for all that you’ve done for me.”

‘Me and Bobby McGee’ greeted me along with a very young girl in a lab coat. “What year is it?”

“3506-10-04,” she told me, “It’s your birthday.”

“Of course it is,” I responded. In the nothingness time had no meaning. Fifteen hundred years, give or take, was but a fleeting moment for me. I had just turned twenty-five. I realized that I was not in Dr. Targue’s lab. This was some kind of hospital – even though I didn’t recognize any of the equipment, I recognized the look. I gave her a good look too. She was just a kid. “You work here?”

“Yes. I’m Eylene, the researcher who led the team that retrieved you from the desert.”

I bluntly asked, “How old are you?”

“Twelve,” she said proudly, “I have been a researcher for three years now. I’ve dedicated my life to finding you.”

“Why? Have you found a cure for cancer? Where are the real doctors?”

“Cancer was eradicated more than four hundred years ago. But it came at an expense no one could have foreseen. After they cleaned the environment, most cancers disappeared. The last ones were genetic in nature, like yours.”

So, they had gone ahead with genetic manipulation of the population. The fix had dire consequences, people started dying younger. The mortality rate dropped from a hundred years on average to eighty in the generation after the mod. And in each successive generation it continued to fall. Now, the average lifespan was twenty-five years. Couple that with a plummeting birthrate, less than ten percent of the population conceived, and because thirteen was the average age of first-time mothers, only a third survived.

“Less than one percent of the population has more than one child,” Eylene said sadly, “that’s why we need you to reintroduce the cancer gene back into the populace.”

“But you can cure me, right?”

“The cure for cancer has always been death,” she said coldly. “I studied Doctor Targue’s records. He was very clever hiding his cryolab under the Pyramids of Giza. However, he left no notes on how his cryofluids were made. You are the only one we could reanimate from your era because you’re the only one who went into cryogenic storage alive. We will begin making the genetic serum as soon as the cancer has returned.”

They made their serum from my marrow. Injected it into pre-teenagers and waited for results. Even though the monster had returned in full force I did not feel him. The fire was quenched by nanobots, millions of them roaming through my body. They didn’t need the frog juice to return me to cryo either, another group of bots produced the hibernating fluids and froze it at the cellular level. No cryotub, no blue gel, just wham into the nothingness again, the monster and me.

I returned ten years later to see Eylene haggard and worn. There was no music playing. I was in an isolation chamber suspended by hair-thin wires and tubes. Millions of them connected me to the ceiling, walls, and floor of the chamber. Eylene had had three miscarriages before the serum rendered her infertile. All the girls who took the serum had miscarriages or stillbirths. The boys who fathered children with non-treated girls, their offspring lived, but none past a decade. And the boys died before their twenties.

I was being prepared for the next series of sera to be given to the boys only. When it was done, I was returned to the cryo-state, back to the nothingness. I was reanimated again twenty-

five years later. A generation of serum babies were born, reached puberty, and had children. Most of the second generation died in early childhood. Humanity was on the brink of extinction. There were far too few to go on. They were going to make a serum from my blood and the healthy supply they had stored up over the years. They planned to give it to everyone, no matter what age or gender. Either humanity would rise from the sea of sorrows or it would be lost for all time. My only request was, "Am I allowed to die with dignity?"

The wall in front of my bed cleared and sunshine bathed my boney body for the first time in centuries. A marble statue a hundred feet tall stood in the courtyard. I finally recognized the monster, the true monster, a doctor with test tubes and beakers trying to beat God.

The End

Antibody

29 May 2029. THE TRUTH BE TOLD. *vincit omnia veritas* (truth conquers all things).

They are at it again. Who are they? The powers that be. What are they up to this time? Unless you have been in a coma for the last decade, or living under a rock, which I seriously doubt, because in the past ten years THEY have left no stone unturned. Nor freedom untrampled.

First, THEY unleashed the plague. I know, there are some who still believe it was a natural occurrence, an Act of God (for my End of the World friends), an accident (some buttered-fingers, overworked, underpaid, lab rat – human or actual furry creature) that innocently infected the world with COVID-19. The fact remains, well over 3 million people died in 2020.

The video screen segmented, and the annoying beep-bloop-blots repeated in a form of a robotic tune accompanied the picture of Vincent Meyer, his royal-blue silk pajama top hanging open down his chest.

Baron shook his head wearily. “What is it, Vincent?”

“Your girlfriend is back,” Vincent said with a twisted smile, “she dropped about a million words manifesto on the worldwide conspiracy network. Have you seen it?”

“I was just getting to it, and she IS NOT MY GIRLFRIEND.”

“Hey, easy, old man,” Vincent said, and smacked a young topless girl on her bottom as she passed by the camera. “Daddy’s working, sweetie. Go put something on before you give my friend here a heart attack, or something worse.”

The young woman stopped, looked into the screen wide-eyed, and waved, then scooted out of the picture.

Baron stroked his short, black beard and tried to hide his pleasure. “If you were her daddy, she would be about six. She looks older than that to me. I am sure you read the whole thing already, why don’t you give me the long and short of it.”

Vincent walked over to his desk and the camera followed him. The window behind him was blue and white, fluffy clouds hanging over his shoulder.

He sipped from a whiskey glass as he tapped the virtual keyboard on his desk. “Ah, here it is. Let’s see... People died 2020. More people died 2021. Vaccine is a hoax, no long-term cure, more of her greatest hits. Here’s something new,” he looked up from the screen embedded in the black oak. “She is accusing President Harris of killing President Biden. Oh, no, wait,” a finger shot up in the air as he scanned the screen more carefully, “your girlfriend, Veritas, is accusing Harris of covering up the fact that Biden died back in October of 22 from MOFASD. A full two years before anyone knew of the new variant that caused it.”

Baron returned from the kitchen with a glass of orange juice in his hand. His tattered and very comfortable tee-shirt hung loosely around his rounding belly. He hadn’t become fat as of yet, but he was losing the battle of the bulge that came to a man in his forties. He considered himself lucky this day, as another totally nude woman, a short-haired brunette crossed between the camera and his friend. Ordinarily, he would not have noticed her hair color, but the curtains matched the carpet, unusual for the supermodel types. “How does Veritas claim to know Biden died from ‘Major Organ Failure And Sudden Death’ in October and not of a simple heart attack in December of 22 like it was reported?”

“Orange Juice. What time is it in, ummm...”

“I’m in Norfolk,” Baron huffed, “and it’s just past 7 am.”

Baron Beard was always annoyed that this young techie was sailing around the world on his— who knew—billion-dollar yacht and didn’t even give a second thought to the plight or the lives of the rest of humanity. He was just like all the other uber rich asses, whom, as soon as the virus struck, cashed in on it, and got the Hell out of Dodge. Whether it was mega-yachts, private islands, or palatial estates well-hidden and secluded, the rich did not suffer the effects of Covid-19. “Well, Veritas dropped the C word right in the beginning, so I am sure this blog is going to be obliterated before more than a handful of us get to read it. She used to be more careful about things like that, I guess going dark for three years makes one a little rusty. Hey, where are you anyway?”

“I don’t know, really,” Vincent smirked. He loved to rub his wealth in Baron’s face.

He had met him at the university and taken his journalism class. Baron was one of those passionate types, all hyped-up about his fellow man and justice. Vincent enjoyed the hours of debates, and the torture he subjected Baron to as he told him how technology was going to make him very, very, very rich. And it did. Vincent argued technology was going to level the playing fields for the Blackman. Invent something, put your stamp on it, and sell it to the world. He told Baron he’d be filthy rich before anyone even knew his name, and he was right. He wasn’t gung-ho for affirmative action, but he was just a click shy of fist in the air, black power. Until he made his money and shifted from we-got-to take-power, to I-made-it-to-Hell-with-the-rest.

“We left my island in the Seychelles a couple days ago. Had to pick up a couple of new toys. You know what I mean.”

“You better be careful you don’t pick up more than you bargained for.” Baron truly hoped he didn’t.

Vincent was an insufferable pain in the ass, but he was a nice guy, and Baron needed that big brain of his. Vincent was half innovator and half hacker. He had developed some of the most sophisticated software for the government, and stole the rest. He was also a good, if not great engineer. His biotech was the envy of the 21st century. But it was in telecommunication where he really excelled. The Covid lockdown was like a goldmine to him. He dug deep and fast.

“What makes Veritas think Biden died from MOFASD? And three months before anyone knew he was dead?”

“She hints at uncovering body double footage, time discrepancies, and flat-out deep fakes,” Vincent looked hard into the camera for a long time before continuing, “here’s why I’m calling you this early in the morning. I sat on this for a few hours, waiting for you to roll out of bed. I tracked one of the servers she used to Chicago. And if you hurry, you can pick up your girlfriend’s trail before it goes dark.”

“I don’t know why you insist on calling her my girlfriend, I don’t believe Veritas is a woman. I believe it’s a cover, she writes like a he, and what the hell! I’m not going to Chicago, it’s a damn Red Zone. And I couldn’t get in there even if I wanted to,” Baron gulped down his OJ and cleared his throat, “which I don’t.” He walked off the camera and returned chewing a piece of toast. “Veritas is too good to be caught using a cat cable to upload her work.”

Vincent waved to someone off camera then smiled a big silly grin, “that is what I thought, but it’s a server in a protected farm, it only sends information out. It’s in the Medical Records Office, which means she either works there or knows someone who does. And as for

Chicago being a Red Zone, those zones are designed to keep people in, not out like the Green Zones. There is an Autodriver waiting for you outside, it will take you into Hammond, Indiana, a Yellow Zone. From there I will get you into Chicago.” He held up his hand to someone off camera. “Hey, the girls are getting restless. They will start without me in a minute. Everything you need is in the Autodriver. What was the saying from that old TV show? ‘The truth is out there.’ Go get ’em.”

Baron walked out the door of his house around noon and into the sweltering heat of a mid-May’s day. Sweat beads immediately formed on his arms and trickled down the backs of his hands.

Too damn hot. Shouldn’t be this hot in May. Whatever happened to the Green New Deal fixing the climate? Oh yeah, that was bullshit!

The black-out SUV sat in his driveway behind his ’92 Dodge Viper, which he washed and polished weekly, although he could never drive it. He had bought it for a steal at two hundred thousand dollars in 2025, four times the original price and one-fifteenth of its top price before Covid and the gasoline restrictions. His neighbors asked why he didn’t keep it in his garage, he answered, “I bought it so people could see it.”

The black SUV Autodriver dwarfed his sports car, it was nothing like the four-seater little electric razor-type the auto industries started putting out in 2025. Like every other business, the automobile manufacturers fell victims to the deadly two-punch of climate science and covid restrictions. Nobody was buying electric vehicles, EVs as they were branded to make them sound desirable, and they kept getting smaller and less attractive over the three years that they were mandated. Then the government shut down gasoline sales to the public in 2025, and every car

became obsolete overnight. That was when Baron bought his Viper, his dream car. He sat behind the wheel in his driveway, imagining himself flying down the highway, blasting Rush's Red Barchetta on the radio. He laughed, as he knew his neighbors thought he had lost his mind.

The SUV door opened to reveal an immaculate interior. He had hoped Vincent included a little company for the long drive, but no such luck. He threw his small black overnight bag on the far side leather seat. He climbed in with a small shoulder bag on his back. The door slid closed, and he made himself comfortable on the back seat. He opened the concertina doors of the bar in the center of the van and looked over the selection of liquors.

"It's about time you showed up," Vincent's voice filled the van. "I did say you should try and catch Veritas before she goes dark again."

The lights on the dashboard came on and the low whine of the electric engine momentarily made itself known. A feature added to the self-driving electric vehicles as some people stepped out of them not realizing they were in motion.

"You will be happy to know the SUV checked the air and no sign of the corona virus or any of its variants has been detected." Another feature added as the Zones went into effect. Vincent continued. "You have a clean bill of health."

"Considering I haven't been any further than my driveway in years, I didn't think I had anything to worry about. The bout I had with Covid was six years ago now, and I never had any of those lingering symptoms people complained about."

"Why are you packing the hardware?" Vincent's face appeared on the monitor that folded down from the SUV's ceiling. "There is a built-in magnetometer."

“That’s something you don’t get on your run-of-the-mill, factory standard, Autodriver.”

“This baby is packed with a lot of bells and whistles,” Vincent sat on the back of his yacht surrounded by trays of food. “For example, I can tell you have three guns in your bag, but only, maybe, fifty rounds of ammunition.”

“You’re the one sending me into an F’ing Red Zone,” Baron did not believe in cussing, “I just want to make sure I get out.”

“But only fifty rounds...”

“Hey, I’m not blowing a year’s supply on one wild-goose chase,” Baron looked around the SUV cabin for other hidden devices. “Besides, people will kill you these days just for your ammo. A couple of mags is all I need to encouraged people to get out of my way.”

Vincent wiped his mouth and drank a glass of champagne. He always ate alone. “Look in the compartment under the back seat. There’s a little something for your safety in there.”

Baron pressed the panel in and it folded out between his legs. There were two black and red guns in holsters. The pistols were smaller than his Smith & Wesson 9mm. He pulled it out and was turning it over, looking for the magazine ejection button.

“You can stop looking for how to load it,” Vincent told him, “It is an ionic magnetic pulse gun. You know, a stun gun without the pesky wires.”

“A freaking stun gun,” Baron shouted at the screen, “you want me to go to Chicago with a freaking bug zapper. Are you out of your mind? Even before all this crazy Covid shit, I wouldn’t go to Chicago without some serious heat. I’m not giving up my S&W, Beretta, or my MP5 for a zapper.”

“You have an MP5, a submachine gun? Aren’t they illegal?”

“Only if you shoot somebody.”

Vincent laughed. “That bug zapper has two settings. Flip the safety down and it fires a plasma charge capable of knocking a three-hundred-pound man in full protective gear out cold at three hundred yards. Flip it up and you send him to the morgue. And you don’t have to worry about running out of bullets, it fires over ten thousand times at three milliseconds intervals before it needs recharging. I guarantee you’ll be able to walk out of Kabul with that in hand.”

“I’m guessing this isn’t legal either?”

“Not once you pull the trigger. Now, his big brother down there will stop a tank at about ten miles. Best thing about these weapons is once they are paired to your biorhythms, only you can fire them. And you must be alive and awake to do so. None of that cutting off your hands and making a glove out of it that plagued the army’s direct energy weaponry.”

“Good to know. I hope that selling point was well advertised.”

“Are you kidding me? None of this is out in public, not the military, nowhere. Only my personal security detail has them, so please, don’t lose it.” The seriousness of the last statement turned his ever-present smile to a scowl. He looked around cautiously before continuing, “when you press the trigger the gun’s laser targeting determines the range and calculates the strength of the magnetic containment field for the ionized gas which it pulls in from the surrounding atmosphere. At low energy, the gas plasma is about the size of a grain of rice, at high power, a pea. At any rate, it moves at near the speed of light, so your target, or anyone else, won’t see it coming. The rifle on the other hand, fires a much larger pulse and at a slower speed. It is

somewhat visible over distance, so use it only in the direst of circumstances. If either of these weapons get away from you, they will self-destruct in a spectacular fashion.” His smile returned as he seemed pleased with the warning.

Baron watched the iron barricades roll back as he approached the Hampton Roads Bridge and Tunnel which was the quickest way out of Norfolk. The Autodriver slowed to 70 mph as it passed the fortified checkpoint, the first of many. He was surprised the vehicle did not have to stop, then realized his trip was preapproved. It slowed down for the necessary scans, to confirm he was the only passenger. The virus and subsequent zonings made travelling anywhere almost impossible. All interstate travel had to be approved weeks in advance by the Department of Transportation. Baron wondered how Vincent had got this trip okayed in a day.

“Hey, one more present for you,” Vincent read the signs of concern on his friend’s face and decided to curtail any questions he was about to ask. “This is the most important piece of equipment I could provide.”

“What is it? A teleporter? Are you about to beam me up, Scotty?”

“Ha ha ha. I wish I could.” Vincent’s fake laugh did not hide the secrecy of what he was about to reveal. “Inside the console is a foil pouch, inside it is an ectoskin. Put it on.”

Baron found the pouch, opened it, and looked inside. He saw two strips of ribbon, one red, and the other green. “Hey! I think you’ve been robbed. There’s nothing in here but the price tags.”

“Not the price tags my technically challenged friend. The suit is a one-piece, ultra-fine mesh material which is invisible under any light. The red and green stripes are the only way you

can find it when you are not wearing it. It will block any microbes from entering or leaving your body.”

Baron grabbed the two stripes and touched the softest material he had ever felt between his fingers. He pulled it out of the pouch and felt arms and legs even though he saw nothing. Judging from the length of the material he figured it to be made for a child, a toddler at best. “You are kidding, right? Am I supposed to fit in this?”

“It’s super stretchy, with a full body hoody. You know, like the pajamas the girls like to wear. You step in first, put your arms in, and pull the hood over your head. The red and green stripes will disappear, and you will be completely sealed inside. Don’t take it off for any reason unless you are in the SUV.”

“How am I supposed to eat,” Baron smirked, “and, you know, do other things?”

“Air and liquids pass through without a hitch. Solids are a problem, as you can image. The ectoskin is powered by your body’s heat and kills microbes on contact. My people tell me it makes anything you drink taste funny. Gives it a slight metallic taste. A small price to pay to protect against G.1.927.2, or as you news people like to call it, The Herod Variant, because it killed children.”

Baron found the button on the bottom of the video screen and switched off the camera. He slipped on the ectoskin with surprising ease. He took a couple of test breaths and felt no strange effects. It was completely form-fitting, molding to his fingers and toes, and every other part of his body. Within seconds he forgot he had it on. He dressed and switched back on the camera. “How durable is this stuff?”

“You can shower in it. Scrub with it on. But don’t think it’s bulletproof, or gas proof, it will not protect you from anything other than biological entities. Well, that’s all I got for you. I’ll check in when you get to Indiana.”

The long ride to Indiana gave Baron time to read the entire ‘The Truth Be Told’ message. He chuckled at the part about the lawmakers being too afraid to take people’s guns away, so they outlawed the ammunition. He had beaten Veritas to the point a year ahead of her conspiracy theory. In his article, ‘The Vanishing Bullet’, he stated the rise in mass shootings and the J6 Insurrection had made it easy for Congress to put limits on the manufacturing of ammunition. Then as part of a massive bill in 2022, they limited the number of bullets a person could buy to one hundred rounds every three months. The Republicans raged against the bill, as they did against most of the laws passed after ‘22, but they lost handily in that election cycle, and the Dems were making them pay. The Republicans privately supported the bill and many others after the J6 Insurrection as the only way to keep themselves safe.

The Dems pushed through the Green New Deal legislation. Veritas claimed it was the main reason Harris covered up Biden’s death. If the country knew she was the President, the ‘22 elections might have swung the other way. She claimed Biden’s speeches were taped, or given by his body double, or cobbled together from other sources. The fact that he gave so few speeches was her proof he died long before anybody knew it.

Baron considered Veritas a conspiracy theorist, much like Q, or the Red Letter, or a half-dozen other crazies on the internet. But Veritas’ theories usually came true, if not when announced, not too long afterward. He on the other hand was a serious journalist. He named

sources when he could, gathered facts and supporting evidence before printing his findings. He revisited his disappearing bullets story when the Green New Deal made copper a high-demand resource, and therefore not available for brass bullet casting.

To make it easier for people to switch to electric vehicles, the Federal Government started putting in charging strips on the interstate highways. All electric cars had a charging inducer built-in like in your phone. As one drove over the five-mile sections in the highway, the car's battery would fully charge. That killed the argument that an electric car could not be used for long-distance travel. It also meant no one had to pay for the power. There were debates about tolls but in the end the electric grid was free to all.

As Baron had written in one of his columns, "The gates to Utopia are about to swing wide open. Travel across America, free and unrestricted, will usher in a new spirit of brotherhood as we climb out of the shadow of Covid-19 isolation." As the SUV quietly rolled over the red and yellow stripes of a charging section, he thought, *how could I have been so wrong?*

He wasn't to blame for the miscalculation, although, over the years, he was the focus. MOFASD exploded on the scene in July 2023. People, otherwise healthy and without warning, were having massive killer heart attacks. Others suffered renal failure and died where they stood. Baron reported that people woke up unable to urinate, then noticed swelling in their legs, ankles, and feet. By nightfall, they developed muscle twitching, itching, and drowsiness. From there, it was seizures or a brief comatose state, and death.

In October of '23, days after Veritas released a memo from the CDC of the alarming numbers of deaths from Acute Liver Failure among young non-alcohol abusers, Baron ran the

numbers and found shockingly, the one thing all these people had in common was Covid-19. The heart attacks, the kidney failures, and the liver failure victims all had traces of a new variant, Gamma. Veritas accused the CDC and the government of covering up the facts. Hiding the numbers by reporting each death from a failure as if it were unrelated to the others by virtue of being a different organ in the body.

Baron could see how the government could miss it. Some people had been vaccinated. All showed no signs of sickness. And he surmised, things were starting to get back to normal, no one wanted to go back to Covid life. But around the world, this new variant was taking hold and killing on a scale that was, even by Covid standards, unprecedented. When he looked at the numbers worldwide, sixty-two thousand a day were dying. He wrote of his findings, “the world is doing a twostep of death with Covid. One step forward and two steps back into a shallow grave.”

He caught flack for that statement, but it was true. Later reporting showed the Gamma variant took twenty-four hours or less to reach contagion or viral-shed levels, was undetectable except via blood testing, and death followed within seven to ten days. With the last day being the only day, anyone knew they were sick. In the same column, he urged the Harris administration to return to lockdown measures immediately. She did not.

Veritas was less subtle in her missive. 15November2023. THE TRUTH BE TOLD. *vincit omnia veritas* (truth conquers all things).

Harris was following the playbook of Trump, pretending everything was just fine and dandy, while silencing the doctors and scientists to win re-election. It did not go well for him; it would not end well for her. This lie would all but ensure his return.

However, no one knew what the lie she was speaking of was then. And she never explained her post afterwards as she so often did when the truth came out. Those few words were the last she wrote for a few years.

But Harris got the message, she announced a ‘Build the Wall’ campaign of her own on both borders to stop people infected with Covid from entering the United States. It effectively cut the legs out from under Trump and any other Republican seeking the office. She easily won re-election with, “Build the Wall in ‘24. Make it safe for all.”

Baron felt the SUV slow down. He was approaching the Indiana state line. The Welcome sign was riddled with bullet holes from the battle four years ago when a group of three thousand people tried to run the barricades. With tanks and armored vehicles across the highway they had no chance of succeeding. It took seven hours and dozens of deaths before the ‘Free Indianans’ turned around and went home.

Since then, steel drawbridges have been installed at every state line by the federal government. The secondary roads were still manned by the National Guard, however, few people tried to travel farther than allowed. Once the Interstate Zoning Law went into effect, gasoline sales were restricted to five gallons per day. People realized they couldn’t get far on so little gas, and no matter where they were going, Covid was waiting for them.

Travel was restricted to medical personnel, active-duty military, and with special clearance from the Department of Transportation, journalists. Baron had worked from home for the past three years, telecommunicating with interviewees, and downloading documentation over

secure servers. The last major trip he took was in 2026 to the United Nations in New York City. That was when all nations agreed to close their borders and banned all international flights.

Covid had won.

The SUV stopped and Baron lowered the window for his viral scan. A soldier in a hazmat suit approached with his M16 hanging down his right side and the black biological kit in his left hand. He held the small cube up to the window and said, “Eyes wide open, look into the red light.”

“Yes, sir,” Baron replied and stared at the bright red dot in the footlong rectangular slit. He had been through many of these medical scans.

The soldier read the display screen on the back of the cube and set it on the ground. He flipped two latches on the right side and folded back the top section. He pulled a nose cup with a long clear tube out and handed it to Baron. It looked exactly like the oxygen mask flight attendants used to demonstrate emergency procedures on planes when people were allowed to fly.

“Is that thing clean?” Baron joked.

The soldier behind his clear face-shield kept his stern visage, “take a deep breath in, then exhale hard.”

Baron followed instructions. He inhaled the cold lemon-scented gas, which he was sure was not just air and blew out as hard as he could. The machine pulled more air from his lungs than he thought he had, causing a burning sensation. He hated the lung scan test.

The machine started beeping and flashing red on the screen display.

The soldier stepped back and snapped his weapon to the ready position. “Mr. Donald Dreiser, please step out of the vehicle with your hands up!”

“Wait! No! There must be a mistake,” Baron objected. His heart rate jumped incredibly high. “That machine is wrong; my name isn’t Don... what did you call me?”

“You have tested positive for Covid-19 virus,” the soldier’s finger was steady on the trigger. The harshness of his words came through the plastic face-shield loud and strong. “Are you admitting to travelling under a falsified identity in violation of section 2.42 of the U.S. Interstate Zoning Code? A crime which gives me the authority to immediately employ lethal force to stop you from going any farther.”

Before Baron could answer, four more soldiers took positions around the SUV.

God damn you, Vincent, what have you got me into? “No. That is not what I am saying. I am Don Dryer. I am saying, I don’t have Covid-19. I haven’t had it for more than eight years. I have been vaccinated and get my regular semi-annual boosters. That machine is wrong! It is reading a false positive.”

“Step out of the vehicle, slowly. Put your hands on your head. Or I will shoot.”

Baron pressed the door button, and it slid to the rear. He carefully placed both hands on his head, his feet on the ground, and stood up very slowly.

A fifth soldier exited the guard station wearing what looked like flamethrower equipment.

Baron had seen what was about to happen to him on television and was not happy.

“Keep your eyes and mouth open,” said the soldier with the tanks on his back, “this stuff tastes bad and stings a little, but is harmless.”

A white cloud engulfed Baron.

The soldier kept the spray going until he heard Baron coughing. “Now, that wasn’t so bad.”

Baron’s eyes were pink and he was still choking on the gas, but he figured it would have been much worse if he had not been wearing the ectoskin. He had seen others double over and hit the ground puking up their guts. And he could still see, blurry, but he wasn’t two-fisting his eyeballs out of their sockets. *This damn ectoskin is probably covered in coronavirus. If I get out of this alive, I am going to track down that snake oil salesman, Vincent, and break my size elevens off in his ass.*

The flamethrower soldier pulled out a black fabric circle and laid it on the ground. “Step backwards one step.”

Baron did and felt the thick rubber soles beneath his feet.

“Put your hands at your sides and don’t move.”

He obeyed.

The soldier pressed a button on his wrist-mounted controls and the black fabric circle inflated around Baron’s body then collapsed, mummifying him. “Do not try to walk. We will transport you from here.”

Baron couldn't see through the black fabric but felt a cold gentle breeze blowing up his face; recycled air, he assumed. He was rocked slightly forward and then tilted back. A strap tightened across his chest. He began to move. *How humiliating, being wheeled away on a hand truck like a piece of luggage. I'm going to kill Vincent.*

Baron could not imagine how long he had been travelling, or where he was being taken. He knew when the hand truck stopped moving, he was probably in a military vehicle. Without sight, or sound, or any tactile sensation, time became meaningless. It wasn't until he felt himself being tilted backward and hand-trucked away that time restarted. Beads of sweat ran down his face. A peppermint tanginess crept into the corners of his mouth and stung his eyes. Then the bright glare of the facemask caused him to squint as he peered around the sterile white room. Cold air forced its way into his nostrils with the burning vengeance of too much cinnamon. Unable to move his arms or legs he must still be strapped to the hand truck.

The wall parted slightly before him and in walked a person of undistinguishable description in a white hazmat suit. The room was bigger than he could determine because it took several steps before the person was close enough for him to see a woman's face in the mask.

He asked, "where am I?"

"Chicago, Illinois Department of Public Health, The Coronavirus Assessment Division," the woman answered politely but curtly. "And before you ask, why am I here, let me start with why you are here. You tried to cross into the Yellow Zone of Fort Wayne, Indiana, with active Covid-19 variants in your system. That's a Class A federal felony." She let the words linger for a moment and as he was about to object, she continued, "and it does not matter whether you

knowingly tried to cross state lines with the virus or did not know you are infected, the law remains the same.”

“I don’t have Covid-19,” Baron quickly objected. He knew a Class A felony carried a death sentence, and while you could be a convicted murderer and get twenty-five years, a virus carrier always got death. “I had it years ago in the initial breakout and have since been clean.”

“Mr. Dreiser, our records do not show you having Covid-19 before or being treated at any government-approved facilities.” She picked up a clipboard from a desk that was below his eyesight. She flipped back and forth between pages. “It says here you denied your identity at the time of your arrest?”

“No! Not my identity, my positive test.”

“Please, confirm your identity for me, Mr. Dreiser.”

Baron tried to keep his poker face on. He could see the papers in the reflection of her facemask. He quickly scanned for pertinent information. “My name is Donald Dreiser. D.R.E.I.S.E.R, some pronounce it Dr8Sir, but it is actually, Drys Err. I was born June 22, 1987, and I’ll be forty-two on my birthday. Do you need my address in Lima?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I am Ms. Delta Grant, the medical administrator of this facility,” the woman returned the clipboard out of sight. “As you probably know, mental confusion is one of the signs of Covid infection. But the only way to be sure if you are infected and with what variant is a blood test. Do you consent?”

“Do I consent?”

“Of course,” Ms. Grant smiled a practiced and facetious smile, “this is still America. You are within your rights to deny permission to me for collecting a sample for testing.” She held up a hand to stop him from answering too soon. “But if you do not want to give a sample, then we will have to hold you in a quarantine center for up to thirty days observation. Let me warn you, after thirty days in one of those facilities, you will have Covid and probably leave through the crematorium. However, if you volunteer a blood sample, you will be held here for about three days while the lab tests are run, in a private room. And if they come back clean, you will be sent on your way.”

“And if the test comes back... less than we hope?”

“You will be admitted into the hospital for treatment,” Ms. Grant maintained her smile, “we have an excellent record for treating most of the variants.”

“Ok, test away,” Baron said, “I’d stick out my arm, but I can’t move it.”

“Of course not. You are still in the antiviral wrap. You will be taken to your isolation cell... room. You will be sanitized and then a blood sample taken. Do I have your consent?”

“Yes.” Baron tilted backward and was on the move again. “Hey! Have you been there the whole time? HEY! I’m talking to you.” He realized there was no one to answer him as he passed through a slit in the side of the room and into a darkened, mirrored tunnel. He was on a conveyor belt passing through various stages of decontamination sprays and colored lights. The wrap dissolved and his clothes were drenched in one fluid then another. A voice warned him to close his eyes and open his mouth, then a bluish cloud appeared before him. He came out of the cloud in a six-by-eight-by-ten-foot-high cell with stainless steel fixtures and a vinyl covered cot. “An isolation room my ass!” he shouted to no one.

The front wall of the cell turned clear. A red-haired woman with bright golden eyes set deep in a line-riddled face stood with a large Afro-American man to her left and a young, slim woman with black curly hair to her right. “It’s still better than the quarantine facilities. There, you would be in a dorm with maybe fifty others.”

“Ms. Grant, I presume.”

“Correct,” she stepped forward and motioned the large man to follow her. He did, pushing a small cart with a black box to the clear wall. A round, red outline appeared on the wall where the box made contact. “Please pull up your left sleeve and stick your arm through the hole where you see the red lights.”

“What is this? Some kind of magic, or a Trekkie gizmo?” Baron remained steadfast and far from the glowing wall.

“Without getting super technical, the wall is made from highly charged metallic particles in a constant state of flux. We control the opacity, density, and the electricity flowing through it at all times. Nothing can escape that cell, not even microbes. Nothing can get in either. And just to ease your mind, the air in your cell is recirculated through a closed-circuit grid that heats it to three thousand degrees and then cools it back down to a comfortable seventy-two. Now, stick your arm through the circle so we can draw blood.”

Baron pulled up his sleeve, revealing a wristwatch.

“Wait,” Ms. Grant commanded. “We have to take your watch. No electronic devices allowed within this facility. You will have to take it off and toss it into the circle.”

“What, this old thing?” Baron looked at his arm then back to Ms. Grant. She was not happy. “This is an old Timex. It is completely mechanical. It was my father’s.”

“I don’t care. Hand it over!”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Baron said with a slight smile, “but I don’t. This watch means too much to me to just hand it over. You can just send me and my watch to the quarantine center. I’ll take my chances there.”

“Just give us the watch,” said the young woman. Grant snapped an angry look at her, but she continued, “it’s not even working. The hands are not moving.”

“That’s because it needs to be wound. I’m sure you’ve never seen a watch that is just a watch. It doesn’t talk to me, show videos, tell me where I am, or anything else for that matter. It just tells time.”

“Put it inside the box. If it is a mechanical device, just a watch, we’ll give it right back,” Grant said, “you don’t want to go to quarantine over something so idiotic as this. Besides, they will confiscate it at the center too.”

Baron unsnapped the metal band and carefully placed the watch into the dark hole beyond the red circle of lights on the wall.

The man behind the box twitched, frowned, and pointed to something only they could see from their side. Grant nodded.

“Go ahead and take your watch, it checks out.” She waited for him to retrieve the watch and before he put it back on said, “now, stick your arm all the way into the box and don’t move.”

Baron put his arm through the red circle, and it disappeared into the darkness. A strange sensation ran up his arm and throughout his skin, like a hoard of fire ants attacking him, biting every inch of his body. Then it stopped.

“You can remove your arm now,” Grant said, staring at him.

He did and the large black man rolled the box back from the wall. The red circle disappeared and for a second the wall appeared to be solid metal again. Grant was talking to her two workers when the wall cleared again.

“Ok, Mr. Dreiser, that went well. Please do not touch the walls as we charge them from time to time to kill viruses. There is a television above me in the corner,” her finger went up and his eyes followed to a section of the wall that was now a screen. “The remote is in the drawer under the bed. Miss Keller will be back in a few minutes with lunch. She is your medical aide, anything you need, press the call button on the remote for her.” The wall went back to its steel look except for the rectangular television screen in the upper right corner.

How the hell did I let Vincent talk me into this? And why did he double-cross me? It had to be him, I passed two state lines with no problems. Then, BAM. As I get to where HE sent me, I get nicked. Now, they’ve got my blood, and when the DNA test shows I’m not who I said I was, twenty-five years in prison at the very least.

Baron’s internal monologue was interrupted by the curly, black-haired girl with amazing green eyes appearing outside his cell. He jumped off the cot, bolted to the wall, and flung both hands against the barrier. The shock threw him to the floor.

“Hey! Don’t touch the wall!” She pushed the cart with the black box up to the wall.

“Especially when it’s in its clear state. I brought you lunch.”

“Thanks,” Baron said, picking himself up off the floor. The red circle formed in front of the black box, and he reached inside and pulled out a tray of food and a juice box. He lifted the cover slightly to see a thick sandwich and fries. *Prison food hasn’t changed at all.* “You can go. You don’t have to watch me eat. I promise I won’t try to drown myself with the apple juice.”

“I do have to wait,” she replied, “I have to retrieve the tray when you are finished. Sorry, can’t leave anything behind.”

“Of course not,” Baron said as he walked back to his cot. Slily, he rolled the ectoskin up his chin, past his mouth, “after all, you know I can take this plastic tray and dig my way out of here. Or perhaps, I’ll use it to block the cameras, wherever they are hidden, and signal my Delta Strike Team to come rescue me.”

“You wouldn’t be the first to try.” She smiled.

“You know, you are quite stunning. What’s your name?”

“Misty Keller.”

“I’ve never seen a woman with your... features. That tan is more than the coming of summer here in Chicago. Where are you from?”

“Chicago. But I get my looks from an unfortunate pairing of a German father and a Puerto Rican mother.”

“Unfortunate? Not in the least,” Baron crossed his legs and balanced the tray in his lap to hide his growing interest in his jailer. “If you are the last person I am to see in this world, I consider myself very lucky.”

“Are you trying to seduce me into breaking you out?”

“Is it working?”

“Not at all,” she laughed. “Hey, eat your fries before they get cold. They are barely palatable hot.”

Baron picked up one long fry and was about to swipe it through the ketchup underneath it. He looked at the plate and shoved the potato stick in his mouth. Then he ate another, and then three more at once. He could now make out the red writing hidden beneath the pile of potatoes. He looked at her and she smiled. He swiped the ketchup with two more fries, cognizant of the cameras and microphones planted in his cell.

He quickly finished the fries and half ate the sandwich of thick unknown meat and government cheese. He gulped down the apple juice that was more water than juice and walked back to the place where the red circle had been with the tray.

“All done,” he said with a smile. “I guess I was really hungry. Now, about breaking me out of here, Misty.”

She did something behind the black box and the red circle appeared. “If you can fit through the circle then you can be a free man.”

Baron looked over the circle as if he was sizing it up, then slid the tray through, “maybe when you bring dinner. I hope the hole will be large then. I intend to work up quite an appetite thinking about you.”

“I hope not,” she laughed the same enchanting way, “no one wants to see that.”

“Then tell the big guy not to look.”

The red circle disappeared. She pulled the cart away from the wall and it turned to steel again.

Baron shouted, “Hey, what did the Red Queen say to you before, just before the wall cleared?” He didn’t know if she could hear him or knew what he was talking about.

The wall cleared. “She said, ‘Don’t get too friendly. He’ll probably be dead and in the crematorium in a week.’ I hope not, for your sake.” The wall steeled up again.

Baron got dinner from Misty, no secret message. A little light flirting, mostly on his part. Then he watched the television screen, two old movies, until the lights went out. Then he lay on his back staring up at the ceiling, waiting.

Misty appeared at the wall. This time, just from her shoulders up was visible, the rest of the wall was steel. “Don’t talk, just listen. And stay on the bed. I don’t have much time.”

Baron leaped to his feet and was inches from her face, “are you Veritas?”

“Didn’t I just say, don’t talk, just listen?” her face showed her displeasure. “No, I am not Veritas. I work for Vincent.”

“That rat bastard. He’s the reason I’m in here.”

“Look, I have about five minutes before the system backups are finished and the security comes back online. Shut up and get on the cot. You needed to get in here and this was the easiest way. The message is being sent from the computer system on the eighth floor. It’s a different system than what runs this place. As far as I know, only Delta Grant has access to that floor. The elevators only go to the sixth floor but there is one staircase past security that goes to the seventh. I believe there is an elevator that goes from the seventh to the eighth floor. In two days, there is a change of the security shift. They work two months on and one off. There is always a lot of chit-chatting going on at the switch. The new team won’t know to check your cell, which will give you time to get to the eighth floor and find out what is going on.”

“How am I supposed to do that? And there is the little problem that in two days my blood test will reveal who I really am. Then I get shoved into the oven for sure.”

“Don’t worry, Vincent took care of it. He designed the security software for this place. And he has secured your blood test. It will get swapped out with Don’s. He never had Covid. In three days, you’ll walk out of here a free man,” her voice did not convey her confidence.

“Ok, I guess Vincent is pulling the strings in the cyberworld. But how am I supposed to find my way to the eighth floor?”

“Keep watching TV,” she smiled, “you’ll see. I got to go.”

Baron did as he was instructed, he watched TV. Behind a movie or a show, displayed schematics, floor plans, and codes to open the door that he entered the cell appeared. Misty was

right, there was only one way to reach the top floor. But that elevator did not just go from the seventh floor to the eighth, it also went all the way to the basement, and three levels below that.

She brought him his breakfast the day of the shift change. She looked worried. There was no playful banter between them. She waited in silence while he hurried through his meal. He returned the tray, and she left.

The encounter or lack thereof left him apprehensive. *Maybe they are onto her. I wonder if they have found out about the messages being broadcasted through the television. Maybe I should abandon this whole idea and just book out of here tonight.*

With nothing else to do, he pressed the remote button and turned on the television, Die Hard, for the third time. Baron was expecting to see the building's layout displayed as a virtual walkthrough again. Instead, he read an ominous message in bold capital letters, 'DONALD DREISER WAS KILLED IN AN EXPLOSION WHILE MAKING GASOHOL. MAY HAVE BEEN AN ACCIDENT, BUT A BLOOD TEST WAS UNABLE TO BE OBTAINED. V'

Well, that explains Misty's mood this morning.

A lot of people were making their own synthetic gasoline since the government put restrictions on the amount one could buy. If you wanted to make a run from a zone, gas-powered cars were the only options. EV's could be shut down or run out of power on the road. The movie continued and the walkthrough behind it. Halfway through, he saw another virtual display; an access tunnel that ran under the building. It was an old sewer line that ran from the middle of Chicago to Lake Michigan, an escape route. Baron felt a little better about going through with the plan.

Misty returned with lunch and a smile. They traded innuendoes and she seemed ok. Then Baron noticed while she was talking about his trip to start a new job working for Indiana Transportation, that she was tapping the back of her hand. Just a couple of times at first, but when she knew she had his attention, fingers drummed furiously.

She was sending him a message in Morse Code. ‘The Autodriver will be waiting at the escape point. I will bring you the little zapper at dinner, make sure it stays off and hidden.’

‘Come with.’ He tapped his message with his foot.

‘Can’t.’

‘Can’t stay here. They’ll know.’

‘Think about it. Be ready.’

At dinner, she delivered the zapper as promised. He received a large shock when he pulled the tray through the red circle. This time, his knees buckled, and he fought not to cry out in pain. The zapper was buried in a pile of mash potatoes. He grabbed the gun and a handful of mashed potatoes and shoved it down his pants. “You want a little dessert?”

“Is that supposed to turn me on?” she scoffed.

“Come on,” he turned serious, “let me take you away from all of this.”

“On an electrician’s salary?”

“Is there a problem down there?” Delta Grant voice boomed in the room.

“No, ma’am. I am sure he is just kidding around,” Misty quickly replied.

“Mr. Dreiser, mental instability is another symptom of the Gamma variant,” Grant’s voice was stern.

“Duly noted,” Baron walked to his cot, “I’ll try to keep the crazy down.” He finished eating quickly and in silence. Slid the tray back through the hole and watched as Misty walked away before the wall returned.

Delta Grant was waiting outside the anterior room to the cell chambers. She surprised Misty as she exited the cell block, “what was that?”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” she accused the young woman, “there was a power surge in the portal creator. It looks like it almost killed him.”

“You can check the equipment for yourself,” Misty spun the cart around, so the display screen faced the older woman. “See, there’s nothing there. And I didn’t notice anything unusual.”

Delta Grant had spent years in the CIA, and she knew a lie when she heard and saw one, “you are done for the night. Clock out. Go home.”

“But I have two more hours on my shift,” Misty’s voice quivered.

“You are relieved.”

Misty left the portal generator and started down the corridor towards the elevator. She fought the urge to look back. She hoped Grant had not ordered a search of the cell. They needed just one night.

Delta entered the cell block and stood watching Baron. From her side, the wall was clear glass as always. She saw the stainless-steel barrier keeping him prisoner. Sitting on his cot, he was staring directly back at her.

From the first time he had shuddered reaching into the box she knew something was not right with him. Every time he reached in his appearance flickered momentarily. His hair flashed from dark brown to black. His facial features shifted slightly, nose and eyes moved on their own. Sometimes, his skin tone faded or darkened for a second. Delta did not believe he was who he said he was, not from the moment she met him.

The television screen lit up with a single word, "GO."

Baron jumped off the cot and started tapping the wall in the corner of the cell. Two taps above his head, three about chest height, and a single tap on either side of that. A door appeared in the wall, slid backward, then sideways. The long black corridor looked dangerous in its emptiness but there was no turning back. He hoped the guards were preoccupied as planned and the cameras frozen with an image of himself on the cot.

He followed the corridor until he came to ladder rungs on the wall. He started climbing. According to the building blueprints, he was on the third floor in the utility access tunnel. He climbed to the top, the sixth floor. The building was separated at that level. He opened a door

and was in the server room. A room that was always unmanned. At the end of the room was a door and beyond it, a short hallway to the only stairs to the seventh floor.

Baron pulled the little zapper out of his pants and switched it to stun. *Please, God, don't let there be anyone in the hallway now.* He cracked the door back and peeked around the opening. His prayers were answered; the way was clear. He ran a few feet to the next door and disappeared into the stairwell. He froze in front of the black globe of the security camera mounted on the ceiling. He imagined sirens going off and flashing lights giving away his position.

Snap out of it and move your ass. He took the stairs two at a time. At the top he ripped the door open and spun into the corridor ready to fire. The place was deserted. The elevator was a mere ten feet ahead. He got to the panel and punched in, "666." Vincent's idea of a joke. *If there's an army on this elevator when it opens, I'll tell them, the devil made me do it.*

The elevator arrived empty. This was starting to look like a cake walk to Baron. He was going to have to take back all those evil thoughts he had about Vincent. The elevator had two buttons, an up arrow and a down arrow. He pushed the up arrow.

The ride was short, naturally; the doors opened to a small vestibule and beyond that was another computer room. There were a dozen desks with monitors and keyboards. Baron sat at the first one and took off his watch. He wound it up and then typed in, "666," on the keyboard. The monitor came to life. It displayed a list of names, addresses, and dates. All women, hundreds of them, in a column, the date they died. There were columns of other information he couldn't decipher. Baron wasn't sure what it meant but he pulled the stem out from his watch and started recording the screen as the names scrolled by.

His watch was mechanical, but the crystal was made of millions of microdots. He could record a vast number of images when the gears were turning. Each tick of the second hand recorded another image on the crystal. He glanced up and saw a light at the far end of the room, another area beyond the computer room. He stopped the watch from recording and strapped it back on his wrist. He was sure he had gotten enough of the information Vincent had sent him for. He went to the door and cautiously peeked through the vertical slit of a window. Then the door slid open.

Well, this is what you came to see.

He psyched himself up to step into the room. It was voluminous. Six rows of what looked like coffins stretched far down the floor. He couldn't count the number, maybe a hundred, maybe two. This had to be the morgue. *Strange. Covid cases are all incinerated. Why would they need a morgue?* He approached the first one and recoiled.

There was a body inside, alright, but she was alive. Hooked up to an oxygen mask and tubes. And she was pregnant. Very pregnant. He looked in the next one and the one after that, all had pregnant women on what he believed was life support. The names on the computer screen started making sense, somewhat. He walked down the row past the baby farm to another door.

It led to a much smaller room. Fewer coffins, much smaller too, lined up in neat rows. As he passed between them a wave of sadness overtook him, they were empty. He reached the end and found a few, ten to be exact, had infants in them. They looked premature.

“Hard to look at, isn't it?”

Baron spun around.

Delta Grant was standing at the other end of the room.

Has she been following me the whole time? Did she send out the missive that brought me here? Or did my luck just run out? “Veritas?”

“What?” She was caught off guard by the question, “Oh no, you found me out.” She laughed. “No, Mr. Baron Beard, I am not your elusive leaker of classified information.” She crossed the room towards him, ignoring the zapper he clutched tightly in his hand. “But I do know who you are now. And please don’t think that little taser gun is going to get you out of here. I’m wearing shielded armor under my clothes.”

“I’ll hold onto it just in case.” Baron pointed the gun at her head before she got within arm’s reach. “Let me guess. You are running your own little genetic lab up here, and things are not going well. Answer me this, if you will, is this a private operation or are you on the government dime here?”

“Does it matter,” she replied coldly, “the only thing that matters are results. The only way out of this hell we are in is to have someone born with antibodies that we can replicate into a working vaccine.”

“And all those women out there, are good Americans, volunteers for the cause.”

“It would be beautiful if that was true,” she sidestepped towards another door. “But it’s hard to ask people to volunteer to be infected with a deadly disease. Some of these women come to us from red zones already infected with the virus and we impregnate them. Some come clean and pregnant, and we infect them. And then there is the third group, neither pregnant nor infected and we get them both.” Delta swung open the side door letting the hum of the incinerator fill the

room. “Unfortunately, most of the women do not live long enough to give birth. And so far, the few babies that were born don’t have the necessary antibodies or survive to develop them. But we keep trying.”

Baron surmised the incinerator was too small for the mothers. It was for the infants. Delta had shown it to distract him. He was not going to let her get the upper hand. He flipped the switch on the gun to the deadly setting and extended it at her forehead, “you’re a monster. You are going to pay for what you are doing to these women and children.”

“Hahaha, I’m not the monster, Covid is. The Gamma variant is Godzilla and King Kong rolled into one. It’s easily transmissible and one hundred percent fatal. Mr. Beard, in five to ten years, we... the human race will be at extinction levels. If we don’t find a cure or vaccine to stop the spread soon... it’s game over.” Delta closed the door but remained where she was. “You think I’m the only one doing this? Think again! There are labs like this in every country around the world. And in some countries—I think you can guess which ones—are taking, let’s call it a proactive approach. There are places where if one person dies from this variant, they burn the whole town to the ground, houses, people, pets, everything. Without warning.” She stood cold and impassionate. “I have the pictures in my office if you want to see them. Have you asked yourself this, why are you here?”

“I know why I’m here.” Baron pushed back his disgust. He had to stay focused. He had to make it out of here alive. “Veritas sent that message to uncover your dirty little secret. I am sure if you asked, some people would come forward. They always do.”

“My God! You are naïve. The people who jumped out of airplanes over Europe or stormed the beaches of France to save the world from tyranny are dead. Today, we have people

whose first concern is, ‘What’s in it for me?’” She shook her head in disappointment. “We have people now, who shoot a store clerk dead rather than put on a simple mask to save her life. That is why we had to enact stricter laws, not to take away personal freedom, but to protect the greater population from themselves. And then there are those like you, gullible. You’re a corporate spy.” She stepped forward as his gun dropped a bit lower. “There is no Veritas. She is a conglomerate of government and corporation leaks designed to manipulate and fool the people.

“Your friend, Vincent Meyer—we know all about him—sent you here to steal our research. The country or person who develops a weapon against this virus holds the power. I am sure he would like it to be him. As would dozens of others. You asked if I work for a private company or the government, I am the Director of Homeland Security. Now, if you give me the taser and your watch. I know you recorded data with it, I will walk you out of here. It is the only way you get out of here alive.”

“I’m not that naïve.” Baron quickly weighed his options, “What is to stop you from shooting me in the back?”

“What’s the point in doing that?” she reasoned. “Without the data to back up your story, you go from journalist to conspiracy nutjob. Killing you will only throw more fuel on an already out of control dumpster fire. Your friend is smart. But that is the trouble with geniuses, they are too smart to see the obvious flaws in their plans. He sent you in here wearing an ectoskin. If I may,” she reached into her lab coat pocket slowly retrieving a makeup compact mirror and popped it open. “He probably told you the ectoskin was some kind of antiviral suit. It was really to mask your true identity, meet Mr. Dreiser.”

Baron saw a reflection, but it wasn't his. The person in the mirror had brown hair, light brown eyes, and was very Caucasian. He had been lied to, from beginning to end. He was speechless.

Delta saw the shock sink in. She was used to the reactions of people when their world collapsed around them. They reacted in one of two ways, complete surrender, or irrational violent outburst. And she knew there was no way of foretelling which way each person would turn.

"As I said, Vincent outsmarted himself. There is no record of you being here, so, you will have no backup to your story should you go public. But if you walk out of here with me, tell Vincent the eighth floor is a room full of computers, which he already knows, then no harm no foul." She watched for a semblance of resignation in his demeanor. "Or you can try to go out, the only door from this place, into the corridor where a dozen heavily armed soldiers are waiting for you. And if you somehow make it past them, there are forty more on the floor below, and more in the subbasement. All of them with orders to shoot to kill."

Baron wanted the story; he did not want to be the story. He did not trust Grant, but he definitely wasn't going to die for Vincent Meyer's whatever this was. He handed the zapper to her and took off the watch. "This is just a watch, no spy tech or anything like that, I hope you will send it back to me in one piece when you're done."

"If it checks out, I will see to it that you get it back." She tapped a spot under her right ear and said, "we are coming out. Stand at the ready." Delta put the devices in her lab coat pocket and took his arm. They started back through the rooms of coffin-like medical units. "We are not the bad guys here and if we had the time to wait for nature to deliver the antibodies, we would.

We simply don't have the time. We are very close to the end of our rope. Then, the nuclear option is our only recourse. You get that, right?"

Baron did not respond as the last door opened, and he was face to face with three teams of four M16s toting soldiers in black armored gear ready to annihilate him. The elevator opened and four more heavily outfitted soldiers awaited him. He grabbed her hand as she was about to pass him to the guards.

She understood his apprehension and got in the elevator too.

The elevator doors opened in the dimly lit subbasement parking garage thirty-six feet below Chicago. Delta pushed Baron from the elevator cab as the four soldiers filed out.

She remained within the elevator, "alright, men, you can handle it from here. You know what to do with him."

The lead soldier stumbled over a black-outfitted soldier lying on the ground. He looked around at the dozens of soldiers in their battle gear strewn about the garage. He snapped his rifle up to his shoulder preparing to fire.

Baron's eyes were blinded by the onslaught of floodlights ahead of him. He turned to the side, trying to save his sight. The soldiers' visors turned black, to protect their eyes. They were spreading out, moving away from him in an automatic defensive maneuver learned over years of practice. He saw them drop in rapid succession before they could fire a shot.

He flung himself back into the elevator and threw a perfect shoulder tackle into Delta's midsection. She hit the back wall of the cab and fell face first on the floor in front of him. *High*

School State Champion Defensive Back two years in a row. I still got the moves. He fished in her pockets for his watch and zapper.

The parking garage returned to its dismal visibility.

Misty called out, “leave her! We got to get out of here before more troopers are called in.”

“I need my watch,” Baron yelled back.

“It can’t be that important to you to die for.”

“It has the information I came here for,” he flipped Delta over and pulled the items from her other pocket. “Got it!” He held the watch up triumphantly.

“Wonderful, let’s go.”

Baron ran to the SUV jumping over two soldiers as he did. He dove through the side door and landed in Misty’s lap. “I’m glad you decided to come with. You did all this? You’re bad ass.”

“It was nothing,” Misty said pushing him off her. “I set the rifle on wide disbursement. It knocked them all out at once. The real trick was getting the other four without hitting you. Lucky for you, they made it easy.”

Rattling noises came from the rear of the SUV as it raced through the old pitch-black sewer tunnels of Chicago.

“Don’t tell me, we are being shot at,” Baron said.

“I told you the army wouldn’t be far behind. I had to crash through two gates to get to you.”

“I hope Vincent popped for the bulletproof paint job.”

“So far, it appears he has.”

“Obstruction ahead,” a female robotic voice informed them.

“That is so sexist.”

“Forget about that!” Baron jumped to the front of the vehicle’s cabin. “How far ahead? Hit the lights!”

“Five hundred feet,” the SUV complied, and the headlights revealed a solid brick wall they were barreling towards.

The shooting stopped. The two armored vehicles blocked the tunnel behind them.

Baron asked the AI, “what’s beyond the wall?”

“Lake Michigan.”

“Give me that rifle,” he commanded Misty as he popped open the Moonroof.

“Are you going to fire on those Humvees? They are equipped with antitank rounds now.”

“No.” He said as he flipped the switch on the rifle to high power. He blasted the brick wall, dropped back down inside the SUV, and the Moonroof slammed shut. The explosion sent brick particles in every direction and especially back at their vehicle. They were within fifty feet

of the wall and long jagged cracks ripped through the bricks ahead of them. “I hope that was enough. Get ready to go for a swim.”

The wall exploded and a violent white fist punched the SUV, throwing it back up the tunnel. It slammed into the two Humvees and landed on its wheels. The tunnel filled with water quickly. The Humvees engines stalled, and its occupants abandoned their pursuit in their scuba gear. They were prepared for all circumstances, but flow of the lake proved to be too much for them to fight.

Slowly, the SUV fought its way through the flooded tunnel to the hole in the wall and into the Great Lake beyond. Once in the water, paddles unfolded from the tires’ rubber threads and the SUV proceeded effortlessly as it was designed to do.

“Did you know this SUV was equipped for underwater operations?” asked Misty.

“I had no clue what I just did wasn’t going to kill us. It was our only option, so I rolled the bones.”

“Where to now, captain Ahab?”

“Canada. I’ll write the story and put it on the internet from there. I can never go home, but I am sure Vincent will find a way to get you back in the States.”

“Actually, I’m not from the United States. But I am sure Vincent will help me get back home.”

04 July 2033. THE TRUTH BE TOLD. *vincit omnia veritas* (truth conquers all things).

The world's death toll still climbs. Unconfirmed totals have sixty percent of all humans, over five billion, have died of the virus or at the hands of their governments. Towns and cities are firebombed every day. Humanity is reaching extinction levels.

A secret laboratory in the United States of America has developed a vaccine from a group of children born with natural immunities. They are inoculating certain members of their population for world control in the post pandemic world.

The five-nation super pack of China, France, Great Britain, Iran, and Russia demands the US release the vaccine or face nuclear war. The United States denies any breakthrough in the fight against COVID-19 and the Gamma variant.

Baron Beard, living in an undisclosed location in the Northwest territory, has yet to write his story.

The End