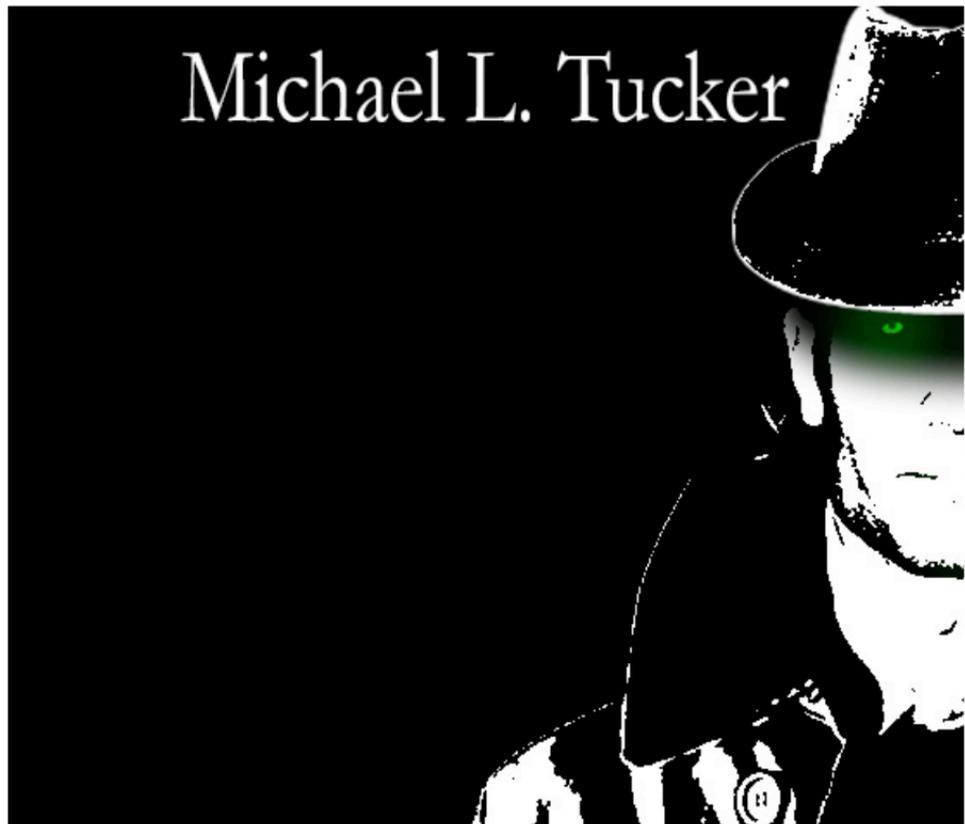


# FOREVER HOLLOW

Michael L. Tucker



*We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar*

*Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion*

*The Hollow Men  
T.S. Eliot*

# Chapter 1

#

“Lies! I’m telling you, they’re all lies! I didn’t do anything wrong. They contacted me, and I refused to help them.”

The young man’s muscles bulged through his dark blue button-up shirt in his attempt to fight against the two silent agents dragging him through the Digitech office. Most of the workers remained silent, eyes glued to the crystal screens in front of them and not on the commotion in the office. Even speaking a single word of defense could get them taken as well. No one said a word as the men in tan trench coats lugged the young man toward the elevator. He continued to call for help, but nobody so much as turned in his direction.

Nobody save Lucian Pope.

Lucian had watched the young man’s predicament with measured interest. Alexander Houston. Hard worker. Always on time with his assignments. Lucian wondered what Alexander had done wrong to warrant a submission of indictment to the ministry from someone. Lucian had never thought of Alexander as a troublemaker. Of course, many people change masks from work to home. Lucian knew that well enough.

He knew the stories. “They” usually came in the middle of the night or found you in a dark alley by yourself. Here today, gone tonight. No questions asked. No tears shed. Your desk emptied and reset as if you never existed.

*These guys aren’t “them” though, Lucian thought. Are they?*

The two men had flashed a pair of ID badges when they first approached the secretary's desk. They never said a word. They never had to. The Federation Investigators never had to explain themselves. They came in and took what they needed and left without a word.

*Something just doesn't add up.*

The thought plagued Lucian for the rest of the afternoon as he finished the data file he had been working on the past few days. His fingers flew over the projected image of a keyboard on his cubicle desk. The small rectangle of crystal prompted him to save. After tapping "OK", he slipped into his leather jacket and headed to the elevator. His desk lamp and computer screen powered down when he moved out of the desk's sensory range. Glancing at his watch, he thought that he could make it to the antique shop and browse around a bit before it closed. Seventy floors later, Lucian walked into the lobby area of the Digitech building.

Outside, Lucian saw Charlie, a co-worker of his, standing out on the sidewalk with a vacant stare on his face. Lucian walked up to him and waved a hand in front of Charlie's face.

"Charlie? Hey, Charlie. You okay?"

The little plump man jumped as if from a daze. He blinked a few times, and his brown eyes seemed refocus. He looked at Lucian through a pair of wide-framed glasses and smiled broadly.

"Lucian! Hey, it's great to see you," Charlie beamed. "How have you been?"

Lucian's brow wrinkled. "Charlie. We just saw each other a few minutes ago." A puzzled look crossed Charlie's face. "We just

left work, Charlie. Look, there's the door to our building right there."

Charlie stared at the Digitech sign as though seeing it for the first time. He took off his glasses and tapped on the lenses a few times. Images flickered in the lenses as Charlie replaced glasses on his nose. Charlie gasped before looking back at Lucian.

"Lucian! Hey! Sorry, my glasses haven't been working properly lately. I need to take them in and get the lenses replaced, but who can really find their way around for the few days it takes them to fix these things, am I right?"

Lucian gave Charlie a noncommittal grunt.

"I mean, I just stepped outside a minute ago and completely forget where I was going. Strange, huh?"

"Yeah, strange," Lucian said vaguely.

"Ah," said Charlie with an energetic nod and broad smile. "I was going home." Lucian could see the transparent map in Charlie's glasses with a highlighted path. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Lucian."

"Right," said Lucian. "See you."

Lucian stood on the sidewalk a few more minutes looking around. Most of the people who walked by wore glasses similar to Charlie's. Their eyes never seemed to look past the frames to the rest of their surroundings. Occasionally, someone would stop mid-stride looking confused, tap on their lenses, and then continue on their way. Lucian shook his head and walked down the sidewalk toward the old antique shop.

#

"Let me give you a hand," offered the shopkeeper.

Lucian broke away from his daze as the wrinkled old man climbed the rolling ladder to the top shelf and pulled down a small figurine. He held a shaking hand out to Lucian who fixed upon it with gray eyes that resembled pools of mercury. The white monkey crafted from fine china gazed back at him with black eyes that hinted at mischief. In its right hand, the monkey held two stars.

“Thank you,” said Lucian as he took the figurine in his thin hands. He turned the monkey over, examining every inch, and noticed a set of initials engraved into one of the stars: E.B. “Fine craftsmanship. E.B.” he mused. “I wonder.” He shook his head, dismissing the thought. “She was more into computers than sculpting. These must be the sculptor’s initials.”

“It has a brother somewhere,” replied the quavering voice of the shopkeeper.

“I’ll give you ten royals,” said Lucian.

“Twenty.”

“Fifteen.”

“Very well, but you’re robbing me at that price.” The shopkeeper took the figurine out of Lucian’s hand. “Lucky for me, I know you’ll be in again next week looking for something else.”

“It’s just a china monkey. What’s so special about it that makes it worth more than fifteen royals?”

“You know as well as I that crafts such as these are no longer made,” said the old man as he shuffled to the front of the store. He wrapped the figurine in parchment paper and placed it in a paper bag. “This is a rare find indeed. Art is a thing of the past. And

besides, you always hear stories of trinkets like this one when you work in this business.”

“What stories?” asked Lucian, eyeing the clerk. He pulled out a small velvet pouch and counted out fifteen large golden coins. He exchanged the coins for the wrapped figurine.

“The usual,” replied the old man. “The mischievous monkey brings with it chaos. Always up to no good. Tales like that. Some others that could bring the Investigators by should the wrong person get wind of them. I’m just lucky they still let me stay in business. You be careful with that, you hear?”

Lucian looked skeptical. “Whatever you say, Nestor. Anyway, thanks for this.” He held up the wrapped figurine. “I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Next week, then,” replied the old man.

The bell above the door tinkled as Lucian walked out onto the streets of Brightwater. He huddled under his black leather jacket as the wind cut into him. Winter seemed never ending here. Lucian could not remember a time in his life when he had felt warm in Brightwater. Even the summer months remained balmy enough to wear a coat.

Lucian looked around at the various neon signs hanging in the windows along the sidewalk. A glowing light bulb in one window, a basic square and triangle image of a house in another, and a beer bottle further down. He looked back to the antique shop—the only place on the block with words written outside—and shook his head. *No wonder the place never gets any customers.*

He continued down the sidewalk, huddled behind the collar of his jacket. Headshots of strangers flashed on screens every few

feet, accompanied by a wide array of monetary units. One picture caught his eye, one he thought he recognized but shrugged off.

Lucian's grandfather lived in the neighborhood. As he passed the apartment building, the same thought entered his mind that always did whenever he passed by. He knew he should visit, but he couldn't muster the desire. So he walked on without a second glance.

Several blocks later, Lucian saw a teenage boy standing at the edge of the sidewalk. As the boy stepped out into the street, Lucian glanced a car speeding down the road further up the avenue. The youth seemed oblivious and strolled across the pavement. Lucian could hear the deafening music blaring from ear buds stuffed into the boy's ears. The car raced toward the boy, who stared at a video playing in his lenses, and Lucian's cries of warning fell on deaf ears. Lucian sprinted down the sidewalk and into the street, tackling the youth to the ground just as the car raced past.

"Hey, man! What do you think you're doing?" screamed the young man.

"I'm saving your life," snapped Lucian. "You're welcome."

"Whatever, man," said the youth. "If I was in any danger, these things would have warned me." He pointed to the pair of stylish glasses on his face. "What are you, some kind of idiot?" The boy shook his head and hurried off down the sidewalk, muttering to himself.

Lucian stood in the street with his mouth hanging open. He quickly grabbed the paper-wrapped package that had fallen out and hopped onto the sidewalk, narrowly dodging another car that whizzed by. He turned and saw the taillights of the car several

blocks away. He approached the only establishment on this side of the street still in business. The neon sign flashed off and on: a yellow circle bisected by three other yellow lines, like spokes of a wheel. The smaller red circles within the larger yellow circle indicated the pizzeria.

An ancient theater lay in a heap of ruins next door; the broken marquee in front read “P----OUNT”. Down the street, a cigar shop had shared a similar fate—a testament to the fate of usurpers. An underground resistance group had once met secretly in the theater before the government found out. Not long after, a “malfunction” caused an explosion. The cigar store burned down one evening after someone else accused the owner of being “one of them”. The ruins remained to serve as a warning to any who might follow in those defiant footsteps. Many of these events were reported as terrorist attacks, however, and the general population had no idea anything different had taken place.

Lucian smoothed back his thick, curly red hair that he had pulled back into a ponytail. He checked over both shoulders before walking in. The smell of baked dough and grease hit him the moment he entered. He found his usual booth in the corner and sat facing the door. Taking off the leather jacket, he wrapped it around the package and placed them in the inner part of the booth snug against the wall.

He looked at the table surface where pictures of all the different menu options danced in a battle for his attention. He wrinkled his nose. Lucian hated that even this place had given in to such laziness. He came to this pizzeria because they still used real people as waiters and cooks. He couldn't blame the owner for the

menu decision. Walter wanted to keep his doors open, and he wouldn't bring in customers with ridiculous things like menus without pictures. Lucian hated it all, but he kept thoughts like these to himself. If he voiced his opinions, the Investigators would surely come for him.

“You want your usual?” asked a plump waitress who approached his table.

Lucian hesitated for a moment. “Yeah, sure. Large pepperoni and—”

“—A water,” the waitress finished with a smile as she tapped the corresponding pictures on the tabletop. She knew Lucian wouldn't go through the self-ordering process. It was his way, and she saw a certain charm in it, even if she didn't completely understand it.

“Yeah,” said Lucian, admitting defeat. The waitress turned to walk away when Lucian stopped her with a determined look on her face. “No, wait,” he said, tapping a picture of a mushroom. “Put some mushrooms on it, too.”

The waitress's mouth dropped open. “Wow,” she said coyly, “changing things up tonight? Next thing you know, you'll be coming here on a Friday.”

“Thanks, Angela,” Lucian said, accepting the small victory. He pulled a book out of the cargo pocket of his dark gray pants. Tucking himself away in the corner booth, he lost himself in the book.

“The Odyssey?” asked Angela, causing Lucian to jump. She set the glass of water on the table and eyed Lucian suspiciously. “What's that?”

“Oh, um, it’s just a story that was written a long time ago. Sea monsters, gods and goddesses, that kind of stuff,” replied Lucian nervously.

“Hmm,” said Angela, running a plump hand down a long braid of dark brown. “Brave man to pull that out in public. You be careful with that, right? Anyone else sees you carrying that thing around, and that’ll be the end, you know?”

Lucian gave a distant smile. “Yeah, I know. There aren’t many places I can go to read. I’m glad you don’t turn me in.”

Angela guffawed, and her excess of chin shook. “Yeah, well, you still better be careful pulling out something like that in here. Walter’s not too keen on folks bringing trouble around his place. He don’t want to get accused of nothing that’s going to get this place torched. Plus, you don’t know who’s going to walk through that door, and they may as soon call the Investigators as talk stories with you.”

Lucian shuddered at the mention of the Investigators, visions from earlier running through his head, and he slid the book down into his lap and out of sight. “I’ll be careful, Angela. Don’t worry.”

Angela smiled and patted him on the cheek. “You do that, sweetie. I’d really miss seeing that gorgeous face of yours around this place.”

She waddled away, and Lucian cautiously buried himself again in the journey of Odysseus. Not until he reached Odysseus wandering through the Underworld and seeing his dead mother did someone disturb the silence of the pizzeria.

Lucian had dug himself so deeply into his book and the booth that he didn't notice the fair-skinned woman with glossy black hair walk through the door and advance directly to his corner booth.

"I knew you'd be here," the woman said plainly as she stood over him. He jumped again at the sound of another voice and looked up from his book, pushing it down into the seat beside him. His eyes widened with surprise.

"Gen?" he blurted without thinking. "What are you doing here?"

The playful smile she tried to wear did not cover the crazed look in her youthful brown eyes as she sat down across the table from her. She hesitated to speak at first. "I don't really have time to explain, but I... I need your help," she said, glancing over her shoulder.

Lucian heard shouts of surprise outside, and Genevieve Valencia ducked down in the booth. He took a long drink of water and eyed the door with narrowed mercury eyes. His thick eyebrows knitted together as he watched a pair of men pause momentarily at the pizzeria's glass-paned door.

Lucian mentally noted the figures: dark trench coats and fedoras, square jaws, green eyes, bushy eyebrows, and brown hair. Satisfied that their prey was elsewhere, the two men continued down the sidewalk.

"You want to tell why the Federation is looking for you?" Lucian asked flatly.

Genevieve's head popped back up over the seat back checking the door. Her eyes flitted around the restaurant before turning back to him. This time, a look of panic gripped her face. A drop of

sweat streaked down her cheek. She paused to gather her thoughts before speaking.

“I really need your help. Don’t give me that look. Please, Luc. You’ve got to help me.”

“Well, I’ll be,” said Angela as she walked over to the table with a steaming pizza on a tray. “You even got company tonight. And pretty, too.” Genevieve smiled politely, and Lucian shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. “You’re just full of surprises tonight, aren’t you?” continued the heavy-set waitress.

“Angela, this is... my ex-wife, Genevieve. Genevieve, Angela.”

Angela’s look said it all. For the first time since Lucian had known her, the gabby waitress had nothing to say.

“Well, I’ll just leave you two for the time being,” she sputtered with a polite smile. “You just let me know if you need anything. You want anything to drink, sweetheart?”

“Um, no, thanks,” replied Genevieve.

Angela returned to the kitchen but remained within earshot. Genevieve stared at Lucian as he helped himself to a slice of pizza.

“What?” Lucian mumbled through a mouthful. Genevieve looked at him incredulously. “You want to leave *now*?” he said.

Genevieve rolled her eyes. “Typical. There isn’t much time. This is kind of important, Luc. You know how the Federation works. It won’t take them long to find me.”

Lucian wiped his mouth and continued eating. A string of cheese still clung to his chin. “Where’s *Richard*?” he asked mockingly. “Why don’t you go running to him?”

Genevieve sighed, exasperated. “Richard’s gone, Luc. That happened a long time ago. You were right. I just couldn’t bring myself to face you again, but this isn’t the place for this discussion. Can we please leave?”

“Eat something. I have to pay for it anyway,” replied Lucian.

“Just like you,” she scoffed. She began picking mushrooms off of a slice. “Since when did you start eating mushrooms?”

Lucian smiled. “Today, actually. I thought I’d try something new.”

“You? Try something new?” Genevieve asked skeptically. “Since when do you try new things?”

She devoured the slice and picked up another and did the same, like she hadn’t eaten in days. Lucian looked at her amazed.

“Well, you know, I got tired of the same stuff all the time. Data entry is not the most adventurous career after all. Especially when I can’t even understand anything I’m entering. All these numbers and figures don’t make any sense. It’s not even English or any other language I recognize. It makes me wonder who’s reading this stuff and what it’s actually for.”

Genevieve gave Lucian a sharp look. They quickly finished eating, and Lucian threw a few silver coins onto the table.

“Thanks again, Angela,” Lucian yelled as they passed by the kitchen.

“See you next week, hun,” replied the waitress.

The temporary relief on Genevieve’s face faded, quickly replaced by tense concern as they approached the door. Lucian noticed the finely tailored black pants and top that hugged her slender body, and he remembered why he had first become

interested in her. He had not fallen in love with her beauty. He had fallen in love with the adventurous spirit she owned and he so desperately desired.

“Where are we going?” he asked as they walked out into the chilling evening.

“Somewhere out of earshot,” she said quickly. “Curfew’s not far away, and if we’re out then with the Investigators *and* the Enforcers about, we don’t have a chance.”

“I’m just around the corner.”

“Sure. Let’s just go quickly.”

Genevieve watched every direction, balked at every shadow, and jumped at every sound as they walked. She wrapped her arm inside of his, which sent a slight electrical jolt through his body, and urged him forward at a brisk pace.

#

They reached the top floor of the apartment building and Lucian’s loft. He pressed his thumb to a small optical scanner by the door. A green light blinked and beeped, and the handleless door slid open with a brief hiss of air. He and Genevieve walked through the door, and at Lucian’s command a handful of lamps around the apartment flickered to life. Lucian removed his leather coat and threw it over the arm of the sofa. He plopped down into the thick cushions and began unwrapping the china monkey.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” said Genevieve, shaking her head.

She ran her finger along the spines of countless volumes of books as she walked along the far wall, which Lucian had replaced with a dozen bookshelves.

“You still lose yourself in mystic worlds and fantasy adventures?”

“Yeah,” he blushed. “I can’t help it.” He walked over to the shelves and sat the monkey on the top shelf and scanned over the titles. “These are so much better than what the stations play now, a whole bunch of nothing. Sex and violence. That’s all anyone wants anymore. Anything else is ‘boring’ or ‘stupid’. I’ll tell you what’s really stupid: this world.”

“What do you do when you have company over?” she grinned.

“Not that I ever have any but... We have company,” he said to no one. The bookshelves recessed into the wall and a thin wall closed over them. He had even taken care to decorate the unassuming wall. Genevieve smiled.

“Of course,” she said. “And the television?”

“Yeah, I know it’s small,” Lucian admitted. “It’s only fifty-two inches, but I just can’t force myself to get anything bigger. If anyone ever did visit, I would just have to deal with the ridicule.”

At his command, another wall flickered on, and several different frames within the screen provided them with a variety of scenes with couples kissing and massive explosions. One screen, one that nobody had control over, flashed photos of wanted terrorists. Pictures of unassuming characters cycled through with their bounties.

“I watch enough to keep up with conversations. It’s not too difficult, though. Just a bunch of who killed whom and who’s getting with whom. Especially when you’re talking to a bunch of morons. I can fake it pretty easily.”

Genevieve rolled her eyes. “Here you go again. Please, I’ve heard this all before. Let’s not get into this tonight.”

“Right,” he said. “So why *are* you here?”

An explosion on one of the television frames rattled the wall, and Lucian furrowed his brows.

Genevieve sighed. “Luc, I couldn’t think of anyone else that could help. You’re right. So many people in this city are completely mindless. They just blindly follow what the Federation tells them to do. You’re the only one I know that has a *real* brain.”

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a tiny lens. She held it up so that Lucian could see it clearly. Confusion set in again as Lucian’s stormy eyes scanned over the item.

“So? It’s a camera. Big deal.”

“Big deal?” Genevieve exclaimed. “It was in my house, Luc.”

“Okay,” He said. “I still don’t get it.”

“Luc, just think for a second,” she pleaded. “Geez, that’s why I came to you in the first place. I didn’t put this in my house. Tonight, when I got home, it was just there. I happened to notice it when I dropped something behind my couch. Who knows how long it’s been there and who’s been watching me? And when I took it off the wall, those guys showed up not long after. I don’t even know how I escaped. It was a miracle, but they’re still after me, Luc. Something’s wrong.”

“Wait, why were they after you in the first place?”

Genevieve sighed, and her shoulders drooped. “Richard stumbled across some information. Something about fighting going on outside the Federation. Other nations trying to “free us” he said. Thankfully, Richard was ignorant enough to think it was a part of

some TV show. But I knew better. Luc, they're fighting out there, and everyone here is oblivious to it. We have to help them. Isn't there anyone around here who can help?"

"Okay," said Lucian after a moment, "just calm down, and we'll think about this. I may know someone who can help us. There's this really smart guy that comes into Digitech every once in a while. He's always staring at people when he comes in, like he's up to something but doesn't want the wrong people to find out. I don't know that anyone else at Digitech knows anything about it."

Eight television frames all screamed for Lucian's attention. Gritting his teeth, Lucian walked over to the television. He was about to turn it off when he stopped altogether.

"What's wrong?" asked Genevieve.

Lucian walked to the window and bent down, looking underneath the window sill. He pulled something off the wall and stared at it for a few moments. He held out before him a camera identical to the one Genevieve held.

"I didn't put this in," he said.

"What's going on here?" Genevieve said, panicked. "If that's there, then they know I'm here. What if they come after you, too?"

"Just relax. Let's just go. We'll go see Dr. Morgan. I think his office is nearby. Maybe he can help us."

"Let's just hurry, Luc. I feel exposed right now."

"Gen," Lucian said, staring at the TV screen.

She followed Lucian's gaze, and her eyes widened. On the channel that circulated the terrorist photos, she saw two new photos: Genevieve Eliza Valencia and Lucian Pope.

#

“What in the hell is happening?” Lucian said.

“I don’t know, Luc. This is how they work.”

Genevieve led Lucian quickly from the building. Turning to her right, she froze immediately like a gazelle spotting a hungry lion. Lucian saw the trench coat at the end of the block walking toward them. They were already walking in the opposite direction when the trench coat noticed Genevieve.

She pulled Lucian around the corner and into the first two men who had looked into the pizzeria earlier. They both reached into their coats, but Genevieve threw a shoulder into one of the men, knocking him into the other.

“Run!” she screamed as she yanked Lucian into the street.

They sprinted across the street, narrowly dodging a car as it sped by. They ducked into an alley between an old post office and small office building. Two bricks exploded as bullets impacted. The third man stood at the corner across the street firing on Lucian and Genevieve.

They ran around another corner, fear making Lucian’s legs heavy as concrete. and into a brick wall that towered over them. Genevieve’s desperate eyes flitted around. A trash incinerator, some discarded boxes, and an out-of-order computer terminal. Then, she spotted a fire escape ladder on the outer wall of the office building and pulled it down.

“Up here, quickly,” she commanded.

They climbed to the third floor before taking a break. Lucian’s lungs ached. Bullets chased them, plinking off the metal platforms, as the three men appeared around the corner. Genevieve pulled a

micropistol out of her handbag. She put two bullets through a window and cleared out the rest of the glass. Lucian stared at her.

“Since when do you carry a gun?”

“Since people started trying to kill me,” she said. “Split up. You go through here. I’ll head up to the roof. Meet me at our spot.” She thrust the micropistol in his hand and kissed him quickly on the cheek. “Good luck.”

She hurried up the ladder. Lucian looked down and saw the three men climbing the fire escape ladder. He ducked through the window and scanned the small office space for an exit as he tiptoed past a cubicle.

He stumbled through the darkness and found the entrance. As he opened the door, he heard two sounds: the crackling of glass under heavy footsteps and the siren of an alarm. Puffs of air spat, and bullets pockmarked the wall around the door. Lucian jumped and ducked at the same time, firing high-pitched shots wildly through the room. Sparks flew from the lights in the ceiling as the bullets went astray.

Lucian rushed through the doorway and down the hall. He came to the elevator and had to choose: elevator or stairwell? *Think, Lucian, think.* After jamming the up button for the elevator, he began to chew on a knuckle. He checked the hallway again. No sign of the man.

The soft electric bell dinged, and the door slid open. Lucian hurried in and punched the button for the top floor. As the elevator door closed, he squeezed back through and shot across the hall through the double doors to the stairwell. He rushed down two flights of stairs, pausing between the first and second floor. Now

his lungs burned as he gaped for air. The micropistol shook in his hand.

As he caught his breath, he listened for his pursuer. Nothing. He crept down the stairs like a whisper and exited into the foyer of the building, checking the area. Still clear. He listened to the machines buzz and hum as they kept their electronic eyes on him. Tucking his chin and hunching his shoulders, he edged toward the exit.

He had almost made it to the front door when the chime of the elevator echoed through his head. Out stepped the trench coat. Lucian saw the flicker in the man's green eyes before training his pistol on Lucian. Panicked, Lucian popped off a round from his micropistol. The man's head snapped backwards, and he fell onto his back. The stray shots from the trench coat shattered the glass doors behind Lucian.

Lucian stared at the body and then at his hand, which trembled more violently now. He scrambled through the door and sprinted down the sidewalk, nearly tackling an elderly woman. He clumsily pirouetted around the woman and jetted across the street and down another sidewalk. Sleet pelted him as he ran for what seemed like hours before looking back or slowing down. He felt lightning coursing through his veins, and droplets of ice seemed to cling to the back of his neck.

The street dead-ended into another. Lucian turned right and then another quick left across the street. He continued down the street westward until he crossed a wide avenue into a darkened park.

## Chapter 2

#

As Lucian crept through the darkened park, he marveled at how drastically a city could change throughout its lifetime.

His parents moved him to Brightwater when he was barely old enough to walk. He remembered a picture he had seen at his grandparents. An old newspaper article from long ago showed an aerial photograph of the sprawling metropolis that promised the world to its citizens. The city had quickly grown and developed as the wealthy moved in to take advantage of all the pleasures of life Brightwater offered. Crime was low; cost of living, affordable; employment opportunities, sound. But all of that happened decades before the war.

Lucian snapped out of the memory as he entered and stalked through the overgrown park. Grass grew through cracks in the sidewalk, and time and nature had taken back what man had once stolen. He walked past ancient tennis courts along the cracked pavement, searching for Genevieve. Vines weaved through the chain link fence.

“Gen,” he called in a hushed voice. “Gen, are you here?”

He stalked through the darkness, the only sound the soft scraping of his shoes on concrete. Fingers of doubt prodded his mind. *What if she didn't make it? You left her to die, Lucian. You really haven't changed, have you?*

Then it appeared, still there after all these years. An aged wrought iron swing hung on rusty chains. He sat down, and the

swing creaked under his weight. He tilted his head back and looked up into the black night. The lights of the city veiled the stars.

“Lot of memories here,” Genevieve said from the shadows. She walked up behind him. “Our first date seems like such a long time ago.”

“And the proposal,” Lucian added.

Genevieve smiled weakly, grabbing hold of one of the chains. She walked around and sat down on the swing next to Lucian. They swung in creaking silence.

“So, what’s this all about?” Lucian asked finally. “What happened?”

Genevieve took a deep breath and exhaled. “I stumbled across some information, Luc, and now they’re coming after me. I don’t know what to do.”

“How bad is it this time?” he sighed.

“It’s bad, Luc. I just hope—”

A rustling in the bushes interrupted their conversation. A tall, dark figure emerged from the shadows. Lucian looked in horror at the hole in the fedora of the man he had shot.

“What in the—” he exclaimed as he scrambled around but got tangled up in the swing. He fell, chin to the pavement with a loud thump, as the man pulled out a pistol, taking aim.

Lucian reached for the micropistol, but a spark shot out from the man’s neck and he froze; they heard a soft, electric burst in the distance. The man in the trench coat remained motionless. Lucian and Genevieve stared in shock, frozen in time.

Finally, Genevieve eased out of the swing as Lucian pushed himself up, both keeping their eyes on the frozen man with a gun

still trained forward. They crept toward the man, who still did not move.

Lucian ventured further, walking up to the man and waving a hand in front of his face. The man looked cryogenically frozen without the actual freezing. More noises in the darkness snapped Lucian's head to his left.

"Clear!" came a shout in the distance.

Flashlights moved quickly through the trees. A tall, athletic man strode up in a long, black pea coat. He stopped under the soft glow of a lamp, which illuminated a head of closely cropped, military-style black hair, and gazed indifferently at the two of them.

"Agent John Small," he said as he flashed an I.D. badge. "I'm with the Society to Engage in the Resistance to Artificially-Programmed Humanoids."

Lucian and Genevieve looked at him with cocked heads and confused stares.

"We call it SERAPH."

"Wait," said Lucian slowly. "Did you say artificially-programmed humanoids?"

"That is correct," replied John Small as he marched to them. "You stirred up quite the scene with these guys tonight. You're lucky you managed to get this far with them chasing after you." He looked at Lucian's hand, and with a scoff snatched the micropistol from it. "What did you plan on doing with this pea shooter? You're gonna need a lot more than this to do any damage to these guys."

"What are you talking about?" asked Lucian.

“I’m talking about *that*,” said Small, pointing to the man in the trench coat. “You shot that thing in the head, right?”

Lucian nodded.

“And it still came after you, right?”

Lucian nodded.

“*That’s* what I’m talking about,” Small grumbled.

“Okay, but what *is* that?” asked Genevieve.

Small reached to the forehead where Lucian had shot it. With a quick tug, he ripped the skin away, causing Lucian and Genevieve to recoil.

“These things are robots?” said Lucian, finally looking at the metal skull that lay beneath.

“Oh, they’re more than robots,” said Small. “Come on. I’ll explain better when we’re safe.”

“Wait,” said Lucian. “How do we know this isn’t some trick? How do we know we can trust you?”

“You don’t,” said Small, “but I don’t really think you want to stay here with this guy.”

“But he’s not moving anymore,” said Genevieve.

“He’s not moving, but...” Small pushed a button on his belt. “Wolfe, how many you spy?”

An electronic voice spoke up. “Five marks closing in on your position. No clear shots yet.”

“Computer, show me,” said Small.

Light projected a three-dimensional replication of the immediate area around the park from a single square lens in front of his right eye. Lucian and Genevieve watched as three red dots

followed Lucian's path from the east toward the park. Two other dots came from the north.

"You really couldn't have picked a better place to end up, though," said Small. "No way to track your movements inside the park, except for him, that is." He motioned toward the stationary trench coat. "We'll use the south exit. Unless you don't trust me and want to take your chances with five GenReps?"

"GenReps?" Lucian asked.

"Generic Replications," said Small. "Clones. So, you in or not?"

"You always said you wanted an adventure," Genevieve said to Lucian. "Here's your chance."

"Yeah, wonderful," he mumbled, staring at the square-jawed cyborg.

Small turned back in the same direction he had come but stopped. He turned back to Lucian and Genevieve. "Put these on." He tossed two objects to them: small, round devices. "It's a scrambler," Small answered the unasked question. "It prevents them from 'seeing' us with their cameras. They got eyes all over this city. Just clip it to your waistband."

They complied and followed Agent Small out of the park where a black sedan hovered silently above the pavement. Small got into the passenger seat while Lucian and Genevieve settled in the back. A large, blond man waited in the driver's seat.

"Let's go," said Small. As they pulled away, Small spoke again into his communicator. "We're rolling."

"Roger that," replied Wolfe.

They drove west on an old toll road. To their left, Lucian saw the old stadium, its dark green body hiding in the night. Lucian recalled stories of games taking place there in the old days. He had never seen one, although his grandfather had mentioned once that his grandfather had taken him to one of the last games ever played in the stadium.

“My grandfather always said it was a shame that they were doing away with the game,” Lucian’s grandfather had said. “People just stopped going to watch. ‘A thinking man’s game,’ he always said, ‘but nobody wants to watch a thinking man’s game. They think it’s too boring.’ That’s what he said at least. He wanted me to remember what the game was like so it wouldn’t be lost in history, but the only thing I can remember about it was they would swing a stick around and run all over the place. Not like it mattered anyway. They would have outlawed it like everything else even if people had gone to watch.”

Lucian shook his head at the irony as the bright lights soon faded into darkness. Nobody said a word until they had driven several miles outside of Brightwater when Genevieve finally spoke up.

“What exactly is SERAPH, Agent Small?”

“The doctor can explain that to you,” said Small. “Dr. Morgan is the brains of the whole operation. We mostly do the legwork.”

“Dr. Morgan?” said Lucian, cocking his head to the side. “You don’t mean Dr. Jonathan Morgan?”

Small turned and looked at Lucian. “Yeah. I do mean him,” he said tartly.

Lucian eased back into his seat. “So he did know after all,” he said to nobody in particular.

“Dr. Morgan likes to sneak into town from time to time to find new recruits.”

“And when he came to Digitech with jobs for us...”

“Looking for new blood,” finished Small. “He had his eye on you for a while. Said you had a good head on your shoulders. Didn’t buy into all this propaganda fed to you by the media. Said he wasn’t sure you’d commit to something like SERAPH, though. I guess you didn’t have much of a chance in the end.”

“Nobody’s committing to anything yet,” Lucian cautioned.

Small spun around again to look Lucian in the eye. “I don’t think you understand what you got yourself into,” Small said. “This is a war. And you already know too much. There’s no going back now, Pope. Your face is plastered all over that city. You go back, you disappear. Forever.”

Small turned back around and let his words sink in. Lucian stared into the darkness as they drove through the wilderness outside Brightwater. He didn’t even know so many stars existed. New truths he had never known existed. The sight brought some comfort. He felt his mom and dad looking down on him from up high. *Would you have gone through with this, dad? What would you have said, mom?* He chewed on one of his knuckles.

“How did you kill that thing, anyway?” asked Lucian after a few moments. “I shot it in the head, but it still came after me, and you said that gun I had wouldn’t work.”

“Their skeleton is made of a lightweight but extremely strong titanium alloy. Civilian bullets don’t work on those guys, so we

modified some conventional weapons.” Small pulled out an elaborately designed pistol and showed it to Lucian. “Rail pistol. This one’s a modified Desert Eagle. Gun powder makes too much noise and leaves a trace. GenReps can easily track that. These beauties use electromagnetic power. Less noise, more power, no tracks.”

He clicked the switch on the handle, and the magazine slid out. “Armor piercing rounds with a delayed electromagnetic pulse. After the bullet pierces the skeleton, the EMP discharges. Ruins all the circuitry inside.”

“Why can’t you just use one giant EMP to shut down all of them?” asked Lucian.

“The skin around the skeleton shields them from the pulse. We can stun them with EMP grenades for a short time, but the only way to shut them down completely is by detonating the EMP inside.”

Lucian looked back at the distant city in the darkness. Broken buildings cluttered the skyline as the city shrank away.

“Where are we going?” asked Genevieve.

“The mountains, where we have the advantage,” said Small as the sedan sipped along the empty freeway towards the black hills looming in the distance.

## Chapter 3

#

The car reached the mountain base a little before dawn. After winding its way up the mountain like a great serpent, the black pavement became gravel. Just beyond the “Road Closed” barricade ahead, the gravel ended at a sheer wall of mountain rock.

Lucian shifted in his seat as the black sedan raced toward the road sign, orange lights blinking with warning. The sign folded to the ground, and the rock wall split in two and opened, revealing a lighted roadway that spiraled into the mountain and eventually into a large underground parking garage.

More black sedans lined one row of the garage while matching SUVs sat across the aisle. An assortment of other vehicles filled the vast garage, including several armored Hummers with 50-caliber machine guns mounted on top. The sedan pulled up to a set of thick, reinforced metal cargo doors. As Agent Small, Lucian, and Genevieve exited the car, the large, mechanical doors crawled open.

A tall, slender man in outlandish clothing strolled toward them. His long, frizzy brown hair bounced in rhythm to his steps. The nervous man fumbled with an old pocket watch.

“Dr. Morgan,” Lucian exclaimed. “I can’t believe it.”

“Hello, Lucian,” said the old man. “It does me good to see you here. I had my doubts, but I thought you might do well with us.”

“What is all of this, doctor?” asked Lucian.

“Let us go inside, and we will talk. Please follow me.”

Dr. Morgan turned, and Lucian and Genevieve followed.

“Sir,” said Small. “A word, please.”

Dr. Morgan nodded. He and Small walked out of earshot of the rest of the group. Small talked quickly in a hushed voice, and Dr. Morgan furrowed his brow, nodding on occasion. He continued to fidget with his pocket watch: winding the winding stem, flipping the hunter case open, and clicking it closed. He whispered a few words in response and then patted Agent Small on the shoulder.

“Good work, Agent,” he said, rejoining Lucian and Genevieve. “This way, if you please.”

They walked through another smaller reinforced door and down a stark, fluorescent-lit hallway. Their footsteps echoed off the concrete walls as Dr. Morgan led them to a conference room where he motioned them to sit in plush leather armchairs. Dr. Morgan paced about the room.

“Have you ever noticed, Lucian, that the people you interact with on a day-to-day basis lack depth?”

“You mean like intelligence?” Lucian asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” replied Dr. Morgan. “It’s not that they are unintelligent, per se. Many of the skills people possess these days require great intelligence. However, what most people in our society lack is the ability to think deeply. Computer, video.”

On one of the walls, a screen illuminated, showing a live feed of a powerfully built man with slick, light brown hair and light green eyes. He wore a finely tailored black suit with a red tie.

“Have you ever listened to what the Sovereign says when he speaks?” inquired Dr. Morgan. Sovereign John Taylor addressed the nation.

“Citizens of the Independent Federation of Postremos, I come before you today with a message of great jubilation. After many months of intense delegation, the Republic of Mentessegia has finally agreed to join the IFP. Although we have had our differences in the past, I pray you would accept our new brothers and sisters openly and wholeheartedly. We in the IFP strive to maintain peace and unity among all the nations of our world.”

Lucian chewed on his lip as the screen flashed an image of a flag waving gently in the breeze. The purple banner had green circle enclosing a golden crown. Beneath the crown were the white letters of the Federation: IFP. Sovereign Taylor appeared again on the screen.

“It is regrettable that so many nations are resistant to peace. President Myers of Urium would have you working as slaves. Prime Minister Reed of Albyrion would seek to steal away our technological resources. I assure you as Sovereign of the IFP that I will not stop until we have established peace in this world. We are currently working on making progress in our technological methods that will help us ensure peace and unity.”

Lucian thought about the camera in his apartment.

“We are working to improve the quality of life through the Federation. Cities like Mirrormont, Jewett City, and Fleming never fully recovered from the war. Our newly acquired resources are being pooled together, and we will be dispensing them throughout

the nation. Together, we can restore our nation back to the modern marvel that it once was.”

Lucian furrowed his brows. Dr. Morgan eyed him with a faint smile, as a teacher does when he expects his student to come up with the solution to a problem.

“There’s something wrong with this,” he said slowly. Dr. Morgan nodded in encouragement. “I feel like I’ve heard this speech before.”

Dr. Morgan threw his hands up in the air and yelled. “Ah! Now you have said it! In fact, you *have* heard this speech before. Perhaps not this exact speech, but you’ve heard this before. Computer, video feeds from the last five years.”

The television screen divided into five screens. Each screen showed a nearly identical picture of the wide-shouldered Sovereign of the IFP. Only the color of the Sovereign’s tie changed, like some strange Warhol painting.

The five Sovereigns began their respective speeches identically. From there, the speeches varied in delivery but carried the same basic message: a new nation in the IFP, new resources, a promise to rebuild the nation.

“He’s been saying the same thing for years,” said Genevieve with a sour look on her face.

“Precisely,” said Dr. Morgan, “but nobody notices because they don’t *think* about what he’s saying. All they hear is that things will get better. And he uses language well beyond the vocabulary of most. And how much improvement has Brightwater seen these many years?”

“Brightwater’s been the same since I was a little kid,” said Lucian. “I don’t recall anything new opening since I’ve lived there. They never even restored any of the old buildings.”

“What about all these supposed resources that the Sovereign is funneling into these cities?” asked Genevieve.

Dr. Morgan erupted in smiles. “Now you’re getting to the real crux of the matter. What happened to all those resources? Indeed, they *have* been delivered to the cities.”

The confused look on both Lucian and Genevieve caused Dr. Morgan burst out in laughter.

“Computer, display Brightwater,” said Dr. Morgan. A large three-dimensional display of the city hovered above the heavily polished oak table in the center of the room. “GenReps,” he said. Tiny red dots sprang up all over the city. Many of them moved around while others remained stationary.

“Have you ever noticed that people do not disagree in Brightwater?”

Lucian thought back to all of his days at Digitech. Ever since he had started working there, he never heard one word of argument out of anybody. He remembered his first few weeks at the company when he asked a question about a more efficient method of data entry. Everyone had stared at him, frozen in horror.

He had quickly found himself an outcast amongst his peers. He soon understood that anytime he questioned anything at work, people looked at him as though he had claimed he could walk on water. As soon as he stopped asking so many questions and worked, his co-workers warmed up to him more.

“Now that you mention it,” murmured Lucian, “that urge to disagree just disappeared gradually throughout the years. I kind of wandered through life without any thought other than the task set before me.”

“Yes, but you were different from everyone else, were you not, Lucian?” asked the doctor. “You found some way to fulfill that urge, didn’t you?”

Lucian sat in silence a few moments.

“The books,” said Genevieve.

“Exactly,” said Dr. Morgan. “You dove into your books in search of confrontation. Confrontation forces the mind to think, to analyze, to understand. All thinkers find their release somehow. Usually, they are outed, but you kept yours hidden, and so nobody knew your true nature.”

“What do you mean ‘outed’?” asked Lucian.

Dr. Morgan moved to the map of Brightwater. He touched a spot on the map and then moved both of his index fingers apart from each other. The map zoomed in to a section of the city. Two red dots moved along a road on the map.

“You’ve already encountered what happens what a person is outed, or close to it at least. The GenReps’ job is to patrol the cities searching out anyone who shows characteristics of rebels. When they identify someone as a rebel, or someone else sends an alert in, that person disappears—unless we can get to them first, of course. There are your resources the Sovereign is sending throughout the nation, monitoring devices to prevent anyone from questioning what he’s doing.”

Dr. Morgan zoomed back out on the city. Thousands of red dots covered the map. “Computer, show surveillance,” said the doctor. The map flooded with yellow dots, covering nearly every inch of the map. “The Ministry has eyes nearly everywhere in the city. The gaps you see are the parks in the city. For some reason, the Ministry ignores the natural areas of the city. Perhaps it’s because people rarely venture into the parks anymore. Who really knows? It makes for great meeting spots for SERAPH, though. Look there,” Dr. Morgan pointed to a building on the map. “They are after someone.”

Several red dots converged on a building in the middle of the city. Dr. Morgan zoomed in on the building, a small apartment complex.

“Watch how they work,” Morgan said, twisting the winding stem on his pocket watch. “Like clockwork.”

Several red dots took positions around all sides of the building while more filed into the bottom floor. As they worked their way up the stairs, a few dots stationed themselves on each floor. Two red dots walked across the fourth floor, paused for a few minutes, and then walked back down the stairs. The rest of the red dots fanned out into the city on patrol. The two red dots that apprehended their mark traveled toward the center of the city.

“How did we get to be like this?” Lucian wondered aloud.

“We willingly did it to ourselves,” answered Morgan. With the disbelieving look from both Lucian and Genevieve, Dr. Morgan explained. “Mankind has spent millennia developing new technologies to help him, beginning with the wheel back in the ancient days. This technology developed exponentially and made

man's life easier, but at a great cost. The human brain is much like a muscle—if you don't exercise it, it atrophies.

“Computers began to do all of our thinking for us, so we didn't have to think. We didn't have to reason. We didn't have to problem solve. Take calculators for example. Those simple machines made it easier to solve complex computations, but as soon as they introduced them into the schools, which were once taught by actual people, students just plugged numbers into their calculators and it spit out an answer. Students relied so much on the calculators that they never mastered basic math skills like addition and subtraction. Nowadays, so many people in the cities have computers that guide them through every decision they have to make, even menial tasks like which groceries to buy and what clothes to wear. The end result is what you see in cities like Brightwater. Millions of people walk around like mindless robots, oblivious to life and thought and focused only on the task at hand.”

“And the ones who go against all of this disappear, right?” said Lucian.

“Correct. These ‘terrorists’ are intelligent enough to reason out what the government has done, or at least get close enough to it to scare the Federation. What would happen if the citizens of the IFP began to realize that they were being manipulated from the top? The government would then lose all of its power; hence, creations such as the GenReps. It's a new method of control. In the past, dictators tried to rule through fear and strength. That may work for a brief time, but thought will always bring forth revolution. The IFP has effectively gotten rid of thought and therefore solidified its control.”

Dr. Morgan's words simmered in Lucian's and Genevieve's brains.

"Doctor," said Genevieve, "what are you doing here?"

"That is an excellent question," he said, scratching his tanned cheek. "We have developed some new technology to help us fight back. Our technologies work along with the human brain to enhance our human capabilities rather than taking over all human thinking. We have hacked into the exterior defenses of the government security unnoticed, but we have yet to gain entrance to the inner network. We can see their surveillance, but we have no idea what is happening behind the closed doors in the Sovereign's Tower.

"There is one other issue as well," he continued. "We lack much of the manpower necessary to fight this battle. Obviously, we cannot recruit just anyone into our organization. Safety precautions, you see. We have attempted to establish communication with factions outside of the IFP, but it is difficult to do so without being traced by the IFP."

"Outside factions?" Lucian asked.

Dr. Morgan smirked. "Oh, we are not the only ones fighting the IFP, my boy. War may seem like a distant memory to the citizens of cities like Brightwater, but it is a very real and present threat to the Federation. Computer, live stream rebel movements. This may surprise you, Lucian, because the government has never allowed you to see any of this."

The television screen divided into eight squares. In each frame battles raged. Lucian's mouth gradually opened as he watched soldiers firing upon what he recognized as the IFP military. He had

only seen them once, many years ago as a young child. A group of soldiers showed up at his house, and both of his parents left with them. His grandmother had arrived later and taken him home with her. He never saw his parents again.

At Dr. Morgan's command, the television screen switched off. "As you can see, we are not alone. Merely isolated on an island. I fear this war will continue on in vain until we can find more information on the Ministry and their doings. There is only one person I know of who could help us out, but we have been unable to find her for many years. In fact, we do not even know if she is still alive."

Lucian's heart sank. "Only one person that could help, and you can't find her?"

"Yes," said Dr. Morgan. "She is our best hope."

"Who is she?" asked Lucian.

"Her name is Esther Bell."

Lucian's face twisted in shock and horror. He began breathing rapidly. Genevieve grabbed hold of his hand.

"That's... my grandmother," he stuttered.

Dr. Morgan bowed his head and could not meet Lucian's eyes. "Yes, it is."